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 Alutsis, then through the lands of three Athabascan 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.

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

Alaska Native leaders serving on the ARRC Board of Directors

Larry Merculieff
William Hensley
Jacob Adams
Carl Mars
Edgar Blatchford
Orie Williams
Emil Notti
Susan Bell

Alaska Railroad Board 1994 - 1996
Alaska Railroad Board 1999 - 2006
Alaska Railroad Board 1999 - 2006
Alaska Railroad Board 2003 - 2005
Alaska Railroad Board 2003 - 2005
Alaska Railroad Board 2005 - 2009
Alaska Railroad Board 2007 - 2010
Alaska Railroad Board 2010-Present

Appointed by Governor Don Ellis
Appointed by Governor Don Ellis
Appointed by Governor Don Ellis
Appointed by Governor Don Ellis
Appointed by Governor Frank Murkowski
Appointed by Governor Frank Murkowski
Appointed by Governor Sarah Palin
Appointed by Governor Sean Parnell

Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Appointed by Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development

Chair, Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
Chair, Commissioner, Department of Commerce & Economic Development
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Appointed by Governor Tony Knowles
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Appointed by Governor Tony Knowles
Appointed by Governor Frank Murkowski
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Corporate Communications
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Corporate Communications
Corporate Communications

President, Chugach Alaska Corporation
President, Chugach Alaska Corporation
President, Old Harbor Native Corporation
President, Old Harbor Native Corporation
President, Sitnasuak Native Corporation
President, Sitnasuak Native Corporation
President, Chugach Alaska Corporation
President, Sitnasuak Native Corporation

Alutiiq
Aleut
Unangax
Yupik
Unangax
Unangax
Inupiaq
Unangax

Gwichín
Kuskokwim
Tanana
Denali
Tanana
Han
Tanana
Tanana

WWII: Cantwell Gandy Dancers
Eskimo Laborers Fill Labor Gap 1951-52

Above: In the early 1950s, the railroad brought 125 Eskimos to help fill a labor market. Section foremen found the men eager to work and interested in doing a good job. At least some of the Alaska Railroad 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. Athabascan men and women experienced 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 right track. Above: A Gandy Section Crew at work, September 1952.