



Alaska History News

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2005 ALASKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY AWARDS



President Bruce Parham awarded the Beaver Log to Karl Gurcke.



(above)
Alaska's Digital Archives received the 2005 Esther Billman Award. The founding partners: Alaska State Library, University of Alaska Anchorage and University of Alaska Fairbanks were represented by (from left) Gladi Kulp (ASL), Susan Grigg (UAF), Bruce Parham (AHS President who announced the award), Kay Shelton (ASL), Arlene Schmuland (UAA), Jim Simard (ASL), and Bob Forshaw (UAF).

Kodiak, island of mystery and beauty, home of the first permanent Russian settlement in Alaska, the place where the northern rain forest gives way to the tundra, and the fitting site of the glorious Alaska Historical Society meeting. Okay, perhaps "glorious" isn't exactly the right adjective for the society, but it certainly describes the feel of the conference.

Certainly all the attendees had a terribly good time. We heard some excellent papers, ate great food, and had some fine museum tours. The Baranov Museum gave the sense of the Russian glory days, and the Alutiiq Museum demonstrated the ancient and modern lives of the original Aleut and Alutiiq owners of the region. In fact, underlying today's current bustling fishing port, Coast Guard base, and busy auto traffic, is the authentic feel of history, ghosts of the past encountered everywhere.

Three institutions shared the **Esther Billman Award of Excellence. The University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Alaska Anchorage, and Alaska State Library** have jointly established the impressive 14,000-item Alaska's Digital Archives that covers not only photographs, maps, documents, but also museum objects. Check it out at www.vilda.alaska.edu. Not very comfortable with computer searches? Just lean back in your easy chair and you'll soon be a champ. It's that easy to negotiate.

Dr. Robert Fortuine was named **Historian of the Year** for his new book on the ravages of tuberculosis in Alaska. *Must We All Die?* *Alaska's Enduring Struggle with Tuberculosis* is published by the University of Alaska Press, and can be found in all bookstores.

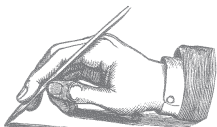
The **Evangeline Atwood Award** is special in that it is given in honor of an individual's long-term contribution to Alaska state or local history. This year retired educator **Marjorie Menzi** was honored for her years of training teachers, preparing curricula, and, for the past two years, working on the teaching of Alaska history in the state schools via the Alaska Humanities Forum.

Compilation of indices or guides to heretofore inaccessible materials can be a thankless job, but of inestimable value to the researcher. The **Pathfinder Award** went this year to **Alexandra J. McClanahan**, usually known as A. J., who has put together four helpful guides to Alaska Native references, and co-authors a column, "This Week in Alaska History" for the *Anchorage Daily News*.

It's hard to compile local history when there's no local newspaper. Vicki Wisenbaugh and friends have published **The Store Door** for three years now, showing the foibles and charms of Tenakee Springs, Alaska. Their **Tenakee Historical Collection** richly deserved the **Elva R. Scott Local Historical Society Newsletter Award**.

And finally, the coveted President's Award, the **2005 Beaver Log** this year went to **Karl Gurcke** in recognition of his tenure not only as a three-term board member but Treasurer, program chair, and all-round hard worker for the society.

The only thing as important as these annual awards is the willingness to nominate good people and groups that deserve applause from all our members. Keep this in mind and look around.



We welcome your letters, news and pictures. Please send them to the editor:

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Message from the President

Lyric Kodiak

While attending our annual meeting in Kodiak last month we stole an hour and went for a walk. My father and I (he gave a talk and roomed with me) wanted to see what was across the bridge that leads to Near Island, just a few hundred yards away from downtown. High above the dark water, we looked down on fishing boats passing through this sheltered shortcut, following a route taken by Russian-American sailing vessels 200 years ago and by Alutiiq skin boats for thousands of years before that.

Reaching the other side, we veered into the spruce rain forest and followed a loop trail that took us around the north end of the island, dropping down to tiny coves and rocky bays and then back to our starting point.

As we emerged from the forest (ignorant of the brown bears we later heard were active in the area) and crossed back to downtown, we looked down and noticed a Russian Orthodox chapel. Surrounded by other buildings, its onion domes forming part of the low Kodiak skyline, it came to life. Several men in black garments came out and stopped to talk in the yard. With robes flapping in the breeze they reminded me of ravens, holy ravens, going about their daily routine.

Kodiak is called the "Emerald Isle" even though it has little in common with Ireland other than green vegetation and a rugged coast. Librarian and historian Phyllis Carlson taught on the island decades ago and once told me that "most of Alaska is epic, but Kodiak is lyric." I thought about her words as we continued across the bridge.

The annual meetings we hold in smaller communities always seem to be the most worthwhile and fun. I think it has to do with small town friendliness — and also by sometimes being trapped when planes can't fly. We tend to focus a little better when we don't have the distractions of the larger communities.

What a great job the Kodiak folks did, organizing events and transportation for a huge turnout of attendees! Our days were packed with receptions, presentations, workshops, tours, exhibits and vendors. Thank you so much to the good people of Kodiak, many of them volunteers, for making us feel so welcome.

Congratulations to newly elected members of our Board of Directors: Doug Capra from Seward, A. J. McClanahan from Anchorage, and Katie Parker from Kodiak. I look forward to working with them over the coming year. Re-elected to the Board were Katie Johnson Ringsmuth, Dorothy Moore, and Bruce Merrell. Leaving the Board after many years of service are Phyllis Movius and Barbara Smith. They have done so much for the Society, especially during this past year as secretary and program chair respectively. We will be finding other ways to make use of their talents.

Do you have ideas about what the Alaska Historical Society should be doing and what we could become? If you haven't already done so, poke around our website at www.alaskahistorical-society.org. Get involved and contact me or other board members and let us know your thoughts.

I look forward to working with you, the members of Alaska's history community, during the coming year.

Bruce Merrell, *President*

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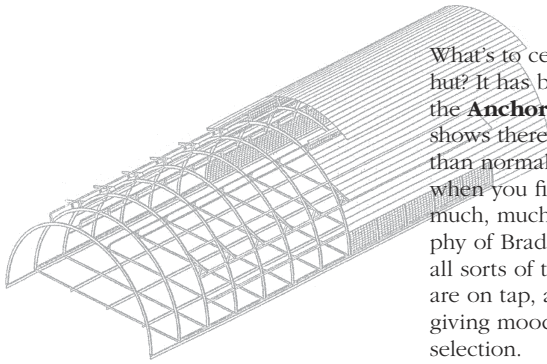


Become a member... or if you're already a member, sign up a friend or relative. Join the hundreds who want to stay in touch with historic Alaska by sending \$30.00 per member (\$20.00 for students; \$40.00 per family.)

It's quick, it's easy, and you receive the semiannual *Alaska History*, the quarterly newsletter *Alaska History News*, and discounts on publications.

Right now a number of back issues of *Alaska History* are on sale; \$6.00 each to non-members, \$4.00 to members. As interest and writing on Alaska history seem to be sprouting like fireweed in the spring, a useful and popular feature is the listing of new books and publications found in each issue. Send your application to Alaska Historical Society, P.O. Box 100299, Anchorage, Alaska 99510-0299; remember to include your address and students, the school you're attending.

Notes from around the state



Drawing courtesy Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

What's to celebrate about the humble Quonset hut? It has been likened to an elephant shed, but the **Anchorage Museum of History and Art** shows there's far more to its architecture and use than normally thought. As always at the museum, when you finish with one exhibit you will find much, much else to admire. The Alaska photography of Bradford Washburn, Native crafts, art, and all sorts of things to celebrate the holiday season are on tap, as are concerts, and, since you're in a giving mood, the museum shop has a great gift selection.

The brown bag lunches, alternating with evening programs, have resumed. The **Cook Inlet Historical Society** manages to find interesting topics and speakers for these lectures held at the Anchorage museum.



After the end of World War II, military quonset huts were used for temporary housing in Douglas. This picture was taken about 1946.

Photo courtesy Gastineau Channel Historical Society, Poor Family.

The Duck Creek base during World War II near Juneau is the main subject of the current **Gastineau Channel Historical Society** newsletter. The first commander and builder of the base wrote at length in 1944. He was proud of the good relations with Juneau, the good bread from the post bakery, and the defenses erected. He also showed creativity in naming the four main streets Broadway, Central, Main, and, daringly, Creekside Drive. There was also a

bare mention of the 600 Indians (sic) moved from the Aleutian Islands being given old CCC rations and materials.

A Juneau resident has added that panic hit Juneau when Pearl Harbor was bombed. A local patriot used his military rifle to shoot out the Gastineau Channel navigation lights.

The society also voted to help sponsor free winter admission to the **Juneau-Douglas Museum**. This has proven very popular. The museum also had a half-day week long program for children. Local experts gave them a chance to know their town in **Juneau Explorers**.



The **Wrangell Museum**, 30 years old and now located in the new James and Elsie Nolan Center, received national recognition from the **American Association of State and Local History**. Now they have professionally designed displays of their fine photographs and artifacts. Congratulations to the director, **Dennis Chapman**. He and our own **Jo Antonson** have been chosen by the AASLH to head the Alaska team. They are looking for award nominations for other local groups.



Historian **Pat Roppel** continues to celebrate Wrangell history and raise funds for the **Friends of the Wrangell Museum** with her monthly compendium of historical news. This month features mining history, including excerpts from letters home by an 1898 prospector who didn't think much of the place, and the little-known importance of canned salmon in World War I. Send \$20.00 to the Friends at 318 Church Street, Wrangell, Alaska, 99929. Tour the city at www.wrangell.com or send an e-mail museum@wrangell.com or just call 907/874-3770.



In another example of the excellent use of the small grants our larger state institutions can spread around, the **Resurrection Bay Historical Society** reports the State Museum grant of \$7,421 has gone to digitizing their photograph collection. The discs can be accessed via a computer station at the museum.

They also report the local name of Resolute Cove has been approved by the U.S. Board of Geographic Names. Isn't it great to live in a state where unnamed places still exist?

The Seward people do keep track of places and things Seward. Last summer a Seward gave a talk to the group on the assassination attempt on his distant relative, William Henry Seward, and gave a bronze medal he had collected to the museum.

Their museum shop is touting a book published by the Gastineau Channel Historical Society. That is a wonderful way to underline the community that is Alaska's historical societies.



A nice anecdote about our great governor, **Jay Hammond**, is in the latest newsletter of the **Tenakee Historical Collection**. The town was embarrassed because Jay and wife, Bella, visited the same day as the community clean-up was held, and there was all sorts of junk lining the trail. Neither guest was at all fazed, and actually poked through the discards. Jay borrowed a wrench in order to take some parts from a three-wheeler for his one at home. He was much amused to learn the owner had parked it just a few minutes before.

A nice selection of radiograms during World War II is also presented. They show the rush and difficulties of running a cannery on a shoestring during the season.



Nob Hill in San Francisco is famous as the site of mansions. No one there ever thought of it as an obstacle, but the pinnacle of achievement. Nob Hill in Ketchikan was a nuisance. It divided the

CORRECTION:

The delightful digitizing of the noted historian R.N. (Bob) De Armond's 70 years of chronicles, **Digital Bob**, is being done by the Juneau-Douglas City Museum, not the Gastineau Channel Historical Society as reported in the last issue. Apologies.

Notes from around the state



Raven illustration by Evon Zerbetz.

original little row of wooden houses on pilings from Newtown, so named when there was a growth spurt around 1900. The walkway was duly widened, no longer followed only the beachline, and was named Water Street. Time went on, the town grew, and by the 1950s a 273-foot tunnel was constructed through the hill. That led to great grumbling during the disruption. Not only were cars down to one lane, but pedestrians also suffered. It was suggested barges could be strung together, providing a floating sidewalk. Tempers ran high during the year. This and the new display, *Raucous! Everything Raven* can be read about in the **Tongass Historical Museum and Totem Heritage Center** newsletter. For a taste of the museums, go to the Ketchikan home page and click on.



We love the frontier, but modernity does intrude. The old-style fishing spears purchased by the **Anvik Historical Society** from Arctic Village couldn't be the traditional 6-8 feet long as the Post Office couldn't take that length. However, the spruce spears do have the head made properly in three sections from caribou antler tied to the handle with caribou babiche.

After years of trying to locate a discernable recording of some Anvik songs recorded in 1925, a noisy but adequate CD was sent by an Indiana center. Now, 80 years later, some of the songs celebrating different animals can be heard.

The society is also selling various booklets on Anvik and Athabaskan legends ranging in price from \$2.00 (postage extra) to \$15.00. When you order, don't forget to enclose \$10.00 for a year's membership so you can enjoy all of the lively newsletters and read the story of the **Young Man and the Blueberry Women**. Another reason for joining is that the membership is down to ten people — let's help them out.



The **Chugiak-Eagle River Historical Society** has a nifty fundraising idea. Since 1996 they have produced a yearly calendar featuring historical photographs of people, places, and events of the community. At \$12.00 these make great gifts for those Down South. Easy and cheap to mail, and guaranteed to be different. Write them at Post Office Box 670573, Chugiak, Alaska, 99567. Another good idea — a local teacher has turned a film his high school photography class made in the early 1970s into a video. Got any similar films lying around? Would make a great presentation.



Another example of the great good produced from the State Museum's Grants-in-Aid program is the \$3,078 to upgrade two displays and the

forthcoming \$5,997 to re-condition two historic keyboards belonging to the **Eagle Historical Society and Museums**. These small amounts do wonders in the hands of the recipients. For pictures see the whizzy www.eagleak.org. The current newsletter identifies photographs from a family visit in 1956. Always good to winkle old letters and pictures from visitors.

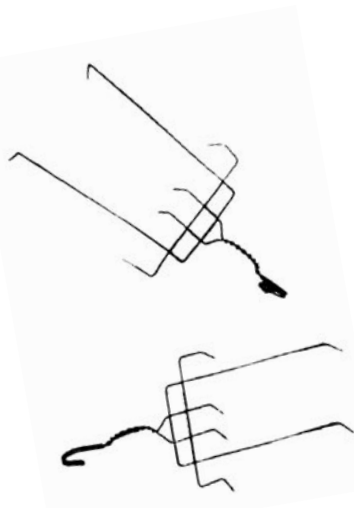
Eagle's summer was enlivened by smoke from wildfires, but not as bad as the year before. Morel mushrooms sprouted from the last fire and various pickers did well. Another topic of conversation was the ornate coffin floating down the Yukon. Investigation showed a Dawson resident had requested cremation with his ashes sent down to float the river one last time. Family and friends decided the coffin made a good boat.



The volunteers at the **Kodiak Maritime Museum** are a creative, optimistic crowd. When they began their project in 1998, it was pointed out they had no building. No problem — it became a "museum without walls." They had no boat — not to worry, one will be provided. No money, no paid director, no artifacts — it just takes time. So now they have a boat, one built with money paid after the 1964 tsunami, named the *Thelma C.* and now donated, along with an exhibit space. There is also a paid director since last spring, and now some exhibit spaces donated around the community for a salmon fish trip, crab fishing, a tribute to a longtime marine radio operator, and even some cards to sell. Whew! Congratulations and very best wishes for future smooth sailing from all of us. Visit their website under construction at www.kodiakmaritimemuseum.org or you can phone or fax at 907/486-0384 or 907/486-0385 respectively.



What to do about Halloween if you want something historic, real, and beyond pumpkins and trick-or-treaters? If you happen to have various cemeteries around, give readers a tour. The **Kodiak Historical Society/ Baranov Museum** does just that in their latest newsletter, writing not only of the lost Simeonoff, the American, Old Russian, and Kodiak City cemeteries, but of some of their inhabitants. The man who raised the first United States flag in Sitka and always called "That American", Benny Benson, designer of the Alaska flag, and the Chief Agent of the Alaska Commercial Company murdered in the Baranov Museum are just three of the short biographies. You might want to give a tour of your cemeteries when the spooky time arrives next year.



The Store Door, the newsletter of the Tenakee Historical Collection asks if anyone can help them identify the objects pictured above that were found in the cabin of Tenakee resident Frank Bongaard.

News & Information

The **Wasilla-Knik Historical Society** reported a very busy and successful weekly farmers' market.



Historical associations are obviously the trendy thing to do on the Kenai Peninsula. The **Kenai Peninsula Historical Association** was the guest of the **Cooper Landing Historical Society** in October, and the **Kenai Historical Society** is very busy helping renovate two old buildings and trying to decide if another is worth saving. The Kenai is a hotbed of history!



The **Iditarod National Historic Trail, Inc.** is delighted to announce the Chugach National Forest has been given \$238,555 to reconstruct the segments of the trail that runs through the area. They also report, via old cablegrams, that after November 1, 1917, there will be heavy use of the trail as the prospectors come out for the winter.



A busy summer is reported by the **McCarthy-Kennicott Historical Museum**. Their enthusiastic curator uses a chin-up bar he installed between two trees next to the curator's cabin as well as doing the normal curatorial duties. Repairs to the museum and proper access are moving along.



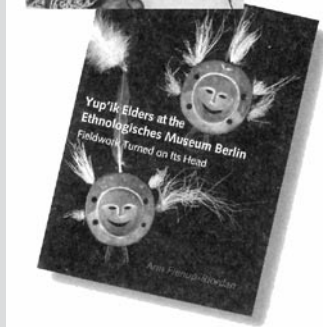
All-singing, all-dancing, or at least a lot of celebrating was done over the summer by the **Palmer Historical Society**. 70 years of the Colony produced special **Colony Days**, **Palmer Pride**, and the **Alaska State Fair**. And of course along the way there was a picnic at Old Knik. Expect it's a bit of a relief to have old 71 coming with nothing special on tap.



The world is divided into two sorts of people: well-organized people and the rest of us. We really, really need the first sort, or we would be surrounded by paper chaos. No, I'm not speaking of my desk at the moment, but the indexing of the mountain of local records owned by the local library and organized by **Nancy Ricketts** as reported by the **Sitka Historical Society**. Now people, ships, mines, businesses, streets, schools, city governments, and obituaries can be accessed through their computer. Invaluable.



The **Sheldon Jackson Museum** continues its **Artifact of the Month** program with an Aleut stone lamp, a Tlingit eagle beaded chest-piece (pictured left), an Ojibway basket (for National Native American Heritage Awareness Month), and Inupiat ice creepers recent features. A nice way to focus on the diversity of the museum's holdings.



YU'PIK ELDERS IDENTIFY COLLECTION

Donations to the **Alaska Humanities Forum** will take you from a Bookworm up through Teacher, Mentor, Professor, Scholar, Visionary, to Philosopher. If you contribute more than \$15,000 I expect a new title will be conferred. Although this is a jokey way of labeling donors, this also gives an idea of what the group does. Anything to improve the civic, intellectual, and cultural lives of Alaskans. Grant awards are on fall and spring cycles. Currently they're also touting a new book by Anne Fienup-Riordan, ***Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Field Work Turned on Its Head***. The elders identified and enjoyed the 2,000-piece collection. From the teaser photographs, this appears a winner.



CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION CELEBRATION

Creating Alaska is not about geology, but a University of Alaska-led project to celebrate the Constitutional Convention in 1955 and all the efforts that led to statehood in 1959. This three-year program will touch all bases, including lectures, a conference of young Alaskans, a documentary, and a traveling museum exhibit.



DESIGN LECTURE SERIES

Architecture, art and sculpture were the theme of the **Alaska Design Forum** lecture series that toured Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau this fall. Let's hope they do it again next year. Seeing beauty in the mundane and unleashing creativity are only a couple of the goals.



SOURDOUGH REUNIONS

News of old friends and spreading the word on sourdough reunions in the Seattle area are the aims of the **Alaska Yukon Pioneers**. For a mere \$10.00 you can subscribe to the newsletter. Write them at 2725-71 East Fir, Mount Vernon, Washington, 98273, call 360/428-1912, or e-mail aypvera@isomedia.com and find out what happened to your first boyfriend!



Obituary

Helen Dittman Beirne, M.D.

Helen Dittman Beirne, M.D., former legislator, Commissioner of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, and energetic volunteer for many, many Anchorage and Alaska health groups, died in Anchorage September 19, 2005, at the age of 83. She will be missed by a broad spectrum of Alaskans, including members of the Alaska Historical Society. Helen served as president of our organization in the 1970s.


ALASKA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Christmas celebration in Eklutna.
Photo courtesy Anchorage Museum of History and Art Library
and Archives.

Visit our Website:
www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org



Christmas celebration in interior Alaska circa 1910.
Photo courtesy Rivenburg Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections,
University of Alaska Fairbanks.

*Note: Photos on this page were accessed through the
award-winning Alaska's Digital Archives website.
(See cover story.)*

Editor's Comments

*A*t first glance, the autumn newsletters from around Alaska are rather dull. It's time to thank the volunteers, so there are long lists of those who helped. If we don't know the people, reading who manned the desk, who built the displays, who unplugged the ventilation system, who painted the museum, let alone who donated the new artifacts and plain old money, is beyond dull.

However, upon thinking it over a bit, a totally different view comes to mind. Could any of our societies operate without those dedicated to state and local history and willing to put in the hours and work? Hours and hours, lovely short summers wasting outside, learning to patiently answer questions and/or turning to construction and painting, and all for the measly reward of getting a thank-you note and mention in the newsletter.

It's called Dedication, and we salute you.

We hope you feel richly rewarded in knowing you have added immeasurably to the knowledge of not only visitors but all those in the community. Having someone look at an old building with different eyes, learn to appreciate the art and traditions of a different culture, or watching children respond with pride to the artifacts of their hometown — this surely makes it all worthwhile. Passing down the best of our towns is an ancient and honorable pursuit. You well deserve all the praise we can give. During the holiday season, don't forget to lift your glass and give a toast to You! (And don't forget to bug your legislators when the subject of Alaska history comes up next session.)

Dee Longenbaugh