



11-13-1880

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#### Recommended Citation

Muir, John, "Alaska Land. A Perfect Day-Nature's Ceaseless Work-Pushing Northward. Indian Superstitions-The Tahkou River Indians-Magnificent Glacial Scenery-Gorgeous Sunset. (Special Correspondence of the Bulletin.) Mouth of Tahkou River, Alaska, August 24, 1880." (1880). *John Muir: A Reading Bibliography by Kimes, 1986 (Muir articles 1866-1986)*. 189.  
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# ALASKA-LAND.

## A Perfect Day---Nature's Ceaseless Work ---Pushing Northward.

### Indian Superstitions — The Tahkou River and Indians — Magnificent Glacial Scenery—Gorgeous Sunset.

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE BULLETIN.]

MOUTH OF TAHKOU RIVER, }  
ALASKA, August 24, 1880. }

I never saw Alaska looking better than it did yesterday, when we bade farewell to Sum Dum, and pushed on northward up the coast towards Tahkou. The morning was extremely beautiful—clear, calm, bright—not a cloud in all the purple sky, nor wind, however gentle, to shake the slender spires of the spruces on the heights, or the dew-laden grass-leaves around the shores. Over the mountains and over the broad white bosoms of the glaciers the sunbeams poured, rosy and warm as ever fell on a field of ripe wheat, drenching the forests and kindling the glassy waters of the bay and the icebergs into a perfect blaze of colored light. Every living thing seemed joyful, and nature's work went on with enthusiastic activity, not less appreciable on account of the deep repose that brooded every feature of the landscape. No better day could be given to suggest the coming fruitfulness of this ice region, and to show the advance that had been made from glacial winter to fruitful summer. The careful commercial lives we lead hold our eyes away from the operations of God as a workman. Yet they are openly carried on from day to day through unmeasured geological seasons, and all who will look may see. The scarred rocks here and the moraines make a vivid showing of the old winter time of the glacial period, and mark the bounds of the mer-de-glace that once filled the bay and covered the surrounding mountains. Already that sea of ice is replaced by water, in which multitudes of fishes are fed, and the rocks are covered with forests and gardens up to a height of 2,500 feet, while the hundred glaciers lingering about the bay and the streams that pour from them are busy night and day bringing in sand and mud and stones, at the rate of tons every minute, to fill it up. Then, as the seasons grow warmer, there will be fields here for the plow like those in the broad level valleys of California.

#### PUSHING NORTHWARD—INDIAN SUPERSTITIONS.

Our Indians, exhilarated by the fine sunshine that morning, were garrulous as the gulls and plovers, and pulled heartily at their oars, evidently glad to get out of the ice with a whole boat. "Now for Tahkou," they said, as we glided over the shining water. "Good bye Ice Mountains, good bye Sum Dum." Soon a light breeze came, and they unfurled the sail and laid away their oars and began as usual in such free times to put their goods in order, unpacking and sunning provisions, guns, ropes, clothing, etc. Joe has an old flintlock musket suggestive of Hudson Bay times, which he wished to discharge and reload. So stepping in front of the sail, he fired at a gull that was flying past before I could prevent him, and it fell slowly with outspread wings alongside the canoe, with blood dropping from its bill. I asked him why he had killed the bird, and followed the question by a severe reprimand for his stupid cruelty, to which he could offer no other excuse than that he had learned to be careless about taking life from the whites. Tyeen, our Captain, who is a better man, denounced the deed as likely to bring bad luck. Before the whites came among them, most of these Indians held, with Agassiz, that animals

have souls, and that it was wrong and unlucky to even speak disrespectfully of the fishes or any of the animals that supplied them with food. A case illustrating their superstitious beliefs in this connection occurred at Fort Wrangel last year while I was there. One of the sub-chiefs of the Stickines had a little son five or six years old, to whom he was very much attached, always taking him with him in his short canoe trips, and leading him by the hand while going about town. Last summer the boy was taken sick, and gradually grew weak and thin, whereupon his father became alarmed, and feared, as is usual in such obscure cases, that the boy had been bewitched. He first applied in his trouble to Dr. Carliss, one of the missionaries, who gave medicine, without effecting the immediate cure that the fond father demanded. He was, to some extent, a believer in the powers of missionaries, both as to material and spiritual affairs, but in so serious an exigency it was natural that he should go back to the faith of his fathers. Accordingly, he sent for one of the Shamans, or medicine men, of his tribe, and submitted the case to him, who, after going through the customary incantations, declared that he had discovered the cause of the difficulty. "Your boy," he said, "has lost his soul, and this is the way it happened. He was playing among the stones down on the beach, when he saw a crawfish in the water, and made fun of it, pointing his finger at it, and saying: 'Oh, you crooked legs! Oh, you crooked legs! You can't walk straight; you go sidewise,' which made the crab so angry that he reached out his long nippers, seized the lad's soul and pulled it out of him and made off with it into deep water. And," continued the medicine man, "unless his stolen soul be restored to him and put back in its place he will die. Your boy is really dead already; he only seems to live; it is only his lonely, empty body that is living now, and though it may continue to live in this way for a year or two, the boy will never be of any account, not strong, nor wise nor brave." The father then inquired whether anything could be done about it; was the soul still in possession of the crab, and if so, could it be recovered and reinstalled in his forlorn son? Yes, the doctor rather thought it might be charmed back and reunited, but the job would be a difficult one, and would probably cost about fifteen blankets.

#### BEAUTIFUL COAST SCENERY.

After we were fairly out of the bay into Stephens's Passage, the wind died away, and the Indians had to take their oars again, which ended our talk. On we sped over the silvery level, close along shore, meeting fresh exciting beauty all the way. The dark forests extending far and near, planted even like a field of wheat, might seem monotonous in general views, but the appreciative observer, looking closely, will find no lack of interesting variety however far he may go. The steep slopes on which they grow allows almost every individual tree, with its peculiarities of form and color, to be seen like an audience on seats rising above one another—the blue-green, sharply-tapered spires of the Menzies spruce, the warm yellow-green Merten spruces, with their finger-like tops all pointing in the same direction, or drooping gracefully like leaves of grass, and the airy, feathery, brownish-green Alaska cedar, blending in harmony, lichens and mosses on the branches, an outer fringe of bushes along the shore, and hanging over the brows of the cliffs, the white mountains above, the shining water beneath, the changing sky over all, making pictures of divine beauty in which no healthy eye may ever grow weary.

Toward evening we came to a village at the head of a picturesque bay, belonging to the Tahkou tribe. We found it silent and deserted. Not a single lawyer, doctor or policeman had been left to keep it. They are so happily rich as to have but little of a perishable kind to keep, nothing worth fretting about. They were away catching salmon, our Indians said. All the Indian villages hereabout are thus abandoned at regular periods every year, just as a tent is left for a day, while they repair to fishing, berrying and hunting stations, occupying each in succession for a week or two at a time, coming and going from the main, substantially built villages. Then, after their summer's work is done, the winter supply of salmon dried and packed, fish oil and sea oil stored in boxes, berries and spruce bark pressed in cakes, their trading trips completed, and the year's stock of quarrels with the neighboring tribe patched up in some way, they devote themselves to feasting, dancing and hootchenoo drinking. The Tahkous were once a powerful and warlike tribe, but now, like most of the neighboring tribes, they are whiskied nearly out of existence. They have a larger village on the Tahkou river, but, according to the census taken this year by the missionaries, they number only 269 all told—109 men, 79 women and 81 children. The comparative numbers of the men, women and children shows the vanishing condition of the tribe at a glance.

#### A ROUGH CAMP—TAHKOU FIORD.

Our Indians wanted to camp for the night in one of the deserted houses, but I urged them on into the clean wilderness until dark, when we landed on a rough, rocky beach, fringed with devil's clubs, greatly to the disgust of our crew. We had to make the best of it, however, as it was too dark to go farther. After supper was accomplished among the boulders they retired to the canoe, which they anchored a little way out, beyond low tide, while Mr. Young and I, at the expense of a good deal of scrambling, discovered a spot on which we could sleep among the thorny panax.

This morning, about two hours after leaving our thorny camp, we rounded a graet mountain rock nearly a mile in height, and entered the Tahkou fiord. It is about 25 miles long, and from 3 to 5 miles wide, and extends directly back into the heart of the Alaskan Alps, draining hundreds of noble glaciers and streams. The ancient glacier that formed it, fed by a thousand tributaries, was far too deep and broad and too little concentrated to erode one of those narrow cañons, usually so impressive in sculpture and architecture, but it is all the more interesting on this account when the grandeur of the ice work accomplished is seen. This fiord, more than any other that I have examined, explained the formation of that wonderful system of channels extending along the coast from Puget Sound to about latitude 59 degrees, for it is a marked portion of the system—a branch of Stephens's passage.

#### GLACIAL TRIBUTARIES.

And its trends and general sculpture are as distinctly glacial as those of the narrowest fiord, while many of the largest tributaries of the great glacier that occupied it are still in existence. I counted some forty-five altogether, big and little, in sight from the canoe in sailing up the middle of the fiord. Three of them came down to the level of the sea at the head of the fiord from a magnificent group of snowy mountains, forming a glorious spectacle as seen from near the head of the channel. The middle one of the three belongs to the first class, pouring its majestic flood, shattered and crevassed, directly into the fiord, and crowding about twenty-five square miles of it with bergs. The next below it also sends off bergs occasionally, though a narrow slip of glacial detritus separates the snout from the tide-water. This forenoon a large mass fell from the snout damming the outlet, which at length broke the dam, and the flood that resulted swept forward thousands of small bergs across the mud-flat into the fiord with tremendous energy. In a short time all was quiet again; the flood-waters receded, leaving only a large blue scar on the snout and stranded bergs on the swept moraine flat to tell the tale.

#### MAMMOTH GLACIERS.

These two magnificent glaciers are about the same size—two miles wide—and their snouts are only about a mile and a half apart. While I sat sketching them from a point among the drifting icebergs, where I could see far back into the heart of their distant fountains, two Tahkou Indians, father and son, came gliding toward us in an extremely small canoe. Coming alongside with a good-natured "saghaya," they inquired who we were, our objects, etc.

and gave us information about the river, the village and two other large glaciers that descend nearly to the sea-level a few miles up the river cañon. Crouching in their little shell of a boat among the great bergs, with paddle and barbed spear, they formed a picture as arctic and remote from anything to be found in civilization as ever was sketched for us by the explorers of the far north.

#### TAHKOU RIVER.

Making our way through the crowded bergs to the extreme head of the fiord, we entered the mouth of the river, but were soon compelled to turn back on account of the strength of the current. The Tahkou is a large stream, nearly a mile wide at the mouth, and like the Stickine, Chilcat and Chilcoot, draws its sources from far inland, crossing the mountain chain from the interior through a majestic canyon, and draining a multitude of glaciers on its way.

The Tahkou Indians, with a keen appreciation of the advantages of their position for trade, hold possession of the river, and compel the Indians of the interior to accept their services as middlemen, instead of allowing them to come down the river to trade directly with the whites.

#### ANOTHER CAMP.

When we were baffled in our attempt to ascend the river, the day was nearly done, and we began to seek a camp-ground. After sailing two or three miles along the left side of the fiord we were so fortunate as to find a small nook in the rocky wall, described to us by the Tahkou Indians, where firewood may be obtained, and where we could drag our canoe up the bank beyond the reach of the ice. Here we are safe, with a fine outlook over the bergs to the great glaciers, and near enough to have the full benefit of the thunder of the bergs falling from their snouts.

This has been one of the best of all my Alaska days; clear and warm, and full of glacier interest throughout.

#### AN ALASKAN SUNSET.

The sunset in this glorious mountain mansion, with the weather so perfect, was intensely impressive. After the dark water of the fiord was in shadow the level sunbeams continued to pour through the square miles of bergs with ravishing beauty, every one of them reflecting and refracting the purple light like cut crystal. Then all save the tips of the highest became dead white. These, too, were speedily quenched, the glowing points vanishing one by one like stars sinking beneath the horizon in a clear frosty night. And after the shadows had crept gradually higher, submerging the glaciers, and the ridges between them, the divine Alpen glow still lingered about their fountains, and the lofty peaks laden with ice and snow, stood in glorious array, flushed and transfigured. Now the last of the twilight purple has vanished, the stars begin to shine, and all trace of the day has gone. Looking across the fiord the water seems perfectly black, and the two great glaciers are seen stretching dim and ghostly back into the mountains, that now are massed in darkness against the sky.

JOHN MUIR.