

The last voyage of the floating court: Stebbins to Nome

The following article is from *Down Darkness Wide*, a book being written by James Chenoweth about his career as a lawman in territorial Alaska. We reprint this chapter with his permission. In Part I (*Alaska Bar Rag*, Jan.-Feb., 1998), the young Mr. Chenoweth boards the Coast Guard Cutter *Wachusett* on its journey from Seward to Barrow during the summer of 1957. It was the last time a federal "floating court" put to sea in Alaska. In the last installment, we left the *Wachusett* in Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island.

PART II OF III

On July 18 we moved up to Stebbins in Norton Sound. A skeet shoot was held mid-morning on the fantail, but the weather on our arrival was too rough to risk going ashore until the following morning. It took about an hour for the first boat to go through the passage and reach Stebbins itself. It was a small village, older than Mekoryuk, though it seemed to me that it smelled better and that the villagers themselves were cleaner and happier. Some villagers worked during the summers at Nome, St. Michael, or in the Yukon area. Others helped manage a reindeer herd they didn't

own which milled around somewhere south of Stebbins. Residents had hoped the construction of an airstrip would improve things but after the strip had been surveyed and staked out, nothing else happened. Local crimes were handled by the five-man village council, elected annually. There seemed to be no liquor problem. I was told that loose dogs were their biggest headache, so I counseled the council about licensing dogs.

The next day, Saturday, July 20 (and still at Stebbins while additional medical and dental work was being done aboard the

Wachusett), we acquired another civilian passenger. Nurse Beltz, from the Public Health Service, was making her rounds and would be with us as far as Unalakleet. A pleasant companion. The Captain was holding an inspection; she and I stayed carefully out of the way as the crew prepared for it.

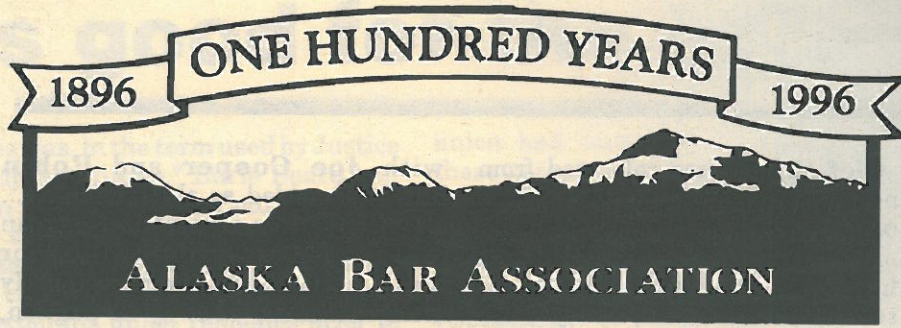
St. Michael is just a short distance east of Stebbins. We moved there on the 20th and managed to land one boatload of patients brought from Stebbins but the rest of us were unable to go ashore until the next morning. Dr. Thompson, Chief Steyskal, Nurse Beltz and myself

caught the first boat. During our trip to the beach, the sea was very choppy and everyone got soaked. I helped them to set up clinic facilities and then began talking to local officials. The weather grew increasingly violent. The wind had picked up and breakers were high out on the water. Around noon we were recalled to the *Wachusett*. Waves were breaking over our boat as soon as we left the beach. Coming alongside the *Wachusett*, we had trouble hooking onto the falls which would hoist us up. When we finally hooked on and started up waves were still breaking over us. Part of the way up, one fall jammed and the boat hung down at an angle. Waves bounced us against the side of the ship. We were lowered back into the water while the drum for the forward fall was fixed. The sea was violent and there was no lee for our boat to hide in. Hooked on again, we were finally hoisted aloft. Overheard, once aboard, were some angry words between the Chief Boatswain Mate and the Captain, who had jumped into the middle of the situation, and (as I was later told) "spewed directions like a whale spouting at the moon."

Personally, I was more interested in the medicinal libation administered to those of us who had gotten drenched—2 ounces of brandy. With only eight feet of water under our keel, Captain Applegate moved us six miles offshore to wait out the storm. The sea had eased a bit the next morning but it was still too rough to put a motor launch over the side. The launches are about 28 feet long and weigh nearly two tons. They were nearly impossible to sink but because of their high prow, they were rough to handle in a strong wind. There wasn't much activity aboard that day except for the court-martial of a sailor who had gone AWOL while the ship was in Seward.

On the morning of the 23rd, we were back in St. Michael. The town was a sad relic of its past. Only 70 miles upcoast from the Yukon River's mouth, it had been a major trading post when the Russians owned Alaska. Gold made its impact on St. Michael in the late 1800s. A revenue ship patrolled the Yukon River to protect the flow of gold coming from the up-river mines and heading for St. Michael. The army posted soldiers at St. Michael for further protection. Sometimes they acted to prevent serious violence, but there was a limit to what the army could do in civilian affairs. Gold, ships, and a large population had filled St. Michael with hustle and bustle.

I would never have guessed at its history when I came ashore. It was a weather-beaten town with a disintegrating boardwalk that led to nowhere. One building had been built by the Russians in 1833. No landing strip and no commercial fishing. Money came from occasional longshoring chores; the town was still a transfer station for goods moving up the Yukon's 1,800 miles of navigable water. A six-man council was elected every November. While the medical and dental teams treated patients ashore or aboard the cutter, I met with the village council. Their problems? Dogs, drunks, and vandalism! Exorbitant prices might have triggered the vandalism. As one example, the Northern Commercial store paid \$4.00 for a bag of coal to be shipped in but charged St. Michael residents \$7.50 for each bag. Among the 200 residents, there had to be some resentment about over-pricing. I passed on whatever guidance I



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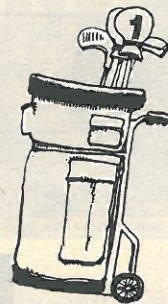


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thought appropriate, doubtful that it would be anything more than a temporary Band-Aid for their real difficulties.

Community spirit was spiritless. In my opinion, Alex Wiksik seemed to be the only person resisting the growing dry rot. He was a patient but deliberate man who had been crippled early in life from bone disease. As president of the council, he forced through a regulation that every male villager had to contribute one hour of labor daily to keep the boardwalk in repair. For every failure to do so, the town imposed a \$1 fine.

One section of St. Michael's constitution and by-laws really impressed me:

"Drinks and Cards: Stakes shall always remain small. They are only a way to increase interest in a game and can never constitute a means to acquire what can only be obtained through hard work. They shall never be in excess of what one is free and willing to give to another as a free gift. However all must keep in mind that drinking and gambling become very easily a tyrannical addiction. When one can control himself no longer and becomes a victim of what is and must remain a recreation, he must stop completely."

I found myself wishing that whoever wrote that statute had also written some of the laws I had to enforce!

If you were traveling down the Yukon in the gold rush days and were in a hurry to reach Norton Sound, you could have left the Yukon at Nulato and gone down the Unalakleet River to - where else? **Unalakleet**. It was a large coastal village with a population of 600, including 150 school children. Already two days behind schedule, that's where we went next, going ashore early on Thursday, July 25. Unalakleet was actually a Native reservation, as many villages were not. One of the councilmen was the local police officer. The U. S. Commissioner told me the village was a quiet one but it was pretty obvious that liquor was a problem. Sale within the village was prohibited, but liquor could be flown in, - and was! DEW line (Distant Early Warning) and White Alice installations for communications were already under

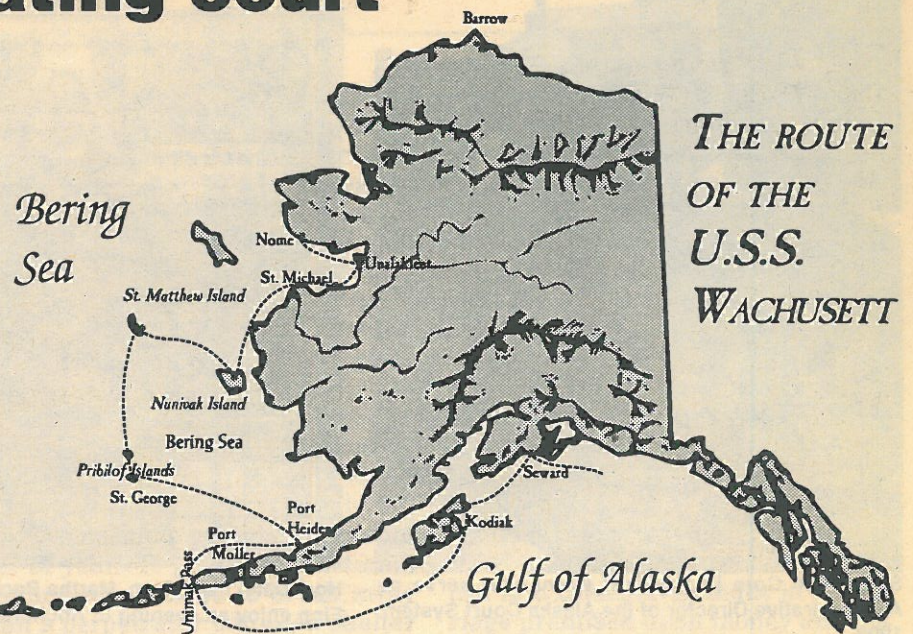
construction. Their completion would add nearly 200 civilian personnel to the area. Many of the local women were attractive and had lived or traveled in the lower 48 states. I noted that Unalakleet's problems would bear watching.

The workload of the medical and dental teams kept us there until the afternoon of Saturday, the 27th. I heard we were leaving about noon, but additional patients kept coming aboard so we didn't actually leave until 4:00 p.m. when we moved up the coast to **Shaktolik**.

The next morning, a strong running surf and shallow water made landing there very difficult. I went in with the first boat. There was no way for the anchor to grip and hold. The boat broached broadside and the crew did a terrific job of keeping it from being swamped by waves. We finally got on shore amid haze, mist, and rain. I did my bit by interviewing local officials and then pitched in to help the shore party. Patients going out to the *Wachusett* had to be ferried by raft and small boat, hauled out to the surf boat on a line between it and the shore party, where we worked in waist-deep water. They went out then through rough water to the cutter itself. As a passenger in the only boat to get ashore, I stayed ashore where manpower was limited, trying to assist the beach party and keeping out from underfoot when not needed. Wet, tough stuff! Back aboard the *Wachusett* in time for a hot shower, dry clothes, supper—and my bunk.

In such bad weather, staying at Shaktolik was impossible. The next day (leaving a radio behind in the village), we moved across Norton Bay to **Elim** on the north side. The sea was rough, but the surf was not as bad along the shore. Catching the first boat in, I finally made a landing where I didn't get wet! I thought that Elim was really unique. Timber grew around Elim (very unusual that far north) and there was no permafrost. In January of the year we were there, it had rained, and from what I was told, well water didn't freeze in Elim.

I talked with some residents, the school teacher, surveyors from the Civil Aeronautics Authority, the local nurse, and an Alaska Native Service carpenter (who came from Denver,



THE ROUTE OF THE U.S.S. WACHUSETT

NJ). The town was founded in 1914 and was originally intended to house an orphanage. So it wasn't surprising to learn that a large part of the village income came from Aid to Dependent Children funds. Many unwed mothers in Elim refused to marry the fathers of their children because doing so would make them ineligible for that income. Which didn't prevent the fathers from living with them. The financial assistance from territorial funds encouraged illegal cohabitation in many parts of Alaska. Privately, I thought that children gained a lot by having a father in the house, and the possible misuse of ADC funds was not really within my jurisdiction.

Although a doctor and a dentist had come ashore with me, patients had to be taken to the ship, which meant carrying them out to the motor launch. So I got wet again.

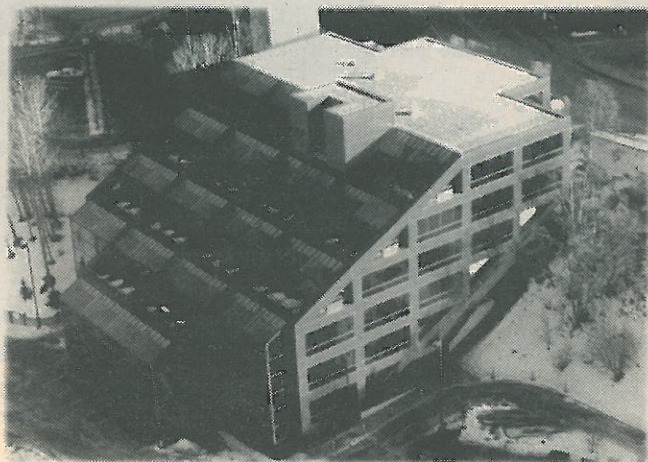
During the night, we sailed a short distance westward to **Golovin**. There we had to anchor so far off shore that it took an hour by surf boat to reach the beach. On the beach, I wondered why we bothered. It was a deserted village, peopled by only a few locals where it had once housed thousands. There was a time when Golovin could boast of having several stores, a school, a Mission Home, a herring cannery, and a herd of 30,000 reindeer. The herd had dwindled to 2,000. The school, the stores and other buildings were empty and decaying with broken or boarded up windows and doors hanging ajar. The beach was littered with wreckage, with rotting hulks of barges and

small boats half buried in the sand. (From one, I salvaged a small ship's wheel as a souvenir.) Civilization had moved 14 miles up-river to White Mountain, leaving behind the carcass of a town which still had a postmaster and a lay minister but no laws, no government, no council, no schoolteacher, and no established church. Golovin would probably continue to die a peaceful death.

Periodically throughout our journey, I reported to Captain Applegate my assessments about villages we had visited. I updated him while we were at Golovin.

We still had unfinished business back in Shaktolik and a radio to recover, but weather conditions there made it impossible to return so we went on to **Nome**, arriving there during the early morning of Wednesday, July 31. Moving up Alaska's coast had taken me into jurisdictions outside of my own. I had passed through areas policed by the U.S. Marshal in Fairbanks, Al Dorsh, and was now in the territory of Bob Oliver, the U. S. Marshal in Nome. My travels had been coordinated with both and when I came ashore in Nome, Oliver's Chief Deputy, George Bayer, was there to meet me. Bob, George and I spent some time together and I passed on whatever I had learned during my trip. Criminal cases I had picked up in Stebbins and Elim were already known to them. The Elim situation was under consideration by the U.S. Attorney in Nome.

(NEXT ISSUE: FROM NOME TO BARROW)



RESOLUTION PLAZA

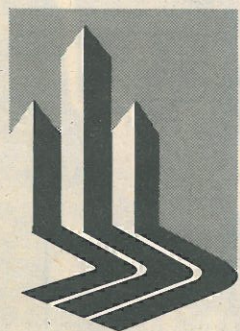
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