



Gold Rush History Made Here

Mt. Wrangel, Alaska's Active Volcano, From Fairbanks Trail.

BY DEWITT HARRY.

RUMORS and reports from the north these days tend to keep interest on the alert, for the men of Alaska would have us of the states believe that they have again struck mineral wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. Soon after the great rushes that carried the hordes of adventurers into that country prior to 1900, there came a gradual tapering off of placer mining, the best of the gravel had been worked, and then came the next phase, with the entry of the great dredges into the gold fields. With the world war their difficulties multiplied, gold did not gain in value as did so many other metals and necessities, but the cost of production did, and once again Alaska suffered a hard blow.

For years Alaskans have claimed that they were receiving far the worst of a bad deal in their system of government. It is the last remaining territory in the nation and they have claimed, with a great deal of justice it might seem, that they were becoming the site for the trial of all manner of experiments. Students of public affairs and men with their whole invested in Alaska have complained that they were being strangled by too many governmental bureaus, and the result has been the impossibility of carrying on business as they should. Alaska of today is a country of vast possibilities, say those who have made a study of her, and few venture to estimate what her future may be. Suffice it to state that reports of new mineral finds would seem to assure Americans that this far-northern possession of ours will yet become a great producer of wealth. The lumber and fishing values of the territory have already been made the subjects of careful reports, and just a few months ago Alaska was placed in a separate forest district of her own, the headquarters being moved from Portland.

New Strikes Start Rush.

Anchorage seems to be the most prosperous city in Alaska today. It is from here, about the center for prospecting of these times, that most of the reports of quartz and placer finds as well as all indications seem to emanate. It is a town situated just where the narrow tapering strip of Alaska that extends down along the Canadian coast comes to an end and Alaska proper begins. Near this point was one of the main trails to the interior in the old gold-rush days, the overland route through the mountains to Fairbanks. The hardy men trying to get to the pay dirt in the interior took the trail and passed the spot shown in the accompanying picture. It marks one of the best sections of the route and even now bits of bones and other remains of their unfortunate pack animals can be found scattered about.

Far to the rear in the picture as shown is Mount Wrangel, one of the few active volcanoes on the continent. It does not look any too terrifying, and it is doubtful if many of the hikers in the old rush days even knew that it was a dormant giant fraught with dire possibilities. Even if they knew that there was danger of some kind about the great mountain, it would likely only have been an incident of the trail, they met and overcame so many terrors. At the time the main rush was on to the Klondike, and it was from this that most of the other sections of the country were located, the majority of the adventurers preferred to come by way of St. Michaels and the Yukon. That route was to go north through the Bering sea around Seward peninsula and thence up the 2000 miles or more of the Yukon, all depending on the camp one was making for.

Trail Terrors Failed to Stop.

Rumors of strikes and new rich grounds multiplied as the explorations went on, and the prospectors struck into new country. Since the days of the great rush there have been many thousands of visitors in Alaska and the Yukon, and but few of them have been able to get the faintest conception of what these days of hardship meant to the men after gold. Bits of the trail will ever stand out cruel and frigid even to those who did not traverse the passes, but who can get even the faintest idea of what these men were confronted with in their great struggle. Gold as a lure brought reward to but few of them in sufficient quantity to repay them for their journeys and hardships. It was not only the terror of the cold, but the hard work that took all that men had and left them too weak to complete their journeys. They often reached their objectives to find that the news of the find had been exaggerated and that they could not make decent wages, much less a fortune. And then there were those adventurous spirits who tried for great stakes, who did not have sufficient cash to outfit themselves properly, and who did not have the training or the faintest conception of what trail hardships meant.

Failure, disappointment were the lot of most of these men, not reward. On one 15-mile stretch of a well-traveled trail the musher in 1898 would pass 2000 dead horses, beasts faithful and who had done their best, but left to die when their period of usefulness was over. It was a cruel life for stock, and the horses in sum-

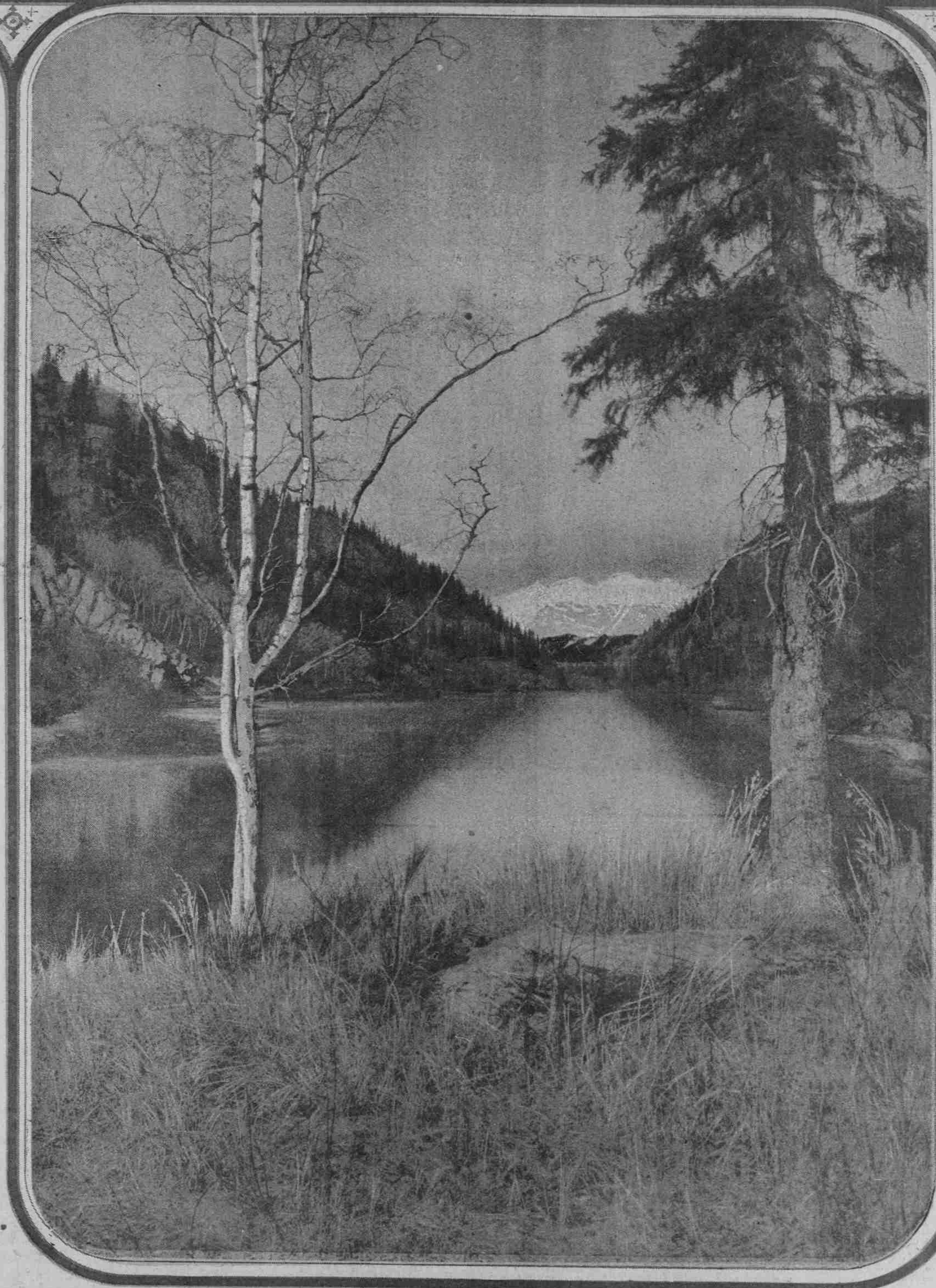


Photo by W. A. Van Scoy

mer faced worse than did the dogs gold, on the trails that they complained things greatly for those who had a better right. Once allow a person to become inculcated with the germ of riches beyond avarice and it is difficult to stop their projects. They are after something, for nothing. It was just this that brought in any number of young men who had no experience and not sufficient funds to equip themselves properly. These fellows dared everything in a foolhardy manner and very few of them ever came through with the fortune. It has made a great ground for argument in discussions of this lure of adventure as to whether

these men were really brave or strong, not merely weaklings strengthened with the one purpose of getting gold and a life of ease. The arguer for the weakness side says that this hectic fever, only rose from foolishness and greed. Be that as it may the gold seeker of the late 90s got his fill of greed and filth and foolishness as a general rule, and many of them are yet seeking. "Plichichamin" was the Indian name for gold in the north and few of the original inhabitants of the country could understand how the white man could risk so much for the yellow metal. To them it had a value all

right, but one that they got from white standards, and as a general rule, though Alaskan visitors have no too fine an opinion of the natives they must admit that they did not, as a general rule, allow the search for gold to mar their lives, as was the case with so many of the men from the far south who invaded their country. The Alaskan native even now seems content to go on with his even life of fishing and hunting, and is not so avaricious as the average white man. Of course there is the argument that they do not know of the refinements of civilization, or do not have any yearning for the many

comforts that are a portion of life in the states. The country has not changed a great deal from what it was 25 or more years ago when the first great strikes were made. Doubtless there is plenty of more mineral wealth to be found there, and the trails will be opened once more when the gold gets back to its standard. The old trails are all there and in the same shape as when they were abandoned years ago. The gold seeker this year has been going in over the Fairbanks trail once more and the indications are that some of the other sections will be opened again within a few years with

new discoveries. The land is far from one of milk and honey and the old prospectors will remember all their lives the many expeditions they were put to for food. The welcome marmots or whistlers and their succulent stews, the small game and the berries in the spring all helped immensely in a country where food of any kind was exceedingly scarce at times. Many were the expeditions that men were put to in order to keep alive, and most of us can remember the wonderful stories that were told of eggs at a dollar a dozen and of other food at like prices. Few would have thought then that civilized people would be paying better than Klondike prices within a few years and glad to get the food. It is just another illustration of what great changes some world event can make, such as a terrific war that involves most of the nations of the globe.

One of the greatest tribulations of the north country is the plague of flies that is liberated there for the short summer season. The tundra or swamps thaw out and the insect life has a very short period of existence, but in this restricted time they reach a much harder stage and are more active than the insect of the south. The explorers who first entered the country were nearly driven wild by them for it was a totally unexpected development. Even now the operators of the great dredges, the machines now working over the remaining gravel of that great placer region, have a great deal of trouble holding their men to work on account of the torture from gnats, mosquitoes and flies during the short working season. There is a short life but an active one.

Prospectors Trying to Forget.

Few of the old timers who made the first rush into some of the more remote camps care to sit down and spin tales of the trails. There seems to be somewhat the same feeling as is possessed by a soldier who has seen horrible sights on the battlefield. They would prefer to forget it and the cruelty it recalls; the grim race with the wolf of hunger and the cold, with the real wolves and the vultures waiting for them, are not the most pleasant recollections; the scanty grass for their animals and the forced moves with little chance for food and the resultant starvation of their best comrades; the tragic episodes on the road that marked the end of the journey for some comrade; the veneer of civilization and how easily it was stripped from the crude strong men in the wilderness.

The men who tackled the north at this time were not out for beauty but for wealth. "We ain't chasing daisies but gold," was one of their standard remarks. On the hike it was hard for any of the men to allow anyone to pass them; no matter how far they had to go it nearly always degenerated into a race, the more strenuous the closer to their goal. Then came the innumerable rumors that had a tendency to swing the men away from their object on some other trail. The tales of "nothing there" and then the magnificent stimulation of new strikes and fortunes being won daily. Many of these men drove into this country by sheer will-power; they really had no right to attain their objectives. They conquered streams that were boiling torrents in summer and steel banded masses of ice in winter. They took no notice of cold or hunger, just drove on to their destination, and if fortunate came out with their fortune.

Miners Drown for Gold.

Soon after the first strikes a number of old miners who had been working on the low-grade propositions in the vicinity of Juneau went into the interior to search for their fortune. A number of them came out with their stake on the little boat islander. The islander was unfortunate enough to hit one of the numerous reefs on the inner passage on the way out from the north and the captain saw that there was no chance to make shore. Even then the majority of these men were so filled with the spirit of getting their hard-earned fortunes out that they could not bear to leave them. They took their dust, many pounds of the gold, buckled it about their waists in their great belts and jumped overboard, never to rise again. They could not, even then, figure the value of their lives.

Most of the present-day development seems to be confined to the coast in Alaska and there is certainly a great contrast between that and the desolate interior. There are few pleasant features of the dreary land inside the encircling mountains of the coast, but there are some great development schemes being carried forth there even under present conditions. Since the advent of the gold searchers tremendous strikes of copper and coal have been made and some realization of the wealth of the coast in lumber has come to be known. It is a country that undoubtedly has a great future, and it must remain in time to prove whether it lies in her gold or other resources. There are those who insist, with a great deal of reason on their side it would seem, that the gold fields have hardly been scratched, and that some day they will locate the great quartz ledges from which the rich nuggets and dust of the placer deposits came. In any event Alaska would seem to be a section of the country that would well repay watching in the years to come.