

THE CHILKOOT TRAIL, ALASKA

by Carolyn Smith



Chilkoot Trail - Carolyn Smith

The 33 mile Chilkoot Trail connects Skagway, Alaska, to Bennett Lake, BC. In the winter of 1898, it marked the beginning of the stampede to the gold fields of the Yukon. Because of the still-remaining artifacts they discarded along the way, it is called the world's longest museum. For us, it was the culmination of our two-month hiking adventures in Alaska and Canada in the summer of 2019. Permits were required; last-minute, we got the 4 nights we requested. At the end of August, the first two nights were wet, but the sun came out when we needed it most. Not much earlier, we would have fried in 90°+F heat.

The first two days were a steady climb over roots, rocks, duck boards and mud through intensely green forest. Since everyone was going the same way and didn't start together, we felt like we had the forest to ourselves. Camps at Canyon City and Sheep Camp had toilets, enclosed spaces for cooking and eating, bear boxes, and camaraderie.



Chilkoot Trail - Roger Smith

The second night, the ranger gave us fair warning of what to expect as we tackled the Chilkoot Pass. It would be a long, steep 4 miles to the pass, then a hard 4 miles down to the next camp, so we should start early and not tarry. How right he was! I was already humbled by the 74% grade of the "Golden Staircase" at the top of the pass and further humbled by the fitness and experience of many of our fellow hikers. We are mid-70's and I had limited experience on rocks or with climbing of any kind.

As instructed, we were off by 7:30 am with our thoroughly drenched tent. The first 2.5 hours up "Long Hill" were a steeper version of the first two days. We were feeling quite fit and trotted right up to the "Scales," where reality set in for us as it had for the Stampeders. Here, their belongings were weighed; some superhuman abandoned a cast-iron stove. I looked up at the pass with more than a little trepidation. There was no trail - just pylons marking a path through steep rock. The Stampeders had stairs in snow, but at least for us the weather was perfect. The Stampeders had to carry a ton (literally) of stuff over this pass in multiple trips. We only had to climb it once.

It took me 5.5 hours to go the next mile. I say "me" because my husband, part mountain goat, could have tripped right up. Instead, he would scout a route, then come back to coach me, "Put your right hand up in that crack, now move your left foot up about 6 inches, etc." Given that I had never done anything like this before, I was exhilarated that my body was cooperating. My only fear was that I might lift my head into a rock I didn't see because of my hat brim. My husband, however, was not as sanguine as he looked down behind me, but he wisely kept his concerns to himself.

About halfway up the staircase, the ranger came down toward us. He said, "I see that you are moving steadily. You are obviously fine mentally and physically, but you need to spend the night in the emergency shelter at the pass. The other side is just as tough and you don't have enough daylight left. My response was immediate: "Thank you!"

We breathed a bit easier the rest of the way up. Two false summits were not as disheartening as they would have been, and before dark we were comfy in the shelter, made even more welcome by the howling wind outside. As a bonus, we didn't have to sleep in our very wet tent.

The next morning, we learned how correct the ranger had been about the other side. Descending a steep slope just below the shelter, I slipped on a loose rock and tumbled downhill head first. Miraculously, the only damage was a broken pole, so I was a three-legged cat for the rest of the trip.

Because we had stopped early the day before, we had a ten-mile day instead of the scheduled six. This was unfortunate because the open mountainous terrain, so different from the dense forest on the other side of the pass, was absolutely magnificent. The trail was quite rocky with only a few smooth patches which enticed us as we saw them in the distance. Happy Camp, the scheduled camp we had to skip, had tent platforms with expansive views, but other hikers told us later the wind had been brutal.



Ascending to Chilkoot Pass - Roger Smith

The trail seemed to go up and down every little knoll on its way to Lindeman Lake campground, which was pleasantly situated among trees. We were able to dry our tent before dark and slept well. The final day's hike was similar to that between Happy Camp and Lindeman Lake. Its cruel "highlight" was about a mile uphill in fine loose sand.

Our final destination, Bennett Lake, was not much more than the train station. Stampeders built boats here to float down to Dawson City. We rested for about an hour before boarding the narrow-gauge train for the ride back to Skagway. There was no food to be bought anywhere, but that day there had been a First Nations celebration. Faster hikers had eaten their fill, but we were too late. A sympathetic ranger scrounged up a most welcome salad for me.

There was a special car to isolate us smelly hikers from the more genteel passengers with their white tablecloths. The ride was reasonably scenic, but I couldn't help but feel a bit smug. I thought, "Poor guys. This is all they get to see," as I reminisced over the magnificence I had seen in the last five days.



Chilkoot Pass from Scales - Carolyn Smith