

# ALASKA HISTORY *News*

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**GOLD RUSH DISCONNECTS MANY ALASKANS** *Inupiaq people who had fished at the mouth of the Egoshoruk for generations found the area overrun in summer 1900, when the city of Nome boomed around the mouth of what 20,000 newcomers called the Snake River. The Gold Rush transformed Alaska by creating new opportunities for many, but it disconnected many Indigenous peoples from their cultures and lands. Photo courtesy University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Wilhelm Hester, photographer, NA2603.*

## Presentations sought for AHS conference in Kenai

With an inclusive theme that speaks broadly to how colonialism, industrialization and global conflict have shaped Alaska history, the Alaska Historical Society will hold its fall conference in the Central Kenai Peninsula, largely at Kenai Peninsula College, Oct. 5-8.

This year's theme of "Connections and Disconnections in Alaska History" references historical processes that have created wealth and opportunity for some while causing profound losses of lands and livelihood for others.

Keynote speaker Diane Hirshberg, director of the University of Alaska's Institute

of Social and Economic Research, will open the conference Friday morning, Oct. 6. An 18-year veteran of UAA and a specialist in education policy, especially Indigenous education, Hirshberg's address is entitled "From Shelton Jackson to the fight for tribal schools: The unfinished history of colonization's impact on Alaska's schools and students."

After several years of pandemic-forced virtual conferences, this year's conference will primarily be in-person, with at least some presentations available live online.

As the Alaska Railroad marks its centennial this year, the conference theme allows presenters to explore transportation con-

nections—dog sleds, boats, trains, vehicles and airplanes—that have linked Alaskans to one another and to the rest of the world, but have sometimes created daunting obstacles within the state. The building of the Alaska Highway connected Alaska to the rest of the U.S., but did so with the labor of a racially segregated work force, with the least-favorable working conditions assigned to Black soldiers.

Alaska's connection with Russia has changed from the colonization of Alaska through the cooperation of the Lend-Lease pilots during World War II to today's

*Please turn to page 3*

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

# Alaska's contributions to America deserve inclusion on 250th anniversary

When 56 delegates from 13 "sovereign independent states" gathered in a stifling



Philadelphia municipal building nearly two and a half centuries ago, diverse Indigenous cultures were thriving in a mysterious far-away territory later known as Alaska.

By the time America's Declaration of Independence was signed in July 1776, Alaska was barely recognized on the East Coast and played no role in America's start. Two years later, British explorer James Cook helped put Alaska on the international map when he found his way to the muddy inlet which would become home to Alaska's largest city.

Alaska's tenuous connection to America's earliest roots seems to be one reason the 49th state is so challenged getting traction in the national "semiquincentennial" celebration of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Six years ago, the U.S. Congress authorized a national celebration to run from July 4, 2026, through 2027 and created a commission to oversee the effort.

Since then, about 30 states have created their own commissions, many along the eastern seaboard with obvious links to the Revolutionary War. The federal commission is ramping up to award grants focused on "the planning of events in locations of historical significance to the United States, especially in those locations that witnessed the assertion of American liberty, such as the 13 colonies; and leading cities, including Boston, Charleston, New York City, and Philadelphia."

The Alaska Historical Society has worked to ensure our state's vital role in America's progression is recognized nationally. Before the current legislative session began in January, AHS board members approached a handful of legislators encouraging creation of a state commission.

We were told that Alaska already has an Alaska Historical Commission on the

books—whose members are appointed by the governor and chaired by the lieutenant governor—that should oversee Alaska's role in the national celebration. So in early February, we contacted newly elected Lt. Gov. Nancy Dahlstrom seeking an audience to discuss the matter. We've since been told the commission will discuss the 250th anniversary at its meeting this summer.

The society believes this anniversary is an opportunity for Alaskans to explore and inform our fellow Americans of Alaska's history in the context of the history of our nation. Alaska has made important contributions toward America's independence, security, diversity and freedom.

While Alaska didn't dispatch any delegates to the Continental Congress, we have played a vital role since, helping secure a new international order through the Lend-Lease program in World War II, providing America membership in the Arctic and leading the nation in establishing basic civil rights for all.

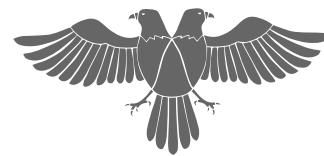
Alaska's involvement should include a focus on our diverse population, especially Alaska's Native peoples and their rich cultures. Through our landmark land claims settlement, Alaska helped make our Native peoples among the most powerful Indigenous people in the world.

The AHS will continue to push for new historical research by both students and scholars reflecting Alaska's vital contributions to the nation as part of our 250th celebration. Two such outlets include the statewide academic competition through the existing Alaska History Day program and the four-part lecture and panel discussion series the society is slated to launch this summer.

We plan to participate in the Alaska Historical Commission meeting to pitch Alaska's role in the national celebration. We welcome suggestions from our members.

On other matters, please read this issue's cover story on AHS's fall conference, especially the call for papers for presentation at that Kenai gathering. We've extended the deadline to May 31 in the hopes of receiving compelling proposals to help make this year's conference another memorable one.

—David Ramseur



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We welcome your letters, news and photos. Send them to:

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[www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org)

or find us on Facebook

# Help us honor those who promote Alaska history

The Alaska Historical Society is inviting nominations for the awards it annually presents to individuals, historical societies and public institutions for notable research, writing and promotion of Alaska history. Projects that have been recognized include special exhibits, historical walking tours, sign projects, oral histories, anthologies, digitizing archival materials, creating a website and commemorating an anniversary.

Nominations are due August 15, 2023. The AHS awards are:

**JAMES H. DUCKER ALASKA HISTORIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD** is given to an Alaska resident for publication of significant new material published in the last 16 months about Alaska's past. Historian Ducker edited the society's scholarly journal *Alaska History* for 30 years.

**ESTHER BILLMAN AWARD** is given to a local or state organization for a project contributing to the preservation and understanding of Alaska history. Billman was the long-time curator at the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

**EVANGELINE ATWOOD AWARD** is given to an individual for significant long-term contributions to Alaska state or local history. Atwood was an AHS founder.

**BARBARA SMITH PATHFINDER AWARD** is given for indexing or preparing guides to Alaska historical material.

Smith, a historian, archivist and exhibit curator, prepared invaluable guides to Alaska Native, Russian Orthodox and Russian American records.

**ELVA R. SCOTT LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY AWARD** is for a special achievement of a community historical society or museum. Scott was a founder of Homer's Pratt Museum, and after moving to Eagle was newsletter editor, tour guide and official of its historical society.

**TERRENCE M. COLE STUDENT AND BEGINNING PROFESSIONAL SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS** are cash awards given to help individuals attend the AHS's annual conference. Cole taught at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and led its public history program.

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO ALASKA HISTORY AWARD** recognizes an individual or group that has made a singular and significant recent contribution to Alaska history.

A nomination should have sufficient detail and supporting materials. It should be submitted to the AHS Awards Committee, by email to [members@alaskahistoricalsociety.org](mailto:members@alaskahistoricalsociety.org) or by mail to P.O. Box 100299, Anchorage, AK 99510. Nominations for the Ducker Award must include a copy of the publication for the committee's use.

## Kenai conference

*Continued from page 1*

re-emergence of the Cold War. The Gold Rush, the rise of commercial fisheries and the oil boom brought new settlers and opportunities for some, but displaced Alaska Natives and took food and economic opportunities from them.

There's no more stark example of disconnection than the history of Alaska Native education policy. Many Alaska Native youth went, some forcibly, from their homes to boarding schools, which often had the goal of separating them from their Native identity. The callous and abusive treatment many children received continues to have consequences today.

This year's theme includes the history of reconnections achieved by Alaska Native people in regaining lands, rights and resources, notably through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and around issues of sovereignty and integration of Native cultures and languages into public education.

Proposals for presenting at the conference are due May 31. Please send an

abstract of 100 words and two sentences of biography to Rachel Mason, program chair, at [Rachel\\_Mason@nps.gov](mailto:Rachel_Mason@nps.gov)

Details of conference activities are still being finalized, but the conference will likely kick off with an evening reception Oct. 5. Friday will feature the keynote address, comments from local elected public officials and presentations. An evening program is scheduled to include an AHS-supported film about a pioneer settler at Lake Clark.

Saturday sessions will focus on reports by local Kenai Peninsula area historical organizations, along with presentation of AHS annual awards for contributions to Alaska history and memorials of Alaskans who significantly contributed to Alaska history and who died during the last year. The conference will continue into Sunday with morning presentations and possible afternoon tours of local historic sites.

Officials from local historical societies already have stepped up to help arrange this year's conference and secure sponsorships for some activities. Details will be forthcoming shortly about hotels, other venues for conference activities and registration.

## AHS seeking new board members

The Alaska Historical Society is seeking members to serve on its 15-member board of directors. Five directors are elected annually to three-year terms (limited to two consecutive terms).

Serving on the board is a meaningful way to participate in the community and help build a respected and effective statewide organization that promotes Alaska's history. Directors meet four to six times a year, primarily through Zoom.

The directors elect the society's officers, set policies and oversee operations of the organization. Each director is expected to serve on several committees such as advocacy, newsletter, communications, annual meeting program and awards.

Please consider serving on the board or recommending someone to serve. If interested, please send a short biography to [members@alaskahistoricalsociety.org](mailto:members@alaskahistoricalsociety.org) by Aug. 15, 2023.



# Kenai historians preserve region's rich history

In photos on the Kenai Historical Society's Facebook page, men in hard hats use a crane to load early 1900s log cabins onto trailers marked OVERSIZE.

"Here comes the parade!" says the caption for a photo of cabins riding flatbed trucks down a Kenai street.

It was the summer of 2009. Retirees from Unocal oil company's Nikiski operation had spent the two prior winters cleaning out and restoring the cabins. Acquired by the city of Kenai over the years, the cabins had been locked behind a fence, inaccessible to the public and used for storage. George and Mary Ford, active members of the all-volunteer Kenai Historical Society at the time, wanted that changed.

So KHS, partnering with the Kenai Chamber of Commerce and City of Kenai, sought a Rasmuson grant to establish Kenai Historic Cabin Park. Funding supported restoration, groundwork, fencing, signs and supplies. Volunteers and local donors provided the rest.

KHS's first Facebook post includes 31 photos of the park's beginnings. Unocal retirees are shown breaking ground at the city-owned site in Old Town Kenai. Peak Oilfield Services Co. workers, their services donated, are pictured moving the cabins into place.

It would be another year before the park opened, according to June Harris, long-time KHS president.

"When the cabins were put in place, I just kind of scratched my head and said, 'What do we do now?'" Harris recalled. "I and three other volunteers managed to get artifacts gathered and the cabins are full. They each have their own history and their own theme."

The cabin park, open five days a week in summer, is the centerpiece of the work of KHS. Admission is free. With only a couple dozen members, the organization continues to stretch its impact with help from community partners.

Hillcorp and the City of Kenai fund docent Mary Waybark to staff the cabin park, which has seen up to 2,000 visitors annually. For just a dollar a year, KHS leases the historic Civic League Build-



**Peak Oilfield Services Co. workers moved homestead cabins to their new location in 2009. Kenai Historic Cabin Park includes five cabins, an old fish cannery truck, a restored 1917 Howitzer cannon and other historic items. Photos courtesy Kenai Historical Society.**

ing from the city—then turns around and leases out the building to generate income for KHS projects, including two \$2,000 scholarships awarded annually to local graduating high school seniors. The chamber of commerce allows KHS to use the historic Moosemeat John Cabin, near the visitor center, to do research and collect information.

Founded in 1956, the Kenai Historical Society's mission is to collect, share and preserve the history of the city of Kenai and the Central Kenai Peninsula, including Nikiski. Members meet monthly (except during summer) and usually host a speaker. Topics range from the history of fox farming to agates on the Kenai beach to a historic former Dena'ina village site in town. Meetings are open to the public.

"Membership is encouraged and sometimes we pick up a new member, but it doesn't always work that way," Harris said. Most of the two dozen KHS members have belonged for many years. The group is aging overall—a challenge facing many historical societies, noted Harris, who is 79.

Jobs and kids keep many younger Kenai residents busy, Harris acknowledged.

"I speak from experience there," she added. She and now late husband Joe joined KHS after their daughters had left home. June had retired from 30 years of work with domestic abuse and sexual assault victims, Joe had retired from Unocal. Their aging friend, neighbor and former Unocal plant manager George Ford asked Joe to head the cabin park project when Ford could no longer do it. "What George asked for, you did; he was a great guy," Harris said. "Because [Joe] got so involved, I got involved."

The historical societies of Kenai, Soldotna, Kasilof, Seward, Cooper Landing and Hope make up the Kenai Peninsula Historical Association. They meet twice a year to share activity updates and listen to a speaker. The association will host the Alaska Historical Society's conference this fall.

"I think it's exciting," Harris said. "We're really pleased."

When in Kenai, purchase a copy of the popular KHS book *Once Upon the Kenai: Stories from the People*, a 1984 collection of oral histories in its third printing. You can learn more about KHS and its cabin park on Facebook and at [www.kenaihistoricalsociety.org](http://www.kenaihistoricalsociety.org).

—Carol Gales

# Adventure-seeking UAF film archivist promotes education so Alaskans appreciate our past

It was family stories that led Angie Schmidt to a lifelong career in film history and service on the Alaska Historical Society board.

Growing up in a small, rural area of eastern Iowa, mostly farmlands originally settled by European immigrants, Schmidt vividly recalls how her great-grandmother's stories, told from the rocking chair on the front porch, brought alive the past—stories of life on the farm, which could be hard, but also filled with adventure. Her father too was a storyteller, pulling a shoe box out of his closet filled with arrowheads and other treasures he had found as a child in the underlying soil, filling her with awe and wonder and a longing for a life of adventure and discovery for herself.

That longing for adventure led to a degree from Iowa State University in Ames and an early career in journalism in southwest Iowa. There, a new awakening to conservation and natural resource issues and her increasing desire for adventure led her at the age of 25 to apply to the University of Alaska Fairbanks for an undergraduate degree in wildlife biology.

As soon as she arrived in Fairbanks, she knew she was home. That this was a place that called to her—the smell, the people, the vibe of a place still open and relatively untouched by change. She enticed her Iowa boyfriend, Chris Miller, to join her and they soon married.

A student job working with archival photos in the university's Rasmuson Library photo lab led to a full-time job in archives in 2000, where she has been ever since, gradually working up the ladder to now serve officially as film archivist at the Alaska Film Archives, a unit of the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives department in the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at UAF.

Schmidt's days at the university brought her into the circle of renowned and recently passed historian Terrence Cole, who brought Alaska history alive to her and enticed her into a graduate degree in Arctic and northern studies, as well participation in Alaska Historical Society conferences and events. That led to her joining the board in 2018 where she has served as secretary since fall 2019—a position she likes because it gives her a small



*AHS board member Angie Schmidt takes in fall colors over Ester last fall with her husband, Chris Miller, in their Super Cub. Schmidt and Miller also enjoy restoring buildings in downtown Fairbanks. Selfie by Angie Schmidt.*

but tangible way to help the organization.

"Alaska has changed so much since I first came here almost 30 years ago," Schmidt says. "When I first moved here in 1995, Alaska was 20 years behind the country, and now we've shot forward so

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**"I'm proud of projects that focus on discussions of historical topics, that promote civil discourse about hard topics."**

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fast, it's hard to keep up mentally. We're still economically stifled, a colonial outpost at the whim of larger forces, but the world has shrunk with everyone connected to the internet, and now Alaska has become more closely intertwined with everywhere else, part of the messy social politics.

"But we're also more aware now of social issues that we need to address such as our relationships with Alaska Native peoples and colonizers such as myself. There's a lot of new people coming to Alaska who don't fit what many consider to be the tradition-

al Alaska mold—we have much catching up to do with new immigrants and how they contribute to Alaska, and need to hear more of their voices."

When she's not working at the film archives or helping with the AHS, Schmidt spends time with her husband remodeling historic buildings. They purchased in 2007 and remodeled the former Tommy's Elbow Room bar on Second Avenue in Fairbanks, which now houses music and dance studios. They also purchased in 2016 and now live in as they slowly refurbish the historic Falcon Joslin house on Fifth Avenue and Cowles Street in downtown Fairbanks.

What does she like most about the Alaska Historical Society? The comradery and the mentorship with people of all ages and backgrounds all around the state.

"We can learn from people who have been historians for many years," she says. "I'm proud of the projects that focus on discussions of historical topics, that promote civil discourse about hard topics. I can see how it benefits the people of Alaska and am excited especially about promoting education—our future leaders need to know our history."

—Molly McCammon



## PETERSBURG

### The Roaring 1920s come to Alaska

The Clausen Memorial Museum presented *The Boardwalk* in March, an original song-and-dance show about life in Petersburg in the 1920s. The show's name came from the boardwalks over the muskeg that characterized the community of 1,000 at that time.

The decade saw the beginning of aviation, economic growth, Prohibition, movies and more. The script, written by local historians Sue Paulsen and Cathy Cronlund, highlights notable local characters, fur farming, dairy operations, segregation, women's suffrage, a visit by the Shriners and a banner year in high school sports when the Petersburg Vikings took the state title in basketball. Attendees, dressed in period style, began the evening with a Norwegian-style feast.

*The Boardwalk* was originally scheduled to open in 2020, but COVID caused a three-year delay. The show's rave reviews suggest it was worth the wait.



The cast of *The Boardwalk*, an original production about 1920s Petersburg. Photo by Grace Wolf.

## ANCHORAGE

### Book documents Nordic skiing history

The Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage was founded in January 1964, only a couple of months before the Great Alaska Earthquake. At the time, Anchorage was a small town with lots of snow and a young, active population, but it had no dedicated ski trails, biathlon ranges or ski jumps. Trail grooming was do-it-yourself; skiers made trails in fields, farms, campgrounds, and military bases. Since then the NSAA has groomed a network of trails and sponsored races, along with a host of other activities that have contributed to Anchorage being a top winter recreation destination city in North America.

Alice Tower Knapp, a past president of the Nordic Skiing Association, has written the book *On Track!* to chronicle the organization, the network of ski trails it has built and its community events. She spoke about the club's history at the April meeting of the Cook Inlet Historical Society. Knapp attended the first Nordic Ski Club race in Anchorage as a 4-year-old.

### Cemetery tours return this summer

Anchorage's fascinating cemetery tours return this summer.

- June 21: The 26th annual "Guided Biography Tour," led by Audrey and Bruce Kelly, includes 10 notable—and sometimes notorious—Alaskans whose leadership, entrepreneurship, hard work and big dreams helped found the city we know today.

- July 9: The 11th annual "Self Guided Walk" features costumed actors to provide a glimpse of life in old Alaska through the eyes of the politicians, pioneers, gold seekers and adventurers who came to make their home here. The 10 selected gravesites are different from those presented June 21.

- August 13: Bring your own chair and watch costumed actors step onstage to repeat the 10 stories featured July 9.

Donations are accepted but not required. For more information contact Rob Jones, cemetery director, at 907-343-6814, or the Kellys at 907-301-5728.

### New virtual Jewish museum exhibit launched

The new Alaska Jewish Museum virtual exhibit, *From Purchase to Prosperity: the Jewish Founders of the Alaska Commercial Company*, was launched April 30 during the Western Regional Rabbinic Convention. Museum curator Leslie Fried had long wanted to craft an exhibit on the company but didn't have room in the small museum building. So she and local maritime historian Penelope Goforth proposed a virtual exhibit. It showcases the founding of the company by Jewish financiers, along with West Coast commerce and maritime traders William Kohl and Hayward Hutchinson. Discussion of the controversies about the company's monopoly on the fur seal industry and the ethics of the founders, with interviews with Perry Eaton, Alutiiq artist, and Rex Wilhelm, former Anchorage Commercial Company CEO, brings the exhibit to life.

At the gathering to introduce the exhibit, Lt. Gov. Nancy Dahlstrom, Anchorage Mayor Dave Bronson, and Assembly Chair Christopher Constant spoke, and remarks from Alaska historian Steve Haycox were read. Rabbi Yo-sef Greenberg introduced the website and talked about the contributions of Jewish merchants to the acquisition of Russian Alaska.

Tour the virtual exhibit online at [www.alaskajewishmuseum.com/exhibits/from-purchase-to-prosperity/](http://www.alaskajewishmuseum.com/exhibits/from-purchase-to-prosperity/)



## Preservation Alaska announces 2023's 10 Most Endangered Historic Properties

To kick off Historic Preservation Month, observed in May, Preservation Alaska announced its 32nd 10 Most Endangered Historic Properties list.

The SS *Nenana* in Fairbanks was ranked as the most endangered historic property. While the Fairbanks North Star Borough has allocated some funding for critically needed repairs, bids have twice come in over budget. The Friends of the SS *Nenana* are fundraising to assist with the restoration of this unique landmark.

The other nine properties are:

- Ascension of Our Lord Chapel, Karluk
- Chitina Emporium, Chitina
- Eldred Rock Lighthouse, Haines
- Pilgrim Hot Springs, Nome
- Pioneer Hall, Ketchikan
- Fort William H. Seward Hospital, Haines
- Bishop Rowe Chapel, Arctic Village
- Bristol Bay Boats, Naknek
- HyYu Stamp Mill, Fairbanks

The annual list is intended to bring public awareness to Alaska's threatened historic properties. Preservation Alaska awards a grant to one of the properties to help leverage funding for preservation work from other sources. Donations for the grant program are welcome. To donate, visit [www.AlaskaPreservation.org](http://www.AlaskaPreservation.org)

## JUNEAU

### Summer museum exhibits, tours starting up

The Juneau-Douglas City Museum's summer exhibit is *For Our Children: Chilkat Regalia Woven in the Lineage of Jennie Thlunaut & Clarissa Rizal*. The exhibit includes Chilkat robes woven by three generations of weavers: the two master weavers, living weavers Shgen George, Lily Hope and Ricky Tagaban, and 17 student weavers who have been mentored the past few years by the living weavers.

Also, the museum's summer walking tours are starting. "Geology Rocks!" will visit places downtown to explain how the city of Juneau was "built on gold." "Death-in-Douglas: A True Crime Walking Tour" will detail seven murder cases in Douglas and Treadwell in the first half of the 20th century. The "Historic Downtown Walking Tour" will introduce Juneau's first inhabitants, view totem poles, share tales of prominent early personalities and describe how the thirst for gold changed the landscape. Get dates, times and tickets at [www.juneau.org/museum](http://www.juneau.org/museum).

### Website features Gastineau area history

The extensive timeline of Gastineau Channel area history is now live at the [juneauhistory.org](http://juneauhistory.org) website. Thanks go to Rich Mattson, Gastineau Channel Historical Society board member, for hundreds of hours of research. If you know of an event which should be added, email the society at [juneauhistory@gmail.com](mailto:juneauhistory@gmail.com)

## Local lighthouse tour benefits mining museum

Forty people will have the chance to take a tour of the historic Sentinel Island Lighthouse and partake in an all-the-fixin's ribs and prawns picnic at the site June 10. Tickets are \$150 for Gastineau Channel Historical Society members (\$175 for non-members) and include transportation from Auke Bay. The boat departs at 1:30 p.m. and will return about 6 p.m. This is the 25th anniversary of the society managing the historic lighthouse, which began operating in 1902. Proceeds from the event will benefit Last Chance Mining Museum, which the society also manages. For tickets, call 907-780-4355. For inquiries about renting the lighthouse overnight, email [SentinelLight907@gmail.com](mailto:SentinelLight907@gmail.com)

## Sealaska lecture series focuses on Raven

Sealaska Heritage Institute is holding a lecture series on Raven as Trickster and Cultural Hero by traditional Tlingit and Tsimshian storytellers in May. The talks will be in person at noon at the Walter Soboleff Building in Juneau and livestreamed on SHI's YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/c/sealaskaheritageinstitute>. Here is the storytellers' schedule:

- May 9: Johon Atkinson, Tsimshian
- May 16: Fred White, Tlingit, Shangukeidi
- May 18: William (Joey) Bolton, Tsimshian
- May 23: David Kanosh, Tlingit, Deisheetaan
- May 26: Dan Brown, Tlingit, Teikweidi
- May 30: David Nelson III, Tsimshian
- June 1: Thomas Thornton, Kaagwaantaan

SHI will be publishing a book with the University of Washington Press with 50 episodes of Raven's adventures as told by Tlingit storytellers. The book will include Tlingit transcriptions of the stories with English translations.

## ANCHORAGE

### Historic Black church lands grant for restoration

The Leake Temple AME Zion Church in Anchorage has received a grant for repairs from the Preserving Black Churches program, which recently awarded grants to 35 historic Black churches across the nation. The grant program, a project of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund in partnership with Lilly Endowment Inc., aims to ensure that Black churches' legacy of spirituality and social justice continues by offering grants for preservation and repairs. The Leake Temple's grant will be used to replace the roof of the sanctuary.



**Leake Temple AME Zion Church in Anchorage. Photo by Sandra Black.**

## PALMER

### Historians hear of longest-standing farm stand

Bruce Bush and Sara Williams shared stories at the Palmer Historical Society's April History Night about Bushes Bunches Produce Stand, a family-owned business in Palmer since 1956. The original homestead of what is now the Bush family farm was staked in 1914 by John "Frenchy" DuFour, who worked on the railroad and as a miner. The farm went through a couple of owners before the Bush family bought it in 1956. That summer, Bruce's sister, Nancy, started a modest roadside stand on a table as a way to make some money. Since, the business has expanded and moved several times. Bruce developed and named the fingerling "Peanut Potato" in 1960. In addition to the farm stand, Bushes Bunches has had a food booth at the Alaska State Fair for many years, where fairgoers can eat deep fried fingerling potatoes with homemade dip.



In 2020, because of COVID, the Bushes Bunches food booth couldn't open at the Alaska State Fair. Instead, it operated from the farm stand. Photo by Heather Hintze, courtesy Alaska News Source.

## KODIAK

### Museum explores measures of Native identity

*Fissions of Native Identity*, a new exhibit at the Kodiak History Museum, explores the intersection between Native identity and government policy. Alaska Natives, like other Native peoples in the U.S., have been subject to measurements of blood quantum to qualify for basic rights, protections and programs under federal law. After the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed in 1971, for example, some Alaska Natives struggled to demonstrate that their blood quantum was sufficient to qualify for participation. A number of tribes and Native corporations have moved from blood quantum to lineal descent as a basis for enrollment. Under a lineal descent policy, anyone directly descended from an original enrollee is eligible for tribal membership, regardless of blood quantum. The idea for the KHM exhibit came from the Kodiak community and was developed with a group of Native community members.

## CENTRAL KENAI PENINSULA

### Historic Dena'ina village near college profiled

Anthropologist Adam Dunstan, part of the Kenai Peninsula College faculty, spoke to the Soldotna Historical Society in February about the large and unique Dena'ina village situated near what is now the KPC campus. The site, Slikok Creek Village, was occupied 400-700 years ago by people ancestral to contemporary Dena'ina, some of whom still live on the Kenai Peninsula.

## SEWARD

### Writer unearths turn-of-century railroad plan

This year marks the 100th anniversary of completion of the Alaska Railroad between Seward and Fairbanks. Seward historian Doug Capra recently obtained from a private collector a copy of the 1902 prospectus put together by promoter John Ballaine as he sought investors for the construction of a railway from the head of Resurrection Bay to the Interior. Ballaine found support for his dream of developing a railroad to gold mining areas, and the project led to the founding of Seward in 1903. The 16-page prospectus includes a photo of a granddaughter of Mary Lowell, part of the family already living at the head of Resurrection Bay when the city was founded. Doug Capra is working on an article about the Ballaine prospectus.

### '64 earthquake destruction to railroad recalled

The Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964 caused great destruction in Seward, leaving a mass of debris over much of the city. The railroad yards were particularly hard hit. According to the *Anchorage Daily Times* of May 14, 1964, quoted in the Resurrection Bay Historical Society's March newsletter, the earthquake left the rail yards "littered with smashed box cars, leaking tank cars and derailed locomotives ... amid a jungle of twisted and split rails." Cleanup of the railroad yards was one of the last phases of the recovery effort, requiring negotiations between the Alaska Railroad and Army Corps of Engineers for a joint project. The fire danger from spilled fuel and oil was so great that guards were stationed around the yards in the weeks before cleanup work began.



Railyard damage in Seward 1964. Photo courtesy Allrefer.com.



## FAIRBANKS

### Recalling “skyscraper” era in Golden Heart City

In 1951, two “skyscrapers” were completed in Fairbanks: the Northward and the Polaris. While the Polaris is now facing destruction, the eight-story Northward has survived and is still in use as an apartment building. Edna Ferber’s 1958 novel *Ice Palace*, which follows a group of Alaskans as they work for statehood, is set in an apartment building very similar to the Northward. A movie version of the novel was produced in 1960, starring Richard Burton. While it received less than stellar reviews, the film continues to be loved by fans. In March, journalist and historian Dermot Cole presented the movie *Ice Palace* to the Tanana Yukon Historical Society, offering commentary on both the film and its real-life inspiration, the Northward.



Northward Building in Fairbanks, 2018.  
Photo courtesy Creative Commons.

### Famous miners inducted into hall of fame

The Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Foundation honored three new inductees this year.

- **Emma Grace Lowe**, known as Grace Lowe, ran placer gold mines in the Livengood district in the 1930s and 1940s and has the distinction of being one of the few women who operated profitable gold mines in Alaska. With her partner Evelyn Mahon she operated a roadhouse in Black Rapids and a store in Fairbanks, but Grace continued to pursue her mining interests and claims.

- **Frederick James Currier** was one of the first to mine in the Circle district, and prospected the Fairbanks area years before Felix Pedro discovered gold. He arrived in Alaska in 1893, climbing the Chilkoot Pass years before the crowd of prospectors arrived, and traveled up and down the Yukon River multiple times. He wrote a memoir entitled *An Alaskan Adventure*, telling of his 10 years of gold mining, 1893-1903.

- **Bridget Mannion Aylward** mined on Napoleon Creek in the Fortymile district and became known as the “Queen of Alaska.” She received a reported 150 proposals of marriage soon after she arrived on the Yukon, but only accepted one from Edward Aylward, a fellow immigrant from Ireland. When Bridget returned to Ireland at the end of her long life, she used the gold she and her husband mined to establish an educational trust fund for children.

The induction ceremony on March 29 was the first to be held at the new Alaska Mining Hall of Fame Museum, located at 406 Cushman St., Fairbanks.

### Local historian recaps “rambling” in Interior

The Tanana Yukon Historical Society held its last lecture of the season in April. Ray Bonnell, historian, artist and resident of Fairbanks, spoke about visiting Interior, Southcentral and Southeast historic sites for over 40 years, his art and writing. He has documented mining camps, homesteads, cemeteries and other sites to record them through photos, detailed pen-and-ink sketches and notes—what he calls “a snapshot in time.” Ray has just self-published *Interior Sketches III: More Rambling Around Interior Alaska Historic Sites*. He serves on the Alaska Historical Commission, the board that reviews nominations for listing properties in the National Register of Historic Places. AHS recognized Ray with one of its Contributions to Alaska History awards in 2011.



## FROM THE YUKON

### Pioneer in Parliament broke glass ceiling

Martha Black of the Yukon Territory was elected to Canada’s Parliament in 1935, less than 20 years after women got the right to vote in Canadian elections. She was an adventurous woman, having climbed the Chilkoot Pass during the 1898 Gold Rush. Her husband, George Black, had been a member of Parliament for three consecutive terms when he became ill in 1935 and could not campaign for re-election. Mrs. Black stepped forward to run for Parliament in his place. She campaigned vigorously throughout the territory, where she was a familiar figure and knew many people, and easily won the election. In Parliament, she received considerable media attention. Her first speech in Parliament was a message of sympathy for Queen Mary on behalf of the women of Canada after the death of King George V in January 1936. She spoke out about the poor treatment given to retired Yukon civil servants and other senior citizens in the territory and worked to improve roads and for better working conditions for miners. She was the first of several female representatives from Yukon Territory to serve in Parliament. (From a story by Michael Gates, in the e-news of the Yukon Historical and Museums Association).



Canadian member of Parliament  
Martha Black. Photo courtesy Library and Archives Canada.

# The Alaska Railroad at 100: A short history

*As the Alaska Railroad celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, retired railroad Executive Vice President Jim Blasingame wrote this history at the request of the Alaska Historical Society. Blasingame, a 42-year railroad veteran, is a member of the board of directors of the Cook Inlet Historical Society. His fellow CIHS member, University of Alaska history professor Ian Hartman, edited this piece.*



On July 15, 2023, the Alaska Railroad will celebrate its centennial. However, it all began on March 12, 1914.

On that day, the U.S. Congress passed the Enabling Act of 1914. Just two and half pages, the legislation gave President Woodrow Wilson sweeping authority to direct resources to construct and operate a rail line in the Territory of Alaska. It was not to exceed 1,000 miles and would connect Alaska's southern coast to the Interior with the purpose of expanding economic development and resource extraction.

The construction of the Alaska Railroad involved three presidents and took roughly a decade to complete. William Howard Taft urged Congress in early 1913 to build a rail line to wrest control from the so-called trusts that had sought a monopoly over transportation in Alaska. Construction occurred in earnest between 1915 and 1923 during the terms of Woodrow Wilson and Warren Harding.

The Alaska Railroad began operations after President Harding drove the ceremonial gold spike into the line in Nenana along the Tanana River on July 15, 1923. The day was indeed memorable as temperatures reached 90 degrees.

The unsuspecting presidential entourage came prepared to brave the cold, and many wore wool leggings and jackets anticipating frigid air. Although their clothing may have protected them from the swarming mosquitoes, a few reportedly fainted from the heat.

During construction, Alaskans called it the "Government Railroad." Only after it began to operate did it become known as the Alaska Railroad. Technically, the railroad was considered an independent enterprise owned and operated by the federal government. It first came under the regulatory authori-

ty and received millions in federal funds.

The war illustrated how important Alaska had become to the nation's strategic defense. In the following decades Alaska would continue to benefit from copious levels of federal defense appropriations. As a result, the railroad upgraded its track and further developed its relationship with the military, but maintenance remained a costly and ongoing effort.

The Good Friday Earthquake which struck Alaska March 27, 1964, wrought extensive damage to the railroad,

destroying much of its property in Seward and Portage and cutting off connection to the Kenai Peninsula.

Workers succeeded in getting the railroad operational within a few weeks despite limited federal assistance. This prompted many Alaskans to question the very premise of the railroad's federal ownership.

These questions intensified as the

railroad failed to hire enough workers to fully participate in the state's 1970s and early '80s oil boom. While the railroad contributed to the pipeline construction effort, it was restricted in hiring the necessary personnel and encountered regulatory headwinds during a time of rapid economic change in Alaska.

Frustrations with federal ownership boiled over in the early 1980s as a vocal contingent of Alaskans lobbied the state to assume control of the railroad. U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens was perhaps the most ardent and powerful advocate for the railroad to be transferred from federal to state ownership. Stevens worked closely with his colleagues in Congress

*Continued on page 11*



**President Warren Harding prepares to drive the ceremonial gold spike in Nenana on July 15, 1923. The historic day was equally memorable for its weather: 90-degree temperatures. Lu Liston Collection, Anchorage Museum, B1989.16.1612.**

ty of the Interstate Commerce Commission and eventually the Federal Railroad Administration under the Department of Transportation.

## **Federal ownership: 1923-1985**

Under federal ownership, the railroad was subject to policies which restricted its ability to compete with private entities that transported goods and materials. The railroad was responsible for much of its financial obligations and had limited ability to market or expand its operations.

It also faced significant costs and overhead which hindered its ability to make a profit. An exception occurred during World War II when the railroad played a primary role in Alaska's war

# Alaska History Day attracts 81 students focused on frontiers

A celebration of Alaska, United States and world history wrapped up in late April with the 34th Annual Alaska History Day (AHD) competition.

The virtual contest hosted 81 students from schools across Alaska including the Aleutians, Seward Peninsula, Interior and Anchorage areas. A total of 49 projects were submitted for review and 23 volunteer judges served from six different U.S. time zones.

This year's contest theme, "Frontiers in History: People, Places, Ideas," connected closely with many elements of the state's history and identity. Alaska history topics were well-represented, with projects examining the Fairbanks-Valdez Trail, Elizabeth Peratrovich's legacy, the Alaska Railroad, the Nome gold rush and the history of the Unanga꥕ people.

Top projects are eligible to advance to the National History Day contest in College Park, Maryland, in June. More than 20 students are expected to make the trip with AHD coordinator Rebecca Heaton leading the delegation.

While more than 80 students participated in the statewide contest, that represents only a portion of the total participation around the state. Figures reported by teachers found that 825 students participated in the history day program at all levels.

Alaska History Day encourages primary and secondary source research, developing historical arguments and creating projects to present research. Students learn valuable research and writing skills, how to think critically about sources and how to develop a strong argument. They then present their research as papers, documentaries, performances, exhibits and websites. Young people are taking the time to examine the past and that bodes well for the future.

The coordinators of the Fairbanks History Day regional contest, Leanna Williams and Rebecca Heaton, approached the Alaska Historical Society about sponsoring the program after the Alaska Humanities Forum stepped back from administering the contest under budget constraints. Without

a statewide sponsor, Alaska would have become the only state in the union without a program. When AHS agreed to be the affiliate organization for the contest in the fall of 2022, its support helped save Alaska History Day.

While this year's participation showed significant growth over that in 2022, contest organizers aim to expand outreach next year to teachers and potential participants through professional development sessions, classroom visits and a website to connect participants to the tips and resources they need to help develop their projects.

Organizers also will work to identify fundraising for student travel costs to partic-



**Tyler Kirk of the UAF history department presents Amal Shubair with her first place award for her project "Music of the Harlem Renaissance" at the Fairbanks History Day awards ceremony in February. Shubair's project advanced to Alaska History Day, where she also earned first prize. Photo by Richard Atkin/Mammoth Marketing.**

ipate in the national contest as one of their priorities next year. To date, Alaska History Day has received financial support from the Alaska Humanities Forum, an anonymous donor from the Cook Inlet Historical Society, a second anonymous donor, the Ted Stevens Foundation and the AHS.

—Leanna Williams

## Alaska Railroad at 100

*Continued from page 10*

and the Reagan administration to craft transfer legislation.

### State ownership: 1985 to present

These efforts culminated in the Alaska Transfer Act of 1982 (45 U.S.C. 1201-1214), whereby the state agreed to purchase the railroad for \$23 million. After working through the thorny details of the transfer, Alaska officially assumed ownership of the railroad on January 5, 1985, in Nenana, where President Harding had driven the gold spike more than 60 years earlier. In contrast to that 1923 day, those who attended the transfer celebration endured temperatures of 30 degrees below zero and warmed themselves with moose and caribou stew.

Once the railroad passed from federal to state ownership, the Alaska State Legislature created the Alaska Railroad Corpo-

ration (AS 42.40) as a separate legal entity with the autonomy to issue bonds for capital improvements and establish a board of directors. The board includes the state commissioners of transportation and economic development, a member who must have at least 10 years of management experience on a major U.S. railroad, one who has management experience with a company of at least 50 employees, and a member to represent railroad employees. The board hires the chief executive.

Today the Alaska Railroad is a self-sustaining corporation that provides year-round freight and passenger service in addition to managing its extensive real estate holdings. It is a fundamental part of the 49th State's culture and economy.

The Anchorage Museum just opened a special exhibit about the history of the Alaska Railroad. Events are scheduled throughout this year as Alaskans commemorate the centennial of this unique Alaska institution.



## AN ODDMENT

# Jack London a witness to Eagle City's wild early days

A young and yet-to-be-famous Jack London spent the winter of 1897-98 in the Klondike, and while he didn't write much, he took mental notes that helped to produce *Call of the Wild* (1903), *White Fang* (1906) and many short stories. On June 8, 1898, he and two friends left Dawson City in a "home-made, weak-kneed and leaky" rowboat to descend the Yukon River. The author described stopping at Eagle City, where American miners evaded what they viewed as Canada's tyrannical regulations

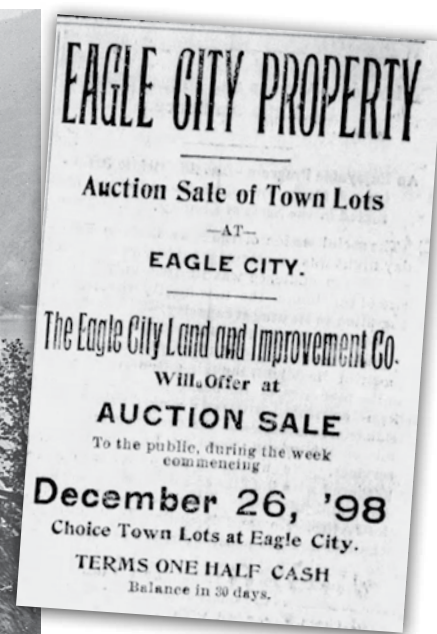
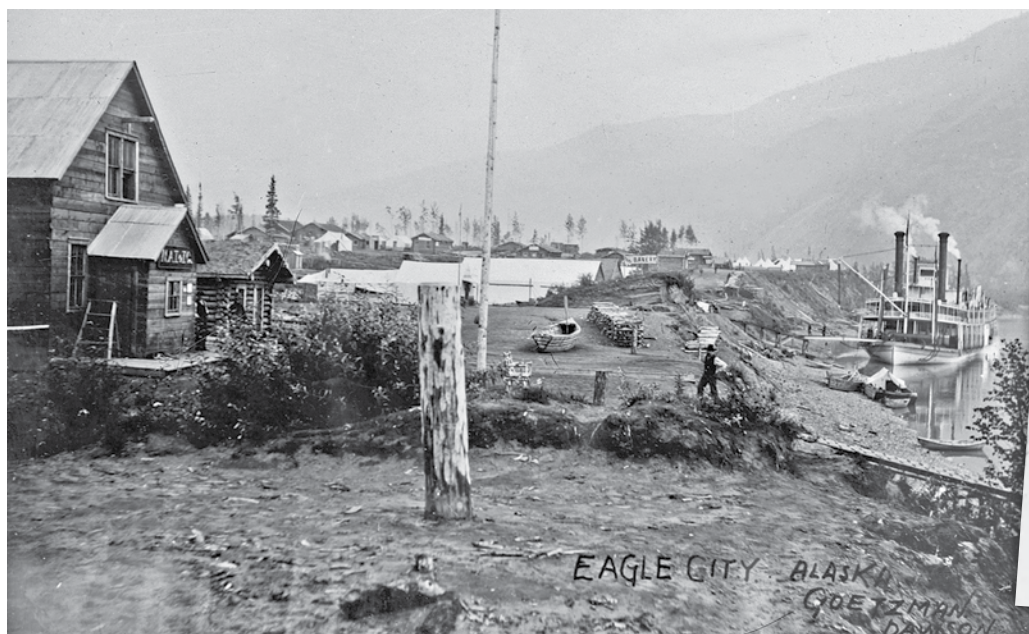
and the tax on gold in particular. London found that the inhabitants of the new mining camp had two obsessions: selling real estate (to promote business and line their pockets) and the card game known as faro. London used the argot of the era, calling the frenzied activity in a makeshift casino "bucking a faro layout":

*Scarcely pausing at the deserted mining camp of Forty-Mile or at Fort Cudahy, we arrived at Eagle City, the first town on the American side of the boundary. What with*

*the strange actions and heavy exactions of the Northwest Territory officials, we gave vent to most excessive enthusiasm on once more treading the soil of Uncle Sam. The 50 inhabitants, while waiting for some steamer to bring them food, were engaging in bucking a faro layout. But they were boomers, halting the games in a vain attempt to sell us corner lots.*

—Chris Allan

Source: "From Dawson to the Sea," *Buffalo Morning Express*, June 4, 1899.



A steamboat at Eagle City, 1899. Photo courtesy University of Alaska Fairbanks, Selid-Bassoc Collection (1964-92-228). Above right: Auction advertisement for Eagle City lots. Klondike Nugget, December 24, 1898.