

Nome gold rush of 1899 recounted

If the stampedeers of 1899 had followed Johnny Horton's directions to the gold in the 1960 movie "North to Alaska," they would have found themselves treading the cold, salty waters of Norton Sound. In the song from that movie, Horton places the paydirt "Beneath that old white mountain, just a little southeast of Nome." That puts the "mountain" in the water. But in the real story, that's actually where the

gold was.

As most Alaskans know, most of the gold taken from Nome was found on the beach. Curiously, thousands of stampedeers walked over it on their way to the creeks before they knew it was there.

Most of the credit for the Nome gold rush goes to the trio of John Byrnteson, Eric Lindblom and Jafet Lindeberg, who became known as the "The Three Lucky Swedes," although Lindeberg

was actually a Norwegian.

In 1898 Byrnteson had been a member of an exploratory party prospecting the Seward Peninsula. Weather had driven their ship into the mouth of the Snake River, about 13 miles west of Cape Nome, and they passed the time waiting for the winds to subside by prospecting the creeks within a radius of four or five miles. They found a little color, but enough to excite them. Byrn-

teson, however, was not discouraged and he formed a partnership with the two other Scandinavians. Soon they had staked out 43 claims between them and, by power of attorney, 47 others for friends, relatives and other backers.

When word of this leaked out, a deluge of gold seekers descended on the Nome area, unaware that "The Lucky Swedes" had not yet found

anything approximating a major gold stike. The chaotic scene that unfolded involved rampant claim-jumping and litigation. Adding to the confusion was the myriad of claims filed by power of attorney for individuals who, in many cases, probably didn't even exist. (The lawful resolution of litigation was not aided by District Judge Arthur H. Noyes, who later turned out to be a crook). (Continued on Page Five)

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In those early stages of the rush, the three "Swedes" must have felt anything but lucky as the blame for the whole fiasco began to fall squarely on them. Rumors began to spread that they had already filed on all the productive prospects when, in actuality, little had yet been found by anyone. The Scandinavians' filings were especially irksome to other gold seekers because federal law prohibited aliens from filing claims unless they could show intent to become citizens. Finally, a miners' meeting was held in which the Scandinavians' mining company was declared illegal and all their claims revoked.

This resolution was in itself illegal, and the miners might have taken the law into their own hands had not a few soldiers from St. Michael dissuaded them with the help of fixed bayonets.

But that was only one lucky stroke for the "Lucky Swedes." More importantly, a few days later they were forgotten when someone thought to pan the sand on the beach. It was hard to believe what was found. Within days, gold was discovered for 40 miles along the waterline in either direction from Nome, and this time, the rush was on.

The coast was icebound for the season, but gold seekers began descending on the tent town in the spring of 1899. During that summer alone, more than two million dollars worth of gold was taken from the beaches of the booming city of Nome.



Nome, 1903 (University of Alaska Library)