At the fringe of America

A Sooner's 4,500 mile trek in Alaska

By RAYMOND BROOKS in the Austin American-Statesman

ALASKA, a fringe of towns and settlements beneath towering peaks crested with everlasting snows, its interior a trackless expanse of uncharted country just outside the arctic circle, is more air-minded for its population and industry than any other part of the nation.

This is the opinion of Prof. Fred M. Bullard, 21 geol., associate professor of geology and mineralogy of the University of Texas, who has just come back from four adventurous thrilling months of observation and scientific work in a section of the interior of Alaska whose mountain peaks and rivers were unnamed and uncharted. He went as a member of the United States geological survey expedition and assisted in mapping an area of interior Alaska hitherto unknown, and in finding the Aleut and Kenai Indian names of tradition and placing them for the first time upon maps.

It is a land where gold may be found in every stream, a land where the sun shines 20 hours a day, a land of live volcanos, where the snow crowds down within 2500 feet of sea level throughout the summer, where ice forms every night of the summer, a land of scenic grandeur and filters over the coast section all the time. They can go only by dog team or by plane in winter, only by plane or the steady stream of prospectors pours into northern Alaska throughout the year. A mineral collection was made for the government. No unusual mineral deposits were found.

The party sketched out little maps of the mountains and streams not shown on existing maps. They, found the old-timers of the Indian tribes. When they returned to the coast they heard from the lips of these Aleut and Kenai wise men the traditional names of the places and wrote these in, as they sounded, upon the maps.

The party apparently ran little risk from bears. They were ready to go away. Mr Bullard drove off a serious herd of caribou by chunking stones at the animals that came to inspect him.

In crossing the milky glacial streams several times pack animals were swept far down the rivers, but the party did not lose any of its animals.

The days were warm, but at night ice half an inch thick froze on the water. About August 20 the snow began to crowd down lower on the hills and it was snowing in camp that day. This was a warning and the party packed out ahead of the snow blanket that already covered the area where the party worked and will shroud the hills and valleys until next June. In past years an expedition, further southeast toward the Fairbanks railroad, was trapped by August snows, its animals had to be killed and its members forced to walk out to the coast.

Back at the coast the party sold its horses to a guide company.

And so Professor Bullard came back to his classes in semi-tropical Texas, thrilled with myriad new experiences and sights of his first trip into the unknown land that is a part of the United States.

Three things, besides his scientific work, interested Professor Bullard. One was the profusion of moose, caribou, reindeer, red foxes, brown and black bears, all of which showed disregard for men for lack of ever having been hunted. Another was the glaciers, lingering remnants of the ice age. The third was the countless swarms of mosquitoes which forced members of the party to wear nets about their hats and wear gloves throughout the day.

At night Professor Bullard read magazines at midnight without light other than that of the sun just below the horizon. The sun set at 10:30 p.m. and rose at 2:30 a.m., during the period he was in Alaska, and its rays could be seen sparkling against the snow of many taller peaks throughout the night.

Mr Bullard and the party of federal men headed by Dr. S. R. Capps, sailed through the inner passage beyond Kenai and disembarked at the edge of Iliamna bay on the west shore of Cook Inlet. Here they took a pack train of 15 horses and started for the interior. As soon as they left the coast existing maps were useless because they didn't show the mountains or the streams that exist.

The party traveled in altogether about 300 miles, traveling above timber line around 2500 feet, and dropping down into timber to camp. Work in the daytime was upon the summits, where areas were carefully mapped. The party found itself beneath the Terracotta range, about 200 miles south of the 20,300-foot towering summit of Mount McKinley. In clear weather Mount McKinley was visible. The party was less than 200 miles from Siberia, across the 60-mile channel between the continents to the north of them.

Mr Bullard took him six weeks to get back to Austin. Four weeks were spent in packing out 300 miles by horseback and two weeks more to come 4200 miles by boat and train.

From the time they left the coast they saw neither white man nor any sign of white man's presence. A few native Aleuts and Kenais, dwindling Indian tribes, still inhabit the interior.

A little gold may be found by panning out in any stream, just enough to lure the prospectors back season after season along the coast, Mr Bullard said. Half the gold mined in Alaska comes from a large scale low grade ore mine at Juneau, the Alaskan capital, through which the party passed.

Briar flowers bloom during the short summer season. The party had fresh meat, by killing a moose, reindeer and caribou. No effort was made to shoot bears, though blacks and browns were seen nearly every day, some prying curiously around the camps. "Too much else to lug up those mountains to carry a gun around," Professor Bullard commented.

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