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## Alaska’s People Documents

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*ALASKA STUDIES • UNIT 3, Alaska’s People Documents*
Anchorage School District
Bilingual Enrollment 2/19/03

- Spanish: 27%
- Tagalog: 13%
- Samoan: 11%
- Hmong: 10%
- Korean: 7%
- Lao: 5%
- Yup'ik: 5%
- Mien: 3%
- Inupiaq: 2%
- Russian: 2%
- Other: 15%
Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

All humans are the same species, and we all descended from the same ancient ancestors from Africa. To aliens from outer space, we would look so much like each other that they would not be able to tell us apart. Just as to most humans every ant looks alike, so to outsiders the differences between humans would seem insignificant.

But even though we know we are all basically alike and are all descended from the same ancestors, we also notice that every human being is unique. We act, think, and feel differently, and we look different. We can accept differences in the people we know, but the problem comes when we are suspicious of differences in those we don’t know.

It all started long ago, before the Ice Ages, when people lived in small groups scattered all over the world. Because they were weak and vulnerable, people in one group learned to fear people they did not know. Perhaps the foreign groups would want to take their land or food, or even kill them. Parents taught their children to be cautious around people who sounded or looked strange.

Today, some of this fear of strangers is still with us, and some of it is wise. We should be sure a person deserves our trust before we give it to him or her. But some of it causes problems, especially if we are afraid of someone or decide not to like someone just because of the way he or she looks.

The idea of “race” probably derived from that ancient and widespread human fear of strangers. We all notice that people from different parts of the world look different from each other. Inuit look different from Scots; Japanese look different from Cape Verdeans. Several hundred years ago, in the midst of an era of categorizing plants and animals, scientists began categorizing human beings as well. They divided up all of humankind based on what they looked like and where they came from. They decided that Africans fit into one category, Asians into another, Europeans another, and so on. They named these categories “races.” But they did not stop with classification. They argued that races weren’t different from each other in looks alone, but that their abilities, intelligence, personalities, and characters were also different. And they went even further, drawing charts that asserted that some of these so-called “races” were superior to others. It is no surprise that, because these scientists were European, they put Europeans, whom they called “Caucasians,” at the top of the scale.

Many people believed in this hierarchy for many generations, and taught their children to believe it. This is why people were able to convince themselves that slavery in the United States was not wrong; if they believed that people from Africa were less able than those from Europe, they need not feel guilty about keeping Africans in subservient positions. If they believed that American Indians were not as smart as the White settlers who displaced them, they could feel that they were doing the right thing when they took their land and farmed it to feed their own families.

Many people still use the term “race” to describe people. Some still think that your race also determines your abilities, intelligence, personality, and character. But most people now know that these other traits are not connected with looks. The world has changed since the days thousands of years ago when our ancestors were afraid of every new face they saw. Now we
work closely with people from all over the world, and cannot afford to judge them on outward appearance.

Besides, nowadays almost everyone on earth has ancestors from at least two continents. Many people have ancestors from three or four. The problem with the idea of “race” in today’s world is, how do we decide which race we belong to if our ancestors came from so many different places? And what difference does it make?

There is another way of dividing people up, called “ethnicity.” Ethnicity is not based on what you look like or on your inherited abilities, but on your culture and, sometimes, your language. You are usually born into an ethnic group, but you can also be adopted into one, or learn a culture, or marry into one. Ethnicity depends not just on your culture and beliefs, but also on whether you are accepted by members of the group.

A third, related concept is “national origin.” Most Americans have many different national origins, because their ancestors came from so many different countries in other continents. For some Americans, national origin is very important: they practice customs and speak the language of their ancestors. For others, it is not important; they might know where their ancestors came from, but they do not feel that they are a part of that country’s culture.

As humans, we can’t help but notice differences. But we need to keep those differences in perspective. Neither your “race” nor your “ethnicity” tells what kind of person you are. These are shorthand ways of typing you. And they are used more often by people who don’t know you than those who do. Unfortunately, your “race” or “ethnicity” can give people the wrong idea if they don’t bother to learn about your character as well.
Race in the U.S. Census Data

Updated every 10 years. http://factfinder.census.gov

Definition:

The concept of race as used by the Census Bureau reflects self-identification by people according to the race or races with which they most closely identify. These categories are sociopolitical constructs and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature. Furthermore, the race categories include both racial and national-origin groups.

The racial classifications used by the Census Bureau adhere to the October 30, 1997, Federal Register Notice entitled, “Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity” issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

White. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as “White” or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab, or Polish.

Black or African American. A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as “Black, African Am., or Negro,” or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian.

American Indian and Alaska Native. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment.

Asian. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes “Asian Indian,” “Chinese,” “Filipino,” “Korean,” “Japanese,” “Vietnamese,” and “Other Asian.”

Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. It includes people who indicate their race as “Native Hawaiian,” “Guamanian or Chamorro,” “Samoan,” and “Other Pacific Islander.”

Some other race. Includes all other responses not included in the “White”, “Black or African American”, “American Indian and Alaska Native”, “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” race categories described above. Respondents providing write-in entries such as multiracial, mixed, interracial, Wesort, or a Hispanic/Latino group (for example, Mexican, Puetro Rican, or Cuban) in the “Some other race” category are included here.
Race in the U.S. Census Data

**Two or more races.** People may have chosen to provide two or more races either by checking two or more race response check boxes, by providing multiple write-in responses, or by some combination of check boxes and write-in responses.

**Comparability.** The data on race in Census 2000 are not directly comparable to those collected in previous censuses.

The concept of race is separate from the concept of Hispanic origin. Percentages for the various race categories add to 100 percent, and should not be combined with the percent Hispanic. Tallies that show race categories for Hispanics and non-Hispanics separately are also available.

**Scope and Methodology:**

The data on race were derived from answers to the question on race that was asked of all people in Census 2000.
# Anchorage and Alaska QuickFacts
## from the U.S. Census Bureau

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People QuickFacts</th>
<th>Anchorage Borough</th>
<th>Alaska</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population, 2001 estimate</td>
<td>264,937</td>
<td>634,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population percent change, April 1, 2000-July 1, 2001</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population, 2000</td>
<td>260,283</td>
<td>626,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population, percent change, 1990 to 2000</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons under 5 years old, percent, 2000</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons under 18 years old, percent, 2000</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons 65 years old and over, percent, 2000</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female persons, percent, 2000</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White persons, percent, 2000</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American persons, percent, 2000</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native persons, percent, 2000</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian persons, percent, 2000</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, percent, 2000</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons reporting some other race, percent, 2000</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons reporting two or more races, percent, 2000</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, percent, 2000</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin, percent, 2000</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
<td>67.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living in same house in 1995 and 2000, pct age 5+, 2000</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign born persons, percent, 2000</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language other than English spoken at home, pct age 5+, 2000</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduates, percent of persons age 25+, 2000</td>
<td>90.3%</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher, pct of persons age 25+, 2000</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons with a disability, age 5+, 2000</td>
<td>34,280</td>
<td>83,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean travel time to work, workers age 16+ (minutes), 2000</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing units, 2000</td>
<td>100,368</td>
<td>260,978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeownership rate, 2000</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing units in multi-unit structures, percent, 2000</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2000</td>
<td>$160,700</td>
<td>$144,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Households, 2000 ................................................................. 94,822 .............. 221,600
Persons per household, 2000 ......................................................... 2.67 .............. 2.74
Median household money income, 1999 ........................................... $55,546 .............. $51,571
Per capita money income, 1999 ..................................................... $25,287 .............. $22,660
Persons below poverty, percent, 1999 ............................................. 7.3% .............. 9.4%

**Business QuickFacts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anchorage Borough</th>
<th>Alaska</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private nonfarm establishments, 1999</td>
<td>7,929</td>
<td>18,433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private nonfarm employment, 1999</td>
<td>108,021</td>
<td>198,459</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonemployer establishments, 1999</td>
<td>17,894</td>
<td>48,441</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacturers shipments, 1997 ($1000)</td>
<td>322,318</td>
<td>3,304,952</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail sales, 1997 ($1000)</td>
<td>3,114,874</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail sales per capita, 1997</td>
<td>$12,392</td>
<td>$10,268</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minority-owned firms, percent of total, 1997</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women-owned firms, percent of total, 1997</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing units authorized by building permits, 2000</td>
<td>1,190</td>
<td>2,1471</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal funds and grants, 2001 ($1000)</td>
<td>2,532,187</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local government employment - full-time equivalent, 1997</td>
<td>7,869</td>
<td>23,132</td>
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**Geography QuickFacts**

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<thead>
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<th>Anchorage Borough</th>
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<tr>
<td>Land area, 2000 (square miles)</td>
<td>1,697</td>
<td>571,951</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persons per square mile, 2000</td>
<td>153.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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</table>

(a.) Includes persons reporting only one race.
(b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.


From: [http://quickfacts.census.gov](http://quickfacts.census.gov)
SOMETIMES, QUESTIONS JUST AREN'T POLITE

Native language classes teach manners in addition to words

By SAND GEREJEVIC

It is a sunny spring morning, but the wind is strong and cold. In the distance, a lone figure stand
against the wind, wrapped in a warm coat and scarf. The path ahead is a mix of snow and mud. A
sibilant sound echoes through the air, carried on the wind.

The language spoken here is one of the Native Alaskan languages. It is a complex system, with
different sounds and nuances that are difficult to capture in writing. The people who speak this
language are proud of their heritage, and they work hard to keep it alive.

As the wind picks up, the figure takes a deep breath and continues on. The sound of the
language grows louder, carried on the wind.

In the background, a group of children can be seen playing in the snow. They are speaking in the
same language as the lone figure, their words carried on the wind. The children are happy, and
their laughter fills the air.

The figure reaches a small building, where a group of people are gathered. They are
engaged in a discussion, their voices raised. The language spoken is the same as that of the
lone figure, and the sound of it fills the air.

The building is a community center, and inside, a group of people are gathered around a
table. They are reading and discussing the language. The sound of the language fills the
room, a constant presence.

The people who speak this language are proud of their heritage, and they work hard to keep it
alive. They believe that their language is a part of their identity, and they are committed to
preserving it for future generations.

The figure stands in the doorway, observing the group. They are filled with pride and
commitment, knowing that their work is important.

As the wind picks up, the figure takes a deep breath and continues on. The sound of the
language grows louder, carried on the wind.

The people in the community center continue to read and discuss the language, their
voices raised. The sound of the language fills the room, a constant presence.

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commitment, knowing that their work is important.
ALASKA'S GREATEST DISASTER

The 1918 Spanish Influenza Epidemic

by Ronald L. Lautaret

The 1918 Spanish Influenza epidemic was one of the most deadly plagues ever experienced by mankind. The epidemic killed more people in a shorter time span than any other event in human history. Estimates are that twenty million people perished worldwide. The disease mysteriously appeared and swept the world in three waves, leaving no region untouched.

Alaska was no exception: the epidemic swept across the Territory in 1918-1919, leaving thousands of dead in its wake. Despite untold numbers of earthquakes, floods, fires, shipwrecks, plane crashes and other tragedies which have occurred since then in Alaska, the 1918 epidemic remains today the greatest human disaster in Alaska's recorded history.

Although of uncertain origin, the influenza seems most likely to have started in overcrowded army "boot camps," or maybe in the feld trenches of the battlefront. It is unlikely that it originated in Spain, nevertheless it became known as the "Spanish flu."

The influenza progressed quickly through its stages. It began as a mild case of sniffles then developed into a debilitating flu and, in many cases, pneumonia. The sickness could go through all of its stages and result in death in only 48 hours. The illness was particularly fatal to young adults. The average age of death was 33.

The steamships which carried the necessities of life to Alaska also carried the deadly germs. The outbreak of the disease followed the lines of steamship transportation. The first cases began to appear in Southeast Alaska in the middle of October, 1918. By the end of the month there were 200 cases in Ketchikan; ten days later the count of sick had grown to 350, and seven people were dead. Across the Panhandle, communities were stricken with the disease. In Hydaburg 250 people came down with the influenza. At Sitka 98 cases were reported among the Native population, and the epidemic also spread to the villages along the west coast of Prince of Wales Island.

One of the worst hit areas was Nome and along the coast of the Bering Sea. The first outbreak in Nome occurred on October 29. Though a quarantine was established around the city, the disease quickly spread southward along the coast to St. Michael.

At the time of the outbreak, there was only one physician in Nome. Schoolteachers and other volunteers were pressed into service to provide medical care.

Poultice medical education was not a requisite for curing for influenza victims. The state of medical knowledge at the time was not capable of dealing with the disease. The serum which was available was both scarce and ineffective. The best care for victims was the kind that could be provided by volunteers: hot food, warm blankets and a clean environment.

The disease was particularly fatal to Natives, who showed almost no resistance. Governor Thomas Riggs stated that seventy-five percent of the adult Eskimo population of Nome and vicinity died in the epidemic. Whole villages lost their entire adult populations; many infants were found frozen in their dead mothers' arms. In three months between November 1918 and January 1919, it was estimated that 950 Eskimos died in the area around Nome.

A doctor was dispatched by dog team to lend aid to the afflicted villages, but he caught the disease and died in Old Hamilton on December 23. There were no other physicians between Nome and Bethel. "Natives on the tundra between Bethel and the south mouth of the Yukon are dying like poisoned pups," the governor's office reported to the regional office of the U.S. Public Health Service. Frank Wansey, a schoolteacher, wired that thirty percent of the adult males and ten percent of the adult females in villages around Marshall died in the first two weeks of December. He requested funds to purchase provisions to prevent the starvation of survivors.

Ronald L. Lautaret is the Head of the Public Services Department at the University of Alaska Library in Anchorage.

10. ALASKA STUDIES • UNIT 3, Alaska's People Documents
Two children at Nalneke, whose parents died when the Spanish influenza hit the community in 1919. (Alaska Historical Library)
It was believed that the worst was over in early 1919, and that the epidemic had died out. Tragically, Alaskans were to learn otherwise. Bristol Bay had escaped the epidemic until the arrival of the fishing fleet in the spring of 1919.

Governor Riggs described what happened in his annual report:

And so the winter epidemic finally wore itself out, but with the opening of the fishing season the first steamers to Unalaska and Bristol Bay brought the deadly germ. For these places the Indian question is solved. Two hundred and thirty-eight orphans, so far reported, are practically all that are left of an Aleut and half-breed population of between 500 and 1,000.

The Alaska Packers Association steamer Keetchik arrived at Naknek on May 22, 1919. The first cases of influenza in the village were reported on May 26, when four male Natives were found sick. The following day there were 28 cases; soon the entire village was sick. The disease spread to all of the Bristol Bay villages except Egegik.

The packing company immediately moved to aid the victims. Crews of men were assigned to medical officers who were told to do whatever was necessary to relieve the suffering. Quarantines were established between the canneries and the villages; the only traffic allowed was the medical crews. Dr. Frederick B. Spencer, medical officer of the Naknek cannery, reported on the activities of the medical crews,

*In their [the victims'] helpless state it was necessary to supply them with cooked food and fuel. The men detailed for the work made rounds twice a day with large vessels of hot food. Coal, kindling wood and other necessities were supplied liberally. The sick were given personal attention daily at Naknek throughout the epidemic. Medicine and medical attention were furnished free without reservation.*

The fatalities were buried and the survivors were given employment and provided with supplies for the winter. The orphans were temporarily housed at Naknek, at the expense of the Alaska Packers' Association, before being transferred to the government hospital in Dillingham.

The influenza epidemic ravaged the coastal areas of Alaska from Rechichan to Nome and Cordova to Kodiak, but miraculously it did not move very far into the interior. One reason was a strict quarantine system which required all travelers from the coast to the interior to have health certificates; those who did not were held in quarantine for five days, the incubation period for influenza. Quarantine stations were established on all trails, roads and rivers which led into the interior. Stations were located at Bohn River, McGrath, Broad Pass, Nulato, Ruby, Eagle, Fort Yukon, Skagway and the Whitefish Roadhouse on the Valdez-Fairbanks Trail.
The operating room in the railroad hospital at Nome, 1918, represented the best Alaska had to offer in medical care during the influenza epidemic. Most of the nurses who came down with the disease didn't live to see a nurse or a doctor. (Archives Museum of History and Art)

Governor Riggs received many requests from businessmen and government officials for exception from the quarantine. He refused to override the local health officials in every case.

Skagway served as the quarantine station for travelers bound over the White Pass and Yukon Railway to Whitehorse. The expenses for operation of the Skagway station were shared equally between Alaska and the government of the Yukon Territory. Steamship passengers were examined upon boarding in Seattle and upon disembarking in Alaska.

Alaska cities responded in different ways to try to limit contact between citizens and thus check the spread of the disease. The city fathers in Fairbanks insisted that all incoming mail be fumigated even though they had been assured that the influenza virus could not long survive outside the human body. A Ketchikan regulation stipulated that only every other stool in restaurants could be occupied and limited to two the number of people allowed in a booth, unless, of course, they were from the same family. Cordova longshoremen lived on the dock so they would not carry the germs between ships and the town; stores did business only by admitting one customer at a time. Schools, pool halls and bath houses were closed. Public meetings were cancelled and people wore masks, hoping that by covering their faces they would stop transmission of the disease.

The epidemic quickly exhausted the health funds which were available in Alaska. The Bureau of Education and the Public Health Service had run out of money by November 13, just two weeks after the plague arrived in Alaska. There were no funds to provide food, bedding or medical care to the thousands of victims, and no money to bury the dead. Burial in the frozen ground around Nome cost $30 a body.

Neither Territorial Governor Thomas Riggs nor any other official had the legal authority to commit funds they did not have. Nevertheless, Governor Riggs courageously authorized the expenditure of money to meet the emergency. He told a Senate hearing, which later investigated the matter, that he had authorized the expenditure of money on his own “personal credit.”

In December and January Governor Riggs traveled to Washington, D.C., New York and Seattle attempting to raise money from government or private sources to cover the costs of fighting the epidemic. He found little support. Riggs wrote that the chairman of the House subcommittee on appropriations was not very helpful.

“He was cordial,” Riggs said, “but not particularly enthusiastic about taking care of our Eskimos in a Territory whose Delegate has no vote in Congress. In fact, even the loss of the Princess Sophia with 343 persons on board did not seem to interest him.” He
The “Decoratton Day” or Memorial Day ceremony at the Anchorage cemetery in 1916 honored those who had fallen in war. Sometimes the 1918 Spanish influenza epidemic overshadowed by the war, but in only four months it killed nearly ten times as many Americans as were killed in all of World War 1. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

The Spanish influenza epidemic still ranks as the worst human disaster in Alaska’s history. It is estimated that about 500 children in Alaska, mostly Natives, lost their parents in the 1918-19 epidemic. These orphans, more than forty of them, were from Nushagak, and were cared for by the Alaska Packers Association until the government could make arrangements for them. (Alaska Historical Library)
asked me how many people we have in Alaska, and, when I told him, said, "Yes, we have more people than that in one of my wards in Louisville.""

The governor did manage to get $25,000 from the Red Cross in February, 1919, to meet current expenses, and the government did provide some aid. All doctors in the Territory were appointed "Temporary Assistant Surgeons" and their salaries ($150 per month) were paid by the Public Health Service. Nurses' salaries were also paid. In addition government officials and ships were pressed into service in various capacities. The naval collie 'Nevada' provided transportation from Seattle for auxiliary doctors and nurses. The steamers 'McCloud' and 'Vicksburg' lent aid in the Bristol Bay region.

In the spring of 1919 the Territorial Legislature appropriated slightly more than $70,000 to pay the outstanding debts resulting from the epidemic. The legislature appointed a special committee to audit charges which had been submitted for payment, and found that many bills had been padded. The committee stated:

From the evidence obtained it would appear that at the outset of the epidemic the work as to expenses was conducted in a conservative manner, but that the report was circulated at Nome that Congress would make an appropriation of $200,000 and after that there was a great deal of expense connected with the work. Evidently, this accounts for the size of some of the bills and the liberal care used in charging for everything that was possible to do. A new outbreak of influenza at Skagway in March prompted Governor Riggs to ask the legislature to appoint a Territorial Commissioner of Health. Riggs wanted the work of controlling the epidemic — and other health crises in the future — to be in the hands of a professional. Eventually the legislature passed a law creating the office of the Commissioner of Health and authorizing assistant commissioners for each judicial division.

Dr. O.L. Sloane was appointed first Health Commissioner in 1919. The first publication of his office was a circular entitled, "Rules Governing Payment of Expenses," which was designed to prevent abuses and overcharging such as had occurred in 1918-1919.

The exact nature of the 1918 influenza virus is still unknown, although most authorities believe it was some form of "swine flu." In 1991 Dr. Albert McKeen of the State University of Iowa led a team of researchers to Alaska to recover lung tissue from Eskimo victims of the epidemic. These Eskimos had been buried in permafrost, and Dr. McKeen hoped to be able to infect laboratory animals with virus from the well-preserved tissue and examine it. The experiment was a failure, and the virus remains a mystery.

No true accounting of the death and misery caused by the epidemic in Alaska can be made. Estimates of the number of deaths range between 2,000 and 3,000. More than 500 children, mostly Natives, were left orphaned. Governor Riggs said that no one seemed to notice or care, as the Natives in Alaska perished by the hundreds. "They were all too much engrossed with the woes of Europe." Riggs said, "to be able to note our own wants... dying by swarms in the dark of the northern nights."
Alaska’s Ethnic Makeup Through History

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<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Creole</th>
<th>Eskimo</th>
<th>Aleut</th>
<th>Athabaskan</th>
<th>Tlingit</th>
<th>Haida</th>
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<td>15,883</td>
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<td>21,787</td>
<td>28,425</td>
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*Exact number is in question; different sources give different figures
Asian Workers in Alaska, Late Nineteenth Century

An excerpt adapted from the book

Making History: Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Life on the Alaska Peninsula

by Patricia H. Partnow

Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino cannery workers were brought to Alaska in great numbers soon after the first canneries opened in the 1870s and 1880s. These men came north on schooners from San Francisco for the summer and then were shipped back in the fall.

According to the 1890 U.S. Census, workers of different ethnicities were paid different wages by the canneries, depending on two factors: their ethnicity and the jobs they did. Scandinavian fishermen were paid the most. Italian and Greek fishermen (called “Dagos,” a pejorative term) were paid less for the same work. At the bottom of the wage scale were the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrant cannery workers, who were not allowed to be fishermen. They had to work and live in the canneries.

One Alutiiq man who lived in Chignik Bay when this system was in operation was Spiridon Stepanoff. He remembered seeing the Chinese workers, in particular. They lived in bunkhouses that were so poorly constructed that you could see daylight between the boards. The men were stuffed together, six in a bunk. There was no bedding, and they had to cook for themselves.

Stepanoff was recorded in the 1960s when he told a Chignik teacher about his memories. As you read this, keep in mind that English was his third language: he also spoke Alutiiq and Russian, so his English is not standard.

He said,

Long tail [the braided queue], they [the bosses] go dragging [the Chinese workers] down to their feet. Later on, now they cut ‘em all off. . . [They treated them] like dogs! And the Chinamen, they don’t care about them, because they couldn’t speak English, you know. They couldn’t understanding nothing. They [the bosses] take ‘em, grab ‘em by the tail and drag ‘em around, to go to work.

Yeah, that’s the bad thing.

Poor Chinamens – they be at the bunkhouse, or they be inside, they could see daylight [through the boards]. The poor Chinamens, they make themselves a little room, sometimes six of ‘em together. Little – like a cupboard. They put their bedding on the bottom. And rice sacks, you know. They used lots of rice, you know. And they sleep there. Lie there upon the rice. Trying to keep together, warm. I used to walk that way, a bunch of ‘em up there, when I stay with my brother-in-law summertime. And they’d lay down, you know, all six of ‘em in one bed.

Alaska was a huge territory with few government officials to police its businesses. In this atmosphere of laissez-faire government and economy, cannery owners could run their companies largely as they wanted without concern about government intervention. As a result, the canneries, like the fur trading companies before them, operated entirely for profit, paying little attention to the well-being of their employees or the natural resources on which they depended.
A Study in Frustration

BLACKS BLOCKED BY BURE.

By CLAUS. M. NASKO

Throughout our history, the quest for new land, adventure, and greater freedoms has captured the imaginations of our citizens. New frontiers were eagerly sought, and stories of pioneering attempts have been vividly followed by those who stayed behind. As late as 1934-35, in the midst of the "Great Depression," the American press and the population at large followed the movement of some 200 families to the Matanuska Valley in the southeastern region of Alaska.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt envisioned the undertaking as an opportunity to take Americans from depressed agricultural areas and give them a chance to start life anew. They would become self-sustaining again and re-live the American dream of rugged individualism. Some 16,000 letters of application were received once final plans had been announced. The number of prospective settlers was finally limited to 200, who, together with their dependents, would number approximately 1,000 persons. The colonists were chosen from Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. It was believed that people used to the harsh winters of these areas would best fit the pioneer life in the Matanuska Valley.

In the spring of 1935, 200 families, amidst much fanfare, arrived in the town of Palmer in the center of the Valley. They were sponsored by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration under its Rural Rehabilitation Division. Together with some 400 relief workers from the transient camps of California, they began to clear land for the projected forty-acre tracts each settler was to receive. They also built living quarters, a school, trading post, cannery, creamery, and a hospital.

In February of the same year, another settlement proposal, one which received very little publicity from the press, was made by "The Alaska Colonization Branch of the United Congo Improvement Association."

The organization's lethargic proclamation optimistically noted: "Alaska offers the American Negro full political rights." Dr. Joe Thomas, a medical practitioner and the group's head, represented some 7,000 members on setet. Many were farmers, heads of families and war veterans. The U.C.I.A., Inc. maintained that, eventually, Alaska could well support one million Negroes. Settlement of Alaska would help speed national recovery, while a larger northern resident population would aid the military defenses of the territory. The U.C.I.A., Inc., however, had only modest initial plans. It asked the President to settle some 400 farmers in Alaska, 200 on the Kenai Peninsula and the rest at Iliamna Bay. To launch the project, Dr. Thomas asked the Federal government for free transportation and the help of craftsmen to build the required log houses. The loan of machinery would enable the black pioneers to clear and cultivate the land. In return for this aid, the U.C.I.A., Inc., pledged to turn the territory's
waste lands into taxable property and to build roads which, in turn, would stimulate trade and transportation and eventually make Alaska self-supporting.

Armed with this plan, much optimism, and a petition containing some 2,004 signatures, Dr. Thomas called at the White House personally. The documents were duly accepted and begin their descent through the bureaucratic chain of command to finally land on the desk of Harold I. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior. Early in March, Ickes replied to Dr. Thomas. He referred to the experimental nature of the Matanuska Colony and the care and caution which had characterized its planning. The secretary felt that until the Matanuska experiment had proven successful, the Federal government was not justified in launching still another. Further studies of agricultural possibilities and markets would be undertaken in the North in future days. For the present, however, the secretary concluded, “conditions compel me to write this disappointing reply...the spirit and purpose of which are appreciated.”

Dr. Thomas now began to display a tenacity which refused to accept defeat. He requested that twenty-five of the Matanuska homesteads as well as 100 out of the 400 laborers needed to build the houses and clear the land be apportioned to the black members of his organization. With “spirit and purpose,” he promised to secure “men who will help you make this government enterprise in the Matanuska Valley a success.”

To explore all additional avenues and give added urgency to the wishes of his organization, Thomas also appealed to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, the President’s wife, and a known friend of the blacks.

In due time, Thomas’ correspondence again wound up on Ickes’ desk with a request for a reply. The secretary passed the whole matter on to Ernest Gruening, the head of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, who, in turn, handed the correspondence to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Gruening, however, took the time to point out to Thomas that the success of the Matanuska project hinged upon the careful selection of families already accustomed to cold climates. Selections, therefore, were being made from among eligible families in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan. Gruening implied that Negroes would be unable to acclimate themselves successfully to northern regions.

The U.C.I.A., Inc., plans for settlement also had found their way to Charles Pynchon, the General Manager of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads of the FSIIC. He informed Dr. Thomas that the group’s plans did not fall within the realm of his agency, but that Gruening of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions was in the best position to help.

Thomas, however, was not easily discouraged by the bureaucratic tangle in which he found himself. On March 20, 1933, he wrote to M. H. McIntyre, the President’s assistant secretary. Thomas told McIntyre that Negro participation in the Matanuska colonization would add black votes to the Democratic party. “Already,” he asserted, “our enemies, the Republicans, are saying that the Democratic party stole our plan to Colonize...and are only putting White farmers in Alaska.”

On the same day, Thomas wrote again to Pynchon, who had previously expressed his inability to help. Thomas refused to give up. “I still believe,” he flattered the General Manager, “you are the man to direct the association’s colonization plan.” Although Negroes were thought to be unsuitable for northern settlement, the politics of the plan had to be considered above all else. Blacks, Thomas asserted, would build a democratic state of Alaska and elect their own governor as well as Congressional delegation. A successful Negro state in the North, he continued, would persuade blacks to desert the party of Lincoln and swarm to Democratic banners. Such an approach, Thomas concluded, would “make some American the biggest White man in America.”

In the meantime, the growing bundle of correspondence had again landed on Gruening’s desk. He now explained that lack of basic agricultural studies about the Kenai Peninsula were the chief reasons which prevented the Federal government from aiding the U.C.I.A., Inc.
At this point, Dr. Thomas again appealed directly to the President. In a letter in early April of 1946, he summarized his efforts for the chief executive by pointing out that Federal department heads had not been overly impressed with his group’s colorization scheme. Taking a hint from Gruening, he asked Roosevelt to grab the seven members of his organization for one year, grant free passage, and also loan three equipped army tents for the use of these scouts. Since the lack of a reconnaissance of the Kenai Peninsula seemed to be the stumbling block to settlement, these seven would find out in a year’s time whether or not the area was suited for agricultural purposes.13

The request again filtered down through the chain of command and came to rest on the desk of Gruening. The Director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions assured the politician that a comprehensive geological and soil survey of the Kenai was planned for the approaching summer. A duplication of tasks, therefore, seemed inappropriate. Request denied.14 There the matter seemed to rest for the time being.

In early December of 1936, the President’s Assistant Dr. Thomas referred to the summer’s survey of the Kenai Peninsula and requested that the Federal government settle members of his organization in early 1938, on the Matanuska model. Shortly thereafter he was told that since no funds had been available, no survey had been made at all.15

Dr. Thomas by now undoubtedly had concluded that the way of government were mysterious and labyrinthine. He relaxed his efforts and gave Federal officials a respite. Thomas moved to Detroit and opened his medical practice. In the meantime, the U.C.I.A., Inc., apparently dissolved. But early in 1938, Thomas again petitioned Secretary Ickes to settle Negro relief families on the Kenai Peninsula. An elaborately drawn map accompanied his latest request. Again, he was told that no monies were available nor were any Matanuska-type schemes planned for the future.16

Undeterred, Thomas made one last effort and again appealed directly to the President. He congratulated the chief executive on the success of the Matanuska experiment, and asked that ten Negro families be selected from southern and midwestern states and settle in Alaska. He further suggested that Leo B. Jacobs, the manager of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, take over and guide this new settlement. The Department of the Interior, instructed to reply, again turned Thomas down.17

The 1950’s, of course, were quite unlike the 1960’s when minority representation has become a requirement. Over a three-year period in that long-ago time, the proposal for a Negro settlement in Alaska was shuttled from agency to agency in the Federal government. Repeatedly turned down, Dr. Thomas did not give up hope easily for the realization of his plans. But with existing prejudices and prevailing beliefs that only people from the world’s northern lands were suited for life in Alaska, Thomas’ plan was doomed to failure from the start.

Notes
2. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 18, 1935, file 8-143, part 1, Alaska Development of Resources, Colonization: The United Congo Improvement Association, Records of the Office of Territories, Record Group 126, National Archives. All following footnotes refer to the same file, and therefore only the correspondences are identified.
3. Memorandum, M. H. McIntyre, Assistant Secretary to the President, to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, February 14, 1938.
4. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, March 4, 1938.
5. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, March 9, 1938; Dr. Joe T. Thomas to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 9, 1938.
6. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, March 5, 1938.
7. Ernest Gruening, Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, March 12, 1938.
8. Ernest Gruening, Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, March 22, 1938.
10. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to M. H. McIntyre, Assistant Secretary to the President, March 20, 1938.
12. Ernest Gruening, Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, April 1, 1938.
13. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 7, 1938.
14. Louis M. H. House, Secretary to the President, to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, April 11, 1938; Ruth Hampton, Assistant Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, April 15, 1938.
15. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, December 3, 1938; Ruth Hampton, Assistant Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, December 31, 1938.
16. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, April 18, 1938; Ruth Hampton, Assistant Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, April 25, 1938.
17. Dr. Joe T. Thomas to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 16, 1938; Ruth Hampton, Assistant Director, Division of Territories and Island Possessions, to Dr. Joe T. Thomas, May 22, 1938.

20. ALASKA STUDIES • UNIT 3, Alaska’s People Documents
PHOTO EXHIBIT HONORS ROLE OF BLACKS IN ALASKA GOLD RUSH HISTORY

© Anchorage Daily News, 1997
Author: Staff (ADN)
February 3, 1997

NOTE: When they raised the American flag in Sitka in 1867, there were blacks living in Alaska. Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc. is dedicated to the preservation of black history in Alaska and constantly is searching for additional historical photographs and items of interest to add to the George Harper Collection of historical data. In celebration of the centennial of the Gold Rush, Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc. prepared a photograph exhibit for Black History Month 1997, "Blacks and the Gold Rush." From data collected in preparing this exhibit, George Harper has selected several items to write about during Black History Month. This is the first of the series.

"Colored Troops to Relieve Soldiers at Wrangell and Dyea" read an Associated Press dispatch from Vancouver, Wash., and published in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer on May 14, 1899.

"Company L, 24th Infantry (colored) from Vancouver barracks, left this evening for Seattle, from which point they will leave for Alaska on May 15. Fifty-six men, under command of Capt. Henry W. Hovey, will take station at Dyea, relieving Capt. R.T. Yeatman and Company H, 14th Infantry, and 49 men, under Lt. J.C. Jenks, will proceed to Fort Wrangell, relieving Capt. Bogardus Eldridge, and Company B, 14th Infantry."

Before arriving in Alaska, the 24th Infantry had many roles in frontier America, including the Indian wars and the Spanish-American War in Cuba.

On May 15, 1899, Company L of the 24th Infantry left Seattle aboard the SS Humboldt. The steamer arrived at Fort Wrangell on May 18 and a detachment of one officer and 46 enlisted men debarked. When the Humboldt arrived at Dyea on May 20, those remaining of Company L, two officers and 48 enlisted men, debarked.

When Company L arrived at Dyea in May, the town was becoming a ghost town. In July, the White Pass and Yukon Route bought out the tramway and shut it down, putting about 75 people out of work. Capt. Hovey requested the troops be moved to Skagway. Before the decision to move reached Capt. Hovey, a forest fire broke out about two miles south of camp. Within 20 minutes after the last boat full of supplies and men left the wharf, the fire roared in on the camp.

The U.S. Court called upon Company L to protect U.S. marshals in enforcing a decree of the court on Oct. 1, 1900. A detachment of 12 enlisted men went to Haines Mission, Alaska to prevent trouble between Chilkat Indians on July 9, 1901. They returned to Skagway on Aug. 10, 1901.

"In interpreting the Army’s role in maintaining peace and order on Taiya Inlet, the service must recognize the role of the black soldiers of Company L, 24th United States Infantry. Capt. Hovey and his black soldiers spent three years in the area. Their good discipline and appearance made a favorable impression on all with whom they came in contact,” the National Park Service said.
MISS TOOTSIE BRAVED THE RUGGED LIFE OF THE GOLD RUSH

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

© Anchorage Daily News, 1997
Author: Staff (ADN)
February 11, 1997

Editor’s note: This is one in a continuing series of historical anecdotes involving blacks in Alaska history, prepared for the Daily News by local historian George Harper for use during Black History Month. Harper is the founder of Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc.

Mattie “Tootsie” Crosby was one of the first black women in the Iditarod-Flat area, now the McKinley Mining District, and one of the early successful entrepreneurs. Tootsie, as people called her, arrived in Skagway at age 16 in 1900 from Chicago. She was one of thousands who came to Alaska in search of gold and fortune. The Gold Rush attracted few women; the life was rugged and raw. Disappointment was more common than wealth. Miss Tootsie survived life in Skagway, traveled the Chilkoot Trail on her way to Dawson City and finally settled in Iditarod. Later she moved to Flat, where she lived until entering the Pioneer Home in Sitka in 1962.

“The Crosby,” according to Miss Tootsie, “was the finest bathhouse in Alaska.” It well may have been. Her ad in a local paper in 1914 stated: “The Crosby, massage and bath parlors. Medicated, mineral vapor, steam, tub, salt and fresh water baths. Electric and faradic massage treatments by expert attendants. Lighted by gas and heated by steam.”

Miss Tootsie wrote articles, which she submitted to the Star News, a newspaper in San Diego, for many years. The articles unraveled stories of days in tents, grub staking, holing up for 70-below winters, an eye that was frozen and lost, breakups that brought out wooden sidewalks as the only means to stay on top of the mud, and constant remembrances of the people she encountered — people with whom she kept in constant contact.

One of the last things she wrote in a letter to her editor perhaps best sums up her philosophy of people and life in Alaska: “I am not qualified to write about civil rights, regardless of the fact that I am a Negro, and I am not too far from 90... We are taught that youth is the seed time of good habits and Alaska is most wonderful land of youth.”

GOLD MINER SHARES FORTUNE
BLACK HISTORY MONTH

© Anchorage Daily News, 1997
Author: Staff (ADN)
February 12, 1997

Editor’s note: This is one in a continuing series of historical anecdotes involving blacks in Alaska history, prepared for the Daily News by local historian George Harper for use during Black History Month. Harper is the founder of Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc.

When the Gold Rushes started, there were 35,000 people in Alaska. Due to the influx of gold-seekers, the population increased to 63,500 for the 1900 census. Many people came to Alaska to make their fortune. Many upon arrival at their port of call immediately booked passage on the return trip back to San Francisco.

Will T. Ewing was one of the many who stayed in Alaska and found his fortune. When Ewing returned to Tacoma about 1906, the headlines of the local newspaper stated “Ewing: Now-Wealthy Alaskan Back in Town Where he Drove Patrol Wagon.” Part of the article is quoted here: “Negroes here are planning a big reception for Bill Ewing of Fairbanks, who has just returned from Alaska. He has a large acquaintance . . . having at one time been . . . driver of the patrol wagon. . . .

He quit that job to go north and prospect, a course that led to his present wealth, for he struck it rich in the Tanana country and had the good sense to hold on when he came into possession of this money.”

Ewing died at his Harvard ranch home near Oakland, Calif., in June of 1923. He was 68 years old. Ewing left his entire estate, valued at approximately $150,000, to the Booker T. Washington Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama.
**MELVIN DEMPSEY**

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

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Author: Staff (ADN)
February 13, 1997

**Editor’s note:** This is one in a continuing series of historical anecdotes involving blacks in Alaska history, prepared for the Daily News by local historian George Harper for use during Black History Month. Harper is the founder of Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc.

They could see the Valdez Glacier from Valdez Arm when Melvin Dempsey arrived aboard the Alliance on Feb. 26, 1898. Dempsey was the descendant of a Cherokee Indian plantation owner and a Negro slave. The following quote is from the recently published book *Valdez Gold Rush Trails of 1898-99*, by Jim and Nancy Lethcoe:

“On March 23, he opened his restaurant; on April 24, he organized the Valdez branch of the Christian Endeavor Society; on May 9, he called the citizens’ meeting that led to the ouster of the first township committee; on May 12, the new township committee presented the Endeavor Society with a free lot for their Hall and Reading Room.”

Dempsey is most remembered for his efforts to help prospectors. He also had a mining claim and mining camp on the Chisna River near the Chistochina River. He was appointed postmaster of Chisna which later became Dempsey.
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HOW EAGLE CITY GOT ITS NAME
BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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Author: Staff (ADN)
February 17, 1997

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Elva R. Scott, Eagle City historian, mentioned in her paper titled “Rascals to Knighthood — Eagle City 1897-1905” about Becky White, “a colored woman whose specialty was ‘Plain and Fancy Washing.’” Part of the paper is quoted here. “As the early settlers penetrated the vast interior of Alaska by traveling the Yukon River, they established their first communities on the banks of the river. In 1897, this was the case of Eagle City, which was populated with courageous, adventuresome folks ranging from rascals to one known knight, with the majority of solid honest citizens falling in between.”

Cash J. Darrell wrote in article in The Alaska Life, “Eagle on the Yukon;”

“Eagle City was first conceived by a disgruntled stampeeder living in a small cabin near the foot of the Slide in Dawson whose name was Old Man Martin. . . . His idea was nourished by what he considered a great injustice upon the part of Col. Steele and his red-coated minions, referred to in the vernacular as Snake-legs.”

Old Man Martin joined his partners, the Hudson brothers, and agreed to establish an American town across the border. They recruited Professor Howard, Barney Gibbony, Ed Martin, George Graves, One Thumb Jack, Jenny Moore, Becky White, “Doc” Pernault, “The Kid” and several other people.

“The motley crew shoved off in a large scow and four smaller riverboats. They were heading for Circle or Rampart. . . . (It was) noon the next day when they pulled into the bank below the high buff . . . Tents were hurriedly pitched . . . a council was called . . . an eagle soared overhead as though an omen. . . .”

The rest is history. Check it out at the library.
During their three-year stay in Alaska, many men of Company L, 24th Infantry were stricken with gold fever. As many as two dozen soldiers were discharged in Skagway and Fort Wrangell. Several of these soldiers were discharged because they were incarcerated in the federal jail or were AWOL. Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc. has been able to find data on several of these men that were discharged from the Army and remained in Alaska. Among them was CPL Benjamin Green.

Green was born in Ohio in 1875. He came to Fort Wrangell with Company L, 24th Infantry. He served in Skagway and was discharged from the Army there. The March 26, 1940, issue of the Alaska Miner recorded Green’s life in Alaska:

“Death came quickly and unexpectedly to Ben Green, Negro, a longtime resident of Fairbanks. While walking on Fifth Avenue . . . Sunday night he suffered a heart stroke, and life became extinct as he fell to the sidewalk.

“Green, who lived at 703 Seventh Ave., was 64 years old. . . . He first came to Alaska as a corporal with Company F [sic]*, 24th Infantry, a Negro regiment of the United States Army. His outfit was stationed at Skagway for a while. . . . He had a fine bass voice. . . . He had traveled in the states several seasons with a Negro minstrel troupe.

“In Fairbanks, for many years, Green had conducted shoeshine stands. . . . Green was a large man weighing in the neighborhood of 260 pounds.”

The Dorman H. Baker Post of the American Legion conducted the last rites for Green. Interment was in the Legion plot of the Fairbanks cemetery March 28, 1940.

*Company L is correct company.
A census of the U.S. population attempts to count everyone in the country at a specific time. The 1900 census of Alaska took place when the people of Alaska were suffering from gold fever. The population was mostly transient and in a constant state of flux. As a result, they did not count many people in Alaska in the census. To add to the enumeration problem, the literacy rate was very low and many people could not read nor write, especially the men of the 25th Infantry. Nome was a busy town, with passenger ships arriving on an hourly basis during the census. Some ship crews were counted, some were not. Many Blacks missed the enumeration.

An officer of the 24th Infantry at Skagway enumerated the men assigned to his company including the men stationed at Fort Wrangell and the soldiers in the Sitka jail. Fort Wrangell also counted the men stationed there as did the people in charge of the Sitka jail.

The traffic between Skagway and Dawson City was very heavy. They did not count many people in transit between the two cities.

Add to all these problems the spelling of place names and people’s names, and you can guess the counting got complicated. The 168 black people listed in the official census report may be incorrect in some respects.
KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE
DESPITE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES, CHRONICLER WORKS TO RECORD BLACK HISTORY

The situation is really quite simple. Unless Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc. receives some sort of financial support from the community, it’s — well — history. “The organization will cease to exist the first of July,” said the organization’s founder and president, George Harper.

And with it would disappear what is probably the first concerted effort to record and memorialize the role that black Alaskans have played in building the state.

Harper, who will be 68 on Valentine’s Day, has been doggedly tracking down what are often no more than mere scraps — hints, really — of black history in the state. His efforts have taken him from Sitka to Nome, from Kodiak to Yukon.

“Most of the information I put out about blacks is usually the first,” Harper said. “Information about blacks or most other minority groups is rarely included in the history books.

“I’ve probably been through every history book about the state of Alaska.”

Harper has located photographs in private and historical society holdings throughout the state, amassing a collection of more than 600 originals and reproductions. He has put together exhibitions detailing the lives of great and ordinary black Alaskans, displaying them in various locations. He’s delivered papers at symposiums with such notables as Pierre Berton, a prolific Canadian historian. He’s responded to requests for information and research from people in cities throughout the Lower 48.

He’s pretty much done the whole thing on his own nickel. And now the retiree can’t afford it anymore.

He’s made appeals to the public before, he said, and he doesn’t understand why the community hasn’t been more forthcoming with funding.

“I’m sure a lot of people are aware of the project,” he said.

But by his own admission, Harper’s not much of a salesman.

Previous attempts to raise funds were only nominally successful. One membership drive gave him a mailing list of about
250 names, he said, but when many of those memberships expired after the first year, few signed up again.

People who donate information and services become honorary members; others donate money. “But not as many,” he added. His mailing list now stands at about 100 names. That lack of membership has done more to hurt the organization than may be readily apparent. A recent grant application to the Rasmuson Foundation was turned down because Harper was unable to demonstrate significant “broad-based community support.”

He has received foundation support before. A grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum and a Permanent Fund Dividend coupon from Alaska Airlines helped him travel one year to 13 different cities throughout the state gathering material.

Another potential fund-raising source, the lecture circuit, presents something of a dilemma for Harper. He generally charges only $50 for a 20-minute lecture. When asked why he didn’t charge more, he noted that a lot of schools — particularly those with higher numbers of black students — might not be able to afford him if he were to raise the fee any higher.

He’s presently engaged in another fund-raising effort. He recently mailed out a five-page letter to 30 predominantly black organizations throughout the state, detailing what his organization needs to survive.

A wish list includes requests for enough money to maintain his web site for one year (under “$500 items”); offer lectures at area public schools (under “$100 items”); and replace an aging and ailing computer that “is seven years old and obsolete,” (under “$5,000 items”).

The same letter cries out, too, for volunteers to act as research and clerical assistants, and to perform data entry.

Many of the two dozen or so items detailed on the wish list are things that Harper’s been taking care of on his own. Others will only come to light with the aid of a generous benefactor.

Harper hopes to produce a video depicting the involvement of blacks in the military in Alaska during World War II. Another project is “a pictorial book depicting the involvement of blacks in the Gold Rushes of 1892 to 1910.”

“It’s very significant because school kids nowadays get white history,” Harper said. “Minority students don’t know anything about the contribution of their group to Alaska.”

Meanwhile, the work continues. Harper is gearing up now for Black History Month, which begins next month — but his calendar isn’t full yet.

“We have a lot of space open for February,” he said.
Mattie “Tootsie” Crosby came to Skagway in 1900 at the age of 16. Her personality undoubtedly served her well through rowdy days in Skagway, over the grueling Chilkoot Trail to Dawson and into the plains of Flat and the Iditarod area, where she settled. She lived in Alaska 72 years.

She lived for 51 years in the Flat-Iditarod area, the owner of a boarding house and caretaker of all who came into her life. She grubstaked many miners in the gold days. Although much money came into her hands, she had nothing left. She did not fritter it away but helped so many down-and-outers. She would not have it any other way. She was born with a generous heart.

The following is from a letter she wrote to a California newspaper after canceling a trip Outside: “I was very happy getting out my snowshoes and my sourdough clothes that I put on. I took a look around and it seemed like I had been away for along time and had just returned. There were my old stamping grounds. Up Flat Creek were the old tailing piles, the old worked-out claims. Best of all were my old sourdough friends that I almost left. . . . Yes, here I am still in Alaska, writing to wish you a Merry Christmas.”

George Harper is the developer of the Blacks In Alaska History Project Inc. The project is dedicated to the preservation of black history in Alaska. There will be two exhibits on display this year for Black History Month: “Blacks and the Gold Rush” is on display at Grandview Gardens Cultural Center until Feb. 21; the 1998 Black History Month exhibit will be at Nordstrom the entire month of February.
Called “the best skipper in the Arctic” by U.S. Coast Guard historian Robert Browning, Capt. Michael Healy plied the seas of Alaska in the late 1800s. He developed quite a reputation for himself through a colorful combination of hard living and exemplary public service such as his effort to save Alaska Eskimos from starvation by bringing a herd of reindeer from Siberia to Alaska. What wasn’t known was that Healy was black. Black Americans were rare in territorial Alaska and, if they were able, some of them hid their heritage for any number of reasons, ranging from a sense of shame to economic necessity. Last year, the Coast Guard named a ship for the captain, the USCGC Healy. Historian George Harper of Blacks in Alaska History Project Inc. has organized an exhibit detailing the life of Healy, presently on display at Nordstrom through February.