

EATING A BEAR WITH ITS OWN TEETH

A Combat Manual of Creative Crisis Management

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The only thing that moves slower
than a dogsled in deep snow
is the bureaucracy in high gear.

Warren Sitka, Alaskan humorist

Chapter I

“Eating a Bear with its own Teeth”

Eagle, Alaska is one of those communities that could never have been established anywhere else in the world but in the Territory of Alaska and at no other time in the history of humankind than in the waning days of the Klondike Gold Rush and the concurrent early days of the Alaska Gold Rush. Its formation was unique because of the characters who were the city founders, men and women who could not make a living anywhere else and, frankly, weren't trying that hard anyway.

As a bit of historical background, one of the most misunderstood epochs of American history is the Alaska Gold Rush. Many Americans firmly believe that the *Klondike* Gold Rush made famous by the works of Jack London and Robert Service *is* the Alaska Gold Rush.

It is not.

The Klondike Strike occurred in a small area of a few hundred squares miles around Dawson City on the headwaters of the Klondike River in the Yukon Territory of Canada. That gold was discovered on the Klondike River near Dawson in 1896 and a town of 80,000 erupted from the tundra. By 1899 the gold had played out and Dawson shrank to a city of 8,000. Today it is a community of about 1,300 that sees 60,000 tourists each summer.

The Alaska Gold Rush, by comparison was seven decades in length and covered an area 1/5 the size of the Lower 48 states. The Alaska Gold Rush started in Juneau in 1880 and ended during the Second World War with major strikes – or what were *alleged* to have been large strikes – in Fairbanks, Valdez, Nome, Kotzebue, Cordova and several hundred other boomtowns that went ghost within a few years of their establishment.

These boomtowns were everything Hollywood has depicted them to be. They had streets of deep mud with plank sidewalks and lines of buildings on either side. Those buildings were most often saloons that were always open. Anything a man wanted was available.

Until he ran out of gold.

Then he was on his own.

Today all that remains of most of these towns are names on a map like Iditarod, Candle and Ophir – and the pseudonyms of the men who added charm to this tempestuous era: Billy the Horse, “Conscientious” Brown, “Bull Frog” Johnson and Duncan “Bughouse Barber” Thomas.

The story of the founding of Eagle began on the woodpile in Dawson. When it came to law and order during both the Klondike and the Alaska Gold rushes, there was a bit of the former and a lot of the latter. As far as the *law* went, there were only a handful of United States Marshals in the District of Alaska – it was not a Territory until 1912 – and about that many Royal Canadian Mounted Police in western Canada. Since there were so few *law* men, miners dispensed their own *order*. This was called frontier justice and it was dispensed through established and quasi-official tribunals. The worst criminals on the American side of the border were sent to Juneau for trial and, if convicted, to McNeil Island in Washington state for incarceration.

If a person was not necessarily a criminal but merely a public nuisance or threat to public order, they were given what was known as a *blue ticket*. This was a ticket out of town on the first means of transportation leaving the community in any direction. The term originated in the early days of the Alaska Gold Rush when most of the undesirables being hustled out of the territory were in the coastal communities which were serviced by the Alaska Steamship Company. Since

the steamship tickets were blue, it was said that the miscreants were given a “blue ticket.” This meant that money had been raised to buy a ticket to get that person out of town.

In many of the boomtowns there were two kinds of *undesirable* individuals. One was the lawbreaker. The other was the unwanted individual. These unwanted persons included the insane, derelicts and destitute. All of these people were considered a danger to the community at large. In Nome, for instance, the Bering Sea froze over in October and did not break-up until June. This meant that you had to have every ounce of food you needed for the winter in your home by the end of September. But if you were insane, a derelict or destitute, you did not have the good sense, foresight or money to prepare for winter. If you could not and therefore did not take the last steamship out, you’d have to spend the winter burglarizing, stealing and even murdering for liquor and food. To keep this from happening, the citizens of Nome established a fund to pay for tickets to get these *undesirable* people out of town before winter set in. As the last steamship was set to sail, the undesirables were rounded up like cattle and *escorted* onboard the steamship. This was called *getting a blue ticket* or being *given a blue ticket*. Once you have been given a blue ticket, the Alaska Steamship Company would take you to Portland or Seattle and not let you back onboard to come back to Alaska.

When it came to the dispensing of justice to convicted criminals, punishment varied by boomtown. There were very few jails, so each community did what it could. In Circle, for instance, jail time was not 24 hours a day. A sign over the hoosegow read "NOTICE: All Prisoners Must Report by Nine O'Clock PM or They Will Be Locked Out for the Night." With temperatures dropping to 50 degrees below zero at night, being locked out was a death sentence. During the summer in the early days of Eagle, the jail was a tent of mosquito netting. Sgt. Woodfill of the U.S Army at Fort Egbert in Eagle reported that the local miners' committee

would "take a prisoner's clothes away from him and push him into [a tent made of mosquito netting.] Just one look at the hordes of mosquitoes eyeing him hungrily from outside the net was enough to stop any prisoner from thinking about attempting to escape."

Whipping was not unusual, but the most common form of punishment was chopping wood for the community. This was known as being "on the woodpile." For the purpose of this book it is important to note that to be "on the woodpile" meant that you were not only an unsavory character but had been caught at it. Thus, it was that in 1897, as Dawson City was plunging toward obscurity, that a nefarious character by the name of Old Man Martin was doing "three months on the woodpile" for some infraction. Angry at being so confined, he turned to two other men similarly convicted, the Hudson brothers, and said

Yuh know, I'd like to live in a country where they could take every jasper that can't say 'H' without hobbling it, and -- say, I got an idea! You know what this country needs more 'n anything else? It needs a good, hell-roaring' git-up and git thar American town, and by Hokey, I'm going to start one, if you two jaspers will back me up'

As the Hudson brothers had nothing of importance to do at the time, or, as a matter of fact, after they had completed their stint on the woodpile, they agreed that such a community should be established. Then three of them went in search of other converts – after they had all finished their respective stint on the woodpile – and set about establishing a community just inside the American border. Their derelict crew of founding fathers and mothers included Martin and the Hudson brothers,

Professor Howard, an owlish gentleman with a white beard who had "a number of honorary letters" from Eastern colleges.

Barney Gibbony, a gambler and saloon man who had just made a killing at the Dewey House in Dawson. Gibbony was looking for a site to build his own saloon and a new town sounded a lot better than trying to fight the high land prices in Dawson.

George Graves and his partner, "One Thumb Jack," who were professional gamblers. Their inclusion in the partnership may have been because they came with their tools of the trade: a faro table and roulette wheel.

Jenny Moore, who had a somewhat successful small lunch counter business.

"Black" Becky White, a black woman whose specialty was 'Plain and Fancy Washing.' White, however, stipulated that her being part of the founding of Eagle were contingent upon her washtubs and wringers be included as cargo. Precious they were for they were the only such tubs in the Klondike.

A medical practitioner of questionable education, "Doc" Pernault.

A drifter known as "The Kid," "The Pest" and "Hey You."

Professor Howard had the ideal spot in mind for a city, which was fine with the rest, particularly since it was only 110 miles south of Dawson. This made it just over the international boundary into the United States and, as Old Man Martin stated with an entrepreneurial gleam in his eyes, "just within good stampeding distance."

As this menagerie of characters set sail down the Yukon from Dawson there were more than a few old timers on the shore who suspected that this might be the start of a rush. Perhaps these individuals knew something they didn't? After all, Dawson's pay dirt wasn't what it used to be. Little did these sourdoughs know just how accurate that hunch was.

The soon-to-be founders of Eagle maneuvered down the river until they had crossed into the United States and settled on an island where the constant breeze kept the clouds of mosquitoes at bay. A somewhat permanent settlement was established whereupon a fight immediately broke out over the name of the community. Votes were evenly split between American City and Eagle City, so a coin was flipped. Barney Gibbony, "being the only one with *Cheechako* money in his pocket," flipped a \$20 gold piece. The coin landed with the eagle up and thus the city was named Eagle.

For the next six weeks, the crew plotted out streets and cut down trees to make way for the expected hordes coming downstream to this new city. An American flag was made from three

California blankets and raised on a tall, stripped spruce. Then came the delicate work. A town was not a town unless it had people and a dozen people a town did not make. So the rascals pooled all of their gold dust. With 400 ounces, three soon-to-be real estate tycoons slipped into Dawson. Their ploy was simple. One of them would go into a saloon, buy drinks for the house and then let it slip that the gold came from the "American side of the border." After quenching his thirst, the sourdough would leave and give the gold bags to another Eagle-ite who would pull the same stunt in another saloon. His appearance would be followed by a third. Ten days later, the three sourdoughs headed south to Eagle, *apparently* unaware of the mob of men from Dawson who were surreptitiously following them. The moment the three *allegedly* unsuspecting sourdoughs landed in Eagle, a great land rush followed.

Eagle, like Dawson before it, was only a boomtown for a shade more than a year. Then Nome drew its population away, down the Yukon River to the golden sands on the shore of the Bering Sea. But Eagle was large enough in 1900 to warrant the establishment of a Federal Judicial District presided over by none other than the Alaskan judicial giant James Wickersham. But the ebb and flow of history passed the city by. The Argonauts swarmed through Eagle from Dawson and Whitehorse on their way to Nome.

In terms of population, Eagle exploded from a handful of residents in 1897 to more than 1,700 by the fall of the next year. Jack London, not yet the famous writer he was to become, passed through Eagle in June of 1898 in the middle of the community's building boom. He arrived at 4:00 a.m. and reported that even the early hour "did not prevent [some residents] from stopping their faro game long enough to try to sell us a corner lot."

But Eagle's population boom did not last long. Within months it was back to 300. Then the seat of the Third Judicial District was moved to Fairbanks and that, in essence, finished Eagle as a growing community.

But it did not die.

It is still very small: 86 people in the 2010 Census.

Probably the best-known resident of Eagle and the man who originated the title of this book was Erwin A. “Nimrod” Robertson. Like most other Alaskans, Robertson came from “somewhere else.” Though he had been born in Scotland he was raised in Maine where he made his living as a jeweler. That ended in the summer of 1898 when he headed for Dawson and the Klondike Strike. But he went north for the most unlikely of reasons. Being an inventor, he believed he could invent an airplane, a “bird machine,” and become the first man to fly. All he needed was a \$1,000 and he was hopeful that he’d be able to pick that up in the Klondike. He never got the chance to be the first man to fly because the Wright Brothers beat him to it in 1903. This did not stop Robertson from continuing to try to fly. It just took him a bit longer than the Wright brothers. His experience was also somewhat less successful. Two decades after the Wright brothers, Robertson was able to finally build his flying machine; a primitive plane covered with bird feathers which, history records, crashed before it left the ground. In Eagle.



[Photo courtesy of the University of Alaska Fairbanks; UAF-1991-98-905.]

A master inventor, it was said of Robertson that he could “make anything except a living.” He was a wizard at unique jewelry, specifically gold puzzle rings, and made knives that had such a fine hone they could trim the corrugation off a silver dollar. For the purposes of this book, he once made a set of dentures for himself from the jaw of a bear he had shot. Then he ate the bear with its own teeth.

[Robertson lived until the winter of 1940 when he became stranded on the trail on his way back to Eagle. Since he had a great fear of being eaten by wolves he did not want them to find his body before his neighbors did. When it was clear he was going to die, he chose to lie on

river ice beneath a trickle of water from a nearby stream and thus freeze himself solid to the ice floe. After his corpse was found, it took rescue workers almost a week to extract his body from the river ice.]

The point of this lengthy introduction is to acquaint the reader of the derivation of the term “eating a bear with its own teeth.” The term means to solve a difficulty by using the problem itself as a source of the solution. Far too often people look at a problem as a stand-alone situation and then try to solve it as if it exists in a vacuum. The inevitable result is the quick fix, something that works for the moment but, over the long run, leads to a larger associated problem. It’s also called being ‘penny wise and pound foolish.’ You are simply making a small problem a big one by “kicking the can down the down,” so to speak.

This book is not meant to be an overall discussion of creative thinking or problem solving. Rather it is a work that focuses on creative crisis management. The examples used in this work were specifically designed to show how individuals have developed unique, workable here-and-now solutions to problems that were threatening to go from crisis to catastrophe. Something *had to be done* and *done quickly*. No one had the luxury of taking their time to come up with a Plan B. In some cases, the solution had to be immediate. In others a short period of time was available. But in all cases, the solution had to be unique, workable and with no residual effects.

All the examples used in this book are real and, frankly, you should encounter them in your college history classes. If you don’t then you failed to learn the basic lesson of history: it does not exist. History is not the story of the past; it is the study of the future. You won’t live long enough to learn from every mistake that has ever been made. Don’t try. Read history and

learn how other people solved the same problems you are facing. Don't want to read history?

Well, keep in mind that it's a lot easier to till a field by plowing around the stumps.

[The entire text is available in the full version of the site]