

Luther Wilson Guiteau Alaska Gold Rush diary, 1898-1901

Overview of the Collection

Creator	Guiteau, Luther Wilson
Title	Luther Wilson Guiteau Alaska Gold Rush diary
Dates	1898-1901 (inclusive) 1898 1901
Quantity	1 vertical file
Collection Number	6125 (Accession No. 6125-001)
Summary	Gold Rush diary of Luther Wilson Guiteau, who joined the Alaska Gold Rush along the Valdez Trail and the Copper River in 1898
Repository	University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Special Collections University of Washington Libraries Box 352900 Seattle, WA 98195-2900 Telephone: 206-543-1929 Fax: 206-543-1931 speccoll@uw.edu
Access Restrictions	No restrictions on access.
Languages	English

Historical Background

When the Klondike Gold Rush began in 1896, the majority of prospectors arrived to the area by a route that primarily went through Canada. As many prospectors and government officials alike wanted an option that was not under foreign control, United States Army Captain Patrick H. Ray began work on an "All-American" trail that led to the Yukon River Basin. Steamship companies, newspapers, and other local supporters promoted this route, which they claimed was an easy trail from the Prince William Sound at Port Valdez to the Copper River basin in the interior of Alaska, where they promised prospectors would find more gold than in the Canadian Klondike. When prospectors arrived at Valdez, however, they found a route that was considerably steeper, longer, and otherwise more difficult than advertised. Many of the 4000 prospectors who attempted this route died from accidents, exposure, or disease. Scurvy, in particular, killed many during the winter of 1899.

Beginning in the spring of 1898, Captain William R. Abercrombie of the United States Army began to search for a safer route from Valdez. He found the remains of trails that had been used by Alaska Native groups, and incorporated these into the Valdez Trail. In 1899, his group began construction on a shorter 93-mile trail from Valdez to the Tonsina River, which was immediately used by prospectors even as construction continued. This trail was eventually completed at Eagle City in 1901.

Luther "Lute" Wilson Guiteau was one of the prospectors who traveled along the Valdez Trail beginning in 1898. A bank clerk, chef, and writer from Freeport, Illinois, Guiteau was born in 1856 to parents

Luther Wilson Guiteau and Harriet Maria Blood Guiteau. His older half-brother, Charles Guiteau, assassinated President James A. Garfield in 1881.

Lute Guiteau began working at his father's bank, the Second National Bank on Broadway in Freeport, Illinois, where he was a bank clerk by 1880. He eventually decided to join the Klondike Gold Rush, and made his way west with his partners Philo Snow, Bill Becker, and Ed Kingsley. Upon arriving in Seattle, the men heard rumors of gold "nuggets as big as birds' eggs" that were being discovered in the Copper River region of Alaska. Realizing that they were beginning their journey long after gold had first been discovered in the Klondike, Guiteau and his party decided to try their luck at the Copper River and departed Seattle on February 14, 1898.

Upon arriving at Port Valdez, the men first had to transport their supplies, which weighed three tons, over five miles to the foot of the Valdez Glacier. Then, using packs and sleds, they began the long trek up and over the summit of the glacier, which was five thousand feet about sea level. It took almost one month to transport the supplies over fifteen miles, in five separate stages, through freezing cold temperatures and heavy snow. After the glacier, the men then had to travel via lakes and streams—including the dangerous Klutina Rapids—in order to arrive at Copper River. After building two boats using lumber they got from logs, Guiteau and Snow navigated through the rapids, while Kingsley and Becker opted to join other parties that roped down the rapids. It took weeks to rope down, but Guiteau and Snow traversed the twenty-five miles of the rapids in just three hours and ten minutes, although it was exceptionally dangerous.

Philo Snow decided to go home not long after they had traversed the rapids, but Guiteau opted to build a cabin and remain for the winter at Copper River, where he teamed up with Ernie Wheat. During the winter of 1899, Guiteau was one of very few men in the area who did not fall ill with scurvy, and instead helped to treat those who did. Many of the prospectors who did not yet have scurvy, and those who did but were still well enough to travel, gave up their hope for gold and returned to Valdez. Those who were very ill were evacuated by Captain Abercrombie when he returned to the area to build the trail.

Guiteau never found gold, but he nevertheless remained in Alaska until 1901. He had many mining claims, and later worked on the road with Captain Abercrombie. When he left the Copper River, he remained for a time in Valdez, where he worked in the Quartermaster's office. He eventually returned to Freeport, Illinois, where he first worked as a salesman and clerk for the German Insurance Company and then, by 1910, as the manager of the Majestic Movie Theatre for the Edison Kinetoscope Company. He later returned to the insurance business, and was still working at the office of Crum & Foster when he was 84 years old.

Guiteau kept a diary throughout his time in Alaska, which he later edited and expanded before publishing his entries in weekly installments in the *Freeport Journal Standard* in 1928. He also wrote a series of three articles about his gold rush adventures, which appeared in *The Alaska Sportsman* from November 1940 to January 1941. An article about Guiteau was also published in the *Alaskana* journal in September 1972.

Luther Wilson Guiteau died in 1944.

Content Description

Diary of Luther Wilson Guiteau's experiences during the three years he spent prospecting and working in the Copper River Basin and the Valdez Glacier area of Alaska during the Valdez Trail Gold Rush of 1898. The diary entries date from August 14, 1898 to October 4, 1901, and relate to many aspects of work and survival during the Gold Rush. Guiteau wrote descriptions of the meals he ate, of his work building a bridge over the Tonsina River along the All-American trail from Valdez to Eagle City on the

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Yukon, of his work as a commissary agent, and of hiking and sledding to haul supplies through deep snow. Also included are lists of provisions, cash loaned, mining claims, and to-do tasks; an account of a magnitude 7.7 earthquake; a hand-drawn map of a mining claim; and an unidentified map. The earliest diary entries, a map of Prince William Sound, and a 1928 newspaper clipping from his published diary entries describing Christmas 1898 were contained loose in the front pocket of the diary.

Photocopies of clippings of Guiteau's early diary entries, which were expanded and published in 1928 in the *Freeport Journal Standard* in Freeport, Illinois, are also included. These entries primarily describe Guiteau's journey from Seattle to Alaska and his experience hauling thousands of pounds of supplies along the Valdez Glacier Trail to the Copper River Basin from February 14, 1898 to December 25, 1898.

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Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Zephyr Used and Rare Books, 2017-06-27

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Gold miners--Alaska

Gold mines and mining--Alaska

Personal Names :

Guiteau, Luther Wilson 1856-1944--Archives

Geographical Names :

Alaska--Gold discoveries

Form or Genre Terms :

Diaries

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

Personal Papers/Corporate Records (University of Washington)

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