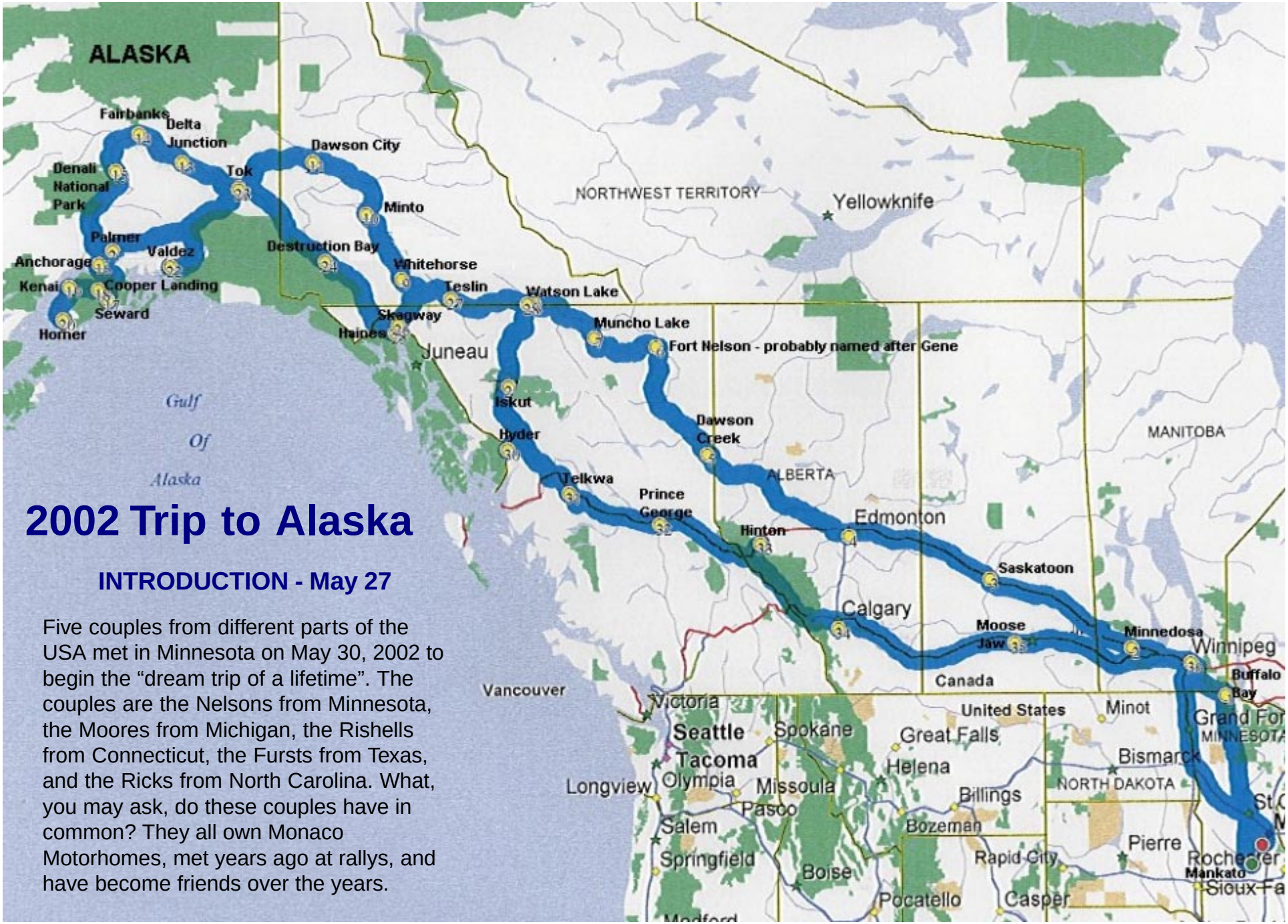


2002 Trip to Alaska

INTRODUCTION - May 27

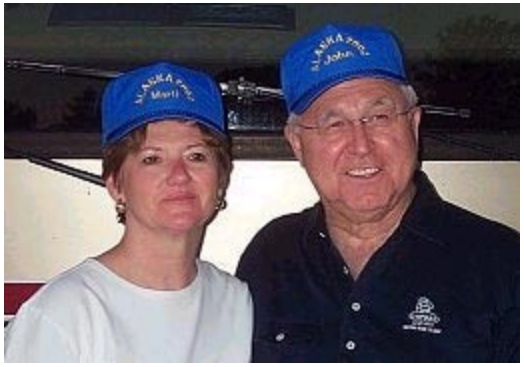
Five couples from different parts of the USA met in Minnesota on May 30, 2002 to begin the “dream trip of a lifetime”. The couples are the Nelsons from Minnesota, the Moores from Michigan, the Rishells from Connecticut, the Fursts from Texas, and the Ricks from North Carolina. What, you may ask, do these couples have in common? They all own Monaco Motorhomes, met years ago at rallys, and have become friends over the years.

After beginning in Mankato, MN, our first stop was Buffalo Bay in Canada for two days of fishing. Then we traveled north through Canada to Dawson City, taking 19 days. We spent 36 days in Alaska, seeing Fairbanks, Denali National Park, Anchorage, Homer, Valdez, Haines and Skagway. The return trip through Canada was a more southernly route, through Prince George and Calgary. We had an extensive itinerary but it was very flexible so each couple was able to enjoy the things they most liked to do.

We enjoyed our trip very much, and we are pleased to share it with you.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS - May 31

Here is the group, modeling their new hats furnished by John and Marti



The Fursts

John and Marti were born in the East but have become Texans. He was born and educated in Pennsylvania and spent most of his life as a CPA. Marti hails from Maryland and was a counselor. Although relative newlyweds (a mere 6 years since they married) they mutually enjoy his 2 sons and her 3 daughters. Those kids have produced 10 beautiful grandchildren for them to love and visit regularly in their travels. Life is good and this trip made it even better.

The Moores

Bill and Judy are from Port Huron, Michigan where they were born and always lived. They met in junior high and dated through high school and college. After graduating from Michigan State University, Bill had a career as an independent insurance agent. Judy was a homemaker and part time elementary teacher after graduating from Albion College. They raised 3 children and now enjoy 5 grandsons. They have had their Monaco motorhome since 1999 and enjoyed this great trip to Alaska.

The Nelsons

Gene and Lolly were born in north Minnesota, were high school sweethearts and have been together for almost 48 years. They lived in Alaska (while Gene was in service), in Minneapolis, and presently in Mankato, MN. Gene is an owner/designer and manufacturer of a bin cleaning equipment business. Lolly is retired from mortgage banking. Their family consists of son Greg, daughter-in-law Sarah, and 7 year old grandson Noah (their pride and joy who, fortunately, lives in Mankato, too.)

The Ricks

Graham and Mary Catherine were both born in NC. They met in college and have spent all of their married life in Greensboro. Graham is an electrical engineer with an automation design company. Mary Catherine is a needlework designer and has an online mail order company. They have no children but travel with a cat, named Hope, that adopted them 2 years ago. The Ricks got their motorhome in 1997 and have used it to do needlework shows for the last four years. They are now semi-retired and, after this trip, they have been in all 50 states.

The Rishells

Bill and Connie are long-time Connecticut residents who also have a lot at Outdoor Resorts in Port St Lucie, FL, where they spend much of their winters. Bill retired five years ago, having been a geneticist and research director for a major poultry breeding firm. He loves to trout fish, ties his own flies and anticipated Alaska's offerings in pursuit of this hobby. Connie is a fun loving person who, with help from Bill, raised two children. She likes to golf, shop and work with computers. She is the communicator of the family and keeps everyone informed. The Rishells have five grandchildren whom they enjoy very much, and who were missed during the Alaska trip.

THE Fishing Trip - June 3

Their mouths are watering for Walleye.

Watch out fish! Serious fishermen on board.

We arrived at Buffalo Bay, a fishing area in Manitoba on the Canadian border, late in the day on May 31st. Located there is a store in which to buy fishing licenses and necessities for the fisherman - including bait, fishing rod paraphernalia, food, and souvenir clothing for those that want to take home a lasting reminder of their trip to this area.

Hauling one in. "Welcome aboard. Yum!"

The lake here is known as the Lake of the Woods. This very large lake spreads across parts of Minnesota, and the 2 Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Ontario. Lake of the Woods has the longest shoreline of any lake in the world, because of its many bays and islands. Commercial fishing was done here until the early 1990's when it was realized that over-fishing was taking place and so today the lake is only used for recreational fishing. The lake is a huge reservoir that is controlled by a big hydroelectric dam in northern Ontario.

Many species of fish are found in the lake including Sauger, Northern Pike, Sturgeon, small mouth Bass, black Crappie and Walleye - the fish of choice for most of the people fishing here. Each kind of fish prefers different areas of the lake based on temperature and topography. The northern part of the lake, which is located in Ontario, is the deep area with depths of up to 200 feet. The eastern and southern part is the rocky, sandy area and the west end is shallow with water depths of 8 to 10 feet. This is Walleye territory.

Noah and his "keeper" Walleye.

At this time of year, most of the fishing boats go out early in the morning. Our group used three boats. Two went out at 8:00am both mornings and had caught their quotas by mid afternoon the first day and by lunch the second day. The third boat, going out at 11am, belonged to Ron, Gene Nelson's brother. How exciting it was when Noah, the Nelson's 7-year-old grandson, landed his first and only fish the first day. On day two he made up for it by hauling in eight!

There is a lot to learn about fishing to the casual observer. Things like how to tell the different kind of fish, what their feeding habits are, what kind of fishing gear is required to reel them in and what the fishing rules in an area are. There are many rules in Canada about weight, length, how many fish and what kinds you can catch. These rules are determined by the fishing license that you purchase. If you figure the cost of the license, renting the boat, and buying the bait, on a good day each fish would cost about $10.00 - and that doesn't count the time it took to catch it. However, watching them enjoying their hobby, you can see they are having lots of fun just sitting around waiting on the fish to steal their bait, pass them by or come aboard the boat. A sign seen in many hospitals states that nurses have "patience". Certainly, fishermen do to!

Very happy fishermen after a day on the lake at Buffalo Bay, Canada.

Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village - June 5

Monday, June 3rd, we drove across Manitoba and spent the night beside a lake at a very nice provincial park in Minnedosa. The next day was spent driving through the flat farming areas found in Saskatchewan. A campground at Saskatoon was our overnight host and there, in a nearby field, we were entertained late that day and first thing the next morning by a red fox and her 3 energetic pups. We departed Saskatoon, continuing on the Yellowhead Trail through magnificent farmland on excellent roads on the way to our next stop, Edmonton, Alberta. Along the way we stopped and visited the very interesting Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village.

The train station.

The town hotel.

The constable's house, furnished by the goverment.

At the beginning of the 20th century, settlers from the Ukraine came to east central Alberta, Canada. Soon after their arrival, Ukrainian culture became visible in the landscape of the area. About 24 miles east of Edmonton, Alberta is this region occupied by Ukrainian immigrants. There one can see living history demonstrations portrayed in an area of 34 restored historical buildings.

Only English was spoken in school

Ukrainian meal - sausage, potatoes & cheese in dough and rice in cabbage.

The site is divided into 4 different areas: a farm, a town, a rural community and an overview of the area. Local residents in costume portray a variety of characters from before 1930. They depict the daily routines of the settlers and visitors can chat with them to learn all about their way of life. For example: a trip to the schoolhouse reveals that teachers could be very young (14 years old); only English was spoken in school; all ages were present in one room, with the youngest at the front; and children who misbehaved were made to kneel on their bare knees on seeds. At the church it was learned that churches not in use were burned to the ground; they sang in church but no musical instruments were allowed; the services were long and the congregation typically stood the whole time, so children did not attend.

One of the Ukrainian churches. Insides are beautifully painted. The alter cloth needlework is cross stitched.

Each building has very well informed guides and much information could be learned from talking with them. Since the interpretations at each building are based on daily activities, no two visits are ever the same.

Traveling about town.

Edmonton, Alberta - CANADA - June 6

On June 6th our group visited Alberta's Legislative Building in the capitol city of Edmonton. The building is an inspiring architectural structure. Construction took five years and was finished in 1912, with exterior materials being primarily granite and sandstone brought from Vancouver and Calgary. The beautiful marble in the interior was imported from Quebec, Pennsylvania and Italy. A domed central structure, six stories high, seemed impressive as we looked up from the first floor rotunda. Just inside the rotunda entrance stands a bronze statue of Princess Louise Caroline Alberta (daughter of Queen Victoria and wife of the first Lieutenant Governor for which the

Alberta's Legislative Building

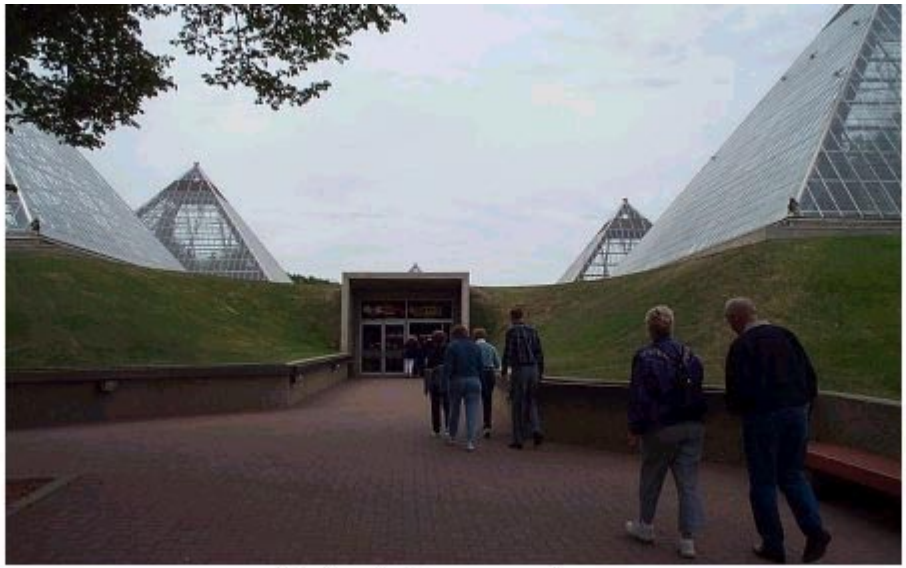
Third floor assembly room.

First floor fountain.

providence of Alberta was named) and of Indian Chief Crowfoot (an early leader who espoused cooperation with the settlers, which led to a peaceful settlement of Alberta).

In the 1800's Edmonton was a major fur trading post. Over the years many important issues have been debated in the third floor assembly room. Some of those debates led to sword fights which explains the presence of a Sergeant at Arms at every meeting. He is charged with keeping order and maintaining the mace (the symbol of authority), which must be present at all assembly meetings.

The fifth floor offers an amazing acoustical anomaly. Anyone who stands within a very narrow space (maybe 18" x 30") hears the sounds of a waterfall. At first it was thought that the roof had a leak. Actually, the sound of the first floor fountain is somehow projected to this exact spot. This "waterfall experience" adds to the charm of the building, which, as you might expect, includes works of art and paintings of leaders throughout the interior. The exterior grounds are planted with flowers and shrubs, providing an especially pleasing sight.



Muttart Conservatory

Next, our group visited the Muttart Conservatory. This is a unique structure with a central atrium displaying art by local artists and four large glass pyramids at each corner. One pyramid is to show seasonal flowering plants and is changed about 8 times each year. The others reflect different climates. The temperate climate pyramid features deciduous and evergreen plants mainly from the north and south temperate zones. This pyramid is controlled such that the plants in it go through their natural cycle of dormancy and growth during a year. The tropical pyramid is similar to a tropical rain forest with lush exotic plants and free flying birds found in the tropical regions of the globe. The fourth pyramid maintains the temperature and humidity of the semi-desert regions of the earth. Plants in this pyramid share the ability to survive the harsh conditions of lack of water and wide fluctuations in temperature. Additionally, the outdoor gardens are beautifully maintained with flowers and plantings of the season.

That afternoon we viewed an IMAX movie (large screen where the viewer feels involved in the movement on the screen) at the Edmonton Space and Science Center, recently renamed Odyssium. The movie on wolves included beautiful photography of the wilds and provided special insight as to the place of wolves in the ecosystem. Time was too short to visit the many exhibits or, for that matter, many other places in the city, however we did save time for the West Edmonton Mall, the world's largest mall. There we found over 800 stores and services, including: an NHL size ice rink, an amusement park with 29 rides and attractions (one of which is a triple loop roller coaster), a submarine, over 100 species of marine life including live dolphins, an 18 hole miniature golf course and a water park that has the world's largest indoor wave pool. After several hours of "shopping and seeing the sights" we met for a great meal at a ribs place called Tony Roma's.

West Edmonton Mall has dolphins.

An 18 hole miniature golf course.

World's largest indoor wave pool.

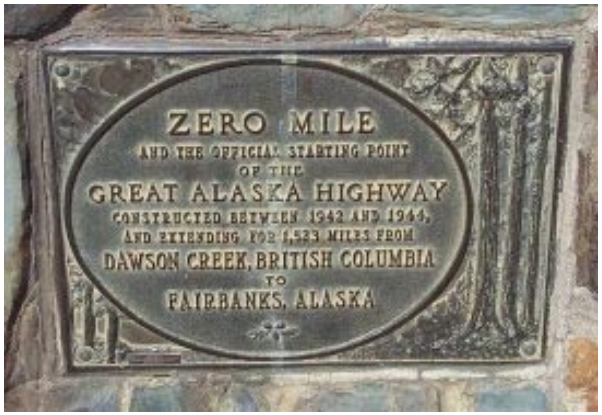
We would be remiss not to mention the visual evidence of Edmonton's vibrant economic activity. Construction, agricultural, tourism and energy industries (primarily oil and gas production and distribution) are flourishing. However, just now farmers are being forced to sell many of their animals as a result of the worst drought in eighty years. Time did not permit a close exploration of the downtown area but we did note that, probably as a response to the severe winter weather, an extensive underground system of walkways connecting office buildings, department stores and shops has been developed.

We could have spent several more days enjoying the sights and delights of Edmonton! For all of us there are many reasons to come back.

MILE “0” OF THE ALASKA HIGHWAY -

LOCATED AT DAWSON CREEK - June 7

Mid-afternoon on June 7th we arrived at Dawson Creek, British Columbia. As we headed for our RV park, the Ricks saw motorhomes that belonged to several of their NC friends in a neighboring campground. Those two couples joined us that night for dinner at the world famous Alaska Café. This establishment is a part of the Hotel Alaska which is located about 50' south of the Mile Zero post in downtown Dawson Creek. Originally known as the Dew Drop Inn, it was originally constructed as a six room building in 1930. The European backgrounds of the owners of the café can be seen in the décor, entertainment and meals. It is mentioned in “Where to eat in Canada”, which lists the 500 best restaurants in the country.



The world famous Alaska Café.

Dinner with friends from NC.

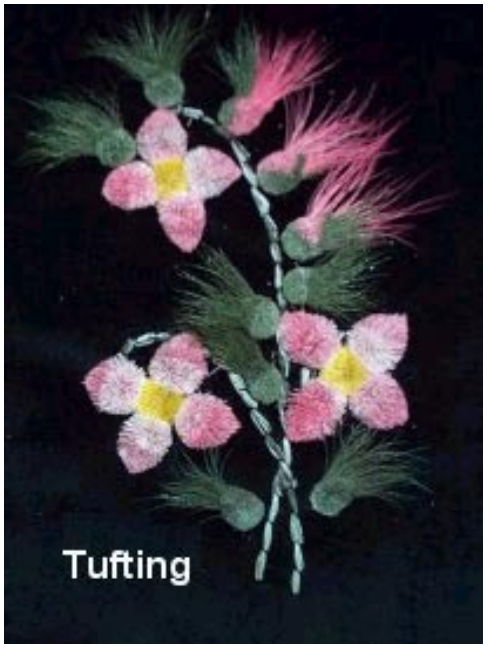
Dawson Creek is the starting point of the Alaska Highway and is easily accessible all year round by the 4 well-maintained highways that junction there. Approximately 300,000 visitors travel through there annually. Our most impressive stop while exploring the city was at the Visitors Center. There we went through a museum that contained animals of the area, and memorabilia from the construction of the highway.

The Alaska Highway came into being because the US needed to be able to move troops and supplies to Alaska during World War II. The location of military posts in Canada determined the road's location. In April of 1942, the road was begun and a "pioneer road" was completed in 8 months, with the dedication being held on November 12, 1942. It was a combined effort of over 10,000 military personnel and 6000 civilians. Once the pioneer road was put in by the military, 54 civilian construction companies were hired to widen, straighten and make the road permanent. Base camps were established at 25-mile intervals and crews would work both directions. "Build the road" was the motto and that meant 7 days a week and 24 hours a day. In a typical week, 4 to 5 miles of road was built. Wages were $ .96 to $2.00 per hour. On October 13, 1943 the permanent road was completed. The road was a joint effort between Canada and the US. Canada furnished land, gravel and personnel and the US furnished equipment, money to pay the workers, personnel and upkeep until 6 months after the war was over. In April 1946, the US turned the Canadian part of the road over to Canada to maintain. Up until 1947 civilians had to have a pass to travel on the road, which was all gravel and allowed for a 45 mph average. This amazing road runs from Dawson Creek, BC to Delta Junction, AK and is 1523 miles long!

Muncho Lake and Watson Lake - June 9 to 12

Over the next few days we traveled the Alaska Highway across British Columbia toward the Yukon. There were 135 bridges constructed on the Alaska Highway and the Peace Bridge was one of the first goals of engineers in 1942. Three different trestle bridges were constructed across the Peace River, only to be washed out by high waters. Today, there is a cantilever and truss bridge that crosses the Peace River.

On Sunday, we drove down “Suicide Hill”, one of the most treacherous hills on the original highway. It was noted for it’s ominous greeting, “Prepare to meet thy maker.” After a short day of traveling, the group arrived in Fort Nelson right after lunch. We perused through another museum on the building of the highway and the guys were particularly interested in the old construction equipment.



A small arts and craft store next door revealed pieces of needlework called moose and caribou tufting and porcupine quill weaving. Moose and caribou tufting is a traditional form of decorating clothes, belts and bags by the Athapaskan Indians. This very old needleart had almost been forgotten until recent years. Today it is becoming more and more popular as it gets better known.

The hair most suitable for tufting is the 6 to 8 inch winter fur found in the center of the animal’s back. It is hand picked, washed and dyed with natural items such as berries, moss and bark. Today, commercial dyes such as Rit are used. After dyeing, the hair is dried and ready for stitching. If a pattern is used, the picture is drawn onto the velvet or hide with a small stick dipped in flour and water. About 15 to 20 hairs are held on the pattern, a stitch is made around the hair and pulled tight and knotted on the back of the material. This makes the hair stand up in a tuft. The hair is then sculpted with small scissors. Because this method is used to make a tufting, there are never two exactly alike. Caribou hair is much softer then Moose hair.

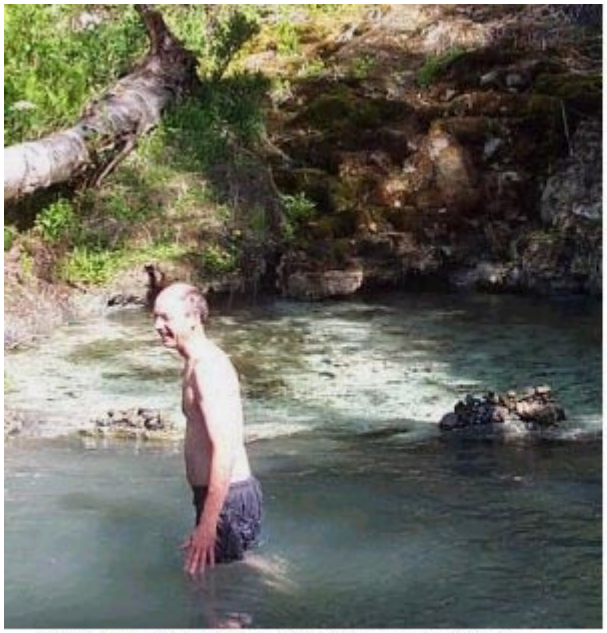
Very, very remote location . . .

but boy what a view!

Captain Jack chauffeurs us around the lake.

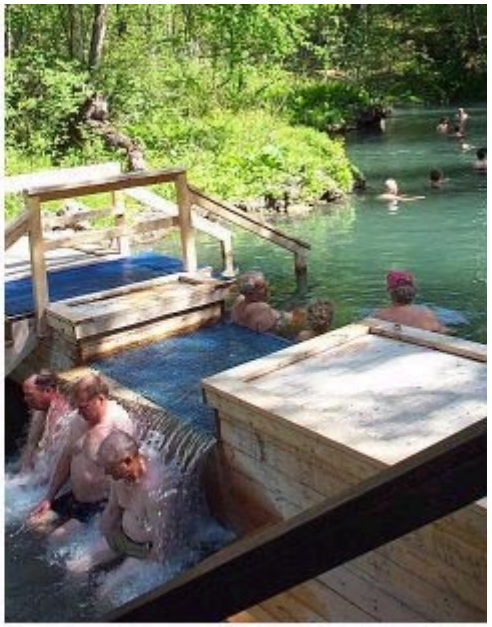
June 10th was spent at Muncho Lake, BC, a picturesque, exciting and very remote stop. The year round population is 13 with several lodges, gas stations, café and campgrounds. During our travel we saw stone sheep near the highway, a rapid flowing river along side the road, and snow capped mountain peaks in the distance against a striking blue sky. The beautiful, clear Muncho Lake’s turquoise

colors are due to the copper oxide leaching into the lake. No algae are found in this lake. We all enjoyed a ride on the lake with Captain Jack's Muncho Lake Tours, on an enclosed boat called Sandpiper 3. The lake is 1 mile wide and 8 ½ miles long, with a depth of up to 560 feet. It drains to the Arctic Ocean. The record catch on the lake was a 52-pound lake trout. During our trip around the lake, we saw hydroplanes leaving and returning from sight- seeing, and back country fishing camps. Our campground was on the lake and directly out our front windows we had an awesome view of the lake and surrounding mountains. In this remote location, phones are through satellite and power is by generators.



The hottest part of the springs.

Monkey business!



Cooling off.

On the way to Watson Lake we crossed the Liard River Bridge. It is the only remaining suspension bridge on the Alaska Highway. It spans 1,143 feet. Our next stop was the Liard River Hot Springs where some of us had a therapeutic soak. There are 2 pools with water temperatures ranging from 108 to 126 degrees. The Liard Springs qualify to be called Thermal Springs, Hot Springs, and Mineral Springs. (Thermal Springs are at least 10 degrees warmer than the ambient temperature, Hot Springs have a temperature of at least 95 degrees, and Mineral Springs contain solids in concentration of at least 1000 parts per million.) While at the springs, we enjoyed seeing our first Moose feeding in the wetlands.

Watson Lake, Yukon Territory was a productive stop for us. The highlight was placing our sign in the Sign Post Forest among 48,000 signs. The forest was started in 1942 by a homesick USA Army GI while working on the Alaska Highway. The Ricks provided a wood plaque, on which each couple used a wood-burning pen to engrave their names and hometown. Together we found just the right location to mount the sign. We visited the Northern Lights Center and watched as the mysteries of the Aurora Boreallis come to life inside the planetarium type dome. Most of us enjoyed huge ice cream cones that didn't have time to melt. Because of road construction and dust, some of us washed our motor coaches and tow cars here.

Where oh where to put that sign!

THE perfect place!