

BUT FEW OBSTACLES TO THE PROSPECTOR...

Alaska's Nunatak Glacier Route to the Klondike

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The rugged glacier-filled mountains surrounding Alaska's Disenchantment Bay did not go unnoticed by those seeking a more advantageous route to the interior of Alaska and the Yukon. In September 1897 a party of eight men was photographed in Sitka prior to their departure on the steamship *Dora* for Yakutat. They were among a group of 25 whose goal was to enter the goldfields by way of a "new and easy" route. Sitka merchant W. R. Mills supplied the men with a letter of introduction to Richard Beasely, manager of Mills's store in Yakutat, instructing him to furnish the party with guides as far as the summit. Whether these men were successful in reaching their destination remains unknown.

Two months after the departure of the aforementioned Van Horne party, a Professor E. K. Hill arrived in the Alaskan capital from the Tlingit village of Yakutat. Hill, originally from Seattle, had reportedly spent the previous two seasons at Yakutat and provided the *Alaskan*, Sitka's weekly newspaper, with the following report:

An entirely new and easy route has already been surveyed from the extreme northeastern point of Disenchantment Bay nearly straight to Allessk [sic] river over about 40 miles of glacier which when covered with snow furnishes an easy and safe route for transporting supplies on sledges.... Whether or not the route up the Allessk and across to the White river is passable has never been determined but no doubt will be discovered the coming summer.

Because any prospectors taking the regular steamers to Yakutat would first stop at Sitka (where they would undoubtedly leave a portion of their money behind in the purchase of food, supplies, or hotel accommodations), the *Alaskan* was quick to point out the tremendous advantages of this "easy and safe" route. In an article titled, "A Chance for Sitka," the *Alaskan* emphasized the disadvantages of other routes to the interior and described the Yakutat route as being considerably shorter. The *Alaskan* informed its readers:

Regarding the new inlet as will be seen by our table of distances given below, the journey is only 425 miles to the mines, and that, too, over rolling grassland! No mountains to ascend, no passes to plod through, probably no deep mud fields to wade across, and, most certainly, no great extremes of cold to endure.

The fact that there had as yet been no firsthand accounts of the nature of the terrain beyond the coast range did little to diminish the enthusiasm of the *Alaskan's* writers.

The northeastern point of Disenchantment Bay described by Professor Hill was most likely what is known today as Nunatak Fjord, a steep water-filled canyon connected to Russell Fjord, which ends at the tidal face of the Nunatak Glacier. This glacier has receded approximately six miles since the days of the gold seekers and is now divided into two glaciers, East Nunatak and West

Nunatak. In 1897-98, however, these two branches of the glacier were joined. A small land tongue on the south side of the Nunatak provided access to the glacier.

Native traditions held that the Nunatak Glacier had long been used by Tlingits venturing into the interior to hunt and trade with other tribes. The glacier itself was named in 1891 by Israel C. Russell, professor of geology at the University of Michigan, during his second visit to the region. From his vantage point at Cape Enchantment, opposite the opening to Nunatak Fjord, it appeared to Russell that the ice completely surrounded the adjacent hill.

The Nunatak Glacier provided access to what Professor Ralph S. Tarr of Cornell University would later describe as a "through glacier," a mountain valley filled with glacial ice crossing the divide of a mountain range. The glacier's western tributary (now known as West Nunatak Glacier) served as just such a highway of ice across the coast range, providing access into the interior near the Alsek River.

This glacial route to the Alsek River was clearly preferable to ascending that river from its mouth at Dry Bay. Explorer E. J. Glave, accompanied by Jack Dalton, had descended the river in 1890. He described the Alsek as a "wild and dangerous river." Where the river penetrates the coast range it is almost cut off by the imposing bulk of the Alsek Glacier and the ice it discharges, posing a substantial barrier to anyone attempting to pass that way. Moving up against the current of such a river, as the members of the Boundary Commission field teams would later learn, was an exceedingly difficult proposition.

In February 1898 a large party of about a hundred men and one woman decided that they would seek their fortunes by way of this "safe and easy" Nunatak Glacier route. These Argonauts came from all around the country and had, like so many others, converged upon Seattle to prepare for the voyage north.

One contingent was made up of a group of New Yorkers who had incorporated themselves as the New York and Bridgeport Mining Company. This party was established when Arthur Dietz advertised in a New York newspaper for partners in an Alaskan mining venture. In all, 18 men eventually joined together and departed by train for Seattle, where they planned to purchase their outfits. While en route to Seattle, Dietz and his party met up with two other parties of men who had boarded their train in St. Paul, Minnesota. One group went by the name of the Gopher State Mining Company of Minnesota; the other called itself the St. Paul and Minnesota Mining Company. These groups had retained George Rennicks as their guide. Over the course of their trip west they all became good friends and later embarked together for Yakutat.

Once in Seattle these men joined the thousands engaged in the business of provisioning themselves for the journey north. Seattle at the height of the gold rush was a bustling community where, it seemed, anything needed for the journey north was for sale. Sixteen years later Dietz cynically described the city as

...a maelstrom of raving humanity driven half insane by the desire for gold.... Money was plentiful and fabulous prices were asked for everything. Every scheme, legal and illegal, mostly illegal, ever devised by mortal to separate a man from his money was run 'wide open'... I think sometimes that almost as much money was left in Seattle by the gold seekers as was ever recovered those two years. The real gold mine was in Seattle.

Despite the dangers posed by frauds, pickpockets, and other nefarious sorts, the group determined to try the Nunatak Glacier route soon purchased the requisite supplies for the trip.

The next step was to secure passage on a vessel going north. Unfortunately, all of the regular boats were already booked well in advance. In discussions with a United States Customs inspector, however, it was learned that there was an old brig moored to a dock in Tacoma that was, for a price, available for charter. This ship was the *Blakely*, owned by the Oceanic Fish Company of Seattle.

The *Blakely* had seen service as a fishing vessel in the Bering Sea prior to being condemned by the government in 1896. She was a 140-foot-long brigantine with a 20-foot beam. Dietz and party were told she could be made seaworthy and manned for a mere \$5,000.

As the *Blakely* appeared to be the only means available for reaching their destination without undue delay, Dietz and his associates, including the parties from Minnesota, decided to seek additional passengers to help defray the cost of putting the *Blakely* back in service. In addition to a sizeable party from Dennison, Texas, there were also a number of individuals who signed on. One such was William Alexander Thompson. Born in Montreal, Thompson had spent his youth in New Jersey before moving to Chicago. He had recently arrived in Seattle from Clinton, British Columbia, where he had been employed as a ranch hand.

Dietz and the Minnesotans also recruited a group hailing from Connecticut. These men, led by a Captain Wilkenson, had incorporated as the Worcester and Northwestern Mining and Trading Company and had hired as their guide a Professor Hill of Seattle. It is quite possible that this is the same E. K. Hill who had spent two seasons at Yakutat. It was later reported, however, that the Worcester group would be unable to sail on the *Blakely* after all; apparently, their outfits had been seized by the sheriff pending the settlement of a suit filed by the steamship company they had originally signed on with.

Carpenters were quickly hired to begin work on the *Blakely* and a tug was engaged to tow her to a berth at Seattle's waterfront. In a mere eight days the previously "condemned" vessel was declared ready by her master, Captain McAfee. In addition to the required repairs to the ship, additional berths and a deck house amidships, as well as additional bunks in the forecabin, were hastily added. Each set of bunks was built three high, with room for two men in each. Thompson, not wishing to spend the duration of the voyage in a hold that undoubtedly still reeked, at best, of old fish, sought out the purser to ensure that he received one of the new berths on deck. "Her hold is pretty rank," he wrote his sister prior to his departure, "and while I can stand considerable, I am looking out for No. 1, just the same, when it comes to comfort."

The passengers on the *Blakely* were extremely confident about the route they were planning to follow into the interior, believing, apparently, all the rumors and speculation they had heard about it. They envisioned their route, in the words of a Seattle *Post-Intelligencer* reporter, as proceeding "from the tidewater through steep glacial walls until they have found a country that is believed to possess but few obstacles to the prospector." The Minnesotans had even gone so far as to petition their senator to create a new mail route to follow in their footsteps.

In behalf of twenty men, nearly all head of families, we ask your consideration of the following statement and petition.

We are in a measure explorers of the interior of Alaska, sailing tomorrow on the brigantine Blakely to Yakutat bay. Thence we go to the Alsek river and northerly to the headwaters of the White and Tananna rivers.

About the same number have already gone into that country from this point and many more will follow as it is believed this will be a feasible route to the interior through and into American territory.

The problems of transportation of supplies and the hardships to be endured by these men in searching out available trails and opening up ways into this arctic region is a troublesome one and we feel entitled to the generous consideration of the post office department.

We respectfully petition that a mail carrier service be established from Yakutat to some point near the headwaters of the Tananna river.

On February 24, 1898, the newly refurbished *Blakely* cast off from her berth on the Seattle waterfront and was towed as far as Dungeness Spit. A reporter from the Seattle *Daily Times* was on hand to witness the preparations for the heavily laden vessel's departure and gave the paper's readers the following description:

Perhaps no vessel has ever left this port so loaded down with Humanity and freight as the brigantine Blakely, which will sail today for Yakutat Bay, with ninety-eight people packed like sardines....

Should these people get seasick there is not enough room around the rail of the vessel for them to pay their tributes to Neptune and it is difficult to understand how humanity's eyes can be so blinded by the greed of gold as to venture to sea in such crowded quarters.

The voyage north on the *Blakely* was the beginning of what would be a very long nightmare for many of her passengers. A dramatic account of the voyage was penned by Dietz in 1914. After spending the night of February 24 at anchor off Dungeness Spit, the *Blakely* set sail for Yakutat before sunrise. Almost immediately seasickness began to spread among the passengers as the heavily laden vessel rolled in the swells. As the weather deteriorated, many more on board became violently ill, including the dogs whose "imploring cries rose above the creaking and clattering of the boat.... It produced a pandemonium that was most distressing." As for the *Blakely's* master, Dietz later recorded that he "had been on a glorious drunk, and had brought several bottles of whiskey with him, [and] kept to his cabin and did not appear until he had consumed all the booze."

By March 3 sea conditions had worsened. Most of the passengers were incapacitated with seasickness, and many of the dogs perished. Captain McAfee, having apparently exhausted his supply of liquor, finally emerged from his cabin and assumed command of his ship; according to Dietz's account, once sober, Captain McAfee proved to be an able seaman. The leaky little ship, her pumps working at maximum, was tossed about violently in one of the fierce storms for which the Gulf of Alaska is noted. For the next several days the *Blakely* was battered by fierce wind and waves. At the height of the storm one of the deck hands, Joe Creeg, was lost overboard. Finally, by March 9, the seas had calmed enough to permit the relighting of the galley stove, and those who were able had their first hot meal in five days. One of the passengers, who had succumbed to his seasickness, was buried at sea. Finally, on March 24, 1898, the *Blakely* rounded Ocean Cape and entered the safety of the sheltered waters of Yakutat Bay. There she dropped anchor.

Once ashore at the little Tlingit village of Yakutat, the passengers and crew of the *Blakely* were welcomed by the Reverend Albin Johnson of the Swedish Evangelical Covenant Mission. A roaring fire was built and meals prepared. Afterwards, Reverend Johnson conducted a prayer service. Considering the ordeal all had endured on the voyage north, none missed this

opportunity to give thanks, even those who Dietz doubted "had ever prayed before." A collection amounting to \$300 was later taken up and reluctantly accepted by the Swedish missionary.

After a couple of days ashore recovering from their recent ordeal, the prospectors began to make their preparations for the trek across the mountains while the crew of the *Blakely* hauled the ship up onto the beach. There they began the arduous task of scraping off the accumulation of barnacles and other growth while the tons of water shipped during the voyage poured out through the vessel's seams; these seams were then re-caulked with oakum. The deck house and berths that had been added in Seattle were broken down and the wood stored in the hold to serve as ballast on the return voyage. While the crew worked on the *Blakely*, the passengers began unloading their outfits from the hold.

Because the *Blakely* had taken on so much water, many of the stored provisions had been ruined. Even the tin cans purchased in Seattle had rusted so badly that they had to be scraped clean and coated with a mixture of seal blubber and fish oil to prevent further corrosion. On shore the equipment purchased in Seattle was tested, tents erected and stoves fired up. The surviving dogs, having been fattened up on the plentiful salmon, were hitched to the sleds and taken for practice runs. Some came to the conclusion that the store-bought equipment was not as well suited to the region as the native-made items at hand and numerous purchases, especially of snowshoes, were made.

Dietz and his party of New Yorkers took leave of the rest of the *Blakely's* passengers when they opted to set out on their own by ascending a tributary of the giant Malaspina Glacier, the largest piedmont glacier in North America, instead of crossing the Nunatak Glacier. This would be a fateful decision on their part. Their dream of an easy passage was to prove instead a continuation of the nightmare that had begun on the voyage of the *Blakely*. Of the 18 men in this party who set out from Yakutat, 11 perished on the trail or in their winter quarters. The following season Dietz and the other six survivors struggled back across the mountains and the Malaspina Glacier to a desolate beach on the Gulf Coast. There they had given up all hope and just lay down on the beach in their sleeping bags. It was in this condition that they were spotted by the United States Revenue Cutter *Wolcott*; two had been rendered totally blind and three were dead in their sleeping bags.

The remainder of the *Blakely's* passengers proceeded up into Disenchantment Bay and Russell Fjord to the Nunatak Glacier. Having been, until recently, scoured by the retreating glacier, the hills and cliffs of the fjord were barren of almost any growing thing save mosses and lichens. At the head of the bay rose the ice cliff of the glacier, constantly discharging ice into the silty waters. On the southern shore of the fjord, near its head, was a small beach backed by a ravine that led to the land tongue of the Nunatak Glacier. It was here that the journey across the ice began.

As each person was burdened with almost a ton of supplies and equipment, it took many trips to haul their outfits up the ravine and onto the ice—over a mile up the hill. Considering that there were some 80 gold seekers and who knows how many dogs crowded on this small beach, all hiking back and forth up the small ravine, one can only imagine how chaotic the scene must have been. Once up on the glacier they then had to ferry all of this material, in stages, approximately 40 miles across the divide to the banks of the Alsek River. This early in the season deep snow covered the ice, which was supposed to make for easy sledding. But constantly having to retrace their steps ferrying supplies soon turned trails into wet, slushy quagmires.

Inclement weather also impeded progress. As Thompson was to note on later trips across the ice, mushy snow, rain, fog, and outright fatigue made crossing the Nunatak a severe test of stamina. At the other end of the through glacier, most likely at what is today known as the Novatak Glacier, the would-be prospectors reached the Alsek River after more than a month on the ice. Then began the difficult task of moving their goods upstream. Near the forks of the Alsek and Tatshenshini rivers several small log structures were built and grandly christened New Hamburg. Here the gold seekers rested after their trek across the mountains and dried and overhauled their outfits.

The "rolling grasslands" and few hills and passes described by the *Alaskan* were a far cry from the rugged wilderness that actually existed in the region of the Alsek River. George E. Farewell later wrote, "No one has ever located anything more substantial than a curse on its barren wilds." The difficult terrain, after the extreme hardships of crossing the through glacier, belied the gold seekers' belief in the "new and easy route" to fortune. Many of the prospectors, so buoyed with confidence when they had started out in Seattle, decided to abandon their venture. These men, including William Thompson, returned to Yakutat the way they had come, abandoning much of their gear along the way. When Professor Ralph S. Tarr first visited the region in 1905 to study the glaciers, he found the area near the land tongue of the Nunatak strewn with discarded sleds, stoves, crampons, and other gear. Thompson was not so disheartened, however, that he followed the others back to Seattle. He spent the next decade at Yakutat.

The remainder of the gold seekers split up at New Hamburg. Some continued to ascend the Alsek in the direction of the White and Tananna River region while another group decided to follow the Tatshenshini River. Of this latter group Alfred Brooks later wrote, "Probably not over a dozen of the original number reached Dalton House, on the Tatshenshini River. They had endured eighteen months of hard labor and privation, only to reach a point on the Dalton trail which can be easily reached from the coast in a few days travel."

The fate of all the others, with the exception of the Dietz party and William Thompson, remains unknown. Historian Pierre Berton writes that 41 of the *Blakely's* contingent died on the trail, including the 18 men of the Dietz party. What was obvious, however, was that the Nunatak Glacier, once believed to be a "safe and easy" route, proved totally unsuitable as a route to the goldfields, and no large groups of prospectors would ever again make the attempt.

The Nunatak Glacier route was not, however, totally abandoned by all. It still remained the most viable route for anyone interested in reaching the region of the forks of the Alsek and Tatshenshini rivers. On a number of occasions over the next few years residents of the village of Yakutat, including William Thompson, again ventured across the ice to trap for furs and pan the occasional stream.

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