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Martin HARRAIS
Valdez, Alaska

Approximately
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GOLD LUNATICS
by
MARTIN HARRAIS.

History, no doubt, will always record the discovery of gold in the Klondike as one of the causes which again gave impetus to the westward movement of the population of the United States. This westward movement has been accelerated by different causes, such as hunting and trapping for rich furs, homesteaders moving into the buffalo lands, California gold strike, and transcontinental railroad building; and retarded for awhile by depressions, which usually follow in the wake of forward movements or booms.

"Depression", one of those unexplained things, struck the country in 1893. Historians have agreed as to the date, but the causes of the thing, "depression", are still in dispute. The thing itself was real. The usual manifestations were abroad aplenty---stock-market crash, gold being drained out of the country, labor strikes and lock-outs, Kansas and Nebraska farmers burning corn for fuel, potatoes and other vegetables rotting in the ground, over-production and people going hungry, and Populist orators telling us all about it on the street corners.

Jobs were not to be had on Puget Sound, where I lived. The only alternative was to go to a new field or join Coxey's Army and march to Washington, D. C. A few did join the march of the unemployed; but a larger number, forced by the depression, were making up parties and going to Alaska, "away up North, where there are lots of icebergs".

we

In the summer of 1907, Falcon sent a reconnaissance party to survey a railroad line to connect the Tanana Valley Railroad with tidewater, selected Haines, at the mouth of the Chilkat River on Lynn Canal, as the seaport, and in the fall gathered the best of our vegetables as an exhibit and ^{Falcon} took them to Washington, D.C. to show our National Government what could be raised in "Seward's Icebox". To our law makers and the country in general, our exhibit was a revelation.

The evening before Falcon's departure for the Outside, we spent several hours in earnest conversation in my office in Chena. I had invited three of our Scandinavian friends who, like myself, were laying ~~aside money~~ ^{planning} to bring their kinfolk from the homeland to the Tanana Valley and establish them on homesteads. We all assured him that as soon as he secured a charter for the railroad, we would send for our relatives. Other friends of ours gave the same assurance. By that time a large number of people were convinced that Alaska had a great and permanent future. Some of us had already burned our fingers in our Outside "safe security" investments, and were not sending all the tons of gold which we were extracting to be invested elsewhere. We were spending or investing it in the development of our own natural resources. We were looking for and developing new placer diggings; blazing our own trails, finding and developing coal claims in Nenana and copper in the upper Tanana Basin; taking up homesteads, clearing, and building homes on them. Congress had granted us the privilege of incorporating our towns, which we did and established local self-government. In the towns we built schools, hospitals, churches, fraternal halls, and modest but permanent homes with electric lights, running water, and other conveniences, surrounded by vegetable and flower gar-

Chapter XXIII.
Copper River Basin ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~the~~ ~~the~~

Instructed by the President, "Do not form hasty judgments or make hasty reports," the careful investigation (?) of Alaskan conditions was made by the army officer while sitting for eleven days in the A.C.Co.store on St.Michael Island, in Bering Sea, in the fall of 1897. That eleven-day matured judgment was embodied in a report in which he urged that military government be established in Alaska--- a report whose hysterical conclusion, "We are not dealing with sane men, but a crowd of gold lunatics," no doubt caused the War Department to establish three forts on the Yukon, and to dispatch two army expeditions in the spring of '98 to select sites for military posts on the coast of Alaska.

Captain W.R.Abercrombie, commanding, came to Valdez to explore the Copper River country, in view of making military connections with the posts to be established on the Yukon. His expedition landed at Valdez on April 18th and he wrote, "The Quartermaster's Department had made no provision for the transfer of stores from the steamer to the shore," and they had to do it themselves. He reports further, "This was one of the most trying nights that the expedition was to experience during the explorations of 1898. The officers and men, not being used to the work they were called on to perform, were badly bruised about the shoulders and back." It must have been hell to move their outfit from the lighter to the shore!

Three different scouting parties were outfitted and sent out to select the route inland, two of which followed the prospectors, who had been necking their outfits over the glacier since February. They got as far up as the "fourth bench", returned to Valdez, and reported

that "there are about seven hundred prospectors on the trail of the glacier". An attempt to employ men to pack stores up to the summit of Corbin Pass (So named in honor of Gen. H. C. Corbin, U. S. A.) proved a failure. A snowslide killed thirteen head of stock, and several men barely escaped death. Being without block and tackle, sledding on the steep ascents proved desperately hard work. As the men were beginning to fag out, I considered that I had taken every justifiable means to penetrate the Coast Range by man power." The Captain called it a day, left his men to rest at Valdez, and went back to Seattle. From his report, "Procured two saddle horses, as well as the required number of pack animals, pack saddles, etc. The latter part of June forty head of stock were shipped to Port Valdez." In the meantime, the George Hazeltsel, et al. had necked all of their "Alaska possessions" over the glacier, built their boats, run the rapids, and were necking their boats up stream and prospecting. It makes a world of difference who pays your bills or what are your incentives!

On the 8th day of July the military expedition, well equipped, organized into four divisions, started out again. They penetrated quite a distance into the Copper River Basin and, upon returning, the different heads made subreports. All mentioned the fact that they found prospectors ahead of them. Captain Abercrombie led one of the sections. He made a very good report of the physical conditions of the country from Valdez over Thompson Pass into the Copper River Basin. As a military man, he recommended a military government for Alaska; thus making that vote unanimous with the score or more of other army officers who, with a bunch of privates, were chasing up and down the Yukon and the Coast, selecting army post and military reservations that summer.

Each one, no doubt, hoped to be the Emperor of the northern empire.

But as a man, although on horseback, who followed the prospectors and observed the hardships they were enduring to neck all their worldly possessions into that hard country, he concluded his report thus: "In conclusion, I recommend some action looking to the completion of the work begun last February by the pioneers now in the Copper River Valley, by the construction of a trail through the Keystone Pass of the Coast Range of mountains from the head of Port Valdez, Prince William Sound, to Thompson Pass, at the head of the Tonsina Valley, a distance of about thirty-five miles, and I only echo the united sentiment of these people that Congress ought to assist them."

The Captain left Quartermaster's Agent, Charles Brown, in charge of the Valdez cantonment and went Outside for a pleasant winter, salary and expenses paid; and "In pursuant of my instructions to construct a trans-Alaska military road from the cantonment at Port Valdez to Port Egbert, Yukon River," returned to Valdez April 21, 1899. He comments, "Many of the people I had met and known the year before were so changed in their appearance that I do not think I recognized one of them."

The first summer and winter were particularly hard on those men who went into the Copper River Basin. They had by far a harder and more dangerous divide to cross than either the Chilkoot or the White Pass divide. When they did get over the divide, instead of having a river on which to float down to their destination, they had to buck the swiftest rivers in the whole of Alaska to pull their outfits up to the headwaters, where they wished to go. They were not only sheechakos but the very scouts, feeling their way into an unknown river basin whose waters drain about seventy thousand square miles.

There was not a white man's habitation before them in that immense area.

They had worked all summer in ice-cold water, pulling their boats up streams thru rapids----a man-killing job. Those who remained in the Basin built their winter cabins in widely separated localities and prospected during the winter. Toward spring, when their supplies were almost gone, they took all their Alaska possessions with them and started back to the coast, encountering the same blizzards, snowslides, and glacier crevasses in reverse order. Hungry, sick with scurvy, they staggered into Valdez. No wonder that Captain Abercrombie did not recognize them! Quartermaster Brown fed them and took care of those who were sick with scurvy. During the summer they got employment on the trans-Alaska military road work and earned enough to buy another outfit. They had nothing to show for their year's hard efforts, no immediate returns. Only one place of rich placer gold was discovered that year. But they went back thru the same hazards again and again. Why? Hazelet recorded in the privacy of his diary the reason.

Six military posts were built in Alaska pronto, costing the taxpayers millions of dollars, and in a few years were abandoned. The trans-Alaska military road from Valdez to Thompson Pass, which was built that summer, was helpful to the pioneers in subsequent years; but there was not a cent spent for roads or trails leading to any of the properties which they had discovered and were developing; nothing was done except what was done by the pioneers themselves.

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co-operative spirit which is prevalent in Alaska, they had selected and cut out a better trail thru Keystone Canyon over Thompson Pass, avoiding the Valdez Glacier. They also had learned that it is a killing job to pull boats up stream in any of the rivers in the Copper River Basin, and moved their outfit in the winter. Nevertheless, they had to face the same roaring blizzards and snowdrifts as they were relaying over the Pass. On the rivers they encountered blizzards, overflows, open water, and treacherous ice where any moment one may drop thru and loose his outfit or life. Their destination? Two hundred miles or more into that immense land where the rivers and creeks "all run God knows where".

They did not find much encouragement for immediate reward the second summer. The rich portion of placer gold which was discovered the previous summer on Slate Creek and could be mined profitably was confined to two short creeks. There are extensive bench and creek-bottom gravel deposits near there which contain gold, but it is low grade and could not be worked profitably, considering what it cost them to get in their supplies. It's still there, and for the same reason. Financially, they were not rewarded, either collectively or individually, except a few on Slate Creek; but, thru their combined labors, they brought to light a mineral country of which Dr. Brooks later said: "I have not seen, heard, nor read of as widely and highly mineralized country as is the Copper River Basin". That mineral wealth is still lying there, practically untouched, for reasons which shall be revealed later.

A party of those men who staggered into Valdez, hungry and sick with scurvy---Captain Abercrombie could not recognize them---went back again in the winter of 1900. They bucked the blizzards, overflows,

open waters, and treacherous ice over the Thompson Pass, the Tonsina, Copper, Chitina, Nizina, and Kennecott Rivers for two hundred miles, and discovered and located the famous Kennecott copper mines. The Kennecott Glacier had eroded the country rock and left exposed a mountain of copper ore---70% copper glance---estimated about \$20,000,000 worth of ore in sight. Hundreds of other copper properties were discovered and located in the Copper River Basin in places too numerous to mention in this brief narrative, but two hundred miles or more from the base of supplies, and no immediate returns unless transportation was provided to that treasure box.

Stephen Birch, a young graduate of Columbia University, came to Valdez in the spring of '98. His capital was his mining engineer's certificate in his pocket. He worked as civilian packer in Lieutenant P.G. Lowe's expedition, which went across the Alaska Range and over to the Yukon that summer. On the divide between the Tanana and the Yukon the going became rather hard, and the military man beat it to Dawson and via Skaguay to the Outside. He wrote in his report, "Under these conditions I decided to leave the animals with a member of the expedition named Stephen. I believed that he had a fighting chance to get some of the animals through the winter and subsequently get them to Fortymile alive". Steve did.

He came back to Valdez again and was employed by Captain Abercrombie, worked the following two years as civilian packer, and observed and studied the country. In the fall of 1900, when the locators of the Bonanza mountain of copper came back to Valdez, broke and discouraged,---"Yes, we have a mountain of copper, but it's two hundred miles from nowhere"---Steve had vision and courage enough to bond that property. He had the personality to interest capital, bought ^{out} the origi-

nal locators, and for ten years, in winter time, freighted in his mining equipment and supplies, over two hundred miles of shifting trail with its undiminished obstacles.

Placer gold is a poor man's mine. While the prospectors were locating those rich copper properties for the future, their immediate quest was to find gold concentrated and rich enough to give them grubstakes, so that they could develop their copper properties.

A party of nine men started from Valdez in the winter of 1902. They pulled by hand their outfit about 225 mi. over the divide, up the Copper and its branches---the Chitina and the Nizina---to Chititu Creek. They prospected, found gold, and located nine claims together on that creek. One claim per man on each creek was agreed upon in their "Mayflower Compact" before they started out from Valdez. Rex Creek is tributary to Chititu Creek. They located nine claims on Rex also and then drew lots for their respective claims on each creek. Frank Kernan drew #9 on Chititu and #1 on Rex, adjoining claims, and the richest ground on those two creeks. He made a modest fortune out of his ground by working it himself. The others were not so fortunate. They could not make their ground pay by hand methods of mining, and later sold out to a hydraulic company, which is still working on Chititu Creek. Did any of them try to chisel in on Frank's rich ground or renege on their agreement? They did not. We carried "the laws of God and men" with us wherever we settled and kept our agreements inviolate.

Chititu and Dan Creek placer gold discoveries gave new impetus to prospecting for gold. Bremner River country and other places were explored and prospected, but, while in numerous places gold was found, the physical conditions of the country and the lack of any assistance for trails made it impossible for them to recover the gold profitably.

The rich Bonanza discovery made copper "King" in the Copper River Basin, and gold mining was pushed into the background. But it takes capital to develop copper mines and transportation to get the ore to the smelter. Of transportation there was none, and most of the sourdoughs did not possess any capital. However, they kept on freighting in their meager supplies every winter, doing their assessment work on their copper properties, and prospecting for gold during the summers. Then in the fall they built boats and went back to Valdez or Lake Eyak, the bases of supplies, running the swift boulder-strewn rapids and avoiding the sweepers and driftwood piles on the banks and bars. The next winter they went back again, and the next, until 1911, when the Copper River and Northwestern Railway was completed.

I packed my outfit over the Chilkoot Pass, ran the Yukon River rapids, mushed my share over the interior of Alaska. I have lived for the past fifteen years in the Copper River Basin. I have had experience in breaking trails on those glacier-fed rivers and freighting my outfit over them for five years. Consequently, I, for one, take off my hat to those early-day Copper River sourdoughs! For sheer grit and determination they are unsurpassed. I can sense, in a measure, their hardships and privations, but I cannot describe them.

An ambitious movie director conceived the idea that he could reproduce and record with his camera the actual hardships of these intrepid pioneers. In 1927 he brought his actors and paraphernalia to Cordova, boarded a C.R. and N.W.Ry. train, rode out about fifty miles, selected a convenient glacier ---level ice---set up his camera, loaded packs on the actors' backs, shot the scene, and pronounced it genuine. Then they ^{went} farther up the river to Abercrombie Rapids, to let his actors run a boat thru the rapids and show how the sourdoughs did it.

The roaring waters looked dangerous to him, but he could not substitute or select any easier rapids, as he had done for the glacier scene. It had to be the real thing or none.

To prevent accidents, he took every precaution. He erected towers at the head and foot of the rapids, stretched a cable from one tower to the other lengthwise of the rapids. From the cable, at short intervals, ropes were suspended---just reaching the water---so that, in the event of the boat's upsetting, his actors could grab the ropes. He stationed men with lifelines on the banks, and boats with men in them at the foot to grab his actors in case of accident. He placed his camera on the bank and took the boat to the head. When everything was set, he cast the boat loose. The scene was not finished as per schedule. Three of his men were drowned. It was not faked dummy drowning; it was actual. With all their precautions, those three bodies are lying in their watery grave until the sea shall give up its dead.

In relating this tragedy, I am endeavoring, in a measure, to convey the risks and dangers my sourdough friends encountered in any of these glacier-fed rivers which they were bucking for years. Their equipment was meager, but they did possess undaunted courage, unconquerable souls. They went thru the Abercrombie Rapids and others successfully many, many times!