

# Home from the final voyage of Alaska's floating court

"Nome" is an odd name. It's not derived from any English, Russian or Eskimo words but it began appearing on British charts around the middle of the 1800s.

Research shows that when the British chart of the region was being composed, the cape in that area had no name. A "C" name was penned onto the chart. That question mark was later interpreted as being a "C" and because the "a" in "name" also looked like an "o", the original notation was read by the next draftsman as "C. Nome". So that body of water became Cape Nome, and the town that grew there was named after the cape.

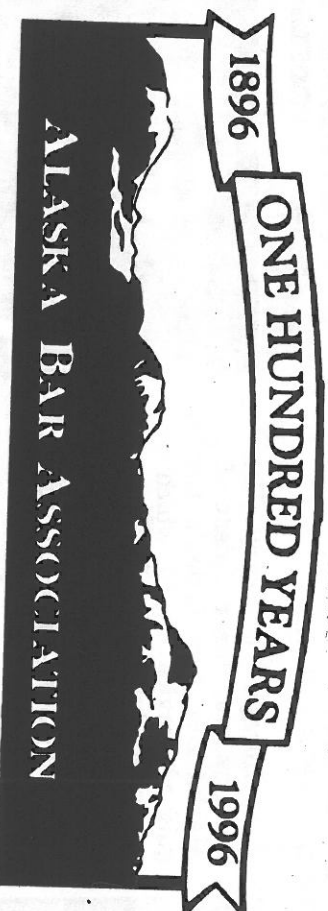
Though I had occasionally sent radio messages to Fred, this was my chance to chat with him on the phone. I was curious about what was going on in my own bailiwick, and whether or not Fred thought I should continue on with the Coast Guard. He reassured me. "Nothing much going on here," he told me.

"We're all taking advantage of your absence by developing our talent for letting sleeping dogs lie." And when I phoned Dennie, she insisted that she and our children, Pam and Geof, were just fine, were having a good summer and that my continuing on the cruise posed no problem for them.

Leaving the matter of duration somewhat open-ended, I was aboard the *Wachusett* when it sailed around midnight in a heavy, "pitch and roll" sea. For the most part, I spent the next day trying to keep from being seasick. Sometimes I was successful. But as we headed back to St. Paul Island in the Pribilofs, the weather started to clear. We landed around noon on August 2 and spent the rest of the day touring the processing plant and visiting a seal rookery. In talking with Roy Hurd, the manager of St. Paul, there seemed to be little work there for us. The village had a six-man police force whose elected chief picks his own crew. Fines were imposed whenever possible although a local jail was maintained "just in case." The Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the Pribilofs, had wisely placed emphasis on community responsibility.

We left that same evening, pushing toward Adak through a storm center with rough seas and a high wind and arriving there late the next day. Adak is one of the Andreanof Islands in the Aleutians but when Alaskans refer to Adak, they're talking about the Adak Naval Base. There's nothing else there, aside from the "Adak National Forest" (a handful of evergreens planted for fun and carefully nurtured) and the Adak Totem, a pole carved by the Seabees during World War II which has the bust of an officer at the bottom, a sailor just above it, and a bee at the very top. Lt. Commander Gottshall was waiting for me with papers from Anchorage. We spent some time discussing the naval problems relating to jurisdiction over civilian criminals. I don't know what the Coast Guard did during the next two days. I sent a wire to Fred saying I would stay with the *Wachusett*.

After serving some civil writs in the case of *Broussard v Broussard*, I just visited and wandered around with my camera. Small world! The bartender at the Chiefs Club in Adak had been born in Clifton, NJ, where Dennie had lived and gone to school.



By JAMES H. CHENOWETH

## Part 3

And at the Adak bank where I cashed a check Dennie had sent me, the teller recognized Dennie's handwriting because she had previously worked at our bank in Anchorage.

The Aleutians are really tough! That's where warm waters from the Pacific clash with colder currents from the Bering Sea. Wind and sea battle the volcanic islands constantly, and anyone there has to live knee-deep in muck and mire. In spite of winds that forced everyone to walk doubled over, military construction engineers in World War II built Adak into the base from which we would

attack the Japanese, dug in on Attu and Kiska after their invasion of Alaska. Told they needed four months to build the base, the engineers did it in ten days. "See that landing strip over there? Back in those days it was the only level spot on the island but it was at the bottom of a tidewater lagoon. Those guys penned in the lagoon, let the receding tide drain it out, and then closed the intake gates. That's how they got a dry landing strip."

Living aboard the *Wachusett* was really quite pleasant for me. Except for climbing up the mast to where the radar was installed, I had the run of the ship and was made to feel right at home. I dined a couple of times with Captain Applegate in his cabin but took most of my meals with the Chiefs. (In my opinion, they ate better than anyone else aboard, probably because they were in charge of the galley. And their habit of a late night snack with freshly baked bread, toasted and spread with peanut butter, is still a habit with me.) The Chiefs answered questions, pointed out areas of interest, and saw to it that I stumbled safely into and out of the surf boat.

Around midnight on the 5th we moved a bit eastward to Atka, a small village with little community activity. Most of the males worked in the Pribilofs during the summer but there seemed to be no activity during the winter and no boats arrive then. Apparently it had been some years since the Bureau of Indian Affairs visited Atka and the inhabitants of the town were quite content to exist on whatever government largesse was available. The water was calm and smooth when we arrived. There was much talk about a planned reindeer hunt, but I decided to abstain. Since there was little for me to do here and eagles were easy to spot, I climbed a few craggy cliffs and took some photos. Then I skinny-dipped in a shallow area, but only briefly! The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. The reindeer hunters returned about 8:30 p.m. - no reindeer! Our schedule called for us to return to Adak and transport mail and

supplies from there to Attu, but as we neared Adak on August 8, the orders were changed. Instead, we scooted back to St. Matthew Island, picked up the two Fish and Wildlife agents we left there earlier, and relocated them on Hall Island, right next door. They went ashore to get soil and plantsamples. The Captain went along to pick up ivory on the beach.

The operational plan for our patrol included a swing through Russian waters in the area near Wales, Alaska. However, diplomatic clearance had been denied for that action so we had a few extra days for other things. I talked to the Captain about using the time to reach Barrow a few days earlier. He had similar thoughts as did the crew. By 8:00 p.m. on August 9, we were underway back to Nome. Taking advantage of the warm and bright weather the next day, I found it would not be too difficult to get sunburned at sea. We paused at Nome just long enough to pick up mail and more water, then headed up the western coast to Teller and Teller Mission.

The two villages are right across the bay from each other. Teller Mission was almost unoccupied at the time. Only two women, two children and two dogs greeted us. The Natives wanted to go to Teller so we took them aboard. The dogs elected to stay behind. Teller Mission had a small population, a school and a church. It was led by a five-man council, two of whom were town marshals. People there worked in Nome or in mines and between May and October, they hunted and fished. No wonder the town looked empty. We crossed the bay and anchored outside Teller in the early afternoon of August 11.

Teller became a town in 1864. It looked like a frontier town except for several freshly painted buildings. Teller was where the lighter-than-air dirigible *Norge* (with Roald Amundsen aboard) landed after having made the second aerial crossing over the North Pole in its 1926 "Rome-to-Nome" flight. I talked with some natives at Teller who could still recall seeing the *Norge* come down through a stormy sky, looking like "a great seal riding through the clouds". Teller was also the doorway to mining locations east of the bay. And the telegraph line which was to be the communication link from North America to Europe through Russia got as far as Teller before the completion of the Atlantic cable ended the project.

In spite of its happy face, Teller suffered from commercial problems; two aggressive merchandising companies had split the town into factions. There was a landing strip and

a good - although shallow - harbor. With a population of 300, Teller had a U.S. Commissioner, a school, a church and a National Guard unit, but no local council. People managed a reindeer herd, picked berries or worked at fishing and mining. In five years, the town had gone through four teachers but aside from an occasional drunk or brawl, there seemed to be little need for a peace officer.

While ashore we discussed the possibility of going up-river 20 miles to hunt reindeer but decided against it. Just as well because we had a rough trip back out to the ship. The wind was at 17 knots with a high surf. For the first time, I had worn my parka and was glad I did.

While I was asleep, the ship had moved into quieter waters around 10:30 that evening, getting ready to leave. There were still two boats ashore, along with the medical team. They were recalled and the 15 residents of Teller who were still on the *Wachusett* were taken back to Teller. Though an eye bolt broke on the last boat as it was being hoisted up, the ship was ready for sea again at 3:30 a.m.

Suddenly we had new orders. An alert had been issued about Russian submarine activity off the southeast cape of St. Lawrence Island. A patrol plane had spotted the sub around noon yesterday. When the plane made a second pass at the submarine, it slipped under water. We joined the search, coordinating our efforts with several military "hunter-killer" planes. Depth charges, looking like 50-gallon drums, were hoisted on deck and locked into K-guns on both sides which would hurl them out into the air. It was unlikely that the sub had lingered, once spotted. Under instructions, we circled the St. Lawrence area until midnight, and then resumed our patrol. I wondered if the presence of the Russian submarine had been the reason we were refused permission to cruise through Russian waters near Wales.

By mid-morning on the 13, we were again anchored outside of Teller. Dr. Thompson, ashore with the medical team, radioed the ship, asking for

**An alert had been issued about Russian submarine activity off the southeast cape of St. Lawrence Island.**

permission to fly to a mine 60 miles away where someone had suffered a heart attack. According to scuttlebutt around the ship later, the Captain had been highly annoyed at the request since it didn't fit within the parameters of our mission and we were now one day behind schedule. If so, he must have relented because he did approve the request. The preacher at Teller flew Dr. Thompson to the mine. It was the doctor's first flight in a small plane. The medical and dental teams finished their work and around midnight we moved on to Wales.

Once there, the violent wind, heavy swells and shallow beach made things quite difficult. I decided not to take the first boat ashore so the medical-dental teams could get squared away before I went in. Just as well I did since they were the only ones to make it that day and had to remain on the beach until 7:00 that evening. Some dental patients came out by skin boat but only one boatload made it. The next day the Captain thought he'd give it a go. He took the motor launch and a small boat, planning to anchor the launch out from the beach and ferry personnel and patients to it,

# Home from the final voyage of Alaska's floating court

*Continued from page 8*

using the small boat on ropes. Tried to get ashore twice but succeeded only in losing an anchor. We did manage to bring a new passenger aboard. He was a technician from the U.S. Navy Electronics Laboratory at Wales who was conducting a study of the currents in the Bering Strait. Our job was to transport him from Wales to the International Date Line and return him to Wales.

The Bering Strait is the narrowest part of the Bering Sea, separating Russia from Alaska by only 53 miles. Early practical adventurers like Max Gottschalk crossed regularly to traffic illegally with Siberian natives, bringing back to Nome rich pelts and ivory tusks. The International Date Line runs down through the Bering Strait, squeezing snugly between two islands, Russia's Big

Diomedes and our own Little Diomedes. They

are only three miles apart. The naval technician had been taking

current measurements all the way from Wales.

He kept right on as we passed down between the islands, but I stared at the land mass that was Russian.

It was a memorable event for me. Between 9:15 and 11:00 that evening we crossed the date line twice, passing - as it were - from August 16 to August 17 the first time and back again into August 16 the second time. I had done time-travel before but never twice in two hours. "Backward, turn backward, O Time, in our flight." And when it happened, we were only one-and-a-half miles away from Russian territory. In 1957 that was close enough!

We returned the technician to Wales in the morning via skin boat, a skeletal frame over which walrus skins had been stretched and fastened. (He took correspondence from me to Fred, wrapped in foil.) In the turbulent weather, it was still impossible to take the surf boat to the beach so medical and dental patients came out to the boat in their own skin boats, called "umiaks." Chattering with them, I learned that the isolated winter conditions and constant importing of liquor sometimes resulted in violence. Six months earlier one man had been shot and wounded seriously by his own brother. Aside from such incidents, there seemed to be no other crime patterns. The Arctic Field Station of the U.S. Navy was located there, and the non-com in charge of the National Guard unit was also the Alaskan Department of Health representative. The Natives bartered skins and ivory for supplies. An elected council met monthly.

With two passengers aboard who had to be dropped off, Shishmaref was a brief stop the next day. It was a long village, set low on the beach, and quite exposed to northern storms. A registered and incorporated village, with about 200 Natives and 10 whites, it was governed by a five-man council. The residents were apparently semi-nomadic. Some worked at Nome, some carved ivory, and some hunted seals. The medical and dental teams finished around 8:00 p.m.

Kivalina, our next stop, lies north of the Arctic Circle. Sailors who cross the Circle for the first time (dubbed "Ice Worms") are traditionally hailed before a hideously whiskered and magnificently enthroned "King Neptune" (usually enacted by the most formidable member of the crew) and subjected to a humiliating hazing in

honor of the occasion. There had been some discussion about conducting a King Neptune initiation on this leg of our journey but it was quietly rescheduled to take place after I left the ship. My ubiquitous movie camera probably inspired those second thoughts.

However, as we crossed the Circle at Longitude 165 degrees, 49 west, I had qualified. Certification arrived by mail some time later. I am now a member of the ORDER OF THE TOP OF THE WORLD, Bering Sea Patriot, and an honored citizen of the "Auroral Arctic Empire in the Silent Realm" by order of "Boreas Rex, Emperor of the Realm of Eternal Whiteness." The certificate is countersigned by Captain Applegate, but Chief Louis Steyskal, self-proclaimed "Arctic explorer", applied the seal of authenticity.

We arrived at Kivalina in a fairly calm sea early on August 19.

I learned that the isolated winter conditions and constant importing of liquor sometimes resulted in violence.

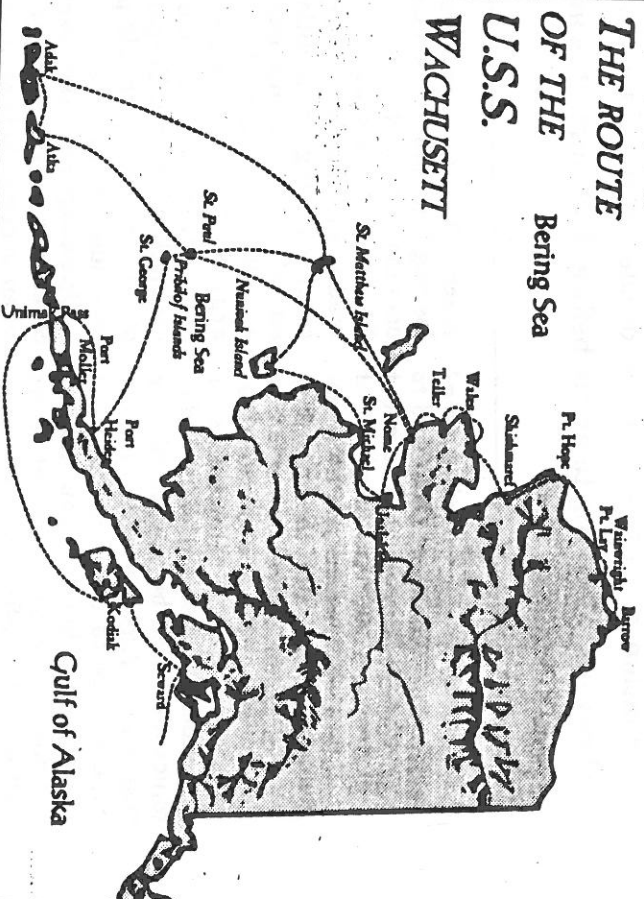
Liquor problems were rare; Kivalina had a strong local council. A 9 p.m. curfew was imposed during the school year. Boy Scout and Girl Scout chapters were active, as was a National Guard unit. The Natives fished and hunted caribou, ducks and seals. They also did longshoring and lighterage when work was available. Many worked in Fairbanks or Nome during the summer.

The next day we were at Point Hope. (Personally I still prefer the older name, Tigara.) Like many other coastal villages, it sat on a long peninsula with a wide beach between it and the sea. The earlier village had been slowly eaten away by waves so newer buildings were being built a bit further inland. It had a happy, active population of about 275 with a town marshal who was seldom needed. The 11-man council, elected for three-year terms, was strong and aggressive. Under its leadership, the village had acquired two defunct diesel engines, repaired them, and began constructing lines to supply electricity to village houses. Poles were floating timbers, rescued from the sea, or brought in from Kotzebue. Piping water to the houses from existing communal wells was being studied. When not busy improving the village, whaling and hunting polar bears were their major occupations. Whaling season closes in the early part of June, and whale feasts are held by rival whaling groups. Whale bones are construction material. The fence surrounding the cemetery was made of uprighing whale bones. Some years ago an old village site was found about a mile inland and for a while Point Hope was flooded with scientists, probing the old ruins.

I'd like to have stayed longer at Point Hope but we had to push on. In the morning of August 23, we dropped anchor off Point Lay in a surf-trough with heavy on-shore breakers and high winds. Sixteen DEW Line workers and 28 Natives called it home. I thought it would be the most remote village I would visit; however, I never got ashore. Neither did the medical-dental teams. With only 16 patients to treat, they came to the ship instead. Done by noon, we sailed on to Wainwright, arriving early Saturday morning, August 24.

It was a somewhat scattered vil-

## THE ROUTE OF THE U.S.S. WACHUSETT



lage built on a boggy tundra overlooking a narrow beach. Drainage was poor and mud was plentiful. Roald Amundsen used Wainwright as a base during polar explorations. Moving toward our anchorage, I caught a slow, distant glimpse of his house, "Maudheim", three miles before we reached Wainwright. It was a long, low building parallel to the beach and at the mouth of a lagoon that stretched for miles into the interior. Amundsen lived there for two years. I'd liked to have looked around inside.

A sunny day and a very calm sea. I went ashore with the Captain who began organizing a caribou hunt while I made my usual rounds. The Wachusett crew got permission to join some natives in

hunting caribou, providing that these they shot were turned over to the Natives for food. I went along, armed with my camera instead of a rifle. One caribou was lassoed from a surf boat while swimming across a lagoon. Shades of the wild, wild west! Hauling the seven dead caribou back to where they could be hoisted into a boat and taken to the town turned out to be a wet, back-breaking chore. We were back on the ship at 11 p.m.

The next day was overcast with a cold wind. With medical-dental work about done, we could be in Barrow tomorrow. Mail for the ship was still in Fairbanks. Timing for arrival in Barrow was tricky. The ice pack was only seven miles offshore and the Captain wanted to be sure the ice-breaker North Wind was available to cut us out if the ice closed in. I ate

lunch with the Chiefs and supper with the Captain, Haislip and McDowell. (The Chiefs eat better than anyone!)

We moved from Wainwright to Barrow, arriving about 10:00 am on August 27th. The sea was extremely rough. Getting me ashore was only possible by using a landing craft from another vessel there. I made my sincere but hasty farewells to the hospitable crew of the Wachusett. The ice pack was slowly moving closer and they didn't want to get locked in. And the Barrow-Fairbanks plane was waiting for me to climb aboard. I took a quick look at Barrow and then did just that. When we touched down at Fairbanks, Marshal Dorsh chatted with me at the airport until my flight left for Anchorage.

I went ashore with the Captain who began organizing a caribou hunt while I made my usual rounds. The Wachusett crew got permission to join some natives in hunting caribou,

David Haislip agreed that the cases should be referred to appropriate authorities for further investigation.) The cost to our department was \$324. I was home at last in the late evening of August 27.

Home from the final voyage of Alaska's floating court. There's a song that's sung by those who have sailed the Bering Sea. Writing this, I recall the final stanza: "So when you boast of fiercest gale, That ever ocean you did sail, You cannot salty sailor be Until you cruise the Bering Sea."

## PROBLEMS WITH CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY?

Call the Lawyers' Assistance Committee for confidential help.

John Abbott	346-1030
Nancy Shaw	243-7771
Michael Lindeman	245-5580
John Reese	274-0401
Brant McGee	260-3500
Clifford Groh Sr.	562-6474
Valerie Therrien	452-6104
William Walker	277-5207

