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John Muir

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Interesting Lecture by John Muir, Before the Sacramento Literary Institute.

The first lecture of the season before the Sacramento Literary Institute was delivered by John Muir at the Congregational Church last evening, upon "The Resources of Alaska." There was a good audience, and the lecture, which was replete with interest throughout, was listened to with most marked attention. The mountains, streams and general features of the Territory were described with a familiarity and clearness which indicated a close study and intimate knowledge of the subject, and which, with the aid of maps and diagrams, was brought to the view of his hearers in a very pleasing and instructive manner.

He opened his lecture by saying that Alaska is the most beautiful and the most interesting country he ever saw. In all his travels north and south he had seen nothing to compare with it. Even California, the land of wonders, with its noble mountains, valleys and forests and waterfalls, is far beneath it in grandeur and varied beauty. California has a majestic mountain range extending 400 miles. Alaska has a loftier range, as profoundly sculptured, extending in this grand curved line along the coast and out into the sea a distance of 2,600 miles, with no material interruption. The highest summit, that of Mt. St. Elias, is 29,500 feet above the level of the sea.

THE ALEUTIAN GROUP,

Which is a part of the Alaska Territory, is but a continuation of this mountain range, but at a less height. In this group of islands there have been between forty and fifty active volcanoes within the past 100 years, and there are eleven at the present time.

The Rocky mountains enter the Territory in the form of irregular spurs and table-lands in the Yukon region, but most is open, rolling grassy plains, with here and there patches of pine and spruce and aspen, while toward the north the ground is quite low, sloping to the Arctic Ocean in lichen and moss-covered bogs and moorlands. The southeast portion of the Territory is heavily wooded.

The lecturer said but little in reference to the glaciers, as he has previously lectured here upon that subject, but he remarked that there are about 100,000 glaciers in the Alaskan Alps, mostly on the Mount St. Elias. Twenty of these glaciers are of the first class, and flow out into the ocean and discharge in the form of icebergs, with a noise like thunder.

THE CLIMATE.

The climate is temperate along the coast, but inland is so hot in summer that people travel at night, just as they do in desert regions under the tropics. The cold in winter, back from the coast, is extreme, ranging from 60° to 70° below zero. The map shows that this new country is large, and like a large man with a big soul, a great, kindly, loving heart, it is bounteous in blessing to man and beast. It would make, if divided, 500 States as large as Rhode Island, 250 as large as Delaware, and about fifteen the size of Ohio.

As to its latitude, it does not by any means lay so near the North Pole as is generally considered; not within a 1,000 miles of it when at its northmost point, and more than 2,000 at its southmost point. The greater portion lies within the temperate zone, where mankind has always reached the best development of all its powers. The warmest most southerly portion of Norway is more than 400 miles further north than the southmost land of Alaska. With the exception of a few square miles, the whole of Great Britain lies to the north of the southmost point in Alaska. The south extremity of Ireland coincides almost exactly with that of Alaska. Yet all those are fertile, kindly countries. Ireland in particular is specially fertile and prolific both in what are called crops and people. There the people, while as near the North Pole as some portion of Alaska, contrive to make themselves heard all over the world, and under every disadvantage multiply and replenish their own country and every other. Even France, the land of vines and wines, has a portion of its territory lying as far north as the southernmost of the Aleutian Islands.

All kind of garden vegetables will grow in Alaska, and many varieties as large as in this State. Barley and oats will also grow and mature there, but it will never be an agricultural country. The people will never go there to raise corn or fruit. A small variety of apples grow there, but they only attain a size about as large as hickory nuts. Potatoes grow very large and in abundance. No general business, however, will ever be made there in raising vegetables even, for want of sufficient level lands. What should be the valleys are covered with water. It is similar in this respect to what California would be if all its great valleys were inland arms of the sea.

As to minerals, every year there are discoveries made showing that there is a great deal of gold in Alaska. It is difficult, however, to prospect, as the ground is heavily covered with moss and conceals the earth's surface. In the interior there is plenty of water, but it is extremely difficult to carry provisions. Flour is worth there from \$25 to \$40 per hundred pounds, and potatoes are about the same price. Many good diggings are found. On the Steekin river mines have paid very well, say from \$10 to \$12 per day per man; some others more and others less. A large quartz mill is running near Sitka, and another 30-stamp mill is now being put up. Some quartz was discovered this season which yields from \$500 to \$600 per ton. He did not think, however, that Alaska would ever compare at all with Colorado and what California had been in this respect. The quality of the rocks in Alaska is the same as that found elsewhere upon the coast where gold exists.

Marble and iron are found there and coal, but the latter not in large quantities.

The yield of furs alone since the Territory was acquired by the United States has more than repaid the amount which was given by the Government for it. The most important of the fur-bearing animals is the seal. One hundred thousand of these have been killed per year. Next to these are the sea otter. These skins are worth about \$100 each, and about 1,100 are killed annually. Deer are very abundant on all the islands. As high as 1,200 have been killed upon a single island. Bears are very plentiful there, the black, and the polar bear further north. There are large numbers of wild white goats and cattle throughout the Territory. The natives make their clothing out of hair spun and woven from the goats.

The waters of Alaska are filled with fish. There are twelve to fifteen vessels engaged in cod fishing every year. It has been estimated that there are nearly 100,000 square miles of cod-bank waters within the Territory and upon the coast, mostly in Behring sea, which is one vast cod-bank. The salmon also are unlimited, and run up all the many rivers and streams to spawn. He told of one occasion when he saw so many salmon trying to go up a river that it would be no exaggeration to say that there were more salmon than water in the river. There are about 1,000 rivers and streams in which they run to the upper waters. Herring are also abundantly found.

The lecturer closed by saying he could but repeat, that Alaska is one of the most beautiful and interesting portions of the United States' possessions. It is the far West of our country. The Attou Island, which is the most westerly point of the Alutian group which are included in the Alaska purchase, is as much farther west of San Francisco as that city is west of the most easterly point of Maine. It is the limit of our "far West."