

DAWSON CREEK BRITISH COLUMBIA - THE BUILDING OF THE ALASKA HIGHWAY  
Mile 'O' of the Alaska Hwy.

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In 1941 the village of Dawson Creek had a population of approx. 500. Although the depression of the 30s had hit everyone hard, Dawson Creek weathered it better than most. The farm crops were good, they grew their own vegetables, raised their own cattle and were self sustained. When the war began they, (like the rest of the country), had their food supplies rationed so that food could be sent to the men overseas. Ration books were issued and ration stamps were used to purchase sugar, butter, coffee etc.

The village consisted of <sup>4</sup>schools, a dance hall and theatre, <sup>2</sup>grocery stores *including* (Co-op and Harpers), Four meat markets (including Lawrence's and Bullens), Two Hotels (The Red Apple which stood on the site of the present Mile 'O' Hotel and the Dew Drop Inn - still standing on 10th st in its original site.) The Peace River Block News was operating, an R.C.M.P. Station (where the Bay is now), A Bank of Commerce, Car garages (including Aspols) and Wades Style Shop.

There was no indoor plumbing or running water. The local people brought their water in barrels from a spring on Bear Mountain.

It was an isolated community as the Hart Highway was not yet built and a dirt trail went to Ft. St. John and beyond St. John there was nothing. There was no air passenger service but there was the Northern Alberta Railway and a good road to Grande Prairie and Edmonton. To go to Vancouver local residents had to go by way of Edmonton which was a 37 hr trip by train.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 there were rumours that the U.S. was planning to build a highway to Alaska. They were worried about the miles and miles of unprotected northland an easy target for an invading Japanese army. What was not known to local residents was that the highway was to be built from Dawson Creek. This route was chosen because the highway could then service the chain of airports already built northwestward from Edmonton to the Yukon as well as give a safe communication line behind the mountains for the defence forces. Canada built the airports and the U.S. was to build the highway. Supplies and men had to be sent to Alaska and a railroad was out of the question due to the wilderness of the area. The construction was to begin in Dawson Creek since that was the end of the railway.

On February 26, 1942 an article in the Peace River Block News read: "U.S. Army Engineers hint strongly of Alaska Military Highway through Dawson Creek". A United States Army official told the News: "We may recommend strongly to the board that 3,000 American troops be brought in immediately in an attempt to have a useable road by next November through to Ft. Nelson".

Dawson Creek residents were used to hearing rumors but doubted they would see any activity in their town.

On March 12, 1942 the Quartermaster Corps #6968 arrived. There were 89 men and two officers. Bill Wainman was one of the men on that first train and he tells the story of landing in Dawson Creek: " Our outfit was the first to arrive



at the railhead in Dawson Creek at about 2:00 a.m. on a bitter morning in March. It was between -35 to -40 below. Warm clothing and stoves did not arrive until about two weeks later. Believe me we worked fast setting up "Tent City" to keep from freezing to death. The army had issued us summer clothes to make us think we were going to the South Pacific. But they didn't fool us as boxes of equipment were marked Dawson Creek, B.C. Canada."

The Quartermaster Corps had the job of preparing the camps and setting up supplies for the thousands of soldiers that were yet to come.

A story from a local resident relates that she was at her Ladies Aid meeting that night and a lady burst into the room saying that an unscheduled train had just pulled into the station and that U.S. soldiers were pouring out. The ladies main concerns were for their daughters.

Another story related by Major Thomas Wayling "One day in early 1942 an outlying farmer picked up his phone and called a number in Dawson Creek "Hello" said a voice at the other end "United States Army of Occupation speaking".

The invasion had occurred. Local residents opened their homes to accomodate as many of the newcomers as possible until their tent heaters arrived.

March 19, 1942 article in the Peace River Block News: "On Monday, N.A.R. exerted a final effort to clear the lines from here to McLennan, and by early evening six special trains had rolled in. That night Dawson Creek buldged its sides to accomodate ap prox. 1,000 soldiers on the rampage for fun and amusement. They had been on the trains for more than a week. It was their night out and it lasted until dawn. What the U.S. Engineering Corps calls the most difficult engineering jobs of the century-the military highway to Alaska is off to a good st art. All week puffing N.A.R. locomotives have brought in the most elaborate road building equipment assembled in Canada for such a major undertaking. Bull dozers, tractors, grades and multipe wheeled truck are the tools which will be used to push a pioneer road - which means a road 9 feet wide, passable for 6 and 4 wheel drive military vehicles into Alaska before the end of the working season."

This was only the beginning and Dawson Creek swelled by several thousand in the coming weeks, vehicles and equipment and pre-fab buildings continued to come in off the railway. Tent cities were quickly erected completely surrounding the town.

Many local businessmen approached the army to see if they could supply some of their needs. Commercial salesmen came from Edmonton to offer the same services. The U.S. Quartermasters told them that all army supplies would be received from the U.S. and that no purchases would be made in Canada unless an emergency developed. Fortunately for local people the army often purchased goods when their supplies ran low. This kept all the stores and gas stations busy. All of a sudden the sidewalks were full and line ups were everywhere. It got so bad at the local bank that local people just mailed in their deposits rather than stand in the line-ups which began at 8:00a.m. It was not uncommon for staff at the bank to work after hours as late as 2:00 in the morning.



One of the drawbacks for local businesses was that five invoices had to be made for every purchase by U.S. army people. A check would come back from the United States but usually not until three months later.

Dawson Creek was booming, its population went to 20,000 at its peak. This severely taxed the water supply used by local residents. As in other communities where the army found supplies and other utilities insufficient they not only put in their own waterworks and sewage systems but co-operated with local municipalities and made their projects oversized so they could service the local population. The army brought water in from the Kiskatinaw River (where we still receive our water supply today), and modern sanitation methods were adopted. Some of the original pipes put in by the army are still in use under Dawson Creek streets.

The army always had the latest movies and often invited local children to see them. When soldiers went to local peoples places for supper they often brought along sugar, butter and coffee as local people had rationed supplies of these items but the army had plenty. The Government Liquor store was in Pouce Coupe at that time and the army nicknamed the liquor "Pouce Juice"

## *Confused?*

.. "GOT A LETTER FROM DAWSON  
CREEK TODAY AND HE SAYS;  
.. OH FOR A BOTTLE OF 'POUCE-  
JUICE' AND THOU BESIDE ME."





Highway construction work began simultaneously at three points, Dawson Creek, B.C. - terminal of the railway, Whitehorse in the Yukon - connected to Skagway by the WhitePass-Yukon Railway, and at Big Delta Alaska. The army moved in 7 engineering battalions. The towns grew overnight. All supplies had to be brought in either to Dawson Creek from Edmonton or to Whitehorse from Skagway Port. The surveyors set out in groups to blaze a trail and after them followed tractors graders and trucks. They found bottomless muskeg, huge forests, black flies and mosquitoes in the summer and always the bitter cold in the winter. The "Tote" Road took 8 months to complete, it was ended with the joining of construction from the North with construction from the South. On November 20, 1942 the official opening of the Alaska Hwy took place at Kluane Lk in the Yukon about 150 miles west of Whitehorse, although the improvement of the constructed road took several more months.

The American Army had built the trail, now Canadian and American contractors and army workers finished the Highway.

The Highway was known as the "Alcan" during construction. (Alaska - Canada). Because of the masses of oil cans strewn along the road, workers often called it the "Oil Can" or the "All Can" Highway. It was officially named the Alaska Hwy by an exchange of notes between the U.S. and Canada July 19, 1943.

One of the dramas of the building of the highway occurred in Dawson Creek on February 13, 1943, when a truck load of dynamite for work on the telephone line along the highway was driven into the trucking garage for repairs. The Livery Stable caught on fire and spread to the truck. Dynamite began to go off. Unfortunately there were also percussion caps stored in the building and an explosion occurred which was heard in Rolla and shattered windows in Pouce Coupe. People were crushed by falling buildings and cut by flying glass. The business section of Dawson Creek was destroyed. A war time lid of secrecy was clamped on the disaster but local residents said that as many as 10 people were killed and over 100 injured. The U.S. government quietly paid for all damages.

An account of Dawson Creek in 1943 by Gertrude Baskine:

"Whatever quaint and quiet village Dawson Creek may have been before it was trucked, bulldozed, line trapped, exploded and burned.. one fact remains that as it stands today it provides a far from attractive gateway to the famed "Road to Tokyo".

We fidgeted on the platform (train). We were having our first taste of dust. No one who has not stood for some half hour or so on the rickety platform of Dawson Creek station while a gust of wind takes on the impact of a pile driver will ever know what dust really can be... we got into some kind of high vehicle and ripped around corners and through a town that even in that fleeting vision looked about the most desolate spot it has been my misfortune to gaze upon. Here the eye rested on piles of lumber, piles of barrels, piles of pipeing, piles of cases, cylinders, casings, rubble piles of junk. There were certain areas cut off from the town by high steel fences and barbed wire... I sauntered out into the bright light of the early evening, gave my name at the sentry box, managed to cross the street without being squashed into a meat pulp and found myself on a street which in the long ago of the year before was one of those quiet pleasant streets. Here and there along the street stood lumber skeletons of a new home, and new store. I turned into what must have been the main street before the fire of February 1943 destroyed the greater part of town. 1

*① Peace River Chronicles, Prescott Publishing Co. 1963.*



By 1944 the sidewalks were clear again and most of the American troops had been re-assigned to the South Pacific or elsewhere. A few troops remained until the war ended in 1945 and then they too headed home. The town of Dawson Creek now had a population of approx. 2,500 and had become a modern town. When the soldiers left they were ordered to destroy all the equipment by the U.S. government so as not to upset the local business economy. Many vehicles and equipment were dumped into trenches on Bear Mountain and all along the Highway. Some of the equipment was auctioned and some was given away against orders.

On April 1, 1946 in accordance with the wartime agreement between Canada and the U.S. the Highway was turned over to the Canadian Army for control and maintenance of the road.

*Note: U.S. Army also built first airport  
present D.C. hospital sits in the middle of the old airstrip*

Written by Cathy Cole  
for the Dawson Creek  
Chamber of Commerce.

*rough copy  
- please excuse errors.  
CC*

- Thanks to Mrs. Jean Lawrence Mr. Harold Pryke and Mr. Giles Dudley for their help in my research.
- Comix drawn by a R.C.F. officer in 1943 and dedicated to the airman who lies buried beneath the mud on Dawson Creek's main street.



# The "Kiss of Death" in the form of a Clearance Paper!



"YOU'RE POSTED TO DAWSON CREEK," HE SAID,  
SO PACK YOUR BAG AND MAKE YOUR WILL,  
THE DEVIL'S CURSE HANGS O'ER YOUR HEAD,  
SO GET READY FOR THE KILL."

"DON'T CURSE AND SWEAR OR PULL YOUR HAIR.  
YOU'VE HAD IT BROTHER, SO OFF YOU GO.  
JUST WRITE AND TELL US HOW YOU FARE,  
AT THE LIFE OF A SOURDOUGH."

*If I knew then what I know now*





*Comes the furlough..*



IN AN EDMONTON CAFE AN AIRMAN  
WAS HUNGRILY EYEING A WAITRESS.  
"GEE YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL," HE EXCLAIMED.  
"OH" BEAMED THE GIRL, "MUST BE BECAUSE  
I JUST GOT BACK FROM THE BEAUTY PARLOUR."  
"OH NO," HE REPLIED, "IT'S BECAUSE I  
JUST GOT BACK FROM DAWSON CREEK".