



## A POSTCARD from CHILKOOT PASS

Story and photos by Corrie Parks

It was 6:45 a.m., and I had been hiking for two hours through white mist on white snowfields. The summer snow crunched beneath my feet as I steadily kicked steps, heading toward a bright orange trail marker barely visible 100 feet ahead. Beyond the marker, a steep, talus-covered hillside emerged from the fog as I came to the edge of the snowfield. I had reached the Golden Stairs.

In 1898, more than 30,000 people walked this same path, lock-stepping up the snowy chute to the Chilkoot Pass, which separates southeast Alaska from the Yukon. They were the “stampede,” racing to the Klondike goldfields and hoping to strike it rich.

Back then, the area immediately below the Stairs was a makeshift city called The Scales. Here, the native Tlingit packers increased their rates from 14 cents to \$1 a pound for hauling goods up the pass. Packers and stampedees alike would make dozens of trips up the Golden Stairs, carrying between 50 and 100 pounds each time.

Gold pans, cast iron skillets and tightly wrapped bags of beans and flour were some of the usual supplies needed for a year of prospecting in the bitter north. A few creative entrepreneurs packed rolls of silk, cases of fresh eggs, live cats and contraband bottles of whiskey - all items that fetched premium prices in Dawson City. At the pass, the men cached their goods, turned around, and returned to the noisy collection of humanity at The Scales to collect another load.

Now the valley was eerily quiet as I scrambled hand and foot up the boulders. Not far ahead, I passed a family from Fairbanks whom I met in camp the night before. They were speaking quietly, as if trying not to disturb the ghosts that might haunt this pass.



### 2 Frères au Klondike

Mario and Jean, of Montreal, were tracing the footsteps of their ancestor who joined the 1898 stampede to the Klondike. The brothers walked the trail in wool jackets, and leather boots, sleeping on folded blankets under a canvas shelter, cooking tinned beans and potted meat in a cast iron skillet. “We find gold in the scenery, in people, everywhere,” Mario said.

33

miles from Dyea, Alaska to Lake Bennett, British Columbia

3,525

feet of elevation gain and the height of Chilkoot Pass (trail starts at sea level)

50

number of hiking permits issued daily by Klondike Gold Rush International Historic Park for modern-day hikers heading over the pass

7,000

estimated population of Sheep Camp during the height of the stampede, April 1898

18

population of Sheep Camp in July 1899 after the White Pass Railroad to Bennett was established and the Chilkoot Trail abandoned

## Sentinel Over Deep Lake

"Why do I go to the wilderness? For the crystal clear streams and the cold winds off snowfields. For the warm, sun-baked granite. For the physical exercise - climbing, swimming, scrambling, glissading down soft snowfields. For the way food tastes after a day of all that. But mostly for the views..." - *Trail Journal - Day 9*



Twisted cables and rusty cogs lay on the boulders around me, reminders of the tramway built in 1898 to haul gear for those who could pay. By 1899, White Pass Railroad in the adjacent valley had monopolized the route to the interior, and the Chilkoot Trail was quickly abandoned.

Wading through the whiteout, I breached the crest of the pass, the sound of a flag whipping in the wind ahead of me. A few steps later, a shelter materialized from the fog. A red maple leaf on the flag indicated I was now in Canada.

Inside, I fired up my stove to melt snow for drinking water, pulled out an array of colored

pens and pencils and a stack of postcards, and sat down to wait.

My hike on the Chilkoot Trail was part of an artist-in-residence program, a joint venture with Parks Canada and the U.S. National Parks Service, and I had plans for the backpackers adding their footsteps to the thousands before them.

Hikers burst through the door in waves, steaming up the windows as they shed sweaty layers and devoured snacks. Stories and laughter bounced around the tiny space. I offered hot tea and chocolate as I passed around postcards.

**22,000**

.....  
estimated number of stampedeers that crossed over Chilkoot pass in 1898

**\$150,000**

.....  
customs duties for goods brought into Canada collected by mounties stationed at the top of Chilkoot Pass

**7,124**

.....  
boats that set sail for Dawson City from Lake Bennett when the ice finally broke in June 1898

**0**

.....  
trees left on the shores of Lake Bennett after all those boats were built [the forest has regrown in the last 100 years]

.....  
This information is from Klondike Gold Rush International Historic Park. Interested in hiking the trail? Learn more at [nps.gov/klgo](http://nps.gov/klgo).



### *Trail to Happy Camp*

"Snow, snow and more snow! Snow canyons 15 feet deep, carved by the river; cracks and fissures of glacial blue opening up. We walk on snow for most of the four miles to Happy Camp, where tired hikers revel in the first warm rays of the entire trail and moods rise with the barometer." - Trail Journal, Day 7



On Location - Corrie Francis Parks on the Chilkoot Trail.

### **KLONDIKE LETTERS PROJECT**

For 13 days Big Sky resident Corrie Francis Parks wandered the Chilkoot Trail, collecting postcards, talking to hikers and rangers, creating art and gathering ideas. This fall and winter, she's working to compile her experiences into a series of animated documentaries and an art exhibition. More artwork, photos and stories on are available at [klondikeletters.com](http://klondikeletters.com).

## EXPLORE

“Write a postcard to yourself,” I instructed. “Write down one thing you want to remember from your journey up the Chilkoot Pass.”

They wrote:

*“From knee deep water at the start, through beautiful forests and then starting for the pass at 4 a.m. Best of all, I did it with my daughter.”*

*“I just experienced the most frightening day of my life. Extreme heights, horrible shoes and snowy hills have made me truly grateful to be alive. I love my life.”*

*“I came north not to run away, but rather to prove something, to awaken a revival. I came for redemption, to save my soul in some way.”*

*“Behind us is civilization... before us, vastness, silence, grandeur – stand alone on the summit... and realize what an atom in the universe you are.”*

*“I want to remember that traveling solo is amazing and that I do not need a partner to have a great time.”*

*“The look on Yanik’s face as he reached the summit and hearing the excitement in his voice as he said this was his favorite day. I want to remember to see the world like that; always fresh, always seeing.”*

*“Another day in the North. Embrace the good! Honour, challenge, laughs, snow, friends and wool socks.”*



### *Ghosts on the Stairs*

“We all follow the orange stakes marking the safe path across the snow bridges, occasionally hearing the hidden rivers rushing under our feet. The stairs have shed their snow faster than the rest of the trail and it is pure scrambling from here.”  
Trail Journal, Day 3

In these handwritten scribbles, I saw the answer to a question I’ve asked many times: Why do we seek out wild places? What are we experiencing there that we can’t find in our daily lives?

As the hikers packed up to continue their journeys, I collected the postcards and tucked them away. I planned to keep them for a year and then, when the memories of this moment have lost their sharp edges, drop them in the mail. My hope is that the act of creating these postcards and receiving the physical artifact in the future will be vivid catalysts for remembering wilderness.

Though the stampedeers were seeking gold in the Klondike wilderness, the vast majority didn’t find their fortune. From their letters and diaries, we can see they found other things: adventure, suffering, love and insight into human nature at its best and worst. I see these same things written on the postcards – ultimately, they’re what make these wild places worth preserving. 🐎

