


Wickersham: The Man at Home

By JoAnne Wold





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COVER PHOTO: The Judge and Debbie on the porch of their home on the corner of First and Noble Streets, Fairbanks.

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—Tanana-Yukon Historical Society
Renée Blahuta, President
Jane Williams, Coordinator

Preface

Even though Judge James Wickersham spent a great deal of his early years in Alaska living in hotel rooms and roadhouses, he was, at heart, a home-loving man. In that effort, he built a log cabin in Eagle, a house in Valdez, and the first frame house in Fairbanks, where he and his wife, Debbie, lived for a number of years. That house sold in 1922 for \$1,500. More than fifty years later the house was restored at a cost of over \$100,000.

The Wickersham House in Fairbanks, now located at Alaskaland, is the first historical monument of the State of Alaska. It is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This small museum, devoted to the life and times of Judge Wickersham, is operated as a project of the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society.

The house was situated on property owned by Standard Oil of California, and was donated by that company to the City of Fairbanks. In 1966 the house was moved to Alaskaland by the Pioneers of Alaska, Igloo #4. Funds for the restoration project have come from a H.U.D. Block Grant, a 1976 Bicentennial Grant, the City of Fairbanks, and the State of Alaska.

Table of Contents

	Page
Preface	iii
Chapter I: Eagle City Days	1
Chapter II: The Tanana Valley	9
Chapter III: Fairbanks and After	15
Epilogue	26
Chronological Review	28

List of Illustrations

	Page
1. James and Debbie Wickersham — 1880	2
2. Judge Wickersham with a hunting party from Ft. Egbert	5
3. Contemplating his first Yukon River Breakup	5
4. Social life at Eagle	7
5. Son Howard with Debbie	7
6. Barnette's Cache — 1902	11
7. "Fairbanks as I first saw it" — James Wickersham	11
8. Corner First and Cushman — 1903	17
9. Law abiding society in evidence — 1904	17
10. Fairbanks in 1906	19
11. Fire! Fairbanks in flames!	19
12. First Street — 1904	21
13. View from the south side of town	21
14. Fairbanks grows. Bridge to Garden Island	23
15. Bridge goes out with the ice	23
16. Indian Council — 1915	25
17. Judge Wickersham meets two Native friends	25
18. 1914 Campaign Poster	27

Chapter I

Wickersham: The Man at Home

Eagle City Days

James Wickersham was 43 years old and his wife, Debbie, was 37 when they left Tacoma, Washington with their young son Howard, bound for Alaska. The year was 1900.

Wickersham had been appointed judge of the Third Judicial Division of the Territory of Alaska. Their destination was Eagle City, a small village on the banks of the Yukon River, 100 miles below the great Klondike mining camp of Dawson. It was not a prestigious assignment by any means, but it was the beginning of a career that would change the course of Wickersham's life and greatly influence the history of Alaska.

In the beginning there was no hint of a monumental career in the making; rather there was disappointment on the part of Wickersham's party that they were being shunted to a little known outpost, while Judge Arthur Noyes and his party were going to Nome—a gold camp that could possibly rival Dawson.

Despite these feelings, Wickersham rallied to the challenge of establishing law in a wilderness country which had no law until his appointment.

Mountain-climber and outdoorsman, Wickersham was not intimidated by the 300,000 square miles that comprised his district from the Arctic Slope to the Aleutian Islands. He was described as a "tireless worker, endowed with great physical strength and extraordinary mental capacity." He would often need to call upon those abilities during his long courtship with Alaska.

If there was any hesitation about this new life in Alaska, it was on the part of Wickersham's wife. Debbie suffered ill health and was not eager for pioneering. In her care was their seven-year-old son, Howard, and the memory of their middle son, Arthur, who had passed away some years earlier. In addition, Debbie would be separated from her oldest son, Darrell, who was most solicitous of his mother's well being. He was attending the Annapolis Naval Academy.

The Wickershams did not sever all their ties in Tacoma, a community in which they had lived for 17 years after moving west from Illinois in 1880. It was in Tacoma that Wickersham was first elected to public office as a probate judge. He also served as Tacoma city attorney. The Wickershams maintained their modest home in that city to which they both would return often in later years.

Lacking family connections and financial independence, Wickersham had forged his career out of dedication and hard work. If his father had had his way, young Jim would have followed in his footsteps, that of a mill owner. It was great persistence and self-sacrifice, plus the loving support of his mother, which enabled Wickersham to go to Springfield, Illinois where he studied law in Governor John Palmer's office. For two years young Jim slept in the back room, swept the floors, kindled the fires and washed the windows for which he received \$5.90 per month. In 1880 Wickersham completed his law studies and successfully passed the bar examinations for the State of Illinois. During those



Ruth Allman, Archives



Ruth Allman, Archives

1880 photos of James and Deborah Wickersham. In that year, when he was 23, he passed the Bar exam and later married Debbie Bell, the postmaster's daughter.

years he married Deborah Bell, the daughter of the Springfield postmaster, hung his shingle, and was not too proud to put his hand to manual labor—that of building fences and shingling roofs—in order to maintain his family. Clearly, not the picture of an ordinary judge, but Wickersham was not an ordinary man.

Accompanied by his family, a clerk of court, Albert R. Heilig, and a stenographer, George A. Jeffery, Wickersham sailed from Seattle on July 2 for Skagway. In his grip-sack was a set of the newly printed *Alaska Codes*. "The honor and responsibility of aiding in founding American courts of justice in the vast new territory was accepted in the spirit that my forefathers shouldered their rifles in 1776 to aid in establishing the independence of the Colonies," Wickersham wrote in his book, *Old Yukon*. Wickersham was in the line of descendents from Sussex, England who settled in Pennsylvania in 1700.

Skagway as the Wickershams first saw it was a town of docks, saloons, hotels, stores, wooden sidewalks and a church. Skagway, the gateway to the goldfields, had by that time reached its peak. Its fame as the most lawless town in Alaska had diminished with the demise of Jefferson Randolph (Soapy) Smith in a shoot-out a year earlier. Wedged against the snowy mountains of the White Pass, Skagway caught its reflection in the blue waters of the Lynn Canal, a most picturesque setting.

The nearly completed White Pass and Yukon Railroad carried the Wickershams to the tent town of Lake Bennett. It allowed them relative ease and comfort compared with the Klondikers of '98, who scaled the White Pass and the Chilkoot by foot, encumbered by heavy back packs and then built some makeshift vessel to brave the Yukon River on a wild ride to Dawson. Rather, the Wickershams boarded a steamer at Lake Bennett, and, thanks to rank and ready cash, they were given berths for the night, to be awakened early the next morning as the steamer set its sights for Dawson.

Dawson in the summer of 1900 was having a heyday. The waterfront was jammed with hundreds of boats—rafts, scows, small steamers, big steamers and a fleet of palatial sternwheelers, the *Susie*, the *Sarah*, and the *Hamah*. The buildings, large and small, were of log—unpeeled, green and chinked with moss; the streets were bogged in mud. The sidewalk passages were planks spanning more mud, swamps and minor sloughs. Over all was the heady excitement born of the drive and dreams of thousands of get-rich-quick miners surging in and out of this gold town. The two-story buildings fronting the levee were covered with signs lighted by kerosene lamps at night, inviting all to the saloons and dance halls. There were *many* saloons and dance halls. It was that kind of a town.

Waiting on the docks when the Wickershams stepped onto Dawson soii was Ed S. Orr, the former mayor of Tacoma and the man who had appointed Wickersham city attorney. Orr, six feet tall, dark and handsome, had established a stage line between Dawson and the mines. Later he carried passengers between Valdez and Fairbanks on the winter trail using horse-drawn double-enders.

On this day in July, Orr was driving a stage drawn by four fine horses to take the Judge and entourage to the famous Bonanza and Eldorado Creek mines. At the Clarence Berry claim "...the exposed gravel paystreaks fairly glowed with nuggets and heavy flakes of gold dust," Wickersham noted. Berry invited his visitors to dig all the gold they wanted—as long as they dug with their hands. Young Howard was very quickly on his hands and knees, and when he had recovered all the gold his hands could hold, he was marshalled to the creek by his mother for a good sluicing.

It was Sunday, July 15, when the Wickershams arrived in Eagle City on the steamer the *John Cudahy*. At the landing to greet them was the entire population, 385 white and native residents, including the acting mayor. The Wickershams were given temporary sleeping quarters at the nearby military reservation, Fort Egbert, but they had to take their meals at the Eagle Cabin restaurant some distance away. There was no house for the Judge and his family; he would have to build it. Neither was there a courthouse or a jail; Wickersham would have to build them, serving as both architect and foreman. Before the work could start, the Judge had to collect license fees from the trading posts and saloons, since the Federal government had not appropriated any money for the structures.

Eagle, established alongside the military post, was the customs station on the border between Alaska and Canada. Situated high on the banks of the Yukon, surrounded by forests of spruce and white birch, the distant rocky bluffs were the nesting places of eagles. On that first day Wickersham looked with delight on the streams for fishing, the hills for hunting, the distant mountains for hiking. Mrs. Wickersham, on the other hand, looked on the dirt paths, the squat log cabins, and the treacherous Yukon River with far less enthusiasm.

There were in Eagle in those days two trading posts, a custom house, a Presbyterian Church, a Catholic Church and hospital, two restaurants, five saloons, and an assortment of log cabin dwellings. Licensing of the businesses went into effect the day after Wickersham arrived. Each saloon paid an annual fee of \$1,000 and the stores—including those at Rampart and Circle—paid a percentage of their sales.

The first case to come before the Judge in Eagle concerned Chief Charley, head of the Charley River band of Tena Indians. Someone had stolen the Chief's dog and if he did not get it back, there would be war. The Judge won the confidence of the Indian chief, and when the dog was returned within the hour, Chief Charley and Wickersham were friends for life. The Natives of Alaska trusted the Judge and later bestowed on him their highest tribute when they made him chief of the tribe, "Annalkahatch"—the man who wears a hat.

First in the order of priorities was a house for the Judge and his family. Wickersham purchased a lot for \$100, and a set of house logs for \$75. With the assistance of a carpenter, Wickersham built a log cabin measuring 16 feet wide by 24 feet long, including a lean-to kitchen with a sloping roof. A foot of moss covered the cabin roof, and more moss was stuffed between the logs to keep out the winter cold. Rough boards salvaged from an old Yukon River boat



Farnsworth Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Life in Eagle was different. The Judge, with a hunting party from Fort Egbert (above). Judge Wickersham contemplates the breakup of the Yukon River in May 1901 (right).



Farnsworth Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

went down for flooring. Small windows were installed as well as a front door and a back door. Wickersham worked side by side with the carpenter, for house building was not new to him. He had built the first house Debbie and he lived in and had earned his living as a carpenter in the early days of Tacoma.

Furnishings for the cabin were as humble as the cabin itself. Wickersham said, "We made some of our furniture, bought a bedstead and some chairs, and an air tight heating stove for the living room, a cheap cook stove for the kitchen, made our shelves and kitchen table, and put down some carpets we had brought from the Outside." The interior walls were covered, and bookcases were built, mounting to the ceiling, on which the Judge's numerous law books were placed. As the winter progressed, some of Wickersham's hunting trophies were hung on the walls along with a pair of crossed snowshoes, giving the cabin an authentic Alaskan flavor. Two rocking chairs provided comfort for the quiet hours.

It took the Judge two weeks to split and pile the wood they needed to carry them through the winter. Once the snow had fallen, he banked the house with snow, nature's own insulation against the cold and wind. The Judge's house was neither fancy nor spacious, but it was one of the warmest in town, even when the temperature went to 60 below, which happened more than once that year on the banks of the Yukon.

Wickersham, with gun in hand and native guide by his side, brought home moose and caribou to be wrapped and frozen and placed in the outdoor cache, near at hand for Debbie's meal planning. The family had to make do with water carried in from the river and delivered to the door by the water man who toted the water buckets on a dog sled.

The only way in or out of Eagle was by steamer in the summer, or dogteam in the winter. That first winter Judge Wickersham held a special session of the court in Rampart, a round trip of more than 1,000 miles made under the bitterest of weather conditions by dog sled and snowshoes. Accompanied by a native guide, Wickersham spent 40 days on the trail making camp and mushing the dogs. Early in the game, this Alaskan assignment called for a "tireless worker, endowed with great physical strength." Waiting at home for him at the end of the trail were Debbie and Howard.

There were other hardships to endure in this sometime inhospitable country. Financial problems were a constant source of concern. The Judge earned an annual salary of \$5,000, a reasonable sum at the turn of the century, but very often his paychecks were five and six months late. When Wickersham accepted the Eagle post, given to him by President McKinley, Wickersham paid his own and his family's traveling expenses from Tacoma to Alaska; he built his own cabin, supported his family, and paid official expenses out of his own pocket. His paychecks for June through November were not received until the following February.

With the slow mail service between Alaska and Washington, D.C., it was five months before Wickersham received permission to use the government sawmill at Fort Egbert in order to begin building the courthouse and the jail.

Debbie adjusted to life in Eagle with style. The Judge (in bowler hat) and Debbie (3rd from left) attend a social function at Fort Egbert.



Farnsworth Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks



Son Howard with his mother at Eagle. Life was exciting for Howard and he adopted Eagle at once.

Farnsworth Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

That was only the beginning of the delays, the red tape and the misunderstandings that plagued the Judge's life all the years he lived in Alaska.

On the day of his entry into Alaska, the Judge began a diary. He maintained this practice every day during the 39 years he lived in the Territory. These journals are available on microfilm at the University of Alaska Archives, Fairbanks, the State Library Archives at Juneau and the University of Alaska at Anchorage. The original journals are in the care of Ruth Allman, House of Wickersham, Juneau. They offer an intimate look into the lives of the Wickershams. Through these journals we learn that the Judge enjoyed taking pictures and developing the Kodak prints which hung on the walls of his Eagle cabin. He tells too of the formal ball at Fort Egbert—the biggest social event of the season—which he and Debbie attended, Wickersham resplendent in his swallow-tail suit.

In his diary the Judge noted October 27, 1900 as his twentieth wedding anniversary. Debbie was adjusting to frontier living by inviting the village ladies for tea, and attending the Indian mission services at the small Presbyterian Church. Howard went for sleigh rides on the frozen expanse of the Yukon River and spent many happy hours with his big malemute dog hitched to a sled.

On Christmas Eve Wickersham and his son walked in the snowy woods and returned with a Christmas tree which they set up in the front room and decorated with apples, oranges, nuts and candy. They then invited the village boys in for a party. The following day there were guests on hand to enjoy the turkey dinner—a turkey that had been carried 100 miles from Dawson for that special day.

That was the first and last Christmas the Wickershams spent together in Eagle. In the summer of 1901, as the Judge prepared to hold court on the Aleutian Islands, Debbie and Howard went back to Tacoma. Later in the summer Wickersham joined them for a two-month vacation. The Judge returned to Alaska alone, and in the fall he was dispatched to Nome to hold court for several months. He wrote in his diary, "I am in for a winter alone. Hard work day and night. Work. Work. But it is all right. I am anxious to do my work and make a clean good record, one which my family and I can look back upon with satisfaction."

Throughout the winter in Nome he noted repeatedly in his diary: "No letter from Debbie," and, "Still no letter from Debbie." When, at last, a letter did arrive, it was bad news. Howard had pleurisy. A telegram, which finally reached the Judge in March, 1902, told of Howard's death two months earlier of the dreaded lung disease.

For a time Debbie sought solace with her remaining son, Darrell, in Annapolis, Maryland. When she returned to Alaska that summer, she, too, suffered an attack of pleurisy. From that time forth Mrs. Wickersham's visits to Alaska became fewer and farther apart. Family life at Eagle was over.



The Tanana Valley

While Judge Wickersham was concerning himself with the work of the court in Eagle, Rampart, Circle and Nome, a new boom town was in the making in the Tanana Valley.

Italian miner and veteran prospector Felix Pedro found color on a creek in the fall of 1901 not far from the Chena River where, coincidentally, a merchant named E. T. Barnette had been unceremoniously dumped by the captain of the *Lavelle Young* when he could navigate no farther up the river.

Barnette's original plan had been to set up a trading post on the Tanana River at the juncture of the Valdez-Eagle Trail. Instead he was stranded in the wilderness with no apparent customers and winter coming on. Then, as if by design, Pedro and his partners saw from their lofty vantage point (now called Pedro Dome), smoke from the *Lavelle Young*. Their need for supplies sent them to the riverboat where they spent a pleasant evening with Barnette and his crew, and told of their mining prospects. That gave the merchant a small measure of hope.

The next day Pedro and his partner filled their packs and disappeared into the spruce forest while Barnette and his men unloaded the boat. In short order trees were felled and a small house erected for Barnette and his wife. Tents served as warehouses until the log trading post was built. That was the beginning of civilization in the Tanana Valley.

In the meantime, a lack of cases in his own district sent Judge Wickersham to Nome in the summer of 1902 to assist in cleaning up the MacKenzie-Noyes scandal in connection with the Anvil Creek claims—the case that was the basis of Rex Beach's book *The Spoilers*. It so happened that Wickersham was at St. Michael, on his way back to Eagle, when on the banks of the Yukon River he met Barnette, who was building a boat to transport his goods up the Tanana. At Wickersham's request Barnette agreed to name his new post Fairbanks, after the Judge's friend, Senator Charles Fairbanks of Indiana, who later became vice president of the United States.

The two men parted. Barnette returned to his trading post. That winter Wickersham took his traveling court to Valdez, a town which was then considered the open door to the Interior. With that in mind, Wickersham purchased a six-acre tract as well as a Valdez city lot for which he paid \$300.00. In less than a month a carpenter had built a 12 by 24-foot house for a total of \$350.00, including labor and materials, which was very quickly leased for \$30.00 per month. At that time Wickersham was residing at the St. Elias Hotel with letters from his ailing wife, Debbie, to keep him company. The doctors had recommended that she take treatment in Arizona.

On Christmas Eve the Judge was honored at a reception at the Moose Hall and greeted by hundreds of well-wishers. Through his steadfast good work on the bench, and with the growing importance of his district, Wickersham was not only highly respected by the people, but also he was an increasingly

powerful judge. The district, which two years earlier had been considered the backwaters, was now the center of the greatest mining activity in Alaska. Gold discoveries in the Tanana Valley would soon make Fairbanks the largest city in the Territory.

When the Valdez Bar Association honored Wickersham with a banquet, there was talk that he was the best qualified man to become Alaska's first delegate to Congress, a position that had not yet been approved by the Federal government. The imminent post had not escaped Wickersham's notice. He confided in his diary: "I would rather be the first delegate from Alaska than judge."

Christmas in Valdez was a difficult time for the Judge. In spite of the work of the court and the public affairs, he was a lonely man. He recalled the Christmas past, the last one spent with Debbie and Howard in the cabin at Eagle, a fine family time of good cheer and good health. All that was gone with the passing of Howard. Wickersham wrote in his diary:

"He was my pride, my love, and the hope of my future, and I am just now beginning to realize that he is dead. His death almost killed his Mother and quite destroyed one-half of my life—hopes and happiness. My ambition went with his dear, sweet baby face. I did not know how much I depended on him nor how much he meant to my life. Howard! Howard!"

While in Valdez Wickersham was kept posted on the developments in the Tanana Valley. He recorded in his diary February, 1903: "I have learned that there are probably 1,000 men in the Tanana diggings at Fairbanks and the trail is lined with crowds going there. I heard it is a good low grade camp, not a bonanza." The following month the Judge was informed that crime was prevalent in the new boom town, and that much "hootch," native brewed whiskey, had been sent in.

Two months later Wickersham was on the trail to Fairbanks via Circle City on the Yukon, with a heavily loaded sled. He had sold his log cabin in Eagle, sold his household furnishings, and recommended that the attorney general move the court headquarters to Fairbanks, the center of the new mining district. Along the trail the stampeders were pleased to see Wickersham going into the Tanana country to establish law where new strikes were being made, one after the other. The Judge's presence gave the gold rush greater credibility and encouraged the miners that there was, indeed, a bright future ahead.

Wickersham, now 45 years old with a stout, sturdy frame conditioned by the rigors of outdoor life, got his first glimpse of Fairbanks before crossing the Chena River "... the new metropolis of the Tanana came into view on the opposite shore. A rough log structure with spread eagle wings looked like a disreputable pigsty," but it was in fact Barnette's trading post, the only mercantile establishment in the new camp. A hundred yards up the stream, also facing the river, a half-finished two story log building without doors or windows bore the homemade sign on a white cloth—Fairbanks Hotel. Two other small log cabins, marked *Pioneer* and *Northern*, made known to the miners with wilderness thirst that civilization and its vices were there.

"A half-dozen squat new structures, a few tents, and an incoming stream of



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Barnette's Cache — 1902



Ruth Allman, Archives

"Fairbanks as I first saw it in April 1903" — Judge Wickersham

dog teams and gold seekers, a small clearing in the primeval forest—that was Fairbanks as I saw it on April 9, 1903,” so Wickersham recorded later in his book *Old Yukon*.

After a night's rest at Barnette's Trading Post, Wickersham began his first day in Fairbanks. He was an historian, with a keen eye for history in the making. He noted in his diary: "At this time there are streets roughly staked out in the woods, parallel to the river. The site is covered with a fine body of spruce timber from six to twenty-four inches in diameter which is now being cut and built up with houses. The Fairbanks, Hotel is a two-story log house and lodges 40 to 50 people. There are probably 500 people here, mostly in tents, but log houses are being constructed as rapidly as possible. Several men are felling the logs and sawing those logs into boards with whipsaws, and such homemade lumber sells for \$200.00 to \$250.00 per 1,000 feet.

"The town is just now at its formation period. Town lots are at a premium. Jumping, staking, recording, building, it's a motley crowd too—sourdoughs, cheechakos, miners, gamblers, Indians, Negroes, Japanese, dogs, prostitutes, music, drinking. It is rough, but healthy. The beginning, I hope, of an American Dawson."

Wickersham's first official act was to name Tod Cowles Justice of the Peace. In quick succession the town took shape beneath the Judge's careful guidance. Four new lawyers in town assisted Wickersham to stake a lot for the courthouse, which he would design and oversee. Before nightfall a plan for a jail was approved, the contract let, and logs cut for the first public building in the Tanana Valley. Hourly, streets were stretching in all directions; and the town recorder, Frank Cleary (Mrs. Barnette's brother), made the maps, and recorded the streets with the names of the men responsible for the town's development—Wickersham, Cowles, Cleary, Barnette and Noble. A collection was taken from the tent and cabin dwellers to finance a driver and dogteam to carry dispatches to Valdez. The message would be relayed to Washington, D.C., requesting mail service and a postmaster for the new town.

"Spring is here, the robins are singing, the snow is melting and in another 30 days it will be glorious," Wickersham wrote. He wished for Debbie by his side. Still he maintained a positive outlook despite family problems and the aggravations caused by his political opponents who regularly fought his reappointments to the bench. During his career in Alaska, recess appointments were made by President Roosevelt when the judiciary committee failed to confirm his judgeship. Wickersham had made legal rulings that created enemies. With that in mind, as well as Debbie's failing health, Wickersham wrote, "I am now very sorry that I did not have my way last fall and resign and stay at home with her. From what she says, and the tone of her letters, I am afraid of the result of her illness."

Not willing to remain idle while fortunes were being made in the Tanana Valley, Wickersham went to the creeks to stake a few claims for himself. He stayed with Jack Costa, an Italian miner who had a rich piece of property. The following day Felix Pedro joined Wickersham and they staked claims on

Cleary Creek. Rank does have privileges.

During the early weeks of April the Judge made more trips to the creeks where he became involved in a number of mining ventures; but, as he wrote in his diary, "I can't speculate too far. Mrs. Wickersham's condition bids me be careful also, for I must always have money on hand to meet her necessities."

Wickersham, the recorder of history, attended the first banquet in the Tanana Valley, an occasion to honor Felix Pedro. This event took place at the Tokio Restaurant on Second Avenue—a 10 by 12-foot tent with a red-hot Yukon stove in the rear. In attendance were members of Wickersham's court; several lawyers, and a half dozen millionaire miners, who dined on roast moose and canned spuds washed down with Hootch Albert's Best Brew. "Pedro's plain, honest straight-forward story of his hardships and his discovery was the address of the evening," Wickersham said.

That account was published in the first newspaper in the Tanana Valley, the *Fairbanks Miner**, Volume I, No. 1, Fairbanks, Alaska, May 9, 1903. Wickersham was the reporter, the editor, and the publisher of the eight-page paper. His clerk, George Jeffrey, typed the stories on paper used to stake mining claims since there was no newsprint and no printing press. Seven copies were made. Revenue was raised from the 36 advertisements which sold at \$5.00 each and promoted such businesses as Barnette's Trading Post, Kellum's Commission House, the City Laundry, Tanana Restaurant, and the Monte Carlo Gambling Hall.

Judge Wickersham had more than one reason for publishing the *Fairbanks Miner*. He was not only an historian, but an explorer as well. Ever since entering the Tanana Valley and getting his first look at the magnificent peaks of the Alaska Range, Wickersham's heart was set on climbing Mt. McKinley. He had to be the first man to attempt to scale the highest peak on the North American continent. He could not do otherwise, even if it meant Debbie would have to wait for him at Rampart until he joined her there to convene his court. Early in May the Judge began preparing for his expedition. Money earned from the newspaper helped finance the trip. "Bought a splendid, good mare for \$5.00," he wrote in his diary, and, "We are now pretty sure of our McKinley trip. Dictated all my letters today. Will leave nothing undone when we go."

More than 100 well-wishers stood on the banks of the Chena one sunny day in May while the steamship flags were flying and the dance hall band was playing to give Wickersham and his party a proper send-off as they headed downriver on their historic trek. For two months this party of five would live on bacon, beans, dried apples, prunes and wild game. They had little equipment, few maps or mountain scaling data, but they did have enthusiasm, energy and the desire to succeed.

Beginning at the mouth of the Kantishna River the men traveled by foot, with an Indian to guide them, to the base of the mountain. The ascent began June 19. The next day they reached a sharp ridge at the extreme upper end of

*An original copy is now carefully displayed by Ruth Allman, House of Wickersham, Juneau.

Bench Glacier and found to their disappointment that the glacier did not connect with the high ridge they were seeking. They were 10,000 feet above sea level. Mt. McKinley towers 20,300 feet. With their food supply exhausted and time running short before opening court in Rampart, they decided to leave the mountain.

Wickersham wrote later in *Old Yukon*: "This happily ended the first attempt of white men, or probably any other men, to scale the mighty walls of Denali. The members of our party returned to civilization in perfect health, the mules rolling fat. Not a moment's sickness nor a crippling accident to man or beast afflicted us. We returned to our labors without any feeling of failure, but with a glow of satisfaction that we had done so much with so little."

Once off the mountain Wickersham made haste to Rampart. Shaggy of beard and in need of a bath and a hair cut, the Judge passed the cabin where Debbie was waiting and went instead to the bathhouse. After donning a clean set of clothes he was prepared to greet his wife. They were not together long before he was off on official business. Wickersham's "floating court" would be in session 37 days. Later Mrs. Wickersham joined her husband in Valdez for their trip to Tacoma. It was there one doctor advised the Judge that his wife had tuberculosis. At that point Wickersham was ready to quit the bench; and if his mining ventures had been more lucrative, he would have done just that. It was certain that his judgeship did not allow him to save money.

That winter the Wickershams traveled for three months, making a trip to Washington, D.C. where the Judge received a vote of confidence from President Theodore Roosevelt. When it was time to return to Alaska, Debbie remained in Tacoma. Wickersham, a home-loving man above all wanted his wife with him, yet he seemed so often to be living alone in a hotel room or a roadhouse. If they had a house, a warm comfortable house, then maybe Debbie could be with him longer. He would build such a house. A house for Debbie in Fairbanks.



Fairbanks and After

It was early spring, 1904. Once again the Judge was journeying North alone, more determined than ever to build a house for Debbie. There was no discussion of such an undertaking with his wife. Debbie, content to remain at their Tacoma home, would travel to Alaska when summer came. The house was to be a surprise.

Wickersham stopped in Seattle to prepare the necessary paper work for Captain Barnette to establish a bank in Fairbanks, the first bank in the Tanana Valley. By this time Barnette had sold his trading post to the Northern Commercial Company which expanded its operation to provide lights, water and steam heat to the immediate downtown area. Fairbanks was growing up. There was a newspaper, a school, several churches, a developing business district, a muddy road to the goldfields, and talk of a narrow gauge railroad. Still, it was a town of log cabins and tent dwellings. There was yet to be built a frame house of native lumber in the Tanana Valley.

Wickersham would have such a house. On April 15, 1904 he purchased from A. R. Thomas, a corner lot at First and Noble Streets, for the sum of \$175. Building could not begin until after spring break-up, at least a month away. In the meantime, Wickersham got his court affairs in order, and in his leisure time he enjoyed a simple social life. The Judge invited Captain and Mrs. Barnette and Frank Cleary to have dinner at Mrs. Napoleon DuPraw's new restaurant on Second Avenue. "She has fine roast goose," he noted in his diary. One morning at 4:00 a.m. the Judge was out with Harry Badger and some of the boys for a bit of duck hunting. "I came back without anything. Beautiful morning."

Wickersham engaged a carpenter to begin work the moment the snow was gone, in order to have the house ready for Debbie's arrival in early June. In preparation he built window boxes to plant ahead of time. Then on Friday, May 13, a day when "One would expect something unfortunate to happen," a telegram arrived from Debbie saying, "I feel well but think it best not to come." Wickersham's diary reveals this reaction: "I am greatly disappointed for either her health is such that she is unable to come or appearances make her think I will not be reappointed. Possibly she thinks it's too long and hard a trip for such a short stay. Will telegram her tomorrow to come if she is not too sick to start the journey."

The journey was 2,700 miles from Seattle by steamship to St. Michael, with a change of steamers at the mouth of the Yukon and another 1,200 miles to Fairbanks. Or there was the equally long voyage via the Inside Passage to Skagway, a train to Whitehorse and a steamer to Dawson and Fairbanks. All in all an arduous trip even for someone in the best of health. On May 18 while the Judge was at work on a fence for his house, he received a telegram from Debbie saying she would come to Fairbanks, after all, arriving in mid-June, as previously scheduled. The next day the Judge telegraphed her \$200. "Have worked late these days on building my fence at my proposed summer residence. Believe it is the first picket fence in the Tanana Valley—real planned

pickets. Put on my old clothes and worked hard digging post holes, sawing, and driving nails. Will begin my house tomorrow. But a little legal work first."

Work on the house commenced May 22. "Have to carry all the lumber from the sawmill on our backs—there is no wagon in the Tanana Country," the Judge wrote in his journal. "The house is going up rapidly." The carpenter was paid \$12.50 per day and the laborer received \$1 an hour; consequently, "I work hard myself." The lumber cost \$313.80. By May 28 the house was finished all but the doors and windows which would have to wait for the arrival of the first steamer of the season. The modest frame dwelling consisted of a 14 by 16-foot living room and a 12 by 14-foot kitchen. There was no indoor plumbing, no electricity, and no central heating.

By the time Debbie arrived on June 17, the walls of the new little house were covered with a floral patterned wallpaper. Japanese matting was placed on the floor; a cook stove had been installed, as well as a good spring bed, and a hat rack made of moose horns. Timothy, bluegrass, and clover were sown in the yard, and the flowerboxes, over which the Judge had so carefully labored, were in their proper places.

Did Debbie like the new house with its cheerful wallpaper and moose horn hat rack? There was no comment in the Judge's diary about his wife's reaction to the surprise he had prepared for her. But, despite the comforts of the new house, Debbie was bedridden most of the summer. Believing that the dry, fresh air was beneficial to her health, the Judge and his wife moved the good spring bed into a tent which was pitched outside their front door and that is where they slept.

There was more to be done that summer than house building. A courthouse must be built, and legal work attended to. In June the court convened in the new courthouse although it was without doors or windows until such supplies arrived on an incoming boat. Wickersham noted, "It was the first session of the District Court in the Tanana country. Now that the mines were seen to have great value much litigation had arisen over locations, discoveries, overlaps. . .and the court was busy."

Wickersham tried many cases to determine ownership of valuable mining property. Of course, he made enemies. He made more decisions regarding great fortunes than any other judge in Alaska at that time. In an effort to discredit Wickersham, his opponents made charges against him which resulted in an investigation by the Attorney General of the United States, who came to Fairbanks in the summer of 1904.

Wickersham was subsequently cleared of all charges, but being constantly under fire had not made his term in public life pleasant. One night the Judge sat at his desk and wrote: "I hope I can make enough money out of my property and mines to enable me to retire from official life soon, for it is hell in Alaska."

That summer the Judge and Debbie took part in Fairbanks' gala Fourth of July celebration. From the houses the flags were flying; in the street the band was playing. A float draped with bunting carrying gayly dressed children was drawn by a team of four big horses. At the grandstand Wickersham gave an



Corner First Ave. & Cushman St.
Fairbanks, Alaska 1903

Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Corner First and Cushman looking east 1903—a beginning



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

By 1904 Fairbanks had come of age with all aspects of a law abiding society. Fairbanks' first courthouse. Judge Wickersham stands in center on porch. His brother, Ed Wickersham, sits on first step right.

oration followed by Mrs. DuPras singing "The Star Spangled Banner." This particular holiday brought forth a great splurge of patriotic spirit, making the Fourth of July second only to Christmas. For the occasion the mines were closed, flooding the town with hundreds of men hell-bent on having a good time.

With or without a holiday, Fairbanks was booming. "It is as if Dawson were transported here overnight," the Judge wrote. "There are probably 2,000 people and the end is not yet. I paid \$175 for the lot where our house stands. The lot is now worth \$1,750. What Shylock called ten per cent profit. My Cushman lot is a choice piece of property and will continue to pay me more than \$300 per month for three years."

After Debbie had been in town a month, she began making plans to return to Tacoma. The Judge would accompany her. He arranged to rent the house for \$45 per month. By July 26th Wickersham and his wife were packing to leave, bound for Dawson on the palatial sternwheeler the *Sarah*.

When the Wickershams reached Tacoma the Judge went alone to Washington, D.C. to put out the political fires that were hampering his reappointment. He returned to Tacoma in time for his 24th wedding anniversary in late October. Several weeks later he was enroute to Valdez. It was agreed that Debbie would meet him there and they would travel the trail together to Fairbanks in March. Soon after the Judge's arrival in Valdez, official announcement came from President Roosevelt. He had reappointed Wickersham.

Again, the holidays were a lonely season for the Judge. He was anxious that Debbie join him, even if it meant winter travel for her. "It is impossible to get word to Debbie so as to get her here before March 1. It is a great disappointment to me," he wrote. In another entry: "Letter from Debbie. She had another cold and consequently a bad day. She wrote that she thinks she ought not follow me. Thinks she won't come and go with me to Fairbanks. Damn it." Later she telegraphed: "I am not coming to Alaska until June."

By mid-February Debbie was more determined than ever not to come to Alaska until summer. She had read an account in a Seattle paper about the great blizzards that raged in the Tanana Valley, leaving people dead in snowdrifts. Even though her husband assured her that the newspaper stories were wholly untrue, Debbie remained adamant. Wickersham said, "I am sorry she will not take my word for anything. Both weather and trail are said to be good. I'm getting really disappointed because she refuses to come." He reflected that this difficulty with his wife made him cross and cranky. In such a state of mind he sent a short and brutal letter to her. "My darling wife, Damn it. Your loving husband." In return he received from Debbie a "nice, clean letter—just like her."

The trip over the Valdez trail which Wickersham wanted his wife to make in February, 1905, took 14 days by dogteam with a driver. They traveled the 371 miles through raging blizzards, plunging through snowdrifts, wading icy streams. The first day they walked 15 miles in a heavy snow storm. At the top of Thompson Pass, an elevation of almost 3,000 feet, they encountered fierce



Charles Bunnell Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

In 1906 Fairbanks had all the promises of becoming one of the largest towns in Alaska.



Falcon Joslin Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

On May 22, 1906 a devastating fire swept the town. On May 23 Fairbanks began to rebuild.

winds whirling the snow hither and thither, drifting and piling.

On the sled was a large phonograph of the latest model with a large horn amplifier and 100 tubular records. "They were packed in excelsior in a long water-tight wooden box, covered with a water proof tarpaulin and securely tied on our sled. Our cooking outfit, bags and other parcels were piled on top of the box and covered with our tent. When we waded the deep overflows of the Gulkana River, our sled, bouyed up by the box, floated like a cork and we brought the box and its contents into Fairbanks without injury," Wickersham said.

The new phonograph was placed in the living room where this novelty became the focal point for many an evening's gathering. On occasion the Judge would direct the great red phonograph horn out the window (with pillows stuffed around it to keep the cold out) and let the strains of "La Boheme" and the rousing Sousa marches fill the wintry air. Wickersham's neighbors were delighted, and so too were the numerous malamute dogs which answered each tune with long and mournful howls. It was, of course, the first music box concert in the Tanana Valley.

By this time Fairbanks had "grown marvelously" with electric lights established along the principal downtown streets. There were new buildings, and wooden sidewalks. Soon after his arrival the Judge was honored at a "splendid public reception" which was attended by more than 500 people, including residents from the town of Chena. "It was a very flattering, complimentary incident in my life in the Tanana and I appreciated it fully," Wickersham said.

On weekends the Judge worked at his little cottage, endeavoring to make it more comfortable, in anticipation of Debbie's arrival in June. Electric lights were installed, and the Japanese matting on the floor was replaced with a "nice new carpet." Wickersham purchased a buffet to fill the void in the living room. In early April he received two good letters from Debbie and one from Darrell. "They make me so homesick," he said. "I do so want her here with me."

As the day of Debbie's arrival approached, the wild roses in the yard began blooming. The Judge, with a gardening assistant, planted flowers and vegetables. Wickersham noted his wife's arrival by writing on June 19: "Debbie well and stronger than last year." In less than a month the Chena River began flooding. "The rapidly rising waters have become a calamity," the Judge reported. "Hundreds of people have been driven from their homes in the low grounds and it is a threat to everyone tonight. It is yet rising and a foot more and it will flow into our house which is one of the highest. It is now flooding across the street and business is dead and people are surprised and disorganized and don't know what to expect. The bridges on the creek road washed out. The general feeling tonight is one of discouragement." By the next day, however, "the river is rapidly falling. The sun is shining, and people feel better."

Two months after coming to Fairbanks, Debbie left for New York to visit Darrell. The next day was Wickersham's 48th birthday. In September he made



First Street, Fairbanks — 1904

Laura M. Hills Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks



Charles Bunnell Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

South Side of Fairbanks, Northern Commercial Company's twin stacks can be seen in distance.

arrangements to rent the house to Mr. and Mrs. Smith for \$35 per month. The tent where he and Debbie had slept all summer was moved to the back of the house and covered with lumber to prevent the snow from breaking it in. Before leaving Fairbanks, Wickersham noted that his eyes were bothering him and that he "must quit smoking."

On the occasion of the Wickersham's 25th wedding anniversary, the Judge was conducting court in Seward while Debbie was thousands of miles away. Wickersham wrote in his diary: "I love my clean-minded, good wife with a stronger love than I did when she became my bride. If our three boys were alive how happy I would be; but only our eldest is left and he is so strong and manly that I cannot complain. Though Howard's death was the greatest loss of my life, it also seems to have been almost the end of my home life."

In the spring of the following year the Judge made yet another trip to Washington to confirm his reappointment. There he was invited to dinner at the home of Vice President and Mrs. Fairbanks, an affair which he describes as "the most beautiful I have ever attended." By the end of June Congress adjourned without acting on Wickersham's reappointment. During a meeting with the President, Roosevelt said, "...you shall be judge in Alaska as long as I am president, go home and go to work. ..." Roosevelt added that he had read everything about Wickersham's case including the testimonies and reports and "I am satisfied with you and will reappoint you." Which he did.

It took Wickersham nearly a month to travel from Washington to Fairbanks. He and Debbie arrived there on July 23, 1906, six weeks after a disastrous fire had wiped out a good part of the business district. Already the pioneers had begun rebuilding. With an abiding faith in Fairbanks' future Wickersham began adding two new rooms to his house, which included the present parlor and small northwest bedroom. The original sitting room became the dining room. A heating plant was installed, for the couple planned to spend their first winter in the house. By October their house was in order and was the scene of a ladies' card party. The guests undoubtedly admired the newly papered rooms, and the great advantages of a hot air furnace, making the home delightfully cozy. However, the couple was still sleeping in the bedroom tent where the temperature dipped to 20 below on November 7, 1906, when the Judge wrote, "I think Debbie is willing to move into the house."

When Wickersham's court work was finished in Fairbanks, it was mid-February, 1907, and 40 below. He and Debbie, who was suffering from a sick headache, struck out by horse-drawn sleigh over the trail to Valdez. They changed sleds five times during the 371 mile trip in order to have fresh horses to battle the blizzard conditions. At times the trail was invisible. The horses were blinded by the snow and floundered in the snowdrifts. All the fears Debbie had about the trail were coming true. Several people had frostbite and Mrs. Wickersham would have suffered the same fate if the Judge had not held her in his arms to protect her from the cold.

In August of the same year, when it was time for Wickersham to open court again in Fairbanks, he and Debbie agreed it would be his last session. Wicker-



Charles Bunnell Collection
Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Fairbanks has grown considerably. Cushman Street is well ordered. The Turner Street bridge looks very rickety but never mind, it will have to be rebuilt after the ice goes out anyway (below).



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

sham would resign. The years had taken their toll. He suffered from a nervous stomach and Debbie's health was delicate too. Wickersham's political opponents were unyielding in their efforts to block his reappointments. Financial security was a consideration too; the Judge could do better in private practice.

Debbie insisted on accompanying her husband on this last trip to Alaska. Enroute she helped him write his letter of resignation to President Roosevelt. After sending the letter the Judge noted in his diary: "And the end of my political career was reached without a pang of regret—with real genuine feeling of relief—I can now begin to organize my home—library and my own private fortune."

By the time the Wickershams reached Fairbanks they received President Roosevelt's letter accepting the Judge's resignation "with deep regret." On December 31, 1907 Wickersham adjourned his court for the last time. That evening he and his wife had a party in their six-room cottage "drinking the old year out and the new one in." Debbie was feeling better than she had in six years.

No doubt Wickersham was pleased to open the *Fairbanks News* on January 2, 1908 and read: "In the years to come, when the smoke of battle is cleared away and people are able to look at the acts of Judge Wickersham and view his record without emotion, the verdict of the Alaskan historian will be that he was a man to whom the adjective *great* must be applied; that he is one who stands preeminent among his contemporaries for the good he has accomplished."

Wickersham, with his wife by his side, was enjoying life as a private citizen in Fairbanks. The future looked bright. Ten million dollars annually was being taken out of the mines. Fairbanks, with a population of 5,000 had come through a flood and a fire in succession, and was the metropolis of the Territory. Wickersham was admitted to the Alaska Bar and immediately outfitted himself with a spacious office in the Red Cross building. During the first months in business he made more money than he did in a year as a judge. He joined the Tanana Club—a men's social organization for the elite; the Arctic Brotherhood; and he took up the sport of curling.

The well ordered life of Judge Wickersham did not last long. Early in 1908 his friends urged him to run for office of Alaska's Delegate to Congress. He accepted. It was not an easy decision, nor an easy campaign, but he won by a comfortable margin. His friends were ecstatic. Evangeline Atwood in her biography of Wickersham entitled *Frontier Politics* wrote: "At Chena Wickersham found the steamer *Reliance* waiting for him with a group of friends aboard who had come down river to escort him back to his hometown in the style of a conquering hero. They brought a band with them, and their banners and horns gave him a gala salute. At Fairbanks a still larger delegation was on hand to declare him a victorious hero; Debbie was there to add her quiet words of approval."

Wickersham came through troubled times—in both his private life and his professional life—but he proved again and again that he was a "tireless worker,



INDIAN COUNCIL HELD AT FAIRBANKS, ALASKA, JULY 5TH & 6TH, 1915.
 (From left to right) Pilot of Wickersham, Alexander Tiltus, Mr. Sprague, G.F. Gramer, Thomas Riggs, Jr., C.W. Ritchie, Chief Alexander Williams, Thomas
 Green, Chief of Tanana, Chief William Tanana, Chief Alexander Stevens, Chief Thomas Nenana, James Wickersham, Chief Ivan of Goodhope, Chief Charlie of Munro,
 Chief John, Samhallet, Chief John of Chena, John Folger of Tanana, Mr. Guy H. Mackay, Paul Williams of Tanana, Interpreter.

Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

By 1915 Delegate Wickersham sees the need to consider problems of both cultures. Here he meets with top chiefs, government and church leaders.



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Judge Wickersham, an anthropologist from early in his life, had a deep respect for the Native people. Here he meets Chief Alexander from Tolovana (far right) (Native in center unidentified). Note the Judge's moose hide boots and Chief Alexander's shoe-pacs. Cigars and white man's hats have bridged a cultural gap also.

endowed with great physical strength and extraordinary mental capacity." His dedication to Alaska spanned 40 years, a period during which he left his footprints across the country from Eagle City to the Arctic Circle, from Fairbanks to the Aleutians, and from Valdez to Washington, D.C.



Epilogue

Wickersham served as Alaska's Delegate to Congress from 1909 to 1921 and from 1931 to 1933. His wife Debbie died in 1926. The Judge married Mrs. Grace Bishop in 1928. In 1921 he established a law office in Juneau and, except for the 1931-33 Delegate to Congress service, continued his practice of law until his death October 4, 1939.

During his years as delegate, Wickersham introduced legislation to provide home rule for Alaska, 1912; to establish the Alaska Railroad, 1914; to develop the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, 1917 (which became the University of Alaska); to set aside Mt. McKinley National Park, 1917; and to introduce the first bill to call for Alaska statehood in 1916.

Wickersham was Alaska's foremost historian. He compiled the *Bibliography of Alaskan Literature, 1724-1929*; he wrote *Old Yukon, Tales, Trails and Trials*, 1938; and, *Alaska Territory Law Reports*—seven volumes of the decisions of the district judges in Alaska. All remain as important source books, and guides to the literature of those early days.

"OUR JIM" Alaska's Sourdough Delegate to Congress



JAMES WICKERSHAM

He
has redeemed
every
pledge made
the
People
of
Alaska

His standing
with the
Administration
insures
SUCCESS
in the
future.

He has made good and we'll send him back

He has pledged his active and earnest support to the Administration's policy of opening up and developing the resources of Alaska, and in acknowledgment of his letter the President says:

"The White House, Washington, D. C.,
"December 3, 1913.

"My Dear Mr. Wickersham:
"Allow me to thank you very heartily for your kind letter. Your generous words of approval are most gratifying to me. Cordially and sincerely yours,

"WOODROW WILSON."

"There is no other man in the Territory who is in as good position to help Alaska in Congress as Mr. Wickersham."—Alaska Citizen, March 9, 1914.

The appropriation of \$35,000,000 for railroad building is largely due to his untiring work in Congress.

ELECTION, NOVEMBER 3, 1914.

Ruth Allman, Archives

Replica of James Wickersham's campaign poster of 1914. When he left Fairbanks for Washington, D.C. he carried the needs of the people with him.

Chronological Review:

- 1857 (August 24) James Wickersham born near Patoka, Illinois.
- 1880 Passed Illinois Bar Examination.
- 1880 (October 27) Married Deborah Susan Bell.
- 1882 Son Darrell born. Died before his father.
- 1883 Moved to Tacoma, Washington.
- 1886 Son Arthur born. Died 1888.
- 1893 Son Howard born. Died 1902.
- 1898-1900 Elected to Washington State House of Representatives.
- 1900 (June 6) Appointed U.S. District Judge for third judicial district with headquarters at Eagle City.
- 1903 Mt. McKinley expedition.
- 1904 (December 1) Moved court headquarters to Fairbanks.
- 1908-1920 Delegate to Congress.
- 1926 Wife Deborah died of tuberculosis.
- 1928 Married Grace Bishop.
- 1930-1932 Served 7th term as delegate to Congress.
- 1935 Received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. Dedicated Eielson Building. Gave commencement address.
- 1939 (November 2) Died in St. Ann's hospital, Juneau. Interred in family plot in Old Tacoma Cemetery.
- 1949 (August 24) Wickersham Day declared by Alaska Legislature.
- 1958 (August 24) House of Wickersham, Juneau, opened to public for first time. Ruth Allman, the Judge's niece, hostess and curator.
- 1979 (August 24) Wickersham House in Alaskaland, Fairbanks, dedicated and opened to the public.

About the author:

JoAnne Wold was born in Fairbanks and completed her formal education there. She attended the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and in 1979 received an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from that institution.

For many years JoAnne has been writing the history of Fairbanks in books, magazines and newspapers. She is the official Historian of the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society and is an Honorary Life Member. Her most recent assignment has been as a special curator for a History of Fairbanks exhibit at the new University of Alaska Museum.

As we read the Wickersham booklet we realize JoAnne expands our perceptions of the times and of the personality of the Judge. It was difficult to piece together the scraps of source material available. Debbie, his wife, left no correspondence. The Wickersham's left no direct heirs.

In this booklet you will get a glimpse of Judge Wickersham as husband, father, and friend. The Tanana-Yukon Historical Society is most appreciative of JoAnne's perceptive treatise.



Jimmy Bedford