On July 31, 1888, five men gathered in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood at the home of Captain Alfred E. Hunt to discuss the possibility of developing, on a commercial scale, a metal known as “aluminium.” Although abundant, no one had yet found a cheap, easy way to process it. It was manufactured in very small quantities, by a costly chemical process, at fewer than 10 sites in the United States and Europe.

Two years earlier, in an Ohio woodshed, Charles Hall had discovered the process of smelting aluminum. By passing an electrical current through a bath of cryolite and aluminum oxide, the metal remained as a by-product. This method, still used today, proved to be a faster, cheaper way of producing aluminum. Hall heard through the grapevine that funding could be found in Pittsburgh. He came seeking financial support, formed the Pittsburgh Reduction Company with Hunt in 1889, and patented his process in 11 countries. Later renamed The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), the company became the leading aluminum producer in the world.

By the early 1900s, Alcoa was heavily invested in the mining of bauxite, an ore from which aluminum is made. It was first discovered in the United States in 1889, but was soon also found and mined across Europe, the West Indies, South America, and Guyana. Russia, historically short of bauxite, had to purchase aluminum from other countries. In 1926, Gilbert Wilson, a geologist working with Alcoa, documented his trip to the Urals, where most of the country’s bauxite is produced today. The letters do not spell out Wilson’s role in the expedition, only that is was “exploratory.”

In the first letter in the collection, dated August 8, he wrote of his travels to his family in England:

In case you are looking for this place in an atlas I am E of Perm and N of Ekaterinburg or Svertlovsk as it is now called in the Urals. Tomorrow morning we sail up the Chousovskiya River in a motor boat all day to get to our destination. We are just a party of three, Dr. Harder [E.C. Harder, from Alcoa], our interpreter Korchevski and myself and...
we have had a great trip across Leningrad to Svertloocksk and thence for a day and a night to here.¹

Twice, in his letter dated August 23, he implored his family to keep his work confidential:

By the way it is all right to say I am in Russia but do not say definitely where, especially about the Tickvin area and do not say that I am working for an American company nor let its name out, because as yet the concession has not been granted definitely and we do not want any other interests butting in as they might if they got any clue as to what is going on.

He finished the letter with a P.S.:

Do not let the fact that I am over here get into print whatever you do, in fact, do not tell anyone outside the immediate family or our friends—I suppose Pa wants to broadcast at the club!²

Wilson’s correspondence continued through October 1926, and described, in some detail, the countryside and the weather. He offered very little information about the mines, but the wet, damp conditions certainly impacted Wilson’s work. His last letter in the collection summed it up:

At present, it is raining, which means that all my pits will be flooded out tomorrow morning! That will mean half a week’s work going phut!³

One might wonder if the work Wilson and Harder did in the Urals between 1926 and 1927 helped Russia build capacity to mine bauxite; Alcoa did not formally enter Russia until 1993. In 2005, the company acquired two facilities, and has since invested more than $760 million in upgrades.

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.