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A History of Trails and Access Routes on  
State Lands in the Kuskokwim Region

State of Alaska

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State Interest Determinations

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## Introduction

The state is currently gathering historic use information on roads and trails in Alaska in order to determine the need to protect and/or acquire rights-of-way for future public access. In addition, the state is seeking to verify the locations of known and unknown trails.

Preparation of this study was requested by the Kuskokwim Area Plan planning team of this division's Resource Allocations Section, and is intended to provide planners with historical information on major trails and access routes on state lands in the Kuskokwim region. When available, contemporary use information was incorporated into this study.

The study is divided into three parts. Part one is a short introduction describing events in the Kuskokwim region that led to the development of trails, as well as activities of the Alaska Road Commission, the primary road builder in Alaska from 1905 to 1959. The second part of the study consists of historical sketches of the <sup>keep</sup> 12 most important <sup>historic</sup> roads and trails, <sup>access routes</sup> established in the Kuskokwim region (they may or may not have their entire routes on state lands in the area). Each sketch includes information on construction, maintenance, and use of the trail. Part three is a historical sketch of aviation and airfield development in the Kuskokwim region, providing information on the establishment of aviation in the region and the

construction of airfields by the Alaska Road Commission in the 1920's and 1930's. Airfield location and dimensions are provided as well. Lastly, part four is a brief narrative of contemporary road <sup>access route</sup> and trail development in the region from pre-statehood to the present. The four parts ~~of the study~~ are followed by a listing of references used in the preparation of this study.

Research for this study included published and unpublished documents, archival manuscripts, newspapers, and periodicals. No interviews or questionnaires were used in its preparation. However, the completeness of each trail historical <sup>y</sup> ~~sketch~~ is based on an incomplete collection of Alaska Road Commission records from the Seattle Federal Records Center and annual reports from 1905 to 1959. Their final history cannot be fully written until all of the records of the Alaska Road Commission can be consulted.

## Introduction

Virtually all trails in the Kuskokwim area were developed as a result of mineral exploration and production and many are in use today as noted on five quad maps for the area by Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Survey's geologist Tom Bunsen (personnel communication 1985) and available in the offices of the ~~DLMM~~ <sup>is division in</sup> Anchorage. The principle mining district in the area was the Innoko-Iditarod district, its distinctive geographic features including the Kaiyuh Mountains, Innoko Valley, and central portions of the Kuskokwim Mountains and Kuskokwim Valley (Maddren 1910:9).

In 1889, Frank Densmore was probably the first prospector to enter the Kuskokwim Valley, <sup>followed by</sup> ~~in his footsteps~~ came Al King, Joe Goldsmith, James Cleghorn, and Harvey Mellish. but none of these men, and others, found enough gold to warrant staying in the region. Thus, the actual <sup>location</sup> ~~discovery~~ <sup>is</sup> in 1906 by Thomas Gane, F.C.H. Spencer, Mike Roke, and John Maki. By the spring of 1907 many hundreds of prospectors had entered the area from Nome and Fairbanks, with the major prospecting occurring on Ganes, Little, Spruce, and Ophir creeks (Maddren 1910:21-24). At that time, the primary route into the region <sup>was</sup> by way of steamer via the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers. There were a few trails <sup>in</sup> ~~by~~ 1907, however, such as the trail from Joaquin to Moore City on Ganes Creek, but generally water transportation was king. In 1910, geologist A.G. Maddren addressed the need for roads and trails based on his survey of the region in 1908:

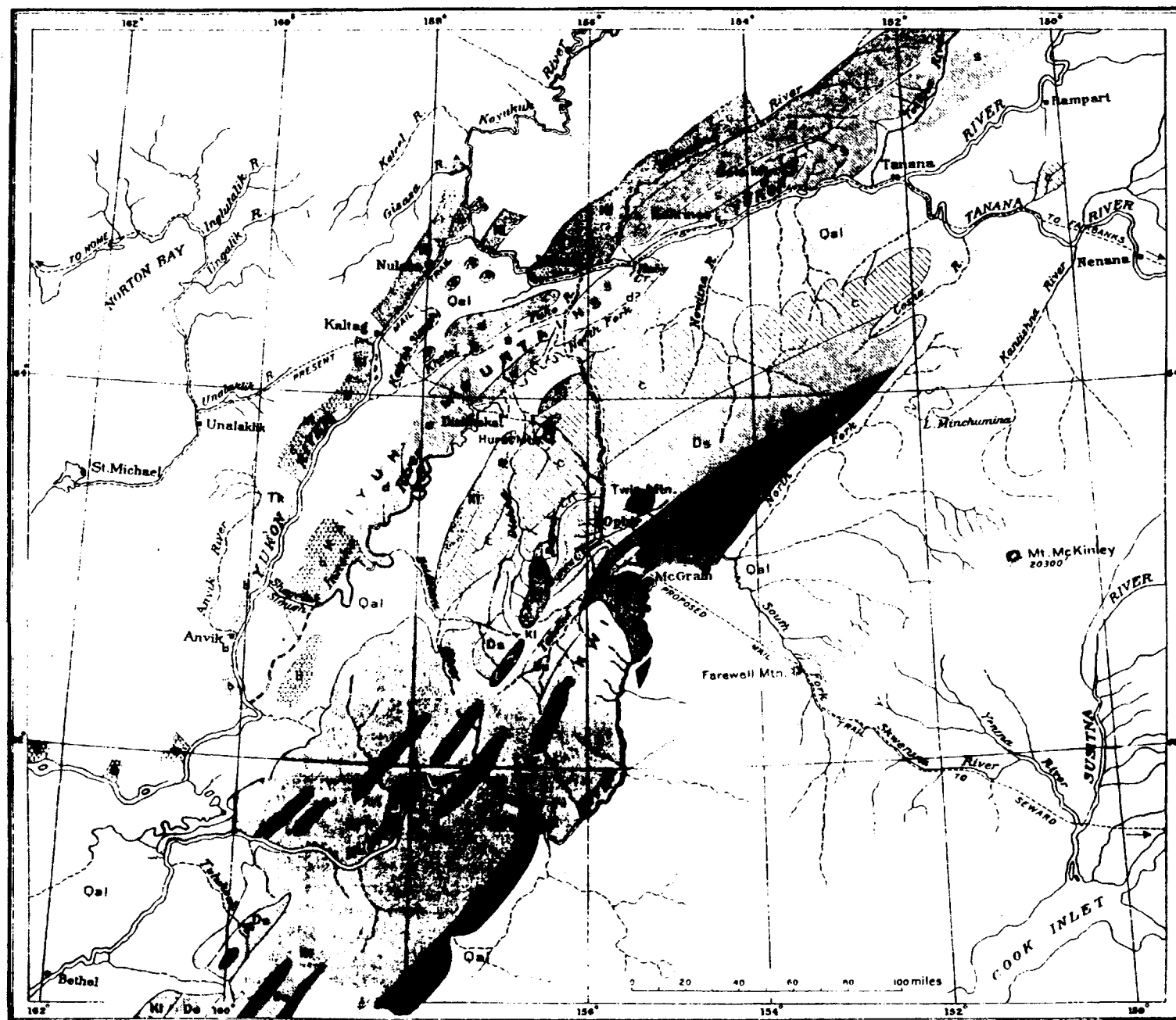
of commercial quantities of gold was discovered in

if a wagon road or permanent winter trail is to be built from the Kuskokwim drainage area to the Innoko Valley, however, it appears best to select a somewhat longer route which would connect a point on the lower Takotna more directly with the Innoko at the mouth of Ganes Creek.

A wagon road, or at least a good winter sled trail, could be built from a point on Takotna river 15 to 25 miles above its confluence with the Kuskokwim to the Upper Innoko Valley near the mouth of Ganes Creek, or about 5 miles further to the town of Ophir. (Maddren 1910:35)

At the time of Maddren's survey, the Alaska Road Commission had conducted a reconnaissance for a trail between <sup>a</sup>Seward and Nome that passed through the <sup>^</sup>Kuskokwim area. But formal trail development was 2 years away. In the meantime, new <sup>mining</sup><sup>^</sup>towns were established; Flat, on the eastbank of Otter Creek 16 miles above its confluence with the Iditarod River, and Takotna Station, 20 miles from Ophir, among others. In the report <sup>^</sup>Mineral Resources of Alaska in 1909, Alfred Brooks reported that thousands of <sup>^</sup>miners and prospectors had entered the region, but high freight rates, absence of trails, and lack of established <sup>^</sup>centers of distribution continue to make the cost of mining and prospecting very high<sup>^</sup> (Brooks, et al. 1910:45). The absence of trails is clearly indicated in a map (figure <sup>^</sup>1) of the region based on Maddren's survey of 1908.

In 1910, many of the miner's and prospector's transportation needs were answered by the Alaskan Road Commission (~~see part II of this report~~).



GEOLOGIC SKETCH MAP OF THE INNOKO, CENTRAL KUSKOKWIM, AND LOWER-CENTRAL YUKON REGIONS

Compiled by A. G. Maddren

1909

## Trail Histories

### Introduction

Because of its remoteness and distance from the mining districts of interior and central Alaska, the Kuskokwim region was one of the slowest to develop. As late as 1925, four years after the Kuskokwim district was organized by the Alaska Road Commission (figure 2), it was noted that "this district comprises one of the most inaccessible parts of Alaska. . .The limited activities within the district together with its remoteness and the great expense of road construction have prevented the construction of any through wagon or automobile road" (Alaska Road Commission 1925:92). However, in 1922, when a report on the district was first included in an ARC annual report, it was the presence of new mining prospects that provided the impetus for road and trail development (Alaska Road Commission 1922:65) "due to the lode mining development at Nixons Fork, northeast of McGrath, and to the successful dredging operations southwest of McGrath, prospecting in this hitherto inaccessible region has been much stimulated. Members of the Board, last year, made reconnaissance trips throughout the lengths of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers."

An important modern mining venture in the area is the Red Devil Quicksilver mine 6 miles northwest of Sleetmute. Its claims were staked in 1933 and it was seasonally operated from 1939 to 1946. It was reactivated in 1952 by





the DeCoursey Mountain Mining Co. and has been in operation since then. It has produced some 20,000 flasks of mercury between 1939 and 1960 (MacKevett and Bert (1963:1-5). Numerous roads were built to access the mine area, as evidenced by maps in U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin No. 1142, 1963. Recent information on trail use in the area is difficult to obtain, and it wasn't until the late 1970's when the Alaska Department of Fish and Game began studying subsistence in Kuskokwim area villages that trail use was written about. In 1987, for instance, Susan Charnley noted for the Aniak and Oskawalik River drainages that "in winter, travel is by dog team or snowmachine. winter trails, --serve as routes for travel and areas for hunting and trapping" (Charnley 1982:40).

Alaska Road Commission Routes

← Flat-Crooked Creek →  
    ^ center all titles

In 1922, the ARC made a reconnaissance to determine the best summer and winter routes to connect the Iditarod district with the Kuskokwim River. A result was the cutting thru of the <sup>a</sup>62-mile winter trail to Flat from Crooked Creek ~~in 1922~~. In 1923, <sup>s</sup>tripods and two shelter cabins were erected along the trail (Alaska Road Commission 1923:63-64). Route <sup>^</sup>32D was the <sup>trail</sup>route over which all mail passed into the Lower Kuskokwim area (Alaska Road Commission 1924:129). In 1926, <sup>s</sup>a 90-foot suspension bridge suitable for pack horses was constructed over Bonanza Creek (Alaska Road Commission 1926:82). Two years later the trail was relocated and its length shortened from 62 to 54 miles, <sup>s</sup> in order to avoid glaciers on the old route (Alaska road Commission 1928:72-73). In 1929, <sup>s</sup>the ARC gave this description of the trail:

This route extends south from Flat over the Flat Creek and Willow Creek roads, across the Bonanza Creek flats and over a low divide to the headwaters of Crooked Creek which it follows to the Kuskokwim River. This route is a part of the through winter mail route Flat to Bethel and is suitable for dog sleds.

on which repairs were made to the Bonanza Creek bridge (Alaska Road Commission 1929:116). Another <sup>The</sup> relocation of ~~the~~ trail took place in 1932 when ~~the ARC constructed~~ 6 miles of new trail (Alaska Road Commission 1932:39). After 1932, <sup>s</sup>ARC reports do not refer to this route.

### Flume Dredge/Ganes Creek-Yankee Creek

In 1921, the Flume Dredge Company constructed an 8 1/2 mile wagon road from mile 6 out of Takotna, on route 38D, to upper Yankee Creek. The ARC provided a road scraper, plows, and grader to the company (Alaska Road Commission 1923:88). Minor maintenance was performed on the two routes in 1922-26, but references to them are not included in ARC reports after 1927, although the two routes were included in references to route 38H.

Ganes Creek-Yankee Creek road, known as route 38I and an extension of route 38H, was constructed in 1922-23 by the Innoko Dredging Company in order to freight in a large dredge to be installed in at Ganes Creek at Claim No. 6 above the roads terminus. The ARC provided a grader and wagons for the work. (Alaska Road Commission 1923:88 and 1924:132).

### Iditarod (Rainy Pass-Kaltag)

The most famous trail traversing state lands in the Kuskokwim area is the Iditarod National Historic Trail, which as "a symbol of frontier travel, and once a main artery of Alaska's winter commerce, served a string of mining camps, trading posts, and other settlements founded between 1880 and 1920" (Bureau of Land Management 1981:11). In the Kuskokwim area its informal roots date to aboriginal trade and travel routes and the use of the Kaltag Portage to Nulato along the Yukon river by Russian fur-traders. The impetus for informal development of the Iditarod trail were the various mining districts that developed along its future route. For instance, ~~there~~ <sup>was</sup> the 1895-96 rush to the Turnagain Arm area, ~~drawing~~ <sup>a</sup> reported 3,000 miners and prospectors. As new communities sprang up, trails were built to connect them. Eventually, a network of trails extended from Turnagain Arm north to the Talkeetna and Yetna River goldfields. In 1898 gold was discovered on Anvil Creek near Nome and in two years some 30,000 people had arrived on the Bering Sea coast.

But isolation was a problem because the Bering Sea froze from October to June and there was no travel route to southern ports. Between 1898 and 1908 four major routes were used to reach Nome, but all were proven uneconomical or unworthy because of length or condition (Bureau of Land Management 1981:15-19). Then, with the discovery of gold on Ganes Creek in 1907-08,<sup>9</sup>

"prospectors on the upper Innoko River joined Nome in demanding a winter outlet to tidewater. Not unaware of the fact that the gold rushes signaled the development of the Kuskokwim Basin, and highly sensitive to demands for better mail service, the Alaska Road Commission looked to the Rainy Pass route [Iditarod Trail] as a potential transportation artery for western Alaska" (Brown 1983:693).

Insert →

An account of Goodwin's reconnaissance appeared in the July 1911 issue of Alaska-Yukon Magazine:

Mr. Goodwin's party consisted of nine men, besides himself, and forty-two dogs--six teams of seven dogs each, every one of which completed the long "mush" in first-class condition. The party left Nome November 9, 1910, and arrived at Seward February 25, 1911. The outfit that was loaded on the sleds at Nome was selected with a view to safety, durability, and compactness. It included tents to house the entire party, stoves, sleeping bags, table top, and the substantial provisions and clothing required by hard-working men.

The trail was measured by cyclometers attached to bicycle wheels fastened to sled runners. Two cyclometers were used until Thanksgiving Day, when one was accidentally knocked off and lost. This was at Kwiktalik, one hundred and three miles from Nome. However, the accuracy of the measurements by the remaining cyclometer is attested by the fact that the first forty-seven and two-tenths miles covered was over a surveyed road and they checked to the dot with the measured distance.

The first stage of the trip was over the old trail from Nome to Unalaklik, a distance of two hundred and six and eight-tenths miles, as registered by the cyclometer, instead of two hundred and twenty-two, as claimed for years. Unalaklik was reached November 30th. In this time the Hegness cut-off was marked, and the Bonanza-Foot Hill cut-off was inspected. Many minor improvements to the weak parts of the trail were made. Particular attention was given to the crossings of Shaktolik river, Egowik River, Strawberry Creek, and Iron Creek. Obscure parts of the trail on the open tundra were marked with tripods.

From Unalaklik on Bering Sea the second stage of the trip was begun. It led to Kaltag on the Yukon river, a distance of seventy-three and nine-tenths miles. Repairs were made all along the route of this trail. Tripods were set at all places where the trail leaves the river. Kaltag was reached December 7th, and from there the party crossed the Yukon and started across country to Dishakaket on the Innoko River. Little work was required on this trail. All the tripods that had been erected by Foreman Giddings were in position, and Mr. Goodwin says it is the best marked trail he ever traversed in Alaska. The tripods used by Mr. Giddings consisted of three sticks of timber each, two of which were eight feet long and the third ten or eleven feet long. These are so fastened together that the longest of the three sticks projects two or three feet over the others at the top and is directly over the trail. Mr. Goodwin adopted this method of trail making for the remainder of the trip to Seward. On this part of the trail the banks of the Kaiyuh Slough are so steep that windlasses and ropes are required to lower the sleds into the gulch and to raise them out again. Dishakaket was reached December 10th, and the party was compelled to remain for four days on account of the extreme cold. The temperature went up to thirty-six degrees below zero on December 14th, and the party started out again, and on the 20th it reached Dikeman, having marked the sixty-seven miles thoroughly with more than thirteen hundred tripods. The trail from Dikeman to Iditarod was, of course, well broken and required no attention. It was the only well broken trail encountered by the party on the entire route. The party reached Iditarod City December 22d, where again it was delayed on account of cold weather. The local thermometers registered from sixty to seventy degrees below zero for a week.

On December 28th the party left Iditarod City for the Kuskokwim river taking the trail via the Iditarod mining creeks to Tacotna, and thence north off Apple Mountain to Berry's at the mouth of Big River on the Kuskokwim River.

Formal development of the Iditarod trail began in 1908 when the Alaska Road Commission (1908:95)

sent a special reconnaissance party during the winter from Seward, the coast terminus of the Alaska Central Railway, via the head of Cook's Inlet, the Yentna, Upper Kuskokwim, and Innoko rivers to Kaltag on the Yukon, connecting at that point with the main overland trail to Nome, for the purpose of examining into the reported developments in the intervening districts and to determine the feasibility of a winter trail by that route thus shortening the distance to Seward Peninsula. The transportation of the party was in charge of Mr. George E. Pulham, Mr. W.L. Goodwin, superintendent for the commission of the Nome district, accompanying the party as engineer.

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The trip, which was through a country but little known after leaving Cook's Inlet, was made without mishap or serious delay, the party leaving Knik, at the head of the inlet, on February 14 and arriving at Kaltag March 19.

→ The following from Mr. Goodwin's report will, it is thought, be of interest:

The route traversed, briefly described, was as follows:

Insert  
The Alaska Central Railway was followed to its end at Mile 54, thence via Turnagain Arm, Glacier Creek, Crow Creek Pass, Eagle River across country to Old Knik, across Knik Arm to New Knik, across country to Shusitna Station, up the Shusitna 3 miles, up the Yentna, Skwentna, and Happy rivers, Pass Creek to Rainy Pass, down the Dalzell, Rohn, and Kuskokwim rivers to near the Tonzona, across country to the mouth of the Tacotna at "McGraths," up the Tacotna and across country to the Tacotna Slough, over rolling hills to Gane Creek, down Gane and across country to Ophir Creek (the Innoko district), across country to Dishakaket, and thence across country to the Kaiyuk Slough to the Yukon, and then up the Yukon to Kaltag, and by Overland mail trail via Unalaklik to Nome.

At Tacotna Mr. Goodwin came back again on the direct overland route between Seward and Nome which was departed from at Dishakaket, where he had left it for the purpose of locating and marking the trail to the newly developed Iditarod district. The mail route to Nome, instead of following the trail here described, will probably continue in a northerly direction after leaving Tacotna by way of Twin Mountain and Ophir, in the Innoko district, to Dishakaket, a distance of seventy-eight miles and a saving a one hundred and fourteen and three-tenths miles in distance as compared with the route via Iditarod and Dikeman to Dishakaket.

The road from Tacotna to Berry's was cut out and thoroughly marked. Nearly three and a half miles in distance was saved by straightening the trail.

~~Here Mr. Goodwin and his party took up the most important work of their trip. Prior to leaving Big River, they were traveling for the most part over trails that had been used more or less for years. From here to the Susitna, more than two hundred miles of country, they were away from road houses much of the time, wallowing through heavy fields of unbroken snow and having constantly before them the problem of transporting provisions for the men and dogs while they cleared out and marked the trail over Yukon to Kaltag, and by the Overland Mail trail via Unalaklik to Nome, Apple Mountain to Berry's, at the mouth of Big River on the Kuskokwim River.~~

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From Farewell Mountain the route of the surveying party was begun up the wind-swept North Fork of the Kuskokwim River to the mouth of Rohn River, thence up the Rohn River valley, following the right limit for two miles, thence up the left limit to the mouth of Dalzell Creek, which creek was followed to the timber line at Rainy Pass, the divide between the Kuskokwim and Susitna valleys. Tripods were set along the trail over the timberless mountain pass to the head waters of Pass Creek on the Susitna side of the range. The trail was followed and marked where necessary down Pass Creek to Happy River, thence down Happy River to Skwentna River, thence down Skwentna river to the Susitna River, more than one hundred and fifty miles distant from Mount Farewell. The real trail work of the trip came to an end when Happy River was reached. From that point on down to the coast the work consisted

of measuring the trail and viewing the country with the idea in mind of improving the route wherever possible for the permanent road that will be built this summer pursuant to the act of Congress appropriating fifty thousand dollars for the Seward-Iditarod mail route for next and succeeding winters. Mr. Goodwin spent as much time as possible discussing with the miners, trappers, roadhouse keepers, and others the questions involved in the topography of the country. He left at every roadhouse a detailed description of the road leading to the next roadhouse including correct information as to distances, conditions of the trail, etc.

Most of the distance from Susitna station to Seward, about one hundred and eighty miles, is over the right of way of the Alaska Northern Railway. (Anonymous 1911:50-54)

In the area of the Kuskokwim the ARC Noted that "this route would form a very good line of communication for the mining camps of the Innoko and Kuskokwim rivers, as well as furnish a much quicker winter mail service than at present for Nome" (Alaska Road Commission 1908:113). The reconnaissance cost \$5,813.74 to conduct.

In 1910, the ARC began actual construction of the Iditarod trail. It is important to note that the name "Iditarod trail" was a popular name, in fact its length was divided into four routes in the ARC's southwestern district, and named 20A, Knik-Susitna trail; 20B, Susitna-Rainy Pass trail; 20C, Rainy Pass-Tacotna trail; and 20D, Tacotna-Kaltag trail. Routes 20C and D passed through the Kuskokwim ~~Plan~~ Area. So, in 1911 route 20C was completed during late that year, and its work consisted of clearing and staking at an average cost of \$51.35 per mile (Alaska Road Commission 1911:15). No work was performed on Route 20D, No work was done on either route in 1913-14. In 1921 rehabilitation of route 20C was conducted at a cost of \$209.50 and route 20D was dropped from the ARC southwestern district roster (Alaska Road

Commission 1921:32) and in 1922 route 20C was dropped as well. Records available to this author do not indicate why the ARC dropped routes 20C and D from its roster. However, it is <sup>possible</sup> reasonable ~~to assume~~ that their continued maintenance was not warranted because of the lack of use of the trail in the 1920's. <sup>3</sup> The impetus for original construction and maintenance, the Iditarod, Nome and Innoko gold-rushes, no longer existed.

In addition, the increasing use of the airplane quickly displaced the dogsled as the premier method of travel and long inter-regional trails rapidly fell in to disuse or were abandoned.

~~Use of the Iditarod trail petered out in the post World War I era as the airplane rapidly replaced the dog team and sled as the premier method of travel in the Kuskokwim region.~~ While there was sporadic use in the 1920's and onward it was not until the early 1970's that the trail again achieved status and became known as an important trail route--the route of the annual Anchorage to Nome dogsled race.

A precursor to the first running of the Iditarod was the 1967 Iditarod Trail Centennial Race held at Knik. In 1973, in order "to promote the rapidly growing sport of sled dog racing and to spur the restoration of Alaska's historic trails" (Anchorage Times 1973:28) Joe Reddington, Sr. and others, organized the first Anchorage to Nome Iditarod Sled Dog Race. Seven members comprised the first Iditarod Trail Committee. ~~Thirteen~~ <sup>More</sup> thirteen years later the race <sup>still</sup> captures world wide attention, ~~and has had its first two women winners, back to back for Libby Riddles in 1985, and Susan Butcher in 1986.~~

### McGrath-Takotna (Summer/Winter)

In 1923, the ARD<sup>C</sup> noted that "a summer pack trail from McGrath to Takotna is badly needed for early spring travel just after the break-up, and in the late fall just before freeze-up" (Alaska Road Commission 1923:88). Accordingly, in 1924, the ARC constructed a 5-mile summer trail, known as route-80A, between McGrath and Takotna. Although the total distance between the two towns was 18 miles, the first 4 miles out of McGrath were part of the McGrath-Candle Creek winter trail and the last 9 miles into Takotna were part of the Candle Creek-Takotna summer trail (Alaska Road Commission 1929:119).

The winter trail from McGrath to Takotna was constructed in 1923, and was known as route-80B, and then as route 80AA in 1924, during which time it was noted to be a part of the thru trail from Nenana to Flat (Alaska Road Commission 1924:133). In 1928 a 78-foot span suspension bridge was constructed over the Tatalina River and the trail was relocated for 4 miles from the bridge (Alaska Road Commission 1928:73).

## McGrath-Telida

In 1923 this ~~was~~<sup>9</sup> a 21-mile winter trail leaving McGrath to Berry's Landing [Medfra] by way of Nixon Fork of the Takotna ~~It~~<sup>was established</sup> provided early fall and spring travel (Alaska road Commission 1923:89). During the following season the trail, ~~now~~ known as route 80B, was relocated and extended to Telida. Its route now went from McGrath up Crooked Creek Valley to Medfra and then along the north bank of the North Fork of the Takotna ~~and~~<sup>2</sup> following its flats on into Telida (Alaska Road Commission 1924:133). After 1924 no additional work was performed on this route.

Medfra-Nixon Fork Mine

Originally known as <sup>the</sup> Berry's Landing-Nixon Mine road, this route was constructed in 1922 or 1923 by the Alaska Treadwell Gold Mining Company. The ARC furnished a tractor and other equipment in its construction (Alaska Road Construction 1923:89-90). Known as route 80F, this 12-mile wagon road extended six miles across low benches in the Kuskokwim River and six miles up ~~Mountains~~ to the mine at a 5% grade (Alaska Road Commission 1924:134). After 1924 no mention of this road is made in ARC reports.

## Nixon Fork-Tacotna Trail (Summer/Winter)

Known as route 80G and 80GG, this 15 1/2 summer and 14 1/2 mile winter trail was constructed in 1923 by the ARC (Alaska Road Commission 1924: ). But no work was performed on the trail after that date. In October 1933, ARC engineer Fred Spack<sup>h</sup> conducted a reconnaissance of the Nixon Fork-Tacotna trail. He considered the trail to be the most worthy project in the Kuskokwim district because it would reduce the cost of transporting fuel oil and supplies to local creeks and stimulate mining activities, as well as providing timber, cleared for the road, to the community (Spach 1933:1-4).

### Ophir-Takotna

Construction of this 23 1/2 mile wagon road, known as route 380, was a cooperative venture between the ARC and the Territory of Alaska (this route was the summer equivalent of the winter Takotna-Ophir trail previously discussed). Construction began in 1921, but because of deep permafrost, progress was slow. However, its importance was rated very high by the ARC because it served about 100 miners operating in the Upper Innoko River, and it also formed a portage between the Kuskokwim and Innoko rivers (Alaska Road Commission 1923:86 and 1924:131).

By 1927, the road had been advanced 21 1/4 miles from Takotna at which time its seasonal advancement included 9,166 linear feet of corduroy, 33 log box culverts, and one 18-foot span bridge (Alaska Road Commission 1927:72). The road was completed in 1928 and was suitable for motor traffic for all except 2 miles of the route. Minor maintenance was performed on this road in 1930-32, after which ARC reports do not refer to this road.



### Poorman-Ophir Trail

(summer mail ?)  
poorman

The ARC conducted a reconnaissance for this trail (route-38F) in 1922 and in 1923 "the trail was blazed and cleared throughout. . . several bridges were constructed and four shelter tents, with stores, erected. This gives a through overland trail from the Yukon at Ruby to McGrath<sup>h</sup> on the Kuskokwim" (Alaska Road Commission 1923:87). An exact description of the trail is provided in the 1923 annual ARC report:

Starting from Ophir for Poorman, the trail fords the Innoko River, then proceeds in a northerly direction over rolling hills for a distance of twenty-three miles where a shelter tent is located in a small valley near the head of Dominion Creek. The trail continues down Dominion Creek and across Folger Creek and valley, then up the Bonanza Creek valley, continuing over a low divide and down into the Cripple Creek district, an additional distance of twenty-two miles.

From the cabins on Cripple Creek the trail continues in a northerly direction, and passes west of Cripple Mountain. After crossing the basin of Colorado Creek the trail follows a high, rolling divide or watershed with several large domes rising much higher than the Dominion Ridge. After travelling about sixty-five miles in a northerly direction from the mining camp at Cripple Creek, the trail bears to the northwest for a distance of about fifteen miles down a long, low ridge into the Timber Creek valley and across Timber Creek over a low divide into Solomon Creek, then over another low divide into Poorman camp and mining district. Between Cripple Mountain and Poorman, three shelter tents have been erected, spaced approximately twenty miles apart. (Alaska Road Commission 1923:87) No maintenance was performed after the 1923 season. Although in 1928, the ARC noted that "summer mail and passenger service would be greatly improved by the extension of the Ruby-Long road through Poorman to Ophir" (Alaska Road Commission 1928:74). In the following year the ARC (1929:118) noted that route 38F "is suitable for foot travel and for pack horses and serves travel from Ruby to Ophir."

not a  
quote

Nixon Fork-Tacotna (winter/summer)

Known as route-80G, the summer pack trail was constructed in 1924 to serve travelers from Nixon Fork of the Takotna River to Takotna. Route-80GG was the winter trail which generally paralleled the summer trail, which was used to transport freight to Tokotna via Nixon Fork after freeze-up. After 1924 no mention of these two routes is made in ARC annual reports.

### Tacotna-Flat Trail

The ARC completed construction of this 87 mile trail in September 1911 at a cost of \$61.65 per mile (Alaska Road Commission 1912:16). No maintenance was performed on route-32A from 1912 to 1921. In 1922 an examination was made <sup>of</sup> ~~at~~ the trail and a contract was let for the construction of shelter cabins and horse barns (route-32A was transferred from the ARC's southwestern to its Kuskokwim district in 1921) at Brush, Forth of July, and Lincoln Creeks. At that time the ARC (1923:81) noted that "there is considerable travel on this trail in summer time and to make it completely safe tripods should be erected throughout." During 1924 wind falls were cleared out and tripods were erected along the high ridges between Tacotna and Flat (Alaska Road Commission 1924:127). Three years later, a cable footbridge was constructed over Otter Creek, at the old townsite of Discovery (Alaska Road Commission 1927:72). No further work was done on this trail after 1927.

### Takotna-Ophir Trail

This 25 mile wagon road, known as route 20-DA, which was an alternate winter route to the Ophir-Takotna summer road, was located and work was begun <sup>^</sup>o it in 1921-22. The ARC made every effort to vigorously prosecute is construction in order to serve the needs of dredge operators on the Upper Innoko River. In 1922, a bridge was constructed over Ganes Creek to complete the trail, and in the following year it was serving local needs (Alaska Road Commission 1922:67 and 1923:81). In 1924, probably because of relocation, route 20DA was reduced to a 19 mile length, and four years later the trail was relocated for 11 1/2 miles (Alaska Road Commission 1928:73).

After 1929, ARC reports do not refer to route 20DA. According to Michael Brown, mining operators in the Innoko district were using the trail even before it was completed. For instance, in 1923 "the Guinan and Ames Dredging Corporation shipped dredge material to Tokotna by boat, and in the following winter transported the dredge from Tokotna to Ganes Creek by team" (Reed Quoted in Brown 1983:724).

## Aviation and Airfield Development

An important element of transportation development in the Kuskokwim region was the establishment of aviation and airfields. Indeed, in 1924, McGrath became a participant in one of the most important aviation events in Alaska's history, when, in order to determine whether it would be practicable to perform mail service by airplane in Alaska on account of the extreme weather conditions during the winter season, the Post Office Department shipped a plane to Alaska in January, 1924, for the purpose of making a number of test flights. Carl Ben Eielson flew eight test runs during the months of February, March, April and May, between Fairbanks and McGrath, a distance of 272 miles. After the final test flight Eielson's airplane was damaged beyond repair, however, he demonstrated that the airplane was a faster and more efficient method of transporting freight, because what took a dog team 18 days to accomplish, he was able to complete in just three hours (Anonymous<sup>b</sup> 1938:1). Eielson's feat also signaled the beginning of aviation in the Kuskokwim region.

Ironically, it would be another seven years before the Post Office would offer another mail contract in Alaska, and even then, the airplane services had to bid against the traditional dog team outfits.

Aviation, as a service, began in the Kuskokwim region in 1926 when competing aerservices from Fairbanks offered freighting and passenger service for

miners in the Iditarod district (Potter 1945:78). Concurrently, the Territory of Alaska provided funds to the Alaska Road Commission for the construction of airfields in the Kuskokwim region, and when possible, local communities benefiting from or requesting airfields, provided monetary assistance or man power to their construction. By the mid-1930's <sup>seven</sup> airfields had been constructed in the region. Additionally, in 1938, Harold Gilliam began the first regular star route air mail service to the Kuskokwim, and it was reported that his delivery in that region was the most perfect in the history of the Post Office (Potter 1945:153-154). On the eve of World War II, Mervyn <sup>C</sup> Golby (1940:368) noted that:

"Most planes flying out of Anchorage and Fairbanks to Bristol Bay, the Kuskokwim, and the Lower Yukon County traverse McGrath. The airport is small, but planes sometimes use a bar on the Kuskokwim in summer and the frozen Takotna River in winter as landing fields.

not a quote [ In the wake of WWII, the Alaska Air Command received funding to construct a permanent aircraft control and warning system in Alaska. Accordingly, an AG&WS was constructed in Spareroohn in 1951 in order to cover a radar gap between interior AC&WS sites at King Salmon, Tataling, and Campion. Since it has always been accessible only from air, military engineers constructed the Split Camp site atop a ridge in the Lime Hills area, the two are connected by a tramway and summer dirt road (Poe 1984:160, 168) / ~~see~~

By statehood <sup>aviation</sup> was the primary mode of transportation to the Kuskokwim region, completely supplanting overland and riverine methods. Its development was further promoted by the establishment of hunting and guide services in the 1960's and 1970's.

### Airfield Construction

In 1926 <sup>airfields</sup> were constructed at Tokotna (route 32E), and Flat (route 33H). The Takotna field was 500 feet wide and 1,000 feet long and located on a hill just back of the town. The Flat field was 400 feet wide and 1,400

feet long and was situated 1 1/2 miles northeast of the town. Apparently restauranter Henry DuRand led efforts to assist the ARC construct the Flat aviation field. As noted in a letter to DuRand in 1925 by the Territorial Highway Engineer "the field as indicated is to be 400 by 1,400 feet as explained before it is most important that all moss be removed when finished the field must be perfectly smooth and free from bumps. All rocks which might impair the speed of a plane running forty or fifty miles per hour must be removed. The territory will pay two-thirds of the cost of the field" (Territorial Highway Engineer 1925:n.p.).

In 1927, additional aviation fields were established at Ophir (route 38M), McGrath (route 80H), and Telida (route 46K). The Ophir field was "L" shaped with one runway 200 feet wide and 750 feet long and the other 200 feet wide and 350 feet long. It was located on an old tailing dump adjacent to Ophir. The McGrath field was 200 feet wide and 800 feet long and was located on the right bank of the Kuskokwim River upstream and adjacent to McGrath. The Telida field, which, for some reason was placed in none of the ARC's districts, but was noted in the Territorial Highway Engineer biennial report of 1927-28, was 250 feet wide and 850 feet long and was located 300 yards back from the McKinley Fork of the Kuskokwim River back of the Telida roadhouse (Territorial Highway Engineer 1927-28:65).

In 1928, an aviation field was constructed at Medfra (route 80J), which was 400 feet wide and 1,000 feet long, and was located on the left limit of the

Kuskokwim River directly opposite the Medfra roadhouse and Post Office (Alaska Road Commission 1926:82, 1927: and 1928: ). Eight years later new aviation fields were constructed at Poorman and Medfra (Alaska Road Commission 1936:7). In 1936, the ARC proposed that an aviation field be built at Crooked Creek, based on the requests of local residents. According to Fred Spach, an ARC engineer, the field would "be of great value to the rich mining area between Flat and the Kuskokwim River as during the past two years a large number of miners have located good pay ground on George River and tributaries, also on Upper Crooked Creek().|||.()As there is strong opposition against constructing a proposed highway from Flat to Georgetown .||.()it appears that the only recourse would be to construct this field" (Spach 1936:n.p.). ~~However, the field was never constructed and by 1940 gold mining ceased because of the war. But, the importance of aviation to the region is clearly demonstrated in this instance.~~



## Contemporary Road Development

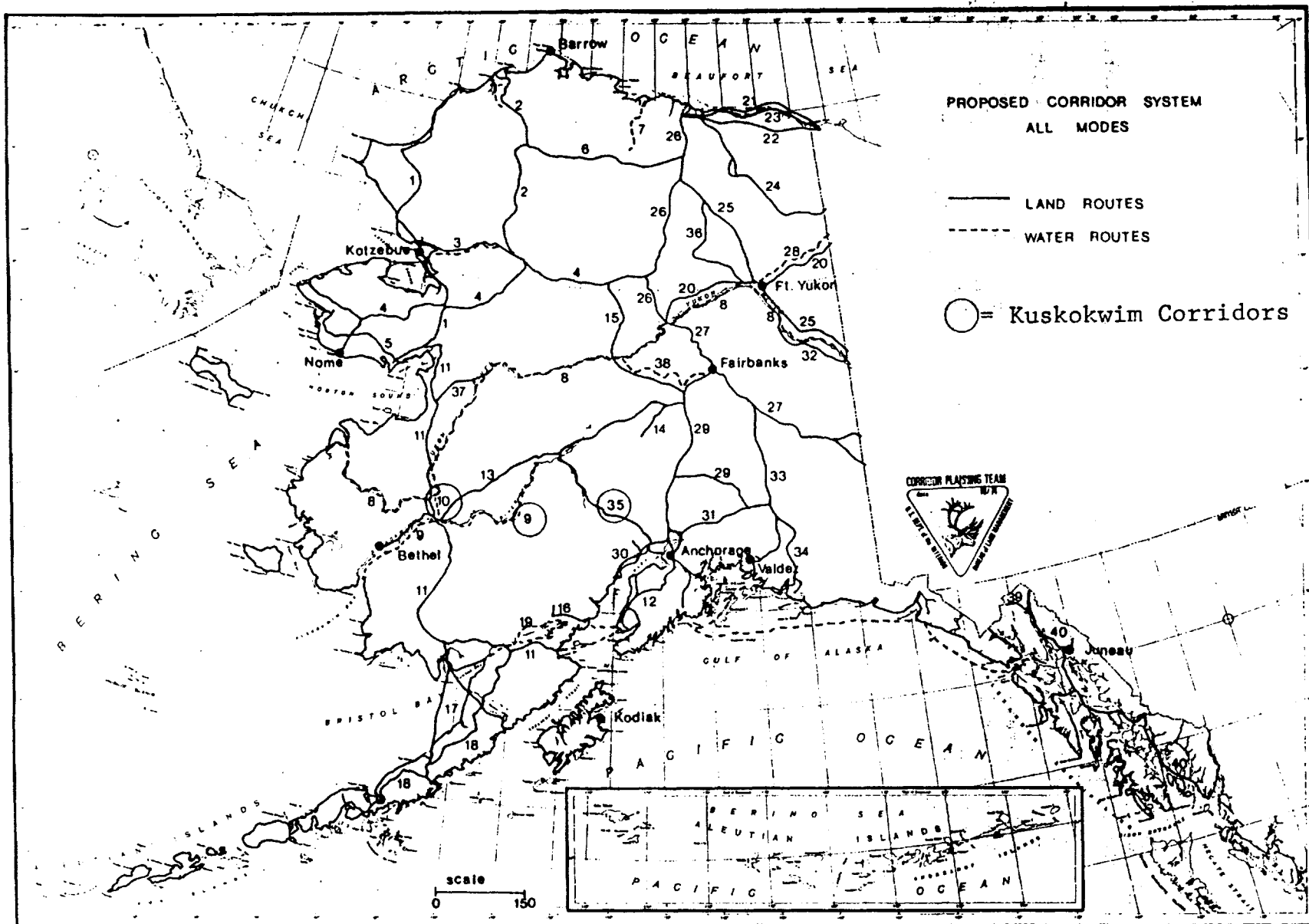
Road and trail construction came to a virtual standstill in the Kuskokwim region during World War II as mining activity ceased. During the 1950's, minor maintenance was performed on some of the ARC roads and trails established in the previous three decades. With statehood, and the abolishment of the Alaska Road Commission, responsibility for access routes in the region passed to the State Department of Highways, and, for the first time, planning for roads was initiated. In 1965, the state, in cooperation with the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, proposed a network of 34 scenic roads in Alaska, of which three were in the Kuskokwim region. Routes 28-30 were the Dillingham-McGrath, McGrath-Lignite, and McGrath to Talkeetna Scenic roads. The following was noted about each route:

McGrath-Dillingham: the construction of a highway to McGrath may provide enough interest to resume steamboat navigation between McGrath and the predominately native town of Bethel.

Lignite-McGrath: this route will provide the McKinley Park motorist with a choice of loop or alternate returns to the Anchorage-Fairbanks highway. . . This route will provide access to antimony mining operations.

Talkeetna-McGrath: a wide variety of recreational experience will be furnished by the Sunshine-McGrath scenic route. . . Rainey Pass has been the connecting link between Cook Inlet and the Kuskokwim River for all means of transportation, dog sleds to airplanes, because of its low elevation.

A decade later the Bureau of Land Management proposed 40 multimodal transportation and utility corridor systems for Alaska (figure 3 ). There corridors were proposed for the Kuskokwim River area. the following was noted about the corridors (Bureau of Land Management 1974:56-58, 60-62, 160-162):



No. 9 Kuskokwim River - this route extends from McGrath in the upper Kuskokwim Valley downriver to the Kuskokwim Bay in the Bering Sea. . .will provide opportunities for mineral exploration and development and numerous trans-shipments points for inland distribution of goods and commodities.

No. 10 Yukon-Kuskokwim Canal - this north-south river transportation corridor lies between the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers....A canal can provide up to two months of additional ice-free navigation into the Yukon River.

No. 35 Rainey Pass - this corridor is a regional intertie between the southcentral portion of the state and the western Alaska region centered around Bethel....

The state and federal proposals never were realized, however, probably because of the enormous cost involved in planning, construction, and maintenance. Thus, Kuskokwim regional road and trail development has occurred on a small scale since statehood, and the primary authority has been the Alaska Department of Transportation's Local Service Roads and Trails Program, which "was established by the State Legislature in 1971 to provide for special needs of 'bush' communities, rural communities and communities both within and outside organized boroughs. . .The program was designed to aid communities that do not have either the financial means or the technical expertise to accomplish a project alone" (Alaska Department of Transportation 1984:iii). In the initial compilation of LSR&T needs in 1971, none were listed for the Kuskokwim region, and since then the Kuskokwim region has received little compensation under this program.

An attempt to identify important trails and roads in Alaska was the 1974 compilation of the Alaska Existing Trail System inventory by the Alaska Department of Transportation. The inventory consists of two parts, a computerized index of trails for each quad (153) in Alaska and an atlas of all 153 quadrangle maps showing the actual or purported routes of trails listed in the index. For the twelve quads covering the Kuskokwim plan region there are about 186 trails listed, of which about 61 are on state lands, and of those there is documentation on perhaps 50% of them. In 1985 this author compiled a similar inventory, in which "roads and trails were chosen for inclusion based on four criteria; one, that there is known historic use; two, that there is at least some evidence that the road or trail has been used; three, that there is documentation available regarding the road or trail; and four, that there are maps available showing the road or trail" (Stirling 1985:n.p.). The criteria in the 1985 R.S. 2477 Regional Trails and Roads Assertion Inventory are clearly stated while the 1974 inventory's criteria and intent is less clear. Both, however, are being used in the current program of the state to protect and/or acquire rights-of-way to historic roads, trails, and access routes. The 1985 inventory is organized into three parts, each corresponding to the northern, southcentral, and southeastern district offices of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. Accordingly, there are 13 roads and trails listed for the Kuskokwim region.

## Omnibus Roads

By virtue of statehood in 1959, Alaska received quitclaim deed to highways, and improved and unimproved real property in June of that year. In the Kuskokwim region the following "omnibus" roads were identified as part of the quitclaim deed:

### Federal Aid System Routes

No. 231	Crooked Creek-Iditarod
261	Sterling Landing-Ophir
271	Poorman-Ruby
1304	Council-Ophir Creek
2100	Aniak road
2311	Flat Branches
	Happy Creek
	Flat-Slate Creek
	Gold Horn
2611	Takotna Airfield
2612	Ganes Creek road
2613	Little Creek road
2680	McGrath Airfield
2711	Medfra-Nixon

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