

Southeast Alaska 1922-1942 Between Two Wars

In this section you will learn about:

- Fox farming
- Aviation developments
- Native land claims
- World War II impact

Fox farming becomes attractive

High fur prices that followed World War I made raising foxes economically attractive. A new industry was born. Islands were in much demand for use as fox farms because the animals could run free. It was believed that wild animals produced better pelts than pen-raised animals. Blue fox was the species usually raised in Alaska.

During the decade after the war three-fourths of Alaska's fox farms were on Southeast Alaska islands. Nervous and shy, especially in breeding season, the foxes adapted well to the seclusion which islands offered. Nearby canneries provided cheap food in defective cans of salmon and scraps of fish. The animals preyed on wild birds and their eggs.

Fox-farming did not require much capital. A fox farmer could lease an island from the U.S. Forest Service for as little as \$25 a year. One or two pair of foxes was enough to stock an island if the farmer could subsist for two or three years while the brood stock multiplied.

By 1920 many fox farm sites had been leased in the Tongass National Forest. Many fox farm operators built cabins on the islands and lived in them. Others visited the islands only to distribute food and skin their furs. The worldwide economic depression of the 1930s destroyed the fledgling industry when the price of furs dropped.

Tokeen on Marble Island

Long ago, Southeast Alaska Indian children played with dolls that had marble heads. Their parents had probably painstakingly chiseled the marble from deposits near Prince of Wales Island (near today's Ketchikan). In 1909, steam-powered machinery provided an easier way to remove the stone, and a new industry was born.

One of the best known marble quarries was at Tokeen on Marble Island, off the west coast of Prince of Wales Island. Blocks of marble, some weighing as much as

11 tons, were quarried from the island and loaded onto flat cars. The gravity-operated cars traveled down narrow-gauge track to the beach, where the marble was loaded on barges for shipment to the Vermont Marble Company mill at Tacoma. There the stone was sawed and polished for use in buildings throughout the Northwest. Because of the high shipping costs, very little of the polished Tokeen marble was ever returned to Alaska. An exception is the marble used in the state capitol at Juneau, which has four pillars and much interior trim of Tokeen marble.

At the peak of marble production, there were eight quarries employing 70 workers at Tokeen. The workers lived in bunkhouses, took their meals in the company dining hall, and worked six days a week for nine months of the year. The quarries yielded more than \$2.5 million in marble before the operation ended in 1927. Most of the buildings at Tokeen have rotted away now, and the quarries are filled with water. In fact, one of the quarries served as a marble-lined swimming pool for loggers who harvested timber near the site half a century after the last block of marble had been carried away.

Commercial air traffic starts

Alaska's first commercial airline operation began in Ketchikan when Roy F. Jones flew a flying boat named the Northbird from Seattle. When he taxied to the Ketchikan dock on July 18, 1922, Jones and his mechanic received an uproarious welcome. Church bells, fire sirens, and steam whistles marked their arrival. The men were carried on the shoulders of the crowd to Pioneer Hall to receive special honors.

For the rest of the summer, the Northbird carried miners, sales people, and sightseers from Ketchikan to remote fishing and mining camps. Jones returned the next summer with plans to expand his airline, but the Northbird crashed on a flight from Ketchikan to Loring. Though Jones was uninjured, he abandoned his plans. Southeast Alaska needed air transportation, but the airplanes to provide it had not yet been perfected. Engines lacked adequate cooling systems and were undependable. Bearings were inferior and early floats were heavy and awkward, limiting the loads that planes could carry.

New attempts at commercial aviation in Southeast Alaska were made in 1929. On a sunny, spring day of that year, R.E. Ellis and Ansel Eckmann arrived in Juneau by seaplane. They carried a Seattle paper published that morning and a bottle of fresh Seattle milk. Both items were displayed with much ceremony as the first same day delivery" ever made from Seattle to Juneau.

By 1936 three airlines were well established in Southeast Alaska. R.E. Ellis who had brought the first fresh milk from Seattle operated Ellis Airlines. He worked

for many other airlines before forming his own with a four-place airplane he bought on credit in Seattle. Sheldon Simmons founded Alaska Air Transport. He raised \$3,000 among Juneau residents to rebuild an airplane that had been wrecked in a snowstorm. Simmons flew up to 18 hours a day in all kinds of weather to establish his company. He was the first commercial pilot to operate year-round in Southeast Alaska. Jim Davis, a boat operator, organized Marine Airways when Alaska Air Transport began cutting into his profits. He and pilot Alex Holden bought a Bellanca Pacemaker, nicknamed "Shakey Jake," because it shook and rattled when it flew. They established weekly mail runs, which included Chichagof Island villages and Sitka. The three firms eventually became part of Alaska Airlines that had started in Anchorage.

Depression saves totem poles

Cedar totems have been significant in Tlingit and Haida Indian cultures for centuries, however they did not become so elaborate or numerous as commonly believed until improved carving tools of iron and steel were available from Euroamerican traders. Some of the most handsome of these later poles were those of the Haida Indians at Old Kasaan on the east coast of Prince of Wales Island. Several of these were exhibited nationally in 1904 and later formed the beginnings of Sitka National Historical Park. The value of the remaining poles at Old Kasaan was recognized but efforts to create a national monument there were delayed until 1916, by which time a fire had ravaged most of the totems remaining at the village site. At other locations in Southeast Alaska, totem poles, house posts, and other treasures of Native art were usually cared for with great attention, but some poles were abandoned when villages relocated for one reason or another. Carving of new poles declined as Southeast Alaska Natives adopted nonNative lifestyles.

Strangely enough, the depression saved many of Southeast Alaska's totems. In 1938 the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which employed laborers on government projects, began a totem pole preservation project under the direction of the U.S. Forest Service. By the end of the depression, 48 poles had been restored, 54 duplicated, and 19 new totems carved. The CCC also documented stories and traditions connected with the totems.

Civilian Conservation Corps employees worked on many U.S. Forest Service projects in Southeast Alaska. They restored the old Russian cemetery at Sitka, excavated the archaeological site of the first Russian fort near Sitka, built a brown bear observatory on Admiralty Island, and erected the first rental cabins in the national forest. They removed log jams from rivers and operated a trout hatchery at Ketchikan.

Natives file land claims suit

Many of the U.S. Forest Service projects took place on land that Indians claimed. The projects came at a time when there was strong national sentiment for preserving Indian culture and for increasing the amount of land set aside for Indian reservations. The federal Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 established six reserves in Alaska, none of them in Southeast Alaska. In 1935, Congress allowed Tlingit and Haida Indians to sue the federal government for their losses. The Indians asked for \$35 million to make up for land and hunting and fishing rights that had been taken from them. The case was not finally decided for 33 years. In January of 1968, the Tlingit and Haidas received \$7.5 million for loss of 16 million acres of ancestral lands. The claims court found the Indians had established use and occupancy to most of Southeast Alaska. While the suit sat in the federal courts, the reservation movement ended.

World War II impacts Southeast Alaska

As Southeast Alaska Native claims for land settlement went to the courts, Congress began to seriously consider strengthening army and navy bases in the territory. One result was an appropriation of almost \$3 million to construct a naval air station on Sitka's Japonski Island. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in June, 1941, the army built Fort Ray on other islands in Sitka Sound. Cannons guarded the harbor entrance. Auxiliary air facilities were built at Annette Island and Yakutat and a cargo transfer facility at Excursion Inlet eventually housed Germans captured in Europe.

The war affected Southeast Alaska's economy. The Alaska-Juneau mine, like all gold mines in Alaska, was shut down because gold production was not considered critical to the war effort. It never reopened. At Sitka, expansion of the naval base created boom town conditions. As he watched boatloads of troops crossing Sitka Sound, one longtime resident sadly remarked that "old Alaska" was lost. ". . . wrecked. This is about as bad as being invaded by the enemy."

As had World War I, World War II created a demand for high quality spruce to construct fighter planes. The Alaska Spruce Log Program was established in 1942. The goal was to harvest 100 million board feet of spruce annually at Edna Bay, west of Prince of Wales Island. Nine logging camps went to work cutting the timber. Two hundred people lived at the headquarters at Edna Bay. Cut logs were formed into what were called Davis rafts, oceangoing log rafts 280 feet long by 60 feet wide by 30 feet deep. Tugboats towed the enormous rafts to mills in Puget Sound. This program ended two years later when metal replaced wood in the fighter planes.

Summary questions

What destroyed the fox farming industry?

Why did a claims court award the Tlingit and Haida Indians \$7.5 million?

How did World War II affect Southeast Alaska?

Inquiry question

Look up World War II American fighter planes and see how many were made of spruce.

Many Nations Challenge Tlingit Claims 1873-1900 Developing Southeast Alaska 1900-1922 Some Needs Are Met 1922-1942 Between Two Wars 1945-1980 The "Old Alaska" Vanishes Suggested Readings