

Buckwheat Donahue
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Skagway, AK
Skagway Oral History Project

- **Buckwheat:** Was born in Perry, Oklahoma, and moved to California soon after. He was 32 when he moved to Skagway in 1983. Upon arriving, he opened Packer Expeditions (which he has since sold) and bar tended at the Red Onion. The population in 1983 was about 450 people, and there was no railroad. He was interested in the tourism business because the town had such a great history and beautiful wilderness.
- **Tourism Director:** Buckwheat has been the tourism director in Skagway since 1999, and has hiked the Chilkoot Trail 10 or 15 times. He attributes the amount of people hiking the trails now to the National Park Service's preservation efforts.
- **Changes in tourism:** There was the gold rush tourism on the White Star Line Ships in 1899-1900. There were also tourist trains running, and men like George Rapuzzi, a man active in the early days of Skagway to advocate for tourism. During WWII tourism almost vanished; the railroad had been commandeered by the Army, and the town was very militaristic. After the war, with the completion of the Alaska Highway, tourism began picking up again. In 1983, 43,000 cruisers (cruise ships) came into Skagway. Skagway has since developed in the last 25 years 10 fold in numbers of cruise ships coming into Skagway, and numbers of tourists. Some other changes include the coming of the Dutch American company in 1992, which brought Caribbean merchants who mostly sell jewelery. Some local Skagwegians do not like the influx of foreign owned businesses, but it has been financially beneficial for the city.
- **Tourism's affect on Skagway:** It helps with funding projects, the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line funded a climbing wall in the Skagway Recreation Center, funding is distributed to the Skagway Arts Council, it provides employment, 80% of the revenue from the cruisers goes to Skagway. Skagway recently acquired an x-ray machine at the clinic and the Sea Walk (docks leading to downtown) was all funded by tourism.
- **The Buckwheat Ski Classic:** The BSC is a fund-raiser for the Skagway Ski Club and is held annually every March. It started in 1987 along the Klondike Highway- an access route to Whitehorse and was a "Hello, Canada" border friendship race. Buckwheat also notes that Skagway wanted to attract "beautiful women in lycra" in the winter. The Eagles in Skagway is the official sponsor.
- **Dyea to Dawson Race:** Dyea to Dawson organizers Jeff Brady and Buckwheat Donahue of Skagway thought a race down the Yukon River would be fun, to commemorate the gold rush. It was held on the 100th anniversary of the gold rush in 1997-98, and was so popular that it became a yearly summer Yukon River race called the "Yukon River Quest." The Dyea to Dawson race required racers to carry all their gear in the 500+ mile, 4 day event. The Yukon River Quest takes racers from Whitehorse to Dawson City, and there are hundreds of participants in this longest paddling race in the world. The race is currently in it's 11th year.
- **The Heart Beat Trail:** In 2003 Buckwheat was in Juneau and began having heart episodes, and had to be admitted to the hospital. Had he been in Skagway, which at the time did not have any suitable cardiology program, he may not have faired so well. As part of his healthier lifestyle and in an effort to raise money for the Dahl Memorial Clinic in Skagway, he embarked on several walking/paddling expeditions. He walked from Skagway to Whitehorse (110 miles), and then from Whitehorse to Dawson City in the Yukon (another 450 miles), and on October 1, 2005 he began the Heartbeat Trail, a cross-continental walk and paddle that took him from Florida to Alaska, finishing on September 8, 2006.) He has since raised about \$80,000 for the city of Skagway's Clinic.