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Valdez Trail days.

By

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The winter of 1913-1914 in Valdez, Alaska, was quite lively because of gold discoveries made in Nelchina and Shushanna.

Steamers heading for Skagway, Cordova and Valdez carried passengers and freight for stampededers going to these new discoveries. Amongst them was Pat. Roney, an Irishman and writer, who had arrived in Juneau, Alaska in February, 1914.

We had met the preceding summer at Yakatagi Beach where we had worked the development of a placer mine on White River and somehow, rumors of the rich strike by the James Brothers in Shushanna had reached us.

We had a fine trip across the Gulf of Alaska in clear, cold weather. On such days the view of Mt. St. Elias rising above her sister mountains and sparkling in bright sunshine, is too beautiful for words.

Apollo, the most westerly gold mine in North America and situated near Unga in Shumagin Islands, must have been operating in 1914 because the S.S. Northwester carried freight for the mine. Aboard also was freight for the Cameron-Johnson Gold mining company of Valdez, Alaska.

I must admit that Valdez did not appear inviting as the steamer moved towards the dock. There was nothing to be seen except snow and mountains. A large sign caught my eyes and it read "Valdez, the Golden Gateway to Alaska". It seemed to make a person forget the bleak appearance of everything. Was not gold the only subject people talked about? On shore in the Alameda Roominghouse and on the streets all I heard were rumors coming from Nelchina and Shushanna about the possibilities of finding such rich gold deposits that the Dawson District would be put to shame.

Louis Anderson, a Swede, had returned to Valdez from Nelchina for the purpose of obtaining a load of supplies. He couldn't take a step without being stopped by people asking his opinion about Nelchina.

I can't remember how many saloons the town had but one was operated by Al White, who in later years became U.S. Marshal for southeastern Alaska. I believe he is still living in Juneau. The Phoenix Hotel was owned by old "Doc" Gunther. Valdez had two newspapers, the Valdez Miner, Republican in views and the Commoner owned by "Honest" John Frame. The Valdez Miner was a daily but the Commoner was published only once a week. Frame being a "dyed in the wool" Democrat, never missed an opportunity to go on the war-path against the Miner and the Republicans.

The trail out from Valdez, as the road then was

named, ran along the Low River in Keystone Canyon and at one place was frequently exposed to snow slides in which several people lost their lives. In the winter of 1913-1914, horses and sleigh dogs were at a premium in Valdez because of the stampede to Shushanna and Nelchina. Valdez became the principal outfitting place for people going to Nelchina, but many heading for Shushanna went part of the way over Valdez trail.

Because of the high cost of freighting and scarcity of sleigh dogs, Pat and I decided to pull our prospecting outfit of about 800 pounds into Nelchina on a sleigh. The distance by going through Copper Center would be about 175 miles and take a month or more, depending on the conditions of the winter trail. One of us would pull the sleigh and at the same time steer with the jim pole sticking out in front and the man behind did the pushing. Of course, many times we were unable to pull the whole load and could only take part of it each time. This mode of transportation might not appeal to city slickers and cream puffs, but in a pinch much can be done by more or less crude ways.

The first roadhouse, Camp Comfort, was ten miles from Valdez and was owned by a woman whose only name so far as I knew, was "Blue Skin", but we bypassed the place. At Mile 18, before climbing towards Thompson Pass, elevation 2840 feet, was a U.S. Signal Corps telegram station and

nearby Wortman Roadhouse operated by Mr. and Mrs. Pete Cashman. Near Thompson Pass was the large relief house built of stone by the government as assistance to travelers caught during winters on the pass and was crowded during the night Pat and I spent there. On our way to the pass our tent was put up as high as we could but below in the timber to get some protection from snowstorms. Above the timber line the trail was covered with snow most of the time and only tall sticks put in the ground showed where the trail was.

It took several days to drag our outfit to the pass because only small loads could be pulled and then a snow storm might suddenly blow up, causing us to leave the sleigh and hurry down to the tent. One day struggling towards the pass a Swede with a bad limp overtook us. He was pulling a small ^{sleigh} ~~roll~~. He said he too was on his way to Nelchina but traveled light as he only wanted to give the camp a look over and if he found it favorable he would return to Valdez and purchase a prospecting outfit. About two weeks later when we had passed Upper Tonsina, who should we meet but that limping fellow pulling his sleigh for all he was worth. Naturally, Pat and I expected to have a talk with him about Nelchina but he didn't even stop to say hello. On asking how he found Nelchina he shook his head hollering; "no good, no good", and kept moving.

From Thompson Pass the trail went in a northeast direction, downhill most of the way to Beaver Dam roadhouse.

The first roadhouse below the pass was Ptarmigan Drop at Mile 33½, operated by Charles Nevelius, a former sailor from Stockholm, Sweden. His cook and housekeeper was Mrs. Lena Pitcher, of the pioneer Oregon Kerr family. She was born in their homestead at Wildwood, near Cottage Grove, Oregon. Read about Mrs. Pitcher on the last page!

Pat and I decided to get a good rest by staying one night in the roadhouse and found it crowded with men going to the new mining camps. Everybody seemed to be in high spirits, hopeful of striking it rich and one man was heard to say he would not take the finest ranch in Yakima Valley in exchange for the life of prospecting.

Old man Bill Blankenship was in the crowd and I heard him tell of his discovery in 1900 of Candle on the Seward Peninsula. He said he had a good notion to stop at Ptarmigan Drop and prospect the small creek that flows into Tsina River, where the bridge is. Later that year I remembered this remark and made several open cuts in the creek without getting any colors in my gold pan. Earlier prospectors had believed in the possibility of finding gold east of the bridge. For a distance of about 1½ miles along south side of the Tsina River several streams flowing from the south into the river had the remains of old sluice boxes.

Blankenship was taking a big load of supplies to Nelchina, one that could not be hauled in one load on his sleigh and had to be re-loaded. He owned a fine bay horse with a cow bell tied to the neck to prevent his ever getting

lost. But it evidently didn't help as I heard later that during the summer in Nelchina the horse had walked away and was never found. Because of his large outfit Blankenship hired a Swede to help him on the trip. After leaving the "Drop" We only made a couple of miles that day and put the tent up near the remains of a former telegram station. I remember that night well for an earthquake woke us up. At about Mile 36 Tsina River was crossed by a bridge and at Mile 40 we went by Beaver Dam Roadhouse owned by a Swedish couple, Mr. and Mrs. Nels Jepson and their young daughter. Tiekel roadhouse at Mile 48 had "Pop" F. B. Vaughan and his Swedish wife as owners. About 1925 they sold out to Charles Romar a Valdez character but by that time there was little traveling on the trail. Ernestine, the next roadhouse, at Mile 58, was owned by Mr. and Mrs. R. Miller and their two daughters. I believe that one of the girls got married to V. T. Stuart, who went to Ketchikan as Manager of Public Utilities in 1940. As a professional engineer, Stuart recommended development of Beaver Falls Hydro-electric project but was much opposed by some hairbrained members of the City Council.

The next roadhouse Upper Tonsina at Mile 77 boasted a fine new loghouse and was owned either by Knut or Jack Navstedt. During prohibition days in 1927, the same Navstedt operated the Windsor Hotel at the corner of Sixth and Union in Seattle, Washington. According to the

newspapers bootlegging was a big business in the hotel.

From Tonsina the trail crossed Tonsina River and went by an Indian village near a small lake that must have contained several hundred starving dogs.

At Willow Creek, Mile 89, was another roadhouse and nearby the Valdez Trail joined Chitna-Fairbanks road. Copper Center at Mile 103 had two roadhouses with Norwegian born Ragnvald Blixt, the owner of one, he was also the U.S. Commissioner. The other roadhouse was operated by the McCreary family. At many places along the trail McCreary had signs nailed to trees informing travelers of their delicious meals, "As good as Mother ever could make".

In later years at Latouche I met Nelson McCreary, the son of the roadhouse keeper. The last time I saw him was in Cordova in 1931, where he was the Chief of Police.

This makes me remember that in 1917 on a trip to Kennecott on the trail was Nelson McCreary's Finnish born wife and their baby girl. Mrs. McCreary was going to McCarthy to meet her husband where he was engaged in hauling out copper ore from the Westover Mine to the railroad. Another passenger on the train was a prominent Cordova business man by the name of Brooks, who I believe, some years later committed suicide in Oakland, California.

I might mention that when on my last trip to Kennecott in October, 1919, I met on the train a Swede, Richard Janson, who told about his experiences in Mexico

during the Civil War there. Understood he later moved to Cordova to live. Another passenger on that train was A. W. Balzimer, best known in Alaska mining camps as "The Russian Kid". He was a professional gambler and probably never had any use for hard work. I don't remember if he got off the train in McCarthy or continued to Kennecott. Read years later in a Canadian Mining Journal that Balzimer, born in 1872 in Germany, had died in January, 1938, in Val d'Or, a mining camp in Ontario.

Returning to Nelchina stampede, Pat and I followed the road after leaving Copper Center until we came to Tazlina River, where we turned to the left and going down on the ice went up the river perhaps ten miles. From then on the winter trail went in a northwest direction until we reached Little Nelchina River and made our camp not far from Crooked Creek.

As is known Nelchina never became a paying mining camp and only in a few places was enough gold found to make mining profitable. The first discovery was made on Albert Creek in 1912 by Odin Olsen, Fred Getchel, Joe Palmer and Duncan McCormick. The ground in the beginning ran as high as ten dollars to the cubic yard, but soon got poorer and in 1914 only 150 ounces of gold was recovered. Joe Palmer I met later in 1917 when he worked in Gold Bullion Mine, Willow Creek district, north of Wusilla.

On North Creek in Nelchina, Frank Blazer and

partners were prospecting about five miles above the timber line and on false bedrock took out \$5,000 from a paystreak one foot wide and 200 feet long. They spent several years trying to find another paystreak without luck. Blazer, born in Switzerland, later prospected around Hyder in Portland Canal District and on Texas Creek built a genuine old country type of cabin near a small lake. When Blazer first came there the lake was barren of fish but securing small trout he packed them to the lake in a coal oil can with the result that there has been fish in the lake ever since.

On a prospecting trip up the Texas Creek in 1926, I came to Blazer's cabin around noon time one day. As I was acquainted with him I knocked on the door several times before Blazer came out looking very sleepy, and said he had been trying to get some sleep during the day because packrats running on the roof had kept him awake all night. Later Blazer moved to Seattle, Washington, where he died January 16, 1964, at the age of 87 years. A fine fellow! His widow, Mrs. Blazer, is living in Seattle at the Jefferson Terrace Home.

In Nelchina one day, I went to visit the recorder of mining claims, L. F. Shaw, also the U.S. Commissioner, and his typewriting machine seemed out of place in the wilderness. Some years after Shaw became News Editor of the Alaska Weekly in Seattle, Washington.

As the camp never became a producer very little

money was in circulation and this effected three Spaniards. They had heard about Dawson, Nome and Fairbanks and how merchandise brought in there had been sold for almost its weight in gold. When the news about Nelchina reached the Spaniards, they decided to try their luck by pulling in a sleigh-load of tobacco, cigars, cigarettes and candy in the hope of quickly selling out with a profit. Not finding any buyers the Spaniards were unable to sell their stock and running short of food they were forced to live on the country. That winter there was plenty of rabbits. One Spaniard was always out hunting and rabbit stew was probably enjoyed at each and every meal.

After looking over Nelchina for awhile without seeing or hearing of any good digging Pat and I decided to head back to civilization. Pat intended to go to Kinik on Cook Inlet and consequently would head west from Nelchina through the Matanuska Valley and I intended to return the same way we came to Valdez.

None of us could at the time, have believed that one day Glen Highway would cross Nelchina country connecting Valdez, Fairbanks road with Cook Inlet and a city to be named Anchorage put on the map.

On the second day of my walk from Nelchina, I

of a lamb and my intention first was to take it to the roadhouse, but being a long way from that place and rough goings, I let it down again on the ground and earnestly hoped that it would be reunited with its mother.

Not able to find the prospect because of too much snow, I started on my return trip by descending to the river that made easy walking because of low water and gravel bars there at the upper end of Tsina which was still covered with about a foot of snow.

Had been on my way for some time when I chanced to turn around and there not 200 feet away was a large brown bear that came and stopped about the same time as I had looked back. What to do now was the first thought that flashed through my mind! I was a mile or more away from any trees, and couldn't get away by running because of the snow. The "38" Colt revolver I packed wouldn't kill the bear, and so I decided that if the Brownie came for me my only salvation was to let him come close enough to permit me to shoot out his eyes.

However, the bear didn't move and neither did I, and for how long we watched each other, I am unable to say - perhaps ten minutes or longer. Then the thought struck me that I should fire a shot in the air and see what effect it would have on him. At the sound of the short *Shot* Mr. Bear turned around and went on his way with snow flying about him.