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ALASKA CLIMATE.

Some Popular Errors Corrected--A Good Country to Live In.

An Alaska Summer Day--Glorious Sunsets.

Bright and Cloudy Weather--Rainfall--Temperature--Alaska Winters.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

FORT WRANGEL, October 16, 1879.

Alaska is a good country to live in, polar bear and iceberg stories to the contrary notwithstanding. The climate of the islands and of all that portion of the mainland that is bathed by the warm ocean current from Japan, is remarkably bland and temperate, and free from extremes of either heat or cold throughout the whole year. It is rainy however, a wee hair too wet, as a Scotchman would say, so much so that haymaking will hardly ever be extensively engaged in here, whatever future developments may show among contemplated possibilities. But even this rainy weather is of good quality, the best of the kind I ever experienced; mild in temperature, gentle in its fall, filling the fountains of the deep cool rivers, feeding the mosses and trees, and keeping the whole land fresh and fruitful; while anything more delightful than the shining weather in the midst of the rain; the great round sun-days that occur in the months of June and July, may hardly be found in any other portion of the world, north or south.

AN ALASKA SUMMER DAY.

An Alaska summer day is a day without night, for the sun at its lowest point is only a few degrees below the horizon, and the topmost colors of the sunset blend with those of the sunrise, leaving no gap of the night darkness between. What is called the midnight of the partial, divided days of other countries, is here only a low noon, the middle-point of the gloaming, with light enough to read by. The thin clouds that are almost always present, are then colored orange and red, making a striking advertisement of the progress of the sun around the northern horizon. The day opens slowly, the low arch of light stealing round to the north-eastward with gradual increase of height, and span, and intensity of tone, and when at length the sun appears, it is without much of that stirring, impressive pomp, that flashing, awakening, triumphant energy, so suggestive of the Bible imagery—a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoicing like a strong man to run a race. The red clouds with yellow dissolving edges now vanish as their color leaves them, and subside into a hazy dimness; the islands with ruffs of mist about them cast ill-defined shadows on the glistening waters, and the whole down-bending firmament becomes pale pearl-gray. For three or four hours after sunrise there is nothing specially impressive to be felt in the landscape. The sun, though seemingly unclouded, may almost be looked in the face, and the islands and mountains with all their wealth of woods and snow, and varied beauty of architecture, seem comparatively dull and uncommunicative.

As the day advances towards high noon, the sun-flood streaming in full power through the damp atmosphere lights the water-levels and the sky to glowing silver. Brightly play the ripples about the bushy edges of the islands, and out over the plume-shaped streaks between them, stirred by some passing breeze. The warm air beats now and makes itself felt as a life-giving, energizing ocean embracing all the world.

Now we may contemplate the life and motion about us. It comes to mind of itself. The tides, the rivers, the flow of the light through the satiny sky, the marvelous abundance of fishes feeding in the lower ocean. Misty flocks of insects in the warm air. The wild sheep on a thousand grassy ridges among the glaciers. The beaver and mink far back on many a rushing stream. Indians floating and basking along the shores. Leaves and crystals drinking the sunlight, and the glaciers on the mountains tracing valleys for the rivers and making meal for every living creature. Through the afternoon, all the way down to the sunset, the day grows in open appreciable beauty. The light seems to thicken and become yet more generously fruitful without losing its brightness or transparency. Everything seems to settle into a deep conscious repose; the winds breathing gently or wholly at rest; the few clouds visible, downy, and luminous, and combed out fine on the edges; a white gull here and there winnowing the warm ether on easy wing—Indian hunters in their canoes, every stroke of their paddles told by a quick, glancing flash, half as big as the moon. No bird-choirs in the groves to sing out, and stir and sweeten the deep, brooding stillness; sky, land and water meeting and blending in one inseparable scene of enchantment. Then comes the sunset with its colors, mingled purple and gold. Not a narrow arch on the horizon, but oftentimes filling the sky, the glowing fountain of it all well round to the north.

ALASKA SUNSETS.

I have seen far more gorgeous sunsets than any I have yet witnessed in Alaska, but none more impressive. The clouds that usually bar the horizon are fired on the edges, leaving a dull centre in strong contrast; and the spaces of clear sky between are filled in with greenish yellow, or pale amber; while the orderly flocks of small overlapping clouds that are often seen higher up are mostly touched with crimson, like the outleaving sprays of a maple grove in the beginning of Indian summer, and a soft mellow purple flushes the sky to the zenith, and fills the air, fairly steeping and transfiguring the islands, and turning all the water into wine. The glowing gold soon vanishes after the sun goes down; but because it descends on a curve nearly in the same plane with the horizon, even the glowing portion of the display lasts much longer than in more southern latitudes, while the upper colors, with gradually lessening intensity, sweep around to the north, and unite with those of the morning.

The most extravagant of all the sunset effects I have yet seen in this moist northland occurred about the middle of July, when we were sailing between Nanaimo and Fort Wrangel, in the midst of one of the most thickly sown of the archipelagoes. The day had been rainy, but during the latter part of the afternoon the clouds cleared away from the west, all save a few that settled down, mostly in level overlapping bars near the horizon. It was a calm evening, and the color came on gradually, increasing in extent of area and richness of tone by slow degrees, as if requiring more time than usual to ripen. At a height of about 30° there was a heavy bank, deeply reddened on its lower side and on the projecting portions of its face. Below this there were three horizontal belts of purple edged with gold, while a spreading fan of flame, vividly defined, radiated upward across the purple bars, and faded in a feather edge of dull red. But beautiful and impressive as was this simple painting on the sky, the most novel and exciting effect was in the body of the atmosphere itself, which, on account of the moisture with which it was laden, became one mass of color—a thin translucent haze of claret purple, in which the islands with softened outlines seemed to float, while a curved ridge of a thick red color seemed to lie drawn around them, on the water where it met the sky, as a fitting border. The peaks, too, in the opposite direction, and the snow fields and glaciers, and fleecy rolls of mist that lay in the hollows of the mountains were flushed in a deep rosy alpenglow of ineffable loveliness. Even the people on the ship's deck were comprehended and worked into the general effect. The divines we had aboard seemed then to be truly divine as they gazed, submerged and transfigured, on the glorious purple flood. So also seemed our salt, storm-fighting old captain, and the tarry sailors, spars, rigging and all.

About one-third of the days of this last summer at Fort Wrangel were cloudy, with very little or no rain; one-third decidedly rainy or nearly so. Of 147 days, beginning May 17th of this year, there were 65 on which rain fell, 43 cloudy and 39 clear. In June rain fell on 18 days, in July rain fell on 8 days, in August rain fell on 15 days, in September rain fell on 20 days. But on some of these days there was only a few minutes' rain—a light shower, scarce enough to count, while as a general thing the rain fell so gently, and the temperature was so mild, few of all these days could be called stormy or at all dismal. Even the bleakest and most bedraggled specimens usually have a dash of late or early color to cheer them, or some white illumination about the noon hours. I never before saw so much rain fall with so little noise. There was no loud rushing wind all summer, nor any thunder. At least I heard none, and from what I can learn it is quite as rare a phenomenon here as in any portion of California—a flash and clap, faint and far away, once in two or three years. There is a fresh, sound, wholesomeness about even the wettest of this weather, that seems generally conducive to health. There is no mildew in the houses, as far as I have seen, or any tendency toward eternal mouldiness in any nook however hidden from the sun. And neither among the people or plants do we find that flabby, dropsical appearance which so soft and poultice-like an atmosphere might lead one to expect. In September clear days were rare indeed. More than three-fourths of them were either decidedly cloudy or rainy, and the rains that fell this month were driven slant by winds moderately strong, and the clouds between showers crawled and drooped in a ragged unsettled way, without, however, betraying hints of violence such as one so often sees in the gestures of the storm-clouds on the California mountains.

CAUSE OF WETNESS OF THE CLIMATE.

The cause of this marked wetness of the climate is not far to seek. It is found in the vapor-laden winds from the Japan current, and the condensing range of mountains along the coast, which, by the way, is more than four times as high as it is generally supposed to be.

TEMPERATURE.

July was the brightest month of the summer, with fourteen days of sunshine, six of them in uninterrupted succession, with a temperature of about 60° Fah.; maximum at 12 M., 70°.

The average 7 A. M. temperature for June was 54° 33'; 12 M., 57° 13'. The average 7 A. M. temperature for July was 55° 93'; 12 M., 61° 75'. The average 7 A. M. temperature for August was 54° 20'; 12 M., 61° 83'. The average 7 A. M. temperature for September was 52° 23'; 12 M., 56° 21'.

The highest temperature observed here during the summer was 76°. The most remarkable characteristic of this summer weather, even the brightest of it, is the palpable velvet softness of the atmosphere. On the mountains of California, throughout the greater part of the year, the presence of an atmosphere is hardly recognized, and the thin, white, bodyless light of the morning comes to the peaks and glaciers as an unmixed spiritual essence, the most impressive of all the terrestrial manifestations of God. The most transparent and most brilliantly lighted of Alaskan atmospheres is always appreciably substantial, and oftentimes so thick that it would seem as if one might reach

out and take a handful of it and examine its quality by rubbing it between the thumb and finger. I never before saw days so white and so full of subdued lustre.

ALASKA WINTERS.

In winter, from what I can learn, the storms are mostly rain, at a temperature of thirty-five or forty degrees, and strong winds, which, when they sweep the channels lengthwise, lash them into waves and carry salt scud far into the woods. The long nights are then gloomy enough to most people, and the value of a snug home, with blazing, crackling, yellow cedar fire and book-covered tables may be finely appreciated.

Snow falls quite frequently, but never to any great depth or to lie long. Only once since the settlement of Fort Wrangel the ground was covered to a depth of four feet. The ordinary depth anywhere near sea-level is said to be a sloppy condition.

The mercury seldom falls more than five or six degrees below the freezing point unless the wind blows steadily from the mainland. Back from the coast, however, beyond the mountains, the winter months are intensely cold. At Glenora, on the Etchene river, less than a thousand feet above the level of the sea, a temperature of from thirty to forty degrees below zero is not uncommon.

JOHN MUIR.