

ISABELLE CLEARY BARNETTE

The First Lady of Fairbanks

1875–1942



Isabelle Barnette, at center, is flanked by bankers and lawmen in this Valdez photograph titled "Passengers and 2,800 lbs. gold dust from Fairbanks by Kennedy's Stage." Husband E. T. Barnette is at the far right. Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Collection Name:

[Lulu Fairbanks Collection](#)

Identifier:

[UAF-1968-69-1547](#)

Title:

[Passengers](#) and [2800 lbs gold dust](#) from [Fairbanks](#) by [Kennedy's Stage](#)

Description:

[Title](#) from [caption](#).

[Photograph](#) of [six men](#) and a [woman](#) ([center](#)) [standing](#) behind [boxes](#) of [gold dust packed](#) for [shipping](#). [Their weapons](#) are [evident](#). [E.T. Barnett](#) is [identified](#) as the [man](#) at the [far right](#).

The [photograph](#) is [affixed](#) to the [back](#) of a [D.T. Kennedy stage line distance table](#) between [Valdez](#) and [Fairbanks](#).

[Cataloger's note](#): The [woman](#) is [probably Mrs. E.T. \[Isabelle\] Barnette](#).

Creator:

[Hunt, P. S. \(Phinney S.\), 1866-1917](#)



Isabelle Barnette drives the Golden Spike for the 1906 Tanana Valley Railroad which connects the towns of Chena and Fairbanks with mining camps in the Goldstream and Chatanika Valleys.

UAF Archives, Terrence Cole Folder 76-38-2N

<http://www.uaf.edu/museum/exhibits/tog/opportunity.html>



The Alaska Commercial Company bought out Barnette's trading post, which was next door. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

More about Isabelle Cleary Barnette:

Isabelle Cleary was born in Minnesota in 1875, the daughter of Irish Catholic immigrants. She was living in Helena, Montana, in 1898, when she married a wheeler-dealer named Elbridge Truman Barnette. He had already been to the Klondike and back, arriving too late to stake a good claim. Now he was focused on Alaska's Interior and studying the economic potential of a trading post on the upper Tanana River. Isabelle's years with E. T. would make history in a marriage infused with adventure, frontier-style high society, and possible ill-gotten wealth. Isabelle, whether or not she knew it on her wedding day, had married a criminal. Together, they would found the city of Fairbanks and later flee from it hostile townspeople amid accusations of embezzlement.

The founding of Fairbanks was not a deliberate act, but rather by circumstance. Events began to unfold in late August of 1901, with Isabelle and her husband aboard the sternwheeler *Lavelle Young* as it steamed up the Tanana River. Their goal was the Tanana Crossing, where E. T. had hoped to establish his trading post. When the ship was unable to ascend Bates Rapids, E. T. urged Captain Charles Adams to go up the Chena River. He insisted that the Chena would meet with the Tanana again, bypassing the rapids entirely. After a few miles it was clear that the Chena was too shallow for the *Lavelle Young* to proceed much further and a heated argument ensued between Adams and Barnette. Alaskan author and historian Terrence Cole described the dispute in his book *Crooked Past: The History of a Frontier Mining Camp, Fairbanks, Alaska*. Barnette was fuming, demanding that the captain push onward. The captain refused—he would not risk his ship—and he chose a spot to offload the Barnettes and their goods. Adams directed his crewmembers and others in the Barnette party to cut some trees and quickly erect a cabin, tents, and a warehouse. Adams was eager to leave. It was the last week of August, and freeze-up was upon them.

Luck was with Isabelle and E. T. The ship's smoke had been sighted by a pair of prospectors in the Tanana Hills. Felix Pedro and his partner Tom Gilmore set out to meet it, hoping to stock up for the winter. When they arrived, the steamer was tied up and the south bank of the Chena was buzzing with construction and moving cargo. Pedro and Barnette met and did business aboard the ship. While Pedro's great gold discovery was still ahead, he told Barnette that his prospects were looking good. Isabelle and E. T. felt a measure of hope that, between trading with local Athabascans and miners, they'd survive

the winter. They viewed this as a temporary stop. As for next year, Barnette still hoped to set up shop at the Tanana Crossing, some two hundred miles away.

When the *Lavelle Young* steamed away, Isabelle collapsed in tears, no doubt wondering what her future would hold. That winter Dan McCarty, one of the men who helped build the post, traveled to Valdez to meet Isabelle's brother, Frank J. Cleary. The two returned on February 20, 1902. According to account published in the May 1903 edition of the town's first newspaper, *The Fairbanks Miner*, they traveled the last four days without food. Within a few weeks of their return, Isabelle and E. T. made the trip south to stock up in Seattle, as the newspaper reported:

"On March 10, Captain and Mrs. Barnette left the Post for Valdez with dog teams, loaded with the rich furs purchased during the winter. They went across the Tanana Valley, up the Delta, and climbed through the Alpine passes of the St. Elias range, and though often in water and snow, reached Valdez in safety and thence went to Puget Sound for the next summer's outfit for the Post."

It was a wise decision, because in July of that summer, 42-year-old Felix Pedro made the gold strike that would incite a major stampede to the hills surrounding Fairbanks. Men poured out of the Klondike in response, and "Barnette's Cache" would flourish. The plan to go to the Tanana Crossing was abandoned.

E. T. and Isabelle had staked out a 10-acre site that included their house, a warehouse, and various outbuildings. The compound was fenced, its boundaries roughly following present-day Second Avenue and Cowles Street, and Sixth Avenue and Cushman Street.

Isabelle's brother, Frank J. Cleary, for whom Cleary Creek is named, also laid out the town site for Fairbanks, which became official in 1903. That fall Isabelle and E. T. conceived their first baby, and Virginia was born the following summer. As the population of Fairbanks grew, the ladies imported their society life to the frontier town, decorating their homes, throwing tea parties, and participating in pageants and parades. They organized fundraisers to establish schools, hospitals, churches, and a town library. At the heart of Fairbanks society stood Isabelle Barnette, the mayor's wife. E. T. also held the role of postmaster as well as leading merchant and banker. They enjoyed a prosperous time.

Gold production in the Interior continued to boom and the city grew with every year. In 1903, miners drew \$40,000 in gold from the ground. In 1904, it was \$600,000 and a year later, \$6 million in gold. Everybody, it seemed, was getting rich.

By 1910, Isabelle was pregnant with a second child, and anticipating any medical problem, she chose to move to Washington for the birth. Baby Phyllis was born in 1911. That year, too, E.T. combined his Fairbanks Banking Co. with Washington-Alaska Bank, and three months later, the bank collapsed and he was accused of embezzlement. It was then his previous conviction and prison time in Oregon came to light. A Valdez court found him not guilty of stealing from his own bank, however that did not change popular opinion in Fairbanks, where residents felt they had been robbed. Barnette fled.

From the heights of frontier society to the shame of guilt by association, Isabelle never seemed to gain confidence in her husband again. In 1918, when she discovered love letters from another woman, she'd reach the end of her endurance. Isabelle filed for divorce and sought custody of their two daughters, Virginia, 16, and Phyllis, 10. On January 27, 1920, the divorce and custody arrangement was granted, and she was awarded \$500,000 in the property settlement.

Isabelle Cleary Barnette—the First Lady of Fairbanks—died in September 1942 at Agnew State Hospital in California. “Isabel Pass” in the Alaska Range north of Paxon bears the name, albeit spelled incorrectly, of the woman who so often traveled on the rugged Valdez-Fairbanks Trail with her infamous husband.

LINKS:

Festival Fairbanks:

www.festivalfairbanks.org/history.asp

Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce:

www.fairbankschamber.org/relocation/history.html

Alaska Humanities Forum, Alaska History and Cultural Studies:

www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=59

Visit the library for more information:

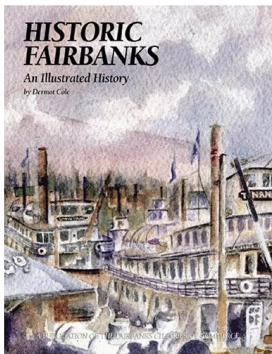
Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about E. T. Barnette and the early history of Fairbanks. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

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 **E. T. BARNETTE** or **FAIRBANKS ALASKA HISTORY**.

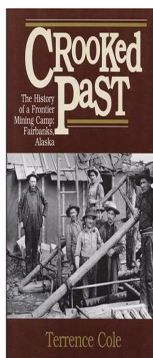
More Reading:

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Cole, Terrence. *Crooked Past: The History of a Frontier Mining Camp, Fairbanks, Alaska*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1991, 1994. First published as *E. T. Barnette: The Strange Story of the Man who Founded Fairbanks*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1981, 1984.

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Heller, Herbert L. *Sourdough Sagas: The Journals, Memoirs, Tales, and Recollections of the Earliest Alaskan Gold Miners, 1883-1923*. Cleveland World Publishing Co., 1966;



Murphy, Claire Rudolf and Jane G. Haigh. *Gold Rush Women*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books, 1997.