The PAYSTREAK

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The Newsletter of the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation (AMHF)

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Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation to Induct Four Mining Pioneers

Frank and Nevelo Yasuda—In 1903, Japanese immigrant Frank Yasuda and his Eskimo wife Nevelo left a North Slope decimated by western-introduced disease and depletion of marine mammals, and led a group of Eskimos and prospectors to the southern flanks of the Brooks Range. They discovered placer and lode gold in the Chandalar Mining District two years later. Later, Frank Yasuda founded the village of Beaver on the Yukon River in 1910, which quickly grew into Alaska’s first functional, multi-ethnic community by the mid-teens of the 20th Century. During World War I, Frank was interned far from friends and family, as were most American Japanese. Frank returned after the war to resume a leadership role in Beaver. Known for his extraordinary kindness, generosity, and honesty, Frank Yasuda passed away in 1958 at the age of 90. His equally revered wife Nevelo died in 1966, at the age of 87.

John Gustavus (Gus) Uotila—In 1913, Finnish immigrant Gus Uotila got off the boat in Seward, and skied 570 miles to the newly-discovered mining town of Flat, in the remote Kuskokwim Mountains. Gus quickly gained the reputation for being the toughest teamster the Iditarod district had ever known, and hauled supplies, cut wood, and relocated gold dredges with draft horses and early model tractors. Beginning in the 1930s, Uotila became a very successful placer gold miner and partnered and mentored many operations in Interior and Western Alaska. Uotila’s legendary skills as an overland freighter were called upon by the War Department and Department of Defense during WWII and the Cold War, when he cut-trained loads for the U.S. Lend Lease Program and for remote DEW Line stations. In 1973, Gus Uotila passed away in Fairbanks at the age of 89, after returning home from a life-long passion...playing pinochle.

Simon Wible—In the mid-to-late 19th Century, Simon Wible mined gold and built canals and water systems in California. Wible built the Kern Valley Water Company canals, founded the Bank of Bakersfield, and was considered one of the leading citizens of Kern County, California. In 1898, at the age of 67, he arrived in Alaska, and mined in the Hope-Sunrise district until his death in 1911. Wible is best known for the use of hydraulic mining technologies, which he used to exploit placer gold deposits on Sixmile and Canyon Creeks. Many placer miners on the Kenai Peninsula ‘copied’ Wible’s hydraulic mining techniques. Wible helped plan the development of placer gold on Crow Creek near Girdwood, which still produces placer gold today. He provided his own epitaph: “There’s something about gold digging. We keep at it until we’re dead.”
Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation
Induction Ceremonies, November 6-7, 2003
Anchorage Sheraton Hotel, Anchorage, Alaska

Program

The General Public is invited to the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation (AMHF) induction ceremony from 7:00 to 9:30 PM on November 6th, History Night. There is no charge for admission. Coffee will be served.

Introduction and Purpose of the AMHF
Interim President Mary H. Nordale ................................................................. 7:00-7:10 PM

Presentation of Inductees
Simon Wible, by Chuck Hawley ................................................................. 7:10-7:35 PM
John Gustavus (Gus) Uotila, by Tom Bundtzen .............................................. 7:35-7:50 PM
Remarks on Induction of Frank and Nevelo Yasuda*, Tom Bundtzen .............. 7:50-8:05 PM

Coffee Break.......................................................................................................... 8:05-8:20 PM

Book Signing........................................................................................................ 8:20-9:30 PM
Wesley Earl Dunkle, Alaska’s Flying Miner, author C.C. Hawley, 2003

*There will also be a ceremony honoring Frank and Nevelo Yasuda during the AMA Annual Banquet on November 7th at 7:30 PM. A banquet ticket will be required.

Acknowledgements

The November 6, 2003 induction ceremony of the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation (AMHF) will feature pioneers from widely differing Alaskan settings. Japanese immigrant Frank Yasuda and his Eskimo wife Nevelo led a group of Eskimos from the North Slope to the south flank of the Brooks Range, discovered gold in the Chandalar district, and founded the village of Beaver. Originally honored during the July 2003, Golden Days celebration in Fairbanks, they will be the focus of a special ceremony at the Alaska Miners Association’s Annual banquet on November 7th. Gus Uotila was a tough teamster that successfully mined placer gold throughout interior and western Alaska and pioneered the transport of heavy equipment overland with the use of tractors. Simon Wible successfully used a variety of water technologies in California, which he later brought to the Kenai Peninsula placer gold mining industry late in his career.

The AMHF Honors committee laid out the groundwork for this induction ceremony. The biographies of Kyosuke (Frank) Yasuda and Nevelo Yasuda were compiled and written by Charles C. Hawley, with assistance from Thomas K. Bundtzen. The biography of Gus Uotila was compiled and written by Thomas Bundtzen, with the assistance of Ron Rosander, Toivo Rosander and Charles Hawley. Interviews with John Miscovich, Cole McFarland, Andy Miscovich, Charlie Uotila Jr., Niilo Koponen, Richard Wilmarth, and Mark Fejes are gratefully acknowledged. The biography of Simon Wible was written by Charles Hawley, with assistance from Rolfe Buzzell. Dermot Cole reviewed all three biographies. Gay Ellen Heath Griffin and Thomas Bundtzen designed, prepared and edited the AMHF Newsletter.
Previous Inductees, Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation

National Mining Hall of Fame Inductees
Six charter members of Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation were previously elected into the National Mining Hall of Fame in Leadville, Colorado.

Stephen Birch: Founder and developer of Kennecott Copper Mines.
Frederick Bradley: Successful manager of Treadwell and A-J Mines, Juneau.
John Treadwell: Founder of Treadwell Mine, Juneau.
Ernest Patty: University of Alaska, and manager of Placer Dredging Ventures.
Clarence Berry: Prominent Klondike and Interior Alaska miner.

Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation Inductees

Fairbanks Spring 1998
Induction Ceremony Honoring Early Yukon Basin Traders and Prospectors

Alfred Mayo: “Captain Al” well-known Yukon River trader, prospector.
Jack McQuesten: Known as the “Father of the Yukon” grubstake for prospectors.
Arthur Harper: Well known and respected trader and prospector and promoter of the Yukon.
Howard Franklin: Fortymile prospector, discovered first “bedrock” placer gold in Alaska.
John Minook: Creole-Athabascan prospector who discovered Rampart district.
Felix Pedro: Discoverer of Fairbanks district in 1902.

Nome Spring 1998
Induction Ceremony Honoring Pioneers of the Nome Gold Rush

Erik Lindblom: The eldest of the ‘Lucky Swedes’, a tailor.
Jafet Lindeberg: The Norwegian of the ‘Lucky Swedes’, president and manager of the very successful Pioneer Mining Company.
Charles D. Lane: Tough, honest and wealthy miner who helped the Lucky Swedes in their legal battles.

Juneau Spring 1999
Induction Ceremony Honoring Discovery of Juneau District

Joe Juneau: Native of Quebec, a California 49er, co-discoverer of gold in Juneau district.
Richard T. Harris: Irish immigrant, co-discoverer of gold in Juneau district.
George Pilz: German immigrant who sent Juneau and Harris into the Juneau area.
Kawa: Tlingit leader who brought rich gold samples from Gastineau Channel area to George Pilz.
Livingston Wernecke: Geologist-engineer for the Bradley companies of Juneau.
Barlett Thane: Promoter-founder of the world’s largest gold mine, the Gastineau at Juneau.

Anchorage Fall 1999
Induction Ceremony Honoring Mining Pioneers of Southern/Southwest Alaska

Andrew Olson: Swedish immigrant, innovator at Flat; long-time miner of platinum.
Evan Jones: Welsh immigrant; father of Alaska coal mining.
Wesley Earl Dunkle: Kennecott engineer and innovative geologist, co-founder of Star Air Service, predecessor of Alaska Airlines.
Fairbanks Spring 2000
Induction Ceremony Honoring Early 20th Century Interior Pioneers

Fannie Quigley: Prospector, renowned for her bush skills, legendary Kantishna character.

Juneau Spring 2001
Induction Ceremony Honoring Early Government Role In Mining

Benjamin D. Stewart: State and Federal mining administrator, Alaska constitutional delegate.

Fairbanks Summer 2001
Induction Ceremony Honoring the Pioneers of the Large Scale Gold Dredging Industry of Nome and Fairbanks Districts

Norman C. Stines: Planned and supervised USSR&M activities in Fairbanks district.
Wendell P. Hammon: Installed the first three large dredges in Cape Nome district.
James K. Davidson: Designed and built Miocene and Davidson ditch systems.

Anchorage Fall 2001
Induction Ceremony Honoring Discovery of Flat District

John Beaton: Co-discovered Iditarod district with William Dikeman.

Fairbanks Spring 2002
Induction Ceremony Honoring Successful Miners and Engineers of Early 20th Century

Herman Tofty: Norwegian immigrant who worked prospects near Manley Hot Springs.
Chester Parington: Acclaimed international mining engineer; wrote treatise on Alaskan placer fields.
Thomas P. Aitken: Arguably the most successful small scale mine developer during the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush; worked both lodes and placers in Alaska and Yukon.

Anchorage Fall 2002
Induction Ceremony Honoring Immigrant Pioneers

Peter Miscovich: Croatian immigrant who settled in Flat, Alaska in 1910. Pioneered the use of hydraulic mining techniques.
David Strandberg: Swedish immigrant who joined the Klondike gold rush in 1898 and the Iditarod rush of 1910. Built placer mining dynasty Strandberg & Sons, Inc.
Lars Ostnes: Norwegian immigrant who mined in the Iditarod district and developed placer mines in remote western Alaska for over 50 years.

Fairbanks Summer 2003
Golden Days Induction Ceremony

Kyosuke “Frank” Yasuda and Nevelo Yasuda: Japanese immigrant and his Eskimo wife, discovered Chandalar gold and founded the community of Beaver.
Nevelo was the daughter of Amaoka, an Eskimo whaling leader at Nuvuk, an ancient village on Point Barrow. The Yasudas led an expedition of Eskimos through wild country from Barrow to the Yukon River.

When they reached the Yukon, they founded the village of Beaver that soon was settled by north coast Eskimos, Indians of the Yukon region, and a few miners and freighters. Backed by a tenuous supply chain that at first reached back to Charles Brower at Barrow, Thomas Carter and the Yasudas discovered rich gold deposits in the Chandalar region of the Brooks Range. Development of the rich deposits guaranteed Beaver’s early success.

Frank Yasuda was born Kyosuke Yasuda in 1868 on Honshu, Japan’s main island, to Dr. Segio Yasuda and his wife Isu. Segio was the 16th in a line of Japanese medical doctors. By the time Kyosuke Yasuda was fifteen years old both his parents were dead and the formerly wealthy Yasuda family was struggling economically. Because of these hardships, Kyosuke decided to earn a living in trade. He apprenticed to the Mitsubishi Shipping Company, and by 1887 Kyosuke had crossed the Pacific Ocean. He left the Mitsubishi Company in California where he encountered both prejudice and opportunity.

Yasuda made a critical contact in 1891, when he signed on as cabin boy to Captain Frank Healy of the famed Bear of the U.S. Revenue Service, a sturdy steam-sailing vessel patrolling northern waters. Yasuda soon assumed part of the purser’s duties on the Bear and began making observations of the weather. In about 1893, with the Bear locked in the ice for the winter, Yasuda left the vessel and took up residence in Barrow where he continued his weather observations for the Revenue Service and then found employment with Charlie Brower. Yasuda, the “little cook”, helped big cook Fred Hopson for eighteen months before he undertook more complex trading assignments for Brower. By 1897 Yasuda had learned the Eskimo language and had established his own trading company, but continued to work closely with Brower.
Culture of the north coast Eskimo centered on the whale. A few dominant men, the umialiks, headed whaling parties. The umialiks were supported by their whaling crews during the whaling season, then took responsibility for the hunters and their families during the rest of the year. Village life of the men centered around the lodges of the whaling leaders. Charlie Brower had established a trading post in Barrow in the early 1880s. Brower adopted Eskimo ways, and soon established a symbiotic relation with his Eskimo trading partners similar to that of an umialik, alternately supporting and being supported by his trading families. Brower encouraged Yasuda to learn hunting skills and the Eskimo language. Yasuda, probably known as Frank by now, was accepted into the lodge family of Amaoka, an important whaling leader at Nuvuk at Point Barrow. Amaoka had a daughter named Nevalo of surprising intellect and independence, which soon was evident in the matter of arranged marriages and related Eskimo customs. The overwhelming need for hunters to supply their families in the harsh Arctic gradually was institutionalized into complex marriage relations popularized as “wife-swapping.” The practice, however, repelled Yasuda and independent Nevalo who vowed a lifetime monogamous marriage. Yasuda and Nevalo married when she was sixteen years old. Nevalo was small and lithe, by family tradition the girl caught at the top of her flight in a ceremonial blanket toss.

By the late 1890s, the scarcity of whales was critical. Although the U.S. government sent relief ships to the Arctic with emergency food supplies, the potatoes, onions, and flour that probably would have been adequate foodstuffs in more temperate climates were a poor substitute for the whale-based, high calorie protein-rich diet of the northern Eskimos. Gradually oversight by the Revenue Service reduced whale harvest by commercial hunters, but Charles Brower believed that it would be at least ten years before the badly depleted whale population could be reestablished. One option for some of the northern people was to move inland and adopt a caribou culture, as had the Eskimo group near Anaktuvik Pass.

At about this time (1902), Thomas G. Carter and his partner Samuel Marsh came into the country. Carter had mined in Montana and had been part of an ill-fated expedition that left the Klondike (ca 1897) in the search for a rumored discovery of gold in Alaska’s Brooks Range. The men did not find gold there and Carter proceeded to the stampede camp in the Cape Nome District, where he did hit it rich. He decided to use part of his newly acquired wealth to return to the Arctic. Carter believed that he could find rich gold deposits in the Endicott Mountains of the Brooks Range, perhaps the deposits that had eluded his earlier prospecting efforts.
Prospectors had come up the Koyukuk River into the central south flank of the Brooks Range very early in Alaska’s mining history, but in general a wide band of swampy and difficult land lay north of the Yukon River and south of the Brooks Range, and the range was wide open for prospecting. Carter believed that a successful prospecting venture into the remote range could be undertaken by self-sufficient parties up the coastal valleys, such as the Canning or Sagavanirktok Rivers, into the north flank range, then into the south flank, Carter’s gold-target area.

Carter had impressed Brower, who recommended hiring the Yasudas as guides. It took Carter nearly a year to find them; the Yasudas were trading to the east and up the coastal rivers. Frank Yasuda was skeptical initially but finally accepted Carter’s proposal. Carter pledged that half of any proceeds from a successful mining venture would go to Yasuda and his Eskimo families if Frank and Nevelo would lead an expedition into the range.

The 1903 expedition began with the exploration of the upper Canning River and subsequently the headwaters of the East Fork of the Chandalar River. When they reached the upper Canning River, with supplies running low, it was decided that Carter and Marsh would stay and prospect, and Frank and Nevelo would return to Barrow for ammunition and food supplies. The party would meet again in the fall of 1904 on Grayling Creek in the headwaters of the Sagavanirktok (colloquially the Sag) River.

In the fall of 1904 the Yasudas, accompanied by Edward Toorak and probably two other Eskimo hunters, left Barrow for the rendezvous at Grayling Creek. They arrived at the rendezvous point only to find that Carter had left earlier. Frank saw snowshoe tracks, which he took to be Carter’s. Nevelo, however, said “No those Carter’s snowshoes but not Carter’s tracks—Eskimo tracks.” Subsequently, the party found Carter’s snowshoes, rifle, and supplies nearby. They feared the worst but decided to stay near the rendezvous until Christmas while hunting caribou on the Anaktuvuk plateau. Carter rather miraculously did rendezvous and told Yasuda about good prospecting country in the North Fork of the Chandalar and his own adventures there and at Emma Creek in the Koyukuk region.

There were rumors in the Koyukuk-Wiseman District that Samuel Marsh, Carter’s former partner, had returned to the north coast with new backing for the prospecting effort. The small party again returned for supplies at Barrow. Marsh wasn’t there, but Yasuda recouped the fortunes of the venture when he sold furs and polar bear skins to friendly traders. Re-supplied in the fall of 1905, the party - which now consisted of the Yasudas, Carter, and four couples of Eskimos - made directly for the head of the Sag River. Carter, now more confident of a destination, wanted to hurry to the Chandalar River area, but Yasuda urged more preparation. They caught the last of the caribou migration, killed thirty-seven animals, put up the meat, and made their winter clothing. As they descended toward the Koyukuk River, more caribou were harvested and the party was well prepared for their wintertime prospecting venture.

Yasuda and the Eskimos made camp and Carter proceeded alone into the Chandalar River basin, where he found gold at Slate Creek and Little Squaw Creek – named for Frank and Nevelo’s new baby daughter. In the summer of 1906 Frank visited Carter and another prospector McNutt at the Little Squaw location and stayed to help the men build their sluice boxes and begin to mine. The gold returns were spectacular. Frank returned to his camp to bring Nevelo and the Eskimos to the new discovery. The Yasudas built a camp on the shore of nearby Ogburn (Squaw) Lake. The following summer Nevelo, while picking berries with her infant daughter, found rich gold-quartz veins that were the source of the placer deposits - the Mother Lode.

In 1907 there was a rush to the Chandalar region, but Carter’s claims were secure. He honored his contract with Yasuda, and protected the Eskimo interest at the mines. The Northern Commercial Company established Caro, a trading post at the head of navigation on the Chandalar, to supply the new mines. But Caro itself needed a supply point
on the Yukon, the main river of commerce. Yasuda selected a location on the Yukon River that had the nearest straight line access to the Chandalar camp. This site, called Beaver or Beaver City, was first occupied in 1910. Thanks to some of Samuel Marshes’ contacts in the eastern United States, funds were found to build a seventy-five mile-long wagon road that connected Beaver with Caro and the Chandalar gold mines.

Over the next several years the population of Beaver grew. Frank and Nevelo returned to Barrow, which was still suffering the effects of disease and a depleted whale population, and brought other families across the Brooks Range to Beaver. The trek to their new home took almost two years. They went up the Colville and across the divide to the head of the Koyukuk River, then traversed the Dietrich and Bettles Rivers before turning down the Chandalar River to Beaver. Some of the older Eskimos died on the trek, but their numbers were compensated for by births. For his role in this long walk Yasuda was called “the Japanese Moses.” Frank was the intellectual leader and sometimes, calling on his memories of the family medical clinic in Japan, the doctor for the expedition. At times Nevelo guided the party towards its destination. According to Billy Neakok of Barrow, Nevelo’s name is derived from the Eskimo word for thread and Nevelo was often the thread that held the expedition together.

In April 1913 Frank Yasuda made his first trip ‘Outside’ in twenty years. He rushed from Beaver to Fairbanks, a bustling town that had not existed when Yasuda first went to Barrow. Even by that date, Yasuda was a respected and almost legendary figure in the north. A reporter for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, noted that: “The history of Mr. Yasuda’s Alaskan experiences is one that, when told, can hardly be believed.” Frank proceeded to Seattle where he met his partner Carter and purchased supplies for the 1913 trading season and posed for a picture with his partner and friend.

By what now seems an amazing coincidence, a few other Japanese were in the Alaska Arctic in the early twentieth century and were drawn to Yasuda. One unexpected visitor to the Chandalar camp was George Oshima. Oshima had been in the upper Yukon region for some time living with Athabascan Indians near Ft. Yukon. George had also learned the local native language. A third Japanese, respected by both Yasuda and Carter, was James Minano. Minano, who was fluent in English, had like Yasuda married an Eskimo from the north coast region. Minano joined the Carter-Yasuda expedition at Anaktuvik Pass in 1903 or 1904 and remained a valued partner to the Yasudas for several years.
At Beaver families long in the whaling culture of the coastal Tareumiut adapted to the caribou culture of inland Eskimo, the Nunamiut. More surprisingly, Kutchin Indians from upriver and Koyukons from downriver also helped settle Beaver. In mixing the groups, two Japanese were catalysts. Yasuda by now was practically an Eskimo, and George Oshima, the Japanese who had lived with the Kutchin near Ft. Yukon, had also been assimilated into native culture. As UAF’s historian and ethnologist William Schneider later described it, Beaver was a functioning multi-ethnic community by the ten years of the twentieth century.

Gradually, trapping supplanted mining in Beaver, but Yasuda continued in his role as community leader and trader. Moses Cruikshank, who came from the upriver Kutchin territory, described Yasuda’s operation:

“We traded with Frank Yasuda and he used to have barge loads of supplies come there. He had a couple of big warehouses just loaded down. And then, when he outfit you, he see that you got the best. Anything that is a little bit spoiled or a little bit old he’d throw away. That’s the kind of trader that Frank Yasuda was. He gives you nothing but the best and plenty of it. And Frank, he trusted everybody... but I think he trusted maybe too many guys... And that way he must of lost a few dollars. But he never turned a person down”.

Yasuda’s legendary generosity may reflect an encounter with a trader in the Koyukuk country. A trader along the Koyukuk River had turned down Yasuda, practically starving. Since that event, Frank vowed never to refuse a man credit. Frank continued to grubstake and supply miners who often were as broke at the end of the season as at the start.

In the mid 1920s, miners hit rich placer gold under the Big River, by far the best placer discovery made to that date in the Chandalar. According to mining engineer Irving McKay Reed, the miners did not forget their earlier grubstakes, and Yasuda was repaid for his years of support.

Yasuda’s first partner, Thomas G. Carter, had lived up to his partnership agreement with Frank and Nevelo, sharing the wealth of the Chandalar discoveries. Carter left the country after a few successful years, but was never forgotten by Yasuda. Pioneer U.S. Geological Survey geologist John B. Mertie, Jr. remembered Yasuda in his biography Thirty Summers and a Winter:

“Frank was an unusual man for his great happiness seemed to come from helping others and he refused no one though he himself had little... When Frank’s partner [Carter], a well-educated man, became ill with cancer, Frank sent him to the Mayo Clinic where all his expenses were paid until he died. When I remarked on the heavy financial burden it must have been, Frank replied, “Mr. Mertie, he was my partner.”

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Beaver prospered as a trapping center. Frank and Nevelo proved to be good fur buyers, graders, and sellers. The couple traveled as far as California in their trading and buying expeditions. World War II changed everything. Even though Alaskans protested, Frank Yasuda, a true Alaskan for fifty years, was sent to an internment camp Outside and separated from his family. Jack Buckley, the U.S. Marshall responsible for northern Alaska, had known Frank for many years, and thought the least he could do was to accomplish the unpleasant task himself. Buckley flew into Beaver and found Yasuda waiting for him with a small suitcase in his hand. While being interred in Fairbanks before transport outside, the embarrassed jailor apologized to Frank for the injustice.

Once again management of the Yasuda’s affairs was assumed by Nevelo—but now at times assisted by her college-educated daughters, Bernice and Hana. Continued intercession by prominent Alaskans, including John Mertie Jr., led to Frank’s early release, and Frank returned to Beaver where he again assumed a leadership role. His greatest joys were his daughters Hana and Bernice and his granddaughter Chaille, who remembers Beaver as a wonderful place to grow up.
Frank had one more creek to prospect. In 1948, with the help of a young Ernest “Ernie” Wolff (who later became a well-known professor of mining at the University of Alaska), Yasuda made one attempt to get back into the Chandalar country, but the going was too tough for the by then octogenarian Yasuda. The young miners practically adopted Frank, and he repaid their kindness by volunteering to cook for them. In the evenings, Frank told them of his adventures throughout his life in the Brooks Range. Frank, already a legend in the north, earned their love and respect. Dr. Wolff has written that he knew only one great man in his own long life, and that man was Frank Yasuda.

Frank died in Beaver on February 12, 1958. He was outlived by his always-faithful holder of the thread, Nevelo, who died in January 1966. The Yasudas are survived by their daughters, who have distinguished themselves in their own careers, and who instilled in their children a respect for education and other cultures.

Afterward

Japanese novelist Jiro Nitta, who wrote a best-selling novel about the life of Frank Yasuda, noted that the meeting of three Japanese, Yasuda, Minano, and Oshima, in the wilds of northern Alaska, was only possible because of the great American gold rush, a rush that attracted men and women from around the world. The young Japanese also needed the support of white men such as Thomas G. Carter and Charles Brower, men who were willing to look beyond the racial and ethnic barriers of the time. Critical also was the blending of American Indians with the Eskimos, who were traditionally wary of each other if not hostile. Eskimos and Indians lived harmoniously at Beaver.

The Alaska Natives quickly learned mining and freighting skills and used them to supplement their subsistence lifestyle. Due to their remote settings, the Koyukuk and Chandalar mining Districts were not overrun by the ne’er-do-wells who “mined the miners” at Dawson City and Nome and overrun Native gold discoveries at Circle and the Klondike. Only the strong survived in the high Arctic. Race and ethnicity were minor criteria to success in Alaska’s northland in the years following Alaska’s gold rush.

Yasuda family, Hana, Nevelo, Chaillé, Frank, and Bernice
The U.S. Revenue cutter 'Bear'

SOURCES


First Visit to Fairbanks,' *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner,* 13 April 1913, 2.

[This brief article is based on an interview with Yasuda who was on his way to Seattle to meet Thomas Carter for trading supplies. It was Yasuda's first visit outside for twenty years. The article gives 1883 as Yasuda's first year in America, and 1891 as the date that he signed up with the Revenue Service.]


[Hana spelled her mother's name as Nevelo. According to Hana, the first Eskimos to follow Frank were "Irigaluk, a young abandoned girl taken in by Nevelo, Shushulik, Auktoliq, and Nishoya." The location for Beaver was chosen by Yasuda and Tolokana. Auktoliq and Nishoya were the oldest couple in Beaver. Hana wrote: "Frank succeeded in maintaining good relationships between and among peoples of different cultures. There were Athabascans from upriver and downriver... Eskimos from Barrow and Kobuk. Several French Canadians, Irish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, German, Portuguese, English, and Japanese—all living peacefully together.]


Neakok, Billy. 2003, letter to Hawley, May 23, 2003


Reed, Irving McK., 1963. "Frank Yasuda: Pioneer in the Chandalar." *Alaska Sportman,* June (1963). 14-15, 42-45. [The two articles by Irving and Mrs. Irving Reed were written thirty-four years apart. Irving corrects some names given in the earlier article and discusses the post 1929 years. The articles are fundamentally the same—as they should be in a true story. Reed was active for many years in the Chandalar as a mining engineer and probably both Reeds knew Yasuda well after about 1925 when they moved from Nome to Fairbanks.]

Schneider, William. 1976, *Beaver, Alaska: The Story of a Multi-Ethnic Community.* Ph. D. Dissertation. Bryn Mawr College. [Schneider points out the similarities between the role of umialiks and traders such as Brower and Yasuda. As to Yasuda's group of Eskimo families, Schneider wrote: "They worked for him in a pattern that had been established by Brower and other traders at Barrow. The trader supported a certain number of families during the year in exchange for services by the family, the principal one was whaling but, also important, was making summer trading trips along the coast. The trader supplied the equipment and the crews were paid, not in cash but in supplies... the similarities of this pattern to that of the umialik and his responsibilities to his crew were noted (268-269)."


JOHN GUSTAVUS (GUS) UOTILA
(1884 — 1973)

Compiled and written by Tom Bundtzen, with contributions by Toivo Rosander, Ron Rosander, and Charles C. Howley; interviews with John Miscovich, Cole McFarland, Niilo Koponen, Richard Wilmarth, Charlie Uotila, Mark Fejes, and Andy Miscovich; reviewed by Dermot Cole.

John Gustavus Uotila, affectionately known as ‘Gus’, was born in Finland on January 17, 1884 to Gustavus Uotila and Ida (Niemi) Uotila. Gus first came to the United States in 1904 through New York City. After spending two years in the Cape Cod region, near Fitchburg, Massachusetts, he traveled to Michigan in 1906. Shortly afterward, Gus moved westward to employment in the copper mines of Butte, Montana. At Butte, he met another Finnish immigrant, Miss Aino (Ina) Keturi. Gus and Ina married in Butte on November 9, 1907. In 1912, Gus became a naturalized U.S. citizen in Boulder, Montana.

Gus developed an urge to go to Alaska while working in the Butte copper mines, and on April 13, 1913, he arrived in Seward with five other Finns, including his brothers Charles, Oscar, and Toivo. The men, laden with heavy packs, set out for the new placer diggings at Flat on skis. The group followed the old Iditarod trail through Moose Pass, then along Turnagain Arm past the tent city of Anchorage and on to the Susitna River. From there they went up the Yentna, Skwentna, and Happy Rivers to Rainey Pass; and then down the Tatina and South Fork of the Kuskokwim Rivers and on to McGrath and Takotna. From Takotna, the Finnish skiers followed the newly constructed mine access trails in the Kuskokwim Mountains to the mining town of Flat. The trip took just 14 days and the stalwart Finns averaged more than 50 miles a day. Uotila’s wife Ina took the ‘easier’ but more circuitous riverboat route, traveling from St. Michael to Iditarod via the Yukon, Innoko, and Iditarod Rivers.

Gus first worked for Charlie Strandberg for one year as a general laborer at Flat, and observing the need for transport of equipment and supplies in the area, went into the freighting business. Initially operating with four black draft horses, each weighing about one ton, Gus daily hauled goods of all types to store owners and mining companies, including prosperous miners Frank Manley, Tom Aitken, and the Reilly Investment Company. During the winter of 1918, using his team of draft horses, Uotila hauled the 350 ton Beaton and Donnelly gold dredge a distance of three miles from the head of Black Creek to the lower end of the Otter Creek paystreak. Later, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gus moved many of the houses and business establishments in the Flat townsite, this time with mechanized tractors, so that the renamed North American Company Dredge could mine the ground underneath the structures. When the mining process was completed, the houses and businesses were moved back by Uotila to their original locations. During his freighting career, Gus hauled thousands of cords of wood from outlying areas into the mining camp of Flat. According to John Miscovich, Gus Uotila was universally regarded as the toughest teamster the Iditarod had ever known.

“After hauling wood from Caribou and Montana Creeks far to the north, Gus would unload the four or five cords of green wood, eat supper, and head over to ‘Uncle Andrews’s card room’ where he would play pinochle until midnight”.
Gus began the transition from horse to mechanized equipment in 1915, when he bought a ‘Clectrac’, one of Alaska’s first gasoline-powered tractors. The tractor was delivered to Gus via riverboat at Iditarod. Having never driven a tractor before, he set out for Flat with the operator’s manual in one hand and the steering lever in the other. Many in Flat were skeptical of this new ‘iron horse’. They became even more skeptical when Gus broke his arm and wrist while hand-cranking the little tractor. In subsequent years, Uotila would drive thousands of miles across Alaska’s mining country with his ‘Clectrac’ and later model crawler tractors. In the 1920s, Gus purchased the first Model T in the Iditarod District, which was used to haul freight from Iditarod to Flat for the Donnelly and Sheppards store in Flat. Unfortunately Uotila’s Model T and its garage burned up when a blow pot placed underneath the crankcase started a fire.

In 1932, Gus Uotila began his first mining venture in partnership with John Ogriz on Slate Creek southeast of Flat. Ogriz and Uotila operated two placer mines on bench and modern stream levels of Slate Creek, using draglines and bulldozers. This placer mining venture operated successfully intermittently until 1951. By this time, Uotila had replaced his burned-out Model T with a Model A, which he used to haul freight into Slate Creek from Flat. It is said that Uotila made the Model A do things on an unfinished road that no one believed possible. During the 1930s, Uotila conducted a winter placer exploration program at Malemute Gulch east of Flat. Each day Uotila would travel back and forth from the exploration site to his home in Flat on 13 foot long, homemade skis made from nearby trees.

Gus Uotila’s team of draft horses hauling the 350 ton Beaton and Donnelly gold dredge from Black Creek to Lower Otter Creek, circa 1918. Photo from Bundtzen and others, 1992.
In 1937, Gus Uotila and Eric Hard, Ophir's dentist, doctor, barber, and blacksmith, purchased claims from Frank Meyers and began development work on Ophir Creek in the Innoko mining district about 70 miles northeast of Flat. The following year, wife Ina and Gus moved to Ophir from Flat, where both began an Ophir residence that lasted for 27 years. In 1938, Gus and partner Hard brought in a 1 1/4 cubic yard Northwest model #5 dragline, the first to be used in the Innoko district.

Despite his change of residence to Ophir, Gus continued to be associated with the Slate Creek placer mine in the Iditarod with John Ogriz, and expanded into new areas. In 1939, Gus and Eric Hard initiated a mining operation on Bear Creek in the Tolstoi district in the Cripple Creek Mountains area, where they operated as Hard and Uotila. This partnership eventually broke up with Eric Hard retaining the Bear Creek ground and Uotila keeping Ophir Creek, where Gus mined for many years until the 1960s.

Also in 1930s, Gus Uotila, Charlie Uotila, and John Ogriz, bought the Moore Creek placer mine from Waino ('Billy the Finn') Koskinen. Moore Creek is about halfway between the Ophir and Iditarod mining camps. Elmer Keturi, Ina Uotila's nephew, and Charlie Uotila would assume operations for the partnership. Moore Creek became one of the largest producers of placer gold in southwest Alaska during the mid-1930s to late-1940s. Starting in 1955, Uotila worked placer ground with Guy Rivers and Weldon McIntosh on Emma Creek near Wiseman for several seasons. These latter claims were eventually sold to Andy Miscovich. From 1958 to the early years of Statehood, Uotila also maintained mining interests with Albert Yrjana on Birch Creek in the Ruby-Poorman district. Uotila also had a few placer claims in the Goodnews Bay district that were staked by him during the late 1920s platinum rush into that area. The Goodnews Bay Mining Company later acquired the claims from Gus, and mined them for platinum successfully. Gus Uotila put his personal mark on many interior Alaska mining camps. Besides the typical bunkhouses, blacksmith shop, radio shack, and tractor repair shop, a 'Uotila camp' would also include a Finnish sauna.

In 1937, Gus Uotila's nephew Toivo Rosander, born in Finland, came to Alaska from a farm in New Hampshire to help Gus get started on Ophir Creek. Although Toivo had no mining experience, he soon learned the trade and later operated several large and successful placer mines in the Innoko and Tolstoi districts. Toivo is still involved with an ongoing placer mining operation with son Ron Rosander and Ron's sons Neil and Kyle on Colorado Creek north of McGrath. In 1939, Gus hired and trained William (Bill) Carlo as a 'rookie' cat-skinner at Bear Creek in the Cripple Creek Mountains-Tolstoi district. Carlo, an Athabaskan from Rampart, would later become one of the most well known placer miners of interior Alaska and started a family mining tradition of his own. Apparently, Gus was not only a good miner but was also a generous teacher and mentor.

During World War II, Uotila's by then legendary skills as a master overland freighter were required by the U.S. Army, who awarded him their first contract to haul overland a large shipment to a remote Alaskan site. Uotila's contract instructed him to transport 500 tons of steel landing mats from Nenana to Galena to be used on a runway of the Galena Air Base, a part of the U.S. Lend Lease program. Because the route included a nearly continuous four hundred and fifty mile stretch of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers, with unpredictable and dangerous ice conditions, many questioned whether it was even possible to complete the effort. Gus Uotila and his crews proved it was possible to routinely transport heavy loads overland and across frozen rivers through innovation and hard work. The ice bridge technologies that were deployed by Uotila to traverse the frequently dangerous, thin ice of the Yukon and Tanana Rivers were some of the first to be used in Alaska. Because of the dangers of going through the unpredictable river ice, the tractors were not equipped with cabs. Two machines did go through Yukon River ice, but there were no fatalities. Uotila's freighting jobs frequently included brother Charlie Uotila, and Elmer Keturi, who accompanied Gus on his many World War II freight runs. Unfortunately, Charlie Uotila 'frosted his lungs' in an extreme cold snap during one of the military cat train ventures, and died of respiratory failure in 1944. Charlie Uotila
was one of Alaska's premier dragline operators who routinely completed tractor repairs without benefit of heated enclosures in extremely cold weather. Gus and Charlie had worked together closely as a team for many years. After the war, Joe Fejes would help and befriend both Gus and Elmer Keturi during their overland freight work.

In 1950, Gus Uotila, Elmer Keturi, and others acquired the Taylor Creek placer mine from Nick Mellick Sr. of Sleetmute. During the spring of 1951, this partnership freighted a large mining outfit, including a dragline, and bulldozers from Moore Creek to Taylor Creek via Sleetmute, a distance of nearly 200 miles. This venture, which involved dangerous and unpredictable traverses across the Kuskokwim and Holitna Rivers, required construction of snow dams, and pole and ice bridges. The route from Moore Creek to Taylor Creek is now a RS2477 right-of-way.

Between 1947 and 1953, Gus initiated a placer gold mine venture with Charlie Uotila's son, Eugene, on the South Fork of the Koyukuk River, south of the Brooks Range. Their pioneer winter cat trail, from Livengood to Stevens Village, the Dall River, and finally to the South Fork, later became part of the Dalton Highway corridor that now provides access to the North Slope oil fields. In 1955, utilizing experience gained from Gus, Eugene Uotila, worked for Alaska Freight Lines on a DEW Line (Distant Early Warning) contract, traversed 600 miles of roadless expanse from Fairbanks to the North Slope with a large cat train, more than 30 semi trucks, and 'Monster', a diesel-powered vehicle with 9 foot diameter wheels.

Gus Uotila's winter cat train expertise was again needed by the military during the cold war. In 1956, at the age of 72, Gus was asked by the U.S. Department of Defense to help build a DEW Line station in western Alaska. Gus Uotila and crew first hauled fuel in 55-gallon drums and several large fuel storage tanks from a river landing area on the Holitna River to the future site of the Sparrevohn Air Force Station on the southwest edge of the Alaska Range. During the following summer, Gus Uotila and others built the initial runway at Sparrevohn with D-8 tractors. Supplies and equipment used to build the remote, cold war military base were flown-in, using this runway.

When not busy with his placer mining and freight runs, Gus and wife Ina spent the winters visiting relatives and friends in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, California, and Florida. In 1952, Joe and Claire Fejes, Elmer and Hildur Keturi, and Gus and Aino Uotila helped organize the Fairbanks Folkdance Club. For nearly 30 years, this organization put on dances that celebrated folk dancing culture from Europe to Asia to North America. Gus Uotila finally retired from placer mining in 1965, and he and Ina left Ophir to make their home in Fairbanks.

Uotila cat train enroute from Nenana to Galena on the Tanana and Yukon Rivers, late winter, 1942-43. Photo from Uotila family album.
Placer miner, cross country skier, overland transportation expert, and outstanding Alaskan citizen John Gustavus Uotila passed away in Fairbanks, Alaska, on February 3, 1973, at the age of 89, after returning home from an evening of pinochle.

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Pioneers Home opened in 1967, both were among the first guests to reside there. Gus was an avid card player and his favorite winter pastime was playing pinochle. After retirement, Gus could often be seen playing pinochle at the Pastime card room in Fairbanks.

Cole McFarland, who was born and raised in Ophir, Alaska, remembers Gus as a hardworking miner with a great sense of humor. “Gus always had time for the younger set”, said McFarland, who would himself excel in the mining business and become president of Placer Dome U.S., Inc. According to John Miscovich, “Gus was a good dancer and all the ladies wanted him as their dancing partner wherever he lived during his long life. Being extroverts, Gus and Ina held many private get-togethers with friends and family both in and outside Alaska”. In a tribute to Gus Uotila, the Pioneers of Alaska Igloo No. 4 wrote: “Brother Gus was indeed a true pioneer. He was noted for his dependability and his respect for his fellow man can best be stated by saying that his word was as good as the gold that he mined”.

Simon William Wible was born, probably of German or Swiss extraction, in Pennsylvania on March 5, 1832. As a boy he moved with his family to Mendon, Adams County, Illinois. Mendon is only a few miles east of the great river of commerce, the Mississippi. Quincy, the seat of Adams County was at that time a bustling river port—just the kind of place to arouse youthful dreams of travel and adventure. When Simon was twenty years old he made his first westward trek, joining a wagon train bound for California. Simon returned to the east to lead two other trips. On his last, in 1858, the wagon train was attacked and broken up by Indians. Wible walked into Fort Laramie, Wyoming, where he soon attached himself to another westward-bound party.

In the next few years Wible mined gold in El Dorado, Amador, and Calaveras Counties in California. He learned the surveying craft, became interested in civil engineering, and began a career in water management. Wible formed the Blue Lake Water System in 1868 in San Francisco. He moved to Bakersfield, Kern County, in 1874 where he homesteaded about three miles west of the city at Wible Station. He constructed the Wible (1874), Pioneer (1874-1875), and the Kern Valley Water Company (1876-1877) canals. The Kern Valley Water Company’s canal was the largest in the county. He also superintended the operations of Livermore and Chester and its successor, Livermore and Redington. In 1882, Wible became the manager of extensive holdings of cattle barons Miller and Lux.

Wible also became interested in horticulture and in 1890 (possibly as early as 1887) founded the Wible Orchard and Vineyard Company. In 1890 Wible was among a group of civic leaders who founded the Bank of Bakersfield; Wible was its first president and served in that capacity until his death. He was widely recognized as the leading citizen of Kern County.

In 1898, Wible, at age sixty-seven began to mine in Alaska in the Hope-Sunrise Turnagain Arm area. He mined in every season through 1910.

The Hope-Sunrise district was discovered as early as 1888 and boomed in the early 1890s. Early miners mined by hand, shoveling rich shallow gravel into long sluice boxes, but they were often handicapped by large boulders remnant of an earlier ice-age. By 1898, most of the shallow pay had been mined and the Kenai boom had largely played out. Wible and his long time foreman, Ben Pilcher, acquired land in Sixmile Creek in 1898 and installed the first hydraulic elevator used in the district. In 1899 Wible bought ground in Canyon Creek. He recognized an extensive system of alluvial gravels on a bench about 100 feet above Canyon Creek and over the next several years developed the bench with flumes, pipe lines, and ditches. Boulders that would have hindered hand miners were pushed over the canyon walls into Canyon Creek by the force of hydraulic giants; reportedly Wible had expended $50,000 on the development of his claims on Sixmile and Canyon Creeks. The ground was not rich, but Wible’s efficient operation netted a profit. A good year for Wible was about 1000 ounces of fine gold.

Wible’s methods were widely copied in the Sunrise district and within a year or two most larger operations used hydraulic technology in the form of giants and elevators. Technology introduced by Wible spread rapidly, and similar operations were run in the early years of the Nome district and at Flat.
Wible also assisted other miners. In about 1899, Wible met a young miner of Finnish descent, Chris Spillum. Chris and partners had restaked a potentially valuable placer deposit on the north side of Turnagain Arm in Crow Creek. Wible bought one of Spillum’s partners and assisted in planning the operation, which justified a large scale hydraulic plant: he designed the plant and superintended its construction. Wible, a short, stocky, handsome man with a high squeaky voice enjoyed working with his men, who worked hardest when Wible was present. One day Simon walked off the job site, but was still close to the open pipe. “I wonder what that old cuss of a hypocrite would say now if he saw us loafing,” said a distant voice on the pipe. Wible returned to the open end of the pipe and replied, “Never mind that old cuss of a hypocrite now. Get busy and quit your loafing.” Crow Creek developed into one of the two or three best mines in the Turnagain arm area thanks partly to Wible’s well-planned beginning.

Wible never married, but he adopted three girls after the accidental death of their parents and raised them in his home in Bakersfield. One of the girls became a doctor, the second a teacher, while the third girl stayed at home to keep house. Apparently Wible thought enough of Chris Spillum that he invited him to Bakersfield where Simon and Chris lived in a hotel but with constant visits to Simon’s nice home. Simon and at least one of the girls thought that Spillum would be a good catch, but Spillum was already too set in his bachelor ways to agree on anything but friendship and returned to Alaska.

In 1910, Simon’s vigorous health began to fade and wealthy miners from Spokane optioned the Canyon Creek property, running it with the help of Ben Pilcher, Simon’s faithful employee. Wible died in San Francisco in 1911, still dreaming of his Alaska mines. Wible was a wealthy man, but he loved mining operations. He once said, “I don’t have to go back to Alaska every summer, but the lure of gold is still too much for me.” He provided his own epitaph, “There’s something about gold digging. We keep at it until we’re dead.”

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Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation Announcement

On March 26th, 2003, Dean Earl H. Beistline resigned as President of the Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation (AMHF) and after much argument (which the Board of Directors lost) his resignation was accepted. Earl cited the need for more youthful leadership, the hard work needed for planning a proposed AMHF facility, and his age as the reasons for his resignation. However, the board immediately and unanimously voted to make Beistline *President Emeritus* of the AMHF as a condition of his resignation, which he accepted. Dean Beistline has been the driving force in founding the AMHF Foundation in 1997 and was its president from 1997 until 2003.

Earl Beistline believes that Alaska’s mining pioneers must be known, understood and appreciated for their contributions to the development of the Territory of Alaska and, later, the State of Alaska. Mining has been an important economic engine for much of Alaska from 1867 to the present and, because of Dean Beistline’s dedication, the people who ran that engine will continue to be honored.

Beistline’s lifelong association with mining as an engineer, miner, and educator of aspiring mining engineers has made him an invaluable resource to the AMHF Foundation. The Board of Directors was both pleased and relieved that he has agreed to continue to act as a source of knowledge and information concerning the people who have made mining an important part of the economy and culture of Alaska.
**Distinguished Alaskans Aid Foundation as ‘98ers**

The Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation was incorporated as an Alaskan non-profit corporation on April 27, 1997. The Foundation was organized exclusively for educational and charitable purposes, including donations to organizations that are tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax code. On September 17 of 2003, the IRS confirmed the 501(c)(3) status of AMHF, and further categorized the organization under codes 509(a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(a)(6).

The foundation is a non-membership corporation that depends on services provided by its officers and directors, others interested in Alaskan mining, and on donations and grants.

The Foundation is especially indebted to fifteen persons who have each contributed $1,000 to become 98ers, in honor of the first stampeders to Alaska in 1898 at Nome.

**The 98ers**

Earl Beistline
Thomas K. Bundtzen
Glen Chambers
Douglas Colp
Wendell Hammon Jr.
Walter Johnson
Wallace McGregor
John Mulligan
Patrick H. O’Neill
Elmer E. Rasmuson (deceased)
William Strocker
Robert H. Trent
Mitch Usibelli
Joe Usibelli, Sr.
William R. Wood (deceased)

Most of the 98ers are recognizable as miners of national or international reputation. The late William R. Wood was President, Emeritus, of the University of Alaska. Dr. Wood suggested the organization of the Foundation. The late Elmer E. Rasmuson was an Alaska banker and benefactor, long interested in Alaska natural resource history. Dr. Walter Johnson’s career was mainly in Native public health, and he knows many pioneer Alaskans. His own research has taken him to Sweden and Norway in search of the true story of the so-called “three Lucky Swedes” of fame from Nome.

The Foundation is seeking about ninety more 98ers, but it welcomes contributions at every level. For further information contact:

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Fairbanks, AK 99701

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