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Alaska



Wiseman, Alaska.

‘The Happiest Civilization’

The ‘happiest civilization’

Wiseman is in the Arctic, a hundred kilometres north of the polar circle. In summer, the sun does not set there and, in winter, it's pitch black for days. According to the census, the former gold-rush boomtown had just fourteen inhabitants in 2010: seven men and seven women. In the farthest northern region of the USA where Wiseman lies, wild animals have outnumbered humans several times over since time began. Herds of caribou, the reindeer's North American relative, migrate along centuries-old routes through the Gates of the Arctic National Park. Grizzly and black bears roam here too, as well as Dall sheep and wolves. Alaska, or *Alyeska* in the language of the indigenous Aleut people, means something like 'great unknown country'. Marks on the landscape bear witness to its volcanic and glacial origins. A few hundred kilometres from Wiseman, glaciers formed by the sun trace the movements of the Ice Age like living fossils. Here you will find forests of black spruce and an endless tundra of mosses, lichens and ferns. When the snow melts, nature explodes. Plants shoot up out of the ground, mosquitoes multiply and the birds arrive – over a hundred species, of which some, especially terns, have flown halfway across the globe to breed in Alaska. Nowhere else in the USA is nature so present, and nowhere else has humanity left such a faint trace on the landscape.

I decide to travel to Wiseman because, when settlers of European descent immigrated to America, the mountains and valleys in this area remained barely touched; there are still historical cabins from the gold-rush era and this region is far off the beaten track for crowds of tourists. As an environmental historian, Wiseman also interests me because of the tension caused by the nature of its geology that is expressed in its landscape. The town itself only exists because of the exploitation of one natural resource: gold. Yet, in the immediate vicinity is one of the largest wildernesses on the American continent.

Wiseman in particular interests me because I happened to read a book by Robert Marshall called *Arctic Village*. Marshall, a forester and plant

pathologist and the son of a wealthy family of New York lawyers, flew to Wiseman in a sports plane for the first time at the end of 1929. The village and the outstanding beauty of the Brooks mountain range and Koyukuk River made such an impression on the 28-year-old that he decided to return in the summer of 1930. He stayed for fifteen months, officially to investigate the growth of trees at the timberline. In truth, he was interested in the lives of the 127 Inuit, American Indians and white settlers in Wiseman. He described them as 'the happiest civilization of which I have knowledge'.¹ I pack *Arctic Village* to read on my trip, not least to gain insight into the changes that have taken place in the northern United States over the past century. The effects on the forty-ninth state – on its economy, landscape, nature and culture – were radical when vast oil resources were discovered about fifty years ago in Prudhoe Bay, its farthest northern tip.

Alaska – a very different side of America?

This journey to the extreme north of the USA is not my first. In 1999, I visited Anchorage, the most populous town in Alaska. Back then, I knew practically nothing about the state. It usually features in history books because in 1867, the US Foreign Minister, William H. Seward, bought it from the Russians for a ludicrously low price. Elsewhere, it crops up in the context of the early twentieth-century gold rush and the Cold War because, during those periods, Americans feared an attack from the nearby Soviet Union. On US land and weather maps, Alaska is nearly always placed in the Pacific Ocean like an enormous island because it does not share a border with the USA, but with Canada. So the image of the isolated, unique 49th state has inscribed itself deep into the collective consciousness. Clichés about the predominance of men and the lack of women also abound, as well as its half-yearly total darkness. Americans don't associate the fast-food restaurants and skyscrapers that I saw in Anchorage with Alaska; they think of polar bears, Inuits and a population that lives in the wilderness. But, in reality, almost three-quarters of the Alaskan population live in towns. In 2016, 740,000 people lived in Alaska, and 300,000 in Anchorage alone. Only a tiny section of the state's 1.723 million square kilometres is inhabited, and over half the towns have fewer than 500 inhabitants.²

Alaska could not survive on its own. The region depends on the state of Washington and its capital city, Seattle. Seattle's business world has maintained close ties to Alaska since the gold rush. Almost everything

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consumed in the North is either shipped or flown from Seattle.³ In economic terms, Alaska is undoubtedly an integral part of the United States.

Despite this, the state has a variety of characteristics that makes it fundamentally different from all others. Nature and culture are governed by their own unique rhythm. 'Only in Alaska', writes the journalist Roxanne Willis, 'does daily life ebb and flow with the caribou migration, the midnight sun, the Iditarod [dog sleigh race], and the Iñupiat whaling season. Only in Alaska are bear maulings, bush plane crashes, and hypothermia common threats to life and limb'.⁴

Only in Alaska does a 10,000-year-old indigenous population made up of Inuits, American Indians and Aleut still exist, still living in their ancestral habitat, not persecuted or driven out like the indigenous populations in the rest of the USA.

Alaska's geography is extreme, incomparable and virtually immeasurable. It is four times bigger than California. Its rocky, rugged coast stretches for 550,000 kilometres and is significantly longer than the coasts of the forty-eight other states taken together. Its territories lie between the arctic and subarctic range on a northern latitude of between 51 and 72 degrees. At the farthest northern point, 560 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, the sun does not rise for 77 days a year and does not set for 84. In the northernmost region of Alaska, permafrost prevails. The ground there has been frozen for thousands of years.⁵ These things all make Alaska an exceptional place, fascinating to visitors.

The fascination of the wild

I am not travelling alone. My wife, an American, thinks that Alaska is too dangerous: 'It's a vast wilderness. I want you back alive', she says. So, a friend of mine, the painter Johannes Heisig from Berlin, is accompanying me. We meet in Fairbanks, Alaska's second-biggest town. Unlike during Marshal's times, you can drive to Wiseman these days. Before we set off, we wonder why most car rental companies don't allow trips along the Dalton Highway, which is the route to Wiseman. But once we're on the road heading north, it becomes clear why (and why almost all the cars here are four-wheel-drives): most of the 666-kilometre-long Dalton Highway from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay is a deeply potholed gravel track.⁶ Long, straight sections alternate with winding, often steep segments. The oncoming traffic churns up stones that glance off our car. 'Be careful that a moose doesn't end up on

your windscreen', says the man in the car rental agency, only half-joking, as he hands us the keys. We have reason to be cautious. The Alaskan Department of Fish and Game estimates that there are easily 700 collisions a year between moose and vehicles.⁷

Our Alaskan number plates say 'Alaska: The Last Frontier'. Fairbanks people laugh about it. But outside of Alaska, a reality TV show called *The Last Frontier* has been running on the Discovery Channel for years, with over 120 episodes and high audience ratings. Why do Americans never grow tired of choreographed scenes of film crews subjected to freezing temperatures and starvation, coyote and wolf attacks, illness and floods on the Kenai Peninsula? Why was Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* such a success, a documentary featuring a young man who spends many summers living among grizzly bears in Alaska, only to be mauled to death with his girlfriend at the end?

And where does the fascination with Christopher McCandless' story come from, a 24-year-old Californian who hitchhiked to Alaska in search of answers to life's big questions, but only found mosquitoes, freezing

On the Dalton Highway, Alaska.



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temperatures and a lonely demise? During winter, McCandless starved to death in a decommissioned bus from the Fairbanks City Transit System and was only found months later by hunters. Hundreds of Americans used to make the pilgrimage every year to retrace McCandless' journey into the wild, having read Jon Krakauer's eponymous biography or watched Sean Penn's movie. McCandless' cult status led to camps being set up next to his bus before it was taken away, camps where people starved like he did. One female tourist drowned swimming in the nearby river and others had to be saved from dire situations. The film *Into the Wild* was a box-office hit in the USA and on video distribution channels. But in Alaska, McCandless is regarded as 'a poacher' and 'a thief', a 'noble, suicidal narcissist' and 'a bum'. For the Alaskan journalist Craig Medred, McCandless and his imitators represent 'self-involved urban Americans ... more detached from nature than any society of humans in history'.⁸

Perhaps, I think, as we drive from Fairbanks into the wilderness, the fascination stems from a longing for another world, one where people have not yet controlled and tamed nature, exploited and built over it, and sealed or excavated the earth. Today, in the Anthropocene, the tides have turned and nature seems completely exposed to the impulses, for good or ill, of people; so we long for it to regain its old power and strike back, at least sometimes, with force. In the vastness of Alaska, a person is a mere speck. It is an extremely remote place where men (there is barely any talk of women) show their strength and courage in the face of ruthless nature. This is reflected in Robert W. Service's poetry and Jack London's *Call of the Wild*.⁹

Hot springs in Frigidia

The highway that takes travellers north from Fairbanks is asphalted for the first few kilometres. There's not a trace of wilderness around here. Instead of travelling straight to Wiseman, we take a detour to Chena Hot Springs northeast of Fairbanks. We hadn't planned it but at the hotel in Fairbanks, they had called after us: 'Chena Hot Springs! It's a must for you! A must for historians!' At first glance, the tiny village is far from spectacular. There's an airstrip for planes, a few wooden cabins and a lake. Its special feature is the hot springs. Over a hundred years ago, Robert and Thomas Swan, two brothers looking for gold, came across the springs by chance when they were canoeing on the Chena River. The water healed Robert Swan's rheumatism and so the history of today's spa resort began.¹⁰

At the turn of the twentieth century, what must have been the tallest trees and the best source of wood in the interior of Alaska grew between the hot springs and Fairbanks. And they were needed in large quantities in the frontier town of Fairbanks. The wood was used to build houses, heat open fireplaces and power the steam engines of locomotives and ships carrying goods and food to Fairbanks.

To our astonishment, we not only find hot springs in Chena but also a vegetable garden with enormous lettuces, tomatoes, beans and peppers, zucchini and potatoes, cucumbers and all kinds of herbs. The apples from the Chena Hot Springs plantation measure almost ten centimetres in diameter. Who would have thought there would be a fruit and vegetable paradise near the Arctic Circle? The endless daylight and relatively mild climate help all kinds of fruit to thrive; in a highly modern, geothermally heated greenhouse, more than 100,000 cut flowers are harvested every year. In fact, agricultural produce in Alaska has set world records: there are reports of a nineteen-pound carrot, a 76-pound rutabaga and a whopping 107-pound cabbage.¹¹

Right near Chena Hot Springs, we come across a collection of rusting farm vehicles, among them a McCormick-Deering harvester from the 1930s. They bear witness to the immigrants' dreams in the first half of the twentieth century, when it was hoped that Alaska could become a large-scale agricultural state. Especially during the Great Depression, when many regions of North America suffered from unemployment, poverty and hunger, Alaska was considered an insider tip where the luckless might strike lucky. The territory that had previously been mocked with nicknames like 'Walrussia', 'Icebergia' and 'Frigidia' slowly underwent a positive makeover. The US government invested five million dollars in 1935 to bring 200 farming families from the Midwest to the Matanuska Valley in Alaska.

The experiment was not a great success. Contrary to the expected dry climate of sun and blue skies, resulting in gigantic yields of crops, severe rains fell in the first spring and summer. Six families gave up in the first six months and over half that number again within five years. It might have been possible to grow enormous pumpkins and ears of corn in Alaska: but unexpected snowstorms could also wipe out the entire harvest. The soil was less fertile than expected and the short planting period and harsh climate conditions did the rest. A market barely existed for agricultural produce and the infrastructure could not meet demand. Even the construction and expansion of the railway network was a mixed blessing in Alaska: the tracks might have opened new markets to Alaskan farmers, but, most of all, they

resulted in competition from Seattle, which knew how to market its produce effectively and smartly.¹² In the end, fruit and vegetable gardens like those in Chena Hot Springs remained the exception rather than the rule.

Gold prospectors

We're barely back on the highway heading north when a gigantic gold dredge comes into sight. Like a metal dinosaur, the Goldstream Dredge No 8 hunkers in the middle of a compound made up of gravel, grass and sand. In its heyday, the towering monster, with its long steel bucket line, inched seven kilometres across the compound shovelling gold-bearing earth, day in, day out, from 1928 to 1959 with a total excavation of over 212 tons of gold.¹³ Harry A. Franck, a travel writer who observed the gold dredge in 1939, describes it with fascination as being similar to 'a large scow with heavy machinery and housing on it, flowing in a little pond of water which it opens ahead by digging in, and closes up behind as it edges slowly along a creek bottom – like some prehistoric monster reaching out its long neck of chain-and-buckets, rooting in the earth with its metal snout, and drawing in enormous daily meals of golden gravel'.¹⁴

The principle of the gold dredge is incredibly simple. These machines were set to work in the twentieth century in any place where traces of gold were found in rivers and creeks. Interspersed in thin layers of stone, the gold was released through weathering and deposited itself as 'river gold' or 'alluvial gold', if you use the geological technical term, in gravel, sand or dirt. The gigantic gold dredges crawled along the rivers throwing up water-saturated soil and separating the heavy gold from the excavated earth with sieves and grooved water channels. Mining dredges like the No 8 worked very well: they combined effective digging with low operating costs. In the year 1935, the Fairbanks Exploration Company paid over 900 employees an annual total of 1.9 million dollars – at a time when the rest of the USA was still suffering from the consequences of the Great Depression. Fairbanks, too, has gold mining alone to thank for its wealth. In the mid-1930s, when the town had a population of approximately 2,700 people, the administration removed the wooden pavements and built concrete houses, as well as the first paved roads in northern Alaska.¹⁵

The craving for gold changed the face of Alaska from the end of the nineteenth century on, and the machinery of the Goldstream Dredge No 8 has left deep marks on the landscape. Historic photos show a desolate landscape,

destroyed and full of artificial mounds and deformations. Most contemporaries saw the gold dredges as the arrival of a new, benevolent era and few anticipated the destructive potential of gold mining. One of them, a journalist and successful writer from a German-American family, John Gunther, went in search of the Goldstream Dredge No 8 in 1947. For him, the gigantic machine was nothing more than 'a big, ugly gray dredge [that] squats in a dirty pool of its own creation, eats out the earth to the water in and then floats on the scum it makes'. It left behind 'the kind of furrow that an enormous obscene un-house-broken worm might leave – an encrusted seam of broken earth with mud and rocks lying across a winding trail like excrement'.¹⁶

John Gunther fretted about the unsightliness of the landscape; today, however, we know that the great gold dredges disturbed not only the appearance but also the ecology in many parts of Alaska. Mountains were literally moved to create enough water to mine gold, and large quantities of water were redirected. Goldstream Dredge No 8 benefited from the construction of a ninety-mile conduit, the Davidson Ditch, which was dug in the 1920s especially for gold mining. Where prospectors believed there was gold, water was entirely at the service of hydraulic gold mining. Once excavation began, the water used became useless. Any method was fair game to gold prospectors to separate gold from sand and rocks and so mercury was used unscrupulously because it settles and combines with gold, making it easy to extract. Then the amalgam was heated, and the mercury evaporated, leaving only molten gold.¹⁷

As we travel north, our conversations revolve around questions of time and place. Heisig, a painter, and so attuned to the visual world, suggests that the gold prospectors' disturbance of nature is barely visible half a century after the last dredges were shut down. However, this period imposed enormous *invisible* damage that is much more far-reaching than tourist places like Chena Hot Springs. Indeed, traces of the mercury used in gold mining have found their way into the soil, creeks, rivers, oceans, fish and our bodies. There has rarely been a phenomenon equivalent to gold mining that has risked such long-term harmful effects on people and the environment for the sake of fast profit.

On the road

One hundred and thirty-four kilometres north of Fairbanks, we reach the stretch of the Dalton Highway that goes all the way to the northernmost tip of Alaska: the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field on the coast of the Arctic Ocean.

Our travel guide says that Dalton is the only highway in Alaska that crosses the Arctic Circle, the only one that crosses the Yukon River via bridge, and the only one that takes you to the arctic Beaufort Sea.¹⁸

Roads in North Alaska are rare. The indigenous population did not have them and the explorers and researchers who explored the interior of this region did not build any. They arrived by ship, and mostly covered long distances by river.¹⁹ That the Dalton Highway exists despite this – a road that crosses the whole of northern Alaska – is down to one reason alone: the discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay.

This took place in February 1968 and hailed the beginning of a radically new era for the region, which had hitherto been spared major crises and wars. Oil fields were not a new thing in Alaska per se (Inuits had already made use of smaller oil deposits over a hundred years earlier). But estimates by scientists in 1968 that ten billion barrels of 'black gold' in Prudhoe Bay were just waiting to be drilled and pumped prompted a scramble for oil that captured the imaginations of investors, thrill-seekers and politicians in every state in America. Overnight, the 300,000-person state was flooded with money. Alaska's newly elected governor, Republican businessman Walter Hickel, immediately set about constructing roads to the oil fields. But the Hickel Highway (Dalton's forerunner) was only navigable in winter. Then its course was marked in the snow by long, vertical wooden stakes. In spring, however, when the snow melted, the 'ice road' transformed into a river of mud. A 'battlebook' was published by the Sierra Club, America's biggest nonprofit environmental organisation, with the title *Oil on Ice* that described the Hickel Highway 'from an environmental point of view' as 'the biggest screwup in the history of mankind in the Arctic'.²⁰ If they didn't get trapped in the mud, the powerful rigs with their long, heavy tractor-trailers, used to transport equipment and supplies north from Fairbanks, inflicted often irreparable damage onto the already susceptible permafrost. For Alaska's natural world, this disaster was a stroke of luck. The destruction of a previously untouched landscape brought to the scene at lightning speed environmental associations and politicians who prevented the highway from being converted into a paved road without first taking full stock of the ecological as well as the technological, economic and political factors. Five years later, and after a fierce battle between the various interest groups, politicians decided against transport routes that would lead through Canada and underground oil pipelines (such as those in Texas and Oklahoma). What they decided on was a haul road – a one-to-two-metre-high gravel surface that would follow the

overground trans-Alaskan pipeline. The Dalton Highway (named after the Alaskan engineer and oil researcher, James W. Dalton) was built in just five months and the pipeline in three years (from 1974 to 1977).²¹

Even though the Dalton Highway has been officially open to the public since 1994, there aren't many reasons for tourists to travel this gravel road. Dalton doesn't offer charming restaurants, marked hiking paths or spectacular views along the way, nor does it pass idyllic villages, stylish gift shops, banks, food or medical supplies stores. Deadhorse, the biggest of three villages along the Dalton Highway with 25 permanent residents, is nothing more than a large oil-industry plant that employs thousands of seasonal workers.

Our first stop is near Pump Station No 6, where the highway crosses the vast Yukon River. Here there are a couple of tumbledown wooden huts selling all kinds of burgers: big burgers and teriyaki burgers, mushroom and vegetarian burgers, BBQ and boo-boo burgers. We are in America, after all! 'We're in the wilderness, but we still need burgers', explains George, who tells us he's an ex-trucker. George is travelling in a small four-wheel-drive Chevrolet truck to show his girlfriend the route he used to drive with his tractor-trailer 'for almost twenty years'. During that time, he lost eighteen fellow truckers. 'When we were coming from different directions', George explains, 'we'd let each other know via walkie-talkie that we were coming round the bend.' Full-frontal collisions were rare, he says, but in winter, some of the drivers plunged down the big embankments and flipped over. That was fatal. 'I'll never forget those pictures.' When George is telling us his stories, it's as if he and his fellow truckers gave every bend in the road and every embankment a name: 'Oil Spill Hill', 'Beaver Hill', 'Roller Coaster' and 'Oh Shit Slide'. George is a dry kind of guy, but when he gets going on the subject of the highway, he transforms into an eloquent travel reporter. As he talks, it's hard to separate the stories he lived through from the ones he's retelling. They were going to build a dam near here, he tells us. 'They wanted to create a big lake and produce energy. But the Eskimos and environmentalists prevented it.'²²

There was indeed going to be a big dam construction near here at one point, but George must have been a child when the planning for the Rampart project began, just a few kilometres from the Yukon crossing. In the 1960s, a massive wall was supposed to be erected in the Rampart Valley to accumulate water from the Yukon and surrounding creeks and lakes to use for Alaska's energy supplies. The US Army Corps of Engineers was commissioned to carry out a feasibility study for this huge undertaking. The dam,

had it been realised, would have put 25,000 square kilometres underwater, equivalent to around two per cent of Alaska's landmass. Spawning grounds for salmon, a refuge for waterfowl, biotopes for mammals and the gravel bed of the Yukon would likely have been flooded by the biggest artificial lake in the world. George Sundborg, an external advisor for the Rampart project, described the floodplains of the Yukon as a worthless area containing 'no more than ten flush toilets'. One could 'search the whole world over', he continued, and it would be difficult to find 'an equivalent area with so little to be lost through flooding'. It is only thanks to the objections by nature conservation authorities, especially the US Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as the nascent protests by the indigenous population – seven native Athabaskan settlements would have fallen victim to the dam project – that the unique habitat of the Yukon Flats was maintained.²³ However, gigantic projects like the Rampart Dam and the oil pipeline to Prudhoe Bay made the indigenous population realise that 'white men' were not only interested in individual areas but were a grave danger to traditional landscapes and ways of life in general, such as hunting and fishing. In contrast to the American Indians in the rest of the USA, however, Alaska's indigenous population were not forced to live on reservations. In December 1971, Inuits and American Indians were granted 962 million dollars and more than sixteen million hectares of land (roughly a ninth of Alaska's entire surface area) as compensation in the most comprehensive settlement of territorial claims in US history. Indigenous territories and village communities could, according to the wording of the settlement, choose territories for their own use.²⁴ As a result, their vote became highly significant when implementing major projects or protecting nature and the wilderness.

On the journey further north, we pass through the region that was supposed to be flooded in the 1960s – the Yukon Flats. Birch, spruce and aspen trees grow here. There are many ducks, tits, woodpeckers and screech owls. We see a moose. But we can only surmise the great expanse and diversity of nature at home here, with over 36,000 lakes, ponds and backwaters. Countless migratory birds use the plains as their summer habitat. Lux and muskrats live here, alongside mink and ferrets, grizzly bears and wolves. We hike a short way through the quiet landscape. Heisig makes tape recordings all along our tour. Years later, the sounds and birdsong evoke images of a remote and incomparably beautiful landscape. How lucky, we say, that, during Jimmy Carter's presidency in 1976, the Rampart Dam was halted, and the Yukon Flats became a national nature reserve.²⁵

In Wiseman

By the time we reach Wiseman, we've covered over 600 kilometres. The town is only two kilometres from the Dalton Highway. On the outskirts, a wooden sign hangs on a tree: 'Wiseman was founded in 1908 and since then has always been able to survive on its own. Huts and property are private. So please respect the property of the people here.' The fact that the former gold-rush village is described as 'able to survive' has a deeper meaning. In the first half of the twentieth century, there were hundreds of villages like Wiseman where gold prospectors settled. Most of them are now weather-beaten or have disappeared altogether. They were never even drawn on a map. Just a few archaeological traces and relics remind visitors of the golden era. Why is Wiseman an exception? Why did the village survive? We spend a few days here looking for the answer in conversations while we explore.

We find a room at the Boreal Lodge, run by Heidi Schoppenhorst. Heidi grew up in Wiseman, was home-schooled and works part-time as a park ranger in the environmental education department of the National Park Service.²⁶ Heidi's mother, June Reakoff, and one of her brothers, Jack Reakoff, also live in Wiseman. The Boreal Lodge dates to 1910. It stands in the middle of some old cabins that are all at least half a century old. Around two-thirds of them have long since disappeared: they were eventually turned into firewood. Of those that are still standing, most are crooked. The soft earth swallows them up. 'In the last twenty years, my cabin has sunk twenty inches into the tundra. The bottommost logs have disappeared into the ground', explains Jack Reakoff, who works as a hunter, gatherer, trapper and guide, and who used to be a pilot. Bernie Hicker from Freising, Bavaria, whom we are surprised to find running a bed-and-breakfast here with his wife Uta, has taken precautions and mounted concrete blocks into the earth. The house in which he, Uta and their three Arctic-born children live used to be a gold prospector's inn called the Silverly and Bowker Saloon. For a long time, it served the Pioneers of Alaska, an organisation that preserves Alaska's gold-prospecting history, as its northernmost clubhouse, or 'Igloo No 8'. Elections used to be held here, Uta Hickers tells us. There was a library, a chapel and a dance hall; today there is still an old piano in the guesthouse. A few metres from the Arctic Getaway, as the B&B is called, there is a cabin where the post office used to be. Post has not been delivered to Wiseman for a long time. But inside the hut, the original counter, post sacks, post box and scales have been preserved.²⁷

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Some of the original goldminers' cabins can be seen around Wiseman.

Many of the huts are decorated with moose antlers. Wiseman's remote location produces some interesting results and cultivates inventiveness. There are tall, homemade antennas and satellite dishes, small trucks with eccentric modifications, walls and roofs improved with corrugated iron and aluminium from long-forgotten construction sites. Hardly anything is thrown away in Wiseman. At the edge of the village, an ancient caravan covered in yellow lichen is hidden away. Perhaps a tourist left it behind? Or was it home to a pipeline worker, a prospector or a thrill-seeker? One time we stumble across a pile of tens of thousands of old aluminium cans: Miller beer and Budweiser, Pepsi and Sprite. The locals ironically refer to this local artwork as 'The Totem Pole of the White Man'. A little further up, overlooking the village, there is a completely overgrown cemetery. Over forty people and some dogs are buried here. Most of the grave markings are made of wood, weather-beaten and no longer decipherable. One of the few gold prospectors here with a gravestone – Harry Ross (1939–1975) is decorated with an American flag and

an artificial red flower. He didn't even make it to his 36th birthday. 'You can tell the value of a man from the sharpness of his knife', says the not untypical epitaph for a frontier town cemetery.

The characteristics of remote places as conceived by the British anthropologist Edwin Ardener all apply to Wiseman: They are 'full of ruins of the past ... There is always change and intervention', 'no stagnation'. Remote areas are 'full of strangers. People in remote areas have a wide definition of "strangers", so that, whatever the real numbers of the latter, there will always appear to be a lot of them. Lastly, remote areas are obsessed with communications: the one road; the one ferry; the tarring of the road; the improvement of the boat; the airstrip' etc.²⁸

Wiseman has access to radio, TV and the Internet; nevertheless, the relevance of its history and gold rush past are in evidence. Among the houses, we find gold pans and bowls, rusty wheelbarrows and gold sluice boxes, winches and buckets, boilers and other steam-powered machinery once used to transport gold. The former colonial goods store on the southern outskirts of Wiseman – the only two-storey cabin – conjures up its long-gone past. When we go inside the building that dates to 1927, it's as if we've gone back in time to Wiseman's boomtown era. On the shelves, there are all kinds of bottles, enamel plates and cups, baking tins, little sacks of salt and metal pots containing vanilla extract and gelatin. On the walls hang flags and adverts for Winchester rifles and ammunition. The most precious find, however, is a pair of golden cast iron scales and a shining, wood-burning stove made by the Lang company in Seattle, patented in the year 1911 and fittingly named 'Arctic'.²⁹

I remember a passage in Robert Marshall's book in which he describes the Wiseman Trading Company: it had 129 different foodstuffs, according to his account, from flour to split peas, tea to olive oil, prunes to figs and macaroni to corned beef. Marshall evidently loved tables and lists, because next to the prices, he noted what you would pay for the same goods in Baltimore: products in the Arctic were twice to eight times as expensive. In spring, Marshall writes, even fresh apples and oranges were delivered via river from the south – for astronomical prices, of course. And for 'those who had a special taste or a lot of money', there was crab, lobster, shrimp and asparagus although it was all canned.³⁰ Today Wiseman no longer has a shop. Just a corner of Heidi's Boreal Lodge sells some items of food and souvenirs to tourists.

Heidi's brother Jack and his family almost exclusively live off fishing,

hunting, trapping, fur selling and Arctic handicrafts. Jack grew up in the wilderness. 'I once went to Anchorage ... but I realised the city isn't for me', he explains. The Reakoff family rhythm is determined by the weather and the migration of the animals. Every summer, Jack goes to Bristol Bay where he works as a commercial salmon fisher. He's paid in cash. He brings back between seventy and ninety kilos of frozen fish – as much as he can take on the plane – to Wiseman. Then it's time to weed and work in the garden. In the fall, he hunts Dall sheep and moose and, during the rainy month of October, he saws wood and cuts meat before the trapping season begins in November. Everything is used: either the family keeps or sells the furs, while they share lux, beaver and wolverine meat with their dogs. In April, Jack hunts bears: 'We love fresh bear meat!' Then the annual changing of the seasons starts all over again. His income is low but in Wiseman, you need less than half of the official minimum wage to lead a good life.³¹

One afternoon, Jack's mother shows us two large buckets of blueberries that she has picked in just a few hours. 'They've never been as big as they are this year', she explains. And then she tells us about the wolf that is doing its rounds in the little village. Early in the morning, it turned up in Wiseman, and while looking for something to eat, it ran into her daughter-in-law's (Jack Reakoff's wife's) cat. But the cat scared it off. Thank goodness! We don't meet the wolf, but its paw prints are clearly visible in the damp, sandy earth.³²

We're slightly surprised to come across a little church in Wiseman (without a steeple or a bell). The Kalhabuk Memorial Chapel was originally a gold prospectors' cabin from the 1910s and belonged to an Inuit called Big Jim. It was considered the social and spiritual centre of Wiseman's indigenous population. The transformation of the Inuit hut into a chapel traces back to June Reakoff, Jack and Heidi's mother – a petite woman with sharp features, silvery-white hair and a peaceful smile on her lips. June has held sermons here for over twenty years. They might tell the story of John the Baptist calling into the wilderness, the promises and the lamentations of the prophets, Christian redemption and the imminent end of the world. Sometimes, June's daughter is the only person in the congregation. The handwritten sermons lie in large piles in the cabin, like an archive in the wilderness. June christened the Kalhabuk Memorial Chapel in honour of Florence Jonas whose Inuit name was 'Kalhabuk'. Robert Marshall wrote that Kalhabuk was 'the strongest woman' he had ever met. Many times, he claimed, he saw her 'with a hundred-pound sack of flour on her back and a

fifty-pound sack under her arm'. For June Reakoff, on the other hand, she was 'certainly the wisest woman' she ever met in her life. 'Kalhabuk knew the mystery of the mountains. And she understood nature's soul.'³³

By chance, Kalhabuk's granddaughter, Ruth Williams, arrived in Wiseman a few days ago and is planning to spend her retirement in a little house here where she grew up. Her partner, Francis, is sawing a couple of planks outside. Ruth invites us into her home. It consists of one room with a homemade bed and a simple metal shelf stocked with tins. Both Ruth and Francis belong to the indigenous population. Ruth's ancestors are Inuits, and Francis's are American Indians. His father, he said, had 'Swedish and German forebears'; and, to prove it, he quotes a Swedish proverb about silver and gold. Because his father married an American Indian, Francis spent his entire childhood and youth in a Native American village. Later he moved away, fought as an American soldier in Korea, and then acquired his pilot's licence. Ruth wants to stay in Wiseman for good. Francis finds Wiseman too remote, too dark in winter and too far from the civilised world. Perhaps the little hut will only be their summer retreat.

Ruth's life story clearly shows how rapidly and radically the Arctic world has changed within one generation. Born in a tent near Big Lake, Ruth belonged, like her grandmother Kalhabuk, to a group of nomadic Inuits who made their living from hunting. For millennia, the indigenous people of Alaska hunted Dall sheep, mountain goats, brown bears or migrating caribou. In spring, the caribou move from the forested regions in the south to the fodder-rich meadows at the foot of the Brooks Range to calve. In Wiseman, Kalhabuk lived in an adobe house whose roof reached the floor like a tent. Before that, she had only known teepees that could easily be put up and taken down while hunting. Tables and chairs were things she'd only heard about.³⁴ At the age of seven, when the USA entered the Second World War, Ruth tells us that she was put in a boarding school of the Church of the Brethren missionaries in Fairbanks. This meant that all of a sudden, she 'arrived in civilisation'. After the war, she visited her grandmother regularly, sometimes several times a year, in Wiseman, where only nine people lived in 1945. Ruth constantly compares current times with her childhood. Spring now comes two or three weeks earlier, she says, and summer lasts longer. 'The trees grow faster, and the meadows higher.' There are more laws to observe nowadays, 'especially from the Bureau of Land Management' which even regulates the planting of trees. 'There are more mosquitoes', says Ruth 'and fewer caribou.' She sounds rather sad when she says this, even when

Wiseman, Alaska. 'The Happiest Civilization'

she mentions her grandmother Kalhabuk 'who always looked towards the mountains', as if 'waiting for the herds of caribou to return' – the sign of better times.

Robert Marshall assumed that the area around Wiseman was not populated before the trappers' and gold panners' cabins were built. Archaeological explorations from the mid-1980s have revealed, however, that mountain Inuits and their prehistoric ancestors hunted, carved animals and camped in the region from at least 6,000 but more likely 12,000 years ago.³⁵ A permanent settlement has only existed in Wiseman since the beginning of the twentieth century. If gold fever had not gripped the American Northwest, Kalhabuk would have not come across the mountains to settle here with her three children to hunt (and prepare) meat for gold prospectors; Ruth would not be here either and the Inuits would still live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. Without gold, Wiseman would not exist.³⁶

An abandoned caravan.



Fortune and gold

Wiseman's heyday (if a frontier settlement of wooden cabins can have a 'heyday') lasted just seven years from 1908 to 1915. During this period, plenty of whiskey flowed. In 1915 alone, sixty tons of alcohol for 300 white settlers and 75 indigenous people were shipped northwards. 'Whiskey', wrote Marshall, 'had the priority over everything else, and the trail never got so bad they couldn't haul whisky up here, no matter how scarce the food might be the road was never in too bad a condition not to transport whiskey, even when food became scarce.' The number of prostitutes in Wiseman reached a record high in 1915 when there were fourteen. From 1920, the number sank back down to zero. Between 1907 and 1911, gold prospectors near Wiseman (Nolan Creek and its tributaries) dug more gold here than in the whole of remaining northern Alaska. And just when mining in Nolan was starting to decline, a small group of gold prospectors excavated a million dollars worth of gold from great depths in the nearby Hammond River Valley in just five years from 1911 to 1915.³⁷

When we find out that there is still a working gold mine some sixteen kilometres away from Wiseman in the Nolan Valley, we set off to visit it. The route takes us partly by car and then on foot through an indescribably beautiful taiga landscape with lakes and brooks and stagnant bodies of water, as well as low spruce trees, birch and aspens, lichens and mosses, tussock grasses and Arctic cotton. Then we suddenly come to a locked barrier, a stop sign and a notice warning us, 'Danger. Do not enter. Authorized personnel only.' Permitted visitors should register in the mining office. We aren't authorised, yet continue on our way until a voice shouts: 'What are you doing here? There's no way through!' In the middle of the Nolan River a woman in a red anorak, high gumboots, a headband and sunglasses stands with a bear whistle around her neck, an old leather belt and a gun stuck in her holster. The longer we talk, the friendlier she becomes. 'I live here', says Sheriar Erickson. There is no one up at the mine at the moment. Sheriar takes us, one at a time, across the river on her quad, the bed of which glitters goldenly. She invites us into an old gold prospector's cabin and introduces us to her partner Jeff, whom she met seven years ago on a trip around the world. In Nolan, her travels came to an end. She thinks that us walking kilometres on foot is 'reckless'. 'Why didn't you come by car? You can drive to the mine. Did you see the grizzly? A grizzly mother with her cubs?' Jeff waves his hand dismissively. Grizzly bears are shy, unlike brown bears. But

when the mine is in operation, they come because the mineworkers always have barbecues. And the bears smell the meat. This summer the bears have been especially hungry. Even so, in the north, they're not as big as they are in the south, where they can fish to their heart's content.³⁸

We'd expected the Nolan goldmine, which is ironically called 'Silverado', to be in full operation. But no one has been mining here for a year and a half. From descriptions by the American writer Philip Caputo, we knew that, until a few years ago, thirty miners and a bulldozer driver had worked in the Silverado mine and excavated 'half a mountainside'. Jeff shows us his 'personal bulldozer', which arrived in Wiseman and Nolan in the 1920s. The vehicle, now completely covered in rust, is an International and bears the weather-beaten skull of a mountain goat on its cooler.³⁹ 'When I came here in 1975 after returning from Vietnam', says Jeff Lund, 'I moved into the chapel in Wiseman. Back then, there were three old-timers still living there.' By that, he means Charlie Breck, Ross Brockman and Harry Leonard, all gold prospectors who had looked for gold before the Second World War. Right at the beginning, shovels were still used in Nolan. But with new technology and mechanical shovels, great mounds of earth could be moved, Jeff explains, 'thousands of yards a day'. The old mines could be scoured again and deeper deposits sought. After a boom in gold prices, investments in old mines became attractive once again 'to mine the rest of the gold'. This meant that business started up again in Nolan in the 1990s. Jeff didn't come to the Arctic as a gold prospector but as a pipeline construction worker. 'What does gold mean to me?' He shows us a lump of gold that he found by chance. 'It feels warm', says Jeff, 'not cold, like metal usually does. Luckily I never got bitten by the gold fever bug. Perhaps I'll strike lucky one day. There are people here who make a living from it.'⁴⁰ Nolan's gold mine was known for nuggets worth more money than just their value per weight. 'Rich people like to put things like that on their desks and in one casino in Las Vegas, there's a Nolan nugget on display.'

Most gold mines, Jeff reports, have been abandoned. There are 'bad guys' at the old mines, 'especially in remote parts'. Drug dealers, black-market brokers, importers. Marijuana is grown in old mining settlements. In the past, the government didn't check the mines at all because they didn't have enough money to do so. Now, a state official drops in on Nolan from time to time.

I try to imagine how the old 'sourdoughs' (the name for experienced gold prospectors) used to live in Wiseman and Nolan. Black-and-white photographs and Super-8 films from the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at

the University of Fairbanks vividly conjure up their stories, such as that of Harry Leonard. He came to Alaska from Maine in 1928 and settled in Fairbanks with his fiancée. First, he worked in the machine hall of a gold company and then as a suit-wearing salesman for a Chevrolet dealer. But from one day to the next, he left behind his creased pants and tie, his partner and the whole of civilisation and dedicated the rest of his life to searching for Arctic gold. In 1934 he ended up near Wiseman. He lived here for half a century with his dogs, tirelessly prospecting, felling trees, hunting wolves and building gold sluices, bought himself a Jeep in 1950, which was flown in on a DC-3, shot Super-8 films and renovated abandoned cabins to resell them (which earned him the derisive nickname of ‘the Capitalist’).⁴¹ In many photos, Leonard – who was described by his friend George Lounsbury as ‘eccentric’ and ‘unapproachable’ – is almost always grinning, toothless and in a hat, alongside Inuits and other miners, a sand and gravel pump in one hand and, more than once, a pan full of nuggets in the other. Harry Leonard didn’t strike it rich, but that was the case for most gold prospectors in Alaska. He spent his retirement in the Pioneers of Alaska old folks’ home in Fairbanks.⁴²

I try and imagine the landscape seen from a bird’s eye perspective and with the mindset of an environmental historian. The gold fever that started in the mid-1800s in California and surged via Canada’s Klondike gold rush up through Alaska is considerably responsible for today’s map of Alaska. Camps, settlements and small towns sprang up everywhere that gold was found. But this wasn’t the case in the mid-1800s. In 1850, when Alaska was still part of Russia, the mining engineer Peter Petrovich Doroshin discovered gold on the Kenai Peninsula. But the Russian czar was more interested in the ‘soft gold’ of furs from polar foxes, beavers, river and sea otters. The last thing he needed was a barely controllable gold rush that would bring countless fortune-seekers to Alaska. That’s why the discovery of gold deposits there was kept secret.⁴³

After the acquisition of Alaska by the USA in 1867, however, the situation changed completely: gold mining in the new territory was viewed favourably and, at the end of the nineteenth century, Alaska experienced a stampede. The first settlements appeared in the far south, near Juneau, and spread northwards. Juneau was the first American town to be established in Alaska and was almost named Pilztown, after the German mining engineer George Pilz, who was supplied gold and other minerals by Chief Kowee of the Auke tribe of the Tlingit people. Because of these findings, the fjord town of Juneau, which is still inaccessible by road today, became the capital

of Alaska. Fairbanks and Nome, too, were founded and owe their continuing importance today to gold mining alone: they are still the most populous cities in Alaska. Only the administrative and industrial city of Anchorage is significantly larger.

Over the last hundred years, engineers and miners from all over the world have disrupted the Alaskan landscape far more radically than in the 15,000 years before. Despite the relatively sparse population of Alaska, man-made changes to its surface over the last century are certainly greater than the transformations caused by nature, such as volcanic eruptions or erosion. A railway line from Fairbanks to the southern coast near Seward was built at great expense. And in the north, gold-mining camps and settlements were created right up to the Brooks Range. Like in Nolan and Wiseman, the earth was excavated in thousands of places, mountains heaped up, and streams diverted. The only exceptions were the swampy Yukon floodplain and the North Slope – the mountain slopes in the far north. Most minor excavations were unsuccessful. They often only left ghost camps behind. The lion's share of gold production in Alaska is handled by four giant industrial gold mines. The Fort Knox mine northeast of Fairbanks, Alaska's largest gold mine, produces approximately 250 kilograms of gold every day. Over 1.5 billion dollars in gold was mined in the record year of 2013 alone, and 1.3 million tons of gold between 1880 and 2017 – an inconceivable amount. To transport this quantity of gold in railway wagons would require at least 220 freight trains, each with fifty of the most modern railway wagons fully loaded with gold.⁴⁴

Gold prospecting was never carried out on a large scale in Wiseman and the surrounding area. From their historic gold mining hut, Jeff Lund and Sheriar Erickson have a view of the Silverado mine, the rubble mountains, offices and vehicles and the vast areas that have been levelled. What keeps them in Nolan is not the mine but the indescribable beauty of nature. Just a few kilometres from the border of the Gates of the Arctic National Park, a spectacular panorama unfolds. Initially, Jeff only wanted to use his gold mining hut in the summer. But then he realised that up here near the mine, he doesn't have to pay rent, unlike in Wiseman. There is no property tax, no telephone, no computer, no television, no garbage fee and no sales tax.⁴⁵ With a visibly cheerful expression on his face, he continues: 'You catch a moose, you have a small garden, and a hole in the ground as your refrigerator. And suddenly life doesn't cost much anymore.' 'We have plenty of time to read', adds Sheriar. And indeed, the walls of their small log cabin are lined with

bookshelves from top to bottom, stocked primarily with classic novels and philosophers like Descartes. 'In winter', says Sheriar, 'it's all ours.' There are a few animals, like Boreal chickadees, Canada jays and ravens. They have to ski six kilometres to fetch water. And they have to use the two and a half to three hours of semi-darkness in the winter to go out. Then 'the snowmelt is incredible, an onrush of new life in spring. The birds have chicks. Everything has to be done quickly.' As we listen to them, my thoughts turn to Robert Marshall. Perhaps Sheriar and Jeff in Nolan and Jack Reakoff, Uta and Bernie Hicker are some of the 'happiest folk', like those he found in Wiseman ninety years ago.⁴⁶

The Gates of the Arctic

Wiseman's happiness has a name: The Gates of the Arctic National Park. Just beyond the Nolan gold mine, west of the sixteen-kilometre-wide Dalton Highway corridor, where all roads end and the wilderness takes over, the area of the northernmost national park on the North American continent starts: the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve. Wiseman's hinterland has remained largely untouched because of the huge nature reserves in northern Alaska. Without them, the region would look very different today: due to its mineral resources, development would have been difficult to avoid.

The Gates of the Arctic National Park spans part of the Brooks Range, named after geologist Alfred Hulse Brooks. The mountain range, which was originally twice as high and has been eroded over long periods, is geographically a continuation of the Rocky Mountains, but a separate geological formation. Hundreds of thousands of years ago, a prairie existed here, which was driven upwards by tectonic shifts and formed mountain peaks. Since the continental plates were once below sea level, you can still find marine fossils on the peaks of mountains in the middle of the Arctic. It was only in recent geological times that an ice age began. Glaciers, whose meltwater shifted and changed the landscape, now sustain a variety of streams and rivers. Six major rivers have been declared protected areas by the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.⁴⁷ Parts of the Gates of the Arctic National Park have been declared a preserve; together with the adjacent Noatak area, it forms the largest 'wilderness area' in the USA. The name of the park, established by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, goes back to Robert Marshall. He thought that two mountains (Frigid Crags and Boreal Mountain) looked like a natural portal and so he named it the Gates of the Arctic. Marshall

was fascinated by terra incognita – and nowhere in North America at the time was there such a huge uncharted area as the Brooks Range. Owing to Marshall's trip to Wiseman and his writing, the region had already been discussed for decades as a potential area for a national park.

From a European perspective, the scale of the Gates of the Arctic National Park is gigantic. At 30,448 square kilometres, it covers an area larger than the whole of Belgium; yet only just over 10,000 visitors come every year. Only in specially designated areas are hunting enthusiasts with a permit allowed to shoot game. The people of Wiseman once resisted closing parts of the national park to hunters and turning them into reserves.⁴⁸ But overall, those we speak to are happy that the US federal government has protected extensive areas of northern Alaska. Hunting and fishing are only allowed for the local population in many places to make a living, but even here restrictions apply.⁴⁹ People from outside also have some advantages. In the summer, Susan Holly works for the National Park in Bettles (a couple of hours by snow sledge from Wiseman) and spends from October to March with her husband hunting and trapping in a cabin in the park; she is disappointed that tourists are allowed to travel by sports aircraft to some areas of the Gates of the Arctic National Park, whereas residents have to use traditional means such as dog sledges, snowmobiles and boats to transport solar panels, batteries and dog food (1.5 tons per year!) to remote hunting areas.

The establishment of the national park and wilderness areas is the result of conflicts of interest and political disputes that go back a long way. The extremely short version of the story is: two camps with opposing ideologies have always existed in Alaska. In one camp, some see economic benefits from gas and oil extraction, and subordinate everything to progress, playing down environmental damage. In the other camp sustainability advocates acknowledge that the long-term consequences of exploiting nature are hazardous: they support ecological protection measures. Arguments of both groups have a particular tradition in the USA. Many American pioneers saw the expansion and development of the vast North American continent as 'divine destiny'. But when national parks – starting with Yellowstone in 1872 – were created, nature conservation representatives also established a specifically American institution. In Alaska, these two philosophies have taken up irreconcilable positions, more so than in other parts of the USA. The majority of Alaska's inhabitants represent the ideology of progress. This camp also receives support from proponents of the raw materials industries, commercial interests, the Juneau government and most Republican deputies.

It is opposed by environmental associations, the government in Washington, especially when led by Democrats (it is responsible for setting up most protected natural areas), the national press and the majority of Democrats.

The promoters of the doctrine of exploitation appear to have an advantage because they can appeal to the short-term economic needs of citizens and outbid their opponents financially – through advertising, lobbying, campaigns and court proceedings. Especially in underdeveloped Alaska, which owes its wealth to natural resources such as gold, oil and gas, the pioneering concept of Manifest Destiny still finds fertile ground today.⁵⁰ Emptiness and cold, seclusion and the sparse population had led many scientists and politicians to push radical plans and infrastructure projects, often in the name of national security, without exploring the ecological consequences. One example was Project Chariot, a proposal that would have created a gigantic crater and an underground port using thermonuclear bombs in 1958 in the far north of Alaska – ironically close to a place called Point Hope. Advocates of the project downplayed, if not completely denied, the effects that nuclear contamination would have on Inuit bodies.⁵¹

Dalton Highway and oil pipeline, north of the Gates of the Arctic National Park.



Wiseman, Alaska. 'The Happiest Civilization'

Environmental protectionists were able to stop Project Chariot and push through a series of initiatives that were not of high interest to large corporations: programmes to rescue polar bears and Greenland whales, as well as the protection of bald eagles and waterfowl in the Yukon Delta. However, environmental associations were often powerless to stop oil extraction in Prudhoe Bay, the construction of the Dalton Highway or underground nuclear tests on the uninhabited Aleutian island of Amchitka – projects all backed by the federal government. (Nonetheless, the Amchitka nuclear project led directly to the creation of Greenpeace.)⁵² Protests against projects on national territory are occasionally successful. If, however, the land belongs to the state of Alaska, the chances for sustainability advocates are almost always worse; and environmental associations are the least effective against the economic interests of indigenous people. Nevertheless, environmental awareness has increased overall across the board in recent decades, and ecology advocates have been able to delay or halt several major projects. In general, the dispute over Alaska's almost untouched nature resembles an ongoing tennis match, in which the opponents watch each other closely, constantly adjust their technique, and coordinate and improve their movements. Each successful strike may be followed by a barely preventable counterattack. Following Donald Trump's presidency, for instance, supporters of oil and gas production suddenly gained the upper hand, while environmentalists found themselves in the role of deflection and defence. The administration of Joe Biden in turn suspended oil drilling leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, thereby reversing a signature achievement of the Trump presidency. Had it been up to the Trump administration, the gates of the arctic would have been flung wide open for drilling rigs in the northern tip of Alaska.⁵³

Past and future

Why did Wiseman survive? We asked ourselves that when we arrived there. It is astonishing that it still exists when you think of the fate of other gold-mining locations. What kept the village's inhabitants in the Arctic? Here, as elsewhere, people have always lived off the resources that secured their survival. The indigenous population hunted animals that regularly migrated through the area; and, with the discovery of gold, some rugged men were able to eke out a reasonably secure existence. 'In the Wiseman area, gold is not simply extracted from streams and rivers, but usually from deep-hole drilling', Jack Reakoff explained. 'The get-rich-quick types didn't like this

area.' Civil engineering requires time and patience. In Wiseman, therefore, the people who settled were industrious, stubborn and tenacious. Those who lived here could not rely on regular deliveries of food and equipment. Instead, many became hunters, gatherers or trappers, and like the Reakoff or Hicker family they continue this way of life today as a part of their livelihood. When gold supplies ran low, the construction of the oil pipeline brought work to all those who could prove residence in Wiseman. Again, a natural resource and its high value drew people to the north. The opening of the Dalton Highway also contributed to Wiseman's survival. Since the village can be reached by car, tourists – not in droves, but from all over the world – have visited the remote village, many of them to see the spectacular Northern Lights. As a result, an abstract value – the beauty of nature and the untouched expanse of the surrounding protected areas – has become a consumable natural resource.⁵⁴

Wiseman is not Alaska. But our visit to the region and an attempt to understand the reality of people's lives and the dynamics of nature in a larger historical context brings to light tensions and challenges, realities and opportunities that are important not only for Wiseman but far beyond. What surprises us on our journeys north from Wiseman (towards the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay, the largest in the USA) and finally back to Fairbanks, is the concurrent existence of things that are non-concurrent: the remoteness of the Arctic world and its connection to the global economy (via pipelines, tankers and the Internet); satellites and subsistence economy; nature conservation and oil spills (of which only the large ones grab media headlines); the apparent constancy of a landscape and its change during the present climate crisis; the simultaneity of past and present.

Fifty million years ago, Alaska had a hot, humid climate, similar to present-day Florida. It took millions of years for the once vast tropical forests to evaporate and be ground into oil and natural gas. What was irreplaceably produced by nature over millions of years has been consumed almost completely within three generations of humans. Was it worth it? If so, for whom?

Here in the north, unlike in Anchorage, where almost all tourists end up, the extreme contradiction of Alaska becomes visible: the contrast between radical protection and the perilous exploitation of nature. This is where the controversy over the meaning of protected areas arises 'where man is only a visitor' (in the wording of the US Wilderness Act of 1964). How important is it to preserve areas that are largely untouched by humans? Indigenous groups and the inhabitants of Wiseman claim that hunting should not be

ruled out. Others make a plea for extracting resources 'to a limited extent'.

But there is also criticism of preserving the wilderness. The environmental historian William Cronon once warned against perceiving untapped nature, especially in Alaska, as divine and the epitome of a perfect, primitive past, a place where people (often men) can discover their true (bestial) nature. Doesn't this imply, Cronon thought, that elsewhere, the places people live in are tainted and unworthy because they have lost their original natural resources? And doesn't it follow that less spectacular places are automatically judged as disposable and played down in importance?⁵⁵

When Johannes Heisig and I leave the north and return to air-polluted cities built on sealed ground, we're convinced that it is valuable per se to leave parts of the globe to their own devices. The fact that ancient subsistence practices and ecologies have been preserved north of the Arctic Circle, alongside technological oil-producing landscapes of the twenty-first century, is of global interest today. The wilderness of Alaska has become an emblematic place, both nationally and internationally. It conveys a message: even if you can, human beings, don't subjugate every corner of the globe to your power! For many, this slogan may not be enough in the age of man-made global warming – and rightly so. Rising temperatures have long since caused glaciers to melt, permafrost to thaw, tree lines to move higher faster, and animals and plants to migrate or die out. What failed miserably almost a hundred years ago – sustainable vegetable production in the Matanuska Valley – is no longer a utopia. Wiseman's future and happiness won't be decided locally. Both oil interests and conservation initiatives have their most effective lobbies in national and international centres of power. But what becomes of Wiseman (in particular) and the Arctic North (in general), and which historical and ecological decisions come to reign in the future, will be a barometer of how Americans deal with their continent and how humans deal with the planet as a whole.