

WOMEN OF THE 1898 ALASKA-KLONDIKE GOLD RUSH



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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the lives of the women of Dawson City at the height of the Alaska Klondike Gold Rush of 1898. It will focus on women of all social classes to prove that the historical moment popularly represented simply as a Northern Wild-West adventure is characterized by a false stereotype. Print media and word-of-mouth painted a picture of a place where Cowboys and Indians were replaced by surly miners and bawdy dance-hall girls. By looking beyond this myth, we are able to discover that the lives of Klondike women are not as stereotypical as they appear at face value. Analyzing elements of women's every day lives—such as labor and sexuality—shows that no woman fits wholly within or outside the stereotype. Thus, we see that it is both a myth that all Klondike women were dance-hall girls, and that dance-hall girls lived completely different, and separate, lives from respectable women.

The first section of the thesis looks at how the Klondike community fits into the broader culture of the Victorian Era as well as similarities and differences to life in other mining towns. This section also introduces several women from all different walks of life that the thesis will use to demonstrate how each type of women was affected by, and how she affected, the culture of Dawson. These women include: a famously dubbed dance-hall girl “Queen of the Klondike” or “Klondike Kate,” a mother and housewife Martha Black, a school teacher Laura Berton, and a single young woman Edna Berry, among many other colorful characters.

The second section divides the type of work women did into three categories—prostitution, dance-hall entertaining, and “respectable” work. Information about the more salacious work is culled from newspaper articles because many sex-workers and dancers were illiterate and none of them were likely to leave behind evidence of their careers. Memoirs of the more elite women provide information about the other side of society—that of the housewife. This section also explores the topics of clothing and gender relations as they relate to the different positions women took in the community. By first dividing the type of work and then looking at individual women, we begin to see how many women were either forced or voluntarily moved in and out of the stereotype of the Klondike woman.

After debunking the Klondike myth by demonstrating the existence and importance of women who did not work in red-light jobs, the last section explores more in-depth some of the mundane tasks Victorian housewives were expected to do and the adaptations they made to perform these tasks in the Klondike region. The tasks include marriage, raising children, creating the comforts of “home” out of a cabin, and preparing food. To come full circle and return to the myth of the dance-hall girl with which the thesis started, we can now look at these girls in a new light. Their lives were just as complex as and intertwined with the Victorian women they lived beside.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are strange things done in the midnight sun,
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was the night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.

~Robert Service, from the “Cremation of Sam McGee”

I have grown up listening to Robert Service’s poems about the Klondike as bedtime stories and have traveled the road from Skagway to Whitehorse every year, sometimes more than once a year. In elementary school my class was taken to Skagway and given a historical tour of the town. The buildings still mostly look as they did during the time of the Gold Rush. This project allowed me to flesh out more of the story behind the buildings and museums I have visited so many times since elementary school and discover who the women were that are so often overlooked in current historical representations of the Klondike because of the myth of the dance-hall girls. I also got a chance to explore the thrill that called so many North and gained a better understanding of the place I simply see as home. I want to thank my parents for raising me in a place that inspires the imagination and where one cannot help being drawn to the beauty of the outdoors.

Two years ago, while interning for the summer at the Alaska State Historical Collections Library, I was given the project of finding specific photographs housed in various collections that were to be scanned and put into a digital database as part of the online Gold Rush Centennial Photographs, 1893–1916 collection. From one of the collections, I pulled out a photograph that made me stop and stare (see title page photograph). A woman, with her hair piled on top of her head, stood against a black background, wrapped from shoulders to toes in yards of white cloth. With the arm farther from the camera she rested her hand on her hip while with the other she attempted to fasten a large bow or other decoration on the left side of her chest. She looked down at the bow with a half-smile on her lips. The picture intrigued me and I had to find out who this woman was. I learned it was Klondike Kate, Queen of the Klondike, a dance-hall girl. Two years later, she would inspire my thesis. I want to thank all the staff at the library for helping me find primary source material for my thesis. They not only pulled the material I found myself in the library catalogue, but they supplied me with other sources I might have missed, and showed me online databases that were helpful. After spending each day of my winter break pouring through memoirs and personal correspondence and articles about the gold rush, I feel I have only scratched the surface of the available material.

I also want to thank my two advisers, Professor James Krippner and Professor Ryan Edgington for guidance in this project.

Last, but not least, I want to give a HUGE thanks to my aunt, Jennifer Gavin, for giving me editing suggestions for each section.

INTRODUCTION

A lonely miner, bundled up in so many layers that he was unrecognizable, stood on a planked sidewalk. The street was lined on both sides by structures, each with a false front to give the illusion that the building behind it was larger than it truly was. The street itself was a quagmire of mud, so the sidewalks were crowded. Men, dressed just like him, moved quickly along the creaking, wooden walkways to their destinations to escape the frigid outdoors. From several of the buildings drifted strains of music, raucous male voices, and the smell of smoke and beer. In search of warmth and some entertainment, a man might have chosen to slip into any one of these dance halls where he could drink, gamble, enjoy performances by scandalously clad girls, or have a “partner dance” with a floor hostess. The lone miner, conscious that he could see his breath on the icy air, glanced up and down the street at the various halls that made up the nightlife of the city he had so recently arrived in. He chose the closest one and ducked inside.

After pulling off his hood and letting his eyes adjust to the dimness, he found himself in a room with a cast-iron woodstove and a polished bar. He ordered a whisky and handed over his gold satchel so the bartender could weigh out his payment. Picking up his drink, he carried it through a second room where men huddled around gaming tables and into a third room where he eased into a chair and took in a sight that had been quite rare since he left home—women.

These women were not just any women; they were Amazons of the North. They captivated a man for an evening. He might find himself giving all his gold over to a girl who would flirt with him, but inevitably escape him at the end of the night. And the dresses they

wore—they often showed bare limbs! How scandalous they were when even the piano wore a skirt lest it show its legs!¹

A girl with sparkling blue eyes and red hair stalked onto the stage. The room fell silent. This was Klondike Kate, Queen of the Klondike. In a deep, throaty voice she began singing the words to what would become her signature song, “She’s More To Be Pitied Than Censured”:



Figure 1: Klondike Kate

Do not scorn her with words fierce and bitter
Do not laugh at her shame and downfall
For a moment just stop and consider
That a man was the cause of it all...²

This scene is much like one that may have occurred in Dawson City at the height of the Alaska Klondike Gold Rush of 1898. Crouched between the river on one side and the mountains on the other, Dawson grew almost overnight with the boom of the gold rush and disappeared almost as quickly two years later.

This thesis will explore the lives of Klondike women of all social classes to prove that the historical moment popularly represented simply as a Northern Wild-West adventure is characterized by a false stereotype. Print media and word-of-mouth painted a picture of a place where Cowboys and Indians were replaced by surly miners and bawdy dance-hall girls. In reality, amidst—or perhaps, beside—the salacious characters lived women who had varied experiences that did not fit within the stereotype at all. This thesis will look at how the time and

¹ Frances Backhouse, *Women of the Klondike* (Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap Books, 1995), 92.

² Lael Morgan, *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush* (Washington: Epicenter Press, 1998), 139.

place of the gold rush allowed women who followed the crowds North to the Klondike to question gender-specific issues such as dress, work, play, and power. Ultimately, however, due to the transitory nature of Dawson, women were pressured into maintaining similar lifestyles, with slight adaptations, to those they had had in the continental United States.

The historians who have embarked on the mission to expose the lives of women who took part in the Alaska Klondike Gold Rush of 1898 all acknowledge the previous lack of study on this subject and have attempted to answer one of two questions: Why is it that women have been so ignored in the collective memory of the gold-rush stories and consequently almost forgotten as having been part of it at all? And, if women are remembered, why is it only the prostitutes and dance hall girls? As authors tackle these questions the lives of the wives and mothers is mysteriously lacking for the most part. The focus has remained on the more sensational saloon-girls of the gold-rush heyday.

The first section of the thesis will reconstruct the events that led to the start of the gold rush and the consequential community that resulted from the large influx of gold seekers. For the latter part, the thesis will explore how and what it meant for women to attempt to retain a Victorian way of life and how this life compared to other frontier pioneer mining lives. Section two will discuss the varied options for work that were available to women. It will also discuss how women managed to artfully expand and retain their gender identity. The last section will focus on the space of the “home,” the private sphere controlled by women.

PART I: THE GOLD RUSH AS PART OF THE AMERICAN WEST AND VICTORIAN AGE IN AMERICA

How the Klondike Gold Rush Started

History may never know who discovered the first gold of the 1898 Alaska Klondike Gold Rush. Stories differ, depending on the source. The name most commonly given as the first discoverer is that of George Washington Carmack, a white, American man. According to his memoir, Carmack, in search of gold, flipped a coin to decide whether to head upriver or downriver and then he had a dream from which he concluded he needed to go salmon fishing.³ On August 16, 1896 a few miles from the junction of the Klondike and Yukon rivers, on a creek later renamed Bonanza by Carmack and his party,



Figure 3: George Washington Carmack

someone spotted gold. The party consisted of Carmack, his Native wife Shaaw Tlaa (better known to history as Kate Carmack), her Tagish brother Keish, renamed Skookum Jim by his non-Native companions, and Kate's Tagish cousin Kaa Goox, alias Dawson Charlie.⁴ Carmack's memoir fails to mention his first wife, Kate, at all. Thus, although Carmack asserts that he came upon the first nuggets of gold to set off the Klondike stampede, his claims remain questionable. They are further discredited by the fact that he justifies his narrative as an attempt to set the record straight about statements made regarding him by men whom he believed to be disgruntled because they were too late to stake claims. He also felt the need to include an endorsement of honesty with his memoir, perhaps a subtle recognition of his nickname, "Lying George".⁵

³ George Carmack, *My Experiences in the Yukon*, Published posthumously by Marguerite P. Carmack (1933), 6

⁴ Jennifer Duncan, *Frontier Spirit: The Brave Women of the Klondike*, (Canada: Doubleday, 2003), 63-68.; Charlene Porsild, *Gamblers and Dreamers: Women, Men, and Community in the Klondike*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 3.

⁵ Carmack, Introduction.;

Melody Webb, *The Last Frontier*, (University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 123

Several theories exist as to who might have really found the first gold. Robert Henderson, a Canadian, may have been the first to discover gold and tipped off Carmack. Carmack angrily recounts in his memoir that the Canadian government awarded a pension to Henderson for making the first gold discovery in the Klondike district. Carmack said he suspected it was because Henderson was Canadian.⁶ Other historians suggest that Skookum Jim and Dawson Charlie found the gold while Carmack slept.⁷

The Sourdough Stampede Association put forth yet another scenario in which Kate Carmack is the true discoverer: "...and while Carmack was resting, his wife in wandering around, found a bit of bedrock exposed and taking a pan of dirt, washed it and found that she had some four dollars in coarse gold."⁸ If it was Kate, unfortunately for her, being a married woman prevented her from being able to file as a claim owner, thus leaving no official documentation of her participation in the gold finding. Married women were expected to file claims under their husband's name.⁹ The men in her party, however, were able to all officially register claims, and Carmack registered as No. 1. This could have been because he was the only literate one among the three men and took charge of the registration process.¹⁰ Although we will never know if it was a woman that started the entire gold rush, this scenario hints at the women largely forgotten for their role in making the Klondike the place it was.

One aspect of the find had more witnesses: Carmack walked into a saloon to brag about it. He wrote, "After gathering my wits and taking a little time to get my breath, I turned my back

⁶ Carmack, 11.;

Webb, 123.

⁷ Webb, 123.

⁸ V. L. Marion, *The Alaska Klondike Gold Book: A roster of the progressive men and women who were the argonauts of the Klondike gold stampede and those who are identified with the pioneer days and subsequent development of Alaska and the Yukon Territory*, Ed. by Sourdough Stampede Association (Washington: 1930), 30

⁹ Morgan, 15.

¹⁰ Porsild, 74.

Porsild writes that both Dawson Charlie and Skookum Jim signed for their claims with a big X, suggesting that they must have been illiterate.

to the bar, held up my hand and said, ‘Boys, I’ve got some good news to tell you. There’s a big strike up the river.’” He then produced a sample of the gold he’d procured.¹¹ Once there was no longer any doubt in the other men’s minds that Carmack had indeed found gold, word spread like wildfire from miner to miner to traders and so on. A steady stream of ambitious people, men and women of different nationalities and levels of society, started to make their way to Dawson: the stampede was on.

Four different routs became popular ways to travel to the Yukon. The first was to simply take a boat up the coast. The second, most frequently written about way to travel there was to take a boat to Dyea or Skagway, and from there hike over the Chilkoot, or White Pass, Trail to the Yukon River. Then at lakes Lindeman and Bennett, the gold seekers would build a boat and float to Dawson. The third and fourth ways were both overland trails. The fact that both life in the Klondike—and the trip to get there—were expensive and dangerous did not stop many from trying. Freezing to death and lack of sufficient provisions were just two of the infinite number of dangers.

The indigenous peoples in the Klondike area overrun by outsiders in 1898 today are known, collectively, as the First Nations. These included the Inuit, the Gwich’in of the North, the Han of the West, the Central-area Tutchne, the Kaska of the East, and the Tagish and Tlingit of the South.¹² Interactions between Caucasians and Natives had been limited before the gold rush. The coastal Tlingit had had contact with non-Native traders and seafarers. The gold discovery increased contact slowly at first, but quickened as Natives found a market selling manual labor.

¹¹ Carmack, 15.

¹² Duncan, 43.

Tlingit and Tagish men and women offered to help carry Klondikers' goods over the Chilkoot Pass for a steep fee.¹³

Many people went in groups and pooled their resources. The groups largely consisted of men, but occasionally sisters and wives, as well as single women joined a party. Dawson City in 1896 consisted of tents and shacks on a mud flat. By 1898, it had grown to about 30,000 people and had schools, churches, libraries, hospitals, banks, law offices, hotels, theaters, dance halls, and saloons.¹⁴ The more respectable institutions along side the theaters, dance halls, and saloons, indicate the presence of the more refined members of the community who lived similarly alongside, and sometimes doubled as, the employees and frequenters of the local night life.

As successful miners began to make their way back home, arriving at ports in Seattle and San Francisco with their luggage full of gold, the press picked up the story and word spread farther. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* sent 212,000 copies of a special Klondike edition, with the headline "A Ton of Gold," to newspapers all over the country. Businessmen and politicians used publicity to promote the stampede in the hopes of benefiting from it.¹⁵ Everyone wanted in on the new found gold.

Population Numbers

Finding census data for the Klondike is a difficult task because people moved in and out of Dawson so quickly that taking a census was somewhat senseless. By culling together estimated numbers from several different sources we can learn a few things. First, there was a definite boom in population between 1898 and 1899. Second, the number of women stayed very low compared to the number of men.

¹³ Porsild, 32, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 5, 7, 8.

¹⁵ Morgan, 34.

Senator Frank A. Aldrich wrote in his unpublished *Forty-Eight Years: Observations and Adventures of a Prospector*, that Customhouse reports of 1880 show 690 arrived in Alaska and 387 departed.¹⁶ These figures relate the relatively low population before the gold-rush boom and reveal that the percentage of people who only stayed for a season was about 50 percent.

On June 23, 1898, Clare M. Stroud Boyntan Phillips was living in Dawson. That day she wrote in her journal that she believed there were about 7,500 people there, only 500 of whom were women.¹⁷ This meant there were 14 men to every woman. The population had significantly increased since the year before. While Martha Black was making her way towards Dawson, also in 1898, she fell into conversation with an officer at a Mounted Police stop and he informed her that since the previous May 18,000 men had passed by the stop—and Black was the 631st woman to have done so.¹⁸ It is not clear how many days or months separated Phillips' diary entry and Black's conversation with the Mountie, but it is evident that the population grew substantially during 1898 and the ratio of women to men remained high. The high ratio was also noticed and recorded by Alfred G. McMichael. He wrote some time in 1898 that he watched people disembark from a boat in Dawson and there were about 50 passengers, 6 of whom were women.¹⁹

Phillips wrote a journal entry in 1899 in which she again estimated the Dawson population. This time she pegged the population at 40,000-50,000 people.²⁰ However, Lael Morgan, author of *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush*, cites a Dawson police

¹⁶ Aldrich, Senator Frank A. *Forty-Eight Years Observations and Adventures of a Prospector*. (From the Alaska State Historical Collections), 39

¹⁷ Clare M. Stroud Boyntan Phillips, *Klondike Tenderfoot: From the Diaries of Clare M. Stroud Boyntan Phillips 1898-1902*. Trans. by Virginia P. Boyntan Nethercott (New York: The Reporter Co., 1992), 35

¹⁸ Martha Black, *Her Story from the Dawson Gold Fields to the Halls of Parliament: Formerly My Ninety Years*. Ed. by Flo Whyard (Washington: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1986), 35

¹⁹ Alfred G. McMichael, *Fourth of July Creek: The Story of Alfred G. McMichael's Trip to Alaska During the Gold Rush of 1898*. Compiled and Ed. by Juliette C. Reinicker (From the Alaska State Historical Collections), 45.

²⁰ Phillips, 101.

census that reports a population of 3,659 men and 786 women.²¹ Although it is unknown how far apart in time terms Phillips' estimation and the police census were, we can assume that the census was taken after the gold-rush boom had subsided and people had begun to leave the Yukon. Overall, the estimated population numbers recorded by Klondike Gold Rush participants reveal that Dawson's hit its heyday for just the two years of 1898 and 1899.

Reasons for Being in the Klondike

By the early 1870s the United States had sunk into a political and economic depression. Factories closed, stores reduced their staff, family breadwinners were out of work, and the labor organizer Eugene V. Debs started promoting railway strikes in 1877. Then, in 1895, the Cuban Rebellion spurred events that set off the Spanish-American War.²² With the country in turmoil, the word 'gold' caused a sensation; there was a widespread, burgeoning interest in the gold rush. In a nation where work was likely to be hard—if one could get it at all—it's no surprise that thousands were swept up by the vision of making their fortune by picking up gold nuggets off the ground. Unlike other gold rushes, boosters hardly needed to promote this event. The state of the country and personal desires to change one's situation were reason enough to go. The women who packed their bags and headed for the goldfields, all sharing the dream of desired wealth, came from diverse backgrounds. Some simply went out of wifely duty, as in the cases of Eudora Bundy Ferry and Alice Edna Bush Berry. Many, however, had more pressing reasons.

The Klondike offered a chance at escape for husbands or wives.²³ Women of all social classes jumped at the chance to turn their backs on their past lives and try their luck in a new community where nobody would question why a single woman was suddenly relocating. This

²¹ Morgan, 15.

²² Black, 15-16.

²³ Porsild, 96.

sentiment is best exemplified by a quote from Maud Parrish, a woman who left her marriage behind. Once on board a ship headed to the Klondike she contemplated the buzzing crowd that surrounded her, “What if they had run away from wives or husbands, conventions and restrictions? The call of adventure, the call of the wild, was in most of them, no matter what they were doing.”²⁴ Had it been appropriate to talk about such topics openly, women might have found solidarity in knowing that many of the women they met at the Klondike were also running away and had come looking for the same things they were: a new life, and adventure.

Martha Black is just such an example. She abandoned a sour marriage in the hopes of finding a future more to her liking. Black, a woman from an affluent background, had grown tired of her high-society life in Chicago and her steadily worsening marriage. After listening to her husband and his friends discussing making the trip north, Black was enthralled. No quiet stay-at-home, she wheedled her husband into letting her go along. Soon after starting out, she and her husband parted company — and matrimony. But she continued to head north. Black viewed the Klondike as “liberty and opportunity”. She wrote that she wanted to “accomplish something worthwhile, something of which my three boys would be proud.”²⁵

Clare M. Stroud Boyntan Phillips, like Black, was a disillusioned wife. She changed her name and headed towards the Klondike hoping it would help her recover from an abusive marriage that ended in divorce. Unlike Black, though, Phillips came from New York City and was the daughter of a carpenter.²⁶ Comparing Phillips and Black demonstrates that marriage problems spanned all social classes, and prompted more than a few women to trek north.

²⁴ Maud Parrish, “from Nine Pounds of Luggage,” in *Maiden Voyages: Writings of Women Travelers*, ed. Mary Morris, (New York: Vintage Departures, 1993), 175.

²⁵ Black, 21, 17, 59.

²⁶ Phillips, 104, vii.

Some women went to the Klondike for a more selfless reason: to teach. Laura Beatrice Berton was offered, and accepted, a position as a schoolteacher.²⁷ New teachers were often being sought as, one by one, those already in the classroom abandoned their teaching posts to try their hands at mining. Anna Fulcomer, who had held a post at Yukon River mining camp, is one of the many who decided to abandon her classroom in 1896-97 in favor of the gold fields.²⁸

While there were several other respectable reasons for women to book their passage north, there were also women whose mining ambitions were limited to the pockets of the men who frequented dance-halls. Parrish, who had left her home and husband, was about 17 years old. There were not many options open to young girls wanting to earn a wage in the Yukon, so they were often forced to turn to the dance-halls. Parrish doesn't mention trying anything else and happily remarked, "Up there I wasn't thought wild and headstrong and naughty."²⁹

Kate "Kitty" Rockwell was another young girl who reveled in the freedom she found in life as a dance-hall entertainer. Kitty grew up in a wealthy home and had a governess. She had been a naughty child. Sometimes she skipped school and had picnics, charging the food to her stepfather's accounts. Her parents sent her to one boarding school after another, where she gleefully misbehaved and was kicked out of each one. Next, her mother tried placing her under the guidance of nuns in South America—that did not work either. Eventually, Kitty ended up in New York with her mother, who had divorced her rich husband and become rather poor. Out of necessity, Kitty needed a job and found one—as a dancer for \$18 per week, enough for her and her mother to live off of. From there she moved to a job at Coney Island. Through connections she had made in the entertainment industry, she received a job offer in the Northwest, so she

²⁷ Laura Beatrice Berton, *I Married the Klondike* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1954),

²⁸ Michael Ostrogorsky, "Female Stampeters to the Klondike and Alaska: Women Were Everywhere," *Columbia Magazine*, (Spring 1994), 39

²⁹ Parrish, 177.

packed what little she had and boarded a train. She was surprised when she got there to learn it was work in a dancehall, but she didn't have enough money to return to New York, so she had little choice but to take the position.³⁰ When Kate heard about the Gold Rush she decided to leave her dance-hall job to follow the masses. She was in her early 20s at the time.³¹ The Klondike provided Kate with the time of her life: not only was she given the moniker "Klondike Kate," but she was also known as the "Queen of the Klondike."

All these women are examples of the diversity that made up the women in the Dawson community. While Klondike Kate and Parrish do conform to the stereotype, the other women certainly do not.

Klondike Society vs. Victorian Life

The Alaska Klondike Gold Rush took place near the end of the Victorian era, which lasted, historians argue, from 1837 to 1901 in England and lingered on until 1914 in the United States.³² During this period, social class standing was viewed as overwhelmingly important. Those who hoped to maintain their status or move up in society followed strict rules of conduct and etiquette. The many advice and instruction manuals on mannerly behavior that were published for women during this period evidence the importance of etiquette. Respectable women were expected to take their place in society as wives and mothers, and provide a well-ordered, happy home for their husbands and children. The manuals informed their readers on the

³⁰ Kate Rockwell Matson, as told to May Mann. "I Was Queen of the Klondike." *Alaska Sportsman*, (August 1944), 11, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Ellis Lucia, *Klondike Kate: The Life & Legend of Kitty Rockwell the Queen of the Yukon* (New York: Hastings House, 1962)

In an interview 43 years after her dance hall days Kate said she was 19 years old when she went to the Klondike. Her biography says she was about 24.

³² Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 1997), IX.

proper ways to run a home, decorate it, cook a meal, and act towards a husband or child, as well as the proper deportment for social situations outside the home.³³

Ellen M. Plante argues that the lives of western pioneer women differed dramatically from those in growing cities because the pioneers were too busy trying to fulfill basic needs of food and shelter to live by Victorian standards.³⁴ However, behind the outward illusion of the Klondike being similar to the “Wild West” myth, there was a unique Victorian society there as well. Dawson was a very unique and fluid space because it only existed for a short window of about two years and the inhabitants came and went quickly. Because no lasting community was set up that formed its own identity over time, the community that existed was based on practices and ideals that the men and women brought with them.

With hopes of gold that would bring new wealth for a family, and the knowledge that the Klondike was a temporary situation, women who could afford to participate in Dawson’s high society maintained their Victorian way of life to the best of their ability. As most thought they would return to their home states soon, there was no reason to let news find its way back home that they had broken social rules; and having been raised with Victorian ideals, the women knew no other way to relate to one another than in the ways they had been taught.

Dawson City, like any Victorian society, had a social hierarchy. People who had been part of the middle class in their previous places of residence easily formed the elite class of Dawson. In keeping with Victorian attitudes, the growing middle-class members, frustrated with their social rank, tried to raise their status. In the northern climate, in a place unlike anywhere the Klondikers had ever been or were ever likely to be, status was not based on wealth, as gold mining could change a person’s wealth overnight. Instead, it was based on virtue and learning.

³³ Ibid., 1.

³⁴ Ibid., X.

Thus, the elite class welcomed the refined members of Dawson's society. Members of the professional and business class, as well as teachers, were invited to attend high-class functions. Miners, laborers, police, and trades people held the next rung of the social ladder. Below them were the lowest forms of society—dance-hall girls and lower still, prostitutes. Some of the women who ended up working red-light jobs arrived in the Klondike with aspirations of joining the elite class, but due to financial difficulties fell into prostitution and dancing. These unfortunate women may have shared elite values, but compromised their virtue. The thesis will further explore this issue in the section on women's dance-hall work. The women who inhabited the red-light district of town had their own internal hierarchy too, based on popularity and notoriety. Lastly, Indians were considered to be even lower than society's "lowlifes."³⁵

The members of different social classes did not mingle much. To maintain their social status, women had to be careful whom they associated with. For example, White women did not visit Native women or women of "dubious sexual morals".³⁶ There was a social stigma against marrying across racial boundaries, so only a small number of the first prospectors married Native women. Martha Black, a woman of the Dawson City elite class, was well aware of the social stratification and remarked on it in her memoir. In retrospect, looking back on the gold rush from a more modern era in which many of the Victorian ideals had faded away, she was sorry for the way women of different social standing treated one another. She wrote, "I have wondered since if we other women could not have been kinder to those so set apart from us. Too often many of us, secure in our legitimacy, swanked by arrogantly."³⁷ In another instance, Black relates a debate over allowing dance-hall girls to buy season tickets to the ice-skating rink where the elite classes held skating parties and ice carnivals. In the end it was decided that dance-hall girls

³⁵ Porsild, 14, 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁷ Black, 50.

would be allowed, but only with certain restrictions.³⁸ This Victorian society had to make certain allowances since everyone lived in relatively close proximity in a climate that fostered empathy for every person not native to the area—because they all had to learn how to survive by any means possible.

As the number of white people grew into bustling communities during the gold rush, society's obvious disapproval of men taking Native wives was felt more sharply. This explains why Natives and white people did not mix in town or live near each other. The majority of Dawson was white, unlike California mining towns where Natives, Mexicans, and people of other races and nationalities formed a large part of the social structure of a town.

During the Victorian Era, the type of place one socialized was very class- and gender-dependent. When the gold rush started, women were scarce. Thus, the first types of social spaces to appear were saloons. Here men gathered to indulge themselves in drink and the company of easy women, who were the first type of women to follow the miners in the hopes of making money off of them, giving rise to the stereotype. Saloons, however, were inappropriate places for proper Victorian women and offended their sensibilities. Respectable women used their homes as social spaces, but keeping their lives in the private sphere meant that only dance-hall goings-ons were public knowledge because the other women did not publish their memoirs until years after the fact. Thus the stereotype of Klondike women flourished.

“Respectable” women did not enter saloons, for fear of being taken advantage of by men. The only exception to this rule seems to be in the case of Mrs. Hitchcock and Miss Van Buren. These two high-society women from New York went to the Yukon in search of a good time and found one. Their male escort took them for drinks to a dance hall with variety actresses. The two society women were more amused by watching the occupants of the private boxes than the show

³⁸ Ibid., 72.

on stage.³⁹ While it would have been unacceptable for these refined women to enter a saloon in, for example, New York or Philadelphia, the unique situation of the Klondike afforded them this opportunity. It was obvious that these women had no intention of integrating themselves into the Klondike culture when they took chips as souvenirs that the dance-hall girls would trade in for their earnings at the end of the night.⁴⁰ Had the women come to Dawson to live like the rest of the high-society women, the lifestyle they would have seen would not have been that of the gold and pleasure seeking males and the females reduced to working in saloons. They would have been welcomed into the homes of women who participated in the “civilized” Victorian household social circle.

Victorian rules dictated that a woman was not to visit a man in his boarding house in order not to compromise her virtuous reputation, but she was allowed to entertain visitors in her parlor.⁴¹ Laura Beatrice Berton, who went to the Klondike to fill a teaching position, wrote about the annoyances of sharing a small house with three other teachers and having only one parlor in which they could each entertain prospective beaux at different times:

By midwinter a real rift developed over the use of the sitting-room for entertaining our beaux. For in those filmless cabaretless days the chief evening’s entertainment for a gentleman and a lady consisted of a stilted conversation on a sofa. Unfortunately, when one of us entertained in the sitting room we seriously inconvenienced the other three. For the parlour was also the sole source of water, hot and cold, and the passageway to a shed which led to the toilet. Thus, while one girl entertained her boy friend, the rest of us were imprisoned in our tiny rooms until morning.⁴²

Most Klondike participants had to make slight adaptations, since many cabins were not built like Victorian homes with parlors. Cabins with wives and sisters became social centers

³⁹ “Two Women in the Klondike,” *The Critic*, vol. 34, No. 863, May 1899, 427-28.

The private boxes will be further explained in the section about dance hall work.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 429.

⁴¹ Porsild, 15.

⁴² Berton, 73.

because their homes were kept warm since there was someone at home all day to keep the fire going. Female laughter, home cooking, and domestic refinements also drew cold and homesick miners to cabins with women.⁴³ Black describes her own cabin becoming a social scene. Neighbor pioneers, both men and women, brought gifts to help her during her pregnancy and afterwards they came to shower attention on the baby because the parents among them missed their own children.⁴⁴

The elite Klondike women retained the Victorian rules of visiting one another in their new social circle. This practice alone debunks the myth that the lives of women in western mining communities differ drastically from the lives of their non-frontier living counterparts. According to the etiquette manuals, visits were to be kept short and serve the point of maintaining or increasing one's social status. Also, if the woman one intended to visit was not at home, the visitor was to leave a calling card as proof of an attempted visit.⁴⁵ Berton explained in her memoir the rigorous visiting schedule she and the other teachers were compelled to keep to in order to maintain their place among the elite women. Each socialite woman had "a day" in which they hosted an open house and the other women were obliged to pay a call:

Anybody who was anybody, and some who weren't, had a day. All my life in Dawson I had one on the second Tuesday of the month. On one's day, one was at home to the entire town during the hours of the late afternoon and early evening.

If the woman was not at home or ill on her "day", she put out a basket and her visitors left calling cards. Social standing was based on the number of women that showed up. Berton confessed that nowhere else were teachers considered part of the elite social circle and she found the ritual somewhat tedious:

⁴³ Backhouse, 44.

⁴⁴ Black, 44, 46.

⁴⁵ Plante, 123. Cards became more elaborately decorated as their importance increased.

As a result of this convention it was possible—nay, necessary—to attend an At Home every week-day afternoon. Sometimes, on crisp winter days when we had been in the stuffy schoolroom all day, Miss Hamtorf and I would rebel at the idea of attending another day. ‘Isn’t it ridiculous,’ we used to tell each other. ‘How much nicer it would be to go for a long walk.’ But in the end we went to tea, to see and to be seen, for it was a great social snub to the hostess not to attend.⁴⁶

The Victorian socialite women probably accepted the teachers into their circle because the “respectable” women of Dawson formed a new support network for one another.

The public social engagements women attended in Dawson were decidedly Victorian in nature. Once Victorian girls were old enough, usually ages 16-18, they were allowed to attend dances, elegant balls, theater performances, concerts, operas, and picnics.⁴⁷ Elite Dawson women wrote about attending summer tennis parties, winter skating parties, sleigh rides, fancy-dress carnivals, balls, social hops, and theater performances.⁴⁸

Several factors caused Victorian ideals to shift over time. Early in the period, the Civil War in 1861 and the second industrial revolution spurred jobs typically held by men to be taken over by women. Afterwards, women kept working and factories opened, providing more wage work for women. With more factory jobs available, fewer women took jobs as domestic help, leaving housewives to do more of their own housework than before. With more women working in the public sphere, it is not surprising that women began to demand more rights—the beginning of the Suffrage movement.⁴⁹ This was a time of shifting boundaries for women and some dared to push them farther than others, but still maintained the basic Victorian way of life. As a result, even though they had made changes to adapt for the ways of life of the Klondike, for the women of Dawson it was still a Victorian civilization.

⁴⁶ Berton, 44 – 46.

⁴⁷ Plante, 15.

⁴⁸ Berton, 49.;

Phillips, 45.

⁴⁹ Plante, 144.

Contrasting Mining Pioneer Life: Klondike, Wyoming, California

It is hard to compare life in the Klondike to life in other mining towns, more specifically those of California and Wyoming. Because the existence of Dawson was so short, as Dawson didn't mature over several years into a stable community, the only comparisons that can be made have to do with daily life. There were large disparities in the way people lived and nourished themselves. The variations in lifestyles were a result of the difference in time period, mining techniques being used, and the physical climates of the areas. Although Klondike women performed tasks differently than their sisters in other mining camps, they still performed the same types of traditional female labor: providing a well ordered home, preparing food for hungry mouths, and a myriad of other chores. Curiously, for the majority of women, mining was not one of their daily activities.

The way the gold mining was done affected the demographics, changing the type of community a mining camp became. Wyoming differed from California and the Klondike for a couple of reasons. First, the mining operation was overseen by a company, meaning there were set social regulations, therefore immediately gender relations were artificially created. Second, Wyoming underground mining, considered young man's work, drew a young crowd of people mostly under age 30.⁵⁰ In contrast to this, California and Klondike prospectors did placer mining, accomplished by panning and/or using sluice boxes. In other words, gold searching was surface work that could be done by anyone who could pick up a pan-full of dirt. This meant that there was no overbearing company and no certain age group more likely to exceed any other in number. The type of community was important because it affected the type of housing set up. For example, in Wyoming the numerous young single men often bunked together in rooming

⁵⁰ Dee Garceau, *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, 1880-1929* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 42.

houses while young single women, possibly prospective brides for the men, boarded with families.⁵¹ In the Klondike, miners could be older and more often lived in small groups in cabins or tents they set up for their own parties. Similarly, California miners commonly lived in groups of two to five.⁵²

Another reason the housing style differed between the gold mining towns of the western continental United States and the Klondike was the greater permanence of the California and Wyoming residents. The western gold rushes prompted the immigration of whole families westward. Many of the immigrants came looking for their own parcel of land to homestead and a new life out in the West.

The Klondike, in comparison, did not prompt a migration of people who settled the area. Very few thought they were heading north to an inhospitable climate to stay, and very few of those who survived the hardship of their travel and time there, did stay. Each season there was a constant movement of people through Dawson to the northern gold-fields or back towards the south. The almost constant turnover explains the lack of homesteads. The turnover instead led to the vacating of small cabins that newcomers would inhabit until they themselves moved on. Some residents of Dawson, who stayed for a longer duration than the average miner, still moved almost every year. Some moved with the seasons, rooming closer to town during the winter when travel was hard and farther towards the gold fields in the spring. Some took trips home, vacating a cabin and having to find a new one upon their return.⁵³ The constant flow of new women through the area prevented the loss of Victorian customs. Each woman presumed she would soon return to her previous setting, which prompted her, for her reputation's sake, to

⁵¹ Ibid., 57.

⁵² Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (W. W. Norton and Company, London, 2000), 106.

⁵³ Eudora Bundy Ferry, *Yukon Gold: Pioneering Days in the Canadian North* (New York: Exposition Press, 1971), 32, 39-40.

provide no reason that might set other women's tongues wagging. The only irregularities these women allowed to Victorian customs were the few adaptations they all had to make due to the climate.

Edna Berry lived as a young girl on a homestead in California and as an adult in a miner's cabin in the Yukon. Consequently, her memoir clearly identifies key differences between the living styles experienced in both types of mining situations. The disparity was of course due to the different climates and outside temperatures common to both places. The cabin Berry describes living in during her childhood was large. It had many rooms, including a kitchen.⁵⁴ These types of cabins, unlike those in the Yukon, were not built with heating efficiency in mind. The warm California temperatures helped to keep cabins warm—so much so that some cabin-dwellers there did their cooking and laundry in another structure so as to keep the residence cabin cool.⁵⁵ Klondike cabins were often one-room affairs with a cookstove in the middle for cooking and heating purposes. Owners of cabins with more than one room closed the doors to other rooms and heated only one room during the day in order to conserve fuel.⁵⁶ Indoor cookstove smoke was also a greater problem in the Yukon than in the warmer climate of California.

Food storage differed as well. In Yukon cabins, food was kept in a cache, a small raised shed, outside in order to keep food out of reach of animals and to prevent the living quarters from smelling like food—so that animals were not tempted to break into the one-room cabins, following the odor. None of these inconveniences affected the definition of Victorian life. As long as women publicly maintained good morals and proper etiquette, the way chores were done hardly mattered.

⁵⁴ Alice Edna Berry, *The Bushes and the Berrys* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1941), 16-18.

⁵⁵ Garceau, 129.

⁵⁶ Ferry, 40.

The cold of the northern climate was also responsible for a lack of produce and livestock hardy enough to be raised in the Klondike. California's fertile soil provided excellent pasturage and hay for raising cows and horses, and for planting gardens and orchards.⁵⁷ The relative ease of farming there was an incentive to homestead, with production of marketable food as lucrative, if not more lucrative, than gold mining.

In such a context, it is not surprising that women's daily chores differed in method depending on location, but remained the same in nature. Traditional female tasks were centered on preparing food, providing care, and creating a welcoming home. One way a housewife did the latter was by making sure the house was heated—which was a constant activity for Yukon women. Wyoming Women were able to use regional fuel resources in the form of sheep chips.⁵⁸ Klondike women did not have livestock to provide such fuel so they relied on wood to accomplish the same basic task.

Wives in mining camps struggled with kitchen duties, but each region posed its own set of obstacles. California women, for instance, had to milk cows and then churn butter.⁵⁹ Klondike women's families could enjoy imported butter—on the occasions that it arrived and was unspoiled—but they had other problems. Since the food was kept outside in a cache, they had to wait for food to thaw before being able to eat it.

In Wyoming, married women could take in boarders to supplement the family income.⁶⁰ Klondike women did not take in boarders, so much as live with a husband and the other men in his party. Both these situations are similar, however, in that the woman had to cook and care for a group of men who may or may not have been family, but became the family unit of the house.

⁵⁷ Berry, 13-15, 31.

⁵⁸ Garceau, 90.

⁵⁹ Berry, 14-18.

⁶⁰ Garceau, 134.

Working and socializing outside the home in the mining camps of Wyoming and the Yukon had similar aspects during the overlapping years of the 1880s. Wyoming women, like those in Dawson, tried to maintain Victorian propriety through the end of the Victorian Era, while also being affected by its changing face. As department stores and a culture of consumerism grew and nationally more women moved to wage labor outside the home, so did the women of the mining camps. For socializing purposes, Wyoming women attended similar events to those held in Dawson. Dancing was as popular in both places then as it is today.⁶¹

PART II: THE VAREITIES OF WOMEN’S WORK AND LIFE IN THE KLONDIKE

The types of work women were able to do in the Klondike fell into three categories: prostitution, dance-hall entertaining, and “respectable” work. The majority of women worked in one or both of the first two fields, creating the “Wild West” myth of the Klondike. However, many women worked in less scandalous positions. One thing all women shared, no matter what type of work they did, was their style of dress. Whether they worked in the private or public sphere, they all wore clothes considered respectable for their Victorian society.

Red-Light District Work

The last recourse a woman could turn to when she had exhausted all other income-earning options was also the most undocumented type of work, despite its fame as the oldest profession—prostitution.

The first women to follow men to the gold rush were prostitutes. They knew that the scarcity of women in the region would bring men to their doors in search of brief female companionship and pleasure; and they would pay dearly for it. Rather than hiding their trade in

⁶¹ Ibid., 63.

an unobtrusive part of town, these women made themselves obvious—as evidenced by miner Alfred G. McMichael’s letter home: “I have seen, though, sitting at their windows, highly decorated maidens in low neck and short sleeves who winked and beckoned the weary traveler in to rest.”⁶² No man, however, was likely to admit to any further interaction with these women beyond seeing them from a distance, leaving sparse documentation of a very prominent part of the Klondike culture.

The information we do have on these women mostly comes from newspaper articles reporting on scandals in which prostitutes played a part. Prostitution historian Jay Moynahan compiled articles from different Klondike newspapers into a book, in the hope of creating a more complete picture of Dawson’s red-light district. The collection includes several sensational articles about suicides and murders by jilted lovers, court cases over financial compensation that turned into comedic plays, and reports about general disturbances in the street fueled by alcohol. For example, one title reads, “A BAD MURDER AND SUICIDE. Dave Evans Shoots His Mistress and Then Kills Himself. Dave Was Jealous and the Woman Fickle The Crime Committed Without Premeditation—A Tragic End.”⁶³ Arguments between miners and their mistresses usually resulted upon a miner finding that the prostitute or dance-hall girl he had convinced to live with him would not quit her prostitution practices. Several of these quarrels escalated to fatalities.

Another article related the tale of a young man who filed a lawsuit after attempting to enter a dancer’s room and subsequently being thrown down a flight of stairs by another man. The plaintiff appeared in court drunk and insisted on conducting the prosecution himself, summoning half the staff and patrons of the dance-hall as witnesses, and recommending imprisonment for all

⁶² McMichael, 45.

⁶³ Jay Moynahan, *Red Light Revelations: A Peek at Dawson’s Risky Ladies, 1898-1900* (Spokane, WA: Chickadee Publishing, 2001), 17-18.

of them when they did not provide satisfactory answers to his cross-examinations. The reporter wrote of the judge, “His worship good naturedly allowed the sport to go on for half an hour, then he discharged Mr. Sullivan and sent Mr. Rosenbaum to the barracks for repairs.”⁶⁴

One other article reported that two female prostitutes and a man, all drunk, had caused a public disturbance by shouting and swearing at one another on Fourth Avenue.⁶⁵

The compilation reveals a red-light industry in which women held power over men who succumbed to the vices of alcohol and lust. Government officials—unable to control the terrible, and often absurd, happenings that the papers reported with so much amusement—tried to regulate prostitution.

The Dawson police realized it would be foolish to try to suppress the sex trade, so they all but legalized it. In the fall of 1899 there was an outbreak of venereal disease. In response, they



Figure 2: Women of Lousetown outside the cribs.

required all prostitutes to get health examinations every month.⁶⁶ The red-light district was then moved to the outskirts of town in reaction to demands for better public morals.⁶⁷ One author wrote that moving the red-light district farther away from the center of town would banish immorality to the edges of society.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶ Porsild, 102.

⁶⁷ Moynahan, 29.

Angelo Heilprin wrote in *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly*: "Women of refinement may now parade through the streets without having their finer sensibilities offended through the public intrusion of the immorals of the lower world."⁶⁸

The truth of the matter was that this move created two red-light districts in Dawson: the first being the government-constructed Lousetown, otherwise known as Klondike City, which lay across the Klondike River from Dawson, and the original zone consisting of Dawson's back alleys and brothels.⁶⁹ Shadowy evidence suggests that some women ran cigar stores in town as fronts for their prostitution businesses in the back rooms.⁷⁰

These women, called by the press "soiled doves," "members of the demimonde," and "ladies of the tenderloin," tended to be older than dance-hall girls.⁷¹ They ranged from about ages 18 to 40.⁷² Some may have lacked the dancing skills to make a living solely by dancing; according to Klondike Kate, some of the dance-hall girls "blended" and did prostitution to supplement their earnings.⁷³ Therefore, the majority of older women most likely were accounted for by girls who's dance-hall days were over.

Whether or not a dance-hall girl practiced prostitution, her profession was still considered part of Dawson's social underworld. This sector had a social hierarchy all their own starting with top-of-the-bill performers of the halls. Logically, singers and dancers of lesser renown followed. Next, but at the top of the prostitution hierarchy, were private mistresses of local elite men. Then there were women of the brothels in order from expensive to cheaper, and finally the cribs, the one-roomed shacks, which lined Paradise Alley. Although there was often tension between

⁶⁸ Angelo Heilprin, "A Year's Progress in the Klondike." *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly*, vol. 56, No. 4, (New York: 1900), ?.

⁶⁹ Porsild, 100.

⁷⁰ Moynahan, 57.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷² Porsild, 123-4.

⁷³ Duncan, 178.

dance-hall girls and women who only practiced prostitution, the women of the demimonde who lived in close proximity to one another formed a close-knit community.⁷⁴

“Civilized” women, however, saw one cohesive group of immoral women and were often angered by their presence for more than just morality’s sake. Not surprisingly, the professions of the demimonde earned women larger incomes than women of superior class were able to earn. Prostitutes not only could surround themselves with fancy home decorations and clothes a proper woman could only wish for, but also had the finances to book ship staterooms early, forcing “decent” women to share accommodations.⁷⁵

While outwardly, women of rank avoided contact with women of the red-light district, inwardly, the younger women were secretly intrigued by the unethical lifestyle of the harlots. Berton writes in her memoir of quickly ducking out of a dress shop when two girls from Lousetown entered. Berton and her friend were afraid to be seen shopping in the same



Figure 4: Dawson City Prostitutes

establishment as the two prostitutes. However, later Berton and the same friend crouched on a hillside overlooking Lousetown and looked down in awe instead of disgust at what they saw. Berton writes that it was a cheerful picture. The women,

dressed in clothing that was not as burdensome as that of Berton and her friend’s, were washing

⁷⁴ Porsild, 113, 130.

⁷⁵ Morgan, 41.

and drying their hair, reclining, singing, and chatting, as waiters brought them bottles and food. The respectable girl looked longingly at the freedom of body movement of the dance-hall women.⁷⁶

Dance Hall Work

Some women came to Dawson to escape the constraints of propriety, while others fell on hard times and turned to one of the few jobs available to unskilled women. Either way, the majority of women in the Klondike could be found working in the numerous dance halls. These are the women who are remembered as representatives of the Klondike and the wild place it could be. Men frequented dance halls to relax and have a good time—to drink, gamble, and enjoy the company of the flirtatious floor-hostesses and stage performers.

Although the dance-hall girls' position appeared outwardly glamorous to the men who arrived each night to shower their affections on the girls, it was a hard life. These women, who left Victorian morals at the door, dressing in a way that would make a respectable society lady blush, and who forwardly teased and flirted with the theater's evening patrons, often indulged in alcohol to keep themselves on their feet.

Most of the dance halls of Dawson had similar layouts. A description of the Monte Carlo, as supplied by Pierre Berton, gives an idea of the environment these women worked in. The building was broken into three rooms. A man entering off the street walked into a small saloon with a sheet-iron stove and a long, polished bar staffed by bartenders in starched white shirts. The next room was even smaller and was used for gambling. Beyond this, at the very back, was the theater and dance floor. This section had a small curtained stage, movable benches on the

⁷⁶ Berton, 77.

ground floor that could be moved aside for dancing, and a balcony with three rows and six boxes. The second floor of the building had twelve bedrooms for rent.⁷⁷

The girls worked 12-hour shifts six nights a week.⁷⁸ They had no break in the 12 hours because they were expected to entertain the men in-between performances. After the performances were finished they were to serve as “floor hostesses,” meaning they danced each dance and had a drink with their partner after each one. Headlining women entertained men in private boxes between their shows. This meant talking to the customer while encouraging him to buy drink after drink. Often a dance-hall girl and male waiter teamed together to “box rustle.” The waiter would discreetly remove bottles still half-full while the girl convinced the patron he had finished yet another bottle and should buy another. The dancer also learned to pour her drink into the cuspidor beneath the table while the customer wasn’t looking so she did not become too intoxicated to perform her job.⁷⁹

A girl’s paid twelve-hour night shift was only half of her work. They also had conditioning workouts in the gym each day, then rehearsal, and then had to memorize lines and lyrics, write skits, playlets, and song lyrics, and design and make or buy their own costumes. Finally, between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. the girls fell, exhausted, into bed.⁸⁰ They had little free time to spend outside the dance halls besides Sundays, because the Royal Canadian Mounted Police did not allow places of pleasure and sin to operate on the Lord’s Day.⁸¹

The pay dance-hall girls received each night was more than most women could make in a month in some other, more respectable, job. A girl’s base pay depended on her status in the hall.

⁷⁷ Berton, 359.

⁷⁸ Porsild, 114.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.;
Lucia, 70, 106.

⁸⁰ Porsild, 114;

Lucia, 91.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Girls who simply acted as floor hostesses, participating in the dancing rounds and tempting men to buy drinks for them, earned \$40 per week. Klondike Kate, who started as a combo performer and dancer, made \$50 per week, but as a headliner with her famous Flame Dance she earned \$200 a night.⁸² Besides their base pay, all the girls earned percentages of the dances and drinks they could get men to buy over the course of an evening. Prices and percentages may have differed depending on the dance hall. Lael Morgan, author of *Good Time Girls*, records one woman as having said men paid two dollars for a one-minute dance, of which she got half (one dollar), and fifty cents for every drink.⁸³ Klondike Kate remembered earning fifty cents per dance and 25%, or twenty-five cents per drink, as well as \$7.50 per bottle of champagne.⁸⁴

Rolv Schillios wrote in an article about Klondike Kate that men acted worse towards working girls than they did towards chorus girls because Kate, while trying to find work in New York City, encountered men who said things that made her refuse to take certain jobs.⁸⁵ While the women of the dance halls were not “respectable” by Victorian standards, they were still in an acceptable position in relation to the male gender, that of being a provider of pleasure for men, making Schillios’ comment most likely true. These women were part of the workforce, but not in a position of power that would make a man feel emasculated, but instead manlier. As women were not allowed to own bars or dance halls, the miners never had to worry about encountering the proprietor of the hall in one of the girls—the dancers were always going to be in the inferior position of performer to patron.⁸⁶ Some of the men also realized that some of the women they bestowed gold nuggets and attention on in the halls had been respectable but had resorted to

⁸² Morgan, 48;

Lucia, 91.

⁸³ Morgan, 36.

⁸⁴ Lucia, 92.

⁸⁵ Rolv Schillios, “Dance Hall Girl: The First of Two Chapters of “Memories of Klondike Kate,” *The Alaska Sportsman* (March, 1956), 10.

⁸⁶ Morgan, 70. One woman, Lulu did play a large part in managing her husband’s dance hall, but she could never have been the owner.

dance-hall work when their money and food had become depleted. Alfred McMichael, a Klondike miner, in letters home wrote of two such women:

So there they were, penniless in Alaska. The men could find nothing to do so the two women came to the rescue. They went and danced in one of the dance houses, while the men stayed in camp, cooked (I hope) and took care of the child. [...] They were respectable people, too, but fancy the feelings of those poor women! They certainly will return rich in experience.⁸⁷

Stories like this were common and may have evoked a type of paternal sympathy from the men towards the girls. This anecdote also shows that even the stereotype of dance-hall girls does not fit all of them. Some women came with morals and etiquette and ended up dancing due to some unfortunate series of events.

While inside the dance halls, girls could seemingly disregard social conventions, but once their dancing days were over these women had to reintegrate themselves into proper society. During the Victorian Era a tarnished reputation ruined a woman's chance at marrying well and of being accepted in a community of more virtuous women. For this reason, Klondike dancers often changed their names when they left to cover up their background and give them a chance to change social class in another place. Many men and women of the Klondike came to be known by monikers given to them by others because of personal attributes or specific events.⁸⁸ Some of the names picked up by the women of the halls included: Diamond Tooth Gertie, Nellie the Pig, Ping-Pong, Diamond Lil, Caprice, Grizzly Bear, Oregon Mare, Gumboot Sue, and Montreal Marie.⁸⁹ The nicknames given to the dancers also helped the girls to later hide their identity once they left the Klondike, and the names, behind them. As the women disappeared from the public stage and changed their names, leaving no traceable public record of themselves, memories of

⁸⁷ McMichael, 220.

⁸⁸ Michael Gates, *Gold at Fortymile Creek: Early Days in the Yukon* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), 27.

⁸⁹ Lucia, 95.

them became fodder for the alluring stories of the Klondike and the fanciful nicknames added romance to the tales.

Some of the information we do have on retired dance-hall girls comes from memoirs of other women, such as Laura Berton. While living in the Klondike she knew men from her social circle that married dance-hall girls, but then were shunned by the Dawson community for the remainder of their stay. She writes of one such occasion:

Dolly Orchard was now Mrs. Jimmy Turner. He was a gold assayer, and until his marriage had been a member of the social set, where he had been in great demand as a bridge player. They had tried to persuade him not to marry Dolly, but when he persisted he became an outcast. [...] They made a contented couple and she achieved the miracle of stopping her husband's heavy drinking. But he soon left his job and they moved out on to the creeks to look for gold. They found little and might have starved, but Dolly, I heard, made ends meet by taking in washing. I later knew many former dance-hall girls who buried their reputations upon marriage and made first-rate housewives. But very few invaded the sacred precincts of Dawson society.⁹⁰

It was examples like Dolly's that made most women change their names and move out of Dawson to any place where their salacious history was unknown so that they could avoid being shunned. Dolly's story also shows that after doing work of such rebellious nature, many women succumbed to the inevitable, or perhaps decided it was finally time to become what was expected of a woman of their time—a housewife. This story also shows a part of the dance-hall girl story not usually told. Some left the life under the lights and took up a more respectable lifestyle.

Girls of the dance halls received no end to marriage proposals from lonely miners who frequented their establishments. The gifts and proposals the men pampered the girls with were often quite exorbitant, as gold wasn't worth much because they could go find more when the current supply ran out. For example, one dancer, Cad Wilson, was given a belt of gold nuggets worth \$50,000 made for her by several of her admirers, while another man had a bath filled with

⁹⁰ Berton, 49.

wine for her. One hopeful miner, Chris Johansen, offered another dancer, Cecil Marion, her weight in gold if she would marry him. Her 135 pounds equaled \$25,000.⁹¹ For some dancers, marriage was the way to re-enter civilized society once the couple left the Klondike. The younger, more spirited and rebellious girls not ready to conform to society's expectations rejected the minor's advances laughingly.

One major difference between the Klondike dancers and their counterparts in the continental United States is that girls who would not have made it as entertainers anywhere else were able to in the Yukon. Heavier girls were accepted at the Klondike where the miners were so starved for womanly attention that they often didn't care what a woman looked like.⁹²

Dawson's dance halls were closed eventually when the city commissioner tightened liquor-service laws.⁹³

Work: "The Respectable Type"

Victorian girls were schooled in domestic skills with the expectation that their purpose in life was to become good wives and mothers. It follows that those who took on wage-earning work in womanhood practiced stereotypical feminine occupations in which they could use their training in domestic skills. In 1861 the Civil War created an impetus for women to make a foray into the public sphere to take over jobs that had been abandoned by men who had gone to fight. After the war, rather than retreating back to the home, many women kept their jobs. As the Industrial Revolution swept the nation, new factories opened up, providing employment for females, and increasing the job market exponentially.⁹⁴ Thus, it was increasingly common for

⁹¹ Ibid., 39.

⁹² Lucia, 120.;

Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush 1896-1899* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 358.

⁹³ Berton, 43.

⁹⁴ Plante, 144.

women to be found working out of the house during the post-Civil War years of the Victorian period. However, with men returned from the war working again, there was less need for the women to take male dominated positions, so women were relegated to fundamentally female occupations. Meanwhile, there were mixed feelings among the male population about women in the workforce. A study of the Klondike community shows that Dawson's workforce was similar to that of any other developing Victorian city in the United States.

To understand how a female's domiciliary abilities translated into wage-earning work we must first explore the unpaid, but no less appreciated, work a housewife did on a daily basis just to keep her household running smoothly. For example, a woman was expected to sew and launder clothes, cook, tend to sick family members, and rear children, to name a few of the numerous tasks she needed to perform regularly. Recounting her pioneer life in California before the Klondike Gold Rush, Alice Edna Berry described several of the tasks her mother performed without help from her children as daily chores. The sewing of new, and mending of old, clothing—all done by hand because machines were yet to be a household item—was done often, as children and men who did hard labor inevitably wore out clothes quickly.⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, western women were not the only women to make clothing. Charlene Porsild describes Native wives of pre-gold-rush prospectors not just putting together, but also dressing skins for clothing.⁹⁶ It is evident that garment-making was a traditionally female role.

Besides clothing one's self, eating is imperative; and as long as a woman was around, the cooking fell to her because the men were engaged in mining or manual labor. In California, Berry's mother had to milk cows, churn butter, garden, and—after all that—cook for her

⁹⁵ Berry, 17.

⁹⁶ Porsild, 35.

family.⁹⁷ In the Yukon, Martha Black was also compelled to cook, but not just for her family. Black owned a sawmill where she had 16 men in her employ, for whom she provided food. She wrote in her memoir: “It wasn’t a life of leisure for me, as I did the cooking for the entire party.” Even as the owner of the sawmill, she still acted in a domestic role for her workers.⁹⁸

Upon settling in Dawson, some women joined the ranks of employed females. These women put the skills that had been considered appropriate for their Victorian education to good use. Although secondary literature claims there was limited interest in work as domestic help near the end of the Victorian Era, several of the Klondike women, according to their memoirs, did in fact have domestic helpers for at least part of the time they lived in the Yukon.⁹⁹ Berry’s party hired a girl, Jane, to help with cooking, while Berry’s sister was sick.¹⁰⁰ Black also hired a woman to help around the house. She wrote, “I had a capable French housekeeper, wife of the mill watchman.”¹⁰¹ This phenomenon of renewed interest in being a domestic helper was most likely due to the fact that females had a hard time finding respectable employment in the Yukon, and housekeeping was a skill they could fall back on that would keep them out of the dance halls—or worse, prostitution—as long as they could find someone who needed the help.

Some women discovered that they could make money by expanding the work they did for their own party and charging a fee to do it for other men who lacked women in their own circle.¹⁰² For example, women turned their sewing duties into small seamstress businesses. Anna deGraff owned her own sewing machine, and thinking ahead, brought it with her to the Klondike. Both men and women of Dawson brought their darning needs to the tent where she

⁹⁷ Berry, 14,18.

⁹⁸ Black, 61.

⁹⁹ Plante, 144.

¹⁰⁰ Berry, 112.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 14,18.

¹⁰¹ Black, 68.

¹⁰² Johnson, 30.

had set up shop. In this way she earned money and befriended all types of people, including dance-hall girls who brought their Paris gowns to her for mending.¹⁰³ About this same time, department stores started opening around the nation, creating a consumer culture and ending the need for all women to be self-sufficient in making their clothing.¹⁰⁴ The few who still practiced the art of sewing clothing opened seamstress shops while most women looked for other profitable niches. One was working as a laundress. A woman taking in laundry in Dawson could make five dollars per day with room and board.¹⁰⁵

One woman's laundress ad posted in *The Klondike Nugget* on July 16, 1898 ran:

The Red Star Laundry
Mrs. Showers, Proprietor
All classes of Laundry work
Ladies' Fine Laundry a Specialty
Work called for and delivered.
Near Klondike Bridge

By browsing through the ads of Dawson's Klondike-era newspapers, evidence can be found of females not only owning firms, but being accepted as business proprietors in society.

Respectable work outside the home for women was not just limited to clothing. Some offered their cooking skills to make ends meet. Another ad, from the same issue of *The Klondike Nugget*, read:

WANTED—A woman cook. Apply at THE NUGGET office.

This ad shows that not only did women hire out their domestic skills for lack of other skills, but also that men wanted a woman's approach in the kitchen enough to go to some trouble to seek it out. While some women hired themselves out as personal cooks to individual parties lacking women, others found ways to share their cooking with more than one group. It was illegal for a

¹⁰³ Duncan, 110.

¹⁰⁴ Plante, 159.

¹⁰⁵ Morgan, 48.

woman to own a bar, but they were allowed to open their own restaurants, road-stops, and hotels.¹⁰⁶ Those who either could not find work as a cook, or lacked cooking skills could still find employment in the food industry—as dishwashers. Dishwashing could bring in about \$25 per week, much less than the pay of a laundress, who also received room and board.¹⁰⁷

Other positions filled by women coincided with the stereotype of the female sex being caring and nurturing. Nursing and teaching are examples of this. The church sent missionaries to Alaska to save souls, and fill health-care provider positions.¹⁰⁸ Nurses, however, must have been more interested in helping people than earning money, because the job only paid \$25 per month on a two-year contract and was not considered as respectable as others a woman could pursue.¹⁰⁹ One position in which a woman could earn a large salary was teaching. The gold-mining-camp schools were willing to pay well to educate their children in the hopes of preventing the teachers from leaving the classrooms for the mines.¹¹⁰ According to Black, the large salaries and “adventurous atmosphere” drew “the finest teachers from every part of Canada.”¹¹¹

The one job women rarely participated in was mining. This labor-intensive work was left to men while women found jobs more suited to their perceived delicacy. Women did “grubstake” male miners, providing funds for their setting up in mining.¹¹² Black wrote in her memoir of grubstaking miners who would pay her back when they had the funds, while Phillips wrote in her journal of grubstaking a miner for her personal interest: She wrote on July 30, 1898, “I got my license (miners) and have sent a man to prospect a claim which I will have an interest in if he

¹⁰⁶ Morgan, 56.

Porsild, 85.

¹⁰⁷ Morgan, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Black, 76.

¹⁰⁹ Morgan, 48.

¹¹⁰ Porsild, 155.

¹¹¹ Black, 68.

¹¹² Porsild, 84-85.

finds it rich enough to record.”¹¹³ While men saw women as natural providers and felt comfortable borrowing money from them for a grubstake, men had mixed feelings about the type of work respectable women could do to earn their money. Black and Phillips experienced two very different reactions by men relating to wage-earning work. Phillips was encouraged, while Black was not. Black, who attempted to run her own sawmill, faced an all-male staff who rebelled at having a woman in a position of power above them.¹¹⁴ She recalled arguing with her foreman: “‘I’m sick of bein’ ordered about by a damn skirt, and I’m through,’ he said angrily as he walked away, a string of oaths fairly making the air blue.”¹¹⁵ As long as men were not employees of a woman, but instead their employers, they were prepared to have women in the work force. Phillips encountered at least one man of such mind. She wrote in her journal, “Women were in great demand, and proprietors of stores and restaurants would walk after us on the streets and ask us if we would like a situation.”¹¹⁶ Later she wrote, “Have position and receive a good salary.”¹¹⁷

The evidence from newspaper ads and memoirs prove that there was a secondary lifestyle for women in Dawson that is mostly ignored in popular representations. All of these examples are of women who lived a much more mundane life in the Klondike than those who danced in the halls.

Dressing Appropriately Does Not Always Mean Practically

One of the distinguishing factors of the Victorian Era was the highly restrictive clothing then considered fashionable for women. At this time, ways of dressing much more defined a

¹¹³ Phillips, 37.

Black, 68.

¹¹⁴ Black, 61.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 62.

¹¹⁶ Phillips, 31.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

person's gender identity. As gender roles in the Klondike stayed the same as they had been in the states the gold seekers hailed from, so clothing styles were maintained. A study of Klondike women's memoirs from the elite social class down to those of the dance-hall girls shows that all women shared the dilemma of trying to dress fashionably and properly while also maintaining practicality. Despite the harsh conditions of the climate, women did not change their dress habits drastically from those they had kept in the states.

The ensemble a woman of the Victorian Era had to wear was very complex. The style of the times called for wide, full skirts made of five to ten yards of material with hems that trailed on the ground. Underneath the skirt were at least two ankle-length petticoats.¹¹⁸ The petticoats hindered leg movement, and the entire combination of petticoats and skirt weighed many pounds.¹¹⁹ High-buttoned shoes were worn on the feet.¹²⁰ As if the bottom of the outfit was not enough trouble, the top was worse. This was the era of corsets: a bodice-piece stiffened with whalebone and worn so as to constrict the waist and chest. According to social standards, the smaller the waist, the prettier it was. No outfit seen in public was complete without a corset. Completing the fashion picture was a stand-up collar stiffened with interlining or boning that forced the wearer to hold her chin unnaturally high.¹²¹

Altogether, the corset and collar made breathing for the unfortunate women very difficult. A woman's tendency to faint was much higher while she was wearing such constricting garments. The frequent tendency to faint after a large exertion led historian Jennifer Duncan to write, "At the time of the Gold Rush, women were called euphemistically the "delicately

¹¹⁸ Backhouse, 15.;
Morgan, 15.

¹¹⁹ Backhouse, 15.

¹²⁰ Morgan, 15.

¹²¹ Backhouse, 15.

nurtured” and the feminine mystique was one of fragility and fainting fits.”¹²² During the height of the rush the only way to get to Dawson was by hiking a long, dirty, trail. It is not surprising, then, that overall the majority of the gold seekers were men. Very few men or women thought the trip was possible for a woman even to attempt. Hiking in a corset was an ordeal almost beyond contemplating. A full-length skirt also created problems when walking through mud, climbing mountains, and fording streams. Meanwhile, it was considered improper to display legs, bare arms, shoulders, and cleavage, making alterations for practicality difficult.¹²³ Women who decided to make the journey had to think carefully about decorum and practicality in outfitting themselves before they left.

Many newspapers printed articles containing lists suggesting the basic necessities a woman would need clothing-wise were she to attempt the journey to the gold fields. Women returning from the Klondike wrote several of these articles.¹²⁴ Annie Hall Strong wrote such an advice article for women. The *Skagway News* printed it on December 31, 1897.¹²⁵ She advised any woman that footwear was the most important consideration. Her list included:

- 1 pair house slippers
- 1 pair heavy-soled walking shoes
- 1 pair heavy gum boots
- Several types of stockings, and several other types of boots.

For clothing, a few items from her list were:

- 1 good dress
- 1 suite heavy Mackinaw, waist, and bloomers
- 3 short skirts of heavy duck or denim, to wear over bloomers

The advice for short skirts might have shocked many women. Skirts were expected by both men and women to cover the entire leg. Martha Black, a socialite from Chicago, outfitted

¹²² Duncan, 42-3.

¹²³ Lucia, 92.

¹²⁴ Backhouse, 16.

¹²⁵ Moynahan, 25-26.

herself for the trip with footwear similar to that on the suggested list. Black writes in her memoir that her outfit included merino wool stockings and high boots of Russian leather with elk-hide soles that were good for securing footholds on slippery trails. However, she did not follow the advise for short skirts. She recalled that her travel outfit was a fashionable outing costume made up of “heavily ribbed tobacco-brown corduroy velvet with a skirt of shockingly immodest length (it actually showed my ankles)...” and a Norfolk jacket, blouse with high stiff collar, and voluminous bloomers that fell below the knee.¹²⁶ Edna Berry, like Black, was a single woman traveling with relations but came from a working-class family. Her packing list also followed some of Mrs. Strong’s suggestions. She wrote that in preparing for the trip her party bought overshoes, gumboots, heavy socks, parkas, and flannels.¹²⁷ She too took a long skirt rather than a short one.

Mrs. Strong was correct that short skirts were preferable on the trail, Black and Berry learned soon after their arrival. Both women decided that a dress was more of a hindrance than it was worth to look fashionable or maintain decorum. Once out on the trail, Martha Black wished her clothing were not so cumbersome. She wrote, “I shed my sealskin jacket. I cursed my hot, high, buckram collar, my tight heavily boned corsets, my long corduroy skirt, my full bloomers which I had to hitch up with every step.”¹²⁸ She complained that the bulky clothes made walking hard and that she felt she could identify with animals carrying heavy loads.¹²⁹ Despite her being uncomfortable and her realization that her skirt was not practical, she continued on without solving her problem. For Black, remaining properly dressed was more important than shedding her skirt. Berry, on the other hand, had less scruples. With 19 miles to walk and her dragging

¹²⁶ Black, 19-20.

¹²⁷ Berry, 81.

¹²⁸ Black, 28.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 26.

skirts weighted with mud, she asked one of the boys in her party to cut her skirt off above the boot tops, after first asking her sister who refused. She delighted in freer movement with less skirts and after another five miles her sister gave up her attempt to remain proper and had a half-yard cut from her dress.¹³⁰ Like many women, Edna and her sister shortened their dresses out of necessity and forged on ahead.

Other women found different solutions. Some wore looser flannel dresses and some abandoned their corsets.¹³¹ At least one woman simply took off her skirt and walked in her undergarments, but from the way she writes about it this solution seemed less scandalous than wearing pants:

I walked the first afternoon, shedding my skirt after getting away from the settlement. Thus I cleared up a question which Stoddard said had been bothering him—what I could do on the trail in a long skirt. He had asked me on the steamer about it, and I had replied that it wouldn't bother me a bit. When he saw me in knickers, he understood.¹³²

Some women scandalously donned pants during their trek over the trail. Nellie Cashman, an Irish immigrant from a working-class family, traveled over the pass by herself and wore men's clothing.¹³³ Most of the recorded instances of women wearing pants involve women of questionable morals, or lower-class women. Dutch Kate, a prostitute, wore men's clothing on the trail.¹³⁴ Klondike Kate, a Dawson dance-hall queen, dressed in boys' clothes to trick the Mounties when they refused to let women ride in the boats that braved the rapids on the way to Whitehorse. Women were told to walk along the shore and meet their boat farther down.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Berry, 106-7.

¹³¹ Backhouse, 16.

¹³² Della Murray Banks, "Woman on the Dalton Trail," *The Alaska Sportsman* (January 1945), 27.

¹³³ Duncan, 206.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³⁵ Mann, 29.

Klondike Kate later recklessly walked off the boat into Dawson wearing hiking breeches and received many raised eyebrows.¹³⁶

American Victorian society was not ready for women to wear pants. As early as the 1870s, a few revolutionary women tried to change the constricting clothing style in favor of looser garments. The movement reintroduced bloomers for women; however, they only became acceptable for sportswear, not everyday wear.¹³⁷ The dress code for women was not entirely left to the women to decide. Men tried to keep women's options on what was considered decent in check. For example, in 1897 it was against the law for women on the Chilkoot Trail to wear trousers.¹³⁸ One of the women was made by an army official to add fabric to her skirt because it was deemed indecently short, as it only fell to the knees.¹³⁹

With men reluctant to let women raise their hemlines, women resumed correct attire upon reaching Dawson, although required dress-length may have relaxed as many women's dresses had been shortened. Edna Berry and her sister changed into clean dresses before landing in Dawson, and Edna remarked, "My dress was quite a bit shorter than Ethel's."¹⁴⁰ In any other place, it would have been improper for either of their dresses to be shorter than full-length. Eudora Ferry, another socialite of Dawson, wrote in her memoir that formal attire in the evenings was a must in Dawson (of course with many layers over it for going outside).¹⁴¹ Even dance-hall floor-hostess girls dressed respectably. They wore full-length black skirts, white shirtwaists with leg-o-mutton sleeves and high collars, button topped shoes, and black stockings.¹⁴² For both

¹³⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁷ Backhouse, 16.

¹³⁸ Duncan, 52.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 231.

¹⁴⁰ Berry, 103.

¹⁴¹ Ferry, 43.

¹⁴² Lucia, 92.

high- and low-class women of Dawson, special occasions called for stylish expensive gowns ordered from Paris.¹⁴³

Exploring the clothing women wore during their northern excursion exposes the impracticality of the traditional Victorian outfit. Even though women on the overland trail freed themselves from some or all of the burdensome skirts and bodices, they returned to the Victorian dressing style upon reaching Dawson. Having women resume wearing the restrictive clothing was one of the ways women and men attempted to maintain a civilized Victorian society in a wholly “uncivilized” place. It was because clothing identified gender that the return to the traditional outfit is an example of the effort to maintain Victorian values and gender roles in a context where necessary adaptations made gender roles more fluid.

Gender Relations

Life in the Klondike created unique power relations between men and women. The jobs women were able to take on subtly provided them with a certain amount of power over their male counterparts. The gender myth of the Victorian Era is that women served men in whatever they did and lacked any meaningful power, or at least men believed this was so. Martha Black’s memory of her father’s attitude toward her mother best exemplifies this misconception: She writes: “He had the fixed idea of the men of that day, that women were created for the sole purpose of ministering to the physical comfort and desires of man.”¹⁴⁴ Women were supposed to be the weaker sex, whose heads only needed to be filled with knowledge pertaining to housekeeping and ladylike conduct in society, which is why Black’s parents sent her to finishing school to learn proper etiquette.¹⁴⁵ One man, who attempted to start a business of bringing girls

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Black, 1.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

to the Klondike to be brides, told the *Tacoma Daily News* what he thought men looked for in a wife: “Nice 18 or 20-year-old girls, respectable, good-looking and willing to work.”¹⁴⁶ The myth was augmented by the fact that, traditionally, men were the sole source of economic support for women.¹⁴⁷ Also, it was socially acceptable for men, married and not, to frequent bars and dance-halls, but women of good morals could not be seen in such establishments. Ruined reputations and ostracism would result if a woman was thought to have taken part in drinking or out-of-wedlock sexual exploits, which was demonstrated by the overall majority of red-light-district women changing their names after leaving Dawson.

In reality, women were not powerless against men and had even increased their power by the end of the Victorian Era. In the private sphere, a housewife had the ability to see that her husband was either very happy or very unhappy at home. In the public sphere, Victorian housewives were considered responsible for keeping their men civilized Christians.¹⁴⁸ A wife was faulted if her husband acted otherwise. Dance-hall girls and prostitutes, although not in the upper echelons of society, had power over men also, as Klondike officials found when they could do nothing but try to regulate the sex trade instead of shutting it down. Women’s power grew as more of them entered the work force and began to earn their own incomes. As they found employment doing stereotypical female work, they demonstrated that women could maintain their gender identity and have increasing social power.

Men of the Klondike were not ready for gender relations to change, especially in a place that was, overall, a man’s world. Women who read the first published issue of *The Nugget* newspaper found themselves unacknowledged as readers. The first line read: “Good Morning,

¹⁴⁶ “Wives for Klondike: Early Next Spring a Lot Will Be Sent Up. South Dakota Man’s Scheme,” *Tacoma Daily News* (August 21, 1897)

¹⁴⁷ Moynahan, 44.

¹⁴⁸ Duncan, 45.

Gentlemen.”¹⁴⁹ Both Martha Black and Laura Berton, remember noticing upon their arrival at Dawson the large ratio of men to women.¹⁵⁰ Further proof of the overall male dominance is Black’s admission that she began to pick up the coarse language used by the men around her, so much that her brother scolded her for using bad language.¹⁵¹

Most of the women found that, in general, the men in the Yukon treated females respectfully and acted paternally toward them—a gesture that showed their belief in the gender myth. Black recalled arriving in Dyea with no place to stay and finding a man willing to bunk with his friend next door while she lived in his one-room shanty of 12 by 14 feet with only a cookstove, two chairs, a table, and a bunk.¹⁵² Edna Berry traveled with her brother-in-law and sister and felt over-protected. Her sister’s husband looked out for the decency of the women traveling with him. At a roadhouse where they stopped for the night, he had dinner brought to the rooms and did not allow the women to go downstairs, saying, “the crowd down there is too rough and the men are all drinking.”¹⁵³ He felt it was his responsibility to keep the women from having to mingle with strange men.

Although Black and Berry were “proper” women, it was not just the “respectable” women who men looked out for; men were sympathetic towards the women that entertained in the dance halls as well. An article in the *Dawson Daily News* reported that businessmen and others petitioned to overturn a ruling stating that all box-rustling (a practice in which patrons were deceived into buying more liquor than they were actually consuming) should be suppressed. The men who would have been the very victims of box-rustling were concerned, the

¹⁴⁹ Edward F. Bush, “The *Dawson Daily News*: Journalism in the Klondike” in *The First Contingent: The North-West Mounted Police, 1873-1874* by Philip Goldring, (Canadian Historic Sites No. 21. (71-128)), 77.

¹⁵⁰ Black, 25;

Berton, 28.

¹⁵¹ Black, 40.

¹⁵² Ibid. 23.

¹⁵³ Berry, 95.

article writes, “that the women should not be thrown wholly out of employment during the severity of the winter.”¹⁵⁴

Gold Rush men tried to keep women in their expected social position. One way male government officials helped this effort at the beginning of the gold rush was through the system they set up to record gold claims. Wives were expected to file claims under their husbands’ names while unmarried women were not allowed to file claims at all, but could buy claims already filled.¹⁵⁵ One reason for trying to maintain the gender relationship, historian Kathryn Morse posits, is that gold mining attracted young men looking for adventure as a remedy for a growing sense of weakness and emasculation. She writes, “American men were attracted to both mining and warfare in part because they felt lost, over-civilized, dislocated, and deprived of ‘intense experience.’”¹⁵⁶ According to this theory, allowing women to register claims under their own names would have meant acknowledging that they were just as capable as the male gender in coping with “intense experience.”

However, women found ways to show they were as competent as the men when it came to defending themselves. Black endured teasing from the men of her party for owning a gun and keeping it by her bed.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Clare Phillips demonstrated her handiness with a rifle, writing in her diary later, “April 30, 1898: I am considered a good shot with my rifle but after killing several and watching their fluttering and suffering, I found no more pleasure in that kind of sport.”¹⁵⁸ We can gather that the act of shooting with a rifle was significant for a woman

¹⁵⁴ “Women Under Less Restraint. Box Rustling Order to be Altered Today,” *Dawson Daily News* (November 28, 1900)

¹⁵⁵ Morgan, 15.

Duncan, 209.

¹⁵⁶ Kathryn Morse, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 119-121.

¹⁵⁷ Black, 33.

¹⁵⁸ Phillips, 22.

because Phillips' diaries measured 2.5x4.5 inches.¹⁵⁹ She would not have written more than the important facts of a day because of the small size of her pages.

Women disobeyed government rules as well. One experience that almost all women shared in their respective memoirs was defying the officials at a river checkpoint. Each party was required to stop at an official checkpoint before attempting to take their boat through a section of river filled with rapids. Here there was a sign that read, "NO FEMALES." Either out of concern for their safety or out of doubt of their ability to cope with the river section, women were told to walk along the banks while the men took the boat through the river and they could meet their boat farther down. Klondike Kate, after being barred from boarding a boat left and returned dressed in boy's clothes. Disguised, she managed to leap onto a boat before officials noticed.¹⁶⁰ Phillips, on the other hand, tried bribery. She wrote in her journal for that day: "After begging and bribing the pilot, I was allowed to stay on the boat..."¹⁶¹ Emma Kelly, a journalist who wanted to experience everything on the trip just as a man would have, simply refused to walk around, so she remained in her boat.¹⁶²

Once in the Klondike, women started exerting their authority as they saw fit. Kelly, who was no passive woman, also refused to see her favorite dog drown when the man driving her boat did not want to stop. She wrote, "I then told him that unless he stopped the boat until the dog could reach it I would shoot him."¹⁶³ Kelly also hired male packers to carry her supplies over the trail for her and often had to act tougher than the men in her employ to get them moving.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶⁰ Lucia, 77.

¹⁶¹ Phillips, viii.

¹⁶² Emma L. Kelly, "A Woman's Trip to the Klondike," In *The Western Woman's Reader: The Remarkable Writings of Women Who Shaped the American West, Spanning 300 Years*, ed. Lillian Schlissel and Catherine Lavender, (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 69.

¹⁶³ Emma L. Kelly, "A Woman's Trip to the Klondike," *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly* (vol. 56, No. 4, New York: 1900), 633.

¹⁶⁴ Emma L. Kelly, "A Woman's Trip to the Klondike," In *The Western Woman's Reader*, 66.

Angry wives could focus a man's attention like nothing else could. In his unpublished memoir of prospecting, Frank A. Aldrich relates an anecdote about incurring the wrath of another man's wife. After soberly stumbling upon another man too inebriated to make it home, he helped the man the rest of the way to his cabin, only to be greeted by a very upset wife. The woman opened the door and the author and the weight leaning on him all but toppled over the threshold, making the wife suspicious that both men were drunk. Aldrich writes,

A woman's anger is one thing a prospector is unable to cope with. On this occasion I received full measure. Some of the language used by the lady you [?]. 'You got my husband drunk and then you bring him here in this condition,' she stormed and pointed her finger at me with a dramatic look of scorn, 'You have killed my husband.'

Aldrich continued: "Trembling with fear I awaited my threatened execution."¹⁶⁵ To appease the woman, the author bet her that not only had he not had a drop to drink, but he would not drink for a year. He upheld his bet and did not touch alcohol—until exactly one year to the day later.

Simply by adapting daily skills to the Klondike region and culture, women managed to artfully employ their ever-increasing power without overstepping their gender identity within the Victorian social system.

PART III: BEYOND THE DANCE-HALL AND RED-LIGHT DISTRICT—A CLOSER LOOK AT WOMEN AND THE KLONDIKE "HOME"

Respectable women that defied the myth of the Klondike had several important duties in the private sphere of the home. This section will explore just a few: marriage, raising children, making a "home" out of a cabin, and cooking. The way in which women performed each of these tasks were unique to the Klondike due to the climate and culture.

¹⁶⁵ Aldrich, 79.

Marriage

The gender imbalance in the Klondike indirectly destroyed the sanctity of marriage. That which had been the highest goal, besides motherhood, for a daughter of the Victorian Era suddenly became a farce.

The first indications of the fluidity of such a highly regarded institution were the unorthodox marriages of prospectors to Native women. It was these women who helped show the men how to survive in the harsh climate.¹⁶⁶ Native wives were used to the hard labor needed to endure the hardships of the Alaska wilderness. Some of their daily chores included gathering and chopping wood, tending fires, melting snow for water, gathering and preparing food, caring for children, and dressing skins to make clothing. They also had to preserve fish and fruit in order to prepare for the winter season.¹⁶⁷

Next, the Victorian ideal of parent-approved flirtatious courting for a long period before a relationship was regarded as serious was dismissed. Men, desperate for helpmates to take over the traditionally female housework at their cabins, proposed to women almost as soon as they stepped off the boats in Dawson. Single women had to fend off proposals from numerous miners. According to historian Jennifer Duncan, it was not uncommon for women to be married in less than a week after their arrival in the Yukon.¹⁶⁸ Charlene Porsild supports this statement, stating that church and newspaper records show at least one wedding per month.¹⁶⁹

Mable LaRose, a dance-hall girl, auctioned herself off to a patron for a winter. She proposed to do the cooking, washing, and other wifely duties in exchange for a warm place to

¹⁶⁶ Duncan, 43.

¹⁶⁷ Porsild, 35, 87.

¹⁶⁸ Duncan, 106.

¹⁶⁹ Porsild, 20.

stay for the winter season.¹⁷⁰ LaRose proves that the distance from the home to the dance-hall was not so great.

Some men tried to cash in on the market for women by setting up matrimonial agencies that would send women to be wives in the Klondike.¹⁷¹ The *Tacoma Daily News* printed an article on August 21, 1897 about a former cattleman who, after visiting the Klondike, thought he could change his product to women and auction them off to miners in the Yukon for \$1,000 to \$2,000 a head.¹⁷²

According to one oft-told story, the bonds of matrimony meant little in the Klondike. One woman, Mabel Long, fell from her boat into the water; while her husband stood unhelpfully by, another man rescued her. Once she was safe, she declared that if her rescuer would have her, she would rather go with him than back to her husband. Her rescuer was overjoyed and her husband very dismayed as he watched her leave in the other man's boat.¹⁷³

Agreeing to be the wife of a prospector, however, was a woman's gamble. There was always the danger that the prospector whom she married would not strike it rich. This discredited another traditional value of marriage; that it should provide economic safety and stability. Suddenly it did not, but it did mean that a woman would fulfill her destiny as a female of the Victorian Era, and she could be guaranteed a warm place to live during the harsh winter.

Children

¹⁷⁰ Lucia, 125.

¹⁷¹ Backhouse, 59.

¹⁷² "Wives for Klondike: Early Next Spring a Lot Will Be Sent Up. South Dakota Man's Scheme," *Tacoma Daily News*, August, 21, 1897.

¹⁷³ Ostrogorsky, 43.

Most parents traveling to the Yukon in search of gold left their children with relatives before heading north, which explains why children are rarely mentioned in Klondike memoirs.¹⁷⁴ It is evident, though, that there were some children in the Klondike because women, such as Edna Berry, went to fill teaching positions. Berry never writes about her pupils in her memoir, but her students may have been the children of mining families, or they may have been native children forced into schools opened by missionaries who went to the Klondike on behalf of the church to open the first schools for non-native kids.¹⁷⁵

Martha Black left two sons with family before heading to the Klondike, but gave birth to her third son in the Yukon. Unfortunately, details of raising him are surprisingly absent from her memoir. She writes that she was pregnant with a son in the fall of 1897 but could not afford to pay the hospital delivery fee of \$1,000 so she delivered her son unattended in her cabin during the winter.¹⁷⁶ But, another source says that two sea captains attended her at the birth of her son.¹⁷⁷ Either way, she provides no more information than that the birth was successful and all the neighboring men helped look after the baby.¹⁷⁸ Her story tells us that while women stereotypically did the child-rearing, men did not balk at helping a neighbor, even if the help included some babysitting. Many fathers missed their own children and were glad of a chance to play with a child and let a little boy tag along to learn manly ways. This babysitting, however, did not amount to any switch in gender roles because it could not compare to the Victorian women's work of everyday parenting.

Mothers had to use whatever resources were available to fashion outfits and other necessities for a child. Black writes that she creatively made a baby swing from a used packing-

¹⁷⁴ Backhouse, 49.

¹⁷⁵ Porsild, 155.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 148.

¹⁷⁷ Backhouse, 55.

¹⁷⁸ Black, 54.

box and sewed baby clothes out of cloth napkins.¹⁷⁹ Porsild, in her introduction, related a personal anecdote about her own mother's resourcefulness. She used old flannels and moss from nearby creeks to make diapers. Later in her book, Porsild inserts a picture to illustrate how women living in "primitive conditions [...] made do with supplies at hand." The picture shows a woman feeding a baby from a bottle—a whisky bottle.¹⁸⁰ All these mothers' inventions illustrate the adaptations women in the Klondike made to fulfill the ancient task of motherhood. They also illustrate once again the existence of women who defied the stereotype.

Building a "Home" and Daily Living in the Wilderness of the Klondike

Creatively recycling scraps found around the house to make essential items was not just for child rearing, but was an indispensable skill in general. By using local resources and those they had packed in over the trail, women became adept at making a home in an inhospitable place.

Many Dawson dwellings were small and had interior walls made of thin stretched cotton, rough boards, and (or) wallpaper. Most cabins had floors of bare earth, because dirt accumulated quickly as miners tramped in, covered in soil, after a long day's work.¹⁸¹ Phillips writes in her journal of living in a cabin that was 8x10 feet in dimension and decorating the white muslin-lined walls with photographs of friends.¹⁸²

Black, like everyone else, started with a cabin devoid of fancy furnishings. When she, her brother, and the rest of their party arrived, they had a cabin constructed to house all of them. A tiny "stateroom" was built into one corner so as to give Black, the only woman, some privacy. The rest of the men had bunks in the single large room. The floor was made of small, round

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 52, 43.

¹⁸⁰ Porsild, x, 100.

¹⁸¹ Berton, 30.

¹⁸² Phillips, 43.

poplar blocks pounded into the earth. For furniture they used tree-trunks, boards, and empty packing crates. Once a table and some chairs were in place, Black decorated the table with linen tablecloths and the walls with blankets she had brought with her. She had also packed in two-dozen linen napkins, a set of silver knives, forks, and spoons, and a bolt of cloth to use in making curtains and pillows, despite the grumbling from the men about the weight it added to the packs. However, Black would not hear of being so uncivilized as not to have a tablecloth and eating utensils. Once she unpacked, Black thought the cabin very homey. She added a vase of flowers to the table for a final touch.¹⁸³

Emilie Tremblay, a woman who had not packed table decorations, cut up one of her long skirts to make a tablecloth.¹⁸⁴ Though a tablecloth may seem a frivolous item to have out in the wilderness, it asserted the female dominance within the home, maintaining Victorian gender roles and Victorian civility despite the ruggedness of the country in which they found themselves.

Eudora Bundy Ferry's cabin was a bit different from that of Black's party. Ferry met up with her husband in the Yukon after he and his party had staked a claim and built a cabin. When she arrived, she found the cabin had the homemade furniture and cast-iron cookstove that almost every cabin had, a linoleum kitchen floor, and some very masculine decorations. The men had decorated with hunting prizes—bearskin rugs, caribou hides, caribou heads, a moose head, and antlers.

Ferry felt the little abode could do with a redecoration. She added bright fabric, a few pictures, books, and a sewing basket before declaring it fit for a woman to inhabit. By decorating with domestic objects rather than wild animals, women turned their cabins into feminine spaces

¹⁸³ Black, 40.

¹⁸⁴ Duncan, 90.

within the masculine world. Men labored outside digging in the dirt for gold and brought the outside inside by decorating with animal skins and heads. Victorian women were expected to keep their men civil, so they put the wildness back where it belonged, outside the house.

Ferry thoroughly enjoyed the task of creating a home out of a cabin. Her favorite activity was “rustling:” finding objects left behind by former inhabitants and creating a use for them.¹⁸⁵ Women of the Klondike seemed to enjoy the challenge of building a lifestyle similar to the ones they had left behind. Making necessary adaptations to Victorian customs was not a problem, because all the other women had to make them as well, though this hardly amounted to a change in domestic culture because the situation was temporary for most women.

Some women were not as accepting of the rugged living style, but these women were touring the Klondike as observers instead of settling for any amount of time. Mrs. Roswell D. Hitchcock and Miss Edith Van Buren, two New York socialites, arrived in Dawson where they were met by their male host. He took them to his cabin to show them how one lived in the Klondike. Hitchcock writes, “We were at once seated on empty grocery boxes for chairs at a pine table without a cover, according to the custom of the country.” Here is yet another woman who remembered, when writing her story later, expressing indignation at the lack of a tablecloth—though perhaps she could excuse it because it was a man’s cabin and he lacked a woman to put the necessary touches on the place.

The women did not get more comfortable with the culture of the Klondike over the course of their visit. After a few more days of visiting, Hitchcock wrote, “... and I have had all we want of such unsatisfactory couches, which are like bicycle tires, liable to be punctured at any time.”¹⁸⁶ She was ready to return to the comforts of civilization.

¹⁸⁵ Ferry, 22-23, 39-40.

¹⁸⁶ Roswell D. Hitchcock, “Two Women in the Klondike,” in *The Critic* (vol. 34, No. 863, May 1899), 426.

One way in which women preserved an image of social decency was through cleanliness. Dawson had a number of bathhouses frequented by both men and women with male and female attendants.¹⁸⁷ If done at home, washing oneself in the Klondike was a slightly complicated matter. Cabin dwellers bathed in their kitchens by crouching in a galvanized tub filled with stove-heated water in front of the oven door for warmth. They encircled the tub with chairs that they had draped with sheets for privacy and to keep out drafts. One had to be mindful not to flood the floor. Washing clothes was a similar affair to washing one's self. There were laundries in Dawson, but women could do it at home with a washboard and the same galvanized tub and stove-heated water. This time the tub was set on two chairs instead of on the floor.¹⁸⁸

As already discussed, the late Victorian period saw a return of women to the kitchen because it had grown harder and harder to find women willing to work as domestic helpers. In her memoir, Black writes that she usually did her chores in the morning before spending the rest of her day cooking lunch and dinner.¹⁸⁹ A major part of cooking was keeping the fire going. It was imperative that the fire in the stove be kept burning all day to heat the house, melt snow for water, and thaw food supplies before they could be used. This was difficult because the wood in the region was full of pitch, which made fires tend to blaze up, and then die out quickly. In the Klondike, it was custom that unannounced visitors were always received with hospitality, but in return they often volunteered to help in the kitchen.¹⁹⁰

Dance-hall girls also endured hardships, but they were able to live in more sumptuous quarters than were high-society women, yet again showing a difference between the dancers and the Victorian community. Dance-hall girls lived in rooms above the theaters in which they

¹⁸⁷ Backhouse, 82.

¹⁸⁸ Ferry, 34, 24.

¹⁸⁹ Black, 61.

¹⁹⁰ Backhouse, 43.

worked. Klondike Kate told her interviewer, May Mann, “I lived over the theater in a beautiful room. It had red and gold wallpaper, and the furniture was of golden oak. The carpet was lush and thick, with a design of great red roses. There were fine Nottingham lace curtains at the windows.” The socially outcast girls who roomed above the theaters lived more lavishly than high-society women in appearance only, however. Each night the dance-hall girls were checked upon to make sure they were in their rooms on time.¹⁹¹ Dance-hall girls could also live in cabins if they desired. Kate lived, unmarried, with her lover Alex Pantages, a scheming bartender. According to Kate, her living with a man and out of wedlock was the custom of the country.¹⁹²

While life in the Klondike kept women on their toes, fighting with the stove fire, devising ways to maintain social appearance and civility, or catering to the needs and fancies of men, they essentially performed the same daily activities of women in their social position elsewhere in the country.

Food and Cooking

During the decade within which the Klondike gold rush fell, new technology slowly modernized the food industry and changed the types of foods available to the Klondike inhabitants.

The evolution of the food industry meant that the food men and women could procure and prepare grew more similar during the Klondike years—assuming that most men had done little cooking before joining the Klondike rush, and therefore did not prepare any meals that involved mixing ingredients or a procedure more complicated than throwing something into a frying pan over a fire, and we assume that women had the training to cook many different kinds

¹⁹¹ Mann, 30, 29.

¹⁹² Lucia, 112-113.

of dishes. By the 1890s, industrial food processing shifted towards mass-produced canned and dehydrated foods. Not astonishingly, these became the basis of miners' diets. Canned food lasted longer than fresh food, which was important during the Klondike winters when ships could not reach Dawson with new supplies because the rivers were frozen. Canned food was also easy to prepare and cheaper than the average housekeeper could buy the ingredients of the can uncooked. Men, as a result, could now enjoy food that previously had needed the assembly of several different elements that would have taken time to put together. In the early days of the rush, such a meal would have been the job of a woman who spent her day cooking for the miners for hire.

In 1899, the Arctic Meat Company of Seattle fitted ocean steamers and river sternwheelers with liquid ammonia refrigeration so it could ship fresh meat to Dawson.¹⁹³ Suddenly, the women of the Klondike no longer needed to rely on getting meat from male hunters—either traders or men from a woman's own party. The changes in the food market would have affected the lives of Victorian women outside the Klondike as well, and thus Victorian life modernized everywhere. Any change in custom in the Klondike would be similar to any in the United States. Thus, the Klondike population could feel secure that Victorian gender definitions were unchanging as men and women's cooking abilities moved towards convergence.

Since so many men had to take up cooking, it became just as much a man's job as that of a woman. Even men with women in their party often shared cooking responsibilities. This change in attitude towards the chore of cooking allowed Edna Berry to demand payment from her own party for cooking for them. She made a deal with her brother-in-law that she would cook

¹⁹³ Morse, 143, 144, 153.

if they paid her \$50 a month so she could earn spending money.¹⁹⁴ Martha Black's party split up the food preparation. The men often took over the cooking while she did the baking—providing her party with pies, pancakes, and doughnuts.¹⁹⁵

Another way in which men and women were equals at cooking in the Klondike was that everyone, with or without prior chef skills, had to learn to adapt to using the limited resources available. The first lesson Black learned in the north was that the same pan served as a dishpan, bread-mixer, bath, and washtub.¹⁹⁶ She also probably learned to reuse packaging of one thing to house another thing. Butter was shipped from the states in 5-pound wooden buckets costing \$5 per pound. The empty butter tubes were excellent for storing baked beans.¹⁹⁷ Getting water was another problem with which everyone had to contend. Ferry found she had to collect water from a spring a quarter mile away and carry it back, but she also collected rainwater in an empty barrel.¹⁹⁸ One of the most common adaptations Klondike cooks had to make was using sourdough sponge instead of yeast to leaven breads, because it was better suited to survive the climate.¹⁹⁹ Sourdough was so important that miners who had been in the Klondike for more than a year, or more specifically had survived the winter season of isolation from the outside, became known as “sourdoughs”.

According to Alfred McMichael's records, the three men that made up his party divided cooking duty by each taking a week. He writes, “I took the cooking for a week, then Boyd for a week and now Knapp begins tomorrow.”²⁰⁰ Just because men took up cooking does not mean they were as adept at it as most women. McMichael's letters home reveal that Klondike miners

¹⁹⁴ Berry, 109.

¹⁹⁵ Black, 32.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹⁷ Backhouse, 64.

¹⁹⁸ Ferry, 23.

¹⁹⁹ Black, 32.

²⁰⁰ McMichael, 86.

who were otherwise portrayed as rugged men who braved the elements in search of gold struggled with the simple task of cooking. He wrote home:

Tonight I finished my first week at cooking. Made my first batch of biscuits yesterday. They were not too bad. Quite as good as some we got from some women on Lindeman. Made corn cake today but it was not a success. Did not taste badly, though, for the first. I can make tip-top oatmeal porridge though, and boil water nicely- if I have a good fire.²⁰¹

Men who hunted animals and braved interacting with Natives in order to trade for meat were proud that they were able to boil water, or make oatmeal porridge—which is no harder than pouring oatmeal into the boiling water. Berry too comments on men’s lack of skill when it came to mealtime. She writes, “When the miners cooked for themselves it was usually sourdough bread, bacon, and beans.”²⁰² Both of these testimonies show that neither men nor women were willing to let go of the stereotype that women belonged in the kitchen more than men did.

During the spring season, getting food to the Klondike was not a problem. The Alaska Commercial Company and North American Trade and Transportation Company kept warehouses full of canned and condensed food and evaporated fruit while supplies lasted.²⁰³ Boats imported luxuries too. Examples of luxuries included fresh fruit, ice cream, cake, eggs, caviar, anchovies, lobster and shrimp.²⁰⁴ Getting local food during the spring was a way to supplement the diet of pre-packaged, preserved foods, but during the winter local food was often the only food available. Food supply from Seattle and San Francisco dwindled when the Yukon River froze, preventing the sternwheelers from coming until the next spring. Miners hunted and traded among themselves and with Natives for meat. Meat came from caribou, moose, and such fish as salmon and brook trout. The salmon was only available for a limited time of the year, but miners could

²⁰¹ McMichael, 78.

²⁰² Berry, 111.

²⁰³ Morse, 140.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 141.;
Berton, 35.

ice-fish for trout during the winter. At Teslin Lake there were swans, geese, and ducks. Women picked berries (strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, blueberries, and cranberries) and local plants, such as rosehips and mushrooms. From the berries they made jams and preserves.²⁰⁵

In comparing the way men and women wrote about food in the Klondike, it appears one thing did not change; women always pragmatically remembered that eating and expenses went hand in hand. From the east coast, over the Oregon Trail, and in the Klondike, women remained the family financial bookkeepers and noted the cost of each food item. According to Ellen M. Plante, women had been the family bookkeepers since the antebellum years, during which young Southern ladies learned math in order to keep records for the plantations.²⁰⁶ Men, it seems, did not write in their personal correspondence or memoirs the price of every item they bought. Phillips, who wrote one short entry when she had something worth writing about, filled an entire day's entry with a list of fresh fruit prices. Her entry for August 1, 1898 reads:

I see a crowd around a fruit stand across the street and find that the excitement was caused by the arrival of a boat of about twenty apples that are about the size of a hen's egg and are selling for \$.50 each. The other fruit on the stand consists of about forty lemons, a dozen oranges (small that sold now for \$.40, red plums \$.50—a small water melon exhibited there a few days ago sold for \$25.00). Cabbage, perhaps a dozen head, \$1.00 per head, lettuce \$.50 a stalk (not head), radishes \$1.00 per bunch, onions the same but there is only one place in the city where they have those luxuries and then only for a week or so.²⁰⁷

Her use of the word "excitement" in this entry is important because in a previous entry she wrote, "There was excitement again today," caused by three chickens in box cages being sold for a dollar each additionally by a man who owned a cow selling glasses of milk for a dollar each.²⁰⁸ It is understandable that since fresh fruit, milk, and unspoiled meat were rare and expensive, their availability should cause some excitement, but noteworthy that it should be so exciting as to

²⁰⁵ Morse, 139, 154-156.

²⁰⁶ Plante, 7.

²⁰⁷ Phillips, 39.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

deserve a journal entry. Black, who wrote her memoir many years later, included food prices to illustrate the affect the seasons had on the food market. Summer and winter food prices differed because of the lack of imported food during the winter.²⁰⁹ To write the prices years later, she also must have recorded the prices during her time in the Klondike. The prices the women have recorded also serve to reflect the inflation of prices due to the mining.

Even though men, as the gold rush continued, gained the ability to cook a greater variety of foods, and neither Klondike men nor women considered it out of character for a miner to cook, McMichael probably expressed the way most men felt when he happily wrote home to say that another mining party had invited him to dinner, and that a woman had cooked the meal.²¹⁰ Men who had come to the Klondike dreaming of sacks filled with gold were less enchanted by the mundane tasks of daily life and quite happy to leave bookkeeping and cooking to women if they had the option.

CONCLUSION

Women were instrumental in creating the culture of the community that flourished for the brief years now remembered as one of the last great gold rushes. This thesis has demonstrated that both the high-class women who practiced Victorian ideals and the women who worked in the entertainment and sex industries were important in shaping the community. The myth of the dance-hall girl and prostitute is promoted by popular culture through representations of the Klondike Gold Rush such as Robert Service's poetry collected in *The Spell of the Yukon and Other Verses* and Charlie Chaplin's silent film *The Gold Rush*. However, these works promote a

²⁰⁹ Black, 54.

²¹⁰ McMichael, 247.

misleading stereotype that ignores the variety of work women did as well as the fluidity of the way women lived, worked and created community in a frontier gold rush environment.

By looking beyond the myth, we are able to discover that the lives of Klondike women are not as stereotypical as they appear at face value. Analysis of elements of women's everyday lives—such as labor and sexuality—shows that no woman fits wholly within or outside the stereotype. Thus, we see that it is both a myth that all Klondike women were dance-hall girls, and that dance-hall girls lived completely different, and separate, lives from those of respectable women. Now, perhaps, we can look at the woman who was Klondike Kate in a new way. With this we will return to the dance hall where we started...

Klondike Kate finished her song and curtsied deeply while men threw nuggets and sacks of gold at her feet. She made a sweeping motion, gathering her prizes and stashing them in the little bag she kept strapped to her belt. Then she stood up and exited the stage. For this beauty the night was just beginning. She sidled up to the bar and asked the closest miner, "Buy me a drink, sir?"

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Figure 1: <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/goldrush/64.gif>

Figure 2: <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/goldrush/63.gif>

Figure 3: <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/goldrush/6.gif>

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