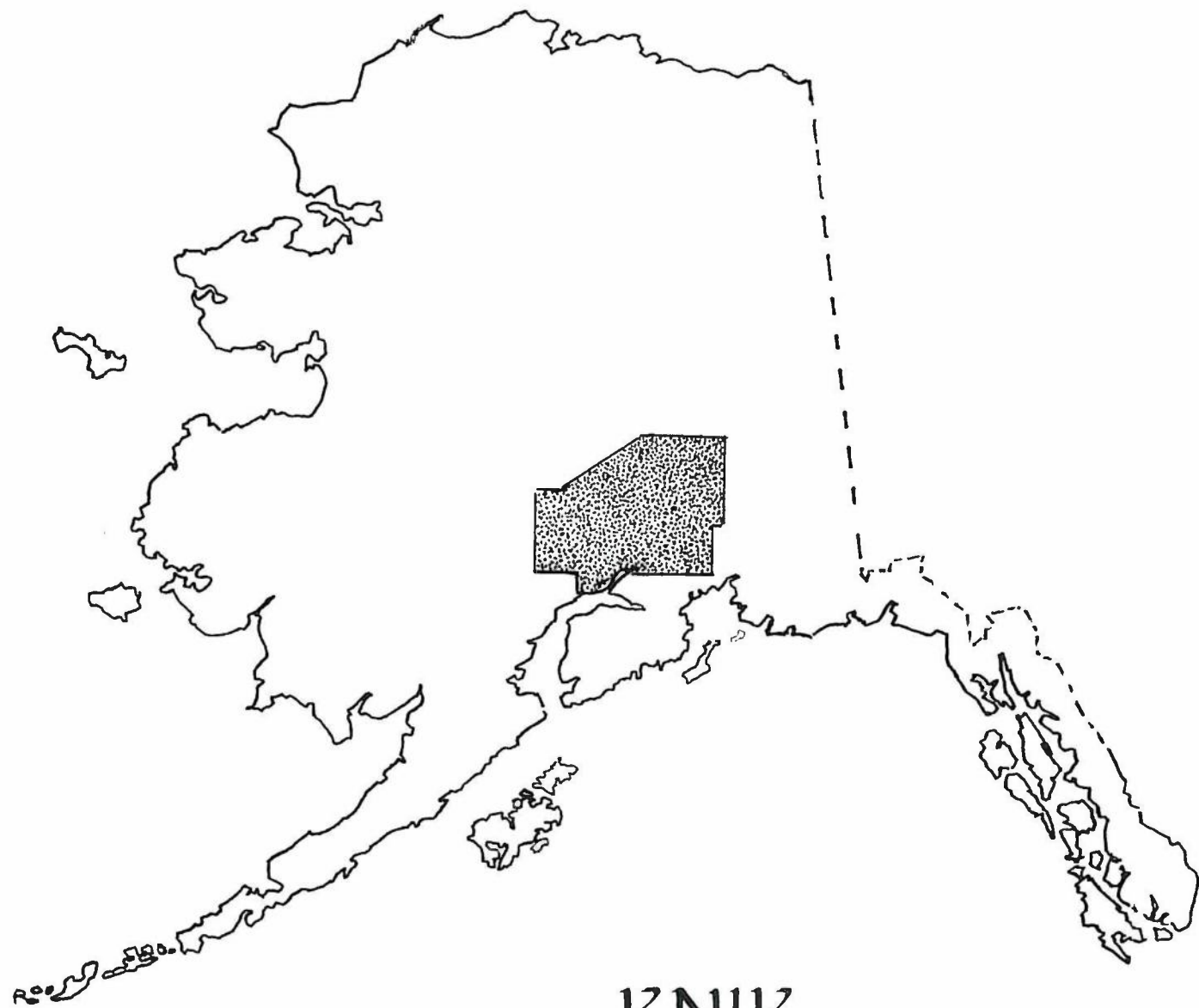


KNIK MATANUSKA SUSITNA



a visual history
of the valleys



KNIK
MATANUSKA
SUSITNA

a visual history
of the valleys

TABLE of CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 7
 METHODOLOGY 9

INDIANS 17

KNIK 31

MINING GOLD 47

RAILROAD 61

MINING COAL 75

MATANUSKA 95

WASILLA 119

TALKEETNA 145

PALMER 161

BIBLIOGRAPHY 225
 GLOSSARY 231
 APPENDIX A 237
 APPENDIX B 245
 APPENDIX C 249
 INDEX 253

ABBREVIATED TERMS USED IN THIS BOOK:

- AHRS Alaska Heritage Resource Survey
(state site inventory)
- MSB Matanuska-Susitna Borough
(borough site inventory)
- ANC Anchorage USGS quadrangle
- TAL Talkeetna USGS quadrangle
- NRHP National Register of Historic Places
- ARRC Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation

Please note: All historical photos in this book have black borders.

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COVER PHOTO: Knik Waterfront
 COURTESY: The Anchorage Museum of History and Art

TABLE of CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 7
 METHODOLOGY 9

INDIANS 17

KNIK 31

MINING GOLD 47

RAILROAD 61

MINING COAL 75

MATANUSKA 95

WASILLA 119

TALKEETNA 145

PALMER 161

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 GLOSSARY 231
 APPENDIX A 237
 APPENDIX B 245
 APPENDIX C 249
 INDEX 253

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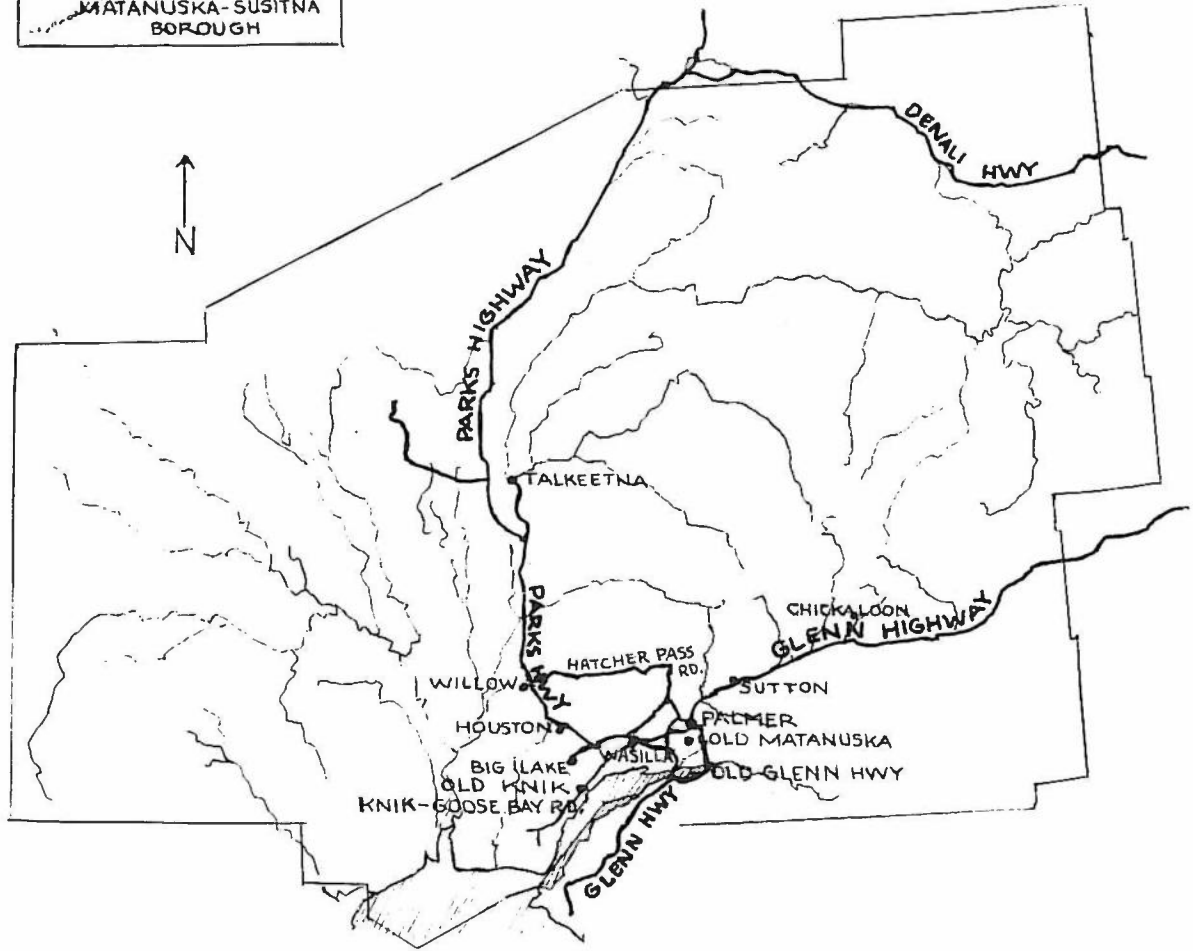
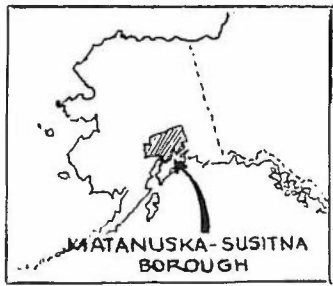
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Matanuska-Susitna Borough

COMMUNITY PROFILE

THE TRI-VALLEYS

Carved out eons ago by advancing Ice Age glaciers, the Matanuska, Susitna and Knik Valleys abut the Alpine peaks of the Talkeetna and Chugach ranges, creating a magnificent terrain of compelling beauty.

The retreating ice rivers left behind a rich soil watered by fish-filled lakes and streams and forested by plants and trees that sheltered animal and man alike. Despite a severe climate, first Eskimos, then the Dena'ina, and finally Russian and American adventurers thrived in these valleys, learning to respect the environment that challenged them.

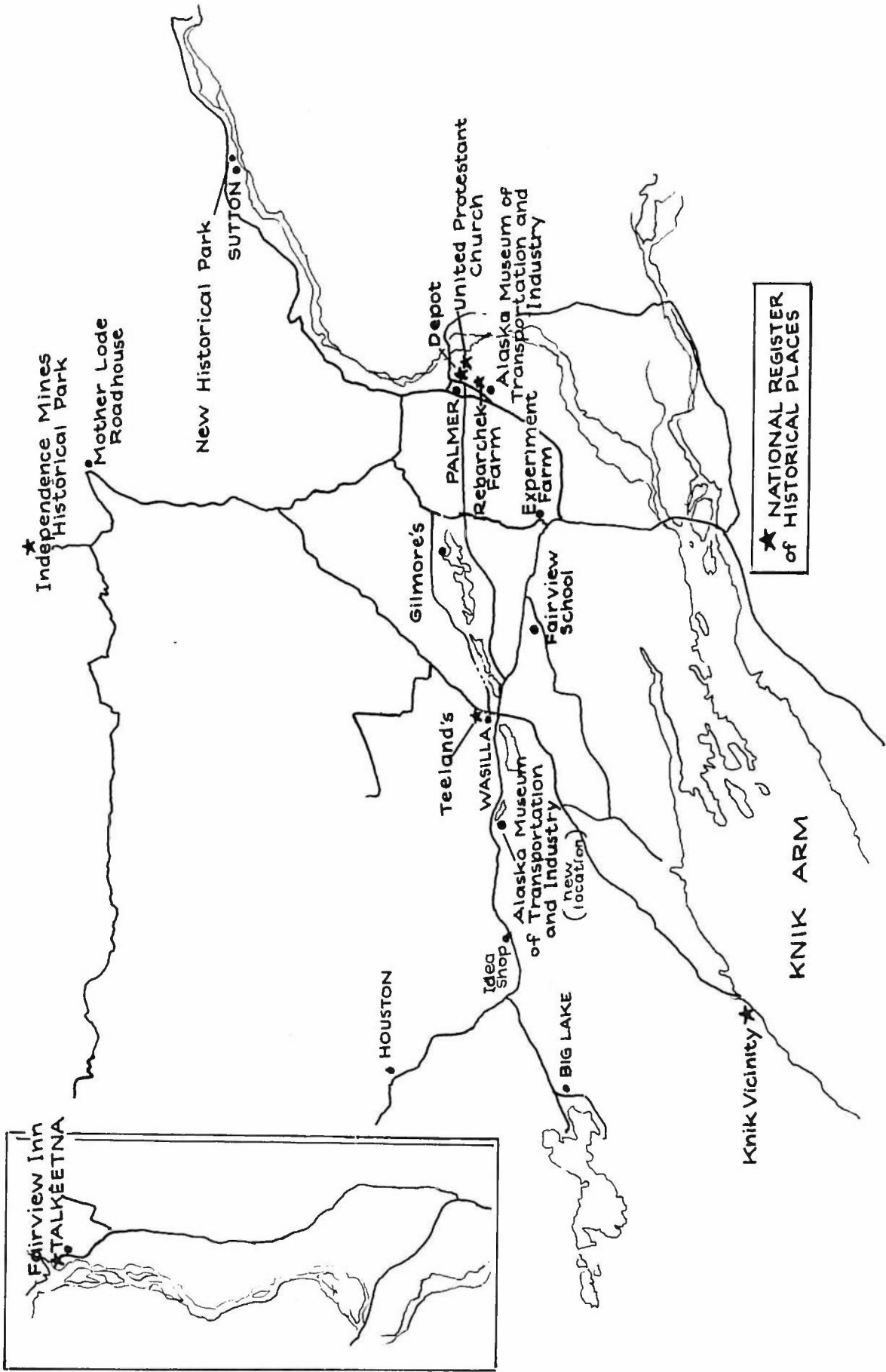
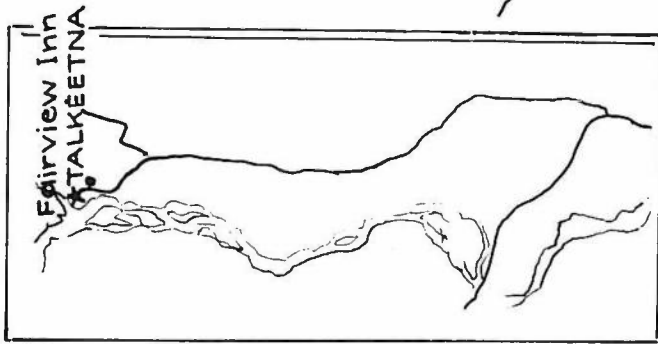
The distinction between the river drainages has faded as 40,000 people now call the Valley their home, and a network of roads crisscross the lower central portion of the 23,000 square miles in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Population has nearly doubled in the last five years. Subdivisions replace old homesteads and colony farms; shopping centers line the highways. Yet the compelling beauty, the freshness of mountain peaks, the lure of sparkling streams — a promise of a better future — remain.

Families, young and old, come to the Mat-Su Valley, leaving behind the comfort of the familiar, to take on Alaska. They are, like the generations before them, a hardy sort of individual, with children to raise and adventures to live.

Many describe the Mat-Su area as a "bedroom community," with more than a third of its working population commuting to Anchorage. In recent years the borough and city governments have attempted to attract and develop industry in the Valley.

Meanwhile, the natural charm of Mat-Su — with its historic heritage protected — continues to draw people seeking a life they can find nowhere else.



METHODOLOGY

Still standing amidst the shopping malls and subdivisions of the Mat-Su Borough are the cabins, farmhouses, barns, and other buildings of earlier eras. These simple structures tell the fascinating story of pioneer courage and of daily life in a rugged frontier.

For anyone who understands the rich history of the Matanuska and Susitna Valleys, the area roadways become guides to what is virtually a vast, outdoor museum. This publication is an effort to document the legacy of the past by recognizing the significance of some of those buildings and relating the stories that accompany them.

In no way does this work propose to duplicate research by the several local historians who have spent many years collecting information. Rather, it attempts to combine in one publication a summary of that information, and bring to light recent research.

The majority of data utilized for the histories recorded here were compiled under various grants and reports. Initially the files in the Mat-Su Borough History Office were xeroxed.

With the help of her trusty word processor, Pat O'Hara collected the information and began writing the narrative. It quickly became apparent that more material was needed for some geographical areas. Pandora Willingham then began visiting museums and knowledgeable residents for more thorough research. This data collecting and writing was a continual process that continued until the final drafts were sent to the printer.

As first drafts were completed, they were reviewed for accuracy by acknowledged local authorities.

Simultaneously, the illustration aspect was addressed while the writing progressed. Under previous grant #02-83-7900, Ron Wendt photographed colony buildings and pre-colony structures in a six-township area. However, the population centers considered for this historical overview did not all fall within this geographical range. Thus additional photos were needed.

Also, it was determined that some of the slides from earlier reports would not reproduce well in black and white. Wendt then took additional photos when necessary.

The task of architectural description fell to Vickie Cole. Whenever possible, the visual description was based on the photos available. In some cases, it was important to investigate the architecture on site. Types of construction, building materials, etc. could be determined by looking at the photos. The actual numbers of windows and doors was left undetermined. Full architectural descriptions for the large number of structures included in this study would take much longer to complete than preparation time allotted this book. The authors hope that the reader will gain some understanding of the architectural types popular during various times in local history.

During research, a number of older maps, blue prints and drawings were found. In order to render these suitable for reproduction, Mary Simpson copied pen and ink renditions of them. In addition, Simpson created a very understandable glossary for the few architectural terms utilized in this history.

During the final weeks before the book was sent to the printers, there were many long work sessions to determine the most pleasing layout.

Special acknowledgements must be given to several people who generously provided their expertise throughout the project: Consultants: Jim Fox — Palmer, Matanuska, and Knik. Dorothy Page — Knik, Wasilla, and Willow Creek. Mary Cracraft Bauer and Robert Tucker — Sutton, Chickaloon, and the Alaska Railroad. We also appreciate the efforts of Frank Cornelius and Bill Hoskins.

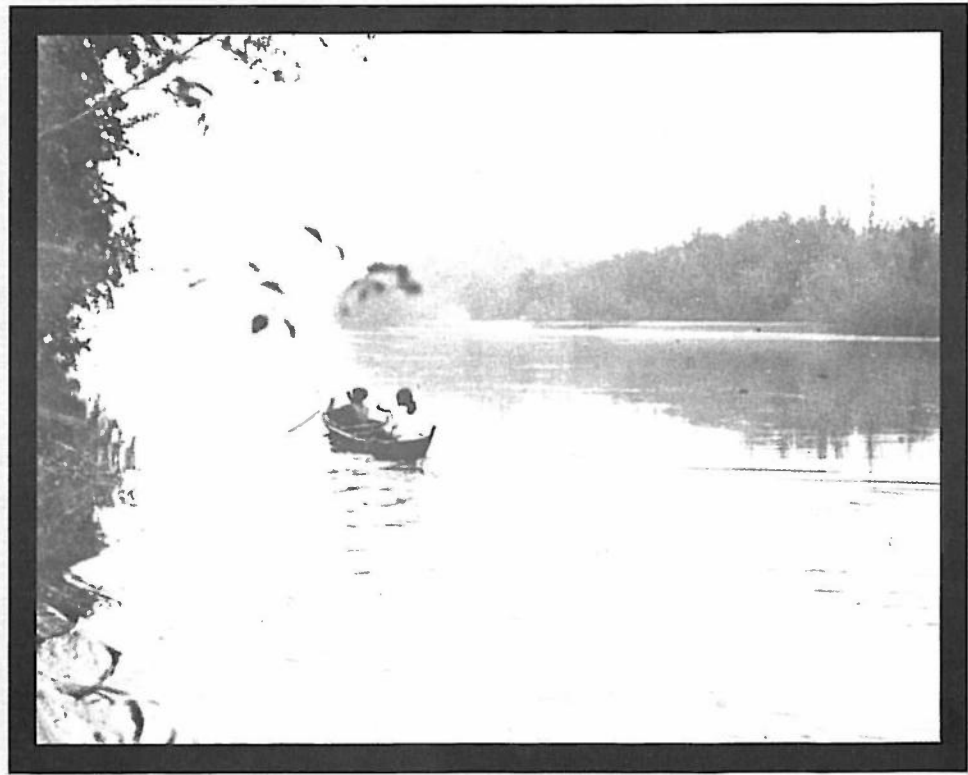
Members of the Mat-Su Borough Historical and Preservation Committee are Jim Ede, president; Mary Geist, John Breiby, Myra Hale, Robert Tucker, Patricia Newman, Dorothy Jones, Ron Bisset. Past president was John Cooper.

We would also like to thank borough manager Gary Thurlow who conceived the idea and followed through on the grant proposal. Local museums have freely donated their research and photos to this project.

We also would like to recognize the efforts of concerned citizens who over the years have diligently compiled and preserved information. They have volunteered many hours of time in museums and on restoration projects, often with little recognition. Without their achievements this book would not have been possible. In particular, we would like to credit the work of Craig Mishler who completed a vast survey of historical buildings in 1981, Kelly Fike-Langford for her survey of colony sites, and Nancy Yaw Davis for the completion of a grant that eventually expanded to become this book.

Finally, articles in several publications have provided an ongoing documentation of history and historical preservation efforts. *The Frontiersman/Valley Sun*, *The Valley Press*, *The Anchorage Daily News*, *The Anchorage Times*, and *Ruralite* magazine have consistently published articles of local historical interest.

As this book was being printed, several of the buildings listed were moved to new locations; some may no longer exist.



DENA'INA
THE PEOPLE



COURTESY: The Anchorage Museum of History and Art



Mrs. Patchell and Baby
COURTESY: The Anchorage Museum of History and Art,
Wheatley Collection.

DENA'INA — THE PEOPLE

Between 1500 and 2,000 years ago, a band of Athabascan Indians who called themselves Dena'ina, meaning "the people," established themselves in southcentral Alaska. (The Dena'ina are also frequently referred to as Tanaina.)

Many similarities between the Cook Inlet Dena'ina archaeological sites and the Eskimo artifacts found on the Alaska Peninsula and at Kodiak lead to the conclusion that the Dena'ina actually displaced an Eskimo population at some point. Some anthropologists believe that the Dena'ina completed a succession of invasions along Cook Inlet. An early Dena'ina legend recounts a huge battle at Point Possession where the Dena'ina drove out the Eskimos and refers to the battleground as the place "where Aleuts we dig up."

Their territory was enormous, covering a range of 41,000 square miles and extending from Kachemak Bay up both sides of Cook Inlet to the Matanuska and Susitna River drainages and west to Lake Clark and Lake Iliamna. About 60 per cent of Alaskans now live in Dena'ina territory,

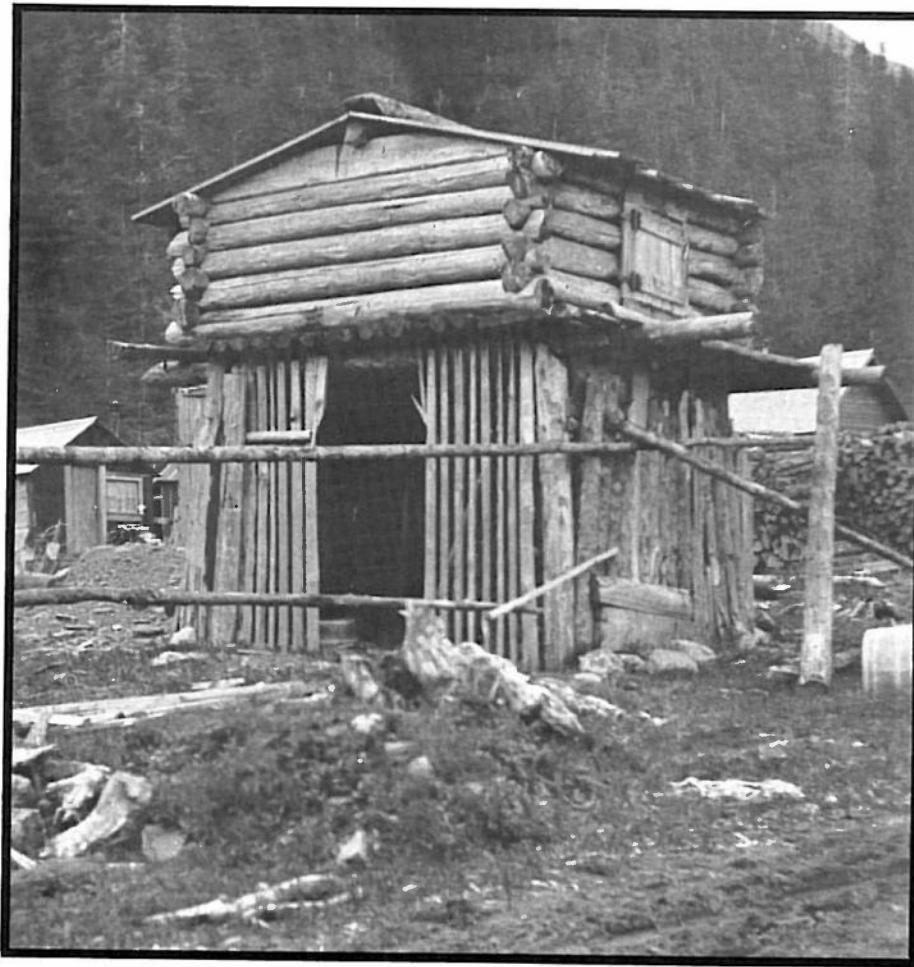
according to Dr. James Kari, who has spent 11 years studying the Dena'ina history and language. Yet, he notes, few people are aware of the rich culture and heritage of the Dena'ina.

Unlike other Athabascans (in interior Alaska, Canada, and as far south as the Navajos in Arizona and New Mexico) the Dena'ina had a highly developed maritime society as well as seasonal hunting, trapping, and fishing activities. Anthropologists estimate the Dena'ina numbered as many as 5,000 before contact with whites. That number has dropped to 1,000 people of Dena'ina ancestry today with only about 150 people actually speaking the language.

Identified linguistically as speaking the Upper Cook Inlet dialect were the Indians living at the head of Cook Inlet, along Knik Arm and the Knik, Matanuska, Susitna, and Yentna Rivers. However, today only 25 people still speak the Upper Cook Inlet dialect and most of them are 60 years of age or older.



COURTESY: The Anchorage Museum of History and Art



COURTESY: The Anchorage Museum of History and Art,
Wheatley Collection

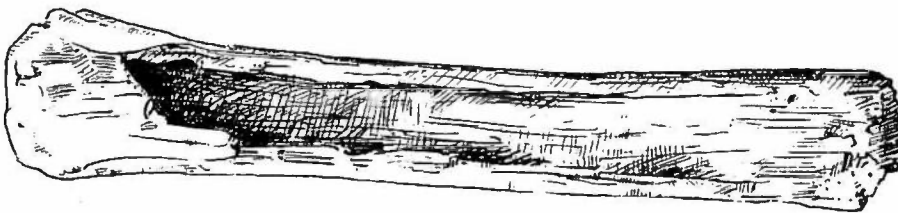
Indian cache



Stone biface from Wasilla area (actual size 3½")



Eskimo oil lamp from Knik area (actual size 8")



Moose bone fleshing tool from 4-Corners area (actual size 11")

The Dena'ina wandered extensively throughout their territory using the rivers and streams as highways year round. In spring after spending the winter months in a camp, they would travel to the ocean for seal and beluga. The salmon run up Knik Arm past what is now Anchorage was extremely important to the Dena'ina, and groups would move to traditional fishing camps in early summer.

Adaptability to the diverse terrain of mountain range and interior lake and stream country resulted in a high level of subsistence skill that commands the respect of modern day anthropologists. The Dena'ina are credited with inventing the birch bark canoe, birch bark basket, and babiche. This ingenious method of making leather thongs uses every scrap of skin to produce the longest string possible without knots.

The Dena'ina lived in villages headed by a "rich" man who, in return for assistance in acquiring food and goods, would care for the village inhabitants. The potlach, given on the occasion of marriages, deaths, and other important events, provided the rich man with an opportunity to gain prestige with massive gift giving to the guests. Before the arrival of white men, the Dena'ina traded frequently with each other and their inland neighbors.

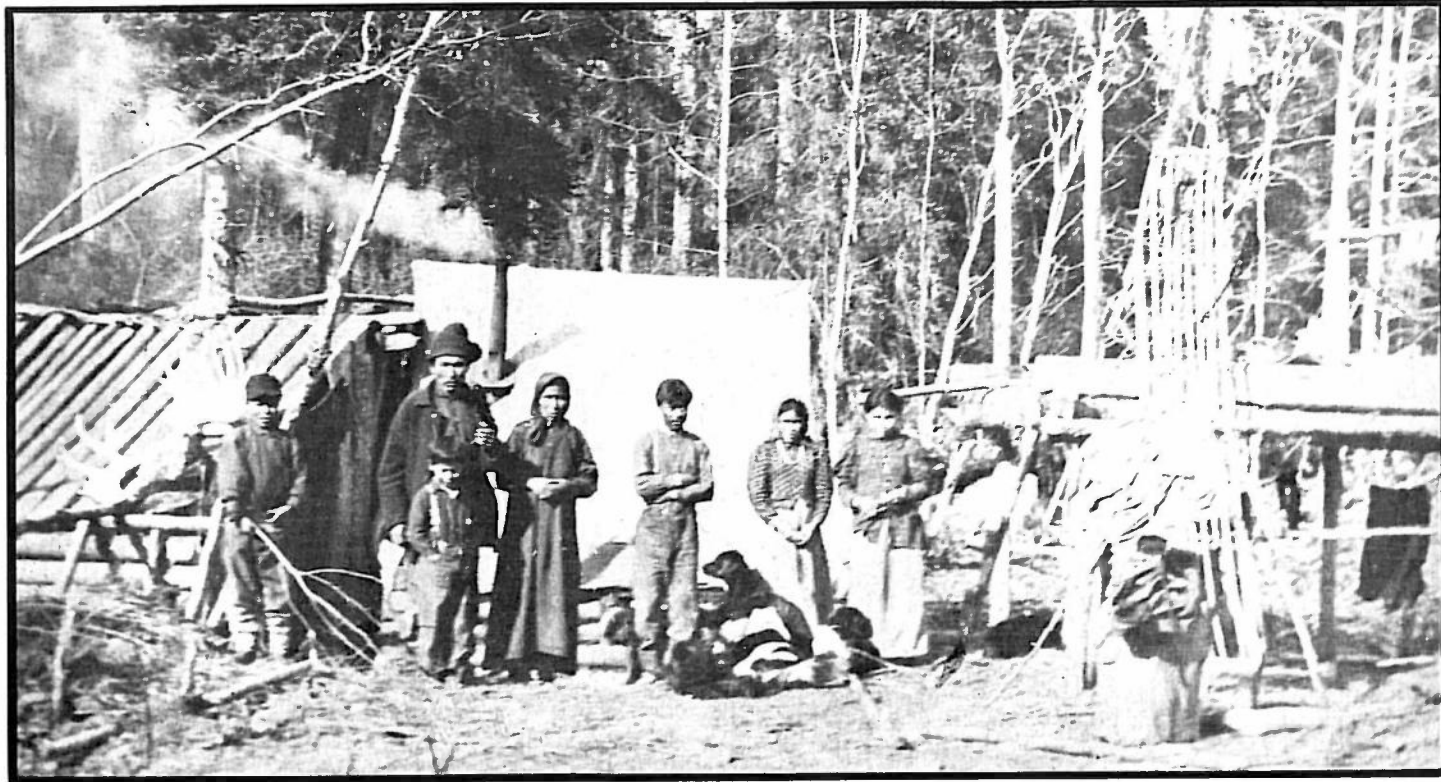
Early Russian explorers found this system useful for developing a fur trade with the rich man acting as intermediary. However, with the decline of the Russian fur industry came a breakdown of the Dena'ina economic structure and village organization.

The religion of the Dena'ina contains many stories about the Raven who, like the coyote of the Navajos, was a trickster. The shaman acted as a priest and a healer and was an important figure even after many Dena'ina converted to Christianity. Particularly important was the close and harmonious relationship between the Dena'ina, animals, and animal spirits.

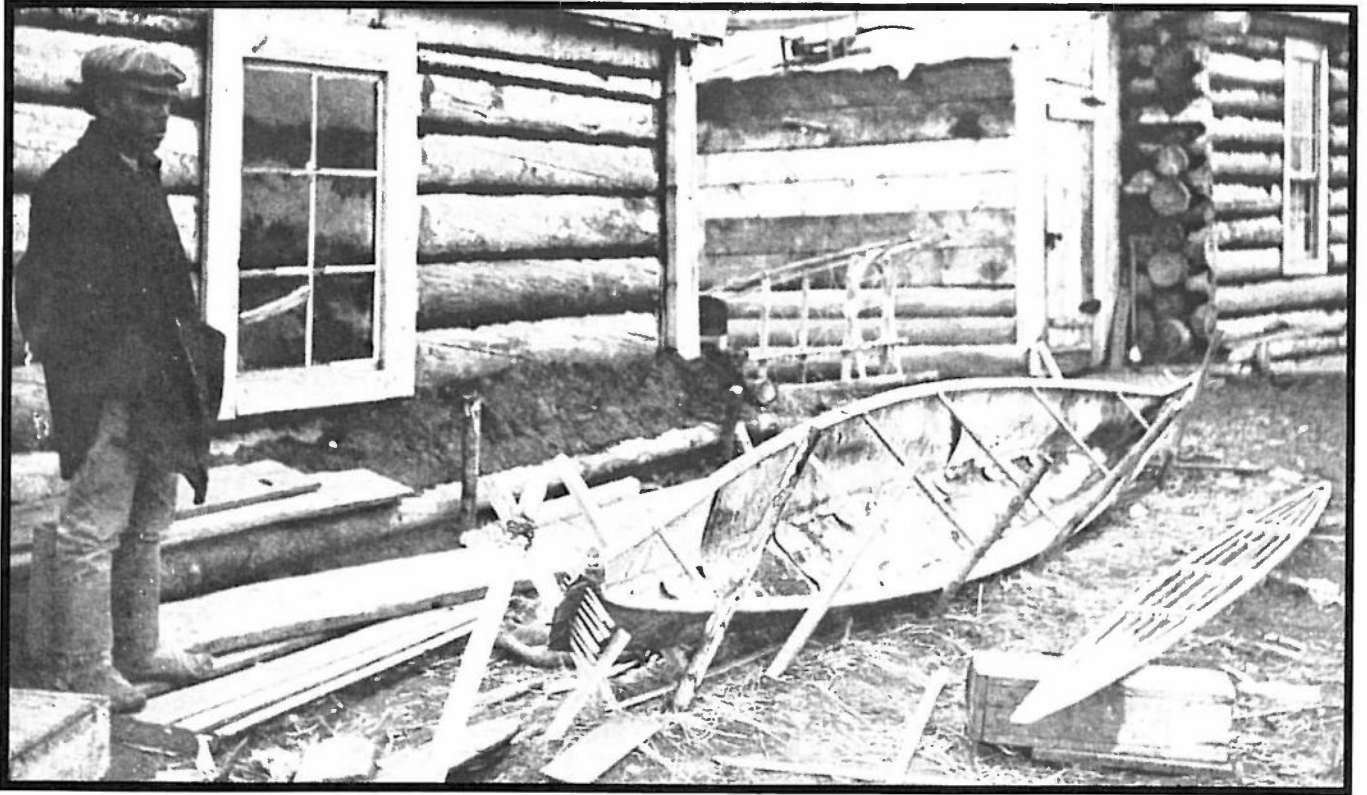
Other legends include the Hairy Man who is actually harmless although large and frightening in appearance, and the Big Fish, most frequently mentioned in reference to Lake Iliamna.

The Dena'ina were a highly complex people with a culture and language that had developed over a 2,000 year span by the time Vitus Bering arrived in Alaska in 1741, followed by James Cook in 1778.

The influence of first Russians and later the Americans changed forever the traditions and lives of the Dena'ina. In 1784 when the Russians



Nakeetna's Camp on the Matanuska, 1906
COURTESY: The Anchorage Museum of History and Art



COURTESY: Ron Wendt Collection



COURTESY: Ron Wendt Collection

established the trading post at Kodiak that later became the main headquarters of the Russian-American Company, they also engaged in a period of heavy fur trading with the Dena'ina. To insure an ample supply of furs the Russians took Indian hostages at Kodiak and later near Kenai.

After some initial resistance, the Cook Inlet Dena'ina did engage in active fur trading and eventually came to act as middleman between the Russians and more interior Indians. The contact, however, resulted in epidemic disease among the Dena'ina who had little resistance to the measles, influenza, tuberculosis, and smallpox of the European civilization.

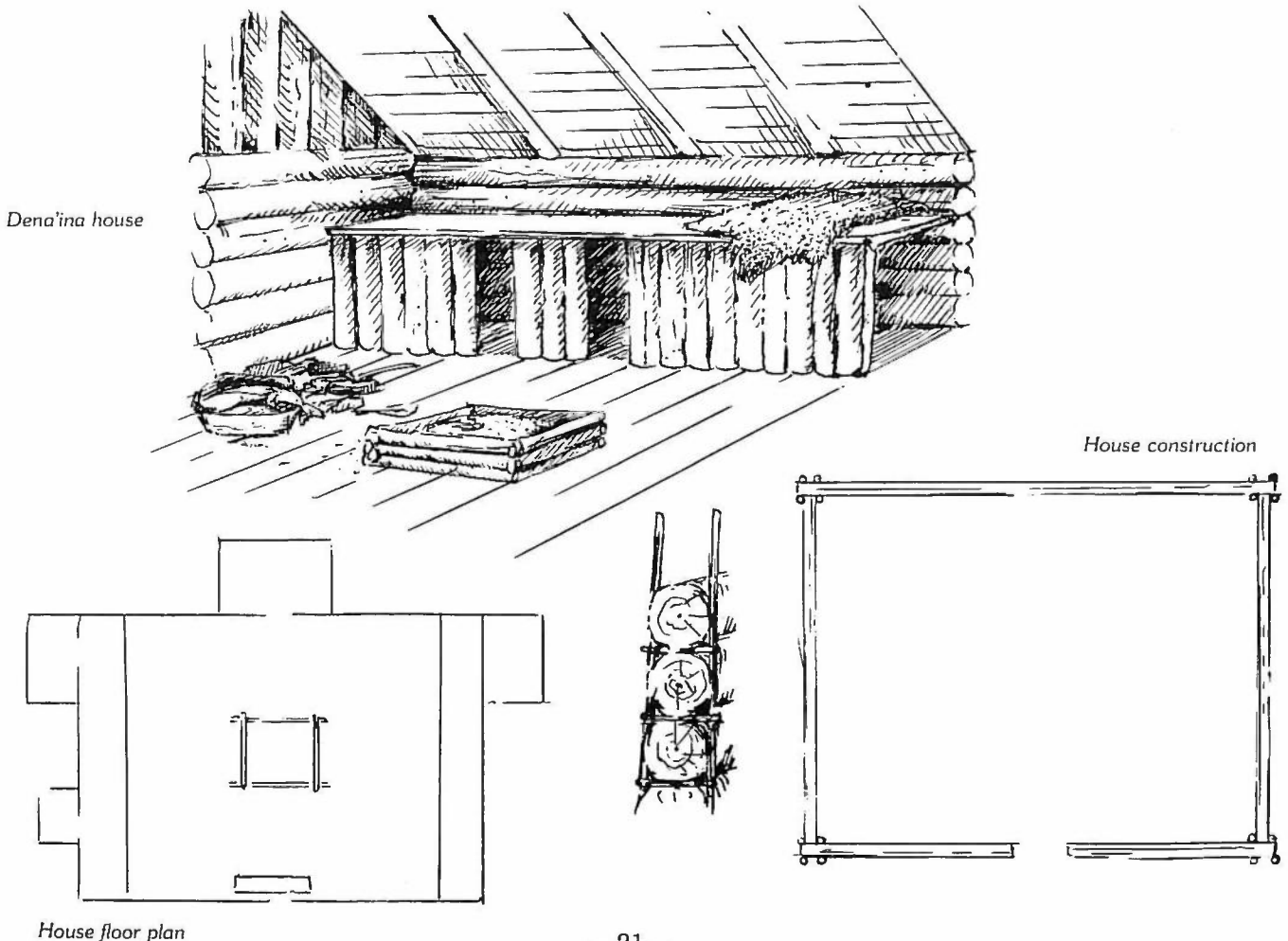
The smallpox epidemic which first appeared among the Sitka Tlingit in 1836 soon spread and is believed to have killed 50 per cent of the Alaska Native population. By 1845 the Dena'ina population had dropped to 816, its lowest point during the Russian period.

At this time another major change occurred among the Dena'ina as the Russian Orthodox missionaries began an active recruitment drive. By

1867, when Russia sold Alaska to the U.S., most of Cook Inlet Dena'ina had converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity. However, the traditional role of the Dena'ina shaman continued to be important through the first half of the twentieth century.

Fur trading continued between the Indians and the Americans through the early 1890's but declined abruptly after that because of a drop in prices. Economically the Dena'ina did not fare well. Commercial fishing enterprises took over traditional Dena'ina fishing streams forcing the Indians to depend more and more on the American cash economy. Through the end of the nineteenth century, the Dena'ina continued a subsistence lifestyle although the animal population in the area gradually decreased.

A 1900 USGS Annual Report gives an indication of the relationship between the Native and white population at the time. "The native inhabitants of the region about the head of Cook Inlet belong to the true Indian stock, as distinguished from the Eskimo tribes of the coast. They are now collected



PEOPLE

Barry, Paul 64
 Bering, Vitus 19
 Bartholf, Chet (Bartholf Brothers) 49,50 **
 Behnke, Mell 39
 Birdsall, Lois "Jo" Bjorn 39
 Bradley, Ralph 39
 Cody, May 37
 Cook, James 19
 Cooper, John 70
 Cottini, Jim, Pia, Victor 53
 Dalton, Jack 77,83
 Doherty, R. G. 79
 Edlund, John 40
 Edlund, Florence 40
 Fleckenstein, Sharon 40
 Fleckenstein, Florence Edlund 40
 Fritzler, Carl 39
 Hammond, Jay 70
 Harding, Warren G. 65
 Hatcher, Robert 49
 Heckey, Ross 81
 Herndon L. J. 49
 Herning, O. J. 32,35,42,49
 Johnson, George "Ma" 81
 Kari, Dr. James 17,23
 Kuoppala, Eino 81
 Marion, Paddy 51
 Martin, Billy 49
 Mathison, Bob & Charlie 43
 McDougall, T. S. 50
 Mears, Col. Frederick 65
 Mendenhall, W. C. 75
 Miller, O. J. 51
 Morris, W. J. 49
 Nelson, Benoni 39
 O'Neill, Phil and Jean 75
 Ohlson, Col. Otto 65
 Omlin, Paul 81
 Palmer, George W. 34
 Patchell 16,21 **
 Pete, Shem 23-26
 Pete, Billy 23
 Potter, Louise 35
 Redington, Joe 39,43
 Renshaw 50
 Roosevelt, Franklin Delano 75
 Rowsey, Evaline 39
 Schroff-O'Neil (claim), 51 **
 Seppala, Leonard 32
 Stadler, Emil 51
 Stewart, B. D. 86
 Teeland, Walter 35
 Teeland, Vivian 35
 Wilson, Woodrow 61,65

TOPICS

Alaska Commercial Company (ACC) 34
 Alaska Division of Parks 55
 Alaska Coal Commission 84
 Alaska Engineering Commission 65,77
 Alaska Free Gold Mine 49,55
 Alaska Historical Society 70
 Alaska Juneau Mine 50,55
 Alaska Pacific Consolidating
 Mining Co 55
 Alaska Purchase Centennial 70
 Alaska Railroad 41,42,50,61,62,65,66,
 69,70,88
 Alaska Railroad Commission 62
 Alaska State Fair, Inc. 70
 Aleuts 17
 Alpine Historical Society 81
 Alpine Historical & Cultural Center 81
 Americans 7
 Anchorage Museum of History & Art 35
 Arch prospects 51
 Athabascans 17,27
 Beluga 19
 Buffalo Mine 81
 Cache 18
 Carle-Wagon Road 41,49
 Census 34
 Centennial Committee 70
 Coal 22,75-91
 coal, bituminous 75
 coal, lignite 75
 coal mines 67
 coal boom 75
 coal rush 75,81
 Coronado Mining Company 57
 Dena'ina 7,17-27
 Disease Epidemics 21,22
 Dog sled 31,32,39
 Earthquake 43
 Ensearch Exploration, Inc. 57
 Eskimo 7,17,18,21
 Evan Jones Mine 79
 farmers, valley 67
 Fern-Goodall Mine 50,53
 Fern Mine (see Fern-Goodall Mine)
 fish/fishing 19,21,23
 fire engine, LaFrance 69
 fur industry 19,21
 gold 22,40,46-57,75
 Gold Bullion Mine 48,49
 Gold Cord 50
 Gold Mint Mine 51
 Guinness Book of World Records 69
 hard rock mining museum 55
 High Grade 51
 historical park 55

INDEX FOR "KNIK MATANUSKA SUSITNA: A Visual History of the Valleys"

For ease in reference, this index has been subdivided into three categories. The main category headings are: Places, People, and Topics.

PLACES:

Alaska 66, 69, 71, 75
 Alpine Inn 75
 Anchorage 19, 41, 61, 62, 65, 66,67, 84
 Anchorage International Airport 70**
 Arizona 17
 Archangel Creek 50, 51
 Barry's Resort (Gilmores) 64
 Big Su
 Boomtown 55
 Bullion Mountain 49
 Canada 17
 Canyon Creek 49
 Chase 66
 Chickaloon 22, 77, 83, 84, 86, 87, 88
 Chickaloon River 88, 43
 Chickaloon River Road 88
 Chitna 71
 Clear 66
 Coal washing plant 75, 77, 84
 Coal Creek 81
 Cook Inlet 17, 21, 23, 31
 Cottonwood 33
 Craigie Creek 49
 Eielson AFB 66
 Eklutna 22, 34
 Eska 79
 Fairangel Creek 50
 Fairbanks 62, 35
 Fairgrounds (Alaska State) 69, 70
 Fire Island 31, 40
 Fishhook Creek 49
 Flat 31
 Fort Richardson 67
 Gilmores (Barry's Resort) 64
 Glenn Highway 77
 Granite Mountain 49
 Granite Peak 55
 Green Acres 65
 Grubstake Gulch 35,49
 Hope 43
 Iditarod 31, 42
 Independence Mine State Historic Park 54, 57, 50
 Independence Mine Camp 55
 Independence Village 55
 Jonesville (coal mines) 69
 Kachemak Bay 17
 Kenai 21
 Klondike Rush 47
 Knik Arm 17, 21, 22
 Knik River 17
 Knik Road 43
 Knik, town of 17, 22, 31-43, 49, 61, 63, 65, 83
 Knik Valley 7
 Kodiak 21
 Kuskokwim River 3
 Ladd's Station 22
 Lake Clark 17
 Lake Iliamna 17
 Little Susitna River 50,51
 Matanuska River 17, 23, 34, 37, 75, 84
 Matanuska, town of 22, 41, 61, 64, 65, 95-115
 Matanuska-Susitna Borough 54, 63, 68
 Matanuska Valley 61, 62, 66, 75, 77,7,9
 Mat-Su Valley 65
 McCarthy 71
 Military Posts 66
 Mills Creek 49
 Moose Creek 77,79
 Mt. McKinley 23
 Nancy Lake 23
 Nenana 65, 75
 New Mexico 17
 Nome 31,47,70
 Old Knik, town of (see Eklutna) 34
 Palmer, town of 22,34,47,67,69,70,88
 Panhandle (Alaska) 62
 Point MacKenzie 23
 Point Possession 17
 Rainy Pass 23,31
 Reed Creek 50
 Seward 31,41,65,66,75
 Ship Creek 41,42,49,65
 Skyscraper Mtn. 55,57
 Southcentral Alaska 55
 Sunny Knik (see Knik, town of)
 Sunrise 43
 Susitna River 17,22,23,49
 Susitna Station 23
 Susitna Valley 7,9
 Sutton 22,52,75,77,81,84
 Talkeetna Mountains 54,81
 Talkeetna, town of 66
 Tanana River 75
 Thompson Pass 71
 Turnagain Arm 43
 Tyonek 22,23
 Upper Cook Inlet (see Cook Inlet) 17,47
 Valdez 71
 Wainwright 66
 Washington, state of 40
 Wasilla, town of 22,23,31,35,41,47,49,61,63,65
 Weaver (see Anchorage, town of)
 Willow, town of 49,57
 Willow Creek 49,35,47
 Wishbone Hill 75,77,81
 Wishbone Hill District 79
 Woodard City (see Anchorage, town of)
 Yentna River 17
 Yukon 31

PEOPLE

Barry, Paul 64
 Bering, Vitus 19
 Bartholf, Chet (Bartholf Brothers) 49,50 **
 Behnke, Mell 39
 Birdsall, Lois "Jo" Bjorn 39
 Bradley, Ralph 39
 Cody, May 37
 Cook, James 19
 Cooper, John 70
 Cottini, Jim, Pia, Victor 53
 Dalton, Jack 77,83
 Doherty, R. G. 79
 Edlund, John 40
 Edlund, Florence 40
 Fleckenstein, Sharon 40
 Fleckenstein, Florence Edlund 40
 Fritzler, Carl 39
 Hammond, Jay 70
 Harding, Warren G. 65
 Hatcher, Robert 49
 Heckey, Ross 81
 Herndon L. J. 49
 Herning, O. J. 32,35,42,49
 Johnson, George "Ma" 81
 Kari, Dr. James 17,23
 Kuoppala, Eino 81
 Marion, Paddy 51
 Martin, Billy 49
 Mathison, Bob & Charlie 43
 McDougall, T. S. 50
 Mears, Col. Frederick 65
 Mendenhall, W. C. 75
 Miller, O. J. 51
 Morris, W. J. 49
 Nelson, Benoni 39
 O'Neill, Phil and Jean 75
 Ohlson, Col. Otto 65
 Omlin, Paul 81
 Palmer, George W. 34
 Patchell 16,21 **
 Pete, Shem 23-26
 Pete, Billy 23
 Potter, Louise 35
 Redington, Joe 39,43
 Renshaw 50
 Roosevelt, Franklin Delano 75
 Rowsey, Evaline 39
 Schroff-O'Neil (claim), 51 **
 Seppala, Leonard 32
 Stadler, Emil 51
 Stewart, B. D. 86
 Teeland, Walter 35
 Teeland, Vivian 35
 Wilson, Woodrow 61,65

TOPICS

Alaska Commercial Company (ACC) 34
 Alaska Division of Parks 55
 Alaska Coal Commission 84
 Alaska Engineering Commission 65,77
 Alaska Free Gold Mine 49,55
 Alaska Historical Society 70
 Alaska Juneau Mine 50,55
 Alaska Pacific Consolidating
 Mining Co 55
 Alaska Purchase Centennial 70
 Alaska Railroad 41,42,50,61,62,65,66,
 69,70,88
 Alaska Railroad Commission 62
 Alaska State Fair, Inc. 70
 Aleuts 17
 Alpine Historical Society 81
 Alpine Historical & Cultural Center 81
 Americans 7
 Anchorage Museum of History & Art 35
 Arch prospects 51
 Athabascans 17,27
 Beluga 19
 Buffalo Mine 81
 Cache 18
 Carle-Wagon Road 41,49
 Census 34
 Centennial Committee 70
 Coal 22,75-91
 coal, bituminous 75
 coal, lignite 75
 coal mines 67
 coal boom 75
 coal rush 75,81
 Coronado Mining Company 57
 Dena'ina 7,17-27
 Disease Epidemics 21,22
 Dog sled 31,32,39
 Earthquake 43
 Ensearch Exploration, Inc. 57
 Eskimo 7,17,18,21
 Evan Jones Mine 79
 farmers, valley 67
 Fern-Goodall Mine 50,53
 Fern Mine (see Fern-Goodall Mine)
 fish/fishing 19,21,23
 fire engine, LaFrance 69
 fur industry 19,21
 gold 22,40,46-57,75
 Gold Bullion Mine 48,49
 Gold Cord 50
 Gold Mint Mine 51
 Guinness Book of World Records 69
 hard rock mining museum 55
 High Grade 51
 historical park 55

INDEX FOR "KNIK MATANUSKA SUSITNA: A Visual History of the Valleys"

For ease in reference, this index has been subdivided into three categories. The main category headings are: Places, People, and Topics.

PLACES:

Alaska 66, 69, 71, 75
 Alpine Inn 75
 Anchorage 19, 41, 61, 62, 65, 66,67, 84
 Anchorage International Airport 70**
 Arizona 17
 Archangel Creek 50, 51
 Barry's Resort (Gilmores) 64
 Big Su
 Boomtown 55
 Bullion Mountain 49
 Canada 17
 Canyon Creek 49
 Chase 66
 Chickaloon 22, 77, 83, 84, 86, 87, 88
 Chickaloon River 88, 43
 Chickaloon River Road 88
 Chitna 71
 Clear 66
 Coal washing plant 75, 77, 84
 Coal Creek 81
 Cook Inlet 17, 21, 23, 31
 Cottonwood 33
 Craigie Creek 49
 Eielson AFB 66
 Eklutna 22, 34
 Eska 79
 Fairangel Creek 50
 Fairbanks 62, 35
 Fairgrounds (Alaska State) 69, 70
 Fire Island 31, 40
 Fishhook Creek 49
 Flat 31
 Fort Richardson 67
 Gilmores (Barry's Resort) 64
 Glenn Highway 77
 Granite Mountain 49
 Granite Peak 55
 Green Acres 65
 Grubstake Gulch 35,49
 Hope 43
 Iditarod 31, 42
 Independence Mine State Historic Park 54, 57, 50
 Independence Mine Camp 55
 Independence Village 55
 Jonesville (coal mines) 69
 Kachemak Bay 17
 Kenai 21
 Klondike Rush 47
 Knik Arm 17, 21, 22
 Knik River 17
 Knik Road 43
 Knik, town of 17, 22, 31-43, 49, 61, 63, 65, 83
 Knik Valley 7
 Kodiak 21
 Kuskokwim River 3
 Ladd's Station 22
 Lake Clark 17
 Lake Iliamna 17
 Little Susitna River 50,51
 Matanuska River 17, 23, 34, 37, 75, 84
 Matanuska, town of 22, 41, 61, 64, 65, 95-115
 Matanuska-Susitna Borough 54, 63, 68
 Matanuska Valley 61, 62, 66, 75, 77,7,9
 Mat-Su Valley 65
 McCarthy 71
 Military Posts 66
 Mills Creek 49
 Moose Creek 77,79
 Mt. McKinley 23
 Nancy Lake 23
 Nenana 65, 75
 New Mexico 17
 Nome 31,47,70
 Old Knik, town of (see Eklutna) 34
 Palmer, town of 22,34,47,67,69,70,88
 Panhandle (Alaska) 62
 Point MacKenzie 23
 Point Possession 17
 Rainy Pass 23,31
 Reed Creek 50
 Seward 31,41,65,66,75
 Ship Creek 41,42,49,65
 Skyscraper Mtn. 55,57
 Southcentral Alaska 55
 Sunny Knik (see Knik, town of)
 Sunrise 43
 Susitna River 17,22,23,49
 Susitna Station 23
 Susitna Valley 7,9
 Sutton 22,52,75,77,81,84
 Talkeetna Mountains 54,81
 Talkeetna, town of 66
 Tanana River 75
 Thompson Pass 71
 Turnagain Arm 43
 Tyonek 22,23
 Upper Cook Inlet (see Cook Inlet) 17,47
 Valdez 71
 Wainwright 66
 Washington, state of 40
 Wasilla, town of 22,23,31,35,41,47,49,61,63,65
 Weaver (see Anchorage, town of)
 Willow, town of 49,57
 Willow Creek 49,35,47
 Wishbone Hill 75,77,81
 Wishbone Hill District 79
 Woodard City (see Anchorage, town of)
 Yentna River 17
 Yukon 31

Topics Cont.

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Holland prospect | 51 | Erie Railroad of Pennsylvania | 71 |
| homesteaders | 31,35,37,40,87 | Kennecott Northwestern Copper | |
| Howe truss span | 88 | River Railroad | 71 |
| Iditarod Trail | 31,32 | Russians | 7,19,21,50 |
| Independence Mine | 40,49,50,54,55,56 | Russian America Company | 21 |
| Jonesville Mine | 79,81 | Russian Orthodox Church | 21 |
| Kelley - Willow prospect | 51 | Salmon | 19 |
| Klondike & Boston Mining Company | 35,49 | schools | 37 |
| Knik Museum | 39,43 | Schroff-O'Neil claim | 51 |
| Knik News | 40,35 | seal | 19 |
| Lane prospect | 51 | seaport | 31 |
| Little Susitna Roadhouse (Motherlode) | 53 | Shough prospect | 51 |
| Lonesome Mine | 51 | slime pit | 51 |
| Lucky Shot Mine | 40,49,51,57 | small pox | 21 |
| Mabel Mine | 50,53 | Snowbird Mine | 51,53 |
| Mammoth prospect | 51 | strip mining | 79 |
| Marion Twin Mine | 51 | Tanaina (see Dena'ina) | |
| Martin Mines | 49 | teamsters | 31 |
| Matanuska Property | 50 | Thorp Mine | 51 |
| Matanuska-Susitna Borough | 7 | Tlingit | 21 |
| Matanuska-Susitna Borough Historical | | trails | 31 |
| Preservation Commission | 88 | transportation, rail | 67 |
| Matanuska deposits | 77,84 | U. S. Navy | 77,83,84,87 |
| Matanuska property | 50 | United States | 21 |
| Matanuska Power Project | 81 | United States Post Office | 37,42 |
| Miller prospect | 51 | University of Alaska | 35 |
| miner's pay | 51 | visitor center | 55 |
| military bases | 76 | War Baby Mine | 40,49 |
| Motherlode | 53 | Wasilla-Fishhook | 41 |
| Mountain Ranges | | Wasilla-Knik Centennial Committee | 39 |
| Alaska | 31 | Webfoot prospect | 51 |
| Chugach | 7 | Whitney Section House | 65 |
| Talkeetna | 7 | Willow Creek Mining District | 22,31,32,35,40,46,47,49,50,51 |
| muckers | 51 | World War I | 65 |
| Museum of Alaska Transportation | | World War II | 47,50,51,55 |
| and Industry | 65,69-71,88 | | |
| National Register of Historic | | | |
| Places | 39,55,63 | | |
| Navajos | 17 | | |
| nomad | 43 | | |
| Pinnacle Rock | 53 | | |
| plane, Cunningham - Hall | 70 | | |
| Keystone Leaning amphibian | 70 | | |
| post offices | 37,42,49,84,87 | | |
| prospect slope | 79 | | |
| Premier Mine | 81 | | |
| pumper | 69 | | |
| Rosenthal prospect | 51 | | |
| Rae prospect | 51 | | |
| railbelt | 62 | | |
| rail system | 75 | | |
| railroad | 22,35,41,42,50,61-71 | | |
| Alaska Central Railroad | 75 | | |
| Alaska Northern Railroad | 77 | | |
| railroad buildings | 61,63,87 | | |