

Historica Canada Education Portal

Klondike Kate

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Katherine Ryan biography from [The Canadians](#) series (external resource). Katherine Ryan, more commonly known as "Klondike Kate," has become a legend of the Yukon Gold Rush. Her decision to join the Gold Rush went against the expectations of women in her time.

Aims

A study of Katherine Ryan's life provides students with the opportunity to learn about the Klondike Gold Rush as well as the suffrage movement, women's roles in society, and women's roles in the family during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Students will explore these issues and themes in a variety of writing exercises.

Background

"Klondike Kate" was not a dance-hall entertainer, but a Northern frontier heroine and a contributor to the development of our nation. She was born Katherine Ryan on August 20, 1869 in the small Irish community of Johnville, New Brunswick. She travelled across the continent to Seattle,

where she became a nurse in the Sisters of Nahomish Hospital.

In Vancouver, she joined the Gold Rush, a bold move for a woman in that day and age. She purchased her equipment from the Hudson Bay Company. The manager stated, "Any lady with the courage to head out to the Yukon on her own deserves the support of The Hudson Bay Company." During her journey, she endured a rough voyage by steamer, and spent harsh winter months moving along the trails.

Klondike Kate accomplished many things in her lifetime. She was the first female member of the North West Mounted Police and helped establish order among those involved in the Gold Rush. An adventurer, a traveller, an educator, a nurse, a prospector, a restaurateur, and a mother-figure to most who knew her, Klondike Kate carved out for herself a legacy, and became a legend at the same time. Klondike Kate has left her mark in history as an early suffragette and important political figure in Northern Canada.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Ask your students to write a journal much like the one Kate may have kept on her journey to the Yukon. Stress the importance of using descriptive words, and encourage imagination. (e.g., What was it was like to travel across northern Canada on foot in the middle of winter?)
2. Map Klondike Kate's journey from Johnville, New Brunswick to her final

home in Vancouver, British Columbia. Make note of obstacles that Kate would have encountered at each stop along the way.

3. Call on your students to research women's roles in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Examine things like: suffrage, role in the family, employment, men's views of women, etc. Then compare Kate's actions to those of more "typical" women of the time. How was she extraordinary?

4. Ask students to make a list of what they would bring with them on a journey such as Kate's. Students are limited to the technology of the time, as well as what they can carry (i.e., Kate carried about 25-30 pounds on her back as well as the weight of her clothing which was considerable).

5. Kitti Rockwell created a lot of problems for Kate Ryan. She was able to take on Kate's identity because of the distance between them. Have students play a game of broken telephone to illustrate the poor communication that existed in the early twentieth century.

6. Call on students to examine some of the important decisions that Kate had to make during her life and during her trip. Would they have made the same decisions? What would your students have done differently if they were in Kate Ryan's shoes?

7. Ask your students to write two letters home. One should assume the identity of a female and one of a male making the trip to the Klondike. Have students describe the conditions they would have faced (e.g., weather, food shortage, fatigue, homesickness, etc).

8. Is Kate Ryan a hero? Divide the class into groups to discuss this notion with respect to her role in the NWMP, as a feminist, and as a suffragette.

9. Create a propaganda piece for a local newspaper, either reporting on the success of the Klondike Gold Rush, or advertising claims for sale. Consider the kind of language that would have been used to get the public excited. Be creative, use tea bags to "age" the paper, or singe the edges!

10. Create an artifact from one part of Kate's journey and write a short paragraph about your artifact, mentioning why it was important to Kate, and how she might have used it. (Examples might include a mining permit, a nurses cap, a recipe collection, a ship's passage ticket, or a list of supplies she would need heading to the Klondike.)

11. You are Katherine Ryan, and have just arrived in the Klondike. Write a letter to your sister in Seattle or your parents back home in Johnville. Describe your journey and talk about how it feels to be the only woman in the cold and isolated land.

12. Kate wore many hats in her lifetime. Select one of Kate's many "jobs" (prospector, nurse, mother, law enforcer with the North West Mounted Police, restaurateur, fundraiser for the Red Cross, etc.) and create a poster of the clothing Katherine would wear with a description of where, when, and why she did this job. Note any challenges associated with this outfit. (As a prospector Katherine Ryan wore about 35 pounds of woolen and leather clothing, travelling 12 - 16 hours a day over rough terrain. Also keep in mind that women wore skirts and dresses during this time period!)

13. Kate settled in Whitehorse, putting down real roots for the first time in her life. Build a model of the log home Katherine built for herself, include a description of the dimensions, as well as the other kinds of things you would expect to find in a home in this time period.

14. Katherine Ryan was the first female Constable Special for the North West Mounted Police. Create a short job description, and then in pairs create an "official police report" chronicling one of Kate's arrests. Include a description of the female who Kate suspected of smuggling gold out of the Klondike, and how the suspect attempted to smuggle the gold.

Resources

[Klondike Kate Worksheet](#)

[Klondike Gold Rush - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Hudson's Bay Company - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[North West Mounted Police - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

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The Canadians: