

The Story of Alaska

by Rupert S. Holland

In the far northwestern corner of North America is a land that has had few stirring scenes in its history. It is an enormous tract, close to the Arctic Sea, and far from the busy cities of the United States. Not until long after the English, French, and Spanish discoverers had explored the country in the Temperate Zone did any European find Alaska. Even when it was found it seemed to offer little but ice-fields and desolate prairies, leading to wild mountain ranges that did not tempt men to settle. Seal hunters came and went, but generally left the native Indians in peace. Most of these hunters came from Siberia, for the Russians were the first owners of this land.

An officer in the Russian Navy named Vitus Bering found the strait that is called by his name in 1728. Some years later he was sent into the Arctic Sea again by the Empress Anne of Russia to try to find the wonderful country that Vasco de Gama had sought. He sailed in summer, and after weathering heavy storms finally reached Kayak Island on St. Elias Day, July 17, 1741, and named the great mountain peak in honor of that saint. More storms followed, and soon afterward the brave sailor was shipwrecked and drowned off the Comandorski Islands. His crew managed to get back to Siberia, having lived on the meat of the seals they were able to shoot. Russian traders saw the sealskins they brought home, and sent out expeditions to obtain more furs. Some returned richly laden, but others were lost in storms and never heard from. There was so much danger in the hunting that it was not until 1783 that Russian merchants actually established trading-posts in Alaska. Then a rich merchant of Siberia named Gregory Shelikoff built a post on Kadiak Island, and took into partnership with him a Russian named Alexander Baranof. Baranof built a fort on an island named for him, some three miles north of the present city of Sitka. The two men formed the Russian American Fur Company, and Baranof became its manager in America.

One day a seal hunter came to Baranof at his fortress, and took from his pocket a handful of nuggets and scales of gold. He held them out to the Russian, and said that he knew where many more like them were to be found. "Ivan," said Baranof, "I forbid you to seek for any more. You must not say a word about this, or there will be trouble. If the Americans or the English know that there is gold in these mountains we will be ruined. They will rush in here by the thousands, and crowd us to the wall." Baranof was a fur merchant, and did not want to see miners flocking to his land, as his company was growing rich from the seals and fur-trading with the natives.

Little by little, however, the news leaked out that the northwestern country had rich minerals, and soon the King of Spain began to covet some of that wealth for himself. The Spaniards claimed that they owned all of the country that had not yet been mapped out, and they sent an exploring party, under Perez, to make charts of the northwest. Perez sailed along the coast, and finding two capes, named them Santa Margarita and Santa Magdalena, but beyond that he did little to help the cause of Spain. Some years later exploring parties were sent out from Mexico, but they found that the wild ice-covered country was already claimed by the Russians, and that the Czar had no intention of giving it up. Other nations, therefore, soon ceased to claim it, and the Russian hunters and traders were allowed to enjoy the country in peace.

Alexander Baranof made a great success of the trade in skins, but the men who took his place were not equal to him. The company began to lose money, and the Czar of Russia decided that the country was too far away from his capital to be properly looked after. The United States finally made an offer to buy

the great territory from the Czar, although the government at Washington was not very anxious to make the purchase. The tract, large as it was, did not seem to promise much, and it was almost as far from Washington as it was from St. Petersburg. The Czar was quite willing to sell, however, and so the United States bought the country from him in 1867, paying him \$7,200,000 for it.

On a fine October afternoon in 1867 Sitka Bay saw the Stars and Stripes flying from three United States war-ships, while the Russian Eagle waved from the flagstaffs and houses in the small town. On the shore soldiers of the two nations were drawn up in front of the old castle, and officers stood waiting at the foot of the flagpole on the parade ground. Then a gun was fired from one of the United States war-ships, and instantly the Russian batteries returned the salute. A Russian officer lowered his country's flag from the parade ground pole, and an American pulled the Stars and Stripes to the peak. Guns boomed and regimental bands played, and then the Russian troops saluted and left the fortress, and the territory became part of the United States.

Up to that time the country had been known as Russian America, but now a new name had to be found. Some suggested American Siberia, and others the Zero Islands; but an American statesman, Charles Sumner, urged the name of Alaska, a native word meaning "the Great Land," and this was the name that was finally adopted.

It took many years to explore the western part of the United States, and men who were in search of wealth in mines and forests did not have to go as far as Alaska to find it. That bleak country was separated from the United States by a long, stormy sea voyage on the Pacific, or a tedious and difficult overland journey through Canada. Alaska might have remained for years as little known as while Russia owned it had it not been for a small party of men who set out to explore the Yukon and the Klondike Rivers.

On June 16, 1897, a small ship called the *Excelsior* sailed into San Francisco Harbor, and half an hour after she had landed at her wharf the news was spreading far and wide that gold had been discovered in large quantities on the Klondike. Some of the men had gone out years before; some only a few months earlier, but they all brought back fortunes. Not one had left with less than \$5,000 in gold, gathered in nuggets or flakes, in tin cans, canvas bags, wooden boxes, or wrapped up in paper. The cry of such sudden wealth was heard by many adventurers, and the old days of 'Forty-Nine in California began over again when the wild rush started north to the Klondike.

On June 17th another ship, the *Portland*, arrived at Seattle, with sixty more miners and \$800,000 in gold. This was the largest find of the precious mineral that had been made anywhere in the world, and Seattle followed the example of San Francisco in going gold-crazy. Immediately hundreds of people took passage on the outward bound steamers, and hundreds more were turned away because of lack of room. Ships set out from all the seaports along the Pacific coast of the United States, and from the Canadian ports of Victoria and Vancouver. As in the old days of 1849 men gave up their business to seek the gold fields, but now they had to travel to a wilder and more desolate country than California had been.

There were many ways of getting to the Klondike country. Those who went by ocean steamer had to transfer to flat-bottomed boats to go up the Yukon River. This was the easiest route, but the boats could only be used on the Yukon from June until September, and the great rush of gold-seekers came later that autumn. A second route was by the Chilkoot trail, which had been used for many years by miners going into the country of the Yukon. Over this trail horses could be used as far as the foot of the great Chilkoot Pass, but from there luggage had to be carried by hand. Another trail, much like this one, was

the White Pass trail, but it led through a less-known country than the Chilkoot, and was not so popular. The Canadian government laid out a trail of its own, which was called "the Stikeen route," and which ran altogether through Canadian territory. Besides these there were innumerable other roads through the mountains, and along the rivers; but the farther men got from the better known trails the more danger they were in of losing their way, or suffering from hunger and hardships.

Towns blossomed along the coast of Alaska almost over night, but they were strange looking villages. The ships that landed at Skagway in the summer of 1897 found a number of rough frame houses, with three or four larger than the rest which hung out hotel signs. The only government officer lived in a tent over which flew the flag of the United States. The passengers landed their outfits themselves, for labor was scarce, and found shelter wherever they could until they might start on the trail.

No one seemed to know much about the country they were going through, but fortunately most of the men were experienced woodsmen. They loaded their baggage on their packhorses, and started out, ready for any sort of country they might have to cross. Sometimes the trail lay over miry ground, where a false step to the right or left would send the horses or men deep into the bog; sometimes it led up steep and rocky mountainsides, where a man had to guard his horse's footing as carefully as his own; and much of the way was in the bed of an old river, where each step brought a splash of mud, and left the travelers at the end of the day spattered from head to foot. The journey was harder on the horses than on the men. The heavy packs they carried, and the wretched footing, caused them to drop along the road from time to time, and then the travelers had to make the best shift they could with their luggage. Had the men journeyed alone, or in small companies, they would have suffered greatly, but the Chilkoot trail was filled with miners who were ready to help each other, and to give encouragement to any who lagged behind. At Dyea they came to an old Alaskan settlement, an Indian trading post, where a number of native tribes lived in their little wooden cabins. These men were the Chilkats, the Stikeen Indians, and the Chilkoots, short, heavy men, with heads and eyes more like Mongolians than like American Indians. Both men and women were accustomed to painting their faces jet black or chocolate brown, in order to protect their eyes and skin from the glare of the sunlight on the snow. The traveler could here get Indians to act as guides, or if he had lost his horses might obtain dogs and sleds to carry some of his packs.

Each of the little settlements through which the travelers went boasted of a hotel, usually a frame building with two or three large rooms. Each day meals were served to three or four hundred hungry travelers at rude board tables, and at night the men would spread their blankets on the floor and lie down to sleep. But as the trail went farther inland these little settlements grew fewer, and the men had to find whatever shelter they could. From Dyea they pushed on through the Chilkoot Pass, where the cliffs rose high above them. The winds blew cold from the north, and the mists kept everything wet. In the Pass some men turned back, finding the trip too difficult. Those who went on met with increasing hardships. They came to a place called Sheep Camp, where a stream of water and rocks from the mountain top had swept down upon a town of tents and carried them all away. Stories of similar happenings at other places were passed from mouth to mouth along the trail. More men turned back, finding such accidents a good excuse, and only the most determined stuck to the road.

In time they came to a chain of lakes and rivers. The travelers stopped to build rude boats and paddles, and navigated them as best they could. The rivers were full of rapids, and it was only by a miracle that the little clumsily-built skiffs went dancing over the waters safely, and escaped the jutting rocks on either bank. In the rivers there was good trout fishing, and in the wild country good hunting, and Indian boys brought game to the tents at night. To the trees at each stopping-place papers were fastened, telling of the marvelous adventures of the miners who had just gone over the trail. As they neared

Dawson City they found the Yukon River more and more covered with floating ice, and travel by boat became harder. After a time the oars, paddles, gunwales, and all the baggage in the boats was encrusted with ice, and the boatmen had to make their way slowly among the floes. Then they came to a turn in the river, and on the bank saw a great number of tents and people. "How far is it to Dawson?" the boatman would call. "This is Dawson. If you don't look out you'll be carried past," the men on shore answered. Paddles were thrust into the ice, and the boat brought to shore. The trip from Seattle had so far taken ninety-two days.

Food was scarce in Dawson, and men were urged to leave as soon as they could. Winter was now setting in, and the miners traveled with dog teams and sleds to the place where they meant to camp. Little work could be done in the winter, and the time was spent in preparing to work the gold fields in the early spring. All through the cold weather the men talked of the fortunes waiting for them, and when the warm weather came they staked out their claims and set to work. Stories of fabulous finds spread like wild-fire, and those who were not finding gold rushed to the places that were proving rich. That summer many new towns sprang up, and in a few weeks the Bonanza and Eldorado mines made their owners rich, and all the tributaries of the Klondike River were yielding a golden harvest.

When men found land that they thought would prove rich they made haste to claim it. Sometimes wild races followed, rivals trying to beat each other to the government offices at Dawson in order to claim the land. Frequently after such a wild race the claim would amount to nothing, while another man, who had picked out some place that no one wanted, would find a rich lode and make a fortune from it. Then there would be great excitement, for sudden wealth usually went to the miner's head. He would go down to Dawson, and spend his money freely, while every one in the town would crowd around him to share in his good luck. One of the most successful was a Scotchman, Alexander McDonald. At the time of the Klondike strike he was employed by a company at the town of Forty-Mile. He had a little money and began to buy separate pieces of land. He could not afford the rich ground, but managed to purchase more than forty claims through the Klondike. At the end of that first season his fortune was said to be \$5,000,000, and might well have been more, as all his claims had not been fully worked. He was called "the King of the Klondike," and pointed out to newcomers as an example of what men might do in the gold fields.

That was only the beginning of the story of the Alaskan gold fields, and each year brought news of other discoveries. But the one season of 1897 was enough to prove the great value of Alaska, and to show that the United States had done well to buy that great territory from the Czar of Russia. Yet gold is only a small part of its riches, and even should the fields of the Klondike yield no more of the precious mineral, the seals, the fur trade, and the cities springing up along its coast are worth much more than the \$7,000,000 paid for it. It is still a land of adventure, one of the few waste places that beckon men to come and find what wealth lies hidden within its borders.

Source:

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