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Wiseman
Alaska

November 5, 1930.

Dear Family et al:

Election Day is one of the three great holidays of the year in Wiseman. From all over the hills, for more than thirty miles distant, the miners head for town, less to do their duty as citizens than to enjoy the social hilarity. The diggings centering around Wiseman are so widely scattered, the extreme distance between Jack Rooney's hole at Rooney Lake and Dutch Henry's sniping on the South Fork being over 70 miles, that many men who have been in the country for over quarter of a century have never visited their friends' operation. But the general congregation in Wiseman at Election Day, Christmas and Fourth of July furnishes the opportunity to keep in touch with one another and to exchange ideas and thus helps to make this geographically scattered community such a closely knit one socially.

As much as a week before Election Day the first man drifted in, and from then on by ones and twos and threes they came, some of the nearer ones not until the day of voting. In town they would group together, and talk on many matters, but it was interesting to observe that the subject of most animated conversation was their work. There are nine outfits of from 2 to 4 men sinking holes this winter, and eight other single men going it alone. By Election Day most had started their holes already and there was eager inquiry and recital in regard to what sort of digging was encountered, how deep it was going to be to bed rock, how the hole lay with reference to the position of the river channel in the geologic age when the gold was deposited, whether there would be cross-cutting, if it would be necessary to timber. There would be discussion of how the gold might have washed down, different geologic theories would be expressed and sometimes sharply contested, reasons would be advanced why such a spot should be just as good as one 300 feet away where $80,000. had been taken out. But they all knew it was a great gamble and that the hard winter's work might not yield them enough to pay for the clothing they wore out.

It all reminded me very much of scientists discussing their research. Only I think perhaps there was more genuine interest and the person who was being told about another's work was not so eager to inject at any cost a recital of his own accomplishments.

Voting took place at the Pioneer Hall. The polls opened at eight in the morning and closed at seven at night. There were three judges: Harry Foley, a Republican because his father had been a Democrat; George Eaton, a Democrat because he and Jim Ham Lewis had years ago been delegates to the same democratic state convention in Washington; and Albert Ness, a Socialist because he never could see how a person could believe in anything else. The voters straggled in all day long and there was much good natured banter, between themselves and the judges. The most important election was for territorial representative to Congress, the candidates being Wickershaw, republican, and Grigsby, democrat, and Wickershamites and Grigsbyites violently but good naturedly urged the merits of their candidates. But nobody took the election seriously and I think the general sentiment was well expressed by the following random remarks:

"It's a sure bet anyway that neither of them cares what happens to us."

"Whatever way the vote goes, things will be just the same as ever on the Koyukuk when it's all over and the world will keep turning once in 24 hours."

"All these politicians have the same motto: follow me and you'll wear diamonds, otherwise I'll put you in jail."

"Whichever one's elected, we know both of them ought to be in jail."

After supper the judges counted the ballots. It would have made Senator Capper think he was in Utopia could he have been there to find that 50 out of 62 potential voters had cast their ballots and that one of them had snowshoed 33 miles to do this while two others had come 31 miles by dogteam. But the crowd of 20 who gathered to watch the counting of the ballots didn't have the proper attitude for Utopian citizens. It is true they cheered violently when a vote for their candidate was reported and jeered at the supporters of the rival candidacy, but it was all a highly flippant procedure. It reminded me very much of the cheering we used to indulge in during our old sandpile horse-races when Fastest Fawn or Turkish Coffee or Girl of the Gas Mines or John B. Waterhole or one of the other imaginary steeds would make a great spurt.

After the votes were counted there was a meeting of Igloo No.8, Pioneers of Alaska. This is the one fraternal order of the community but unlike most organizations of that sort it is almost completely democratic. Anybody who came to Alaska prior to January 1, 1906 can join. There are no secrets and no member is ever favored, no non-member ever discriminated against for that reason. All its property is shared by the whole community, members and non-members alike. This includes a hall where the biggest dances are staged, a large phonograph, a library and a fund for taking care of the sick who are broke. Since there is no civil organization in the community the Pioneers function as a voluntary cooperative for performing many of the tasks usually done by the local government. They supervised the building of the airplane field, raised funds to buy a wireless station, protested to the Post Office Department on the abominable mail service. It was the result of this latter action which principally occupied this meeting which I was invited to attend. Also to my surprise they elected me as an honorary member.

Shortly after that meeting was over, at about 10 o'clock, the Election Day dance commenced. The Hall was crowded, people sitting on chairs and benches all the way around three sides of the 25 x 40 foot room. On a platform at the fourth end was the large orthophonic phonograph which provided the music. At eleven o'clock when the dance was at its peak there were 45 people present, 28 men, 10 women, 7 children. The dances were delightfully varied compared with outside: not only the standard fox-trots and waltzes but also two-steps, schottisches, heel-and-toe polkas and one swell square dance. But best of all were the native dances.

At about mid-night Big Jim, the uncrowned king of the Koyukuk eskimos, jumped up at the close of one of the fox-trots and said in a

loud voice: "Now it's our turn." At this the whites all clapped and everybody around me whispered what I already knew that they were going to stage a Kobuk dance. The four older eskimo women, who had been dancing the white dances continuously since ten, filed out to the dressing room. Jim sat down by his big base drum which had been sent him from outside and Harry Snowden and Jonas sat on either side of him. This, I was told was a very small group. They used to have as many as 20 natives dancing together.

Then Jim started beating the drum, lightly at first, while he and Harry and Jonas sang together at the top of their lungs a song which at first sounded like just the wildest sort of cacophony. But pretty soon you noticed a strange rhythm to everything and the sense of discord vanished. In perfect time to the rhythm Nakukluck, Kobuk Mary, Keepuk and Mrs. Jonas entered the room, all dressed up in their most magnificent parkas of caribou, sheep, wolf, wolverine and otter fur pieced together in fanciful design with animal tails hanging like tassels all over the back. They swayed back and forth to the music, arms moving gracefully in slow motion. They formed a semicircle on the floor around the men who were now singing louder than ever. Jim kept beating the drum harder and harder. Suddenly Harry got up and went through the wildest gyrations, jumped up and down, threw his arms from side to side, twisted his body and emitted the most dismal yells. But everything here too was done in perfect time to Big Jim's beating and singing. Indeed they all followed Jim as carefully as an orchestra would follow its conductor. After Harry was through Jonas jumped up and danced and then Harry returned again. In all the variety of contortions through which the two men and in a later dance Jim went they consistently held their bodies in cubistic shapes: the arms and legs as they jumped around would be held either straight or at right angles but never in a curving way. The women on the other hand kept always in harmonious curves as they swayed back and forth, going through a sort of muscle dance. Very much as in their every day lives they formed a background for the activities of the men.

But all this dancing was not meaningless like the white dances. The song which Jim sang as well as the dance had been made up by himself and represented a sort of history of his people's migration from the Kobuk to the Koyukuk. I could understand quite a lot of the phrases and next evening Jim explained me what I did not understand. You may be disappointed in the realism of the story. Before reciting it I must add that the words of the story were continually interspersed with "Ya! Ya! Ya!" and "Hanga! Hanga! Hanga!" , much as we sometimes sing tra-la-la-la and doo-doo-ddo-doo. Here in substance is the song which Jim sang.

"I was out hunting all through the long sun and when I got back I found my people were gone. But I found a few old people still left and they told me that everyone had gone to the Koyukuk. So I came across the mountains and I found them living at Coldfoot with the white people. I was all dirty so I asked for water to wash my hands and when I had washed they gave me food to eat and coffee to drink. I was very happy because I knew my people had come to a good place where there were lots of caribou and moose and sheep and bear and fox and lynx and plenty of fish and trees to build houses. And all the white people were very good to them. When Christmas came we went up to Wiseman and we danced and sang and talked and ate at the roadhouse and had a very fine time."

All this acted out elaborately: amazement at finding people

gone, tedious journey to Koyukuk, washing hands, drinking coffee, pleasure.

At one o'clock everyone repaired to the roadhouse where a lunch of coffee, cake and sandwiches was served. About two the dancing recommenced and an hour later there were still 27 people at the hall. When the dance finally broke up at 6:35 A. M. there were still 16 of us left. These included five women who had danced every dance all night, Mrs. Jonas in addition having participated in the Kobuk dances. Mamie Green had spent the usual busy day which the mother of three young children in this country must inevitably spend; Mrs. Wilson had walked up seven miles from Emma Creek through the snow; while the other two, Mabel Marsan and Lucy Jonas, had been occupied all day cooking dog-feed and going to school respectively. Of the men who stuck it through Knute Ellingson, Hughie Boyle and George Eaton were all about 70 or older. Despite their age Knute and George dance beautifully, in fact they're the two best dancers in Wiseman. As a matter of fact, it was the older men who kept things going, Victor Neck, John Harvey, and I being the only ones under 50 to stick it out. Harry Snowden, who went thru all the violent eskimo gyrations, also hung on through the last fox-trot.

II

November 18

I am just back from a ten day trip up the Middle Fork to help Jess Allen and Kenneth Harvey haul in their sheep meat which they shot this fall, to see the country and to continue my study of tree growth at timberline. Jess is 51 and despite the loss of an arm is one of the best woodsmen in camp. Kenneth, only 29, is the second youngest man in Wiseman. This was the first real mushing (i. e. dog-sled travelling) I had ever done for serious purposes. We had two sleds with five dogs for one and six for the other. We took turns driving the sleds and running ahead to pick the route. Our journey was 62 miles up the Middle Fork to the last big forks in the river, within about 15 miles of the Arctic Divide. Here Jess and Harv had cached eight sheep. It took us three days to make the trip out and six to come back. The first night we had an old trapper's cabin for shelter, after that we had only a tent with a stove which we carried along with us.

My conclusion in regard to mushing without trail or prepared shelter may be summed briefly in the remark that it's the most damnably uncomfortable work I know but that there are moments of exhilaration which you wouldn't exchange for anything. Most of you can drop the letter here but a few with a penchant for detail may care to read further.

The first reason why this mid-winter mushing is such damnable work is that whenever the going is real heavy, which means whenever there's deep snow or gravel bars to cross, you have to get out yourself and pull with the dogs. On this trip such work involved about a third of the distance and it seems that psychologically as well as philogenetically man is too far removed from the beasts of burden to get much joy out of such labor. The second reason is that wherever the going is just ordinarily heavy you are supposed to run along behind the sled so as not to overburden the dogs. Its nothing to trot several miles through the light snow this way without stopping. The third reason is that whenever the going is real good on glare ice and it's perfectly legitimate to hop on the sled and ride, in a few minutes the wind and the 25 below zero atmosphere and your previous per-

spiration combine to make you so cold you're even more uncomfortable than in the first or second misery. In addition there are such trivial annoyances as snow blowing in your face and the depression of starting out before the short November daylight commences and appreciating all day that when you're done travelling you've got four hours of tight rustling to get camp set up, wood cut, dogfeed cooked and supper prepared. And then of course there are overflows and they really rise above the class of trivial offenses. You see when it gets real cold the river at places freezes solidly to the bottom. This dams the water which is flowing under the ice all winter and it backs up and finally flows out over the top of the ice by way of some crack or airhole. Thus you find these overflows of water on top of the ice. Often they're glazed over so that you think they're good ice until you break through. If you are wearing shoe-packs and the water doesn't go over you're all right. If you're wearing moccasins, which are much warmer, or if it does go over the top, your feet get soaked and then you've got to stop just as fast as you can, build a fire and dry out. Most of the people who have lost their feet in this north country and many who have frozen to death had their catastrophe start on an overflow.

But now for the exhilaration, and after all one minute of that makes up for an hour of the other. Sometimes it comes standing on the back of your sled, in the few minutes before you get too cold, while you're flying over smooth ice and living in the rhythm of your trotting team. Sometimes it comes when you look up suddenly and notice some great towering limestone crag, for the Middle Fork is bounded by any number of rock faces from 500 to 1500 feet high. Sometimes it comes when you feel yourself overcoming the distance between you and your destination, overcoming the cold, overcoming the hard travelling, overcoming 60 miles of an uninhabited and seldom traversed wilderness. Sometimes it comes over a longer period, as that morning when we made that last lap on our journey to the Upper Forks. There was perfect weather for once, the going was good, and we could observe the whole pageant of a midwinter Arctic morning growing out of a midwinter Arctic night. It was full starlight when we started, heading straight on the course toward Polaris. After half an hour the black sky in which the stars twinkled brightly and coldly commenced to turn gray and the stars slowly faded. The gray became faintly blue and then a single snowy peak in the northwest showed a tip of pink. So gradually you could hardly notice it advancing, the pink spread from peak to peak until all the summits to the north and west were colored. The pink kept creeping down the slopes, changing so imperceptibly in color that it was a surprise when you noticed the pink was all gone and the whole mountainsides were bathed in a golden spray, craggy peaks, snowfields, dark spruce timber, everything. And then all of a sudden, after a whole morning of shadow, there was a wide bend in the river and at high noon we drove out into the sunlight.

We reached our destination at the Upper Forks that afternoon shortly after one. It was getting constantly colder and we couldn't work hard enough setting up camp to keep warm. We had to stop frequently and warmed our feet and hands by the fire where the cornmeal was cooking for the dogs. But by 5:30 all the chores were completed and we retired to the well-heated tent for supper and repose.

That night of November 10 probably most of you were spending comfortably in steamheated rooms in the heart of steamheated cities. That night near the arctic divide, though the thermometer did drop to 40 below and we had only a thin canvas shelter, we probably spent scarcely less

comfortably. But ours was a single oasis of warmth and comfort in thousands of square miles of freezing wilderness. That same night, eight miles below us, Albert Ness was forced by darkness to stop and he shivered through a miserable night by an inadequate siwash fire.

That night also marked the tragic conclusion in the romance of Martin's cousin, Leo Slisco. Leo's father had made a small fortune at Nome. With plenty of money and unusually good looks Leo had run riot among the chorus girls of Frisco, had married and gotten divorced from a prominent West Coast actress and a night club queen, had twice contracted and been cured of syphilis and was now an advanced dope addict. Broke, sick, just over his second divorce, he had determined to come to Wiseman and his cousin and start life again. Reaching Fairbanks the authorities jugged him a month for disorderly conduct while under the influence of hop and refused to allow him to come to the Koyukuk by plane. So he set out over the 320 mile trail from Nenana. There was a roadhouse 18 miles out. Leo apparently had gone 17 of them when it must have gotten dark and certainly very cold. Inadequately clothed, unused to the north country, dissipated I can perfectly picture the cold horror which must have seized him when darkness came on and no shelter was reached. He probably felt that he had travelled at least 30 miles and must surely be on the wrong trail, that his only hope for life was to return. Anyway, when one mile from shelter he wheeled around and backtracked. Next morning they picked him up by the side of the road in a sitting posture, frozen stiff. Like so many others he had only sat down to rest a minute which suddenly became eternity.

Next morning from our shelter Harvey set out straight up the mountain opposite camp in quest of more sheep. Jess and I started upstream. We had gone a mile and a half when Harv came running up with the news that Ness had just driven into camp, with a message for Jess to return at once because Mrs. Allen was sick. We all returned to camp and found there was nothing critically wrong but that her mind was affected quite badly. She had shown traces of insanity on and off for the past two years, apparently a complication of going through change of life.

The way this case was handled by the community was typical of how such emergencies are met on this frontier. It was essential for Jess to be gotten, everyone around town could see that. So Marsans volunteered their dogs and sled and Albert Ness volunteered a week of his time and considerable misery and set out after us. As I have already related, he had to siwash out one night in the bitter cold. But all this was considered merely the normal neighborliness of the frontier and Albert expected no thanks and would have been indignant at any offer of money.

It was too late for Jess to start back to Wiseman that day but next morning he was off before daylight and with six dogs making his empty sled fly down the river he reached town by night. Meanwhile, there being nothing to be done then, I set out again for the divide between the Koyukuk and Chandalar. The two streams were but three quarters of a mile apart and were connected by a very low pass rising only 50 feet above the Chandalar Valley and 500 above the Koyukuk. It was bleak and windswept this frigid mid-November afternoon and with the thermometer still below 30, snapping photographs with a cut-film camera was a chilly pastime, to put it mildly. But there was a joy in sliding on the ice of the Chandalar 40 miles above where any other Wiseman white man had been, a joy in seeing the rugged arctic divide only 10 miles away, lit by the last sunlight of the short

afternoon and especially an exhilaration in coasting 500 feet into the Koyukuk.

Returning to camp I stopped at the last timber. By dint of much pressure and at the price of numerous shivers and some profanity I bored nine different trees. The ages and distribution of the timber gave beautiful confirmation to my theory on the advance of the northern timberline. When I got to camp I just had time before darkness to cruise a quarter acre sample plot in the heavy timber surrounding us. It would be quite disconcerting to those who hold the commonly accepted theory of a stunted northern timberline to learn that just a mile and a half away were trees 18 inches in diameter.

Albert Ness stayed with us to help haul the meat back to Wiseman. It took us six days to return because the loads were so heavy we had to double haul more than half the distance, that is split the load and haul twice over the same ground. It was hard work but the nights in camp were very pleasant. Ness is a remarkably well read man and his interests are wide. Harvey loves to talk about guns and hunting better than anything else, but when you get him off those subjects he has very interesting ideas. The following topics jotted down one evening are typical of the subject matter of our conversations in which I always let them take the lead.

1. Houdini
2. Heredity vs. environment
3. Genes and heredity.
4. Health.
5. Medicine.
6. Birth Control.
7. Free discussion of sex essential.
8. All of us agnostics.
9. Dogs.
10. Creasy, the one negro in the Koyukuk
11. Race prejudice.
12. What fine people the eskimos are.
13. Terrible treatment of Indians outside.
14. A hunting experience of Harvey.
15. Thrilling experience of Ness during 30 years in northern wilderness.
16. Geography of upper Bettles River
17. Spiritualism
18. Psychoanalysis.
19. Protons and electrons.
20. President Harding.
21. Rottenness of American government today.
22. Life in here happier than outside
23. Mining.
24. An experience of Ness breaking thru ice.
25. General Miles.
26. Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington
27. Woodward's biography of Washington praised by Ness.
28. Hypocrisy and narrowness of religion.
29. Crime due to example of wealthy.
30. Big companies rule lives of employees.

This letter will go out in a day or two by plane. Mrs. Allen was judged insane last night by jury as required by the laws of Alaska, and consequently the Territory can now take her to the sanitarium at Morningside for proper treatment. It is a perfectly clear case of paraphrenia and she is obviously in the second stage where the patients have well-systematized delusions of persecution. She thinks there is an elaborate plot to poison the people of Wiseman, one by one, to break up the school, and especially to do away with her because she has fought so hard to keep the school here. She has also done a lot of reading lately on thought transference and I was rather flabbergasted when I returned to town to find that I had flashed her psychic messages 62 miles down the river that there was gasoline in the coal

oil, strychnine in the prunes and arsenic in the flour.

Jess is all broken up but he has sense enough to see that it is imperative that she be taken where she can get treatment. He comes in to see me two or three times a day and having chosen me as the person on whom to unburden has unfolded a most poignant psychological tragedy in which a domineering family, suppression of sexual information, a lonely childhood, absence of any friends, terrible fear of being an old maid and abhorrence of sexual intercourse have played a part. All this has happened in spite of the fact that Mrs. Allen has the best formal education of anyone in Wiseman with two years of graduate work at Wellesley on top of a four year college course, and in spite of the fact that her brother, Dr. C. is head of one of the biggest medical clinics on the West Coast.

It was important for the hearing last night to get jurors who had modern ideas in regard to insanity. Again it was typical of this frontier spirit that when I walked up to Hammond River yesterday to ask Verne Watts, Victor Neck and Harvey to come down, they dropped their work immediately and walked the six snowy miles to town and then after the hearing at 9:30 at night trudged the six long miles back, all without the slightest feeling of having done anything heroic.

Bob.