

Reflecting the accuracy of oral history through the recollection of yukon gold ru...

[History](#)



Although both native oral tradition and conventional written history have its own merits, there is a tendency to value written history over oral traditions. This stems out of the idea that one is necessarily more accurate than the other. There is a common misconception that because oral history is not documented, it is subject to a multitude of interpretations and miscommunication, thus less valid. While it is true that discrepancies may arise, it doesn't necessarily mean that it doesn't have its advantages. In fact, what this reveals about the narrator's cultural values and the influences of structural factors is extremely valuable information. These differences in methods of documenting and recounting history gives us the opportunity to understand why particular actors choose to include certain details and omit others. Different presentation and emphasis of past events in the Klondike gold rush (1896-1899) are used by natives in their oral history and non-natives in conventional written history to instill differences in ideas of representation, success, and testimony.

When studying the Yukon gold rush, a name that is repeatedly seen and heard is that of Skookum Jim. Skookum Jim was a Native American packer employed by William Ogilvie in 1887 who earned his name "Skookum", meaning strong, by being able to carry heavy loads across far distances. Although Jim is depicted as strong and heroic in both oral history and written history, the extent to which this image is portrayed differs drastically. While conventional written history recognizes the symbol of Jim as a frontier folk hero, the way in which it illustrates him suggests qualities of weakness not seen in native interpretations. For example, in written accounts, there is an emphasis on the fact that Jim longed to be a white man, or a prospector.

They claim that he was different from other natives because he “ displayed the white man’s kind of ambition”. This “ difference” between Jim and other natives in light of the description of him as a hero implies that his superior qualities are “ white” and thus better. This in addition to the unechoed assumption that he wished to be a white man demonstrates a kind of white superiority seen in much of history and in the recounting of it. On the other hand, when natives are narrating Jim, they focus on his unwavering moral conviction and obligation to the customs and traditions of the world he comes from. They explain how he uses all his powers to attempt to find his missing sisters—so much so that the quest of gold becomes secondary. Unlike written accounts that suggest that he wished to be a white man, oral traditions dictate that he was aware of the values of the Tagish people; in this case, his duty as an eldest brother to commit to maintaining the welfare of his sisters. He had a moral conviction to recognise this duty and identify it as being the right thing to do. Thus, the native oral traditions place an emphasis on Jim’s steadfast moral values and his strength as a man to counter typical written history that has a tendency to depict and to cater to the representation of natives as weak, inferior savages who had no conscience; this simultaneously putting the white saviour industrial complex into question.

The disparate uses of mythology by natives and non-natives in the narration of the Klondike Gold Rush is used to inculcate different ideas of success and how it is/was achieved. Firstly, native oral literature credit success to family, community, traditions (values). For example, the attribution of Skookum Jim’s success is two-part: 1) to the myth of the Frog as his spirit helper and

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Tl'anaxeedakw, or Wealth Woman who blesses him and 2) to his observance of "long-standing values" of his people. Because of his ability to recognise cultural customs, such as mythical creatures and their role in the fortune of people, and social customs, such as his duties as the eldest son, he is able to succeed tremendously. On the other hand, written accounts use mythology to emphasize individual merit as the source of success. For example, the miners of the time scrambled to locations where there was a myth that an abundance of gold would be found. They would listen to prospectors' claims that there was a strike, then answer to the "siren call of a new stampede": but almost always, this was a myth, a word-of-mouth without concrete evidence. If success was reached, it was because of individual merit: because the miner arduously panned for gold and was judicious in his choices of location. This myth of individualism was critical to success. It was every self-reliant miner for themselves: the second a strike occurred, there was a stampede to stake claims for every man himself. Moreover, their mythical namings of strike locations, such as Bonanza and Eldorado, only served to heighten this fervor to claim such fantastical lands for themselves.

All societies use narrative structures inherent to their backgrounds to help members construct meaning out of past historical events. The differences in how such societies present history and what they decide to include is part of a larger agenda. This is to say, native oral traditions and conventional written histories present historical events in ways that help transpire their beliefs and that help direct interpretation of past events in a way they see as reflective of their values. For the natives, by portraying Jim as a man with an unwavering loyalty to his family and his culture, they are able to impart their

culture's emphasis on tradition and community. Furthermore, they are able to simultaneously help people question the misconception of their society as inferior and without morals. The non-native literature, on the contrary, are able to further impose their belief in white dominance as well as their belief in self-merit in the journey for success. Both have favourable and unfavourable characteristics to their approach, which is what makes history so fascinating and what reminds historians to be critical in their journey to the past.