

Southcentral Alaska 1880-1900 ROUTES TO THE INTERIOR

In this section you will learn about:

- Searches for routes to Interior Alaska
- Cannery development
- Coal development
- Gold discoveries on Cook Inlet
- Mount McKinley
- Routes to Interior gold fields
- Gold discoveries in the Copper River valley
- Impact of gold stampedes
- Agricultural development

The army begins to search

Census-taker Ivan Petroff believed that the Susitna River was the key to a transportation route through the Alaska Range to the Interior. His opinion started a debate that continued for many decades. Also arguing for the Susitna River route was Lieutenant William R. Abercrombie of the U.S. Army. Abercrombie had headed the first United States military exploration of the Copper River. His mission was to determine Native reaction to the prospectors who were beginning to enter the region. Abercrombie and his party had begun their difficult journey up the Copper River in June of 1884. They rowed and pulled their boats upstream. The water was so cold that the men could pull the boats for no more than 15 or 20 minutes before having to let go of the towlines and run up and down the bank to warm up.

On July 13, Abercrombie sighted two magnificent glaciers. He named one for his commanding officer, General Miles, and the other for George Washington Childs of Philadelphia. The glaciers were constantly discharging huge icebergs into the river. The slabs of ice rushed past the struggling party like a fleet of men-of-war," propelling tons of rocks and debris in their wake. "The water fairly hissed," Abercrombie reported, "carrying with it boulders, some of them two feet in diameter, the impetus of which would break a leg or rip the bottom out of a skin boat." One of the party's small canoes was crushed.

The lieutenant and his men soon turned back. Abercrombie was convinced the glaciers and rapids made the Copper River route impractical. He suggested the Susitna, a river he had never seen, as the means to enter the Interior.

Allen breaks through

Instead of following Abercrombie's suggestion, army superiors sent Lieutenant Henry T. Allen to try the Copper River ascent the next year. Allen succeeded where Abercrombie had failed. One reason was that he started earlier in the year and ascended the lower reaches of the river before break-up.

Allen's party began their journey on March 29. The men traveled by sled and by snowshoe, carrying canoes to use when the river ice went out. A little more than a month later the party arrived at the Ahtna village of Taral at the junction of the Copper and Chitina rivers. Taral consisted of two houses, and one of them was empty. The other was occupied by a prospector named John Bremner, who welcomed them enthusiastically and fired his last round of ammunition in answer to Allen's salute. Allen described the prospector as "a picture of wretchedness, destitution and despair" who was near starvation and "shortening his belt one hole every other day." The explorers could do little to help Bremner. They were nearly out of food themselves, their diet having been reduced to "snowballs and rabbit tracks." From Taral, Allen and his men, joined by Bremner, went up the Chitina River to the camp of Nicolai.

The mission might have failed had it not been for this 18-year-old Ahtna chief. Although he had forbidden his people to trade with the white men, Nicolai did not hesitate to share the tribe's meager food with them. Nicolai showed Allen copper utensils his people used, bullets they made of a copper and silver alloy, and pure copper nuggets from a vein that he claimed to own.

Nicolai guided Allen and his party back down the Chitina River and then up the Copper River to the limits of his territory. The Ahtna gave the party little information about a route to the Interior. "No Natives we met had ever heard of a trail over the mountains to the northward," Allen wrote. More likely, the Ahtna did not want to share their knowledge of routes because it might endanger their role as middlemen in the trade between interior and coastal Natives.

Allen continued north through the unmapped country. On June 5, 1885 the party crossed Suslota Pass into the Tanana River valley, which Allen described as "the most grateful sight it has ever been my fortune to witness." Before summer ended, Allen and his men had completed a journey of 1,500 miles that took them up the Copper River and to Interior Alaska. There they descended the Yukon River, made a side trip to the Koyukuk River, then went on to St. Michael. They had proved that it was possible to reach Interior Alaska by way of the Copper River.

Salmon canneries open

Although there was interest in using Southcentral Alaska's river valleys as routes to the Interior, attention was also given to the region's resources. A

salmon canning industry had been started in Alaska several years before Allen's explorations. In 1882 the Alaska Packing Company established Southcentral Alaska's first cannery. It was located where the Kasilof River flows into Cook Inlet, near the site of the Russian fur trading post of St. George.

Over the next dozen years, approximately 12 percent of the salmon canned in Alaska came from the Southcentral region. Half of the 12 percent came from the waters of Cook Inlet and half from the Prince William Sound and Copper River areas where canneries opened in 1889.

By the 1890s, this region "to westward" (as Southeast Alaska residents called it) was sprinkled with new camps and settlements. Canneries, fur trading posts, and mines dotted the vast area. Maps grew out of date before they were completed, for canneries came and went with the seasons, gold camps shifted as new strikes were located, and trading posts lost business to new settlements.

The first fur trading posts in Southcentral Alaska had been built along the coast near sea otter havens. By the end of the nineteenth century sea otters had almost completely disappeared from Southcentral Alaska waters. Prices paid for other pelts were low. Fisheries and gold discoveries lured many trappers away. The post at Kenai, where 10,000 beaver skins were once traded in a single year, was almost abandoned.

American efforts to exploit Kachemak Bay coal about this time were no more successful than Russian efforts. Although the U.S. Geological Survey conducted intensive surveys in the area and private companies did some exploratory mining, by the end of the nineteenth century the Homer area was all but abandoned. The post office there, which had been established in 1896, was closed in 1907. There would later be some fox farming and homesteading in the area, but not until the 1964 earthquake destroyed Seldovia's waterfront and its canneries relocated would Homer become the center of Southcentral Alaska's seafood processing industry.

Gold seekers rush to the Kenai Peninsula

Although the Russian engineer Doroshin had panned colors in streams on the Kenai Peninsula, no major strikes were made in Southcentral Alaska until 1888. That year, Charles Miller discovered gold on Resurrection Creek. The news spread rapidly. Prospectors had soon staked claims along most of the creeks in the northern Kenai Peninsula area. Hope and Sunrise became trade centers for the miners.

During the 1896 stampede to the Kenai Peninsula as many as 3,000 people landed at Tyonek, a trading post on the western shore of Cook Inlet. Other prospectors

crossed Portage Glacier from Prince William Sound. Most were enroute to Turnagain Arm, but some went to the mouth of the Susitna River and headed inland to search for gold in the Interior.

Dickey names Mount McKinley

Among those who arrived in 1896 was William Dickey. Dickey reported that more than 100 parties started up the Susitna River that year, but only five attained "any great distance." Some turned back after nearly losing their lives to the river's swift current. One young man from Boston gave up because he did not want to prospect a country where he was "obliged to tie his head in a gunny sack every night in order to escape the mosquitoes."

Mosquitoes plagued Dickey and his partner, Allen Monks, too. Dickey was philosophical about the matter. "Luckily in June the days are so long that it is never too dark to see to kill mosquitoes," he said. As the two men explored the Susitna River they saw in the distance a mountain whose huge peak "towering far above the high rugged range encircling its base . . . compelled our unbounded admiration."

Dickey learned that the Indians of Cook Inlet called the peak Bulshoe, a word derived from the Russian word bul'shaia, that means great. Other Athapaskans knew the mountain as Denali, also meaning great. Dickey, however, named the giant mountain McKinley to honor the nation's twenty-fifth president.

The following year Dickey published a crude sketch map of the Susitna River. At that time few persons had interest in using the river as a transportation route to the Interior. It offered neither a direct nor an easy passage to gold fields of the upper Yukon River.

Prospectors seek all-American route

Yukon gold discoveries soon ended the Kenai Peninsula boom. Austin E. "Cap" Lathrop anchored the J.L. Perry at Sunrise on August 15, 1897. He brought news of gold strikes on the upper Yukon River. When the Perry sailed with the flood tide two days later, a full load of prospectors was aboard. Sunrise was left almost a ghost town.

The Perry went out of Cook Inlet, into the North Pacific and then into the Bering Sea to reach the Yukon River. There, most prospectors took passage on a steamboat headed upriver. The combination of sea and river travel was long and expensive. Interest was great in finding an all-American trail to the upper Yukon River. Such a route would be shorter than the water route and would

replace trails through Canada where travelers had to pay customs duties as they crossed the border.

Greedy prospectors were in a hurry to reach the Yukon River gold fields. In the spring of 1898 an estimated 4,000 stampedees attempted a route which, on a map, looked short and safe. It went north from tidewater at the head of Prince William Sound, across Valdez Glacier, down the Klutina River, and then up the Copper River to the mountain passes that led to tributaries of the Yukon River. Crowded steamers landed stampedees and their outfits on the beach near the glacier's toe. The glacier crossing was terrifying. Climbing it took days. Frequent blizzards obliterated the trail. Avalanches threatened travelers. Snow blindness hampered many. Many of the stampedees could not complete the crossing. Their cluster of tents and log cabins at the water's edge started the town of Valdez.

The army begins a road

Meanwhile, the debate continued over the best route to the Interior from the Southcentral coast. The army ordered expeditions to Southcentral Alaska in 1898 to learn more about potential routes to the Yukon River. Captain Abercrombie, who had attempted to ascend the Copper River in 1884, received orders to explore the Copper River area for a route. At the same time, Captain Edwin F. Glenn was directed to cross from Prince William Sound to Cook Inlet and seek the best way from there to the Yukon River.

Glenn's party investigated several routes from Portage Bay in Prince William Sound overland to Cook Inlet and trails along the Susitna and Matanuska rivers to Interior Alaska. Only one party, which went from the trading station known as Knik on upper Cook Inlet up the Matanuska River and from there past Lake Louise to the Delta and then the Tanana rivers, reached the Yukon River. Glenn concluded this was a feasible railroad route, but added that it was premature to contemplate such construction. He noted, too, that his expedition had obtained very little information about the Susitna River.

Abercrombie and his men investigated the trail over Valdez Glacier and routes down tributary streams to the Copper River.

One party led by Abercrombie went as far north as Mentasta Pass, which led to the Tanana and Fortymile rivers and by them to the Interior gold fields. The captain, who had previously expressed preference for a route from tidewater along the Susitna River to Interior Alaska, now recommended construction of a military trail from Valdez north to the Yukon River.

This recommendation brought Abercrombie back to Alaska for a third time in 1899.

He and his construction crew arrived at Valdez to find the people there sadly demoralized. The prospectors had passed a terrible winter in the new town. As many as 20 men crowded together in each of several log cabins that measured only 12 by 15 feet. Abercrombie reported that at night they "huddled in blankets on the floor packed like sardines in a box." Many suffered from scurvy, a result of improper diet, or frostbite, brought on by a lack of suitable clothing.

Their footwear in some cases consisted of the tops of rubber boots that had been cut off . . . and manufactured into shoes. Around their feet they had wound strips of gunny sacks in place of socks.

Most survivors fled south as soon as they could. The army hired some of those who remained to begin blazing a trail to Interior Alaska. The Trans-Alaska Military Road, as the trail Abercrombie began came to be called, was hard to build. Abercrombie by-passed Valdez Glacier and chose a route that followed river valleys and stream beds. Men with axes followed survey crews, felling trees, then clearing brush. A third party with picks, crowbars, and shovels graded the trail. Crews with sledge hammers came last and cleared debris left after blasting. The result was a trail, in places only five feet wide, but it made travel to the Interior much easier. The trail eventually reached Eagle on the Yukon River near the Alaska-Canada border.

Prospectors find more gold

While Abercrombie and his men were road-building, prospectors who had crossed Valdez Glacier and survived the winter in the Copper River basin discovered coarse gold in the southern foothills of the Alaska Range. Some worked the Chistochina River, a tributary of the Copper River. The Chistochina River proved to be the richest placer gold producer of Southcentral Alaska.

About this same time other prospectors found traces of gold in the Susitna River drainage to the west, but not in paying quantities. No major gold finds had been reported in the Susitna River basin by the time the century ended.

Life changes with new arrivals

The increasing presence of prospectors and their followers, whether successful like those on the Chistochina River or unsuccessful like those in the Susitna River area, brought changes to the lives of the people who already resided in Southcentral Alaska. Prior, the purchase of Alaska by the United States had mostly meant that American fur traders replaced the Russians. The Russian Orthodox Church continued to establish and maintain schools for Native children. The Natives had little contact with the new government except an occasional

visit from Revenue Service cutters or explorers.

As the nineteenth century ended, gold rushes brought prospectors in numbers that soon far exceeded the total Native population in the region. The prospectors' demands for supplies at trading posts drove prices up. Their careless use of fire set tremendous acreages of forest alight. Their kill of animals for food diminished the supply available to Natives. At the same time, canneries built at the mouths of streams that flowed into Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet interrupted the salmon migrations that provided the fish that were a staple of the Athapaskans' diet.

The canneries wasted great numbers of salmon. A visitor to the Kasilof cannery in 1902 noted that as many as 20,000 fish were caught in a single trap during a 24-hour period. Only king and sockeye salmon were canned. Coho, pink, and chum salmon that entered the trap were killed and thrown away.

Expensive supplies create interest in farming

Americans confronted the same problem that plagued the Russians, supplying food to people in Alaska. Most supplies had to be shipped from San Francisco or Seattle. Shipping costs were added to food prices. Because food was so expensive, there was interest in encouraging local agriculture.

Georgeson, the federal agricultural expert, came from Sitka to open an agricultural station at Kenai in 1898-1899. It was the second of a number of experimental stations he established throughout Alaska to encourage crop production.

Although some farming had continued on the Kenai Peninsula after the Russian departure and some began around American trading posts, it was not extensive. Farms were small and served only local markets. The major difficulty was the absence of roads. Moving crops from farms to local markets was as difficult as getting supplies to the farms from Seattle and San Francisco. These problems affected the Kenai experiment station as well and it closed in 1908.

The farming potential seemed greater near Knik. Georgeson sent trading post operator George Palmer some seed from Sitka. Palmer carefully recorded his successes and failures with gardening. "I must learn myself before I can teach others," he cautioned. "Instructions about planting should go with all the seeds you send out." Although Palmer and other Knik area residents established gardens, their market remained local.

Census-takers return

The turn of the century brought census-takers back to Alaska. H.H. Hildreth was the census agent for the Cook Inlet district. Hildreth finished the count after encountering what he described as "various dangers and hardships." He traveled by snowshoe, sailboat, dog team, and foot as he journeyed from the Kenai Peninsula to the Susitna River valley. He crossed Turnagain Arm in March when the waters "were filled with great icebergs." In later months he rowed across in "storms, headwinds, and calms."

Hildreth traveled around 3,653 miles. He pointed out that a successful census-taker needed to be able "to swim, to cross a glacier, to scale a snowcapped mountain, or wend his way through a deep canyon and not lose his presence of mind." For Southcentral Alaska the lesson was clear. Neither farming nor mining would be successful until dependable, year-round transportation was available.

Summary questions

Why was Lieutenant Abercrombie sent to explore the Copper River in 1884?
What was one reason Lieutenant Allen succeeded in going up the Copper River when others had failed?
What was the significance of Lieutenant Allen's journey?
Why was the "all-American route" to the upper Yukon River gold fields important?

Inquiry questions

What present-day transportation follows the route of the Susitna River? The Copper River?
Find out about salmon packing in Southcentral Alaska today.

TAMING THE LAND OF FIRE AND ICE
1880-1900 ROUTES TO THE INTERIOR
1900-1915 FIGHT FOR A RAILROAD
1915-1930 THE RAILROAD YEARS
1930-1970 THE EXPANDING ECONOMY
1970-1980 THE LAND AND ITS USE
Suggested Readings