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No. 2262.

ALASKA.

BY W. G. WILLIAMS, D. D.

The western world has known some large transactions in real estate, but none on so great a scale as when the United States purchased Alaska from Russia. But doubtless this *ultima Thule* of our North-

known mineral and other resources in man is sure to make known of civilized man has not yet looked great area. Only the imagination riches are deposited there by Him in vain.

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Chautauquan, v. 7, 1887, July.

Alaska.

By W. G. Williams.

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However, in the extent and character of inhabitants, in churches takes civilization.

Less than only a hundred fifty years. It was thus Behring, the famous Russian explorer, in his search, sighted the snowy country. It was by right of his discovery to the country. But the territory was long before Behring. For before him, wandering bands of rude men, finding their way eastward through the ice, were attracted on by the rich rewards of fossil

sion. Mr. Seward is more than sustained, and no prophet's eye is able now to foresee the important influence Alaska may yet have on the nation's commerce.

Among those who have laid the country, and, indeed, the world, under obligations for information about Alaska, Mr. Hubert Howe Bancroft deserves the first place. His recent work, "History of Alaska,"* possesses the same clearness, accuracy, and detail which characterize all the author's numerous works. The history is recognized authority on all Alaska questions.

Alaska is both great and small. It is great in territorial extent, being one-sixth as large as the whole United States, or equal to eleven states the size of New York. It has a coast line which, reckoning the islands and smaller indentures, is greater than the circumference of the earth. It has the highest mountain of the western continent. A single group of islands numbers more than eleven hundred. Its river Yukon, as shown by Schwatka and the earlier Russian explorers, is the second longest water-course on the globe. Alaska is great in its land and sea fur-bearing animals and in the incalculable quantities of food-fish found in its bays

ivory, the tusks of the ancient mammoth elephant. At length they reached the shore of the Pacific, when, urged by their migratory spirit and dreaming of richer ivory fields beyond the waters, they put to sea without chart or compass, on rafts of rudest construction. Many of them perished amid ice and storm, but others pushed on and finally came to the Aleutian Islands and the coast of Alaska. The contact of Cossacks and Aleuts produced such scenes of strife and cruelty as only the conflicts of barbarous and brutal races exhibit.

For half a century after Behring's discovery, Russian traders and adventurers flocked pell-mell to this new region where they imagined was a never-failing source of wealth. And, indeed, so rich was the harvest of furs that many of those early fortune-seekers found success in the gains of a single voyage. Many went for wealth and found a grave; but still the quest continued and increased until it was apparent that without government restriction the seal-fisheries would soon become exhausted. This necessity led to the chartering of the famous Russian American Company.

The history of Alaska during the Russian period is mainly the history of this company. Organized at the close of

* History of Alaska. A. L. Bancroft & Co. San Francisco.

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BY W. G. WILLIAMS, D. D.

The western world has known some large transactions in real estate, but none on so great a scale as when the United States bought Russian America. We got nearly four hundred millions of acres at two cents an acre.

Terra incognita it was then, and an unknown country to the large majority of our people it remains to this day. Much was said at the time about the folly and extravagance of the investment, and sentiment was strong that it had been better to let the czar keep his icebergs and glaciers, and the seven and a half millions purchase money remain in the treasury where it was then greatly needed.

But time proves all things right or wrong, wise or unwise, and time has shed its light on the much-mooted wisdom of the Alaska purchase. Mr. Seward had great faith in the measure, regarding it as the greatest achievement of his career; but he said, "It will take a generation to find it out." The generation is rapidly passing, being two-thirds gone; and through the labors of a few pains-taking investigators the facts have accumulated sufficiently to warrant a conclusion. Mr. Seward is more than sustained, and no prophet's eye is able now to foresee the important influence Alaska may yet have on the nation's commerce.

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and rivers. But doubtless this *ultima Thule* of our Northwest is greatest in the unknown mineral and other resources which the spirit of inquiry in man is sure to make known in due time. The eye of civilized man has not yet looked upon three-fourths of its great area. Only the imagination is left to suggest what riches are deposited there by Him who hath made nothing in vain.

Alaska is very small, however, in the extent and character of its history, in the number of inhabitants, in churches and schools, in all that makes civilization.

The history proper covers only a hundred fifty years. It dates from 1741 when Vitus Behring, the famous Russian explorer, after weary months of search, sighted the snowy peaks of Mt. St. Elias. It was by right of his discovery that Russia laid claim to the country. But the territory had been discovered by Asiatics long before Behring. For nearly two centuries before him, wandering bands of rude Cossacks had been pushing their way eastward through northern Siberia, lured on by the rich rewards of fossil ivory, the tusks of the ancient mammoth elephant. At length they reached the shore of the Pacific, when, urged by their migratory spirit and dreaming of richer ivory fields beyond the waters, they put to sea without chart or compass, on rafts of rudest construction. Many of them perished amid ice and storm, but others pushed on and finally came to the Aleutian Islands and the coast of Alaska. The contact of Cossacks and Aleuts produced such scenes of strife and cruelty as only the conflicts of barbarous and brutal races exhibit.

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the last century it continued with successive renewals of charter till the purchase by the United States in 1867. Among the items of its contract with the government appear the following: They agreed to maintain a mission of the Græco-Catholic Church, members of which were to accompany all trading and hunting expeditions which were likely to bring them in contact with native tribes that they might endeavor to christianize them and encourage their allegiance to Russia. They were also to use efforts to promote ship-building and domestic industries.

In the main the career of this great monopoly was one of large profits without much work toward the civilizing and improvement of the natives. Nor was much of that sort to be expected. Experience tells us that to secure such results the work must be entrusted to other hands than those of a great company whose sole reason of existence is to make money.

After the purchase by America the wholesale slaughter of fur-bearing animals began once more on a scale equal to that which followed the Russian discovery. In the greed for gain men often forget the plainest principle of political economy or human prudence, viz.: to protect the source of supply. The seal-fisheries were again threatened with extermination. The government's expedient to prevent this was the leasing of the Prybilof or Seal Islands to the Alaska Commercial Company for a term of twenty years with the condition that not more than one hundred thousand skins should be taken in a single year. This company by the terms of its contract pays into the treasury of the United States a fixed rental of fifty-five thousand dollars a year, and a tax of two dollars, sixty-two and a half cents on each fur-seal skin, and fifty-five cents per gallon on all seal oil shipped from the islands. Through a period of fifteen years this revenue has averaged annually three hundred seventeen thousand dollars. By the expiration of its lease it will have paid an amount almost equal to the cost of the territory.

In addition to the financial side of the contract there are numerous humane conditions inserted. Provision is made for the remuneration and treatment of the natives; goods are to be sold them at rates not more than twenty-five per cent above wholesale price in San Francisco; widows and orphans at the Seal Islands are to be provided for at the company's expense; medicine is furnished without charge; all agents and employees of the company are enjoined to treat the inhabitants of the islands with the utmost kindness; they are to instruct the natives in household economy and to endeavor to help them to a higher civilization. Requirements like these reflect credit on the government that imposed them. But it must be borne in mind that they apply only to a small fraction of the whole population, being those alone on the islands where the company's trade is carried on. Outside of this small number, with slight exception, scarcely anything has been done during the whole twenty years of American possession for the moral and intellectual improvement of the people. The record is not creditable to a great Christian nation.

The population of this vast region, by the census of 1880, is only thirty-three thousand. Of these not more than ten per cent can be called civilized. There is reason to believe that in the earlier part of the Russian occupation it was twice the present number. Many theories are offered to account for the decrease: the rigor of the climate; the fact that where it is milder, as at the capital, Sitka, it is so wet and malarious, there being a rain-fall of eighty-three inches in the year. But the truer explanation is found in the extremely degraded condition and habits of the people. Sir George Simpson, the traveler, says, "A full third of the

population of this coast are slaves of the most helpless and abject description. Some of them are prisoners taken in war, but the majority have been born in bondage. These wretches are the victims of cruelty, and often are the instruments of malice and revenge. If ordered to kill a man they must do it or lose their own life. The earth huts of the Aleuts were without ovens. There was always a scarcity of wood and often of food. Sometimes their only diet was rotten fish, but those employed by the company were well fed, housed, and clad."

Such, practically, is the condition of a people who since 1867 have been wards of the nation. During the Russian period, at the expense of the Russian American Company, the Greek church made an attempt, with some success, at churches and schools and even hospitals. When the territory changed hands the Greek church relaxed its effort and most of its work was abandoned. To our shame it is confessed that no hands have taken up the work they forsook and carried it on in any adequate degree. Congress, it is true, made an appropriation for educational purposes, but there has lacked the interest to apply the money to the intended purpose.

One exception, at least, to the above is the work under direction of the Reverend Sheldon Jackson, superintendent of Presbyterian missions in the territories. He has succeeded in establishing a few schools and has applied some of the government money which was waiting for some one to devote to the avowed object of the appropriation. To quote Mr. Jackson's words, "Russia gave them government, schools, and the Greek religion, but when the country passed from their possession they withdrew their rulers, priests, and teachers, while the United States did not send any others to take their places. Alaska to-day has neither courts, rulers, teachers, nor ministers. The only thing the United States has done for them has been to introduce whiskey." This was written in 1877, ten years after the country came into our hands. The second decade has brought some changes, but so slight as by no means to quit us of serious responsibility and reproach.

But notwithstanding their debased condition and the fact that the moral idea seems almost utterly dormant, they are quick to learn and eager to be taught. They can appreciate the sharpening of their faculties for the practical benefit it brings. Fittingly has Mr. Bancroft asked, "What shall we do with the people of Alaska? Let them sit and gaze seaward with a steadfast stare, awaiting the arrival of the steamer which, bearing the United States flag, brings them month by month their supply of hootchenoo (molasses-rum)?"

In striking contrast with the Alaska of little civilization is the Alaska of great commercial resources and possibilities. Mr. Seward when visiting the territory in 1869 said in a speech at Sitka, "Mr. Sumner, in his elaborate and magnificent oration, although he spoke only from historical accounts, has not exaggerated—no man can exaggerate—the marine treasures of the territory. Indeed what I have seen here has almost made me a convert to the theory of some naturalists, that the waters of the globe are filled with stores for the sustenance of animal life surpassing the available productions of the land."

It is estimated that at the Prybilof Islands alone five millions of fur-seals make their annual summer resort. It is at this time that they are taken by the seal-hunter. By limiting the number to one hundred thousand a year the best skins are secured and the industry is protected from that excess which in other parts of Alaska and in the south seas has exhausted the supply. The skins must be removed

within half an hour after the animal is killed or they are worthless. They are then salted on the fleshy side, afterward pickled, then rolled in bundles of two with the fur side outward and tightly corded. In this condition they are shipped to San Francisco to be counted by the government agent, and then being placed in casks they are sent to London, the great seal-fur market of the world.

The method of dressing and dyeing the seal skin is a trade secret, and the industry is almost wholly confined to London. The French have tried hard to make competition. They have imported artisans from England and succeeded in mastering all the processes except the dyeing, which secret has baffled them.

Beside the seal are various other kinds of peltry, among them the fox, beaver, marten, and sea-otter; of the latter alone there is an annual catch of from five to seven thousand, whose skins are sold in London at from seventy-five to a hundred dollars each.

Not until recently was there any just idea of the vast quantities of fish found in the waters of Alaska. It is more than probable that in the near future these waters will be the main source of the world's supply; especially if as often prophesied other sources begin to decline. Salmon, cod, herring, mackerel, halibut, and several other kinds abound. To illustrate how recent and how rapid is the growth of this industry, there is the fact that the salmon-pack alone increased from eight thousand cases in 1880 to thirty-six thousand in 1883. But the shipments are only a small fraction of the annual catch. The salmon is the staple food of the natives who waste ninety per cent in preparing for use. It is estimated that they take from ten to twelve millions salmon a year; some of them, the king salmon, weighing from eighty to a hundred pounds. Add to this the corresponding abundance of other food-fishes found in these waters and we have an idea of the possible commercial greatness of this single resource.

When in the not far away future twenty-five millions of people shall inhabit the states and territories of the western coast, when a net-work of railroads shall be spread through all that region, who will pretend to estimate the commercial value of these marvelous fisheries?

That same future may also have need for the great timber resources of Alaska. As far north as the Yukon the mountains and valleys are covered with forests. Spruce is the most abundant and the bark of the hemlock spruce may yet be in demand for tanneries. But the most valuable is the yellow cedar which grows to a height of a hundred feet and a circumference of twenty feet. The wood is very durable and is prized beside for its aromatic odor. It is used in ship-building and the fine work of the cabinet-maker. Un-

der the second charter of the Russian American Company ship-building was extensively carried on and the same will doubtless be true again, as the requisite iron, coal, and timber are found near to navigable water.

Coal is found in many parts and the indications are that there will be no lack of supply when the world's demand calls for it. There are the several varieties, lignitic, bituminous, and anthracite. Likewise in various places petroleum of good quality has been discovered floating on the water's surface.

It is not uncommon for men to fancy there is gold and other valuable metals where they are not. But in the case of Alaska the mining prospect is far from discouraging. A valuable copper mine is in operation at Prince of Wales Island; lead is found at Baranoff, Wrangell, and Kadiak Islands; and in south-eastern Alaska a trace of gold is found in almost every stream emptying into the Pacific. Expeditions have recently been made by prospectors with almost uniformly encouraging reports. A company who went as far as the mouth of the Stewart River report that they examined more than a hundred streams in all of which gold was found. Mining has already proved successful in several places. Nearly a half million dollars have been expended in the development of the Treadwell mine at Douglas Island, and the result is said to more than justify the outlay. No one need doubt the mineral wealth of the territory and the certainty of a future mining population there.

If now we put all these facts of resources together and give the whole a touch of the imagination sufficient to include the undeveloped and unexplored, we shall begin to understand what a fine bargain we made in the purchase of the country. But it would be a serious, sinful blunder to fancy our debts paid in this transaction because the seven and a half millions have gone into the Russian treasury. A Christian nation cannot always pay its debts in cash, neither is it enough that Congress make appropriations for education. The people of Alaska though politically and outwardly they are now manumitted, are still slaves to vice in its most hideous forms—a servitude not reached by acts of Congress. The forces of Christian civilization must be directly applied. The great church organizations which in the main wield these forces have a larger duty than has yet been realized. The task is greater than it seems. The population though small is scattered over so large a region that to reach it is difficult. Beside they are sunk so low that the moral torpor is hard to dispel. We must see to these obligations promptly else Alaska though she may yield us commercial glory, may give us also moral disgrace.