

“John Muir and the Fire on the Mountain” Episode Transcript

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<https://www.wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/john-muir-fire>

Introduction

On Christmas Eve, 1914, world-famous naturalist John Muir died in his bed, surrounded by scattered papers. Until the very end, he was working on his Alaska manuscript, recounting his adventures in Alaska nearly forty years before. Among his stories was one he had never before put in writing.

During a dark and stormy night in Fort Wrangel, Alaska, John Muir surprised everybody when he climbed the mountain behind the town and built a gigantic fire near the top. The people down below could see it light up the sky, and their reaction has become a legend.

Today, on Wrangell History Unlocked, we're talking about John Muir and the Fire on the Mountain.

Whether he knew it or not, Fort Wrangel was a crossroads moment in John Muir's life. Everything he had been working towards, and running from, came to a head in Fort Wrangel.

We'll try to answer the burning question: why did he build the fire?

Music: Scotland the Brave

Part 1. John of the Mountains

A. Brief Biography

John Muir was tall and lean, with piercing eyes and a long red beard. He was born in Dunbar, Scotland in 1838, and immigrated to Wisconsin at the age of 11. He maintained his thick, Scottish accent throughout his life.

John Muir made his living writing and speaking about nature.

He was a mixture of genius and madness, an eccentric with a great scientific mind and a poet's ability to describe the world. His appetite for wilderness knew no bounds. He often ventured alone, scaling mountains under punishing weather, all to get closer to nature.

B. Daniel Muir

His ability to survive harsh conditions may have come from his childhood.

John Muir survived terrible beatings from his father, Daniel Muir. The elder Muir was a strict Scotch Presbyterian who worked his children hard, especially John, doling out physical punishment alongside diatribes on sin and hellfire. Young John could match anyone for reciting Biblical scripture, if only because his father whipped him until he could.

Daniel Muir hated his son's love of nature. When John wanted to study glaciers, his father wrote him a letter, condemning his work:

You cannot warm the heart of the saint of God with cold icy topped mountains. O, my dear son, come away from them to the Spirit of God and his holy word... And the best and soonest way of getting quit of writing and publishing [of] your book is to burn it, and then it will do no more harm either to you or others.¹

¹ John Muir: Life and Work. Edited by. Sally M. Miller. p. 19.

John Muir found his own spiritual path—one less brutal than his father's. John Muir's heart was always with nature, it became his work, and his work consumed him.

C. Louie Strentzel

Which meant that, by the age of 40, John Muir was still a bachelor, with no children.

A friend named Jeanne Carr intervened. Through carefully crafted letters, she arranged for John Muir to meet with an eligible 32-year old woman named Louie Strentzel. Muir relented, and on the night of June 19, 1879, John Muir proposed to Louie Strentzel. She accepted.

Then he left, the very next day, for Fort Wrangel.² He promised to be gone a short time. They would not see each other again until the next year.

D. Sheldon Jackson

John Muir traveled all over America, but had never been to Alaska. Alaska was still a mystery to much of the nation and the world. After a chance encounter with Reverend Sheldon Jackson in early 1879, John Muir found his “in” to Alaska. Jackson regaled Muir with stories of his flagship mission to the Tlingit in Fort Wrangel. Reverend Jackson invited Muir to be his guest on a steamship voyage from Portland, Oregon to Alaska. John Muir had no interest in converting souls, but he was eager to get close to Alaska's glaciers. He accepted the invitation.

The steamship voyage to Alaska was sometimes awkward. In addition to Muir and Jackson, a company of leading Presbyterian Church elders and their wives accompanied them. to Muir biographer Linnie Marsh Wolfe describes the trip like this:

² The Pacific Historian. p. 114.

The relations between him [Muir] and the clerics remained mutually stand-offish. Early in the voyage they dubbed him “that wild Muir,” and later events did not soften their judgment. His opinion of them and the sarcastic comments he made may not have been quite fair. A deeply ingrained prejudice against missions was a hangover from his youth.³

John Muir was out of his element. For several weeks, Muir found himself cramped into steamship, in the company of people he clashed with. He was the odd man out. While the Presbyterians called him wild man, he came up with his own nickname for them: the Divines.

John Muir was just getting started.

*Music: John Anderson My Jo, Mary Scot,
Keelman O'er the Land*

³ The Life of John Muir: Son fo the Wilderness. By Linnie Marsh Wolfe. p. 204-5.

Chapter 2. Alaska

A. Arrival

On July 14, 1879, John Muir finally set foot in Fort Wrangel. In a letter to his fiancé Louie Strentzel, he described it:

...a rickety falling scatterment of houses, dead and decomposing, set and sunken in a black oozy bog, the crooked trains of wooden huts wriggling along either side of the street, obstructed by wolfish curs, hideous Indians, logs, stumps and erratic boulders, the mud between a little too thick to sail in and far too soft to walk in.⁴

The soft, swampy bog of Wrangell Island, called muskeg, put Muir off. It was too wet to camp on. Muir looked for higher elevation. He spied the top of Mount Dewey. Said Muir:

Every place within a mile or two of the town seemed strangely shelterless and inhospitable, for all the trees had long ago been felled for building-timber and firewood. At the worst, I thought, I could build a bark hut on a hill back of the village, where something like a forest loomed dimly through the draggled clouds.⁵

Mount Dewey rose like a backdrop to Fort Wrangel. It is a gentle giant, not rocky or craggy, but round, all set with soft, spongy moss, ferns, and tall trees creating a high canopy. It served as a timber supply for the community below.

From the summit of Mount Dewey, you could clearly see the Tlingit village of Kaach.xan.a'kw, set back a ways, wrapped along the coast, all the way out to Shustack's Point. Directly at the bottom of Mount Dewey, the fledgling gold rush town of Fort Wrangel sprung up around the abandoned army buildings. And just north of the fort buildings was Foreign Town, a

⁴ Letters from Alaska, John Muir. Edited by Rober Engberg and Bruce Merrell. p. 12.

⁵ Chapter 2, Travels in Alaska, by John Muir.

small neighborhood for Natives and White people who did not belong to a family in the larger Tlingit village.

B. Tlingit

The Tlingit village of Kaach.xan.a'kw just ended the most massive and significant decade in its history. In recent memory the US Army arrived, built a fort, bombed the village, and left. The Cassiar Gold Rush kicked off, the Army returned, and the Army left again. Presbyterians came, challenging traditions and gaining Tlingit converts. The recent death of Chief Shakes V, Kaawishté, the year before, shook things up. He was the longest-serving in the Chief Shakes, who had seen the Russians, the British, deadly epidemics, the Stikine Gold Rush, the Cassiar Gold Rush, and more. The new Chief Shakes, Gush Tlein, was barely into his first year as chief when John Muir arrived.

John Muir often formed quick, harsh opinions of the Native Americans. On arriving in Fort Wrangel, John Muir says a few White people warned him that the “Indians were a bad lot, not to be trusted.”⁶

Muir could be paternalistic, describing Native Americans throughout his life as childlike and lazy. Some Tlingit people brought Muir to the south end of Wrangell Island to see the abandoned Tlingit village of Kaatsitl Aan. Writing about it in his private journal, Muir said:

There is one characteristic, however, that they have fully developed in common with all wild tribes, namely, superstition. They attribute to witchcraft all diseases and events of which they know not the cause... But notwithstanding the superstition in which all wild, or rather ignorant, peoples are sunk, that by which these Indians are afflicted is attended by and checked by more sound sense and natural reason than are found among the so-called enlightened and religious of our own race.⁷

⁶ Chapter 2, Travels in Alaska, by John Muir.

⁷ John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir. By Linnie Marsh Wolfe. p. 271-272.

Muir would use the concept of “superstition” to describe the Tlingit again, on the night of his fire.

C. Pent Up

Muir could only entertain himself with the glaciers around Wrangell Island for so long. He yearned to see the glaciers further north. Once again, he boarded a steamship with the Presbyterian elders. This time, they were headed north to Chilcat Country.

The trip was doomed by mechanical trouble and had to turn back. The party returned to Fort Wrangel in early September, delaying again the trip to Chilcat Country. The glaciers and Louie Strentzel would all have to wait a little longer for John Muir.

Muir must have been frustrated by the pace of his Alaskan adventures. In the past, in California, he could explore to his heart’s content, roaming freely wherever his feet could take him.

In Fort Wrangel, things were different. John of the Mountains was confined to cabins and steamships. Going out required assembling a crew. He spent nights sleeping on the floor inside the old fort buildings. He wrote that, before the night of his fire on the mountain, he had not yet even so much as built a campfire.

D. The Date

One night in September, that would all change. John Muir never offered a date for his fire on the mountain, but he left clues.

The only other eyewitness account of John Muir’s fire comes from Reverend S. Hall Young, who also wrote about his life in Alaska decades later. Taken together, John Muir and Reverend Young are the only two reasons we know this story exists. Figuring out the date of John Muir’s bonfire requires examining both for clues.

The first clue comes from Reverend Young, who suggests the bonfire was up to 3 weeks before or after the birth of his daughter on September 19.

The second clue comes from the way both men describe the night as exceptionally dark. Muir calls it “pitch dark” while Young uses the Greek expression “dark as Erebus.”

According to a moon phase calendar, the moon was full was near the beginning of Young’s six weeks, and full near the end of the six weeks. But right in the middle, September 15,⁸ was the New Moon, a virtually moonless night — exceptionally dark.

To back this up, look at scribbled, hand-written diary John Muir kept in Alaska. We can find evidence to support September 15 as the night of the fire.

First, on the page before his September 16 entry, Muir drew the view from Mount Dewey. It shows misty islands with labels such as “purple edged with gold” and “red like a border to the [blessed] isles.”

Second, and most intriguing, this illustration in John Muir’s diary, page 189, features unmistakable brown splotches which resemble small ember marks, suggesting he drew this scene by the light of his fire.⁹

Third, in his diary dated September 16, John Muir described the view from Mount Dewey, using his prosaic, transcendental language to describe a typical cloudy day in Fort Wrangel:

Lovely silvery satiny pearly day the view from the hill over the bay ravishingly beautiful & novel the water a mirror but white mostly the islands black with black reflection whole [form] outlined, then the blue [islands] beyond they also mirrored in front in own color then the glossy [satiny] clouds

⁸ timeanddate.com

⁹ Journal of John Muir. Page 189. <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmj-all/1377/>

with dark purplish centers & bars of black [never] before saw
20 white a day so much subdued lustre.¹⁰

Next to this entry, he scribbled in the edges that he found a spruce tree on the “hill back of Wrangell” 475 years old, and six foot in diameter.

This suggests he arose on the morning of September 16, wrote about the view from the top of Mount Dewey, and ventured east, down the hill, toward the rising sun.

All this goes to postulate that the date of John Muir’s fire in Fort Wrangel was September 15, 1879.

Reverend Young sheds light on what happened immediately before John Muir ascended the mountain. Young shares an interesting remark about a lantern, that suggests Muir’s premeditated motives:

One wild night, dark as Erebus, the rain dashing in sheets and the wind blowing a hurricane, Muir came from his room into ours about ten o'clock with his long, gray overcoat and his Scotch cap on.

"Where now?" I asked. "Oh, to the top of the mountain," he replied. "It is a rare chance to study this fine storm."

My expostulations were in vain. He rejected with scorn the proffered lantern: "It would spoil the effect."

I retired at my usual time, for I had long since learned not to worry about Muir.¹¹

John Muir was tired of accepting the hospitality of others—even a lantern on a dark, cold, stormy night. He needed to get back to his roots. He would do this his own way.

¹⁰ Journal of John Muir. <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmj-all/1378/>

¹¹ Alaska Days with John Muir. By S. Hall Young.

*Music: John Anderson My Jo, Mary Scot,
Keelman O'er the Land*

Part 3. The Fire, from Travels in Alaska

One night when a heavy rainstorm was blowing I unwittingly caused a lot of wondering excitement among the whites as well as the superstitious Indians. Being anxious to see how the Alaska trees behave in storms and hear the songs they sing, I stole quietly away through the gray drenching blast to the hill back of the town, without being observed. Night was falling when I set out and it was pitch dark when I reached the top.

The glad, rejoicing storm in glorious voice was singing through the woods, noble compensation for mere body discomfort. But I wanted a fire, a big one, to see as well as hear how the storm and trees were behaving.

After long, patient groping I found a little dry punk in a hollow trunk and carefully stored it beside my matchbox and an inch or two of candle in an inside pocket that the rain had not yet reached; then, wiping some dead twigs and whittling them into thin shavings, stored them with the punk. I then made a little conical bark hut about a foot high, and, carefully leaning over it and sheltering it as much as possible from the driving rain, I wiped and stored a lot of dead twigs, lighted the candle, and set it in the hut, carefully added pinches of punk and shavings, and at length got a little blaze, by the light of which I gradually added larger shavings, then twigs all set on end astride the inner flame, making the little hut higher and wider.

Soon I had light enough to enable me to select the best dead branches and large sections of bark, which were set on end, gradually increasing the height and corresponding light of the hut fire. A considerable area was thus well lighted, from which I gathered abundance of wood, and kept adding to the fire until it had a strong, hot heart and sent up a pillar of flame thirty or

forty feet high, illuminating a wide circle in spite of the rain, and casting a red glare into the flying clouds.

Of all the thousands of camp-fires I have elsewhere built none was just like this one, rejoicing in triumphant strength and beauty in the heart of the rain-laden gale.

It was wonderful,--the illumined rain and clouds mingled together and the trees glowing against the jet background, the colors of the mossy, lichened trunks with sparkling streams pouring down the furrows of the bark, and the gray-bearded old patriarchs bowing low and chanting in passionate worship!

My fire was in all its glory about midnight, and, having made a bark shed to shelter me from the rain and partially dry my clothing, I had nothing to do but look and listen and join the trees in their hymns and prayers.

Music: Amazing Grace

Part 4. The Reaction

A. Perspectives

The next part of the story has gone down in legend: *the Tlingit people below see a light in the clouds, become frightened and superstitious, and flee to the White people begging for help.*

The only versions of this story are from Muir and Young.

Their accounts have gone unchallenged, but there's a lot to unpack. Using what we know about Fort Wrangel in December 1879, we can reconstruct the events of the night, from the perspective of the Tlingit.

B. Towyatt

On a stormy night like September 15, Towyatt might be inside, warming himself by a small fire, built on the floor in the center of a clan house.

Towyatt was a headman in the Naa.yaa.ayi clan. Towyatt may have been the most important convert in Reverend Young's church. Towyatt was known as a cool-headed, diplomatic peacemaker. He counseled Chief Shakes during the Bombardment of Wrangel ten years before. When Tsimpshian Christians began worshiping in Fort Wrangel, Towyatt invited them into his home. Towyatt helped to build the congregation Reverend S. Hall Young recently assumed.

It's no surprise, then, that Reverend Young tells us it is Towyatt, leading four other Tlingit men—Aaron, Moses, Matthew, and Thomas—to the fort that night.

The Tlingit knew fire. They practiced days-long cremations, brought down trees using fire,¹² and survived in Alaska over 10,000 years using fire. For miles along the coastline of the village, the Tlingit must have been able to

¹² <https://nsew.carnegiemnh.org/tlingit-people-of-the-northwest-coast/we-talk-to-the-trees/>

see the clouds directly above Muir's fire, alight with fire. Set back a ways from Mount Dewey, the Tlingit could take it all in. From Shustack's Point, at the end of the peninsula, the Tlingit could likely see the light reflecting in the water.

According to Muir, the fire itself may not have been visible, but its effect in the sky above was. Said Muir:

Neither the great white heart of the fire nor the quivering enthusiastic flames shooting aloft like auroral lances could be seen from the village on account of the trees in front of it and its being back a tattle way over the brow of the hill; but the light in the clouds made a great show, a portentous sign in the stormy heavens unlike anything ever before seen or heard of in Wrangell.

Towyatt and his men walked at least 1,000 yards of coastline, pushing north against the pounding rain, toward the glowing light unlike anything they had ever seen. They passed the scattered buildings of the gold rush town, and entered through the gates of the fort to alert someone.

C. Crittenden

But who? Since the Army left two years before, chaos and disorder reigned. Towyatt and his men decided to tell the one person in Fort Wrangel with any government title at all: Deputy Collector of Customs Rudolph D. Crittenden.

Crittenden had a reputation for under-reacting to problems. He replaced a Deputy Collector who was an aggressive, hyperactive problem solver who burned out and gave up when he received little support for his efforts.

Crittenden was different. Crittenden saw his role as limited. The winter before, after being on the job only two months, a mob brought him a man named John Boyd they said shot and killed a man named Thomas O'Brien inside a saloon. Crittenden declined to do anything about it, as it was not in

his job description. The mob convened a miner's court, tried John Boyd, and hanged him under Crittenden's impassive gaze.

Like the missionaries, Crittenden lived in one of nicer buildings of the abandoned fort. The Tlingit men, lead by Towyatt, came to his door. Wrote Muir:

Some wakeful Indians, happening to see it about midnight, in great alarm aroused the Collector of Customs and begged him to go to the missionaries and get them to pray away the frightful omen, and inquired anxiously whether white men had ever seen anything like that sky-fire, which instead of being quenched by the rain was burning brighter and brighter.

Muir makes claim which makes the Tlingit men seem even more helpless: that they begged Crittenden to get Reverend Young to pray away the fire. This is probably false. Reverend Young was close with Towyatt. Reverend Young was deeply engaged with the local Tlingit community and lived inside the fort walls, as well. It is highly unlikely the Tlingit ever begged Crittenden to go to Reverend Young. They could visit him themselves.

In response to the Tlingit men's alarm, Muir writes that Crittenden suggested the "strange fire" might be a "volcano, or ignis fatuus." While Alaska is home to many volcanos, Mount Dewey is definitely not one of them. And ignis fatuus, also called wil o' the wisp, is a pale flash of light, given off by gas escaping from a bog marsh — a phenomena unseen in southeast Alaska's wet climate.

Whether it truly a volcano erupting or just wil o' the wisp, Rudolph Crittenden stayed true to form, and is recorded as having done nothing.

D. Reverend Young

Towyatt and his men left Crittenden's home and made the short trek to Reverend Young and his very pregnant wife, Fannie.

If Towyatt and his men were working off intuition, then going to Reverend Young's home was a smart move. Just earlier that night, the man responsible for the fire had been inside this very home.

Reverend Young found himself awoken in the middle of the night. He described the Tlingit men as “rain-soaked and trembling” and “greatly excited and frightened.” Immediately, the Tlingit men ask Reverend Young to pray. Matthew, speaking for the group, says the whole tribe was “frightened by a mysterious light waving and flickering from the top of the little mountain that overlooked Wrangell; and they wished me to pray to the white man's God and avert dire calamity.”

In this part, both Muir and Young say the Tlingit men were frightened and sought out Reverend Young to pray. While this seems like even evidence of a superstitious reaction, it is reasonable to expect them to ask Reverend Young to pray — he is, after all, a reverend. He led prayer on Sunday services and at ceremonies. Towyatt may have been a recent convert to Christianity, but he did not misunderstand the role of the reverend.

Young tried in vain to explain what they were seeing:

"Some miner has camped there," I ventured. An eager chorus protested; it was not like the light of a camp-fire in the least; it waved in the air like the wings of a spirit. Besides, there was no gold on the top of a hill like that; and no human being would be so foolish as to camp up there on such a night, when there were plenty of comfortable houses at the foot of the hill. It was a spirit, a malignant spirit.

Reverend Young may have twisted the Tlingit group's metaphors for literal truth. The passage goes from “like the wings of a spirit” to “it was a spirit, a malignant spirit.” These Tlingit men, through a language and culture barrier, attempted to describe a fire unlike any they had ever seen. Describing something you have never seen before requires analogies, even imperfect ones.

Muir and Young, the only two authors of the story, cast the Tlingit reaction as one seized by fear and superstition.

But the Tlingit response was not irrational. The size, timing, and place of the fire simply made no sense. Its proximity to the buildings of Fort Wrangel posed a risk. And at no point in the past fifty years of European outsiders coming to Wrangell Island had anyone done anything like this.

John Muir describes Reverend Young's reaction:

When Mr. Young was called from his bed to pray, he, too, confoundedly astonished and at a loss for any sort of explanation, confessed that he had never seen anything like it in the sky or anywhere else in such cold wet weather, but that it was probably some sort of spontaneous combustion "that the white man called St. Elmo's fire, or Will-of-the-wisp."

These explanations, though not convincingly clear, perhaps served to veil their own astonishment and in some measure to diminish the superstitious fears of the natives; but from what I heard, the few whites who happened to see the strange light wondered about as wildly as the Indians.

Like Crittenden, Reverend Young suggests it might be wil o' the wisp. He also suggests it might be St. Elmo's Fire, a natural phenomena familiar to sailors, where rods aboard deck would build up charges and glow.

Once again, what Crittenden and Young saw was all a matter of perspective. From multiple angles in the Tlingit village, you were at a distance to see the full effect of the fire in the clouds above Mount Dewey.

Inside the walls of the fort, you were closer to the fire, but you may not have seen the clouds above the fire, due to obstructions like trees and the front brow of Mount Dewey.

From their limited perspective inside the fort, Crittenden and Young may have only been able to see the fire's glowing periphery which might explain

why they each suggested faint, natural glowing light phenomena like wil o' the wisp and St. Elmo's Fire.

After pondering a moment, Reverend Young figured out the mystery.

Suddenly the true explanation flashed into my brain, and I shocked my Indians by bursting into a roar of laughter. In imagination I could see him so plainly—John Muir, wet but happy, feeding his fire with spruce sticks, studying and enjoying the storm! But I explained to my natives, who ever afterwards eyed Muir askance, as a mysterious being whose ways and motives were beyond all conjecture.

"Why does this strange man go into the wet woods and up the mountains on stormy nights?" they asked. "Why does he wander alone on barren peaks or on dangerous ice-mountains? There is no gold up there and he never takes a gun with him or a pick... Why—why?"

When we come back, we'll try to answer: Why did John Muir build this fire?

Music: Scotland the Brave

Chapter 5. All That Remains

A. Return to Life

After extending his Alaskan adventure several times, John Muir returned south in December 1879. He and Louie Strentzel married in April 1880. Louie became pregnant a few months later, just in time for John to leave again, to continue his Alaskan adventures again with his friend, Reverend S. Hall Young, and a new travel companion, a little dog named Stickeen.

John and Louie Muir had two daughters: Wanda and Helen. By all accounts, he was a good father and a loving husband.

B. Books Published

Travels in Alaska was the first book published after John Muir's death. The same year, Reverend S. Hall Young published, Alaska Days with John Muir. For the first time, the world heard the story of John Muir and the fire on the mountain. It has gone down as one of Wrangell's colorful legends about a colorful figure.

But no legends go unexamined. In 1978, almost one-hundred years after John Muir's fire on the mountain, Dr. Richard F. Fleck wrote in American Indian Quarterly:

Perhaps he [Muir] relied upon his old feelings toward Wisconsin and California Indians when he built a fire in the rainy woods to cause a weird glow in the sky which frightened the superstitious Indians of the area... Muir takes pride in his seeming power over the local primitives in describing their wild fear.¹³

¹³ John Muir's Evolving Attitudes Toward Native American Cultures. by Richard F. Fleck. https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/fleck-john-muir-evolving-attitudes-toward-native-american-cultures.aspx

C. The Legend

Perhaps John Muir's motive was a spectacle to catch the attention of the Tlingit village. A fire of that size would surely draw attention. If John Muir could not impress the Tlingit, he could at least leave an impression.

Or, perhaps Muir's intentions were objectively scientific. The newspaper column Muir published just two months after the fire on the mountain describes the quality of firewood to be found on Wrangell Island. Wrote Muir:

A yellow cedar fire, to any one witnessing it for a time, is quite a notable phenomenon. The flames quiver and rush up in a multitude of ragged edged lances, while the burning surfaces snap, and crackle and explode, and throw out a shower of glowing coals, with such a noise that conversation in an ordinary pitch of voice is at times impossible.¹⁴

...I have not yet seen a trace of fire in all these woods. The roots are set in a deep sponge of wet mosses, kept saturated by the abundant rains that fall throughout all the seasons, so that running fires are impossible here...¹⁵

Wrangell Island is a wet sponge. Perhaps John Muir was just testing his hypothesis that even a great fire would not spread in such a wet place.

D. Fort Wrangel is Like Dunbar

But Muir's motivations likely ran deeper. In Fort Wrangel, Muir's past, present, and future clashed, in a way even he may not have understood.

From the moment he arrived, Fort Wrangel must have reminded Muir of his long-lost boyhood home in Dunbar, Scotland. Both towns were small perches upon the rocky coast, far away from the central places of power, where working-class men and women fished and lived self-sufficient

¹⁴ Daily_intelligencer_1879-11-16_2.pdf

¹⁵ Daily_intelligencer_1879-11-16_2.pdf

lives.¹⁶ Both communities were in northern climates and—incredibly—share the same latitude: 56° north of the equator.

The Tlingit, like the Scots, organized into clans, identified by name, crests, and stories.

E. Presbyterians

Both Fort Wrangel and Dunbar, Scotland were known for their Presbyterians, as well. Scotland is the cradle of Presbyterianism, and in Fort Wrangel, John Muir found himself surrounded by Presbyterians.

The Presbyterian elders must have evoked memories of Daniel Muir. A story from John Muir's autobiography as a boy reveals a lesson Daniel Muir taught his son about fire. At the tender age of 11, Daniel Muir put his son to work in the fields of Wisconsin clearing brush:

I was first put to burning brush in clearing land for the plough. Those magnificent brush fires with great white hearts and red flames, the first big, wild outdoor fires I had ever seen, were wonderful sights for young eyes. Again and again, when they were burning fiercest so that we could hardly approach near enough to throw on another branch, father put them to awfully practical use as warning lessons, comparing their heat with that of hell, and the branches with bad boys.

"Now, John," he would say,—“now, John, just think what an awful thing it would be to be thrown into that fire:—and then think of hellfire, that is so many times hotter. Into that fire all bad boys, with sinners of every sort who disobey God, will be cast as we are casting branches into this brush fire, and although suffering so much, their sufferings will never never end, because neither the fire nor the sinners can die.”¹⁷

¹⁶ https://www.jmbt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/3_08.pdf

¹⁷ Excerpt From: John Muir. “The Story of My Boyhood and Youth.” Apple Books. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/the-story-of-my-boyhood-and-youth/id510931070>

Daniel Muir looked into a fire and saw visions of hell. His son saw heaven. Where John Muir went, he reclaimed his right to enjoy nature and its beauty. Fire is ancient and can symbolize many things. For John Muir, fire was a friend and steady companion.

F. Memories of Louie

And yet, Muir's friends refused to accept that nature alone could be his companion. He needed a woman. They conspired to set him up with Louie Strentzel. With his promise to marry Louie, John Muir had one foot in his future. By embarking on his adventure to Alaska, he kept one foot firmly in his past ways.

In Fort Wrangel, Muir dwelled among young families. There were the Vanderbilts, whose precocious daughter captured Muir's affection. There was Reverend and Fannie Young, about to become parents for the first time. Toddling children and pregnant mothers must have been a constant reminder of the settling down Muir had put off for so long. Wild man Muir confronted a life as a tamed man.

By the middle of September, Muir had lived on the hospitality of others for two months, never once going camping. The lifelong loner must have yearned for his old habits.

H. Sweet Release

The fire atop Mount Dewey was sweet release for John Muir. He was a man pulled in many directions. Echoes of the past mingled with visions of the future. John Muir sought escape on the mountain that night. As he had done so many times before, he built a fire with his bare hands. As the fire grew taller, wider, and louder, it cast light upon the clouds above and danced in the reflection of Muir's wide eyes.

John Muir was finally back in his element.

Decades later, as a much older man with failing health, Muir did not forget this fire. For the first time in his life, he put the story in print. John Muir ended his story of the fire on the mountain with this:

I have enjoyed thousands of camp-fires in all sorts of weather and places, warm-hearted, short-flamed, friendly little beauties glowing in the dark on open spots in high Sierra gardens, daisies and lilies circled about them, gazing like enchanted children;

and large fires in silver fir forests, with spires of flame towering like the trees about them, and sending up multitudes of starry sparks to enrich the sky;

and still greater fires on the mountains in winter, changing camp climate to summer, and making the frosty snow look like beds of white flowers, and oftentimes mingling their swarms of swift-flying sparks with falling snow-crystals when the clouds were in bloom.

But this Wrangell camp-fire, my first in Alaska, I shall always remember for its triumphant storm-defying grandeur, and the wondrous beauty of the psalm-singing, lichen-painted trees which it brought to light.

Music: Loch Lomond

Wrangell History Unlocked is produced by Ronan Rooney. Today's episode features music from the public domain by the Air Force Reserve Pipe Band: Scotland the Brave, John Anderson My Jo, Amazing Grace, and Loch Lomond.

Other music featured includes A Celtic Blessing performed by Bonnie Grace. Fisherman's Cousin performed by Rune Dale. All sound effects from today's episode are under license from epidemicsounds.com.