

The Alaskan Trip 2005

We flew to Vancouver, B.C. on Alaska Airlines and the flight was generally uneventful, until the time to go through Canadian customs. Let's just say that Canada either has too many visitors or too few customs agents.

We stayed at the Vancouver Fairmont, a really first class hotel that holds the distinction of being built right over the airport and customs offices. Very convenient.

The Holland-America representatives were very visible and helpful in the lobby all the time our 117 person group was at the hotel. Unfortunately, we were never to see them again in places like Denali where they were really needed.

On the first day a bus took us to the ferry, which took the bus and us to Victoria, and the Butchart Gardens. The Butchart Gardens were superb, but it was just a bit late for azaleas and not yet right for roses, but still Butchart is magnificent ANY time. This was our second visit to Butchart Gardens and we had to rush through it to meet the bus in two hours. We then took the bus to Victoria, where we first tried to walk to our previous resting place in Victoria, the Beaconsfield Inn. (1987)

Our sense of direction was off...by several blocks, and we had a fine walk through the "historic district" which is some lovely small homes, well maintained. We returned to the downtown district and into the Empress Hotel, where, after a nice tour trying to locate a public telephone, we called the Beaconsfield for an address.

Not having a lot of time, we elected to hire a Peditax cab to run us over to see the Beaconsfield. Although it was only blocks away, the Peditax driver made several false starts in finding it, and then took us the long way home... from the outside the Beaconsfield is as beautiful as ever. The room we stayed in is now \$279, Canadian.

We arrived back at the hotel and had a fine dinner and went to bed. The next morning we had breakfast we were to be in the lobby for another tour at 8:45...we came to the lobby about 8:45. The bus for other groups came, and people left...but our "purple group" bus didn't come, and we waited in the lobby without sufficient seats. The bus finally arrived at 11:15, and by then we were really pretty peeved – but we hoped it would get better.

(Vanguard says the problems were caused by Holland-America.)

The bus driver took us to Queen Elizabeth Park, then Chinatown, then Gastown, then Stanley Park – and finally to customs to board the Statendam. Unfortunately everyone could have easily passed the tour and we found out later that the Statendam was ready to receive us by 11:30, and by the time we arrived after 3 p.m. it took FOREVER to go through customs – primarily because the Vanguard people awarded numbers discriminately while the numbers were called sequentially. Therefore, some people sat and awaited customs while others, arriving later, got through immediately.

We finally got aboard and into our stateroom, 051, a veranda room – and really nice. It had a Jacuzzi tub, a bed, a couch, a table, a chair, TV and DVD, and an outside veranda.

Our late arrival meant a rushed trip to the “Lifeboat Drill” The Statendam had a late departure because we were tied up in such a way that another cruise ship had to leave first. It is hard to imagine that things would have been nearly so difficult had the departure point been Seattle, where we could have avoided the Canadian customs – twice. We will not do a foreign departure again. The Canadian Customs & Vanguard combination was the California Department of Motor Vehicles as directed by Abbott and Costello!



We went to dinner on-board in the Rotterdam Room, and had a terrific dinner at Table 74 – our table for two for the cruise. I had tomato bisque, spinach and blue cheese, roast pork and lemon sorbet. Jean had beef soup, avocado and crab salad, roast pork, and apple strudel.

It was obvious that even though this was a formal dining room with wine waiters, that even on “casual” nights, casual means different things to different people. You can group people into the “Appropriate Dress” Groups, who can dress well, or causally depending upon the time and place...they remind me of the Football Coach who, observing the stupid goalpost activities of some NFL players, remarked, “Act as if you have been there before.” Some do.

There are the “Farmers.” Perhaps this is a geographic cultural practice, but there are those who wear their caps or hats while inside, and even when sitting down to breakfast, lunch, and dinner! I have even seen a man wearing his suspenders over a undershirt at lunch in the casual dining Lido room, and men wearing round neck T-shirts in the Rotterdam Room. You have to wear a collared shirt to play golf almost anywhere! In spite of the cost of a Holland-America line cruise, some men appeared to have won their ticket in a raffle at Bubba’s Beer Bar in Bigfoot, Texas.

Interesting enough, women seem to “get it” much better than men. I seldom saw a woman in inappropriate dress. Apparently they have no influence on their spouses! Jean thought the women were not appropriate in their dress when she saw blue-jeans in the Rotterdam Room. She said she would not go to the store dressed as they were.



There are also the “Asians.” While we did not have many Asians aboard, I never saw one or a pair – where there were two there were six. And Asians do not like to stand in line...if in the rush of people to get in line, one couple gets toward the front, within minutes the Asians you have behind you will appear, almost magically, with their friends at the front of the line. Walla!

Dinner in the Rotterdam Room



There are the “Porkers” – people not just overweight but medically morbidly overweight. These usually come in pairs also, and my only concern with them is that they overflow bus seats and take up at least half the bus/train isles, and they can’t keep up in the walking parts of the tours. We had a couple in our group who were each two axe handles wide...

Another identifiable group are the “smokers” – of which there were precious few. These people rushed to take every opportunity to grab a few puffs, jumping off busses first or

looking for open decks in the driving rain...more to be pitied than scorned.

The first full night was at sea, and like all of the nights at sea, the seas were like glass. Admittedly, at least for the first few nights we were in the “Inside Passage” and that can be smooth because it is often protected by the outward islands, but not always. The weather throughout was less rainy than had been predicted by Weather.com – they had predicted rain in every port on every day. We lucked out...although it rained that first day while we were at sea...which was of no concern because the ship is so large and so beautiful that there is plenty to do without going out on the deck, and after the previous two days, rest was welcome...

On our rest day began at 8 a.m. with eggs benedict in the Rotterdam Room, then Jean went to hear about extra tours and booked a float plane trip above a glacier and the White Pass Railroad trip – both of which turned out to be terrific. I went to the Neptune Room on the 10th deck to write my “Alaska journal” in longhand...the Neptune Room was a hosted room with live guitar and great reading material. A special party was being held, with free drinks...after I left I discovered that the Neptune Room was for the exclusive use of the Deluxe Veranda Rooms and the two Penthouse Rooms. I had been “poaching” because although we were on the same 10th deck, we were only in Veranda Rooms...not “Deluxe” Veranda Rooms. Oooops! We thought it was for the use of people on the Navigation Deck, but it was only for some people on the Navigation Deck! We did not go back!

Dinner was “formal” – which is to say coat and tie and hardly “formal” – although a few people were indeed formal. Jean and I both had excellent onion soup and shrimp cocktail...I had chateaubrian and Jean had King Crab. Terrific dinner.

We set clocks back had a good night’s sleep and arrived I Ketchikan at 6 a.m. – it looked interesting.



Ketchikan

We began with breakfast in the Rotterdam Room, but it was becoming obvious that this was too much of a good thing...the food was so good that even with the European portions being served, we were stuffed.

We were in the harbor at Ketchikan, Alaska “The Salmon Fishing Capitol of the World” – our first port stop and one of my favorites, but not to Jean’s taste...she thought it a poor community. It is, but as we were to learn, most of Alaskan port towns are poor, since the main industry is fishing, excluding tourism. Ketchikan is about four blocks by four blocks, with the pier spaces filled with at least 16 jewelry stores that are also represented on-board – including Diamond International and Tanzanite. The stores back several blocks are on the sites of the last Red Light District (called, appropriately, “Creek Street”) which closed in 1954, and all the old houses of prostitution, now stores, are built on piers over the creek that runs through town. The saying was that “Ketchikan was the only place in the world where salmon and fishermen both swam upstream to spawn!”

We had a light rain all day.

The interesting thing about Ketchikan is the crossing guards in lieu of stop lights...there are no stop lights, and in fact there is little need for even crossing guards unless a cruise ship is at the pier. I suspect that there is always a cruise ship – or two – at the pier.

I was constantly amazed with the number of jewelry stores on-board and in most ports. Obviously, some people buy their jewelry that way because if it duty free, and tax free. One woman we overheard on the cruise remarked to her table that this was her 28th cruise, and another replied that she felt like a “piker” because this was only her 11th. Perhaps these are the people who buy all of the jewelry,... someone must be doing it and we understood from one staff member that many of the jewelry stores were once on the Caribbean runs, but that they have moved to the Alaskan tours because of the greater affluence of the passengers...certainly the jewelry stores had customers in them by the bunch.

I liked Ketchikan, because it was so compact, and it was clean. With a population of about 7,000, it is the southernmost town of the Alaskan peninsula. The island on which Ketchikan sits has a total population of about 14,000. (Actually, even the town will grow to 14,000 during the summer to service the tourist trade.)

Our bus driver has lived in Ketchikan for 43 years, and like many people we talked to he does whatever is necessary



A Ketchikan Stop Light

Downtown Ketchikan

to stay – drives buses, does construction, runs a two room B&B, pumps gas... whatever he can do to stay. He is articulate and intelligent, so the Alaskan draw must be very strong for him. Ketchikan gets 13 feet of rain each year and little snow, but lots of clouds.

It was surprising that my Cingular phone worked just fine – but I could not retrieve any messages! I could call out, and receive calls, but could not retrieve waiting messages. I finally called Cingular and they worked some black magic, but it

was a continuing problem throughout Alaska. One small problem – Cingular technical assistance only works M-F, 8-5. Not much help over the weekend.



Let me tell you about the Totem Poles – about which there are many...except they are all copies. Totem Poles last only 70 years, more or less, so in the 1939 Depression the Civilian Conservation Corps investigated the methodology and meaning of the Totems, and learn to carve them. The method had been lost among the Indians in the intervening years and the CCC did not just carve new ones, but trained the Indians how to do the carving in the traditional mode. Even the CCC carved poles have decayed, so these current poles are copies of copies. They do not impress me much except as copies. Ketchikan is also the place where we learned a lot more about Totem Poles than we really wanted to know, as we toured a bunch of totems. (Every community is filled with totems!) The good news is that they decay in 70 years; the bad news is that they are still making more of them!

All of the Indians of the North were nomadic prior to the arrival of Caucasians, chasing the caribou herds for food, clothing and shelter – and of course fishing along the way.

We had prime rib for dinner and were ready for a diet! Although we love the Rotterdam Room and their food, we can't keep this up. We had a quiet overnight run to Sitka and unfortunately had to anchor in the stream and take boats to the pier. It was a bit inconvenient.

Sitka is a slightly larger fishing port that certainly appeared more prosperous, but its main claim to fame is that it is the site of Russian influence from their time of ownership. Russia of course sold "Seward's Folly" to the U.S. for two cents an acre. The Russian Orthodox Church in the middle of town is the main tourist interest, although we attended an all-female, amateur, American dance group that was awfully good!

We are sorry that we didn't find an eagle preserve. Sitka only gets 75 days of sun, 75 days of clouds, and the rest is rain each year, and has a population of 8,400...unlike Ketchikan which is four blocks

Glacier from the Floatplane



by four blocks, Sitka is linear, it appears to be just about one block wide, perhaps two in some places. It has only 14 miles of road, and is a bit more upscale than Ketchikan. Just not much.

Dinner was salad for Jean and roast turkey for me...we both had Crème Brule...we are overdue for a diet!

The ship was underway for Juneau at 5 p.m.

A quiet night.

Juneau is the only state capitol that you can't reach by automobile! You can fly in or come by ship...that's it. (There may be a rail road...)

We had an early breakfast in the Lido where we could have a breakfast buffet, then quickly to the pier at the bow of the Statendam for a float plane. We took the float plane to a glacier, over which we flew for quite a bit of time...the glacier was huge (larger than the state of Delaware, AND GROWING) and unexpectedly dirty, as we were to learn all glaciers look dirty. It is ground rocks, which happens to boulders as they are ground into fine dust as the glacier moves 70 or 80 miles to their end point. The flight was smooth.

The weather was fully overcast but there was no rain...temperature was 64 degrees. Brisk but not cold, damp but not wet. The population is 31,000, and the leading industry is government from October to May, and tourism from May to October.

There were five cruise ships in port that day! Tourism is indeed the primary industry!

After the float plane we took a bus to the Mendenhall Glacier, which is much more visited because it is more accessible...and that glacier is shrinking. Glaciers look pretty much the same...and they are huge. Alaska has more glaciers than the remainder of the world, combined, and strangely enough each glacier, which is just a permanently frozen river of ice, is usually only 70 years old. That is to say snow that falls some 70 or so miles away in one year will reach the end of the road in about 70 years.

Juneau is where we toured a "Salmon Factory" that raised and released Salmon into the water. What I found interesting is that once released the salmon always come back to their home waters to spawn in six or seven years, so the "factory" built a fresh water artificial stream that the fish could swim up



A Long Way Down from the White Pass RR

and spawn! There they would normally die, or be eaten by bear or wolves, but since it is an artificial stream they are killed and used in fertilizer!

Juneau is so quiet that when McDonalds opened a few years ago, they sold 17,000 hamburgers the first day! People in Skagway wanted hamburgers so much they had an ambulance pick up burgers and rush them to Alaska Airlines where they were whisked to Skagway!

Quiet night at Lido for dinner.



Morning in Haines, which is just a few miles from Skagway. There were several cruise ships in Skagway, and I guess there was no room for us...so Haines. There is not much in Haines...there is not much more in Skagway, but it was historically the jumping off point for the Yukon Gold Rush.

All gold rushes attracted thousands of miners, but of course it took a long time to get to the discovery so those there first had the best opportunity to stake their claims. The center of the Yukon Gold Rush was Dawson...well into Canada. Getting to Dawson was the most difficult of the gold rushes, and in addition the Canadian authorities, with enforcement by the Northwest Canadian Mounted Police, required that you had to be packing a ton of provisions to enter the territory!

Miners landed at Skagway with a ton or more of provisions, so they had to have a lot of money just to play the game. Then, they walked over the frozen Chilkoot Pass in steps cut in the ice – a slip was deadly, and even getting out of line for a rest meant waiting for a potential competitor to let you back in! Your provisions were simultaneously being packed by mule over White Pass, where Dead Horse Gulch piled up 3,500 or more dead horses and mules who slipped over the side of the narrow pass...and the stench reached Skagway, 17 miles away!



Juneau Downtown

Once you and your provisions were over the passes, you had to set up camp and build boats for perhaps several months before the river to Dawson thawed, then you raced the other boats downriver to Dawson only to find that most claims had been settled! Most late miners had to reverse their course and return to the States, empty handed, broke, and with scurvy. (Prostitutes fared a bit better because they ALWAYS struck it rich...but the trip was every bit as bad for them, and they were also required to bring a ton of provisions...)

The year after the Dawson City Gold Rush was well underway, the White Pass Railroad was built in a year by 35,000 workers, at a cost of 35 lives...Jean and I took the train, and in many places the drop beside the coach is 1,000 feet or more. It was a great train ride because it gave some idea of the problems in getting to Dawson City. The miners who struck it rich earned every dime...many spent every dime and got nothing...or worse yet, died!

More than 100,000 planned to set out to Dawson, perhaps half got as far as Skagway, and only a few hundred struck it rich. Ships leaving New York for Skagway were packed to the rails...but before those people reach the Cape, the die was cast as to who was going to be rich.

The big days of Dawson lasted fewer than 10 years, but there is a photo of a dance being held in the Opera House — at 4 a.m. — and it shows gentlemen (?) dressed in tux, and ladies (?) in ball gowns in as plush a setting as could be found on earth. It was said that Dawson at its peak matched Paris in finery!

Dawson went dark when the next gold rush boom town of Nome began, and that petered out years later when Fairbanks and the Klondike opened.

Skagway really piqued my interest in the Gold Rush, and caused me to write a lengthy article on the unsung heroines of the Gold Rush – Prostitutes, without whom the gold rushes would have been vastly different, and who suffered the harshness of deprivation in getting to the gold country just as much as did the men.

(Unlike the miners, however, all prostitutes struck it rich!)

Unfortunately, my publisher of the San Diego Business Journal is a bit of a prude and although the emphasis in the article was on the economic aspect of gold rush prostitution, he would not approve it for publication.

Pity. It is an attachment to this journal.

In Skagway we unfortunately had to anchor in the stream and take boats from the pier back to the ship. It was a bit inconvenient. Hell, it was VERY inconvenient...we arrived at the pier at noon to get



back to the ship and we had just missed a boat. We waited until the 1 p.m. boat, standing all the time, and were told we must be on “standby” while people who arrived even after 1:15 went aboard because they were on a tour designed to use the boat at 1 p.m. They need more boats to run Statendam boats in between the currently scheduled and excellent, but overcrowded outside boats.

We ate dinner at the Lido...we are unlikely to frequent the Rotterdam Room much – too much food. At the Lido we can decide upon our own fare...

Portage Lake Glacier



As we go further north, the amount of sunlight increases. Tonight the sun set at 9:50...it will rise at 4:15. Seas are like glass...weather is much better than expected.

Enroute to Seward...calm seas but poor visibility...we know there are beautiful mountains off the starboard side, where our veranda is, but there is nothing to see. We will just pretend that there are huge snow-covered mountains there, but visibility is about 4,000 yards...

We have a full day of just sailing, but after several days of touring, we can use the rest. I recommend an inflatable seat cushion for the many hours of bus and train travel...I am going to have a sore butt by the time this is over! Next time – a travel cushion.

Our final port is Seward...but we got to see little of it. The bus arrived and we were off to Anchorage!

We went to a wildlife preserve to kill a bit of time before going to the Portage Lake Glacier tour -- because we had missed the first boat on Portage Lake. The preserve was fairly interesting, but the Portage Lake boat trip was excellent. Portage Lake didn't exist 100 years ago, but the Portage Glacier began to recede and melt -- the resulting lake makes it easy to visit by boat. The boat was too big to



Moose Racing the Bus in Front

Discovery III -- Best "Tour" in Alaska!



haul to the lake, so it was brought as parts and assembled on site. The lake tour brought us within 150 feet of the Portage Glacier for excellent photos.

We arrived in Anchorage, the largest city in Alaska (250,000) but as a city it does not show much. It is neither fish, nor foul nor lean red meat. It lacks the charm of the smaller communities, but has none of the metropolitan interest of a real city. It just is. Its real value is that it has an ice-free harbor, and serves as a rail-head to go into the interior of Alaska.

That is why we are here...to take the train to Denali and further to Fairbanks. Just about the only memorable thing about Anchorage is a sign near our hotel that reads, "Alaskan Crab Diner, \$19.95"

The train to Denali was 8 hours...I really NEEDED an inflatable cushion. The trip was excellent, through beautiful country in beautiful rail cars owned by Holland America. Big dome rail cars with lots of glass on the top deck and major dining facilities on the lower deck. The meals were just as good as those on the ship!

For 60 miles along this route, there are "White Flag" trains run twice each week during the summer and one a week during the winter. White Flag trains stop for anyone waving a "white flag" and is used by people living really in the boonies, and who had no other transportation available. There are a lot of them...and their homes are seen back away from the tracks. They do seem to have a lot of ATVs, but there are few towns, so they take the train to the next town to shop, and then ride it back...

The commentary from the "hostess" on the top deck was top drawer. She said, jokingly, that "there is a state law that at no time can a tourist be more than 150 feet from a gift shop, so there is a gift shop aboard" – and yes, there was – on every rail car. And, I don't think we were more than 150 feet from a gift shop on the entire 14 days!

The food aboard the train was superb. The train was pulling four Holland-America cars, and probably at least as many Princess Line two story cars.

The next problem was upon arrival at Denali...the busses were waiting for us, but unfortunately we did not know which Holland-America bus to get on because the list of people and busses had not been sent. Many people consequently got aboard the wrong bus, then had to get their luggage and



Indian Bead Work



go to another bus and store their luggage...some had to move through three busses. People were getting a bit peeved. Jean and I were lucky...we saw all of the chaos, and went to the last bus – and that happened to be, by pure luck, the right bus!

The busses took us to our cabins. Enroute, the ran into a “moose jam” – a moose and its two week-old moose-ets were feeding beside the road and of course all the busses and private cars stopped to watch.

The cabins were clean and well done, but not luxurious.

The next morning we ate early in the buffet, and looked in the ever-present “gift shop.” There was a terrific large photo of four beautiful Golden Eagles sitting on a limb and all looking at the camera – a truly amazing shot! The photo was taken by famed wildlife photographer Johnny Johnson, and it was a limited edition of 950. The price was, unframed, \$195...all of the framing instructions were on the back. It was mailed to me. The photo is titled, “United We Stand” and it is enough to raise the hair on the back of your head!

We got on the buses...and they are the only busses permitted under contract to the Denali National Park. They are operated under contract with Aramark company...and they are Bluebird school busses, and they had little padding on the seats! They are very uncomfortable and especially so over the only road available, a DIRT ROAD. (Inflatable cushion, where are you?)

(Incidentally, our bus was 40 minutes late, and they had no backup standing by. You would think they had never done this before...)

The bus driver was both an excellent driver, and an expert spotter – he could see a grizzly bear, literally miles away, in the brush, while wheeling this bus within inches of the edge in a corner around a bend! He would slide to a stop and say, “Moose at 2 o’clock” and everyone would whip out their binoculars and look for many seconds before someone would spot the moose, or the bear...the guy was absolutely uncanny!

It became obvious that I was armed with the wrong camera for this event...my camera is designed for real estate. It is small and light, and therefore convenient...but photographing wildlife at two miles is well beyond its scope. I needed a Canon Rebel with telephoto lens...



Home on the Chena River

Glacial Silt Meets Fresh Water in the River



We spotted and watched three adult grizzly bears, two grizzly cubs, a moose, lots of sheep, and some caribou. It was a terrific tour for wildlife because many tours see nothing of wildlife. Denali National Park is HUGE, the size of Massachusetts, and the wildlife go where they please when they please. We were really lucky.

The tour stops many times for a “potty stop” and it is a terrific tour...the park only has 54 miles of dirt road, so you can’t see much of the park without hiking into it. We were sorry we did not have the opportunity to take

a helicopter around 20,000 foot Mt. McKinley, the highest mountain on the continent, and very visible that day in sunlight, a bit unusual. We did get some good shots from 40 miles away, but 20,000 feet is huge from any distance.

We would have also liked to take a white water rafting trip, but again not sufficient time. The trips come in three flavors, easy, hard, and REALLY hard!

Back on the double-decker train for a trip to Fairbanks...another four-hour ride. Beautiful, and again the food was terrific, but again an inflatable cushion would have helped.

Arrival in Fairbanks was well-organized, for a change. The bus assignments were clear, and we were welcomed by a representative, whose name begins with a “G” – she has been working for Holland-America since she was 15. We checked into the Westmark hotel, and it was first class – not as good as in Vancouver, but great nonetheless.

Jean and I really liked Fairbanks best of all the places we had stopped. It has a population of about 29,000, and it has the greatest temperature swing of any place on earth. It has reached 99 degrees in the summer, and minus 66 in the winter! They don’t cancel school until minus 50, and recess in school is not canceled until minus 20!

Fairbanks is a nice town with three Starbucks, McDonalds, Burger King, KFC, Loews and Home Depot, among other icons of civilization.

Fairbanks is a great introduction to the REAL “Last Frontier” and fortunately it happened so recently that Fairbanks had 400 telephones, two daily newspapers, electricity, and even automobiles during their Klondike Gold Rush!



Gold Dredge #8 -- Terrific!

Alaskan Pipeline

But it was a REAL frontier — Prostitutes were a HUGE part of Alaska — when President McKinley went to Fairbanks in 1920 to drive the golden spike on the Alaskan Railroad, he was hosted by the Mayor of Fairbanks and his wife — who was a former prostitute. (His first wife, who died earlier, was also an ex- prostitute.) Also greeting the President was the Highway Commissioner (with his ex-prostitute wife), the only drug store owner (with his ex-prostitute wife), and...



Fairbanks was the scene of the Klondike Gold Strike, and about \$1.5 billion in today's dollars was removed from the nearby creeks. After the easy panning was depleted, and second strike was continued by digging through the permafrost to bedrock – 80-90 feet down. There is still one heck of a lot of gold left there! The local forests were depleted building the fires necessary to melt the permafrost, so the dredges could dig down to bedrock. Over millennia, the gold flakes had, because of their relative weight, sifted through the permafrost and gravel to the bedrock.

Big dredges were used for the second strike, and we had the opportunity to go to Dredge #8 (Owned by Holland-America. Surprise!) on Goldstream just outside Fairbanks...it was quite an education. (Entry is \$29.50 a person and is highly recommended.) That dredge only moved through 4.5 miles of the creek in the 30 years it was in operation – and it produced \$317 million of dollars in gold at today's gold price. (7,500,000 ounces of gold.) The dredge only cost \$250,000 to build, and operated until 1959!

Jean out-panned me...she got \$15 in flakes, while I only got \$7. I contend that each “poke” was seeded differently – as they were – but Jean did do a better job, anyway. We combined the flakes and had a necklace pendant made of the flakes. To reward Jean for her expertise, we got her a pure nugget...for \$429! There were flashier ones for sale, some for less money, but this one actually looks like a nugget! (The others looked like huge flakes!)



Home on the Chena River

That Dredge #8 gift shop probably makes as much money as the Dredge did in operation!

After the tour and gift shop, we had “Miner’s Stew” at the “mess hall” for the Dredge, it was excellent, and then hopped the bus for a trip back into Fairbanks. At no time did the real “Miners” eat so well!

Enroute, we stopped alongside the highway where the Alaskan Pipeline comes close to the highway. It is a huge, and impressive feat – built on permafrost.

Mt. McKinley



From there we went to the riverboat Discovery III and a trip down the Chena River. Now THAT is a trip!

The Discovery III has obviously been preceded by two other and smaller riverboats, all owned and operated by the same family – and their youngest daughter is the first and only woman to ever qualify for a riverboat license!

It is a huge riverboat, but only draws less than 36 inches of water, and is actually driven by the paddlewheels.

The homes along the river are fabulous...particularly since the river floods, if not regularly at least sufficiently to make it interesting! There are many two story log homes that are just beautiful.

The highlight of the highlight riverboat trip was a 20 minute talk and demonstration by Susan Butcher, the first woman to win the extremely difficult Iditarod Sled Dog Race – and just to prove she was not a fluke, she won it FOUR times. She is married to another winner, and together they have a sled dog training facility that is very large and well organized. There must have been 40 dogs in training.

As she was talking to the tourists from the riverbank, her dogs were barking constantly and running around at top speed, chasing each other and jumping in the river. Finally, she went over to the ATV that she uses for training purposes.]

The dogs ran instantly to their traces, and as they were hooked up by a trainer, Susan had to keep the brake set firmly as each dog pawed air trying to get started. When the last dog was harnessed, she let the brake off and the ATV almost became airborne...those dogs wanted to run so badly. They went in a huge oval of at least a mile or two in length at such a fast pace that you would never believe it. After she had finally stopped them someone asked how long it took to train them to run...she said, “It takes 2 seconds to teach them to run...and 2 months to teach them to stop!”

I believe it.

Susan is a real athlete, and with four wins is a certified superwoman! The tour announcer of the riverboat, who hosts a radio show on the local station, told us that everyone knows what goes on in Fairbanks. Many years ago, in the 80s, there was a rumor that someone had bought four of the best dogs of a dog trainer in Fairbanks, so the radio announcer asked the kennel owner about the story.

“I hear some girl bought some of your best dogs. What does she plan to do with them.”

“She came in with a wad of bills, and paid top dollar. She was alone, no man with her. I asked her what her plans were, and she said, ‘Go into the bush and train dogs. I am going to win the Iditarod.’ What do you think of that?”

“Not much” was the reply from the announcer.

It was surprising the small and slim size of the dogs! Her husband met the boat at the Indian Fishing Village and demonstrated the dogs, close-up. He explained that the “Big” dogs were used for sprint races, but the sled dogs used in distance races like the Iditarod were thin like marathon runners, as opposed to the more muscular sprinters.

Parenthetically, the Iditarod is over 1,000 miles long and approximates the dog sled relay race used to get serum to sick children in Nome, Alaska back when the serum did not have a long shelf-life. There are many complaints about the harsh treatment of the dogs, and the current commercialism of the race. Some people just like to complain.

The family that owns the Discovery III has built an “Indian Fishing Village” at the terminus of the cruise on the Chena River. Of course the local Indians were nomadic, so it was only during the time after the arrival of white men that they lived in villages and more importantly in log cabins but still they did live that way for several centuries.

That was an interesting stop. Particularly because the speakers were all local Indian girls who were students at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. Very attractive girls.

On the way back we got a better look at the “Governor’s Home.” Amidst the beautiful log homes, hidden in the rushes, is the home of the Governor of the State. It is a 1945 Pullman rail car, converted into a residence. Interesting.

This trip was terrific, and we treated it like a “Disneyland Tour” – which is to say IF we do get to return we now know what we want to see again, or to find time to see for the first time. Alaska is said to have five seasons: Winter, May, June, July, August and Winter!

In Alaska they have a lot of rain when they don’t have snow, but we were very fortunate. Summer “tourist” months take light jackets, but waterproof for certain.

But the people are impressive. They are no-nonsense, no frills kind of people -- about as far from the Rodeo Drive and 5th Avenue as you



Ahh...Jean...Behind You! Each Bear is 9 Feet Tall 15

can get. Their forebearers hacked out a home in this wilderness, and it could not have been easy.

Jean's interest is to fly to Fairbanks, because that is the place we liked best. After several days of sightseeing, with more time spent on gold issues, we will rent a car and drive to Denali. There we will take the helo around Mt. McKinley and the white water rafting trip. Leaving Denali, we will drive to Seward where we will stay at the military lodge on the Kenai Peninsula, and take driving trips around. We will flyhome out of Anchorage.



“Short Take Off and Landing” (STOL) in 150 Feet!



Homes and Businesses Along the River in Fairbanks

Prostitutes Helped Settle Alaska, Too!

A recent visit to Fairbanks, Alaska, generated in me a non-judgmental look at the life of the Klondike gold rush, which had a large societal acceptance, even celebration, of prostitution, necessitated by a 10:1 ratio of men to women. Almost all the women, however titled, were actually prostitutes...although they called themselves “singers” or “entertainers” or even “circus performers.” Without the prostitutes, the male/female ratio would have approached 1,000:1!



The morality of prostitution acceptance in an isolated and dangerous environment may be seen as situational ethics, but one wonders at the desirability for monogamous relationships in a future spaceship set off on a generation-long voyage with a crew of 1,000 men and 120 women...or 1,000 women and 120 men.

Similarly, our relatively puritanical concepts, which work quite well in a society of general gender equilibrium, were not so germane in the “last frontier” of the Klondike fewer than 100 years ago.

In looking at prostitution during the Klondike gold rush, it is amazing to me why writers do not place terms of reference into their material. The Klondike gold rush happens to be our most recent “big strike” gold rush, lasting from 1898 to 1910. Since the camera was well developed and the writing and educational professions were also well developed, the Klondike gold rush is perhaps our best-documented gold rush. It was simply a relatively recent event. Some of the well-known names of the Klondike died around 1960.

While I was panning for gold in Fairbanks recently, I was told that gold panners averaged between \$20 and \$100 a day in the Klondike gold rush – without reference to whether that was \$20 in today’s



dollars or \$20 in, say, 1905 dollars. \$20 paper money in 1905 is equivalent to about \$370 today, but \$20 gold (which was the medium of exchange) is worth \$529. While even that is not a lot of money considering the back-breaking labor of the miners and the fact that prices for everything represented hauling it over miles of snow, it was not bad for a time when the nation, indeed the world, was in a depression!

Reading the literature about those times, “Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush,” I learned that “entertainers” would

dance with the miners in Fairbanks for \$1 a minute. That is \$26 a minute in today’s gold – which is probably still too little to dance with someone who may not have bathed in months – but it places the information into a better perspective. The girls also got \$.50 for each drink they sold, and the profits from their prostitution, of course.

A popular dance hall girl could conceivably take home \$1,000 an hour, in today’s gold price, and those who supplemented their dancing with prostitution, as almost all did, could make **SERIOUS MONEY!** In fact, since many of the prostitutes also grubstaked promising miners, and bought up mining claims from miners who owed gambling debts, many of the “entertainers” were very wealthy. It is likely that all of the “actresses,” “entertainers,” “dancers,” “circus performers” and other descriptions were also prostitutes. The number of unattached women who were not prostitutes was in the single digits...because ANY woman seeking only marriage would have multiple proposals in the first week! Women who married could marry a Klondike King, but that “King” would likely go broke quickly several times, so the diversification of prostitution brought both greater money and more security to the adventurous women. Entertainer and prostitute to mine owner and rich woman. That is a productive economic model, absent questions of morality, and on the frontier Victorian morality was in short supply!



The “entertainers” who had stage talent and were popular could, because of their well-marketed on-stage name, market themselves for a lot of money. One auctioned herself for the six-month winter to the highest bidder, with the caveats that she could accept the second-highest bid if the winning bidder was not of her choosing and and that anyone who physically abused her would find himself with a knife in him. The winning bid was almost \$13 million in gold. Several beautiful singers and dancers were auctioned off for marriage for their weight in gold! Lesser knowns worked the houses of prostitution for as about \$3,000 a night, and low-caste streetwalkers earned \$75 a trick. (All figures in gold at today’s price of gold.)



The saying in Fairbanks was that there were two ways of making money in the Klondike – mining and mining the miners. Purveyors of liquor, sex, food, or mining provisions were more likely to make a steady living than were the miners – although some miners did strike it rich. The two best roads to riches were mining and owning a saloon, but neither profession was available to women.

Fortunately, even the log cabins of the original Fairbanks have been gathered and are maintained in “Pioneer Park.” Because

the cabins are not that old, much like the information about the era, they are in great shape. It is a “frontier” but not all that old.

Most of us only have a vague idea of the “time value of money” and that vague idea encompasses our limited personal experience. We vaguely understand that home prices have risen dramatically in certain years, and that home values have generally increased over the long decades by “a lot” – but quantifying “a lot” is not within the general knowledge base we normally possess.

Even the approximations of the value of dollars in this article are inaccurate because prices in the Klondike and in Fairbanks were figured in gold dust – and gold does not necessarily increase as does the dollar figured on inflation. Gold has its intrinsic value, and in those days the dollar value was \$16/ounce – today it is something around \$423/ounce. Gold value does not change in a direct line with inflation, as does the dollar.

Needless to say, whatever the price of gold, there was some good money made during the Dawson and Klondike gold rushes. A singer who really thrilled the crowd could expect to leave the stage with more than \$13,220 in gold nuggets in today’s money. One known prostitute, who married the first mayor of Fairbanks, was known to have made \$2,115,200 in two years in today’s gold price. She owned a Fairbanks cigar store (which she bought with the wages of sin from a previous gold rush); but you can’t make \$2,115,200 simply selling cigars in two years!

