

COLDFOOT -- PAST AND PRESENT

Courtesy of Northern Alaska Tour Company

In 1899, gold was discovered in Slate Creek that started a gold rush. People with hopes of striking it rich came into this remote country. A tent city developed where the Koyukuk River and Slate Creek meets. There were no roads at that time so the prospectors had to take a ship from Seattle to the west coast of Alaska, then transfer to a boat that came up the Yukon River into central Alaska, then onto a barge that came northward along the Koyukuk River to here. Slate Creek City as it was called then was home to 500 plus people. A city plan was filed for 10 square blocks and streets were named. There were stores, saloons, and about 80 other buildings.

The environment is harsh and remote. Winters are long and dark when no mining could take place. Temperatures get down to 60 degrees below zero. Within a few years, most of the surface gold was taken. Life was hard. Many people began to leave as less gold was found. As winter approached people began leaving.. it was said they got coldfeet and so the gold rush down known as slate creek city took a new name – Coldfoot.

The Slate Creek gold rush lasted about six years. Then a severe winter and the discovery of more gold about 20 miles upriver sent the last of the inhabitants packing. Coldfoot was abandoned and many of the buildings were scavenged for building a new river port, called Wiseman. Today there is a couple of old shacks and a 3-person cemetery that are left of the original Coldfoot.

In the early 1970's, plans began to build a Trans-Alaskan Pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez, running through Koyukuk valley. A supply road was built called the Haul Road, later named Dalton Highway. Trucks moved equipment north to the oil fields. As pipeline construction progressed, various temporary camps were established to house workers. Coldfoot became a main camp as it is almost halfway between Fairbanks and Prudhoe Bay. Nearly 300 people lived at Coldfoot as the pipeline was built. For many of the truckers it was a good stop to rest along the rough road. As the pipeline was finished and work moved southward so went the workers and the facilities that serviced them.

A food concession permit was offered to establish a food stop along the highway. Dick Mackey, Iditarod dog-sled winner, got the concession and moved a converted blue bus into Coldfoot to sell hamburgers and hot dogs. Eating was outdoors among the mosquitoes and dust. Eventually, some of the truckers who frequented Coldfoot decided to build a structure out of salvaged lumber from equipment crates they were hauling back from Prudhoe Bay. Dick Mackey moved his food business indoors and this became the first Coldfoot Truck Stop café. A center timber used for support was signed by the original builders and is used today to post messages for truckers and travelers. As the pipeline was finished, ATCO units were moved from the work camp housing and adapted into a 50-room motel.

Coldfoot is a destination for many people from around the world in both winter and summer. Travelers come here to experience the beauty of this far country. Work crews who maintain the pipeline and trucker hauling supplies still frequent Coldfoot year round. The café doors are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year to all travelers. In winter, tour groups come here to view the Northern Lights and dog sledding is very popular for visitors as well as Alaska mushers with their own teams. Elderhostel groups come to visit and learn about the life in the Arctic and enjoy winter's quiet under the northern lights. In summer, the area's population rises as summer staff is hired and crews set up. Miners come back ever searching their claims looking for the elusive gold as they have every summer since gold was first found in this area in 1899.

Just about every kind of vehicle has been on the Dalton highway from the hand-pulled cart of two guys walking to Prudhoe Bay to Mercedes Benz and buses. There's always a few bicyclists each summer and trekkers going all the way from the tip of south America to the top of north America. Travelers come through to view the scenery and the curious come to see what is here. Some come to work, some come for recreation...