

C I T Y O F T E L L E R

C O M P R E H E N S I V E D E V E L O P M E N T P L A N

S U M M E R , 1 9 6 8

prepared for the

A l a s k a S t a t e H o u s i n g A u t h o r i t y

by

A l a s k a C o n s u l t a n t s

The preparation of this report and all maps contained herein was financially aided through a Federal grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, under the Urban Planning Assistance Program authorized by Section 701 of the Housing Act of 1954, as amended. This document and maps were prepared under the Urban Planning Assistance Program for the Alaska State Housing Authority.

However, Teller's native population still suffers from the typical native Alaskan ills of poor education, poor health, poor housing and extremely low income levels. In addition, rivalries between the two major Eskimo groups, the two stores and the two churches tend to divide this community. Although all elements of the community have a common goal of upgrading the standard of living of Teller residents, it is essential that these elements be combined to reach that goal.

A. PAST DEVELOPMENT

Like many other Seward Peninsula communities, Teller owes its origins to the gold rushes to this region at the turn of the century. However, although the gold rushes brought the first permanent settlement here, the site on which Teller now stands had long been used by Eskimos of the area as a camp for catching and drying fish. Known as Nooke to the Eskimos, the site later became known as Libbysville when it was used as a winter camp in 1866-67 for Captain Libby's section of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition.

Teller became established as a permanent community in 1900 with the discovery of gold in the Sullivan area, 15 miles to the south. A town named Bering, located 5 miles south of Teller on the shore of Port Clarence, was the first settlement but its population soon moved to Teller. With additional gold discoveries in the Kougarok area to the east, Teller flourished for a brief time as a central supply point for these two mining areas. At the peak of the gold rush to this area in 1900, Teller reportedly had a population of over 1,000 persons and supported a bank, a Post Office, 13 saloons, several hotels and numerous stores. However, the gold rushes here were of short duration and by the time of the 1910 Census, Teller's population had dwindled to 125 people.

At about the same time as the gold rushes to this area, the Federal government was establishing the reindeer industry in the Seward Peninsula. Teller Mission, located about 5 miles northwest of Teller on the shore of Port Clarence, had been established in 1892 as the first reindeer station in the State. In 1898, a group of Norwegians, Finns and Lapps were induced to migrate here to assist in the new industry and were followed shortly after by the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Mission. After about 1906, the Federal government's role in the station diminished and the mission instead became the dominant influence.

Teller and Teller Mission developed side by side, with Teller functioning primarily as a trading and transportation center and Teller Mission (now known as Brevig Mission) being primarily a mission settlement. The distinction in function between these two communities was later illustrated by Teller's having a school for white children only whereas Teller Mission's school served only native children.

The magnitude of the gold rushes to the Seward Peninsula had prompted development on a scale which has rarely since been equalled in this area. Rail lines were built at great speed leading from Nome to many of the gold producing areas. During this early period, a route was surveyed for a railroad linking Nome and Teller, as it was believed that freight could be landed at Port Clarence and reshipped by rail to Nome for a lower cost than it could be landed from vessels in the roadstead at Nome. Although the railroad and the fuller development of Port Clarence never materialized, Port Clarence was clearly considered the finest port of the region and had Teller been closer to the mainstream of mining activity, this scheme would undoubtedly have been implemented.

Also during this early period, Teller was connected to Nome by long distance telephone, part of a system totalling 350 miles of wire. However, the poles came down in a storm in 1913 and by that time there was little incentive to replace them. Although the hectic early days of Teller were not repeated, mining activities continued on a smaller scale throughout the region and Teller survived, though barely, as a permanent settlement. By 1920, only 80 people lived in this community and by 1930 this figure had dwindled slightly more to 76 persons.

During the 1920's an event which generated local excitement was a much publicized Naples to Nome dirigible flight. The dirigible instead landed at Teller, short of its objective, and was subsequently incorporated into many of the community's buildings. Also a cause of local excitement was M.G.M.'s selection of Teller for the filming of The Eskimo in 1931-32. The tiny wooden igloos constructed for the movie are still scattered round town and one was serving as a dwelling unit in 1967.

As a partial substitute for gold mining, reindeer herding and fox raising became locally important. However, neither industry proved wholly successful. In 1937, the Federal government bought out all non-native herders, although native-owned herds continued in the

Teller area. The fox raising industry likewise declined, principally due to a slump in the national demand for fox pelts.

What probably saved Teller from extinction was the presence of a relatively sophisticated community structure remaining from the gold boom period, plus a continued interest in the ultimate revival of mining activities and the development of Port Clarence. The facilities available in Teller attracted Eskimos here from the surrounding region and Teller ceased to be a "white man's town". A count of the community's population in 1942 indicated that of Teller's permanent population of approximately 110 persons, only 10 were non-natives, although several more white persons were in the area during the summer months when mining activities were underway.

With the outbreak of hostilities in the Pacific during World War II and the subsequent occupation of several of the outermost Aleutian Islands by the Japanese, a northern port and resupply point was sought by the U. S. War Department. Military requirements for this proposed project included the construction of a railroad and pipeline from a point near Fairbanks on the Alaska Railroad to the west coast of the State and the development of a deep water port at the railroad terminus. Studies by the Corps of Engineers, including the surveying of a railroad route and the investigation of possible port sites, concluded that Port Clarence offered the only natural deep water harbor on the west coast capable of meeting military requirements.

Some idea of the scale of development envisaged at Port Clarence can be gauged by the Corps' description of the facilities required to handle an estimated 350,000 tons of cargo per month, together with 50,000 tons of petroleum products from this proposed facility:

"General Plant Data

To accommodate 8 ships at one time; four reinforced concrete floating piers each 90 ft. wide x 450 ft. in length.... Six storage warehouses, each 180 ft. x 450 ft. with railroad tracks therein. Storage area in warehouses 1,000,000 square feet. Two reinforced concrete cold storage buildings for 8,000 tons of goods. Railroad car yards for 900 freight cars. Open storage yard, with track run-ways between railroad tracks, to accommodate unloading and stacking of merchandise alongside 225 cars. Petroleum products storage, 50,000 tons; bulk storage (in above tonnage) 175,000 barrels

.... Railroad terminal facilities with shops and 18 stall locomotive roundhouse. Administration building composed of two wings each 56 ft. x 135 ft." */

Total cost of the project, including the construction of 730 miles of railroad track and the pipeline, was estimated at \$123,167,000, with the development of the Port Clarence portion alone estimated at \$26,528,000.

Unfortunately, from Teller's standpoint, the Japanese threat to the north was over before the War Department's plans for Port Clarence were implemented. However, the community continued to attract new residents from other small villages of the region, principally from Igloo and, more recently, from Little Diomedé Island. By 1950, some 160 persons lived in Teller and at the time of the 1960 Census, the community had a population of 217.

Since 1960, three important developments affecting Teller's future have taken place. The first was Teller's assumption of government responsibilities by its incorporation as a fourth class city in 1963. The second was the provision of a land connection to Nome through the completion of the Nome-Teller Road in 1966. The third development, and one with strong parallels in Teller's past, revolves around the Corps of Engineers' studies for the construction of a deep water port facility on the west coast of northern Alaska. Thus, the development of Port Clarence may yet prove to be an economic boon in the future development of Teller.

B. TELLER TODAY

Although 86 percent of the 197 persons living here in 1967 were of Eskimo origin, this is not a typical Eskimo community. The layout of the town dates from the gold rush days and, despite the very low income levels of most Teller residents, a real effort has been made to keep the community looking attractive. As a result, Teller has the reputation of being one of the cleanest communities in Northwest Alaska. Housing conditions are poor here, as they are in other areas, but very little junk lies around Teller's buildings and the City has a cared-for appearance.

*/ United States Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers,
Seattle Office, Rail and Port Surveys of Alaska, April 24, 1943.

REFERENCES

- 1) Abrahamson, John D., Westward Alaska : Characteristics of the Native Economy and its Underlying Resource Base, unpublished report prepared for the U. S. Federal Field Committee for Development Planning in Alaska, Anchorage, 1967.
- 2) Abrams, Charles, Housing the Alaska Native, prepared for the Alaska State Housing Authority, Anchorage, February 1967 (Alaska State Housing Authority Remote Housing Report No. 1).
- 3) Alaska Department of Economic Development and Planning, Alaska's Population and Economy : Regional Growth, Development and Future Outlook, prepared by George W. Rogers and Richard A. Cooley, Juneau, March 1962.
- 4) Alaska Planning Council, Preliminary Economic Survey of the Seward Peninsula Area, Juneau, December 1940.
- 5) Alaska Steamship Company, Presentation at the Public Hearings on Deep Draft Navigation Improvement for the Seward Peninsula, Alaska, held by the Department of the Army, Alaska Division, Corps of Engineers, Nome, Alaska; Kotzebue, Alaska; September 12-13, 1967. Presentation by Mr. James F. O'Sullivan.
- 6) Transportation Consultants, Inc. and Wilbur Smith and Associates, Alaska Highway Study, prepared for (the) U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Public Roads, 1965.
- 7) United States Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers, Seattle Office, Rail and Port Surveys of Alaska, April 24, 1943.
- 8) United States Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers, Seattle Office, Reconnaissance for Railroad or Highway West of Fairbanks, June 15, 1942.
- 9) United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population, 1960 - Alaska, Washington, D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office, 1960-1962.
- 10) United States Department of the Interior, Alaska Natural Resources and the Rampart Project, Stewart L. Udall, Secretary, Washington, D. C., June 1967.