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ALASKA RIVERS.

Their Number and Characteristics---

The Stickine.

Sublime Alpine Scenery—An Alaska Canyon.

Glacier Mud—Stupendous Glacial Phenomena.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

SITKA, December 27, 1879.

Alaska is covered with a network of deep, cool, perennial streams, that flow on, ever fresh and sweet through grassy plains and mossy bogs and rock-bound glacial cañons, telling everywhere, all the way down to the sea. How bountiful are the clouds that fill their ample fountains. Some thirty or forty rivers have been discovered in the Territory, the number varying as the smaller ones have been called rivers, or creeks, by the map-makers. But not one of them all, from the mighty Yukon, 2,000 miles long, to the shortest of the mountain torrents falling white from the glaciers, has thus far been explored. Dall Kennicott and others have done good work on the Yukon, and miners, trappers and traders have been over most of the region in a rambling way, and each have brought in detached bits of river knowledge, which, though too often misty and uncertain, have been put together in maps that are better than nothing. The coast line in particular, with the mouths and lower reaches of the rivers, has been fairly drawn, but their upper courses are in great part invisible, like mountains with their heads in a cloud. Perhaps about twenty of the Alaska rivers are a hundred miles or more in length.

The Yukon drains about as large an area as that drained by all the other streams of the territory combined, flowing through British territory for a distance of six or seven hundred miles in a general northwesterly direction, then approaching the Alaska boundary near Fort Yukon, it turns abruptly to the left, and pursues a southwesterly course across the territory to the Behring Sea, in latitude about $62^{\circ} 30'$. It is a broad, majestic flood, scarce at all interrupted by rapids, nearly twenty miles wide in some places, and navigable for light-draft steamers about fifteen hundred miles—a noble companion of the great Mackenzie, the two heading together in the smoothly sculptured Rocky Mountain plateau.

THE KUSKOQUIM.

The largest of the rivers whose sources all lie within the bounds of Alaska is the Kuskoquim, which flows into the bay of that name in lat. 60° , and is supposed to be about five or six hundred miles in length.

To the north of the Yukon delta a considerable number of short streams fall into Norton Sound, Norton Bay and Kolzebue Sound. But from the northmost of this series around the shores of the Arctic ocean to the boundary line, a distance of nearly a thousand miles, there is only one river of considerable size, the Colville, which falls into the Arctic ocean in lat. $70^{\circ} 30'$, lon., $150^{\circ} 30'$.

Between the mouths of the Yukon and Mount St. Elias, creeks and rivers occur at short intervals, most of which flow quietly as they approach the sea, through low bogs and beds of glacial drift. The principal streams are the Kuskoquim, Suchitno and Copper rivers. On the last mentioned, which is supposed to be three or four hundred miles in length, rolled masses of native copper have been found. The Indians were acquainted with this metal before the advent of the whites, and probably obtained their supplies of it for the manufacture of knives and ornaments from mines located somewhere in the basin of this river. From St. Elias the coast mountains extend in a lofty unbroken chain beyond the southern boundary of the Territory, gashed with stupendous cañons, every one of which carries a majestic stream, deep enough and wide enough to be called a river, though comparatively short, drawing their sources from the glaciers back thirty or forty miles in the white solitudes of the range. A few, however, of this foaming brotherhood—the Chilcat, Chilcot, Takoo and Stickine rivers—come from far beyond the coast range, though flowing across it through cañons cut for them by the glaciers, heading in the broad Rocky Mountain plateau, in company with the Mackenzie and Yukon. The tributary cañons of the great trunk cañons of all these rivers are still occupied by glaciers, which descend in glorious array on both sides, their massive bulging snouts back a little way in the shadows, or pushed grandly forward among the cottonwoods of the banks of the streams, or blocking their way, and compelling them to flow beneath the ice through long arching tunnels.

The Stickine is perhaps better known than any other river in Alaska, because of its being the way back to the Cassiar gold mines. It is about 350 or 400 miles long, and navigable for small steamers to Glenora, 150 miles, flowing first in a general westerly direction through grassy, undulating plains, darkened here and there with patches of evergreens, then curving southward, and receiving numerous tributaries from the north, it enters the Coast Range and sweeps across it to the sea through a Yosemite Valley more than a hundred miles long, and one to three miles wide at the bottom, and from five to eight thousand feet deep, marvellously beautiful and inspiring from end to end. To the appreciative tourist sailing up the river through the midst of it all, the canyon for a distance of about 110 miles is a gallery of sublime pictures, an unbroken series of majestic mountains, glaciers, falls, cascades, forests, groves; flowery garden spots, grassy meadows—furniture enough for a dozen Yosemites—while back of the walls, and thousands of feet above them, innumerable peaks and spires and domes of ice and snow tower grandly into the sky. Sailing along the river the views change with magical rapidity. Wondrous, too, are the changes dependent on the weather. Avalanches, from the heights, booming and resounding from side to side; storm-winds, from the Arctic highlands, sweeping the cañon like a flood, and filling the air with ice-dust; rocks, glaciers, and forests, in spotless white. In spring, the chanting of cascades, the gentle breathing of warm winds, the opening of leaves and flowers, birds building their nests, hundred-acre fields of wild roses coming into bloom, and tangles of bramble and huckleberry, swaths of birch and willow creeping up the lower slopes of the walls after the melting snow, massive cumuli piled about the highest peaks, gray rain-clouds wreathing the outstanding brows and battlements of the walls. Then the breaking forth of the sun on it all; the shining of the wet leaves, and the river, and the crystal spires of the glaciers; the looming of the white domes in the azure, the serene color-grandeur morning and evening, changing in glorious harmony through all the seasons and years.

AN ALASKA CANYON.

It is not easy to begin anything like a full description, where so great a multitude of varying objects crowd forward into view; nevertheless, I will try to draw a few suggestive outlines of this one representative canyon, one of many, hoping that those of my readers who are free may some day come and see for themselves.

Leaving Fort Wrangel on one of the small steamers that carry supplies to the mines, you notice that the water of the bay is milky for miles out from the mouth of the river, caused by glacier mud—the fine portion of the grist ground from the rocks by hundreds of glaciers ranged along the cañon walls. Entering the river five or six miles from Wrangel, the smooth, green islands of the Archipelago are at once lost to view, and the cañon walls sweep grandly to the sky, with their evergreens in showy array, peaks 7,000 to 8,000 feet high, with small glaciers between them seen over the tops of their arrowy spires.

STUPENDOUS GLACIERS.

About fifteen miles above the mouth of the river you come to the first of the great glaciers, pouring down through the forest in a shattered ice-cascade nearly to the level of the river. Here the cañon is about two miles wide, planted with cottonwoods along the banks of the river, and spruce and fir and patches of wild rose and raspberry extend back to the grand Yosemite walls. Twelve miles above this point a noble view is opened along the Skoot river cañon—a group of glacier-laden Alps from ten to twelve thousand feet high, the source of the largest tributary of the Stickine. A few miles further on the walls are steeper and smoother, offering fine ways for avalanches, and but little anchorage for trees, so that they are mostly bare, like those of the Merced Yosemite. The granite, too, has the same neutral gray tone, and the sculpture and general style of architecture are similar. Cascades are chanting everywhere, descending in white ribbons from the upper glaciers to the green levels of the river. On one massive rock-front, corniced with ice, I counted eight that formed a fine lace-work, beautifully relieved in the small green willows that fringe their edges. The largest booms like Yosemite Falls in the spring, pouring from the blue shattered edge of a glacier to the foot of the wall in a snowy plume, two thousand feet long.

Thirty-five miles above the mouth of the river, the most striking object of all comes in sight. This is the lower expanded portion of the great glacier, measuring about six miles around the snout, pushed boldly forward into the middle of the valley among the trees, while its sources are mostly hidden. It takes its rise in the heart of the range, some thirty or forty miles away. Compared with this the Swiss *mer de glace* is a small thing. It is called the "Ice Mountain," and seems to have been regarded as a motionless mass, created on the spot, like the rocks and trees about it, without venturing a guess as to how or when. The front of the snout is about 300 feet high, but rises rapidly back for a few miles to a height of about a thousand feet. Seen through gaps in the trees growing on one of its terminal moraines, as one sails slowly along against the current, the marvelous beauty of the chasms and clustered pinnacles show to fine advantage in the sunshine; but tame indeed must be the observer who is satisfied with so cheap a view.

INDIAN TRADITIONS—INDIAN TRADER.

On the opposite side of the river there is another large glacier flowing, river like, through the forested mountain bosses. Some 300 years ago these two glaciers, say the Indians, once pushed their snouts together and the river flowed beneath in a grand tunnel, through which they sometimes ventured in canoes. This tradition is interesting as containing a truth carried hundreds of years without suffering much. That they did meet is undoubtedly true, though more than 300 years ago, as the age of the spruces growing on the banks of the river show. Between the snouts of these two noble glaciers lives Choquette. Happy man—perhaps somewhat blind to his blessings. It was not without grave misgivings, he told me, that he ventured to build here, fearing something would happen in connection with that strange ice mountain. He is an Indian trader, the only settler on the river up to within a few miles of Glenora. Some thirty-five miles above this place the Hudson Bay Company had a trading post, now abandoned.

MORE GLACIERS.

The great glacier is hardly out of sight ere we come upon another of grand size, pouring a majestic white flood through the evergreens of the river level, while almost every hollow and tributary cañon contains a smaller one, according to the size of the area it drains; some like mere snow banks, others with the blue ice apparent, depending in heavy bulging curves and graduating into the river-like forms that maze through the lower forested regions, and are so striking in appearance that they are admired even by the passing miners with gold dust in their

eyes. I counted a hundred and sixty-one in sight from the river, but the whole number drained by the river throughout its entire course is probably three hundred or more. A very short geological time ago this magnificent cañon was occupied by a grand trunk glacier that flowed to the sea, to which all these residual glaciers were united as tributaries.

NEW LAND ON A YOUNG WORLD.

The Stickine, like all the other rivers of Alaska, is still young and imperfect, like a half-developed plant. The trunk is well formed, but the branches are only short stumps, slowly growing upward right and left over a hundred mountains as the glaciers melt back in compliance with climate. The trunks of some of the shorter rivers heading in the Coast Range are still as imperfect as the branches of the larger ones, while a few that are predestined to take their places in the general system have not yet commenced to flow. Over the region stretching from the north arm of Cross Sound towards Mount St. Elias, the glacial winter still rules. All the landscape is covered by a remnant of the ice-sheet. When it melts the area of the sea will be somewhat extended, and several rivers added to the number already in existence.

A short time ago there was not a single river in Alaska.

JOHN MUIR.