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PREFACE



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



Century Sam

and self-legitimizing 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.¹

— *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.”²

136. **Lawyer!** *Do you want to get a good job in the 'States? Then call on me. I will get you a job in the 'States. I will get you a job in the 'States. I will get you a job in the 'States.*

120. **Jonathan takes the Fever!** *Jonathan took the fever. Jonathan took the fever. Jonathan took the fever. Jonathan took the fever.*

100. **Run for a Ticket!** *Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket.*

90. **\$500 per day!** *Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket.*

80. **Give a Kiss!** *Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket.*

50. **Reporters come!** *Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket.*

40. **The Heat!** *Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket. Run for a ticket.*

THE FRAZER RIVER THERMOMETER.

THE FRAZER RIVER GOLD MINES, AND THEIR HISTORY.

PRICE, 12 1/2 CENTS.

125. Without multiplication - *the largest one published in the world.*

120. *the half the height to an even scale.*

110. *the largest one published in the world.*

100. *the largest one published in the world.*

90. *the largest one published in the world.*

80. *the largest one published in the world.*

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Our history of the gold mines of the Frazer River is not by any means a new discovery, although it is commonly so described. For nearly a century the whole of the west country, which forms the present possessions of the Hudson's Bay Company, has been considered a wilderness capable of yielding nothing but furs and peltries; and yet, so long ago as 1777 that region was visited by an English officer, Currier by name, who published a book in which he has been the repository of all the accounts of gold in the Northwest Territory, and for which he was usually treated, as one "too indulgent in belief."

Once in a while, it is true—that since California became a State—a mine runner has retraced, not this mine but the seeking for the countries lying along Frazer's and Thompson's Rivers, but little success was met with. At length, in April, 1828, two persons returned from the mountains, where they had contrived to get together a small quantity of the dust. This they exhibited to their friends, without at all exaggerating the richness of the lode from which they had found it. The story of their success was treated about, until in 1831, in that city, on the 10th June, a young man who claimed to have had relations with a prospecting man on Frazer and Thompson Rivers. He represented gold as being abundant near hundred acres or more above the junction of those rivers, but not to be gathered on account of the hostility of the Indians. The country, according to his report, was terribly rough and unattractive—plenty of new and cold weather, but excellent winters were to be expected, mountains cold, certain passed through, in the course of which persons experienced the party he belonged to had their hands touched a certain. Nevertheless he gave the gold, which he described as "being as thick as pebbles upon the bottom of the stream"—so thick that they could have dugged it up by the shovels, if the Indian had not objected.

As a sign of the abundant nature of this story, the new excitement spread like wildfire. Parties in the interior and elsewhere whom first had scented the lode, soon made the warmest and most successful excavations whose miners had secured every prospect, were created with a confidence which extended itself to the reproduction of articles in which the capacities of the freshly discovered gold regions were set forth in glowing colors.

Our miners, however, did not trust altogether to the journals, or to mere hearsay. Numbers of Companies working paying claims immediately organized themselves by the purchase of their own tools, with full consideration of the laws. This was the signal for a general excitement. By the time the first prospect was fully developed, great numbers of persons who had not even seen the mine were on their way to the mountains to develop. One man who owned a claim, which had been paying him from ten to fifteen dollars per day, sold it at a great sacrifice, and took the direct route to the mountains. The route he took throughout the month of June were through by miners, journeying toward the nearest point of departure with all the implements of their business calling about them. The first steamer to arrive from San Francisco was many an one thousand at a time, and one conveyed nearly nine hundred hands to the mountains, and these establishments, and these establishments, and these establishments, were making money rapidly.

There was a succession of reports rather contradictory in their nature, but all the risk increased. Several mining towns in the state were depopulated. Even public officials abandoned their duties and followed with the tide. In the latter part of June, more authentic information was received, and parties who had gone up to the mine returned to the city to prepare reports, but instead of magnifying the yield of gold in the new mines, most of them were very guarded in their replies to the numerous questions which were put to them. These made their purchases and inquiries, and they went off with all possible speed, thus adding still further confirmation to the miners. Some of the gold mines, however, in the mountains about San Francisco. It is for the most part in very small scale. From one hundred to two hundred dollars are said to have been made by fortunate miners in a single day. Others, when they are not very rich, are said to have made an average of twenty dollars per day each, during a period of several weeks.

The large numbers of persons who were pouring into the British Possessions now advanced this time, however, though they had no time to issue a Proclamation, warning the claimants that they were encroaching upon the rights of the Hudson's Bay Company, and forbidding them to trade with the Indians upon any pretense whatever. They were also informed that they must obtain a paid-for permit of the officers of the company at Victoria, before ascending the river, and that no American goods should be brought for the purpose of trade without the payment of a heavy duty. This order would be beneficial to the Hudson's Bay Company, but it was not intended to be a hindrance to the miners. At this point it declined, eventually, to furnish, one of the principal claims of the Pacific coast. It was returned, all of them having considerable sums in debt, and one being said to possess as much as \$20,000 in Frazer River treasure. Three others on Beilfongham Bay are considered to be the property, and this is within the American limits, the public attention is principally directed that way. Companies of speculators had already started for those places, where they brought up all the gold that was considered available for their purposes, and the prices of lots indisputably rose from a very nominal valuation to prices far beyond the value of the gold.

Whitman and Schone, the two latter being very much together, are from a very early date. So great did the rush now become, that it was necessary to make several attempts to accommodate the yield of the precious metal had been exhausted, but the miners were found a fresh difficulty in their way. It was ascertained, that during a considerable portion of the spring and summer, the country was liable to frosts, which would render it impossible for some time to get the principal deposits. Gold, however, is said to have been found in the banks at some point above a place called Hill's Bar, in quantities, which yielded from five to fifteen dollars per day to the miner. Mr. Hill, from whom some little bar took name, returned to Beilfongham Bay in the latter part of June, with a party of men, the river had risen too high to be profitably worked, and that it would be six or eight weeks before the waters would subside sufficiently to answer the purposes of the miners.

Meanwhile thousands had ascended the river, and improvements were going on at Victoria, in the line from Whistons, with the view of establishing a route to the upper mines proposed, which by this time is nearly if not quite completed. Some fugitives have been given to the westward, and persons going to the new diggings are comparatively at the mercy of the bar. At Fort Langley, to which point the steamer *Sevanja* has been conveying passengers from the Bay, she had been ranging as high as \$15 per barrel, and common gold sold at the extraordinary figure of seventy cents per ounce.

The news received by the *Republic*, today (July 24), does not in any respect contradict the particulars already received. Numbers of persons who left San Francisco with barely sufficient means for their journey to Beilfongham Bay are described as being driven to seek their fortunes in the mountains, and some of them are said to have found their principal gold. Wages for the several kinds of labor, such as pick-digging, digging, etc., are only \$2 per day. The wages for the several kinds of labor, such as pick-digging, digging, etc., are only \$2 per day. The wages for the several kinds of labor, such as pick-digging, digging, etc., are only \$2 per day.

"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."³ 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 trod 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.⁴

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 desperate for news of a “New El Dorado.”⁵

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 unknown 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 Island, 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.



80° F: Getting a letter from a friend.

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.⁶ 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.