

Evan Jones and Alaska Coal Mining

IF YOU VISIT HOMER TODAY, YOU CAN pick up coal along the beaches of Homer Spit, and use it to barbecue your lunch. Remains from the cooking and heating fires of ancient Eskimos in the Kachemak Bay region prove that just such coal was sometimes burned as fuel in prehistoric times.

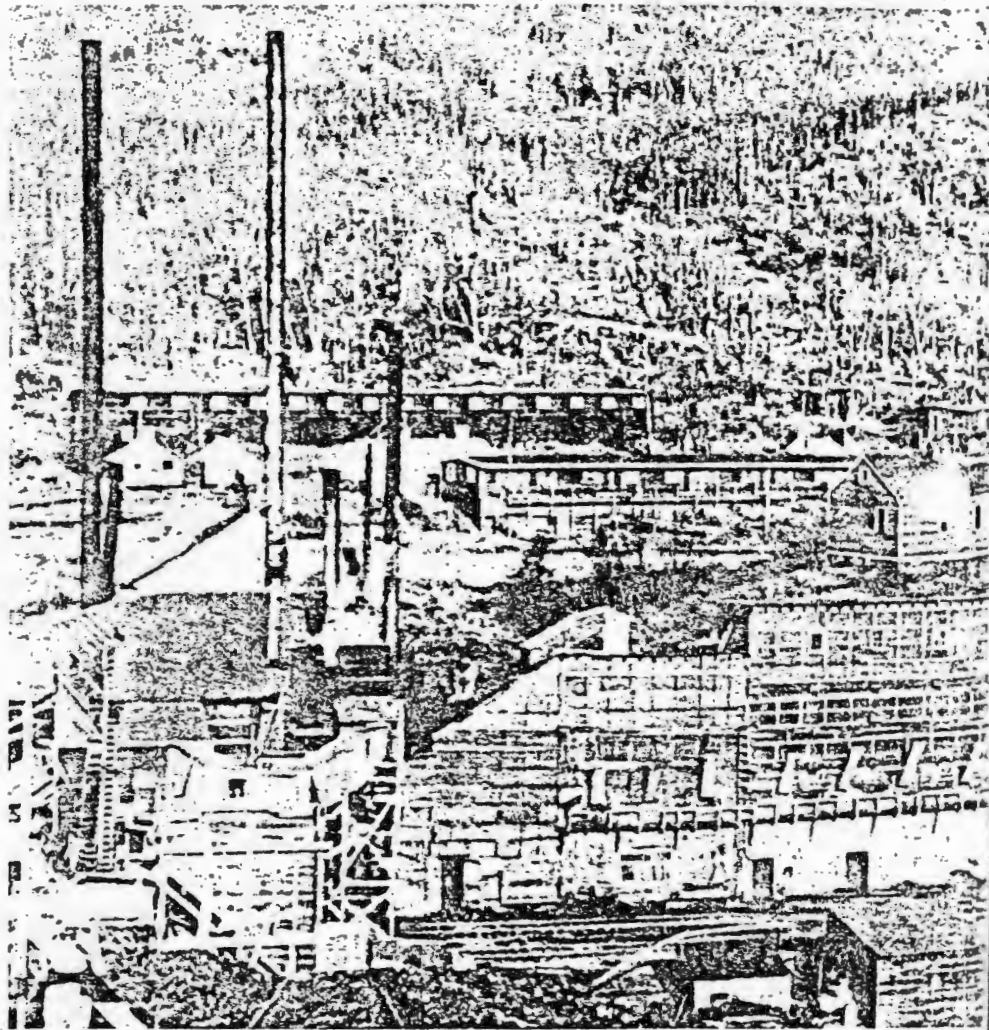
Lignite deposits were "discovered" by the British sea captain Portlock in 1786 near Port Graham on the west coast of the Kenai Peninsula. These same deposits were being mined in 1855 by early Russian settlers of the peninsula.

Coal became big business in Alaska when, in 1896, gold seekers Joseph Wilson and Jimmie Teck spotted the Matanuska coal deposits as they were traveling up the Kings River. The Geological Survey verified these deposits in 1898, and in 1914 Congress passed legislation permitting leasing of Alaskan coal lands; the Navy wanted coal for its Pacific fleet.

Coal and the Alaska Railroad are closely related. Access to coal fields was one of the main reasons the railroad was built here. After the completion of the Alaska Railroad in 1923, total annual tonnage of coal shipped within Alaska soon ran between 1.3 and 1.5 million tons.

A branch of the Alaska Railroad reached Moose Creek in 1916-17, and "it is said," relates Don Irwin in his *The Colorful Matanuska Valley*, "that the first coal mine to operate in the Valley was the Baxter Mine on Moose Creek. . . . The Baxter mine car track was built from the mine to the brow of the hill overlooking the main line of the railroad. Coal was dumped from the mine car into a chute which carried the coal to a railroad car set on a siding. The Baxter Mine was developed by Evan Jones."

Who was Evan Jones?



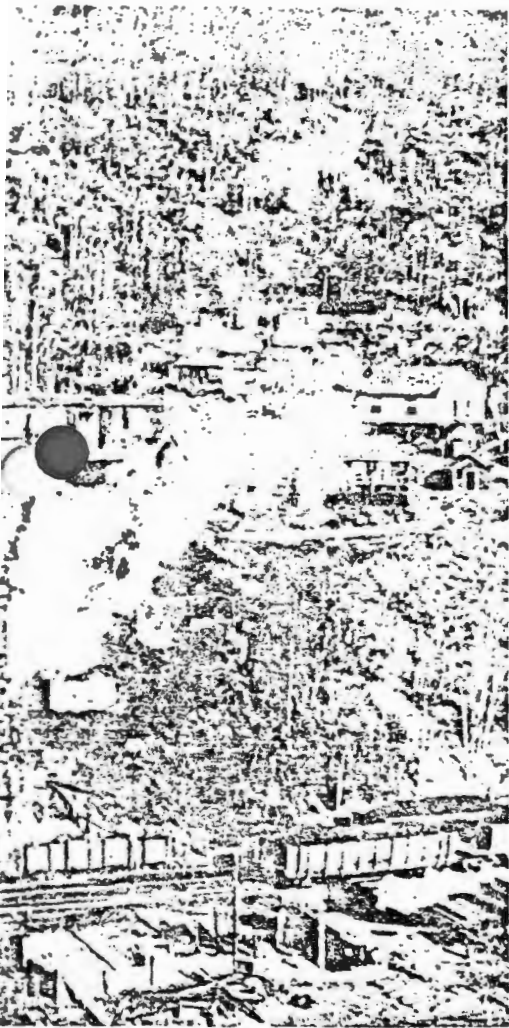
The Evan Jones Coal Company plant at Jonesville. (Alaska Historical Society)

Born in Wales in 1880, Evan Jones left his homeland for Manitoba when he was a teen-ager. About 1905 he moved to the state of Washington and in 1906, in Seattle, married Bronwen Morgan (also of Welsh extraction). Evan was entirely self-taught in the matters of mining and geology. He worked in the coal mines around

Ravensdale and Black Diamond in Washington, and later in British Columbia.

In the fall of 1917, Evan Jones was hired as superintendent of mines of the Alaska Railroad. He and Bronwen and their two daughters, Vivian, nearly 6, and Vanney, 9, moved to Eska, about 20 miles northeast of Palmer.

By ANN CHANDONNET



Evan and Bronwen Jones's wedding picture, 1906. (Courtesy of the Heritage Library, National Bank of Alaska, Anchorage)

Jones was in charge of the Chickaloon and Eska mines and he spent half his time at each site. At first, recalls Bronwen Jones, there were 125 to 150 workers at the Eska Mine, living the lives of bachelors. But soon those with families began to build private houses and bring their wives and children out, and by 1919 there were 21 children, a school and a teacher, Miss Ora D. Clark.

Evan Jones spent 3 years at Eska-Chickaloon. Then he and his family

moved to a new mine site, which was named Jonesville. (Jonesville is 16 miles northeast of Palmer. A post office was established at Jonesville on November 11, 1921. Evan Jones himself was postmaster from May 23, 1922, until November 1, 1923. The post office was discontinued on February 28, 1944.) The Evan Jones Coal Mine, owned by Jones and several partners, opened in 1920 but did not begin productive mining until completion of a railroad spur connecting it with the Eska spur in 1921. It soon became the major producer of the district and continued to be so until at least 1962: 300,000 tons of coal (an annual revenue for the Alaska Railroad of \$700,000) were hauled each year over the Jonesville spur. Matanuska coal was used for electricity, domestic heating and coal-burning steam engines. Eventually oil supplanted coal as a fuel, and

Matanuska coal came to be used almost exclusively by three power plants, two of them at the military posts just outside Anchorage, the third owned by Chugach Electric.

In 1952 the Evan Jones Mine employed 250 miners and took out about 1,000 tons of coal per day.

In 1961, a natural gas pipeline was completed from Kenai to Anchorage, jeopardizing the coal industry at Jonesville; the military bases soon converted to gas. Damage to the rail spurs by the March 27, 1964, earthquake was another blow. By the end of April 1964, \$125,000 had been spent on repairs to the Matanuska-Jonesville branch line alone.

Underground shaft mining as Jones knew it ended about 1955. Then strip mining began, under federal ownership. Under the Statehood Act, the mine was assumed by the State of Alaska about 1964-5 and continued operations until the area ran out of ore and into fault complications.

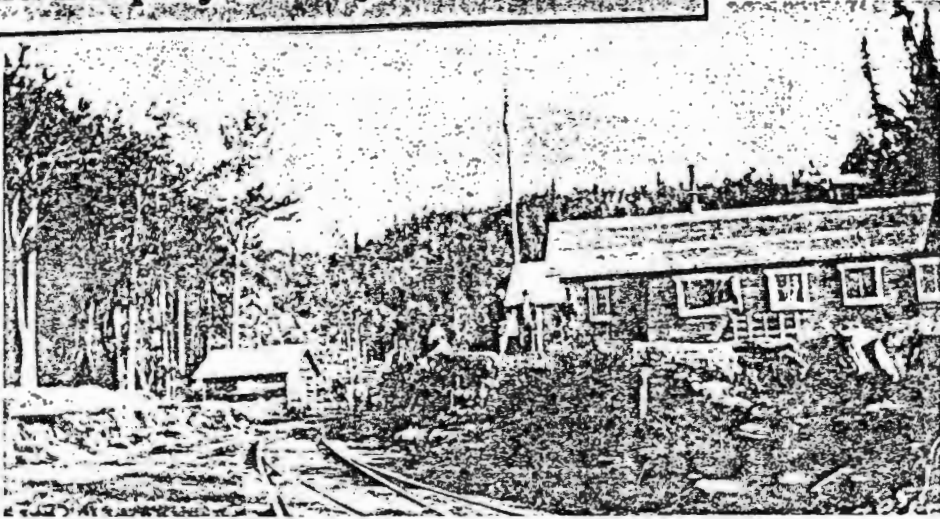
Jones's methods of prospecting involved a lot of walking. He would walk back and forth along sections of the railroad, looking for favorable outcroppings; for recreation, he would hike up one side of a mountain and down the other to a favorite fishing spot. He sold his share of the Jonesville location, recalls Bronwen, "because he was more fond of prospecting and starting up coal mines than of continuing with them."

In 1923 the Jones family left Alaska so Bronwen could get medical treatment at the Mayo Clinic. While she was recuperating, Evan decided to do a little prospecting in Washington, around Ravensdale. One day he happened to meet Austin E. "Cap" Lathrop on the street, and Lathrop, who had large holdings in Alaska, invited Jones to become superintendent

(ANN)

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**vans Jones, A Welchman, Staked
at A Claim That Would, 30 Years
Later, Pump Out 1,000 Tons
Of Coal A Day
And Employ Nearly 300 Miners**



The railroad spur at Eska, 1917, with the railroad tracks in the foreground.
(Courtesy of Mrs. L. D. Davenport)

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of his Suntrana Mine. Consequently, the Jones family returned to Alaska in the fall of 1925. Suntrana, part of Lathrop's Healy River Corporation, is north of the Alaska Range; reached by a 4.4-mile spur of the Alaska Railroad from Healy.

Bronwen and the girls lived in Anchorage, on Fifth Avenue between H and I streets, in a house that is still standing. (The municipality has offered the house to Bronwen, but she has no means to preserve it.)

About 1928 Jones left Lathrop and moved to Admiralty Island to investigate a coal deposit there, but the deposits were not large enough to become a full-scale mining operation.

Jones returned to the Eska Mine, and about 1932 founded and developed the Wishbone Hill Coal Company on Moose Creek near Jonesville. He also prospected in the Houston area, near Willow.

Evan Jones died in 1950 in Homer, where he had gone to put in an exploratory tunnel. Seventy, he was the victim of a massive heart attack.

Bronwen Jones, who was 90 in November 1978, has resided in the Palmer Pioneers' Home since 1971. Her delights are patchwork quilting (even the backrest and seat of her rocker are covered with patchwork, each square outlined with contrasting embroidery) and her most recent great-grandchildren, twins, the first within memory in the Jones clan.

In addition to Vivian and Vanney, who accompanied their parents to Alaska in 1917, Bronwen Jones bore two more daughters in Alaska — Martha Bernice or "Marnice" and Margaret. All four are married: two still live in the Anchorage area, and regularly visit their mother. □

ANN CHANDONNET, a native of Massachusetts, lives at Chugiak, just north of Anchorage, with her husband and children and pursues an active career as a free-lance writer. Previous articles in *The ALASKA JOURNAL*® were "Sophia Pletnikoff's Cloth Made of Grass," in the Winter 1975 issue; "The Goodales," in the Autumn 1975 issue, and "Margaret Mielke" in the Winter 1976 issue.