**Barkerville and the Fraser River Gold Rush**

In the mid-1800's, news of the gold in the Fraser River had reached the outside world and created a buzz for prospectors around the globe who were in search of wealth. Many of these prospectors traveled to the west coast of Canada in hopes of striking it rich in discovering immense gold deposits in the river. With prospectors and miners coming from every direction, the gold deposits in the rivers would quickly decline, which led to many of the more brave prospectors to follow the Fraser River north where they would eventually reach the Cariboo region. A prospector by the name of John B. Wilkinson, made the journey up the Fraser River with a small party of men after they had received news of the fortunes that the Fraser Valley brings. On John's journey, he writes his brother and family whenever the opportunity arises. In John's letters, he describes the struggles of navigating through the canyons of the Fraser Valley and all of the fortunes he encounters in his travels, as well as constant updates on the condition of the gold rush, as he doesn't want his brother to embark on the journey too soon and walk away from the gold fields empty handed.

In John's first letter to his brother, he describes the treacherous conditions he and his party had to overcome in their travels, the water levels in the Fraser River rose at such a rapid speed that they were forced to put a halt to their travels until water levels decreased. Although John’s expedition up the Fraser River wasn't as smooth sailing as he might have hoped, he writes to his brother that he is "very much pleased with his trip, and also notes that he is in good health first class spirits, strong and hearty as a Buck."1 Though John is very pleased with his expedition thus far, he pleads to his brother to stay put where he is, as the provisions from the gold rush aren't too prosperous, though he notes that the rations of food and supplies at Fort Alexander were very cheap and living was very easy. Once the winter started to set in, John and his party of men started the journey south to Victoria, where they would reside until the spring season, at which time they would embark on the journey back to the Cariboo region.

Along with John Wilkinson, his party of men, and other miners from parts all across North America, many of the miners were of European descent who had traveled all the way from Europe. As European migrants arrived in the Cariboo they had brought an influx of disease with them. In the early years of the Cariboo gold rush a smallpox outbreak, which would be brought into the region by the Europeans, reduced much of the First Nation population in the Bowron Lake region close to the town of Barkerville, this First Nation group was known as the Dakelh people. In 1934, a white resident of Barkerville at the time of this epidemic, Hazel Kibee, wrote a letter stating that “few Indians survived.”2 This statement would suggest that the outbreak of smallpox and measles in the Cariboo affected the indigenous people in such a way that nearly led to an entire depopulation. The Dakelh people had suffered from this outbreak of disease because they hadn’t developed an immunity to the smallpox disease like the Europeans had before immigrating to North America. Another contribution to the suffering was due to the fact that the Dakelh people didn’t have or know of the remedies required to treat the smallpox disease, the Europeans had previously dealt with similar outbreaks in Europe, and were able to develop a number of remedies to heal the sick.

This great depopulation of the indigenous people would bring forth the notion that First Nation people didn’t coexist with the European miners of Barkerville, this would prove to not be the case. The number of First Nation residents in Barkerville was so minuscule as to almost be invisible to the eye of the miners. Despite the mass depopulation of the Dakelh First Nations of the Bowron Lake region, First Nation activity in the gold rush era became more vibrant in the years following 1862. Many First Nation people served as hunters and berry pickers, as well as packers for the miners traveling throughout British Columbia in their effort to land in the gold fields of Barkerville. These packers were hired by groups of men traveling long distances from southern British Columbia to pack their supplies and provisions. The hiring of First Nations as ‘pack mules’ would ease the workload for the miners who would have to navigate their ways through many mountainous regions and canyons throughout the interior of the province.

As well as being packers, the indigenous people who didn’t participate in the activities of mining, spent a large part of their time hunting the wildlife in the area and foraging for berries in the fall months. It is reported that First Nation peoples of all origins traveled to the Barkerville area to pick berries. Barkerville’s high elevation and subalpine forests produced an abundance of wild berry crops, most notably the huckleberry.3 These berry crops would prove to be a very important seasonal food supply while most of the animals were in hibernation for the winter months. Aside from the gold rush itself, [[1]](#endnote-1)another major contribution to the Barkerville economy came from hunting, which was done mostly by the indigenous people in the area. Because the town of Barkerville consisted of such a large population for such a small and remote village, the supply of food was in very high demand with a very short supply being provided. This high demand and low supply resulted in a meat shortage in the years between 1866 and 1871, this meat shortage would provide a market for indigenous people to use their knowledge of hunting and fishing for their benefits. The lakes in the Bowron region contained a very generous supply of fish and would become the main provider for the fish industry in 1867. Indigenous people were able to sell buckets full of fish for one bit, which would amount to 25 cents. The main market was Chinese miners, who were always ready for good cheap grub.4 An October 1869 newspaper noted that, “those who have been in the fishing business, will much better than if they had been mining.”4 While berry picking, hunting, and fishing, would be one of the main labour markets for the First Nation people, other avenues of labour would arise elsewhere in the province through means of transportation.

One of the extreme hardships put on the miners of the Cariboo gold rush was the wear and tear put on their bodies from traveling to and from the gold fields every year. In the early years of the Barkerville gold rush, Governor James Douglas questioned Gold Commissioner George Cox why he hadn’t collected licensing fees from miners on his journey, Cox responded by stating “With perpendicular ascents and dangerous descents my eyes and thoughts were wholly engrossed with the safety of my life, more especially when crawling along the edge, paths ... are only a few inches in width and ... from the trail along the sides of this lofty mountain and overhangs the river.”6 even with somewhat improved conditions over the early years, the path up to the Cariboo still remained to be a very treacherous journey for one to endure. These remarks from George Cox to Governor Douglas sparked interest in constructing a road to ease the travels for miners and others who would embark on the journey to the Cariboo. This road that was to be constructed would be known as the Cariboo Wagon Road. The completion of the Cariboo Wagon Road in 1865 would allow for large wagons to load freight received from steamers in Yaletown and carry it all the way to the mines in Barkerville. Although very beneficial to the miners of the Cariboo, the Cariboo Wagon Road proved to be very detrimental to the indigenous labour market in the Fraser Canyon. The packing of goods from the docks of Yaletown to the miners of Barkerville was traditionally done by indigenous people, Chief Justice Matthew Begbie recalled that “no supplies were taken in except by Indians ... Without them ... the country could not have been entered or supplied in 1858-1860.”5 The indigenous people’s main duties included the packing of goods, loading wagons and boats, as well as numerous other tasks. With the Cariboo Wagon Road completed indigenous packers were quickly put out of business by horse-drawn wagons and sleighs that were able to transport goods to the miners in a much more efficient manner.

Although the gold rush was very prosperous for some miners who actively participated in the gold fields, it also had some huge impacts on British Columbia as a province. With miners and prospectors coming from every corner of the globe, Governor James Douglas in Victoria was forced to take action into his own hands. Governor Douglas provided the mainland with some much-needed protection and ordered the establishment of some law enforcement throughout much of the province. In 1866, a decision was made to combine the two colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia into a single crown colony, which would be known as British Columbia, denoting Victoria as the capital. In doing so, Governor Douglas had hoped that this would save a lot of costs in transportation of goods and services as well as simplify the government’s administration.7

By 1868, activity levels in Barkerville would be reduced significantly, this was due in large part thanks to a fire that destroyed the majority of the village. Late at night, on September 16, 1868, Barkerville would be engulfed in flames. The fire was said to have been started when a miner was trying to kiss a girl who was ironing some garments. While trying to steal a kiss from this unsuspecting girl, the miner accidently knocked against a stove and displaced a pipe that was lying atop the stove, the pipe would burn through the canvas ceiling and through the roof of the building that the two were in. The fire that started in this building would quickly spread through all the very dry wooden buildings in the town of Barkerville, and within hours much of the town would be destroyed. With the devastation that had occurred, and the winter quickly approaching, residents of Barkerville would be forced to act quick in the rebuilding process. Within weeks, the majority of the town would have been rebuilt, but during the rebuilding phase, many miners had left town in search of new gold fields. This would lead to the eventual downfall of the historic town of Barkerville.

Some parts of the history of Barkerville would suggest that the gold rush era would be more beneficial for the economy of British Columbia and the country of Canada than it would be for the individual miners who were able to discover great fortunes in their diggings. The Cariboo gold rush provided the mainland with a much-needed improvement in their transportation system, with the creation of the Cariboo Wagon Road, which would end up being a key contributor to the colonization of British Columbia. Although the gold rush provided a number of benefits, it also had some severe drawbacks, most notably the impact it had on the Dakelh First Nations. The mass depopulation of the Dakelh people due to the smallpox outbreak would provide the Dakelh with some very dark times, which leads to the belief that First Nation people didn’t coexist with the miners. This would prove to not be the case, as many First Nation people provided Barkerville with valuable resources through means of hunting and gathering. Throughout the years Barkerville became more and more prosperous for many of the miners, up until the eventual destruction of the village. The fire that tore through Barkerville would be a major factor that would lead to the fall of the historic village. While rebuilding started almost immediately following the devastating fire, many of the miners would begin to pack up their belongings and leave town in efforts to find new gold fields where they would hope to become more prosperous. With the majority of the population of Barkerville leaving town, the town would eventually become a ghost town in the years following the fire.

1. John B. Wilkinson, letters to his brother, April 2, 1860 – September 12, 1862

   Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country to Work,” (BC Studies, Issue 185, 2015) : 8

   Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country to Work,” (BC Studies, Issue 185, 2015) : 15

   Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country to Work,” (BC Studies, Issue 185, 2015) : 17

   Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country to Work,” (BC Studies, Issue 185, 2015) : 18

   B. Griffin, *“Miners at Work, a History of British Columbia’s Gold Rushes”*, accessed November 10, 2016. <http://www.empr.gov.bc.ca/MINING/GEOSCIENCE/PUBLICATIONSCATALOGUE/OPENFILES/1992/Pages/OF1992-19-MinersWork.aspx>

   *“Canada History,”* last modified 2013, accessed October 28, 2016. <http://canadahistory.com/sections/Eras/responsiblegovernment/barkerville.htm>

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