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ALCAN Highway opening ceremony, narration by J. Frank Willis

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Notes: Original on 7-inch tape, master copy on CD

A radio voice introduces the recording. Then another voice [probably J. Frank Willis] says he is speaking from an improvised control room in a rear of an American army truck that is parked way up at the Soldiers Summit which is in the high part of the Alaska-Canada Highway. About 100 yards from him, the official opening of the highway is being conducted. There are about 300 people gathered around the speaker's stand. They are mostly soldiers and civilian road workers from nearby camps but there are also a good number of civic and military dignitaries.

General K. D. Bush of the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers gives the opening speech for the highway, describing the scenery of the highway that stretches from Dawson Creek, Alberta, to Fairbanks, Alaska.

Willis continues: At the ceremonies, American and Canadian soldiers are standing on their respective sides. Peter Sturburg [sp?], who is speaking soon, is giving his report on the opening ceremonies. Reverend [Unclear] Charles Hammond of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church of Whitehorse gave the invocation. Minister of Public Works from Alberta, W. A. Fallow, was unable to attend but a message from [Unclear] was read. J. S. Brice, the district engineer of United States Public Roads gave a demonstration and spoke on behalf of the workers who helped to build the road. General [Unclear], who was in charge of defense of Canada Pacific Coast and he said a few words. After the official speeches, the first convoy of U.S. Army trucks will drive the highway to Fairbanks.

General K. D. Bush introduces Ian Alistair Mackenzie, a Canadian Minister of National Health who represents the Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King who can't attend the ceremony. Mackenzie gives a speech in which he says that the prime minister regrets not being able to attend the ceremonies and reads his message in which the prime minister congratulates the U. S. Army whose efforts have made the highway ready 4 months ahead of schedule and talks about collaboration between U. S. and Canada. U.S. built the roads while Canada built air fields for mutual defense. He believes the road will be a vital strategic factor in defense and will lead them to ultimate victory.

Then Mackenzie gives his own speech that congratulates the collaboration, peace and good will between the two nations. He also gives credit to the Corps of Engineers who are "engineering wonders of the whole world" and urges them to carry on their splendid work. The road is built for war but it will be used in peace times as well. [Applause.]

11:22 J. Frank Willis says that a few weeks ago the Governor of Alaska, Ernest Gruening visited the commanding general and staff of Northwest Service Command. Gruening is represented today by E. L. Bartlett, Secretary of State and an acting governor of Alaska. Mr. Bob Bartlett will speak to the territory and bring a message from the governor. He also represents an official flag of the territory [of Alaska] on behalf of the Alaskan chapter of the Daughters of Revolution. The flag is from Mrs. Donald McDonald of Fairbanks whose husband advocated the road construction for many years.

Bartlett gives a speech that begins with saying that he has been an Alaska Resident since 1905 and he has vivid memories of the difficulties of transportation which will now be eased by progress and the epical road. He congratulates everybody involved and is happy that U.S. and Canada are now tied in partnership.

14:18 Gruening's letter addresses General J. O. Connor of Northwest Service Command, Yukon Territory, and says he regrets not being able to be present in the opening of Alaskan Highway because of official business in Washington D. C. He also emphasizes the tactical significance of being able to transport military supplies to Alaska. He congratulates the builders, thanks them for their labor and thanks Canada who helped it to happen.

Bartlett continues that he will present the Alaska Flag from the Daughters of the American Revolution, which is a gift from Mrs. Donald McDonald. He gives it to General Bush.

James A. O'Connor, a U.S. Army Commanding General of Northwest Service Command is responding on behalf of the organization that is responsible of construction, maintenance and operation of the highway.

At 17:49 James O'Connor addresses the audience and says the road is a bond, a tie between U.S. and Canada. It's also the end of the romance of the pioneering of the road and he talks about the pioneering experience of road construction that was a challenge. Then he talks about the uniting function of the road, which is signified by its name that comprises of the first letters of Alaska and Canada. Of the road's 1600 miles, 1200 miles goes through Canada and it's generous of Canada to let American soldiers build it. He says it's in times of peril when nations get together to accomplish projects of "this magnitude."

He mentions a diary about the men of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition who were led by Carl Charles S. Buckley of the United States Army of Engineers. Previous to that there were Alexander Mackenzie, Frazer and others whose exploration surpasses the deeds of the main American explorers. Knowledge of this makes the U.S. Army proud of having built the Alcan Highway on American ground. James O'Connor thanks the people who built the road and says he's proud to be one of them and thanks the visitors who are present at the opening ceremony. Dignitaries present are: Mr. Mackenzie, Dr. Kenzell [sp?], General Burke [sp? Burgess?], General [Unclear], Mr. Bartlett and many others. He also thanks communities and their goodwill, and the Government of Canada. [Applause.]

At 25:46 James O'Connor [?] says he has a pair of scissors with which the ribbon will be cut. One blade from the scissors will be sent to Franklin Roosevelt and the National Archives of the United States and

the other will be for Prime Minister King and the National Archives of Canada.¹ Mr. Mackenzie and Mr. Bartlett will cut the ribbon.

The narrator Frank Willis tells that the representatives of the two nations are stepping towards the ribbon and the ends of the ribbon are held by four soldiers who were building the highway: Corporal [Refines] Sims, a Negro soldier, Private Alfred Jalufka from Texas and Master Sergeant Andrew E. Doyle of Philadelphia and Corporal John T. Reilly of Detroit, another Negro. Private Jalufka is the person who completed the road, having knocked down the last tree. [Canadian and U.S. National Anthems are played.]

28:58 Frank Willis continues by telling that the huge trucks have started rolling on the highway towards Fairbanks. They are the “first convoy to push through.” They are the symbolic first of the trucks that will carry weapons of war to Alaska “which will surely smash our enemies in the Pacific.” The broadcast was recorded by the CBC’s Speaker’s Department.

At 30:06 Frank Willis [?] says the next tape is the Alaska Highway documentary that is written by Rusty Heurlin from Whitehorse and it’s 15 minutes and 20 seconds long.

A narrator’s voice says that on April 1st, 1964 in Whitehorse the control of the Alaska Highway was turned over from Canadian Army’s Northwest Highway System to the Federal Department of Public Works and the ceremony took place at the same place where the Canadian Army assumed the control from American Army 18 years ago.

The story of Alaska Highway began on September 4th in 1897 when inspector J. D. Moody from the Northwest Mounted Police set out from Edmonton with three men and Indian guides. They blazed a trail from Edmonton to Klondike. They were gathering information on the best route through Rockies and through Northern British Columbia to the gold fields. Moody and his men faced various adversities: Once they had to chop their way through 300 miles of fallen timber and another time a forest fire almost wiped them out and only a change of wind saved them from death and so on. Eventually they reached the Pelly River and when they arrived at Fort Selkirk, they had been traveling for 14 months. Moody reported that their route north was completely impossible.

32:13 The great gold rush to the Klondike continued and in 1905 the Canadian Government decided to build an all-Canadian route along Moody’s old trail, 750 miles from Peace River to Teslin [or Tetlin?] Lake. Superintendent Constantine, the first Mounted Police to enter the Yukon Valley was put in charge of the Athabasca District after leaving the Klondike and the monumental task was given to him. The expedition consisted of 30 men and 60 horses and the road was 8 feet wide and had a [unclear, guest

¹ Both the ceremonial ribbon and the Canadian half of the scissors are located at Laurier House in Ottawa (<http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/on/laurier/index.aspx>).

house?] every 30-miles. Constantine and his men bridged bogs and rivers, hacked through the forest and after 3 years the government abandoned the project. The road was to be called the Road to Nowhere.

Donald McDonald of the Alaska Road Commission started a 1-man campaign for a highway that would eventually lead from Panama to Polar Sea. [There is a sound clip from 1928 where he asks for the road from the Congress.] He lobbied it for 26 years, seeing the military value of the road and in 1939, just 18 months before Pearl Harbor he said he couldn't understand people placing their reliance on Pearl Harbor and that Alaska doesn't share their blind faith [a sound clip from him].

34:52 When Pearl Harbor was attacked in December, 1941 and Japanese Troops invaded the Aleutian Islands, McDonald was taken seriously. The decision about the highway was made within hours and on 4th of February, 1942, President Roosevelt commenced the construction of the highway. [Sound clip where Roosevelt talks about the road that is to be built to supply troops.] The work started in March, 1942.

On another sound clip a woman's voice tells that the existing chain of airports from Edmonton to Fairbanks dictated the highway's route and that the construction started simultaneously at Whitehorse, in Yukon, Dawson Creek, British Columbia and in Big Delta, Alaska. Pipelines for petroleum started. All the three communities grew from small towns into buzzing construction centers.

[Following is done using different narrator voices.] For 9 months and 11 days the soldiers and the civilian contractors worked in the wilderness to join the sections. In many instances the road follows the old trails of the Klondikers and fur traders. 10, 000 men helped to build it with the available machinery and trying to avoid permafrost problems that thawed and sunk the road.

Supplying men and equipment was another problem, especially during the war when there were many shortages. The road crew showed ingenuity with forging new parts to their machines to replace the broken ones and using berries and occasionally bear stakes in kitchens. Mosquitoes were everywhere and the men became grouchy because of them, being happy when the weather turned cold.

39:19 New names joined the names of old Gold Rush names: Coal River, Muncho [Lake], Watson Lake, Rancheria [Creek], Morley [River], Teslin [Lake], Johnson's Crossing, Squanga [Lake], Jake's Corner, Champaign, Canyon, Desdiash, Haines Junction, Kluane [Lake], Sheep Camp, Destruction Bay, Burwash, Corduroin [?], Siwash Camp, Snag, and the spot that tried men's souls and was considered Siberia, the Donjeck. The milepost numbers that designated camps became small communities.

A woman's voice is talking about Whitehorse that used to have 300 souls in the Gold Rush days had thousands of men pour in. The airport was enlarged. [Unclear] had a camp of thousands of men and temporary houses were constructed to house them. Women were scarce and it was customary to charge \$1 dollar fee for a couple who went to dances while lone men were charged \$2 dollars and women were paid to attend. There was gambling and money around, as well as a profitable rum running business from Skagway to Whitehorse. The military police were everywhere so the town was literally American controlled.

In 9 months and 11 days, the road was completed and a ceremony was held at Kluane Lake on November 20th, 1942 to commemorate the completion of the road. The spot was named Soldier's Summit. [A sound clip from the speech of Colonel Bush, the Chief of Staff of the Northwest Service Command is presented.]

J. A. O'Connor spoke too and Ian Mackenzie read a message from Prime Minister King that said that the builders of the highway have made an enduring monument for the benefit of both nations. Bartlett and Mackenzie cut the ribbon and the first trucks started rolling towards Fairbanks.

42:34 The United States turned the highway over to Canada 6 months after the end of the war and Canada was confronted with maintaining the road. On April 3rd, 1946 they had a ceremony at the milepost 917 near Whitehorse where Canadian Government, represented by General McNorton and [Unclear] Walsh, accepted the title to the highway. A bulldozer was driven off the ramp by an American and it was handed over to a Canadian soldier who drove away. The highway had changed hands. McNorton gives a speech in which he talks how Canada has done their share of financing the road. Then Canadian army worked year after year to build emergency air-strips, roads off the highway and temporary bridges. They had to deal with an endless variety of trouble from landslides to dust and glaciers. Also, truckers and tourists had started traveling it and road camps grew into communities.

44:24 The civilian travel was a trickle in 1946 but now the road has improved so much that nearly a million cars used it last year [1963] and the rate has increased annually since 1946. Now in 1964 the army gave the responsibility of the highway to the Department of Public Works since it had more civilian than military significance. Old-timers and people who have moved to the Yukon since the end of the war are saddened that they will lose their army friends "but where there are roads, people will follow."

[Music is playing. Break in the recording.]

At 48:57 the recordings begin again from the beginning.

[End of the recording.]