

Interior Alaska 1940-1980 CONSTRUCTION BOOM

In this section you will learn about:

The effects of World War II upon Interior Alaska
How the oil pipeline brought about the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act
Doyon, Ltd.
The effects of pipeline construction on Fairbanks
Changes that have occurred in Interior Alaska

World War II brings changes

World War II brought rapid and dramatic change to Interior Alaska as well as to other parts of the territory. Congress appropriated \$4 million for a cold-weather testing facility at Ladd Field near Fairbanks, where American-built airplanes were winterized for use in Russia. The Alaska Highway was built, linking Fairbanks to Canada and the rest of the continent. The Alaska segment followed the Tanana River north. Some branch of government employed two-thirds of Interior Alaska's work force.

After the war's end, military construction continued. Ladd Field was enlarged and later renamed Fort Jonathan M. Wainwright. In 1948, another airfield about 30 miles south of Fairbanks was expanded and named for pioneer pilot Carl Ben Eielson.

Post-war growth brings government regulations

By the end of the war many social changes had come to Interior Alaska. Many residents did not welcome the changes.

The Civil Aeronautics Administration had extended its authority to Alaska just before the war began. Interior Alaska's pilots protested the switch from uncontrolled aviation to federally-regulated air traffic. The territory built airports and seaplane bases. Most major villages in Interior Alaska had airstrips maintained by the territory by the 1950s.

Fairbanks handled increased amounts of air traffic. Weeks Field had become dangerous and obsolete. It was replaced by a new international airport at Fairbanks. Private pilots were dismayed at the new airport's regulations and fees. They persuaded the territorial legislature to fund Phillips Field on Garden Island. Most Alaskans, however, appreciated the added convenience and higher safety standards that resulted from federal regulation of aviation.

Alaska-Siberia Aircraft Ferrying Project

In the winter of 1942-1943 a group of American pilots flew over the frozen expanse of Interior Alaska toward Fairbanks. Their route took them from Great Falls, Montana, across Canada to Whitehorse where the most difficult part was yet to come. Over winter Alaska, clear air turbulence stalked the pilots, atmospheric interference hampered the limited radio reception, and navigation was not much more than a matter of luck. Few accurate maps of Interior Alaska were available. Temperatures were unusually severe, even for Alaska. Any pilot surviving a forced landing was almost certain to die from the cold.

These intrepid pilots were members of the Alaska-Siberia Aircraft Ferrying Project. Their mission was to deliver American manufactured airplanes to the Soviet Union. Russia and the United States were World War II allies, and Russia needed more aircraft to stave off the German attack. When the airplanes reached Ladd Field, Soviet pilots took over the controls for the long journey across western Alaska, the Bering Sea, and Siberia, to European Russia.

The first hop for the Russians, from Fairbanks to acme, was over 400 miles, but within the range of a stripped-down fighter plane. Galena was used as an intermediate airfield when necessary. The distances between refueling stops in Siberia were even greater. Severe weather increased the risk of losing pilots and planes. Fatalities occurred on both sides of the operation. Can the American route, 133 planes were lost before they reached Ladd Field.

Despite losses, the Alaska-Siberia Aircraft Ferrying Project was a success. Some 8,000 aircraft were shipped through Alaska to the Soviet Union between 1942 and 1945.

Alaskans vote for statehood

Some of these same Alaskans and others viewed the federal government and its land use regulations with distrust. Simultaneously, they feared the growing movement for Alaskan statehood. An election held in 1946 to find out how Alaskans felt about statehood showed that most of the territory's voters favored the measure. In Interior Alaska, 49 per cent of the voters gave their support to statehood.

Many recent arrivals in the state favored statehood, for they felt it would bring development and raise living standards. They were opposed by anti-statehood forces such as the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner owned by Austin E. Cap" Lathrop. He felt that self-government would bring expenses that Alaska

could not bear. After Lathrop's death in 1950, the new owners of the News-Miner endorsed statehood. In April, 1954, the News-Miner published a special statehood supplement. "Give Americans the full privileges of American citizenship," the newspaper said. "Turn Alaska's destiny over to Alaskans."

The next year delegates were elected to a constitutional convention which opened that fall at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Ernest Collins was one of nine Interior delegates and the oldest of all those elected from the 22 newly-created electoral districts. He had been a member of the first territorial legislature when it convened in 1913. The 82-year-old delegate said, as the convention ended,

Little did I think at that time that forty-three years hence I would be a member of a convention that was drawn here by the Territory of Alaska to draft a constitution for statehood, and I say to you, it has been a wonderful experience.

At the end of 76 days a constitution was adopted by a vote of 54-0 with one abstention. When the constitution was submitted to voters for their approval, it was not as popular as many had expected. The Fairbanks vote carried the election in Interior Alaska. Many towns including Ester, Tok, Flat, McGrath, Manley Hot Springs, Cantwell, and Stevens Village rejected the constitution. In Nulato the vote ended in a tie. In Alaska as a whole the document was approved by a margin of almost two to one. Two years and two months later, the United States Congress made Alaska the forty-ninth state of the union.

Change comes to the Yukon River

Despite political changes, the struggle for a livelihood continued. Neither trapping nor mining was very profitable in the post-war years. Yet change was coming. Signs of this change were making their way into remote corners of Interior Alaska. Helicopters were a noisy prelude to intense exploration for oil and other minerals. Plastic-wrapped loaves of bread were delivered by airplane to villages where grocery counters were still piled with furs.

The Natives unify to claim their rights

The Athapaskan way-of-life started to change with the arrival of the first fur traders on the Yukon River. In the years following contact disease dramatically reduced the Native population. Many chose to leave their villages and locate around trading and mining camps. Many hunted and trapped for traders. Others worked as guides and packers.

The new State of Alaska reaffirmed the section of the 1884 Organic Act that recognized Natives' use of the lands they had historically occupied. In 1959 Alaska Natives had not unified to claim their rights. The reservation system proposed to the Tanana chiefs in 1915 had never been widely implemented, although three reservations were created in Interior Alaska by executive order. A withdrawal at Fort Yukon totaled 75 acres. The Venetie Chandalar Reserve established in 1943 included almost 1.5 million acres and four villages. The Tetlin Reserve in the Fortymile region covered 768,000 acres. Only 183 of Interior Alaska's residents lived within these withdrawals in 1960.

Then, in 1961, the state laid plans for a recreation area in the Minto Flats region, an important Athapaskan fishing, hunting, and trapping area. Natives throughout Interior Alaska joined those who lived in Old Minto to prevent the loss of Native land. Another challenge to Native-claimed land was a proposal to build a dam at Rampart Canyon on the Yukon River about 100 miles northwest of Fairbanks. The dam would be the largest in the world. Approximately 10,000 acres of the Yukon Flats would be flooded. The Natives protested the potential loss of a primary subsistence area. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service opposed the project because of the overwhelming fish and wildlife losses. One conservationist wrote that 1,200 Natives would have to move, and the livelihood of 6,000 more in Alaska and 3,500 in Canada would be affected by the reduction in the salmon run. A large moose range, waterfowl breeding grounds, and haven for small fur-bearers would be lost. The Rampart Dam proposal died a quiet death in 1965.

Interior Alaska Native groups were among 17 organizations that met to establish the Alaska Federation of Natives in 1966. For the first time, Athapaskans were formally allied with the Tlingits, Haidas, Eskimos, and Aleuts. They worked toward a common goal, to halt encroachments on their lands.

Athapaskans and Northwest and Arctic Eskimos fought a plan to build an oil pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. Much of the proposed route crossed lands they claimed. As the nation's energy needs increased, so did pressure to build the pipeline. A compromise was reached in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

Doyon, Ltd, receives lands

In Interior Alaska the regional corporation created by the 1971 act was Doyon, Ltd. The corporation could select 12 million acres of land. This was the largest area granted any of the 12 regional corporations. In addition, Doyon, Ltd. received a cash settlement of \$48.5 million. Under the leadership of John Sackett, its first president, Doyon, Ltd. invested settlement funds in such potentially profitable ventures as oil exploration and television. In its first

annual report Doyon, Ltd. noted that its goal was to seek ways to make life better for stockholders.

Fairbanks is center of pipeline construction

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act cleared the way for pipeline construction. Fairbanks was the staging base for pipeline construction in Interior Alaska. Work began in the summer of 1973. Subcontractors, management personnel, construction engineers, and thousands of job-seekers flocked into Fairbanks.

Few were prepared. The cost of living climbed higher and higher. The fleet of 700 yellow trucks operated by Alyeska Pipeline Service Company became symbols of the traffic congestion which accompanied pipeline construction.

The congestion was not limited to traffic. People stood in long lines in post offices, restaurants, and supermarkets. Newcomers crowded into trailers and campgrounds. Some slept in their cars while they searched for housing. The Salvation Army and Rescue Mission made beds available. When the beds were taken the overflow slept on the floor. The city tried to keep up with the demand for such services as telephones and power, but it could only jump from crisis to crisis.

Construction of the pipeline and the North Slope haul road that parallels the pipeline from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay began in 1973. The road includes the first bridge to span the Yukon River. Across Interior Alaska the pipeline route roughly follows the routes of two highways, the Richardson and the Elliott. When construction was completed in 1977, a recession hit Fairbanks. The city, however, did not return to its pre-construction population.

Alaska's land is fought for

The statehood bill had granted Alaska 103.5 million acres of federal land within its boundaries. Before the state completed its selection of land the Native claims issue interfered. With the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act came a new issue, (d)2 lands. Under a clause lettered (d)2 in the Native Claims Settlement Act, the federal government was required to study possible national interest lands in Alaska which might be reserved for the use of all Americans. As a result of such study, an Alaska lands bill was introduced in the House of Representatives and became known as HR 39. The bill called for the withdrawal of almost 144 million acres of land.

Congressmen held hearings throughout the state to listen to Alaskans' views. One

of the hearings was in Fairbanks, for much of the land proposed for withdrawal was located in Interior Alaska. Interior residents who spoke at the hearing expressed different views. Fairbanks symphony conductor Gordon Wright, for example, saw HR 39 as a gift of wilderness for his children. Others agreed with Alaskan Senator Mike Gravel that the bill would make Alaska a ward of the, federal government. Representatives of Doyon, Ltd. voiced three concerns. These were over access across federal withdrawals to Native lands, the impact that adjacent federal lands might have on Doyon, Ltd. lands, and continued subsistence use of national interest lands.

Finally, in mid-November of 1980, Congress passed a compromise lands bill which set aside 56 million acres of land as wilderness and 55 million acres as wildlife refuges. Abutting the Canadian border is Yukon-Charley National Monument that protects a portion of the upper Yukon River and the Charley River drainage. The Yukon Flats has been reserved to protect waterfowl and mammal habitat. Between Yukon-Charley and Yukon Flats is Birch Creek that has been proposed as a wild and scenic river. To the south of Yukon-Charley portions of the Fortymile River have also been proposed as a wild and scenic river. In addition, there are five proposed national wildlife refuges, Kanuti, Koyukuk, Nowitna, and portions of the Innoko and Tetlin rivers.

The resolution of most land issues in Interior Alaska and failure of efforts to build a pipeline to carry natural gas from the Prudhoe Bay oilfields in Northwest and Arctic Alaska to tidewater in Southcentral Alaska caused a pause in Interior Alaska's economy at the beginning of the 1980s. Some early activities such as fur trading had become very minor factors in the region's economy. Experimental agriculture development east of Fairbanks depended for success not only on good crops, but also on transportation of the crops to market and markets for the crops. Mining operations fluctuated with world gold prices. Government spending, including university developments, rose and fell with tax revenues. Retail business trended toward good and bad years relative to the basic industries. In many respects, the future of the region was tied, as the past had been, to economic considerations.

Summary questions

Why did Cap Lathrop oppose statehood?

What were some of the Interior Alaska issues that increased interest in resolving Native land claims?

Inquiry question

Find out how long it would take to travel by air from your community to three

other communities in your region. Then find someone in your community who can tell you about traveling to those same places by some means other than air travel.

THE YUKON RIVER AND ITS PEOPLE 1800-1869 THE RUSSIANS AND ENGLISH MEET 1869-1896
STARS AND STRIPES UP THE RIVER 1896-1910 CHANGING LIFESTYLES, DIFFERENT
VALUES 1910-1940 1940-1980 CONSTRUCTION BOOMS Suggested Readings