

Linda S. Thibodeau

Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,
& Museums

lam.alaska.gov

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Robert C. Banghart

Chief Curator

Alaska State Museums

395 Whittier St.

Juneau, Alaska 99801-1718

907.465.2901

Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: **October 8, 2010**

Mark Whitman to recount the tall tales of Willoughby

The Alaska State Museum will host a special presentation in celebration of an oft-forgotten Juneau pioneer. Mark Whitman will present “Dick Willoughby’s Book of Claims,” a free historical and entertaining presentation geared toward adults, at 7 p.m. on Oct. 22 and again at 2 p.m. on Oct. 23.

Historian and librarian Whitman has dedicated years of his life toward the study of Richard Gentry Willoughby, the man whose name in the present day is associated with the downtown Juneau avenue and an island near the entrance to Glacier Bay. But to Whitman and other historians, “Uncle Dick,” as the man was affectionately known, was one of Southeast Alaska’s original characters.

Willoughby came to the region from Missouri after working his way up the West Coast, staking his claim on properties around the region in the mid to late 1800s in the name of gold. He filed more mining claims than most men of his day, many of which were located on Admiralty Island. But after he proved that he had a nose for gold, he realized that the real money was in the saloon business.

“Dick Willoughby is one of those characters who knows how to empty a man’s pockets overnight, usually with dancing girls,” Whitman said.

He did quite well for himself financially, but the act of amassing wealth wasn’t Willoughby’s claim to fame. He was best known — and is most fondly remembered by Whitman — as a hoax master. His tall tales spread far and wide, some making headlines as fact in such trusted publications as The San Francisco Call, The Richmond Dispatch, and The New York Times.

Willoughby's biggest claim, and a favorite story of Whitman's, is the discovery of the "Silent City," a phenomenon appearing only on June 21 of each year. Willoughby claimed, and convinced many to believe, that on this day, a phantom city would appear on a great glacier outside of Juneau. It is stories such as this that led Whitman to name Willoughby as "one of the most colorful, interesting people in the history of the Northwest."

"He was the real deal, hiding behind the mask of the fool," Whitman said. Willoughby's other claims include outrageous accounts of bear encounters, miraculous healings and ventriloquist tricks. He was also a musician and dance caller who performed in seedy establishments along Juneau's original Front Street. His cabin sat atop Telephone Hill, which at the time was a prime location to greet tourists with his hoaxes as they arrived at the steamship dock. In his day, Willoughby made himself the talk of his town, and people would gather around him to listen to his stories. Why, then, does this character's story now go untold?

"I think his story is buried because it's inappropriate, but it's really important for us to remember who we are and where we came from," Whitman said.

Whitman's presentation will be given with the accompaniment of Bob Banghart on the fiddle and Jack Fontanella on banjo. Parental discretion is advised as the performances contain raucous historical content for mature audiences.

Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 and under are admitted free of charge. An annual pass that allows unlimited visits to the Alaska State Museum and the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka is available for \$15. Assistance is available for visitors with special needs. Please contact Visitor Services at 465-2901 before the visit.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Phone (907) 465-2901 Fax (907) 465-2976

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