

The Story of Seward's Folly

by Susan Clinton



ABOUT THE READING The U.S. Secretary of State, William Seward, negotiated a deal with the czar to buy land from Russia for 7.2 million dollars in 1867. However, many Americans believed that purchasing this frozen desert (originally called Russian America) was a huge mistake.

VOCABULARY

lavish extravagant

luxuriant productive

endorsement approval



As you read the passage below, think of how Seward was able to persuade others.

That Saturday night, Seward set to work on two fronts. He launched a newspaper campaign to win over the American people, and he launched a week of **lavish** dinner parties to win over individual senators. He immediately released news of the treaty (all but the price) to the newspapers, especially to the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. This paper was run by his friend Thurlow Weed. But as fast as Weed could publish favorable articles, Seward's old enemy Horace Greeley wrote against it.

Weed's headlines boasted "Grand Acquisition of Territory" and "Our Pacific Coast Line Doubled." Meanwhile, Greeley was calling the territory "the national ice-house" and poking fun at Seward's glowing picture of it: "In a comparison of Mr. Seward's documents we find the Polar bear reclining among roses, barley ripening on icebergs, grass of **luxuriant** growth over which the Esquimaux shuffle with snow-shoes, and Winter everywhere sleeping in the lap of May." . . .

At this time, too, many Americans believed in the doctrine of "manifest destiny." This was the belief that it was America's destiny to extend itself over

Horace Greeley was a journalist who helped stop Seward's attempt to gain the Republican candidacy for president.

Alaska is larger than the state of Texas.

the whole continent and even beyond. Seward certainly believed it. He once said, “Our population is destined to roll its resistless waves to the icy barriers of the North, and to encounter Oriental civilization on the shores of the Pacific.”

Luckily for Seward, Charles Sumner of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee believed it too. On April 8, Sumner made a three-hour speech advising the Senate to vote for the treaty. . .

Sumner’s speech was more than an **endorsement**. Sumner, like most Americans, started out knowing next to nothing about Alaska. In one week he had put together an enormous amount of information, and it all went into his speech. He had temperature readings to prove that winters in Sitka were warmer than winters in Maine. He described the weather-proof parkas of the Aleutian Islanders. Most importantly, he listed all the ways of making money in the new territory. . .

Sumner wound up his speech by suggesting a new name for Russian America—the Indian word *Al-ay-ek-sa*, meaning “great land.” People pronounced the word as “Alaska,” and the name stuck.

Sumner said that fur traders could get rich from selling seal pelts and walrus tusks. He also mentioned the profits to be gained from fishing. However, no one knew about Alaska’s vast resources in 1867. It wasn’t until 1968 that oil was discovered.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

1. Main Idea What were some of the arguments used to convince people that the purchase of Alaska was a good idea?

2. Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences Why do you think Seward’s efforts to purchase Alaska were successful?

ACTIVITY

What if William Seward was speaking at your school, and you have been selected to introduce him? Prepare a speech to introduce him to your classmates.