

W.A. DICKEY  
ALASKA'S FIRST CHESS CHAMPION  
(1896-1920)



*The Rainier*  
Studios

707 Second Street,  
Between Columbia and Cherry.

Seattle.

Photograph courtesy of the University  
of Washington Libraries

A few years ago, while researching the life of Alaskan artist Sydney Laurence, I came across the following article in the Valdez Daily Prospector for January 18, 1913:

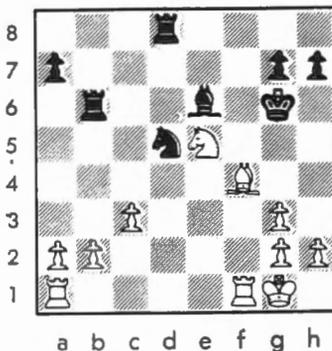
"W.A. Dickey, recognized as one of the finest chess players on the Pacific Coast, was in the city (Seattle) yesterday, a guest at the Rainier-Grand. Chess, however, is only a hobby with Mr. Dickey. His real mission in life is to take copper out of a mine which he owns at Valdez. Mr. Dickey is on his way to New York, but while in the city took occasion to point out a few of the finer points to chess players at the Commercial Club--Seattle Post Intelligencer."

Dickey's name was already familiar to me as that of one of the men who had helped finance Laurence's famous first painting of Mt. McKinley, the "Top of the Continent". But of his chess play I had known nothing. What follows presents my findings since this initial discovery.

William Andrews Dickey was born in Manchester, New Hampshire on October 20, 1862. He attended Princeton University (then a college) graduating in 1885. While at Princeton, in addition to his studies and some newspaper work, he played baseball (pitcher) and chess. In both 1884 and 1885 he was the University Chess Champion as well as an officer of the Princeton Chess Club. He also captained the Princeton Chess Team in a successful correspondence match with the students at Columbia University. This game has survived and is presented below.

Correspondence Game  
Bishop's Opening  
Princeton, N.J./New York City, 1884-1885

Princeton University (Dickey's Team)	Columbia University
1. e4	e5
2. Bc4	Nf6
3. d3	Bc5
4. Nf3	d5?! (A)
5. exd5	Nxd5
6. Nxe5	O-O
7. d4	Re8
8. O-O	c6
9. Nxf7	Qh4
10. Bxd5 (B)	cxd5
11. dxc5	Kxf7
12. Qxd5+	Be6
13. Qxb7+	Nd7
14. c6	Reb8
15. Qc7	Rc8
16. Qg3	Qxg3
17. fxg3+	Nf6
18. Bg5	Rxc6
19. c3	Rd8
20. Nd2	Kg6
21. Bf4	Nd5
22. Nf3	Rb6
23. Ne5+ (c and diagram)	



Position after 23.Ne5+

### Notes

(A) Losing a Pawn without evident compensation. Frank Marshall, American Champion 1906-1936, favored 3...d5!? rather than 3...Bc5 used one move earlier by the Columbia players. In the case of Marshall's move, in contrast to the game continuation, after 4.exd5,Nxd5; 5.Nf3 Black may play 5...Nc6 protecting his King Pawn. Marshall comments: "The theorists frown on this move because it is likely to lose a Pawn. However, it has been my experience that White loses time and weakens his position in gaining the Pawn, so that the sacrifice becomes a worthwhile investment." (My Fifty Years of Chess, p.37)

(B) 10.dxc5 is likely to transpose into the text after 10...Kxf7; 11.Bxd5+. If 10...Qxc4 then 11.Nd6.

(C) These are all of the moves for the game I was able to locate. The comment in The Princetonian for May 6, 1885, was as follows: "In the game with Columbia, Princeton has long had a slight advantage in pawns, but through a singular move (21) of Columbia, Princeton's game is materially strengthened as will be apparent on a study of the moves.... The game is thus in Princeton's hands and it would not be suprising if Columbia, after a half-dozen more moves, would resign the game."

Is this assessment of the position correct? Is Columbia's game about to collapse? I offer a book prize for the best analysis of this position submitted to me in writing before March 15, 1988.



From The Princeton Bric-A-Brac for 1884

On February 22, 1885, as part of the first annual meeting of New Jersey chess players, Wilhelm Steinitz, World Chess Champion 1886-1894, gave a simultaneous exhibition against twenty-nine opponents at Elizabeth, New Jersey. The day was a public holiday and the gathering brought together the best chess players from around the state. Each player paid one dollar to participate, each spectator fifty cents. Play began at 2:45 p.m. and at 7:00 p.m. Dickey was among the seven players still surviving. Eventually, Steinitz won all twenty-nine games, but Dickey was one of ten players awarded a one-year subscription to Steinitz's International Chess Magazine for having made the best defense against the champion. A photograph was taken of the event which may still exist, but most

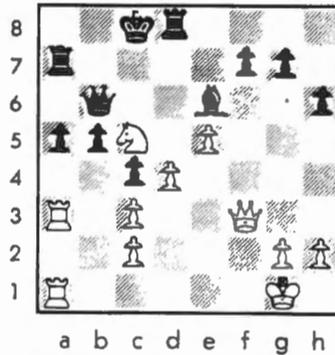
importantly the record of the game was preserved in volume three of Ludwig Bachman's monumental Schachmeister Steinitz (Ansbach, 1920). The game is given below, together with Ludwig Bachman's notes translated from German. Notes by the present writer are also individually distinguished.

Simultaneous Exhibition  
Vienna Game  
Elizabeth, N.J., February 22, 1885

Wilhelm Steinitz  
World Champion 1886-1894

W.A. Dickey  
Princeton University  
Champion 1884-1885

1. e4	e5
2. Nc3	Nf6
3. f4	d4
4. fxe5	Nxe4
5. Nf3	Nxc3 (A)
6. bxc3	Be6
7. d4	Be7
8. Bd3	Nd7
9. 0-0	c6
10. Rb1	Nb6
11. Nd2	Qc7 (B)
12. Qe2	0-0-0
13. Nb3	Nc4
14. Bxc4	dx4
15. Nd2	b5 (C)
16. a4	a6
17. axb5	cx4 (D)
18. Ne4	h6
19. Ra1	Qb6 (E)
20. Ba3 (F)	Bxa3
21. Rxa3	Rd7
22. Rfa1	Ra7
23. Nc5	a5
24. Qf3	Rd8 (G and diagram)
25. Rxa5!	Rxa5 (H)
26. Rxa5	Bd5
27. Qg4+	Kc7 (I)
28. Ra6	Qb8
29. e6! (J)	Qc8 (K)
30. Qf4+	Rd6
31. Qxd6	Mate



Position after 24...Rd8

### Notes

(A) Weaker players when playing stronger ones are usually tempted to exchange pieces at every opportunity. It seems to simplify the game and to make it less dangerous. Frequently this is an error of judgment. Here Dickey without necessity exchanges his strongly posted Knight thereby furthering White's development and strengthening his center. The standard moves in this position are Bb4 (preventing the immediate advance of the Queen Pawn); Bc5 (tempting White to play d4 which will be answered by Bb4); Nc6; Bg4; and Be7. The last mentioned, 5...Be7, is considered best and is followed by 0-0 and f5, further supporting the Knight on e4, or, if the f Pawn is exchanged, eliminating the White Pawn on e5 which severely constrains Black's position. (Moore).

(B) Qd7 was a better move. (Bachman).

(C) Simple and safe was Qa5. (Bachman).

(D) The Black position now seems solid and strong, but Steinitz shows how to breakthrough and finish him off. (Bachman).

(E) Kb7 deserves preference. (Bachman).

(F) Steinitz gets rid of the Black Bishop and obtains a good aggressive outpost for his Knight. (Bachman).

(G) Black prepares to gain control of the crucial h1/a8 diagonal by 25...Bd5. But Steinitz begins a brilliant and devastating combination with his next move. (Moore).

(H) If 25...Bd5; 26.Rxa7!, Bxf3; 27.gxf3, b4 (if 27...Qg6+; 27.Kf1 and Queen moves such as 27...Qxc2 allow mate in seven); 28.R7a6, Qb5; 29.Ra8+ winning. (Moore).

(I) Moving the king to b8 seems safer. Possibly Dickey had dreams of 29...Rg8 after 27...Kc7; 28.Ra6, Qb8; 29.Qxg7. (Moore).

(J) Stronger than the obvious 29.Rxh6. Its geometrical potency lies in the clearing of the h2/b8 diagonal while at the same time threatening a further advance of the Pawn to e7. (Moore).

(K) Not the most resistant but there is no salvation. For example, if 29...Bxe6; 30.Qf4+, Kc8; 31.Rc6+ winning. Or if 29...fxe6; 30.Nxe6+, Bxe6, 31.Qxe6, Qb7; 32.Qe5+, Kc8; 33.Qc5+ pinning the Queen with the Rook next move. (Moore).

---

On June 8, 1886, Dickey left Manchester, New Hampshire, for Seattle, Washington Territory, spending a year with relatives in Arkansas along the way. Once in Seattle he engaged in a variety of businesses: real estate, wholesale and retail groceries (with shipments to Alaska but destroyed by fire) and banking. He also played baseball with Billy Thornell's Seattle Reds and was one of the first curve ball pitchers in Seattle. And, of course, he continued to play chess, joining Clarence Bagley's Seattle Chess Club in 1887. The years following the financial depression of 1893 were extremely good ones for the chess club, men freed from the requirements of expanding businesses having unencumbered time for the game. These conditions came to a halt with the discovery of gold in Alaska and the Klondike.

In an effort to improve his fortunes in a more dramatic way than was happening in Seattle, Dickey went to Alaska in 1896. Arriving during the Kenai gold rush, he explored the Susitna River region, prospecting along the way. During this journey he rediscovered, named, and estimated within 300 feet the height of Mt. McKinley, the highest mountain in North America. His experiences together with a map of the region were published in the New York Sun of January 24, 1897. Also, there was an article by Dickey on "The Susitna River, Alaska" in the National Geographic of November, 1897.

In 1898 Dickey participated in the Klondike gold rush, packing into Dawson over the Dyea Pass. There he discovered a rich claim on Solomon Hill, but lost it in a legal dispute with Canadian Government officials. In 1899 he participated in the famous Harriman-Alaska Expedition. In the 1900's he became active in copper mining operations in the Prince William Sound area and is said to have been financially successful. (Terris Moore's Mt. McKinley, The Pioneer Climbs (Seattle, 1981) is a useful source for basic biographical information on Dickey.)

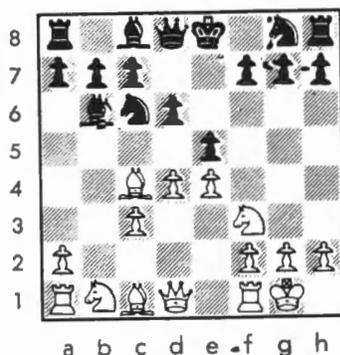
---

It was sometime during this period that Dickey invented the Klondike Gambit. The precise date of inception is not clear from the evidence I have seen. The Evans Gambit had been one of the

great attacking openings of the 19th century. The Lasker Defense, which had been successfully played by Emanuel Lasker, World Champion 1894-1921, at St. Petersburg 1895-96, had brought depression to the world of gambiteers, eventually virtually eliminating the Gambit from serious master practice. It was in the crucial initial position of the Lasker Defense that Dickey proposed a daring sacrifice of the Queen for two Knights, thereby creating a material and positional imbalance, and leaving Black with an awkward, even precarious position. Dickey studied the position carefully and was frequently able to win with the gambit even against strong opposition.

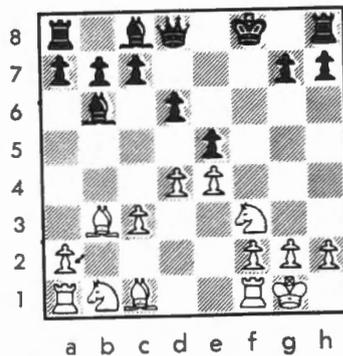
The opening moves leading to the Lasker Defense to the Evans Gambit are:

- |    |     |                   |
|----|-----|-------------------|
| 1. | e4  | e5                |
| 2. | Nf3 | Nc6               |
| 3. | Bc4 | Bc5               |
| 4. | b4  | Bxb4              |
| 5. | c3  | Ba4               |
| 6. | O-O | d6                |
| 7. | d4  | Bb6 (see diagram) |



Position after 7...Bb6

Lasker's idea was that if White choose to regain his sacrificed Pawn by 8.dxe5, dxe5; 9.Qxe8, Nxd8; 10. Nxe5, after 10...Be6, he is not only left without an attack but also has serious Pawn weaknesses on the Queen-side, his sails being, so to speak, without wind and rotten. Rather than the unappealing 8.dxe5, Dickey proposed 8.Qb3 and after 8...Na5; 9.Bxf7+, Kf8; 10.Bxg8, Nxb3; 11.Bxb3 the post-sacrificial position of the Klondike Gambit variation is reached (see diagram).



Position after 11.Bxb3

"Now its everyman for himself and the devil take the inept," comments John N. Nourse in a 1950's Washington Chess Letter. White threatens to win a Pawn and to open the a3/f8 diagonal for his Queen Bishop with 12.dxe5; and he appears to threaten 12.Ng5 which would menace a Queen/Rook fork and would clear the way for f4 and the opening of the f file. On the negative side it should be mentioned that White is still undeveloped on the Queen-side and that if White after 11...Bg4 played immediately 12.Ng5 he weakens his control of d4 and would allow 12...Qf6; 13.Nf7, Rg8; 14.Ng5, Ke7; 15.Bxg8, Rxg8. In this position Black has returned material but appears to have the better position and prospects. Again in the above variation, if White were to play 13.f4 with idea, as mentioned earlier, of opening the f file, then 13...exd4 is extremely strong. Without any claim of an in-depth analysis, it seems that simply 12.Nbd2 continuing development is White's best response to 11...Bg4.

Not only is the precise time of invention of the Klondike Gambit uncertain, but also the circumstances surrounding its advent are not completely clear. C.B. Bagley (1843-1932) the grand old man of Seattle chess, who had been playing "chess since the time Morphy went to Europe," reports in a 1918 issue of the American Chess Bulletin that one day Dickey and a man named Rigsby were playing an Evans Gambit when the play came up. "At once this form of the gambit became very popular. Dickey played White against all comers, and as he has always been a subject of a great deal of badinage in the club, it soon became known as the 'Fool's Own' an imitation of (Joseph Ney) Babson's (1852-1929) 'King's Own'." (1.e4, e5; 2.f4, exf4; 3.Kf2 constitutes the King's Own, an outlandish gambit idea proposed by the 19th century Anglo-Irish master William Pollock (1859-1896). Pollock had shown the opening to Babson who immediately employed it with overwhelming success against an opponent who had been giving him considerable trouble. The value of surprise and shock to incapacitate is not to be underestimated.)

Clarence Bagley also says that "I believe he has played it (the Klondike) more or less in some of the New York clubs on his visits there from Alaska, where he has lived most of the time for twenty years. I feel sure if the Eastern members should play it enough to recognize its merits it would become as popular as the Rice Gambit." (ACB, 1918, p.72).

In the February, 1920, issue of the American Chess Bulletin A.H. Kenaga, another member of the Seattle Chess Club, reports that "The 'Dickey Gambit' is growing more popular than ever, partly on account of its discoverer, Mr. Will A. Dickey of Seattle, winning with it considerably, when used, both here and in his travels all over the country. Many of the leading chess players all over the country concede it to be one of the hottest attacks ever discovered on the board, even more violent than the accepted Muzio, and it results in more chess to the square inch, on account of its infinite variety, than anything worked out within the last thirty years." (ACB, 1920, p.44).

Writing in the early 1950's in the Washington Chess Letter, regional chess historian John N. Nourse comments that "Mr. Dickey won a special niche in chess fame as the originator of a daring opening which he introduced both here and in New York, and which was played extensively at the time. It was called variously, 'The Fools Own', the 'Klondike' or 'Dickey's Gambit'." He quotes Otto Case (Washington State Champion for 1926) as saying that "along in the middle of the opening he sacrificed a Queen (for two minor pieces) gaining a maximum attack with nearly all his remaining pieces....Worst of it all, Mr. Case laments, was that he beat us all and then looked up for approbation. He even went to New York and won many games from the leading players there until they became familiar with the attack. I gave it another name, I called it the 'Britches', because it was a right and left prong of great strength."

Concerning the origin of the Klondike Gambit, Nourse presents the following legend for which E.A. Erickson is the authority. "It seems that Mr. Dickey and a group of his colleagues, mostly mining engineers, had missed the last boat of the season out of Alaska, and were doomed to play all winter until spring, which gave our talented pioneer ample time and opportunity to analyse the Evans Gambit....Probably playing with weaker players, and in an effort to confer a handicap, he devised the Queen sacrifice and became so adept at it that he was able to confound Seattle's best players with the gambit until much study and analysis developed some defense." Viewed from the standpoint of the 1950's, Nourse thought that the Klondike Gambit could be "recommended as a minor handicap against slightly weaker players."

In the early 1900's Edward Everett, chronicler of early Seattle chess, published an article in the Post-Intelligencer which featured two games played by W.A. Dickey using his gambit against Clarence Bagley. While they are clearly casual games probably played at a fairly rapid pace, which explains a number of careless oversights, their historical interest and the general quality of the play remains quite good, and they definitely seem worthy of republication. Unfortunately, John Nourse does not give even an approximate date of play or publication.

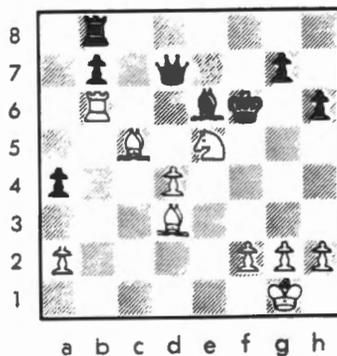
Evans Gambit Accepted  
Lasker Defense, Klondike Gambit Variation  
Seattle, date unknown

W.A. Dickey

C.B. Bagley

1. e4
2. Nf3
3. Bc4
4. b4
5. c3
6. 0-0
7. d4
8. Qb3
9. Bxf7+
10. Bxg8
11. Bxb3
12. cxd4
13. Ba3
14. Nbd2
15. Bc2
16. e5
17. exd6
18. Nxd2?
19. Ne4
20. Bd3
21. Rab1
22. Rxb6
23. Nxd6+
24. Bc5
25. Rb1
26. Rb6
27. Nc4+ (B)
28. Ne5
29. Bc4
30. Bxd5
31. Nd3

- e5
- Nc6
- Bc5
- Bxb4
- Bc4
- d6
- Bb6
- Na5
- Kf8
- Nxb3
- exd4
- h6
- a5 (A)
- a4
- Bg4
- Ba5
- Bxd2?
- cxd6
- Ra6
- Rb6
- Kf7
- Qxb6
- Kf6
- Qc6
- Rb8
- Qd7
- Be6
- Qd5? (C and diagram)
- Rd8
- Rxd5
- Black resigns



Position after 28. Ne5

## Notes

(A) Black's last two moves may look strange at first viewing, but are in fact part of a systematic effort to take the venom out of the Klondike Gambit. 12...h6 prevents the apparent White threat of Ng5 and in some variations allows for artificial castling by Kg8, h7; 13...a5 prepares for a rapid advance of the QR and QN Pawns, thereby gaining time, blocking the important a3/f8 diagonal, and creating counterplay on the Queen-side. The next game demonstrates these potential advantages.

(B) White could obtain a won endgame by 26.Ne4+, Kf7; 27.Bc4+, Be6; 28.Bxe6+, Qxe6; 29.Rxe6, Kxe6 but evidently hopes, with justification it turns out, for more.

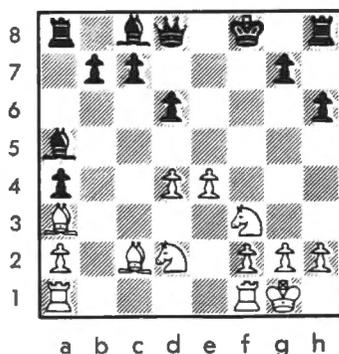
(C) Bagley should have set a subtle trap with 28...Qc7. If White then plays the natural looking 29.Bc4, Black replies with 29...Qxb6!; 30.Bxb6, Rc8 with an excellent counterattack based on threats of mate on the first rank, threats of winning pieces pinned in the defense against mate, and threats of queening the advanced Black QR Pawn once the White QR Pawn is captured. Against 28...Qc7 White should simply play 29.f4 thereby maintaining his bind, creating an additional threat (30.f5), and giving his King some breathing room.

W.A. Dickey

C.B. Bagley

First fourteen moves are identical with those in preceding game

15. Bc2	Ba5
16. e5 (A and diagram)	b5
17. exd6	b4
18. dxc7	Qxc7
19. Be4	Bb7
20. Bxb7	Qxb7
21. Rab1	Qe7
22. Bb2	a3
23. Bal	Qe2
24. Rfel	Qd3
25. Re3 (B)	Qc7
26. Rbel	b3
27. R3e2? (C)	b2
28. White resigns	



Position after 15...Ba5

## Notes

(A) 16.Rab1 is a stronger move. White should take prophylactic measures to restrain Black's advance on the Queen-side before advancing in the center.

(B) A better try was probably 25.Nb3 blockading the QN Pawn. If Black persists in his pursuit of White's QR Pawn with 25...Qc2; then 26.d5, Qxa2; 27.Nfd4 with a number of threats including Rcl followed by Re2 winning back the Queen.

(C) Considerably more resistance could have been made by 27.axb3, Bxd2; 28.R3e2.

---

There is still considerable information to be gathered concerning W.A. Dickey, chess player. One suspects, for example, that there are additional games to be found in contemporary newspaper columns, and perhaps some photographs or other memorabilia. Also, there is likely to be further information in the extensive files accumulated by John Nourse in the process of writing his history of chess play in Washington state. An initial effort to locate these files was unsuccessful. But we already probably have enough information to form a fairly accurate estimation of Dickey's play. While we do not know specifically when he learned the game, since he became Princeton University Champion it seems likely that he learned the game well before entering the University. His play suggests that he was a solid, "logical" player who was cautious and calculating, but who was willing to take considerable initial risks in order to create opportunities--rather what one would expect from a successful businessman. This trait, opening daring followed by cautious exploitation, is shown not only in the Klondike Gambit but also in his known preference for the Allgaier Gambit (1.e4, e5; 2.f4, exf4; 3.Nf3, g5; 4.h4, g4; 5.Ng5 which requires the sacrifice of the Knight after 5...h6). He was not a professional player, business matters always coming first, chess remaining for him an intellectual pastime, diverting and satisfying. That he valued the results of his play is clear from his regularly recording them in his diaries.

As far as we know, he would have been the de facto Chess Champion of Alaska from the time of his first arrival in 1896 until his retirement to Seattle in 1920, where he lived until his death in December, 1939. During part of this time, especially during the the gold rush period, he would have had serious competition. Alex Yeomans, who placed first, and R.K. Latimer and R.P. Wilson who were just behind in the March, 1900, chess tournament in Skagway, would have been strong opponents. Also, L.W. (Dick) Palmer who placed first in the February 18-23, 1901, Nome Chess Tournament, with the remarkable score of nineteen wins, one draw and no losses, and Frank A. Steele who placed a strong second and had earlier been one of the better players at the Seattle Chess Club, both would have been exceptionally strong challengers. But overall there is little doubt of Dickey's supremacy. He was not a

master player, but he was a player of expert strength. His play was sufficiently respected in Washington that in the 1950's when they compiled their Hall of Fame list, Dickey was listed as State Champion from 1915 to 1925. I believe that we also are fortunate to be able to consider such an accomplished and devoted player our first Alaskan Champion.

Robert S. Moore  
Anchorage, Alaska  
February, 1988