Written by **Denise Behreandt** on March 31, 2008

America's North Star

Now, after days of rain, the skies cleared momentarily and Steller, the ship's scholarly naturalist, happened to be standing on deck looking north when he saw it: above the clouds, still far away, a gigantic ice-covered mountain, larger than any other he had ever seen, spearing above the highest clouds like a glimpse of some heavenly realm. The vision lasted only a few seconds before the ever-shifting cloud cover blocked the view. Steller rushed below deck to tell his shipmates and Captain Bering, but nobody aboard believed him. "It was, as usual, dismissed as one of my peculiarities," a frustrated Steller wrote in his journal. The day was July 15, 1741.

The following morning, the entire crew of the *St. Peter* saw the mountainous shoreline of an unknown land shimmering under a clear sky and gave thanks to God for preserving them. They put ashore on what is now known as Kayak Island, admiring the pristine forests of giant Sitka spruce; the icy waters teeming with sea otters, seals, and whales; and the mountains, vast beyond all imagining, that hung enticingly on the northern horizon. Greatest of all of them, Mount St. Elias, which had been Steller's first glimpse of mainland Alaska, rose more than 18 thousand feet above sea level only a few miles inland, the pinnacle of one of the highest and most glaciated mountain ranges on Earth. Exceeded in elevation on the North American continent only by McKinley and Canada's Mt. Logan, Mt. St. Elias lies in the heart of an enormous trackless wilderness encompassed today by Wrangell-St. Elias and Glacier Bay National Parks in the United States and Kluane National Park in adjacent Canada. Many of its remote valleys, peaks, and ice fields have yet to be explored, and most of North America's tallest mountains are found there.

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles to the southeast, the *St. Paul* had also reached land — on the very same day as the *St. Peter*. Somewhere not far from modern-day Ketchikan, the *St. Paul* sent two successive landing parties ashore to look for fresh water. Both parties vanished without a trace. After several boatloads of Tlingit natives approached the ship, the captain of the *St. Paul* made the agonizing decision to leave. The fate of the 15 men who went ashore has never been discovered.

The *St. Paul* made it back to the comparative safety of Kamchatka before the storms of autumn set in, but not her sister ship. Steller, Bering, and their shipmates worked their way back along the Alaskan coast and through the Aleutians before foundering on the desolate coastline of Bering Island, now part of Russia. More than one-third of them, including Bering, perished of scurvy, but the survivors managed to rebuild their ship and sail back to Russia the following summer. They brought with them tales of treacherous seas, fickle natives, and numbing cold — but also of unimaginable riches for the bold — furs, lumber, and probably precious metals beyond reckoning. The hundreds of prime sea-otter pelts in the *St. Peter*'s hold attracted particular attention. Alaska — meaning "the great land" in the Aleut language — was now on European maps, and Russia, eager for more sea-otter furs, was the first to pursue her treasures.

In the more than 260 years since Bering's great exploratory voyage, Alaska has changed surprisingly little. Despite centuries of exploration and colonization, first by Russia, afterwards by Britain and Spain, and finally by the United States, large swaths of Alaska remain under-or unexplored, and while scurvy and hostile natives are no longer a threat, Alaska still finds ways to penalize the careless. Every year dozens of people perish in plane crashes; in freezing, glacier-swollen rivers; in animal attacks; in the bitter cold; even in vehicular collisions with moose. To those of us accustomed to the comfortable, well-protected lifestyle of the Lower 48, Alaskans, with their cavalier acceptance of risks and dangers, seem an anomaly in the early 21st century. Yet modern Alaska remains a frontier — wild, rugged, dangerous, and above all, free, to a degree unknown in the rest of the United States for generations.

* * *

"Alaska," the Canadian proprietress of a small inn in northern British Columbia tells me, "is full of people who don't have what it takes to succeed anywhere else. Pretty strange types, for the most part." She herself is from Vancouver, and isalready doubting the wisdom of her move to the north woods.

* * *

Getting to Alaska overland is no easy feat. From western Canada, there are two main land routes to Alaska, one of them following the Alcan or Alaskan Highway from eastern British Columbia. The other, the Cassiar Highway up western British Columbia to the central Yukon, is the route my brother and I choose on a recent trip, because it will bring us to Alaska sooner.

Our first foray into Alaska on our 12-thousand-mile drive is via a 40-mile spur road off the Cassiar Highway, the westernmost motorable road in Canada, paralleling British Columbia's — and Alaska's — magnificent coastal mountains. At the end of the spur lie the twin communities of Stewart, British Columbia, and Hyder, Alaska. Stewart is a typically neat, well-appointed, quiet Canadian town, albeit one overhung with picture-postcard glaciated mountains. Hyder is something else again.

We stop at the border crossing — one of the very few with no customs checkpoint on the U.S. side. Hanging over the gravelly, puddle-studded road is a banner, epitomizing Alaska's incurable love of irreverent signs: "Welcome to Hyder, the Friendliest Ghost Town in Alaska." Beyond the sign a single muddy street meanders past several ramshackle buildings and out of sight around a steep

mountainside. We have reached Alaska.

* * *

"I've lived here most of my life," one of Hyder's residents and former town drunk (he hasn't touched alcohol in 10 years, but the nickname "Barfly" has stuck) tells me. "I never had a steady job until I was 40. When I die, I want them to put my remains in a jar and set it afloat in the fjord. I've encouraged my friends to take potshots at the jar before it floats out of range."

* * *

Hyder's three dozen-odd permanent residents constitute a typical Alaskan bush community. As an unincorporated settlement, Hyder, like many rural Alaskan communities, has no local government whatsoever. The town consists of several bars, a hotel, a restaurant built out of an old bus, two general stores, a furrier, and a scattering of cabins and ramshackle houses where Hyder's offbeat, eclectic community of individualists live.

And there are the bears. Hyder is overrun with bears, both grizzly and black, particularly during the salmon runs. There's even a bear-viewing platform along Fish Creek just outside of town, where we watch beavers and a foraging black bear the following evening. The grizzly sow and her cubs that are usually around fail to put in an appearance, but we pass them the next day along the highway on the way out of town. A few years back, a grizzly bear ate one of Hyder's residents as he slept in his backyard after a hard night's work as a short-order cook at the local bar. Children do not play outside in Hyder, and most people carry guns, most of the time. Such is life on the frontier.

Hundreds of bush communities scattered all across Alaska face similar odds, and very few of them are even reachable by road. For Hyderites, the nearest Alaskan community is Ketchikan, 75 miles away by float plane. For most other bush communities, from Arctic Village in the Brooks Range to Ruby on the central Yukon River, bush planes and the intrepid men who pilot them are the only lifeline.

No one epitomizes Alaska's risk-embracing, pioneer spirit more than her bush pilots. Over more than a century of trial and error, Alaskan bush pilots have mastered the hazards of landing airplanes where there are no airfields and no ground control — on river bars, on tundra, on flowing water, even on glaciers. Those who pioneered flying in early 20th-century Alaska — men like Carl Ben Eielson, Noel Wien, Bob Reeve, and Jack Jefford — often paid for their exploits sooner or later with their lives, but Alaska is the better for it. Eielson, a bookish North Dakotan who came to Fairbanks in 1922 to teach school and decided to become a pilot, survived a plane crash far out on the Arctic Ocean by hiking back to shore over the pack ice. He and his copilot took 14 days to reach a fur station at Beechey Point, and Eielson lost one finger to frostbite, but through trials and errors of this kind learned to fly the 500 miles from Fairbanks to Barrow. Eielson later became the first man to fly over the top of the world, from Barrow to Spitsbergen in a Lockheed Vega, but he eventually perished in a plane crash in Siberia.

* * *

I stop for supplies by the Hyder General Store, a red building with a false front crammed with every imaginable sort of hardware and sporting good. The stocky, 50-something proprietor, who could pass for a barkeep in a John Ford Western, is watching The Green Berets on an ancient VHS player. He's happy to sell me extra ammunition for my 12-gauge and to talk about life on the last frontier.

"I came here in the '70s because I wanted to be a free man," he tells me. "I couldn't live anywhere else. Most people in the Lower 48 don't want freedom anymore and expect government to run their lives. I

think they've forgotten how to be free."

* * *

Nowadays, not everyone comes to Alaska to be free, but many do. To outsiders, Alaska sometimes seems rough and unrefined — until one remembers that, so, once upon a time, was the so-called "Old West" in the eyes of Eastern "dandies," and before that, the frontier eastern states, allegedly uncouth and uncivilized, both repulsed and fascinated European visitors. Alaska's communities are rough looking: in the absence of zoning laws, rusting machinery proliferates in unkempt front yards. No building codes means dwelling places feature creative, haphazard modes of construction that would not be tolerated in the neighborhood-watch culture of the Lower 48. Road signs, at least those erected by the state, are almost invariably bullet-ridden beyond recognition. General stores with clapboard fronts are found in almost every town, looking like kitschy artifacts from some Old West tourist trap — except that in Alaska, they are completely genuine.

As for Alaskans themselves, the proprietors of this irreverent live-and-let-live culture are a diverse and colorful bunch. In Alaska grizzled prospectors rub shoulders with back-to-nature types, solitary artists fraternize with fur trappers, and worldly fortune-seekers mingle with devout religionists like Old Order Orthodox Russians. Among such there appears to be only one point of consensus: no Alaskan is fond of being told what to do.

"Seward's Folly," one achievement for which the Johnson administration deserves due credit, was one of two 19th-century land acquisitions in which the United States took advantage of European turmoil from afar, instead of immersing herself in it. But whereas the benefits of the Louisiana Purchase were palpable from the outset, the wisdom of acquiring a freezing, seemingly impenetrable wilderness sundered from the rest of the country by hundreds of miles of British Canadian territory was not immediately obvious. The sea otters, Alaska's most valuable resource, had been hunted almost to extinction along with the fur seals, and Russia, eager to prevent her British enemies from acquiring "Russian America," was happy to unload the Alaskan wilderness for a bargain-basement price ($7.2 million dollars, or less than two cents an acre). After the purchase was finalized, most of Alaska's few hundred permanent Russian residents, living mainly in what is now Sitka and on Kodiak Island, returned to their homeland. America was left with what many expected would be a frozen liability.

The discovery of gold in the 1880s changed all that. The famed Alaska and Yukon gold rushes brought fortune-seekers from all over the world, and by the early 20th century many settlements had taken hold in Alaska, from Nome on the Bering Sea, to Fairbanks in the interior, to Anchorage and Skagway along the south coast. Most of the new settlements were fueled by the quest for gold and other precious minerals; many Alaskan towns, like Nome, still have very active gold mining and prospecting, and many Alaskans work claims part-time on weekends and holidays.

Statehood in 1959 was a mixed blessing for many Alaskans, who anticipated that full-fledged integration into the United States might dilute Alaska's firmly entrenched culture of freedom and individualism.

Politically, modern Alaska is the freest place anywhere on Earth. There are no state gun laws, virtually no taxes (Alaska is one of only seven states with no income tax whatsoever), comparatively few restrictions on hunting and fishing, and some places, like Hyder, with no police, municipal government, or public school. Alaska is the only state whose government actually gives money back to her citizens; the well-known Permanent Fund, inaugurated in 1982, disburses revenues from mineral-lease royalties

(particularly Prudhoe Bay) to Alaskans every October.

Alaska's political class is forced to live in Juneau, a city only accessible by air or water, and Alaskans want to keep it that way. Longtime pressure by politicos to move the capital to more-accessible Anchorage has been firmly and consistently rejected, ensuring that Alaska's government is kept penned in where it can do as little damage as possible. Alaska's current governor, Sarah Palin, is an Idaho native but a typical Alaskan: an avid hunter, fisher, and all-around outdoorswoman. Governor Palin is a staunch champion of gun rights, low taxes, and the development of Alaska's immense natural resources. A fervent opponent of abortion, she is also America's most popular governor, with approval ratings well over 80 percent.

To reach the rest of Alaska from Hyder, we drive north and then west for over 1,000 miles, through British Columbia and across the Yukon Territory, before reaching Alaska again, 450 miles southeast of Fairbanks.

* * *

"Fairbanks is as Alaska as you get," one Fairbanksian lady tells me. "Anchorage, that's for the people who come here but don't want to be Alaskans."

* * *

Fairbanks is a very small city surrounded by wilderness. As recently as the mid-20th century, Fairbanks was still a true frontier town with many of the residents living in cabins, struggling to survive winters where the temperature routinely drops to 50 below. Even today, vehicles in Fairbanks all have engine heater cords dangling from their grills, and every parking space is equipped with an electrical outlet.

Fairbanks was opened to the outside world with the completion of the Alaska Highway in 1942. Originally built for military deployment in a monumental feat of engineering during the Second World War, the "Alcan" was opened to the public after the war. Portions of its 1,390-mile length from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska, not far from Fairbanks, are still unpaved or under construction, but the road now accommodates a steady flow of car, truck, and RV traffic from Canada and the Lower 48.

Not far to the north of Fairbanks is another engineering marvel, one built for a very different purpose. In 1968, oil was discovered beneath Prudhoe Bay on Alaska's Arctic Ocean coast, 500 miles north of Fairbanks. To convey construction equipment and other supplies to the site, a road of some sort was needed. The "Haul Road," more recently renamed the "Dalton Highway," was the result. The Dalton, which rises about 40 miles north of Fairbanks at a wilderness junction, is a surprisingly broad, mostly gravel route plied by trucks and a few intrepid motorists. It parallels the famous Alaska Pipeline for its entire 450-mile length, and was opened to the public in the 1990s.

After crossing a somewhat shaky-looking span laid with heavy wooden planks over the Yukon River, the Dalton winds north through dwindling boreal forests of spruce and fir, past thousands of square miles of recently burned-over forest (Alaska has few resources to fight the huge wildfires that sometimes erupt in the deep wilderness), and into the Endicott Mountains north of the Arctic Circle, part of the east-west chain known as the Brooks Range. Beyond the Yukon River station there is only a single gas station before Prudhoe Bay, at the mining village-turned-truck stop, Coldfoot. Not far from Coldfoot, at Prospect Creek, the temperature in the winter of 1971 plunged to a bone-chilling -80° F.

A few miles beyond Coldfoot, nestled in the heart of the Endicotts, is the village of Wiseman, a true

Alaskan bush community whose residents all live in cabins, some with reindeer moss plugged in the cracks between logs to keep out the winter cold. All electricity is generated with home generators, which allows some of Wiseman's residents access to the Internet and cable TV via satellite. Everyone in Wiseman lives a subsistence lifestyle, hunting moose and caribou for meat, catching fish in the Koyukuk River, growing gardens that have to be started indoors in March and April, and trapping lynxes, wolverines, wolves, and other furbearers for additional income. Some also work as guides in nearby Gates of the Arctic National Park.

* * *

"The only way they got us to agree to let them put a national park here," the lady from Wiseman tells me, "was by agreeing not to try to prohibit hunting and that kind of thing. As long as we can hunt and fish, we don't mind the park. We don't get too many tourists, anyway." I ask her what happens when someone gets lost in the park. Do they have search and rescue? "Nah," she says. "Pretty much, you're on your own in Gates of the Arctic. You get in trouble out there, nobody's going to come looking for you."

* * *

In 1980, at the end of the Carter administration, the federal government extended its grasping reach into the Alaska wilderness with the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, to the anger of most Alaskans (then and now). With the stroke of a pen, President Carter, knowing his elected successor, Ronald Reagan, would veto the bill, designated 106 million acres of Alaska's wilderness as federally protected land, creating 10 new national parks, like Gates of the Arctic and even more remote Kobuk Valley, in the process.

Most national parks in Alaska (Denali being the major exception) are run differently from those in the Lower 48, however. Unlike, say, Yellowstone or Yosemite, visitors to Gates of the Arctic and other remote parks are allowed to carry guns and to use them at any time for defense against wildlife. Hunting — of bears, caribou, moose, Dall sheep, and other game animals — is permitted, and rangers are very few and far between. Most Alaskan National Parks, with the exception of Denali and the very edge of Wrangell-St. Elias and Kenai Fjords, are inaccessible by road in any event, and few besides experienced, well-equipped hunters and other outdoorsmen even visit them.

The Dalton Highway winds up through the chilly, windswept Brooks Range, crossing Atigun Pass, the highest motorable pass in Alaska, on a slick, 18-degree roadway that trucks negotiate at a crawl. At the top of the pass, we pause for supper beside a pull-off where gravel has been quarried not far from a permanent snowfield. All along the Dalton Highway are such stand-alone quarries, where, in a typical display of Alaskan can-do, water is pumped from nearby ponds and watercourses and mixed with gravel and dirt to create the mixture that forms the road's frost-resistant surface. The Dalton Highway is constantly under construction, and this evening, a single road grader is working Atigun Pass. After a while, the grader pulls over next to our car, and the driver, a rangy, dangerous-looking man with coal-black eyes, comes over to chat while he waits for his ride from the nearest pump station. He's from Kentucky, he tells me, and has lived in Alaska and worked along the Dalton for some 20 years, both as a trucker and as an equipment operator.

Beyond the Brooks Range, the Dalton Highway crosses the treeless tundra of Alaska's North Slope, along the western edge of the notorious Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We reach Deadhorse, the dusty industrial camp on Prudhoe Bay, the following afternoon, and manage to fit in time for a swim in the

frigid Arctic Ocean before settling into our room in the Prudhoe Bay Hotel. Although it has no permanent residents, Deadhorse hums with activity day and night. The thousands of workers man exotic machinery equipped with squashy, tundra-ready tires to extract Prudhoe Bay's riches. Huge herds of caribou amble unconcerned amid the maze of pipes and service roads, and, we are told, both grizzly and polar bears frequent the area.

* * *

"A charging polar bear can hit 37 miles per hour," the gruff Deadhorse tour guide, who escorts us to the wind-whipped shore of the Arctic Ocean, tells us. "We have to drive 38 miles an hour to outdistance them." He waves a hand at a big herd of "boo" (caribou) by the roadside. "As you can see, the animals don't mind the oil drilling one bit. I don't know why the environmentalists have to make so much trouble."

* * *

Because of the permafrost, all buildings at Prudhoe Bay rest precariously on top of the ground; sewage is also conveyed in above-ground pipes. Deadhorse is a product of modern man's adaptive ingenuity; it is probably the nearest thing to a moon base I will ever see.

From Deadhorse, there is only one way out without a plane ticket — back along the daunting Dalton Highway. We complete the round trip in six days, having seen more wildlife — moose, Dall sheep, musk oxen, caribou, even a wolf hunting along the pipeline — than human beings.

The rest of our itinerary takes us across much of the rest of the state that can be reached by road, from offbeat Talkeetna, inspiration for fictional Cicely, Alaska, of the popular TV show *Northern Exposure*, to the peaks and fjords of the Kenai Peninsula. At remote Valdez, southern terminus of the Alaska Pipeline, we saw reminders of the terrifying power of nature in Alaska, the mournful ruins — mostly foundations, now overgrown with dwarf willows — of a town destroyed by the great tsunami that followed the great Alaska earthquake of March 1964. Near even remoter McCarthy, more than 60 miles from the nearest paved road, we visit the mostly-intact ruins, still clinging to a chilly, glaciated mountainside, of the Kennecott copper mine, one of the busiest mines in the world in the early 20th century. From 1911 to 1938, thousands of men toiled in the Kennecott mine with only two days off per year, braving extreme cold and long separation from family and friends. As with other mining ghost towns across Alaska, however, when the copper played out, the entire complex was abandoned to the elements.

Life in the Last Frontier is not without cost. Food and commodities (such as heating oil) are sometimes prohibitively expensive, and the long, dark winters can drive even seasoned sourdoughs to distraction. Abuse, both of people and of substances, is a problem, especially in areas where the cold and remoteness takes a toll on the psyche. But such were also the problems on frontiers of an earlier age.

* * *

In the lonely cemetery in Wiseman, hidden in the boreal forest in the hills behind the town, the epitaph on one weathered grave marker from the 1970s sums up the outlook of modern-day pioneers in the Far North: "You know the worth of a man by how sharp his knife is."

* * *

Everywhere in Alaska, even in comparatively urban Anchorage, we saw signs of the pioneer culture and love of personal freedom that sets Alaska apart from the rest of the modern world. The enterprising boat captain in Seward who showed us Alaska's celebrated sea otters, the itinerant preacher I met

along Homer's windswept spit, the oil-field workers on the North Slope, all were driven by a need to live their lives free of outside interference. This, once upon a time, was the spirit that animated Americans everywhere, from the founding of the republic to the colonization of the farthest reaches of the American West. It was the spirit of the Mayflower, of the Erie Canal, of the covered wagon, of the cattle drive. While it persists in a minority of individuals in the Lower 48, nowhere but in Alaska is it today a majoritarian sentiment. As Governor Palin expressed it in her inaugural address, "America is looking for answers. She's looking for a new direction, the world is looking for a light.… That light can come from America's great north star; it can come from Alaska."

Photo: AP Images