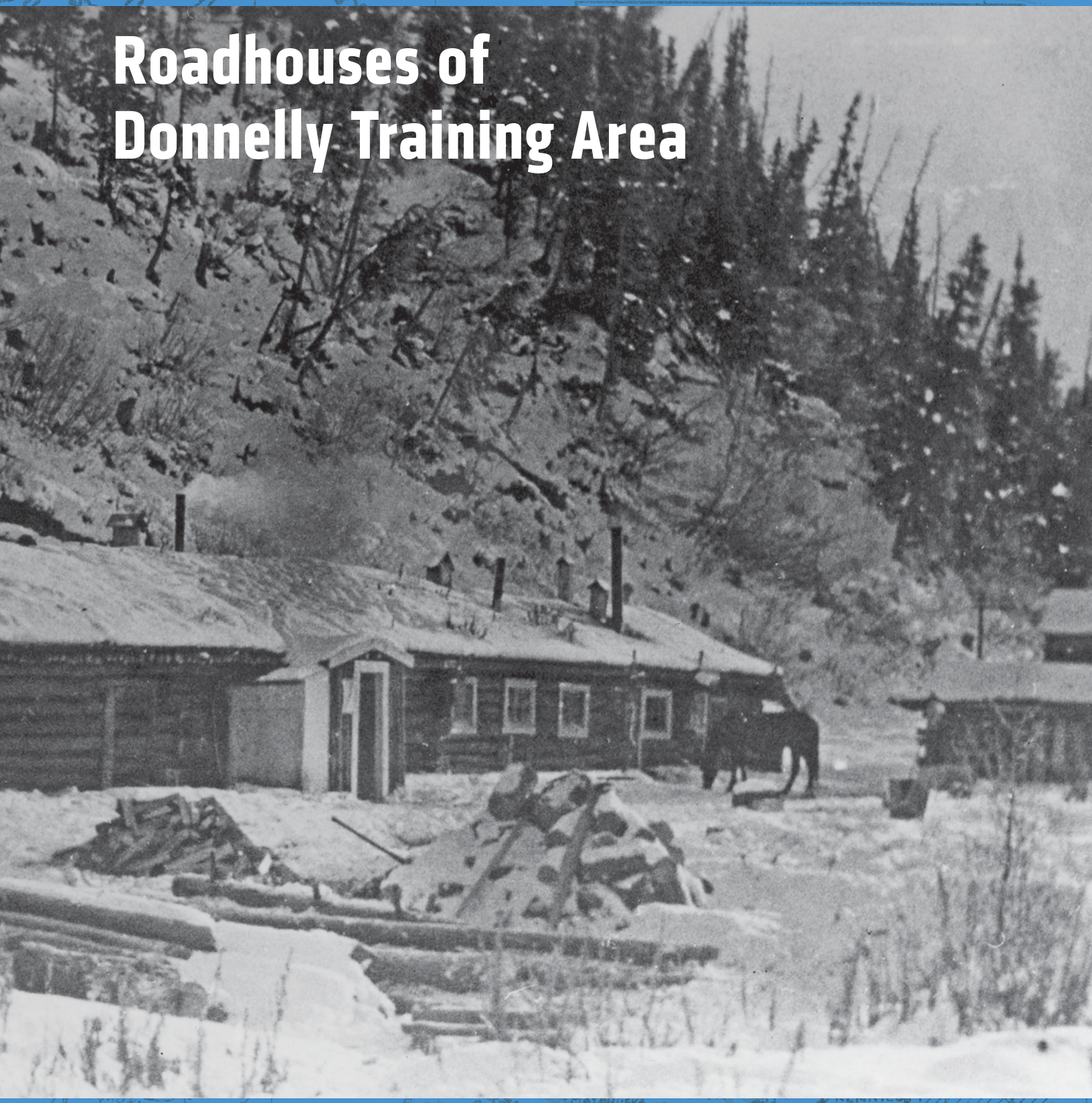
Beacons of Civilization

# Roadhouses of Donnelly Training Area



This work is adapted from a thesis entitled, *Beacons of Civilization: The Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway*, published by Cassandra Woster in 2016 in fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts through the Historic Preservation Planning Program at Cornell University.

**On the front and back covers: Exterior view of Donnelley's Roadhouse, March 1916.**
*D. D. Pittman Photograph Collection, Alaska State Library.*

**Background: Third bench camp on the Valdez Glacier, 1898.**
*Crary-Henderson Collection, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage, Alaska.*

## Introduction

The roadhouses of Alaska have served as the gathering points for locals and old-timers since the very beginning of American history in the territory. Simply mentioning the name of a long-standing roadhouse to someone who has been in the state for more than a few decades will often bring out stories and memories from times spent at various establishments. These stories are almost never negative, often comical, and always contain real-life glimpses into the history of the land and its inhabitants.

Discovering the histories of the roadhouses is often an exercise in discovering the life histories of the individuals associated with them. Alaska is not a place where deed chains can be easily put together; differences in government administration means that deeds and land grants are often spread among local courthouses, repositories in Juneau and Seattle, and archives in Washington, DC. Roadhouses often took on the names of the people who built them, so it becomes necessary to look at old newspaper articles and obituaries and conduct personal interviews to gather any sense of the history of a roadhouse.

Roadhouses embody the stories of the people who built Alaska and stand as the physical evidence of a history that is difficult to glean from other sources. They sprang up as groups of people spread across the territory, prospered as the people did, adapted to the changes in the territory over time, and died when the people left. Those still operating today serve the same purpose they did more than a century ago: providing food, shelter, and community for the spread out and often isolated pockets of population living in rural Alaska.

Despite their role as an embodiment of history, the roadhouses have only recently begun to be acknowledged as having played vital parts in the development of Alaska. This is likely due to the fact that many of these vibrant places were still operating in full swing when academia began writing Alaskan histories. Given the size of Alaska, the importance of existing prehistoric sites, and the overall lack of financial resources, prehistoric archaeological projects often take priority over Alaskan roadhouses.

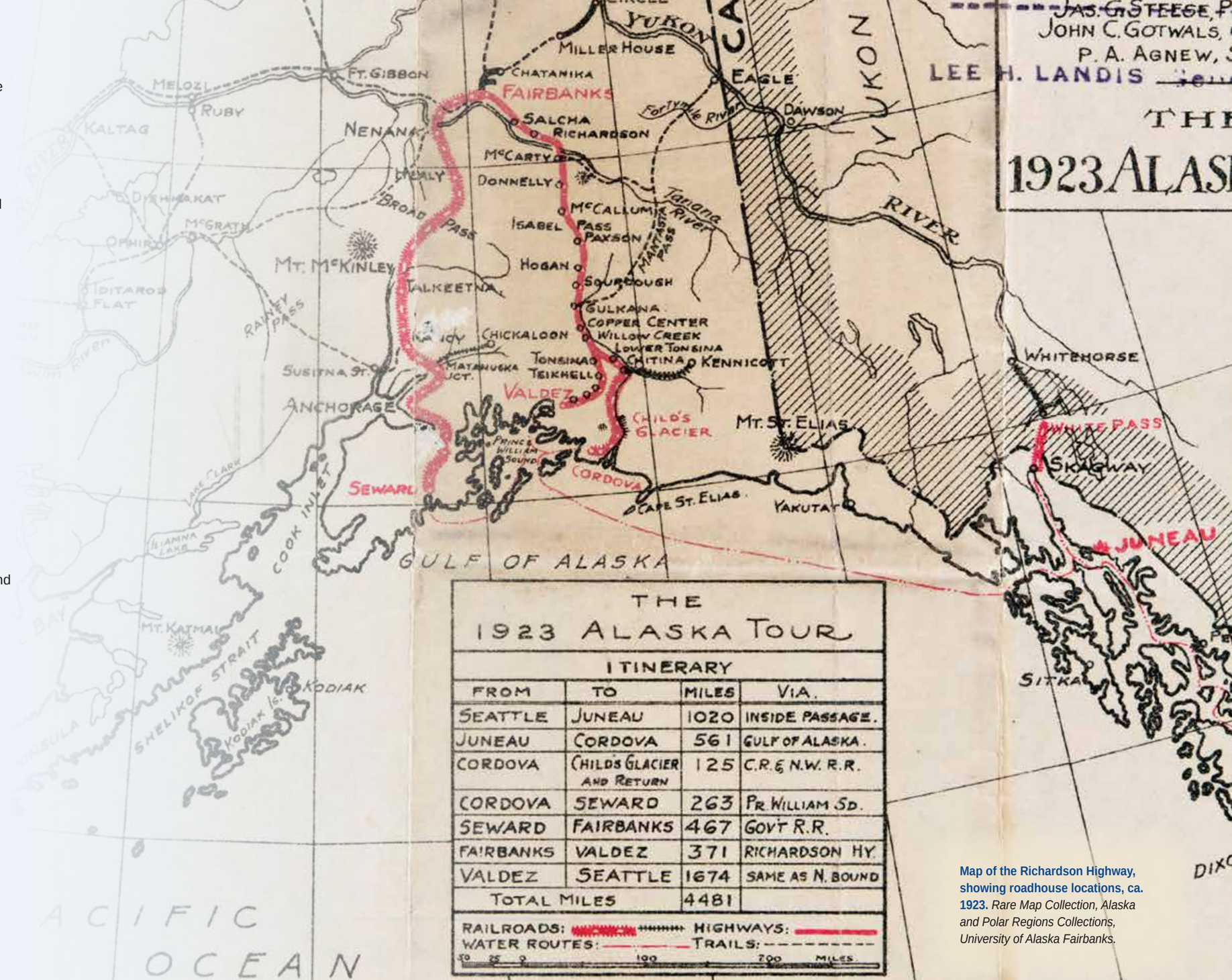
Donnelly Training Area (DTA) is an area of approximately 624,000 acres, set aside for use by the U.S. military for training purposes and managed by United States Army Garrison Alaska at Fort Wainwright. This training area contained a large portion of the winter route for the Valdez Trail, which connected Valdez to Fairbanks during gold rush times. Today, the Richardson Highway follows much of the original route of the Valdez Trail. Ongoing construction and realignment projects have caused the

demolition for many roadhouses over time. The Richardson Highway borders the east and north boundaries of DTA, where the summer route of the Valdez Trail ran to avoid the turbulent Delta River and the bogs associated with its shores. As a result, the area that DTA encompasses contains the remains of several roadhouses that were associated with the Valdez Trail.

This work attempts to capture the history of the roadhouses known to be within or adjacent to the boundaries of DTA. The locations of several of these roadhouses are difficult to verify due to shifting riverbanks and limited access to training lands. The impermanence of the structures themselves, built from raw timber, means that many of the roadhouses have deteriorated beyond surface level investigations.

Roadhouses were typically established one-day's journey apart, a distance of 10 to 20 miles depending on the terrain along established transportation routes. This trend began during the gold rush period, when a day's travel was limited to the number of miles a traveler could walk. The distances of travel possible in one day increased as road conditions improved. Eventually, the roadhouses were spaced at intervals achievable by automobiles.

The roadhouses in this region were part of a much larger system of roadhouses that lined the Valdez Trail and Richardson Highway for a length of approximately 400 miles. Many of the roadhouses associated with the early gold rush period have disappeared due to abandonment and neglect. Several, however, still serve as roadhouses, offering lodging, food, and emergency supplies and repairs to travelers. A few even offer tourist amenities such as guided hunting, fishing, hiking, and skiing trips. At the height of the roadhouse period during the Fairbanks gold rush in the early 1900s, the roadhouses were all interconnected and were considered a community of their own.




THE
1923 ALASKA TOUR
ITINERARY

| FROM | TO | MILES | VIA. |
|---|---|---|---|
| SEATTLE | JUNEAU | 1020 | INSIDE PASSAGE. |
| JUNEAU | CORDOVA | 561 | GULF OF ALASKA. |
| CORDOVA | CHILDS GLACIER AND RETURN | 125 | C.R.& N.W. R.R. |
| CORDOVA | SEWARD | 263 | PR. WILLIAM SD. |
| SEWARD | FAIRBANKS | 467 | GOV'T R.R. |
| FAIRBANKS | VALDEZ | 371 | RICHARDSON HY. |
| VALDEZ | SEATTLE | 1674 | SAME AS N. BOUND |
| TOTAL MILES | | 4481 | |

RAILROADS: HIGHWAYS:
WATER ROUTES: TRAILS:
50 25 0 100 200 MILES

**Map of the Richardson Highway, showing roadhouse locations, ca. 1923.** *Rare Map Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*


**Beaver Dam Roadhouse, September 26, 1915.** *Hamburger-Kittridge Family Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

## Alaskan Roadhouses

Roadhouses originally succeeded and failed due to their location rather than quality of amenities. The roadhouse systems in Alaska were extensive, growing along every transportation route. The importance of roadhouses in Alaska was obvious to travelers, who often lived or died depending on their ability to stop for food, shelter, and information.

As prospectors, fortune hunters, and adventure seekers poured into Alaska during the gold rush period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the immediate need for food and shelter along the trail led to the creation of rudimentary establishments. Roadhouses developed along the famed Chilkoot and White Pass trails, leading from Skagway and Dyea to Dawson City at the heart of the Yukon Klondike Gold Rush. They were usually situated at the crossings of bodies of water and trail junctions. In time, they were viewed as potential locations for growing settlements, as recommended by Major Wilds P. Richardson, head of the Alaska Road Commission (ARC) in 1908.[1]

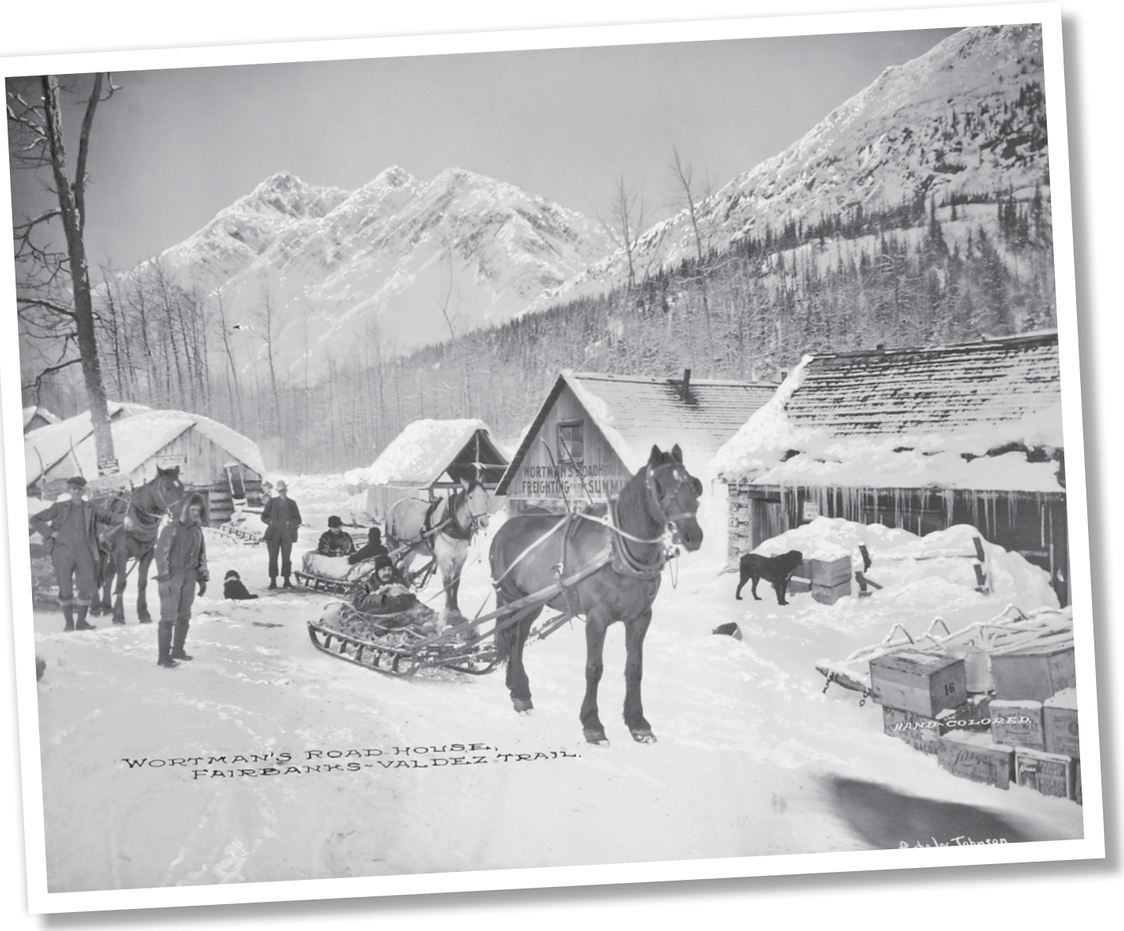
After their establishment, roadhouses began to serve as community centers for the dispersed prospecting population that had invaded Alaska, distributing mail and civic notices along with news and supplies. They were popular gathering points during holidays, drawing in many people from the surrounding areas for celebrations and potlucks. As the roadhouses were located on the road system and were generally larger spaces than the average prospector's cabin, they often served as locations for area residents to engage in civic events when a judge or other authority passed through, including court trials and marriages. The roadhouses also became staging points for ARC crews. They provided easy access to construction areas and had ample room for men and equipment. The roadhouses could often make extra revenue by covert activities such as gambling and prostitution; there are conflicting reports as to whether this was encouraged by the roadhouse owners and proprietors. Several of the establishments also sold postcards to travelers featuring photographs or drawings of the roadhouses, providing travelers with a method of communication to the outside while also promoting trail establishments. An interesting alternative use for the roadhouses occurred during the winter of 1919; in response to the spreading flu epidemic that year, quarantine centers were set up at various roadhouses to hold travelers so as to ensure they were not infected. On the Richardson Highway, these roadhouses included Rapids Roadhouse and Pile Driver Roadhouse.

**Major W. P. Richardson, U.S. Army President of the Board of the Alaska Road Commission, undated.** *Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

Dogsled teams hauling freight were often based out of individual roadhouses. Mail deliveries were initially done through dogsled, and the mail drivers had individual sections of trail for which they were responsible. The mail drivers were occasionally owners and proprietors of roadhouses, such as Fred Nichols at Paxson Roadhouse.[2] The roadhouses almost

[1] "Alaskan Settlements," *Hot Springs Echo*, October 31, 1908.

[2] "Fred Nichols, veteran of trails, dies at Gulkana," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, January 14, 1926.




**Wortman's Roadhouse post card, undated.** *Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*

always had accommodations for dog teams, usually long low buildings adjacent to the mail roadhouse buildings. "Proprietors generally had a stock of dried salmon, the most common dog food in early days."[3] Additionally, the roadhouses often served as official post offices, including Gulkana Roadhouse and Copper Center Roadhouse, which furthered the connection of the roadhouses and the mail lines.

As the trails improved and transportation moved from dogsleds to horse sleighs, the roadhouses constructed barns and sheds to house and maintain freight horses and equipment. Some of them were independently owned and maintained. Edward S. Orr, owner of the main freight company on the Richardson for many of the early years, maintained barns and spare horses at many roadhouses, including Paxson Roadhouse and Donnelly Roadhouse. Orr was also a main source of information on road conditions

[3] Michael A. Smith, Alaska's Historic Roadhouses (Anchorage: Alaska Division of Parks, Office of Statewide Cultural Programs, 1974), 6.

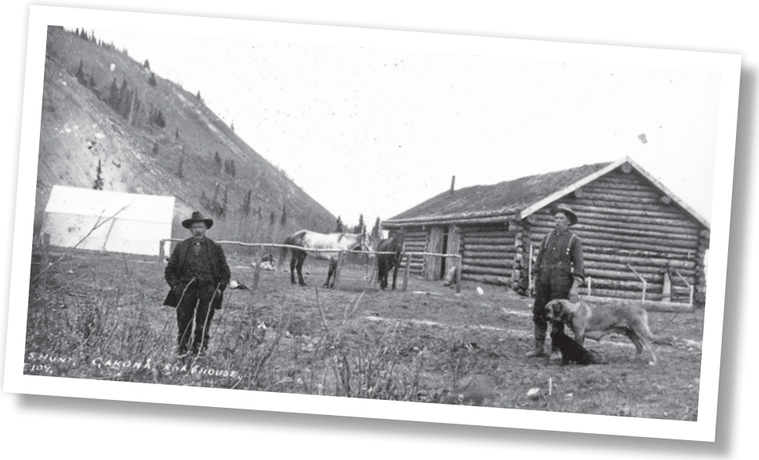


throughout the Interior. Orr had previously worked as an investigator of trail conditions and improvements in the Klondike, working with the Canadian government.[4] Orr also undertook many road improvements himself in the early years, working in tandem with the roadhouse operators.[5] As road conditions improved even further, the roadhouses began to offer mechanical services for automobiles as necessitated by the rough conditions on the road. Many still offer this service today.


**Ed S. Orr & Co. stage leaving Valdez for Fairbanks, December 9, 1908.** *Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

The roadhouses of the Richardson Highway began to appear with the first beginnings of trail in 1899. Originally, tent communities and small shantytowns had appeared at various locations along the Valdez Glacier, providing services for travelers attempting to cross over the glacier route. With the start of the Valdez Trail by Abercrombie in 1899, more formal roadhouses began to appear and spread quickly along the trail ahead of Abercrombie's construction crews. These early roadhouses were little more than reinforced tents and spruce log shelters. In a storm, however, or after a hard day along the trail, they were welcome respites for travelers.

As travel increased following the strike of gold in the Fairbanks region and the Valdez Trail was subsequently upgraded, roadhouses grew in size and popularity. At certain areas, such as Big Delta and Copper Center, multiple roadhouses sprang up, competing with one another until one folded and the other assumed




**Gakona Roadhouse, undated.** *Crary-Henderson Collection, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage, Alaska.*

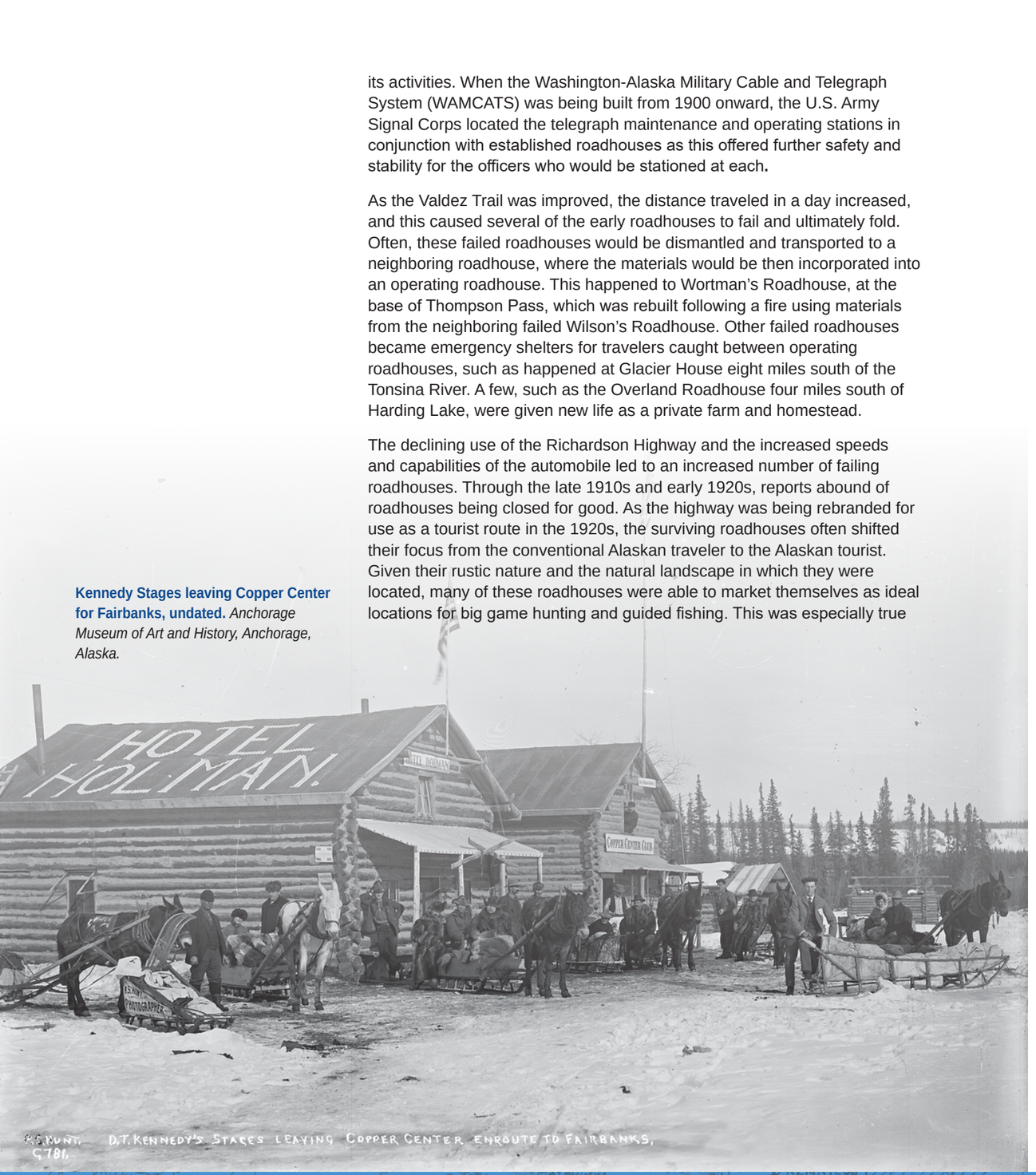
[4] "Orr not satisfied with Valdez Trail," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, November 10, 1906.

[5] "E. S. Orr tells of winter trail to Valdez," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, November 17. 1906.

its activities. When the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) was being built from 1900 onward, the U.S. Army Signal Corps located the telegraph maintenance and operating stations in conjunction with established roadhouses as this offered further safety and stability for the officers who would be stationed at each.

As the Valdez Trail was improved, the distance traveled in a day increased, and this caused several of the early roadhouses to fail and ultimately fold. Often, these failed roadhouses would be dismantled and transported to a neighboring roadhouse, where the materials would be then incorporated into an operating roadhouse. This happened to Wortman's Roadhouse, at the base of Thompson Pass, which was rebuilt following a fire using materials from the neighboring failed Wilson's Roadhouse. Other failed roadhouses became emergency shelters for travelers caught between operating roadhouses, such as happened at Glacier House eight miles south of the Tonsina River. A few, such as the Overland Roadhouse four miles south of Harding Lake, were given new life as a private farm and homestead.

The declining use of the Richardson Highway and the increased speeds and capabilities of the automobile led to an increased number of failing roadhouses. Through the late 1910s and early 1920s, reports abound of roadhouses being closed for good. As the highway was being rebranded for use as a tourist route in the 1920s, the surviving roadhouses often shifted their focus from the conventional Alaskan traveler to the Alaskan tourist. Given their rustic nature and the natural landscape in which they were located, many of these roadhouses were able to market themselves as ideal locations for big game hunting and guided fishing. This was especially true




**Kennedy Stages leaving Copper Center for Fairbanks, undated.** *Anchorage Museum of Art and History, Anchorage, Alaska.*

**Dog teams at a telegraph station on the Fairbanks-Valdez telegraph line, ca. 1900-1912.** *University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

for Rapids Roadhouse and neighboring Yost's Roadhouse, both located in the prime hunting area of Isabel Pass. During the 1920s, Alaskan hunter Frank Glaser had taken over ownership of Rapids and utilized it as a base for his activities as a big game hunting guide and market hunter. Yost's Roadhouse, abandoned after 1917, was likewise used in the 1920s by bear hunters seeking to provide specimens for academic study.

The operation of a roadhouse was a difficult task, made so by the remote locations, the severity of the landscape, and the scarceness of resources. However, they provided life-saving services to travelers, and, as such, the owners and proprietors were often afforded celebrity status by area residents and people using the trail. In 1906, it was reported that "roadhousing, at its best, is a thankless and almost profitless business, and we are inclined to consider the man who has the hardihood to go out on the trail and build a shelter against the storm, as a good bit of a Samaritan."[6] News articles throughout the early twentieth century reported on the comings and goings of roadhouse proprietors and almost always included praise for their activities. The owners and proprietors seemed to constitute a community unto themselves. They often traveled together into Valdez or Fairbanks for supplies, and news articles report that they even attended

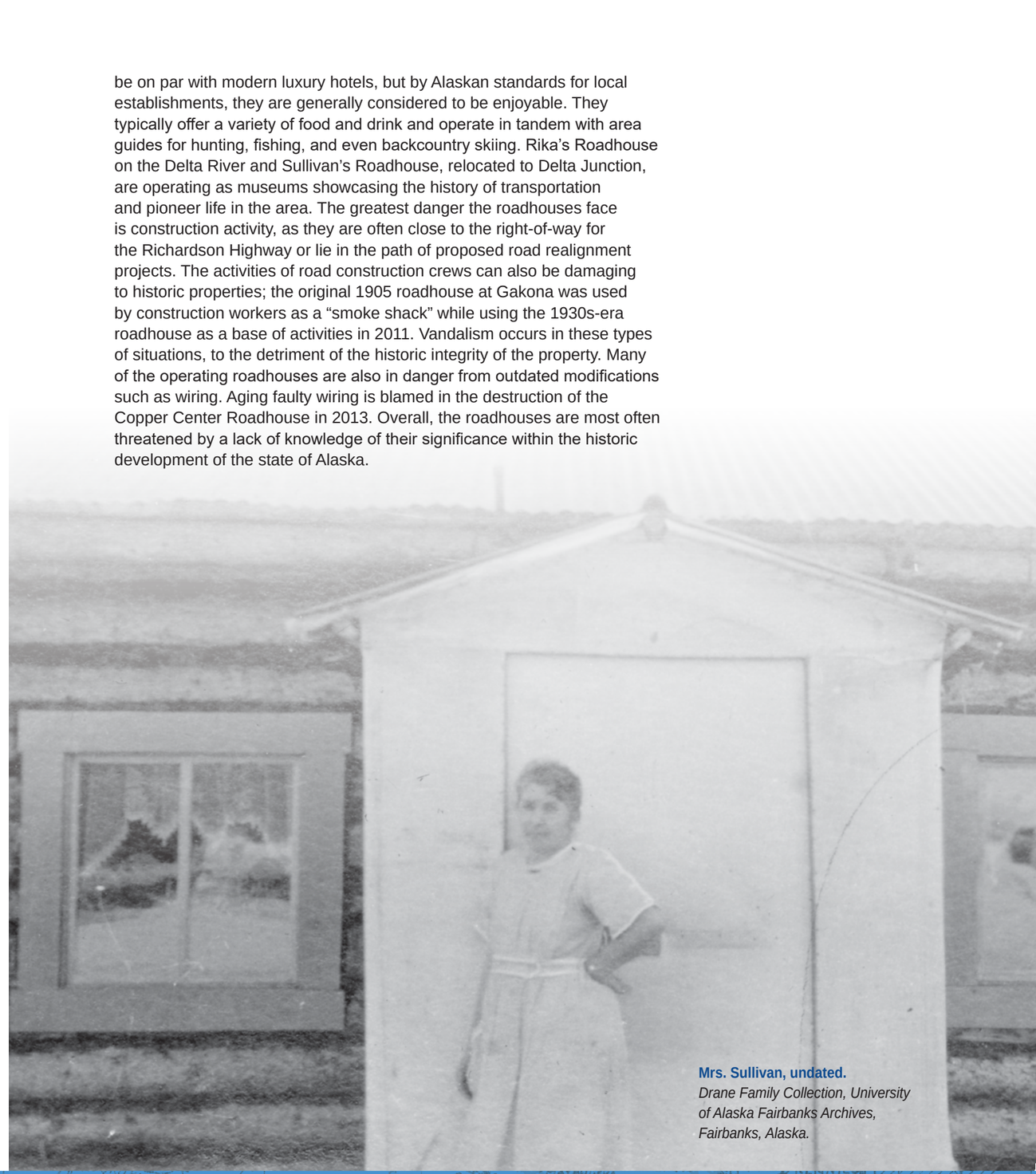
[6] "The Roadhouse Man," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, December 10, 1906.


**Paxson's Roadhouse, 1923.**
*Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

weddings and holidays hosted by one another. They also provided one another with emergency services. When the Birch Lake Roadhouse burned down in November of 1916, the proprietor, James Chisholm, was forced to walk barefoot to neighboring Dad Martin's Roadhouse to seek assistance. The roadhouse was lost, but the actions of the people at Dad Martin's Roadhouse saved Chisholm's feet, which had been frostbitten so badly they later required a two-week hospital stay in Fairbanks. In a similar vein, when Paxson's Roadhouse burned down in 1924, Alvin Paxson and his family were taken in by Mrs. Elizabeth Griffith at the Gulkana Roadhouse. This move was fortuitous for Paxson, as he took over operation of the Gulkana Roadhouse after Mrs. Griffith's death in 1925.

The operation of roadhouse systems as a single unit was aided by the fact that many establishments, especially along the Richardson Highway, were often owned and operated by the same people over the years. Paxson, originally establishing his base of operations at Paxson's Roadhouse at Mile 185, also eventually came to own Our Home Roadhouse further south and operated the Gulkana Roadhouse until his death in 1926. Mrs. E. E. Dotty was the main proprietor of Wortman's Roadhouse for many years, but also owned and operated the roadhouse at Ptarmigan Drop further north. Charles Nevelius, by all accounts, never owned a roadhouse but operated Ptarmigan Drop, Rapids, and Yost's roadhouses at various times throughout his life. Jack and Florence Sullivan began operating roadhouses together in Nome during the Nome Gold Rush; Florence had previously operated a roadhouse establishment near Dawson City during the height of the Klondike Gold Rush. When the couple moved to the Richardson Highway, they opened Sullivan's Roadhouse, which they operated from 1906 until its closure around 1920, after which they purchased and reopened Byler's Roadhouse closer to Fairbanks. They operated Byler's until their deaths a few months apart in 1924.

The roadhouses that remain today range from archaeological remains to fully operational roadhouses updated with the latest in modern conveniences. The operating roadhouses are not generally considered to be on par with modern luxury hotels, but by Alaskan standards for local establishments, they are generally considered to be enjoyable. They typically offer a variety of food and drink and operate in tandem with area guides for hunting, fishing, and even backcountry skiing. Rika's Roadhouse on the Delta River and Sullivan's Roadhouse, relocated to Delta Junction, are operating as museums showcasing the history of transportation and pioneer life in the area. The greatest danger the roadhouses face is construction activity, as they are often close to the right-of-way for the Richardson Highway or lie in the path of proposed road realignment projects. The activities of road construction crews can also be damaging to historic properties; the original 1905 roadhouse at Gakona was used by construction workers as a "smoke shack" while using the 1930s-era roadhouse as a base of activities in 2011. Vandalism occurs in these types of situations, to the detriment of the historic integrity of the property. Many of the operating roadhouses are also in danger from outdated modifications such as wiring. Aging faulty wiring is blamed in the destruction of the Copper Center Roadhouse in 2013. Overall, the roadhouses are most often threatened by a lack of knowledge of their significance within the historic development of the state of Alaska.



**Mrs. Sullivan, undated.**
*Drane Family Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

**Rika's Roadhouse State Historic Park, July 2012.** *Photograph courtesy of Casey Woster.*

## Richardson Highway History

The Richardson Highway began as an all-American route from the Port of Valdez into the Klondike gold fields in the Yukon and later the gold-rich Interior of Alaska. A difficult route, few prospectors achieved their destination during the peak Klondike years. As the focus of prospecting activities shifted to Interior Alaska and the Fairbanks region in particular, the U.S. Army was charged with the establishment of a transportation route to facilitate law-enforcement activities. The Richardson Highway was officially begun in 1899 as a route from Valdez to Eagle and was known as the Valdez-Eagle Trail. Following the gold strike at Fairbanks in 1901, however, the route was shifted west and became known as the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, the Valdez Trail, the Military Trail, or simply The Trail. As Alaska grew in population and activities in the Interior became more permanent, the route was renamed the Richardson Road and then the Richardson Highway in honor of Major Wilds P. Richardson, who focused energy and money on the construction and maintenance of the route. Use of the road declined in the 1920s and 1930s, but saw resurgence in activity during the World War II era and again in the 1970s with the construction of the Alyeska Pipeline.

The Richardson Highway today is a 366-mile long stretch of two-lane road running from the port town of Valdez in the Gulf of Alaska to Fairbanks, a former gold rush town located just south of the Yukon River in Interior Alaska. Two sections of the route have been designated as Alaska Scenic Byway: the northern segment, from Fort Greely to Fairbanks (Mile 261-Mile 362), and the southern segment from Valdez to Glennallen (Mile 0-Mile 128). Despite these designations, the central portion of the route, from Glennallen to Fort Greely, contains some of the highest and most scenic spans of the road, as well as some of the most violent areas for storms.

The current route of the Richardson Highway was neither the original nor originally intended route from Valdez into the Interior. Following the gold strike in the Klondike in 1896, Valdez became touted as the jumping off point for the all-American overland route to the Klondike, which had the advantage of avoiding Canadian customs officials. Originally, the route from Valdez was intended to weave north to the gold rush city of Dawson; subsequent gold rushes eventually shifted the route to Eagle, Alaska, and then ultimately to Fairbanks.

The all-American route to the Klondike was short-lived. Initially, the route was heavily advertised in newspapers despite a government report from 1884 on the impassible terrain in the area.[7] In 1884, Lieutenant W. R. Abercrombie was dispatched by the U.S. Army to investigate previous Russian reports of hostile Alaska Natives in the vicinity of the Copper River. With the increase in prospecting and exploration of Alaska that began after the Alaska Purchase in 1867, the government recognized that American citizens would eventually explore and interact with the Native people in this region. After a failed attempt at ascending the Copper River from its coastal terminus, Abercrombie employed two Russian Creole guides who knew of a route into the Copper River Valley. The route utilized the Valdez and Klutina glaciers to cross the Chugach Mountains.[8]

It was this route that was first used by prospectors heading to the Klondike in 1897. Glacier travel was particularly dangerous, as the softening of snow and ice during spring and summer months could weaken ice bridges over vast crevasses. Avalanches and storms were among the challenges along the exposed faces of the glaciers. Exposure, scurvy, and starvation claimed the lives of many prospectors attempting to travel this route. Of approximately 3,000 prospectors known to have attempted this route during the Klondike stampede, only two hundred are known to have made it to Dawson. Most returned to Valdez while others struggled north into the Copper River Valley, where they began prospecting.[9] Camps sprang up on the glacier itself to support travelers, rudimentary groupings of shelters utilized by prospectors to rest before continuing their glacier ascent.

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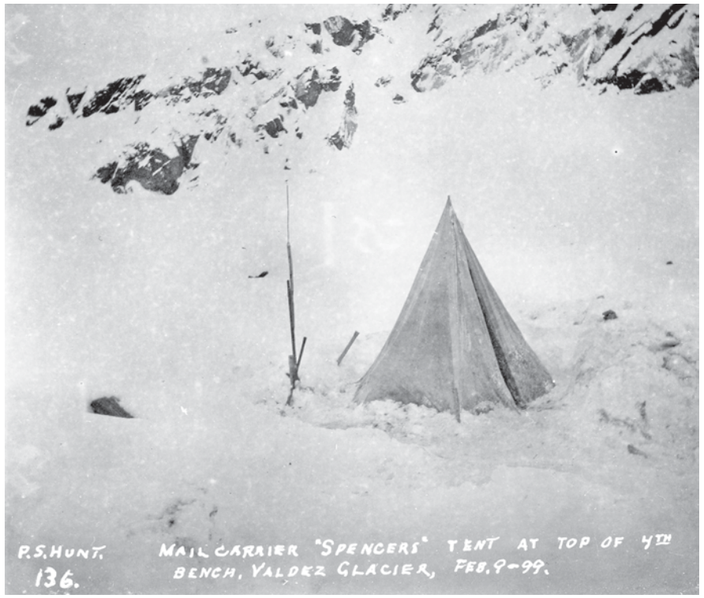
[7] Jim and Nancy Lethcoe, *Valdez Gold Rush Trails of 1898-99* (Valdez, Alaska: Prince William Sound Books, 1996), 7.

[8] Geoffrey T. Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900* (Anchorage, Alaska: U.S. Department of the Interior, Alaska Division of Parks and Recreation, 1997), 5.

[9] Morgan B. Sherwood, *Exploration of Alaska: 1865-1900* (Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 157.



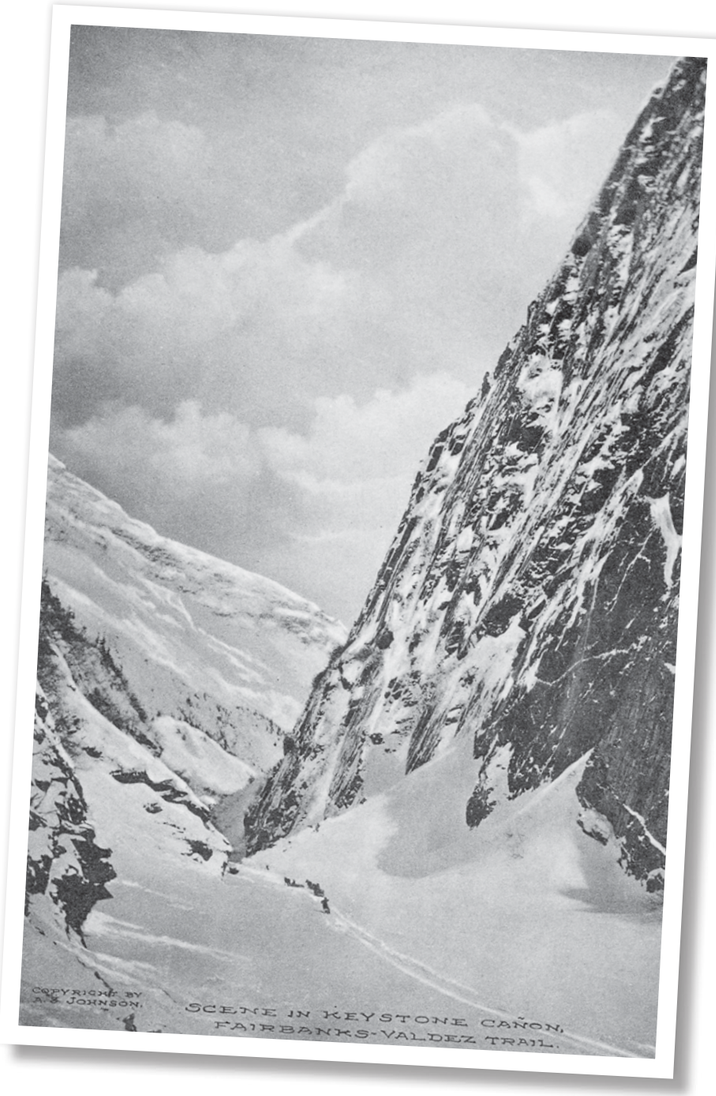

**Mail carrier's tent at the top of the fourth bench of the Valdez Glacier, February 9, 1899.** *AHFAM McDade Collection, Anchorage Museum of Art and History, Anchorage, Alaska.*

In response to the plight of the prospectors returning to Valdez in sick and starving conditions, the government sent Abercrombie to Valdez again in 1898 with the hopes of locating a safer trail into the Interior. Reports vary as to the exact method by which Keystone Canyon was discovered, but the government reports indicate that Abercrombie located the canyon pass, giving easier access through the initial impassible stretch of mountains surrounding the port of Valdez. Plans were quickly made to blaze a trail through the canyon and over Thompson Pass.[10]

Between 1898 and 1900, the gold strike in the Klondike began to slow, and prospectors began to move down the Yukon River towards the previously investigated Fortymile region in the Alaskan interior and Nome on the western coast of Alaska. In an attempt to provide law and order to the prospecting centers in the Interior along the Yukon, military forts were established at strategic points: Fort St. Michael near the mouth of the Yukon River, Fort Gibbon at the confluence of the Yukon and Tanana rivers, and Fort Egbert near the gold rush settlement of Eagle City in the Fortymile region. Eagle City was of particular concern, as it was located just a few miles from the Alaska-Canada border and served as a port of entry. It also "provided services to more mining camps than any other along the Yukon" at the height of its prosperity.[11] Additional military reservations were also established, most notably Fort Liscum at Valdez. However, as a consequence of the increased population and military presence, "inadequate transportation was becoming an ever-increasing problem."[12] A method of transportation needed to be established to provide access to the Interior on a year-round basis. Summer transportation could be arranged by utilizing open water, sailing to the mouth of the Yukon and then taking steamers up the Yukon to Dawson. In the winter, however, the Interior was largely isolated by sea ice, cutting off mail and supplies during the coldest months.

In the summer of 1899, Abercrombie returned to Alaska with the charge of creating the Trans-Alaska Military Road from Valdez to Fort Egbert on the Yukon. Congress appropriated funds totaling $49,975 for the construction effort, and, by the close of the season in 1899, Abercrombie had succeeded in establishing a mail route to Fort Egbert and cleared 93 miles of packhorse trail from Valdez to the Tonsina River.[13] In addition to trail building efforts, Abercrombie also became aware of the serious conditions of the prospectors who had wintered in Valdez. He was obliged to extend aid to approximately 500 miners and prospectors, housing and feeding them through the following winter.[14]

In 1900, a U.S. Senate subcommittee decided to establish "a system of transportation routes and that the basis of such as system should be a well-built wagon road connecting the Pacific Ocean at Valdez with Eagle on the Yukon River, a distance of approximately 400 miles."[15] Pressure had been placed on the government by the people residing in Alaska through Judge James Wickersham to improve road and trail conditions within Alaska, with the argument that doing so would be to the economic benefit of everyone. "The lack of good trails and wagon roads made mining very expensive. Miners and trading companies had built trails and bridges by subscription, each contributing as much as they could afford. But each fall the winter trails had to be reconstructed, and each spring the summer trails and bridges had to be rebuilt."[16] The basis for the transportation route would follow the rudimentary trail already surveyed by Abercrombie from Valdez to Fort Egbert, dubbed locally as the Valdez-Eagle Trail. In doing so, the government also hoped to open up more of Alaska to development and promote a more permanent population, one based in Alaska for agriculture




**Travelers in Keystone Canyon, undated.** *Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

[10] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 6.

[11] Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 139.

[12] Major General Gilman C. Mudgett, *Building Alaska with the U.S. Army*, prepared by the Information Office, U.S. Army Headquarters, Alaska, 1958, 58.

[13] Mudgett, *Building Alaska with the U.S. Army*, 73.

[14] Mudgett, *Building Alaska with the U.S. Army*, 72.

[15] Claus-M Naske, *Alaska Road Commission Historical Narrative* (Fairbanks Alaska: State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, 1983), 22.

[16] Naske, *Alaska Road Commission Historical Narrative*, 18.


**Fairbanks, Alaska on August 3, 1904.**
*R. C. Force Papers, 1900-1910, Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

as well as mining activities. By 1901, the U.S. Army had completed a pack trail from Valdez to Eagle City.[17]

In 1902, a small mining stampede took place in the area just upstream from the confluence of the Chena and Tanana rivers. Prospectors from Nome flooded east in response to reports of gold found in the vicinity of Ester Dome in the fall of 1901. In September of 1902, Fairbanks was officially established by the area miners. In December of that year, a second minor stampede to the Fairbanks area occurred from Dawson City, with approximately 800 miners and prospectors setting out on the frozen Yukon for Fairbanks in temperatures close to 50 degrees below Fahrenheit.[18] By Christmas of 1903, there were approximately 1,500 to 1,800 people working in the vicinity of Fairbanks.

Owing to the population increase of Fairbanks from 1902 to 1903 and the subsequent drop in population in the Fortymile district, Fairbanks quickly became the focus for the military in terms of peacekeeping. Judge Wickersham, serving for the Third District Court of Alaska, moved his headquarters from Eagle City to Fairbanks in 1903 and proceeded to set up a judicial court system from the burgeoning metropolis.[19] Prospectors traveling north from Valdez into the Interior took advantage of the Trans-Alaska Military Road, traveling the pack trail as far north as the Gakona River before turning northwest for Fairbanks. By 1904, this trail, dubbed the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail or alternately the Valdez Trail, had become the dominant route of transportation into the Interior.

Roadhouses quickly began to spring up along the trail system, beginning almost as soon as the first prospectors began to travel north. Camp Comfort, located near the start of the trail, was among the first official roadhouses established, being first mentioned in government reports in 1898. By 1902, Camp Comfort boasted a two-story log building and by 1910 had a reputation for good food and comfortable bedding.[20] Before long,

[17] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 6.

[18] Naske and Slotnick, *Alaska*, 136.

[19] Terrence Cole, ed, *Old Yukon: Tale, Trails, and Trials* (Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 2009), xxvi.

[20] Hallock Bundy, *The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail* (Seattle: The Alaska Publishing Company, 1910), 23.



roadhouses appearing at intervals of 10 to 20 miles along the trail opened and closed in response to shifting demand and quality of service. Overall, 51 roadhouses are known to have operated along the Valdez Trail between the establishment of the road and the decline of use in the 1920s.

In response to the growing importance of Fairbanks, the U.S. Army was authorized to build a branch of the Trans-Alaska Military Road northwest from Gakona, providing reliable access from Valdez to Fairbanks. Gakona became the junction of the two trails, and a homestead located at the junction became a roadhouse that served travelers and area prospectors alike. An initial survey of the route to Fairbanks was conducted in the summer of 1904, and estimates of $1.5 million were made to improve the existing route from pack trail to wagon road.[21] In order to fund the road construction work, legislation was suggested that 70% of the taxes on licensing fees within Alaska be set aside for road construction work, dubbed the Alaska Fund. Construction would be overseen by a Board of Road Commissioners, “composed of an engineer officer of the U.S. Army to be appointed by the Secretary of War and two other officers drawn from troops stationed in Alaska.”[22] The board was also given the ability to decide where roads were needed based on petitioned need. Roads were only to be built to permanent settlements, thereby not wasting funding and effort constructing roads to transitory or impermanent mining settlements. The better-established roadhouses along the Valdez Trail often fit the bill for a permanent settlement, serving as community centers for prospectors, fur trappers, and adventurers in the given area.

On January 27, 1905, the legislation was signed into law creating the ARC with Major Wilds P. Richardson named as the president of the board. Richardson was familiar with Alaska, having been stationed at Fort St. Michael at the mouth of the Yukon River and overseeing military and judicial action along the Yukon River prior to the establishment of the Third Judicial District of Alaska. Richardson was also familiar with the previous road construction work of the U.S. Army.

Five years prior in 1900, Congress had appropriated $450,000 to build “a communications system which would tie Alaska and the United States together.”[23] The WAMCAT line, was intended to connect all of the military forts within Alaska, and from them to the contiguous United States and was specifically to be for military purposes. By 1901, landlines had been constructed connecting Dawson City, Yukon Territory, to Fort St. Michael. Soon after, cables were completed connecting Valdez to Fort Egbert along the Trans-Alaska Military Road. In view of this previous connection, Richardson enlisted the U.S. Army to aid in construction efforts, as the military was already in charge of the telegraph line. A branch from Gakona to Fairbanks was of particular military importance. “Richardson then asked the Army to assign a company of engineer troops to Alaska. This company, to be stationed at Valdez, would work under the direction of the Board in

[21] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 7.

[22] Naske, *Alaska Road Commission Historical Narrative*, 24.

[23] Mudgett, *Building Alaska with the U.S. Army*, 81.

improving the military trail and mail route between Valdez, Fairbanks, and the Yukon" as well as construct telegraph cable along the new route.[24]

During the winter of 1905, construction efforts were concentrated on surveying and flagging the new military route, following the existing Valdez Trail. In 1906, the ARC and the U.S. Army Signal Corps began an official working relationship, with the telegraph cable line being officially changed to match the line of the new road. Having the road and telegraph lines parallel one another would provide additional funding for the road and allow for easy access to the cable line by the established wagon road. Construction on the wagon road commenced, with funding coming from the two different sources. Military funds were used primarily on the main Trans-Alaska Military Road, while the Alaska Fund was used for local road improvements and construction of smaller trails leading from the main road to smaller communities along the route.[25]

Prior to the creation of the Trans-Alaska Military Road and the ARC, travel from Valdez to the Interior was accomplished by foot or pack animal. The trail was often just barely wide enough for a small wagon or sled. During winter months, sufficient snow coverage was required in order for supplies and mail to be brought over the route from Valdez,[26] as dogsled was the most efficient means of transportation in the winter months. In the later winter months of January and February, it was possible to ride the trail on a bicycle; the wisdom of this means of transportation was questionable, but adventurous travelers had succeeded by 1905.[27] In 1907, the best time made for travel over the route from Valdez to Fairbanks was accomplished by freight hauler Ed Orr in a time of six days, ten hours, and ten minutes for the entire 400-mile-long route.[28]

There were two major routes north of Isabel Pass, the Delta Cut-Off winter trail and the Summer Trail. The Delta Cut-Off followed the Delta River once out of the pass to the junction of the Delta and Tanana rivers at Big Delta. This route was not ideal for summer travel, however, due to the shifting nature of the Delta River, and a secondary summer route was constructed on firm ground. The Summer Trail diverged from the Delta Cut-Off at Donnelly Roadhouse just north of Isabel Pass, crossed overland along the side of Donnelly Dome, and up to Big Delta where it rejoined the exiting trail. The Delta Cut-Off was permanently abandoned in 1921 following road improvements on the Summer Trail. Sullivan's Roadhouse in particular suffered from the abandonment of the Summer Trail, closing in 1920.

The goal of the ARC was to improve both routes into a wagon road, thereby improving on the total travel time and the difficulties associated with traveling extensive distances over pack trails. The trail was increased to a width of

[24] Naske, *Alaska Road Commission Historical Narrative*, 31.

[25] Naske, *Alaska Road Commission Historical Narrative*, 40.

[26] "The Roadhouse Man," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, December 10, 1906.

[27] "To Valdez on Bikes," *Fairbanks Weekly News*, February 18, 1905.

[28] Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report 1907* (Department of the Interior, 1907), 14.


**Traveling to Fairbanks by bicycle, in Tiekel Canyon, undated.**
*Crary-Henderson Collection, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage, Alaska.*

10 to 16 feet depending on the section of road, with adequate grade and drainage to sustain traffic. In order to improve drainage, it was sometimes necessary to remove the vegetative ground cover, which resulted in the melting of the permafrost layer not far below the surface. To combat this, crews utilized corduroy construction, a technique that involved placing wood poles parallel to the roadbed and then covering it with a second layer at right angles with the first.[29] Corduroy construction is still employed on small rural access trails, as it provides a stable platform for travel over bogs and swampy ground. Additional drainage was provided by the construction of culverts as needed, usually of log taken from the surrounding vegetation. The construction of permanent-intending bridges also began, although bridge construction was often inadequate in the face of violent glacial rivers.

By 1908, over one-third of the route was officially suitable for wagon travel and "with the steady improvement of the overland trail to the coast, our spring and fall periods of isolation diminish with equal steadiness, and the time is now in sight when the freeze-up will have lost much of its

[29] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 8.


**Automobile on the Valdez Trail, 1913-1914.** *Crary-Henderson Collection, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage, Alaska.*

significance."[30] Nineteen construction crews were working steadily on the trail during the construction season of 1909,[31] and the first motorcycles were able to make the trip in two days in April of 1909. Motorcycles became increasingly used on the trail, outfitted to pull sleds.[32] The trail was officially deemed a wagon road by 1910, although it was still not meant for heavy traffic during the summer months or automobiles. Mail runs were being made three times per week by 1910,[33] and 3,500 people and 2,500 tons of freight were moved over the trail during that season.[34]

The first serious discussion of upgrading the road for automobile use was suggested in 1912, and by 1913, the trail had been improved to the extent that an automobile was able to make the trip from Fairbanks to Valdez. Bobby Sheldon, a Fairbanks freight hauler and automobile hobbyist, successfully made the trip in a 1913 Model T, averaging nine-miles-per-hour.[35] Following this success, more automobiles quickly followed suit, to the extent that the ARC was forced to declare that it made "no pretense of having built roads adapted for automobile travel" and widely discouraged their use on the trail.[36] By 1915, automobiles were in such extensive use that the mail runs were made exclusively by auto.[37] Automobiles also improved the roadhouses, allowing for supplies to be delivered at a more frequent rate, improving the accommodations and the food served. Roadhouse

[30] "Trail Improvements," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, October 23, 1908.

[31] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 8.

[32] "Two Days from Coast to Here," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, April 13, 1909.

[33] Bundy, *The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail*, 14.

[34] Grace Edman, Alice Hudson, and Sam Johnson, *Fifty Years of Highways* (Nome, AK: Alaska Department of Public Works, Division of Highways, 1960), 7.

[35] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 10.

[36] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 10.

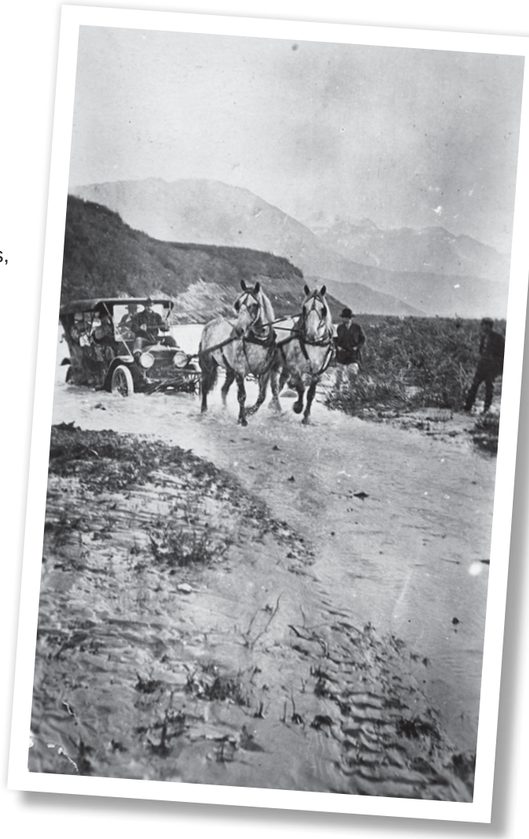
[37] "Over Trail Mail Service Starts Today," *Alaska Citizen*, October 4, 1915.



operators were able to use automobile travel to further their custom by offering automobile repair and rescue services.

The entrance of the U.S. into World War I in 1917 saw the use of the road as a military transportation route, with trucks introduced for use along the entire length for hauling freight and inspecting and repairing the telegraph system. The use of motorized vehicles "was responsible for cutting the time necessary for an inspection of the line, a round trip of 740 miles, from six weeks to ten days."[38] Richardson was relieved of ARC command in August of 1917 and transferred to the war effort, ending his official stewardship of road construction in Alaska. His commitment to the route had been so extreme that it had for some years been referred to as "Richardson's Hobby" and he continued to write editorials praising the road and the work of the people who maintained it.[39] In 1919, the ARC officially renamed the route from Valdez to Fairbanks the "Richardson Road" in honor the amount of work Richardson had put into the road, and in 1920 the road was rebranded the Richardson Highway.[40]

A shift in the use of the Valdez Trail began in 1911. All travelers heading for Fairbanks since 1902 had used the route, and all mail and freight was hauled over the trail. Freighting companies, including the Ed Orr Stage Company, regularly made trips from the coast to the Interior and back again, leaving several times per week by 1911. However, discovery of high-grade copper ore in the mountains 60 miles east of Copper Center resulted in an increase in transportation needs to the region. Initially, the mines were accessible by road, with a trunk road connecting to the Valdez Trail at Chitina south of Copper Center. A secondary road connected the mines with the port town of Cordova, east of Valdez. Construction on a railroad connecting the mines with Cordova was completed in April 1911, leading to relatively easy transportation through the coastal Chugach Mountains in comparison with that of the Valdez Trail.[41]



**ARC horse team towing a car across Gunn Creek, 1915.** *Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

The completion of the Copper River and North West (CR&NW) Railroad resulted in a drastic shift in use for the lower section of the Valdez Trail. It proved to be cheaper to send mail and freight over the rail line to the mines and then on to Chitina over a connector line. As a result, the lower section of the Valdez Trail fell into disuse. Stage and freight began to connect from the rail line terminus at Chitina to Fairbanks, and, by 1913, little stage or freight was being taken over the southern portion. The route was a faster method of travel, with the travel time from Fairbanks to Chitina listed at 45 hours in

[38] Mudgett, *Building Alaska with the U.S. Army*, 104.

[39] "Communication," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, September 22, 1917.

[40] "Next Season's Boulevard," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, September 20, 1920.

[41] Lone E. Janson, *The Copper Spike* (Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1975), 137.

August of 1913.[42] In January of 1913, news items in Fairbanks urged people to consider traveling by stage through to Valdez rather than taking the rail line from Chitina, in an attempt to support the now-failing roadhouses south of Chitina.[43] The trail was kept open all winter only through the efforts of the residents of Valdez in an attempt to prove that the trail was the only sure route into the Interior. By 1915, the main users of the southern portion of the trail consisted of area residents.[44]

The use of the Valdez Trail declined further beginning in 1921. Beginning in 1917, the federal government began investing in the Alaska Railroad, a rail line to connect the major port of Seward, Alaska, with the then-named Mt. McKinley National Park and ultimately with Fairbanks. The goal of the federal government was to further open Interior Alaska for increased settlement and development. The project was completed in 1923 at a total cost of $65 million. The rail line began operating in 1917, even before the line was fully complete, with construction moving north from Seward and south from Fairbanks simultaneously. The Alaska Railroad had the advantage of providing comfortable, fast, and easy transportation of goods and people from the coast into the Interior, although at a steeper price than the stagecoaches on the Valdez Trail. Trains leaving Seward would run as far as the line had been completed, after which people took stagecoaches to reach the opposite end of the operating rail line.

In the end, the Valdez Trail could not compete with this new means of transportation. There was a massive move to rebrand the route as a pleasant and scenic method of accessing the Interior and began to be marketed for tourism. A mass marketing strategy was enacted in 1920 to advertise the route “on the Outside,” complete with the distribution of postcards.[45] Many postcards depicted picturesque roadhouses situated happily along the road. The completion of the Alaska Railroad as far as Broad Pass in 1921 left only a few miles of coach travel, and thus the decision was made to begin closing the Richardson Highway for winter travel. This decision was in direct contrast to the original use of the route, which had been focused almost entirely as a winter route into the isolated Interior. The highway had lost significance to the point that the only winter travel over the route was localized or for the purpose of maintaining the telegraph line, which for several years had been gradually being upgraded to telephone line.[46] Roadhouses along the Richardson Highway either closed as a result of the declining travel or adapted their accommodations for use by tourists, whose standards for accommodations were considerably higher than the average Alaskan resident.

The advertisement of the Richardson Highway as a tour route was relatively successful, and by 1923, the entire route had been officially

[42] “Chitina to Fairbanks by Automobile,” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, August 25, 1913.

[43] “Poor Business for Roadhouse,” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, January 27,1913.

[44] “Roadhouses Prepare for Big Business,” *Alaska Citizen*, October 4, 1915.

[45] “Next Season’s Boulevard,” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, September 20, 1920.

[46] “Near the Broad Highway,” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, June 11, 1921.

**President Warren G. Harding driving the Golden Spike to complete the Alaska Railroad in Nenana, Alaska, July 1923.**
*Alaska Purchase Centennial Collection, Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

upgraded for use by automobiles.[47] Outside tour companies had picked up advertisements for the route and began working to provide tour trips, calling the highway the “Golden Belt Line” and “appealing to the more adventurous traveler.”[48] The name “Golden Belt Line” and the use of the term “highway” were considered misnomers to travelers unfamiliar with Alaska; “to Outsiders and inexperienced travelers who are used to concrete highways and easy travel, the term highway (it being like no other highway they ever saw) enables them to criticize it harshly from a highway standpoint, whereas if it were called trail, and they found it anything better than a trail anywhere, they would be compelled to boost it.”[49]

[47] Smith, *Alaska’s Historic Roadhouses*, 19.

[48] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 11.

[49] “Views Along the Richardson Trail,” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, August 4, 1925.


**Richardson Highway tour bus, undated.** *Skinner Foundation Photographs, Alaska State Library, Juneau, Alaska.*

Transportation of mail and passengers along the Richardson Highway further declined with the introduction of aviation. The earliest flights in Alaska had taken place at air shows beginning in 1914, but the potential for the use as a viable means of transportation did not begin to catch on until the early 1920s. It was not viewed as a practical means of transportation until 1925 due to the extreme temperatures of Alaskan airspace in summer and winter and the lack of appropriate landing areas. In 1925, however, the Territorial legislature appropriated $5,000 for the construction of airfields, and the ARC was given the task of construction at major locations.[50]

By 1930, 61 government-funded airfields had been constructed, with countless more in private operation. "Increased use of airplanes led to decreased use of some trails and roads, and in some cases to their decreased maintenance or abandonment."[51]

During the 1930s, the Richardson Highway saw an increase in passenger and freight traffic linking the Interior to the coast and newly opened mining opportunities. While the rest of the U.S. was in the throes of the Great Depression, mining activity increased as a response to the increase in the price of gold and other precious metals. Additionally, the federal government had raised the cost of transportation over the Alaska Railroad in an attempt to cover losses. This led to a 35 percent increase in traffic along the Richardson Highway. Attempts to raise taxes on licensing fees and the requirement of tolls to utilize bridges and ferries on the Richardson Highway in order to encourage use of the Alaska Railroad led to sometimes violent conflict with Alaska residents. Rika's Roadhouse, near the confluence of the Delta and Tanana Rivers 90 miles south of Fairbanks, was the site of one such uprising: in 1940, truckers commandeered the ferry crossing of the Tanana and even reputedly kidnapped the U.S. Marshall sent to investigate the disturbance.[52] By 1942, the government had "effectively given up the struggle to force the Alaskan residents and businesses to use the railroad rather than the road system."[53]

The Richardson Highway became the object of military study during the buildup of international hostilities in the late 1930s. In 1939, "Congress passed a bill (later known as the Initial Defense Appropriation Act) that provided federal funding to states and territories for military readiness."[54] This included funds for the creation of military installations. Alaska had the distinction of being considered a strategic military location, and Army air and naval bases were constructed across the territory. In order to better connect the various bases on the Alaskan mainland (primarily in Anchorage and Fairbanks), funds were dedicated to the connection of roads from Anchorage to the Richardson Highway and the overall improvement of the Richardson Highway to handle the increase in heavy traffic. The First Deficiency Bill of 1941 provided for the construction of a highway from Palmer (Anchorage) to the Richardson Highway, later known as the Glenn Highway, and, in 1942, the First Deficiency Appropriations Act provided $2.2 million for bridge construction and widening and realignment of the Richardson Highway.[55] Construction of the Alaska Highway, connecting Alaska to the contiguous U.S., began in 1942. Funds totaling nearly $1 million were appropriated for the Richardson Highway to bring the road up to the same standards as were being employed on the Alaska Highway. Despite the increase in funds and road improvements, the ARC in 1944 continued to report the need for funds to continue and increase construction of the Richardson Highway.[56]

**Rapids Roadhouse air strip, August 16, 1938.** *Woodrow Johansen Papers, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

The 1950s and 1960s saw an expansion of tourism, mining, oil, and fishing industries across the state. The military presence in Alaska remained high, owing to the ongoing conflicts of the Cold War and Alaska's proximity to Russia. "The defense industry in Alaska was the biggest employer and biggest spender in the state from the 1940s to the 1970s," and was only surpassed in the late 1970s by the sudden massive expansion of the oil industry.[57]

In 1968, vast oil fields were discovered in Prudhoe Bay off Alaska's North Slope. The problem was transporting the oil from the North Slope of Alaska to the contiguous U.S. Construction quickly began in the 1970s on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System, which runs from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez,

[50] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview* (Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, 2014), 57.

[51] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 58.

[52] Bleakley, *Valdez Trail National Register of Historic Places Multiple Nomination Form 10-900*, 11.

[53] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 69.

[54] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 75.

[55] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 76.

[56] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 78.

[57] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 98.

a distance of approximately 800 miles over unsettled country. In order to facilitate construction and maintenance of the pipeline, a gravel road was built from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay, which became known as the Dalton Highway, and was eventually built to state secondary road design requirements.[58] The Dalton Highway was constructed to connect to the Richardson Highway, and the pipeline begins to follow the Richardson as soon as it passes Fairbanks. The existing road provided and continues to provide easy access to the pipeline. Construction activities brought a sudden economic boost to the communities along the highway, providing seasonal labor and utilizing the resources available at each community.

Today, the Richardson Highway is used for access to the pipeline, for recreational purposes, and as a route for hauling freight from Valdez. The communities along the route continue to provide support for travelers. The Richardson is a favorite route among Alaskans, and is currently being investigated for historic significance. The various involved parties are investigating what the designation of a 150-mile long stretch of mostly rural highway will entail and how it will impact construction and usage in the future.

[58] Mead and Hunt and Cultural Resource Consultants, LLC, *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, 119.


**Richardson Highway south of Tazlina, 2012.** *Photo courtesy of Scott Woster.*

The Richardson Highway stands as a testament of the activities of Major Wilds P. Richardson during his tenure as head of the Alaska Road Commission. The route, stretching from Valdez to Fairbanks and crossing two major mountain ranges, evolved from a trail suitable for foot and pack animal to a fully paved, two-lane transportation route into the Interior. The route from Valdez to Fairbanks has not shifted dramatically during its more than 100-year history, with only slight realignment along most of the route to accommodate changing engineering and automotive technologies. The importance of the highway as a major transportation artery cannot be underestimated.

## Donnelly Training Area Roadhouses

DTA is bisected by the Richardson Highway. The area between the existing highway and the Delta River contains Donnelly Dome, an area landmark for thousands of years. The area contains lakes, hunting grounds, and hiking trails, but it is most commonly used by the military for training purposes.

The current Richardson Highway diverges from the Delta River south of Donnelly Dome to take advantage of firm ground for road construction. Historically, however, this was known as the summer route of the Valdez Trail. The winter route followed the Delta River, passing Donnelly Dome to the west and continuing north to the confluence of the Delta and Tanana rivers. Travel over river ice was preferred in the winter, as the ice provided a relatively smooth surface for sleighs and a swifter passage than over the rugged tundra of the summer route. As a result, there were a number of historic roadhouses situated along the winter route, to the west of Donnelly Dome and the current route of the Richardson Highway, squarely inside land maintained and utilized by the military.

The following are history synopses of the roadhouses that existed on what is now military training land.

### *Donnelly's Roadhouse*

Donnelly's Roadhouse had a fortunate location. Built at the junction of the Summer Trail and the winter Delta Cut-Off Trail, the site ensured the roadhouse's use year-round. It was a single-story log building with a sod roof, nestled "against the hill overlooking the Delta River." It had large horse barns and storage, operated as a stage station, and was also the base from which the stage horses were put out to summer grazing on the Delta Flats.[59] E. P. Donnelly and R. E. Shanklin are listed as the proprietors in ads beginning in 1909, which advertised that the roadhouse had recently been renovated with new apartments for women. It also featured doghouses

[59] Walter T. Phillips, *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway: The First Quarter Century, 1898 to 1923* (Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Historical Commission, 1984), 58.

for mushers.[60] The roadhouse was advertised in travel guides in 1910 as being an excellent stop, with good meals and much in use as a base for game hunting in the area.[61] In 1911, J. T. Geoghan is listed as the proprietor in a news item dealing with a demented musher who had been creating trouble further north at Big Delta.[62] Tom Flannigan, who owned several other roadhouses during his time in the Interior, had taken over the roadhouse by 1913.[63] In August 1916, the Delta River flooded its banks and began to tear away at the trail, and, by mid-month, all of the buildings associated with the roadhouse were reportedly washed away. Flannigan had sufficient time to clear the roadhouse, however, and was quickly at work rebuilding.[64] Ownership was taken over by Jim E. Stone in January 1920, when it was noted a shootout took place at the roadhouse. The event involved a Signal Corps officer who went on a shooting spree, although he failed to kill anyone before being mortally wounded himself.[65] Hunting parties became the primary patrons of the roadhouse during the decline of traffic in the 1920s.[66] The Delta River shifted course again in 1926, washing out the roadhouse for a second time. A stopping point was not rebuilt in the area until the modern Donnelly Inn was constructed in 1956.[67]

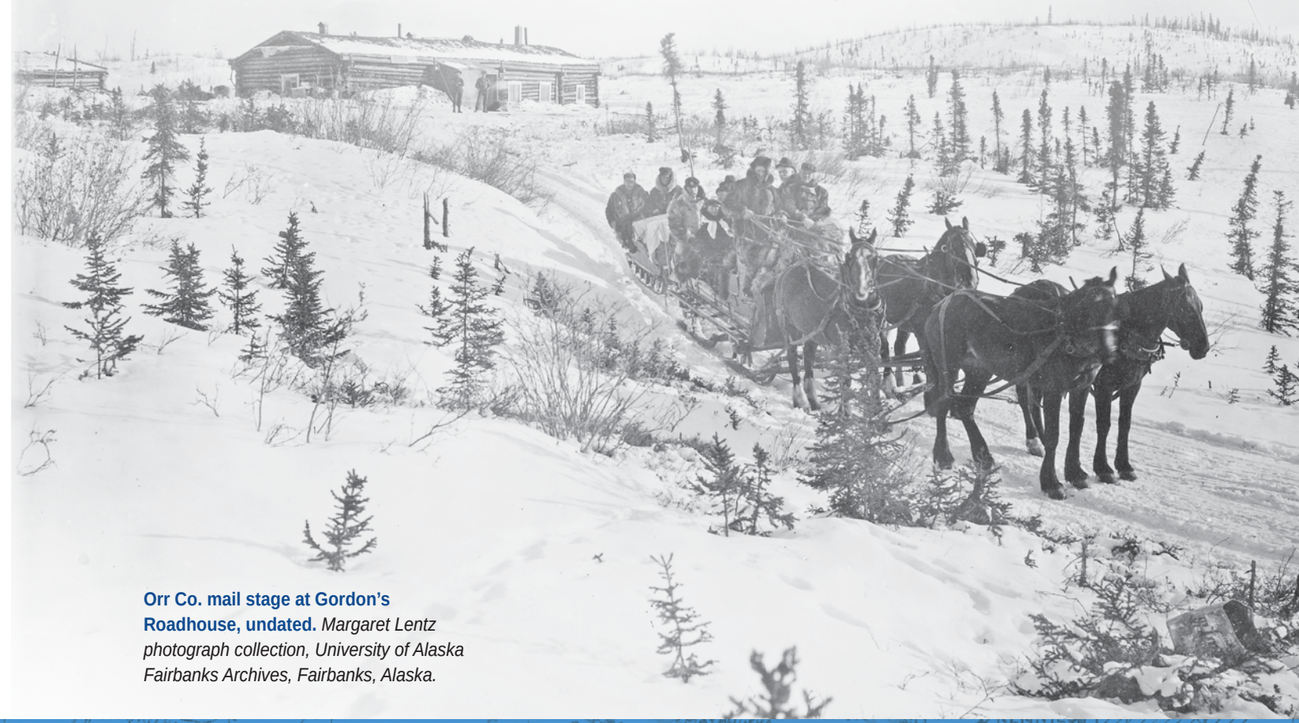
**Donnelly Roadhouse and Telegraph Station, undated, between 1910 and 1920.** *McKeown Family Photographs, University of Alaska Anchorage.*

## Gordon's Roadhouse

Gordon's Roadhouse was listed in mileage charts as being approximately 16 miles north of Donnelly's Roadhouse, but the exact location on the old trail or the current road to it is unknown. Mr. and Mrs. H. E. Gordon opened the establishment prior to 1909 when advertisements for the roadhouse first appeared in Fairbanks papers.[68] A travel guide in 1910 claimed it was a popular hunting spot and that Gordon "is the possessor of some the largest black bear skins seen in the territory. He is a famous hunter and a day spent with him in the hills is a great day's sport."[69] One skin, brought to town in 1914, measured more than nine-and-a-half feet. Gordon sold his roadhouse to Henry "Butch" Stock in 1914, returning to the states with his wife, whose health was then failing.[70] Stock continued to run the roadhouse through the 1920s.[71] When he married Miss Jennie K. Perry in 1917, the wedding was attended by many other roadhouse proprietors, including those from Donnelly's, McCarty's, and others.[72]

Nothing is recorded about the closure of the roadhouse, although it would appear that it served primarily as a destination for big game hunters. Whether the roadhouse was on the Delta Cut-Off or Summer Trail is not known.

**Gordon's Roadhouse, circa 1978.** *Fort Wainwright Cultural Resources Office, Fort Wainwright, Alaska.*



**Orr Co. mail stage at Gordon's Roadhouse, undated.** *Margaret Lentz photograph collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

[60] "Donnelly's roadhouse ad," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, April 12, 1909. [61]Bundy, *The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail*, 27.

[62] "Demented Man Walks in Snow Without Shoes," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, October 6, 1911.

[63] Phillips, *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway*, 58.

[64] "Donnelly Roadhouse Being Washed Out," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, August 13, 1916.

[65] "Miller reports Donnelly's case; gunman may die," *Nenana News*, January 10, 1920.

[66] "New Yorker Likes Alaska Hunting," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, September 10, 1925.

[67] Phillips, *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway*, 58.

[68] "Gordon's roadhouse ad," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, April 12, 1909.

[69] Bundy, *The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail*, 29.

[70] "Gordon brings big bear skin," *Fairbanks Daily Times*, May 31, 1914.

[71] "First visit here in eighteen years," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, August 11, 1925.

[72] "Roadhouse man is married," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, April 20, 1917.


**Beale's Cache looking north on the Richardson Highway, undated.**
*Woodrow Johansen Papers, University of Alaska Fairbanks Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

## Beale's Cache

Beale's Cache was a short-lived roadhouse not substantially used by the stage companies. It was a single-story cabin of unpeeled logs with tents for storage. It was located on the west side of Donnelly Dome, at an elevation of 1600 ft.[73] The cabin may have been originally constructed by Charles Miller; he is recorded as being in possession in 1917-1918. Frank Glassie, the later owner of Rapids Roadhouse, reported helping Miller build a new cabin at the Cache in 1915.[74] In 1919, it was sold to John Hajukovich, one of the original owners of Rika's Roadhouse in Big Delta, and he was said to have used the building as a base for hunting parties in the Donnelly Dome area.[75] Glassie also reports that at one point the roadhouse was owned by the well-known roadhouse man and trail character Henry "Butch" Stock,[76] but this cannot be verified. In a travel guide from 1929, it is recorded as deserted, but still used "as a jumping off point for hunters going from the main road into the Jarvis Creek country for moose, sheep, and bear."[77]

## Sullivan's Roadhouse

Sullivan's Roadhouse, originally located 84.5 miles south of Fairbanks on the south bank of the Little Delta Creek, was one of the only roadhouses to have a single owner during the entire span of its use. It was constructed in 1906 by Jack and Florence Sullivan along the original winter Delta Cut-Off into Fairbanks, but when the trail was rerouted in 1907, the roadhouse was moved to a new location closer to the new route. The Sullivans operated a successful roadhouse business in this location until 1920, when they relocated to Byler's Roadhouse closer to town.

The Sullivans were considered to be old-time Alaskans. Florence Sullivan had participated in the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898, operating a successful hostelry in Dawson City. In the winter of 1900, she took part in the stampede to Nome, walking the full length of the Yukon River with two men she paid

[73] Phillips, *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway*, 59.

[74] Rearden, *Alaska's Wolf Man*, 22.

[75] Phillips, *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway*, 59.

[76] Jim Rearden, *Alaska's Wolf Man*, (Missoula, Montana: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 40.

[77] Richardson Highway Transportation Company, *A Travelogue of the Richardson and Steese Highways* (Alaska: Richardson Highway Transportation Company, 1929), 16.

**Sullivan Roadhouse, undated.**
*Drane Family Collection University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

to haul her outfit. She met and married Jack Sullivan in Nome, and they relocated to the Interior during the stampede in 1904.[78] They were familiar with the roadhouse business and operated what was argued to be the best roadhouse along the trail for many years.[79] Jack Sullivan was also a carpenter and was employed by the ARC from 1908 to 1922 to repair the bridges in the area, for which he was paid $1.75 per foot.[80]

Sullivan's Roadhouse was constructed with a sod roof, metal had been installed at some point early on and later replaced with modern corrugated metal, although the original pole decking was maintained. The roadhouse was a one-story, 18 by 76-foot building consisting of unpeeled white spruce logs with four rooms separated by interior non-structural walls. The rooms were divided by use, including a front room, a kitchen, a storeroom, and a room that was divided between dining and guest quarters. Cloth curtains were hung from the ceiling to create a series of small guest cubicles for privacy, and the dining room also served as overflow bunk quarters for men when the roadhouse was crowded. The original occupancy was listed at 40 guests.[81]

**Jack Sullivan's dog team, undated.**
*Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1905-1917, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska.*

Abandoned by the Sullivans in 1922, the site occupied by the abandoned roadhouse was ultimately incorporated into the Army training lands associated with Fort Greely, just south of Delta Junction. The U.S. Army was aware of the roadhouse's location and significance, and the roadhouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. Unfortunately, the roadhouse ultimately stood at the edge of an artillery range and was in danger of being hit by stray ordnance. In 1996, the Army agreed to help

[78] "Mrs. Jack Sullivan dies Sunday morning," *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, January 24, 1924.

[79] "Personal mention," *Alaska Citizen*, May 27, 1912.

[80] Erica Z. Kracker and Edward B. Kiker, *Sullivan Roadhouse National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form 10-900* (Anchorage, Alaska: U.S. Department of the Interior, Alaska Division of Parks and Recreation, January 1978), 4.

[81] Kracker and Kiker, *Sullivan Roadhouse National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form*, 4.

**Sullivan's Roadhouse, July 2012.**
*Photo courtesy of Casey Woster.*

move the roadhouse to a more secure location within the town of Delta Junction. A site directly off the Richardson Highway was prepared, including a new concrete foundation. The roadhouse was successfully installed at the site and ownership transferred to the Delta Chamber of Commerce.[82] Today, Sullivan's Roadhouse operates as a museum dedicated to Alaska roadhouse and transportation systems.[83]

## Additional Roadhouses

In addition to the well-established roadhouses, there were three roadhouses established along the Delta River whose locations were so temporary as to be not easily verified at the present time. These roadhouses supported winter travel only, and, due to the shifting nature of the Delta River, it is probable that these establishments no longer exist. Distance tables varied from year to year depending on the publisher and date of creation, but the following three roadhouses were all listed to be within three miles of one another based on the location of Bennett's Roadhouse in Big Delta.

Nigger Bill's – The current location of Nigger Bill's is unknown. References to its location in contemporary sources list it only in relation to other now-lost roadhouses. It is mentioned by Wickersham in March 1905 as a sturdy log cabin built by an African American named Bill, and operated by Henry Stock as a base for his commercial hunting operations.

Colgrove Roadhouse – Listed in the general vicinity of Nigger Bill's in 1904, there are very few references to this roadhouse. It was listed in distance tables in 1904, but disappeared soon after.

Bradley's Roadhouse – Like Colgrove, Bradley's Roadhouse is only mentioned once, in a *Valdez News* item dated from December 10, 1904.[84] No other information is readily available.

[82] Kracker and Kiker, *Sullivan Roadhouse National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form*, as Amended, 1997, 5.

[83] Sullivan Roadhouse Historical Museum, online at: http://www.alaska-highway.org/sullivanroadhouse/index.html.

[84] Phillips, *Roadhouses of the Richardson Highway*, 57.

## Conclusion

For more than a century, roadhouses throughout Alaska have served as life-saving refuges from the Alaska climate. Operating as more than that, however, they have been gathering places for Alaskans to come together across a dangerous, isolated, and remote expanse of territory. From serving as shelters from storms and supply depots for early travelers to providing meals and mechanical services to modern-day travelers, roadhouses continue to operate across Alaska for the mutual benefit of all Alaskans. The roadhouses can be used to help map early transportation routes across areas where trails have been rendered unrecognizable by the overgrowth of vegetation. Roadhouses also embody the record of survival of people living in remote communities and can be valuable tools for researching historic events in otherwise nameless landscapes.

Although surveyed and documented in both 1974 and 1984, many changes have occurred along the Richardson Highway in the intervening 32 years, making new documentation and preservation of these roadhouses that much more important. Road construction projects and the gradual realignment of the highway mean that some roadhouses have been removed during the clearing process while others have been made inaccessible to vehicles. The surviving roadhouses that continue to operate often face dire financial threats and the loss of integrity due to careless alterations. The roadhouses that have not survived in the commercial sense and were abandoned are often in danger of destruction by neglect and vandalism. All of these roadhouses are in danger of being forgotten entirely, their importance during the gold rush period and the role they played in building Alaska lost to neglect and time.

Roadhouses hold a distinctive place in the history of Alaska, and those that survive are testament to the tenacity and determination of the first American explorers and pioneers in Alaska. Although many at first came to Alaska in search of freedom from the constraints of a more civilized society, the roadhouses themselves often formed the centers of community life across rural Alaska. These roadhouses became beacons of civilization in the beautiful, wild, and unforgiving landscape that is Alaska.


## Cultural Resources Management at Fort Wainwright

The Cultural Resources Management Program supports the Army's mission by inventorying and managing cultural resources in a manner that complies with federal law, minimizes impacts on the mission, supports sustainability of resources and infrastructure, and provides sound stewardship of properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Cultural Resources Management Office is located within the Environmental Division, Building 3023. Copies of publications and additional information on the history of Fort Wainwright are available upon request. Business hours are Monday through Friday 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

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