

Effects of WWII on Alaskan Economic Development and Infrastructure.

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Introduction.

Alaska was known to be a strategically positioned territory from the very first days of American purchase, but was largely ignored as a location of military significance until the early days of the second world war. The massive build-up of personnel, equipment, and defenses in the territory during the early 1940s was an unprecedented event in the history of the state, and has left a lasting impression on the daily lives and activities of almost every Alaskan today. Much of Alaska's modern-day infrastructure, transportation systems, and economic prosperity found its start in the activities of WWII, and the very fact of statehood soon after the war was accelerated by the attention and development brought on during the war years. It is true that much of this development and economic growth would have been seen eventually without the catalyst of the war, but at a much slower pace and over a greater period of time.

Strategic Value of Alaska

The strategic location of Alaska was noted by Seward during his first proposals to purchase the territory, and was a major part of his argument in favor of acquisition. Before purchase, Alaska gave the Russians an important base for west coast trade and exploration, but was so remote from the centers of government and commerce that it was eventually seen as too expensive and useless to retain. Located at the center of a great-circle route from North America to Asia and Siberia, Alaska was recognized early on by such visionaries as Seward to be a key location for controlling trade and defense in the North Pacific, and what would later be called the Pacific Rim (Cambell 10).

Partly because Alaska was seen by many as a worthless wilderness, it was not utilized to much extent for military bases or patrols after purchase. The military did control the government of the new territory, and a few outposts were established, but little money or effort was invested to exploit the strategic potential of the area. The navy surveyed the Aleutians in the early 1900s with trade and harbor possibilities in mind, but did not establish any bases. A few supply and coaling stations were set up in Sitka and Kodiak, one was planned for Kiska island but was never constructed due to finance problems. Over the years, various territorial governors and military strategists tried to gain attention and support for the territory, but the only significant military interest was the construction of telegraph lines, some air stations and experimental flights, and a few isolated weather stations. Naval exercises held in the Aleutians in the 1930s established the brutal and oppressive nature of weather in the chain, which was deemed poorly suited for air, sea, or land action (Campbell 9-12).

Only after rising tension between the US and Japan in the late 1930s did the US military begin serious efforts to fortify Alaska, as part of a defensive plan to protect the west coast from possible attack. The first major military budget for the territory was released in 1938 and outlined plans for enlarging the Sitka, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor bases. Despite growing tensions in Europe and Asia, Congress remained hesitant to authorize further funding for Alaska. More money for bases and defensive improvements was appropriated in 1940 after Japan signed treaties with Germany, and the US began to

prepare to enter the war (Campbell 12).

During and after the US's involvement in the World War II, Alaska was almost universally recognized as a vital strategic area in the defense and control of American west coast interests. Military involvement did not stop with the end of hostilities in the north, but expanded in several areas into the large bases of today. Major road, airport, and harbor projects built during WWII were maintained by both military and civilian agencies, some becoming public property while others were consolidated into modern bases. Cold War development added to that brought by WWII, and even now with the Soviet threat gone, Alaska is being prepared to respond to new potential threats from rouge states and new enemies. As foreseen by Seward and others, the state has finally become a major transportation hub for northern great-circle travel, but for air rather than sea voyages.

Pre-WWII Development

The majority of development in the territory of Alaska previous to WWII was centered around natural resource extraction. Salmon canneries and logging camps populated the coastal regions, and mining towns brought people to many different parts of the state. Although mining had been very significant in the early exploration and industrial growth of Alaska, by the 1940s fishing accounted for almost 80% of tax revenue (Campbell, 9).

Few permanent roads of any length existed in Alaska prior to WWII. Wagon paths and traditional native trails crisscrossed the state, but despite popular demand for a road connection to the continental US, very little development occurred in this direction. Alaska's first railroads were all built to facilitate the movement of natural resources, gold for the Nome, Tannana Valley, and the White Pass and Yukon, copper for the Copper River Northwestern, coal for the Katalla and Homer railroads, and fish for the Yakutat and Southern. The Alaska Railroad was the first to be built as a general-purpose transportation and freight corridor in the 1930s, with no single economic impetus. Later some of these systems would provide vital transportation links during the war years, but before that time they were often the only means of efficient travel through certain parts of the territory (Cohen, 60, 71, 76).

Alaska's mineral and natural resources are extensive enough that continued exploration and development would likely have contributed significantly to the territory's economic growth and later formation as a state. However, this development was largely of a boom-and-bust nature, with mining and other industrial operations opening and closing constantly. While a few major cities survived on a diversity of economic activities, others rose and fell with the industries that they supported, becoming ghost towns at the whim of company profits. Most of the industries operating in Alaska around this time were owned and controlled by outside interests in the lower 48 states, with no interest in the permanent viability of the territorial economy or population (Campbell, 8-9).

Ironically, the advent of war and a wartime atmosphere in Alaska worked to the detriment of some development industries. As the US entered the European and Pacific conflicts, many residents of Alaska left to join the armed forces, and several companies faced closures due to a loss of workers. When General Simon Buckner was placed in charge of Alaska's military operations, he was able to suspend mining as an unnecessary wartime activity in order to appropriate heavy equipment for construction (Campbell, 14). Many canneries and mines closed during the war and re-opened later, some (such as

Port Althorp and Sand Point) serving as military support installations during the interim (Dickrell 56).

Infrastructure Development

The impact of WWII was felt the most in the field of infrastructural enhancements to the territory of Alaska. As L.J. Campbell comments in the opening pages of *Alaska Geographic's* WWII issue: "...much of what one finds in Alaska today is linked in some way to World War II" (Campbell 4). War brought the Alaska highway, new and improved airfields, new ports, and many new communities and structures which are still in use today.

The Roosevelt administration was responsible for finally beginning construction of the road linking the territory to the rest of North America. It was seen by some as an unnecessary waste of money, the prevailing opinion being that North Pacific operations were chiefly of a naval nature. The road suddenly became a high priority project as the need for men and equipment in Alaska became apparent in 1942. Completed in just eight months, largely by African-American members of the Army Corps of Engineers, this single road link to the contiguous United States and Canada would soon be one of the most important factors in the growth of Alaska (Griggs 8-10). With a road connection, many new activities became economically feasible in the state, and travel became much easier and cheaper for the general public.

Air travel was coming into a golden age during the 1930s, and this boom was to include the territory of Alaska. Although aircraft were soon an important part of statewide transportation and communication, the support facilities in much of the state remained primitive, little more than clearings cut out of the forest or tundra. Forward-thinking military leaders such as General Buckner soon realized the importance of airplanes in the territory, and were responsible for creating dozens of new airfields and permanent air bases across Alaska, as well as upgrading and improving many of the existing fields, many of which were used by both military and civilian commercial aircraft (Cohen 78). While the majority of the large bases were spaced along the southern coast and Aleutian Chain, patrol bases and the lend lease program brought a series of permanent airports and air force bases to the interior and western regions of Alaska. Bases and temporary staging areas stretched along much of the new Alaska highway, and throughout the islands of Southeast and Southcentral Alaska. Later in the war the Aleutian bases would be used to stage bombing raids against northern Japan, and later many of these fields became important civilian passenger and cargo stops for the major cities and remote villages of the state (Wilson 76).

Port facilities were another important addition to the territory. Previous to the war there was little need for large shipping terminals, and few deep-water ports available. Skagway and Seward, at the coastal ends of Alaska's two major railroads, were extensively upgraded to receive military and civilian cargo vessels, and a new cargo rail port was also built at Whittier (Cohen 60, 64, 71). New ports for supplying and repairing naval ships were constructed at Kodiak, Dutch Harbor, and Ketchikan. Today some of these ports are important links in the transportation of bulk material into and out of the state, while others are the bases of major fishing operations in Southeast and Southwestern Alaska (US Dept. of the Interior, 28,31,33).

While a few of Alaska's major military bases have remained in the possession of the government and military, many were abandoned soon after the war and became available to nearby communities and residents. Ports and airstrips were taken over by

commercial operations, while industries and transportation systems that had been shut down or taken over by the military were able to reopen. In Sitka and Kodiak, old barracks and hangars became warehouses, school dormitories, and businesses. Underground bunkers became secure storage locations and in at least one case, a house. The quonset hut, an efficient prefabricated structure used at almost every military site, soon became popular as temporary or permanent housing for many Alaskans (Denfield 50, Stoltenberg 8).

Alaska received upgrades to much of its existing infrastructure as a result of wartime logistics needs. The Alaska Railroad and the White Pass and Yukon Railroad were both used extensively to transport airfield, road, and pipeline construction equipment, and even the abandoned Yakutat and Cordova railroads were briefly brought out of retirement to haul construction supplies for new airports (Eyak; Cohen 60-77). An entirely new port and city at Whittier were constructed for use in case Seward were attacked, the site being hidden by mountains and difficult to bomb. Military construction crews blasted two rail tunnels and created an elaborate plan for huge self-contained barracks which could hold the entire population of Anchorage during an evacuation (Cohen 64). Only two of these massive buildings were constructed, with one now home to almost the entire population of Whittier. At its northern end, the Alaska railroad was lengthened by a few miles to aid construction of Ladd Field (later Fort Wainwright). Almost all of these upgrades helped improve the later operation and productivity of the sites and facilities affected.

The end of the war put a large amount of property and material into private hands. After the war, surplus land was sold and equipment sold or otherwise disposed of if not worth returning to the lower 48. This was the case with a majority of equipment; the high cost of shipping cargo out of the state meant that even expensive and sensitive material such as canons and explosives were often dumped into the sea or left in bunkers, where they are still found today (Campbell 15). Sometimes the re-use of government property and equipment was completely unauthorized; local residents frequently moved in as soon as the military departed in order to salvage equipment and strip useful materials from buildings and bases. In some cases, authorized or not, entire buildings were relocated from military bases into nearby growing towns. While some of the bases and facilities would eventually suffer decay and disuse from their lack of value or remote locations, many others became important parts of communities and helped jump start the development of communities and businesses after the war (Students of UHS 32-34).

Communications Development

Improved communication was another component of WWII infrastructure that benefited Alaska. Telegraph lines already existing between major cities were upgraded extensively during the war, especially along rail and road corridors. New lines were laid along the route of the Alcan highway and to new airfields along the way, and many new submarine cables were run to coastal and island communities (Campbell 10-11, Morgan 46.).

Despite advances in telegraph and wired telephone technology, the most important communications system during this time would prove to be radio. When he took command of the northern forces, General Buckner was appalled at the lack of a reliable statewide communications system in Alaska. With his immediate superior General DeWitt of the Western Defense Command, Buckner was able to persuade headquarters to provide the necessary funding through a convincing demonstration. An

alert called by Dewitt after Japan's 1941 mobilization reached Panama within minutes, but "...in Alaska it took four days for the alert to reach all stations. Radios were so thinly scattered and so undermanned that airplanes, runners and dog sled teams had to deliver the word to frontier stations" (Garfield 68). Once Buckner had sufficient support, wireless stations were set up all across the territory to serve aircraft communication and navigation, and as early warning systems for possible attacks.

Improved radio communications benefited not only the military, but also provided a vital link to the rest of the world for a region that had long been isolated by geography and technology. The vast expansion of Alaska's wireless communications capabilities far surpassed anything that had been possible with the resources of private companies and local governments, bringing for the first time a truly statewide communications system. Military radio stations also brought some of the first wireless entertainment and news to Alaska, sometimes without approval from the FCC (Cohen 6-7). While restricted to a large extent to military and official use during wartime, after the war many of these broadcast and two-way stations were turned over to communities, and surplus radio equipment became available for private use in aircraft, boats, and homes. Alaska was soon connected to the outside world not just by roads and material trade, but also by news and information exchanges.

Economic Development

The construction of so many military bases and the transportation of so much equipment through the state in the 1940s provided a gigantic boost to Alaska's economy. While much of the work was done by armed forces personnel and vehicles, private companies and contractors were extensively employed as well. In Kodiak alone, base construction employed over 3000 contractors and military laborers in May of 1942 (Stoltenberg 5). A large Seattle corporation, Siems Drake Puget Sound, did much of the early construction work, but several other outside and local contract companies were involved. (Rennick "Bases" 54-57). Native villagers had new opportunities for income as laborers and construction workers, or from selling supplies and souvenirs to military personnel (Campbell 13).

While some of Alaska's pre-war industries were adversely affected by the commencement of hostilities and military construction in the state, others profited a great deal. The logging and milling industry was almost unable to keep up with the demand for lumber to supply new construction projects, and the fledgling oil industry began to boom with the construction of the Canol pipeline from Canada. (Cohen 3, 14). Oil exploration and drilling on the North Slope had already begun by the turn of the century, but with military interest in the Naval Petroleum Reserve and other areas of northern Alaska, commercial involvement also increased in the region (Rennick "Search" 78).

When completed, the Alaska Highway brought greater convenience for shipping supplies and products into and out of the state, and commerce between Alaska and the contiguous US boomed. At the end of the war the population of Alaska had swelled almost 40 percent, due in part to the newly opened access routes and the attention brought to the territory by military operations (Campbell 40). Commercial aircraft used the upgraded runways at former military bases to bring supplies and people into remote villages, and more ships and barges were able to offload bulk material such as construction supplies, heavy machinery, and vehicles at the many new ports. All of these items were soon in demand as new residents and businesses appeared.

An often overlooked aspect of the connection between Alaska and the lower 48 is the effect of Canadian-US relations on the economy of the state. World War II was a major turning point in the history of Canadian-American relations, being one of the first times the nations had cooperated in joint military and large scale construction. Involvement in the second world war and later the Cold War were probably the main forces behind the strong friendship currently shared by the countries. Despite their familiarity and common interests, the two countries were unaccustomed to working together in the early years of WWII (Perras xx).

Canadian business interests are quite active in a number of Alaskan industries today. Previous to the Alaska Highway's completion, trade between Alaska and Canada was sometimes cheaper than between Alaska and the continental US. Today major Canadian towns along the border of Alaska, such as Dawson and Whitehorse, still see a large amount of cross-border commerce (Cohen 24). Construction of the highway, by necessity passing through Canadian territory, was quite beneficial both to Alaskans and residents of Canada's Yukon Territory and British Columbia. During construction the population of Whitehorse grew from 700 to over 20,000, and the airfields and construction camps built along the route by Americans would later help open up the Canadian provinces and Yukon Territory in much the same way development did for Alaska (Griggs 8). Despite a few conflicts and internal power struggles, war in the north proved that these neighboring countries could work together for their common benefit and establish a strong defense and trade relationship (Perras xxviii).

Conclusion

Alaska's modern identity and society has been shaped by the many diverse events of its long history, from exploration, hunting and trapping, mining, fishing, logging, trade, and other pursuits which brought people here from all over the world. The most significant events to lay their imprint upon the state in recent history are those of the second world war. Although a relatively minor conflict in the greater view of world events and warfare at the time, the invasion of Alaska and the subsequent defense and recapture of occupied islands occupied a huge number of men and an enormous amount of material. These events and their lasting effects reshaped the very nature of Alaska, changing the way that it was seen by outsiders while changing the way that Alaskans viewed and interacted with the outside world. The war brought Alaska out of obscurity and into a global economy at the same time that its touch on northern soil left Alaska with an infrastructure ready to support a more diverse economic system. Without the relatively brief impact of war, Alaska would not have grown so fast and so well as it did in the middle of the 20th century, and may have languished for decades as a mere territory and forgotten frontier.

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