

H78-77

Edwin Rhodes, Paul McCarthy

Fairbanks, Alaska

June 29, 1975

Paul McCarthy said he had been thinking about the importance of the Richardson Highway to Alaska. He was able to obtain funding for a photographic study of the Richardson Highway. He and Edwin Rhodes went through the archives at the University of Alaska and looked through several hundred or thousand photographs. They also photographed the highway in 1975 to compare with what it looked like years ago. They have 1000-1500 current photographs from between Fairbanks and Valdez. They think the highway is changing rapidly because of the pipeline construction and the much heavier traffic now using it. The agency that funded the study was the Alaska Humanities Forum. Paul and Edwin are trying to interpret the history of the highway. They hope the public will see how the highway has contributed to community in Alaska. It was the first long highway that connected major communities in Alaska. It has been used for over seventy years. Edwin Rhodes is introduced. Edwin said he will discuss the origin and development of the Richardson Highway as we know it today. Historically Interior Alaska was entered via the Yukon River. During the early days prior to the American occupation, the Russians occupied the southern coast and entered short distances up into the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. The British, in pursuit of furs, came in from the Canadian side, down the Porcupine River and up the Yukon River from its head. During the years preceding the purchase of Alaska there was a major effort to construct a telegraph line from the United States to Europe through Siberia. As a result of this effort the Western Union Company launched a survey of the telegraph line coming up from Southeast Alaska and up to the headwaters of the Yukon, down the Yukon and then across the Bering Strait into Siberia. Robert Kennicott and William Dahl were two individuals that contributed to the knowledge of Interior Alaska during that survey. After the purchase of Alaska there was no real interest in Interior Alaska. The primary interest was the continuation of fur trade and fishing. Gold had been discovered by the Russians, but it was not pursued to any great extent. The real magnet to the interior of Alaska was gold. It followed up the discoveries in California and Colorado gold rushes. The Cassiar gold discoveries happened in British Columbia in 1871 and as a result there were a lot of American entrances through southeast Alaska. In 1880 Juneau and Harris discovered gold in what became the Treadwell Mine. A lot of gold seekers continued on up through Canada up through the Yukon Valley in the 1880s. The only overland access into the Yukon was through Canada. Otherwise one could go up to the Yukon and it was only open for three months. In the 1880s there was a lot of interest by the United States government to provide overland access through U.S. territory. In 1884 Captain Abercrombie was directed to explore the Copper River Valley and any other possible accesses into the interior of Alaska. In 1885 Lt. Alan was able to traverse over to

the Copper River and followed a route up to the Tanana River. At the same time Lt. Glenn entered Cook Inlet and was able to traverse up to the Copper River on what is now the Glenn Highway. In 1890s gold was discovered on the Yukon and the major activity in American territory was in the upper Yukon River centering around Circle. To get to Circle through the Canadian route one had to cross the border and for this reason the army established garrisons at Eagle and Tanana. The headquarters was at Saint Michael because that was still the primary American entrance into Alaska. In 1896 gold was discovered at Klondike and this was the main stimulus that triggered the present day growth of Alaska and northwestern Canada. The Chilkoot Trail was the main route to the Klondike gold fields, but other routes were used. In 1897 there was a rumor that there was a route from Valdez that would permit a shorter and easier route to Dawson. In the spring of 1898 over 2,000 gold seekers attempted to cross the Valdez glacier to the Copper River Valley and then up to the gold fields. Many failed, but that was the beginning of the town of Valdez. It was an easier access inland than the Copper River. In 1898 Captain Abercrombie was told to establish a military trail from Valdez to Eagle. It was started in 1899 and was completed by 1904. In the interim Felix Pedro discovered gold at Pedro Creek and Captain Barnette established his supply post. This was the beginning of Fairbanks. There was no direct access from Fairbanks to the coast at that time. The miners started operating and most of them came up the Yukon River and the Tanana River. In 1904 a district judge in Fairbanks died and Mike Mahoney volunteered to take him by dogsled to Valdez. Mike Mahoney made it to Valdez. The army had conducted the pioneer trail exploring. The Road Commission was established in 1905 under the War Department. Captain W.P. Richardson was the first commissioner and he designated as the first priority to develop the trail from Valdez to Fairbanks. That was the beginning of the Richardson Highway. Most of the time in the northern country it is easier to travel during the winter. The dogsled had been established for many years in northern country and with reasonable preparation horse drawn sleds could be used. The first improvement to the Valdez-Fairbanks trail was to prepare it for winter travel. The area from Delta Junction to Copper Center had to be constructed by the road commission. Other portions were improved. The trail had to be six feet wide. It was used in the winter for the first three years to bring mail, passenger and freight travel, and provided fresh meat by allowing cattle to be trailed. The next step for the commission was to prepare a wagon road. It had to be eight feet wide and had to be crowned and ditched for drainage. The biggest problems were crossing muskegs and swamps and open bodies of waters. There were a number of techniques that were developed then and are still in use today. Use of insulation under the road was used to prevent the permafrost from thawing in 1910. Another technique was to blade the surface off and let the permafrost melt and then fill in the road. Copper was discovered by the early prospectors and noted by the army explorations. Abercrombie noted that a railroad could be built from Valdez, across Marshall Pass and up the Copper River. The Guggenheim foundation bought the mining properties and built a railroad strictly to get the copper out of the area. During the early surveys for the railroad there were a number of railroad companies formed. There was a rivalry between a railroad going up the Copper River and a railroad coming out of Valdez. There are still signs along

Keystone Canyon of the early effort to build a railroad. The Copper River route won out. Mike Heaney who built the Whitepass Railroad was the primary engineer who located and constructed the Copper River Railroad from Kennecott. The highway continued to be upgraded. In 1910 the first wagon made it from Fairbanks to Valdez. Bobby Sheldon drove a car from Fairbanks to Valdez in 1913. Vehicle travel became more and more common. It required better surfacing on the road. Gravel was used. WWII caused a significant increase in activity in the Interior. The Alaska Highway was built as well as the Glenn Highway. The years following WWII saw further improvements in the highway. It was paved in 1951. The use of the highway for recreation and tourism continued to increase. There was some increase with the construction of the DEW Line. The Port of Valdez had lost a good deal of significance due to the construction of the Alaska Railroad. The next step in the history of the Richardson Highway was the construction of the Alaska Pipeline. The audience was asked if there were any questions. Mike Dalton made a comment about Bobby Sheldon. Edwin Rhodes commented about Bobby Sheldon's first car. There was a question about a locomotive being hauled overland. Edwin said they were hauled overland by wagon. There was a question about Juneau being established as the capitol without any roads. Edwin explained that all the action in Alaska's early history was in the southeast area. The fishing industry was of great importance. Mike Dalton asked about stream crossings on the Richardson Highway. Edwin said there were several ferry crossings. The last one in operation was across the Tanana and operated up into the 1930s. A permanent bridge was put up in about 1940-41. There were early foot bridges built by people using the trail. The horses had to ford the streams. The Road Commission began building bridges over all the streams in 1906 beginning with the Tazlina River in the Copper River Basin. They were wooden bridges that usually had to be rebuilt after break-up in the spring. Later they were constructed out of steel with high foundations. There was a question about the roadhouses on the highway. Edwin said they were like the old post houses from ancient days. They were established according to an average travel during a day. Along the Richardson Highway, the roadhouses were ten to twenty miles apart. Paul McCarthy explained the photographic displays. He talked about the experiences of some of the early bicyclists on the highway. He commented on some of the roadhouses. He believed that the roadhouse at Copper Center was still offering full services.