"Kickfest at Dawson City": Native Peoples and the Sports of the Klondike Gold Rush

Michael K. Heine and Kevin B. Wamsley
University of Calgary

When news of the discovery of gold on Bonanza Creek in August 1896 reached San Francisco and the American mainland, tens of thousands of gold seekers stampeded into the southern part of what is now Yukon Territory (1). Most followed the difficult Chilkoot trail through the coastal mountains of Alaska. A smaller contingent chose the more circuitous route through Edmonton: to Great Slave Lake via Lake Athabasca, down the Mackenzie River, then via Rat or Wind Rivers through the territory of the Gwich'in Indians, into Yukon and on to the gold fields (see Figure 1). Dawson City, which in September 1896 had amounted to not much more than a tent camp, had by the summer of 1898 ballooned to a temporary maximum population of probably 50,000 (2). Even by 1904, when many unsuccessful stampeders had left the area, the population of the city and its outlying camps still stood at over 16,000 (3). When, in the winter of 1899, the Gwich'in Indians traveled south to find out what the cause of all the excitement was, they were in for a discovery of their own (4). The expansion of the frontier had come to a temporary halt on the southern reaches of their country, and Dawson City had come to be located in the middle of the territory of their neighbors, the Han Indians.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the position of Native people within the system of sporting and recreational activities that soon developed into an important aspect of urban life at Dawson. We argue that Native people were excluded from the system of regularized sporting and recreational activities that came to be an important element of the cultural fabric of the city. In contrast, they took part in the sports that were organized during the celebration of Dominion, Empire, and Independence Day. Here, however, they were placed in a position of projected cultural inferiority, being relegated to either the side of pageantry or the ridiculous. This ostensible domestication of the "unknown" side of the northern frontier constituted an important stabilizing force for stampeders bereft of security in a demanding and often inhospitable northern environment (5).

Michael K. Heine and Kevin B. Wamsley are with the University of Calgary, Faculty of Kinesiology, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4.
Initial Contacts Between Native People and Klondikers

The immediate impact of the events previously outlined on the Native cultures was felt in the economic field. Han and Gwich'in had occupied central positions in the fur trade for the 50 years preceding the gold rush, but, being at the time of the stampede neither interested in staking claims nor in obtaining permanent wage labor, they were soon relegated to a peripheral position in the newly forming, incipient industrial economy (6). A small number were seasonally integrated into the wage economy, working for the miners or as wood cutters for the steamboats, but the main area of Native involvement came to be provision hunting and trapping,