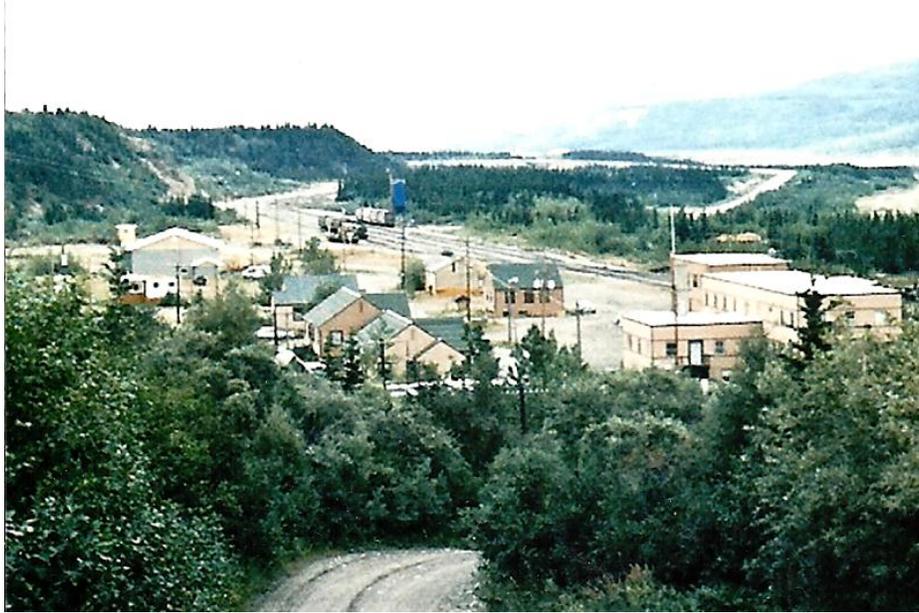


HEALY HISTORY

By Beverly Hall Mitchell



Healy



Suntrana

PREFACE

In the interior of Alaska, 100 miles south of Fairbanks, lies the beautiful Healy Valley. The Healy River flows into the Nenana River. Most maps call it Healy Creek, but locals have always called it a river. In 1919, a railroad construction camp sprang up near the confluence of the two rivers. It became known as Healy Fork. Suntrana, a coal mining camp, developed four miles up the Healy River.

Neither Healy Fork nor Suntrana still exist, but I had the pleasure of living in both. I knew some of the old-timers, and I enjoyed listening to their stories about the early years. When I was in college, I wrote a paper about the history of the area. There are no public records and none of the early residents left journals, so my first paper contained a few facts and a lot of local tradition. It also contained many errors.

I've done more research; I've revised my paper; and I want to share what I've learned. I added the final chapter at the request of several individuals who read earlier versions of my manuscript. It isn't really history, but it will give you an idea of what life was like in the valley during the Sixties.

Healy is still a great community, but things are much different now. There are more residents, it is less isolated, and tourism makes a major contribution to the local economy. I wonder what the sourdoughs would think if they could see the valley now?

THE FIRST SETTLERS

Hunting is a favorite pastime in Healy each fall, and it seems that tradition may have begun more than 11,000 years ago. Archaeologists found ancient artifacts that suggest prehistoric humans hunted in the area. They didn't live there, but they camped on a terrace above Dry Creek, just west of present day Healy.¹

The Healy Valley was still uninhabited wilderness when two separate survey parties passed through there in 1902. Alfred H. Brooks, accompanied by six men and twenty horses, explored the area for the U. S. Geological Survey.² William G. Atwood, a civil engineer working for the Alaska Central Railway, led a crew seeking the best route for a proposed rail line.³ These men saw large coal deposits and an abundance of wildlife, but no humans.

Felix Pedro found gold near Fairbanks that same year (1902). The rush was on and prospectors soon claimed all likely spots. Latecomers spread out and started seeking gold in other locations. The first prospectors explored the Healy Valley about 1904. They found some gold, but not much. Most of them moved on, but a few liked what they saw and decided to stay.

One of the first settlers was a Texan named John Colvin. Local tradition says he arrived in 1904. Perhaps that is the year he made his first trip to the valley, but it does not appear he settled there until later. He built a cabin on the west bank of the Nenana River, directly across from the mouth of the Healy River. Colvin became a market hunter. Commercial hunting was illegal, but that law was not strictly enforced. Later, Colvin moved to a cabin about five miles up the Healy River. In 1958, he took a trip to Texas. While there, the 75-year-old bachelor surprised everyone by marrying his childhood sweetheart.⁴

John Popovich, an Austrian immigrant, arrived about the same time as Colvin. He lived in a cabin up Lignite Creek. He made a living selling moonshine to the gold miners at Ferry and Kantishna. In 1918, the Bone Dry Law made it illegal to manufacture, distribute, or sell alcohol, but that didn't stop Popovich or his customers.⁵

Another early resident was James Paul Sherman. J.P. had a gold mine on the Totatlanika River, about 20 miles northeast of present day Healy. He made regular trips to Fairbanks for supplies, and while there he met and married Agnes Eckert. Agnes gave birth to two daughters, Irene and Jeanette.

On February 15, 1913, J. P. left Agnes and the girls at their Totatlanika cabin when he went to Fairbanks on business. After he left, Agnes regretted not going with him and decided to try to catch up with him. She set out pulling the two girls on a sled. Irene was two, and Jeanette was two months old. Night came, and Agnes became lost. She eventually found her way back to the cabin, but the baby had frozen to death.⁶

Agnes had a baby boy in 1916. That fall, they rented a cabin on Fifth Avenue in Fairbanks. On November 28, 1916, tragedy struck again. Jack Hansen was walking down the street at about two p.m. when he noticed the cabin was on fire. He heard children screaming, and he rushed in to save them.

At the time of the fire, Irene (age 5), her baby brother, and a young neighbor named Mary Porter were home alone. The fire went out and they started to get cold, so Irene tried to restart it. In the process, she caught the cabin on fire. They tried to get out, but the door was locked. The children were rushed to the hospital, but the baby died soon after arrival. Mary died the next day.⁷ Irene survived, but she was severely burned and had to undergo many surgeries.

The Board of Children's Guardians (social services) took custody of Irene, and she spent a few years at the mission in Nenana. She also spent time in a Seattle hospital. J. P and Agnes

moved to Healy, and they homesteaded 80 acres where the power plant now stands. In addition to mining and trapping, J. P. also ran a fish wheel. It is unclear whether Agnes died or if the couple separated, but Irene lived with her father. She married and had a son, but the marriage ended in divorce. J. P. sold the homestead about 1960 and moved to Talkeetna. Irene moved to Fairbanks. Her face was badly scarred, she dressed like a bag lady, and she swore like a sailor. Some people shunned her, but many others became her friend. She would talk to anyone who would listen.

In 1913, four men took two boatloads of equipment and supplies up the Healy River and began mining on Home Creek (now Gagnon Creek). In the first four years, they got about \$4,000 worth of gold.⁸ That was not enough to make a large mine profitable, so they moved on. Two partners with modest expectations took over. Joe Gagnon was from Canada and John Fern was from Norway.

The two men supplemented their income by cutting logs for the coal mine and working seasonally at McKinley Park. In addition to working as a guide and packer, Fern also entertained tourists with his banjo and guitar.⁹ In later years, Fern was a wrangler for a big game guide named Bill Waugaman. He kept Waugaman's horses at Squaw Point near Suntrana. He was still working there when he died in 1961.¹⁰

In 1914, the U. S. Congress passed two acts that would change the Healy Valley forever. The Alaska Railway Act authorized the construction of a government railroad to Fairbanks. The Coal Leasing Act opened federal lands for mining. The railroad route was chosen to access the coalfields. The railroad needed coal for their steam engines, and freighting the coal to market guaranteed the railroad would have a steady income. Healy began its existence as a community in 1919 when railroad construction and coal mining began in the area.

THE RAILROAD

The cost of living in Alaska was ridiculous! The supply never met the demand. That was particularly true in the interior. What Alaska needed was a railroad. The Alaska Central Railway began constructing a railroad at Seward in 1903. They intended to continue north and pass through the Healy Valley to the Tanana River near present day Nenana. They encountered many obstacles and the company went bankrupt. They reorganized as the Alaska Northern Railway, but this attempt also failed.¹

Alaskans appealed to the U.S. government for help, and Congress agreed to construct and operate a railroad from Seward to Fairbanks. Construction on the government railroad began in 1915, but they did not begin working in the Healy area until 1919. A construction camp sprang up near Colvin's cabin at Mile 358.

In March 1920, Special Agent C.H. Calhoun headed up the Nenana River to take the U.S. Census. He found about 200 people living in the Healy Valley. Many of them worked for the Alaska Engineering Commission, some worked for the Healy River Coal Corporation, and a few were prospectors and trappers.

Most of the residents were men. There were only seven women and seven children. The majority of the residents (73%) were foreign immigrants from 18 different countries.² Nearly all of them were new to the area. If the census had been taken a year earlier, Calhoun could have counted the residents on his fingers.

When Calhoun arrived at Camp Healy, he saw two large warehouses, a barn, a blacksmith shop, a mess hall, and a bunkhouse that all belonged to the Alaska Engineering Commission (AEC).³ The Healy River Coal Corporation had an office, tippie, and a bunker there. Visitors could stay at either the Healy River Roadhouse or the Singleton Hotel. Other businesses included a restaurant, laundry, bakery, and shoe shop. The buildings stood in a row facing the train tracks.

The AEC was an Interior Department agency run by the U.S. Army Engineers. They contracted with "station men" to do preliminary clearing, grading, and excavating. They employed laborers to lay the tracks and bridges. Work crews starting in Anchorage and Nenana worked towards each other. In 1920, the gap between the north and south ends of steel stretched nearly 100 miles. Horse-drawn wagons and bobsleds transported freight and passengers between Healy and Hurricane.

Another construction camp was located at Mile 356. Kestly Camp was mostly tents, but it had a hospital. The hospital was located there because the Nenana River Gorge was the most dangerous stretch of the entire project.

From April to June 1920, a severe flu epidemic swept the area and work virtually stopped. Ninety per cent of the residents became ill, and the few who remained healthy had to care for the sick. The flu caused many deaths in Fairbanks and Nenana that year, but fortunately none were reported in Healy.⁴

The federal government established the Healy Fork post office in August 1921. It was located in the Healy River Roadhouse and Anthony Lyden, proprietor of the roadhouse, was appointed the first postmaster.⁵ Healy Fork was named after the river, but no one is certain who the river was named after. Some people say it was named after John J. Healy, president of the North American Trading and Transportation Company. He may have grubstaked some of the early prospectors.

Another theory is that it was named after Michael A. Healy, a captain in the U. S. Revenue Cutter Service. The Nenana River was originally called the Cantwell River. Lieutenant Henry T. Allen named it after John C. Cantwell of the Revenue Cutter Service.⁶ Perhaps he named the Healy River for Cantwell's coworker. The name Healy Fork was often shortened to Healy, but it was not officially changed until 1968.

The crowd cheered when the first train from Seward arrived on February 5, 1922.⁷ It left Seward three days earlier and overnights in Anchorage, Curry (Mile 248.5), and McKinley Park. There was not a bridge at Nenana, but it was completed later that year. On July 15, 1923, President Warren Harding passed through Healy on his way to Nenana where he drove the golden spike at the dedication ceremony.

Most of the railroad construction camps closed, but Healy Fork became a permanent railroad station. Freight trains overnights in Healy. The passenger train overnights at Curry, but it stopped for passengers to eat lunch in Healy. Healy Fork had a population of 36 in 1930 and 41 in 1939.⁸

Two of the residents were Bill and Bertha Greene, a congenial couple from the east coast. Bertha was 13 years older than Bill. Bertha was the station agent, and Bill was the telegraph operator. They lived in Healy about 15 years before transferring to Curry.

The railroad built a hotel, and Mr. and Mrs. Mark Bertelson managed it. Mark was from Denmark. Serving the train crews and passengers kept the Bertelsons busy. Some days they served lunch to as many as 200 people. A patron gave the following description:

A favorite memory of one who has stopped there is the way the place looked around the mid-winter holidays. The crowd surged in, women in furs, in mukluks, in suits and silk stockings; families, college boys and girls, men; everyone is hungry; trays are loaded with soup and sandwiches and dessert and coffee. There is the pleasant chatter of knives and forks, and the sound of talk and laughter. In a corner, a lighted tree glitters with ornaments and apples, and frosted cakes, and decorated oranges. There is music from the radio, and a canary sends out his piercingly sweet song. In the windows narcissus and begonias in bloom deny the cold outside. It is, all in all, such a scene of comfort and cheer that surprises a stranger come to the Alaska wilderness in mid-winter.⁹

In May 1941, fire destroyed the hotel. Luckily, it was a calm day, and the fire did not spread.¹⁰ The Bertelsons lost nearly everything they owned. They moved into the old mess hall and remodeled it. It became the hotel for a few years. Mark died in 1943,¹¹ and Henrietta moved to Arizona.

When the railroad built a hotel, the Singleton Hotel became a store. The store was cheerful and warm. Shelves and counters displayed the merchandise, and a cubbyhole in the corner served as the post office. Railroad workers stayed in the bunkhouse, and they ate at the hotel. After dinner, they gathered at the store to visit around a huge, pot-bellied stove.¹²

One of the regulars at the store was a man named Bill Dickinson. "Hobo Bill" worked for the railroad during construction. Later, he did some trapping and occasionally worked as a laborer. He lived in a wall tent under the railroad bridge, and he would go to the store to warm up. Bill was an avid reader, and he was considered the resident expert on politics. He remained in the valley more than 40 years.¹³

Paddy Rogan, a railroad employee, also spent most evenings at the store. Paddy was a good storyteller. He spoke with an Irish accent, and he had no qualms about exaggerating a bit. He told one story about a time he was prospecting with a partner near Ferry. He was down in a 400-foot prospect hole when he got thirsty. His partner, Tennessee Joe, had just made some moonshine and he lowered a jug of it to Paddy.

Now Pat says, “Had I not tried to make a pig of myself this would have never happened, but instead of taking a drink and sending the mug back up in the bucket, I sat down there and drank like a real Irishman could and should. At first the hole began swinging and swaying around in vicious circles and then finally I fell out of that hole. Yup, the whole 400 feet. I was jest a leetle scratched and bruised up so I was sitting around the cabin trying to get my strength back, when one of them there Healy winds came up and blew all the dirt from that hole and it was a horrible sight in front of our cabin. Tennessee and I took a picture of the thing and sent it out to the News-Miner. A donut manufacturer from Chicago came to buy our hole for his factory, but this man went broke for the simple reason that it takes more dough to go around a big hole than around a small hole.”¹⁴

Andrew (Andro) Dragich emigrated from Austria in 1908 and lived in California a few years before moving to Alaska.¹⁵ When he first got to Healy, he ran a trap line, but from 1933 to 1937 Dragich was the storekeeper and postmaster.¹⁶ He then built a roadhouse at Lignite where he had several greenhouses and a large garden. Healy did not have a beer parlor then, so Dragich opened one at the roadhouse.

Anna Shannon, a Swedish immigrant, became the storekeeper after Dragich. In January 1925, a diphtheria epidemic broke out in Nome. Diphtheria serum was rushed from Anchorage to Nenana by train and then it was relayed from Nenana to Nome by dogsled. Anna and her husband “Wild Bill” lived in Nenana at the time. It was 10 p.m., and 60 degrees below 0, when Bill and his dogs left on the first leg of the relay. Bill carried the precious cargo 60 miles to Tolovana where he handed it off to another musher. The “Great Race of Mercy” was big news throughout the United States, and the mushers became heroes. Bill spent the next year touring the U.S. telling about the experience. Anna and seven of their dogs accompanied him.¹⁷

After returning to Alaska, the Shannons mined in Kantishna for several years. In the spring of 1934, Bill and Anna set out on a prospecting trip over Rainy Pass. They expected to be gone three weeks, but the weather warmed up, the ice melted, and they were not able to return by the same route. For three months, they fought hunger, exhaustion, and mosquitoes. Anna estimated they walked 600 miles before they got home.¹⁸

Bill disappeared in 1937, and Anna believed a grizzly bear killed him. She was left alone in a cabin in the wilderness. She heard about a possible job at the store in Healy, so she went there. At first, Anna worked for Dragich, but she later purchased the store. Anna kept the place spotless, and she did not have a spittoon. She made the men go outside to spit. Anna served as the Healy Fork postmistress from October 1937 to May 1944.¹⁹ That is when she married Dragich and moved to his homestead. They retired to California about 1947.

World War II caused a severe labor shortage because some workers joined the military and others left for better paying jobs. At the same time, traffic on the railroad increased. The military used trains to ship personnel, equipment, and supplies. It became necessary for the army

to assign soldiers to work for the railroad to keep the trains running. Members of the 714th Railway Operating Battalion lived in Quonset huts about one-half mile northwest of Healy for two years.²⁰

Paddy Rogan told a humorous story about when soldiers were stationed in Healy:

Healy was a sort of Siberia and the soldiers wanting to go home played insane. Now there were three types of these fellows. First there were the real weak minded that the loneliness had taken a real hold of. Then there was the second type who were playing at being nuts in order to get home and finally the third group who were making fun of the first two types and it was pretty hard to tell them apart. For instance one guy had a block of wood on a dog chain. He called the block of wood Fido and insisted that Fido accompany him at all times.

It finally got so bad that the captain asked to interview the most wild outlandish acts made around the camp at Healy and within a few days was informed of a fellow who insisted on sitting on a toilet seat and fished in the next bowl. The captain soon appeared in the latrine with his own fishing outfit and calmly sat down facing the Private and asked, "Having any luck, fellow?" The soldier immediately left and spread the story around the camp that the captain was cracked.²¹

Most of the buildings sat near the ledge of the riverbank and more of it crumbled away each year. Colvin's cabin was "anchored by cable and propped by posts," so the wind would not blow it over the bank.²² In 1946, the railroad built a new hotel and depot near the Quonset huts. They soon built a bunkhouse, homes, and other buildings at the new site. The original town site was abandoned and eventually torn down.

In May of 1952, the roundhouse burned, destroying some locomotives.²³ The steam engines were replaced by diesel engines. Healy did not have a local newspaper, but some news made the Fairbanks papers. In 1955, they reported that The Alaska Railroad had discontinued management of the Healy Hotel. The railroad still owned it, but they leased it out to private contractors. The next year, the paper reported that freight trains no longer overnighted in Healy. In July 1958, a month long forest fire destroyed 50,000 acres.²⁴

Every spring, kids don their breakup boots and splash through puddles. Imagine the surprise the Healy kids had in 1957 when one of them found a \$100 bill in the mud! They hunted for more treasure, and they found a total of \$1200. No one knew where the money came from, so they decided it was "finders, keepers".²⁵

Shortly before midnight on September 21, 1958, a freight train derailed near Lignite. A wheel on one of the cars broke, and it swerved off the track. Seventeen other cars followed, ripping up the rails and roadbed for a quarter mile. Several cars tipped over and spilled their contents. A tank car split open and aviation fuel spewed out. Fortunately, none of the five-man crew was injured.²⁶

Although the railroad played a significant role in Healy's history, it tells only half of the story. Coalmines were equally important to the region's development.

COAL MINING

Coal seams were clearly visible to anyone passing through the Healy valley, and as early as 1908, residents of Fairbanks were discussing how they could get access to the coal.¹ They desperately needed it, but the coal fields were not available for lease and there was no way to transport the coal if they were. In March 1914, Congress agreed to open the land for mining and to construct the railroad. It was four years before the land was actually available for lease.

Commercial coal mining began in the Lignite area in 1918. The Robert Burns Mine furnished coal to the AEC. The coal was mined with picks and shovels. It was then loaded into horse-drawn sleighs and shipped to Nenana. The tracks reached the mine in April 1919 and then coal could be shipped by train.²

The Healy River Coal Corporation (HRCC) opened a mine at Healy in 1919. Their office was at Healy Fork, and they mined nearby. Fairbanks residents rejoiced when the first load of coal reached them that winter. It sold for \$9 a ton, delivered.³ In 1921, HRCC moved their operation four miles up the Healy River. Horse-drawn sleighs transported the coal to Healy where it was loaded on the train. At Nenana, it was unloaded and transferred to narrow-gauge cars so it could be shipped on to Fairbanks. At first coal could only be brought out when the rivers were frozen because there were no bridges.

Suntrana was the HRCC camp. Suntrana is an Athabascan word meaning, “burning hills”. The name is appropriate because spontaneous combustion causes the coal seams to catch fire, and it is common to see smoke coming from the hills. In 1922, the AEC completed a bridge across the Nenana River and a railroad spur to Suntrana.⁴

HRCC built a tippie at Suntrana to load coal into the train cars. They also built a bunkhouse, mess hall, power plant, and other buildings there. The bunkhouse had steam heat, indoor plumbing, a laundry room, and a rec room. Two men shared each dorm room. These buildings all stood on the north side of the river. On the south side of the river, there were homes for married employees and their families. A footbridge connected the two sides.

Austin E. “Cap” Lathrop became president and general manager of HRCC in 1924. Lathrop was a self-made millionaire who used his vision and wealth to develop the mine. Lathrop was a man of contrasts. Some people hated him and others loved him. He was known as a penny-pincher, but he was generous in giving to charities and anyone in need. He knew his employees personally and took an interest in them. He considered them family.

Lathrop enjoyed physical labor. Even though he owned five theatres, two radio stations, and a newspaper, he liked to work at the mine. He was still working there the day he died at age 84. On July 26, 1950, Lathrop was struck and killed by a loaded train car at Suntrana. His heirs sold his interests in the mine to a group of Anchorage investors. They changed the name to Suntrana Mining Company.⁵

Suntrana had a population of 61 in 1930 and 78 in 1939. Two of the residents were Genevieve Andre and Magdalena Martin, both Italian immigrants married to coal miners.⁶ The Territory of Alaska established one-room, eight-grade schools in Healy and Suntrana. These schools required a minimum of eight students to receive funding. In 1932, there were only six school-age children in Suntrana. Genevieve and Magdalena enrolled to learn English and boost enrollment.⁷

Occasionally, hiring preference was given to applicants that had school-age children. Some years there were not enough children to keep the school open, and children were taught at

home using correspondence courses. One dedicated scholar walked to Healy to school. In the winter, he skated to school on the frozen river.⁸

Coal production increased because of World War II, and the army assigned soldiers to work at the mine. Approximately 200 people lived in Suntrana during the war. The government paid the soldiers, but Lathrop insisted on paying them also. He did not want to take advantage of the cheap labor.⁹

In 1942, an explosion killed two men. The mineshaft was closed, and the bodies were never recovered.¹⁰ That may be why the military decided to diversify their supply of coal. They gave contracts to two new mines in the area. The Diamond Mine was located near Otto Lake, and the Usibelli-Sanford Mine was located about two miles upstream from Suntrana. Both of them were strip mines. They used tractors to uncover the coal and load it into trucks.

The Diamond contractors, Lytle and Green, built a five-mile gravel road to transport coal from the mine site to Healy. There the coal was loaded on a train for shipment to Fairbanks. Most of the Diamond employees were from Iowa, and they lived in a bunkhouse at Healy.¹¹ There wasn't a lot to do in Healy, so sometimes the men entertained themselves by playing tricks on each other. For example:

The bull cook liked his booze and usually had a bottle hidden somewhere near his work. But some of the boys drained the liquor out of his quart bottle and substituted coal oil. When the bull cook came busting in and took a swig it nearly downed him, and he stomped downstairs of the Old Healy Hotel swearing that he would kill the man who did such a dastardly trick. Of course, everyone sympathized with him and began trying to run down the horrid criminal and they voted a duel with shot guns at 50 yards. The duel was arranged and they found a culprit who squealed and howled that he was scared to death of such a dangerous character as the bull cook. Besides, he was entirely innocent of the whole thing...but the crowd bragged up the bravery of the bull cook and forced the culprit to go through with it or face a certain lynching.

Everything was arranged: seconds, acting doctors and final judge. The duel took place out on the road in front of the hotel and the principals stood back to back with single barreled shotguns in their hands. At the count of ten, they marched thirty steps each. There was great excitement when they whirled and fired at each other. The bull cook was knocked flat by the kick of his shotgun. The culprit fell screaming, and his doctor ran and doused him with ketchup. The bull cook knew he was dead or at least filled full of buckshot, but he was told that he was just too tough for the shot to penetrate and that he had killed his opponent.

Everyone went to Lignite for some more celebrating and drinking and the bull-cook was somewhat shocked to find the culprit riding along in the same truck with him. The story was finally told in truth. One of the Diamond Coal miners had a reloader. He took the shot out of the 12 gauge shells, filled them with powder, and reloaded them. There was quite a kick due to heavy wadding but no harm done. Thus knocking the duelists down.¹²

Emil Usibelli, an Italian immigrant, went to work for HRCC in 1936. At first, he was an underground miner, but in 1938, he contracted with HRCC to supply the lumber they needed to support the tunnels. In 1943, Usibelli and a partner, Tad Sanford, opened a coalmine east of

Suntrana. Usibelli bought his partner out in 1948.¹³ At first, they had an office and bunkhouse at Suntrana, but about 1949 they established the Usibelli camp.

The Suntrana miners belonged to a union, but the Usibelli miners didn't. In 1952, the United Mine Workers organized a picket line, and miners from the Jonesville Mine near Palmer traveled to Suntrana to demonstrate. Local tradition says that some miners were beat up and some fires were set. There must be some truth to these stories, because Usibelli sued the United Mine Workers union for \$20 million. They claimed \$30,000 property damage. The additional damage included loss of business and potential loss of contracts.¹⁴ I don't know the results of this law suit, but Usibelli did go union.

There have been other mines in the area through the years. Arctic Coal was located at Lignite. Cripple Creek was located upstream from Usibelli. It later became the Vitro Mine. Cripple Creek had to pass through Usibelli property to get their coal to the railroad, and Usibelli refused to grant permission. After a heated discussion, Usibelli set up a rifle range with targets set up on one side of the road and the shooters on the other. In 1955, the Department of the Interior granted Cripple Creek a right-of-way through Usibelli property and closed the rifle range at the same time.

Two years later, Usibelli and Cripple Creek found themselves on the same side of a legal dispute. Suntrana Mining Company sued them for \$30,000 and a restraining order to stop them from dumping overburden into the Healy River. They claimed the overburden was filling the river and making them more vulnerable to floods.¹⁵

The court ruled in Suntrana's favor, but floods were common from the very beginning. Fires were also frequent occurrences. The worst fire was in August 1952. It destroyed most of the HRCC buildings, including the tippie, powerhouse, mess hall, and offices.

In 1960, Usibelli purchased the Suntrana Mine and the two operations combined. In 1961, a cave-in killed one man and injured two others. The company ceased underground mining after that, but it was mainly because the underground mines had been mined out. Surface mining was also more economical.

Emil Usibelli was killed in an accident on March 27, 1964. His son Joe took over and continued to expand the mine. Emil's grandson, Joe Jr., is now president of the company.

Many individuals have worked at the mines over the years. Good wages and comfortable housing lured employees, but after a few years they moved on. Andrew "Sarge" Costa and Ralph "Buck" Buckholtz were two exceptions. They came as soldiers during the war, and they continued working there after they were discharged. They both stayed until they retired.

Buck was quite a character. He dressed in greasy overalls and worn out boots. He had wire around the toes of his boots to keep the soles from falling off. He spoke in a loud, booming voice. Buck was very frugal, but he was sometimes careless with cash. He used \$100 bills for bookmarks. One day, Buck was concerned because some old lockers had been discarded. He went to the dump to retrieve some gloves he had left in a locker and the \$1,000 he had placed in one of the gloves.

Buck worked as a "grease monkey", but when he applied for a passport he called himself a "lubrication engineer". He used his passport to go to the Olympic Games in Australia (1956) and Japan (1964). He could afford to travel first class, but he chose to work his way overseas on a freight ship.

One day, Buck's supervisor reprimanded him and it made him mad. He squirted the supervisor with a grease gun he was holding. The supervisor promptly fired him, but when he

told the office what had happened they said he couldn't fire him. Buck had not drawn a paycheck for several years, and they couldn't afford to pay him what they owed him.

The men worked at the mines, and the women worked in the home. Hunting, gardening, and berry picking were practical pastimes. Friends enjoyed getting together to dance or play cards, and community picnics were popular events. A free movie was shown each week.

At first, residents bought basic food items at the company store. After the store burned (1952), it became necessary to order all groceries. Many residents ordered in bulk from Seattle twice a year. Homemakers planned together. "I'll order a case of chocolate cake mixes if you'll order a case of yellow cake mixes, then we can split." Another important question was, "How many cases of toilet paper do you think I should order?"

These orders, sometimes weighing as much as 2,000 pounds, were shipped on a barge to Anchorage and then put on the train to Healy. Carrying a ton of food and supplies downstairs to the basement was quite a chore, but the shelves looked like a well-stocked store when they finished. About once a month, fresh produce and dairy products were ordered from Fairbanks. At first these were sent out on the train, but in later years they were sent by plane.

You could drive from Suntrana to Usibelli, but you could not drive to Healy. The road was more like a trail, and there was not a bridge to cross the river. The mine owned a 4 X 4 Dodge recon vehicle that had been modified to drive on the tracks. This vehicle was affectionately called "The Doodlebug", and it was used to pick up mail and passengers on train day. It was also used as a shuttle to the Healy Hotel on Saturday nights.

The Doodlebug had two bench seats that faced each other, and it held about 14 people. Some Saturdays, it had to take several trips. The Doodlebug was not allowed on the main track so they parked at the bottom of the hill and a footpath led to the hotel. Ladies in their party clothes tried not to get them dirty on the way up the hill. Drunks tried not to stumble on the way down.

You could not drive to Fairbanks. You had to go by plane or train. There were four trains a week; two went north and two went south. Unless there was a medical emergency, most people only went to Fairbanks once or twice a year. Pregnant women usually went to Fairbanks a few weeks before their due date and stayed at a hotel. Babies that decided to come early were born at home. One was born on the train on the way to town. The railroad gave her a free lifetime pass.

ODDS & ENDS

Not everyone worked for the railroad or the coal mines. Mary Brooker, a Swedish immigrant, was married to a gold miner. She was an excellent cook, and she fed others wherever they lived. At various times, she had restaurants in Nenana, McKinley, Kantishna, and Healy. In 1923, Mary built a hotel, store, and restaurant in Suntrana.¹

A widow named Mary Thompson moved near Suntrana in 1927. "Goat Mary" raised goats and chickens, and she sold milk and eggs to local residents. She also ran a beer parlor and a brothel. Prostitution was illegal, but it was common to find one near mining camps.

Sarge Costa often drove the Doodlebug, and in later years he joked about picking up a minister, a priest, and several prostitutes on payday weekends. He dropped the "ladies" off at the Goat Ranch and the men went on to Suntrana. Sarge's wife Jessie told about a time her first husband, a railroad section foreman, was called to the Goat Ranch because some of his crew were causing a disturbance. After several hours he had not returned, so Jessie went there and shot the chimney with a rifle. Several individuals, not all of them dressed, came running out of the building.²

One of the area's best-known residents, Frank Glasser, contracted with the railroad to haul freight and passengers between the "ends of steel" in 1920. In 1922, he helped Olaus Murie capture caribou in McKinley Park. Glasser ran a trap line on the Savage River from 1924-1937. His cabin was 18 miles from Healy, but he went there to shop and pick up his mail. He often stayed at the hotel. Glasser was friends with the Greenes and with John Colvin. He bred one of his malamutes to a wolf, and his first litter of half-breed pups was born in Colvin's cabin.³

Otto Lake was named after Otto Maki, an immigrant from Finland. He had a homestead there. He didn't name the lake. Residents of Healy called it "Finn's Lake" or "Otto's Lake" and the name stuck. Maki tended a flock of sheep for the Alaska Agricultural College for a few years. Maki lived on his homestead until the time of his death in 1969.⁴

The Agricultural College had another project in the area. Lee "Pop" Hollis raised Galloway cattle, yak, and a cross of the two species for the college. The yak seemed to thrive, but they were a nuisance. They ruined gardens and upset passing dog teams. They liked to seek refuge in the railroad tunnels, and they would not budge when a train came. The trainmen flashed their lights, blew the whistle, and even shot off fireworks with little success. Both projects were dropped because of the depression.⁵

After the yak were returned to Fairbanks, Pop went to work for the railroad. Pop and his wife Fern had three children. At first they lived in a cabin on Dry Creek, but after Pop lost the cabin in a poker game they built a home on leased land near the hotel. It was the only privately owned home in Healy. Most families lived in railroad housing. Fern served as postmistress from 1946-1964.⁶ The post office was located in their home. After they retired, they lived in Anchorage a few years before moving to Washington.

Carl Anderson, a Norwegian immigrant, came to the area in the 1920's. Anderson worked for Mt. McKinley Tourist and Transportation Company guiding pack trips into the park for a few years. He then became a well-known game guide. Anderson and his wife raised two children on their Lignite homestead. Berle Mercer bought the homestead in 1957, and he raised buffalo there.⁷

Reverend Bert Bingle never lived in the Healy Valley, but he made regular visits there for more than 20 years. Bingle, a Presbyterian minister, conducted church services in Healy, Suntrana, and several other communities along the rail belt. In Healy, they met in someone's

home. In Suntrana, they met at the rec hall. In 1952, Bingle purchased the Diamond Coal Company bunkhouse in Healy to use as a church. He paid \$200 for the building and leased the property for \$12 a year. The summer of 1955, the local teenagers helped him build a little log church in Suntrana.⁸ A Catholic Church was built in Suntrana a few years later.

When Alfred Brooks reported on his 1902 expedition, he suggested the possibility of building a power plant at Healy.⁹ The idea was discussed many times through the years. Golden Valley Electric Association (GVEA) finally built one in 1967.

The railroad bridge was planked in 1969, and a separate bridge was completed in 1971. Suntrana residents could finally drive to Healy! That made it possible for the state to consolidate the grade schools and establish a high school. Six seniors graduated from the Healy-Suntrana School in May 1970. That first year, they met in the Suntrana School. The next year they attended the new Tri-Valley School.

Beginning in 1965, it was possible to drive a car from Healy to Fairbanks. However, there was no bridge at Nenana. You could drive on the ice in the winter or take a ferry in the summer, but you could not go in spring or fall. If you wanted to drive to Anchorage, you had to go through Fairbanks, Delta, and Glenallen. The Anchorage-Fairbanks (now Parks) Highway was completed in 1971.

After the highway was completed, Healy was no longer isolated. Most people driving the Parks Highway passed right on by without detouring to visit Healy. However, in August 1976, a motorcycle gang traveling from Anchorage to Fairbanks decided to stop at the Healy Hotel. While they were there, they got into an argument with some railroad workers. Several shots were fired and three people were injured.¹⁰

In 1978, Usibelli leased land from the railroad to establish the Tri-Valley subdivision. They closed the mining camps of Suntrana and Usibelli. They sold the houses for \$1, but the purchasers had to pay the expense of moving them to the new subdivision. GVEA employees were living in trailers near the power plant. Some of them chose to build in the new subdivision and others built at Otto Lake.

In 1985, the state of Alaska bought The Alaska Railroad from the U. S. government. That October, they auctioned off the entire town of Healy! The successful bidders moved their buildings to the subdivision. Little remains at Suntrana, Usibelli, or Healy Fork. Those communities are gone, but not forgotten. Those who lived there remember them fondly.

MEMORIES

I'll never forget my first trip to the Healy Valley. My dad went to work at Usibelli in November 1961. He temporarily lived in the bunkhouse, but then my mom and brother Butch joined him. I was reluctant to move to "the bush". I was a seventh grader at Main Jr. High in Fairbanks, and a one-room, eight-grade school sounded boring. My parents agreed to let me stay in Fairbanks to finish the school year. I lived with my sister and her husband.

You couldn't drive from Fairbanks to Healy in those days. You had to travel by train or plane. I wanted to spend spring break with my family so on a sunny spring day in 1962; I boarded a small Fairbanks Air Service plane for a flight to Usibelli. I had never flown in a plane before, so I felt a mixture of fear and excitement. I gazed out the window and marveled at the beauty of the mountains and the vastness of the terrain.

It was a short flight, and we landed at a gravel airstrip near Usibelli. It was a beautiful location, but there wasn't much there. I saw about a dozen buildings, and some huge trucks. Dad met my plane, and he pointed out the school and the bunkhouse. We went into the mess hall for some strawberry shortcake.

There were a few houses in Usibelli, but most of the families lived in Suntrana. Mom had warned me that Suntrana wasn't much of a town, but that was an understatement. A row of ten houses faced the river. They were all the same size, they had the same floor plan, and they all had corrugated metal siding. The company rented them to their employees for \$40 a month. A few trailers and cabins were scattered among them. We lived in one of the cabins. It was smaller than the houses, but it had more charm. We only paid \$25 a month for rent. There were two churches, but there were no regular church services. Reverend Bingle had retired, but he still visited occasionally.

Whenever I smell coal burning, I think of Suntrana. All of the homes had coal furnaces. The coal was free, but you had to carry the coal in and the ashes out. If you were going to be gone in the winter, you had to get someone to keep the fire going so the pipes wouldn't freeze. One time a neighbor boy tended the fire for us. He must have filled the firebox, because when we got home we saw that our Christmas candles had melted and our linoleum had bubbles in it.

We also cooked on a coal stove. Controlling the temperature was a challenge. A cake might take 20 minutes or it might take 45, depending on how hot the fire was. We had free electricity, but the power fluctuated a great deal. The lights would go dim, and my record player would slow down and speed up as I listened to my 45's (vinyl records).

The school stood on a hill behind our home, and I saw some kids go there with kites. I went there to get acquainted. There were six or seven kids of various ages. One of the boys was Rick Mitchell. I learned that he lived in the house next door, and that our moms were good friends.

KFAR had installed a television translator the previous summer, but only a few families owned a TV. We were one of the lucky ones. We only got one channel and the reception was poor, but Rick's family liked to come over in the evening and watch TV with us. Rick's step dad was a baker, and they usually brought doughnuts or cinnamon rolls when they came.

When spring break was over, I flew back to Fairbanks and looked forward to returning in May. This time, I traveled by train. The trip to Healy took four hours. We passed a few homesteads and stopped in Nenana to pick up passengers, but I was amazed at the lack of civilization. I liked the rocking motion of the train. I went to the dining car to get a can of pop.

The restroom had a sign that said, "Do not flush when standing at station." I thought that was funny, but gross.

We arrived at the Healy depot and went into the Healy Hotel for a hamburger. Hamburgers cost a dollar, and milkshakes cost fifty cents. I thought that was outrageous! The railroad owned the whole town, and all of the buildings were painted a boring brown. In addition to the depot and hotel, there was a bunkhouse, recreation hall, a school, and a few houses.

We walked across the tracks and down a hill to reach the Doodlebug. We didn't have much baggage, so we only had to make one trip. Sometimes, when we had done a lot of shopping, we had to take several trips up and down the hill.

I never got bored that summer. On nice days, we played softball or went on hikes. On rainy days, we played board games. Every Friday night, there was a free movie at the Usibelli School. Occasionally, we would sleep out in tents or dance in someone's basement.

Healy, our favorite destination, was four miles away. We often walked there. Once, we had to turn around because a bear stood on the tracks. Another time, the train came as we were crossing the railroad bridge. Even without the train, crossing the bridge was scary. You had to step on the ties, and they were far apart in some places. The wind blew hard, and you could see the river rushing below. When we got to Healy, we would buy a milkshake and watch the passenger train go through. We usually caught a ride home on the Doodlebug.

There were no stores in Suntrana. There was a commissary in Usibelli that carried a few things the miners needed like cigarettes and work gloves. Sometimes we would walk there to get a can of pop or a candy bar.

More often, we would just watch for the Doodlebug. The Doodlebug didn't only drive on the tracks; it could also drive on the road. They used it to meet the plane and deliver the groceries. We took note of where it went, and we'd visit those houses later that day. We knew they would have goodies to share. We also knew what day Marie Lamb did her baking. I don't know what I liked the most, the smell of her kitchen or the taste of her fresh baked bread with homemade raspberry jam.

On Father's Day, a group of us went on a church picnic. It would have been simpler to have our picnic closer to home, but it would not have been as exciting. The railroad added a passenger car to the coal train, and we all piled on for the trip to Healy. I got to ride in the caboose! In Healy, we caught the noon train to McKinley Park. We ate our picnic lunch at Morino Campground and hiked to Horseshoe Lake. The northbound train left for Healy at 4:30. Today, residents think nothing of going to the park and they don't realize what a big deal it was then.

The weather that summer was mostly warm and sunny but in August, it started to rain. It kept raining until the river flooded and washed out all the bridges. We couldn't go to Usibelli or Healy. We couldn't even go to the business side of Suntrana. A friend said, "Wouldn't it be fun if our mom's had been checking the mail when the footbridge went out?" I didn't argue with him, but I was glad my mom was home.

The tundra and trees changed colors, and there was a chill in the air. Mom and I picked lots of berries. We made jam from the raspberries. We froze the blueberries and cranberries for baking. Dad shot a moose. We all worked together to butcher it, wrap it, and put it in the freezer.

Fall meant it was time to go back to school. One teacher taught all eight grades. Half of the building served as our classroom, and the other half was the teacher's apartment. Twenty-

two students were enrolled in the Suntrana school that year.¹ There were three eighth graders, but I was ahead of the others so I spent most of my time teaching the younger students.

We enjoyed sledding and ice-skating. A woman named Bertha started a girl's club. We met at her house once a week and she taught us to cook and to sew. I earned a lot of money babysitting that winter. Nearly every Saturday night, people piled into the Doodlebug and went to the Healy Hotel to party. I babysat for two or three families at a time, and I got \$1 per hour per family.

Suntrana was protected by hills on three sides. That meant we did not get the "Healy Hurricanes", but it also meant we spent most of the winter in the shade. I'll never forget the joy I felt when the sun returned in the spring.

Eleven students were enrolled in the Usibelli School, and twelve students were enrolled at Healy.² The Mercer kids were home schooled at their Lignite ranch. At the end of the school year, we invited them all to participate in a track meet at the Suntrana School. The ribbons we ordered did not arrive, so I made some out of crepe paper. We had a good time, and it became a yearly tradition.

My second summer was as fun as the first, and I didn't want to leave. There wasn't a high school, so some students studied by correspondence and some attended Sheldon Jackson, a boarding school in Sitka. My parents thought it would be better if I lived with relatives in Wyoming during the school year and only spend summers at home. It was hard, but I think it was the right decision.

Only one family in Suntrana had a phone. Mom used their phone to call me a few times, but hearing her voice made me homesick. I loved getting Mom's letters. She kept me up on the local gossip. One letter told about delivering a baby. Mrs. Murphy, the schoolteacher's wife, had gone into labor early and the weather was too bad for a plane to fly to Fairbanks. Mom was happy to assist with the birth. Another time, Mom wrote about the Good Friday earthquake. There wasn't any damage in Suntrana, but they felt it. The big news in that letter was that Emil Usibelli had been killed when he was run over by a scraper.

My Alaskan summers were the best part of the year. One year Donna Ritter (Evans) bought a Honda 90. We used that for our trips to Healy and Usibelli. The next year, Dad gave me an old jeep to drive. One day, I drove a bunch of friends to Usibelli. The road was also the airstrip. I glanced back to see if a plane was coming, and I didn't see or hear one. I was shocked when a plane landed right in front of us. Apparently, the kids piled in the back of the jeep blocked my view and made more noise than the plane.

Dad bought a cabin up the Healy River. He also bought the old Doodlebug, and turned it into a hunting rig. Dad took six of us girls to the cabin in the Doodlebug. He dropped us off and picked us up a week later. The cabin didn't have plumbing, so we carried water from the river to wash up and do dishes. There was an outhouse out back. We hiked, played games, talked, and laughed. We even enjoyed the cooking and cleaning since there were no moms to supervise.

Looking back, I'm surprised our parents let us do that. The world was a safer place back then. We did get spooked once. We could hear something in the entryway. When we got brave enough to look, we saw a porcupine eating the broom handle.

In July 1966, we talked my mom into taking a few of us to Fairbanks for Golden Days. It was illegal and unsafe to drive a vehicle across the railroad bridge at Healy, but we didn't let that stop us. After the coal train had departed, we drove to the bridge and bumped our way across. The gravel road was rough, and there were lots of curves. We took the ferry across the river at Nenana. It was a long trip, but we had a great time.

Dad quit his job at Usibelli and went to work at Clear Air Force base. We had to give up our company house in Suntrana, so we bought the Hollis house in Healy. It was the only privately owned home in Healy. We leased the land from the railroad for \$25 a year. Some people called Healy "Brown Town", but our house was a bright yellow. Dad commuted the 40 miles to the base. I still enjoyed watching the train go through, but now I could just wait to go out when I heard the whistle.

All the time we lived in Suntrana, my dad wrote letters trying to get permission to plank the railroad bridge. We had moved from Suntrana when he finally got what he wanted. The railroad bridge was planked in 1969. Rick and I were married on September 20, 1970 in the little log church in Suntrana. We had our reception in the Healy Rec Hall. We wouldn't have been able to do that if they hadn't planked the railroad bridge.

My mom's pet project was getting a high school. She wrote more letters than my dad did. She also passed petitions. By the time Healy got a high school, we had moved to Anderson and Mom started lobbying for a high school there.

Rick worked for Usibelli and we lived in Suntrana in the early 70's. We left for a while, but we returned to the valley in 1983. Rick worked for GVEA, and we lived in the subdivision. One fall day in 1985, we gathered with the rest of the community in front of the Healy Hotel when the railroad auctioned off the whole town. I remember it as being a cold, gloomy day, but I am not sure about that. Maybe that was just how I was feeling.

They auctioned off the houses, the depot, and the rec hall. No one bid on the hotel. I don't know if it was because it would be hard to move or if it was a silent protest. It did sell later, and it was moved to the highway. "Going, going, gone" didn't just apply to the buildings. It was the end of an era.

HEALY HISTORY TIMELINE

- 1902- Alfred Brooks explored the area for USGS
- 1904- First prospectors arrived
- 1914- US government authorized construction of a railroad to Fairbanks and opened federal land for coal mining
- 1919- Railroad construction and coal mining began in Healy area
- 1921- Healy Fork Post Office established & Suntrana mining camp opened
- 1923- Railroad completed
- 1930- Healy population 36, Suntrana population 61
- 1941- Healy Hotel burned
- 1942- Coal mine explosion
- 1943- Soldiers stationed at Healy and Suntrana, Usibelli Coal Mine opened
- 1946- New hotel and depot, Healy relocated
- 1952- Fires at Healy and Suntrana
- 1961- Usibelli bought Suntrana mine, cave-in
- 1965- Road open to Fairbanks
- 1967- GVEA power plant
- 1969- Schools consolidated, high school established
- 1971- Road open to McKinley and Anchorage
- 1978- Tri-valley Subdivision opened, Usibelli & Suntrana camps closed
- 1985- Healy sold at auction.

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