

Slide Cemetery

In the forest near the historic townsite of Dyea lies the Slide Cemetery, a reminder of the most deadly disaster of the Klondike Gold Rush, the Chilkoot Trail Avalanche of April 3rd, 1898.

The Palm Sunday Avalanche

At the height of the Klondike Gold Rush, the boom town of Dyea teemed with over 5,000 people. Merchants operated restaurants, trading posts, and hotels catering to stampeders bound for the Chilkoot Trail. Thousands of gold seekers transported their goods and equipment over the trail and the Chilkoot Pass during the winter of 1897-98, packing supplies on foot up the steepest sections. All had hopes of making it to the Klondike gold fields in the Yukon Territory of Canada, where they believed they would become rich beyond their wildest dreams.



View of avalanche area two weeks after the event

Library and Archives Canada, Credit: Henry Joseph Woodside/Henry Joseph Woodside fonds/PA-016154

Klondike Gold Rush NHP



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Some, however, never made it. In April of 1898 a snow slide buried a section of trail on Long Hill just below an area known as the Scales. The Palm Sunday Avalanche occurred around noon on Sunday, April 3rd, after weeks of snowstorms. Tlingit packers and other experienced mountain travelers warned of avalanches, but many stampeders eager to reach the goldfields were caught in the slide. When stampeders at Sheep Camp heard the rumble of the avalanche, they soon began rescue efforts. Up to thirty feet of snow buried the avalanche victims, and while several people did survive, scores perished. Although accounts vary, over the next few days rescuers recovered over seventy bodies.

After the Avalanche

A temporary morgue was established at Sheep Camp, and criminal characters took advantage of the opportunity to loot the victims before an official committee could set about sorting out victims' possessions and writing death certificates. Northwest Mounted Police and U.S. Army officers were dispatched to monitor the operation. The bodies were eventually transported down to Dyea, where the Army established a separate cemetery for the victims. Other victims were shipped home.

“Some were found lying, sitting, or standing, others in frightful positions with horrible expressions on their faces, while others looked as though they had just gone to sleep....”

Harry “Flick” Flaharty
April 4, 1898



Yukon Archives, Anton Vogee fonds, # 71

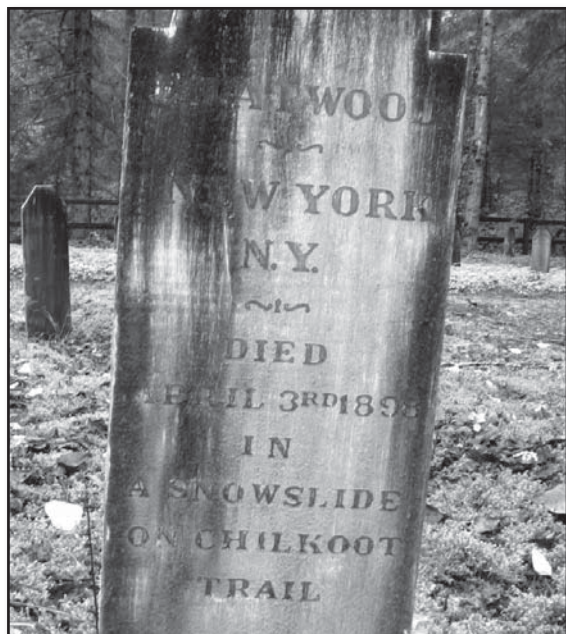
Hauling bodies to Sheep Camp

Additional bodies may have been discovered after the snow melted later that spring. Poor records and conflicting reports make it impossible to determine all the identities or the exact number of victims actually interred at the cemetery or killed. Rosters of the dead don't match each other and death certificates are missing. Identities of the victims remain unconfirmed today.

The peak of the stampede had passed by late spring of 1898, and Dyea's population declined as neighboring Skagway became the main port at the end of Taiya Inlet. The avalanche discouraged many stampedeers from using the Chilkoot Trail. As Dyea became a ghost town, the Slide Cemetery fell into neglect.

The Slide Cemetery Today

Over the last several decades, maintenance work at the Slide Cemetery was done sporadically to keep the site up. Beginning in 1940 and continuing until the 1960s, groups such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Alaska Youth Adult Authority performed major cleanups, erected fences, replaced headboards, and constructed a path to the cemetery.



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Avalanche victim grave marker

The graves located along the path outside of the Slide Cemetery were placed at this location in 1979. These graves include

members of the Mathews family and other previous long-time residents of Dyea. Prior to 1979 these graves resided in the historic Town Cemetery in Dyea. During the 1970s, the Taiya River began washing the cemetery out as it is still doing today. To protect these graves, they were moved to this spot adjacent to the Slide Cemetery.



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Graves outside the Slide Cemetery

The heady days of the Klondike Gold Rush have now long since passed. The clamorous sounds of stampedeers vigorously pushing their way over the Chilkoot Trail are forever silent. Even so, these headboards serve as quiet reminders of the dangers of the trails and of the risks the stampedeers took in their quest for gold.