

Reading Log #6

This week's readings focus on the era of the gold rush in British Columbia. Many previous studies on the subject do not show an accurate representation of what the Indigenous peoples were involved in at the time of the gold rush. In the article, "‘Into That Country To Work’: Aboriginal Economic Activities during Barkerville's Gold Rush" by Mica Jorgenson, the connection between the gold rush and Indigenous life is examined to gain a better understanding of this time in history. The article depicts an overall view of the gold rush and the roles of Indigenous people. In examination with primary documents from the time we are able to get a general understanding of the gold rush in British Columbia. In this analysis we will look at the area surrounding Barkerville before, during, and after the gold rush.

Before the gold rush, the Indigenous peoples occupied land around the Fraser River and the Cariboo Mountains. "The earliest documentary evidence relating to the Cariboo Mountains dates to Simon Fraser's 1808 expedition"¹. On his expedition he "noted the presence of 'several houses of the Nasquitins . . . at the mouth of the Cottonwood River and the Quesnel River, both of which emerge from the Cariboo Mountains'"². On his return trip he received fish and berries from the Indigenous peoples and he thought it to be "part of an existing subsistence and trading economy"³. Around 1850, the province was hit with a "massive depopulation" mostly due to the European measles and influenza outbreaks in previous years which wiped out much of the Indigenous populations, followed by the further reduction due to a smallpox outbreak⁴. This led

¹ Mica Jorgenson, "‘Into That Country To Work’: Aboriginal Economic Activities during Barkerville's Gold Rush", *BC Studies*, no. 185 (2015), 115.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

to the Indigenous populations being much smaller and one myth carried over time is that the Indigenous peoples were “gone before the miners arrived” which as we will see, is untrue⁵. “Vague reports of gold on the Fraser River filtered south to California as early as 1855, and rumours became reality by the fall of 1857” and this led to the beginning of the Cariboo Gold Rush⁶.

After “the discovery of gold on Keithley Creek in 1860”, Barkerville was founded two years later in August of 1862⁷. The site of Barkerville was chosen because of its close distance to the gold-bearing creeks even though “the steep, narrow gullies and extreme temperatures made it a difficult place to live”⁸. Many Indigenous peoples found work in Barkerville throughout the year, however it is noted that there was an influx of Indigenous peoples in Barkerville during the summer months⁹. Some even tried their luck with the gold rush. “Aboriginal miners had been major participants in the Fraser River gold rush in 1858” and river-panning was a common technique used¹⁰. Since Barkerville was located in the mountains, it was difficult to transport goods in and out of the mining town. This is when “Aboriginal packing” began and was the main source for resources to enter and exit the town¹¹. The “Cariboo Wagon Road, completed to Barkerville in 1865”, was an important transport route that led to the “phasing out” of the Indigenous packing labour, however it did continue after the completion of the road¹². Another way Indigenous peoples could have earned a living in Barkerville is through prostitution, though

⁵ Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country To Work”, 112.

⁶ Unknown, “A Great Humbug’ British Columbia’s Gold Rushes”, *A Few Acres of Snow*, 232.

⁷ Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country To Work”, 109.

⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

⁹ *Ibid*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 129.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 126.

¹² *Ibid*, 126-127.

it is hard to trace because of the vague documents and “sources rarely define the actual exchange of sexual services, goods, and cash”¹³. These are examples of just some of the occupations the Indigenous peoples had during the reign of the Cariboo Gold Rush.

After the gold rush, many foreigners returned to their homelands but some small groups continued mining and panning for gold¹⁴. Charles Major, one of the many travellers, describes British Columbia as “not what it was represented to be” and continues to explain that “[t]here is no [available] farming land” and “[t]here is nothing . . . but mines”¹⁵. He explains that the odds of striking it rich in the Cariboo Gold Rush are very low. “It is estimated that the number of miners who make over wages, is one in five hundred; and the number that do well in the mines is one in a thousand”¹⁶. C. Gardiner recalls their experiences of the gold rush and describes how dangerous the journey was. They write, “[w]e very nearly lost two of our men, but were providentially saved by catching hold of the branches of a leaning tree, as the current was taking them swiftly down”¹⁷. This shows that travelling in and out of Barkerville (or the surrounding areas) via the rivers, or even panning for gold during high river flow is very dangerous and life threatening.

Overall the Cariboo Gold Rush was an era that excited many people near and far with the dream of striking it rich. However, for many this dream was that, just a dream. Many travellers lost money through their expeditions due to travel expenses and not earning their money back in the mines. It is also seen that the Indigenous population did not just disappear when it came time

¹³ Mica Jorgenson, “Into That Country To Work”, 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 129.

¹⁵ Charles Major, “2. Charles Major, ‘News from British Columbia,’ *The Daily Globe*, January 2, 1860” *A Few Acres of Snow*, 237.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 239.

¹⁷ C. Gardiner, “1. C. Gardiner, ‘To the Editor of *The Islander*,’ November 17, 1858” *A Few Acres of Snow*, 235.

for the gold rush, but they occupied many different jobs when and where they were needed. It turns out there was a lot more to the Cariboo Gold Rush than what popular media or even previous studies have shown us. Even though a certain topic seems that it has already been covered, there are always new aspects and different views to examine it through.