

ALASKA RAILROAD

Alaska Native Contributions

Eskimo Laborers Fill Labor Gap 1951-52

WWII: Cantwell Gandy Dancers



Above: In the early 1950s, the railroad brought 125 Eskimos to help fill a gap in the labor market. Section foremen found the men eager to learn and interested in doing a good job. At least some of the Eskimo workers were from Bethel. Pictured, the men pose in front of railcars. Right: An Eskimo Section Crew at work, September 1952.



During World War II, the gold mines around Cantwell shut down. Athabaskan men and women experienced with hard physical work at the mines were willing to fill a shortage in track laborers, known also as "Gandy Dancers," so named for their use of railroad tools made by the Gandy Manufacturing Co. Left: Women maintain the tracks. Above: A Cantwell section crew in front of the tool house.

The Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC) is in the process of developing displays that recognize Alaska Native contributions to the construction, operation and maintenance of the federally-constructed and now state-owned railroad. Research for this project began in late 2011 and will continue in 2012. Ongoing research includes:

- Identification and review of resource books and other publications containing pertinent information.
- Interviews with several former/retired and current Alaska Railroad workers and board members with Alaska Native heritage.
- Review of historical photograph collection at several Alaska institutions, including libraries and museums.
- Request for photographs from family and other private individuals who are associated with former and current railroad employees having Alaska Native heritage.

The Alaska Railroad extends from Seward north through the traditional lands of the Alutii, then through the lands of three Athabaskan groups: the Dena'ina, Ahtna, and Lower Tanana people.

Research to date indicates Alaska Native involvement at every level, from laborers during initial railroad construction between 1914 and 1923, to track maintenance during World War II, to top leadership guiding corporate policy on the ARRC Board of Directors after state ownership. Today (as of year-end 2011) 30 Alaska Railroad employees indicate their ethnicity as Alaska Native / American Indian; these employees perform in many areas of railroad operations and maintenance.



Today's Railroaders



Left: Brakeman/Conductor/Engineer Will Notti climbs aboard an SD70MAC locomotive. Notti is Athabaskan and Yupik. He joined the railroad in 2000. Right: Fireman/Engineer Gordon Larson operates a locomotive. Larson is a Tlingit Indian. He joined the railroad in 1985. Both trainmen are second generation railroaders.

Do you have information or photos you would like to contribute to this effort? Please contact ARRC Corporate Communications Officer Stephenie Wheeler at (907) 265-2671 or wheelers@akrr.com.

Alaska Native leaders serving on the ARRC Board of Directors



Larry Merculieff
Aleut

Alaska Railroad Board 1989 - 1990 as Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Governor Steve Cowper

- Director and Chair, Aleut Corporation Board of Directors
- CEO, Tanadgusix Corporation



William Hensley
Inupiaq

Alaska Railroad Board 1994 - 1996 as Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Governor Tony Knowles

- Founder, Director and President, NANA Regional Corporation
- Founder, Maniilaq (Kotzebue Region)
- Executive Director, President and co-Chair, Alaska Federation of Natives



Jacob Adams
Inupiaq

Alaska Railroad Board 1999 - 2006
Appointed by Governor Tony Knowles

- President and CEO and Board Chair, Arctic Slope Regional Corporation
- Mayor and Assembly President, North Slope Borough
- City Council Member, Barrow



Carl Marrs
Alutiiq

Alaska Railroad Board 2001 - 2005
Appointed by Governor Tony Knowles

- President & CEO, Cook Inlet Region Inc. (CIRI)
- CEO, Old Harbor Native Corporation
- President, Association of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANSCA) CEOs



Edgar Blatchford
Inupiaq

Alaska Railroad Board 2003 - 2005 as Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Governor Frank Murkowski

- Director and Chair, Chugach Alaska Corporation
- Founder, Alaska Newspapers, Inc. (Calista Corporation subsidiary)
- Cultural Historian, Qutekac Native Tribe



Orie Williams
Athabaskan

Alaska Railroad Board 2005 - 2009
Appointed by Governor Frank Murkowski

- President & CEO, Director and Chair, Doyon Limited
- President and Director, Toghthelhe (Nenana Village Corporation)
- Member, Nenana Tribal Council



Emil Notti
Athabaskan

Alaska Railroad Board 2007 - 2010 as Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Governor Sarah Palin

- First President, Alaska Federation of Natives
- President, Doyon Limited



Susan Bell
Inupiaq

Alaska Railroad Board 2010-Present as Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Governor Sean Parnell

- Shareholder, Bering Straits Native Corporation
- Shareholder, Sitsasuaq Native Corporation
- Vice President, Goldbelt Incorporated

