



Yukon Country

Chasing the ghosts of 1898

■ CHUCK DELL

Silently, but steadily, the fog and mist rolled off the Yukon River and down Front Street. One could almost imagine the ghosts of 1898 lurking quietly in the shadows. The calm was nearly staggering in a town where once the hue and cry never ceased.

This is downtown Dawson City in the Yukon Territory, a town of approximately 1,800 hardy souls, a mere fraction of the 30,000 who lived here shortly after one of the great gold strikes in North American history.

Yukon Country

Looking for an RV destination that includes fabulous scenery, fun and frontier history? Consider visiting Klondike country in the Yukon.

On August 16, 1896, George Carmacks and his two Indian brothers-in-law, Skookum Jim Mason and Tagish Charley, struck gold — *lots* of gold — on Rabbit Creek, now known as Bonanza Creek. From their discovery through 1912, \$175 million in gold was panned from the region. Little wonder that the Klondike gold strike drew thousands



of prospectors and totally captivated the dreams and hopes of a depression-plagued outside world. Today, Dawson City is smaller and less boisterous, but more fun and entertaining.

Located 162 miles south of the Arctic Circle at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike rivers, Dawson City is a quiet town where memories of the gold boom linger, though the opera halls have crumbled into the permafrost and most of the clamorous saloons and gambling casinos are long gone.

Dawson City is a 330-mile detour (one way) for anyone traveling north on the Alaska Highway. Just north of Whitehorse, catch Provincial Route 2 — the North Klondike Highway — and head north. Our RV rolled easily on the modern all-weather highway, and the



drive was unruffled and uneventful.

Ironically, Dawson City lost the title of capital of the Yukon to Whitehorse when the gold production dropped and the population began seeking its fortunes and futures elsewhere.

Still, recollections of Dawson City and the Yukon have best been preserved in the writings of most-favorite son, poet Robert Service, whose cabin remains perfectly restored on 8th Street in Dawson. There is no record that Service, a bank teller, ever panned for gold in his four years in Dawson City, but the sales of his poetry and books far exceeded another of the town's famous authors: Jack London.

But, while little physical evidence of that bygone era remains except

Yes, you can-can at *Diamond Gerties Gambling Hall* (left). Dawson City's downtown "boardwalk" is exactly that. The Yukon River in early autumn (above) and the restored S.S. Klondike (below). Opposite page: The massive No. 8 gold dredge alongside Bonanza Creek; children panning for gold; the free George Black ferry, crossing the Yukon River; and the smallest desert in the world.

the stories and memories, a visit to the area is more than entertaining and educational.

In Dawson City there is *Diamond Tooth Gerties Gambling Hall*, which recreates in amazing realistic style, life of that golden era. The Yukon Visitor Information Centre is housed in a replica of the 1897 Alaska Com-



Yukon Country



One shop, the Klondike Nugget & Ivory, in operation for more than 100 years, features an array of gold nuggets pulled from local creeks, as well as a nine-foot-long Mammoth tusk.

There are a number of Yukon government campgrounds dotting the Alaska Highway as it carves through the Yukon, but only one is in the area, just east of Dawson on the Klondike River. Dawson itself boasts a number of RV parks, however (including Guggieville, said to be the first Good Sam Park in the Yukon!).

We parked our RV at a campground one-quarter mile north

of town across the Yukon River and commuted back and forth to Dawson via the free George Black ferry.

Perhaps the best time to visit is during the summer or autumn, but an interesting winter visit can be planned in conjunction with the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest sled-dog race that passes through Dawson City each February. Keep in mind, however, that according to the Klondike Visitors Association, temperatures in the dead of winter in the Yukon range from -80°F to 32°F .

Aside from Dawson City proper, the Yukon also offers plenty of interesting side trips for the adventurous. Dawson is essentially the gateway to the Arctic Circle (take Provincial Highway 5 north, about 20 miles east of Dawson City off Highway 2), while a drive down the South Klondike Highway, south of Whitehorse, will bring you to famous Skagway, Alaska. En route, visitors pass the celebrated Chilkoot Pass and White Pass. Skagway, located on Lynn Canal, is the northern terminus of the Alaska Marine Highway ferry system. It was the gateway through which passed most of the gold-strike stampede. ■

mercial Co. store and supplies accommodation information, a schedule of daily events and a town street map.

And, of course, there's still the magic "pull" of the gold ore. A number of outfitters in and around Dawson City offer adventurers the opportunity to dip a pan into the cold waters of Gold Bottom or Hunker Creek, and sluice for traces of the shiny metal — and you keep what you find. Should you visit around the first day in July — Canada Day — you can also participate in the Yukon Gold Panning Championship. Competition is intense — the winner goes on to the World Gold Panning Championship — but the categories include opportunities for novice panners. Another gold-themed event is Discovery Day — the Yukon's territorial holiday, August 16-18, which celebrates the discovery of gold in the territory.

If you'd rather shop than pan, you can still feed your own gold rush.

