



WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD  
FROM A PHOTOGRAPH LOANED BY  
HIS SON FREDERICK W. SEWARD

# *THE ROMANCE OF AMERICAN EXPANSION*

*BY H. ADDINGTON BRUCE*

*SEVENTH PAPER*

## *WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD AND THE ALASKA CESSION*

IN studying the territorial growth of the United States, it may not be amiss to remind the reader, the most conspicuous fact hitherto encountered has been the inevitability of the different acquisitions. The first migratory movement—the movement across the Alleghanies, following necessarily from economic stress and the genesis of a bold, enterprising, and restless people—was certain soon or late to give rise to a struggle for mastery of the Mississippi, the great mid-continent waterway. In good season a peaceful solution for the problem thus created was found in the Louisiana Purchase, transferring from the French to the American nation not only the Mississippi but also the enormous area to the westward watered by the Mississippi and its affluents. Then, and equally of necessity, was presented the question of acquiring the one piece of territory to the east of the Mississippi still held by alien hands, and constituting a serious menace to the welfare of the United States. This, again, was happily settled by the Florida Purchase, though only after the use of intimidative methods, amply justified, however, by the principle of self-defense and self-preservation.

Texas came next, an acquisition not in itself necessarily inevitable, but rendered so by the stupendous folly of the Mexican authorities in permitting the colonization of that outlying and practically unoccupied province by the representatives of a nation stronger than theirs and differing from theirs in race,

institutions, and points of view. When the inevitable conflict arose, the National instinct for expansion was, as has been shown, powerfully reinforced by a sectional desire, and Texas, though not without a severe struggle, became a part of the American Republic. Meantime, and likewise under the secondary stimulus of sectional interests, agitation had begun looking to anticipation of the inevitable by carrying the westward movement still further forward—across the Rocky Mountains and down to the shores of the Pacific. As yet the Nation had not fully entered into its own, and vast expanses of internal territory were still to be occupied before a second transmontane migration would become necessary; but there were certain impatient souls who, rightly enough, urged that action should not wait on necessity. The outcome of their urging was, on the one hand, the occupation of Oregon, to which the United States was rightfully entitled, and, on the other, the seizure of California, to which she had no title at all, but which in the course of time, given a continuance of the conditions then existing in that remote section of Mexico, would almost certainly have accrued to her by force of “silent immigration.” In any event, the acquisition of California speedily became an established fact, and with it the “manifest destiny” of the American people to pass from sea to sea, and to assume headship in the western hemisphere, found fulfillment.

Nor, with the instinct for expansion

thus strengthened and quickened by the unparalleled success and rapidity of the transcontinental movement, was it reasonable to expect that no further effort would be made to extend the dominions of the United States. On the contrary, everything pointed to such additional effort; with this difference, that while it had hitherto been comparatively easy to map out in advance the successive steps taken, it was impossible longer to predict in just what quarter future acquisitions would be found. That, clearly, would depend altogether upon new needs and wisely grasped opportunities, the element of inevitability remaining only so far as concerned the certainty that the Nation would not rest content with what had already been obtained. There were, of course, those who essayed the prophet's rôle, variously indicating Mexico, the West Indies, Canada, and even mid-Pacific and trans-Pacific territories as the next to be absorbed in the growth of the United States. But few were prepared for what actually occurred—the acquisition by purchase of the region in the extreme northwest known as Russian America. Remote, difficult of access, and generally believed to be worthless and uninhabitable, this was regarded by most Americans of the time as the least desirable of all possible territorial additions. Yet, thanks to the foresight, energy, and enthusiasm of a true statesman, William Henry Seward, it was the first to follow the Mexican Cession and the Gadsden Purchase.

Seward, for his part, occupies a unique place in the story of American expansion. The acquisition of Russian America is more directly attributable to him than is any other acquisition to the moving spirit most closely associated with it. And, unlike the others in our gallery, he was not born and brought up in an atmosphere peculiarly favorable to the development of expansionistic sentiments, but was, on the contrary, distinctly a self-made expansionist. His early years were spent on a farm in New York State, where he enjoyed few educational or other broadening advantages; and thereafter, until well past the age of forty, his interests were essentially State interests, although the eminence he rapidly

attained in the councils of the Whig party, which he joined on its formation in 1832, inevitably widened his outlook. When, however, he began seriously to consider the future of the United States as a territorial as well as a political entity, the heritage of a naturally exuberant imagination, together with the influence of the teachings of his first political idol, John Quincy Adams, made itself felt; and he promptly ranged himself among the adherents of the Jefferson-Adams-Jackson-Benton school of aggrandizement. On only one important point did he differ from them—stoutly opposing territorial growth by the aid of military conquest. "I want no enlargement of territory," he once wrote, "sooner than it would come if we were content with a masterly inactivity. I abhor war as I detest slavery. I would not give one human life for all the continent that remains to be annexed."

With this reservation, not one among the many apostles of the doctrine of "manifest destiny," whose voices were so loudly raised in the years immediately preceding the acquisition of Texas, Oregon, and California, surpassed Seward in preaching territorial expansion. With Jefferson, he "viewed the Confederacy as the nest from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled." With Benton, he beheld the American people continuing their westward movement until they had fairly established themselves on the Asiatic shores of the Pacific. At one time, in imagination, he located the "ultimate capital" of the United States in the "valley of Mexico," where "the glories of the Aztec capital would be renewed." And even when he "corrected this view," possibly from a growing distrust of the advantages to be gained from absorption of the restless and unruly Latin-American republics, Seward still placed the "future and ultimate central seat of power" in such a quarter—"at the head of navigation on the Mississippi River and on the Great Lakes"—as to indicate his belief that the Stars and Stripes would one day wave over the entire continent from the frozen Arctic to the tropical Caribbean.

Nor did he exhaust his expansionistic

sentiments in flamboyant generalities and high-sounding predictions. To the best of his ability, and perhaps more earnestly than any other builder of the prospective American Empire, he toiled to make his dreams come true. When he was first in a position to turn his energies in this direction—with his election to the United States Senate in 1849—the growing contest over slavery claimed and held his attention, to continue uppermost in his heart and mind until Appomattox brought it to its dra-

Indian Islands of St. John and St. Thomas. It was even reported that he had it in mind to annex a part of China; and that this rumor did not altogether do him injustice is evident from a letter he wrote to Cassius M. Clay. "Russia and the United States," he warned Clay, "may remain good friends until, each having made a circuit of half the globe in opposite directions, they shall meet and greet each other in regions where civilization first began, and where, after so many ages, it has become now lethar-



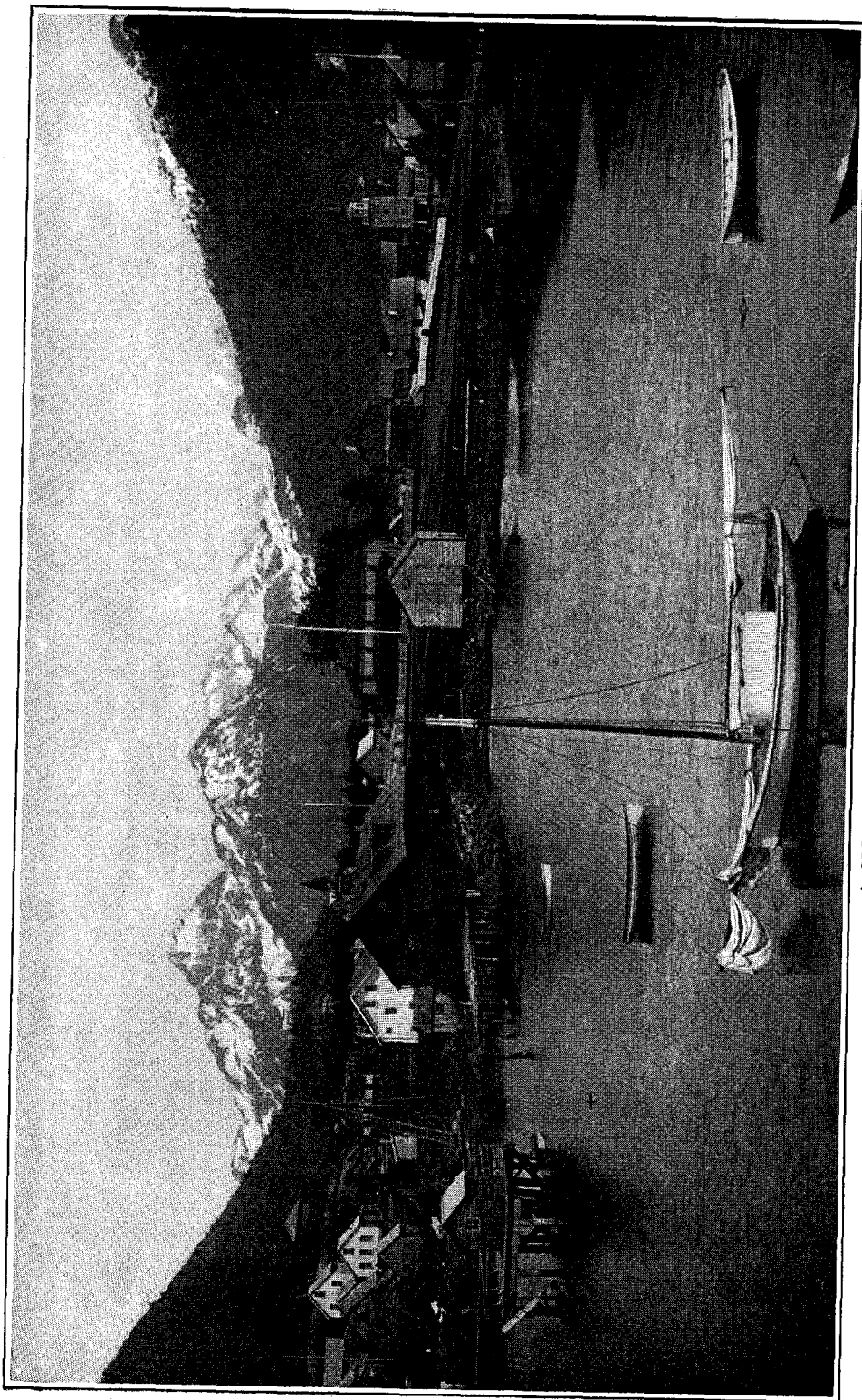
THE OLDEST GREEK CHURCH IN AMERICA, AT SITKA

matic close. Then, as Secretary of State under President Johnson, he hastened to promote his darling project of creating a greater America than even that which had been born of the irresistible sweep to the Pacific. All over the world he cast his eye, seeking here and seeking there for territory which the United States might advantageously possess.

He had all the fire, one might almost say the recklessness, of the true enthusiast. Besides Russian America, the concrete additions which he endeavored to make included Hawaii, Cuba, Hayti, San Domingo, and the Danish West

Indic and helpless." With respect to the Danish islands he actually succeeded in negotiating a treaty of cession, but this failed of ratification in the United States Senate, chiefly owing to Congressional animosity to the Johnson Administration. The same influence played a part in paralyzing his other efforts, and to such an extent that, for all his ambition and high hopes, when he stepped out of office he could boast of but one territorial achievement—and that an achievement held in scorn and derision by the vast majority of his fellow-countrymen. To-day, time having proved that Seward was right and the Nation wrong,





A GLIMPSE OF SITKA FROM THE SEA

it stands as an enduring monument to his fame.

He did not, however, originate the idea of acquiring Alaska. That was broached as early as the Oregon debates of 1846, with the suggestion that, by insisting on possession of the whole of Oregon, and persuading Russia to sell her territory in the north, the United States would secure an unbroken coast line from the Arctic to California. Tradition has it that the Russian Government was at that time approached on the subject. Certainly a few years later a definite offer of five million dollars was made in an informal way by Senator Gwin, of California. Gwin's proposal elicited the interesting information that, while the Czar's Government deemed the sum named too low for consideration, it would be willing to open negotiations so soon as the Russian Minister of Finance could look into the question. But nothing was done at the time, and, the Civil War soon following, the fact that tentative steps had been taken was quite forgotten until chance directed Seward's attention to Alaska in 1866.

For years there had been friction between Russian and American traders and fishermen, owing to the monopoly exercised by the Russian Fur Company over the waters as well as the lands of the North Pacific. This company was organized in 1799 as a means of developing and exploiting the colonial territories which Russia had acquired in America by virtue of Bering's discoveries in 1741 and subsequent exploration, occupation, and conquest. Besides full commercial privileges, the Russian Government granted it such extensive administrative rights that it enjoyed practically sovereign authority within the sphere of its operations,

a power which it wielded with extreme cruelty to the native inhabitants and singular harshness and arrogance to the representatives of other civilized nations. Tempted, nevertheless, by the hope of winning golden profit, foreign merchantmen made their way to Russian America in increasing numbers, and before many years captured a goodly portion of the fur trade which the company was seeking to monopolize. Vigorous protests to St. Petersburg followed, and in 1821 the Czar issued a ukase in which, after claiming for Russia all of the American coast from Bering Straits to the fifty-first parallel, he declared that "it is therefore prohibited to all foreign vessels not only to land on the coasts and islands belonging to Russia as stated above, but also to approach them within less than one hundred Italian miles." At once the United States and Great Britain took umbrage at this assumption of ownership to a region to which they themselves had pretensions, and still more at the trading prohibition. Negotiations were begun on the basis of a territorial adjustment, and ultimately, by treaties concluded with the United States in 1824 and Great Britain in 1825, Russia agreed to content herself with the coastal country north of latitude fifty-four degrees forty minutes, and to modify the obnoxious restriction in trade.

This modification, as affected the United States, consisted in opening Alaskan waters and ports to American vessels for a period of ten years "for the purpose of fishing and trading with the natives of the country." Unfortunately, unscrupulous traders so abused the privilege by selling liquor and firearms to the natives, in defiance of the Russian regulations, that at the termination of the ten-year

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A TRIBAL MONUMENT OF  
THE OLD HYDAH INDIANS



period it was not renewed. Some diplomatic correspondence followed, but in the end the United States Government submitted, and in 1837 officially warned American skippers to keep away from Alaska. With the passage of time and the settlement and steady growth of Oregon and California the limitation thus imposed upon American commerce came to be more and more keenly felt. But no measures were taken to remedy the situation until, in

a fur trading company in the hope of persuading the Russian Government to renew to them the privileges of the Russian Fur Company, whose charter had expired. Forthwith a brilliant prospect unfolded before Seward's boundless imagination. Russia, he was well aware, was beginning to consider her American holdings a source of embarrassment rather than of profit. Mismanagement and the successful competition of the Hudson's Bay Company, which had lit-



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THE FIRST TRAIN FROM SKAGWAY OVER THE WHITE PASS, ON THE ROAD WHICH WAS COMPLETED IN 1902

1866, the Legislature of Washington Territory adopted a memorial to President Johnson, in which, after stating that "abundance of codfish, halibut, and salmon of excellent quality have been found along the shores of the Russian possessions," they begged the President "to obtain such rights and privileges of the Government of Russia as will enable our fishing vessels to visit the ports and harbors of its possessions."

In due course this memorial came to Secretary of State Seward for action; and about the same time he learned that a number of Californians had organized

erally forced a large territorial lease in Russian America as compensation for damages inflicted in violation of the Treaty of 1825, had wrecked the Russian Fur Company. Instead of yielding a handsome revenue, the settlements now showed an annual deficit. Moreover, they were remote and difficult to defend—so weak, in fact, that they were certain to fall at the first attack. That attack, in all probability, would come from Great Britain, Russia's deadliest foe. On the other hand, it would be to the interest of the United States to forestall any attempt by Great Britain thus

to extend her coast line on the Pacific. Besides which, Alaska was unquestionably a country of great possibilities, from both a military and an economic standpoint. If Russia wished or could be induced to sell, there was, in Seward's opinion, every reason why the United States should buy. And rumor credited him with further believing the purchase might be made the occasion of rallying the Nation to the support of the discredited Johnson Administration

pany. This Clay did, and reported to Seward that the Russian Government seemed to think favorably of his proposal. "The Russian Government," he similarly wrote to a promoter of the California organization, "has already ceded away its rights in Russian America for a term of years, and the Russo-American Company has also ceded the same to the Hudson's Bay Company. This lease expires in June next, and the President of the Russo-American Company tells



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LAKE BENNETT, THE STARTING-POINT FOR DAWSON CITY, SITUATED IN THE KLONDIKE REGION

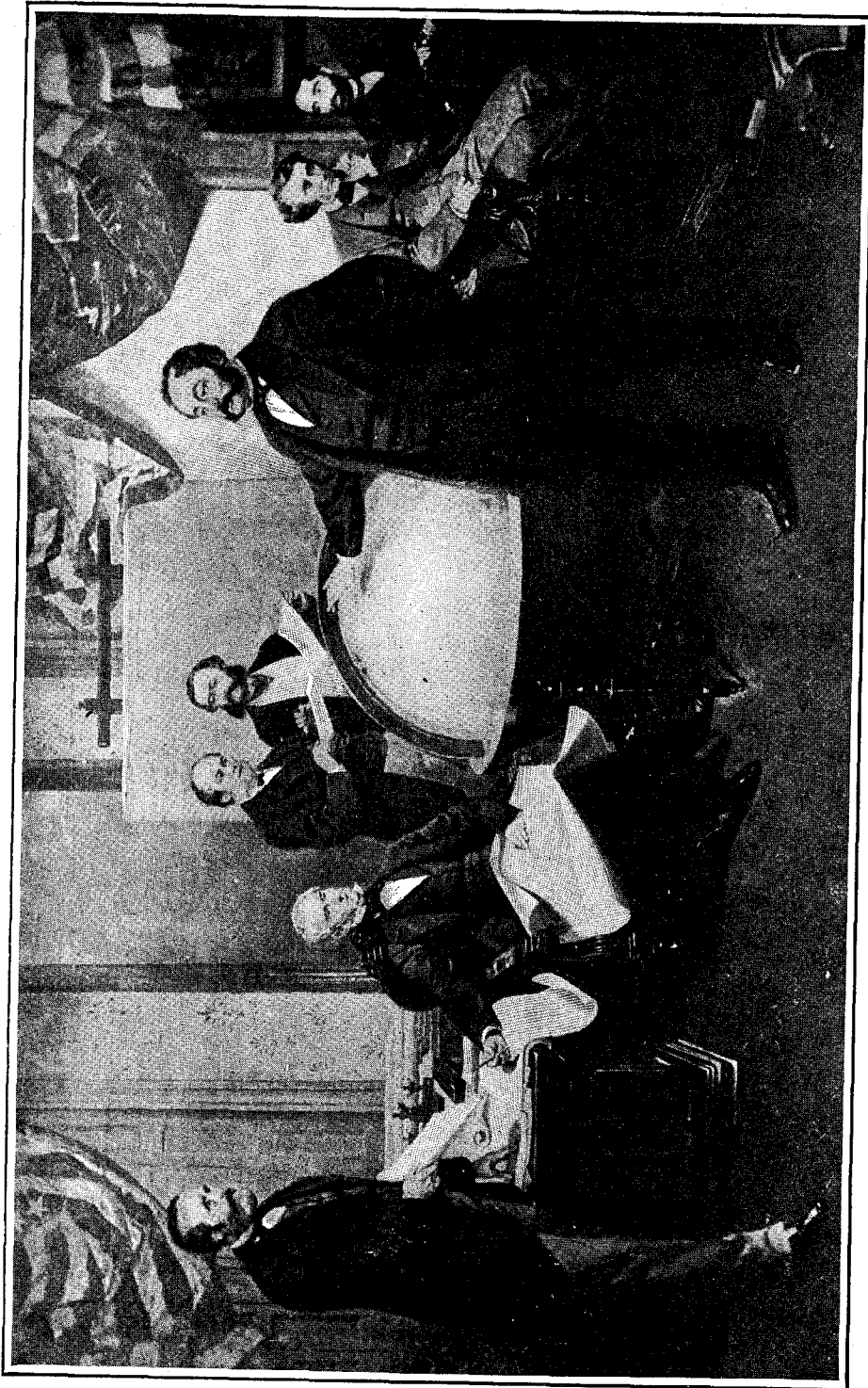
Confiding his plans and hopes to no one, he went to work. His first step was to call the attention of the Russian Minister, Edward de Stoeckel, to the Washington memorial, and to urge upon de Stoeckel the desirability of effecting a comprehensive arrangement between Russia and the United States to prevent difficulties arising on account of the Alaska fisheries. He then instructed Cassius M. Clay, the American Minister at St. Petersburg, to take up with the Russian Chancellor, the great Gortchakoff, the question of granting a franchise to the projected California Fur Com-

pany. This Clay did, and reported to Seward that the Russian Government seemed to think favorably of his proposal. "The Russian Government," he similarly wrote to a promoter of the California organization, "has already ceded away its rights in Russian America for a term of years, and the Russo-American Company has also ceded the same to the Hudson's Bay Company. This lease expires in June next, and the President of the Russo-American Company tells

me that they have been in correspondence with the Hudson's Bay Company about a renewal of the lease for another term of twenty-five or thirty years. Until he receives a definite answer he cannot enter into negotiations with us or your California company. My opinion is that if he can get off with the Hudson's Bay Company he will do so, when we can make some arrangements with the Russo-American Company."

Meantime, de Stoeckel had returned to St. Petersburg on leave of absence, and the attitude of his superiors soon underwent a complete change. Whether





THE SIGNING OF THE ALASKAN TREATY  
From a painting by Leutze

this was a result of representations made by Seward to de Stoeckel before his departure it is impossible to say, the veil of secrecy in which the negotiations were conducted not having been entirely lifted to the present day. In any event, the eager Secretary of State was informed that Russia had no inclination to make temporary and minor arrangements of the nature proposed, but would willingly enter into negotiations looking to a sale of her American possessions. The story is told that, on the very night de Stoeckel was leaving St. Petersburg to resume his official duties in Washington, he was abruptly accosted by the Archduke Constantine, the Czar's brother and chief adviser, and given permission to negotiate a treaty of cession.

Arriving at Washington early in March, 1867, the preliminaries were quickly arranged. Seward's first offer of five million dollars was met by a counter-demand for ten millions, de Stoeckel finally agreeing to accept seven. Then a slight hitch arose on the question of the rights and privileges still held by the Russian Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, Seward insisting that the territory must be delivered to the United States free of all encumbrances, and offering to pay in addition two hundred thousand dollars if this demand were met. De Stoeckel consenting, the terms of the proposed treaty were telegraphed to St. Petersburg via the Atlantic cable, which had been put into successful operation only the year before. Anxiously Seward awaited the response, fearful lest it should come too late to permit of action by Congress, then in extra session to insure execution by President Johnson of the reconstruction bill recently passed over his veto. But the Secretary's anxiety was short-lived. Before the end of March the desired permission had been received.

Then Seward acted with a promptitude unparalleled in the annals of diplomacy. He was at home, playing whist with his family, when de Stoeckel, on the evening of March 29, called to inform him that the imperial consent had been given. "If you like, Mr. Seward," said he, "I will come to the department to-morrow, and we can draw up the treaty." "Ah,"

responded Seward, pushing back his chair from the whist table; "why wait until to-morrow, Mr. de Stoeckel? Let us make the treaty to-night." To de Stoeckel's objection that the State Department was closed and that his own secretaries were scattered about Washington, Seward insistently replied: "If you can muster your legation before midnight, you will find me at the department, which will be open and ready for business." Carried away by Seward's enthusiasm, de Stoeckel gasped acquiescence, and soon messengers were hurrying in all directions to summon department and legation officials. At four o'clock on the morning of March 30, after unrelenting toil throughout the night, the treaty transferring Alaska from Russia to the United States was engrossed, signed, sealed, and ready for transmission to the Senate.

There its sponsor was to be Charles Sumner, Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Even from Sumner Seward had kept the secret of his negotiations until de Stoeckel brought him the welcome news from St. Petersburg, and the Massachusetts Senator's amazement on learning of the treaty may be better imagined than described. He promised, none the less, to use all his influence to secure its ratification, though by no means in favor of it himself. "The Russian treaty," he wrote to a friend a few days later, "tried me severely; abstractly I am against further accessions of territory, unless by the free choice of the inhabitants. But this question was perplexed by considerations of politics and comity and the engagements already entered into by the Government. I hesitated to take the responsibility of defeating it." Others were outspoken in their hostility to the treaty and in denunciation of Seward for having arranged it. In fact, a flood of criticism rolled towards Washington from almost every section of the country, and especially from the States of the East and Middle West. Russian America was declared to be a "barren, worthless, God-forsaken region," whose only products were "icebergs and polar bears." Its streams were "glaciers," its ground was "frozen six feet deep," for vegetation it



had nothing but "mosses." Some one, with cheap sarcasm, suggested that it be called "Walrussia," and there were many who thought that "Seward's Folly" was the only fitting designation for it. All of which had no effect whatever on the imperturbable Secretary of State, who amused himself and his friends by reading from old newspapers the similar comment passed in former times on Jefferson's purchase of the "desert waste" of Louisiana, and the later acquisition of the "noxious swamps" of "snake-infested" Florida.

What did disturb him was the thought that the Senate, influenced by the treaty's evident unpopularity among the Nation at large, might reject it. But in the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations he had an all-powerful ally. Whatever his private opinions, Sumner for the time being kept them rigidly to himself, and while the treaty was being considered in committee, labored diligently in the preparation of a speech which should insure ratification by an overwhelming vote. This speech, afterwards elaborated and published as a monograph on the resources and possibilities of Alaska, he delivered April 9 to an audience that followed his every word with the greatest interest. He

began by hinting at the reasons which had induced Russia to part with her holdings, and reminded his hearers of the motives impelling Napoleon to cede Louisiana. "Perhaps," he suggested, "a similar record may be made hereafter with regard to the present cession. . . . All must see that in those 'coming events' which now, more than ever, 'cast their shadows before,' it will be for her advantage not to hold outlying possessions from which, thus far, she has obtained no income commensurate with the possible expense for their protection. . . . In ceding possessions so little within the sphere of her empire, embracing more than one hundred nations or tribes, Russia gives up no part of herself. And even if she did, the considerable price paid, the alarm of war which begins to fill our ears, and the sentiments of friendship declared for the United States, would explain the transaction." Turning to the reasons why the United States should accept the cession, he summarized in vivid outline all the information he had been able to obtain concerning the timber, minerals, furs, fisheries, physical features, climate, and inhabitants of Alaska, drawing a picture in sharp contrast with that of the "iceberg and polar bear" critics. It was an unanswer-



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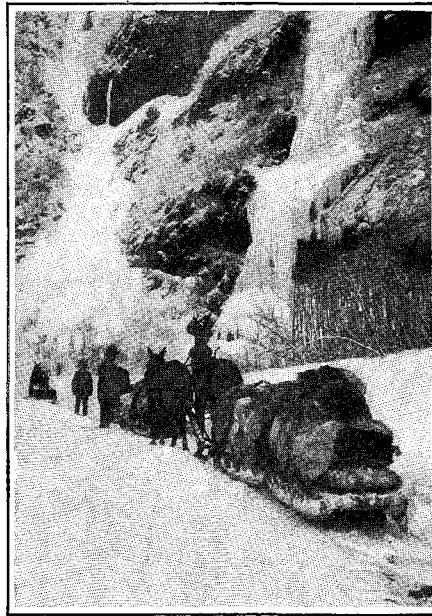
NOME CITY, AT THE MOUTH OF THE SNAKE RIVER



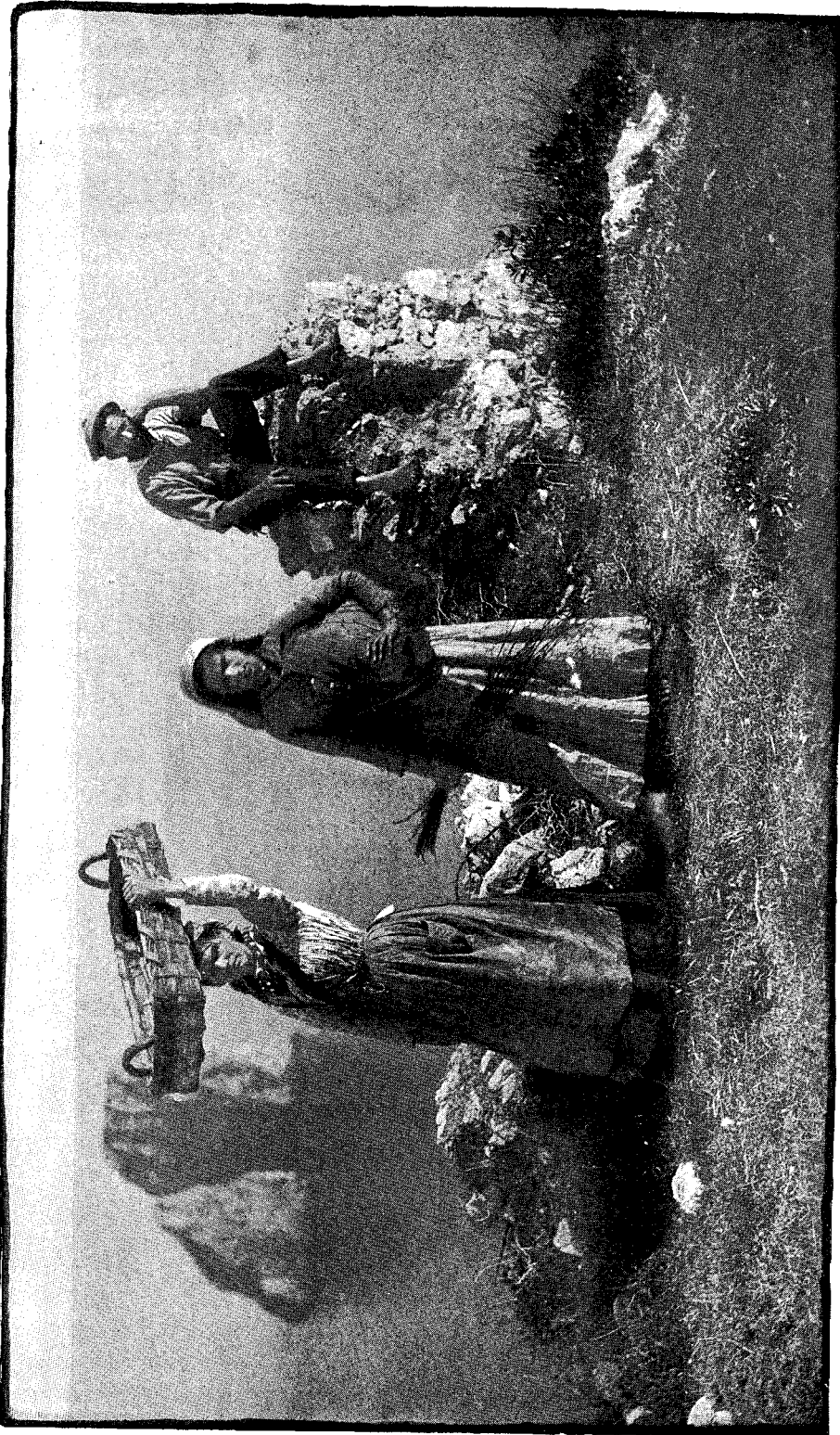
able argument, silencing all opposition so far as the Senate was concerned, and that same day the necessary "advice and consent" to ratification was given by the impressive vote of thirty-seven to two, Fessenden and Morrill of Vermont alone voting in the negative.

Danger now threatened, however, from the House of Representatives, where certain members, jealous of their rights, asserted that the President and the Senate were in duty bound to consult the House with reference to a treaty involving the payment of money—this view finding its justification in the fact that appropriation bills had to originate in the House. For more than a year, and until long after the United States had taken possession of its new Territory, the necessary bill appropriating the seven million two hundred thousand dollars called for by the treaty was not passed,

and in passing it the House took occasion to assert its right to consider the stipulations of a treaty of this kind before it could go into effect. Incidentally the debate revealed the continuance of a widespread hostility to the cession. "The country," declared Washburn, of Wisconsin, the leader in the attack, "is absolutely without value," and he condemned the treaty acquiring it as "an outrage on the rights of the American people." But Seward still rejoiced in his achievement, and died accounting it among his most meritorious efforts. To the present generation, well aware of the riches that have since been discovered in the supposedly icy wastes of Alaska—the name of which, by the way, was selected by Seward himself—there cannot be the slightest doubt that he had indeed labored wisely and well for his country.



ON THE GOLD TRAIL



DWELLERS IN CAPRI