



Mt. McKinley, also known as Denali, “the great one”, in the native Athabaskan language

North to Alaska

—by *David L. Holland*

Every September, a couple of college buddies and I go on a two-week camping trip. We fly out to the nearest large city in the western United States that strikes our fancy, rent an SUV, and head out to parts unknown. For example, last year we met in Phoenix and drove up to the northern rim of the Grand Canyon and then circled through southern Utah, camping at the various national parks. The year before that we met in Denver,

rented an SUV, and drove up to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons National Parks.

This year, we took John Wayne’s advice and flew up to Anchorage, Alaska. We rented a 30’ Winnebago RV and drove over to the nearest Wal-Mart to load up with the necessary essentials for our Alaskan adventure. After hauling our groceries and beer out to the RV and stowing them away, we determined it was time to hit the



road. The sun doesn't set until 9:30 p.m. or so at that time of year, so we set the GPS for Denali National Park (about 240 miles) and headed out on the George Parks Highway. Leaving Anchorage behind, we drove through beautiful scenic countryside. Suddenly, we came onto a sharp curve doing about 55 MPH, and found ourselves dodging a bottle of Ragu spaghetti sauce which went flying through the air from an opened cupboard.

Whew, that was a close one!!! We pulled over, cleaned the mess up, checked all the cupboards, and resumed our journey.

After another 50 miles or so I saw vehicles up ahead pulling over and figured there must be wildlife on the side of the road. So, after parking our behemoth RV, we all jumped out with our cameras and binoculars to check out the action. Sure enough, a magnificent moose and her baby moose were grazing off the side of the road. We all photographed the pair until they had enough, and off into the woods they went.

Finally, we arrived at our campsite for the night at Denali State Park (not to be confused with Denali National Park 70 miles up the road in Interior Alaska). We walked over to the scenic overlook to get a look at Mt. McKinley, which, at 20,320 feet, is the highest mountain on the North American continent. I saw a tremendous mountain range in the distance, but Mt. McKinley was obscured by clouds. A fellow tourist pointed out that because of extensive cloud cover, the chance of seeing its peak is only 30 percent of the time. This clearly was not one of those times. We returned to our campsite and had supper around the campfire, hoping to be more successful the next day. I knew luck was on our side when I stepped out of the RV to clear, pristine skies and bright sunshine the morning after. I walked over to the overlook and, Mt. McKinley was absolutely awesome. It overpowered all the other mountains around it. We spent an hour or so taking pictures from every angle.

Established in 1917 as Mount McKinley National Park, its original two million acres grew to six million acres by 1980, and its name was changed to Denali National Park and Preserve. We pulled into the park and found our campsite after sightseeing around the visitor center and checking out the exhibits and films providing background information about the park. There is only one road into the interior of the park; it stretches 92 miles and beyond the 15 mile mark is not accessible to private vehicles. So, the next morning, we boarded a "concessionary" bus and rode it through the wilderness to the Eielson Visitor Center at the 69 mile mark. Along the way the bus would stop on the gravel road whenever any wild life was spotted and we would get out our cameras and binoculars. As we drove deeper into the park, we spotted caribou in the river valleys, Dall sheep on the hillsides, and grizzly bear forag-



Karibou [left] and Dall sheep [center] in Denali National Park



Trans-Alaska Pipeline System



ing in the tundra. After about four hours on the road we rolled into the Eielson Visitor Center and stared across an enormous, glacier-filled canyon below Mt. McKinley. Denali Park is probably as wild and as remote as any park in the country but its extraordinary grandeur is something to behold.

We spent three days at Denali and then headed out to Fairbanks. Fairbanks is the second largest city in Alaska and the northernmost in all of the United States. It is not necessarily a well planned city. However, we did find a large Safeway and after stocking up on food and beer, we drove out of town along Main Street. We then followed the Richardson Highway southeast to Delta Junction, a city at the confluence of the Delta and Tanana rivers.

That night we camped at Big Delta State Historical Park, on the banks of the Tanana River. Rika's Roadhouse, now the centerpiece of the park, served between 1909 and 1947 as a resting place for gold seekers, fur traders, hunters, freighters, and other travellers on their journey along the historic Valdez-to-Fairbanks Trail. There was a large gold strike around Fairbanks in the early 1900s, and the gold rush stampeders would cross the Tanana River by ferry at Rika's.

We continued along the Richardson Highway, the first major road built in Alaska, to historic Glennallen where we had crossed over the Alaska Range to the Wrangell Mountain Range (home of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park) and on through Copper Center. We camped that night at the fabulous Mangey Moose Saloon & Cantina RV Park. Now, this was definitely our kind of RV campsite! The place was rather run down and had what I call "atmosphere." It was run by some Russians who barely spoke English, but all the locals hung out at the bar, watching a 52" HDTV playing MTV rock band videos or enjoying a game of pool. As a concession to the less hardy, hot showers were available for \$5.00, and there was a sauna too.

That night we joined the locals for a few beers and an eight-ball tournament. When we finally packed it in, it was quite late, but it was a social night to remember. The next day we drove over Thompson Pass and hiked to the Worthington Glacier, then drove through the scenic Keystone Canyon to the Port of Valdez, the largest port Kenai Peninsular and home to 4,353 people.

Valdez is located on the northeast tip of Prince William Sound, at the terminus of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. We rolled in that afternoon to clouds and light rain and registered at our RV campground in the heart of Valdez.

There is a giant pier next to the oil terminal; and fishermen lined up along it casting for silver salmon. They were pulling in 20-25 pound salmon as fast as they could throw in a line. It was quite a sight. As I was walking around, a lady asked me if I would like to have a salmon. Well, of course I said "sure enough," and before I knew it, she had hooked one and reeled it in. We filleted the fish at a nearby fillet stand and packed it in ice. That evening we grilled the salmon at our campsite—and, boy, did it taste good!

The next morning we drove the RV onto the ferry for a five-hour trip across the Prince William Sound over to Whittier Island. That ferry ride was absolutely fantastic. Surrounded by snow-capped mountains, the Sound was a bluish sheet of pristine water basking in another perfect day. We saw a large sea lion





is filled with quaint shops and art galleries. Anybody who wants to visit the Kenai Fjords National Park goes there through Seward, the gateway to the park.

We camped on the shore, in the heart of Seward. Every afternoon an otter would swim leisurely back and forth along the shore on his back, waiting for an unsuspecting fish to come

colony and later sailed by the outflow of melting ice from the Columbia Glacier. Blue icebergs were floating in the Sound everywhere we looked.

We finally docked at Whittier and headed for the 2.5-mile-long Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel, the longest highway tunnel in North America. The tunnel connects the port city of Whittier to the Seward Highway on the Kenai Peninsula jutting from the southern coast of Alaska. This combined-use rail and highway tunnel opened to vehicle traffic in June 2000 after an extensive conversion from a World War II railroad tunnel. We waited in line, paid our toll, and drove through it, straddling railway tracks all the way. Fortunately, no train came from the opposite direction when we were in the tunnel.

Once out, we drove 175 miles down the Kenai Peninsula to Homer, a hamlet on the shore of Kachemak Bay. Homer is famous among fishermen for sport and commercial fishing of salmon and halibut as well as orca and humpback whales. But Homer's spectacular scenery has also made it very touristy. Regardless, we had great time exploring the local lore and its finest examples. Toward the end of the day we sauntered into the Salty Dog Saloon which was conveniently within walking distance from our RV camp. All the walls of Salty Dog are tacked with one-dollar bills from floor to ceiling. I don't know when it all started, but it's become customary for a patron to take out a dollar bill, write his or her name on it with a Sharpie, and then tack it to the wall. There must be at least 100,000 dollars on those walls.

After a day or two we left Homer and headed for Seward on the other side of the Kenai Peninsula. Seward is one of Alaska's oldest communities and it



Holmer hamlet's finest

by. Then, as a lightening rod, it would flop over, dive down, and resurface again, holding in its paws its fish dinner which it then proceeded to devour while again swimming leisurely on its back. Quite a sight!

After some more exploring at Seward and a hike to the nearby glacier, we headed back to Anchorage. We spent our last night camping in the parking lot of a RV rental place. Early the next morning we packed up, took a shuttle to the airport, and bade Alaska a fond adieu.

Alaska is one beautiful place. I highly recommend adding an Alaskan vacation to your wish list for 2011. ■

[Editor's note: David Holland, LS, is Henrico County Surveyor and NSPS Governor from Virginia. This article was also published, in a different format, in The Old Dominion Surveyor, vol. 47, no. 4.]