

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Photos from the author

Part XI Life in the River Villages

It might be in order here to say a few words about life in the river villages and some of the people who made them what they were. Actually the villages were all pretty much the same. Since modern conveniences were mostly lacking, things usually were accomplished by "make do" and "make shift." But you couldn't beat the hospitality of those villages anywhere in this uneasy world.

"High society" in the villages usually consisted of the U. S. Commissioner, the trader and the postmaster, and they took their obligations seriously. For instance, at Ruby, come Thanksgiving, nearly all of us were invited up to the U. S. Commissioner's house for dinner. By Ruby's standards, it was a real gathering of notables. The commissioner was a lady, and she was competent both as an official and as a holiday cook.

One Thanksgiving we all arrived, and in due time dinner was announced. The table was heaped with a big turkey and all the trimmings, except for one thing—the gravy. Madame Commissioner couldn't get it to thicken. Well, we were all pretty hungry and the dinner was cooling off while the futile attempts continued. Something had to be done. Finally I said, "Mrs. Commissioner, did you by any chance use snow water to mix your gravy?" Of course I knew she had because I'd seen the big drum of snow water sitting by the stove.

"Why yes I did, Sam," she said. "Is that what's wrong?"

I assured her that was it, and that there was no reason to struggle further. We could eat it thin and like it. There were a few feminine comments around the table, such as, "Well, I never knew that before," but we tied into the meal without further ado. Several days later I met one of the ladies on the street and she gave me a withering look and said, "I've found you, Sam, that wasn't very nice. I've been making gravy out of snow water for years."

A number of lady commissioners served in the various river villages. After I knew inherited the office from an elderly chap who had gone to Fairbanks and died. She took over the post office, and her first task was to get her up and straighten out the records.

I found that her predecessor had used a big stack of old Saturday Evening

Posts as a filing cabinet. However good the Post might be as a magazine, it is wanting in a number of respects as a filing cabinet. About all you could say for it was that it kept everything flat.

There was no record of what page to turn to in which issue to find out about "No. 1 Below Discovery on Trail Creek," or anything else for that mat-



Mail order catalogs were important in the villages and at times they comprised almost our entire cargo.

ter. In addition, every magazine was not used to its full capacity, nor in any kind of order. She found that a written request from Midnight Creek with notice of assessment work done had been presented for recording, complete with recording fee, but the recording was not done. The whole thing was simply filed in the Saturday Evening Post. Then I went down about the eighth or tenth issue, she found a pension check for a man who had been dead several years, and a couple pages later, another check for the same man. Since several of the Posts were used in this manner, it was necessary to go through them all, page by page. Quite a few \$20 bills turned up, too, all accompanied by notices of assessment work accomplished, bearing dates of several years back.

But there was not the slightest evidence of skulduggery or malfeasance. The records so far as they were carried were straight as a string and balanced

out. The new Madame Commissioner lost no time in entering assessment notices on the books and returning the unused pension checks to the territorial government, accompanied by a report of the demise of the pensioners.

As I said before, the trader also was an important personage in the village, but he was only human and subject to be taken in occasionally, too. I remember one time in a river village, an Indian had a raging thirst but no money with which to quench it. A man and his wife were running the trading post there, and they took turns with the work. The trader would take a two-hour hitch, and then his wife would come down and take a two-hour hitch. The Indian, who had taken note of this procedure, by some means or other acquired a mink pelt. He went into the trading post when the man was there and deposited the \$16 he got for the pelt. Then when the lady came in for her two-hour stint, the Indian came back and drew out his cash deposit. When the man came back for his two-hour shift, the Indian bought \$16 worth of whiskey on his \$16 credit that wasn't there any more. Then he made himself scarce. The trader and his wife didn't get together on this deal until it was too late.

Dances were popular in all of the river villages, and sometimes the liquor flowed very freely. At one of the remote villages one Christmas I arranged to fly in all the holiday mail and the turkey and fixings for the Christmas dinner, but leaving the whiskey out. This worked out fine up to a certain point. I'd been invited to Christmas dinner at the trading post. It was just growing dark and we figured we had it made, when we heard the drone of an aircraft. The pilot landed and parked under the bank and was peddling out of the airplane. The local preacher and I stood on the bank and listened. Fifths that went for \$7.50 on the Yukon had become far more valuable en route and were going for \$18 on the Koyukuk. There really wasn't a thing we could do about it. The sales were accomplished in a hurry, and the pilot took off into the night without coming up onto the bank to say hello.

In addition to the local preachers, an occasional itinerant preacher would make the rounds of the villages. One time when I was flying bush mail and freight on the Koyukuk, I had a young

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preacher as a passenger. The freighting fell right in with his plans, since it involved overnighing at various villages. The first night he preached at Wiseman to a full audience, lacking one. The next night he preached at Bettles with a good turnout. It was pretty cold that night, so I spread myself out on the floor near him and promptly fell asleep. He preached a long and windy sermon, accompanied by my snorts and snores, which apparently went over well with the congregation. When I woke up, everyone was laughing fit to split their sides.

This preacher carried a trumpet along with him. It was a brass affair, and looked as though some very good music could be had from it if placed in expert hands. But played by the preacher, it sounded like a bunch of ravens on a garbage dump. I asked him why the trumpet. He said that he was handicapped in that he could not sing. So it was his custom when he made a special point in his sermon to let go with a couple of toots. Since he made many points, there was much tooting.

I got to be quite fond of this chap. Every time he rode with me I had him out on the tail in the prop blast steering me around, and he performed like a veteran. After we got pretty well acquainted, he confided to me what he was really looking for. I'd sort of figured this out, but hadn't let on. What he had in mind was a prosperous Indian village where there was no missionary in residence. I guess I just about broke his heart when I told him that such a combination just didn't exist in Alaska. So our last night together was at Hughes, where he preached to the good people

A Russian Orthodox Church on the lower Yukon River, decorated for Christmas.



Fellow fliers along the Yukon. From left to right, Hans Mirow, Ron Taylor and Warren Tillman. The picture was taken at Fort Yukon.

accompanied by my snores and his tooting trumpet. The people of Hughes got a big bang out of this, and they have a story of their own about how I filled in for the sermon.

Then there was a man in one of the river towns who patronized the lonely Hearts Clubs. About every second year, Jack managed to save up enough money to send for a "bride." She would come first class all the way with expenses paid by the old sourdough. The brides, to a bride, could not stand the solitude of the Yukon, and they usually took off for the States again in a month or two. Jack would escort them to their means of conveyance, and pay all the bills back to their starting point, plus a little for extras. Then he would cinch up his belt and start saving for the next try two years hence.

The last bride I saw come in arrived on the river in front of town in April. There was water on the ice for a hundred feet out on the river. She stepped out of the plane in high-heeled slippers, a pretty dress, and a fancy hat with flowers on it. But when she saw the log cabins perched on the river banks and the dog teams all around, she looked pretty uncomfortable. During the usual stay of a month or two, we saw very little of her around Ruby. But one day I met her downtown and she told me, "Mr. White, I am leaving next week. This town is not too bad, and Jack is a fine man and I like him. BUT OH MY GOD, THAT HOUSE!" True to his customary procedure in such cases, Jack did the right thing all the way through. He was a rather remarkable man.

But the river did have some built-in conveniences. Across from Ruby and about a half mile upstream the Melozi River enters the Yukon. There are quite a few hot springs along the watershed of the Melozi and it is a very warm water river. Since the Yukon is very cold

and heavy with silt, and the Melozi is warm and clear, it is over a mile below Ruby before the waters mix. So if you want a bath, all you have to do is cross the Yukon to where the warm water flows. There's plenty of room, and a complete range of depth and temperature. If you want it warmer, go nearer to the Melozi; if you want it cooler, go farther down the Yukon.

At Ruby, in addition to the dances that were held, moving pictures were shown about once a week. Of course, the pictures weren't any great shakes, but they were something to laugh at and a place to socialize with one's fellows. And nearly every Sunday evening most of us would gather at Sig Wigg's roadhouse for one of Mame Wigg's most bounteous and wonderful feeds. Sig was an old dog team mail carrier, and Mame was about the best cook on the river.

The famous hospitality on the Yukon didn't just apply in the settlements. The same was true out in the sticks. You might, on occasion, find yourself having to spend a night or two in an Indian's trapping cabin. He might not have much, but what he had you were welcome to. You may have to sleep on the ground, as most of these cabins have no floor except Mother Earth. But you are welcome to space to roll out your sleeping bag, and you'll likely be furnished a



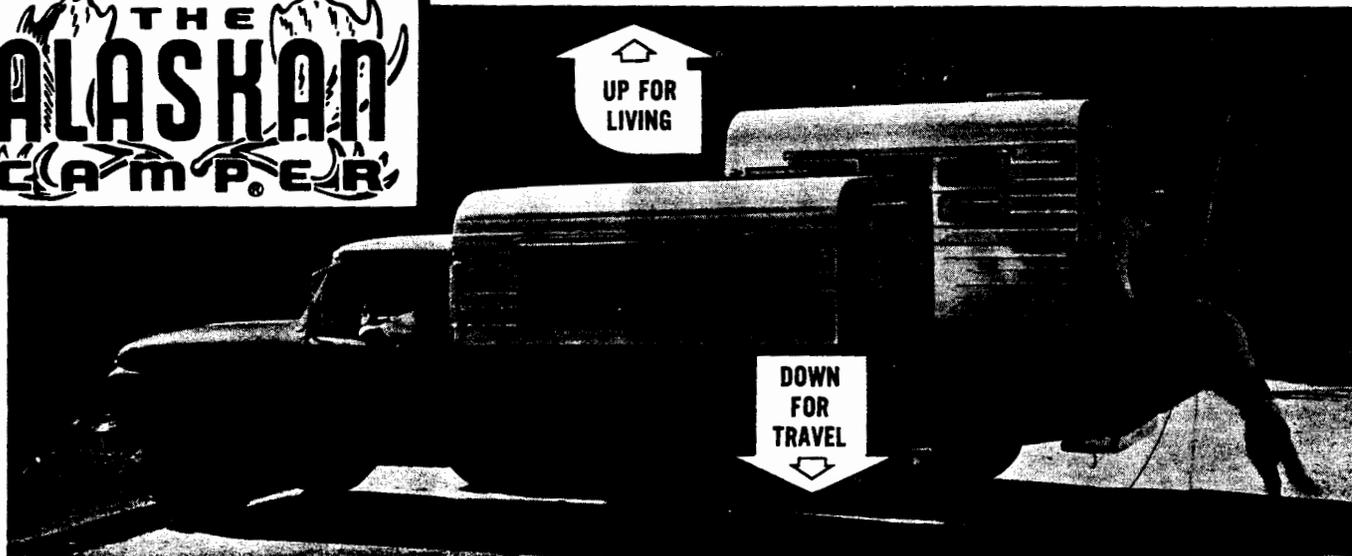
Mrs. Joe Rcmaker, at the right with the white apron, let me have six potatoes and followed them with a talking to the next time she saw him.

dried moose or caribou hide for a mattress. This, along with some moose meat and beans and a few frozen berries, is a whole lot better than a shakedown under a tree at fifty degrees below zero.

Only once did I find something lacking along the hospitality line that wasn't in keeping with the tradition of the Yukon, but I think I took care of that. I had stopped off at Circle City for a couple of days on my way to Fort Yukon

by boat. A young couple I knew was running the N. C. store there and living in the apartment upstairs, so I stopped by to call on them. The chap was quite given to practical jokes at times. He said, "We would invite you to dinner, but there are no potatoes in town."

I could see he said this to be polite, but that they really didn't want to be bothered. So I said, "Fine. I'll be here for dinner. I know where I can get



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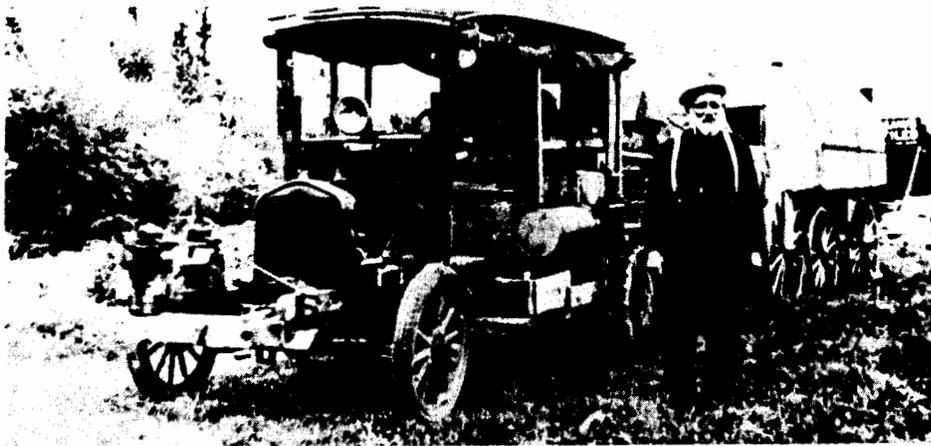
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Joe Barstow and his wagon train at Circle City in 1925, waiting for the Steese Highway to arrive. Joe was a blacksmith by trade and was kind, honest and friendly.

some potatoes." Their veiled consternation was apparent.

It was true that Circle was out of potatoes and I had none on my boat. But I figured that Mrs. Romaker, who was running the Tanana Roadhouse, would have a few hidden away somewhere. So I went over to the roadhouse with my little speech all rehearsed.

"Mrs. Romaker," I said, "tomorrow early I have to leave for Fort Yukon and I will be camping out, and if I can't have potatoes when I camp out, I just can't eat."

I could see right away I had scored. She looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "I'll let you have six. You'll have to get along with those." I thanked her profusely, took the potatoes back to the N. C. store apartment, and laid them on the table. There were some hard stares, but I stayed for dinner. Then I left early the next morning so as not to see Mrs. Romaker in case she found out. But on my next trip through Circle a month later, she really gave me a talking to, much to the amusement of everyone within earshot.

Another oldtimer at Circle City was Joe Barstow, a blacksmith. Back in the late 1920's, Joe, like everyone else, was waiting for the highway to come through from Fairbanks. He knew he had quite a few years to wait yet, but he was getting ready. Joe had acquired an old Model T Ford and he rebuilt it into what he called a "general utility" vehicle. He replaced the rear wheels with sprockets. Then he extended the frame, and on this extension he mounted bull wheels about the height of the old ones, only these were made of a sort of laminated lumber and were a foot or so wide. On these wheels he bolted lugs for improved traction. When connected up with the forward sprockets, it pro-

vided a much reduced gear ratio.

On the front end of the contraption, Joe mounted a saw frame and a circular saw. Behind, he attached a couple of old buggies, like those drawn by horses in which a stricken swain would take his girl for a ride back in the 1890's. He rigged hoops and bows over these, and then stretched canvas tightly over all so that he had a couple of covered wagons for living quarters and storage. It was his plan, when the highway arrived, to travel in a leisurely manner and file saws, sharpen and repair scissors and knives, and saw wood.

Joe had measured out a circular course in town, and he drove around this many times with the covered wagons in tow, checking his gas consumption and his miles per hour. I rode around with Joe once, and the thing worked after a fashion with much smoke, harsh grindings and shaking. But it was a picturesque outfit.

You might ask what a Model T Ford was doing in Circle before the highway got there. Well, many years before, a road of sorts had been made from Circle to Central, Mastodon Creek, and Circle Hot Springs. At first this road was for horse-drawn vehicles only. Later it was improved enough so that a Model T could get through when it was frozen or real dry, and a couple of Model T's were shipped up by steamboat. As Joe planned it, his eventual destination was Valdez. He figured two or three years would do it. But alas, it was not to be.

He got tired of waiting for the highway and took off for Eagle Creek and across Eagle Summit. He stopped where Mr. and Mrs. Leo Moore were living beside the road in some new log cabins, took sick there, and died. Joe's Model T and covered wagons just sat there, and might still be there today. He was a good kind-hearted man, and actually

realized part of his dream since he made nearly a hundred miles and crossed Eagle Summit, which was doing pretty good.

Local industry in the villages was generally confined to trapping in the fall and winter and fishing during the summer. The fishing was done mostly with the famous Yukon River fish wheels. These wheels cannot be used in clear water because the fish can see them and pass them by. But in the silty waters of the Yukon they were very effective. Once in awhile, if a village got a little surge of prosperity, a sawmill would spring up. The lumber could be shipped up and down the river to other villages via barge and river boat. Such was the case at Ruby where a friend of mine repaired the old sawmill, and went into business, using logs which he cut up the Yukon in the winter and floated downriver in the spring.

I asked him to build me a one room cabin at Ruby as a sort of base camp for operations there. We agreed on no price, but he went ahead and furnished the lumber and built the cabin. There have been few deals in my life where I gave a man a blank check for a job I wanted done, as I did in this case. I like to remember it because when he came through with the bill, it was remarkably reasonable.

On my frequent trips up the Yukon I used to swing over the winter camp where he cut his logs and hauled them out to the bank of the river. If I saw a pile of boughs out on the snow-covered sand bar, I went in and landed. Once he had broken down and hadn't turned a wheel for five days. I flew on in to Fairbanks, where I was headed anyway, and got the parts he needed and delivered them to him the next morning. Shortly after that he was logging again. I often used to stop for a pot of coffee and lunch, which was always a pleasure. His capable and attractive wife was doing the cooking, and she had been brought up by her parents to know how to cook right.

Late one April I had orders to go get this fellow and his helper and bring them in to Ruby on a business trip. The snow was deep and soft, but he had wallowed out a runway just long enough to get in and get out of. We were all set to leave Ruby about four o'clock the next morning to get back while the runway was still frozen. This fellow's helper was a bit nervous, and asked how I thought I could get our load into that small space. But my friend answered for me. He said, "We don't have to worry about that. That is for Sam to worry about." It was a compliment in my book.

(More next month)