MINERS AT WORK, A HISTORY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA’S GOLD RUSHES

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ABSTRACT

The search for gold is the single most dramatic event of British Columbia’s early history. Although European settlement originally was founded on furs, it was the gold rushes of 1858 through the 1860s that changed the direction of development in this province for considerable time. These gold rushes not only brought a sharp increase in population and wealth but also initiated development of an early infrastructure of roads and services and directly influenced the shape of British Columbia’s politics. It has been estimated that between 1860 and 1880 about $35 000 000 worth of gold was extracted from the 130 square kilometres (50 square miles) surrounding Barkerville. Although the later gold rushes were smaller, they also played an important role in our history.

The rush to British Columbia was only one of a series of sudden shifts in population and wealth that resulted from the search for placer gold. California and Australia both attracted hordes of miners in search of riches. This paper places the British Columbia gold rush in a world context; it drew less world attention and was smaller than either the Californian or Australian rushes. The discussion then follows, in some detail, the progress of the early miners up the Fraser River in 1858, past Hill’s Bar, reputedly the richest bar in North America, and on into the Cariboo and Barkerville in the 1860s. Particular attention will be paid to the interaction of the government and the miners, especially as highlighted by the Ned McGowan incident of 1859 and the Grouse Creek war of 1867. An examination will also be made of the life of the miners and the conditions under which they worked, as well as the wealth they extracted. A brief look at some highlights of other British Columbia gold rushes, starting with Rock Creek in 1860 and ending with Atlin in 1898, will also be presented.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most exciting historical events in British Columbia was the gold rush up the Fraser River into the Cariboo to Barkerville. This portion of our history has aroused more interest than almost any other episode and much has been written about it. These events certainly had a greater impact on post-contact British Columbia, than any other event that took place in such a short period of time. The Fraser River and Cariboo gold rushes, however, are only part of the full picture of the search for placer gold in the province and while this paper mainly focuses on them it also touches on other rushes.

19TH CENTURY GOLD RUSHES
Miners have been preoccupied with gold for centuries. The 19th century introduced new elements into this quest. Several gold discoveries early in the century, especially in Brazil and Siberia, focused attention on the availability of placer gold. No stampede developed to Brazil or Siberia, since both of these discoveries were too distant and under strict government control. A great deal of the work in Brazil, for instance, was carried out by slave labor. As well, world communication and transportation networks had not quite reached the necessary plateau for such a mass movement of people. These factors came together in 1848 and 1849 to spark the greatest gold rush the world has seen, the one to California. Over 100,000 people are estimated to have been in the gold fields by 1852 (British Columbia at its peak probably had no more than 20,000 miners). In California between 1848 and 1860, an estimated $639 billion in gold was discovered while in British Columbia between 1858 and 1949 an estimated $93 million worth of gold was recovered. In 1859 the California goldfields produced over $44 million in gold, while British Columbia production in 1860 amounted to over $2 million. Even though the accuracy of both figures is somewhat suspect, the difference is so great that any errors are not significant. Nor does this detract from the importance of the gold rush to British Columbia and its impact on this territory, but rather illustrates the difference between the two areas and why many prospectors saw and portrayed the British Columbia goldfields as a humbug and false trail.

It was also in California that the techniques of gold mining were refined. Most of those eager prospectors who flocked to California had no idea of how to look for gold and the Sierra Nevada was their training ground. Miners, or those who had learned from the Californians, seemed to be always available thereafter to set newcomers straight. Most of the techniques had originated centuries before, but knowledge of them was not widespread – from gold panning to rockers to sluices, all were learned and relearned during the California Rush.

In the 1850s another substantial rush developed, this time to Australia. In 1851, it is reported that about half the male population of South Australia had departed for the goldfields. Although numerous 49er’s (participants in the early California rush) went to Australia, even more prospectors arrived from England. It is worth noting as well that the Australian discoveries were made by an Australian who had gone to California in the search for gold. He remembered seeing similar areas in Australia and returned home to make the first Australian discovery.

**FRASER RIVER GOLD RUSH**

Gold was still being found in California at the time of the gold rush to British Columbia, but much of the easy digging was gone and many miners were seeking new sources of wealth. Gold had been reported earlier in British Columbia, around Fort Kamloops in the early 1850s, for instance. Rumors of gold found on the Thompson River by natives aroused interest in California and when the S.S. Otter arrived in San Francisco in February of 1858 carrying some of this gold, the rush was on. James Moore, one of the first miners to reach the Fraser River, was attending a fire department meeting in San Francisco when he first heard the news. He and others were dispatched to British Columbia to report on the situation. Miners soon flocked to Victoria on their way to the Fraser River.

Moore’s group, the first miners on the Fraser River, bypassed Victoria and went through
Whatcom and Point Roberts to reach the Fraser in March of 1858. His company had camped for
the night at Fort Hope and then moved on in the morning, stopping for a midday meal on a bar
about 2.5 kilometres below Yale (about 21 kilometres from Hope). T.H. Hill thought he noticed
colours and washed a pan of gravel discovering one of the richest river bars in the world.
During Hill’s Bar’s peak production, each miner averaged about 50 cents a pan day; over $2
million in gold was recovered. (Values of gold are somewhat difficult to determine and convert
but are given in this paper in the value of the day; the $2 million from Hill’s bar, at about $20
per ounce (31.1 grams), would equal about $35 million, at $350 per ounce today). Hill’s Bar
was also the site of another incident which will be referred to later. A few bars below Hope were
also mined in early 1858. Gold in paying quantities was found at Fargo’s Bar about 5 kilometres
above Sumas and before the end of 1858 miners had worked their way a considerable distance
up river. At least seven bars below Hope were mined, between Hope and Yale there were at
least 26 bars and between Yale and Lytton another 40. The gold-bearing sand and gravel in
these bars varied considerably but at Hill’s Bar it was said to be 2 metres deep, 60 metres wide
and cover the whole bar, a distance of about 0.8 kilometre. Mr Winston, so it is recorded, took
about 23 kilograms of gold from the bar between December 1858 and April 1859; at times they
reportedly obtained about 1.5 kilograms (50 ounces) a day and when running the sluices day
and night, up to 2.5 kilograms (70 or 80 ounces). It was quite a sight. Alfred Waddington
reported seeing 800 rockers at work between Hope and Yale, while Governor James Douglas, in
November 1858, thought there were about 10 000 miners at work above Murderer’s Bar which
was located just below Hope (Howay, 1914, p. 41).

CARIBOO GOLD RUSH

These miners were often footloose and early in 1858, at least one adventurer, Aaron Post, had
worked his way as far as the Chilcotin River, testing and trying every bar and reportedly finding
gold in most of them. The gold hunters were moving into the upper Fraser by early in 1859.
After reaching the mouth of the Quesnel River in May of 1859, prospectors continued up both
the Quesnel and the Fraser, finding rich diggings. The advances away from the Fraser found the
richer strikes to lure the miners ever on. On the Horsefly River for instance, five men with two
rockers, took out about 3.1 kilograms (101 ounces) in one week, some areas reported earnings
of $200 per day per man. Incentives such as this spurred prospectors onward and soon they
were trying the most inhospitable of places. In 1860 Doc Keithley, George Weaver and their
companions found Keithley Creek and adjoining streams, and finally in 1861 William Deitz and
his partners crossed over Agnes Mountain and discovered Williams Creek, the richest of the rich
Cariboo streams.

At first Williams Creek gave no sign of its great wealth, and was called for a time Humbug
Creek, but late in 1861 Mr. Abbott decided to penetrate the hard blue clay over which they had
been mining [at a depth between 8 and 12 feet (2.4 - 3.7 m)]. Under this clay was the real
wealth of Williams Creek. Working alone (his partner had gone for supplies) Abbott retrieved
about 1.5 kilograms (50 ounces) in 48 hours. The claim, with three men, produced at least 3.5
kilograms (120 ounces) per day and probably more, with an estimated total production of $150
000, though this is certainly low. Many of the miners were very reluctant to reveal how much
gold was recovered by their efforts and so estimates are very inaccurate.

These were difficult workings, hard to get to and difficult to work (Figure 1). Some went to a
depth of over 24 metres (80 feet) and had to be continually pumped to reduce the water
(Figure 2). Supplies were expensive and winters harsh. When compared to the diggings in
California it was misery. Nor did the large tract of ground exist as in California, the Cariboo
goldfields covering a comparatively small area.
One of the worst problems was travelling to and from the goldfields. The early trek through the Fraser Canyon was formidable. On one occasion when Governor James Douglas queried Gold Commissioner George Cox as to why he had not collected licence fees on his journey, Cox replied:

> With perpendicular ascents and dangerous descents my eyes and thoughts were wholly engrossed with the safety of my life, more especially when crawling along the edge, paths ... are only a few inches in width and ... form the trail along the sides of this lofty mountain and overhangs the river. (George Cox to James Douglas, 6 April 1859, see Howay, 1926, p. 101).

Even after conditions had somewhat improved, the trek remained arduous. In 1862, W. Champness ventured up to the Cariboo to try his hand at mining. He did not have great success but he did leave us an interesting account of his adventure. After what he felt was a trying
journey to Williams Lake, well over one half the trip, he recorded:

Miners returning from the Cariboo diggings...after hearing the complaints of our travelling difficulties thus far, only laughed at us saying, "You’ve not even reached the bad tracks yet." And we soon had reason to believe them: Our horses were often plunged up to the belly in swamps and mud. British Columbia is truly a horse-killing country. At times we dragged our burdens heavily up steep and forested mountains. Then, again, we frequently met with rapid and steep streams, where in the absence of bridges, we had to wade or otherwise attempt - often at the risk of life and limb (Champness, 1972, p. 61).

Upon completion of the Cariboo Road in 1863, the trip became easier and faster than in previous years and included way-side houses (Figure 3). The journey, however, remained strenuous and it was not until 1865 that a wagon road finally reached Barkerville. Even with its final completion, the average stage time from Yale to Barkerville was still four days (Howay, 1914, p. 131).

Figure 3. "A way-side house", 1862, from Cheadle (1971). (British Columbia Archives and Records Service, HP 74431).

Travel was not only very difficult but conditions on reaching the mines were often not much better:

Hundreds, after working like slaves, and expending all their little capital, have had to retrace their weary way down to the coast, with scarcely rags enough to cover them, obliged to tie bits of sacking around their bleeding feet, and to sell their blankets for a very little bread. Truly, the numbers of these poor broken-down fellows, with their pale, pinched faces and tattered rags, eloquent of hunger and poverty, were enough to dishearten all of us together; for hundreds of such passed us during our journey, in parties of from two to a score. (Champness, 1972, pp. 61-62).

Nor did this situation improve with the better access by road. Alexander Allan found conditions just as bad in 1868 as Champness had found in 1862.

I know that in gold country such as this people generally suppose that a man cannot help but make money and have plenty of it always at command but a more mistaken idea was never entertained. There are it is true many who have made and are now making their fortunes, but it is also true that the far greater number rank as unfortunates, those whose lot it may not be believed but it is only too true is worse than the most miserable and poverty stricken person in the old country (Bescoby, 1932, p. 48).
Along Williams Creek, the richest of the gold areas, four small communities grew. Richfield was the earliest, and it became the government centre, but was soon eclipsed in size and importance by Barkerville (Figure 4). Further down the creek from Barkerville was Camerontown, and Marysville below it. None of these towns were far apart.

![Barkerville in 1865](https://www.empr.gov.bc.ca/Mining/Geoscience/PublicationsCatalogue/OpenFiles/1992/19...)

Figure 4. Barkerville in 1865. (British Columbia Archives and Record Service, HP 93780).

William Cheadle visited Williams Creek in 1863 prior to the establishment of Marysville:

> At dusk we arrived at Richfield, the first part where gold was struck on this creek, & it was quite dark before we reached Cameron Town below, passing thro’ Barkerville or Middle Town. The whole 3 towns extending almost continuously down the creek for a mile & containing about 60 or 70 houses a piece. This spring there were only 3 or 4 houses at Cameron Town! Our path was a difficult one over endless sluices, flumes & ditches, across icy planks & logs, all getting tumbles, gumboots being very treacherous. (Cheadle, 1971, p. 249).

Despite the hardship and the many who were unsuccessful, these were rich claims. In 1862 Thomas Elwyn, Gold Commissioner at Richfield wrote to Governor Douglas:

> The yield of gold on this creek [Williams] is something almost incredible...Cunningham & Company have been working their claims for the past six weeks, and for the last thirty days have been taking out gold at the rate of three thousand dollars every twenty four hours...Steel & Co have been engaged for the last ten days in making a flume but during the previous three weeks their claims yielded two hundred ounces [~100 kgs] a day. These figures are so startling that I would be afraid to put them on paper, in a report for His Excellency’s information were I not on the spot and know them to be the exact truth (Akrigg and Akrigg, 1977, p. 240).

Such views are as typical as those expressed by the many disheartened miners. There is no doubt that many returned poorer than they arrived with only a few finding great wealth, but there is also no doubt that some did find such wealth. As the Reverend Edward White wrote in 1861:

> The bags of [gold] dust which are now coming down, confound and strike dum[b] every person who has dared call Fraser River gold mines a humbug. If I had time and space I would fill sheets with the reports of lucky ones. I could give you a long
list of those who went up last spring with hardly enough to pay their expenses to Cariboo, and are now returning with $5 000 to $20 000 each. (Christian Guardian, 4 Dec. 1861, p. 192, cited by Akrigg and Akrigg, 1977, p. 235).

The early hustle and bustle had slowed considerably by 1865, even though a lot of gold was still being taken from the ground at numerous mines (Figure 5). Few new discoveries were made and the gold was getting harder and harder to get. As hydraulic operations started, water wheels, pumps and other devices became needed accessories to gold mining. It was no longer a game for the individual miner.

![Figure 5.](image1)

Williams Creek from Black Jack Canyon, 1868. (British Columbia Archives and Records Service, HP 13188).

Barkerville in 1862 was a city of tents but by 1863 wooden houses began appearing. A continuous complaint was that the roadway was always dirty and never repaired. In the fire of September 16th, 1868 about 116 buildings were destroyed, but the town was reportedly built larger and better and included three gas lights, one each in front of the two banks and the Hudson’s Bay Company store. Prior to the fire (Figure 6), Barkerville had a variety of merchants and other enterprises with most of the buildings being businesses and included 20 general stores, 18 saloons, 8 boarding houses, with only 2 private residences listed as destroyed by the fire. Even though the peak of the gold rush had passed, rebuilding Barkerville proceeded quickly; 41 merchants reestablished themselves in 1868, by 1869 there were 76 and 98 in 1871 (Bescoby, 1932, p. 2).
Camerontown and Marysville, each about 1.5 kilometres apart, were located between Barkerville and what is now Wells. Marysville was largely residential but some businesses and other facilities were set up in Camerontown, such as the hospital in 1864. Other communities grew up on some of the surrounding streams and in the gulches. Some of these earlier small communities were Grouse Creek, Keithley and Van Winkle, initially considered as the main centre for the area. Some of the others included Antler in 1863 which had seven merchants. Centreville was established in 1867 and by May 1868 had 100 dwellings. Felixville sprang up at the head of Conklin Gulch in 1869 and Gladstoneville at the mouth of Chisholm Creek in 1870. The buildings were often rough, though lumber was available from several small sawmills. The cabins the miners lived in were generally one room affairs, made of log with a single window and single door, a stone fireplace and a mud floor; some of the larger companies built bigger buildings (Bescoby, 1932, p. 4).

**LAW AND ORDER**

There was general agreement among the pioneers that lawlessness played little part in the mining community, in general it was a pretty safe place. Thomas Hammett commented that *Respect for Law and order was always a marked feature of life in Cariboo.... The strict enforcement of the laws scared away the 'bad men' who used to give a bad name to mining camps on the other side of the line...* (Bescoby, 1932, p. 31). James Douglas wrote to Newcastle at the Colonial Office in 1863 that *unanimity and good feeling prevail among the miners on Williams Creek and both the Upper and Lower Towns have been perfectly quiet, and free from disturbance.* (Bescoby, 1932, p. 32). The local paper, the Sentinel, reported only a few crimes: a burglary Aug 26, 1865 of a merchant, for instance, or the bar-room fight in 1866 which was reported as generally friendly in nature. Between 1866-71 only 135 criminal cases were heard and of the 25 in 1868, two were felonies, six thefts and the rest drunkenness.

There were only two recorded instances of individuals who could be considered habitual criminals. One was Jesse Pierce. He is first noted in 1864 when he was in court over a mining dispute. In 1865 he was charged with supplying liquor illegally to native women in Lorings saloon in Camerontown and in 1868 he squabbled with James Knight at Mosquito Creek. He was wounded, but his adversary Knight was let off as the wounding was considered accidental. In September 1868 Pierce was in a fight in the Arcade saloon in Barkerville, and in March 1869 he assaulted William Phillips at Mosquito Creek, who died as a result. Pierce was imprisoned but escaped and in September 1869 was declared an outlaw. As far as I am aware he was not recaptured. Another individual, William Williams, also had a long list of offenses but these two men are the only two so recorded (Bescoby, 1932, p. 37).

Two incidents especially stand out in the story of law and order during the gold rush. The first occurred in 1858 at Hill’s Bar. When the miners flocked to British Columbia in 1858, James Douglas acted speedily toward taking control of the situation and protecting the realm for the British Government. He adapted procedures used in the Australian rushes and appointed Gold Commissioners who would act as general government representatives, though their main concern was to enforce the mining regulations. Douglas proclaimed that *The Gold Commissioner alone without a jury shall be the sole judge of law and fact.* (Bescoby, 1932, p. 9). Unfortunately some of his first choices of employees were not the best.
On Christmas day in 1858, a Hill’s Bar miner committed assault in Yale. Captain Whannell, the Gold Commissioner at Yale, sent out a constable with a warrant to Hill’s Bar where the criminal was residing. George Perrier, the Hill’s Bar Gold Commissioner refused to recognize the warrant and even issued a warrant for the arrest of the victim in Yale. Whannell than arrested Perrier’s constable when he arrived in Yale to serve the warrant. A posse was organized under Ned McGowan, who had a notorious reputation. They proceeded to Yale, released the constable and arrested Whannell, who Perrier then arraigned and fined for contempt of court. Accusations flew to Victoria and Douglas immediately dispatched Colonel Moody with Judge Begbie and marines to the scene. McGowan was fined for his part and Perrier and his constable dismissed. (This is a much abbreviated version of the story, for more information, see Akrigg and Akrigg, 1977, pp. 146-154). These first government representatives seem to have been an unsatisfactory group, especially Perrier, Whannell and Richard Hicks. Hicks was deficient in nerve for the position he holds, so Begbie wrote to Douglas in early 1859, I cannot get anyone to speak up for him. Even Mr. Edward McGowan who does him the honour of preferring him to Capt. Whannell alleges his reason to be because he prefers dealing with a knave rather then a fool. (Matthew Baillie Begbie to James Douglas, 1 Feb. 1859, 14 Jan. 1859, Colonial Correspondence, F142a, Provincial Archives and Records Service). By the end of 1859, they were largely replaced with a new group of more competent men, many of whom had served in organizations such as the Irish Constabulary; Peter O’Reilly, being one example. Not that they were all without blemish. Andrew Elliott was temporarily removed while Douglas had his books and transactions audited. All was found in order, merely in great disarray and after a reprimand, Elliott was reinstated. (C.S. Young to Andrew C. Elliott, 6 June 1862, Colonial Correspondence, Provincial Archives and Records Service).

The second incident is the Grouse Creek war of 1867. In 1864 the Gold Commissioner Peter O’Reilly granted the rights to a certain portion of land on Grouse Creek to the Grouse Creek Bedrock Flume Company of Victoria, for ten years, provided it fulfilled all conditions of the Gold Fields Act. The Grouse Creek Company ran out of money and left the site apparently abandoned in 1866. The local Canadian Company applied for rights over the supposed abandoned claim and these were granted by the Gold Commissioner, Warner Spalding. Some months later the Grouse Creek Company renegotiated with the Crown, through Spalding, for its rights to the claim and they were reinstated. The Canadian Company of course objected and the case returned to Miners Court under Spalding who, not unsurprisingly, found for the Grouse Creek Company. The Canadians refused to move. After further exchanges, the district magistrate finally requested the marines. Instead, Governor Seymour arrived and persuaded the Canadian Company to leave the ground, evidently with the promise of a new trial. A few of the company were arrested but spent an agreeable time in jail as, their sympathizers supplied them with bountiful grog; [and] what with games and songs, interspersed occasionally with a derisive hoot at the officials, they were the jolliest convicts ever seen. (British Colonist, September 9, 1867, cited by Tina Lo, A Delicate Game: The Meaning of Law on Grouse Creek, paper presented at British Columbia Studies, 1990). Joseph Needham (Figure 7), Vancouver Island’s Chief Justice, decided in favour of the Grouse Creek Company and this was finally accepted by the Canadian Company. Both of these, so-called wars, were tests of the local justice system and little violence accompanied the incidents. What they did do was bring to a crisis point certain problems which needed resolution; the replacement of incompetent Gold Commissioners and some changes and clarifications to the method of dispute resolution, as well as clarification of the limits of government authority and the extent to which the government was prepared to go to protect its authority.
OTHER BRITISH COLUMBIA GOLD RUSHES

Although the Fraser River and the Cariboo gold rushes are the most dramatic of the gold rushes they were not the only such episodes. Even in 1859 many of the miners were leaving the dwindling bars of the lower Fraser and some headed for a new strike in the Boundary Country at Rock Creek. Charles Wilson, an officer on the boundary survey described this community in 1860:

_The Town or rather, I beg its pardon, city has sprung up like a mushroom, there are about 350 inhabitants, miners, gamblers, sharers,... Pikes, Yankees, Loafers... There are a good many substantial log buildings, stores, gambling houses, grog shops, butcher shops, etc..._ (Wilson, 1970, p. 126).

This was one of the wilder communities and reportedly needed to be straightened out by Gold Commissioner, Judge Cox, though according to Wilson, "the miners have behaved very well." (Wilson, 1970, p. 126). Mining lasted at Rock Creek for about three years with an estimated $250 000 worth of gold recovered.

In 1863 a small flood of miners occupied the Wild Horse Creek area in the Kootenays, so named when the first miners to the area saw a wild horse near the mouth and followed it up the creek. This was a rough and ready camp, which was portrayed as, a _horde of outlaw gamblers, murderers and out of a job desperados_. The miners, however, immediately established a miners’ court system and elected a sheriff while awaiting the arrival of a Gold Commissioner to handle legal matters (Christian,1967, p. 29).

The main feud seems to have been between the early and late arrivals over accessibility to the better claims. When a brawl erupted, one Tommy Walker shot off Yeast Powder Bill Burmeister’s thumb. Bill, not taking this lightly, shot Walker dead. A miners’ jury acquitted Bill.
Gold Commissioner Haynes arrived one week later, investigated and gave the same verdict.

The main town was Fisherville which was described in 1864 as a queer place and thoroughly a "mining camp"... all sorts of log huts, shake houses, split timber huts, bark huts ... men lounging about — others playing cards — others drunk — miners rocking and sluicing — pack trains commencing — altogether a motley vagabond crew in the midst of a lively and exciting scene (Birch Diary, 1864, British Columbia Archives).

When Gold Commissioner Peter O’Reilly arrived in 1865 he found Wild Horse very similar to other mining areas he had served at:

Glad to see many old faces from the Cariboo who gave me a hearty welcome. The town is like all the mining villages I have yet seen, therefore nothing very attractive, the mines of course I don’t as yet know anything about but the country if I may judge by the little I saw of it on the my way in is a vast improvement on Cariboo as is the climate from all I have heard. (Peter O’Reilly to Caroline, May 18th, 1865, O’Reilly Collection, British Columbia Archives).

In 1864 about 2300 were mining in the area but this boom quickly died with about 450 remaining in 1866.

There were small rushes to many different streams such as to Leech River near Victoria in 1864 and to many areas of southern British Columbia, but in the late 1860s most of the excitement moved north, to Omineca in 1869, Cassiar in 1873 and finally Atlin in 1898. The trek of miners to the north was smaller than the rush to the Cariboo. In the Omineca, Germansen Creek became the focus of the search with the rush peaking in 1871. In 1872 only two creeks, Germansen and Manson were being worked and in 1874 the rush had dwindled to about 60 claims being worked by some 80 miners. The Cassiar rush peaked in 1876 with about 2000 miners working the area. Some were rich creeks, the Dease River, for instance, yielded nearly $1.5 million in gold, but neither the Omineca nor the Cassiar possessed the wealth of either the Cariboo or of the later strikes around Atlin (Howay, 1914, pp. 266-272).

The Atlin gold rush occurred at the same time as the much more spectacular rush to the Klondike and so has been somewhat overshadowed, but it was a substantial gold find. Miners were able to trek down from the Yukon to the newly formed community of Atlin (Figure 8) or stop on their way north. In late 1898, over 3000 miners were working the streams around Atlin (Figure 9). Production in 1898 was estimated at more than 100 kilograms (3750 ounces) of gold, valued at $75 000. By 1899 about 12 440 kilograms (400 000 ounces) of gold, with a value of $8 000 000, had been produced. Between 1898 and 1949 over $22.5 million in gold was recovered from these creeks.
The search for placer gold did not end with the spectacular and often shortlived rushes. In 1889 the Gold Commissioner John Bowron recorded that Williams Creek with its tributaries, worked for nearly thirty years still yields more gold than any other creek in the Province. (British Columbia Department of Mines, Annual Report, 1889, p. 273). All these areas, plus many others, continued to be worked once the main rush had passed them by and miners still continue to find gold in most of the early gold areas as well as making new discoveries. One of the largest nuggets found in British Columbia, weighing about 1617 grams (52 ounces), was discovered in 1937 on Alice Shea Creek. Gold was only found in that area, for the first time in 1932.

**PLACER MINING IN THE EARLY 1900s**

A brief look at some of the major placer mining operations just after the turn of the century shows that although many small operations continued into the 1900s, the industry underwent a transformation which included an increasing dependence on hydraulic mining methods. The hydraulic operation was first introduced in 1860s. A monitor directs a high pressure stream of water to wash the gravel down to the sluice box for the recovery of gold (Figure 10). Tremendous amounts of gravel and earth could be moved by this means. The largest of these developments were in the Cariboo and the Atlin areas with some renewed interest in Cassiar and Omineca.
The largest of these operations was in the Cariboo. Miners had realized by 1900 that much of the wealth of Cariboo gold remained locked in the deep gravels of the streams and gulches. Cutting below the old surface workings on the South Fork of the Quesnel River, near Quesnel Forks, the Consolidated Cariboo Hydraulic Mining Company produced a gigantic pit at Bullion. In 1900, for instance, the company moved nearly 2 million cubic yards (over 1.5 million cubic metres) of gravel and recovered 20 470.91 troy ounces (636.7 kilograms) of gold (Anonymous, 1901a). Even though it was by far the largest, Consolidated Cariboo was not the only player. Many of the longer worked creeks continued to be mined using both older and slower techniques as well as hydraulic methods. The Forest Rose property on Williams Creek, for instance, was first developed in the 1860s with the owners first using hydraulic methods in 1876. It remained in continuous operation until 1900. On Grouse Creek, the Waverly Hydraulic Company started work in 1880 and remained in operation for some years after 1900.

Discoveries in the Horsefly area in 1901 were thought to be the precursor of developments that would bring the Cariboo to world attention as had events in 1862 (Anonymous, 1901b). Certainly some new excitement was generated, but the deep gravels of the Cariboo required capital and laborious effort to bring them into production.

Consolidated Cariboo’s Bullion mine, on which development had started in 1894, was to remain the largest of the producing mines. The company operations in 1903 included 34 placer mining leases covering about 25 000 acres. They employed about 120 men and had 53 kilometres of canals, three main reservoirs, two secondary reservoirs and a main sluice at the Number 1 pit 365 metres (1200 feet) long. Despite recovering slightly over $1 million between 1894 and 1902 the company still had not made a profit. During that period it was estimated that about 4.5 million cubic metres (6 million cubic yards) of gravel had been washed and that about another 380 million cubic metres (500 million cubic yards) remained (Watson, 1903). Over 9 million cubic metres (12 million cubic yards) had been worked by 1905 and the company claimed to be making 19 cents to the cubic metre (25 cents to the yard) but later estimates were about 7.5 cents to the cubic metre (10 cents per yard). Consolidated Cariboo lost money and the pit, 0.8 kilometre in length, was closed. Reopened in later years, Bullion Placers Limited finally closed the pit in 1942 (Lay, 1935).

In the Atlin, Cassiar and Omineca areas hydraulic mining emerged about the same time. Five
hydraulic operations were working creeks near Atlin in 1900, while several large companies were also operating in the Omineca. The Cassiar, in 1894, was slumbering after the great excitement of 1872. In 1900, a hydraulic operation commenced on Thibert Creek and although it remained the only operation until 1904 when the Berry Creek Company started, gold production grew in importance over the next decades. Hydraulic mining, in this fashion, is no longer legal in British Columbia.

**CONCLUSION**

The story of placer mining in British Columbia is far from finished. New discoveries are made every year and considerable quantities of gold are still found. The placer gold mining industry has changed from its early origins. Although some methods have been discarded and others introduced, the gold pan is still commonly used for testing small gold finds and the sluice box remains the primary means of separating gold from its associated gravel. The attraction of wealth is only part of the incentive to the gold miner, for the romance of the search for gold has cast its lure widely.

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