

A Trip to Bering Sea



EARLY in the summer of 1897 a Government survey party, under Will Ward Duffield, Assistant Chief of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, was sent to the Pribilof or Seal Islands.

The object of this expedition was to make a complete topographical and geographical survey of the four islands comprising the Pribilof Group. Of this party H. J. Slaker and C. H. Roesch, of the class of '98, A. I. T., became members. On May 5th the party, eleven in all, boarded the revenue cutter "Bear," and at sun-down were slowly steaming out of Puget Sound.

After coaling up at Departure Bay, Vancouver Island, and stopping a short time at Victoria and Port Townsend, the boat headed for the open Pacific.

The "Bear," the same boat that rescued Greeley in 1883, is a staunch sea-boat admirably fitted for heavy work in the ice fields in the Arctic Ocean. The morning of the 11th found us *slightly* under the weather, due to what is sometimes called mal-de-mer, but in plain English, sea-sickness! For several days we managed to take small quantities of beef-tea or something equally light, if only for a few moments. Even the sailors attempted to sympathize with us.

On the 18th of May the Shumagin Islands were sighted and at noon the boat anchored opposite Unga, an island in the Aleutian Peninsula. At this place we had the opportunity of visiting a large gold mine, one of the few quartz mines that are in operation in Alaska at the present time.

Unalaska and Dutch Harbor were reached on the 20th after passing through a long chain of picturesque islands. Astronomical observations were taken at Unalaska and then on the 22d the "Bear" steamed out into Bering Sea. By 8 o'clock the next morning the Islands were reached, but we were compelled to wait forty-eight hours for a favorable landing.

An immense native skin-boat (bidarra) at last appeared, manned by twelve Aleuts, who proceeded at once to land our instruments and baggage.

The Pribilof Group lies about 200 miles north of the Aleutian Islands and consists of four islands, St. Paul, St. George, Otter and Walrus, the latter two being considerably smaller than the others and uninhabited. They are of volcanic formation, some of the craters, especially the one on Otter Island and several on St. Paul, being very distinct and regular in form.

The Russians under Pribilof made the first settlement on the Islands in 1786, but they did not assume absolute control of the sealing business until 1799. In the Alaskan purchase, 1870, the Islands with the seals were turned over to the United States. Since 1870 the natives have been taken care of and lead a freer life, quite in contrast to their servile life under the Russians. They were originally Aleutians, but having so long intermingled with other races they seemed to have characteristics belonging to all races from the Negro up to the Caucasian.

The inhabitants of the islands are entirely shut off from civilization for seven months of the year. It was no wonder then that we were astonished at their eagerness for news. The two prevailing questions were as to who was elected president and how the prize fight resulted or rather, in the reverse order.

During the five months that were spent on the islands, opportunity was taken to make a study of the fur-seal. Very little is known of the movements of this animal during the winter months but every summer the herd returns to these islands.

The male seals are the first arrivals in the spring and an interesting sight it is to see the sleek-looking animals struggle for their favorite positions among the rocks. While on the rookeries or breeding grounds the male seal never leaves his position for food during the entire season of three or four months. The female (cow) seal begins to arrive in June and is much smaller and more graceful.

After the birth of the pups, the cows go out to sea for food. It is while on these trips after food that so many cows are killed by the pelagic sealers. In the meanwhile the poor