

PREFACE

Jumping Off the End of the Earth

Even the idea of Alaska is daunting, the way it flexes its mountain ridges and spreads its glaciers at the top of the globe, one edge running alongside desolate Canada, the other nearly touching frozen Siberia. It's too vast and too wild to take in all at once.

The Russians, who began hunting sea otters in the Aleutians in 1743, occupied Alaska for little more than a century. Focused on maritime fur trade, they settled mainly on islands, and at the mouths of rivers and the heads of bays. They were able to gain little headway in controlling the place and had mixed results in their efforts to manage the indigenous peoples. Their greatest success—if one can call it that—was with the Aleuts, whom they brutalized into providing labor, sex, and companionship. There is one particularly barbarous tale about a tyrant named Solov'ev who, American cultural historian Stephen Haycox tells us, was nicknamed “the deadly nightingale.”¹ The fellow is said to have lined up a number of Aleuts, one behind the other, and then fired a bullet into the chest of the first to see how many of them it would penetrate. Even if the story is apocryphal, as it well may be, it captures the brutal determination of the Russian fur trappers to wrench profits from Alaska by whatever means it took.

The Russians encountered more resistance when they tried to subjugate the fiercely independent Tlingits in southeast Alaska. The two cultures, Russian and Indian, would eventually develop a mutual—if somewhat uneasy—alliance. Despite tensions, the Natives were enticed by the trading goods the Russians offered—cooking pots, knives, heavy woolen coats, and beads—while the Russians needed the deer meat and potatoes that the Tlingits could supply. The greatest number of colonists the Russians ever had on Alaskan soil was 823 and, given that limited manpower, they were never in a position to develop the vast resources of the mainland. Thus, the Inupiat and the Athabaskans, occupants of more remote regions, were left largely alone.

Aside from the companionship of the Natives and the cold winter wind,

there was little in the New World for the promýshlenniki, the Russian fur hunters. All manufactured goods—window glass and building materials, writing materials and candles—had to be shipped from the motherland. The yearlong sea journey, via Tierra del Fuego or Cape Horn on through to the North Pacific, was so treacherous that it was soon abandoned as a supply route. Meanwhile, the overland trek across Siberia was of even greater duration and could take as long as two years. By the time supplies reached Alaska, Haycox says, “most of the butter was rancid, the flour filled with worms and lice.”²

Supplying the colony would be an ongoing issue, but the Russians would give up on the New World for other reasons. They were unable to defend their territory on the North American continent and, although fully aware of the value of Alaska’s coal, fish, gold, and ice, were unwilling to expend the funds and efforts necessary to develop those resources. So, in the end, they packed their valises and sold their claims in North America to the United States.

It was 1867, and the United States was occupied and preoccupied with post-Civil War reconstruction. Some might have perceived the Alaska territory as a land of ice and snow inhabited by strange, wild beasts, but, as Robert Campbell, historian of the American West, points out, all that “nonsense” about “Seward’s Folly,” “Walrussia,” and “Icebergia” was the product of un- and ill-informed minds. Those in the know, those foresighted enough to recognize Alaska’s potential and promise, knew better.³

At that time, secretary of state William Seward was still serving in the position to which he had been appointed by his great friend, the late Abraham Lincoln, and Seward had a vision of Alaska’s role on the world stage and its future in American domination of the Pacific. To at least a portion of the citizenry, the acquisition of Alaska would be a first step toward the incorporation into the United States of Canada—or, at the very least, British Columbia. As the *New York Times* proclaimed, such a move would release British Columbians from their “bondage” to Great Britain.⁴

Senator Charles Sumner was an especial fan of the idea of acquiring Alaska. He had perused all of the Russian and European scientific reports about Alaska, including accounts of more than sixty Russian scientific voyages. In a three-hour peroration on the Senate floor, Sumner was so persuasive that the final vote in favor of the purchase was an astounding thirty-seven to two. On October 17, 1867, the day before the Russian flag was lowered and the Stars and Stripes hoisted in its place at Sitka, the *New York Times* proclaimed Alaska to be “our Northwest bargain.”⁵

A bargain and a land of potential and promise it may have been, but for another fifteen years or so, that was about all it was. Travelers to Alaska in those days would have to have not merely good but *really* good reasons to go there. Government-sponsored scientists and soldiers were generating essential and path-finding reports, but most early visitors were business people and missionaries. These came forewarned, knowing they should carry along whatever they needed—or learn to do without. Once they ventured farther than the southeastern coastal panhandle, they would encounter few non-Native residents and none of the comforts of home. As late as 1874, according to Haycox, there were a mere thirty-two Caucasians spread along the three major rivers of the interior—the Yukon, the Tanana, and the Kuskokwim. Needless to say, supplies and groceries, if one ran low, were impossible to find.

The southern and southeastern coastal regions had benefitted from eighteenth-century mapping and exploring expeditions led by two English captains, James Cook and George Vancouver, and, at the conclusion of the Russians' tenure, the coastlines were fairly well defined. On the other hand, the interior—the vast heart of the mainland—was still largely unmapped and unknown—except by its Native inhabitants.

In 1880, gold was discovered along Gastineau Channel. The Treadwell mine opened on Douglas Island and began to provide jobs and attract settlers. A decade later, Juneau boasted a newspaper, hotels, restaurants, drugstores, and—inevitably—saloons and breweries. But travelers who exchanged the homeyness of Juneau for the wilds of the Kenai Peninsula or the banks of the Yukon River would have searched in vain for a hotel or boarding house—much less a confectioner or a blacksmith.

Most of the gold near Juneau (after the quick depletion of that found lying around) was lode ore—ore still encased in rock—and would have been difficult to recover without the Treadwell's huge stamp mills. Until the discovery of more easily recovered placer gold (gold that had been eroded into stream and river beds) in the regions of Fortymile River (1886) and Birch Creek (1893), there was a slow drip, rather than a trickle, of newcomers into Alaska. The 1880 census could track down only 435 non-Natives in the 600,000 square miles of the territory, and some of those were Russian holdovers. Given that small number of non-Native residents, Congress was understandably unwilling to fund a civil government or territorial structure for Alaska. Those who perceived what Alaska historian Morgan Sherwood has called “conspiratorial neglect” on the part of Washington were mainly denizens of the only area of Alaska populated by whites, the southeast. Ironically, when

the government started paying attention and sponsoring military explorations of the interior, the Sitka *Alaskan* objected to such spending, arguing that the money should be spent “nearer home” instead of in a part of the territory so sparsely populated by whites.⁶

Inevitably, things changed. By 1910, Alaska’s population of non-Natives had increased nearly a hundredfold, and visitors and newcomers were still arriving. Why, after centuries of what might be termed—at most—a sort of benign neglect, did Alaska become a place to which people traveled for excitement, adventure, and fortune? The writers in this collection provide us with some of the answers.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, America’s perception of Alaska and the role of Alaska on the national scene underwent profound alteration. That change resulted from a plethora of news accounts about the gold rush and gold rush towns and from the publication of widely read firsthand accounts by early travelers. For the first time, readers had access to information about a place that had been, until then, largely inscrutable. Those who had considered Alaska uninviting and uninhabitable were disabused of the notion. Those who had already known otherwise learned more. Significantly, Alaska became a desirable destination—alluring, exciting, and different.

Why was Alaska different? Fundamentally, there was all that natural beauty. Early visitors to Alaska were often well-heeled and well-traveled, but their nineteenth-century eyes would see sights unlike any they had seen before. Even an experienced traveler such as naturalist John Muir, himself a man who knew a thing or two about wilderness, was hyperbolically rhapsodic in his descriptions of Alaska. He called it “the very paradise of poets, the abode of the blessed.”⁷

There were grizzly bears, caribou, whales, and golden eagles—and salmon packed so tightly in the rivers that it seemed a person could cross on their backs. Glaciers, unseen and unheard, calved icebergs—some as big as hotels or railcars—into empty bays. Waterfalls, springs hot enough to boil an egg, rainforests, the crumbling remains of Russian occupation, and Indian villages with totems awaited.

Forget the scenic wonders, the skeptic might say. Wasn’t Alaska just like the rest of the American wilderness had been twenty-five, fifty, or a hundred years earlier—raw and wild? Alaska would shrug off the comparison. The southern American frontier had been fairly well trod by its original inhabitants before the white men appeared, but some of Alaska’s vast spaces were unfamiliar even to the Native peoples whose ancestors had roamed the land

for thousands of years. English hunter Agnes Herbert wanted Yupiks to guide her upriver from their home at the mouth of the Kuskokwim River, but their chief pooh-poohed the idea. His people had never been that far from home. Likewise, Lieutenant Joseph Herron's Indian guides urged him to abandon a trip that took him and them deeper and deeper into the wilderness. They finally deserted him because "they 'saveyed'... the country no further."⁸

The vastness and scope of Alaska's unknowns, combined with other factors—the climate, the geography, and the environment—made exploration difficult. But forays into the wilderness were made less daunting by the friendliness of the Natives. Military explorers, accustomed to the conduct of the Indians on other parts of the American frontier, were to be pleasantly surprised by the hospitality afforded by Alaskan Natives. There were exceptions to this general geniality, to be sure. The Chilkats jealously guarded the southern passes at the head of Lynn Canal until the American army made clear that it intended to take control, and at least one party of Russians was known to have been massacred by Copper River Indians for unknown reasons. For the most part, however, expeditions in Alaska were welcomed with shelter and victuals—albeit the humble moose nose and beaver entrails—by Natives who were themselves starving.

Alaska is set apart from the rest of the country by the intractability of its landscape and the harshness of its environmental conditions. Nowadays, a farmer in Matanuska Valley may have to harvest his pumpkins with a forklift, but such extraordinary growth is exceptional. The growing season in Alaska lasts a mere forty-five to ninety days (depending on the latitude), half the territory is treeless, and where trees do grow, they do so slowly. According to environmental historian Roderick Nash, only a little more than 5 percent of Alaska's land is suitable for farming and grazing, and he relates how 1930s' visitor Robert Marshall "found knee-high spruces over a century old" in the Brooks Range.⁹

As hard as it is on plants, Alaska can be even tougher on animals. The climate is often brutal, and competition for survival is fierce. According to Nash, Alaska has less harvestable game per acre than does Oregon. He suggests that the justly deserved reputation of the place for animal viewing may be as much a product of the plentitude of its wilderness as of its wildlife.¹⁰ Military leader Henry Allen and his men, who had hoped to "live off the country" on their 1885 exploration of the Copper River, could find no game and grew so weak from hunger that they staggered around like drunks.¹¹ As one old-timer said, Alaska is "a hungry country."¹²

Such subtleties could have easily escaped some of Alaska's nineteenth-

century visitors. But they would not have failed to notice the nascent aura of romantic intrigue. In the late 1800s, the nation had to grapple with the fact that the rest of the American frontier had vanished. “Fears of howling wilderness,” writes Robert Campbell, were giving way to the “terror” of urban living, mechanization, and industrialization.¹³ The perceptions of savageness and wildness were no longer threatening and became, instead, enticing ideas. The primitiveness of Alaska, with its perceived status as “the last frontier,” drew travelers north.¹⁴

At the head of a long train of visitors to Alaska came a California nature-lover and incipient hippie named John Muir. Already known as a wilderness defender, Muir arrived in Alaska in 1879 by the only method available—the monthly mail boat. He canoed the waters of southeast Alaska that summer and fall and, liking what he found, returned the following year. While exploring, he carried along a pocket compass, a barometer, and the map drawn by Captain Vancouver a century earlier.

Muir’s euphoric dispatches about the “pure” wilderness he found in Alaska were widely read, first in California and then around the nation. Those popular accounts of Alaska’s beauty captivated the public and, according to Nash, inspired commercial carriers to begin offering tours.¹⁵ Many early excursionists returned home to write up accounts of their voyages, and those accounts, in turn, inspired others to visit.

Mail boats gave way to first-class steamers and colorful captains dedicated to excursionists’ pleasures. Tourists could anticipate a sail through the placid waters of the Inside Passage and (as visitors called them) the “emerald isles” of southeast Alaska, a climb over a glacial moraine (wearing hobnailed boots was a good idea), and a visit to the Treadwell mine (a regular stop on the tourist agenda, glowingly described in travel books and promotional brochures). Guidebook author Eliza Scidmore assured her readers that the Treadwell’s owners had no objection to tourist visits, but she hastened to add that work in the mines would not be suspended nor would guards or guides be provided. In those pre-OSHA days, Scidmore urged visitors “to exercise great caution in entering tunnels, where trains are always moving; pits, where blasts are being fired; and [the] mill, where no voice can be heard to warn them of belts and cogs.”¹⁶ At the end of a visit to the Treadwell, early tourist Charles Taylor and his companions were invited to fill their pockets with gold dust.¹⁷ If travelers were looking for an unusual experience, in Alaska they would find it.

While tourists were rambling around the southeastern panhandle, the blank places on the map of Alaska’s interior were calling out to adventure seekers—like the Sirens who sang to Ulysses. One of those adventure seekers

was English explorer Harry de Windt, a man who believed that some feats remained unachieved not because they were impossible but simply because no one had managed to do them. De Windt was determined to be the first to journey by whatever means it took—foot, ship, boat, railroad, reindeer, horse, or dog sled—from New York to Paris by way of Alaska. When asked what he hoped to gain by risking his life and enduring such hardship, de Windt's answer was simple: he wanted to do something that had never been done.¹⁸

And what can be said of the cool indomitability of a man like army captain William Abercrombie? During “twenty-nine consecutive hours of practically continuous work, without sleep, rest, or shelter,” Abercrombie and his men crossed Valdez Glacier, first in fog, then in rain, sleet, and snow. When they arrived at their destination, they were coated in ice. Abercrombie concluded the route was impracticable for travelers, but, never losing his sang-froid, he wryly summed up the trip: “Like all other nights, this one came to an end.”¹⁹

If the tourists were curious and the adventurers determined, a third group of early travelers—the prospectors—were hungry. Many of them were surprised, when they reached Alaska, to find that the ground wasn't covered with gold. Hadn't the newspapers and magazines said anyone could go to Alaska and return a millionaire? All that hard-earned cash wasted on supplies, all that claptrap junk bought from hucksters in Seattle and San Francisco—and then it dawned on them: how were they to get home from Skagway or Nome or Valdez, flat broke and sick with scurvy?

Without exception, the people who went to Alaska in those days were out of the ordinary. Their ideas and dreams—some of them cockamamie, others merely far-fetched—drew them north. Tourists, adventurers, and gold seekers all went to Alaska filled with anticipation and a fair amount of trepidation, whether packing a sealskin coat and a fur muff for a tramp across the glacier or carrying a pack as big as a baby elephant for a trek into the wilderness.

Some of their plans would come to naught; some were changed by the experience; some were glad to escape with their lives. When few people voiced a desire to see Alaska, the writers in this collection wanted—desperately—to go there. Whatever they were looking for—new sights, new adventures, or newly found gold—they were all on a quest.

Was Alaska different? Let's put it this way: while the white-gloved populace of New York was setting out in their carriages for concerts at Carnegie Hall, in Alaska, volcanic islands were erupting from the sea.

In 1971, my then husband (I'll call him “P.”) and I were on sort of a quest ourselves. He was job hunting and had answered a three-line ad in the *New*

Orleans Times-Picayune that read, “Accountants wanted, Anchorage, Alaska,” followed by a phone number in Houston. We each had our own romantic notion of what life in Alaska would be.

When P. was a child, his family had owned a single volume of Funk and Wagnalls *New World Encyclopedia*—volume “A”—and he had been enchanted with the article on Alaska. In my house, we had subscribed to *National Geographic*, and, like the magazine’s readers a century earlier, I found the stories about Alaska especially appealing—that giant, distant territory, part of America, yet foreign and strange. I remember a glossy pictorial spread of Anchorage stretched cozily along the foot of the Chugach Mountains, houses covered with a blanket of snow, windows warmly lit in the dusky purple twilight.

Neither P. nor I had been farther north than Chicago, and leaving home would mean saying good-bye to the world we knew—south Louisiana, with its humidity, swamps, colorful politicians, and our families. At the same time, there was something oh-so exciting about venturing to an exotic place far, far away. Our dreams were fairly generic: P. hoped to fill the larder with big game, and I thought of a cabin built on a mountainside beside a clear stream. My little French grandmother, with her conscripted world view, asked if there were any Americans “in that place.”

In the end, we were captivated by the idea of no more mosquitoes, no more swamps, and, the job offer having included such generous remuneration, we were led on by that universal motivator: “We’ll be rich!” Holding our breaths, we said yes. We might as well have jumped off the end of the earth.

Anxious to begin seeking his fortune, P. set out to cover the nearly 5,000 miles between New Orleans and Anchorage in our Chevrolet Impala. He was shod in penny loafers and wore his yellow cotton windbreaker—as I remember, the only coat he owned. Although it was October, the Impala wore no studded tires. The snow met up with P. in Canada, and, somewhere on the Alcan Highway, he acquired a set of chains.

A month later, I flew from New Orleans to Chicago and then on to Anchorage. Having traveled on a commercial flight once before, I was an experienced traveler. On the extravagantly named Northwest Orient Airlines, I chose a window seat over the wing where the thrum of the engines droned on and on, later to reverberate in my brain in the days that followed. The plane, meanwhile, flew into the night over dark, frozen Canada, and then over dark, frozen Alaska.

It all seemed rather daring until I stumbled out into the November cold, with its snowy drifts, carrying an eleven-month-old baby in one arm and a

diaper bag in the other. I was twenty-four years old and wearing double-knit maternity pants with an elastic waist, since I was—ta da!—once again pregnant. Would there be a competent physician to deliver our baby? We'd soon find out.

In the darkness, the air-conditioned Impala fishtailed out of the airport parking lot as the vehicles around us puffed plumes of foggy, grey exhaust into the night sky. One day followed another, and I watched from the window of our tiny apartment as a flat, pale, lemon-colored disk of sun rose late in the morning in the hazy southeast. It made a low pass over the horizon and, in the early afternoon, dropped off the face of the earth again. And that was on the days when there was sunshine.

The Impala wended its way between the dirty snowbanks that edged the roadways. The car had an automatic transmission, but I kept one foot on the gas pedal and the other hovering over the brake in the event that I hit a patch of glare ice. "Don't worry," P. would say. "You'll get used to it." And, in a way, I did. At least for a time.

A dozen or so years later, I was still in Alaska. By then, I had three children, was still married to P., and, after a stint composing obituaries, was freelancing for the *Anchorage Daily News*. In the depths of another grey winter, I paid a visit to the windowless little room which then housed the rare book collection at the University of Alaska Anchorage's Consortium Library. At random, I pulled Robert Dunn's *The Shameless Diary of an Explorer* off the shelf and found the extraordinary tale of a 1903 Mount McKinley expedition gone awry—agony, adventure, and unforgettable characters, such as spoiled Simon, who hogged more than his share of the condensed milk, and the pompous Professor, who fiddled with his theodolite when it was time to saddle the horses. Who could resist a book that begins, "This is the story of a failure"?

I turned to Dunn's neighbors on the shelves—other writers in the section designated by the Library of Congress as "Alaskan History," all those F901–951s. As I read the stories about Alaska in the late 1800s and early 1900s, I discovered a time and a place that no longer existed except between the covers of those books. Many of the authors were strong-minded individuals, buoyant, self-confident travelers with original voices. Although those books had been widely popular when they were published, when I first read them in 1983 they were no longer even in circulation. I decided that these writers were too good to ignore and started collecting their works. Today, some of these books have been reprinted, and that's a good thing, for they are as interesting and enjoyable now as they were when they were written.