

# U.S. Bought Alaska 110 Years Ago This Week

Courtesy of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

By TERENCE COLE

Tuesday is the 110th anniversary of the transfer of Alaska from "his majesty the Emperor of all the Russias" to the United States. On Oct. 18, 1867, at the Russian American capital city now called Sitka, the flag of the Czar came down for the last time in a most embarrassing ceremony.

Two hundred-fifty American soldiers marched up in front of Baranof's Castle and stopped on the right side of the 90-foot-high flag pole, and a party of Russian soldiers assembled on the left. At 3:30 in the afternoon the soldiers were ordered to present arms. The nine-inch guns of the American warship in the harbor and a Russian battery on the wharf began to salute each other.

As "peal after peal" went "crashing and re-echoing in the gorges of the surrounding mountains," the Russians started to lower their flag, but it got caught high up in the rope. When the soldier didn't stop pulling, the border was ripped off the Imperial flag and the Czar's standard hung there like it didn't want to come down.

A few Russian soldiers tried to climb up the flagstaff but none of them could get higher than about 45 feet, so finally they looped the rope and hoisted one man up the pole.

The soldier untangled the flag but instead of bringing it down with him, he dropped it. The Imperial Eagle floated down and landed on the upright bayonettes of the Russian troops. The U.S. flag was then raised and with three cheers that embarrassed the Czar's men further, Russian America was no more.

With the dispute over the Panama Canal treaties, some politicians have been comparing the construction of the ditch across Central America with the purchase of Alaska. If they do have anything in common, it is the initial bitter opposition to the treaties. No one wants to "give away" the Panama Canal and no one wanted to buy Alaska.

The Alaska purchase was the brainchild of the Henry Kissinger of 1867, William H. Seward. Secretary of State Seward served under Andrew Johnson, who until recently was the most unpopular Republican president, and he gave Seward a free hand in foreign affairs. During March of 1867 the Russian minister to the U.S., Baron Stoeckl, and Secretary Seward met for secret talks in Washington. With the approval of the president and the rest of the cabinet, Seward agreed that the U.S. would buy Russian American for \$7.2 million.

On the evening of March 29 Seward was playing cards at home with his family when Stoeckl arrived to say the Emperor had cabled his approval of the deal and they could sign the treaty in the morning. As the secretary's son later wrote, "Seward, with a smile of satisfaction at the news, pushed away the whist table saying: 'Why wait till tomorrow, Mr. Stoeckl? Let us make the treaty tonight.'" Before midnight they gathered in the offices of the Department of State, and by 4 a.m. the treaty was signed and ready for ratification by the Senate.

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When news of the treaty became public the next day, no one could believe that Seward was in his right mind.

Harper's Weekly sent an imaginary correspondent to Alaska to investigate Seward's new purchase. "They have ice in abundance all the year round," he reported. "The hamlets, cities and bergs are all ice, and the Governor or Magistrate is called the Ice-berger. As far as the eye could reach the fields were white with the harvest and the ice crop was very promising...The cattle, they lie all day crosslegged on cakes of ice, and I suppose they give ice-cream, on account of their peculiar cool pasturages."

Because the coast was covered with ice it was "very slippery indeed," and he didn't think an enemy "could get a foothold on these shores." All in all, he thought, "I never saw a place that was so much in need of buying as this."