

## Nan's 1938 Alaskan Diary

Transcribed by Anna van Raaphorst Johnson

*In the summer of 1938, Nan (Nettie Augusta Riedel van Raaphorst) and a female friend drove from Minden City, MI (a little town in the "Thumb") to Seattle, took the Inside Passage cruise through southern Alaska, and then drove back.*

*The following account was written up for either the Minden City or Harbor Beach newspaper. The information was "sanitized" for general consumption, I believe—I remember her telling me that on this trip she got a bacterial infection from eating improperly refrigerated beef and nearly died! For the time such a trip would have been a daring adventure for two unaccompanied young ladies—they even camped on their own and must have changed a number of flat tires along the way.*

We began our trip to the Northwest by seeing a little of Michigan's North and West. The scenery in our own state is some of the loveliest, and we enjoyed our drive along Lake Michigan north from Ludington. One of the prettiest drives in the state is that from Harbor Springs to Cross Village where the motorist winds along between trees that crowd close to both sides of the narrow road and meet in a canopy of leafy beauty overhead. Now and again an opening between the trees reveals the blue of Lake Michigan. Above the straits [of Mackinac] we enjoyed the state and national forests, the deer that we saw, and the sand dunes.

### Minnesota

On the evening of July 1 we arrived in Duluth where Lake Superior was steaming up in a dense fog. It lifted for a moment to give us a fine view from the top of a hill of the city spread out down the hillside. Thermometers on the streets the next morning registered 54 degrees, which was quite a contrast to the near 100 degrees that we had the next day in North Dakota.

That afternoon in Bemidji, Minnesota, a town in the section of the state called Paul Bunyan's playground, we met that famous fictional character in the "person" of a huge status on the shore of a lake.

Paul, you remember, is the logger who baited his hook with hams when he went fishing and sometimes battled for days before landing his fish. His ox, Blue Babe, measured forty-two ax handles and a plug of tobacco between the horns and had such strength that if Paul wanted a road or a river straightened he just hitched Babe on and—presto! The deed was done.

We crossed the Mississippi near Bemidji, a thin little stream up there near its source, and felt that we were getting west.

### North Dakota

As we drove along toward the North Dakota line we noticed that the tree growth became shorter and sparser. In North Dakota there are few trees except in towns, and what there are have been planted.

Many were dead at the top, and around farms often whole groves had died leaving the farm sitting on the flat prairie unscreened. "Flat prairie" isn't quite correct, for while there was a section where one could see for miles in every direction, even there the road led up over a rim somewhat like the edge of a saucer, and when we went on westward the gently rolling hills became gradually higher. In fact, from point of view of sea level, the whole trip west was uphill and the trip home downhill.

Farms seemed odd to us because the buildings were so small, and towns because the elevators were so many and so tall. Grain is threshed in the fields and stored in the elevators, so every town, no matter how small, has several elevators, and larger towns have as many as six. Of course, there could be no orchards since trees don't thrive, and that makes the farms look still more bare. Here and in Montana you learn the meaning of "wide-open spaces," and you are amazed at how much sky there is.

Along the road we saw piles of tumbleweed. Here we saw our first sagebrush, too—a gray weed that smells just like the seasoning you use for your Thanksgiving turkey. Prairie horned larks and meadow larks flew up along the roadside, and hundreds of gophers scampered across the road with a dancing gait that suggested our nickname for them: "scamper-puss."

North Dakota roads are not particularly good, and in that state we had the worst piece of highway of the whole trip. It was a piece of road under construction but supposed to be open, and striking it after a heavy rain we wallowed for miles through rich oozy black mud a foot or so deep. The car was plastered an inch deep with it, and we were well spattered. But we had already learned the futility of car washes. In Minnesota, where some Michigan clay we had picked up *en route* attracted much attention, we had the car washed. Within an hour on the road the car was dirty again. So this time we waited a day, and Nature sent us a flood in Montana that washed the car clean!

## Montana

We encountered a good deal of rain on the trip. The first eight days we drove we had rain at least part of every day. Sometimes it was only showers; sometimes, as in Montana, it was a deluge. On this one occasion we had hail, too, and such sheets of rain that the car stalled for a few minutes. We could scarcely see to drive anyway, so it didn't matter. In one little town after that shower, water ran ankle deep on one street, and west of there at Havre, Montana, there were flood sales in progress to dispose of goods damaged by water the week before.

We were told that the rains this year were the first in ten years in that region, and so everyone was happy over them. We didn't find the cloudy weather disagreeable, either; it was better than bright sunlight for driving and sightseeing, and every time we especially wanted to see something by sunlight the sun obligingly shone for us.

Although the eastern part of Montana is much like North Dakota, with rolling hills and prairie land, gophers, prairie larks, killdeers, cactus, and acres and acres of sunflowers, the western part perfectly justifies Montana's designation as "the land of shining mountains."

Sixty miles from Glacier National Park, the snow-covered Rocky Mountains suddenly loomed up on the horizon. The trip through the park was one of breath-taking beauty. Beautiful green timber, snow-clad

peaks, waterfalls, glaciers, fields of beautiful flowers, and friendly wild animals make the 50- or 60-mile trip up over Logan Pass (6600 feet up) and the Continental Divide one to remember forever. Triple Peak Divide sends water in three directions: north into Hudson Bay, south into the Gulf of Mexico, and west to the Pacific Ocean.

We met our first bear in the park and photographed him. Later we saw seven others. And many smaller animals—woodchucks, chipmunks, squirrels, etc—are interestingly careless of man's approach. I believe other large animals such as elk and mountain sheep may be seen if one has time to take to the trails. The fields of beautiful flowers growing right up to the icy fingers of the glaciers are a delightful and colorful sight. We left the park regretfully.

## Idaho

Along the beautiful soft-blue Kootenai River in Montana and Idaho we enjoyed seeing a number of deer and some delightful forest scenery. Most of what we saw in Idaho was forested, and the road ran between tall trunks that reminded us of cathedral aisles.

The Kootenai River, according to a Montanan to whom we talked, runs an interesting course. It rises in Canada, flows down into Montana and Idaho, turns and flows back into Canada so near its original stream that there is just room for a road between, and forms a lake which is the headwater of the Columbia River.

My map does not verify this story of a river that "shakes hands with itself," but whether it does or not, it is a very beautiful river.

## Washington

Washington, "the Evergreen state," is particularly gifted with beautiful cities, forests, rivers, mountains, and farm and fruit lands. Sweet cherries were ripe and we bought the black ones at 5 cents a pound and white ones at a little over 4 cents. Apricots, too, were abundant and cheap.

Although much of the state is forested and mountainous, the canyon route from Ritzville to Ellensburg, west of Spokane, is desert-like, with ashy soil and only sagebrush and such plants growing in it.

The heat against the rocky canyon wall is intense. We were told that it had been 120 degrees during the heat of the day, and when that night we tried to sleep near the wall so as to avoid going over a mountain pass in a thunder storm, we found it still *very* hot.

On the return trip we crossed that stretch at noon and thought their estimate low! Even that night when we unpacked in the cool of a mountain evening, cold cream poured like water and our clothes were warmed as over a furnace. But it was an interesting drive with fascinating rock formations and petrified forest as one of its features.

With an early-morning drive that led across Columbia River and over the Snoqualmie Pass (Cascade Mountains) we arrived at the fine city of Seattle on July 8 to sail for Alaska at nine in the morning. That is

6:00am in Michigan. [Oops! That would be noon in Michigan.] We gained one further hour on the boat so that our watches were four hours behind home time while we were in Alaska.

## On Board the SS Yukon

Our ship was the *SS Yukon* of the Alaska Line, bound on a Totemland Cruise north as far as Skagway. The Inside Passage, “the lover’s line of the Seven Seas,” is an intricate, winding ocean land of (roughly) a thousand miles—actually a water-filled mountain canyon sheltered from the rough ocean by the mountains. Only once or twice briefly did we feel the ocean swell; most of the trip the water was glass-smooth.

The scenery is magnificent. Along practically the whole route evergreen timber lines the mountain sides. Often the passage is so narrow that you can easily see deer feeding along the shore. The Wrangell Narrows, called the Broadway of Alaska, is so tortuous a route that it must be marked by innumerable guide lights—hence the “Broadway”—and even then it calls for skillful navigation.

Water and sky are unbelievably blue, and the snow-covered mountain peaks are beautiful. The whole route is beyond description. To see a full moon rise behind one of the snowy peaks is a breath-taking experience.

## Ketchikan

Our first port of call was Ketchikan, center of Alaska’s fishing industry. Eight hundred fishing vessels call Ketchikan home, and 30 canneries operate in the neighborhood. Salmon, of course, is one of Alaska’s major industries, the average yearly pack valuing \$36,620,000. That would please Mr. Seward if he could know, for the purchase price of Alaska was only \$7,700,000, and he was derided for spending that much on his “ice box.”

Incidentally, Alaska isn’t the ice box most people imagine it. There is much rain—and we had rain at least part of seven or our nine days. It comes down with no effort at all, apparently. We bought a postcard reading thus:

### Rain

It rained on Monday morning  
When I struck Alaska’s shore,  
And then on Tuesday morning  
It rained a little more.  
Wednesday was a cloudy day  
With rainstorms interspersed,  
And Thursday was a deluge  
That everybody cursed.  
Friday brought a drizzle  
That was worse than a Scotch mist  
To prepare the way for Saturday  
And total the week’s list

Of a normal summer...say!  
I forgot to mention Sunday  
Which turned out a rainy day.

But the temperature in southeastern Alaska in summer ranges from 55 to 85 degrees. The latter figure surprised us, but it is claimed to be correct. And in the winter this southeastern section "doesn't get very cold," say the Alaskans; Sitka is said never to get colder than Washington, D.C., which is hard to believe!

Of course, above the Arctic Circle the weather would be different, but a great deal of Alaska is below that. In the section between Valdez and Fairbanks it is said that strawberries so large are grown that six make a dishful, and that flowers are equally huge. We didn't get to that locality, but we did find beautiful flowers at Skagway; immense dahlias were in bloom, and dahlias were not even blooming here [in Michigan] at that time.

Speaking of strawberries reminds us of the "Alaskan strawberries" served on shipboard at the evening lunches. They turned out to be good old baked beans!

## Wrangell

Our second port of call was Wrangell, where we saw many totem poles. A totem pole was carved to tell the whole history of the family who lived in the house in whose yard it stood. Seeing it, one versed in totem lore could tell at a glance whether or not he would be welcomed there. Many of them are very interesting.

## Petersburg

Petersburg, said to be a wealthy city, is famous for its shrimp fishing. Like the other Alaskan towns it clustered at the foot of the mountain slope beside the sea, a long dock extending out to greet the ships bringing in supplies and taking out shrimp and other things. There are cars in Alaskan towns, but long distance travel must be by boat or air, for roads only extend a little beyond the limits of the villages.

## Taku Glacier

At six in the morning after we left Petersburg the ship's whistle announced our arrival at Taku Glacier, a "live" glacier of blue ice a mile wide rising 200 feet from the water's edge. A glacier is alive if it is being pushed forward by the formation of new ice at its back. Norris Glacier nearby is a dead one, and it lacks the luster and clear blue color of Taku.

At Juneau the next day we saw Mendenhall Glacier, and in one afternoon's run another day we saw something like eight, some pushing right out into the water. We saw one or two tiny icebergs that had broken off the glaciers.

## Juneau

Juneau, the capital of Alaska, has a very beautiful building in which is housed the territorial museum. Among many interesting Indian and Eskimo exhibits was a cross section of a tree which was labeled to show the tree's great age. When Columbus discovered America the tree was very, very old, and then it had lived less than half its life.

Juneau's school, like those of the other towns, was a fine one. A postman to whom we talked expressed the pride of the Alaskan for his country, and spoke of the lure of it. "Whoever has been to Alaska will ever yearn to come again" seems to be truly said. Alaskans, it appears, are healthy and happy, and there is no poverty such as is found down here, we were told.

### Chilkoot Barracks

At Chilkoot Barracks, Uncle Sam's most northern army post, the passengers of the *Yukon* were entertained at a movie and dance in the post's recreation hall. Besides enjoying the army's hospitality here in a setting of snow-covered mountains, we had occasion to notice the effect of the midnight sun. When the dance was over at 1:00, it was still light enough to see clearly all the buildings on the grounds. Only fine detail was not discernable. At 2:00, when the boat sailed, it was growing lighter.

### Skagway

Skagway, entrance to the Klondike Country and the most northerly city on our trip, is a quiet little village now, but it has vivid remembrances of the delirious days of the gold rush. Soapy Smith's skull [Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith (1860-1898), according to Wikipedia, was an American con artist and gangster who had a major hand in the organized criminal operations of various towns in Colorado and Skagway, Alaska] is painted on the rocks, and a museum contains some mementos of this bold bad man as well as of other people and events of the stirring old days.

If you wish, you can make a trip on the White Pass and Yukon Railway over the gold rush "Trail of '98" to Lake Bennett from here.

### Sitka

Leaving Skagway we came south to Sitka, stopping at several salmon canneries en route. At one of them we loaded salmon for six hours (all passenger boats up this way also carry cargoes) and so we had ample time to see the whole process from the unloading of the fresh fish to the loading of the boxes of cans. The process takes but a few hours and everything is so scrupulously clean that one's appetite for this delicious red meat is increased by seeing the canning.

Although we loaded several hundred thousand cans at the one port and stopped at three, we heard that our load was a mere beginning of the salmon shipping. The season was only starting.

Sitka has probably the most enchanting setting of all the Alaskan cities, with a harbor dotted with tiny wooded islands and nearby Mt. Edgecumbe, resembling Japan's Fujiyama. The old Russian capital of Alaska, Sitka has a Russian cathedral still of interest. A deeply wooded lover's lane is full of interesting totem poles. Of special interest when we were there were the 16 or so planes lying in the harbor.

### Homeward Bound

From Sitka we were homeward bound. The scenery was of never-ending interest, and the porpoises and gulls and many other sea birds also claimed much attention. One exciting morning we saw a "portable geyser"—a whale! He spouted several times, to our delight, and the sun shining on his square head and dark shining body gave us a good idea of how he looked.

The trip back was all too brief, and we tried all the last golden sunny day to fill our eyes with the coolness of Alaska's blue sky and water, and white mountains and glaciers. But late in the afternoon the dark smoke of Washington's or Vancouver's forest fires crept across the sky, spoiling the scenery, and we went in to dress for the gala farewell dinner and masquerade ball.

That ended the ship's good times, which had included nightly dances and daily horse races or bingo games, not to mention the four [!] super-delicious meals a day! Sunday morning, July 17, we crossed the gangplank again onto Pier 2, Seattle.

But...

“Ever again in my dreaming  
I'm sailing the sheltered seas,  
And hearing the tale of Alaska  
Told by the whispering breeze.” (Gilman)  
[From “The Calling of Alaska” in *Alaskaland: A Curious Contradiction (1914)* by Isabel Ambler  
Gilman]

We, too, have felt the “spell of the Yukon” and will “ever yearn to go again.” The Alaskan forget-me-not is surely symbolic of the land. It weaves a spell.

## **Mt. Rainier**

We expected home to be our next highlight, but we reckoned without Mt. Rainier. Leaving Seattle—a fine city in a beautiful setting—we went over the Chinook Pass of the Cascade Mountains, turning off to see Mt. Rainier National Park.

When we were still many miles away from this magnificent shining mountain, it first became visible as a gleaming white cloud in the sky. When, after miles of approach during which it became gradually more vivid and more beautiful, we finally stood at its feet, we felt that the white men couldn't do better than alter the Indians' name for it and call it “the mountain that *is* God.” (The Indians called it “the mountain that *was* God” because of its volcanic origin. But in its snowy beauty it still suggests something celestial.) It is the third highest mountain in the United States [at the time, of course, Alaska was not yet a state], rising over 14,000 feet.

The park has all the attractions of Glacier National Park—fields of flowers, great glaciers (it has the most glaciers of any peak in the U.S.), great old trees (as old as 600 years), and lovely green young timber, magnificent views, fascinating wild life, hiking trails, bridle paths, trips escorted free for nature study, skiing, and “tin pants” sliding—sliding down the snowy mountains on tough breeches made smooth by paraffining the seat. Here was another place we hated to leave. If only it were nearer by!

## **Idaho and Montana, Again**

Back over Washington's mountain highways where snow banks lay beside the road, we began our “downward” trip east. From Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, a little city as pretty as its name on a beautiful lake, we went east over the Lookout Pass of the Bitter Root Mountains, 4727 feet up, back into Montana.

On these roads as on the roads coming west great rocks rose sheer beside the road. There were sometimes evidences of slides, and often warnings "Look out for falling rocks." Each mountain range had its own distinctive type of rock formation and all were interesting.

Near Butte we crossed the Continental Divide again, going over the Pipestone Pass of the Rocky Mountains, 6495 feet up. Butte was an airy, clean-appearing city, about which the historical sign board said this: "She was a bold, unashamed, rootin'-tootin', hell-rarin' camp in her younger days, and she still takes her liquor straight." (These sign boards, artistically posted with appropriate decorations at every point of historical interest, make driving in Montana entertaining.) Bozeman was another particularly attractive city, of which Montana has many.

The return trip yielded scenery similar to the trip west except that since we were farther south we saw more grain. In Montana great rolling fields of it miles wide were being harvested by combines, some drawn by many horses or mules. We saw one drawn by 16 mules.

### **South Dakota**

In South Dakota we finally found the grasshopper scourge we had been told of. Fifteen counties had been eaten bare by them. They had eaten the leaves off the trees and the grass off the ground, so that in Lemmon, South Dakota, where we spent a night, there was little in sight but bare earth.

We wished we could bring with us the cattle and horses to feast on the hay on our roadsides.

### **Minnesota Again, and Wisconsin**

Minnesota's lush vegetation and thriving farms were a treat to our eyes, and the resort country approaching Minneapolis was a pleasant sight. That evening we crossed the Mississippi River, and leaving the twin cities behind us we hurried on to Manitowoc, where we took the ferry across Lake Michigan.

### **Home**

We arrived home July 22 with 24 days of travel and about 8000 miles behind us and enough memories of beautiful and interesting places, scenes, things, and people to last us the rest of our lives. What a magnificent country we live in!