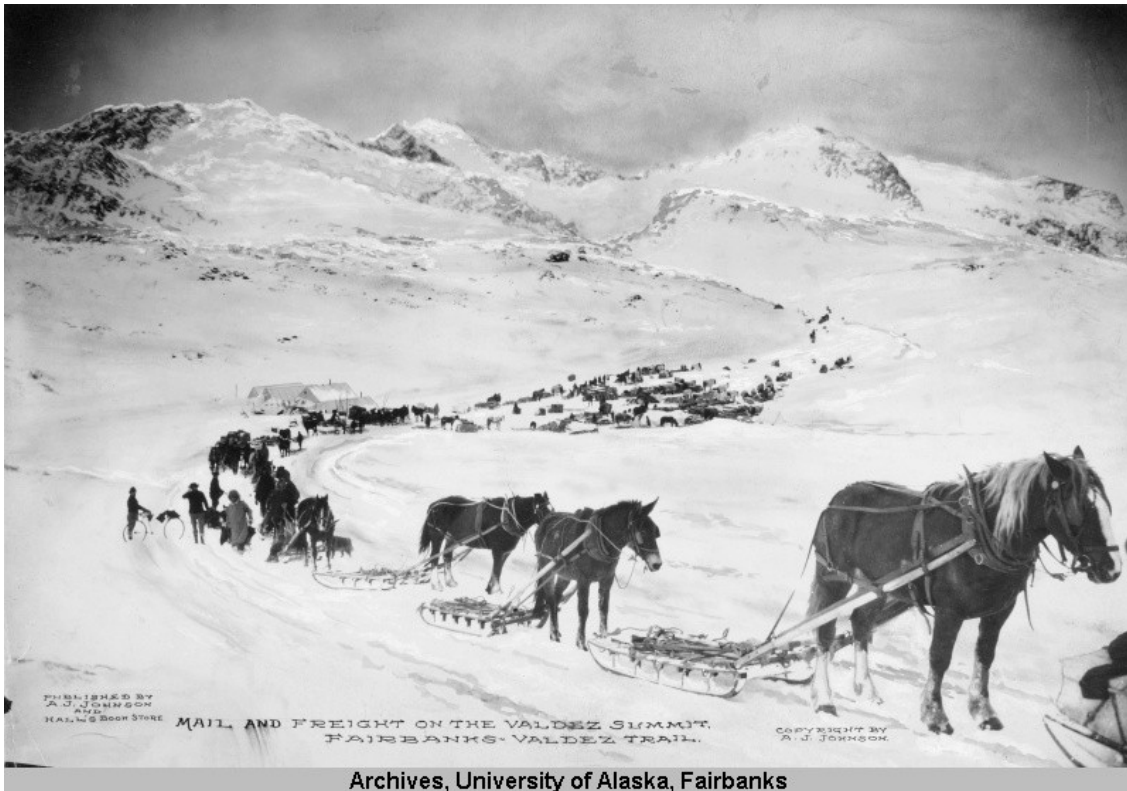


Land, Sea, Air / Roads and Railroads

By Tricia Brown

The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail Constructed 1898-1906



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail was most passable during months when the ground was frozen, yet getting over the snowy summits in deep winter remained a great challenge. This photo by Albert J. Johnson is captioned "Mail and freight on the Valdez summit," or Thompson Pass. The cluster of buildings in the distance may be the Ptarmigan roadhouse. Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Collection Name:

 **Identifier:**

 **Title:**

 **Description:**

Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917

UAF-1989-0166-121-Print

Mail and freight on the Valdez summit

Title taken from caption.

"Mail and freight on the Valdez summit Fairbanks-Valdez trail."

Copyright by A.J. Johnson. Published by Johnson and Hall's Book Store. Cataloguer's note: This is a picturesque view of the mountains in the distance and travelers with their horses and sleighs making their way up the steep hill. Down in the valley, one can make out the small settlement, or camp from which this group of travelers had perhaps started out.






 **Creator:**

Johnson, Albert J.

 **Location:** Thompson Pass (Alaska)



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name: AMHA. General Photograph File
 **Identifier:** AMHA-b62-1-2035
 **Title:** Horse pack train crossing a patch of snow on Valdez-Fairbanks Trail.
 **Description:** Horses in a pack train crossing snow, Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Alaska, near Tiekel River, on what is now Richardson Highway. From verso: "1/2 mile from Tiekel Roadhouse (1963) then called "Tekel". (Location 49 1/2 mile). Right hand side of road going to Valdez. Roadhouse is mile 50 now (1963), 52 then (1909). Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." 1909? Original photograph size: 3" x 4 1/2".
 **Subject.TGM:** Horses
Packtrains
Men
 **Location:** Tiekel River (Alaska)
Richardson Highway (Alaska)



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Collection Name:

Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917

 **Identifier:**

UAF-1989-0166-116-Print

 **Title:**

Going up Valdez summit

 **Description:**

Title taken from caption.

Cataloguer's note: A light inscription to the top left corner reads "Thompson's Pass." Various groups of dog sledging teams are seen here on the Valdez Summit. Photographer's number: D54.

 **Creator:**

Johnson, Albert J.



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Collection Name:

Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917

Identifier:

UAF-1989-0166-123-Print

Title:

A stage load of travelers

Description:

Title taken from caption.

"A stage load of travelers Fairbanks-Valdez trail." Photo by Johnson; original image is hand-colored.

Creator:

Johnson, Albert J.

Corporate Name:

Orr Stage Co. (Valdez)



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:

Crary-Henderson Collection



Identifier:

AMHA-b62-1-a-302



Title:

A trail barn.



Description:

Title taken from front. Man with shovel standing outside temporary barn for horses along Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, Alaska. From verso: "Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society." Photographer's number G3307. n.d. Photographer: P.S. Hunt. Original photograph size: 8" x 10".







Creator:

Hunt, P. S. (Phinney S.), 1866-1917



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Collection Name:	AMHA. General Photograph File
 Identifier:	AMHA-b78-65-22
 Title:	Freighting near the summit of Thom[p]son Pass on Valdez-Fairbanks Trail.
 Description:	Title taken from front. View of horses pulling freight sleds near the summit of Thompson Pass, Alaska. Photographer's number P123. Photographer: P. S. Hunt. Original photograph size: 3 3/8" x 4 7/8".
 Creator:	Hunt, P. S. (Phinney S.), 1866-1917

George Hazelet

More about the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail:

"The man that starts in to pull 1500 lbs of supplies from Valdez to the top of the summit must needs have plenty of grit, a good supply of muscle, for it is no easy task and I firmly believe that many of the parties now put down at Valdez alone to overcome this task would fail, but seeing others going over, with determination set in every line of their faces, they brace up and proceed and finally to their surprise almost, they have accomplished what under other circumstances would have proven impossible."

—Diary of prospector George Hazelet, May 1, 1898
Valdez Museum & Historical Archive

"Every day we hear of some fellow we used to meet going and coming on the trail that has backed out and is offering his outfit for sale."

—Diary of prospector Guiteau, March 11, 1898
From *Valdez Gold Rush Trails 1898-99*, by Jim and Nancy Lethcoe

Like many other enterprises in Alaska, the beginnings of the 386-mile Valdez-Fairbanks Trail were steeped in gold mining. Once gold was discovered in the Klondike the rush was on. Stampedeers poured up the Inside Passage and over the White Pass or Chilkoot Pass to access Canada's goldfields. Others opted to steam to St. Michael on Alaska's western coast and travel a thousand miles up the Yukon River. Near the turn of the century, the U.S. government was looking for a shorter, faster "All-American Route" to the Klondike.

A siren call also led some stampedeers to Valdez, Alaska, as all over the United States, the headlines of 1897-98 promised "Gold in Alaska!" and "Valdez Glacier—Best Trail!" writes Jim and Nancy Lethcoe in *Valdez Gold Rush Trails of 1898-99*. The stories boasted yet another gold rush, this one to the Copper River Valley.

"Steamship companies promoted the Valdez Glacier Trail praising it as the only All-American trail to Alaska's Interior," the Lethcoes write. "It was one of the greatest hoaxes in Alaska's history. The prospectors arrived to find a glacier trail twice as long and steep as reported. With frontier grit, they set about hand sledding more than a thousand pounds of supplies over the glacier, building boats, rafting the Klutina River's Hell's Gate rapids, and prospecting unnamed creeks. By August most of the 4,000 or more gold-rushers knew—they had been conned."

Yet news of the gold in the Klondike was genuine, and many prospectors considered the Valdez entry point as an alternative to the route up the Inside

Passage. The shortcut would lead to Eagle, Alaska, where miners could complete their journey upriver on the Yukon River or work the streams around Circle, Eagle, and Fortymile country.

Early trailblazers were determined to find a safer, more efficient route and in 1899, under the jurisdiction of U.S. Army Lt. William P. Abercrombie, surveyors began work on a trail from Valdez to Eagle City. Destitute prospectors labored along with the soldiers to finish the trail by 1901. It began known as the Trans-Alaska Military Road or the Valdez-Eagle Trail. Much of the primitive trail was comprised of corridors already in use by Alaska Natives across Chugach and Atna lands. Meanwhile installation work began on the WAMCATS telegraph line along the trail, and following a 1903 visit by members of a Senate Subcommittee on Territories, the federal government allocated funds to make further road improvements.

“The new trail quickly attracted its first common carrier,” wrote National Park Service historian Geoffrey Bleakley in *A History of the Valdez Trail*. “In December 1904, James Fish announced that his Valdez Transportation Company would soon provide passenger service to Fairbanks. ‘Over such part of the trail as is practical,’ he assured travelers, ‘comfortable bobsleds will be fitted up and drawn by two horses. Over the summit, and wherever it is not practicable [sic] to run two horses abreast, the single double-ended sleds will be used and the horses driven tandem.’ A month later the first of its tri-weekly stages left Valdez, promising a nine-day trip for the exorbitant price of \$150.”

The army completed its survey work during 1905-1906 with a goal of bringing the trail up to wagon road status. Meanwhile the importance of Eagle was waning. With the discovery of gold in the Tanana Valley, and a shift away from the Klondike, more commercial traffic was now going through Fairbanks. Also, Judge James Wickersham had moved the Third Judicial District Court from Eagle to Fairbanks, thereby strengthening its role as an Interior hub. Hundreds of prospectors bound for the Interior made use of a fork off the Valdez-Eagle Trail

that was known as Castner's path or the Valdez Trail. And by 1907 that portion was incorporated into the well-traveled Valdez-Fairbanks Trail.

In the next decade, winter or summer, thousands of travelers employed the trail, mostly by saddle horse, dog team, horse and double-ended sleigh, and wagons. The U.S. mail as well as tons of freight was transported over the trail. Roadhouses developed along the route as homesteaders opened their doors, offering meals and night's rest to weary travelers and their horses. Generally, the roadhouses were about a day's ride apart. While many of the original roadhouses have perished, many by fire, those that remain are on the National Register of Historic Places.

The first automobile over the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail was a 1913 Model T, which was shipped into Fairbanks and purchased by Al White. The Model T covered the rugged trail southbound from Fairbanks during the summer of 1914. Photographer Phinney S. Hunt captured an image of the car with its banner boasting "Fairbanks-Chitina-Valdez!! Or Bust!!" Shortly afterward, the trail was renamed the Richardson Highway after General Wilds P. Richardson, the first president of the Alaska Road Commission.

LINKS:

"A History of the Valdez Trail," by Geoffrey Bleakley, National Park Service Historian:

www.nps.gov/archive/wrst/valdeztrlhistory.htm

Alaska Humanities Forum, Alaska History & Cultural Studies, "America's Territory: Overland Routes Develop":

www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=230

University of Alaska Fairbanks KUAC-TV travelogue *Anywhere, Alaska*:

www.uaf.edu/kuac/anywhere/richardson.html

Crossing Valdez Glacier, from *Valdez Gold Rush Trails 1898-99*, by Jim and Nancy Lethcoe:

www.alaska.net/~awss/VGTrail.html

Historical maps of the Valdez Glacier route:

www.alaska.net/~awss/HistoricalMaps.html

City of Valdez, Parks & Recreation:

www.ci.valdez.ak.us/parks_rec/trails.html

Valdez Museum & Historical Archive:

www.valdezmuseum.org

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve:

www.nps.gov/archive/wrst/valdeztrail.htm

Visit the library for more information:

Alaska's libraries include plenty of audio, visual, and written material about Alaska's early roads. 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 **VALDEZ-FAIRBANKS TRAIL or RICHARDSON HIGHWAY**.

More Reading:

Joan M. Antonson and William S. Hanable. *Alaska's Heritage: Unit 4 - Human History: 1867 to Present*. Anchorage: Alaska Historical Commission, 1985.

Bundy, Hallock C. *The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail: The Story of a Great Highway* (1st Annual). Seattle: Alaska Publishing Co., 1910.

Hunt, William. *Mountain Wilderness: An Illustrated History of Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Natural History Association, 1996.

Lethcoe, Jim and Nancy. *Valdez Gold Rush Trails of 1898-99*. Valdez, AK: Prince William Sound Books, 1996.

Mitchell, Brigadier General William L. *The Opening of Alaska, 1901-1903*. Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories, 1982.

Phillips, Walter T. *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway: The First Quarter Century, 1898 to 1923*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Historical Commission, 1984.

Phillips, Walter T. *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway II*. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Historical Commission, 1985.

Valdez Transportation Company. *Alaska, a Travelogue of the Richardson Highway 1928: Constructed and Maintained by the Alaska Road Commission*. Valdez, AK: Valdez Transportation Co., 1928.

VIDEO:

Beck, Larry and Tom Hughes. *The Valdez to Fairbanks Trail*. VHS. Anchorage, AK: Alaska Heritage Review, 1985.

University of Alaska Fairbanks KUAC-TV travelogue *Anywhere, Alaska*:
www.uaf.edu/kuac/anywhere/richardson.html

PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS:

Alaska Road Commission photograph collection, 1909-1959. Lomen Brothers. 100 glass lantern slides; 16,759 photographs.

Walter T. Phillips photograph collection, Fairbanks and environs, 1911-1918. About the photographer: Walter Phillips grew up in Valdez, his parents arriving there in 1908. In 1915 they moved to Old Iliamna and returned to Valdez in 1923. He worked for the Signal Corps, the Alaska Road Commission and later as a telephone lineman on the Valdez Trail (now part of the Richardson Highway). In June of 1984, Walter Phillips completed *The Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway, the First Quarter Century, 1898 to 1923*, which he researched under an Alaska Historical Commission grant (Historical Collections, TX909.P53). Mr. Phillips retired to Palmer, Alaska.

Atlantic Richfield Co. photograph collection, 1904-1910, including 49 views selected and copied from two albums owned by the Atlantic Richfield Co. Photographers include Albert J. Johnson, George G. Cantwell, P. S. Hunt, and Clarence Leroy Andrews.