

Day 3 ~ Wednesday 23 July, We strike gold.

Neil tells us some locals wonder, "How can you call it tourist season if you can't shoot them?" They want Alaska to secede.

In 1901, hoping to reach goldfields E.T. Barnette and his new wife contracted to sail up the Tanana River as far as possible. Unfortunately the Captain decided to take a fork into the Chena and got stuck. Since the agreement was that they would leave the boat when it could go no further, they found themselves a hundred miles from the gold fields. They established a trading post and eventually gold was found nearby by Felix Pedro whose claim was jumped. This is now Fairbanks.

With the increase in gold prices, once unprofitable claims are being reopened using modern technology. At the Eldorado Gold mine we are greeted by the owners, Dexter and "Yukon Yonda" Clark. They do find gold here, but the Eldorado exists primarily to entertain tourists and teach mining techniques. A train of open cars holding about 200 enters a drift mine shaft (near horizontal) and our lessons begin. Narration comes from overhead TV's with wireless link to our story teller Tim.



Making steam.



Steam jet.



Donkey engine hoisting a bucket from a mine shaft.



Ready to tip.

Gold is found below the perma frost at the boundary with the bed rock strata. The only way to reach it was to melt the perma frost. Miners cut down trees, burned them to create steam which was then pumped into the ground. It might take a year before mining could begin. Mines worked in winter, extracting the pay dirt, dumping it in piles. In the summer, gold was extracted.

An old donkey engine hoists a bucket from a mine shaft to a Gen Pole where it trips and empties into a pile.



The sluice.

We sit on benches either side of a sluice to watch the recovery process. Pay dirt is dumped in a hopper. It came from a site over the hill. Above the hopper is a reservoir of water. When the water is released, it washes the pay dirt rapidly down the sluice, along with pebbles and small boulders. Agitated by metal grills the gold (19.2 times heavier than water) sinks and is collected on mats of Astro Turf. The water is recycled. The fines are panned to recover every last flake.



Don't fall in!



Yonda panning for gold..

Each clutching a small poke bag of dirt, we move to panning school. Several dozen water tubs are arranged in rows in an open shed. Instructors show us how to pour the dirt in the pan and swill it around. We are assured we will all find gold. I suspect they have planted flakes. It is not as easy as it looks and I welcome some help to finish the wrist work.

I think that between us Jan and I may have 5 cents worth, but when weighed am surprised that the value is closer to \$15. We handle a 19oz gold nugget valued at \$40,000.



Panning school.



Dexter.



It's here, somewhere.

After a suitable stay in the gift shop we return to the bus by train, entertained by our fiddling conductor, Earl Hughes.

There are only two refineries in Alaska, so gasoline at \$4.50/gal, is the most expensive in the nation.

The visitor Center boasts a sod roof for insulation.

Fairbanks is only 100 miles from the Arctic Circle. On July 21st, the longest day, there are 22hrs of daylight, so a midnight baseball game is played without lights.

It is drizzling which compliments the 100 day growing season.

We enjoy lunch at the Cookie Jar.

Up on a hill, sits the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska. A huge grizzly greets us. Here we learn about the geology, geography, flora, fauna and native crafts. Home made knives are surprisingly well configured. The long daylight hours prevent us from seeing the Aurora Borealis, but a film substitutes.



Welcome!



Interesting art.

Just down the hill we stroll around the Georgeson Botanic Garden and admire huge flowers and vegetables.





Some things are huge!



Museum of the North.



Adjacent to the Chena River is the Golden Heart Plaza, with green lawns, trees and benches in a park-like setting. Our dinner tonight is a salmon bake (barbecue.) We are each handed a platter, drink ticket and visit a series of open sided log sheds where buffets await. Salads, veggies, rolls and a choice of barbecued meats or fish and dessert. We could eat at park benches. It is sunny, but cool so we sit inside.

On the other side of the park, past a retired paddle wheeler, is a "village". Older buildings have been brought here and reconstructed around the Palace Theater; an old provision store.



Neil, our tour guide.



Outside a display of vintage automobiles.



These older buildings were brought in to create the "Village."





The musical, a lighthearted review, tells the story of early Fairbanks. The vocalists are good, the piano player amusing, costumes turn of the century. Seating is an odd mix of chairs and church pews, but photography is allowed.

Fairbanks and McKinley were politicians who gave their names in exchange for financial favors to Alaska, but never visited here.

Time to write cards. It is 10:30pm and no sign of sunset.

