

Klondike Beckons Adventurous Group

O'Neill Men Catch Glimpse of Alaska Gold but Expedition Proves Failure

As the magic words in the 1870s and '80s were free lands in the West, so in the closing years of the 19th century the Klondike became the magic wand that stirred the blood of pioneers and adventurers.

Having had a part in taming prairieland, a group of O'Neill men caught the glint of gold in the newly-opened territory of



Alaska and formed a party which headed for the frozen wilds in January, 1900.

There were fellows around O'Neill who could extract gold bricks out of a sandhill or turn a Rocky Mountain pebble into a diamond.

In 1899 Jack Meals, a former treasurer of Holt county, and G. C. Hazelet, a former clerk of the county, head of the O'Neill schools and chitney factory promoter, interested Omaha capitalists who put up their cash against the time and staked out claims that Meals and Hazelet had located on their visit to Alaska for a party of gents back home.

Among these was L. G. Gillespie, the present county assessor who represented his father in this expedition. Mr. Gillespie furnishes the facts for this story.

Meals and Hazelet had been in Alaska for a year looking the field over and locating a number of mining claims. In 1899 the Chisna Mining Co., was organized with the financial backing of a number of men in Omaha and the late John McHugh was among those to put money into the undertaking.

Besides Meals and Hazelet the claim holders, Holt county men and others, were: W. B. Bocher, W. A. Porter, E. A. and H. Y. Tuffin, F. R. Davis, John Hazelet, O. R. Dimmitt, W. F. and Fred Quint, F. R. Small, J. J. Barnett, C. H. Garwood, Ralph Evans, J. D. Brown, J. R. Critterton, Henry Fleming, W. L. Trussell, W. F. Kelley, L. G. Gillespie, J. E. Grady, Lee Crawford, H. J. Watkins, A. H. McNeir, Col. Porterfield, Col. Acton, Ben Saunders and A. T. Potter.



Mr. and Mrs. Jack Meals ... he went to Alaska.

Acton and Porterfield were enrolled as the mining engineers.

The party left Omaha January 26, 1900, says Mr. Gillespie, arrived in Seattle January 29 and left there for Valdez on February 1, arriving at port on February 13, but did not get the equipment and supplies unloaded until the 22. On March 5 a move was made to reach the interior. Two camps were established, some of the party remaining in Valdez until the supplies were all moved to the first camp. "The march in was a matter of working our way a few miles each day from camp to camp.

"We had to make a trail in the snow about 10 feet wide and on an average from four- to 10-feet deep to get through," recalls Mr. Gillespie. "We did not make more than seven miles between camps going up. When going by boat we made at the most six miles at a stretch; and were in water up to our waistline and at times to the shoulders.

"In the winter we moved the supplies by sleds drawn by

horses up the Copper river to the Chisna river.

"We had the ordinary machinery such as was used in the Black Hills and had to move it by horse-drawn sleds in the beginning. Other methods were employed even to packing the equipment in on our backs. We arrived at the claim August 26, 1900.

"Many prospectors with dog teams, pack horses or hand sleds passed us on the way in. As a result of this when after two months we arrived to find that our claims had been jumped and we had to go into court in Alaska to get them back. So we were delayed a year in starting operations. This delay exhausted our supplies so some of the party went out to get stocked up with supplies for another year. Potter, Crawford, Dimmitt, Saunders and two or three others remained in camp and spent the winter putting up a log house, which was divided into sleeping quarters and dining room. Bunks were built along the walls in pairs, one above the

other and each accommodated two men."

"In the Spring of 1901, the prospectors were all set to start operations, but to pass over these activities to ultimate results the venture was a failure.

"One of our number, E. A. Tuffin, took a contract to carry mail from Valdez to Eagle," says Mr. Gillespie.

"While on a trip with the mail he was caught in a blizzard and he was found frozen to death by his brother, H. Y. Tuffin, who headed a searching party. The body was taken to his home in Iowa for burial.

"The hunt for gold was abandoned. Meals and Hazelet remained in Alaska. Hazelet was employed by New York mining interests and Meals served as deputy United States marshal and made his home at Valdez. Mr. and Mrs. Hazelet both died and were buried in Cordovia. The mining property was taken over under mortgage by John McHugh, who kept John Hazelet there to look after it. Later John got into the tourist trade and was directing groups on sight seeing tours and was reported to have made \$15,000 a year at the business, retired and went to Los Angeles where he died."

Mr. Gillespie is one member of the party that still survives. He returned to prairieland in Holt county. Lee Crawford went to Pennsylvania where he died 10 years ago.

After a visit to his brother, George, and family in California about 1920, Jack Meals died soon after. He was one of the early settlers South of Atkinson, freighted and rode the cattle ranges. The family lived for some years in O'Neill and Jack was the lifesaver for a number of school children here in the blizzard of January 12, 1888. Mrs. Meals has been making her home with a son in Seattle. George Meals, a son, is a prominent rancher of the Atkinson community.

First Hotel Built Near Roundhouse

A lordly old cottonwood by the turn in the road near the Burlington round house, as you approach the sale barn, marks the site of O'Neill's first hotel, a rude building of logs and rough lumber.

Darwin Sparks presided as landlord and provided bunks and meals for the shifting human element on prairieland. Something a little better in the way of a building was put up by Mr. Sparks on the spot where the Knights of Columbus hall now stands, first known as City Hotel and then the name changed to Arcade House.

Retiring from the hotel, Sparks took to the grassland, owning the property just South of town that later belonged to Tom Carlon. Sparks spent many years on a body of land he bought eight miles South of O'Neill, where he died some years ago.

Precaution Works for Authorities

From The Frontier, June 7, 1894: "Sells' circus attracted a large crowd to the city last Friday. Everything passed off smoothly and the show gave general satisfaction. The collection of venal vampires that travel with the aggregation failed to get their work in here to any great extent, owing to precautionary measures adopted by the city authorities."

HAGERTY INDUCES HUNT TO MIGRATE

The personally conducted colonization movements of Gen. John O'Neill ended with the fourth and last in 1887. These colonists kept in touch with their former neighbors with the result that the movements into the upper Elkhorn country continued for some years. Among those arriving in the early 80's was the family of John Hunt, settling on a homestead South of the river two miles out from O'Neill. Of that family there is still living the daughter Mrs. John (Nora) Lapham, now making her home in Philadelphia, Pa., and one son, Den, who with his wife, the former Nellie Cronin, a daughter of Holt county's first probate judge, face life's sunset in their comfortable home at 51st and O streets in Lincoln. And what appears here is the story as Mr. Hunt told it to a Frontier representative.

Our family, Mr. Hunt said, came to Nebraska in two installments by team when I was 12 or 13 years of age. Father and sister Nora and a younger brother came first, traveling at the rate of about 25 miles a day on the long trek from Winona, Minn., until the last day they covered the final 40 miles in order to be on hand for the wedding of Patrick Hagerty and Mary McGreevy.

Hagerty was a personal friend of the family and had induced my father, said Mr. Hunt, to migrate to "God's Country."

The wedding was a frontier social event, the bridegroom dispensing good cheer with a generous and lavish hand, which he could afford to do as he was the "rich man" of the settlement. Mrs. Hunt and the other members of the family, including Den, came through by team the following year, arriving in the month of October. The family dwelling on the homestead was a sod house, earthen floor, roof rafters and ridge pole cut from timber in the Niobrara river gulches, spread over with brush, hay and sod.

Mr. Hunt recalls that first winter in that sod house as the worst within the scope of his memory, and in times of thaw or rain the household equipment of pans and tubs was brought into service to catch the leakage through the roof and save themselves from being mired by the dirt floor converted to mud. This condition, not an isolated case, did not last long and the family in time had a comfortable frame house in which to move.

Mr. Hunt, who likes to speak well of his neighbors, recalls only one, that he could not have a good word for. But their immediate neighbors were the Sullivan and Connors families, who were highly esteemed, and it became an almost daily social activity for the parents of these families to meet in one or the other home for the popular game of "45" while the kids amused themselves in the other home. Mrs. Connors, not in the manner of the pioneer born, found homestead life distasteful and that family returned to Pennsylvania after a few months.

Mr. Hunt recalls his early schooling with some bitterness. The school house was North of the river near the Hank McEvony home and the children living South of the river had to wade the icy waters in Autumn and Spring and tramp through snow in Winter. The teacher, Jim McAllister, was something of an austere pedagogue and came into the schoolroom each morning with a bunch of willows, with which, Den says, "he whaled hell out of us."

But it was a happy day when he started to school in O'Neill. For the five school days he lived in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Dave Wisegarber in a log house that stood just South of the depot that was here at that time. He paid his board and room out of earnings for caring for the saddle horses of the cowboys, stabling them in a hay shed affair Wisegarber built for that purpose.

Their first crop of corn on the homestead "breaking" was disappointing, but as the land was cultivated results were better. But prices for crops were not alluring—15 cents a bushel for corn, 13 cents for potatoes and around 40 cents for wheat. Most of the wheat crop, however, was hauled to Knollkamper's mill on the Eagle. Here they got 30 pounds of flour and some bran for each bushel of wheat. The horses brought from Minnesota could not carry on farm work without grain so a team was traded for two yoke of oxen which seemed to make a go of it on the abundance of grass. Two cows in time developed a herd which allowed the sale of two-year-old steers at \$15 per head. Mr. Hunt's schooling in town fell under the guiding hand of Miss Kate Mann, a remarkable character in many respects, and he attributes to her guidance



Yesterday's Registration Crowd O'Neill Nebr. OPENING OF ROSEBUD ... O'Neill won renown through the U. S. land office. During the opening of the Rosebud in South Dakota in the early 1900s O'Neill was filled with hopefuls.

his own development into a building contractor and journeyman mason and bricklayer. He supervised the brick work on St. Mary's academy and did this work on many of the homes and business buildings in O'Neill. Oddy enough, after leaving O'Neill, Den became a 10-thousand-dollar-a-year insurance man, but first filled an important position with the International Harvester company.

It was while going to school the romance started, as the romances that culminate in the happy and enduring home life frequently do. If the school boy and school girl affairs perish in O'Neill, Oddy enough, after leaving O'Neill, Den became a 10-thousand-dollar-a-year insurance man, but first filled an important position with the International Harvester company. Dark tragedy fell across the pioneer picture from time to

time. In addition to those recorded in another story, Den reminds the writer of the time Eddie Gallagher, a brother of Andy, was shot, presumably by accident by Mike O'Laughlin, who met an identical fate the following Sunday morning on his way to town to attend church. Who did the shooting was never determined. Slugs from Winchester and Colt, .45s whizzed through the air about every day and it was something to keep out of the way of them.

The Holt County Banner, successor of the Holt Record, was under the guiding hand of G. M. Cleveland, a lawyer, and had been "smearing" Pat Hagerty. Mr. Hagerty cast about for a newspaper man that he might induce to counteract this journalistic and editorial annoyance. He lighted upon a Democrat at Monroe, Wisc., whom he induced to come to O'Neill and launch a paper and had no difficulty in converting his imported editor to Republican doctrine. This was made easy by reason of land office patronage being given to Republican papers. So the able W. D. Mathews set up shop, brought a printer from Monroe, Ezra Saunders, and that accounts for there being The Frontier in which to print this story.



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