

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 customers 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



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 lovingly dubbed "Goo-gah" (Baby).