

THE BIG BEND GOLD RUSH

These goldfields were located on tributaries of the Columbia River in an area known as the Big Bend Country so named for the huge hairpin bend a few hundred miles long in eastern British Columbia formed by the Columbia River as it curves around the Selkirk Mountains from the river's source to the southeast in the Rocky Mountain Trench and turns southwards towards the Arrow Lakes and eventually the United States. The main finds were in the middle of the southward leg of the river's journey out of the Big Bend proper where the towns of Mica Creek and Big Bend marked the northward focus of the rush. The main part of the rush was nearer the Arrow Lakes, on creeks tributary to the Goldstream River and Downie Creek, which lay respectively immediately above and below the infamous Dalles des Morts or "Death Rapids" of the Columbia, which had been the scene of horrendous tragedies twice, in 1817 and 1838. The main town centres of the rush were at La Porte, British Columbia, at the foot of the rapids, and Downie Creek, nearby at that stream's confluence with the Columbia just downstream from La Porte.

The rush was a spin-off of the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush, the first of the major gold rushes which dominate the colony's history, out from which the huge influx of miners from California on the Fraser fanned out into other regions of the colony in search of gold. Other rushes found in the same years were the Rock Creek, Wild Horse Creek, Cariboo, Omineca, and Stikine Gold Rushes, as well as the Colville and Colorado Gold Rushes which were manned by many who had been on the Fraser and such rushes as Big Bend. The story of the Big Bend Gold Rush is as much about the effort to get there - as with all British Columbia gold rushes - as it is about the rush itself, which was modest in terms of earnings in comparison to the Fraser and Cariboo, or to the later silver and galena rushes just south in the Slocan, West Kootenay and Boundary Districts. When the rush was discovered, the upper Columbia was extremely remote from any form of non-First Nations civilization in that period, although some who reached the Big Bend rush came overland up the Rocky Mountain Trench from what is now Montana, or via Washington Territory up the Columbia River itself. Impossibly far from the Fraser, which was itself very remote and difficult to get to from Victoria, or from the rest of the world.

There were various routes into this area, as men had fanned out over the whole of British Columbia and adjoining US territories in the wake of the Fraser Gold Rush and had heard news of the rush from all directions. The Columbia route was mostly navigable and many came via that route. Regular steamboat service to La Porte, the head of navigation from Marcus, Washington Territory began in 1866. Most, however, came via a water route from the foot of Kamloops Lake, just east of Cache Creek and so near the main trails associated with the Fraser rush and the new goldfields being found north in the Cariboo. From there, steamer services travelled from Kamloops Lake via Fort Kamloops and up the South Thompson to reach Little Shuswap Lake and via the Little River to Shuswap Lake (also called, especially in the old days, Big Shuswap Lake). Shuswap Lake is one of the largest lakes in southern British Columbia, effectively an H-shaped series of four freshwater inlets, the northeast arm leading to the mouth of the short but powerful Seymour River. From there, a few passes including Pettipiece Pass led over wide cols in the Monashee Mountains to reach the Columbia, where other steamer services operated to the boomtown of Big Bend and to the mouths of the Goldstream River and Downie Creek.

The first steamer service to the Big Bend operated from that location was owned by an Italian settler from California named Savona, and so the location became quickly known as Savona's Ferry (later Savona).

In later years, once the rush was over, the Big Bend became the route of the first road connecting what is now the province of Alberta to British Columbia, which remained in use until the building of the Trans-Canada Highway through the Rogers Pass. Most of the goldfields and what remained of their boomtowns and old mining camps and workings is now beneath the waters of the reservoirs of Mica Dam or Revelstoke Canyon Dam (the Mica Dam is one of the Columbia River Treaty dams).