



## *Palmer Historical Society*

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### **Map of Willow Creek Mining District** Copyright 1910 by D.H. Sleem, M.D.

This delightful old map by Dr. Sleem takes us back to the early development of the Matanuska Valley. The Palmer Historical Society is pleased to resurrect this map and give it a bit more life.

Looking over the Sleem map, we see the town of Knik, then the regional commercial hub but now a ghost of its past importance. Cottonwood is no longer inhabited, and Old Knik is called by its original name of Eklutna.

The map shows the proposed Alaska Northern Railroad, with branches to the Chickaloon coal fields and Susitna – it would be years before the federal government took over and built the Alaska Rail Road, and with slightly different alignment. Some of the trails were only seasonal, poorly marked, and now long gone, while some sections are now parts of current roads. The cabins along the trails are noted – a critical feature when traveling by foot or horse.

While the overall geography of the area seems reasonably accurate, many of the lakes and creeks in the valley are a couple miles misplaced and many of the place names are no longer in use. Agricultural resources are noted, especially hay and grass important for horses.

As the name states, this map was primarily about the gold mining in the Talkeetna Mountains at the headwaters of Willow Cr. and Little Susitna River. By then, these mines were the regional economic engine of the early century, attested by the three trails from the port of Knik. The map shows locations, claimants, and dates of the earliest lode and placer claims, but precedes any accurate survey of these claims. With the recent lode staking, a gold rush was obviously in progress. Lucky Shot and Warbaby, the biggest lodes in the district, remain to be discovered.

Just how could Dr. Sleem make such a detailed map in 1910? There were earlier maps, but without detail at this scale. The coastline, including upper Cook Inlet, was accurately charted dating back to James Cook in 1778. Army exploring parties lead by Glenn and Castner in 1898-99, with W.C. Mendenhall of the USGS, produced accurate regional topographical maps in 1900 of the Chickaloon trail. Johnston and Herning's 1899 map and Herning's 1906 update covered a similar regional scale as these USGS maps, with less accuracy but more local names. In 1905, G.C. Martin of USGS mapped the Matanuska River coal regions to the east in detail.

These regional maps shared an important resource – the wisdom of natives, traders, and prospectors. “Information central” was Knik, with businessmen G.W. Palmer credited for helping the USGS expeditions and O.G. Herning as co-author of other maps. Dr. Sleem relied on them or similar resources for many of the features and place names on this local map.

PHS reprinted this map in its original size showing the wear and tear befitting its age, and adding the credits: “Reprinted by Palmer Historical Society 2008, courtesy of Bob and Kay Pippel”. Copies are available at the Colony House Museum, other local museums, or online.

## Dr. Sleem and our rediscovery of this map

Seward, where Dr. Sleem resided, was a new town but already a major regional commerce center and all season port. Even Knik store owner O.G. Herning had a winter residence in Seward. The town's prospects were then based on the fledgling railroad and the related mineral resources. The following biography of Dr. Sleem comes from *Seward Alaska, A History of the Gateway City, Vol I: Prehistory to 1914*, for which we thank the author, Mary J. Barry:

“Another arrival in 1904 was the very busy and versatile Dr. David H. Sleem, physician and businessman of Seward.

Dr. Sleem was born in April 1864 in Jerusalem, then part of the Turkish empire, and immigrated to the United States in 1888. His wife, Lillian, was born in Illinois of German parents in 1880.

He obtained his medical knowledge abroad as a graduate from Beirut University, and in the United States at the University Medical College, University of New York; Bellevue Hospital; and Columbia University, New York City.

He practiced medicine in New York for ten years, when it was recommended that, because of heart trouble, he should move to a colder climate.

He gave up his lucrative practice and went to the Atlin gold strike in British Columbia. He remained there a year, then mined on Eldorado Creek, near Dawson. He moved to Nome, then to Valdez, and finally to Seward in 1904.

He erected Sleem's Hall in Seward in 1904, for meetings, dances, and religious services.

Besides his occupation as a physician, he also was a partner in a transfer business with George Salami, a teamster; active with the Chamber of Commerce; on the school board; in several literary and cultural groups; an accomplished musician (his wife also sang); a spokesman and writer concerning Alaskan affairs; and an enthusiast over mining. This latter interest led to a project of his that has caused his name and reputation to be

remembered to this day – the creation of several tinted maps on the Valdez

area, the mining districts of the Kenai Peninsula, the Willow mining area, and other maps, some encompassing large areas, others more restricted, on portions of Alaska that intrigued him. Considering that very little of the country had been surveyed then and large parts were still virtually unknown to the new settlers, he did remarkably good work in reproducing the areas, and his maps are a useful historical tool. At the time he had them printed, they were much in demand by prospectors, miners, and potential investors in Alaskan mining.

Dr. Sleem was in private practice from 1904 until 1909, doing operations and giving medical care when necessary, performing autopsies, even reading the burial service for a young man far from home, who had hung himself while suffering from a mental disturbance.



In May 1909, he was appointed physician and surgeon for the Alaska Central Railway and for the railroad contractors, Snow and Watson. He established a general hospital for railroad and private cases.

In December 1908, Dr. Sleem's home was damaged by fire. He and his wife were out when the flames were noticed. The Reverend Pedersen rang the church bell as an alarm, but it took a while before people realized it was ringing for a fire. The fire department saved the house, but the roof and Dr. Sleem's books were ruined. His piano, instruments, furniture, clothes and a map he had just completed were saved.

Repairs were made and the Sleems were back in their home by February.

After the Seward Commercial Club was organized, Dr. Sleem became an active booster for the organization. He wrote an article on the route from Seward to the Iditarod for the club's advertising pamphlet, and it was reprinted in the *Alaska-Yukon Magazine*. When he and his wife made an extended trip to the states, he gave talks promoting the Seward area.

After work on the Alaska Northern Railway ceased, and the population diminished and work slowed down, Dr. Sleem went to Valdez. He died of a heart attack there, on October 11, 1913.

Dr. Sleem was held in high regard at Valdez, as he had been in Seward. On the day of his funeral, the business houses closed in his honor. The public schools were also closed, as Dr. Sleem had frequently given talks to the students and was beloved by them.

Dr. Sleem was a leader in promoting a project to furnish a free reading room for the men at Valdez. After his death, the Reading Room Sleem Memorial was organized to carry on his work."

Obituary from Seward Weekly Gateway, October 13, 1913.  
Courtesy Resurrection Bay Historical Society

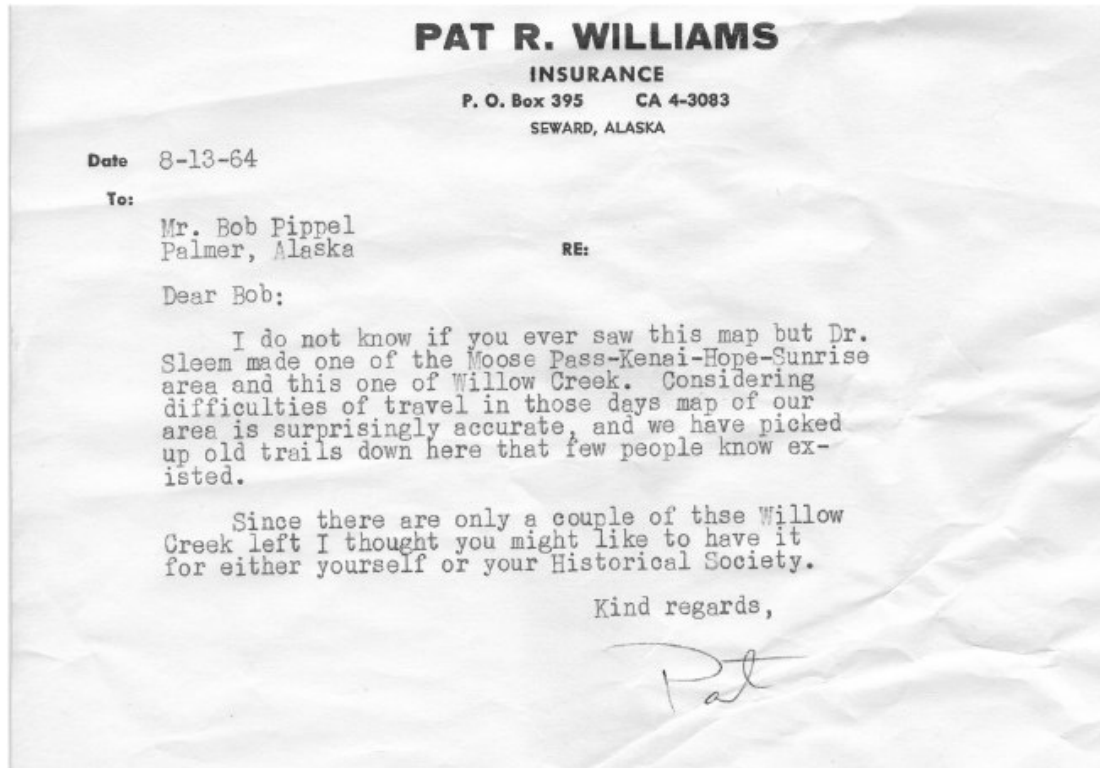
## DR. D. H. SLEEM DIES, A VICTIM OF HEART DISEASE

Valdez, Oct. 13--Dr. David H. Sleem of Valdez dropped dead from the effects of heart disease Saturday afternoon. He was attending a patient, and suddenly complained of a severe pain in his side. Soon after, he expired. But an hour before, he said he never felt better in his life.

Dr. Sleem, whose untimely death proves a severe shock to his legion of friends, here as elsewhere, was an old timer of Seward, having arrived in the town in the year 1904. He remained here, in the practice of his profession, until his departure for Valdez, some three years ago. He was a scoundough of the northland. Giving up a lucrative practice in the city of New York, he went to the Atlin strike in 1898, remained there until 1900, went to Nome early in that year, remained there two years, and then went to Valdez, from whence he came to Seward. He leaves a wife, residing at Bremerton, Washington, to mourn his loss.

While remodeling the family home in Palmer, Bill Pippel found this map with the following note. He had not seen them before, so he brought them to PHS, and we began to find out what we could. An internet search revealed four of these Willow Cr. maps listed in Alaskan libraries. Dr.

Sleem had printed three other maps, including Seward-Hope-Sunrise, Iditarod, and Southcentral (a pocket edition from Seward to Tanana). He also authored a short book on insurance.



That prompted a call to Seward Insurance – “Of course we remember Pat, I’ll tell her you called.” I next called Lee Poleske at the Seward Museum, who promptly read me newspaper clippings of Dr. Sleem, described his importance in the town, and suggested Mary Barry for further research. He praised Pat as Seward’s premier historian, and hoped I could meet her.

I had barely hung up when Pat called - “Yes, I remember the letter and sending the map...” Tony Pippel and I later visited Pat and were thoroughly charmed by her gracious wit and clear memory of early Seward – she was known as the only one who knew where everything was.

Pat was born in 1909 to L.V. and Hazel Ray, who had met, married, and built a family in Seward. Her father was a highly respected attorney, Seward mayor, and first territorial senate president. When he died suddenly in 1946, Pat finished some of his work including the probate of Judge S.O. Morford, who was a bit of a hoarder. She kept a bundle of the various Sleem maps, which the heirs suggested be thrown out with the trash, and gave them out over the years.

Pat knew Bob Pippel for several years – both owned small town insurance agencies. Their fathers, L.V. Ray and Walt Pippel, were litigants in a nationally famous court case. Walt wanted to sell produce from his Palmer farm on the open market, but the Matanuska Colony required all its members to sell to their cooperative. As federal district attorney, L.V. represented the Colony, but noted the irony of prosecuting a hard working farmer for being successful.

We hope you find this map as rewarding as we have.

*Ralph Hullett*  
for the Palmer Historical Society