

A Christmas story for those in jail



Nobody ever writes a story dedicated to people in jail, but I think I'll be different. It must be hard to be behind bars at this time of year, with Christmas going on. So I'd like to tell a few amusing tales of incarceration in early Alaska, one of which reached its zenith on Christmas Eve.

I remember when I was first in Alaska, the Cordova jail used to let prisoners out each day to go down and bail their boats. I thought that was a little amusing till I read about early Circle City, one of the first Yukon River gold rush towns. The jail in that place sported a sign which read:

**"Prisoners must be back in their cells
each evening by 9 o'clock,
or they will be locked out!"**

History records that, at 50 and 60 below zero, there were no known incidents of having to lock an inmate out of the Circle City jail.

The story I want to tell took place down river in Tanana in the early days, after the river froze up and no more mail or supplies came into the country, cabin fever became a major problem.

The winter of 1899, an old prospector known only as Harvy, moved into an abandoned cabin where he found an old printing press. On inquiry, he found that the press had been brought from Sitka in 1892 by Gordon Bettles and a missionary, Rev. J.L. Prevost. They had briefly published the "Yukon Press" at nearby Ft. Adams.

Now the press was in the hands of a prospector with a journalistic bent and lots of time on his hands. Harvy, it turned out, had no patience with such boring pastimes as reporting the news. His newspaper, published now and then, carried nothing but editorials. Mr. Harvy took to task the federal government, the Territorial government, the President, the Governor, the Democrats, the Republicans, and various and sundry representatives of officialdom, all of whom he attacked impartially.

He had special scorn for all the local government officials, such as the U.S. Postmaster, the U.S. Commissioner, the Deputy Marshal, U.S. Recorder, Prosecutor and Jailer. It so happened that all these official duties rested in one man, the pompous trading post manager, called The Pope of Alaska.

Harvy took special delight in calling scorn down on this man, no matter which hat he was wearing at the time. And since Harvy had a lot of time on his hands, his editorials became more and more flaming as the season progressed, and the miners, wintered in with nothing more exciting to read than the labels on tin cans, bought the paper with great delight. Indeed, it was turning out to be one of the more interesting winters, they all chuckled, while the object of the editorials burned with indignation.

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At last, right around Thanksgiving time, Harvey was arrested by the Deputy Marshal on a warrant sworn out by the Commissioner, charging him with "contempt of the United States Court." The Prosecutor found him guilty, and the Jailer clapped him in one of the two cells in the local hoosgow. Naturally, this action by the Commissioner-Deputy Marshal-Prosecutor-Jailer (all the same man), made the Trading Post Manager (still the same man) very happy, because he also had the contract to feed the prisoners. The diet he furnished, sardines and crackers, meant that the prisoners soon got bored with the official fare and began furnishing their own bacon-and-beans. The "Pope of Alaska" was happy.

He began his Christmas Eve celebration in the trading post in a joyous frame of mind, but right in the middle of the festivities, a prospector appeared with an armload of the "Yukon Press", with the ink still wet!

If the editorials before had been hot, now they were blistering. In a column called "From the Inside" the editor called down the wrath of the muses on the head of the local law. Harvey was writing his paper again, passing the article, through the bars to the "boys" on the outside, and the "Yukon Press" was once again in business, and better than before.

The Pope of Alaska, his peaceful Christmas in shambles, and the mirth of the winter-bound population of Tanana,

ringing in his ears, acted at once.

The Commissioner swore out a warrant, and the Deputy Marshal, with a straight face, served it on the printing press, loaded the clumsy piece of machinery on a sled and hauled it into court, where it was tried and found guilty. The printing press was thereupon thrown into a vacant cell next to the editor.

Peace descended on Tanana after that, but the miners still has a week or two of stories to laugh about. That would have lasted until spring, except word of the gold strike at Nome reached the camp, and within days Tanana was all but desert-

ed. Harvey, his sentence served, got out of jail, loaded his sled and headed for the gold fields. The printing press, its sentence served, was thrown on the garbage heap.

And so ended the saga of "Freedom of the Press" in early Alaska.

That same printing press, the oldest press north of Sitka, was subsequently salvaged by the University of Alaska and resides in the museum in Fairbanks.

Harvy, his winter pastime of editorializing forgotten, disappeared down the trail and what happened to him is not recorded in the history books.