

Land, Sea, Air / Roads & Railroads

By Tricia Brown

### **Golden Age of the Roadhouses**

On foot or on horseback, travelers on Alaska's earliest transportation corridors couldn't rely on roadside services to make their trip more comfortable. The traders and prospectors who moved along the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail in the late 1800s packed their own tents, bedrolls, and enough supplies to get them to a town or trading post. Sometimes crude log shelters offered relief, for animals and men alike, from the elements. But as a new century began, improvements to the trail resulted in increased traffic, and enterprising settlers saw the earning potential of offering room and board. Other outposts were refitted to accommodate travelers and their horses. And the golden age of the Alaska roadhouses was launched.

Alaska had been virtually ignored by Congress since 1876, when the U.S. government invested \$7.2 million to buy the territory from Russia. With the first Organic Act of 1884, residents were able to form the beginnings of a civil government, yet still there was little federal interest in this "Walrussia," as Alaska had been dubbed during congressional debates over the purchase. However, before the century ended, gold discoveries in Alaska and the Klondike would ignite the imagination of the nation.

With increased attention on its far-flung territory, pleas for improved transportation and communications resulted in more government projects. Military engineers constructed a telegraph line called WAMCATS, for Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System, and military and civilian workers labored to improve the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail. The government began granting annual funding to the Alaska Road Commission and upgrades on the road continued into the early 1900s.

Freight, mail, cattle, dog teams, and passengers coursed along the trail systems, and roadhouses sprang up along the route, each one about a day's ride apart by dog team. Some were built for their new purpose; others had been homesteads, telegraph stations, or

perhaps an outpost for the military or government railroad builders. At the peak, more than thirty roadhouses, offering varying degrees of luxury, could be found along the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail. Their names could be traced to a local geographic feature, or an owner, former or current: Wortmann's, Sourdough, Richardson, Sullivan, Black Rapids, Summit, Camp Comfort, Timberline, Meier's, and many others.

"The roadhouses weren't fancy . . .," wrote Michael Parrish in a 2002 *Los Angeles Times* story about the historic waysides, ". . . bunk beds with spruce boughs for mattresses or a bare corner to throw your bedroll in. According to one early chronicle, guests at a dirt-floor log roadhouse were served an alleged rabbit stew from a large kerosene can that was permanently settled on an old stove. As the contents thinned with each new diner, more water, rabbit, caribou, lynx or bear—whatever was around—was tossed into the pot."

Most importantly the roadhouses saved lives. Every season brought its unique hazards and tragedies. The trails were most passable during the winter months, when the surface was frozen and insects were absent. However, travelers could be caught in blinding snow or killing cold. In summer, the road could be a mosquito-choked path of knee-deep mud.

"At least a dozen people died in the winter of 1913 along the old Valdez-Fairbanks Trail," wrote Parrish, "lost in churning blizzards as they struggled to find Yost's Roadhouse. The two-story log lodge in the central Alaska Range was often so buried in snow that only its stovepipe poked above the drifts. Yost's was two hundred yards back from the trail, making it even harder to find in a storm.

"The summer after that deadly season, a Lt. Dougherty of the U.S. Army Signal Corps installed a wire fence across the winter trail to steer blizzard-blind trekkers toward the front door, and a 150-pound bell mounted near the roadhouse would clang whenever the wind blew. Those innovations are said to have saved many lives."

By the 1920s, when there were fewer horses than motorized vehicles, the roadhouses and inns along Alaska's roads and railroad lines were each an oasis of hospitality, and acted

as seeds of the tourism industry. During the decades to follow, many of the old log structures decayed or burned, and the few that remain today are historic buildings.

### **THE ROADHOUSES:**

The **Blix Roadhouse** was among the first, constructed in Copper Center by Ringwald Blix in about 1896, when prospectors were seeking an all-American route to the Klondike, and military crews were planning the telegraph line between Valdez and Eagle. The original roadhouse stood until 1932, when it was destroyed to build the current Copper Center Lodge.

One of the oldest roadhouses in Alaska's Interior, the **Sullivan**, served travelers on a portion of the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail called the Donnelly-Washburn winter sled trail. Built in 1905, the roadhouse was operated by John and Florence Sullivan until 1922. Federal funding in 1966 helped move the historic log building across the Tanana River and into the town of Delta Junction, where it now houses artifacts as a museum across from the visitors' center. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

In Gakona, Hart's Road House was built in 1903 and later renamed **Sourdough Lodge**. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places on October 1, 1974, and four years later was designated a National Historic Landmark. The landmark roadhouse, however, was lost to fire on December 27, 1992.

Two miles outside of Tok on the portion of the Glenn Highway known as the Tok Cut-off, the **Gakona Lodge** includes a two-story log building dating from the late 1920s. The original lodge and other outbuildings on the seven-acre historic district are even older, dating from 1904.

Gulkana was a telegraph station in 1903 during the WAMCATS years. A fur dealer named C. L. Hoyt operated the **Gulkana Roadhouse** there until 1916. Dating from the early 1900s, the complex included a store, post office, and stage station. Gulkana lies at Mile 127 Richardson Highway.

Also standing is the restored **Rika's Roadhouse** along the Tanana River at Mile 274.5 Richardson Highway. Variouslly called Bates Landing or the McCarty Roadhouse, the 1906 structure was purchased by Slavic immigrant John Hajdukovich, and he later deeded the roadhouse to a Swedish woman, Rika Wallen, for back wages. The roadhouse is the centerpiece in a ten-acre site designated as the Big Delta Historical Park. The Delta Historical Society now operates a museum housed in what was an old blacksmith shop. Visitors may take a guided tour, and camping is available nearby.

Thirty-eight miles south of Delta Junction, the **Rapids Roadhouse** was named for the nearby glacier when it was built in 1902. The original building accommodated guests into the 1990s. In the 21st century, owners were working to restore the old lodge with grant funding from the state's Office of History and Archeology. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2001. It stands at Mile 227.4 Richardson Highway.

Beginning in 1917, the **Talkeetna Roadhouse** has hosted gold miners coming and going to area hills and streams. Built by brothers Frank and Ed Lee, the historic roadhouse still operates on Talkeetna's Main Street at the end of a fourteen-mile spur road off the Parks Highway.

#### **LINKS:**

##### **Rika's Roadhouse:**

<http://www.alaskafursandgifts.com/roadhouse.html>

##### ***Los Angeles Times* story by Michael Parrish:**

<http://www.latimes.com/travel/destinations/alaska/la-tr-richardsonhwy28jul28,1,4706300.story?coll=la-travel-alaska>

##### **Copper Center Lodge:**

<http://www.coppercenterlodge.com/>

##### **Talkeetna Roadhouse:**

<http://www.talkeetnarnoadhouse.com/>

##### **Sullivan Roadhouse Historic Museum:**

<http://www.alaska-highway.org/delta/sullivan.htm>

##### **Tonsina River Lodge:**

<http://www.tonsinariverlodge.com/history.html>

### **VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Alaska's libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the development of early roads in the territory and the roadhouses that grew with them. 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 ALASKA ROADHOUSES.

### **MORE READING:**

Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. *Roadhouses along the Richardson Trail: Photocopies of Traveling Exhibits*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Museum; Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Humanities Forum, 2000s.

Ferguson, Judy. *Parallel Destinies, An Alaskan Odyssey*. Big Delta, Alaska: Glas Publishing Company, 2002.

Garrett, Ronald C. *Life at the Talkeetna Roadhouse*. Spokane, Wash.: Alien Publishing, 1998.

Phillips, Walter T. *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway: The First Quarter Century, 1898 to 1923*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Historical Commission, 1984.

Phillips, Walter T. *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway II*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Historical Commission, 1985.

Smith, Michael E. *Alaska's Historic Roadhouses*. Boulder, Colo.: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1974.

Valdez Transportation Company. *Alaska, a Travelogue of the Richardson Highway 1928: Constructed and Maintained by the Alaska Road Commission*. Valdez, Alaska: Valdez Transportation Co., 1928.

### **ARCHIVAL MATERIALS**

**Alaska Road Commission photograph collection, 1905-1956.** University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. The collection also includes a series of 422 photographs depicting Road Commission work in Southcentral Alaska, primarily in the late 1920s through mid 1930s. Subjects include construction activities on the Richardson

Highway, Gulkana-Chisana Road, Robe River Road, and Kotsina Road; landscapes and roadhouses found along the roadways; and some aerial views.

**P.S. Hunt photograph collection, 1905-1917.** Alaska State Library. The collection includes a variety of images and scenics taken in Valdez including community activities, buildings, and transportation companies operating on the trail from Valdez to Fairbanks.

**George A. Parks photograph collection, 1911-1933.** Alaska State Library. The collection includes images of a 2,500 mile inspection trip to northern and interior Alaska which Governor Parks, Malcolm Elliott (President of the Alaska Road Commission) and R.J. Sommers (Territorial highway engineer) took in 1928. Other images were taken by Parks when he worked for the U.S. Land Office and include Alaskan villages, mining operations, and vessels on the Yukon. The collection also contains aerial photographs of southeast Alaska from the U.S. Navy Alaska Aerial Survey Expedition in 1926.

**U.S. military telegraph stations in Alaska, photograph collection, 1910-1925.** Alaska State Library. Includes U.S. military telegraph and wireless stations in Delta, Donnelly, Fairbanks, Fort Egbert, Fort Liscum, Gulkana, Hogan, Paxon, St. Michael, Salcha, Copper Center, Thompson Pass, Tiekell, Wortmann's, Tonsina, Valdez and Valdez to Fairbanks Trail.

**Miller House Collection, Martin Frank Miller and Jay F. Kelly, 1915-1965.** University of Alaska, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. The Miller House Collection contains Martin Frank Miller's papers, Jay F. Kelly's papers and other papers pertaining to Miller House, a combination roadhouse, post office, and general store owned by Martin Frank Miller. Miller House was located 110 miles north of Fairbanks on the Steese Highway. Martin Frank Miller was a Circle Springs miner who later became U.S. Deputy Marshal at Nulato. Jay F. Kelly was the manager of Miller House for many years.

**Cyrus Kingsley Gates postcard collection, 1898-1920.** Alaska State Library. Cyrus Kingsley Gates collected these postcards at age 15 while on a trip to Alaska with his uncle, P. G. Gates, of Pasadena, California, during the summer of 1920. Dates of the postcards range from 1898-1920. Includes images of Rapids Roadhouse, Sourdough Roadhouse, Yost's Roadhouse, Meier's, Tonsina Roadhouse, Caribou Hotel (Carcross), Royal Hotel (Atlin), McCarty Ferry, Alert Bay, Hotel Holman (Copper Center), Seattle Hotel (Valdez), and Tanana Commercial Co.