

THE DOCTOR, THE PUBLISHER AND THE CURMUDGEON:

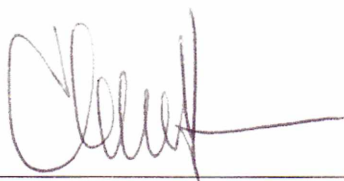
HOW PERSONALITIES, POLITICS AND THE PRESS

SET THE STAGE FOR ALASKA STATEHOOD

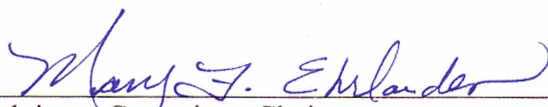
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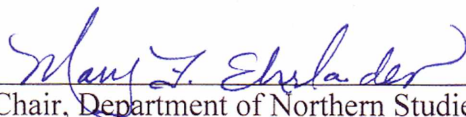
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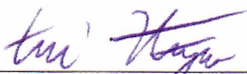


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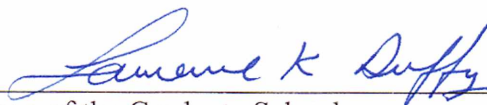


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THE DOCTOR, THE PUBLISHER AND THE CURMUDGEON:
HOW PERSONALITIES, POLITICS AND THE PRESS
SET THE STAGE FOR ALASKA STATEHOOD

A
THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about Alaska's struggle for statehood in 1959. But before there was a unified push for statehood, before World War II changed the face of Alaska forever and people such as Bob Atwood, Bill Egan and Bob Bartlett fought the good fight, there was a "perfect storm" of personalities, politics and press coverage that prepared Alaska for what would become its greatest triumph. This thesis examines the lives, motives and politics of Territorial Governor John Troy, Territorial Governor Ernest Gruening and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. Their individual vendettas, drive and quests for power directly influenced conditions in the Alaska Territory that would lead it to become a state. Along the way, the press corps, notably the *Juneau Empire*, held sway over the population and used partisanship and agenda setting to keep statehood boosters at bay for more than a decade.

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of June 30, 1958, Lee Jordan sat in the composing room in the back shop of the *Anchorage Daily Times*. He had seen nearly 10 years setting type and putting together pages for the newspaper, yet no day crackled with this kind of anticipation. He was a long way from his parents' printing shop in Birmingham, Alabama. He was a long way from where he thought he'd be when he told the Army "anywhere but Alaska. I can't stand the cold."¹ But as it did with so many others, the place got under Jordan's skin. Now he didn't want to live anywhere else.

Though it was the end of June, the temperature was a crisp 56 degrees, not that the weather was much on people's minds this Monday. For many, if not most, Alaskans, the day's priority was news, *any news*, from Washington, D.C.

At the *Anchorage Daily Times*, the newsroom Teletype hammered away. Most employees were "sitting around waiting to see what would happen," Jordan remembers. Fewer than 20 people staffed the whole operation. A 12-page *Times* was a big deal. The newspaper was usually eight pages. But this day was going to be one of the biggest news days in Alaska history.

Finally the news reached the *Times* office: It was official. The Alaska statehood bill had passed the Senate. The editor asked Jordan for the largest type size available, something big to run on the front page of a special edition. The six-inch-tall letters Jordan dug up were a "Doomsday Type," he recalled. The editor suggested "We're

¹ Lee Jordan, interview by author, typed notes, Anchorage, Ak., January 2008.

#49!” But that was too long to fit across the page. Jordan’s compromise read simply “WE’RE IN.”

In downtown Anchorage, the Elks Club hung a massive American flag and the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous queen climbed a fire truck ladder and added a 49th star. In Fairbanks, the Shake ‘n Steak restaurant advertised the “Move Over Texas Special,” offering 50 percent off all dinners — a nod to the fact that Texas, previously the largest state in the union, was less than half the size of Alaska.² Residents from Nome to Anchorage to Skagway lit up the night sky with celebratory bonfires.

The newspaper headlines on June 30, 1958 marked the end of Alaska’s long struggle to become the 49th star on the U.S. flag. It was the first new state admitted since Arizona, in 1912. And though many residents cannot imagine an Alaska without a permanent fund dividend or debates over the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, without Sarah Palin or discussion about whether or not the state’s capital should be moved from land-locked Juneau, there are those who recall a time when they needed a plane or boat to enter or leave the territory, when local management of game and fisheries was on par with a penguin sighting, and when few events seemed more liberating than a baseball field built without federal permission.

Much has been made of Alaska’s struggle for statehood, and rightly so. The territory was far away from the Lower 48, sparsely populated by most measures, and with little infrastructure and even less money to fund the framework necessary for a

² Alaska Humanities Forum, “Governing Alaska: Alaska Celebrates Statehood” (Anchorage: Alaska Humanities Forum, 2008), 1.

functioning member of the United States of America. The territory boasted no manufacturing base, few roads, and little health care.

Still, in March 1916, James Wickersham, Alaska's delegate to Congress (who represented the territory's interest but was not allowed a vote), introduced the first Alaska statehood bill on the 49th anniversary of the 1867 Alaska purchase in Washington, D.C. It was mostly a ceremonial gesture. Wickersham knew Alaska wasn't ready to be a state.³

It took decades for the "Alaska idea" to take root in the Senate, and 42 years for the statehood bill to pass. In the intervening years, the idea of a 49th star on the U.S. flag was bandied about from time to time, but it was not until the 1940s that it was considered seriously. There were myriad reasons for the timing: Depression-era New Deal programs like the Matanuska Valley Colony relocated impoverished farm families from the Midwest to Alaska where they might have a more "productive" existence. World War II proved Alaska's strategic importance to the nation, and the massive influx of military personnel, plus an expanded labor force to support defense department construction in the post-war years bolstered the territory's population. In 1940, about 3,000 people called Anchorage home; by 1951, the city's population had increased to 47,000.⁴ Also, the newly constructed Alaska-Canada highway linked the territory to the Outside by road. World War II and the Cold War that followed put Alaska on the United States' strategic map, and it was those wars that would push the territory off down the road to statehood. In other words, the territory was maturing. And as Alaska matured, so did her politics.

³ Richard H. Bloedel, "The First Bloom of Alaska Statehood," in *The Alaska Journal*, 2, no. 1 (Seattle: Winter 1972), 9.

⁴ City of Anchorage. Accessed 23 March 2009 from <http://www.ci.anchorage.ak.us/History/>.

The names of those involved in the statehood campaign are legends in modern Alaska: Anthony Dimond, Alaska's delegate to the House of Representatives from 1933 to 1945 and E.L. "Bob" Bartlett, his successor in that position, lobbied Congress to take Alaska's quest for statehood seriously. Politicians such as Ralph Rivers and Bill Egan trumpeted the cause in Alaska and in Washington, D.C. as part of Alaska's "Tennessee Plan," a tactic first employed by the Tennessee Territory. In Alaska's version, two senators and a congressman elected by the citizens of the territory traveled to the nation's capital to lobby for statehood.⁵

But as much as statehood was an achievement of politicians and activists, it was an achievement of the American Press Corps and its newspapermen. In the Lower 48, the vast majority of newspapers and magazines supported the idea of a 49th star on the U.S. flag in editorials and pictorial spreads.⁶ In Alaska, *Anchorage Times* publisher Robert Atwood and *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* publisher C. W. Snedden led the charge in the press, running pro-statehood editorials and, in Snedden's case, publishing a multi-page pull-out in the paper as a means to convince Alaskans of statehood's virtues.

Yet one newspaper, the *Alaska Daily Empire* (later the *Juneau Empire*) stood in stark opposition to most journalists' and publishers' attitudes. It was the nation's most virulent anti-statehood newspaper, and in the early years of the statehood movement, a particularly powerful one. The *Empire* was headquartered in Juneau, the territory's capital, and had enormous power to shape opinion and policy in the territory. It might

⁵ Claus-M. Naske, and Herman E. Slotnick. *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1987), 154.

⁶ *Time* magazine, 14 April 1958, 24; *Seattle Times*, 7 April 1957, 1; *Life* magazine, 26 May 1958.

have persevered too, were it not for a couple of notable editorial missteps and an opponent the likes of which Alaska had never seen.

Territorial Governor Ernest Gruening was perhaps the loudest and one of the most persuasive voices in the early quest for statehood – a man of dazzling intellect and drive who brought attention to one of Alaska’s core predicaments: being an area of vast natural wealth controlled largely by corporations and people who spent little time in the territory, let alone called it home. “Far too much survives in Alaska of the earlier practice to take-it-all-out, take-it-down-below, leave-as-little-as-possible, spend-nothing-in-Alaska,” Gruening said to the Alaska State Legislature in 1941. “Indeed, the most serious defect in our Alaska economic and social structure is just that. Too much going out. Not enough staying here.”⁷ The solution, Gruening maintained, was a more modern system of taxation and statehood for the territory.

Gruening was a politician unlike any Alaska had seen. Born to Prussian immigrants who had done well for themselves on the East Coast, Gruening enjoyed upper-middle class privilege. He spent a childhood summer in Europe learning French, and he followed in his father’s footsteps and attended medical school, graduating from Harvard Medical School in 1912 at the age of 23.⁸ Subsequently, he eschewed medicine for a career in journalism and then public service, as the Director of the Office of Territories and Island Possessions in 1934.

⁷ Ernest Gruening, *Message of the Governor of Alaska to the 15th Legislative Assembly* (Juneau, 1941), 9.

⁸ Claus M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska’s Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 2.

What Ernest Gruening brought to Alaska was more than a keen political sense and the twentieth-century ideology Alaska so desperately needed. He brought a journalist's mindset and a fearlessness that allowed him to fight the *Empire* and anyone else who got in the way of his goals. It was a battle of wits, policy, and on at least one important occasion, the law.

Yet it is difficult to imagine a man of Gruening's pedigree moving to, and championing, the cause of "The Last Frontier." To understand what brought Gruening to Alaska and drove his passion for statehood, one needs to recognize the perfect storm of personalities and politics that set the stage for what would become the Alaska Territory's greatest triumph.

Like many great achievements, such as the Pulitzer Prize or the Emancipation Proclamation, Alaska's statehood arose from more than altruistic yearning and perseverance. In the 49th state's case, it was a combination of factors all too well known in politics *and* journalism: ambition, competitive drive, a quest for power and the petty vindictiveness that comes when people do not get what they want.

Alaska owes plenty not just to East Coast child of privilege Ernest Gruening, but also to Territorial Governor and *Empire* publisher John Troy, and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. Each man held enormous power, and each had a history as a newspaperman. For if not for these three very different men who shared a few key personality traits, Alaska might still be in the position of Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands.

CHAPTER 1: JOHN TROY AND THE CIVIL SERVICE PEDIGREE

John Troy was born in Dungeness, Washington on October 31, 1868. The Troy family farm sat further a field in Clallam County, which stretches across the north side of the Olympic Peninsula in what, in 1868, was southern Washington Territory. The western edge of Clallam County is the Pacific Ocean. To the north, Clallam extends nearly 100 miles along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. An area of exceptional beauty, the nearby Olympic Mountains would serve as the centerpiece of Olympic National Park, established in 1938.

The first settlers arrived in the Clallam area in the 1850s. In the late nineteenth century, it was an area of a few thousand at most. Many residents made a living felling the many stands of red cedar, Douglas fir, Sitka spruce and other conifers. Settlers like the Troys lived in small outposts. The Troys resided on a farm and may have used the rich soil to grow potatoes, as many of their neighbors did.⁹

In Troy's day, much of Washington Territory still fit the frontier mold. While his parents were farmers, they did not conform to today's stereotypes of rural folk. Smith Troy was born in Pennsylvania, to parents who eventually moved west. Laura Bass Weir Troy was the daughter of a prominent Washington pioneer family.¹⁰ Laura instilled a love of reading in each of her five children and Smith Troy, the family patriarch, served in the Washington Territorial legislature and the first Washington State legislature in

⁹ Kit Oldham, "Clallam County -- Thumbnail History." *HistoryLink.org Essay 7576*. Accessed 13 August 2009 from < http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=7576>.

¹⁰ Leslie Murray, "John Troy: Firebrand, Crusader, Gentleman – And Editor," *Juneau Empire*, 15 October, 1987, sec. 1A.4.

1889. He held other civic posts as well: Clallam County school superintendent, country auditor and country commissioner.¹¹

John Troy's brothers and sisters held positions reflective of their prosperous upbringing. His brother Preston Troy was an attorney and, for a time, president of the Washington State Bar Association (Preston's son would become Washington's Attorney General in the 1940s). David Troy, John's other brother, ran a dairy in Port Townsend, Washington, served in the Washington State House and Senate and was a member of Washington State College's Board of Regents. One of his sisters, Sara Troy Callow, served the Dungeness community as school superintendent. Public service, it seems, ran in the Troys' blood.

John Troy was no exception to this rule. Little is known about his childhood, but he attended "country school" in Clallam County and high school in Port Townsend, about 40 miles from his home.¹² In the late 1880s, the distance from home to school was more than a day's drive and Troy likely boarded at or near the secondary school.

A JOURNALIST'S BEGINNINGS

At age 18, Troy began three years of working for his uncle, Allen Weir, at the *Port Townsend Argus*, a weekly newspaper.¹³ He loved the work, but disagreed with his uncle's politics. The Troys were progressives, Democrats. Weir was a Republican. Perhaps eager for his son to follow in *his* civic footsteps, Smith Troy, who was Clallam

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Anthony Dimond, "Biographical Sketch of Mr. John Weir Troy," TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

¹³ Leslie Murray, "John Strong: Firebrand, Crusader, Gentleman – And Editor," *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*, 15 October 1987.

County auditor in 1889-90, appointed his son deputy county auditor. The son surely learned a great deal about bookkeeping and fiscal responsibility from the elder Troy. After two years, he became deputy county clerk. When he was 24, John Troy ran, as a Democrat, for the position of Clallam County auditor. He won.

Still, his time with his uncle created a passion for a different kind of service in the young Troy. In 1891, when he was just 23 years old, Troy established the *Democrat Leader*, a weekly newspaper in the newly incorporated city of Port Angeles.¹⁴ Port Angeles was about 50 miles away from Port Townsend and his uncle's *Argus*. Ideologically, Troy's *Democrat* was a million miles away from his uncle's conservative ideals. The *Argus* ran editorials about subjects like the dangers of immigrant labor.¹⁵ Troy's *Democrat* ran stories about the advantages of government subsidies.¹⁶ In Port Angeles, Troy met Minerva Lewis, the daughter of a prominent Port Angeles physician. The couple married in 1892. Troy was becoming exactly the sort of man he wanted to be – influential, powerful, connected. For the rest of his life, he would strive for control and notoriety. And when what he wanted was not given to him, Troy took it.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Port Townsend (Wash.) Weekly Argus*, "The Chinese Problem," 16 June 1876.

¹⁶ *The Democrat Leader* (Port Angeles, Wash.), "New Programs for the Northwest," 7 October, 1891.

THE RUSH NORTH

In July of 1897, exciting news reached Washington Territory: there was gold, plenty of it, in the Yukon. Troy left the *Democrat Leader*,¹⁷ and a month later he and Minerva arrived in Skagway, Alaska.

Thousands came to Skagway, the most popular gateway to the Yukon, seeking fortune. A nationwide depression had started in 1893, caused by railroad overbuilding, the withdrawal of European capital from American markets, and a shaky national banking system.¹⁸ The economic situation left many unemployed and unsure of the future and the prospect of quick riches appealed to people from coast to coast. But John and Minerva did not make the dangerous trek over the Chilkoot Pass from Skagway, nor did they set up shop outfitting the miners with needed supplies as others did. Instead, Troy cashed in on the gold rush by working as a correspondent for newspapers in Seattle and New York City.

No biographical sketch of Troy provides a reason for the move to Alaska. He may have yearned to stretch his “reporter’s legs.” He may have longed to escape Clallam County, where he faced competition from his two brothers in the area of civil service. Or he may have been on the run from the law.

A New York Times article published on November 4, 1897 details the Port Townsend arrival of the steamer Al-Ki, a ship returning from Alaska.¹⁹ It reads, in part,

¹⁷ Troy likely sold the paper. Though no biographical sketch of him mentions the sale of the *Democrat Leader*. But the paper did continue to publish until 1905, according to the Library of Congress.

¹⁸ Douglas W. Steeples and David O. Whitten, *Democracy in Desperation: The Depression of 1893* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing 1998), 4-7.

¹⁹ *New York Times*. “Returned From Alaska: Steamer Al-Ki Brings a Large Party from Skaguay – Alleged Embezzler in the Number,” 4 November, 1897.

“Sheriff Dyke of Clallam County, Washington, also was on board. He had in custody John Troy, ex-Auditor of Clallam County, who, it is alleged, embezzled over \$5,000 during his two terms in office. The Sheriff found Troy at Skaguay. Troy willingly accompanied the Sheriff, and says he will have no trouble in clearing himself.”

Five thousand 1897 dollars is equivalent to roughly \$130,000 in 2009.²⁰ And while there is no evidence to prove the allegations raised in the article,²¹ they do not seem out of character for the man Troy would become in Alaska. This was, perhaps, the first instance of fiscal impropriety on Troy’s part. It would not be the last.

²⁰ Measuring Worth, accessed 10 November 2009, www.measuringworth.com (of several sites consulted, this was the best credentialed).

²¹ The NY Times article is the only mention found of the allegations. It is clearly the John Troy described in this paper. The Clallam County Historical Society tried to confirm the information, but all of their newspapers from the era were destroyed in a fire.

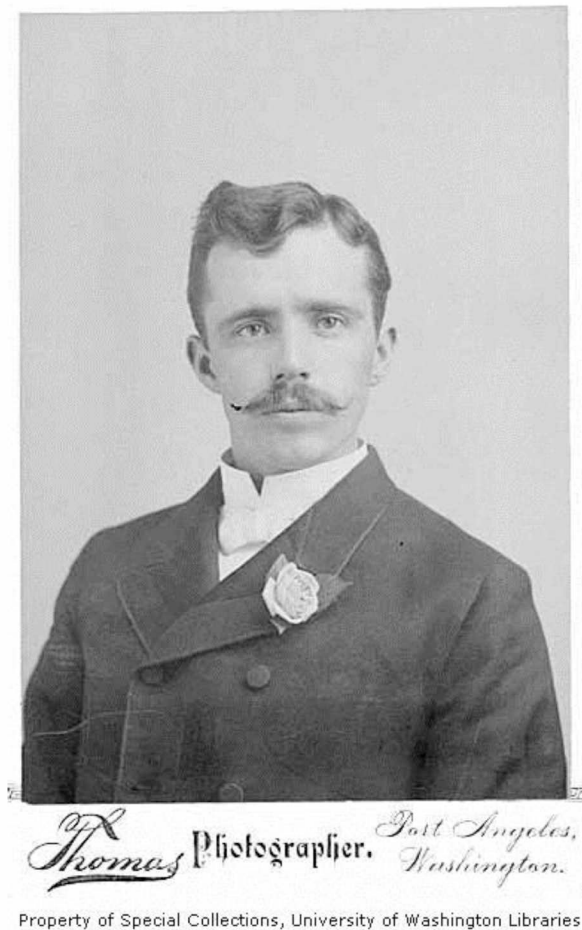


Fig.1 John Troy, photographed in Port Angeles, Washington, 1894.
(Courtesy University of Washington Library)

BACK AND FORTH

John Troy was probably back in Skagway, Alaska in time for the birth of the first of his two daughters, Helen Marian, on March 22, 1899.²² Around this time, Troy contracted what most accounts refer to as “camp fever.” Medical literature of today supposes that camp fever was likely the bacterial disease more commonly known as

²² “Biography,” TD, Helen Monsen Collection, Alaska State Library Historical Collections (MS 206), 4. While no account explicitly states that Troy was there for the Helen’s birth, it seems likely. Most accounts place Troy in Alaska in late 1898.

typhus.²³ Though a course of antibiotics will cure the disease today, the condition was much more serious in the nineteenth century. “He was carried aboard a southbound steamer on a stretcher and spent the next three years under the medical care of his father-in-law in Port Angeles,” writes Lew Williams in his book, *Bent Pins to Chains*.²⁴ Troy’s second daughter, Dorothy, was born in Port Angeles in 1901.

By 1902, Troy was back in Alaska working at the *Skagway Daily Alaskan*,²⁵ where he eventually became part owner of the newspaper. At the *Daily Alaskan*, he followed the same path as the man who had become his friend and mentor, J.F.A. Strong.

STRONG’S FORCE

Like Troy, John Franklin Alexander Strong began his journalism career in the Pacific Northwest, where he married Anna Hall Strong in 1896. And like Troy, Strong came north at the calling of the Gold Rush, landing in Skagway in 1897. But while Troy seemed content in Southeast Alaska, Strong was a journalistic entrepreneur, eager to explore. He moved to Dawson, Yukon Territory in 1898 to work for the *Dawson News*, then to Nome, where he helped found the *Nome News*, and later the *Nome Nugget*.²⁶ At the *News*, Strong established himself as an intelligent, tireless businessman and editor who believed that the then-district of Alaska should be granted full territorial status. In one *News* editorial he wrote:

²³ "epidemic typhus," Encyclopædia Britannica Online, accessed 20 March 2009, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/189804/epidemic-typhus>>.

²⁴ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 86.

²⁵ Historically, “Skagway” was often spelled “Skaguay.” To avoid confusion, this text uses “Skagway” in instances other than a direct quotation.

²⁶ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 96.

We are long past the wet nurse period. We have been wearing the cast-off clothes of our sister states long enough. We want a new suit, made to fit us as perfectly as possible. We are American citizens, capable of self-government, independent, honest, in the main; courageous, or we would never have ventured thus far; and enterprising, as our acts, not words, show.

We must act unitedly to get legislation that will make us self-respecting, make us feel that we are part and parcel of the U.S., and not a foundling eager to accept any crumbs, or cast-off garments that a lot of congressmen, who know nothing of our needs or requirements, may see fit to give us.²⁷

Strong left Alaska for a time and worked at newspapers in Nevada and California, where he started the *Greenwater Herald*, before returning to Alaska and establishing the short-lived *Katalla Herald* and the *Iditarod Nugget* in the town of Iditarod.²⁸ Along the way he grubstaked many Alaskans and his popularity grew. It seems only natural that his wanderlust (or perhaps fear and restlessness) would lead the politically minded Strong to Alaska's political nexus, Juneau, where he founded and edited the *Daily Alaska Empire* in 1912.²⁹

At the *Empire*, Strong continued his tirade against those he deemed Alaska's oppressors. He wrote "three to five editorials a day, each on a different topic."³⁰ In his editorials, Strong praised Woodrow Wilson, lobbied for women's suffrage, argued for

²⁷Ibid, 97.

²⁸Leslie Murray, "John Strong: Pioneer Journalist to Territorial Governor," *Juneau Empire* 75th Anniversary Edition. 15 October 1987.

²⁹ The *Daily Alaska Empire* is the paper more commonly known today as the *Juneau Empire*. According to the *Empire*'s self-penned history, The paper was originally known as the *Alaska Daily Empire* and changed its name to the *Daily Alaska Empire* in 1926. Throughout this text, *Daily Alaska Empire* or *Empire* is used to avoid confusion.

³⁰ Leslie Murray, "John Strong: Pioneer Journalist to Territorial Governor," *Juneau Empire* 75th Anniversary Edition. 15 October 1987.

construction of an Alaska Railroad that would lead from Southeast to the Interior, pushed for assistance for Alaska Natives and chastised Seattle residents for what he deemed their superior attitude.

Meanwhile, Alaska's status changed from district to territory in 1912 and President William Howard Taft appointed Walter Eli Clark as the territorial governor. When Woodrow Wilson was elected president later that year, the choice of Alaska's governor fell to him. Wilson appointed his booster, J.F.A. Strong.

BACK, THEN FORTH AGAIN

By the time Strong was appointed governor, John Troy had left Alaska. His marriage to Minerva Lewis had crumbled (they divorced in 1911)³¹ and Troy was working as the editor of *Alaska Yukon Magazine*, headquartered in Seattle.³² Here Troy solidified his politics about the northern territory. "Alaska's great need is legislation and executive action that will unlock its wonderful resources to the developer," he wrote in 1911.³³ "The trouble is not far to find. The powers at Washington have been proceeding without regard to the temper of the resident people of Alaska. Every interest has been considered except the interests of the men and women who have established their homes in that Territory." In another editorial Troy demonstrated his views on Alaska's mining industry. "Every ounce of gold, every pound of copper, every ton of iron or tin that is freed from mother earth... means every man or woman is given an opportunity to live

³¹ Minerva Lewis Troy spent the rest of her life in Port Angeles, Washington. In a further twist on the tradition of the times, her daughters, Helen and Dorothy, grew up primarily with their father, though they visited her occasionally. Minerva eventually became an accomplished artist and musician. She died in 1960, at age 87, according to Leslie Murray's account of Troy's life and telephone conversations with the Clallam County historical society in 2009.

³² "Guide to John Weir Troy Collection," Alaska State Historical Library. TD, 2.

³³ John W. Troy, "Home Rule Should Be The First Step," *Alaska Yukon Magazine*, March, 1911.

better or happier.”³⁴ They were sentiments that Troy would hold close for the rest of his career.

While in Washington, Troy held the secretary’s post at the Washington State Democratic Committee meeting in 1912, during Woodrow Wilson’s campaign for the presidency and stayed active politically. But Troy’s heart was still clearly in the North. While in Skagway, he had served as the city’s first auditor and first city clerk. He had become active in the Democratic Party, representing Alaska at the party’s national convention in 1904.³⁵ So when his friend and mentor Strong called to ask Troy if he would consider returning to Alaska to edit the *Empire* while Strong was in the governor’s office, Troy jumped at the chance. By the end of 1913, Troy was in Juneau with daughters Helen and Dorothy in tow. In 1914, Troy purchased the *Empire* from Strong.

In Alaska, Troy felt he was home. Clearly comfortable behind the editor’s desk, Troy campaigned tirelessly for his pet causes and grew his business in impressive fashion. In 1916, the *Empire*’s circulation topped 2,500,³⁶ more than the entire population of Anchorage (1,856) and approaching that of the capital city itself (3,058).³⁷

Juneau itself was growing too. Prospectors had staked a 160-acre beachfront town site in 1880. But in the early decades of the twentieth century, Juneau bustled. The Alaska-Juneau, Alaska-Gastineau and Treadwell mines pulled millions of dollars’ worth of gold out of the tunnels and shafts snaking around the city. In 1913, the Queen Anne-

³⁴ John W. Troy, “Alaska and Conservation,” *Alaska Yukon Magazine*, March 1912, 53.

³⁵ Leslie Murray, “John Strong: Pioneer Journalist to Territorial Governor,” *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*. 15 October 1987.

³⁶ *Daily Alaska Empire Archives*, 1916.

³⁷ “State of Alaska Web site,” accessed 20 November 2008, <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/dca/commdb/CF_CUSTM.cfm>.

style Alaskan Hotel opened its doors, promising steam heat and a 1½ kilowatt wireless station on the roof. It billed itself a “pocket edition of the best hotels on the Pacific coast.”³⁸ The city boasted two garbage services, plenty of saloons (until the area went “dry” and many were converted to “reading rooms or soft drink parlors”),³⁹ and the Nevada Café on Front Street, which served “snipe, grouse, ptarmigan and mallard duck, along with choice steaks, chops and cutlets.”⁴⁰ Perhaps most intriguing to Troy, Alaska’s first Territorial Legislature convened in Juneau in 1913.

As much as Troy was interested in growing the *Empire*, he also sought to grow his political reputation. He remained an active and ardent supporter of the Democratic Party, serving as delegate to the party’s national conventions in 1920, 1924, 1928 and 1932. Troy and the *Empire*, at the time the only “Democrat newspaper” in the territory, “kept the party’s adherents on the alert, driving home Democratic doctrines, preaching party loyalty and carrying the organization along almost by the sheer force of his personality,” according to former *Empire* reporter Leslie Murray’s history of the paper.⁴¹

Yet Troy’s personal life did not follow the Horatio Alger-like trajectory his career seemed destined to play out. In 1916, Troy married Ethel Crooker Forgy, who at the time was the superintendent of schools in Seward. Records make little mention of either of Troy’s marriages. Both John and Ethel were staunch Democrats, and attended Democratic National Conventions together, in San Francisco in 1920 and New York City

³⁸“History,” Alaska Hotel and Bar, accessed 2 November 2009, <<http://www.thealaskanhotel.com/3.History.htm>>

³⁹ “Saloon Men to Open Soft Drink Places,” *Daily Alaska Empire*, 27 December 1917.

⁴⁰ Cathy Brown, “Where Hungry Men are Welcome: Restaurants Catered to Appetite, Health,” *Juneau Empire*, 23 November 1934.

⁴¹ Leslie Murray, “John Strong: Pioneer Journalist to Territorial Governor,” *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*, 15 October 1987.

in 1924. Yet from 1920 until her death in 1974, Ethel lived in California. Some accounts attribute her location to “sinus trouble.”⁴² The Troys corresponded regularly, and John visited Ethel at least once a year in addition to sending her a monthly allowance. Yet, when John Troy died, Mrs. Troy was living in Hollywood. She apparently did not attend the funeral.⁴³ His closest companion, confidant and caretaker was his eldest daughter, Helen, who herself was sometimes mistaken for the First Lady of the territory.⁴⁴

In 1918, with daughter Helen at his side, Troy positioned himself for a surge to power and a fight that would destroy his relationship with his close friend and mentor. It would also change the course of Alaska history.

⁴²Leslie Murray, “John Troy: Firebrand, Crusader, Gentleman – And Editor. *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*, 15 October 1987.

⁴³“John Troy Passes Away,” *Daily Alaska Empire*, 4 May 1942.

⁴⁴ An article in the New York Times dated 24 August 1937 includes the sentence “Strife between Alaskan and Japanese fishermen ‘is graver than you suspect,’ Mrs. Helen Troy, wife of Governor John Troy of Alaska, said today.” Mistaking Helen for John Troy’s wife was likely common, as Troy and Ethel’s relationship was exceedingly odd for the era.

CHAPTER 2: TROY TO POWER

In *Daily Alaska Empire* editorials early in J.F.A Strong's gubernatorial term, John Troy praised the governor's politics and decisions. This was not surprising, as the two shared many of the same causes: full territorial government for Alaska (both felt the Organic Act left the territory shortchanged), anger at the federal government for its "abuse and neglect" of the territory, and more statewide development. Yet by 1918, something had changed.

When Governor Strong backed James Wickersham as Alaska's delegate to Congress, Troy was furious. Wickersham had shepherded Alaska's second Organic Act through the U.S. Legislature in 1912. Troy felt it was insufficient for Alaska's needs.⁴⁵ Since his Skagway days, Troy had pushed for what he called "a full territorial government," policies that would allow the territory jurisdiction over its fish and game resources. Troy's idea of "home rule" also included greater powers for the territorial legislature. Under the Organic Act, Alaska could not assume debt or organize county government without the consent of Congress.⁴⁶

Wickersham was a pragmatist. He knew that Alaska was not yet ready for statehood, but believed it should be in the territory's long-term plans. Meanwhile, he was pleased with the Organic Act, which he referred to as the "Home Rule bill" in his diary.⁴⁷ Still, in 1916, Wickersham introduced a statehood bill to Congress. It was a mostly a ceremonial gesture, but Wickersham wanted to go on record with the territory's intent. In

⁴⁵ Richard H. Bloedel, "The First Bloom of Alaska Statehood," in *The Alaska Journal*, 2, no. 1 (Seattle: Winter 1972), 8-10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ James Wickersham, *Diary*, 18 August 1912, accessed 4 November 2009 from <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/hist_docs/wickersham/ASL-MS0107-diary021-1912.pdf>.

the *Empire*'s pages, Troy's editorials called statehood "so absurd, so utterly foolish, that one is sorry for its perpetrators."⁴⁸ Oppositionists, like Troy's, primary concern about statehood was increased federal taxation and control of the land from Washington, D.C.⁴⁹

Wickersham was a Republican who ran for reelection to Alaska's congressional seat in 1916 as a Progressive Bull Moose candidate. His opponent was Charles Sulzer, Alaska Territorial Senator, miner, Democrat, and close friend of John Troy. The *Empire* made no secret of its allegiances, running front-page stories with headlines like "Senator Sulzer Masterfully Presents Issues to Largest Meeting of Campaign" and "'Wick' Begins Abusive Tactics In the Interior."⁵⁰

"In a speech Saturday evening Delegate James Wickersham attacked in a most vicious and personal manner Senator Charles Sulzer, John W. Troy... and members of the regular Republican organization," read one dispatch. "Delegate Wickersham never asked the President or the Secretary of the Interior to aid his (full territorial government) measure, nor did he take steps ascertain it" read another.⁵¹

The *Empire* was the most powerful newspaper in the territory at the time, a title it would hold until the days following World War II. It was the largest newspaper in Juneau, and Juneau was the territory's capital. The *Empire* in 1916 was then what the *Washington Post* is to D.C. today. Coverage and endorsements carried great weight. Sulzer and Troy worked together, according to Wickersham's diary. "On Saturday Sulzer

⁴⁸ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 291.

⁴⁹ Claus-M. Naske, and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1987), 144.

⁵⁰ John W. Troy, ed, "Senator Sulzer...", 20 October 1916 and "Wick Begins...", 23 October 1916, *Alaska Daily Empire*, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

laid the long talked of ‘full territorial government bill’ egg,” Wickersham wrote. “John W. Troy, Editor of the Juneau Empire is here and assisted in the performance and will now probably do the ‘cackling,’ for I am informed he drew the bill. It consists of my bill, with many of the checks against crooked legislation left out. It seems to me that it contains every ‘job’ the big corporations in Alaska will want.”⁵² In addition to the stories that filled the *Empire*’s pages, the newspaper ran huge ads for Sulzer, “Alaska for Alaskans” as the tagline.⁵³

The *Empire* undoubtedly affected the election, which was close. Alaska Attorney General George Grigsby, another Troy confidant, ruled that the 1916 election, experienced some “irregularities in voting in some Westward precincts so those votes should not be counted.”⁵⁴ The canvassing board, which included Governor Strong, disagreed. Wickersham had won by 31 votes. Attorney General Grigsby appealed the case to the U.S. District court and won. The Democrats’ candidate, Sulzer, was installed as Alaska’s delegate,⁵⁵ though not for long. By 1917, Wickersham had successfully contested the election, though he only served for a few months in 1918. Infuriated, Troy and company focused on destroying Wickersham and anyone who supported him, including his former mentor and friend, J.F.A. Strong.

Strong spent most of his adult life in Alaska and by most accounts was a good and popular governor. He was also respected in Washington, D.C. It would be difficult to

⁵² James Wickersham, Diary, 22 January 1918, accessed 4 November 2009 from <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/hist_docs/wickersham/ASL-MS0107-diary029-1917-1918.pdf>.

⁵³ *Alaska Daily Empire*, October 1916, multiple issues.

⁵⁴ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 293.

⁵⁵“Wickersham Defeated; Charles A. Sulzer Elected to Congress,” *The New York Times*, 9 November 1916.

harm Strong politically. So Troy did what many politicians have done throughout history: he got personal.

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST STRONG

George Grigsby hinted at the plan to undermine Strong in a January, 1918 letter to Charles Sulzer, which read, in part: "I have been informed from a source...that Strong was born in St. Andrew's Parish, St. Croix Village...New Brunswick, and was naturalized in Berlin, N.H. 11th District Court. It might be well to look this up. This is either true or a stall, and I am not at liberty to state the source of the information."⁵⁶

That Strong had been born in Canada was common knowledge, but now Troy heard rumors that he had never become a U.S. citizen. Troy hired the Thiel Detective Agency to pursue the matter in January 1918.

The detectives visited New Hampshire, New York and New Brunswick on Troy's behalf (and at Troy's expense), providing the *Empire* editor with detailed reports of every conversation and every lead. The detectives traced a Strong family to Codys, New Brunswick, a place so small it was not counted in Canada's 1911 census.⁵⁷ In Codys, a longtime resident spoke of a teacher named Strong who had left for the West because of "financial and other troubles."

⁵⁶ John Weir Troy, "Correspondence with Thiel Detective Service re: JFA Strong," LS, Item 1, in John Weir Troy Collection, State Historical Library of Alaska in Juneau.

⁵⁷"Census of Canada, 1911," Library and Archives of Canada, accessed 14 November 2009 at <<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1911/index-e.html>>.

“Mr. Strong’s reputation while at Cody’s [sic] was bad,” read one detective’s report, “he having been a very heavy drinker and is said to have deserted his wife and several children at the time of his going West.”⁵⁸

This description did not resemble the same beloved man who served as Alaska’s governor. The detectives tracked down one Charles D. Strong who had a brother who had disappeared. Charles Strong said he’d tried to find his brother for years, but had been told he died in a Seattle hospital. Further, Strong said, according to the detective reports, he had no photograph of his brother and was unaware of any that existed. But Charles Strong’s wife was alive, he said, and might talk to them.

The detectives contacted Troy and asked for a picture of Strong. On January 25, 1918, with photograph in hand, Gregory Winslow, a lawyer working for Thiel Detective Agency, visited Ms. Strong.

“She at once recognized the photograph as that of her husband...” reads a letter to the Thiel Detective Agency dated January 25. “Sometime after he was married he decided to leave New Brunswick and obtain employment elsewhere and for a time corresponded with his wife and remitted her money... The last she heard of him was ten or fifteen years ago and he was then in Washington Territory.”

Upon hearing the news, Grigsby, Sulzer and Troy exchanged telegrams that can only be described as giddy. This news could not have come at a worse time for Strong, who had just started his second term as Alaska’s Governor. Troy gave the information he had uncovered to Franklin Knight Lane, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior. Strong

⁵⁸ John Weir Troy, “Correspondence with Thiel Detective Service re: JFA Strong,” MS 52a, Misc. Items, in John Weir Troy Collection, State Historical Library of Alaska in Juneau.

resigned his position in March, 1918. He left office on April 18, the same day the *Daily Alaska Empire* ran a massive headline on its front page that read “Facts Concerning Strong’s Citizenship.” The story alleged that Strong was a drunkard who had left a wife and three children destitute and remarried without first divorcing his Canadian wife.

Wickersham, who ignited Troy’s vendetta against Strong, wrote of Troy in his diary after the story ran: “When Troy cam from Olympia down & out, busted and in need, Gov. & Mrs. Strong gave him work, aided him to get a start, sold him their paper on credit & when he got the chance he murdered them with this brutal story! If there is no hell there ought to for a dog of that kind.”⁵⁹

Thomas Riggs, the Democrats’ handpicked successor, took office the same day.

A DREAM FULFILLED

With Riggs in the Governor’s office, Troy focused on his own political agenda. Along with the support of Riggs, Attorney General Grigsby and Sulzer, Troy lobbied successfully for the position of Collector of Customs for Alaska.⁶⁰ He was appointed in 1919.

Troy continued to be active in the Democratic Party, attending the national conventions in 1920 and 1924. He pursued his idea of full territorial government, both in public appearances and in the pages of the *Empire*, perhaps the most effective weapon in his political arsenal.⁶¹ Troy campaigned for Woodrow Wilson and James Cox in the *Empire*’s pages. He rallied support for causes he held dear, including low taxes for the

⁵⁹ James Wickersham, Diary 8 March 1918, accessed 4 November 2009 from <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/hist_docs/wickersham/ASL-MS0107-diary029-1917-1918.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “No Time for Factional Quarrels,” *Alaska Daily Empire*, 11 March 1926.

fishing and mining industries and increased power for the Alaska legislature. Not everyone agreed with his assessment of Alaska's situation. "I am writing a letter to John W. Troy on the Power of the Legislature under Sec. 3 of the Organic Act – trying to set his mind straight," James Wickersham wrote in January, 1933.⁶² Wickersham was popular and well respected, but he did not own a newspaper.

John Troy's continued loyalty to the Democratic Party did not go unnoticed. When Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1933, he appointed 64-year-old John Weir Troy as Governor of Alaska.

Troy, though generally modest in public, had wanted very much to be governor. He was gleeful upon hearing the news.⁶³ After decades of public service and party service, he held the highest office Alaska offered.

Alaskans too seemed pleased. Troy was one of them, as much an Alaskan as anyone. He had been in the state for 30 years. Roosevelt's office was flooded with letters of support and endorsements for Troy, including one from Anthony Dimond, Alaska's delegate to Congress. Even James Wickersham realized Troy's power, and though he disagreed with Troy in myriad instances, he believed him the best choice. "While he has fought me at every election in which I have been a candidate since 1908," Wickersham wrote, "I shall write the letters for this reason: Some Democrat must be appointed – the Democratic organization in Alaska has unanimously endorsed him... I

⁶² James Wickersham, Diary 4 January 1933, accessed 4 November 2009 from <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/hist_docs/wickersham/ASL-MS0107-diary042-1933.pdf>.

⁶³ Anthony Dimond, Personal Papers, telegrams from John Troy to Mrs. Troy and Anthony Dimond, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

would rather see him in the office – for the benefit of the Territory – than any other man in his party.”⁶⁴

Troy sailed through the confirmation process.⁶⁵

As governor, Troy emphasized mining and the need for federal assistance for miners. He continued to champion full territorial government for Alaska. He lobbied for more aid for Alaska Natives, airmail service for the territory, construction of a highway that would connect Alaska to the Lower 48, and a military presence in the territory.⁶⁶

One of his most visible accomplishments was to organize and fund the building of the first bridge across the Gastineau Channel, a move that linked the communities of Juneau and Douglas.⁶⁷

Though he was a Democrat, Troy’s allegiances sometimes belied his party status. After all, he had spent the majority of his life in Southeast Alaska. Some of his closest friends were mining company owners, people with ties to the fishing industry and other men who had made their fortunes in Alaska and benefited greatly from low taxes and the general “hands off” policy of the federal government.⁶⁸ When Troy was reappointed to a second term in 1936, he likely expected more of the same smooth path he had traveled so

⁶⁴James Wickersham, Diary, 27 January 1933, Diary 42, accessed 4 November 2009 from <http://library.state.ak.us/hist/hist_docs/wickersham/ASL-MS0107-diary042-1933.pdf>.

⁶⁵Ibid, letters of support for John Troy, memo about the confirmation process.

⁶⁶Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 290-95.

⁶⁷“Gov. Troy Tells of Combine Effort Which Led to Actual Construction of Big Bridge,” *Daily Alaska Empire*, 13 October 1935.

⁶⁸Terrence Cole, “Blinded by Riches: The Permanent Funding Problem and the Prudhoe Bay Effect,” *Understanding Alaska* (Anchorage: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, 2004), 33-35.

far. Instead, he attracted a firestorm of criticism, legal trouble and controversy, courtesy of U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CURMUDGEON COMETH

On the second page of his *Autobiography of a Curmudgeon*, Harold L. Ickes writes:

Let it be whispered that I frequently order the Department of the Interior elevators shut down and all the steps and landings greased just before quitting time, and before you can repeat the second verse of the national anthem the story has become a part of my public reputation. The relish that the average individual seems to have for such exhibitions of depravity lends support to any statement about a public official, no matter how grotesque it may be.

To say that Ickes had a well-deserved persecution complex throughout his public life is an understatement. Yet the self-coined curmudgeon was also a dedicated public servant who worked tirelessly, often for progressive causes ahead of his time. For 13 years Ickes held the U.S Secretary of Interior post. His tenure ran from March 4, 1933 to February 15, 1946, longer than any Secretary of the Interior before or since. This “short, slightly rotund, slightly ruffled character, bespectacled, sandy-haired and pug-nosed, his square face...fixed in a look that could have been halfway toward a scowl of outrage or hovering at the fringe of laughter”⁶⁹ was nearly a force of nature. He was a difficult man. He accomplished a lot.

At the Interior, Ickes administered the Public Works Administration (PWA). He championed the rights of Native peoples, fought for National Parks and fought for the idea of oil and resource conservation. Yet he was bellicose, self-righteous and obstinate. In other words, Ickes was destined for a life in politics.

⁶⁹ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 2.

ICKES' BEGINNINGS

Harold L. Ickes was born on March 15, 1874, in Altoona, Pennsylvania. He was the second of seven children born to Martha (Mattie) McCune Ickes, of a strict Presbyterian family (that also took a keen interest in politics) from Holidaysburg and Jesse Boone Williams Ickes, a dashing tobacconist with a flair for flattering the ladies. Jesse's father had been a successful farmer who ventured into Altoona real estate. He eventually set up shop for his young son in a building he had erected downtown.

In the late 1870s, Altoona was a railroad town. The Pennsylvania Railroad's "railroad works" employed more than a third of Altoona's men. Much of the rest of the town, including the doctors, hotel, bars and shops, was dependent on the railroad as well. Ickes biographer, T.H. Watkins, writes that in 1880 the railroad works "built 85 new locomotives, 106 passenger cars, and 3,781 freight cars."⁷⁰ It was a busy, crowded semi-city, thriving in industry, yet with many unpaved streets, much pollution and clapboard houses.

Ickes was close to his mother, who struggled to provide for her large family on Jesse's meager income. "I have never known anyone who accomplished so much with so little to go on," Ickes wrote. Young Harold spent much of his childhood helping Mattie raise the younger children and listening to her complaints about Jesse Ickes.

"It was always a major operation to get money out of Father," Ickes wrote. "Not because he was stingy, but because he wanted it for his own pleasures."⁷¹ The elder Ickes

⁷⁰ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 13. Unless otherwise noted, biographical information in this section is derived from Watkins.

⁷¹ Harold L. Ickes, Unpublished personal memoirs, Library of Congress, Folder 2, 18.

is described as a “joiner” by Ickes’ biographer, and it seems an apt description. Jesse spent at least as much time at bars and community clubs as he did in the tobacco shop, and little time at home. That left young Harold (whom the family called “Clair,” a shortening of his middle name, LeClair) with much responsibility at a relatively young age.

Ickes often showed disdain for his father, if not in person, then certainly in his writings. He wrote that though Jesse Ickes owned a notions store, “father had ‘notions’ of his own that ran more to play more than to work... He was seldom, if ever home of an evening.”⁷² In another recollection, he tells of his father’s membership in the volunteer fire department, something that might have been a point of pride for a young boy. Yet Ickes says that Jesse

... continued his membership in [the fire department] even after we had moved so far away from the engine house that it was physically impossible for him to get to it before the fire has burned itself out... It was a major family feat... to get my father up from a warm bed, dressed, and on his way to a night fire that was already lighting the night sky. I can see him now, leaving the house at a canter, helmet awry, adjusting himself to the complicated outfit for a set-to with the flame that was either spent or under control long before his arrival.⁷³

Perhaps as a result of his strained relationship with his father and his myriad domestic responsibilities, Clair Ickes experienced a solitary childhood. He had few escapes. One was reading. In his autobiography, Ickes claims to have read “almost” 1,500 books by the time he was 16. He read everything he could acquire and memorized

⁷²Harold L. Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943), 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

much of the Bible. Another diversion was buggy rides in the country with his grandfather. Ickes felt calmed by the mountains and wildflowers, so much so that he created a garden at home with roses in the back yard and a rock garden along the side of the house.⁷⁴ Though Ickes was likely lonely, it was not such a deprived existence. While a son naturally yearns for the love and support of his father, Ickes had his mother, his siblings, his garden and his books.

All of that changed just after Ickes' sixteenth birthday.

In the spring of 1890, Mattie became ill. What began as a cold deepened to something much worse as her lungs filled with fluid. Just 38 years old, Mattie Ickes died in June. Prior to her passing, she had discussed her wishes with her sisters, who had come to aid in her care. Mattie asked her sister Ada Wheeler, who had no children of her own, to take care of 9-year-old Amelia and, if he so desired, Clair. Mattie likely knew how unhappy her son, who had been a sort of surrogate husband, would be in Altoona. While the other Ickes children stayed behind with their father, Clair and Amelia boarded a train headed for Chicago in July. Clair Ickes would spend the next four decades of his life there.

IN THE WINDY CITY

At first Ickes hated Chicago. Decades later, he wrote in his autobiography

It was the day of full-length and ample skirts, of long mutton-leg sleeve waists that terminated in high collars ... I didn't like any of it... I missed my mother and my friends. I longed for Altoona. It was three years before I would admit that the skyscrapers of Chicago were as big and

⁷⁴ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 13.

architecturally satisfying as the three-story wooden buildings fronting Altoona's own main street; that the homes of Chicago were as comfortable or well built as those of the city from which I had come' or that even the wide spaces, the beautiful parks, or Lake Michigan itself could compare with the steep hills, the faraway mountains, or the artificial lagoon of Lakemont Park that lay midway between Altoona and Holidaysburg.⁷⁵

His aunt and uncle lived in Englewood, several train stops from downtown Chicago. His uncle Felix operated a drug store similar to Irwin's Drugstore in Altoona, where Clair had worked the previous year after dropping out of school in order to help support his family. Clair now worked for his uncle, but received no pay. He attended high school in Englewood, where he was a loner with tattered clothes (the ones he had brought from Altoona). Another uncle, Sam McCune, perhaps pitying the Ickes orphan, occasionally purchased socks, underwear and shoes for the boy. He always made a show of this small generosity, a fact that troubled Ickes deeply.

Meanwhile, Ickes' dogged determination and years of reading paid dividends in Englewood, where he graduated from high school in three years instead of the usual four. He overcame a fear of public speaking to be elected class president, and the high school faculty selected Clair Ickes to give the prestigious "Welcoming Address" at the graduation ceremony. There was just one problem: he had nothing to wear. Graduation was no occasion for his Altoona tatters. Ickes and Aunt Ida wrote to Jesse Ickes pleading for money and Clair's father sent a few dollars that were supplemented by more funds

⁷⁵ Harold L. Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943), 11-12.

from Sam McCune. Ickes purchased his suit and delivered the commencement address. His father did not attend.

After he left the Wheeler home, Ickes saved his money until one day he paid a surprised Uncle Sam McCune back – every cent. It was a point of pride for Ickes, as personal finances would forever be on his mind.⁷⁶

Ickes' childhood was plagued by heartbreak, loneliness and loss. The death of his mother, the indifference of his father, and the indentured servitude he was subjected to in Chicago would affect the rest of his life, and his career. Ickes longed for loyalty and security. He would spend the rest of his life searching for both, and never finding enough.

COLLEGE AND BEYOND

By the time he graduated from high school, Clair Ickes had become something of an expert in adversity. When he decided to continue his education, the seemingly insurmountable problems of tuition, room and board were challenges he took in stride. Ickes moved from the Wheeler house to a place where he did housekeeping in exchange for room and board. As for tuition, Ickes met with the founding president of the University of Chicago and secured himself work on the school grounds. He supplemented that job with teaching English to recent immigrants in a night school program.⁷⁷

Ickes struggled with school and his many other tasks, but by his junior year, in 1896, he hit his stride. He joined the Debating Club, wrote for the student paper, as well

⁷⁶ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Unless otherwise noted, the biographical information in this chapter comes from Watkins' *Righteous Pilgrim*.

as the *Chicago Weekly*, and became a member of the University Republican club, a move that would influence the rest of his life.

The same year, Ickes became infatuated with Anna Wilmarth, “said to be the richest girl in college.”⁷⁸ Wilmarth was the daughter of Henry W. Wilmarth, who had made a small fortune in lighting fixtures and real estate. She had gone to all the right schools and belonged to all the right clubs. She was handsome, proper, and humorless.⁷⁹ The two went on several dates and Ickes was over the moon. Yet by the fall of 1896, Ickes received discouraging news: Anna and her mother were planning to travel to Europe for a year. Undeterred, he wrote her letter after letter while she was abroad. She had shown great interest in him in the summer of 1896 and Ickes clung to hope, even when months went by without a response. Then, in March 1897, Ickes learned that Anna was to be married to a graduate student in medieval history at the University of Chicago. He was inconsolable. She had encouraged him, he wrote in his diary. Why? Support and security had been snatched away again.

Ickes threw himself into his studies and his extracurricular activities, representing the University of Chicago at the annual convention of the American Republican League and volunteering for the Chicago mayoral campaign of John Maynard Harlan, who lost. Ickes graduated from the University of Chicago in May 1897, politics lodged firmly beneath his skin.

⁷⁸ Harold L. Ickes, Unpublished personal memoirs, Library of Congress. Folder 7, 32.

⁷⁹ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 46.

After a summer in Altoona, Ickes took a job as a newspaper reporter back in Chicago, working first for the *Chicago Record*, then for the *Chicago Tribune* until the *Record* lured him back with the promise of a steady salary of \$20 per week.⁸⁰ At the newspapers, Ickes often covered politics.

Chicago has long been a city known for ugly politics and political corruption. Much of that reputation today has its roots in the era in which Ickes worked as a reporter. Ickes reported on politicians and elections, bribery and treachery. He was hooked. When the *Record* closed, four years after Ickes' journalism career began, he moved almost seamlessly into a position working for John Maynard Harlan, the mayoral candidate for whom Ickes had volunteered during his senior year of college. Harlan was running again for mayor, and he felt 1903 might well be his year.

LOVE AND POLITICS

So began the era of Ickes as "right hand man" to the losing candidate. Ickes was a reformer through and through. He also believed that if he fought hard enough and long enough, he would eventually win. He hitched his wagon to star after star, none of which rose. Harlan never made it past the primary. In 1905, he lost again. Ickes supported Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, when he came in second as the Bull Moose candidate. When Hiram Johnson ran for President in 1924, Ickes managed his Illinois campaign. In 1926, he managed the senatorial campaign of Hugh S. Magill. There were a few winners, notably Ickes friend Charles Merriam, who won election to city council. But for the most

⁸⁰ Ibid, 58.

part, Ickes seemed to support the candidate he believed to be the best choice, regardless of the candidate's electoral prospects.

He continued to work tirelessly. He completed his law degree at the University of Chicago in 1907 and went into private practice. He was active in the Progressive Party in the 1910s and often served as informal advisor to "reformer" candidates. Still, he voted Democrat when his conscience dictated it. In 1922, Ickes became president of the Chicago branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He participated in progressive causes and served the YMCA in France at the end of World War I. And he married Anna Wilmarth.

Ickes' biographer T.H. Watkins speculates that the relationship between Anna Wilmarth and Harold Ickes took the bizarre path it did because both were children of alcoholic fathers.⁸¹ It is as good an explanation as any. Anna had married James Westfall Thompson in 1898 and given birth to a son named Wilmarth in 1899. Ickes maintained a casual relationship with the couple, and was known to Wilmarth as "Uncle Clair." Still, when the couple asked Ickes to move into their Chicago home in 1901, Ickes thought it odd.⁸² But by 1903, he had acquiesced.

Ickes had been living in a fraternity house with an old college friend while putting his younger sister through the University of Chicago, and a comfortable room in an upper middle-class home, complete with servants, was likely appealing. Anna was on an extended trip with their son, Thompson explained as he extended the invitation, and she

⁸¹ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 82-83.

⁸² *Ibid.*

very much wanted Ickes in their home. Though Thompson was likely unhappy with the arrangement, he mostly made little issue of it. He was far too occupied with his writings in medieval history.⁸³

When Anna and Wilmarth returned from their trip, Ickes became a sort of surrogate father to the boy. Though Watkins, and Ickes own personal papers, hint that he and Anna's love affair had resumed, emotionally if not physically, to the outside world "Clair was soon accepted by unknowing friends and relatives as just another member of the family – rather like a distant cousin who made himself useful around the house."⁸⁴

Thompson and Anna's marriage continued, much to Ickes' frustration.⁸⁵ But in 1909, the relationships at the Thompson house reached a breaking point. "Following the dictates of one of her whims of steel, Anna had brought a young girl home with her from the Chicago Home for the Friendless, one of the charitable institutions with which she was involved."⁸⁶ Anna adopted the young girl, Frances (though Ickes handled all the paperwork) and moved her into the home she shared with her husband, son, and Ickes. A few months later, Frances came to Anna and told her that Thompson, Anna's husband, had touched her inappropriately.⁸⁷ Anna confronted her husband and promptly filed for divorce.

Ickes married Anna in 1911, well after her divorce and after Thompson himself had remarried. The couple had a son, Raymond, in 1912. Anna and Ickes' relationship,

⁸³ Ibid, 85.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 87.

⁸⁵ Harold L. Ickes, Unpublished personal memoirs, Library of Congress, Folder 7, 24-29.

⁸⁶ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 101.

⁸⁷ Harold L. Ickes, Unpublished personal memoirs, Library of Congress, Folder 7, 40-44.

troubled from the start, might be looked at as one more example of how the curmudgeon refused to give up, of how he constantly searched for security, though it continued to elude him.

Anna Ickes, and perhaps more importantly, her money, enabled Harold's political work while his law practice largely languished. Anna, too, was civically minded and active in the Women's Trade Union League, the Women's City Club of Chicago, the Women's University Club and others. She became keenly interested in Native American affairs and sparked a similar interest in Ickes, who helped found the Chicago Indian Rights Association.

Yet all was not rosy for the orphan from Altoona. As diligent and bright as Harold Ickes was, he could also be abrasive, difficult and given to bouts of depression. Such was the case in 1924, when Ickes turned 50. His relationship with Anna had not been the storybook love affair Ickes imagined. Anna was given to wild mood swings that did not mesh with Ickes' tendency toward depression. "His marriage was, much of the time, ludicrous and painful," Watkins wrote, "a maelstrom of obligation and misery that fed his depression and self-pity."⁸⁸ The couple led largely separate lives, which must have troubled the man who'd sought loyalty and support. Ickes felt abandoned by former political allies and complained that he "gave more than he received."

⁸⁸ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 169.

“I don’t think he *had* any close friends to whom he would feel he could turn with openness and candor and the defenses down in case of pain or trouble,” his son, Raymond, told an interviewer in 1985. “I don’t know of any.”⁸⁹

Ickes philandered, beginning a series of affairs, most of which amounted to flings and nothing more.⁹⁰ Mostly, he sulked and sulked some more. For a man who for so long sought to alleviate his solitary existence, it must have been a lonely time.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 218.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 221-223.

CHAPTER 4: THE INTERIOR

By 1932, it seemed Ickes' fortunes had turned. His contemporaries sought him out to form an independent Republican group to support Franklin Delano Roosevelt's candidacy for U.S. President. At first, Ickes demurred. Though Roosevelt was a Democrat, Ickes held him in high esteem. He had been a TR man in 1900 (when Theodore Roosevelt was the vice-presidential candidate) and again in 1904. He voted for Roosevelt in 1912 as well, and believed Theodore Roosevelt's cousin was cut from the same, or at least similar cloth. With Hoover burdened with the Great Depression, FDR's prospects of winning were strong.

There was just one problem: Anna was running for reelection to the Illinois State Assembly. She had created a political career in her own right and had a good chance of retaining her position. But Anna was running as a Republican. She was no great fan of Hoover, Ickes noted in his autobiography, but how would it look for her husband to head an organization dedicated to electing a Democrat to America's highest office?

Finally, Ickes decided to campaign for Roosevelt. As a nod to the potential fallout, he promised Anna that, were Roosevelt elected, he would seek appointment as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, a post that appealed to Anna's longstanding interest in Native American rights and culture. "I had trouble convincing her that I wasn't just trying to feed her soothing syrup," Ickes wrote, "but at last she believed me and accepted my decision."⁹¹

⁹¹ Harold L. Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943), 263.



FIG. 2 Harold Ickes
(courtesy Library of Congress)

HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN

When Roosevelt won the 1932 election, it was the first win of an Ickes-backed candidate since his friend Charles Merriam had been elected to the Chicago City Council in 1909. What was more, Ickes found himself far higher in the Roosevelt administration than he intended to be: Secretary of the Interior.

Ickes had not been Roosevelt's first choice, nor his second. Those honors were held by Ickes' old ally Hiram Johnson and Bronson Cutting, respectively. When both men demurred, Roosevelt turned to Ickes, who had decided that Interior was the position

he wanted. Roosevelt knew he needed to curry favor with middle-of-the-road voters and “old school” progressives if he hoped to garner support for any of his programs through Congress. For once, Ickes achieved exactly what he wanted, and then some.

The U.S. Interior Department of 1933 was, as today, simply huge. Ickes was suddenly the commander of more than 30,000 full-time employees scattered throughout the United States and her territories. It was a complex operation and a bureaucratic nightmare, dubbed “The Department of Things in General,” according to Ickes’ biographer. “Even when it was created, it was as the recipient of functions cheerfully discarded by the departments of Treasury, State and War – the three executive departments then in existence. It was something of a bastard agency that Ickes had been summoned to administer...”⁹² Ickes, the patron saint of lost political causes, dug right in.

The U.S. Interior Department had grown out of the last great western expansion of the United States. Created as the Home Department in 1849, and quickly renamed, the U.S. Interior Department encompassed the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the U.S. Division of Territories and Possessions, the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and much more. Among his charges: millions of acres of parkland, scientists spread out across the nation conducting all manner of research on federal lands and waters, every fish in every river and stream, and Alaska.

Ickes, ever the detail man, seemed unfazed.

⁹² T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 304.

LOOKING NORTH

As early as July 1933, Ickes turned his attention to Alaska. The *Daily Alaska Empire* ran an unsigned editorial on July 6, titled “An Unjust Tax.” The editorial attacked a license fee imposed on automobiles that used Alaska’s Richardson Highway (the only road to Interior Alaska at the time) both as a means to pay for continued maintenance and construction and to keep the Alaska Railroad competitive as a means of transportation. It was a program, the editorial noted, that Secretary Ickes’ Interior Department had inherited from the Hoover Administration. Ickes argued that the highway was constructed with federal funds, so requiring a tax was not out of line. Moreover, cargo traveling the highway was competition for cargo on the federally funded Alaska Railroad.⁹³ Ickes sought to level the playing field.

“Such an imposition is the height of absurdity and cannot be defended either in theory or practice,” the editorial read. The editorial also singled out Secretary Ickes specifically. “The argument of Secretary Ickes,” it read “is so weak that it requires no refutation and so inconsistent that it defeats its own purposes.”⁹⁴

It was the only mention of Ickes in the *Empire* that day, buried deep in the paper, near an advertisement offering “wool filled cotton quilts” for \$5.95 from B.M. Behrends Co., Inc. department store. Yet the editorial found its way to Ickes’ desk, and two weeks later the Secretary sent Territorial Governor John Troy a letter in his typical, direct style. It read, in part:

⁹³Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 376.

⁹⁴ “An Unjust Tax,” *Alaska Daily Empire*, 6 July 1933.

I believe I am correct in assuming that you are the owner of this paper, and as such can direct the editorial policy. On this assumption, I wish to inquire how you can reconcile this attack on the Administration with the loyalty that is expected of a Presidential appointee.

I consulted you on April 22, 1933, before reaching a decision, and as Governor you expressed your views in opposition ... which were properly considered. Once the decision was made, however, it became your duty as the chief Federal officer in the Territory to adopt and properly support the Federal policy.

... it is decidedly contrary to the continuance of large subsidies at the expense of overburdened taxpayers in the States, and the citizens of Alaska must realize that the time is rapidly approaching when self-support and the independence that goes with it is more important to their welfare than Federal "hand-outs" secured, oftentimes, through propaganda.⁹⁵

The letter was typical of Ickes, who expected (and desperately wanted) loyalty and support in his endeavors. He would never get loyalty from John Troy.

The letter also reflected what would become Ickes' position on the Alaska Territory: more self-sufficiency, less expectation of federal support. Yet it was not so simple, as Troy indicated in his reply. "Like you, I am not in favor of Federal 'hand-outs' as such," Troy wrote on July 30. "I do feel that, as principal owner of the land and other resources of the Territory, the Federal Government should be liberal in its contributions toward development."⁹⁶ Troy had a point: in 1933, less than one half of one

⁹⁵ Harold L. Ickes, Professional Correspondence, Alaska. Library of Congress. Folder 22.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

percent of Alaska's land was privately held.⁹⁷ If the territory were to become self-sufficient, the federal government would have to give up some of its land.

The rest of Troy's letter to Ickes appears to be disingenuous. Troy told Ickes he had not even read the editorial, but that he would "do so immediately." He also wrote that when he was appointed governor of the territory "I separated myself from the Daily Alaska Empire in every respect except that of stockholder."

"When I withdrew from the Empire I made my severance absolutely complete," Troy continued.⁹⁸ What Troy did not mention, but Ickes likely knew, was that the publisher of the *Alaska Daily Empire* at the time was his elder daughter, Helen, and the editor was Robert Bender, Troy's son-in-law. Bender and Helen often lived at the governor's home when they were in Juneau. And just three days before Ickes' wrote his letter, Troy had traveled with Bender by plane to visit a cannery in the Peril Straits.⁹⁹ That Troy was not acutely aware of the newspaper's contents, especially such a politically charged editorial, is almost inconceivable.

This may have been the first time Ickes took issue with what he believed were Alaska's attitudes toward the federal government, but it would not be the last. To Ickes, Troy was the embodiment of those attitudes, and this doubly offended him. Not only was Alaska (and by extension, Troy) wrong in principle, Alaska's governor should have supported Ickes without question. After all, he was an executive appointee.

⁹⁷ Theresa Hull and Lina Leask, "Dividing Alaska, 1867-2000: Changing Land Ownership and Management," *Alaska Review of Social and Economic Conditions* (Anchorage: University of Alaska Institute of Social and Economic Research, November 2000), 2.

⁹⁸ Harold L. Ickes, Professional Correspondence, Alaska. Library of Congress. Folder 22.

⁹⁹ "Crosson Flies Gov. Troy and 2 Other Men," *Alaska Daily Empire*, 17 July 1933.

CHAPTER 5: THE ICKES-TROY DIVIDE

The U.S. stock market crash of 1929 marked the onset of an economic depression unlike anything in history. Unemployment reached unprecedented levels. Farmers lost their land. Industrial production declined.

But the 1930s were also an exciting time in American politics. With Roosevelt in the White House rolling out his New Deal programs one after another, the government spigot opened wide. Across the nation, struggling economic sectors clamored for a drink. Roosevelt's three R's, Relief, Reform and Recovery, manifested themselves in highway projects, a mandated minimum wage, the Social Security Administration, the Works Progress Administration and more.

The *Daily Alaska Empire* ran stories about a proposed air base and a new small boat harbor. In 1935, the federal government established the Matanuska Colony, a relocation of farming families from Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota to the Matanuska Valley in Southcentral Alaska in order to give them a fresh start. Perhaps most beneficial to Alaska, in 1933 Roosevelt increased the price of gold from \$20.67 to \$35 per ounce.¹⁰⁰ This huge increase brought a gold mining boom and by 1936, production rose. According to Naske, "the value of mined ore rose from \$10,209,000 in 1932 to \$26,178,000 in 1940."¹⁰¹ Increased production meant the mines needed more employees, and the future in Alaska looked bright. The territory had not experienced the

¹⁰⁰ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Random House, 1968), 298.

¹⁰¹ Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick. *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 110.

depth of depression seen in many of the states, as it had not enjoyed the same level of prosperity in the 1920s.

Nevertheless, broad federal ownership of land and continued withdrawal of parcels for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and National Forests irked many Alaskans. A November 1937 editorial in the *Alaska Daily Empire* summed up the prevailing attitude nicely. “Population and industrial advancement cannot be attained unless there is room for such expansion,” it read, “and there becomes less and less room for such a program as more and more land is gathered in under Federal government control.”¹⁰²

The federal government, on the other hand, and Secretary Ickes in particular, thought Alaska had more than enough resources. The problem was how they were being used.

NEW DEAL, NEW BRIDE

As the New Deal programs descended upon the nation, Harold Ickes made certain some of the riches found their way to Alaska as part of the Public Works Administration. Results included docks, bridges, public buildings, a hotel in Mount McKinley National Park and an Alaska guidebook.¹⁰³

In the midst of this ambitious and exciting work, Ickes received news that his wife Anna was killed in a car accident in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on August 31, 1935. Theirs had been a complicated relationship that, after many years, Ickes had given up trying to salvage. At the time of her death, Anna and Harold were leading nearly completely

¹⁰² “Alaska Development Vs. The Federal Land Control,” *Alaska Daily Empire*, 26 November 1937.

¹⁰³ “Unemployed Get One Billion,” *Alaska Daily Empire*, 14 July 1933 and Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1987), 109.

separate lives. Still, Ickes was named executor of the estate and received the vast majority of Anna's wealth.¹⁰⁴

Anna's death apparently came as a relief to Ickes more than anything else.¹⁰⁵ With Anna gone, he was free to pursue any one of a number of women. Yet the companion the 60-year-old Harold Ickes chose was the 23-year-old sister of his dead wife's daughter-in-law.

Jane Dahlmann was the younger sister of Betty, who had married Wilmarth, Anna Ickes' son from her first marriage. Jane had been a frequent visitor to the Ickes' home in her youth and the two were acquainted. She plays almost no role in Ickes' *published* life, yet in his unpublished memoirs he wrote of meeting her in the fall of 1935,¹⁰⁶ just a few months after Anna's death, after she contacted him to arrange a meeting.

She wanted my advice on something important to her and would I see her if she came to Washington? It rather bored me. I was not keen about the prospect of having to play host to a young girl. However, the family relationship had been such that I could not say "no" ...

I went down to the station and when the train pulled in I started down the platform. In the distance I saw an attractive woman with beautiful red hair... And before we ever reached each other I knew I was in love.¹⁰⁷

Like everything with Ickes, the relationship was complicated, not least because of their 39-year age difference. Jane's family did not approve of the match. But three years later, in May, 1938, the couple wed secretly in Dublin, Ireland. A telegram from

¹⁰⁴ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 408.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 408-9.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 923.

¹⁰⁷ Harold L. Ickes, "Untitled Autobiographical Draft," Harold L. Ickes Papers, Library of Congress, 424.

President Roosevelt arrived shortly thereafter. “AFFECTIONATE GREETINGS TO YOU BOTH,” it read. “ABILITY OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT TO KEEP A SECRET ESTABLISHED FOR FIRST TIME IN HISTORY.”¹⁰⁸ By July, they had planned a grand tour of Alaska.

NORTH TO THE FUTURE?

Jane and Harold Ickes reached Ketchikan in the first week of August, 1938. Governor Troy met the couple in Juneau and accompanied them on an excursion to the Mendenhall Glacier. While he was in Alaska, Ickes took the opportunity to lecture Governor Troy on what he considered a horrible situation, “the ease with which whisky could be bought by the Indians.”¹⁰⁹ Troy, according to Ickes’ diary, promised to do something about it.

Ickes visited Seward, Anchorage and the Matanuska Colony, on which Ickes reflected in his diary, writing that the project “has been a failure in one or two respects but in so far as the underlying principle is concerned, it has proved to be a great success.”¹¹⁰ Ickes may have overstated the situation. While the Matanuska Colony ignited great interest nationally, the farms faced many of the difficulties any Alaska industry encountered: high freight prices, distant markets, and high labor costs.¹¹¹ Nine of the 200 families selected left after less than three months and some estimates place the

¹⁰⁸T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 605-6.

¹⁰⁹ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 449.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 442.

¹¹¹ Murray Lundberg, “The Matanuska Colony: The New Deal in Alaska,” accessed on 16 November 2009 from <<http://explorenorth.com/library/yafeatures/bl-matanuska.htm>>.

cost of the project at \$5 million. By 1948, 69 percent of the original settlers had left the territory.¹¹²

Ickes spent a good deal of his Alaska trip thinking about the territory and its future. He found the Kennecott mines particularly troubling. Less than four decades earlier, prospectors discovered vast copper deposits in the area. In the summer of 1938, the last of the mines was preparing to shut down, after having removed several hundred million dollars' worth of ore, leaving virtual ghost towns behind. This "mine it and leave it" policy became known in Alaska as the "Kennecott Syndrome." On August 13, Ickes wrote in his diary

The chief drawback to Alaska, as I see it, is that the people here, generally speaking, think of everything in terms of mining ... Mining is more or less a gamble even in the best of circumstances, and a gambling spirit does not make for the building up of a normal American community with a background of agriculture or industry. People have come to Alaska to exploit gold or copper, and then take the wealth back to the United States to live the easy life. Alaska has reached the point, in my judgment, where it ought to build up its agricultural, forest, and other stable resources for the long pull.

This Territory is capable of supporting many more thousands of people than now live here, but it will do more harm than good to the Territory if more people come here as prospectors than as husbandmen or those interested in building up permanent homes for themselves and their children. I have taken occasion to talk along these lines to people whom I have met here. I have told them that their psychology is wrong. I very much doubt whether they have understood what I was talking about.¹¹³

¹¹² Claus-M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the 49th State* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1987), 113-115

¹¹³ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 444.

On August 19, the *Alaska Daily Empire* ran a banner headline, “Sec. Ickes Urges Change in Alaska Attitude.” The accompanying story said Ickes did not have anything against mining, or large commercial fishing operations as such, but he believed “Alaska isn’t getting its fair share of the return from those industries to build up ... against the time when, for example, mining is exhausted.”¹¹⁴ Ickes pressed Alaskans to levy higher taxes on its mineral wealth and to explore a timber industry. He extolled the excellent peas, wheat and oats coming out of the Matanuska Colony.

“You need to develop the tourist industry,” the article quotes Ickes as saying. “The finest opportunity in the world for it right up here in Alaska.” He addressed the tourist industry as well, and his surprise that Alaska collected no general property tax. Taxes could help establish rapid steamship lines from Seattle, Ickes said according to the article.

The next day the *Empire* ran another unsigned editorial, titled “Write Your Own Ticket.” Like high school students who had just attended a pep rally, the writer(s) sounded positively gleeful with possibility. “Mr. Ickes was just giving us a bit of sound philosophy, his sights raised on the future,” it read. “Secretary Ickes gave us something to think about. He gave us something to act upon. But will we do it? Have we got what it takes or are we going to continue to try and make a stake and then high-tail for the sunny south?”

It was a good question to ask, a seemingly easy question. But when decisions rested on Alaskans taxing themselves, the politics were complex. Ickes was pushing the

¹¹⁴ “Sec. Ickes Urges Change in Alaska Attitude,” *Alaska Daily Empire*, 19 August 1938.

territory to ready itself for statehood. But in order to do that, Alaska would have not only to grow industry and agriculture, but also to replace at least some federal dollars with revenue gained from taxes on industries that already existed, specifically the mines that employed so many and the fisheries that took so much.

SHOWDOWN

Ickes position on Alaska's mining industry was no secret. Because ore is a non-renewable resource, Ickes believed more taxes were in order. He advocated a 3 percent gross tax in addition to a 5 percent tax on gold production. Governor Troy disagreed.

Troy did not believe in more taxes, and he did not believe statehood was a wise path for the territory. Statehood would mean even more federal control in Alaska, he feared. Full territorial government was the answer, with Troy himself in the driver's seat. It was the same attitude he had held in 1916, when James Wickersham had introduced the first statehood bill.

In his 1938 annual report to the Interior Department, Troy made his position known. He sought to protect what he believed were the interests essential to his territory. They were also the interests essential to his power base. Troy drew a line in the sand in his report, calling the gold and platinum tax an "especially heavy rate" and listing the tax among "adverse factors" in the development of Alaska's mining industry.¹¹⁵ Ickes vehemently disagreed.

In a lengthy letter on October 3, Ickes admonished Troy for his remarks on the gold and platinum tax proposal. "These statements (in your report) are contrary to the

¹¹⁵ Anthony Dimond, letter from Harold Ickes to John Troy dated 11 June 1939, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

views of the Department of the Interior as expressed by me during my recent visit to Alaska and are also at variance with sound policy,” Ickes wrote. “I think it would be very advisable not to have to statements to which I have referred appear in your report and with your approval I shall arrange to have them eliminated.”¹¹⁶

A little over three months later, Alaska’s newspapers, including the *Empire*, reprinted Ickes’ letter in full, in the *Empire*’s case under the headline “Mineral Tax Raise Urged By Secretary.” In a display of the prevailing parochial, anti-federal government attitude in the territory, Alaskans praised Troy for standing up for the mining industry. *The Anchorage Daily Times* ran an editorial that read, in part:

Since when was a governor told what he could report?
Since when did the Interior Department obtain authority to
dictate the attitude of the Alaska governor?

Governor Troy would betray Alaska if he followed the
commands of Ickes. The governor is an oldtime (sic)
Alaskan and has first-hand information on conditions here.
If the governor failed to make those statements in his
annual report, he would be derelict in his duty.

Instead, the vituperous Secretary of the Interior closed his
eyes to the facts and virtually commanded the governor that
he must heed Mr. Ickes’ crackpot theories.¹¹⁷

This was a conflict that has plagued Alaska since passage of the First Organic Act: people in Alaska resenting policy decisions made thousands of miles away. While Ickes’ letter, which invoked the Kennecott debacle and itemized the value of the gold carted away from the territory on a yearly basis, may have had some valid points, it also

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 353.

reeked of condescension, and thinly-veiled threats. “Another aspect of this situation should be considered,” Ickes wrote.

Annually, the Federal Government appropriates \$500,000 for the building of roads in Alaska, in addition to approximately the same sum that is voted biennially by the Bureau of Public Roads. A very considerable road expenditure benefits exclusively a few small mining companies. Roads that were costly to build and expensive to maintain are today specifically serving individual mining enterprises in Alaska, that is, private businesses ... Consequently, a serious question may very be well raised as to whether this is sound public policy if the mining industry itself does not bear a fair burden of taxation.¹¹⁸

Roads were of particular concern to Alaskans. For years Delegate Anthony Dimond, Governor Troy and others had been pushing for an Alaska International Highway that would connect the territory to the Lower 48. The publishing of Ickes’ letter to Troy ignited a storm of anti-Ickes sentiment that never abated. When Ickes heard of the incident, he was irate.

“EMPIRE JANUARY TWENTY FIVER CARRIED TEXT MY LETTER OCTOBER THREE CONCERNING GOLD TAX, EVIDENTLY FURNISHED BY YOU,” Ickes telegraphed Troy on February 9. “RELEASE (of) INTRADEPARTMENTAL OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE WITHOUT PRIOR AUTHORIZATION IS DIRECT VIOLATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS. UNLESS YOUR EXPLANATION ADEQUATE I SHALL INTERPRET YOUR

¹¹⁸ “Mineral Tax Raise Urged By Secretary,” *Alaska Daily Empire*, 25 January 1939.

ACTION A DISREGARD OF GOOD FAITH AND THE IMPLICIT TRUST
ESSENTIAL TO YOUR OFFICE.”¹¹⁹

Troy cabled Ickes immediately and told him the release of the letter had not come from the governor’s office. Instead, Troy said, it must have come from someone in the Territorial Legislature. Troy had given the legislators a copy, he said, for “information and study.”

Troy’s elder daughter, Helen Bender, by now served as First Lady, aiding her father in many gubernatorial matters because of his declining health (Troy was nearly 70 years old). She wrote an explanatory letter to congressional delegate Dimond. “I don’t think anyone who knows John (Troy) would doubt his good faith or believe him to be untrustworthy,” Bender wrote. “He has regretted deeply that it has been impossible for him to press the passage of an 8% gross gold tax such as the Secretary desired.”¹²⁰

Bender’s letter was carefully worded, politically so. “Impossible for him to *press the passage*” of a tax? No legislative record shows an effort on Troy’s part to have a tax passed. The only reason it was “impossible” for Troy to press the issue was that Troy did not agree with the tax. After all, he was the governor. He had the press, especially the *Empire*, at his disposal.

While it may never be known whether Troy released Ickes’ letter to the press directly or if he had, in fact, simply provided copies to the Legislature, one thing is certain: The relationship between Troy and Ickes never recovered.

¹¹⁹ Anthony Dimond, telegram from Harold Ickes to John Troy, dated 9 February 1939. Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 109.

¹²⁰ Anthony Dimond, letter from Helen Bender to Anthony Dimond, dated 9 February 1939 TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 109.

CHAPTER 6: PAYBACK

When John Troy assumed his position as Alaska Governor in 1933, he had passed his duties as editor of the *Alaska Daily Empire* to his son-in-law, Robert Bender.

Accounts differ on how much Troy involved himself with the *Empire*, especially during his first term. Williams writes that Troy “actively ran the *Empire* from 1912 to 1937,”¹²¹ and letters from this time seem to support that assertion. However, the *Empire*’s self-penned history lists Helen Troy Bender as the paper’s publisher from 1933-1955.¹²² Troy wrote to Secretary Ickes more than once denying involvement in *Empire* business. In addition to the 1936 letter, Troy wrote Ickes in 1938, and again in 1939, reminding Ickes that he officially resigned from the newspaper in 1933. Troy maintained he “was only a stockholder”¹²³ in Empire Printing Company, the parent of the *Alaska Daily Empire*. What “stockholder” entailed was apparently up for debate. Troy owned two-thirds of the Empire stock. The bulk of the rest was in the hands of immediate family members.¹²⁴

Troy’s first lady was the *Empire* publisher. His son-in-law had been the newspaper’s editor until his death from alcoholism in 1937.¹²⁵ After Benders’s death, Helen lived with the governor. Surely on occasion, talk turned to the newspaper.

¹²¹ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 352.

¹²² Carl T. Sampson, ed. *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*, 15 October 1987, 4.

¹²³ Anthony Dimond, letter from John Troy to Harold Ickes, dated 11 June 1939. TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

¹²⁴ Anthony Dimond, letter from comptroller general’s office to Harold Ickes, dated 13 May 1939, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

¹²⁵ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 352.

In January 1938, auditors from the Comptroller General's office of the United States uncovered some irregularities on Alaska's books. The Empire Printing Company had won several bids to print the Alaska Legislature's session laws, rule pamphlets for the House and Senate, and other sundries. The auditors concurred "there was no possible hint of wrongdoing on the part of John" Troy.¹²⁶ But that was before Troy crossed Harold Ickes.

On May 22, 1939, Ickes sent Troy a short note along with a copy of a nine-page letter from the Comptroller General of the United States. The letter accused Troy of several crimes. Troy had entered into contracts with the Empire Printing Company in which he was majority stockholder and president while holding the office of governor, the letter contended. Troy had signed an "oath of disinterestedness" that precluded him from doing business with the territory when he took office, the letter said. Further, the administration had purchased a pickup truck with federal funds. The governor's secretary, Harry Watson, was using the truck as a personal vehicle, the letter said.

The charges were serious. Troy faced criminal prosecution. "If you care to comment on the statements made in this letter...before I take further action," Ickes wrote, "will you please do so promptly."¹²⁷

Ickes was out for blood.

Understanding the gravity of the charges against her father, Helen Bender sought a solution that would allow her father to extricate himself from the situation gracefully.

¹²⁶ Anthony Dimond, letter from Helen Bender to Anthony Dimond, dated 1 June 1939, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 109.

¹²⁷ Anthony Dimond, letter from Harold Ickes to John Troy, dated 22 May 1939, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 109.

John Troy's health was not what it once was, and his daughter likely believed the humiliation of the comptroller general's charges would destroy what fighting spirit he had left in him.

“It seems apparent to me that the Secretary is desirous of getting John (Troy) out of the job – but we can't let him get out this way,” Helen Bender wrote Anthony Dimond in June. “It would have been so much better, fairer, anyway, to...suggest that he be approached from the standpoint of the Territory needing a more active man – or something of the sort...”¹²⁸

Sometime in the summer of 1939, Helen Bender flew to Washington, D.C. to meet with Harold Ickes. Ickes would not allow Troy to remain in the governor's office. That much was clear. Bender and Ickes discussed Troy's resignation and Bender likely expressed an interest in saving face for her frail father.

In early August, Helen Bender received a letter from Ickes confirming the plan: Troy would resign his post, citing his poor health. Ickes wrote that he would talk to the Attorney General and recommend against prosecuting Troy in the Empire printing matter. “I thought you should have this information as I am writing the Governor with reference to our discussion of his resignation when you were here,” Ickes wrote.¹²⁹

In a letter to Troy dated August 12, Ickes was positively smug, though the undertone is only evident if one is aware of what had recently transpired. “Your health

¹²⁸ Anthony Dimond, letter from Helen Bender to Anthony Dimond, dated 1 June 1939, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 109.

¹²⁹ Ibid, letter from Harold Ickes to Mrs. Helen Troy Bender.

has not been good for a long time,” Ickes wrote, “and in such a situation a man’s first consideration ought to be a personal one.”

I am writing to say that you should allow no sense of duty to prevent you from taking a step that is in the interest of yourself and the members of your family. It happens that from the point of view of the Administration, your resignation at this time would not be at all embarrassing; on the contrary, it would come at a fortunate time.¹³⁰

Ickes was determined to maintain control of the situation. His letter made clear exactly who was in charge. He wrote in closing: “I think that the best way for you to handle the matter would be for you to send me your resignation and let me give out the news here with an appropriate statement.”

The governor’s daughter was relieved. “John is taking this pretty well,” Helen Bender wrote Anthony Dimond. “It is a blow – but golly after the secretary’s letter practically removing (unless I’m too optimistic) the danger of prosecution on the comptroller general’s business – there is nothing else to do.”¹³¹

Troy’s resignation was effective October 15, 1939. His quest for power and control had cost him everything, except his stature as an Alaskan worthy of esteem. When he died May 2, 1942, his reputation was still intact. Most Alaska histories cite ill health as the reason for his resignation.¹³² His passing was mourned in newspapers across the state. “John W. Troy was a Christian gentleman in the truest meaning of that term,”

¹³⁰ Ibid, letter from Harold Ickes to John Troy, dated 12 August 1939.

¹³¹ Anthony Dimond, letter from Helen Bender to Anthony Dimond, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

¹³² Though Ernest Gruening’s autobiography, among other sources, hint at something more complicated, a full accounting has never before been published to the author’s knowledge.

said Bob Bartlett, then Secretary of Alaska. “Alaska can ill spare him. Alaska will not forget him.”¹³³

NEW BLOOD

In the months following Troy’s resignation, Bender, Dimond and others in the Alaska Democratic party worked to see one of their own be appointed Territorial Governor. At the time – and some may argue it has not changed much in the more than 60 years since – many in Alaska had an “us or them” attitude toward the federal government. The territory was trapped in a political and ideological tunnel of its own making. More than a dozen names were bandied about as candidates for the governor’s post, all of them Alaskans.

President Roosevelt and Secretary Ickes had their own ideas about who should take over: someone not beholden to the “old Alaska” ideas. Only a fresh voice unafraid of alienating old friends could succeed. They wanted someone smart, progressive, and interested in a New Deal for Alaska,¹³⁴ someone like Ernest Gruening.

The Interior Department’s Division of Territories Director could not have been less of an “insider,” a fact that undoubtedly delighted Ickes whose vindictive side would have been all too pleased to raise the ire of the Alaskans who had grown to hate him. That Ickes was threatened by Gruening and that Gruening was a thorn in Ickes’ side made the idea that much sweeter.

¹³³ “Friends Pay Tribute to John W. Troy,” *Daily Alaska Empire*, 4 May 1942.

¹³⁴ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 282.

CHAPTER 7: THE DOCTOR IS IN

“I have received from Governor Troy, of Alaska, the resignation that I asked for,” Harold Ickes wrote in his diary, “and I sent over to the White House promptly a commission naming Dr. Gruening to that post.” Anthony Dimond had sent a telegram insisting that an Alaskan be appointed, Ickes noted. He added that he wished the President would appoint Gruening “at once,” perhaps anxious that Dimond’s plea would reach the President’s ear and that the president would listen.¹³⁵

No one was more surprised at Ernest Gruening’s appointment than Gruening himself. In his autobiography, *Many Battles*, Gruening remembered being called to Ickes’ office in August, likely a short time after the Ickes had brokered the resignation deal with Helen Bender. The Secretary told him he wanted Gruening to be the governor of the Alaska Territory.

“I want to think it over,” Gruening said to Ickes, “but I incline to the view that I should not take the post.”¹³⁶

Gruening told Ickes that he wanted some time to think about it, that he was about to leave on a vacation and would mull it over. Ickes demanded a decision immediately. Gruening left the Secretary’s office without giving his assent. “I dictated a letter to Ickes in which I repeated that if my answer had to be immediate and before my departure it was ‘no,’” Gruening wrote in *Many Battles*. “And then I left for a month’s vacation.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 711.

¹³⁶ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 282.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Gruening wrote that the Secretary's office called him and that his secretary informed Ickes that Gruening was traveling by automobile and unable to be reached. The next time Gruening heard from Ickes, albeit indirectly, was while driving in the coastal Maine town of Rockport. "On September 2, we heard the following news flash," Gruening wrote. "Washington: President Roosevelt today appointed Ernest Gruening, Director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions, as Governor of Alaska..."

In his autobiography, Gruening wrote simply: "That was how it was done."¹³⁸

BOY WONDER

Ernest Gruening was born February 6, 1887 in New York City, the son of Prussian immigrants. Gruening's father, Emil, was a self-made man in true American immigrant style. He left East Prussia to avoid serving in the king's army and arrived in America penniless in 1861. He joined the U.S. Army instead, and served in the Civil War in a New Jersey regiment. After his discharge, he attended the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons while tutoring in the evenings to support his education. By 1870, Emil Gruening had established a medical practice in New York, where he specialized in eye and ear problems.¹³⁹

Emil Gruening married Rose Fridenberg in 1874. She died giving birth to the couple's daughter in 1876. Four years later, Emil married Rose's sister, Phebe. Eventually Emil had five children – four girls and a boy, Ernest.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 3. Biographical information in this section comes from either Naske or Gruening's autobiography unless otherwise noted.

Emil Gruening excelled at doctoring, and he was a smart businessman. Ernest and his siblings grew up privileged: they spoke German at home and English outside of it. They spent a year in France with their mother because Emil thought they should learn the language. All attended private schools and were encouraged to be independent and inquisitive. Gruening remembered his childhood fondly, the creek that ran beneath the concrete in the backyard, and how he practiced tennis near his mother's garden.¹⁴⁰

Ernest enrolled at Harvard in 1903, when he was just 16, and graduated in 1907. The same year he entered Harvard Medical School, following in the footsteps of his father. "It had always been taken for granted that I would be a physician," Gruening wrote in *Many Battles*. But his father also indicated that his true wish was that Ernest would be a professional, the profession itself did not matter. During one of his medical school summers, he met Dorothy Smith at his tennis club. They married in 1914.

In his last year of medical school, a restless Gruening applied for a medical internship he knew would give him a month off between the end of the semester and the start of the internship, and he resolved to explore his growing fascination with journalism. He wrangled an interview at the Boston *American* and explained his situation to the city editor.

"We can probably give you a job as a cub reporter," Gruening recalled the editor's saying, "but don't do it, my boy. Anyone who would give up medicine for this

¹⁴⁰ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 9.

must be crazy. Even if you get to be managing editor of the *New York Times*, you'd make a mistake to give up that fine practice your father has."¹⁴¹ Gruening was not convinced.

Gruening graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1912. He never practiced medicine. He had been bitten by the journalism bug. So, like so many Alaska governors and even Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, he became a reporter. "I had found medicine absorbing," he wrote, "but not to the exclusion of everything else."

As a reporter, Ernest Gruening continued to lead a seemingly charmed life filled with one success after another. He wrote for the *Boston American*, the *Boston Herald*, the *Boston Journal*, the *New York Tribune* and the Spanish-language daily, *La Prensa*, among many others, eventually accepting the managing editor's position at *The Nation* magazine in 1921. Along the way, he and Dorothy had three sons, Ernest Junior, Huntington Sanders, and Peter in 1915, 1916 and 1922.

At *The Nation*, Gruening recruited respected writers and railed against social injustice – issues of race, poverty and politics, both domestic and international. Nothing was off limits on Gruening's watch. In one issue, the magazine ran a 30,000-word story about Haiti and the Dominican Republic written by Haiti's former Secretary of State. Gruening writes of the publication of the story and resulting policy changes in his autobiography with characteristic vanity. Gruening lived life largely without fear and believed himself to be correct in all matters.

More often than not, he was.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 30.

POLITICAL PASSION

Among Ernest Gruening's assets was the uncanny ability to seize a moment. While editing *The Nation*, he developed a keen interest in Mexico. After just two years at the magazine, where he was enjoying tremendous success, he resigned his position to travel and learn more about America's southern neighbor.¹⁴² Gruening felt Americans knew too little about Mexico and set out to write a book to remedy the situation. The resulting volume, *Mexico and Its Heritage*, was published in 1928 and "is still recommended today by both the U.S. State Department and many Mexican officials as required reading."¹⁴³

In the mid-1920s, Gruening grew increasingly interested in politics and participated actively in the Progressive Party, serving as publicity director for Progressive presidential candidate Robert LaFollette. Though he knew LaFollette would not win (he carried only his home state of Wisconsin), politics ignited a passion in Gruening that would last the rest of his life.

By 1927, Gruening had moved his family yet again, this time to Portland, Maine, where he served as editor of the newly created *Portland Evening News*. With the newspaper as his pulpit, Gruening preached on all manner of progressive causes. He railed against utilities magnate Samuel Insull for what he deemed his monopolistic practices, political corruption, and despite Maine's geographic location, problems in the Caribbean and Mexico. When the Gruening family suffered a great tragedy in 1931 with

¹⁴² Money was never a concern for Gruening. His father had amassed a small fortune and provided a healthy inheritance to each of his children.

¹⁴³ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 4.

Ernest Jr.'s death from a middle ear infection, Gruening turned to work to alleviate his grief.¹⁴⁴

He circulated his editorials widely and, in 1932, even wrote to New York Governor and Presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt urging change in United States' policy toward Latin America. But the Maine stage was too small for muckraking Gruening. By the time candidate Roosevelt became President Roosevelt, Gruening was back at *The Nation*, working as one of four editors at the magazine. He traveled to the nation's capital at least once a month to "check up" on Roosevelt's activities and write editorials on the administration's progress.¹⁴⁵

In September 1933, Gruening was in Washington, D.C. on one of his regular visits when he was called to the White House for an audience with President Roosevelt himself. The President, familiar with Gruening's writings and travels in Latin America, asked him about his thoughts on Cuba. Impressed with his knowledge and obvious diplomatic skills, Roosevelt appointed Gruening as an advisor to the U.S. delegation headed to Uruguay for the Seventh International Conference of American States.¹⁴⁶

Then, in 1934, after a short and contentious editorship at the *New York Evening Post*, Gruening joined The Foreign Policy Association for a study of Cuba's social and economic situation. In each position he held related to international affairs, Gruening was praised for his knowledge and diplomacy. After the trip to Uruguay, U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent Gruening a letter that read, in part: "You have exhibited initiative,

¹⁴⁴ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 148-150.

¹⁴⁵ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 7.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

constructive capability and a spirit of splendid teamwork. I do not know anyone in your position who could have rendered more desirable and important service to the American Delegation and to the United States Government than you have rendered in connection with this mission and Conference.”¹⁴⁷

While the letter undoubtedly pleased him, Gruening had grown up in an environment where encouragement and praise were as common as tennis lessons and discussions about literature. He appears to have taken Secretary Hull’s praise in stride. Harold Ickes, on the other hand, yearned for exactly this kind of recognition. Ickes’ childhood possessed none of the charm of Gruening’s upbringing. Having lost his mother as a young teen, and moved to Chicago to live with an aunt and uncle who treated him more like an indentured servant than a member of the family, Ickes had not known economic security until he married his wife, Anna. And even then her wealth created greater insecurity for Ickes in some ways. Had Ickes received such praise from someone in such a high position, he might have basked in its warmth for days. Gruening, on the other hand, took such affirmation of his abilities in stride.

Given the stark differences in their upbringings, it is not surprising that when the paths of these men finally did meet in the Roosevelt administration it was a less of a merge than a collision.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 9.

CHAPTER 8: BATTLE OF WILLS



Fig. 3: Ernest Gruening
(courtesy Alaska State Library Historical Collection)

Ernest Gruening and Harold Ickes were not strangers when Gruening joined the Roosevelt Administration in 1934. Gruening had written about Ickes in an editorial praising Roosevelt’s cabinet the previous year. Pleased with the praise, yet always insecure, Ickes wrote to Gruening that he hoped that after witnessing his work, Gruening and his fellow Progressives “will feel that at least I have done the best that was in me and regard me as still a member of the Progressive fold.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Harold L. Ickes, Letter to Gruening dated 9 March 1933, Secretary of the Interior file, Library of Congress.

In 1934, Roosevelt indicated to Ickes that he would like the bright diplomat to become a permanent part of the administration.¹⁴⁹ The pair met in August and Ickes offered Gruening the directorship of the newly created Interior division, the Office of Territories and Island Possessions. Gruening accepted, though he wrote in his autobiography “I was conscious of my inadequacy to head the division. I had never visited three of its four prospective wards, Alaska, Hawaii and the Virgin Islands; and I had spent only one day in Puerto Rico in the course of a 1931 seminar in the Caribbean. I did not advertise my lack of firsthand experience and, fortunately, none of the newspapermen who interviewed me raised the question. In fact, the editorial comments on my appointment were uniformly favorable.”¹⁵⁰

Gruening spent the first few weeks on the job organizing his office and delighting in his good fortune in being appointed to such a prestigious position. This delight included his admiration, albeit qualified, for his boss, Harold Ickes. “I had never met Ickes,” Gruening wrote in his autobiography

But what I knew of him, or thought I knew of him, gave me assurance that I would be working for an intellectually and spiritually congenial man. He was known as a progressive who for years had been battling in the Middle West for liberal causes – unsuccessfully, most of the time, until the advent of the New Deal. . . . I was confident I would be happy in the Department and told my friends so.¹⁵¹

But, Gruening added, “I was soon to be disillusioned.”

¹⁴⁹ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 10.

¹⁵⁰ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 181.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

Both Ickes and Gruening were accustomed to doing things their own way. As an editor, if Gruening wanted a writer to work for him, he simply asked. Ickes, by now a veteran of the Interior Department labyrinth, kept order the only way he knew how: by maintaining tight control. So when a position opened in the Division of Territories and Gruening mentioned it to a friend, Robert Herrick, Ickes was irate. According to Gruening's autobiography, Ickes flatly refused to accept the suggestion, calling the man "a snob."

But the incident didn't end there. According to Gruening's account, Ickes then "covered himself" with a paper trail that indicated Herrick's appointment had been Ickes' idea and Gruening had derailed the appointment by offering Herrick a much higher salary than Ickes' thought prudent. "I wondered if that was how Ickes intended to conduct the Department of the Interior," Gruening wrote. "If so, I knew it would be impossible to trust him."¹⁵²

His trust in Ickes shattered, Gruening began to avoid his superior and the chain of command. He often approached President Roosevelt directly, a habit that angered Ickes, who believed Gruening was undermining his authority. "As I was waiting to go into the President's office," Ickes wrote in his diary in February of 1938, "out popped Gruening with Judge Moore and another man from the State Department. I resent this short-cutting to the White House. It is something Gruening has been guilty of on many occasions."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Ibid, 184-85.

¹⁵³ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 320.

The lack of affection between Ickes and Gruening was hardly a secret in Washington, yet the breadth and depth of what Ickes felt toward Gruening is perhaps best explained in his own words. In 1946, after Ickes left the Interior Department, he responded to a letter that inquired about his troubled relationship with then-Alaska Governor Gruening. The letter-writer, Carl Wenz of Madison, Wisconsin, was presumably a stranger to Ickes, as no pleasantries were exchanged between the two men. Wenz inquired about policy the Secretary laid down with Gruening about not leaving the territory without Ickes permission. Wenz wondered whether the policy was a reflection on Ickes' attitudes about federal control of the Alaska Territory. "I take it that you do not know Governor Gruening or how he operates," Ickes responded.

I brought him to Washington originally as Director of the Division of Territories and Islands. I never had any man on my staff who spent so little time in his office. Usually when I tried to reach him by telephone I found that he was elsewhere and I had to search all over the Department for him although in the end I came to discover that he was likely to be in one of two or three offices.

It got to be a joke in Interior, the time that Mr. Gruening could devote to personal pleasure and ineffective gossip. He let others in his division do the work while he wandered footloose, not only in other offices of the Department but in other departments.

... Governor Gruening considered that he was a law unto himself. He never hesitated to shortcut me when he thought that he could advantage himself.

I believe that you would find that I gave to the members of my staff loyalty for loyalty. I was always happy when I could help them to an improvement, either in salary or in grade. I do not believe there was a more loyal staff in

Washington. Governor Gruening was the conspicuous exception.¹⁵⁴

That two men of such pride and self-importance could exist in the same administration is not surprising, given the healthy ego and sense of superiority often ascribed to politicians.¹⁵⁵ But that they could exist in the same department is nothing short of remarkable. It was only a matter of time before something had to give. Interior wasn't big enough for the both of them, unless, of course, one of them was far, far away.

ALASKA, HO!

“I am thoroughly convinced that I ought to have a new Director of Islands and Territories in place of Gruening,” Ickes wrote in May, 1939.¹⁵⁶ It was the culmination of many disputes between the men, not the least of which was a dustup involving the Puerto Rican Reconstruction Administration (PRRA).

Roosevelt created the PRRA after Gruening pled his case. Gruening didn't have the power to deal with Puerto Rico's unemployment, poverty and other problems, he said. There were proposals from the President's Policy Committee on Puerto Rico, but no way to fund or administer them. So Roosevelt created the PRRA in 1935 and made Gruening its director.¹⁵⁷ Ickes, not surprisingly, was angered by Gruening's new power and complained about it to the President often.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Harold L. Ickes, Letter from Carl Wenz, dated 13 November 1946 and letter to Wenz, dated 20 November 1946, Alaska file, Library of Congress, Box 42.

¹⁵⁵ Alan C. Elms, *Personality in Politics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1976), 61.

¹⁵⁶ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 636.

¹⁵⁷ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 12-13.

¹⁵⁸ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. II 1936-1939* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 523.

Reform and relief did not go well for Gruening with the PRRA. His decision to allow health clinics in Puerto Rico to distribute birth control information angered the Catholic Church, a major power in the territory. Many of his staff complained about various phases of Gruening's relief plans. Puerto Rico's Liberal party complained about the way money was spent.¹⁵⁹

Ickes must have felt some pleasure hearing of Gruening's struggles. He consistently pressed Roosevelt to take away Gruening's powers at the PRRA. If it were up to Ickes, Roosevelt would have disposed of Gruening altogether.

Gruening's alleged mismanagement of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions and what Ickes deemed his insubordination had reached a point of no return in early 1939, just as John Troy's insubordination regarding Ickes' (and the federal government's) view on the Alaska minerals tax had occurred. It was the perfect time for a changing of the guard.

Roosevelt is credited with the decision to appoint Gruening as Alaska Governor. "I knew that it was President Roosevelt's idea, and not Ickes'," Gruening wrote in his autobiography. Ickes, "I was convinced, would never have offered it to me of his own accord."¹⁶⁰ Still, despite the pay raise and prestige of the position, Ickes must have been ecstatic to be rid of Gruening, or at least to have him out of the immediate vicinity.

¹⁵⁹ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 14-16.

¹⁶⁰ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 282. Note: Ickes' *Secret Diary* also supports Gruening's version.

Gruening had visited the territory twice, first in May 1936, when he delivered the University of Alaska's commencement address at the request of University President Charles Bunnell. His second visit came in 1938, when he visited on an extended tour in his capacity as Division of Territories and Island Possessions director. On his second visit, he crossed paths with Ickes more than once, at times traveling with the Secretary. Gruening also spent time with Governor Troy and Delegate Dimond and felt he understood at least some of the issues facing the territory. But he did not think he should be the one to be responsible for them. Gruening had never sought a frontier lifestyle. He was a professional in the tradition of his father, Emil. He did not hunt like other Alaska men; he played tennis. He did not hike in the wilderness; he rode horses. His interests ran to Mexico and Central America, not the north.

After Gruening heard the surprise newscast of his appointment as Alaska governor, he went to see the president. According to his autobiography, he told Roosevelt that he thought University of Alaska President Charles Bunnell or Congressional Delegate Dimond would be great choices for governor. He said he would provide Roosevelt with a longer list of names if he so desired.

"Ernest," the President said, according to Gruening, "Alaska has lost touch with the federal government. There's a lot of the New Deal that hasn't come to Alaska. You know your way around here. You know what we're trying to do. You know how to get it done. You can be of great help to Alaska. You should go."¹⁶¹ Gruening's recollection of

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 283.

the conversation seems a bit inflated, but it matches the tone of his autobiography. A healthy ego is one thing Gruening never lacked.

Roosevelt wanted to wait until after Congress adjourned before he made the appointment official.¹⁶² So it was after a brief delay that the Gruening family arrived in Alaska on December 4, 1939.

¹⁶² Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 24.

CHAPTER 9: GRUENING TAKES ALASKA

The appointment of Ernest Gruening as Alaska governor was met with great skepticism in the territory. He was an “outsider” and Alaskans cried foul when Roosevelt announced his nomination. They demanded that an Alaska resident be appointed rather than some East Coast doctor. Within Alaska’s Democratic Party, several men campaigned for the position. The rifts created threatened to divide Alaska’s Democrats.

Helen Troy Bender was one of the few who saw Gruening’s strengths. She’d met Gruening on one of his Alaska visits. “Maybe I am not very loyal to the Territory or the party,” Bender wrote Anthony Dimond in October 1939, “but unless you ... can get the job ... I think I’d rather see Dr. Gruening confirmed. It might save a battle in the party.”¹⁶³

A QUICK STUDY

Gruening set himself to learn as much as possible about his new charge. What he discovered surprised him. Until 1912, Alaska did not even have its own laws – it was governed by the laws of the Oregon Territory. The territory had elected its first Congressional delegate just over three decades earlier, and the legislature allowed under the second Organic Act of 1912 “was more limited in its field of action than the legislature of any other territory had ever been.”¹⁶⁴ A system of boards created by the legislature diluted the power of the governor’s position. The territory lacked infrastructure and a taxation system consistent with its abundant natural resource wealth.

¹⁶³ Anthony Dimond, letter from Helen Bender dated 14 October 1939 TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 110.

¹⁶⁴ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska’s Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 30-31.

Gruening found Alaska's tax system "archaic." According to historian Cole, "from 1917 to 1936 the total taxes paid into the territorial treasury from *all* mining operations, which included Kennecott and every gold mine in Alaska, was only about \$1.9 million, representing less than one-half of one percent of the gross mineral value of about \$430 million."¹⁶⁵ Alaska was hardly keeping its share of the profit from non-renewable resources. Gruening made taxation one of the key issues of his administration. In short, he had his work cut out for him.

As much as Gruening's and Ickes' opinions differed on issues ranging from proper office protocol to economic issues in Puerto Rico, they did agree on one thing: Alaska needed to be pushed, pulled or dragged into the twentieth century, a progressive system of taxation, and, eventually, statehood. On the way there, both men would face opposition from many parties, most notably the press.

¹⁶⁵ Alaska Planning Council, "Graphical Survey of Territorial Administration and of Basic Industries," (1938) quoted in Terrence Cole, "Blinded by Riches: The Permanent Funding Problem and the Prudhoe Bay Effect" (Anchorage: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, 2004), 50-51.



Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Fig. 4: Gruening takes the oath of office as Alaska’s governor, with John Troy at right.
(courtesy University of Alaska Fairbanks archives)

TROY’S GHOST

John Troy was out of the governor’s office, but his daughter still ran the *Alaska Daily Empire*, the primary newspaper of the capital city, and Troy’s views would continue to be expressed in its pages. For more than 30 years, the *Empire* pushed for a “full territorial form of government,” the anti-Wickersham stand it adopted after passage of the second Organic Act in 1912. The paper touted the benefits of home rule, endlessly extolling the virtues of a better territorial government with more powers by Alaska, for Alaska. But the *Empire* had never advocated statehood for Alaska. And though publisher Helen Bender may have initially championed Gruening’s appointment as Alaska

Governor, her attitude quickly changed. Like her father before her, she opposed any sort of federal “meddling” in Alaska affairs, especially increased taxation. And she would use her newspaper to broadcast her position.

Helen had spent the majority of her life in Juneau. She attended the University of Washington, though she never graduated, and worked for a few years in California’s newly booming movie industry.¹⁶⁶ But Juneau was clearly where she felt the most at home. The mining interests so prominent in town were people she knew well. She counted some of the top management in the salmon canning industry among her friends.¹⁶⁷ These were the same interests that opposed increased taxes and statehood. Many also advertised in the *Empire*. These relationships undoubtedly affected her business decisions.

Meanwhile, her father, with whom she was unusually close, grew more and more frail and sick. Helen’s new husband (pilot Alf Monsen, whom she married in her dying father’s hospital room, and who himself would die just a few years later in a plane crash near Ketchikan) was off flying for Pan-Am Airlines much of the time. She had no children. So Helen Monsen may have looked to her Juneau friends for support and advice. Gruening contended that she was “under the influence of her attorney, Herbert L. Faulkner, partisan and attorney for absentee interests.”¹⁶⁸

Those absentee interests, including the Alaska Steamship Company, another Monsen friend, were the objects of Gruening’s attacks as he campaigned for more taxes.

¹⁶⁶ Anthony Dimond, unsigned memo regarding Helen Bender dated 27 June 1939, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Series 3, Box 3, Folder 109.

¹⁶⁷ Carl T. Sampson, ed., *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*, 15 October 1987, 9.

¹⁶⁸ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 335.

Alaska's nearly non-existent tax structure and lack of local governance made it possible for miners, canners and others to exploit Alaska's natural resources for tremendous financial gain, Gruening argued.

Alaska has enriched the nation. But it has done relatively little for itself. The time has come when an increasing portion of that wealth should be kept in Alaska for the further development, progress, and improvement of Alaska and the Alaskans. That is the fundamental issue which faces us here today. That is the challenge which we should meet.¹⁶⁹

Helen Monsen countered that Gruening was a federal bureaucrat (not even a real Alaskan!) who simply wanted to bloat the government. In 1944, "Here We Go Again Folks" was an editorial that essentially blamed Gruening for the closure of the Alaska-Juneau mine, which had closed due to low gold prices and a labor shortage brought about by World War II. In another editorial, titled "Abuse of High Office," the *Empire* accused Gruening of canceling a Federal Works Project in Anchorage because he didn't get along with "some people of that city," a reference to Gruening's strained relationship with the head of the Federal Works Agency.¹⁷⁰

"This could mean any number of things," the editorial read. "Perhaps they didn't vote for the right political candidates – or perhaps they didn't wear their hats the right way." The same day, the *Empire* ran an eight-column headline on the front page: "Gruening Answers Senate Charges," though no charges were made against Gruening in the story. The text referred to Gruening as "his Excellency, the Governor," contrasting the "well-bred" Easterner with salt-of-the-earth Alaskans.

¹⁶⁹ Ernest Gruening, *Message of the Governor of Alaska to the 15th Legislative Assembly* (Juneau, 1941), 9.

¹⁷⁰ "Abuse of High Office," *Alaska Daily Empire*, 28 March 1946.

The continued attacks frustrated and angered Gruening, the former journalist. He wrote responses to the *Empire* and demanded they be printed. “Whether you also wish to publish an editorial apology and retraction for having published, without any attempt at verification, so baseless and injurious a criticism, I leave to your sense of fairness,” Gruening wrote the *Empire* after one such attack.¹⁷¹ The *Empire* refused to print Gruening’s missives or issue any retraction.

DECLARATIONS OF WAR

While Gruening battled the *Empire*, Ickes battled his own Alaska foes. Alaskans were upset about the Interior Department’s policies regarding the railroad in the 1930s and the subsequent tax on the Richardson Highway. The U.S. Senate, dismayed at the operating deficit of the Alaska Railroad, had demanded cuts. The subsequent passenger rate and cargo increases “raised the cost of living and doing business along the railbelt, dismaying local residents.”¹⁷² Troublesome, too, was Ickes’ endorsement of a plan to relocate European Jewish refugees to the territory. Alaskans seemed to believe that the best way to develop Alaska was to let it develop itself.¹⁷³

By 1941, frustration ran high in the Alaska Legislature. At a loss for what to do as Secretary Ickes continued to exercise his “dictatorship” over the territory, the legislature forwarded to President Roosevelt a petition calling for Ickes’ resignation. News accounts quoted Roosevelt as saying the petition was “a refreshing reminder of the

¹⁷¹ Ernest Gruening, letter to the *Juneau Empire*, 1946, Ernest Gruening Collection, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 726, folder 7.

¹⁷² Pat Lawler, “Harold Ickes: The Man Alaskans Loved to Hate,” in *The Alaska Journal*, 13, no. 1, (Seattle: Winter 1983), 103-104.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 105.

freedom of expression enjoyed by a democracy.”¹⁷⁴ But the President took no action, much to the chagrin of Alaskans.

The petition did, however, receive considerable press coverage. As a result, *Chicago Tribune* advocacy journalist George Tagge wrote a six-part series on Ickes and Alaska that ran under inflammatory headlines such as “Alaska Pioneers Blast Ickes For Park Land Grab,” along with “New Ickes Grab For Power Stirs Alaskans’ Fears,” and “Alaskans Blame Ickes As Salmon Catch Tumbles.”

“Alaskans today expressed fears that Secretary Harold L. Ickes is making another attempt to tighten his ironhanded control over the territory by having Admiralty Island, just south of (Juneau), turned into a national park,” Tagge wrote in one dispatch from Juneau.¹⁷⁵ Another of Tagge’s articles asserted that Ickes’ “Indian affairs bureau” used “Gestapo tactics” in interviewing Alaska Natives about conditions in the territory.¹⁷⁶

Most of the stories began with a shred of truth, but only a shred. Led by legendary Colonel Robert McCormick, the *Chicago Tribune* was the most strident national voice of opposition to Roosevelt’s presidency and his New Deal policies. Ickes and Alaska seemed to be an easy target. The newspaper was the beating heart of reactionary journalism at the time and under McCormick’s direction sought to embarrass the federal government at every turn. With a robust news service that distributed stories to dozens of other newspapers, it often succeeded.

¹⁷⁴ “Alaska Piles Up Its Grievances Against Ickes,” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 March 1941.

¹⁷⁵ George Tagge, “New Ickes Grab for Power Stirs Alaskans’ Fears,” *Chicago Tribune*, 6 April 1941.

¹⁷⁶ George Tagge, “Resident Assails Ickes’ ‘Gestapo’ Among Alaska Indians,” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1941.

While Ickes did seek to withdraw Admiralty Island as a National Park, it is doubtful he intended to evict those who made their homes on the island. Ickes was not quoted in any of the six articles, which took almost every Interior Department division to task while faintly praising the U.S. Forest Service. Still another of Tagge's stories began "Like Hitler, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes and other Federal officials have laid a barrage of pseudo-scientific propaganda to gain dictatorial control..."¹⁷⁷

The coverage even angered Ickes' sometime nemesis, Ernest Gruening. In a memo to Ickes dated April 21, 1941, he wrote:

The Chicago Tribune series seems like an evident attempt on the part of that newspaper to vent all of its accumulated spleen against the administration in general and you in particular.

The articles fall into several classes:

1. Articles which air what, from some Alaskan standpoints, are grievances against Departmental policy.
2. Articles which discuss issues that are controversial but in which the Tribune gives a biased and one-sided presentation.
3. Articles which make charges that have nothing whatsoever to do with you but which are nevertheless "pinned" on you.¹⁷⁸

Gruening's memo included a five-page attachment that analyzed each of Tagge's articles and gave background on some of the sources Tagge quoted. In a rare moment of humanity between the two men, Ickes thanked Gruening for his attention and said he

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Harold L. Ickes, memo from Ernest Gruening dated 21 April 1941, Alaska file, Library of Congress. Box 43.

hoped to prepare a response to Tagge's allegations in the form of a magazine article.¹⁷⁹ Ickes, it seemed, had so much on his docket that no magazine article ever appeared. His attention had turned, at least temporarily, from Alaska.

THE REAL WAR

While the *Empire* waged war against Gruening – for proposing taxes, for demanding change, for suggesting statehood, and for Helen Monsen, for not continuing her father's fight – World War II was changing the physical and political landscape of Alaska. The war brought billions of federal dollars to the territory in the form of military bases and projects like the Alaska Highway. Sitka saw the construction of a naval base during wartime, but the majority of World War II construction took part in areas of the state far from the capital. The populations of Anchorage and Fairbanks boomed as newcomers arrived, first for work, later to stay. It was a newer, younger, different Alaska than the one John Troy found in 1897, certainly not the place where Helen Monsen was born in 1898.

Gruening was no longer alone in his “outsider” views. Anchorage's population increased by a factor of 10 in the 1940s. Similar population explosions took place in the Interior. The 1930s and '40s brought new creative and energetic minds from the Lower 48. Bob Atwood, who arrived in 1935, purchased the struggling *Anchorage Times*. In short order he turned it into the largest and most profitable newspaper in the state.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps more important for Gruening, Atwood became a champion of the statehood

¹⁷⁹Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, Vol. III 1939-1941* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1954), 475.

¹⁸⁰Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 420.

movement and a powerful Gruening ally in the press. Meantime, in late 1944 “the *Empire* had quietly dropped from its masthead its long-standing claim that its circulation was greater than that of any other publication” in Alaska.¹⁸¹

Alaska’s new residents came from states that had gained full status decades or longer ago. They were accustomed to the political freedom that came with membership in the United States. They were used to paying income taxes. Finally, Gruening’s proposals gained traction.¹⁸² He had campaigned for an income tax since 1941. In 1949, a newly elected territorial legislature held a special session and passed a territorial income tax.¹⁸³

Juneau, however, did not experience an influx of outsiders full of vigor and new ideas. Juneau’s 1940 population stood at 5,729. In 1950 it was 5,956. It was hardly the exponential increase seen in other parts of the state. Indeed, one of Juneau’s biggest employers, the Alaska-Juneau mine closed in 1944 due to high costs and a labor shortage because of the war. While much of Alaska grew and blossomed into a new era, Juneau and her *Empire* remained caught in the same old arguments, content to maintain the status quo.

¹⁸¹ Carl T. Sampson ed., *Juneau Empire 75th Anniversary Edition*, 15 October 1987, 9.

¹⁸² Terence Cole, “Blinded by Riches: The Permanent Funding Problem and the Prudhoe Bay Effect” (Anchorage: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, 2004), 70-71.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

CHAPTER 10: DEATH OF AN ‘EMPIRE’



Fig. 5: Helen Monsen in the newsroom at the *Alaska Daily Empire*.
(courtesy *Juneau Empire*)

Tensions between the *Empire* and Gruening escalated during Gruening’s second term as governor. While he won over many Alaskans with his tireless devotion to the territory and his progressive ideas, Helen Monsen remained unmoved. In 1944, perhaps sensing its loosening grip on the citizenry, the *Empire* reprinted an editorial from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* titled “The Power of the Press.” It read: “The world needs more men at the printing presses to help us save the freedoms we now enjoy. Yes, and to extend those freedoms to those who groan under the yoke of tyranny. The power of the printed

word is almost beyond limit.”¹⁸⁴ The *Empire* may have been engaged in a case of wishful thinking. Despite its continued campaign, Alaskans approved a statehood referendum by a 3-2 margin in 1946.

The next year, the *Empire*, published an editorial titled “Statehood For Alaska.” The writers accused Gruening of never presenting the facts on statehood and instead offering shoddy financial figures about the true cost of the process. The newspaper tried to undercut Gruening’s popularity by charging that he stacked Alaska’s political offices with his friends.

Gruening responded by letter a week after the editorial’s publication. “I do not regard the editorial policy of the EMPIRE as any of my business,” he wrote.

I have no quarrel with the EMPIRE because its views on statehood or other matters that happen to be different than my own. I could wish that the town had a newspaper that occasionally defended the rights of the people who are investing their lives in the development of Alaska, instead of always upholding the actions of the absentee landlords, their agents and satellites, but since it does not I have long since accepted as inevitable that we are to be without such benefits.¹⁸⁵

Gruening began to call the *Empire* part of the “Axis press,” a roster that also included *The Anchorage Daily News* and *The Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. They were newspapers he believed were subsidized by the advertising dollars of absentee interests. Gruening’s secretary maintained a clipping file of the articles and editorials the governor

¹⁸⁴ “The Power of the Press,” *Daily Alaska Empire*, 24 August 1944.

¹⁸⁵ Ernest Gruening, “An Open Letter to the Alaska Daily Empire,” dated 5 September 1947, Ernest Gruening collection, TD, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 31, Folder 245.

found offensive. More and more, the *Empire* seemed to be on the losing end of the battle. Perhaps in desperation, the vitriol increased.

In 1950, the *Empire* ran a banner headline that read “Did Gruening Influence Elections?” The story featured a Nebraska senator accusing Gruening of calling schoolteachers in rural Alaska to inquire about their preference for Alaska’s congressional delegate, insinuating that he tried to influence their preference, though it offered no evidence. A 1951 editorial criticizing Gruening’s political appointments called for an end to “this Kremlin-style dictatorship.” The newspaper devoted pages of editorials to Gruening’s “unsavory” dealings in the construction of a Palmer, Alaska airport. In some early-1952 stories, the *Empire* referred to Gruening as “Ernie.” There seemed to be no end in sight. Every mention Gruening made of statehood was met with cynicism and ridicule. Had Juneau experienced the population growth seen in other parts of Alaska, its voice may have been much louder, especially since it was the capital city. Instead, the *Empire* had to rely on other news outlets that shared its anti-statehood, anti-Gruening views. The *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* fit the bill.

News-Miner owner Austin “Cap” Lathrop was known as “Alaska’s first home-grown millionaire.”¹⁸⁶ He was a businessman of prestige and influence. He also opposed statehood. Lathrop owned several businesses and theaters in the state on which he paid little or no taxes. If Alaska became a state that would surely change. The *News-Miner*, while not offering up the same level of personal attacks as the *Empire*, often made the case against statehood in its pages.

¹⁸⁶ Elizabeth Tower, *Mining, Media, Movies: Cap Lathrop’s Keys for Alaska’s Riches*, (Anchorage: Elizabeth Tower, 1991) 11.

But Lathrop died in a railroad yard accident in 1950, and C.W. Snedden purchased the *News-Miner*. Lathrop's views would influence Snedden at first (as they likely influenced the views of many *News-Miner* readers). "When I took over the paper from 'Cap' Austin E. Lathrop in 1950, I inherited several file drawers of very valid arguments against statehood," Snedden later wrote. But he began to question the arguments over the next three years.

In 1953, Snedden asked his editor, Jack Ryan, to prepare reports on the "pro" and "con" sides of statehood for the territory. Ryan became convinced that statehood was Alaska's best bet. A short time later, the *News-Miner* published a four-page section listing the reasons why the newspaper now chose to advance the idea of statehood.¹⁸⁷

With the flipping of the *News-Miner*, Alaska's two largest newspapers now supported statehood. The public across the state grew increasingly convinced. Helen Monsen did not. The *Empire's* crusade continued. But on September 25, 1952, Monsen's *Empire* would err in spectacular fashion.

THE MOVEMENT STOPS

The headline that ran in the *Daily Alaska Empire* on September 25, 1952 was large, even by *Empire* standards: "Bare 'Special' Ferry Fund." Underneath the banner ran two stories. The first was "Gruening, Metcalf, Roden Divert 'Chilkoot' Cash to Private Bank Account." The second read simply "Reeve Raps Graft, Corruption." The second story reported on a talk given by congressional candidate Robert Reeve on government

¹⁸⁷Carroll V. Glines, Jr., *Alaska's Press and the Battle for Statehood*. (Washington, D.C.: American University, 1969), 63.

corruption. It had nothing to do with Gruening, though on the *Empire*'s front page, the two stories looked like peas in a pod.

The newspaper clearly wanted the idea of corruption at the top of readers' minds. The "Chilkoot bank account" story provided details of a "special fund" allegedly set up by Gruening, Territorial Treasurer Henry Roden and Highway Engineer Frank Metcalf to pay operating expense for the "Chilkoot," a state-owned ferry. The story implied that Gruening and company had created a personal slush fund. Beneath a photograph of a check drawn on the ferry fund, the *Empire* ran an editorial titled "Start Talking Boys."

The fourth paragraph of the Chilkoot story was especially damning: "The case closely parallels that of Oscar Olson, former territorial treasurer who is now serving a prison term at McNeil's Island penitentiary for violating the law in the receipt and disbursement of funds."

In fact, the state had purchased the Chilkoot from private owners who no longer wanted to operate the ferry, which ran between Haines and Juneau. The Chilkoot was the only transportation between the two cities, and the state did not want a gap in the system. The "territorial voucher" payment system proved cumbersome and unreliable, however, which left the ferry managers without funds to purchase the most basic operating necessities. After meeting with the attorney general, a special account was set up for Chilkoot operating expenses like fuel and toilet paper. The only person authorized to withdraw funds was the ferry's purser. There had been no corruption or malfeasance in the case, and the *Empire* would pay a high price for its relentless, and finally reckless, battering of the territorial governor.

Gruening, the former journalist, seized on the Chilkoot story and used it to exact revenge on the *Empire*. The three men sued the Empire Printing Company for libel. In letters to his lawyers, Gruening referred to the newspaper simply as “the enemy.” He pressed for a trial separate from Metcalf and Roden. And though each man sought \$100,000 in damages, Gruening thought he deserved \$200,000 after the *Empire*’s legacy of mistreatment. “In my case, as distinct from the other two plaintiffs, it runs back 10 years or more,” Gruening wrote to his attorney. “It adds up to deliberate and sustained prejudice, malice and hatred and the cumulative effect should be considerable.”¹⁸⁸

Gruening let loose all of his anger toward the *Empire* as the suit played out. In letter after letter to his attorney he referred to the *Empire* as “the enemy.”

This particular libel was merely the culmination of a long series of attacks, suppressions of truth, distortions, aspersion, (and) vilifications, clearly revealing bias, malice and hatred.¹⁸⁹

The *Empire* refused to back down. The newspaper ran a series of editorials and stories on the suit, many on the front page. In October 1952, the *Empire* ran the following under the headline “Intimidated!”

The apparent purpose of this (suit) is to frighten the publisher of the Empire into relaxing her relentless fight against the excesses of Gruening’s administration and to undermine public confidence in a reputable newspaper. To set the record straight the Empire’s publisher herewith informs Dr. Gruening that she is not and will not be frightened by his political antics nor those of his cohorts; that the Empire will continue, in the highest traditions of the free press, to inform the public of the conduct of its

¹⁸⁸ Ernest Gruening, letter to Walter Buell 3 March 1955, Ernest Gruening collection, Alaska & Polar Regions Collections, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Box 726, Folder 10.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, letter dated 24 July 1954.

elected and appointed officials without fear, favor or respect to political party lines.

Amidst the feuding, Juneau's journalistic landscape widened. The *Juneau Independent*, a weekly tabloid, launched in 1952. Its editors were disgruntled former *Empire* staffers. The *Empire* lashed out again, suggesting the paper's modest success was due to Gruening's backing. The *Independent* responded:

We actually do have the governor's backing. Governor Gruening coughed up his five dollars for a year's subscription with a smile. The fiver and the smile were both welcome, although I personally suspect the smile was one of relief. With the pack after him for so long (with lead dog *Empire* snatching fangs full of pants week after week), he probably felt even a starving new pup might be a diversion.¹⁹⁰

In the end, Gruening, Roden and Metcalf filed a single suit. The case was moved from Juneau to Ketchikan owing to the amount of attention it received in the *Empire's* pages. The court sided with Gruening, though he did not receive the financial windfall he sought. Each plaintiff was awarded \$1 in compensatory damages and \$5,000 in punitive damages, upheld on appeal.

The damage to the *Empire* far exceeded the monetary awards it was forced to pay, though the cost of the trial alone exhausted Helen Monsen's bank account. But beyond profit, journalism is an enterprise that cannot be effective without trust, respect and reader confidence. Though it is difficult to quantify, these were likely lost with the libel verdict against the newspaper.

¹⁹⁰ Lew Williams, Jr. and Evangeline Atwood. *Bent Pins to Chains: Alaska and Its Newspapers* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2006), 547-48.

The libel trial consumed five years of Helen Monsen's life (the appeal went through 1957). The *Empire* now competed with the *Juneau Independent*, launched in 1952, for readers. And readers were harder to come by. Out of money and out of energy, Monsen sold the *Empire* to William Prescott Allen in 1955.

Vindicated, Gruening continued to advocate for statehood. In a few short years, his cause would win.

CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION

While Gruening claimed victory, Harold Ickes faced defeat. He did not fare well in the new Truman administration. Franklin Roosevelt's death in April 1945 affected him deeply. Ickes greatly admired the president and though they did not always see eye to eye, he felt supported in FDR's administration.

Truman, on the other hand, did not cotton to Ickes' nettlesome style. In his biography of Ickes, Watkins relayed a story told by newsman Marquis Childs. Aboard a reporters' cruise with the president, a reporter asked a question about the Interior Secretary. "Are you referring to shitass Ickes?" Truman responded, according to the account.¹⁹¹

This sort of treatment was a far cry from the congenial relationship Ickes enjoyed with President Roosevelt. He felt abandoned yet again.¹⁹² Ickes knew that Truman was not the friend and confidant Roosevelt had been and prepared to resign, only to hear from the president that Truman intended to keep him around.¹⁹³

Work at the Interior department might have proceeded apace, were it not for President Truman's nomination of Edwin Pauley for Secretary of the Navy in 1946. Pauley owned an oil company, and Ickes worried about the potential conflict of interest with the Navy's jurisdiction over offshore oil deposits that lay beneath the continental

¹⁹¹ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 823.

¹⁹² Harold L. Ickes, Unpublished diary entry dated 29 April 1945, Harold L. Ickes papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹³ T.H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 826.

shelf.¹⁹⁴ When Ickes' was called to testify at Pauley's confirmation hearings, he spoke honestly of his conversations with Pauley. In one recollection, Ickes talked about his efforts to file a lawsuit asserting federal title over the offshore oil. Pauley approached him in 1944, Ickes said, and told him that he could raise significant money for the Democratic Party from the oilmen of California if the lawsuit did not proceed.¹⁹⁵

Confronted with Ickes' testimony when he took the stand, Pauley said "I am sure Mr. Ickes was very much confused. I only asked him to help raise money for the Democratic Party." Ickes countered by returning to the stand and reading his diary entry concerning the conversation in question.

Truman defended Pauley. "Mr. Ickes can very well be mistaken the same as the rest of us," he told the press.¹⁹⁶ Ickes had had enough. He resigned in anger in February 1946, just before Alaska's statehood referendum, the results of which undoubtedly pleased him.

Ickes continued to write a syndicated newspaper column until his death in 1952, just over a month shy of his 78th birthday.

Ernest Gruening continued to campaign for statehood. With the results of the statehood referendum behind him, the momentum of the movement grew. He became a champion of Alaska Native rights, bringing them into his statehood advocacy fold.¹⁹⁷ Thought President Eisenhower replaced Gruening with Benjamin Franklin Heintzleman

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 826-828.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 828-829.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 832.

¹⁹⁷ Ernest Gruening, *Many Battles* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 323.

as Alaska's governor in 1953, the East Coast doctor did not relent. He rallied against treatment of Alaskans as "second class citizens," using the *New York Times*' refusal to continue to send its international edition to the territory as evidence.¹⁹⁸ He assisted *Anchorage Times* publisher Bob Atwood in his administrative capacity on the Alaska Statehood Committee. He wrote editorials published in pro-statehood publications.

When the Alaska Constitutional Convention convened in Fairbanks in 1955, Gruening delivered a speech to the delegates titled "Let Us End American Colonialism!"¹⁹⁹ He reentered official political life when he was selected as one of Alaska's senators who would travel to Washington, D.C. to lobby for admission to the union.

Gruening was elected as one of Alaska's first U.S. Senators, pending statehood, in 1958. He served as an Alaska Senator for a decade. One of his most notable votes was being one of just two senators who opposed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. When Gruening believed he was right, he did not care about popular sentiment. He continued to be active politically, moving back to the Lower 48 and working as a political consultant and president of an investment firm. The years he spent in Alaska were some of the most productive, and effective, of his life. He died on June 26, 1974.

With the exception of Gruening (and then only in his later years), the men who set the stage for Alaska statehood were not elected to their positions. Troy, Ickes and Gruening were each appointed, all by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Without

¹⁹⁸ Claus-M. Naske, *Ernest Gruening: Alaska's Greatest Governor* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 181-82. After Gruening wrote to *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger, the newspaper reversed its decision.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

traditional elections, these men did not have to have popular ideas, only good ones. They did not need to work polls, necessarily, or worry about staying on point. They also did not, necessarily, need public support.

This freedom was both a blessing and a curse. While men like Gruening were allowed to advance ideas that were for the greater good, though not necessarily popular at the time, these men's circumstances also allowed for petty vindictiveness and ego to sometimes get in the way of progress.

Banished to the north, Gruening had something to prove. Banished from his family, Ickes had everything to prove. Troy needed, or at least wanted, to redeem himself and make a reputable name for himself, perhaps to compete with his brothers in Washington.

The perfect storm of personalities created by Troy, Gruening and Ickes set in motion events that made Alaska Statehood a real possibility and, in the end, a reality. It is likely not coincidence that each man had experience in, and close relationships with, the press corps. Troy, Gruening and Ickes each had been a reporter. They were acutely aware of how to shape a story and how to "spin" the news to promote their agendas. What they could not control was how the press responded to their politics. In a territory that was not allowed to elect its leadership, the press became the pulpit where editors and reporters preached their gospels on corruption, politics, reform and policy.

This is nowhere more evident than in the case of the *Juneau Empire*. Troy used the newspaper to advance his political agenda, and his daughter used it to continue her father's legacy. Gruening battled the *Empire* and won, though it is doubtful he would

have prevailed without the support of much of the rest of Alaska's press corps. Without the support of the *Anchorage Times* and the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, the statehood movement may have languished much longer.

It is tempting to wonder what might have been if Troy's embezzlement in Port Townsend had been common knowledge, if Gruening had cowed to Ickes' bellicosity or flatly refused to move north and instead headed south to his beloved Latin America, or if Ickes had grown up with love and support and a mother who watched her son become an attorney. Alaska would likely still be a state, but the foundation may have been shaky at best. Had Troy remained governor, progress would have taken a back seat to absentee interests. If Ickes and Gruening had worked well together, "Alaska's greatest governor" might well have completed his career as the director of the Division of Territories and Island Possessions.

Instead, Alaska, and indeed Hawaii, whose statehood was inextricably tied to that of Alaska, owe these men, and the newspapers that covered them a great debt. Before the Alaska Highway, before the War, before the referendum or the taxes or the flag-waving, there was the publisher, the doctor and the curmudgeon.

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