

HARRISON HIKE: THE ULTIMATE FIELD TRIP

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As a teacher with a passion for teaching Canadian history, I liked 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. In British Columbia, the Gold Rush of 1858-65 provides a natural focus for a fieldtrip. 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. While working with an enthusiastic group of teachers at McPherson Park Junior Secondary School, while piloting a new program called the Canadian Studies program, we decided to head for an historic route to the gold fields.

The Harrison-Lillooet trail—provided the ideal area for exploration. Starting with a hike made possible by Fred Smith and Varrie Parke and others I led groups of forty to eighty grade ten students on a six-day backpacking trip along a portion of this route from 1976 until I retired in 1999. Other Burnaby schools experienced the trip as well – Burnaby North, Moscrop, Kennsington, Burnaby Central and Burnaby South.

The Harrison-Lillooet trail had one major advantage: its relative remoteness had largely protected it from urban development. Although logging and a BC Hydro access road have had an effect, much of the route was 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 was 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 Royal Engineer Colonel Moody climbed to survey the trail.

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

Each group of ten students had a teacher and another adult leader (often a former student) in charge. Students were 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 was to be prepared for wet weather.

The Harrison Hike itself took place the last week of May. One the first hike parents drove their

students to Harrison Hot Springs where they were transported by a logging taxi to Port Douglas at the north end of Harrison Lake. From there they hiked almost 50 km to the south end of Lillooet Lake. As there was 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 met this criterion. In the course of the six days the students experienced, 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 did their own cooking over open fires and learned to do without the usual modern conveniences. They built their own latrines and hung their food at night so that it will not be eaten by animals. Carrying packs weighing from 12 to 25 kilograms provided a physical component and the new (to some) experience of blisters, sore muscles and near-exhaustion.

The setting also lent itself to the kind of educational activities that are better done out of doors. Over the years teachers and other adult leaders 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. On one occasion 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 took 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 allowed the students a hot bath just when they need it most.

Another highlight was 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 had 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.

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)