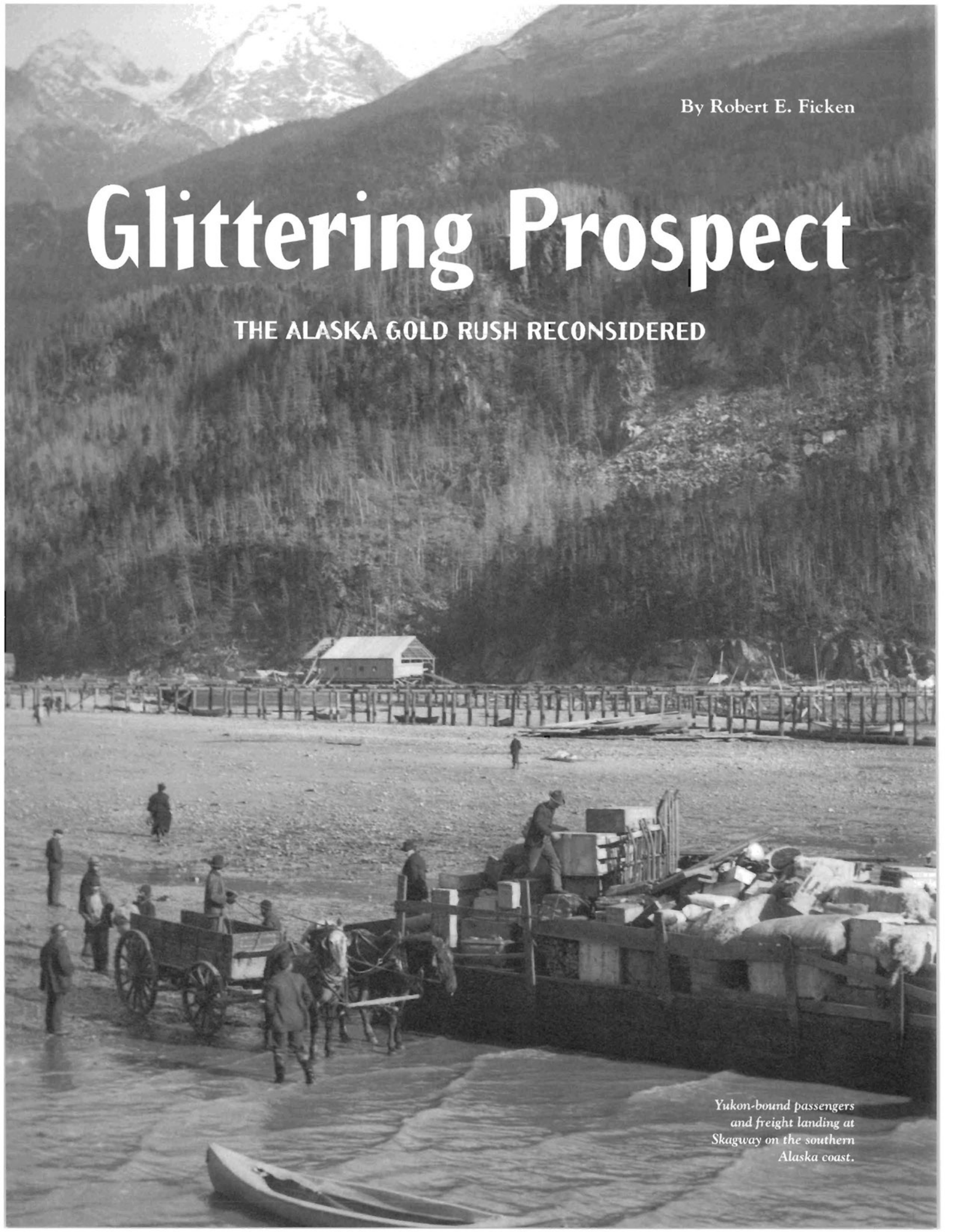




By Robert E. Ficken

Glittering Prospect

THE ALASKA GOLD RUSH RECONSIDERED

Yukon-bound passengers
and freight landing at
Skagway on the southern
Alaska coast.

On July 17, 1897, the steamship *Portland*, entering the Strait of Juan de Fuca inbound from the summertime ports of southern Alaska, met a flotilla of tugboats chartered by headline-hungry reporters for the newspapers of Puget Sound. The basic, and truly amazing, details were ready for printing by the time the vessel tied up that evening in Seattle. At least \$700,000 in gold lay, by conservative accounting, in the *Portland*'s heavily guarded storeroom. The passengers, moreover, stood ready to carry unknown additional amounts of dust ashore, concealed in baggage or about their unkempt persons. "There has never been," the *Post-Intelligencer* proclaimed in the first of several gold rush special editions, "anything like the strike in the Klondike since the famous days of California nearly fifty years ago."

Residents of Seattle, paying rapt attention to the stories told by miners debarking from the *Portland*, went "stark, staring mad on gold," or so claimed a visiting eastern journalist. Touring the docks, former territorial governor Eugene Semple described the waterfront as "crowded with knots of men so worked up over the news that they can scarcely avoid being run over by the cars." The talk, along with the subsequent history, focused on the sudden and unexpected opening of a new mining frontier in the frozen north. Alaska, claimed many of the wise men and women on the scene, would bring

prospectors spent the winter of 1890 in the drainage of the upper Yukon River, the diggings about Forty Mile Creek serving as the focus of attention. Although early returns were somewhat disheartening, enough good claims were sited, according to one enthusiast, "to convince the most skeptical that Alaska is one of the most extensive mineral sections in existence." Miners returning to Washington state revealed "the secrets" of the Yukon—"that hitherto strange country"—to a receptive audience. The basic routes to the diggings, as well as the many obstacles to be overcome, were soon widely known. "The summer lasts only about sixty days," returnees pointed out in stressing the limited season for work, "and the ground is so frozen that the summer heat has but little effect upon it." Supplies might easily run short, especially if riverboats were delayed by accident or unfavorable water conditions.

Visions of gold triumphed over concerns of practicality, however, accounting for sustained interest in the northern mines. By 1893 Forty Mile Creek was, as a letter from the Yukon advised, "thoroughly prospected from one end to the other." New discoveries that year focusing on Circle City, another point accessible by river steamer, ignited a "rush to Alaska... in dead earnest." Vessels sailed from Puget Sound "loaded" to the "gunwhales [sic] with prospectors." Over the summer and in succeeding working seasons, a thousand miners labored on

By 1893 Forty Mile Creek was "thoroughly prospected from one end to the other."

to an end the long economic nightmare known as the Panic of 1893. With the homeport docking of the *Portland* serving as a perfect symbol of the relationship, Seattle was destined to become the leading city of the Pacific Northwest by virtue of its natural monopoly of the Alaskan trade. Soon established as firm tenets in the popular conception of regional history, these assertions were, at best, gross exaggerations representing the triumph of myth over fact.

For one thing, the intrepid seaborne reporters had rushed to meet the *Portland* because of the news telegraphed two days before that another treasure-bearing steamship, the *Excelsior*, had already arrived in San Francisco. There was nothing new about the Alaska-Puget Sound connection. By 1890 at least five ocean-going vessels served a regularly scheduled route from Seattle and Tacoma, the cities selected by the federal government for the handling of all mail to and from Alaska. Canneries in the north shipped frozen halibut and cod to tidewater railheads in western Washington. At an early date Alaska also became a popular tourist destination for wealthy excursionists eager to view the fjords, glaciers, and other natural wonders. "Every visitor," a Seattle newspaper noted in 1891, "has returned an enthusiastic missionary, so that the... journey from Puget Sound to Alaska promises to become [the] most popular of all American recreative sports." Coming and going, travelers filled hotels, dined at restaurants, and patronized outfitters, all to the benefit of business enterprise along the shores of Puget Sound.

Persons more interested in the accumulation of wealth than in scenery were also drawn north to Alaska. Two hundred

the stream bars and along the banks. Exploration began, meanwhile, for a more direct land route to the Yukon, by way of one of the passes looming above the lower Alaskan coastline.

Large numbers of men went north again in the spring of 1897. The latest reports were "of a nature to stir the blood of the '49er," causing a thousand fortune-seekers a month to sail from the ports of Puget Sound alone. Trade patterns and rivalries were by now well-established, the sale of "outfits" to Alaska-bound prospectors having long since become a rare depression-era lucrative enterprise. Beginning in 1890, Tacoma's chamber of commerce sent annual delegations to the Yukon to exploit business opportunities. Seattle, as even Tacomans conceded, soon took the lead in the competition but hardly monopolized the jumping-off trade as other Puget Sound urban centers, along with Portland and San Francisco, also vigorously engaged in the commercial contest. All points south of the 49th parallel worried that British Columbia might secure the advantage, especially if rumors about the best deposits being in Canadian, as opposed to American, territory turned out to be true.

Carried aboard the *Portland* in July 1897, the evidence of the great strike at Dawson—the recently opened camp on the indisputably Canadian upper Yukon River—represented more of a long-anticipated culmination than a stunning surprise. The gold-laden steamer arrived at its Washington port-of-call in the aftermath of another significant regional development—recovery from the economic collapse of the 1890s. Certain signs of improvement had become evident earlier in the year. Recording an upswing in trade, merchants



celebrated the "general revival which is always certain to follow a...period of depression." More building permits were issued in Spokane in March than for any month since the beginning of the depression. "Traveling men" returning from eastern Washington reported that sales were "better than they have been in five years." Completing a long and complex reorganization process, America's railroads hired 100,000 new workers in the spring and early summer.

Lumbering, the principal economic activity west of the Cascades, showed renewed signs of life in the first half of 1897, heavy eastbound shipments along the trans-continental rail lines reflecting the emerging status of the Pacific Northwest as the nation's premier forest products region. Frederick Weyerhaeuser and other Great Lakes investors appeared on the scene, intent upon acquisition of increasingly valuable Washington timberland. On the far side of the mountains wheat ranching also exhibited unmistakable evidence of returning prosperity. Early season quotations were the highest in half a decade, and the railroads, in anticipation of the largest crop in Washington history, scrambled to assemble rolling stock. Mining recovered, with active camps in the Okanogan and in the Kootenay country north of the

ABOVE: Seattle merchants dominated the supply trade to Alaska.

RIGHT: Steamers sailed from Puget Sound ports to Alaska regularly.

FAR RIGHT & LOWER RIGHT: Pamphlets, booklets, and a variety of other print pieces offered advice to Klondike-bound prospectors.

49th parallel looking to Spokane for supplies and capital.

Manifest signs of this recovery accounted in large part for the caution urged by establishment voices in the immediate aftermath of the *Portland's* arrival. "Those who know when they are well off will stay where they are," a Tacoma editor advised in pointing to the already resurgent Puget Sound economy. Similar expressions appeared in the Seattle press. "All who go in search of fortunes do not make them," the *P-I* asserted, proverb style. "Don't let anybody lose his head because of the discovery of the new gold fields," the *Times* pronounced. The Klondike diggings about Dawson were, after all, thousands of hard water and land miles distant. Those prospectors booking immediate passage would arrive before the first deep snow, but too late to stake claims. Gold hunters waiting until August to depart could expect to be stalled on the Alaskan coast until the spring of 1898, river navigation having ceased for the season. The recently charted direct trails by White Pass from Skagway and by Chilkoot Pass from Dyea would, in the meantime, have been choked by horrific drifts. Individuals planning a trip north, therefore, ought to "think twice" and remember that ample wealth-

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ALASKA

THE PIONEER

CUT RATES to Alaska
Cabin \$10. 2nd Class \$15.

PACIFIC COAST STEAMSHIP CO.

AL-I

All Newly Refitted, New Upper Deck
Commodious Second-Class Passengers
WILL SAIL FOR

TACOMA

Tuesday, Oct. 25th

Mary Island. Ketchikan. V
Juneau, Douglas Is.

Klondike

Entered at Sea

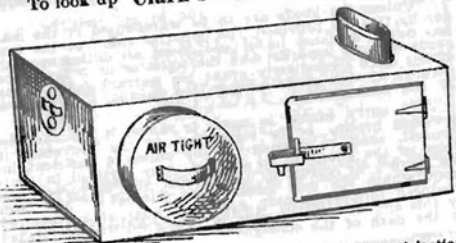
Vol. I.

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DO NOT FORGET

To look up Clark's Air-Tight Camp Stove



It will hold fire longer, burn less wood and give better satisfaction than any stove that has gone into Alaska. We have had positive proof of this from Dawson City and the trail. Do not let some of those out-fitters tell you they have the best candle lantern in the anything better. We also make the best candle lantern in the anything better. If you cannot find them at your out-fitters, call at headquarters. T. F. Clark & Co., 918 Western Ave., Seattle

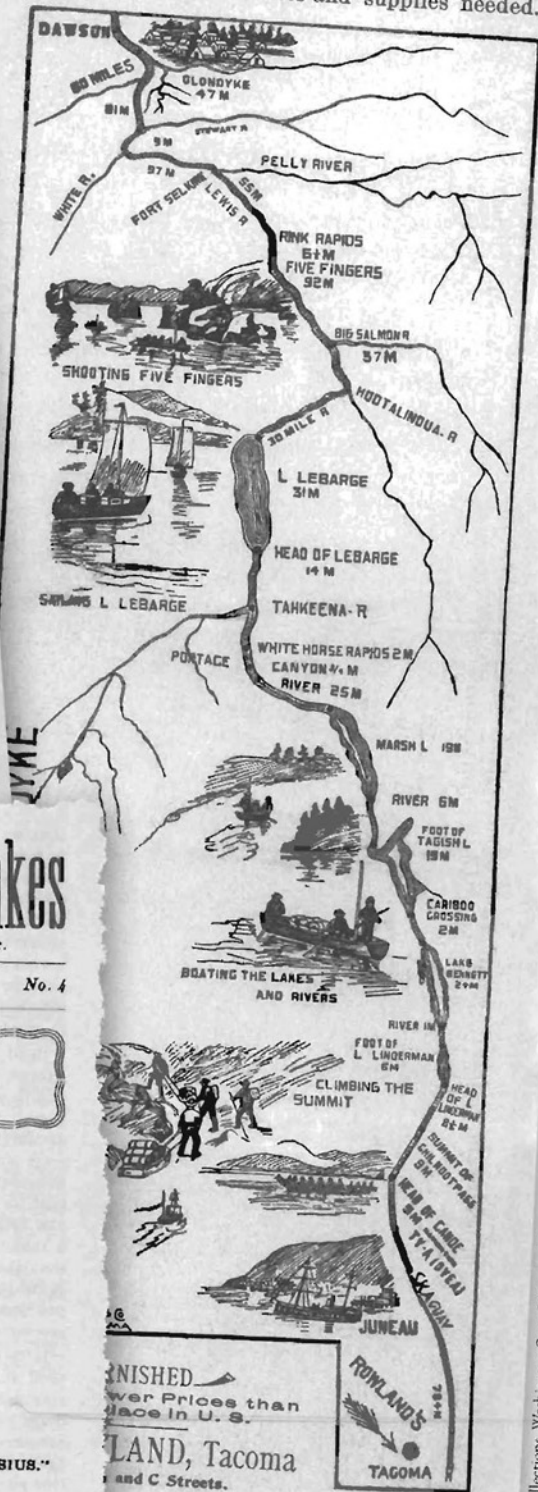
Klondike publications were bursting with ads for all manner of supplies and equipment aimed at prospectors outfitting for their journey north.

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1898
W. G. ROWLAND'S
MAP TO
THE KLONDIKE GOLD MINES

Preserve this map. You will find it very useful, and be able to tell your exact location when on your journey. For full particulars send 25c postal note for one of our books giving full information, steamer routes and supplies needed.



gathering opportunities were readily and safely available at home in the state of Washington.

Sober and entirely rational advice was widely ignored as an entire region fell victim to the so-called "Klondicitis" epidemic. The business life of interior Washington towns all but shut down once their energetic male residents sped away to Puget Sound embarkation points, cash in hand. Wharves buckled under the weight of supplies, equipment, and waiting passengers. According to understated official vessel manifests, some 2,000 miners sailed aboard the first outbound steamers, convinced that the Yukon was the greatest thing since the Sierra Nevada of 1849.

Easterners also convinced themselves that Alaska was "the new California." Western Union operators transmitted 50,000 words of golden news within 48 hours of the Portland's docking. Exaggerated reports that \$2 million in dust had been landed stimulated fervent interest. By the end of August, an estimated 10,000 fortune-hunters had found their way to Washington, most going to Seattle, which was thought to be the place where letters to and from home were best handled. Viewing the initial horde, local observers predicted that 100,000 prospectors would descend upon Puget Sound before spring. "You may expect to see throngs of enthusiasts taking the roads to Seattle," Eugene Semple wrote a distant friend, "very much as the religious fanatics did in the first Crusade."

A mind-set common to all gold rushes explained the general failure to heed initial cautionary advice. "The more reports are circulated about the hardships and perils of the country," one onlooker pointed out, "the more intense the desire of adventurous men and women to go to the front." For some, the prospect of wilderness adventure triumphed over reason. Worn out by the depression, many sought instant financial redemption. The majority would undoubtedly fail to find gold, but a few could expect to obtain riches, a lottery-like calculation sure to overwhelm rational analysis.

Prospectors clearly intended to make the journey in 1897, so Washington residents might as well profit from the hysteria. Arguments stressing the dangers of the trip and the wisdom of waiting at least for spring were quickly set aside as expressions of commercial disloyalty. The hazards, the *Post-Intelligencer* belatedly revealed, were in truth "astonishingly small." The Alaskan working season turned out to be, upon close counting room inspection, much longer than previously reported, coincidentally verging on year-round status at the most promising sites. The only genuine threat to life and limb came from possible pirate attack on south-bound gold ships. "Wintering," in a further happy measure of revisionism, was "not as unpleasant as might be supposed." Difficulties should be anticipated, but "they may be overcome by individual effort, requiring neither capital, machinery, nor organized labor."

Mercantile enterprises of all kinds sought to make money from the exodus. Pacific County firms sent fresh Willapa Bay oysters, packed in five-gallon cans, to Alaska for transit across

"Steamers which have for years been in the 'boneyards' have been repainted and hastily refitted."

the passes to delicacy-craving Dawson gourmards. Puget Sound and Grays Harbor sawmills shipped vast amounts of lumber to Skagway and Dyea for construction of wharves and buildings. Outfitting, though, was the easiest means for stay-at-home Washingtonians to benefit from the gold rush.

"When it is considered that an outfit includes sufficient necessities to last at least one year," a commentator noted, "it will be seen that the business...will increase enormously." Self-appointed experts advised that each miner take, in addition to clothing and tools, 1,000 pounds of provisions, including 400 pounds of flour, 100 pounds each of beans and sugar, and 10 of coffee. When not quarreling among themselves, all Washington supply points insisted that the lowest priced and highest quality goods were obtainable on Puget Sound, rather than in Alaska or the Canadian Yukon.

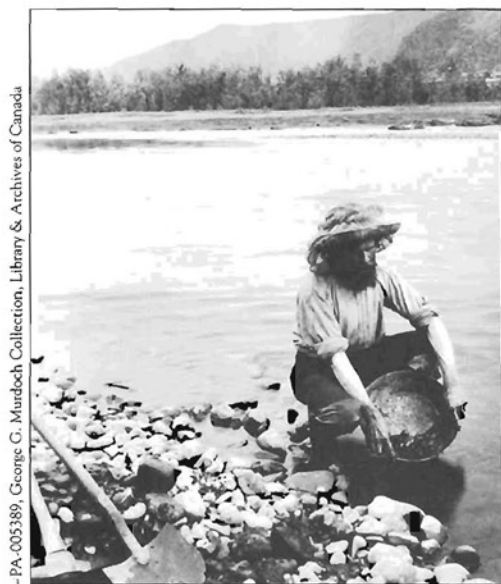
Chauncey Griggs, the managing partner of the St. Paul & Tacoma Lumber Company complex on Commencement Bay, reported "doing about two or three thousand dollars of Klondike business daily" at his firm's waterfront general store. The attention devoted to Alaska was therefore an easily comprehended phenomenon. The advertising pages in a single issue of the Port Townsend newspaper reflected a region-wide preoccupation. Waterman & Katz, a local emporium, claimed to "make it a specialty fitting out Klondike gold-seekers." Grocers and boot-makers proffered food and footwear "for the Klondike!" Wright's, another Port Townsend store, held in stock 1,000 "complete and accurate guides, giving the distances between points and maps of the Klondike and Yukon." The Townsend Awning Company had tents "and all kinds of Canvas" ready for sale "at short notice" to departing "Klondikers." Establishments specializing in items of minimal utility in the north worked gold rush themes into their ads. "Some Say 'Ho!' for Klondyke!," proclaimed a bicycle seller. "We Say 'Ho!' for a Good Bike—Cheap!"

Because miners could not find gold without first getting to Alaska, transportation was another obvious source of profit. The "tremendous demand for passenger and freight room" created truly golden opportunities in the first weeks of the rush. The large Washington sawmill concerns, longtime operators of subsidiary shipping fleets, sold off "old hulks" at unexpectedly lucrative prices. The same lumbering firms also served huge fees from charters, the Port Blakely Mill Company, for instance, earning \$40,000 from a single voyage to the mouth of the Yukon River. Schooners and other sailing craft, vessels previously regarded as unsuitable for Alaskan waters, were also pressed into service, decks piled high with unstable cargo. Puget Sound yards, meanwhile, set to in earnest constructing steamships and riverboats for the Alaska trade.

Given the money-making opportunities, dreadful abuses were an inevitable feature of the maritime business. Traveling aboard the Seattle-owned *Humboldt* in August 1897, inexperienced easterners found that the fine print on their tickets required them to work the substandard vessel all the way to the Yukon River. The humbugged passengers at least arrived safely, a luxury often denied Alaska-bound prospectors. "Steamers which have for years been in the 'boneyards'..." a contemporary investigation revealed, "have been repainted and hastily refitted." Federal surveys supposedly guaranteed the "safe condition" of all ocean-going vessels, a reassuring declaration compromised by the willingness of corrupt inspectors to exercise thorough nondiligence. The ancient and federally

BELOW LEFT: Prospectors used traditional means to pan for gold along the Yukon River.

BELOW RIGHT: Harsh weather made for difficult conditions of life and work in the Yukon country.

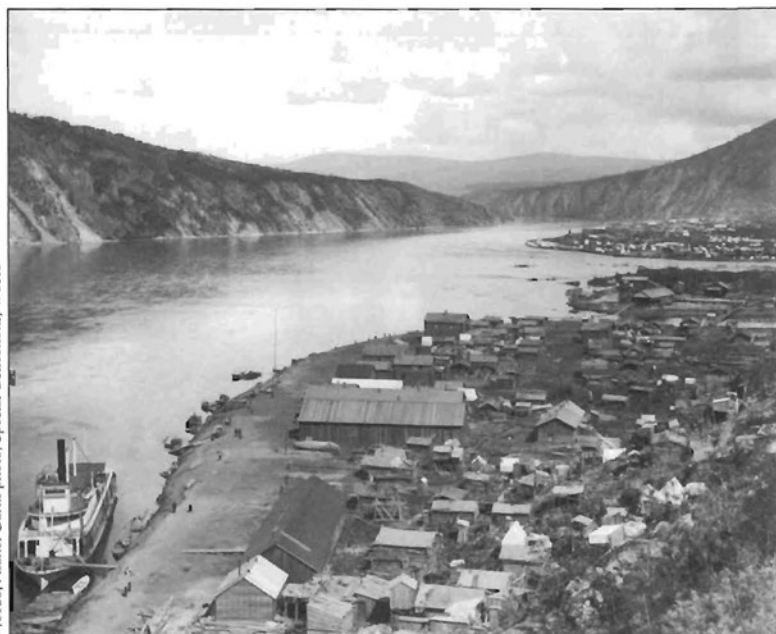


approved *Eliza Anderson*, rotting on the tide flats after four decades of heavy duty on Puget Sound, sailed in September without lifeboats, eventually ran out of coal, and wound up on the beach well short of its destination. Overall, three ships were wrecked on uncharted rocks, a fourth exploded, and a fifth was abandoned by its fearful crew.

Willing to abide all manner of perils and frauds, Seattle merchants retained the leading place in the exploitation of Alaska. Recognizing that "it is a difficult task to divert the trade when it once sets strongly in one direction," local business interests worked hard to maximize existing advantages, including connections to three transcontinental lines—the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and the Canadian Pacific—and possession of the central Puget Sound post office. The chamber of commerce spent \$2,000 a month promoting Seattle in eastern newspapers and magazines. Close to 100,000 copies of the special Yukon editions published by the city's newspapers went to train stations, libraries, and other public facilities across the nation. Thus laying claim to three-quarters of the business, local outfitters credited "the old-time spirit of Seattle push." Competing towns grumbled instead about "the old arbitrary spirit which long sought to rule the entire state of Washington."

Urban competitors up and down the Pacific Coast, though lagging behind Seattle, also adeptly engaged in "blowing their Klondike horns." San Francisco interests published maps depicting Alaska as but a few hundred miles north of the Golden Gate, with no ports in-between. Portland claimed to offer both the lowest prices and superior representation in Skagway. Tacoma tried hard to match Seattle in chamber of commerce promotionalism. "The opportunity that is presented is one that very seldom comes," a local editor affirmed, "and it behooves this city to make the most of it." Victoria and Vancouver entered the contest from across the border, sending agents to meet incoming trains in Seattle in an effort to divert miners to British Columbia outfitters.

Energetic schemes came as well from Spokane, where leaders of opinion had initially argued against going to Alaska. In addition to the extreme dangers of the trip north, a "food famine" supposedly loomed in the Klondike, with mass starvation sure to follow. Belatedly realizing that dramatic advertising might generate profit from the rush, Spokane merchants soon changed course and began touting their inland city as "the natural starting point for American prospectors." Heavily promoted as the old Hudson's Bay Company trail, a wagon and packing route supposedly led to the upper Yukon drainage, where ruiners could easily construct boats and rafts for the final descent upon Dawson. The road was open in winter, avoided all mountain ranges, crossed well-watered regions abounding in fish and game, and was, without doubt, the best "poor man's route." Unfortunately, expeditions sent out to locate and mark the exact line turned back in the face of harsh weather and unspeakable wilderness conditions. Adept in defeat, Spokane resuscitated earlier predictions that Alaska's inevitable failure would, in the end, work to the advantage



Dawson was the focal point of the gold rush to the Yukon.

of the interior Pacific Northwest as ruined prospectors by the score settled in eastern Washington.

Compromised by association with self-interested purveyors of optimism on the one hand and death-proclaiming pessimism on the other, the "frozen truth" of the Klondike was nonetheless revealed to a substantial extent by the end of 1897. Food was dear over the winter, available only at astonishingly high prices. Accounts from Dawson indicated that the provident and the improvident—those who had come with and those who had come without adequate supplies—prepared for weeks of conflict over provisions. "The speedy rule of the hard law of survival of the fittest" prevailed, claimed a wintering Oregonian. Preachers swore like drunken teamsters, and pack animals reportedly committed suicide rather than be driven across the mountain passes. Faith and honor were prime casualties of the gold rush, a development reflected in the the federal government's decision to cancel a planned relief expedition amidst general conviction that the stories of famine were a ploy devised by Washington state merchants intent upon over-supplying the soldiers.

Returns from the north for 1897 certainly fell short of frenzied expectations, confirming the advice earlier proffered by persons familiar with the seasonally limited nature of Yukon adventure. Alaska was, to be sure, "a land of gold and mystery...sweeping north to the shores of the Arctic sea," but the wealth could not easily be removed by poorly equipped prospectors arriving at the end of summer. Newspaper publishers spent \$6,000 chartering vessels to meet the second return of the *Portland*, only to find that the famed treasure steamer carried little gold and no intelligence regarding new discoveries. Army officers stationed in Alaska reported that only 7 percent of the miners reaching the Klondike in

1897 had found enough dust to cover expenses. Few observers doubted, however, that the excitement would resume in the spring of 1898. "Nine out of ten" might be doomed to "make a failure" out of the mines, a Seattle newspaper reflected in explanation, but the exact composition of "the lucky one-tenth" could not be "determined in advance."

Summing up the results of the initial feverish summer, thoughtful Washington residents concluded that Alaska was, at the very least, responsible for "the waking up of our people,"

of the Pacific into "an American lake." Thanks to what one commentator described as "the rotundity of the earth," Seattle and Tacoma were, after all, closer to most Asian ports than competing export centers on the West Coast.

Conveyed aboard regularly scheduled steamers, direct trade with Asia commenced in earnest during the earliest years of statehood. Of particular importance, flour shipments to China held steady through the years of depression while those to Japan mounted at an impressive rate. Four Seattle mills ran 24 hours

Preachers swore like drunken teamsters, and pack animals reportedly committed suicide....

for restoring confidence among a populace long mired in "apathetic" mode. "California gold was the wonderful magician in 1849," a Puget Sound daily noted in expressing a common theme, "Klondike gold was the magician in 1897." The conviction that the gold rush had brought an end to the hard times was more dramatic effusion than demonstrable fact.

The real economic story, in the final weeks of 1897, encompassed the playing out of trends well-established prior to the *Portland's* celebrated voyage. Rapidly increasing demand in both the eastern rail and Pacific Rim markets, plus the high tariff policies imposed by the McKinley administration, accounted for an upswing in lumber prices of two to four dollars per thousand feet, depending on grade. Beyond the Cascades, the fall wheat harvest more than fulfilled expectations—the largest crop ever going to market at prices last recorded in pre-Panic times. Farmers earned enough profit to pay off debt, add acreage, and acquire new machinery.

An all-out rush to the north resumed, of course, in 1898. Although sailings were delayed by the outbreak of war between the United States and Spain, two dozen steamers, grossly overloaded with wealth-seekers and cargo, departed from Seattle alone in late May and early June. The opening of the White Pass railroad facilitated travel, shipment of supplies, and the export of dust from the Klondike. Attention shifted in 1899 to the new diggings at Nome, close to the mouth of the Yukon River and accessible by all-sea route from Puget Sound. Gold production for the year exceeded the \$16 million mark. Commercial connections between Alaska and Washington were by then organized as a matter of everyday business enterprise. The typical southbound steamer loaded substantially more gold than the amount carried by the *Portland* in July 1897, without inducing, to quote one dismissive dock watcher, "an extra pulsation in the veins of any inhabitant."

In long-term retrospect, an unrelated development of the late 1890s was of greater regional significance. The nation's emergence as an imperial power culminated in the wartime acquisition of Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines. Honolulu became a way station and Manila an offshore staging point for the exploitation of Chinese and Japanese markets. The governor of Washington, John Rogers, a somewhat atypical Populist advocate of expansion, celebrated the coming transformation

a day, producing exclusively for cross-Pacific consumers. The ports of Seattle and Tacoma, meanwhile, exported steel rails and rolling stock manufactured east of the Mississippi to railroad and minor contractors in China and Japan. Though times were "at their darkest" during the Panic of 1893, Washington was, according to contemporary analysis, "saved from complete stagnation" by the rapid growth in international trade.

America's victory over Spain acted as an accelerant to preexisting trends. In August 1898, 150 trading vessels set sail from Elliott Bay alone—six times the figure for the same month in 1891. Dispatched in large part through Puget Sound, American exports to Asia had, by one accounting, "increased nearly seven-fold" in the same span of years. Seattle and Tacoma together shipped \$9 million worth of flour in 1898. Washington-based industrial enterprises sent special envoys abroad to drum up more business in Chinese and Japanese cities. Meanwhile, Hawaii took on new economic importance as a United States territory. Military construction, among other burgeoning activities, created a demand for building materials and profit-making mercantile ventures.

Even in Seattle, the self-declared capital of the gold rush, these were the truly important events that took place in the final years of the 19th century. Precious metals from the Klondike and Nome were best regarded as "mere incidents," the *Times* asserted, when compared to the wealth generated by "the new Pacific trade." America's orientation appeared to be shifting, and quickly so, from Europe to Asia. Settlers and investors—people interested in building homes, industries, and cities—were on the way to the Pacific Northwest. "Rivet your attention upon the Pacific ocean," the *P-I* cried. "About the shores of this new Mediterranean will cluster all the wealth, the activity, the thought, the dominance that made the old Mediterranean the market and pleasure pavilion and the treasury of the earth." Occupying the vital spot upon the sea of the future, Washingtonians were destined beneficiaries of a "prominence and a prosperity of which the most sanguine now would scarcely dare to dream." Set against this glittering prospect, Alaska was, indeed, a secondary albeit adventurous theater of operations. ☺

Robert E. Ficken has written many books and articles on Pacific Northwest history, most recently *Washington State: The Inaugural Decade* (Washington State University Press, 2007).

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FRONT COVER: Howard Clifford, 95, holds a photo thought to be of Clifford himself running off Galloping Gertie on November 7, 1940, just before it collapsed. In the background, the second and third Narrows bridges span southern Puget Sound. This past-meets-present portrait was shot by Dean Koepfler, a Tacoma News Tribune photographer. Koepfler's work is featured in *Bridging the Narrows*, on exhibit at the Washington State History Museum through November 18, 2007. See related article beginning on page 3. (Courtesy News Tribune)