

Yukon's Black history: Remembering the intrepid, courageous Lucille Hunter



Lucille Hunter at home in Whitehorse in 1960. Hunter came to Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush with her husband and stayed in the territory for the rest of her life. (Yukon Archives, Richard Harrington fonds)

She arrived in Yukon alongside thousands of others, all making their way to the Klondike in 1898 in search of gold.

But Lucille Hunter's story is anything but typical.

For one thing, she was a Black woman. Look at any historic photos from Dawson City during the Gold Rush and you'll see a sea of whiskered white faces.

"Lucille was an incredibly intrepid and courageous woman," said Charlotte Hrenchuk of the Yukon Hidden Histories Society. Her organization aims to bring more attention to under-appreciated characters and stories from Yukon's past.

"She's someone I wish I had known."

Hunter didn't just arrive in the Klondike for a season and then disappear again on the next southbound riverboat — she stayed in Yukon for the rest of her life. By the time she died in 1972 at the age of 93, she was a well-known and well-respected character in Whitehorse, with plenty of yarns to spin.

"Her story isn't one of dance hall girls, or people who just made their killing and left the Yukon," Hrenchuk said.

"She lived here for the rest of her life and she worked very, very hard. She and her husband had mining claims. She raised their daughter on the creeks. She was just a really interesting woman, by all accounts."



'Souvenir of Happy Days at Scroggies Roadhouse' — Lucille Hunter with some friends in 1918. (HHSY/Carol Young Family Collection)

Hunter was young and pregnant when she and her husband Charles first travelled from the U.S. up to Yukon. They didn't travel over the famous Chilkoot Pass though — they had chosen to go via the infamously grueling Stikine Route through northern B.C. to Teslin Lake because they believed at the time it would be cheaper and easier.

"Which, of course, it was not," Hrenchuk said.

Leaving the segregated U.S.

It's not clear why the Hunters decided to head for the Klondike. Hrenchuk figures they were young and may have just been looking for adventure. But she also wonders if part

of the lure of the North was its promise of a less racially-segregated society than the Hunters knew in the U.S.

The couple arrived at Teslin Lake in late 1897, where Lucille gave birth to her daughter. The young family then headed North to the Klondike by dog team, in mid-winter.

That's where they stayed for the next 40 years or so. When Charles died in the late 1930s, Lucille reportedly carried on working their claims for a few more years — walking many miles to reach them — before finally settling in Whitehorse and opening a laundry business downtown.

Hrenchuk says Lucille Hunter was a "fiercely independent" woman, and is still remembered fondly by people old enough to have known her.



Lucille Hunter in her 80s at the Whitehorse shipyards, in 1964. (Roloff Beny/Library and Archives Canada)

"She's buried up in the Yukon Grey Mountain Cemetery, in the Yukon Order of Pioneers [section], because she was granted honorary membership — the first woman ever — for her perseverance as a miner," Hrenchuk said.

"So she contributed greatly to the fabric of the Yukon, and to Yukon society."

Hrenchuk says it's important to recognize people such as

Hunter, who maybe haven't been as celebrated as other historic figures, and to shine a light on the diversity in Yukon's past.

"I think that representation is really important for newcomers and for children, to see themselves as part of Yukon history, not as just some strange new transplant, but that there is a history of Black people, and Asian people, here in the Yukon," she said.

"[Lucille Hunter] had so many strikes against her, really, to begin with — to actually make that journey and to thrive as a Black woman in the territory, I think was really amazing," Hrenchuk said.