

The '87 Alaska Pioneers

By ALICE HENSON CHRISTOE



AKERS of history are they who accept the challenge of the wilderness, leaving snug firesides and beaten pathways to hew for themselves new places in strange lands.

The fugitive frontier, as she flees, sends back a call, ---a lurking challenge that stirs the blood and wakes an echo in the heart of man.

Not all men hear that call, and not all who hear answer. For there are many in whom the warmth of the fireside, the cheer of the dear, familiar ways are as clinging hands that stop the ears or stay the footsteps.

Within those hearts that hear the frontier call wakes varied echoes. Sad hearts there are—hearts bruised and quivering from the grip of sorrow--- to whom the frontier proffers the peace of her pitying forests, the calm of her quiet waters, the aspiration of her lofty peaks, the healing balm of her solitudes. Strong, sturdy hearts there are --- hearts choked by the dust of ancient institutions, cramped by the bands of narrow customs --- whose strength leaps to the challenge of that call, eager to breathe the freshness of an untried air. And to these the frontier offers the task of building cities, of daring the wilderness and subduing it, of making desert places blossom as the rose for the generations that come after. Sordid hearts there are whom the frontier tempts with gold, ---not the honest gold that the hand of Nature has scattered in the hills and valleys, but the reeking, sinister gold that is snatched from the weak hands of brothers. Rebellious hearts there are, which chafe and irk under the sane restrictions that guard the

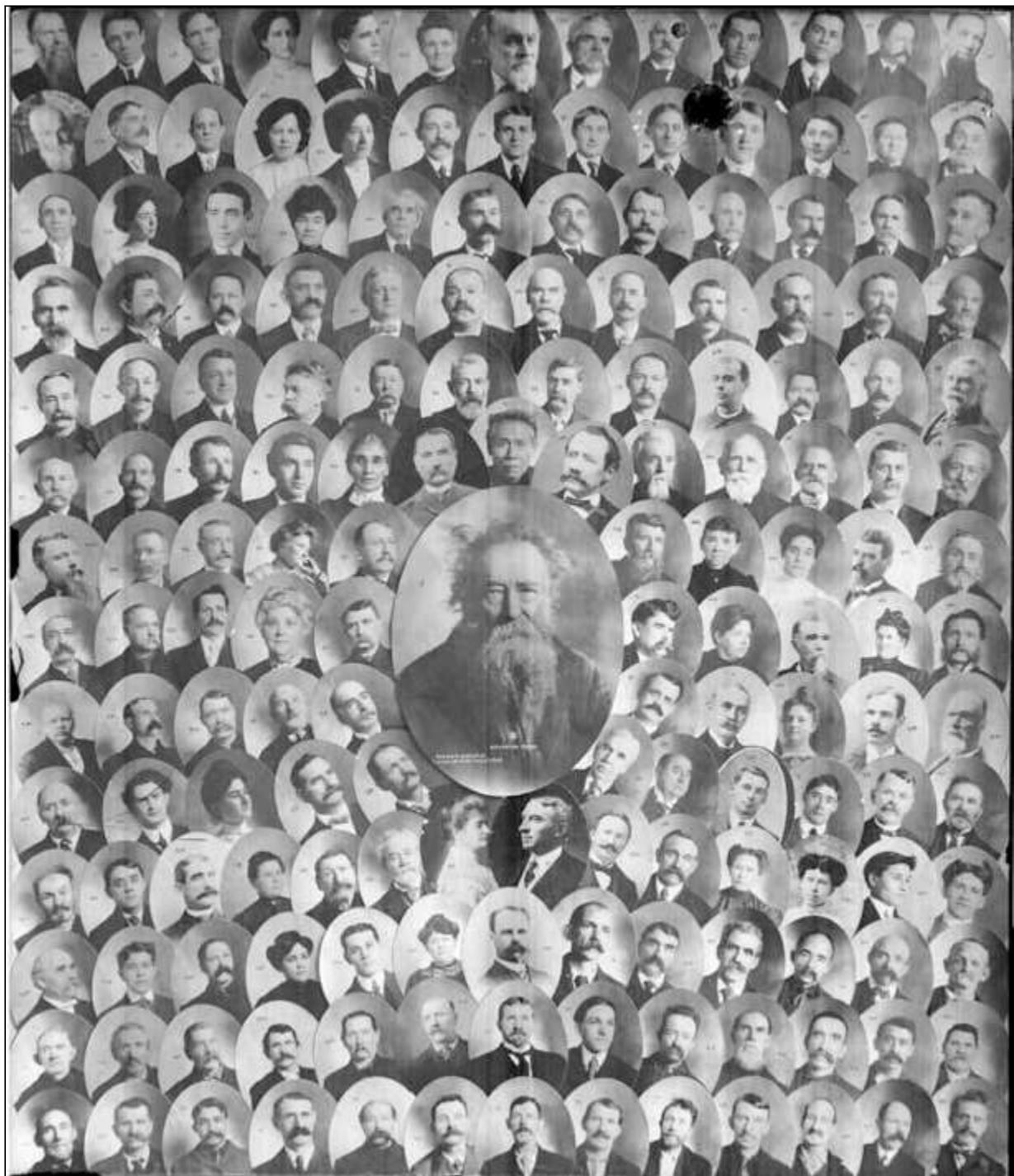
common good, and to these mutinous ones that distant call seems to promise an unbounded freedom.

And so the frontier draws her people. In her outstretched hands are many gifts, both good and evil, and with a quiet smile she watches her children choose; for it is with these gifts that she tries and tempts them. The strong and the weak, the sordid and the sad, the grave and the careless, ---she has something for each. With the same inscrutable smile she sees the scoundrel exult over his glittering prize and the honest heart puzzle over his modest one. For, behind the scenes on the frontier as well as in the crowded cities, the shuttle of destiny is busy with those gayly-colored threads wherewith the pattern of man's life is woven.

Slowly, through the centuries, the frontier has retreated --- always westward, westward --- until now she knocks again at the gates of the ancient civilizations. But in none of her stands has her call been more alluring than in this last frontier, Alaska; for here her voice became a trumpet-call that woke a world and men went mad to hear.

Here and there about its borders that fugitive note has sounded, and here and there the flying feet still flutter. Backward we may trace them, through the Innoko, the Tanana, the copper country to the westward, Nome, the Klondike, Skagway, Juneau, Wrangell, Sitka, --- back to where the imperial flag of Russia floated over a historic castle in whose halls the Old World met the New. The trail has been marked by light feet, swift with the strength of hopes fulfilled; by lagging feet heavy with the weight of broken lives. The page that tells

1887 ALASKA PIONEERS ASSOCIATION



its story draws the ready tears and readier laughter; for always the story of the frontier is a tale that thrills the listener. And Alaska's story is but half begun.

From the eastward, years ago into the new country came the French-Canadian trappers and coureurs du bois, threading its forests and winding the banks of its mighty river in search of its treasure trove of furs. In the interior country, that country now owned by Canada, settled those true children of the wilderness, grouping themselves here and there into scattered trading posts.

From the westward, across the seas, came the Russians in the wake of Vitus Bering, the explorer, --- that motley crowd of merchants, sea-otter hunters, soldiers and titled officials who made up the little foreign settlement on these distant shores.

Up from the southward, from California, from the coast states and from farther east cam the prospectors and those venturesome spirits who follow close in the footsteps of the frontier. In Southeastern Alaska they made their first stand, and from here as a base, when the days of the "gold fever" dawned, the multitudes surged hither and thither as the finger of fortune beckoned.

It seems, then, fitting that from this section should emanate a movement to preserve and make permanent the memories of those past days that are now historic. Fitting, also it seems that such a movement should find its origin in a kindly and fraternal impulse of care for on who shared those days, one who helped in the making of the history that they of tomorrow shall read.

On November 20, 1907, Richard T. Harris, discoverer of gold at Juneau died in Mount Tabor, Oregon, with mind pitifully darkened as a result of paralysis. When news reached Juneau, a movement was set on foot by pioneers of the community to have the body brought thither for interment. Joseph Juneau, his partner,

from whom the town took its name, was sleeping just at the right of the entrance to the little burial ground, and it was proposed that Richard Harris should rest opposite, at the left of the gateway.... By inquiry, it was found that eight-seven dollars would pay the expense of such an undertaking. It was then suggested that a search be made for eighty-seven pioneers who would contribute a dollar each to bear this expense. This was done. And the eternal slumber of Richard Harris is lulled by the ceaseless murmur of that stream from whose banks he drew the golden touchstone that called the capital of Alaska into life.

It was at a meeting called to arrange details for the last rites, which every old-timer within reach of the vicinity attended, that a motion was made to make the organization of pioneers permanent.

Meanwhile the number of prospective members had increased far beyond the original eighty-seven, and the idea had spread and broadened. On January 25, 1908 a meeting was called to effect a permanent organization.

Article One of its constitution states name and object;

"This society shall be known as the '87 Alaska Pioneers. Its objects are: To cultivate social intercourse and form a more perfect union among its members; to create a fund for charitable purposes in their behalf; and to perpetuate the old-time friendships and early history of the territory."

Article Two defines conditions of membership;

"All residents of Alaska prior to the last day of December, 1887 (except Indians), shall be eligible."

At this meeting, also, permanent officers were elected, Mr. John Olds, one of the prominent and well-known pioneers being honored by the office of president and Mr. Emery Valentine, to whose active efforts the origin and organization of the society were largely due, by that of secretary. Capt. J

T. Martin, a resident of the country since 1885 was chosen as marshal, to take charge of those public occasions when the pioneers attend in a body.

Resident vice-presidents have also been named in most of the Alaskan towns, the list being as follows: Juneau, John F. Malony; Douglas, W. C. Boyd; Treadwell, Richard McCormick; Haines, Sol Ripinsky; Sitka, Edward DeGroff; Wrangell, Fred Lynch; Ketchikan, A.P. Swineford; Kilisnoo, Carl Spuhn; Hoonah, George Shotter; Skagway, George W. Dillon.

Many of the remaining Alaskan towns will doubtless be represented later by residents who have drifted to these more recent camps from the older settlements, for populations in Alaska are still subject to sudden shiftings and wholesale migrations. The Yukon country, thought now under a different flag and with its own order of pioneers, is also in view of the historical and geographical connection on the list with honorable vice-president in the person of Mr. N.A. Fuller, of Dawson, one of Alaska's oldest "old-timers," who will go down to history as the man who "grub-staked" Richard Harris and Joseph Juneau when they started from Sitka on their memorable prospecting trip.

The membership has at present reached 330, and is increased from time to time as eligible present themselves, ---though the members jealously watch against intrusions or the acceptance of those who have not the required number of years to their credit. The names of members with the year of their arrival in Alaska are recorded on parchment decorated with typical historical sketches by one of the sons of Richard Harris, and here may be found dates which bridge all the years for the last half-century. The earliest date to be found is that opposite the name of Mrs. D. Kennedy, 1853, Mr. George Kostrometinoff, 1854, is one of those whose residence dates back to the time of Russia's rule on these shores.

The organization fulfills its fraternal side by caring for fellow members in case of need, illness or death, and in this way has done much to cheer and brighten the common pathway.

The social side is well looked after. Gatherings from time to time are greatly enjoyed, when "sour-dough" stories, speeches and songs call back memories of former days.

The most recent, and perhaps most interesting, social event of this kind was the Pioneers Ball given at Juneau in celebration of Alaska Day, October 18. Fully a thousand people were present on the occasion --- Alaskans of every known type and variety --- and people danced who had never danced before. Old-time reels and square dances alternated with the more modern waltz or three-step, and sour-dough and cheechako brushed shoulders and joined hands right merrily as the music beat its joyous rhythm.

A most interesting historical scene was reproduced during the evening commemorating the forty-first anniversary of the raising of the American flag at Sitka on the occasion of Alaska's transfer from Russia to the United States. The very flag used on that occasion, and the same uniform worn by Prince Maxsoutoff, the Russian governor, were used, several of the spectators having also been present at the original scene nearly a half-century before, among others Chief Tom, an Indian, who appeared in the native dress of that by-gone day. Prince and Princess Maxsoutoff were realistically impersonated; also General Davis the representative of the United States in the transfer.

A choir of Russian voices was first heard in the national hymn of their country; then a solemn Russian chant, led by the priest in his gorgeous robes, announced the lowering of the Russian flag. A file of American soldiers from the revenue cutter Perry formed while the documents which sealed the memorable transfer were

delivered. As the American flag rose to the top of the staff the stirring strains of "The Star Spangled Banner" were heard, greeted by the cheers of the patriotic audience.

Mr. George T. Snow, an actor and member of the "87 Pioneers, who has given theatrical performances in every corner of Alaska, was in charge of the dramatic presentation of this scene, his daughter, Miss Crystal B. Snow, being selected to sing "The Star Spangled Banner." The whole representation of the famous scene was carried out, and awakened much interest.

In the refreshment room the viands were of that appetizing sort calculated to tickle the pioneer palate. Everything, in fact about the affair radiated the warmth and good fellowship of the good old by-gone

days, and never in the history of the vicinity has an event of the sort been more successful.

It is planned that each year, hereafter, in the existence of the "87 Pioneers their annual ball will celebrate the raising of the American flag in Alaska territory.

The years of the future will glide away bearing changes and transformation in their train. But the past is changeless the record of those days has been written indelibly by the finger of time. We of the present may, perhaps, master this present, and even vanquish the future as it approaches. But the past belongs to the pioneers. To them must we look for the story of those by-gone days with their lights and their shadows, their humor and their pathos.

