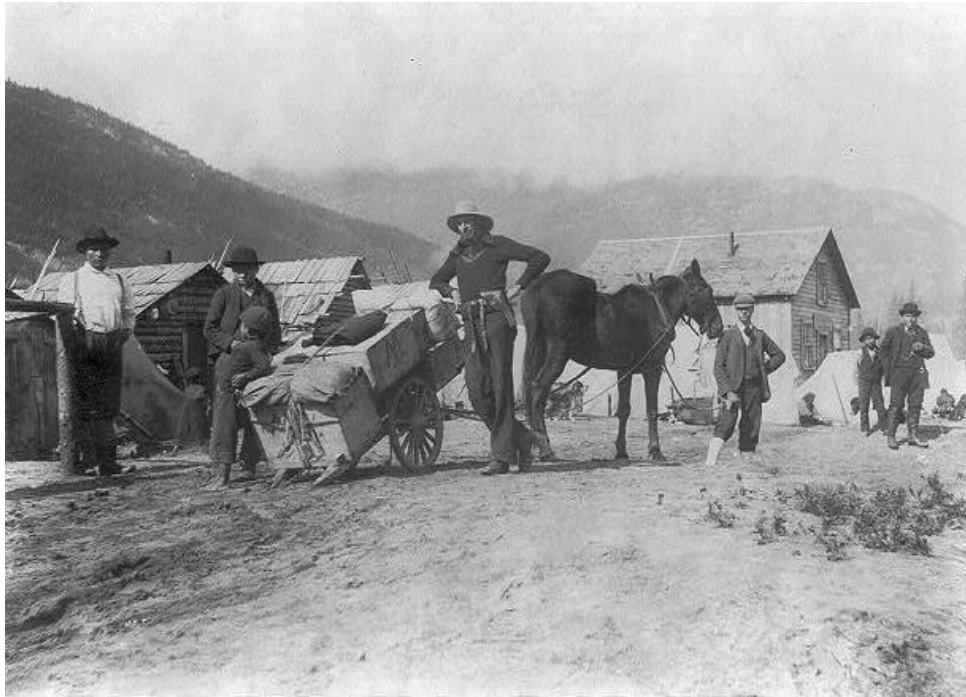


IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
Klondike wagon loaded with provisions, 1897

Alaska Gold Beckons Iowa Men

“This letter may be pretty hard to read by the time you get it. Our ink has long since frozen up and bursted,” Henry Lamprecht wrote to his friend, Hub Phillips, back in Eldora, Iowa, in March 1897.

Lamprecht had set off for the Alaska gold fields in search of his fortune earlier in the year. Having spent the winter in the Klondike, he reported that he had found “miles of rich pay.” He described men who had taken a single tub of water into their cabins and panned out \$2,000 in less than a day—after only about 30 minutes of work. And although a man could earn as much as \$15 per day as a laborer in the nearby towns, what man would be satisfied with that when vast riches awaited him in the gold fields?

The Iowan had a claim at Coal Creek that had been quite productive, and he anticipated more to come from that investment. “It has been good pay as far as we have looked,” Lamprecht wrote. “How much more there is we do not know,” he added.

Although living in a tent in January and February had been grueling, Lamprecht felt it had been worth the rewards. “Every creek and river carries some gold,” he boasted. And he wanted his Eldora friends to benefit from the riches also. He wrote that there were not enough men to do the work of prospecting, and he begged his friends to join him in Alaska. He advised they bring some good dogs, as they were as valuable in Alaska as a team of horses was in Iowa.

A year later one of Lamprecht's Iowa friends, Charles Polley, was on his way to Alaska. Like Lamprecht, Polley was trying to convince their friend Hub Phillips to join them in Alaska. Travelling by steam boat from Washington state, Polley described in a letter to Phillips that most of the passengers suffered terribly from seasickness spending much of their time "feeding the fish." He wrote about waves as high as a two-story building causing the boat to roll on her side, with chairs and tables "chasing one another around the cabin."

After an especially rough day on the water Polley spent over an hour feeding the fish and then headed for his bunk. The next morning he said everybody looked "hollow-eyed" and their clothes were so loose that they appeared to have "rooms to rent."

Polley's fellow passengers were all headed for Alaska, and he admitted he was traveling with a wild and wooly bunch of characters. Every one of the men carried a gun, and he predicted they weren't afraid to use them—even on the crew if the "grub" didn't improve.

"Everybody looks seedy," Polley wrote in a letter to Iowa. "No one has shaved since we left home." And there was no fire on board the ship, so the travelers were "nearly frozen."

It's unclear if Phillips ever joined his friends and if Polley ever made it to his destination. In August 1899 the *Daily Iowa Capitol* newspaper reported that Lamprecht had visited his family in Eldora, and he carried with him \$25,000—a "fortune" according to all accounts.

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