

The Road to Tourism

By Jennifer Houdek

Today, tourism is Alaska's second major industry, however until about fifty years ago, only the richest and/or hardiest vacationer would strike out for the Last Frontier. Before World War II, traveling to and throughout Alaska was difficult, with snow and ice making travel routes impassible during the winter months. So Alaska's tourist season generally ran from mid-June to mid-August. Also scheduling was a problem. Steamships transporting tourists from the Lower 48 didn't always coordinate with train or riverboat operations, leading to many delays, and leaving tourists stranded in mosquito-infested wilderness. Finally, the cost to travel to Alaska was prohibitive. In the early 1900s, only wealthy businessmen and their families could afford the \$600 per person travel expense, plus take off five weeks for the complete trip.

With the opening of Mount McKinley National Park in 1917 and then the completion of the Alaska Railroad running to the park in 1923, tourism to Alaska became more affordable and popular.

At the close of World War I, steamship companies began actively advertising trips to Alaska's Inside Passage. In 1921, the Alaska Steamship Company, which already had been in operation since 1895, teamed up with the Alaska Railroad and Alaska-owned motor coach companies to create "The Golden Belt Tour." The steamer would take one group of tourists to Seward and to connect with the railway to Fairbanks, while a second group was dropped off in Valdez and transported by motor coach on the Richardson Highway to Fairbanks. In the Golden Heart City, the groups would cross paths and return on the opposite route they had come.

In 1923 President Warren G. Harding visited Alaska to formally open the Alaska Railroad, as well as travel around the state. The President visited Valdez and Cordova, traveled the Richardson Highway and viewed Keystone Canyon and finally the Miles and Childs Glaciers on the Copper River by way of the Northwest Railway. Publicity from

the President's travels made people from the Lower 48 curious to see Alaska for themselves. Further boosting tourism to Alaska, the Alaska Railroad opened a tourist office in Chicago's Loop in 1929.

Tourism was finally taking off when the Great Depression swept the country, and numbers declined rapidly. In 1940, attempting to recover from the drop in tourism, *The Valdez Miner* ran a weekly ad that boasted of Alaska's beauty: "The Richardson Highway . . . traverses the famous Keystone Canyon, 13 miles from Valdez, whose grandeur and scenic beauty are rarely excelled anywhere in the world . . . Nor are the beauties of this route to the Interior confined to Keystone Canyon. Climbing the easy grades beyond to the summit of Thompson Pass, there is unfolded to the view a vast panorama of jagged, snow clad peaks interspersed with narrow valleys clothed with tropical verdure . . .

Mountain and glacier, plain and forest, rippling brooks and mighty rivers, some as clear and sparkling as the diamond, others gray or brown with the silt which the mighty glaciers at their heads have ground from their rocky beds. Verily, no trip in all Alaska, nor in all the world offers more to the tourists than this trip from Valdez to Fairbanks over the Richardson Highway."

The tourism industry expanded into the Interior and Mount McKinley National Park when the Alaska Railroad was completed in 1923. The railroad built a train station in the park, which created easier access for tourists. Entrepreneurs such as Dan T. Kennedy, Maurice Morino, and Pat Lynch jumped at the chance to capitalize on the impending tourist boom in the park.

Kennedy obtained the first concession permit in the park. He built the Savage River Tent Camp, which provided the only tourist accommodations in the park. Kennedy also provided transportation, by packhorse and later stagecoach, from the train station to the tent camp as well as tours throughout the park. In 1925, the Mt. McKinley Tourist & Transportation Company acquired the tent camp and added a dining hall and recreational hall with a dance floor. The company upgraded their transportation vehicles from horse and stagecoach, to bus and automobile fleets.

Maurice Morino and Pat Lynch built roadhouses along the railroad track on the eastern border of Mount McKinley National Park to provide accommodations for the railroad workers and miners. Although Pat Lynch left early on, in 1923, Morino built a new roadhouse closer to the railroad bridge over Riley Creek. His property grew to include the roadhouse as well as cabins built to accommodate tourists. Morino ran the roadhouse until his death in 1937; he was buried in the park.

In 1923, the Alaska Railroad built the Curry Hotel for visitors who could afford more lavish accommodations. The hotel was located 100 miles south of Mount McKinley National Park. There, tourists aboard the Alaska Railroad park tour could stop for the night. Although the hotel's prices were high and there wasn't a newsstand, library or bar, it did offer clean rooms, a beautiful view of Mount McKinley, as well as a swimming pool, a golf course, and tennis courts. During the winter months, the hotel was advertised to Alaska residents as a "get-away resort." A ski tow and floodlights were set up for nighttime skiing and was a popular spot for the members of the Anchorage Ski Club. Along with skiing, dances were scheduled every evening and the hotel soon became a vacation spot for Army and Air Force officers and wives. The Curry Hotel was busy year-round until it burned in 1956.

As more and more tourists flooded Mount McKinley National Park each year, pressure was put on the Alaska Railroad to build a hotel in the park. The wall tents offered by the Savage River Tent Camp and the Copper Mountain (now Mount Eielson) camp were considered primitive to visitors. In 1937, construction began on the hotel. Costs were kept low as the Alaska Railroad transported the building materials for free and the Alaska Steamship Company reduced its shipping rates by 35 percent. The hotel was opened in time for the 1939 season.

Alaska's tourism industry declined once again during World War II, however, travel picked up again nationwide as the war ended. When the Denali Highway opened in the 1950s, visitors could at last drive their own vehicles into Mount McKinley National Park. In 1959, the Eielson Visitors' Center was opened and the park road was upgraded to accommodate the increase in traffic. However in 1966, environmentalist Adolph Murie

petitioned Congress to halt the upgrade of the road, arguing its negative effects on the wildlife in the park. Conceding to Murie's campaign, the final eighteen miles of the road remain in their original state, with only the bridges being replaced.

After the end of World War II, a Fairbanks pilot with Wien Airlines, Charles "Chuck" West, was selling, organizing, and flying tours to Nome. Recognizing the need for more services, he launched Arctic Alaska Travel Agency with another Fairbanksan, Paul Greimann, owner of Alaska Coachways. They were among the first to network with travel agencies in the Lower 48 to promote Alaska travel. After Greimann dropped out, West went on to found a hotel chain, motorcoach network, and Inside Passage cruises, offering full travel options to tourists as early as 1957. His umbrella company, Westours, established Chuck West as the "Father of Alaska Tourism." In 1973, West sold controlling interest of Westours to Holland America, and later founded yet another travel company called Cruise West, a Seattle-based business directed by his son, Richard West. Chuck West died in 2003 at age 90.

The Alaska Steamship Company remained a popular travel option for tourists, even after the wartime construction of the Alaska Highway. However, the company suffered financial losses from the end of charter privileges and subsidy payments, and an upswing of air travel, coupled with labor problems, spelled the end of passenger service as of July 1954. The steamship *Denali* made the last passenger trip to Alaska in September 1954; afterward, the passenger ships were sold off. The Alaska Steamship Company continued to transport cargo until rising operation costs forced the company to shut down in January 1971.

Tourism to Alaska has only increased throughout the years. With the construction of the Alaska Highway (ALCAN) in 1943, the Lower 48 was finally linked to Alaska's Glenn Highway, and more and more visitors chose to drive north. The Parks Highway opened in 1972 with a more direct link between Anchorage and Fairbanks and further increasing the number of tourists to Mount McKinley National Park. The Alaska Railroad remained a popular mode of transportation. Today, large tour companies still book their guests on Alaska Railroad package trips along the railbelt.

In the last decades of the 20th century, luxury cruise travel to Alaska gained popularity and with each year, more and more cruise ships may be found along the Inside Passage and Southcentral. Ports of call include Ketchikan, Wrangell, Sitka, Juneau, Skagway, and Seward, where visitors can book on-shore excursions with the Alaska Railroad and motor coach service, much like the “Golden-Belt” tour that the Alaska Steamship Company offered in 1921.

LINKS:

Information on the Mount McKinley Army Recreational Camp, 1938 – 1953:

<http://www.alsap.org/McKinley/McKinley.htm>

More about George Lingo of the Mt. McKinley Tourist Organization:

<http://www.alaska.edu/opa/eInfo/index.xml?StoryID=275>

Denali Historic Resource Study booklet, pictures and maps:

<http://www.nps.gov/archive/dena/home/hrs/hrst.htm>

“Frontiers in Transportation,” by Ann Kain:

<http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/22-10/22-10-14.pdf>

Timeline of the Alaska Railroad:

<http://www.akrr.com/arrc119.html>

Alaska Steamship Company Travel Brochures, 1928–1954:

<http://www.timetableimages.com/maritime/images/alaska.htm>

History of the Alaska Steamship Company:

<http://www.theshipslist.com/ships/lines/alaska.htm>

VISIT THE LIBRARY FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Alaska’s libraries hold audio, visual, and written material about how the Alaska Railroad was established and its effect on Alaska’s tourism. 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 RAILROAD, ALASKA STEAMSHIP, or MCKINLEY PARK HISTORY**.

MORE READING:

Alaska Steamship Company. *Sailing Sheltered Seas to Alaska*. Seattle: Alaska Steamship Company, 1931.

Alaska Steamship Company. *Alaska: Sailing Sheltered Seas*. Seattle: Alaska Steamship Company, 1933

Brastad, Erling. *Recollections of the Alaska Steamship Company: By Erling Brastad, John Vogler, Arnold Wiest; recorded by William Schnieder* Fairbanks: Program for the Preservation of Oral History and Traditions, Alaska and Polar Regions Dept, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1984.

Brown, William E. *A History of the Denali – Mount McKinley Region, Alaska: Historic Resource Study of Denali National Park and Preserve*. Santa Fe, NM: National Park Service, Southwest Regional Office, 1991.

Clifford, Howard, *Alaska / Yukon Railroads: An Illustrated History*. Oso, Wash.: Oso Publishing, 1999.

McDonald, Lucile. *Alaska Steam: A Pictorial History of the Alaska Steamship Company*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society, 1984.

Rennick, Penny, Alaska Geographic Society, *Alaska's Railroads*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society, 1992.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL:

A History of Alaska Steamship Company, 1895-1954. Alaska State Library, University of Alaska Anchorage, University of Alaska Fairbanks. Masters thesis written by Marylou McMahon Haugland at the University of Washington in 1968.

Steamship Company Publications and Promotional Materials, 1887. Alaska State Library. Includes travel guides, brochures, maps, passenger lists, daily bulletins, newsletters, shipping schedules, publications and miscellaneous from Alaska Steamship Co., Pacific Coast Steamship Company, Alaska Coast Company, and British Columbia Steamship Company.

A Good-Natured Map of Alaska: showing the services offered by "The Alaska Line" and suggesting some of the most interesting features of the Territory, 1934. Alaska State Library, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks. A 51 x 72 cm map produced by Alaska Steamship Co. and Farwest Lithograph & Printing Co.- Seattle.

When you think Alaska, Think Alaska Steamship Co., 1929. Alaska State Library. A 53 x 76 cm map made by Alaska Steamship Co. and Poole Brothers - Chicago.

Beulah Marrs Parisi Papers, 1938 – 1995. Alaska State Library. The collection consists of Beulah Marrs Parisi's biographical scrapbooks, photographs, and related materials concerning her life in Anchorage during World War II and her volunteer work with the USO. The collection includes biographical scrapbooks (1941-1945), photographs from or related to the scrapbooks, publications, newspaper clippings, and a six-page reminiscence on the wartime newsletter, *The Mukluk Telegraph*. The biographical scrapbooks contain autobiographical narratives, letters, photographs, programs, newspaper clippings, and other materials. The photographs include over three hundred copy prints and negatives from the scrapbooks, plus other original prints and negatives. The publications consist of wartime Alaska magazines, issues of *Flying Time*, the newsletter of Headquarter Squadron of the 11th Fighter Command in Adak, and illustrated booklets for the Alaska Steamship Co., the Alaska Railroad, the USO Club in Anchorage, and the Mt. McKinley U.S. Army Recreation Camp. The newspaper clippings primarily concern the Morrison-Knudsen Construction Company, aviation, and airplane crashes and rescues.

Florence Carr Wendt Collection, 1935-1967. Alaska State Library. Includes unpublished manuscript, typescript poems (Robert W. Service) and legends, menus from the S.S. *Victoria* and S.S. *Yukon*, a copy of Sydney Laurence's "Mount McKinley," and a loose-leaf scrapbook containing photos, postcards, maps, and travel brochures from a 1935 Alaska-Yukon tour.

Lloyd Spetzman Photograph Collection, 1946-1968. Alaska State Library
Collection of 854 slides and a photo album with 168 black-and-white photos that includes images of buildings in Anchorage, railroad engines and stations, canneries, fishing boats, Alaska Railroad scenes and equipment and photos taken during a trip from Anchorage to Seward. Photos from this trip include Matanuska Valley and Glacier, Kenai Peninsula, Portage Glacier, Spencer Glacier, Bartlett Glacier, Turnagain Arm, Palmer Highway and bridge, Girdwood, Pioneer Peak, Kenai Lake, Mount Susitna, Cook Inlet and Knik Arm. Images cover all of Alaska except the southeast regions. The collection also includes an Inuit grammar dictionary (manuscript), plant lists, field notes, loose photographs, correspondence to and from Spetzman, and a loose-leaf, black-and-white photograph album.

Frederick Date Papers, Photographs and Artifacts, 1833-1976. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of papers, publications, photographs, and artifacts relating to Frederick Date's life and activities in Alaska. There are also more than 600 photographs, which depict towns, buildings, social activities, mining, travel, people, and Date's activities with the Alaska Road Commission and the Alaska Railroad.

Alaska Railroad Microfiche Project Collection, 1984. Alaska State Library
Construction of the railroad began under the Alaska Engineering Commission (AEC) around 1916. The AEC became the Alaska Railroad Commission after construction was complete in 1923, and eventually, The Alaska Railroad. Because early construction was of interest to the government in Washington D.C., professional photographers were employed to document the work in Alaska. Photographers represented in the collection include P. S. Hunt, H. G. Kaiser, A. J. Johnson and The Sydney Laurence Co. Between 1915 and 1923 nearly 2,700 photographs were taken. The project to preserve the collection of Alaska Railroad photographs on microfiche was funded by the Alaska

Historical Commission and directed by M. Diane Brenner of the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum. The Anchorage Museum of History and Art [previously Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum] holds the original photograph and reproductions may be ordered from the Museum.

U.S. Alaska Engineering Commission Photograph Collection, 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. Views of other south central Alaskan towns are included. Official photographers for the Commission, represented in the collection include: P.S. Hunt (Phinney S.), H. G. Kaiser, A. J. Johnson and S. Laurence. The collection also includes views by The Sydney Laurence Co. and E. A. Hegg.

Alaska Railroad Tour Lantern Slide Collection, 1923. Alaska State Library. This collection of 85 colored lantern slides advertised The Alaska Railroad's Tour #2 in the first year of operation for the Alaska Railroad in 1923. The slides are imprinted with "Alaska Railroad, Washington D.C." The tour began at the Alaska Steamship pier in Seattle and continued by steamship up through the Inside Passage to Seward where the passengers boarded the train. The images start at Seward and show the scenic views along the tour as the train heads to Fairbanks and then by automobile to Valdez. Tour #2 covered 4,402 miles in 22 days, and cost \$240.65. The slides advertised the scenic beauty of Alaska and activities of Alaskans living along the route.

Alaska Railroad Photograph Collection, 1916-1922. Alaska State Library
A collection of 356 black-and-white photographs taken by Alaskan Engineering Commission photographers and professional photographers hired to record railroad construction. In addition, people, camps, buildings, and communities along the railroad are shown. The collection includes a series of agricultural photographs, from the Matanuska Valley and Fairbanks, among others. Images of government officials are also identified. Photographers represented in the collection include P. S. Hunt, H. G. Kaiser, Albert J. Johnson and several views by the Sydney Laurence Co. Most images have AEC numbers.

Alaska Railroad Construction, 1915-1918. Alaska State Library. A collection of 152 black & white photos that documents the preliminary route exploration, surveying, and early construction of the Alaska Railroad, ca. 1915-1917. Views include railroad survey and construction work, bridges, and the towns of Fort Seward, Anchorage, Seward and Cordova. Also included is a portrait of Thomas Guy Wansbury and one panorama of the original railroad survey crew. Includes views by Louis H. Pedersen, Paul Beran, John E. Thwaites, and Straughan.

Robert Lewis Papers and Photographs, 1941-1943. University of Alaska Anchorage. The collection consists of papers and photographs from Robert Lewis' service in the U.S. Army at Fort Raymond, Seward, Alaska during World War II. The papers include: two issues of the *Daily Polaris* (the Fort Raymond post newspaper), a certificate of completion and text from a University of Alaska extension course in mining, notes on combat intelligence, plans for a bridge, a National Park Service booklet on Mount

McKinley National Park, and an Alaska Defense Command booklet about the Mount McKinley U.S. Army Recreation Camp. The photographs include those of Robert Lewis and Battery E, Fort Raymond and its facilities and troops, and scenery and recreational activities on the Kenai Peninsula and along the Alaska Railroad. Localities depicted in the photographs include Seward, Mount McKinley National Park, Fairbanks, Cooper Landing, Moose Pass, Russian River, Rendezvous, Hope, the Divide Ski Area, and “Alaska Nellie” Lawing’s house and trophy room in Lawing. The photographs also include a group of images of Adak Island and the army base there, taken in 1951.

Jacques N. and Marion M. Jacobsen Collection, 1882-1967. Alaska State Library
The collection includes the Klondike gold rush, Native peoples, arctic life, U.S. Coast Guard activities, 1922-1925, railroads, World Flight airplanes, fishing, mining, ships, sled dogs, glaciers, lighthouses, Mt. McKinley (Denali) and Mount McKinley, scenics, and Elmendorf Air Force Base, 1954-1955. Photographers include: Lomen Brothers, W. H. Parker, Alaska Shop, Elite Studio, A. Wischmeyer, Guy F. Cameron, Otto Schallerer, H. A. Ives, Charles S. Cann, Ordway, Kirk, Case & Draper, E. W. Merrill, O. D. Goetze, Lewis Rice, E. A. Hegg, John E. Thwaites, Dedman, Edward De Groff, T. W. Ingersoll, Trevor Davis, Frank La Roche, Landerkin & Winter, Partridge, and B. L. Singley. Papers include First Day Covers of 100th Anniversary Purchase of Alaska, Admission of Alaska to statehood; Alaska travel guides, and Air Force manual, 1951.

MOVING IMAGES:

AMIPA-hjc-001

Mount McKinley National Park, travelogue by Howard J. Cooper, 1927. Alaska Moving Image Preservation Association (AMIPA). University of Alaska Anchorage Consortium Library. 16 mm, black-and-white, silent film. This 30-second excerpt shows the roadhouse built, owned and operated by Italian immigrant Maurice Morino (1870–1937) at Mount McKinley National Park (later renamed Denali National Park and Preserve); the backside of the entrance sign to McKinley Park; the McKinley Park railroad station and a brief view of an entrance to a railroad tunnel. Except for the McKinley Park entrance sign, the scenes were filmed from a moving train. Intertitle at beginning of excerpt reads, “Entrance to McKinley Park.” This excerpt is from an original motion picture travelogue made by Howard J. Cooper from footage shot when Cooper traveled to Alaska in 1927.

Denali National Park: Early Tourism Exhibit video, 2005. Alaska State Library. A DVD with black and white sequences written by Heather Walter and McClosley Productions Inc., that discusses the early tourism of Denali National Park and Preserve of the Alaska Interior.

Across Time and Tundra: A Historical Journey Through Denali National Park and Preserve, 2002. Alaska State Library. A video recording with black and white sequences written by Jane Bryant and Jane Ahern Tranel that discusses the creation of Denali National Park and Preserve of the Alaska interior, and the early tourism which followed.