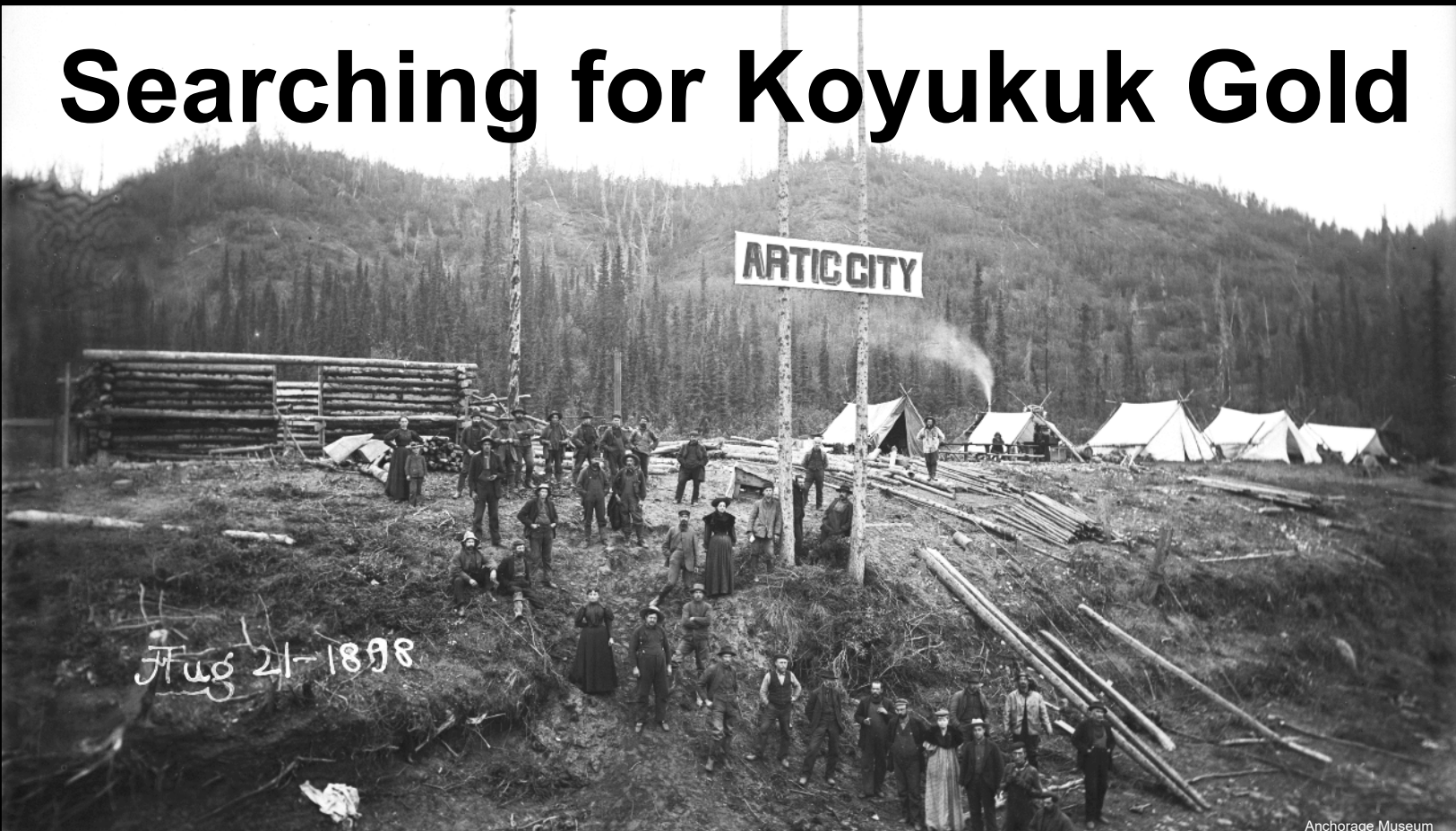




# Searching for Koyukuk Gold



Residents of Arctic City, a gold rush boomtown on the Koyukuk River, pose for a photograph taken from the cabin of a steamboat by Jasper N. Wyman, August 21, 1898. During the brief but intense boom, log cabin outposts were built wherever steamboats stopped on branches of the Koyukuk River.

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*You may think it strange but it is a fact that with all the men and boats that wind up in the Koyukuk River, I do not think there was scarcely a dollar in gold found. . . . I have known 150 colors to be found in a pan that you could count with the eye but all float gold and would not pay to sluice.*

—Claus Rodine, July 1, 1899

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In 1897, when the world heard the news of gold in the Klondike, Americans from all walks of life succumbed to gold fever and rushed northward to find their fortunes. Some stampeders went alone and formed partnerships on the way to the goldfields. Others formed mining companies and pooled their talents and resources. This was the approach taken by twenty-five Illinois residents from Galesburg, a railroad town about two hundred miles from Chicago. On January 18, 1898, twenty-four of them signed papers creating the Galesburg-Alaska Mining and Developing Company. The next step was to travel to a land none of them had ever seen and to find some gold.

## Surviving winter

Along the way, the Galesburg group heard rumors that the Klondike was no longer a good gamble—the best claims were taken, Dawson City was crowded, and the Canadian government taxed gold production at ten percent. Instead they decided to try the Koyukuk River flowing out of Alaska's central Brooks Range and through the homeland of the Koyukon Athabascans. Since the mid-1880s, the Koyukuk showed some potential as a goldfield, but it only sustained a handful of miners who struggled to overcome distance, bitterly cold winters, and high supply costs.

During September of 1898, temperatures dropped as the Galesburg group staked placer gold claims along what they called Help-Me-Jack Creek and nearby Rock Bottom Creek. After cutting spruce trees, they notched and assembled the logs into cramped 16-by-16-foot boxes each with a wood stove that could keep four or five men warm (or at least alive) through the coldest nights. The walls were chinked with moss, and the roofs were covered with sod. They called the camp West Beaver, and farther to the south similar camps were taking shape along with the minor boomtowns of Bergman, Peavy, and Arctic City.

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## Dreams unrealized

Once the rivers and creeks were frozen, the men began prospecting for gold. From the beginning the results were disappointing. Jasper Wyman described digging eight feet down and coming away with nothing but the desire to ignore failure and press on. The miners were using a technique to penetrate frozen ground called “burning down.” As Wyman explained in a letter home, perseverance was his watchword:

*We carefully panned the gravel and dirt from each firing and day's digging and also when we struck bedrock but not a single color did we find. As that's part of the game we will try and think nothing of it but will return down stream and try another creek below on our way back.*

While many stampedeers toiled in the southern foothills of the Brooks Range, others pushed north through what is today Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve. Frostbite and death by hypothermia faced them wherever they roamed, along with another menace: scurvy. For many, the nutritional limits of the miners' menu—mainly bacon and beans—would soon become a matter of life and death.

## 'Out with the ice'

During the long winter, morale in the camps was low. No one had struck gold in the Koyukuk drainage, disease and accidents were common, and many were so discouraged that they no longer believed there was any gold to be found in Alaska. Some suggested trying to reach Dawson City and the Klondike, but most were just waiting to “go out with the ice.” Even before spring arrived, the stampedeers were on the move, dog mushing and snowshoeing southward.

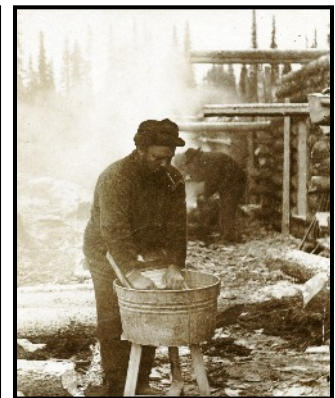
Before the ice had yet broken up, the Galesburg group began loading their river steamer, the *Illinois*, which had spent the winter on blocks to protect it from crushing ice. They also tore down their cabins to cut into firewood to fuel the ship's boilers. When break-up arrived on May 26, the return journey was plagued by the same mishaps that slowed their voyage north the previous fall. On the first day, the vessel broke a rudder, landed on two sandbars, and blew a gasket causing the boiler to lose steam. Only after the vessel entered deeper water did the voyage go more smoothly. Eager to see the end of their Alaska adventure, they raced other steamboats to the trading post of Koyukuk at the river's mouth. Once on the Yukon River, they witnessed the exodus of destitute miners from the Klondike who were trying to reach the ocean and book passage home.



A 'jolly string band' at Bergman, April 8, 1899.

## For more information

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**Clockwise:** Koyukuk prospectors in the mining camp of West Beaver play cards to pass the long winter evenings; men drift mining using a shovel, bucket, and homemade winch to dig 30 feet down; a prospector washing clothes with a washboard and tub; the steamer *Aurora* frozen in a slough at Bergman; two Koyukuk prospectors of the 'Beaver Party' return from a caribou hunt in the central Brooks Range. Courtesy of Anchorage Museum, Jasper N. Wyman Collection and Alaska State Library, Claude Hobart Collection.

