

# Tale of a Crooked Road

## The Alaska Highway from early promotion to the opening to the public.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this exhibit is to tell the story of the Alaska Highway. From early plans and promotion efforts. The wartime decision to build the highway. The highway's use as a military highway. And opening the highway to the public after World War II.

**Scope:** The time scope of this exhibit is the years 1932 to 1948. The physical scope of this exhibit is the Territory of Alaska and Western Canada north and west of Edmonton, Alberta. This exhibit will show the promotion, building, military use, and eventual opening to the public of the highway using labels, covers, postcards, documents and other material.

**Historical Perspective:** The Alaska or "Alcan" Highway was a pre-war dream that became a wartime necessity. The idea of a highway had in planned and promoted since the time of the Klondike gold rush. During the 1930's there were several efforts to promote the idea of a highway. These included a dog sled trip and a motorcycle trip over the proposed route.

The prospect of war in the Pacific made the highway a priority. The U.S. and Canadian governments had begun discussions even before the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the attack and the declaration of war the project became a priority. Construction was ordered in February 1942.

Seven U.S. Army engineer regiments were sent north to build the pioneer road. They began to arrive in March 1942 and immediately began building. Units started construction from the railheads at Dawson Creek, BC, and Whitehorse, YT and the end of the existing road at Slana, AK. At the same time the U.S. Public Roads Administration made plans to follow the army engineers turning the pioneer road into a permanent highway.

The initial pioneer road was completed in November 1942 and the permanent road was completed in late 1943. The highway was used to transport supplies to Alaska and to the airfields of the Northwest Staging Route.

And yes, the road was very crooked.

**Exhibit Information:** Exhibit text is presented as shown below:

- Item information is in black.

- *Historical information is in Italics and bordered in green.*

- Postcard captions are boxed and in Blue.

### Exhibit Plan

- I. Before the Highway
- II. Building the Highway
- III. Using the Highway
- IV. Highway Opened to the Public
- V. Epilogue

# Tale of a Crooked Road:

## The Alaska Highway from early promotion to the opening to the public

Synopsis of Exhibit  
Written February 16, 2025

### Background

This exhibit tells the story of the building of the Alaska Highway. It covers the 1930's promotion of a highway, The building of the highway by military and civilian personnel, the use of the highway by the military, and the post-war opening of the Alaska Highway to civilian use.

The time period of the events and the material is 1932 to 1948.

### The Challenge Factor

The Challenge of collecting this area is similar to collecting any war zone. The chaos of the times, secrecy and just plain odd events of wartime make collecting a war subject difficult.

One challenge I have documented is the challenge of builders and highway promoters to promote the high while maintaining military security. As an example of the conflict between the two, when the highway was dedicated, news organizations could say where the dedication was, when it happened but could not report on the temperature.

### Exhibit

This exhibit tells the story of the Alaska Highway. It will touch on the earliest ideas for a highway. In the 1930's there were several promotional efforts by several groups. The highway was even promoted as part of the early ideas for what would eventually become the Pan-American highway.

The outbreak of the Second World War and the threat to the west coast and Alaska gave yet

another reason for the highway. So, a deal was struck between the United States and Canada, and construction began.

After the initial construction was completed, the highway was operated as a military highway with no civilian traffic allowed. With the end of the war, the highway was opened to civilian traffic.

The exhibit includes covers, picture postcards, labels, documents and other material. All of this material helps tell the story.

### Exhibit items of note

Covers from the seven army regiments that built the first pioneer road, including the three very rare colored regiments.

Covers from the Public Roads Administration. The US government organization that managed the improvement of the original pioneer road.

An American Automobile Association (AAA) wartime map of the Alaska Military Highway. Yes, an auto club produced a map for a highway that its members could not drive on.

Postcards and covers that document the two trips over the proposed highway by Clyde "Slim" Williams. One by dog team in 1932 and one by motorcycle in 1939.

Photo Postcards that were produced from photographs taken during construction and early operations. These were used to promote the highway and the activities of the builders.

## Post Card Publishers

As the highway was being built, photos were taken by official photographers for several organizations. Permission was granted by these organizations to the publishers to use these photos. This information is included if known.

- Canadian Post Card Company, Limited, Toronto, Ontario
- Photogelatine Engraving Company Ltd. Ottawa, Ontario
- Provincial News Co. Ltd., Edmonton, Alberta
- Rumsey & Company, Toronto, Ontario

## Selected References

*Northwest Epic: The Building of the Alaska Highway* by Heath Twichell, revised edition, 2022. Epicenter Press

*A History and Directory of Yukon Postcards 1897-1942* By Ken Elder  
Appendix 1 specifically deals with Alaska Highway cards.

*The Trail of '42: A Pictorial History of the Alaska Highway*, by Stan Cohen, Revised Edition, 1988

*Wild Ride*, Sandi Genrjevic, Anchorage Daily News, October 19, 1999.

*Cassiar Highway 37, The Slim Williams Way*, Jim Stirling, Alaska Magazine, April 1978.

Richard Helbock  
*"Military Postmarks of Territorial Alaska"*

*Alaska Sourdough, The Story of Slim Williams*, Richard Morenus, Rand, McNally & Company, 1956. Out of print, but easily findable.