

Fairbanks

To

Homer



Thomas Evans

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PREFACE:

On February 10, 2022, I found this Alaska travel journal from late August 1999. I had forgotten about it. I had a large scrapbook with brochures and photos. The journal was pretty good but needed quality editing. The images were not so good. Many had poor content and were out of focus. I scanned some acceptable selections and entered them into this journal version.

Our tour of Alaska was a two-week excursion, part by train, part by boat, and part by RV. The original idea was from **Kay and Ed Guthrie**. Ed had made annual visits with his father to Soldotna to fish for salmon. He promised Kay he would put together a vacation to include couples. Then, when he and Kay visited **Tom and Sharyn Evans** in Tennessee over Labor Day in 1996, he announced his grand plan.

We would rent several RVs for two weeks and drive from **Fairbanks to the Kenai Peninsula**. Ed and Kay had several California friends who would also like to join us. Tom and Sharyn thought they had at least twelve people in their regular travel group who would enjoy the adventure. We talked to our friends, and it seemed we had at least 16 people committed. We estimated four to six RVs for our caravan.



Ed roughed out a general route and schedule. He even included fishing time for those who might join him and his father as they fished the Kenai River. I took his concept and filled in the details for our potential adventures. We needed everyone to "fish or cut bait." We had to lock in the rental RVs. Our sixteen was reduced to four: Kay, Ed, Sharyn, and Tom.

At first, we were a little disappointed. Ed and I had spent much time researching and drafting an exceptional plan for sixteen people. But we were fortunate. Finding and coordinating facilities for a large group was a bigger job than anticipated. By scaling back to just four, we created an even better itinerary.

We selected small B&Bs and remote cabins in more desirable locations. We tailored special events to be more suitable for four people rather than generalizing for a crowd.

Then, we had the unpredictable Alaskan weather. It was spectacular, but initially, we experienced a little rain and unappealing temperatures. We would have felt the

pressure of an unhappy crowd. However, our plans worked together. Rain or shine, we didn't have to worry if everyone was happy.

Similarly, spending a week in a small RV could have been challenging. It could have been a disaster—the "trip from hell." We might have also saved by not having the other twelve or more friends on this excursion. When we checked out our vehicle, the rental agent told us about a previous check-in.

He said, "*The two couples were 'at each other's throat'. They were feuding and were in separate units.*"

Our trip went well, probably for the following simple, obvious reasons. We made sure to discuss in detail what each of us wanted to do in advance. This approach minimized disagreements and hurt feelings if a favorite stop got curtailed or excluded, or if someone took too much time at different locations. We knew what was most important for each person and made it a priority. We respected everyone's feelings and allowed for private time. Most critical, we were flexible. Our motto remains, "Plan in great detail; execute in great flexibility."

The primary positive of the RV is that you can take all the comforts—well, maybe many of the comforts—right into the near wilderness. If you research, you can find pretty private, picture-postcard locations in the **Chugach National Forest**.

The big negative for RVs is that you can't run into town for supplies once you find this unique spot. We compromised during our stay in the Chugach. We found a park ranger reserve in our fantastic place, which let us roam freely.

These big vehicles are not your minivans. A large RV needs an experienced driver. I wouldn't want to drive a large RV around your typical city. Make a lousy turn at an intersection, and your rear-axle overhang could clear the sidewalk of pedestrians. Fortunately, Alaska is an RV country. Virtually every establishment plans to park these behemoths. Ed had been driving a large RV for many years. He handled it with ease.

After our trip, we reflected on our most enjoyable times and what to repeat. At the top of our list, that night with the spectacular Aurora Borealis was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

We enjoyed Denali Park, the Kantishna Wildlife Tour, our nature hikes and kayaking.



The Alaskan scenery is beyond words. It's a sight that can only be truly appreciated when shared with a few companions in the backwoods, not on an extensive commercial tour. I'm already dreaming of returning for an even more primitive adventure, such as backpacking, kayaking, or biking.

The Alaskan homesteaders, the Athabascans, the rangers, and wildlife guides have a quality of life from these unique, unspoiled mountains, streams, and wildlife.

What did we enjoy the least? I didn't care for Anchorage. It is just another city, albeit on a smaller scale. I have no reason to spend any more time than necessary on it.



OUR PLAN

Aug 28: Saturday – Arrive at Fairbanks – **B&B** for 7 Gables, 4312 Birch Lane

B&B Two Bedroom Apt (\$360): (907) 479-0751, gables7@alaska.net

Aug 29: Sunday – Tour Fairbanks - B&B: 7 Gables Inn

: Breakfast at B&B

9:00 to 1:00 University of Alaska Museum - highly recommended.

2:00 to 6:00 Riverboat Discovery (\$39.95/p)

Aug 30: Monday – Depart to Denali – Denali River **Cabins**, 5 minutes from Visitor Center @ Denali Park

CABINS: (\$140/night): (907) 683-2500

8:15 to 12:00 Alaska Railroad (\$162): Class: Adventure, (907) 265-2494

1:00 to 3:00 Tour Visitor Center Area,

3:30 to 5:30: In-room

5:30: Dinner & Cabin-Nite Theater (800) 276-7234,

Aug 31: Tuesday – Tour Denali Park - Denali River Cabins

7:00 to 7:00: Kantishna Tour

Dinner : Hotel in the Cabin area .

Sep 1: Wednesday – Depart to Anchorage - **B&B** Mahogany Manor, Governor Suite, 204 East 15th Ave

B&B (907) 258-7877, MahoganyManor@compuserve.com

12:15 to 7:45P **Alaska Railroad** (\$306): Class: Adventure, (907) 265-2494.

Along the Denali Wilderness. It stops at Talkeetna and Wasilla.

Eat on the train.

Sep 2: Thursday – Tour Anchorage - evening in the **RV**.

RV (\$1015): Wayne & Sharon, 3689 Artic Rd, (907)-561-9800 (\$ 500 Deposit)

Morning: 4 Hours Walking around downtown Anchorage:

- Log Cabin Visitors Center, Old City Hall,
- Alaska Public Lands Information Center,
- Ship Creek Viewing Platform, Tony Knowles Coastal Trail,
- Oscar Anderson House Museum, Imaginarium,
- Reeve Picture Museum, Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

Afternoon: pick up the RV and stock it with provisions.

Sep 3: Friday – 70 Mile Drive to Portage Lake, **Campground** (\$10):
Williwaw Creek, 800-280-2267

Morning: Drive Seward - stops at POIs Potter Marsh area, Beluga Point,
Candle Factory at Girdwood

Noon: Check into the campground

1:00 to 5:00: Stop at Begich, Boggs Visitor Center, Hike around the Glacier.

7:00: Ice worm Safari in the Park, Ranger Campfire in the park.

Sep 4: Saturday – 100 Mile Drive to Seward. **Campground:** City Campground
Ballaine Blvd (no tele # first come basis)

10:00: Break camp and hit the road.

11:00-12:00: Short side trip to Hope, an old gold mining town, for a lunch break.

2:00: Arrive at Seward and get set up at Campground.

3:00: Stop at Kenai Fjords National Park Visitors Center
In Seward Rail Car Center on 3rd Street.

4:00: Explore Seward.

Sep 5: Sunday – Kenai Fjords National Park Tour - **Campground:** Same as above

All Day - Kenai Fjords Tour (\$100/p) boat (907) 224-8068

Sep 6: Monday – 200 Mile Drive to Homer - **Campground:** Driftwood Inn/RV Park,
135 West Bunnell Ave (907) 235-8019,

9 AM: On the road.

Noon: Lunch in Soldotna

3 PM: Arrive in Homer and set up camp.

4 PM: Take a short hike down the Spit in Homer.

Sep 7: Tuesday – Homer - **Campground:** Same as above

Guided Day Long Kayak Tour of Kachemak Bay Park (\$100/p), Jakolof Ferry Service
(907) 235-2376 or Romancing the Sea (907) 235-6126

Sep 8: Wednesday – Homer - **Campground:** Same as above

9:00 to Noon: Walking Tour of Homer Art Galleries and Pratt Museum

Noon to 4:00: Ferry (\$36 RT/p) over to Halibut Cove

7:00 to 9:00: Evening sail (\$35/p)

Sep 9: Thursday – Back to Anchorage (247 miles) – Drop off RV & Depart (late night)

SATURDAY, DAY #0: DEPARTURE

After sitting for two hours on the plane from Nashville to Minneapolis, two hours in the airport, and five hours from Minneapolis to Fairbanks, our backs and bottoms were sore. Even worse, our seats were cramped in people shuttles. Fortunately, our plane was only 70% occupied. We had a little elbow room, which Sharyn took full advantage of.

When a young man sat in the window next to Sharyn, she brazenly suggested that he would be more comfortable somewhere else on the plane. She even identified a few alternatives for his evaluation. (Put her on a plane, and she turns from the matronly nurse into the territorial lioness.)

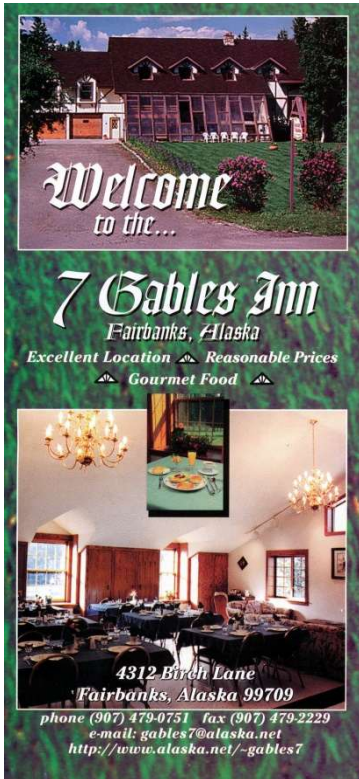
After the plane took off, he took the hint and moved. She then rolled up the armrest and took possession of two seats. They became her bed. She was able to sleep. I was relegated to shifting incessantly on my one coach seat in search of tolerable comfort.

While on schedule, our plane landed in Fairbanks around 8 PM. Getting our luggage took nearly an hour. No one flying to Alaska travels lightly. Passengers loaded carts full of bags, coolers, fishing gear, and camping gear. With all this extra gear on the plane and limited space, I worried our luggage would not make this flight. Nevertheless, the last few packages had our bags,

Around 9:30 PM, we hailed a taxi to the **Seven Gables B&B**. It was in a quiet residential area in the student housing neighborhood of the University of Alaska. The University was about a mile away from the Seven Gables. It was in "off-campus" housing. Its main house and two adjoining apartment buildings had rooms for only a dozen guests.

The Seven Gables was converted from a fraternity house, although it never occupied students. The husband of our hosts, a young couple in their late thirties, had built and designed it. So, it could have been a fraternity house, except the university has no fraternity houses. The wife told me that U of A was known as a party school. Really? It told her with the extreme cold weather in Fairbanks, that statement seemed to be an oxymoron. She chuckled and agreed.

The main building had two kitchens, two dining areas, and a sizeable knotty pine-paneled great room. The central kitchen and dining room could serve about 50 people.



We had a two-bedroom apartment in a separate building. Kay had already arrived and was waiting for us. After we said our hellos, we did our conventional "flip of the coin for rooms." Kay won the large bedroom on the first level, and we were on the second level.

Our apartment had a small bedroom, a sitting room with a desk, and a bath with Jacuzzi. The sitting room was part of a loft that opened above the kitchenette and living/ dining room on the first level. We could lean over the railing and call our requests to the cook. No space was wasted in the headroom. The ceilings were low. It was seven feet high on level #1 and slanted from seven to four feet on level #2. Sharyn would have become a ceiling decoration if I had bounced in our bed. Her side of the bed was near the lowest part of the slant and just one foot below the ceiling.

We returned to a small kitchen in the B&B. Here, our host gave us an orientation on Fairbanks. The wife was chipper and extroverted. She did the cooking and entertained the guests. She was full of energy and bragged about having gourmet breakfasts. One young woman helped her with breakfast and the housework.

The husband was considerably more reserved. He did all the maintenance and financial work. He was pleasant but withdrawn. He told us what there was to do and the best way to do it. Unfortunately, his recommendations did not match my plans.

I had assumed we could get around just fine with a few taxis. He politely informed us that "*happy people rent cars.*" Fairbanks was a pioneering town. Taxis were not reliable, too expensive, and inconvenient.

On Saturday at 10:30 PM, we decided we needed a rental car. We called around town and found nothing open for the weekend. We finally called back to the airport. They were very accommodating. They sent someone from the rental company to pick us up and return us to the airport to rent a car.

Although the sunset in Fairbanks was around 9:30, it remained lit almost until midnight. The sun may have been below the horizon, but the sky remained illuminating. The refraction and diffraction provided enough light for outdoor activity for an hour or two after sunset.

On our first night, the sky was cloudless. We had considered staying up to see the Aurora Borealis, which was visible three nights out of four in Fairbanks.

I did the math. Our bodies were still on Tennessee time. Darkness wouldn't be enough for viewing until one to three AM. Add that to the three-hour time difference between Alaska and Tennessee; we would have been awake until 4 AM at the earliest. We decided to wait for another evening. We met some Japanese tourists at breakfast the next day who stayed up to the requisite time but saw nothing. We chose correctly.

The average age of an Alaskan resident was thirty. None of us doubted that. Only the young had the stamina to survive the harsh Fairbank weather. It had three months of almost total darkness in the winter and three months of drizzled rain in the summer. Last year, the city had two weeks where the temperature never rose above 50 below zero. The rivers froze to a thickness of 4 feet or more.

As we met people, we always asked, "*Why did you choose to live in Alaska?*"

Most seemed to be loners or pioneer types. One of our taxi drivers lamented, "Fairbanks had become too crowded." He arrived when Fairbanks only had 2000 people, which was how he wanted it.

He said, "*25,000 people lived there, plus 15,000 students at the University.*" (I think he was a little low on the town people and about double the student number).

In the summer, I thought the average age had shifted dramatically. Everybody who owned an AARP card came to Alaska, and 95% of them were on some tour bus. I saw no tourists under the age of 50. Aside from mining or harvesting natural resources, tourism was the number one source of income for the State.

What was the draw of Alaska for vacationing seniors?

The only thing I figured was that Princess, Holland America, and the other major tour companies who owned Alaska marketed it well. They catered exceptionally well to this category of travelers. When these tourists returned to their "retirement communities," they shared their pictures and described how well they were treated and how easy the mode of travel was.

SUNDAY DAY #1: FAIRBANKS

Considering we did not get much sleep until after midnight Alaskan time, morning came too soon. The room was accommodating. Nevertheless, sleeping a few extra hours would have been more invigorating, but we had a full day ahead. Besides, we were now "happy people." We had a car and had to get moving.

A gourmet breakfast was served from 7 AM to 9 AM every morning in the main building. We were looking forward to it. On Sunday, we had an Italian Breakfast:

- Basil Yogurta Frittata
- Banana Tiramisu
- Black Bottom Muffins
- Polenta with Apples and Sausage

On Monday, we had a Jewish Breakfast:

- Blintz Soufflé
- Tropical Kugel
- Hash Browns
- Chareseth
- Raspberry Rugulah



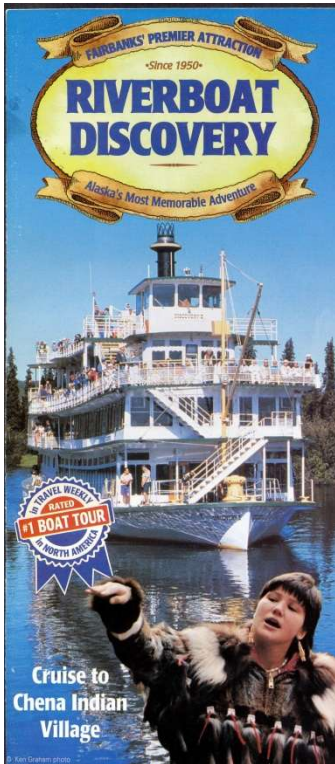
What was all this stuff? I didn't know, but we enjoyed it. Besides, I am fond of breakfast, even if I am unsure what I eat.

Our first Fairbanks adventure was the *Riverboat Cruise, Discovery III*. It was the only major show in town. Fairbanks didn't have much to do outside of the University of Alaska. Besides the boat, the El Dorado gold mine was the other major draw. The major tour companies selected – four hours on the riverboat and four hours on the gold mine. In the evening, they all ran out to *Alaskaland*, the 44-acre pioneer park built for the **Alaska 1967 Centennial Exposition**.

We were warned, "*Get before the busses arrived.*"

We did. We parked in the lot with no more than a dozen other cars. Shortly after us, nearly thirty tour buses started to pull in. Even in Europe, outside the *Sistine*

Chapel, I never saw so many busses. The boat holds 700 people. It didn't have a full load, but the ship didn't miss it by much.



Four generations of the Binkley family operated its four-deck sternwheeler riverboat. The ticket cost \$40. Multiply that by 700 passengers twice a day from May through October, and they had a \$7 million business, not to mention all the concessions they sold and their salmon canning.

Discovery III traveled down the *Chena River* for about ten miles. They had several attractions to point along the bank. The four major events were: "*Bush*" pilot, sled dog ranch, *Chena Indian village*, and "*fish camp*."

The boat stopped at each site. Someone onshore with a microphone described the local activities. Passengers could engage with those onshore. Everywhere, the ship had microphones and TV cameras.

After the boat sailed, we noticed all the little pontoon planes moored along the shore. Homeowners had small airplanes at their river docks, like Tennessee lake owners had ships at their docks. The homes along the river were basic log cabins, like a child's *Lincoln Logs*.



However, with the *Piper Cub* at the dock, these straightforward homes were more than that which was apparent.

For example, our guide pointed out the home on the river where *Ronald Reagan* met with *Pope John*. That was a clue.

As we continued down the river, a "bush" pilot provided us with an exhibition of the skills of one of these little *Piper Cubs*. It took off and landed on no more than a 200-foot stretch of grass along the river. The illustration shows how little space these planes need. This alacrity was critical to developing an immense country with no other infrastructure. These tiny planes were everywhere in Alaska. In the

winter, they replace their wheels with skis. They could pop off any surface. Here, the rivers and lakes all froze, creating landing sites everywhere.



The next stop was with **Susan Butcher** at the Tanana and Chena Rivers confluence. She won the *Iditarod Race* four times and had her dog training camp at this location. Susan was waiting with a microphone as the boat pulled near the shoreline. She introduced her dogs and discussed her training program. She told the story of Granite, her lead dog. He was in charge when she won the race in record time for the first time in 1986 and again in 1987.

One of her inspiring and dramatic stories was about an athlete near death. He was lucky to be alive and incapable of competing at any level. He returned, defied all the experts, and won "the big one." Susan talked about Granite's heroic spirit and her solitary faith in his desire to be a winner. In '86 with Granite, she broke all records: the first woman to race, win, and do it 14 hours ahead of the second-place male finisher. In '87, she and Granite beat that record. She and Granite won again in '88. Susan won with another lead dog in '91.

After an hour, the boat turned around and headed back. However, just before we turned, we got a clear view of the twin peaks of Denali, two hundred miles away. We can say we saw it, even if the weather turned bad.



On our return, we stopped at the *Chena Indian Exhibit* and "*Fish Camp*." A young Athabascan Indian woman was on shore to explain what "Fish Camp" was about. The boat pulled along the side of the camp, and we listened to her explanation and her stories.

A fish camp is typically a tiny family operation for catching and preparing salmon. It usually consisted of a fish trap, a cache, a smokehouse with drying racks, a couple of tents to shelter the family, and a couple of houses for the dogs. It was a fairly standard setup.

The trap was a water-mill-type contraption that rotated, scooped the fish out of the river, and dropped them into retaining boxes. It usually pulled out 400 to 1200 pounds of salmon a day.

The cache was a small house built on six-foot-high stilts. Frequently, it was no bigger than a large doghouse. The campers stored their supplies in it. This construction was necessary to keep these supplies out of the reach of varmints.

The smokehouse was often just a roof on four six-foot-high corner poles. The fish were cleaned and hung for a few days to dry and smoke. Fish that did not get smoked, such as chum for the dogs, were hung and dried on other racks in the sun.

The five types of salmon were: Red (**Sockeye**), Pink (**Humpy**), Silver (**Coho**), King (**Chinook**), and Chum (**Dog**). The prized Red Salmon had the best eating flavor. Pink Salmon was nearly as good as the Reds. In that order, the Silvers and Kings were of a lesser grade and were usually served in restaurants. For example, our B&B hosts warned us that the Salmon Bake at *Alaskaland* used king salmon. The Chum had the poorest flavor and was collected primarily for dog food.

The next consideration for smoking salmon was the selection of wood. Alder imparted the best flavor. However, "fish camps" usually did not have it available, so they used cottonwood.

The **Binkley family** (the Riverboat owner) canned salmon. They used only red salmon and had a unique marinating recipe. We purchased and snacked on a few cans during our travels. It was every bit as good as they claimed.

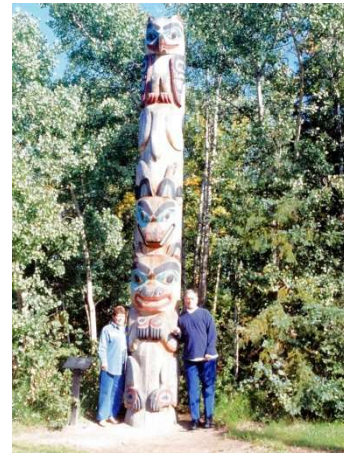
The next shore attraction was the *Chena Indian Village* exhibit onshore. We left the boat and divided into smaller groups with our guide. We moved to four major stops: an Indian village, a hunting and fishing lodge, an Indian crafts exhibit, and a dog-mushing pen.



Our guide was a young, extroverted woman. She gave an interesting and nice ten-minute talk.

The elaborate Eskimo coats were the highlight. With all their handwork and a beautiful assortment of furs with beaded decorations, everyone wanted to know where they could be purchased. Nope, these coats were prized family possessions and likely not available. However, the Athabascan family had other coats for sale for over \$20,000.

After our four-hour Riverboat ride, the tour was over. The *Alaska Museum* was next on our schedule. Hopefully, the tour buses did not have it on their agenda. Every guidebook says tourists should visit the museum if they have only one day in Fairbanks. Fortunately, the significant tours did not go there. The University of Alaska was limited and didn't have space for hordes of people.



The Museum had several small rooms with the typical exhibits. They described the history and geology of Alaska. That took about an hour.



They had a half-hour demonstration of the games at the Indian Olympics. The events in the competition depict the type of skills that an Eskimo would need to survive. Three medal-winning students now attending the University on scholarships presented each game with minimal theatrics.

Sharyn and Kay got involved in some Indian dance.

After this show, a high school teacher gave a "Mister Wizard"-type presentation with an hour-long slide lecture on the Northern Lights. He received his Master's

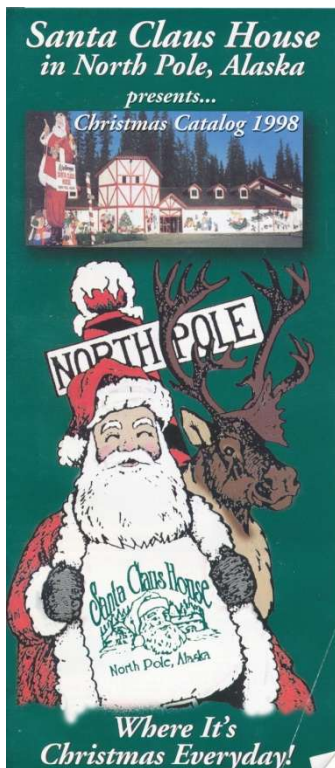
degree from the University of Alaska in the study of the Northern Lights. Like the Indian Olympics, it was a bit amateurish.

We quickly completed the museum and had a couple of hours to "fill in." We considered the Alaska Pipeline, just north of the city, and a trip to the North Pole, just south of the town.



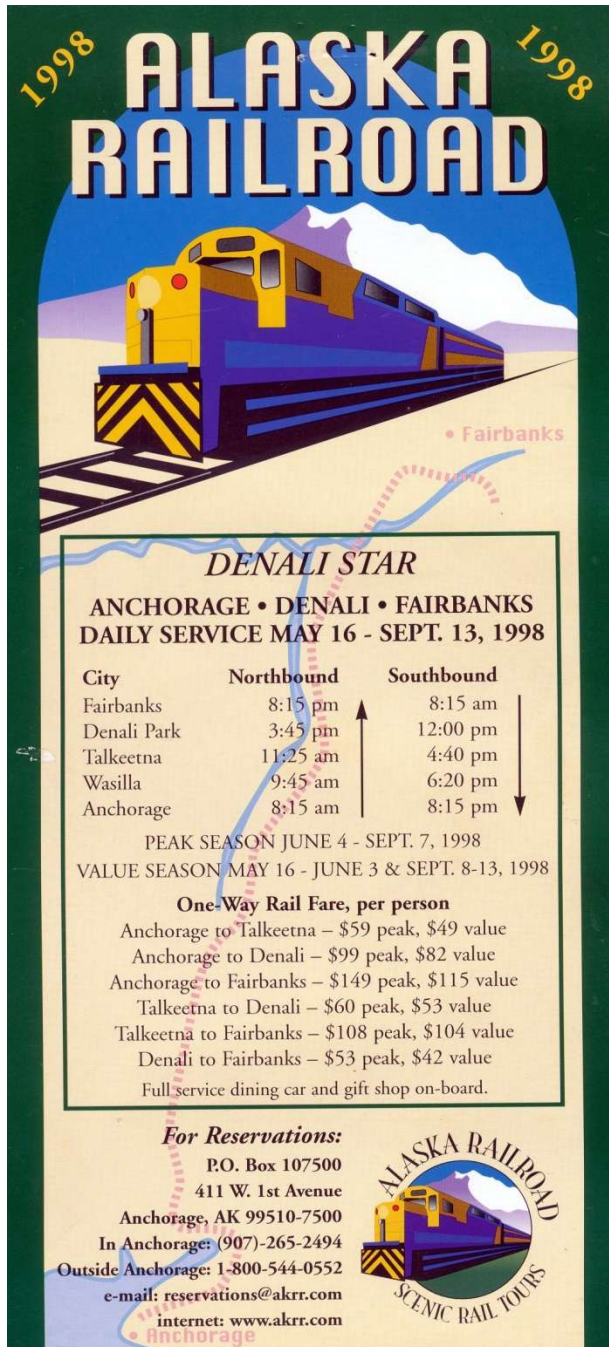
The pipeline was nothing more than that. It came from the ground about 5 miles north of Fairbanks and traveled along the surface. A small souvenir shop was beside the pipe, but nothing was explained. The Alaska Museum had a scale model.

The North Pole is a small town about 15 miles south of Fairbanks. As one might suspect, it takes full advantage of its name and location. Along the highway in the city, there is a big Santa Claus souvenir shop and a Santa Claus campground with reindeer in a pen. There are also several fast-food shops to cater to tourists.



MONDAY - Day #2: TRAVEL to DENALI

Monday was a near catastrophe—we almost missed the only train for the day. We had everything scheduled. Two days earlier, we called the Shuttle and told them our schedule. They agreed to pick us up at 7:30 and take us to the train station after breakfast. They didn't!



1998 ALASKA RAILROAD 1998

• Fairbanks

DENALI STAR
ANCHORAGE • DENALI • FAIRBANKS
DAILY SERVICE MAY 16 - SEPT. 13, 1998

City	Northbound	Southbound
Fairbanks	8:15 pm	8:15 am
Denali Park	3:45 pm	12:00 pm
Talkeetna	11:25 am	4:40 pm
Wasilla	9:45 am	6:20 pm
Anchorage	8:15 am	8:15 pm

PEAK SEASON JUNE 4 - SEPT. 7, 1998
VALUE SEASON MAY 16 - JUNE 3 & SEPT. 8-13, 1998

One-Way Rail Fare, per person
Anchorage to Talkeetna – \$59 peak, \$49 value
Anchorage to Denali – \$99 peak, \$82 value
Anchorage to Fairbanks – \$149 peak, \$115 value
Talkeetna to Denali – \$60 peak, \$53 value
Talkeetna to Fairbanks – \$108 peak, \$104 value
Denali to Fairbanks – \$53 peak, \$42 value
Full service dining car and gift shop on-board.

For Reservations:
P.O. Box 107500
411 W. 1st Avenue
Anchorage, AK 99510-7500
In Anchorage: (907)-265-2494
Outside Anchorage: 1-800-544-0552
e-mail: reservations@akrr.com
internet: www.akrr.com

ALASKA RAILROAD
SCENIC RAIL TOURS

• Anchorage

At 7:00, the shuttle was at our B&B. We told them they had the wrong time and returned at 7:30. The driver said, "*No problem.*"

We had breakfast and returned to the pick-up point at 7:30. There was no shuttle. At 7:45, there still was no shuttle. We called. They said they would be there immediately. Ten more minutes passed. Still, there was no shuttle. We were panicking. We called again and got the same response. At 8:00, there still was no shuttle.

The girl who worked in the B&B saw that we were in deep trouble and said she would talk to her employer and take us to the train station. We started loading her station wagon when the shuttle finally appeared. The train was leaving at 8:15, and it was 8:00, and we had a ten-minute drive. We had no idea if we would make it. We still had to load our luggage and get seat assignments. Everyone knew the promptness of trains.

The trains left right on time and waited for nobody.

We raced through town and arrived at the Depot with three minutes to spare. I ran to the ticket counter and told them, "*Hold that train!*"

Kay had the shuttle driver drive directly to the luggage platform, where they unloaded the bags. They told me, "***Get running!***"

Our car was at the front of the train, fifteen passenger cars from where we stood. **We ran!**

Sharyn and I passed the conductor out on the ramp and paced with his pocket watch in his hand. He was anxious to shout, "***Let her roll!***" He scowled as we passed him.

They put Kay, who was still trying to give them our destination, on a little cart and ferried her to the front of the train.

When we finally got our seats and sat down panting, Kay said, "***They are sending the luggage to the wrong hotel! I was trying to clarify where we were staying when they said GO. We will fix it.***"

We decided we would solve that problem when we got off the train, which we were glad to be on. We had not been in our seats for more than 30 seconds and had not regained our breath before the train started to move.

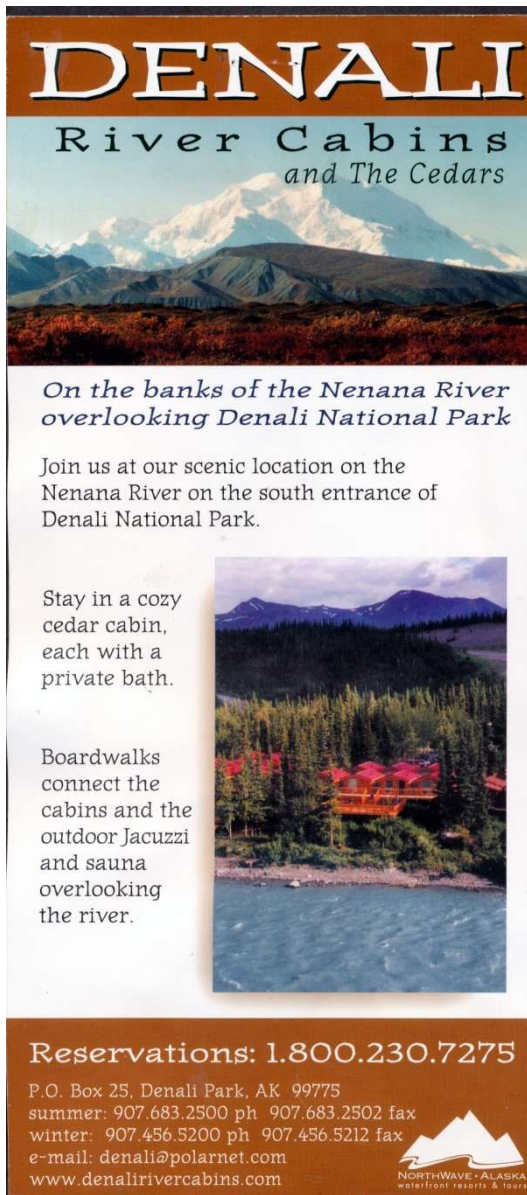


The rest of the ride was pretty uneventful. The scenery was fascinating. Near Fairbanks, it was primarily flat with forests of spruce trees. When we were within 30 miles of Denali Park, we moved into the mountains. Sharyn and Kay stayed in their seats and chatted most of the time. I went up into the observation car and watched the scenery.



We arrived in **Denali** shortly after noon. Kay checked on bags, and I searched for our ride to the cabins. Despite all the confusion at the other end, the bags ended up exactly where they should have gone. Fairbanks train station called ahead and told them that they had mistagged them. When the train arrived, the porters pulled them off and put the correct hotel name on them.

They took off to Denali River Cabins. We didn't!



DENALI
River Cabins
and The Cedars

On the banks of the Nenana River overlooking Denali National Park

Join us at our scenic location on the Nenana River on the south entrance of Denali National Park.

Stay in a cozy cedar cabin, each with a private bath.

Boardwalks connect the cabins and the outdoor Jacuzzi and sauna overlooking the river.

Reservations: 1.800.230.7275
P.O. Box 25, Denali Park, AK 99775
summer: 907.683.2500 ph 907.683.2502 fax
winter: 907.456.5200 ph 907.456.5212 fax
e-mail: denali@polarnet.com
www.denalirivercabins.com

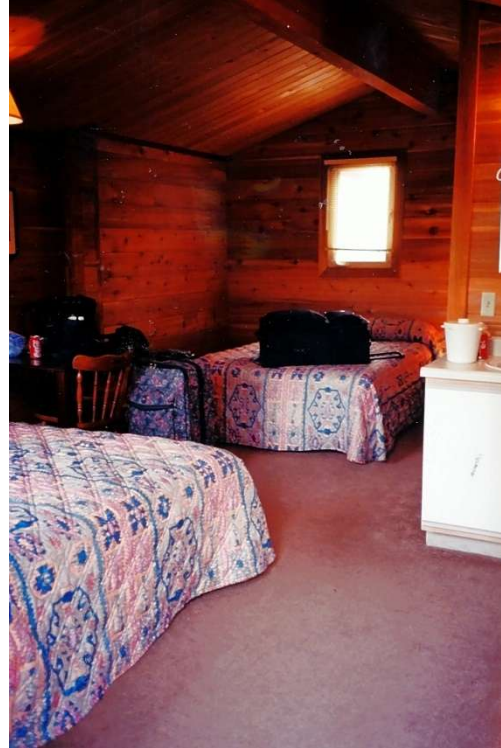
NORTH WAVE ALASKA
waterfront resorts & tours

We sat at the train station, waiting for the Cabin people to promise to pick us up. Finally, Kay called them. They forgot to mark that we needed a train pickup or that anyone that day needed one. Several of us were standing there. So far, we were not too satisfied with the competence of the hotel and taxi people, but the day wasn't over yet.

The *Denali River Cabins* were eight miles from the train station and in the opposite direction of all the hotels used by the tour companies. Fortunately, shuttle buses ran every half-hour between points central to all activities. We had a ride.

We couldn't have asked for better accommodations. We had a brand new little spruce log cabin right on the bank of the *Nenana River*. They had about as much room as our main bedroom at home. We had spruce walls, ceilings, and floors. Everything was built of four-inch-thick tongue and groove logs.

It had Dutch doors opening to the river. I told Sharyn I wouldn't close that door's bottom half. We were going to go to sleep watching and listening to the river. It was quiet, with only the sound of the flowing water, and relatively remote, although we had everything we needed, including two restaurants within 300 yards. It was so peaceful. Black spruce trees surrounded the cabins. There was nothing but forest on the opposite bank of the river. As you looked from our cabin across the river, you could see the Alaska mountain range, about ten to twenty miles away.



We planned for the evening to go to the *Cabin-Night Dinner* Theater after meeting Ed, who was coming by train from Anchorage. We had prepaid tickets; at least, I thought we had. When I made the reservations, I was instructed to pick them up at McKinley Village, a resort several hundred yards from the river. Ed arrived okay and without any of the complications that we experienced. **We were not so fortunate with our tickets.**

When I went to pick them up, they couldn't find our reservation. I gave them our confirmation number, and they said, "Oops, that is when our computers crashed, and we lost all the reservations."

They then said, "*We are all sold out.*"

I said, "*No, you aren't!*" *The whole day had not gone well, and I had reached the limit of* my patience with Alaskan competence.

The girl at the counter said, "*I will write new tickets for you, send you to the show, and call ahead and have them make room.*" She did exactly what she promised, and we had no further problems.

The show was great, and the food was okay. It portrayed a Kantishna Roundhouse Circa 1930. The waiters and waitresses sang, danced, and interacted with the guests during the dinner and the show. Everybody enjoyed himself. I would most definitely recommend it. Again, it was not an activity you will find with the large tour groups. They don't have the room to accommodate a lot of people. Some of the smaller tour groups were there.



The acts related the story of how gold was discovered around **Kantishna** and about the lives of some legendary people at that time. They were not only entertaining but also historically accurate.

TUESDAY – Day #3: DENALI

Denali was spectacular. A national park the size of Massachusetts had two mountain ranges: the tallest mountain in North America and the largest mountain in the world. The best time to visit was early September.

Kantishna Wilderness Trails

Daily Departure
6:30am
Return to hotels by
7:30pm



Discover a piece of Alaska's golden history and the warm hospitality of the Kantishna Roadhouse.

Lunch Is Served

in the dining room at the Kantishna Roadhouse which we have named in honor of our local legend, Fannie Quigley—gold miner and hostess extraordinaire. Fannie lived in the Kantishna area from 1905 to 1944 and was famous for her hospitality and good cooking. We at the Roadhouse aspire to the same reputation!

Gold Panning

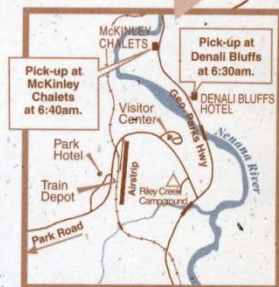
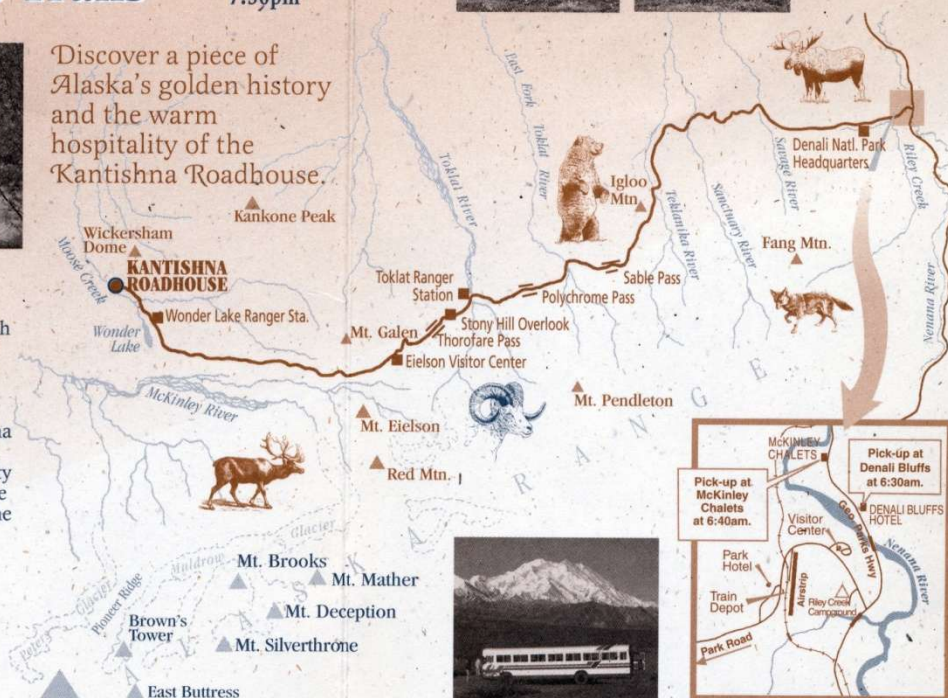
We provide rubber boots and panning equipment and you keep all the gold you can find! Back at the lodge, we will laminate your gold flakes on a beautiful "gold card" as a keepsake of your visit to the historic gold mining district of Kantishna.

Sled Dog Demonstration

Our kennel of happy sled dogs and their handler give daily programs on the history and care and keeping of sled dogs. Dog mushing, as it is known locally, was once the main mode of transportation in interior Alaska and continues to be a popular recreational aspect of outdoor life here in the North.

Bits of History

Kantishna was once the site of intensive mining activity, dating back to 1905. The old recorder's office, located on the property of Kantishna Roadhouse resort, is a picturesque reminder of that earlier era as is the original old roadhouse which still stands nearby the modern lodge.



Boarding the Bus

The Kantishna Wilderness Trails bus picks up at two locations.

Depart Denali Bluffs Hotel 6:30am, ~ Depart McKinley Chalet 6:40am

Please indicate where you will be meeting the bus at the time you book your reservation. Our full-sized motorcoach is white with red striping and will be easy for you to spot.

Children

We cannot accommodate children 4 years old and younger. Alaska State Law requires that children of these ages be secured in approved safety seats and our bus is not equipped with safety restraints of any kind. Children five years old and up are welcome at the full rate; we do not have a special rate for children.



Call for reservations 1-800-942-7420



Horseback in Kantishna

This activity is not included in the package price of your visit, but is available for guests who enjoy trail riding in a wilderness environment. Our professional wranglers on staff will be your guide. You may pre-book and pre-pay for your ride at the time you book your Kantishna Wilderness Trails tour. Arranging a ride on the day of your visit will depend upon availability. 1 hour ride- \$55.00

On our tour, we got to see:

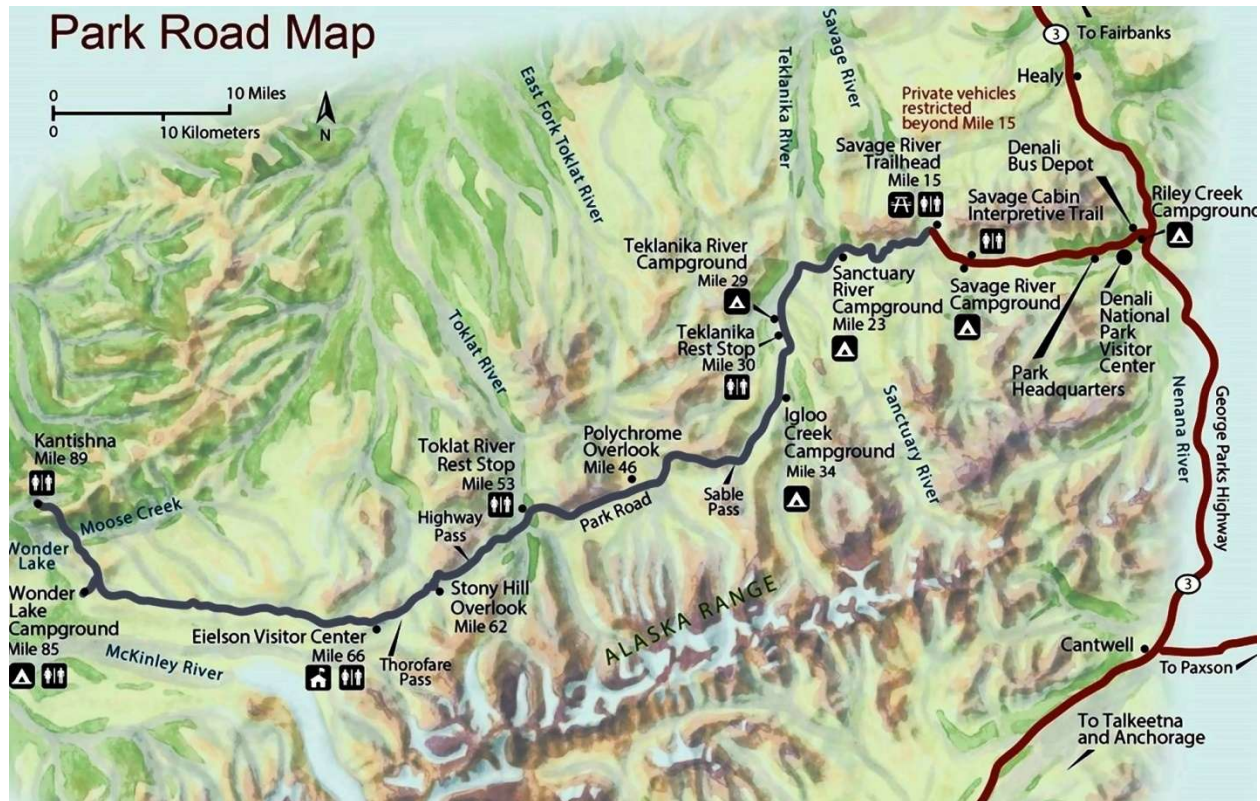
- 12 **Grizzly Bears**
- 8 **Caribou**
- A half dozen herds of **Dall Sheep**
- 2 **Moose**
- A dozen different species of **small mammals**
- A dozen different species of **bird**
- The **fall colors** (beats any place in North America!)
- Twelve nuggets of **gold**
- And the GREAT one – **Denali** (I took nearly a dozen pictures of it and its peak)

Although *Denali National Park* covers a large area, visitor access was restricted. Its automobile traffic was open to professional photographers or those with a special permit. Visitors entered the park either by foot (aka backpacking) or by tour bus. The official reason for the limitation was to minimize the impact of too many people on the park's ecology. The unofficial reason was to keep losing automobiles off the narrow roads with no safety guards that winded along the Outer Mountain range above two-thousand-foot cliffs.

The park offered three types of wildlife tours: a four-hour tour, an eight-hour tour, and the thirteen-hour Kantishna tour. Imagine spending thirteen hours on a bus! That had to be painful. I had considered doing just the four-hour tour, but Kay did some research. She discovered that the highly recommended *Kantishna Tour* was the premiere alternative. We went with her analysis. In 20-20 hindsight, we chose the best options. I would do it again. The thirteen hours went by way too fast.



We rode in a luxury-class bus, whereas all other tours used school buses. We received a good lunch, and after our first six hours, we did a little panning for gold. Most importantly, our tour only went beyond mile marker 65 (we went to 95 miles). It offered a different view of the peak of Denali. At the 65-mile point, dense clouds shrouded Denali. We couldn't even see a mountain, let alone take pictures.



Our tour guide, **Jeff**, was **outstanding** and loved his job. He was a minister, naturalist, historian, poet, teacher, and bard extraordinary. Although he was a native of Wisconsin, he got emotional as he repeatedly told us how much he loved this park. He shared numerous poems he wrote expressing his feelings. He exhibited his photographs above his seat. Even though he had made this trip hundreds of times, he was as excited as his passengers whenever we encountered wildlife or got an unusual view of Denali. He would frequently pull out his camera with the rest of us.



After we boarded the bus, Jeff warned us that he would give us a test at the end of the tour about a thousand facts and history about the park. Then, on our return trip, he told his four-hour-long story, "Decade of Denial." As a teacher, he had small techniques for remembering this information, like relating the river names to the fingers on his hand. Thanks to Jeff, the following facts were totally from memory.

The park has two mountain ranges: the Alaska and Outer Range. The Outer Range is the oldest, while the Alaska Range has the oldest rock. The Alaska mountains were formed from a section of land that collided.

The park had five rivers—the Savage, the Sanctuary, the Tekaleka, the East Fork, and the Toklat—and four forests—the **Dunken**, the **Porcupine**, the **Igloo**, and the **Tall Timber**.

Since the park was formed in 1917, it has expanded twice to its current boundary. Initially, it was a sanctuary for the Dall Sheep, then it expanded to protect the Grizzly and again added the **Caribou**. The number of sheep in the park was unknown. It had 200 to 400 Grizzlies and 3000 Caribou.

Mount Denali was initially named by the Athabascan natives and meant "the Great One." Around 1896, the prospector **William Dicke** renamed it Mt McKinley after he wrote a letter to the pro-McKinley **New York Sun** newspaper. It published the revised mountain's name, and McKinley's supporters whooped the idea into reality. That renaming irritated the native Alaskans. As a consolation, in 1980, the park was called Denali. Nevertheless, Alaskans treated both the park and the mountain with one name – Denali. **President McKinley** never visited Alaska nor saw the hill named after him.

The first 15 miles of the paved road to Savage Rivers allowed visitors without permits. This populous area had many hiking trails and campgrounds. The train depot ran at the eastern edge. The park was in the flat plain **Tioga** zone with black spruce (pipe cleaners) and white spruce (Christmas trees) forests.

The road for the next 77 miles was gravel. It increased in elevation into the tundra zone, and scrub replaced trees. The permafrost was highly controlled from damage that could last hundreds of years. Our driver pointed out several horse trails that were still quite evident but hadn't been used in over fifty years. They still appeared as lines scarring the valleys.

Our road traveled along the edge of the Outer Mountain range. Across from the other side, we viewed the majestic Alaska Mountain range. Those mountains rose from almost sea level across the valley and sloped eleven thousand feet to the sky.

The road scribed along the side of the Outer Range was treacherous. Crews repaired these roads in continuous maintenance. At one to two thousand feet above the valley, the gravel road cut into the side of the mountain. Two vehicles barely had enough room to pass. Many times, crossing buses, brushed mirrors.

The bus drivers had their own rules of engagement for crossing. Likewise, the bus passengers on the downside road edge got an ultimate thirty-second thrill. They

remained motionless as they looked out their windows a couple of thousand feet into the valley.

The tour bus operators minimized distractions for the citizens of Denali Park. When they approached a wildlife sighting, they pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. No one was permitted to leave the bus, and everyone was encouraged to remain quiet. Only the clicks of camera shutters were heard.

Visitors were not guaranteed to see any wildlife across the enormous park. Some people on tours said they saw nothing, not even the ubiquitous Alaskan State bird, the Ptarmigan. They hopped along the side of the road about the size of a gross. Their little feet had mukluks covered with white feathers, ready for the first snowfall. We saw hundreds of these little guys.

Several mountain ridges were in different ranges. The lower group had no snow at less than five or six thousand. Many had multi-color vegetation on the lower half and barren rock to the top. We often saw little white specs of small herds of Dall Sheep contrasting their snow-white fur against the dark-gray rock at the distance of higher elevations.

The other taller ranges above eleven thousand feet had snow on their peaks above six or seven thousand feet. A definite white line started at the same altitude on each mountain.



At 20,320 feet, Mt Denali stood alone and made its weather. The great one rose almost twice in height with two peaks. Its white cap looked like a tooth or molar. For two-thirds of the time, it was shrouded from view. Its tall, cold rock formed moisture to collect clouds around it.

Eielson Visitor Center was at mile 66 in the park. The shorter tours ended here. Unfortunately, Denali was not yet visible. In the observation room, someone marked an outline of the peak with a grease pencil on the glass window where the peak would be seen.

Our thirteen-hour tour still had another 26 miles to travel. At Wonder Lake, at another nineteen miles, we saw Denali's peak as the clouds passed for about fifteen seconds.



The picture on the left side shows what we were supposed to see: **Denali** from **Wonder Lake**. As we passed, the mountain was clouded over. When we returned at the end of the tour, we saw it shown in the previous “tooth” version.

I borrowed this photo from **Kantishna Roadhouse**.

Around 1 PM, we had gone as far as the road traveled in the park.



We pulled in front of the **Kantishna Roadhouse**. Here, we had lunch and had an afternoon activity. We could pan for gold or visit a kennel of sled dogs to learn about mushing. Passengers who wished to fly back could also catch a small four-seater for the nominal price of \$125 a person.

We chose to pan for gold.

After lunch, we stood in a 45-degree cold stream in boots, looking for a few flakes of gold. I suspect the whole event was orchestrated. Everyone found a little gold.



Generally, each person had three or four flakes the size of a pinhead in their pan. If I were to guess the procedure, our instructor scooped up rock and dirt behind the lodge, seeded it with gold flake, and loaded it into the little bags he later poured into our pans. A few cents of gold can go a very long way.

In the past, how many unsuspecting green horns purchased "gold mines" due to similar trickery?



We took "our find" to the lodge front desk, and they laminated it into a plastic card for us.

By this time of day, the sky had cleared, with only a few puffs in the heavens. We were anxious to get back on the road. We still hadn't seen Denali and would have that opportunity on the way back. Denali stood five minutes away at Wonder Lake, prepared to give us an audience. Jeff stopped the bus, and the cameras started clicking away. On our way back, we saw Denali many times.



In addition to seeing Mountain Denali, our excursion was highlighted by catching the park at the peak of the fall colors. The hills were a kaleidoscope in crimson reds of the miniature birch trees and fireweed, the golden, phosphorescent yellows of the aspen, the rich deep greens of the spruce, the brilliant reds of the bear berries, cranberries, and elderberries. The background was framed by a blue sky with small pillows of clouds and white-capped mountains.

This Denali Park experience brought to mind a girl we met on our Alaska return plane to Minnesota. She had just driven up the **Alaskan Highway** from Louisville.

She said, "*On the end of the road at Glenn Highway, I had to pull the car to the side of the road and recover. I was in sensory overload.*"

Indeed, she didn't see the richness and vividness we are witnessing today. All our travels were in their fall colors.

We had one more treat just before we left the park's protected area. We witnessed what few people have ever seen live. Our guide was all excited. In his thirteen years of escorting the group through the park, he had never seen what we were now watching. His camera was clicking pictures just as fast as ours were.



About 100 yards from the road, a couple of caribou males in the rack were head-to-head with antlers locked in battle. Cameras were clicking in the bus as they were busy pushing each other and fighting for every inch. Professional photographers were stopping and setting up their movie equipment.

We finished dinner around 10 PM and retired to our cabins. As the sky darkened, we inhaled the cool air and sweet smell of the river water outside our door. Splashing sounds flowed over the rocks, and clouds were rolling in. We decided to "call it a night" and went to bed.

At about 11:30 PM, there was a lot of commotion outside our door. It sounded like the Japanese embassy had moved in next door. Then we heard Kay yell, "Tom and Sharyn, *wake up!*"

Half-awake, I heard her again, "Tom and Sharyn, *wake up! It's the Northern Lights*".

We quickly jump out of bed. It was our other wish. **As we looked out the door, the sky was all lit!**

The chatter we had heard was Japanese tourists several cabins away. They were running around unscrewing the cabin porch lights so nothing distracted their view of the sky.

For an hour, we were hypnotized by our once-in-a-lifetime experience. Streams of white glowing smoke emanated from the horizon. Then, from the bottom edge, ectoplasm from the sky drifted in separate directions. We watched a stage like a curtain break apart into vertical shafts glowing with green and red light.

Suddenly, the lights would disappear. The sky was dark for five minutes, then one section started to glow green, and another glowed green at the top and red at the bottom. As light took form, it looked like spiritual angels in green dresses with red dancing shoes swirling around in the heavens in synchronization with some unheard orchestra.



Nothing, absolutely nothing, compares to seeing the Aurora Borealis for real. It's like eating a piece of chocolate: Look at all the pictures in the world, but no photos can describe the taste.

WEDNESDAY – Day #4: TRIP TO ANCHORAGE

We woke to a cold, windy, and overcast day. The sky was heavy with dark clouds. We had been anticipating lousy weather, but today was a compromise. It could rain while we traveled on the train.

At noon, we boarded the train. Unlike our prior train adventure, we arrived at the station an hour early. We were first in line to get our seat assignments, facing seats with tables. We wanted to play cards.

It was dark and dreary, and it was cold. On benches in the open train station, we huddled with other tourists, trying to shield each other from the wind. It was a nice way to meet some other travelers.

We traveled the first four hours through the mountainous country. Like in the park, the trees, shrubs, and bushes were decked out in their fall outfits. We watched a full spectrum of fully saturated brilliance—yellow, red, orange, and green. We had every nuance. The yellows glowed as if little suns were trapped in the leaves.

Too bad the sky was overcast. Had the sun been available to illuminate, this landscape would have been a sight without equal. We would have to return. We had a little room left for perfection.

We befriended a family traveling with a couple of cute little boys on our train ride. They were from California and lived about five blocks from Kay and Ed. Ed had met them on the ride from Anchorage to Denali Park. They were returning from their visit and had the table next to ours on the train. It was like everyone had been long-time friends. The boys, Sean and Devin, were 11 and 8 in age (I guess).

Sean spent most of the trip hustling the other passengers. When he and Devin were not playing some game with Mom and Dad, he catered to getting passengers' drinks, who, in turn, gave him a tip. Toward the end of the trip, he had earned \$1.75.

He and Devin decided to play poker with me (aka Tom). We played for a couple of hours. I won all his money, plus an additional "stake" he conned from his mother.

After he lost his money, he asked me, "You aren't going to keep all my money, *are you?*"

I said, "*Of course I am.*"

I then handed all his gambling losses to his mother and said, "*Mama, this money is for you.*"

I told Sean, "*This is your first life lesson – never play poker with a stranger.*"

*Historical Charm
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204 EAST 15TH AVENUE
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PHONE: (907) 278-1111

FAX: (907) 258-7877

TOLL FREE: 888-777-0346

EMAIL: mahoganymanor@compuserve.com

WEB: www.mahoganymanor.com

We reached Anchorage at 8:30 and caught a taxi to our B&B, the Mahogany Manor. Our hosts greeted us warmly and graciously. After we settled, they proudly gave us a tour of their home and discussed its history. It was a great way to visit and not feel like a stranger in a new town.

The Mahogany Manor used to be one of the largest private homes in Anchorage. The prior owners used it to entertain dignitaries when they visited. The house was nicely decorated with mahogany paneling in the living (or library) room, the great room, and the sunroom.

Their small bar was stocked with airplane-sized bottles of booze. (The lady of the house once worked for Northwest Airlines.) A waterfall was next to the front door. A grand piano was next to a copper-hooded fireplace in the great room. A Christmas tree was set up with brightly colored miniature lights.

Our section of the house was called the **Governor's Suite**. It had two bedrooms and a small living room. Outside our suite was a kitchenette stocked with breakfast foods.

THURSDAY – Day #5: ANCHORAGE

We awoke to pouring rain. We knew that we would get rained upon when we were in Alaska. That was a given. Our schedule for today called for picking up the RV, walking around Anchorage for a while, and visiting the State Fair in Palmer. The rain continued until we got to our campground.



"*RV Sharon*" picked us up at the B&B around 10 a.m. We spent the rest of the morning checking it out and stocking up on food for our trip.

Our 29-foot, Class C Gulf Stream motorhome had two beds, a shower, a toilet, a kitchen, an electric generator, and most basic appliances.

Ed and Kay already owned a motorhome similar to our RV rental. Ed was willing to drive the RV during the entire trip. I suspected I could have driven the vehicle, but we were in better safety to let Ed handle all those duties.

We drove into downtown Anchorage around 1 PM. We had many things to do, but the weather was miserable. The rain was heavy, almost too heavy to do much walking around and sightseeing. We headed for the first item on our list: the **Public Lands Information Center**. It had everything a tourist wanted to know and never thought to ask about Alaska, a small museum, and a theater. We spent the next three hours there. First, we watched (sometimes with our eyes shut) three movies about Alaska. Second, we toured the center. We made a couple more stops in town, shopped, and headed for **Palmer State Fair**. The rain was just too debilitating.

When we got to our campground, the **Homestead**, the rains stopped, and the sky began to clear. It was a quality RV park, registered as a Good Sams RV Park. The restrooms were in a log cabin, with semi-classical music playing softly in the background. The toilets used warmly heated water. The laundry was in the same building.

Our campsite had a picnic table and a nice view of forested fields with snow-capped mountains. We walked around the RV park several times, met other campers, and ate dinner.

FRIDAY – Day #6: STATE FAIR

We awoke again to rain. It was getting a bit monotonous, but we were optimistic. After breakfast, we cooked in the RV and headed for the *Alaska State Fair*.



We walked around the fair in the rain, sometimes on the heavy side. Although it was your typical State Fair, many exhibits were unique to the lifestyles and culture of Alaska. Kay and Ed watched Chinese acrobats and pigs racing in several sideshows. Sharyn and I spent this time in the agriculture exhibits. Palmer was known for the gigantic vegetables, such as a 95-pound cabbage head.

By the late afternoon, we were done. We drove back to our campsite at **Willawaw Creek**, 45 minutes south of Anchorage. We were in the beautiful Chugach National Forest.



Our site was semi-private, exceptionally well-maintained, and almost manicured. We were in a spruce forest, and behind us was a mountain with a large blue glacier.

After we set up the RV, we did some quick reconnaissance of our camping area.

We had dinner and planned for evening activities. The regular park host was not present. He was out Moose hunting. We had a substitute host. We asked him about the **Ice Worm Safari** noted in our guidebooks for the campfire program. He was unaware of it and suspected it might be a summer activity.

The Ice Worm Safari left from the Visitors Center about a mile up the road. It was scheduled to take fifteen minutes, but we were running late and in the middle of dinner. We decided not to inhale our food and skipped it. Instead, we did our nature program later that evening.



We found a small path behind us that led to the mountain's base. A small notice at the trailhead warned of bear sightings in the area. Nevertheless, we were adventurous.

We hiked across streams swollen by the recent rain and through the forested valley until we came to the foot of **Kenai Mountain**, just below Middle Glacier. A large piece of the glacier high in the mountain had calved, lying within our reach. However, we had to figure out how to ford a couple of streams that blocked our way.

Ed and I wanted to go to the fallen glacier ice. We started throwing rocks into the last stream, limiting our travel, hoping to pile enough to enable us to cross without getting wet.

Our hiking companions encouraged us with the usual female language, such as, "That is far enough! You are going to *fall in! We are going back.*"

We retorted with the usual male response, "*Goodbye. Don't get lost. Don't let a bear get you.*"

We continued working with the rocks until we realized we were not progressing. The stream kept rising behind and flowing over our rocks, so we reluctantly abandoned our quest.

On our way back from our nature hike, we met other campers. We discussed our curtailed adventure. The ladies greatly exaggerated what they saw, describing a cache we found along the trail strapped to some bushes.

Kay said, "*It looked like an arm chewed off by a bear and hanging in the bushes.*"

The other campers told us of a stream at the other end of the park where the salmon were spawning. One could observe a small overlook above the stream with fish. We decided to detour it since it was on our way back to our RV.



The stream was only six to twelve inches deep and twelve feet wide. Full of salmon struggled to get up the flowing water. When they weren't fighting the strong current, they were fighting each other for position in the water. Several varieties of salmon did battle along maternity row.

Thirty or forty fish, twelve to eighteen inches long, were in this small section of the stream. If they ever got too close to each other, one would swing its head and attempt to take a bite out of the other. Procreation was serious business for these folks.

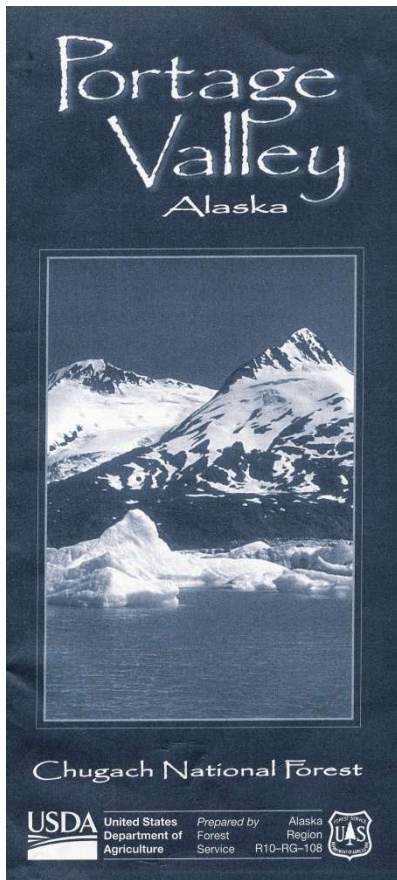
The rest of the evening was almost uneventful. The night sky was overcast and dark. The bathrooms were across the road in some ten-foot-high bushes. It's a nice place for the imaginative mind to think a bear would hang out. At least, that was what the ladies thought. If I were a bear, a potty shed would certainly not be high on my last list of places to visit.

Nevertheless, one of our clans thought she heard an animal rustling in the bushes. She came running, even though she had not satisfied her potty objective. When we asked if she needed to return,

She said, "*No, I am done.*"

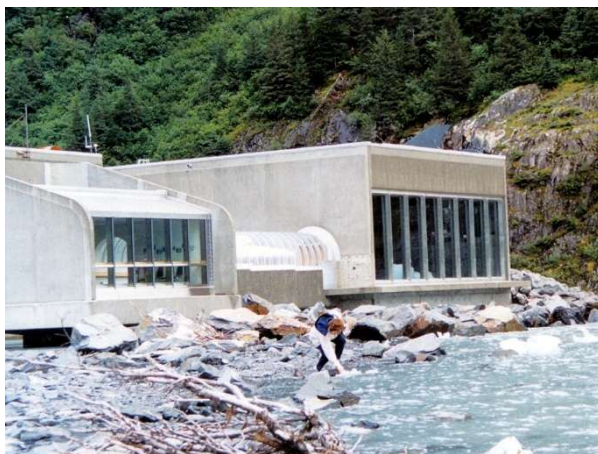
The reader can piece in the missing details.

SATURDAY – Day #7: PORTAGE LAKE



Our first stop this morning was the *Begich-Boggs Visitor Center* at the end of **Portage Lake**. The melting of the Portage Glacier formed the water. Before we arrived, several chunks of ice had calved from the glacier. They had floated down the lake right up to the Visitor Center. We could reach into the icy water and pull a sample for close inspection. Glacier ice looked like any ice from the refrigerator, except it had a lot of small voids. I guess these voids diffracted the light and made the ice appear blue from a distance.

The Center had exhibits and a movie about the formation or, better yet, the glacier's disappearance. The film also introduced the **ice worm**—a small creature about the size of a seamstress's straight pin. It lived in the ice crevices. In the evening, it emerged and fed on bacteria deposited on the ice during the day. That was why the **Ice Worm Safari** (that we missed) was at night.



When the Park Ranger announced his movie over the PA, he said, “*We have a surprise ending.*”

After the show, they pulled up the movie screen. Behind it was a huge, floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall picture window. It looked out to the mountains and the

glaciers they support. It was a great view and a photo opportunity to capture the mountains, lakes, and glaciers.



Our next stop was the small town of Hope, a side trip about 15 miles from the main thoroughfare on the Kenai Peninsula. The old gold mining town was home to about 200 people (at the most). Kay went into a small café near the city to scout for lunch. She told the proprietor that we would most likely return after we toured the town of **Hope**.

He said, "*The **WHOLE** town!*"

"*Yes.*"

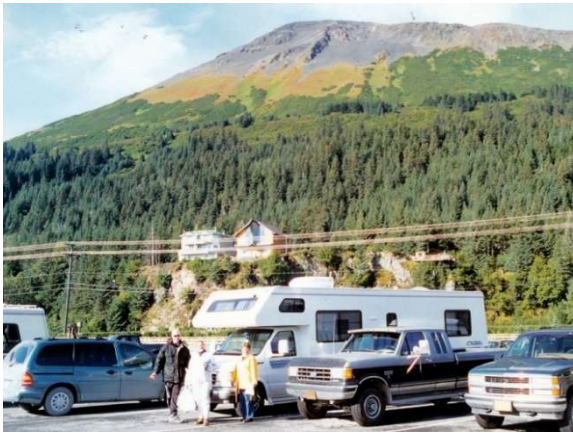
"*I will expect you within a half-hour.*"

He was right. After we got to it, we didn't find much to see or do in Hope—just a quaint, small one-room museum.



The first thing we noticed as we entered a couple of feet from the doorway was an old barrel stove. A little old lady fussing with the fire was delighted to see us, and we were probably her only visitors for the day. We roamed around for about five minutes, and Kay purchased a video.

The little old lady proudly told us her husband was in the video. He was interviewed in one of the segments. We had lunch in Hope and headed to **Seward**.



We arrived around 3:30 and started looking for a place to park the RV for the evening. We found a good spot at the water's edge in the city park. The only problem was that we couldn't reserve it. If we left, we would lose it. After a discussion, we decided the activities we planned for Seward were more critical than our camping location, so we reluctantly abandoned it and headed for the **Iditarod Show**.

The **Iditarod** was a nine-day dog sled race from **Seward** through **Anchorage** to **Nome**. It was highly grueling on both dogs and humans. The participants were supposed to race six hours on and six hours off. Although they slept during those six hours off, few got much sleep or rest. Frequently, a musher fell off the sled due to sleep deprivation.

The purse was a half-million-dollar shared by the contestants and their sponsors. The winner got about a quarter-million in prize money and endorsements.



This show was at the dog ranch of one of the mushers who trained and competed in the annual event. Our host's best finish was fourth.

This business was a family affair. All the sons and daughters raised and trained the dogs. They gave a little talk. Our guide was a fourteen-year-old boy. Remarkably, he knew about all aspects of the race and the equipment.

The sled dogs were born and raised on this ranch. They started training almost from the day they were weaned. The pups pulled and rode little sleds or wagons with the youngest children.



A dog graduated to serious sled dog work at one year old, pulling wagons around for as much as 60 miles a day. The better ones participated in the Iditarod as a training exercise. They ran it in 13 days rather than the typical 9 days.

A dog was ready for competition at two and a half years old. It may have competed until nine years old if it had been good.

These dogs were not the Siberian huskies that everyone pictures. They were mixed breeds, slender, and weighed no more than forty-five pounds. They were trained more for speed and endurance than for strength.

The typical sled weighed about 45 pounds and was made of wood—no plastics or miracle materials, such as aluminum, graphite, or titanium. Those sleds would be too expensive and not justify the incremental cost.

More importantly, if a sled broke on the trail, as many did, the musher wanted to be able to repair it. Fancy materials were difficult, if not impossible, to repair on the trail at 60 degrees below zero and in a blinding snowstorm. Wood remained the material of choice.



The Iditarod was not a "winner-take-all" event. Usually, no more than \$5,000 was between the first and second-place finishers.

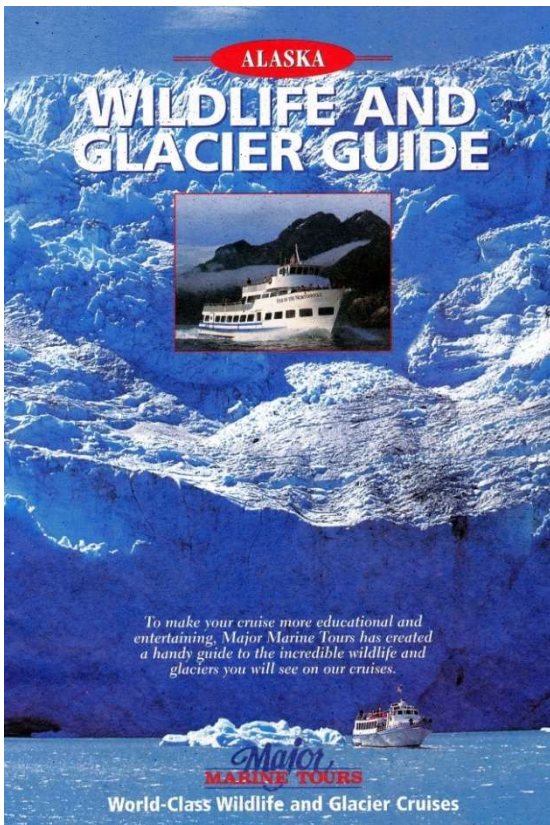
Everybody got a ride around a two-mile course through the woods with ten dogs pulling. We boarded a six-person sled on wheels, and off the dogs ran. Before removing, they started yelping away as if saying, "Enough talk, *let's move it.*"

Once the musher yelled, "Mush," the dogs took off without a sound. They were all business. After one mile, there was a brief rest period, which the dogs impatiently tolerated. They loved pulling that sled and wanted to move.

When we returned to town, we parked the RV in a public parking lot in the harbor area. Hereby, within walking distance, we had telephones, clean public restrooms with showers, and a mountain/ocean view. We weren't supposed to park and camp RVs in the parking lot. Signs were everywhere saying, "Camping was not permitted." Nevertheless, it seemed better than the "zoo" with the hundreds of RVs sandwiched into small slots by the water. Plus, believe it or not, we had a little more privacy.

SUNDAY – Day #8: KENAI NATIONAL PARK

The sun was shining! We were caught by surprise when it rudely awakened us in the window. We began to believe that grizzlies were spotted more in Alaska than ole Sol. The sky was nearly cloudless, and the ocean was very calm. We couldn't have asked for a more perfect day for a boat ride.



After breakfast in the RV, we walked to the harbor, where the boat for our eight-hour excursion awaited us. Several companies offered these tours. We selected "Major Marine Tours." They advertised the only tour with a park Ranger as the guide.

Our fifty-foot-long boat had two decks, a glass-lined cabin on each floor, and a walkway around the top floor. The windows ran from two feet above the floor to the ceiling. We could have stayed in the heated cabin, gotten a good view of the sights, or braved the elements and watched it from the top. The weather was so lovely that most of the passengers stayed outside.

As we left the harbor, the captain announced our instructions: If you feel seasick, use the railing, not the restrooms. The heads were those who needed it for more conventional purposes. Blocking the restrooms caused more people to get sick.

The seas were ten feet two days ago, and the boat did not go out. They were only five feet yesterday, and the railing was used several times. Today, they were calm, and nobody needed the railing. We did notice, however, that many people with little patches behind their ears were being cautious.

We left **Seward Harbor** along the coast to **Bear Glacier**. Here, two glaciers merge into one ice flow that travels into the ocean. Without stopping, we sailed about a half-mile from **Bear Glacier** and headed toward the **Holgate Glacier**. This time, the boat moved within 100 yards of shore.



Ranger Jessica explained that glaciers were formed from snow that did not melt. They moved at a speed of 2 feet per day, sliding on a bed of water between the ice and the mountain. The weight of the ice caused the bottom to liquefy. Most Glaciers also had many deep crevasses, some as deep as a ten-story building. The movement of the ice breaks it, causing crevassing.

We sat for about half an hour watching and listening to a calve. Small icebergs were around Holgate from where portions had broken away. Its vertical face was at least twice the height of our tour boat, dwarfing observation boats that moved close to it.

If we were very quiet, we could hear the rumble as it slid toward the ocean, and we had no trouble hearing the chunks that fell into the water.



From there, we sailed to the harbor islands to observe bird colonies and sea lions. Many birds were nested in remote little islands. We saw eagles, seagulls (the ranger called them something else, but that was what they appeared to me), puffins, and many other species that I cannot remember or would not remember when told.

The sea lions were sunning themselves at several locations. Even though the tour boat came within several hundred yards of their resting spot, they didn't move. They were comfortable with the intrusion that happens several times a day. Finding

sea lions was not difficult. They like to use the same bathing area. Our tour maps even marked precisely where we saw them.

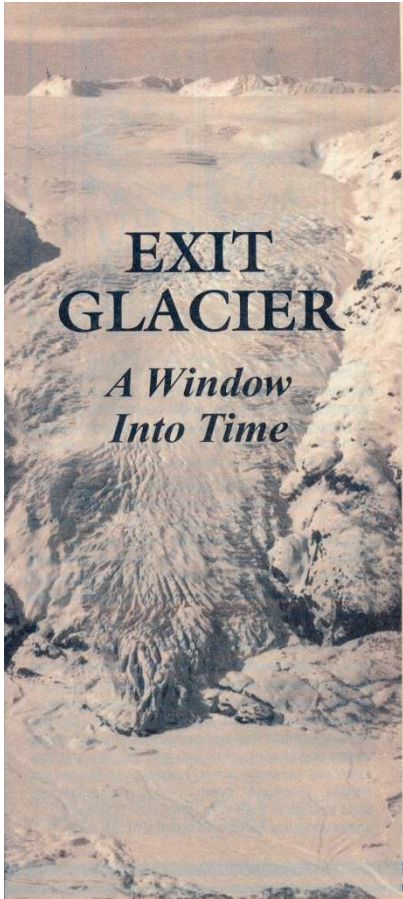
A significant event, however, was seeing whales. We did not expect to see any. It was late in the season, and whales had already migrated to Hawaii. Ranger Jessica said they had not seen any whales on their last three trips.

We nearly returned to Seward when we spotted one juvenile humped-back whale near **Rugged Island**. He was feeding and surfaced every three to five minutes.



Just as we decided the time was running out on this tour, he went airborne and took a giant leap out of the water so everyone could see him, from head to tail fin. "Whalers" call that acrobatic moment "breaching." It was a "Kodak Moment" if anyone had his camera aimed at the correct location. I didn't. The best I ever photographed was just "a piece of tail."

MONDAY – Day #9: ROAD TO HOMER



After breakfast in the RV, we headed for **Exit Glacier**, just north of Seward and eight miles down a washboard gravel road. The RV didn't enjoy the ride at all. It groaned and made painful noises as Ed maneuvered the best he could around the bumps. At the end of the season, these back roads became a challenge. With everyone wedged against anything that moves, trying to keep the RV from shaking apart, we made way.

The State Park Service maintains a lovely park at Exit Glacier. They have two trails, depending on your capabilities: a lower trail that is suitable for almost anyone and an upper trail that rises at 30 degrees for several hundred yards. Both trails take you to the ice, where you can touch or crawl. Sharyn and I met Ed on the Upper Trail. He had already been to the Glacier, but we made him turn around and join us. Kay remained in a pavilion.

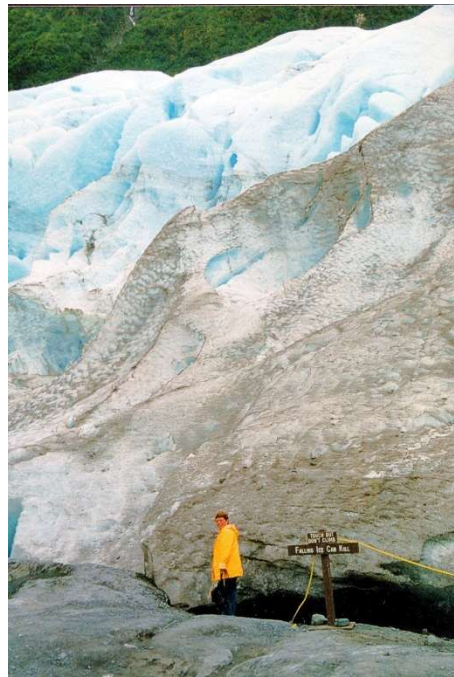
When we got to the ice, Ed crawled out onto it so we could get his picture.



Even though the surface looked dirty in some locations, which gave the appearance that it might be a little gritty and suitable for walking, it wasn't. It was as slick as glass (or ice). Sharyn was my usual model. She said she wasn't going anywhere near the glacier. Ed volunteered until he got out there and couldn't get back. Since he had the RV keys and wouldn't toss them to us, we had to help him off the ice.

As we walked along the asphalt walkway to the glacier, the park service placed minor marker signs with a year displayed. It showed the location of the edge of the glacier at that time. The first one we saw as we moved away from the glacier's edge was in 1978. It was a third of a mile from the edge. The next one was in 1950.

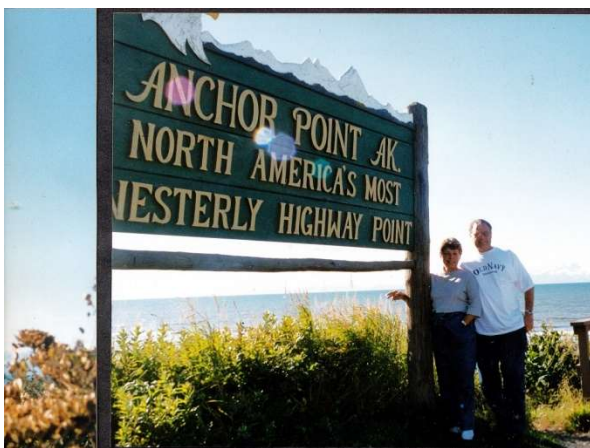
That one was a half-mile from the edge. The last sign we saw was around 1900. It was two miles away. At that rate of melt, I expected within the next decade, the glacier would be out of reach.



The day was gorgeous. The sky didn't have a cloud. It must have been in the mid-sixties. It was lovely, and we hoped to take a scenic float trip at **Cooper Landing** that afternoon. We called ahead to get reservations.

They said, "*Take your time; we are all sold out.*"

We should have anticipated that. After a couple of months of rain, this weekend was the first wonderful time. Everyone headed for the outdoors. Our river rafting trip became a drive-by as we coveted the river through our window.



At **Anchor Point**, the road reaches its furthest point west in North America. Here, we looked across Cook Inlet at the Aleutian Crown. We stood next to a 3-foot by 5-foot sign that noted our extreme position on the road system. Along the vacant beaches, we could see for miles in all directions.

We saw the four major Alaskan volcanoes: **Mt. Redoubt**, **Mt. Iliamna**, **Mt. Augustine**, and **Mt. Douglas**. They were around 10,000 feet high and had a representative cone shape. They were very prominent among the lower 3—to 5-thousand-foot mountains.

In Alaska, the term beach seemed like an oxymoron. We certainly can't do any of the activities typical of a beach. The beach may have looked inviting on a bright sunny day, but we didn't consider entering the water. It was so cold we would have lived for only a few moments.



We reached the end of our drive—Homer, a small fishing village, was almost at the end of the road. The road continued for another 20 miles, but we were advised not to travel it in Homer. The people living in a few small Russian villages did not appreciate outsiders.

Homer was in Alaska's "banana belt." It received the warm Japanese current that moderated its temperatures. Unlike Fairbanks, which plunged in the winter to 50 or 60 degrees below zero for daily highs, Homer maintained comparatively warm weather, probably no worse than Chicago weather. Flowers were everywhere, without foliage or even a hint of autumn.

The **Homer Spit** was a narrow peninsula five miles from Homer into **Kachemak Bay**. At most places, it averaged no more than 500 feet wide. A paved two-lane road ran the length, and a walkway was along the road for about half that distance.



About halfway down the Spit was the Fishing Hole, which was a narrow inlet, nothing more than a tidal pool covering about five acres. At high tide, the water rushed from the Bay. At low tide, the water reversed direction. That motion trapped schools of salmon. Often shoulder to shoulder, fishermen lined the inlet banks, cast their lines into the water, and snagged a salmon.

Ed called it "*combat fishing*". After watching the action for about an hour, I understood exactly what he meant. It was like "fishing in a goldfish bowl."

Fishing the **Spit** certainly was not very sporting or even very fun. However, this technique might be justified if someone needed the fish for subsistence or was a small child. We talked to a German who spoke broken English. He explained how his friends back home were waiting on his "catch."

We camped at the **Driftwood Inn** in the old section of town, on the inlet near Homer Spit. It is included in the historical register and several other buildings in the neighborhood. We had initially considered using one of the RV campgrounds on the Spit. However, these sites were primarily for fishing and not for sightseeing.

This evening was Kay and Ed's anniversary. Sharyn asked the desk clerk at our RV camp what the best restaurant in town was. Her advice was the Homestead, located eight miles away, toward those inimical Russian towns. The restaurant had our best dinner of the trip.

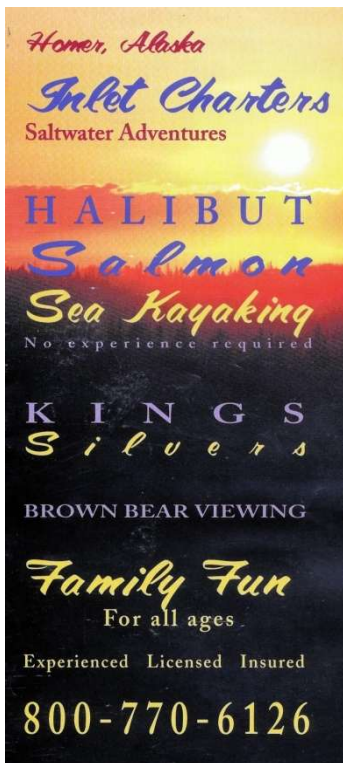
TUESDAY – Day #10: KAYAK AT HOMER

We had another idyllic day - clear skies and temperatures in the mid-sixties. It was one of those days when we needed to be outdoors. We started early with a walk on the beach along the ocean. A little later, we went kayaking. We culminated the day with another walk along the same beach.

In the morning, the tide was out. We walked several hundred yards along our new favorite beach, normally underwater. From all four compass points, the sights were picturesque. To our east and south, the snow-capped peaks of the Kenai Range stood in Kachemak Bay. To the west, the volcanoes Mt. Douglas and Mt. Augustine rose from the ocean horizon. To the north, Homer and our RV park were nearby.

We repeated our walk on the same beach around 8:50 in the evening. The tide was low again. The approaching sunset treated us to a stunning sky. The sun along the west set the volcanoes to fire near the horizon. The sky radiated crimson red in all directions: west, north, east, and south. The mountain snow caps lighted in a rosy reflection.

We recanted stories from earlier days as we strolled beside the water's edge. For an hour, we splashed our feet on the sand, dodging jellyfish stranded on the



Rising tide. Skylight sparkled across the water ripples. Although our feet got cold and wet, we didn't care. The memorable sunset enhanced the moment. Eventually, as the tide rose, we unwillingly retreated to avoid getting trapped on our little sand island.

Our day had started back on the Spit exploring for a kayak trip. We found a little beachfront store perfect for our schedule. It advertised a half-day trip leaving at 1:30 and returning at 7:30.

Their water taxi picked us up at the Spit across the street from the vendor. It traveled us across the Bay. On our way, we stopped a couple of times to watch the Humped-Back whales and to view Sea Gulls, Puffins, and rare Red-faced Cormorants nesting on fifty-foot-high granite mounts.

The boat tried to get close to the whales, but they were on the move, so we never got a good picture. The birds, on the other hand, were too close. Their white roost over the ordinarily black rock became a bird port-a-potty, smelling foul air.



Our destination was a small landing just outside of **Kachemak Park**. Our guides, Scott and Susan, owned it. They used it as a base camp for their kayak trips. They had built a couple of rafts to store the boats. Susan was particularly proud of the little raft tethered between a row of wooden stairs that ran up a cliff to a cabin and a larger thirty-by-thirty-foot raft on which they racked the kayaks.

The smaller raft had a pulley system that allowed it to move back and forth like a ferry between the stairs and the cliff.



We had a choice between two-person and single-person kayaks. Two couples with us and our guides selected the two-person version. The newlyweds insisted on having individual boats, and I thought their marriage was already in trouble.

These boats had a little rudder that the person in the rear of the ship manipulated with foot pedals. They were difficult to get used to—like walking.

And trying to chew gum at the same time. Some people just pulled the boat out of the water and steered it with the paddles.

Before getting into the kayak, we had to put on all equipment. A little skirt with elastic was around the top, and a bungee cord was around the bottom perimeter. The skirt wrapped around the middle of our chest, and the bungee went around the kayak's opening to keep water out of the boat. A life jacket was on top of our coat. We had several rubberized pouches strapped to the top of the kayak to take our extra stuff, such as cameras.

Our guides lowered the boat into the water and helped each person slide. These boats were built for Eskimos, typically no taller than five and a half feet. Six-foot

people almost had to be contortionists to feed their legs into the cramped space. However, once we were wedged into the little boat, we were very comfortable, stable, and easy maneuvering.

Everybody received a training run before we headed out for wildlife viewing. Kay was very concerned. She had back problems, and she was afraid that she would not be able to participate. She had no trouble whatsoever, and she found plenty of back support. She didn't want to quit (that was probably because Ed said he was doing all the work). Although nobody had kayaked previously, we had no problems.



We passed our test and headed to a little bay with oyster and clam beds. On the way, we passed **Freddie the Sea Otter**. He was lying on his back in the water with his paws folded on his chest. We maneuvered to within ten feet of him. At first, he ignored us. Then he rolled around several times to view the creatures who had invaded his

Slumber. Determining that we were no threat, he returned to his resting position and gently floated away, oblivious to these intruders. We paddled through tunnels formed by rock archways over the water. We guided our boats around an inlet and over to some floats.



We caravanned our kayaks to a narrow isthmus formed at the low tide and landed the boats onshore. We walked a few hundred yards to the other side to view the scenery of **China Poot Bay**.

Scott said, "*Anybody wants to take a difficult ten-minute hike to a prominent point.*"

He assumed that statement would discourage almost everyone – not so.

Everyone responded, "***Lead on.***"

He hopped onto an old tree root and then onto a narrow spruce needle trail that rose about a hundred feet along the edge of a cliff. Off he took.

As he walked, he kept saying, "***Here bear, here bear***".

I thought he was being cute until I noticed a pile of bear dung on the trail. I knew exactly what he was doing. The extra noise alerted any bears in our presence.

He quietly said, "*There are quite a few black bears in this region. I have spotted them several times on this hike.*"

I chose not to share his comment with the rest of the group. Most likely, many would have immediately voted to abandon our excursion.

At the end of the trail, we viewed **China Poot** - a coned-shaped mountain peak. We were at a protected location hidden by heavy woods on all sides, except a few feet at the cliff's edge, a hundred feet straight down to the bay.

Scott said, "*I like to come here to think.*"

I would have been thinking about the potential of bears and the long leap into freezing water.

Returning from our hike, we paddled back to the base camp. We didn't see anything new. We went along the shoreline and the commercial oyster beds. Freddie had returned and was feeding. This time, he was uninterested in posing.

Extracting from the kayaks was easier than getting in. Susan and Scott quickly stacked the boats, and we boarded the water taxi. We had a fifteen-minute ride back across Kachemak Bay to Homer Spit. Again, on our return trip, we spotted several humped-back whales and stopped briefly to watch them.



We celebrated our enjoyable day at the famous **Salty Dog Saloon**.



WEDNESDAY – Day #11: HOMER

Alaska treated us with another cloudless day. We had no firm plans. Everybody loafed all morning dressing, showering in the Driftwood Inn facilities, and cooking and eating breakfast. Near our parking spot, a woman was repairing fishing nets. We stopped and spent some time with her. She didn't mind. She admitted her work was a bit boring. She enjoyed talking and "knotting" at the same time.



In the evening, she worked as a school custodian. During the day, she mended nets for local commercial fishing companies. Her nets were hung across an eight-foot-high rack. She pulled them across a rail at the top of the rack, hunting for holes.

She was slender and looked a little weather-aged, as expected of someone standing for hours in the elements.

She charged \$10 an hour to find and re-sew holes. She was particularly proud of her quality. She had been doing this work for nearly ten years and had a special knot that she felt was more potent than the original weave. She felt her knot was superior to any of her competitors. She worked very quickly. She should have been charging \$15 an hour.

She said, "*My knot came to me several years ago as a vision.*"

Although this woman had resigned to menial labor, she was no dummy. She talked intelligently and listened to "books on tape" while working. At this time, she was listening to "*The Partner*" by John Grisham. She was not a native of Alaska. She moved from Michigan ten years ago and has stayed.

We drove to Anchor Point to visit Norman Lowell's studios in the afternoon. He was a local artist who almost exclusively specialized in Alaskan scenery. He worked in oils, pastels, and watercolors. His oils used both brush and knife. I noticed no apparent uniqueness of style or extraordinary quality in his work. His value was based on building a name over many years. At 78 years old, he has been painting since he was 18, with no training. He lived and worked on a back road along Anchor River.

NORMAN LOWELL
ALASKAN RESIDENT ARTIST SINCE 1958



WINTER LIGHT

Norman Lowell 16X20

The original was painted of a frosty winter morning on the Archer River near the Norman Lowell studio and gallery.

Fifteen Classic Prints
IN LIMITED EDITIONS

He displayed his work in a 5000-square-foot exhibition building and was adding another 50% to it. His funds came from no help from state or federal money, so he must have been doing well. Most of his paintings were priced over \$10,000, with a few in the \$100,000 bracket. Even his limited-edition prints (500 to 1000 units) were more than \$350 each.

We talked with the artist, viewed his work, and toured several little rickety cabins where he worked. He collected and displayed a few antiques. Kay saw a painting on a random-shaped piece of red clay slate about a square foot in size. She wanted it and tried to talk Norman into selling it to her.

Regardless of her pleading, he said, "No."

He felt it was too fragile. She said he promised to do another for her for \$250 if he found time. This offer was remarkably generous based on some of his other price tags. But, *"if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is not true."* The hooker was *"if I find time."* I wouldn't be too quick to find a spot in my curio cabinet yet.

Returning to Homer, we went to the Pratt Museum, an easy walk within several blocks of our RV park. The Driftwood Inn and many of the buildings in our neighborhood were part of a historic walking tour, but we didn't. The Pratt Museum, with its ten thousand square feet of exhibits, was adequate for us.

Historic Harrington Cabin

"I arrived in Homer in 1939... Mae Harrington offered to let us stay in her cabin in town for a time until we could either find a cabin, fix up a cabin in town or get ourselves situated.

It's the kind of hospitality that was known in those days.

Everybody was willing to help somebody else."

Brant Edens

PRATT MUSEUM
3779 Bartlett Street, Homer, Alaska 99603
907-235-8635

Brochure sponsored by the Homer Foundation

Dinner that evening was at the **Elks Lodge** alongside our RV park. Their members had a restaurant with windows and a patio overlooking the Bay. We were nearly the only ones in a large dining room, so we ate and enjoyed the beautiful sunset. The food was some of the best we had in Alaska. We had a private party with great food and a great view.

THURSDAY – Day #12: RETURN TO ANCHORAGE

The rain had to happen sometime. We didn't mind. It was our last day in Alaska, and we were leaving. We drove back from Homer to Anchorage, cleaned up and returned the RV, and flew from Anchorage airport that evening on a shuttle bus to the airport; Alaska taunted us just one more time.

The drive from Homer to Anchorage was uneventful. We stopped in Soldotna and picked up Ed's fish he caught the week before our arrival. It was stored at the house of his fishing guide. Ed always did well fishing in Alaska. He caught fourteen Silver Salmon. His limit was eighteen. He was taking home sixty pounds of filleted catch.

After this brief stop, we continued to Anchorage and arrived at 5 PM. We notified the RV Rental office that we had arrived, cleaned, and refilled all its tanks. The rental companies expected clients to return the RV precisely as received. Before we left Homer, the ladies had laundered the bedclothes, towels, and rugs. We washed the RV at a "do-it-yourself" car wash a few blocks from the rental office. Twenty-nine feet of RV was a lot of scrubbing.

Our last meal was at the **Sourdough Mining Company**, a few miles from Anchorage International Airport. The restaurant could seat several hundred people in its two main dining halls. They also had a wild, Alaska popular stop for the tour buses in a hall next to the dining room. Fortunately, no bus groups were during our dinner. They also provided a courtesy shuttle bus to the Airport and into Anchorage.

As we headed west to the airport, Alaska provided us with one more incomparable display. The sun was setting behind some mountains, projecting individual red rays into the heavens. Photographers were pulling over to the side of the road, trying to capture the image. A man was on top of a parked RV with his camera mounted on a tripod. I ran to the front of the shuttle with my camera, hoping to get a picture.

The sun moved entirely out of sight behind the mountains, still blazing a bright red glow. A half dozen rays spread to an angle of 45 degrees from the horizon, reflecting off the clouds halfway up the sky. The sun turned from yellow-red to crimson magenta, like the setting sun on a Japanese flag.

What a fitting climax on a great vacation!

REFLECTIONS

Sharyn and I started seriously traveling about five years ago when my sister Patti had the great idea to join her and Carl for the twenty-fifth anniversary in Hawaii. For the last ten years, we have been fully involved in a new business and never had the money or the time to relax.

Hawaii was wonderful. The travel bug bit us "big time." We decided to plan one major trip at least every two years, which eventually became two trips yearly. We had too many places to visit, and visiting Alaska was not on that list.

High school friends whom we met at a thirty-fifth class reunion invited us to join them. Albeit reluctantly, we agreed,

We had two years to plan the trip. We talked to many people about their favorite travel destinations. Almost everyone mentioned Alaska, and we were intrigued. What was so popular about Alaska?

We loved camping, hiking, and other outdoor activities. Some destinations on our list were a Colorado River Rafting trip, Dude Ranch, a train trip through the Canadian Rockies, and others. But we never thought about Alaska.

After spending two weeks in Aleut, the "great land", we didn't imagine why we forgot about it. We had seen nothing that compared. The state was majestic and unspoiled by the march of progress. It had:

- Denali "the great one" - the largest, although not the tallest mountain in the world,
- The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Yukon Delta Wildlife Refuge - the largest and second-largest, respectively, national parks in the world,
- Rain forests.
- Volcanoes.
- Active, moving glaciers.
- The Northern Lights.
- Hardy, friendly people.
- A plethora of wildlife not otherwise observable in the lower forty-eight states.
- Some of the best fishing in the world.

Would we go back? You bet! We were only able to experience a tiny portion of it, Alaska has several popular tourist attractions: cruise boats, RVs, driving around, hiking, camping, etc. Since this trip, we have also been going by cruise boat. It was just limited to visiting, not to experiencing. Hiking and camping were the best

methods, but they were not physically easy for most. The RV was a great compromise. One could get "up close and personal," covering much territory. Professional tour companies were widespread, with organized RV caravans spending months in Alaska.

No better way to summarize Alaska was to plagiarize the words of the young woman we met on the plane on our way home. She had driven her car up the Alaskan Highway several weeks earlier.

When she reached Glennallen at the end of the Alaska Highway, she said,

"I just had to pull my car to the side of the road and catch my breath. I was in full sensory overload."