

I thought that you might like
to see this essay - it being
written by George Henry Dawson's
great great nephew -

L.W.S.

Essay on The Alaska Boundary
Dispute -

written by Alan Geldart, great
Grandson of Sir Wm. Dawson -

His mother writes

" Alan (15) has just come home
with 100% marks for his essay
on the Alaskan Boundary Dispute.
Quite a family surprise! "

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Alan Geldart

The Alaska Boundary Dispute

- Grabbing the 'Panhandle'

Britain and Russia

After Fraser, Thompson and Mackenzie had explored to the west coast the North West Co. moved in for fur trade with the Indians. It established posts as far north as the 55° parallel. The Hudsons Bay Co. was also trading in southern B.C.

Meanwhile the Russian American Fur Trading Co. was working south from Sitka, a major port on the 58° parallel.

With the two companies (by now the Hudsons Bay had joined with the North west Co, 1821) competing for trade and rights, a boundary between the two countries seemed the logical solution.

In 1825 Britain and Russia settled a treaty boundary between Alaska and New Caledonia (B.C.) Russia was not to go south of 54°40' North of that Russia was allotted a strip of land along the coast for the purpose of trading with the Indians. This strip, called 'the Panhandle', was described as such - south of Prince of Wales Island, in and up the Portland canal to the 56° parallel, then to follow the summit of mountains situated parallel to the coast as far as the point of intersection of the 141st degree west longitude. At no point was the line to go more than 35 miles inland. Russia's interest in this coast was to compete heavily with China's fur market.

United States and Russia

Since the 1825 treaty Russia officially had a borderline for Alaska. Forty-two years after the United States bought Alaska from Russia. The U.S. paid 7,200,000 dollars in gold for 586,000 square miles of land - a cheap price.

The population at that time was 10,000, 600 of whom were Russians.

Russia was unable to keep up its colony.

In buying Alaska, the United States, of course, bought the Russian rights. The same border would apply.

Gold is the trigger

In 1896 gold was discovered in the Klondike near Dawson city. And in 1897 the word had spread to bring prospectors in from the world over.

There were several routes to the goldfield. One via the Mackenzie River and others from small ports and overland and lakes. The easiest, shortest and most popular route was up the Lynn canal to Skagway and through rivers up to Dawson.

The great question was, who owned this port at the end of the canal. Both Britain and the United States wanted it.

If the United States owned it they could collect a high duty on every prospector's find when he left.

If Britain owned it then they could move freely in and out

of the Yukon and collect their duty.

This brought up the subject of the boundary. Britain claimed that the treaty of 1825 clearly stated that the border was thirty five miles from the ocean's coast, which entitled them to Skagway.

The United States said the treaty meant that the border was thirtyfive miles from each inlet, which entitled them to Skagway.

Tribunal

Britain approached the U.S. to form a court of 3 impartial jurists, one to be from a neutral country, The United States wanted 6 judges, three from each side. For two weeks in September and October 1903 they discussed it.

The three main questions

Did the boundary run around the head of the inlets or cut across them? (The Lynn canal went 90 miles inland). Britain said: "Is it not absurd...to say that the ocean extended to its (inlet's) head; surely the ocean stopped at the general line of the coast"?

Were there mountains to be found corresponding to the terms of the 1825 treaty or must the line run at a distance of 35 miles from the head of the most inland inlet?

Was the Portland canal the passage now so called, or did the treaty mean Observatory Inlet farther south?

United States argument

The treaty said that the line is to follow the 'windings' of the coast. The U.S. deciphered this as following the inlets and not the coast.

The treaty showed a continuous range of mountains around the heads of inlets.

The object of Russia in demanding the strip had been to retain her trade with the Indians, They deciphered this as meaning that the heads of the most important inlets were to be in Russian possession in order for trade.

Roosevelt, the President of the U.S. at that time, was determined that the decision should go in favour of the United States; he did not care how that decision was obtained. He appointed three jurists, who publicly had announced their siding to the U.S. They were Elihu Root, Sen. Henry C. Lodge, and Sen. George Turner.

The Canadian judges and one British one were Sir Louis Jetté (of the Supreme Court of Quebec), Mr A.B. Aylesworth and Lord Alverstone (chief Justice of England). These three were known to be impartial.

The United States was asking for 30 miles around every inlet from the Pacific.

Britain wanted the line to fall 30 miles from the 'general trend' of the coast.

The Decision

1 - The strip must include the heads of all inlets; this meant the Yukon Territory was cut off from the sea.

2 - Mountails could be found for most of the way and the border should run along the tops of them.

3 - The Portland canal ran to the north of Prince of Wales Island and turned south, leaving the U.S. with two little islands?

These decisions meant that the United States got almost their entire claim. They got the heads of all the inlets but not all the land that they had claimed beyond.

First of all, the decision was a deadlock: 3 for the U.S. and 3 for Britain. Lord Alverstone, however, was requested by the Prime Minister of England to change his vote. The Prime Minister had been unofficially threatened that the U.S. would forcibly have taken Alaska. The two Canadian judges refused to sign the document but it was passed anyway.

Canada's reactions and feelings

Canada felt she had been betrayed by Britain. She now felt more strongly about handling her foreign affairs herself.

"Eventually this reaction (Canada's ill feeling of the boundary dispute) was instrumental in accelerating the movement towards Canadian autonomy in foreign affairs".⁶ Prime Minister Laurier established the Canadian Department of External Affairs in 1909 partly because of this ill feeling and/or search for identity.

Another result of the dispute was the sharpening-up of Canadian-American relations; the two established the International Joint Commission. This Commission was given authority to solve boundary problems between the U.S. and Canada.

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BEHRING SEA ARBITRATION 1891.

Not the least of Dawson's services to his country were those in connection with the Behring Sea Arbitration. He was one of the Commissioners and was sent by the British Government in 1892 to the North Pacific ocean, on an extended cruise to inquire into the conditions of the fur seal life there. Subsequently he took part in the conferences held in Washington and assisted in the preparation of the British case, which was laid before the Behring Sea Arbitration Commission at Paris. His evidence and forcible arguments undoubtedly secured for the British side of the case a much more favourable finding than would otherwise have been obtained. Lord Alverstone, Lord Chief Justice of England at that time said " It is not possible to overrate the services which Dr Dawson rendered us - I consulted him throughout on many questions of difficulty and never found his judgment to fail, and he was one of the most unselfish and charming characters I have ever met. " - I consider it a great pleasure to have known him. " In recognition of his services on the arbitration Dr Dawson was made a companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (C.M.G) Being decorated by the late Queen Victoria.

The Arbitration was to settle the limits of where the U.S.A. and Great Britain had rights to hunt seal in the Behring Sea. This had been a very serious dispute, and even Russia entered into the dispute, for she claimed the exclusive jurisdiction over the Behring Sea - by right of discovery - but this was ruled out by the argument that Spain had no exclusive right to the Atlantic, Columbus having discovered America. The U.S.A. was claiming even more than Russia. Formerly there had been treaties between Russia and Great Britain, but these were in connection with sovereignty over the sea for the purpose of avoiding a conflict of their fishing interests - but in the first place, it was the remonstrance of Great Britain and the U.S.A. against Russian pretensions which led to these treaties about sea limits - The present issue was with the U.S.A. and was a very serious argument over the seal industry & rights to certain waters - The U.S.A. went so far as to seize British ships at this time.

The above paragraphs I believe will add to the interest of Alan Geldarts essay - they are taken from the book " Life and Letters of George Mercer Dawson " written by Lois Winslow-Spragge.

(George Mercer Dawson son of Sir William Dawson of McGill University.)