



Boas Tailor and Furrier Shop



In many ways, Skagway was one of the last Western frontier boom towns. In two year's time, Skagway's population went from one family to more than eight thousand people. Many of Skagway's buildings are stereotypical of a western boom town building: a two-story false fronted building with a small shop downstairs and the shopkeeper's residence upstairs. The history of the Boas Tailor and Furrier Shop mirrors Skagway's up-and-down, boom-and-bust frontier economy.

Building History

The first proprietor of this building was Henry Boas. Boas, a tailor and furrier, first moved to the neighboring gold rush town of Dyea in 1897, but with the collapse of that town, he moved to Skagway and purchased property on Broadway between Third and Fourth Avenues in 1899. Shortly thereafter, he erected this two-story false fronted building with the intention of attracting business.

Shortly after the store opened, Boas formed a partnership with Charles R. Winter. Boas sold out to Winter in 1902

and left Skagway for the new gold rush boom towns of Fairbanks and Iditarod.

Winter carried on with the business, advertising in the 1904 newspaper, "All Kinds of Goods at Eastern Prices, Coats, Capes, Boas, Muffs, Gloves, Robes, and Rugs of All Kinds. New Fur Mens Coats from \$7.00 to \$100.00. Genuine Seal Caps \$7.00." Winter continued with the business, but apparently business proved to be unprofitable. Winter eventually sold his building to George B. Wright, a carpenter for the White Pass and Yukon Route Railway. For the next three years (1905-1908) several businesses operated in the structure.



*Boas Tailor and Furrier Shop in original location (on left)
Third and Broadway, 1900*

False Front Architecture

During Skagway's gold rush era, thousands of prospectors traveled through Skagway on their way to Dawson City and beyond. Most did not spend much time in Skagway, but many bought supplies or had services performed here before hurrying up the White Pass Trail or, later, boarding a railcar on the White Pass & Yukon Route Railway.

To grab the attention of these customers and the contents of their wallets, many businesses erected elaborate false fronts on their buildings. These false fronts projected

an image of size and prosperity. Customers were more apt to buy from a solid, stable company than from one which was not, even if that stability was in looks only.

False front architecture is characterized by an elaborate wall added to the front of a usually simple gable-roofed building. Compared to the front of the structure, the building's sides and back were often less substantially constructed. A look at the Boas building's roofline from the side will reveal its false front.

Later Building History

In 1908, jeweler Herman D. Kirmse purchased the building from Wright. Kirmse first arrived in Skagway in 1897 and opened his first jewelry and curio shop shortly thereafter. With the purchase of this building, he named his brother, Dick Kirmse, as manager of his new "lower" Broadway store (the "upper" Broadway store was at Fifth and Broadway).

Kirmse's new shop opened in 1908, and continuing in the tradition of frontier

boomtown architecture, the first floor served as the place of business, the second floor became housing for seasonal workers. When Herman Kirmse unexpectedly died in 1912, his widow, Hazel, inherited the store. Hazel later wanted the store closer to the railroad depot and the tourists, so the building was moved to its present location (on Broadway between 2nd and 3rd) in 1926. The building was extensively remodeled at this time and continued to be used as a curio shop.

H. D. KIRMSE, Pioneer Jeweler
Diamonds Watches Jewelry
Most Extensive and Original Stock on the Pacific Coast
AWARDED TWO GRAND PRIZES AND FIVE GOLD MEDALS AT
THE A.-Y.-P. EXPOSITION FOR FINEST
Nugget Jewelry, Old Ivory Carvings, Indian Curios.
ALASKA FURS and RUGS
CHILKAT BLANKETS INDIAN BASKETS
Native Made Copper and Silver Jewelry and Souvenirs
ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE SENT BY MAIL ON REQUEST.
SKAGWAY ALASKA

Advertisement from Skagway Daily Alaskan, October 1, 1910

The building's use continued to change, however. In the 1930s, the Canadian National Steamship Company and the Admiral Line leased the space for their offices. During World War II, Army draftsmen prepared plans for the Alaska-Canada Highway project in the building.

After World War II, the building was once again used as a curio shop. In 1978, Jack Kirmse, the son of Herman Kirmse, sold

the building to the National Park Service. The National Park Service restored the structure in 1986 and the building is currently part of the park's historic property leasing program.

Today, the restored Boas Tailor and Furrier stands as a reminder of Skagway as a boom town, both in its frontier past and its modern present.

Historic Building Leasing Program

The Boas Tailor and Furrier is one of over a dozen historic buildings owned by Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. These buildings are leased to private businesses under the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Annual lease payments help offset the costs of maintaining this and other historic buildings in the park. The compatible commercial use of this structure continues Skagway's long tradition as a bustling center of business activity.