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Yukon

Ken Coates and Amanda Graham

The mystique – and attraction – of the Far North is overwhelmingly rural. Historical images of the region highlight Indigenous occupation of traditional territories, European explorers venturing out across vast uncharted lands, and prospectors searching for gold along the riverbanks. Contemporary images, while different in nature, have a similar hue: white water rafting along ferocious northern rivers, photographers venturing into wilderness tracks, homesteaders setting up their cabins along a bucolic subarctic lake. This is the Yukon of history and tourism brochures, the Far North of the imagination, and Canadian fantasies about the northern territories¹. The reality, while including glimpses of these imaginings, is much different.

The Yukon today is a predominantly urban society: 27,962 people (just over 76% of the total population) live in the territorial capital (June 2014)². Another 3,487 people live in the next two largest communities, Watson Lake and Dawson City. And it has long been thus. During the world-famous Klondike Gold Rush, most residents lived in and around Dawson City, the entrepôt for the gold fields (the population of the region peaked at around 30,000 before 1901, a number it has not exceeded since that time).



In those early years, the rest of the territory was home to around 4,000 Yukon First Nations people, who lived and travelled lightly on the land. The Yukon population collapsed after the Gold Rush, falling from over 27,000 at the time of the 1901 census to 4,157 in 1921 before surging again after 1942 when the construction of the Alaska Highway and related military projects brought tens of thousands of soldiers and construction workers to the region³. One effect of the WWII “invasion” by American soldiers and Canadian and American construction workers was the undermining of Dawson’s role as the territorial capital and the emergence of Whitehorse as the largest community in the Yukon.

The contours of present-day rural life in the Yukon are very simple: Whitehorse dominates the territory, economically, socially, and politically. A network of small communities and mine sites overlies the southern two-thirds of the territory, with centres located along the Alaska, Campbell, and Klondike highways. These are tiny communities, with all but two under 1,500 people, many with substantial First Nations populations, basic (and sub-basic) services (e.g., highways, health centres, elementary schools), and little in the way of non-highway/tourist-related business activity. The mining labour force tends to be quite mobile; few of the workers live permanently close to the mines, with most staying in Whitehorse or “Outside,” that is beyond the borders of the territory. Unlike the situation in the Northwest Territories, almost every community has a highway connection. Only the village of Old Crow (population 249 (June 2014)), located several hundreds of kilometers off the Dempster Highway, is without road access.

The number of “real” rural people, living off the electrical grid and emphasizing self-sufficient lifestyles, is surprisingly large and getting larger across the territory. In the Southern Lakes, along old mine roads, and in many of the Yukon’s seemingly unlimited number of scenic locales, individuals and families have taken up residence. While some have gone back to the “living off the land” lifestyle, most have modern, well-equipped homes, just located along the shores of Bennett, Marsh and Tagish lakes, in the shadows of the stunning St. Elias Mountains, or in the commuting belt around Whitehorse. These folks are a diverse group, some migrating from Whitehorse and southern cities for a quieter, less impactful life; visitors from Europe (especially Germany) who became entranced by the wilds of the Yukon; artists looking for Subarctic inspiration; and still others search for cultural and spiritual connections with First Nations people. It

appears, in fact, that there are more “real” rural people in the Yukon than Alaska, which celebrates and highlights the lifestyles of those living in the bush.

Yukon First Nations, whose ancestors roamed freely across the vast lands of the upper Yukon River basin, actually have comparable residential patterns. The largest group (4,130 (June 2014)) lives in Whitehorse, including many from the rural Yukon communities. Seven of the Yukon’s 17 communities have majority Aboriginal populations (Old Crow (88.35%), Pelly Crossing, Ross River, Burwash, Carmacks, Teslin and Carcross (59.96%) in descending order). There is a great deal of movement back and forth between the capital city and what are called the rural communities, and strong financial and social ties focused on Whitehorse. Many live part of the year in outlying fishing, hunting, and berry-picking camps; a smaller number lives permanently in remote corners of the Yukon.

The superficial impression one gets of rural life in the Yukon – of demographic collapse, migration to the territorial capital, and economic marginalization – is misleading. Although the percentage of the territorial population centred on Whitehorse has increased from a decadal average of 66% (1974 to 1983) to 75.4% (2005 to 2014) and, in 2014, the area outside Whitehorse had only 8,705 people (23.7% of the total population), the rural communities have eight of the nineteen (42%) seats in the territorial assembly. The Yukon Party’s long dominance of the Yukon government is rooted substantially in its success in the outlying constituencies. First Nations have changed the urban-rural balance even more. The signing of their land claim Umbrella Final Agreement in 1993 and the subsequent signing of accords with eleven of the fourteen Yukon First Nations has brought millions of dollars in investable capital to the First Nations, only one of which is centred in Whitehorse. In addition, protocols and structures for research, environmental assessment, development-project approval, and impact and benefit agreements with resource firms have strengthened the hands of rural First Nations in a way that few would have imagined only thirty years ago.

Political and economic power has not resulted in dramatic improvements in rural First Nations life, however. Life chances in the smaller Indigenous communities lag well behind those in Whitehorse and the south, though almost two-thirds of Yukoners report a strong or very strong sense of belonging and over 90% report they are satisfied or very satisfied with their lives⁴. Educational attainment generally is

better than across the country as a whole. In 2011, 67.1% of Yukoners 25 to 64 have a postsecondary qualification (compared to 64.1% nationally)⁵, while 51.0% of Aboriginal identity Yukoners in the same age group have one (compared to 48.4% nationally)⁶. This is, in significant measure, due to a well-funded education system and a very active Yukon College that specializes in adult basic education and work-force training and higher education. For Aboriginal rural residents, unemployment is high, income low, and socio-cultural challenges often quite severe, a reality that has convinced many First Nations to embrace collaborations with resource companies in order to provide more jobs and to produce a higher quality of life in the region.

The Yukon Territory, as one of the most highly subsidized societies in Canada (it ranks third in per capita allocation of federal support in Canada, 2014-15 at \$24,722 behind Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, compared to \$3,720 in Prince Edward Island⁷), provides decent services to rural areas. Basic infrastructure, from roads to internet to medical care, is much better than in the vast provincial north of Canada thanks in large measure to federal financial support. But the challenges of rural Yukon remain. Whitehorse is a powerful “magnet” that draws people, wealth, and opportunity to the capital – including much of the First Nations’ investment from their land claims settlements. There is, as well, no regional offset to Whitehorse, no second community with sufficient economic and political power to counterbalance the overwhelming presence of the territorial capital. This has shown up recently through the Yukon variant of the Wal-Mart effect. The Whitehorse Wal-Mart opened in 2001, causing a rapid shift in the city’s economic order but undercutting retail operations across the territory⁸. So powerful is the retail strength of Whitehorse that several of the smaller communities – no longer have full-service grocery stores⁹. The advent of electronic commerce, which allows consumers to shop globally, is further undercutting the commercial viability of small-town operators. Newly opened groceries in Haines Junction and Old Crow show, in contrast, that there is both a need and a will for retail services in the small towns.

There are other challenges. Government funding ensures that the electrical and Internet grids are better than most rural areas in Canada, there are still shortcomings in rural infrastructure. Schools and health centres have difficulty attracting and keeping the professionals (although this is less of a problem than in many parts of rural Canada due to the natural attractiveness of many of the outlying

Yukon communities. Young people, many of whom relocate to Whitehorse for high school are prone to leaving permanently for the city or heading outside for work and education. In this, the Yukon shares problems with rural areas the world over.

The people in the outlying communities and rural Yukon generally are working hard to reverse the demographic and economic challenges. First Nations are using their financial resources and economic authority to get much better deals with resource companies than in the past. For example, the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in Old Crow, located in the northern part of the territory, is very entrepreneurial and co-owns a regularly scheduled airline that flies between the Yukon and southern cities. Champagne-Aishihik First Nation has long been innovative and forward-looking in its investments and is a commercial force to be reckoned with. Carcross-Tagish First Nation, based an hour south-west of Whitehorse, has some of the most creative entrepreneurial strategies of any Indigenous group in Canada. The Kaska First Nation, located in south-east Yukon and northern British Columbia, has not signed a treaty but is developing a Kaska Resource Law and working on new partnerships with development companies.

There are other initiatives designed to strengthen socio-economic conditions in the rural areas. The Tr’ondek Hwech’in First Nation in Dawson City, for example, are developing a teaching farm and greenhouse to create both jobs and healthy food supplies for their central Yukon communities and several central Yukon communities are exploring the viability of a shared greenhouse. First Nations engagement in tourism, mining training, and other initiatives illustrate a deep community commitment to resilience and sustainability in place.

The Yukon government, empowered since the 1960s by a lengthy process of devolution of power and resources from the Government of Canada, provides considerable support to rural areas in the Yukon, more so than most other jurisdictions in Canada. The Government of Canada, as a result of the political processes, is less active than it had been in the past. The rural Yukon has its advocates and special programs, but a long-term solution for rural viability remains elusive. Whitehorse might be the greatest challenge for the rural Yukon communities, but land claims will help to anchor and even attract people to “the communities.” The Yukon Territory is quite different from the two other northern territories. Geography, geology, proximity to the United States, the Alaska Highway, the White Pass and Yukon Route Railway, the over 300,000 tourists, 4,821 km of

roads, 9 radio stations, 5 newspapers and 2 television stations, 2 MacDonald's restaurants, etc., make it seem from a southern perspective, not so different. The result is that discussions occur less about "the north" and most about "the Arctic." Yukon is not imagined as an Arctic place. Its role in matters of Arctic sovereignty and security is minimal.

The rural Yukon continues to face major forces for change. Technology has been transforming the north for years, as have investments in infrastructure and capacity building. The pull of the capital city and southern centres remains strong and is actually getting stronger as the gap in income, employment, services and facilities between the larger communities and the rural areas grows. Lifestyle opportunities, with the Yukon's impressive natural setting attracting working professionals from around the globe, provide something of an economic and social offset, but not sufficient to this point to put rural Yukon on a favourable or sustainable trajectory.



References

1. Sherrill Grace, *Canada and the Idea of the North* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).
2. Statistics not otherwise referenced are drawn from Yukon Bureau of Statistics. *Yukon Statistical Review, 2014*. (2015) at <http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/stats/pdf/Annual_Review_2014.pdf>.
3. During the world-famous Klondike gold rush, the estimated 30-40,000 miners flooded the region. By 1901, the year of the census, the territory's population stood at 27,219 with a third (9,142) counted as Dawson City residents, a proportion that slowly slipped to a low of about a fifth in 1931. In 1901, then, about 14,000 people were scattered on the gold creeks beyond the town. The rest of the territory was home to around 4,000 First Nations people, who lived and travelled lightly on the land. After the gold rush, as the easy pickings were played out, the territorial population declined, to 8,512 in 1911 and to its lowest recorded number, 4,157, in 1921. Population rose slowly thereafter until 1942, when the construction of the Alaska Highway and related military projects resulted in the swift deployment of an "army" of tens of thousands of soldiers and construction workers to the southern Yukon.
4. The source of this is Table 2.1, "Canadian Community Health Survey Indicator Profile, Canada and Yukon," in *Yukon Statistical Review, 2014*. The health data is drawn from the national Canadian Community Health Survey that "covers 92% of the targeted population [(people 12 years of age and over)] in the Yukon" (Statistics Canada, "Definitions, data sources and methods: Canadian Community Health Survey - Annual Component (CCHS)"(July 2015) available from <http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=3226>).
5. Yukon Bureau of Statistics, "Education, Labour, Mobility and Migration: 2011 National Household Survey Highlights" (January 2014), Information Sheet #C11-03, retrieved from < http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/stats/pdf/Education_Labour_Mobility_Migration_2011.pdf>, p. 2.
6. The National Household Survey shows that 1,945 of 3,810 Aboriginal identity respondents held a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree. Statistics Canada, *NHS Aboriginal Population Profile, Yukon, TER, Yukon, 2011*, retrieved from < <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CD&Code1=6001&Data=Count&SearchText=yukon&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>>. In comparison, nationally that figure is 48.4%. See Statistics Canada, "The educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada," retrieved from < http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/99-012-x2011003_3-eng.cfm>.
7. Department of Finance Canada, "Federal Support to Provinces and Territories" <<http://www.fin.gc.ca/fedprov/mtp-eng.asp>>.
8. According to the Yukon Business Survey, reported on the Government of Yukon Socio-Economic Web Portal, Yukon, in 2013, had 3141 businesses. Of those, 733 of them were based outside of Whitehorse. In the 7 reporting years since 2001, the average Yukon business had 4.29 workers and the average rural business had 3.1. The average number of workers in Whitehorse businesses in 2001 was 4.94 workers per business, dropped to 4.69 in 2003, rose to 5.11 in 2007, dropped to a low in 2009 and reached 4.63 in 2013. The number of rural businesses has grown from 495 in 2001 to 733 in 2013, at which time they employed 2480 workers, on average 3.38 workers per business. The YG Bureau of Statistics information on retail trade cannot show rural vs Whitehorse statistics for confidentiality reasons.
9. The current Yellow Pages lists grocery stores in Dawson, Ross River, Faro, Mayo, Pelly Crossing, Carmacks, Teslin and Watson Lake. In addition, there are some seven grocery stores in Whitehorse along with Walmart and two Shoppers Drug Marts and dozens of small and specialty food and convenience stores. The Haines Junction and Old Crow (opened May 2015) stores are important developments. The food retailing sector forms about 30% of the total retail business in the Yukon.



STATE OF RURAL CANADA 2015

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