

Beyond Mile Zero: The Vanishing Alaska Highway Lodge

Community. By Lily Gontard; photos by Mark Kelly. Harbour Publishing, 2017. 100 colour and B&W photos. 7 x 8. 224 pages.

Reviewed by Jesse Devost

It feels good to read a book about hospitality, but it's bittersweet to read about a dying hospitality culture.

Beyond Mile Zero: The Vanishing Alaska Highway Lodge Community, written by Lily Gontard with photography by Mark Kelly, provides a rich visual and storytelling journey along the Alaska Highway visiting the former and current lodges that dot the route.

This book successfully taps into a core element of northern travel and discovery. The stories and photographs will attract the attention and sense of nostalgia of so many who live in or who have moved to the North. Most northerners likely have a lodge experience or two.

The evaporating past is a common lament in the book and one that many long-timers in the North speak about in general. The writing and photography of *Beyond Mile Zero* take on this subject in a compassionate but objective way, and bring the reader to contemplate the nature of ingenuity, pride, the working life, and letting go. It is more than just a road trip, it is a journey.

From its origins to today, driving the Alaska highway—"The longest main street in North America"—is a major draw. When the highway opened for public use in 1948 (the official ribbon-cutting took place in 1942), many lodges sprouted up. By 1955, services were available about every twenty-five miles (40 km). Today, the average distance between lodges is roughly 100 to 150 miles (160–240 km).

The first lodges were rudimentary structures, barely more than army barracks, built by the British Yukon Navigation Company to accommodate its bus passengers along the early route. Public travel was still restricted at the time.

Early pioneers of these places were multi-skilled and self-sufficient—in business and the services offered, and also in remote winter survival. Lodge owners may appear to have had a simple life, perhaps because of their isolation and stationary nature, but in reality their lives may have been more demanding and multifaceted than those of most city dwellers. Operators had to be versatile, picking up

kitchen or gas station duties if workers suddenly ran off with passing truck drivers.

Gontard and Kelly lay out the stories and photographs in a geographically chronological way—starting from Mile Zero in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and finishing just before the highway officially ends at Delta Junction, Alaska.

Each lodge featured is a well-rounded portrait that includes history; interviews with past owners and, for lodges still in operation, their current owners; and beautiful photographs of the landscapes, the buildings, and the proud people that inhabit them.

The text and historical research are well told and thorough. Gontard has done an excellent job of editing what must have been mountains of information and interviews into cohesive and flowing stories. Kelly's photographs make you feel like you're in the kitchen with the owners, getting warm and filling up with baked goods on a long winter's journey.

Readers might experience this book in a number of different ways. Some will enjoy hearing the stories of old and not-so-old life on the highway. There's plenty of character and charm in the tales, like the unrelated lineage of the several Bobs who ran the Toad River Lodge from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, or Amanda Harris, who came from Ireland and has been running the White River Lodge since 2008. Others may absorb this book as a tribute to a fading way of life and how this relates to the nature of work, fulfillment, and adaptation.

The stories in the book reflect on the "duty of career" from a couple of generations ago. Maybe back then there were fewer job choices for people, or fewer physiological barriers for people to try business ventures in the middle of nowhere. It seems like many who took on lodges had little or no prior experience in the field. Embarking on such a career path so far outside one's vocation or educational background seems so unusual today.

Most lodge owners just went and did it. The demand for these services in the early days of the highway was certainly present. Even though the lodge operators enjoyed their lives, "passion" was rarely mentioned in the book. It was a job that was also a way of life. Nowadays, there seems to be more of a need for passion to motivate one into a career. Lodge ownership does not seem a desired vocation for the young today. Although many children grew up and worked in these remote family businesses, few were eager to take it on, unlike

a generation or two ago when taking on a lodge from aging parents was a rite of passage.

It can sometimes feel melancholy to digest stories of the past and reconcile their diminishing in the current economic and technological world. In this context, one could see the book in a tragic light, but this can also signal a transition or a case of history evolving.

In the September 2017 issue of *Outside* magazine, author Brendan Leonard writes about taking his Tesla Model X on a road trip across the western United States. Leonard sometimes finds himself challenged to find adequate charging facilities to get his electric SUV, which has a maximum range of 295 miles (475 km), through certain legs of the trip. So his route is planned around the location of charging stations.

A level of spontaneity is lost with the limited range of the electric vehicle, but the article speaks to adjusting routines and expectations: slowing down, having patience, and making use of the services and local highlights en route. This could be the start of a modern lodge movement

On the seventy-fifth anniversary the Alaska Highway, it's a relevant time to reflect on the evolution of this significant route in North America. *Beyond Mile Zero* is a timely release and exploration. It is a history book that bleeds into the present. The book also feels quintessentially northern and comforting. For these reasons, it is an essential part of any northern book collection.

Entertaining, beautifully photographed, and poignant, *Beyond Mile Zero* is much more than portraits of lodge owners. It's a journey through northern culture.

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