

The Alaska Railroad

A Brief & Incomplete History

(for more information refer to the Books listed in the Bibliography)

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the completion of the Alaska Railroad and the gold spike ceremony in Nenana on July 15, 1923.

The Beginning

The Alaska Central Railway (ACR) was incorporated in the State of Washington in 1902 for the purpose of building a railway from a seaport in Alaska to the Tanana river and thus to the Interior gold fields. Construction began in 1904 and the Alaska Central Railway completed 51 miles. The Panic of 1907 forced them into receivership in 1908. The railroad was reorganized as the Alaska Northern Railway (ANR) in 1910 building an additional 21 miles to Kern Creek before it too ran out of money.

While the ACR and the ANR did not lay a lot of track, they were instrumental in the development of the idea and need for government assistance in creating reliable transportation in the Alaska Territory. In 1912 President Taft created the Alaska Railroad Commission to study transportation problems and suggest solutions. They recommended a government built and managed railroad as the best option.

The Alaska Engineering Commission (AEC) was established by President Wilson through his Secretary of Interior Frank Lane to build the government railway in Alaska. Three commissioners were appointed. Frederick Mears was the chief engineer of the Panama Railroad, Thomas Riggs, a surveyor and engineer (and future governor of the Alaska Territory 1918-21), and William C Edes, a civil engineer.

The Panama Canal was completed in August, 1914 and some of the construction equipment was made available to the AEC in the building of the Government Railway. The Wasilla Depot shows its roots from buildings designed for the hot tropical climate in Panama - and rather ill-suited for Alaska.

Construction began on the Government Railroad in April, 1915 when Mears established his field headquarters at Ship Creek. The Alaska Northern Railway was purchased by US Government in 1916. The Ship Creek construction camp, or 'tent city' went on to become Anchorage, the largest city in Alaska.

World War I created manpower and supply shortages during the construction of the Alaska Railroad.

After many construction delays and a concrete pier failure on the Susitna River bridge, the Fairbanks Syndicate led by Delegate to Congress, James Wickersham and his cohort John Ballaine in Seward tried unsuccessfully to have Mears removed for incompetence. It didn't work. Foremen, Supervisors, employees and the citizens of Anchorage supported him and the efforts to have him fired failed.

The Susitna River bridge, one of four bridges left to complete the line to Fairbanks was built over the winter by the American Bridge Co from Gary, Indiana. The 504' single span through truss bridge was completed in February, 1921. This left Hurricane Gulch, Riley Creek (and Hines Creek) at McKinley Station and the Tanana river at Nenana to complete the line. After only 60 days of construction, the American

Bridge Co completed the 918' Hurricane Gulch bridge in August, 1921. The Riley Creek trestle was completed in February, 1922. That left the biggest challenge, the Tanana River crossing in Nenana, as the final link to Fairbanks. In August, 1922 the American Bridge crews began arriving in Nenana to assemble the steel single span through truss bridge. The first train to cross the 701' bridge over the Tanana River was on November 23, 1922 but it was not officially opened for traffic until February, 1923. In August, 1974 it was named the "Frederick Mears Memorial Bridge" in honor of the builder and chief engineer of the line.

Steam Locomotive #618, an Alco-Brooks 2-6-0 built in 1906 and originally used by the Isthmian Canal Commission in Panama, pulled the Presidential Special from Seward to Fairbanks. With several stops along the way, including the gold spike ceremony in Nenana on the afternoon of July 15, 1923, it arrived in Fairbanks at 9 pm. The sun was still shining surprising the honored guests from Washington DC.

The Early years

The Panama Canal locomotives (from the Isthmian Canal Commission), 200 series Alco 2-6-0's acquired in 1915-16 were showing their age by 1930's and many were scrapped. Others lasted into the 1940's.

Here's a short list of some of the major steam locomotives classifications and related information.

301 0-6-0 built by Alco in 1906 for the Northern Pacific, to Alaska in 1943, scrapped in 1947.

310 series, 0-6-0 Most of these were built by Lima in 1944, retired in 1954.

400 series, 2-8-0 built by Lima, later renumbered 500 series.

550 series, Baldwin 2-8-0's, originally built in 1943-44 for the US Army.

600 series, 2-6-0 built in 1906 for the Isthmian Canal Commission, acquired by the ARR in 1922.

700 2-8-2 built by Baldwin in 1926-28 for the ARR, retired in 1954, sold to Spain in 1958.

750 2-8-2 built by Alco in 1909 for the Northern Pacific, acquired by the ARR in 1942-43.

800 4-8-2 built by Baldwin in 1932 & 1942, scrapped in 1953.

900 4-6-2 built by Baldwin in 1940 & 1945, sold to Spain in 1958.

The Whittier cut-off was opened June 1, 1943. Connecting Anchorage to Whittier using two tunnels between Bear Valley the US Army Corps of Engineers created a shorter route to an ocean port. The Whittier tunnel was renamed Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel in 1976. Named after one of the original surveyors and engineers, Anton was born in New Zealand. Anton later became the Chief Engineer of the Alaska Railroad and was the mayor of Anchorage from 1956 to 1958. He died in 1960.

With the advent of more powerful diesel locomotives in the late 40's, the famous Loop District was realigned in 1951-52. The trestles were fire hazards and considered to be the weak link on the rail line between Portage and Seward and with the new track alignment the trestles were no longer needed.

The Diesel era

Below is a list of some of the major diesel locomotive models and their arrivals on the ARR.

Steam locomotives were well used during WWII and through the 1950's but the economic value of diesels was apparent and the switch to these more modern locomotives began in the mid 1940's.

The first new diesels bought from a manufacturer were two 1,000 hp RS-1's from Alco in June, 1944 for use on the Whittier cutoff. The rails from Whittier to Anchorage are the busiest on the line. The arrival of

ex-US Army Alco RSD-1's, RF1A's & RF1B's began in 1947 eventually numbering over 50 units. Additionally, 4 ex-US Army SW-1's also arrived in 1947.

The final run of a steam locomotive was in 1964 when Baldwin 2-8-0 number 557 pulled an excursion train. Fortunately, this locomotive is back in Alaska being rebuilt for use on the Alaska Railroad again.

In April, 1967 the Department of the Interior handed over control of the Alaska Railroad to the newly created US Department of Transportation (DOT). A widespread overhaul of the ARR logo and paint scheme was designed by Chester Mack in 1976 with a bold ALASKA and blue and yellow paint. He also created the Bicentennial scheme on two FP7's and a caboose that same year.

12 New EMD cab and booster (B units) arrived. Five F7A and five F7B and two FP7A's in 1952-53.
12 F7's from DRGW 1970 (seven cab units and five booster units).
Six F7's arrived from Great Northern in 1969.

Alco S2 (4 units, 7100 series) arrived in 1955.

Baldwin VO-1000 #1300 ex-US Army acquired in 1949 and retired in 1957, scrapped in 1968.

The last steam locomotive, a Baldwin 2-8-0 #557 was used in 1964.

13 GP7L's were ex-US Army units built in 1951 and acquired in 1960.

Nine GP7u were rebuilt in low nose configuration in 1976-77 by ICG's Paducah shops and renumbered 1801-1809.

Brand new EMD GP30 arrived in 1963, upgraded in 1974 and renumbered 2504 as a GP35u.

3 New EMD GP35's arrived in 1964-65.

Ex-Amtrak E9A's no. 430 and 434 were acquired in 1981 and renumbered 2401 and 2402.

3 MP15 and one MP15DC numbered 1551-1554 arrived in 1992-93.

GP40-2 3001-3015 1975-1978. The final 4 GP40-2 units built in 1978 arrived with the new Chester Mack bold ALASKA blue and yellow paint scheme. All the early ones arrived in the black and yellow paint.

GP40u 3016-3020, 5 ex-PC/Conrail 1983.

GP49 4 new units in 1983, 5 more new in 1985.

GP38 2001 & 2002 acquired used in 1983.

GP38 2003-2008 ex-PC/Conrail 1985.

Alaska did not join Amtrak but did benefit from the creation of a national passenger rail network. Surplus coaches, diners, café-lounge cars, dome cars and baggage cars bought from the Union Pacific in 1971 and Southern Railway in 1981 (5200 number series) replaced the aging Alaska equipment.

The State of Alaska bought the Alaska Railroad from the federal government in 1985 for \$22.3 million. Under the terms of the Alaska Railroad Transfer Act (ARTA) the state received title to over 650 miles of track, 38,000 acres of land, 57 locomotives, over 1,800 freight and passenger cars and MOW equipment. In addition, the state had to operate the railroad for 10 years (at a minimum) or it would revert back the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

SD70MAC's Demo's 7002 & 7004 ran on the ARR in July, 1997, and proved to be of value. New SD70MAC 4001 arrived in 1999. A total of 16 were in service by the end of 2000 ushering in a new era of C-C trucked diesels. By late 2007 the ARR had 29 SD70MAC units on its roster.

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