

## Historical Qualities of the Copper River Highway

For thousands of years, the Copper River region has been a productive home and crossroads for Native peoples, traveling by kayak, dugout canoes and umiaks, and across land on foot, snow shoes and dogsleds. The Eyak, Ahtna, Tlingit, Alutiiq, and Aleut cultures had villages throughout the Copper River watershed, Prince William Sound and Gulf of Alaska where they traded and perpetuated their rich cultural heritage. Hawkins Island, across Orca Inlet from Cordova, once had many Eskimo villages the largest of which was “Palugvik” which has been declared a National Landmark. It dates back some 1,000 years to inhabitants who called themselves “Chugache.” Artifacts reveal how these Chugach Eskimos lived. The Tlingit and Eyak native peoples began arriving from the East and South and the area became a trade center. Today, the Native Village of Eyak has a beautiful cultural center and museum in the harbor of Cordova.



The area was known as Eyak and in 1887 the first cannery was established at the head of Odiak Slough (near the present site of Cordova’s community hospital). When copper ore was discovered by non-natives in the Wrangells in the early 1900s, the desire to mine the ore resulted in the building of the Copper River and Northwestern rail road from the rich Kennicott Mines 196 miles south along the edges of the Copper River, to the harbor where steamships carried the copper ore away to be smelted in the lower 48. The harbor town of Cordova, sprang up almost overnight with major investment interests like Guggenheim, J.P.Morgan, Michael J. Heney, and Cap Austin Lathrop, an Alaskan developer who laid the foundation for his fortune in Cordova. Michael Heney named the town Cordova in March 1906, after his favorite town Cordova, Spain. (Explorer Salvador Fidalgo had named the eastern bays of Prince William Sound as “Puerto Cordoba” during his voyages in the

late 1700’s). Heney, known as “the Irish prince”, was responsible for overseeing the building of the “Million Dollar Bridge,” a major arctic engineering undertaking for its time, situated between two glaciers. While the bridge was damaged in the 1964 earthquake, in 2005 Alaska DOT&PF financed the repairs to lift the last section up to make it again passable by car, foot or bicycle. The C.R. & N.W. Railroad, also known as the “*Can’t Run and Never Will*”, was a major undertaking considering the technology of the early 1900’s and the extreme conditions.

From 1906 to the closing of the Kennicott mines in 1938, Cordova was a boom town, with passenger train service up this corridor to Alaska’s interior. However, when the mines closed, the railroad was abandoned and the right-of-way given over to the State of Alaska. Today the lower 52 miles of this abandoned railroad cross some of the most incredible natural scenery in the state of Alaska. It is known as the Copper River Highway.

In response to World War II, the U.S. military built an airport 12 miles out from Cordova

on the Copper River Delta, and built a road on the rail right-of-way to transfer supplies and men. "Mudhole Smith" airport (named in the 1980ies) was the largest airport in the region at that time and did much to provide Cordova's economy during hard times. It remains today as Cordova's "connection" to the outside world, with daily jet service to Anchorage and to the lower 48 states. As one travels east from Cordova along the Copper River Highway, remnants can be seen of previous bridges and structures. At mile seven on the north side of the Copper River Highway, one can see the concrete foundations and pilings left from the U.S. Navy's radio and weather station during 1914. It was accessed via hand powered railcars. A second station was located at mile 14 during World War II.

The U.S. coast guard traces its roots in Alaska as early as 1865. The "USCG Sweetbriar" began her service in Cordova in May 1976 to maintain navigational aides in Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska from Seward to Yakutat. Today the USCG "Sycamore" serves the same function and has a significant presence in the town.

Russian, Greek, Norwegian and many other immigrants found there way to Cordova with various industries tied to rich marine resources; seal and sea otter pelts, crab & clam industries, and of course the rich salmon fisheries. Canneries supplied many jobs then as they do to this day. Driving through the community of Cordova today gives one the feeling of driving through time viewing remnants of old cannery buildings and fishery related artifacts. One can still see fisherman repairing their nets and readying their gear every spring in preparation for the salmon season that starts every year in May.

The topography around Cordova, the Copper River Delta and Prince William Sound was changed dramatically in 1964 by the 9.2 earthquake. The community of Cordova raised in elevation approximately 6 feet, the result of which put an end to the world renown razor clam industry for which Cordova had become famous.

Many historical photographs of Cordova and the C.R. & N.W. Railroad are displayed in the Cordova Historical Society Museum on Main Street in Cordova. Books, maps, stories and DVDs tell of a time in Cordova's recent past, of steamships, sternwheelers, dog teams, railroad steam engines, and Cap Lathrop's first "horseless carriage" that paraded down main street .

#### **Landmark events in Cordova's recent history:**

- 1898 first cannery established in Odiak Slough
- 1906 Michael J. Heney establishes the town of Cordova
- 1910 completion of Million Dollar Bridge
- 1911 March 29, CR&NW railroad completed
- 1911 April, 8<sup>th</sup> "Copper Day" first load of copper ore reached Cordova (CRNW railroad cost \$25 million to build, operated from 1911 to 1938, produced copper ore valued at nearly \$300 million)
- 1917 P.Halferty opened first razor clam cannery " The Pioneer Packing Company"
- 1938 closing of Kennicott Mines and last run down the CR & NW railroad
- 1942 World War II building of Mudhole Smith airport, conversion of RxR to road
- 1951 fire in downtown Cordova destroyed the Empress theatre
- 1961 Cordova founded their winter "iceworm festival"
- 1963 fire destroyed much of the town
- 1964 Earthquake measuring 9.2 on Richter Scale
- 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill
- 2005 Restoration work on Million Dollar Bridge
- 2007 Chugach Forest Service expands campground at Childs Glacier site