

# THE ALASKA ASSOCIATION

OLD CITY HALL 524 WEST FOURTH AVENUE, SUITE 203, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA 99501

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## TONGASS AVENUE WIDENING PROJECT THREATENS KETCHIKAN'S PAST

by Gillian Smythe

State proposals to widen portions of Tongass Avenue, Ketchikan's main traffic arterial, have created controversy locally because the project could destroy as many as 50 of the community's historically significant structures.

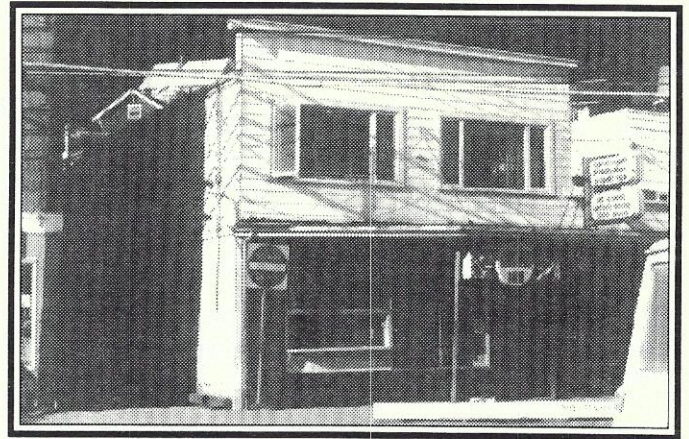
Tongass Avenue extends north and south of Ketchikan's downtown area along the steep coastline of Revillagigedo Island. To the north, major sections of the route are on a viaduct over the tidal flats. According to the State Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, the existing two lane route north of town is heavily congested, with as many as 19,000 vehicles per day during the summer months. In addition, the Tongass Avenue viaduct is in need of repair. Hence the current road widening and viaduct repair proposals.

The State has developed as many as eight alternatives for upgrading the Tongass Avenue route north of town, including a "no action" alternative. (All alternatives include repairs to the Tongass Avenue viaduct). Two proposed upland bypass routes were rejected on the grounds that they would not attract enough traffic to lessen congestion on Tongass Avenue. Depending on which of the remaining alternatives is finally selected, between 7 and 16 buildings eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places will have to be relocated or demolished according to a Department of Transportation and Public Facilities spokesman.

Close to 40 other buildings likely to be affected by the Tongass Avenue upgrading proposals which are not eligible for National Register status are nevertheless considered to be historically significant. Together with those structures which are eligible, they reflect Ketchikan's early development as a mining, fishing and regional supply center. The proposals to widen Tongass Avenue not only threaten many of these historically significant buildings but they would profoundly change the appearance of the community.

Ketchikan residents have been presented with the various construction alternatives proposed for the Tongass Avenue widening project. Local advocates of historic preservation argue that in terms of the destruction of historic buildings, the cost to the community is too high. They also charge that the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities has not given adequate consideration to alternatives which would be less intrusive on the historic fabric of the community.

Some Ketchikan residents have been fighting to save historic buildings since the first major renovation of Tongass Avenue in the early 1950's, but few buildings in the community have yet been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. (It should be noted that the reason that several historically important buildings in the area are not eligible for National Register status today derives from the 1950's highway widening project).



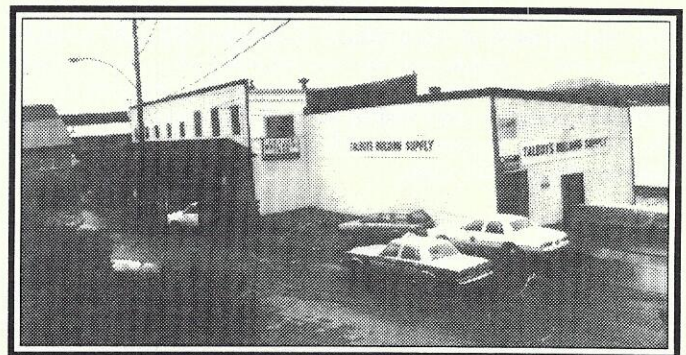
*Sparhawk-Young store, Ketchikan*

The former Sparhawk-Young store and the Talbot's store and warehouse complex are examples of unprotected historic structures which may be threatened by the Tongass Avenue widening project. According to Ketchikan Historical Commission member, Daniel E. McElhinny, the loss of such buildings would be a major setback to local preservation efforts. As described by McElhinny:

"Built prior to 1910, the Sparhawk-Young store was among the earliest businesses in the Newtown area of Ketchikan. Originally operated by J.W. Young and later by E.E. Sparhawk, it sold groceries, dry goods and hardware items to pioneer residents. Patrons included fishermen, housewives, cannery workers and prostitutes. After the 1920's, the building continued to house retail businesses.

Talbot's store was built in 1927, just a few blocks west of the Sparhawk-Young store, and served as the coal depot for the community. The Talbot buildings are built on wood pilings and retain many of their historic features. It has been a family owned business and landmark at one end of Tongass Avenue for over sixty years. The importance of this property to Ketchikan's history will become a dim memory if street improvements require its demolition."

The Ketchikan Historical Commission adopted a resolution opposing the Tongass Avenue improvement project in the summer of 1991. According to Commissioner McElhinny, the preservation of historic



*Talbot's Store, Ketchikan*

## FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

**TONGASS AVENUE WIDENING PROJECT THREATENS KETCHIKAN'S PAST (Continued)**

structures is an essential aspect of Ketchikan's identity as a community, providing a sense of linkage with the past that promotes a feeling of continuity and security. Furthermore, according to Commissioner McElhinny, large scale demolition of such historic buildings constitutes a threat to the wellbeing of the community. He added that the true costs of the Tongass Avenue project must reflect the loss of historically significant buildings.

Others in Ketchikan have also opposed the Tongass Avenue widening project. For example, Ketchikan City Councilman George Lybrand was quoted in the Ketchikan Daily News as saying that "it is going to cost about \$30 million to save eight minutes in travel time." The same newspaper quoted Councilman Jeff Budd as saying that he believes the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities "should look into mass transit systems more before making a decision."

As communities such as Ketchikan confront the challenges of growth and development, local residents are searching for what is important enough in the past to be retained in the future. This sense of identity, so easily lost in projects that destroy historic properties, is central to the concept of "community." The challenge of the Tongass Avenue project, and others like it, is one of preservation education. Alaskans must be presented with a clear picture of the long term value of preserving historic properties and the positive influence these properties can have in their community. Ketchikan can only benefit from development projects that include a strong component of historic preservation.

**FAIRBANKS EXPLORATION COMPANY COMPLEX**  
By Russ Sackett

In the 1920's, the U.S. Smelting, Refining and Mining Company (U.S.S.R. & M.) of Boston bought and consolidated thousands of individual mining claims in the Fairbanks and Nome areas. In the mid-1920's, following the opening of the Alaska Railroad which made transporting heavy equipment practical, the company began large scale dredging operations on its consolidated claims in the Fairbanks area.

As a U.S.S.R. & M. subsidiary, the Fairbanks Exploration Company (F.E. Company) was formed to administer, operate and maintain the dredging activities. In anticipation of the large scale operations that the firm would have to sustain, the F.E. Company began to construct extensive physical facilities in 1926, just north of the Chena River. The development of the company's complex not only provided support for its operations but also contributed to an economic revitalization of Fairbanks between 1925 and 1942. By 1930, the F.E. Company complex consisted of 20 to 30 buildings, ranging from electrical power to accounting, dedicated to the providing support for outlying dredging activities.

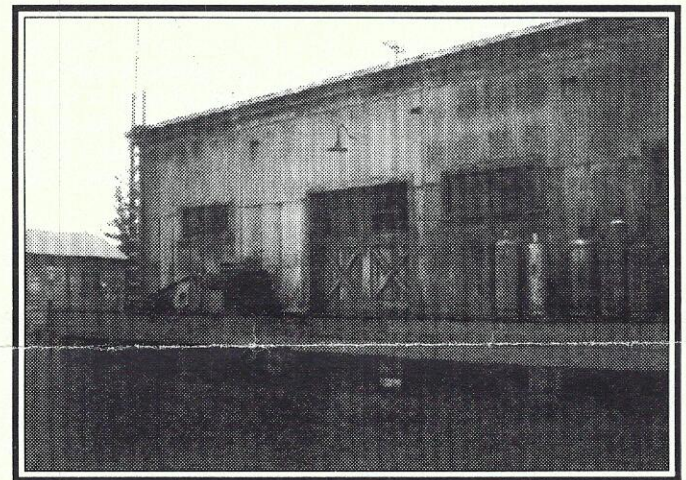
From the mid-1920's to the beginning of World War II, the company employed approximately one-third of Fairbanks' workforce. Although the company continued its operations until 1964, operations peaked prior to the suspension of gold mining activities in 1942 due to the war effort. In 1964, the assets of the F.E. Company were acquired by the present owner, the Alaska Gold Company.

The F.E. Company complex consisted of administration offices, retort facilities, machine shops, a blacksmith shop, electrical generating facilities, coal storage facilities, auto repair facilities, barracks, and numerous warehouses and exterior storage racks. These buildings stand on the west side of Illinois Street, adjacent to the Alaska

Railroad yard. A residential portion of the complex is located on the east side of Illinois Street. Because of the frugal organization of the F.E. Company, the complex appears today much as it did in the 1930's. With the exception of the Power House/Transformer Station which was torn down in 1974, the buildings retain their historic integrity and contain original machinery, material stock and even office paperwork.

In 1984, several F.E. Company buildings were determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and, in 1991, the complex was determined eligible as an historic district. Formal nomination of the district, however, has never been pursued.

Today, the complex is beginning to deteriorate due to lack of maintenance and it is also in the way of a planned highway expansion project. In addition, it is threatened by development. Portions of the property have changed ownership. The new owners have removed several buildings and preservation of the complex is in doubt. The Fairbanks Historic Preservation Foundation, a non-profit organization, is seeking money to purchase the complex and restore it. However, at present, the ultimate fate of the F.E. Company complex is unknown.



*Part of Fairbanks Exploration Company Complex*

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*The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation (AAHP) was founded in 1981 as a private, statewide, non-profit corporation dedicated to the preservation of Alaska's prehistoric and historic resources through education, promotion and advocacy. Preservation of the built environment provides a vital link and a visible reminder of the past, emphasizing the continuity and diversity of Alaska.*

# ARCTIC VILLAGE MISSION CHURCH

By Russ Sackett

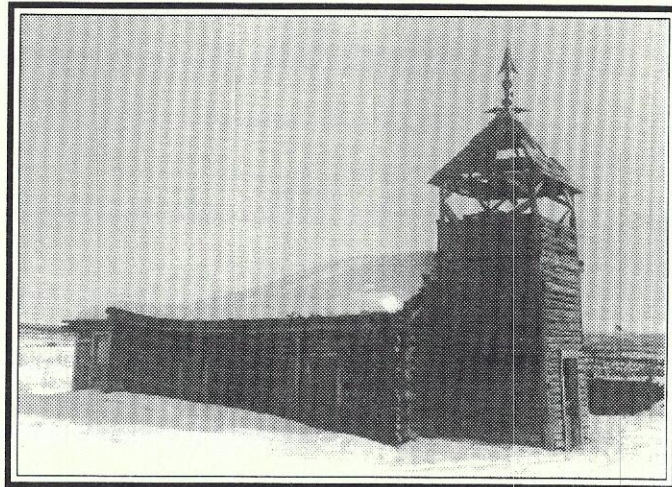
Most Arctic Village residents claim kinship with the Neets'ait Gwitch'in, one of nine Gwitch'in bands of Athabascan Indians who traditionally occupied northeastern Alaska and northwestern Canada. The first permanent structures at Arctic Village were built in 1909, although Neets'ait Gwitch'in lifestyles remained primarily nomadic for many years. In fact, Arctic Village did not function as a year-round settlement until 1959 when the first permanent school was constructed here. However, the Episcopal church has been an important element in community life since the town's earliest beginnings, due largely to the efforts and teachings of Albert E. Tritt.

Through contact with Episcopal missionaries during visits to Fort Yukon, Albert Tritt began to convert his neighbors in Arctic Village to the Episcopal creed. During the latter part of the first decade of the 1900's, Tritt held services in his own home for his immediate family and friends. By 1916 or 1917, Tritt and his followers were able to construct the major room of the old Arctic Village Mission Church.

The original church building measured approximately 17 feet by 17 feet. Logs for its construction were felled within a ten mile radius of the village and were brought in by dogsled, as well as being floated down the river. Interior furnishings, consisting of the altar, altar rail, altar throne and pews were all products of the local community. Over the years, a bell tower was added to the front of the church and an addition to the back was constructed. With the addition, the church was enlarged by 9 feet in length.

In 1925, Albert Tritt was ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Church and continued to serve his congregation until his death in the mid-1950's. The church built by Albert Tritt remained as the community's church and social hall until 1960 when a new church was built. Since the construction of the new church, however, the old church has been left vacant. The Arctic Village Mission Church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in April 1977. The church's significance is based on its association with Albert Tritt and on its architecture.

Over the years, the church has deteriorated to a point where its continued existence is now threatened. The building has become a source of firewood and the salvaging of its parts has begun to compromise its structural integrity. In the late 1980's, restoration of the building was considered under an economic development program. However, this never materialized and the future of the building remains in question.



Arctic Village Mission Church



## PLEASE NOTE:

If you have renewed your AAHP membership, a "92" will appear after your name on the mailing label for this newsletter. If a smaller number or no number appears after your name, this means that your membership has expired. Please check the number after your name and renew your membership today if it is not current.



## MEMBERSHIP

Membership runs from January 1 through December 31. Dues are payable by December 31 of preceeding year.

Benefits include subscription to the quarterly AAHP newsletter \* workshops & seminars \* annual meeting \* historic preservation advocacy.

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Please Return To: The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation  
Old City Hall, 524 West fourth Ave., Suite 203  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
Attention: Treasurer

**AAHP ANNUAL MEETING  
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1991**

**2 pm - 4 pm**

**at the  
Loussac Library, Public Conference Room, Anchorage**

**FEATURED SPEAKERS:**

Russ Sackett :  
"Alaska's Ten Most Endangered Historic Sites"

Kathryn Burns:  
"The Nation's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Sites"

*The program will be followed by AAHP's annual board meeting*

**AAHP Members and All Interested Persons are Invited**

**Refreshments will be Served**

For further information, please contact  
Bill Coghill, telephone 333-4746.

**NEW PLANS FOR ANCHORAGE'S  
FOURTH AVENUE THEATRE**

by Gillian Smythe

Plans to turn Anchorage's art deco Fourth Avenue Theatre into a tourist attraction and gift shop were announced in August 1991 by developer Robert Gottstein. The previous owner of the building, Act III Theatres, ceased operations in January 1990.

Gottstein stated that he intends not only to make needed repairs to the Fourth Avenue Theatre but, provided it is economically feasible, to refurbish the structure and make it as grand as it was originally intended to be.

The twinkling lights of the Big Dipper constellation which are imbedded in the ceiling will remain in the 44-year old landmark, Gottstein said. The movie screen will also remain, as will the original decor and the gold and silver leaf murals of wildlife, gold miners, riverboats and mountains.

Current plans call for the main seating area of the two-tiered movie hall to be replaced by a tourist-oriented gift shop, while a snack bar will be installed in the downstairs lobby. Upstairs, seating in the balcony area will be replaced with tables and chairs for snack bar customers. Scenic views of Alaska will play across the big screen. People eating upstairs will be able to hear and see the movie while the shoppers cruise the floor below, Gottstein said.

**THE ALASKA ASSOCIATION**  
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