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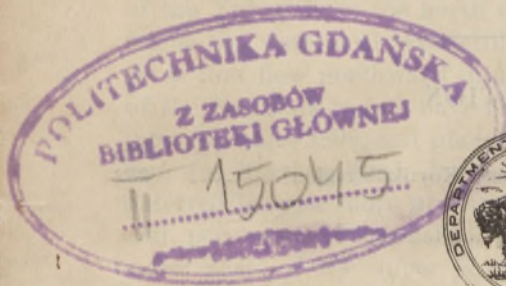
RECONNAISSANCE OF THE NORTHERN KOYUKUK VALLEY, ALASKA

BY

ROBERT MARSHALL



Mineral resources of Alaska, 1931
(Pages 247-256)



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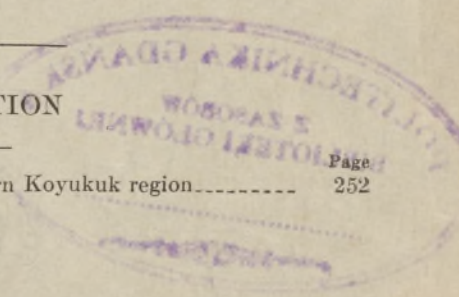
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CONTENTS

Foreword, by Philip S. Smith.....	Page 247
Introduction.....	247
Drainage.....	250
Mountains.....	252
Nomenclature.....	253
Population and settlement.....	254

ILLUSTRATION

PLATE 6. Sketch map of drainage in northern Koyukuk region.....	Page 252
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RECONNAISSANCE OF THE NORTHERN KOYUKUK VALLEY

By ROBERT MARSHALL

FOREWORD

By PHILIP S. SMITH

In the course of the 35 years in which the United States Geological Survey has been conducting investigations of the mineral resources of Alaska, about one half of the Territory has been surveyed on at least exploratory standards. There are, however, many large tracts in which even the major features have not been determined with any degree of definiteness. One of these little-known tracts includes part of the headwater region of the Koyukuk River, the large tributary of the Yukon from the north that rises in the Brooks Range, which forms the watershed separating the southward-flowing rivers from those that flow northward into the Arctic Ocean. Surveys of parts of the Koyukuk region have been made by the Geological Survey at intervals since 1898, and plans have constantly been under consideration for further work in the unmapped portions but have been deferred because more pressing needs called for the available funds and personnel. Fortunately, however, within the last few years many parts of the upper Koyukuk region have been traversed by Robert Marshall, who has made many observations regarding the physical features of this district and has coordinated them with the facts hitherto available. As a result Mr. Marshall has prepared a sketch map showing all the principal streams of the region, has determined from local sources the names of many of the features, and has otherwise contributed to the knowledge of the geography of the region. His record therefore supplements that already published and partly fills the need that has long been felt for more adequate and reliable information about the remote and less accessible parts, and its publication by the Geological Survey should be of service to all those interested in the region. A more comprehensive account of his travels and work in the Koyukuk region is in preparation by Mr. Marshall for private publication.



INTRODUCTION

The Koyukuk River, which is one of the largest tributaries of the Yukon, has its headwaters in the Brooks Range, whose crest throughout much of its extent is slightly north of the 68th parallel of latitude. Southward from this crest to the Arctic Circle, the country tributary to the Koyukuk embraces an area averaging about 110 miles north and south and about 140 miles east and west.

It is doubtful whether any of the famous scenic areas in the United States contain more magnificent scenery than that at the head of the different Arctic tributaries of the Koyukuk River. To the writer the great U-shaped valleys at the head of Ernie Creek, the North Fork, and Clear River are not a whit less stupendous than those of the famous Yosemite, and the grandeur of the deep gorge of the Kenunga Valley is not excelled by any of the magnificent valleys of Glacier National Park. Grizzly Creek flows through a canyon 2 miles across at the top, with walls about 3,500 feet high on the north side and 2,500 feet on the south. Blackface Mountain, at the foot of the Valley of Precipices, has a sheer cliff of about 3,000 feet, resembling Gibraltar in appearance but more than twice as high. The Arrigetch Peaks of the Alatna River are a series of unscalable needle peaks such as probably cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world. The Alatna and John Rivers flow for miles through high, rocky mountains which rise almost from the margins of the streams. On Hunts Fork of the John River is Loon Lake, from the very shore of which a high, rocky mountain juts thousands of feet in the air, with a great waterfall plunging in several leaps for a drop of at least 2,000 feet.

All through this country in the clear days of winter the pure-white snow, the dark-green spruce trees, and the deep-blue sky mingle in an infinite variety of patterns. In summer the snow is gone, except on the north face of the higher mountains, but in its stead are the black and brown and gray and yellow rocks and the different colors of the varied vegetation, including the wild flowers, which blossom from early May until late August in gorgeous profusion.

During the summers of 1929, 1930, and 1931 and the winter of 1930-31 the writer was in this region engaged in the study of tree growth at its northern limit. In view of the fact that only part of this country had been mapped, it was obviously desirable to make sketch maps of such of the unsurveyed country as was traversed. At first these observations were merely compass bearings taken along the main valleys that were followed, and distances were estimated by the length of time required to traverse them. Later, however, a crude system of compass triangulation was established from sev-

eral mountain peaks. The observations thus made, combined with the instrumental surveys executed by the United States Geological Survey, furnished the basis for a sketch map covering the greater part of the Koyukuk River drainage basin north of the Arctic Circle (pl. 6).

In order, however, not to leave any considerable blank spaces in this area, it was decided to utilize information which the writer had been able to obtain from local prospectors and trappers in the Koyukuk region. Particular effort was made in using this information to accept only such as was furnished by men who had experience and special competence.

From the foregoing statements it is obvious that different parts of the map have different degrees of accuracy. The portions mapped by instrumental surveys of the United States Geological Survey are unquestionably the most nearly correct. The writer's own surveys probably rank second in accuracy. The least precise parts are doubtless those sketched by hunters and prospectors. In order that the user of this map may know the areas covered by the sketches of different kinds the following lists give the sources of the material used.

The United States Geological Survey is the source of the mapping of the main stream and the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River, the Alatna River, the John River, the Dietrich River as far north as latitude 68° , the entire valley of the Bettles River, and all that has been done in the vicinity of the South Fork. It also mapped the tributaries of the Alatna River from the west, Rockybottom Creek, Unakserak Creek, and the tributaries from the east north of latitude $67^{\circ}40'$.

The writer is responsible for the information on which the names and general positions of most of the individual mountain peaks are based and for the sketching of the courses of the Kutuk River and its tributaries; Hunts Fork and its tributaries, except Kevuk Creek; tributaries of the John River, except Timber, Sixtymile, Crevice, Publituk, and Ekokpuk Creeks; the Wild River and all its tributaries above the mouth of Flat Creek; the tributaries of the main Koyukuk River between the Wild River and the North Fork, except Mud Creek; the valley of the North Fork north of the mouth of Glacier River, except Swede Creek, the Tinayguk River north of Wolf Creek, and Amawk Creek; the tributaries of the Middle Fork south of the mouth of the Hammond River, except Twelvemile, Slate, Emma, and Marion Creeks; the Hammond River and its tributaries; and the Dietrich River north of latitude 68° .

Information and sketches supplied by Charlie Suckik, an Eskimo who has a splendid topographic sense, served as the basis for mapping the Nahtuk River; the Iniakuk River and tributaries; the

Sozhekla (Henshaw) River; the tributary streams entering the main Koyukuk from the north between the Sozhekla and John Rivers; the Malamute River; Sixtymile Creek; the Wolverine River; Kevuk Creek; and Ekokpuk Creek.

The mapping of the following sections was based in the main on information supplied by Ernie Johnson, a prospector who has accompanied the writer on many of his trips; Pegeeluk Creek; Timber Creek; Publituk Creek; the Allen River and its tributaries; the tributaries of the Wild River, except those north of Flat Creek; Mud Creek; the North Fork and its tributaries south of the mouth of Glacier Creek; the Tinayguk River and tributaries north of Wolf Creek; and Amawk Creek.

Many of the smaller side streams of the Middle Fork north of the Hammond River (except Gold Creek) and of the Dietrich River are based on sketches made by Jesse Allen and Kenneth Harvey. Information regarding Swede, Slate, Emma, and Marion Creeks was supplied by Jesse Allen.

Additional information regarding certain of the other features shown on plate 6 is based on sketches by Selawik Sam, James Murphy, George Huey, Victor Neck, and Al West.

In addition to the sketching of these various streams, many of the residents of the district have rendered valuable assistance in many other ways. Especial mention should be given to Ernie Johnson, Al Retzlaf, Kenneth Harvey, Jesse Allen, and Albert Ness, who at different times accompanied the writer during the 157 days he spent traveling over the country. These men are not only able field men but also companions with whom it was a great joy to live in the intimacy of the trail.

DRAINAGE

The general outline of the streams that form the headwater portions of the Koyukuk River system is apparent from the accompanying map.

The following table shows the approximate area of the basins of the seven larger branches of that portion of the Koyukuk River lying north of the Arctic Circle and of the principal subsidiary streams tributary to them:

Drainage area, in square miles, of principal tributaries of the Koyukuk River north of the Arctic Circle

Alatna River.....	3,300
Iniakuk River.....	750
Kutuk River.....	290
Alatna River north of Kutuk.....	500

South Fork.....	3,100
Fish Creek.....	¹ 460
Jim River.....	¹ 480
Mosquito Fork.....	¹ 200
South Fork north of Mosquito Fork.....	¹ 440
John River.....	2,700
Malamute River.....	260
Allen River.....	310
Wolverine River.....	280
Hunts Fork.....	580
John River north of Hunts Fork.....	550
North Fork.....	2,000
Glacier River.....	400
Tinayguk River.....	290
Clear River.....	250
North Fork north of Clear River.....	590
Middle Fork.....	1,800
Hammond River.....	360
Bettles River.....	440
Dietrich River.....	380
Wild River.....	650
Sozhekla (Henshaw) River.....	550
Tributaries flowing directly into main Koyukuk River.....	900
	<hr/>
	15,000

The entire drainage basin of the Koyukuk River north of the Arctic Circle is about a quarter again as large as all of Belgium and about equal in area to Massachusetts and New Jersey combined.

In the following table are listed minor streams in this region tributary to the Koyukuk which have drainage areas of 100 square miles or more.

Drainage area, in square miles, of principal minor tributaries of the Koyukuk River north of the Arctic Circle

Kevuk Creek.....	230	Nahtuk River.....	120
Ernie Creek.....	220	Ekokpuk Creek.....	120
Agak Creek.....	180	Jane Creek.....	120
Publituk Creek.....	170	Timber Creek.....	110
Unakserak Creek.....	150	Flat Creek.....	110
Michigan Creek.....	140	Helpmejack Creek.....	110
Mettenpherg Creek.....	140	Tobuk Creek.....	100
Pingaluk River.....	140	Slate Creek.....	100
Sixtymile Creek.....	130		

No consistent scheme of using the terms "river" and "creek" so as to designate the approximate size of the respective areas is practicable. In a general way the major rivers are virtually unfordable except at times of unusually low water. The subsidiary rivers can be forded at frequent intervals during normal stages, but they are impassable at high water. The large creeks can be forded in normal

¹ Approximate.

high water, but in times of extreme flood they too cannot be crossed, and under exceptional conditions even some of the smaller creeks cannot be forded.

No definite statements can be made about the possibilities of boating on the various streams in the Koyukuk drainage basin, as they depend on three variables—the stage of the water, the size of the boat, and the amount of effort one cares to expend in dragging his boat over the rocks. To speak very generally and base the statement on the writer's concept of that imaginary stage called normal water, that variable the draft of a normal poling boat, and that indefinite condition of not too much dragging, the major rivers of the northern Koyukuk drainage basin are navigable about as follows: The Alatna River to Unakserak Creek, the South Fork to the Mosquito Fork, the John River to Publituk Creek, the Wild River to Wild Lake, the North Fork to Ernie Creek, and the Middle Fork to Bettles River.

MOUNTAINS

The maximum height of the mountain peaks in the range that forms the northern boundary of the Koyukuk River Valley has been variously estimated by casual travelers all the way up to 16,000 feet. However, all reliable observations made from many different mountains scattered throughout this region, checked by such measurements as have been made by vertical-angle readings and by the use of the hypsometer and barometer, are convincing that this extreme estimate is many thousand feet over the true height of the loftiest peaks.

The peak that seems to tower distinctly above any other mountain in the region stands between the head of the North Fork and the valley of the Clear River, in approximately latitude 68° , longitude 151° , and was named by the writer Mount Doonerak from the Eskimo word that means spirit, or, as they would translate it, devil. An estimate of the elevation of this peak, based on observations made by the writer with barometer and hypsometer, indicated that it was about 10,100 feet high. Noel Wien, a well-known Alaskan aviator who flew to Point Barrow shortly after these observations were made, passed this mountain at an altitude of 10,000 feet and estimated that its summit rose about 500 feet above that elevation. In 1931 Joe Crosson, another well-known Alaskan aviator, while flying at an elevation of 9,000 feet, also estimated that the peak was about 500 feet above him. Thus three different estimates of the height of this mountain—9,500, 10,100, and 10,500 feet—indicate that its actual elevation is probably not very far from 10,000 feet.

The United States Geological Survey determined by plane-table surveys and vertical-angle measurements that the highest peak at



Compiled principally from U.S. Geological Survey maps and traverses and records of Robert Marshall, 1932.

SKETCH MAP OF DRAINAGE IN NORTHERN KOYUKUK REGION ALASKA

Scale $\frac{1}{500,000}$

5 0 5 10 15 20 25 Miles

Note: X designates pass

Compiled principally from
U.S. Geological Survey maps
and reports and reports
of Robert S. Peck, 1892.

ALASKA SKETCH MAP OF DRAINAGE IN NORTHERN KOTLIK REGION

Scale
1:50,000

Notes: See opposite page



the head of the Noatak River was 8,400 feet above sea level. By using also the foregoing elevation of Mount Doonerak and the elevations of the various points that had been instrumentally determined as scales for comparison, it is apparent that several of the peaks in the unsurveyed parts of the district probably exceed 8,000 feet. Among these peaks are Nahtuk Mountain, between the John and Alatna Rivers; Kollutuk Mountain, just east of the John River; Three River Mountain, at the headwaters of the John and Anaktuvuk Rivers and the North Fork; Katiktak Mountain, in the conglomerate range between Kenunga Creek and the head of the Tinayguk River; Alapah and Marshmallow Mountains, in the Arctic Divide just north of Grizzly Creek; Inclined Mountain, at the culmination of the tilted conglomerate range between Ernie Creek and the head of the North Fork; Boreal Mountain and Mount Doonerak, between the North Fork and the Clear River; and Apoon Mountain, just south of the headwaters of the Clear and Hammond Rivers.

In spite of the jagged and forbidding appearance of these northern mountains, the initiated may find numerous low passes throughout the Brooks Range. These are of immense value to the traveler moving from one drainage basin to another, for they may save many miles of roundabout wandering. In order to make what information the writer possesses available for general use, the map indicates all passes in the Koyukuk drainage area which are known to be traversable by sled.

NOMENCLATURE

The accompanying map includes many names never before recorded on any map. A large number of these are local names which have been in general use for many years. All well-established local names, except a few repetitions or unusually trite ones, have been retained. New names for three of the four canyon creeks in the region have been adopted, and the commonplace and confusing use of East Fork and West Fork for branches of many of the streams have been discarded in favor of more distinctive titles. None of these changes, however, have been made without first receiving local acquiescence and then obtaining the approval of the United States Geographic Board of the names thus selected.

As a rule the native names for geographic objects have been retained. Nahtuk and Kollutuk Mountains and Agak and Kevuk Creeks are examples of such Eskimo names. A few Indian names, such as Sackitlannahoyza, however, seemed a trifle too cumbersome for preservation and have been replaced by others.

There are innumerable mountains and streams in this unexplored country which, so far as could be learned, had never been named by either whites or Eskimos. For a few of these which had special

significance distinctive designations were given by the writer. In the selection of names for such features preference was given to appropriate euphonious Eskimo words. For instance, the first part of the name Katiktak Mountain is the Eskimo word which means white, and was chosen because this peak is so much higher than the surrounding summits that it stands out white in the autumn when the others still remain black. A second class of designations includes the names of people who have played a prominent part in local history. Thus Allen River is named after Lt. (later Maj. Gen.) H. T. Allen, the first white man who ever visited the region. Some features, such as Marshmallow Mountain and Pyramid Creek, were named for their appearance. A few were named after some special adventure which occurred on them—for instance, Grizzly Creek from a fight between the horses of the writer's party and two grizzly bears. The only name of a stranger to the region that has been given by the writer is Holmes Creek, so named because the creek was discovered on the ninetieth birthday of the great American jurist, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

POPULATION AND SETTLEMENT

The first white men to enter the Koyukuk drainage basin north of the Arctic Circle were Lt. Henry T. Allen and Private Charles Fickett, both of the United States Army. These men visited the region in 1885 in the course of a remarkably venturesome exploratory expedition under the auspices of the War Department. Two years after they left, the first prospectors came into the country, and during the next decade about 20 different men tried rather unsuccessfully to mine gold in the upper Koyukuk drainage basin.

In 1898 occurred the great gold rush to the Klondike and Alaska. In that year about 200 men poured into the upper Koyukuk country, and since that time there have never been less than 75 white people in the region. The major occupation of these people has always been prospecting and mining of gold. Today (1931), 34 years after the first great stampede, there are still 57 people engaged in the quest for gold. The boom days have long passed, however, and whereas in the years of greatest production gold worth \$300,000 to \$400,000 was taken out of the ground annually, in 1931 the total amount recovered was only about \$27,000. Of this about \$14,500 was obtained from winter drift mines, and about \$12,500 was washed out in the summer open-cut mines.

The following table gives the names of all the creeks on which mining activities were in progress in 1931, as well as the number of men who worked on each during the course of the year. That the

total number of men adds to considerably more than the 57 mentioned in the preceding paragraph is due to the fact that some men worked on two or more creeks at different times during the year.

	<i>Miners</i>		<i>Miners</i>
Nolan Creek.....	17	Pingaluk Creek.....	2
Hammond River.....	12	Gold Bench.....	1
Wild River.....	10	Mosquito Fork.....	1
Emma Creek.....	4	Sixtymile Creek.....	1
Jim Gulch (at head of Glacier Creek, 4 miles west of Big Lake).....	4	McCamant Creek.....	1
Porcupine Creek.....	3	Winnie Creek.....	1
Myrtle Creek.....	3	Twelvemile Creek.....	1
Big Lake.....	2	Minnie Creek.....	1
		Gold Creek.....	1

It may be pointed out that of the first seven creeks named in the foregoing list, all except Jim Gulch have been worked more or less uninterruptedly for 27 to 32 years. They are old diggings from which few of the miners have much hope of large fortune. Among the streams on which only one or two men were working in 1931, Pingaluk Creek, the Mosquito Fork, Winnie Creek, and Sixtymile Creek are practically virgin ground.

The total population of this 15,000 square miles of the upper Koyukuk River Valley north of the Arctic Circle on October 1, 1930, was only 127. These people centered chiefly around two major towns. The larger of these—Wiseman—is at the point where Wiseman Creek enters the Middle Fork. At its store some 103 people do the major share of their trading. The smaller town—Bettles—is just below the mouth of the John River, about 85 miles downstream from Wiseman as measured along the winding course of the Koyukuk. The remaining 24 people of the region do their trading here. Allakaket, close to the Arctic Circle, is the trading center for some 38 Eskimos and about 120 Indians. Here also live 2 white missionaries and 1 white storekeeper. In the foregoing enumeration of the population of the upper Koyukuk region the people of Allakaket are not included, because their range is seldom more than a few miles north of the Arctic Circle.

If halfbreed children are classified as belonging to their mothers' race, the 127 people of this upper Koyukuk region were divided as follows:

Race	Men	Women	Children	Total
White.....	70	7	—	77
Eskimo.....	9	11	24	44
Indian.....	1	4	1	6
	80	22	25	127

INDEX

A	Page
Acknowledgments for aid	4-5, 227-228, 249-250
Admiralty Alaska Gold Mining Co., operations by	15-16
Admiralty Island, coal mining on	72
Aerial photographic mapping, cooperation with Navy Department in	89-90, 97
Agnes Creek, gold placers on	52
Alaska Chichagoff Mining Co., operations by	15
Alaska Juneau Gold Mining Co., operations by	13-14
Alaska-Kassan Gold Mining Co., operations by	16
Alaska Mercury Corporation, operations by	79
Alaska Railroad, cooperative work with	108-114
Alaska Railroad belt, field work in	119-121
index map showing location of areas in which investigations were made	pl. 1
purpose of investigations in	119
Alaska Range, cooperative work on south flanks of	113
Albion Gulch, gold placers in	49
Alder Creek, gold placers on	40
Alder Gulch, gold placers in	43
American Creek, Iron Creek district, gold placers on	49
Eagle district, gold placers on	40
Tofty area, gold placers on	213-214
sample of placer concentrates from	241
American Creek Dredging Co., operations by	37
Amy Creek, gold placers on	35
Aniak district. <i>See</i> Tuluksak-Aniak district.	
Anthracite Ridge coal field, cooperative work in	110, 111-112, 119-120
reexamination of	73
summary of report on	121-122
Antimony, deposits of	80
Apollo mine, work at	24
Archangel Creek, Willow Creek district, mines on	127
Arolic River Valley, gold placers in	44
Asbestos, prospecting for	81

B	Page
Baker Creek, tin belt of	206-208
Baker Hot Springs. <i>See</i> Manley Hot Springs.	
Banner Creek, gold placers on	34
Barite, prospecting for	81-82
Barrett lode prospect, Hot Springs Dome	215-216
Bear Creek, Fairhaven district, gold placers on	47
Goodnews Bay district, gold placers on	44
Kenai Peninsula, gold placers on	30
Bear Creek, Rampart district, prospecting on	192
Tuluksak-Aniak district, gold placers on	44
Bear Gulch, gold placers on	38
Beatson mine, cessation of work at	60-61
Beaver Creek, gold placers on	38
Beaver Dredging Co., operations by	35
Benson Gulch, gold placers in	49
Bering River field, coal deposits of	72-73
Bez property, operations on	15
Big Chena River, gold placers on	32, 34
Big Creek, gold placers on	40
Big Denver Creek, lode prospects on	216
sample of placer concentrates from	242
Big Hurrah mine, possibility of reopening	24
Bismuth, deposits of	80-81
Bluff district, gold placers in	49-50
Bonanza Creek, Rampart district, prospecting on	192
Bonanza district, gold placers in	50
Bonnifield district, gold placers in	41
placer-gold produced in	32
Boulder Creek, gold placers on	37, 214-215
sample of placer concentrates from	241
Bremner district, prospecting in	22, 28
Bristol Bay, work in region north of	93-94

C

Cache Creek, Cook Inlet-Susitna region, gold placers on	29
Tofty area, placer mining on	212
sample of placer concentrates from	240-241

	Page		Page
California Creek, gold placers on	51-52	Copper River region, gold placers in	28
Candle Creek, gold placers on	46-47	lode mining in	22
Canyon Creek, Fortymile district,		placer gold produced in	26
gold placers on	36	Coffee Creek Mining Co., operations	
Kenai Peninsula, gold placers		by	48
on	30	Copper, mining of	57-61
Tuluksak-Aniak district, gold		price of	59, 60
placers on	44	production of	9, 59
Capps, S. R., Mineral investigations		Council district, gold placers in	49
in the Alaska Railroad		Coyote Creek, gold placers on	50
belt, 1931	119-135, pl. 1	Craigie Creek, Willow Creek district,	
Carl Whitham mine. See Nabesna		gold mines on	127-128
Mining Corporation.		Cripple Creek, gold placers on	36
Carson, Walter C., topographic map		Crooked Creek, gold placers on	40
of Girdwood district		Crow Creek, arsenopyrite-gold-quartz	
by	21	veins on	124
Casadepaga River Valley, gold placers		gold placers on	30
in	48		
Cascade Creek, gold placers on	44-45	D	
Cassiterite, origin of	221-222	Dahl Creek, gold placers on	48, 51-52
Central Creek, gold placers on	51	Dan Creek, gold placers on	28
Center Creek, gold placers on	46	Daniels Creek, gold placers on	49-50
Chambers, Alfred A., chemical anal-		Deadwood Creek, gold placers on	37, 38
ysis of water by	226	Dawson Creek, Rampart district,	
Chandalar district, gold placers in	39-40	gold placer mining in	
placer gold produced in	32	vicinity of	180-181
prospecting in	23	Deep Creek, tin placers on	69
Chatanika River, gold placers on	32	samples of placer concentrates	
Chatham Gold Dredging Co., opera-		from	238-239
tions by	32	Dime Creek, gold placers on	49
Chechako Gulch, gold placers in	29	Discovery Fork, gold placers on	40
Chichagof Mining Co., operations by	15	District offices, work of	98-99
Chicken Creek, gold placers on	36	Dole, R. B., chemical analysis of	
Chicken Creek Mining Co., opera-		water by	226
tions by	34	Dollar Creek, gold placers on	29
Chilkat Oil Co., operations by	74-75	Donlin Creek, gold placers on	43
Chisana district, gold placers in	42	Dora claim, work on	14
placer gold produced in	32	Doric Gulch, gold placers in	37
Chistochina district, gold placers in	28	Dredges, list of	54-55
platinum placers in	67	placer gold mined by	52-54
Chititu Creek, gold placers on	28	thawing ground for operation	
Chrome ore deposits, work on	79-80	of	55-56
Chulitna River, field work in basin		Drew mine, Rampart district, sec-	
of West Fork of	120	tion of coal in	224
summary of report on investi-		Dry Creek, platinum placers on	66
gations on West Fork			
of	129-130	E	
Chulitna Valley, prospecting in	23	Eagle Creek, Circle district, gold	
Circle district, gold placers in	37-38	placers on	37
placer gold produced in	32	Mount McKinley district, gold	
Clara Creek, platinum placers on	66	placers on	43
Cleary Creek, gold placers on	32	Eagle district, gold placers in	40
Cleary Hills Mines, work on prop-		placer gold produced in	32
erty of	19	Eagle Gulch, gold placers in	48
Coal, occurrence of, in Anthracite		Eldorado Creek, Bluff district, gold	
Ridge district, upper		placers on	50
Matanuska Valley	121-122	Engineer Creek, gold placers on	33
outlook for markets for Alaska	73-74	Ester Creek, gold placers on	32
production of	9, 69-72	Eureka and vicinity, Kantishna dis-	
Cook Inlet region, gold placers in	28-31	trict, field work in	110, 120
placer gold produced in	26	Kantishna district, summary of	
Copper Mountain district. See		report on	132-133
Mount Eielson district.			

	Page		Page
Eureka area, Hot Springs district,		Glen Creek, Kantishna district, gold	
early history of.....	166	placers on.....	41
lode deposit in.....	217	Glenn Gulch, gold placers in.....	35
mineralization in.....	219-220	Golconda Creek, gold placers on.....	28
samples of placer concentrates		Gold, production of.....	9, 12
from.....	236-238	production of, by sources.....	12
sketch map of.....	pl. 4	trends of.....	9-11
Eureka Creek, Hot Springs district,		Gold lodes, production of.....	12
gold placers on... 37, 192-195		Gold placers, general conditions of	
Kantishna district, gold placers		mining.....	24-26
on.....	41	production of.....	26-56
Eva Mining Co., operations by.....	19	prospecting for, features of.....	25-26
Evan Jones Coal Co., operations by... 70-71		Gold Cord mine, Willow Creek district, work at... 17, 127, 129	
Expenditures, distribution of..... 104-108		Gold Creek, Koyukuk district, gold	
in cooperation with Alaska Rail-		placers on.....	39
road.....	113-114	Gold Run, Bonfield district, gold	
		placers on.....	41
		Eureka area, gold placers on... 200	
F		Fairhaven district, gold placers	
Fairbanks Creek, gold placers on... 32		on.....	47
Fairbanks district, cooperative work		Port Clarence district, gold	
in.....	110	placers on.....	50
field work in.....	120	Goldsmith Dredging Co., operations	
gold placers in.....	32-34	by.....	48
lode gold produced in.....	12	Goldstream, gold placers on.....	32
lode mining in.....	18-20	Good Hill district, gold placers in... 41	
placer gold produced in.....	32	Goodnews Bay district, gold placers	
production of.....	134	in.....	44-45
summary of report on.....	133-135	platinum placers in.....	66-67
Fairbanks Exploration Co., opera-		Goodwin Gulch, tin placers in.....	69
tions by.....	32, 33	Granite Creek, gold placers on.....	34
Fairbanks Gold Dredging Co., opera-		Grant Creek, gold placers on.....	41
tions by.....	32	Greenstone Creek, gold placers on... 38	
Fairhaven district, gold placers in... 46-47		Gunnison Creek, Rampart district,	
Falls Creek, gold placers on..... 29		gold placers on.....	192
Fern mine, work at..... 18, 126-127, 129		sample of placer concentrates	
Fishhook Creek, Willow Creek district, Gold Cord mine		from.....	235-236
on.....	127		
Flat Creek, Iditarod district, gold		H	
placers on.....	34	Hallum claim, work on.....	14
Ruby district, gold placers on... 38		Hammon Consolidated Gold Fields,	
Florida Creek, gold placers on..... 191		operations by.....	46
Fortymile district, gold placers in... 36		Hammond River, gold placers on... 39	
placer gold produced in.....	32	Hansen & Allbright, work of... 37, 210-212	
Fourth of July Creek, gold placers		Happy Creek, gold placers on.....	34
on.....	40	Harrison Creek, gold placers on... 37	
Fox Gulch, platinum placers on..... 66		Head & Strand mine, work at..... 24	
Franklin Gulch, gold placers in... 36		Healy River Coal Corporation, opera-	
		tions by.....	71-72
G		Helm Bay, development at.....	16
Ganes Creek, gold placers on..... 35		Henry Creek Gold Dredging Co., op-	
Garnet Creek, Rampart district,		erations by.....	48
prospecting on.....	192	Henry Ford mine, work at.....	19
Georgetown district, gold placers in... 43		Hidden Creek, gold placers on.....	43
Gertrude Creek, gold placers on... 35		Hill, J. M., work of, in Fairbanks	
Girdwood district, field work in... 110, 120		district.....	19-20
prospecting in.....	21	Hirst Chichagof Mining Co., opera-	
summary of report on.....	123-125	tions by.....	14-15
Girty, George H., fossils identified		Hi Yu claims, work on.....	19
by.....	147	Holmes Gulch, gold placers in... 43	
Glacier Bay, studies in.....	91	Hoosier Creek, gold placers on... 41, 186-187	
Glen Creek, Eureka area, gold plac-		Hope, gold placers near.....	30
ers on.....	203		

	Page		Page
Hope district. <i>See</i> Moose Pass-Hope district.		Jarvis Creek, gold placers on	33
Hot Springs district, drainage and relief in	167-169	Jim Gulch, gold placers in	39
early history of	165-166	John River Basin, gold placers in	39
geologic investigations in	166-167	Julian Creek, gold placers on	43
geology of	172-173, 228-231	Jump Creek, gold placers on	46-47
gold placers in	36-37	K	
tin in	69	Kantishna district, field work in	120
lode deposits in	215-217	gold placers in	41-42
mineral waters of	224-226	production of	32
analyses of	226	prospecting in	23
mineralization in	217-223	summary of report on Eureka and vicinity in	132-133
placer gold produced in	32	Karshner Creek, sample of placer concentrates from	242
settlements and communications in	170-172	Kassan Gold Mining Co. <i>See</i> Alaska-Kassan Gold Mining Co.	
Hot Springs Dome, intrusive mass at	229	Katalla field, production of petroleum in	74-75
relation of, to origin of tin ore deposits	244-246	Keewalik Mining Co., operations by	46-47
Howard, C. S., chemical analysis of water by	226	Kenai district, platinum placers in	67
Howell & Cleveland, property of	209	Kenai Peninsula, field work in	120
Humboldt Creek, gold placers on	47	gold placers in	30-31
Hunter Creek, gold placers on	41, 177-181	lode mining in	20-21
samples of placer concentrates from	232	Kennecott Copper Corporation, operations by	59-60
Hutlinana Creek, gold placers on	37, 205	Ketchikan district, mining in	16-17
Hutlinana Hot Springs, analyses of water of	226	Kiana, coal mining near	72
features of	225	gold placers near	51
Hyder district, mining in	17	Klehini River, prospecting on	27
Hyder Lead Mines (Inc.), prospecting on property of	17	Klery Creek, gold placers on	51
I		Kobuk Alaska Mines, operations by	51-52
Idaho Bar, gold placers at	41, 183-184	Kodiak Island, platinum in beach placers on	67
sample of placer concentrates from	234-235	surveys on	102
Idaho Gulch, placer mining near	212	Kougarok district, gold placers in	48-49
Iditarod district, gold placers in	34	Koyuk district, gold placers in	49
placer gold produced in	32	Koyukuk district, gold placers in	38-39
Iene Creek, gold placers on	50	placer gold produced in	32
Independence Creek, gold placers on	37	Koyukuk region, northern, mountains of	252-253
Ingle Creek, gold placers on	36	northern, navigability of streams of	252
Inmachuk Valley, gold placers in	47	population and settlement of	254-256
Innesvale Gulch, gold placers in	37	sketch map of drainage of	pl. 6
placer mining in	210-212	nomenclature of	253-254
Innoko district, gold placers in	35-36	sources of information incorporated in map of	248-250
placer gold produced in	32	scenery of	248
platinum placers in	67	Koyukuk River, drainage area of tributaries of, north of the Arctic Circle	250-251
Inspiration Point Mining Co., operations by	64	Kuskokwim region, gold placers in	42-45
Intrusive rocks of Suslota Pass district, character and distribution of	156-158	Kuskokwim Valley, lode mining in	22
Iron Creek area, gold placers in	49	L	
J		Last Bench, gold placers on	37
Jack Creek, Suslota Pass district, gold placer prospects on tributary of	162	Lava flows of Suslota Pass district, Tertiary and recent, character, distribution, and age of	158-159
Jack Wade Creek, gold placers on	36	Lead, production of	9, 64-66

	Page		Page
Leasing of mineral lands, administration of	115-117	McCaskey Bar, gold placer mining on	37, 198-199
Lillian Creek, gold placers on	35	sample of placer concentrates from	237
Limestone, production of	78-79	McKinley Creek, Eureka area, gold placers on	205
Little Creek, Innoko district, gold placers on	35, 36	Meketchum Creek, gold placers on	38
Nome district, gold placers on	46	Mentasta Lake, gold-placer prospects near	162
Little Eldorado Creek, Chisana district, gold placers on	42	Mertie, J. B., Jr., Mineral deposits of the Rampart and Hot Springs districts	163-226
Fairbanks district, gold placers on	32	Mesozoic sediments of Suslota Pass district, age and correlation of	153-154
Little Minook Creek, gold placers on	41, 181-183	character and distribution of	148-151
samples of placer concentrates from	232-234	fossils of	154
Little Minook Junior Creek, gold placers on	184-185	thickness and structure of	151-152
sample of placer concentrates from	234	Metcalf & Findlay, work on claims of	17
Little Moose Creek, gold placers on	41	Miller Creek, gold placers on	37
Little Squaw Creek, gold placers on	40	gold placers on, tin in	69
Lituya Bay region, gold placers in	27-28	Miller Gulch, Tofty area, placer mining near	212
Long Creek, gold placers on	38	Mills Creek, gold placers in	29
Lucky Gulch, gold placers on	35	Mineral industry, collection of facts regarding	2-4, 97-98
Lucky Shot mine, Willow Creek district, work at	127, 128	studies of	1
Lucky Strike mine, work at	20-21	Mineral production, general features of	5-6
Lynx Creek, Kenai Peninsula, gold placers on	30	trends of	6-8
Shungnak area, gold placers on	51-52	value of total, 1880-1931	8-9
M			
Mabel mine, work at	18	Mineral resources, scope of work on	83-86
Macklin Creek, gold placers on	48-49	Mineralization of Rampart and Hot Springs districts, general features of	217-222
Maid of Mexico property, operations on	16	stages of	223
Malamute Gulch, gold placers in	34	Minook Creek, gold placers in	174-177
Manley Hot Springs, analysis of water of	226	lode deposit on upper	217
features of	224-225	Miscellaneous mineral products, value of	9, 77
Maps, drainage, of southeastern Alaska, compilation of	89-90, 104	Moffit, Fred H., The Suslota Pass district, upper Copper River region	137-162
issued or in preparation	87-88	Mohawk Mining Co., operations by	18
Marble. See Limestone.		Molybdenum, prospecting for	80
Marguerite Creek, gold placers on	41	Monahan Creek, gold placers on	28
Marietta claims, work on	17	Monarch mine, work at	21
Marion Twin mine, work at	18	Montezuma Creek, gold placers on	40
Marshall district, gold placers in	40-41	Monument Creek, gold placers on	46
placer gold produced in	32	Moore Creek, gold placers on	43
platinum placers in	67	Moose Creek, Bonfield district, gold placers on	41
Marshall, Robert, Reconnaissance of the northern Koyukuk Valley	247-256	Ruby district, gold placers on	38
Marvel Creek, gold placers on	44	Moose Creek coal field, cooperative work in	112
Mason Creek, gold placers on	41	Moose Pass-Hope district, field work in	110, 120
Mastodon Creek, gold placers on	37	summary of report on	122-123
Matanuska field, coal mining in	70-71	Moran Creek, gold placers on	41
prospecting for coal in	73	Morelock Creek, prospecting on	192
Matanuska Valley, field work in upper	119-120	Mount Eielson district, field work in	110, 120
prospecting for petroleum in	76	prospecting in	23
summary of report on coal basin in upper	121-122	summary of report on	130-132

	Page		Page
Mount McKinley district, gold placers in-----	43	Permian rocks of Suslota Pass district, age and correlation of-----	146-148
N			
Nabesna Mining Corporation, operations by-----	21, 159-162	character and distribution of-----	144-146
Napoleon Creek, gold placers on-----	36	fossils of-----	147
Navy Department, cooperation with-----	89-90, 97, 102-103	thickness and structure of-----	146
Nelchina district, gold placers in-----	28	Peters Creek, gold placers on-----	29
Nenana field, coal mining in-----	71-72	Peterson Oil Association, operations by-----	76
Newsboy property, work on-----	19	Petroleum, production of-----	74-75
Newton Gulch, gold placers in-----	46	prospecting for-----	75-76
New York Alaska Dredging Co., operations by-----	44	Petroleum products, shipments of, to Alaska-----	75
New York Gulch, placer mining on-----	214	Pingaluk Valley, gold placers in-----	39
sample of placer concentrates from-----	241	Pinnell River, gold placers on-----	47
Nickel, prospecting for-----	80	Pioneer Creek, gold placers on-----	37, 195-198
Nicolai Placer Mines, operations by-----	28	samples of placer concentrates from-----	236-237
Nixon Fork district, mining in-----	22	Platinum Creek, platinum placers on-----	66
Nizina district, gold placers in-----	28	Platinum metals, production of-----	66-68
North American Dredge Co., operations by-----	34	Platte Creek, gold placers on-----	41
Nolan Creek, gold placers on-----	39	Poker Creek, gold placers on-----	37, 205
Nome Creek, gold placers on-----	35	Poorman Creek, gold placers on-----	38
Nome Creek Dredging Co. <i>See</i> Beaver Dredging Co.		Porcupine district, gold placers in-----	27
Nome district, gold placers in-----	46	Port Clarence district, gold placers in-----	50
Northwestern Alaska, gold placers in-----	50-52	Projects, summary of, for season of 1931-----	89-99
placer gold produced in-----	26	summary of, for season of 1931, in cooperation with Alaska Railroad-----	109-110
Notobac Creek, gold placers on-----	29	for season of 1932-----	99-104
Nugget Creek, gold placers on-----	29	for season of 1932, in cooperation with Alaska Railroad-----	111-113
Nuka Bay district, mining in-----	20	Publications issued or in preparation-----	86-89
Nutqua Gold Mining Co., operations by-----	16	Q	
O			
Office work, features of-----	99	Quail Creek, gold placers on-----	189-191
Offield Creek, gold placers on-----	50	sample of placer concentrates from-----	235
Olive Creek, gold placers on-----	35	Quartz Creek, Fairhaven district, gold placers on-----	47
Olympic Creek, gold placers on-----	44	Tofty area, placer mining on-----	212-213
Omega Creek, gold placers on-----	37, 203-204	Quicksilver deposits, work on-----	79
sample of placer concentrates from-----	238	R	
Ophir Creek, Council district, gold placers on-----	49	Rampart district, climatic conditions in-----	169-170
Innoko district, gold placers on-----	36	coal in Tertiary rocks of-----	223-224
Osborn Creek, gold placers on-----	46	analyses of-----	224
Otter Creek, gold placers on-----	34	drainage and relief in-----	167-169
P			
Pacific Coast Cement Co., operations by-----	78	early history of-----	163-166
Park, Charles F., work of, in Girdwood district-----	21, 31	geologic investigations in-----	166-167
Pass Creek, gold placers on-----	29	geology of-----	172-173, 228
Patterson Creek, Fairhaven district, gold placers on-----	46-47	gold placers of-----	41, 174-192
Tofty area, tin belt of-----	205-213	location of-----	163
Pearson & Strand mine, work at-----	22	mineralization in-----	217-223
Peat deposits, attempts to develop-----	82	placer gold produced in-----	32
Pedro Creek, gold placers on-----	32	samples of placer concentrates from-----	232-236
Pedro Dome area, Fairbanks district, workings in-----	134	settlements and communications in-----	170-172
		sketch map of-----	pl. 3

	Page
Rampart Gold Mining Co., work of	177
Ray, J. C., work of, in Willow Creek district	18
Ready Bullion mine, operations by	18
Reeside, John B., Jr., fossils identified by	154
Resurrection River, gold placers on	30
Revillagigedo Island, prospecting on	16-17
Rex Creek, gold placers on	28
Rhode Island Creek, gold placers on	37, 199-201
Richardson district, gold placers in	34
placer gold produced in	32
Richardson Highway, work in areas near	91-92, 101-102
Riddle Gulch, gold placers in	43
Riley, J. E., Investment Co., operations by	34
Ross, C. P., work of, in Chulitna Valley	23
work of, in Valdez Creek region	30
Ruby Creek, Mount McKinley district, gold placers on	43
Rampart district, gold placers on	188-189
Solomon district, gold placers on	48
Ruby district, gold placers in	38
placer gold produced in	32
platinum placers in	67
Russian Creek, prospecting on	192
Ruth Creek, gold placers on	35
Ryan lode, investigation of	18-19

S

Salcha River, gold placers on	34
Schuchert, Charles, fossils identified by	147
Seattle Creek, Eureka area, gold placers on	200
Seattle Junior Gulch, gold placers in	37
Seventymile River, gold placers on	40
Seward Peninsula, coal mining in	72
gold lode mining in	24
gold placers in	45-50
placer gold produced in	26
tin placers in	69
Shirley Bar, gold placers at	37, 200, 201-202
sample of placer concentrates from	237-238
Shungnak area, gold placers in	51-52
Shushanna district. <i>See</i> Chisana district.	
Silver, outlook for mining of	63-64
price of	62
production of	9, 61-64
Sixmile River, gold placers on	30
Slate Creek, Goodnews Bay district, gold placers on	44-45
Rampart district, gold placers on	41, 187-188

	Page
Slate Creek Mining Co., operations by	28
Smith, Philip S., Administrative report	83-117
Foreword by	247
Mineral industry of Alaska in 1931	1-82
Solomon district, gold placers in	47-48
Sonny Fox mine, work at	20
Soo mine, work at	19
Southeastern Alaska, activity in prospecting in	16
gold lode mining in	13-17
gold placers in	27-28
lode gold produced in	12
placer gold produced in	26
surveys in	97, 100
Spruce Creek, gold placers on	47-48
Squirrel Creek, platinum placers on	66
Squirrel River Valley, gold placers in	50-51
Stuyahok River, gold placers on	40-41
Sullivan Creek, placer mining on	37, 209-210
samples of placer concentrates from	239-240
Sulphur deposits, work on	82
Sunrise, gold placers near	30
Surveys, progress of	95-97
Susitna region, gold placers in	28-31
placer gold produced in	26
Suslota Pass district, area of	138
climate and vegetation of	141-142
drainage of	139-140
geology of, summary of	144
location of	138
mining in	159-162
placer-gold prospects in	162
population of	143
previous explorations of	138-139
reconnaissance geologic map of	pl. 2 (in pocket)
relief in	139-140
trails in	141
unconsolidated deposits in	154-156
Swede Creek, gold placers on	50
Sweepstake Creek, gold placers on	49
Switch Creek, gold placers on	37

T

Taku district, work in	90-91, 100-101
Tanana, climatic conditions at	169-170
Tenderfoot Creek, gold placers on	34
Thanksgiving Creek, gold placers on	37, 204-205
Thunder Creek, gold placers on	29
Tilleson & L'Heureux, property of	37, 209
Timber Creek, gold placers on	38
Tin, production of	9, 68-69
Tin ore, occurrence and character of	242-244
origin of	244-246
Tobin Creek, gold placers on	40

	Page		Page
Tofty area, mineralization in-----	218-219	Wattamuse Creek, gold placers on--	44-45
sketch map of-----	pl. 5	Wells, F. G., work of, in Kantishna	
tin belt of-----	205-213	district-----	42
tin ore of, occurrence and char-		West Fork of Chulitna River, field	
acter of-----	242-244	work in basin of-----	110, 120
origin of-----	244-246	summary of report on investiga-	
samples of placer concentrates		tions in basin of-----	129-130
from-----	238-242	What Cheer Bar, Eureka area, gold	
Tofty Gulch, placer mining near--	212	placers on-----	193
Tolovana district, gold placers in--	35	Whelan mine, work at-----	22
placer gold produced in-----	32	White Creek, gold placers on-----	30
Tolovana property, work at-----	19	Wilbur Creek, gold placers on-----	35
Tonsina district, work in-----	92, 101	Wild River, gold placers on-----	39
Topkok Chief Mines Co., operations		Willow Creek, Iditarod district, gold	
by-----	49-50	placers on-----	34
Troublesome Creek, gold placers on--	192	Marshall district, gold placers	
sample of placer concentrates		on-----	40
from-----	236	Willow Creek district, field work	
Tuck, Ralph, work of, on Kenai Pen-		in-----	110, 120
insula-----	21	mining in-----	17-18
Tulsequah River, prospecting on		occurrence of gold in-----	126
claims west of-----	14	production of lode gold in-----	12
Tuluksak-Aniak district, gold placers		summary of report on-----	125-129
in-----	44	Willow Creek Mines (Inc.), opera-	
		tions by-----	17, 127, 128
U		Windy Creek, gold placers on-----	50
Unalakleet, coal mining near-----	72	Wonder Gulch, gold placers in-----	48
		Woodchopper Creek, Tofty area,	
V		placer mining on-----	207
Valdez Creek district, field work in--	110, 120	Wrangell district, surveys in-----	97, 100
gold placers in-----	29-30	Wrangell Mountains, work in area	
prospecting in-----	23	north of-----	91-92
summary of report on-----	129	Wrangell-Petersburg district, mining	
Valdez district, gold lode mining in--	22	in-----	16
Valparaiso property, operations on--	16		
Vanadium, tests for-----	81	Y	
Vermont Marble Co., operations by--	78-79	Yakataga Bay region, gold placers	
		in-----	27-28
W		Yellow Creek, gold placers on-----	41
Wainwright, coal mining near-----	72	Yentna district, platinum placers in--	67
Walker Fork Gold Corporation, opera-		Yentna-Cache Creek district, gold	
tions by-----	36	placers in-----	29
Waring, G. A., quoted-----	225	Yukon Basin, early history of-----	163-166
Waters, A. E., Jr., Placer concen-		gold placers in-----	31-42
trates of the Rampart		placer gold produced in-----	26, 32
and Hot Springs dis-		Yukon-Tanana region, work in--	93, 103-104
tricts-----	227-244		



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Harold L. Ickes, Secretary
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY
W. C. Mendenhall, Director

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MINERAL RESOURCES OF ALASKA

REPORT ON PROGRESS OF
INVESTIGATIONS IN

1931

BY

PHILIP S. SMITH AND OTHERS



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W. C. Calkins, Director

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CONTENTS

	Page
Mineral industry of Alaska in 1931, by P. S. Smith.....	1
Administrative report, by P. S. Smith.....	83
Mineral investigations in the Alaska Railroad belt, 1931, by S. R. Capps.....	119
The Suslota Pass district, upper Copper River region, by F. H. Moffit.....	137
Mineral deposits of the Rampart and Hot Springs districts, by J. B. Mertie, Jr.....	163
Placer concentrates of the Rampart and Hot Springs districts, by A. E. Waters, Jr.....	227
Reconnaissance of the northern Koyukuk Valley, by Robert Marshall.....	247
Index.....	257
Selected list of Geological Survey publications on Alaska.....	1a

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
PLATE 1. Index map of the Alaska Railroad region showing location of areas in which investigations were made.....	120
2. Reconnaissance geologic map of the Suslota Pass district, upper Copper River region..... In pocket.	
3. Sketch map of the Rampart district, showing location of gold placer mining operations.....	174
4. Sketch map of the Eureka area, showing location of gold placer mining operations.....	198
5. Sketch map of the Tofty area, showing location of gold placer mining operations.....	206
6. Sketch map of drainage in northern Koyukuk region.....	252
FIGURE 1. Trends of mineral production of Alaska, 1890-1931.....	7
2. Trend of value of gold production of Alaska, 1880-1931.....	11
3. Copper produced from Alaska mines, 1900-1931, and fluctuations in the price of copper during that period.....	60
4. Index map showing location of the Rampart and Hot Springs districts.....	164

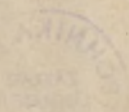


CONTENTS

1000
 1001
 1002
 1003
 1004
 1005
 1006
 1007
 1008
 1009
 1010
 1011
 1012
 1013
 1014
 1015
 1016
 1017
 1018
 1019
 1020

ILLUSTRATIONS

1021
 1022
 1023
 1024
 1025
 1026
 1027
 1028
 1029
 1030
 1031
 1032
 1033
 1034
 1035
 1036
 1037
 1038
 1039
 1040
 1041
 1042
 1043
 1044
 1045
 1046
 1047
 1048
 1049
 1050
 1051
 1052
 1053
 1054
 1055
 1056
 1057
 1058
 1059
 1060
 1061
 1062
 1063
 1064
 1065
 1066
 1067
 1068
 1069
 1070
 1071
 1072
 1073
 1074
 1075
 1076
 1077
 1078
 1079
 1080
 1081
 1082
 1083
 1084
 1085
 1086
 1087
 1088
 1089
 1090
 1091
 1092
 1093
 1094
 1095
 1096
 1097
 1098
 1099
 1100



1900
 1901
 1902