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ALASKA RAILROAD CORPORATION HISTORIC TIMELINE

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ALASKA RAILROAD

This ***Alaska Railroad Corporation Historic Timeline*** document is maintained by the:

Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC)
Corporate and External Affairs Department

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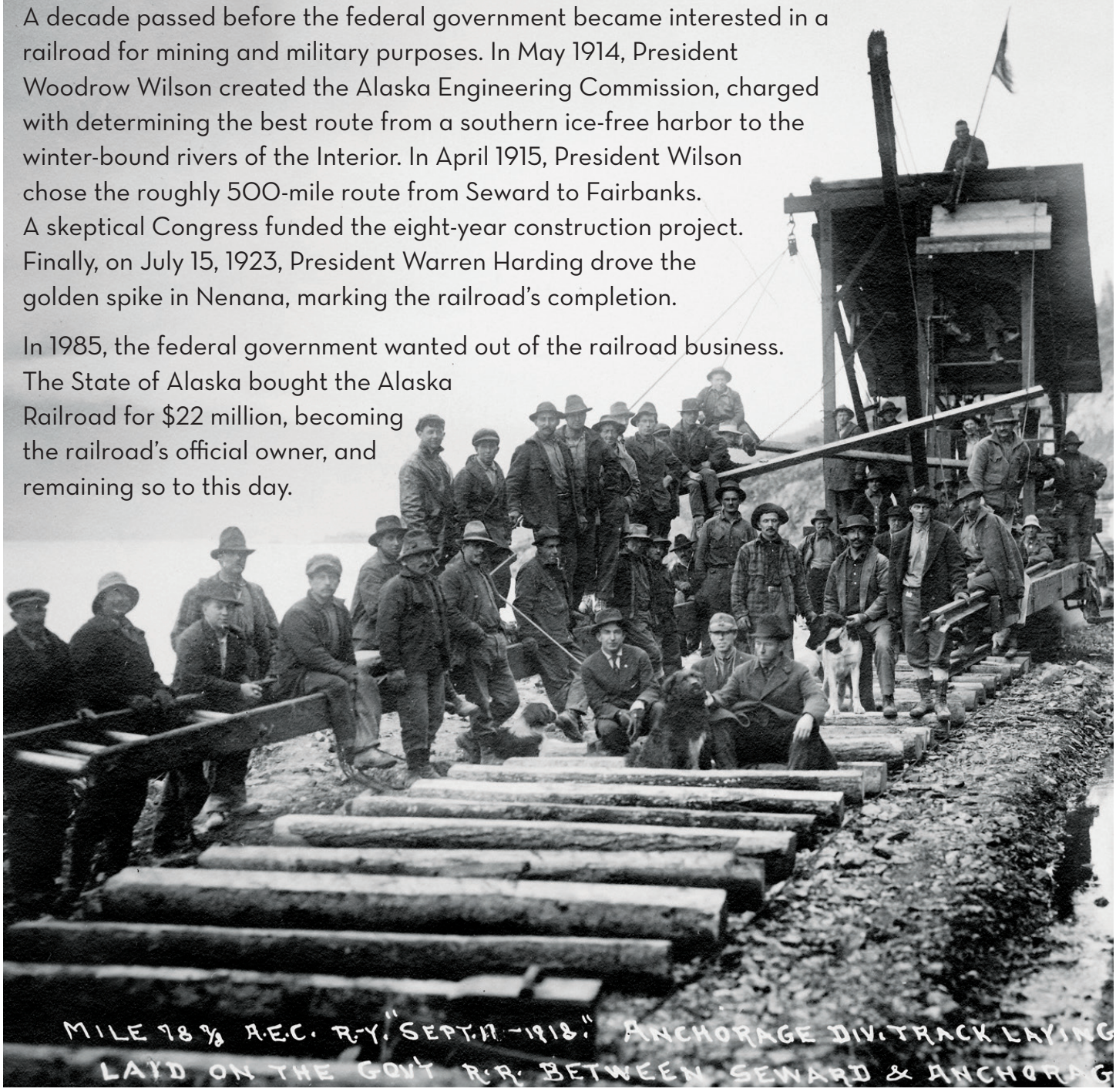
The Alaska Railroad played a pivotal role in our country's military and economic endeavors, and has had a profound impact on Alaska's history and development as well. It grew from humble beginnings in 1904 as a private line stretching a few miles north from its origin in Seward. The owners – the Alaska Central Railway and later the Alaska Northern Railway – went bankrupt.

A decade passed before the federal government became interested in a railroad for mining and military purposes. In May 1914, President Woodrow Wilson created the Alaska Engineering Commission, charged with determining the best route from a southern ice-free harbor to the winter-bound rivers of the Interior. In April 1915, President Wilson chose the roughly 500-mile route from Seward to Fairbanks. A skeptical Congress funded the eight-year construction project. Finally, on July 15, 1923, President Warren Harding drove the golden spike in Nenana, marking the railroad's completion.

In 1985, the federal government wanted out of the railroad business. The State of Alaska bought the Alaska Railroad for $22 million, becoming the railroad's official owner, and remaining so to this day.



DOCUMENTED HISTORY

The Alaska Railroad's historical information can provide context and interest to media news and features. This section offers some reputable sources for railroad historical photos, records and other documentation.

The Alaska Railroad does not employ a staff historian or have its own archive or museum. Rather, the Alaska Railroad has long relied on institutions that are uniquely qualified to preserve, protect, organize and facilitate public access to historical records and photos. Within the last decade, these relationships evolved into official transfers of ownership.

Alaska Railroad and Alaska Engineering Commission Archived Historic Photo Collection

In September 2010, the Alaska Railroad transferred ownership of its historical photo collection to the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center. The collection consists primarily of photographs, but also includes postcards, invitations, brochures, commemorative buttons and pins, anniversary press packet, reports, rail tickets, and video film. Transfer is by a deed of gift signed by the railroad, museum and state archivist. The gift enables the museum to obtain grants and other funds to enhance future efforts to preserve, protect and display the collection. The Alaska Railroad stipulated that the collection must remain in Anchorage and be accessible to the public. Requests for commercial use of the photos must still be approved by ARRC Corporate Affairs.

Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center
Archives | *Atwood Resource Center*
625 C Street | Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Website: https://www.anchoragemuseum.org/collections/library-archives/

Archive Phone Number: 907-929-9235

Museum Email: museum@AnchorageMuseum.org

Alaska's Digital Archives: https://vilda.alaska.edu/

Alaska's Digital Archives presents a wealth of historical photographs, albums, oral histories, moving images, maps, documents, physical objects, and other materials from libraries, museums and archives throughout our state. This includes a number of historical Alaska Railroad images that have been scanned and digitized, and tagged for online search.

Alaska Railroad Federal-ownership era (pre-1985) Records Collection

In June 2009, Alaska Railroad transferred ownership of historic records from the period when the railroad belonged to the federal government (1914 – 1985). The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) had been storing these records as a courtesy for a number of years. The Alaska Railroad records collection offers a comprehensive look at historic events and decisions that helped shape Alaska's political and economic climate. The transfer enabled NARA to dedicate staff time and resources to catalogue, label, store and restore the materials to facilitate access and to protect against physical deterioration. The agreement called for these records to remain in Alaska, and originally they were housed at the NARA Pacific Alaska Region office facility in Anchorage. When NARA eliminated this region office in 2014, Alaska Railroad records were transported to the Alaska State Archive facility in Juneau, ensuring they remain in Alaska.

Alaska State Archives

Andrew P. Kashevaroff (APK) Building | 395 Whittier Street | Juneau, Alaska 99801

Website: https://archives.alaska.gov/

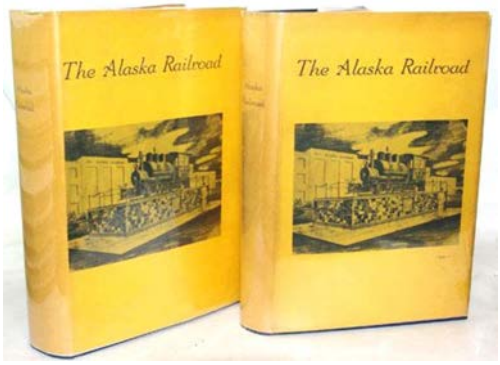
Phone: 907-465-2270 | **Email:** archives@alaska.gov

Staff Contacts: http://archives.alaska.gov/staff_directory.html

Reference Publications

Alaska Railroad Annual Reports: Yearly financial highlights, along with business and operating milestones are documented in ARRC annual reports. These reports are available at several Alaska library system branches. Reports dating back to 1982, a few years before state ownership, are also posted online at: https://www.alaskarailroad.com/corporate/leadership/reports.

Prince Historical Reference Books: Numerous books have been written about the Alaska Railroad construction and other historically significant events. One nonfiction publication that is well-regarded as an accurate historical reference tool is the Alaska Railroad in Pictures 1914 – 1964 (Volumes 1 and 2) by Bernadine LeMay Prince. It was published in 1964 in Anchorage as a hardcover release. While no longer in print, the book set is available at several Alaska library system branches.



ALASKA RAILROAD TIMELINE: HIGHLIGHTS IN HISTORY

CONCEPTION AND CONSTRUCTION

1903: Alaska Central Railway built Alaska's first railroad, starting in Seward and extending 50 miles north.

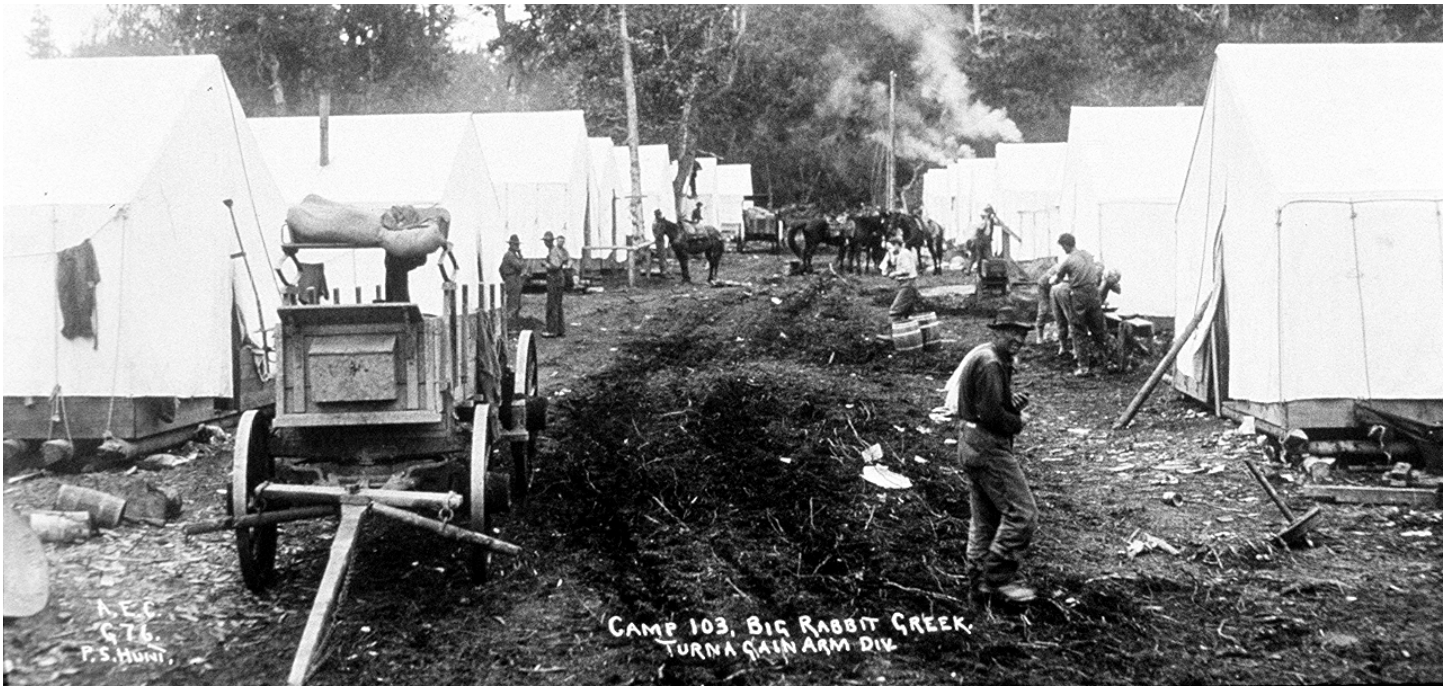
1910: Alaska Central Railway went bankrupt in 1907 and reorganized as the Alaska Northern Railway Company in 1910 to extend the Railroad to Kern Creek, 71 miles from Seward.

March 12, 1914: The U.S. Congress agrees to fund construction and operation of a railroad from Seward to Fairbanks. Estimated construction cost is $35 million.

June 1915: Anchorage is created as a construction town along Ship Creek, where the railroad moves its headquarters from Seward.

1917: Railroad construction crews peak at 4,500 workers. The Tanana Valley Railroad, a 45-mile narrow-gauge line into Fairbanks from the Chatanika mining area to the northwest, was purchased, principally to obtain its Fairbanks terminal facilities.

July 15, 1923: President Warren G. Harding travels to Alaska to mark completion of the Alaska Railroad by driving a ceremonial golden spike at Nenana, one of the state's largest cities at the time. President Harding died from an attack of food poisoning on his return trip to San Francisco on Aug. 2, 1923.



EARLY OPERATIONS

1930: With a combined population of 5,400 people in Seward, Anchorage and Fairbanks – the only sizeable towns along the Railbelt – the Railroad was unable to generate enough business to be profitable.

1938: Under the management of Col. Otto F. Ohlson, the Alaska Railroad operates its first profitable year.

1940-43: World War II brings large profits from hauling military and civilian supplies and materials.

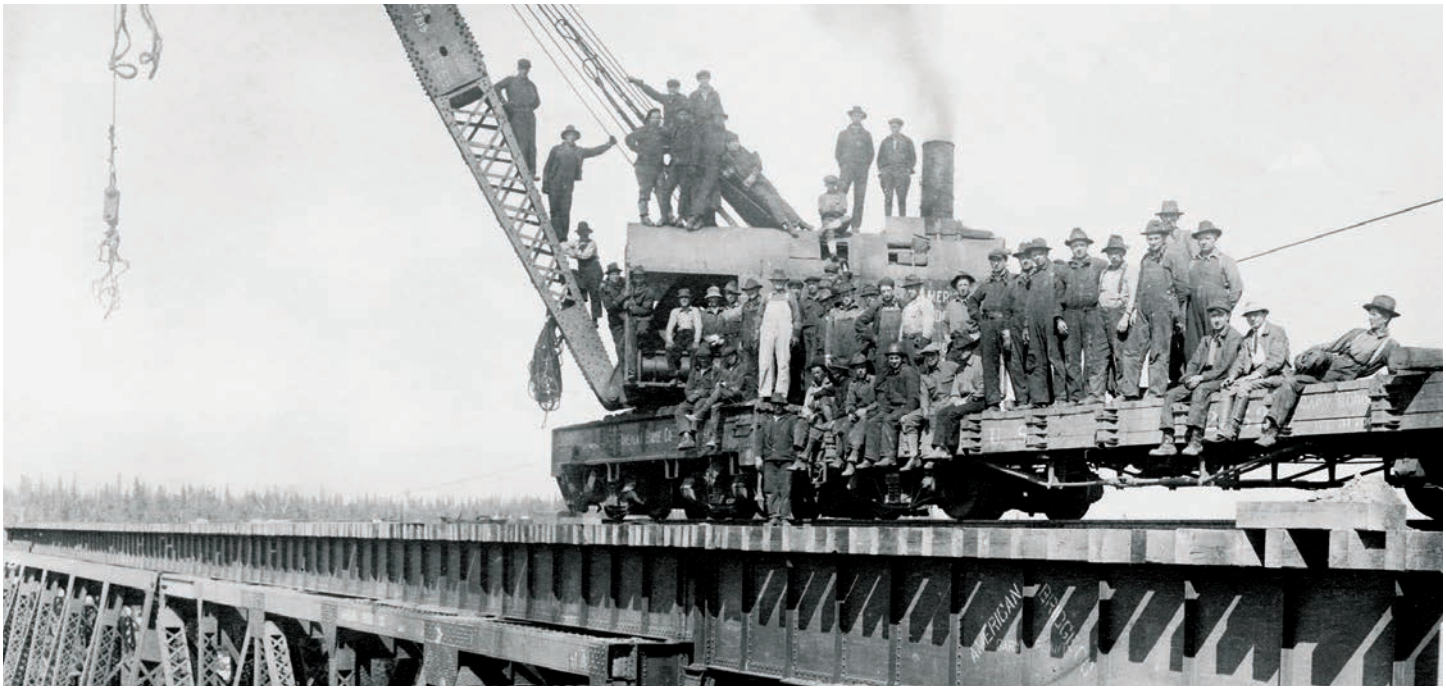
1943: Two tunnels are built through the Chugach Mountains to allow rail access to Whittier, a military port and fuel depot, to support the war effort. A new Anchorage passenger depot is completed in December.

1944: Whittier opens as a second railroad port. Diesel locomotives begin to replace steam engines, a process completed in 1966 when the last steam engine was sold.

Post-War: Congress approves a $100 million track rehabilitation program.

October 1947: The inaugural run of the *Aurora*, a blue and gold streamliner, marks upgraded passenger service between Anchorage and Fairbanks.

1953: Competition from roads forces Seward passenger service to be discontinued. Extensive track rehabilitation is completed.



May 1962: The first car-barge service is established at Whittier, followed by train-ship service in June 1964. This enables railcars from any rail point in the Lower 48 to ship to any point along the Alaska Railroad.

April 25, 1963: President John F. Kennedy signs an executive order making the Alaska Railroad tariff rates subject to the Interstate Commerce Commission.

March 27, 1964: Railroad damage from the Good Friday earthquake is estimated at $30 million. Freight service from Anchorage to Fairbanks is restored April 6. Passenger service is back on line April 11. Freight service to Whittier resumes April 20.

April 1967: Control of the Alaska Railroad passes from the Secretary of the Interior to the Secretary of Transportation.

FEDERAL-TO-STATE OWNERSHIP

January 1983: President Ronald Reagan signs legislation authorizing transfer of the Alaska Railroad to the State of Alaska.

May 1984: The Alaska Legislature authorizes Governor Bill Sheffield to negotiate with the federal government for transfer ownership of the Alaska Railroad to the state.

July 1984: Governor Sheffield signs legislation establishing the quasi-public Alaska Railroad Corporation and its seven-member board of directors.

1984: The Alaska Railroad develops new passenger services with the cruise industry, accepting contracts to pull superdome double-decker luxury coaches. Tour Alaska attaches the first three private dome railcars to the Anchorage-to-Fairbanks daily train service.

January 1985: The Alaska Railroad becomes the property of the State of Alaska in transfer ceremonies held in Nenana and Seward.

STATE-OWNED OPERATIONS

October 1986: A 100-year flood destroys two major bridges and several smaller bridges and covers the tracks in mud, causing nearly $3 million in damage. Service is restored within 13 days.

1988: A new depot is constructed at Denali National Park and Preserve, the ultimate destination for thousands of summer visitors.

Winter 1989-1990: A severe winter of extended cold and heavy snowfall causes delays to train operations. Attempts to deter moose from the tracks include noise-making shotgun shells and a pilot car that runs in front of freight trains to shoo moose off the tracks.

December 1990: Overall freight revenue for the year increases 10%. Passenger ridership increases 17% over 1989, totaling 436,964 passengers.

1992: Two 1,500-horsepower switch engines are purchased to free road engines for heavier work and improve customer service.

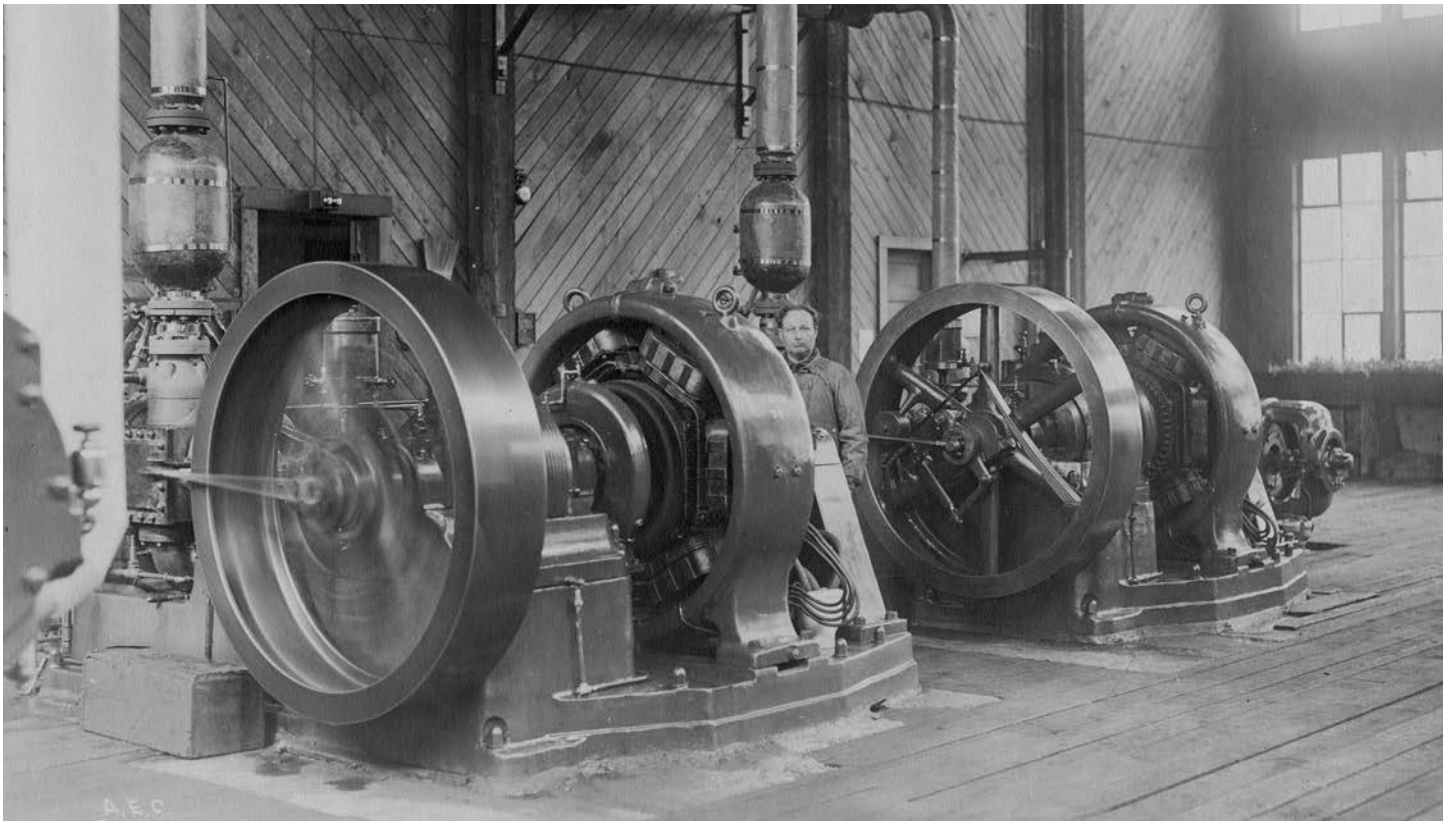
May 1992: Employees in Anchorage move into a new, 38,700 sq. ft. headquarters building constructed along Ship Creek. Cost of construction totals $6 million. Alaska Railroad Corporation is the sole tenant.

1993: Alaska Railroad Corporation retires 200 old railcars to reduce expenses.

November 1994: The railroad brings a 700-foot-long rail grinder to Alaska to remove imperfections on the rail. Cost is $1.2 million to realize a cost savings of $5.3 million over 10 years.

December 1995: Ridership hits a new high with 492,528 passengers taking the train during 1995.

1996: The Alaska Railroad shows a record profit of $8 million, surpassing the previous record profit of $7.9 million in 1995. Passenger ridership grows to 512,000.



GREATER FUNDING FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

1996: Alaska Railroad begins to qualify for federal funding and receives $10 million in Congressional grant funding to install 87,000 railroad ties.

1997: Alaska Railroad develops a program of projects to build new depots and docks, improve rail infrastructure and modernize through new technology.

1997: Former Governor Bill Sheffield becomes CEO and President of the Alaska Railroad.

1999: Whittier Tunnel opens to vehicular traffic and becomes the only rail/vehicle shared tunnel in the United States. Railroad ceases to operate the Whittier rail shuttle between Portage and Whittier after 55 years of service.

2000: The Railroad buys 16 new 4,000 horsepower SD70MAC locomotives to increase fuel efficiency and capacity.

2000: Alaska Railroad initiates the Grandview passenger train to serve cruise ship passengers traveling between Seward and Anchorage. Computer Aided Dispatch is introduced to replace the manual method of tracking trains on handwritten log sheets.

2001: Patrick K. Gamble, former Four Star Air Force general, is named the new CEO and president.

2001: Railroad completes a new freight dock in Seward and upgrades the existing dock to serve as a passenger-only facility. Improved avalanche detection and prevention system is installed. Railroad joins new partnership with Lynden Transport to operate the rail-barge service between Whittier and the Lower 48. The new tugboats and barges increase efficiency.

2001: Railroad begins construction on a track-straightening program between Anchorage and Wasilla to improve safety and efficiency and to reduce the transit time by 40 minutes.

2002: Real estate revenues exceed $11 million for the first time. New web-based passenger reservation system is implemented. Railroad initiates program to install auxiliary power units and software technology on locomotives to reduce diesel emissions and noise.

2002: Many projects completed using federal funds. In Anchorage, the Bill Sheffield Rail Depot at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, Ship Creek Plaza and other pedestrian amenities including sidewalks and lighting are completed. In Whittier, a side-unloading barge dock and a pedestrian underpass traversing under the rail yard.

2003: Initiated new sightseeing service to Grandview and Spencer Glacier whistlestops, offering a popular day-trip travel choice in 2003. Completed new depot at Denali National Park and Preserve.

2003: Most successful year in Alaska Railroad history: Net income reaches a record high of $14.5 million; fewest employees injured than ever before; train incidents measured well below national average. *Onboard Services Magazine* names Alaska Railroad the best passenger railroad in 2003.

Spring 2004: The Railroad purchases eight new SD70MAC locomotives, increasing the number of railroad locomotives to 60. At 4,300 horsepower, the new locomotives increase the railroad's capacity.

August 2004: The Alaska State Fair Intermodal Commuter Center opens at Alaska State Fair grounds in Palmer. The new facility, initiated by the State Fair, includes a new rail station, restrooms, handicap parking and convenient and safe drop-off traffic flow through a new fair gate.

April 2005: Completed and dedicated a new Anchorage Operations Center. The new state-of-the-art facility serves as the nerve center of the Alaska Railroad, bringing dispatch, transportation, safety and operations together under one roof.

May 2005: Completed and dedicated a new Fairbanks Depot, designed for traveler convenience, efficiency, safety and to meet the railroad's capacity needs for the next 30 years.

May 2005: Introduced a new GoldStar class rail service by adding two new double-deck luxury cars to the *Denali Star* train, which operates daily from mid-May through mid-September.

May 2006: Employee Dwight West wins Safety Person of the Year Award presented by the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Associations, a national group representing over 400 railroads across the United States.

August 2006: For the first time ever, ARRC issues tax-exempt bonds to fund an aggressive track refurbishment program.

August 2006: Widespread flooding knocks out rail and highway service between Anchorage and Fairbanks. The Railroad is back up and running in less than 48 hours and is the first post-flood transportation link between Alaska's two largest cities.

June 2007: ARRC and the Matanuska Susitna Borough signed a Memorandum of Agreement to pursue environmental work, engineering and alternative analysis in support of the Surface Transportation Board-led environmental document for a Port MacKenzie rail line extension.

Fall 2007: Alaska Railroad begins burning ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel in all its locomotives well ahead of the federal 2010 deadline.

2007: ARRC records a record-setting safety year, with only one reportable train "accident" (anything over $8,700 damage) for the year. This ties a railroad record and is well ahead of the national average. ARRC recorded its second-lowest incidence of minor train derailments for the year, a 64% reduction over six years.

Summer 2008: As part of an overall initiative to improve the railroad's environmental footprint, ARRC reduces energy demand on the Anchorage rail yard boiler plant by nearly a third.

Summer 2008: ARRC conducts its largest military mobilization move ever, transporting nearly 1,000 military vehicles from Fort Wainwright to the Port of Anchorage in support of the 1-25th Stryker Brigade Combat Team's eventual deployment to Iraq.

Fall 2008: ARRC begins transforming its 1940s-era freight shed into an office building. The building was designed to ensure this will be the first historic building in Alaska renovated to meet the stringent standards of the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program.

2008–2009: The Alaska Railroad reduces its workforce by about 25% (200 positions) during a two-year period in response to a global economic downturn.

May 2009: ARRC debuts the new Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) on the Glacier Discovery train service.

September 2010: Rail industry veteran Christopher Aadnesen is named president & CEO.

December 2010: With a 10-year lease, the newly remodeled Historic Freight Shed becomes the new base of operations for the USDA Forest Service.

March 2011: The Surface Transportation Board releases the final EIS on the Point MacKenzie rail extension recommending the Mac East Variant (Mac Central) and Houston South as the preferred route.

September 2011: ARRC hosts a groundbreaking ceremony for the Tanana River Crossing (Northern Rail Extension - Phase 1) in Salcha, Alaska. The $188 million capital project will allow for year-round access by the military to the largest training grounds in the country.

November 2011: The Surface Transportation Board authorizes the Alaska Railroad to build and operate the new Port MacKenzie Rail Extension.

November 2013: William O'Leary becomes the first born-and-raised Alaskan to become ARRC's president and CEO.

August 2014: The Tanana River Crossing is officially completed.

May 2015: ARRC earns a Silver LEED Certification award for the renovation of the Historic Freight Shed.

Oct. 9, 2015: The Alaska Railroad becomes the first railroad in the United States to be granted approval from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) by rail.

Fall 2016: Fairbanks Natural Gas and Hitachi High-Tech AW Cryo, Inc. of Japan works with the Alaska Railroad to employ two intermodal cryogenic tank containers (ISO tanks) to demonstrate intermodal transportation of LNG from Anchorage to Fairbanks. This was the first transportation of LNG by rail in the United States.

December 2016: For the first time, the Alaska Railroad offers midweek service on the *Aurora Winter Train* during the Christmas and New Year holidays.

January 2019: ARRC entered the revenue service demonstation (RSD) phase of its Positive Train Control implementation putting the railroad on track to meet the federally-mandated deadline of Dec. 31, 2020.

Spring 2020: A new business comes on line. With new infrastructure completed in 2019 on railroad land in Anchorage and Fairbanks, ARRC begins hauling fuel in support of of Petro Star's fuel distribution service.