



Yukon Gold!!

The Bottles of Canada's North

Phil Culhane & Julia Pike

Ed note: The Internet, like the Yukon, is a great place to look for buried treasures. Every day, we get a couple dozen bottle-related emails, and every once in a while, one of them sends us off on a treasure hunt, looking to piece together a story. Last fall, two readers wrote to enquire about the bottles of the Northwest and Yukon Territories. My curiosity piqued, I went in search of a couple photos for "What's Out There" and ended up with a whole lot more!

If you're looking for a bottle with an exciting rags-to-riches (and sometimes back to rags) story, you need look no further than our far northern Territories - the Yukon and Northwest Territories. I'll wager most of you have never seen - maybe never even thought of - bottles from Canada's two territories. They're far scarcer than hen's teeth, and far more valuable - both in market

price, and in the incredible stories that lie behind them. Telling names like "Bonanza Bottling Co." "Klondike Brewery" and "Eldorado Bottling Co." remind us that our north was a land built on gold, and on man's dreams of striking it rich.

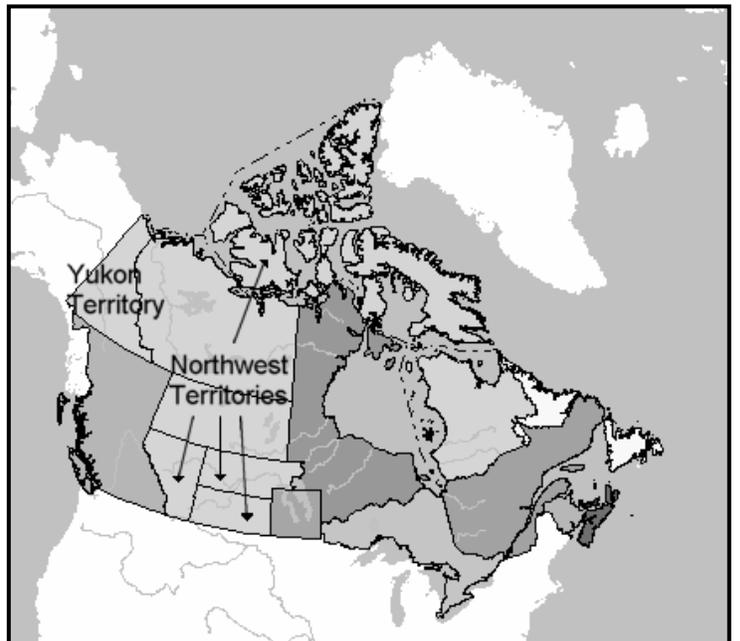
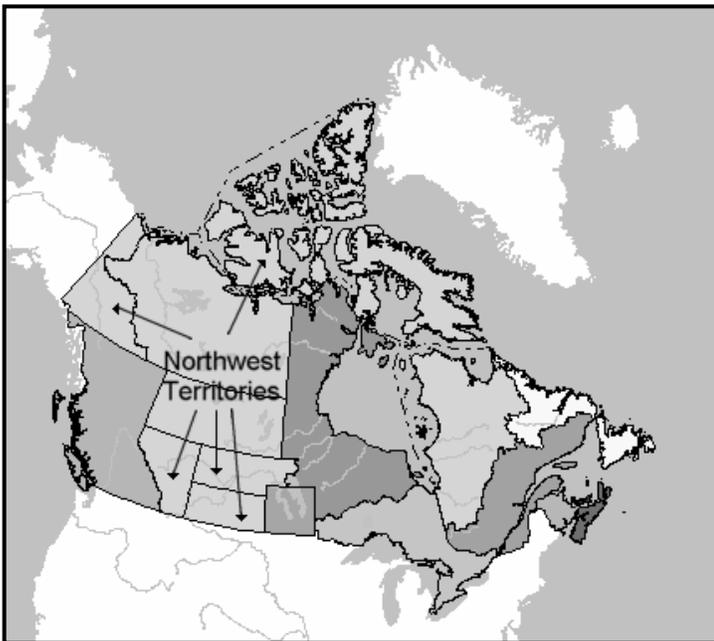
A Quick History Lesson

Canada's far north was left pretty much to its own devices until late last century. But in August of 1896, gold was discovered on Bonanza Creek, in what was then the Northwest Territories. Within two years, Dawson City had a population of between 30-40,000 people! Newspapers were among the first companies to establish themselves in this far north. Other smaller businesses included butchers, bakers, grocers, clothiers, tobacconists, blacksmiths, brothels, gambling halls and no less than 22 saloons. Six sawmills could-

n't keep up with the demand for lumber. Two soda water bottlers and a brewer also decided that Dawson City might be the place that they would "strike it rich!"

There was more than just fool's gold in Dawson City, and many did strike it rich. The Bank of Commerce opened its doors in June, 1898, with one million dollars in bank notes which they exchanged for gold dust and nuggets. The million lasted only **two weeks**, when the bank shipped out \$750,000 in gold. But prices more than compensated for the newfound wealth. A meal that cost 15-cents in Seattle was \$2.50 in Dawson and much inferior. Five dollars usually bought a meal of beans, stewed apples, bread and coffee.

By the summer of 1898 the carnival atmosphere gave way to the raw re-



Canadian maps from 1897 and 1898. Note the large light grey area covering much of Saskatchewan, Alberta, the NWT and the Yukon on the 1897 map (left). The Yukon Territory was carved out as a Territory in its own right in 1898. (Source: www.atlas.gc.ca)



"The largest fruit, confectionery, cigar and tobacco store in the north. Dawson YT." All the available luxuries were available in Dawson City in 1898. Some newly rich miners threw away gold nuggets as if they were worthless stones. (Dawson City Museum PH 983.182.3)

ality of heat, mosquitoes, mud, filth, stench and disease. Horses got stuck in the muck of the streets and wagons sank up to their axles. Pedestrians waded knee-deep through what writer T.C. Down described as "this festering mass of putrid muskeg." Typhoid broke out in July and was rampant throughout the summer. The town's two small hospitals were filled to capacity. The North-West Mounted Police instilled law and order, which confounded many Americans. They expected the anarchy of American mining camps, and were shocked to learn that handguns were illegal in Dawson. Others openly resented having to behave themselves and obey Canadian laws.

Just when order was being created out of all the turmoil, a major gold discovery was made in Nome, Alaska, and an exodus began. News had filtered into Dawson during the winter of 1898, prompting hundreds of gold-seekers to head out along the

frozen river. Many more waited until the opening of navigation, and the first steamboats of 1899 left Dawson crammed full of passengers. As the Klondike gold rush subsided, the drain continued throughout the following two decades. Today, Dawson City has a year-round population of about 2,000 people.^a

The Bottlers

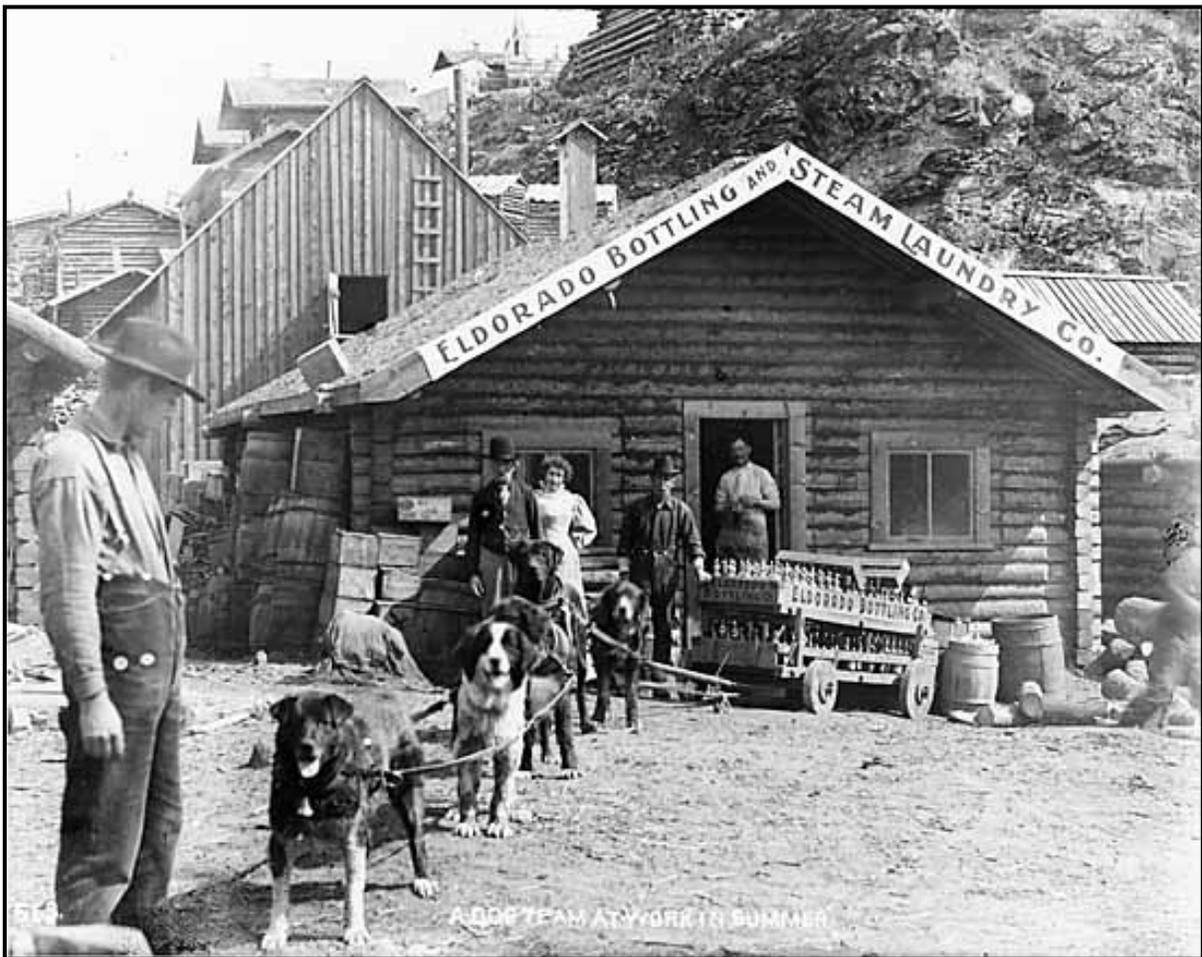
One of the consistent stories that I've heard about gold rushes was that the people who made the best money were not the miners, but those who sold supplies, services, etc. to the miners. And among those, we must include at least two soda water bottlers and a brewery, each of which left behind traces in the form of bottles!

Bonanza Bottling Co.

Thus far, I've found very, very little remaining except for a very rare bottle to remind us that this com-

pany once existed. A point of much curiosity is the embossing on this bottle: "Bonanza Bottling Co / Dawson City, N.W.T." The "Northwest Territories" was a blanket term used to cover all "other land" in western and northern Canada for much of the 19th century (see maps on page 48). The Yukon Territory Act was assented into Parliament on June 13th, 1898; Dawson City having been a part of the Northwest Territories up until that date. So the obvious question - did this bottle pre-date 1898? Were the bottles ordered prior to the creation of the Yukon Territory but delivered and used after the Yukon came into existence? Or did the person ordering the bottles use the older name? Good questions; tough questions. Given how few people resided in Dawson prior to 1898, it's unlikely that many of them would refer to it by its N.W.T. name post-1898; our uneducated guess is that this bottle was used, or at least ordered, prior to June 13th, 1898. Thus, although they are both from the same town, you could arguably own Hutchinson bottles from BOTH of Canada's territories! Hopefully someone, someday, will find that shred of information that answers the question. Was Bonanza Canada's first northern soda water works? The jury's still out, but it sure looks that way.

The Bonanza hutch, so far as we know, is the only embossed bottle that exists with "N.W.T." inscribed on it, and it is one tough bottle to get! One showed up on eBay about two years ago and, despite surpassing \$1,000 US, did not meet its reserve. Of course, bottles in this price range are valued on a transaction-by-transaction basis, but it wouldn't surprise me to see a mint specimen change hands for \$1500-2500 Cdn. That said, there are so few on the market that a deliberate search of the dumps and river in Dawson City could turn up enough of these great bottles to drop that price by two thirds. How many bottle diggers could there possibly be in Dawson



My choice for the best Canadian historical bottle-collecting photo ever! Can you beat this 1899 photo of the Dog Team from the Eldorado Bottling and Steam Laundry Co.? And are those syphons on the top level of the cart? Caption: A dog team at work in summer. [Exterior view of the log structure located on Bridge Street near the cliff. In front are employees watching a dog team pull a wooden cart (marked 'Eldorado Bottling Co.') filled with bottles.] YA# 4712. Date: Summer 1899. Fonds/Collection: H.C. Barley fonds. Photographer: H.C. Barley, photographer.

today? And how many would there be tomorrow if they knew what those fools down south might pay for a mint specimen?

Eldorado Bottling Works / Co.

At least two bottles and a syphon are known from this firm, as well as one of the greatest bottle photos I've seen (see this page). Yes! I am Joe, and I am Canadian. I live in an igloo, and I get my soda water delivered by....dogsled!!!

Thanks to the above dated photo, we know that Eldorado was in business as early as 1899. According to *Historic Yukon & Alaska Hotels, Roadhouses, Saloons & Cafes Index - Proprietors and Managers*, J. Nicol and Robert Mitchell

were proprietors of the Eldorado Bottling Works in 1901. In 1903, *Polk's* mentions the Eldorado Bottling Works, James U. Nicol and Robert L. Mitchell, proprietors, located at 214 Bridge Avenue. A further reference in *Polk's Alaska-Yukon Business Directory and Gazetteer 1905 - 1906* mentions Eldorado. By 1909-10, *Polk's* states that W.P. Brayton was now the proprietor and that Eldorado Bottling Co. (note the name change) had moved to 814 Bridge Street (or more likely that Bridge Street had been renumbered, as the last two digits are the same). The *1915-1916 Polk's* was the last place we found mention to the Eldorado Bottling Co., with M.S. Eads listed as the manager, and the address moved to 117 First Avenue. This bevy of in-

formation lets us know that Eldorado Bottling Works was in existence c. 1899-1906, and that Eldorado Bottling Works was in business from c.1909-1916. Of course, the above photo throws a wrench into any easy dating split between Works/Co., as this photo is clearly a "Co." reference, but dates from 1899. Thus, for now, we are restricted to the conclusion that the Eldorado Bottling Co./Works was in business, with at least three owners, from c. 1899 to c. 1916. Looking at all the hutchinsons in that dog cart, there must be more out there somewhere! One bit of conjecture: I'd suggest that Eldorado may have stuck with their hutchinson bottles throughout the course of their existence – given the cost of purchasing and delivering new equipment, the owners of



1984.50.23 - Photograph of "The Eldorado Bottling Works." "Under Crocus Bluff (P. Butterworth)." Front Street at Crocus Bluff with small log cabins built along street and up the hill behind. A group of unidentified people is posed at the front of the Eldorado Bottling Works. "Peerless Laundry" and a "Lunch Room" are also advertised along the street. In front of the Peerless Laundry the cart reads "Shore Acres Standard Theatre." Circa 1897-1910. Dawson City Museum and Historical Society, 1984.50.23, The Cribb's Drugstore Fonds.

Eldorado may have just “done their best” to keep the hutchinson-based bottling equipment in some sort of working order for as long as possible.

The Eldorado bottles “suffer” from the fact that the owners never thought to append the city or territory name to any of their (known) bottles. As you can see from the front cover, there were two print variants on the Eldorado hutchinsons. One Eldorado hutchinson showed up on eBay (seemingly becoming a standard reference site) about two years ago and sold for about \$450 US at the time (about \$700 Canadian at the time).

Time for some more conjecture here: Given the hunch that Bonanza existed prior to June 1898, the first reference to Eldorado coming in 1899, and the cost of lugging soda water bottling equipment up to Dawson City, I'd like to suggest that

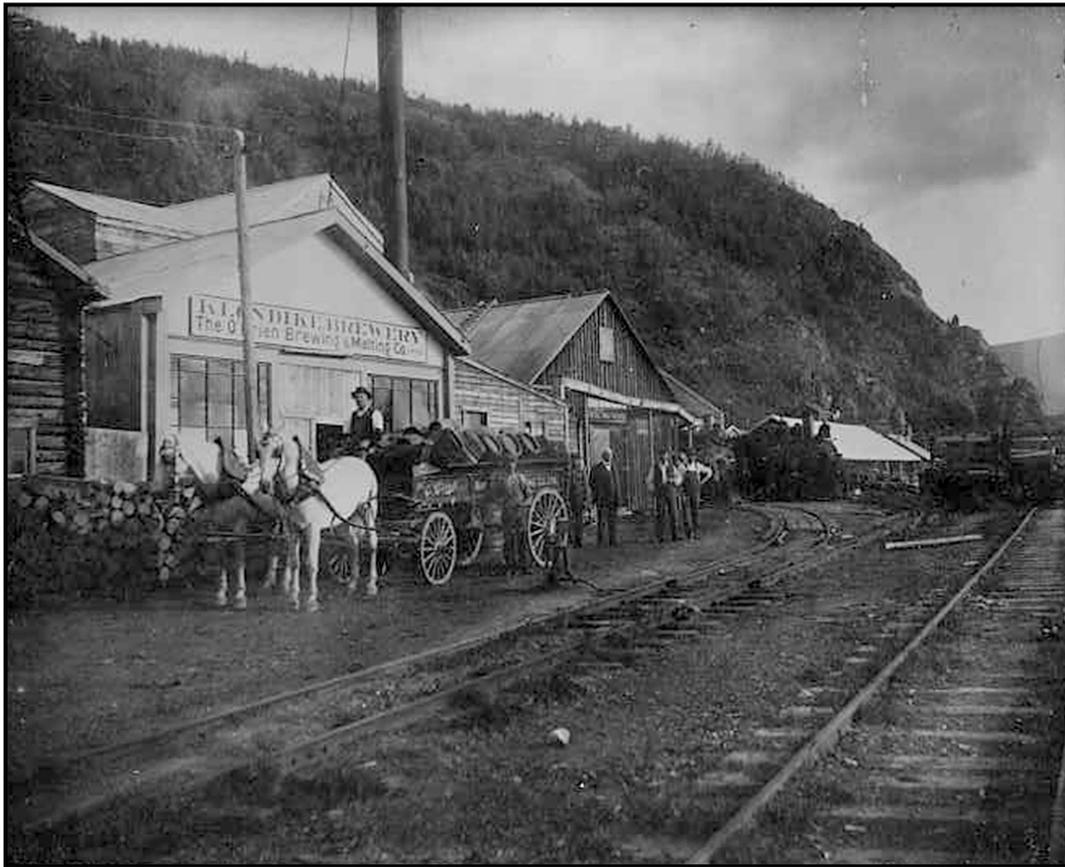


Possibly the only remaining syphon from the Eldorado Bottling Co. Dawson City Museum and Historical Society: 1978.1.276.

research may someday show that the proprietor of Bonanza, having chosen along with the great masses in Dawson City to move on to the gold fields in Alaska in late 1898-early 1899, sold the equipment to Nicol and Mitchell, who changed the name, ordered new bottles, and kept the business going for at least the next sixteen or seventeen years.

Klondike (O'Brien) Brewery

Rosemary Allerston has written a great article entitled “The Beer that Made Milwaukee Jealous” – a great story of the O'Brien Brewing and Malting Company, better known locally as the Klondike Brewery. At least a couple neat facts can be gleaned from this article for the casual reader. Thomas William O'Brien, the proprietor of Canada's first territorial brewery, was born three miles outside of Barrie, Ontario on March 8, 1862! By 1887, O'Brien and a partner had headed



1984.9.4 - Photo of a two-horse team pulling O'Brien Brewing & Malting Co. wagon loaded with kegs in front of Klondike Brewery in Klondike City. Several sections of Klondike Mines Railway tracks are in the foreground, with two locomotives visible in the background. The Klondike Brewery was owned by Thomas O'Brien. The brewery was located in Klondike City and opened in 1904. The business was known for its steam brewing process, and operated under O'Brien until he died in 1916. F.W. Vinnicombe took over until 1919 when prohibition finished all enterprises associated with beer and spirits.

Dawson City Museum and Historical Society, 1984.9.4, The Jeckell, George Collection

out for the gold fields in Juneau, Alaska. He reached the Yukon River, and stopped at Fortymile in September. He opened a store at Circle City in 1894. Early in 1896, he heard about George Carmacks' find on Bonanza Creek, poled up-river and staked or otherwise acquired a number of claims there. Some of these were very profitable, and O'Brien took little time in turning his gold profits into many successful mercantile and property interests.

As the story goes, the gold fever died down in Dawson City starting in 1899, and by 1904, there were fewer than 7000 souls left. They still enjoyed their beer, though, and grumbled at the cost of the brew brought in from down south.

O'Brien, sensing a market opportunity, banded together with several friends, and on February 1st, 1904 (100 years ago this year!!) the O'Brien Brewing and Malting Company (Limited) came into existence.

A neat advertisement states "Klondike Brewery, Klondike City. Manufacturing at the Klondike Brewery, the beer that made the Klondike famous and Milwaukee jealous. Manufactured from the best Bay Malt in California and Simon Hops. We also manufacture the famous Red Feather ariated waters, ginger ale, cream and lemon sodas, champagne cider, sarsaparilla and siphons, and numerous other drinks used in the trade. Operated by The O'Brien Brewing and Malting Co., Ltd., Dawson, Y.T." Among other

things, this ad lets us know two things: one, that Eldorado had some competition in the soda water business, and two, that, at one time at least, there was an O'Brien / Klondike syphon bottle out there!!

The brewery did a steady business, selling everything from Blue Label, Red Label Steam Beer, K.B. Special Brew, lager, porter, soft drinks and cigars. Starting about 1910, the Dawson City Directory listed two of Tom's sons, Henry and James, as bottlers in the brewery. Between 1904 and 1910, Klondike sold a total of 365,000 gallons of beer! O'Brien's operated until 1919, when prohibition finished all enterprises associated in any way with beer and spirits, according to a 1980 reference work.



A bottle of O'BB&M Co Bohemian Style Beer on a pale aqua crown top bottle. The label includes "Dawson, Y.T." Dawson City Museum and Historical Society.

Panning for Yukon Gold

As to availability, sadly, there are exceptionally few of these bottles on the market. Who knows, with the prices mentioned in the previous pages, we might spawn a new "gold rush" – how much is a ticket to Dawson City anyhow and where's my digging shovel? A quick Web search showed a cost of \$1200 for the return flight via Westjet / Air-



Klondike Brewery Special Brew label, brewed by the Klondike Brewery, Dawson, Y.T. Dawson City Museum and Historical Society

north, so hey! A couple bottles found and you could more than break even – and weren't you looking for a reason to get away for a weekend??

Well, we can't provide a treasure map to those of you who might be hardy enough to venture north in search of bottled gold, but we can provide this bone-chilling historical note: "In the spring of 1899 when the river ice was due to go out, government officials ordered the town's garbage piled out on the ice. At breakup the Yukon River swallowed what it could, and delivered the rest downstream. Dawson residents thought they had discovered a novel and efficient means of garbage disposal, but no thought was given to the people who lived downstream."^b So if you do want to find some lovely Yukon bottling gold, bring your SCUBA equipment – and your warmest drysuit!!

In closing, I must thank Julia Pike, curator of the Dawson City Museum, without whom this article would not have been possible. Julia did tons of background research and took the photos for the front cover of this magazine, all on a very short timeframe. Should your research or vacation interests lead you to an interest in our far north, I can only suggest you contact Julia (there's an ad for the Dawson City Museum on the inside back cover of this issue of the magazine). You will be warmly received, and I'm sure if she can provide help or information, Julia will. And no, the bottles are NOT for sale!!

^a Historical context excerpted from Ken Spotswood, *The History of Dawson City, Yukon Territory*.

<http://www.yukonalaska.com/communities/dawsonhist.html>

^b *ibid.*