

The Richardson Highway Formerly the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:



Identifier:



Title:



Description:

Crary-Henderson Collection

AMHA-b62-1-a-83

Automobile with banner: Fairbanks. Chitina. Valdez!! or bust!!

Banner title taken from front. View of men riding in Model T Ford with banner, Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Valdez, Alaska. Also from front: "Valdez, Alaska." From verso: "The first auto over V[aldez]-F[airbanks] Trail. Model T Ford. Shipped into F[air]b[an]ks. Came out over V[aldez]-F[airbanks] Trail, summer of [19]13 (or 14). Car sold to Al White. Auto is 1913 Model T. Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." Photographer's number P203. 1913-1914. Photographer: P.S. Hunt. Original photograph size: 5" x 7". Hunt, P. S. (Phinney S.), 1866-1917



Creator:

 **Date.original:**

1913-1914



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:

Skinner Foundation. Photographs, Alaska Steamship Company, 1890s-1940s. ASL-PCA-44

 **Identifier:**

ASL-P44-05-139

 **Title:**

Richardson Highway - Alaska Road Commission.

 **Description:**

Intersection with two road signs. Fences and buildings in background.

Sign in image: Richardson Highway, Valdez - Chitina - Fairbanks Military Road Constructed and Maintained by the Alaska Road Commission.

 **Corporate Name:**

United States. Alaska Road Commission

 **Time Period:**

1913 to 1939



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

AMHA. General Photograph File



Identifier:

AMHA-b57-5-330



Title:

Grading with tractor and grader.



Description:

Title taken from verso. Caterpillar tractor pulling man on grader, Richardson Highway, Alaska, with logs alongside road. Also from verso: "Richardson Highway. Holt "Cat" & an Adams Leaning Wheel Grader. 6-10-23. Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." June 10, 1923. Original photograph size: 3 1/2" x 5 3/4".



Date.original:

June 10, 1923



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

AMHA. General Photograph File

 Identifier:

AMHA-b76-168-5

 Title:

Valdez-Fairbanks wagon road (Valdez end).

 Description:

Title taken from verso. View of car stopped on narrow dirt Valdez-Fairbanks wagon road, now Richardson Highway, Alaska, toward the Valdez end, with men standing alongside. Also from verso: "Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." n.d. Postcard. Original photograph size: 3 3/8" x 5 3/8".



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name: The Alaska Railroad Tour Lantern Slide Collection, 1923. ASL-PCA-198
Identifier: ASL-P198-62
Title: Keystone Canyon and highway.
Description: Physical description: Tinted lantern slide : glass, col. ; 3 1/4 x 4 in.
Creator: Alaska Railroad
Date original: 1923
Related Materials: <http://www.ccl.lib.ak.us/uhtbin/cgisirsi.exe/x/x/0/5?searchdata1=ocm56507928>



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:

Skinner Foundation. Photographs, Alaska Steamship Company, 1890s-1940s. ASL-PCA-44

 Identifier:

ASL-P44-05-076

 Title:

Richardson Highway Transportation Company bus and ferry, on river's edge.

 Description:

Damaged photograph.

 Creator:

Ordway Photo Shop

 Location:

Denali National Park and Preserve
McKinley Park (Alaska)

 Time Period:

1939 to 1959



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

 Collection Name:	Skinner Foundation. Photographs, Alaska Steamship Company, 1890s-1940s. ASL-PCA-44
 Identifier:	ASL-P44-02-046
 Title:	Richardson Highway. Bear Creek Suspension Bridge, ca. 1929.
 Description:	Valdez Transportation Co's fleet of Studebakers crossing bridge.
 Corporate Name:	Valdez Transportation Co.
 Location:	Bear Creek (Alaska)
 Date.original:	1929?



Made For Alaska S. S. Co. By E. L. Fisher

Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:	Skinner Foundation. Photographs, Alaska Steamship Company, 1890s-1940s. ASL-PCA-44
 Identifier:	ASL-P44-05-029
 Title:	Richardson Highway tour bus.
 Corporate Name:	Richardson Highway Transportation Co.
 Location:	Denali National Park and Preserve McKinley Park (Alaska)
 Time Period:	1913 to 1939



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:

Skinner Foundation. Photographs, Alaska Steamship Company, 1890s-1940s. ASL-PCA-44
ASL-P44-02-011



Identifier:



Title:



Description:

Valdez Transportation Company's Studebaker Fleet. Where Alaska Steamers and the Richardson Highway meet.

Title taken from image.

Signs in image: Center of the Prince William sound Gold and Copper Belt; Valdez, Terminus of a Great Scenic Road, The Richardson Highway; To Fairbanks, Chitina, Circle City.; The Key to the Golden Heart of Alaska; Cars for Hire, Inquire Here.



Corporate Name:

Valdez Transportation Co.



Date.original:

1929?



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

AMHA. Ickes Collection

 **Identifier:**

AMHA-b75-175-268

 **Title:**

Richardson Highway.

 **Description:**

Title taken from label on matting. View of Richardson Highway in Interior Alaska. Also from label: "Fairbanks, Alaska. (Temp. 47)." Photographer's number 8104. Sept. 1938. Photographer: Ray B. Dame. Original photograph size: 8 1/8" x 10".

 **Creator:**

Dame, Ray B.

 **Date.original:**

Sept. 1938



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Collection Name:

Edward Lewis Bartlett Papers, 1938-1970

 Identifier:

UAF-1969-95-467

 Title:

Group at the Richardson Roadhouse

 Description:

Group gathers outside the Richardson Roadhouse during Gov. Bone's trip. Visible are Governor Bone and his family, Bob Hickman and his wife, Judge & Mrs Clegg, Ben Eielson, Vide Gaustad and O. P. Gaustad.

 Personal Name:

Bone, Scott Cordelle, 1860-1936

Hickman, Bob

Clegg, Cecil H. (Cecil Hunter), 1873-1956

Eielson, Carl Benjamin, 1897-1929

Bartlett, Vide Marie Gaustad

Gaustad, Ole P.



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

-  **Collection Name:** The Alaska Railroad Tour Lantern Slide Collection, 1923. ASL-PCA-198
-  **Identifier:** ASL-P198-58
-  **Title:** Richardson Highway. Views near Tikal [Tiekel?] red flowers (fireweed) and mts.
-  **Description:** 1920's touring car on the highway which appears to be little more than a lane in this area.
Physical description: Tinted lantern slide : glass, col. ; 3 1/4 x 4 in.
-  **Creator:** Alaska Railroad
-  **Date.original:** 1923
-  **Type:** Image (Lantern slides)
Image (Photographs)
-  **Related Materials:** <http://www.ccl.lib.ak.us/uhtbin/cgisirsi.exe/x/x/0/5?searchdata1=ocm56507928>



1928 Ford used by Gov. Parks &
Major Elliott for inspection of
Richardson Highway.

Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:	George A. Parks. Photographs, 1911-1933. ASL-PCA-240
 Identifier:	ASL-P240-068
 Title:	The 1928 Alaska Tour (33) by Governor George A. Parks, Major Malcolm Elliott, Mr. R.J. Sommers, Territorial Hwy Engineer.
 Description:	Album caption: 1928 Ford used by Gov. Parks & Major Elliott for inspection of Richardson Highway.
 Creator:	Parks, George A., 1883-1984
 Contributors:	Elliott, Malcolm Sommers, R.J.
 Personal Name:	Elliott, Malcolm Parks, George A., 1883-1984
 Corporate Name:	United States. Alaska Road Commission
 Date.original:	1928



Alaska State Library - Historical Collections

Collection Name:

George A. Parks. Photographs, 1911-1933. ASL-PCA-240



Identifier:

ASL-P240-082



Title:

The 1928 Alaska Tour (39) by Governor George A. Parks, Major Malcolm Elliott, Mr. R.J. Sommers, Territorial Hwy Engineer. Album caption: At Willow Creek--Gov. Parks.



Description:

Sign in image: Richardson Highway, Valdez - Chitina - Fairbanks Military Road Constructed and Maintained by the Alaska Road Commission.



Creator:

Parks, George A., 1883-1984



Contributors:

Elliott, Malcolm

Sommers, R.J.



Personal Name:

Parks, George A., 1883-1984



Corporate Name:

United States. Alaska Road Commission



Location:

Willow Creek (Valdez, Alaska)



Date.original:

1928



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

AMHA. General Photograph File

 **Identifier:**

AMHA-b76-168-3

 **Title:**

Valdez-Fairbanks wagon road, Va[l]dez end.

 **Description:**

Title taken from verso. Men driving trucks along the Valdez-Fairbanks wagon road, now Richardson Highway, Alaska, toward the Valdez end of the road. Also from verso: "Now Richardson Highway. Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." n.d. Original photograph size: 4 1/4" x 2 1/2".

 **Time Period:**

1913 to 1939



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

 **Identifier:**

 **Title:**

 **Description:**

 **Creator:**

 **Date.original:**

AMHA. Alaska Railroad

AMHA-bl79-3-1863

View on the Richardson Highway, glacial canyon, Delta River near Rapids Roadhouse.

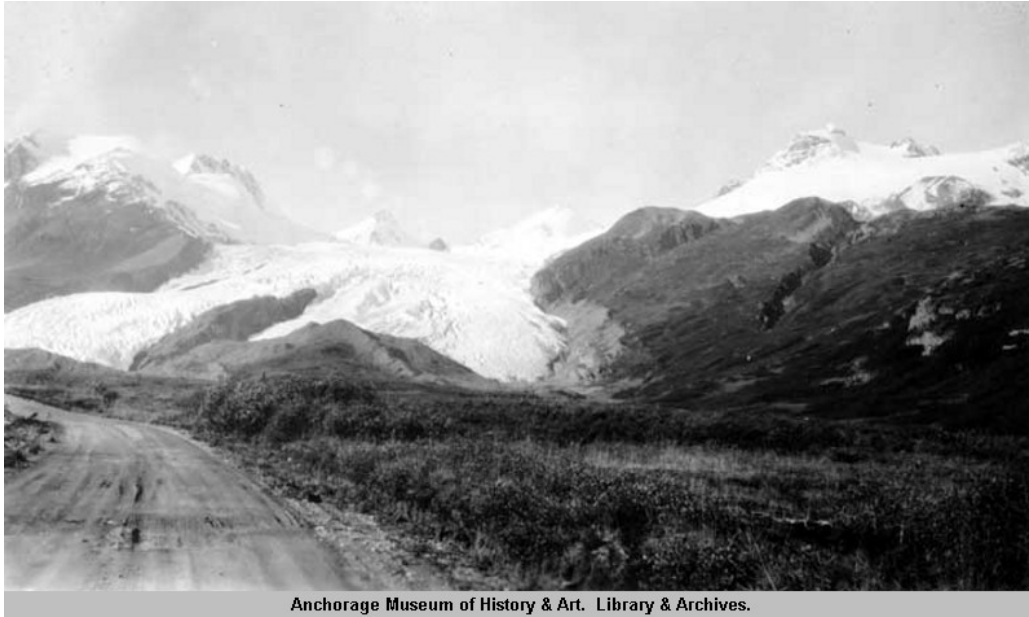
Two men in a car on the Richardson Highway near the Delta River in Alaska. Photographer's number 230. Summer 1923.

Photographers: C.J. Blanchard and Ray B. Dame. Original photograph size: 3 7/8" x 5".

Blanchard, C. J.

Dame, Ray B.

Summer 1923



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:	AMHA. General Photograph File
 Identifier:	AMHA-RichardsonHighway
 Title:	Worthington Glacier.
 Description:	Title taken from verso. View of Worthington Glacier, Alaska, from Richardson Highway. Also from verso: "Mile 30 Richardson H[igh]w[a]y. Late 20's or early 30's. Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." 1926-1934. Original photograph size: 2 3/4" x 4 1/2".
 Date.original:	1926-1934

More about the Richardson Highway:

Alaska's first highway sprang from a frontier pack trail that served thousands of gold miners as the Valdez-Eagle Trail and later as the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail. In its first two decades, after several growth spurts, it was groomed to accommodate motorized traffic and named for General Wilds P. Richardson, the first president of the Alaska Road Commission. Today the Richardson Highway extends 364 miles from Valdez to Fairbanks.

The evolution of the road began in 1899, under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Army, with construction of a 93-mile packhorse trail connecting Valdez and Tonsina River. Much of the primitive trail was comprised of corridors already in use by Alaska Natives across Chugach and Ahtna lands. Army trailblazers extended the route to Eagle City on the Yukon by 1901, and installation work began on the WAMCATS telegraph line.

Following a 1903 visit by members of a Senate Subcommittee on Territories, the federal government allocated funds to make further road improvements.

“The new trail quickly attracted its first common carrier,” wrote National Park Service historian Geoffrey Bleakley in *History of the Valdez Trail*. “In December 1904, James Fish announced that his Valdez Transportation Company would soon provide passenger service to Fairbanks. ‘Over such part of the trail as is practical,’ he assured travelers, ‘comfortable bobsleds will be fitted up and drawn by two horses. Over the summit, and wherever it is not practicable [sic] to run two horses abreast, the single double-ended sleds will be used and the horses driven tandem.’ A month later the first of its tri-weekly stages left Valdez, promising a nine-day trip for the exorbitant price of \$150.”

In 1905, Wilds P. Richardson, president of the Alaska Road Commission, wrote the Secretary of the Army urging him to station a company of engineer troops at Valdez to work on the military trail. The army completed its survey work during 1905-1906 with a goal of bringing the trail up to wagon road status. Meanwhile the importance of Eagle was waning. With the discovery of gold in the Tanana Valley, and a shift away from the Klondike, more commercial traffic was now going through Fairbanks. Also, Judge James Wickersham had moved the Third Judicial District Court from Eagle to Fairbanks, thereby strengthening Fairbanks’ role as an Interior hub. Hundreds of prospectors bound for the goldfields made use of a fork off the Valdez-Eagle Trail that was known as Castner’s path. By 1907 that portion was incorporated into the well-traveled Valdez-Fairbanks Trail. During the 1908-09 season, some 136,000 pounds of freight and mail moved over the trail.

In the next decade, winter and summer, travelers employed the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, most using saddle horses, dog teams, horse teams and double-ended sleighs, and wagons. The road surface was more passable when frozen; in summers, the byway was rutted, muddy, and in places, swamplike.

Roadhouses had developed along the route as homesteaders opened their doors or entrepreneurs built lodgings, offering meals and night’s rest to weary travelers and their horses. Generally, the roadhouses were about a day’s ride apart. While many of the original roadhouses have perished, many by fire, some of those that remain, such as Rika’s Roadhouse at Mile 275, are on the National Register of Historic Places.

The first automobile over the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, now called the Richardson Trail, was a 1913 Model T, which was shipped into Fairbanks and purchased by Al White. The Model T covered the rugged route southbound from Fairbanks during the summer of 1914. Photographer Phinney S. Hunt captured an image of the car with its banner boasting “Fairbanks-Chitina-Valdez!! Or Bust!!” Shortly afterward, the Richardson Trail became known as the Richardson Highway.

In 1917, following a Territorial Board of Road Commissioners appropriation of \$20,000, shelter cabins were erected for winter travelers. And in the post-WWI years, the federal government sent war-surplus trucks, tractors, and other road-building equipment to the territory, drastically improving road maintenance. By 1919, nearly all of the traffic on Alaska’s roads was made up of motorized vehicles.

With the opening of the Alaska Railroad in 1923, traffic on the Richardson diminished. That year, President Warren G. Harding toured the state by ship, motorcar, and railroad. At Nenana, he drove the ceremonial Golden Spike that connected the northern and southern sections of the railroad, and after a visit in Valdez, the entourage drove a portion of the Richardson Highway and was entertained at a roadhouse. That year, too, territorial Governor Scott C. Bone offered the latest statistics on the Richardson: 1,517 people, 87 motor vehicles, 30 wagons, 24 double bobsleds, 26 packhorses, and 345 tons of freight had moved on the road. Traffic had dropped dramatically in comparison with the winter of 1906-07, when as the sole road north, the trail transported 2,300 people, 160 head of cattle and 2,100 tons of freight from Valdez into the Copper River Valley or onward to Fairbanks.

Amid concerns over national defense, in 1941 the Alaska Road Commission built another road connecting Anchorage to the Richardson, dubbing it the Glenn Highway. The new road would join Anchorage and Fairbanks, linking the strategic air bases in each city. And during the post-war years, the Secretary of Defense ordered surface upgrades on Alaska’s three major roads—the Alaska Highway, Richardson Highway, and Glenn Highway. While the Richardson Highway was coated with an all-weather surface, it was not paved until 1957.

The trans-Alaska pipeline, built in the mid-1970s, paralleled the Richardson Highway for nearly half of the pipeline route from Valdez to Prudhoe Bay.

In the 21st century, the one-time frontier trail remains a major transportation link between the ice-free port of Valdez and the great Interior, offering residents and visitors alike access to many communities, recreation, or simply an unsurpassed scenic drive.

LINKS:

Alaska Humanities Forum, Alaska History & Cultural Studies, “America’s Territory: Overland Routes Develop”:

www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=230

University of Alaska Fairbanks KUAC-TV travelogue *Anywhere, Alaska*:

www.uaf.edu/kuac/anywhere/richardson.html

Delta Junction community website:

www.alaska-highway.org/delta/richardson.htm

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska’s libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about Alaska’s early roads. 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.
3. Go to the Keyword field, and type in **RICHARDSON HIGHWAY**.

More Reading:

Alaska, the Richardson Road: Valdez to Fairbanks. 1922. “An illustrated booklet descriptive of the road, the towns at either end and the surrounding country with beauties and possibilities of Alaska.”

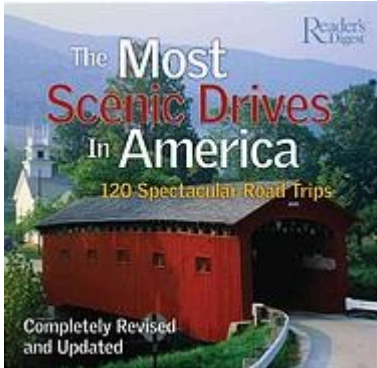
Antonson, Joan M. and William S. Hanable. *Alaska's Heritage: Unit 4 - Human History: 1867 to Present*. Anchorage: Alaska Historical Commission, 1985.

Bundy, Hallock C. *The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail: The Story of a Great Highway*. (1st Annual). Seattle: Alaska Publishing Co., 1910.

Mitchell, Brigadier General William L. *The Opening of Alaska, 1901-1903*. Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories, 1982.

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

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



Reader's Digest Association. *The Most Scenic Drives in America: 120 Spectacular Road Trips*. Pleasantville, N.Y.: Reader's Digest, 2005.

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

VIDEO:

Beck, Larry and Tom Hughes. *The Valdez to Fairbanks Trail*. VHS. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Heritage Review, 1985.

PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS:

Alaska Road Commission photograph collection, 1909-1959. Lomen Brothers. 100 glass lantern slides; 16,759 photographs.

Walter T. Phillips photograph collection, Fairbanks and environs, 1911-1918. About the photographer: Walter Phillips grew up in Valdez, his parents arriving there in 1908. In 1915 they moved to Old Iliamna and returned to Valdez in 1923. He worked for the Signal Corps, the Alaska Road Commission and later as a telephone lineman on the Valdez Trail (now part of the Richardson Highway). In June of 1984, Walter Phillips completed *The Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway, the First Quarter Century, 1898 to 1923*, which he researched under an Alaska Historical Commission grant (Historical Collections, TX909.P53). Mr. Phillips retired to Palmer, Alaska.

Atlantic Richfield Co. photograph collection, 1904-1910, including 49 views selected and copied from two albums owned by the Atlantic Richfield Co. Photographers include Albert J. Johnson, George G. Cantwell, P. S. Hunt, and Clarence Leroy Andrews.