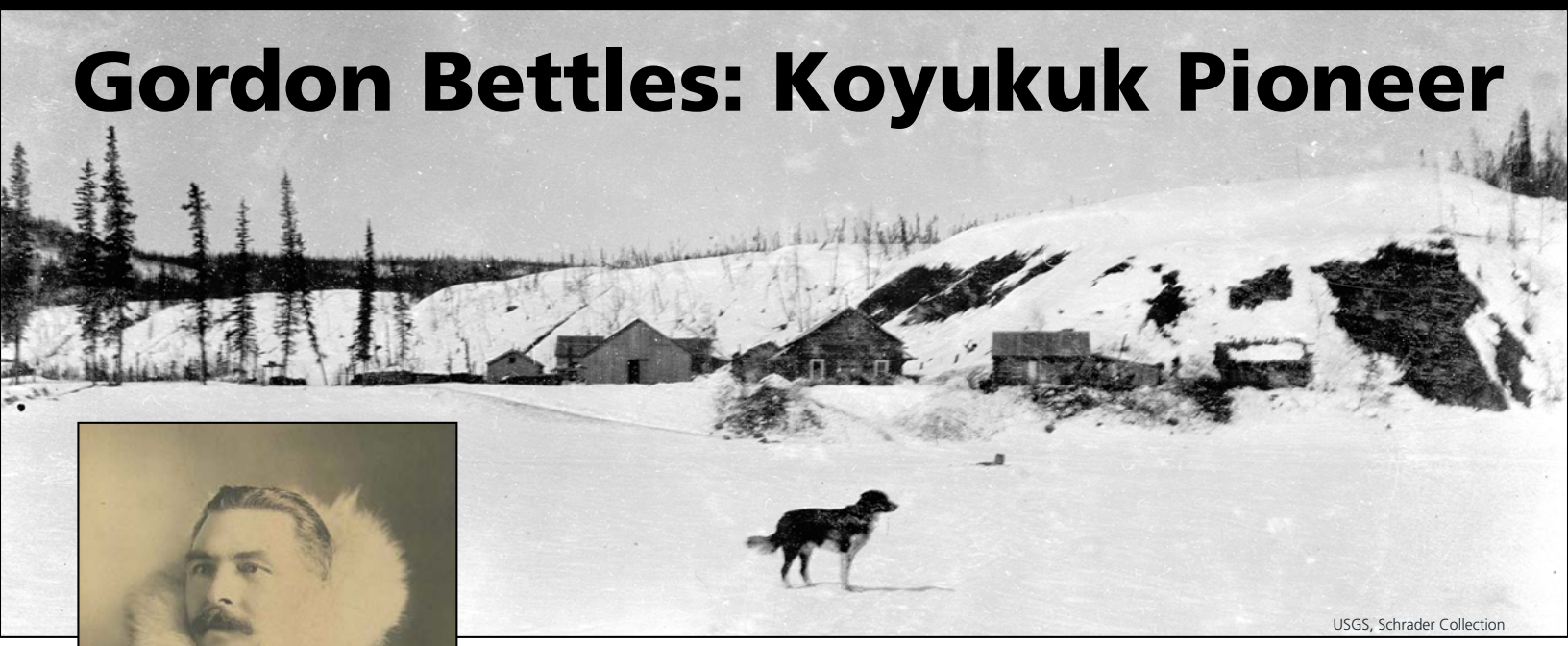
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve

Gordon Bettles: Koyukuk Pioneer



USGS, Schrader Collection

The tiny outpost of Bettles (seen here in 1900) was founded as a supply depot on the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River at the northernmost navigable point for steam launches. Gordon C. Bettles (left) established the store there in 1899 to supply prospectors heading farther north in search of gold. Portrait courtesy of Candy Waugaman, Bettles Family Collection.

It is hard to imagine telling the story of Koyukuk gold without mentioning the energetic and good humored Gordon C. Bettles—fur trader, shopkeeper, prospector, newspaperman, and friend to the down-on-his-luck placer miner. In 1888, Bettles was twenty-seven years old and eager to make his fortune. He had been mining for silver in Montana, but he abandoned his claims when he heard about a gold discovery on the Fortymile River in what is today Canada's Yukon Territory. Although a decade would pass before the great Klondike gold rush, Bettles joined a group of sixty men who scaled Chilkoot Pass and risked life and limb to travel the upper stretches of the Yukon River in rough boats. Before they found gold at the mouth of the Fortymile, twenty of the group had given up and returned home. But not Gordon Bettles!

My father was in practically every stampede in Alaska and he walked to most of them, a pack on his back and a rifle in his hand.

—Mr. Bettles' daughter
Marguerite Bettles Golder

Pioneering shopkeeper

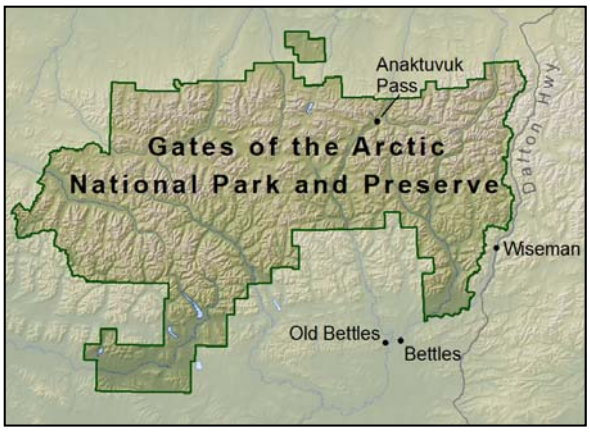
For several months he traveled through Fortymile country using a portable sluice box called a "rocker" to wash up to $50 per day from streambed gravel. However, as soon as he caught wind of prospects in the Kuskokwim region in southwestern Alaska, he and his partner left in search of gold and adventure. After a long winter and no signs of gold, Bettles returned to the Yukon River and in partnership with the fur trader Al Mayo he started a trading station near the confluence of the Tanana River. This was the beginning of his career as a shopkeeper and entrepreneur in some of Alaska's most remote gold fields.

By 1890 a group of miners discovered gold on Koyukuk tributaries north of the Arctic Circle, and Bettles responded by ordering 20 tons of supplies and forming G.C. Bettles & Company. "From a pickaxe to a candle" was the company's motto in newspaper ads. Four years later he opened a store, or "beanshop" as the miners called them, at a place along the Koyukuk he called Arctic Village. Business was slow in the early years because only a handful of men were willing to brave harsh winters and dig through frozen Koyukuk gravel bars to collect gold dust, flakes, and nuggets. In addition to running his store, Bettles owned the Yukon River steamboats the *Cora* and the *Koyukuk* and traded with Alaska Native trappers for the furs of marten, red and silver fox, beaver, and mink. Early in his career as a shopkeeper, Bettles earned a reputation for generosity because he freely offered miners a "grubstake" of food and supplies that they could pay back when they found their gold.

Frontier newspaperman

In 1892 Bettles married Sophie Kokrine, daughter of a Yukon River trader from Russia, and started a family. He also became a charter member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers, an organization formed to bring order and ethical conduct to the emerging gold camps. The Bettles name also spread throughout the region when he volunteered to help in the publication of *Yukon Press*, the first newspaper in the interior Alaska. In the paper's first edition, he warned eager prospectors that a full season of back-breaking labor was needed on the Koyukuk before they might have a hope of seeing profits:

> *Miners coming to this section of the country from the outside world: I deem it necessary to advise them, owing to the difficulty of opening deep diggings, as it will at least take the greater portion of the first season before much, if any returns are realized, to come prepared to meet those obligations.*



Gold rush stampede

In 1898, five years after Bettles first reported on the Koyukuk, the overflow from the famous Klondike gold rush sent two thousand gold-hungry prospectors to Koyukuk country where they believed they would find the next El Dorado. Wherever their steamboats stopped the miners built log cabin camps and started digging. Responding quickly to the new opportunity, Bettles established the outpost of Bergman and another farther north he called Bettles. By the following spring, the prospectors' gold fever had faded and only one hundred miners remained, but the Koyukuk mining district held on with additional gold discoveries in 1906 and 1909.

Storefront at "Old Bettles" on the Koyukuk, 2008.

After the rush

Beginning in 1901 the tiny settlement of Bettles had a post office and continued to serve local miners, but by the 1930s most of the residents had moved on to Wiseman or, in the 1940s, to the new Navy airfield seven miles upriver (the town that grew around the airfield was also called Bettles). Today the tiny outposts established by Gordon Bettles are ghost towns or have disappeared entirely, but the larger story of gold mining in the region has become an important part of the history in and around Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve.

For more information

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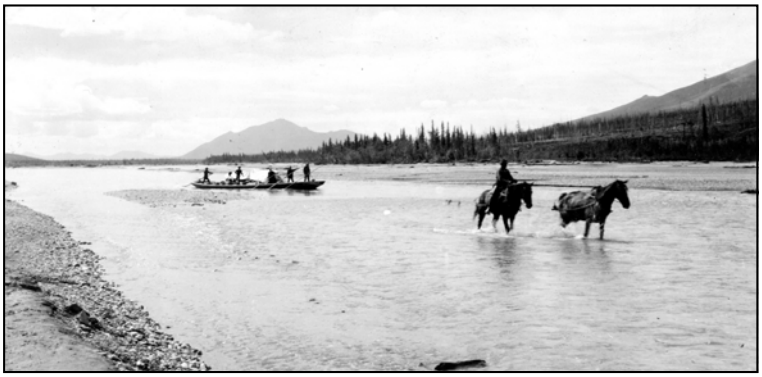
www.nps.gov/gaar/historyculture

Counter-clockwise: Gordon Bettles (far left with dog) joins the Yukon Order of Pioneers, 1895; his store and saloon at Bergman on the Koyukuk River, 1899; horses pull supply scows up the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk, 1911; Marie Kokrine, Sophie Kokrine, and daughter Marguerite, ca. 1900. Photographs from Alaska State Library, Anchorage Museum, USGS, and Candy Waugaman.