

Community Life / Communities

Anchorage, the Tent City

By Tricia Brown

Alaska's biggest city sprawls across the Anchorage "bowl" in Southcentral Alaska, from the edge of Cook Inlet to the slopes of the Chugach Mountains, its borders bumping against military installations on one side and a national forest on another. It's hard to imagine its beginnings as a tent city near the muddy banks of Ship Creek in 1915, a railroad construction camp that grew so large in such a short time, unsanitary conditions threatened the spread of disease.

The Alaska Engineering Commission, charged by the federal government to build a railroad, had selected a town site as early as spring 1914, for in March of that year, the AEC chartered a survey of what is now downtown Anchorage. With federal funding for the railroad guaranteed by President Woodrow Wilson, in early 1915 a construction camp boomed at Ship Creek. Situated between the deepwater port of Seward and the railroad terminus at Fairbanks, Ship Creek Landing was deemed the best site for the railroad headquarters.

With its radical tidal swings and broad mud flats, the location seemed less than ideal. Shore access was difficult for oceangoing vessels, and freight as well as horse and foot traffic maneuvered over corduroy log pathways and boardwalks. In prehistory, Native

Alaskans hadn't seen fit to settle in this particular spot, although evidence of settlement can be found at several better sites along Cook Inlet. Nonetheless, the city of white tents and hastily built log cabins served as temporary housing for representatives of the Alaska Engineering Commission, railroad construction workers, their families, hoteliers, restaurateurs, laundry operators, freight haulers, and others who supplied services.

By June of 1915, as conditions at the tent city became dangerously overcrowded, land on the nearby bluff was cleared and railroad officials were ready to sell townsite lots. In early July, more than 600 lots were auctioned off, and building there began in earnest. Gradually, the boomtown population grew to 2,000. If the residents had had their way, the new town would have been named "Ship Creek" or "Alaska City." Instead, the postal service made the decision, settling on "Anchorage."

Working under the business name "Sydney Laurence Company" in 1915, Laurence, who would one day achieve fame for his oil paintings, earned his living as a commercial photographer. Assisted by a second photographer, Alberta Pyatt, Laurence catalogued life in the railroad construction camp, from the tent city restaurants and laundries, to baseball games on the 4th of July, and the historic auction in which town lots were sold.

Today, few original wood-frame homes or businesses from 1915 are still standing, viewed as somewhat expendable as the town matured. Also the 1964 Good Friday Earthquake rendered others irreparable. Notable survivors include:

- Oscar Anderson House, 420 M Street

- Wendler Building, 4th Avenue and D Street (Originally built at 4th Avenue and I Street; moved here in 1984)
- Kimball Building, 5th Avenue and E Street

The Alaska Railroad was the largest local employer in the two decades that followed and by 1940, Anchorage was one of the biggest towns in the territory.

LINKS:

Anchorage history, Municipality of Anchorage:
<http://www.ci.anchorage.ak.us/History/history.html>

Downtown Anchorage Walking Tour:
<http://www.acsyellowpages.com/anchorage/tour/>

FILM and VIDEO:

Building the Alaska Railroad, University of Alaska Fairbanks Film Collection:
<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdmg11/image/2659.mov>

49-second film clip, black and white, silent, of a film clip organized like a film newsreel. Shown is a railroad construction camp, the Alaska Railroad bridge over Eagle River, and a railroad observation car. Captions on the film read: “The government railroad north of Anchorage will pass through miles of cranberry swamps on the way to the greatest coal fields and copper-producing sections of Alaska,” “Crossing Eagle River on a 100-foot span, the largest native timber construction on the government railroad,” and “Observation car formerly used in Panama.”

Life in Early Anchorage, University of Alaska Fairbanks Film Collection:
<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdmg11/image/2660.mov>

67-second film clip, black and white, silent, of life in Anchorage, 1915-1917. Clip is in a film newsreel format and shows Anchorage street scenes, the 3 in 1 Laundry, a pie-eating contest, some Anchorage houses and finally the Alaska Labor Union of Socialists, and Pioneers Hall. Captions for the silent film read: “Smith Films – Alaska,” “Anchorage—typifying the new era of progress and civic development in Alaska, growing in one year—from a tent to a population of 10,000, “3 in 1—All blonds (sic),”

“A few bungalows in Anchorage,” and “The largest log cabin in Alaska which recently was destroyed by fire during labor troubles.”

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about the settlement of Anchorage and Alaska Railroad construction. 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 **SHIP CREEK** or **ALASKA RAILROAD**.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Barry, Mary J. Jack and Nellie Brown: *Pioneer Settlers of Anchorage, Alaska*. Anchorage, Alaska: The author, 2000.

Bernhardt, Joshua. *The Alaskan Engineering Commission: Its History, Activities, and Organization*. New York: D. Appleton, 1922.

Cohen, Stan. *Rails across the Tundra: A Historical Album of the Alaska Railroad*. Missoula, Mont.: Pictorial Histories Publishing Co., 1984.

Frankfourth, Jo and Lidia Selkregg. *Anchorage “Roots” through Multiple Land Use for Ship Creek Landing*. Anchorage, Alaska: Municipality of Anchorage, 1982.

Johnson, Kaylene and Roy Corral. *Portrait of the Alaska Railroad*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Northwest Books, 2002

Salt, Harriet. *Mighty Engineering Feats: Clear and Concise Descriptions of Ten of the Greatest American Engineering Feats*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969, 1937.

Sherwood, Morgan B. *The Cook Inlet Collection: Two Hundred Years of Selected Alaskan History*. Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1974.

Tower, Elizabeth A. *Anchorage: From its Humble Origins as a Railroad Construction Camp*. Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1999.

Wilson, William H. *Railroad in the Clouds: The Alaska Railroad in the Age of Steam, 1914-1945*. Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Publishing Co., 1977.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

U.S. Alaska Engineering Commission photograph collection. P.S. Hunt, Sydney Laurence, H. G. Kaiser, and Albert J. Johnson. 1916-1918. Alaska State Library. This collection includes views of Anchorage churches, buildings, hotels, theatres, and festivals, construction activities, facilities and equipment of the Alaska Railroad, then identified as Alaska Engineering Commission Railway.

Miscellaneous Alaskan views, Nellie Shepard Brown, 1913-1950. Alaska State Library. Collection includes images of the Bear Creek Mining Co.'s activities in the Upper Kobuk Valley, taken by Mac's Foto (Anchorage), Anchorage pioneers Jack (John) and Nellie Edyth Brown's life in the Knik, Ship Creek and Anchorage areas (1915-1917), and views of buildings and people at St. Michael and Fort St. Michael collected by a Mr. Grenfel from 1913-1914 while serving as an engineer for the military.

Augusta Pyatt photograph collection, Augusta Pyatt and Sydney Laurence, 1915-1916. Alaska State Library. Little is known about Augusta Pyatt except that she worked for Sydney Laurence, Alaska's most famous painter, in his photography lab in Anchorage. Her photographs include people, views, and activities from the Anchorage area during the years 1915 and 1916. Also includes several photographs by Sydney Laurence.