

Alaskans / Pioneers

By Tricia Brown

ALASKA NELLIE
Nellie Neal Lawing
1873-1956



Nellie Neal Lawing is barely visible at the far right, wearing a fur parka and mukluks, and holding her gun. The undated photo by Otto Clarence Schallerer is labeled "Alaska Nellie and her trophies, Lawing, Alaska." Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Collection Name:

[AMHA. General Photograph File](#)

 **Identifier:**

[AMHA-b65-18-741](#)

 **Title:**

[Alaska Nellie](#) & her [trophy](#)s, [Lawing](#), [Alaska](#).

 **Description:**

[Title taken](#) from [front](#). [Alaska Nellie](#) ([Lawing](#)) [wearing](#) a [parka](#) and [mukluku](#)s and [holding](#) a [gun](#), as she [sits](#) among her [animal hunting trophy](#)s. From [verso](#): "[Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society](#)." n.d. Photographer: [Schallerer's](#). [Original photograph size: 8" x 10"](#).

 **Creator:**

[Schallerer, Otto Clarence](#)

www.moosepass.net



Alaska Nellie and her pet bear, Crow Creek mining camp, near Girdwood, 1918. Moose Pass Community website.

http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxph.fhaigh_00012



Two Nellies, ca. 1924. Nellie Cashman, miner (left) and Nellie Neal Lawing, big game hunter, right. Lulu Fairbanks Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.



Kenai Lake, ca. 1941-1945. "Alaska Nellie" Lawing poses in the door of her cabin with a few of her hunting trophies nearby. University of Alaska Archives and Manuscripts, Arthur O. Trosvik Papers.

More about Alaska Nellie:

One of Alaska's best-known crackshot hunters and camp cooks was wiry, independent woman named Nellie Neal Lawing. Born Nellie Troster, "Alaska Nellie" was already 42 years old when she arrived in Seward on July 4, 1915. But her timing could not have been better for an ambitious and hard-working woman.

Construction of the Alaska Railroad had recently begun, and Nellie was the first woman to be awarded a lucrative roadhouse contract with the Alaska Engineering Commission. She provided government employees room and board at the Mile 45 roadhouse, a place she renamed Grandview. The name has outlasted the roadhouse itself, and that bend in the railroad is as beautiful as ever. Today, on the Alaska Railroad's southbound route

from Anchorage to Seward, passengers are especially drawn to the windows during the Grandview stretch.

Alaska Nellie later wrote about those times in her memoir: “Grandview seemed the most appropriate name to me for Mile 45. Being without paint with which to paint a sign, I found an old blue coat, which I washed and pressed, cut letters for the sign from it and sewed them to a strip of white oilcloth. This pennant was tacked to the front porch in front of the house. Mile 45 was now Grandview.”

In summers, Alaska Nellie tramped the bush on foot; in winters, she drove dogs. One winter, the mail carrier was overdue at the roadhouse. Nellie hooked up her own team set out to find him in a blizzard. When she found the man nearly frozen, she brought him back to the roadhouse, warmed and fed him, then proceeded to deliver the mail to the train. For her heroic efforts, the town of Seward gifted her with a gold nugget necklace, which she treasured for the rest of her life. With that, she added “hero” to a growing list of descriptors: camp cook, big-game guide, hunter, and gifted storyteller—with a penchant for stretching the truth for dramatic effect.

Later Nellie operated a roadhouse at a railroad camp near the Susitna River that became known as Curry. In those days, it was called Dead Horse Hill.

In 1923, President Warren G. Harding traveled to Alaska to drive the “Golden Spike” in a ceremony marking the completion of the railroad between Seward and Fairbanks. That year, Alaska Nellie bought the Roberts roadhouse, a railroad stop on Kenai Lake, where she fed her guests fresh vegetables from the garden, fish that she’d pulled out of Kenai Lake, stacks of sourdough pancakes, and plentiful game meat. She also fed them plenty of stories—tall tales as well as truths.

The busy roadhouse edged the tracks and the jade green waters of Kenai Lake, nearly 25 miles north of Seward. In reporting the roadhouse sale, the *Seward Gateway* newspaper referred to Nellie as “known in every camp in the Territory.” Originally called Roosevelt, the flag stop was renamed “Lawing” when Nellie Neal married Bill Lawing. The couple

spent their best years there, crossing paths with regular folk, celebrities and politicians. They traveled the States, too, sharing their stories, trophies, and furs. Nellie even visited Hollywood, rubbing elbows with some of the great ones in silent film and coming home with signed photographs, gifts, and grand memories.

Nellie was a packrat by nature, and she filled her rooms to overflowing with wildlife trophies, photographs, books, travel souvenirs, and other bits of natural and human history. A story was attached to each item and she was always ready to tell it. Alaska Nellie's Wildlife Museum grew into such an attraction that the Alaska Railroad offered it as a tourism destination for travelers out of Seward. Occasionally visitors got to pose with Nellie's latest pet bear cub, which she kept collared and chained to a post. Other cubs were stuffed and mounted for the Wildlife Museum. (How and when Nellie crossed the line between pet and prey remains a mystery. As an old woman, she raised rabbits, butchering some for food and allowing others, her named pets, to die naturally. She would then conduct a funeral and bury the rabbit under a white cross in a little cemetery next near her cabin.)

Nellie told visitors to the Wildlife Museum that she already had a considerable collection even before she married Bill Lawing and moved to the Kenai Lake roadhouse. It took two railcars to make the move, she said, and the collection only grew as she continued to guide and hunt.

In 1936, documentary maker James A. FitzPatrick produced and narrated a nine-minute film titled, "Land of Alaska Nellie." Composer C. Bakaleinikoff wrote original score for the short film. (Later he would conduct for the 1935 film classic, *The Bride of Frankenstein*.)

Bill Lawing died in 1936, leaving 63-year-old Nellie crippled by grief, but she continued the labor-intensive job of running a roadhouse and adding to her collections.

Friends urged Nellie to write her life story, but upon completion she had difficulty finding a publisher. She stubbornly refused to make any changes to her manuscript—not one

deletion. However, in May 1940, Seattle Printing and Publishing Co., in Seattle, Washington, published Nellie's unvarnished autobiography, "Alaska Nellie."

In her later years as a widow, Nellie's ways became even more eccentric, but she still harbored the gift of gab that had entertained people for years. One Moose Pass resident recalled a drop-in visit to Nellie's, remembering the place as rundown and shabby after the death of Bill Lawing: "Nellie greeted us and took us into the museum, a gloomy place in the semi-darkness, shadowy and spooky. The light plant had been out of order since Billie Lawing's death. Suddenly I was conscious of something very large right over my head. I ducked. It was a harmless moose head in velvet." The woman also noted that Nellie had about a hundred rabbits in hutches, many of them named, and that her favorites roamed the house. Outside, the cemetery for pet rabbits was studded with white crosses.

In a 1957 *Alaska Sportsman* article, published a year after Nellie's death, Carrie Ida Pierce wrote about a one-month stay at the roadhouse. Beginning with the first day, Nellie took Pierce on a grand tour, telling story after story. "That night I slept in a tiny room, in a huge bed that covered more than half the floor space," wrote Pierce. "On the wall was a life-size oil painting of Alice Calhoun, an actress of silent movie days. A silk patchwork quilt was folded on the foot of the bed. Each piece of silk brought the memory of some tale. An old desk was crowded in a corner, and on it was the framework of cubbyholes that had been Lawing's post office when it had one, and Nellie was postmistress. Over the desk was a rack filled with loaded guns. It seemed I'd never get to bed. Nellie wanted to tell me the story of each thing in the room. A new and sympathetic listener was just the right person for Nellie to have around."

In Pierce's opinion, Nellie was living in the past, surrounded by her favorite mementoes and sometimes drifting into silence as she was absorbed by a memory.

"Her living room was strewn with piles of letters, birthday cards, Christmas cards. Some had fallen to the floor, and lay there. She showed me several envelopes mailed after she

and Billie had toured the States with their furs and trophies. Addressed simply to ‘Nellie, Alaska,’ they had reached her.”

One of those letters is now part of another collection, that of the Resurrection Bay Historical Society, which operates the Seward Museum. Among the other items on display in Seward are one of Nellie’s hats, her marriage license to Bill Lawing, and several historic photos, including a 1943 photo of Nellie signing one of her books for a soldier.

Nellie died in 1956 and was buried next to Bill Lawing in the Seward Cemetery. Alaskan screenplay writer Doug Capra researched Nellie’s life closely to write a one-woman show titled “Into Alaska a Woman Came.” According to Capra, in 1949 Nellie had signed away her property to the Territory in exchange for an old-age pension and medical coverage. “So, when she died, the Territory was first in line to get its investment back,” Capra said. But that was just the beginning of detangling a probate nightmare.

“It wasn’t until November 1956 that her estate, such as it was, was auctioned off. Before the auction, there were several attempts by people in Seward and Anchorage to keep her collection together and turn the whole place into a museum—as Nellie said she had wanted. During the probate of her estate they learned that when her husband Billy died in 1936, his estate hadn’t been probated, so they went back and did that. During that investigation, they learned that much of the property he had left Nellie actually belonged to the Territory and/or the Alaska Railroad.” Capra added that the confusing legal issues were not sorted out until the early 1960s.

In the years since Nellie’s death, various individuals have owned Nellie’s old roadhouse and other buildings with the intention of keeping her memory alive. In 1975, “Alaska Nellie’s Homestead” was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and for a while, it was operated as a bed-and-breakfast. But funding for stabilizing the old structures has always been difficult to obtain; by 1998, the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation included the site on its list of Ten Most Endangered Properties.

While Alaska Nellie's is no longer a functioning business, visitors can still drive by the Lawing site, just a short way down an access road from Mile 23 Seward Highway. Most of Nellie's original buildings are no longer standing, but looking out across the track to the gem-colored waters of Kenai Lake, it's easy to imagine her best years in this spot, an unforgettable hostess and friend to all who passed by.

LINKS:

A February 20, 2005, *Los Angeles Times* story by Alaskan writer Kaylene Johnson:
www.latimes.com/travel/printedition/la-tr-alaska20feb20,1,4936188.story?coll=la-headlines-travel

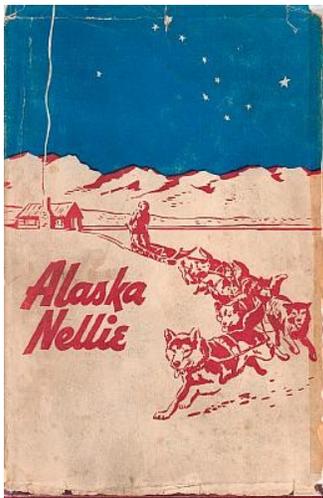
Moose Pass (near Lawing) community website:
www.moosepass.net

The view of Grandview:
www.alaskarails.org/route-map/grandview.html

More on the Seward Museum at Museums Alaska website:
www.museumsalaska.org/

Alaska Railroad history:
<http://www.alaskarails.org/ARR-history.html>

Check www.eBay.com or www.Amazon.com to purchase rare copies of *Alaska Nellie*, Lawing's autobiography.



Visit the library for more information:

Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about Alaska Nellie and the Alaska Railroad. 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 **ALASKA NELLIE LAWING**.

Other Reading:

Alaska magazine, "Alaska Nellie: A Little Girl's Dream Leads to a Life of Adventure," by Kaylene Johnson, March 2003.

Jones, Cherry Lyon. *More Than Petticoats: Remarkable Alaskan Women*. Falcon Publishing, March 2006.