

Historic Roads of Alaska



Driving the History of the Last Frontier

Front cover: Chevrolet crossing glacier stream on Richardson Highway near Worthington Glacier.

The Alaska Railroad Tour Lantern Slide Collection, 1923. ASL-P198-56
ASL-PCA-198

Back cover: Keystone Canyon on the Richardson Highway.

Alaska State Library, The Alaska Railroad Tour Lantern Slide Collection, 1923
ASL-P198-62

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Haines Highway.
Alaska State Parks



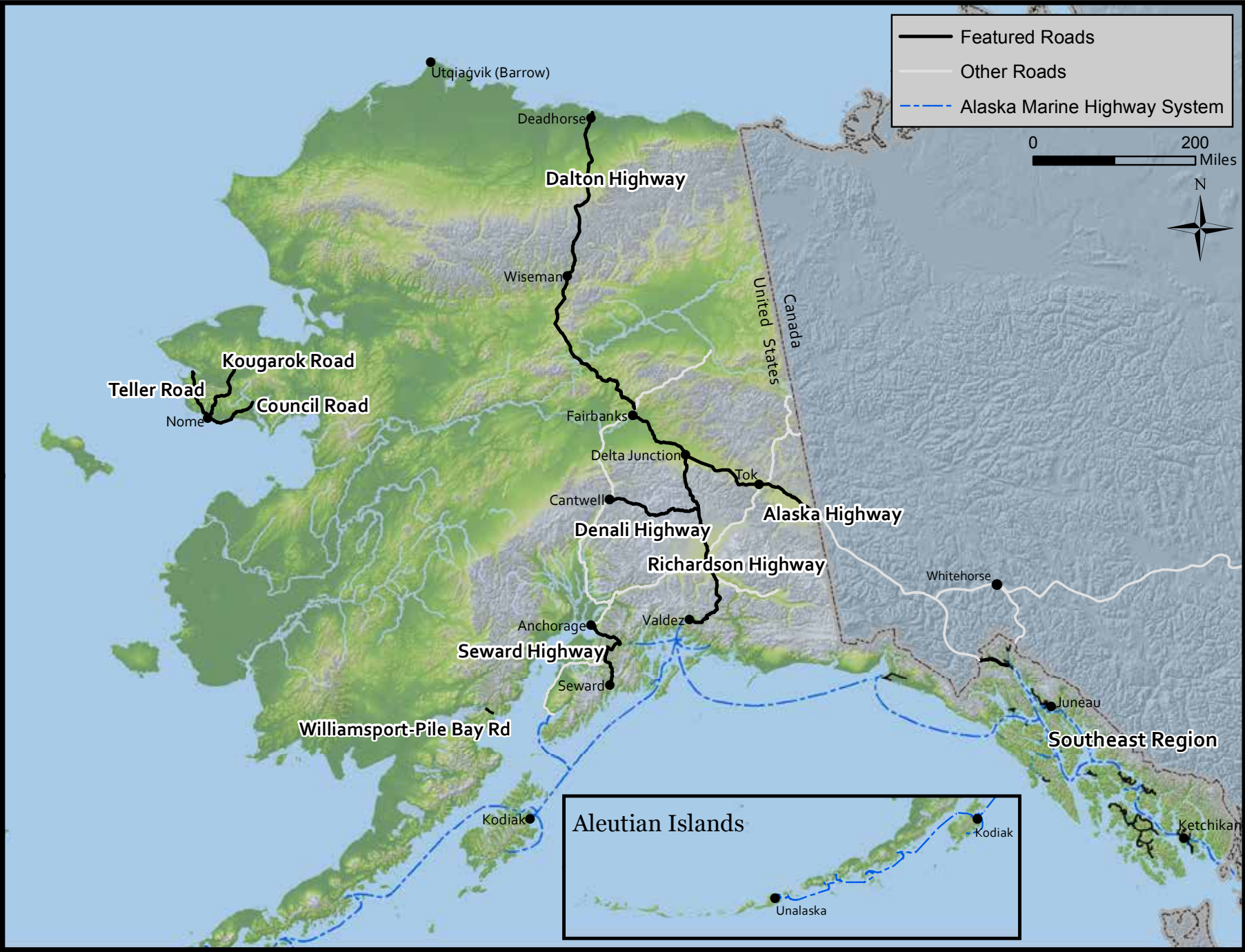
A tour bus operated by the Richardson Highway Transportation Co.

Alaska State Library, Skinner Foundation Photo Collection
ASL-P44-05-029

Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	1
	Alaska's Historic Road Agencies.....	3
	Alaskan Road Construction.....	4
2.	The Richardson Highway	7
	Roadhouses.....	10
3.	Nome Roads	13
	Nome-Council Road.....	14
	Kougarok Road.....	15
	Nome-Teller Road.....	17
4.	Southeast Region	21
	Alaska Marine Highway System.....	25
5.	Williamsport-Pile Bay Road	27
6.	The Alaska Highway	31
	Tok.....	34
	The Black Engineers of the Alaska Highway.....	34
7.	The Seward Highway	37
	Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel.....	41
8.	The Denali Highway	43
9.	The Dalton Highway	49
10.	Further Readings	54
11.	List of Terms	56

Featured Roads



1. Introduction

Driving along many of Alaska's highways, it would be easy to see them as just the same as any other highway elsewhere in the United States. They are, today, paved corridors stretching for miles across the land, passing through large cities and small towns, carrying travelers from near and far. Yet for most of their existence, Alaska's highways and roads were very different, and some of them remain so to the present. Their histories are diverse, growing out of the activities of thousands of Alaska Natives, pioneers, prospectors, soldiers, and engineers who blazed, dug, and paved the routes. They reflect the history of Alaska, from its time as a new territory on the edge of the existing frontier, through the booms of gold rushes, to the growth under the threat of World and Cold wars and the establishment of statehood.

Many of Alaska's first roads were built to access the territory's resources. The lure of gold and other minerals, along with resources such as fish and timber, brought many of Alaska's early American arrivals. But these men and women found it difficult to get around, and most transportation, even to burgeoning gold mines, was by water. In order to make it easier, and cheaper, for prospectors, miners, and others to access these resources, the federal and territorial governments began building trails across Alaska. This trail network became extensive, reaching parts of the territory that had limited connections before, especially to the ports that connected Alaska to the rest of the country. These trails and roads often had numbers, but it was usually easier to identify them by their destination, or after a prominent figure or engineer who led to their construction. Even today, most Alaskans refer to highways by name (the Richardson, the Seward, the Alaska Highway, etc.), and several different highways may make up one numbered highway route.¹

¹ Several Alaska highways are also part of the Interstate Highway System, numbered A-1 to A-4, although they are not signed. Again, several different highways may make up one numbered Interstate Highway route.



The first edition of *The Milepost*, published in 1949.
Morris Communications

In time, the government agencies developed road building programs, laying the foundation for many of Alaska's historic roads and connecting Alaska's far-flung communities, helping to tie the growing territory closer together. Without these roads, it is hard to envision Alaska's economy developing as quickly and extensively as it did, especially in the middle of the 20th century, when new military spending combined with the discovery of oil resources to lift Alaska's economy to new levels.

This booklet looks at the history of some of these roads – the Richardson Highway, selected roads around Nome, the roads in the Southeast, the Williamsport-Pile Bay Road, the Alaska Highway, the Seward Highway, the Denali Highway, and the Dalton Highway – to explore their role in Alaska's history. These roads are by no means all of the historic roads in Alaska, nor do they tell the whole history of road travel in the state. These roads represent different aspects of the state: from small connector roads to long highways leading to the rest of the country; from local roads that connect communities to ferries that connect whole regions; and from the first major road to gold regions to the latest major road to oil regions. These roads are also spread across Alaska and demonstrate the vastness of Alaska and its diversity in climate, economy, and population. Their individual histories illuminate the many ways that Alaska evolved from "Seward's Folly" to a prosperous state, and together can open a new window on Alaska's history.

Alaska Road Commission
work camp near Copper
Center on the Valdez-
Fairbanks wagon road.

Alaska State Library
Skinner Foundation Photo Collection
ASL-P44-05-029



Alaska's Historic Road Agencies

Before the turn of the 20th century, the federal government paid little attention to the new territory. As historians Claus-M. Naske and Herman Slotnick noted, Alaska's needs "received little consideration from a far-off government in Washington that neither knew nor cared very much about them."² Those needs included roads. Native trails were plentiful, and some wagon roads developed along popular routes or to mining claims, but Alaska's road network did not expand much from the 5 miles of wagon roads that existed at the time of the Treaty of Cession in 1867, and most of the construction was by the miners and residents themselves. The gold rushes of the 1890s and early years of the 1900s brought thousands of people to the territory, and the need for suitable road transportation became a constant outcry to Washington. In response, Congress created the Board of Road Commissioners for Alaska in 1905 (usually called the Alaska Road Commission, or ARC), funded by an "Alaska Fund" made up of money collected in the territory from liquor licenses, occupation fees, or trade licenses outside of incorporated towns.

The ARC originally was under the War Department, and consisted of three Army officers, one of which served as the president. The first president, Wilds P. Richardson, served for the ARC's first twelve years, and laid the foundation for its success. The commissioners oversaw small teams of surveyors, engineers, and construction crews in defined regions across the territory. Alaskans could petition the ARC to build roads. Many of the early roads were built to support mining or other economic activity. Later, the ARC provided support to the Alaska Railroad and the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) for maintaining some of the railroads and airfields that made up part of Alaska's transportation system.

The ARC faced a monumental task from the start. Alaska's population was growing as more and more people arrived to strike it rich in the gold fields or to make their way in the new towns serving those fields. Newcomers found few roads or even trails when they arrived, and looked to the ARC to provide those roads. But Alaskan communities were scattered across the expansive territory, from older towns like Juneau in the Southeast, to newer ones like Fairbanks in the Interior and Nome on the west coast, so it simply was not possible for the ARC to build a network of roads across all that land. Even deciding which area to prioritize was difficult, especially given the limited funding the ARC had to work with and the geographic and environmental challenges Alaska presented.

² Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the 49th State*, 76.



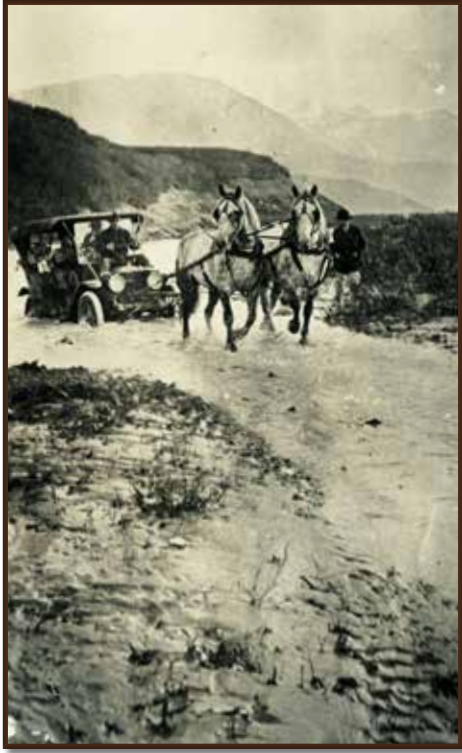
Winter view of an Alaska Road Commission building in Fairbanks.

Estelle and Philip Garges Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library
University of Alaska Anchorage
UAA-hmc-0381-series2-27-1



An Alaska Road Commission construction crew grading a road with a case tractor.

James Gordon Steese Papers, Dickenson College, Archives and Special Collections



Alaska Road Commission horse team tows car across Gunn Creek on the Valdez Trail, 1915.

Alaska State Library, John William "Bill" Frame Photo Collection
ASL-P228-279



A corduroy road at Cache Creek near Talkeetna, circa 1922.

James Gordon Steese Papers, Dickenson College, Archives and Special Collections

As Alaska grew in the first half of the 20th century, other federal agencies like the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR, the predecessor to the Federal Highway Administration [FHWA]) began to operate more extensively within the Territory. The BPR operated largely within national forests, but worked alongside the ARC and the Territorial Road Commission, a small territorial agency, to successfully develop the road system. Over the years the ARC underwent many changes, both in structure and in name, eventually forming the basis for today's Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) after Alaska achieved statehood in 1959.

Alaskan Road Construction

Building a road in Alaska is not as simple as clearing a path and laying asphalt or concrete. Across the more than 600,000 square miles of its territory are numerous construction challenges to highway engineers: rugged mountains, glacial rivers prone to flooding during breakup, soft and wet muskeg, and permafrost under 80 percent of the ground. On top of those elements, Alaska has some of the most extreme climates in the country, from -80°F in the winter to 100°F in the summer, with heavy snowfalls common from the early fall to the late spring. The road builders in Alaska have had to learn how to overcome these challenges, often through experience and trial-and-error, to come up with techniques to safely and efficiently create highways in Alaska.

When the ARC began building roads in the early 20th century, most of its employees' knowledge came from less severe environments. In many cases, that knowledge was enough to start building roads. Dirt or gravel roads sufficed to allow for wagon and then motor vehicle passage. In wetter terrain like muskeg, the ARC was often able to construct corduroy roads, laying stripped trees parallel across the roadway to top with dirt or gravel. To keep water from accumulating over the roads, they were built with crowns that drained water from the center of the road to the side ditches and with culverts, often made of logs, to allow water to flow under roads.

The surveyors, engineers, and construction workers in Alaska quickly found that their knowledge sometimes did not translate well to the territory beyond laying basic roads. Some muskeg was so deep and wet that even using corduroy would not keep the road from sinking. An even bigger problem was permafrost. Some permafrost can reach 1,000 feet below the surface and can contain large amounts of frozen water. Early engineers found that after removing the vegetation and topsoil cover, what was solid ground one day became a deep

quagmire the next, as the permafrost melted and released the water. Diverting this water with ditches proved futile, as water can't drain downward through permafrost.

The most successful method to build over permafrost was to leave the top layer of tundra, allowing it to insulate the permafrost from above, and then putting gravel or other fill on top. Although engineers realized this requirement early on, it was not until after World War II that equipment became more available and reduced costs so that it could become standard practice.

Paving Alaska's roads was a lower priority than in the rest of the country, where it was commonplace by the 1940s. For much of its history, the ARC determined that paving Alaskan roads was unnecessary, even as traffic increased. Only after World War II did the increasing use of the roads lead officials to begin paving some of the more important highways, including the Richardson and Alaska Highways, in order to meet the increasing demands on the roads from new military and industrial traffic with heavier loads. Yet even as cars became important to transportation in Alaska, some highways – including the Denali Highway and the Taylor Highway – remain partially unpaved today and are not fully maintained in winter.



A plank road (left) in Alaska, circa 1916.

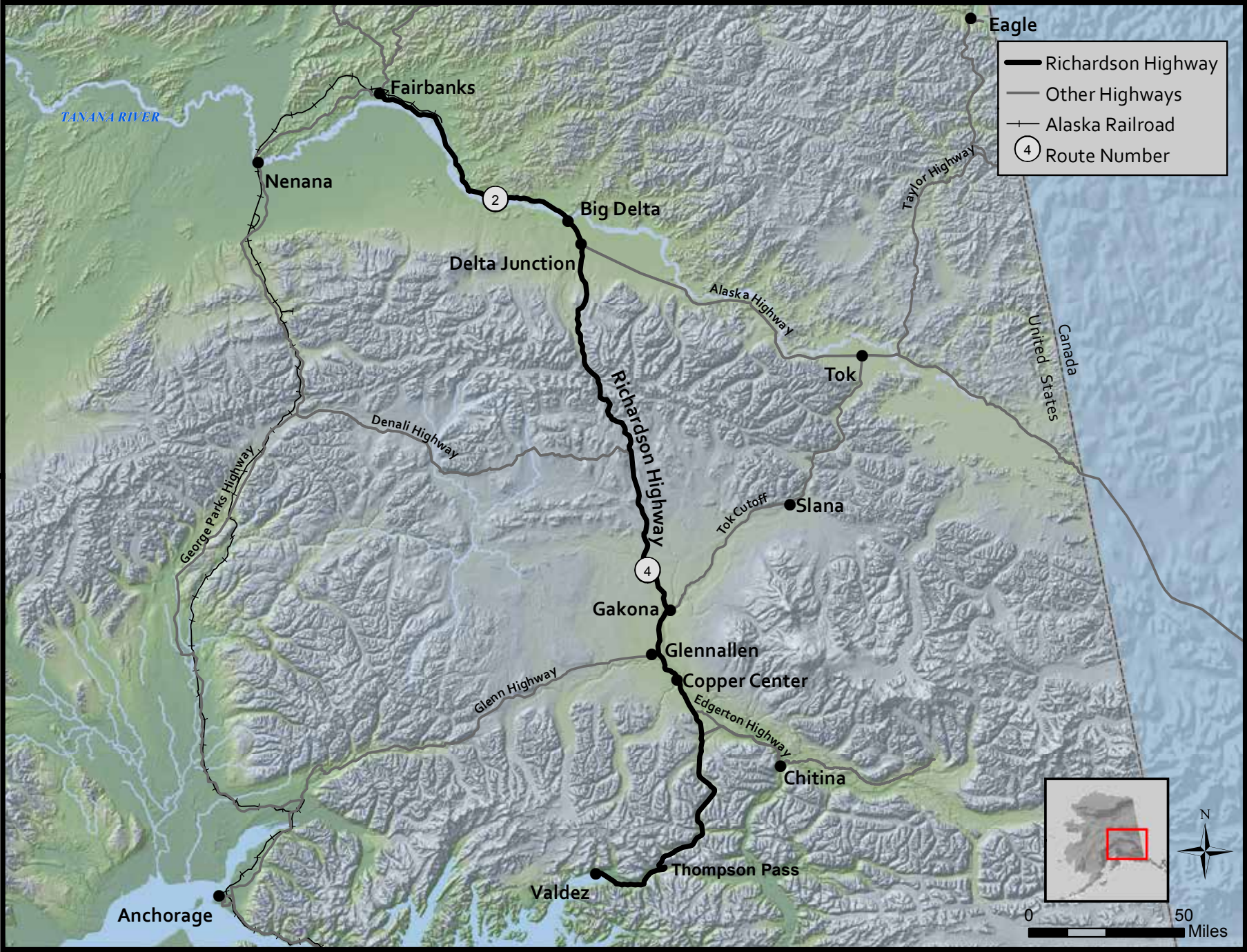
Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Prints & Photographs Division,
Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsc-02194



Frost heaves on the Richardson Highway.

Accent Alaska.com / Alamy Stock Photo

The Richardson Highway



2. The Richardson Highway

The Richardson Highway was the first road in the territory of Alaska to expand from a long-distance trail to a road. Most overland travel before its construction was either local in nature, or was by pack train in summer or by dogsled in winter. The military initially built a wagon trail to the interior of Alaska to support freight movement to and from new gold producing areas, and then improved it as its economic importance increased. As it transitioned from the Valdez-Eagle Trail, to the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, to the Valdez-Fairbanks Road, to the Richardson Highway, it became the first long-distance, all-weather road, and the main route of Alaska's development in the first half of the 20th century.

At the turn of the 20th century, when the trail was started, its southern terminus at Valdez was a brand-new landing spot for adventurers and prospectors arriving by steamship seeking an "All-American Route" to interior Alaskan and Canadian gold fields. Its current endpoint at Fairbanks didn't exist. Most gold-hunters setting out for Dawson City in the Canadian Klondike region or Eagle in the Alaskan Fortymile region either went the long way on the Yukon River from St. Michael, or crossed the White Pass or Chilkoot Pass through the coast mountains at the head of the Lynn Canal, and then crossed the international boundary into Canada, which was tightly controlled by the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. To avoid the customs inspectors, prospectors looked for a direct overland route from Valdez to Eagle, initially crossing the glaciers north of Valdez on their way to Copper Center and Eagle.

While this route was passable, it was not easy. The climb over Valdez and Klutina glaciers was twice as long and steep as the route's promoters claimed. Many men died from exposure in blizzards, from falling into hidden crevasses in the glacier, or from scurvy after running low on supplies. Many others died in the rapids of the Klutina River. Most who set out from Valdez never made it to the gold country, either turning back to the Lower 48 or stopping in Copper Center.



A car summiting Thompson Pass on the Richardson Highway, circa 1922.

James Gordon Steese Papers, Dickinson College, Archives and Special Collections

Facts:

Length: 366 miles

Highest point: Thompson Pass, 2,678 feet

Construction started: 1898 (pack trail to Eagle)



Three automobiles on the Richardson Highway in Alaska.
Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress
LC-USZ62-108346



The Richardson Highway at the entrance to Keystone Canyon.
Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Prints & Photographs Division
Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmssc-02203

The government sent the U.S. Army to look for an alternative route from Valdez to Copper Center. By following the Lowe River eastwards towards Keystone Canyon, they found a glacier-free route over Thompson Pass that was passable in summer, with less risk. Once over Thompson Pass, the route north towards Copper Center was relatively simple, and from there the Army could construct a trail to Fort Egbert in Eagle. Starting in 1903, they used the trail to support the construction and maintenance of a telegraph line that connected the gold rush Army posts at Eagle and Valdez with each other and the rest of the country.

It was the discovery of gold near Fairbanks in 1902, and the subsequent gold rush that created the city in the years afterward, that determined the course of the Richardson Highway. Stampeders and suppliers began heading to Fairbanks rather than Eagle, and the route of the trail changed in response to this growing Fairbanks traffic. Under Major Wilds P. Richardson, the ARC upgraded the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail to a wagon road, so that by 1910 it was possible for vehicles to make the trip. The ARC put a log and gravel corduroy surface over wetter stretches, widened some parts of the road, including through Thompson Pass, and built bridges or established ferries over streams, often in conjunction with local residents.

Within a few years, pioneering motorists began to tackle the road in their cars, including Robert Sheldon, a Fairbanks resident who claimed to have built the first automobile in Alaska when he lived in Skagway in 1905. In July 1913, Sheldon and three passengers set out from Fairbanks in his Ford Model T with a banner proclaiming "Valdez or Bust" hanging off its side. At Big Delta, they had to build a raft out of poling boats to ferry their car across the Tanana River; other streams they just drove through. The trip took a total of 59 hours to reach Valdez, with a side trip to Chitina along the way. A few days later, an Army truck made the first trip from Valdez to Fairbanks, averaging 8-9 miles per hour, with a top speed of 18 miles per hour. These first trips showed that the Richardson Highway could be a viable route for motorized transport if it was upgraded to a slightly higher standard.

Savvy entrepreneurs, including Sheldon, took advantage of the access that the Richardson Highway provided and began operating motor stage lines between Fairbanks and Valdez. These cars offered passengers a relatively comfortable means of travel, sometimes in large luxury vehicles like Sheldon's Pope Toledo. The trip still usually took several days and the passengers would arrive covered in dust and dirt, sometimes as a result of having to help pull the car out of thick mud. As one traveler said, "when the car dropped out of sight and was submerged in mud, I decided that what we needed most was a periscope and a compass to steer by while traveling

beneath the surface of the Sea of Muck.”³ The typical trip cost \$100 [approximately \$2,500 in 2017 dollars] for a passenger and up to forty pounds of baggage.

Starting in the 1920s, the ARC worked to upgrade the road to motor vehicle standards, but it remained a rough route for many years. It was not a year-round road, as the high snowfall in Thompson Pass closed the road for the winter. The road relied on ferries instead of bridges to get the cars and trucks across several larger rivers, and much of the road remained gravel. Still, by the late 1920s trucks began regularly hauling freight up the road; first after sections of the Alaska Railroad washed out in 1929, and then as an alternative to the railroad and its high rates.

The competition between the road and the railroad for supplying Fairbanks became increasingly intense through the 1930s as both routes vied for freight business and for funding from the federal government. In 1931, the railroad management convinced Congress to institute a toll on the Richardson Highway to make shipping rates over the rails more attractive. When crossing the Tanana River by ferry at Big Delta, trucks were required to pay up to \$175 depending on truck size and weight. The truckers vehemently opposed this toll and began finding ways to avoid paying it. In the summer of 1939, they began using the ferry themselves at night after the toll collector had left work. For a time, it looked like the conflict might even turn violent. On one occasion, when some truckers were unable to pay the toll, a fight broke out. A Marshal was sent to help enforce the toll and the truckers were arrested. After short trials in Fairbanks, all of them were found not guilty. Later, an enterprising trucker built his own ferry and began operating it for truckers to avoid paying the toll at the existing ferry.

Fortunately, as World War II loomed in 1940 and 1941, Fairbanks became important to the military, making the toll dispute obsolete. The railroad was unable to handle the increasing amount of supplies needed at the new Army Air Corps field near the city as the war clouds grew nearer, so the Army began shipping more material by truck over the highway. The tolls faded away, and truck traffic on the highway was no longer hindered.

The wartime needs required raising the road standards on the Richardson Highway so that it would be capable of handling heavy traffic all year. As a result, the Army and the ARC improved the road considerably, including beginning paving projects and, most importantly, bridging the remaining ferry crossings, including across the Tanana River at Big Delta. Cars and trucks could finally drive all the way from Valdez to Fairbanks without leaving the road surface.



A group of travelers attempt a trip to the creeks, along the Richardson Highway, before 1916.

Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Prints & Photographs Division
Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsc-01684



Trucks carrying freight in the summer on the Richardson Highway, circa 1922.

James Gordon Steese Papers, Dickinson College
Archives and Special Collections.

³ Carlton Fitehett quoted in Dermot Cole, *Fairbanks: A Gold Rush Town that Beat the Odds*, 59.



The telegraph station at Tonsina on the Richardson Highway. The station was relocated to Fairbanks in 1967 as part of the Alaskaland exhibition.

McKeown family photographs, Archives and Special Collections
Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage
AA-hmc-1011-33



The McCarty U.S. Government ferry over the Tanana River near Big Delta. The ferry was near the McCarty telegraph station, which was named after a local trading post owner.

James Gordon Steese Papers, Dickinson College, Archives and Special Collections

Unfortunately, they still could not drive it year-round. While paving made it an all-weather road, the snow in Thompson Pass continued to close the road outside of Valdez on a regular basis. The pass is known as the snowiest place in Alaska and on average it sees over 550 inches of snow per year, making snow removal a constant and difficult task. On top of that, avalanches in the pass can be common. The ARC did not have the funding, even in post-war years, for full winter maintenance including plowing the pass, and so a private company stepped in. In 1949, Alaska Freight Lines based snow moving equipment in the pass and an employee moved into the pass for the winter to operate it. Once it was clearly possible to keep the pass open through the winter in all but the worst weather, the ARC began year-round maintenance of the highway and paved the road over the pass in 1955.

Today, the Richardson Highway remains one of the main arteries of Alaska's highway network. Changes to that network have reduced the importance of parts of the Richardson, in particular the stretch between Glennallen and Delta Junction. In the 1950s and 1960s, anyone wanting to drive between Anchorage and Fairbanks had to follow a path from the Glenn Highway out of Anchorage to Glennallen, then onto the Richardson to Delta Junction and Fairbanks. When the State opened the George Parks Highway in 1971, it became the preferred route for drivers between Anchorage and Fairbanks, and traffic on the Richardson Highway declined. But many Alaskans still drive the Richardson, looking for fishing on the lakes and rivers, recreation in the parks and mountains, or to experience the history of Alaska's first highway.

Roadhouses

In its beginnings, travel on the Richardson Highway was slow and could be dangerous, especially in wintertime. To help the early travelers, there were roadhouses every 10 to 20 miles. Some of these roadhouses were big, timber buildings offering food, lodging, accommodations for horses, and supplies. But many of them, especially in the early years, were just tents set up on the side of the road offering a night's shelter and a bit of food. With names like the Overland, Donnelly's, Rapids, Sourdough, and Yost's, these roadhouses were vital to anyone travelling between Valdez and Fairbanks.

As vital as the roadhouses were it was often hard for the owners to keep them running and profitable, and they changed hands and closed often. They were affected by the changing locations of the trail, as the ARC sought the best routes for both summer and winter travel. A winter trail known as the Delta or Donnelly Cutoff operated between Donnelly on the Delta

River and Washburn at the confluence of the Little Delta and Tanana rivers. The roadhouses that operated on that popular route lost much of their business when the new Alaska Railroad opened in 1923.

The opening of the Alaska Railroad from Seward to Fairbanks also affected roadhouse business on other parts of the route, redirecting traffic away from the road. When automobiles began to replace horse travel on the highway, many roadhouse operators hoped that the increase in traffic on the road might help their business. Traveling by car, however, made many of the roadhouses obsolete, since cars could travel farther and more reliably without having to stop overnight. The roadhouses that survived were able to offer gas stations or auto repair facilities in addition to food and lodging. But many disappeared by World War II. One roadhouse, Sullivan's on the Little Delta River, was taken over and used by the Army at Fort Greely starting in World War II, before it was moved in 1997 to Delta Junction to serve as a museum.

The history of the Richardson Highway includes roadhouses like Yost's near McCallum Creek, where the Army strung a fence along the highway to guide travelers to the building during heavy snowstorms. There was also a bell on the building that rang in heavy winds. One of the most famous roadhouses was Rika's Roadhouse, at the meeting of the Big Delta and Tanana rivers. The longtime owner, Rika Wallen, was a fixture in the area, serving as postmaster as well as restaurateur and innkeeper. After the roadhouse closed, the State of Alaska took over the property and created Big Delta State Historic Park around it, keeping the history of Alaska's roadhouses alive.

Another way that roadhouse history remains on the Richardson Highway is through businesses that feed and lodge travelers today. Often with historic buildings alongside more recent ones, these lodges maintain the roadhouse traditions of their forebears like the Gakona Roadhouse and the Black Rapids Roadhouse.



Yost's Roadhouse at milepost 203, near the confluence of McCallum Creek with Phelan Creek. The roadhouse was an important stop on the road, especially in the winter when travelers could become stranded in dangerous weather.

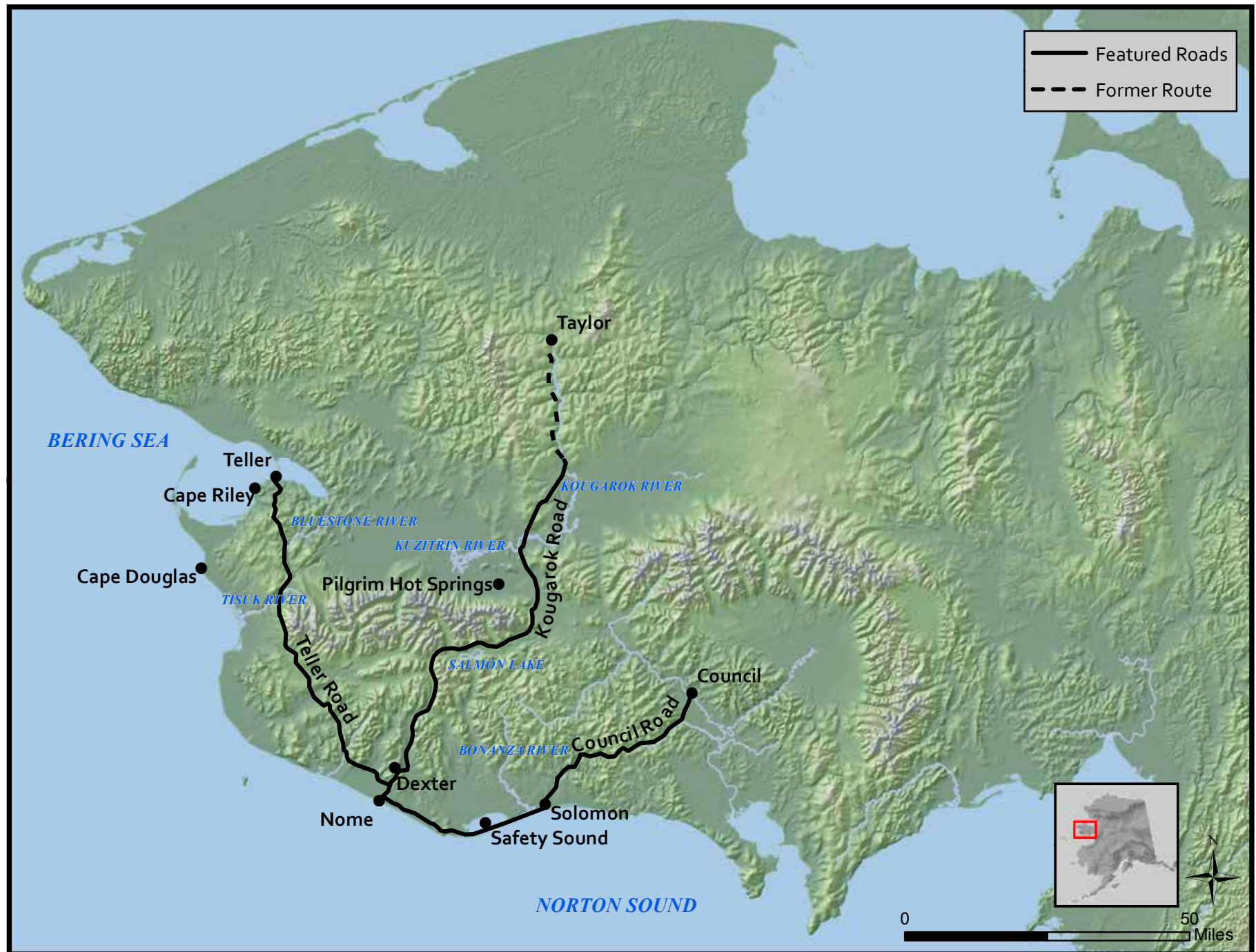
Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917
UAF-1989-166-627-neg nitrate, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks



Paxson's Roadhouse at milepost 185, near Summit Lake. After fire destroyed the structure, a new building was built nearby at the same time the Denali Highway opened.

Alaska State Library, The Alaska Railroad Tour Lantern Slide Collection
1923, ASL-P198-52

Nome Roads



3. Nome Roads

While Alaska's modern highway network has grown substantially since the first wagon road from Valdez to Fairbanks, it does not connect to Nome, the largest community in western Alaska. Yet from its founding, Nome has been connected to the rest of the Territory by trails. As transportation transitioned from long-distance trails to paved roads, Nome came to serve as a hub for a vital local road network, connecting the communities and resources of the Seward Peninsula to the town, and through the trail system to the rest of the state.

Nome's transportation history is marked more by water than by land. It was water that brought the first non-Natives to the far northwest of the continent, whether they were whalers, missionaries, or prospectors. It was water that defined where the miners who sparked Nome's gold rushes found their riches, whether in the creeks flowing into the Bering Sea or on the beach along the sea. It was by water that most of Nome's gold-rushers arrived after the creek discoveries in 1898 and the beach discoveries in 1899. And it was by water that many of them left disappointed those same years.

There was some overland travel to Nome in those early years, by foot, by dogsled, or even by bicycle, especially in the winter when the Bering Sea froze and sea travel was impossible. In one extreme example, in the winter of 1900, Edward Jesson rode a bicycle from Dawson City to Nome, using the string of roadhouses, shelters and cabins to cover more than 1,000 miles in a little over a month.

To assist these travelers, the ARC developed an overland trail system that ran from other parts of the Territory like Seward and Fairbanks to Nome and Western Alaska. Because many of those who traveled from Seward to Nome ended up at the gold boom region around the Iditarod River in the Middle Yukon area, the route became known as the Iditarod Trail, which in the 1970s



A street scene in Nome, circa 1920s, showing the wooden planks that often made up in-town roads in the area.

Alaska State Library, Lloyd Jarman Photo Collection
ASL- P337-10-024

Facts:

Lengths:

- 72 miles (Nome-Council)
- 86 miles (Kougarok)
- 72 miles (Nome-Teller)

Construction started:

- 1902 (Nome-Council)
- 1900 (Kougarok)
- 1906 (Nome-Teller)



A passenger train runs along the Council City & Solomon River Railroad in October 1915. The railroad was already nearing its end, but it opened the path for the road from Nome to Council.

Nowell, Frank H., Frank H. Nowell Photograph Collection
University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Division, Nowell 4498



Men working on an embankment and culvert near Nome, filling sandbags to protect the road.

Walter W. Hodge Papers, ca. 1925-1948
UAF-2003-63-293, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

became part of the Iditarod Sled Dog Race and was designated a National Historic Trail. These trails further proved their value in January 1925, when a relay of dogsleds rushed diphtheria serum from the railroad at Nenana to Nome to control an outbreak of the disease.

As Alaska's road system grew, the dream of traveling overland to Nome remained. When the Army built the Alaska Highway during World War II to connect Alaska to the Lower 48 states via Canada, the full plan included continuing the highway past Fairbanks all the way to Nome. Building a highway between Fairbanks and Nome continued to be a goal of many politicians, including Alaska's U.S. Senator Ernest Gruening in the early 1960s, and others since.

Cars and roads played other important parts in Nome's history. The first cars arrived by ship in the early 1900s. In 1905, the Alaska Automobile Transportation Company shipped up a Thomas Flyer automobile from the Lower 48, planning to use it to carry up to seven passengers at a time on a private toll road between Nome and Solomon, 30 miles to the east. They built two miles of road out to Fort Davis, but the plan never got any further than that. Still, it became apparent that roads between Nome and the surrounding communities were important, especially for the mining operations going on across the Seward Peninsula. In time, three of these roads developed into a regional highway network that still exists in the area: the Nome-Council Road, the Kougarak Road, and the Nome-Teller Road.

Nome-Council Road: Nome may have been the center of gold mining on the Seward Peninsula, but prospectors were active across the area, especially as the beach sands gave up their gold all along the coast. One of the more promising gold mining locations in the early years was Solomon, 30 miles east of Nome. A gold camp started there in 1899 and, within a few years, as many as 2,000 people resided in Solomon during mining season.

In addition to the mining activity on the Solomon River and other local creeks, Solomon served as a supply base for prospecting and mining work further inland, up to Council. But using the route along the Solomon River was slow and expensive, with costs often as high as \$58 [\$1,625 in 2017] per ton, which limited gold production. The solution was to build a railroad from Solomon to Council. Work on the Council City and Solomon River Railroad, the first standard-gauge railroad in Alaska, started in the fall of 1902. Financial difficulties and declining demand for service ended construction after 1906, and the railroad company went bankrupt in 1907. Activity on the tracks continued for a few years afterwards, but it was irregular or limited to private use.

The failure of the railroad, however, opened the door to new road development. Already, private interests had started building towards Solomon from Nome, although that road only extended a

few miles. In 1905, the ARC began upgrading the trail from outside of Solomon to Council into a wagon trail, helping to ease some of the travel difficulties and costs. It also subsidized private ferries that operated at Port Safety and the Bonanza River, which helped keep travel open from Nome to Solomon, connecting existing private and ARC roads. For winter travel along the coast, the ARC planted red-flagged stakes along 250 miles of trail, 50 to 150 feet apart, providing travelers with landmarks to follow when snow covered the natural landmarks.

The ARC continued to upgrade and improve the trails along the coast and up the Solomon River towards Council over the next decade, even with limited funds. Through the 1920s and 1930s mining continued in and around Council, and the road and its branches serviced these mining activities. These trails replaced the railroad, which was essentially abandoned in place. The tracks were salvaged for other purposes and the rolling stock was left where it lay. It is still visible today alongside the Nome-Council Road, identified on maps as the "Last Train to Nowhere."

By 1950, the Nome-Council Road was largely connected along its whole length, allowing automobile traffic from Nome to Council in the summertime. The BPR, which absorbed the ARC in 1956, built bridges over Bonanza Creek and across the inlet to Safety Sound in the late 1950s, removing the need for the ferries and completing the road's whole length.

Today, there are no longer permanent residents living in the villages at Solomon and Council, but the road allows people to continue to visit the villages and the sites along the way. Many "Nomeites" travel the road to Council, where they keep summer cabins or fish camps. It is also a popular route for birders, and the Audubon Society named Safety Sound one of the "Important Bird Areas" in North America. Along the road, travelers can see signs of the gold activity of the first rush and the later operations, including dredges; summer camps where the locals hunt, fish, and gather food each year; and the stakes that marked the winter route and now mark the Iditarod National Historic Trail. They can walk through the rusting remains of the "Last Train to Nowhere" on viewing platforms and read about its role in the region's history.

Kougarok Road: The road from Nome north to the Kougarok River, also known as the Nome-Taylor Highway, was built to service the prospectors and miners working the streams in the area. It also featured a railroad line in its early years. The railroad was a little more long-lived than its Solomon counterpart, but the gold was not quite as plentiful. People still find reasons to travel up the road to the Kougarok River region to mine, to visit the soothing Pilgrim Hot Springs, or more recently to run ATVs.



A group of men around the car taking them to an old mine northwest of Nome, June 1957.

Leland A. Olson papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library
University of Alaska Anchorage, UAA-hmc-1064-574



A photograph of the Nome-Council Road, circa 1922.

James Gordon Steese Papers, Dickinson College, Archives and Special Collections



A team of dogs pulls a "pupmobile" on the railroad tracks north of Nome, August 1924.

Ickes Collection, Anchorage Museum
B1975.175.438.



Buildings at Pilgrim Hot Springs, Alaska.

Fred Henton Collection, Anchorage Museum
B1965.018.678.

The railroad that went north from Nome was a narrow-gauge line originally called the Wild Goose Railroad when it was built in 1900. By 1904, as the Nome-Arctic Railroad, it extended inland about 10 miles to the community of Dexter. The railroad had difficulty making money and ran into labor problems as well, and was shut down the following year. But just a year later, the Seward Peninsula Railroad Company formed, and bought the Nome-Arctic track, and extended it up to the Kuzitrin River. The new line had 128 bridges and trestles, and crossed the Kuzitrin River on a 1,000-foot trestle, which had to be removed every winter and returned every spring to keep the river ice from destroying it. Miners paid only 2 cents per pound to ship on the railroad, far less than the 10 cents per pound to use wagons from Nome. Unfortunately, there was not much business, and after 1910 shipping service was discontinued entirely. Several companies purchased the line in subsequent years to support their mining operations in the Kougarak district, but it saw little regular use.

While losing the railroad made it more difficult for prospectors to venture into the Kougarak River region, they continued to do so, following a trail along the Nome River, then cutting north across the tundra to Salmon Lake. From there, they followed trails along the Pilgrim River, Iron Creek, and the flat lands towards the Kuzitrin River. They found food and shelter at the roadhouses built every half-day's walk from each other, and a rudimentary route developed from these travels.

Local residents found ways to use the railroad tracks for their own needs. They pushed wagons or carts along them, or hitched the wagons to dogs to create "pupmobiles." They put flanged wheels on automobiles and ran them along the tracks. But with no-one directly responsible for the railroad, there was no regular maintenance and the tracks deteriorated. When the bridge over the Nome River washed out in 1914, the ARC had to step in to run a ferry across the river. In 1921, the Territory of Alaska bought the railroad from its owners and turned it over to the ARC to maintain it as a matter of "great public interest."

The ARC spent over \$100,000 rehabilitating and maintaining the line over the next several years, but rather than spend money running trains along it, simply left it open for the local residents to continue using their pupmobiles and special cars, and for local companies to handle freight as common carriers. The tracks remained in use in the 1920s and 1930s, through World War II, and then until the late 1950s.

It was only in the mid-1950s that the ARC decided to replace the railroad with a gravel road along a similar route. The road ends on the north side of the Kougarak River, although an ATV track

continues beyond the river. The 300-foot bridge across the Kougarok River has been in place since the construction of the road, but it is not an original bridge built for the road. The State deconstructed the Cushman Street Bridge that had crossed the Chena Slough in Fairbanks since 1917, and transported it to Nome and then to the river crossing, where it was reassembled. That operation was completed in 1961, after the bridge in Fairbanks was replaced by a new one.

Today, the Kougarok Road sees traffic from people going to mine, fish, or view the abundant wildlife of the area. It's also the road to Pilgrim Hot Springs, which has long been a popular destination, first for local Natives before the arrival of Europeans, and then for Nomeites looking for some therapy or recreation. Early in the 20th century, the spring was a homestead of local miner Henry Beckus, who also built a roadhouse to accommodate miners looking for some recreation, and the ladies who came up from Nome. This was an isolated homestead, and to feed himself and his guests, Beckus grew produce in gardens warmed by the water. After the roadhouse and saloon burned, the owner moved on, and in 1917 the Catholic Church acquired the property through a donation, opening an orphanage there. By tapping into the hot springs, the orphanage heated the church, greenhouses, and other buildings, even pumping the water through pipes to get flush plumbing for their residents. The orphanage operated for about twenty years, but closed in 1941. The property deteriorated in the following years, but recently, owned by a consortium of Native corporations, there has been renewed interest in the springs as an energy or agricultural site.

Nome-Teller Road The third road heading out of Nome is the only one that connects to an occupied town, the Native village of Teller about 70 miles northwest of Nome. The road is also known as the Bob Blodgett Nome-Teller Memorial Highway, after the Teller businessman and politician called the "Heller from Teller." Crossing the tundra west of the Kigluaik Mountains, the road is considered one of the more scenic in the state, offering grand views of the mountains, the flatlands, and the sea.

Inupiat Native people occupied the area around Teller before the arrival of European explorers in the 19th century. Its location on Clarence Bay made it a good location for the initial work camp of the team scouting the Western Union telegraph line from Chicago to Siberia in 1866-67. But it was reindeer that put Teller on the map, and gave it its present name in 1892. In that year, Captain Michael Healy of the U.S. Revenue Marine Service (the forerunner to the U.S. Coast Guard) and Alaska General Agent for Education Sheldon Jackson came up with the idea of transplanting Siberian reindeer to Alaska to serve as a new sustainable food source for the Native population. They landed 171 reindeer at the spot Jackson dubbed the Teller Reindeer



A cabbage field at Pilgrim Hot Springs. The warm water from the springs make a fertile area for growing produce.

Fred Henton Collection, Anchorage Museum
B1965.018.74



A church building at Pilgrim Hot Springs. The Catholic Church operated an orphanage at the site from 1919-1941.

David McMahon, Alaska Office of History and Archaeology



The Cushman Street bridge in Fairbanks, 1917. In 1961 the Alaska Road Commission moved the bridge from Fairbanks to the Kougarok Road.

Curtis R. Smith Photographs, ca. 1917, UAF-1997-59-11, Archives University of Alaska Fairbanks



Men at a reindeer fair at Kuuzamapa Hot Springs near Pilgrim Hot Springs, February 1916. Reindeer herding was an important industry around Nome in the early 20th century.

Early Alaska Photograph Collection, Anchorage Museum, B1981.036.22

Station, named after Secretary of Interior Henry Teller, and began constructing the buildings and facilities for the Siberian herders and their Inupiat apprentices. The Siberians were later replaced with Scandinavian Sami, and the reindeer herd prospered for about thirty years. At their peak in the early 1930s, there were more than 600,000 reindeer in herds across the Seward Peninsula and western Alaska, many of them owned by Native herders.

There was a small gold rush to Teller when the discovery of gold 15 miles south at the Bluestone River in 1900 brought thousands of prospectors to the area. At its height, Teller had a population of 5,000 people. As with much of the rest of the peninsula, travel from the coast to the interior mines was difficult. The U.S. Geological Survey report in 1900 called the trail between Teller and Bluestone River "moss-covered..., which affords only very poor walking for both man and beast."⁴ Still, after 1905 the ARC maintained the route between Teller and the mining camps as the Teller-Bluestone Trail.

Most of the overland transportation from Nome to Teller went along the coastline. Starting in 1906, the ARC laid out a winter trail connecting Nome, Cape Douglas, Cape Riley, and Teller. While mainly used by dogsleds in the winter, it was passable by foot in the summer, and was marked with flags for easy observation. The route required ferries over two rivers, the Sinuk (Sinrock) River and the Tishou (Tisuk) River. Another trail followed the Tisuk River inland to the Bluestone River, and then north to Teller. It appeared on maps starting in 1909, but the ARC did not maintain it along its whole length. Over the next several years, the ARC worked on sections of the coast route out to Cripple River, Sinrock River, and Tisuk River, but traffic was limited, especially compared to other routes out of Nome.

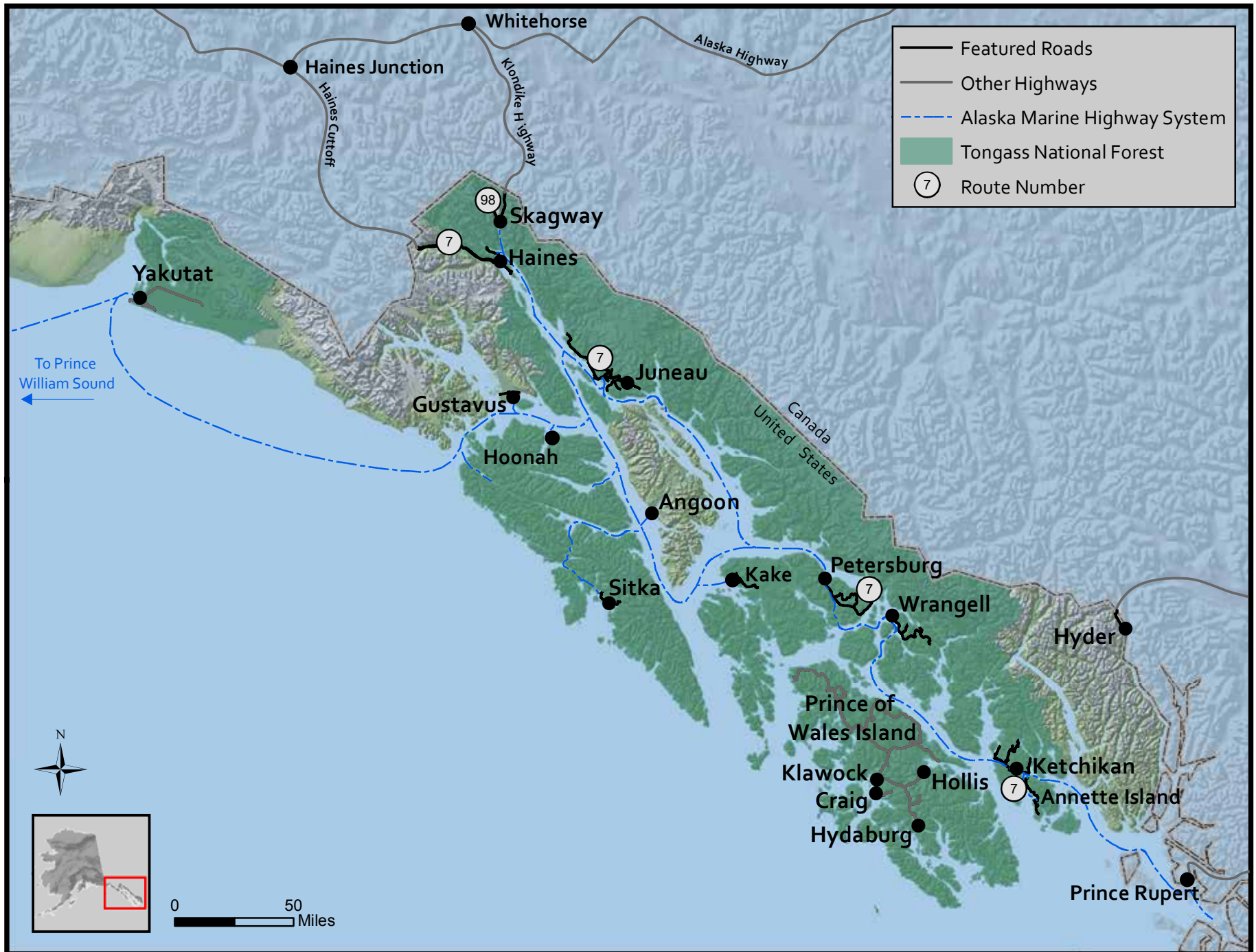
It was not until after statehood, when the State of Alaska Department of Highways succeeded the ARC, that a true road was built between Nome and Teller. By the early 1960s, the State was slowly upgrading the route, starting with the Teller-Bluestone Trail. Between Penny River and Nome, the road connected with an existing road built earlier to access the mining on Sunset Creek just west of Nome. A few years later, the State had completed bridges across the Sinrock, Feather, Eldorado, Tisuk, Goldrun, and Bluestone rivers between Nome and Teller. By 1965, the road was complete from Nome to Teller.

⁴ Alfred Brooks, with Arthur Collier and George Richardson, *A Reconnaissance of the Cape Nome and Adjacent Gold Fields of Seward Peninsula Alaska, in 1900*, 68.



Road leading out of Nome.
Sherry Ott, www.ottsworld.com

Southeast Region



4. Southeast Region

Southeast Alaska is a different place than the rest of the state. Made up of hundreds of islands and a narrow mainland strip, with steep mountains and deep fiords, there is no way to run a road between its scattered communities. Most of the land is part of the Tongass National Forest, created in 1907. These characteristics combined to make road building in the Southeast piecemeal, with different agencies at different levels of government at different times competing and cooperating to construct roads between towns; to natural resources like timber, fish, and gold; and to ports outside of the region.

When the federal government created the Tongass National Forest in 1907, there were no roads or trails beyond local ones, and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) officials considered travel by land to be impractical. Still, there was a recognized need for some roads, and so the government put these activities in the hands of the ARC. The ARC's funding was inadequate to meet the needs across the entire territory, and the Southcentral and Interior regions tended to get more funding than the Southeast. By 1924, the ARC listed seventeen roads that it had constructed in the Southeast. Some were on the populated islands, and some were around mainland communities like Skagway and Yakutat.

That same year, the government transferred responsibility for roads in Alaska's National Forests from the ARC to the BPR. The goal was to bring Alaska's National Forest roads in line with those in the Lower 48, and bring in new sources of funding for these roads, while freeing up resources for the ARC to build roads in the rest of the Territory. The move changed the nature of roadbuilding in the Tongass, as BPR roads tended to be built to a higher design standard than those built by the ARC.



A view on the road from Juneau to Mendenhall Glacier.

Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Prints & Photographs Division
Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsc-01974

Facts:

Region's Most Extensive Road System: Prince of Wales Island, over 1,500 miles, approximately 200 paved

The only marine route in the nation designated a National Scenic Byway and All-America Road: Alaska Marine Highway System



The covered Mendenhall Loop bridge near Juneau.
Alaska State Library, U.S. Alaska Road Commission Photo Collection
ASL-P61-083-078



A short bridge along the Glacier Highway near Juneau, built by the Bureau of Public Roads.
Alaska State Library, George A. Parks Photo Collection
ASL-P240-235

Through the 1920s and into the 1930s, the BPR focused on expanding the access around communities in the Southeast. Most of the roads the agency built were to service towns like Juneau, Ketchikan, Wrangell, and Petersburg. Yet much of the transportation focus remained water-based. The BPR only constructed about 300 miles of roads in the region during this period, and most of the roads were short.

The majority of economic activity remained near the coasts. For example, timber cutting was sometimes done so close to the coast that the tops of the cut trees fell into the water. Felled trees weren't typically transported by land in those days, but were slid into the water on skids, formed into rafts, and towed, up to 200,000 board feet at a time, to mills. Roads were more likely built to connect a town to a cannery, integrating an important industry with the local communities.

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought changes to roadbuilding in the Tongass. One of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's early responses to the Depression was the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), where unemployed men were enrolled into work camps to provide manual labor on conservation projects. Unlike the rest of the country, the CCC in Alaska came under USFS jurisdiction from the start, with the expectation that most of the work would take place in the Tongass and Chugach national forests, with a focus on transportation improvements.

Most of the men recruited for the CCC in Alaska worked in the Southeast out of camps near Ketchikan, Petersburg, and Juneau. They built roads and trails around these towns and others like Craig, and improved the recreational facilities within the Tongass. The CCC also built warehouses, dock and harbor facilities, an air base on Annette Island, and helped restore or duplicate over 100 totem poles.

When the United States entered World War II, road connections with the rest of the country through Canada gained importance. Much of the focus was on the construction of the Alaska Highway, but a new highway, known as the Haines Highway or Cut-Off, connected the northern part of the region to this new corridor. Running from the port of Haines on Chilkat Inlet, it followed the route of the Klondike Gold Rush-era Dalton Trail, which itself followed a Chilkat Tlingit trail. The ARC had built a wagon road over part of the trail after the gold rush, in 1908. The new road provided another access point for military supplies shipped from the Lower 48, especially useful in case of difficulties on the White Pass and Yukon Railway from Skagway to Whitehorse.

After the war, the road remained open, although not year-round until 1963. Vehicles that drove it required radio-monitoring for safety. Starting in the 1980s, the Canadian and American governments cooperated in improving it as part of the Shakwak Project, making it a key link in the international transportation system.

By that time, the Haines Highway had been complemented by the Klondike Highway, running from Skagway on Chilkoot Inlet to Whitehorse and then on to Dawson City, largely following the railway and prospecting routes. Construction of that road began in the early 1970s, and was completed by 1978. By 1986, it was open year-round, and was becoming an important commercial link between the port at Skagway and the Alaska Highway, as well as mining operations in the Yukon Territory. In recognition of the history of the Klondike Gold Rush that started in 1898, the Alaska portion is signed as Route 98.

The Second World War stalled road activity in the rest of the Southeast beyond basic maintenance. After the war, though, the USFS looked to expand operations in response to an increasing demand for lumber and pulp products. A major impetus behind this new activity was the need for timber to reconstruct Japan, where some cities had suffered up to 90 percent destruction. In 1944, Congress provided new funding for road building in Alaska's National Forests, with particular attention to the Tongass Highway near Ketchikan, the Glacier Highway near Juneau, and the roads near Wrangell. Meanwhile, Congress in 1947 opened the Tongass National Forest to large-scale timber harvesting by private companies, under new 50-year contracts. These new opportunities led to the creation of companies like the Ketchikan Pulp Company and the Alaska Lumber and Pulp Company, Inc., who built new mills that became the backbone of the logging industry in the Tongass.

These new operations changed not only the timber industry, but also the road network. In the 1950s, the amount of lumber cut nearly tripled, signaling a rise that would last into the 1970s. The demand for more timber required cutting farther from the coasts; for the first time, extensive logging roads were needed.

The flourishing timber industry also brought new residents to the Southeast, and with them new demands for better roads. In 1953 and 1954 alone, the BPR undertook 26 road projects costing tens of millions of dollars in the Tongass Forest. These projects improved, expanded, and in some cases paved roads like the Glacier Highway, the Tongass Highway, the Mitkoff Highway near Petersburg, and the Haines Highway. When Alaska became a state, these formed the basis for Alaska Route 7, integrating with the new ferry service to form a regional transportation network.



Men employed by the Civilian Conservation Corps working on a breakwater near Kake, 1941.

Alaska State Library, Butler/Dale Photo Collection, ASL-P306-0383



Klondike Highway, looking back toward Skagway, May 1977.

Alaska State Library, Robert Burrell Photograph Collection, 1975-1977, ASL-P522-48



Logging truck on forest road, Alaska.

Alaska State Library, Dora M. Sweeney. Photographs, 1935 - 1975
ASL-P421-299



Ferry cruising in Alaskan waters.

Alaska State Library, Alaska Division of Tourism Photograph Collection, ca. 1950-,
ASL-PCA-22-14-C1-070

This road building activity continued after Alaska's statehood transferred much of the responsibility for roads to the state, with the exclusion of roads in the National Forests. The BPR continued its work in the Tongass Forest, now in partnership with the State, expanding and improving some logging roads while also recognizing the need to serve the towns and their populations better. As activities like car camping became more popular, the USFS found that its existing road networks limited people's ability to reach recreation areas by car. The USFS looked into alternative approaches like developing a ferry service to connect the roads across the islands, although it never started the project. Instead, some timber access roads were upgraded to highway standards and expanded to reach and connect more communities.

The result was a patchwork of roads that included Forest Highways (public roads through National Forests), state roads, and local roads, as well as the ferry system. By 2011, there were over 3,000 miles of roads in the Southeast region, more than 700 miles designated as Forest Highways, and more than 800 miles of state roads. Some of these roads connect communities, but many are short segments for local travel. More recently, the State developed networks like that on Prince of Wales Island, where roads connect the communities of Hydaburg, Craig, Klawock, Hollis, and others.

Alaska Marine Highway System

Since there are no roads between most of the islands, it was necessary to connect the communities and their residents in other ways. In 1963 the State created the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS). The AMHS currently serves travelers through its out-of-state ports in Washington State and Canada, through the communities of Southeast Alaska and Southcentral Alaska, across to the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands.

The AMHS traces its history back to private ferry ventures, the most notable being the *MV Chilkoot*, a ferry that ran between Juneau, Haines, and Skagway in 1948 and 1949. In 1951, the owners sold the ferry to the Territorial government, which ran it and its successor, the *MV Chilkat*, through the early statehood years. To establish the AMHS in 1963, the State bought new ferries, the *MV Malaspina*, the *MV Taku*, and the *MV Matanuska*, and expanded the service to more communities in the Southeast. Through the 1960s and 1970s, the service added ferries and stops, connecting through the Inside Passage to Seattle and then Bellingham, moving beyond the Southeast to the Southcentral region (connecting with the railroad at Whittier and the highway at Valdez), and out to Kodiak Island, the Alaska Peninsula, and the Aleutian Islands with the *MV Tustumena*.

Although the AMHS includes many long-range routes, the system also provides an internal network within the Southeast region. Several of the ferries serve only the Southeast communities, acting as feeder and shuttle routes within the larger system. For many residents of the area, the ferries serve as critical transportation links. They transport students to sports tournaments, allow construction companies to move equipment between job sites, and help link the local communities into a larger region.



The Haines ferry *MV Chilkoot* loading a vehicle at Juneau, July 1950. The *Chilkoot* was a repurposed World War II landing craft that was one of the first ferries in the Southeast.

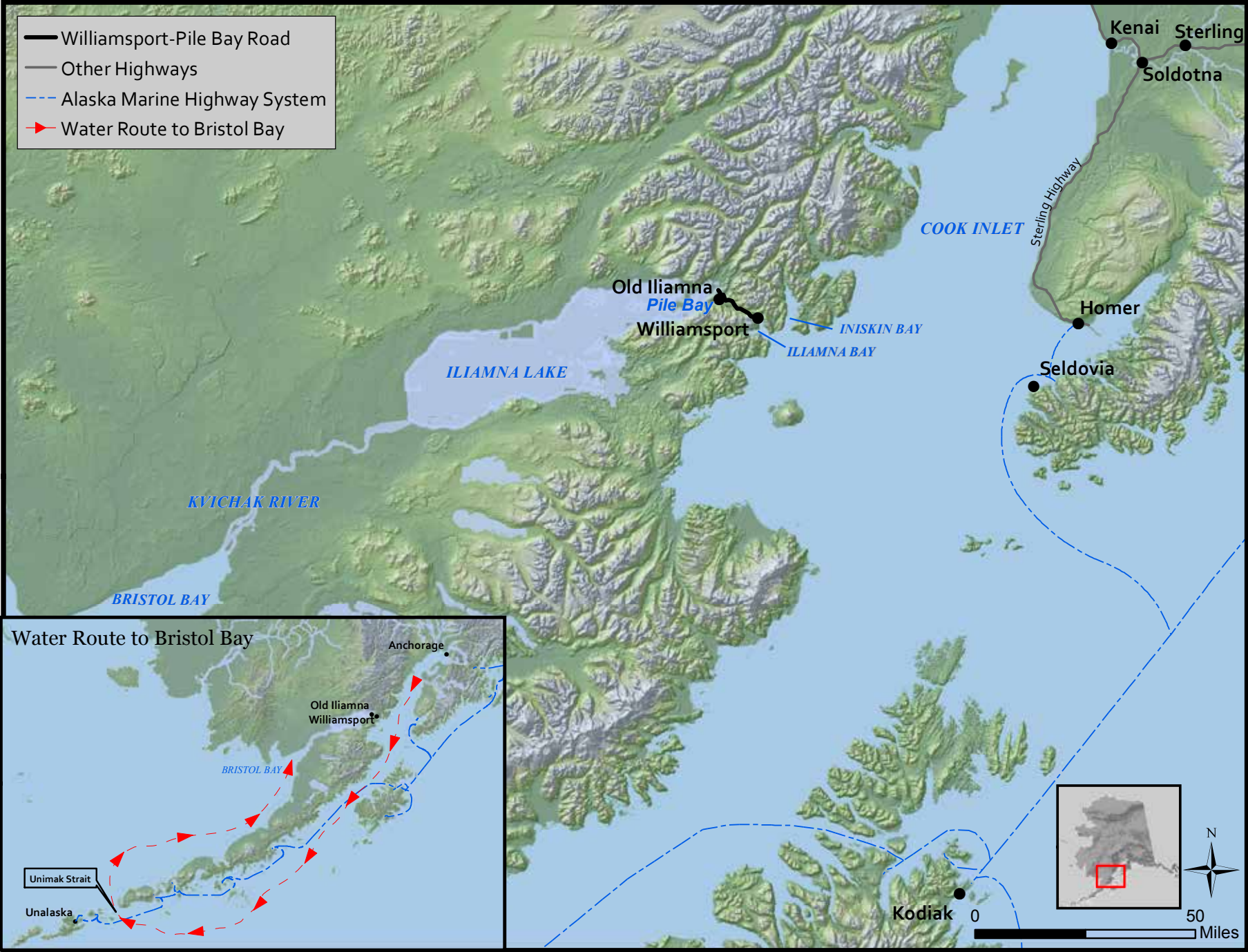
Alaska State Library, Lloyd H. "Kinky" Bayers Manuscript Collection, ASL-MS10-4-06-75-679.



Inauguration of ferry *Malaspina*, 1963.

Alaska State Library, Caroline Jensen. Photographs, 1948-1972
ASL-P417-131

Williamsport-Pile Bay Road



5. Williamsport-Pile Bay Road

Williamsport-Pile Bay Road is an unpaved road that follows a traditional Native portage connecting Cook Inlet and Iliamna Lake. It is not a long road, nor is it a heavily travelled road. But for the residents of the Iliamna region and for the fishermen of Bristol Bay, it is an important road. Without it, supplying the villages around Iliamna Lake would be much more difficult and expensive, and getting to the fishing grounds of Bristol Bay would be longer and more dangerous. Although Iliamna Lake and Bristol Bay are not far from Anchorage by air, there is no quick way to reach them by water. The long arm of the Alaska Peninsula separates Cook Inlet from Bristol Bay, and sailing around the peninsula means a trip as far out as Unimak Island. While not a major road in the traditional sense, the Williamsport-Pile Bay Road has provided the region with a vital, if short, link to the rest of the state.

Native trade brought Russian commercial interests to the area and there was a Russian-American Company trading post on Cook Inlet since the turn of the 18th century. The Alaska Commercial Company took it over after the Treaty of Cession in 1867, but even with the traditional Native portage, travel to Iliamna Lake was difficult, raising the costs of supplying the communities in that region. There was an effort at the turn of the 20th century to build the Alaska Short Line Railroad as part of a line that would extend all the way to Nome, but it never advanced beyond surveys and some preliminary grading, some of which is visible south of the road.

In 1916, the ARC sent engineer John Zug to the head of Iliamna Bay on the west coast of Cook Inlet. There he found the trail that went to the village of Iliamna just short of the lakeshore (now known as Old Iliamna and abandoned after the 1918 flu outbreak). Zug decided that it would be possible to upgrade this trail to a low-standard wagon road, allowing travelers to skip the trip around the Alaska Peninsula and improving the supply situation for the local villagers.



A view of Williamsport-Pile Bay Road.
Ray and Linda Williams

Facts:

Length: 15 miles

Width: 12 feet

Original construction date: 1916



Carl Williams hauling a boat to Iliamna Bay on Cook Inlet, 1950s.
Carl and Lyle Williams



Clearing a rock-slide on Williamsport-Pile Bay Road with a bulldozer.
Carl and Lyle Williams

The next year, the ARC appropriated the \$8,000 needed to build this road, sending eight workers in July 1917. After transferring their supplies from their ship on Cook Inlet to the shore over 2 miles of mudflats that were only exposed twice a day at low tide, they packed them another 2 miles to their camp on their backs. The workers built 7.5 miles of road by the end of that first season, but were forced to stop 5 miles short of the lake.

Less than a week after the crew left, rain washed out the first 4 miles of the road, making it impassable for the next several years. In 1921, the ARC sent another crew to build the road, this time relocating it to higher ground. While this improved the surface of the road, its grade was now so steep that it was unsuitable for wagons, and even pack horses had difficulty.

When Superintendent Hawley Sterling visited the road in 1924, he found that the 10 miles of wagon road that the ARC had on paper essentially did not exist on the ground. As a result, local inhabitants still had trouble getting affordable supplies. Sterling argued for the necessity of the road, with the additional possibility that minerals like gold, silver, lead, copper, and oil in the area could also bring new development. The ARC agreed, and spent over \$12,000 by 1927 rebuilding the wagon road to the village of Iliamna, 2.5 miles short of the lake.

Unfortunately, this gap between the lake and the road complicated the supply problem, as shippers had to transfer their goods onto smaller craft to navigate the shallow, swift rivers between the lake and the road. Often, goods had to be piled on the banks of the Iliamna River through much of the summer, waiting for higher water. Local petitioners called on the ARC to finish the road all the way to the lake, so that shipping would be cheaper and safer, and prospectors who already had mining claims in the area could begin working them with machinery that could only be brought in over a road.

In 1937, the ARC allocated money for the completion of the road to Iliamna Lake. The amount of money was more substantial, over \$32,000 in 1938 alone, allowing for a proper wagon road between Iliamna Bay and Iliamna Lake. Although it was still a lower-standard road, it was enough to make freight traffic between Cook Inlet and Bristol Bay a reality. Since then, the ARC and later the Alaska DOT&PF have maintained the road.

Although the State of Alaska maintains it, the Williams family are the real stars of the Williamsport-Pile Bay Road. Carl Williams, a settler from New York State, bought 25 acres and a trading post on the Cook Inlet side of the road in 1936, a couple of years after arriving in Alaska. Using the post as his base, he began a freight service with his brother Lyle along the

road, sometimes carrying the freight on his back. He then began transporting fishing boats by Caterpillar to Lake Iliamna in the spring, and back to Cook Inlet in the fall. His son Ray Williams took over the business and continues to help transport boats and freight over the road with his son. A sign on the Iliamna River bridge now honors Carl Williams' role in the road's history.

The road sees much of its activity from the fishing industry in Bristol Bay. Each June, fishing boats leave Anchorage, Homer, or Kodiak and cross Cook Inlet to Williamsport. There they wait in line for the tides, and one-by-one are hauled from the water onto the road. After crossing the portage, they slip back into the water on Iliamna Lake and cross the lake to the Kvichak River, where locals guide them slowly through the shifting channels out to Bristol Bay. At the end of the season, they return from Bristol Bay by the same route. Anywhere between 50 and 60 boats make the trip both ways each year, putting up to 10,000 miles on Williams' rig just from the back and forth. In 2014, Williams hauled boats a record 120 times.

Because of the narrow width of the road and its bridges, only boats 14 feet wide or less can cross the portage, so some are built to that size specifically for the road. The trip on the road takes at least an hour, depending on the condition of the road and bridges. In the past, that could mean one or more bridges might be out, requiring the trucks to ford the rivers, with water flowing in through the doors. It also means driving above an open drop of 750 feet at the summit of the pass. The State has improved the road in places, but the pace is still usually not more than a crawl.

In recent years, the lure of the minerals around Lake Iliamna has brought attention to the Williamsport-Pile Bay Road as an access route. The possibility of a mine on State lands operated by the Pebble Partnership revived provisional plans in 2007 to upgrade the road as part of a new Southwest Alaska Area Transportation system, to make it a two-lane, all-season road and including extensions to a new barge landing site and a new deep water port on Iniskin Bay. The Iliamna Development Corporation, a local Native Corporation, started operating a freight and fuel service over the road in 2009, serving both the Pebble operations and local residents through a general store. These important services add to the long-standing role that the Williamsport-Pile Bay road has played in the area.



Carl and Wilma Williams with their first two children, Charlie and Pauline, in 1939.

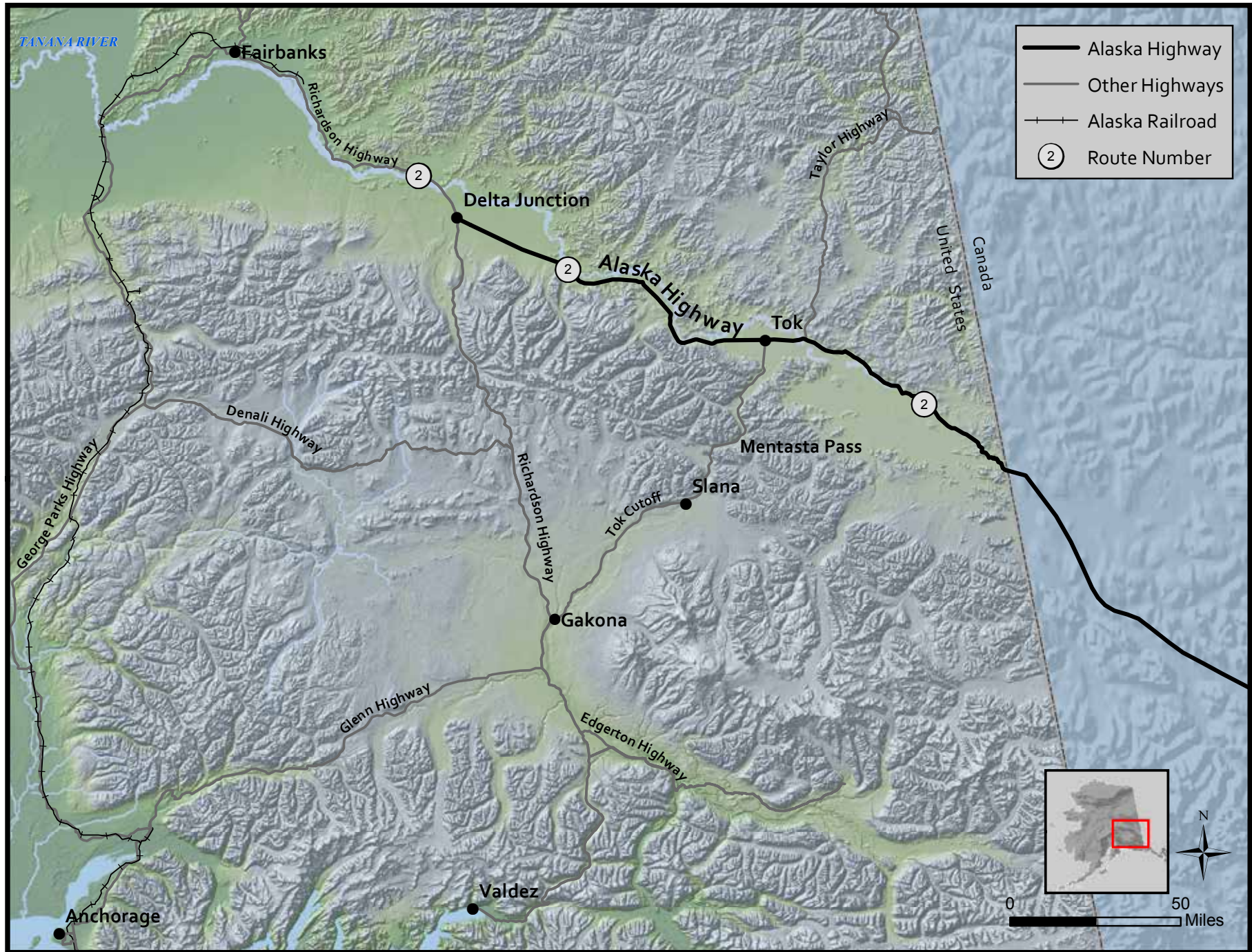
Carl and Lyle Williams



Chet Williams backs the *F/V Eagle Claw* into Pile Bay on Iliamna Lake, June 2015.

Molly Dischner, KDLG – Dillingham, alaskapublic.org.

Alaska Highway



6. The Alaska Highway

The construction of the Alaska Highway (originally called the Alaska-Canada, or Alcan, Highway) was one of the most extraordinary feats of engineering of World War II. It was the first road built to connect Alaska with the Lower 48, and it was built in under a year. Since its completion, it has taken an iconic place in Alaska's transportation history and is still the primary overland route to and from the continental United States. As a result, it was a key factor in Alaska's progress towards statehood and in the state's subsequent economic growth.

Ideas for building a highway through Canada that would connect Alaska with the rest of the United States had existed for years before the country entered the war in 1941, but there was little more than a few plans to show for these ideas. Two main ideas dominated the conversation. Route A followed the inland side of the coastal mountains, opening up the possibility of spur roads to southeast Alaskan communities. Route B was further inland, following the Rocky Mountain Trench through the center of British Columbia.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, suddenly there was a need for this overland connection to move troops and supplies to Alaskan bases if the shipping routes were attacked. In just a few short weeks, the American and Canadian governments thrashed out a series of diplomatic agreements on who would build the road, who would pay for it, and who would administer it, both during and after the war. But instead of following either Route A or Route B, the U.S. Army chose a third, Route C, which connected a string of airfields known as the Northwest Staging Route that were just being constructed on the east side of the Rocky Mountains and into Alaska. Route C could provide land transportation to Alaska and connect the Northwest Staging Route airfields to a source of overland supply.



The Alaska Highway near Dawson Creek, British Columbia in 1948.
"Sarge" and Lorrie, courtesy explorenorth.com

Facts:

Length: 1387 miles (200 miles in Alaska)

Highest point: Summit Lake, B.C., 4,250 feet

Construction started: 1942



Road construction equipment in deep mud.

Alaska State Library, Alaska Highway Photo Collection
ASL-P193-023



The Color Guard at the ceremony for the completion of the Alaska Highway held on Soldiers Summit on November 20, 1942.

Edward Lewis Bartlett Papers, 1938-1970, UAF-1969-95-551
Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks



A car on a stretch of the Alaska Highway in 1942.

Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress
LC-USW33-000933-ZC

A few months after choosing Route C and signing the agreements, the first bulldozers began pushing their way through the forests, muskegs, and mountains of Alaska and British Columbia, frequently to the surprise of local residents. And a few months after that, the more than 10,000 soldiers of the seven regiments of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the road to a level where trucks could run between Dawson Creek, BC and Delta Junction, Alaska. On November 20, 1942, a ceremony at Soldiers Summit overlooking Kluane Lake in the Yukon Territory formally opened the Alcan Highway to military traffic.

To call this first Alaska Highway a primitive road would be generous. It was unpaved, with only a thin layer of corduroy, dirt, or gravel to define it, and there were many sharp turns, steep grades, and narrow bridges over rivers. Over the course of the remaining war years, the federal government, along with private Canadian and American contractors, widened the road, improved the surface, straightened many of the curves, flattened many of the grades, and bridged the rivers. Especially in Alaska, few sections of the original highway are still part of the current route, but some are still visible. Although the road in 1945 was still very basic, it was much more of a highway than what the soldiers carved out in 1942. Most importantly, it served its purposes, bringing supplies to the growing military presence across Alaska and providing a navigation aid and support to pilots flying to Alaska.

After the war, the road in Alaska also serviced the Haines-Fairbanks pipeline that provided petroleum to military installations in Alaska for much of the Cold War. The American and Canadian militaries also maintained communication lines along the highway, some of which are still visible. Most of the highway transferred to Canadian administration, first military and then civilian in 1964. More and more people drove it, while pilots continued to use it for navigation purposes. In an emergency, some pilots even used the highway as a landing strip, putting down on the road and then pulling into a resident's driveway to go find needed mechanical help or supplies.

Driving the highway in those initial years after it was opened to homesteaders in 1946 and then to the public in 1948 took more than a little planning. In addition to needing to know the route and gas requirements, travelers needed to bring extra auto parts, prepare to sustain themselves on the road by eating in their cars or trailers, and be ready for emergencies with first aid kits and other supplies. Perhaps most importantly, they needed to prove to the authorities that they were prepared with all of this material. There were checkpoints along the road in these first years where the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) would check that travelers had their first aid kit; ax and shovel; tire chains; two spare tires and tubes; jack, tow rope; etc. In winter they needed even more equipment, including anti-freeze; grilles for the heater, defroster, and radiator; light oils and greases that wouldn't freeze easily; and fuel additives designed to prevent frost and ice.

All of those spare tires were necessary, as it was common for tires to fail on an almost daily basis. Nor was more significant repair unheard of, and many drivers had to spend days and nights in lonely outpost towns and road camps, waiting for a crucial part to be flown in to the repair shop so that they could get on their way again. They also learned to not only roll their windows closed but to turn the fan up full blast, even in the summer, to increase the air pressure inside their car and keep the dust out. Many made the trip all the same, including people who hitchhiked along the road, even though doing so wasn't permitted. They braved bouncy and uneven gravel surfaces, dust when the weather was dry and sucking mud when it rained, and long distances between any signs of other people, which was often just a lone gas station that may or may not have any gas to sell (at a higher price than they were used to). But they found stunning vistas, encounters with wildlife around many corners, abundant fishing, and friendly hosts in the roadhouses, inns, and converted work camps that dotted the highway.

While the Alaskan portion between the border and Delta Junction was paved by the 1960s, some of the Canadian portion remained gravel or chip seal treatment into the 1990s. In 1977, the Canadian and American governments came together to cooperate on some improvements to the highway. The agreement, which led to the Shakwak Project, called for the U.S. government to fund improvements and upgrades through the Yukon territory, with the Canadians handling the work. The funding and work continued over the next three decades, helping to expand the paved portions of the highway.

Slowly but surely, the Alaska Highway became a tourist destination as well as a way to get to Alaska. Key to this development was the Milepost, an annual guide to the highway that included maps, tips for driving the road, advertisements for services along the road, and other useful information for travelers. The first edition, published in 1949, was just 72 pages, but it quickly became the bible for the Alaska Highway. Now the guide comes in at over 700 pages, covering not only the Alaska Highway, but also connected highways and other tourist regions of Alaska and northwest Canada.

Today, the Alaska Highway is a modern, year-round road, paved from Dawson Creek to Delta Junction (with exceptions for stretches of near-perpetual construction). Thousands of drivers, recreationists, cyclists, and hikers travel the highway, whether moving to Alaska, touring in an RV, looking for an adventure, or just seeking to experience one of the more unique road experiences in North America.



Trucks mired in deep mud, ca. 1942-1943.

Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alexandria, Va



A sign on the Alaska Highway informing drivers about the need to stop for customs inspection by the Military Police.

Alaska State Library, Evan Hill Photo Collection
ASL-P343-144



Traveling the Alaska Highway, summer, 1949.

Courtesy of Robert and Dorothy Anderson



Signposts and buildings at Tok junction in 1943, during construction of the Alaska Highway.

William O.L. Chinn Photographs, Archives and Special Collections Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage
UAA-hmc-0620-series1-f4-30



A boy stands outside the U.S. Customs station at Tok on the Alaska Highway in the early 1960s. Sign reads: "All vehicles & persons stop. Checking station. Keep right."

Wien Collection, Anchorage Museum
B1985.027.780

Tok

The construction of the Alaska Highway changed settlement patterns along its length. Some existing Native communities moved closer to the highway, while new communities, like Tok, grew around supply bases and other work camps. Athabaskan Natives had used the area around the Tok River for centuries before European contact, and had established the nearby village of Tanacross where the Eagle Trail crossed the Tanana River in the early 20th century. When construction on the Alaska Highway began in 1942, planners decided to connect the new road with the Richardson Highway at Gakona, creating a shorter link between the port at Valdez and the Alaska Highway 90 miles from the border. That link became known as the Tok Cutoff, and the junction became a natural place to build a construction camp, which eventually became Tok.

Building a camp in what was then a remote area was not a cheap proposition, and Tok camp quickly gained the nickname of "Million-Dollar Camp." But unlike many other camps along the highway, Tok remained in place after the construction was done and grew into a thriving town. The Northern Commercial Company opened a store there in 1944, a post office opened in 1946, and a school was built in 1947. By the time the Alaska Highway opened for public use, Tok was the location of the customs post, and thus a necessary stop for all travelers entering or leaving Alaska. The post would remain in the town until 1971, when it was moved to the Alaska-Canada border.

As traffic increased over the next few decades, Tok prospered from being at the junction of the Alaska Highway and the Tok Cutoff. No matter if travelers from Outside were driving to Fairbanks, Valdez, or Anchorage, they had to pass through Tok. This gave Tok a unique place in the state, as what Alaska Governor Wally Hickel called "Mainstreet, Alaska." Although not an incorporated municipality, Tok is the center of state and federal government and services for the region.

The Black Engineers of the Alaska Highway

It took seven regiments of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build the Alaska Highway; three of them were all black – the 93rd worked from Carcross to Teslin in the Yukon Territory, the 95th operated around Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, British Columbia, and the 97th built around Slana and Tok, Alaska. The Army at the time was segregated, and no black soldiers served in white units. The black soldiers sent to the highway were ill-prepared and ill-equipped for what awaited them. Almost all of the men were from the South; in fact, the Army initially resisted sending black soldiers

to the north, expecting that they would not be able to handle the cold weather. They often received low priority when receiving their machinery, if they received machinery at all. And they were subject to harsh racism from many of their superior officers, all of whom were white, and other military and civilian authorities.

Despite these obstacles, the black regiments succeeded exceptionally in their tasks. In Alaska, the Army sent the 97th Regiment to Valdez, and then up the Richardson Highway and an existing spur road to Slana. Working northeast, they finished the road now known as the Tok Cutoff between Slana and an ARC camp at the present-day site of Tok. They then turned southeast, and built the Alaska Highway section between Tok and the Canadian border. While not part of the main Alaska Highway, the Tok Cutoff was necessary to shorten the route to Valdez.

The start was inauspicious. The men had to wait in Valdez for the 12 feet of snow in Thompson Pass to clear, then they had to improve the Richardson Highway route using mostly hand tools, to get their equipment to Slana. It took ten weeks for their heavy equipment including bulldozers to arrive from Valdez, and some of it was so old and in need of repair that the regimental commander had initially rejected it in Seattle. It was still sent to Valdez.

The section of road the 97th was to build was one of the more difficult areas of Alcan construction. The road from the Richardson Highway to Slana was a mining road built in the 1920s, and beyond that there were little more than trails. Between Slana and Tok, the soldiers had to build over the Mentasta Pass, constantly dodging mudslides, washouts, and flooding, while blasting and clearing out glacial ice, often by hand. The equipment had difficulty in this mountainous terrain, and the men learned quickly how to replace a bulldozer's caterpillar tread while dangling over a cliff.

Yet the men persevered, and once over the pass and into the Tanana River valley made such good speed that they outpaced the white regiment they were supposed to meet at the Alaska-Canada border. The other black regiments similarly outperformed the Corps' expectations, whether building a bridge in less than five days, laying especially well-constructed sections of the road, or overcoming the racism of the time to gain acceptance in the Army and in Alaska.



The 97th Regiment of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed the northern section of the Alaska Highway. The regiment, comprised of 400 black soldiers, camped at Big Delta from December 1942 to April 1943.

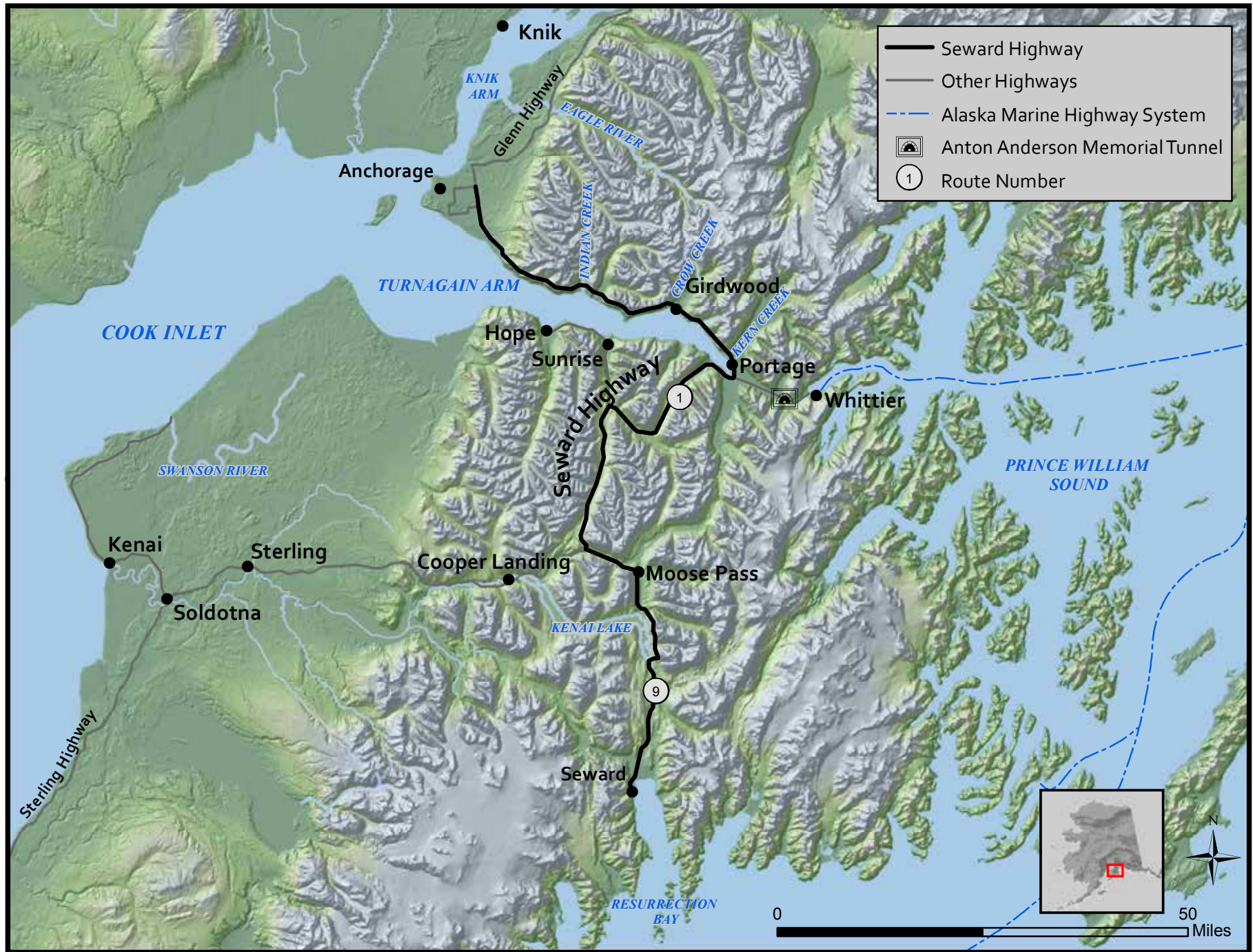
William Griggs



Members of a black regiment of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers carry a log during construction of the Alaska Highway in 1942.

Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alexandria, VA

Seward Highway



7. The Seward Highway

The Seward Highway evolved from portions of two of Alaska's most famous transportation routes: the Alaska Railroad and the Iditarod Trail. Both routes connected the burgeoning communities in Alaska's interior with its southcentral coastal communities that opened to the ocean. Yet the periods of peak use of both routes were relatively short-lived, as new technologies and new transportation patterns largely supplanted them. As airplanes became more expedient for hauling freight to the territory's far-flung communities and mining camps, the dog-teams in Southcentral Alaska all but disappeared as means of transportation. And as motor vehicles became more convenient for moving passengers and goods between growing cities and towns, railroad use became more specialized. In their place – from the homesteads and recreation spots of the Kenai Peninsula to the metropolis of Anchorage – was the Seward Highway, a 127-mile road between Anchorage and Seward.

Much of the impetus for trail construction on the Kenai Peninsula came from connecting small gold camps scattered across the region, and more distant camps all the way to Nome. Discoveries of gold along the southern coast of Turnagain Arm in 1888 led to founding of camps at Hope and Sunrise in 1895, while smaller discoveries on Trail Creek, Kenai River, and Quartz Creek brought prospectors to Cooper Landing, Moose Pass, and other small towns. Further north, there were similar minor discoveries on the north shore of Turnagain Arm, at Crow Creek and Indian Creek.

Although gold discoveries brought people to the region – with as many as 10,000 gold rushers in Hope and Sunrise in 1898 – the real action was elsewhere. The Klondike and Fortymile River regions, the Fairbanks district, and the beaches of Nome all attracted tens of thousands of prospectors, businessmen, and entertainers looking to strike it rich as miners, or by mining the miners. None of these areas was easy to reach much of the year, requiring long steamship and river boat trips, crossing difficult mountain passes, or navigating frozen rivers in the depth of winter.



A camp of the Canyon Creek Development Company at Mile 29 of the Seward Highway.

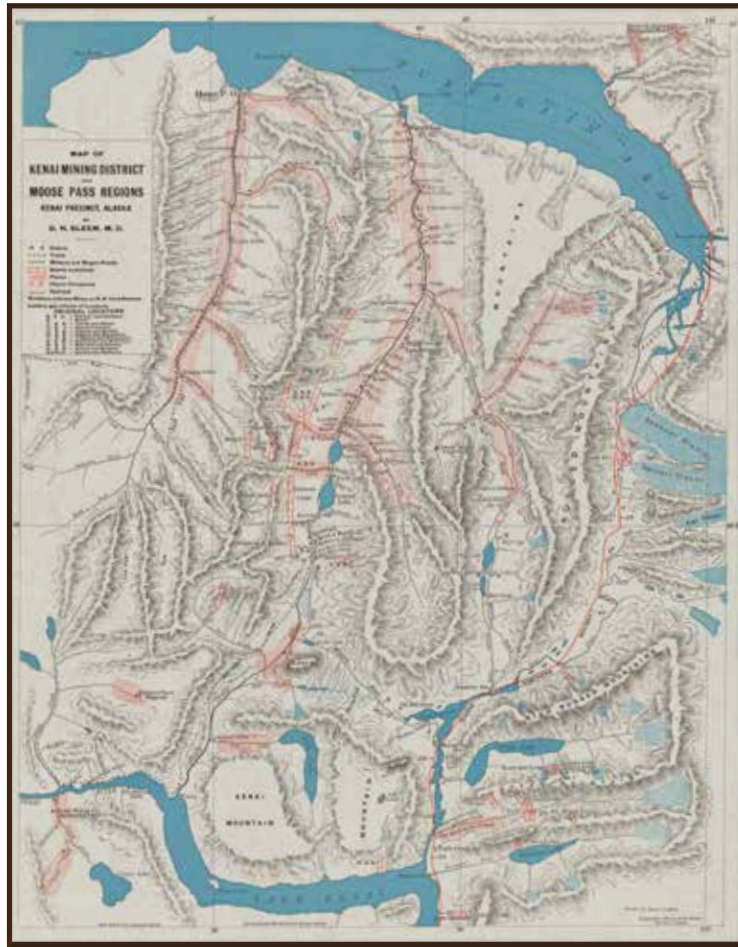
Alaska State Library, Alaska Highway Photo Collection
ASL-P61-070-159

Facts:

Length: 127 miles

Highest point: Turnagain Pass,
1,015 feet

Construction started: 1947



A map of the Kenai mining district and Moose Pass regions, 1910.

Rare Maps Collection, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections
UAF-G4372 K452 H1 1910 S55 c2, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

The prospect of year-round travel to the interior gold fields prompted a new company, the Alaska Central Railway, to begin construction in 1903 of a railroad from the ice-free port of Seward north towards the Matanuska coal fields and then on to Fairbanks. After several business failures, the private railroad building effort ended in 1914. The railroad had succeeded in reaching over 70 miles to Kern Creek partway along Turnagain Arm, but would go no further without new money.

While the railroad companies were making slow progress, the ARC had begun work in early 1908 on an alternative, a trail between Seward and Nome. That year, a survey team marked a route between the two towns, later clearing land, marking trees, and putting up flags tied to huge tripods to show travelers the trail. The surveyors used the path forged by the railroad out of Seward, and connected it to miners' trails running from Moose Pass and other camps. The trail started around the north shore of Turnagain Arm, crossing the Chugach Mountains at either Crow Pass or Indian Pass. From Eagle River, it hugged the Knik Arm to the village of Knik, before heading northwestward towards the Kuskokwim and middle Yukon regions and the Seward Peninsula.

Although the ARC trail provided a clear winter route between Seward and Nome, it was unclear how many people would use it. But a new gold rush around the Iditarod River in 1909 in the Yukon region brought hundreds of travelers to the route, and its utility for transporting mail, gold, and other freight made it an important link through the Territory for nearly two decades. It also made Seward an important port, with as many as 70 dogs at a time arriving to drop off and pick up cargo in their sleds. A trip from the gold fields could carry tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of gold to be transported to banks in the Lower 48.

Still, much of the interior was cut off from reliable year-round freight service to the coast. The failure of private companies to connect Seward with Fairbanks by rail led Congress in 1914 to authorize the building and operation of a railroad in Alaska. Under the Alaska Engineering Commission, the federal government would finish the railroad from Seward. Construction headed out in both directions from the new town of Anchorage on Ship Creek, but the short construction season, the difficult terrain, and the interruption of World War I slowed the process. It wasn't until 1923 that President Warren G. Harding drove the final golden spike at Nenana, as part of his trip as the first sitting president to visit Alaska.

Although much of the focus was on the railroad, efforts were already underway to improve the road network in southcentral Alaska. Much of the Kenai Peninsula and Turnagain Arm areas were under the control of the USFS following the creation of the Chugach National Forest in 1907. During this time, the USFS worked with the ARC on roads in the National Forest, including two roads that the ARC had started in 1907 (at Johnson Pass from Upper Trail Lake to Sunrise) and 1909 (from Moose Pass to Summit Lake). In the 1920s, the USFS focused on upgrading roads to allow for automobile traffic, starting in Seward and Moose Pass. By the end of the decade, it was possible to drive from Seward to the south shore of Kenai Lake and from Moose Pass to Hope. However, there was a “missing link” between Kenai Lake and Moose Pass, where travelers had to load their cars on to the railroad to continue their trip. It wasn’t until 1937 that the USFS closed this missing link and connected Seward to the northern part of the peninsula by road. There was a similar disconnect between Anchorage and Moose Pass, and any drivers from Anchorage to the Kenai Peninsula needed to load their car on the train to Moose Pass, and then unload it to drive south to Seward, north to Hope, or west to Cooper Landing.

As these road portions opened, more and more people moved to the Kenai Peninsula. The area had long been popular for recreation, but few people lived there year-round at the time. In the early years of the 20th century, local miners and other residents hired themselves out as hunting guides, taking wealthy hunters from Europe and North America on month-long expeditions for bear, moose, and sheep. But many of these residents had been seasonal, mining and hunting in the summer, then leaving in the winter. It was also difficult to obtain land within the National Forest boundaries. The USFS did open land to limited, 5-acre homesite permits, but tried to restrict commercial use of the land. The growing transportation links offered opportunities for new, permanent residents to start a farm, open a fishing lodge, or build a gas station or restaurant along the roadside. The USFS increasingly accommodated these new residents, both by building new roads like the highway to western Kenai Peninsula (which became the Sterling Highway) and by opening new land to settlement. In 1947, the area east of the town of Kenai was opened to homesteading, leading to the founding of the towns of Naptowne (later renamed Sterling) and Soldotna. The USFS built a gravel road to Kenai from Cooper Landing, completed in 1950. Travel to these communities could still be difficult and traffic on the roads remained light.

It was clear that a highway was needed between Anchorage and Seward to facilitate the settlers on the Kenai Peninsula, promote recreational use along Turnagain Arm and the peninsula, and provide an alternative to the railroad for freight transportation. During the late 1940s, the ARC, in cooperation with the BPR and the Alaska Railroad, constructed this highway following the railroad route from Anchorage along Turnagain Arm to Portage (relocating parts of the railroad in



Sled dog teams line up on Fourth Avenue in front of Brown & Hawkings store in Seward after bringing in a load of gold dust from the Iditarod gold fields, December 1910.

Robert McEaney, Photographs 1904-1913
Seward Community Library Association, SCL-38-30



A car stopped at Mile 33 on the Moose Pass Highway, now part of the Seward Highway, Kenai Peninsula, 1940.

Sylvia Sexton Collection
Seward Community Library Association, SCL-1-1506



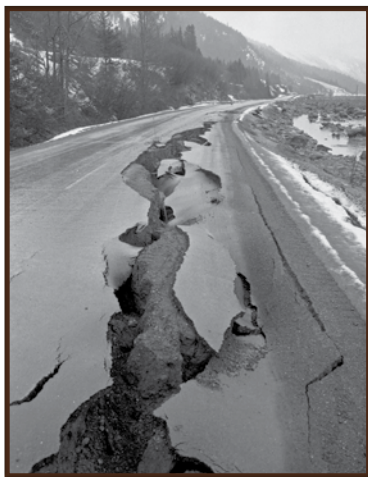
A view of the Seward Highway near Girdwood on Turnagain Arm, August 1952.

William O.L. Chinn Photographs, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage
UAA-hmc-0620-series1-f3-82



Earthquake damage to the Seward Highway bridge over Twentymile River near Portage on Turnagain Arm, following the earthquake of March 27, 1964.

Ward Wells, Ward Wells Collection; Anchorage Museum, B1983.091.S4176.96



A crack on the Seward Highway caused by the earthquake.

Ward Wells, Ward Wells Collection Anchorage Museum, B1983.091.S4176.95

the process), then turning west to cross over Turnagain Pass before heading south to Moose Pass. The initial construction was completed in 1951, and for the first time Anchorage residents could drive straight through to the Kenai Peninsula and Seward without needing the train.

The ARC and the Territory of Alaska continually improved the highway over the next several years, paving the Seward Highway in 1954 and widening it to allow two-direction traffic along the whole route. The timing of the highway construction was fortuitous, as oil was discovered at Swanson River in 1957, and later off Kenai's west shore in Cook Inlet. The discovery touched off new economic activity and new settlement along the highways, which connected the oil fields to Anchorage via the Seward Highway.

Much of this construction work was destroyed just a few years later, when the Great Alaskan Earthquake struck on March 27, 1964. Twenty miles of the highway sank five to nine feet, below the high-water mark of Turnagain Arm, and the high tides that followed damaged other sections of the road. Both of the communities of Girdwood and Portage situated along the highway were destroyed by subsidence and the tides, with Girdwood being relocated inland and Portage largely abandoned. Many bridges along the highway were damaged, some beyond repair. In Seward, underwater landslides deepened Resurrection Bay and swallowed parts of the dock and rail yard, two loading cranes, and forests. Fires broke out throughout the town, and residents found themselves unable to leave after the bridge that crossed Resurrection Creek on the highway out of town was damaged.

In all, the quake caused more than \$21 million [\$160 million in 2017] in damage to the Seward Highway. The State of Alaska spent much of the next several years cleaning up and rebuilding along the Seward Highway. With money and assistance from the federal government, debris was cleared away, bridges were rebuilt, and roadbed and rail lines were shifted to higher ground.

The Seward Highway has developed into one of Alaska's busiest highways, as well as one of its most picturesque. In 1988, the highway was one of the first designated by the USFS as a "Scenic Byway." The State of Alaska designated it a state Scenic Byway in 1993. Similarly, the Federal Highway Administration named it a National Scenic Byway "All-American Road" in 2000.

Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel

The Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel connects the town of Whittier on Prince William Sound with the Seward Highway near the former townsite of Portage. It was built as a railway tunnel to the port of Whittier during World War II, when the single port of entry for the railroad at Seward was insufficient for the buildup before and during the war. The trip from Whittier was also shorter and easier, provided the trains went through the mountains instead of over them. In 1941, the Army began construction under the supervision of engineer Anton Anderson, and completed the 2.5-mile tunnel through Maynard Mountain, as well as a shorter 1-mile tunnel through Begich Peak in April 1943. The new rail line through the tunnels turned Whittier into a significant port for Southcentral Alaska, housing over 1,000 people at its height.

After the war, the Army withdrew from the town, which became a commercial port operated by the federal government. The population declined, but the town soon became a popular destination for boaters from Anchorage and for Alaska Marine Highway ships. To meet this demand, the Alaska Railroad added a special shuttle along the Portage-Whittier spur line, carrying personal vehicles on special flat cars through the tunnels. Like the trains carrying cars through the Kenai Peninsula before the completion of the Seward Highway, it was a makeshift solution to a growing problem.

Recreational activity on Prince William Sound increased with the arrival of cruise ships. To meet the new demand, the Alaska DOT&PF decided to connect the Seward Highway directly with Whittier, by converting the tunnel to a mixed car-train tunnel. Construction started in September 1998 and was finished in June 2000. The new tunnel design is a one-lane concrete route with rails sunk slightly below the road surface, which allows for car and train traffic in either direction on a carefully coordinated schedule.

The tunnel is the second longest highway tunnel in North America, and the longest combined road and rail tunnel in the world. Its one-of-a-kind ventilation system is powered by reversible jet fans that ensure proper air flow and quality. Although the tunnel is open year-round, it is most popular in the summer recreation months, when as many as 50,000 vehicles pass through it every month. Some of the travelers use Whittier as a base for recreation, while others continue on to cruise ships or the Alaska Marine Highway.



Men standing atop a pile of rubble during the construction of Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel to Whittier on Prince William Sound, 1942.

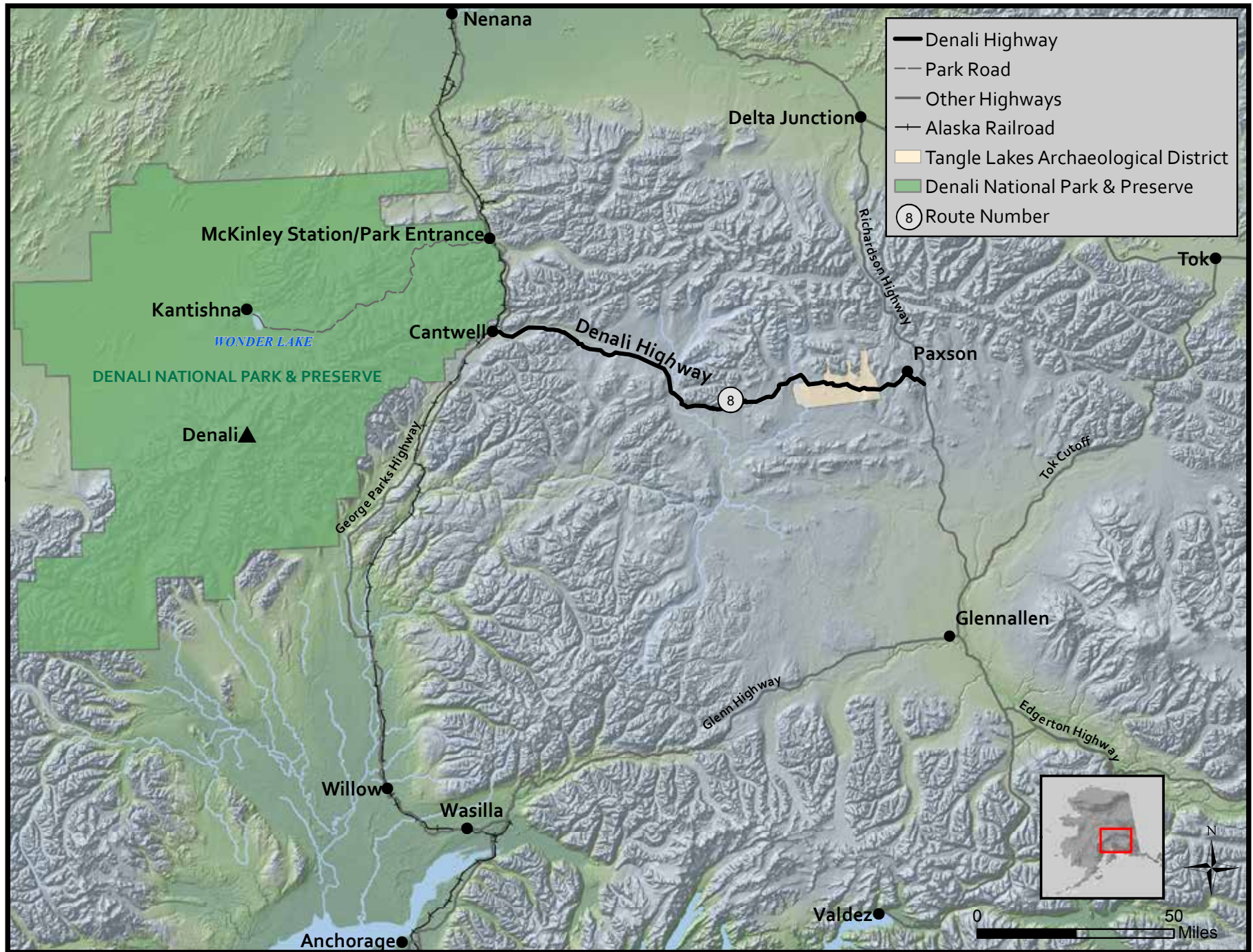
Benjamin B. Talley Papers, Archives and Special Collections
Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage
uaa-hmc-0241-b4-f17-9



Colonel Benjamin Talley and General Simon Bolivar Buckner standing with other soldiers on an open railroad car outside of Anton Anderson Tunnel during the opening ceremony in November 1942.

Benjamin B. Talley Papers, Archives and Special Collections
Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage
uaa-hmc-0241-b4-f17-19

Denali Highway



8. The Denali Highway

Denali (Mount McKinley prior to 2015) has long been a centerpiece of tourism in Alaska. In the early years of the 20th century, people came to view the highest mountain in North America. The driving force behind the creation of Denali National Park (Mount McKinley National Park prior to 1980) in 1917 was Charles Sheldon. He predicted in 1908 that when the area “shall be made easy of access with accommodations and facilities for travel, including a comfortable lodge at the foot of the moraine of Peters Glacier, as it will surely be, it is not difficult to anticipate the enjoyment and inspiration visitors will receive.”⁵ But in those days there was no easy access or accommodations. Even when the federal government built a road into the park, it was only available to visitors arriving by train, as no roads connected from either Fairbanks or Anchorage. It wasn’t until the middle of the 20th century that road access would arrive with the Denali Highway, which, by connecting the Richardson Highway to the existing McKinley Park Road at the train station, acted as a continuous 250-mile long road from Paxson to Wonder Lake. For a time, the Denali Highway was the main route for car travelers to access to the park.

The modern history of the Denali Highway area goes back to the turn of the 20th century. Four prospectors discovered gold at Valdez Creek in 1903, coming away that year with more than \$50,000 [\$1.3 million in 2017] in gold, which brought others into the area and started small settlements like the town of Denali. The miners carved trails between Valdez Creek and Paxson on the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail (which later became the Richardson Highway), and then west to Cantwell on the Alaska Railroad, to access their sites. Although most of the industry shut down during World War II, miners returned in the 1950s, and mining continues to the present.

⁵ Charles Sheldon, *The Wilderness of Denali*, 272.



Cars driving on the snow covered Denali Highway.

Averill and June Thayer Photographs
UAF-2010-25-479, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Facts:

Length: 134 miles

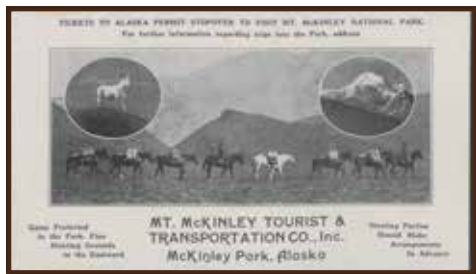
Highest point: Maclaren Summit
4,086 feet

Construction started: 1950



Tour buses pass under the gateway to Mt. McKinley National Park in the early years of the park.

Alaska State Library, Skinner Foundation Photo Collection, ASL-P44-05-002



A ticket for the Mt. McKinley Tourist & Transportation Co., Inc. for a trip to Alaska including a stopover to visit Mt. McKinley National Park.

James Gordon Steese Papers
Archives and Special Collections Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA

Still, the Valdez Creek mining district was overshadowed by the mountain to its west. The first travelers to Mount McKinley, including those who made the first ascents of its peaks in 1910-1913, usually came from Fairbanks, traveling over the tributaries of the Tanana and Nenana rivers or overland by dogsled or pack train. Many of these travelers were prospectors and miners going to the Kantishna gold mining district, where gold was discovered in 1905. It was not until the opening of the Alaska Railroad in 1923 that people could easily arrive at the park. By that time, there was already lodging for these new visitors, Maurice Morino's roadhouse, which he opened in 1921 alongside the railroad tracks, just south of the current park visitor center. Local papers looked forward to the coming tourists and their business, predicting a "highway to connect the government railroad, and the building of hotels for the accommodation of visitors."⁶

To aid the expected visitors, the ARC began constructing a road into the park from McKinley Station on the railroad. The ARC blazed the initial trail to Wonder Lake and Kantishna in 1922, but a wider road was not complete until 1938. This McKinley Park Road offered access into the park, but there was no way, aside from the railroad, to get to the park.

The railroad promoted tourism, building a hotel at the McKinley Park Station in 1939 and promoting the train ride as the "Mount McKinley Route," and the National Park Service (NPS) offered tourist services through concession businesses. During World War II, the Army took over the hotel for an Army Recreation Camp, where more than 11,000 soldiers and civilian defense workers enjoyed skiing, riding dogsleds, taking car and horse trips into the park during the summer, and fishing at Wonder Lake.

But the lack of other means of accessing the park kept the tourist numbers relatively low. Even during the summer tourist season there were days when there might be only one guest in the hotel, and the Railroad often lost substantial money operating it. It was clearly necessary by the 1950s to connect the park to the larger road system in order to maintain its viability.

The idea of a feeder road from the Richardson Highway to the park went back to the 1930s, and was connected to the idea of a road connecting Canada to Alaska, what would eventually become the Alaska Highway. If people could drive to Alaska, then it would only make sense for them to also be able to drive to Mount McKinley, especially since a road from the park entrance into the park already existed. By the start of World War II, the ARC had started survey work on a route from Paxson on the Richardson Highway to the Valdez Creek mining area along the existing miners' trail. The ARC meanwhile had already constructed a trail from Cantwell on the

6 *Nenana Daily News*, June 9, 1921, 2.

railroad to Valdez Creek, and in 1938 upgraded this to a tractor road. World War II put any further development on hold, but these routes were ready when the idea resurfaced post-war.

The ARC drove the interest in constructing the road immediately after the war, supported by the park's staff, which hoped to offer alternatives to the high railroad ticket prices for visitors. Construction of the road began at both ends in 1950, and the ARC also began construction of a connector road from Cantwell to McKinley Park Station that year. By 1952, the newly named Denali Highway began to take shape, but it was not until August 1957 that the full route was opened. The road stretched 155 miles from Paxson to McKinley Park Station, turning north at Cantwell for the final 20 miles to the park.

The arrival of private cars via the new Denali Highway was a major change for the park. Prior to the opening of the highway, almost all vehicle traffic on the park road was guide-driven cars or buses, with a few private cars that visitors would ship to the park on railroad flat-cars. It was a big deal if there were six private cars in the park on a single day. Now many more people had access to the park, and attendance more than doubled from 5,200 in 1956 to 10,700 in 1957, and then again to 25,900 in 1958.

To accommodate all these new visitors, the NPS added features in the park: more campgrounds, new visitor centers, and wayside exhibits. The agency upgraded and improve McKinley Park Road, and laid out hiking trails to cater to the younger visitors and families now arriving by cars. To fill up those cars, and their passengers, a gas station with a grocery store opened near the hotel. Car camping became popular, as it was now possible to drive from Fairbanks, Anchorage, or elsewhere beyond the Denali Highway directly to the park's campgrounds.

However, the life of the Denali Highway as the primary road access to the park was short. Even before it opened, officials were exploring more direct connections linking Anchorage, the park, and Fairbanks. A road was completed between Fairbanks and Nenana by 1956, with the intention of connecting it to the park, and a route had already been surveyed between Wasilla and Willow to the south. Through the 1960s, highway construction was pursued from both directions, and by 1971, the new Anchorage-Fairbanks Highway, later renamed the George Parks Highway, was completed. About 20 miles of the Denali Highway from Cantwell to the park entrance was incorporated into the new highway. This route cut 120 miles off the trip between Alaska's two largest cities and made access to the park more direct from both.

The Denali Highway remained important in its own right. Its location to the south of one of the main stretches of the Alaska Range mountains offered many panoramas of Interior Alaska unavailable anywhere else by car. Many people traveled it as part of a loop tour out of both Fairbanks and



Buildings of the Tangle River Inn at Mile 20 of the Denali Highway, July 1984.

Delores Mann slides, Archives and Special Collections Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage
uaa-hmc-0571-b2-f2-326



A car with an Airstream camping trailer traveling the Denali Highway to Mt. McKinley National Park.

Courtesy of the Charles Smith family (www.casarodante.org)



Trail leading from Denali Highway into the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District.

Tom Gillispie, Alaska Office of History and Archaeology



Mountains along the Denali Highway

Alaska State Library, James Edwin Morrow photographs
UAF-1977-59-31

Anchorage, connecting with the Richardson and Parks highways. It boasts lively recreation areas and is popular with off-roaders, boaters, birders, hunters, and fishermen.

The highway opened up new access to archaeological sites, particularly around the Tangle Lakes. In 1957, archaeological work began in the area, and researchers soon found over 500 prehistoric sites dating back at least 12,000 years. These sites document the movement of Native people into the Interior, their hunting and subsistence activities, and how they adapted to a changing environment, including a flood that significantly lowered the water level of Tangle Lake and a volcanic eruption from Mount Hayes 90 miles away. A 226,000-acre archaeological district around these sites was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 to protect their integrity.

The opening of the highway brought entrepreneurs to provide services to travelers. The same year that the highway opened, Butch Grattias opened a restaurant and cabins as Gracious House Lodge at Milepost (MP) 82, and the following year Maclaren Lodge was established at MP 42. Tangle River Inn opened in 1970 at MP 20 on a homestead held by owners Jack and Naidine Johnson since 1953. These lodges became fixtures along the road, providing more than just food and accommodations. They also offered the only repair services on the highway; acted as tour operators; provided staging grounds for snow machine and plane trips around the area; and even carved trails for hiking and hunting.

The Denali Highway remains in much the same condition as it was when it was first built, with only the easternmost 21 miles and westernmost 2.6 miles paved. In the early 2000s, the Alaska DOT&PF introduced plans to pave additional mileage. Opposition from many locals who prefer the slower speeds and lower traffic that the gravel requires put those plans on hold, and most of the road remains unpaved.

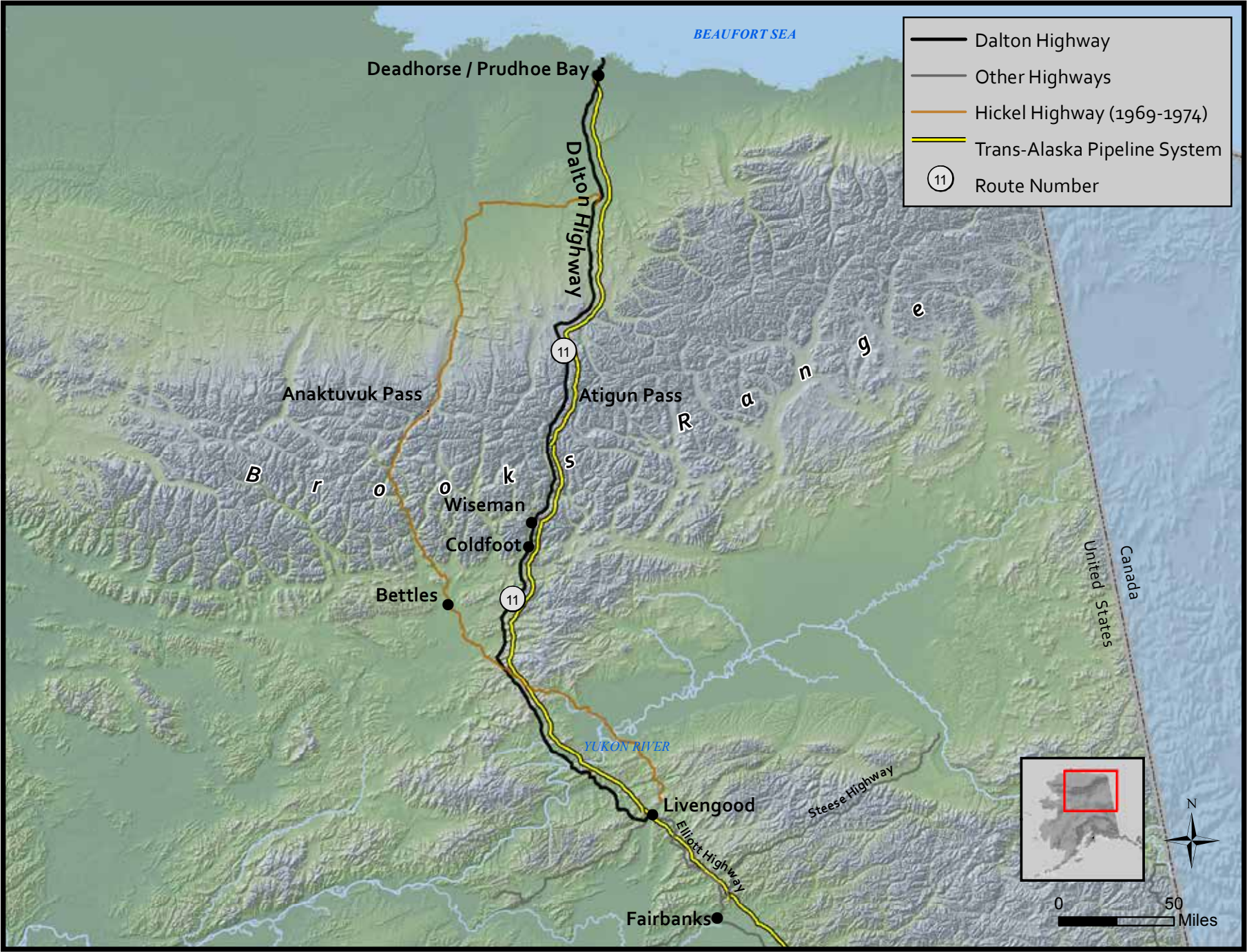
The road closes for the winter, but there is still plenty of activity as snow machiners and dogsledders travel the highway for recreation and racing. An Iditarod and Yukon Quest qualifier race, the Gin Gin 200, takes place along the highway every January, and other competitions are popular.



The Alaska Range as seen from the Denali Highway.

Murray Lundberg, ExploreNorth.com.

Dalton Highway



9. The Dalton Highway

The Dalton Highway. The Haul Road. The Ice Road. The highway that runs from outside of Livengood north of Fairbanks to the oil facilities on the Arctic Ocean has gone by many names in its short history. Originally built as a service road during the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, the road became a commercial road to deliver supplies to the oil facilities at Prudhoe Bay, and then a general access road to the far north of the state. It is one of the northernmost roads in the world, and one of the toughest highways to drive in the United States. Most importantly, it is the road that allows workers to service the pipeline and keep the oil flowing from the wells on the North Slope, connecting them to the rest of the state and its economic success.

Before there was a road to the North Slope, people traveled north through the Interior of Alaska and over the Brooks Range, mostly by foot or dogsled. Many of these people were doing what they had done across the territory: looking for gold. Prospectors moving on from the Klondike and Fortymile gold camps to the southeast made their way up to the Koyukuk River region around the turn of the 20th century, founding the Slate Creek mining camp near present-day Coldfoot. The region was so remote and difficult to access and, as the story goes, at least one prospector trying to push further got “cold feet” at the camp and decided to return to more populated towns, which earned the camp the name of Coldfoot.

While some of these prospectors did find gold in the region, the rush to Coldfoot was small and short-lived. By 1912, the post office closed, and within a few years many of the residents had moved away. A few settled a little further north at the town of Wiseman. In 1930, author and conservationist Robert Marshall stayed for a year in Wiseman, producing his celebrated book *Arctic Village*. The book is an account of life for people living, in his words, “200 miles beyond the edge of the Twentieth Century.” Although the book didn’t change life much for the residents of Wiseman (although it did cause many arguments, and Marshall did split his royalties with them), it did bring people to visit the community from all over the world.



An aerial view of the Haul Road (now the Dalton Highway) as it drops north from Atigun Pass in the Brooks Range, during the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, March 1974.

Steve McCutcheon, McCutcheon Collection, Anchorage Museum
B1990.014.3.411

Facts:

Length: 415 miles

Highest point: Atigun Pass, 4,800 feet

Construction started: 1974



A scene on the Hickel Highway during its construction, April 1969.

Woodrow Johansen Papers
UAF-2000-148-32, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks



Trucks bound for Bettles and Prospect Creek Camp on ice road during Trans-Alaska Pipeline construction. March 10, 1970.

Steve McCutcheon, McCutcheon Collection; Anchorage Museum
B1990.014.3.636.

Most visitors to Wiseman in the years after the publication of *Arctic Village* arrived by air, since there was no road from Fairbanks north past Livengood. There were trails, and dogsled travel was common in the winter, but part of being beyond the edge of the 20th century was not being connected by road. Over time, a few cars and tractors found their way to Wiseman, but until the North Slope oil discoveries of the 1960s, Coldfoot and Wiseman were their own societies.

That isolation presented a problem to the companies who discovered oil. They needed to transport much more equipment than they could fly north, but there were no roads on which to do so. Fortunately, they had some precedent to draw on. In the 1950s, the U.S. government had constructed a series of radar sites on the Arctic coast, known as the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line. Some of the equipment went over land on convoys of vehicles, mainly large tractors and specially-designed winter transports known as Snowtrains, crossing the tundra north from the town of Circle. It took almost 40 days to travel the winter route of over 400 miles to the coast, but they were successful at moving the material to the sites.

So when in the late 1960s the state and the oil companies began looking at how to get equipment to the newly-discovered oil resources, there were already drivers and other workers around with experience of traveling over the tundra. That didn't mean that building a road would be easy. This initial road, dubbed the Hickel Highway after its promoter Governor Wally Hickel, would need to be built from scratch, bladed into the tundra and over the Brooks Range as quickly as possible. That meant building in winter when rivers could be crossed on ice and the ground was frozen hard enough to support the heavy machinery.

The first vehicles through in the winter of 1968 were the bulldozers, each towing equipment mounted on sleds, known as wannigans. The wannigans were not just piles of supplies, but cafeterias, workshops, and sleeping quarters for the workers. Just over 100 days after leaving Livengood, the bulldozers reached Sagwon near Prudhoe Bay, 550 miles from the start. As soon as the bulldozers opened the path and the graders behind them formed it into a rough road, trucks began hauling supplies to start building facilities.

Even with the road, however, the journey was not an easy one. Snow constantly blew across the road, building up into huge drifts that threatened to block the trucks. Drivers quickly learned how to plow through the snowdrifts, but that didn't always work. When the lead truck in a convoy would get stuck in a drift, the following trucks would hook chains up to it and pull it back so that it could bulldoze its way into the drift again, repeating until the trucks were through. Even worse were the storms that enveloped the highway. Blizzards up to 80 hours long in Anaktuvuk Pass would catch several trucks in their grasp, forcing the drivers to sleep in their trucks, cook canned soup on their engines, and siphon fuel from shut-down trucks to keep a few running for heat.

Trucks used the Hickel Highway for the winters of 1969 and 1970, but its route through Bettles and over the Brooks Range at Anaktuvuk Pass was further to the west from where the oil companies were looking to build their pipeline. The cost of maintaining it was too much for the State, and the road fell into neglect. A short burst of activity in 1974 as a supply road for the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline kept the route in use, but without maintenance, it became impassible in the years following. Parts of the Hickel Highway remain visible, a legacy to Wally Hickel's goal of oil development in the Arctic.

The oil companies needed a route to access their facilities at Deadhorse on the North Slope and to perform maintenance on the pipeline. So the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company built the first version of the Dalton Highway, known simply as the haul road, starting with the stretch from Livengood to the Yukon River in 1969. This road was focused entirely on the private oil industry needs, although Alyeska agreed to build it to state secondary-road design requirements.

However, the plan to quickly build the pipeline ran into obstacles. First, Native land claims needed to be settled, through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. Not long after, a group of environmental organizations sued the federal government over the pipeline's permits – including the right-of-way for building the haul road along the pipeline route – and over the environmental review process. In 1973 the courts sided with the environmental groups, leading Congress to pass the Alaska Pipeline Authorization Act to resolve the permitting issues. These delays meant that it was not until 1974 that Alyeska began construction on the pipeline and the majority of the haul road. The road was needed first, and over five months in the summer of 1974, 390 miles of road were built.

For the next three years, the haul road was the scene of nearly constant travel and activity up and down its route. Alyeska and its contractors spared nearly no expense building the pipeline, since every day that the oil remained in the north was a day's sale on the markets lost. That rush meant jobs were plentiful and pay was very good, including for the truckers who moved most of the material to the many pipeline construction camps north of Fairbanks. It wasn't uncommon for Teamsters to earn between \$7,000 and \$10,000 per month [\$35,000 to \$50,000 in 2017]. Because of the difficult road conditions and likelihood of bad weather, the Teamster contract guaranteed eighteen-hour days, which could translate to a trucker earning \$80,000 [\$395,000] in a year, working nine or ten months.

That good money could come at a cost. Like the Hickel Highway, driving the haul road in its first years was no easy task. Although it was built to higher standards than its predecessor, it still had many dangerous spots, especially going over the Brooks Range. As well, many truckers were from outside Alaska, and didn't have the experience driving in its unique conditions. As one Alaskan trucker said, "You'd be surprised at the older drivers that have been around a long time, driving everywhere in the



Heavy equipment at work during the construction of the Haul Road (now Dalton Highway).

BLM



Removing the barracks at the Old Man camp on the Haul Road (now Dalton Highway) during the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, February 1976. Many of the camps were modular to allow for easy movement along the construction route.

Jack Van Eaton Photographs
UAF-2014-72-86, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks

country, come up here and thought there's nothing to this. The next thing you know, they are in the ditch, upside down or maybe dead." Nor were things easy for local drivers. That same trucker described hauling the eighty-foot pipes that made up the pipeline: "It was a good way for a truck driver with a good record to blow his reputation in one trip. [The trailer] had a mind of its own.... It turned on its own."⁷

Alyeska finished the pipeline in 1977, and on June 20th oil started flowing from Deadhorse to Valdez. The company still needed the haul road for maintenance and transportation, but it no longer needed to control it. In 1979, the company turned over what Alyeska's president called a "gift to the state." Two years later, the state opened the newly named James W. Dalton Highway to public traffic up to Disaster Creek at MP 211. The whole road opened to the public in 1994, drawing a new flock of travelers to the North Slope. Some of them go for the adventure of driving the far north almost all the way to the Arctic Ocean, some seek new streams to fish, and some to view the abundant wildlife, including herds of caribou and muskox. Bus companies run chartered trips over the highway, offering round trips or connections with flights to or from Deadhorse. There are even some who bike or run along the highway. For several years, intrepid runners competed in the "Coldfoot Classic," a 100-mile ultramarathon run between two points on the highway over Halloween weekend.

Despite the regular traffic, the road is still fairly undeveloped. Most of the highway is unpaved, and travelers are notified to take more than one full-size spare tire on rims, along with extra fluids and emergency supplies, especially since there are only two spots – the Yukon crossing and Coldfoot – to get fuel and food before Deadhorse. Some of the hills and corners are especially difficult, including Roller Coaster (MP 75) and Beaver Slide (MP 110). The challenging nature of the road has made it popular for television shows about extreme conditions, including *Ice Road Truckers*, *America's Toughest Jobs*, and *World's Most Dangerous Roads*.

⁷ Sam Little quoted in Dermot Cole, *Amazing Pipeline Stories*, 41.

Kamikaze Trail

Not every road has its own song, but Sam Little was more than just a trucker. In 1976, musician Freddie Fender gave a show at Hering Auditorium in Fairbanks, and Little was his opening act. "Singin' Sam" performed his new song "Kamikaze Trail," about driving the haul road.

Whoever thought that a bunch of flatlanders
Would be trucking on the Kamikaze Trail

Now there's a road up north of Fairbanks,
The Kamikaze Trail's well-known.
It's a challenge to any truck driver,
Who really likes to carry their own.
You know the haul is tough, the roads are rough,
But the big rigs up and down her sail,
Oh just a big happy family of gear-jammers
a-trucking on the Kamikaze Trail

If you make it over Hess on the Yukon ice bridge
You'll spin out on Mackey Hill.
Down the beaver slide up Gobbler's Nob,
And Chandalar's always a thrill.
Well you better iron-up for Atigun Pass
And at the ice cut take a D-g's tail.
From there she's a freewheeling all the way to Prudhoe,
a-trucking on the Kamikaze Trail

[Courtesy: Sam Little, www.singinsam.com]

The song fit into a popular music and cultural trend in the mid-1970s, celebrating trucking and the men driving the rigs. Songs like "Convoy" by C.W. McCall, movies like *Smokey and the Bandit*, and TV shows like *Movin' On* all integrated trucker culture, CB radio call-signs, and life on the road. Little recorded many other songs while continuing to drive across Alaska and elsewhere, before settling down in Tok.



Dalton Highway and Trans-Alaska Pipeline

USFWS, Steve Hillebrand

Background photo: Drive to Sukakpak in June along the Dalton Highway.

NPS, Whitney Root



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List of Terms

AMHS: Alaska Marine Highway System

ARC: Alaska Road Commission

ARR: Alaska Railroad

BLM: Bureau of Land Management

BPR: Bureau of Public Roads

CAA: Civil Aeronautics Administration

CCC: Civilian Conservation Corps

DNR: Alaska Department of Natural Resources

DOT&PF: Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

FHWA: Federal Highway Administration

MP: Milepost

NPS: National Park Service

USFS: United States Forest Service

Featured Roads



