Interior Alaska
1869-1896 STARS AND STRIPES UP THE RIVER

In this section you will learn about:

The gradual dependency of the Indians upon trade goods
Explorations of Schwatka and Allen
The first explorations for gold in the Interior
New settlements

The British Leave

In the summer of 1869 the first steamboat to venture on the Yukon River came upstream. It bore the river's name, Yukon. The 49-foot smoke-belcher carried U.S. Army Captain Charles P. Raymond on an important mission. His destination was Fort Yukon. Raymond confirmed that the trading post was inside the United States boundary and asked the British to leave. In his report Raymond wrote: The Stars and Stripes now float at Fort Yukon. Anyone who desires to is at liberty to look for mines."

Although some prospecting was going on in the years immediately after Alaska's purchase, economic activity focused on the fur trade. The Pioneer Company had entered the Yukon River fur trade in 1868 at Nuklukayet, but was soon bought out by Parrot and Company. This firm operated the Yukon, which dropped traders and supplies at Anvik, Nulato, and Nuklukayet on its trip upriver in 1869. In 1870, however, Parrot and Company merged with the Alaska Commercial Company.

After also taking over the former Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Yukon, the Alaska Commercial Company started other posts along the Yukon River. By 1880 there were additional company stations at Anvik, Russian Mission, Andreaf sky, Kotlik, Shageluk, and Nulato. That year Interior Athapaskans sold 75,000 pelts to the traders.

Three men originally drawn to Alaska by the promise of gold were among those who helped to extend the Alaska Commercial Company's influence. Arthur Harper, Jack McQuesten, and Al Mayo had already trapped and prospected their way through Canada. When they pushed on to Alaska in 1873, Harper was convinced that the gold-bearing mountains of the Canadian Yukon extended into the new possession. The three men soon ran out of supplies.

In order to continue prospecting, McQuesten and Mayo agreed to act as traders for the Alaska Commercial Company. Harper continued to prospect. In 1874 McQuesten and Mayo followed the Yukon upriver from Fort Yukon, taking a ton of supplies for a new outpost, Fort Reliance, south of present-day Dawson in Canada. There they traded with the Han Athapaskans for furs.

The methods of trapping had changed little. Steel traps and wire snares had

arrived through Native trade channels many years earlier, but Athapaskans preferred the spruce snares they had always used. They dismantled the metal traps and used the iron and steel to make tools.

A great change occurred with the use of dogs to haul freight. In earlier years the Natives used double-ended sleds pulled by women when traveling in winter. The traders first harnessed dogs to pull freight sleds. The introduction of dog teams meant that trapping could be extended over more territory and more furs could be taken.

Fierce competition among the purchasers meant higher prices for furs. But this did not always benefit the Athapaskans. Prices of the goods which they received in return for their furs were also raised. While these items were once considered luxuries, they were now becoming necessities. The Athapaskans had come to depend on cotton fabric, gunpowder and shot, tea and sugar, combs, soap, flour, tobacco, butcher knives, and pocket knives. Tobacco which cost the trader 30 cents might be exchanged for a marten fur valued at five dollars.

By 1883, the Alaska Commercial Company had achieved a monopoly. The company lowered the prices that it paid for furs. This caused hardships for Natives who depended on trapping for a living.

Rumors bring the army

Despite almost 20 years of American fur trading Interior Alaska was still largely unexplored. No one was more aware of the lack of information about the Interior than General Nelson Miles who was responsible for United States Army activity in the new territory. Congress refused to fund large-scale army exploration of so vast a land containing so few inhabitants, but when Miles heard that Native trappers on the Yukon River were unhappy because of a drop in fur prices he dispatched First Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka to the Interior. Schwatka began his journey to investigate the possibility of hostilities in 1883.

Three years earlier, a U.S. Navy steam launch equipped with a cannon had persuaded the Chilkat Tlingits of Southeast Alaska to allow travel to the upper Yukon River region over Chilkoot Pass, which they controlled. When Schwatka began his journey, non-Native prospectors were hiring Indians to pack their gear over the trail. Schwatka and his party crossed the pass using Chilkat Tlingits to carry their supplies. On the other side, the trail from the coast became a series of connecting lakes and rivers leading to the Yukon River. The men built a log raft, which they christened the Resolute, for their voyage downstream. As the party traveled downstream, Schwatka observed the people and game and fish resources. Near Anvik the party boarded the Alaska Commercial Company steamer and reached St. Michael on August 30.

In 1885 both official and popular versions of Schwatka's journey were published. Although widely publicized, the venture added little new information to what earlier travelers had learned. The publicity did not help General Miles obtain exploration funds. All that followed was done with little money.

Allen completes remarkable journey

Lieutenant Henry T. Allen undertook the most remarkable of the army explorations in 1885. With $2,000 the army allocated for an expedition into Interior Alaska, Allen outfitted himself, Private Frederick W. Fickett, and Sergeant Cady Robertson. Two prospectors later joined the expedition. After exploring the Copper and Chitina rivers they finally crossed Suslota Pass into the Tanana River valley, Allen wrote "On this pass . . . I sat proud of the grand site which no visitor save an Ahtnatana or Tanana Indian had ever seen."

The party followed the Tanana River to its confluence with the Yukon then travelled down the Yukon to the Koyukuk River. After investigating the Koyukuk they again followed the Yukon and reached St. Michael the end of August.

By the time the persistent lieutenant completed his trip through the Interior, he had explored 1, 500 miles of wilderness and had charted the courses of the Copper, the Tanana, and the Koyukuk rivers. He was the first explorer to successfully ascend the Copper River and cross into Interior Alaska from Prince William Sound. Although little note was made of it at the time, Allen's journey made significant contributions to the understanding of Alaska's geography.

Prospectors find gold on the Fortymile River

As Lieutenant Allen and his companions headed down the Yukon River they encountered a noisy riverboat appropriately named New Racket. The boat was loaded with 30 tons of supplies and mining gear for miners who had moved into the Canadian Yukon. Gold had been discovered at a spot called Cassiar Bar.

That strike did not last long and miners began prospecting other rivers and creeks to the west. One of these was the Fortymile River. Although the Fortymile River joins the Yukon River in Canada, it begins in the forested hills and mountains of Alaska. By September of 1886, prospectors Howard Franklin, Howard Madison, and Mickey O'Brien had worked 25 miles up the Fortymile River. On September 7 their pans fielded the first coarse placer gold of Interior Alaska.

Missionaries come to Interior Alaska

The 1886 strike attracted prospectors to the Fortymile Mining District and awakened new interest in the Interior. Among those interested were Catholic and

Protestant churches in the United States.

After the first trading posts opened along the Yukon River, missionaries arrived. The Russians and the British opened missions at their outposts on the Yukon River. Roman Catholic priests journeyed to Fort Yukon in 1867, but reported no success converting Natives to Christianity. When prospectors came into Interior Alaska, the churches had more people to serve.

A year before the fortymile strike, Sheldon Jackson, General Agent for Education in Alaska, proposed a plan to assign mission responsibilities. He invited Protestant churches to undertake educating and doctoring the Native people. Jackson assigned a specific region to each group that wanted to work in Alaska.

The Episcopal Church was assigned the Yukon River region. John Chapman opened one of the most important Episcopal missions in 1887 at Anvik. He spent the next 40 years among the Ingalik Athapaskans. The mission was built apart from the Ingalik village. Natives who wanted to live in the new town were charged rent of one dollar a year. Both English and Ingalik Athapaskan languages were taught in the mission school. The church had a strong influence on Anvik youth, but most elders, in particular the village shaman, held to their old beliefs.

Churches not invited by Jackson were also active in Interior Alaska. The Russian Orthodox Church continued work it had begun years ago in the lower Yukon River region, and in 1886, Roman Catholic Archbishop Charles Seghers asked to be sent to Nulato. He had visited Alaska four times before. At Nulato he hoped to establish a permanent mission station. Although Seghers was murdered by his lay companion as they descended the Yukon River from Bennett Lake, two Jesuit priests who had accompanied him as far as the upper river continued to carry on the archbishop's program.

The Roman Catholic church established Holy Cross Mission on the middle Yukon River in the summer of 1888 as the center for its work in Interior Alaska. Like Anvik, the Holy Cross mission had a day school and a boarding school. Holy Cross was also a divided community. The mission was on one side of the Yukon River and the Native village was on the opposite bank.

Jackson's concept of dividing Alaska into separate territories for competing denominations was a curiously pragmatic approach that treated Alaska's Natives without much regard for their preferences, yet expressed concern for their moral and physical well-being. This contradictory attitude continued to be reflected for some time in missionary work undertaken by American missionaries working in Alaska. It contrasted remarkably with the attitude that had been held by Orthodox missionaries in Russian America.

New settlements arise

Prospectors fanned out across the Fortymile district after 1886. They located gold claims along its streams. They gave these claims colorful names such as Our, My, Mosquito Flats, Poker, Napoleon, Forty Five Pup, Soda, Lost Chicken, Happy New Year, Polly, Baby, and Deadman.

New settlements were established in the Fortymile country. Most were just a few cabins built around a roadhouse. The first was Franklin in 1887. Jack Wade, Chicken, and Steele Creek followed.

Prospectors become miners

The Fortymile district's gold-bearing sands and gravels could be sifted only in the brief summers when water was available. It took large quantities of water to operate sluice and rocker boxes that trapped the gold. Some miners worked year-round by keeping a fire going to thaw the frozen ground. They hauled buckets of dirt out of shafts to the surface and stockpiled the dirt until summer.

The work was hard and profits slim. Once in a while a miner might recover as much as $200 in gold dust in one day, but this was exceptional. At the end of the 1887 season, a miner named Frank Buteau had accumulated $3,000 in gold dust. This was more than any of the others mined on the Fortymile River, so they called him "King of the Fortymile."

Traders found Fortymile and Cudahy

Prospector Arthur Harper, who had split with his friends Mayo and McQuesten in 1874, spent the subsequent years poking around the upper Yukon River. When he learned of the Fortymile strike Harper opened a post, which he named Fortymile, at the stream's mouth overlooking the Yukon. The post was in Canadian territory, but served mostly American prospectors and miners.

Fortymile quickly attracted business interests which wanted to break the Alaska Commercial Company's monopoly on the Yukon River. Captain John J. Healy and C.D. Dixon formed the North American Trading and Transportation Company in 1892 for this purpose. Healy established a store across the Fortymile River from Harper's town. He named it Cudahy, after his wealthy Chicago backers. Soon both Cudahy and Fortymile had dance halls, breweries, and saloons. Fortymile also boasted a barbershop, opera house, and cigar factory. Cudahy had the barracks of the North-West Mounted Police, who arrived in 1894 to keep order.

Rivalry between the Alaska Commercial Company and the North American Trading and Transportation Company meant lower prices, better quality, and a larger selection of merchandise. Before the firms began competing, prospectors and

miners had complained bitterly about supplies

The bacon was in slabs three feet long, all of which was yellow. We called it the "Yard Bacon." The flour was moldy, the rice was lumpy, the fruit was green and in the beans were plenty of rocks and gravel.

The Alaska Commercial Company was popular because McQuesten offered credit. His rivals practiced a cash-only policy. Occasionally the Alaska Commercial Company lost money when prospectors and miners failed to pay their bills, but it was a grubstake that led to another big strike on the Yukon River.

Circle is called Paris of Alaska

McQuesten grubstaked miner Peter Pavlov, better known as "Pitka," and his brother-in-law, Serge Cherosky. They found traces of gold in Birch Creek, a Yukon River tributary that begins in the Crazy Mountains southwest of the present site of Circle.Almost overnight Fortymile became a ghost town as prospectors hurried down the Yukon River to the new strike. Winter wasapproaching. Many of the gold seekers chose to winter during 1894-1895 on the south bank of the Yukon River at a point atwhich Birch Creek and the Yukon River run close together. The new boom town was named Circle in the belief that it lay north of the Arctic Circle. Surveys later proved it was some 50 miles to the south.

Inhabitants called their log cabin city the "Paris of Alaska." McQuesten and Healy again opened rival stores. The newcommunity may have seemed like Paris to some of its residents. To others Circle was a dirty, ugly, frontier town. When Episcopal Bishop Peter Trimble Rowe visited in 1895, he described Circle as "a row of saloons, gambling houses and dance halls and general stores." There were two main streets which faced the river.

For a number of rows back there straggled little one room cabins, four or five hundred of them. A sawmill with sprawlingunsightly heaps of yellow sawdust marked the lower end of the settlement, a stranded, wrecked sternwheel steamboat lay in a dry slough at the upper end. Beyond the sawmill huddled ten or twelve cabins of Indians.

It proved difficult to reach the Birch Creek diggings. Once stampeders left the Yukon River they had to pack gear and supplies over the boggy and mosquito-infested Yukon Flats. Then they had to climb hilly country beyond. Later, roadhouses opened and freight services hauled supplies and mail. Packers charged 10 to 20 cents per pound. Most used dog teams to pull their sleds.

Riverboats create jobs

The Yukon River remained the principal route to Interior Alaska. It led to the gold fields. As the 1800s came to a close, growing river traffic created jobs for those who lived along the banks. The Alaska Commercial Company added new steamers when mining increased in the Fortymile and Birch Creek districts. The North American Trading and Transportation Company started a rival transportation service with the Portus B. Weare.

Early riverboat crews included many local Natives. Most of the pilots of the boats were Natives. In particular, the Athapaskans knowledge of the river got the boats through the channels between Fort Yukon and Circle which were the most difficult to navigate.

The early steamboats burned wood. They used an average of two cords of wood per hour tying up every 10 hours to refuel. At first steamboat captains sent their crews ashore to cut wood. It took at least six hours for a crew to gather and cut enough wood to last for 10 hours' run. Along the treeless banks of the lower river, they had to depend on driftwood. Waiting for crews to cut or gather wood was inefficient. Before long, the steamboaters arranged for wood yards where cut wood could be stacked along the river to await their arrival. Natives began supplying the wood the boats needed.

Sternwheelers

There's a river boat a-woodingup beside a muddy bankSafety valves a-screamingnow they're hauling in the plankAnd the great wheel starts a-churningshe's a-shaping Destiny,A-heading up the riverthrough an empire yet to be.

S.C. EllsNorthland Trails

For more than 80 years sternwheelers shaped the destiny of Interior Alaska. They were periodically caught fast in ice, swamped in storms, or stranded on sandbars. Despite such disasters they provided the best means of moving passengers and freight into the Interior Alaska during the summer.

The flat-bottomed riverboats were very practical. Their wooden hulls were buoyant and easy to repair. They averaged 125 by 30 feet in size, yet their steam-driven paddlewheels needed only a few inches of water. Landing docks were unnecessary, for the bow of the riverboat could be nosed ashore while the stern and paddlewheel stayed in deeper water.

Most sternwheelers had three decks. The boiler, firebox, engine room, cargo space, and kitchen were on the main deck. Above the main deck was a cabin deck for passengers. The top deck, or Texas deck, contained the crews' quarters. Above was the pilot house.

Some sternwheelers were built at St. Michael near the mouth of the Yukon River. Others were moved north from Seattle. The Sarah, Susie, and Hannah were the queens of the Yukon River steamboats. Ordered by the Alaska Commercial Company, they were built in Indiana and shipped to Unalaska where they were reassembled. The 222-foot sternwheelers had 1, 000-horsepower engines. They served with style, from rich mahogany-paneled dining rooms to their monogrammed bed linens. The boats were designed to carry 150 passengers, but sometimes as many as 500 persons were aboard. Those without cabins slept where they found space.

In Interior Alaska the steamboat era began in 1869 and ended 86 years later, when automobiles, railroads, and airplanes replaced the last sternwheelers. The last steamboat on the river was the Nenana.

Summary questions

What impact did the introduction of dog pulled freight sleds have on fur trapping?
What happened to prices paid for furs when the Alaska Commercial Company obtained a monopoly on the fur trade?
What was the result of Lieutenant Henry Allen's 1885-1886 exploration?
What was one result of increasing steamboat traffic along the Yukon River in the late nineteenth century?

Inquiry questions

Map the regions of Interior Alaska where gold mining went on before 1900, then find out where in Interior Alaska gold mining is going on today.
River steamboats were very important in Interior Alaska for a long time. Find out how most freight is carried into Interior Alaska communities today.

THE YUKON RIVER AND ITS PEOPLE1800-1869 THE RUSSIANS AND ENGLISH MEET1869-1896 STARS AND STRIPES UP THE RIVER1896-1910 CHANGING LIFESTYLES, DIFFERENT VALUES1910-19401940-1980 CONSTRUCTION BOOMSuggested Readings