Alaska-Yukon: Unique Adjustments, Yet Unsung

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One likes to feel that he is a pioneer—that he is a discoverer. The Alaska-Yukon region today is one of the places where, in one summer one can see much that he has never heard of nor read about. One reads much of the midnight sun, the well developed airplane service, the intense cold, and the activities in this high-latitude land. But one does not read of the simple adjustments that have been made in this large sparsely populated region. One can read of the "largest number of airplanes per capita" but one does not read of such things as what happens to the five-gallon gasoline containers once they are emptied.

Since the airplanes serve all the region, gasoline must be cached at somewhat converging points along the elastic air lanes. It is in this manner that the containers get distributed throughout the land. They are rectangular—bright and shiny when new — always soft and easily smashed. They serve as water pails when the top is cut off, and a wire handle is added. If water must be carried far, a thin slab of wood floats as a cover to keep it from spilling. One sees these pails everywhere, in towns, villages and at lone cabins.

Other containers are cut apart and serve as shingles; some of the pieces are used as patches on boats; some serve to strengthen the skii that replace the summer's wheels on the airplanes that do not use pontoons; some strips are attached around the posts that support the cache. These stop small animals from getting into the winter's food. Basements of course, are practically unheard of in this land of frozen subsoil.

Other containers—with the top intact but with one side removed, become a dish-pan, a pan for cooking cereal for man or dog, or a pan that serves as a laundry tub. A home-made plunger with a stick and an empty condensed milk can complete the laundry equipment in this region of men—trappers, miners, wood-cutters.

Mention has been made of the frozen sub-soil. Only the upper 3–6 feet ever thaws. The frozen gold-bearing sands and gravels of old stream beds, must be thawed before they can be dredged. (The individual miner must be content to work the upper layers.) The thawing is done by forcing (through hose and pipe) cold water into the ground. It percolates and penetrates slowly—that which is beginning to thaw

this summer, will continue thawing the following winter, and will be the location of next summer's dredging. The cold of winter, then, cannot refreeze the thawing of one summer—or, the cold of one winter cannot re-freeze hard enough the freezing of many winters.

At Fairbanks, the bigger buildings (bank, federal building, the town or city hall, and school-house) are constructed of re-inforced concrete. The new buildings at the University of Alaska, some five miles out in the country from Fairbanks are also of concrete. There is no building stone near, and lumber is, of course, a fire hazard (especially in this town where the mains are kept empty until the alarm is sent in). The foundations for the Fairbanks buildings rest on or in the frozen depths. Small piles of brush are burned, the heat below thaws all the night, and the next day the partly frozen material is hacked out, until ever-frozen depths are reached. The four-story Federal Building is now four years old, and there are no cracks to indicate settling.

The smaller cabins which are typical of the region, seem about to disappear into the "mush". One has the feeling he is going into a hole or a den, for these rest on the surface or very shallow foundations. All buildings, whether cabin, school, hotel or trading post, have a hole or opening near the ceiling for ventilation. This vent may be round or square, may be closed with a rag or be slatted, may be purchased or be home made. The vent is necessitated by the need to allow the heated air which would normally gather near the ceiling to escape. If it did not escape, the roof would sweat, and the room would be damp, uncomfortable and unhealthy. With 67 degrees above inside, and that much (or more) below zero outside, much rime gathers outside the openings to festoon the building. Wood is the common fuel. Stoves are cast iron or made of the iron barrels that we associate with iron oil-barrels.

Another building adjustment (also related to the cold) is the well-like entry in all public buildings. The entry is a room a step or two lower than the main floor. On entering, one door is closed before the other is reached. Any cold admitted settles, or is caught in this "catch basin", and when the inner door is opened there is no (or little) draft.

Although the impression is gained that dog teams are unusual, there are many teams still used by Indian, Eskimo, trapper, freighter and, of course, the government has teams. The prospector rarely has a team, although he may have a dog or two for company and as pack animals. During the summer, the white man may find his team a nuisance. They must be kept tied, fed, and watered (a gasoline container cut in half supplies two water pans). If the owner wants to do some seasonal work with a dredge company, if he wants to go to the trading post on the river, if he wants to go "Outside", then he finds his winter's necessity a summer's nuisance. There are, however, individuals that make a business of boarding dogs for the summer. Their places are near some center such as at Fairbanks or at Dawson, or along the Yukon where

river transportation serves to connect a widely scattered population. Mention has been made that the government owns dogs. The Mounted Police of Yukon have no mounts, but use canoe, skii or snow-shoe, dog-team or airplane.

There are many other unique adjustments which the environment has influenced. There are the board-marked graves in a land lacking in stone. One cannot help but realize the scope that a gold rush reaches after reading from the markers the original home-land of the deceased. Paper flowers are plentiful, and they suggest the lack of flowers or the futility of placing them on the winter's grave. They do not suggest that the green-houses (now dilapitated) are filled with lettuce, radishes, cucumbers and tomatoes. There is the white beaded altar skin in the Episcopalian mission at Ft. Yukon. There is the soddy or *yertch* that is occupied by some young men attending the University of Alaska. There is the Experiment Farm there (University) which is crossing cattle with the musk-ox to develop a new high latitude dual purpose breed.

There are many adjustments not commented upon, many unobserved. At Sitka there is the new home for old men. One side faces the sea. It is for the sailor and fisherman. The other side faces the mountains. It is for the trapper and prospector. One looks in, the other looks out. There is, yet, much to be discovered.