

The Westman Wilderness Chilkoot Pass Hike

Friday, August 29 to Tuesday September 2, 2014

The Chilkoot Trail is a 53 kilometer trail through the Coast Mountains that leads from Dyea (pronounced Die-ee-ah), Alaska (near Skagway) to Bennett, British Columbia. The Chilkoot Trail was the most direct, least expensive and thus most popular access route to the headwaters of the Yukon River for the swarms of men that sought their fortunes in the goldfields around Dawson City, Yukon in the late 1890s. While some prospectors tried hiking from Edmonton, not-yet-Alberta to Dawson City, most sailed from Seattle to Dyea, hiked one of a few trails to the headwaters of the Yukon River, and from there completed the trip to the goldfields by boating down the River.

As it became apparent that many of the prospectors who chose the Chilkoot simply were not going to survive the arduous terrain and harsh weather, Canada's North-West Mounted Police declared that prospectors could only enter Canada if they had at least one ton of food and gear - enough to supply a man for one year. At first prospectors ferried their own gear or hired locals, backpacking about 100 pounds per trip, from campsite to campsite along the trail, slowly moving closer to the headwaters of the Yukon. In short time, there was an aerial tramway to move goods up the worst five miles of the trail, for those with money.

Tens of thousands headed for the goldfields, a few thousand got there, and all but a handful were too late to cash in – all the land had been staked and claimed well before the masses arrived.

That was 1898. Having heard of the hardships endured back then, some deluded club members decided that this would be a fun hike. Planning started in the spring, and by mid-summer, eight members had signed on, the ever optimistic Judy as tour organizer, Di as her lieutenant, James as the detail man and geocache expert, Ed and Bert as photographers and trail sweeps and novices Robert the rancher, and Rick and Sue who, like Judy are ever optimistic. Tim was a late addition to the troop, signing on mid-August.

Rick and Sue drove to Whitehorse, transporting the packs of most hikers in their SUV. The rest flew to Whitehorse. From there we went by bus and train to Skagway, Alaska, the community nearest the trail head. For several fliers, the adventure had an inauspicious start - Tim arrived an hour late for the ride from Brandon to Winnipeg and then the car had a flat tire – so an estimated 10 PM arrival at Bert's house turned into an 11:30 arrival. Tim, demonstrating his preparedness and organizational skills, had about 100 pounds of gear in several bags including an 8 by 8 polypropylene tent but no sleeping bag. Bert and Judy worked with Tim until about 1 AM to get his gear sorted down to the essentials for the hike. Then off to bed for a restful sleep until alarm time at 4 AM and off to the airport.

The flights were smooth and on time. In Whitehorse, we met up with Rick and Sue, sorted out the packs they had brought up, toured the town, shopped for some emergency waistband repairs for Di's backpack, had a fine supper at Klondike Rib and Salmon, found the bus terminal and got our bus/train tickets to Skagway and hit the hay and listened to each other snore.

The trip to Skagway started by bus then a transfer to train and a ride on the Yukon White Pass railroad from Fraser BC to Skagway. This very scenic, world famous rail line was constructed to service the gold rush. It was completed in record time and although too late to cash in on the gold rush, was an economically viable freight line until good roads reached Whitehorse. It has since operated as a tourist attraction, and for all but cynics like me, is a thrilling and memorable experience.

In Skagway we caught up with our advance party – Rick, Sue, Ed and James who were a day ahead of us, toured the town, checked into our hostel and claimed our bunks, bought a few more supplies for the trip, had lunch, laughed at Robert when a crow crapped on his head (several people say this is an omen of pending good luck, but it did not appear that Robert felt lucky to be the chosen one), ate some fine meals, arranged transportation to the trailhead, met Frank from Holland who was doing the same hike as us, then went to bed and listened to each other snore. Ed and James had purchased ear plugs, having shared a dorm with a thunderous snorer the previous evening. Without earplugs, I determined that indeed this man's snore was louder than both James' and Ed's, but it was not as consistent. Judy got to listen to the bunk above her squeak for a while as its young male occupant played with something he had found under his blankets.

Dyea Dave, our bus driver entertained us with history, stories and jokes on the way to the trailhead. He was so entertaining in fact that Judy almost (but not quite) forgave him for his abruptness or rudeness when she telephoned him to set up the ride.

I was mostly at the back of the pack, so the trip report that follows is from that perspective and primarily shows pictures of the less speedy hikers. At the end of this report are James' notes about the advance party.

Enjoy,

Bert



At the trailhead, as ready as we will ever be.

The Hike – Day One – Dyea Trailhead to Canyon City – 12.5 Km

The hike started with an uphill climb. Up and down and up and down and up, total vertical might be about 600 feet, net gain of 300 feet, mostly in lush rainforest. Sue showed us that cooling down was as easy as falling off a log.



Sue picks herself up after a cooling dip in the swamp and cheerily moves on with life.



Day Two – Canyon City to Sheep Camp – 8 Km

Canyon City was the bottom end of a five mile long aerial tramway that was an enterprise used to transport goods to the top of the Chilkoot Pass. A mile from the campsite, the Canyon City Ruins are some residual material left over from the buildings and equipment at the base of the tramway. Before breakfast I checked it out and reported to our crew that I thought it was “an unbelievable tourist attraction”. After breakfast, we all hiked up to see the old steam boiler, a bit of a decaying log building, and old stove, some saw blades and bits of rusty iron on the forest floor. After the excitement of the ruins, we hiked back to camp, packed up our gear and hit the trail.

My father spent the war years in England, Belgium, Holland and France. If anyone asked



Canyon City Ruins are accessible via a swinging bridge.

him what he thought of Europe he would say “Lots of old stuff.” I guess that some of his attitudes rubbed off on me. Yes, I think it is unbelievable that the Canyon City Ruins is a tourist attraction.



After the swinging bridge, this stove was one of the highlights of the Canyon city ruins.

Most of the first two days of hiking was through rainforest. The forest floor was covered with a thick, lush, green carpet.

While Canyon City to Sheep Camp is considered by some to be an easy day, the consensus of most in our crew was that the distance covered and the estimate 800 feet gross/700 feet net vertical gain belie the difficulty of this day’s hike. It was a pleasant but tough day.

Day 3 – Sheep Camp up the Golden Stairs to Happy Camp – 13 or 16 Km

The first half of this section of our hike is what made the Chilkoot Trail famous. From Sheep Camp, the trail only goes up to the Pass, gaining 2700 feet before dropping about 800 feet on the way to Happy Camp. On the way up are the Scales where the NWMP stopped the prospectors and required them to weigh-in their food and gear before letting them move on up the Golden Stairs to the Pass and into Canada and the bitter disappointment that would await them in Dawson City. At least they wouldn’t be hungry.

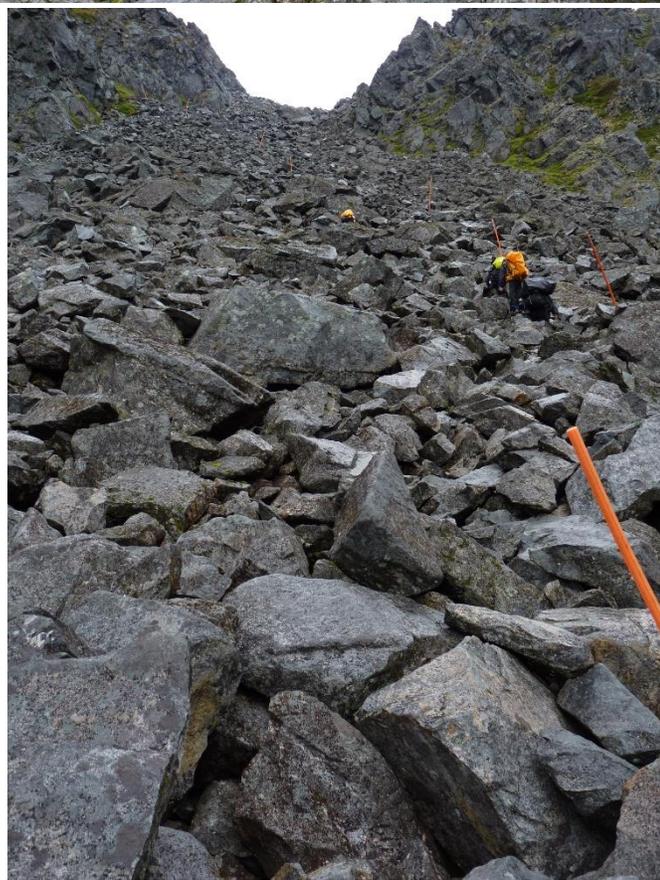
The photos on the following pages are of the slower hikers in the Westman crew as they wend their way up the mountain and towards the Chilkoot Pass.



The encampment in the foreground is prospectors accumulating their wares for weigh-in at the Scales. You can see the lines of prospectors the climbing the Golden Stairs. In the sky above the straight, dark line up the mountain just to the left of centre, you can see the aerial tramway.



The walk up to the Scales was a steady climb above the treeline. The skies were overcast and clouds low for the first few days of the hike, but we didn't have much rain during the days. We did have rain on a night or two.



The trail from the Scales to the Pass was a scramble over rubble, rock and boulder.



Climbing the Chilkoot in 1898 - these guys would have benefited from a trip to MEC to get better backpacks.

The summit within sight. Live in hope, die in despair - there were four false summits on route to the Pass.



At the Chilkoot Pass summit was a monument made of one of the aerial tramway cable pulleys. Further down the trail was a Parks Canada Ranger station and a warming hut with hot water and rice crispie cake smacks.



On the way to the Scales, walking along a bit of a ledge, Tim had a misstep and fell over the edge. Fortunately trees stopped him where they did, otherwise he would have had a long and painful tumble. He needed a hand to get back up on his feet and to climb back onto the trail. Then, in the boulders near the summit, he had another misstep, fell and dislocated a shoulder. Parks Canada Ranger Stephanie was close at hand and took charge. Tim's shoulder was relocated, his pack split amongst those on the scene, and this ragged troop continued to the Ranger Station where arrangements were made to helicopter Tim to Whitehorse. It was about 4:30 before the survivors headed on from the summit to Happy Camp.



Tim showed us that there are faster ways back to Whitehorse.

The hike from the summit to Happy Camp seemed to take forever. When we thought Happy Camp must be within shouting distance, we met a Ranger hiking to the

Ranger Station at the summit to escort

Stephanie to Happy camp. He told us we only had a couple of kilometers to go. Longest two kilometers of our lives. It was about 8 PM when we got there. No one was looking for company for a side hike that evening.



After the summit, we hiked through areas with year round snow then back down onto alpine meadows. Like the other days, there was ever changing scenery and lots of creek crossings.



Day 4 – Pleasant Camp to Bare Loon Lake via Lindeman City

On paper, this was an easy, downhill day – with only four or five hundred feet of climbing and a net loss of elevation of about 500 feet, over a distance of 14 to 15 km. In reality, a longish hike after a big day is often not an easy day even on a fairly flat trail, and so was the case for me. Relative to the previous day, it was fairly uneventful; the only incident of note, I reached in my pack on cut a finger on the damn hatchet (the guard had come off the blade). I carried that cursed hatchet the whole hike and my finger was the only thing of note that it cut. James, next time you want a hatchet on a hike....



The trail from Sheep Camp to Bare Loon Lake was mostly flat, much of it in alpine meadows following close to waterways. At right, Ed photographs four weary but happy hikers.



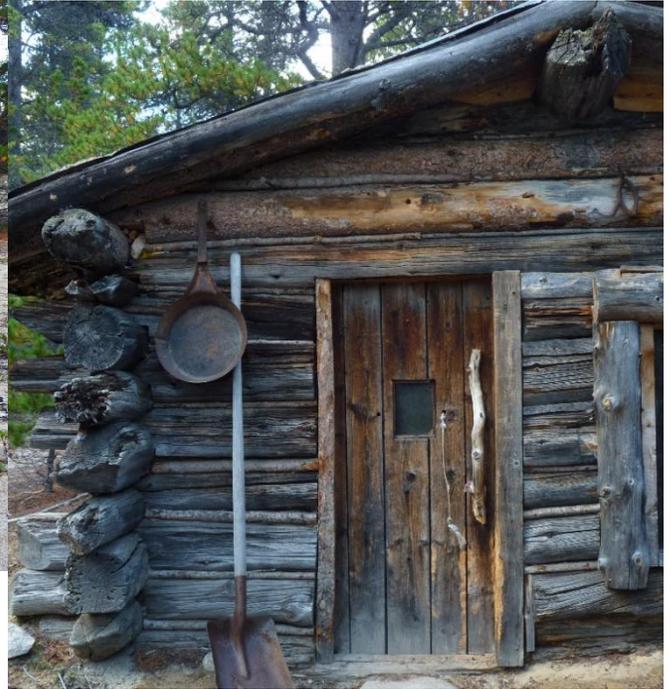
At Bare Loon Lake, we were treated to an outhouse on wheels, a gorgeous sunset over a very pretty lake and the first clear skies of the hike.



Day Five – Bare Loon Lake to Bennett then a Train and Bus Ride to Whitehorse

At somewhere between six and seven kilometers of gentle downhill (about 200 feet vertical drop), this was our easiest day. We had hours to get to Bennett where a hot stew dinner and apple pie lunch awaited us before we got on the train back to Fraser BC, then on to a bus and back to Whitehorse. This

was a pleasant hike through alpine forests and meadows.



As we neared Bennett, the trail widened and trail signage improved. A log cabin along the trail provided an opportunity for picture takers to pretend they are photographers

The community of Bennett is at the headwaters of the Yukon River and was a place where prospectors loaded their supplies onto boats for the final leg of their trip to Dawson City. The community was established in autumn of 1898 as a camp where several hundred prospectors waited for the river to thaw and the boat ride to begin. The only remaining building from that era is the church which was built by the prospectors that fall. The church also served as a meeting place and social center. In the spring, the miners headed downstream leaving the town vacant. The community was never repopulated, and the church has since sat empty, serving as a constant reminder of the futility of the whole gold rush episode, and perhaps of life itself.

The White Pass Yukon railway passes through Bennett. The train station, built in 1910, has been restored and now serves as a cookhouse serving a gold rush style stew dinner for train tourists and hikers. Train tourists eat in dining rooms facing the tracks. Hikers, most of whom have not bathed in at least a week, are served in room serviced by a back entrance. Robert noted that the stew, made from Alberta beef, could not compare to blue 52, who broke her leg and now resides in his deep freeze. The apple pie wasn't as good as our trail deserts, either.

Tim rode the train to Whitehorse to meet us hikers and update us on his helicopter ride and hospital visit. On the train, hikers, most of whom have not bathed in at least a week, were seated in separate cars from the tourists. Sucks to be them, stuck in a car full of aging, boring, odourless tourists rather

than a car full of aging and ripe hikers. A couple of tourists joined our car. We warned them of the danger, but they held their noses and stayed.



The church in Bennett, was built by volunteers using local materials and now is maintained at great expense by Parks Canada and protected by fire sprinklers installed on the roof and grounds around the building to protect it from the threat of a forest fire.



Above - the train station in Bennett is a welcome site for hungry hikers, hungry tourists and photographers.



At left - "I hear the train a comin, its comin round the bend...." Johnny Cash could write and sing a song. The train approaches the station at Bennett, bringing Tim and a troop of hungry tourists for stew, apple pie, the scenery and a bit of history.

On the homeward bound train ride, Ranger Stephanie sought out Robert and advised him that he was being charged for having defaced Parks Canada property. When hiking alone, he was worried that he was off trail (i.e., lost). He used his hiking pole to carve his initials into the trail, so if he really was lost, we would know where to direct his family if they wanted to search for his remains. Robert, who by his own admission, hates confrontation, was caught speechless when she handed him the ticket. It read "you've been pranked".

In Fraser we transferred to the bus and before we even loaded, the bus driver ticked off Di. Unlike our bus driver on our earlier trips, this one just drove the bus. She was not a tour guide, just a busdriver, and seemingly not a very happy one. That's understandable, after having to deal with Di....

In Whitehorse, we checked into our hotel, showered, loaded backpacks into Sue and Ricks SUV and went out for a fine supper at Burnt Toast Restaurant. After supper, Robert went to the Trail of 98 bar with Ed and James where he identified all the animal hides on the wall. For this he was awarded a pin officially recognizing him as a member of *the '98 breakfast club*. Back in our hotel room, we turned in early and listened to each other snore. The flight back to Winnipeg the next morning was via Vancouver and Calgary. It was a long and boring day.



The bus stopped in Carcross, Yukon on its way back to Whitehorse. Di did not buy the bus driver a coffee

Final Remarks from the Back of the Pack

Beginning at the hostel in Skagway, we hung out and hiked with Frank from Holland. We enjoyed his company and his perspectives on life. He was on the same schedule as us but was a faster hiker. He would arrive early at our next campsite and if there were shelters with woodstoves, he would build and maintain a fire for our comfort. In return, we fed Frank our leftovers for which he and we were both thankful, and in return for the leftovers, he washed the pots and pans from which he ate. He was impressed with the fact that we had desert every day, including a fresh fruit crumble (thank you Judy) and ice cream bars (thank you Rick and Sue).



Left - Our hiking companion and fun guy Frank from Holland Frank says goodbye as we leave the train to go to back Whitehorse and he continues on the way back to Skagway.

Frank, thanks for keeping the home fires burning.



Frank wasn't the only fun guy we saw on the hike - there were lots of other very picturesque fungi along the trail



This picture is for the kids - so Rick and Sue pretend they are still getting along after their first major backpacking/hiking adventures



The Advance Party - James' View

There was an advance party who ensured that everything was as it should be in Whitehorse and Skagway. Rick and Sue drove in a few days early and Ed and James joined them a day before the rest of the crew arrived. We toured around Whitehorse before boarding the Bus/Train combination for the Whitehorse-Carcross-Fraser-Skagway journey. We enjoyed a day of exploring and hiking before being joined by Bert, Judy, Di, Robert and Tim.



Checking the sights of Whitehorse.



Refreshments in Skagway.



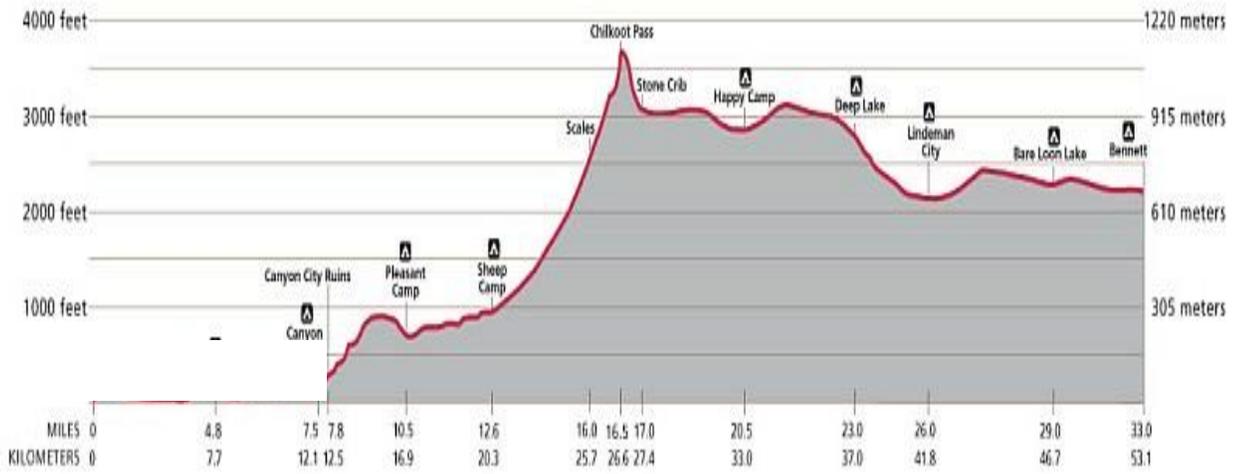
A pre-hike hike to do some GeoCaching.



Supper at Sheep Camp – the last supper before we assault the mountain, or did the mountain assaults us? As usual, there was lots of good food and good company at mealtimes.

To see more of James' photos click here to go to:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/101649491842932613628/ChilkootTrailAug29Sep2?authuser=0&authkey=Gv1sRgCOjj4J6JzfLeXQ&feat=directlink>



Profile of the Chilkoot Trail hike