

IN THE SHADOW OF EAGLE BLUFF

A Pictorial History of the U.S. Army's Fort Egbert at
Eagle, Alaska, 1899-1902



National Park Service
Edited and Notes by Chris Allan

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Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve

2021

Acknowledgments

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Front Cover: John H. Hoeppel serving as operator in charge in Fort Egbert's telegraph relay office, ca. 1902. The fort served as one of many stations along the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System. Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, John H. Hoeppel Photograph Collection (1986-188-20).

Title Page: Postcard of Fort Egbert with Eagle Bluff in the background, ca. 1905. Photograph by Clarence L. Andrews, Eagle City's customs agent. Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, Abraham and Lula Meinzer Photograph Collection (1995-260-11).

Map of Eagle City and Fort Egbert (Page 9): The trading company stores and warehouses in this plat map belong to the Seattle-Yukon Transportation Company, the North American Transportation & Trading Company, the Alaska Exploration Company, and the Alaska Commercial Company. Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, Rare Maps Collection (1986-34-3).

Back Cover: A soldier fires a blank charge in Fort Egbert's saluting gun, ca. 1902. Eagle Historical Society & Museums, Eagle, Alaska.



Today Fort Egbert's restored buildings, including the mule barn in this photograph, are maintained by the Bureau of Land Management, which offers tours for visitors in cooperation with the National Park Service and the Eagle Historical Society & Museums. Photograph by Chris Allan, NPS.

Introduction

In 1897 the unpredictable nature of the Klondike gold rush worried U.S. government officials. Thousands of Americans, and people from around the world, were flooding into Alaska and Canada's northwest, and the news coming out (what little news there was) hinted at starvation, lawlessness, and border tensions. The Secretary of War sent Captain Patrick H. Ray and Lieutenant Wilds P. Richardson to investigate. When Ray found himself facing down hungry goldfield refugees who threatened to loot company warehouses, he recommended sending soldiers north and building forts to bring order to Alaska's vast interior.

Ray recommended two locations along the Yukon River. The first became Fort Gibbon near the mouth of the Tanana River. The second was near the U.S.-Canada border where the mining camp of Eagle City was taking shape next to a rocky outcrop the miners called Eagle Bluff. The bluff lies at the geographical center of the traditional Hän Hwëch'in homeland that extends westward along the river corridor and eastward across the international border. Until the arrival of fur traders, gold-seekers, missionaries, and soldiers, the Hän had a settlement near the base of the bluff they called *Tthee Täwdlenn*; their descendents now live upstream in present-day Eagle Village.

In Spring 1899, Richardson brought a detachment of 25 men to work in the shadow of Eagle Bluff, and the War Secretary named the new post Fort Egbert to honor Colonel Harry C. Egbert, who died fighting in the Philippines as part of the Spanish-American War. At the end of July 1899, Ray was promoted to Major and arrived in Eagle City with 99 soldiers of the Army's Company L of the 7th Infantry, 14 members of the Hospital Corps, and 20 civilian workers. Ray dismissed Richardson's men and put Captain Walter K. Wright in charge with orders to build barracks and officers' quarters. However construction was slow, and lax discipline, desertions, and bitter disagreements between Ray and Wright hobbled the project.

On August 23, 1900, the able and efficient Captain Charles E. Farnsworth took charge of Fort Egbert. Farnsworth had led the construction of Fort Gibbon, and he described Company L as "the most drunken and worthless" crew he had ever seen, adding,

There was not a semblance of discipline among either the soldiers or civil employees. The men of the company were living all around the post in cabins and were mutinous when ordered to work.

Wanting a fresh start, he transferred them all to Fort Gibbon, 625 miles away, and brought his own men, the soldiers of Company E, to take over construction at Fort Egbert. In the meantime, Judge James Wickersham had also arrived in Eagle City to establish a courthouse for Alaska's newly created Third Judicial District. The two men would become good friends and their arrival marked the beginning of an era of relative tranquility.

Captain Farnsworth put his men to work building additional barracks and a large stable for horses and mules. Soldiers also caught and dried fish or hunted caribou to supplement their rations, and they began construction of a telegraph cable to meet the Canadian line from Dawson City. This short telegraph leg was just the beginning of a much larger effort that would result in the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) linking Alaska to the rest of the United States. Of

all the assignments the soldiers at Fort Egbert faced, building telegraph lines in the wilderness was the most arduous, leading Farnsworth to declare, "Men dread building the line."

Cold weather, slow mail delivery, and homesickness took their toll on the soldiers and the civilian staff at the fort, and many were tempted by Eagle's saloons, gaming halls, and brothels. Farnsworth followed the Army's directives and prohibited gambling, but he eventually allowed penny-a-point bridge as long as his men stayed out of the town's rowdy faro and poker parlors. His strategy for preventing heavy drinking in what he called "the horrible whiskey holes downtown" was to approve construction of a Post Exchange where the men could socialize and drink beer at 25¢ per glass. In addition, Farnsworth allowed his soldiers to supplement their wages by unloading steamboats in the summer for \$1 an hour, provided they did not spend the money on booze or gamble it away.

Baseball games, canoe races, shooting matches, and dances also helped to pass the time and provided opportunities for enlisted men, townspeople, and officers with families to mingle. Judge Wickersham's wife Deborah and son Howard socialized with the Farnsworths and their son Robert. Along with other prominent community members, they put on holiday celebrations and dinner parties and founded literary clubs like the "Wise Men's Club" (also known as the "Club of Twelve Cranks") whose members wrote essays and gave speeches. Farnsworth and Wickersham also became avid hunters, going together to a well-supplied camp about 20 miles to the south near the Fortymile River.

Over the years, Fort Egbert's mission evolved from preventing lawlessness to improving transportation and communication in a changing Alaska. During the first decade of the new century, the troops at Fort Egbert helped to build and maintain the WAMCATS under Brigadier-General Adolphus W. Greely. Meanwhile, Eagle's fortunes were changing when, in 1902, prospectors began mining gold in the Tanana Valley to the west, luring many locals away and prompting Wickersham to move the judicial seat to the new boomtown of Fairbanks. By 1909 wireless radio technology made the telegraph obsolete and diminished the need for the fort. By 1911 the soldiers were gone, the fort was closed, and all that remained was a small Signal Corps crew to operate a wireless station.

This began a long period of decline for Fort Egbert's infrastructure as local people sought to repurpose the buildings or demolish them for use as lumber or firewood. By 1940, of the 45 buildings that made up Fort Egbert at its peak, only 5 remained: the mule barn, granary (for storing animal feed), quartermaster storehouse, water-wagon shed, and one example of officers' quarters. In the 1970s, these buildings were added the National Register of Historic Places as part of Eagle's National Historic Landmark and were restored by the Bureau of Land Management and local volunteers to serve as museums and interpretive spaces. And Fort Egbert has another, largely unseen, legacy—lumber from its dismantled buildings was reused in cabins and mining camps along the Yukon River and beyond, including in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve and as far away as Fairbanks.

Archival Collections

The majority of the photographs in this volume came from the 7 archival collections listed below. Captions in the booklet are followed by initials indicating where each photograph can be found (for example, FE for Fort Egbert Construction and Activities in the Alaska State Library's Historical Collections). The photographs in the booklet appear in a roughly chronological sequence from 1899 to 1902 and are accompanied by two letters from Fort Egbert soldiers that appeared in newspapers (pages 12-13, 23).

Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska

(FF) Farnsworth Family Papers, 1899-1943

(RF) Raymond C. Force Papers, 1900-1910

(SB) Selid-Bassoc Photograph Collection

(NA) North American Transportation & Trading Company Collection, 1898-1900

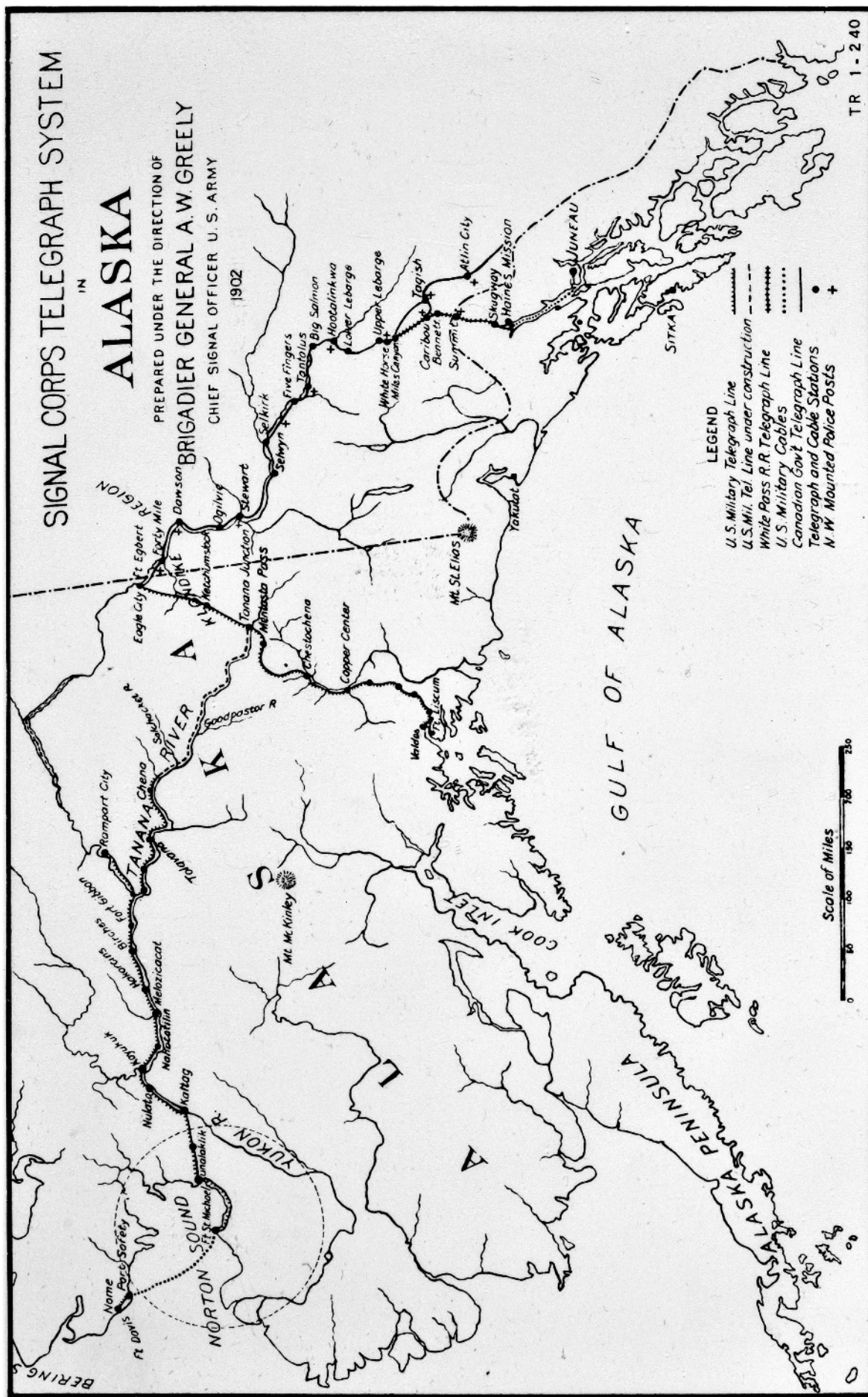
Alaska State Library and Historical Collections, Juneau, Alaska

(FE) Fort Egbert Construction and Activities, 1899-1912

(AT) Ark A. Tower Photograph Collection, 1901-1903

(WS) Wickersham State Historic Site Photographs, 1882-1930s

For readers who want to see more photographs of Fort Egbert, these collections can be viewed online at Alaska's Digital Archives. For personal recollections about life in Yukon River Army forts, see Robert J. Farnsworth's two-part memoir "An Army Brat Goes to Alaska" in *Alaska Journal* (Summer and Autumn 1977). The original manuscript of this memoir and all of Captain Charles Farnsworth's personal and official correspondence can be found in the Farnsworth Family Papers.



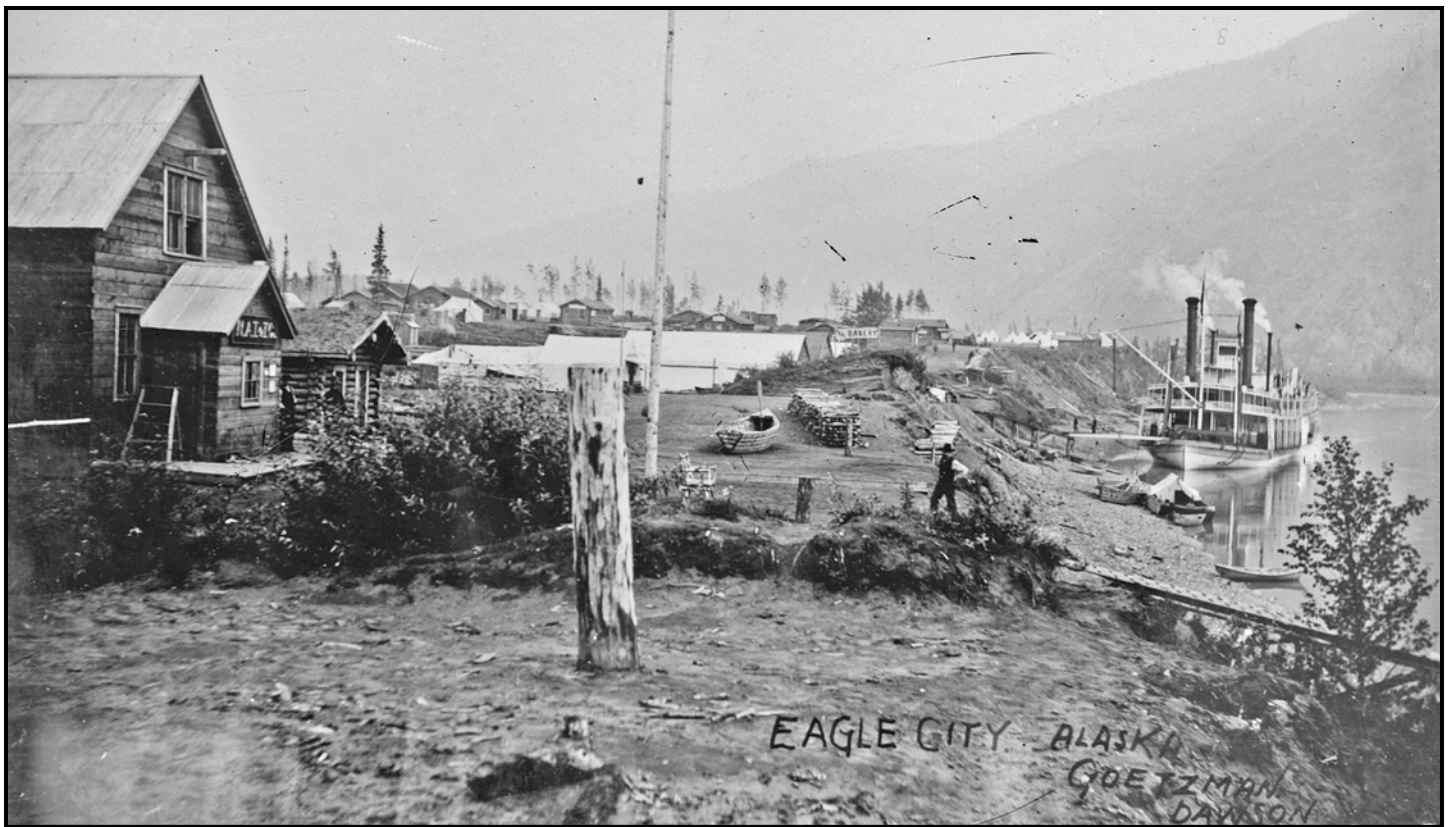
In this 1902 map, Eagle City and Fort Egbert appear along the Yukon River near the U.S.-Canada border. The Army's Signal Corps was charged with connecting the contiguous United States with Alaska's interior, south coast (at Valdez) and west coast at Nome and St. Michael. Fort Egbert was an important hub of operations in this monumental effort. In 1903, underwater cables between Valdez and Sitka and between Sitka and Seattle, Washington, accelerated communications and made the system fully operational. Alaska & Polar Regions Collections and Archives, Rare Maps Collection (1996-3-1).



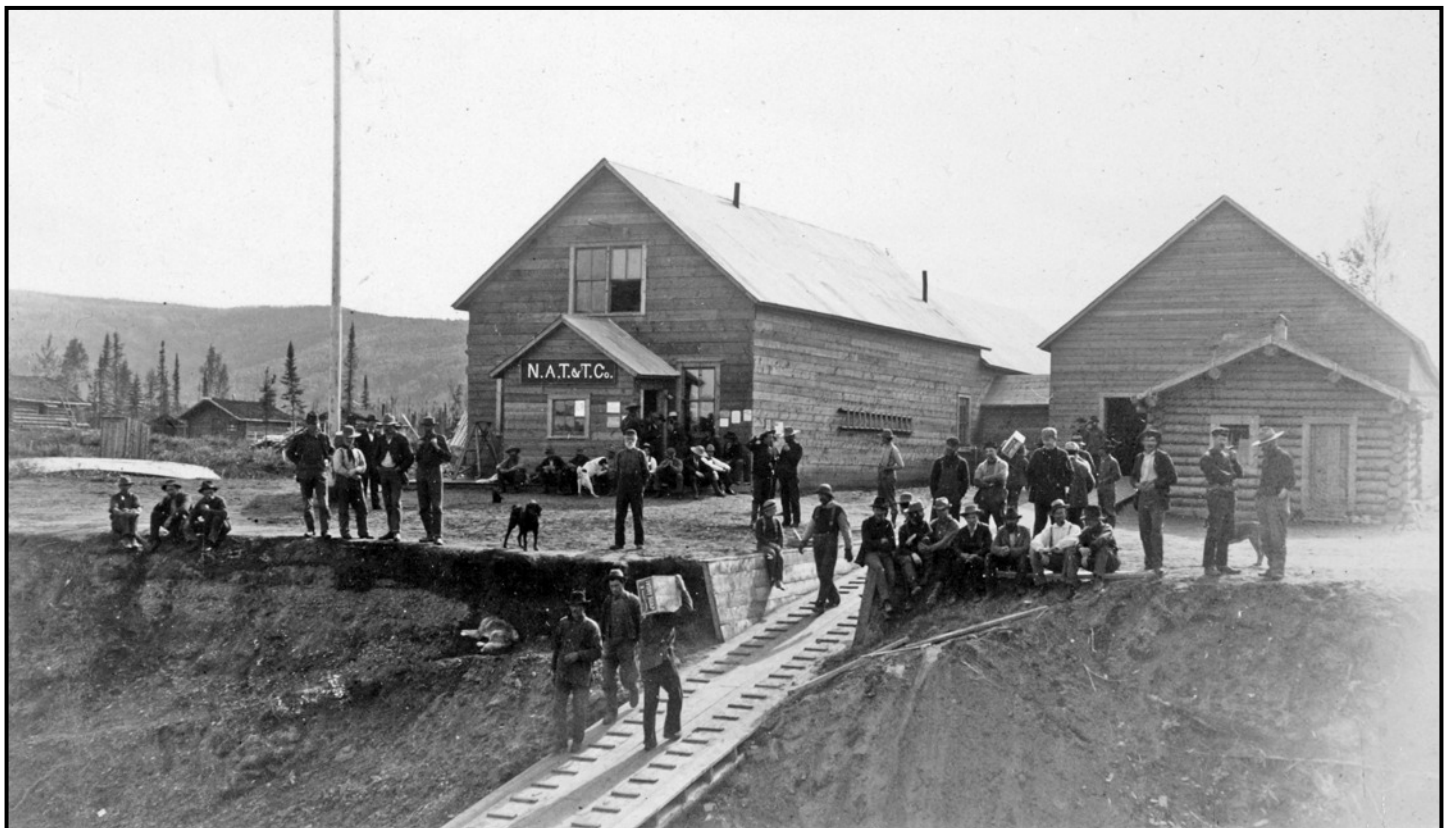
Fort Egbert was only a construction camp in 1899 when Major Patrick Ray and Captain Walter Wright arrived with the 99 soldiers of Company L, 7th Infantry. This photograph shows the harbor at St. Michael, the ship that brought them north (twin masts in background), and at right is the steamboat that would take them up the Yukon River. (FE)



The soldiers of Company L mingle with locals at the village of Russian Mission about 260 miles up the Yukon River, June 1899. They would travel over 1,000 miles more to reach their new posting at Eagle City. (FE)



When the troops arrived to build Fort Egbert, Eagle City was still a rough and tumble mining camp, but it was not without a measure of panache. Bert Snedden of the Army's hospital corps observed, "The people [here] have a most cosmopolitan air about them. For instance, you may stand on the street and see a dirty, muddy, wet, bedraggled, long haired, unshaven, ill kept specimen of manhood come along and pull out a roll of greenbacks or even a pouch of gold dust, to pay for some necessary article, with as much alacrity as a New York lady on a shopping expedition at a bargain counter." (SB)



Soldiers and miners at Eagle City watch a steamboat being unloaded, 1899. The store and warehouse belong to the North American Transportation & Trading Company, and the man on the ramp shouldered a box labeled "Ivory Soap." (NA)



Captain Wilds P. Richardson (of Richardson Highway fame) established this work camp at the newly formed military reservation that for a time encircled all of Eagle City, July 1899. (FE)



Civilian employees and the soldiers of Company L enjoy a meal in the shadow of Eagle Bluff, July 1899. Progress on a log cabin bakery, guard house, and hospital steward's quarters was slow, and barracks and officers' quarters were needed before winter. (FE)



Freshly cut 3-sided spruce logs were used in this barracks building designed to accommodate 60 enlisted men, August 1899. As winter approached, the need to complete the barracks became increasingly urgent. (FE)



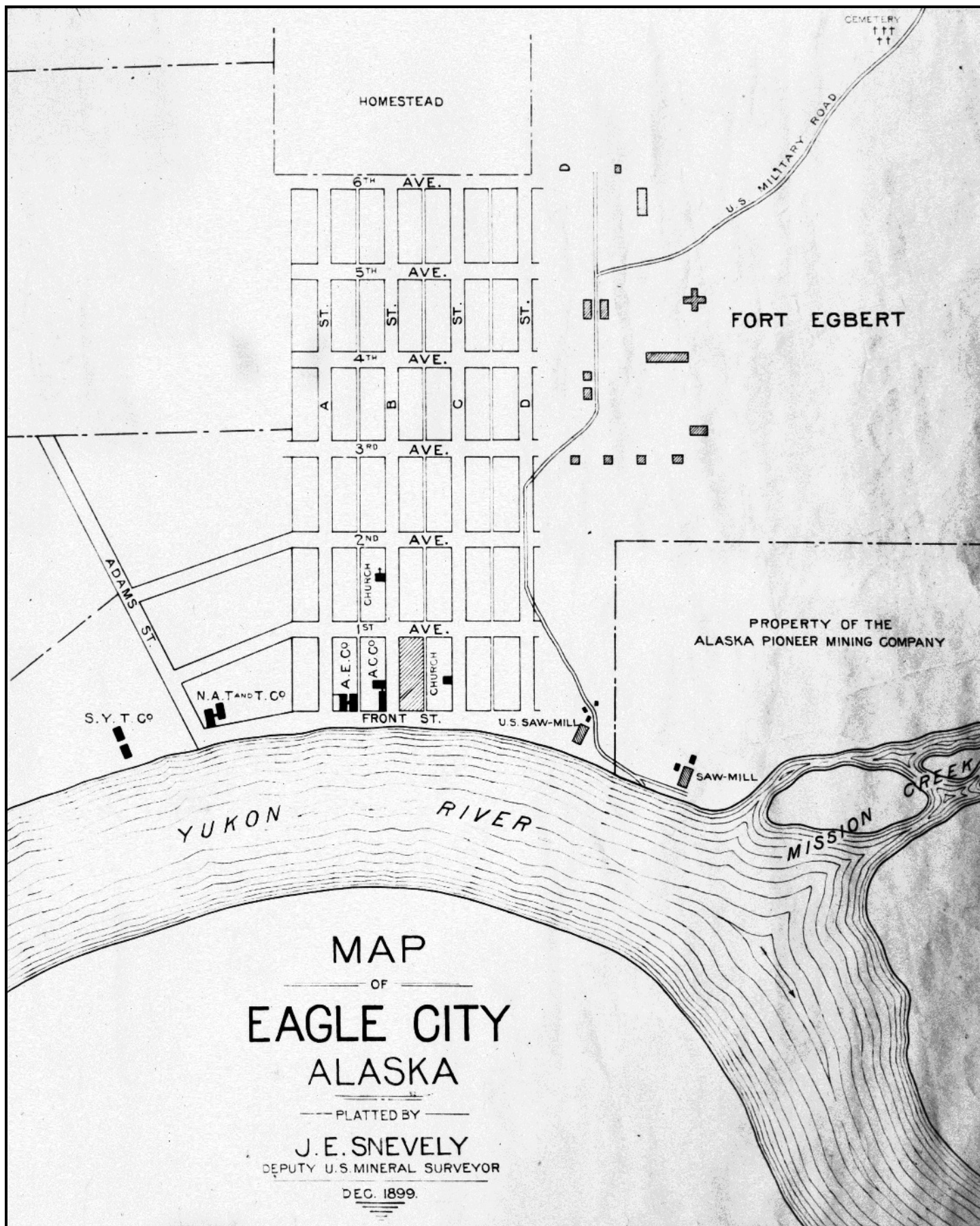
After the building was completed, the logs shrank and twisted as they dried, letting in cold air and making the occupants grumpy, September 1899. Two additions would be made to this building in the coming years. (FE)



Fort Egbert's first barracks building nearing completion, September 1899. Stacks of shingles can be seen to the left; lengths of water pipe are piled on the right; in the foreground there appears to be a garden producing vegetables for the fort's mess. (FE)



Left to right: Fort Egbert's hospital, enlisted men's barracks, and officers' quarters, November 1899. In the foreground are stumps from the land clearing that happened just months before. (FE)



This map by James E. Snevely of Sandusky, Ohio, shows Fort Egbert taking shape along with the town's commercial company offices, churches, and sawmills (the Army's sawmill is on the left and Carl M. Johanson's on the right). The town's log cabins are not shown.



On October 20, 1899, Fort Egbert's bakery was largely destroyed by fire because water was not available to extinguish the flames. A second bakery building was soon completed nearer the barracks, but it too burned in 1904. (FE)



The Army's sawmill greatly enhanced construction efforts at Fort Egbert and provided lumber for Judge Wickersham's new courthouse and jail. The sawmill was the only building in this early phase of the fort not built of logs, April 1900. (FE)



Horses appear like ghosts as they pull freight sleds over snow-covered trails, 1900. Horses, mules, and sled dogs all served as pack animals at the fort. This photograph was taken by Sergeant Ark A. Tower who commanded a squad of Fort Egbert soldiers. (AT)



"Where Eagle Buries Her Dead," 1900. At Birch Hill Cemetery, located behind Fort Egbert, a cross (at left) marks the grave of Dr. William R. Laughton who stampeded to the Klondike and then died in Eagle City on November 6, 1898. (FE)

ABOVE THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

Sixty-Eight Degrees Below Zero, But Uncle Sam's Boys Are
Happy Because the Sun Has Come Back

St. Louis Republic, March 18, 1900

Fort Egbert, Alaska, February 12—Fort Egbert is situated near Eagle City on the Yukon River, about eight miles from the Canadian border. It was established last July by a detachment of the Seventh Regulars under command of Major [Patrick H.] Ray. It is on high ground, safely out of reach of the annual floods the great river is said to indulge in, and the region is a healthful one.

The main building is of two stories, built of spruce logs squared on three sides and laid up with the bark side out. Every crevice was then carefully caulked with oakum, the walls papered and ceiled [plastered] on the inside and double floors laid.

A number of smaller huts were put up for the accommodation of the men, storage, etc. but there are to be about eighteen buildings in all, and the majority are left for next summer. They are costing a mint of money, but I suppose Uncle Sam can afford it, and a military post may be needed here some day if our cousins across the way get too grasping [ref. to Canadians].

Mechanics brought along did much of the work, but we boys took our turns with hammer and saw, and the results are creditable. Carpenters charge a dollar an hour, and lumber is \$100 a thousand [feet]. The Government sent a first-class portable sawmill along with us, and we are getting out a great quantity of pretty fair lumber. The logs are mostly spruce, and were rafted down the American and Mission creeks before it froze up. They are only from a foot to eighteen inches through, but are clear and good.

When we crossed the Arctic circle at Circle City, on the way up the Yukon River last July, the fact was mentioned, but had little meaning to us. All the way up the river we had seen green trees and gay-colored wild flowers covered acres of the flats, or what looked like meadows, along the way. In fact, I never saw such sheets of bloom anywhere, except the golden poppy fields of California. The fore part of the winter was so mild we might have been anywhere in the Western States, instead of the 'polar regions.' It did not get below zero more than 12 or 14 degrees, with but a foot or two of snow.

We jested a good deal about the weather and ridiculed our new uniforms unmercifully. Anything so unsoldierlike you never saw, and the first time we wore them on parade discipline was at a discount. It consists of yellow mackinaw blouse and trousers of the heaviest make, thick woolen sweaters, German socks, felt shoes, shoe pack and moccasins, fur caps that cover the entire head and neck, and thick woolen mittens. Complete, the outfit is unique, and perfection for the climate.

In December the mercury went down to 57 degrees below zero. By the middle of January it touched 68 below; but up to date there has been a steady, slow rise. I was on guard on the night of January 17, and when relieved had the curiosity to take a lantern and look at Major Ray's thermometer. It stood at 68 degrees below, and I came near freezing in getting back to quarters.

Thermometers are a mistake. If we had none we should not think it one whit colder than when it used to be 40 degrees below at home. The frost is more than an inch on the windows, and coupled with the absence of the sun, has helped to make our quarters gloomy for homesick men.

We saw the last of the sun October 29. The old truant only peeped at us for a moment on that day from behind the mountain tops of the south. After that we never caught sight of his jolly old face until January 16. Then he just took a look at us, barely showing half of his face, and then dropped out of sight once more. Now, however, he stays about five hours with us. Perhaps we were not glad to see him, and perhaps we didn't give him a rousing cheer. Try three months without a gleam of sunshine and you will thoroughly understand how we feel about it. We count on only four months more of winter now.

The first snow came October 1, and it has been coming at short intervals ever since. The dog teams are all on the go all the time, to keep the trails open, making trips to Dawson and Circle City, or rushing supplies out to their mining claims. Nearly every able-bodied man in the 'city' has a gold claim somewhere, from which he expects to make his fortune sooner or later. Eagle City has 400 inhabitants and just about as many dogs. We are agreeably surprised to receive mail from home on an average of once in two or three weeks.

It takes a month from the mailing of a letter in the States to its receipt here. They carry nothing but letters, so all the news we get is from clippings. We are simply starving for newspapers. A dog team brought a batch of letters not long since by way of Dawson, with the news the city had had another disastrous fire.

The first ice in the Yukon floated past here October 12 and from that time on the river was full of it until it closed on November 24. It had been frozen over solidly at Dawson for more than a week then.

On November 27 it broke loose again here, however, with a roaring and crashing that was fairly deafening. It was a grand sight to see those mighty cakes of ice, weighing tons, tossed about like rubber balls and piled up in fantastic shapes, almost mountain high. In an hour the river was entirely frozen over again, and will probably not open again before June or possibly May. Wonderful tales keep coming in about Cape Nome. As long ago as the middle of January some men came in from Skagway bound for the new direction.

Now not a day passes that dog trains laden with food and tools do not go through. The whole country seems to have gone daft over the matter, and I am wondering if the fever has reached the States.

A Dawson paper, the *Weekly News*, dated January 15, tells the story about an old resident of that city who has a claim at Cape Nome who is positively known to have taken out \$400,000 worth of gold in the past season. And he certifies that many other men took out from \$100 to \$10,000 a day.

Everybody seems to take stock in these statements, and a rush has commenced, exceeding anything ever heard of before. The ease with which the gold is mined is what attracts them. In the Klondike one has to dig a soil frozen hard as iron by building huge fires and thawing it out. At Nome the gold is in the sands of the beach and a vast extent of alluvial plain. The Japan current flowing past warms the region much earlier than the sun can here, so the working season, or washing, cleaning-up season, is much longer.

Dawson will be the gainer by these tales, for they are calling away much of the floating population it finds so hard to feed. The fire I spoke of was in the business portion, and the loss is estimated at over half a million.

—Continued

By the way, when we came up Circle City had several hundred inhabitants, but now they say there are only twenty left. All the others have started to 'mush' (travel by dog team) across country to Nome. We are also told that there are about 2,500 men wintering at the Cape. Nothing has been heard from them since November and old-timers are feeling dubious as to how they will make out. They have a collection of small frame huts, huddled close against each other for warmth, and many have only tents. Fire is what is most to be feared in their case, but if the snow is very deep they will have great difficulty in getting wood.

A man here has a contract to furnish wood for the entire post at \$11 a cord. He has two horses, for which, by the way, he paid \$300, and, do his best, he cannot get the wood to us as fast as we need it. This is a horrible country for horses and mules. They have to be dressed as warmly as humans are, and then they seem to suffer more.

The dogs actually seem not to mind the cold at all, and will drop down anywhere in the snow and sleep. For once in my life, I am where canines are worth paying a tax on. A pair of well-broken, shaggy big fellows are easily sold from \$200 to \$500.

To steal a dog here is, in the eyes of the people, to deserve hanging. Three men arrived here not long since with some stolen items. They sold one of the dogs here, stole another and went on toward Nome. A couple of days later men came in pursuit of them. Besides the dogs, they had stolen some twelve hundred dollars, but that was a minor consideration. Major Ray sent a man and dog team along with them, but I have not heard the result of the pursuit.

The Canadian police have paid us several visits, and are very friendly, but seem to think it incumbent on them to teach us our duties.

Note: Prospectors named Circle City because they thought it was on the Arctic Circle, but this is a geographical error. The soldiers traveling to Fort Egbert did cross the Arctic Circle but instead at Fort Yukon about 50 miles to the north.

An Army dog team hooked to a cart with Fort Egbert's mule barn in the background, 1900. The soldiers used dogs for short-distance jobs and in the winter when deep snow made cross-country hauling impossible for horses and mules. The mule barn is one of five fort buildings that have been restored and offer today's visitors a chance to peer into the past. (FF)





Packers at Fort Egbert prepare for an excursion, 1899. These men were part of a crew of 20 civilians—including carpenters, teamsters, hunters, a topographer, and a blacksmith—who were hired to build the frontier fort and supply food for the soldiers. (FE)



The Army's water wagon powered by two mules delivered drinking water from Mission Creek to Fort Egbert buildings, 1900. In winter, when the silt content of the Yukon River dropped, soldiers chopped holes in the river ice to find a ready supply. (FE)



Company L, 7th Infantry, mustered outside their barracks on March 31, 1900. Four months later they would all be sent down river to Fort Gibbon because of poor discipline. Company E from Fort Gibbon would be their replacements. (FE)



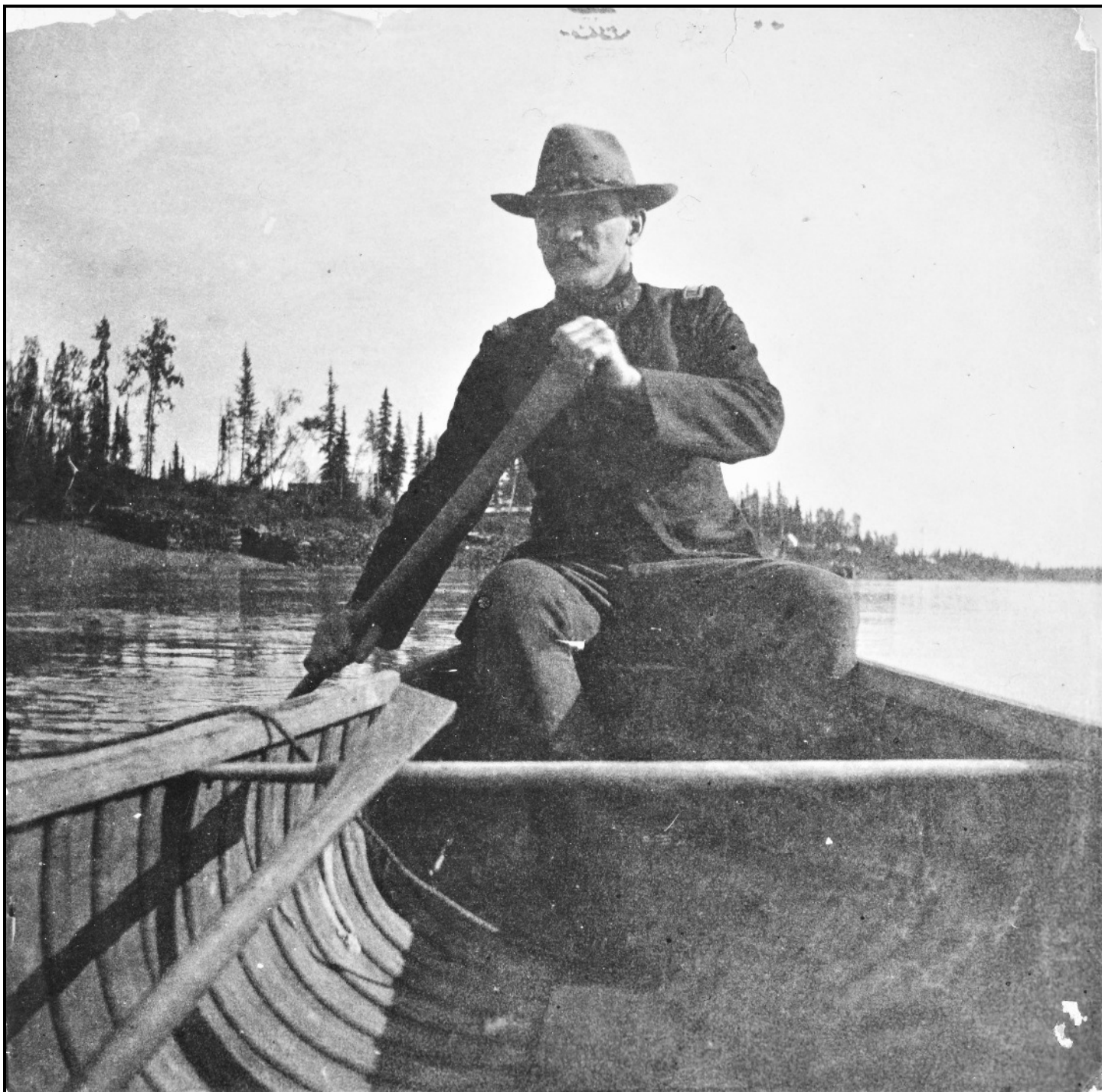
Eagle City's waterfront with soldiers and townspeople milling about and a steam-powered launch at the beach, 1900. By this time the town had a U.S. Customs station and had become an important port of entry for vessels crossing the international border. (WS)



The U.S. Army's Company E, 7th Infantry, under command of Captain Charles Farnsworth, disembarking at Eagle City from the steamer *T.C. Power*, August 23, 1900. The company of 102 enlisted men were to relieve Captain Walter Wright's Company L who had been working on Fort Egbert for a year and were known for low morale, drunkenness, and desertion. No posting to Alaska was easy, and many complained of cold weather, bad food, and long, dark winters. One veteran of Company E later wrote,

Fort Egbert is what they call the most beautiful post in Alaska. This post we, the soldiers who were there, will never forget. It is 11 miles from the boundary line and 165 miles from Dawson City. In this place the boys saw hard days cutting a trail and working on the telegraph lines. Here a lot of our men deserted on account of the hard work and poor rations.

[From "Soldiering in Alaska," see page 23 for full text; image from Farnsworth Family Papers]



Captain Charles Farnsworth paddling along the Yukon River, ca. 1901. Young and enthusiastic, the captain began his Alaska assignment, with his wife Helen and son Robert, directing the construction of Fort Gibbon near the confluence of the Yukon and Tanana rivers. But when reports of a general collapse of discipline emerged from Fort Egbert, he was called upon to switch the garrisons of the two forts and to restore order. Farnsworth found an ally in Judge James Wickersham, who arrived in Eagle City around the same time to establish the seat of Alaska's Third Judicial District. Together they worked to bring the rule of law to the region and faced down saloon-keepers and prostitutes who lured soldiers away from the fort. In addition, the captain improved relations between the Fort Egbert soldiers and their neighbors by sponsoring twice monthly dances, allowing townspeople to secure lumber from the Army sawmill, and adjusting the boundary of the military reservation to exclude Eagle City. (FF)



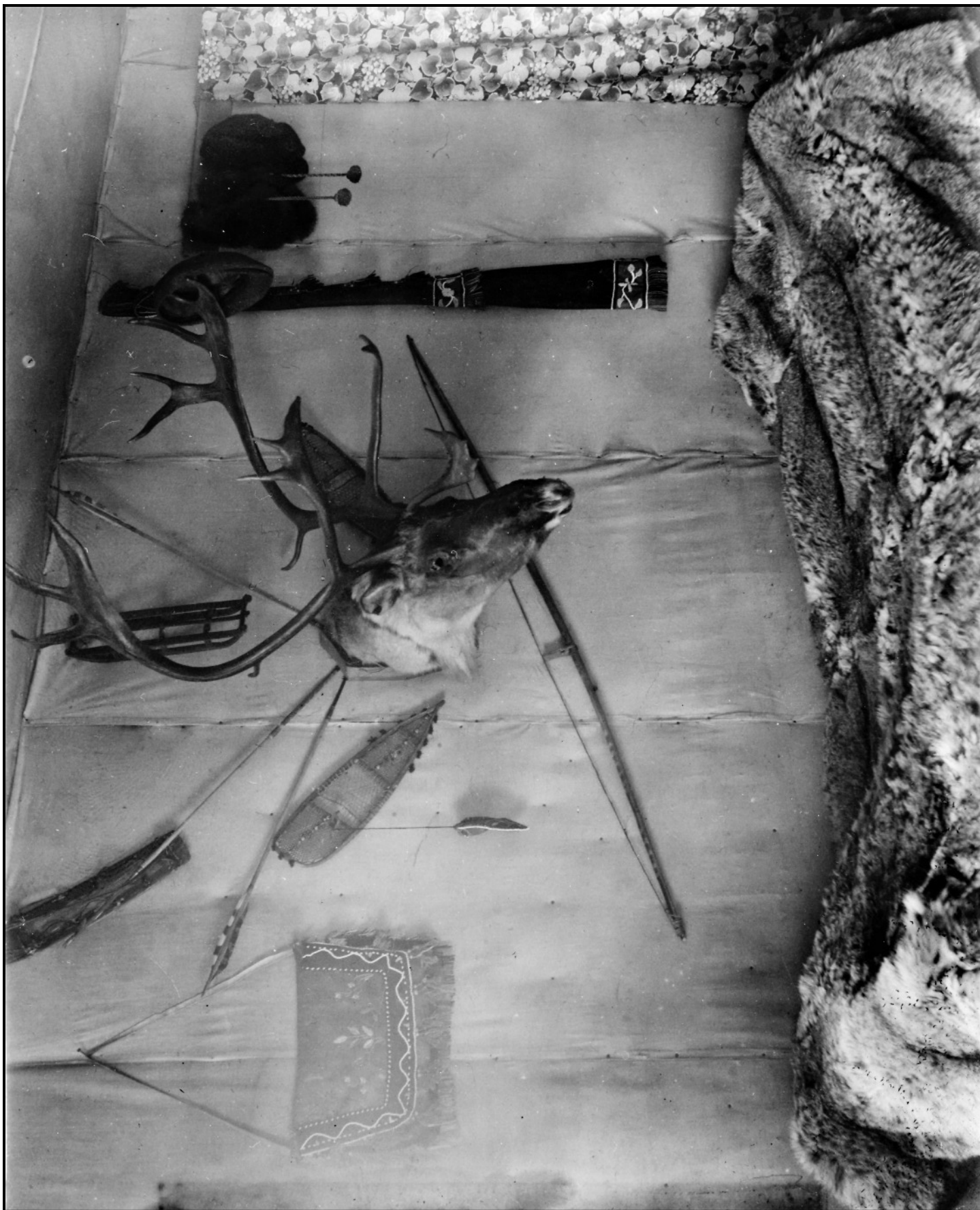
The cooks of Company E baking pies, 1900. They fed the soldiers what was available. This might be standard Army rations or local caribou, moose, and ptarmigan, ducks and geese. At times, beef was provided by Jack Dalton, who had a contract with the Army to bring cattle overland from Alaska's southeast coast. (FF)



Fort Egbert's baseball team prepared for all-weather play, 1900. On the 4th of July the soldiers were challenged by a team of Canadians and Americans from across the border at Dawson City. (FF)



Eagle City residents gather to greet a local hunter (bearded, far right) arriving with sleds loaded with game, 1900. (FF)



Captain Farnsworth's sleeping quarters with a caribou-head mount, a bow and arrow set, and an Indigenous beaded shoulder bag, rifle scabbard, and fur mittens, 1901. There is also a miniature snowshoe and sled, and what appears to be a football. (FF)



Left to right: Reverend James W. Kirk, Helen Farnsworth, Deborah Wickersham (seated with son Howard), and the wives and daughters of various Fort Egbert officers, 1901. Sporting Edwardian fashions on the frontier, these individuals and their families represented high society at the fort. They organized holiday functions, formed literary and social clubs, and decorated their homes with imported wallpaper and fine furniture. (RF)



Mary Ensign, wife of Presbyterian minister Charles Ensign, poses with her students from the Hñan Hwëch village upriver of Eagle City, 1902. The mission day school was located next to Fort Egbert and had a reading room that was visited by Eagleites and soldiers most evenings. (AT)

SOLDIERING IN ALASKA

The Experience of an Infantryman in Building Posts and Other Duties

National Tribune, Washington, DC, February 20, 1902

[At the beginning of this letter, Private Nathan Lazdon of Troy, New York, describes landing at St. Michael in 1899 and sailing up the Yukon River to build Fort Gibbon at what was then called Tanana Station. Soon he would be reassigned to Fort Egbert.]

When I write *Tanana Station*, or *Eagle City*, do not think they are towns or cities like our own. When we went there, Tanana Station had only one log cabin; the rest was a swamp and brushwood. Our first work was to cut away the brush and dig ditches to drain the water out. Our company went to the woods to cut logs. Company F did the home work. After two months' hard work a sawmill was built, and we started in to build our new post. In December we moved into our new quarters and our post was named Fort Gibbon. It was built along the Yukon River opposite the mouth of the Tanana River. . . .

People in civil life sometimes think a soldier is lazy and don't want to work. They are mistaken. A soldier works harder than a civilian. There is nothing more that a soldier would care for than to have a good company commander. The days when we were undergoing the hardships in the woods and digging ditches in the frozen ground, suffering from the severe cold, with the thermometer 70 below zero, soldiers getting sick one after another, our Captain came in to see us just the same as a father to his children. He would see to it that the sick were cared for, and also the men who were not sick. And as I was also sick, I now express my thanks to Captain Chas. S. Farnsworth.

August 15, 1900, we left Fort Gibbon for Fort Egbert, where we arrived on the 24th.

Fort Egbert is what they call the most beautiful post in Alaska. This post we, the soldiers who were there, will never forget. It is 11 miles from the boundary line and 165 miles from Dawson City. In this place the boys saw hard days cutting a trail and working on the telegraph lines. Here a lot of our men deserted on account of the hard work and poor rations.

Several of our boys went out on a hunting trip and we stood a good chance of freezing to death. We came near being eaten up by wolves one night. We were camped in the cold snow with a guard posted. In the night there was heard the sound of wolves howling in the distance. It was not long before the guard aroused us, and when I peered out from under the blanket I saw what looked like a thousand balls of fire in the night. They were not balls of fire, however, as I quickly learned, but they were the glaring eyes of a band of hungry wolves. We grabbed our guns and opened fire on the animals and succeeded in scattering them. During the battle of the wolves one of our men shot one of his hands off. We killed a number of the wolves and also captured two fine caribou.

When our soldiers reached Fort Egbert it was a barren wilderness. We were set to work clearing the place, and soon established a barracks. The miners began coming in, inspired by the stories of large gold finds in that section, and it was not long before there were a number of cabins made, all of logs, of course, and the place began to look like civilization.

It is an awfully cold place, however. There are about two months of the year when it snows, and it snows for sure in that country when it does snow. It is nothing to see snow from five to seven feet deep. In the cold months there is no snow. For three months there is no day—it is all night. Those are dreary times in the camp. Then in the Summer time there are no nights, and the days are mighty long.

The soldiers and officers have good times, even if the country is snowed under. The Government has about 40 pack horses in the fort. Capt. Farnsworth has his wife with him, and lives in pretty good quarters. He has his cutter [a light-weight sleigh] and drives within the post with his wife, when it is not too cold for man or beast to be outdoors. He has his body-servant, a colored man [ref. to Clifford Hancock]. He is a fine singer, and was something of an actor. He had been with some theatrical troupe, but got it into his head that he would like to see something of the world, and engaged himself to Capt. Farnsworth. He sings and does many things to make it pleasant for the officers and their families.

It is a good place for a soldier to make considerable money outside of his pay as a soldier if he wishes. Take it in the Summer time, when the transports [steamboats] come in, they have to be unloaded in haste, so that they can get away again. Men work all night at this business and get good pay. They can earn about \$1 an hour.

The Captains will let the soldiers go and aid in unloading the vessels after they have finished their own work, provided they save their wages. If it is found that a man gets his money and then spends it for drink, he don't get out again. I was particularly favored in the matter of getting put to work on the vessels. I was careful with my money, and when I reached Troy I had saved over \$1,100, in addition to my wages as a soldier. I expect to go back, having merely come home at the expiration of my enlistment to see my aged mother.

—Nathan Lazdon



The steamboat *Susie* landing at Eagle City on June 26, 1901. At the height of the Klondike gold rush more than a hundred vessels carried people and cargo along the Yukon River, but that number declined quickly after 1899. Even so, paddlewheel steamers like this one provided transportation between St. Michael and the continental interior. The unfortunately named William B. Drown offered these comments about the Alaska Commercial Company's ship:

For two years I have been purser on the steamer Susie, one of the best steamboats in Alaskan waters. She and her mates—there are four boats built on the same lines—are not much different from the boats on the Mississippi. The Susie was built on the Washington coast by a firm of Indiana boat builders, who sent their workmen nearly across the continent. She is as magnificently built as any of the boats here and the trip up the Yukon can be made as pleasantly as a pleasure trip on the rivers in the States.

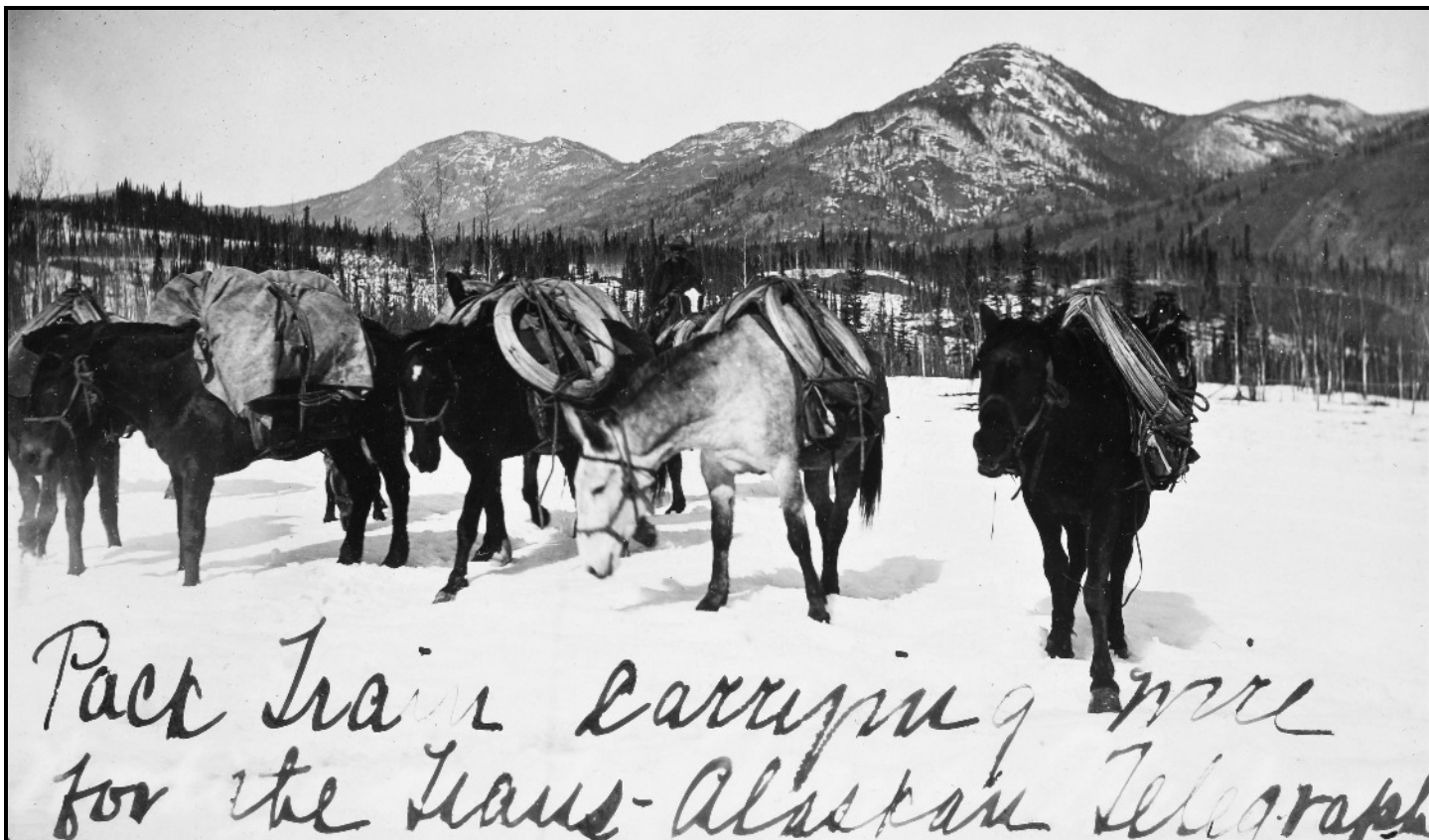
[From "Steamboating on the Yukon," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 9, 1900; image from Farnsworth Family Papers]



The first clearing for the telegraph line that would lead from Fort Egbert eastward to the U.S.-Canada border where the line would join with one coming from Dawson City and points south, 1900. (FE)



Soldiers cutting ice blocks on Mission Creek for refrigeration at Fort Egbert, 1900. Note the ice tongs at bottom. (WS)



"Pack train carrying wire for the Trans-Alaskan Telegraph," 1901. Much of the ambitious telegraph project that became the WAMCATS line was launched from Fort Egbert first to the Canadian border, then south to Valdez, and finally west to Nome. (FF)

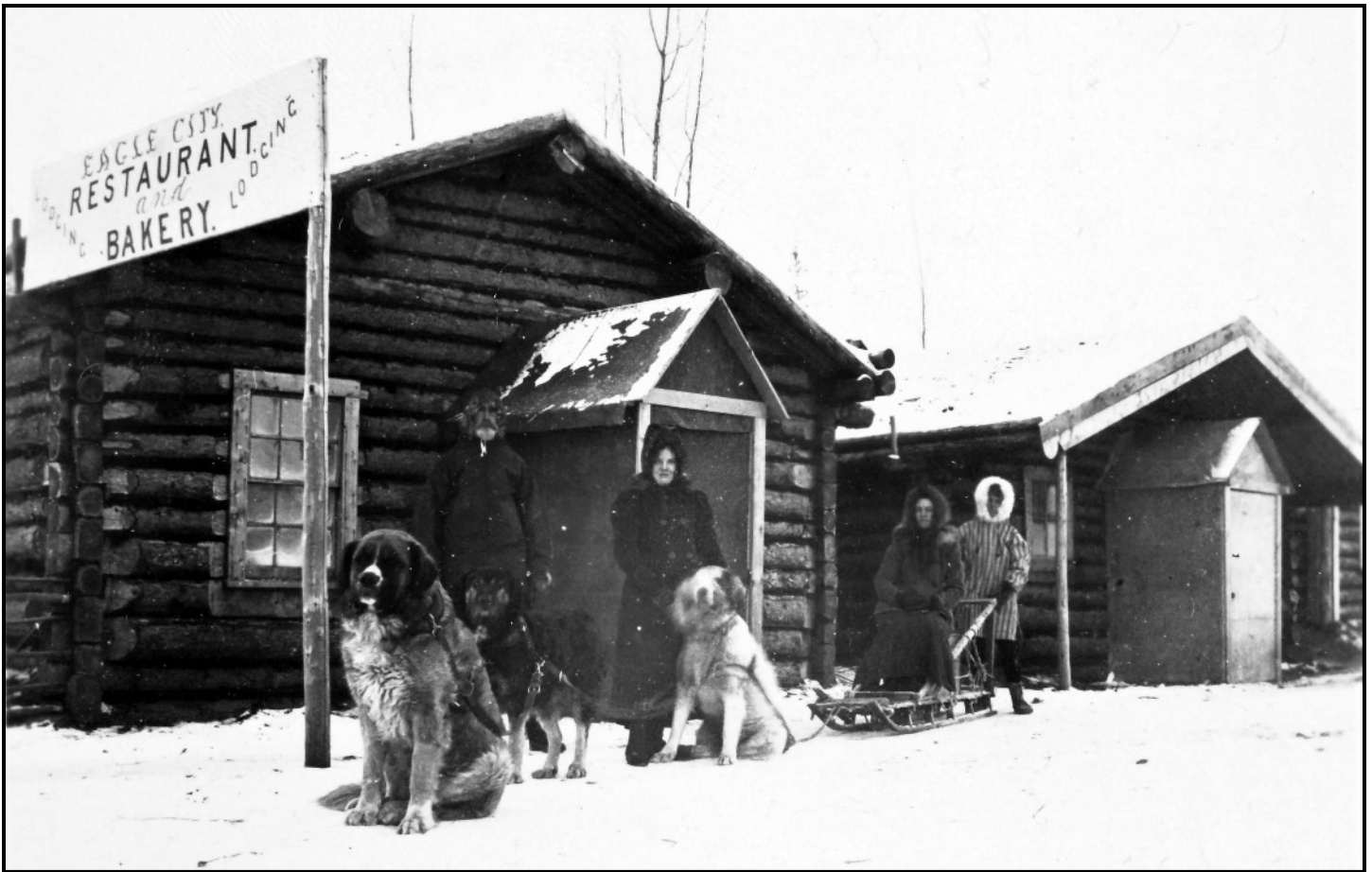


Frank Lee and Charley Webb hang 50 caribou and gather over 100 ptarmigan at a camp south of Eagle City, October 1901. Captain Farnsworth and Judge Wickersham joined expeditions like these that supplied Fort Egbert with meat for the winter season. (FF)



Women and children from Eagle Village—the Hān Hwēch'in community roughly three miles upriver from Eagle City and Fort Egbert—gather for Christmas celebrations at the Eagle Presbyterian Mission, December 25, 1901. Popcorn strands and wax candles adorn the spruce tree. As part of the holiday celebrations, the Farnsworth family, the Wickersham family, and others were invited to the village for a performance of Hān dances and songs. (FF)

[For more about Eagle Village and the Hān see, Craig Mishler and William Simeone's *Han, People of the River: Hān Hwēch'in—An Ethnography and Ethnohistory* (2004)]



A dog taxi outside the Eagle City Restaurant and Bakery, 1901. In addition to restaurants and rustic lodgings, the town had three stores and five saloons, each with its own log cabin clubroom for gambling and other forms of entertainment. (FF)



At the Hän Hwëch'in village near Eagle City, a fisherman poses with his net, a group of soldiers, and a missionary, 1902. Although Yukon River flooding has forced village residents to relocate in recent years, the community remains near this site. (AT)



Judge James Wickersham and Helen Farnsworth wander among ice thrown onto the Eagle City beach by spring ice jams and flooding, May 1901. (RF)



Fort Egbert soldiers firing the National Salute on July 4, 1901. One of these two guns remains on display at the fort today. (FF)



"Sgt. Tower's Squad Room, Ft. Egbert, Alaska," 1902. Sergeant Tower led these soldiers and was an avid photographer during his time serving at the fort. They are holding Krag-Jorgensen .30 caliber repeating rifles that were standard issue for the Army. (AT)



Fort Egbert residents, with wood scraps and sawdust under their feet, gather near the U.S. government sawmill to watch the ice going out on the Yukon River, May 1901. In a letter, Farnsworth refers to his wife when describing the same event at Fort Gibbon the previous year:

Just now the fire bell rang, the mill whistle blew, the soldiers cheered, the prisoners groaned, the dogs barked and Helen shrieked to warn everybody that the ice was starting to break and move, so we all rushed down to the river bank . . . The breaking of the ice is the great event of the year along the Yukon.

[Quoted in "A Soldier on the Yukon" by William R. Hunt; image from Farnsworth Family Papers]



A group reaches the highest point on Eagle Bluff and behind them is the Yukon River, the U.S.-Canada border, and the Ogilvie Mountains in Yukon Territory, 1902. (RF)

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