

## LAKE BENNETT AND THE WHITE PASS & YUKON ROUTE



### A TENT CITY SPRINGS UPON THE INLET BETWEEN LAKES LINDEMAN AND BENNETT IN THE SPRING OF 1897

At the confluence men are barely visible with a boat on the ice in preparedness to float downriver towards Dawson City. There were scows capable of carrying a herd of oxen and rafts that could be loaded with horses and hay. It was here that men slaved with the whip saw to turn trees into green lumber. The Royal North West Mounted Police insisted that the prospectors build their boats to withstand five fingers rapids.

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Lake Bennett sits partly in British Columbia and partly in the Yukon and is just north of Alaska not far from the Alaskan port of Skagway.

The narrow-gauge White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad connects Bennett, British Columbia at the south end of the lake with Skagway further south and Whitehorse, Yukon, on the north. It runs between Skagway and Fraser, British Columbia, during the summer months. The abandoned town of Bennett, British Columbia, historically referred to as Lake Bennett or Bennett Lake and the town of Carcross [previously Caribou Crossing] are on the shores of Bennett Lake.

During the Klondike Gold Rush, Bennett Lake was where the gold-seekers who had crossed the Coast Mountains from Skagway or Dyea, carrying their goods over the Chilkoot Trail or the White Pass. The prospectors purchased or built rafts to float down the Yukon River to the gold fields at Dawson City, Yukon. A large tent city sprang up on its shores, numbering in the thousands and offering all the services of a major city.

In late May 1898, the North-West Mounted Police counted 778 boats under construction at Lindeman Lake (located at a difficult portage above Bennett Lake), 850 in Bennett and the surrounding area, and another 198 at Caribou Crossing and Tagish Lake to help transport thousands of goldfield-bound travellers. It was further estimated that another 1,200 boats were built in these areas over the next few weeks. The police warned the boat builders to build strong to endure the 500-mile trip down lakes, through canyons, and river. As a precaution each boat had a number painted on its prow so that it could be checked in at police posts along the route.

By 1899 the White Pass and Yukon Railway reached Bennett, the head of river navigation. Dozens of steamboats plyed up and down the Yukon River to Dawson City causing freight rates to tumble.

The most difficult task facing the prospectors was the turning of trees into boards for the building of boats to ride the rivers to Dawson City. For this the men whipsawed green lumber into planks for the often crude and too small a craft to withstand the river trip. The whipsaw device often turned the best of friends—

This boat, a remnant of the gold rush era, lies on display in shipyard park in Whitehorse.





**CROSSING THE EAST FORK OF THE SKAGUAY RIVER**

The first passenger train over the White Pass and Yukon Route to the summit of White Pass, 20 February 1899

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**ROYAL MAIL SLEIGH**

Manufactured by xxxxxxx xxxxxxx xxxxx xxxx, this fully restored White Pass and Yukon Route Royal Mail sleigh stands on display at the Transportation Museum at Whitehorse. Buffalo robes are part of the display. They gave warmth to the travelers during the cold spells of winter.



when inexperienced—into the bitterest of enemies. The man below endured the sawdust while the man above had to pull up the saw. Trees became planks and in time planks were turned into boats.

The KMR ran from Dawson City to Sulphur Springs near the 3,000-foot high Dome, the highest point in the center of the gold fields. The operation continued until 1913 by which time much of the railway's economic base had evaporated as the gold rush wound down and dredges took over the gold recovery with far fewer people.

Thomas W. O'Brien, owner of the Klondike Brewery, and other entrepreneurs chartered the Klondike Mines Railway in 1899 to provide transportation to and from the goldfields. Unfortunately, the start of construction was delayed by politics until 1905. he had other troubles as miners who had staked claims in the gold

**WHIPSAWING**

Whipsawing lumber was tackled by placing uncut logs on a tall rectangular frame made from logs onto which were placed one or more logs for sawing into planks. One person stood on top of the platform and his partner stood beneath and the pair worked a lengthy saw back and forth in an almost vertical position to cut the log into 12-foot and sometimes longer planks. In most instances the planks were 12 to 14 inches in width by 2-inches thick. The man on top had to maintain his balance and pull the saw upwards through the log while the man below had to pull down while looking up to ensure that the cut was staying straight and that resulted in him getting sawdust in his eyes. To a “chechako” or greenhorn, whipsawing was one of the hardest of all mining operations.

Walter R. Hamilton in his book ‘The Yukon Story’ didn’t exactly see it that way: However, when the art of proper saw setting and filing for this purpose

is learned and the rhythm of responsive lift and pull is acquired and muscles coordinated, the spirit of holding your own with others who are doing the same comes into play and you try to see how many feet you can cut in a day. One man stands on the log as it lies in the saw-pit, and the other stands on the ground below and they lift and pull alternately, as they cut the log into boards or planks. The boards required for sluice box bottoms are usually cut twelve feet long and twelve inches wide at the one end, widening to fourteen at the other. This allows them, when made into sluice boxes to fit together like stove pipes, so that the water will flow through them.”

This twelve inch tall sculpture titled ‘Whipsawyers’ by Elmar Schules of Delta, British Columbia, very accurately portrays the working of a whipsaw operation. The cut planks are laid out on top of the platform temporarily until they can be piled underneath the platform. In both the British Columbia and Klondike gold rushes the planks were used for boatbuilding, cabin building and for the making of sluices for the recovery of the gold during the summer months.



**BENNETT, WINTER 1902**

The White Pass & Yukon Railway track appears in the foreground of this Eric A. Hegg print. In the left foreground four horses mill around in a corral that is surrounded by five-feet of snow. An eatery and motel are situated near the riverbank to cater to the needs of the travellers. A riverboat is frozen in at the river's edge.

Today the White Pass & Yukon route features Bennett as part of their Yukon adventure excursion.

