

## YUKON

*Ringed all around us the proud peaks are glowing;  
Fierce chiefs in council, their wigwam the sky;  
Far, far below us the big Yukon flowing;  
Like threaded quicksilver, gleams to the eye.*

*Robert Service*

Most of my adult life (and some of my not-so adult life), I've lusted for areas of the earth's surface where there is little of man's evidence. I've lived in and traveled through some of those, but the place that started all that for me as a youth was the mythical land of Robert Service and Jack London... White Fang and the Gold Rush... The Yukon. The river by the same name, flows right through all that history of the Yukon Territory and then all the way across Alaska and into the Bering Sea. Over 2000 miles!

On July 29<sup>th</sup> of this past summer, two friends and I began a trip of 500 miles in kayaks from the same point many of the gold rushers started from in 1898, to reach Dawson and the big gold strike. Our gold was to be the river and the country around it with peaks of more than 6,000 feet, a river of constantly changing moods and directions, and animals and birds of magnificent proportions.

We began in the middle afternoon of that day after reaching Johnson Crossing on the Teslin River to the southeast of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. We would be on the Teslin for approximately 115 miles as we paddled to the northwest around Whitehorse, meeting the Yukon at Hootalinqua.

This place called Johnson's Crossing was a staging area for miners in their attempt to avoid the tortuous Chilcoot Pass and the dangerous Whitehorse Rapids. The next, and only bridge in the 500-mile trip to Dawson would be at Carmacks, about half way.

As I loaded the big double kayak, my two partners, Dave and Duane, made for the trading post near by. This would be the last post of civilization until Carmacks and it was reputed to have huge sticky buns. They got their sticky buns and I believe they had a personal experience with mosquitoes while hunting for the trail to the trading post.

The rain that was dribbling as we loaded increased in intensity once we started paddling. Headwinds made paddling difficult for several hours in what was now a wide, straight river valley. We kept the paddles as low as possible to avoid the strength of that wind.

Traveling side by side, I noticed that David's single kayak was riding low in the rear with the freeboard almost covered, but the front stuck out seven or eight inches. He seemed to be fighting for stability.

In the late afternoon, near 100 mile landing, we saw a black bear heading up the riverbank to escape us.

Later still, we passed a young man in a single canoe, using a double kayak paddle. As Duane and I closed on his boat after ferrying across the river, he waved at us. He looked to be native...of one of the "First Nations," with a husky build and dark

complexion. Our attempt at communication was not a success as we turned downriver having understood only one word from him (“sorry”).

On the second morning we passed his camp early in the AM and on the third day we saw him come to the bank to wave at us about one hour after we had begun.

The rain stopped later in the evening of that first day. By this time, around 9 PM, we had found an old campsite with little evidence of recent use. The river was high with few campsites on the gravel bars. We were forced back into the bush a bit on this site and it was covered with mosquitoes.

By 11 PM we had finished dinner and by 11:30 it was getting ‘darker’. It never got ‘dark’.

There were no trees big enough, at this latitude, to hang food on, so we strung a rope through all our food bags and attached pots and pans. All this David and I positioned so that we would have clear sight and a clear shot (if necessary) from our beds. Our shotguns became welcome bedmates.

The mosquitoes disappeared about the time the temperature hit about 50, and the thermometer kept on dropping...into the 40’s.

In 7.5 hours of travel we had covered only 27 miles this first day. Our packing had been bulky, with many heavy supplies stored on top of the enclosed kayaks. On the big double this was not a problem. On David’s single, it was a different story. Our camp was about 6 miles north of 100 mile landing in a bend of the river.

The second morning arrived foggy, but with the sun above the fog. Our food bags had not been touched and I think we were all relieved as that would have made for a very hungry week. The first resupply point would be at Carmack some 225 mile from our start.

Spectacular was a good description of the morning, as the fog began to lift and the day became brilliantly bright, right through the fog.

Almost immediately we found ourselves in a much more narrow stretch of the Teslin with high timbered shorelines and clay cliffs as well as a faster current. Just drifting, taking it all in, we were doing 6-7 miles per hour and paddling hard we got up to 10-12 mph. The next 30 miles were similar.

The Mary River entrance came up during this time and we would probably have missed it except for the whirlpool that threw us around at its entrance and woke us up in a hurry.

In the mid-morning our first moose appeared. In fact it was ‘meese’, mom and calf swimming in the river as we intruded.

Numerous eagles flew around us or sat as still as centennials with only their white heads giving them away.

After coming through Roaring Bull Rapids (more like whimpering calf), we began looking for a campsite without much luck due to the high water and covered up gravel bars. The shoreline was jungle!

As we darted back and forth between islands and river banks through strong current, David yelled something and pointed. It was an Eagle sitting almost on the ground close to us. As I looked, there was the immediate grinding of gravel and we were swung sideways into a gravel bar just below the water’s surface. As the kayak began to lean over, being pushed through the gravel by the current, I jumped out and then fell, trying to get to the front of the boat to pull us off the bar before we upset. With Duane pushing

with his paddle and me pulling the front, we did escape with minimum damage, possibly our egos were bruised more than anything else.

David had seen us hit and had escaped the bar. We met for a late lunch on a big gravel bar downstream and made camp there, about 39 miles that day in wind, water, and sun.

Day three dawned (kind of) in the mid-40s. Our routine of positioning food bags where we could see and shoot was still working, although this time we were on an isolated gravel bar in the middle of the Yukon River. That helped a lot.

The mountains here were unlike anything I had ever seen. Most had eroded sides, which looked like old clear cuts, but had never seen man's saws. The rock underlayment had little soil on top of it and the constant freezing and thawing seemed to produce continuous loose soil and falling trees. Over all, there were about four different patterns or stages: spruce or pine, aspen, openings of low alder brush, and slide areas with no growth yet apparent. We watched small pebbles as well as large rocks continuously rolling down the slopes from their homes up higher in the soil profile.

All around us we could see peaks at elevations from 4500 feet to 6500 feet or more as we flowed through this panorama on a river at about 3000 feet in elevation.

At one pullout to stretch and take care of old men's needs, David suddenly jumped out of the muck he had landed in, yelling and pointing at something in his shoe. I had no idea. Quickly he had his shoe off and there in the muck lay something that looked like a four to five inch salamander, but had no legs. David was still coming down from the feeling of having this little guy squirming around among his toes, but Duane and I began to chuckle and then laugh...very hard. David smiled. I don't think he really laughed much. We called it a 'sala-mud-eel'.

About this time we passed Teslin Crossing with an obvious road entrance on the west shore. This would be the winter trail to Livingston, an old gold strike town north of the Teslin. Later we came up on Mason Landing, the summer trail crossing to Livingston. Livingston was no more.

Twice we saw salmon thrashing on the river's surface, the large reddish color spotted easily.

And finally, as we rounded a large bend, another valley with a long peninsula jutting out on our west warned us of the junction with the Yukon coming up. Hopefully we would be able to ferry across this larger river and get to its western shore, past many islands and in a strong current.

At this point we were looking for Hootalinqua, the old meeting area of the tribes at the Yukon and Teslin junction, but more recently a riverboat staging area and telegraph and Royal Mounted Canadian Police post. Now, only a camp ground with some old cabins and relics.

As we ferried across from one river to the other and looked behind us as the current pushed us down stream, we could see the Yukon. Then looking to the western shore, signs of camps, Hootalinqua!

We camped there next to 3 German couples with their native Klepper kayaks. It would be the last time we saw them, but I did share some German Brandy that evening as we talked about everything under the sun.

Our Indian friend in the canoe arrived about 6 PM and came over to say hello. We made him a cup of coffee and asked him where he was from. His answer was: "I am

Japanese.” As it turns out, he lived about 100 miles north of Tokyo and made pizza for a living. He said that he had also been to New Zealand and Australia. Then he hung his head a bit and said, “I must get a new job.” We all laughed.

He looked more native-first tribes than Japanese with his husky, dark appearance, but this was a lesson to us.

There were four camps there at Hootalinqua that evening- one German, one American, one Canadian, and one Japanese.

We drifted into the current on our fourth morning in a much wider and windy river.

As we neared Cassiar Bar looking for a lunch site later, I noticed what I thought was a beaver on the far eastern bank of the river. As the current brought us nearer and I was able to adjust the 1000mm lens, the beaver sat up and became a bear, more specifically a grizzly bear. He looked about as surprised as we were, but probably not any more than us. We were by him quickly in the current and around a bend and into a bar where we pulled up for lunch and watched a cow moose feeding under water next to a huge slide. As I recorded her feeding, she decided that we were probably up to no good and swam across the width of the Yukon River, no small undertaking. We also found huge canine tracks on that bar—probably wolf.

Much of the afternoon was spent in high winds and few places to hide. We camped that evening at Twin Creek in an old abandoned settler site, complete with old sod roofed cabin and paths. We had made about 56 miles.

The following morning, day five, was uneventful, but was a beautiful sunny day starting in the 40's, gloves and jackets being the order of things, lunch on a sandbar to escape the mosquitoes and wind medium.

We passed under the only bridge in 500 miles of river, the Carmack Bridge, in the middle of the afternoon and paddled like crazy to get across the current and into a little put-in at the First Nations-Little Salmon Tribe campground.

A boardwalk beginning at the campground took us into ‘town,’ which consisted of one grocery store, one gas station, one restaurant, and one bar. Carmack is named for George Carmack, who along with Slookum Jim and Tagish Charley, discovered the first Klondike gold.

There was no gold in Carmack. We did see plenty of drunks and a culture that looked to be going downhill. We kind of watched our gear pretty closely.

Later in the evening, around seven or eight, our Japanese friend arrived and set up camp. This would be the last time we would see him or hear of him during the trip.

We left early in the AM to get through Five Finger and Rink rapids as early as possible. About 11:30 AM we pulled into sight of Five Fingers. Four huge basalt boulders crossed the Yukon there, separating the river into five shoots or channels. These rocks were like three story houses. A whole ridge of basalt had worn away many eons ago to allow the river to flow through here.

Above the rapids, on the eastern shore, we could see the Klondike Highway twist in to carve a bench just above the east side of the river. It had no place else to go. As we got closer we could see tiny specks of people on a walk way and then on the cliff above the far right channel which we would be taking. We realized then that we were the spectacle here. They would be watching from above as we crashed through what we realized now was class three or four rapids with six foot waves in a long and turbulent

chute. This turbulence, coming in, made it hard to line up and forced us to watch very closely as we began to move away from the eddy along the eastern shore.

David went ahead in the single and almost immediately was pushed off center to the right and needed to adjust quickly to center himself in the channel.

I held back in the big double, watching him...giving him enough time...before we committed.

Then there were no more alternatives. We were in it for whatever happened. If we lost our boats or our gear here, it would be the end of the trip or even more.

I watched David, now hitting big waves, his single kayak being raised into the air and then slapped down hard as the cross currents took him from at least three directions.

I saw him high brace at least twice and then...finally...come out below it and turn to watch us.

We were now starting through the far right channel into one of the chutes. Duane held his paddle at shoulder height to avoid hitting waves and altering our course. I ruddered with the paddle, the tail rudder having little effect.

The double blasted right through like one of the big trading canoes of old, hardly smacking the waves at all. Our course was perpendicular through most of it. To turn in this in the big kayak would have been disastrous.

Several miles later we hit Rink Rapids and again stayed in the eastern shore eddy to the far right. This time we were able to avoid any major waves. The middle of this one looked like Five Fingers. The high water had produced something a bit different for this time of year.

From this point on, we did not see many of the folks we had met further up on the Yukon or Teslin rivers. Some, no doubt, had taken out at Carmack rather than go another 250 mile to Dawson or go through the Five Finger. We wondered about the Japanese fellow, in a single, small canoe with a kayak paddle...it could be deadly for him.

At the end of the trip some days later in Dawson, we learned of another Japanese man who had been upset in Five Fingers, lost everything, and had turned up on a dirt road many miles away, disorientated and in his underwear with no shoes.

Afterward I asked David what he had experienced in the single. He said he was very close to going over several times and had high braced almost on to his side. The high bracing and his will probably saved him.

By late afternoon we had found an abandoned settler's cabin a few miles north of Minto. Someone had reconstructed portions of it, and the sod roof was still amazingly intact. The floor sagged in the middle, but it was dry and there were bunk bed racks. 'Any port in a storm' applied here. It was the darkest night we were to spend on the trip since the cabin excluded the normal late daylight of our 'nights.'

As we stood on the bank of the Yukon, looking around and GPSing our site, two canoes approached very close to the bank, obviously hunting a site for a camp. Since we were staying in the old cabin I yelled, "We have plenty of room here."

Ashore came three Swiss men and one Swiss woman. They were extremely friendly and humble. Introductions were made- one mountain climber, one doctor (the woman), and two just graduated students.

As they unloaded from their 'bear barrels', cold beers were produced for all and we toasted in about four languages. We learned it in the Swiss form of German although I have forgotten it already.

We snuck away early the next morning, day seven, from the settler's camp. There was still no sign of life in the Swiss portion of the camp as we pushed off.

Rain came as we got into the kayaks and continued for the next two and one-half hours. It was a cold rain, in the early morning, with a cold wind. I'm sure we were all wondering how we would survive this day, pushing down this huge river...completely soaked and cold.

Mid-morning found us coming around a big bend where we could see what had to be the Pelly River coming in from the northeast.

Miraculously, the rain had stopped and patches of blues shown through the cloud layer. Then an apparition appeared on the high western bank. We could see log buildings! It had to be Fort Selkirk, the old Hudson Bay fort originally built in the mid 1800s for the fur trade.

We turned quickly to the west to ferry as fast as possible to that shore so as not to end up downriver from the landing area beneath the bank.

As the boats were tied to ropes on the steps going up the high bank, a little, old lady appeared way up on the bank and said, "We have free camping here." Then she looked at Duane standing there in his bare feet and said, "Your feet must be cold!" She was holding a broom.

We climbed the bank and found a village in the remaking. Directly in front of us was a camping site for many with a big fire area and a bunch of folks standing around getting warm and making large, light pancakes. Introductions were made as we were offered pancakes. All of the campers were Swiss. There were about five or six groups. The sign at the top of the bank, identifying this as Fort Selkirk, was in English and German.

As it turns out, this place was an arrangement between the Canadian Government and the First Nation's tribes of that area. It included a reconstruction camp and fish camp run by First Nations, about one mile of buildings being reconstructed to historical accuracy, and a great camp ground including a log cabin with a stove to cook and warm up, as well as tables to eat at. It was a good idea and it was working.

The fort was originally built next to a native village in 1848. It lasted one year only as the Chilkoot Indians destroyed it to eliminate the British competition in trading. Years later it was reconstructed and was a substantial community, which included a Canadian Army Field Force, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and came into its own during the gold rush in 1898.

From our vantage point on the high bank we could see the Pelly River Valley a bit up stream as well as basalt cliffs all along the eastern side of the Yukon. We could even see two holes in the high basalt cliffs where the Canadian field force, 100 years ago, aimed with cannon for practice and probably to scare hell out of anyone thinking of invading the fort.

Getting back to the Swiss and the pancakes, they were offered, we salivated, and turned them down, thinking that we would be taking advantage of the situation. Really we must have looked pretty bad. I think they pitied us. Duane told me later that he 'lusted' for some of those pancakes.

Two of the Swiss groups had come down the river in two canoe flotillas, with canoes tied with logs and rope like catamarans. They had done this for stability in the

rapids and because they drifted a lot and could talk and move around much more. They had come through Five Fingers this way.

There were no roads into this place, only the river and an airstrip.

One Swiss fellow and his wife were especially talkative and mentioned they lived in Seattle.

I immediately said, “my youngest son went to school there in forestry”.

This man looked a bit surprised, and then said, “I teach Forestry Engineering there.” Well, as it happens, this was Professor Schiess of the School of Forestry at the University of Washington. He had taught Raed, my son, some years ago.

So this was our shortest day. We knew now that we could do fifty miles per day unless the weather or something else interfered. We camped out in the open, almost on the edge of the bank, with a view that extended many miles in all directions, including the Yukon River Valley and the Pelly.

Sitting there watching this entire spectacle playing out in front of us as if we were eagles perched on a monster tree, I noticed a white layer of something all along both sides of the high banks on both sides of the river. I was to learn that this was ash, just under the soil profile, and above most of the gravel. Volcanic activity back many years had produced this layer from several inches to several feet thick. Later, in the White River coming from the St. Elias Range down near the Alaska border, we would see the entire Yukon turn almost white for the rest of our trip because of this volcanic ash.

Rain came again in the evening while we were at Selkirk. This time, though, we were able to watch a magnificent display of fireworks as lightning strikes hit the Yukon valley from where we had come, and then a rainbow extended across it's breadth.

Sunday morning, the eighth day out, we drifted away from the oasis of Selkirk with no other signs of life aroused yet. The day was normal except for headwinds. We camped that evening on a sandbar and GPSed our location to about 58.5 miles from Selkirk, near Ballarant Creek.

There were moose tracks everywhere on the bar, but no Griz. Ah...a good place to camp hopefully. Except for the wind, which sent sand into our tents, food, and mouths, it was special. A 600-foot cliff on our east and the Yukon River spread out on our other three sides.

Monday, day nine, was ‘moose morning’. First a calf and cow darting in and out of the brush on an island west of us as we approached in the fog. Then four more cows feeding at different locations on islands. As long as we continued to move on the river, they watched us and continued to feed.

By 10 AM we had found the famous Kirkman Creek lady, Linda, on a homestead sixty miles from anywhere. We had been told to look for a sign along the river (in German) advertising coffee, cookies, cake, bread, and gold nuggets.

As we tied up the boats and climbed the bank, dogs of every size surrounded us, barking up a storm. I'm sure Linda knew there was someone coming, but as we hit the top of the bank we found no signs of life, only a beat-up old log cabin with some shack additions and a tin roof that looked like it would blow away in any wind.

All three of us wandered around and up to the cabin and stuck our heads in the open entrance of the shack attached to the cabin. There we met Linda.

“Yes?” was her only response. She seemed suspicious. I looked at David and Duane and then down at myself and no longer wondered at her hesitancy.

Finally, humbling myself to ask for alms, I said, “Do you sell cookies and coffee?”

“Yep, I do. Get your cookies or whatever else you want and go into that Gazebo over there and I will bring you coffee. You’re lucky, I just made a fresh pot.”

She warmed a bit when we asked her about fishing and even talked some about netting, saying, “Just don’t get caught.”

By early afternoon we had passed the mouth of the White River and it’s milky white consistency, coming from the southwest. We could immediately hear the grit on the kayaks sides. Sediment and flow from this river and the Yukon produced a wide delta with many islands and a width perhaps three or four times that we had come through already.

We picked our way around and through this to a cliff on the eastern side of the Yukon. As we neared, I saw a black splotch about twenty or thirty feet up the bank. When we passed, the black splotch became a black bear moving very fast. Again our speed down the river was surprising bears. After that bear, we passed the Stewart River entrance, a big gold bearing area to the north of the White River.

Camp was made near Ballarant Creek late in the day about 57 mile short of Dawson. It was a mosquito-infested mud and gravel bar...a place of convenience, but now all three of us had visions of salmon steaks, good salads, and great beer. We knew we could make Dawson the next day.

Our last morning on the Yukon went fast as we pushed to make Dawson as early as possible. Things had changed since that first day. The kayaks were balanced and the occupants were more accustomed to the eight to ten hour days paddling and the constantly changing moods of the river.

By middle afternoon we could see signs of man as we moved back and forth in the winding, but mostly northbound river. A starkly large slide kept appearing above bits and pieces of the town. Later we could see the Klondike River Valley coming in from the east, and its almost clear water ...the Yukon was still milky. For a while there was a line down the middle, one side of the Yukon clear and one milky white.

We pulled in next to the old Keno Stern Wheeler parked high and dry above us and walked up the high bank above the levee that surrounded Dawson. The streets were dirt and dusty and activity was high with a mix of those who had gotten off or were going on to the river, and RV’ers who had ferried across the river from the RV Camp. There was no bridge across the Yukon here, only a free ferry for everyone.

The international youth culture had arrived here, even in Dawson. We saw kids that could have been anywhere in the world, with their spiked hair, droopy pants, and boom boxes.

There were also busloads of tourists, most of them American. We had resurfaced, and except for the anticipation of good food and good brew, I wondered if we should just continue to some place where we would not see this spectacle.

Dawson was still a bustling, make it while you can place, only the gold of the past was no longer the draw. There was still gold, but it was tourism, here in a land where permafrost made the buildings lean and winters got down to 50 to 60 below. It was 80 degrees and folks were sunning themselves in the park along the river.

We had come around 500 miles by kayak. We had done this in about nine and one-half days and had averaged about 6.5 miles per hour for those hours that we were actually on the water.

More importantly, we had floated that same place...all those miles... that men had done in the spring of 98 on rafts and anything else that they thought would make it to the gold fields in Dawson.

Oh Yes, and we found Klondike Kate's with damn good salmon and salads and beer. We also found the young Japanese fellow on our last day in Dawson. He had made it...alone.

*Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting  
So much as just finding the gold  
It's the great, big, broad land way up yonder;  
It's the forests where silence has lease;  
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder;  
It's the stillness that fills me with peace.*

*Robert Service*

*Kerry D. Gyekis*

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