



UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, FAIRBANKS

Fairbanks, Alaska 99701

December 19, 1988

Norman Piispanen
Northern Region Planning
DOT&PF
600 University Avenue, Suite B
Fairbanks, AK 99709-1096

Dear Norman,

This serves as a progress report on the historic trails project.

The principal investigator finished a short history of the Nabesna Valley.

The P.I. is continuing to carefully examine every annual report of the Alaska Road Commission and xeroxes information pertaining to trails. There is a great deal of material, and the xeroxing is a tedious job. Once done, the P.I. will highlight pertinent information in red. He will use the documentation in his narrative report, and turn the documents over to DOT&PF once they have been used.

The P.I. plans to go to Seattle during the spring break in March and examine the records of the Alaska Road Commission there and have the important materials xeroxed.

As agreed upon, the research and writing during the academic year is conducted with the 20 percent donated research time. The P.I. will use full-time funding after the end of the spring 1988-89 semester.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Claus-M. Naske".

Claus-M. Naske, Ph.D.
Professor of History

CMN:sl

HISTORY OF THE NABESNA VALLEY

In his account of his trip down the Tanana River in 1885, Lieutenant Henry Allen noted that the Indians of the Upper Tanana referred to the Tanana River as the Nabesna. When Alfred Brooks made the first systematic exploration of the Tanana Valley 13 years later in 1898, he found that the name Nabesna was no longer being used by the Natives. "For the sake of preserving this euphonious Indian name," Brooks wrote, "we have applied it on the map to the chief tributary of the Upper Tanana, for which we were unfortunately unable to find the true Indian name." In Brooks' opinion the newly named Nabesna River was the "most important tributary of the Upper Tanana," but it must be noted that he considered the Chisana River to be part of the Tanana.¹

The Natives had several more or less permanent communities on the Nabesna. On the upper river, the settlements were mostly along the route of the old trail which ran from Batzulnetas village in the Copper River valley, to the Nabesna, Chisana, and White River valleys. The trail went down Platinum Creek to the Nabesna, and ascended Cooper Creek to Cooper Pass, from where it followed Notch Creek and Cross Creek to the Chisana. The Indians living at the mouth of Cross Creek on the Chisana often wintered near Cooper Creek on the east side of the Nabesna, or near the mouth of Platinum Creek, on the west side of the Nabesna. When anthropologist Robert McKennan visited the area in 1929, the Indians were camped on the east bank of the Nabesna near the mouth of Cooper Creek, and the population was 16.

Seventy-five miles downstream was another Indian settlement referred to by McKennan as the "Mouth of the Nabesna" where 59 people lived. This group formerly had only one permanent village called "Fish Camp," located about 13 miles above the mouth of the Nabesna. Fish Camp was on a clearwater stream

where the Indians gathered from May to July during the summer run of caribou and whitefish. The Natives moved to Nabesna Village nearer the mouth of the river when trading posts were established there in the early years of the twentieth century. According to McKennan, this group of Natives ranged "well up the Nabesna Valley." The U.S. Geological Survey also said there was "an old Indian trail" which ran down "the south bank of the Nabesna River."²

When William Peters and Alfred Brooks reported on their 1898 trip down the Tanana, Brooks wrote generally of the routes and means of transportation in this part of Alaska.

In the past the few prospectors who penetrated this region limited their journeys chiefly to the larger waterways. In the open season they followed these in boats, or more often in downstream trips on rafts, and in the winter traversed their frozen surfaces with dog teams. The Indians also use cumbersome rafts for navigating the rivers, which they construct very ingeniously without the use of tools. When they are unprovided with axes, they use drift timber or burn off dead trees, and fasten them together with withes. They also construct well-shaped birch-bark canoes, which are decked over in the kayak fashion and are usually only large enough for one or two persons. These are propelled by a single paddle, with which they alternate from one side of the canoe to the other at every second stroke. Canoes of a similar pattern are also covered with moose skin in lieu of birch bark, and these are sometimes made much larger. In going up shallow streams in their small canoes, the Indians make use of two short poling sticks, one in either hand. In this manner they are able to make fairly rapid progress against a 4 or 5 mile current. The swifter parts of the river are seldom navigated by the Indians, and then only in downstream trips, the return being made by portage. The Indian canoes are very frail craft and

are easily injured on rocks and snags, and this is probably the reason they have such a fear of swift water and why their statements in regard to the danger of rapids are almost always overdrawn. In winter the Indians make long journeys with their dog teams, and this is undoubtedly the best time to travel in the region.³

Brooks marked the Nabesna on his 1898 map from where it leaves the mountains to the Tanana, but unlike the Chisana, the Upper Nabesna had not yet been explored. The United States government remedied that situation somewhat a year later when two exploring expeditions reached the Nabesna. The first was a six man party with 15 horses, led by topographer William Peters and geologist Alfred Brooks. While examining the copper deposits on Kletsan Creek, a tributary of the White River, the survey party met two prospectors named E. J. Cooper and H. A. Hammond. These two men brought the first pack train through Cooper Pass on the old Indian trail.

"Mr. Cooper gave us some valuable information about the region," Brooks wrote later. When the geologists crossed into the Tanana watershed, they retraced the trail of the two prospectors going through Cooper Pass to the Nabesna River. Brooks described the Nabesna as "the largest tributary of the Tanana." Like the Chisana, it was a "swift flowing stream." They followed the Nabesna downstream for about 20 miles below the mouth of Cooper Creek, before heading overland to the northwest towards the Tetlin River. Though their expedition had gathered more information about the Nabesna than was known before, the river was still a mystery. As Brooks stated in his report, "The headwaters of the Nabesna have not been explored above the point where our route crossed the river."⁴

Shortly after the USGS survey party passed through the valleys of the Chisana and the Nabesna, two men working for the U.S. Army, Oscar Rohn and A. H. McNeer, traveled 47 miles across the Nizina Glacier in 15 days to the

Chisana River. Rohn and McNeer had no idea where their glacier trip had taken them, as Rohn explained in his report:

During the trip over the glacier the storms which are almost constant on the summit at that time of the year, the difficulties of traversing glacial ice, and snow-blindness absorbed our attention and left us no time to speculate on what drainage we were reaching. When, however, the glacier had been crossed, the latter became the all-absorbing question. After following the stream which headed in the glacier for a distance of 12 or 15 miles in a northeasterly direction, and finding that it led out of the mountains in a direction almost due east, we became convinced that it was the Tanana River, and we decided to make a portage through a gap in the mountains to the west, by which we hoped to reach what we felt sure was a branch of the Copper River. At the end of a seven-days' packing trip we reached a large river, which, however, proved to be merely a branch of the Tanana, called by the natives Nabesna.⁵

Rohn and McNeer followed the tracks left by Peters and Brooks through Cooper Pass. They were running out of food and decided the quickest way to get to a trading post or return to a settlement in the Copper River valley would be to raft down the Nabensa to the Tanana, instead of trying to find a pass through the mountains. The two men constructed rafts, probably at a spot near the mouth of the Cooper Creek. They did not raft very far down the Nabesna, however, as the Indians informed them of the easy overland trail to the Copper River.

Rohn's account of the event states:

The season being so far advanced that ice was rapidly forming in the streams, and our provisions being reduced to less than ten days' rations, we decided to build rafts and make our way down the Nabesna and Tanana with all possible haste. Before proceeding down the Nabesna very far,

however, we met natives, from whom we learned that a portage of five or six days led to the headwaters of the Copper River. Securing these natives as guides and packers, we made our way overland to Batzulnetas, on Copper River, which was reached on the 2d day of October.⁶

In the same year that these two expeditions penetrated the Nabesna Valley, the first major mineral discovery was made in the area. On Jacksina creek, a tributary of the Nabesna, several prospectors discovered quartz gold. Years later Jacksina Creek was the site of one of the most successful hard rock mines in Alaska, however, the prospectors of 1899 were looking for placer gold, not quartz gold. Unlike most parts of Alaska, the gold of the Upper Nabesna was not in placer form. To separate the gold from the rock in the mines on the Nabesna, a stamp mill was needed, not just a pick, a shovel, and a gold pan. Because the Nabesna was not a "poor man's camp" like the Klondike, Nome, or the Chisana, there was never a large stampede to the area.

One early account of the discovery of quartz gold on Jacksina Creek is contained in an issue of the *Valdez News*. The newspaper had one of their reporters interview Mr. K. J. Fjeld, one of the original discoverers, in 1903.

In 1899 a party of prospectors were camped on the Jacksina and were looking for placer gold. Mr. Fjeld was one of the party and during his prospecting he discovered that a certain slide which came off the mountain contained much fine gold though not sufficient to pay. He concluded that this gold came from a quartz ledge which could be plainly seen above the slide but as in those days quartz in that locality was considered worthless and he continued his search for placer.⁷

The USGS did a study of the Mineral Resources of the Wrangell Mountains in 1902, in which it reported that lode gold had also been found on Monte Cristo Gulch, California Gulch, and Orange Hill. The investigators for the Survey said

that gold could be found above the head of the river on the east side of the Nabensa glacier, but though the prospectors in the area were typically optimistic about its potential, the scientists had a different view of the future.

We regret our inability to present as encouraging a report for this section as had been made by the prospectors referred to, and feel that all that can be safely affirmed is that a considerable amount of low-grade gold-bearing rock exists at the head of the Nabesna River, in which economic values may be found in the future.⁸

Prospectors also had their hopes vested in the copper resources of the Nabesna. Since the discovery of the Bonanza copper claims at Kennecott, miners believed that on the north side of the mountains near the head of the Tanana there might be other deposits just as rich. In the winter of 1901-1902 a man named McCleary arrived in Valdez saying he had discovered a ledge of copper 500 feet long, between the Chisana and Nabesna rivers. According to Mr. McCleary there was about \$1,000,000 worth of copper exposed on the face of the ledge. In the spring of 1902 a large well-equipped six-man party with nine pack horses set out for the copper district at the head of the upper Tanana. An Indian from the upper Tanana arrived in Valdez later that summer with news that there were many copper prospectors in the area. The *Alaska Prospector* quoted the Indian as saying: "White man all same mosquito."⁹

In July of 1902 a man named Mr. Dickey discovered copper on the Nabesna. Dickey was working for another man named Millard, who had been sending copper prospecting parties into the upper Tanana for several years. Dickey staked 41 claims on the Nabesna and brought out 60 pounds of sample ore to Valdez.¹⁰

Small parties of prospectors thoroughly investigated the Nabesna in the early years of this century, but there is little record of their activity except for a few

scattered accounts in the newspapers of Valdez, 200 miles to the southwest. One typical article about miners going to the Nabesna appeared in January of 1903.

J. F. Roy of this place, has sent C. F. Johnston, L. M. Best, and N. M. Patterson to the Nabesna River, a tributary of the Tanana to prospect and locate mineral lands known to exist on that stream. Johnston and his father left here very early last spring with a large outfit, 1,500 pounds of which Johnston claims to have cached on the Nabesna, and it is to this cache the present outfit is going, which enables them to travel light. When the snow disappears they will prospect for placer gold, as Johnston claims to have found some very good free-milling quartz in that vicinity last year.¹¹

Through 1903 and 1904 the Nabesna country still seemed promising to some prospectors, but most of the true stampeders in Alaska at that time were then on their way to the new strikes at Fairbanks. A sizeable number of men from the Nizina district, who joined the stampede to Fairbanks, crossed over the mountains and boated down the Nabesna from its upper reaches to the Tanana, and continued downstream all the way to Fairbanks.

For the minerals on the Nizina it was far shorter to go on the trail through Skolai Pass to the White River, and across the divide to the heads of the Chisana or the Nabesna, then to descend the Chitina to the Copper River. All summer reports were arriving in Valdez of the stampede from the Nizina mines to Fairbanks. A dispatch dated May 29, 1903, stated, "A great many people leaving Nizina for the Tanana."¹²

In June a long article detailing the activities of the miners of the Nizina district was mailed to the *Valdez News*, and the letter included a discussion of the Tanana stampede.

Red McConnell, who bonded from A. J. Kelsey the jumped claims on White Gulch or upper Chitutu, did considerable prospecting on the claims during

the early part of the season, but evidently without results, as he pulled up stakes and started to the Tanana. The old saying that "distance lends enchantment to the view," is found to be as true here as elsewhere, as many people have the Tanana fever.

At least 25 men and probably more have left for there, and others are talking of going.¹³

Altogether probably several dozen people left Nizina and went down to Fairbanks by boat. The Valdez News received a partial list of the stampeders, who went by way of the upper Tanana route.

Word was brought out by Mail Carrier Jefferson of some of the people who left Nizina for the head of the Tanana and for Fairbanks; Judge Roy, Mrs. Shields, Ed Mullins, C. G. Grimm, Bill Lemeragee, Harry Behrens, Bill Crumb, R. Rettig, John Cascaden, Harry Hare, E. S. Serafford and others have gone down the Tanana.¹⁴

Even after the stampede to Fairbanks was over, there were parties which took the upper Tanana route from Nizina to Fairbanks. In the fall of 1904 the *Alaska Prospector* reported that many travelers bound for Fairbanks went down the Chisana.

A number of men have gone from Nizina to Fairbanks this fall. The route followed by most of them is over Scolai Pass to White River, and from there across to Shushana (Chisana), a tributary of the Tanana, and thence down the Tanana.¹⁵

The recorded information about the area is so scanty, it is impossible to even make a guess as to how many men descended the Nabesna or Chisana by boat. But for the men in the Nizina District, the water routes down the twin sources of the Tanana River were well established. More than three years after the first recorded instance of travel from the Nabesna to Fairbanks, the *Alaska Prospector* reported

on the activities of several men who were involved in the development of the lode mines on the upper Nabesna River.

Pontius Magnusson arrived yesterday from the Nabesna, where he has been on a prospecting trip....The Levensaler party is still prospecting in the neighborhood and so is Geo. Wilson. Jas, Casey, and Shay have gone to Fairbanks, moving their supplies down the river in scows.¹⁶

There was other traffic on the Nabesna, not by travellers bound to Fairbanks, but in connection with an effort to develop the lode mines on the upper river. Though the stampedeers of 1899 had no interest in the quartz mines of the Nabesna, there were men who were willing to spend their money to develop them. In 1903, K. J. Fjeld, the original discoverer of the gold deposit on Jacksina Creek, returned to the spot he had seen in 1899 with his partner Paul Paulson and seven others. They staked a total of 28 claims, including a copper ledge they had also discovered. In addition to Fjeld and Paulson, 26 other people, mostly from Valdez, were investing in the mines. Fjeld and Paulson later formed a company called the Royal Gold Mining Company, which was annulled and replaced by the Royal Development Company in 1905, capitalized at \$2,500,000, to manage these 28 claims near Jacksina Creek.¹⁷

In 1907 the Royal Development Company brought in a three stamp mill to crush the rock at the mine; this was said to be the first stamp mill taken into the Interior of Alaska from the port of Valdez.¹⁸

Another mining man who was interested in the lode prospects of the Nabesna was millionaire Henry Bratnober, a quartz mining expert who did exploratory work for certain English and American capitalists, and was said to have formerly worked for the Rothschilds. Bratnober's experience in this part of Alaska dated back to 1898, when he was led by Jack Dalton to a point on the White River to look over copper prospects in the area. In 1903 Bratnober and Dalton, with an

eight-mule pack train, again examined potential mining sites in the Upper Tanana.¹⁹

When Bratnober left Alaska at the end of the field season in 1903, he described how there were 300 starving prospectors at the "head of the Tanana." The *Valdez News* was furious with Bratnober for the unfavorable comments he was making about Alaska; the truth, according to the *News*, was that most of the miners Bratnober referred to had returned to Valdez or had "gone down the Tanana." "This pot-bellied old reprobate has some object in spreading these slanderous reports," the newspaper predicted, "aside from the mere pleasure which some people take in lying."²⁰

Whatever the case may be, Bratnober was back in 1904 and he examined the Fjeld prospects on Jacksina Creek. He refused to invest in the property because after assaying the ore he declared "there was nothing in it." But Bratnober was back again the following year in the summer of 1905. This time he was more than just a little curious. He had a steamboat specially built to ascend the Tanana and Nabesna Rivers, and put together a four-man crew outfitted with forty tons of provisions.²¹

His steamboat, the *Ella*, was launched at Whitehorse on May 20, 1905. Bratnober and a fellow investor in the proposition, C. H. Gray, were both on board the gasoline-powered sternwheeler when it reached Dawson City on June 22, 1905. Bratnober explained to the *Dawson Daily News* that he was bound for the upper Tanana, and planned to go 200 miles above Tanana Crossing. The Dawson paper said, "Mr. Bratnober has been in the upper Tanana and at the head of the Copper and the White Rivers a number of times. Evidently he thinks that country has a future."

Bratnober explained that his plan was to return to Dawson by October 1, 1905, and freeze the *Ella* in on the upper Yukon. "From that point the boat will be

able to make an early start for the upper Tanana next spring." The newspaper interview also contained a description of the *Ella*:

The *Ella* draws 11 inches of water, is 120 feet long and 26 feet beam. She is a sternwheeler, built light especially to navigate shallow streams. She carries no cargo this trip except supplies for her own use. The boat first was constructed outside, and reassembled at Whitehorse. She is under the American flag. Captain J. B. Geer is in command of the craft.²²

If Bratnober's plan was to go 200 miles above Tanana Crossing, as he told the *Dawson Daily News*, he intended to go far up the Nabesna River. The trip did not go as well as they had hoped. While steaming up the Tanana River, they lost a man overboard who was killed. Though the *Ella* was specially designed to navigate shallow streams, the boat had great difficulty ascending the Tanana River. Late in July the *Ella* was still struggling upstream far below the Nabesna. An article detailing the progress of various steamers on the Tanana River stated:

The novel gasoline boat *Ella* was reported to be on a bar about 100 miles above Fairbanks, in the neighborhood of the Delta country. It struck the bar at high water, and was soon a good mile from sufficient water to float her.²³

The *Ella* did eventually reach the mouth of the Nabesna River on July 24, 1905, and started upstream, but by that time it was very late in the season. They had little time to spare, otherwise the boat might get caught in the open and they would risk having it destroyed by ice floes during spring breakup.

Bratnober's sternwheeler *Ella* ascended the Nabesna to a point about 15 miles above the mouth, where his men unloaded the party's 40 ton load of supplies. Apparently the *Ella* then headed back down the Nabesna into the Tanana, and on below Fairbanks. The *Ella* did not make it to Dawson City by October 1, as Bratnober originally planned, and instead the boat spent the winter at Nenana.

Bratnober returned to Fairbanks on the *Ella*. He said he left four men in charge of his stockpile of provisions on the Nabesna, "who will devote their time toward opening copper mines in which the company is interested."²⁴

Walter Fisher, who spent the summer of 1905 prospecting in the Chisana and Nabesna valleys, gave an account in 1913 to the *Fairbanks Daily Times* of what happened to the Bratnober party.

In the fall of 1905, Mr. Fisher reports, the Bratnober outfit brought their boat *Ella* 15 miles up the Nabesna, where they unloaded their outfit and awaited the freezeup. As soon as the ground was in condition, they freighted over the ice to Camp Creek, a tributary of the Nabesna, where they did a lot of prospecting for copper. They staked a lot of ground, which has never been developed to any extent, owing to the poor transportation facilities. The last ever down with these claims was in 1908, when Jim Galen went in to represent the claims.²⁵

Bratnober believed that his trip on the *Ella* had been very successful. "I think this expedition will be the means of opening up a good district," he stated. Bratnober claimed that in the past he had seen tons of pure copper on the headwaters of the White, Chisana, and Nabesna rivers. Like all of the early twentieth century promoters and developers in Alaska, Bratnober thought that transportation meant just one thing: railroads. Only steel rails across the mountains could provide the cheap transportation costs that would bring millions of people to the country, as Bratnober and many others so fervently desired. Trails or roads could not quench the thirst of men with railroad fever. "It is no use to build wagon roads," Bratnober said while discussing the Nabesna, "for what would you do with them when built."²⁶

Bratnober hoped that the Copper River Railroad would be extended to the Nabesna and cross over the Fortymile District and the Yukon. Railroads were far

preferable to steamboats as far as convenience, speed, and shipping costs were concerned, but until the day when railroads would crisscross Alaska, the promoters would have to be satisfied with the continual hazards and inconvenience of river traffic, and expeditions like that of the *Ella*.

To promote the further development of the mineral resources of the Nabesna area, the United States Geological Survey sent a seven-man party into the district in 1908. They were equipped with 11 horses and had a large outfit, which had been brought in by sled the previous winter to their base camp at Sargent's cabin on the Nabesna, near the mouth of Camp Creek. At the time of their visit the stamp mill on Jacksina Creek was not in operation. Three men were working on the property, but no ore was being taken out. In 1907 the Royal Development Company had milled 60 tons of ore, but the season had not been as profitable as the company had hoped. Though the ore was assayed at \$30 worth of gold per ton, only about \$12 in gold was recoverable from each ton of ore, which was not enough to cover the high costs of operation and transportation.²⁷

The assessment work was done on the claims owned by the Royal Development Company until at least 1914, but like the claims staked by the Bratnober party, these too were allowed to lapse. About the time that the Royal Development prospect was abandoned, gold was discovered on the Chisana River, bringing a new phase of development to the upper Tanana region.

During the stampede, traffic on the Nabesna was not nearly as heavy as the traffic on the Chisana. From the Tanana River, it was shorter for a man to pole up the Nabesna to Sargent's Cabin and then cross through Cooper Pass to the diggings, than to pole up the Chisana. One party, which planned to take the Nabesna route, was headed by E.E. Dilley, who was in charge of transporting a two-kilowatt wireless plant to the Chisana for Fairbanks promoter Falcon Joslin. Dilley planned to have the steamer *White Seal* take him to the mouth of the

Nabesna River, and if possible he would send the wireless equipment up the Nabesna in poling boats. The *White Seal* had left too late in the season to make it to the mouth of the Nabesna, and Dilley had no opportunity to try his plan.²⁸ Most of the other stampeders however, wished to take their boats as close to the goldfields as possible, and for them the Chisana was the preferable route.

There was a great deal of boat traffic up the Tanana River from Fairbanks in the summer of 1913 with hundreds of stampeders on their way to the Chisana strike. The trip of the 291-ton sternwheeler *Reliance* in August of 1913 seemed to establish the mouth of the Nabesna as the upstream limit of navigation for large sternwheelers on the Tanana. The *Reliance* made a fast 12-day round trip between Fairbanks and the mouth of the Nabesna with little difficulty. Near the mouth of the Nabesna the freight and passengers on the sternwheeler was unloaded at a spot they called Reliance City. From here the stampeders had to pole their boats up the Chisana or Nabesna rivers, or go overland to the strike at the head of the Chisana.

When the steamboat men on the *Reliance* returned to Fairbanks after their trip to the mouth of the Nabesna, they had little good to say about the Nabesna River.

Officers of the steamboat state that the Nabesna River at its mouth is unnavigable for steamboats. The delta is wide and the water is very swift and very shallow. Even poling boats would have a hard time in getting up the river, although it is probably better water beyond the delta. The Chisana River, which, with the Nabesna, forms the Tanana, is, on the other hand, almost sluggish. It is very wide at the mouth, and full of islands, but it is very shallow, there being not more than one and one-half feet of water....

Most of the men who went up on the *Reliance* at once started over for the diggings, some in poling boats and some on foot. Tetlin Indians claimed

that they could go up the Nabesna and across to the Chisana, on foot, in three days, while it would take five days to pole up the Chisana. Some of these Indians were hired by the stampeder, some of who took the Chisana Route, others by way of the Nabesna.²⁹

Some of the men from the *Reliance* did decide to pole up the Nabesna. Four of those who poled up the river were Frank Lawson, Jack Biglow, Frank Carpenter, and J. C. Wood. Later in the year Carpenter gave an account of their trip up the Nabesna River after getting off the *Reliance*, to a Fairbanks newspaper.

When they were landed at the mouth of the Nabesna, it was decided to go in by poling up that stream and then crossing over the divide into the Chisana. With that intention Frank Lawson, Jack Biglow, and J. C. Wood started out, and proceeded with great difficulty as far upstream as Sargent's Cabin, which is located about sixty miles from its mouth. They then cached the boat and each carrying a pack, started over the summit.³⁰

The Lawson party did not go all the way into the Chisana, however, because about 25 miles short of the diggings they met some people they knew who described the poor conditions in the Chisana camp. After hearing the bad news, Lawson, Carpenter, Wood, and Biglow, retraced their steps and ran their poling boat back down the Nabesna from Sargent's Camp to the mouth of the river.

While taking their poling boat down the river, the four men met the 65-ton steamer *Tetlin* at a point about halfway between Sargent's Cabin and the mouth of the River. Lawson estimated that the *Tetlin* was about 35 miles above the mouth of the Nabesna. Lawson described the situation on the *Tetlin* when they passed it.

He told of having met the steamer *Tetlin* at a point 35 miles up the Nabesna River. The boat was unloaded and the passengers were preparing to strike out overland for the Chisana River. Dave Cascaden, who went up on the *Tetlin*, and several others expected to spend the winter prospecting in the

foothills between the two forks which compose the Nabesna and the Chisana. They have built a cache where the boat was unloaded, and will make that their base of supplies, relaying from time to time as they need the provisions. Everybody in the *Tetlin* party was well equipped and all were ready to spend the winter in the district.³¹

The *Tetlin* was a 65-ton sternwheeler under the command of Captain Northway. It had departed Fairbanks for the upper Tanana on July 29, drawing somewhere between 18 and 20 inches of water. The boat was carrying a "full crew" and six tons of supplies. She was a "high powered boat for her size" and appears to have been the largest boat ever brought any great distance up the Nabesna River. At the present it is not known for certain, but it appears that the *Tetlin* never got off the Nabesna. The remains of a sternwheeler that was wrecked during the Chisana stampede are reportedly still buried in the mud about 15 miles above the mouth of the Nabesna River. Though it has not been positively identified, it appears that the wreck may be that of the *Tetlin*.³²

Another party of stampeders came down the Nabesna in poling boats on their way back to Fairbanks, and they too said that they passed the steamer *Tetlin*. On the return of Pat O'Connor and Pete McDonald from the Chisana district the *Fairbanks Times* gave an account of their trip.

O'Connor and McDonald report that they started down the Nabesna River in a small boat with Lysle Brown and Billy Thorpe and that the craft upset and the greater part of the outfit was lost. Brown and Thorpe then joined Dave Cascaden, Hershberger, and Estby, who were starting on a prospecting trip from the Nabesna River across to the Chisana.

Later, McDonald and O'Connor were able to recover the boat, but the supplies were ruined. They then started downstream and picked up the other two men at the mouth of the Nabesna. While coming down the

Nabesna they passed the steamer *Tetlin*, which was hopelessly high and dry on a bar. The water had fallen so far that they do not think the boat can possibly get over this year. All of the crew had deserted the *Tetlin* and were making their way downriver as best they could.³³

In the early spring of 1914 the chances of moving the *Tetlin* from its resting place on a Nabesna River bar appeared to be good. The first steamer to reach Fairbanks from the upper Tanana in May of 1914 brought the following news: "The little steamer *Tetlin* is reported to be in good condition on the Nabesna River, and will come downstream as soon as conditions permit, which probably will be in a copy of weeks."³⁴ But the wreck was never moved.

Like most of the sternwheelers which ran on the western rivers of the United States in the age of steam, the riverboats which traveled on Alaskan rivers before and after the gold rush had short lives. Western riverboats were generally designed to carry a large amount of freight in shallow water; the boats were built at the lowest possible cost and were often poorly constructed.³⁵ Because of the nature of the shallow streams on which they operated, (steamboats captains sometimes joked they they could tap a keg of beer and run for miles on the suds) wrecks were frequent even on heavily traveled rivers.

In their history of steam navigation on the Brazos River in Texas, Puryear and Winfield describe the lives of the sternwheelers on that river. A similar account could be written about the short lifespans of the sternwheelers which operated in Alaska, like the *Tetlin*.

The life of a Brazos paddlewheeler was busy, hazardous, and short. Most boats endured only four to five years against the factors that conspired to sink them. This brevity of existence may be attributed in part to the attitude of the owners, who decreed that a steamboat should be built as cheaply as possible and exploited to the limit of its capability in order to

wring maximum profits from a short-term investment. Despite extravagant claims of staunchness, the western riverboat simply was not built to last--its hull was light, its superstructure flimsy. To secure maximum speed with shallow draft, builders sacrificed strength and rigidity of construction. The average steamer captain, more concerned with profit than safety, subjected his boat to persistent abuse....³⁶

Another account of the reasons why the *Tetlin* ascended the Nabesna River was given by the Captain of the *Tetlin* himself to a reporter from the *Cordova Daily Alaskan* in 1913. Captain Northway, who had a trading post near the mouth of the Nabesna River, and had spent the last six years in the upper Tanana, explained that he ascended the Nabesna because he was told that he could not make it up the Chisana. The newspaper article describing the interview with Northway states:

Captain Northway took a party of 18 from Fairbanks on his launch *Tetlin*. He had no trouble in reaching the mouth of the Nebesna [*sic*], but instead of continuing up to the Chisana he took the report of men coming down who stated that it would be impossible for him to get up. This he afterwards found to be incorrect. He succeeded in getting up the Nebesna [*sic*] about 30 miles. But he was then more than 60 miles from the diggings.

Among the men on the *Tetlin* were many old timers like Dave Cascaden, E. W. Hershberger, Ben Estby, Teddy Kittleson, T. Anderson, Lisle Brown, Mr. Report, and Mr. Thrift. These men all had at least 500 pounds each of grub and plenty of money.³⁷

The stranded passengers on the *Tetlin* started prospecting the tributaries of the Nabesna. Some good mining ground was located and there was even a small stampede to the creeks near the *Tetlin* in early September, 1913.³⁸

In summary, it was possible for Chisana stampeders to pole all the way up to Sargent's Cabin between 60 to 70 miles above the mouth of the Nabesna and then go overland to the diggings, on the major trail in the district. This route was definitely not as popular for men with poling boats as ascending the Chisana itself, where they could bring their boats far closer to the scene of the strike and not have to pack their supplies overland any great distance.

For a prospector or a trapper, a poling boat was as important as a modern American's family car; he went everywhere in it. A man could haul large quantities of freight and supplies in a poling boat drawing only a few inches of water.

During the Chisana stampede a large party of men without poling boats walked up the Nabesna River for a short distance, while enroute to the Chisana strike on foot. An account of their trip was given by C. W. Peterson, when he returned to Fairbanks in September 1913.

Mr. Peterson...left Fairbanks on the steamer *Reliance* on the night of August 6, and, together with the rest of the passengers, was landed at the mouth of the Nabesna River ten days later. Together with twenty companions, among whom were William Brown, formerly of the Eagle saloon; John Smith, of Cleary; Jack Allman, of Fairbanks; Oscar Enstrom of Eva Creek; Ben Holben, a cook; two men, both named Martin, and a man named Buchols, led by an Indian guide, he set out overland for the scene of the strike. They followed along the Nabesna River for about seven miles, after when they cut off between the two forks which form the Nabesna and Chisana, and landed on the latter stream within thirty miles of Wilson Creek (Chavolda Creek).³⁹

Another overland route through the Nabesna valley followed by many stampeders to the Chisana was the old Indian trail from Batzulnetas village in the

Copper River valley to the head of the White River, which crossed the upper Nabesna valley. The stampedeers knew this route as the Gulkana trail, and it entered the Nabesna valley through the heads of Jack or Platinum creeks. The trail crossed the Nabesna near Sargent's Cabin and then headed up Cooper Creek to Cooper Pass and down Notch Creek to the Chisana.⁴⁰ The stampedeers who poled boats about 60 miles up the Nabesna River to Sargent's cabin, continued their journey to the goldfields on the last portion of this trail through Cooper Pass.

Many stampedeers believed that the Gulkana trail was the best route to the Chisana diggings. The major obstacle along the route was crossing the Nabesna river itself. Jack Sullivan had his mule sink in the quicksand along the Nabesna, and it was only with great difficulty that he and his companions were able to pull the poor animal out.⁴¹

Despite the hazard of the quicksand along the Nabesna, two men who went all the way to the diggings on the trail from Gulkana, said they believed it would be possible to take a wagon in on the trail at least to the Nabensa River and perhaps as far as the Chisana River. Ed. Bartlett, Claud Kelly and two other men left Fairbanks with two wagons and four horses on August 1, 1913. They left one wagon at Gulkana and their plan was to take the other wagon loaded with supplies in as far as possible. It was reported they they used the wagon for at least 60 miles on the well-blazed Indian trail to the head of Platinum Creek. Kelly and Bartlett brought one of the "largest overland outfits" from Fairbanks to the Chisana in 1913 and in their opinion it was an excellent trail. Others who went in to the Chisana over the Gulkana trail with horses and outfits of varying sizes that summer included: Gene Huckins, Jess Myers, George Hainsinger, Bert Johnson, Horace Huddleston, Frank Huddleston, Phil Lynch, Jim Mogan, N. Barbettini, Theodore Rehn, T. Calvin, Neil McLeod, Frank Manley, Arthur McNeer, and H. I. Miller. The USGS stated that during times of high water both the Nabesna and

Chisana "are dangerous if not practically impassable."⁴² For many years, however, the overland trail across the Nabesna was a major route to the Chisana mining district.

The gravel bars in the Nabesna River were described by the USGS as being good grazing ground for livestock. In his 1943 report on the geology of the Nutzotin Mountains Fred Moffit wrote:

Certain parts of the district support stock in both winter and summer. They are places where either the snow does not become so deep that the horses cannot dig out the feed or where the wind keeps the ground bare. The bars of the Nabensa River illustrate both these conditions, and they have supported from 25 to 30 horses in winter for many years.⁴³

Overland access to the Nabesna was greatly increased when the Alaska Road Commission completed construction of the Nabesna Road to Nabesna in 1933, replacing dogsleds, caterpillars, and pack trains, with automobiles and trucks.⁴⁴ At that time one of the richest gold lode mines ever discovered in Alaska was in full production on Jacksina Creek, the old Nabesna Mine, and a fleet of trucks began hauling the ore out over the new road.

The old Nabesna mine which had first been discovered by K. J. Fjeld in 1899, had a series of owners after the Royal Development Company abandoned the prospect at the time of the Chisana stampede. Finally, in 1924, Carl Whitham, one of the original discoverers of the lode mine and a veteran of the Chisana stampede, restaked the claims on Jacksina Creek for himself.⁴⁵

The Nabesna Mining Corporation was formed in the fall of 1929 to develop the mine. Carl Whitham was the President and General Manager. In a paper by Russell G. Wayland, "Gold Deposits Near Nabesna," published by the geological survey in 1943, the author gives a summary of the operations of the Nabesna mine.

A tram was built to the mill site at the base of the cliff, and by the summer of 1931 a small mill was in operation and a permanent camp under construction. The scale of operation was gradually expanded until the mill was treating about 60 tons of ore a day, and the operating season reached a year-round basis in 1935. The mill recovery increased from 50 to 90 percent, and the costs were reduced to permit the mining of ore carrying only \$15 worth of gold to the ton...

Work on the 250-foot level began in 1931 and on the 650-foot level in 1933. After 1936 almost all stoping was done between the 250 and 450-foot levels. In 1937 the important No. 49 vein was discovered. Most of the known veins were worked out by early 1939. Since that time much disappointing development work has been done, and it now appears as if the mine may be exhausted. The gross production by the end of 1940 was \$1,869,396.⁴⁶

Before the road was constructed, ore from the mine was flown out from the Nabesna airstrip, which was known as Reeve Field and was located on a bar in the Nabesna River. As in other parts of Alaska, the airplane revolutionized transportation in the area. Eventually, the runway at Nabesna was 13,000 feet long and 200 feet wide, and one of the largest strips in any of the outlying areas in interior Alaska.⁴⁷

A major airstrip was also built at Northway during World War II along the Air Transport Command route for lend-lease aircraft. According to a military historian, James D. Bush, who described World War II construction projects in Alaska, the Northway base was built with supplies and equipment hauled by small river boats seven miles up the Nabesna to Northway, above Northway Indian Village and Nabesna Village. "Small river boats of 45-ton capacity," Bush wrote, "can travel p the Tanana River from Big Delta to the Nabesna River, thence approximately seven miles upstream to the Northway garrison."⁴⁸

On the lower miles of the Nabesna River traffic was extremely heavy, and still is today. The traders on the lower Nabesna regularly brought their large 40-foot freight boats up to Nabesna village. The sphere of influence of the traders extended a much shorter distance up the Nabesna River than it did up the Chisana River. Ted Lowell said that the farthest he ever ascended the Nabesna was about 15 miles by dogteam to the spot where the wreck of the steamer *Tetlin* lies. McKennan, however, noted that the band of Indians at Nabesna Village near the mouth of the river, ranged "well up the Nabesna Valley." In his description of their seasonal movements in search of food, McKennan states that the Nabesna Indians often went fishing during the summer far upstream at a small lake where the Nabesna cuts through the Nutzotin Mountains.⁴⁹

In the past, men searching for gold travelled up and down the Nabesna and Chisana rivers in little handmade boats. Few of the people who float down the Nabesna or Chisana in the future, will make their way in boats made of whipsawed lumber, but the fiberglass boats and rubber rafts that will be used by the readers of Sepp Weber's book are about the same size as the cruder craft which were used to navigate these rivers eighty years ago.

FOOTNOTES

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2. Robert A. McKennan, *The Upper Tanana Indians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 18; F. H. Moffit, *Geology of the Nutzotin Mountains, Alaska*, USGS Bulletin No. 933-B (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 100.
3. Brooks, *A Reconnaissance in the Tanana and White River Basins*, pp. 439-440.
4. Alfred Hulse Brooks, *A Reconnaissance from Pyramid Harbor to Eagle City, Alaska*, 21st Annual Report of the USGS, Part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), pp. 339, 351.
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10. *Valdez News*, July 26, August 16, 1902.
11. *Alaska Prospector*, January 29, 1903.
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16. Ibid., August 2, 1906.
17. *Valdez News*, September
18. *Alaska Prospector*, January 17, 1907.
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20. *Valdez News*, September 26, October 3, 1903.
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22. *Dawson Daily News*, June 22, 1905.
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29. Ibid., August 19, 1913.
30. Ibid., September 9, 1913.
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32. Ibid., July 29, 30, 1913.
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34. Ibid., May 19, 1914.
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36. P. A. Puryear and N. Winfield, *Sandbars and Sternwheelers* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1976), pp. 39-40.
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39. *Fairbanks Daily Times*, September 9, 1913.
40. Ibid., August 1, 1913.
41. Ibid., September 20, 1913.
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