

ROBERT MARSHALL  
Wiseman,  
Alaska.

October 6, 1930.

Dear Family et al:

I am now comfortably established in my Wiseman home. It consists of a 16 x 18 foot log cabin which I have rented from Martin Slisco, proprietor of the roadhouse. Martin is giving me the cabin, all the wood I need to burn and my dinners for sixty dollars a month. He is also giving me, free of charge, a great deal of devoted help and kindness in everything from getting me established to aiding me in my various studies. He is a walking encyclopedia in regard to the inhabitants of Wiseman and can tell me with equal facility the exact year any of them came to the Koyukuk or how many dogs each of the 76 adults owns.

When I was gone to the Arctic Divide, Martin fixed my cabin with an architectural device of his own invention. He ripped up dozens of cardboard cartons and completely shingled the outside of my cabin with this material. It gives the house a weird but unique appearance. Of practical concern, however, it furnishes an ideal insulation against the cold of the arctic winter. With the cabin freshly mudded in addition, new dirt shoveled on the roof and a fine, large heater, I am all set for 60 below.

If the outside is unique the inside is rather typical of the frontiersman's home. In size, as I have mentioned, it is 18 feet from the door to the rear end and 16 feet wide. On the south side, where it will admit the maximum possible sunlight, is a large window 64 inches long by 24 inches high. Through it I can look out across the still unfrozen Koyukuk river to a range of steep, rugged mountains all covered with snow. In the immediate foreground are the buildings of the roadhouse which really means hotel and community center. As you know the closest road (also the closest pavement, railway, or doctor) is 200 miles away airline and 1500 miles distant by the usual means of transportation, consequently the initial half of roadhouse is somewhat misleading.

The height of my cabin is 7 1/4 feet on the long sides and about a foot more in the center. The walls are all lined with canvas, which once was calcimined green but now has faded, under the influence of considerable moisture, to a dozen different shades of blue, green, gray and brown, all hodge-podge together. My walls, in good frontier style, have their sole pictorial ornamentation in the form of a large calendar advertising "Martin A. Pinska - Leading Clothier - Fairbanks, Alaska". This calendar shows a picture of an old she-bear and two cubs being stung by hornets and two hunters just coming up. It is entitled "The Surprise Party." There are also three maps on the

wall, but this is not quite in keeping with custom. In the very center of the room is the heater on which I cook my breakfast and lunch as well as using it to keep the cabin warm. There is a large rack above it for drying wet clothes.

As one faces the door my bunk is in the rear right-hand corner. It has a straw mattress which is fairly comfortable if one shakes it up every three days. Otherwise there develops a non-conformity between its topography and the outline of the human body. I will tell you what in the line of furnishings I see as I lie in my bed on a morning just before arising.

Immediately to my left, against the center of the rear wall, is a bureau with deep shelves instead of drawers. In it I keep all my inner apparel. My outer garments, instead of flying all around the room as is my usual habit, are hung neatly from seven hooks on the rear wall. I know those who have lived intimately with me, especially the family, Al Cline, Neil Hosley, Bob Weidman and Harry Gisborne, will be incredulous, but it is gospel truth. On top of the bureau is my portable orthophonic and my 30 precious records. In the left hand rear corner is a two decker bunk. The lower berth is all made up for any guest I may invite to spend the night with me. The upper one contains my camp equipment: 2 tents, 2 sleeping bags, 4 pack sacks, an air mattress, a pair of skis and an extra axe.

Starting forward along the left wall comes a high cabinet with seven shelves devoted, from top to bottom, to: medical and surgical equipment (grateful acknowledgment for selection hereby made to George Wislocki, Fliss Clothier, and Dr. Winkenwerder at Johns Hopkins), photographic equipment, psychological equipment, scientific apparatus (principally meteorological, ecological, and botanical), a still empty shelf, stationery and my mineralogical collection.

Beyond this cabinet come my three fuel boxes, one with paper and wood shavings for starting the fire, one with kindling and one with heavy wood. Over one of them hangs my Springfield, .30 rifle. In the left front corner is my bathroom table, as it were, with wash basin, water bucket, slop pail underneath, mirror on the wall and comb, toothbrush, etc. scattered around. Next to it, along the front wall, is my kitchen cabinet which carries dishes, cooking utensils and food. My reserve food supply I keep under the spare bunk but there is little of that since the store is only a two minute walk away.

The only highbrow feature of my entire apartment is found in the right front corner, where are situated my two book cases. The better one is of crude local construction, made of unvarnished boards hammered together so as to constitute four two-foot shelves. This bookcase is devoted to the humanities. Next to it is my scientific bookshelf which consists simply of two egg crates placed end on end.

The contents from which will be drawn my coming year's reading, contain the following books:

HUMANITIES BOOKCASE

Top shelf - biography and history

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Life of Sir William Osler                     | Cushing   |
| Life of Pasteur                               | Radot     |
| Life of John Marshall                         | Beveridge |
| Rise of the American Civilization             | Beard     |
| Decline of the West                           | Spengler  |
| Ordeal of Civilization                        | Robinson  |
| Strange Death of President Harding            | Means     |
| A History of Education during the Middle Ages | Graves    |
| The renaissance                               | Pater     |

Second shelf - Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy.

|                                 |                          |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Middletown                      | Lynd                     |
| Coming of Age in Samoa          | Mead                     |
| Humanity uprooted               | Hindus                   |
| The sexual life of savages      | Malinowski               |
| The Golden Bough                | Frazer                   |
| The Quest for Certainty         | Dewey                    |
| Pragmatism                      | James                    |
| The Philosophy of William James | James (edited by Kallen) |
| Humanism and America            | Foerster                 |
| The dance of life               | Ellis                    |
| Emergent evolution              | Morgan                   |
| Science and the modern world    | Whitehead                |
| The social contract             | Rousseau                 |
| Ethics                          | Spinoza                  |
| The republic                    | Plato                    |

Third Shelf - Fiction

|                          |              |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| Power                    | Feuchtwanger |
| Typhoon                  | Conrad       |
| Kristin Lavransdatter    | Undset       |
| The Magic Mountain       | Mann         |
| Jean Cristophe           | Rolland      |
| War and Peace            | Tolstoy      |
| Anna Karenina            | Tolstoy      |
| Pride and Prejudice      | Austen       |
| Nicholas Nickleby        | Dickens      |
| Swann's Way              | Proust       |
| Within a budding grove   | Proust       |
| Gargantua and Pantagruel | Rabelais     |
| Dorian Grey              | Wilde        |
| Mrs. Dalloway            | Woolf        |
| Erewhon                  | Butler       |

Fourth Shelf - Drama, Art, Poetry, Essays

|                              |                     |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Complete Works               | Shakespeare         |
| Plays                        | Euripedes           |
| Lyrical dramas               | Aeschylus           |
| Man and superman             | Shaw                |
| An anthology of world poetry | Edited by Van Doren |
| Outline of art               | Berpen              |
| Essays                       | Lucian              |

Science

|  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Minor surgery                                      | Christopher                       |
| Emergencies of general practice                    | Morse & Colcord                   |
| Essentials of physiology                           | Bainbridge & Monzies              |
| Applied anatomy                                    | Treves                            |
| A manual of individual mental tests<br>and testing | Bronner, Hoaly, Lowe,<br>Shinberg |
| The trauma of birth                                | Rank                              |
| Elements of scientific psychology                  | Dunlap                            |
| Social psychology                                  | Dunlap                            |
| Physics of the air                                 | Humphreys                         |
| Thermodynamics                                     | Lewis & Randall                   |
| Differential and integral calculus                 | Cohen                             |
| Calculus made easy                                 | Thompson                          |
| Medical biometry and statistics                    | Pearl                             |
| An introduction to the theory of<br>statistics     | Yule                              |
| The universe around us                             | Jeans                             |
| The plant in relation to water                     | Maximov                           |
| Growth in trees                                    | MacDougal                         |
| Geology applied to mining                          | Spurr                             |
| Government geological bulletins on northern Alaska |                                   |
| The friendly Arctic                                | Stefansson                        |

Now I will complete my interrupted circuit of the room by starting down the south or right wall. Just two feet from the bookcase my window commences and occupying the entire space in front of it is a large table 68 x 45 inches. On top of it are three large filing boxes, my stationery, a dictionary and -- Now, Al, Neil, Bob, Gis, Molly and Pacy who have worked on desks adjacent to me, don't faint! There is not a trace of the usual chaos of papers, books, magazines, gloves, snowshoe straps and the like, but an immaculately clean oilcloth surface whereon I can spread the work of the moment without having first to shovel clear a small space on which to set my papers.

Finally, leaving the desk we can return to the right rear corner to find me by this time jumping out of bed, running to the paper and kindling boxes, grabbing a handful of each, dumping them in the heater in efficient arrangement, striking a match and

igniting the more readily combustible fuel.

## II

So far I have described only my most immediate material surroundings which are of course the least important part of my life. I really ought to tell you something also about my human surroundings. The only trouble is that I don't know where to begin. There are 76 adults, white and eskimo, who make this community of Wiseman their headquarters and I already know all but six. Every single one of them stands out in my mind as a unique and interesting personality. Obviously it is impossible to tell you about all 70 in this letter so I guess I might as well take one at random and try to give you a little glimpse of him.

## III

I spent the other night with old George Eaton in his cabin on Nolan Creek. George is almost 70 and has lived pretty much alone for 33 years. He talked with me until after midnight, going backward to the thrilling days of '98 when he crossed White Pass in mid-winter on the trail to Dawson, going forward to his prospects for the coming winter in the hole which he and Smithy Wanamaker and Jess Allen have sunk on Four Below. George thought there might be pretty good money here, but he'd been prospecting for 33 years in the far north and he knew perfectly well that "gold is where you find it." George also explained to me, with ample reminiscent illustrations, what an exceptionally good carpenter and hunter he was and how his four dogs made the finest dog-team in the country.

After a six o'clock breakfast, while we were waiting for the dishwater to warm, George rummaged up for me all his store receipts for the past year, as I was anxious to obtain some figures on the cost of living in Wiseman. In the course of this task he came across a couple of rolled sheets of paper.

"Maybe, Bob," he said, "you'd be interested in this poem I wrote for one of the affairs they had at the Pioneers Hall. I never had any education, so it's not very much, so maybe you won't want to look at it."

Of course I was anxious to see it, so George handed this poem to me.

Setting alone in my cabin  
After crude supper was done  
Wondering why I never took life serious  
Why I turned it all into fun.

For the chances I had were many  
Poker was my game  
Had I led the right sort of life  
I might have won myself fame.

It was one day in Seattle  
The fairest of fair women I found  
And she knocked my heart for the count follows  
In the first and fatal round.

Our courtship was like a dream follows  
And after a couple of months hurried by  
We were happily wedded  
Neath Seattle's blue sky.

Well, that was the beginning of the end pals  
For my blood was still running hot  
I tried hard to forget the fast life  
But forgot it I could not.

I lost out on the swack parties  
The poker and crap games I missed  
The devil's deep voice called me  
And damned if I could resist.

I listened not to the pleading  
Of the little wife so loving and sweet  
Instead I trampled her heart down  
Under my very feet.

Soon after our separation  
To this Hell's cursed Alaska I came  
I was lucky playing poker  
So they boosted and passed my name.

Then I went to mixing with women  
The kind that know no shame  
And I lost like all men do  
Who endeavor to play that game.

The devil was my leader  
I obeyed each and every command  
And drank sported and gambled  
With the rest of the fallen band.

Now if I but had the power  
To turn life's stained pages back  
I wouldn't be setting here pondering  
In my dirty little old shack.

"Gee, that's fine, George," I said, "that's simply swell. I like especially those lines - over here - 'The devil's deep voice called me and damned if I could resist."

George's wrinkled face was all smiles.

"That's the part Mrs. Pingel didn't like at all, but it's the truest lines in the whole poem. Of course you understand that poem hasn't nothing to do with me really and there's a lot in there that isn't just so for anyone. A person has to change things a little to put them in poetry. But I'm atelling you, Bob, Alaska's broken up more lives than any god damn place in the world. There's Pete Dow and George Huey and myself and god almighty only knows how many thousands more in here lost their homes by coming to Alaska. Of course I've had some awfully good times in here but if I never came in I'd probably have a small fortune now and I'd have a wife yet and most likely children and something to look forward to. My brother and his wife lived together forty years and he told me they never had let anything unpleasant pass between them in all that time and I don't know why it would have been any different with us."

George got off the bed where he was sitting and went over to the wall. There was a badly faded picture hung there by a pin. He removed the pin and handed me the yellowish picture. It was of a woman sitting competently on horseback, a broad hat on her head, a confident expression on her face. She was not bad looking although her pug nose was a trifle too prominent.

"That's the woman that was my wife," George explained. "She sent me that picture after I came to Dawson. She was only sixteen when I married her and I was thirty. I hear some people say a man shouldn't marry a woman if she's more than ten years younger than him, but god damn it, that's all nonsense. Me and my wife, we were just as happy as could be for seven years. We lived on a farm near Scattle. My wife, she was a good one on the farm. Knew all about everything. We had some neighbors and they'd gone to college and one day when she first got there the woman come to call on my wife. We had a young bull and the woman pointed to him and said:

"'My, that's a fine cow you got, I bet you get lots of milk from her!'"

"My wife told me about it that night and she says: 'I've never been to college but at least I can tell a bull from a cow!'"

"But I wasn't satisfied. We had to work too hard, I thought. And then we had a baby girl and I wanted her nicely brought up. Well, it was late in 1897 that the reports come in of the big strikes in the Yukon country and I thought all I had to do was to go to Dawson and I could pick up a fortune in a few weeks' time. I thought surely I'd be back by fall, just loaded with gold. Then I was going in business in Scattle and it would be a much better life for my wife than on the farm.

"I left Seattle on February 14 and got to Dawson June 3. Well, I made good money right from the start. Not big money but good money. I could have made big money too. There were two brothers, Benson was their name, and they wanted me to go into partnership with them but I knew they were crooks and I didn't want to mix up with them. So when Jim Benson, he was the older one, came up and says:

"George, you're the best mechanic in the whole Dawson country, and I want you to come in with us on 17 Below as a partner," why then I says:

"You god damn dirty crook, I wouldn't work with you and your brother if you gave me the whole of the Klondike!"

"So I walked away and that next summer they took \$140,000. from that ground. But I went ahead and did nicely, only you see how it was, I didn't want to go home until I'd made a real stake, \$50,000. I set for myself. I would have made it too in a year or so. And then one day about three years after I came to Dawson I got a letter from a lawyer and he said my wife was suing me for divorce on the grounds of desertion and that I should come back if I wanted to defend myself.

"Well, I got so ~~mad~~ god damn mad I tore the letter up and I never answered the letter and I didn't write to my wife again for better than 15 years. But it really wasn't her fault after all. I found that out years later. There was a bunch of bastards, came back from Dawson to Seattle, and they went to my wife and filled her up with the god damnedest pack of lies you ever heard tell of. Told her I was living with another woman an' that I was 'runk all the time an' I don't know what all they didn't tell her. There wasn't a god damn word of truth in anything they said but you know some people aren't ever happy unless they're stirring up trouble. But of course my wife had no way of knowing it wasn't so and then there was the mail. Why, they'd think on the outside you could write a letter and get an answer inside a week and maybe it would be a year before I ever got her letter and maybe I wouldn't get it at all. Why, when I was building my boat on Lake Bennett in the spring of '98 there'd be fellows would come around and they'd tell you they was going out in a week and if you had any letters to send outside to have them ready in a week and they'd take them out to the post-office at Skagway for a dollar a letter. Well, maybe they would and maybe they'd just take them up the trail a couple of miles and bury them in the snow and they might be \$10,000 to the good. That was the way our mail worked in those days. So you can't tell, some of my letters might have gone that way and she never heard of me and with all those lies they gave her it wasn't her fault and it wasn't my fault neither.

"Well, I commenced going with the sports then, not much you understand because I still expected to make a fortune and come back and shake it in her face. And then I'd take my little daughter back with me. She was seven years old then and she used to write me letters all the time. She had a beautiful handwriting too, I'm atelling you."

George got up and unpinned another faded picture from the log wall of his cabin.

"This was her. She was seven years old when this was taken and a few weeks later she was drowned. Well, I never felt so terrible in all my whole life. Nothing seemed to amount to anything anymore. I just went crazy. Yes, Bob, I'd be a rich man today if she hadn't died. But I'd been thinking ever since my wife left me that every cent I made would be for my girl's benefit and when she died I just couldn't stand the thought of money no more. I just couldn't get rid of it fast enough. Why, I'm telling you, I gave away fifty dollar bills right out in the streets of Dawson.

"I'd always gambled a little but now I spent all my time gambling and I hoped I'd lose too. I went with the whores every night. Only I never went crazy like old Knute or Poss and paid them a thousand dollars just because they asked me. I've gone to bed with more god damn women than any man in all Alaska, I guess, but I never paid them more than their price. But they all liked me just as much as if I'd given them a fortune. I used to haul wood in Dawson right down the row and there wasn't a one who wouldn't come out and smile at me. When I was out to Anchorage in 1923 I went into a restaurant with Sam Dubin and Murray. All of a sudden a woman came and threw herself around my neck and pulled me one side to the counter and kissed and kissed me. She said to Murray and Dubin:

"I never thought I'd see this man again. He's the best dancer ever come into this north country. We were pals together in Dawson 25 years ago."

"And me not knowing her from a man only for the clothes she wore. But she told me her name was Sweet Marie and I kind of remembered the name. When I got ready to pay she wouldn't take a cent of my money but she took Dubin's and Murray's.

"You don't spent a cent in here today, boy!" she said.

"But there were hundreds of more like her. Some of the best looking women I ever saw in my life were in those old dancehalls. When Dawson was at its height you could go into a dancehall and find a hundred beautiful young women whom you'd have to travel days and days and days to find their equal outside. A woman who wasn't good looking, she just couldn't make a living, that's all. They were a pretty hard, cold-blooded lot but they had some wonderful points at that. Take the Oregon Mare, for instance. Why when they had that flu epidemic in Fairbanks she worked night and day nursing people who wouldn't even look at her when they got better. Aunt Kate - she was a wonderful singer you know - she used to offer her services free for the charitable entertainments in Dawson. She married Pantages, you know, and set him up in the show business and then when he got independent he treated her like I wouldn't treat a bitch dog. She used to come to me - you know how a woman sort of seems to like to confide in someone when she's in trouble - and she told me all about this Pantages."

George stopped and for perhaps a minute there wasn't a sound except his deep breathing and puffing on his pipe. Then he got up and knocked out the ashes.

"George," I queried, "have you ever met your wife again in all these years?"

George had started walking toward the stove but he wheeled around.

"Well, I guess I have. I was riding in a street car in Seattle along First Avenue when I was out in 1917 and I saw a woman on the street wave at me. I started to get off but she motioned me not to so I stayed on. I thought probably she'd made a mistake, you know, and took me for somebody else.

"A few days later I was walkin; along Pike Street and looking into a store window when a lady comes from behind and grabs my arm. She says: 'Do you know me?'

"Well, I was just about to tell her if I wanted any whores I knew where to go to find them and she needn't try to pick me up, when all at once I recognized it was my wife.

"'Will you talk with me', she says.

"'Certainly,' I says.

"So I took her into a moving picture show where we could sit and talk together quietly and she told me the whole story I was tellin; you about the lies that was told her and her never getting any letters from me. She was married again but she hadn't no children. She wanted me to come and meet her husband but I wouldn't do that. She said he was a fine man but if she was on her deathbed I know she'd call for me. There's something comes between a man and woman when they've lived together, I don't care under what circumstances they separate, that never passes away."

By this time the water on the stove was boilin; and we had to add some cold water before we could wash the dishes.

Bob

I regret the typographical error which appeared in Bob's letter of September 23rd. The word "malacistic" should have read "masochistic."

Ruth Marshall Billikopf.