ESKIMO CLUB AT ST. MICHAELS

PHASES OF LIFE ON BERING SEA

U. S. REVENUE CUTTER SERVICE

Nome's Eight Months' Isolation and Possible Means of Winter Communication.

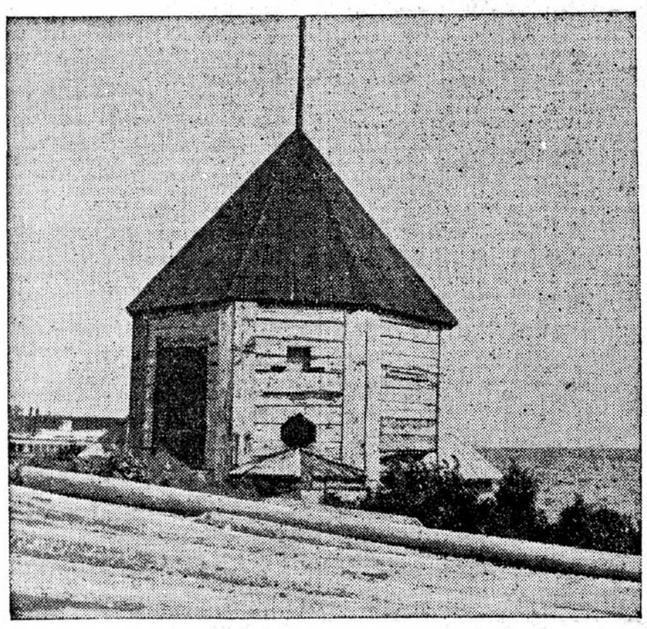
St. Michael, Once the Scene of Russian Trading Operations and the Center of Another Boom Under American Occupation—Club Life Among the Indians—A Function in the "Kazhim"—The Revenue Cutter Service and Its Value to Alaska—The Hazards of the Sea at Nome—An Ice Breaker That Could Keep Winter Communication and Travel Open.

VI.

SEVENTY-FIVE miles from where the waters of the Yukon mingle with the restless tides of Bering sea, they begin to stray out over the low, flat wastes that border that part of the sea known as Norton sound. The banks drop low and the tawny floods of the Yukon delta spread farther and farther till, almost without knowing just where, the traveler emerges from the long channel of the great river, cut nearly 2,000 miles thru the heart of Alaska, out onto the waters of the western sea. The Yukon, like the ancient Nile, in at least one particular, has seven mouths, the most southerly of which is ninety miles by sea coast measurement from the most northerly. Boats from the upper river looking for a harbor must take this northern channel and make all haste, if, fortunately, they find the sea quiet enough for river craft, to St. Michael, sixty miles up the coast from the mouth of the northern outlet. It is a good deal like going to sea in a tub—this thing of venturing out on Norton sound in a flat-bottomed river boat, and is never undertaken without some degree of trepidation even by the stout-hearted. There is always the serious consideration that Bering sea can make trouble for the river craft on short notice, and the steady progress which the boat makes running at full speed while Captain Holscher stands in the wheelhouse closely scanning the open sea on his left, suggests the thought that we have caught old Neptune asleep and are trying to sneak by while the old fellow isn't looking.

The harbor of St. Michael lies on the north end of the island, and here the senatorial party arrived on the afternoon of July 27. The whole island is a military reservation and no commercial or transportation interest can get a foothold there or even make a landing or pitch a tent except by permission of the United States government. Several trading and transportation companies engaged in the Alaskan trade have obtained concessions here and have erected docks and storehouses and hotels and houses for their agents and employes and for a time made this the great shipping center of the far northwest. That was in the boom days of 1898 and '99 and before the White Pass railroad diverted the larger part of the travel and traffic to the Klondike to the shorter route. All these companies have now been consolidated into two or rather all but one have been merged into the Northern Commercial company, the one declining to go into the combination being the North American Transportation and Trading company which shares the trade and traffic not only of the Yukon but of the Alaskan coast.

ST. MICHAEL was occupied by the Russians in 1835, who established there a military and trading post for the purpose of carrying on the fur trade with the Indians of the lower Yukon country. They fortified the place. Some of the old Russian storehouses are still standing, having been incorporated into the long row of office buildings and storehouses now used by the Northern Commercial company. An old, hexagonal blockhouse on the most prominent point extending out into the harbor is still the repository of half a dozen little rusty Russian cannon, which were once mounted here and at other places around the harbor. The island is treeless, but covered with a heavy growth of coarse, red top grass, moss and vines. Captain I. N. Hibbard, superintendent of transportation for the Northern Commercial company, and Captain O. J. Humphrey, who occupies a like position for the North American Transportation & Trading company, entertained the senatorial party most hospitably during a twenty-four-hour stay.



OLD RUSSIAN BLOCK HOUSE AT ST. MICHAEL.

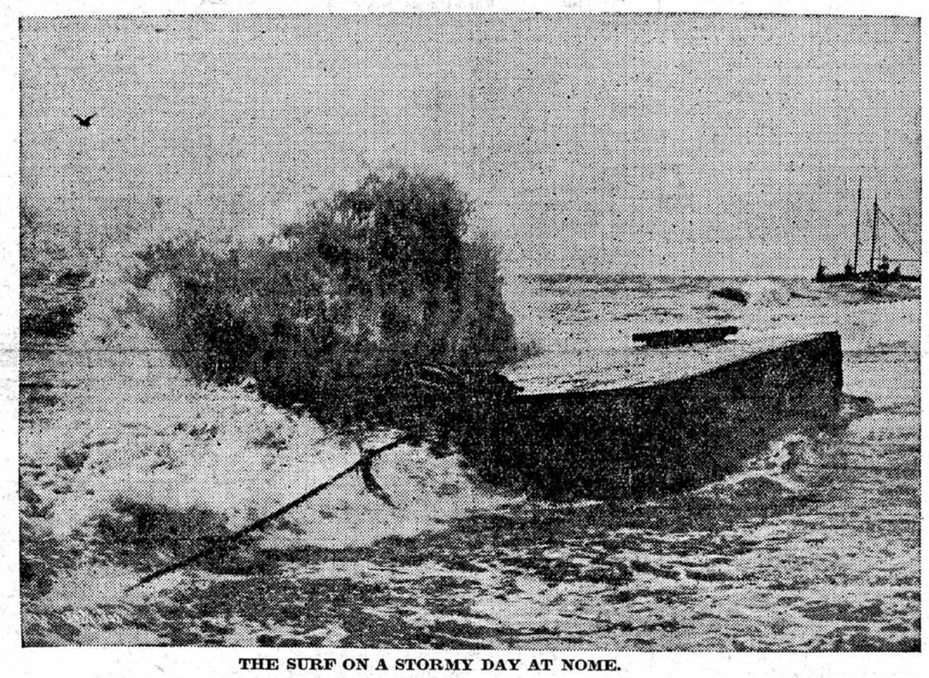
St. Michael is the shopping place of the curio hunter. The trading companies have large stocks of Indian wares which can generally be bought as cheaply in the companies' stores as from the natives themselves. Among the best specimens of the Indians' handicraft are walrus tusks carved so as to serve as cribbage boards or as other articles and decorated with crude but not uninteresting designs in black representing feats in hunting or fishing, various Indian sports, the native in his kiak or the antics of the seal and the snowy and shaggy coat of the polar bear. There are miniature sledges, perfect patterns of those in actual use; miniature kiaks and bidarkas, the native sealskin or walrus hide boat; seal and bird spears, baskets, masks and a great variety of trinkets carved in walrus ivory.

THERE are two small Indian villages on the island, and the word small is necessary for accuracy, because it doesn't take more than half a dozen little huts to make an Indian village which literally swarms with life when the dogs begin to bark and the inhabitants show up to see what is going on. The Indian village, as a sort of appendix to the white man's town, is almost the invariable rule. The Alaska Indian who knows little of tribal life or relation in these days, haunts the abode of the white man, and is never so happy as when he is imitating as closely as he can the white man's dress and manners. He is a sociable, good-natured chap, and not only enjoys loafing around the white man's town or camp, but he has provided for the social side of his make-up in various ways. The potlatch is a social function, on which the host usually bankrupts himself. It may take years to provide for such an entertainment, but it is a "charity ball" on a very large and very elaborate scale. All the guests must be provided with gifts—he originated the idea of party "favors"—as well as gorged with food; and while the host generally finds himself a pauper at the conclusion of the feast, has he not laid every one of his guests under obligations to him and established a permanent claim on their hospitality? The unfaithful steward of the parable didn't fix himself better with his master's debtors when he wrote off half their indebtedness than the giver of the potlatch has established his future claim for food and shelter on those whom he has feasted and loaded down with presents in the form of blankets, furs, etc. It's a pretty expensive thing to be invited to a potlatch, but it is not recorded that such an invitation was ever refused.

These social functions are often held in what is really the village clubhouse. With their social instincts strongly developed, such a public convenience is a necessity and into the clubhouse of one of the Indian villages at St. Michael we were invited to witness some native dancing.

THIS clubhouse is called the "kazhim." This one was a typical structure of the kind, built of logs against the hillside and partly under ground. Entrance in summer is thru a hole low down on one side thru which we crawled on our hands and knees into an apartment about 20 feet square. In winter this entrance is closed and admission is thru a hole in the floor of a sort of antechamber along a small tunnel under the wall of the house and up thru a hole in its floor. There are no windows or other means of ventilation and no openings for light or air except a hole in the middle of the roof, thru which the smoke from the fire built in the middle of the floor escapes. Around the wall is a wide shelf about 4 feet above the floor on which the Indians sit or recline at their pleasure. Here the men of the village congregate in winter, sometimes bringing some of their curio work, like ladies to a sewing bee, but—note the similarity again—indulging themselves chiefly in gossip or in the recital of their traditions or in rehearsing exaggerated accounts of their individual prowess and skill in fishing and hunting. Games are also played and dancing forms an important part of the program. It was this feature of club life in an Eskimo village that we were permitted to witness.

Besides our party of nine and a few from the offices of the commercial companies, there were present a dozen or fifteen natives. After repeated urgings by the headman and considerable conferring, probably as to what number from their extensive repertory should be produced for the benefit of the visitors, three men stepped out, stripped to the waist, and commenced to dance with that grace peculiar to all Indians. There was music by the band, of course, and the instruments were two, one consisting of a piece of tanned sealskin stretched tight over a big hoop, and the other of a large, square, empty tin lard can, on both of which the performers beat rythmically with sticks, as they uttered a doleful sort of chant, now in low and nasal monotone tones, and now raising their voices into a higher key, but never stopping for an instant while the performance was on. The dancers began posturing, and jumping about stiff-legged, turning now this way and now that, raising their arms and stiffening their muscles in attitudes of defiance and defense. Gradually their excitement increased; the drums beat louder and more rapidly, the bodily contortions became more vigorous and the facial grimaces more fierce; the dancers began to grunt and then to shout in their rough, gutteral tones, and the excitement spread to the other Indians, who presently became a sort of chorus, joining in the measured strain. What an absurd performance, indeed! But there is nothing ridiculous or farcical about all this—not to the Indian; he is intense in his seriousness and the expression on every face is as near to that of enthusiasm as it is possible for the Indian to get. At last the dancers began to show signs of exhaustion; the strenuousness of the performance gradually diminishes and finally it stops. The dancers gasp for breath and stagger about while the sweat rolls from their glistening bodies. The show is over, the story of personal or of tribal achievement and valor has been told and there is nothing more to be done except to snap the camera as one of the dancers stands for an instant under the opening in the roof, and then to seek the outer air, which smells and tastes sweeter than it ever did before. No admission fee to this unique performance is accepted; this is the part which the Indian villagers play in the entertainment of the party from "Boston-land."



THE SURF ON A STORMY DAY AT NOME.

THE revenue cutter service is a branch of the public service with which those of us who live in the interior have little to do and of which the most of us probably know little. We may not generally know, for instance, that it is really older, as an organization of the government, than the navy and that it was established in 1789 with the aid of vessels belonging to some of the original states which they, as colonies, had employed for coast defense before the federal government was formed. Any history of Alaska must deal more or less with the revenue cutter service because it has had more to do with the administration of affairs than any other agency of the government in Alaska. Some account of this service belongs in this story not only on account of the important part it bears in the conduct of public business in Alaska, but because one of the revenue ships was the home of the senatorial party for a period of twenty-eight days. Before leaving home Senator Dillingham had arranged with the treasury department to have the revenue cutter McCulloch meet the senatorial party at St. Michael and convey us thence on the remainder of our journey back to Seattle. This vessel was found waiting for us at St. Michael when we arrived.

Captain W. C. Coulson received us on board Tuesday evening, July 28, just a month after we left Seattle and 2,988 miles from that sound port by way of the inside passage to Skagway, the White Pass railroad and the Yukon river.

The McCulloch, it will be remembered, was Admiral Dewey's dispatch boat at Manila and carried from Manila to Hongkong the first account of the brilliant engagement in Manila bay May 1, 1898. It was also the first of the Asiatic squadron to become a target for the fire of the Spanish guns. It was during the night of April 30, when Admiral Dewey was leading his fleet under cover of darkness past Corregidor island that the smokestack of the McCulloch, which was last in the line, suddenly began to burn out and belched forth flames like an iron furnace. The flaming chimney at once attracted the attention of the Spanish garrison in the Corregidor fortress and the first shot in the war of the Philippines was fired at that shining mark with the result that usually followed Spanish marksmanship.

The McCulloch was built in 1897, just in time to get into business at Manila, where it was attached to the Asiatic squadron, according to the custom which makes the revenue cutters a part of the naval service in time of war. This vessel is a handsome craft, 219 feet long, having a tonnage of 869, and a record on her trial test of 17½ knots, or 20 miles, an hour. She is of composite construction, which means that her hull to the water line is built of wood and above of steel. These revenue cutters are often obliged to go on long cruises and experience shows that wooden bottoms do not become so foul as steel bottoms.

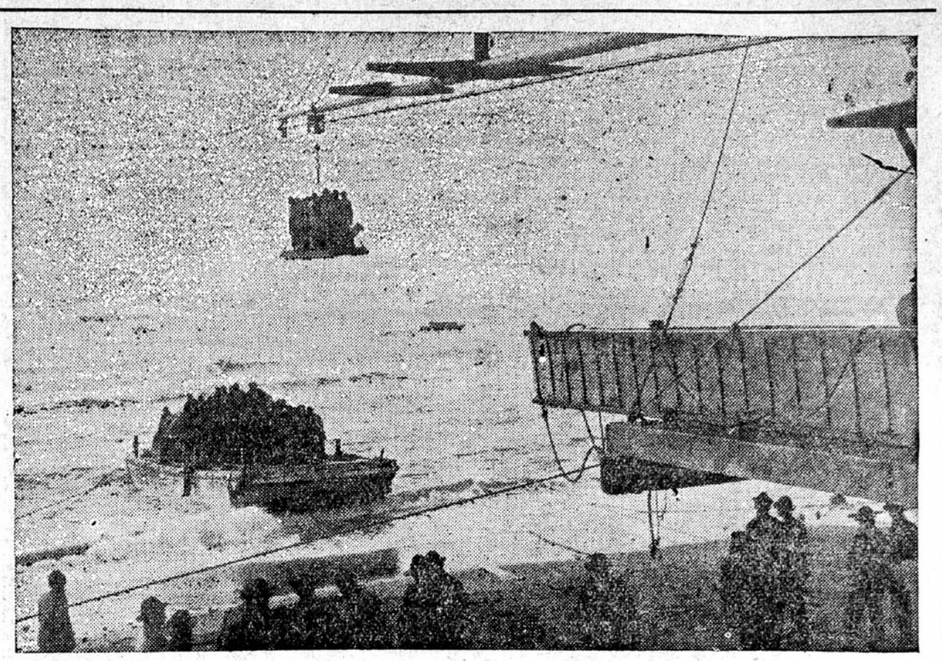
ALEXANDER HAMILTON was the founder of the revenue cutter service. He obtained authority first in 1789 to employ persons to serve in boats in harbors and along shore to aid in collecting the revenue. He appreciated also that only persons of the most trustworthy character were desirable for this service, otherwise they "would probably serve to screen fraud rather than to detect it." Great pains was therefore taken in the enlistment of officers and men, and the high standard then recognized as necessary has been maintained ever since.

The duties imposed upon this arm of the service are to aid in the enforcement of the customs revenue laws, render assistance to vessels in distress, enforce quarantine regulations, compel observance of the neutrality laws and the laws governing merchant vessels, protect wrecked property, prevent depredations on government timber lands, guard the seal and other fisheries, prevent the sale of arms and liquors to Indians, aid in the establishment and maintenance of life-saving stations, supervise the lighthouse service, aid in the coast survey, assist in scientific exploration, and in general stand in readiness to do anything that may be required to promote the safety of life and property along our ocean fronts as well as on the great lakes. The revenue cutters on the Pacific coast are equipped with several guns. The McCulloch has two rapid-fire guns and also two magazine guns that were once in service on the Reina Christina, the Spanish flagship at Manila.

In time of war the officers and vessels of the revenue cutter service, which in peace are under the direction of the treasury or revenue department of the government, are placed under the command of the navy department, and in all our wars, both against foreign foes and during the great rebellion, they have rendered valiant service to the country. The Harriet Lane, a revenue cutter, was attached to the Fort Sumter relief expedition in 1861, and the first shot of the rebellion fired from a loyal ship was discharged from her deck. It was when her commander had treacherously surrendered the McClelland to the rebels, and Ritchie, a subordinate officer, had torn down the Confederate flag, run up again the stars and stripes, and had succeeded in delivering the ship to General Butler at New Orleans, that General Dix delivered that famous order: "If any man attempts to haul down the American flag, shoot him on the spot."

THE history of the service is full of deeds of heroism performed not alone under the inspiration of war, but at times when there was only the incentive of a sense of duty. The courage which braves the dangers of the ice fields of Bering sea and the Arctic ocean, which battles with darkness and storm in the life-saving service, the devotion to duty which sends officers and men into plague infested ports and keeps them there to enforce quarantine and carry aid and comfort where pestilence stalks, the superb and unfaltering heroism which sends a Jarvis and a Call and a Bertholf 1,600 miles afoot across the ice fields of Alaska in midwinter at the constant and imminent risk of their own lives that they might save the lives of the imprisoned whalers at Point Barrow—these things are seldom mentioned and rarely if ever heard of by the general public, but they make up a large part of the life work of our revenue cutter service and particularly that part of it which patrols our North Pacific coast line.

The commissioned officers of the line are prepared for the service on a training ship, where candidates who have passed satisfactory examinations as to physical condition and educational qualifications, spend two years in learning navigation and the duties of the service. A revenue cutter like the McCulloch carries about sixty men in the forecastle. Besides the captain, the officers are a first lieutenant, who is the executive officer of the ship; two second lieutenants, one of whom is the navigator, and a third lieutenant. These are the officers of the line and have taken the course prescribed on the training ship. The chief engineer and two assistants are taken from civil life on examination as to their knowledge of mechanical engineering. Each vessel also carries a medical officer, who is engaged under contract for a definite term. The stress laid by the government in the first instance, when this service was organized, over 100 years ago, on the importance of securing for the officers of this department men of high grade, has been kept in mind to this day. Strict discipline is maintained and the routine of ship life when on a cruise is not unlike that on board a cruiser of the navy. Ship drills are required at stated times, when each man's duties are rehearsed for various possible emergencies and requirements.



LANDING AT NOME.

IT is 111 miles from St. Michael across Norton sound to Nome, where we arrived in rough weather on the morning of July 29. It was not so rough we couldn't land, but rough enough to involve some danger and afford the senatorial committee a practical demonstration of the need of better landing facilities. The people of Nome seemed, somehow, not to regret very cordially that we had some adventures in getting ashore. Nome, it will be remembered, has no harbor. It stands on the open sea, exposed to the storms that sweep northward across Bering sea over an unbroken stretch of over 700 miles. The location of the town was determined not by any regard for natural landing facilities, but by the discovery of the gold-bearing beach sands. Bering sea is shoal and the slope of the beach very gradual; it is impossible for seagoing ships to go within less than a mile of land. Passengers and freight must be taken off on lighters and it often happens that ships cannot unload either passengers or freight or even the mails for several days after arrival. The only shelter on that bleak and dangerous coast is that afforded by a small island ten or fifteen miles away, behind which vessels are sometimes obliged to retreat to avoid dragging their anchors and being dashed to pieces on shore. And our experience with the risks and delays incident to landing and embarking, were not confined to the difficulties we encountered on arrival. We were obliged to wait thirty-six hours after the intended date of departure till the sea had quieted down so that we might venture out to our ship, and were observant during that time of the arrival of two ships outside, neither of which could land a single man till the storm subsided. One of them, a mail ship from St. Michael, was forced to carry passengers and mail back again—mail that we were particularly anxious to receive as it was supposed to contain letters for our party, and, as a matter of fact, did, as we afterwards learned.

THE first glimpse of Nome, obtained by the aid of our field glasses, showed a low, treeless coast, and along the water's edge for a mile or more stretched a thin line of small frame buildings, some two stories and few more pretentious in height, crowded so close to the water's edge as to suggest danger from the waves, if it were not known that the sea is very shallow for a mile or more from the water line.

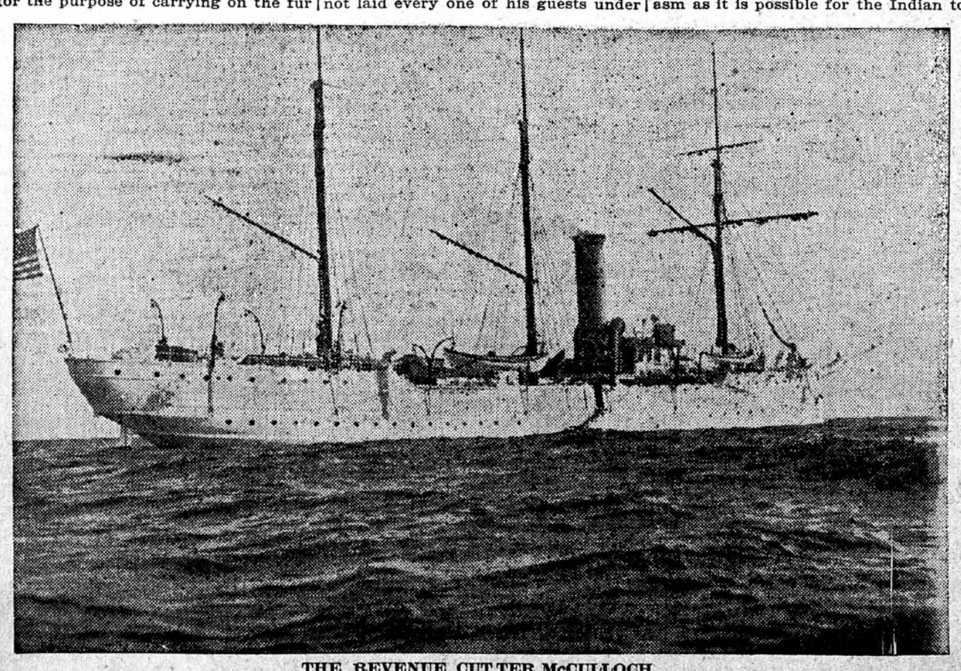
Our vessel came to anchor about 9 o'clock, and a small steam tug was presently observed coming to meet us, while further in we presently discovered a dory mounting one wave after another and bringing the quarantine officer. The tug could not come along side, but stood off and sent a dory to convey us over to it. The second load consisted of Senators Nelson, Dillingham and Burnham and the transfer from the dory to the tug was attended with so much difficulty, and the tug itself seemed such an unsafe dependence as it rolled and tossed about that the senators elected to stay in the dory and be towed ashore. That soon proved to be impracticable and extremely dangerous; the line was cast off by the oarsmen in the dory and the three senators were rowed ashore, where they arrived in safety, but not without a wetting in the surf. Those on the tug were transferred just outside the breakers to a stout, flat-bottomed barge, which was hauled thru the surf by a cable from shore, picked up from the deck of the barge in a cage let down from a long, projecting beam and carried up over the surf to a high platform on land.

And that is the way passengers and freight are unloaded and loaded at Nome the greater part of the time. A small stream, the Snake river, comes down from the hills, flows thru the west end of the town, turns along the landside of a sand spit for half a mile and then cuts thru into the sea. The people of Nome believe that a jetty built out from the mouth of this stream and the dredging out of a sand bar that lies across the entrance would make it practicable for small vessels and lighters to pass thru to a safe harbor inside the sandspit and the senatorial committee were urged to procure an appropriation of $150,000 for such an improvement. Lighterage costs from $3.50 to $5 a ton for ordinary merchandise and more for heavy machinery, and it was contended that on the 50,000 tons of freight handled there every year the cost would be reduced enough to pay for the improvement in two years.

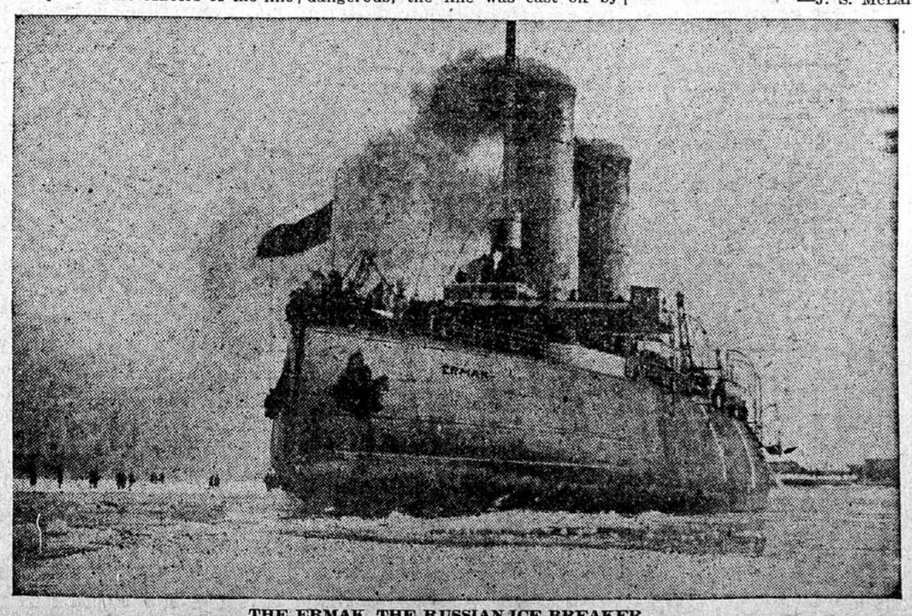
ABOUT the first of June a fleet of merchant vessels sails from Seattle for Nome. It is all open sea till they get thru the Aleutian chain at Unimak pass and for some distance northward in Bering sea, but sooner or latter they encounter the ice fields. The ice is breaking up and floating down from the north and there is great strife to see which ship will force its way thru the ice and land its passengers and freight and mail at Nome first. The race is not always to the swift or the first in starting, for it sometimes happens that the vessel which for a time seems to lead in the race gets caught in an ice pack and is forced to wait for it to break while it sees its rivals move on thru open water to their destination. The ice breaks up in Bering sea in front of Nome about June 15 as a rule and closes that port, if it may be called a port, about Oct. 10. The open season at Nome is over now and from this time till the 15th or 20th of next June that great camp and all the Seward peninsula are absolutely cut off from communication with the outside world except thru a monthly letter mail. This fact has developed a great deal of interest there in the powerful ice-breaking boats built by the Russian government for the purpose of keeping open the port of Cronstadt on the Baltic sea. In 1898 the largest of these vessels, the Ermak was put in service and it is authoritatively stated has plowed its way thru solid ice fourteen feet thick for a distance of 200 miles. It is 305 feet long, its displacement is 8,000 tons and it carries 3,000 tons of coal; its engines have 10,000 horse power and it is so constructed that when it fails to plow thru the ice it literally climbs up on the edge of it and breaks it down by its enormous weight. It is credited with having made thirty miles in eight hours thru the solid ice. Nome is about five degrees farther north than Cronstadt, but it is believed that the ice field in Bering sea could be traversed as successfully in winter by such a vessel as the Baltic and they would like to see our government undertake it. The proposition is certainly an interesting one and as Alaska is developed and becomes more populous it may seem to our government to be a desirable thing to do. It is not improbable, however, that improved facilities of transportation and communication by land will be found to be more practical and more economical.

What there is in the way of resources developed and undeveloped at Nome and on the Seward peninsula to justify extraordinary effort on the part of the government to establish better communication and better transportation will be the topic next Saturday.

—J. S. McLain.



THE REVENUE CUTTER McCULLOCH.
(Photograph taken from the dingy in rough water.)



THE ERMAK, THE RUSSIAN ICE BREAKER.