

MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH – SPECIAL EDITION- ALASKA HIGHWAY – May 8, 2003

Hi folks

Donna has collected a story from a friend she has corresponded with for the past couple of years. He and her father worked for the same company, although never met.

I hope you will persevere and read Cyril Griffith memories. It is a long piece and full of interesting tidbits. We were not given permission to abbreviate it.

Donna has also followed Cyril's story with one of her own. I think you will enjoy it too.

Sherron

HISTORY OF THE ALASKA HIGHWAY

By Donna Clayson

The Alaska Highway covers 1,422 miles (2,275 km) beginning at Mile Zero, Dawson Creek, B.C. and ending at Delta Junction, Alaska. Only 221 miles (354 km) are in Alaska. From Dawson Creek, the highway extends almost 595 miles (952 km) to Lower Post, where it enters the Yukon.

*Construction of the Alaska, or Alcan Highway began in 1942 during World War II. Originally called the Alaskan-Canadian Highway and today it is simply known as **The Alaska Highway**. The United States armed forces declared the need for an access and service road to service the military airfields being built between Edmonton and Fairbanks. Construction began in April. When the Japanese army invaded two Aleutian Islands in June 1942, a new sense of urgency led to the road's early completion date of September 1943. Round-the-clock construction involving 9,000 US soldiers and 12,000 hired workers made the building of this highway one of the greatest engineering feats of our time and heralded as almost impossible to accomplish.*

These men did an exceptional job under duress. Ill housed, often living in tents with insufficient clothing and monotonous food, they worked 20-hour days through a punishing winter. Temperatures hovered at -40F degrees for weeks at a time. A new record low of -79F was established. The majority of these troops were from the South; yet they preserved. On completion, many were decorated for their efforts and then sent off to active duty in Europe and the South Pacific.

Now the highway is mostly paved in Canada and completely paved in Alaska.

Now, let's hear from a gentleman that was there – Story Editor

TRUCKING THE TOTE ROAD TO ALASKA: 1942 – 43
Memories of the early days of the Alaska Highway
By Cyril Griffith
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About the Author:

Cyril Griffith worked for H & N Transport of Dawson Creek (formerly known as Newman Bros. Transport of Regina, Sask.) from August 1942 until the spring of 1943.

During this period, the Alaska Highway was in the process of being constructed. The “tote road, carved out of rough terrain a year earlier, was the only route for supplies, equipment and personnel involved in the construction of the main highway. Cyril drove a fuel transport truck along the tote road carrying supplies to various construction camps.

In 1943, he returned to Regina and married shortly afterward. He and his wife, Betty, moved to a farm near Naicam, Saskatchewan, where they raised a family and operated a grain and livestock farm until 1978. Between 1978 and 1988, Cyril drove transport trucks and charter buses.

Now fully retired, he makes his home in Naicam. He enjoys being able to watch an “old time prairie blizzard” from the comfort of a heated house without having to look after cattle or tend to a truck.

My memories are many. I will try to outline some of them in this article.

After the bombs dropped on Pearl Harbour in 1941 the North American governments were afraid Japan might attack through Alaska. In early 1942 an all-out effort was started to put through a military road from the end-of-steel at Dawson Creek, B.C. to Fairbanks, Alaska. It was about 1800 miles of untracked wilderness. Today the road is known as the **Alaska Highway**.

I had spent the winter of 1941-42 in the Air Force, but was given a medical discharge in May 1942. I got a job driving fuel trucks out of Regina for Wallace and Mike Newman. In early August the Newman Bros. moved to Dawson Creek to help with the road building. I was one of about eleven men that went with them. This is my account of the year I spent working on the Alaska Highway.

We landed in Dawson Creek in late August of 1942. Newman Bros. had joined forces with Holman Trucking of Moose Jaw to form the H & N Trucking Co. of Dawson Creek, making about nine trucks in all to subcontract under Okes Construction, an American company who had set up an administration camp at Fort St. John to handle all civilian trucking up the road for the year 1942-43. The road at that time was only a tote road to move in the men and camp buildings that by the end of 1943 were, for the most part, Quonset or prefab plywood of about 20 feet wide by any length up to about 200 feet, and machinery to build the road that became the Alcan Highway. The American army had merely pushed through the tote road in the summer 1942 – no easy feat! The year 1942 brought many soldiers and civilians to the north.

First in were the American army engineers. By the time we arrived in August of 1942 they were well seasoned, having fought rivers, creeks, mountains, hills, swamps, permafrost, mosquitoes, sand flies in the roughest of living conditions. It was said that in one camp not far from Fort Nelson about 100 men lived for over a week on only fish as supplies were unable to get to them – and were well aware of the reason they were there.

On arriving in Dawson Creek we were directed to a piece of ground that had been a field. There we started to set up camp, build bunk houses, garage, office and everything else so urgently needed, as Dawson Creek at that time was an agricultural community of about 600 people at the end of the steel, and suddenly in 1942 it mushroomed to 5000. Construction workers and army arrived, as we did with nowhere to eat or sleep. I well remember the two cafes with the block-long lineups. Needless to say we set up our own eating-place as soon as possible. Water was a big problem too with only private wells in the old part of town. For the first month or two there was a man with a team of horses and a tank that went from house to house filling water pails. With all those people, as soon as anyone saw him they would come running with a pail of their own, so he was not able to cover the town let alone half of the newcomers. As soon as Wally, our boss, could get straightened around a bit he bought the guy out and put trucks on. The water had to be hauled about 1 ½ miles from a shallow well near a spring but a pipeline was completed as soon as possible. However, it wasn't in operation until late in the winter.

Some of the bosses were characters. The most outstanding one was Wally Newman. Wally was a workaholic who had the gift of pushing his men, his trucks, his luck, and everything he had anything to do with to the very limit, but not over. Night or day was no different to Wally. I remember one cold morning; Wally came in to the bunkhouse in the early hours and woke us with a yell. One of the guys yelled back, "Light the fire." So he did just that, with a tin of gas, blowing the lid off the airtight heater and sending flames halfway to the roof – very effective for getting men out of bed quickly. On another occasion, we had built a shack that was to become a halfway house up the road. After loading it on a truck, we started out to take it up. Having been working day and night, Ray Snyder went to sleep in the shack while it was being moved, with Wally driving and I as a sleepy passenger. We came to the old Cut Bank River bridge that was an overhead steel structure. Wally, coming down the hill much too fast as always, took a look at the bridge and said, "We can't get through that!" so immediately cut down through the shallow river that was about 50 feet wide. The cats and heavy machinery had been going there. We almost made it, but Ray gave Wally heck for not stopping in a more level place as he had been thrown out of bed.

And then there was 45-year old Lee McMillan. Lee was a driver that knew no end to any day or trip because one trip finished and another one started almost sooner than the first finished. A tremendous driver, I saw him pull feats on icy hills that most would call lucky but I am confident that given the same circumstances he would pull the same tricks again and again. His trucks always seemed to run for him, seldom had trouble that he could not fix with some tape, rope or wire. All the fellows had something special about them and practically all were good in the first group of men that went up there but, as with any boom situation, their types gradually gave way to more questionable characters.

I should explain my statement "icy hills". Practically the whole road was packed snow. In severely cold weather traction was fairly good but it would warm up almost over night to above freezing in the mountains. The road would become very treacherous as most of the road from Fort Nelson to Liard River was rugged mountains, a distance of about 200 miles, and some of the

steeper grades were up to 24% on the switchbacks. I have seen tools, chains, men and even trucks sliding down faster than a man could run. We all had to carry and use tire chains often. The road from Fort St. John to Fort Nelson was in the foothills most of the way and they were almost worse than the mountains as the ups and downs would be much longer. As I said before, we were subcontracting to move material up the tote road – that meant everything – machinery, prefab camp buildings, groceries, gas and diesel fuel to build the present road. Us with the tanks unloaded in barrels. I was lucky to be driving a tank truck. I hauled 100 gallons. At least my load was the same all the time; some of the others were not so lucky and had loads of all shapes. About six tons was the maximum we were able to haul because we would just power out on some of the steep hills or could not hold them going down. The U.S. army had all six-wheel drive new trucks; ours were the run-of-the-mill trucks of the day, two and three ton Fords, Chevs, Dodges, Internationals and other 1939 and 1940 models as it was war time and new ones were impossible to get for civilians, as were many parts, tires, antifreeze, etc.

My first trip was with Archie McMillan and Ray Snyder. We were all billed to the Sikanni Chief River camp. It took us a week to get there, only one hundred miles or so, but mud rivers and creeks made it almost impossible. The Peace River hill was our first real encounter with hills, although the Cut Bank River had a fair little hill but the Peace was a long one going down, some places quite steep, especially with our 6-ton loads on the hydraulic brakes of the day and the Chevs and Internationals with the valve in head motors that would not stand too much back pressure or they would break valve stems. The Fords and Dodges were much better in that respect, but did not have as much power for up hills, so the make was a topic of argument as it still is today. We were ferried across the Peace, but there were some temporary bridges in on other rivers. We never really got by the Sikanni Chief River until freeze up. Before Christmas some trucks got as far as Muncho Lake, a distance of around 300 miles from the Sikanni Chief River, but any of our trucks only got to Fort Nelson, approximately 200 miles from the Sikanni, because the barrel trucks needed to be first.

After the New Year we started to move farther and farther up the road, but it was about mid February before I got through to Whitehorse. I well remember pulling into Whitehorse on my first trip there at 62 degrees below. We were really unable to dress properly for those extreme temperatures because we had to be free to move quickly at all times. It was common practice for us to carry at least four tin cans – tomato cans or such like – to put fuel oil or gas in to be put under the rear end and transmission every time we stopped as the heavy grease that we needed to use for that type of extreme work would freeze solid if let to cool off – a practice the insurance companies of today would frown on I am sure – however I saw relatively few fires caused from this practice. Motors were left running at all times, even in warmer weather as we never knew when the temperature would drop, and we had only our trucks to sleep in. Army camps seldom had room for us transients and, of course, many of the construction camps did not either, until they became better established, so our trucks were our home away from Dawson Creek. After freeze up it became much easier to travel – the shaky temporary bridges were frozen and not as wobbly, the mud holes frozen solid. But with the cold weather came frozen gas lines, as the gas was not treated in those days. We had to use wood alcohol to keep the gas lines clear. A stopped motor was a serious matter in subzero temperatures. At first alcohol was hard to get so we used about one-quarter cup at a time only when needed. Also, generator problems were serious as we needed lights on nearly all the time and depended on electric defrosters and heaters, of course we nearly all carried a spare. Speaking of tires, we would carry at least two spares as in those days there were many different types of truck wheels. Today they are nearly all standard; if they had been at that time we could have borrowed back and forth as we always traveled at least two trucks together but not more than four as there was too much time lost with

a large convoy. Being war time antifreeze was another problem and was only available for civilian use in very limited amounts so we had to make do with alcohol based antifreeze but that was very unsatisfactory as going down hill for long distances at a time our motors would cool right down until the alcohol would thicken then would not circulate when the up hill came. Another thing was rear axles. They would frequently break and leave you stranded, so again we carried a spare or at least I did. These were some of the minor problems. I have seen major repairs on motors, transmissions and rear ends being made right on the side of the road in very severe weather. We would put a tarp around the vehicle – if we had one – and use our heat pots – cans of either gas or fuel oil – the old standby when a truck broke down. It was impossible to tow the truck anywhere as the hills were much too steep either up or down; and there of course were no garages along the tote road as there are today.

Our equipment was a far cry from the vehicles of today with fuel injection diesel motors, alternators, much-improved thermostats, Jake and air brakes, thirteen and fifteen speed transmissions very different from the four and five speed we had then. Many of the hills would have taxed today's equipment. A driver had to learn and use every trick in the book and even more as the conditions changed so much from mud and shaky bridges to sheer ice and icy hills, to water holes as springs kept running in winter, causing pools of open water.

To look at them one could not judge how deep they were so you had to be very careful and not hit them too fast, that was a real handicap, as of course, they were always at the bottom of a hill when you had to start climbing again. On the present road these short little downs and ups have been eliminated, as they were often very steep.

I guess something should be said about the tote road as it compares to the road today or even as the road was at the end of 1943 and 1944. Much has been done in those years after the camps and fuel storage and more surveying. In 1942 a lot of the tote road was one way as were the temporary bridges involving much stopping and waiting, but a loaded truck always had the right of way as did a truck backing down a hill – an unwritten rule of the road. A trucker backing down a steep icy hill had no choice because when you spun out going up the only recourse was to get into reverse immediately and start backing as slowly as possible, you may have to speed up a little at a time to keep all wheels turning which was a must.

In 1942 the surveyors were only a short distance ahead of the army bulldozers, and many places were changed as soon as breakup in 1943 came. In the winter it gave the surveyor a chance to back track and cut out places, like they did on Suicide Hill as it was named. It was a hill of about one mile down and very crooked, which started down gently and became progressively steeper with a sharp turn at the bottom onto a narrow bridge. Many a brake got hot on that one, some too hot to be of any use. The secret there was to start down very slow as is with any long hill when you are going down. It is always easy to go faster if you want to, but not always easy to slow down if you find yourself going too fast. There were many bad places bypassed or fixed in early 1943 and, of course, they were building bridges and culverts all winter so many of those treacherous places of 1942 were not as bad or were eliminated when spring came. Of course they have been improving the road ever since with great improvements being made the last few years.

There was the Peace River bottleneck in the spring of 1943, which I will never forget or understand. We were being ferried across after the ice went out, as the ½ mile long crooked and wobbly temporary bridge of the fall and winter had washed out. The ferry was a small barge type pushed by a paddle wheel, riverboat style that took about an hour to make a trip. It held six

trucks at most. The ferry would go upstream about ¼ mile in close to shore then cut out into the current then drift down current with full power, cutting across all the time, then came back up current along the other bank. They were working day and night on the bridge. And at the same time had been working day and night on a huge ferry that held about 25 trucks at one time and was guided on cables anchored to the foundation of the new bridge and was powered by the current – an ideal set up. Before that was ready to use, in order to get fuel up the road to keep things going a pipeline was run across, temporarily hung on the not yet completed bridge, and pumped gas into a small tank on the other side that we loaded out of for about three weeks. Then the big barge or ferry was ready to use. It relieved the bottleneck immediately and the pipeline was discontinued. The big ferry ran for about one week. I made one trip across on it, then the bridge was ready for use. I will never understand the expense or the rush to get the big ferry going, as the pipeline was a big help to keep the gas moving. As I said before the American army engineers were the first work crew in, and were cooperative with the Canadian civilian trucks and would help us any way they could. There was no one allowed past the first checkpoint – that was manned by the military police that did not have a badge or a purpose for being there. At first the American and Canadian civilians who set up the construction camps and manned the trucks and machines were the adventurous, hard working type who could see a few dollars and at the same time helping the war effort. Most were in the 35 to 50 year old age range, as most our of young people were overseas at the time – I was 23 years old at the time and had received a medical discharge from the air force – in general they were a good hardworking lot that had just come through the depression of the 1930's and knew how to work. Contractors were getting 25 cents a ton-mile and I, as a driver, was getting \$30 a week and paid my own meals – better than the \$10 per week that I had been getting in Saskatchewan. As time went on the drifters started slowly moving in, and in mid winter the army moved the engineers out and replaced them with what they called the Quarter Master Corp. that was made up of white army unit numbering 2000 or more – the truck drivers, cat skimmers, etc. that were fresh out of Washington military school or whatever where they were taught I don't know what. I am sure the books they had read did not say anything of the experience that the American army engineers had gone through. The engineers were a fine group of guys and willing to help us in any way they could but when they were moved out things rapidly became worse as far as help from the army, but by that time temporary civilian camps were getting set up more all the time – both Canadian and American – and help from those camps was available (but as you can imagine, the ability to help was limited).

As time went on the long distance trucks (the ones out of Dawson Creek) started to make it tougher for themselves; some would stop for help and some small repair or bed for the night and in the morning would leave with all the repairs they could carry, bed and all. Finally whiskey became the only medium of exchange at most Canadian and American civilian camps as well as all army camps. A bottle with the seal intact, no matter what size, was worth a new motor or whatever you needed from the army. The waste was unbelievable. By spring there was hardly a steep hill that did not have lumber, barrels of gas, cement, or any type of material used, scattered at the bottom. Broken down army trucks littered the bottom of the hills and ditches or even over banks. The cost to the American government was far above the wildest dream. The army had ten-ten wreckers as they called them, they were really glorified tow trucks, but the only vehicle capable of towing broken down and wrecked vehicles and they could not keep up to the demand. About that time, if our trucks broke down we did not dare leave them alone on the side of the road as they would be stripped of any movable parts as people were desperate to keep moving any way at all – another reason to travel two or more trucks together.

It became apparent in early winter that check stations were needed as it was possible for trucks and driver to just vanish, as did one truck and driver in one of our neighboring outfits. In mid December he left on a trip and was not heard from. A month-long search found the truck straight down a 100-foot embankment and the frozen driver about 50 feet from the road. Needless to say we all welcomed the checkpoints that were set up about every 50 miles. They were operated by the military police so if a truck did get into trouble the whereabouts could be quickly traced. They also tried to control other illegal activities such as whiskey, theft and any sort of wrongdoing. The army camps in most cases were about 50 miles apart. They used them as relay points for their drivers from Fort Nelson to Liard River (about 200 miles) through some of the most mountainous area. They had sent in about 400 black army personnel to man the camps and drive their trucks – I felt sorry for those guys, most right out of the southern cities and states – being sent up to that sub-zero wilderness to live in tents as were most of the army camps with no exception in that rough area – survival became their only aim. It was always good for an evening’s entertainment to stop at one of their camps for a while, as there would always be a crap game going on – could those fellows ever talk to those dice. I only saw a pair of threes take \$3,000 off the blanket. It sure looked big to me, as I said before I was working hard for \$30 a week. On one occasion I hitched a ride a few miles back along the road for a repair. I knew better but was desperate. On the way going down a very steep hill and onto a narrow crooked bridge at a nearly uncontrollable speed, sensing I was frightened the driver said, “don’t worry, boss, Uncle Sam has lots more trucks and lots more nigga’ boys to drive ‘em.” I don’t remember my answer, if any but that was typical of the whole attitude among the army after they had moved the engineers out. On one occasion I pulled up behind a civilian truck that had an army truck facing me. The army guy came back asking if I had a pail. No I did not, so he yelled back, “Okay, let her go boss.” I did not know what was going on at that time, but soon found out the Canadian had a bottle of whiskey and only water in his radiator so a trade was being made for which two pails were needed. They had one but let the water go. The last time I saw them, the army guy was on his way tipping up his bottle knowing full well he had just drained the radiator. On the return trip a few miles from the spot was the army truck in the ditch (the motor seized up, no doubt). There were lots of similar instances of waste.

In about mid February of 1943 Dawson Creek was rocked with a tremendous explosion. There was an old barn that had been hastily transformed to a garage to repair trucks in and it caught fire. While it was burning a large crowd had gathered to help the fire fighters and were in close to see as much as possible. It was not generally known that a large amount of dynamite was stored in the loft. When it blew there were about 200 people injured and a number of fatalities. The fire leveled a complete square block in the town, a number of businesses as well as some homes. The American army helped in every way they could by transforming cargo planes into air ambulances to Edmonton or any available hospital and any medical staff available. It was a terrible setback for the busy community. I was up the road at the time. When I got back off that trip, about six inches of snow had fallen on the embers and people were giving it little talk as it was wartime and there was a road to build.

When spring break up came all trucking was stopped for about six weeks from mid April to the end of May. I came back to Saskatchewan as all temporary bridges were washed out and had to be replaced with whatever would allow us to cross – pontoons or even fords or ferries. There were a few permanent bridges built by then. The trucking was very slow from then on as washouts and slides of permafrost giving out and just plain mud became very common so very little money was made in the early part of the summer. As time went on it became much better as more of the road was becoming graded and graveled and the whole road was alive with construction. In dry weather it became nearly impassable because of dust that hung for miles

between the trees. Night was the best time to travel as lights of oncoming trucks would show around the numerous blind corners and seemed to show through the dust a little better. Maybe the reason night driving was best was because the air would be heavier and the dust would settle quicker. But the farther up the road you got the more natural obstacles there were, like washouts and slides and in late June and July the numerous bogs showed up in places where the army engineers had got through with the machines on just plain permafrost, but when it was disturbed it would melt down leaving a trough of mud. Long stretches were corduroyed but the trucks would have to be pulled through by large cats operated by the army personnel and some of those operators were not too sympathetic with the Canadian civilian. Four feet of slack in the tow chain or cable meant nothing to them. To protect ourselves and our trucks, we put about 15 feet of heavy cable running back on each side of the frame of the truck fastened securely just in front of the rear springs and coming to one common heavy ring that was carried, when not in use as a tow hook on the front bumper. On one occasion I was pulled through a swollen creek or drain wash with the motor shut off and the water right up in the floor of the cab.

Steamboat Mountain was one to be reckoned with any time of year. At that time it was really steep in places. It is still a long hill but some of the steeper inclines have been taken out. I remember coming to the bottom, on the way up hitting it as fast as possible. In a little more than one hundred yards I would have been through all gears and in the bottom gear. There I stayed for about three miles by working hard it was possible to shift up to second gear but only for a short way so would pick a satisfactory motor speed and sit back and relax for that stretch. Going down was a different matter. It was very steep and crooked, being so long we had to use the utmost caution, if you did not want to join the wrecks scattered along the last mile or so, before you started up again.

Farther on was Muncho Lake (a beautiful sight) on the tote road. Around the lake it was very narrow, with having been blasted and pushed into the bottomless lake. When spring of '43 came there were crews blasting the mountain back, widening the road to what it is today. The road would be closed for a day or so at a time, when there had been a blast and we would have to go up over the peaks, as it was called. That was a trail that followed the packhorse trail of the gold rush in 1898. It was passable only with the help of a bulldozer. I only had to make that trip once both ways. I was glad of the experience, as some of our boys had made it and were telling stories that I found hard to believe. Summit Lake was a beautiful spot but as cold as Muncho Lake. Before getting to the Liard River from Summit Lake, a distance of about 75 miles, there were some very sharp hills that were taken out for the most part in '43. During the winter a civilian construction camp had been set up on the shore of the Liard River. They were working on the permanent bridge – I think the one that is there today. They ferried us across the river. I remember the ramp as being very steep. In June of '43 I became sick and one of the men, while waiting for the ferry, persuaded me to go see the doctor as they had set up a kind of makeshift hospital – one of two that I knew of along the road, the other being at Mile 8, as it was called then, just above Musqua River, not far out of Fort Nelson. However, when the doctor saw me he promptly got me off the road and into the isolation ward, a tent out behind the hospital, a prefab building having about ten beds – side by side. I had the mumps and he sure did not want anything like that making its rounds up there where time and progress were of all importance. I was there almost two weeks disappointed because it happened before I had got across the river and the chance to get into the famous Liard Hot springs which are very popular today.

I first saw those springs in mid January 1943, just a path in the snow where the boardwalk is today. At that time there were the remains of a trappers cabin among that tropical growth – an ideal spot for that frigid country.

The road was a bit better that winter past Liard. The Coal River hill gave us a little problem at times, but from there to Watson Lake the country leveled out a bit. Watson Lake was a large army camp, an important supply point because the airport there was very active and at that time Watson Lake was about five hundred and fifty miles from Fort St. John and the first crossroad we came to in all that way. There was a sign there saying Lower Post 20 miles, the arrow pointing south and on the same post pointing north said Watson Lake airport 8 miles north. That was almost the first sign in that distance too. That is where the famous Watson Lake signs of today got started. We only stopped at the central station, as our loads were mostly heavy freight that went to the various camps. Some freight did come down from Whitehorse – about four hundred miles farther on – which had come in on the narrow gauge railway from Skagway. It also went the other way, that is north from Whitehorse. That narrow gauge railway was something else – being built on trestles and on mountainsides a good bit of the way – we heard a lot about it, as a lot of army personnel had come in that way. I was not to know until some years later. We went up there as tourists in 1974 and went to Skagway from Whitehorse on the railroad, the only way at that time. Dizzy heights and steep grades let us know first hand what the people of the gold rush had to contend with before the rail was put in. That was as spectacular as the Alaska Highway itself. We did not get above Whitehorse very often, at least I did not, only one trip to near Burwash Landing. The road was very narrow around Kluane Lake as was Muncho Lake at the time, but very beautiful. There was just as big a push from Anchorage and Fairbanks down to meet the crews that we were trying to supply. There were a lot of army trucks that were running right through, at least they were supposed to, some of them did not make it, as we could see late in the summer of '43 when the army had started to haul with their big wreckers that I mentioned before, all the wrecks and broken down trucks and equipment of all kinds into the central dump as they were called. The equipment consisted of trucks of all kinds, large and small, and road machinery such as cats and road graders, and anything that was used up there by the army, nothing was worth hauling out of there as a lot of it was special equipment, made for the job or it had become obsolete; that part of it I could understand but not the careless abuse before the machine had done its work. These dumps I heard later were buried for the most part. Years later when we were up there as tourists, the first time I had been back since 1943, there was quite a big change mostly in services such as service stations, motels, etc., that were non-existent at the time the highway was being built. We visited a dump that had not been buried. It covered about 25 acres and had been stripped of anything saleable such as batteries, radiators, all brass, chrome – although there was little of that – copper and such like. It was, I think, at the top of the hill at Johnson's Crossing.

I must mention because you by now will be wondering what we ate and when we washed or bathed or did laundry. Some of the drivers' wives started a small restaurant in a shack that became available or was built for the purpose when we were in Dawson Creek. It held about ten people when full – and it was most of the time – with stools running around a horseshoe counter. It was very good and well run – a kind of home for us poor bachelors while we were in Dawson Creek, which was not much of the time. The restaurant didn't get started until about Christmas time. Before that it was the lineups at the Chinaman's uptown although I became very good at wrangling invites. Up the road it was army camps at first that fed us camp type, but as the civilian construction camps gradually became established they were much better but we had to be there at meal time at least at most of them. There the food was the best you could wish for – the old lumber camp style. We could purchase meal tickets at our office for 50 cents each that were acceptable at any of the civilian camps, and the army were obliged to feed us at their camps at any time we arrived – hungry that is – we often ate at the camps and were glad we did not have to stay for another meal when cooking or catering outside in sub-zero weather left a lot to

be desired. On one occasion when myself and another driver were on the end of the line and very cold, we had to pull the frozen pancakes out of the way to get to cold ones and then break the ice on the syrup container. We were only too happy to get anything to eat but really glad we did not have to live and work under army conditions although our lot was as bad. Lots of times we did not get anywhere for meals. This was more in the early part of the year. Taking lunches with us was out of the question for those of us living in the Dawson Creek cafes until some of the wives arrived but even then it was difficult as we were on the road most of the time. As the winter went on I remember at Prophet River, I think it was, there were two elderly trappers that had been in there for years getting their supplies in by packhorse when the road went right by their log shack. The shack had walls about three feet high, and dug into the ground about three feet making it about six feet high. It was as snug as could be. Lum and Abner, they called themselves, and they were in their late sixties or early seventies. Anyway they were just so happy to see people; they started serving pancakes any time of the day and a lot of the night. Their menu hung above the stove and it read blueberry pancakes, raspberry pancakes, etc., about six different kinds and all came out of the same bowl of batter, but they were happy and we were happy to be there. Their table was in the middle of the shack and would seat about eight men maximum. We all sat on blocks of wood, as that was the only type of chair in the place (a far cry from the licensed dining rooms of today). I always looked forward to getting to their place. Of course Fort St. John had a fairly good restaurant, as it was off the road about one mile. It was not busy and was well run so that was always a stop going and coming. Then there was the fellow who would not tell us his name, he was friendly and hospitable but was running from U.S. law or I should say had run from the U.S. law. He had been in there 24 years and built up a nice set of log buildings on the banks of Teslin Lake – a beautiful spot. He had taken a native girl for a wife. They had as nice a family as you would want to find anywhere, all had been sent out to school at Whitehorse and Edmonton. The whole place was neat and trim and a lovely meal was set before us. They did not ask if we were hungry – that was taken for granted in that country. There were only three of us. It had not become a roadhouse, as it was a walk of nearly a mile off the road. I had been told about the place and how he liked company. There were other interesting things about that place. As we were walking in there single file along a narrow path we could see small huts on each side. It was bright moonlight and suddenly six big huskies were at the end of their chains to meet us. They could not quite reach the path or each other. Needless to say we walked the straight and narrow. The noise of the dogs aroused the master who came to the door and with one loud word all was quiet. We introduced ourselves and were invited in for the most interesting evening. Later that evening the dogs started barking excitedly again so he went to the door but immediately turned to us and invited all to come out. On the other side of the lake a distance of a little over $\frac{1}{4}$ mile, we saw that moonlight night six big timber wolves chase a moose out of the bush and get him right on the lake. Our host just left him there for the wolves. He said it likely had been chased so long the meat would be no good anyway. I imagined he had lots of meat dressed the proper way.

One thousand miles, or two weeks at least, from Fort St. John was Whitehorse. By the time we were able to get there it had several good restaurants and a hotel for a good night's sleep and a bath and a new set of clothes or underclothes at least. New clothes were also bought at the other end too, as there was no place to do laundry or get it done quickly as that was before clothes dryers.

Speaking of baths, near the end of July, an enterprising guy in Dawson Creek built a shack with a pile of stones in it under which he built a fire. For a fee you got a towel and into the shack where you sat on three benches placed at various heights. There was a dipper and a pail of cold water that you used to throw water on the hot stones. Depending on the amount of water you used,

either the steam chased you to the top or bottom bench – a crude sauna but it worked. I sure felt like a rag when I came out of there – only tried that once. About that time there were people in Dawson Creek who started taking in washing as water became plentiful. Most of us gathered up all the wash and underclothes that had not been washed the previous year. I did not have to buy any work socks, shirts or underwear for many years after.

About the end of August 1943, I felt the need for a change so thought I would go back to Naicam and help with the harvest as we still had the farm there – rented out of course. I got the chance of a ride back to Saskatchewan and when I left Dawson Creek I had the full intention of going back when the dust settled in the fall, but never did until 31 years later. I could not believe the changes that had taken place in these years, but also surprising how little some of the places I remembered most had not changed little since I first saw them 46 years ago. Many miles have been cut off the tote road of 1942. I believe it was about 18—miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Fairbanks, Alaska then. Now I don't think it is more than 1800 kilometers.



ACCIDENT DURING CONSTRUCTION - 1942

Photo taken by Doug Storing

THE NORTH BECKONED

By Donna Clayson

We were living in Dawson Creek, B.C. when my dad, Doug Storing, had the urge to go back north. Dad first saw the north as a 19-year-old teenager in 1942 when he was hired by Okes Construction in Dawson Creek to help on the construction of the Alaska Highway. After the war, dad returned to Dawson but after being in the north it was all he spoke of and he had to

return. In 1961 Dad leased a garage from Jack and Jean Courtney in Haines Junction. He was responsible for vehicle repair and gas pumps. The garage even had a small take-out; hamburgers, the best ice cream cones in the region and great french fries.

Dad left on his own while mom cleaned up the loose ends. I had to finish a difficult year of grade 6 while mom packed up. In the second week of July, 1961 we climbed aboard a Greyhound bus destined for the Yukon. As the miles passed by I began missing my friends and familiar surroundings. The trees passing by made me drowsy so I laid my head on moms lap. I was dreaming of running through the wheat fields on grandpa's farm in Drayton Valley, Alberta. The wind was blowing my long blond hair and I was laughing at the antics of Buck, my black Labrador retriever. We were so happy and carefree. It was 1,016 miles to our destination and the Alaska Highway was long, dusty and boring. As I became more aware of my surroundings I realized something was wrong. My chest hurt, it was hard to breathe and my nose was burning. Suddenly, I was fully awake, sorry my dream ended. My mother, Al and I were riding on a bumpy Greyhound bus on a dusty dirt road to a place I'd never heard of or cared to. A place called Haines Junction, Yukon (Mile 1016, one thousand sixteen miles from Dawson Creek). Over a thousand miles away from home, my friends, everything that was familiar. Traveling to a place that was cold (mom said) in the winter and always chilly or raining in the summer. Nobody told us about the forest fires. I looked out the window. All I could see was smoke and fire along both sides of the highway. My God! Why were my parents dragging me to this God-forsaken country?! Dad was waiting for us at the Junction. He'd already been there for 3 months setting up the business. A garage he would run and the coffee shop mom would run. I wanted to go home. All I wanted was to run home!

There were 3 days to remember how life was like – a life I would never experience again. On to a new set of rules. A place where “Only The Strong Survive”. Would I make it? I didn't know. I was too busy trying to breathe and hold the wet cloth to my mouth that the bus driver gave to each of us at the last rest stop. I closed my eyes – wanting to go back to my dream, of Buck, Grandpa, wheat fields and the farm

And I dreamed

The second day the smoke cleared and I was beginning to enjoy the scenery. The bus driver was announcing that we would be stopping soon for a meal. I felt dirty and my clothes smelled like smoke. I got my shoes on and mom brushed my hair that was wet from perspiration and helped get me presentable. I couldn't believe how hot it was. Mom told me that the north was cold, even in summer but the further north we went the hotter it seemed to get. Mom was always fussing over me and it felt good. I'm glad I didn't know at the time that all that was to end in the near future or I would have felt worse that I already did.

As we got closer to Watson Lake, Yukon (Mile 635) I noticed the trees were very spindly. The community was so tiny, probably 200 residents. I wouldn't have believed that a place where people lived could be so small. Guess what? The place we were going to live had a grand population of 50!

We stopped at Watson Lake for lunch. The café was a cabin with bear hides on the wall and moose head trophies throughout. The locals were very friendly and there were a few natives passed out beside the main door. I ordered a hamburger and fries. Mom ordered a sandwich, coffee and a pack of cigarettes. When the hamburger came I couldn't believe my eyes. It was huge! I even got a triple portion of fries. I wondered if all Yukoners ate this much.

We were in Watson Lake for an hour and back on the bus. After eating so much I was really tired. Mom lit a cigarette and settled back in the seat. As we rode along, I gagged on the cigarette smoke. I looked outside and couldn't believe how tall and skinny the spruce trees were. The Alaska Highway was still very dusty. The road never seemed to end. The countryside was beautiful and so different from the prairies. The colours in the sky, the trees, the lakes, everywhere always seemed to be changing. The air was alive, seeming to "talk". It was easier to breathe and from Watson Lake to Whitehorse I kept the window open as far as it would go and held my mouth as close to the outside as I could get. The dust seemed to "push away" from the bus scooping in fresh air from the countryside. The fresh air and the movement of the bus lulled me to sleep.

Mom woke me up when we reached Jakes Corner. The bus stopped and picked up a fresh driver. Jakes Corner was a weird place. It was more a feeling of weirdness than anything tangible. The entire time I was in the Yukon I never could pinpoint the reason. Jake ran the café and gas bar. He had built a large swimming pool inside the café

We pulled into Whitehorse (Mile 918) around suppertime. The streets were very dirty and everything had a layer of dust on it. The only impressive thing about Whitehorse was the surrounding mountains. The bus station didn't look like it had ever seen a broom or mop. One look at the washroom made me change my mind about using it. I started to cry thinking this was our final stop. How could anyone live in this dirty, filthy place!? I was used to clean surroundings, as mom was a clean-freak. I was tired of traveling but another 1000 miles would have been welcome just to get out of this place! I was elated (mild word) when mom said, "no, another 98 miles to go". A 2-hour stop was enough for me. We walked to the Edgewater Hotel and ate supper. Again, the portion was enormous and mom ordered a kids' portion. I didn't see anyone overweight so how did Yukoners do it? If I continued to eat in Yukon cafes I would be huge.

We were on our way to Haines Junction – population 50 in the winter and triple that in summer. As we approached the last several miles I was looking forward to seeing my dad. As the bus began the curve to the left the magnificent St. Elias range came into view. Here it was mid July and there was snow on the mountains. I was awestruck! Nothing was as beautiful or intimidating as those mountains. I felt light-headed, carefree, stress-free, everything combined. Forty years later that same feeling would come over me every time I saw those mountains come into view.

The bus pulled into Bakke's Lodge. We finally made it – 3 days after leaving Dawson Creek. Dad was there, looking refreshed and younger than I had remembered. Obviously the mountain air was doing him some good. As I remember, our first meal was moose roast, mashed potatoes and homemade buns. As I ate I couldn't help staring at the St. Elias range ever looming outside the window.

We weren't there long before dad announced that he was leasing the garage across the Alaska Highway from Bakke's. It had a repair shop, pumps and small concession. Mom would be the cook – make hamburgers, serve ice cream and prepare the fries. There was a small table if you wanted to eat inside but mostly it was take-out. I would 'man' the pumps and dad would do the repairs in the small shop.

Life was good. I didn't realize until the first day of school that I hadn't thought about the friends I'd left behind in Dawson Creek. The moment I saw the mountains all thoughts of life anywhere else vanished.

I was busy pumping gas. There were all types of vehicles but found the semi trucks were the most challenging. At eleven years of age I was small but agile and I had to climb on top of the hood to wash the windshield and maneuver the hose to the diesel tank on the trucks. I must have been slow and I'm sure the truck drivers going to Alaska were in a hurry. To take their mind off the clock I would encourage them to go in and have a hamburger – "The best hamburger in the Yukon!" They would and by the time it was ordered, cooked and eaten I was done. Of course, there were cars to do at the gas pumps. I was busy but sure enjoyed myself. By the end of the fall season I could tell you what province or state every vehicle was from before they pulled up to the pumps by the color of their license plates.

Mom was enjoying cooking and visiting with the tourists. What was most fun for her was prettying up the place. Curtains, souvenirs and rugs on the floor. Everything was shiny and spotless. Outside I smelled of gas and dad was covered in grease and grime. We were happy, each content doing our own job.

One day I had some free time. The trees had turned magnificent colors; the mountains had some fresh snow on the tops and there was a definite chill in the air. I happened to pass by a 45-gallon drum we used for garbage. Lying on top was a bomber jacket – brown in color. I tried it on and liked it, I felt it fit perfectly – mom said it was way too big. She was just jealous, I reasoned. In the pocket was a watch and in the other pocket was a \$5.00 bill. I wore that jacket the rest of the winter and spring.

Dad had a moose hide jacket made for me by Roselee Washington. It had beautiful beadwork on it – flowers on the shoulders and a moose head on the back. When springtime came I retired the bomber jacket and wore this new one. I was very proud of it and felt like I truly belonged to that great north country. I wore that jacket out and when it was finally in tatters I had Roselee take the beadwork off and transfer the patches onto a new pair of mukluks.

The winter went by so quickly. There were days that a Chinook would come in and the temperature would rise from -30°F to +50°F within 24 hours. Imagine, one day you're wearing a heavy parka and scarf and within 24 hours you're in a t-shirt and cut-offs! So many days during the winter months the sky was so clear and blue. The snow had a blue tinge to it. It was easy to take excellent pictures in this type of atmosphere.

In the spring dad introduced me to hunting big game and jack rabbits. I had been shooting since I was five years old but had never hunted moose or jack rabbit. Yukon moose are very large and intimidating and jack rabbits are four times the size of your domestic rabbit. Every Sunday dad would close the garage early and we would go hunting. Our diet consisted mainly of moose, bear and rabbit. Domestic meat was very difficult to get and wild meat was abundant. Donna Madsen and I would hunt rabbits whenever we could (Donna was 5 years old and my regular hunting partner). We didn't have to go far to get wild game. Sometimes all I had to do was open the back door, aim and fire. Dad used to say, "Make sure you kill the rabbit, first shot. If you wound a rabbit they will cry like a baby and you will never be able to shoot one again." It did happen just before we moved away from the Junction and it's true – they do cry like a baby. I never could bring myself to shoot another one.

My year and a half in Haines Junction taught me to respect nature, wildlife and to instill a sense of pride in who I was. I grew from being a kid to a respected person in my own right. I never again thought about Dawson Creek and remained content pursuing new dreams in the Land of the Midnight Sun. My years in the north turned into a love affair that has never wavered and remains strong to this day. I thank all the northerners that made this trip so enjoyable and rewarding for me and someday I WILL go home.



HUNTING IN HAINES JUNCTION, AUGUST 1962

Donna Madsen (5 years old)

Donna Clayson (12 years old)