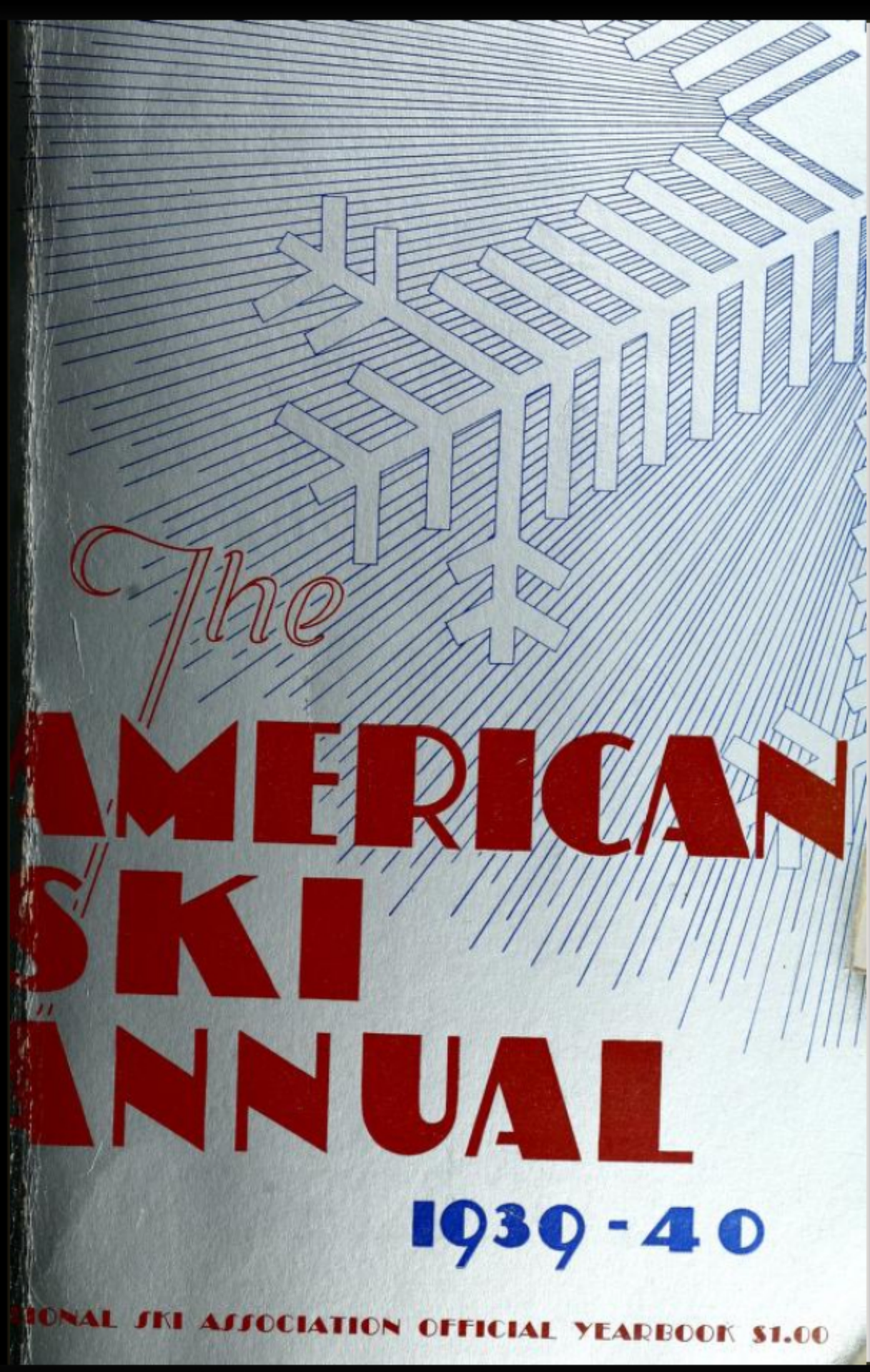
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THE LURE OF THE NORTH

By

TED COOMARA

I BET it must be keen out West," said June.

"Why not Alaska," said Denny.

"When shall we go?" I said.

But when sugaring came, and spring, we fished, and what with girls and jobs, Alaska seemed too far away to go to.

Yet last summer, five years later, I was on board a steamer that slowly poked its way up the inside passage from Seattle to Juneau. Life in Vermont seemed unreal and far away, and the new smells of salt water and spruce forest, and the sight of the Jap-American schoolboys on board going north to work in the canneries were most exciting. There were occasional snow-capped peaks on the eastern horizon, and in Queen Charlotte Sound whales spouted and porpoises tore through the water at the ship's prow.

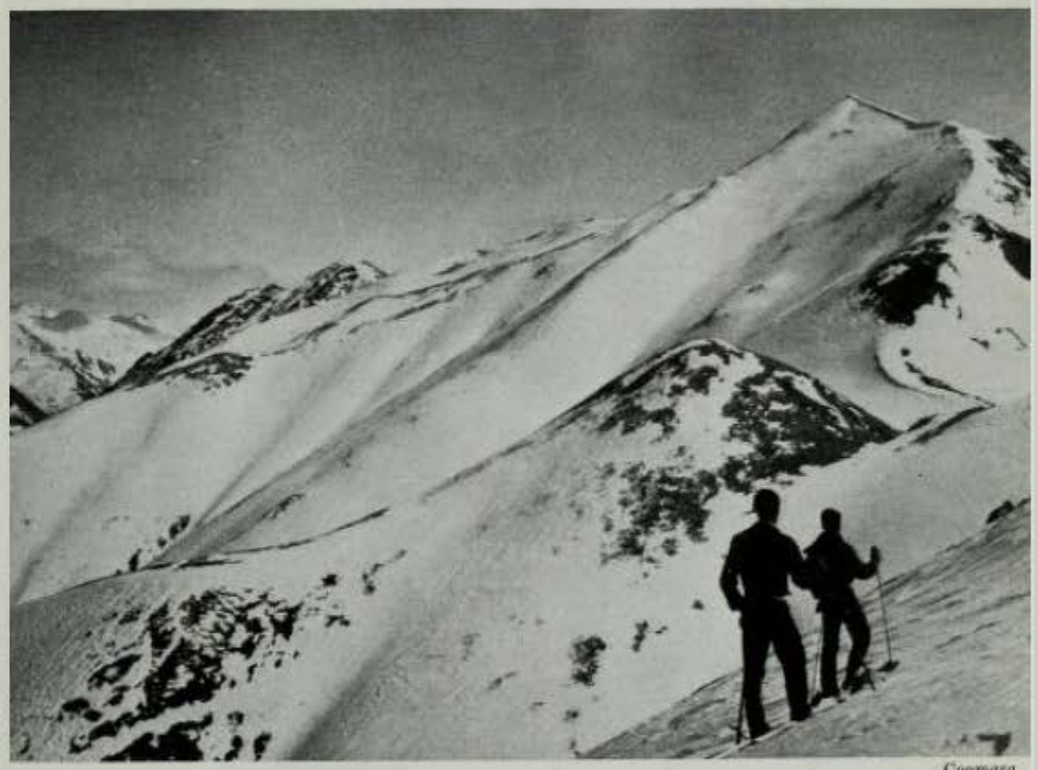
There were no bronzed vikings on board, no titian-haired beauties; the ship vibrated unpleasantly, and the setting was just similar enough, no more, to that often depicted in contemporary magazines, to make one feel that he had seen it all before somewhere, even the fog-banks that clung to sheltered coves on the islands, and the small white halibut boats that sometimes crossed our course.

The boat reached Juneau in three days. The sun beat down hotly, a humid 78° in the shade, though but two hours' hike up from the docks the peaks bore great snow-patches that glistened coolly under the dazzling blue sky. Taxi-cabs cruised the cement streets, and it seemed a strange contrast to see the wilderness so close to a town with movies, a radio station and two daily newspapers.

Juneau is not interested in skiing in late June. Every-one is thinking about the salmon run that will come, the price of fish; and each evening those who have boats go down the channel and strip-fish for kings and cohoes, with never a glance at the snow above and close by.

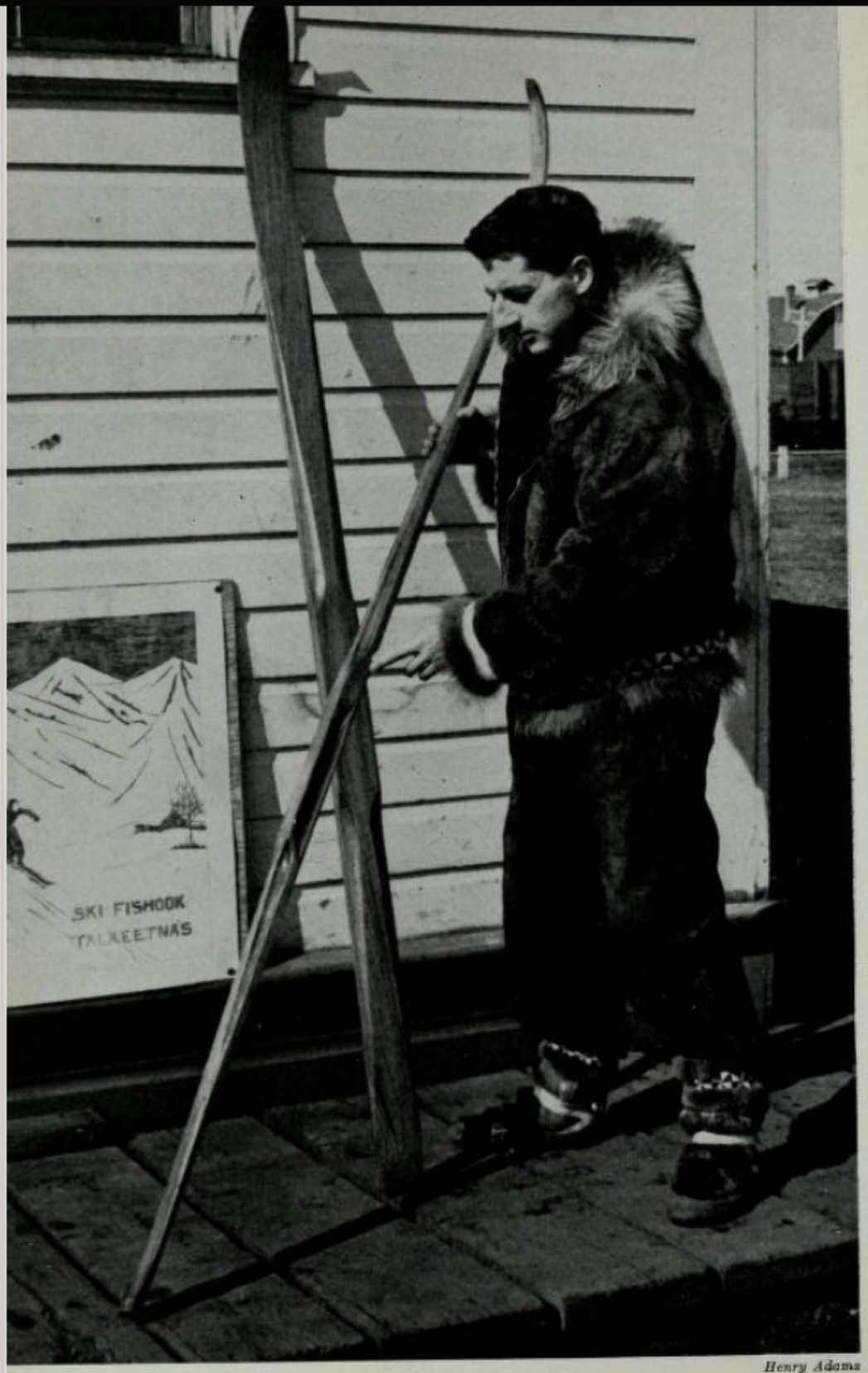
Within a few days I packed my skis up Mt. Roberts, partway, and an hour and a half out of town I put them on, above timberline, and enjoyed an afternoon of perfect spring-snow skiing, on snow as white as winter snow, without a trace of grit or twigs in it. At the edge of the snowbanks grew dwarf wild lupine that nodded in the soft warm air from the sea below, and my companion could not resist asking for my skis to try them out, and feel the thrill of floating down long slopes among masses of wild flowers, stripped to the waist, skiing under a warm sun on perfect snow.

But shortly after that we had a lot of rain and there were no more ski trips until October, except one I would rather forget, where I



Coomara

IN THE CHUGACH, ALASKA



Henry Adams

COOMORA TEACHES SKI MAKING TO NATIVES IN ALASKA

packed my skis to a glacier in quest of September snow, struggling on slippery steep grass slopes through devil's club and alder bushes, reaching a solitary four-foot spruce above timber just at dark, just as it began to rain. Two of us made camp and crawled muttering into our sleeping bags. In the morning it was apparent that we were at least a day's struggle away from snow, and it was raining through our sleeping bags. We began the descent, over a different route that ended with a two-hour plod down the bed of a rushing stream, soaked. We stumbled over a promising quartz vein in which the gold was visible to the eye, but such was our frame of mind that we ignored it and silently forced our weary feet to move, our minds vague and dreaming of food and ease.

Late in October the leaves began to rot off the hardwoods in Southeastern; that is the willows, the tree alders and the mountain ash. Leaves do not change color on the coast. They grow sodden and fall damply off the trees. One evening as the clouds drew back from the peaks the mountains were all white on their summits, down to about 2500 ft. The snow was still there the next day, and when it rained again in Juneau, which was soon, more snow fell above timberline, and from then on there was always skiing of a sort, not more than two hours' walk from town.

There are about five hundred skiers in Juneau now, with a rapidly increasing number expected. Many of Alaska's best downhill and slalom men live in Juneau, and rivalry is keen on the trails.

On Douglas Island there are several trails, some cut in the best New England manner, especially one steep racing trail resembling the Chin Clip at Mt. Mansfield, Vermont. The Forest Service has been very cooperative and the Indian CCC corps at Juneau has literally created most of the ski area out of the wilderness.

But after all, ski areas better than that on Douglas island can be found at a number of places in the States. The reason a skier should visit Southeastern Alaska is to ski the ice-caps, or for the spring skiing in May and June above timber, all of which he can do while staying each night in a luxurious Juneau hotel. A taxi-cab will drive him to the base of the peak he wishes to ski on, each morning. The Taku ice-cap, sections of which can be reached in four hours from the city, is practically unskied and unexplored. It is a photographic and scenic paradise awaiting the skier, and the indolent skier at that . . . . one who craves a hot bath and frequent movie shows on a skiing vacation. In midsummer the darkness lasts only a couple of hours, and then, also, the rainfall is at its minimum.

One raw grey day early in January, when clouds shrouded the peaks and the neon signs on the liquor stores shone with enhanced brilliance, Captain Ricketts, commander of the U. S. Coast Guard cutter *Haida,* invited me to join the ship for a short cruise up Lynn canal to Haines, where Uncle Sam maintains Alaska's only garrison.

At Haines, where the climate is quite like that at Juneau, very damp at sea-level, very snowy above 1500 feet for six months of the year, the garrison boasts 300 pairs of skis. Also, as if to make life easy for ski instructors, the parade ground is smooth as a billiard table and it

slopes just enough to permit continuous turning when skiing downhill on hard packed snow. But there is a catch. They have snow enough most of the winter, but the skis are all eight feet long, and are fully and completely equipped with toe-straps. There are no ski poles in general use and no ski boots, only shoepacs. A mile from the garrison a mountain (it must have been *created* for skiing, its contours are so adaptable to ski trails) stands snowclad eight months of the year, unskied. Because Haines itself has frequent thaws the staff (nine out of eleven are from the south) assume that a real development in military skiing is unwarranted. This coincides with the opinion of the army staff at Washington, D. C. Yet at Haines they think nothing of taking large details away on two-week trips up toward Klukwan where the climate is consistently cold, with dog-teams, parkas, and all the winter paraphernalia associated with an arctic expedition, which a trip into the country inland from Haines most decidedly is not. Perhaps twenty years from now the military value of skiing will be appreciated, as it is now in Europe.

Captain Ricketts and his crew of the coast guard are eager and proficient skiers, and when in port, groups of officers and men may be seen each day on Douglas island, practising their turns and learning all they can of skiing. The ship keeps a number of pairs of skis on hand for emergency and for training purposes.

Until you're north of the coast range and west of Cape St. Elias, you're not in Alaska, as anyone from the Westward or the interior will tell you. Thus when an opportunity came in mid-January to sail for Seward and points north, I took it. This is the gateway to the part of Alaska that is described so glamourously in magazines, and in Rex Beach stories (which, by the way, give a far more accurate picture of the country than do the majority of contemporary cheechako novels).

At eleven P.M. about fifty hours out of Juneau, via Skagway, the S.S. *McKinley* tied up at Cordova in heavy rain. Russell Dow, member of several Brad Washburn parties, welcomed J. W. and me, and we talked skiing until the boat left for Seward, while outside the rain sank into four feet of sodden snow. Russ told about the splendid runs nearby on Eccles, the Golden Stairs and other places I have now forgotten, near town. As we left the dock at 3 A.M. Russ called up that he would see us at the Anchorage fur rendezvous in February. Then J. W. and I went below for a little sleep, drugged with weariness and lulled by the soft throb and tremor of the ship as she made her way westward.

"Have one of these chocolates, Joe," I said.

Said he . . . . "I think I'm going to be sick."

Before sunrise a day later, the train left Seward for the North, rocking on the warped roadbed that leads through endless forests of spruce and cottonwood draped with snow which grew deeper up to the summit of the pass, before the track dipped on the Cook Inlet side. Although the peaks were lost in snow-clouds the open country around the loop, where the descending track circles upon itself, appeared magnificent for skiing, if there were skiers. When the train reached Turnagain Arm the climate began to change, and a thin dry snow overlay

the ground instead of the deep heavy wet snow of the coast. Nearing Anchorage the spruce and birch trees were covered with at least two inches of frost.

The same afternoon I skied in the Anchorage ski bowl at the edge of town with members of the ski club. The bowl occupies several acres and is quite steep, with a seventy-foot vertical drop, a small ski tow and a very well-designed twenty-five meter jump. Around the bowl, which is the bank of an alluvial stream bed, the land stretches away flatly to the Chugach Mountains ten miles away. To the west is the inlet, and north across the forested plains the summit of Mt. McKinley is visible on clear days, 150 miles away. Anchorage has snow from November until April, but the fall is light, and although thaws practically never occur in winter there is not always enough snow on the ground for good skiing. The temperature is very seldom below zero, and winds are infrequent while sunny days are common.

I was going to the Westward to teach ski-making at the vocational school for Alaska natives at Eklutna, twenty-seven miles out of Anchorage on the Matanuska valley highway. That evening I caught the Palmer bus as far as the school and began an interesting three months among Eskimo, Aleut, and Indian boys and girls of high school age.

At Eklutna it is flat, but two miles away the Chugach rises up sharply to the east. West, it is half a mile to the shore of Knik Arm on the inlet. At first the days were very short, and we did much of our skiing, mostly roaming around on the flat, after dark. Some of the boys and girls had skied before, and all who made skis soon learned slalom technique well after we had located a small hill.

The middle of February drew near, and the Anchorage fur rendezvous with it. At Eklutna there was a stir, rehearsing the Eskimo dances, the tossing on a walrus hide, and practising for the ski events, in which the students had not previously taken part. When the time came we went into town and joined the large group of contestants that had come from all over Alaska. Russell Dow was up from Cordova as he promised. (He stayed, and went to work at the Independence Mine, located in superb ski country in the Talkeetna Mountains above timberline and Fish-hook Inn.) Joe Werner of the Juneau ski club was there; Pete Totemoff, Alaska's best skier, was up from Cordova, and Will Huttala and Charlie Sundholm were down from Fairbanks with the rest of their squad, while Anchorage had young Todd Cunningham, graceful jumper and slalom man, and George Renngaard, jumper, to lead the local group. Eklutna, new to the sport, had Henry Adams, Eskimo from Haycock, for the cross-country, who had passed five men when he broke a binding and had to retire, and Tim Alfred, young Indian from Healy who took third in the high school jumping contest although he had never been over a jump until a week before. The outstanding skier of the meet was Pete Totemoff, Cordova Indian, with two firsts and a third place to his credit, whose jumping was as beautiful as any I have seen. Second and third places went to Renngaard and Cunningham. The latter is only sixteen, and he shows great promise as a competitive skier. The results were: Totemoff first in jumping and downhill, Huttala first in slalom, and Sundholm first in cross-country.

After the meet there was a banquet, and the next day a few of us left with Bob Briffet in the light company's pick-up for Fish-hook Inn and a ski trip to Lucky Shot Pass, on slopes and snow that dwarf anything in the States for size and quality. Fish-hook is sixty-five miles out of Anchorage on the highway, fifteen miles out of Palmer, where the colonists have their troubles. The prices are low, the Inn is good, and you can drive six miles *above* the inn and ski down to it as often during a day as you and the driver can stand it. The Fish-hook ski season lasts eight months. You would not want it to last twelve, as it might interfere with rainbow fishing during the summer. (The best fishing is not near Fish-hook Inn, but ask Leonard Hopkins of Anchorage where it *is*, and maybe he will tell you.)

The air was growing mild at Anchorage, and as soon as the rendezvous was over everyone began to think about the Fairbanks ice carnival held in mid-March. Dog-team racing outshines skiing at Fairbanks, with pari-mutual betting and large money prizes for the winners. But although dogs come first, there is plenty of skiing in Alaska's "golden heart." The Fairbanks country resembles the Berkshire hills of Massachusetts, rolling, sometimes steep, and covered with spruce and birch. The snowfall is light and dry; and it is often distinctly chilly in winter, although the air is usually still. Long distance winter travel is mostly by dog-team or plane, and short trips are often made with skis.

When we, the Anchorage contingent, arrived in town at midnight on the special train, we found a mob of welcomers at the station.

In fact, it was difficult to get off the train and impossible to get off the platform for about ten minutes, owing to the dense throng of people. A hubbub of voices filled the air, to which was added the sound of the University band as it struggled through the crowd. It was about 15° below zero and a slight haze hung over the town, lit by thousands of Chinese lanterns strung on wires across the streets. Bed? Not a chance. Once off the train it was into our best clothes and off to a dance.

Next day some of us ambled around the cross-country course looking it over, and then went on out to Birch Hill where the jump, slalom and downhill were to be held. Appropriately enough, these events take place within a quarter of a mile of the new cemetery. The south exposure gives one the benefit of the sun, of which one is very glad, and the downhill run is about three-fourths of a mile in length, and what it lacks in steepness is compensated for by its narrowness, which makes it an interesting descent.

The day of the cross-country dawned wintry and bitter, and the race was run in sub-zero weather with a keen east wind and light snow. The only kind of parkas worth anything to the spectators were *fur* parkas, and those who owned them were fortunate.

The day of the Birch Hill events was also cold, but sunny and without much wind, and snow conditions were absolutely perfect; two inches of light fast powder on a packed dry base. The outstanding event occurred when Cunningham decided he would run the downhill with jumping skis, found himself unable to turn, and took out a number of small cottonwood trees before he came to rest in a spill that

eliminated him from serious competition. Will Huttala emerged as winner of the ski meet, retaining the Fisheries trophy in Fairbanks until next year.

Already plans are being laid to hold a ski meet at the next Fairbanks ice carnival that will attract contestants from the "outside," that will be better than any held before, and that will put all other Alaskan ski meets in the shade.

After the carnival, one thinks of spring, and in parts of Alaska the snow begins to disappear about this time. When, returning south, I climbed off the train at Eklutna, my mukluks crunched on a hard crust that indicated a thaw while I was gone.

There remained only some delightful skiing on corn snow in the company of some Eklutna students one day in April, in the above-timber country in the Chugach, across the highway a couple of miles from the school. We climbed on grass under a warm sun, then put on our skis and schussed and swung our way down to the trees. We sat on grassy knolls and ate candy bars, and took pictures. We slalomed in the gullies and ate snow to quench our thirst, and idled down the last stretch. The best skiers waited for those who fell, and we spoke about next year, wondering where we'd be, and what the skiing was like in all the remote places the young men came from. Late in the afternoon when the sun was low, we made our way through the bushes and scrub that will next year be the Peters Creek ski road. The school bus, loaded with students, came out to pick us up and save us the hike back to the campus.

A week later I caught the train north again, with skiing over until the fall. It was almost time for the break-up, and the train was full of men coming north to spend the summer at the placer mines of the interior. As the Fairbanks Flyer swung around a curve I glimpsed the mountain we had skied on the week before, still streaked with snow, and the words of my Eskimo friend Henry Adams came back to me . . . . "skiing . . . . lots of fun."

Russell Dove

TIMBERLINE NEAR CORDOVA, ALASKA