

THE ALASKA ASSOCIATION FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Old City Hall, 524 West Fourth Avenue, Suite 204, Anchorage, Alaska 99501

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PIONEER SPIRIT, MYTH AND REALITY HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN FAIRBANKS

by Renee Blahuta

Fairbanks—mining, university, military town and supply center for northern Alaska—the “Golden Heart” of Alaska. Fairbanks is also a town of contradictions.

Established in 1902 as a boom town by the chance discovery of gold in the Tanana Valley, Fairbanks takes great pride in its early heritage. Local residents are loyal to their city, and often refer to its pioneering history. Oral history is assiduously collected, early newspaper pages are carefully preserved, and photographs and written accounts are treasured. Each year, Golden Days, a week long celebration, recalls the town's early pioneering history.

On the other hand, the preservation of Fairbanks' historic structures is an issue which is frequently controversial and is often considered a stumbling block to economic development. A city that prides itself on its pioneer heritage suddenly finds itself on the defensive when considering the value of its historic log and clapboard structures and finds it difficult to place value on them. Even Fairbanks' delightful Art Deco buildings do not escape this devaluation by many of its citizens and government officials.

Many Fairbanks residents firmly believe in development—new development—sometimes to the detriment of the community as a whole. Too often, little thought is given to making the city a better place to live, in preserving its heritage or in developing alternative markets such as heritage tourism. During the early 1980's, California-type strip malls popped up like mushrooms after a storm. Historic structures in the downtown area were demolished to make way for empty lots in a mistaken attempt to transform Fairbanks into a modern hub of the North. It did not happen. Today, the parking lots remain, while old historic neighborhoods get more shabby looking and gap-toothed as buildings are vacated and condemned without a planning process.

Historic Fairbanks has seen no systematic rehabilitation efforts. Coordination by local governments is difficult. Planning falls within the responsibility of borough government, while building and condemnation permits are issued by the city. A combined city-borough historical commission has yet to assume adequate overview powers. Parking lots are numerous, vacant lots are plenty. The business community, from bankers to small entrepreneurs, is often not knowledgeable about historic preservation opportunities and tends to become locked into an outdated vision of urban renewal by calling for destruction of whole neighborhoods, commercial buildings and industrial sites. These are the same sites and buildings so often proudly referred to in the town's oral and written history.

Within the last few months, Fairbanks has lost its oldest commercial building, the Northern Commercial Company store. This building, set along the banks of the Chena River, could have been successfully rehabilitated and added to the city's eroding tax



Photo by Charles Backus

Creamer's Dairy, Fairbanks

roll. The adjoining property owner, Key Bank of Fairbanks, acquired the site and destroyed a key historic building merely to add yet another parking lot to the Fairbanks cityscape.

Do city and borough fathers support historic preservation? It is sometimes difficult to tell. In principle, yes. But, when put to the test, a different picture often emerges. Whenever confronted with decisions on historic preservation issues, both local governments have consistently supported well meaning but also inappropriate alternatives without due consideration of long term planning issues and goals. Certainly, attempts by nonprofit preservation groups to save invaluable historic sites for the people of Fairbanks, to rehabilitate endangered sites and develop heritage tourism opportunities in their community are often doomed to failure. Misunderstanding as to values and historic interpretation by government officials are common.

The loss of the Fairbanks Exploration Company complex just at a time when the complex was found eligible for funding under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1992 is particularly tragic. Historic preservation groups had worked for years to educate local residents on the importance of the site while, at the same time, attempting to raise funds for its acquisition. Although the project had considerable support, little headway was made until this year. Also this year, the Golden Valley Electric Association began purchasing property near its administration building and made an offer on the Fairbanks Exploration Company complex, dependent on removal of the outbuildings and their contents. Pleas from preservation groups to keep this industrial site intact and to allow them to purchase and develop the site as a world class mining museum fell on deaf ears. With removal of the outbuildings and their contents now underway, the value of the site has been compromised. Nevertheless, even if only

the remaining buildings such as the F.E. Company administration building and staff housing remain, they are still a very valuable historic asset well worth preserving. Future use of the administration building could include space for a badly needed museum and interpretive center for mining history. To put this plan to use, the cooperation of the Golden Valley Electric Association and its members will be needed.

Main School, together with the Fairbanks Exploration Company complex and the Lacey Street Theater, was included on AAHP's Ten Most Endangered Historic Properties list in 1992. Current plans call for gutting the Main Street School, although no review of the plans has yet been undertaken by the Fairbanks Historical Commission. The Lacey Street Theater is currently on the market. Its facade has recently been painted, but its future is in question.

Fairbanks has a non-profit Historical Preservation Foundation which was established with the specific goal of restoring the Sternwheeler Nenana. Owned by the Fairbanks North Star Borough, the sternwheeler carries a National Landmark designation and was in a sorry state of disrepair before the current efforts. Now beautifully restored, maintenance of the vessel as an historic exhibit and interpretive center is likely to provide new challenges for the Foundation.

Fairbanks has no local organization set up to purchase and rehabilitate historic properties. The results of this can be easily seen. One of the first things you observe when walking through downtown Fairbanks neighborhoods is the lack of care and understanding of historic buildings. Many of the city's oldest remaining structures are abandoned or boarded up by their owners. Street people often camp out in historic neighborhoods. Refuse accumulates, often being followed by condemnation procedures and controlled burns. Another piece of historic Fairbanks gone, another scar on the Fairbanks cityscape. Many of these structures do not need to fall prey to decay. Rehabilitation of old homes for low income housing, small bed and breakfast establishments, professional offices or specialty shops could give downtown Fairbanks new life while, at the same time, greatly adding to its identity as an Alaska pioneer town.

Creamer's Dairy along College Road is listed on the National Register. Closed in 1966, the site is now owned by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Much of the farmland has long since been turned into a wildlife refuge, an attraction of great pride to Fairbanks residents. Each year, migratory birds stop at Creamer's Field for rest and sustenance on the long trek to their nesting grounds. Still, the dairy buildings remain empty. An interpretive study currently being conducted stresses habitat interpretation, with the historic significance of the dairy being downplayed as unimportant. It is hoped that this trend can still be reversed. So far, no input from historic preservation groups or from the Historical Commission has been requested in the planning process.

Ultimately, a sense for historic preservation will come to Fairbanks. More and more local individuals are questioning the lack of local preservation ordinances and planning processes. Today, Fairbanks is home to many people from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds who hope to raise their families in the community. Many come from areas with a well established preservation heritage. They listen to the old stories of early achievements and hardships, but know that only the preservation of historic Fairbanks can convey a sense of history and a sense of place to the people of our town.

NOTES FROM AAHP'S ANNUAL PICNIC

This year, AAHP's annual picnic was held on August 8 at Jerry Strang's Gakona Roadhouse. The event was a great success. Hosts Jerry and Barbara Strang provided a sumptuous banquet of caribou hot dogs, burgers, assorted salads and a great rhubarb dessert.

In addition to AAHP board members and their spouses, the picnic was attended by Wilda and Brooke Marston, Donna Lane and Bill Copeland, Karen and Lyman Wade, Lizbeth Henning and several Gakona area residents.

Henra Sundt, aged 84, gave a fascinating talk about life in the Gakona area in the early days when she and her husband owned the Gakona Roadhouse.

Visitors also toured the historic Gakona Lodge and its outbuildings, several of which Jerry is still working to restore.



Henra Sundt, AAHP Picnic, Gakona

AAHP EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 1992

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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 visible reminder of the past, emphasizing the continuity and diversity of Alaska.

LACEY STREET THEATER

by Russ Sackett

The Lacey Street Theater, built in 1939 by Austin E. "Cap" Lathrop, is significant for its Art Deco architecture and for its association with entertainment in Fairbanks. It is one of only three remaining Art Deco buildings in downtown Fairbanks which has maintained its architectural integrity. It is also notable as one of Fairbanks' early reinforced concrete structures.

Austin E. "Cap" Lathrop had business interests around Alaska in shipping, transportation and mineral extraction. In turn, these activities provided the capital to establish a chain of theaters. Starting with the "Empress" in Cordova (built in 1910 and rebuilt in 1915), Lathrop built an Empress in Anchorage in 1916, an Empress in Fairbanks in 1927, the Lacey Street Theater (listed on the National Register) in Fairbanks in 1939 and the Fourth Avenue Theatre (also listed on the National Register) in Anchorage in 1947. He considered motion pictures "the most eagerly devoured form of family entertainment in the frigid northland."

B. Marcus Priteca, the "dean of American theater design," and a prominent Seattle architect, designed the Lacey Street Theater during the winter of 1938-39. Frank Zallinger and Frank Hollineck designed the interior, and Pierce Horrocks was the engineer. Seattle builder C.W. Hufeisen constructed the building. "Buy Alaskan" and "local hire" were major community issues in Fairbanks during the 1930's and labor and materials for construction of the building were obtained locally.

The grand opening of the Lacey Street Theater took place on the evening of January 25, 1940. Speakers included Lathrop, James

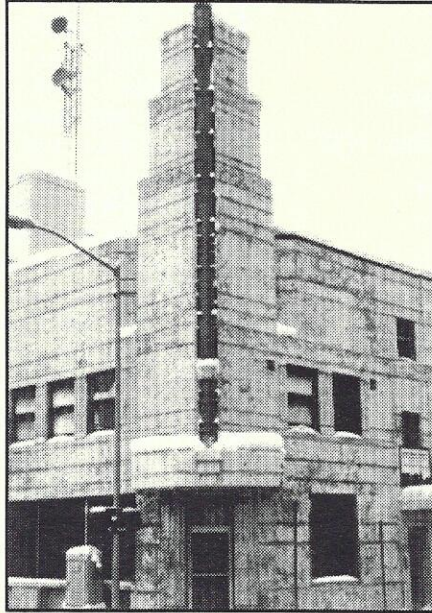
Barback (President of the Fairbanks Igloo of the Pioneers of Alaska), and former Mayor E.B. Collins. Lathrop proudly stated that "although small in scale, the new theater was the finest in the territory and equal to the finest theaters in the West." The opening ceremony was carried live over Lathrop's KFAR radio station.

The U.S. Quartermaster's Department leased the second floor office space in the building, while the Bank of Fairbanks, of which Lathrop was part owner, occupied the first floor. When the bank moved in the early 1940's, another financial institution rented the space and remained there until 1977 when a pawn shop became the tenant.

On January 28, 1966, a mysterious fire broke out in the theater and gutted the building. The fire left Fairbanks without a movie theater as the Empress Theater, dating from 1927, had closed in 1961. At the time, the Lathrop company had been considering construction of a new theater complex on the south side of town and decided to advance its construction schedule. The company also decided to rebuild the Lacey Street Theater at a cost of \$700,000 and it reopened on May 2, 1966. The only visible exterior changes were to the roof, windows and doors. The interior was completely rebuilt and modernized.

The Theater finally closed in 1981 and has remained vacant ever since. In 1990, the Fairbanks Development Authority became the owner of the building and is now attempting to sell it. This past summer, the Fairbanks Main Street program repainted the exterior to its historic color scheme.

However, until an appropriate owner is identified, the Theater suffers from neglect and needs major rehabilitation. Lacey Street Theater was placed on the National Register of Historic Properties in 1990. It was featured as one of AAHP's "ten most endangered historic sites" in 1992.



Lacey Street Theater, Fairbanks

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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Donations to AAHP are tax deductible, as allowable under IRS regulations.

\$_____ is enclosed. Also, I would be glad to participate in AAHP activities in the following areas:

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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 6, 1992
11:30 AM - 3 PM**

at the
Fourth Avenue Theatre, Upstairs, Anchorage

FEATURED TOPICS:

"Fourth Avenue Theatre Rehabilitation"

"Alaska's Ten Most Endangered Historic Sites, 1992"

"Historic Eagle: Before and After"

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

AAHP Members and All Interested Persons are Invited

**Lunch will be available for \$5.95
at the Fourth Avenue Theatre**

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

TAX INCENTIVES SEMINAR

by Russ Sackett

A seminar addressing tax credits and investments for rehabilitation of historic buildings will be held November 14, 1992, in Anchorage. Guest lecturers will include Ward Jandl, Chief of Technical Preservation Services, U.S. National Park Service, Washington, D.C. and Bryan M. Park, Principal of Northwest Housing Resources, Inc., a subsidiary of the Reed McClure law firm in Seattle.

The morning session will address how to have the rehabilitation of historic buildings certified to qualify for tax credits. Ward, Jandl, State Office of History and Archaeology staff, and National Park Service Alaska Region staff will present guidelines and examples of the certification process. In the afternoon, Bryan Park will discuss financial and tax incentives available for historic preservation projects.

The seminar is open to the public. The program is directed both to owners of historic properties who wish to take advantage of the tax credits and to those interested in tax credit investment.

The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation, Anchorage Historic Properties, the National Park Service, and the Office of History and Archaeology are sponsoring the seminar. It will be held at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 121 West 7th Avenue, Anchorage.

A workbook will be provided to persons or companies who pre-register (\$30 pre-registration; \$40 on November 14). For registration information, contact Russ Sackett at 762-2633.

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