

ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN MAP LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES
BULLETIN

A “world-startling discovery” - Stories in the Canada Lands Survey Records

Roddy McFall
Library and Archives Canada

Abstract

In 2017, a small collection of survey plans in the custody of Library and Archives Canada (LAC) grew exponentially when Natural Resources Canada’s Office of the Surveyor General transferred over 90,000 original survey maps and field books from the Canada Lands Survey Records (CLSR). Dating as early as 1769, these underused archival records document the survey, settlement, and sustainable use of Crown Lands. Among many other things, the CLSR collection documents Canada’s Indigenous history and culture such as the distribution of language groups, treaty rights, the location of Residential Schools and Indian reserves, and Indigenous land use and occupation. Through these, we can see the history of Indian reserves, National Parks, military bases, railway development, the fur trade, and the Arctic. As we will see, the records also help tell the story of the significant Indigenous contribution to the Klondike Gold Rush.

Keywords: Bonanza Creek, gold rush, Klondike, mining claims, Skookum Jim, William Ogilvie, CLSR

Historians are taking an increased interest in memory studies: how different societies tell their stories, and what is remembered and omitted from a society’s collective memory. The Canada Lands Survey Records (CLSR) collection at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) tells countless stories. One of the CLSR’s more significant stories involves the mapping of the claims discovered in the Klondike Gold Rush and the role of Indigenous people in this endeavour.

But first, some background. In 2015, the Surveyor General Branch at Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) approached LAC about the potential transfer of approximately 90,000 records from the CLSR collection, for a total of 1.5 kilometres of archival holdings. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between LAC and NRCan in early 2017 governing the transfer, preservation and circulation of this major acquisition for LAC.

The collection consists of the official textual surveys and their associated documentation of Canada Lands (First Nations reserves, national parks lands, Crown lands and territorial lands) dating from 1769. It consists of maps, survey files, survey plans and survey field books. NRCan, the caretaker and owner of the official records of the Surveyor General of Canada Lands, had digitized and made the CLSR collection available online. This made possible the physical transfer of the collection to LAC to ensure its long-term storage and preservation. This acquisition complements LAC’s

existing collection of 1,034 official survey plans of reserves and residential school lands across Canada, transferred from the Legal Services Division at NRCan in 1959.

These underused CLSR archival records assist in documenting aspects of Canada's Indigenous history and culture, including the distribution of language groups, treaty rights, the location of residential schools and reserves, and Indigenous land use and occupation. Through these, we can see the history and evolution of Indian reserves, national parks, military bases, railway development, the fur trade, the Arctic, and defining events like the Klondike Gold Rush. As Bob Weber points out: "Reconciliation is rewriting Canada's memory banks as archivists across the country work to make their collections more open to and sensitive towards Indigenous people."¹

Now for that story of the Klondike Gold Rush in the CLSR. Before he became the second Commissioner of the Yukon Territory, William Ogilvie was a noted Dominion land surveyor working in western and northern Canada. In 1895, he was commissioned to make all of the required surveys for town sites, mining claims and mineral deposits in Yukon. He surveyed the Alaska-Yukon boundary at the Yukon River in 1887–1888, and in 1896, the Klondike goldfields of Bonanza Creek and Eldorado Creek. Ogilvie's surveying work determined the approximate location of the 141st meridian, the current boundary between Alaska and the Canadian territories.

The "Plan of Placer Mining Claims on part of Bonanza Creek in the Klondike Mining Division of the Yukon Territory," plotted by Ogilvie's field books, documents the discovery claims made by Kèsh (also known as "Skookum" Jim Mason, meaning strong, and identified as "Tagish Jim" on the map), who was a member of the Tagish Khwáan First Nation, his American brother-in-law George Carmack, and his sister Shaaw Tláa, also known as Kate Carmack. These three are credited with discovering the first piece of gold in Bonanza Creek, an event that triggered the Klondike Gold Rush. This specific survey map and the accompanying field book reflect the important roles of Ogilvie, Mason, and George and Kate Carmack in what Ogilvie called a "world-startling discovery."² It was unusual for discovery claims made by First Nations prospectors to be accepted by mining authorities, which makes these records even more remarkable.

It is now recognized that First Nations people were relegated to the back pages of the history of the Klondike Gold Rush. However, through these records, Ogilvie put Indigenous prospectors like Mason on the front pages. Ogilvie used the sobriquet "Tagish Jim" in his field books and on his survey maps, and Mason also figures prominently in Ogilvie's memoir *Early Days on the Yukon*; the chapter "Discovery of the Klondike" includes a section dedicated solely to Mason. Ogilvie described Mason as his "old friend," and Ogilvie spoke of how he "employed Jim in various capacities, and always found him reliable, truthful, and competent to do any work I gave him. Afterwards, while working on his claim on Bonanza, I had more experience with him, and it only corroborated the opinion I have expressed of his character."³

In describing Mason, Ogilvie wrote that "he possesses a practical knowledge of prospecting that is far beyond what one would expect to find in an uneducated savage. Further, he is qualified as a

¹ Bob Weber, "Rewriting Canada's memory banks: Archivists 'decolonize' collections," Canadian Press, February 19, 2018.

² William Ogilvie, *Early Days on the Yukon & the Story of Its Gold Finds* (Reprint Edition, Arno Press, 1974), p. 115.

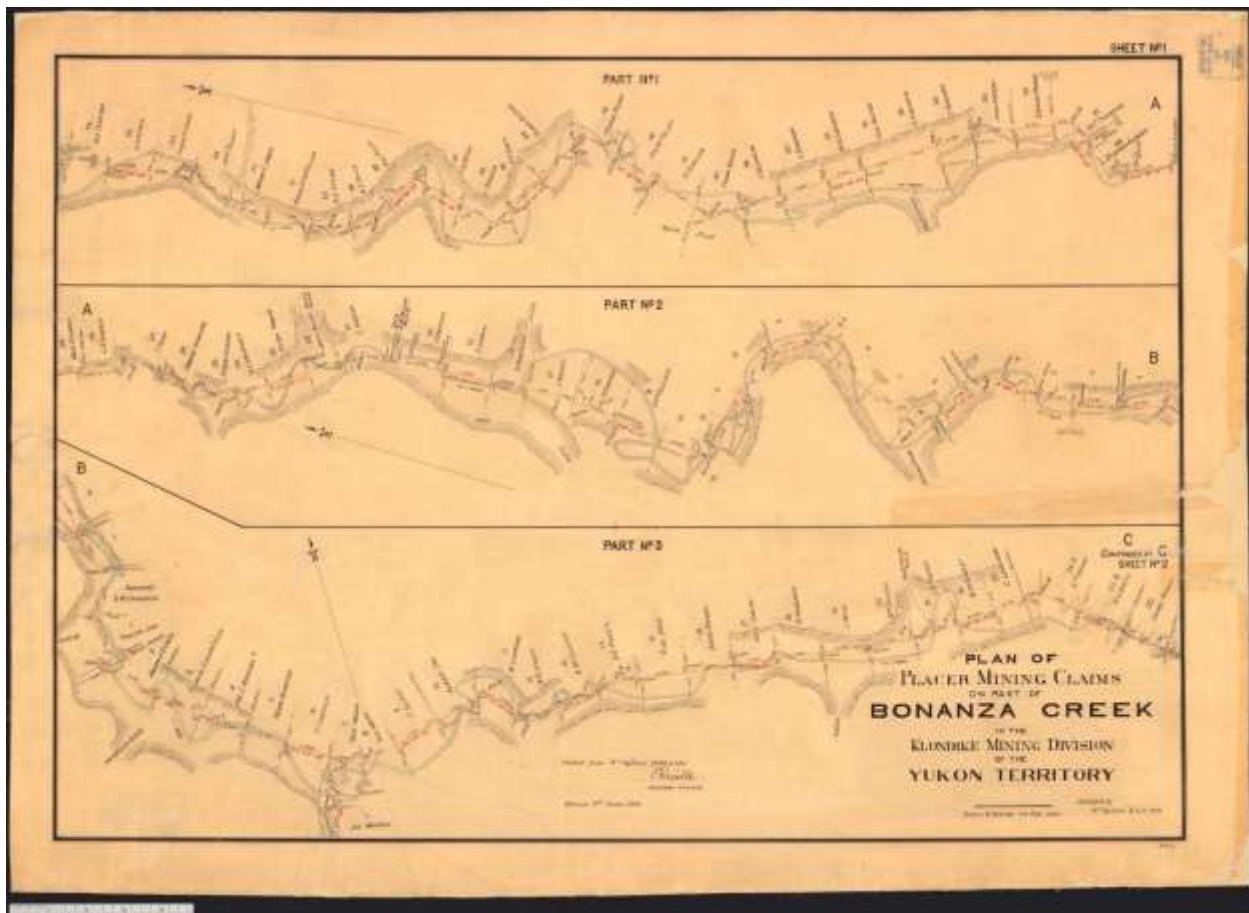
³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

prospector in a way that few white men are, for he carries nothing on his outings, which last weeks at a time, but a rifle, hatchet, and gold pan.”⁴ As jarring as it is in 2018 to read this account referring to an “uneducated savage,” Ogilvie nevertheless assigned the discovery mining claims at both Bonanza Creek and Eldorado Creek to Mason and his nephew “Tagish Paddy”.

Through these records, we can see the history and evolution of Indian reserves, National Parks, military bases, railway development, the fur trade, the Arctic, as well as defining events such as Ogilvie’s “world-startling” Klondike Gold Rush. The CSLR acquisition, then, and the survey plans maps acquired earlier from NRCan, will offer more untold stories. Hitherto unknown voices are bound to emerge.

Image 1:

The survey map below was based on the field books of William Ogilvie, a noted Dominion land surveyor working in western and northern Canada. The map documents the discovery claim that triggered the Klondike Gold Rush, an event Ogilvie called a “world-startling discovery.” On the bottom-left corner, we can read the names of George Carmack and Tagish Jim.



[Placer Mining Claims on part of Bonanza Creek in the Klondike Mining Division of the Yukon Territory](#)

Credit Library and Archives Canada, R214, vol. 2089 (8284 YT CLSR), [MIKAN 5012299](#) / e011202237

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Image 2:

An enlarged version of the bottom-left corner of the same map. We can read the names of “G.W. Carmack” and “Tagish Jim” Mason, both credited with making the first discovery of gold at Bonanza Creek in 1896, an event that triggered the Klondike Gold Rush.

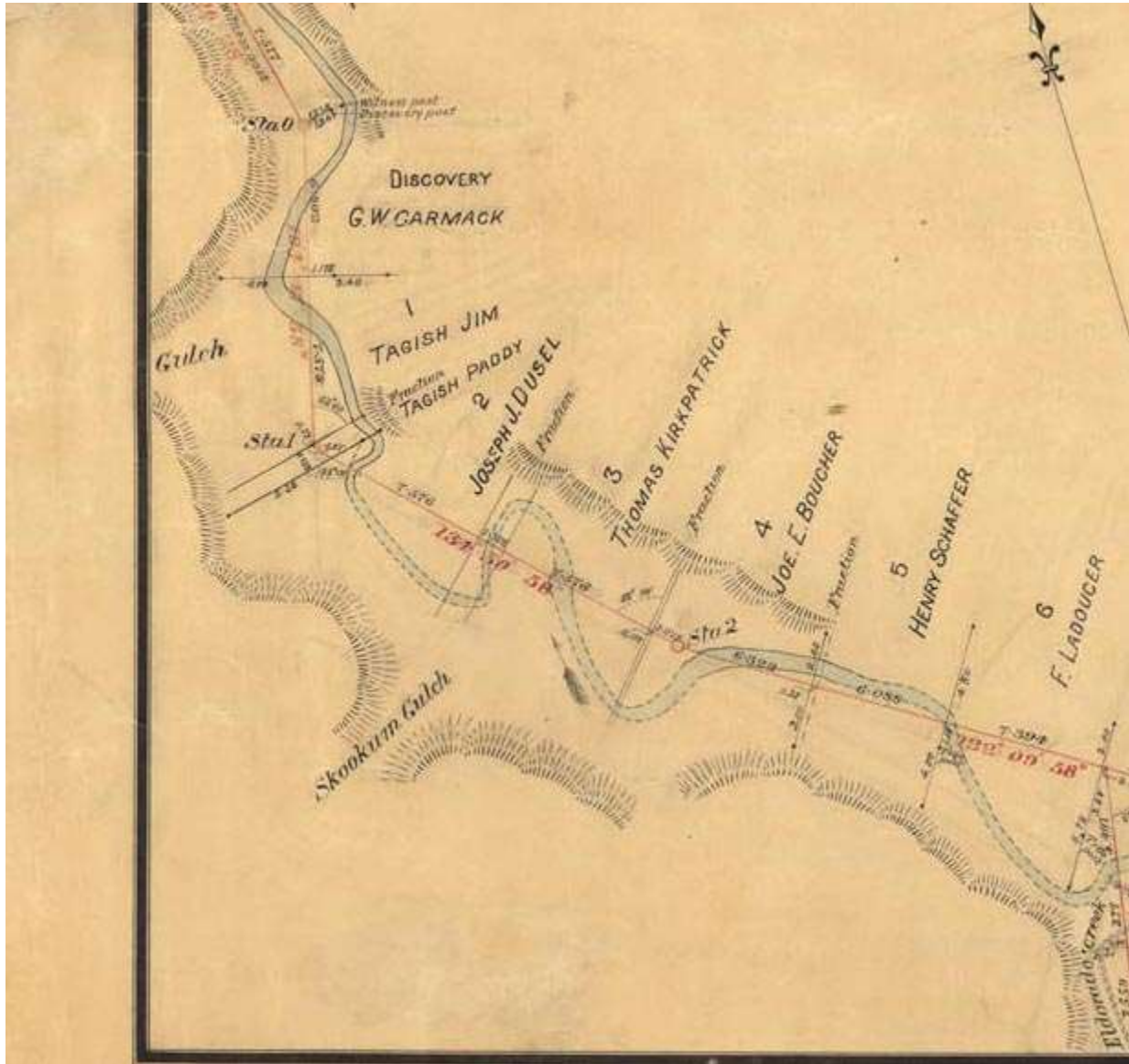
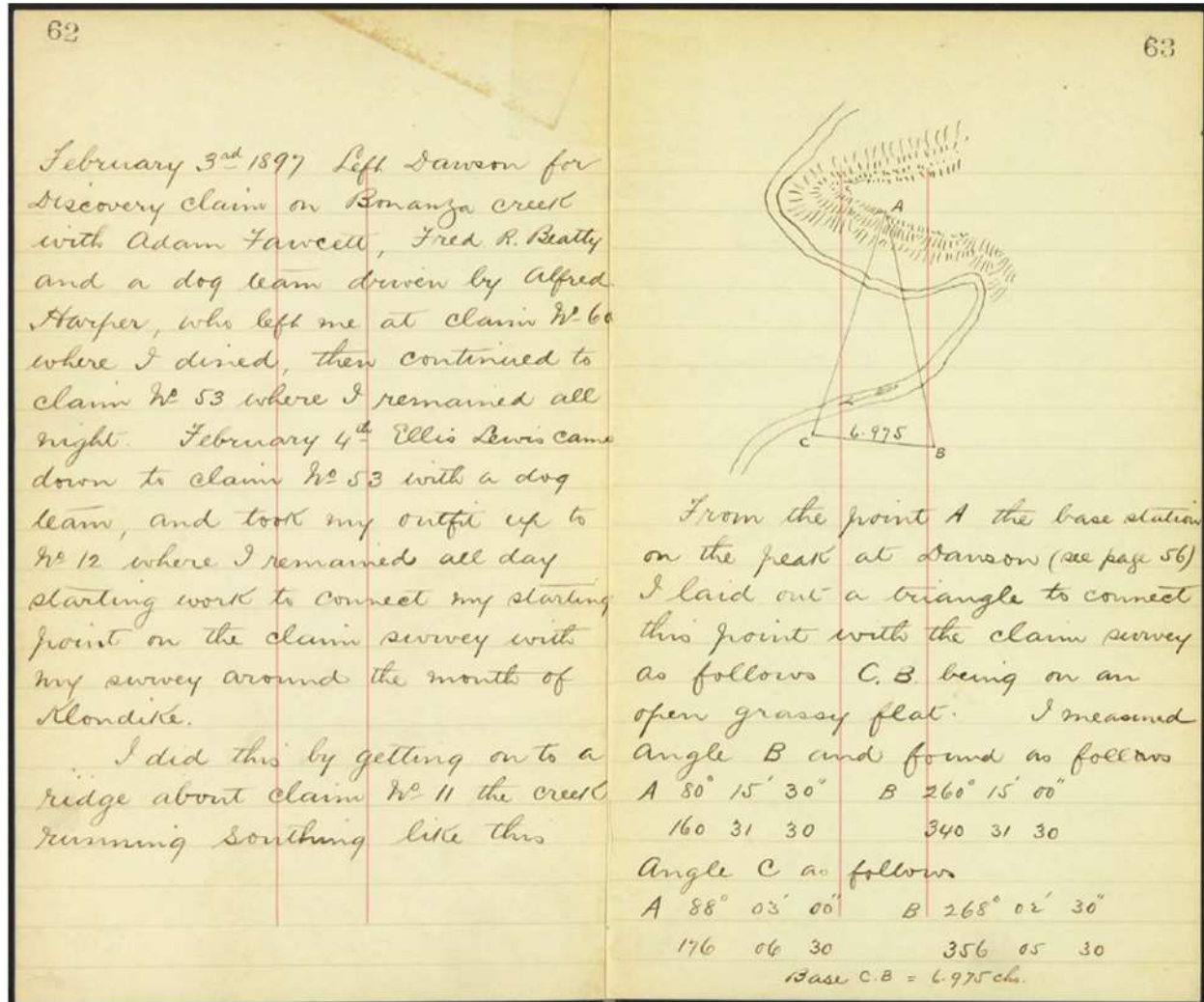


Image 3:

The "Plan of Placer Mining Claims on part of Bonanza Creek in the Klondike Mining Division of the Yukon Territory" was plotted by Ogilvie's surveying field books, including the passage from the one below.



Field book of surveyor William Ogilvie Credit Library and Archives Canada, Field book no. FB6192 CLSR YT, R214, Vol. 4044, MIKAN [5012291](https://www.mikan.ca/5012291)

Image 4:

Undated photo of prospector Jim (Kèsh) Mason (also known as “Skookum” Jim), and identified as “Tagish Jim” on the survey map above. A member of the Tagish Khwáan First Nation, Mason was exceptional as it was unusual for discovery claims made by First Nations prospectors at the time of the Klondike Gold Rush to be accepted by mining authorities.



Skookum Jim, Yukon Pioneer Credit: Canadian Dept. of Interior/Library and Archives Canada/
PA-044683, MIKAN [3358566](https://www.ican.gc.ca/3358566)

Image 5:

William Ogilvie, noted Dominion land surveyor and second Commissioner of the Yukon Territory, and his party surveying the 141st meridian, the current boundary between Alaska and the Canadian territories, in 1895. Ogilvie is seated second from right.



William Ogilvie's party at winter quarters near the Alaska–Canada boundary line, October 1895.
Credit: William Ogilvie/Library and Archives Canada/C-074924, MIKAN [3389602](#)

Roddy McFall is a Senior Archivist at Library and Archives with responsibility for – among other portfolio assignments – the cartographic records of Natural Resources Canada. He spent five years writing on Canadian politics for The Economist Intelligence Unit, and spent three years at the Bermuda Government Archives assisting in the creation of its nascent government records programme. He holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History and Political Science as well as a Master of Arts in History, both from Carleton University.