

Government / Military

Fort Gibbon and the Village of Tanana

By Jason Wenger

Even before the Klondike gold strike, Alaska's Interior was crawling with miners and traders who were drawn by gold and the opportunity to get rich by finding it or mining it out of the pockets of the miners. Some men and women demonstrated foresight and wisdom by trading with Athabascans and Western competitors. The desire for order and fair trade was evident through the local miners' meetings, which set the rule of Western law in these small societies. However, by 1897 accounts of lawlessness and even murder among ungoverned miners reached an already concerned U.S. government in Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Secretary of War ordered Captain P.H. Ray and an infantry of men to investigate the Interior. Captain Ray concluded that the unattended mining towns were in dire need of organization and government. At his recommendation, the government built six forts at the most popular mining sites and widely used trade routes. Ray wanted to build three forts on the Yukon River, placed at critical junctions in the transportation system. They were Fort Egbert (near the Canada border), Fort Gibbon (near Tanana at the confluence of the Yukon and Tanana Rivers), and Fort St. Michael (on the Bering Sea, at the mouth of the Yukon River). The three forts would connect the east, central, and westernmost segments of the Yukon River, which cut the territory nearly in half.

Among the three, Fort Gibbon was centrally located near the Athabascan village of Tanana, called "Nuchalawoyya" by the Native people, meaning "where the two great rivers meet." The location was ideal. It had long been a major trade location for the Koyukon and Tanana peoples, and from this location in the heart of the Interior, the U.S. military oversaw the shipping and trading of supplies and brought civil order to the miners.

Though Fort Gibbon thrived as a crucial hub and trading post for miners in the early 20th century, the necessity of the fort was short-lived. As early as 1906, both successful and penniless miners were leaving the Yukon. However, the fort remained important in what may have been the largest communications project in the history of Alaska: the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System.

By June 1903, under the direction of Lt. William Mitchell, crews completed construction of the first telegraph line to span Alaska's Interior, from Valdez to Fort Egbert on the Yukon River. More lines along the Yukon River linked Forts Egbert, Gibbon, and St. Michael. Finally, a submarine cable from Seattle to Valdez was completed. For the first time, military intelligence officials could transmit telegraphed messages strictly through American soil and international waters.

The gold rush died out, and wireless radio connections soon made the use of the telegraph nearly obsolete. Fort Gibbon was abandoned in 1923, with the brief exception of its use as a temporary air base refueling stop during World War II. The U.S. government decided it was no longer necessary to man the one-time hub. In May 1936, WAMCATS was redesignated the Alaska Communications System (ACS).

According to the 2000 federal census, about three hundred people—most Athabascans—were living in Tanana. Remnants of the once-bustling Fort Gibbon are no longer visible; however, its history remains an important chapter in Alaska development and in the country's military history.

LINKS:

More about Fort Gibbon:

www.alsap.org/FortGibbon/FortGibbon.htm

www.nps.gov/gaar/Expanded/key_values/cultural_resources/gaunt_beauty/chapter4.htm

More about Lt. William “Billy” Mitchell:

www.gi.alaska.edu/ScienceForum/ASF7/751.html

www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/cc/mitch.html

www.worldwar1.com/dbc/mitchell.htm

www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Air_Power/mitchell/AP12.htm

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska’s libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about the Fort Egbert, Eagle, and the WAMCATS project. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.
2. Click on the listing for **ALNCat** (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **TANANA ALASKA** or **FORT GIBBON**.

MORE READING:

Mitchell, William, Lyman L. Woodman. *The Opening of Alaska*. Anchorage, Alaska: Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1982. Second edition, Missoula, Mont.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1988.

Gary C. Stein, “Ship Surgeon on the Yukon,” *The Alaska Journal* 11 (1981), 232. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Abandoned Military Reservations. Records of the General Land Office (RG 49), 1975. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Microform, 2255 p. Alaska military reservations (Fort Liscum); Fort Davis Military Reservation (Ta 10556); Naval reserves, Alaska; Fort Gibbon, Alaska; and Fort Liscum Target Range.

Alaska Communication System Photograph Collection, 1904-1963. Alaska State Library. Collection includes 2,199 black-and-white photoprints.

Robert N. DeArmond Photograph Collection: Early Views of Alaska, 1890-1920.

Alaska State Library. Includes 157 black-and-white photographs, including enhanced views of early Alaska used for postcards and other commercial purposes. The Albertype Company in Brooklyn, N.Y., originally printed the 8 x 10 inch sheet of photographs in which 3 or more views were arranged together then included in publications. A variety of Alaskan subjects are depicted including communities, sled dogs, glaciers, mining, Alaska Native arts, artists, boats and housing, vegetables and flowers, wildlife, fishing, hunting,

and railroads including the Copper River and Northwestern Railway and the White Pass and Yukon Route. Publishers and photographers represented in the collection include: Landahl's Emporium (Dawson) and Albertype Company (Brooklyn, NY), Winter & Pond, P.E. Kern, E.A. Hegg and P.S. Hunt. Contents: Cordova, Dawson, Fairbanks, Fort Gibbon, Juneau, Manley Hot Springs, Metlakatla, Sitka, Skagway, and Wrangell.

C. S. Farnsworth Papers, 1899-1943. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks. The collection contains narrative monthly reports, personal letters, articles written by C. S. Farnsworth on hunting for game and a historical sketch of Fort Gibbon. The collection also contains a group of photographs showing scenes of life in and around the forts.

George L. Harrington Photograph Collection, 1909-1917. Alaska State Library. Volume 1, a U.S.G.S. scrapbook compiled in accordance with the survey order, primarily concerns geological formations and includes views of Ruby, Long City, Fort Gibbon, Fort Yukon, Anvik Mission, Eagle, Tolstoi, Holy Cross, Russian Mission, Marshall-Fortuna Ledge, Candle, Teller. Also included are views of Simel's Store and Sawmill on the Dishna, the steamer Oil City, the schooner *Silver Wave*, the gasboat *Standard*, *Mayflower of St. Michael*. Vol. 2 is a personal photo album and contains commercial postcards & original photos of the Alaska Boundary Survey in 1909 & 1912, the Boundary Survey crew, Athabascans, birch-bark canoes, fish drying operations, a fish wheel at Ruby, Fort Yukon, the White River, Nation River, Porcupine River, riverboats. The album also includes pictures of Asa Baldwin.

Herron, Joseph Sutherland and Edwin F. Glenn. *Map of explorations in Alaska, 1899: All-American Route to the Yukon from Tyoonok, Cook Inlet to Fort Gibbon via the Upper Kuskokwim Country*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. War Department, 1900. Held at Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Carl F. Lewis Photographs and Artifacts, 1916, 1917, 1919-1922, ca. 1950. University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library, Archives and Manuscripts Department. The collection consists of the photographs, post cards, artifacts, and company party invitation of U. S. Army soldier Carl F. Lewis, who enlisted in the U. S. Army in 1916. He trained at Fort McDowell, San Diego, California, with the 3rd Recruit Company and served in G Company of the 21st Infantry Regiment. Lewis' unit was sent to Fort Gibbon, Alaska, near the village of Tanana on the Yukon River, in September 1919. The company also established a camp at Nenana on the Tanana River to safeguard government property of the Alaskan Engineering Commission. The company left Fort Gibbon for Anchorage in June 1922 before the post was deactivated that September.

Military in Alaska and the Yukon Territory, 1867-1985. Lyman L Woodman. Alaska State Library. Two boxes of archival material include documents, clippings, articles, and first draft of *The Story of the Alaska Communication System, 1900-1943*; material located while researching the history of the U.S. Army in Alaska.

Military reservation, Fort Gibbon, Alaska, 1900-1923. Photocopy of map depicting Fort Gibbon. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Charlie J. Patton Collection, 1915-1957. Alaska State Library. The Charlie J. Patton collection includes 313 photographs, including two scrapbooks, of the Yukon River area, Tanana, Ruby, Fort Gibbon, Fort Liscum, Cordova and Tonsina, Alaska. Many are captioned. Images of roadhouses, the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Copper River and Northwestern Railroad, Alaskan Native culture, and portraits are also included in the loose photographs. A photograph album contains images of Charlie Patton, his family and friends and their various activities including amateur theater. An oversize scrapbook contains both clippings and photographs of various Alaskan subjects. Patton also collected articles and newspaper clippings on Alaska and the Pacific Northwest-related events that are filed in folders by subject.

Post Returns, Fort Gibbon (Alaska); United States Army Adjutant General's Office, 1899-1916. University of Alaska Anchorage, Consortium Library, Archives and Manuscripts Department. This collection consists of the post returns for Fort Gibbon from 1899 to 1916. They include the units stationed there, their strength, names and duties of officers, a list of communications, and a record of events. 2 reels, microfilm. The collection was purchased from NARA in 1983. It includes reels 402 and 403 of National Archives Microcopy 617.

U.S. Army Signal Corps Photograph Collection, 1889-1970. Alaska State Library. Includes 194 black-and-white photoprints. The collection includes images of Alaskan forts, telegraph stations, World War II, prisoners of war, U.S. military personnel and military life.