

Alaska Highway Mythology: Bulldozers to RVs

Laura Pitkanen

Abstract: Alaska Highway tourism has grown steadily since the opening to civilian traffic in 1948, and one of the primary motivations for Alaska Highway travellers is the enduring mythology of this route that is steeped in hardship, wilderness, and survival motifs. Yet how has this mythology been sustained when Alaska Highway conditions, services, infrastructure, and communities have changed drastically from the 1940s to present day? The answer to this question has numerous facets, yet a significant contributor to the endurance of Alaska Highway mythology lies in popular literature, in which highway travellers have ceaselessly disseminated tales of adventure, hardship, and challenge among the general public. However, while the preponderance of travel writers and the tourism industry extol the hardship of the Alaska Highway, this mythology is coming under pressure. This paper explores the complexities of Alaska Highway mythology in popular tourism literature since the 1940s and reflects upon the ability of Alaska Highway mythology to “survive.”

Beginning in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, the Alaska Highway winds approximately 2200 kilometers through the northwest before officially ending in Delta Junction, Alaska. The Alaska Highway was primarily constructed as a military route to link Alaska with the rest of the United States during World War II. Since opening to civilian traffic in 1948, Alaska Highway tourism has grown steadily, and one of the primary motivations for Alaska Highway travellers is the enduring mythology of this route that is steeped in northern wilderness, hardship, and survival motifs. Yet how has this mythology been sustained when Alaska Highway road conditions, services, infrastructure, and communities have changed drastically from the 1940s to present day? The answer to this question has numerous facets, yet a significant contributor to the endurance of Alaska Highway mythology lies in popular literature, in which highway travellers have ceaselessly disseminated tales of adventure, hardship, and challenge among the general public. Literature produced by the tourism industry, including guidebooks and advertisements, has also been an influential factor in the survival of Alaska Highway mythology.

In this paper, I discuss the complexities of Alaska Highway mythology over time by drawing on accounts of the Alaska Highway in popular tourism literature since the 1940s. As tourists often have preconceived expectations of the Alaska Highway and the North, tourists are shown to be an influential factor in the dissemination of Alaska Highway mythology. However, while the preponderance of travel writers and the tourism industry continue to extol the hardship mythology of the Alaska Highway, this mythology is coming under pressure. This paper examines these contradictions within the context of northern tourism.

Northern Tourism

Tourism is an expanding global service industry.¹ The Subarctic and Arctic are becoming popular tourism destinations and tourism is a rapidly growing industry in the North.² The primary motivation for tourists who visit the North is wilderness landscape, and this has been identified as particularly important for road based tourists.³ Coates asserts that the land through which the Alaska Highway travels is as “unsullied, primeval, and magnetic as it ever was”⁴ yet intense development in this region has not been without controversy. The establishment of roads along with changes in transportation services and development initiatives have increased the accessibility of northern regions. Where once the North was fairly inaccessible due to the high costs of travelling to remote regions, many places in the North are now directly accessible by roads.⁵

Within Canadian northern regions, the Yukon is identified as particularly appealing to the tourism industry due to the history of the Klondike Gold Rush, which is heavily marketed in Dawson City, along with the mythology –and convenience– of the Alaska Highway.⁶ Similarly, Alaska, enshrouded in its own mythology of isolation, wilderness, and frontier, also has a special allure for northbound tourists. Although Alaska is also accessible by air and ferry, the Alaska Highway is a significant tourism route to this region. Indeed, Alaska is the primary destination for northbound Alaska Highway travellers⁷ and the majority of Alaska Highway travellers are from the United States.

Northern regions that are accessible by road, such as the Alaska Highway corridor, and more recently the Dempster Highway, are predicted to suffer disproportionate growth as tourism puts pressure on the infrastructure of local communities. Johnston notes that northern Canadian highways have become tourist corridors⁸ yet this is arguably also true of highways in Alaska. It is important to note that the Alaska Highway has developed into a “linear, service economy,”⁹ of which tourism undoubtedly plays a lead role.

Johnston and Hall suggest that road based tourism in particular may cause a “saturation” of the northern landscape.¹⁰ This assertion has direct relevance to Alaska Highway communities, as well as its tourism industry, which focus primarily on road based tourism.

The consequences of tourism, a highly complex industry, are often poorly understood or ignored by development proponents and tourism operators. In *Communities, Resources and Tourism in the North*, Butler cites that there is significant “misconception”¹¹ regarding the northern tourism industry. Among the consequences associated with tourism, Butler identifies difficulty in controlling tourism once it is established and a lack of community consensus regarding direction and rate of tourism growth. Johnston and Madunic caution about the potential impacts of tourism in the North and note the apparent lack of awareness among tourists regarding their own contribution to environmental degradation.¹² In addition, Johnston outlines numerous other issues that may be particular to northern regions, including the high cost of importing goods for tourism demands; a high degree of economic leakage; the short summer season in the North that exacerbates the seasonality of the tourism industry; and the effects of tourism on northern subsistence lifestyles, the environment, and wildlife.¹³

While tourism may hold economic promise for northern communities that are vulnerable to boom and bust resource cycles, northern tourism is a highly seasonal industry. The third-quarter peaking of Subarctic and Arctic tourism from June to September places economic limitations on tourism operators. Furthermore, this seasonality may exacerbate the effects of tourism in the North by injecting large numbers of tourists into small communities, in a relatively short time period. Due to the complexities of the tourism industry, Butler argues that host destinations may become frustrated with the volume or nature of their own particular tourism industry.¹⁴

During the early rush of development on the Alaska Highway, numerous tourism establishments opened, yet many subsequently closed in boom and bust fashion. Ironically, despite the localized business support of highway maintenance workers, highway improvements undermined many tourism establishments as road improvements enabled Alaska Highway travellers to travel longer distances without the need for supplies or lodging.¹⁵ A further factor in this trend was the shift towards “self-containment”¹⁶ in Alaska Highway tourists, notably Recreational Vehicles (RVs). Additionally, while improved road conditions increased tourism volume on the Alaska Highway, these improvements also resulted in the clustering of tourism infrastructure at highway nodes such as Watson Lake, Whitehorse, and Haines Junction.¹⁷ Road speed was another factor in this process; indeed

Haigh claims “speed has changed the landscape geography of the Alaska Highway and diminished the importance of the landmark stops.”¹⁸ The predominant tourism infrastructure on the Alaska Highway now caters to RV travel.

The modern use of Alaska Highway mythology may be a marketing ploy designed to capitalize upon novice Alaska Highway tourists or a sentimental and nostalgic look back at earlier highway conditions. Regardless, the importance of marketing in Alaska Highway mythology cannot be overstated. Private and public sector marketing creates preconceived images and stereotypes of destination places and these processes cannot be separated, indeed they operate in tandem. The stereotyping of northern images and promises of certain experiences can be seen with respect to the Alaska Highway. Drawing on the 1896–1898 Gold Rush and pioneer history, construction accounts, and the mythology of this route as hardship and wilderness, the tourism industry markets the Alaska Highway as a unique tourism destination. In relating these ideas to the Alaska Highway, several interesting points can be made. First, the mythology of the Alaska Highway, as previously demonstrated, has undoubtedly formed preconceived ideas of this route among the general public. Noteworthy, however, is that tourists *expect* certain experiences to be met, and thus the onus is put on Alaska Highway communities to provide them. Nash points out that it is often the hosts who are forced to adapt to tourists demands, rather than the tourists having to adapt to the realities, and limitations, of host destinations.¹⁹ While a sense of nostalgia for community members is certainly one component in Alaska Highway events and services, the Gold Rush theme, construction era, and pioneer aesthetic are also highlighted for the benefit of the tourism industry.

Second, the marketing of Alaska Highway paraphernalia has packaged Alaska Highway history into tourism products to be sold and consumed. This trend, which began at the inception of the Alaska Highway, continues to present day. Although no doubt humorous, the canning of Alaska Highway dust during the 1940s is indicative of the early tendency to capitalize on tourist stereotypes and expectations of this route as an arduous journey. The Alaska Highway festival *Rendezvous '92*, a celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the highway, while celebrating community and regional achievements, also sought to bolster tourism interest in this route. Coates, in publishing a historical book on the Alaska Highway, *North to Alaska*, that coincided with this commemorative festival in 1992, notes that “now, perhaps, the Alaska Highway’s time has come ... it is time to recall the history of a unique,

remarkable, and delightful road, which ranks among the world's greatest driving adventures."²⁰

As a road based tourism destination, the Alaska Highway is also extensively marketed towards RV tourists. The widespread participation of Alaska Highway communities in the tourism industry is demonstrated from the plethora of tourism establishments and clearly evident in advertisements placed throughout travel guidebooks, notably *The Milepost*. This tourism publication has played an instrumental role in the Alaska Highway tourism industry, and in particular this guidebook has influenced the growth of the most visual form of Alaska Highway tourism, RV travel. A brief examination of *The Milepost* will shed insight into how this publication has helped shape the Alaska Highway tourism industry.

The Milepost shows a distinctive trend towards perpetuating the myth of the Alaska Highway as a unique, challenging route for the adventurous tourist. The original edition of *The Milepost*, published in 1949, one year after the opening of the Alaska Highway to civilian traffic, was intended to assist travellers, not only in finding suitable accommodation and essential services such as gasoline, but also to enhance their experience by noting points of interest along the highway.²¹ Designed with "road logs," which describe the Alaska Highway according to mileage from Mile 0 (Dawson City, British Columbia) to Mile 1422 (Delta Junction, Alaska), early editions of *The Milepost* informed the traveller about potential road conditions and hazards on the Alaska Highway. Early editions of *The Milepost* also included information concerning climatic conditions, safety tips for winter travel, customs and immigration, and hunting and fishing regulations. Historical references and stories were also present in early editions of *The Milepost* and have remained a component of this publication since its inception.

A further, self-proclaimed rationale for *The Milepost* in 1949 was to dispel myths, termed "wild and confused impressions," about Alaska and the Alaska Highway.²² These myths, said to be widespread among the general public, were attributed to other published accounts of travel in these regions. *The Milepost* was, and still is, touting itself as the quintessential guidebook for the traveller who seeks to know the "truth" about the Alaska Highway, which reportedly cannot be obtained in other "careless and inaccurate" publications.²³ In 1978, recognizing the influence of *The Milepost* in the Alaska Highway region, the guidebook's founder, Bill Wallace, remarked that *The Milepost* "has become part of the unfolding destiny of the vast northwest American and Canadian wilderness."²⁴ Currently, *The Milepost* serves as the self-proclaimed "bible for north country travel" (*The Milepost*, 2010, cover)

and describes itself as “almost as famous as the highway.”²⁵ RV representation has been included in *The Milepost* since the 1949 edition, in which, described under the log for Mile 2 of the Alaska Highway, is a business that provides “good parking for house trailers.”²⁶

Yet, what may have been a small reference to RV tourists in 1949 is now a deliberate marketing strategy to attract an increasing number of RV tourists to travel the Alaska Highway. In addition to photographs showing RVs on stretches of the Alaska Highway, advertisements of extensive gravel parking lots with individual electrical hook-ups abound, inviting the RV tourist from within the pages of *The Milepost* to stay in the numerous towns that dot the route. These visual RV advertisements in *The Milepost* dominate the pages in the Alaska Highway section. Information posted on *The Milepost* website stresses the necessity, and even safety, of travelling via this guidebook. This publication now provides exhaustive detail of tourism services and related products, including mile-by-mile entries that describe the natural scenery as well as every conceivable landmark along the way, with suggestions on “must see” accommodations, restaurants, gift shops, tourist attractions, scenic byways, and even photo opportunities. While *The Milepost* does serve the purpose of companion guidebook that is undoubtedly helpful to some, and amusing to other, Alaska Highway travellers, the promotion of Alaska Highway tourism through descriptions and imagery of droves of RV tourists now contradicts the mythology of the route. Recently, perhaps in recognition of these issues, *The Milepost* website has featured stories about alternative forms of Alaska Highway travel, including motorcycles, antique cars, and solar vehicles, noting “anything goes on this pioneer road.”²⁷

The potential for controversy over appropriate levels and types of tourism is already evident in the most popular northern tourism destinations. For example, while RV tourists travel the Alaska Highway *through* the Yukon, the goal destination for the majority of RV tourists is Alaska, specifically Denali National Park. This park is a popular tourist destination primarily due to the grandeur of Mount McKinley; however, RV tourism in Alaska has been described as “elephants linked in a circus train, huffing and puffing over the mountain passes in search of solitude.”²⁸ In addition, the crowd of RV tourists in Denali National Park is blamed with an aesthetic disruption of the landscape, as gravel RV parks now dominate the landscape near the park’s entrance. Further, in reference to Denali National Park, Doogan comments “somebody snuck into the park and installed a giant Winnebago magnet” and refers to RVs as “land whales.”²⁹ Catton refers to development on the Alaska Highway, noting specifically that the Alaska Highway was intended to be “orderly, controlled communities designed especially for the tourist

business flowing through them.”³⁰ In reference to the experience of travelling the Alaska Highway, Catton also comments that these developments “sought to make Alaskan travel comfortable where it had been rough, routine where it had been unpredictable.”³¹ These comments shed insight into debate regarding Alaska Highway tourism.

Tourism does have the potential to make genuine and positive contributions to local and regional communities. However, the potential long-term effects of tourism are often not addressed by its proponents. Despite any negative consequences of the industry, proponents herald tourism as an economic saviour for small northern communities. However, the long-term consequences of tourism for northern communities may be substantial, as it has the capacity to alter the basic foundations upon which small, unique communities are built. Ringer asserts that “economic windfalls do not come without social costs, whatever the inclination to devalue or overlook their importance ... the manner in which tourism is developed bears directly on the long-term ‘character’ of the destination—physically, economically, and culturally.”³² While the merit of Ringer’s argument for Alaska Highway communities is certainly up for debate, it is noteworthy to mention here that perhaps due to the changing nature of Alaska Highway tourism, Alaska Highway mythology is coming under pressure.

Alaska Highway Mythology

Two stereotypical images, often perceived in conjunction, predominate among tourists interested in northern regions: the North as hostile and challenging, and the North as pristine, fragile wilderness.³³ While the former may inspire tourists to conquer a forbidding landscape, the latter may contribute to touristic illusions of solitude, self-enlightenment, and spiritual reconnection with the environment. According to Coates:

the Far Northwest is one of the most romantic and magical places on the continent, mythologized as a land where humans can test the limits of their endurance and determine nature as it was and ought still to be. It is, put simply, North America’s last frontier.³⁴

The allure of northern isolation and the perception of wilderness landscapes are significant factors in attracting tourists to northern regions, and wilderness images are a large component of the ecotourism and adventure tourism sectors. Yet ironically, tourism, even in its most non-consumptive forms, inevitably contributes to a change in these same features. Fittingly, Alaska Highway mythology was built upon these images of the North,

as the hardship mythology from early construction and tourism accounts combines with pristine wilderness images to create the stereotype of the Alaska Highway as a rugged landscape to be survived.

The North has long been the subject of various myths, and while historical works seek to disabuse many of these myths, a preponderance of literature continues to depict the North with mythical images.³⁵ Early myths include the perception of the North as an inhospitable wasteland and as a vast and endless storehouse of resources.³⁶ As these myths have diminished in importance, other myths, equally southern in origin, have evolved in their stead. These stereotypes include the perception of the North as a mysterious, forbidding frontier.³⁷ Indeed, largely emanating from the Klondike Gold Rush, the North is often seen as the Last Frontier. Increasingly, the North is also envisioned in the minds of southerners as the last true wilderness.³⁸ As contradictory as these myths have become, remnants of all of these pervade the mythology surrounding the Alaska Highway, which distinguishes this route from all other highways throughout North America. In fact, in the 1940s, the Alaska Highway was often referred to simply as "The Road."³⁹ Among the various nicknames attributed to this route, notable ones have also included the "gravel magnet"⁴⁰ and the "adventure road."⁴¹ While Alaska Highway mythology beckons travellers northward, it also provides Alaska Highway communities with a common regional identity.

According to Cruikshank, people do not concoct myths as a means with which to escape reality. Rather, myths become the reality.⁴² Also, myths are not necessarily based in factual events; they are primarily based upon perception and become a type of "truth" over time.⁴³ In addition, myths are not merely based in the past, as they are also inextricably tied to the future.⁴⁴ Subsequently, myths have the potential to be a dynamic force and the importance of myths for both community consciousness and outsider dreams can be significant. Grant contends that "even if a minority view, a respectable consensus may be sufficient to sustain a myth."⁴⁵ Thus, as myths embody collective perceptions, it follows logically that as more people believe in a given myth, the stronger that myth becomes.

While the Alaska Highway has developed a mythology of its own, how one perceives the Alaska Highway also appears to be linked to one's interpretation of the North. For example, in his book *The Mysterious North*, Pierre Berton includes a chapter in which he logs his own Alaska Highway adventures in 1948, thus including the Alaska Highway in his vision of the North as something quite mysterious and challenging.⁴⁶ Still, other travel writers conceive of the Alaska Highway as a pioneer, frontier experience,⁴⁷ while others romanticize this route as a true wilderness experience.⁴⁸

In *Hitch-hiking the Alaska Highway*, written in 1946, Gertrude Baskine narrates the spark that led her to be one of the first women to travel the Alaska Highway:

Everybody started saying to me; "But what made you do the Alaska Highway anyway?" What had? I looked deep down within myself, as the Freudians say one should, and there I saw that it had all started last winter at a party at my house. Everybody was bored until someone threw the words "Alcan Highway" on the conversational fire. It struck a blaze immediately. We had all heard of this famous road being whipped up out of the wilds ... The party argued and contradicted itself into a huge success ... my interest aroused.⁴⁹

Gertrude Baskine was among the earliest civilians to travel the Alaska Highway, and her convictions attest to the fever that the Alaska Highway inspired in the popular imagination. Tall tales, many of them quite vivid, have been circulating about the Alaska Highway since its inception. Beginning with the construction of the pioneer road, countless tales of harsh working and living conditions culminated in the growing reputation of the Alaska Highway as a hardship route. The construction phase was notorious for horrendous working conditions, frigid temperatures, hordes of fierce insects, and back-breaking labour in permafrost. Following upgrades to the pioneer road, early tourist travel added to the hardship mythology, as travel stories rife with excitement became disseminated throughout the general public. Travel tales often focused on hardship, perseverance, survival, and "man" against nature. Subsequently, the Alaska Highway became known among the general public as a challenging and hazardous adventure through the wilderness of the North.

Popular periodicals, such as *Alaska*, *Alaska Sportsman*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Forest and Outdoors*, *Life*, *Maclean's*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, *Reader's Digest*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Time* have disseminated Alaska Highway tales throughout the general public, reinforcing and adding to the public perception of the Alaska Highway as adventure, challenge, hardship, and wilderness. Beginning in 1942, various articles, editorials, photographs, and travel diaries appeared in these popular magazines. These literary pieces described conditions on the highway and detailed the real experiences of average people who undertook the challenge of driving the Alaska Highway. Over and above the countless magazine stories and travel diaries, Alaska Highway mythology has also become embedded in numerous poems and songs that describe the adventure and

often danger associated with travelling this route. These countless tales must certainly have captured the imagination of the public as well as inspired numerous travellers to drive the Alaska Highway for themselves.

These popular pieces extol the virtues of the Alaska Highway region and also warn future travellers of road hazards, while providing advice regarding special precautions that travellers should take in their journey. Decades of Alaska Highway tales have ensured that the Alaska Highway mythology remains alive and well in literary form. The following poem is perhaps the most famous of the Alaska Highway poems, and its continued appearance on various souvenir items exemplifies the long-lasting mythology of this route:

Winding in and winding out
Fills my mind with serious doubt
As to whether the lout⁵⁰ that built this route
Was going to hell or coming out!

Despite extensive development and increases in the availability of services on the Alaska Highway, the multifarious mythology of this route has endured, and continues to inspire thousands of tourists to travel this famous route. Paraphernalia that bears the slogan "I survived the Alaska Highway" crowds souvenir shops and adorns the clothing of travellers, vehicle bumpers, and various postcards. The memorabilia includes postcards with the inscription "I drove the Alaska Highway and lived"⁵¹ and "We drove the Alaska Highway. Yes, damn-it, both ways."⁵²

These slogans of hardship and perseverance stem not just from tales of potholes and steep grades but also from the popular perception of northern isolation. Thus travellers "survived" the road conditions, the mosquitoes, and the northern landscape. Also evident in the slogans of these various souvenirs is a conveyance of pride and personal achievement in conquering the Alaska Highway, as tourists appear to relish the association of danger in driving this route. Interestingly, the cartoonish image on one particular Alaska Highway postcard from Arctic Circle Enterprises depicts a frightened looking couple driving an RV over a dirt and gravel road, while luggage flies off the back of the RV and a grizzly bear takes a swipe at the windshield. While this image is obviously exaggerated, these souvenir images and slogans serve to perpetuate and reinforce the myth of the Alaska Highway as a rugged, challenging wilderness route.

Regardless of motivations or the contradictions, Alaska Highway mythology is still popular among both travellers and tourism operators.

Maschmeyer reports that tourists continue to be anxious about driving the Alaska Highway, asking questions such as “Are there really potholes the size of the Grand Canyon?” and “Will my windshield get broken?” While Maschmeyer assures that the former question is definitely a highway myth, the second question carries no guarantee either way.⁵³ Historian Ken Coates refers to the “mystique and aura” of the Alaska Highway, noting that this highway is not simply a link to Alaska but a destination in itself.⁵⁴ One northerner sums up the public opinion of Alaska Highway communities in quite a unique way: “Its image for the rest of the country is studded with words like awesome, majestic and lonely ... The nation at large continues to react to us as though we were situated on the far side of the moon.”⁵⁵ Interestingly, Maschmeyer further assures readers of *Alaska Magazine* that “The worst thing about the Alaska Highway is its reputation.”⁵⁶ An examination of early travel accounts in popular literature will shed insight into how the road’s mythology has not only evolved, but has endured over time.

Often included in the travel accounts of highway travellers are historical references to the suffering, hardship, and glory of the early construction period of this highway that was instrumental in creating the Alaska Highway mythology. Writing in 1944, Godsell notes in *The Romance of the Alaska Highway* “the rugged wilderness now traversed by the Alaska Highway, seems always to have beckoned to the adventurous spirit of Americans.”⁵⁷ Adding to the allure of the North, frontier rhetoric also played a significant role in adding to the mythology of the Alaska Highway as an adventurous, challenging route. Early tourists likened themselves to early American pioneers, willing to be among the first to accept the dangerous and exciting challenge of driving the road. Commenting on the fortitude of early highway travellers, one couple wrote: “Every person who drives the Alaska Highway is a pioneer for a time, whether he intends to be or not.”⁵⁸ Fascinated by the highway’s mythology and drawn by the myth of the North, travellers began to travel northward to conquer this now famous route. Subsequently, many of these travellers contributed their own unusual tales to the growing mythology in popular literature.

Early Tourism

As the private automobile replaced the bulldozer, a new phase in Alaska Highway mythology was born. While tourists did not suffer in the same way as did construction workers, early highway travellers experienced many of the same conditions that workers faced, notably mud, dust, cold temperatures, and biting insects. Since the early 1940s, travel tales rife with accounts of

numerous hazards, including treacherous driving conditions, steep grades, sharp curves, flat tires, broken windshields, and lack of services have graced the pages of popular magazines. Individual tourists also published countless books filled with personal anecdotes about their highway experiences. These various tales of challenge, perseverance, and hardship appear in popular literature, both intermingled and juxtaposed with tales that extol magnificent scenery of unparalleled beauty. These diverse and contradictory images have effectively created a unique and mystifying vision of the Alaska Highway among the general public.

While the Alaska Highway was not officially opened to general civilian traffic until 1948, numerous people made the trek earlier subject to special permission and inspection by highway authorities.⁵⁹ Several early travellers included details of these inspections in popular magazines, including *Forest and Outdoors* and *The Alaska Sportsman*. Writing for *The Alaska Sportsman* in 1947, Boyd and Boyd noted being required to fill out registration forms and obtain safety information at the Traffic Control Board of the Alaska Highway, in Edmonton, Alberta. Upon arrival in Dawson Creek, Mile 0 of the Alaska Highway, they were also required to check in with the Canadian Highway Traffic Control Office for travel identification cards.⁶⁰

Early Alaska Highway travellers also warned of the potential difficulties that they might encounter along this route, offering advice on travel necessities:

We would say that if a person traveling the Alaska Highway is not a good mechanic, he should take one along—even if the mechanic's tools should outweigh the other luggage. Certain spare parts and equipment—four good tires on the car and two good spares on wheels, extra axle, spare motor parts such as fuel pump, fan belt, spark plugs, distributor parts, tools for motor repair purposes, jack, tire pump, ax, shovel, pick, tow rope, and a large container for extra fuel—should certainly be brought along.⁶¹

Referring back to his trip in 1947, Fagerson added the following to this already extensive list: “one rotor arm ... trouble lamp ... First Aid Kit ... and food for five days.”⁶² To add to this anxiety, the Northwest Highway System published a statement in 1948, warning potential drivers that they must fend for themselves, should they choose to drive the Alaska Highway: “Travellers cannot expect assistance in matters of food and shelter or of automotive repairs from Northwest Highway System maintenance camps.”⁶³ At the time they were written, these pieces of advice were fairly realistic as conditions on the Alaska Highway were notoriously rough. Tales of vehicle breakdowns,

flat tires, and broken windshields filled the pages of travel stories, journals, and personal letters. The personal memoirs of George Hayden detail portions of his experience on the Alaska Highway in the 1940s:

A sign on the road reads, "Go Slow—80 miles of Ice." It turned out to be 120 miles of glare ice. We ran into a chinook (a thawing wind) which lasted over an hour. We didn't slip off of the road once, but when we stopped to check our tires we had to push to get started again as we couldn't get traction on the ice. Came close to putting on the chains. It rained a little too and you couldn't stand up on the road without hanging onto the car.⁶⁴

Personal stories of early Alaska Highway travellers were bound to raise the eyebrows of friends, family, and co-workers back home. While not published until 1990, *The Road North: One Woman's Adventure Driving the Alaska Highway 1947-1948*, also attests to the hazardous conditions of this route during the 1940s:

Getting an early start proved to be tough. The rains had caused rock slides and the roads [sic] hadn't cleared them away. Only luck saved me going around a curve at a fairly good speed on a slight down grade. The huge rocks just happened to be lying on the road in such a pattern as to give me barely enough room to slide past them without going over the bank. That would have given me a good tumble for several hundred feet into the valley below.⁶⁵

Iris Woolcock's journey was also fraught with vehicle trouble, including multiple flat tires, which caused her to purchase "eleven new tires and twenty-three inner tubes" while only partially into her journey.⁶⁶ She noted:

The last ten miles of road to Whitehorse were worse than any I had encountered as far as maintenance was concerned on the highway proper. It was a ghastly stretch of washboard, holes, loose gravel and soft dirt through which I could hardly pull the trailer on the level. I could see why some tourists had become discouraged at this point and turned back at Whitehorse.⁶⁷

In addition to vehicle breakdowns, poor road conditions, and unpredictable weather, fierce biting insects plagued Alaska Highway travellers. Writing in 1947, Boyd and Boyd described the mosquitoes as "big as hummingbirds, thick as fog, and forever hungry."⁶⁸ In an article, "*Stouthearted Ladies Group Conquers Alaska Highway*," a group of women

divulged their experience with mosquitoes: "The radiator boiled ... extracted a bucket full of dead mosquitos. We had remembered running into clouds of them earlier ... they had clogged the spaces in the cooling system completely!"⁶⁹

Estelle Angier celebrated her sixty-third birthday while driving the Alaska Highway. The personal journal of her 1954 trip also reveals a wealth of information regarding early Alaska Highway travel conditions and sheds insight into the perceptions of this route as hardship. Vehicle repair receipts in Angier's journal tell a story wrought with automotive repairs and multiple flat tires. For example, perhaps due to prior knowledge of the physical conditions of the Alaska Highway, Angier purchased an oil change and grease job in Dawson Creek on 24 July 1954.⁷⁰ The road must certainly have been treacherous, as she purchased another oil change and grease job, plus had her gas tank repaired just two days later in Whitehorse.⁷¹ Other vehicle troubles arose, yet she noted the comments of one Alaska Highway mechanic as encouraging: "You shouldn't be discouraged by one little hole in your gas tank, or one or two flat tires!"⁷² In addition to vehicle repairs, Estelle Angier also noted evidence of dangerous highway conditions. She wrote "periodically along the hiway, [are] small cairns of stones surmounted by a wooden cross ... they remind the traveler to be cautious by posting accident signs: '1 killed here 1953; 2 killed here 1952; 1 killed here 1951'."⁷³ Furthermore, writing in *Highway Magazine* in 1959, Spindler provided the following memoirs from his Alaska Highway trip: "2 days of dust-choking travel, but temperatures permitted closing the car windows at times. Flying gravel pock-marked our windshield, but not too badly. We had only two blowouts on this Highway."⁷⁴ Referring to uneven road surfaces, Spindler also cautioned potential travellers: "A driver can easily lose control of his vehicle on these undulating stretches."⁷⁵

However, not all early Alaska Highway travellers shared in these hardship experiences or held a belief of this route as hazardous. In 1951, writing for *Canadian Geographical Journal* only four years after Iris Woolcock's journey, Harrington reassured potential Alaska Highway travellers that driving the Alaska Highway was relatively safe: "No longer do perils beset vehicles traversing the Alaska Highway, for settlement has come in to assure the motorist freedom from serious difficulty."⁷⁶ In fact, Harrington described, in great detail, the numerous improvements in safety and services along this route, noting at Mile 158, where "a sign on the highway warns 'Steep Hill. Gear Down'. During 'convoy' days, the sign read 'Suicide Hill. Prepare to Meet Thy God'. But the grade has been much improved since then."⁷⁷

Yet, in *Alaska Sportsman*, 1961, McCombie noted “loose gravel, mud, puddles and chuckholes ... not a ‘highway’ we think, but a ‘road’.”⁷⁸ Detailing many of the difficulties he faced on this highway, McCombie also wrote “We are covered with mud and you can’t see our license plates—Cracked our windshield today” and in reference to his second flat tire, “How lucky it happened here and not on some of these hairpin turns!” This 1961 Alaska Highway journey was certainly a tough trip, as McCombie also wrote “Road is slick—Pulled in at Mile 278 because we were afraid of it—good thing we did—cars stuck all along the way and a station wagon reported turned over behind us.” Interestingly, after experiencing all these difficulties, he still reflected “hope it remains difficult to do,” an attestation to the importance of Alaska Highway mythology.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, wilderness mythology persisted throughout travel stories in popular magazines. Despite increases in development in this region, travellers still thought of the Alaska Highway as wilderness. Interestingly, however, Boos distinguished between the highway and the wilderness landscape:

The untamed nature of the land *starts at the edge of the road* [emphasis added] and beckons one to shoulder a haversack, rifle or camera and forge into its depths. But the bush, as the locals call the off-the-road areas, is not to be taken on its postcard idyllic appearance. It is truly a wilderness that must be reckoned with at every turn.⁸⁰

Despite upgrades to highway conditions, the Alaska Highway was still subject to natural forces, such as periodic flooding, washouts, and insects.⁸¹ For example, mosquitoes have continued to be a common theme among highway travel stories. In addition, tourism tales of hazardous floods, dust, mud, gravel, and flying rocks continued to appear in popular magazines well into the 1970s. Writing for *Alaska* magazine in 1978, Boos commented “the insect population breeds in plague-like proportions ... northern mosquitoes are a curse ... a trip in to the bush or even a stop in the shade at its edge is unbearable without heavy clothing and a liberal dousing of insect repellent.”⁸² Boos also noted:

After the first 5 miles of dust, shoulder-jerking potholes and twisting ruts, I dispatched the thought of turning back, cursed the thought of what 1,500 miles of this would do to me and my van, and resolved to make it ... I observed a spectrum of preparations for the rigors of the highway ... to campers done up like armored cars, complete with headlight protectors, windshield screens, front-end

screens, taped windows for dust control, flaps and under pans ... most everything taken on the present-day highway should be considered at least partly expendable.⁸³

Also writing for *Alaska* magazine in 1978, Truesdell emphasized the importance of taking safety precautions prior to beginning an Alaska Highway trip, noting “dust is probably the most talked about feature of Alaska Highway travel.” Complimenting his story with illustrations of vehicle protection devices, he provided advice on how to protect a vehicle from dust, stones, and rocks with various shield devices: “Stones pose a hazard for travelers. Not only will flying rocks shatter unprotected headlights, windshields and clearance lights, but they’ll also gnaw, mile after unmerciful mile, at your tires.”⁸⁴

The project to pave the Alaska Highway most certainly diminished the flying rocks and loose gravel. The paving of the Alaska Highway was definitively instrumental in altering the experience of the journey, yet while later travellers noted highway improvements, the focus of most published and archival accounts continued to herald the danger, hardship, and wilderness adventure of driving this route. The excitement of the Alaska Highway mythology, coupled with a genuine desire for a unique vacation, thus elicited tales of hardship and fortitude throughout the following decades.

Modern Tourism

The Alaska Highway has continued to serve as a source of inspiration for personal travel accounts filled with mishap. As exemplified by Bristow in 1981, danger continues to be present in these accounts:

The forbidding clouds had opened up and poured down barrels of water, making the road a slick loblolly of mud. We came across at least five outfits that had either slid off the road or overturned. Miraculously, no one had been injured.⁸⁵

In 1990, *Maclean’s* magazine noted “The highway’s condition ranges from flawless pavement in much of the Alaska section to bone-rattling potholes and dirt-road stretches farther south. Natural disasters, such as mudslides, periodically threaten the route.”⁸⁶ Over the years, tourists provided advice to lesson some of these difficulties. Indeed, some drivers recommended driving the Alaska Highway during the winter, as “the roadbed smooths out ... there’s no flying gravel ... the dust is gone and the mosquitos are dead ... you have the whole road to yourself.”⁸⁷

Although challenge and hardship continued to be significant threads throughout popular literature, there was also a sad acknowledgment that conditions along the Alaska Highway had vastly improved over time. In 1981, Olson lamented, "For all the romance and legend it is no longer the wilderness trail it once was. The paving project is racing toward completion; few long stretches of unpaved road remain."⁸⁸ Writing for *Alaska* magazine in 1986, the editors of the guidebook, *The Milepost*, reported, "Driving to the North is no longer the ordeal it was in the early days. Those early images of the Alaska Highway with vehicles sunk in the mud up to their hubcaps are far removed from the asphalt-surfaced Alaska Highway of today."⁸⁹ While the Alaska Highway was not entirely paved at this time, a significant portion had been resurfaced and highway improvements were ongoing.

Moreover, contradictions regarding highway conditions, travel preparations, and experiences became evident in popular accounts of Alaska Highway travels. For example, Schreiner, writing for *Canadian Geographic* in 1992, observed that the Alaska Highway "is tamer today,"⁹⁰ while Olsenius, writing for *National Geographic* in 1991, asserted, "If you let your mind wander, the road will jump up and bite you."⁹¹ However, despite being described as tamer, the "Great Road North" was still widely thought of as "one of motoring's real adventures."⁹² Thus, regardless of contradictions between Alaska Highway mythology and real experiences, the popular perception of this route as hardship and wilderness endured.

Despite numerous contradictions throughout popular literature, evidence of the continued belief in Alaska Highway mythology can be found in these later publications. In a 1992 issue of the popular magazine *Alaska Living*, Jensen described his family's reaction to his planned Alaska Highway trip:

When we explained further that we would be driving to Fairbanks via the Alaska Highway, our madness was confirmed. I still remember my mother's words: "You'll ruin your car, lose your belongings, and probably get eaten alive by heaven only knows what out there in that wilderness. I know. I've seen pictures."⁹³

Writing for *Up Here* magazine in 1992, Hart also cautioned that the Alaska Highway is "a road that tests your driving skills to the limit ... fatigue is the main enemy of drivers ... elderly drivers of recreational vehicles are often caught napping and end up in the ditches on the side of the Highway."⁹⁴ In *National Geographic*, 1991, Olsenius described the modern Alaska Highway as "tortuous," yet subsequently glorified this route: "The

highway almost immediately acquired a certain mystique, like other fabled routes to adventure, an epic embellished, rather than diminished, by actual experience."⁹⁵ While most hazards, such as steep grades, sharp curves, and muddy dirt roads have now been eliminated from the Alaska Highway, a few real hazards remain unavoidable, notably the weather, the mosquitoes, and other biting insects. These ferocious, blood-sucking insects have remained a consistent element in traveller tales since the opening of the Alaska Highway.

Due to the personal challenge associated with driving the Alaska Highway and finding a common bond in their hardships and experiences, camaraderie among highway travellers has resulted in this route being named "the friendliest road in the world."⁹⁶ Converging at rest stops and service stations, people shared their experiences.⁹⁷ However, as tourists undoubtedly told each other of their respective harrowing and exciting experiences, they effectively reinforced and added to the notoriety of the Alaska Highway. Although improvements and upgrades have continuously been made to the condition of the Alaska Highway, this road still captivates the imaginations of tourists. Alaska Highway literary pieces continue to appear in popular magazines, and people publish their personal travel accounts and advice in book form. These contemporary Alaska Highway travel books, such as *The Alaska Highway: A Portrait of the Ultimate Road* (2002) and *The World-Famous Alaska Highway: A Guide to the Alcan and Other Wilderness Roads of the North* (2008) attest to the endurance of the mythology among travel writers. For example, in this latter book, Brown states:

...the Alaska Highway has been surveyed, straightened, graded, rerouted, paved and populated in places, but it remains a wild thing that's only somewhat tamed. This route through some of the most uncivilized parts of the continent still embodies the romance and challenge that adventure travelers seek. For some, it's not the getting to Alaska that matters anymore—although Alaska is a lifetime dream for many—it's having done the road. That's why the souvenirs sell so well—just driving the highway places you in the 'I did it!' club (10).⁹⁸

As exemplified above, recent travel accounts reflect on changes to the highway over time yet reinforce the wilderness and hardship mythology in their writings.

Regardless of the decade in which one drove the Alaska Highway, the reactions to reaching the end of the Alaska Highway are similar throughout popular literature accounts. For example, early tourists remarked that while

they were “extremely tired, dirty and dusty all over, we were nonetheless as happy as larks. We had driven the Alaska Highway! We felt like stopping in the center of Fourth Avenue and yelling ‘Whoopee’, or ‘Eureka’.”⁹⁹ However, despite immense improvements in road conditions, infrastructure, and services, later travellers also found great pride in driving the Alaska Highway:

At the roadside turnouts and rest areas winded travelers were stopped to survey the condition of themselves and their rigs. More than one was shaking his head at the mud-over-dust, dust-over-mud, tattered appearance of his American Dream Machine. But the same exhilaration I felt was on everyone’s face. It was in that tired, head-twisting smile that said, “I don’t believe it, but I’m here.”¹⁰⁰

Reflected in all of these writings is a sense of nostalgia towards an earlier time, when the Alaska Highway was truly a hardship route. The acknowledgment of highway improvements in literary works pales in comparison to tales of excitement, danger, and adventure associated with the Alaska Highway, which dominate the pages of Alaska Highway stories.

Later travel writers also continue to have strong associations with Alaska Highway mythology. These travellers endeavour to adopt the earlier tales, add their own unusual stories, and thus perpetuate and reinforce the mythology of the Alaska Highway. In doing so, they effectively link themselves to this mythology and thus proclaim with great pride, “I survived the Alaska Highway.” Furthermore, while the need for mileposts has long since passed, modern Alaska Highway travel writers also rely heavily on the milepost format to describe the highway.¹⁰¹ Frontier images are also still linked to the Alaska Highway, as shown in the Alaska Highway travel log, *The Alaska Highway: Geographical Discovery*, written by Huber and Huber in 2000, whose dedication reads “To frontiers and the roads that take us there.”¹⁰² However, disagreements over the merits of Alaska Highway mythology have been brewing for some time. For example, writing for the *Anchorage Daily News* in 1991, one book critic ponders the motivations of travel writers who continue to depict the Alaska Highway as hardship and adventure. Referring to the travel book *The Alaska Highway: An Insider’s Guide* by Ron Dalby, Hunt notes:

For some reason, Dalby wants to cry up the great “adventure” involved in driving the highway, but all the hype seems misspent ... The road has its pleasures and rewards, but 50 years of change

have made history and romance even harder to find than they were in 1942.¹⁰³

Other writers have echoed these sentiments over time, as seen in the article featured in *Trailer Life* magazine in 1989, “*Alaska Highway: Fact or Fiction,*” in which it is noted that RV travellers have long and heatedly debated the myths of the Alaska Highway.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

‘If this landscape outside were a dream, would you love it less?’
‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘If I knew it was a dream.’¹⁰⁵

Alaska Highway mythology, sparked by the initial construction period of the pioneer road, has been adopted by highway travellers and has transformed this route into a tourist attraction. Since its inception and initial construction phase, the Alaska Highway has drawn hordes of tourists northward to experience this rugged route. Pulled by various myths of the North, and inspired by travellers before them, Alaska Highway tourists have effectively woven Alaska Highway mythology through decades of highway travel, despite highway changes, improvements, and developments. However, although Alaska Highway mythology has endured throughout popular literature, the tourism landscape of the current Alaska Highway no longer resembles the highway lore.

Travelling the Alaska Highway in present day, while still an adventure of sorts, bears little resemblance to the mythology that has accompanied this route since 1942. Road conditions, apart from intermittent stretches of construction, are paved and generally in quite good condition, automobile services and supplies are frequent, tourism infrastructure appears at regular intervals, and services are clustered in major centres along the Alaska Highway. Large-scale tourism facilities, including RV parks, dominate the built landscape and the RVs abound along the road during summer months. Furthermore, a multitude of signs, billboards, and advertisements dot the landscape. Despite these changes in the nature of the Alaska Highway landscape and in the nature of the touristic experience, tourism continues unabated.

As shown earlier throughout popular literature, travellers along the Alaska Highway often have expectations of the Alaska Highway landscape. Yet this phenomenon is not limited to the Alaska Highway region. Preconceived images and stereotypes of landscapes have also been shown by Heat-Moon to influence travellers in Kansas. Full of myths regarding prairie

landscapes, tourists throughout the Great Plains have thus been compelled to arm themselves against the prairie elements: “The piling of equipment and gumption and will were part of the very purpose of their vacations, although I don’t think they realized it.”¹⁰⁶ However, this perseverance in the face of danger, coupled with the determination to overcome the elements despite the preconceived hardships, is suggested to be indicative of a search for self-fulfillment. For example, Heat-Moon ponders that tourists to Kansas “subconsciously wished for a genuine American pioneer experience.”¹⁰⁷ Similar suggestions can also be made about Alaska Highway tourists, as frontier and wilderness images are evoked throughout the various mythologies of the highway and the North. Alaska Highway travellers, as demonstrated by their preparations and equipment, also appear to be wishing for particular experiences, including those of early pioneer and related lifestyles that are associated with hardship and endurance.

To further this argument, as particular landscapes have unique stereotypes, it follows that individuals are attracted to certain destinations based on the expectation of experience that one hopes to acquire. In this sense then, travellers may seek to follow a dream. Graburn’s assertion that tourism is, in actuality, a spiritual quest for individual self-fulfillment and enlightenment¹⁰⁸ lends credit to this notion. Quinney also alludes to these concepts in his statement, “I travel throughout the country to enter a new realm, to change my nature—to become the nature that I am.”¹⁰⁹ Alaska Highway travellers, armed with mythology, *The Milepost*, and spare auto parts, are also seeking to “survive” this highway. Also armed with preconceptions and pre-formed expectations, Alaska Highway tourists may seek to “re-create,” both in a spiritual and leisure sense, yet also may seek to physically re-create the historic journeys of those who have experienced the route before them.

The Alaska Highway is a symbolic landscape, and as Meinig notes, symbolic landscapes reflect an “idealized past.”¹¹⁰ However, built landscapes are dynamic and ever changing, reflecting trends and processes of the people who not only inhabit them, but also of the people that pass through them. Interestingly, Meinig argues that Americans express “individualism, status, freedom, love of mobility and change” through the automobile, noting “the highway is the fundamental structural element of [the] landscape.”¹¹¹ As Meinig (1979) observes throughout America, the automobile has “created its own landscape.”¹¹² Meinig comments:

[The automobile] carries us effortlessly to all those amenities and services made familiar and profoundly democratic by the

nationwide uniformity of the McDonalds, Holiday Inns, and a hundred other franchise operations. We move along a linear landscape, intensely developed strips and open interstate routes, made secure and legible by uniform road designs and standardized emblems.¹¹³

Thus, similar to other North American highways, the Alaska Highway also represents another powerful force in American culture, that of individuality, mobility, and freedom and these ideas resonate through Alaska Highway mythology.

Alaska Highway books, poems, articles, and personal logs that glorify and reinforce the hardship, survival, frontier, and wilderness mythology of this route may be linked to a sense of nostalgia, yet this mythology is also a clearly defined marketing strategy. The tourism trend, notably the RV phenomenon, dominates the highway during summers months, in part due to the famous mythology of the Alaska Highway. Thus, it benefits both travel writers and tourism operators to continue to perpetuate this long-standing mythology, despite this route having been “defanged.”¹¹⁴ Writing for the *Anchorage Daily News* in 1991, Hunt contends that the current belief in Alaska Highway mythology is no longer applicable: “all the hype seems misspent ... why argue that it ‘leads you back in time, back to when the world was a simpler place, a wilder place ... a more enchanting place.’”¹¹⁵ Recently, in 2008, the Great Alaska Historical Society noted that “people still have the perception that they’re going to be driving up through the wilderness and they need 17 spare tires and armor plates to punch their way through ... we want people to know that you don’t need a surplus army tank.”¹¹⁶

Alaska Highway mythology, rooted in hardship, wilderness and survival, has endured in popular literature for over sixty years, despite changes and improvements to conditions, infrastructure, and services. While popular literature has served to reinforce Alaska Highway mythology among the general public, it appears that the ability of this mythology to remain intact is uncertain. Alaska Highway travel accounts in popular literature extol the hardship, wilderness, and survival motifs of its mythology, yet the continued selling of Alaska Highway mythology is not without criticism and the allure of the road has not been without controversy. As tourism has increased along this route, so has infrastructure and related services designed to accommodate mass tourism demands. The Alaska Highway landscape of today no longer resembles the hardship route of the past; indeed tourism and commercial infrastructure abound along its length, placing Alaska Highway mythology in a somewhat contradictory state. However, as noted

by Haycox, myths, once embedded in the popular consciousness, regardless of the level of truth and accuracy, are difficult to “dislodge.”¹¹⁷ Further, he points out that “myth and identity are closely interwoven, and people do not like to be disabused of self-images upon which they have based their lives and activities.”¹¹⁸ Grant seems to agree and expresses that people are “reluctant to relinquish long-standing beliefs that defy logic.”¹¹⁹

The dissemination of highway tales, both real and imagined, throughout popular literature has served to inspire thousands of travellers to “conquer” the Alaska Highway. Graham’s assertion that “historians are concerned ... because they seem to think that such popular literature serves to reinforce the stereotypes of the region and does little to account for the structures and societies that have developed in the North” has merit here.¹²⁰ While other factors, such as marketing, most definitely play a role in sustaining Alaska Highway mythology, the preponderance of hardship, wilderness, and survival motifs in popular and tourism marketing literature offers further explanation for the endurance of Alaska Highway mythology over time, as travellers endeavour to proclaim, “I survived.”

Author

Laura Pitkanen completed her MA in northern studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She is currently a PhD candidate in geography at the University of Toronto.

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