

A Klondike mystery: the secret of Graeber's grave

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Finding the grave proved easy. A short wander among the sheet-metal tombstones and wooden crosses in Dawson City's Roman Catholic Cemetery soon revealed the final resting place of an Australian who had been on the Klondike. His grave was marked with a replacement wooden cross, painted white with his details neatly set out in black lettering. The weathered original cross had been left in place, leaning behind its replacement (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The grave of Norman Nicholas Graeber, Dawson City, Yukon.



Source: Photo by Robin McLachlan.

This was the first grave I found that evening in the Canadian summer of 2008 in my search for evidence of an Australasian presence on the Klondike Gold Field. What better evidence than the grave of an Australian who, as Henry Lawson put it in his 1902 poem *Bourke*, had left his bones on the 'Klondyke'? I made a careful note of what was written on the cross:

Norman Nicholas Graeber
March 2, 1908
Age 31 Australia

I had set out on this search after a day of enjoying the tourism offerings of Dawson City, a

National Historic Site managed by Parks Canada. What a day! Guided walking tours and presentations by Parks Canada staff, sometimes in costume. Beautifully restored heritage buildings and intact streetscapes - with boardwalks. A high spot was a tour of the carefully rebuilt Palace Grand Theatre, where I would later discover an Australian singer had trod the boards a century before.¹ The Dawson City Museum housed in the imposing Old Territorial Administration Building (1902) had kept me captive for hours. I had been transported to an *Historian's Heaven*.

But, something troubled me. The Klondike Gold Rush history offered throughout the day was dominated by an American narrative, quite likely in response to the many

American tourists who visit Dawson. I wondered about the historic presence of Australians and New Zealanders, both nations being famous for their 19th century gold mining. Surely, some of them must have made their way to the Yukon in response to the Rush of 1898. But, nothing was said by my guides about Australasians; no mention of them was apparent in any place I had visited that day. Come evening, sitting in Bombay Peggy's, I decided to finish my beer, and with my way lit by the Midnight Sun, to venture forth and investigate this curious omission. I sought an answer where an historian would look for physical evidence of past residents – a local cemetery.

Norman Graeber's grave would prove to be the first of several graves of Australasians I found on that visit to Dawson.² His grave, however, is personally special as it is my *Ground Zero*, marking the beginning of my research on Klondike Australasians. Over a decade later, with now more than 700 identified Australasians in my research files, I continue with my quest to gain a measure of recognition of their contribution to the history of the last great gold rush of modern times.³

There is, however, an irony in that my Klondike obsession began with the grave of Norman Nicholas Graeber. I would soon discover that the information written on his cross was almost entirely incorrect, some of it was even an outright lie. It would prove true that the man in the grave was a Mr Graeber born in Australia who died in 1908, but everything else written on his cross was questionable. The real question to be answered though was why there was this intentional deception about his true identity. What secret did this grave hold?

Discovering the story of Norman Nicholas Graeber

Unlocking the secrets Graeber took to his grave has proven to be a challenge. While I think I now know the key elements of his story, Graeber still holds close some of his secrets, which is perhaps the way it should be.

I have yet to find any extant letters Graeber may have written to those affected by his actions. To my knowledge, he did not keep a diary recording the thoughts behind what he did. Reconstructing his story has come largely from a diverse range of public and official sources, with a forensic linking of fragments of evidence providing an explanation of what was written, whether intentionally or erroneously, on his grave's wooden cross.⁴

I could not find any Australian records for a Norman Nicholas Graeber, including most importantly a birth registration. Likewise, a thorough search of digitised newspapers, published in Australia and in Dawson City, yielded no useful results. I have also failed to find Norman Graeber in any accessible Klondike-associated source before 1904. No Australian with the surname of Graeber (or Graber) appears in the boat registers kept by the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP) listing those travelling to the Klondike Gold Field via the Yukon River in 1898.⁵ This record accounts for about 90% of those who took part in the Rush of 1898. Neither does Norman Nicholas Graeber appear in the *1901 Canada Census*. A logical explanation could be that Norman Nicholas Graeber did not arrive in Dawson City until sometime after both the 1898 Rush and the 1901 census.

There is, however, a reference in the Dawson City entries in the *1901 Canada Census* to another Australian 'Graeber', a Nicholas Graeber, a 35 year old unmarried gold

miner who had arrived in the Yukon sometime in 1897, prior to the NWMP boat registers.⁶ The brief census entry also tells us he was a Roman Catholic and could speak French. He was considerably older than the wooden cross Graeber, whose age at death in 1908 was 31. Other than a coincidence in sharing a given name and birth in Australia, I had yet to find evidence to show the two men were possibly the same Graeber.

Nicholas Graeber reappears in 'The Great Clean Up', a special edition of the *Dawson Daily News*, published in 1902. He is reported working with some success Claim #10 on Soap Creek, on the left fork of Gold Bottom.⁷

A curious coincidence was becoming apparent in my research. Mention of Nicholas Graeber disappears from records just prior to when the name of Norman Graeber appears in 1904 and 1905 as the owner of the Klondike Livery Stables in Dawson City.⁸ But then, people were continually arriving and departing from the Klondike in the early 1900s. This coincidence may have been evidence of nothing more.

A lucky find

The clue to finding a definite link between the two Graebers came in a letter sent home to Bright, Victoria, written by Albert Abrahams whose Klondike story I was also researching. His letter provided a list of people he had seen on the Klondike, which included 'Grabaer' (sic) from 'Omeo'.⁹ (A typo in his name had stymied my earlier Trove searches!) Trove searches for 'Graeber' and 'Omeo' now opened the way to a flood of newspaper articles about Nicholas Graeber, one time Omeo hotelkeeper, and his marital problems. It was revealed in salacious detail that Graeber was a serial adulterer, leading to his wife Ellen Graeber successfully obtaining a judicial marital separation, but not a divorce, from her husband in May 1896.¹⁰ By January 1897, Nicholas Graeber, now a Melbourne stock broker, had left Victoria for 'mining speculation in Western Australia'.¹¹

The first reports in Australian newspapers of the discovery of gold on the Klondike appeared in July 1897, leading to a rush of Australians over the following twelve months.¹² It seems likely Nicholas Graeber was among the first to join that rush, but his travel details remain unknown. He left behind his estranged wife Ellen and two young children, John and Aileen, none of whom he would see again.

Separately, I made use of the family history internet resources of *ancestry.com.au* to source more information on Nicholas Graeber, discovering some critical, if conflicting, details in his birth and marriage records.¹³ Nicholas Jeremiah, to give his full given names, was born in 1862 in Ballarat East, Victoria to John and Maria (née Darcey) Graber (sic). His birth registration provided a birth year considerably different to 1866 and 1877, as suggested respectively by the 1901 census and the 1908 wooden cross. *Green's Mortuary Records* gave the age at death as being 41 years old, which is consistent with the census entry.¹⁴ According to his birth registration, Nicholas Jeremiah Graeber would have been 45 years old when he died, if he is the man in the grave.

The family surname given in his birth registration was Graber, not Graeber. The registration certificate for his marriage to Ellen Cameron in 1885 was signed by him as 'Graeber' but elsewhere in the document in another hand it is written as 'Graber'. Nicholas made a personal decision to change the spelling of his surname to Graeber, while

his parents and siblings stayed with Graber. His wife, and their children, changed their family surname back to Graber following his departure in 1897.

The clinching evidence

While the circumstantial evidence pointed to Norman Graeber and Nicholas Graeber being the same man, conflicting details, such as age and name disparities, and the absence of direct proof called for caution – and a return visit to the library of the Dawson City Museum. The evidence I needed was to be found where my search had begun, in the Roman Catholic cemetery. Or, more precisely, what I sought was in the transcribed records of St Mary's, Dawson City's Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵

In the 'Sepultures' (Burial) section of the records, I found the entry (1073) for Norman Nicholas Graeber, 'ans 31, de Victoria, Australiee', and a revealing detail, 'laisse 1 femme'. He left a wife! But it was not Ellen back in Victoria.

Figure 2: Copy of Norman Graeber's signed declaration for his marriage licence, dated 4 July 1906.

Nº 643

Canada: }
Yukon Territory. }

I, Norman Nicholas Graeber
Widow of Dawson

make oath and say as follows:

1. I and Sarah Ann Katharine Couture
Dawson

of Dawson

are desirous of entering into the Contract of Marriage, and of having our Marriage solemnized at Dawson

2. According to the best of my knowledge and belief, there is no affinity, consanguinity, pre-contract, or any other lawful cause or legal impediment to bar or hinder the solemnization of the said Marriage.

3. I am of the age of thirty one years and the said Sarah Ann Katharine Couture is of the age of twenty six years.

(SIGNATURE) N. N. Graeber

Sworn before me at Dawson
in the Yukon Territory this 4th
day of July A. D. 1906
[Signature]
Issuer of Licenses.

Source: Item #643, GOV 1686 (Marriage), Yukon Archives, Whitehorse, Yukon.

On the 10th of July 1906, Norman Graeber, son of John and Marguerite Darcy (sic), had married Sarah Couture at St Mary's (entry 92). He gave his marital status as 'vf de

Helen Cameron', that is widower of Helen Cameron. Taking into account linguistic differences in spelling, Helen was Ellen. Helen Cameron was Mrs Ellen Graber, née Cameron, who was not dead; she would live until 1942. Norman and Ellen were still legally married in 1906. Graeber provided the same lie in his marriage licence application, stating he was a 'widower' (Fig. 2).¹⁶ The coincidence of the maiden names of his mother and his first wife offered sufficient evidence to confirm Norman and Nicholas were the same man. As for his failure to age over time, even men can be vain, especially when a young lady is involved.

Figure 3: Catie Couture (1880-1915), possibly taken prior to her arrival on the Klondike in 1902.



Source: Courtesy of Couture family.

Figure 4: Catie Couture (left) unknown woman and Norman Graeber, Dawson City, ca. 1906. The only known photo of Graeber from his time on the Klondike.



Source: Courtesy Dr Lorrie Neilsen Glenn, Catie's grandniece.

Winning the hand in matrimony of Sarah Couture (Figs. 3 and 4) provided the key to solving the mystery of the two men sharing the one grave. Norman Nicholas Graeber, also known as Nicholas Jeremiah Graeber, was a bigamist.

Graeber's Dawson City wife, Sarah Ann Catherine, or Catie as she preferred, was a 26 year-old *Métis* from Selkirk, Manitoba.¹⁷ Catie was on the Klondike in company with her extended Couture family, some of whom were early arrivals on the field. The couple may have met at a dance at Louis Couture's Hunker Creek Roadhouse.

My search of the records of St Mary's provided me with a final tragic note for the Klondike story of Norman Graeber (entries 435 and 1072). Norman and Catie had a son, Anthony Gerald, born on the 23 June 1907. Anthony lived for only a month and lies buried not far from the grave of his father. Catie returned to her family in Manitoba following the death of their son. She was not present for the funeral of her husband; Alphonse Couture oversaw the arrangements.

Figure 5: Grave of Anthony Gerald Graeber, Dawson City. He is buried in the infants section of the Roman Catholic Cemetery.



Source: Photo Robin McLachlan.

Epilogue

Nicholas Jeremiah Graeber's identity makeover to become Norman Nicholas Graeber was flawed. Telling details of his old life found their way into the records of his new life. He may have brought too much of his old self with him to the Klondike to step fully into a new life. We are likely never to know. His story of taking on a new identity, abandoning a family back home, is not unique among the Australasians I have researched. There are others, both men and women. Each has a unique story to tell.

There is a final mystery to offer about the grave in the Roman Catholic Cemetery shared by Norman and Nicholas. The dates of month and day on the wooden cross are incorrect. What should they be? That's a secret

I will keep for the time being.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

¹ Robin McLachlan, 'Transformed: Australian women seeking new lives on the Klondike, 1898-99', *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 19, October 2021, pp. 143-160.

² Robin McLachlan 'Grave Stories from the Klondike', *Inside History*, May-June 2012, pp. 34-38.

³ Robin McLachlan, 'Not a Motley Throng: Australians on the Klondike, 1898', *History* (Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society), March 2020, pp. 2-4.

⁴ To reduce endnote referencing, I refer the reader to my article, 'Reflections on my Journey on the Digital Klondike Trail of '98', *ISAA Review (Historiography)* [journal of Independent Scholars Association of Australia], vol. 20, no. 1, 2022 [in press], together with the *ancestry.com.au* family trees referenced in this paper. Individual biographical details, including digital copies of key documents, will be found there with information on the sources used in researching this paper and in my Klondike research generally

⁵ *Yukon River Boat Registration Ledgers* (Northwest Mounted Police Records (R.G.18, D1-D4). MF#29, Microfilm Reel 011, vols. 5-11), Yukon Archives, Whitehorse.

⁶ Canada Census entry for Nicholas Graeber, Year 1901; Census Place: The Territories, Dawson City (Yukon), Sub-District F-36.

⁷ *The Dawson News Golden Clean up Edition*, Dawson News Pub. Co, Dawson, Yukon Territory, 1902, p. 42.

⁸ *Dawson City Electoral Roll (1904)*, Dawson City Museum Library; and, *An Index to ... Polk's Alaska-Yukon Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1901-1912*, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1995, vol. II (D-G), p. 57.

⁹ 'Homeward Bound from Klondike', *Wangaratta Chronicle*, 5 November 1898, p. 3.

¹⁰ 'The Divorce Court – Graeber v. Graeber', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 6 May 1896, p. 3; and, 'Locking up a Barmaid for three weeks', *Bendigo Independent*, 7 May 1896, p. 2.

¹¹ 'Obituary Notices', *Ballarat Star*, 26 January 1897, p. 4. (Obituary for John Graeber, his father.)

¹² Robin McLachlan, 'Booming the Klondike Down Under: The British Columbian Connection', *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 15, October 2017, pp. 150-65.

¹³ Biographical references and source information for 'Nicholas Jeremiah Graeber' and 'Norman Nicholas Graeber' can be accessed via the *ancestry.com.au* website on their separate public trees posted by 'KlondikeDiggers'.

¹⁴ Entry for Norman Grarber (sic), *Green's Mortuary Records*, Dawson City Museum Library (Entry records Norman Graeber died of appendicitis on 3 April 1908 in the Good Samaritan Hospital, age 41.)

¹⁵ Marthe Beauregard, *Baptemes Mariages Sepultures de Ste-Marie de Dawson City Yukon 1858-1956*, Editions Bergeron & Fils Enr'q, Montreal, 1976. Items 92, 435, 1072 and 1073. (The book is a typescript transcription of the records of the Roman Catholic Church in Dawson City. The records were written in French as the church's clergy and many of the parishioners were French speakers.)

¹⁶ Marriage Licence #643, Norman Nicholas Graeber and Sarah Ann Catherine Couture, issued 4 July 1906, GOV 1686 (Marriage), Yukon Archives, Whitehorse.

¹⁷ Biographical information for Sarah (Catie) Couture can be accessed via the *ancestry.com.au* website on the 'Sarah Anne Catherine Couture' public tree posted by 'KlondikeDiggers'. Additional information on the Couture family was provided through email correspondence with Mr Brian Boggs and Dr Lorrie Neilsen Glenn, Halifax, Canada.