

North to Alaska with a true pioneer

By Patricia A. Douglas

THE ALASKA-KLONDIKE DIARY OF ELIZABETH ROBINS, 1900, edited by Victoria Joan Moessner and Joanne E. Gates: The University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks, 1999, 367 pp., with photographs and maps, \$22.95

What do a woman traveling to Alaska one hundred years ago and a present-day Jacksonville State University professor have in common? *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins*.

Joanne E. Gates, an associate professor of English at JSU, is the co-editor of the book, along with Victoria Joan Moessner, who teaches German at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Gates' interest in this project began in the mid-1980s with a biography of Robins she wrote as her dissertation project while at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Robins (1862-1952) was an English actress and writer in London and New York. The diary is about her journey to "rescue" her brothers, Saxton and Raymond, in Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush.

My interest in the book is two-fold. First, it is

a true-life story of a woman taking on an adventure in her life, which I enjoy. I have several books of this type in my collection, including *The Road North: One Woman's Adventure Driving the Alaska Highway 1947-1948*. Both of these are stories of adventurous women bent on making solo trips to "The Last Frontier." The main difference between the two is that they are told from different eras. I guess I should think about writing the story of my own Alaskan adventure.

This brings me to the second reason that I have a personal interest in this book. Like many of my fellow military veterans, I was in Alaska for three years. Compared to the conditions in which Robins survived, I had it easy. I love the land and the rich history of Alaska.

The descriptions in the book are very vivid, even to the point of detailing the provisions Robins was to take with her. Traveling to Alaska in that day meant only one way, by boat. The journey was long and could be dangerous, so packing proper provisions was critical. Though this part of the book is a bit slow going, the details of how she, a

single woman in a man's world, had to take time to prepare for such a trip is important to the story.

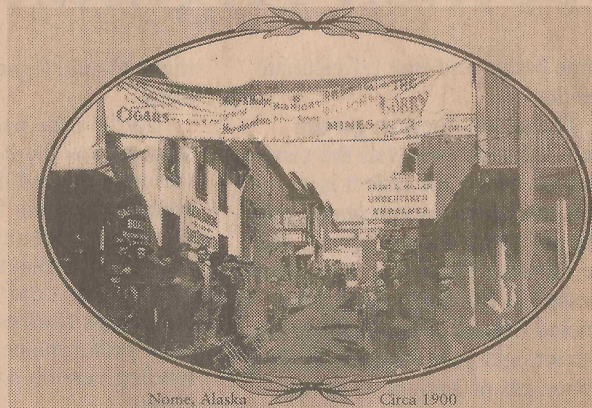
The few photographs sprinkled throughout the book caught my eye. Robins had photos of herself taken while she was doing some very "Alaskan" things — such as panning for gold, or riding a buggy onto the tundra. She also

made sure to photograph what she saw around her. These include the Russian Orthodox churches, the beaches and streets of Nome, the wharf at Dawson. These photographs, part of the Robins estate at the Fales Library of New York University, are an excellent addition to the book.

The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900 is available at the JSU Bookstore. It can also be ordered directly from the University of Alaska Press by calling 1-888-252-6657. Information on other works written by and related to Robins is available on a Web site dedicated to her: www.jsu.edu/dept/english/robins.

The Alaska Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900 is a very welcome addition to my collection of works about Alaska.

Patricia A. Douglas is a copy editor for The Star. She was stationed in Alaska for three years at Fort Richardson.



A street scene of Nome, Alaska, as viewed through the eyes of Elizabeth Robins.

Courtesy/Alaska University Press

Diary reading:

Joanne Gates will read from *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900*, Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. on the 11th floor of the Houston Cole Library or the campus of Jacksonville State University.

The event is sponsored by Friends of the Houston Cole Library. There will be a reception following the program along with a book signing.

Gates, an associate professor of English at JSU, first discovered Elizabeth Robins, the actress and writer, while in graduate studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Now she consistently lists Robins' work, *Votes for Women*, in her syllabus for a course she teaches on women's literature.

"Her influence in her times was quiet considerable," said Gates. "She was an important voice in the struggle for votes for women. It's a good time to re-acknowledge that."