

Notable Women of the Klondike

The discovery of Klondike gold in 1896 began a stampede of more than 100,000 prospectors. This legendary event – forever known as the Klondike Gold Rush – caused a global movement of people that was unprecedented at the time. In fact, during this time, Dawson City became the biggest city west of Winnipeg and north of Seattle. Although it lasted just a few short years, the gold rush left a rich historic legacy with stories of triumph, defeat, bravery, and the peculiar madness of gold fever.

It's important to note that the global influx of gold-seekers deeply impacted the land and the local First Nations people, who had been there for thousands of years. This time in history was not always positive and the impacts of development and colonialism are still felt today. Despite the mixed experiences, the Gold Rush made a dramatic contribution to shaping the culture and society of the Yukon today.

While the story of the Klondike Gold Rush and “the men who moil for gold” (Robert Service, a British-Canadian poet and writer, often called “the Bard of the Yukon”), has been covered extensively in history books and pop culture, lesser known are the inspiring stories of several women who either travelled to, or were residents of, the Yukon at that time.

Travel Yukon worked with Patricia Cuning, Executive Director of the MacBride Museum in Whitehorse, to compile profiles on six notable women whose lives left an indelible mark on the territory.

“The story of the Klondike is an epic journey,” says Cuning. “For most of the people who came to the Klondike – even those who didn’t make it all the way to Dawson City – it was a defining moment in their lives. While it was adventurous, and exciting, it was also dangerous, difficult, and emotionally taxing. That part is not often talked about, because we have a literal Hollywood treatment of it that’s been presented in popular culture.

“The women whose stories were sensationalized in popular media in the mid 20th century were an important part of the social fabric of the Yukon and the historic Gold Rush.

“The strong business-minded women who ran the restaurants, the laundries, and even the sawmill, were integral to the economic growth of the Klondike. The story of the acumen of the women is largely overlooked during that period. But if you look at all the secondary businesses, they were run and also owned by women. The money wasn’t just made in the gold field, and the women were well positioned to mine the miners – and not just at the dance hall.

“At the MacBride Museum, we have the real objects that were carried or abandoned on the way to the great Gold Rush. We also have diaries with the actual words of the stampede.”

The museum proudly displays information and objects from the lives of the following six notable women:



Photo Credit: Yukon Archives, Richard Harrington fonds, 79/27, #277

Lucile Hunter

In the early years of the territory, few women came to the Klondike, and only a small percentage of these women were Black. Census Canada says that in 1901, there were only 99 Black people in the whole of the Yukon. Black women earned a living by baking or sewing, working as domestic servants, mining, and running their own businesses.

Lucile Hunter was 19 years old and pregnant when she and her husband Charles left the United States, most likely from the state of Michigan, and made the trip to the Klondike in 1897. They travelled via the Stikine Trail, one of the most difficult routes to the Yukon. When they reached Teslin Lake in December of that same year, Lucile gave birth to a daughter, whom they named Teslin.

The family continued to Dawson, arriving in early February of 1898, well before most of the stampedeers who had to wait for the Yukon River to thaw before heading further north. They staked three claims on Bonanza Creek in February 1898 and lived for a time at Grand Forks, at the confluence of Bonanza and Eldorado creeks. They were very successful and had many claims and workers in their employ. A few years later the family moved to Mayo, where they had silver claims when the silver boom followed the Dawson rush.

During this time, in the later 1910s, Teslin moved to Seattle, giving birth to Buster Hunter in 1920. Unfortunately, she did not survive the birth of her second child, and both mother and baby passed sometime in the '20s. Buster Hunter moved back to the Yukon to help his grandparents on the claims after that.

After Charles died in 1939, Lucile and Buster continued to operate gold claims in Dawson and silver claims near Mayo. Every year, she walked from Mayo to Dawson and back again to check on her claims and her workers. The distance between the two towns is over 200 km, and would have taken several days by coach or weeks by foot.

In 1943, the US Military came to the Yukon to build the Alaska Highway. Lucile and Buster moved to Whitehorse, where she operated a laundry. Although she was completely blind in her later years, she continued to be fiercely independent. Lucile died in 1972 at the age of 93. Buster Hunter, Teslin's son, moved to the coast of BC.

Upon Lucile's death, she was interred into the Yukon Grey Mountain Cemetery in Whitehorse, and is the first and only woman to be placed within the Yukon Order of Pioneers section because of her contribution and perseverance as a miner.



Photo Credit: Gladys Pennington, MacBride Museum of Yukon History Collection, 1989-2-213

Kathleen Rockwell, “Klondike Kate”

“The men did not come to the Yukon for the gold; they came to see me,” Klondike Kate Rockwell, perhaps one of the most famous performers in Dawson City during the Klondike Gold Rush, is quoted as saying.

Klondike Kate was born Kathleen Eloisa Rockwell, in Kansas in 1876. As a young woman Kate was beautiful and full of life. “My father showered luxury on me,” she told biographer May Mann later in life. “How could anyone imagine that his beloved and indulged stepdaughter, who was being groomed to take her place as a society leader in the city, was destined to become a variety showgirl and a Yukon dancehall queen?”

As a teenager Kate was expelled from several boarding schools because of her behaviour. She loved to dance and flirt, especially with older men.

After moving to New York City, she took the name “Kitty Philips” and found a job as a chorus girl in a variety theatre. From there, she worked in Washington and Oregon, before coming north. During her first year in Dawson City, she made \$30,000 – a fortune at the time – working at dance halls. One night, while wearing a gown from Paris, she was crowned “Queen of the Yukon.” On her head she wore a crown made from a cut up tin can with burning candles stuck onto the jagged points. The audience went wild as Kate danced with wax dripping into her hair.

While in Dawson, Kate fell in love with a waiter named Alexander Pantages. She supported him for five years as he worked his way up in the theatre. He sent Kate to Texas for a year to perform and make money. While she was gone, Alexander met and married a younger girl from the “right side of the tracks.” Heartbroken, Kate sued him for breach of promise to marry her. “[Kate] declares that by her earnings as a vaudeville performer in the Klondike during the early strike she enabled Pantages in five years to jump from poverty to riches, from a waiter in a dance hall in Dawson to the position of theatre magnate,” reported the Dawson Daily in June 1905. The case was resolved out of court, leaving Kate with a settlement that she invested in real estate.

In 1933, Kate married John Matson and the pair returned to Dawson City for their honeymoon. Matson stayed in the Klondike and continued mining, while Kate went back to the United States. John and Kate rarely saw each other, though they regularly exchanged letters. In 1946, one of John’s letters did not arrive on schedule and Kate began to worry. Soon after, his frozen body was found just five miles from his cabin. Kate later settled in Oregon and married twice before passing away peacefully, at age 80, in 1957.

In the 1960s, when Dawson City recreated the showgirl era of the Gold Rush, singer and dancer Gillian Campbell came to town to perform as Klondike Kate. Ray Buchanan of Watts Costumes in Vancouver, designed and created all Gillian’s outfits; many of them, including her Klondike Kate dresses, are on display at the MacBride Museum.



Photo Credit: Bob Bishop, MacBride Museum of Yukon History Collection, 1991-10-1

Shaw Tláa / Kate Carmack

In 1896, a group of people made a gold discovery at Rabbit Creek that would change the Yukon and Canada forever. One of those people was Kate Carmack.

Carmack was born into a Tagish family as Shaaw Tláa. While she was young, she married a Tlingit man and bore a daughter, but both died during an influenza outbreak. She subsequently married George Carmack, a prospector from California, who was packing goods along the Chilkoot Pass with Shaaw Tláa's brother, Skookum Jim (Tagish name, Keish) and her cousin, Dawson Charlie. George and Shaaw Tláa had a daughter named Ahgay, whom George called Graphie Grace.

Shaaw Tláa was with George, Jim and Charlie on August 17, 1896, when they discovered gold on Rabbit Creek.

There are many differing accounts as to why the party was at the creek and who was the first among them to spot the dull yellow metal. Local oral stories in the Yukon say it was Shaaw Tláa who found the gold, or even Keish.

George, as the only white man in the group, registered the claims and gave one each to Jim and Charlie.

As a native woman, Shaaw Tláa had no way of registering the claims in her own name. All these claims yielded hundreds of thousands of dollars in gold, thus making their owners rich, but Shaaw Tláa had no legal claim to any of it.

Shaaw Tláa and George went to Seattle in 1897, bringing with them news of the gold in the Klondike. In 1898 thousands flocked to the Klondike to stake their own claims.

The Carmack family took trips out to Seattle with their riches multiple times. Soon the marriage faltered – some accounts blame alcohol; others say Kate tired of living in a city.

In 1900, Shaaw Tláa and George parted ways officially. Shaaw Tláa claimed desertion and infidelity and demanded half of the \$1.5 million estate. George claimed he and Shaaw Tláa were never really married, and so she never did get her share of the fortune.

During this time, while Shaaw Tláa was in Seattle, George returned to Dawson City and married another woman, named Marguerite Laimee, who owned a cigar store (which is a euphemism for a brothel). He proposed to Marguerite on the same night her met her.

Shaaw Tláa returned to Carcross, Yukon, soon after, and lived on a government pension until 1920, when an influenza epidemic swept through the territory. While some sources say Shaaw Tláa died at age 53, others say 63. Her gravestone in Carcross lists her name as, “Kate Carmacks,” and her birth year as 1857. In 1925, George passed away. His daughter Graphie Grace settled out of court with Marguerite and George's sister, and each received one third of George's estate.

Graphie did not have any children. While there are no direct descendants of Shaaw Tláa, she has many modern-day relatives.

Kate Carmack was inducted into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame in 2019 (joining the Klondike Discoverers who were inducted in 1999)

The Canadian Mining Hall of Fame inducted the Klondike Discoverers as a group in 1999. These men – George Carmack, Robert Henderson, Skookum Jim Mason and Dawson Charlie – have historically been credited with the discovery that set off one of the world’s greatest gold rushes. The Klondike Gold Rush established the Yukon and opened up the North, and also opened up Canadians’ eyes to the territory’s possibilities.

New information has since revealed that Kate Carmack also played an integral role in making this discovery. As an Indigenous woman, her traditional knowledge and skills allowed her and George Carmack, along with Skookum Jim Mason and Dawson Charlie, to live off the land in the Forty-Mile and Stewart River areas during their years of prospecting. Specifically, Kate’s ability to sew and market her mukluks and mittens to fellow prospectors provided the means to support their work. Clouded in hearsay and sensational reporting at the time, most historians agree that it is not clear who made the actual discovery. Oral histories shared among local Indigenous communities suggest that Kate herself found the first nugget of gold. The Canadian Mining Hall of Fame is proud to recognize Kate Carmack’s crucial contribution to the Klondike Discoverers and add her to this induction.

Credit: Canadian Mining Hall of Fame – Canadian Mining Hall of Fame

Shaaw Tláa’s memory is preserved in the form of a hand-sewn ground squirrel fur cape on display at the MacBride Museum. It is believed that Shaaw Tláa made this cape in 1900 after returning from the United States, where she would have seen many capes in a similar style. When Shaaw Tláa made her cape, she took that style and made it her own. The cape exemplifies the mixing of two cultures – its design is distinctly European, yet it uses traditional First Nation materials of rare black ground squirrel fur and intricate beadwork.

At the time, squirrel pelts were commonly used in clothing and blankets because they were lightweight and warm, although it was a labour-intensive process to sew the tiny furs together. Ground squirrel pelts are also relatively thin compared to caribou or moose hide, so garments generally required a lot of maintenance and the fur would have to be replaced regularly. Expert evaluation found that it has suffered little damage, meaning it was likely kept in storage and saved for special occasions.



Photo Credit: MacBride Museum of Yukon History Collection, # 1989-11-92

Martha Louise Munger Black

Martha and George Black were the political and social backbone of the Yukon for decades. Martha was widely known as a businesswoman, advocate and community supporter, while George practiced law, served the Yukon in the Territory and in the House of Commons, and organized a troop of Yukoners to serve in World War I. Both had interesting adventures before they met, but together they became lifelong advocates for Yukoners and helped make Yukon a player on the national political scene.

Born in February 1866 to wealthy family, Martha Louise Munger grew up in Chicago. Her first memory was of the Great Fire, which the Mungers fled when their home was destroyed. She had a “finishing school” education, excelling at elocution and botany.

Martha married Will Purdy in August 1887, and two sons followed shortly thereafter. Will’s work for the railroad often kept him away from home and Martha found outlets for her energy in addition to raising her family. She organized the Women’s Pavilion at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and provided relief to families stricken with poverty in the late 19th century.

In winter 1897, Martha and Will were headed to the Klondike Gold Rush, when he decided to abandon the adventure, so she continued to Dawson with her brother. After climbing the Chilkoot and riding the mighty river, the 631st woman through the Mounted Police checkpoint at Tagish, she arrived in Dawson. Claims were staked on Excelsior Creek, and she gave birth that winter to her son Lyman alone in their small Lousetown cabin. She never saw Will again.

Martha’s father arrived the following spring to bring her back to civilization, but she soon was drawn back to the Klondike. The claims were paying off, and with the money they brought in, she was able to finance two sawmills. By 1901, her older sons had arrived and Martha was a pioneer businesswoman in Dawson. In need of legal assistance, she met Dawson lawyer George Black.

Black was born in Woodstock, New Brunswick in 1873. He became a lawyer in in Fredericton in 1896 but “gold fever” called him and he headed to the Klondike for the rush in 1898. He mined on Livingstone Creek for two years, where he supposedly found enough gold to make him rich — only to see his fortune swept away in a flood, according to Black’s Parliament of Canada biography. After this rough luck, he moved to Dawson and returned to practicing law.

George asked Martha to marry him soon after they met, but it wasn’t until 1904 that they wed. One year later, Black was elected to the Yukon Council.

“I am a firm believer in the principle that married couples, from the beginning, should be in complete harmony in religion, in country, and in politics. So immediately after my marriage, without compunction, I became an Anglican, an Imperialist, and a Conservative.”

– *Martha Black My Seventy Years (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1938)*

George became the Yukon’s Commissioner and, in 1911, he and Martha took up residence in the Government House in Dawson. He was a strong advocate for legislation to protect miners, loggers and others who worked for companies that went bankrupt in

the boom-and-bust northern economy. Martha performed duties as mistress of the mansion and both of them welcomed everyone to the residence, and became known for helping those in need.

Martha also pursued her botanical studies. She completed a collection of pressed Yukon wildflower specimens as well as an exhibition collection for Canadian Pacific Rail that was assembled on a trip across the country by train. She battled for the crocus – fuzzy harbinger of Yukon springtime – to be accepted as the Territorial flower. She worked continually for a service group called the International Daughters of the Empire, and the Dawson Chapter was named after her.

In 1916 George enlisted to join Canadian troops headed for the Great War in Europe, subsequently commanding the Yukon Infantry Company of 275 men including son Lyman. Martha insisted on joining him and went to England on the troopship, where she continued the Yukon Comfort Fund work started in Dawson. She did YMCA canteen work, sewed for the Red Cross, visited injured Yukon soldiers in hospital, gave lectures, and wrote columns for the newspapers at home. George was wounded in 1918, but recovered in a French military hospital. As the war came to an end, the Blacks were invited to Buckingham Palace to meet King George and Queen Mary.

In 1921, George was elected to Parliament, returning to his seat through 1930, when he became Speaker of the House of Commons. Martha's strongest feminist comments were made in 1924 when she said in a Toronto Saturday Night interview: "The House of Commons sat long this year. I have never been an ardent suffragist, but the longer I live, the more I realize that women couldn't do any worse than the 200-odd so-called statesmen that Canada sends to Ottawa each year."

By 1935, George was seriously ill. When the election of that year was called, he was convalescing in a psychiatric hospital, and Martha stepped up to run in his place as an Independent-Conservative. She won the seat, which made her only the second woman to sit in Canada's House of Commons.

This was a period of tough times for the family: Lyman was killed in a motor vehicle accident in Ontario in 1937, followed shortly thereafter by the death of oldest son Warren.

By the time of the 1940 election, George had recovered, and so Martha stepped aside. George was re-elected and remained in the House until 1949.

Martha passed away on October 31, 1957, at the age of 91. She is buried in Pioneer Cemetery. George remarried and moved to Vancouver, B.C., where he died in August 1965.

Honours and Awards

In 1917, Martha was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in recognition of a series of lectures on the Yukon that she presented in Great Britain. In 1946, she was made an Officer of Order of the British Empire for her cultural and social contributions to the Yukon. In 1986, a Canadian Coast Guard high-endurance multi-tasked vessel was given the name "Martha L. Black."

In 1997, Canada Post issued a 45-cent stamp in her honour. Mount Martha Black in Yukon bears her name. Today the ferry that connects Dawson City to West Dawson is named the George Black Ferry. There is also a street in downtown Whitehorse, called Black Street, which is named for both George and Martha. Mount Black, the highest peak in the Big Salmon Range, is close to George's Livingstone claims.



Photo Credit: Yukon Archives, "First White Woman on the Yukon." Photograph reproduced from *Glimpses of Alaska...* by Veazie Wilson., 82/3, #1

Émilie Tremblay

Credited with being the first white woman to travel over the Chilkoot Pass, Emilie Tremblay literally had to hike up her heavy skirts and follow the trail to go down in Yukon history. Women at the time would be wearing long wool skirts with lots of heavy underlayers, and shoes that would have been leather with a small heel. A long wool coat would cover a heavy thick wool jumper or jacket, and underneath even more wool layers and scarves.

Born in Quebec in 1872, Emilie Tremblay (née Fortin) was 15 when her family moved to New York. While there, she met and married Pierre-Nolasque (Jack) Tremblay and, in 1894, they took the 8,000-kilometre journey to Fortymile.

The couple settled at Miller Creek where Emilie was the only woman. Their small cabin had been previously occupied by her husband and a group of miners and conditions were far from luxurious — the walls supported bunks where the men slept and in the centre of the room was a black pile of spit.

“...The men, tired from working on their claim, would lie in their bunks and spit at the post in the centre of the room,” Yukon historian Michael Gates wrote in his book *Gold at Fortymile Creek*. “Tremblay took a shovel and started her clean-up at the centre of the room and, in the following days, cleaned it from top to bottom.”

Emilie quickly became well known for an elaborate Christmas dinner she served to a group of hungry miners. Because of Fortymile’s remote location, she was lacking the amenities necessary to fix up a feast, but she more than made do. She sent out invitations scrawled on birch bark, guests brought their own utensils, and a long unused skirt served as the tablecloth, according to Gates. She served up a spread of rabbit, caribou, potatoes, sourdough bread and prune pudding. And, later on in the evening, a neighbour showed up with a bottle of rum that he had walked all the way to Fortymile to obtain.

In the spring of 1895, Emilie was joined by a friend: the French-Canadian wife of another miner that she had met in Juneau. Emilie planted a vegetable garden on the roof of their cabin to improve their diet.

At the end of the summer, the Tremblays returned to New York. In 1898, the couple began their second trip to the Klondike, and ended up settling on Bonanza Creek, where Jack prospected for gold. Emilie spent her time keeping house, baptizing newborns, and helping the wounded. She was godmother to 25 children, and offered shelter to widows, missionaries, and travellers. They stayed at Bonanza until 1913, when they settled in Dawson and Emilie opened a novelty shop called the Madame Tremblay store.

A few years later, in 1922, Emilie founded the Ladies of the Golden North, and in 1927 she became president of Yukon Women Pioneers. During the First World War, she knit more than 250 pairs of socks for soldiers.

In 1935, Jack, known as the “Grand old man of the Yukon,” passed away. Emilie spent the following few years travelling, but returned to Dawson in 1940 and married Louis Lagrois at the age of 68. She spent the last years of her life in a retirement home in Victoria, BC. She passed away in 1949 and age 77.

Today Ecole Emilie Tremblay is the only school in the Yukon that offers students complete French immersion classes from kindergarten to Grade 12.



Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Yakima Valley Museum

Belinda Mulrooney

It was a moment of hopeful desperation. When Belinda Mulrooney arrived in the Klondike in 1897, legend has it the Irish-born, U.S.-raised entrepreneur tossed her last half-dollar into the Yukon River and vowed that she would make her fortune in that rugged land. She quickly made good on that vow.

Mulrooney's success was due to her incredible foresight. When she came to the Klondike from Alaska (to which she had voyaged the previous year in response to the discovery of gold), she didn't waste her time packing staples like beans, bacon and flour. Every prospector had access to those. Instead, she packed her bags full of silks, hot water bottles and fine cottons – things that miners in a remote region would want after a long winter digging in the creeks. She sold her supplies at a 600 per cent mark-up, and sunk the money she made into building a restaurant and much-needed housing for miners. "There was nowhere then in Dawson for the newcomers to live and lumber was as scarce as hens' teeth," she is quoted as saying in the book *Klondike Women*. "I started buying up all the small boats and rafts that were arriving, hired a crew of young fellows who had nothing to do and had 'em build cabins."

Mulrooney's fortunes grew, but instead of sitting back and watching the money come in she looked for other investments. She opened the wildly successful Grand Forks Hotel, which was located at the junction of Bonanza and Eldorado Creeks, and it quickly became the centre of the town.

"Miss Mulrooney is a modest, refined and prepossessing young woman, a brilliant conversationalist and a bright business woman," reported the *Klondike News*, April 1, 1898. "Mulrooney... had no big brother or husband to rely upon, but she believed that if women could grace almost any business or profession at home, she could be a successful trailblazer."

As lonely, discouraged miners decided to sell their claims and return home, Mulrooney bought them. Soon she became a stakeholder in one of the most successful companies of the time – the Eldorado-Bonanza Quartz and Placer Mining Company.

She then moved back to Dawson City and opened the Fair View Hotel, the finest lodgings in town. "The completion of the Fair View fills a long-felt want in Dawson," reported the *Klondike Nugget* in July 1898. "Miss Mulrooney is to be commended for her enterprise, for the hotel is by far the most pretentious structure now in Dawson."

Mulrooney married Charles Carboneau in 1900, in one of the most glamorous weddings in Dawson City. They lived happily together for a few years splitting their time between Dawson and Paris, and then the tides turned. Mulrooney's businesses began to fail, and Carboneau was charged with embezzlement and fraud. They split ways – some accounts say that she divorced Carboneau, others say that he left town with her jewels and furs.

Mulrooney followed the Alaskan gold rush to Fairbanks where she had some success mining and running a bank. She settled in Washington and used her amassed fortune to support her family. She died in Seattle in 1967, at age 95.