

FUR TRADE OF THE PACIFIC COAST.

Reports by the early explorers of the Atlantic Coast of the rich furs to be procured from the natives, and the hope that other and more valuable articles could be obtained in trade, led to the organization in England, in 1669, of a company to engage in that profitable business. They applied for a royal charter to Charles the II, who had but recently ascended the throne of his murdered father. The king earnestly desired the discovery of a passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific (then known as the "South Sea"), by going around America to the north. Such a passage was believed to exist, and was known as the "Straits of Anian," to which name modern historians have prefixed the word "fabulous." Upon the agreement of the company to diligently search for this passage the charter was granted. The two-fold object of the company was expressed in the charter, which created "The Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay," organized "for the discovery of a near* passage into the South Sea, and for the finding of some trade in furs, minerals and other considerable commodities." Of the vast region whose water shed is into Hudson's Bay,† this company was given absolute control to the exclusion of all persons whomsoever. All persons were forbidden to "visit, hunt frequent, trade, traffic or adventure" therein without permission of the company, and the annual rental to the Crown for this magnificent empire was "two elks and two black beavers," to secure which the king must go upon the land and collect for himself. There are few rent receipts on file among the papers of the company. This was the founding of the organization known in history as the "Hudson's Bay Company," a name vividly impressed upon the memory of pioneers of Oregon and Washington.

The company soon learned that the discovery of the Northwest Passage would be highly detrimental to its interests, and consequently, instead of searching for one as the King had expected, it exerted all its influence to prevent one from being discovered. The result was that a whole century passed before the English Government made a vigorous effort to discover the Straits of Anian. Meanwhile the Hudson's Bay Company occupied the granted territory and kept the Government and every one else not connected with the organization in complete ignorance of that region, in which it was doing a business which had assumed gigantic proportions. Such was the organization of that company which, a century and a half later, ruled the Pacific Coast from California to Alaska.

The pioneers in the fur trade of the Pacific were Russians. The illustrious Peter the Great had gradually extended his dominions eastward across the snowy wastes of Siberia until his empire was washed by the waters of the Pacific, beating upon the Peninsula of Kamtchatka. The fur trade of Siberia became valuable and added ma-

terially to the great revenues of the Tsar. His next step was to discover a water passage into the Pacific from the great Arctic Ocean which washed his dominions on the north. Just such a passage as the English were desirous of finding by sailing west from the Atlantic, he proposed to discover by sailing eastward towards the same common point. He ordered vessels to be constructed at Archangel, on the White Sea, and on the coast of Kamtchatka. The former were to search eastward for a passage into the Pacific, and the latter were to hunt for the same waterway by following northward along the Pacific Coast of Asia. Peter died before his plans could be put in operation, but they were faithfully carried out by his two successors, Catherine and Anne. A series of explorations were carried on from Kamtchatka, resulting in the discovery of Behring's Straits, in 1728, by Vitus Behring, a Danish navigator who had charge of the Russian expedition.

In 1732 another expedition discovered the mainland of Alaska, and in 1741 Behring reached the American Coast in the vicinity of Mount St. Elias, a name which he bestowed upon that giant peak which rears its snowy crest nearly twenty thousand feet above the sea. Upon the return voyage they were driven out of their course and many of the crew died from scurvy. They finally sighted a small island lying between the Aleutian Archipelago and Kamtchatka, and running their vessel close in they landed with the intention of spending the winter. The island, now known as "Behring's Isle," is a small speck upon the bosom of the sea, consisting of a few barren granite peaks thrust up from the water, their sides continually lashed by the surf and upon which the waves dash furiously when storms sweep across the surface of the ocean. Their house was constructed of the broken timbers of their vessel, the *St. Peter*, which was wrecked upon the rocks during a gale immediately after they disembarked, and whose broken pieces were washed up by the surf. Before spring Behring and thirty of his followers found a grave on those water-bound rocks. Upon the return of spring the survivors constructed a small vessel from the wreck of the *St. Peter*, and in August succeeded in reaching the Bay of Avatscha on the Kamtchatkan Coast, the point from which they had sailed.

Although half a century elapsed before a full account of this fatal but most important voyage was published, the general features of it were known in England soon after its sad termination. The unfortunate crew had lived upon the flesh of fur-bearing animals—probably seal and otter—and their skins had served for beds and clothing. In these furs were the survivors clad when they returned, and their value led to the dispatch of several private expeditions by Russian traders, to visit the islands lying to the eastward in search of furs. In this way the fur trade of the Pacific was begun, and in a few years reached proportions fully as great as that of the Hudson's Bay Company on the Atlantic Coast. For years this hazardous traffic was carried on by individual adventurers, but at length Siberian capitalists formed a

* The Straits of Magellan had been discovered in 1520, and the passage was made around Cape Horn in 1616.

† Entered and named by Henry Hudson in 1609, but probably entered first by Gaspar Cortesal in 1501.