

Land, Sea, Air / Trails and Rails

The Parks Highway

By Tricia Brown

Among Alaska's handful of highways, the Parks is perhaps the most traveled, as the shortest route connecting two of the state's most populated cities: Anchorage and Fairbanks. Then there's the added bonus—along the way, motorists can take in outstanding views of Mount McKinley, North America's tallest mountain at 20,320 feet. Six other peaks, each greater than 12,000 feet, bulk up the horizon. The scenery is so exceptional that one 116-mile portion of the Parks has been designated a State Scenic Byway.

Opened in 1972, the Parks is 323 miles long, extending from the Glenn Highway, 35 miles north of Anchorage, to Fairbanks in the Alaska Interior. The road originally was known as the Anchorage-Fairbanks Highway until it was renamed in 1975.

One of the most important transportation routes in the state, the Parks also roughly parallels the route of the Alaska Railroad. Prior to the highway's opening, the railroad was the principal access to Mount McKinley National Park, which in 1980 was renamed Denali National Park and Preserve. The road parallels the eastern boundary of the present-day national park. Also, the Parks Highway bisects Denali State Park, established in 1970, allowing visitor access to hiking, camping, boating, and wildlife photography, among many recreational activities.

Newcomers and visitors to Alaska often assume the name "Parks Highway" is related to its proximity to the state and national parks. Actually, it honors George Alexander Parks, governor of the Territory of Alaska from 1925 to 1933.

Parks was born in Denver, Colorado, on May 29, 1883, and a year after graduating from the Colorado School of Mines, arrived in Alaska in 1907 as a mineral examiner for the U.S. Land Office. He left the territory for World War I military service, but returned afterward to work as chief of the field division of the General Land Office. At age 41, he

accepted the post of Assistant Superintendent of Surveys and Public Lands. A year later, in 1925, President Calvin Coolidge appointed Parks as territorial governor, and he served two terms.

Throughout the Depression years, Parks worked for the U.S. Department of the Interior as a district engineer. And during World WarII, Parks was a partner in the R. J. Sommers Construction Co., working on various military projects.

A 1906 alumnus of the Colorado School of Mines, Parks received a Distinguished Achievement Award from the school in 1950. The former territorial governor lived to be nearly 101 years old, passing away on May 11, 1984.

LINKS:

State of Alaska, Parks Highway (Alaska's Scenic Byways):
<http://www.dot.state.ak.us/stwdplng/scenic/byways-parks.shtml>

Alaska Travelers Information Service, State of Alaska:
<http://511.alaska.gov/>

National Geographic Destinations:
http://www.nationalgeographic.com/destinations/Denali_National_Park/George_Parks_Highway_Scenic_Drive.html

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about Alaska's highways and Gov. George A. Parks. 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 ROADS** or **GEORGE A. PARKS ALASKA**.

MORE READING:

Alaska Historical Library, Alaska Historical Commission. *Biographical Profiles of Alaska Governors, 1884-1984: Including a Guide to the Annual Reports of the Territorial*

Governors on Microfiche. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Historical Library, Division of State Libraries and Museums, 1985.

Alaska Historical Library. *Inventory of the Governor George A. Parks Papers (Manuscript 91) and Photographs (PCA 240)*. Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Historical Library, Division of State Libraries and Museums, 1985.

Parks, George A. *Early Exploratory Routes, Alaska*. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1952.

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

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

George A. Parks Photograph Collection, 1911-1933. Alaska State Library. Collection of 625 black-and-white photoprints 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.

George A Parks Papers, 1916-1984. Alaska State Library. Collection includes correspondence (1918-1983), scrapbook, and newspaper clippings concerning Parks's Alaska activities, certificates of appointment, awards, and honors; material on establishment of the George A. Parks Highway; and biographical information; together with photos reflecting Alaska government activities, 1923-1933, and mining and community activities, 1911-1951.

Governor George A. Parks Papers, George A. Parks; Dora M. Sweeney, 1976-1981. Alaska State Library. Collection of eight items includes correspondence to and from Governor Parks in his later years primarily celebrating his birthdays. Also includes a proclamation by the City and Borough of Juneau for Governor George Parks Day, a letter from Governor Jay Hammond, and "State of Birthdays in the Supreme Court for Candle County," a spoof.

Juneau and Southeast Alaska Photograph Collection, 1920s. Alaska State Library. Collection of 43 photoprints includes a portrait of George A. Parks and the Old Witch totem pole when it was located in front of the Nugget Shop, Juneau.