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AS IT WAS AND IS, 1865-1895**

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**WILLIAM HEALEY DALL**

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ALASKA AS IT WAS AND IS  
1865-1895

BY

WILLIAM HEALEY DALL

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ANNUAL PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS DELIVERED BEFORE THE PHILOSOPHICAL  
SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DECEMBER 6, 1895

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ALASKA AS IT WAS AND IS:

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WILLIAM HEALEY DALL.

[The annual presidential address, delivered before the Philosophical Society of Washington, December 6, 1895.]

In 1864 the apparent hopelessness of the attempts to establish a workable transatlantic telegraph cable led those interested in telegraphic communication with Europe to consider other means of attaining that end. It was thought that a short cable across Bering strait might be made to work, and no doubt was entertained of the possibility of maintaining the enormously extended land lines which should connect the ends of this cable with the systems already in operation in Europe and the United States. A company was formed for this purpose, and an expedition to undertake the explorations necessary to determine the route was organized. The coöperation of the Russian and American governments was secured and the necessary funds subscribed. Searching for properly qualified explorers, the promoters of the enterprise consulted the Smithsonian Institution and were brought into communication with Robert Kennicott, of Chicago, a young and enthusiastic naturalist, who had already made some remarkable journeys in the Hudson Bay territories in the interest of science. His explorations had taken him to the most remote of the Hudson Bay posts—Fort Yukon, on the river of the same name—regardless of every kind of hardship, privation, and isolation. His ardor was so contagious that before returning to civilization he had communicated it to almost every one of

the hard-headed fur traders in that remote and inhospitable region, and for years afterward bird skins, eggs, ethnological specimens, and collections in every branch of natural history poured from the frozen north into the Smithsonian Museum by hundreds and thousands.

When Kennicott, after traveling for months on snowshoes, sledges, or bateaux, stood at last on the steep bluff at Fort Yukon, he saw the yellow flood of the great river surging by the most remote outpost of civilization and disappearing to the westward in a vast and unknown region. An uninhabited gap of hundreds of miles lay between him and the nearest known native settlement to the west. Far in the north the midnight sun lighted up the snowy peaks of the Romanzoff mountains, whose further slope it was believed gave on the Polar sea. No one knew where the Yukon met the ocean. On most maps of that day a large river called the Colville, found by Simpson on the Arctic coast as he journeyed toward Point Barrow, was indicated as the outlet of the Yukon watershed. South of the Romanzoff mountains for an unknown distance vast tundras, scantily wooded with larch and spruce, the breeding grounds of multitudes of water fowl, intersected by many streams, but level as a prairie, extended to the west.

The native population of this region, as far as known, had always been scanty, and an epidemic of scarlet fever, introduced some years before through contact with other tribes trading to the coast, had swept them absolutely out of existence. Not an individual was left, and the nomadic natives who reached Fort Yukon from the east and southeast hesitated to approach the hunting grounds, where the mysterious pestilence might linger still.

Obliged to terminate his explorations here, Kennicott returned, after months of weary travel, to the United States, but cherished the hope of some day penetrating the *terra incognita* on whose borders he had been obliged to pause and turn away. The dream of his life was thereafter the exploration of Russian America, the discovery of its fauna,

and the determination of its relations to the fauna of Siberia and Japan. The group of young zoölogists which gathered about him at the Chicago Academy of Sciences, an institution of which Kennicott was practically the creator, was frequently roused to enthusiasm by impromptu lectures on the problems to be solved, the specimens to be collected, and the adventures to be anticipated in that virgin territory.

The need of the telegraph company for one familiar with life and conditions in the north brought him the long sought opportunity, and he undertook to lead the exploration, provided he was permitted to utilize it for science to the fullest extent commensurate with the attainment of the objects of the expedition. He stipulated that he should be permitted to select a party of six persons who should be qualified to make scientific observations and collections in the intervals of other work, but who should hold themselves ready to do any work required by the promoters of the enterprise, even to digging post-holes for the line if called upon.

His terms were accepted, and the scientific corps of the expedition organized and started for San Francisco. Here two of the members were detailed to join the party engaged in exploring the route through British Columbia; the others, of whom the speaker was one, accompanied Kennicott to the north.

In July, 1865, the expedition entered the bay of Sitka and our acquaintance with Russian America began.

Sitka was then a stockaded town of about 2000 inhabitants, with a village of more than 1500 Indians outside the walls. The settlement contained a Greek church, a Lutheran chapel, shipyards, warehouses, barracks, a clubhouse for the officers, a sawmill, a foundry where brass, copper, and iron castings of moderate size were made, beside numerous dwellings. All the buildings were log structures, their outer walls washed with yellow ochre, the roofs chiefly of metal painted red. High above the rest, on an elevated rock, rose a large building, in which the governor of the Russian colonies had his residence. This, known to visitors



as the "castle," was built of squared logs, with two stories and a cupola and was defended by a battery. The warm colors of the buildings, above which rose the pale green spire and bulbous domes of the Greek church, seen against steep, snow-tipped mountains densely clothed with sombre forests of spruce, produced a picturesque effect unique among American settlements.

Outside the walls, along the beach, was a long row of large Indian houses, low and wide, without windows, built of immense planks painfully hewn out of single logs with stone adzes, whose marks could still be distinctly seen. They were entered by small, low doors, rounded above, so that he who came in must bend to an attitude ill suited to defense. The front of each house was painted with totemic emblems in red ochre. Their dimensions were sometimes as much as 40 by 60 feet, and the area within formed one large room, with the rafters visible overhead, the middle portion floored only with bare earth, on which the fire was built, the smoke escaping through a large square hole in the roof. On either side were raised platforms with small partitioned retreats like state-rooms, each sheltering a single family. As many as one hundred people sometimes dwelt in one of these houses. The only ornaments were totemic carvings, generally against the wall opposite the entrance; overhead hung nets, lines, and other personal property drying in the smoke along with strips of meat or fish and fir branches covered with the spawn of herring.

On the bank, which rose behind the houses, densely covered with herbage of a vivid green, were seen curious box-like tombs, often painted in gay colors or ornamented with totemic carvings or wooden effigies. These tombs sheltered the ashes of their cremated dead. On the beach in front of the houses lay numerous canoes whose graceful shape and admirable workmanship extorted praises from the earliest as well as the later explorers of the coast. When not in use these were always sheltered from the sun by branches of spruce and hemlock or tarpaulins of refuse skins. Among

the canoes innumerable wolfish dogs snarled, fought, or played the scavenger.

The natives still retained to some extent their original style of dress, modified now and then by a Russian kerchief or a woolen shirt. As a rule, they were barefooted, stolid, sturdy, uncompromising savages, who looked upon the white man with a defiance but slightly tempered by fear and a desire to trade. The mission church of that day was built into the stockade, with doors entering it both from the Indian and the Russian town. When services were held the outer door was opened, the town door closed and stoutly barred. Once these fierce clansmen had endeavored to rush into and take the settlement when the door leading inward had been left unfastened. From the time when the first white men to touch these shores, Chirikoff's boat's crew in 1741, were without provocation massacred, these natives had not failed to maintain their reputation for courage, greed, treachery, and intelligence.

These conditions outside the settlement necessitated a military discipline within it. Sentries regularly paced the walks by day and night, the sullen Indians were systematically watched, and the little batteries kept in readiness for use.

The needs of the business of the company made Sitka a lively manufacturing town, in spite of the multitudinous Russian holidays. Society there was like a bit of old Russia, with the manners, vices, and sturdy qualities of sailor, peasant, and courtier fully exemplified within its narrow limits. A fishery at Deep lake, a few miles away, furnished fresh salmon in abundance, which was freely distributed to all comers twice or thrice a week during the season. The company furnished each employé with certain stated rations of flour, sugar, tea, etc., at fixed prices; the harbor, within a few yards of the stockade, contained abundance of seafish, and the Indians' price for a deer, skinned and dressed, was a silver dollar or a glass of vodka. The primeval forest came close to the town; the demand for firewood and timber had made little impression upon it. White settlements in the

Alexander archipelago were confined to a few small fortified trading posts. Fort Wrangell and Fort Tongass alone could be regarded as approximately permanent. The parties sent out to trade or hunt worked from a temporary camp or an armed vessel as a base, and, owing to the ill-feeling which existed between the natives and Russians, smuggling and illicit trading were rife. Missionary effort did not exist outside of Sitka, and even there amounted to little more than the bribery of some greedy savage to perform for a consideration some rites which he did not understand.

The law of Russia which prevented a permanent severance of a subject from his native soil (except for crime) operated to encourage temporary unions of the company's servants with native women. Marriages were not allowed between full-blooded Russians and natives, as at the expiration of his term of service the Russian must return to his own parish in Russia, and the native could not be carried away from the place of her nativity. After the transfer of Alaska to the United States many of these Russians elected to remain in the country and were married to the mothers of their children; but at the time of our first visit the most surprising social fact to us was the perfect equality which appeared to subsist between these irregular partners and the married women who had come from Russia. So far as we could perceive, both classes behaved with equal propriety and were treated with equal respect by the community, and the only restriction which the authorities insisted upon was that no Russian should take to himself a partner who had not been duly baptized. The issue of these unions, being of Alaskan birth, were free to marry in the country, and with their descendants constituted the class to which the Russians gave the name of "Creoles." Some of them rose to eminence in the service, and one at least became governor of the colonies.

At the time of our visit the business of the colony was exclusively the development of the fur trade. Agriculture was confined to a trifling amount of gardening very imperfectly performed. The fisheries were utilized only to supply food