



Seattle's Golden Dreams: Contemporary Perceptions of the Northern Gold Rushes

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About the Author

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Abstract

The discovery of gold in Alaska in 1897 brought about major changes in Seattle as this sleepy logging town awoke from a period of depression and received a revitalizing jolt as it rapidly developed into an important port for trade with the Alaskan frontier. This sudden growth was celebrated throughout the gold rush years and even up until the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909, but by this time, Seattle's greatness was already fading. In spite of a hopeful and expectant population that foresaw Seattle as the new New York of the West, Seattle relapsed into its former struggles. Although numerous critics predicted that Seattle's "boom" was solely a consequence of the gold rush, and incapable of sustaining the city's growth and prosperity, Seattleites maintained not only a sense of hope, but of extreme optimism with respect to their city's future. This paper will examine the perceived benefits of the northern gold rushes as reflected in contemporary columns in the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*, arguing that, in the eyes of its inhabitants, Seattle was not only fast becoming a premier port city in the world, but her economic growth spurred on by the gold rushes was unmatched, so as to rival and outshine the competing ports of San Francisco and Portland. Additionally, the city's future bore every sign of an enduring continuation of these conditions. This paper will then proceed ten years into the future to consider the changes in these perceptions, showing that while much had changed, Seattle maintained the same expectant and hopeful view for the future.



When news of the discovery of gold in Alaska reached the continental United States in July 1897, the impact was sudden. The *Post-Intelligencer* reported in a column later that month that “from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific coast and from Florida to British Columbia the whole country has been aroused by the fabulous finds in the Northern Eldorado.” Further, this column argued that “compared with the excitement all over the country today, growing out of the marvelous discoveries of virgin gold below the gravel beds of the icy Eldorado and Bonanza, the California affair seems insignificant, local and even insular.”¹ The California gold rush of 1849 bore no comparison with the wealth and popularity of the Alaskan discoveries lasting from 1897 until 1900. With improved means of communication spanning the globe, the whole world was watching developments in Alaska as numerous miners rushed to claim the golden opportunity.

For the western coast of the United States, the hope of growth and prosperity loomed on the horizon as the portal to this land of gold. As the *Post-Intelligencer* related on 29 July 1897, “no ten days in the history of this city [Seattle], or, indeed, of the whole Pacific Northwest, have been filled with more important events than has the period intervening between this morning and the arrival of the Portland Saturday a week ago.” Major changes were transforming Seattle with the arrival of ships, starting with the *S. S. Portland*, bearing

¹ “Clondyke Riches Stirs a Nation,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 29, 1897.

successful miners from the northern gold rushes, and the citizens of this city saw opportunity and a new future for their home.² The gold rush, they predicted, would—and even then, was—transforming their world. This paper will examine these perceived benefits of the northern gold rushes as reflected in contemporary columns in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, arguing that, in the eyes of Seattleites, Seattle was not only fast becoming a premier port city in the world, but her economic growth spurred on by the gold rushes was unmatched. Additionally, the city’s future bore every sign of an enduring continuation of these conditions. After analyzing these impressions from the 1897-1900 gold rushes, this paper will proceed ten years into the future to consider the changes in these perceptions, showing that while much had changed, Seattle maintained the same expectant and hopeful view for the future.

With the aid of the gold rushes, Seattleites considered their city to be rapidly becoming a major international port. A July 1898 column expressed this sentiment, noting, “Seattle is a commercial city. It is to the Pacific Northwest what New York is to the East, and promises some day to be as far ahead of other Pacific cities as New York is greater than her sister Atlantic cities.”³ The city’s citizens had already witnessed spectacular growth as miners

² Kathryn Morse, *The Nature of Gold: an environmental history of the Klondike gold rush* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003): 185.

³ “Seattle is the Gateway,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 21, 1898.



raced into Pacific ports en route to the profit-promising northern lands. Seattle had become a bustling metropolis and Seattleites had interpreted sudden escalation of economic activity as a harbinger of their future as the upcoming New York of the West.

Seattle was already endowed with a “wonderful harbor’ and ‘railroads,”⁴ and with the added benefits of the gold rush, her rise to prominence was nearly completed.⁵ With respect to Alaska, Seattle was seen as its natural commercial relation. Even before the gold rushes, “Seattle had already built up a trade with Alaska,”⁶ a claim confirmed by Morse in his book *The Nature of Gold*, in which he described the promise of the growing relationship beginning in 1891.⁷ As early as 1897, however, Seattleites saw their city as the only business partner with Alaska during the gold rush, as one headline declared: “Alaskan trade absolutely controlled by this city.”⁸ The article continued by alleging that “if there ever was competition between Seattle and other cities on the Pacific coast relative to Alaskan business, it has entirely disappeared.”⁹

These claims, however, remain controversial, as a passage in the explorer Spurr’s 1900 account of his travels throughout Alaska suggests the superiority of San Francisco in the region. Spurr described an Indian chief’s intentions that “when he got dust enough he was going to ‘San Francisco,’ that being to him a

general name for the world of the white men.”¹⁰ This Indian chief’s only linguistic link with the outside world was not the Puget Sound port that the newspapers boast, but her California competition. Sale, in his book *Seattle, Past to Present*, also indicated that Seattle lost much of her business with miners since the city lacked the necessary assay office to exchange the incoming gold with US currency. Rather, the nearest office was down in San Francisco; thus, many miners bypassed the Washington port on their race to cash in their precious acquisitions.¹¹ Nevertheless, the presumptions made by the newspapers reveal the spirit of Seattleites who felt that their city was dominating business with Alaska.

Seattleites also believed that this dominance over the commerce of the northern gold rushes was on account of both Alaska’s proximity and the safer, smoother route that ships leaving Seattle followed. The *Post-Intelligencer* reported,

Vessels from Portland and San Francisco bound for Alaska must not only travel a much greater distance, but must traverse the open ocean. Communication between Seattle and Sitka and Juneau, on the other hand, is nearly all the way through a series of inland passages, perfectly sheltered, and as free from storms and dangers as

⁴ “Seattle is the Gateway.”

⁵ Morse, 181.

⁶ “Seattle is the Gateway.”

⁷ Morse, 179.

⁸ “Clondyke Riches Stirs a Nation.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Josiah Edward Spurr, *Through the Yukon gold diggings; a narrative of personal travel* (Boston, Eastern Publishing Co, 1900): 216.

¹¹ Sale, 186.



Puget sound itself, of which they are but a continuation.¹²

Seattle was perceived as the more natural port to engage in mercantile relations with Alaska.

As the booming city of Seattle continued to grow and bask in the prosperity brought by the gold rush, her citizens began to consider her as more than the gateway to the northern climes. She was the New York of the Pacific, and the city's reach naturally extended to all of the ports along the Pacific Rim, stretching even as far as India. The *Post-Intelligencer* alleged that, "in Tokio, Yokohama, Kobe and Nagasaki; in Shanghai and Hongkong. In Vladivostok and in Calcutta, Seattle, from being an unknown town, became a familiar word in shipping circles and commission houses."¹³ Seattleites perceived that their city's fame and trade extended across the oceans.

One particularly appealing event that fed this extreme pride in participating in international commerce was the arrival of Japanese trading vessels to Puget Sound. The company for which these ships sailed established Seattle as a center for trade with the United States. The *Post-Intelligencer* told of the "establishment of a great line of ocean steamers from the Orient, making Seattle its American terminus and bringing it into immediate connection with one of the greatest shipping companies of the world."¹⁴ Six months later it

continued, "the selection of Seattle as the Eastern terminus of the great Japanese steamship [company]...[had] supplied the only connection required to complete [Seattle's] commercial supremacy."¹⁵ The Japanese frigate *Miike Maru* had arrived in Seattle in 1896 and mercantile relations were quickly established.¹⁶

While the foundation of a commercial relationship with Japan suggests Seattle's economic progress, it is difficult to substantiate similar claims concerning the rest of the Pacific, especially the rather frivolous assumptions concerning how "[Seattle's] opening up of a trading line with Central America afforded a new market and a promising one" with "limitless opportunities to Seattle."¹⁷ Even at its height as a commercial port at the end of the gold rush, Seattle remained second to San Francisco in amount of commerce, and San Francisco's proximity to the Latin American ports implicate superior relations than Seattle could ever achieve.¹⁸ Sale did, however, point out that by 1900 Seattle was at least participating in international commerce, exporting "wheat, flour, and lumber to the United Kingdom, Peru, Chile, Hawaii, Tahiti, and Japan."¹⁹

Seattle was not alone in pursuing trade across the Pacific, and even with respect to the acquisition of fiscal benefits as the central hub to Alaska, Seattle had strong competition. Portland and San Francisco competed for this

¹² "Seattle is the Gateway."

¹³ "Industrial, Municipal, Social and Economic Growth," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 24, 1898.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "Seattle is the Gateway."

¹⁶ Sale, 185.

¹⁷ "Industrial, Municipal, Social and Economic Growth."

¹⁸ Morse, 173.

¹⁹ Sale, 172.



position, but already in an article from July 1898, Seattle had deemed herself superior, for “it has wrested the larger share of the Alaska trade from San Francisco and Portland.”²⁰ While Morse has shown this claim to be untrue,²¹ its suggestion shows the city’s insatiable thirst, with the stimulus of the gold rushes, to be realized as the premier port city of the Pacific.

The rise of Seattle as a center of trade was not the only perceived benefit of the gold rushes. Though closely associated with its commercial success, citizens perceived that their city was undergoing a period of spectacular growth—defined both economically and in terms of population—that was producing results not only in Seattle, but also across the entire state of Washington. “What will be the effect of the Klondike excitement on the state of Washington?” one *Post-Intelligencer* column asks. “There can be but one answer so far as the state of Washington is concerned. The effect will be beneficial.”²² The article continued by affirming that “it is safe to say that there is hardly a corner of the state which has not felt already in some way the benefits created by the travel to Alaska and the Yukon gold fields.”²³ These claims were supported by evidence in increased prices of products throughout the state of Washington, even extending to distant Yakima and Spokane. As the publishers of the *Yakima Herald*, for instance, related, “we can say without hesitation that prices have increased

during the past few months and that the increase is directly traceable to the Klondike trade.”²⁴ This rise in the prices of various commodities resulted from an amplified demand within Seattle as the city experienced the manifold advantages of the gold rush. In summary, the column concluded, “[the Klondike excitement] has induced increased consumption of coal for steamers, of lumber for boats, buildings and mining purposes, of dairy products, wheat, oats, hay and rice stock, of garden products, evaporated potatoes, onions, carrots and other vegetables; of fruit products in prunes, apples and other evaporated fruits.”²⁵ The arrival of miners in Seattle on their way to exploit the gold of the north created demand for supplies for their journey, and this demand increased the prices and profits of Seattle’s suppliers throughout the state of Washington.

Besides economical improvements, Seattleites boasted a significantly augmented population with settlers arriving from the East in droves enticed by the gold rush. While many returned back East, many stayed in Alaska or the Pacific port cities. A *Post-Intelligencer* article written toward the conclusion of the gold rushes answered critics by arguing that “we find that 1900 is out of all comparison the banner year for building in Seattle’s history.”²⁶ Critics had apparently objected to Seattleite claims that their city was growing—a perception which appears to be common throughout the Pacific Northwest region, otherwise the article would

²⁰ “Seattle is the Gateway.”

²¹ Morse, 173.

²² “Effect of Gold Discovery,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 24, 1898.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Seattle’s Solid Growth,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 3, 1900.



not need to address a claim that the population of Seattle neither accepted nor believed in. Further, the thriving, bustling port city after the depression years of the 1890s must have made it apparent that Seattle was growing.

To enforce his argument, the *Post-Intelligencer* writer continued: "Every house is rented before it is finished; visitors invade the premises wherever work is going on and inquire the name of the owner that they may get first chance; and business quarters are under contract to tenants before the first stone is laid in their foundations."²⁷ The resulting picture of a city with eager settlers seeking both permanent accommodations and a stable position not only lends credence to a city bustling with an larger urban crowd, but one also having been on the very verge of potential success, only requiring the spark of the gold rushes to start a burning bonfire on the Northwest coast. The *Post-Intelligencer* emphasized that the success of Seattle during the gold rush years was a result of "influences already at work brought into sharper energy by Klondike."²⁸ Regardless of the actual underlying motivations for Seattle's booming growth, this advancement was appreciated as the product of the northern gold rushes.

Seattle was not only perceived as rapidly becoming a premier port city in the world undergoing unmatched economic growth, but she was additionally understood as holding a future that bore every sign of an enduring continuation of these prosperous years. An 1898 Seattle headline prophesied, "beneficial results

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Industrial, Municipal, Social and Economic Growth."

have already been general and far-reaching—destiny's hand points here to the scene of Man's Greatest Activity."²⁹ Seattleites foresaw just such an "enduring prosperity"³⁰ as the developing Pacific New York, with influences stretching into every Pacific port, from Central America to China, and even penetrating the Indian Ocean.³¹

Skeptics, however, denied that Seattle would be able to maintain its growth after the waves of gold stopped empowering its economic status. The *Post-Intelligencer* noted, "envious rivals have spoken of the acknowledged prosperity of the city as a 'boom,' a temporary thing, child of the Alaskan movement."³² This apprehension, however, appears to have been prevalent in the minds of many Washingtonians; one newspaper writer observed concerning the prosperity spurred on by the gold rush: "how many years it will continue is uncertain."³³

In order to reassure themselves with respect to a prosperous Alaska-less economic state, Seattleites assumed that their success was a result of a growing economy, which, irrespective of the influence of the gold rushes, would have continued to expand. One *Post-Intelligencer* headline read, "various causes that have been helping to make Seattle Great and Prosperous," and the succeeding article related, "this change, though rapid, did not take place in a day or week. It was the work of causes that had long been exercising a formative influence

²⁹ "Effect of Gold Discovery."

³⁰ "Industrial, Municipal, Social and Economic Growth."

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Seattle's Solid Growth."

³³ "Effect of Gold Discovery."



on the city's destiny, and which were simply called into sudden and more active energy by the rich gold discoveries in the valley of the Yukon."³⁴ Even as the gold rushes were reaching their conclusion, the newspapers continued to insist that Seattle was more than a conduit of the gold rush, "even were the Alaska trade to decrease—although the fact is that it is but in its infancy—the development of Seattle acknowledges it only as one incident in a great career one drop in the swelling tide of prosperity that is pouring in upon us."³⁵ While the Alaska trade with respect to gold had already grown rather aged and elderly, the perception remained strong that Seattle would continue both as the port city of the world and as a stable economic powerhouse.

Within ten years of miners first leaving the coastal ports of the United States on their toilsome journey toward the Yukon in their quest for gold, Seattle decided to host a world's fair to commemorate the event. In the eyes of Seattleites, the expected benefits of this gold rush had been realized—a perception quite apparent in the *Official Guide* to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. Through this book and other mediums, Seattle grasped for the attention of the world showing everyone that she was a civilized, modern city, preparing to benefit as the center of Pacific trading. There were no doubts that Seattle would soon become one of the world's premier cities.



In glancing at the front cover of the *Official Guide*, these three aspects are quite visible. Below the title, the official logo for the AYPE glimmers with internationality and, in the eyes of Seattleites, the story of their city's growth. The logo pictures the historical development of a newly settled region into a booming, modern city, with all the accouterments of New York or London.

This logo pictures the convergence of West, East, and North upon the city of Seattle in its development and growth. Three women enter a central area, Seattle, all with different origins yet all bearing with them symbols of Seattle's prosperity. Arriving from the East, a woman in western dress carries a train bringing with it settlers and, later, miners. Her left hand gently points to a spot on the ground, declaring this to be the site where the three ladies may converge. Under the direction of James Hill, the Great

³⁴ "Industrial, Municipal, Social and Economic Growth."

³⁵ "Seattle's Solid Growth."



Northern railroad completed a line in 1893 that used Seattle as its western terminus. The train served as a connection between Seattle and the settled East, promising continued growth, industry, and prosperity to a now civilized city.

Sale argues that the “Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909 on the University of Washington campus proclaimed to the world that Seattle had arrived.”³⁶ The age of settlement had concluded, and Seattle was far more than a backwater logging town. Now, its residents claimed that their city was both civilized and modern. Not only could the city successfully host a world’s fair, but she also possessed her own hinterland of which the exposition itself boasted. Advertisements and suggested tours in the *Official Guide* boast the innumerable “cultured” activities a tourist could participate in: “frequent trips” by boat to Alaska with regular train services to the mountains and an intra-city trolley line.³⁷ Morse cites a speech given by Arnold George, the secretary of the Yukon Miners and Merchants Association, at the AYPE: “Today the journey to these gold fields is a continuous picnic.”³⁸ With these modern innovations, Seattle became the equivalent of a western New York, a northern San Francisco.

In the center, a woman clothed in white garments comes from the North. Behind her, the dazzling Northern Lights sparkle, revealing her arctic origin. In her open palms she bears a gift

³⁶ Sale, 94.

³⁷ *Official guide to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition: Seattle, Washington, June 1 to October 16, 1909* (Seattle: Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition Publishing Company, 1909): 25,37.

³⁸ Morse, 63.

of gold to Seattle. She represents the miners who, chasing the wealth of the northern gold rushes, used Seattle as a staging area for their expeditions, and, upon their return, as a location to exchange their acquisitions for cash.³⁹ This economic investment and, often, resultant population increase provided the capital and labor to spur Seattle to new heights of growth.

Seattle’s coming of age was not the only boast her citizens sought to make during the AYPE. In addition, they believed the northern gold rushes had established a new frontier of trade stretching across the waters of the Pacific. One of the exposition’s primary goals according to the *Official Guide* was to “establish closer commercial relations between the United States and all Pacific countries.”⁴⁰ The visionaries in Seattle saw the potential for transpacific commerce which now became available with the development of modern cities along the Pacific coast. This new potential existed solely on account of the growth that accompanied the northern gold rushes after 1896, and Seattleites understood this connection, as evidenced in the very nature of the exposition itself. The display marked the twelfth anniversary of the discovery of gold in Alaska.

The gold rushes, however, did not just open a new region of commerce. San Francisco had long tapped into the multitudinous benefits of Pacific trade. Instead, Seattleites claimed that a new center for this commerce had arisen in the wake of the gold rushes. The *Official Guide* proudly boasts that “this is the first world’s fair

³⁹ Sale, 186.

⁴⁰ *Official guide*, 25.



to exploit the commerce of the Pacific.”⁴¹ The only other world’s fair located in the Pacific Northwest was in Portland, but, unlike Seattle’s international venture, Portland focused on the national theme of Lewis and Clark’s centennial. Even the three in coastal San Francisco only had US-centered emphases. The Pacific regions had not been yet claimed, and the AYPE was Seattle’s opportunity to take mercantile possession of this vast expanse. The *Official Guide* further comments, “the Philippines, for the first time, are represented. Hawaii, too, occupies a building directly in front of the main building, and across the street is the Alaska building.” Seattle argues that these are her hinterlands: she has reached out across the Pacific and sits as the hub of transpacific trade.

The third woman in the AYPE logo, a Japanese lady coming out from the shade of a distinctively Asian-styled tree, presents Seattle with a ship. The ship is modern, capable of enduring the transpacific cruise from distant Japan and the east to the harbors of Puget Sound. Seattle visionaries imagine this new destination of commerce to be their territory and future. The city’s past had established her as an emerging power, and, now, with the economic and population boom coming from the northern gold rushes around the turn of the century, she was now able to pursue a bright new future as the center of trade along the Pacific Rim.

The *Official Guide* expresses no concerns or preoccupations with the city, but finding such a reference would prove unexpected and, in a piece of pro-Seattle propaganda, its presence would be

⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

counterintuitive. The *Official Guide* does, however, emphasize the importance of Seattle in Pacific commerce, observing that “every country bordering on the Pacific Ocean is a partner in the big enterprise.”⁴² While the exact meaning of “big enterprise” is never explicitly stated, it suggests a future replete with successful mercantile activity throughout the Pacific Rim. Most importantly, Seattle is seen as a participant in this bright new future.

Nancy Wilson Ross, writing in 1941 about her childhood experiences, recollected the invigorating air of expectation and anticipation of Seattle’s path to glory:

When in 1909 Seattle held its Alaska-Yukon-Pacific exposition it announced to the world awareness of the elements which should, by geographic placement, determine its development and give it its quality: Alaskans, Indians, Canadians, Eskimos, and Russians, the Pacific Islanders, and the Chinese and Japanese. These were Seattle’s neighbors and her business associates. They might also have been her teachers as well as her pupils. Seattle, near the century’s turn, gave promise of becoming a really unusual American city.⁴³

Seattle’s distinctiveness lay in its promise: its westward orientation. Ross associated the city’s neighbors as those not along its natural boundaries, but wherever trade could take the ships which departed from the ports of Seattle. These distant destinations were its “neighbors,”

⁴² Ibid., 25.

⁴³ Sale, 92.



whose destiny lay alongside one another—and a very prosperous destiny they foresaw. Sale writes, “there were those who in the flush of Seattle’s success dreamed that Seattle could become one of the great cities of the world, the Venice or London of the Pacific. That was not to be.”⁴⁴ As Sale foreshadows, these great expectations were only to be crushed within the next decade.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Seattle was hopeful in 1909.

The logo of the 1909 World’s Fair in Seattle captures the self-perception of how the city’s past had molded her into the present developed and civilized state she was quickly becoming and how Seattle’s future revealed a paradise of continued economic growth and promise. These same perceptions were present in the minds and aspirations of Seattleites during the years of the gold rush itself. At the turn of the century, the citizens of Seattle foresaw a vast trade network stretching across the Pacific, and they were particularly proud of their commercial relationship with the Japanese. This same mindset persisted a decade later as the city looked abroad and sought to incorporate the Japanese. In both periods, there was a consistent and pervasive dream that Seattle’s future would shine, with or without the presence of gold. These expectations had not yet been dispelled from Seattleites’ minds.

Several aspects had changed, however. In that decade after the termination of the gold rushes, Seattle had become more globally-minded and realistic. The *Official Guide* emphasized the AYPE’s goal of bringing

together all of the Pacific Rim to embark together on the “big enterprise.” Certainly, the city of Seattle was to play a leading role, but there were other partners that would compete alongside her. Another innovation was the concern with Seattle’s appearance. Newspapers during the gold rushes were not primarily concerned with Seattle’s modernization and civilized status. Rather, they considered a crowded, bustling city a sign of progress and future success. Seattleites were also more self-confident that their city would rise to the forefront of international trade, as opposed to the earlier gold rush years when there existed a lingering apprehension of the temporality of the economic and population growth.

In considering the periods from 1897-1900 and the AYPE in 1909, it is worth noting that these two increments of time, as well as the intervening decade, were high points, thrust in the middle of two depressions.⁴⁶ In spite of all these hopes and expectations, Seattle relapsed into its former struggles. Perhaps the critics arguing that Seattle was over-reliant on the gold rush for its economic stability were correct. Thus, when the gold rush concluded, Seattle’s greatness slowly faded. Nevertheless, there was over a decade of hope and vision of a prosperous Seattle.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 94.

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