

# JOURNEY TO ALASKA

My grandfather, Frederick Wilhelm August Poppe, was an adventurous, enterprising man. He was born in Kragero, Norway, in 1851 and came to this country when he was only 18 years old. He settled in Prior, Minn., during the late 1870s.

Somewhere along the line F.W.A. married a woman named Henrietta. They had four sons. The third, Walter, was my father. With his help and by reading old newspapers in Minnesota and Seattle, I managed to put together this recollection of my grandfather's adventures in Alaska's gold fields.

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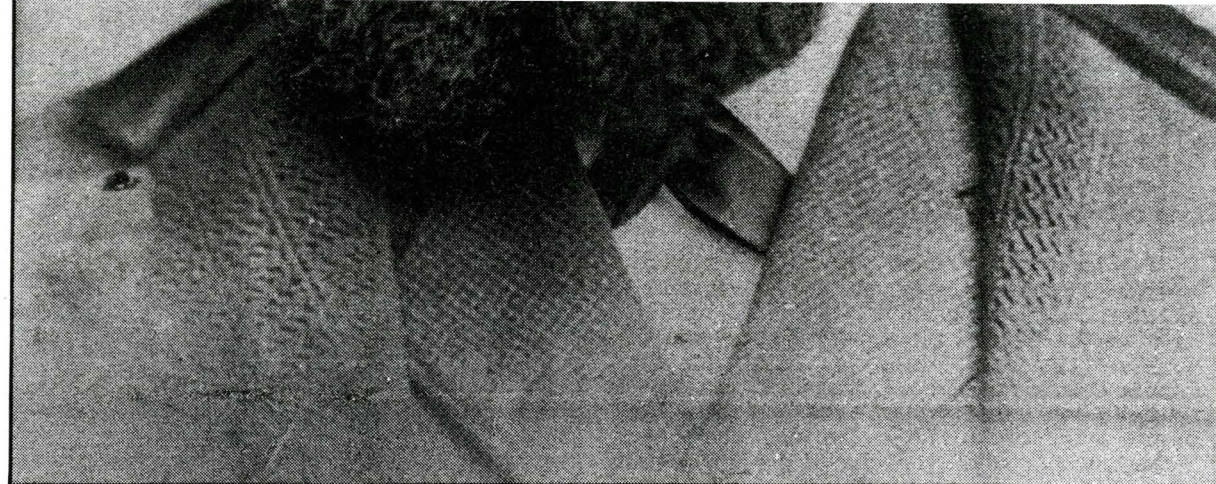
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Frederick Wilhelm August Poppe

In December of 1897, F.W.A. Poppe of Milbank, Minn., organized a band of men bound for the gold fields of the North. Poppe objected to the exorbitant rates companies were charging for transportation to the placer mines of Alaska, so he set up a venture for men of lesser means. Members of his company could make the trip for about \$350.

Their expenses broke down roughly as follows:

- Fare to the West Coast, \$40.
- Extra clothing, tools and one year's provisions, \$100.
- Fare from Tacoma to Alaska, including transportation of grub stake, \$200.
- Incidentals, \$10.

The Poppe party of 33 men left Revillo, S.D., at 8:40 a.m. on Monday, Feb. 28, 1898. Poppe had left a week earlier to make arrangements for the trip north from Seattle. He also devoted some time to introducing an ore-testing drill; with it he could drill through frozen ground and secure samples of the dirt.

On March 6, 1898, the 34 men set sail for Alaska's Copper River on the maiden voyage of the steamer Valencia, which had been purchased in New York by the Pacific Whaling Co. The Valencia's journey became a front-page item on the March 20, 1898, issue of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. A caption under the photo of the boat read:

"Steamer Valencia, which on her first trip

carried the largest number of passengers that ever left on a single steamer for Copper River. Between mutiny among her passengers and severe storms, she had a most exciting trip."

Private letters from some of the men aboard gave an illuminating account of the eight-day trip north. The ship carried 590 passengers, 23 horses and 28 dogs.

Shortly after leaving Seattle, they encountered the first of two storms. The first was so severe it threw the ship off course for 24 hours. After it let up and the crew managed to get back on course, an even more severe storm hit, causing the cattle to collide and break legs.

Because the ship was top-heavy, the storm caused it to roll badly. In an effort to save the ship, the captain decided to kill the livestock and throw the animals overboard along with their pens and hay.

The waves continued to roll high, and passengers and crew decided the situation was dangerous. Most of the passengers were seasick. According to the newspaper, the captain reported that men were so frightened they sat on their bunks with guns in hand, ready to shoot themselves if the vessel went down, rather than drown.

Once the storm settled, passengers had time to become disgruntled over poor food in the galley. They elected Poppe to act as their spokesman and demand better provisions. Poppe told the captain that if things didn't improve, passengers would take over the ship's

galley and do their own cooking. The captain said that if they tried it, there would be dead bodies lying on the deck. To prove that he meant business, his crewmen carried loaded guns. As a precaution against insurrection, the captain hooked up hoses to the hot water pipes and then challenged the passengers to try to take over the galley.

Passengers and crew never came to blows. The captain was true to his word and started to provide better food, even though it caused a shortage before the end of the voyage.

The Valencia enjoyed smooth sailing until it reached Valdez. There, the captain refused to anchor where the party could unload the boat. He insisted they anchor on an island some six miles from Valdez. This would have cost the passengers \$10 apiece, or \$6,000, to have their belongings taken to shore in small boats. The passengers refused to land and waited two days before they won out and were taken to Valdez.

On Saturday, March 19, they finally reached Port Valdez. Because Valdez had no dock, they waited for lighters (small, flat-bottomed boats) to carry their baggage; unloading took two days.

William Hiblou was the first of the Poppe party to give up and return to Milbank, on account of an attack of rheumatism. A letter he carried with him from another member of the Poppe party was printed in the Milbank Herald-Advance of April 22, 1898:

"My appetite was never better than now. We



are camped at the landing and are moving our goods over the pass. My party has moved 1,400 pounds to the third bench of the glacier, which is about nine miles from here and over the hardest part of the pass. I think it will take us about three weeks to move to the timber line on the other side of the glacier, which is, as near as I can find out, a distance of about 35 miles.

"I have not been able to find out how far it is to the Copper River as no one has been through yet that I know of. We have our stuff on sleighs and some places on the glacier we haul our loads over the benches with blocks and lines and it is very hard work. A good many have given it up and gone back. The weather is fine here; it is about 30 degrees above through the day and about freezing at night. I think this is a healthy climate.

"One of us has a Kodak and has taken 11 views. The snow is about six feet deep here. There are only four frame buildings in this place, but the woods are full of tents."

On June 17, 1898, the Herald-Advance reported that two members of the Poppe party had returned from their gold-hunting expedition. They reported that Poppe and some others had paid \$500 for a horse and gone on, while several others in the party started without the aid of horse or mule. Man and beast traveled 28 miles from the bottom to the top of the glacier. To get all of the goods to the summit, each man had to make 12 trips, or travel 12 miles to move his goods one mile. The boys took almost 30 days to cross the dangerous glacier.

The wife of Lou Ranous, a man in the Poppe party, received two letters from her husband. One was dated June 26, 1898, and the other July 4. He reported that the party had built boats on Lake Margaret and made a successful 30-mile voyage — 20 of them over rapids.

The letter told how many prospectors who had preceded them down the rapids lost their outfits. Poppe and his group reached the Copper River successfully. They stored most of their provisions and went 175 miles up the Copper River to prospect. No particular discoveries of gold had been made, but "color" was reported in many places. After the Copper River, the party stored all but about two months' provisions and went on a prospecting tour to the Tunana River.

In the May 12, 1899, issue of the Herald-Advance an article entitled "From the Copper River" offered these details of Poppe's expedition:

"Mr. F.W.A. Poppe, who a little over a year ago organized an expedition to the Copper River country in Alaska, returned last Satur-

fleeing from the country. So that of thousands who last year went into the Copper River district scarcely any now remain. While colors of gold were found in many places, none in paying quantities were discovered and the climatic difficulties and overflow of water and swollen conditions of the rivers and streams in the summertime made prospecting discouraging and hazardous.

"The scenery throughout the country is sublimely grand and life there during the summer months would be comparatively comfortable were it not for the pest of mosquitoes and gnats which make life a burden, and the bites of which are extremely poisonous.

"Mr. Poppe states that the streams abound with the finest fish he ever ate; salmon and trout in seemingly inexhaustible quantities,

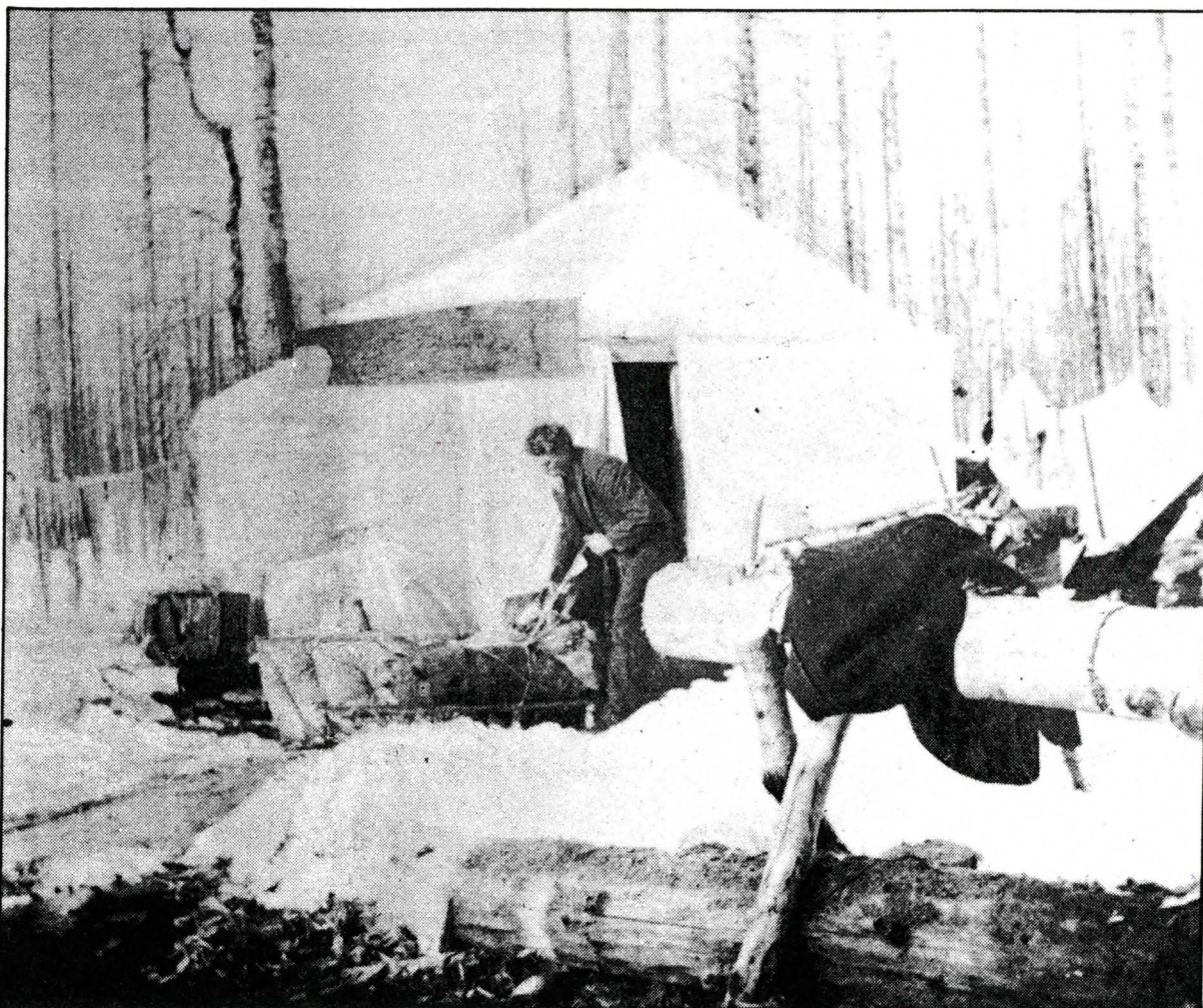
along with whitefish, cod and halibut, while game is also plentiful. Besides the grandeur of the mountains — of which there are active volcanoes — the countryside is dotted with the most beautiful lakes, forests and marshes. The mountain sides are covered with a profusion of flowers, berries and currants of innumerable varieties."

Among some of the souvenirs Grandpa Poppe brought back with him was a very handsome sealskin in its natural state, a number of bear skins, including one of a cinnamon bear, and an ivory walrus tusk cribbage board. ♣

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□ Walter Poppe lives in Seattle and works as an industrial hygienist.

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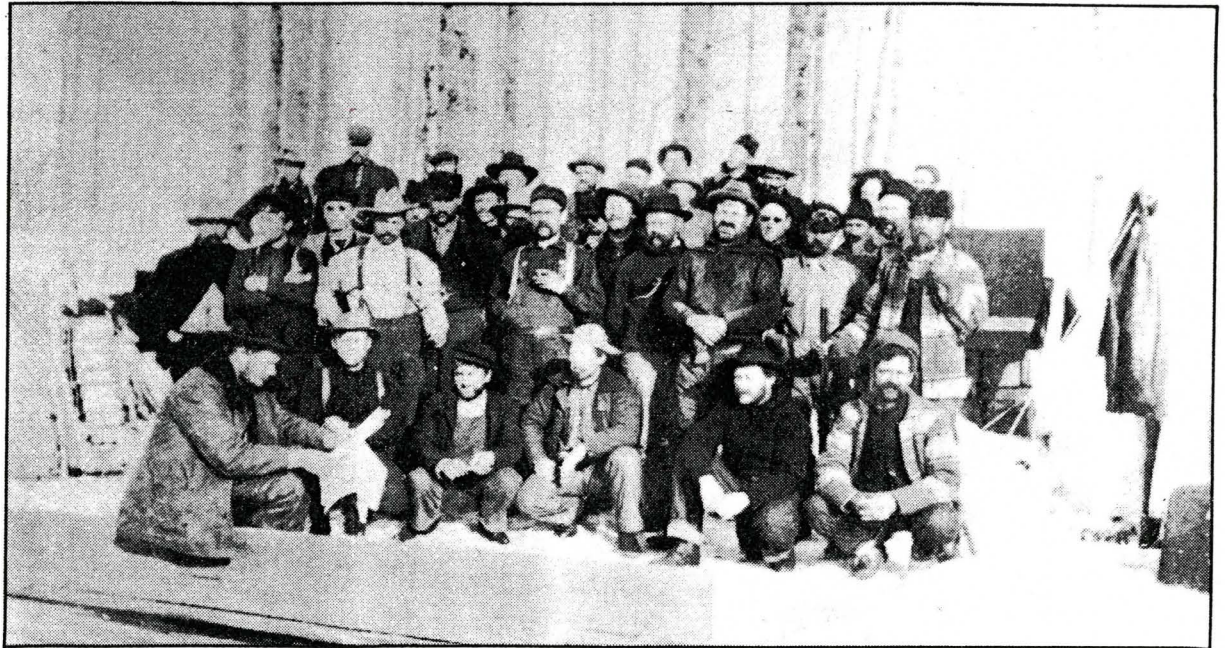
"Mr. F.W.A. Poppe, who a little over a year ago organized an expedition to the Copper River country in Alaska, returned last Saturday. He was the last of the party to return, excepting Lou Ranous, who is still in Alaska.

"Mr. Poppe has had a very rough experience. Both in the trip to the interior, where hardships and laborious packing of supplies made the journey anything but a picnic, and on the return to the coast, when the arctic freezing and storms on the glacier required the utmost endurance, and in which six of those who were with Mr. Poppe on the return gave up their lives and others lost limbs, hands and feet.

"While on the glacier, Mr. Poppe, with others, was compelled to burrow a cavern in the snow and remain there for three days and nights, not daring to sleep. He had kept himself in good condition by continued exercise and exposure while in camp and was thus enabled to withstand the terrible draft upon his vital energies. But there were others who were not so well fitted or prepared for the ordeal and they succumbed to the cold and hardships. As it was, Poppe's hands were somewhat frozen, resulting in the blacking of the fingernails. During the winter the thermometer ranged from 40 to 60 degrees below zero most of the time. When the scurvy commenced to work havoc among the prospectors, a large number died from this disease and a general exodus took place, many selling their provisions, supplies and guns for anything they could get and

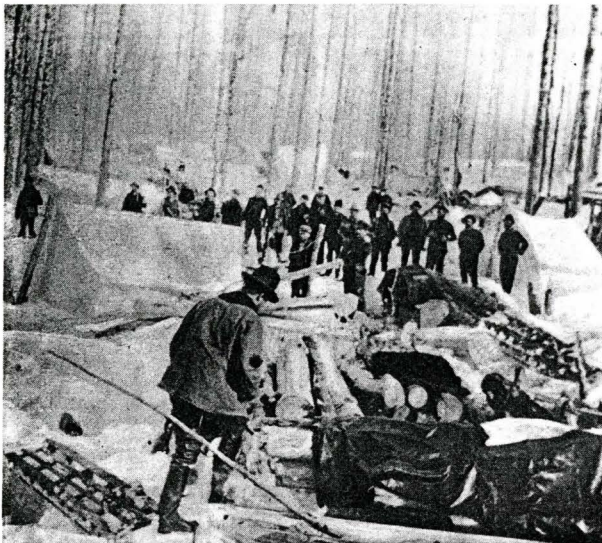


**A prospector prepares a sled in Valdez for the trip inland.**

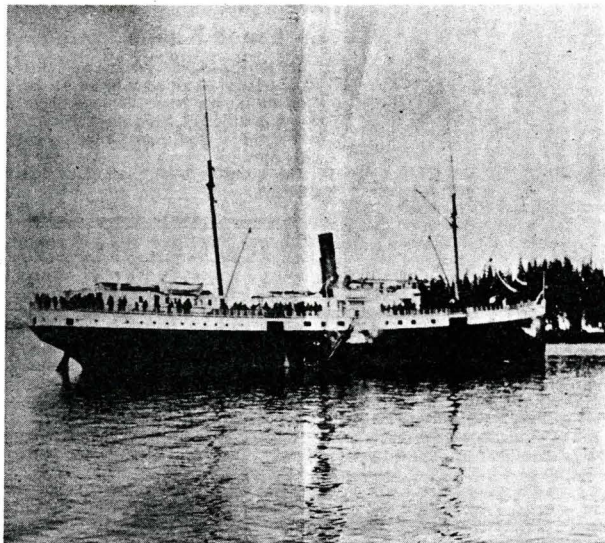


**The Poppe party in Valdez.**





**VALDES** — The center of the camp at Valdes, shown here, gives an idea of the rough conditions that members of the Milbank party endured, even when they were in "civilization."



**VALENCIA** — The Valencia survived fierce storms and a mutiny by the passengers as it made its way to Alaska. The ship's captain and the passengers were at odds throughout the voyage.



**GLACIER** — This glacier was one of the hazards that members of the Poppe party had to cross in order to get to the gold fields.

## Milbank men tried their luck in Alaskan gold fields

**Editor's note:** The following article, by Walter H. Poppe, Seattle, Wash., details an expedition his grandfather, F.W.A. Poppe led to Alaska. Poppe and a group of Milbank men went to the gold fields of Alaska to seek their fortunes.

Walter Poppe, using many references to old newspapers, has written an extensive history of his family.

My Grandfather, Frederick Wilhelm August Poppe, was quite an adventurous, enterprising and colorful man. He was civic minded and a leader of men. For one thing, he opened the Milbank Drug Store in 1881. In those days examinations were not required so all a man had to do was declare that he

was that she came to visit Grandmother and forgot to go back to the old country. We all called her "Tante." She lived with the family until her death Oct. 27, 1956 in Minneapolis. A Miss Henrietta Geswein lived with the Poppe family for a number of years also. However, she returned to Germany to visit her mother in April, 1899.

On April 15, 1897, F.W.A. Poppe registered a certificate of nomination for Mayor of Milbank opposing Henry S. Volkmar (Editor of the Grant County Review). This brought to the surface the fact that there probably existed some bad blood between these two men for many years. In reviewing microfilms of the old Grant County





Milbank Drug Store in 1881. In those days examinations were not required so all a man had to do was declare that he was a druggist.

The following ad is from the Sept. 15, 1881 issue of the Grant County Review:

**MILBANK DRUG STORE**  
 A Complete And Well Assorted  
 Stock of Drugs and  
 Patent Medicines  
 Prescriptions accurately compounded  
 Full Stock of Scandinavian  
 and German Medicine on Hand.  
 F. W. A. Poppe

Later on he opened another drug store in Aberdeen. He also went into the insurance business on May 28, 1897.

F. W. A. Poppe and his father, Arendt, left Kragero, Norway, to come to this country when Grandpa was 18 years old. Both Arendt and F. W. A. Poppe were born in Kragero, F. W. A. on Feb. 8, 1851, and Arendt on Feb. 17, 1831. Kragero is located on the rugged south coast of Norway. It is a city of many islands. It has been described as a picturesque painters paradise.

They settled in Prior, Minn. during the late 1870's. Somewhere along the line Grandpa and Henrietta (maiden name unknown) were married. Their first son Henry was born in 1878. When they moved to Milbank is not known; however their second son, Frederick H., was born June 27, 1882, in Milbank. He was followed by Walter H., born Feb. 2, 1885. Henrietta died very unexpectedly six days after she gave birth to her fourth son on April 15, 1887. This son's name is not known to this writer. Henrietta's funeral services were held in the German Methodist Church in Milbank. My Great-grandfather Arendt Poppe died on April 5, 1888.

Grandpa took his second wife in 1890. Her maiden name was Martha Brockmann of German descent. Martha had a sister living in Blooming Grove Township who was married to I. O. Berg, so it is presumed that she was from the Milbank area. Grandpa and Martha had one child, a daughter christened Eleanora Martha, on Sept. 13, 1891. Eleanora's nieces and nephews referred to her as Tante Eleanora. Grandpa was called Grosspapa and Grandma was Grossmama. German, Norwegian and English were spoken within the family circle.

Township maps reproduced from a 1910 Atlas showed that F. W. A. Poppe owned 480 acres in Vernon Township and that his wife Martha had 160 acres in Madison Township. Schools were

located in the area where there probably existed some bad blood between these two men for many years. In reviewing microfilms of the old Grant County Review, I wondered why Grandpa had dropped his drug store ads in the Review. For many years they appeared weekly and then there were none. In pre-election articles F. W. A. Poppe was not listed as a candidate for the office of mayor in the Review, whereas he was in the Milbank Herald Advance. Following is an abstract of a post-election article that appeared in the April 22, 1897 issue of the Grant County Review:

Henry S. Volkmar won the election by a majority of 28 votes. He had been reluctant to run, having served as mayor four previous times. He didn't think that he could afford to take off from his private enterprises.

Volkmar accused Mr. Poppe of being opposed to high licensing of saloons under state law. He stated that Mr. Poppe wants to operate a "blind pig" (a speakeasy) while claiming to be a prohibitionist. He also accused Mr. Poppe of offering \$5.00 to everyone that voted for him. In addition to those charges he stated that Mr. Poppe promised appointments to positions under his administration. No proof of this and other allegations of improprieties were ever given. On the other hand Mr. Henry Volkmar promised to give Milbank a clean and wholesome administration.

In December of 1897, F. W. A. Poppe organized a company bound for the Gold Fields of the North. F. W. A. Poppe objected to the exorbitant rates being charged for transportation fares to the placer mines in Alaska by the two existing commercial companies. The sole object of his organization was to make the venture feasible for men of small means. Members of the company could make the trip for about \$350.00 from Milbank. This cost was broken down as follows:

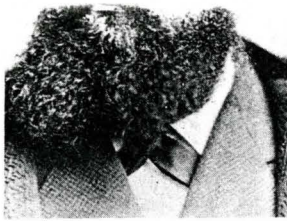
Fare to Pacific Coast — \$40.

Extra clothing, tools and one years provisions — \$100.

Fare from Tacoma to point of embarkation, including transportation of grub stake — \$200.

Incidentals — \$10.00, for a total of \$350.

Poppe's company left Revillo at 8:40 a.m. on Monday, Feb. 28th, 1898. Poppe had left a week earlier to make arrangements for embarkation from Seattle. Poppe also devoted some time to introduce a testing drill, which he had patented. With this instrument one could drill through frozen ground at a rapid rate and secure samples of dirt



F. W. A. Poppe

from Michigan. Those men making the trip were as follows:

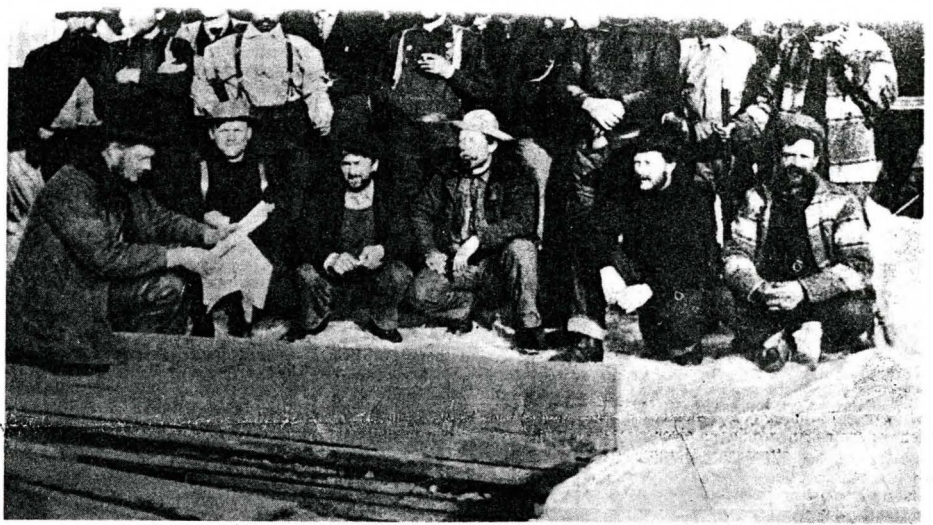
L. P. Ranous, L. Hebert, E. Sanford, Kole Bundy, Charles Foss, W. Pepke, Orin T. Clark, William Hiblou, Carl Scotty, J. H. Eastman, Charles Overby, S. C. Ayers, Ed Myron, Charles Kemper, M. C. Matson, A. E. Braddock, August Templeton, Andrew Faff, D. K. Danielson, Ole Koervenmon, James Loma.

Ole Oslison, Ivar Strand, P. A. Kitsum, Ole Anderson, A. S. Anderson, Frank Heins, J. P. Johnson, Niles Hoagland, Mr. Dunmer, Mr. Kank, Mr. Hauer, John Stewart.

On March 6, 1898, the 34 men from the Milbank and surrounding areas set sail for the Copper River in Alaska on the maiden voyage of the steamer Valencia, which had been purchased in New York by the Pacific Whaling Company. The sailing of the Valencia with the Poppe party aboard was a front page item on the March 20, 1898 issue of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. A 5 1/2" x 4 1/2" picture of the steamer was included in the article. It's caption read: "STEAMER VALENCIA which on her first trip, carried the largest number of passengers that ever left on a single steamer for Copper River. Between Mutiny among her passengers and severe storms, she had a most exciting trip."

The Valencia landed on March 14, 1898, at Prince William Sound. Private letters from some of the men aboard gave this account of the eight-day trip north. There were 590 passengers aboard, including the Poppe party. They also had 23 horses, two oxen and 28 dogs aboard. Shortly after leaving Seattle they encountered the first of two storms. The storm was a severe one and drew the ship off course for 24 hours. After the storm had let up and they had managed to straighten the ship back on course, they hit another storm on Saturday night which was even more severe than the first one.

This storm caused the livestock to



**POPPE PARTY** — This photo shows the entire Poppe party that made its way to the gold fields of Alaska. The number of men in the party was to diminish, as some returned home and others died.

However, they never actually came to blows, as the Captain was true to his word and furnished better food. He did so even though he caused a shortage before the end of the voyage.

After the storms were over, it was smooth sailing until they reached Valdes. The Captain refused to anchor where the party could unload the boat and made an attempt to anchor on an island some six miles from Valdes. This would have cost the party \$10 apiece or \$6,000 to hire their belongings taken to shore in small boats. The passengers refused to land and waited two days before they went out and were taken to Valdes. On Wednesday, March 16, they left Orca where they lay for 36 hours waiting for the tide to rise. On March 17, they arrived at Valdes, but could not unload their baggage as they were detained on an island of floating ice.

On Saturday, March 19 they finally reached Port Valdes. They unloaded their freight after waiting for lighters (small flat bottom boats) to come from below as there was no dock at Valdes. It took two days to completely land their goods.

William Hiblou was the first man in the Poppe party to return to Milbank from Alaska. He was compelled to abort the trip on account of an attack of

others bought a horse, paying \$500 for it and went on, while Sanford, Clark, Hebert, Ranous, Steward and Foss took their baggage and started without the aid of horse or mule.

It can be better estimated as to the amount of hard work the party was subjected to when you remember that it was 28 miles from the foot to the top of the glacier and in order to get all of the goods to the summit it was necessary for each man to make 12 trips. Therefore traveling 12 miles to get his goods one mile. Considering this distance traveled by the party, it is not surprising that it took the boys almost 30 days to cross this dangerous glacier.

Mrs. Ranous received two letters from her husband. One was dated June 26, 1898, while the party was at Lake Margaret and another dated July 4 when they reached the Klutena River. The party built their boats on Lake Margaret and made a successful 30-mile voyage of which 20 miles were over rapids. The letter stated that getting down these rapids, many of the prospectors who had preceded them lost their outfits.

Mr. Poppe and his party had already reached the Copper River, stored most of their provisions and gave most the

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During the winter the thermometer ranged from 40 to 60 degrees below zero most of the time. When the scurvy commenced to work havoc among the prospectors, a large number died from this disease and a general exodus took place. Many selling their provisions, supplies and guns for anything they could get and fleeing from the country. So that of the thousands who last year went into the Copper River district scarcely any now remain.

While colors of gold were found in many places none in paying quantities were discovered and the climatic difficulties and over-flow of water and swollen conditions of the rivers and streams in the summer time made prospecting discouraging and hazardous. The scenery throughout the country is sublimely grand and life



elaborated about the Poppe family in 1885, 1888.

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I do not know when Helene Hartung came over from Germany and joined the Poppe family. The story I was told

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This storm caused the livestock to collide with one another and many legs were broken. It also caused the ship to roll badly because it was top heavy. The Captain then decided to kill the livestock and throw the animals all overboard along with their pens and hay, in an effort to save the ship.

The waves were rolling about 50 feet high and the passengers and crew decided that the situation at this point was getting dangerous. This storm lasted until midnight Sunday night. According to the Seattle P-I, the Captain reported that the men were all so frightened of the storm that many sat on their bunks with guns in hand, ready to shoot themselves in the event of the vessel going down, rather than have a drowning death. Ninety-nine percent of the passengers were seasick.

Other happenings aboard the boat arose when the passengers became disgruntled over the food. At that point, the passengers elected F.W.A. Poppe to act as their spokesman and demanded better provisions. Poppe told the Captain that if things didn't improve, the passengers would take over the ship's galley and do their own cooking. The Captain claimed that if this was attempted there would be some dead bodies lying around on the deck and to prove that he meant business his crew carried loaded guns.

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Mr. Poppe has had a very rough experience. Both in the trip to the interior, where hardships and laborous packing of supplies made the journey anything but a picnic; and on the return to the coast, when the arctic freezing and storms on the glacier required the utmost endurance and in which six of those who were with Mr. Poppe on the return gave up their lives and others lost limbs, hands and feet.

While on the glacier, Mr. Poppe with others, was compelled to burrow a cavern in the snow and remain there for three days and nights, not daring to

During the winter the thermometer ranged from 40 to 60 degrees below zero most of the time. When the scurvy commenced to work havoc among the prospectors, a large number died from this disease and a general exodus took place. Many selling their provisions, supplies and guns for anything they could get and fleeing from the country. So that of the thousands who last year went into the Copper River district scarcely any now remain.

While colors of gold were found in many places none in paying quantities were discovered and the climatic difficulties and over-flow of water and swollen conditions of the rivers and streams in the summer time made prospecting discouraging and hazardous. The scenery throughout the country is sublimely grand and life there during the summer months would be comparatively comfortable were it not for the pest of mosquitoes and gnats which make life a burden, and the bites of which are particularly poisonous.

Mr. Poppe states that the streams abound with the finest fish he ever ate; salmon and trout in seemingly inexhaustible quantities, along with whitefish, cod and halibut, while game is also plentiful. Besides the grandeur of the mountains, of which are active volcanos, the countryside is dotted with the most beautiful lakes, forests and marshes. The mountain sides are covered with a profusion of flowers, berries and currants of innumerable varieties."

Among some of the souvenirs Grandpa Poppe brought back with him was a very handsome seal skin in its natural state, a number of bear skins including one of a cinnamon bear and an ivory walrus tusk cribbage board that is now in my possession. When I was in Anchorage, Alaska, in Sept. of 1985, I purchased a couple of pieces of Pristine Ivory to be used for its repair. Pristine Ivory is the only type of Ivory that can be legally bought and sold by non-natives in Alaska. Natives sculpt many beautiful artifacts from white ivory that appears on the retail market.

They are popular items among the tourists. Ulu knives, the legendary knife of the arctic, are another popular item.



TENT-RESTAURANT — This tent served as the city restaurant in Valdes. This picture was taken on March 27, 1898.