

# Telling the Yukon's untold stories

The Hidden Histories Society shines light on the overlooked people and events that contributed to building the Yukon

When Paul Gowdie first learned about the hundreds of Black soldiers who worked on constructing the Alaska Highway in the 1940s, he was surprised.

"I'm in a mostly white town, in a mostly white territory, and I attend this presentation and find out that 30 percent of the soldiers who built the highway were Black," he says. "I thought: OK, I am not the first—there were others before me and that was encouraging."

He felt connected to the place he chose to call home, and that felt good. But it also made him wonder why he hadn't heard about that part of the Yukon's history before.

Gowdie wanted to find out more and that brought him to the Yukon's Hidden Histories group in 2009.

Hidden Histories had formed almost a decade earlier in 2000 to fill a gap—to find and share the untold stories of Black history in the Yukon.

Charlotte Hrenchuk is one of the group's founding members. She has three adopted children from Sierra Leone, and she started Hidden Histories when she saw what they were learning in school and knew they didn't see themselves reflected in the history being taught at the time.

"I wanted them to be proud and I wanted them to have figures they could look up to," she says. "We hear the horrible stories about slavery, but we don't hear enough about all the amazing contributions that Black people have made to society."

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Charlotte Hrenchuk



Paul Gowdie and Charlotte Hrenchuk of the Hidden Histories Society.

Photo by Leighann Chalykoff

So, Hrenchuk and the group set out to help create that tapestry themselves, each story a thread. And, once they started following those threads, they became wrapped up in the work.

"The more we did, the more we wanted to do," says Hrenchuk.

With new members joining, the group broadened its

focus to include the untold stories of Asian people in the Yukon. They brought attention to stories that colonial accounts of history tend to skip over: people doing everyday things, living good lives and enduring.

"When you say the word 'history' people kind of glaze over, but the personal stories touch peoples'

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hearts,” says Hrenchuk. “These stories are part of the mainstream history; they’ve just been overlooked, but they should be integrated and available.”

To bring those stories forward, the group used the resources they had available and sometimes simple grassroots tactics.

“At the beginning, we would go into the library and pull books off the shelves and ask the librarians to display them for Black and Asian history months,” says Hrenchuk. “After a while, the librarians started doing it themselves, and that’s when we feel like our work is bearing fruit—when someone else picks up the story and starts telling it.”

Since they began this work the volunteer group has been supported by a secret weapon: archival researcher Peggy D’Orsay.

“She has the most brilliant ideas and she’s on all the time; always sending us the most obscure and interesting things,” says Hrenchuk.

Often, the hunt for those lost stories begins with a single photograph. Then, the group works together to dig deeper and find more connections through documents, such as birth records and newspaper articles. They bring these pieces together to form a picture of the person’s life.

Over the years the group has become a repository for those overlooked stories.

“There were many marginalized ethno-cultural individuals who tried to make a go of it as well that you just don’t hear about because they don’t fit the key points in the historical narrative,” says Gowdie. “They didn’t strike it rich or they weren’t outrageous enough.”

Lucille Hunter is a prime example. Pregnant at just 19 years old, Hunter travelled the Stikine Route to the Klondike in 1897. Over her long life in the Yukon, she owned gold and silver claims in Dawson and Mayo, and she ran her own laundry business in Whitehorse.

The Hunter family’s story, and many others like it, had been stored in the archives until it was uncovered by the Hidden Histories group. Ensuring stories like that are remembered is important to Hrenchuk and Gowdie. It’s what makes them continue the volunteer work.

“As I get older, I am more curious about my cultural and racial identity,” says Gowdie. “I am fully into it now that I have a daughter. I want her to have better experiences than I did.”

Find out more at [hhsy.org](http://hhsy.org). •



LEFT

Roughly one-third of the 11,000 U.S. soldiers who worked on the construction of the Alaska Highway were Black. Most were from the southern United States.

Yukon Archives, R.G. Gabriel fonds 2005/10 #18

BELOW

Lucille Hunter pictured at her home in Whitehorse in 1960.

Yukon Archives, Richard Harrington fonds, 79/29 #277

