

Sam White, Alaskan

Photos and story by Sam O. White

Chapter One: I go surveying.

I LANDED in Alaska in May of 1922, a little late as far as I was concerned for I'd had a yearning for Alaska throughout most of my youth. But by the time I'd grown up and made enough money to pay my way North, there was a war coming up which delayed matters for a couple of years. Finally I made it as a reconnaissance man with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. Since then, I've made it a point to stay.

I was born in Maine on November 26, 1891, on a hillside farm which my folks hewed out of the virgin timber. I was one of nine children. We lived in a three-room log house, and walked two and a half miles to a country school house which was painted red. The wonder is that it was painted at all. It was a two-term school arrangement and I didn't quite get through the eighth grade. There were chores and farm work to do every

morning and evening. It was a rough life but a good one. We had little or no money, but in those days everything was on a barter or exchange system, so we had warm clothes and plenty of good wholesome food.

I worked as a hunting guide, a lumberjack and scaler, and as a foreman on the International Boundary Survey. But in 1917, I signed up with the U. S. Army and chose the Infantry, although I was soon taken out of that and put in a special battalion of rangers. I wound up in Company C, which was a picked group of men from every state in the Union, one from Mexico, one from England, and a Canadian or two. There were also a couple of Alaskans, Donald Buckingham of Ketchikan and Jack Allman of Fairbanks, and I used to pump those chaps for all the information I could get.

In 1919 I was back in Maine and back on the International Boundary Survey. Two years later I transferred to the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey and worked in Utah and Arizona. But finally in April of 1922, I passed civil service examinations with the aid of veterans' preference, and came to Alaska to do reconnaissance on precise triangulation.

We arrived in Seward and headed for Anchorage via the Alaska Railroad. My first real taste of the North came when the train stopped at Nellie Neal's cabin to give everyone a chance to meet Nellie. She was a frail little woman, I thought, but one could sense her driving urgency to get things done. And there at her place were laid out bigger bear skins than I had ever imagined, and moose racks like I had never seen before. Nellie had a pelt or trophy of every game animal in Alaska.

There are plenty of problems connected with survey work anywhere, and I got a speedy introduction to those unique to Alaska. We started out doing reconnaissance work north of Anchorage, and my job was to find and blaze a pack trail about ten miles across Bullion Swamps. I selected a route and blazed it with little difficulty, but a few days later while leading a pack train across it, we lost my trail right in the middle of the swamp by a beaver pond. What had happened was that the beavers had cut down both saplings I had blazed, and it took some time casting about to find the trail again. In the meantime, one

The Author



horse got down in the mire and we nearly lost her and her pack. By the time we pulled her out, she had the longest neck in the whole string of horses.

About midway through the season, I had my first tangle with a grizzly bear—and I didn't like it. I was cruising trail for a move, and we were so pressed by the observing party that I left camp about two and a half hours ahead of my pack train. This is a poor procedure, but was deemed necessary under the circumstances. Near the head of Peters Creek, about two-thirds of the way to my destination, I rounded a large outcropping—and put on the brakes quickly. I found myself right between a huge sow grizzly and her two yearling cubs.

To me, the cubs looked big, too. The old bear was about 150 feet away and hadn't seen me, so I cautiously tried to get back behind the outcropping. But on my second step backwards, she spotted me. She emitted a blood-chilling roar and made a big bound in my direction. I fired, and she went down in a heap. Struggling to get up, she rolled over on her back with all four feet waving in the air. Finally she regained her feet and made a shorter bound towards me. I fired the second shot for the same place, left side between neck and shoulder, and she went down again. This time she could only crawl in my direction, roaring and chopping her jaws. She sure had a cavernous mouth. I finished her off with the third shot.

I felt very depressed. She was a fine specimen of a grizzly, and it was a shame to have to destroy her. I climbed up on the outcropping and waited for the pack train. Our horses were veterans. They nibbled grass close to the huge bear and seemed unconcerned. This was terrific bear country, and from then on we moved with caution. We saw many grizzlies the next few days, but none offered hostilities when apprised of our presence at a distance.

Late that summer in the vicinity of Talkeetna River, two men of my party ran low on supplies. They went to a cache we had established with a large supply of provisions in it, and found a wolverine had got there first. Everything but one sack of flour had been heaved off the cache to the ground and destroyed as only a wolverine can destroy things. However, one fifty-pound sack of flour, wrapped in a tarp and roped up, had lodged in the fork of a limb on the way down. The wolverine had worked on it, but aside from chewing the tough tarp had done no damage. The men retrieved the flour and returned to work for two more weeks on a menu of flour, meat and blueberries.

The wolverines in this vicinity and north to Broad Pass were numerous and troublesome. My own party of recon-

naissance and building consisted of three men and six horses. Since it was near the end of the season, we decided to consolidate work so that the reconnaissance party would assist in the light-keeping on the upper stations of the last quadrangles.

We were camped at the fork of two creeks where there was a large patch of cottonwood, brush and a few spruce trees above, and barren ground below. I placed an automatic light on the station atop the mountain and used great care to see that everything was in working order. These lights were operated on and off by clockwork and powered by dry cell batteries. Back in camp that evening, we got a message by signal light from the observing party on the mountain to the south. It said, "Light out on Montana."

A moderate snowfall didn't bother the horses but we lost many of them when a blizzard caught us.
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We acknowledged, and I beat it up the mountain with another set of batteries for the light. Upon arrival, I heard a snarl, a scrabbling, and in the darkness I saw a shadow detach itself from the stand the light was on. I took a pot shot at the shadow and heard a fiendish scream. On inspection of the stand, which was made of stout spruce poles and weighted with a half ton of rocks, I found that Mr. Wolverine had chewed up the dry cell batteries and apparently eaten some with great relish. They were of telephone size. I tore out the wreckage, replaced the batteries, and readjusted the light. Then I mounted guard until one a.m. when the observing party was finished.

The next evening I went back up the mountain, checked the light and set it on another station for the observation party. My two companions returned to camp about two hours after I left and found everything in a horrible mess. All food was destroyed, including over a hundred pounds of prime moose meat. One pair

of shoepacs and an axe were missing. We searched the entire wooded area and found nothing. We could determine only that one large wolverine had been there, but how he could accomplish all that destruction and still have time to get away with shoepacs and an axe in those two hours is a mystery. We still had two weeks to do, and we did it on mucky salmon, caribou, ptarmigan and frosted blueberries.

On our way out to the railroad in September, we happily came upon a well-stocked cache. We just took the items we needed most, beans, salt, oatmeal, sugar and coffee. We made a list of this, signed our names to it, and posted it on the cache. When we got back to Anchorage, we also called upon the owner of the cache, A. A. Shonbeck, with a copy of the list. But he was very

kind to us, would take no pay, and even said it wasn't necessary to replace the items taken as there was no shortage in the cache. We were very pleased.

Late the following April, Bill Scaife and I took off from Anchorage to do reconnaissance for the summer work. We hopped a train on the Alaska Railroad and got off about noon at Caswell. We were about fifty yards below the station house and were adjusting our packs for the long hike ahead, when the section foreman came down and said, "I've got the best cook in all Alaska but I don't dare invite you to eat. You chaps just walk up near the front door and do some more adjusting."

We hustled up and were busily making these new and unnecessary adjustments when the door opened and a kindly tirade of cussing was directed towards us.

"A fine pair of cheechakos! Blinkety-blank-blank. You know it's dinner time

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and you don't know enough to come in and eat!" We looked up and saw a tall slender good-looking lady of past middle age.

"Well, you knothheads," she said. "Come in and eat!"

We did just that. She was a real cook and a typical sourdough woman, having spent many years in Alaska. After eating our fill, she insisted we take a loaf of bread with us. I was to see more of this kindly and capable lady in Fairbanks where she married a good friend of mine and lived out her very useful life.

Well, we left the railroad and went eastward into the mountains. There was much water and snow, and the creeks were high. We had three dogs with us and they were packing some of our food. We fed the dogs on ground squirrels and marmots, which were numerous as well as succulent and sustaining for the dogs.



No matter how much we cooked that porcupine, it was like chewing on a Kelly Springfield tire.

Bill was always talking about roasted porcupine, and I kept trying to discourage him. One evening when we made camp under some spruce trees by a singing creek I was much perturbed when the dogs got very interested in something up in the trees. I bided my time, and when Bill was busy elsewhere, I took a look. Sure enough, there was a porcky. I moved the dogs and hitched them to a tree farther away, but to no avail. Bill soon spotted the porcky and brought him down. He cooked and cooked that porcky, but each time we tried it,

it was just like chewing on a Kelly Springfield tire, and they weren't noted for being tender. Finally Bill offered it to the dogs, who also disdained it. That was the last of the porcky business that trip.

From this camp about forty miles from the railroad, we turned north and proceeded in a zig-zag fashion, selecting probable sites for stations. Some nights we slept on top of ten feet of snow with spruce boughs under us. Other nights we had bare ground. The creeks were running southwest which presented the problem of many crossings. The small ones we waded, and then built a fire and dried out on the north shore. But as it was spring, most of the creeks were running full and sometimes it took hours to find a tree long and big enough to span them. All were turbulent and swift, and if one fell in he would be dashed apart on the rocks at once.

At one place in the mountains we spotted some bear tracks that went up and down the peaks as though they were level ground. The bear apparently turned for nothing. He went over snowslides before they slid, and over others after they slid, but never seemed to get caught in one.

A short time later, just out of the mountains, we came to a large stream. There was good timber, so we scouted around and finally found a tall spruce standing on a bank where the stream narrowed. The tree must have been about thirty inches at the stump, but it would have to be undercut accurately, and have a thick scarf to hold it to the stump so that when it hit it wouldn't bound ahead and drop over the bank. Also one had to watch the fall, and if it showed a tendency to crowd upstream or downstream from the center of desired impact, one had to be quick to cut the corner that would draw it up or down the proper amount.

I got the tree undercut, and had started on the back scarf. But I was so pooched out that I had to rest. Bill was always insisting that I did too much of the work (when usually he'd end up doing two-thirds of it), and insisted on finishing the tree. I stressed the importance of keeping a strong scarf on the stump and watching the tree fall to give instant attention to the appropriate corner.

He attacked the tree with vigor. It fell, missed the mark on the opposite bank by two feet, bounced at the butt, leaped a full three feet, and the current seized it and snapped it in the middle like a match. Bill was very disappointed. But I assured him that while I was becoming an expert with an ax, he was becoming an expert with logarithms, and that it was altogether possible that I would have missed too.

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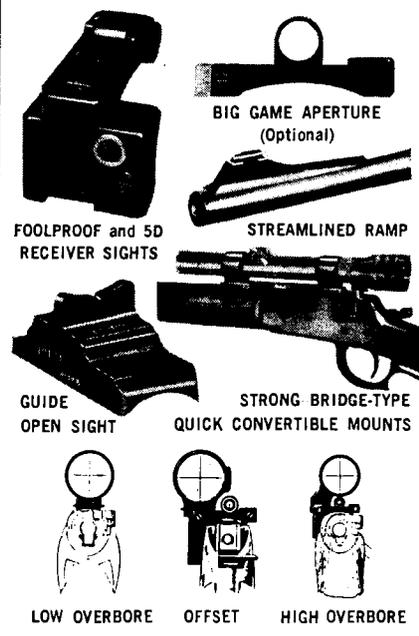
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Wolverines were a great nuisance in the Broad Pass country. They not only got into our food caches but ate the batteries of our signal lights.

After a rest and a pot of tea, we set off again and about two-and-a-half miles downstream we found where the stream split into two channels, the big one on our side. There we dropped a big cottonwood tree over to the gravel bar island in the center, and then waded the smaller channel to the far shore. We were beat out. About thirty feet from the creek was a bank some eight feet high topped by a bench covered with a good stand of spruce. We hitched the dogs under one tree and made our camp under another about fifteen feet above the bank.

That night it snowed four inches. About two a.m. the dogs started an awful tumult. I raised up but could see nothing. The dogs were looking towards the creek and were all bristled up. I looked for five minutes but could still see nothing. Then finally the dogs quieted down and I went back to sleep. Early the next morning I built the fire while Bill went to the creek to get water. When he got to the bank he hesitated, looked up and down, and then came tearing back for his gun. I grabbed mine and headed for the bank.

Right under the bank was the granddaddy of all bear tracks. I traced it up the creek a ways and then down the creek a ways. At no time did the bear swerve right or left or change the cadence of his step. When the dogs set up their clamor, he was no more than fifty feet from them and closer to us, and he neither quickened nor slowed down his pace. We concluded he had some real important business up ahead and had no intention of being diverted.

Our vitality was waning a bit as we were rationing our grub to make it last. But we could not take a game animal since we could use no more than twenty-five pounds of meat before it would spoil. We were stretching what grub we had

with squirrels, ptarmigan and other small game. And on one of the dogs we were packing a small reserve of sugar—sort of saving this as a last luxury. Then the next creek we crossed on a log, this knothead pup decided to swim. He came out on the bank one-fourth of a mile below, and there went our sugar. But a few days later we hit the railroad at Talkeetna and entrained for Anchorage.

Things went smoothly enough that summer of 1923. Bill was the engineer in charge, and Oscar Risvold was my packer again, a very capable one who later became a reconnaissance man. By late August, the observing party was in the barren high hills at the head of the Chunilna River. I had trails selected and the stations ready for the next two quadrangles, and since we were closing down work on September 1st, I then cruised and marked a trail for the observing party all the way in to Curry on the railroad. Oscar, Bill and I arrived there August 25th and were put up in the big old comfortable log roadhouse that Nellie Neal had operated during the railroad construction days.

The next morning we awoke to a heavy snowstorm, with six to eight inches of the stuff already on the ground. I realized the snow would cover many of my markers on the trail, as much of it was above timberline where the markers were cairns of rocks. So I took off alone to intercept the observing party.

The snow came down steadily, and although I had a good pair of snowshoes I kept bogging down. The next morning it was still snowing. I made it up over the top of a bare ridge, and then bogged down completely. I could go no farther so I cached what stuff I had with me under some rocks and returned to Curry for help. Oscar, Bill and I left early the following morning, each packing an extra pair of snowshoes for members of the observing party. We arrived late that evening at timberline and built a spruce bough wickiup under a spruce tree whose wide branches came close to the ground.

Early the next morning we started up onto the barren ridge. We were all wearing black mosquito nets to prevent snow blindness. By that time there was thirty-seven inches of snow on the ground, and still more coming. We got to the area where I had cached the grub in the rocks, but had trouble locating it. Suddenly I saw some dark figures against the snow.

"There are caribou!" I said.

"No," somebody argued, "them are whistlers."

So I sent my lead dog over to see what they were. It turned out that they were mice, working on the stuff I had left in my cache. This illusion is often caused by fog or snow against a flat

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white background. The mice had used about a fourth of my supplies, but we gathered up what remained and headed up the ridge, taking turns breaking trail.

Then the blizzard really hit us. We still had four or five miles to go up the ridge; then we had to turn south and drop off the ridge over a steep cliff with only one possible trail down it. Visibility went down to practically nothing. I had to resort to the compass to make sure of direction. The blizzard was so intense that it drove snow through every opening in our clothing, where it melted and caused considerable discomfort.

It soon became evident that we had to make timber or perish. At last we came to what I was sure was the cliff where we turned south but I could not find the path down. Finally we came up with an idea. I worked my way to what looked like the edge and pushed my dog, Smokey, over into the void, half expecting never to see him again. Then we huddled under a rock to wait. In about twenty minutes he came back along the edge of the cliff, wagging his tail and so pleased to see us.

His tracks where he climbed back were obliterated in a matter of seconds by the blizzard, but I urged him on ahead and he led us down the trail to the head of timber on the right creek.

Here we found a large spruce tree with branches touching the ground and the lower several feet interlaced with wild hay. We cut out some more space under these branches where there was no snow and the wind could not penetrate. We spread our meager sleeping robes, built a large fire to the lee, and hung our wet clothes to dry. We divided the night into two-hour watches to keep the fire going and to see that the clothes did not burn. The flames stretched horizontally along the ground.

In the morning as we were preparing our almost non-existent breakfast, a large block of ptarmigan landed just below camp. Bill took the .22 and got near enough to shoot, but he was so tired and beat out he settled down in the snow to steady his aim. At that instant every last bird took to the air and two-thirds of our breakfast disappeared down the creek.

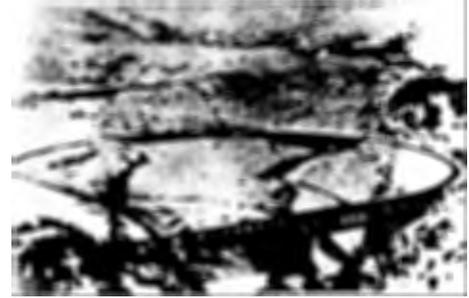
Well, we couldn't waste time mourning over this, but packed up and made our way down to the main creek. Almost at once we came upon the trail of the observing party, and fired a shot. An answering shot was heard down the

creek, and we were soon with them. Their grub situation was little better than ours, but they did have some caribou meat which we cooked up. As soon as the aroma hit the air, one of the horses came to the fire to join us. The packer said, "He eats caribou steaks." And sure enough, he did eat several steaks right there.

All of the horses were in bad shape and I was filled with pity every time I looked at them. Eight horses had disappeared when the blizzard hit the observing party in the hills, and five more were to drop before we got back to the railroad.

It was obvious that the trail I had selected could not be used now, so I had to find another trail down the creek through snow nearly hip deep. It took us five days to make it back to the railroad track five miles below Curry, at great hardship for both man and beast. At one place, where we were forced to cross a large and very swift stream, my faithful dog Smokey was swept under a drift pile. Oscar leaped onto the pile, lay flat, and fished around underneath until he came up with Smokey, almost drowned. We stopped right there, dried Smokey off with a blanket and built a fire. After he had led us to safety down the cliff side, he was considered a very important member of the party.

A short time later we left the creek and made a beeline over a low ridge for the railroad. It was on this ridge that we lost the last of the five horses that was to die since we joined the party. He just sank to the ground and could not get up. I stumbled on ahead, found the railroad tracks, and made it into Curry. One of the railroad men loaded several bales of hay we kept there onto a hand car, and I ran this back to where the horses were to hit the tracks. Fortunately, those five miles were downgrade, as I was so pooched out that my arms and legs bent like rubber hoses. When I arrived we started to break up the bales of hay, but had to give way as about fifteen frantic horses fell onto it and beat the bales apart with their hooves so they could dive in.



We went north from Seward over the Alaska Railroad and made the famed loop, which has since been removed.

Back at Curry the railroad management again put us up in Nellie's old roadhouse, which had two good stoves and plenty of coal. The food and warmth were more than welcome, but one night, Bill, the chief of the party, had more supplies than he needed.

The building had a "balloon ceiling," so common in those days. This consisted of a layer of thin drill stretched over the rafters to sort of pretty up the interior. This ceiling had been up for many years, and was becoming weak and bulged ominously in places. The biggest bulge was near a stove and over the cot Bill had selected.

"Bill," I said as I was stoking the stove and banking the fire for the night. "What do you suppose makes that ceiling bulge? I'll just take a poke at it and see."

Bill, who was in his sleeping bag, looked up at the ceiling.

"Leave it alone!" he yelled. Too late. I had nudged it with the coal shovel.

The ceiling split and there was a crash like a farmer dumping a load of rocks. A huge pile of old doughnuts, hot cakes and cookies buried the cot bed. Bill struggled to get from under, sleeping bag and all, all the while roaring like a wounded bear. The whole gang joined in the chorus, mightily enjoying the incident.

I should have saved some of that pastry. It would have been famous today, as this was Nellie Neal's dining room where she fed the construction crews of the Alaska Railroad around 1916. The squirrels knew the quality of her cooking and had cached a huge supply of it in the balloon ceiling. ▲

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