

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Chapter II—More Surveying

I'd been in Alaska two years when, in the fall of 1924, the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey sold all of its horses in Fairbanks and pulled out of the Interior. We had the scheme or network observed as far as Healy, and the reconnaissance done to Fairbanks. But they ordered me to stay on and carry the reconnaissance through to Eagle the following summer. That suited me fine. I didn't want to leave Alaska anyway.

That winter I made several dog team trips around the country out of Fairbanks. Two or three of them were to Chena Hot Springs, which were run at the time by an oldtimer named Otto Meyer. On one trip up I met the "Male-mute Kid" whom I had known for some few years. He was one of the old school dog drivers and had vast experience in that line. Whenever the Kid wanted to call it a day, he just rolled up in a robe and slept in his sled on the trail. On this trip he had about eighteen dogs in harness; an undisclosed number of dogs running loose, catching rabbits and getting into traps and snares; and on the front of his sled was a carton filled with a litter of newborn pups. He was always acquiring dogs but never wanted to get rid of any.

At the Hot Springs, Otto had, at considerable expense, acquired two or three dozen chickens which he kept in a heated cabin with a chicken wire fence around it. The Kid's loose dogs had

ripped a hole in this fence in jig time, and in a matter of seconds killed all the chickens but for one rooster. The one left was a cock with a beautiful long tail. He managed to keep out of the dogs' reach, but lost his tail. Otto was, of course, very sad over this state of affairs. Getting a bunch of chickens just to Fairbanks in those days took some doing, and getting them from Fairbanks to Chena Hot Springs was a major accomplishment.

The Kid's real name was Fred Loudro. The dog team business was bad then, and no one could make a dime. The good old days of passenger and freight hauling with dogs were coming to an end. The Kid had had his day on the Anchorage-McGrath-Flat trail, and it was quite a day. The Kid and other dog drivers would leave Anchorage with sled loads of oranges and lemons, kept from freezing by footwarmers placed on the load, and on arrival at McGrath and Flat would sell them at a dollar each.

Sometimes the Kid would leave Anchorage with three dog teams, one with a load of freight and the other two for passengers. Fares were collected at Anchorage, and the passengers wound up not only paying their fare but driving a dog team. If I remember correctly, the fare from Anchorage to McGrath was \$275. Then there were the roadhouse expenses en route, which made it a pretty costly trip.

Between Chena Hot Springs and Fairbanks, a distance of sixty miles, was the Colorado Roadhouse. It was a large two-story log building, well-built, but not well-placed. It was located on flat ground and too close to the Colorado Creek, which glaciated badly. It was run by a Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. Johnson was a huge powerful Scandanavian and a hard worker who never asked any one for help. Mrs. Johnson was a gracious English lady and also a hard worker. She set a bountiful table of excellent food as Johnson was a good provider. She called her husband by his last name, "Johnson."

Mrs. Johnson's brother also was at the roadhouse. He was typically English and wore a neatly trimmed beard. He also was always neatly dressed in store clothes, and spent all his time sitting in a special overstuffed chair reading the classics. He was supposed to be an invalid. His first name was Cedric, but I have forgotten his last name.

On one of my overnight stops there, the creek was glaciating like mad. Glaciating starts by the creek freezing to the bottom. Then the water breaks out and runs over the top of the ice. Then that freezes, and the process keeps repeating until it is not unusual for a small creek to turn into a fifty-foot deep glacier a half mile wide. Johnson was an expert at humoring a glacier and leading it around by the nose. If he had been half as expert at picking the site for his roadhouse, he could have saved himself a lot of work.

At the time of this particular stop, the situation was like this. Johnson had built an ice wall around the roadhouse and kept it one foot or more higher than the water running on top of the glacier. That night the ice wall was up to the middle of the lower windows and four feet away from them. The water was running on both sides of the roadhouse, but Johnson kept freezing the wall higher, an inch at a time. He was also cutting ditches in the ice when the water threatened to go over the wall. If it did, the roadhouse would have been flooded in a matter of minutes.

I wanted to help Johnson, but he would not permit it. He said I did not know how, and might let the water into the house. Perhaps he was right. Anyway, there was Johnson, working the clock around, while Cedric and Mrs. Johnson and I slept peacefully below the

Mosquitoes were fierce and we built smudges which the horses learned to use.



water line. Whenever I woke up, I could hear the water gurgling and splashing around the roadhouse. But I slept well, having much faith in Johnson.

At one time Johnson had been a timber cruiser. I could only wonder deeply what chain of events brought these three to the wilds of Alaska and, more specifically, an English lady, her invalid brother, and a powerful Scandinavian woodsman into the same household. I got to be very fond of those people and used to visit them often.

That May my packer, Dan McKenzie, and I left Fairbanks with six horses to carry the Survey reconnaissance through to Eagle. We traveled via the Goodpaster and the Fortymile, and after we left Shaw Creek we saw no human beings for the next two-and-a-half months. The one village in that area, Joseph Village at the confluence of Joseph Creek and the Fortymile, we found abandoned. We figured an epidemic must have hit the village several years before as there were some graves that looked to be about the same age. Some of these had been dug into by wolves. We also found parts of two skeletons in a cabin that had almost tumbled down.

A few of the log cabins and caches were still standing. In one of the caches we found eight rifles of 1873 model, all of 44-40 calibre. The rifles were in air condition and usable with the proper ammunition, but there was no ammunition about. We tied them up in one bundle with rope, and left them in the best cache still standing.

Game was in great abundance, with caribou by the thousands along the whole route. Moose were everywhere in considerable numbers, and there were mountain sheep at the head of the Goodpaster and on the mountains, including Mt. Brenson. Bears, both black and grizzly, were also numerous, as were wolves.

One night late in August we camped at the head of a creek above timber where there were a few dry poles for firewood. That evening, a beautiful clear night, we heard a terrific rumpus down the creek in the timber—grunts, roars, crashes and thumps! We figured there must be a grizzly bear fighting, or possibly a bull moose. Two days later we finished our work, and as we moved down the creek towards the north limit of the Fortymile River we kept a lookout for the scene of the great tumult.

We didn't have to look close. We couldn't have missed it blindfolded and with a cane. On the bank of the creek was an area three hundred feet long and a hundred feet wide completely torn up and pulverized. Jack spruce were broken and reduced to kindling wood. At the other end of this devastated area lay an immense rack of moose antlers, the skull, several joints of the neck bone, all



My packer, Dan McKenzie, in our camp at the head of the Goodpaster River.

picked clean. In about the middle of this devastation was a wolf's tail sticking out of the mud. We pulled it out and there was no wolf attached. On the upper side of the area, we found a big standing dry spruce with a smooch of blood twelve feet up from the ground, along with a banner of wolf hide two inches wide and six inches long hanging on a knot and waving in the breeze. How many wolves did this job I could not attempt to say, but it must have been a terrific battle.

This country was full of soda springs. A bit later we came to one on a flat

piece of ground at the end of a bench. Behind it to the north was a dense thicket of jack spruce, and all around it was a stand of timber. Some of the trees had been undermined by moose digging in the roots for minerals. Water bubbled out of the ground over quite an area, and in the center was a cone about twenty feet high that may have been of volcanic ash, with a base about a hundred feet in diameter. The inverted center of the cone was about half full of water, which was cold but still bubbled merrily. Moose trails, knee deep, radiated around like spokes to a hub.

Dratted new-fangled Gadgets.

The old hickory limb we used to use down by the river was fine. Then they came up with bamboo, and then split bamboo. First thing you know they were turning out these fancy hollow fiberglass rods. And spinning reels, of all things. Dratted new-fangled gadgets.

One thing they left alone for a while, though, was the old loop guide. No changes there, no-sir-ee. (So we busted a line now and then. Can't win 'em all).

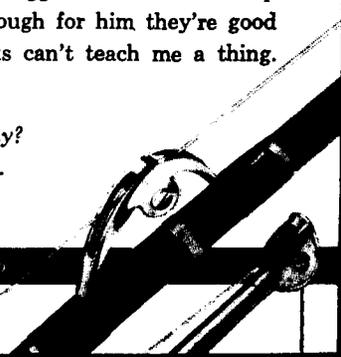
Now this AFTCO outfit comes up with what they call a fool-proof roller guide. Says you can even spin-cast with it. After all, feet were made before wheels, weren't they? My grandfather dragged his lines across loop guides for years, and if they were good enough for him they're good enough for me. No-sir-ee, these smart-alecks can't teach me a thing. Dratted new-fangled gadgets.

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We camped about a half mile below the springs on a sizeable creek of beautifully clear cold water. Moose would come barreling through this place, splash through the creek, and never slow up until they reached the soda springs. The next morning I went up to investigate further. I found a place I could hide in the top of three trees that the moose had undermined so that they fell and wedged between some other trees. I made myself comfortable about twenty-five feet off the ground, and didn't have to wait long.

Three moose, one of them a big bull, came tearing into the opening. The sides of the cows were gaunt and sort of caved in. They rushed to the top of the cone, and then reached down to the water. They were nearly standing on their heads. I could see their sides bulging out more and more as they drank. Then they backed hastily out of the hole, looked wildly around, burped a couple of times as only moose can burp, and took off. All this time, the bull was digging in the muck about seventy-five feet from the cone and licking the ground. He stuck around after the cows left, but he kept looking towards a certain spot across the opening and grew more nervous by the moment. Finally after about five minutes he, too, took off in a mad rush.

A couple of minutes later, two huge timber wolves strolled out from the spot in the woods the moose had been watching. They sauntered towards the center of the clearing, and I settled their hash for them then and there. On inspection of the wolf carcasses, I found they had recently fed and were rolling in fat and very smelly. That accounted for their lack of interest in the three moose.

The bull moose never did go to the cone to drink as the cows did, but seemed to prefer the minerals from the muck. I never determined whether this was unusual or not. We thought this water must be something, but neither of us could drink it as it was very bitter. Our horses wouldn't drink it either.

Horse feed at this time was getting pinched by frost in a few places, but my packer found a good swale of green grass half a mile back of the thicket. He put the horses there, with hobbles



The author on the Yukon River above Circle in 1925.

and bells on a couple of them. The next morning he went out to check and instead of walking way around the thicket, he started right through it. He'd gone about a hundred feet when he parted the branches of two spruce and found himself looking right down into a wolf's face. He shot, and in an instant the air was full of wolves—behind him, in front of him and, he claims, sailing through the air right over his head.

He got out of there and back to camp, and never mind the horses. When I got back to camp that afternoon he was still in a high state of excitement. So the next morning we went back to the thicket and he told me where to look. I could not coax him back into the thicket, and he took a dim view of my going in. I found two dead wolves and the bloody trail of two more, but we could not trace them.

At Liberty Fork, where I'd had John Powers of Eagle cache some horse feed for me, we got a nice surprise. We found he'd also cached a few delicacies such as a jar of honey, a dozen lemons and a couple dozen eggs, all gratis. We sure went for them in a big way. Then at O'Brien Creek, south of Eagle, we came to a mine employing about twenty men, and figured we were back in civilization again.

That spring I'd had an eighteen-foot canoe shipped from Fairbanks to Eagle where Powers stored it for me. So we sold our horses in Eagle. They brought from seventy-five cents each on up to seventy-five dollars, bid by Mrs. Powers for one big black. The ones that went cheap were used for dog food, the higher priced ones for work horses.

We left Eagle in the canoe for Circle and arrived there on October 1 in a blinding snowstorm. The following day

we set off on foot over the mail trail for Fairbanks, but we were not alone. At Circle, a dude hunter who was a wealthy Texas banker, and a man and a woman who had been invited to leave Dawson wanted to attach themselves to our party. They probably figured that two skookum younger bucks might be quite a help on this route at this time of year. It is part of the Alaska tradition to help others, so we agreed.

There were two nights en route with no shelter, and other nights when we all had to crowd into a small one-room cabin. There was also one night in a cabin whose owner had cataracts on his eyes and was a bit off his rocker at times but he measured up in the end and was hospitable. As it turned out, the elder banker was an asset, but the man and woman taxed our resources painfully and held us up quite a bit. However, we arrived in Fairbanks in about a week none the worse for the trip.

That winter I had to go back to Washington, D.C., to put in several weeks trying to bring my field notes to where they were understandable, that sort of work I do not relish. Then I took a furlough home in Maine for the rest of the winter. It was good to be with relatives and friends again, but otherwise Maine seemed different. Everything looked so small.

My next assignments were in Minnesota and Iowa, and then to New Orleans for the winter where we worked in the Baratavia Bay and Grand Isle area. At that time it was becoming painfully apparent that the Coast and Geodetic Survey would not be returning me to Alaska for many years. But luck was with me and I was to be North again in a matter of months.

(More next month)

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