

HOPE BELT FERGUSON'S INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

By H. Joseph Ferguson

North to Alaska
December 1900-August 1901

At first glance, it might seem unusual for someone forty-seven years old to leave his family and head for the, "Alaska Gold Rush." Actually, Hope Belt Ferguson 1853-1904, was just doing late in his life what his father had done earlier in his own time.

Hope's father, Albert Wilkins Ferguson 1821-1891, was a Virginia native. At about the age of fifteen, Albert headed West to Lewisburg, Virginia (Now West Virginia). There he met an attractive girl by the name of Margaret Wetzel 1822-1895, who hailed from one of the toughest families in Colonial America. The Wetzels were known for their tendency to settle away from populated areas, even at the risk of defending themselves alone against the Indians. By the 1800's, Native Americans were no longer welcoming the constant encroachment of white settlers. A relative of Margaret Wetzel's, Lewis, was the subject of a book, entitled, "Frontier Hero." Lewis was an Indian fighter, and Colonial scout. Although his exact relationship to Margaret is unclear, the family connection was long affirmed.

Albert Ferguson was a talented carpenter, able to build shelter for his family, and gain employment wherever he traveled. It was no surprise, then, that five years after their 1844 marriage, Albert and Margaret moved to Lexington, Missouri, to begin an adventurous trek west. By then the couple had produced three sons. Sadly, one died shortly after birth. In 1849, Albert left his tough little Wetzel spouse and sons, joined a wagon train, and headed west over the Fremont Pass into California. There, he panned for gold on the Sacramento River, but left when a violent fever broke out in the region. Making his way to San Francisco, Albert joined a chartered steam vessel and went north to Astoria, Oregon. The little ship went across the treacherous Columbia River mouth, "With all hands lashed to the rigging."

Gold fever dies hard with the Ferguson family, however, and within a year Albert was down in southern Oregon panning for gold on the Rogue River. It was not fever that cut him short this time; it was the Rogue Indians. They did not appreciate the ambitions of white persons disturbing the pristine river of their heritage. When the Indians went on the warpath, Albert went on north to Salem. As he had in Virginia, Albert became active in the Masonic Lodge, and his carpentry trade bloomed to a builder's business. Records indicate that he was a successful bidder on government buildings, an indication of establishment in the local business community.

Things were good enough in 1852 that he sent for Margaret, who was loyally waiting in Lexington, Missouri. She took a ship through the Isthmus of Panama, no doubt to avoid the risks of the wagon trains. Sadly, the worst happened, and both the Ferguson boys died in a shipboard outbreak of Cholera. Margaret and Albert were reunited in Salem, Oregon, where they had no relatives, children, or money. Now in their thirties, they were also no longer young by the standards of the times.

That is where this story begins. In 1853 Margaret gave birth to her fourth son. After losing the first three, and traveling the country to rejoin her spouse in a strange land called, "The Oregon Territory," what would she name her fourth son? Optimistically, she called him, HOPE!

Hope Belt Ferguson entered this world from a remarkably tough woman. He was the fourth live birth, and five more would follow. All but one of the children would live to see the new century still forty-seven years away, and one of his siblings would live until 1944. The genetics of the Ferguson and Wetzel combination were now working. As noted below, Margaret Wetzel and Albert Ferguson wasted no time in replenishing the family that nature had reclaimed from them.

Following Hope's birth in 1853, came;

James Ernest	1855
Edward Zest	1859
Fidella Wetzel	1860
Ada	1865
Lulu	1867

The first four children were born in Salem, the last two in The Dalles, where Albert had a Planing mill in partnership with Louis Pope, and was elected sheriff of the County twice. Lulu died at about age two. Margaret, incidentally, was forty-five years old when Lulu was born.

If gold was in the Ferguson blood, then so was Astoria. In 1876, Albert moved his family back to the town at the mouth of the river that nearly swallowed him when he arrived in 1851. He was now in his fifties, suffering badly from what was probably Arthritis, but determined to continue making his mark on the fledgling State of Oregon.

Hope B. Ferguson was twenty-three when the family moved back to Astoria. He first became known to this author at the Seaside Historical Museum. While rummaging through old photos in the then new facility, I spotted a picture of a hunting party taken in the wilds of Seaside in the 1880s. A tall, bright eyed, young man stared out from the group. He was carrying a long barreled rifle, wearing, as I recall, buckskin clothes, and a wide brim hat that was flat topped, and tilted to the left. The caption identified him as, Hope Ferguson. At that moment, great uncle Hope came alive to me, and since then I have come to know him personally, though he died thirty years before my birth.

Albert and Margaret Ferguson had little formal education, but their children were urged to be achievers in the new society. The particulars on Hope's schools are not available, but by the age of thirty, in 1883, he was the County Auditor in Pomeroy, Washington. No doubt wishing to have the best help, he hired twenty-four years old Edward Zest Ferguson as Deputy Auditor. Lest the reader fear unwarranted nepotism, Edward was in 1904 the subject of an article featuring the most prominent citizens of Western Oregon.

The Northwest was not a population center in the days of early statehood, as a look at census figures reveals. Oregon, in 1880, had a population of two hundred and fifty thousand whites, Washington counted about the same, and Alaska, which comes later in the story, had about twenty thousand. Because of the way people were counted in those times, we do not know the number of Native Americans, or other non-whites.

On May 19, 1881, Hope married Elmira Montgomery in Pataha, Garfield County, Washington. The Montgomery family had moved to Washington

from Illinois, where Elmira had been born in 1856. Elmira would give birth to seven children; six of the children would survive to adulthood. The first child, Fidella Alfred, died a month after birth in 1882. He was followed by:

Robert Wilkins	1883
Hope Belt	1885
Ernest Edward	1887
Margaretha Ethel	1890
Harold	1895
Ada V.E.	1898

Life was volatile in the early days of the Northwest. Several generations would pass before the introduction of unemployment insurance, social security, or medical coverage. The social umbrella for Fergusons, was family. History does not record the reason for every move, but by 1895, Hope and Elmira were living in Astoria, where nearly all the family gathered for important occasions. Albert, Hope's father, had died in 1890, and Margaret, his mother, passed away in 1895. As the oldest surviving son, it would be natural for Hope to return to the family business, and help with support where required. The youngest of Hope's and Elmira's children were born in the Astoria area. They were, Harold in 1895, and Ada in 1898. When Margaretha (Margaret Hayes) married in 1917, the wedding was in Astoria. Most Ferguson weddings were held in the living room of the Albert Ferguson home, built in 1886 on Grand Avenue. The classic Victorian structure stayed in the family until 1934, and has since been registered for its historic note.

Was it the return to his father's house that brought the wanderlust out in Hope? Was it the genetic call to the wild that generations of Wetzels and Fergusons had responded to so enthusiastically? Whatever the case, by 1900, Hope Belt Ferguson was planning a trip to Alaska to find gold. The port city of Astoria would be an easy place to catch the fever. One can imagine the effect of the stories about gold told by people coming off the vessels from Alaska.

The lure of gold was not new for Hope. He had heard the stories from his dad about panning on the Sacramento River in 1850, and the Rogue River in 1852. In 1890 Hope invested twenty-five hundred dollars in the common stock of the Idaho Consolidated Mining Company. Adjusting for inflation,

his investment was the equivalent of more than forty thousand dollars in 1996. When it came to the subject of gold, Hope Ferguson put his money where his mouth was. History does not record the return on Hope's investment in the Idaho company, but his enthusiasm for the hunt had not diminished ten years later.

Weather cycles were not understood in the 1890s. They were simply accepted as, "Acts of God." Hope and his partners had no way of knowing that they were going to Alaska during the winter of one of the strongest El Nino weather years ever. The strange and wild weather that Hope observed in his diary was never questioned as unusual. He would comment on the effects of weather on his battered little traveling party, but had no way of knowing that nature was reversing itself for a year. Eighteen ninety-nine witnessed the absence of the monsoon season in India, leading to a terrific drought. Western Canada experienced unusually warm weather, and the Alaskan weather was wild. At least it sounds that way from the person being victimized by it on the way from Nome to the Kuskokwim River.

Hope Ferguson was not an impulsive person. He was also not young, or immature. Why, then, would he take part in a winter trip of over five hundred miles in the wilds of Alaska? It was not just the gold. The precious metal was still being found in California, even southern Oregon. It was not the intoxication of riches. Hope was not young enough for that emotion, and had already experienced success. His family life appeared rewarding, and he was surrounded by younger siblings that were in his debt. Hope, however, had figured out something that made the gamble worth the attempt. Consider the following line of reasoning.

Most of the gold hunters in Alaska went where the people and the support systems were in place. Pack animals, trams, trails, towns, ports, bars, and financial firms, existed for the hopeful miner. It is often said that the real fortunes were made by those living *off* the miners as opposed to those actually looking for gold. Hope Ferguson, on the other hand, was a gold panner, not a miner, and had probably learned the art from his father. More importantly, Hope and his partners could live off the land. They were woodsmen and hunters. These skills, as we shall see, would be tested in ways that Hope had not even envisioned. Though they would often stay at established camps during their long ordeal, the strategy worked. They were

nearly always alone, and may have accomplished their goals had Mother Nature not decided otherwise.

Traveling from Astoria, Oregon, to Nome, Alaska, in the winter of 1900 was no doubt an adventure itself, but the details of Hope's trip were not recorded. Travel by sea was the only method, and there were many ferries plying the long route from Seattle to the north. Seas in the Northwest are nearly always heavy in the winter. Also, the unusually warm weather in Western Canada during the winter of 1900, could produce heavy wind and rain. This would be caused by the split jet stream in an El Nino year. Perhaps Hope received the kind of entrance into the port of Nome in 1900 that his father had experienced going into Astoria in 1851.

Hope's traveling group from Nome to the destined Kuskowim River was divided into four partnerships of two people each. The partnerships were as follows:

- 1 Hope Ferguson and Malcom* Johnson
- 2 H.D. Campbell and Dick Waldon
- 3 William N. Stanton and Joseph Gehgirty
- 4 Pat Sullivan and Dick Fullerton

Hope also listed a partnership with H.C. Ash of the A.E. Company of Nome. Ash did not go on the trip, but was certainly a financial partner. He was probably supplying the equipment in return for a share of the gold recovered. An educated guess says that the A.E. stood for, Ash Explorations. Ash would put up the money, and someone else would do the exploring.

Hope's diary was a series of mostly short entries made at the end of long and tiring days. In order to clarify the story for the reader, I will combine portions of the diary. The document in its entirety, however, appears at the end of this work. I encourage the reader to review the exact words of this courageous person. Hope intended for the document to be read, because he sent it to his spouse, with a note that said, "Sweetheart, this will be interesting reading for you." Even with the expectation that the diary would be read, I doubt that he would expect it to be published ninety-seven years later.

*As spelled in Hope's diary.

PART TWO
HOPE'S INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

The reason for the trip beginning from Nome on December 15, may have been to trade four months of rough weather for four months of midnight sun. The optimistic gold hunters no doubt envisioned the portage of hundreds of pounds of the precious metal from the Kuskokwim River back to Nome. They would prefer the summer months for the job. Only about four hours a day are too dark for outside work in the summer that far north. The trip ended on August 6th, 1901. Was that the intended date? Or, was that all the weary band of human beings could take? Hope Ferguson could not have lasted much longer, as we shall see, but the diary does not fill in the details.

December 15 To December 25

Those first few days were filled with enthusiasm, with diary entries short and to the point. Despite being on foot, the party was making good headway. This was in spite of a heavy portage, and the Alaska weather. Other gold seekers were also on the trail, and there was some semblance of civilization. On the twenty first, the men stayed in a roadhouse, “..run by parties stranded from sloop St. George.” It is likely that the shelter was constructed from the wreckage of the sloop, or was simply the beached St. George intact.

It was on the 22nd that Hope may have had an inkling of what was to come. “After dark camped on ice Berring Rim. No wood, fire or grub. Rolled up in a blanket and lay until morning. I fell into the sea through a crevice and got right foot wet. Came near freezing it.”

The next day, however, saw the little band of seekers stopping at a roadhouse called, “Mom’s.” Don’t be fooled by the term, “Roadhouse.” Many of the diary comments were about trails, or lack of trails. These shelters along the way, probably run by discouraged gold hunters, should have been called, “Trailhouses.” Hope does not comment further about, “Mom,” but at least the travelers had a meal. The party picked up an additional member, at least temporarily, in, “Boardman.” We may not have known this except that, “Boardman’s dog badly bit his hand tonight.” Dogs were such a necessity for survival, even companionship, that it is doubtful that Mr. Boardman did much to the animal that turned on its master. The

dogs worked so hard, creating such great hunger, that Boardman may have made the mistake of placing his hand between his dog, and food.

On Christmas Eve of 1900, Hope Ferguson had crossed Norton Sound, stopping at E.E. Wilkie's Cape Dandigh roadhouse. The dogs were, "..overly tired." The travelers had covered one hundred seventy-five miles in ten days. They had to be exhausted, and seeds of doubt were probably not far from their minds. Hope Ferguson, after all, had spent his entire forty-seven years in the mild climate of the Pacific Northwest.

Christmas day found Hope, "..Laying off today. Grouse for dinner. It is quite cold, eighteen below, and wind. Most of party left for Shaktoolik. I am quite sore from pushing sled." Hope may have been a master at the understatement. To stay behind when most of the party moved on meant he was feeling miserably, which he nearly admitted. At forty-seven, he was likely old enough to be father to most of his traveling partners. But in the thick of the wild, each person had to shoulder his share of the load, because success, even survival, demanded it. Hope could expect no sympathy from his fellow gold hunters. He needed to prove that he could still carry his own weight. Otherwise, he could count on being left behind permanently.

December 26, 1900 To January 1, 1901

If Hope was bothered by his foot being in the icy water on December twenty second, imagine how he felt on the twenty sixth. He fell in the Unalakleet River, and had to return to the previous night's camp to change clothes. It turned out not to cause a delay because the weather was so stormy, that no travel was possible until December 29.

By New Years Eve, Hope and a make shift group had reached Unalakleet. One of the three dogs in the group was lame, and the weather was still bad. Perhaps more disturbing to Hope was his last entry that day, "..and party two days ahead." We will never have a full description of what Hope's problems were. We know he was older than he should have been for such a trip, he had fallen in to the water twice, and his dog had gone lame. A younger person may also have been slowed by such events.

New Year's Day, 1901, found Hope's spirits high. He had to be an optimist, of course, or such a journey would not have been contemplated, let alone attempted. "New Year. What will it bring us? The natives fired off guns and made quite a hurrah last night. I washed up all my clothes this morning and made hot biscuits. Cooked Dolly Varden trout and wild grouse for dinner. The boys (seven of them) seemed to enjoy it. There are two stores, a mission, school and about two hundred Indians here. Party consists of H.D. Campbell, Dick Waldon, Billy Stanton, Boardman, and Jos."

Because Hope's traveling partner was Malcom Johnson, it may have been disturbing to be two days behind him, and the rest of the original traveling party. Hope obviously decided not to let that interfere with his New Year's wishes. It is noteworthy that Hope, after washing his clothes, cooked a big meal for the, "Boys." This may indicate that he was the most experienced camper in the group. The term, "Boys," incidentally, did not infer age in those times, but was used in regards to males within an established group.

January 2, 1901 To January 31, 1901

It was nineteen degrees below zero on January 2, but Hope does not editorialize on that fact. Like most people of his time, Hope Ferguson was a fatalist, pretty much accepting whatever the present situation provided. It was not a deep philosophical decision for Fergusons, because they had never had other choices. He did find a bright spot to the day, however, noting that Campbell had taken one hundred pounds of flour to Kaltag. If Campbell was successful, this assured food in the future. At least, for a while.

The next five days were spent in travel from one established camp to another in search of the elusive gold. Then, on January 8, signs of increased danger surfaced. The Dozier party of Nome met Ferguson's group as the Doziers retreated. Hope quotes the men, and then adds his own comment, "...there was no trail or grub on Yukon or Kuskokwim Rivers, but we go on just the same." Hope was not self destructive. Therefore, he had made a professional assessment about the bearers of the bad tidings. He decided that they were less competent than him. Hope Belt Ferguson had spent a lifetime as a hunter from a long line of hunters. He expected to find food where others could not, and trails where none had been found previously. This confidence would cost him dearly.

On the tenth, Hope comments that it must be forty below zero, and on the eleventh he says it is sixty below. The diary reads, “..Inside tent covered with heavy frost and hot fire going. One Indian passed for Kaltag, and Boardman started for Kaltag. *Crazy*. If it does not moderate will stay in camp tomorrow.”

On January 18, Hope comments on Boardman once again leaving for Kaltag. He had been correct about Boardman’s first attempt, but here was the individual trying again in conditions still deteriorating. The next day the coal oil froze, which reportedly happened only when the temperature declined to seventy below.

By the eighteenth the weather was not as cold, but, “Storming on the mountain with head wind.” Worse still to Hope was the following, “Nichols’ party(3) came in from Kuskokwim. Claim it’s a fake. No gold being found.” No gold being found? Imagine how Hope Belt Ferguson felt at that moment. In spite of it all, he left the next morning for Kaltag.

In the next several days he would freeze his nose and chin (frostbite), get sick with biliousness (food poisoning), and take poison by mistake (?). The one bright spot is an entry in the January 22nd diary, “Boardman (good riddance)...pull(s) out.” Obviously, Hope had little respect for the man as a traveling partner, and probably began to think of him as a liability.

On January 23, as Hope recovered from the poisoning, mail came in, and he heard about the election of President McKinley. By the 31st, Hope made camp only eight miles from his goal of Kaltag. He continued to mention that others went on while he stayed back. One hopes that he was showing wisdom that comes from age, but one also recognizes that the effects of a hard life were being amplified by the terrible weather.

The results for the first quarter of Hope’s Incredible Journey can be summarized as follows:

Frostbite, food poisoning, wet clothes, lame dog, terrifying weather, physical exhaustion, separation from partners, discouraging news about gold prospects, *but* renewed determination.

History may record many things about Hope Belt Ferguson, but quitting is not one of them.

February 1, 1901 To April 1, 1901

By February 2, Hope was in a decent cabin, presumably near Kaltag. The people with him, however, did not include Malcom Johnson, his partner. Unless the partnership was a much looser arrangement than normally assumed, Hope must have been quietly concerned.

By the beginning of the second week of the month, the men had found fish, and other food. They also had established enough contact with the Indians, that life had some sense of normalcy. For pay, the Indian women would patch clothing and such. Hope also writes that, "Billy and Jos. split the blanket this evening.." Prior to this, Hope had mentioned, "..Trouble in upper camp.." About this point in time, after all the travails, such problems were to be expected. Happily, this did not end with gun fire.

On the ninth, Hope wrote, " Very cold and windy. Sullivan back from Kaltag. Says everyone is going back, that there is *no* gold...Stanton went to village, saw two men from Kuskokwim who report there is *no* strike, fish, or anything else on the Rim." Such information registered with Hope, but who could trust greedy gold hunters who might be intentionally spreading negative rumors about a rich strike? Also, he might properly think that others were not in his league when it came to hunting, fishing, or looking for gold. Boardman, who incidentally had returned, may not have been the only incompetent that Hope met along the trail.

By the twelfth, nine of the twelve had given up. Hope Ferguson was not one of them. He wrote, "..We three go on." Would he end up entirely alone? Was his persistence stronger than his aging body? On February 14, he wrote, "Knocked Dude in the head last night, one dog less. Will make hard pulling for Kuskokwim now." In a later age, people of those times sound insensitive. This is not true, in the observation of this writer. Suffering in silence was considered necessary for those who lost living things they cared about.

Hope still had his sense of humor, saying that Mel and Billy were, “Disconsolate,...Heartbroken,” because the young squaws had followed the “Whiskey” men down the river.

On February 23, Hope was cooking in camp, and the boys were out hunting. They successfully found the trail desired, and a cache of abandoned food. Hope says, “We will confiscate.” The party was killing grouse, and generally finding the food they needed. If food was available in spite of the rumors, could the stories of no gold be false? Kuskokwim would tell its own story.

The eight days until March 3, were spent hunting food and trails. Weather continued to limit the group in everything but the necessities. On March 4, Hope wrote, “I suppose McKinley is inaugurated today and times are lively in D.C., but I am alone in camp..it is not very pleasant for me.”

Finally, after more than two months of hardships, Hope Belt Ferguson admitted to feeling lonely, even depressed. He probably felt guilty about the temporary loss of control, because the next entry on the fifth says, “Pleasant, good days. Traveling, crossed the river twice. Hard work crossing.” Now he was comfortably back to commenting *on* the trip, not how he *felt* about the trip. By the middle of March, the three men were finding grouse, caribou, and Indians. Thus, they had food, directions, and company. Hope seemed to hold the Indians in high regard, which would be natural because of Hope’s love of the outdoors, and his comfort with nature.

Six days later, the situation was reversed. The game had moved on, and the party was hungry, and needing food. “Something must be done soon.” On March 23, Hope wrote, “Boys did not return last night. It is pretty lonely, enough to give one the jitters alone in these mountains.” Hope’s vulnerability, and lack of food, were working on his nerves.

For the next six days, the men divided their time between hunting for food, and hunting for signs of gold. How frustrating it must have been to finally reach the promised land, and be starving from lack of food. In the last few days of March, Hope wrote, “..I went to look for cache. Traveled from 6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. without stopping but found nothing. Snowshoeing fifteen and a half hours without rest is hard work. I am very tired tonight.”

April 1, 1901, To June 30, 1901

April began with a snowstorm, and a continued lack of food. The human beings could tough it out for extended periods, but the animals could not. They were beasts of burden, and without their strength, the entire mission would fail. In that regard, “..Killed Sport, and cooking and feeding him to other dogs. Cindo relishes him but Fanny won’t go near him..” Down to just three men (Hope, Mel, and Billy), the party could get by with less animal assistance. What they did have, however, had to be strong.

How bad was it? Note the April 4 entry after visiting an Indian village, “Traded coat for caribou meat and dried fish...camped at 6:30, estimated travel eighteen miles. I am sick, did not eat any supper.” The next day, “Ate three small pieces meat for breakfast. Lived on hot water for balance of day..dried dog salmon don’t agree with me.” It was not Hope’s only coat that he traded for food. The critical level of hunger, however, becomes apparent when clothing in the cold Alaska winter was traded for a modest amount of meat and dried fish.

The physical crisis now facing Hope surfaced again in his April 6 entry, “..No sleep last night and I have not ate a thing today. Fainted on the trail about an hour after starting out this a.m. and camped in an old vacant Indian house which fortunately is in good condition and a stove in it. Hope for a good night’s rest. *Very Tired.*” Where would he get the strength to continue? Only Hope Ferguson would know, because the next day he traveled twenty-five miles to New Kaltag, “...had a good feed of bread and fruit, first for five days.”

For eight days the party ate, traveled, and made human contact where possible. No mention of gold was made during this period. They had not given up, or they would have headed back like the rest. One suspects, however, that by not talking about the subject, they were hoping to not think about it. The party stopped at, “Slaughter House Gulch,” on April 14, aptly named for the murder of two people by a jealous man three years earlier. He was in a group of four men and one woman (his). It does not take much imagination to figure out what happened.

Until the end of April, the little group continued to recover, meeting a missionary, and many friendly people along the way. One cannot help

wonder from this end of the century, if there was a better route to New and Old Kaltag than the one used by Hope. Someone was getting flour and other goods to a trading post, and the supplies certainly were not traveling the route of Hope's party. It also comes to mind that if there was very much gold in the region, some of the good people living there would have panned for it. On the other hand, perhaps they did find gold, and kept quiet about it when strangers arrived.

May began with, "Weather colder and bitter traveling." Once again, Hope fell in the frigid water, soaking both feet and goods. The men traveled for eleven hours on May 1, and "Could not get along without the Indian." Hope also expresses concern for the partner left behind with few provisions. It may be assumed that he was referring to Billy, who had been sick with a bad toothache. It seems logical that he had a serious infection. Toothaches, and minor aches and pains were suffered in silence. Billy was obviously hurting badly.

The group was, "Delighted at seeing the face of our partner appear in the door in good health." The Indians had found Billy alone, and hungry, and took him to the village where Hope's party waited. The Indians were very good friends to the gold seekers.

Until May 10, the entries are nearly all involved with hunting for food, and travel to camps. The group was beginning to retrace steps, and must have believed the gold was near. Hope's entry on that day says, "Washing our clothes and chasing the G.B." Did he mean, gold bar? Probably, because on May 18, he writes, "Found..gold on bar."

On May 21, Hope gives the reader another short look at his inner thoughts. After writing about a close call two of the other men had when their raft disintegrated, he writes, "Dream: 2 pieces of burnt paper---everlasting life--- everlasting death (?)." Nothing in his next entry gives us a clue as to what else was going through his mind.

No other mention of gold was made until the final day of May. The days in between were spent simply trying to survive. The erratic weather was confusing the men. Fighting mosquitoes one day, and snow the next, caused the group serious problems. For example, note the entry on May 29 from a campsite many miles away from the main one, "We find we can't reach our

objective point on the amount of grub we have with us so we return. It is now 11 p.m. and snowing hard. We are sitting around a campfire trying to get warm. No coats or bedding.”

On May 31, as though it was nothing special, Hope wrote, “Warm. Slept all day. Done some panning in the evening on bar. Good results.” The celebration was undoubtedly brief, however, because just one day later, the main concern was not gold. It was survival. “This is our last day in a camp where we have had to rustle for grub and have really accomplished nothing. We have found plenty of indications of gold but frost and then high water have kept us from getting to bedrock but we will get back if possible.” Even without punctuation marks, the reader can see deep discouragement on one hand, but then Hope Ferguson’s eternal optimism on the other.

Hope let us know just how bad it was by recording the inventory of rations as of June 1, 1901. “We have left in grub line, besides the 2 grouse just killed, enough sourdough batter for 6 pancakes and 2 cups of old musty flour and nothing else, and we don’t know when we will get to village and whether they have anything to eat.” Little did Hope realize that June 2 would be far worse than June 1.

June 2 started well enough. It was a pleasant day, and in spite of the meager breakfast of rationed flapjacks, the group set off at noon by raft toward the village. Disaster soon struck.

“Floated along nicely until about 3 o’clock when we ran into a sweeper which completely capsized us, turning our raft bottom side up. The water was quite deep and icy cold. Billy made for the shore and I and Mel clung to raft. I was first on to bottom of raft and ran to other end to Mel’s assistance, as he had gone under raft and had his foot caught, but got on O.K. Billy with the two dogs made for right bank. We had not gone down river from here more than 200 yards when we hung up by a snag by the tent, which was lashed on over load, having come loose and dragging. After some little time we cut it loose and we landed a few hundred feet below on a bar, where after an hour or two of work and being in the cold water up to our waists we succeeded in turning raft.”

Cold, hungry, and dejected, the little band regrouped that evening around a fire. Of all the material lost, one loss was potentially disastrous. Hope says, “Losing our shotgun will keep us from getting anything to eat until we reach

Indian village, which will be *several* more days if no more mishaps.” The next day he wrote, “Found a piece of bacon rind, 2 inches by 6 inches. We divided it into 3 pieces and made quite a meal from it. We have some tea.”

Fortunately, the raft drifted to an Indian camp on June 6, and the three men ate well for the first time in two weeks. The next day, however, they were back aboard their raft, and traveling in wider, deeper water. This made Hope feel better about their chances.

On June 10, Hope made a very bad error for an experienced woodsman. He knowingly ate tainted food. “The caribou was killed last January and is full of old dried clotting blood and green with mould but tastes good to hungry and starved men.” Though Hope tried to talk little of it, he was seriously ill from the rotted meat. A full week later, he writes, “This diet is not agreeing with me. Fainted twice yesterday and once today.”

The broken pieces of the raft had been converted in to a boat by June 19, and after an application of pitch, the travelers moved on. Though nothing was noted in the diary, we know that the only gold Hope was chasing at this point, was at home. For example, on June 23 Hope says, “Struck it rich..” He refers to meeting two other men in a boat, who had extra rations. The amount of food shared with strangers by people on the Alaskan trail may be an indication of the character of the times. It also may illustrate how badly Hope’s weary band of gold hunters looked. It is likely some of both.

On June 28, Hope Ferguson wrote, “3 nights and two days traveling without sleep and hardly anything to eat. We are all very weak and worn out. All have lost from 15 to 20 pounds flesh on this trip. I am as *thin as a wafer* but our troubles are now probably over.” If only Hope’s optimism was matched by reality. Unfortunately, his problems continued to mount.

July 1, 1901 To August 6, 1901

By the first day of this historic month in America, Hope and his traveling partners were in Grayling. It was a settlement large enough to be a stop for the sternwheelers. Hope’s luck had not improved, however, and he missed the last boat of the day. There was available food in Grayling, and Hope was, “Resting and eating.” Grayling would be the spot where the three loyal

men would part company. After all they had been through together, we know the bonds between Mel, Billy, and Hope were strong. Hope's entry was in the tone of the times, nevertheless, and says, "Mel goes up river and Billy stays here."

On July 3, Hope Belt Ferguson celebrated his forty-eighth birthday. That is, he might have celebrated except that he was heading down the river in a small boat with three new acquaintances. They were, "Jos. Adams, Jim Hapwood, and Andy King." There was a head wind, and it was stormy. If that was not enough, Hope writes, "My arm sprained, swollen and paining continually. A bad cut finger and an ulcerated tooth, jaw swollen twice its size, and headache." As the fateful trip started its final phase, Hope Ferguson was beginning to tell the reader what had really happened to him. It was not pretty.

Whoever coined the phrase about truth being stranger than fiction, could have had Hope Belt Ferguson in mind. From July 9, 1901, until July 12, there are no entrees in the diary. Here is what happened, "On the morning of the tenth we started and at start encountered mud flats and were compelled to go out to sea, and then instead of turning to the East as we should, kept North and N.E. course before the wind until 5 p.m. When realizing that *we were heading for the Siberian coast*, we turned East, but at this time rain was coming in torrents and wind blowing almost a hurricane....Spelled one another and used my sprained arm. It was excruciating pain to me at times, we thought we could not make it as it looked as we were bound to go down, boat half full of water....I am sure more than one prayer went up, and all were glad and thankful to God to strike shore this a.m. on a rocky island." It was just another day in the life of Hope Ferguson in Alaska.

On July 13, after nearly going out to sea again, the party reached St. Michael's. "Met Capt. Hubbard who gave me passage on sternwheeler "Dora" for Nome. On sternwheeler now feeling tired, hungry, but comfortable, having dried my clothing." In two days he would be in Nome with, "C.E. Boyle and many friends." There he would wait for his partner, H.C. Ash. Strangely, there is no mention of Malcom Johnson, his original traveling partner. Perhaps there had been no firm agreement between the men.

Though Hope does not speak of gold, he may have had some. He was able to get goods and food all along the way. Hope must have paid for some of the items. His last entry speaks of waiting for his partner, Ash. This implies unfinished business, and we know that all of Ash's equipment was at the bottom of the river. The business would consist of paying Ash his share of whatever was panned and retained.

Tuesday, August 6, 1901, was the last entry in Hope's journal. He was feeling better, rested, and, "Ready for another trip." The author doubts that he meant another trip to the wilds of Alaska.

Hope Belt Ferguson did not live long after returning from Alaska. Who could? He died on May 17, 1904, less than three years after the end of his Alaskan adventure. Did he leave a fortune? He was a financial risk taker as evidenced by his investment in an Idaho mining company in 1890. He was also very private about his personal life, so we do not know. Likely, Hope had a fair amount of resources, or he would not have left a young family behind in Astoria, Oregon, while he took an eight months trip in Alaska. Perhaps he accumulated enough gold in Alaska to pay for the trip, and more. We will never know. It is not important, in the view of this writer.

What is important, is the legacy of amazing tenacity in the face of disaster. It is a legacy of eternal optimism when all seems lost. Hope was a dream chaser, a rainbow seeker, the kind of American that many have come to believe was fictional. Hope, however, was real.

What motivated Hope Ferguson? The spirits of his mother and father were with him every step of the way. His father had already tried in Oregon and California, the things that Hope attempted in Alaska. His mother accepted hardships of monumental proportion without complaint. It appears that everything Hope did was to honor the Wetzel and Ferguson traditions. He may not have realized it. As noted from his diary, Hope did not spend a great deal of time in introspection.

Getting to know Hope Belt Ferguson more than ninety years after his death has been a privilege. He did not expect anybody outside his immediate family to be interested in his trip. There are lessons to be learned from studying his diary, however, that make Hope Belt Ferguson, a person to remember.

