

E. T. BARNETTE

Fortune Seeker, Fortune Taker

1860-1930



E. T. Barnette, at right, was joined in Valdez by bankers and lawmen for this photograph titled "Passengers and 2,800 lbs. gold dust from Fairbanks by Kennedy's Stage." Barnette's wife, Isabelle, is the woman at center. 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](#)


E.T. Barnette's grand-niece, Virginia M. Cunningham, identified Barnette as the subject of this portrait. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.


Collection Name: [Historical Photograph Collection](#)
[Vertical File Addendum Photograph Collections-People](#)
[UAF-1989-12-101](#)

 **Identifier:** [UAF-1989-12-101](#)

 **Title:** [E. T. Barnette, head & shoulders](#)


 **Description:** [Title](#) from [cataloger](#).
[Portrait photograph](#) of [E.T. Barnette](#).
[Identification](#) was [provided](#) by [Virginia M. Cunningham](#), the
[grand-niece](#) of [Barnette](#).


 **Subject.TGM:** [Pioneers](#)
[Business people](#)


 **Personal Name:** [Barnette, E. T. \(Elbridge Truman\)](#)


E.T. Barnette posed for this formal, full-length portrait in fringed clothing. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.


Collection Name: [Historical Photograph Collection](#)
[Vertical File Addendum Photograph Collections-People](#)
[UAF-1989-12-102](#)


 **Identifier:** [UAF-1989-12-102](#)

 **Title:** [E. T. Barnette, standing](#)

 **Description:** [Title](#) from [cataloger](#).
[Portrait photograph](#) of [E.T. Barnette](#) in [fringe clothing](#).
[Identification provided](#) by [Virginia M. Cunningham](#), [grand-niece](#) of [Barnette](#).

 **Subject.TGM:** [Pioneers](#)
[Business people](#)
[Clothing & dress](#)
[Men](#)

 **Personal Name:** [Barnette, E. T. \(Elbridge Truman\)](#)

 **Type:** [Collection](#)
[Image \(Photographs\)](#)

Barnette found a job managing the North American Transportation and Trading Company when he reached Dawson in 1898 before returning to Montana to marry Isabelle Cleary.

Collection Name: [North American Transportation and Trading Company Collection, 1898-1900](#)
[UAF-1995-190-49](#)

 **Identifier:** [UAF-1995-190-49](#)





 **Title:** [Cafe Regina - Dawson](#)

 **Description:** [Title taken](#) from [caption](#).
["North American Transporatation and Trading Company's building."](#)

 **Subject.TGM:** [Cafes](#)
[Hotels](#)
[Dogs](#)

	Pulling Fire escapes
 Corporate Name:	North American Transportation & Trading Company
 Location:	Dawson (British Columbia)
 Region:	Outside
 Time Period:	1896 to 1913

The sternwheeler *Isabelle* is visible in this wide-angle view of Fairbanks taken June 13, 1905, by Lorenzo E. Robertson. Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Collection Name:	Charles E. Bunnell Collection
 Identifier:	UAF-1958-1026-2163
 Title:	Fairbanks Alaska from across Chena River June 13, 1905
 Description:	Title from image . Photograph of the Fairbanks waterfront as seen from across the Chena River . Visible are Motel Northern , The Northern Commercial Co. , the sternwheeler Isabelle , Sargent & Pinsky , Solly's Cigars & Tobacco , The Horseshoe , The Monte Carlo , The Tanana , The Lacy , The Eagle , The Senate , Key City Laundry and Bath , and the Gilsey House . The bridge may be under construction .
 Creator:	Robertson, Lorenzo E.

More about E. T. Barnette:

Little was known about Elbridge Truman Barnette's shady past when he landed in Alaska, and more than a century later, there haven't been many gains. The record shows that Barnette was convicted of larceny in his early 20s, serving time in the Oregon Penitentiary with an early commutation, thanks to some political connections. That much is known. Others from his pre-Alaska days blamed him for their misfortune, whether from missing horses or whiskey or cash. But like many who arrived during the gold rush years, he was one more man seeking a fresh start and new opportunities in the Far North.

Barnette seemed blessed with the ability to land in the right place at the right time and later slip the bonds of his indiscretions. Fairbanks is where it is because of a blindly determined Barnette arguing with a sternwheeler captain who could go no further upriver. He lost the argument when the captain simply offloaded his goods. Barnette couldn't have known that there, in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere, he would soon meet his first customers, miners Felix Pedro and Tom Gilmore, who had spotted the column of

smoke from the steamship when it first entered the Chena. He also had no idea that Pedro would make a major gold discovery within a year, instigating a stampede that would make both of them wealthy and put Fairbanks on the map.

Yet, just ten years after he founded Fairbanks, E. T. Barnette was charged with embezzlement, then acquitted, then run out, remembered for years as the most hated man in town. A sad ending to the story of a man who was once a prominent figure in Fairbanks society.

He was born Elbridge Truman Barnette in 1860, in Akron, Ohio. How or why he headed to Montana remains unknown, but he was 34 and single when he left Helena, Montana, for Seattle, arriving on August 2, 1897, just as Klondike Fever was sweeping the country. Barnette and 160 fellow passengers, all infected with the fever, boarded the steamer *Cleveland* and headed for St. Michael on the Bering Sea. From there the stampeders would be reboarding a sternwheeler that was to transport them up the Yukon River to Dawson City and the goldfields. However, due to unanticipated delays, the *Cleveland* arrived in St. Michael merely five hours after the sternwheeler had departed for Dawson. Barnette and the other passengers, determined as ever to reach their destination, invested in their own little steamer, the *St. Michael*, and set out for Dawson on their own, hoping to make it before the river froze.

Regrettably, the *St. Michael*, plagued by a breakdown, a fire, and disease among her crew, got stuck in Circle City. It was September 28 and the Yukon was frozen. But Barnette still wasn't ready to give up. He bought the fastest dog team he could find and headed east. Bad luck rode with him. When he finally made it to Dawson, every creek already had been staked months earlier. Doggedly he stayed and looked for another way to make a living.

In 1898, Barnette briefly managed some of the mines for the North American Trading and Transportation Company (NT&T). He stayed a year then left for Montana to marry an Irish Catholic woman named Isabelle Cleary, twelve years his junior. The newlyweds settled in Circle City, where Barnette turned a nice profit on supplies and mining claims he had made.

Ever angling to get richer, Barnette decided to contact John Jerome "J. J." Healy, an entrepreneurial man he'd met while working at NT&T. Healy shared his vision of building a railroad from Valdez to Eagle as an "All-American Route" to the Klondike. During their brainstorming, Barnette conceived the idea of establishing a trading post at the Tanana Crossing, the halfway point on Healy's planned train route.

Barnette needed financial backing, so he went into partnership with Charles Smith, whom he'd met in Circle City. With a dream of establishing a "Chicago of

Alaska” at the Tanana Crossing, Barnette left for San Francisco to buy \$20,000 in supplies and have them shipped to St. Michael. Back in Circle, he bought the steamer *Arctic Boy* and brought it to St. Michael to take on the cargo. Yet the *Arctic Boy*, loaded with 135 tons of supplies, would never leave the St. Michael harbor. A crew member took her out for a joy ride and hit a submerged rock, tearing out the bottom. Barnette was stuck with all the supplies for a trading post and no way to get there.

Meanwhile Captain Charles Adams and Thomas Bruce, co-owners of the steamer *Lavelle Young*, had witnessed the *Arctic Boy*’s unfortunate demise while in port. Barnette approached them about using the *Lavelle Young* to get his supplies to the Tanana Crossing. Alaska historian and author Terrence Cole retold their conversation in his book *E. T. Barnette, The Strange Story of the Man Who Founded Fairbanks*: “I was dumbfounded, “ Adams said. “Valdez-Eagle Crossing? Why, man, that’s nearly 400 miles up the Tanana above Fort Weare! How are you going to get there?” Barnette responds, “I figured the *Lavelle Young* could make it . . . ”

Adams told Barnette he was doubtful that the steamer would make it up the Tanana, or even make it past the Chena Slough. However, Barnette could not be swayed. He drew up a contract, promising that he would pay Adams \$6,000 if he could at least get them as far as the Chena Slough. Barnette added that if the *Lavelle Young* could get no further, he and Isabelle would “get off with his goods wherever that happened to be.”

As Adams had predicted, the *Lavelle Young* encountered a stretch of shallow rapids on the Tanana and could go no further. Barnette urged Adams to try the Chena River, claiming an Indian friend had told him the Chena would get them back to the Tanana, bypassing the troublesome rapids. The steamer made it several miles up the Chena River before the water became too shallow. Adams had taken Barnette as far as he was contractually obligated, and he was not willing to risk going aground. Still, Barnette insisted on transport to at least the mouth of the Chena River. Adam refused.

The date was August 26, 1901, the end of summer and the end of Barnette’s passage. The couple and the crew unloaded the supplies onto the southern banks of the Chena River and began cutting trees to build some semblance of housing and a warehouse. The site is now somewhere in present-day downtown Fairbanks, between Second Avenue and Cowles Street, and Sixth Avenue and Cushman Street. (The area is recorded in the 1910 federal census as the “address” for the Barnettes and their five-year-old daughter, Virginia.)

Even before the boat departed, Barnette’s frustrations diminished with the arrival of his first customers, Felix Pedro and Tom Gilmore. They had seen the steam coming from the *Lavelle Young* and were anxious to restock their supplies before winter.

Although he was glad to learn there were other prospectors in the area as well, Barnette still had his hopes fixed on his original destination, the Tanana Crossing, some two hundred miles away.

In March 1902, after seven months at the Chena River trading post, the Barnettes left for Valdez, along with Isabelle's younger brother, Frank J. Cleary, and friends Charles Smith, Jim Huntington, and Dan McCarty. Intent on setting up shop at the Tanana Crossing by fall, the Barnettes continued to Seattle to restock their supplies and buy a flat-bottomed boat that might reach that portion of the Tanana. Cleary and McCarty returned to man the Chena River trading post while the Barnettes were Outside. Barnette purchased a boat, named it the *Isabelle*, and had it shipped in pieces to St. Michael.

There, while the *Isabelle* was under assembly, federal Judge James Wickersham of the Third Judicial District Court came to call on Barnette. It would be a history-making visit, as Wickersham was one of the most powerful and influential people in Alaska, and a shrewd political strategist. Wickersham suggested that Barnette name his trading post settlement "Fairbanks," in honor of Senator Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana. Wickersham realized the potential and value of having this powerful ally in office. In exchange, Wickersham would do his best to see that the community flourished—he would push to relocate the seat of the Third Judicial District from Eagle to Fairbanks. Barnette wholeheartedly agreed. Later Barnette would recall, "If we should ever want aid at the national capital, we could have the friendship, at least, of someone who could help us." The Republican senator would become Vice President under Teddy Roosevelt in 1904.

By September 1902, the *Isabelle* was complete, yet Barnette soon realized he had wasted yet more money on his new boat. Even a new, shallow-draft vessel such as the *Isabelle* could not navigate the shallow waters of the Chena at that time of year. The vessel grounded on a sandbar mere miles from his post. Smaller boats were used to ferry the goods over the last four miles.

Then he heard the news: a month and a half earlier, on July 22, 1902, Felix Pedro had discovered gold just twelve miles north of Barnette's trading post. At last the idea of opening his Tanana Crossing trading post gave way to bigger dreams of promoting "Barnette's Cache," later known as "Barnette's Trading Post."

Soon miners were rushing to the gold fields of Fairbanks. In November 1903, Fairbanks became incorporated and with help from Judge Wickersham, Barnette became its first mayor. Wickersham did indeed move the Third Judicial District from Eagle to Fairbanks and by 1906, with a population of 5,000, Fairbanks had become Alaska's largest city.

As Fairbanks grew larger, Barnette grew wealthier. Along with his duties as mayor, Barnette collected fees from miners he staked, worked as postmaster, and even became president of the Washington-Alaska Bank. But was he an honest banker? Later, most of the townpeople would vehemently say no.

In 1906, Barnette found himself in a lawsuit filed by James H. Causten, the man who had loaned Barnette and his then-partner Charles Smith the \$6,000 they needed five years earlier to hire Captain Adams and the *Lavelle Young*. In return, Causten was to receive “one-third of all mining and other property acquired” as well as one-third of the proceeds from the sale of Barnette’s \$20,000 worth of trading goods. Barnette never made good on his promise, however.

In a Seattle court, Causten demanded that he was “an equal partner and therefore, entitled to one-half of all the property, real and personal” that Barnette had attained from the time that he arrived at the new town site in 1901. Barnette denied his demands and stated that Causten should only receive one-third interest in the mining property and sales, and only during the winter of 1901-02. The case of *Causten vs. Barnette* dragged on for two and a half years. Unfortunately for Barnette, this court battle brought up something Barnette had spent years keeping a secret: he was an ex-convict who had spent four years in the Oregon Penitentiary for larceny. Although Barnette’s friends and supporters waved it off as ancient history, the focus on his shady past signaled the end of his prosperous days in Fairbanks.

As the initial boom of the gold discovery waned, so did Barnette’s wealth and prominence in the community. On January 4, 1911, Barnette’s Washington-Alaska Bank went bankrupt. Enraged bank customers blamed him for its failure and for withholding return of their money. Hearing the accusations, Barnette fled town on March 27, 1911, and less than a week later was charged with embezzling \$50,000. He was tried in a Valdez court in December 1912. To the chagrin of his enemies, E. T. Barnette was acquitted of the embezzlement charges and found guilty on only one count: falsely reporting the financial health of the bank, a misdemeanor. However, in the public eye, he was guilty, loathed, a man who’d again used his wealth and influence to escape justice. Barnette had become the most hated man in Fairbanks, and once again he fled the town he founded, this time forever.

The Barnettes resettled in the Los Angeles area and attempted to rebuild their lives. But more scandalous behavior followed. In 1918, when Isabelle found love letters from another woman, she filed for divorce. The action was granted and she gained custody of their two daughters in 1920. The mother and two daughters are present in the San Francisco census of 1920, renting a home on Jackson Street; Isabelle gave her age as

42; daughter Virginia was 15 and Phyllis, 9.

As for E. T. himself, after leaving Alaska, he roamed the continent, still looking for ways to make big money. He was sighted back in Alaska's Kuskokwim country at one time, and in Seattle, San Francisco, Mexico, and Montana. He never fully settled anywhere and died in 1930. Isabelle died in a state hospital in California in 1942.

Although Barnette's reputation as a devious, conniving man lingers, Fairbanks flourished because of his determination to achieve his dream of creating a "Chicago of Alaska." And despite his failings, fifty years after he was run out of town, the city named an elementary school for him. Alaska history could not be complete without E.T. Barnette and the unusual, eventful story of the man who founded what is now Alaska's second-largest city.

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:

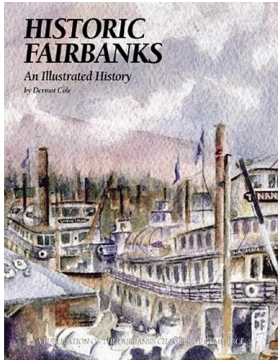
Alaska's libraries include audio, visual, and written material about E. T. Barnette and the early history of Fairbanks. Visit your local library or go online to see what's available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

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**.

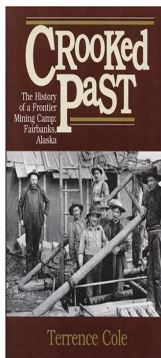
Recommended Reading:

Alaska Geographic Society. *Fairbanks*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society, 1995.



Cole, Dermot. *Historic Fairbanks: An Illustrated History*. San Antonio, Tex.: Hisotrical Publishing Network, 2002.

Cole, Dermot. *Fairbanks: A Gold Rush Town that Beat the Odds*. Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1999.



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.

Hedrick, Basil Calvin; Savage, Susan C. *Steamboats on the Chena: The Founding and Development of Fairbanks, Alaska*. Fairbanks: Epicenter Press, 1988.

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

