

# **THE GOLD RUSH: HIKING HISTORICAL TRAILS**

Charles Hou, British Columbia

## **INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA**

Grades 10 to 12 History, Geography, Language Arts, Mathematics, Environment, Phys. Ed

## **CONCEPTS**

- Learning about the Gold Rush; appreciating the perseverance and strength of these mining entrepreneurs; engagement of all the students' senses.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

As a teacher with a passion for teaching Canadian history, I like to share my interest in history with my students and help them connect with events which have shaped the city, province and country in which they live. If I taught in the Maritimes I might take my students on a field trip to Louisbourg; in Quebec, they would explore places associated with the battle of 1759; in Ontario, they would visit the sites of the Rebellion of 1837; and in the prairies, they would explore sites associated with Louis Riel's 1869-70 and 1885 confrontations with Ottawa.

In British Columbia, the Gold Rush of 1858-65 provides a natural focus for a field trip. Barkerville, the centre of the gold rush and a provincial historic site, is a little too remote and the weather unsuitable at the time of year I would most like to take my students.

Luckily, an earlier route to the gold fields—the Harrison-Lillooet trail—provides the ideal area for exploration. Therefore, once a year, for the past twenty years, I have led groups of forty to eighty grade ten students on a six-day backpacking trip along a portion of this route.

The Harrison-Lillooet trail has one major advantage: its relative remoteness has largely protected it from urban development. Although logging and a BC Hydro access road have had an effect, much of the route is almost unchanged from the Gold Rush days when stagecoaches travelled back and forth between the north end of Harrison Lake, and the south end of Lillooet Lake.

Major personalities in BC's history travelled through the area—men such as A.C. Anderson, Governor James Douglas, Judge Matthew Baillie Begbie, Cariboo Cameron and Billy Barker. It is literally possible to follow in their footsteps. The road was constructed by the Royal Engineers and surveyed by their leader, Colonel Richard Clement Moody, another important figure in BC's history. Physical remains still exist of the communities that sprang up at each end of the trail and along its length. One can see the site of Begbie's first trial, and a hill Moody climbed to survey the trail.

## **INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES**

While some of the students have had considerable outdoor experience, others have never been hiking before. Therefore, the first weekend in May we go on a local day hike with loaded packs, and on the second weekend we go on an overnight hike in the Fraser River Canyon.

Each group of ten students has a teacher and another adult leader (often a former student) in charge. Students are responsible for their food and personal equipment, and group equipment is divided among the various members. Some items such as tents and packs are available on loan from the school district if needed. By the end of the second hike the students realize just how heavy a loaded pack can be, and how important it is to be prepared for wet weather.

## **THE FIELD TRIP**

The Harrison Hike itself takes place the last week of May. A chartered bus takes students to Port Douglas at the north end of Harrison Lake. From there they hike almost 50 km to the sound end of Lillooet Lake. As there is a road paralleling the trail we are able to have a parent or another adult drive a van along the route and join us each evening.

In order for a field trip to be truly successful it must involve all five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—as well as provide intellectual and emotional stimulation. The Harrison Hike meets this criterion. In the course of the six days the students experience, to some extent at least, what the gold miners experienced in 1858-65 on the way to the gold fields. The sights, sounds and smells of the beautiful Lillooet River and the surrounding forest are unforgettable. For six days the students do their own cooking over open fires and learn to do without the usual modern conveniences. They build their own latrines and hang their food at night so that it will not be eaten by animals. Carrying packs weighing from 12 to 25 kilograms provides a physical component and the new (to some) experience of blisters, sore muscles and near-exhaustion.

The setting also lends itself to the kind of educational activities that are better done out of doors. Over the years teachers and other adult leaders have taught lessons on Gold Rush literature, orienteering, gold panning and geology, applied mathematics (finding the height of trees or the distances across lakes, or scaling trees), astronomy, art using charcoal from the fire pits, rock balancing, drama, shelter building, outdoor cooking in a student-constructed oven, outdoor aerobics, exploring, trail construction, fishing, edible plants, plant identification, wilderness Olympics and crafts and folk singing. Recently I invited a bagpiper and a fiddler to further enrich the musical experience. We have also re-enacted some of Matthew Baillie Begbie's trials on location. We usually take a day off from hiking to complete these activities. The students also keep diaries recording their experiences.

Besides its historic interest and natural beauty, the Harrison-Lillooet area has some unique features. St. Agnes Well hot springs, used by the native people of the area for

thousands of years, were described by the gold miners as “the only free pleasure in British Columbia.” Reached halfway through the trip, the springs allow the students a hot bath just when they need it most.

Another highlight is a visit to Skookumchuck, a small native village of 20 to 50 people that once housed 350. It has the most beautiful native church in the entire province—an unexpected treat after hiking 20 miles through the wilderness. The students also have an opportunity to meet native people from the area who speak about local history, tell Lil'wat traditional stories and drum and sing traditional songs.

One unplanned educational experience came as a result of the field trip. When logging and mining activity threatened the trail, students became involved in a campaign to save it for future generations. They circulated petitions, wrote letters, sold calendars to publicize the trail, and spoke to local historical societies, and in doing so gained first-hand experience in the democratic process. After a year and a half of student lobbying, the government minister responsible for heritage sites came to the school to announce that the Harrison-Lillooet Gold Rush Trail was to be made into the third heritage trail in the province (the others are the Alexander Mackenzie trail and a Hudson's Bay Company trail in Manning Park). The government is now involved in taking steps to preserve and develop the trail.

Students who are bombarded with so many intense experiences in such a short time will likely remember the hike for the rest of their lives. They make new friends and emerge from the six days with a set of shared memories that will last a lot longer than most classroom experiences. The history of Canada, for these students, will have a lot more meaning, and the positive exposure to the past carries over into the classroom.

## **CONCLUDING ACTIVITIES**

To complete the experience, we invite the students and their families and friends to come to a slide/diary reading night about two weeks after the hike. Leaders give fun awards to the students in their groups and we use a slide show and diary readings to re-live the hike and bring closure to a rich educational experience.

I would like to let the students have the last word:

“The trails were beautiful and I actually ‘felt’ history for the first time. Walking along I tried to imagine what the original explorers must have felt as they came through this virgin forest.” (TB)

“I am saddened because this week has gone so fast. It always seems when you enjoy something so much, time flies. I have gone from unknowing to caring and loving each person. The rewards are endless. Listening to voices sing in joy together, doing things which we will probably never do again and sharing memories of travels and untold beauty.” (SF)

“During this trip I learned a lot of things... I chopped my first tree and crossed a narrow bridge, which I later helped rebuild... Also, I got to know and really enjoy the wilderness. When it was really hot, you could smell the pine scent, sweet and heavy... We were given and taught independence, and confidence. So, at the end of it all, you’re able to say: I’m proud of myself.” (LM)

### **About the Educator**

Charles Hou taught at Burnaby South Secondary School in British Columbia. One of the highlights of his career is the Begbie contest, a bilingual provincial Canadian history quiz for grade 11 students. Charles has published extensively in Social Studies journals and has co-authored 2 Canadian history books. He is also on the executive of the British Columbia Social Studies Teachers’ Association. In his leisure time, Charles takes his students on overnight hikes on historic trails. He has won numerous awards for history projects and student produced films.