In 2004, as America celebrates the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Alaskans can take pride in our own state's great journey of discovery, the Allen Expedition of 1885. Though it occurred eight decades later, it has sometimes been called

Alaska's 'Lewis and Clark Expedition'

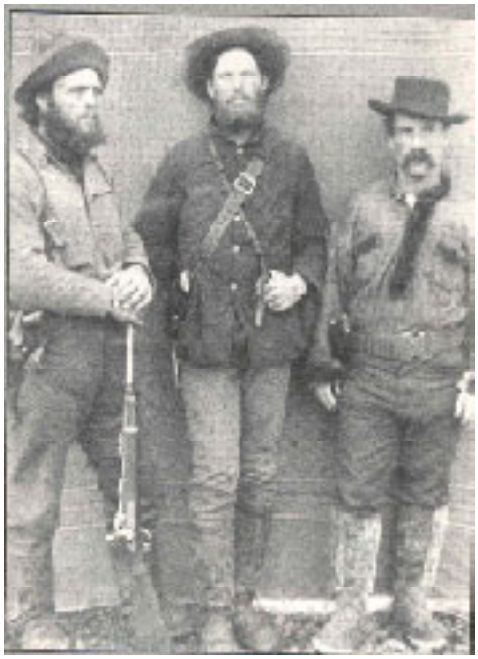
by Robert E. King

The 1885 Allen Expedition also entailed exploration of uncharted terrain and resulted in many new discoveries. It was the first time westerners traveled from the coastal regions of south-central Alaska northward through the Alaska Range into the Yukon drainage. From there the expedition continued westward to the Bering Sea — completing a total of 1,500 miles in less than 20 weeks. It was a remarkable achievement.

Allen's distinguished career

Henry Tureman Allen, born in 1859 in Kentucky (11 years prior to the death of the last member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition), graduated from West Point in 1882. During the next 41 years, he would serve his country in various military capacities, ending his distinguished career as commander of the American Occupation Forces in Germany during 1919-1923 after World War I.

Yet arguably his most exciting assignment was one he received in his mid-20s as a young lieutenant serving as an aide to veteran Indian fighter, Gen. Nelson A. Miles. In 1880, Miles was put in charge of the U.S. Army's operations in the Pacific Northwest. This was after leading numerous campaigns against Indians in the American West, including the Cheyenne, Comanche, Sioux tribes under Sitting Bull (who defeated Gen. Custer in 1876), and Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce in 1877. However, Miles had other interests as well, including exploration. He was fascinated with reports of Alaska Territory and in 1883 sent Army Lt. Frederick Schwatka on an expedition to explore the Yukon River basin, an area only partly traversed earlier by the Russians, British and Americans. The trip was a success.



Lt. Henry T. Allen (center) along with Pvt. Frederick Fickett (left) and Sgt. Cady Robertson (right) completed an historic 1,500-mile exploration into the interior of Alaska almost 120 years ago.

A dangerous plan

With the encouraging results of the Schwatka Expedition, Miles set his sites on a new and much more ambitious goal to explore an area of Alaska where no westerner had successfully gone before — the Copper River country and points beyond. The plan was to send a party to ascend the Copper River and find a passable route through the unexplored Alaska Range to the Yukon drainage. If successful, it would be a major achievement.

The trip was not without danger and uncertainty. Earlier, at least three groups of Russian explorers had perished in the Copper River country, where the Ahtna Indians of the Copper River were known to be fiercely territorial. Also, no British or Americans had successfully made the formidable journey despite some attempts. To Miles and the military, it was a challenge with no guarantee of success. It was in this less-than-optimistic setting that the Allen Expedition was launched and its start clouded even further.

Lt. Allen was not Miles' first choice to follow up on the successes of the more modest Schwatka Expedition. That assignment had gone to Lt. William Abercrombie who left in 1884. But as weeks passed with no word of his fate, Gen. Miles became concerned and sent Lt. Allen to investigate. Accordingly, he sailed

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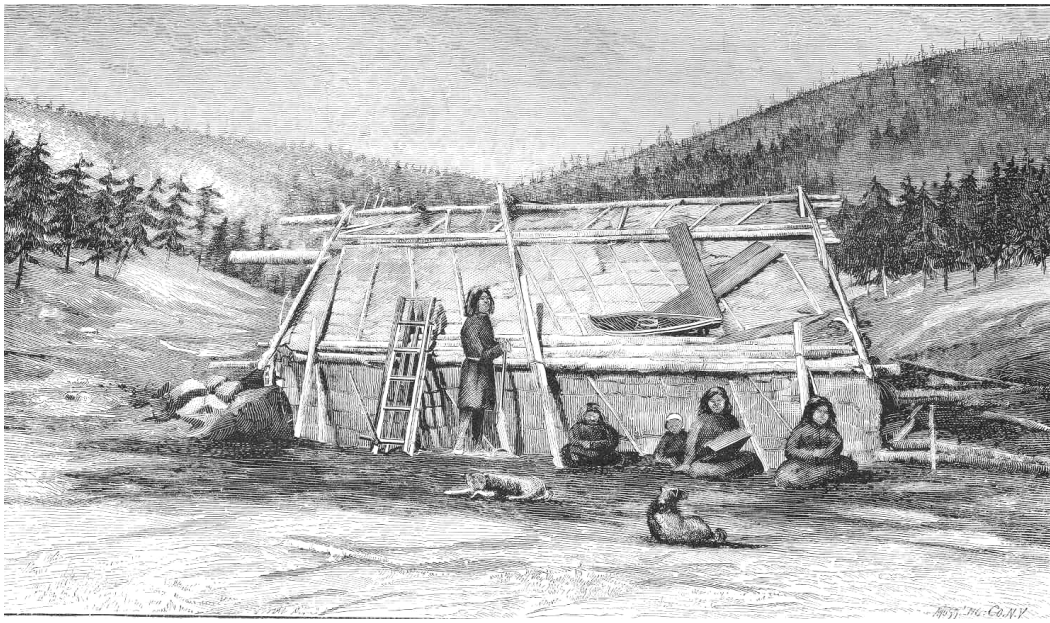
north in late 1884, thereby getting his first taste of adventure in Alaska. While Abercrombie and his men did return safely, they nonetheless failed in their quest. Abercrombie's report painted a gloomy prospect for further exploration in the region. He concluded that the route they had tried to pioneer was not practical due to overwhelming obstacles of high mountains, glacier-filled valleys, and daunting rivers beset with swift rapids which had forced the group to turn back. This was certainly discouraging news. Had it not been for Gen. Miles' continuing interest in Alaska and Lt. Allen's newly-found excitement for the territory, it would have ended there.



The Native village of Tarai in the Copper River drainage as seen by Allen in 1885.

A second attempt

Instead, Miles persisted and soon was able to win support for one more attempt to explore the Copper River country and beyond. But it was to be a more modest expedition of only three men. Lt. Allen was selected to lead it and he handpicked two other men to come along. They were Cavalry Sgt. Cady Robertson, a fellow soldier from his own unit, and Pvt. Frederick W. Fickett, a signal corpsman, whom Allen had met in Sitka during his trip to determine Abercrombie's fate. Both turned out to be good choices.

The small party wasted little time in starting north to Alaska. Lt. Allen received official orders on Jan. 27, 1885 authorizing the trip. Two days later the three men were on a steamer headed for Alaska. They would not return to Allen's post at Vancouver Barracks in Washington Territory until later that year. And what they did during their time away made history.

As expected, the primary purpose of the expedition was to learn about and map unknown terrain including a pass through the Alaska Range and beyond into the Yukon Basin. But there was another reason, a military one. By the terms of their official orders, Allen and his men were to report on the Native people, including information on how much of a future threat they might pose to other westerners that would later venture into this region. Memories of the ill-fated Russian expeditions lingered. Also, this was a time in America when conflicts with Native peoples elsewhere were still occurring in some areas. After Allen returned, his commander, Gen. Miles, was sent on a special mission to fight Geronimo.

Natives contribute to success

Thus, the military's concern for what they might face in Alaska was understandable given the times. But, in view of Lt. Allen being authorized only two other men for his expedition, this order to assess Natives from a military standpoint was a bit ironic. Later, it would become even more ironic in light of how well Allen and his men were treated by the Natives they encountered. Had it not been for the Alaska Native people encountered, at times the small group of travelers might have perished. Similar situations occurred during the Lewis and Clark Expedition, some 80 years earlier.

Allen's epic expedition covered 1,500 miles of unexplored territory in just 20 weeks. Fairbanks is shown for reference; it did not exist in 1885.

With full knowledge of potential problems he might face, Lt. Allen nonetheless saw this trip as a great opportunity. The expedition eventually succeeded where all others before them had failed. Not only did Allen and his men record information on the people they encountered, but they became trusted enough by Ahtna Chief Nicolai that he led them up the Chitina River to a secret outcropping of nearly pure copper. Allen's record of this remarkable place helped inspire later searches for copper in the region leading to the later discovery of the Kennecott Copper Mines, one of the richest deposits of high grade copper ever found in North America.

Among the other notable discoveries made by the men was Suslota Pass, a usable route from the Copper River County into the Tanana and Yukon Valleys. Most remarkable of all was their mapping for the first time of the Copper, Tanana and Koyukuk Rivers. And all this in less than 20 weeks while traveling overland for more than 1,500 miles!

Allen's group had lots of help from various Alaska Natives along the way. These residents of Unalakleet were considered "members of the crew" for a portion of the trip.

An invaluable report

Two years after their return, Lt. Allen completed an impressive 172-page report, accompanied by detailed maps. It was modestly titled "Report of An Expedition to the Copper, Tanana, and Koyukuk River, in the Territory of Alaska, in the Year 1885, for the Purpose of Obtaining all Information Which will be Valuable and Important, Especially to the Military Branch of the Government." While the document contained around 20 illustrations, including sketches of terrain they encountered as well as depictions of some Natives, Allen and Fickett were greatly disappointed by one unfortunate event. They had brought along a camera, but the numerous glass-plate photographs they made with considerable effort were later lost by a messenger.

Today, Allen's well-written report remains an invaluable document for Alaska. It provided not only a history of prior exploration in the Copper, Tanana and Koyukuk River areas including oral history anecdotes, but a compelling narrative of their harrowing trip. It also recorded invaluable observations about the Natives encountered along the way and their cultures, which were already undergoing changes due to contact with outsiders. Allen, not unlike early cultural anthropologists of the time, even speculated on connections between various peoples of Alaska and their prehistoric movements based on "general appearance and manner."

In addition, Allen's report included observations on animals, geology, volcanic activity, glaciers, minerals, and even the weather. Altogether, the Allen Expedition created the first written record for much of interior Alaska, a remarkable accomplishment that places it among the greatest journeys of discovery in American history. It was indeed Alaska's own Lewis and Clark Expedition!

This map from the official 1887 Allen Expedition report shows the lower portions of the Copper River.

Footnote: While Robert King, BLM's State Archaeologist for Alaska has great admiration for Lt. Henry T. Allen and the remarkable achievements of his expedition, he also has a special interest in the Lewis and Clark Expedition as he is a distant relative of Meriwether Lewis.