

## Chapter 23

### Nome

Where should I start? I spent about two weeks at Nome — working during the days — then trying to see and find out all I could about this historical area during my time off. Everything is tied together, but I can't just jump from one subject to another, or you would never read the rest of my book. So, let me attempt to get all the "happenings" together in some sort of order — either subject wise or chronological.

I landed at the Nome airport in late afternoon following my unexpected trip to Kotzebue. I was met at the airport by the entire crew of the Corps of Engineers Project Office — the Project Engineer, whose home was in Anchorage, but stayed in Nome during the summer months, and two Eskimo employees — only one of which could speak English. I don't believe anyone on earth can speak the Eskimo language except an Eskimo. I was told the average Eskimo must speak about 10,000 words to conduct their day to day lives (The average American uses about 3500 words.) — but this is not my story. Anyway, the one Eskimo employee had to translate everything said back and forth to his buddy.

We found my bags and I was taken to one of the two hotels in town — both being two-story buildings. I can't say they equaled the Hilton, but they were clean and adequate — and at a rate of \$6.00 per day; I was able to overlook some of the missing niceties without too much trouble. Really it wasn't bad, and as I traveled more and more into rural areas (don't tell

me all Alaska is rural), I became accustomed to somewhat less than the best.

I guess I should tell you here that the tour I had flown with all day, checked in at the other hotel — a big day for Nome — both hotels having new customers arriving the same day. It was kind of good to get out of the hustle and bustle of the tour crowd. There is an Eskimo name for tourists (tenderfoot) — I guess I'm one now, as I have forgotten the word. The most acceptable definition of it is — if you don't know the word, you are one.

I believe a very brief historical description of Nome and surrounding area would help to let you picture it better, as I try to relate the events I encountered there.

Nome was a product of the "Gold Rush Days" of the late 1800's. All of Canada and Alaska seem to be overrun by placer miners during that period. Gold was discovered at Anvil Creek just outside of Nome in 1898, and within just a short time the population of Nome jumped to twenty- twenty-five thousand — called Anvil City at that time. Much evidence of the old gold rush days still exists around Nome, and in fact, gold mining was still actually being pursued at the time I was there in 1967.

Nome is located some 700 air miles west of Fairbanks, and about 8 or 900 miles northwest of Anchorage. This compares with only about 150 miles southeast of East Cape, USSR. Residents of the area make their livelihood by mining, reindeer farming, fur farming, and trapping. Minerals mined in the area are of course gold, but also includes silver, iron, coal, graphite, copper, lead, tin, and platinum. The population of the town at the time I was there was just over 2,000 — of which I believe it was said were 90% Eskimos. Tourism — like the tour I flew in with — also helps the economy a great deal.

A fairly modern airport, paved runways, and I believe GCA and other navigational beacons which are provided by the FFA, encourages air travel to the area. I understand that during World War II, the United States was providing airplanes to the Russians to assist in their war with Germany. This airport at Nome was built for that purpose. Russian pilots would fly to Nome, and ferry the planes across to Russia — in fact, the natives actually became quite good friends with some of the Russians during that period. Remember, Russia

owned Alaska until October 18, 1867 when it was purchased by the United States for a cash payment of \$7,200,000.

Everything in Nome is close by. The main street is perhaps four or five blocks long, and contains the normal stores and businesses to support a community of this size. There was one cafe in town — if you don't count the small lunch counters in the hotels, — a movie theater, post office and federal building, and a BIA School and hospital, and of course, the usual bars and joints you find all over Alaska. This is the largest town west of Fairbanks (that's 700 miles away), in this part of Alaska. I went to the movie one night while I was in Nome, and it was packed.

The Eskimos (and anyone else) and bars don't mix very well in the cold winters. The Project Engineer told me that the winter before, an Eskimo had visited one or more of these bars, and had left to walk home some quarter of a mile from town, and had "passed out", falling into a snowbank. It was snowing that night with the wind blowing pretty strongly. While laying in the snowbank he was covered with blowing snow and froze to death. The snow concealed his body, and he was not found until the next spring when the thaw came. I was told events like this had happened on several occasions.

Before I leave the cafe behind, let me tell you a couple of things about it. They had good food, better selections than you would normally find in remote areas. Their specialty was "Sourdough" bread and pancakes. I have always been a fan of sourdough bread, and order it now when I get the chance. Sourdough pancakes are sort of ho-hum.

The other noteworthy item was my lifetime desire to have milk to drink with my meals. When I would order a meal here, I would always ask for "sweet milk", and always received the same answer — "not today". Then one day I hit it. The waitress said they had just received a shipment of milk from Seattle, and I could have my 75¢ glass of milk (75¢ was a lot to pay for a glass of milk in 1967). As soon as she set it in front of me, I took a good swig — and it was blinky — undrinkable. So, all the time I was in Nome, I didn't have any milk.

The houses in Nome were all built three or four feet off the ground, with piers of

cross-ties for their footings. This seemed very strange to me — so I asked why. It was explained to me that I was in permafrost country — only the top few inches of the ground would thaw even in the summer time. This necessitated that the houses to be built high enough off the ground to keep the heat from thawing the ground under them. This would cause uneven footings that would tear the houses apart as they settled in the warmest areas first.

An example of this was there to see at the time I was there — the U.S. Post Office Building. You know the government (I worked for it) — we knew everything. It seems some genius of an engineer some place decided that if you would put a heated basement under the buildings as they did in Anchorage, they would hold together in Nome also. They didn't. Nome was not Anchorage. When I was there they were talking of having to tear down the building because of settling, causing visible cracks throughout the walls.

The permafrost caused another strange sight I noted while I was there. One day I was walking along Main Street when I saw that the City Utilities crew had dug up a water line. This was no water line like I had ever seen before — it was a six inch "wood stave" pipe packed with styrofoam, in the middle of a two-foot square wooden box, all buried underground. This was the only method they had for piping water or sewage through the permafrost they said. It had something to do with expansion and contraction of the pipes, and the styrofoam box held enough insulation to protect it from the extreme temperatures.

The roads at that time were gravel — mud holes were prevalent — so watching your step when walking was in order. You remember your favorite "Western" motion pictures? Downtown Nome might well have been mistaken for the town where the "shoot-out" occurred between the cattle baron and the hero who saves the community then marries the only sweet and innocent girl in the area. People walked down the center of the streets and only on occasion would you have to move to let a car pass by. Don't get me wrong, there were cars there — just not enough traffic to run everyone off the streets.

Roads out of town were to the east toward Fairbanks (I heard this was planned to be an auto route to Fairbanks some day), and one out to the north through the gold fields. These were maintained during the winter to keep them open, as well as they could. Quite a few people lived out these roads, especially to the north, and the one to the east provided access to several small villages.

The Corps of Engineers Office was maintained during the summer months to keep the harbor navigable. I believe the harbor freezes over in the winter, so all supplies freighted in by boat or barge must arrive during the summer months. The Project Office is located on the shores of the harbor, and houses a tug boat and sand dredge which is pulled behind the tug. Soundings are made almost daily of the ever-changing channel in the harbor — for a distance of some ten miles out to sea — to make sure a certain depth is maintained to open water. Norton Sound is not deep — neither is the Bering Sea, particularly through this area. A sea wall protects downtown Nome from the south and a concrete jetty is located at the mouth of the small harbor which also faces the south. There are no reefs or other breakwaters to still the seas when they are heavy. The Corps of Engineers maintains the jetty. An invoice for repairing this jetty was one of the bills I needed to pay while I was in Nome — but let me get the area well identified before I start that part of my story.

Just to the northwest of Nome, maybe eighty or a hundred miles are the King Islands — and to the southwest maybe a little farther, are the St. Lawrence Islands. The entire area around Nome was rather open. Inland the mountains are not tall, only some 2500 feet, and more rolling than rugged — still quite beautiful in their own way.

I promise you that just as soon as I mention a few facts about the Eskimos, I'll move on with my story.

The name Eskimo means "eaters of flesh", and they inhabit almost all areas from near the Arctic Circle on north all around the world. They have no kings or rulers and "police" themselves when outside "civilized areas". Let me add here that they do a far better job of

policing themselves than some "civilized" lawyers, judges, politicians, sports enthusiasts, and maybe a lot of doctors who claim to — but that's not my story this time. The Eskimos have only two kinds of punishment — ostracism and death — but neither are rarely executed. When a punishable crime has been committed, the whole tribe sits as judge and jury.

The Eskimos are small in stature — usually no taller than five and a half feet, but very muscular and strong. They work for survival, and the whole communities have strong social ties.

The first time I returned to the lower 48 after being in Alaska, the most popular question I was asked was, "Do Eskimos live in igloos?" No. At least not permanently so. However, on occasions when off on a hunting trip during the hard winters of this area, if an intense storm should overtake them, they would build a snow block igloo for protection from the elements until the storm would pass by. I believe most all Eskimos in Alaska live in wooden frame houses such as you might see in rural, poverty areas anywhere in the United States. Some of the houses are half dugouts, the first three feet or so being below the ground level with the rest above the ground, and perhaps with sod roofs.

I have mentioned the reason I was sent to Nome, so let me quickly explain what I encountered — using just a few incidents out of several — so I won't bore you.

I'll start with the concrete jetty at the entrance to the harbor. Years of wave action had eroded the concrete to the point that repairs were required, or the jetty would soon be lost. You will remember that the population of Nome was just over 2,000, so varieties of workers were not available. When you found someone who would do the work you required — you hired him. Procurement regulations popular in Washington work well in Washington, but don't always come off too good in places like Nome. Innovations are required — think — how can I do what I have to do with the regulations I have to work with? The Project Engineer found a man who would repair the jetty (probably the only man in Nome) — he would only take the job one way, keep his time and material costs, then when the task was completed, that would be his price.

This came to six hundred dollars — not a major purchase. The only problem was that procurement regulations prohibited the purchase of labor. The Project Engineer (who hated administrative duties) wrote up his purchase order for so many hours of labor and so much cost of materials.

The District Office in Anchorage and the Project Engineer in Nome had been sending this purchase order back and forth for some six months attaching their own memorandums to it each time. The individual who had performed the work still hadn't been paid.

When I re-wrote the purchase order to buy a "job", the individual was so put out with the government I could hardly even get him to talk with me. But, once again he signed the invoice for the work after my having guaranteed him he would be paid this time. He received his check in about a week.

I won't go into other vendor problems, but The Hudson Bay Company — who just about owns the world to the north — was near the point of "cutting off" sales to the government because of non-payment of accounts due. A little public relations as well as paying our bills, started a new relationship with them.

After I had left the Nome Project Office, I never heard, but I think I would be safe betting that another year, another employee, would be making another TDY trip to Nome to pay bills again and soothe over public relationships one more time. The dilemma of the Alaska District, Corps of Engineers, was that try as they may, no other employee who could handle the task of dredging the shipping lanes, could be found who would spend nine months of the year in Nome.

The property audit went o.k. so I'll skip the particulars and move on with my story. This is enough time spent on work anyway, when there are so many more interesting things to tell about this area.

After work and on weekends, I was able to drive around the area to see the historic sights. Everyone I met would tell me another story about a gold mine, or the Eskimos, or about the

area in general. There is enough history in the area to amass volumes of books — but since I'm not a historian, nor did I make any attempt to verify what I was told, I'll just record it as I remember it or saw it.

I believe the best starting place is right at my hotel. They were not overrun with customers, so all who stayed there pretty well became acquainted. After all these years I can't honestly say that I remember but one man — a man in his eighties at that time — who said he had come back to Nome just one more time before he died, just to see the gold fields again. For hours, we would sit in the lobby of the hotel and he would relate to me stories of the gold rush days which he participated in as a young man. He would mention a "digging" at a certain place, and I would later drive there, and you could almost visualize the story he had told about it. Some of the spots he would tell of millions of dollars of gold being mined, would be a small hole in the ground as if a storm cellar had collapsed, with maybe an 8' x 10' shack by it. This sight was duplicated dozens of times in the area.

He told of the intense winters they experienced and of the number of deaths which would occur — yet for everyone who died, each boat would bring many more to take their place. He said that not nearly everyone who came, or died there, ever found much gold at all, but others struck it very rich. I can't remember if he was one of the lucky ones or not — but he was alive.

You would think that anyone who would some twenty-six or twenty-seven years later attempt to write a book about what he learned and saw in Alaska, would have had the intelligence to record or at least take notes about conversations such as this, but I didn't. Hours of our conversations are now lost — forever.

Let me now take you on a journey through the gold fields.

Some mining was still going on when I was there, though very limited. This was before the time when President Nixon took our dollar off the gold standard — a terrible mistake, I believe — and at this time the price of gold was set at \$35 a troy ounce. (Many gold mines in Alaska were at that time only producing enough to maintain their claims — hoping to "push" the price of gold up by supply and demand).

Just to the west of Nome were three gold dredges — only one still operating — and it on a limited basis, mostly for the tourist trade. The other two had been abandoned years before. These gold dredges are monstrous machines, some hundred feet long, and standing three or four stories high. They float on water, and move on their own lake across the ground by removing the dirt in front of them, process it through the dredges to find any gold in it, then pile it behind them. The water stays with the dredge — so on they go across the land. These dredges are adjacent to, and in the same area with, the pick and shovel mines I have mentioned above.

A tourist came by and we exchanged cameras for pictures, so we could both go home and prove we had been there. I kept looking to the ground to see if during the past years someone had missed that fist sized nugget, but I never found it. I did get to hold one on another occasion, that covered the palm of my hand. It was quite heavy, and I was told that at that time it was worth about \$3500 — that at \$35.00 per ounce. Now the price is about \$400 per ounce — whee!

The next day at work the Project Engineer asked if I would like to go with him and his crew on an inspection trip out into Norton Sound. They needed to take a few soundings in the harbor, and they wanted to check on a Bureau of Mines Ship about a mile off shore.

We boarded the tug — pulling its dredge/barge behind — and made top speed (about 6 knots per hour), for a very nice half day. The Eskimo crew knew their jobs very well, so the Project Engineer and I mostly talked about the Bureau of Mines Ship, minerals, and other noteworthy items around Nome.

The ship was the size of an ocean freighter, and was equipped with all kinds of hoists, beams, clam shells, and buckets. We circled the ship a good hundred yards away from it but close enough to wave to the workers. There were openings in the sides of it (access points), and the stern let down to launch boats and etc.

The Project Engineer said they had been in the harbor at Nome for several months, dredging the bottom of the sound for minerals, and that a good bit of gold had been found, as

well as other valuable minerals.

He told me that some people had panned the beach at Nome and had actually found some gold on the beach. Never let it be said that I missed my chance, so the next time I had a chance to walk the beach I took it — still looking for that fist sized gold nugget. That wasn't my day either — oh well.

Another day while at work, we received a telephone call about 9:00 in the morning from the airport. They said a young "bush pilot" needed someone to bring him a five gallon can of gasoline for his airplane — *sitting on the side of a hill about five miles out of Nome.*

Now this was something new. I grabbed my camera, we jumped into the pickup and took off. The location was on an access road to a highly classified communications site atop a twenty-five hundred foot mountain. The road was more a trail than a road, but we made it all right, and sure enough there sat a two-passenger bright yellow airplane, on the side of a mountain right where it *shouldn't* be.

The pilot was there to greet us — glad to get some gasoline — and ready to tell his story. It went something like this as I remember it.

The night before, the young pilot — from a village somewhere in the area — was asked to fly an Eskimo lady to the hospital in Nome, as the time to give birth to a new baby was at hand. They loaded in his plane and took off for Nome, only to find the Nome airport closed because of heavy fog. Now the new baby didn't even know what fog was, and certainly had no plans on waiting indefinitely to see what this world looked like.

Counting the minutes while circling the airport hoping for a break, it became quite evident something was going to happen real soon — also, his gasoline was running low. Since no refueling tankers were in the air, he decided it was time to find land — preferably, land he could see. Then he remembered the communications site on the side of the mountain, found the access road by moonlight, and barely seeing enough to touch down, landed successfully. That sounded too easy. The road was on the *side* of the mountain — one side was up, and one side was down. Now it is said down in Tennessee that the cattle have one leg longer than

the other in order to stand on the side of the hills to graze, but; the wheels of the airplane were both the same distance down from its wings. This landing was made about midnight — in moonlight. Let's give this pilot credit for an almost impossible landing — and later a takeoff.

While being able to "park" his plane, completely blocking a single lane trail, he still had to get the lady to the hospital — at least five miles away. The communications site was enclosed with a high chain link fence, with warning signs everywhere indicating *no one* was welcome. So, not wishing to become a target to someone inside, he yelled his head off until someone answered. He told them why he was there, so the communications site employee called the hospital to send an ambulance for the lady. I understand she just made it and was the happy mother of a baby boy.

The pilot stayed with his plane the rest of the night, then found a phone the next morning, called the airport, who called us, so here we were.

He emptied the gasoline into the plane, then was ready to attempt a take off. We walked with him up the road — slightly uphill — for a little over a hundred yards which he *thought* would be sufficient to become airborne. There was a slight curve in the road between his plane and this point which he *thought* he could negotiate, but if he had to go farther than we were, there was a much sharper curve he would have to deal with. The mountain fell away to the south at about a 30 degree drop, and he *thought* that if he had to, he could fly off the road, and follow the course of the mountain down, until he could gain sufficient air speed to fly safely.

I stayed at the curve with my camera, so I could get a "good" picture of his take off, never thinking he might crash at the exact point where I was standing. I moved off the road a few feet downhill, then he was coming straight at me — his right wing just clearing the side of the mountain — gaining speed, but still no take off. Then, just a few feet from where I was crouched, his wheels cleared the ground and he passed over me only a few feet above. He banked downhill as planned, and was airborne.

We were to meet him at the airport, so off we went. When we got there, no one had seen

him. We waited awhile but knew he should have been there long before us. He then called from another unused airport on the other side of town to tell where he was.

We crossed town and talked to him a few more minutes, then he took off for his next flight, just as if this was a normal day to day happening. I guess it was — in Alaska.

I wrote about permafrost and the changes that must be made because of it. Well, the miners had the same problem. Have you ever tried to dig in frozen ground? And how do you suppose they could break down the frozen chunks of ore — even if they could dig it?

Just on the outskirts of Nome to the northwest was a giant plant of some sort. I couldn't identify it. It resembled maybe a power plant? a chemical plant? or maybe a refinery? I generally am not embarrassed to ask questions, so ask I did. I would never have guessed the answer.

During the gold rush days, the miners needed something to thaw out the ground so they could dig it — then wash away the dirt to find any gold it might contain. What better method could they use than steam. This plant was a giant steam plant. In 1967 it was just sitting there rusting away, but the two foot diameter steam lines still ran from it far out into the country — these above ground.

I was nearing the end of my TDY tour in Nome, and I hadn't as yet traveled very far out of town. On my next day off I decided I would go north — out through the gold fields first. This road forks just out of Nome with one fork leading to Bunker Hill and Taylor, and the other to Teller. I didn't travel far enough to reach either of these towns, but as far as I went it was a very interesting drive. The hills were barren — mostly only grass and tundra. This road was kept pretty well, so up to 45 to 50 miles an hour was a comfortable speed except when in the mountains.

Let me start at the beginning. I have already mentioned the small gold mines along the side of the road. These "diggings" kept appearing well out into the country. Some had plaques stating how much gold was taken — sometimes within just months. All appeared to be very small mines.

As I traveled farther away from Nome, the road had taken a course over the top of hills but as I looked into the valleys I was aware that the hills had become higher. Across the valley looking to the hills opposite where I was traveling, I started noticing the steam line paralleling the road I was on — and that mines were scattered periodically along the route.

I also noticed the railroad running in the same general area. I later found out this was a famous railroad from the gold rush days named "Curley Q". I later learned that tours were available on this railroad but I didn't find out about it while in Nome, or I would have tried it.

As I drove further out of Nome, the road crossed the mountains and turned up a valley. Right beside the road was a very fast moving river — I believe it was the Nome River, though I'm not absolutely sure where I was at that time. I traveled by its side — several houses were spaced over the area — until I reached a point where I felt it was necessary to return to Nome.

I was very pleased with my day. The steam line, mines, railroad, and the general area, had all been covered by my "old timer friend" at the hotel. It now seemed I was more a part of it.

Just before I left Nome, I was again able to attain some transportation and this time I drove east. This road was more like a trail than the other, but it was planned to someday use this route to connect with a road out of Fairbanks, making auto travel to Nome possible. At the time I was there, it only went to Port Safety, Big Hurrah, and on to Council. But none of these were my points of interest.

A few miles down this road, the King Island Eskimos had set up camp as they did each summer to do ivory carvings and sell them to tourists. This was one of the sights I wanted to see before I left, and this was my last chance. About four or five miles out of town I came upon their camp — a sight you really need to see for yourself.

A whole village of Eskimos had migrated to this area, living and working under their skin covered boats, tilted up on their sides — this being their only protection from the weather. Three or four at each boat would sit cross-legged on the ground — wearing caribou parkas and suits, carving figurines out of the ivory obtained from walrus tusks or whale bones. They

were just a few feet from the road, and paralleled it for perhaps a quarter of a mile.

I would have liked to talk with them, but they were there to sell their merchandise, and I was not there to purchase on this day, so I drove past them on down the road, then turned around and drove back to Nome. There were many changes I would make today, if I had all these opportunities to do over again — including talking with everyone I could find who would talk with me.

Then it was time to leave Nome and all its history behind and head back for Anchorage.