

## THE CHILKOOT TRAIL

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The words Alaska, Yukon and the North West Frontier have always made my blood tingle. Somehow or other I have an affinity with Indians, bears and wide open spaces. I have climbed and roamed all over Scotland and England, been to all the other well known climbing areas in the Rockies, but the call from the far north west of Canada tugged at me. I could see no prospect of heading into this unknown until, completely out of the blue, an invitation came from a cousin in Anchorage to join up with her party of mainly USA Airforce personnel, to trek the Chilkoot Trail from Skagway to Lake Bennet.

I hadn't even heard of this trail, but was soon sold on the idea when 'Alaska - a Walking Guide' arrived. However, talk of the Panhandle, Klondykers and Dawson City were still a bit of a mystery, but trawling the Internet helped and I was able to order the trail guide from Seattle. The Chilkoot trail came about during the late 1800's as the most accessible means of getting to the gold rush centre of Dawson City from either Seattle or Vancouver. Prospectors sailed to Skagway via the Inner Passage, crossed the Rocky Mountain barrier then journeyed down the Yukon river to Dawson City, a journey of 2,500 miles which could take a year.

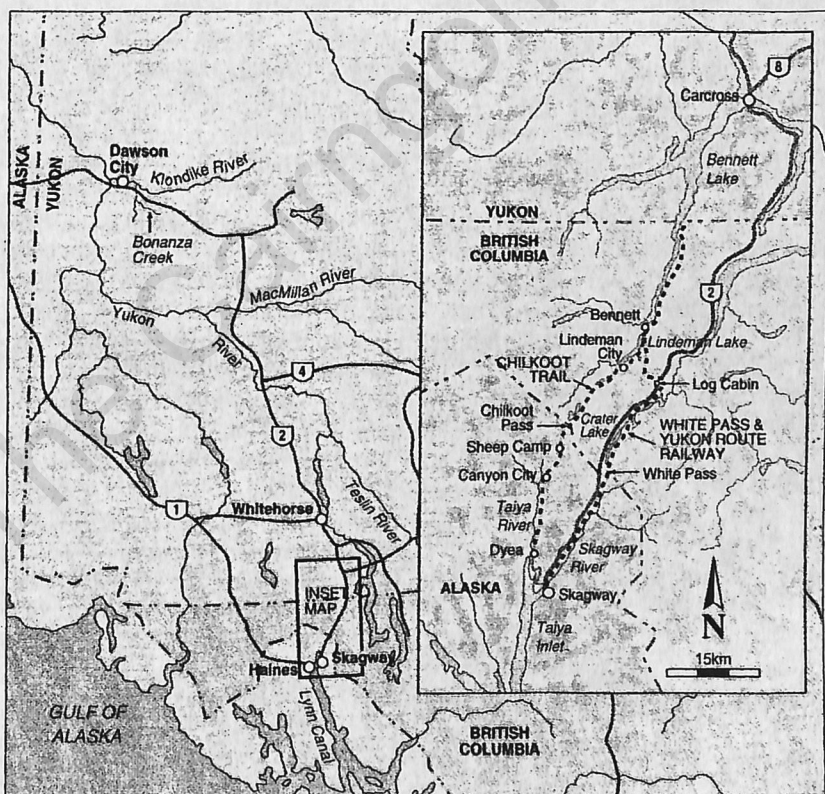
I also discovered that the trail is now an important National Heritage site and strictly controlled. Booking a back country permit was essential as was an itinerary. This was accomplished after much transatlantic telephoning, so the next step was to become really fit. This was an opportunity to walk and climb new routes in the Cairngorms, carrying increasing amounts of liquid as heavier loads to improve my stamina and back strength.

Plans were well advanced when news came that the US airmen had been placed on 24 hour standby due to the Middle East crisis. I suddenly found myself on my own, but willing and ready so off I went. It took four days of ten hours at the wheel to drive the Alaskan Highway to Skagway. On speaking to a couple of sunburned back-packers at Log Cabin, where the trail crosses the highway, I learned that the trail had been closed for the last three days because of a serious forest fire. Imagine my thoughts after eight months of planning and travelling some seven thousand miles! Just my luck that the weather had been very sunny to make the undergrowth tinder dry. The scenery was magnificent with snow-capped peaks, glaciers and endless forests, but the last 30 or so mile descent towards to sea level was even more spectacular as the valleys narrowed.

Skagway was like being back a hundred years in time with wooden buildings and boardwalks. The Ranger office confirmed that the trail was closed, but while discussing my plight news came that the fire source had been located at a remote trapper's cabin, and that it would re-open the following day for 50 back-packers. Unfortunately around 100 were already

in the vicinity and I felt my luck was running out. The only salvation could be to turn up at 7am next day and hope. So there I was listening to group receiving trail instructions - sterilise all drinking water, stay on the trail, don't leave any food which would encourage bears and so on, while another ranger did a head count. A group from Texas had ten bookings but only eight had signed in. The ranger looked at me "You are number nine, get yourself ready." I was certainly ready with Bergan rucksack, Icelandic special sleeping bag, spare clothes, stove, food for three days, tent, bear bell, cord to suspend food over high poles and three litres of tonic water to relieve beastie bites. A coach took us the nine miles to the trailhead at Dyea, our permits were checked, and we were off.

Even although it was only 9am the temperature was in the high 70's and very humid. The trail immediately disappeared into dense woodland and started to rise gradually, then more rapidly. The undergrowth was so dense that I seemed to be walking on my own. The heat and humidity were almost unbearable and fluid intake exceeded my estimations, but after some five



Route of The Chilkoot Trail

miles of uphill toil Finnegan's Point and a well earned rest was reached. Next stop was the ruins of Canyon City. It was hard to visualise how massive equipment was manhandled into such an inhospitable area, and how 30,000 Klondykers survived here in the depths of winter, to be ready for the dash to Dawson city when spring arrived. Most did, but some succumbed as we read on short epitaphs seen on makeshift headboards. Such was the lure of gold.

We passed Pleasant Camp and the woodland became less dense with majestic peaks, ice blue glaciers and towering cliffs in view. Sheep Camp, our destination was 13 miles and some 1,000 feet above Dyea and very well maintained. We learned from the notice board to expect a ranger at 7pm, and a rifle-carrying slip of a girl appeared to give us instructions for the next day. Everyone must be up and away by 6am to allow good walking on the several miles of snow near the summit, and there were brown bears, so we must be vigilant.

I left at 5am, my bear bell providing accompaniment. Members of one group ahead whistled in turn while the other picked up sizeable stones and sang. We were soon beyond the treeline, and the valley narrowed with huge boulders to negotiate and torrents to cross. It was a relief to reach Scales and rest before the steep climb to the summit. This 45 degree ascent was known as the Golden Stairs, and the image of the moving line of men, like ants on some gigantic anthill, was with me all the way. Pieces of machinery were scattered amongst the boulders at the 3,600 foot summit, and again I was dumbfounded by the determination of the Stampeders to move heavy equipment over such hostile ground. We were now back in Canada and the going became easier as we traversed long snowfields, and followed the winding trail past Stone Crib, Crater Lake, Morrow Lake and Happy Camp to our campsite at Deep Lake, some 23 miles from Dyea.

There was a low mist next morning although blue sky was visible. I broke camp at 6am and made my way to Lindeman City with yet another graveyard. Lindeman Lake was the starting point for the Stampeders to float the 550 miles to Dawson City, by whatever means they could muster. Half way along the lake is the Cut Off Trail which meanders through woodlands to reach the Bennet to Skagway railway line. Six miles back along the line is Log Cabin, the end of my 39 mile trail.

It was a superb trek with well managed campsites, plentiful indicator poles and not one piece of discarded rubbish. The scenery was magnificent but we saw little wildlife. An extended trail from Seattle to Dawson City which takes about a month is becoming the 'in thing' for American backpackers. I was pleased that all my preparations had been worthwhile, although I had to sterilise water by boiling since I hadn't taken enough with me. And yes, I cannot wait to receive another invitation to that magic land of four seasons - Winter, June, July and August, Alaska.