

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 30, 2014

The Alaska Highway: In the late 1930s, Canada began construction of a major highway artery to connect Edmonton, the capital of Alberta Province, with the U. S. Territory of Alaska. Utilizing existing roads, such as they were, from Edmonton some 350 miles northwest to Dawson Creek, barely in British Columbia, the main "Alcan" highway with completely new construction would cover another 1,700 miles to Delta Junction, Alaska, where it would connect with the Richardson Highway, recently built by the United States, from the port of Valdez to the inland city of Fairbanks. The first major hurdle was crossing the Peace River, less than 50 miles from Dawson Creek, and a massive bridge was built, hundreds of miles from the sources of material. Late in 1939, however, when Canada entered World War II on the side of Great Britain, the emergency was in Europe, and the building of the Alcan Highway was put on hold.

Early in 1942, soon after Japan had attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, two American islands in the western Aleutians were occupied by the Japanese, and it was feared the aggressors would attempt to invade North America through Alaska. The U.S. Government had little trouble in convincing the Canadians to expedite completion of the Alcan Highway, to be done on Canadian soil mostly by U.S. participation and expense. With a massive effort, the 1,700 miles of the Alaska Highway (the name Alcan was seldom used thereafter) was opened from Dawson Creek to Delta Junction in record time. Already connected to the port of Valdez and to Fairbanks, a branch off the Richardson Highway went westward to Anchorage and its major air base being built there. Army 6 x 6 trucks and other heavy vehicles could move, through Canada, from the Continental U.S. to its prized but vulnerable territory of Alaska. The total distance from Edmonton to Fairbanks was about 2,150 miles.

This part of North America was not completely new to continental Americans. When gold was discovered near Dawson City (no connection with Dawson Creek) on the Yukon River in the Klondike in 1898, the lure of instant riches brought thousands seeking an easy fortune. In those days, access to the Klondike was by boat to the port of Skagway in Alaska, then a 100-mile trek over White Pass to Whitehorse, a thriving frontier city on the Yukon River, wherefrom steamboats operated downstream (north) to Dawson. The narrow-gauge White Pass and Yukon Railroad opened within a year, making the journey over the pass much easier. Over 40 years later, the Alaska Highway would touch the Yukon River and pass through Whitehorse, then capital of Canada's Yukon Territory, but Dawson City was off to the north with no strategic importance except to tourists.

I had always wanted to drive the Alaska Highway, but it was not to be. Ruth and I did finally get there in 1988, but with a large tour traveling in deluxe motor coaches. Even then, it was a 45 m.p.h. road, mostly gravel requiring massive scraping each spring. We came from Skagway on a good road over White Pass, parallel to the tiny railroad, and joined the Alaska Highway at Whitehorse. A few tourist facilities had been developed along the road, including a small town called Beaver Creek, where the tour company had built a primitive lodge. While we had good weather during our trip, heavy rains in the area caused massive mud slides that closed the highway just before we came along. The tour company did its best to find small airplanes to ferry passengers to and from the nearest air strips across to the other side, where another set of tour buses were also stranded. We flew in an eight-passenger plane, got a beautiful view of the countryside, and soon were on our way again toward Delta Junction and Fairbanks.

My Landenberg friend Oliver Eastburn and his wife, Edna, had two unmarried daughters living in Anchorage (one was an M.D., the other a C.P.A.), and the senior Eastburns drove over the highway in their motor home each summer for many years in the 1980s. About 1996, Ray Carr drove a specially made Stanley Model 70 from Anchorage over the highway and on to Bar Harbor, Maine, a trip of about 5,000 miles. I understand the Alaska Highway is now paved all the way.