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Ernest Nichols Wolff, 1919-2005

Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes

Ernie Wolff gives a talk about mining history in Alaska at the Tanana Yukon Historical Society meeting on March 23, 1972. Wolff considers the beginning of "Interior Alaska" to be when the Klondike stampede occurred. The Russians gave up Alaska in 1867. From reading a few books, like the biography of Baranov, Ernie learned that the Russians were in the Aleutians in the mid-1700s. But their real history began around 1800, when Baranov established a steady colony at Kodiak. They were hunting sea otters; fur trading was their interest, not mining.

Wolff has composed a chronology of mining discoveries and events:

1849-- Peter Goroshin, a mining engineer, worked in Kenai mining coal, and supposedly mined some gold on the Russian River on the Kenai Peninsula. Later discoveries of gold in the Interior were made by people with mixed Russian-Native backgrounds.

1862-- Discovery made on the Canadian side of the present border (in British Columbia) on the Stikine River. Shuket found some placer gold on bars of the Stikine. Most of this history is written down in literature of the U.S. Geological Survey. Brooks was in the country before Alaska's gold rushes.

1870-- Transfer of Alaska from Russians to Americans occurred. Placer gold was found around Sumdum Bay in Southeast. There's still considerable hard rock gold there.

1871-- The Cassiar District was struck, in central British Columbia. It's been in use from then until now. It's now the center for asbestos mining for North America. About 15 years ago, the most important asbestos mining district shifted from Western Canada to Eastern Canada. The Cassiar Asbestos Corp. has opened a new mine at Clinton Creek, at the mouth of the Fortymile River, in an old mining district. Clinton Creek is like a modern city with stores and shops.

For the next few years, there was discovery of placer gold in Southeast Alaska. The same year the Cassiar was struck, gold was found around Wrangell, off the Stikine. All this time, the capitol was at Sitka. Brooks said it was a black year in U.S. history when they bought Alaska and provided no government at all. There was a military presence, but lawlessness was prevalent in Southeast.

1872-- A quartz stream was found near Sitka, named the Stewart Mine. It never came to much, but is famed as the first hard rock discovery in Alaska.

1873-- Two parties reached the interior of Alaska by way of the Porcupine River. These were headed by Harper and McQuesten. Both of them left many descendants in Alaska. They married Native wives. The same year in Southeast, Windham Bay was discovered.

There's still a lot of placer gold there to be worked. A lot of people, including Ernie, think the price of gold will increase, and there will be more gold mining in Alaska.

Mick Silva is a name of importance in early mining. A gold discovery in the old days was the most important event that could take place in people's lives. The discoverer did gain some immortality.

1875-- The upper Yukon was reached via Chilkoot Pass for the first time. More people crossed it before 1900 than any other route going to the Interior. This was before the railroad was built.

1877-- The Stewart Mine came and brought a mill north.

1879-- Naturalist John Muir and S. Hall Young made a trip along the Southeast coast up into Glacier Bay by canoe. They reported gold prospects to be pretty good.

1880-- As a result of this, businessmen of San Francisco and Sitka sent out Joseph Juneau and Richard Harris. One gave his name to a city, the other to a recording district (no one's heard of Harris, though). They also went by canoe or small boat from Sitka to the present site of Juneau, where they discovered gold-bearing quartz. Sitka lost a lot of population and Juneau gained a lot at that time. There was placer mining there, too. All of Southeast has been glaciated; glaciers swept out the large concentrations of placer gold. Anything found later was reconcentrated since glaciers were there, in the last 12,000-15,000 years. Of course, there are still glaciers there now.

Two years later, the first stamp mill was erected, across the channel at Treadwell. The next mill was installed at the Ebner Mine in Juneau. Treadwell had a good-sized lode to work on: a mineralized dike that yielded \$4 per ton. It became very efficient. At Juneau they weren't doing as well. There were small veins in the slate that would peter out.

1884-- Gold was found at Unga Island in southwestern Alaska. It produced quite a bit of gold for a long time. In 1884 mining laws were also extended to Alaska. Before this, the "Miners' Law" was used. The first thing to do was organize the mining district and elect the most important official in the district, the recorder. Then they would have a miners meeting and adopt the laws that would govern them, mainly applying to mining.

Chuck Herbert, in his book on mining law, says that Miners' Law persisted until the 1930s in the Interior. In Wiseman, for example, the meetings at Pioneer Hall were the only social force there was, other than the marshal.

1886-- Burrs Bay: a low-grade camp with six or eight mines, and mills that operated there. Ernie talked to a man in 1953 who bought the photography business from Winter and Pond, along with all their mining holdings. He was the bitterest man Ernie ever met.

Also in 1886, gold was found in the Fortymile District, on Franklin Creek. (Forty miles was the distance from Ft. Reliance.) Howard Franklin found this gold.

1887-- There was a stampede to Yakutat Bay and Utoya(?) Bay for beach placer. It didn't produce much but it didn't have to. People were happy if they could make \$3 or \$4 a day.

1888-- Placer gold found at Resurrection Creek, on the Kenai Peninsula.

1893-- The Circle District was struck. Pitka and Ceresco supposedly had Native blood. The same year, John Minook discovered gold at Rampart. These districts are still producing gold. In Blazing Alaska's Trails, Brooks said that Circle was a fine civilization; there was no crime and the people were well educated (they set up their own library), all before the Klondike gold rush.

Gold was found at Tramway Bar on the Koyukuk River the same year. It was a very far-away spot.

1896-- Gold was discovered in the Klondike District. Carmack struck it on Bonanza. Henderson had told Carmack about it, but didn't make much off it. There were enough people in the area to tie it all up in no time.

Anything that happened between 1896 and 1898 would be anticlimactic, says Ernie, but in 1897 gold was found on the Seward Peninsula at Ophir or Wofor(?) Creek.

1898-- Thousands of people all arrived at Skagway, went over the Chilkoot Pass, built boats at Lake Lindeman, and arrived in Dawson at about the same time. This was the real beginning of modern Interior Alaska history, to Ernie. A lot of people found nothing and/or went home, but a lot fanned out into Alaska.

There's no mining to speak of now in Dawson, but during the gold rush, within 7 years all the ground had been taken up by big dredging companies. The same year, in the Porcupine District near Haines, gold was discovered. There was quite a bit of placer gold taken out, but it's dead now.

Also in 1898 gold was struck at Nome, by three Swedes: Lindeberg, Brynteson, and Lindblom. The Kobuk Stampede also occurred. Two thousand who men came to Alaska during the Dawson rush landed at Kotzebue, assuming gold was to be found all over. They spread out along the Kobuk River; a lot of them got scurvy. None did any prospecting the first winter, they just holed up in their cabins. Many went to Nome the next year, and many went out with "blue tickets." The dozen or so that stayed eventually went to the head of the Noatak, and the six that found gold there named it Lucky Six Creek.

1899-- The Upper Koyukuk was discovered. In 1901 when the lucky six found that Lucky Six didn't amount to much, they built rafts and went down to Koyukuk. One of them, Amerill, lost his raft along the way. He died in Sitka a couple years ago, at almost 100 years old. Well into his 80s he was roaming the Chandalar looking for a prospect

he'd lost years before. The six that came down to Koyukuk worked there and then went into Chandalar. Amerill didn't get south of the Yukon for 48 years.

In 1899 gold was also discovered on the beach at Nome. This is where a lot of lawlessness came in. There wasn't much work involved in getting this gold.

Copper was discovered at Kennicott in 1899 as well. This event was overshadowed at the time by all the gold discoveries. Copper was also being brought out of the LaTouche Mine at Prince William Sound.

1900-- Placer tin was found on the Seward Peninsula, a small item to note. At that time it was shipped to the East Indies. Now it is shipped to Texas.

1902-- Felix Pedro had been with Brooks on an expedition down the Tanana. They went to Circle, but Pedro kept wanting to get back to the Fairbanks District. In the winter of 1901-1902 they spent on Bear Creek, between Fairbanks Creek and Fish Creek, they found nothing. The next summer they made a discovery on Pedro Creek. The Barnette steamer had come up around the same time, and supposedly Barnette saw the smoke coming from on top Pedro Dome. There are dozens of stories of this, and dozens of books written on it. It was a big strike in Alaska, equal in importance to the Nome strike.

People swarmed in, especially from Dawson. Charlie Strandberg and his brother came in style on a barge from Dawson, loaded with their children and mining outfits. Strandberg arrived in Chena in October, crossed the hill to Ester, and got a lease at 60%. They got all the horses they could, beat the freeze-up, and mined all winter. Ernie says they became some of the "big operators" in the Interior. Other prospectors came down the Goodpaster to the Tanana. Things moved pretty fast from then on.

1903-- The Bonnefield District, on the north side of the Alaska Range, was struck. Also Denali or Valdez Creek on the upper Susitna, and Lode 10 at Lost River.

John Murphy and his partner Cook were in the Bonnefield for 40 years. He recalls sitting on stumps on 1st Ave. in 1903. Everyone was cussing the camp, so they went over to the Bonnefield District, where they stayed until they died in the 1950s.

The Kantishna District is still being worked. There was a copper smelter for 3 years at Hadley, that opened in 1905.

The Tenderfoot District at Richardson produced into the 1930s.

1906-- Chandalar: Frank Yasuda was there in 1891, at Barrow. A White man named Carter showed up at the same time and they agreed to prospect. Yasuda had married an Eskimo woman and had a large following of Natives who lived off the country. Frank was supposed to supply a grubstake by trading, and bring it to Carter in the Brooks Range, where he'd be prospecting. In 1906 they found gold. The same year McNitt came from the Koyukuk, and should be credited for claims also.

Another important fellow was Marsh, one of the greatest explorers of all times, though many called him a con man. He was a mining engineer, geologist, and friend of Brooks. He carried a small theodolite with him and made astronomical observations.

[Tape cuts off.]

Marsh(?) built a cabin in the dead of winter at Caro at the mouth of Flat Creek. He cut the trail from Beaver to Chandalar.

1906-1907-- Gaines Creek in the Innoko District struck, as well at Yentna, in the Talkeetna District.

1907-- Ruby District

1910-- Long Creek, south of Ruby

1909-- Iditarod

1909-- Cleary Creek in the Kobuk District

1910-- Hughes on the middle Koyukuk

1910-1911-- Lower Kuskokwim

1910-- Valdez

1910-1920 Mercury found in Kuskokwim region. Mercury has been an important factor in Alaska's economic life.

1911-- Hammond River. Gold was mined out of crevices.

1911-- The first copper was shipped out of Kennicott. This was the richest copper mine ever found. Kennicott Copper Corp. is one of the largest in the world today.

1912-- Sushana on the upper Tanana

1913-- Nelchina and Marshall on the lower Yukon, both placer camps

1914-- Livengood, the last one found

1915-- Juneau had not been able to make it. They finally started to mine the slate with gold in it with a large scale operation. A common belief was a man died underground every day, but Ernie doesn't believe it. They were shut down during the war, as all gold mines were. They were mining rock that ran 80 cents a ton, for a cost of 50 cents. Open pit mines now mine rock that runs no less than \$6.00 a ton.

1916-- Chromite on the Seward Peninsula

1918-- Hyder District, called the Stewart District on the other side

1924-- The railroad was completed, and allowed industrialization of the Interior, because it brought in dredge parts and more importantly coal. Norman Steins is credited with lining up the old worked out claims and demonstrating you could make money open pit mining with a dragline. Then he sold it all to the Fairbanks Exploration Company. Dredging was the basis of the industry from 1928-1965. Ernie says there was over \$100 million in the ground when dredging began in the Interior. It's hard to speak of the value of gold because gold went from \$20.67 to \$35.00 in the middle of all this.

A little known item in the late 1920s and early 1930s was the recognition of platinum at Goodnews Bay. It's the only platinum produced in North America that's not by-product platinum and the only platinum produced by the United States.

1930-- Nabesna: Carl Whittam roamed those hills for years and found gold and mined it. In 1930 copper mining on the Prince William Sound ended.

1934-- The price of gold went up. Everybody was buying Cats and draglines.

1942-- Gold mining was shut down because of the war. It never really started again to any significant degree.

1957-- Oil was found on the Kenai Peninsula.

A copper property on the Kobuk, now called Bornite, was around in 1908, but 50 years later Mr. Burt got to developing it, and if it were in the states it would be working right now. Walter Hickel wanted to build a road to it, but 800 miles of rails doesn't pan out for profit.

1968-- Prudhoe Bay was struck. The ecological strike started at the same time.

Mining companies have been spending over \$10 million per year on exploration in Alaska. Right now we're in a recession; exploration money is hard to get.

Ernie believe there are copper deposits in the Fortymile. Four or five have been found in the last two summers. Gold is now \$48.00. If it went way up he thinks there would be a resurgence of mining.

[Close of speech. Questions from the audience.]

A question about the Willow Creek District, Hatcher Pass: Ernie had this in his notes but somehow he missed it. It started in the first decade of the century, and produced until

WWII. Independence may have run even after that. Mike Thompson worked at Moose Pass for a while.

"How big was Marshall?" It produced steadily from 1913 until WWII.

Mining on the Koyukuk was mainly done close to Wiseman. The Stanich brothers were on Porcupine Creek until the 1950s. A fellow (Lundeen) has a skin-diving outfit, maybe on Minnie Creek. He does well. Andrew Miscovich has coarse mining, too.

Manley was struck in 1901-1902. Gus Conrad was at Manley when he heard about Fairbanks. As a metallic province, all of Alaska is a gold province.

"Why did Kennicott close up?" The best reason Ernie's heard is that they ran out of copper. Phil Olesworth is a manager for an international nuclear exploration company and he studied the Kennicott deposit. Ernie talks about the geology of it.

On oil companies prospecting for gold, drilling through ice, etc.: Ernie thinks if the price of gold goes up it may be worth it.

[End of meeting]