

Adventures in Alaska

By Edward Eggleston

The Copper River of Alaska flows from north to south into the ocean. The Yukon River, which is farther north, runs from the east toward the west. It was known that the waters of these two rivers must be near together at the place from which they started in the mountains, but it was not known whether anybody could pass from the valley of the Copper River over the mountains into the valley of the Yukon. A scouting party was sent to find out whether the crossing from one river to the other could be made. This party returned, saying that it was impossible to pass from the Copper River to the Yukon, because the mountains were too high and steep.

In 1885 General Miles sent Lieutenant Allen to try to find a pass from the valley of the Copper River to that of the Yukon. Lieutenant Allen was a very determined man. He set out with the resolution to find some way of crossing the mountains, however much labor and suffering it might cost. He took two soldiers, and had two other white men with him, and he got Indians to go with him from place to place as he could. The party started up the Copper River in March. From the first their sufferings were very great. They had to travel day after day, and sleep night after night, with their clothes wet to the skin. They soon found that they could not take their canoe, on account of the ice. They had to leave most of their provisions, because they could not carry them. Some nights they sat up all night in the rain.

But when they got to a country where it was not raining all the time, they had a way of keeping dry at night. They had brought along sleeping bags. These were made of waterproof linen. Each bag was a little longer than a man. It had draw strings at the top. They put a folded blanket inside, and then pushed the blanket down with their feet so that it would wrap about them and keep them warm. Then they drew the strings about the top. This kept the body dry.

They suffered a great deal from hunger. There were very few animals in the country where they were, and most of the Indians they found had but little to eat. Lieutenant Allen's party were sometimes glad to pick up scraps of decayed meat or broken bones about an Indian camp to make a meal on. Much of the meat and fish they had to eat was badly spoiled.

They grew so weak that it was hard for them to climb up a hill, carrying their guns and their food. They sometimes reeled like drunken men when they walked.

They would have perished from hunger if they had not had a man with them who knew how to stop the rabbits when they were running. This man could make a little cry just like a rabbit's cry. Whenever a rabbit heard this sound, he would stop and look round for a moment. Then the hunter would have a chance to shoot him.

But these rabbits were so small and so lean that it took four or five of them to make a meal for a man. At one place the party were so hungry that an Indian who was with them fainted away. When they reached a house soon after, where there lived a chief named Nicolai, they found a five-gallon kettle full of meat boiling on the fire. They drank large quantities of the broth, and ate about five pounds of meat apiece. Much of this meat was pure tallow from the moose. They all fell asleep immediately after eating. When they awaked, they were almost as hungry as before.

At last they reached the head waters of the Copper River. Here they found the hungry Indians waiting for the salmon to come up from the sea, as they do every year. As long as the salmon are in the river, the Indians have plenty to eat. So they kept dipping their net, hoping to catch some salmon. At last one little salmon was caught. It was a thin, white-looking little fish. The Indians now knew that in two or three days they would have plenty. They hung their little fish on a spruce bough, and they kept visiting it, singing to it with delight. The white men did not wait for the salmon to arrive.

From this place they left the Copper River, and started to cross the mountains. This was the pass through which it was said that nobody could go. Lieutenant Allen and his men were obliged to carry provisions with them. Part of the provisions they carried themselves: the rest they packed on dogs. This is a way of carrying things used only in Alaska. A pack is strapped on a dog's back just as though he were a mule, and with this the little dog goes on a long journey through the mountains.

The party started over the mountains in June. At this season of the year in that country the sun shines almost all night, and it is never dark.

Lieutenant Allen's party traveled either by day or by night, as they pleased, as there was always light enough.

When they got to the foot of the last mountains they had to climb, they found a little lake. Here they got some fish to eat, but the salmon had not come yet. They hired some Indians to go with them, and divided the weight of everything into packs. Every man carried a pack, and every dog carried as much as he could bear. As they climbed the mountains, they could look back over the beautiful valley of the Copper River. Still hungry and nearly tired out, they pushed on until they camped by a brook in the mountains.

Here they found that the salmon had come up the Copper River from the sea, and had run up this brook and overtaken them. The fish were crowding up the brook to get to a little lake at the head of it, where they would lay their eggs. In some places there was so little water in the stream that the fish had to get over the shallow places by lying on their sides. In doing this, some of them threw themselves out of the water on the land. The hungry men could catch them easily, and they now had all they wanted to eat. One of the party ate three large salmon, heads and all, for his supper. As the sun shines almost all the time in the Arctic regions, in the summer, the days become very hot. On the last day of Lieutenant Allen's journey up the mountains the heat was so great that the party did not start until five o'clock in the afternoon. They reached the top of the mountains that divided the two rivers at half-past one o'clock that night. Though it was what we should call the middle of the night, it was not dark.

The party were now nearly five thousand feet higher than the sea. At half-past one in the morning the sun was just rising. It rose almost in the north. Behind them the men could still see the valley of the Copper River. Before them lay the valley of one of the branches of the Yukon, with twenty beautiful lakes and a range of mountains in sight. White and yellow buttercups were blooming about them, though the snow was within a few feet. No white man had ever looked on this grand scene before. The men forgot their hunger and their weariness. They had done what hardly anybody thought could be done.

A mile further on they stopped to build a fire, and here they cooked the last bit of extract of beef that they had with them. It was the end of all the provisions they had carried. Having gone to bed at two or three

o'clock in the morning, they did not start again until two in the afternoon; for day and night were all one to them, except that the light nights were cooler and pleasanter to travel in than the days.

They were told by the Indians that by marching all that night they could reach an Indian settlement, and, as they had no food, they determined to do this. In this whole day's march they killed but one little rabbit, which was all they had for nine starving men to eat. But at three o'clock in the morning of the next day the tired and hungry men dragged themselves into the little Indian village. Guns were fired to welcome them.

The fish were coming up the river. A kind of platform had been built over the water. On this platform the Indians stood one at a time, and dipped a net into the water for fish. All day and all night somebody was dipping the net.

The Indians had never seen a white man before. They were very much amused to see white faces, and one of the white men who had red hair was a wonder to them.

Allen and his men got food here. Then they built a skin canoe, and started down the river. After many more hardships and dangers, they reached the ocean, and then took ship for California.