St. John River

http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/yukon_river/default.asp

Route of the Gold Rush

**Original Gwich'in name:** Yukon meaning 'great river'
**Current official name:** Yukon, from the Gwich'in original
**Source:** Coastal Range mountains of northern British Columbia
**Mouth:** Bering Sea at St. Michael, Alaska
**Direction of flow:** northwest
**Length:** 3,185 kilometres
**Main Characteristic:** aboriginal resource and Gold Rush route

Of all Canada's great rivers, the Yukon is the one that has most retained its natural glory, while still being visibly marked by great human events.

The Yukon's wide valley descends gently from the mountains of northern British Columbia, through the Yukon Territory and across Alaska to the Bering Sea. Boats can navigate all the way from the Alaskan coast to Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon Territory.

The valley of the Yukon is believed by some anthropologists to have been the main immigration route for North America's first human inhabitants. According to this theory, the ancestors of today's aboriginal peoples arrived across a now-submerged isthmus joining present-day Alaska with Russia's Siberia. Some aboriginals dispute this theory and believe in their own traditional teachings that their ancestors originated in North America.

In 1896 gold was discovered in a stream feeding the Klondike River, a tributary of the Yukon. Word spread around the world and would-be prospectors rushed to the Yukon River valley in what was called the Klondike Stampede.

The Klondike Stampede of 1897 was a severe shock to the cultural and physical health of the Yukon First Nations. Earlier contact with outsiders had been very limited and Yukon Native peoples had not yet suffered the epidemics of European diseases and addictions to tobacco and alcohol that had already devastated Natives living further south.

The rush to the goldfields caused the very rapid development of a transportation system in the Yukon. Seeing an eager market in the Stampeders struggling up the Chilkoot Pass towards the Yukon headwaters in British Columbia, investors rushed to build a narrow-gauge from the Alaskan port of Skagway to the heart of the Yukon Territory.

The White Pass and Yukon Route reached Whitehorse in 1900, two years after the gold rush ended. But the end of the gold rush was just the start of industrial mining in the Yukon and the railway company prospered.

Mining equipment and other freight taken by train to Whitehorse were still a long way from the goldfields radiating out from Dawson City.

To move people and freight from Whitehorse to Dawson City, the railway company built a fleet of steam-powered, sternwheeler boats. These tall, white riverboats were similar to those made famous on the Mississippi River in the United States.
The steamboats burned tremendous amounts of wood to produce the steam that powered their wide, shallow paddlewheels. At their peak, about 200 sternwheelers were running on the Yukon River. Wood camps were set up every 50 kilometres along the river, employing many woodcutters who were aboriginal peoples.

The White Pass and Yukon network of narrow-gauge steam trains and sternwheeler riverboats continued to be the only practical way to move goods into the Yukon until World War II. Fearing an invasion of Alaska by their enemy, the Japanese, the United States then decided to build an inland road that would be safe from attack by warships.

Thousands of Americans bulldozed a rough highway from northern Alberta, through the Yukon, into Alaska. The United States Army pushed the Alaska Highway into the Yukon in 1942, crossing the Yukon River at Whitehorse. For many aboriginal communities along the route, this was their first contact with diseases against which they had no immunities. Measles, dysentery, jaundice, tonsillitis and meningitis invaded the aboriginal population.

To supply their Alaskan defences with gasoline, the Americans also built an oil refinery at Whitehorse and a pipeline over the mountains to oil wells at Norman Wells, on the neighbouring Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories.

Peace ended the need for a local source of gas. The pipeline and refinery operated for less than a year. Today, the route of the abandoned Canol pipeline is now overgrown with vegetation and provides a challenging trail for strong, experienced backpackers.

Meanwhile, the Yukon continued to be the last waterway in North America whose riverside settlements depended on the proud sternwheelers. Once an all-weather highway linked Whitehorse and Dawson City in 1955, the riverboats were forced out of business.

Today, most of the river traffic on the Yukon is for pleasure. Canoeists come from all over North America and may parts of the world to enjoy the Yukon River. Tourism has replaced mining as the Yukon's most important business.

Today, outside of Whitehorse and Dawson City, the banks of the Yukon are home to aboriginal communities gradually recovering ownership of land, self-reliance, health, and protection of the natural environment. While non-Natives still dominate government, police, and courts, the concerns of Natives are no longer simply ignored.

Concern for the health of the Yukon River and the territory’s environment is shared by Yukoners of every origin to an extent unmatched anywhere else in Canada. The economic and cultural needs of nearly all Yukoners now depends upon the river’s health and beauty.
War brings a highway to the Yukon

When the United States joined the Allies in the war against Germany and Japan in 1941, American military leaders feared the Japanese might invade Alaska. The remote northern state depended entirely on shipping for its supplies, and ships could be easily attacked by submarines.

The fear was justified. Japanese naval units did land on some remote Alaskan islands and some Japanese submarines reached the west coast of the United States.

The American government rushed to build a secure, inland route to Alaska. In just eight months, they pushed through 2,333 kilometres of dirt road from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Fairbanks, in the middle of Alaska.

The American Army took over the White Pass and Yukon Railway and used it to carry bulldozers, trucks, prefabricated bridges, and thousands of soldiers into the Yukon. Whitehorse became the main construction base.

The American Army was racially segregated during the war. Most of the Army units sent to build the road were made up of black soldiers from the Southern United States, commanded by white officers. The biting blackflies of summer and the bitter cold of winter made life miserable for men accustomed to year-round good weather.

First Nations living in Northern Yukon were among the last of North America’s aboriginal peoples to maintain a traditional way of life, having little contact with non-aboriginals.

The Alaska Highway brought the First Nations into regular contact with non-Natives, and exposed them to diseases against which they had little immunity. Construction crews over-hunted the game upon which the First Nations depended. The traditional way of life became impossible.

First Nations families had no choice but to move from hunting and fishing territories to settlements along the highway where they could find work and government services.

The Alaska Highway was turned over to Canada after the war and has been constantly improved ever since.

There is plenty of evidence today remaining of the wartime construction. Well-built military barracks have been converted to solid, attractive homes in Whitehorse. Abandoned military trucks and construction equipment are still common along the highway. A prefabricated "Bailey Bridge" is in use linking a Whitehorse city park with an island in the Yukon River.

Today the Alaska Highway remains the only overland route between the "lower 48" states and Alaska. At the same time, the highway is Canada's only road link to the Yukon. Its name alone carries an aura of adventure and the Alaska Highway has become an important tourist route.
Yukon River: Bonanza


The quest for Klondike gold

Three members of the Wolf Clan of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation and a non-Native relative were prospecting for gold near Dawson City in 1896. They found it in the gravel of Rabbit Creek. The discoverers, Keish (Skookum Jim), Shaaw Tláa (Kate Carmack), Káa Goox (Dawson Charlie) and George Carmack would become rich from mining their discovery.

George Carmack renamed the stream Bonanza Creek, and the rush was on. People had been mining small quantities of gold in the Yukon for 20 years. The 1896 strike was the first big one. Other prospectors already in the region were quick to stake out claims to all of the promising creeks.

In 1897, the first of the successful miners reached Seattle and San Francisco with their new fortunes. News of the gold strike set off a stampede to the Yukon. With nearly all of the gold fields already claimed before they left for the Yukon, few of the Stampeders would make their fortunes.

Most of the Stampeders were Americans. The sudden arrival of more than 30,000 eager gold seekers to the region of Dawson City was a challenge to Canadian authority in the sparsely-populated Yukon. Canada's response - sending a detachment of North-West Mounted Police to the Yukon - fostered another enduring image of Canada. The red-coated Mounties built much of their legend maintaining law and order in the Yukon.

The mining claims were originally worked by many men wielding picks and shovels. In winter, fires were made to thaw the frozen gravel. The gravel was carried in buckets to sluice boxes. Creek water flowing through the sluice boxes separated the stone gravel from the heavier gold nuggets and flakes that would sink to the bottom of the box and get caught in wire screens. The lighter gravel was flushed out of the box.

The gold-bearing rock is 400 million years old and was broken up by stream erosion into gravel containing gold nuggets and flakes. Because the Klondike region was not scoured by glaciers, the gold bearing gravel was not dispersed. The extreme cold of the Ice Ages held the precious gravel together.

Miners still uncover huge, 10,000-year-old tusks of woolly mammoths. The now-extinct, woolly mammoth was a giant, elephant-like mammal common in the Yukon before the last ice age.

One-by-one, individual miners sold their claims to mining companies. The companies could afford the big dredges used to strip the stream bottoms of gold-bearing gravel. The floating dredges would dig their way upstream, sluicing the gravel as they went.

Large-scale gold mining ended in 1966. Yukon gold mining has become, once again, a small business of stripping gravel from stream beds and washing it with creek water. Today's miners use front-end loaders and sluice-boxes the size of trucks, but they are lucky to make a modest living. Today, about 750 people work in about 200 small gold mines.

Modern miners are also hampered by tougher laws to protect the environment and by Native claims to Yukon lands.

Dawson City's gold rush heyday is over, but it still prospers from the thousands of summer tourists who come from Europe, Asia and the rest of North America to see this boom town, carefully restored to its glory days of the Gold Rush.
Yukon River: Staking a Claim

[A First Nation's right to the land](http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/yukon_river/staking_claim.asp)

Most of the descendants of the Yukon's original inhabitants prefer to call themselves "First Nations" because the term is a reminder of their ownership rights to the land they have lived on for thousands of years.

Most of the 500 residents of Carmacks, 175 kilometres downstream from Whitehorse, are First Nations people. They are eager to see the settlement of Yukon First Nations land claims in the territory so that their ancestral rights will be recognized. The Canadian government has promised that about eight per cent of Yukon land will be returned to the stewardship of its aboriginal peoples.

Before the frenzy of the Gold Rush at the turn of the century, Carmacks was an ancestral campsite on an important trade route, heavily travelled by the Kutchin from the north and the interior and by the Tlingits from the coast.

The arrival of Europeans goods and tools brought change to the traditional lifeways of the people.

The site was named Carmacks when the non-aboriginal fur trader George Washington Carmack built a cabin there. Carmack was one of the three prospectors who staked the claim on Bonanza Creek that ignited the gold rush.

For a while, Carmacks was a busy fuel stop for Yukon riverboats. In the mid-twentieth century, when the Klondike Highway was completed, the old Carmacks campsite once again became a welcome service stop for travellers.
Stampede up the frozen Chilkoot Trail

More than 30,000 men, and a few hundred women, rushed to the Klondike region of the Yukon when word of a major gold discovery reached Seattle and San Francisco in 1897.

There were two practical routes to the Klondike for the thousands of Stampeders hoping to make their fortunes from the discovery of Yukon gold in 1896. The first leg of the journey was by ship from San Francisco, Seattle, or Vancouver to the coast of Alaska.

From Alaska, the easiest and most expensive route to the Yukon was by sternwheeler steamboat around the coast of Alaska and, from the Bering Sea, up the Yukon River to Dawson City. The cheapest, most common, and hardest route started further south on the coast of Alaska, near Skagway.

The gold seekers climbed over the steep and difficult Chilkoot Pass to the upper reaches of the Yukon River. Most of them travelled in mid-winter so they could drag their goods on sleds up the frozen Taiya River.

A small detachment of Mounties at the summit refused entry to Canada to anyone without food and enough equipment to survive for one year. The requirement also increased the amount of customs duties the Mounties could charge for goods purchased in the United States.

At the time, the location of the border between Canada and the United States was in dispute and some people feared there could be war over Canada's claim to the Chilkoot Pass. Today, the Parks Canada cabin at the summit is a welcome shelter for hikers climbing the steep and often windy pass.

To relay their supplies to the top, the poorly-dressed Stampeders had to climb the trail 40 times each, with 120 kg loads on their backs. Most of them made the climb in winter, up steps carved in the deep snow of the pass.

Winter also allowed the Stampeders to haul sleds up the Taiya River instead of carrying supplies to the foot of the pass. But winter was a curse as well as an aid. Seventy Stampeders were killed by a single snow slide; many of them are buried at Slide Cemetery at Dyea.

The poorest Stampeders hauled their own sleds and carried everything on their own backs over the pass. The better-off paid Native American packers, most of them coastal Tlingit, who had controlled trade through the pass for centuries. The wealthiest could pay to have their supplies lifted up the trail, over the summit, and down to the headwaters of the Yukon by means of pack horses and cable cars powered by steam-driven winches.

One of the steam boilers, still in good condition, sits today in the coastal rain forest, one day's hike from the coast. Century-old boots, shovel blades, sacks of oats, telegraph wires, and tramway cables decorate the 53km trail from its start on the Alaskan coast to Bennett Lake in British Columbia. Both Canada and the United States protect the trail as a historic site and it is unlawful to take or disturb gold rush artifacts.

After arriving at the waters of the Yukon, the gold seekers had to fashion boats to take them and their supplies down the river to Dawson City.
Some Stampeders and their supplies foundered in the high winds of Bennett Lake. Others - as many as 300 - drowned in the rough Whitehorse rapids, so named because the white water suggested the waving mane of a galloping horse. Entrepreneurs responded to fear of the Whitehorse rapids by building a light tramway to shuttle the prospectors and their goods the eight kilometres around the dangerous white water.

The Stampeders arrived at Dawson City only to discover that every river and creek had been claimed entirely by prospectors who had already been in the Yukon when the gold was discovered. Some of the Stampeders stayed on to work for claim holders. Most sold their supplies to get enough money to pay their way back home by riverboat down the Yukon.
Yukon River: Scaling Fish


Salmon spawners get over a dam

The Yukon River is one of the most important salmon-breeding rivers in the world. Each year, the river and its tributaries witness the return of huge Chinook salmon to spawn in tributary creeks. Returning salmon have been a vital food source to aboriginal peoples for thousands of years.

Some experts believe the salmon use a powerful sense of smell to trace their route back to gravel beds where they were hatched six or seven years earlier. However they find their way, the salmon migration begins far out at sea where salmon mature. Yukon salmon that have been hatched and tagged near Whitehorse, were later caught as far away as Japan.

Until 1957, the Yukon was free-flowing from its headwaters in British Columbia all the way to the Bering Sea on the north coast of Alaska. Salmon swam freely through the Whitehorse Rapids to spawn in the tributaries and creeks upstream of Whitehorse.

The river was dammed at Whitehorse in 1957 to provide electrical power for the small city. The salmon's natural migration route past Whitehorse was suddenly blocked by the power dam.

To provide a partial remedy, an artificial channel - the Whitehorse Fishway - was built beside the dam. The Fishway is 366 metres in length, the longest wooden fish ladder in the world.

The Fishway is a sloping trough fitted with a series of partitions. Water courses down the trough from the reservoir behind the dam, flowing over and through the partitions.

The partitions slow the flow and provide climbing fish with resting places. The fish can jump over the partitions but most swim through the underwater doorways joining each compartment.

Halfway up the Fishway, the salmon enter a viewing chamber where they are counted and measured by Fishway staff looking through glass windows. The fish are then removed from the viewing tank with nets and placed in the upper section of the Fishway to complete their climb over the dam.

By the time they reach the Fishway, the salmon are exhausted and fringed with fungus growing on their injured skins. They have spent three months swimming the 3,000 kilometres of the Yukon River, without eating.

The digestive systems of all Pacific Ocean salmon degenerate at the start of the migration. By the time they reach the upper reaches of the river, they have just enough energy and determination remaining to built nests and spawn. Soon after despositing and fertilizing their eggs in the gravel nests they build by swishing their tails, both male and female salmon die.

Some of the fish are removed from the Fishway and taken to a nearby hatchery. There, the eggs are squeezed from the females and sperm, called milt, is squeezed from the males.

The eggs are fertilized with the milt and hatched artificially in tanks. The following spring the baby fish, or fry, are released by teams of students into creeks upstream from Whitehorse. This artificial hatching of salmon eggs is needed to make up for the loss of naturally-hatched fry who are killed by the turbines of the power plant as they try to make their way downstream towards the sea.
Very few of the salmon hatched or released upstream of the dam ever make it back home after spending their adult lives in the Pacific Ocean. Most will be eaten by other fish or trapped at sea by commercial fishing boats. Some years, only 150 salmon return to the Fishway.

The biggest return since the dam was built was in 1996 when nearly 3,000 salmon were counted. Fishway staff believe the reason for the large return was the fact that the fish had managed to escape the fishing boats by returning two weeks sooner than expected.
A First Nation recovers from cultural suppression

Cradled by stunningly-beautiful lakes and mountains, Carcross is inhabited by the Carcross-Tagish First Nation.

The original Tagish residents were directly on the trade route of the coastal Tlingit and adopted many of the Tlingit social customs.

Formerly called Caribou Crossing, Carcross was a stopover for Gold Rush Stampeders at the turn of the century. Three of the Klondike gold discoverers were members of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation and are buried there.

First Nation residents in Carcross have unbreakable ties to the land and their own traditions. Sweat lodge ceremonies to heal and purify the spirit are held in Carcross. There is a summer camp for young people as well where they learn the skills of survival and communal living.

Carcross is on its way to becoming a healthy community, but some residents still battle social problems. The reasons are complex. Some adults in Carcross trace their difficulties to their childhood when they were taken from their homes and placed in church-run schools.

Church-run schools suppressed established, aboriginal cultures and languages. Traditional religious beliefs were replaced by European concepts that had nothing to do with aboriginal experience or spirituality. As a result, today, many in the Native population are struggling to retain their cultural integrity and pride.

Recently, the Carcross-Tagish First Nation demolished the local boarding school founded by the Anglican Church in 1901 and restored the land to its natural state.

The First Nations peoples anticipate with hope the negotiation of self-government agreements which would give them limited law-making powers over land use, hunting, trapping, fishing, business, culture, health care, education, and conflict resolution.
Yukon River: Spreading the Word

http://www.ccge.org/resources/rivers_of_canada/yukon_river/spreading_word.asp

Yukon storytelling tradition welcomes the world

Yukon aboriginals have a rich, unwritten history. Archeologists believe the Yukon and Alaskan regions may be the oldest continuously-inhabited region of North America. But, until recently, history was passed from generation to generation only through the ancient art of storytelling.

Storytelling was an important part of life and many hours were spent telling the myths and histories of this part of the world. Stories were a way of teaching and entertaining; it was also a means of passing on traditions, values and attitudes about the nature of the universe.

The Yukon storytelling tradition is expressed each summer through an international storytelling festival in Whitehorse. Storytellers from Yukon First Nations join others from Russia, Europe, Japan, China and Australia to entertain and educate under tents set up on the banks of the Yukon River.

One tale by well-known First Nation storyteller, Angela Sidney, is called Skookum Jim’s Frog Helper and describes how the Tagish prospector was guided to gold discovery that set off the Klondike Stampede a century ago.
The White Pass and Yukon Route

Hissing and murmuring softly on the dock, steam locomotive Number 73 stands out elegantly in its black boiler and red trim against the white hulls of the cruise ships tied up alongside the dock at Skagway, Alaska.

Today, the historic White Pass and Yukon Route carries passengers from the cruise ships over the mountains to the Canadian border at Fraser, British Columbia. The train travels through dramatic terrain, clinging to canyon walls, diving through tunnels, and skipping over waterfalls on wooden trestles. The line earns its slogan, "Scenic Railway of the World."

When the railway was built a century ago, travellers to Alaska and the Yukon wanted something other than scenery. They were after Yukon gold. It was the difficult and expensive trek of gold-seekers up the Chilkoot Trail that inspired entrepreneurs to dream of a fast, easy way over the mountains.

While the Stampeders were struggling up the Chilkoot Trail in 1897, a group of British investors backed the building of a railway from Skagway on the Alaska coast over the mountains to the headwaters of the Yukon River at Bennett Lake. From there, the Stampeders could travel by boat down the river to the Klondike goldfields.

Construction began in the spring of 1898. Most of the workers were Stampeders wanting to increase their "grubstake" of money and supplies so that they could continue on to the goldfields of the Klondike. In August, rumours of another gold strike, this time in northern British Columbia, ran through the construction camps. More than half of the railway workers quit and headed for the new gold strike, most of them carrying off the shovels and picks that belonged to the railway.

Soon after reaching its first objective of Lake Bennett, the railway was pushed through to Whitehorse. The last spike was driven at Carcross, Yukon, in July, 1900.

At Whitehorse, the railway connected with the company's fleet of sternwheeler steamboats that connected Whitehorse with the mouth of Yukon River on the Bering Sea.

Like many mountain railways, the White Pass and Yukon laid its rails three feet apart (91 centimetres), instead of the wider standard gauge. The narrower track meant smaller, less-expensive tunnels, bridges, and ledges to be cut into the mountainsides. The railway is one of very few narrow gauge railways left in North America, all of them now dependent on tourists.

The stampede of prospectors was almost over by the time the railway was finished. But to kill off all remaining competition, the railway purchased and smashed up the aerial tramways operating over the Chilkoot Pass.

As the Stampede ended, commercial gold production in the Klondike was just starting. The White Pass and Yukon Route prospered by carrying mining machinery, supplies, workers and their families as far as Whitehorse.

Relations with Yukon Natives along the route were good from the start. Part of the railway route crossed land owned by Keish (Skookum Jim Mason), a member of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation and one of the original discoverers of gold in the Klondike. In return for the right to cross his land near Log Cabin, British Columbia, the railway promised jobs for the people of the community. Tagish elders recall that the railway kept its promise into the 1950s.
The White Pass and Yukon Route was a critical supply line for the United States Army during the construction of the Alaska Highway during World War II. Whitehorse became the main construction camp for the highway builders.

After the war, the overworked railway was in poor condition with little prospect for prosperity. The railway and its declining fleet of steamboats was taken over by a new Canadian company.

The new owner made the White Pass and Yukon a pioneer in using large sealed containers to carry freight. The railway prospered until the 1970s when a decline in metal prices caused mines to close in the Yukon.

The railway's fortunes were made worse by the opening of a highway between Whitehorse and Skagway in 1978. Rail service to Whitehorse was abandoned in 1982. Trains continue to operate infrequently as far as Bennett Lake, the headwaters of the Yukon.

Fifteen years after the last train left Whitehorse, the narrow-gauge tracks are overgrown with weeds and slender trees. Many Yukoners hope railway operations will be restored all the way from Skagway to Whitehorse to increase tourism which has become the Yukon's most important industry.