

## Abandoned Buildings, Living Communities Local Resistance to Preservation in Dawson City, Yukon

Jane Burns

Volume 21, Number 1, 1999

Ethnicités et régionalismes  
Ethnicities and Regionalisms

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087765ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087765ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Article abstract

Dawson City is many things to many people. To the local white community, Dawson City is a home where they live within both a tourist destination and a globally recognised historic site. Many resist these labels, quietly opposing the reconstruction and tourism movements that have dictated much of Dawson City's community history since the 1960s. Although they admit, "We're living off our history," residents resist the power which has been given to the federal agency, Parks Canada, to decide which buildings should be restored and which should be left to die a "natural death."

### Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

### ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Burns, J. (1999). Abandoned Buildings, Living Communities: Local Resistance to Preservation in Dawson City, Yukon. *Ethnologies*, 21(1), 163–176.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087765ar>

# ABANDONED BUILDINGS, LIVING COMMUNITIES

## Local Resistance to Preservation in Dawson City, Yukon

Jane Burns

*Memorial University of Newfoundland.*

On the radio, a new all-Canadian trivia game is highlighted. “The question for Dawson City” the host announces: “What’s the number one industry in Dawson City, Yukon? Answer: Tourism.” Miners I talk with at the annual “Placer Miners Barbecue” disagree, believing that mining still beats tourism as the number one industry. The local saying, “mining the tourists,” suggests both are right. In this mining town, community members acknowledge: “We’re living off our history” (JB 97-03).<sup>1</sup>

Dawson City, Yukon, is many things to many people. To the Han Natives, it is a former home. To the Federal Government of Canada, it is both a nationally designated historic site and an economic complexity. To many American tourists, the journey to Dawson City is a re-creation of their ancestors’ trek to the Klondike Gold Rush streams during the 1898 race to the Yukon in search of wealth. For other tourists, it is an entertaining, if short, stopover on their way to Alaska.

To the local white community, Dawson City is the place where they live within this tourist destination and globally recognised historic site. As an historic event, the Gold Rush now has to be invented and re-created and its story told through the restoration of Gold Rush era buildings. Many residents, including employees of the organisations that run these operations, contest and oppose tourist labels. In taped interviews I conducted with them, locals expressed this resistance by voicing their fondness for the abandoned, often collapsing buildings over the reconstructed and restored ones. Quietly opposing the

---

1. This and all further materials from interviews are held by the Dawson City Museum. I would like to thank Mac Swackhammer for permission to use my fieldwork research.

reconstruction and tourism movements that have dictated much of Dawson City's community development since the 1960s, a history in which they themselves participated, they look back nostalgically at the town before the reconstruction movement:

I think it's too bad the town isn't like it was when I came. I think the tourists would enjoy it a lot more. They would really like it the way it was when I came here, with the — you came in at the airport, at the south end of town. There was a store there and it leaned out into the street — the General Store — where I did my shopping. And I often wondered if it was going to fall over, you know. All these old buildings that are gone. I think the tourists would love to see that. But I guess that's progress (JB 97-01).

Many residents similarly seem to identify with the buildings. One of the most dilapidated in town, as well as one of the most photographed, is the Guns and Ammunition Building. Ironically, it is owned by the local tourism association. As a former Parks Canada employee described:

We had a big discussion [in the community] on the Guns and Ammunition building. That's a live building. This building went through all the environmental problems through the past many years and finally, it's falling on its knees. It's buckling. The Palace Grand building doesn't tell the same story. Its story has to be written. There has to be something to read. The Guns and Ammunition building tells them what it is — they just look at it. Your mind works — look at what the environment, the permafrost — does to buildings (JB 97-04).

The speaker identifies with the building in the way that he has also experienced the North, as a place of harsh environmental conditions. He does not value the building merely because of its connection to the Gold Rush era.

In the summer of 1997, I spent two months in Dawson City, interviewing locals about the history of tourism in their community. The Dawson City Museum was preparing the background research for an exhibit on tourism to the area. That topic dictated my research questions, and thus the issue of native resettlement — and subsequent return — is not addressed here.<sup>2</sup>

The following discussion is therefore based on this short period of fieldwork. I interviewed thirty residents, but in addition, I attended guided tours of the town, saw a "Follies" performance at the Palace Grand Theatre,

---

2. I direct readers to two works which cover this topic: Cruikshank (1998) and Jarvenpa (1994).

spent a few evenings at the gambling hall Diamond Tooth Gertie's, listened to a performance of poetry at the Robert Service cabin, took the native-run Fishwheel Charters Tour, and viewed the promotional films "The City of Gold" and "The Yukoner."

I learned that Dawson City's particular blend of tourism and historic designation began to take hold in the 1950s. The federal government was expressing interest in establishing historic sites in the North which would promote development. In a visit to the area in 1959, then Prime Minister John Diefenbaker "himself first raised the possibility of developing Dawson City as an historic tourist attraction" (Taylor 1990: 171). A summer event, the Dawson Festival was planned to bolster the number and length of visits to the community. However, in order to house the festival, an old theatre had to be restored. Thus began the re-creation of the Palace Grand. And so, as well, began the formal link between tourism and restoration. Historian C.S. Taylor described the abruptness of this decision: "[I]n plunging into the reconstruction of the Palace Grand, the branch [Historic Sites] became mired in a large and unfocused project to develop Dawson as a tourist attraction" (Taylor 1990: 173).

Much has been written about the subsequent failure of the Dawson Festival and the ensuing uncomfortable relationship between the town and the federal government, through the actions and decisions of Parks Canada (Jarvenpa 1994; Stuart 1987). Many local residents still talk of these conflicts:

There are a lot of things that have been dictated to the community through Parks. Not paving the street — and things like that. Which is one of my concerns. I think it's totally idiotic. If you really want to be historic about it and don't pave the streets — then why don't you go back to the horse and buggy days and don't allow motorised vehicles in town? You have to realise that people no longer want to walk around in the mud. Watch the tourists — tiptoeing through the mud in Dawson. It usually leaves a really bad impression on people (JB 97-15).

The Gold Rush era buildings have been the primary focus of the federal government's involvement with the community, starting with a master plan of restoration that has since had to be revised due to cutbacks. Other organisations and institutions have also been involved in "saving" buildings, including the Territorial Government, the local tourism association (the Klondike Visitors Association), the Masonic Lodge, and the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire. However, it was Parks Canada which brought in the historians to

decide which buildings would be given priority. As one Parks Canada employee told me:

The National Historic Sites Board came to Dawson. They decided they should recommend to the Government that the Gold Rush be protected. And they did that. But the biggest problem was — nobody knew what to do with it. So they went on for years and years. Dawson should be retained as one. Or, we should get a street — King Street to the Palace Grand and move other buildings there. Then of course the dredges and Bear Creek. All these things came up. It became a major discussion. I don't think they know today what they're going to do with it. They're still at it. They have buildings they haven't done anything with (JB 98-03).

Scholar of culture Ronald Grimes sees museums as:

[Q]uasi-religious and quasi-political institutions, which is to say, they espouse values and mobilize power in the interests of specific groups. The fieldwork necessary to acquire objects [in this case, primarily buildings] is inherently political. Even though museums may aim to be cross-cultural in scope and to challenge ethnocentrism, they are also arenas in which one culture displays another (1990: 64).

Parks Canada was given the power to decide which buildings should be restored and which should be left to die a “natural death,” the fate of most vacant buildings which shift and eventually collapse due to the affects of the permafrost on which they have been built. Yet it is clear that many community members would make quite different decisions, based on another series of beliefs and values. For example, one woman views a building's significance from her own experience:

Like the building the Yukon College is housed in. There's very little mention of its life as a hospital. And yet to me, that's the most important thing. All my kids were born there. The city history stops at 1912 or something. I think we as citizens could build up the community history (JB 97-09).

You can't go many places in Dawson City without being reminded that Dawson City is, at least during the summer, very much a tourist town. At the community pool, a high school student talked of moving to Dawson City seven years ago and always being aware of the tourists and being careful not to walk through their photo shots. At the Dawson City Museum, an employee talks about tourists who think Dawson City is a purely a re-creation, neglecting to recognize that it is a living community, which has a life outside of tourism. These tourists often fail to realise that gold mining is still a real industry in the

area and ask: “Do you get your gold from Alaska?” (fieldnotes). A Parks Canada guide started her walking tour by pointing out that Dawson City is “an active town within an historic site” (fieldnotes). She took time during her excursion around the older, restored buildings to talk of Dawson City today, as a dynamic location which is youthful and changing: “Here’s our school — and here’s where we plan to build our new Recreation Centre.”

During Canada Day celebrations at Minto Park beside the Dawson City Museum, the Master of Ceremonies announces an up-coming “photo op”; you can have your photo taken after the official opening with the Can-Can dancers from the gambling hall, Diamond Tooth Gertie’s (see photo 1, photo 2). The image of the Can Can dancers with their flying skirts and fishnet stockings provides one of the most easily recognised icons of Dawson City. It also, ironically, reinforces the “maleness” of the Klondike Gold Rush experience as it is presented in Dawson. The image excludes from the official story women who came to the Klondike as neither dancers nor prostitutes — as miners, domestic workers, and so on.

When asked how many in the crowd are from the United States of America, at least eighty-five per cent of the visitors raise their hands (see photo 3). Likewise, two thirds of those who came to Dawson City during the Gold



1. Can Can girls and Mounties pose for the camera on Canada Day.



2. Tourists photograph Can Can girls and Mounties on Canada Day.

Rush stampede were American. Anthropologist Robert Jarvenpa compares the current trek to Dawson City with that of the past:

The annual influx of tourists recreates the “rush” experience which is central in the local conception of history. The very fact that eight out of every ten visitors derive from the United States resonates with the predominance of American miners in the original stampede. This lends a pilgrimage-like quality to Klondike tourism as thousands of Americans journey to the remote locale each summer, in essence, to witness a reenactment of a chapter of their own history (1994: 42).

In many ways, tourism has always been part of the white, Euro North American experience of the Yukon. Indeed, the stamperders themselves could be seen as the first influx of tourists to Dawson City:

Broadly speaking, tourism began with the gold rush itself when a few travelers and sightseers plied the Yukon River by steamboat....Other early visitors occupied privileged positions in the arts and communications and helped create some of the imagery and mythology of the gold rush which appealed to later generations of tourists and which have become part of the process of cultural commoditization (Jarvenpa 1994: 29).

Jarvenpa points out that the themes emphasised in these early travels highlight the heroic struggle of man — that is, of male humans — against the “savage” frontier, a theme which is also found in the works of Robert Service. Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank observes:

What seems to fascinate readers of Robert Service’s poems about “a land where the mountains are nameless” or Jack London’s drama of individual men in stark confrontation with nature is their clarity, enhanced by elements bound up in North Atlantic folklore about gold. Remembered as a “poor man’s gold rush,” the gold strike in 1896 coincided with a world depression and seemed to offer opportunities to thousands of unemployed men (1998: 73).

Cruikshank points out that these mountains were indeed already named and “were home to people rooted to place by narratives of connection” (Cruikshank 1998: 73), i.e. the indigenous people who had lived there for centuries. She concludes, “The gold rush was ultimately part of a larger, less glamorous operation than our folklore acknowledges — the expansion of the new Canadian state into the margins of northwestern North America” (Cruikshank 1998: 74).



3. A tourist says thank-you.



Organised tourism began in the 1950s, with a growing awareness within the community of Dawson City that it needed to find alternative economic resources. The Yukon Consolidated Gold Company was preparing to leave. The territorial capital had been moved from Dawson City to Whitehorse. And so, the community began to respond. One resident spoke of his experience:

When I arrived in Dawson [in 1951], Dawson was, maybe, depressed. Development was moving out of here. Or getting ready to do that. So I believe it was a time when people knew what was going to happen to the community. I got involved with the community and tourism. I always believed that the community had to do something. Mining was just something of the past. We had to find other ways. With the territorial government moving out of here — the main part of the economics in Dawson — we had nothing left. The mine was closing down, the government was pulling out. We had a population around 500. People were locking the door and walking away from their places (JB 97-03).

Many early tourism events were run by community members. For example, local residents, dressed in their version of period costume, met the boat loads of tourists who came up the Yukon River from Whitehorse. A group formed, calling itself the Klondike Visitors Association (K.V.A.):

There was a group here involved in tourism — Chamber of Commerce at that time was the organisation — we're talking about the early fifties now. Again in '52 or '53 they decided they needed more — we had to look at something. A branch of those people organised a tourism association. They became an organisation of their own — which is now the K.V.A. (JB 97-03).

These early events were locally generated and organised. They consisted of gambling with phoney money and theatrical plays put on by locals to the poems of Robert Service, using home-made costumes to represent past times:

We made our own costumes up. And they weren't authentic. We had bustles and everything. We found out years later — they weren't wearing bustles! We just made up the costumes on our own as I say. All this was done volunteer. No one was paid for anything. The mesh stockings, the feathers, the dresses. No one was paid. All of this was done voluntarily. It was for tourists, basically. And then Parks started paying wages. I remember it vividly. For doing what we did for free (JB 97-05).

Another resident talks about the early “gambling”:

I remember going — we didn't call it Gertie's then I don't think. Anyhow, we went and you could win little vials of gold. In the various gambling. Gold was still at forty dollars an ounce then — so I think there was five dollars of gold in a little vial so you could change in your chips or play money or whatever it was they had and you'd end up with a little vial of gold. And they had volunteers for entertainment — they had a band. The city engineer, Charlie Rendell, played in the band and the mining recorder — Mac Munroe — he played in the band. So it was all part of the community. The tourist industry then was considerably different from what it is now. There was no influx of people to look after the tourist trade (JB 97-04).

He too stresses the volunteer activity. And another speaks of the fun:

Mac Munroe did the reading. He read it very, very slowly. It's a long poem by Robert Service. It was a story about the North. And everything was acted out very slowly. And it was comical — it changed, different years. But one year — maybe a couple of years — this lady acted as "The Stranger" — "and his guts hung out." Well, she tied a bunch of cans on a rope and when she got on the floor and crawled — she's crawling across the floor — these tin cans are dragging behind her. Well, you know — it just broke everybody up. We played with it over the years. The more we did it, the funnier it got. Everybody put their own little interpretation on it. It got to the point where I made sure I had real, real red rouge. When the part was being read about, "The Lady That's Known as Lou," I was standing at the bar with my back to the audience, you know — pretending I was drinking a drink — and smoking a cigarette. And when he [the poem's narrator] says, "And my God, how ghastly she looked with her rouge" — I'd turn around and look at the audience. Well, they just broke up laughing (JB 97-05).

After this period came more organised gambling, still locally run, at Gertie's. Mainly a seasonal operation, Gertie's still operates only occasionally for community fundraisers during the winter. From my interviews, it would appear it was more of a local hang-out when it first opened than it is today.

I say that's my way of supporting K.V.A. — going into Gertie's! But it's fun. Especially the first few times when you're seeing a new show. There aren't so many locals who go anymore. It used to be a good meeting place (JB 97-05).

The show really hasn't changed. The money invested in the entertainment has increased. When I was first here, the dancers — in between shows — used to come down and sell drinks. The building was much smaller. The floor was not level. On a busy night, you couldn't see from one side of the building to the other — for the dust and the smoke (JB 97-09).

Residents clearly feel it was more fun when the floor wasn't level. Dancers are now recruited from professional schools, including Ryerson in Toronto, and they no longer sell drinks. The informality of these early days is remembered fondly, as this former Can Can dancer relates:

Back stage [at Gertie's], there I was, planning the Church service because we didn't have a minister. So I would be up — reading something out of the Bible the next morning — and there would be the same people that we entertained the night before! And there would be Gertie's [gambling] chips in the offering plate! We took them (JB 97-12).

This "Golden Age" of tourism involved many community members. Gertie's was still a meeting place, dancers led Church services the next morning, and the boundaries between official agencies were quite fluid. Those who worked for Parks Canada gave their time freely to the K.V.A. as well as to the Dawson City Museum, with a core of people moving easily from one group to another, donating services (fieldnotes). Now, however, Parks Canada employees wear period costume in official Parks Canada colours, to distinguish themselves as government employees.

Similar developments took place in Cavendish, P.E.I., as Diane Tye has noted: "Governmental agencies and entrepreneurs replaced early locally controlled tourist operations" (1994: 122). But in their emphasis on fun, volunteerism, and local involvement, residents of Dawson City express their resentment against the intrusion of bureaucracy in the form of Parks Canada.

Like the adults, many of the children of Dawson City prefer the deteriorating buildings. This was evident in one account of "Discovery Day," the community's celebration of the anniversary of the discovery of gold. The parade and other events counterbalance the more tourist-focused Canada Day activities with ones aimed at the local audience. People still talk about how a few years ago, in an act which mocked, yet celebrated, the town's obsession with the Gold Rush era buildings, a group of children dressed up as one of the more popular buildings, Lowe's Mortuary. It cannot be wholly coincidental that they chose this particular structure, one of the few originals, now slanted and shifting, left to show the long term effects of building upon permafrost. One resident told me:

All the kids go on the parade, decorate their bikes. There was one group, the three of them went as Lowe's Mortuary. They did a coffin on the back of a bike. They had the undertaker and the nurse (JB 97-14).

As anthropologist Carole Farber has pointed out, “cultural performances provide ideal entrees into a community’s symbolic, economic, social and political life, especially because they are organised and presented to members of the community by members of the community” (1983: 33). Dawson City residents both young and old take the parade as an opportunity to display themselves to themselves and others. The children, like many of the adult residents, have chosen one of the more slanted buildings as their favourite. Local residents are most compelled by — and most fond of — those buildings which show the affects of the environment. These people, like the buildings but unlike the seasonal workers who move to Dawson City only to work in the tourist trade, stay all year and endure the harsh Northern winter.

However, the tourist experience in great part involves admiring the buildings. Jarvenpa describes the tourism of Dawson City as “passive,” characterised by the following: “For many, this involves strolling the boardwalks of Dawson City, gazing at deteriorated and refurbished buildings and attempting to capture some nostalgic feeling, however fleeting, of the Klondike experience at the turn of the century” (1994: 30).

The residents of Dawson City hold varying opinions on the benefits of both tourism and government involvement. Within the historic site, there is also a living community with local concerns, such as running a summer camp for native children, choosing the location for a new recreation centre, and protecting the town from an overflowing river bank. Native groups such as the Han are working to rejuvenate their culture after the disruption that came with the Gold Rush stampeders, causing them to relocate to the new community of Moosehide. Discussions continue about what constitute the true industries of Dawson City, and what constitute its soul:

You’re still treading a fine line between what is the tourist attraction here. And when the mining especially becomes less real and more contrived in terms of recreating mining, it’ll be an interesting challenge — dilemma — for the tourism aspect of the economy. I think there will be an on-going debate on what the soul of Dawson is and how far you can go in the direction of promoting tourism without losing that essence (JB 97-06).

The buildings assembled are among the few tangible artifacts which confirm the Gold Rush era, an event that lasted only a few years until prospectors moved on to the next find at Nome, Alaska. The creation of a series of “National Historic Sites” by Canadian politicians and federal bureaucrats can be seen as an action by those in power to create a shared,

national sense of history — a reinforcement of this “imagined community” (Anderson 1993: 6) called Canada. The result becomes a “cultural artifact” (Anderson 1993: 4) and as such, can be examined in terms of national and local meaning as well as through the physical forms that comprise and construct it. Curiously, an event which is American in character and players, such as the Gold Rush stampede, has been claimed as Canadian, perhaps as a way of guaranteeing a continued federal presence in this part of the North.

The restoration in Dawson City also raises questions about museum and preservation practices that remove an artifact from its original context and overlay it with new, sometimes invented, meanings. In this case, abandoned buildings that were playgrounds to a previous generation’s children, and sometimes also workplaces for adults, become museum pieces, dusted off, catalogued, and unused (see also Turgeon 1997). In maintaining the buildings as museum pieces, have these buildings been denied a natural — as the shifting permafrost would ensure — death?

While comparing white museum practices to those of many Native people, Grimes comments:

I am not claiming that Native people never preserve sacred objects, only that when they do, the objects are more like beings and less like museum things. Such “object-things” are either returned to the elements or kept alive with use. So when we Whites control humidity, install glass to filter the sun’s rays because they fade colours, and encase objects in glass we, in effect, deny both life and death to a sacred item (1990: 83).

Surely buildings that are used as playgrounds contain more complex meanings and significances than those that have been “dusted off” and catalogued. As another resident said:

Some of my friends — my peer group — who were born and brought up in Dawson — I love to sit down and have a drink and talk about their growing up here. It’s a human trait to look back with nostalgia on something lost — but they talk about the buildings that were boarded up — that Parks Canada didn’t do anything with, the K.V.A. didn’t do anything with. They were just boarded up. They were just there. There was no tourism to speak of. No one was investing in those buildings. They were just buildings that had been abandoned. This was in the mid ’50s — even early ’60s. That was their playground. They would climb in and out of those buildings. Find pieces of paper lying around. Turn of the century stuff. For them it was normal. It would now be such a special event. Because everything has been catalogued, itemized and identified and specified. Now, the serendipity

would be lost. When I talk to them about how they grew up, they think of this — as opposed to that — as Disney Land. I think they see it as something lost that can never be recovered (JB 97-11).

Laurier Turgeon comments on this decontextualisation of an artifact: “Now purified, the object is marked with the identification code and with an inventory number, after which these references are transcribed into the collection catalog; the object is thus granted official status as an artifact” (1997: 20), ensuring the loss of serendipity. The case of Dawson City raises many similar questions, about the conflicts — and potential reconciliation of — community interests and tourism.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1993. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Burns, Jane. Collection of taped interviews with residents of Dawson City, Yukon. Numbered JB 97-01 through JB 97-19, held at the Dawson City Museum.
- Cruikshank, Julie. 1998. *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.
- Farber, Carole. 1983. High, Healthy and Happy: Ontario Mythology on Parade. In *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performances*, ed. Frank Manning. London: Congress of Social and Humanistic Studies, University of Western Ontario.
- Grimes, Ronald. 1990. *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in its Practice, Essays in its Theory*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Jarvenpa, Robert. 1994. Commoditization Versus Cultural Integration: Tourism and Image Building in the Klondike, *Arctic Anthropology*, 31: 27-46.
- Stuart, Richard (Environment Canada). 1987. Recycling Used Boom Towns: Dawson and Tourism. Paper presented to the Symposium on Boom and Bust Cycles in Communities of the Canadian and American West.
- Taylor, CS. 1990. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada's National Historic Parks and Sites*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Turgeon, Laurier. 1997. The Tale of the Kettle: Odyssey of an Intercultural Object. *Ethnohistory*, 44: 1-29.
- Tye, Diane. 1994. Multiple Meanings Called Cavendish: The Interaction of Tourism with Traditional Culture. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 29: 122-134.