

CATHERINE VAN CURLER

ORAL HISTORY 78-75

I am a pioneer of Alaska - a real pioneer. My husband and I landed in Skagway, August 24th, 1898, where we lived until the next September. We took train over the White Pass to White Horse where we bought a boat and with a man with us started a 7-day trip to Dawson. We camped under trees every night, during our seven days and nights over rough water through 30-Mile, through Lake Labarge, down the Yukon through Five-Finger and Hells Gate, where every minute we would think it was our last ride on earth, the water was so rough. We passed many many wrecked boats, but we made the long dangerous trip to Dawson in 7 days without any mishap.

The 16th of September, 1899, we landed in Dawson, where we got a cabin in which we lived three months. The only windows we had were empty beer bottles. Every other bottle was upside down, set in as a long window and caulked in between with moss. In December we moved to Bonanza where Husband worked a lay three years. Then we moved over on Hunker Creek where he worked a lay until we took steamer for Fairbanks, landing ~~like~~ 24th Alaska/on August/1904. There we have resided ever since. We have never been outside of the Territory since first coming in in '98.

Since arriving in Fairbanks we have seen many ups and downs - more downs than ups. We both have worked very very hard. We built our own cabin in 1904; in 1907 cut our own trail up the Chena River with three dogs and a small outfit and camped wherever night overtook us. Next summer we came to Fairbanks by poling boat. Him and I started up the Chena River with ~~12~~ nineteen hundred pounds in our boat. It took us 30 days to make 160 miles by water and the worst water ever poled upstream by any woman and man---almost one continuous riffle and swift water.

We landed at our mine October 1st, 1907, where real work began. We built a cabin without horse or nails to help to make it with. Husband

cut the logs and poles to cover the roof. We rolled them on skids to the boat, put them in the boat, poled them up to where we built our first real home in Alaska. I peeled the roof poles while he got the logs ready. He hewed the logs on one side. Then we put the logs up as far as we could put them up. When it got too high to reach, he put a rope around each log and we pulled them up by arm power. But in ten days we had a 3-room cabin made. He whip-sawed all the lumber we needed alone, which was a real man's job, But we had a nice cozy home.

Next spring in 1908, we cut timber to put in a dam of 600 feet long across the Chena River. Then our trouble began---to cut a new channel for to take the water of the river---we cut moss and niggerheads by the day and weeks. Then we took our pick and shovels and started to dig an opening for the water to go through. Ah, the weary hours we spent to cut that new channel! No one knows but ourselves. We worked from 12 hours to 20 a day. In three years we had it cut through. Drying one-half mile of the main river, then he and I whipsawed lumber enough to make 48 boxes and 14 flume boxes. We set them up and started to shovel in, in the bed of the river. We worked one month. A big rain came and raised the river until our new channel would not take all the water. So it tore out 80 feet of our dam--took lots of our tools we had been working with. We had the boxes and flumes all tied together with cables and ropes. They first swung around. We saved them. Then we started to work on the new channel to widen it and make it deeper. Here we worked until October. Then we started to put in the broken part of our dam. We went up river one-half mile and cut our timber. He and I packed it a thousand feet on our shoulders to the river where we put it in and floated it to our dam to patch the hole with.

Then after landing all the timber we needed, we started to cut acres and acres of moss to put on the toe piling when we was ready for to put them in. We carried it all in by hand-barrow - him on the

front end and I on the back end, where we packed moss until 2 o'clock in the morning. We would go home and rest awhile and get a cup of coffee, then do the same thing over again - packing moss. When we got enough packed - what we thought would cover our toe piling - then we started closing up the break. We worked all day and up to 3 o'clock in the morning to close it. Then we took the boat and brought in tons and tons of rock to put on our moss in front of the piling. Ah the weary hours we put in early and late, but we got it in in ten days.

We started to sluice again. Sluiced until it froze up. But the next spring after what we thought all danger was past - our dam went out again. We put it in again with many days of hard work and sleepless nights as all timber and moss had to be carried again - only from further away. We went to sluicing again. The dam went out three times during that summer. Each time we put it in. Each time was a little harder. We got in only a week or ten days of sluicing that season but had everything ready for a good season the next spring. We got our summer wood hauled and sawed up. A couple of young fellows came along so we hired them for the summer. We started sluicing early and looked forward to a good summers work.

But disappointment got in the way again. Everything was going along so nice and I had killed a moose in front of the house and we was rejoicing at my good luck. But the weather did not look very good. By evening it was quite cloudy. I said to my husband and the two boys - hadn't we better clean up the boxes in case it rained and caused the river to raise and the dam to break. Ah no. Van said: we have the boxes well tied and I don't look for the water to raise much and I believe the dam will stand the raise. But ah, at 3 o'clock I heard the most awful racket. I jumped out of my bed and saw our dam grinding along downstream. I called Van and the two boys. They came running out.

just in time to see a large tree strike the flume. They started to fall broke. the cable they was tied together with and took 7 days sluicing for three men besides 48 boxes and 16 flume boxes. It was a sorrowful thing to see all our grub money and two men's wages going downstream besides. Ah so much hard labor! Next day the water had gone down enough so we went to find the shovels and picks, paná and all tools but everything was gone. Besides the boxes, the gold that was in the boxes was gone. We travelled down one-half mile below from where they had been working. We found one sluice box turned upside down. We turned it over. We took the riffles out of it and got one ounce of gold. We went a little further down and found another box with one riffle left in it. We got one-half ounce in that. Well, that was all we had for our winter grubstake and 10 cents a pound for freight. Van was terrible discouraged.

So we let the two boys go and ~~payed~~ payed each \$20, until we could pay them up. Well we decided we would put the dam in again. We started at the same old thing - cutting and carrying out timber on our shoulders to the river; run it down river to the dam; cut moss; packed it in for days; got everything ready. We found 100 feet had gone out but we both started with a stout heart and lots of will power and by the time we got it in, it was freezing up in the fall. Then we got our winter meat and cached it. Then we started cutting logs for saw logs for boxes next spring. Hauled them one and a half miles with our five faithful dogs. By December we had cut and hauled in 48 logs. Then it was time to start to town for our outfit.

Van made three trips with the dogs, hauling freight to save the 10 cents a pound. I stayed alone while he made the trips. He was gone 15 to 20 days each trip. Not a person did I see during all those days. From 1910 to 1917, I stayed to home every winter and in summer

helped my husband shovel in each day. By that time we got our dam to hold so it did not break again until the flood of 1929. Then it went out about the whole length of it and as we was both wore out from hard work and Mr. Van was so bad with his back and hips, we could not put it in again.

But during our hard luck and hard work, we both enjoyed the life we lived. Then we thought we would spend the winters in Fairbanks. We would come down that long 80 miles with three dogs and camp outfit, bed and 5 days grub on the sled. (That was before my roadhouse on the road.) We would pitch tent, or if too tired, spread our robe on spruce boughs, roll in tired out- snow to one's knees - get up at daylight; hit the trail again after eating a very light breakfast, mostly too light for our long trail ahead of us. Then we made up our minds that the trips was getting to be hard on us, as we both had to walk both coming and going. I have walked that 80 miles five times. One trip coming to town I had 30 pounds on my back. Van had 45 pounds on his back. All of our dogs had died but one so that meant - walk. As I said, the trips was getting too hard on us so we decided to come down in the fall by boat and go back in the spring with our outfit.

We used to start with 1800 pounds in our boat. Van and I poled that 160 miles up the Chena River to our mine over the roughest water that ever ran downstream. It used to take us 15 to 20 days to land it. We made four trips by boat. The river got so bad it got so it was not safe with a boat as the river was making new channels every summer so we quit poling our outfit up river. Then we bought a horse. Freightied with him three winters. The third spring he fell over a steep bank, landed on some logs and broke his back - a rather hard blow to the Van Curlers. That meant back to dogs for a few years. Then we bought another horse. We done our freighting with him four years.

I made one trip alone with the faithful old animal. I started

with 1800 pounds on the double ender but had to make four camping places during the trip. He was so tall I had to take a block of wood to stand on to put on his harness. We got in bad snow drifts. I had to shovel him out of several drifts before I got home. But I enjoyed every minute of my long trip alone. I had a rooster in a box taking him home with me, so that kept me company as he would crow and crow as soon as he saw daylight. I was on the trail $4\frac{1}{2}$ days. It snowed and blowed and filled the road full of snow, 4 and 5 feet high. But I got home without any more trouble than a little hard shoveling of the horse out of deep snow once in a while.

In 1930 we got stranded with our outfit. The freighter we got to take it up - his team played out 45 miles from home so we had to cache our outfit on a big niggerhead flat. No timber to do anything with so we put what grub we had in a big pile. We had 28,000 pounds with grub and tools of different kinds. We put a tent over it all and put what our 3 dogs would haul on the hand sled and started for home. By that time the snow was going fast but by traveling nights we made it in 3 days, or rather nights. So when the ice was just about all out in the spring Van built a scow and we started down 80 miles by river for our outfit. We took along our three dogs and toboggan in the scow. We had to haul our outfit $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles after getting to where we cached it, to the river. We hauled it with 3 dogs. But before we could haul that 2500 pounds to the river that mile and a half, that road had to be considered. We both took our axes and started to cut timber 8 feet long and as large as a stove pipe, and packed it out to where we had to start in on the road. We cut and packed timber $2\frac{1}{2}$ days and laid it across the road a foot apart. The third day we started with the toboggan to haul that outfit to the river. When we got to the cache a bear had got in it and destroyed about 400 pounds. Our dogs smelled

the bear and ran away from us but when we got to the cache they was waiting for us. So we put on 200 pounds and started for the river. We used to haul 3 loads a day. It took us $4\frac{1}{2}$ days to haul it to the river. Van Curler got the bear just about the time we had the stuff all hauled. It was a big black bear.

Then the fifth day we loaded our boat to see about what we could do about poling it up the river. We put 19 hundred in the scow. So we built a high cache and cached the balance of the outfit. We peeled bark and covered the cache with it. On the 9th day we started for our home with the scow and outfit. Oh man - then our troubles began! We got about 15 miles where it took 8 days of hard poling and wading to get it that far. There we took off 250 pounds and cached it in a cabin and started with 17 and a half hundred. Now maybe you don't think we had some time! The riffles was so steep we have worked 5 hours to get over one riffle. We were so tired we were wore out when night came. Worked from 5 o'clock in the morning until 10 and 11 o'clock at night. We would get out and eat our breakfast and start working again until 10 and 11 o'clock at night pulling that boat. We would take our blanket roll up any place we could find dry timber for a fire. We were so cold and wet. Of course that was all in the days work. We had 250 feet of line. Sometimes Van would be pulling and I leading the scow and sometimes I would take the line and go ahead and Van would lead the scow. When we would come to a bad riffle, one of us would go the length of the line and tie it on a tree ahead as far as our line would reach. Then hand over hand, we would pull up to where we had it tied. Next bad piece of water we came to we would do the same thing over again by pulling ourselves up by the rope.

One day Van was tying the rope 250 feet ahead and I was holding the boat. A big moose came out of the woods and crossed our line and

and almost pulled it out of Van's hands. But he dropped it down so no harm was done. We poled and tied lines until we was all in. We laid up one day for to rest. We saw bear, moose, beaver, mink, otter and caribou. We got about 40 miles from home. We both was wore out. We went in a relay cabin and Van built a windlass. He fastened it to the bow of the scow and put the 250 foot rope on it. When we got to a bad riffle we wound windlass ourselves up over it. Oh it was such a big help to us in getting the scow up. We got within 25 miles of home so we stopped at an old cabin and made another cache and cached all of our grub. Stayed 4 days to rest up then we started for home. Each of us put a pack on our back of what we was short of at home. I had butter and bacon. Van had flour. I had 24 pounds and he had 35 pounds on his back. We put canned stuff on the dogs backs. Each one was loaded. We had 25 miles of niggerheads to travel over. Anyone who ever travelled over them knows what they are like to travel over. And we thought the mosquitoes would eat us up before we got home asx they were out full force. We got home at 5 o'clock in the evening - wore out. We was gone lacking 3 days of being a month. That was our last river work. That was in the year 1931.

I have been chased by a bear and saved by one of our faithful dogs. We have killed 22 bears to save our grub from being destroyed. In 1933 we came to Fairbanks as Van's health gave out with hard work and hardship. And in 1935 I had the misfortune of getting mixed up in a F.E. truck. Had my leg broke three places and foot badly hurt and laid in the hospital 10 months where everyone was kind to me. Thanks to doctors and nurses. So ended our long usefulness to Alaska as pioneers of hardship and hard work. But we feel proud that we are pioneers though we will never get the credit of being pioneers. But they cannot take the memory from us of being man and wife and of helping make Alaska.

Dated October 17th, 1936
At Fairbanks, Alaska.