

# Northward ho!

The cutter *Bear* moved with confidence among the ice floes of the Arctic, for she was the harbinger of spring to the frozen north

BY DR. G. A. STANSFIELD

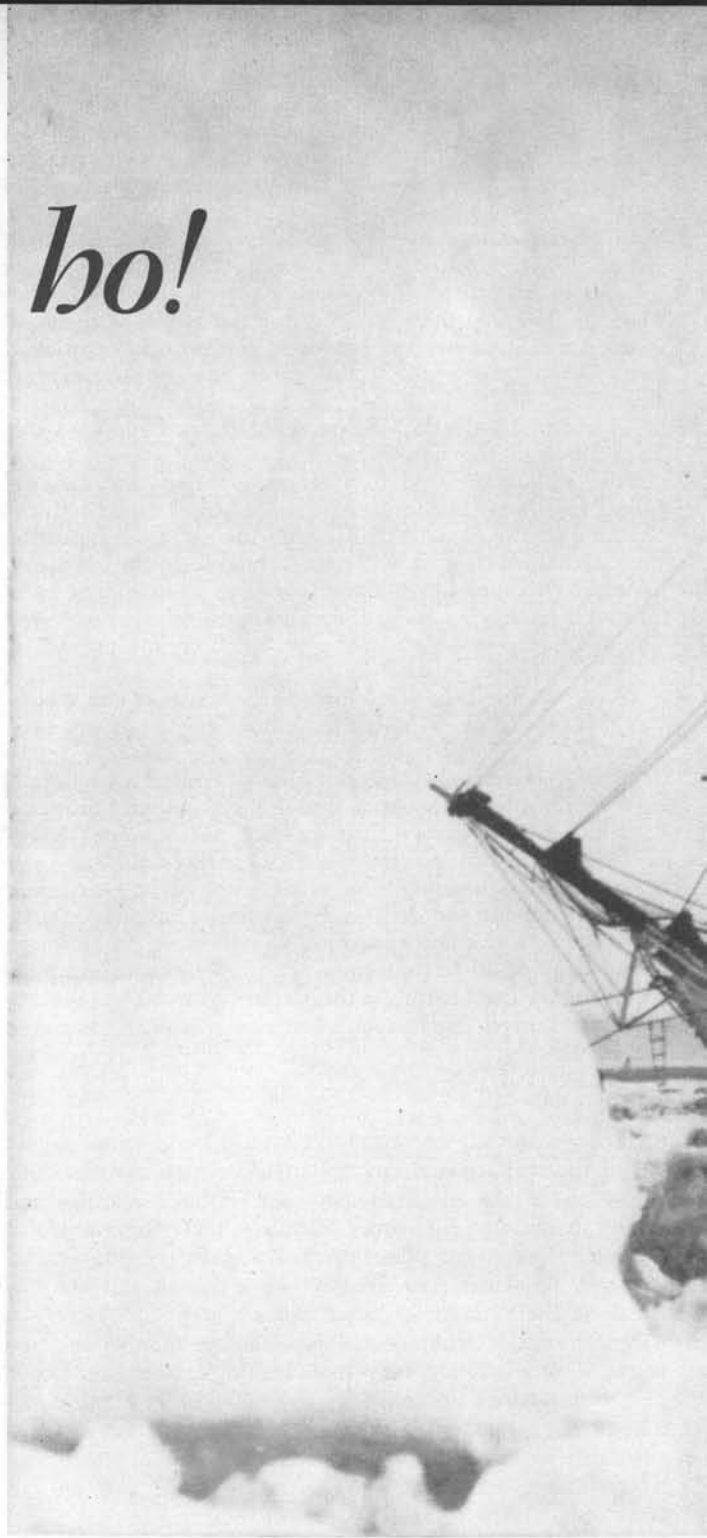
as told to Gordon R. Newell

IT WAS MORE than half a century ago, in the spring of 1899, that the full-rigged ship *King Arthur*, out of Glasgow, made her landfall at Cape Flattery. A salt-streaked, rusty old three-master she was as she took the Puget Sound tugboat's hawser, wallowing there in the thin watery sunlight of a northwest April morning. She had been almost seven months—208 days—on the outward voyage. The Cape Horn rollers had pressed her down and clawed at her for weeks. More lonely weeks beating up through the doldrums had festooned her iron hull with trailing wreaths of weed and crusted barnacles.

I was third mate of the *King Arthur*; it was my first taste of the quarterdeck after seven years of sailing the seas as foremast hand, bosun and apprentice. My loyalty should have been with the battered old square-rigger, but the tug was drawing us away to a mooring in a port that was no ordinary port. In those last months of the old century, Seattle was a roaring, seething madhouse. As our rusty anchor chains rumbled through the hawse pipes into Elliott Bay, we saw the very climax of the fabulous Alaska Gold Rush.

Below Seattle's seven hills the waterfront streets were lined with saloons and Alaska outfitters, and few of them closed their doors by day or night. People of all races and types crowded the stores and the streets. Swedes in red sweaters and corduroy breeches, blue-eyed Danes, pig-tailed Chinese, Irish and Scots, bank clerks, runaway sailors, shoeblacks and gaudy women—all jostled and rubbed elbows as they outfitted for the magic North. The piers were lined with steamers. Everything that would float was pressed into service to take the treasure seekers to El Dorado. Out in the harbor the hoarse voice of an Alaska liner echoed even as waterfront newsboys screamed that she was bringing in "two million dollars in raw gold!"

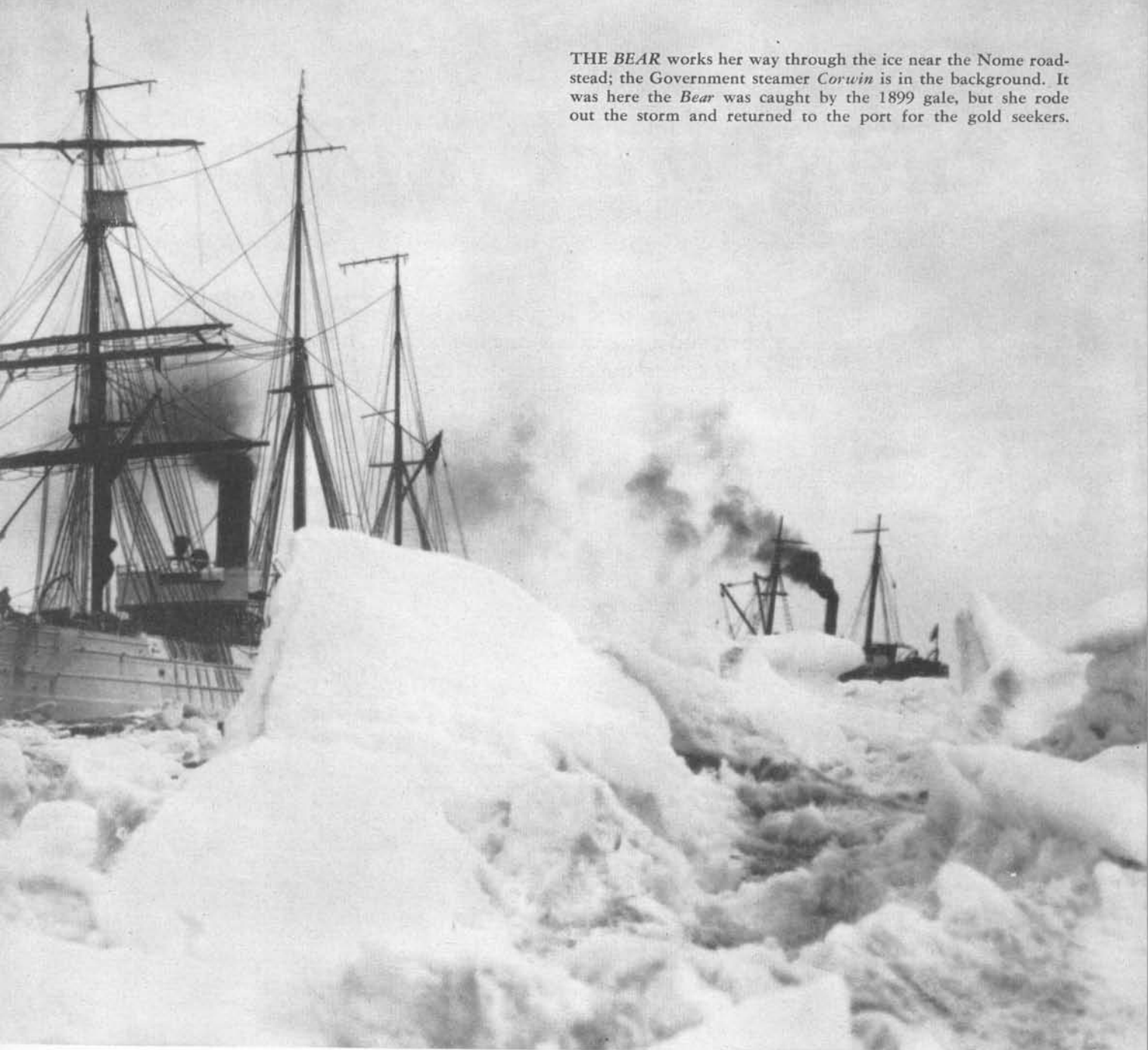
Yes, there was the madness and the magic of vast, quick riches in the very breath of Seattle then, and seven months is a long time for a lad to fight the sea and live on the flinty bread and sour salt horse of a Scottish windship. Two more heads were turned by the dream of Alaskan gold that night. I slipped overboard with my buddy and we swam in the darkness to an anchored scow. A rowboat picked us up and set us ashore on Seattle's garish, roaring waterfront. We had left more than a half year's pay behind us when we left our ship. Our total assets were a dollar and a half and the sodden clothes upon our backs. We were in Seattle, but it was only the gateway



to the land of quick riches. How were we to get there?

Then it was that we heard of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Bear*, the storied patrol ship of the northern seas. Even then she was famous on the western coast of America, but that she was outfitting for a cruise to Alaska and needed seamen was all that we knew of her, or cared. She was lying across the bay at the Bremerton Navy Yard, we were told. We had the price of a meal and tickets on the steamboat *Mary F. Perley*, so the next morning found us saluting the officer of the deck on board the cutter *Bear*. A few minutes later we were signed on as ordinary seamen in the United States Revenue Cutter Service.

Our new ship was no beauty to eyes used to the slim, tall grace of the Cape Horn windships. The cutter *Bear* was a barkentine-rigged wooden steamer. She was 185 feet long with a 31-foot beam, and her heavy, angular hull



THE BEAR works her way through the ice near the Nome roadstead; the Government steamer *Corwin* is in the background. It was here the *Bear* was caught by the 1899 gale, but she rode out the storm and returned to the port for the gold seekers.

All photos: Williamson's Marine Photo Shop.

had more of sturdy power than fleet beauty about it. Built at Dundee, Scotland, in 1874, she spent the first decade of her life as an Arctic whaler. Then, in 1884, she was purchased by the U. S. Government to search for the lost Greely Arctic Expedition. She found and brought back the seven survivors of the original party of 35.

The Navy operated the *Bear* on that Arctic mission, but in 1885 she was transferred to the Coast Guard, or Revenue Cutter Service as it was then called. She had come to the West Coast the following year, and for a dozen years before we joined her had been bringing spring to the far North. She was always the first ship into the Bering Sea as the winter ice melted away. She brought civilization with her — news of the outside world, law and order, food for the starving, and medicine or the chaplain's prayers for the dying. After the *Bear* came the freighters

and the passenger liners, but she was always the first.

Northwesterners had already learned to love and to admire the sturdy, brave old cutter. To them she was much more than just a ship; to Jimmy and me, fresh off the *King Arthur*, she was, at first, something less than a ship. She was simply refuge from the cold and hunger and fatigue of a Glasgow square-rigger and the Cape Horn road. Once with her we felt safe and somehow secure. We found out later that the *Bear* had that effect on people.

**B**UT our sense of security didn't last long. Black visions of a British prison hulk were haunting us the very next morning. The newly uniformed recruits were assembled on the quarterdeck for instruction in the manual of arms. Jimmy and I had belonged to the British Naval Reserve. The rifle drill was al- (Continued on page 53)

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most instinctive with us, but it was the British drill. As the commands were given by the lieutenant in charge, our snapped responses were in marked contrast to the ragged efforts of the other recruits. There was also considerable contrast between our movements and those outlined in the American drill regulations.

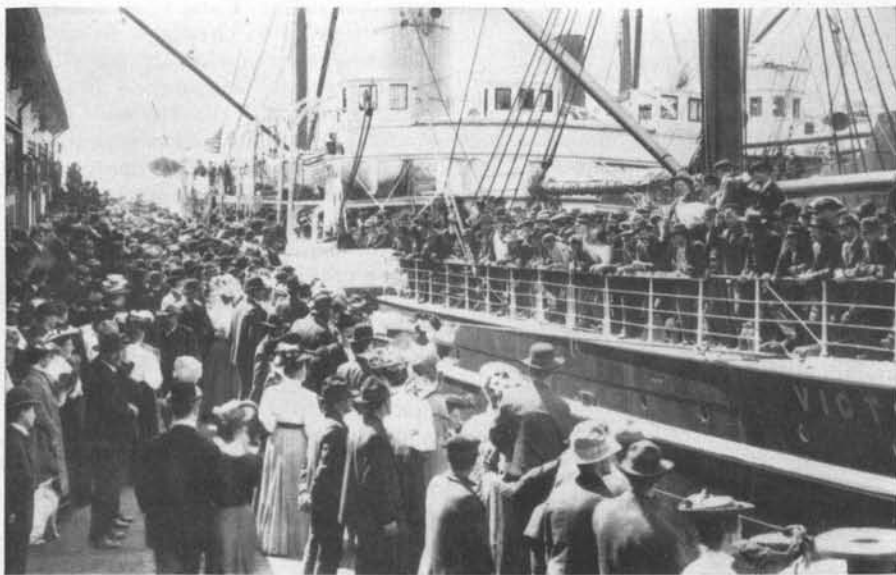
"Nos. 15 and 22 step two paces to the rear!" the lieutenant snapped. Jimmy was 15; I was 22. Then, dismissing the rest of the company, he turned to us with a grin. "Where did you boys train?"

We knew then the jig was up, and it was no grinning matter for us. I could see myself aboard a British prison ship lifting 32-pound shot, stiff-kneed, and stepping two paces, putting it down, picking up another — three years at hard labor as a deserter. The officer was pressing up now. "Both you boys are out of the British Navy, aren't you?" It was a statement rather than a question, and Jimmy knew we were caught. He mumbled "Yes sir" like a murderer confessing his crime. I just nodded my head, too scared to even mumble. When he asked us our ratings I found strength enough to answer, "Seaman gunner," while Jimmy told him, "First shellman and loader." Then we stood at rigid attention, waiting for the lieutenant to call the master at arms.

But he was grinning wider than ever, much like a man who has just found a couple of matched pearls in his oyster stew. "You can go forward now," he said, "and don't worry too much about it." Forward we went. Next morning I found myself posted as a gun captain. Jimmy was rated seaman gunner. It was not until much later, however, that we discovered the lieutenant was tickled pink to find a couple of trained British naval ratings among his band of raw recruits, and would no more have sent us back than we would have gone voluntarily.

In a day or two we shifted to Seattle to load the rest of our stores. Early the following morning we started north. As we steamed past the big sea-stained square-rigger that had been my home for so many weary months, strange emotions stirred within me. That rust-streaked gray hull with the row of painted ports was the last link with home, a link that I had severed. Now I was serving under the flag of my adopted country. I was getting used to better food, better pay and better accommodations than I had ever known before. Most of all, I was feeling an equality with my fellow men such as I had never known.

Finally I lost sight of the *King Arthur*; her tall masts were hidden behind the forested bulk of West Point. I had put my past behind me, and the course was north. North to the land of mystery and hidden riches, of shining mountains and spectral glaciers, of volcanoes, Eskimos, rushing rivers and motley hordes of treasure seekers. North past Bella Bella, with its totems and its thunderbirds, past Metlakatla with its sprawling



THE VICTORIA carried gold seekers to Alaska in 1899, and still sails there today. Though ships left Seattle's waterfront daily, the crowds on shore never diminished.

salmon cannery, its strange smells and shrilly chattering Chinese workers. North under a warm spring sun that made rainbows of the waterfalls which fell sheer from mountain peaks to salt water, and north under a full moon that shone in weird splendor upon the pallid, titanic face of Muir Glacier.

Then west we went to the Aleutians, to Unalaska and Dutch Harbor. At Dutch Harbor our skipper, Captain Tuttle, proved that he was a worthy commander for the old ship that was never daunted by the Arctic ice. He slipped on the ice-coated brass that covered the steam launch's gunwale and hurtled feet first into the bay. When he came back up among the ice floes he emitted a geyser of chill salt water and shouted, "Save my hat! It cost me 13 dollars!" But never a word about the frigid water.

A few nights later a fierce gale swept the bay at Dutch Harbor. At two in the morning the signal quartermaster reported that a fishing schooner had gone on the rocks at the point. All hands were at once called on deck and a volunteer boat's crew was picked to save the crew of the stranded schooner. The cutter was rolling and pitching at her mooring; icy wind and spray swept the decks. I had learned never to volunteer for anything and I felt almost cozy on that frozen deck as I watched my more heroic shipmates launch their boat and fight madly to keep it from being dashed to pieces against the *Bear's* swooping side. They made it somehow, and two hours later they were back. They brought no rescued seamen with them, nor did they seem happy about their exploit.

After an hour's hard rowing they had sighted the schooner's lights, but repeated hails brought no response from her decks. Finally, after a great deal of yelling through frostbitten hands, a calm and comfortable-looking old gentleman peered over the schooner's taffrail. He was in his stocking feet and had a pipe upside down in his mouth. The lieutenant in the boat was annoyed at this lack of concern. "Quick, man!" he shouted. "We've come to take off your crew before you break up!"

The old salt spat expertly over the rail and rejoined, "Take it easy, Sonny. I'm all right. Just stuck in the mud. I'll be off on the next tide. G'wan home."

Well, love's labor was lost and there was nothing for it but to head back to the cutter — another hard hour's pull through a tearing gale. When we got them aboard, the main brace was spliced (grog was served out to them), and this time I broke my rule. I was a volunteer for the ceremony. Next morning the boat's crew sadly lined

the rail to watch the troublesome fishing schooner sail on the flood tide.

LEAVING Dutch Harbor, the *Bear* patrolled the seal herds for a few days. There were no signs of poachers, so we soon headed north again, toward St. Lawrence Island. There we parted company with a Presbyterian minister who had come with us to take charge of the mission station on the island. His place was taken by a Captain Schroeder, late of the sealing schooner *Edna Watts*. She had been wrecked on the ice floes in an autumn storm the previous year; the crew had escaped to the ice. Captain Schroeder was sure he could make out the loom of land in the darkness and he was sure it was St. Lawrence Island. But the mate was equally certain that land lay in the opposite direction. The crew sided with the mate, so the captain started off by himself. He reached the island where the Indians found him, days later, with both feet frozen. He had been living for some time on the carcass of a dead walrus. They took him to the mission, where he was cared for until the arrival of the *Bear*. We left him at the hospital in Dutch Harbor on the return voyage and there the remnants of his frozen feet were amputated. The mate and crew, who went in the wrong direction, were never seen again.

By this time we were sighting many bergs; the bosun let it be known that we would be in the Arctic ice pack before night. The officers were already looking at it from the flying bridge. At this point I stuck my head out through a port to look for the ice. As I was unable to see it, I twisted my head and looked up to see which way the officers in the bridge wing were looking. At that moment the ship's doctor, a confirmed tobacco chewer, let fly with a large quid. It caught me squarely in the eye. The doctor, who was a kindly man, rushed down to the 'tween decks where I was dancing in anguish and led me to the sick bay. There he washed out my eye and gave me a large glass of whiskey. I downed it and he anxiously inquired, "How do you feel now, boy?" When I told him I would let him spit in my other eye if he would give me another drink as stiff as the first one, he ran me out of the sick bay. Thus the most painful injury of my Coast Guard service ushered in my first experience with the legendary northern ice pack.

Skirting the ice, the *Bear* plugged on toward Little Diomedé Island, her compound engine and two-bladed propeller driving her at a steady nine knots. Under sail alone, with a brisk wind, she was capable of eight knots. We arrived at Diomedé none too soon;

most of the Eskimos were sick, many of them dying or already dead of the white man's twin gifts to primitive people — tuberculosis and syphilis. At one village we found only dead bodies being gnawed by the starving, wolf-like native dogs. We loaded the entire surviving population of the island, with dogs and possessions, aboard the cutter. Then we burned the villages to the ground, buried the dead and put chloride of lime over everything.

It was a nasty job, but things aboard the *Bear* were scarcely more pleasant. Sick Eskimos, crawling with vermin, were everywhere, leaving grease spots wherever they stepped on our lovely white oak decks. The remaining space was taken up by sacks of very ripe whale and walrus blubber, ivory, bladders of seal oil, Kayaks, oomiaks, dogs and the by-products of dogs. It was a bloody mess.

To add to the almost unbelievable confusion, some misguided individual decided upon a midnight fire drill. From a deathly stillness broken only by the throb of the engines and the gentle lapping of the bow wave came the blaring of the bugle, the shrilling of bosun's pipes, the shouting of orders. Men were running about in their underwear unreeling hoses. Steam pumps were clanking; hand pumps thumping; lifeboat crews rushing to their stations; Eskimo dogs barking. It was pandemonium. The poor natives thought the bottom had fallen out of the ship. They grabbed their kayaks and oomiaks, threw them overboard and jumped in after them. We had to pipe down, lower boats and spend the rest of the night picking up scared Eskimos. We didn't lose a man, but there was much speculation in the crew's quarters as to just who had called that fire drill!

We thankfully disembarked our native passengers on the mainland, where arrangements were made for them to be cared for at Teller. Then we sailed to Nome, where for 30 miles the beach was a seething mass of humanity washing gold from the red sands. A terrible gale caught us there, but the staunch old *Bear* clawed out of the open roadstead to ride out the storm in the lee of Sledge Island. Two days later we steamed back to Nome, or what was left of it. The flimsy tent city had literally been blown apart. The beach was strewn with wreckage now, instead of gold seekers. It was then that I saw the steamers *Roanoke* and *Centennial* take aboard 1300 destitute people to be dumped penniless on the Seattle docks.

Nome was a depressing place and I was glad when we left. My urge to become an Arctic treasure seeker had left me long ago. I was glad to stay

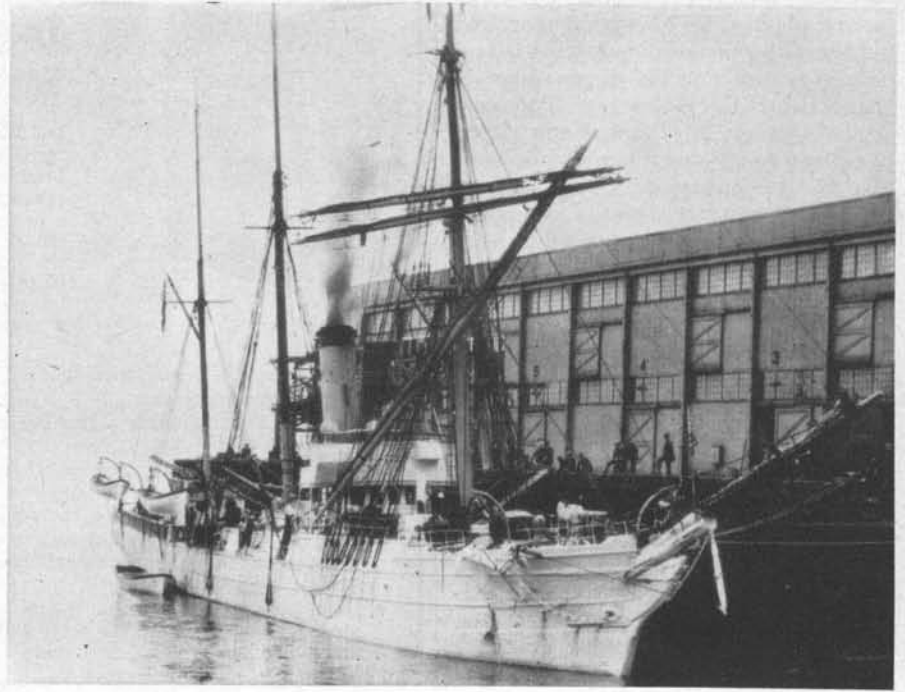
with the stolid, dependable old *Bear* as she plodded on about her manifold duties. There were few inhabited places in the Far North we missed: Cape Prince of Wales and Kotzebue Sound, thence to Point Hope, Cape Lisburne and Point Barrow, "the corner of the continent," where we put out emergency stores on the ice for the Eskimos. There I was startled to hear an old Scottish bagpipe tune being whistled by a swarthy, fur-clad figure among a group of Barrow Eskimos. I am a Scot and a piper myself, so this aroused my curiosity. I wasn't at all sure the man could understand English, but I had to ask him where he had learned that tune.

"In Dundee, where I was born and raised," he answered in a broad Scots burr. He was no Eskimo, but a survivor of the wrecked whaler *Grampus*. He had lived with the natives for five years and liked it, and had a native wife who lived only to see to his comfort. He was an honored member of a community where all things were shared equally, and he had no desire to return to "civilization" with us.

WHEN the *Bear* had completed her yearly round of benign duties as floating hospital, police station, church and supply depot, she headed north again for surveying and observation work along the solid ice pack. By the time we had penetrated the ice pack to 74° 10' it was October; the ice was thickening and it was time to turn south again. It was none too soon. At Point Hope we picked up 30 destitute miners whose only food was a sack of moldy flour for which they had paid \$40. South of Point Hope we came to an area where the ice pack was frozen solid. There was no way around.

Now it was up to the ice pilot. From his station in the crow's nest he sought out the thinnest places in the frozen barrier, calling his directions to the helmsman below. The value of the cutter's two-bladed "ice propeller" now became apparent. At the ice pilot's orders the stout old ship would crash into the ice at full speed; the engines were halted at the moment of impact. The two propeller blades would stop in a vertical position, so there was no danger of their being caught or broken by the ice. During this performance the ice pilot earned his pay, for the shock of impact whipped him about in the lofty crow's nest until his teeth rattled.

At last a time came when even the cutter's massive ice bow with its iron-wood sheathing could not crack the fast thickening ice pack. The ship was frozen in, the awful squeeze of the ice making the massive ribs bang like gun blasts in the still air. It was a



THE BEAR was always the first ship into the Bering Sea when the winter ice melted. Here she takes on supplies at Seattle preparatory to departure on her spring cruise.

nerve-wracking period, but the *Bear* was a ship not easily defeated. Giant powder was manhandled out on the ice ahead of her and we literally blasted a way out. It took 18 days of constant labor, but clear water was reached at last. When the ship floated free the main brace was spliced for fair; everyone from the captain to jimmy ducks and the half-starved miners enjoyed the festivities.

There were other routine duties after that. At St. Michael, near the mouth of the Yukon, we helped the crew of the river cutter *Nunivak* put their ship in winter quarters on ways high above the water. It was hard work, but it had its compensations, for the *Nunivak's* bosun served out grog every two hours to ward off the chill and speed the work. Since he didn't know me I was often able to go through the grog line two or three times at a call, and so felt little pain.

When the job was finished it was time to head back to the States. We staged a big celebration at the barracks on the night before sailing and I distinguished myself by winning both the pie-eating and whiskey-drinking contests. Later, navigating shakily along the narrow causeway that spanned the tundra between barracks and dock, I was frightened out of what few wits were left to me. A huge white beast reared up across my bows and bawled horribly in my face. I had heard about polar bears. This, it turned out, was only a white cow belonging to the barracks, and she was

almost as frightened as I. But I didn't learn that until later and then it didn't help much.

The next day we left for home. Among our passengers were several prisoners going outside for trial, a lunatic, several invalids, our 30 destitute miners, and two prostitutes who had been arrested for smuggling. Our fresh supplies were almost gone and we were subsisting on "substitutes" — mostly dehydrated vegetables and dried fruit. This crowded state of affairs and limited cuisine finally caused our honest bosun to blow his top. He voiced his sentiments with the bellowed disgust of a veteran who is watching things going to the dogs. "What's the service coming to?" he roared. "Here we are, coming down loaded with substitutes, destitutes and prostitutes!"

But it was all in the day's work for the revenue cutter *Bear*. She carried it on for almost 30 years after Jimmy and I left her. After that she got new diesel engines to take Admiral Byrd to the Antarctic. The last I heard of her she was taking refugees to Palestine,\* still helping suffering humanity with slow, patient strength, still undefeated. The *Bear* is a part of America. School children should learn of the ship that brought spring to lonely, sick and hungry people, just as they learn of famous battleships. I am proud to have served with the *Bear*. ⚓

\*The *Bear* was sold to the Shaw Steamship Company of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1947. She was renamed *Arctic Bear* and was intended for the North Atlantic sealing fleet, but never went into that service. She is now laid up at Halifax. — Ed.