



HISTORY

A PARADE OF FOURTHS

ALASKANS CELEBRATE INDEPENDENCE DAY
by Michael Engelhard

LOVING LIBERTY, AMERICANS HONORED their nation's birth in Alaska when it was still foreign soil. Two years before the United States bought the territory from Russia, the Western Union Telegraph Expedition's Surgeon-in-Chief Dr. Henry P. Fisher arranged its first July Fourth bash in the capital New Archangel, present-day Sitka.

As guest of the Russian governor, Fisher had tired of the outpost's routine and diet. The Brooklyn exile decided to celebrate Independence Day stylishly, helped by two supply vessel captains anchored in port. He requested the customary gun salutes and received Russian-American Company officials and their wives and daughters for a light meal on *Clara Bell's* quarterdeck. Before music and dancing commenced, they all toasted Lincoln and the Tsar. Elegant shipboard dining continued to mark the anniversary: a Depression-era feast-day menu for the Inside Passage on SS *Aleutian*—a

steamer considered “palatial”—boasted Petersburg shrimp wiggle, stuffed Oregon turkey, compote of Washington cherries, and Seattle ice cream.

Most small towns staged modest parades, contests, and banquets; dogfights could halt a grand procession. Remote homesteads at least read the Declaration of Independence or gathered to share food. Ever handy, rifles often replaced fireworks, whose brilliance summer twilight mutes. Performances varied by region, from kayak

Above: Parade on Nome's Front Street, 1916.

aces and blanket tosses to Russian Orthodox blessings or rock-drilling competitions. Nome stamperders boarded the Wild Goose Mining Company's narrow-gauge railcars for picnics near the claims. Roman chariots raised dust clouds outside Skagway. In 1908, the Juneau Native Band's tubas and cornets "furnished suitable music," and its players posed on bleachers for a photo, far more put together than Deering's septet, which that year rocked broom, man-size barrel, five-gallon motor-oil can, and nautical "loud hailer," a primitive megaphone.

Some sepia duotones foreground historical context. Ford Model Ts or "Tin Lizzies" pulled floats. In 1898 Skagway, Yankee Doodle and his pony adorned with flags and paper fans joined the jubilee with "its noisy brass band and its patriotic airs." Dignitaries watched in front of a clapboard shack—City Hall, decked with spruce boughs for lack of bunting. Yankee Doodle's pony was a miner's ass, appropriate for that British stereotype, a disheveled simpleton. The following year, 24th Infantry, African-American "Buffalo" soldiers trooped through town, spic-and-span in white gloves. Doughboys freshly returned from France a generation later stepped down Anchorage boulevards, rifles shouldered, led by a drummer and trailed by children in their Sunday best. Elsewhere, women sprinted in ankle-length dresses, baring more leg than they

Above: Tug-of-war in Skagway, between 1900 and 1916.

Right: Boxing contest, Cordova, circa 1920.



normally would. Then, too, political messaging heightened the pageantry. Juneau's Filipino cannery workers in 1931 demanded their islands' autonomy. "We want the same kind of independence the thirteen colonies gained back in 1776," their float proclaimed.

The 1919 observance at Baked Mountain Camp surely ranks among the strangest. Old Glory flew from makeshift poles a National Geographic Society expedition to Katmai had erected above the treeless, smoldering plain. The scientists had emblazoned one wall tent with the boldface, hand-painted date. They fried bacon and baked biscuits, Spartan holiday fare, in the volcanic vents' blistering steam. ↱

Though not a nationalist, the author is proud that one of the two ships that hosted Alaska's first July Fourth—the Hamburg brig Susanne—flew a German ensign.

