

Alaska Highway



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

Alaska does not have a dense network of roads. In fact, many towns and villages are so remote and isolated they are not linked to the outside world by road. They are not even linked to each other by road. They are only accessible by air or by boat.

Alaska's only road network is found in its central region, linking its largest city, Anchorage, to Fairbanks, Soldotna, Homer, Seward, Glennallen, Valdez, McCarthy and some small villages.

The US government bought this huge piece of land known as Alaska from the Russians in 1867. The price paid was US\$7.2million, a princely sum in those days but a pittance by today's standard. Divided by Alaska's total land area of 1,518,600 sqkm, the price worked out to a mere US\$4.74 per sqkm. Yet Mr. William Seward, US Secretary of State who signed the treaty for the purchase of Alaska, was severely criticised by many American people for his lack of foresight in buying a piece of land that had nothing but ice on it, and they dubbed the purchase "Seward's Folly" and Alaska "Seward's ice-box"! For a long time Alaska saw little development and its population grew very slowly.

During the Second World War, the US government was very worried about the possibility of a Japanese attack on Alaska. It wanted to construct a road to link Alaska to the US mainland via Canada to enable US troops to mobilise quickly to face the enemy. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in the morning of 7 December 1941, was one of the major factors which prompted the US government to start construction work on the Alaska Highway on 11 February 1942.

The road that runs from Dawson Creek in British Columbia, Canada, to Delta Junction in Alaska via Whitehorse in Yukon Territory, Canada, covered a distance of 2,700 km and was mainly constructed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Canada gave its cooperation on two conditions: That USA bore the full cost of the road and that the road and other facilities



in Canada would be handed over to Canadian authorities after the end of the war. Progress on the construction was very speedy and the road was completed on 28 October 1942.

The road, however, was designed according to military standards and was not suitable for use by general vehicles until 1943. It was opened to the public in 1948. A lot of work had since been undertaken to improve its horizontal and vertical alignments as well as its surface. As a result, the overall length of the Alaska Highway was reduced to 2,232km (as measured in 2012). Today, the entire length of the highway is paved. However, a few sections of the highway require periodic maintenance because of movements in the permafrost subgrade.

The Alaska Highway is truly one of the most impressive engineering feats of the 20th Century as it is such a long road constructed over difficult, mountain terrain in such a short time (less than 9 months). A drive along the highway is one of those once-in-a-lifetime road trips that many people dream of doing but very few actually accomplish.

My wife and I considered ourselves blessed as we were able to drive on it from Whitehorse to Delta Junction during our backpacking trip in Alaska in September 2014. The scenery was spectacular.

By the way, Mr Seward was vindicated almost exactly one century after he signed the treaty for the purchase of Alaska. In 1968, oil and gas were discovered in Prudhoe Bay off the northern coast of Alaska, and that reserve turned out to be the largest in the world. ■