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THE RIVER TRIP TO THE KLONDIKE.

BY JOHN SIDNEY WEBB.

WITH PICTURES REDRAWN FROM PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE MOST PART TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR.



IN behalf of the Alaska Commercial Company, which had been carrying mails free of charge for years, I applied to the Postmaster-General for the establishment of a postal route along the Yukon River; and as the department, preliminary to deciding the question, asked for information on the subject of population and other points, it was decided by the company to send me over the route. The trip included the whole coast of Alaska, where is to be found the grandest scenery in the world, including glaciers, mountains, volcanoes, peaks, cañons, and fiords, in bewildering profusion.

We arrived at the island of St. Michael, in Norton Sound, on June 26, 1897, and, much to our delight, were not hindered by the ice, which, however, lay in dangerous-looking fields to the westward. The year before, the first boat had bumped about until the 7th of July, hemmed in by the masses of ice which filled Norton Sound. St. Michael is a curious old Russian station, built in the days of the fur-trade of the patriarchal Russian-American Company, to the entire plant and wide-spread business of which the Alaska Commercial Company of San Francisco succeeded some thirty years ago. It is a clean, bright little town, a cheerful, bustling place, where one sees a painted house for the last time in the trip up the Yukon. Traces of the Russian occupation remain in the fort, the language, and the church, which still controls the natives. The houses of the post are built upon a hill and about the edge of a small bay, along the shore of which the Eskimos pitch their tents, and beach their kayaks and bidarkees, in picturesque confusion.

The natives are interesting to watch, and "sure-enough" Eskimos. They do all the labor in unloading the vessels, moving cargoes, and getting the goods in and out of the huge warehouses. Whenever a native has got the particular thing he came for, be it a tin can or a rifle, he quits work. Even under the stress of his extreme desire for tobacco or

tea, nothing can induce him to work more than every other day. The majority are packed in badly set up huts, surrounded by their dogs. An Eskimo has more dogs than a Virginia negro. They never bark, but howl, day and night, in a sad, disheartening way.

About St. Michael, and covering the country inland, is found a spongy, springy species of moss, notable chiefly as a habitation for mosquitos. The nearer you get to the arctic circle, the hungrier the mosquitos become; and when you cross the circle and reach Fort Yukon, these pests are to be reckoned by millions, and no one dares expose himself unless protected by nets and gloves.

The visitor at St. Michael is impressed by the number of the officers and employees of the company. It is hard to realize that such a large plant is needed to handle the business of three short months. The shortness of the season is one of the things which the companies now being formed all over the land for transportation and trading in the Yukon River region must take account of; for it is a most serious item in any calculation in regard to the cost of carrying on business. All the employees, officers, and mechanics must be engaged by the year, but for all practical purposes their active service lasts for only four months. The new companies will find themselves seriously hampered, also, by the inability of human nature, however strongly fortified by good resolutions, to resist the temptation to rush to the gold-fields, the crews leaving ships and boats to destruction, and enterprises stranded. This was an old story in the days of '49 in California, and has been repeated to some extent in Alaska during the past season.

For many years there was little else to be done at St. Michael but to gather in the furs, send out the few trade goods to the storehouses along the river, and transport the supplies for the various missions; but of late years the miners have been pouring into the country in larger numbers, usually coming in by way of the mountain trails from Dyea, and rarely resorting to the river route. In this way men crowded into the country without