

Alaska As I Knew It

Edby Davis

By Edby Davis

Part V—River Boating and More School

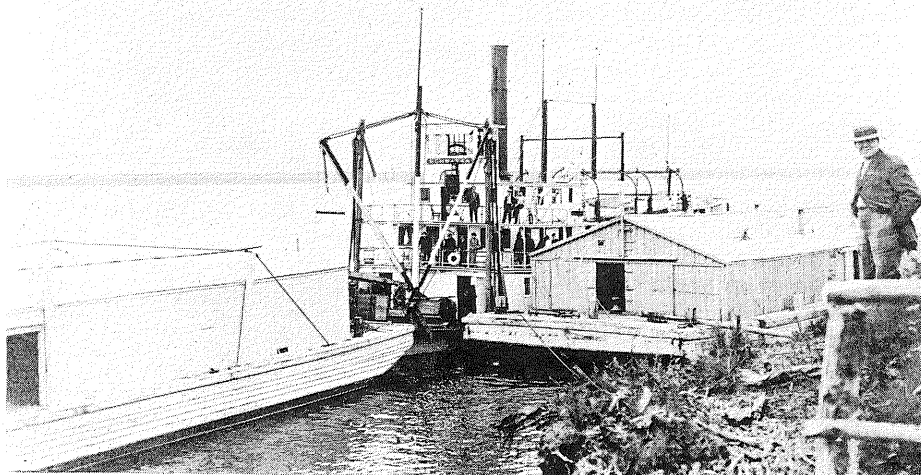
BACK home in Fairbanks after my brief service in the Army, I worked at a number of odd jobs until the middle of May, 1920, when W. W. Hunter offered me a job on the barge *McNabb*. Mr. Hunter was an old friend; he and his family had been aboard the *Prince Rupert* when I went south to Fort Lewis. They had wanted to transfer from the *Prince Rupert* to the *Princess Sophia* at Skagway but were unable to do so, and this saved their lives. The *Sophia* went down with all hands.

The *McNabb* was an insulated barge, used for carrying frozen meat. In the early days of Fairbanks, meat came in "on the hoof," mostly by river steamers, and there were four slaughter houses in the area. By 1920, however, this had changed and most of the meat came in frozen. The Waechter Bros. Meat Company owned three barges equipped to carry frozen meat. In addition to the *McNabb*, they were the *Trinder* and the *Lithcoo*. Each barge had a refrigeration system and a house with walls twelve inches thick and filled with insulation. At the stern of each barge was an ammonia plant operated by a gasoline engine. Quarters for the help were also located at the stern, as well as a small office.

The meat company also owned the river steamboat *Robert Kerr* which was fitted with refrigeration and was used to push the barges and to carry perishable cargo. By the time I went to work for them, however, business had gotten so slack that the *Kerr* had been laid up and the barges were being handled by steamboats of the White Pass and Yukon Route.

Mr. Hunter was in charge of the barge *McNabb* and he hired me to go with him to St. Michael, on Bering Sea, for a load of meat and return to Fairbanks. The job would last all summer, or as he put it, "until snow flies."

We left Fairbanks on May 23, being



A Yukon River steamboat and her barges.

pushed by the steamer *Tanana*, and arrived at Nenana the following day. We stayed there until the 29th, when we went on down to Tanana, or Fort Gibbon as it was more frequently called then. There we found the steamer *Seattle No. 3* which had arrived from Dawson with a number of empty barges and a big crew of fishermen bound down the river for Andreafski. There was only one family aboard, a Mr. and Mrs. Runyon and their daughter, Jane.

From Fort Gibbon, the steamer *Tanana* went upriver to Dawson while we hooked on with the other barges in front of the *Seattle No. 3* for the downriver trip. We pulled into the bank at Ruby at 3 a.m. on June 2 and found the whole town there to greet us as we were the first boat of the season and consequently quite an event.

A woman wanted to take passage to St. Michael where she could board a steamer for the states, but all of the *Seattle's* staterooms were filled. Mr. Runyon offered to bunk with some of the other men, however, and the new

passenger moved in with Mrs. Runyon and Jane. The steamboat was so crowded that it required four table settings at each meal to feed all on board. Breakfast invariably consisted of bacon and eggs which were ice cold, but fortunately there was lots of hot coffee.

At Holy Cross, which we reached on June 4, we picked up the barge *Lithcoo* which was smaller than the *McNabb* and had come down the Innoko River from Flat City in the Iditarod district. The *Seattle* kept picking up barges all along the river until we had eleven in all by the time we reached its mouth.

We got to Andreafski on June 7 and there the salmon crew left us. Things changed immediately aboard the *Seattle*. The waiters blossomed out in white coats, which they had not worn before, and there were bills-of-fare on the tables and plenty of good, hot food. There were plenty of mosquitoes, too. A smudge was kept going in the dining room and the waiters spent their spare moments fanning the air with towels to drive the mosquitoes away.

We reached the mouth of the Yukon, where there was a wireless station, on June 11 and stayed there until the 18th when we received word by wireless from company officials at St. Michael to proceed. We wormed our way through the ice and reached St. Michael in a matter of hours. Two ocean steamers, the well-known *Victoria* and the *Elihu Thomson*, a refrigerated vessel, were waiting for us. Both steamers were old-timers in the Alaska trade and both had been built in Great Britain and had come under the American flag by special Act of Congress. The *Thomson*, which was originally the Norwegian vessel *Italia*, had

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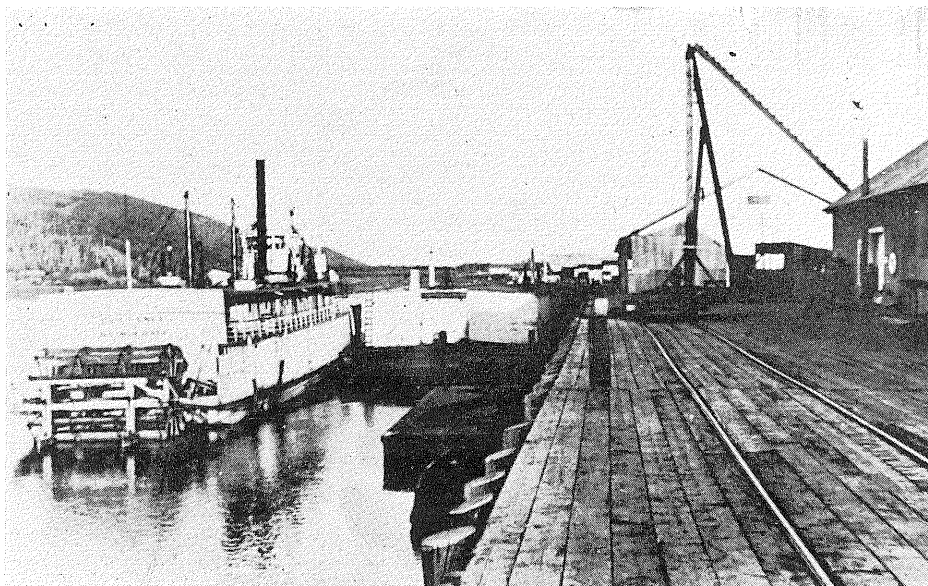
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been carrying meat and other frozen produce to Alaska since 1898 but this was to be her last trip in this trade. On her way south she loaded whale meat, oil and meal at Akutan and following discharge of this cargo at Tacoma she was sold to Peruvian interests.

Our first job in preparing to receive our cargo of meat and other perishables was to start up the gasoline engine which turned the ammonia compressor of the refrigeration plant. We cooled off all of the storage rooms, then were taken in tow by the tug *Meteor* which put us alongside the *Elihu Thomson* to receive cargo. It took three days to load 325 tons aboard us. On June 28 the *Seattle No. 3* again took us in tow and headed for Fairbanks. She also had the *Lithcoo*, which had loaded from the *Thomson*, and four other barges with general cargo from the *Victoria*.

As soon as we started the return voyage, we began regular six-hour watches on the *McNabb*, which meant six hours on, then six hours off, the same as the



The steamboat RELIANCE and barge at the Nenana dock.

steamboat crews. We reached Andreafski on July 2 and fought mosquitoes along this entire lower section of the river. At St. Michael and while we were on salt water there had been few mosquitoes or none at all. We had to spend a day at Andreafski where the old steamboat *Wilbur Crimmin* was stationed to help other steamers wash their boilers. We had used salt water while traveling from the mouth of the river to St. Michael and back, and all the salt had to be washed out of the boilers.

On July 4, which we celebrated by working the usual watches, the steamboat *Reliance* came alongside and took the *Lithcoo* and headed up the Innoko River toward Flat, or Flat City, as it was usually known. At every stop we made along the river, Mr. Hunter would sell some of our cargo. He would not cut any of the sides or quarters of meat, but he did break open cases and sell chickens, turkeys, sausages, ox-tails, tongues, hearts and other such items. He also sold quarters of beef and sides of pork, veal and mutton to restaurants and stores.

Soon after we left Ruby, on July 12, the steamer *Tanana* came up alongside and took another of the barges, "on the fly." That is, the barge was transferred from one steamer to the other while both were running at full speed. This was a touchy operation and required precise timing and a good deal of skill on the part of both crews.

At Tanana, the steamer *Yukon* took over our barge and the *Seattle No. 3* returned to St. Michael. The *Yukon* had come down from Dawson and was loaded with tourists who had never seen a barge like ours. Many of them came aboard to learn how freight was moved in that part of Alaska. On July 19 we tied the *McNabb* five miles below Fairbanks while the *Yukon* went on with its passengers and another, lighter barge. We followed the next day and tied up for the summer to act as storage for the meat we had brought. With this change, I went to work at 1 p.m. each day and worked through until 11 p.m., when I shut down the refrigeration plant for the night. Mr. Hunter started the plant again at 5 a.m. and kept it going until I took over after lunch. This routine continued until October 15, after which artificial refrigeration was no longer required. My wages were \$150 a month.

The following year, 1921, the *McNabb* again made a trip to St. Michael to bring back meat but another man, Jess Bryant, was in my place. After that

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meat began reaching Fairbanks via the newly built Alaska Railroad and the barge line went out of business. The *McNabb* was tied up at St. Michael and is still there, while the barge *Trinder* finally wound up at Teller.

I worked for three years, then decided to attend the Bliss Electrical School in Washington, D.C. I left Fairbanks on September 7, 1923, taking the train to Seward and quickly covered the route over which Archie and I had walked in 1919 following our discharge from the Army.

At Seward I got passage on the steamship *Alaska* which had been launched earlier that year at the Todd Shipyards in Tacoma and was on her third voyage to Seward. On the way south we stopped at many canneries to load salmon and reached Seattle on September 17. I got to the school in Washington, D.C., just an hour after the term opened and learned that my application for admission had been received only the day before. A place was found for me, however, and I began the intensive course of study which crammed four years of instruction into a single year. The school had been founded in 1893 and it continued in operation until 1950 and had a very high scholastic rating.

When Christmas came we had a brief vacation and I joined an uncle, four aunts and twenty-five cousins at Lenoir, North Carolina, my father's old home. I took a liking to that part of the country and when school ended in June I took a job with the American Aluminum Company at Badin, North Carolina. I started work there at forty cents an hour, eight hours a day and seven days a week, and the heat was terrific. It was a good deal different than it had been at Christmas. There were many electrical storms and during my first one the shift foreman asked me why I was so red in the face. I replied that in the past half hour I had seen more lightning than in my whole previous life. He was pleased, anyway, that I didn't run to the basement as some of the newcomers did.

In the meanwhile, during a reception at the Bliss School I had met Miss Annella Van Devanter and we had continued to see each other frequently, going to church and prayer meeting and to art galleries and various historical places together. After I moved to Badin, we corresponded and finally on December 2, 1924, we were married at her church in Washington. Two of my former school teachers from Fairbanks, Miss Henrietta Mirick and Miss Margaret

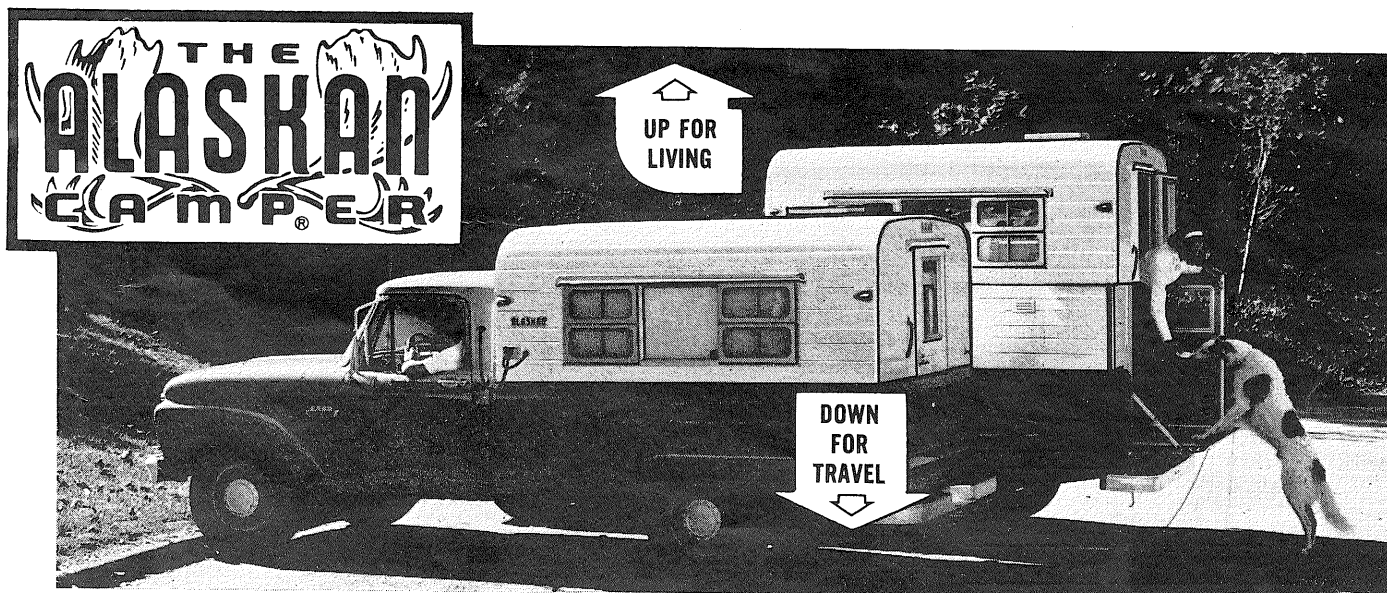
Carpenter, attended the ceremony, as did Alaska's Delegate in Congress, Dan Sutherland, and Mrs. Sutherland. The Sutherlands took the four of us to the Willard Hotel for an evening lunch.

We spent three happy years at Badin and during them I advanced from one job to another until I was making fifty cents an hour and could climb no higher until someone retired.

In the fall of 1927 my brother, Roden, wrote to me from Fairbanks about the Fairbanks Exploration Company, a subsidiary of the big United States Smelting, Refining and Mining Company. The F. E. Company, as it was known, had purchased all the property of the Tanana Mill Company and was erecting a power plant, offices, machine shop, warehouse and gold room. The plans were to run an electric power line to Ester and Chatanika and to operate twelve big gold dredges.

Roden said the F. E. Company was hiring a good many people, including electricians, and that I could get a job there if I wished. After some correspondence it was arranged and Annella and I decided to move to Fairbanks, my old home. ▲

(More next month)



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