



Charley River Gold-Seekers



NPS, Josh Spice

The Charley River flows through the heart of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. The entire 105-mile length of this Wild and Scenic River lies within the preserve's boundary, and during the Klondike gold rush, prospectors searched for their fortunes along its tributaries.

It has been mostly the arrivals of '98 who have 'got in on' the creeks below here, the creeks that are now beginning to be most talked about. Chief among these streams is Charlie River, which pours into the Yukon about eighty or ninety miles above Circle. Here some ninety to one hundred men are hopefully sinking holes, occasionally encouraged by the glitter of big nice fat 'flax seed' colors.

—Seattle Post-Intelligencer
January 22, 1899

Crossing the line

The Klondike gold rush of 1897-1899 drew thousands of eager stampedeers to gold fields in northwestern Canada, but only a few found what they were seeking. Often the most promising mining claims had been taken and latecomers had to find other employment or work as laborers at other people's mines. Also, the Canadian government taxed gold at ten percent and enforced strict mining regulations. Many Americans looking for new opportunities crossed the U.S.-Canada border to investigate Alaskan rivers and creeks. One of these was the Charley River, which got its name from the Han Athabascan leader Chief Charley whose village was not far from the river's confluence with the Yukon.

Prospectors on the move

Once gold-seekers left the Klondike for the American side of the line, they began giving patriotic names to the waterways like Washington Creek and Fourth of July Creek. This was a celebration of being on home soil and, it was suggested, an attempt to irritate the Canadians. Two clusters of cabins took shape near the mouth of the Charley River—the first was called Derwent after its founder Jack Derwent, and the other was Independence.

William T. James of Sterling, Illinois was one of the early stampedeers to the Charley River and wrote this on October 18, 1898 (he spells the river's name with an -ie as was the practice in the early days):

It was getting too cold to try to go to Charlie River by going down to the mouth and going up, so we thought we would go up Seventy Mile and cross the mountains. So we loaded the boat again and a fellow from Ventura, California came with us. We came up this far and left some flour and bacon here and then went up to where the river forks. We crossed four ranges of mountains before we got to the main river. We prospected in four different creeks but did not have enough grub to last us till we could sink a hole.

Searching for gold

Hauling supplies and digging prospecting holes along Charley River tributaries was back-breaking work, and only a few miners stayed beyond the first year. William James did, and he described in his journal the practice of "burning down" which involved setting fires to melt frozen ground before hoisting the material to the surface with a bucket and winch, or windlass:

Jan. 31, 1899: Derwent stayed all night with us last night. I got some wood cut and a stick for the windlass drum.

Feb. 2: I went up to my hole today and started cribbing around the top.

Feb. 6: I started a fire this evening. When I first got up to my hole my heel started to ache so I went up to Charlie's and warmed it [he later found a hole in his boot].

Feb. 8: I got about 10 inches more out today but got so cold did not start fire tonight. We got four good sized colors and several smaller ones out of a pan of gravel I brought down to Derwent's tonight.

Feb. 9: As it was 50 degrees below this morning neither of us went up to our holes today, but put in the day hauling wood.

For James and roughly one hundred other Charley River miners, the gold flakes and tiny nuggets called "colors" were all they would ever find, and they eventually abandoned their cabins and departed for the new excitement 1,000 miles away in Nome.

Creating a national preserve

In the 1970s, when planners investigated Alaska for potential national parklands, they recommended the Charley River and emphasized the area's gold mining history. President Jimmy Carter made the river part of a new national monument in 1978, and with the passage of ANILCA two years later, the unit became Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. The Charley River watershed was also added to the nation's Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Today visitors floating the river can see hunting and trapping cabins and, if they look closely enough, faint signs of activity from the gold rush era.

This map (oriented with south at the top) shows the Charley River tributaries, most of which were prospected in 1898-99. The branches of Bonanza Creek (bottom left) were the most heavily mined. The prospectors built two camps near the banks of the Yukon—Derwent and Independence. Sam Creek (bottom right) also attracted a swirl of gold miners. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 17, 1899.

For more information

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Prospectors at Derwent, a mining camp near the mouth of the Charley River, August 23, 1899. *Seattle Public Library, Arthur C. Pillsbury Collection (123).*

