

a rope yarn. A dozen years of sailing the Baltic and the North Sea, his position bettering almost voyage by voyage, and then--"Had I been born with brass on my corners, you'd one day be calling me Admiral," Melander half-joked to his deckhands the day he was made first mate.

Just such a billet, second in command of a schooner bearing twenty fresh seven-year men from Stockholm in the spring of 1851, was the one which shunted Melander to Alaska. Russian America, that world-topping wilderness yet was, its wholesale purchase by the United States--and consequent rechristening of New Archangel to what the coast's natives knew this vital speck of site as, Sitka--waiting a decade and a half into the future. Russian America: on the broad map of midnineteenth-century empires, a colossal crude crown of northwestmost frontier significantly apart from the Hudson's Bay span of Canadian dominion; indeed, tipped sharply, as if in deliberate spurn, away from London to the direction of Siberia and St. Petersburg.

Although he had no farthest thought of new endeavor at the onset of that voyage, a pair of outlooks swerved Melander into staying on at New Archangel. The first loomed square ahead--the eleven-month expanse of return voyage in the company of the schooner's captain, a fidgety little circle-faced Finn who was veteran in the Baltic trade but had proved to be quite literally out of his depth on the ocean. The other lay sidewise to Mister First Mate Melander's scrutiny, berthed there



against a backdrop of Alaskan forest the spring morning when he reached final exasperation with his dim captain. The Russian-American Company's steamship, the Emperor Nicholas I.

In a time and place earlier, Melander would have been the fellow you wanted to set a spire on a cathedral; in a later, to oversee a fleet of mail planes. But on an April day in 1851, at one of the rim-ends of the known world, what sat at hand was this squatty wonder of self-propulsion and a proclaimed shortage of gifted seamen in these northern Pacific waters which the fur-trading Russians historically had navigated, pre-Nicholas and pre-Melander, like men lurching across ice.

"If the wind were clever enough," Melander observed to the baffled Finnish skipper upon taking leave of him, "it ought to snuff out these steamsnorters before they get a start, aye?"

~~For~~ as will happen, Melander after pledging to the Russian-American Company did find his life altered by the alluring new nautical machinery, right enough--but not in the direction hoped. Only seldom the Russians fired up the Nicholas, which proved to require approximately two days of chopping by the wood crew to feed the boilers for each day of voyage--a visiting Hudson's Bay officer once amended the vessel's name to Old Nick, on the ground that it consumed fuel at



the rate you might expect of Hell--and on the occasions when its paddlewheels were set into ponderous thwacking motion, positions aboard were snatched by bored officers of the small Russian navy contingent stationed at New Archangel. Melander's service aboard the Nicholas occurred only whenever the Russian governor, Rosenberg, took his official retinue on an outing to the hot springs at Ozherskoi, an outpost south eighteen miles along the coast from Sitka Sound. In Melander's first Alaskan year this happened precisely twice, and his sea-time-under-steam totaled six days.

The rest of his workspan?

no 4/ Melander maybe under different policy would have gone on to earn his way up the ranks of the Russian-American Company at New Archangel like a lithe boy up a schooner's rigging; become a valued promyshlennik, harvester of pelts, of the Tsar's Alaskan enterprise in the manner, say, that along the adjoining fur frontiers of northmost North America occasional young Scotsmen of promise were let to fashion themselves into field captains of the Hudson's Bay Company by learning to lead brigades of trappers and traders, keep the native tribes cowed or in collaboration, deliver a reliable per cent of profit season upon season to London and, not incidentally, to hold those far spans of map not only in the name of their corporate employers but for the British crown which underlay the company's charter terms like an ornate watermark. But maybe is only maybe, and the fact is that within the Tsar's particular system of empire-by-proxy, Swedes and other outlanders who signed on with the Russian-American Company's fur-gathering enterprise did so as indentured laborers, seven-year men. And so a Russian overseer conferred



assignment on Melander as promptly as the supply schooner vanished over the horizon on the voyage back to Stockholm and Kronstadt.

"Friend sailor," the overseer began, "we are going to give you a chance to dry out your bones a bit," and Melander knew that what followed was not going to be good. Because of his ability of handling men and, from time on the Baltic, his tongue's capability with a bit of Russian and spatter of Finnish, and his Gotland knowledge of fish, henceforth Melander was in charge of the crew which salted catches of salmon and herring for New Archangel's winter larder.

Seven-year men. "The Russians' hornless oxen," as Melander more than once grumbled it.

"Deacon Step-and-a-Half is at it again."

Melander peered with interest along the card-players and