

‘Mr. Alaska’ Brother James Wickersham

The name of “FIGHTIN’ JIM” WICKERSHAM brings a cheer from every Alaskan pioneer and sourdough. To Alaskans everywhere, JUDGE JAMES WICKERSHAM was “Mr. Alaska.” Pioneer judge, statesman, scholar, explorer and author, he probably did more than any one man to build Alaska. Already famous in the States, Wickersham’s pioneer instinct eagerly accepted the herculean challenge of establishing courts in Alaska. Appointed by President McKinley in June 1900, he became the first judge of the Third Division, District of Alaska, embracing about 300,000 square miles of virgin country, without roads, schools, cities; only a few mining camps far apart. Eagle City, first incorporated town in Alaska, became the seat of his court. He also held court in Rampart, 528 miles distant. During winter he traveled by dog team, breaking trail and walking over one thousand miles with temperatures from 20 to 40 below!

Judge Wickersham organized all the District’s minor courts, reserved sites for court houses and jails, drawing plans and letting contracts for their construction. He appointed clerks, commissioners, justices of the peace and probate judges. In 1901-1902 he was brought to Nome, the Second Division Court, and cleaned up the scandalous mess in the court, due to the claim jumpers. This was the basis of Rex Beach’s classic story “The Spoilers.” A murder case in the Aleutian Islands caused him to call a special court session in Unalaska; beginning the first floating court, which has been an integral part of Alaska’s court system ever since. From 1900 to 1908 Judge Wickersham’s decisions formed the background for Alaska’s mining law.

In 1903 Wickersham published the first newspaper, the “News Miner” in Fairbanks.

Ardent supporter of Alaska’s right to elect a delegate to Congress, passed in 1905, in 1908 Wickersham resigned from the bench and was elected Delegate to Congress, serving until 1921.

His work toward home rule for Alaska resulted in the signing of the



Proposed Judge James Wickersham Centenary Postage Stamp for first day of issue at Fairbanks, Alaska, as drawn by Linn Forrest.



Air Mail stamp commemorates statehood for “North Star” Alaska, as designed by Richard C. Lockwood. First day at capital city Juneau—date debated?

Organic Act by President Taft in 1912 — on Judge Wickersham’s birthday, August 24th. 1914 marked another Wickersham milestone when he succeeded in getting the Alaska Railroad Bill enacted into law. This marked the birth of Anchorage, which began as a railroad construction camp.

Today’s University of Alaska was founded by Judge Wickersham, in his fight for the Alaska public school bill in 1915. His efforts gave Alaska its first national park in 1917, with the establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park.

Judge Wickersham introduced the first Alaska Statehood Bill to Congress in 1916, providing greater home rule than enjoyed under the Organic Act of 1912.

Continued

In 1910 James Wickersham wrote "The Forty-Ninth Star" for Collier's Magazine, the first article published nationally on Statehood for Alaska. He contributed to many national magazines and scientific journals throughout his life. His Bibliography of Alaska Literature—1724-1924 catalogs over ten thousand items. His own personal library, the greatest single collection of Alaskan literature in existence, is now owned by the Territory of Alaska. His private papers, books, artifacts, including his diary, are still in his home in Juneau. His biography, "Old Yukon — Tales, Trails and Trials," is a classic.

Brother Wickersham, at the time of his death October 24, 1939, was a member in good standing in Tacoma Lodge #22, Tacoma, Wash.

—Submitted by Bro. James Wong,
George Washington Chapter.



Bro. James Wickersham



Judge Wickersham (center) in council with Indian chiefs, Fairbanks, Alaska.