

HISTORY OF THE COPPER RIVER OVERLAND TRANSPORTATION ROUTE

The history and controversey surrounding the construction of an overland route from the Gulf of Alaska to the Interior of Alaska is interesting, confusing and quite involved. The following provides a concise narrative of the history of the Copper River Highway.

In 1899 and 1900, the discovery of copper near the town of McCarthy spurred interest in an overland transportation route from the Gulf coast to the Alaskan Interior. Shortley afterward, several railroad companies organized and displayed various levels of interest. By 1906, there were two railroads competing from Valdez (the Valdez-Yukon Railroad and the Copper River and Northwestern Railway) and two railroads competing from Katalla (the Alaska Pacific and Terminal Railroad and the Catalla and Carbon Mountain Railroad) and another (the Copper River Railroad) one planning to compete from Eyak, the present day site of Cordova. In 1906 clearing and grading began on the Copper River & Northwestern Railway's (CR&NW) route from Valdez; and construction began on the Copper River Railroad's route from Cordova. At the end of 1906 the Copper River Railroad merged into the CR&NW which then announced that it would abandon it's work in Valdez (including the newly completed Keystone Tunnel) and Cordova and finish construction from Katalla instead. Katalla had one main disadvantage, it was an unsheltered harbor on the Gulf coast; breakwaters were to be the solution for both the CR&NW and the Alaska Pacific and Terminal Railroad (AP&TR). In 1907, the CR&NW began work from Katalla with one line running toward the coal fields near the Bering River and the other toward the Copper River and copper mines. The rival AP&TR also began construction of two lines in the same directions. The smaller Catalla and Carbon Mountain Railroad was only to be a short line to the coal fields with no intention of building a Copper River route. Disastrous storms in the winter of 1907 - 1908 destroyed the port at Katalla and the breakwaters which were nearly complete. Cordova was selected by the CR&NW as the new tidewater port and construction resume from there to the Kennecott Company Mines near McCarthy.

The railroad, completed in 1911, transported over \$100,000,000 worth of Copper ore out of the McCarthy-Kennicott area (an early day misspelling made the mining company Kennecott while the region, river and settlement are Kennicott). However, because of the depletion of the highgrade ore, a falling copper market and the Depression, the mines closed in 1938 and the CR&NW ceased operations in 1939. With the Kennecott Mines closed, both the towns of Kennicott and McCarthy became virtual ghost towns.

Almost immediately after the railroad's closure the residents of Cordova started working to get the railroad converted to a roadway. The 77th Congress, in 1941, enacted Public Law (PL) 176 which allowed the CR&NW to transfer to the United States its holdings including: "rights-of-way, including terminal and station grounds and lands used as sites for structures or purposes of any kind ... and all other properties in Alaska used in connection with the construction, maintenance and operation of the railroad." The Act which also allowed the United States to accept the properties "to be used, operated and maintained, as far as may be practicable or necessary as a public highway, tramroad or tramway ..." PL 176 was signed into law on July 15, 1941 and the CR&NW relinquished its claims on March 29, 1945, and was accepted May 11, 1945 by the Commissioner of the General Land Office (now BLM), Department of Interior.

World War II prevented any construction of the road except the first 13 miles, which was needed for defense purposes to serve the new airport at Cordova. Additionally, some sections of rail were torn-up for scrap metal to help the war effort.

With the war over, certain businessmen in Cordova began a drive in 1946 to resume conversion of the railbed to a highway. A complete reconnaissance was done in 1949 by the Alaska Road Commission (ARC) from Cordova to Chitina. Congress appropriated \$550,000 to the ARC in 1953 to begin conversion. An additional \$2,400,000 was specifically set aside for 1954. In 1954, the possibility of construction of the Wood Canyon Dam on the Copper River, which would have inundated the highway, forced the ARC to conduct another reconnaissance and identify alternate routes. The reconnaissance considered the Tiekel River Valley, Tasnuna River Valley, Uranatina River Valley and a higher elevation route above the impoundment levels of the dam. The Tiekel route was the one most favored should the Wood Canyon Dam have been built.

Highway responsibility was transferred to the Bureau of Public Roads in 1956 and conversion continued to MP 49. The Alaska Department of Highways assumed responsibility with statehood in 1959. All rights-of-way were deeded to the State under the Alaska Omnibus Act, and conversion continued. At this time, the State's plan was to convert the railbed from Cordova to Chitina where the existing Edgerton Highway would complete the link to the Richardson Highway. The Edgerton highway was reconstructed and engineering and design south from Chitina began. To complete the highway as quickly as possible, construction was to be done from both ends, at Cordova and Chitina. Construction continued until the 1964 earthquake. At that time construction was completed north to Mile 59 and design was completed south of Chitina 15 miles to the Uranatina River. The earthquake damaged, beyond repair, many bridges along the route (including the Million Dollar Bridge at mile post 49) as well as the roadway. An assessment of the earthquake damage had shown that major reconstruction of the bridges and the roadway would be needed, so before and reconstruction commenced, both the State and Federal governments determined that a reevaluation was necessary.

The feasibility study showed that reconstruction to Chitina was not as feasible as a direct connection to the Richardson Highway via one of two routes. One route would follow the railroad grade to the mouth of the Tiekel River, then follow the Tiekel River to meet the Richardson Highway at approximately Milepost 50. The other route would follow the old railroad grade to the mouth of the Tasnuna River; then follow the Tasnuna River to meet the Richardson Highway just south of Thompson Pass (MP 22). After public hearings were held in Cordova and Valdez to gather input on the alternative routes under consideration, the Tasnuna River route was selected, and repairs to the damaged bridges and roadway began with surveys from both ends.

In 1969 Congress passed PL 91-190, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Contracts were let for the Flagg Point Bridge crossing and then for repair of MP 27-39. NEPA administrative regulations did not require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this work since it was only repair of the existing roadway within the existing right-of-way. Design was completed on the Tasnuna route from MP 82-MP 116 (Copper River to Richardson Highway) and an EIS was written on this portion to comply with NEPA.

In the Fall of 1972, the Alaska Conservation Society and the Sierra Club indicated that they would challenge the right of the State and Federal governments to repair the section between MP 27 and MP 39 unless an EIS was written that would address impacts along the entire highway route. They felt the EIS should address the impact on the entire area not just on the road along the Tasnuna River. As a result, the State delayed repair of MP 39-MP 82 and began work on an EIS. Consequently, several Draft EIS documents were written in 1973 as were some addendums to EIS documents, each covering various sections or all of the Copper River Highway route.

The final Environmental Impact Statement was completed November 29, 1973, but apparently did not alleviate the concerns of various environmental organizations. In 1973, the Alaska Conservation Society and the Sierra Club filed a legal action against further construction of the Copper River Highway; consequently the courts granted an injunction against further construction. An out-of-court settlement signed in June, 1975 stipulated that the State would not resume any construction beyond mile 49 until December 18, 1978 or until final legislation was passed by the U.S. Congress to resolve the status of public lands withdrawn by Section 17(d) (2)(A) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA). Another stipulation mandated a regional transportation study (resulting in the Prince William Sound Transportation Study), a reevaluation of all reasonable alternatives and the issuance of a supplement to the Final EIS which was issued in 1973.

Meanwhile in April, 1973 the right-of-way of the former Copper River and Northwestern Railroad from the Tasnuna River to Chitina was recorded in the National Register of Historic Places, therefore, it falls under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and Section 4 (f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966. Essentially, these provisions state that a highway cannot be built through such areas if a prudent and feasible alternative is available. This effectively left the Tasnuna River route as the only route for a highway connection. It is the Tasnuna route which was being considered, hence all public hearings, votes, etc., since 1973 have been based on the Tasnuna (most southerly) route as a connection to the State Highway System.

The draft supplement EIS was issued on September 1976. However, action on the final supplement was withheld until the Prince William Sound Transportation Study (PWSTS) was completed. The PWSTS, in turn, was delayed until the d-2 controversy quieted down, which resulted in an autumn 1981 issuance of the final PWSTS. That document suggests that Scenario 4, which includes the construction of the Copper River Highway, would pose the best means of dealing with the transportation needs of the Prince William Sound area.

Sentiment concerning the construction of the highway became divided. Some people and groups wanted the highway built while others wanting to preserve the lifestyle they have, did not want the highway built. Various public meetings were held in Valdez and Cordova; some times the majority of those present favored the highway's construction, at other times they were against it. Various groups and Municipalities issued resolutions of support. This issue (build/no build) had, of course, been a major concern to the people of Cordova who's lifestyle would be highly impacted. Citizen input culminated in the August 24, 1982 vote: 301 for the highway, 422 against. The Cordova City Council reversed its decision it made earlier that year and took a stand against further construction of the highway.

The issue of whether or not to build the Copper River Highway became paramount in early 1983 because of the availability of Emergency Relief (ER) funds for the Million Dollar bridge replacement. ER funds are made available at 100% funding for a period of 20 years after a natural disaster (the 1964 earthquake). The Federal government made available to the State \$18.5 million of ER to replace the Million Dollar Bridge. This money must be obligated by January 1, 1984, however, the federal government would not fund the bridge with ER money unless the State made a firm commitment to continue the route.

In early 1983 Governor Sheffield directed the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities to analyze the cost of the route and other aspects such as public sentiment, etc. Based on this and other information, Governor Sheffield issued a "no build" decision. With this decision, it appears that the Copper River Highway has been tabled indefinitely.