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As a fifth-generation British Columbian, I have always been fascinated by the stories of my ancestors who chased “the golden butterfly” to California in 1849. Then in 1858 — with news of rich gold discoveries on the Fraser River — they scrambled to be among the first arrivals in British Columbia, the New El Dorado of the north. To our family this was “British California,” part of a natural north-south world found west of the Rocky Mountains, with Vancouver Island the Gibraltar-like fortress of the North Pacific. Today, the descendants of our gold rush ancestors can be found throughout this larger Pacific Slope region of which this history is such a part.

My early curiosity was significantly moved by these family tales of adventure, my great-great-great Uncle William having acted as foreman on many of the well-known roadways of the colonial period: the Dewdney and Big Bend gold rush trails, and the most arduous section of the Cariboo Wagon Road that traversed and tunnelled through the infamous Black Canyon (confronted by Simon Fraser just a little over 50 years earlier). My imagination was alive to the stagecoaches that once careened through these precipitous canyon corridors, the paddlewheelers brimming with fortune seekers, the saloons and gambling dens that quickly sprang up to accommodate the varied thirsts of booze and card games, and the prospect, too, of chancing upon a life-changing golden bonanza. The adventurers who, like my ancestors, rushed along these early trails in search of the mythical motherlode, were seized with “gold fever” — the return of the glory days of ’49 that had swept California and the world.
I remember travelling these regions with my father while young, stopping one day to marvel at the magnificent Nicoamen Falls, a massive torrent of water blasting through a rock defile in haste to join the Thompson River. It was here that I first thought — in this enchanting desert-country of steep canyon walls and rock spires, sage, and ponderosa pine — that the Interior landscape must hold other stories beyond the gold rush place names of Boston Bar, Texas Bar, and New York Bar. And perhaps appropriately, many years later, I was to learn that the waterfall that had so transfixed me in my youth held two amazing stories, both related to the gold rush. The first claimed that the very first gold discoveries that set off the 1858 rush had occurred just below the confluence of the Nicoamen and Thompson rivers (Hwy No. 1 sweeps by the general locale), and that it was actually Indigenous people who made the discovery and actively mined here prior to 1858. The second and much older story spoke of a powerful shaman of the ancient Nlaka’pamux peoples who, from atop this sublime waterfall, foretold the coming of the white man and, prophetically, how their nation would be shaken to its core.

It was, in fact, stories such as these that convinced me to look below the surface of the accepted historical narrative that informed the public’s consciousness: a celebratory story of pioneer progress that excluded the pivotal role of Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities such as the Chinese. It is most telling, indeed, that during the 100th anniversary of the Fraser River gold rush (and founding of the Crown Colony of British Columbia), the Provincial Centennial Committee celebrated the achievements of white gold seekers with its mascot known as “Century Sam” who, with revolvers and a sheriff’s badge, more closely resembled a Californian vigilante than a member of the fledgling colonial civil service charged with asserting British “law and order.” While British authority under Governor James Douglas had originally sought to prevent the entrance of foreign gold seekers within the emerging goldfields of British Columbia, conversely this BC100 imagery, and thus branding, celebrated the arrival of the Californian miners north of the 49th parallel, thus constituting a signal loss of memory that had conveniently forgotten the early Indigenous miners in addition to the considerable
chaos and challenges with which British and Indigenous sovereignties were confronted by such a mass invasion.

As I prospected my way down the Pacific Slope through American archival collections, following the trail of the ’58ers back to California, a further piece of the gold rush puzzle began to emerge that was also largely lost to time. It is an epic telling of violence, Native-newcomer conflict, and indeed war with Indigenous peoples on either side of the 49th parallel. The Fraser Canyon War, in particular, is surely one of the great untold stories of our time — fuelled by the genocidal notion that “a good Indian is a dead Indian.” The more I prospected in archival collections south of the border, the more it seemed that “Century Sam” neither accurately represented the year 1858, nor was this an event, from an historical perspective, that could be celebrated in such an exclusive
and self-legitimating way, favouring as it did the California culture that had claimed the land.

Prior to the establishment of the Colony of British Columbia, on 19 November 1858, British sovereignty was marginal and the Fraser goldfields were clearly an extension of the American West. The Indigenous world was not defined by the 49th parallel, nor the kind of violence that crossed the international border with the expansion of the California mining frontier. These foreign gold seekers, in prosecuting military-like campaigns, engaged in significant battles with Indigenous peoples, broke the back of full-scale Indigenous resistance in both southern British Columbia and eastern Washington State, and brokered treaties of peace along the Fraser River corridor — having taken the law into their own hands to the exclusion of British authority. The very roots of Indigenous rights and unrest current in the province today can be traced to the 1858 gold rush and the making of a New El Dorado. As well, it brought about the formal inauguration of colonialism, Indian Reserves, and ultimately the expansion of Canada to the Pacific Slope.

Professor Jack Lohman, CEO of the Royal British Columbia Museum, has rightly stated that the actual facts of “B.C.’s gold rushes are forgotten” and that to understand this history “we need to reimagine it.” As such, it is my hope that the reader will find here more than a few golden pay streaks to stir the imagination and begin to see the New El Dorado of the north for what it really was, that of a devastating contest for the lands and resources of British Columbia and, for Indigenous peoples, a prophecy fulfilled of apocalyptic proportions.
INTRODUCTION

Fraser River Fever on the Pacific Slope of North America

What’s the matter? What a clatter!
All seem Fraser-river mad,
On they’re rushing, boldly pushing,
Old and young, both good and bad;
Lawyers, doctors, judges, proctors,
Politicians, stout and thin;
Some law-makers, some law-breakers,
Rogues as well as honest men.  
— San Francisco Bulletin, 19 June 1858

Gold rushes have become romanticized as free-spirited, golden ages of opportunity played out on frontiers around the world. They have thrilled populations, both past and present, regardless of age, profession, social and economic standing, race, religion, or creed. During a gold rush, anyone might join and break free from the drudgery in which daily existence held them: indentured labourers and ship-bound sailors, bankrupted merchants and “liberated” slaves, young men and women who rebelled against fathers, and fathers considered knaves. Abraham Lincoln’s future secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, was not the only American to be swept up by the excitement of the Fraser River gold rush when he declared: “A marvellous thing is now going on here . . . [that] will prove one of the most important events on the Globe.”  


“The Frazer River Thermometer” measuring the stages of gold fever in 1858. It was a popular broadsheet distributed throughout California by Sterett & Butler, San Francisco.
When he made this statement in 1858, Stanton was then federal agent for land claims settlement in California, and he merely observed from afar the effects of the massive rush north. But those to whom the call of gold was irresistible — well over thirty thousand migrants — were to invade the lands along the Fraser and Thompson rivers in search of the elusive metal that had previously been the sole mining preserve of the Salishan peoples.

As the mining frontier moved northward from California, through Oregon and Washington, it was the Indigenous peoples’ discoveries of gold in British Columbia that diverted Euro-American populations north of the 49th parallel, precipitating the Fraser River gold rush: “Never, perhaps, was there so large an immigration in so short a space of time into so small a place.” Those who could afford passage, at least 23,000 miners, dashed north to Victoria, or U.S. centres such as Port Townsend or Bellingham Bay, via sailing ships and larger steam-powered vessels. At least 8,000 others trudged overland from such places as Sacramento, Placerville, or Yreka through northern California to Oregon, along the Columbia and Okanagan (Okanogan) rivers of Washington Territory, and across the 49th parallel to the northern fur trade preserve of New Caledonia, what was then the unconstituted territory of Britain. The “Fraser River Fever” was of such consequence that the American president James Buchanan was compelled to take the unprecedented step of appointing an emissary to the region to represent and protect American interests. Contemporary accounts claim the flood tide of immigration north surpassed thirty thousand to as many as one hundred thousand people.

The effects of such a massive outpouring of population from the American Pacific Coast states impacted particularly the gold rush metropolis of San Francisco. By 1858, the placer mines of California were largely played out, leaving many an old '49er without any serious occupation but to frequent the bars, boarding houses, or back alleys of San Francisco. Capital- and labour-intensive hydraulic mining had replaced the halcyon days of picks, pans, and shovels, and marginalized the average sourdough, or made him a wage labourer at best. At the very depths of a state-wide depression, the Golden State’s lustre became
further tarnished as a huge unemployed class was increasingly desper-
ate for news of a “New El Dorado.”

Word of the Fraser discovery reached a news-hungry press. Early in
the spring of 1858, San Francisco newspapers began publishing rumours
about the riches in surface-diggings to be found along a previously un-
known river in a foreign land to the north. As these isolated reports
grew in size, flavour, and frequency, a handful of old Californians and
perhaps a few hundred from Washington, Oregon, and Vancouver Is-
land, who had the necessary experience in placer mining but no capital,
were immediately attracted by the emergent “New El Dorado” that
was offering renewed hope for a return to the glory days of the 1849
California gold rush. News of these “pioneer” successes reached others
who also were without the needed capital to compete in California’s
mines, and they in turn travelled north.

The word was out, and the Fraser River quickly became a home for
thousands upon thousands of impoverished placer miners. Just under
ten years after the California gold rush commenced, and forty years
before the exodus to the Klondike goldfields, crowds of emigrants
flooded the docks of San Francisco. A line of steamers to Victoria, Port
Townsend, and the instant town of Whatcom were inaugurated, with
other lines quickly added. Every available sailing craft, no matter how
rundown, was put into service to accommodate the swelling crowds.