

Crisis and Opportunity

Three White Women's Experiences of the Klondike Gold Rush

by Carolyn Moore

Dans cet article, l'auteure décrit l'expérience de trois femmes blanches pendant la ruée vers l'or du Klondike et elle met en relief l'environnement non-

traditionnel dans lequel ces femmes ont vécu. La société qui s'est formée pendant la ruée vers l'or a permis aux femmes de transgresser leurs rôles traditionnels.

Women's participation in the gold rush has been defined in terms of their relation to men.

A very strange girl sat by the stove on a little home-made chair. She was reading a novel. When I entered and was approaching her, she calmly rose, turned around and said, "Are you cold? Have this chair" and she shoved the one she was sitting on to me. It was the only chair in the house. I shall never forget that strange girl and how strange I felt in her presence. This was an unusual experience for me. She had dark, ragged unkempt hair; a sort of yellow, muddy complexion (I think much of it would have come off with a good wash); a broad flat nose and a large mouth but very pretty eyes. She wore moccasins on her feet and a dress that was ragged and short.

Grace Bartsch, a white woman travelling up to the Klondike gold rush at the turn of the century, wrote about this "unusual experience" with discomfort. Bartsch expected that a literate, polite woman would neither be living in squalor nor be part-Native. As much as we may enjoy Bartsch's vivid prose, and as questionable, or even amusing as we may find her tone and assumptions, this 1900 account mirrors some of the

pitfalls awaiting feminist historians attempting to write women into the history of the gold rush. In order to do justice to the complexity of women's lives, work, and interactions with one another at this particular time and place, we need to be willing to embrace the "unusual" experience of feeling "strange" when our expectations are challenged.

The Klondike gold rush of 1898 was a haven of adventure and opportunity for white men from the South. A fortune could be made in gold or business interests, and the stories that came out of the adventure would become the folklore of subsequent generations. Pierre Berton wrote the classic account of the gold rush in his 1958 *The Klondike Fever: The Life and Death of the Last Great Gold Rush*, painting the Yukon landscape with colourful characters and wild adventures. Women in this and similar accounts have been relegated to stereotypes: either the prostitute (whether 'whore with the heart of gold' or 'evil seductress'), or the virtuous-domestic woman (the miner's frontier wife). In either case, women's participation in the gold rush has been defined in terms of their relation to men. Only now are feminist scholars beginning to write other narratives which reveal the lived experiences of women in the Klondike to have transcended these stereotypes. Those alternative narratives uncover women struggling, alone, together, or with men, in a variety of ways to make lives for themselves, to forge economic opportunity from the social crisis created by the gold rush (see Kelcey, Mayer). What follows are some of those stories.

Georgia White was a young woman who travelled from her home in San Francisco to Dawson City in the summer of 1898. She was a sole-supporting unmarried mother of two children, whom she had arranged to have

board at home with a friend, Mrs. Audep, for the summer. She made this arduous journey to earn money to send home to her children, which she did regularly every two weeks. White was extremely worried about her children's welfare while she was gone, and her diary that summer was filled with continually references to how much she missed them. In this diary she also recorded her travels, jobs, feelings, and impressions of life in the Klondike.¹

White liked company; she met friends on the boat ride up to Skagway, Alaska, and continued to make friends as she travelled to Dawson. Emma and Minna were two women she met on the boat. Emma travelled with Minna and White to Skagway, and then disappeared from reference in the diary until Dawson City. Georgia White and Minna, however, were fast friends during their entire Yukon journey. They were dependent on each other for support and comfort. Georgia White also made friends with men along her journey. She wrote, on the evening of March 7th, "Frank and Murphy stayed here all night." While the sexual status of any of these

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relationships is unclear, a picture of a lively and engaging woman emerges from the diary.

The diary also testified to the loneliness women sometimes experienced in the face of the often abrupt departures produced by the gold rush's stop-and-start economy. One evening in Dawson, she wrote "Frank and Co come to say 'good-bye' as they start

for Sheep's Camp. Oh how sad I feel, left alone, and no letters about my little ones to let me know how they are." White often mentioned how lonely she felt; much of her experience in the Klondike must have entailed meeting people only to say good-bye, and all the while she was concerned about the welfare of her children.

Escorted by a number of ever-changing men (Mr. McLennan, Mr.

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Karn), White and Minna travelled together from Dyea to Sheep Camp, which was at the base of the Chilkoot Pass. The following day, the group left Sheep Camp at 5 a.m.,

this time with Mr. McLennan and Mr. Mahoney. Georgia White described the difficult trip over the Pass, which could not have been made easier by the swigs from the bottle they carried:

The road is rough, and rocky and bad smelling from the dead horses and dogs. We arrived at the Scales and drank two glasses of lemonade and rested then started up the summit which is very steep. We stopped every few moments to rest and take a sip at the bottle and dear Minna walked back of me so I could not fall. We reached top of summit at 8 and as the Customs Officers were not up yet we went and had breakfast and it was cold and windy and as the bottle had gone a little to my head and standing and waiting was tiresome [sic] so seeing a pan lying beside me and some walnut shells I commenced a shell game and had the men laughing. I even called up one of the officers to show me he was a man of means he came and examined them. Then we paid our duty and started down the summit.

Although according to her diary always surrounded by people, White nonetheless seemed plagued by lone-

liness, poor self-esteem, and a feeling of not measuring up. Aside from being emotionally distraught, she must have been physically exhausted, for she and Minna made dinner for the entire camp en route from Skagway to Dawson, no small feat in itself. Desperate with worry about her children and her consequent concern for her sanity, she describes these feelings in her diary after this particularly stressful day:

I fear very much that I am a damper on our company, I am so quiet and seldom if ever make fun or seemed good-natured. Firstly, I think constantly of my little ones and God knows at times it seems more than I can bear but I must—for Oh deliver me from becoming insane up here. I wished I could cut up more and make it pleasant for those around me for I feel so kindly toward them all. They are all so nice. Another reason I am not feeling just well, but do hope before the journey is over I will amuse them some.

On August 3rd, Georgia White wrote in her diary: "[w]orked in laundry all day. Earned \$5." Shortly afterwards, however, she found herself ill, depressed, and unemployed. On September 1st she wrote, "[t]ook poor Minna to Catholic Hospital. She has typhoid...." Typhoid was reaching epidemic proportions in Dawson City that summer, and was more than likely why Georgia had been confined to her bed for several weeks as well.

The following day, Georgia's boat came in:

Left Dawson at 7pm on the steamer LEAH. Only one other lady aboard a Mrs. Colombe, husband and baby. She has been three years in Circle City, on Birch Creek. Poor baby is very sick. Oh how I hate to leave poor Minnie alone at Dawson, sick in the hospital. It seems so cowardly of me but duty calls me

home. If I wait any longer I must stay here.

She was afraid of missing the last boat out before the river froze. She may also have been afraid of not having the will-power to leave.

Georgia White, after six months in the North, was finally heading home. Her voyage south was a stormy one, but she arrived safely in Seattle on October 8th. Her ship, the Brixham, went on the rocks two days after she disembarked. Her diary ended with her arrival in Seattle, and therefore, her life after her adventure is unknown.

Georgia White was an unmarried mother travelling on her own. She must have been incredibly resourceful and motivated to have the initiative required to travel all the way to Dawson to find work and send money home.


For married women, like Grace Bartsch, travelling to the Klondike with her husband, Chris, was a very different experience. Grace Bartsch, too, kept a diary in which she described her voyage and her impressions of the Native and non-Native people she met. The Bartschs left Vancouver in the spring of 1900, and hooked up with various parties through the mountains and on the rivers. Grace Bartsch was often the only woman in the groups that she and her husband travelled with and to some large degree she was an independent woman with a sense of adventure.

Grace Bartsch, in her travels up the Klondike trail, often separated from her husband for days at a time, and generally the only woman in a camp of men, began creating a new image of herself. Travelling along the shore of the Yukon River in mixed company, she switched her mode of travel when a rafter in their company, "invited me on the raft with him and as I am fast learning to do without other women I went eagerly along." While Grace Bartsch's sense of security gave her the license to pursue her curiosity about activities like rafting with an unknown man in ways not open to

other less well protected “respectable” white women, her sense of entitlement to comfort and lodging fueled her judgmental disdain for much she encountered.

In the incident with which this article began, Bartsch found much on which to comment. She went on to recount her incredible disgust with the food that Miss Simpson, the woman described earlier, presented their party:

The independence of a gold rush woman might be situated on race and class privilege.



We had for our meals a caribou pie, some granulated evaporated potatoes (black-looking things); bread, tea, and dried apple for desert.

Ah, me! I tried to relish the meal, but the untidy, dirty house and the unclean cook spoiled my meal. I could not eat... When dinner was over, and we were all warmed up, we were ready for the next roadhouse, hoping it was a little cleaner.

Grace Bartsch wrote about interactions she had with Native women much more than most of the other non-Native women whose written accounts of the Klondike survive. At Fifty Mile River, a camp outside of Dawson City, she met two Native women, and described them in the context of the world she knew, not theirs:

...Two Indian girls from the village came to camp in the evening. They had been taught by the missionaries to talk English and were able to make me understand. Susan was the wife of the Indian held in Dawson for the murder of the white man; Jennie was a girl of about twelve who loved to tell about Susan’s man and the murder.

Grace Bartsch met these two women again, travelling up-river towards Dawson. Grace and her hus-

band Chris went into a Native community to borrow some equipment they needed to continue their journey. The Bartsches assumed that the Native people would gladly lend their equipment. When they encountered resistance and incomprehension, it did not cross their minds that perhaps the Natives were deliberately misunderstanding them; the Native people might well not have wanted to help a couple that took the help for granted. Grace’s account of this interaction, like that of the one with Miss Simpson, also seems to concentrate on dirt—dirt that seemed, in Grace Bartsch’s world, synonymous with racial inferiority and childlike simplicity:

...(Indian Jim) very cordially invited us in (to his home), so in we went. Upon the floor sat 3 or 4 dirty black squaws, wearing dirty dresses and many ornaments. Upon each finger of the two hands were rings, 3 or 4 on each finger; rings on their toes and in their noses, and strings of beads around their necks. They seemed to be having afternoon tea, for, from a dirty blue teapot on the floor beside them, they poured something that they drank and with it they ate black dry bread. They were not at all disturbed, but simply grinned as if much pleased with themselves. I can say that they were certainly poor housekeepers though. They seemed most happy, which is much to their credit. Susan, who was a widow, lived just next door and came in with Jennie.

Chris tried to make them understand, as Jim could not, that he wanted to borrow the auger but couldn’t, so he went searching for the auger himself. There was rubbish of all description, not mentioning the dirt, under their bunks and in every corner. To our great satisfaction we found what we wanted and left.


Grace and Chris Bartsch took the

auger despite the fact they had not been given permission. As white people of means, their sense of entitlement is strikingly evident; significantly, the independence of a gold rush woman like Grace, then, might be situated on race and class privilege.

As in the case of Grace Bartsch, a kind of independence seemed to characterize a third woman whose letters and personal records have survived, Lillian Taylor. She was a single woman who had lived in Dawson City and Whitehorse from 1898 to 1904, before moving several hundred miles out to a small community called Livingstone Creek in 1905. There she owned and operated a laundry and invested in various mining speculations. She provided a striking example of an unconventional woman living a non-traditional lifestyle.

She had a number of business partners and seemed to be very adept at juggling several business deals at the same time. She owned a deed, dated February 23, 1898, for a claim she had bought just outside Skagway, Alaska for \$50 from George Roth. She also had a business relationship with another man out on the creeks, “your friend and pardner [sic], R.J. McKnight.” He wrote to her April 20, 1904, from Sheep Camp in the Chilkoot Pass, discussing the idea of staking claims around that site, the base of the famous Chilkoot Trail.

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He asked ‘Lilly’ to check the claim registers and see what was available.

Four months later, Taylor was involved in another mining scheme. William Rudisell² was a merchant in Livingstone Creek with whom Taylor had a variety of business connections. He also seemed to be a slightly shady colleague that was perhaps asking for more than his share. He wrote to

Taylor on August 4, 1904, from the Vancouver Hotel in Whitehorse, questioning her about their partnership:

I thought I would drop you a few lines so as to find the reason you do not answer my letters are you angry because I asked you for a few dollars if so be kind to let me know... Now Lilli you must remember your promise to stick with me in my mining and you are to share your successes with me should there be any.

Rudisell made no concessions to the "femininity" of his partner. Taylor was obviously an equal player in this arrangement, perhaps even the partner who held the upper hand.

She must have written him quite a harsh reply. He responded on August 11, seemingly outraged, this time from the Commercial Hotel in Whitehorse.

Lilli, tell me are you fickle minded or what is the matter with you? Did you not write me a letter when I was on Bullion Creek saying that you expected me to divide with you whatever I found?

Taylor was pulling out of their business arrangement. He continued: "What do you take me for a D—[sic] fool? Do you think I would pay all my expenses and then give you a share of what I find?, 'not much'..." he responded in apparent disbelief.

Despite her failed partnership with Rudisell, Taylor maintained contact with him. The following year there is a record from Rudisell's store in Livingstone Creek, listing her credit with the store and the goods she had lately purchased (Store Bill).

Taylor's personal relationships, as well as her business ones, seemed to thrive on ambiguity and relative evasiveness. While living in Whitehorse, Taylor had a sweetheart, a North West Mounted Police officer named Herbert. But Taylor left Whitehorse for Livingstone Creek without clearly

explaining to Herbert the state of her heart. Poor Herbert was rather desperate, as Taylor would only write infrequently of her plans. He wrote to his "dear Lillia" on November 22, 1905:

I received your letter and needless to say was much pleased to hear from you, however your letter carried sorrow as you say you do not know when you are coming to White Horse. Well Lillia you know when you left you promised to come back in one months time so the least you can do is to keep your promise which I am sure you will do you may imagine how anxious I am for you to come back...

Herbert had to wait four months for a reply from Lillian Taylor, one that included a strong defense of her work and independence. He wrote back promptly on February 3, 1906, sounding hurt but unsure of his ground:

I received your most welcome letter and needless to say was much pleased to hear from you after waiting so long I thought you had forgotten me but glad to see it is not the case.

He was incredulous that she could live so far away. He wrote: "You say you are learning a trade well Lilia you know a trade is no use to you in White Horse so you are only waisting [sic] time."

In the next two pages Herbert begged Taylor to return to Whitehorse. As the correspondence ended at this point, we don't know whether Lillian Taylor kept her business in Livingstone Creek, continued speculating in mining claims, or succumbed to Herbert's entreaties.

A single mother whose female companion "walked back of me so I could not fall" as they crossed the treacherous Chilkoot Pass; a middle-class matron rafting down the Yukon River; a businesswoman shrewdly holding both lovers and business partners at

bay while she took advantage of the economic opportunity afforded by the gold rush. To the conventional observer, such images may seem "strange;" to the feminist historian, they provide a challenging new picture of women's lives and work on this glittering frontier.

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¹Georgia White file. Georgia White's diary was carried for years by W.C. "Bill" White, her son and was later given to her granddaughter, Dorothy DeBoer, one of Bill White's daughters. Dorothy DeBoer edited her copy of the diary and donated it to the Alaska State Museum in 1965.

²Her partner's name could be Rudisell or Rindresell; the writing was illegible.

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