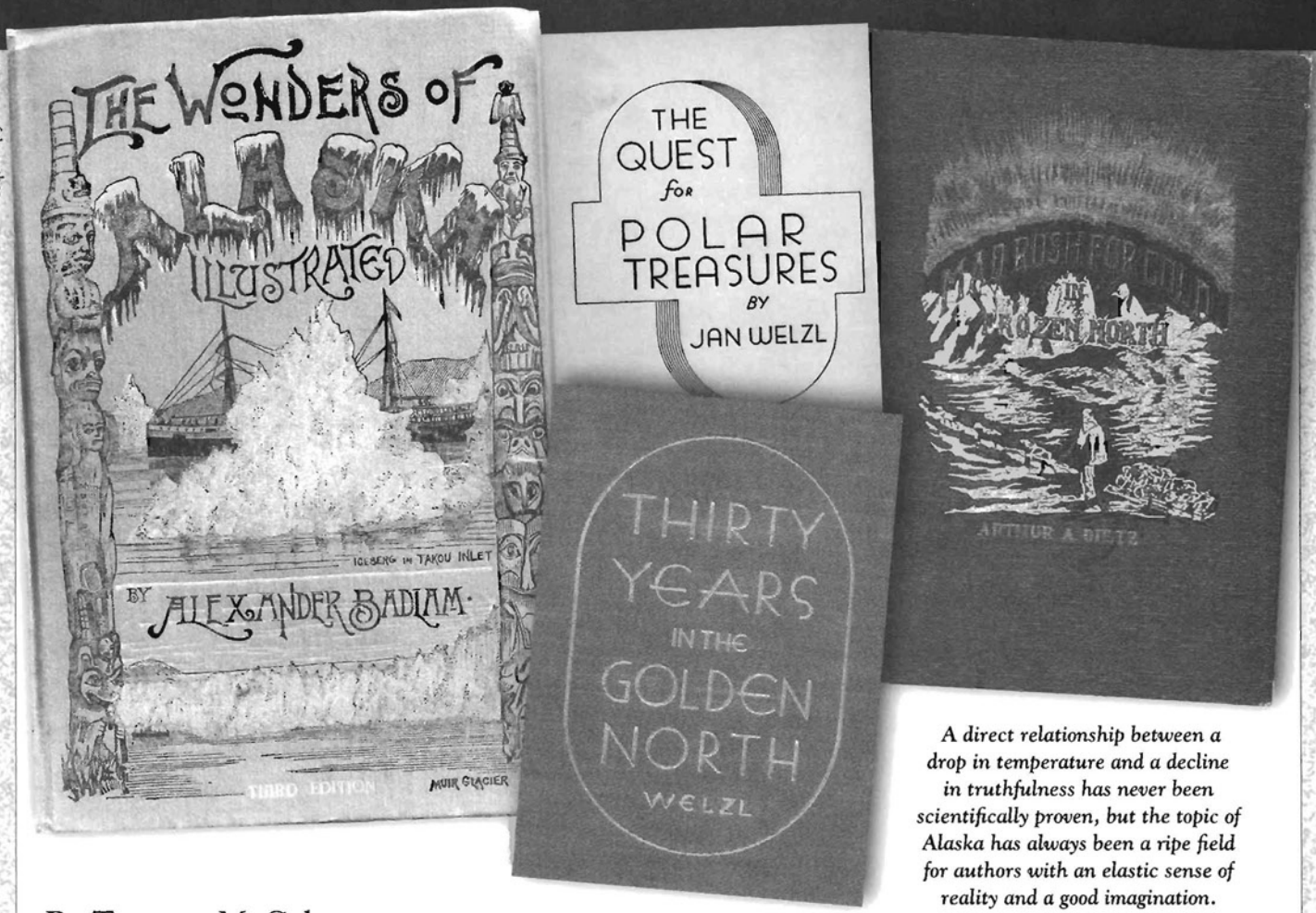
KLONDIKE LITERATURE



Courtesy of the author

A direct relationship between a drop in temperature and a decline in truthfulness has never been scientifically proven, but the topic of Alaska has always been a ripe field for authors with an elastic sense of reality and a good imagination.

By Terrence M. Cole

ALASKAN LITERATURE IS RICH with infamous falsehoods, frauds, and forgeries. This is not because no one in Alaska knows how to tell the truth, though admittedly the region has long had a reputation for a liberal, almost postmodernist attitude toward prevarication. During the Klondike gold rush at the turn of the 19th century, the *Seattle Times* reported that "there were more liars to the square inch in Alaska than any place in the world."

Whether or not Alaska did in fact have the world's highest population density of liars, frontier conditions dictated that

The Mad Rush for Truth in the Frozen North

the whole truth was generally not the normal bill of fare in the far north. Wilson Mizner lived in Alaska for more than five years, from 1897 to 1902, and later went on to fame, fortune, and bankruptcy as one of America's most notorious bon vivants and literary wits of both Broadway and Hollywood, and one of the developers, with his brother Addison, of Boca Raton in Miami during the Florida land boom of the mid 1920s. Mizner is one of most often-quoted Americans in history; some contend that it was he who first coined the phrase, "Never give a sucker an even break," and likened Hollywood to a tour through a sewer in a glass-bottomed boat. He was himself described by Damon Runyon as "the greatest man-about-town that any town ever had."

Mizner provided one of the harshest assessments of Alaska's pioneer literary production, concluding that virtually everything ever written about the gold rush was nonsense. His biographer, Alva Johnston, claimed that Mizner had a "lifelong contempt for Arctic fiction, with its supermen and its superdogs," and a special hatred—inspired in part by honest jealously—for the works of Jack London. "Fifteen years after the death of Jack London," Johnston wrote, "Mizner still got indignant at hearing him praised." Rather than Jack London's hardy frontiersmen of tooth and claw, Mizner said the reality of early Alaska was that most men were greedy but timid weaklings who couldn't shoot straight. He recalled one memorable evening in the Yukon Valley when a saloon-full of gold miners were boasting about their shooting prowess, and suddenly a rabid husky dog charged through the door. "Everybody began shooting at it," Mizner recalled. "They hid behind the bar and made barricades of chairs and tables, took careful aim, and blazed away. The floor, walls, and ceiling were peppered with bullets." When the smoke finally cleared, according to Mizner, not a single one of the storied frontier sharpshooters had even come close to hitting the mad dog, which was still standing in the middle of the saloon; in the end it was the bartender who resolved matters by clobbering the poor brute on the head.

Authors typically take great delight in either debunking common wisdom about the far north or reveling in it.

Of course Mizner's "true story" is about as realistic as a scene from one of his Broadway comedies; it sounds as lifelike as a sketch from Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles*. "Like most men who make laughter the main object in life," his biographer admitted, "Mizner was somewhat given to exaggeration."

The tendency to improve the truth may simply be part of the storyteller's craft because life is infinitely complicated and stories, no matter how complex or sophisticated, are relatively simple, pared down from the multitude of messy details that a raconteur must eliminate to hold the audience. Unless the tale occasionally wags the truth, a story is unlikely to be either memorable or even comprehensible.

Since the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, one of the simplest and most enduring story lines of social and political commentary in Alaska has been the charge of the federal government's neglect of the territory, which has allowed undue outside domination by absentee corporate interests. To an extent this was just a local manifestation of a national campaign for enlightened government that emerged in the late 19th century during the Progressive Era. The battle against government neglect was a central thrust of the progressive movement. Reformers and public-minded citizens charged that government malfeasance, corruption, and inaction in the face of corporate mischief by a wide assortment of robber barons—meatpackers, drug manufacturers, transportation companies, sweatshops, oil companies, etc.—were destroying the American dream of justice and democracy for all. In the same way that Upton Sinclair exposed the meatpacking industry in *The Jungle* and Frank Norris tackled the railways in *The Octopus*, Alaskan author Rex Beach wrote *The Looting of Alaska* and *The Spoilers*, about the judicial corruption that plagued the Nome gold camp.

The first formal and systematic articulation of the wholesale federal abuse of Alaska was by progressive historian Jeanette Paddock Nichols in her 1923 political history of the territory, while the fullest elaboration came 30 years later from Alaska's brilliant New Deal governor, Ernest Gruening, who wrote a provocatively titled volume, *The State of Alaska*, in 1954. Gruening's history of the territory was the scholarly front in his campaign for Alaska statehood, which was finally achieved in 1959.

Alaska gained incalculable benefits, power, and resources with statehood, including a state constitution that generally emphasizes the primacy of local control and self-determination above competing interests. It also received a disproportionate share of the federal budget pie and federal power—far more than its citizens have ever paid into the national treasury—thanks particularly to the influence and longevity of Alaska's senator Ted Stevens. Even so, the "neglect thesis" is one of the staples of Alaskan history, popular culture, and political campaign rhetoric.

Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that Alaskans are so used to telling this story about themselves, and so expert at complaining—like most Westerners—about how they have been abused by outsiders, that in this age of victim

Courtesy of the author

The decline in the propensity for telling the truth at high latitudes—particularly among those with a high level of alcohol consumption—can perhaps be deduced from this undoctored gold rush-era photograph of a "typical" Alaskan barroom. The horse had no comment.

glorification and the popularity of the so-called "new Western history," the Alaskan neglect myth is still simply irresistible even in the 21st century.

A corollary to the well-worn neglect thesis is what I would call the "igloo thesis," the notion that Alaska's real problem is the ignorance of outsiders about actual conditions in the state—the "we don't live in igloos" refrain. Alaska's Governor Scott C. Bone wrote in 1923 that trying to showcase the real Alaska to the world was his highest priority.

"Inherently, Alaska is all right," Bone wrote in his 1923 annual report. "Its paramount need is and ever has been to be known and understood. Popular misconception has been its heaviest handicap. Climatic fallacies are now being eradicated. Truth is at least implanting itself." According to Bone, Alaska had a mild and almost temperate climate. The territory was "blessed with ideal summers," though he conceded that winters in the interior were "no more bleak and forbidding" than places like Montana, Wyoming, or North Dakota.

Whether one accepts Governor Bone's rosy depiction of Alaska's climate or not, his contention is representative of one of the two basic types into which most Alaskan literature seems to fall. Authors typically take great delight in either debunking common wisdom about the far north or reveling in it. They either reject what we think we know about this faraway land or re-affirm our preconceptions in gory detail.

ONE OF THE GREATEST northern debunkers was explorer, scientist, lecturer, and controversialist Vilhjalmur Stefansson, author of *The Friendly Arctic* (he said he particularly enjoyed the title simply because it made people so angry) and numerous other works. Stefansson's provocative essay, "The North That Never Was," had a simple thesis: 90 percent of what the average, well-educated person "knew" about the Arctic was wrong. The Far North, he said, was surrounded by a great "wall of ignorance" much more impenetrable than anything ever built by man.

Probably the most preposterous book in the history of publishing, and a favorite target of Stefansson's, was *Thirty Years in the Golden North*, the alleged memoir of a Czech miner named Jan Welzl. *Thirty Years* is so outrageous that it is hard to imagine why anyone with a shred of common sense could not have been able to see through the fraud.

Consider, for instance, his experiences as a dog musher. Not in the 10,000 years or more that humans have been driving dogs in the Arctic has anyone ever done what Welzl claimed he did routinely: deliver the mail with a team of 350

dogs. Supposedly this massive canine corps, stretched out over half-a-mile, would pull a train of 24 sledges with a total load approaching nearly 50 tons. This dog express train, he claimed, like a fast freight on the main line, never stopped once it started, so pick ups and deliveries were made on the fly. In cold weather, he wrote, apparently without a trace of humor, mail drivers would use nitro-glycerin cartridges to blow up the ice and create sleeping caves for shelter in the storm. "This has happened to me," he wrote, "heaps and heaps of times."

Ivan Petroff holds the distinction of telling more lies about Alaska that were believed for more years than other person in history else.

EVEN SOMEONE WHO was just remotely familiar with basic human biology should have realized that the book was a fake after reading Welzl's section on medicine. The author alleged that he once saw a badly frostbitten man pull off his own nose. Fortunately, an Eskimo doctor later arrived and grafted the nose of a young child in its place; supposedly, Eskimo parents were perfectly willing to give up their children's noses whenever necessary.

Frostbitten fingers were even easier to remove. "When the hand or the fingers are frostbitten," Welzl maintained, "the patient has to bang the limb against the edge of a table and the frostbitten parts drop off." Dentistry was rather crude as well. According to Welzl, he once solved a man's toothache by tying a rope to a team of five dogs, hooked to a pincers wedged on the sore tooth. When he fired a shot the dogs took off and supposedly the tooth came clean out of the man's mouth, without even breaking.

But nothing in the entire book was more bizarre or ridiculous than his rendition of Eskimo sexual practices and child-rearing habits.

> *On our island Eskimo girls are mature as a rule at the age of six. As soon as the first signs of maturity appear, the child lives with all the men in the family, her brothers, father, in fact, all of them. She generally has her first child between six and eight.... After the child is born, the mother's breasts swell and from that time onwards the Eskimo woman has milk all her life. That is why she will nurse at any time and anybody, other adults actually come and feed on her milk. Sometimes I have arrived at an Eskimo hole, poked my head in and seen two women lying on the ground feeding each other. Sometimes they feed dogs, too.*

Instead of dismissing Welzl's book as the hogwash that it obviously was, many critics gave it high praise for insightfulness and originality. The north was apparently so far away and so strange, readers were more than willing to accept sheer nonsense. Unbelievably, *Thirty Years in the Golden North* sold at least 150,000 copies in 1932 and was a selection of the Book of the Month Club. Stefansson shared the same publisher, the Macmillan Company, and to his horror, instead of pulling the book from circulation after he pointed out some of its most obvious errors, the publisher actually released a sequel called *The Quest for Polar Treasures* the following year.

While Welzl's book is clearly the most egregious example imaginable of a pure fraud, it has not had the long-term impact of two other works that are almost equally brazen in their distortion of the truth.

Though first published nearly 120 years ago, Hubert Howe Bancroft's *History of Alaska, 1730-1885* is still the most comprehensive work about the Russian period of Alaskan history, and it set a low standard for truthfulness. Bancroft's research assistant and writer, Ivan Petroff, holds the distinction of probably telling more lies about Alaska that were believed for more years than any other person in history.

Not much is known for certain about the Ivan Petroff's background, but it is clear that he was a world-class liar, cheat and forger. He was ostensibly a Russian émigré, though some scholars say he was probably not Russian at all. With careful detective work, Richard A. Pierce, the esteemed scholar of Russian America, has tried to follow Petroff's tracks in search of the truth about this elusive character. Pierce discovered that Petroff proudly served three tours of duty in the United States Army during the American Civil War; He became a three-time veteran because he deserted to earn additional signing bonuses.

Petroff first came to Alaska on a fact-finding trip and research tour for Bancroft in 1878. He evidently found facts about Alaska to be in short supply, and so he fabricated a dozen manuscripts, totaling some 200 pages—still housed reverently in the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley—which Petroff claimed were original Russian documents he had translated. The only original thing about these documents was that they had originated with him. Some have suggested that Petroff could hardly write the Russian language, but apparently that never hindered his skill as a "translator" of imaginary documents.

Petroff invented a sizable portion of Bancroft's *History of Alaska*, including a notorious story of the seduction and murder of Father Juvenal, a respected Russian Orthodox missionary and martyr. This is probably the single most famous incident in Bancroft's entire 775-page history. It is certainly true that Father Juvenal was a Russian Orthodox martyr, but the scandalous details Petroff invented of how and why he was killed have no relationship to reality. The seduction

of Juvenal by a young native girl is one of the most famous events in all of Russian American history, and like Parson Weems's famed account of George Washington and the cherry tree, it never occurred.

According to Petroff's nearly pornographic depiction, while preaching in a village on the Alaska Peninsula in the summer of 1796, Father Juvenal told the local natives they must "put away their secondary wives." In revenge the local chief supposedly sent a young native woman to seduce the priest, and that night he succumbed to her alluring charms. As Bancroft's history discreetly put it, "In the dead of night, according to his own confession, an Ilyamna damsel captured him by storm." The evidence was Juvenal's supposed diary—actually written by Petroff—in which the Russian priest both confessed his sin and explained the details of his indiscretion. To prove the story, Petroff dutifully included the entire fake diary entry in a long footnote in Bancroft's history. Juvenal is supposed to have written:

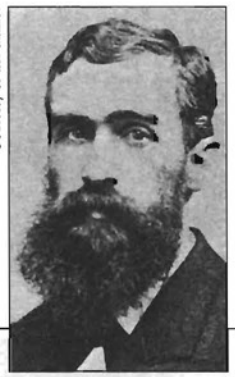
> *With trembling hand I write the sad occurrences of the past day and night. Much rather I would leave the disgraceful story untold, but I must overcome my own shame and mortification, and write it down as a warning to other missionaries who may come after me.... In the middle of the night I awoke to find myself in the arms of a woman whose fiery embraces excited me to such an extent that I fell a victim to lust, and a grievous sin was committed before I could extricate myself. As soon as I regained my senses I drove the woman out, but I felt too guilty to be very harsh with her.... How can I hold up my head among the people, who, of course, will hear of this affair? I am not sure, even, that the boys in the adjoining room were not awakened by the noise.*

Inexplicably, except for the fact that Petroff invented the story, Father Juvenal then supposedly swore that his highly embarrassing confession was true. "God is my witness that I have set down the truth here in the face of anything that may be said about it hereafter." In the days that followed, Petroff explained how Juvenal was wracked by guilt and shame. "My disgrace has become public already," his alleged diary continues, "and I am laughed at wherever I go, especially by the women. Of course, they do not understand the sin but rather look upon it as a good joke." For his penance Juvenal sentenced himself to a cold winter without heat. "I have vowed to burn no fuel in my bedroom during the whole winter, in order to chastise my body—a mild punishment, indeed, compared to the blackness of my sin."

Despite his remorse, Juvenal continued to insist that the local chief with three wives abandon his polygamous relationship, which was allegedly the reason why the chief had the priest killed some time later. The purported journal stops short in the middle of a sentence; the martyred priest's last words were purportedly,

"My wound pains me so that I can scarcely...."

"Here the manuscript journal breaks off," Bancroft's history concludes, "and probably the moment after the last



Courtesy of the author

LEFT: Ivan Petroff, the biggest liar in Alaska history.

BELOW: Petroff (far right) conducting work for Alaska's 1890 census. When his fabricated stories were subsequently uncovered, his name was removed from the census, but this picture remained as the volume's frontispiece.

Courtesy of the author

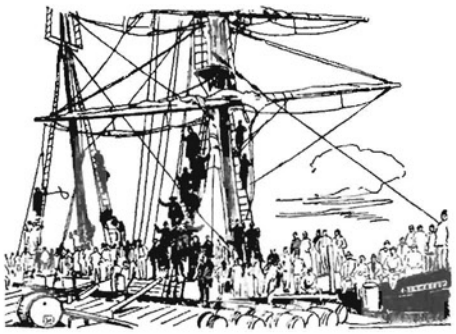
line was penned his assassins entered and completed their work by stabbing him to the heart."

Once the notorious story of Father Juvenal's seduction made it into print, like all such published lies, it took on a life of its own. Due to the story's salacious nature, however, most writers using the book as a reference only referred to it in passing. For instance, in her 1919 travel account, writer Agnes Burr said delicately that Father Juvenal was "a man undoubtedly of high ideals, earnest, and conscientious in his beliefs, but weak in practice."

Perhaps historians are a more skeptical lot, because over the years most generally distrusted the Juvenal seduction story, or at the very least were too discreet to mention it, except in a footnote. One notable exception was popular historian Hector Chevigny. In his 1943 book, Lord of Alaska: Baranov and the Russian Adventure, he devoted an entire chapter to "The Sin of Father Juvenal," though he admitted in his bibliography that the diary manuscript, which Petroff claimed to have translated, was of "doubtful authenticity." In later years Chevigny clearly realized the spurious nature of the story and included no mention of it in his more comprehensive 1965 history of Russian America.

Although most historians have long been wary of Petroff, other writers in desperate need of written sources—particularly anthropologists—proved to be far more gullible and eagerly swallowed the bait, as anthropologist Lydia Black pointed out in a 1981 essay in *Ethnohistory*. Black criticized many prominent anthropologists who used the Juvenal diary simply because no other sources were available. On the other hand, she pointed out, historians had generally recognized that "archival materials associated with the name of Ivan Petrov cannot be automatically taken at face value," even if such experts had to "admire the man for (his) sheer audacity and richness of imagination."

"Imagine that great army of misguided humanity—the very flower of America's best physical manhood—going down to death for mere gold...."



While Ivan Petroff's fabrications have been exposed, the handiwork of a gold rush participant named Arthur A. Dietz has never received any recognition as the purported author of the greatest fake gold rush memoir ever written. In 1914 Arthur Arnold Dietz published one of the most memorable books about the 1897-98 Klondike Stampede, *Mad Rush for Gold in Frozen North*.

Dietz's shocking memoir tells a horrific tale unmatched by any other Klondike account for its volume of death and starvation, hardship, and suffering. Men drop dead, disappear into glacial crevasses, freeze their limbs, or suffer snow blindness in virtually every chapter. The carnage was dreadful. Out of the original group of 18 men with whom he started for the goldfields, Dietz claimed only he and three others survived. When they were finally rescued, his last three living partners were shattered wrecks, completely broken in health, with two permanently blinded—and like Ishamel, only Dietz was left to tell the tale. No one could verify his story, but no one could contradict it either.

Since the publication of *Mad Rush for Gold in Frozen North* nearly 100 years ago, numerous historians and writers about the Klondike gold rush have relied heavily on the book and quoted it extensively. The best two histories of the gold rush period, Pierre Berton's *Klondike Fever* and William R. Hunt's *North of 53*, rely heavily on Dietz's narrative. It is easy to see why both Berton and Hunt were so captivated by the book. Not only is *Mad Rush* an intriguing story that is exceptionally well told, but it is also an irreplaceable account of one of the most gruesome and irrational episodes of the Klondike gold rush. Although there were many bad ways to get to the Klondike, Dietz's memoir is a tale of one of the very worst. His autobiography is the only primary source of any length about the so-called Malaspina Glacier trail, a trail famous for futility because it did not exist, as the men and women who tried to follow it soon learned to their sorrow.

Perhaps it is fitting that the only memoir written about this imaginary trail up the Malaspina Glacier is imaginary itself. While *Mad Rush for Gold in Frozen North* may contain some kernels of truth and is based on the adventures of a real person, internal evidence proves that the book is mostly a literary forgery, a historical fabrication that offers us a glimpse not of what actually happened but of what the author thought should have happened on the trail to the Klondike.

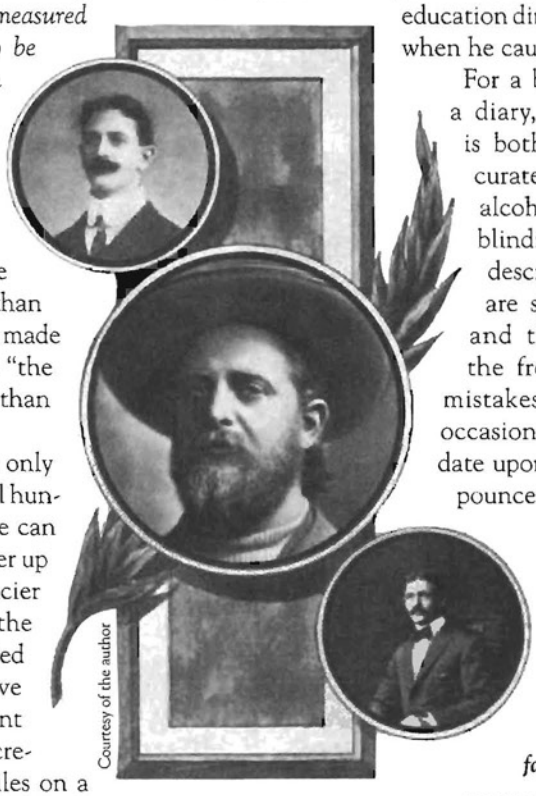
The historical record indicates that virtually no one who attempted the Malaspina Glacier trek ever made it to the Klondike. The Malaspina Glacier is one of the largest tidewater glaciers in North America, a frozen ocean of ice of almost 1,000 square miles, which flows down across the coastal mountains separating the Yukon basin from the North Pacific. On the map a giant swatch of ice from the mountains to the sea, the Malaspina Glacier—and the Valdez Glacier farther west—appeared to be a frozen highway to the interior, a perfect route across the mountains to the goldfields. But experience soon proved the utter fallacy of Alaska's glacial highways.

In 1899 writer Addison Powell summarized his experiences on the Valdez Glacier trail, which was far more popular and accessible than the supposed route over the Malaspina Glacier. Powell wrote,

One can crossover on the crusted snow in the spring of the year in fancied security, not realizing the chasms, caverns, and crevasses of unknown depths beneath him, unless he has traveled across there in summer. We measured one crevasse that...was estimated to be 1,800 feet deep. Men have been known to have fallen in those refrigerating chasms and their bodies were never recovered. How many have lost their lives there will never be known.

Powell claimed that crossing the Valdez Glacier was more dangerous than traversing a war zone. "Of all the noises made about the war with Spain," he wrote, "the Valdez glacier has caused more death than did the whole Spanish navy."

Fewer people died on the Malaspina only because far fewer—no more than several hundred at most—attempted it. As anyone can testify who has ever seen the huge glacier up close, climbing up the Malaspina Glacier was like walking across a minefield the size of Rhode Island. A prospector loaded with a ton of supplies might as well have charted a route over the top of Mount Everest as to navigate the dangerous crevasses and ice falls for hundreds of miles on a moving river of ice.



Courtesy of the author

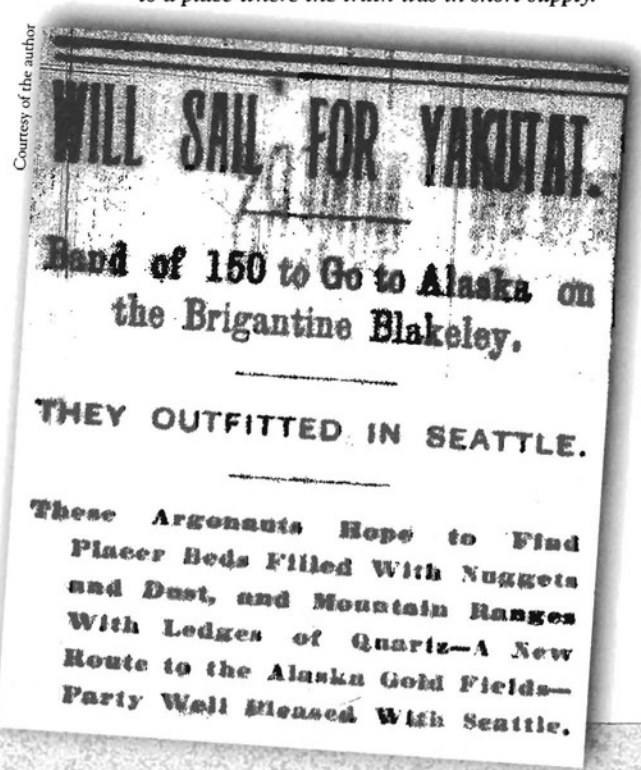
LEFT: Arthur Arnold Dietz, the supposed author of Mad Rush for Gold in Frozen North. *The 1914 book was "based on a true story," but this preposterous tale is one of the great fabrications of Alaskan history, long accepted as factual by journalists and historians.*

THE FIRST MYSTERY about Dietz's memoir is who wrote it. Though Arthur Arnold Dietz is listed as both the author and the copyright holder, the preface is attributed only to "Author" and written in the third person. "During the time he was away," the preface explains, "Mr. Dietz kept a diary in which he recorded his adventures up until the time when he lost all record of time in the great Arctic night, but he kept a record of every incident for the two years and two months that he was away." *Mad Rush* may have been written by a friend or colleague of Dietz's, but based on the quality of the writing, it was probably scripted by a professional ghostwriter or perhaps a Los Angeles journalist looking for some extra money. Whoever wrote it did so with simple, sharp sentences and a refreshing clarity that makes the book seem convincing. For instance, upon his arrival in Seattle, Dietz looked in awe at the con men and hucksters fleecing the men bound for the Klondike. He said Seattle "was more wicked than Sodom; the devil reigned supreme." He had never seen anything like the evil he witnessed in Seattle. "Previous to that time I thought that nothing could surprise a New Yorker."

Little is known about Arthur Dietz except what is in the book itself. Seattle newspaper accounts at the time of the gold rush list his name on the passenger manifest of the brigantine *Blakeley*, the ship on which he sailed north in February 1898 (though the book mistakenly states that the voyage took place in 1897). The book claims that Dietz was the physical education director of the New York City YMCA when he caught gold fever.

For a book that is supposedly based on a diary, however, the author's memoir is both unbelievably vague and inaccurate, almost as if it was written in an alcoholic stupor or perhaps one of the blinding snowstorms that he frequently describes. Monstrous factual mistakes are spread throughout every chapter, and these are major blunders—like the freshman geography student who mistakes Africa for Australia—not the occasional misspelled name or incorrect date upon which some critics instinctively pounce with such delight.

BELOW: As Dietz and his fellow treasure hunters prepared to set sail for Yakutat in February 1898, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer *launched news of the expedition with grandiose hyperbole well suited to a voyage to a place where the truth was in short supply.*



Courtesy of the author

WILL SAIL FOR YAKUTAT.

Band of 150 to Go to Alaska on the Brigantine Blakeley.

THEY OUTFITTED IN SEATTLE.

These Argonauts Hope to Find Placer Beds Filled With Nuggets and Dust, and Mountain Ranges With Ledges of Quartz—A New Route to the Alaska Gold Fields—Party Well Blessed With Seattle.

Courtesy of the author

Since time immemorial the tall tales of travelers from far away places have inspired stories of mythic proportions. Alaska has long filled the role in American history of a strange and magic land beyond the edge of the unknown, where the dragons are indistinguishable from the mosquitoes.

For instance, Dietz makes the nonsensical claim that when his party landed on March 24 at Yakutat near the foot of the glacier the sun was doing the impossible—shining almost all night long just days after the spring equinox: "The absence of night appealed to us as being very peculiar." There is no place on the planet that can receive more than 12 hours of sunlight around the time of the equinox. What is truly peculiar, however, is that they also claimed to have seen the Northern Lights at Yakutat, a difficult feat under the brightness of the Midnight Sun. At one point the author claims "the Aurora Borealis was so brilliant that it was almost as bright as day and it was difficult to sleep at any time."

Further on, the author tells of one member of the party dying from typhoid fever, which his companions believed he contracted by digesting too many mosquitoes with his food. Dietz also states that, while carrying a 50-pound bag of beans, he stumbled and broke his right wrist in two places. "From that time on," he noted, "for several weeks, I was compelled to use my left hand for everything, and I became left handed." They consumed so many beans on the trip, commented Dietz, that for 15 years after his return he could not eat them.

By his own admission, Dietz's party had only the faintest idea where they were going. He claimed that originally they were not even going to stop at Dawson City but were instead bound for an unnamed spot hundreds of miles north of Dawson on the "lower Mackenzie River." After they had somehow mysteriously learned of a "wonderful supply of gold along the Tanana River, we changed our minds." He further admitted that he and his companions "were the only ones who attempted to enter the goldfields by the route we took." Their absolutely unerringly faulty sense of geography meant that they never knew exactly where they were at any time, and his repeated statements of losing all track of time—again, and again, and again—meant that they had no bearings in either space or time, and these are two of the most consistent indicators that the narrative is completely fabricated. "As I look back now," he said in one typical passage, "this portion of my life seems clouded in an almost impenetrable maze. I had no definite idea of the passing of time."

In the end, Dietz or whoever wrote the book probably crafted the story as a cautionary moral tale about the dangers of greed. When fear replaced greed, he had a life-changing experience; his road to Damascus was across the Malaspina Glacier:

The fact that we were in all probability hopelessly lost, many miles from civilization, impressed itself upon us. For the first time since we left New York City we were thoroughly frightened. Life even with its terrible hardships had never seemed so sweet, and that we had been so foolish as to imperil it to seek gold now appeared to be unthinkable. GOLD! We detested it; we hated it, and from that day on we did not spend a minute looking for it. Our ambition was demoralized. Our single and only thought was to save ourselves and try to get out of the country.

LOOKING BACK ON his youthful adventures in Alaska more than a dozen years later, Dietz was philosophical about what he had endured. "Behold, the power of gold!" he warned. "Imagine that great army of misguided humanity—the very flower of America's best physical manhood—going down to death for mere gold, which after all is a minor consideration in the affairs of men." Dietz claimed that he had spent nearly two years, by his reckoning, wandering the wilderness of Alaska, searching for gold, but in the end it was an easy choice to leave his money belt and his small stash of gold behind:

When after untold hardships I made my way into the heart of Alaska, and it came to be a question of life or death, I left behind the gold I took along without great regret as I would leave behind a worthless burden. I have learned the value of gold as compared with life. But in 1896 I did not realize that or this story would never have been written—or experienced.

For nearly 100 years Dietz's harrowing memoir has been accepted as a reputable work of nonfiction, as a reliable memoir of a gold rush stampeder. The real lesson of *Mad Rush for Gold in Frozen North*, however, is to be careful of what you choose to believe. That was true during the gold rush, and it is equally true for literary explorers who venture into the uncertain terrain of Alaska's historical literature.

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***FRONT COVER:** Cover image from the official program for the 10th Annual Championship Race at Tacoma Speedway, July 4, 1921. Local favorites competed against big name drivers from around the country. The winner, for the second year in a row, was the illustrious Tommy Milton, who a few weeks earlier had won the Indianapolis 500. (#1976.53.1, Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society)*