

Denali

National Park and Preserve
Alaska

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

The Long and Winding Road

A History of the Denali Park Road

“The simplicity of everything was relaxing. The road was not a highway, aggressively disrupting the land, but a simple, quiet thing, and the Alaska landscape seemed to come right up to the roadside. It was restful and in keeping with what this place stands for. We should strive to keep it that way.”

-Biologist, Olaus J. Murie, 1959



Entrance Arch, June 24, 1939 DENA Archives #39-1

The Denali Park Road has an intriguing history which includes more than just how and why it was built. It also tells the story of a commitment to preserving a bit of Alaska's wilderness where humans are not a dominant part of the landscape. In many ways this rugged gravel road allows visitors to feel a bit of the spirit of Alaska as the pioneers knew it. Preserving the very character of the road that Murie describes above is essential.

“A main artery road through the passes is the park's most urgent need,” Harry Karstens, the park's first superintendent, wrote in 1921. He realized that a national park needed to be accessible to its visitors. Constructed between 1922 and 1938 as a joint project between the Alaska Road Commission and the National Park Service, the park road extends 90 miles to the community of Kantishna.

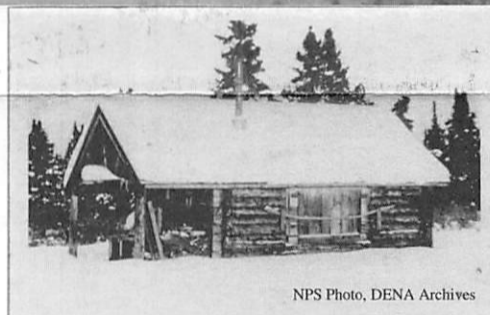
Throughout construction road crews were held to stringent guidelines for design and aesthetics, ensuring that the road followed the natural contours of the land and provided for scenic vistas. What resulted is a road that takes advantage of panoramic views and interesting terrain, providing access to the park's outstanding resources: the

scenic wildlife against the backdrop of America's highest peak, Mount McKinley.

Building a road into remote wilderness took time. Several roadside cabins were constructed near the route as cook houses for road construction crews. Later they provided shelter as “relief cabins” for rangers patrolling the park. Rangers who patrol the park today still use them.

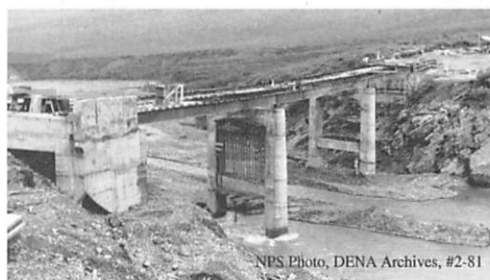
In 1972, construction of the George Parks Highway made it possible for more visitors to drive to the park. Anticipating a dramatic increase in visitation and subsequent adverse impacts on wildlife, park officials established a shuttle bus system that same year. By using the bus system, today's visitors help preserve the park's wilderness character that has changed little since Karstens' day.

Keeping the park's gravel road smooth is a full-time job. Here Arthur Gardner pilots one of the early road graders at Denali.
-UAF Archives, Herbert Heller Collection
#79-44-1376N



NPS Photo, DENA Archives

Sanctuary Cabin is still used as a patrol cabin and can be seen just off the park road near mile 22.



NPS Photo, DENA Archives, #2-81

River crossings in Alaska are notoriously dangerous. Construction of the East Fork Bridge in 1954, near mile 43, made travel into the park much easier and safer.

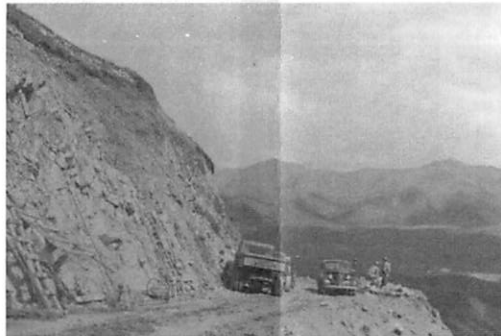
“Pack trail from McKinley Park Station to Kantishna Post Office, about 110 miles....with necessary native timber bridges, shelter cabins, etc. passable for pack train in summer and dog teams or single horse drawn double –ender sleds in winter— \$35,000.00. The Alaska Road Commission will agree to perform the above work on a contract basis...”

-Letter to NPS from James Steese, Alaska Road Commission, 1922. The letter also noted that it would cost approximately \$10,000 per mile to upgrade the road for automobile standards.

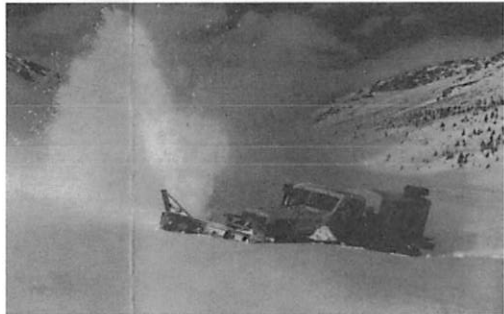
A Journey Back in Time: Road History Milestones



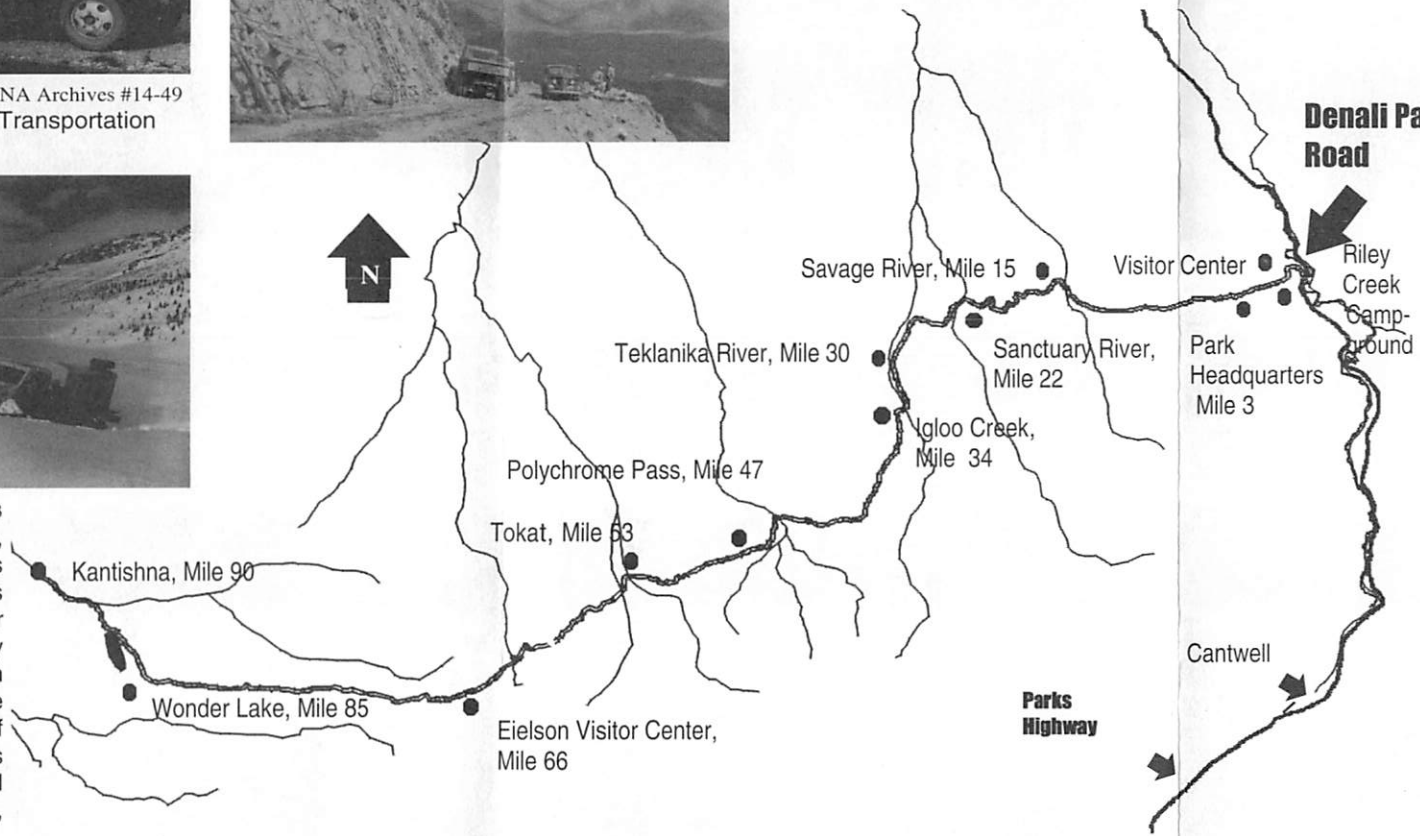
NPS Photo, DENA Archives #14-49
A Mt. McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company bus circa 1939.



NPS Photo, DENA Archives #25-1
Polychrome Pass is famous for views of colorful rock bands and the Alaska Range. In 1939 Civilian Conservation Corps road crews worked on widening the notoriously narrow and winding road over the pass.



NPS Photo, DENA Archives, 40-73
Snow drifts, overflow ice, and spring snowstorms have presented challenges to maintenance crews for years. In 1964 a heavy equipment operator slid on glare ice and lost his life when his vehicle rolled off the road near Toklat. This photo shows snow removal in the Savage River area, 1967.



NPS Photo, DENA Archives #2-25.5

The old timber bridge that crossed the Savage River, near mile 15 of the park road. Today visitors may drive private vehicles to the new bridge. Dall Sheep frequent the area and many visitors like to hike up to the prominent rock outcrop known as Savage Rock.



The Early Years 1917-1922

In 1917 the National Park Service expressed interest in building a park road to improve visitor access to the park. Local miners also wanted a road to connect their settlements to the Alaska Railroad then under construction. The seeds of the park road project were sown. The railroad reached Mt. McKinley National Park in 1922 and 7 visitors arrived. That same year Congress authorized \$5,000 for the construction of the road.



The Railroad Era 1922-1957

The train historically played a prominent role in the visitor experience to the park. In 1935 the roundtrip transportation fee from the Alaska Railroad Depot to Savage River Camp was \$7.50. In 1924 an additional \$150,000 was approved to build 33 miles of road. The road was opened to Savage River at mile 15 and 64 visitors arrived at the park. In 1957 the Denali Highway provided the first direct automobile access to the park.



The Automobile Era 1957-1972

Traffic to the park increased and in 1957 10,662 visitors came to Mt. McKinley National Park. In 1959 Alaska became the 49th state. In 1960 maintenance of the park road is conducted by the NPS. In the mid-1960s, road improvements undertaken up to mile 30 were halted because of public concern that more traffic would adversely affect the nature of the park and its wildlife. In 1972 the George Parks Highway provided a convenient connection to the park and 88,000 visitors came to the park.



The Bus Era 1972-Present

In 1972 unlimited use of the Denali Park Road was deemed to pose a threat to wildlife and to what park visitors value most – a serene view of wildlife at close range. The park introduces a new system of buses for sightseeing and access to camping. In 1980 the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act is signed, guaranteeing access along the park road to inholders in Kantishna. In 1999 over 370,000 visitors came to Denali.