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Alaska

The Last Frontier

by William P. Ancker

Describing Alaska requires the use of superlatives: biggest, tallest, longest, most, and even fewest. Here are some of the notable features of the 49th state of the United States:

Clockwise from the top:

Alaska has the tallest mountain in the country, Mt. McKinley (also called Denali) at 6,194 meters (20,320 feet). McKinley is not very tall by the standards of the Himalayas, Karakoram, or Andes, but it is the tallest mountain in North America.

Alaska has the northernmost location in the U.S., Point Barrow. It also has the westernmost location, Little Diomedes Island, in the Bering Strait. In fact, the Russian island, Big Diomedes, is only about four kilometers away from Little Diomedes.

Alaska is the biggest state, with approximately 1,517,000 square kilometers (about 586,000 square miles) of territory.

Alaska has the fewest people per square kilometer. The population density is only one person per 2.6 square kilometers (about one square mile).

Alaska has the most glaciers of any state. This is not surprising, given its location, but who would guess it has 5,000 of them? Two of the glaciers are each larger than the state of Delaware, which is 5,290 square kilometers (2,044 square miles).

Alaska has the longest coastline, approximately 10,700 kilometers (about 6,640 miles), which makes it longer than the coastline of the "lower" 48 states combined. If all the islands of Alaska are included, the amount of coastline increases five-fold.

BIG, BIGGER, BIGGEST The state of Alaska is the biggest state in the union. The map to the left shows Alaska superimposed on the lower 48 contiguous states as an indication of its size. ©Cartesia

ARTIC VILLAGE This small village is in the Arctic Circle. Alaska's population density is estimated to be only 1.1 persons per square mile. The small state of Rhode Island has 948.1 persons per square mile. ©Associated Press

RUGGED COAST The rugged beauty of this long coastline is typical of Alaska. ©PhotoDisc

There is more to Alaska than numbers, however. Its history is part of the history of North and South America. Archaeological sites show that it was part of the earliest bridge between Asia and the Americas. Although it has a modern infrastructure, the landscape and weather still determine, to a large extent, how people there travel.

Native People

Between 13,000 and 40,000 years ago, as the growth of enormous glaciers lowered the level of the oceans and exposed land that had been previously underwater, there was a land connection between Asia and North America. Known as the Bering Land Bridge, it formed a vast flat route between the two continents that allowed a gradual migration of people to the Americas.

Some archaeologists think that *Homo sapiens*, as well as animals and possibly plants, migrated across the land bridge. There is limited physical evidence of migration, however, because the land bridge is now submerged underwater. There are at least two ways people could have migrated from Asia. One is that groups of hunters may have followed game animals from Siberia to Alaska and then southward. Another is that seafarers may have followed the southern shore of the land bridge to Alaska, then continued all the way down the western coast of the Americas.

A crucial part of this migration theory is that the land bridge stayed open for thousands of years. Even as ocean levels slowly rose and covered the land bridge, transit by boat would have been possible. The native inhabitants of Alas-

ka may have been rather late migrants, arriving after the descendants of earlier migrants had already established populations as far as South America.

The name “Native Alaskan” is used to collectively identify the indigenous people of Alaska. In the past, they were subsistence hunters and gatherers who depended on the oceans and rivers for marine mammals and fish and were distinguishable by their areas of settlement and languages. Some groups had permanent villages, for example, those in the Aleutian Islands. Others, such as Eskimos, had different winter and summer settlements.

The Eskimos and Aleutians comprise the two largest groups of Native Alaskans. There are two subgroups of Eskimo. Originally, Inupiat Eskimos are from the northwest, on the coastline of the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Sea. The Yup’ik Eskimos are from the southwest, on the coastline of the Bering Sea and the Gulf of Alaska. The Siberian Yup’ik Eskimos are from Saint Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea near Russia. The Aleutians are from the western part of Alaska Peninsula and the many large and small Aleutian Islands that extend hundreds of kilometers into the northern Pacific Ocean. Smaller groups of Native Alaskans include the Athabascans, who originally inhabited the eastern interior of Alaska and the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Alutiiq groups who are from the coast and islands of the southeast.

Native Alaskans did not escape the violence, disease, and misunderstanding that other indigenous people of the Americas suffered from European explorers and settlers. Fortunately, the Eskimos, Aleutians, and other Native Alaskans have survived the turmoil and change imposed by Russians, Americans, Canadians, Japanese, and other newcomers to their ancestral lands.

One of the greatest changes, which was set in place when the Danish captain Vitus Bering “discovered” Alaska, and which has affected the lives of Native Alaskans ever since, is the transition from traditional subsistence living

to a cash economy. Modern transportation and communications have also altered the way of life for Native Alaskans, even those living in the most remote villages.

In 1971, through the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, 17.8 million hectares (44 million acres) and almost \$1 billion were paid to Native Alaskans as compensation for the lands and livelihoods they had lost since 1867. The land and money were divided among newly established Native corporations that represented Native groups and villages. Today, Native Alaskans make up about 17 percent of the state's population of approximately 640,000 people.

History

The first Europeans to visit what is now called Alaska were sailors on an expedition funded by Russian czar Peter the Great and led by Captain Bering. In 1728, Bering and his crew sailed through the strait that is now named after him, between the easternmost part of Asia and the westernmost part of the Americas. Their journey proved that Asia was not connected to North America; however, due to heavy fog, they never actually saw the nearby land of North America. In a second expedition, in 1741, Bering headed further south, landing on tiny Kayak Island off the shore of what is now the southeastern part of the state.

In the 1780s and 1790s, Russians began small colonies, first on Kodiak Island and later on the mainland. Their principal interest was fur trapping. In 1799, the Russian-American Company was established to look after Russian interests. For the next 68 years, the company provided the only form of government for the European colonists, who never numbered more than a few hundred. Relations with the Aleutians and Tlingits were not always peaceful, and eventually British, Canadian, and American competition developed in the fur trade. By the 1860s, Russia wanted to sell its North American territory.

Alaska officially entered United States history when it was purchased from Russia in 1867 for \$7.2 million. Most Americans were opposed to the purchase at the time. They ridiculed the Secretary of State under President Abraham Lincoln who negotiated the purchase, William H. Seward, by calling Alaska “Seward’s Folly” and “Seward’s Icebox.”

Until 1896, there was little official U.S. presence in Alaska. As a result, large-scale hunting and commercial fishing were allowed to nearly deplete the population of whales, walruses, fur seals, sea otters, and salmon upon which Native Alaskans depended for food and subsistence.

The long period of neglect by the U.S. government ended in 1896 when gold was discovered in the Yukon Territory of Canada, near the Alaska border. This launched a gold rush, bringing thousands of people there. Gold was also discovered near Nome, Alaska, in 1898, and soon thereafter in other parts of the territory, bringing even more people to Alaska. With the arrival of the miners,



settlers, and other newcomers, Americans began to take notice of the other abundant resources in the area. Finally the need for some form of official local governing authority became obvious to the leaders of the U.S. government.

A number of major events and developments took place in the following decades that led to statehood for Alaska in 1959. A non-voting delegate from Alaska was admitted to the U.S. Congress in 1906, and a territorial legislature was established in 1912. A railroad linking the coastal towns of Seward and Anchorage with inland Fairbanks was completed in 1923.

In early 1942, the United States and Canada agreed to build a highway through western Canada to connect Alaska to the “lower” 48 states. After only eight months of construction by engineering teams of the U.S. Army, the 2,300-kilometer road (over 1,400 miles) was completed. By 1953, the petroleum industry had begun important drilling operations in Alaska. Eventually oil, along with mining of coal,

copper, and gold, would become the state’s largest sources of income.

Many new residents arrived in the 1970s and 1980s seeking well-paying jobs, and the economy diversified in new ways. Although the state is still dependent on income generated from fishing, petroleum, and the extraction of other natural resources, the tourism industry has grown tremendously in recent years. More than one million tourists visit Alaska annually, mostly during the summer, to see firsthand its unique combination of people, history, and natural wonders.

Clockwise from the top:

Skagway, AK In 1897 this town became the gateway for gold prospectors traveling to the Klondike. ©Associated Press

Tourism A Norwegian Cruise Line ship sails through the Gastineau Channel en route to Juneau. ©Associated Press



Transportation

Because of its many mountains, rivers, and islands and its long and harsh winter, Alaska has relatively few roads. In some areas, such as the southeastern part of the state, road construction is impossible due to the large number of glaciers. In other places year-round snow cover requires residents to rely more on air travel than automobiles to reach distant areas of the state.

In fact, Alaska has more pilots, airplanes, and airports per capita than the rest of the United States. Those “airports” include lakes where seaplanes land and take off. There are even air taxis that take residents and tourists to isolated wilderness areas and pick them up later. The state capital and third largest city, Juneau, is accessible only by water or air.

Because of its northern location, Alaska has become an international hub for air cargo. Anchorage International Airport handles more cargo planes—most of them fully loaded 747s—than any other airport in the country.

Ferries are also an indispensable means of transportation within the state. The Alaska Marine Highway was established in 1963 to carry passengers and vehicles on water routes. Two ferry systems operate year-round on the southern coast of Alaska, linking cities and towns on the mainland as well as numerous islands.

Conclusion

The motto of Alaska is “North to the future!” The state lives up to that promise in several ways. First, it has one of the youngest populations in the U.S.—the median age is only 31 years. It also has one of the highest rates of secondary school graduation in the country, with over 90 percent of enrolled students completing their studies. Second, the state’s government has a strong commitment to the well-being of its citizens. A good example is the Permanent Fund, which is a large investment of public money derived from sales of the state’s nonrenewable natural resources, primarily petroleum. Some income earned by the fund is used to pay for important state projects, but most of it is paid to individual Alaskans in the form of an annual dividend. No other state offers this type of generous payment to its residents. With respect for the old and a willingness to embrace the new, Alaska can offer a bright future to all its people.

References

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Right:

Air travel These floatplanes on Lake Hood in Anchorage are the typical mode of travel used by many people to access more remote areas. ©Associated Press



Iditarod

Annual Sled Dog Race

“Mushing” is the sport of racing teams of dogs that pull sleds over snow. It grew from an ancient and practical means of transportation of native people of Alaska: using muscular dogs to carry cargo through harsh winter weather. The largest and most famous sporting event in Alaska is Iditarod, an annual race of teams of sled dogs and their drivers (or “mushers”) that takes almost two weeks and covers approximately 1,800 kilometers (1,120 miles) from Anchorage to Nome.

The Iditarod commemorates a historic event from the winter of 1925, when a relay of 20 teams of dogs and mushers was used to deliver urgently needed medicine to Nome. Severe weather conditions made delivery by boat or airplane impossible. That heroic effort of men and their beloved dogs prevented an outbreak of diphtheria in Nome and saved hundreds of lives.

The first Iditarod was held in 1973. The race has grown steadily since then, both in the number of entrants who compete and the number of volunteers who help behind the scenes. Over the years, mushers and their dogs have come from Alaska, 20 other U.S. states, and 14 foreign countries to compete in “the last great race.”

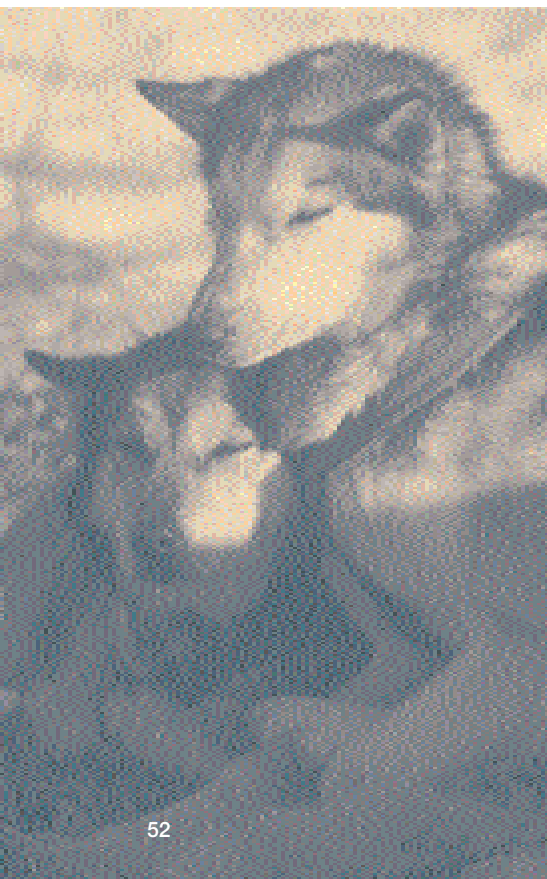
The race begins every year on the first Saturday of March in the city of Anchorage, which is on the Gulf of Alaska in the northern Pacific Ocean. It ends in the town of Nome on the coast of the Bering Sea. The middle section of the racecourse, between the villages of Ophir and Kaltag, alternates each year. A northern route is taken on even numbered years and a southern route on odd numbered years. This enables more villages to participate as checkpoints during this test of endurance across very sparsely populated wilderness.

The checkpoints are essential for a race of this length, difficulty, and isolation. Because there are no roads linking every section of the race, airplanes are

used to ferry supplies and people before, during, and after the event. In fact, the race has its own “air force” of 23 volunteer pilots who transport dozens of race personnel, such as judges, dog handlers, and veterinarians, and tons of cargo, including dogs taken out of the race due to sickness or injury.

There are important rules in Iditarod to protect the health and safety of the teams of musher and dogs. During the race, the mushers must take several mandatory rest stops. One eight-hour stop occurs in the middle of the race, and another occurs before the last 124-kilometer (77-mile) section of the race into Nome. In addition, at one point during the race—whenever each musher decides is best—the team must rest for 24 hours. The mushers have to carry certain safety equipment for themselves, such as a warm sleeping bag, a pair of showshoes, and a small cooker for boiling water.

This safety equipment also includes items for the teams of dogs, which can range between 12 and 16 animals per sled. Two pairs of “booties” for each dog are required to protect the animals’ paws from sharp ice and other obstacles on the trail. Most of the sled cargo is dog food. Each musher must also carry a special veterinarian notebook, which is presented to the veterinarian who examines all the dogs on a team at each checkpoint. The rules of Iditarod specifically state, “There will be no cruel or inhumane treatment of dogs.”





A unique feature of Iditarod, in addition to the extreme climatic conditions and unusual mode of racing vehicle, is that women and men mushers compete together. In fact, in the 30 years of this grueling race, a woman has won five times. In 1985, Libby Riddles was the first woman to win. Clearly, winning Iditarod takes months of planning and training. Perhaps an indication of the tremendous dedication and preparation required to succeed in Iditarod is that 20 editions have been won by only five mushers. (See the chart at the left below.)

Iditarod has an education component, too. Every year, a Teacher on the Trail is selected among numerous applicants to observe the race firsthand and prepare lessons based on the race for elementary students. The selected teacher follows the trail where the teams race, sleeps in a sleeping bag at checkpoints, travels on Iditarod Air Force planes, and is present for the finish in Nome. Every day during the race, the teacher uses a laptop computer to post news reports, photos, and lesson plans to the official race Web site for classroom use around the world. There are other responsibilities, too. The Teacher on the Trail must also attend and report on the Junior Iditarod, a short sled dog race for teenage mushers held beforehand, and may be called upon to serve as an official spokesperson for Iditarod and make many public appearances at schools in Alaska and other states.

IDITAROD

Multiple Winners and Dates of Victory

Name	Nationality	Number of Victories	Dates of Victory
1. Rick Swenson	USA	5	1977, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1991
2. Susan Butcher	USA	4	1986-88, 1990
3. Doug Swingley	USA	4	1995, 1999, 2000, 2001
4. Martin Buser	Switzerland	4	1992, 1994, 1997, 2002
5. Jeff King	USA	3	1993, 1996, 1998

Opposite top left:

IDITAROD TRAIL Doug Swingley takes the lead in 1996 on the frozen trail near Ophir. ©Associated Press

Opposite bottom left:

TIRED DOGS Two of the strong Huskies of Charlie Boulding from Manley, Alaska take a rest during the 1996 race. ©Associated Press

Above left:

WINNER'S CIRCLE Doug Swingley gets a lick from his lead dog Elmer with his other lead dogs Stormy and Cola by his side. ©Associated Press

Above right:

BALTO PREMIER Libby Riddles, the first woman to win the Iditarod, hugs one of her lead dogs at the premier of *Balto*, an animated film about the diphtheria epidemic of 1925. ©Associated Press

Below:

REST STOP The dogs rest on straw beds at the official checkpoint 224 miles from Anchorage. ©Associated Press/AP

