KOTZEBUE AND THE KOBUK

STRANGE FEATURES OF LIFE AND WORK IN THE HEART OF ARCTIC ALASKA

The Kobuk Valley and Its Big Golden Nuggets—Great Copper Deposits—The Coal of Cape Lisburne—Silver in Placers—Kotzebue Sound and Its Eskimos—A Country of Flowers, Fish and Game—Fur Farming and Its Possibilities.

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NOME, Alaska.

There's a land above the Arctic, they call it Kotzebue,
I seem to hear it callin', it's callin' to me and you.
It ain't no place for children, nor for women understand;
'Taint no place for mollycoddles, but for men with lots of sand.
Seems a thousand miles from nowhere and a million from a sound,
A-judgin' from the silence that's a-hangin' all around.
But again I hear it callin.' It's callin' me and you,
So I'm sailin' in the mornin,' sailin' north to Kotzebue.
—Edgar C. Raine.

THIS letter relates to Kotzebue and the Kobuk. It deals with arctic Alaska, that vast area which lies between the arctic circle and the Arctic ocean. It treats of one of the least known countries of the world and one of the strangest. My information concerning it comes from talks with its prospectors and explorers, who have drifted to Nome for their winter supplies, and with the miners and traders who live there and who have taken advantage of open navigation to pay their annual summer visit to this metropolis of the north. Last night, for instance, I had a long talk with a man who has a store and trading station on Kotzebue sound, and during my stay I have had interviews with Judge M. F. Moran, who represents our farthest north in the legislature of Alaska. He lives so far away from Juneau, the capital, that his mileage allowance is $900. His home is at Shungnak, on the Kobuk river above the arctic circle, and so far north that during the summer he has broad daylight for three months in succession, while for a part of the winter his home is almost shrouded in darkness.

But before I give the gist of these interviews let us take a bird's-eye view of the country to which they relate. Arctic Alaska comprises about one-fourth of the territory. It is almost half the size of Texas, more than twice the size of Illinois and three times that of Ohio, Virginia and Kentucky. If you could lift it up and drop it down upon Europe it would more than cover the half of France, Germany or the Spanish peninsula, and it would entirely hide the British Isles with its blanket of snow.

Arctic Alaska may be said to begin a little south of Bering strait and to run from there eastward to the Canadian boundary, and northward to the Arctic ocean. The country comprises some parts of the northern watershed of the Yukon, and it includes the Rocky mountain system, which, extending from the United States through Canada, runs almost to the western end of Alaska. This range in Alaska is nearly 100 miles wide, and it slopes down into the plains which border the Arctic ocean. The mountains are a mile and a half high where the range leaves Canada, and they fall to the height of the Alleghanies, or lower, on their way westward.

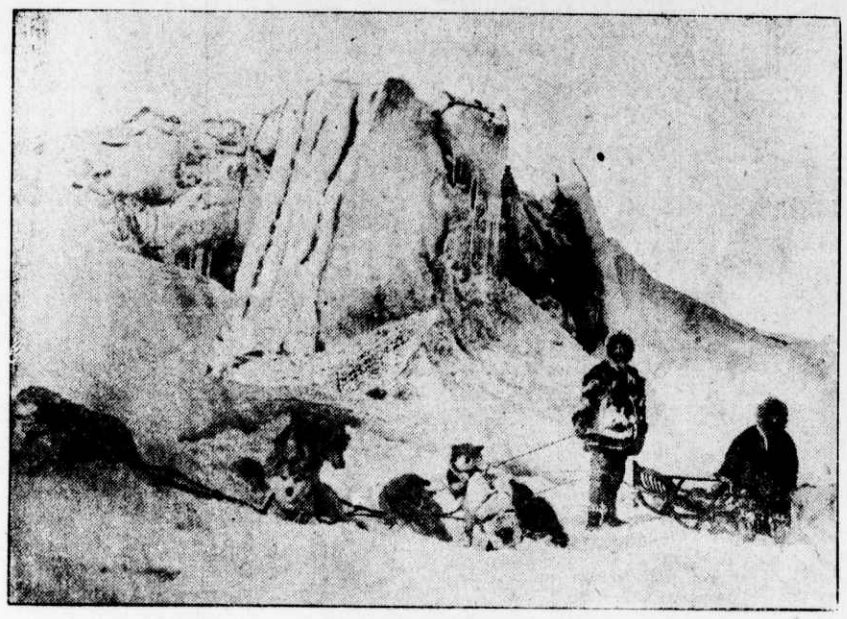
The coastal plains are a part of the tundra belt that encircles the Arctic ocean. Much of the ground is low and swampy. It has great lagoons and morasses and many slow-flowing rivers. The plains are covered with moss, upon which the Eskimos graze their reindeer. There is practically no timber, except the stunted trees in the mountains, and the alder and willows, which grow along the banks of the streams.

The vast country has less population than any other under the American flag. It has a few white men living along Kotzebue sound and on the banks of the Kobuk river, and there are, all told, perhaps three or four thousand Eskimos. The Eskimos are scattered along the Arctic ocean in little settlements, the largest of which have only three or four hundred souls. There are several Eskimo villages in the interior. The government has established schools at nearly all of these settlements and many of the Eskimos are growing rich in the raising of reindeer. They also hunt walrus for their ivory tusks, which they sell to the traders, and they deal largely in furs.

One of the chief trading stations is at Kotzebue sound. The white men in charge there tell me that they have during the summer 500 native families living in canvas tents, and that the Eskimos come in by sea from as far north as Point Barrow. They use great skin boats, called omiaks, which are five or six feet in width and 30 feet long. Such boats will carry from five to eight tons. They have square sails and are propelled also by paddles.

The natives bring with them the furs they have caught in the winter, and trade them for calicos, ginghams and other cloth. They buy all kinds of hardware and especially needles for the sewing of parkas and mukluks. They want the best of guns, knives and hatchets. They buy canned foods of various kinds, and even stoves and window glass to take back to their homes. One reason for their coming to Kotzebue is to catch salmon, the winter food supply for themselves and their dogs.

I asked the trader to tell me something as to the character of Kotzebue sound. He replied:



Kotzebue Sound in Winter.

"It is a great bay, into which flow some of the largest rivers of northern Alaska. One is the Kobuk, which is six or seven hundred miles long; another the Noatak, which is almost as large, and a third is the Selawik, which is more than half the length of the Kobuk. The port is an open roadstead, but there is good shelter for ships, except when the south wind blows."

"What sort of a settlement have you at Kotzebue?"

"It is little more than a trading station. It has a store and a fish cannery. The chief industry is the fisheries, the Eskimos coming from long distances to catch and dry their supply of fish for the winter."

"Are the fish of that region valuable?"

"Yes. They are caught in the icebergs, and are fine and fat. Owing to the intense cold, they have a coat of blubber between the skin and the flesh. We have a great many salmon, and also speckled trout and Dolly Varden trout. Our cannery has a capacity of 15,000 cans per annum, and it has been shipping salmon and salmon trout for four or five years. The salmon is of a light color and it does not bring so much for that reason. But to offset this we have the Dolly Varden trout, which reaches a weight of 10 to 15 pounds and a length of three feet. The trout are especially fine. They are caught in abundance when running and the output of the cannery might be greatly increased."

One of the best authorities on Kotzebue sound and the Kobuk river is Judge M. F. Moran, who lives on the Kobuk two or three hundred miles from the sound. Said he:

"It is 3000 miles from Seattle to Kotzebue, and the steamers make regular sailings there every July and August. There are small steamers on the Kobuk, and goods are carried up that stream into the heart of the territory. I live in the Kobuk valley and have been there for 12 years, winter and summer. I have taken up a homestead of 320 acres about 200 miles east of the sound. It is the farthest north of any homestead in Uncle Sam's territory."

"What kind of a climate have you?" I asked.

"I consider the Kobuk valley one of the most delightful parts of Alaska," replied Judge Moran. "We have four months of summer and six or seven months of very cold weather. All the streams are frozen solid by the first of October and we have a steady cold from then until about the middle of May. Shortly after that the ice goes out with a rush and summer begins."

"How cold does it get during the winter?"

"The thermometer sometimes goes down to 50 or 60 degrees below zero, but as a rule it is much above that, and we have weeks when it is only a few degrees above or below. The air is dry and there is but little wind, and we have no trouble to keep ourselves warm. There are, perhaps, 75 white people who live on the Kobuk and its tributaries. Many of the men have brought their wives with them, and children have been born in the country. Among our people are emigrants from North Dakota and Minnesota; they say that the climate of the Kobuk is quite as good as the country from which they came."

"Give me an idea of your summers."

"They are delightful. We have many days when the thermometer goes up to 80, and I have seen it at 94 degrees above zero. It is light all the time during the summer. We put away our lamps in March and do not bring the mout until late in September. You can read a newspaper at any hour of the night without artificial light. There is so much sunshine that everything grows twice as fast as in the states. The grass along the river is as high as your head, and the land everywhere is green and spotted with wild flowers. We have great fields of blue forget-me-nots, thousands of wild roses of a delicate pink, buttercups as yellow as gold and sheets of fireweed that wave under the wind like masses of flames. We have altogether 40 different varieties of wild flowers. We have also many wild berries. Our cranberries are only half as large as those of the states, but they are redder and their flavor is better. We have wild raspberries, gooseberries and currants, and salmonberries of a pale lemon color. We have all kinds of moss, and especially that upon which the reindeer feeds. There are now several thousand reindeer in the district. They are owned by the Eskimos.

"We are now raising vegetables. We used to bring our turnips, potatoes, carrots and cabbages from Seattle, not realizing that we could grow them ourselves. We now raise all we want out in the open and also lettuce, peas and beans. We grow the finest of tomatoes and cucumbers in our hothouses."

"Tell me something about the game of the Kobuk?"

"It is of many varieties, and we are so far north that no one bothers about getting a license for hunting. There is excellent fishing. The streams of the delta are such that you can travel hundreds of miles in a gasoline launch. They are deep, but the water is so clear that you can see the bottom almost everywhere.

"The whole valley is full of wild birds. There are great flocks of wild geese, ducks and sandhill cranes that come to feed on the berries that grow on the banks of the lakes. These birds arrive about May 1, sending out their scouts in advance. The natives watch for the first goose and then prepare for the hunt."

"We have two species of ptarmigan," Judge Moran continued. "One of these is the size of a quail and the other that of a prairie chicken. These birds are to be found the year around, and, strange to say, they change their color with the season. In the summer the feathers are brown, the color of the tundra. In the winter they turn to snow white, so that it is difficult to see the birds against the snow. This is a protection of nature. It is the same with our rabbits. They are brown in the summer and in the winter snow white. We have millions of rabbits. They feed on the bark of the willow trees, and they will eat the bark as high as they can reach, standing on the snow as they do so. This kills the trees, and you often see dead willow thickets of vast extent."

"Have you any big game?"

"We have moose here and there and thousands of caribou. The caribou go about in large droves in the winter. As to fur animals, we have otter and muskrat, ermine and marten, and our mink are noted the world over for their fine fur."

"How about foxes?"

"We have the best that can be found in the frigid zone," replied Judge Moran. "We have every kind, including the red, the cross, the black or silvertip and the white and the blue. All of these foxes belong to two families. The red fox includes the cross and the black. The white includes the blue. Our red foxes average about 17 pounds in weight. The white and blue foxes will run about eight pounds."

"Can fur-farming be carried on at a profit in that part of Alaska?"

"There is no doubt of it," said Judge Moran. "We have the ideal climate for fur production and we can breed foxes, marten, mink and ermine. The Kobuk was once the natural home of the beaver, but that animal is now almost extinct. During one year we shipped muskrat skins to the amount of $100,000. We are now shipping none. Muskrats could be raised on farms all over Alaska.

"As to foxes, I have started a fur farm at Shungnak and a mbreeding whites, reds and crosses. I have had as many as 72 foxes at one time, and I am now rapidly increasing my supply by buying breeding stock of the natives. I pay them one and a half times the value of the skin. Until lately, I have lost a number of foxes because I did not know how strong to make the pens or inclosures in which they were kept. I began with high fences of chicken wire, but that wire was too weak and the mesh was not right. The animals walked right through it. Now I have a 14-guage steel wire, with a two-inch mesh. It is made for fox fencing, and it seems to be excellent."

"What do you know about the Kobuk river?"

"I ought to know something," said Judge Moran. "I have lived on the Kobuk for more than a decade and have hunted and fished and prospected for gold all along it and its tributaries. The Kobuk is about the best stream in arctic Alaska. It is 600 miles long. It flows east to west, not far north of the arctic circle, and empties into the Arctic ocean at Kotzebue sound. The stream winds about like the Yukon, and its delta has as many mouths as the Mississippi. In normal times it is navigable for 300 miles for steamers of two and one-half feet draft. It is a better river than the Tanana, and shallow draft boats can go further up it."

"Is the country well mineralized?"

"Yes, there is more or less gold all along the Kobuk. You can drive your shovel almost anywhere into the gravel of the creeks and find color. In 1913 a nugget as big as my hand was brought into the store at Kotzebue sound and traded for goods. That nugget weighed 44½ ounces, and its actual value was almost $1000. The miner who brought it said he had found it when moving his sluice boxes. He had it on his shovel and had thrown it away with the other rocks, when he noticed that the shovel seemed heavy. He then went over to where he had thrown the stuff and found the nugget in the mud. He washed the mud off and saw that the lump was pure gold."

"Then your gold must be coarse?"

"Yes, it is all free gold, some fine and some coarse. We catch it in sluice boxes and without quicksilver."

"Is there much mining being done?"

"We have a number of prospectors and miners who are working on the creeks that flow into the Kobuk. There are some also on the Squirrel and Shungnak rivers. I have a mining property on Dahl creek. In 1910 a nugget was found there that was worth $700. As to the gold of arctic Alaska, our country is in the infancy of its development. Many of the creeks carry low-grade gravel but will some day be dredged at a profit. We have also gold quartz in which you can see the fine grains of gold with the naked eye."

"What other minerals have you?"

"The country has never been prospected," replied Judge Moran. "It is full of minerals, but no one knows just what there is nor the values. As to copper, we have some large deposits. Mr. Bradley, the manager of the great gold mines at Treadwell, took one option on a copper find near the Kobuk river at a price of $400,000. That was about 12 years ago, when copper was low. The price continued to decline and he finally gave up the option. At the present time the deposit could probably be mined at a great profit.

"Among the other minerals we have large deposits of asbestos, silver and coal. Some of the silver is placer, and can be washed from the streams. We have also antimony and tungsten, and a jade which, it is believed, will command a high price in the market."

"Are the coal deposits of any value?"

"There is one mine on the Kobuk that has supplied the local demand for the past 18 years, and there are other beds of fairly good coal near the Arctic ocean. There are some deposits near Cape Lisburne that have been known a long time. They were mentioned by Henry D. Woolfe, who had worked in them prior to the census of 1890. He describes the coal as semi-bituminous, and says it will make steam quickly although it has a large percentage of ash. One of the deposits covers 25 square miles. It is also reported that there is a lake of oil and oil springs northwest of Wainwright. The government has long known of an oil belt there, but the region has not been surveyed nor prospected. In fact, no one knows what we have in these far northern parts of Alaska. It may be that the next great gold stampede will be to this region."

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

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