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The Quest for Lillian Alling: Two authors contributions.

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Description :

78 years after Lillian Alling began her journey home; questions and the mystery still remain. Calvin Rutstrum first introduced me to this remarkable women's walk across the US and Canada, and recently Cassandra Pybus has attempted to fill in some of the details.

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Introductory paragraphs found in Calvin Rutstrum's wilderness how-to manuals (*Way of the Wilderness* and *New Way of the Wilderness*) were always interesting to me, but would have slipped by essentially unnoticed, except for his reiteration of Lillian's story in his 1980 *Hiking Back to Health*. Calvin retells the story again to illustrate what a person can do if willing and determined, but this time expands this into a complete chapter; fills in some additional details and included a photograph of her and her dog. He also reveals that he had attempted over the years to determine her fate after she presumably left Alaska.

Cassandra Pybus, in *The Women Who Walked to Russia: A Writer's Search for a Lost Legend*, combines her attempts to uncover the mystery and motivation of Lillian Alling's 1927-1929 walk across the United States and Canada, with her road trip through British Columbia following Alling's route north.

Excerpts from Rutstrum and Pybus are presented in this review. Rutstrum is probably familiar to many readers here but *The Women Who Walked to Russia*, is Pybus's first US published book. She is an Australian researcher and writer. I found her book recently while looking through a catalog of books, and even though the sales text or title did not mention Lillian Alling, I knew this was the story that Calvin Rutstrum had used as an introduction to his three first books and again retold in *Hiking Back to Health*.



Lillian Alling, on the Telegraph Trail Photographer unknown but possibly Jim Christie of Cabin 9, from Calvin Rutstrum's *Hiking Back to Health*.

So I begin with Calvin's telling of the story, first published by Rutstrum about 2 decades after her journey began.

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1946 and 1952/53 editions of Calvin Rutstrum's *Way of the Wilderness*

In the summer of 1927, Lillian Alling, a young Russian immigrant, homesick and compelled to perform menial tasks for a living in New York, decided to go home. She had no money for transportation---so she would hike back to Russia. She tramped to Chicago, to Minneapolis, to Winnipeg, refusing all invitations to ride.

Next she was seen on the Yukon Telegraph Trail in the northern part of British Columbia, Canada, a small pack on her back and a length of iron pipe in her hand for protection. The Provincial Police at Hazelton prevented her from making a winter journey through the Canadian wilds, but they were able to hold her only until Spring.

Starting out again, she hiked along the Telegraph Trail, over the wild mountain regions, finally reaching Dawson. Here she worked as a cook, purchased and repaired an old boat, and in the Spring of 1929, plunged her boat into the waters of the Yukon River right behind the outgoing ice and reached a point east of the Seward Peninsula. There she abandoned the boat for overland travel, reaching Nome and later the Bering Strait, where she was last heard of dealing with the Eskimos for boat passage across the Straight to Russian (Asiatic 1952 edit) soil.

Hard to believe? Yes. But if you care to check the story, you will find it in the files of the Provincial Police in British Columbia.

*To say that the experience of Lillian Alling is within the bounds of any person intent on such a venture, would, of course, be false. Few person, either man or women, have the hardihood, let alone the ability, to undertake such a venture. My purpose in mentioning it is to show that most of us could, by comparison, undertake a wilderness journey of some kind and succeed if we would arouse our determination, lay our plan, and go ahead with it. **Way of the Wilderness**, 1946, 1952, 1953.*

Calvin's 1958 introduction to *The New Way of the Wilderness* presented nearly the same text as in the editions of *Way of the Wilderness*. I present this again at the bottom of this article for the students of Calvin who may be interested in sentence structure and capitalization changes, along with various other small edits, that were probably the result of the large book publishing editors. See article end for this text.

Because of its rarity I present Calvin's retelling and analysis in its entirety from *Hike Extraordinary* in:

Hiking Back to Health 1980

I have, nevertheless, chosen for distinction and sheer novelty, a hike that made no apparent pretense at competition, and even if it were placed in the competitive category, I think the reader will agree that it has to rank as one of the foremost in length and determination. The fact that the hike was made by a young women might attach to it even greater significance. Also, it might suggest that the Women's Liberation Movement---while grossly obtuse where the subtle process of sex interrelationship is concerned, and where the Movement's tendency is to make irrational "oranges with apples" comparison---cannot be wholly wrong in the contention that women might accomplish much of what is man's boast.

Lillian Alling, a Russian immigrant, the principal in this hike, found New York an unfriendly place because of a language handicap and because she had been compelled to earn her living doing nothing but menial work. There came a time when she had exhausted her tolerance of servility. She longed for the life she had left in Russia, even though it was perhaps drab enough in the collective, totalitarian employment. But our indigenous leaning are not easily explained, and Lillian Alling suffered that nostalgia which so many of us in various ways have to endure,

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though we cannot logically reason our feeling about it.

Perhaps not having sufficient funds for a boat trip---or was it perhaps for a challenge? We really don't know---in any event, she decided in 1927 to walk back to Russia. It was not, we might presume, a poorly calculated undertaking. She apparently studied maps, for she had laid out her course well. She placed her meager, most essential belongings in a small shoulder pack, acquired a short piece of iron pipe for defense, and set out. Elbowing her way through the crowded streets of New York, she received no more than fleeting glances, and these because of very likely she was the only one of thousands on the streets of New York City who shouldered a pack for a ten thousand mile hike. Had the press known of the aspirations of this girl, or had they occasion to believe that her venture had the least chance of succeeding, an aura of national---even international---news coverage would, no doubt, have hung over her in feature form for the thousands of miles she hiked from New York City to the shores of Bering Strait. But this news coverage was not to be. Her loneliness and her aspirations were hers alone for much of the roughly, I calculated, twenty-two million steps.

We need to pause for a moment and conjecture what might have been her outlook. There is repeated evidence along the way that she refused all lifts, whether through fear or independence, though, as seen by numerous motorists, she hiked from New York to Chicago on the highway. Apparently, she feared the possible consequences of accepting such rides, seeming to cringe when rides were offered. The iron pipe weapon of defense which she carried further indicated that she thought hitchhiking might involve hazards. Yet, there are other indications that she would some day probably want to boast to her peoples on the Steppes of Russia that she had made this great solo hike. Can we not also assume that she enjoyed the undertaking? She was accustomed to hard work, and obviously well withstood the rigors of weather. Though of average build, she was strong as evidenced by her achievement; and no doubt, she grew physically more capable with each mile hiked.

Conspicuous enough as a lone girl with a pack, she was seen in Chicago, in Minneapolis, and in Winnipeg. If her great hike began with but a single step, as we commonly say, she repeated that first step enough times to bring her across the United States and a part of Canada, to the Yukon Telegraph Trail in the northern part of British Columbia. A telegraph trail linesman was utterly amazed to see a lone women hiking in that remote wilderness, especially in the late fall when weather could be harassing even for the hardy telegraph service men. Her clothes were tattered from trail abuse. If her laudable determination and spirit of adventure were not to be questioned, her knowledge of the coming weather as applied to her dress and equipment apparently were. The linesman telephoned the British Columbia Provincial Police at Hazelton and reported her attempt to brave the approaching winter mountain wilderness.

The Provincial Police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police of Canada had had need at times to intercept various individuals and small parties venturing into the wilderness when these authorities had reason to question the party's ability to cope with weather, the remote wilderness, and other unfamiliar adversities. But the situation must certainly be rare where such interception was applied to a venturesome girl, from perishing in the deep snow, subzero temperatures and blizzards, so common to the higher altitudes of the Rockies. Nevertheless, knowing what she was up against, her spirit was undaunted. She pleaded with the detaining police that many miles could be covered before the big snows came.

But undaunted spirits are not the only requirements needed to cope with mountain wilderness in winter. Consequently, the police managed to find sufficient employment for her in the area, so that before heading out again in the spring, she had accumulated some cash. Why the Provincial Police should be so concerned about her safety as an individual, was somehow difficult for her to understand. They let her continue her hike as the weather warmed, on the condition that she report to each of the cabin service stations along the Telegraph Trail.

Linesmen at these cabins kept tab on her between stations, and whenever they accompanied her part way over

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stretches of rough terrain, they found her setting an amazing pace. She did not dally even at the cabins, though dutifully reporting in to satisfy the travel safety requirement of the Provincial Police. From these stops she departed immediately. Thus, as a result of her cryptic manner, a kind of mystery and legend grew up about her among the people with whom she was obliged by circumstance to make contact. Men living for long periods alone in the wilderness naturally create a hunger for talk and take advantage of the opportunity whenever rare circumstances allow contact. There was little talk, however, when Lillian Alling reached the cabins of the lone linesmen. She withheld all comment on the purpose and general nature of her long trek. Fanciful conjecture naturally followed here whole motive for making the hike. She did, however, let down her guard enough to accept the offer of a dog as a companion from one of the linesmen on the trail.

By the time Lillian Alling arrived at Dawson, Yukon Territory, she had used up another hiking season and was obliged to spend the second winter there. She obtained a job as a cook in one of the lumber camps. From Dawson to Bering Strait not trails and only dense wilderness lay before her, forming a barrier to hiking. She, nevertheless, was not frustrated in her effort to continue. During her spare time she patched up a crude, abandoned boat. Here at Dawson flowed the famous Yukon River, and her amid the outgoing spring ice, Lillian Alling launched here unsturdy craft in the wide expanse of the spring flowage and headed down river. She was seen in her craft at Tanana, Alaska, drifting toward the coast.

Those applauding her success, others questioning her judgment and capability along the route, were both the people who were seriously concerned about her safety, and the invidious elements who likely did not possess quite the dominant spirit equal to that of this slip of a girl. With methodical precision of what seemed to be a well-organized river voyage, she arrived in Nome, Alaska. There she abandoned her craft, which was found in very poor condition, and made some minor purchases for resuming foot travel.

Travel achievement, no matter what the method, seemed to be hers---resourcefully fitting the mode of travel to the terrain. This was evidenced by the fact that, as seen by an Eskimo, she was hiking along the beach, pulling a tiny cart containing her possessions. She had fashioned the cart herself out of some miscellaneous junk, further evidence of her capability.

On the shore of Bering Strait, the account of her great journey becomes nebulous. Conjecture tells us that she succeeded in getting the Eskimos to take her across the waters of the Strait, for she was seen talking to them. Since from here on she was no longer seen in Alaska, we can assume that she continued her journey in Russia. I have endeavored by correspondence with the Russian press to learn what happened to her---if she reached the Russian side, if she was lost in crossing the Strait, or if she met trouble on reentry. Correspondence, so far, has failed to evoke any kind of answer. This is understandable because we have to presume that before the unfree Russian press could answer such an inquiry, they would likely under slave-state "journalism" have to plead their request---and , no doubt, futilely---with the hoi polloi-minded Kremlin. Where totalitarianism is the whole emphasis, the Lillian Allings, apparently, get short shrift with all other noncollective-associated, aspiring individualism. Her extraordinary achievement might well have deserved the plaudits and respect of a free and appreciative society. **Hiking Back to Health**, 1980.

The Women Who Walked to Russia: A Writer's Search for a Lost Legend, 2003

Now this leads us to the recent publication by Cassandra Pybus. Her quest to complete the mystery of Lillian Alling, hopefully to answer Calvin's final questions, was my primary reason for reading this book. Apparently she was initially intrigued by Lillian's story when she encountered a reference in a BC bookstore.

While browsing a bookshop in Prince George, I noticed a reference to a women who walked to Russia, just one of many remarkable tales of endurance and determination that make up the folklore of this spectacular, wild region.

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*Masculine tales for the most part, these stories belong to the genre of heroic self-improvement: carving out new territory, striking it rich, that sort of thing. Lillian's story intrigued me in a way the others did not, because of its intensely domestic impulse that fueled her extraordinary feat. She simply wanted to go home. **The Women Who Walked to Russia**, 2003.*

She wrote an article *Reaching Atlin*, **Brick Magazine**, (Canada) March, 1999, (which I have not read) that was supposed to "wash this women right out of her hair". However, she continued to want more. Apparently her starting points for Lillian's story were Edward Hoagland's *Notes from the Century Before* and Francis Dickie's 1972 *True West* magazine article. I have not seen either of these sources, but Cassandra's brief synopsis of Dickie's article seems to follow Calvin's retelling from *Hiking Back to Health*, and she states that;

Hoagland's information was wrong in almost all its particulars....

Cassandra's efforts are similar to Calvin's attempt to fill in the details, but goes far beyond a chapter in a book and some correspondence with the Russian press. Part I, *Looking for Lillian* outlines Pybus's efforts to locate Lillian's origins, her status in New York, and her travels out of British Columbia where records exist. She has researched Lillian Alling's immigration to the US and tried to physically trace her BC walk. Her analysis of Lillian's origins and possible actual last name is well presented, however, the records do not pinpoint any actual confirmed entry point for Lillian. She makes a decent case for Lillian's origin as Belorussia, as a displaced Jew from the Pale of Settlement with a last name that was some derivation of Olejnik.

I had hopes that Cassandra Pybus would fill in many of the missing details of Alling's journey. Unfortunately, Alling's trail is quite cold and filled with slightly contradictory bits and pieces of her journey. Pybus, in her journey north, finds traces of Lillian's walk, but primarily focuses on her trip with her friend. Pybus spend nearly all of Part II, *Raven Road* discussing the various points of the road trip but primarily her interactions with her travel partner. This portion of the book adds little to the mystery of Alling, but much to the trials of driving north with a companion that is less focused on Cassandra's goals. For a more in-depth critique of this portion of Pybus's book see YukonBooks.com.

Part III, *Adrift in Beringia* benefits from Cassandra and her traveling companion having split up. Some general discussion is presented on other "explorers" trials in the subarctic and there is much speculation on Lillian Alling's movements from Dawson City north, but little more was added to the existing accounts. One interesting reference was made to a story published in 1948 in *Shoulder Strap* the journal of the British Columbia Provincial Police by J Wellsford Mills.

I can find no evidence that Lillian's statements were ever recorded by the provincial police or the Hazelton court, so I must assume that Mills interviewed Constable Wyman. I further assume that Wyman supplied Mills with the information he used to construct a dialog in which Lillian Wyman emphatically, "I am going to Siberia". Mills must also have interviewed one of the lineman, Jim Christie, who is credited with the photos that accompany the piece. From Christie's information, Mills reconstructed Lillian's journey from cabin to cabin. "At no time was she communicative," Mills writes. "She told nothing of her past". Mills's story comes to an end at Dawson City. "Extensive inquiries have failed to discover her eventual fate," he concludes.

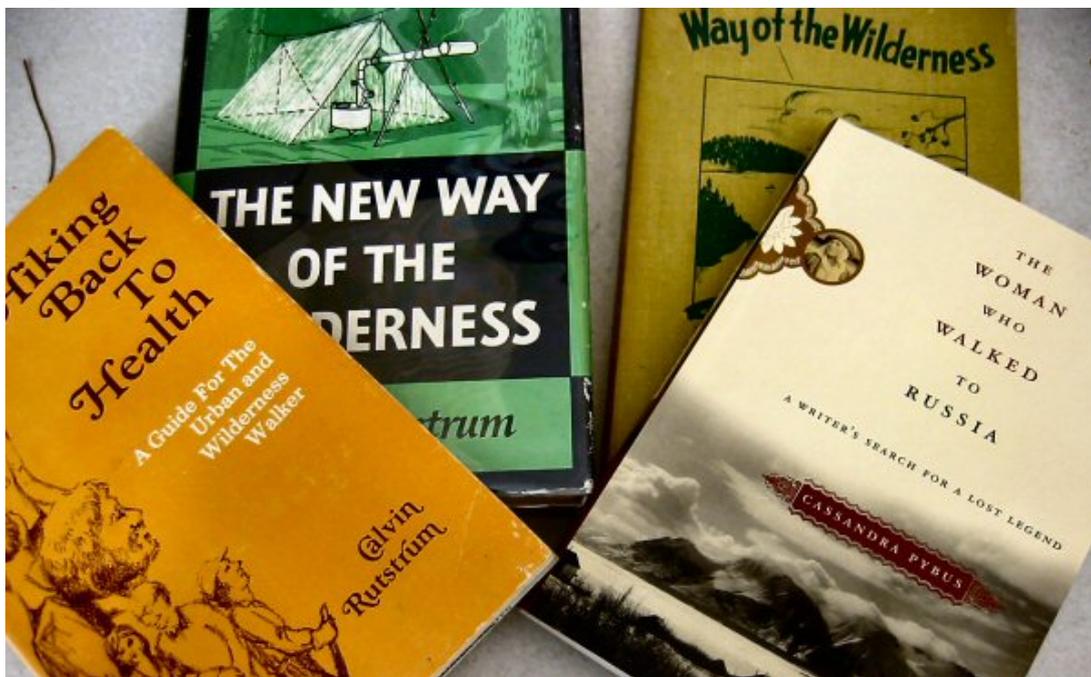
*Mills's account was cannibalized by Francis Dickie for his article in "True West" in 1972, in which he has Lillian say, "I go to Siberia". The elements of the encounter with the provincial police are the same in the Dickie article, but the actual dialogue is somewhat different. **The Women Who Walked to Russia**, 2003.*

A letter Cassandra received from a retired police officer named Greenfield, does add new nuances to the story. He attributes her walk to find and marry her boy friend. He was apparently responsible for guarding her upon her arrest

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in Hazelton. He states that Lillian carried a landing card in the name of Ailing and had married a man in Telegraph Creek (not the boy friend she was seeking). Cassandra runs with this romance interest and speculates that Lillian and her husband lived out their lives in Alaska and Lillian died in Sitka. No attempts seem to have been made to stitch this story a bit tighter together however.

We are left 78 years later with a number of accounts by various authors and a few photographs. So while the mystery of Lillian Alling's motives and endpoint remains, there can be no doubt that her efforts were extraordinary. Her spirit and determination was an example, and can still be an example, for all those who put their mind to accomplish a task.



The Books

Resources

Calvin Rutstrum's other books and a bit more from *Hiking Back to Health* can be found in my earlier review of his [complete works](#).

Way of the Wilderness, Calvin Rutstrum, was originally published by Burgess Publishing in 1946, with a revised edition in 1952 followed by a reprint in 1953. These are among the most difficult to find of all of Rutstrum's work. Both eBay and [bookfinder.com](#) have listed editions over the past few years, selling from \$10 to over \$100.

The New Way of the Wilderness, Calvin Rutstrum, 1958, was published by Macmillan and reprinted many times over the years. It recently has been reprinted in a University of Minnesota edition, but the hardcover editions are very commonly found at local used bookstores, eBay, and [bookfinder.com](#). Excellent first editions can generally be found for less than \$5.

Hiking Back to Health, Calvin Rutstrum, 1980, was published by ICS Books, Pittsboro, Indiana in both paper and hardcover. They can sometimes be found offered on eBay or somewhat more commonly on [bookfinder.com](#). This is one of Rutstrum's more difficult to find editions and it sells at widely varying prices.

The Women Who Walked to Russia: A Writer's Search for a Lost Legend, Cassandra Pybus, 2003 was published by Four Walls Eight Windows, New York in large format paper, can also be found in both new and used editions on [bookfinder.com](#). It sells for \$7 and up.

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The Legend of Lillian Alling - The Woman who Walked to Russia, an 18 page pamphlet by Diane Solie Smith, is listed at [Yukon Books](#) for \$6.95 CND. I have not yet read this.

Yukon News, 1997, an [on-line article](#) by Don Sawatsky, which covers Alling's story. This article closely follows Calvin's outline until her boat journey down the Yukon.

[Pybus's website](#) University of Tasmania.

Additional detail, (Rutstrum's Lillian Alling story from):

1958 *The New Way of the Wilderness*

In the summer of 1927, Lillian Alling, a young Russian immigrant, homesick and compelled to perform menial tasks for a living in New York, made up her mind to go back to her homeland in Europe. Because she had no money for transportation, she decided to hike back to her native country. She tramped to Chicago, to Minneapolis, to Winnipeg, refusing all invitations to ride.

She was next seen on the Yukon Telegraph Trail in the northern part of British Columbia, Canada, a small pack on her back and a length of iron pipe in her hand for protection, heading towards Alaska. The provincial police at Hazelton prevented her from making a winter journey through the Canadian wilds, but they were able to detain her only until spring.

Starting out again, she hiked along the Telegraph Trail, over the wild mountain passes, finally reaching Dawson. There she worked as a cook, purchased and repaired an old boat, and in the spring of 1929, launched it into the waters of the Yukon River right behind the outgoing ice and reached a point east of the Seward Peninsula. There she abandoned the boat for overland travel, reaching Nome and later Bering Strait. She was last heard bartering with the Eskimos for boat passage across the Strait to Asia.

If you care to check the story, you will find it in the files of the provincial police in British Columbia.

*To say that the courageous and almost incredible experience of Lillian Alling is within the bounds of anyone would be presumptuous. Few person, either man or women, have the hardihood, let alone the ability, to undertake such a journey. My purpose in mentioning it is to show that most of us could, by comparison, undertake a wilderness journey of some kind, and succeed if we would but arouse our determination, lay our plan, and go ahead with it. **The New Way of the Wilderness**, 1958.*

Post-scriptum :

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