

At the Turn of the Century

Jimmy Duke's Roadhouse--- LUXURY FOR TRAPPERS AND MINERS

By MRS. DOBBS
(Information provided by
85-year-old Titus Bettis)

Perhaps it wasn't the best in comfort or looks, but in those parts in those days, Jimmy Duke's Roadhouse seemed like the Hilton Hotel to cold and weary trappers and miners.

The building was of cottonwood and spruce logs and was divided into two parts. One—the front portion which faced the Tanana River—was the dining room, where so many pots of beans Jimmy's cooks were so famous for, were served.

As with the Trading Post, guests were "greeted" with the sight of a bear rug, Jimmy's silent reminder to careless guests that they were to wipe the snow and mud off their boots before they stepped any further.

Just inside the door and to the right was the mammoth cast-iron cookstove surrounded with cooking pots and utensils which hung on the walls.

After hanging their parkas on wooden pegs guests seated themselves on benches at one of two, long serving tables which occupied the room.

While they waited for their food, guests could entertain themselves by studying pictures on the walls. The pictures were Jimmy Duke's favorites; a picture of his bewhiskered father, Jimmy Duke, Sr., or a framed portrait of the Confederate General, Robert E. Lee. Jimmy originally came from the south, and his father had figured prominently in Sherman's Army during the Civil War.

In the northwest corner of the dining room was an enclosed cubicle room, used as a cook's area and for food storage. Jimmy, who seems to have been terrified of the thought of fire, daily would bring over the furs from the Trading Post after closing hours.

The furs were put to nightly storage in this cubicle room (if you found a hair in your food you never blamed it on the cook!). But Jimmy knew there always was somebody awake and alert to keep the fires going at the Roadhouse. The thought that his trading furs might be destroyed by fire during the hours the Trading Post was unoccupied was a thought that Jimmy evidently could not bear.

After eating, guests would pay the cook the standard price for their meal—\$1.00. If they planned on spending the night, their bill was upped for the customary per-night rate—50¢.

Passing through the door which connected the dining area with the bunk area, the guests found themselves in a room literally lined with beds; four top, four bottom on either side of the narrow room.

Most of the carpentry work for both the Trading Post and Roadhouse was masterminded by a man named Adolph Nelson. He was better known as "Two-Cord Nelson," which was derived from his ability (so it was said) to cut, deliver and stack two cords of firewood to his cutsumers in one day's time.

The furniture built by Nelson was, of necessity in those early pioneering days for Alaska, crude. But it was most certainly serviceable and, above all, sturdy. Nelson had furnished the Roadhouse dining room with two long eating tables with tops made of hand-hewn cottonwood planks, lashed together and supported by birch log legs of commendable dia-

meter. Benches of equal length and sturdiness provided seating for guests during meals.

A glimmer of ingeniousness had been employed in constructing bunks for the sleeping quarters. Using planks similar to those used in the dining tables and benches, the bunks were built outward horizontally in right angles from the walls. These were in the form of shallow wooden frames, and were supported on the outer edge by ladders which gave easy access to the higher bunks.

Around the perimeter of each of these frames—close to the bottom edge—Nelson had drilled a series of holes with a hand auger. Through these holes strips of bearhide was webbed and interlaced to form a sort of bed-springs. On top of the bearhide webwork were placed ticking material pallets filled with hay



'You Tell Them Indians There Would Be Two Bridges They'd Take You for Lunatic . . .'

(EDITOR'S NOTE: We are sorry that Mrs. Dobbs first name was not available when Jimmy Duke's Roadhouse story was set. Alfred Starr of Nenana furnished further information on Mrs. Dobbs story of the early days in Nenana. Alfred Starr said, "Sent this other article back the one type. We might be able get it on ALASKA formerly ALASKA SPORTSMAN because it about frontier days up here and history early days in Alaska.")

Nenana, Alaska
March 4, 1970

Dear Sir:

I am sending this article about Jim Duke Roadhouse as it was between about 1904 and 1914.

I ask Titus Bettis who traded for years with Jim Duke tell this story. This article written by Mrs. Dobbs, I hope you will get this on the Tundra Times to show what it look like in early days here.

I came here in 1910 I give talk at civic center February 28, 11:30 a.m. about what I know here in Nenana 1910 to 1914. There was only about 10 white people here in 1910.

The natives were out all winter and some of them in summer drying meat and fish living off the country like they always did before white man came.

Few whites started to show up by 1904. The winter trail went through Dunbar those days all the travel went down to Tanana and Yukon. I went through Dunbar so Nenana was pretty well isolated in winters. Summer was different. All steamboats going to Fairbanks in 1910.

Lots natives work on riverboats those days besides living off country in winter. Fur was cheap but food was cheaper then too. So was not too bad early days.

You tell them old Indians there will be two bridges here, railroad and highway, Clear Station will be out here in 1970, they would have taken you for a lunatic.

In 1913, we lost a horse in July which Mission paid \$700 for.

I made two trips up Nenana River that summer, First was in August with bunch of boys none was over 16, all under. We went 10 miles and started to play on sand bars. We run out of food. Had to come back.

I went with Mr. Tatum late September, no blankets. We live off rabbit roast by fire over two weeks. We went little below Ferry. I seen three white prospectors with rowboat above Rex. I don't know how they got that far upriver—swift current on Nenana River.

One Indian camp, Old Bettis, old Esau where Rex Bridge is now, someone told us those days there be highway through Nenana Canyon Bridge at Rex, me and Mr. Tatum would taken him for lunatic.

It sure did not look there will anything around later.

Print my letter on Tundra Times too with this other article.

Sincerely,
Alfred Starr, Sr.
P.O. Box 424, Nenana, Alaska

and/or dried grass. Titus Bettis attests the bunks were quite comfortable.

At the far end of the bunkhouse and to the left of the rear door, was another of Nelson's indestructible tables. This one, however, was of a somewhat smaller size and served as a washstand. Facilities for shaving were handy, as was a small washtub for handwashing a few clothing items. A makeshift clothesline directly over the washstand nearly always held a few drying items of clothing.

A short distance from the side door to the East was a small log cubicle which enclosed a rope-and-pulley well. This well supplied both the Roadhouse and Trading Post with whatever water was needed.

Of course, accommodations for dogteams were available. Guests tied their teams in the area surrounding the back door of the bunkhouse.

Heat was provided by two drum-like castiron stoves. The stove in the dining room held 4-foot logs. The stove in the

bunkhouse was smaller, stood upright and burned 2-foot logs.

Light came from Kerosene lamps. Several hung from the apex of the beamed ceiling, and several others took intermittent spots along the lengths of the eating tables.

In one era of the history of Jimmy Duke's Roadhouse, visitors were served their meals by Belle Starr (Al Starr's sister), who worked there on summer while visiting Nenana from her home town of Tanana; "Three-Way" Annie from McGrath, who was so quick of movement that she seemed to be going three directions at once; Crippled Minnie Oats, or a woman from McGrath called "Black Bear."

Familiar local faces in the dining hall were Sawdust John, Shorty Charlie—who was more often called by his nickname, "Shorty Ribs,"—a Norwegian fellow called "Bismarck," George Duncan, John Anderson, Oliver Lee, and a clerk from Jimmy Duke's Trading Post whom the local girls quite loving dubbed "Goo-gah" (Baby).

Special Attention to Tuberculosis: HEW

Alaska Senator Ted Stevens said today that he had been assured by Secretary Robert O. Finch of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare that the Alaska request for future project grants to fund the tuberculosis control program in our state will be given special attention by HEW.

The Senior Senator for Alaska praised Secretary Finch for his quick recognition and favorable response to the critical Alaska problem.

"The Secretary has told me he is aware that Alaska possesses a unique regional need for special project funds to combat this dread disease," said Senator Stevens. "I am confident that we will have this full support in continuing the tuberculosis program in Alaska at its necessary level."

Senator Stevens said that most Alaskans were aware of the crisis the tuberculosis program in Alaska faced last year when, because of our state's low population, it was indicated that the level of federal formula funds to conduct the tuberculosis program would be drastically reduced.

"Secretary Finch responded

at that time by awarding Alaska a special grant of \$232,000, enabling this vital program to be continued in our state at the required level," said Senator Stevens.

AHRC Awards Pins to Four of Its Employees

Four employees of the Arctic Health Research Center received Length of Service Certificates and pins in a recent ceremony.

Recipient of the 20-year service certificate was Dr. Kathryn Sommerman, with 5 years' prior federal service in the Department of the Army and Department of Agriculture. She joined AHRC in 1955 and has been chief of the Automology section since 1960.

Receiving the 10-year service certificates were: Elmer Feltz, chief of virology since 1959; Dennis Carroll, center warehouseman since 1968, with nine years' service; and Merlie Hughes, AHRC librarian since 1959.