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Alaska- Golden Land of Opportunity

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A LASKA always meant snow, ice, igloos and Eskimos to me until I landed in the heart of it last summer. Now it means a golden land of opportunity.

It's a most amazing land. You almost have to see its glaciers and mountains, rivers and tundra to even believe such a place exists. Alaska's beauty is rugged and untouched. Over-population is the least of its worries, since it is one-fifth the size of the United States, yet has only 95,000 people.

Alaska isn't just appreciated by its “sourdoughs,” but harbors many curious college students along with other transient workers (cheechakos) during summer months.

How would you like to get up a tennis game or a mountain climbing party about midnight, or see a baseball game under the midnight sun? Many of us from schools all over the States took part in these activities, plus many other unusual amusements. We all found employment somewhere, whether it was in one of Alaska's “wide-open” frontier towns or in some isolated spot with a caribou, a moose or a bear for a next-door neighbor. I was one of the latter lucky ones. It wasn't too uncommon to be peacefully sleeping in your bedroom while a bear was munching on an early breakfast in the kitchen. I was employed as a desk receptionist in one of the railroad-owned hotels, the McKinley Park Hotel.

High wages

The government seems to have the monopoly on employment in the territory. Wages are high to keep pace with the cost of living. Taxes, also, are constantly reaching for the highest bidder.

You think you're pretty wealthy after you've worked eight hours a day for $2.00 to $3.50 an hour, but suddenly you're faced with a bitter reality when you discover a bill for a hamburger and milk shake comes to $1.85. They say in Alaska there are no pennies, nickels or dimes; you deal only in quarters for small change.

The gold dredges around Fairbanks made me wish I had been there a few years earlier when the “rush” was in full swing. This industry is beginning to fade in the Interior, yet gold is still priced at $35 an ounce.

What amazed me about the mining was to see the huge dredges merely floating on the top of a rather shallow creek. When one stream runs dry of the precious metal, other streams are searched. The product either comes out in dust or small nuggets. Four to five thousand dollars a day are removed from many of the veins.

To remove the gold from the earth during the process of placer mining, cold water is piped fifteen feet under the ground. The tons and tons of equipment used is unbelievable. The letters "USSR" on most of the equipment startled me before I was told they stood for United States Smelting and Refining Company. You can never imagine a sight like floodlights illuminating a gold dredging scene, making a far more impressive act than any opening night Broadway ever hoped to have.

Transportation by foot

After once being grounded 60 miles above the Arctic Circle, I realize there's only one sure method of transportation in Alaska—by foot. Roads are scarce, and concrete highways are a mere dream. This increases the livelihood of the “bush” pilots. In Alaska, instead of your date picking you up in his new car to see the latest movie, he will probably come by in a Piper Cub and you'll spend the evening flying over glaciers, around mountain peaks, swooping over moose, scaring up timber wolves and maybe giving some poor brown bear a heart attack.

One of the most unusual forms of transportation I saw was the 10th Air Rescue crew flying into the territory in which I was working, to take a man stricken with a heart disease to the nearest hospital 125 miles away. It really is miraculous to think that such a system has been established to care for the inhabitants of Alaska's isolated spots.

People from the outside just can't seem to understand why the Alaskans never become worried if a telegram isn't delivered for five or six days. Perhaps it does take all day to get a call through from Anchorage to Fairbanks, but then the cause might be unavoidable such as a reindeer herd becoming entangled in the wires.

The United States Army Signal Corps is responsible for the communication system and considering their equipment and the conditions at hand, they are doing a fine job. If you don't happen to get the person you want on the phone, someone is always glad to relay a message for you.

University of Alaska

Although the University of Alaska doesn't have the typical American college look, it does harbor a school that has contributed much toward the educational status of Alaska. The course of study centers around geology, mining, engineering, geophysics and home economics. The students attending are not the “rah-rah Joe College” stereotype, but are seriously after an education.

I formed my impressions of the Eskimos during my brief stay in Kotzebue, an Arctic village of 500 natives and 100 whites. They are typical of what you would expect of a northland inhabitant . . . buried under fur.
parkas and mukluks, they are sincere, friendly, and light-hearted people, characterized by large round features and dark skins. Their constitutions must be ironclad to withstand 80 below zero weather and no sunlight during long winter months. It was great fun to try and understand their motions and strange languages. I’ll never understand how so many could live under one small roof. Families of 6 to 12 people were housed in a small cabin.

The Alaskan Native Service is doing a great deal toward health and sanitation in these parts. Tuberculosis is a common disease due to the unhealthful conditions. The Eskimo children average about a sixth grade education which is provided by the U. S. Office of Indian Affairs.

The Eskimo makes his living by fishing, hunting, herding reindeer and working for the whiteman. Reindeer herding sounded fascinating when told by a 60-year old herder, Charlie, who hadn’t slept in a house for 22 years. He told of the practicality of a herder having more than one wife to prepare the meat that might spoil if there was but one woman to cook and preserve it. I became so enthusiastic over the sport of reindeer herding, that I might have stayed and tried my luck if it hadn’t been that I had been on a strict reindeer diet (prepared in stew, soup, with noodles and roasted) for three days.

Mt. McKinley National Park presents this scene of Mt. McKinley, highest mountain in North America, behind Wonder Lake

The Eskimo is always proud to show his sealskin boots, kiaks, umiaks, dog sleds and favorite huskies. Their accomplishments with ivory are worthwhile seeing. With a few turns of a handmade tool, they can turn the backbone of a walrus into an amazing art creation.

If you enjoy Iowa State’s Barjche, you would appreciate the performances of the American Eskimo. I almost forgot where I was one evening while watching a native Eskimo dance. The rhythm and perfect time they kept is almost unbelievable. The style compares closely with our form of modern dance. The women stand in one position using their hands and bodies to express the music and interpret their feelings. The men do not remain stationery but move their entire bodies, especially their hands and limbs. The accompaniment is carried on spontaneously by a few drummers and a chorus of enthusiastic singers.

If you have read books about the Eskimo woman chewing a seal skin to soften it for the sole of a mukluk, it’s true. I’ve seen them do it. And they really hang their fish out to dry on hand-made racks.

Living in a village like this is like returning to a 50-year old civilization. While chatting with a white man store keeper in Kotzbue, in what I thought was a little village store, I was surprised to discover the huge inventory of supplies they carried. He remarked that the freight alone for the winter’s stock had come to $10,000 plus $3,000 to have it unloaded and brought to shore. In a village such as this, most of the supplies are either airborne or shipped from Seattle by boat.

The most important part of Alaska, the part that seems to remain in my memory the longest, is the people. Alaskans never worry about time or what tomorrow holds or what may happen next week. Every day is their day, and every minute of it holds the kind of peaceful happiness that takes years for us to cultivate. The complex competitive world is “outside.”

The Alaskan finds enjoyment in being independent, hospitable, friendly, and void of all worries. In Alaska, someone always knows someone that knows someone that knows you. Life must be longer in Alaska. Time seems to slip by without anyone realizing it was even there. In Alaska, you ask someone what time it is and if there’s more than one person standing around, you’ll most likely get a two-hour time range for an answer. What’s an hour or two one way or another to an Alaskan, as long as the sky is still overhead?

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