

ALASKA: A love affair



GRANDMOTHER and friends — Sweepstakes River, Alaska, 1909.

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There is a part of Alaska that most people never see, and that is the frozen backcountry where in the 1900's prospectors dug their way to either fortune or ruin, where teams of malamutes were the only transportation to the nearest neighbor 20 miles away, where men froze to death in search of gold.

These backcountry places separated the sourdoughs from the cheechakos. Sourdoughs were those who survived an Alaskan winter — officially, one who had seen the Yukon ice go out with its enormous earthquake-like explosion in the spring thaw — and cheechakos were the greenhorns, the city slickers who came ill prepared for the harshness of a frozen land no man could tame, naive men who thought that gold was there for the picking.

These places — Nome, Candle, Council, the Sweepstakes River, Dime Creek — all settlements in the shadow of the Pole, were homes of my grandfather and grandmother from 1900-1917.

My grandmother, Mattie Steiner, was 20 years old and living in Waterville, Wash., when she was engaged to marry the boy down the street. The year was 1900 when she broke off the engagement in favor of adventure.

"The world is wide," she wrote in her journal. "How can I live without seeing it?"

Her brother, Otto, was in Nome, seeking his fortune, and so the very next time he came to visit the family in Waterville, she announced that she would join him in Alaska.

"Heavens, Mattie, you can't do that," Otto was recorded as saying. "There isn't a decent woman in all of Nome."

Otto, of course, was referring to the ladies of the night, who wore the risque, low-cut dresses of velvet and who plied their trade in the numerous saloons up and

down Nome's Front Street — mining the miners, so to speak.

"I told Otto," wrote my grandmother, "that if there were no decent women in Nome, there would then be one."

And so, Mattie Steiner boarded a steamer alone and headed for the frozen north.

She was a photographer, and every Friday evening in a corner of every cabin she lived in afterward, she developed her photographs of miners and their immense piles of pay dirt, of rough-hewn cabins under enormous mountains of ice, of teams of dogs pulling entire households of possessions across frozen rivers, and there were pictures of the birth of my own mother in a tiny hospital in Candle, 90 miles south of the Arctic Circle.

My grandfather was Bobby Brown, a well-respected trailsman, prospector and racer of dogs — a competitor in some of the first All Alaska Sweepstakes races. The old photographs tell me that he was a handsome man with blue eyes that spoke of an intense love of life.

Grandmother and grandfather had met at a dance of the "high society" Nome 400, where he picked her up in the chair she was sitting in after she had refused his invitation to dance. After he whirled her around the floor in his arms, chair and all, he set her down, tipped his hand and thanked her.

They were married soon after.

Grandfather struck it rich a couple of times, but usually it was tough going. Grandmother learned how to survive alone while he was gone for provisions — often up to two weeks at a time. She learned how to survive if lost in a blizzard, which she was once, 100 feet from the cabin. She buried herself in snow, like a malamute, and waited for the sky to clear.

In the face of death there was an enormous passion for life — and each other. There are stories of Mattie Steiner and Bobby Brown dancing in the snow. And when for months they couldn't get out of

their cabin they read encyclopedias from A to Z. And with their friends they amused themselves on dark winter nights with minstrel shows.

My mother and her older sister pretended that each corner of the cabin was a place to explore — Chicago, Boston, Aunt Lizzie's house, and so on, and they had imaginary teas with imaginary children.

The love affair of my grandparents continued for 13 years, until the day my grandfather slipped and fell into an open saw on Dime Creek. Leonard Seppala, who happened to come on the scene moments after the accident with a full team of dogs, commanded my grandfather strapped to his sled immediately, and just as quickly sped off in the direction of Candle, nearly 100 miles away.

Seppala's "Race with Death," as it was later called by the poet Esther Birdsall Darling, was with a team of champion dogs that had won the All Alaska Sweepstakes that year. It was Seppala who was later lionized for his life-saving run of hundreds of miles through a terrible blizzard of winter into Nome, taking serum to the tiny community that had been stricken with an epidemic of diphtheria so severe that people were dying like flies.

But in spite of Seppala's heroic efforts, grandfather did not live. His tomb, paid for by friends and fellow miners who loved him, was erected in the center of Candle and today it is a chief marker of that settlement, now inhabited largely by Eskimos.

Grandmother stayed in Candle for several months afterward, to give birth to their third child, and soon after, she returned to the Outside — to the home of her youth in Waterville.

I am the granddaughter of those people, and my mother always told me that she believed I inherited my sense of adventure from my grandmother.

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ESKIMO SLED DOGS are neither Malamutes or Huskies.

Jeans-clad granddaughter to remain cheechako?

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I don't know. A year ago, after venturing a bit on behalf of National Geographic readers, I had the idea of doing a magazine story on the Alaska story of my grandparents. My plan was to retrace their gold rush trail.

An Alaskan publishing company was very interested in the idea and I was put in touch with their roving editor, an adventurous woman who divided her time between Anchorage and Laguna Beach.

We met, and when I told her what I wanted to do, she told me there would be "absolutely no problem" in executing my plan. She had been to Candle herself, she

said, and knew how to go about it.

"All you have to do," she told me, "is hire a bush pilot. You go in with a backpack, the pilot will let you off, and without a doubt you'll be met by curious Eskimos who will take you in."

She said the Eskimos were hospitable and would feed me well with seal meat and dried ptarmigan, and she added that I would have no trouble finding my grandfather's tomb which she remembered well.

Right then and there I came to a shocking realization: My grandmother, in the relatively unliberated age of 1900, in her long skirts and frilly blouses, did what I, as a liberated jeans-wearing woman of the

1980s would probably never do.

Although I am proud to be a descendant of sourdoughs, I will probably remain a cheechako, and I will strain my ears to hear the stories of the present-day adventurers who manage to get to that part of Alaska that most people never see — particularly Candle.

I know that what looks to be a little settlement of Eskimos is really the empty stage of an intense, romantic play involving people who lived, loved — and died — pursuing dreams that were laced with far more than the gold that lay beneath the ground.