

July 1866

Letter from George Kennan to Doctor Morrill, July 4-16, 1866

Citation:

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Summary:

During the Russian-American Telegraph Expedition to Siberia, American explorer George Kennan writes to Dr. Charles Morrill of Norwalk, Ohio, Kennan's hometown. The letter lacks the final part and signature, as do several others reproduced here.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Ghijigha Head of Ghijighinski Gulf

Monday July 4th - 16th 1866

Dear Doctor,

I suppose Doctor you are now for the first time aware of the existence of such a place as that whose unpronounceable name stands at the head of this sheet. I fancy I see you as you tear open the envelope and glance at the letter, turn half around in that easy office chair of yours and demand with a look of astonishment, "Ghijigha! Where in the ---- name of all that's geographical is that?" You needn't look up some old Colton's Atlas or musty gazeteer with the hopes of finding it: Previous to our arrival it hadn't assumed sufficient importance to attract the attention of map publishers and gazeteer men so that we may be regarded for all practical intents and purposes as original discoverers. It is a little village situated in North Eastern Siberia at the head of Ghijighinski Gulf one of the northern arms of the Okhotsk Sea, a village destined to come into future notoriety as the "Head Quarters of the Asiatic Division Russian American Telegraph Co." I have been living here idly since my return from Anadyrsk on the 27th of March awaiting the arrival of our vessels but as they seem to have abandoned us entirely I have taken to writing my own memoirs in three volumes profusely illustrated to be handed down to posterity by my friends in case the said vessels never come and I fail to succeed in getting once more to a civilized country. It's to be entitled "Life sufferings and captivity of a Siberian Exile" written by himself. In the intervals of this more serious labor by way of relaxation I am also writing letters to all my friends with the faint hope of eliciting some response it being now fourteen months since I last heard from friends or home. I intended to have written you last winter previous to my departure for Anadyrsk but my time was almost wholly occupied with preparation for winter travel arrangements for dogs, sledges, and the outfit of our little party so that I had barely time to write a short letter home. Since that time I have wandered continually like a restless Korak over all the country between here and the Gulf of Anadyrsk driving my sledge in the day and sleeping on the snow under the blue polar sky at night so that I could not have written had I felt inclined. I never have received a letter from home since I wrote them that I was about to start for Kamchatka and I have a great curiosity to see what they thought when they learned that we had gone north through Kamchatka on horseback. Many were the anxious consultations of the little family circle around the fireside I have no doubt as the long winter evenings came on and great the fears for our safety. I know exactly how they would talk; Father would expatiate upon my being too ambitious, too reckless & adventurous and would express fears that I might volunteer to go on hazardous & difficult expeditions too fatiguing for my strength. Mother would ever have before her eyes a picture of her wandering son lying sick in some miserable hut in the wilderness without friends without assistance & with no Doctor Morrill to help him out of his difficulties, while Jennie would talk anxiously of the hardships the storms the extreme cold and the danger that that "delicate constitution" of mine would give out under the many trials to which it would be subjected. Hattie with a little spark of pride in her brother's adventurousness would combat Father's views but still think with a sigh how hard it was to be exiled for so long from home friends society and country. Read them the letter & see if it isn't exactly what they have thought a hundred times. In the meanwhile the unconscious subject of their discussions was driving dog sledges, hunting reindeer, getting lost in mountain storms, & living in Korak or Tchucktchi yourts on vast snowy steppes six thousand miles away. Happily none of their gloomy anticipations were realized. I have been on one or two somewhat hazardous expeditions but good fortune and good health have never deserted me & I have the satisfaction of knowing that I have not failed in anything which I have undertaken. I think that the strength of my constitution is now triumphantly proved: I have a better opinion of it myself than I have ever had before since it has held out through the hardships we have had to experience and it won't do for Mother to base her fears any longer upon my delicate health & "want of vitality"!! Perhaps she thinks it doesn't require any vitality to sleep on the snow in a temperature of 50o below zero, to ride horseback for a week wet to the skin day and night with nothing of any account to eat, to travel in five months on horses, reindeer & sledges over six thousand versts^[1] of Siberian country. Perhaps it don't, but I think

a young man with a delicate constitution would experience some difficulty in doing it.

I have written home an account of our "travels and adventures" which I presume Father has shown you so I won't repeat it again but give you a short summary of the work accomplished in the Asiatic Division since our arrival here in December and the prospects for the successful construction of the line. The route six thousand versts in length between the Amoor River and Behrings Straits has been explored and located although in one or two places a further exploration in summer is desirable. Houses & buildings for our use have been purchased or built at Okhotsk Yamsk Ghijigha Penjina Anadyrsk & various other points along the route. Dogs sledges and reindeer for purposes of transportation have been bought and are on hand. Work has been going on at numerous places between here and Okhotsk & a considerable number of poles are in the ground. Fifty laborers were engaged at Anadyrsk in April and we confidently believe that all the poles for the Anadyr River are by this time cut and distributed as Mr Bush had ordered to raft them down the river as soon as the ice would permit. Yourts or houses for shelter have been built every thirty or forty miles between Anadyrsk & the mouth of the river and everything is so to speak in a state of forwardness. This has been accomplished since December by five men. The exploration was entirely satisfactory and I believe there is not a doubt in the minds of any of the officers who made it but that the line in Asia can be successfully built & maintained. I located the route between here and the mouth of the Anadyr and for that portion of it I can speak confidently. I would guarantee, properly supported, to build it in two years & work it as successfully and cheaply as any line of equal length in the States. I do not speak hastily or without consideration; I have been over the whole of it two or three times and am thoroughly acquainted with all of the obstacles and difficulties. The route between the Amoor River and the straits may be divided accordingly to the nature of the country into three distinct & widely differing divisions each presenting peculiar obstacles & each requiring a different method in the construction of the line. First the timbered region extending from the Amoor to a point two hundred miles west of Ghizigha. Second the barren region from that point to the Aklan River a distance of five hundred versts and Thirdly the river region from the Aklan to the mouth of the Anadyr eight hundred versts. In the first division the heaviest work will consist of chopping away the abundant and unnecessary timber to make a road for the line. In the second the difficulty will be in transporting poles from long distances on dog sledges as there is hardly a tree in the whole 500 versts except occasionally on the banks of the streams. In the third or River division there is no difficulty of great importance: the line will follow everywhere the course of timbered & for the most part navigable rivers where there will be no necessity either of chopping away timber or of bringing poles from long distances. The rivers afford abundance of game and fish and excellent sites for stations. We will always be able to supply the stations throughout the year with fresh meat which can be obtained at a trifling price from the numerous tribes of Tongoos Koraks and Tchucktchis who roam with immense herds of reindeer everywhere. Horses and cattle will take care of themselves throughout the year in most places. There are thousands of them at Kolyma in lat 71o. Cabbages and turnips can be cultivated here & potatoes parsnips carrots & beans between here and the Amoor. Fish geese and ducks abound everywhere in summer. You see that the question of subsistence is not one which need trouble us. As for scurvy, it is almost unnecessary to say I have never heard of such a thing in the country. When the line is built & in working order, comfortable station houses constructed every thirty or forty miles each supplied with dog teams horses & cattle & surrounded by a little garden, newspapers magazines and new books circulating at short intervals throughout the line from St. Petersburg (arrangements for the have already been made), I really cannot see that it will be such a terrible hardship to live here. The officers will have light labor and plenty of amusement. They can cultivate their little garden, ride horseback, sail, shoot bear and reindeer in the summer and read, write, sleep, drive dog teams & trap foxes hares and partridges in the winter to say nothing of masquerades, dances, dog racing, and walking on snow shoes which are among the amusements of that season. We shall always get the news of the world of course as promptly and regularly as if we lived at home. I may be peculiar in my views but I had rather live two years of such a life here than one of that dull monotonous treadmill existence which I lived in

Cincinnati. I have probably experienced as great hardships as any that can befall travelers in this country and much greater than will be possible for any of the employees to experience hereafter, yet on the whole I have enjoyed myself pretty well so well in fact that I have no objections to a year or two more. So much for life in Siberia as it will be.

I suppose you are not aware of the fact that I have acquired considerable reputation in Siberia as a medical practitioner. It is true & is an illustration of how a reputation may be sometimes established on a very slight foundation. I am considered in Anadyrsk as deeply skilled in the healing art and the numerous cases I have had there would have made a young physician's fortune- Ha Ha. It would have been a laughable sight if you could you have seen Doctor Kennan visiting his patients on a dog sledge some bright clear winter's morning in Anadyrsk. I used to go quite often to a Russian's about three miles up the river to visit an old lady who was sick with inflammation of the lungs. I was generally driven over by a Cossack with a fine team of dogs & it used to be a very pleasant drive. Sentinels were always posted outside of the house to give notice of my approach & upon my arrival I invariably received a salute of four or five guns fired in a volley. The house was always scrubbed clean & bright, the women had on their best dresses and gayest handkerchiefs, a kettle was simmering cheerfully over a bright fire in the fire place and a bunch of deer's tongues, tarts, & similar delicacies spread on a white cloth in the center of the room. I was previously under the impression that the patient's wants took precedence over those of the physician but it is not so in Siberia. I was compelled to eat lunch drink tea and smoke before paying any attention whatever to the patient, when that was done I would make out my prescription.

[1] A verst is equivalent to 0.6629 miles.