

YUKON ROADHOUSES
An Historical Survey

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Table of Contents

Historical Overview	1
Themes	3
Known Sites	4
Sources	5
Select Bibliography	6
Appendix	7

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Historical Overview

Yukon mail was initially carried only during the summer months, aboard steamers plying the Yukon River and its tributaries. When winter service began, the mail was transported by dog team over the frozen Yukon River with a few "cutoffs" overland where convenient. However, the continuing influx of southerners, with their need for more timely news, created a demand for better year-round service.

The first roadhouses in the Yukon developed after 1899, when the Canadian Development Company (C.D.C) received the winter mail contract. Its roadhouses were built at intervals of approximately twenty miles to provide rest, food and shelter for the mushers and their dogs. Three years later, the Dominion Government authorized construction of a winter road from Whitehorse to Dawson. The White Pass and Yukon Route built this road when they took over the mail contract in 1902.

With construction of the road, horse-drawn wagons and sleighs replaced the dog teams. This meant that more freight and passengers could be carried, and new roadhouses were built where necessary. The roadhouses provided fresh horses and meals at every stop. In addition, they provided liquor and supplies to the traveller and, more than likely, to area residents as well.

Each post comprised a roadhouse, stable, storehouse, woodpile and, sometimes, cabins.¹ There were often hay meadows associated with these complexes as well. Most roadhouses were only open during the winter months as travel reverted to the rivers in summer.

Descriptions of roadhouses vary. Historical photographs suggest that the standard Canadian Development Company facility was a single-storey, log structure. This is in accord with the description of one traveller who remarked that some of the roadhouses were quite small and that everyone slept in one room.² The roadhouses remaining today (at least those we know of) are large, two-storey log buildings. Hugh Bostock described them in 1950:

The roadhouses, themselves, were large two-storey log buildings

¹ Gordon Bennett, *Yukon Transportation: A History* (Ottawa, 1978), p. 90.

² Laura Beatrice Berton, *I Married the Klondike* (Toronto, 1954), pp. 112-113.

with gently sloping gable roofs, dirt-covered to keep out the cold, and sheeted with boards to shed the summer thunder showers.³

Roadhouse interiors might be divided optimally into bedrooms, a dining room, a kitchen, a common room and a bar. This of course varied with the size of the facility, since some were too small to even have divisions for sleeping quarters. If there was a bar, however, law required that there be at least six separate bedrooms, a sitting room and a dining room separate from the liquor service.⁴

As the Yukon developed, roads sprang up when and where required. Even the government-financed road between Whitehorse and Dawson was re-routed to service the Scroggie Creek and Black Hills areas when they became more active.⁵ The Klondike goldfields were a tangle of roads servicing the creeks and outlying communities. As more centres developed, more roads were built.

Although it is not well documented, one can reasonably assume that more roadhouses were built to accommodate travellers on frequented byways. However, unless the post was along the government road from Whitehorse to Dawson, information is scarce. Most sites appear as a mere dot on early maps with a name and very little else to describe them. Some of the places now included in the Yukon Heritage Inventory did not have even that distinction until pointed out by area residents knowledgeable in local history.

Thus, the main body of information currently available on roadhouses relates to those on the Whitehorse to Dawson winter road. The depth of that information depends on the era examined. There are tantalizing lists of roadhouses from early travellers who list places that do not appear on the White Pass and Yukon Route schedules for the winter road or on maps of that period. The Bartsch family diary, for example, lists thirty-one stops along the ice and land route from Dawson to Whitehorse in 1900.⁶

Similarly, while W.D. MacBride noted only eleven stops on the government road built in 1902,⁷ an anonymous listing with that article identifies forty-

³ Hugh S. Bostock, "A Sketch of Road Development in the Yukon Territory," *The Arctic Circular*, Volume 3, Number 6 (December 1950), p. 64.

⁴ *Annual Reports of the Commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police* (Ottawa, 1902).

⁵ Bostock, "Road Development," p. 66.

⁶ Yukon Archives, Corporate Record 86/104, Part 1, Folder 122, Chris Bartsch, "Our Trip Over the Ice -- Dec 12th, 1900," p. 1.

⁷ W.D. MacBride, "White Pass Stage Line," *The Beaver*, Outfit 284 (June 1953), pp. 43-45.

-five stops between Dawson and the British Columbia - Yukon border. To further confuse matters, a 1901 article in the *Whitehorse Star* notes fifty stops between Whitehorse and Dawson.⁸

By the 1920s, with decreasing mining activity, the system of roadhouses began to deteriorate. The roads themselves fell into disrepair. Passengers had to supply their own food, which was eaten in the open, and were lucky to see one post per day.⁹ Mail and freight were hauled along the winter road by horse until 1922. Thereafter, trucks and caterpillar tractors were used.¹⁰ Since these vehicles often carried their own accommodation in the form of a caboose, and since there was no longer a need to change vehicles every twenty miles, roadhouses were phased out almost entirely. Many of the stables were converted to garages and the trees crept back into the hay meadows.

In 1937, White Pass secured the winter mail contract once again but they now used airplanes for transport.¹¹ Airplanes became the preferred way to travel in winter and, with the construction of the road to Mayo from Whitehorse in 1950 and to Dawson in 1955, roadhouses ceased to function.

Themes

There are a number of themes associated with roadhouses that deserve study. The main one of course is "Commerce/services/accommodation." Associated with this is the theme of "Commerce/services/food and drink."

Roadhouses are unusual within these themes in that they were so specialized. They were dependent on one transportation route, which functioned in only one season. The roads they serviced were in turn dependent on one form of communication -- the mail. While there was also freight and passenger business on these roads, it quickly diminished once the mail ceased to flow or was carried by other means.

The second theme of interest is "Transportation/land/road." The feature of greatest interest is the development of a system of roadhouses built virtually at the same time, and by the same company in the case of the Whitehorse to Dawson road. The fact that the main winter road was built and operated by the White Pass and Yukon Route ties the roadhouses into an even larger system which included rail and water transportation. This lifeline to the

⁸ "72 Years Ago in the Whitehorse Star: Roadhouses," *Whitehorse Star*, 28 November 1973, p. 4a.

⁹ Bennett, *Yukon Transportation*, p. 101.

¹⁰ MacBride, "Stage Line," pp. 43-45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

outside was crucial in the development and sustenance of the Yukon's economy. Even on roads connecting smaller centres, roadhouses acted as part of a network, and never simply as haphazard, isolated developments.

As noted, roadhouses were originally built to provide support for the mail service. In fact, their ultimate fate was determined by the chosen mode of mail delivery. That there is a connection between the roadhouses and the theme "Communications/verbal/postal" is clear. Many of the sites had official post offices. What is not clear is just how much of a role they may have played in the distribution of mail or how they may have acted as a clearing house for other types of information. It is likely that the roadhouses also functioned like local bars or public houses in the dispersal of news and information. Their demise may have had an effect on the ability of outlying areas to maintain contact with the rest of the Yukon community.

Because most of the roadhouses were built to a standard design, and for a particular purpose, it is worth examining them under the theme of "Buildings/functional type/commercial" and under "Buildings/design."

It would also be worthwhile to examine roadhouses in their role as small service and information centres to determine whether or not they played a significant role in "Settlement and Community Development/patterns."

Known Sites

The list of extant sites is very small in comparison to the list of sites known to have existed at one time. There are remains of roadhouses at:

Robinson:	South Klondike Highway at the Annie Lake Road.
Montague:	Klondike Highway approximately twenty miles south of Carmacks.
Carmacks:	in the town of Carmacks.
Yukon Crossing:	about twenty four miles below Carmacks on the Yukon River.
Hunker Summit:	on the Hunker Road.
Cole's:	on the Duncan Creek Road.

There are a few other sites, such as Hootalinqua, which served river travellers. These have not been included in this study.

The early ice road route also included Lower Labarge and Fort Selkirk, both of which have extant historic accommodation facilities but it is unclear whether or not it dates from the period of the early road. There is also a

structure at Champagne reputed to be Jack Oliver's roadhouse on the Kluane wagon road. This has not been confirmed.

Appended are four lists of roadhouses: the original CDC facilities in 1899; two similar lists from 1900 and 1901 from the Bartsch Diaries and the Whitehorse *Star*, respectively; and a list from the 1904 White Pass and Yukon Route schedule. Save where noted above, the existence of these sites has not been verified.

As mentioned earlier, there were a number of well-travelled roads other than that from Whitehorse to Dawson. Many of the major ones are outlined in Bostock's 1950 article on road development in Yukon. He notes that there were roadhouses built on these other roads although he did not include a list of sites or names to accompany his map (appended). Of these roads, those numbered 1 to 5 should be thoroughly examined. The remainder are relatively recent developments or were service roads rather than well-travelled routes between communities.

Sources

While considerable information exists on the construction of the Whitehorse to Dawson winter road, there is very little in the way of description of the building and operation of the roadhouses. Similarly, the other roads in Yukon are mentioned but there is almost nothing describing the services to be found along the routes.

Early maps of Yukon are very useful in providing names and locations for roadhouses.

Diaries, the Yukon River Oral History Project and personal narratives provide insight into the conditions of travel and accommodation. These would likely be the best sources to examine to piece together a profile of individual sites and the daily functioning of roadhouses in general. Since the importance of roadhouses began to decline over sixty years ago, recent oral history sources may not prove too useful for first-hand knowledge. However, second-hand sources have already been of assistance in locating sites, if not in providing much detail on their histories. The Yukon River Oral History tapes provide some detail but again it is sparse.

A more thorough examination of North West Mounted Police reports and government files on road construction and maintenance would also prove useful. The annual police reports tend to mention only that a roadhouse was there if there were police business associated with it, such as a fire or complaints of bad food. However, since a number of N.W.M.P. posts were directly associated with roadhouses, a detailed examination of daily reports would likely prove fruitful in building a body of knowledge on specific sites. Other sources of information in government documents include land and liquor applications. These at least have the names of the owners of roadhouses at the time of application and often a brief description of the structures associated with the application.

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Appendix

From 1904 White Pass and Yukon Pamphlet

Winter road stops from Whitehorse to Dawson

Tahkeena (Takhini Crossing)
Little River
Nordenskiold (possibly aka Kynocks)
Braeburn
Montague
Carmack
Tantalus
Mackay (possibly aka Yukon Crossing)
Minto
Pelly
Humes (aka Grand Valley)
Stevens
Stewart
Wounded Moose
Beemish

OUR TRIP OUT OVER THE ICE - Dec. 12th, 1900. By Chris. Bartsch.

Early in the morning of December 12th, 1900, Bill Acheson, William Graham and us two, Grace and I, started on our return trip to the outside, meaning the coast. It was forty-five below zero and not at daylight as we took to the trail on the Yukon River.

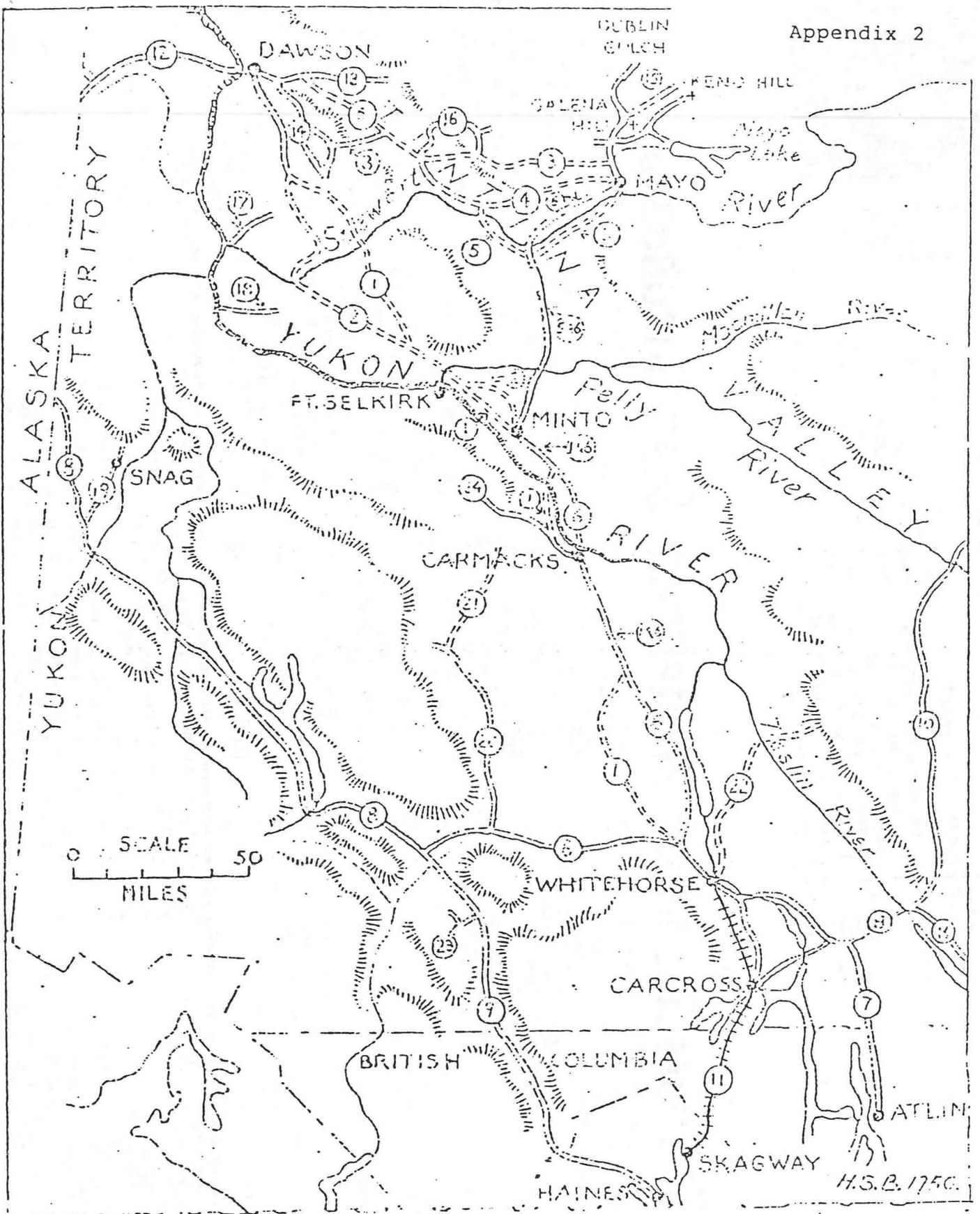
We had our horse, "Dick", hitched to a double end sleigh, with a full-sized basket on top and handle bars at the back, to guide it. It had a small platform at the end, between the handle bars, just big enough for the driver to jump up when the going was easy. In the basket Mrs. Bartsch sat with her trunk at her back, to lean on, and all added down with blankets and fur robes, and the gallon syrup can full of hot water at her feet. Only her head was above the covers, to breathe. Below, the air was glittering with white frost, which made it feel more like twilight, with the sun hardly ever visible and getting dark at four p.m. Now "Dick", our horse, was white with frost. We wore our fur caps and parkas. However we averaged over forty miles a day, some days making over fifty miles. It all depended on the location of the road houses, where we could get meals and stop over nights. Here is a list of roadhouses we visited on our way:"

Coming out from Dawson.
ROAD HOUSES AND DISTANCES.
BETWEEN DAWSON AND WHITE HORSE.

<u>Distance from Dawson.</u>	<u>Miles.</u>
Twelvemile House, to right on Mainland.	12.
Ensley roadhouse, to left on Island. (Dinner)	18.
Indian River, left on Mainland.	28.
Log cabin, left on mainland. (over night)	42.
Sixtymile pass, left on Mainland.	48.

Continued.

	<u>Miles.</u>
Ninemile, right on Island. (Dinner)	57.
Stewart river, left on Mainland. (over night)	73.
White river, left on island.	82.
Thistle Creek, left on mainland.	92.
Kirkmen, left on Mainland. (Dinner)	100;
Halfway Post, right on Island.	101.
Tulare Island, right on Island.	106.
Island Post, left on Island,	113.
Clerk's Place, left on Island, (over night)	115.
Big Four, left on Island.	124.
Ritchie's Place, right on Mainland. (Dinner)	132.
Selwyn, right on Mainland	142.
Woodchopper's Cabin, right on Island.	146.
Captain Whalen's Place, right on Island (Over,N)	159.
Selkirk, right on Mainland. (Dinner)	176.
(Over C.D. Cut Off.)	
C.D. Post No. 9.	180.
Patterson's	188.
Minto, (Over night)	200.
Mackey's Post. (Dinner)	224.
Five Finger Post.	228.
Taylor & Robinson's (over night)	246.
Cormack's (Dinner)	248.
Montague. (Over night).	268.
Chico. (Dinner)	290.
Foot of LeBarge, (Over night)	315.
Head of LeBarge.	345.
White Horse. (End of Trail, nine days.)	370.



The Overland Stage

By MICHAEL WASSIL

On November 2, 1902, White Pass inaugurated an overland stage service between Whitehorse and Dawson City. The trail, laid out the previous summer by the Territorial Government to replace the frozen

sleigh was hauled up safely on the far bank. The baggage and freight were reloaded, the horses hitched to the sleigh, and the first overland stage went on to Dawson City on an otherwise uneventful journey.

72 Years Ago in the Whitehorse Star: Roadhouses

JANUARY 16, 1901. New table of Distances. On the Winter Trail between White Horse and Dawson. Good accommodation for travellers.

14- Tahkenna	355
27- Upper LaBarge	342
36- New Island Roadhouse	333
42- Middle LaBarge	327
57- Lower LaBarge	312
67- Midway	302
79- Chico	290
91- 33 Roadhouse	278
99- Montague	270
113- Robertson's	256
124- Model Roadhouse	245
125- Carmack's	246
113- Miller's	236
135- Wilson's	234
145- Mackay's	224
153- Aurora No. 5	216
159- Hootchikoo	210
169- Minto Renton	200
176- Patterson	193
182- Meat Cache	189
185- Eldorado Steamboat	184
190- C.D. Post No. 9	179
193- Selkirk	176
190- Tent	167

Below we publish a list of the various stopping places on the winter trail between White Horse and Dawson. At each place mentioned there are from one to three roadhouses where travellers can secure comfortable lodgings and good meals at reasonable rates. We are indebted to Mr. J. Doody for the information we are herewith enabled to furnish those contemplating a trip to interior points.

Miles from White Horse	Miles from Dawson
0- White Horse	369
7- Seven Mile Tent	362

208- Capt. Whalen's	159
216- Ritchie Island	153
222- A.B.G.	147
227- Selwyn	142
236- Ritchie's	133
242- Sleepy Hollow	127
245- Big Four	124
256- Clark's Roadhouse	113
258- Island Post	111
262- Coffee Creek	107
265- Tulare	104
270- Kirkman's	99
278- Thistle	91
285- White River	84
298- Stewart River	71
312- Nine Mile House	57
313- Mrs. Burns	56
321- Ogilvie	48
329- Log Cabin	40
334- Reindeer	35
340- Lansdowne	29
341- Indian River	28
353- Ainslee	16
354- Cozy	15

357 Twelve Mile House 12
369 Dawson 0

JANUARY 23, 1901. LUMBER for buildings, scows or boats at Caribou or White Horse. Apply Otto H. Partridge, Mill Haven. Geo. W. Woodruff, White Horse.

JANUARY 23, 1901. Athletic Club Social. Early last week the North Star Athletic Club issued invitations to a progressive whist party to be held in the gymnasium of the club Thursday night. By 8 o'clock the time appointed for the commencement of amusements the room was crowded with those who had received invitations. On entering visitors were met at the door by the patronesses of the club, Mesdames G.A. Pringle, M. J. Taylor and Miss Kate Ryan and made to feel perfectly at

home. After a short time spent in conversation ten tables were placed in position and after the choice of partners was decided progressive whist claimed the attention of the majority, although there were numerous other means of amusement offered those who were not up to date on this seductive game. When the score cards were examined at the end of the game it was found that Mr. H.M. Lay had won the prize for gentleness which consisted of mince pie, and M. Bennett, was declared titled to the first prize -- a cake of equal dimensions as the pie. Rose and Mr. Keit of corraling the ounces consisting of a doll and a piece of

then they left it to freeze solidly overnight. The following morning, they sprinkled more water on the surface of their ingenious ice bridge and then retired to a leisurely breakfast. When the ice bridge seemed solid enough the men carried the freight and baggage across one piece at a time. Then they led the horses across one by one. Finally, there remained only the heavy sleigh to be

invigorating. But in poor conditions, the journey could be an ordeal for everyone. To keep out the chill, passengers were supplied fur coats and robes, as well as fur caps, charcoal foot-warmers, and felt boots or moccasins. Drivers, called skimmers, wore coonskin coats with bright red sashes tied around the waist, and fur-backed leather gloves with silk or

Before the conclusion of the game president Rol made the welcome that as soon as the program was decided to dancing, which was highly applauded by all. He also said that the same program would be repeated by the Thursday evening notice.

1899 NWMP Annual Report

Table of Distances to Stopping Places Built by Can. Dev. Co.

<u>No.</u>	<u>POST</u>	<u>MILES</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
1	Bennett	0	Superintendent - Ex-Sergt. Pulham
2	Caribou	28	
3	Lewgan	22	
4	White Horse	20	
5	Upper Labarge	25	
6	Lower Labarge	30	
7	Chicó (fork of Nordenskiöld Trail)	23	
8	Montagu	23	
9	Cormacks ($\frac{1}{2}$ mi. from river)	24	
10	Mackay (Rink 5 mi. above)	24	
11	Minto	24	
12	Selkirk	24	
13	Selwyn	30	
14	Tulare	36	
15	Stewart	39	
16	Sixty Mile	23	
17	Indian River	20	
18	Dawson	28	Supt. F. B. Davies
	Tagish from Bennett	50	
	Atlin from Tagish	40	

