

## Industry / Mining

### THREE LUCKY SWEDES and the NOME GOLD RUSH

By Tricia Brown

A trio of miners, the so-called “Three Lucky Swedes,” is credited with the gold discovery that launched the Nome rush. (Only two were indeed Swedish: Erik Lindblom and John Byrnteson. The third man, Jafet Lindeberg, was a Norwegian.) The men found color on Anvil Creek on April 23, 1898. As partners, they staked dozens of claims on what would prove a moderate gold deposit—nothing that could satisfy the thousands of gold-hungry miners that would soon arrive from the Klondike. The stampede had responded as stampede do, dropping their shovels and setting out in an adrenalin-fueled frenzy, hoping to get in on the action sooner than they had last time.

In a June 14, 1899, special edition of the *Klondike Nugget*, readers in the Yukon were warned to wait for further evidence of the gold find before setting off for the Bering Sea coast: “The deductions which the *Nugget* is able to make at this time from the information available are as follows: That gold in some quantity or other has been struck in the Cape Nome country is true, that it was known to the outside last winter, and is old news, appears evident, and that there is a big rush to the new gold fields is beyond question. The information most essential, namely, how rich the field has proven to be, is a sealed book, and the *Nugget* feels impelled again to urge its readers to await confirmation of the reported big discovery before joining the stampede. No Klondiker needs to be told that stampedes as a rule are a ‘fraud and a snare’; neither need he be reminded that Koyukuk and Kotzebue Sound were heralded quite as loudly as the Cape Nome discovery. Though the chase to each place by thousands of gold seekers resulted in discouragement for most and death for many. ‘Look before you leap’ is a maxim as old as the human race, and as true as steel.”

Before long, the population of the camp temporarily called “Anvil City” numbered 10,000. While some found modest success, others were disappointed and angered, believing they’d been tricked. John Hummel, an Idaho man, was among those who’d bet it all and lost—destitute miners who ended up camping on the beach. There, he and others worked the sand. Hummel was well rewarded, taking out \$1,200 in gold in the next three weeks. The news was like throwing gas on a campfire. By the summer of 1900, the population of Nome had exploded to more than 20,000 people, and there was scarcely a square foot of unclaimed sand in 40 miles of beachfront.

Larry Gedney, writing in a 1985 “Alaska Science Forum” article, suggested that Lindblom, Byrnteson, and Lindeberg never intended to mislead, but simply made a discovery then staked numerous claims for themselves as well as relatives and supporters. The appearance of a rush was no different than the real thing to the arriving stampeders who recklessly staked and challenged claims, and sought the legal backing of a crooked Nome District judge named Arthur H. Noyes.

“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,” Gedney wrote. “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.”

Unlike the goldfields of the Klondike or Interior Alaska, which lay at the end of a brutal journey, the miners and merchants who headed for Nome found it easily accessible. Passengers could board comfortable ships in San Francisco and Seattle and land at Nome in less than two weeks. Nor did they have to enter a foreign country or carry all of their own supplies over a great distance. That summer of 1900, Nome’s population grew to

20,000 people and the beach was covered with tents and rockers and sluice boxes. It was, for a time, Alaska's biggest city. It earned another unexpected title as well.

"In the summer of 1900, Nome was the largest general delivery address in the U.S. postal system," reported the National Postal Museum. Letter carrier Fred Lockley wrote about the challenges for frontier postal clerks in his book, *Alaska's First Free Mail Delivery in 1900*, citing that there were so many people named Johnson around Nome, clerks had to use five filing boxes to sort mail for the Johnsons alone.

Missionaries followed the stampede to the Bering Sea coast, too, including the Rev. S. Hall Young, who had served in Southeast Alaska from 1878 to 1888. A decade later, the Home Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. invited him to return to Alaska, and in 1899, he was headed for Nome with the miners. Stopping in St. Michael, he encountered Dr. Sheldon Jackson, Special Agent for Education in Alaska, and a Presbyterian minister himself. He told Young, "Hurry on to Nome; you will find the greatest task of your life in that new camp!"

That fall, Young arrived to find that nearly half the gold seekers had already left. Of the men left in Nome, a third had typhoid fever. It was said that he conducted eleven funerals in one week. Later, Young himself fell ill and nearly died during almost eight weeks of battling the disease. By January of 1900, his strength renewed, Young drove a dog team to Council, some 85 miles northeast of Nome, where he labored for six months planting the seeds for a new church. By June he was back in Nome, where a new influx of miners had arrived, and with them, epidemics of smallpox and German measles.

With disease, devastating fire and severe storms would challenge the people of Nome in its early years, and the gold rush itself was played out by 1903. Twenty years after the population boom of 1900, the numbers had dwindled to 852. Regional gold mining continued in the decades that followed, especially through dredge operations, which eventually ended by 1962. In the 20th century, at least 3.6 million ounces of gold were drawn from the beaches and goldfields of Nome.

## LINKS:

### The Klondike Nugget 1899 reports:

<http://www.arcticwebsite.com/GoldReportedNome.html>

### Alaska History and Cultural Studies, Alaska Humanities Forum:

<http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=66>

### Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Nome:

<http://www.nomealaska.org/museum/>

### Postal Delivery during the Nome Gold Rush:

<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/gold/lockley.html>

## VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about the early days of Nome and its gold rush. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **NOME GOLD RUSH**.

## MORE READING:

Cole, Terrence. *Nome, City of the Golden Beaches*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society, 1984.

Frederick, David C. *Rugged Justice: The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the American West, 1891-1941*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994.

French, L.H. *Nome Nuggets: Some of the Experiences of a Party of Gold Seekers in Northwestern Alaska in 1900*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1983. First published in 1901.

Koschman, A. H. and M. H. Bergendahl. *Principal Gold-Producing Districts of the United States*, US Geological Survey, 1968, Professional Paper 610, p.18.

Littlepage, Dean. *Gold Fever in the North: The Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush Era, A Gold Rush Centennial Exhibition*. Anchorage: Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Municipality of Anchorage, 1997.

Lung, Velma D., Ella Lung Martinsen, Edward Burchall Lung. *Trail to North Star Gold, a Sequel to Black Sand and Gold*. 2nd ed. Portland, Ore.: Binfords & Mort, 1974, 1969.

McLain, Carrie M. *Gold-Rush Nome*. Portland, Ore.: Printed by Graphic Arts Center, 1969.

Sherzer, Edwin B., Clara Miller, Kenneth J. Kutz. *Nome Gold: Two Years of the Last Great Gold Rush in American History, 1900-1902*. Darien, Ct.: Gold Fever Publishing, 1991.

## **VIDEO:**

Letzring, Michael, Miachel Porcaro, Terrence Cole. *Nome*. VHS (ca. 50 min.) Anchorage: KAKM Video, 1998.

## **ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:**

Grinnell, Joseph. *Gold Hunting in Alaska*. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Microform, 96 pages. Elgin, Ill., Chicago, David C. Cook Pub. Co., 1901.

**Eric A. Hegg Photographs and Published Albums, 1898-1905.** University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection includes photos and souvenir albums published by Eric A. Hegg. The collection contains 28 cyanotype and two black-and-white photographs, plus three published souvenir albums. The photographs include images of the Klondike and surrounding areas taken during the gold rush period of 1898 through 1900. The first album depicts life in the Klondike during the 1898 gold rush. The second album deals with the Nome gold rush at the beginning of the twentieth century. The third album contains images of Southeast Alaska, circa 1905.8 through 1900. The souvenir albums contain halftone prints of Hegg photos.

**Lomen Family Papers, 1850-1969.** Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks. The Lomen papers contain an extensive amount of material relating to the reindeer industry. The papers also contain correspondence with public figures such as explorers Stefansson and Amundsen; Gudbrand Lomen's court case calendar, legal opinions and articles he wrote; Alfred Lomen's legislative papers, radio broadcasts and speeches; material relating to an effort to have Ralph Lomen appointed governor of the Territory of Alaska; a large collection of photographs and two reindeer films; and the personal papers of individual members of the Lomen Family.

**Julia W. Weber Collection, 1890-1910.** University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of a transcript of Myrtle Ryan's diary and an album, given to Julia Weber by Dorothy Boche, containing 109 photographs and postcards. The diary (1900-1901) relates Myrtle Ryan's travel to Alaska, her Klondike trip, and her daily life in Nome. The photographs (ca. 1890-1910) depict villages in southeast Alaska, totems, boats, and various people.