A PLACE FOR THE BIRDS: THE LEGACY OF CREAMER’S FIELD MIGRATORY WATERFOWL REFUGE

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A PLACE FOR THE BIRDS

The Legacy of

Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

A

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis details the farming history and current importance of the Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in Fairbanks, Alaska. More significantly, it is the story of a grassroots effort by the community of Fairbanks, working with a kindly old farmer, to preserve open land in the heart of a rapidly expanding city for the benefit of the thousands of migrating cranes, geese and ducks that rely upon the grain fields each spring and fall. Because of their vision, Creamer's Field has become a center for environmental education, outdoor recreation, and biological research while actively providing for the needs of wildlife.
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Early into the data gathering process, I saw that I would never be able to compile all the tidbits of recollection that capture the richness of the Creamer, Hinckley and Noyes families. I am sure I have missed many interesting stories and connections, and I hope that those who know them will pencil them into the margins.

Many people provided information, reviewed sections for factual accuracy, and given me encouragement during the writing of this thesis. I would like to especially thank Jim Herriges, John Wright, Susan Grace Stoltz, Herb Melchior, Ruth Knapman, Mark D. Ross, Gail Mayo, Donna Krier, Mette Moeller, Peggy Hetman, Don and Tracy Pendergrast, Frank Nelson, and above all, Jeannie Creamer-Dalton for your time and assistance, which you gave so generously.

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INTRODUCTION

In the heart of the city of Fairbanks, Alaska, is an oasis for residents and travelers alike. Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, an expanse of farm fields ringed by forested lands, provides a quiet place to walk, ski or simply enjoy lunch. Surrounded by businesses, housing developments, and a four-lane highway, this three-square-mile remnant of land, complete with a quaint turn-of-the-century farmhouse and two handsome barns, has somehow escaped urbanization. The fields are gently rolling and free of permafrost, making them ideal for urban development. Instead, geese, ducks and cranes by the thousands make use of the farmland each spring and fall. And in winter the land is a mecca for area dog mushers and skiers. What is the history behind the homey farmhouse and the Midwestern-style barns? And how is it that this farm gained refuge status?

An intriguing story unfolds -- it is the story of a pioneer farm built in the midst of an ancient flyway for cranes and waterfowl. And it is the story of the townspeople who grew to appreciate the green fields and birds that congregate there. When the farm eventually faced foreclosure, the farmer hoped to keep the land undivided, for he loved the fields and the birds. The community, too, felt this connection to the land, and this inspired them to work with the farmer to save the land from becoming just another housing complex or shopping mall. Together they found a way to preserve the farm as a waterfowl refuge.

Under the management of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the refuge offers waterfowl protection, recreational access, environmental education, and opportunities for wildlife research. One of the less tangible but clearly evident aspects of the refuge is the appreciation or sense of place that so many people feel for it. Writer Yi-Fu Tuan popularized the term “sense of place” in the early 1970s. “What begins as undifferentiated space,” he stated “becomes place when we endow it with value.”1 Thirty years later, sense of place has become a widely accepted component of ecosystem management.2

Sense of place can be described as a strong connection to a certain location, and as something that may define or strengthen one’s self-identity. Sense of place incorporates beliefs, values and feelings associated with a location.3 Knowing the history of a place can enhance one’s

1 Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1977), 6.


own connection to that place. For this reason, to truly appreciate this treasure we now call Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, it is important to know the history of the Creamer’s Dairy, and how it became a place for the birds.

Figure 2: Juvenile Sandhill Cranes at Creamer’s Field, Herb Melchior Collection, Fairbanks, Alaska
CHAPTER ONE: THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE TANANA VALLEY

Because of their antiquity, cranes have been witness to the transformation of Alaska from arid grassland to a region of vast forests and wetlands. For some nine million years, judging by a fossilized leg bone found in Nebraska, lesser sandhill cranes have inhabited the North American continent, flying over a landscape that has changed slowly but profoundly over time. They have adapted to these changes and survived, even flourished, while somehow retaining their own primordial elegance.

Change Over Time in Interior Alaska

The Tanana Valley is a 600-mile long river drainage lying between the Yukon-Tanana Uplands to the north and the Alaska Range to the south. Forming near the border of Canada’s Yukon Territory, the Tanana River runs westward nearly halfway across the state of Alaska before merging with the Yukon River. It is the Yukon River’s largest tributary within the state of Alaska. Fed by glaciers, snowmelt and rain, the river is gray with silt, and its banks are crumbling and unstable.

As recently as 10,000 years ago, grassland dominated the whole of Alaska. Animals now extinct or found only on other continents, inhabited the treeless, open plains. Interior Alaska remained ice-free during the last glacial period (20,000 to 100,000 years ago), and the climate was dry, with little rain or snowfall. There were few lakes, and salmon did not surge up the rivers in any great numbers. Grasses, sedges and sage comprised the majority of the plant species. Animal species of this time period include camels and horses. Woolly mammoths roamed the valley floor, and lions waited out the heat of the day in grassy depressions.

Around 12,000 years ago the global climate began to change. In Alaska, cloudy skies reduced evaporation, while an increase in rainfall raised the levels of lakes and rivers. Streams that had carried high silt loads were diluted with fresh water and snowmelt, resulting in increased fish populations. The swelling rivers and wetter climate lead to an increase in willows, which quickly

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4 Johnsgard, Crane Music, 27.

5 Fossil remains along Ester Creek and the upper Goldstream Creek near present day Fox, Alaska, indicate an abundance of small horses.

spread along drainages. As the glaciers melted in Canada and elsewhere, birch, aspen, and white and black spruce migrated northward and took hold. By 9,000 years ago, a woodland dominated by spruce trees defined the Interior. This forest extends east across Canada, and west into Siberia, creating a radius of trees around the circumpolar North called the Taiga or Boreal Forest.

Animal populations increased due to the change in climate and vegetation. Migratory bird numbers rose in response to a surge in insect populations and suitable nesting habitats. Moose, which had been prevalent in the Interior 35,000 years ago, once again made their way into the Tanana Valley where willows, their favorite food source, now grew in profusion. Bison and elk also populated the Interior. And possibly in response to this increase in wildlife, the first human inhabitants to settle in Alaska began to make their way east across the Bering Strait and up the river drainages.

Native Vegetation

Present-day interior Alaska is a mosaic of white birch stands, shimmering aspen, tall white spruce, and stunted black spruce, marshlands, and burn areas reseeded in hot pink fireweed. The difference from one location to the next can be attributed to a number of variables. In general, low-lying areas have poor drainage and are dotted with bogs and ponds. Permafrost is often just 12 to 30 inches below the surface, and the vegetation is most frequently black spruce and shrub species like willow and dwarf birch, with intermittent paper birch. Fire and cultivation can expose bare soils to solar radiation and result in a lowering of permafrost levels to four feet or more below the soil surface. Soils that are underlain with alluvial gravel generally have adequate drainage and can support grain crops and other forms of agriculture.

Upland slopes generally have good drainage, and permafrost may not be present, or may lie several feet deep -- too deep to impact tree growth. These sites are typically forested with white spruce, birch and aspen. However, on north-facing slopes, where the sun does not warm the soils adequately, permafrost typically dominates with a corresponding growth of black spruce and alder. In these forested regions, moss covers the forest floor in a spongy, continuous carpet. This moss provides an insulating layer over the permafrost, keeping it from thawing more than an inch or two during the warm days of summer. Open grasslands are not normally part of the typical Interior

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
ecosystem. Any open field is likely the result of an oxbow that has separated from a river and, over
time, filled in with rushes and grasses during its transition back to forest.

Climate

Interior Alaska is well known for its extreme winters. Temperatures of zero to 20 degrees
below Fahrenheit are the norm for December and January and lows of −40 and even colder are not
uncommon, occurring on an average of 14 days each winter.\(^\text{10}\) While snow can occur anytime from
September until May, October though March are the snowiest months. Winter temperatures typically
dip below freezing during October and seldom reach above freezing again until April. Consequently,
snow accumulates throughout the winter, resulting in an average snow depth of three feet a year.
Sunlight in the winter months dwindles to less than four hours a day in late December. While the
winter months are not generally cloudy, ice fog can prevail during periods of extreme cold. Ice fog,
lasting for several days or even weeks at a time, occurs when cold air settles into the lowlands and
water vapor rises into the air from open leads of water or from home heating and car exhaust and
freezes -- staying suspended in the air until the inversion breaks.

Summer months are noteworthy for their perpetual daylight and warm temperatures. Interior
Alaska is bathed in light continuously from early May until the first weeks of August, when dusk and
then nightfall return again. Temperatures in July typically register between lows of 50 degrees and
highs of 72 degrees. However, temperatures in the 80s and a few days of 90-degree temperatures are
not uncommon in June or July.\(^\text{11}\) (See Appendix A: Fairbanks Average High and Low Temperatures,
Precipitation and Snowfall)

Total annual precipitation in the Interior averages 12 inches a year, with most of the moisture
falling during the summer. August is typically the wettest month, and April is the driest. On
average, May 21\(^\text{11}\) is the last date for freezing temperatures, and the growing season for crops and
home gardens gets under way shortly thereafter. While frost can occur at any point during the
summer, August 30 is the average date for the first killing frost.\(^\text{12}\) This gives interior Alaska a
growing season of about 100 days. With the abundance of daylight during this period, leafy
vegetables such as lettuce, cabbage, peas and broccoli grow rapidly. Grain crops flourish under
these conditions as well and, short of any weather problems before a September harvest, the yield
per acre can be respectable.

\(^{10}\)http://www.uaf.edu/coop-ext/publications/freepubs/EEM-01355.pdf

\(^{11}\)Ibid..

\(^{12}\)Ibid.
Interior Rivers

In the heart of this Interior forest, the Chena River wanders down from the Tanana Uplands, fed by springs and run-off. The river runs clear but dark -- stained a tea-brown by leaf tannins. It supports a variety of fish: grayling and salmon in the summer and burbot after freeze up in the fall. For much of its length the Chena is deep enough to float a canoe, and towards its terminus it can accommodate passing sternwheelers. Where the Chena and the Tanana Rivers wed there is a swirling mix of dark clear water and milky glacial water.\(^{13}\)

By late October most Interior rivers freeze over. At the end of March the ice will be three feet deep or more. Underneath the ice, cold water still flows. Sometimes this flowing water encounters an ice dam where the river has frozen to the bottom. The moving water then finds a crack that will allow it to surge out over the surface of the existing ice. When the overflow freezes upon exposure to air temperatures, the white surface of the river is stained from the golden-brown waters of the river.

In late spring, the ice on the rivers moans and creaks. Sometimes breakup is dramatic, with a roaring, grinding sound as the water underneath surges forward and huge blocks of ice break loose and are squeezed up and out into a jumble of shifting blocks. Sometimes breakup is easy -- the ice rots out from the bottom up until pockets of river begin to appear. Day by day the sun and the rivers eat away at the shoreline ice, until one day the ice is gone and the muddy banks begin to cave in to the rivers in the ever-changing gain and loss of silt along the shores of the Chena and Tanana Rivers.

\(^{13}\) A point of clarification: in times past, a slough branched off of the Tanana River and met the Chena River several miles upstream from Fairbanks. Consequently, the Chena that ran past the early settlement carried more volume and a higher silt content than it presently does. Civil engineers, in an effort to reduce flooding from the Tanana, closed off the slough. Historic accounts written before the engineering project correctly refer to the Chena as the Chena Slough; after the engineering effort it became the Chena River.
Interior Natives

Interior Alaska has long been home to the Athabascan Indians who are closely related to the Navajo people in New Mexico and Arizona. The first Alaska Natives crossed the Bering Land Bridge some 10,000 years ago and spread sparsely throughout interior Alaska. As hunters and gatherers, they depended heavily on fish and caribou for food, shelter and implements. Forming small family groups, they established winter villages and summer fish camps in accordance to the resources available.14

Villages were frequently built at the confluence of rivers. At the confluence of the Tanana and the Chena Slough, two small villages thrived. These villages comprised the Chena people. One village stood on the northern banks of the Tanana just below the confluence of the two rivers, and the second village was on an island within the Tanana River, just downstream from the first village.

Undoubtedly population size varied over time, but at the point of first contact by outside explorers near the turn of the twentieth century, approximately 100 people lived in the villages.\textsuperscript{15}

In a January 2003 symposium on the Chena Natives, Athabascan elder Rita Alexander recalled a visit she made as a young child with her family and others from their village of Minto to the Chena villages, around 1918. They traveled downstream to attend a memorial potlatch, using a boat with a small outboard engine. The trip took the better part of two days. As their boats approached, the people on board fired their guns into the air to let the villagers know they were coming, as was the custom at that time. The people on shore returned the salute, and the incoming boats were tied together as the Minto villagers began to dance. They danced all the way to shore. Rita recalled that the Chena people, while sharing the same Athabascan heritage and traditions, spoke a different dialect of the Athabascan language.

Helen David was born in Chena around 1915. Helen’s parents and two younger siblings died, leaving Helen, age five or six, and her older brother orphaned. They were taken away from the village and eventually placed with a Native family in the village of Tetlin. It is likely that Helen’s family died of the flu that swept the country in 1920 and profoundly impacted the Native population.\textsuperscript{16}

Chena Natives would have been among the first customers to the trading post that sprang up on the banks of the Chena River just after the turn of the century, trading furs for supplies. Undoubtedly they hunted and fished along the Chena and ran dog teams up the river during the winter months long before the city arose among the trees.

Local historian and Native elder Howard Luke moved to the island village of Chena as a boy of 15, in 1934. At that time only four people continued to live in the villages. Many of the homes remained but stood empty. To this day Howard continues to live on the island. In his early 80’s, he is the last remaining resident of a once vibrant community.

\textbf{Waterfowl}

Against a backdrop of late-winter trees, a pair of lesser sandhill cranes flies westward following a line of budding willows and a stream burbling with melt-water. Farm fields come into view, and the birds begin to descend. On the fields, plows have scraped the snow away in long rows to expose the

\textsuperscript{15} Michael Krauss phone interview by author, 27 March 2003, Fairbanks, Alaska.

\textsuperscript{16} Betty Inglis, public lecture, 31 March 2003, Noel Wien Library, tape recording, University of Alaska Museum Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.
soil, and volunteers have spread grain in readiness for the birds. Weary from weeks of flight, the pair circle, calling back and forth to each other. Their reedy cries are answered by other birds, already arrived, and with deep strokes of gray wings they slow their flight, swing down long slender legs and prepare to land. Here, on these prepared and protected fields, they will recover from their three-thousand mile journey before continuing west to their nesting grounds.

Each spring, just as the rivers break free from winter’s grasp, pairs of swans, streamers of cranes, clusters of ducks and V’s of geese begin to arrive. The sheer variety is a delight after a winter of bird activity limited mainly to resident ravens, chickadees and redpolls. The migrants include; Canada and greater white-fronted geese, lesser sandhill cranes, mallards, American widgeons, northern pintails, trumpeter and tundra swans, northern shoveler, buffleheads, greater and lesser scaup and green-winged teal. Shorebirds arrive or pass through in great numbers as well, including golden plover, lesser yellowlegs and red-necked phalaropes. (See Appendix E - Average Date of First Arrival for Migrant Birds).

The lesser sandhill crane is an annual favorite among area residents. In all some 250,000 lesser sandhill cranes pass through the Tanana Valley each spring. This number represents about half of the world’s total sandhill crane population. Most of these birds continue west to the vast breeding grounds of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta or even further west into Siberia. A local breeding population of about 25,000 cranes conclude it’s journey in and around the greater Fairbanks area, and perhaps 10 percent of these birds, or some 2,500, descend upon the Creamer’s Field National Waterfowl Refuge on College Road.18

The cranes predictably arrive in Fairbanks between April 19 and April 2819, a week or so after the first Canada geese arrive. Soon the fields at the refuge, still half in snow, contain hundreds of the elegant gray birds (along with thousands of geese and ducks). Weary from a six-week journey that began in northern Texas, the cranes fatten up on grain and grubs and insects. They engage in the wild, showy dances for which they are known and, if not already paired, begin the process of mate selection. Once they regain their strength and conclude their social duties, they fan out over the Tanana Valley and choose a nesting site. Here they mate and produce eggs, almost always two, in a shallow cavity lined with grasses and sedges. After a month of incubation, the precocial chicks (fully feathered) hatch into a world of abundant insects and unending daylight. The adults have just eleven


18 Note: Another population of cranes, the greater sandhill crane, also summers in Alaska, but south of the Alaska Range. These birds fly up from wintering grounds in California and are seen in the Anchorage area before moving out towards Bristol Bay.

or twelve weeks to teach their long-legged young the basics of survival in the brief flair of summer. By late August, the chicks are as large as their parents and are now ready to join them in the long migration south. The chicks can be distinguished from the adults because they lack the adult’s red crown. Between three and four thousand cranes make a stopover at the Creamer’s Field Waterfowl Refuge before continuing south. They depart gradually over a two or three-week period, the stragglers often leaving at the forefront of a storm. Their fall journey will take them over golden aspen forests and snowy mountains, past sagebrush-covered slopes and vast grasslands to wildlife refuges and farms in western Texas.

Figure 4: Adult Sandhill Crane, Herb Melchior Collection, Fairbanks, Alaska
CHAPTER TWO: EARLY CONTACT AND THE FOUNDING OF FAIRBANKS

The Yukon River was the primary route of travel for early European fur seekers. The Russians established trading posts along the river during the late 1700s, followed by the British in the mid 1800s. The Tanana Valley, however, was little known by outside explorers until near the end of the nineteenth century. The first known contact along the Tanana occurred in the mid-1870s when traders Arthur Harper and a gentleman known as Bates traveled from the present location of Dot Lake, Alaska, down the Tanana River to the Yukon. In 1885, Lieutenant Henry T. Allen, United States Cavalry, and four crewmembers made the first study of the Tanana River drainage. Allen and his men set out in early March from the mouth of the Copper River and traveled 300 miles up the Copper River, down the Tanana to the Yukon and down the Yukon to the Koyukuk River — 1,500 miles all told. It was an epic journey, and the men nearly starved before reaching the Yukon. Despite their hardships, however, Allen made excellent notes, and his maps became the template for charts of these rivers until official surveys were made twelve years later. 20

In 1896, a United States geological expedition undertaken by J.E. Spurr, H.B. Goodrich and F.C. Schrader indicated probable gold deposits along tributaries to the Yukon, including the Fortymile and Birch Creek, and they publicly speculated about gold in the Tanana Valley. Consequently, in 1898 two steamboats, the Tanana Chief and the Potlatch, made probably the first steam-powered trip up the Chena Slough. On board were eighteen prospectors ready to take up pick and shovel in the hills above the remote valley. 21 The first significant gold discovery in the Tanana Valley occurred just after the turn of the century, and the story of this discovery became a local legend.

The Discovery of Gold and the Birth of a City

Felix Pedro, or Felice Pedroni in his native Italian, was the youngest of six children. Raised in a small village in northern Italy where his father found employment as a coal miner, Felix never learned to read or write and initially followed in his father's footsteps and worked in the mines. But in 1881, at the age of 23, he set out for America. He found his way first to Carbonado, Washington,


where he mined gold for several years before heading north to the Klondike gold fields. Here he tried his hand at gold mining until the late 1890s when he made his way west into Alaska. As luck would have it, Felix found and then lost a gold-rich creek near the Chatainika River, north of Fairbanks. He found work in the Circle City mines, but when his finances allowed, he stocked up on supplies and walked the 160 miles back to the Chatainika area. Time and again he returned to search for the rich gold deposit he had lost, working with stubborn determination.

In late August of 1901, Felix and his mining partner at the time, Tom Gilmore, from Iowa, worked the hills north of the Chena Slough. They had exhausted their food supplies and were subsisting on berries and wild game while contemplating the long walk to Circle City for re-supply. On August 26th Felix and Tom caught sight of the smoke from a steamship several miles away on the Tanana River. They watched with interest as the ship attempted the Bates Rapids a few miles above the Chena Slough confluence. Boat captains typically considered the Bates Rapids to be the terminus of river navigation on the Tanana, as the river became too shallow for a boat bearing cargo. After several failed attempts to proceed up the Tanana by this route, the steamship headed back down river and then turned to travel several miles up the Chena Slough. Felix and Tom, hoping for a quick remedy to their food shortage, made a bee-line towards the ship.

The ship’s captain, Charles Adams, having failed to find a way around the troublesome rapids on the Tanana River, probed his way up the Chena Slough, but again ran into shallow waters. His next option was to unburden the boat of its passengers and cargo, having brought them as close to their destination as possible. E.T. Barnette and his wife, Isabelle, along with a handful of helpers, had booked passage on the Lavelle Young from St. Michael and carried with them 130 tons of supplies – enough to open a trading post at Tanana Crossing, many river miles upstream. Barnette, displeased at being deposited with his wares in this remote and uninhabited location so late in the year, attempted to persuade Adams to take them back to the mouth of the Chena, where a small trading post had recently been established. The captain, however, expressed his concern about the difficulties he would encounter if he ran aground while moving downstream with a loaded boat. After a heated and emotional argument, with Isabelle likely distraught at the turn of events, Barnette


and Captain Adams worked out a compromise. The Captain agreed to take them downstream to a high bank on the south side of the slough, which Barnette had noticed on their way up. Here Adams deposited his passengers along with enough supplies to outfit a small regiment. Felix Pedro and Tom Gilmore, upon reaching the stockpile of goods, became the first customers to load up on flour, bacon and beans before heading back into the hills.

Barnette established a temporary trading post on the river and called his tiny enclave Chenoa City. He still intended to transfer his goods to Tanana Crossing the following summer. There he planned to profit from a trail being built between Valdez and Eagle. For the time being, he and his wife and their workmen would have to winter over on the banks of the Chena. He traded with Athabascans in the area and sold goods to a handful of miners. Things looked bleak for the Barnettes, as winter’s darkness and cold settled in, but their luck was about to change. 26

Eleven months later, in July of 1902, Felix Pedro worked alone. Tom Gilmore had headed back to Circle City. Although only 41, Felix had a weak heart, and the years of hard work had taken their toll. Nonetheless, he worked as best he could and found enough promising color to keep him in supplies. On or about 22 July 1902, he worked a small creek about sixteen miles from the Chena Slough when he made a significant strike. He was too weak to sink the hole deep enough to hit bedrock and so headed to Fairbanks for help. With the assistance of willing laborers, the wealth of the strike was confirmed. The creek became known as Pedro Creek and the hill above it as Pedro Dome.

Claims were quickly staked on Pedro, Cleary, Gold and Twin Creeks and by the time summer ended, more than 110 claims had been staked on a dozen creeks throughout surrounding area. 27 A town began to grow out of the wilderness. Trees up and down the valley were felled for cabins and heat, and single-track roads were built out to the mining camps. Acting on the suggestion of Judge James Wickersham, Barnette named the growing community “Fairbanks” after Senator Charles Fairbanks of Indiana. (Senator Fairbanks later served as vice president under President Theodore Roosevelt.) In return, Judge Wickersham helped the community prosper by relocating his courthouse from Eagle to Fairbanks. Soon a post office and a bank sprang up, and in 1903 the Northern Commercial Company (NC), a large retail chain, bought out the Barnettes’ log trading post.

26 Ibid., 20 – 24.

CHAPTER THREE: TWO FAMILY HISTORIES LEADING UP TO FAIRBANKS

Fairbanks was destined to grow into something more than just a tent town for miners. Business-minded people with families built shops and churches and schools in this remote but promising community in the north, and the agricultural potential of the Tanana Valley intrigued farmers and herdsmen who read about it in papers across the nation. Two such families, the Hinckleys and the Creamers, were among those to settle and prosper in Fairbanks. They tried their luck in several boom and bust towns before settling at last in Fairbanks.

The Creamers

Charles Newton Creamer, known as C.N., worked as a teamster for Wells Fargo Bank, driving the Weaverville stage in the prosperous California mining town. C.N. and his wife, Mary Jane Todd Creamer, or Minnie, had seven children. Their son Charlie, born in Weaverville on May 4, 1889, was the only boy in the family. His sisters from the oldest to the youngest were Tessie, Mattie, Frances, Camellia, Genevieve and Marion. In 1896, C.N.’s sister Emma, and her husband, Al Noyes, came from Colorado for a visit. Emma and Al were fired up about their impending move to Juneau, a bustling gold mining town where high-paying jobs were begging to be filled. Their enthusiasm was contagious, and when they headed north for Alaska, C.N. went with them.

Not long after they reached Juneau they heard talk of a big gold strike in Dawson, Canada, and they formulated a new plan. While Emma remained in Juneau, C.N. and Al made a trip to Seattle for six sturdy horses and returned north to Dyea, near Skagway -- the jumping-off point to the Dawson gold fields. In June of 1898, they set up a business freighting goods from the beach in Dyea to Sheep Camp at the base of the Chilkoot Pass for miners in route to Dawson. Once they unloaded the freight it was up to the miners to haul the goods over the pass. Trip after trip, the miners would haul tremendous loads on their backs up the pass, using the steps cut into the ice. From there they would walk to Lake Bennett in British Columbia, Canada, construct a boat or raft and begin the long float down to the Yukon River and on to Dawson City. C.N. and Al hauled freight day after day and watched the steady line of gold seekers as they made their way up and over the pass. Surely they must have talked of throwing in their lot with the rest and heading to Dawson.

In the spring of 1897, Minnie Creamer decided to join her husband and packed up the family home in Weaverville. She sailed to Juneau with her children, including Charlie, who had just turned

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eight, and remained there until Thanksgiving Day when they made the short trip up to Dyea. After a
difficult landing on the beach, Minnie found that the cabin C.N. promised to have ready was no
more than a tent, and the Thanksgiving dinner he prepared was, as Charlie recalled “a big pot of sow
bellies and beans.” Eventually C.N. built a two-story log house in Dyea for his family, and they
remained there for two years while C.N. and Al ran the freight business. The men had three two-
horse teams and young Charlie drove a team when they were shorthanded.

Not everyone who set out for Dawson City completed the trip. Jefferson Randolph “Soapy”
Smith ran a shady gambling ring and swindled many would-be miners out of their grubstake money,
so that they returned to Dyea and headed home before they even began. Charlie remembered Soapy
and how he dressed in a smart suit, not in the work clothes of the stampeders. Soapy and his gang
of hot-heads were involved in a shoot-out one night when irate townsfolk attempted to drive them
out of Skagway. Soapy was killed in the volley of gunfire. This occurred in 1898, shortly before
completion of the White Pass and Yukon Railway. Later, when Charlie lived in Fairbanks he
recognized three of the men in Soapy’s gang. Some of them remained in Fairbanks for the rest of
their lives, but they weren’t gamblers anymore, and Charlie never revealed their identity.

The Creamer family faced multiple tragedies in 1899. Al, who had not seen his wife in
nearly two years, made arrangements to travel to Juneau for a visit. Minnie sewed green-backs
(government currency backed by gold) into the lining of his coat and vest so that he could discretely
transport the money, and he booked passage on the Clara Nevada. The boat was loaded with
gunpowder, and according to regulations, she should have been unloaded at Berner’s Bay before
taking on passengers. But she steamed into Skagway first and picked up 60 passengers, including
Al Noyes. As the boat entered Berner’s Bay, it exploded, and all on board were killed. Al’s body
was never recovered. Shortly thereafter, the White Pass Railway from Dyea to Sheep Camp was
completed and C.N. was out of a job. To add to their troubles, Tessie (C.N. and Minnie’s oldest
daughter) fell and injured her hip. The family went to Tacoma to seek medical treatment for her, but
Tessie died of her injury.

In 1900, C.N. once again headed north, this time making the trip from Tacoma to Dawson to
find work. Then in 1903, hearing of the gold strikes in the Tanana Valley, he joined Fred Noyes

31 Ibid.
(brother to Al Noyes) and headed for Fairbanks. In 1904, C.N. sent for Minnie and the children. The family traveled once again from Washington State to Skagway and this time took the White Pass and Yukon Railway to Whitehorse, Canada. From Whitehorse they traveled to Dawson on the Selkirk and then rode the Sarah down the broad Yukon River to the Tanana. Changing boats again, they traveled up the Tanana to the Chena River on the Tanana. The boat tied up in front of the NC store, formerly E.T. Barnette’s trading post, and young Charlie and his family had their first look at Fairbanks. “Everything was wide open” with saloons, gambling and dance halls, Charlie remembered many years later. The town contained only a few log cabins but no shortage of tents. Once again, Minnie and her children had come north to a tent city.35

Anna Carr and the Hinckleys

Meanwhile, in similar fashion, another family made decisions that would eventually lead them to Fairbanks. Charles T. Hinckley was born in Illinois and worked for the Hines pickle factory before making his way to Washington near the turn of the century36. He met and married Anniebelle “Belle” Carr. Together they managed a dairy in Portland, Oregon. But word got around that a dairyman in the gold rush town of Nome could sell fresh milk for $5 a quart. The Hinckleys headed from Seattle to Nome with several cows on the schooner Nome City on 7 June 1900. Four weeks later they arrived in Nome, a tent city of 20,000 people37 on the sandy shores of the Bering Sea. For eighteen months they worked to establish a dairy. There were no trees for a log barn, so the Hinckleys made do with double-walled tents to house the cows that first winter. Firewood was available, but only by making a 100-mile trip inland by dog team. Life in Nome was challenging. The Hinckley’s tents were swept away by a storm with 75 mile-per-hour winds in September 1900.38 And to make matters worse, competition from several other dairymen brought the price of milk down to a dollar a quart.39

37 Naske and Slotnick, Alaska, A History of the 49th State, 80.
In the fall of 1902 the Hinckleys wintered in Washington but returned to Nome in the spring. They brought with them Belle’s younger sister, Anastasia Elizabeth Carr. Born January 29, 1885 and known to everyone as Anna, she was a girl of eighteen in 1903. A spunky, petite brunette, she loved the trip north, with dancing and parties on the boat at night and church on Sundays. In an undated memoir she wrote:

I was a good sailor and enjoyed every minute of the trip. Even the huge ice pack we crept through for several days. ... Then Nome at last. It was very dusty. I was disappointed. But the sea and the long beach were always clean and we rode our horses there. I loved to sit and watch the waves come in. ... In the winter the snow would almost cover the homes. Skiing was one of our main sports and we had our horses and cutter to drive and lots of parties.40

Anna found work at the Billy Rowe Boarding House41, but she probably welcomed the news when her sister and brother-in-law began to consider a move. By the spring of 1904 the Nome gold rush had peaked, and it was time to look for new opportunities. The growing community of Fairbanks, located 1,280 miles inland by way of the Yukon and Tanana Rivers, would surely need fresh milk as news of the lucrative gold rush there spread.

The Hinckleys almost certainly heard the reports of good agricultural land in Alaska’s interior. The Department of Agriculture published findings in 1901 stating, “It is chiefly the vast interior which will furnish the agricultural land in Alaska.”42 The Tanana Valley purportedly had a longer window between frost dates than anywhere along the Yukon River drainage. In addition, the Homestead Act, which had been extended to Alaska in 1898, was amended in 1902 to allow homesteaders to lay claim on 320 acres, double the 160 acres granted throughout the rest of the country.43 The discovery of a rich gold deposit near an area of agricultural promise truly set Fairbanks apart from other gold-mining towns, promising longevity beyond the initial flush of wealth that gold provided.

Anna joined the Hinckleys as they took three cows and their best horse and headed to Fairbanks on the first boat of the season. The cows helped to offset the cost of their passage,

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40 Anna Creamer, unpublished diary entry, undated, Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.


42 Robe, “Penetration of an Alaskan Frontier,” 94.

providing fresh milk for the crew and passengers. In her memoir Anna wrote of a beautiful trip. "The trees and all nature so green, after the barren beaches of Nome. We had fresh vegetables and game picked up at trading posts where we stopped to get wood for the boat." After 27 days, a small cluster of log buildings and tents came into view. Fairbanks at last. Anna and the Hinckleys steamed into Fairbanks in July 1904. Anna was 19 that summer, while Charlie was a tall gangly boy of 15. Their paths would cross constantly in tiny Fairbanks over the next several years.


45 A. Creamer, unpublished diary.

46 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 6 March 1959.
CHAPTER FOUR: ESTABLISHING A DAIRY IN EARLY FAIRBANKS

The Hinckleys and Creamer families, settled into small log cabins not far apart. The Hinckleys established a dairy on Fourth Avenue between Cowles and Kellum, and the family cleared the land and cut spruce trees to build a low log building. The cows wintered in one end of the building, and the family lived under the same roof at the other end. The dairy was located just two blocks west of the red light district. "The Row", on Fourth Street between Cushman and Barnette, had a tall wooden fence with a gate built across both ends of the street to screen the girls and their customers from the rest of the town folk. The town did not extend much farther than the dairy, and in an interview in 1959, Anna recalled riding her horse in Fairbanks "along trails through the trees, on what are now Cowles and Kellum Streets."  

![Figure 5: Hinckley’s Dairy (circa 1910), Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska](image)

Anna Carr left the family dairy to marry Louis Golden on 2 October 1904, with Hudson Stuck presiding over the ceremony. Louis was a good deal older than Anna. He ran a saloon and dancehall and was something of a gambler. Anna did not care for his lifestyle and encouraged him

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49 Anna Carr and Louis Golden, marriage certificate, 2 October 1904, Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.

to open a grocery instead. Together they ran Golden's Grocery, located on First Street and Wickersham.\textsuperscript{51}

C.N. Creamer and Fred Noyes staked out property on the north side of the Chena Slough, across the water from Fairbanks. The property ran from Graehl landing to the eastern end of a slough they named Noyes Slough. Fred established the Noyes Mill (later renamed the Tanana Mill) on the slough, and C.N. assisted Fred with the mill. In addition, C.N. operated a ferry to transport people across the Chena Slough to and from Fairbanks, and cut and sold ice from the slough in the winter.\textsuperscript{52} He had a two-story frame house built in Graehl (near the location of the present day Wendell Street Bridge) and soon had 24 head of horses and mules. C.N. then established a business unloading freight from steamships at the mouth of the Chena and freighting it up to Fairbanks.\textsuperscript{53}

Young Charlie attended seventh grade at Main School that first year. The school had opened just the year before and already had 50 students. He returned the next fall, but after a falling out with the principal, he decided he had enough schooling. He found work at Waechter's Meat Market, where he helped drive cows from town out to Gilmore Trail in the spring, remained with them over the summer and drove them back into town in the fall when it was time to slaughter them. Gilmore Trail, called Ridge Road at that time, was the first trail out to the gold mines. Later in the summer, Charlie and Ralph Waechter rode horseback to Circle on the Yukon River, collected a herd of cows brought up from Seattle and drove it the 160 miles into town.\textsuperscript{54} For extra income he often made home deliveries for Golden's Grocery, and as he matured into his tall lanky frame he became a "favorite with the ladies".\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{Establishment of Fairbanks Agricultural Experiment Station}

By 1905 Fairbanks had a population of 2,500, and the route to Valdez had improved to a wagon trail. The city's residents put up with muddy streets, but they soon enjoyed limited phone service and a seventy-five horsepower engine, which provided enough electricity to power 1,000

\textsuperscript{51} Lewis, "The History of Creamer's Dairy," 5.

\textsuperscript{52} Wold, \textit{The Way it Was}, 68.

\textsuperscript{53} C. Creamer, interview, June 1973.

\textsuperscript{54} C. Creamer, interview, June 1973.

\textsuperscript{55} Wold, \textit{The Way it Was}, 70.
lights. Those living outside the radius of electricity used kerosene lamps and candles to brighten the long winter nights. Construction began on the Tanana Mines Railway (later known as the Tanana Valley Railroad) with plans to lay track between the town of Chena, on the Tanana, and the outlying mines in Fox, Olnes, Gilmore City, Dome and Cleary and into Fairbanks. This would greatly facilitate mining operations, as heavy equipment could be brought in.

In addition to a lucrative mining industry, the Tanana Valley saw an increase in agricultural efforts, with 82 registered homesteads in 1905. With hopes of gaining insight on farming in the challenging north, Fairbanks residents sent a petition to the Secretary of Agriculture requesting the establishment of an agricultural experiment station in the Tanana Valley. In response, Charles C. Georgeson, special agent in charge of the United States Agricultural Experiment Stations, arrived at the end of July and spent the first few days of his visit traveling on horseback to different homesteads to ascertain the agricultural potential of the region.

Under a directive from the Secretary of Agriculture, Georgeson had already established experimental stations in Sitka, Kodiak, Rampart Village, and Copper Center. He found the soils in the Tanana Valley to be nearly free of rocks and easy to work once the trees were cleared away. Local gardeners simply amended the loam soil with manure and reaped impressive results. Satisfied by what he saw, Georgeson set about locating a site for an agricultural experiment station.

Georgeson first considered the Delta Junction area because large tracts of land remained available. Locating the experimental station near Fairbanks, however, would benefit a greater number of people. The Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce, not wanting to miss this opportunity, used its powers of persuasion to interest Georgeson in a 1,394 acre tract of land between the communities of Chena and Fairbanks. The tract was situated on a south-facing slope, making it well suited for cultivation. Moreover, the location was adjacent to the Tanana Mines Railroad, thus providing good access to the community.

The site proved to be quite satisfactory, and by 1906, a wide assortment of garden crops grew in neat fields. Georgeson also grew an assortment of flowers, adding to the visual appeal. The Fairbanks community took note of the crops and techniques that produced results and incorporated what it found to produce bountiful home gardens and field crops.

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56 Robe, “Penetration of an Alaskan Frontier,” 197.

57 Fairbanks Daily News Miner, 1 August 1905.

58 Ibid.

59 Note: Two other field stations in Alaska followed: the Matanuska Farm Station began operations in 1914, and the Palmer Research Center opened in 1948. These three stations continue to operate, while all earlier stations shut down during or shortly after the Depression. In 1991 the Fairbanks Experimental Station, became the Fairbanks Research Station, retaining a research garden, 260 acres
Fairbanks Business District Burns

But even before the first garden rows were planted in the spring of 1906, Fairbanks faced near-ruin. On the evening of May 22, young Charlie sat in the barbershop getting a shave and a haircut, while a few doors down, Dr. Moore, a dentist in the Fairbanks Building on Cushman Street, attended to a patient. An alcohol lamp used to sterilize the doctor’s instruments stood burning below an open window. Suddenly a breeze puffed out the curtain and the fabric passed over the flame. In seconds the room was afire, and with frightening speed the flames advanced until the three-story building was ablaze. Fortunately Dr. Moore and his patient were able to run from the building, alerting others as they fled. But the unusually dry spring weather and the closely spaced wood buildings proved a recipe for disaster.

In minutes, much of downtown Fairbanks was in flames. The hand-drawn carts used by the firemen were no match for the inferno, and water pressure soon ran low. The Washington-Alaska Bank, the jail, the Riverside Hotel and Senate Saloon were soon engulfed in flames. Only quick thinking saved the rest of the town. When extra water pressure was needed for the fire hoses, the manager at the NC store called for all the stores of bacon to be thrown into the boiler. The 2,000 pounds of sizzling bacon raised the water pressure enough to contain the blaze. The fire had consumed everything from First Avenue to Third and from Cushman Street to Lacey. The entire business district burned, with the exception of the NC company warehouses. Yet the townsfolk of Fairbanks were not to be deterred. Rumor has it that the sounds of saws and hammers could be heard even before the smoke cleared.

Hinckleys Expand the Dairy in Fairbanks

Perhaps inspired by the rebuilding going on around them, the Hinckleys bought out the Morton and Downing dairy on the north side of the Chena Slough in the community of Graehl.

in crops and a 50-acre research forest. The garden, now called the Georgeson Botanical Garden, is open to visitors and area gardeners who freely walk among a dazzling display of flowers, fruits and vegetables and glean information for boosting home garden productivity. The Research Station and Garden are under the management of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.


They relocated their business to this location, and constructed a log barn and a two-story log house. They acquired 14 milk cows and sold milk for one dollar a quart. They expanded their customer base, but shipping milk bottles from Seattle proved beyond their means. Instead they improvised and used “imperial quart” wine bottles. These green wine bottles, filled with cool rich milk and sealed with a cork, were delivered to homes and restaurants throughout the Fairbanks area. In the winter they delivered milk by horse-drawn sleigh. Mr. Hinckley fitted the sleigh with a small shed containing a wood-burning stove to keep the bottles of milk from freezing. Merwin “Buster” Anderson, raised by his grandparents, C.N. and Minnie, was a small child when the Hinckleys ran the dairy at of Graehl. He remembered going along on the three-hour milk route many times. According to Buster, Mr. Hinckley was “a very jolly person, a hard worker, but a happy man. Mrs. Hinckley did the milking and all the cooking.” Young Charlie Creamer also helped with milk delivery from time to time and met Felix Pedro and his wife Mary when he delivered milk to their house on Clay Street.

In 1910, the Hinckleys purchased 327.42 acres of land a mile west of town on Ester Road (later called College Road). A notarized deed states that Charles Hinckley purchased the land from a Mr. E.G. Murray. The selling price, however, is unknown. The land at the time of purchase contained improvements that included a cabin, barn, fencing and a ditch. The farm had upwards of forty-six acres of open grassland, called Murray’s Meadow. Mr. Murray may have cleared the land for grazing, or the meadow may have been the remnant of an old river channel. The Hinckleys initially made use of the field to graze their cattle during the summer months -- driving them out to the land in early June and back to the dairy barns in early September.

They built a barn on the land with logs cut from the surrounding woods. Moss pressed in between the logs and a two-foot thick sod roof provided protection against the weather. Mr. Hinckley used the barn in the summer months for twice-daily milking and storage, and for several years he drove the cows out to the homestead to graze in the spring and summer and over-wintered

them in Graehl. He tilled the open land and grew wheat, oats, peas and barley for winter feed, supplementing what he grew with shipments of hay and grain from Seattle. Feeding cattle through the winter represented a major expense; feed shipped from Seattle cost $165 a ton, and each cow required three tons of feed to get through the winter.\(^7\) The Hinckleys also faced the challenge of keeping good workers, since each rumor of a new gold strike enticed some to grab a shovel and head to the creeks.

Gold contributed significantly to the economic growth of the city. In 1903, gold production amounted to just $40,000. In 1904, that figure rose to $600,000. In 1906 the gold assayed amounted to nine million dollars and $30 million in 1910.\(^7\) In terms of production, the value of gold extracted in Fairbanks surpassed both the Klondike and Nome strikes. The continual increase in production drew a steady stream of settlers during the years before the First World War. While many folks came intending to work in the gold mines, others came to offer their services, be it medicine, storekeeping or preaching. In 1909, some 3,000 people lived within the city of Fairbanks, with many more scattered throughout the hills. The city had schools, churches and saloons, two breweries, three sawmills and two machine shops. The N.C. Company ran steam heat to nearby businesses and homes.\(^7\) There were dances and socials on a regular basis, and one did not have to look far for warmth and entertainment.

Wood was still the only source of heat in the growing community, and by 1913 the city burned 12,000 – 14,000 cords of wood annually.\(^7\) Trees were cut for miles around, until the hills in every direction were bare. The sawmill Fred Noyes built in 1904 prospered and in 1910 he moved the operation to Illinois Street (the current site of the Golden Valley Electric Company). He had a stately home built, also on Illinois Street, with finely crafted furniture shipped from England all the way around Cape Horn. (The home still stands today in quiet elegance.) That same year he built a 60-foot stern-wheeler, *The Idler*, which he used for recreation.\(^7\) By the 1920s Fred became one of the wealthiest men in the Alaska Territory.\(^7\)

New modes of transportation made headway in interior Alaska, hinting at great changes for the future. The first automobile rolled down the streets in 1906, and by 1914 there were 25

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\(^7\) Lewis, “The History of Creamer’s Dairy,” 5.


\(^7\) Bill Stroecker, lecture, 2002, Anne Wien Elementary School, Fairbanks, Alaska.

\(^7\) Price, “Homesteads on Fort Wainwright,” 27.
Then construction began for a college west of the city, adjacent to the Fairbanks Agricultural Experiment Station, with Judge James Wickersham placing the cornerstone on 4 July 1915. Perhaps even more exciting was the impending construction of the Alaska Railroad, which would connect Fairbanks to the seaport town of Seward, 400 miles to the south. Fairbanks appeared to be on the fast track to economic growth and prosperity.

In 1915, the Hinckleys moved their operations entirely to the Murray Meadow land on College Road. They disassembled their log home, numbering each log, and moved them all to the new home site. Once on location, they reassembled the logs and rebuilt the house. (This house now serves as the Visitor Center Farmhouse on the Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.) The Hinckleys also built a new barn, as the old one had begun to sink into the soft ground. This time, the logs for the barn had to be cut some 40 miles up the Chena River and floated down river because of the lack of trees locally. Their years of hard work were paying off. On 10 February 1917, court records proclaimed, “Charles Timothy Hinckley is granted ownership of 327 42/100 acres – having met the homestead requirements.”

As the decade drew to a close, the prosperity the city enjoyed during its early years faded, and Fairbanks experienced an economic down turn. In 1918, gold production in Alaska dropped off as World War I brought crippling inflation. With gold prices frozen by law at $20.67 per ounce most mines were unable to operate at a profit, and people left in great numbers to enlist or find better jobs in the states. Charlie Creamer enlisted in the United States Army and was stationed first at Ft. Gibbon, Alaska, where the Tanana and Yukon Rivers join, and in Iowa for six months. He was discharged and returned to Fairbanks in 1918, where he soon found work with an Alaska Railroad construction crew.

Prohibition swept the nation, beginning in Alaska in 1918 by popular vote and continuing until 1933. But Alaskans are known for their ingenuity, and many found ways around the law prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. During that first dry winter, Charlie’s friend, Frank Miller, kept six barrels of whiskey under the Isabelle Creek Bridge on the south edge of the

78 Charles Hinckley, court records, City of Fairbanks, Alaska, granting ownership of homestead, Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.
79 [http://www.ex.ac.uk/~RDavies/arian/amser/chrono15.html](http://www.ex.ac.uk/~RDavies/arian/amser/chrono15.html)
dairy. Bootleggers ran a still up the Salcha River and Mike Yankovich, a potato farmer in the hills northwest of town (where the University of Alaska Large Animal Research Station is now), brewed some pretty good whiskey, according to Charlie. Mike would bring a wagonload of potatoes to town, hiding bottles of moonshine under the load. Even the Hinckleys found a way to make whiskey in a three-gallon milk can. 81

Anna and Charlie Leave Alaska and Marry

During this period Anna’s marriage to Louis Golden faltered, and having no children, they divorced. Anna’s parents still lived in Washington State and were now quite elderly. In 1918 Anna, aged 33, decided to move to Washington to care for them. Few courtship details are known, but Charlie Creamer followed Anna to Washington two years later, leaving Fairbanks on a train 19 September 1920. 82 He and Anna were married on October 16 of that same year in Seattle, Washington. 83 Many years later, when asked about Anna’s divorce from Louis Golden and Charlie’s subsequent marriage to her, Charlie gave his warm laugh and stated, “When they split up, I fell heir to her”. 84 In 1922, Anna gave birth to Donald Creamer in Pioneer, Washington, where Charlie and Anna settled. He was to be their only child.

The Creamers ran a strawberry farm for a time, but Charlie did not care for the work. They invested in a chicken farm instead, which they ran for the next six years, selling chicks throughout southern Washington and around the Portland area. Charlie grew tired of the rainy winters and suggested a move back north. Anna, however, liked Washington, so as a compromise, they planned a visit in May 1927. Charlie would look for work and they would decide on a move at that point. 85

81 Ibid.


83 Anna Golden and Charles Creamer, marriage certificate, 16 October 1920, Seattle Washington, Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.


85 Don Creamer, interview by Robin Lewis, 29 June 1988, tape recording, Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE CREAMERS PURCHASE AND MODERNIZE THE DAIRY

The trip from Seattle was easier than in years past because the railroad from Seward to Fairbanks had been completed in 1923, after eight years of construction. With five-year-old Don along, Charlie and Anna boarded a boat from Seattle to Seward and then took a train from Seward to Fairbanks, overnighting in Curry, Alaska. The trip took five days by boat and just two days on the train.86

They stayed with Charlie’s parents, who lived on the 500 block of Graehl Street.87 It did not take long to see that Fairbanks had undergone several changes in the seven years they had been “Outside.” The completion of the railroad provided a boost to the city’s economy, which had been in a downward slump since the war. Before the railroad, people ordered their food and goods a year in advance. Now goods could be shipped from Seattle in just ten days, so produce and other items were available year round. Trains allowed for coal deliveries – alleviating concerns about a wood shortage for heating businesses and homes. In addition, the railroad facilitated the delivery of large mining dredges, which breathed new life into the gold industry.88

The Fairbanks Exploration Company (FE Company), a subsidiary of the United States Smelting, Mining and Refining Company, was in the process of establishing three gold dredging operations. They needed men to lay roads, build power plants and operate electric equipment and dredges for the mining camps. The FE Company held the key to revitalizing the economy of Fairbanks. Charlie inquired about a job and felt certain he would be hired in the spring, and Anna consented to the move.89

Other exciting changes occurred during the Creamers’ absence as well. In 1922, the newly completed Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines (renamed the University of Alaska in 1935) opened its doors to a student population of six. In 1923, Carl Ben Eielson began making daily flights between town and the mining camps to take out supplies and ferry miners and their families into town and back. And in 1924, pilot Noel Wien completed the first airplane flight from Anchorage to Fairbanks, following the tracks of the railroad to keep his bearings.

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
89 D. Creamer, interview, 29 June 1988.
In early September the Creamers returned to Washington State, where chicken prices had dropped to 15 cents a bird. They stayed the winter and sold off everything they could. Then, in late April 1928 they returned to Fairbanks, bringing with them 1,500 broilers, 500 hens and 40 crates of eggs. Fresh eggs and live chickens were still hard to obtain during the winter in Fairbanks. In fact, in the years before rail transportation, eggs were stored in a cool cellar all winter long and turned regularly to prevent spoiling. The taste of the eggs grew stronger as the winter progressed, so that by spring, the people of Fairbanks were most receptive to fresh eggs and eager for live laying hens. The Creamers sold their first laying hens for four dollars apiece.

They stayed that summer with the Hinckleys. Mr. Hinckley was 55 years of age that year and had been a dairyman for better than thirty of those years. He had 12 milk-producing cows and Mrs. Hinckley still milked them all, morning and night.

During the early 1900s dairy farmers did all the milking, bottle washing and processing by hand, without the benefit of milking machines and sterilizers. Pasteurization had been developed in the early 1860s after Louis Pasteur, a French chemist, found that heating milk delayed spoilage and greatly reduced the spread of milk-born illnesses. But for small dairies, such as the Hinckley’s, investing in pasteurization equipment was cost prohibitive. As early as the 1890s, scientists speculated that humans could contract bovine tuberculosis by drinking milk from infected cows. Further study indicated that cows confined together in barns for much of the winter had a much higher incidence of the disease than free-range dairy herds.

In Alaska, a federally-contracted veterinarian inspected farms twice a year. In August 1919, after examining the Hinckleys stock, the veterinarian found that 25 of the 26 cows on the dairy tested positive for bovine tuberculosis. The only means of eradicating the disease in cattle was to slaughter them. This done, the dairy ceased milk production on August 24, with the Hinckleys receiving some government compensation for their loss. Because the Hinckleys operated the only

90 Nancy Murphy, “Fairbanks Wildlife Management Area: the Human Use Aspect” (Fairbanks: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, fall 1975, photocopied), 1.


94 Ibid., 72.
local dairy at the time, the city of Fairbanks went without milk until new cows could be shipped up on a barge from the states, several weeks later.95

The Hinckleys had placed the dairy up for sale in November 1924, but so far no one had come up with the purchase price.96 The asking price of $12,000 included the log farmhouse and the low log barn, several smaller buildings, 12 milk-producing Holsteins, one Holstein bull, 12 calves, an assortment of dairy utensils and farming equipment, and all 327 acres. Charlie and Anna likely made the decision to buy the dairy during their final winter in Washington, because they received financing just two weeks after returning to Fairbanks, and closed on the purchase on 1 May 1928.97 Charlie had worked off and on for the Hinckleys for years. He knew the basics of dairy farming and he was a hard worker. Anna could do the bookkeeping and she had good business sense.

Charlie and Anna borrowed $2,000 from the First National Bank in Fairbanks, where his sister Mattie’s husband, Ed Stroecker, worked as a loan officer. (Ed later became bank president.)98 Then Charlie secured $6,000 in a private loan from Bill McGrath, a long-time Fairbanks miner. The balance they paid to the Hinckleys in installments over the next five years.99 The Hinckleys made their goodbyes and moved to Washington, where they opened a roadhouse between Olympia and Seattle.100 Anna was 43 and Charlie was 39 in 1928, the year they bought the farm. On 21 August 1933, the Hinckleys conveyed the land in full to the Creamers through the courts in the State of Washington.

The Creamers bought the farm just as agriculture began to take hold in Alaska. In 1930 there were 500 farms in the territory, up from 12 in 1900.101 All around Fairbanks, forested land gave way to field crops and livestock. The aptly named Farmer’s Loop Road, to the north of the Creamer’s dairy, became the farm belt for Fairbanks as homesteaders cleared the land section by section and planted potatoes and grains.


96 Ibid., 26 November 1924.

97 Ibid., 1 May 1928.

98 Knapman, public lecture, 7 April, 2003.


101 Shortridge, American Perceptions of the Agricultural Potential of Alaska, 163-164.
Building the Herd

Initially, Charlie had one hired man. Together they milked the cows by hand, then strained the milk and delivered it to area stores and restaurants. It took them about two hours each morning and two hours each evening to get the milking done.\textsuperscript{102} A quart of milk went for 25 cents. In addition, Charlie grew and harvested oats and peas for the cattle, built sheds and mended equipment.

Charlie and Anna had a desire to expand the business, and just a month after buying the dairy, they bought out the Slater herd, which consisted of 10 milk cows, a yearling and two calves.\textsuperscript{103} When the Buzby's put their dairy cattle up for sale, Charlie purchased that herd of 19 cows and walked them over to the fields on College Road. Then, in 1937 Charlie added to his herd of Holsteins, purchasing 10 golden Guernseys, known for the high fat content in their milk.

The Creamers not only gained cows, but reduced the competition as well. Initially, six or seven small dairies provided for the needs of the community, but soon only two dairies supplied the community: the Creamer's and the Bentley's. Henry T. Bentley began his dairy in 1912 and ran it

\textsuperscript{102} D. Creamer, interview, 29 June 1988.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Fairbanks Daily News-Miner}, 2 June 1928.
with the help of his three sons. Born in England, he had learned the restaurant trade as a youth in England, and he ran the Butte Restaurant in Fairbanks from 1903 – 1912. His dairy operation expanded and before long he milked a dozen cows a day. In the fall of 1930, the Bentley’s lost their barn (and apparently their livestock) to a fire. This resulted in a local milk shortage. Consequently, the Creamers purchased six cows from Washington and shipped them up by train to boost their milk production. The Bentleys received an order of twelve milk cows in January of 1931 and rebuilt their barn in May, improving upon the old barn by adding a concrete foundation.

At first, the Creamer’s farm had no electricity or running water. A well with a hand pump provided water for the cows. In the winter Charlie and his farmhand Bill Oscum milked the cows and strained the frothy milk by lantern light. As the business grew, Charlie and Anna hired on more help. When they couldn’t find workman locally they advertised through the Seattle newspapers. For a number of years Leonard Neumann worked for the Creamers and made ice cream, and Oscar Canton, a native of Finland was their maintenance man. Oscar was a little unusual. He chose a room in the attic, just under the roof without the benefit of insulation. He slept there for years and kept warm in the winter with a bearskin. He finally determined that he needed a Finnish wife and went back to Finland to find one. He never returned and no one ever heard how his search turned out.

While the farm kept the Creamers remarkably busy, Anna never lacked for energy and she loved to dance. She and Charlie often went out, Anna in a floral dress and her mink coat and Charlie in his dapper hat and suit. Anna was “a real dynamo” according to her granddaughter, Jeannie. She never seemed tired or complained about the endless work and she expected others to work just as hard. She oversaw all the cooking for the hired men, and she got up every morning by five to start the coffee and get breakfast on the table. She was a good cook and a “mother hen,” according to Jeannie. She kept a large garden, raised chickens and did the bookkeeping and

104 Ibid., 2 December 1930.
105 Ibid., 9, January 1931.
banking, including applying for loans. In business correspondence, she took to signing her name “A.E. Creamer,” and the return correspondence frequently addressed her as “Mr. A.E. Creamer,” which did not bother her at all. She found time to be an active member of the Pioneer Women of Alaska. And on Sundays, Anna arrived at the Immaculate Conception Church promptly at nine with Don trailing behind her. Charlie did not attend church.\(^{109}\)

Don took to farm life and rode horses from an early age. When he was seven or eight he tried to saddle up his own horse for the first time. He got the saddle on all right and mounted the animal, but when the horse went around the corner of the barn, Don found himself, still in the saddle, hanging upside-down underneath the horse. He had not tightened the cinch well enough.\(^{110}\) He grew up surrounded by family, even though he had no brothers or sisters. Three of Charlie’s sisters, Mattie, Marian and Francis, remained in Fairbanks and were raising families of their own, and Don’s grandparents, C.N. and Minnie Creamer, continued to live in Fairbanks for the remainder of their lives.\(^{111}\)

### Increasing Crop Production

As the farm prospered, Charlie invested much of his energy into raising crops to see his livestock through the winter. In the early 1930s Charlie grew about sixty acres of feed annually, but when he lost the crop three years in a row due to rainy weather, he had to purchase feed from the N.C. Company at $120 a ton. Consequently, Charlie and Anna decided to switch to silage for their winter feed.\(^{112}\) The silage, a mixture of oats and peas, would heat up and ferment in the round silo towers and could be used throughout the winter to provide a nutrient-rich feed for the cows. The oats and peas did not need to be dried in the field, but could be harvested and loaded directly into the silos, reducing problems associated with rainy weather. The Creamers grew oats and field peas together in the field to make the silage. The oats supported the trailing pea vines, so that a regular mowing machine could cut it and side rakes could load it.\(^{113}\) In 1934 the Creamers built two 100-ton silos and eventually replaced these with two 200-ton silos, seeking additional financing to build them. In addition, they grew barley for grain and brome grass for hay.

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\(^{109}\) Ibid..  
\(^{110}\) Ibid..  
\(^{111}\) C. Creamer, interview, June 1973.  
\(^{112}\) D. Creamer, J. Creamer, R. Creamer, public lecture, 2 April 1992.  
\(^{113}\) D. Creamer, interview, 29 June 1988.
Every year Charlie increased the size of his fields, cutting trees and pulling the stumps out of the black loam with horses, and, along with a small crew, he grew feed for 30 milk cows, 8 calves, 8 horses and 12 hogs. He cultivated the well-drained soil and left off clearing where the permafrost lay close to the surface, leaving the boggy forests for the fox and moose. The Creamers purchased additional land, eventually increasing their holding by another 377 acres located mostly north of Farmer’s Loop Road. This included the 320-acre Roy Shafer homestead on Farmer’s Loop that Charlie bought for $5,500 at public auction on 5 October 1948.

At the end of the growing season, after the crops were put up for the year, Charlie culled the old stock from the herd. In the back of the hay shed he shot the cows and hung them on a cross beam to be skinned. Here the meat cured for a couple of days, with the cool fall weather keeping it fresh.

Adding Farming Equipment and a Fleet to the Dairy

As their sales increased to area restaurants and stores, Charlie and Anna retired the old delivery wagons and bought their first delivery vans around 1929. They began home delivery routes in 1932 or 1933, about the same time they started making ice cream. Charlie fitted the vans with tiny wood stoves and a smoke stack rising out the back window to keep the milk from freezing in the bottles in the winter. The driver laid the fire before leaving the warmth of the barn and then lit it after the van began to cool down, around Second Avenue. After a few more stops the driver adjusted the damper, and that would usually suffice until he completed the route. In the summers the delivery routes extended out to the mining camps, where the miners enjoyed ice cream after dinner with their coffee.

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114 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner 29 August 1934.
115 This figure was derived from a lands record search at the Fairbanks Borough Lands Office by the author.
116 Don Bell and Don Creamer, interview by Mark Ross and India Spartz, 3 November 2001, Creamer’s Farmhouse, tape recording, University of Alaska, Rasmuson Library Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.
117 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 4 September 1934.
118 D. Creamer, interview, 29 June 1988.
Don often accompanied his father on the daily milk run in the mornings before school. He helped out on the route until 8:30 a.m. Then he ducked into the Imperial Cigar Store near the Co-Op Diner and read magazines until time for school. By the age of 11 he learned to drive the Model A Ford delivery truck, and he took it out alone to make deliveries to the gold mining camps of Ester and Chatanika.\textsuperscript{120}

Summer milk deliveries were done in the early years without the benefit of refrigeration. The drivers wet gunnysacks and laid them over the milk cans kept them cool. Sometimes whole cans were set in the creek to keep cool. Charlie enjoyed telling the story of Frank Going. Going delivered milk and newspapers thirty miles out to the mining camps, driving out one day and coming back the next. In those days, milk came in three-gallon cans and drivers dispensed it with a quart measure. "Well, them days they had these little anchovies for a snack in the bar. And somebody dumped anchovies into his [Going's] milk can." So Going headed out the next morning, having stored his milk in the cool creek overnight. He arrived at the home of well-to-do jewelers, Mr. and Mrs. Sutter. When he poured out a quart of milk for them, "Here came the fish." Going jumped back and said, "My God, the can got too deep in the river I guess." \textsuperscript{121}

New delivery vans lead to the purchase of new farm machinery, and in 1934 the Creamers bought their first gas tractor. Horses required feed year round, and the teamsters, who used to work ten and twelve-hour days, now wanted to head home after an eight-hour day. So Charlie made the

\textsuperscript{120} D. Creamer, J. Creamer, R. Creamer, public lecture, 2 April 1992.

\textsuperscript{121} C. Creamer, interview, June 1973.
switch to tractors and bought a Case Model L in 1935. Tractors did not completely replace horses because the tractors frequently got stuck. But by the 1940s crawler tractors were available and, with their wide, continuous tread, they worked even in the snow.122 Charlie and Anna added new farm equipment as well. In 1936, in addition to a second Case tractor, they bought gangplows, brush breaking plows, hay loaders, a disk harrow and a side delivery rake.123

A fire truck was the next addition to the growing fleet. Fire service did not extend outside of town in those days, and when a civil defense fire truck became available for a volunteer fire crew, Charlie agreed to house it. Subsequently, the dairy responded to most fires in the area and Chuck Oster became the main driver for the truck. It had a good siren, but it did not go very fast, never exceeding 30 miles per hour, even going downhill.124

Then, in the late 1930s or early 1940s Charlie acquired a Detroit Chalmers convertible. This stately car had originally belonged to a Dr. Cassel. Charlie’s uncle, Fred Noyes, bought it when the doctor moved, and when Fred moved outside, C.N. acquired it. C.N. did not care to drive much, however, and told Charlie if he wanted it “he better come get it.” 125 Charlie restored the Chalmers and kept it, and later gave it to Don.

Farmhouse and Dairy Improvements

By the early 1930s the dairy was due for modernization. The green wine bottles were gone, replaced with thick glass milk bottles, but these were still washed by hand with a brush and set upside-down to dry. Charlie processed the milk by pouring it from the milk bucket through a strainer and into a 10-gallon can. The can was set to cool in a water tank and decanted into two-gallon cans that were then used to fill the milk bottles.126 Charlie made ice cream with salt and ice that his father, C.N. Creamer, cut from the river in the winter. C.N. cut the ice with a handsaw into 200-pound blocks, about two feet square, and stored it, packed in sawdust, in the large icehouse by the Wendell Street Bridge. The ice usually lasted all summer.127

With an eye towards modernizing, Anna and Charlie built a new milk-house in 1934 and equipped it with a Baker ice machine to generate ice for ice cream. They added modern electric separators, churns, a new refrigeration plant a new sterilizing room complete with a new boiler to provide hot water and steam for washing bottles and cans. Bottle fillers sped up the decanting process, and milking machines relieved the men of hours of hand milking. "No effort is spared to make this dairy the most sanitary one in Alaska" according to a write-up in the local paper. The dairy now produced milk, cream, butter, ice cream and cheese.

The summer of 1936 brought additional changes to the dairy. No sooner had the crops been planted but plans were underway for a series of construction projects. Anna and Charlie hired laborers to move the farmhouse several yards closer to the barns and onto a new root cellar with a cement foundation. Charlie oversaw the addition of a modern kitchen and bathroom on the north side of the farmhouse, and the exterior of the house underwent a transformation with white siding applied over the old log structure. A five-car garage became the next project.

In the fall of 1936 the dairy, purported to be the largest farm in Alaska under cultivation, produced 30 bushels of threshed barley per acre – a satisfactory yield even by Lower 48 standards. The Creamers and their crew raised 200 tons of oats and peas to provide for 40 milk cows, 16 calves and 5 horses. The dairy shipped milk and other dairy products by truck, rail and plane to Livengood, Circle, Nome and Dawson City. The success of the dairy came just as farmers throughout the central plains of the United States dealt with record heat, frightening dust storms and widespread crop failure.

While the Depression of the 1930s dragged on for much of the country, Alaska bounced back much sooner, due largely to a surge in dredge mining operations. Because of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's decision in 1934 to increase the value of gold from $20 to $35 an ounce, the gold rush in and around Fairbanks re-ignited, with the FE Company leading the way.

Construction of the First Louden Barn

Once the Creamers remodeled the house, the deterioration of the old log barn became strikingly evident. The floor and lower logs were rotting and dairy operations were outgrowing the

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131 Ibid., 28 September, 1936.
limited space it offered. Therefore, in 1938 the Creamers contracted with the Louden Machinery Company in Iowa to build a large Iowa-style barn, so named because the distinctive roof became common in Iowa for many years.

Concrete footings were poured to a height of three feet, and the frame construction began on the barn walls for a building that would measure 110 feet long and 36 feet wide. The loft walls extended an additional ten feet above the standard 32 foot height in order to allow it to hold 165 tons of hay -- enough to feed 55 cows through the winter. The resulting structure had a curved metal roof and three gleaming ventilating cupolas on top.

The contractors installed a steam heater, and blowers and fans to provide ventilation and distribute heat evenly. The walls were a foot thick and insulated with sawdust, and after the first winter the Creamers never used the steam heat, because the cows provided enough warmth. Cork brick flooring eased the strain of confinement for the cows during the long winter months and automatic water fountains quenched their thirst.\(^{132}\) And down through the center of the building a track ran for a cart to transport manure out of the barn. The barn was a state-of-the-art addition to the farm and the $13,700 price tag for materials and labor surpassed the amount the Creamers paid

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for the entire farm ten years before. More than ever, the farm took on the appearance of a Midwestern dairy. To complete the modernization, Anna and Charlie oversaw the construction of a bottling plant, and ordered a new milking machine, and an ice machine to keep up with an increasing market for ice cream.

Figure 9: Creamer’s Dairy (1940), Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska

After they finished the barn, but before rounding up the cows for the winter, the Creamers put on a first-class barn dance and hired Billie Root and his orchestra to provide the music. On 22 August 1938 with the last of the construction dirt swept up and the tables laid out with food and drink, Anna and Charlie greeted the arriving guests. Nearly everyone in Fairbanks turned out for the event and cars were parked all along College Road. One thousand people joined in the dancing and took turns riding through the barn on the new manure cart. As things wound down, Creamer’s ice cream was served. Then, with waves and calls of thanks, tired but happy townsfolk rode back to their cars on College Road in a wagon drawn by four stately Percherons.


BARN DANCE

The Event You Have Been Waiting For. Given on the completion of our new barn, and in appreciation of the years of splendid support by the people of Fairbanks.

The public is invited to come as our guests and dance from 9 until 12 to the music of Billy Root and his orchestra. The place is the second floor of our new, modern barn, and the time is 9 p.m. Tonight.

Overalls and gingham—YES!
Dress Clothes—NO!

CREAMER’S DAIRY
The home of Quality Milk Products

Figure 10: Barn Dance Flyer (1938), Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska

Don was sixteen when the first Louden barn was built. He helped haul lumber and ran back and forth to provide a saw here and a hammer there. A few weeks after the big barn dance, Don had his own party. One of the “ladies from the alcohol manufacturing business” fixed him up with four or five gallons of grain alcohol. Don mixed up 30 gallons of punch, with plenty of ice. The young crowd played records on the old RCA and tried for radio reception by running a wire up and out the loft. And of course they rode the manure train “after they got to feeling pretty good.”135

Further modernization occurred simultaneously for the Creamer and Bentley Dairies. In November 1940 both dairies installed pasteurizing equipment in order to keep up with national health standards. On 31 December 1940 the Creamers ran a full-page ad in the local paper to inform the public of their new pasteurization process, stating that they had invested $20,000. In the advertisement they provided an overview of the milking and bottling methods. Essentially, after milking the cows, Charlie and his crew poured the raw milk into a large cooling tank and then routed it to the pasteurizer. (A basic pasteurizer is a heated vat that brings milk up to 145 degrees for a minimum of 30 minutes, effectively killing most bacteria while retaining the natural flavor of the milk.) After pasteurization, the milk again entered a cooling unit where it chilled to 38 degrees prior to bottling. The bottling machine then filled the glass bottles, a capper capped them, and the bottles were placed in cases for delivery. A bottle washer cleaned the returning bottles with a 150-degree alkali solution pressure soak and a chlorinated bath before the final rinse. The Creamers also invested in a machine to homogenize the milk used in making ice cream. (Homogenizing breaks up the liquid milk and cream into minute particles for a smoother more consistent texture.)

Birds During the Farming Years

Located approximately five miles north of the Tanana River, and adjacent to sloughs that had once branched from the river, the Creamer’s farm lay along the principle migration corridor taken by lesser sandhill cranes and a vast number of ducks and geese on their passage to and from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta each spring and fall. Over the years, as the Creamers cleared trees and cultivated the soil, the farm became an important stopover for weary birds in route.

Each spring, in preparation for planting, Charlie and his crew shoveled up the manure that had accumulated near the barn all winter and spread it on the fields as fertilizer. With its dark color, it sped up snowmelt, and because it contained undigested grain, waterfowl were attracted to the fields as they migrated back north from wintering grounds in the south.

Charlie enjoyed the birds and he swept up spilled grain around the dairy and spread it for them when they began to arrive in the spring. The birds did not interfere with the crops because they left for their nesting grounds before spring planting. Spring duck hunting became illegal in

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136 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 12 November 1940.


138 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 31 December 1940.
due to declining bird populations, but many hunters disregarded the regulations. Charlie did
not allow hunting on his land even during hunting season -- he reasoned that the birds paired for life,
and shooting any would result in fewer birds for the next generation.140

In 1937, spring arrived late, and the ducks were two weeks behind their usual arrival date
when they finally appeared on May 4. Thousands of ducks, many more than in previous years,
descended on the fields and began to search for food. Apparently snow had covered up their
normal feeding stops in route, and the birds were starving. Charlie took it upon himself to feed
them, spreading peas and oats that they eagerly consumed. The local papers reported that the dairy
“looked more like a duck ranch than a cow farm.”141 As warm weather melted the snow in the
fields, the ducks, mostly Northern pintails, gathered in the resulting melt ponds, along with a
number of lesser sandhill cranes. The influx of birds continued for two weeks, and the birds became
so tame they waddled right into the barn among the cows to solicit handouts.142 By June 9 the birds
had moved on, and Charlie planted his fields and turned his cows out to graze, running three weeks
late himself due to the long winter.143

Because of the level of human activity on Creamer’s field during the fall, the majority of
birds typically made their fall rest stops at the Experimental Farm and out on the grain fields along
Farmer’s Loop road. When many of these farms switched from grain crops to hay more birds began
to frequent the float ponds and open fields at the city and military airports. This posed flight risks,
and in the mid 1940s, the Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Association began to purchase and spread
grain for the birds at Creamer’s Dairy and at the Experimental Farm. The grain drew the birds away
from the airports and their numbers increased greatly at both farms. The presence of so many birds
drew town folk and school children to the dairy. School children had long come to tour the dairy
and watch the milking process, now they came to study the birds as well.144 The arrival of
waterfowl at the Creamer’s Dairy came to be viewed as a harbinger of spring in Fairbanks.

140 Bell and D. Creamer, interview, 3 November 2001.
141 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 12 May 1937.
142 Ibid., 18 May 1937.
143 Ibid., 9 June 1937.
144 Bell and D. Creamer, interview, 3 November 2001.
CHAPTER SIX: CHANGES DURING AND AFTER WORLD WAR II

In Europe, events culminating in the Second World War were escalating daily as France and England joined in the war against Germany. Alaska, remote and unprotected, appeared vulnerable. In 1939 construction began on Ladd Field, just east of town (later renamed Fort Wainwright). Construction of airstrips and barracks went into overdrive, and work proceeded throughout the winter. By summer, 1,000 men worked to cover three shifts a day. The base opened for operations in September 1940.\textsuperscript{145}

On 7 December 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the United States found itself swept up in the Second World War. Construction of the Alaska-Canadian Military Highway began in April 1942 and was completed between Dawson Creek, Canada and Fairbanks in a remarkable eight months. Built to provide access to airstrips and to facilitate the delivery of military equipment, the road was initially closed to civilian traffic.\textsuperscript{146} As the war escalated, men from throughout the Interior honored the call to enlist and left Alaska to serve. Once again, as with the First World War, Fairbanks businesses were left with a shortage of skilled farmhands and laborers, and the impact on the dairy was immediate. On 18 December 1941, Charlie wrote Governor Ernest Gruening to request some leniency in the draft for dairy workers:

Now another very serious situation has arrived, the Army is drafting all the young men. I am supplying Ladd Field and most of the city. We are running 90 head of stock and we have a large investment, too large to run without help. I have had to take one of the trucks myself and I should be on the place to oversee things. It’s so hard now at my age to work like this. I will be obliged to cut down the herd of cattle unless there is some way I can keep these men I have trained. I had to take my son out of college in March to take one of the delivery trucks. I hated to take him from his school but I could not get anyone, so he had to take a truck. And he had worked every day and Sundays too, all summer.\textsuperscript{147}

Despite his appeal to the governor, Charlie and Anna lost most of their skilled workers to the war. On 1 October 1942 the Creamers stopped making home deliveries because they lacked drivers to run the routes, but they kept up deliveries to local restaurants and grocery stores.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{145} Price, “Homesteads on Fort Wainwright,” 15.

\textsuperscript{146} D. Cole, \textit{Fairbanks, A Gold Rush Town That Beat The Odds}, 120.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 131-132.
Initially milk went from 25 cents a quart to 45 cents a quart during the war years. The Creamers still delivered milk in glass bottles, but these were getting increasingly difficult to re-supply. Charlie established military contracts with Ladd Field and instead of running three trucks around town on home-delivery routes, he made one large delivery to the base where he sold milk, ice cream, cottage cheese and buttermilk. The base, in turn, provided a source of part-time laborers, with soldiers pitching in during their off-duty hours.\textsuperscript{149}

That fall, City of Anchorage residents faced milk shortages, partly because the army base required large quantities of milk, and partly because of crop failure due to excessive rain. Cattle farmers could not import grain from the states because the military utilized most of the shipping space, so consequently many farmers found it necessary to slaughter their cows. City officials encouraged the rationing of milk products.\textsuperscript{150}

By June 1943 both the Creamer and Bentley dairies suspended all bottled milk delivery due to labor shortages and price fixing by the Office of Price Administration.\textsuperscript{151} The high cost of maintaining operations could not be offset by the fixed price of 20 cents a quart set for milk and 69 cents a pound set for butter.\textsuperscript{152} Moreover, by June, Charlie was so short-handed that he had not yet planted his fields, putting him three-weeks behind the growing season. To cope, the Creamers dedicated all dairy production to their military contract and hoped to avoid butchering their milk cows. Charlie contracted with the military to reconstitute powdered milk supplied by the military by adding sweet cream to increase the milk fat to between three and three-and-one-half percent.\textsuperscript{153}

Don worked long hours with Charlie at the dairy and made most of the deliveries to the base. But he found time to do a little courting, and soon found a young woman with whom to share his life. In November 1943 Don and Connie Allyn were wed. Don was 21 and Connie was just 18. Connie soon became pregnant with their first child, but in 1944, before the birth of Jeanne Creamer, Don was drafted.\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{148} Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 29 September 1942.

\textsuperscript{149} Don Creamer, interview by Mark Ross and India Spartz, 10 November 2001, Creamer's Farmhouse, tape recording, University of Alaska Rasmuson Library Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.

\textsuperscript{150} Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 29 October 1942.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 1 June 1943

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 27 February 1943.

\textsuperscript{153} D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.

\textsuperscript{154} Creamer-Dalton, interview, 19 April 2003.
Don wondered if someone on the draft board had it out for him. Eddie Clausen, manager of the NC, became greatly upset with the Creamers after they ceased store deliveries. According to Don, Eddie figured “If you’re going to give the army all your milk, your kid can go too.” Farm workers could get draft exemptions, but somehow Don’s did not come through. He served 23 weeks at Fort Richardson in Anchorage and then the army assigned him to Shemya Air Force Base, on Alaska’s Aleutian chain.155

While Don was in the service, Charlie and Anna cut back on the herd, paring down to 40 milk cows from the fifty they had maintained, in order to reduce milk production. On 4 June 1945 Charlie’s mother Mary died from a stroke. C.N. Creamer died just four months later, on October 10. On the same day C.N. died an article in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* stated that the Creamers would accept offers for the purchase of the dairy herd, stating that the dairy would likely close due to the difficulty in securing sufficient staff. The Chamber of Commerce, in an effort to avoid a milk crisis during the winter, appealed to the Director of Selective Services to release Don Creamer from military service so that he could return to the farm.156

Don applied for and was assigned to Ladd Air Force Base and finally, in 1946, he was discharged and returned to the farm. Once he returned, delivery routes resumed and the Creamers began to increase their herd size again. The population of Fairbanks expanded as enlisted servicemen returned home, and the presence of the military base just outside of the city provided a steady source of business and revenue for the dairy.

**Creamer’s Dairy Production Increases to Meet Population Growth**

In 1947, after a four-year wartime delay for material delivery, the Creamers oversaw the construction of a second Louden barn. It had the same dimensions as the first barn, but lacked the extra ten feet of height in the loft that gave the first Louden barn such a distinctive stature.157 This barn would hold an additional 50 cows and the hay needed to feed them through the winter. In 1949 Charlie and Anna extended Don a one-third partnership in the dairy.158 In 1950, the Bentley Dairy closed, and for the next ten years, the Creamer’s business prospered.

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158 Ibid., 10.
The herd soon grew to 80 milk cows, plus 30 or 40 dry heifers kept as reserve stock. The
dairy sold 250 to 300 gallons of Grade A milk and 400 to 600 gallons of ice cream daily, along
with sherbet, cottage cheese, whipping cream, buttermilk, chocolate milk and an orange-flavored
drink.

The number of full-time farm workers increased from 12 to 18 people between 1950 and 1960. The workers were given housing, with small cabins for the married men and a bunkhouse for the single men. Anna continued to provide meals for the single men and over the years she hired a number of women to assist her in the kitchen.

Figure 11: The Creamer Family and Crew (circa 1955), (Don, Charlie and Anna Creamer are back row left)
Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska

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By the 1950s, milk consumption nationwide was on the increase. The National Dairy Council ran an effective campaign, marketing milk as the perfect food – essential to good health. Once relegated to infants and small children, milk gained acceptance as a staple beverage, and per capita consumption increased to 45 gallons per year in 1945 (compared to 27 gallons per year in 1909)\(^{161}\). In addition to higher per capita demands for milk, Alaska experienced a steady rise in population, with a reported 75,000 residents in 1940 and 138,000 by 1950. Fairbanks experienced tremendous growth, with an increase in population from 5,600 in 1940 to 11,700 in 1950.\(^{162}\) By 1959 milk and milk products made up over fifty percent of all commercial agricultural sales in Alaska.\(^{163}\)

Agriculture throughout Alaska evolved to meet the demands of local communities, with fresh vegetables and local dairy products available to most communities along the road system. Aside from dairy farming, the establishment of large-scale meat and crop production met limited success in Alaska due to a lack of infrastructure for marketing the products,\(^{164}\) and the costs of shipping items beyond state borders. In the early 1950s an estimated 30 to 40 families farmed as a main source of income in the Fairbanks area, averaging some 30 acres of cultivated land per farm.\(^{165}\) (More recently Alaskan-grown seed potatoes have increased market sales outside of the state due to their resistance to potato blight.)

**Growing Up as Farm Kids**

Work on the farm never ceased, but Anna and Charlie always made time for their grandchildren. Don and Connie had six children over a span of sixteen years: Jeannie, Charles, Donald, Clifford, Roxanne and Jeffery. Don and his family lived on the farm in a house to the east of the main farmhouse, but the farmhouse remained the central hub of activity. Over the years the Creamers built several small houses for workers and their families to live in, and a community took shape on the farm.\(^{166}\)


\(^{166}\) D. Creamer, J. Creamer, and R. Creamer, public lecture, 2 April 1992.
Jeannie’s earliest memories include following her Grandpa Charlie everywhere, as he went about the business of running the farm. He had a wonderful way with animals, always patient and soft-spoken. And he never seemed to mind Jeannie, his little shadow, close beside him as he worked.167

The farm was a wonderful place for rambunctious children. The pond behind the barns (now called the seasonal pond) filled up with snowmelt and became a swimming hole each summer. And on clear summer nights, as the sun hung low over Ester Dome, an open field invited baseball games. The Tanana Valley State Fair took place each summer just to the west of the dairy, and the children slipped under the fence to save the fifty-cent entry fee. Over the Fourth of July there were firecrackers (the roman candles were saved for wintertime when it was dark enough to see them). In the winter the haylofts provided a warm place to play, and by flooding one of the corrals the children formed an ice-skating rink right there on the farm.168

The farm offered an assortment of animals in addition to the cows. Grandma Anna kept chickens and pigs, the barns were home to numerous cats and kittens, and the family always had a dog to pal along on the day’s adventures. The farm and surrounding woodlands attracted wild animals too, primarily moose and fox, and the occasional black bear or coyote. One year, before the children were born, a small herd of caribou came bounding over the fence along College Road. When Don went out to tend to the cows there were caribou in among them.169 Sometimes Alaska Fish and Game employees brought out orphaned animals in need of fostering. Once they brought a moose calf that quickly bonded with the children and followed them everywhere.170 (See Appendix D: Mammals of Creamer’s Field)

As a young girl, Jeannie developed a love of horses, but there were no riding horses at the farm, so she asked her father for one. Don denied her repeated requests until Grandma Anna took up the cause. Anna remembered her own days of riding and she argued that Jeannie would benefit from working with a horse. Don reconsidered, and bought a horse for Jeanine at the town rodeo. The horse, a bay gelding named Blaze, did not like men at all. Charlie attempted to train him and finally gave up in frustration. Jeannie took up the challenge and the horse turned out to be gentle around children. Jeannie spent many summer days riding him around the farm and the countryside

169 Bell and D. Creamer, interview, 3 November 2001.
Don later bought an American saddlebred gelding from Dr. John Weston in town. This horse appeared to limp badly, but in truth, he was just a good actor. Jeannie rode him, even though he had the habit of kicking up his back legs and pitching off his riders. He was fast, and Jeannie delighted in outracing her horseback-riding friends. Later that summer the family paired the horse with a former jockey working at the dairy, and together they won a race at the Tanana Valley Fair.

Several times throughout the year the extended family got together. Charlie’s sisters came with their families, and the house spilled over with cousins. Connie played piano and Bill Stroeker played trumpet with everyone singing or humming along. Connie’s parents lived in town, too. Grandpa Allyn had a good singing voice and some people said he only attended church because he liked to sing.

One of Jeannie’s favorite memories was of movie night. Several times a month Don or Charlie rented a movie from the co-op, usually a cartoon or Western, and Anna cooked up a big batch of popcorn. Everyone came to watch, farm workers and family alike. They crowded into the big family room in Don’s house and hand cranked ice cream, with each of the kids taking a turn until their arms gave out. It was one of many ways the Creamers built a family and a community on the farm.

Charlie Takes Up Potato Farming

Despite the surge in milk consumption after World War II, profits at the dairy were never dependable. Charlie sought ways to diversify, and he bid on and won a contract to supply the military with potatoes. He selected a site off Farmer’s Loop (on land that would later become the Jeff Studdert Race Grounds) and put in 50 acres of potatoes.

He tried Arctic seedling potatoes and White Rose and a variety of red potatoes as well. Potatoes grew well in Alaska and were free of the blights that affected potato crops in the rest of the United States. Charlie’s crop flourished and in early September, when fall breezes shook the golden leaves from the birch trees, Charlie prepared for the harvest. He hired 150 potato pickers.

171 Ibid..
172 Ibid..
173 Ibid..
174 D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.
175 Bell and D. Creamer, interview, 3 November 2001.
and, of course, the grandkids came too. Charlie rounded up everyone willing to work: folks coming in from the mines, military boys with farming backgrounds and anyone else with a good back.  

Charlie tilled up the potatoes with a mechanical potato digger, turning the fields over first thing in the morning and allowing them to dry a little. Then by nine or ten o’clock everyone piled into the flatbed trucks and headed out with gunnysacks and lunch baskets to make a day of it. They worked the potatoes free of the soil and loaded them into the gunnysacks, making their way steadily down the rows. In the late afternoon, as daylight waned, Charlie forked over a few final rows and, with their backs aching from bending over, the potato pickers found those potatoes more by feel than by sight. Then, brushing the dirt from their farm clothes, they all climbed back into the trucks and made the trip home. Over the next few days the potatoes were washed and sorted in the farmhouse root cellar. Any damaged potatoes were culled and fed to the cows, who ate them with pleasure. Charlie met his contract with the military and had potatoes left over to sell in the grocery stores. He stayed in the potato business for about twenty years, but he never found it to be as lucrative as he had hoped.

**Transportation Advances and Competition Affect the Dairy**

While the Creamers realized strong dairy sales and growth during the 1950s, they began to face competition from dairies in the lower 48 states. As early as 1936, a word-of-mouth campaign from stateside dairies conveyed the notion that milk from Alaska lacked vitamin D because of the long winter months. The Creamers attempted to counter this rumor by running radio and newspaper advertisements to correct the misinformation and pointing out the benefits of buying fresh local milk.

When the military lifted travel restrictions on the Alaska Highway in 1948, farmers and dairymen from the lower 48 states quickly expanded their marketing to Fairbanks. Then, in June 1951, the Fairbanks International Airport opened at its new location southwest of town, offering longer runways and better operations. Large stateside dairies like Carnation and Arden, because of their relatively low operating costs, and because of shipping subsidies, flew milk to Fairbanks and sold it at prices that undercut the Creamer’s Dairy. The Creamers dropped their prices to remain

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176 D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.


competitive, and their profits fell to just a one or two percent return on their investment.\(^{179}\) When dairies across the country went to paper cartons, the Creamer’s Dairy began using paper cartons too, although they stayed with glass bottles for home delivery. Despite these changes, the outside dairies soon dominated the market on grocery store shelves in Fairbanks.\(^{180}\)

Closer to home, in the spring of 1954, the Matanuska Valley Cooperative Association in Palmer Alaska, bought the Fairbanks Laundry building at 124 Second Avenue and established a milk processing plant for small local farmers, directly competing with the Creamers. When Charlie first got wind of the Co-op’s plans to locate a branch in Fairbanks, he appealed to the Fairbanks City Council not to proceed with a proposed tax incentive for the Co-op. He estimated his investment in the dairy to be $500,000, with 120 head of stock and $40,000 of improvements made just in the last year.\(^{181}\) None-the-less, the new dairy plant opened 18 June 1954,\(^{182}\) and was deemed the most modern in Alaska. Competition from the Matanuska Co-op processing plant continued until 1962, when they closed down the Fairbanks operation due to an insufficient supply of local milk.

**Dairy Regulations Tighten with Statehood**

While the competition from local and outside milk processors resulted in a significant decrease in store sales, the Creamer’s dairy still had its military contracts, home delivery routes and most of the business from local restaurants. The Creamers adjusted by increasing their ice cream production with their surplus milk, even though ice cream did not provide as much profit. On 9 April 1959, Charlie and Anna, along with Don and Connie, assumed a new $120,000 mortgage on the dairy through refinancing. They invested in new bottle washing equipment and an automatic capper to better meet their contract with the military -- knowing that it would take four or five years to make good on the investment.\(^{183}\)

To compound their difficulties, The Creamers came under increasing pressure from sanitation inspectors to comply with national health standards. Nationwide, mechanization, increased production, and more stringent sanitation regulations greatly increased the capital needed to maintain a state-certified dairy. The trend stateside was for consolidation of dairies, with fewer

\(^{179}\) D. Creamer, interview, 29 June 1988.

\(^{180}\) D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.


\(^{182}\) Ibid., 17 June 1954.

\(^{183}\) D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.
dairies producing more milk. Once Alaska became a state in January 1959, dairies came under strict federal sanitation requirements.

Twenty years before, Charlie had been progressive with his silos and protein-rich forage, which resulted in increased milk yields. The barn, once state-of-the-art, now needed an expensive upgrade. Charlie's workers had always milked the cows in their stalls, tying up their tails to prevent them from contaminating the milk. But the cows frequently laid down in their stalls and there was no easy way to keep them clean, despite hosing the stalls daily. Workers washed the cows' flanks off with chlorine, but bacteria counts in the milk often exceeded Federal limits. In order to comply with the new standards, the Creamer's Dairy needed to build a loafing shed for washing cows daily and a milking parlor for milking separate from any other activity. Milk had to be piped in stainless steel tubing to the milk house, where it would be cooled immediately, resulting in less handling and less contamination.

State inspectors walked through the dairy, clipboards in hand, and pointed out all the areas of concern. The dairy had problems with moisture even with the fans going, and drying it by heating the cavernous buildings was prohibitively expensive. Sewage runoff created another problem. The Creamers had always hosed out the barns and let the rinse water run into the slough just west of the barns. But the slough was frozen solid for seven months of the year. Charlie and Anna needed to build a sewer system. Then coliform counts at the dairy exceeded milk quality standards one too many times, and it made the local papers. Anna and Charlie could not see any way to afford further modernization, and the strain began to wear them down. Always known for his gentleness, Charlie got so angry with one inspector that he took the man roughly by the shoulder and escorted him from the building. Then, because of sanitation concerns, the military did not renew their annual contract. The loss dealt a blow to the dairy -- now over-extended with debt.

Don, Connie, Charlie and Anna struggled to find a solution to their troubles while sitting around the table in the farmhouse kitchen, and their conversations often deteriorated into arguments out of worry and frustration. Connie kept the books by then and knew how bleak their

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185 D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.

186 Don Creamer, interview by Robin Lewis, 1 July 1988, Creamer's Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.

187 Ibid.

188 D. Creamer, interview, 10 November 2001.
finances were. Don suggested improvements, but Charlie and Anna did not want to upgrade if it meant more debt. Don grew discouraged and wanted to leave the dairy business, but Charlie and Anna talked him into staying time and again.\textsuperscript{189}

**The Writing on the Wall**

With their best years behind them, Charlie and Anna were losing ground. The buildup of the military in Alaska provided good-paying jobs that did not require working 70 or 80-hours a week, so securing and retaining a good crew required higher pay for fewer hours. Farms in the lower 48 states reduced labor costs through increased mechanization. In Alaska farmers faced excessive transportation costs for equipment, a limited distribution range for the crops they raised, and the increased availability of goods freighted up from the states. Not surprisingly, farming settlements in Alaska never expanded throughout the agriculturally viable regions as they did in the lower 48 states and Canada.

State sanitation requirements, while sound in principle, put the burden of implementation on Alaskan dairies at a time when outside competition dramatically reduced profits. Even in lower-48 dairies, compliance with newer health standards took time. In a 1980 survey of New York state dairies, 80 percent still lacked modern milking parlors, and one third of all farmers were still using the mobile milking machine introduced just after the turn of the century, transporting milk in buckets to cooling vats rather than using stainless steel tubing.\textsuperscript{190} The Creamers were both in their seventies when they were confronted by the insurmountable obstacles imposed by competition, tighter sanitation regulations, and finally, state taxes. The realization that the dairy was sadly outdated and financially overextended must have been overwhelming.

By 1965 the family faced losing the farm. Confronted with a $175,000 mortgage\textsuperscript{191} and dwindling sales, they knew they needed to sell. Connie and Don separated that same year. Then, on October 14, Anna Creamer died. She was eighty years old. Charlie was 76 and had been in the dairy business for thirty-eight years, working seven days a week the whole time.\textsuperscript{192}

Early in 1966 the First National Bank, with Ed Schroeder as president, foreclosed but gave the Creamers time to try to sell the dairy. Charlie and Don had 108 cows when they turned them out of the barns that summer and dried them up. Their milking days were over. In the fall Charlie and

\textsuperscript{189} D. Creamer, interview, 29 June 1988.

\textsuperscript{190} http://www.vermontdairy.com/history.htm.

\textsuperscript{191} Murphy, “Fairbanks Wildlife Management Area: the Human Use Aspect,” 2.

\textsuperscript{192} C. Creamer, interview, June 1973.
Don slaughtered the animals and sold the meat. The beef they could not sell they piled out back for the foxes, as they could not afford refrigeration. Years later the bones remained as a bleak reminder of all that once was.

Figure 12: Creamer’s Dairy (circa 1960), Creamer’s Farmhouse Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska

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194 D. Creamer, interview, 1 July 1988.
CHAPTER SEVEN: FROM FARM TO WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

By the 1960s, the farm and the city were rubbing shoulders, as new houses, schools and businesses crowded up against the eastern and southern borders of the verdant farmland. Such a parcel of land, so close to the core of the city, offered highly desirable building sites, with well-drained soils, a flat grade and proximity to power, water and major roadways.

Fortunately, another option came into play. This small farm, developed over 65 years through the toil and determination of two families, now inspired a community. The people of Fairbanks felt a connection to the place. They set their spring clocks by the arrival of the first geese on the fields each April. In the winter area mushers raced dog teams across the snowy fields and woodlands beyond. The dairy inspired nostalgia because it had grown up with and alongside the city. The farm offered a sense of place at the heart of a community experiencing rapid change -- because of its history, its ties to the community, and because of the pastoral setting it preserved. In its decline, a new purpose for the land took shape.

Fairbanks Citizens Organize to Save the Farmland

In October 1966, Charlie and Don contacted area realtors to inform them of the availability of the farm. In the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, Charlie stated that taxes "are just too high to keep going", and that he hoped to avoid subdividing the land. Fairbanks Realty listed the farm, and soon had a buyer for 100 acres on the southeast corner. The construction of Joy Elementary School and Wedgewood Manor Apartments soon followed on that parcel of land. Additional land off Farmer's Loop also sold. Soon just 247 acres remained.

Interestingly, a few years before the dairy went up for sale, a small group of local people at a monthly Alaska Conservation Society (ACS) membership meeting considered the purchase of the dairy. On this particular spring day Celia Hunter, Ginny Wood, Bob Weeden, Leslie Viereck, Dan Swift and ACS president Jane Williams met over brown bag lunches in a room at the University of Alaska. Small talk circulated about the weather and the arrival of birds at the Creamer's Dairy. Someone voiced a thought: would it not be wonderful to purchase the dairy some day so that school children and area residents could continue to enjoy the open space and birds?  

When the dairy became available for purchase, ACS members quickly sought to raise public interest in purchasing the land for use as an educational and recreational site. Elbert Rice,


head of the University of Alaska Civil Engineering Department and an ACS member, organized a public meeting on 1 May 1967 to discuss the purchase of the property.197 Twenty-five people turned out for the meeting, including Fairbanks North Star Borough Planning Director Donn Hopkins and Borough Assembly Chairman Harold Gillam. Hopkins and Gillam recognized the land’s potential for recreation and environmental education and, upon their recommendation, the Borough Assembly authorized $2,500 in borough funds to study the potential for developing recreational and educational facilities on the property. The National Audubon Society’s Nature Center Division would conduct the study.198 The borough did not have the budget to purchase recreational land, and because the dairy lay outside of the Fairbanks city limits, the city could not fund the purchase. It would be up to the state of Alaska to appropriate the purchase price for the property.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game requested an analysis of the site by the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife to determine if the land met the requirements for the Federal Aid for Wildlife Restoration Program. An expert from the Portland Regional Office came up just two weeks later, on 15 May 1967 to make the determination.199 The Bureau findings concluded that the land was an established stopover for waterfowl during their spring and fall migrations and qualified for federal funding under the Pittman-Robertson Act, P.L. 75-415. This fund was financed by a national tax on the sale of guns and ammunition to be used for the preservation or improvement of land used by wildlife for feeding, resting or breeding200. The fund would provide 75% of the purchase price if the State of Alaska could provide the remaining 25%.

That same month, on May 2, Alaska Governor Walter J. Hickel toured the farm while on a visit to Fairbanks for the Alaska 67 Exposition at the newly completed Alaskaland, a historical park featuring many of Fairbanks’s oldest buildings. He was aware of pending legislation to purchase the farmland for a wildlife management area and after a visit to the farm, he returned to Juneau in support of the purchase.201

197 Spindler, Ecological Survey 18.


199 Ibid..


The Flood of 1967

The August rains of 1967 caused a brief setback in the efforts to purchase the farm. August in interior Alaska is predictably rainy, but that year, with the ground already saturated from a wetter than normal June and July, heavy rains forced the Chena River over its banks on August 14. The water crept higher, lapping over curbs and driveways and inundating basements. The swirling floodwaters continued to rise throughout the day and into the night and some 15,000 people headed to higher ground at the University, Eielson Air Force Base and Lathrop High School. The city’s hospital flooded, and all patients had to be moved to Bassett Army hospital on Fort Wainwright, where even there the basement flooded. Homes and businesses stood in water four feet deep or more and power was out all over town for up to a week. Parked cars were submerged and the roads became channels for canoes and motorboats, with road signs jutting up from the surging waters. Creamer’s Dairy did not escape the flood and the cold brown water filled the farmhouse basement and flowed over the cork floors of the barns. Governor Hickel declared Fairbanks a disaster area. The water receded within a week, but months of work lay ahead, as Fairbanks shoveled out mud and sorted through debris. Property damages reached $85 million, making it the worst disaster in the city’s history.

Money Is Raised to Secure the Land

Two months after the flood, the state had not yet signed an agreement with the Creamers to purchase the dairy, and private developers jotted down numbers with an eye towards subdividing the farm into residential lots. The Alaska Conservation Society knew that the Creamers might have a lucrative offer any day and realized they had to act quickly. ACS hoped a fund drive would raise enough money for a down payment on the land until the state could authorize funding for the full purchase price. But could the people of Fairbanks, still recovering from the devastation of the August flood, raise the money needed?

On November 21 members of ACS approached Charlie and Don, asking them (in Don’s words) “do you want to sell, or do you want a park?” Charlie hated to see the wildlife and birds displaced, and felt strongly that the land should remain in open fields. Don and Charlie signed an agreement with ACS stating that they would hold off on any offers to buy the farm until December 1st. That gave ACS just ten days to raise $5,000 in earnest money towards the purchase price of the farm.

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ACS members, most notably ADF&G biologist Bob Weeden, scrambled to get the word out, approaching area businesses, schools and outdoor user groups. Fairbanks responded with a passion that surprised everyone and funds began to come in even before an account was set up to receive them. 204 The Campfire Girls at University Park Elementary School baked cakes with mixes donated from local stores and raised eighty-two dollars at their bake sale.205 Local dog musher and writer Mary Shields attended school fundraising events with a great-horned owl riding on her shoulder to draw attention to the needs of wildlife in the area.206 Students from Nordale Elementary donated money they had set aside for a Christmas gift exchange. Eielson High School held a dance, and the $350 they raised in admission fees went to the fund. Dog mushers, bird watchers and other outdoor enthusiasts who had long frequented the fields during different times of year responded with support as well. The fund drive was truly a grass-roots effort, spearheaded in large part by the city’s children. But by December 1, only $2,000 of the $5,000 needed had been raised. ACS went to the Creamers and asked for an extension. The Creamers consented, and extended the agreement until December 8.

The money continued to trickle in, and at 3 P.M. on December 7, Denali Park Elementary made a $124 contribution to cap the $5,000 goal.207 Still donations kept coming, with a total of $6,800 raised by over 200 individuals and businesses. The Golden Nugget Skydivers provided an exhibition jump marking the end of the drive.208

Charlie and Don Creamer signed the option agreement with ACS on 15 December 1967. They agreed to sell 259 acres at a price of $268,000. This included all of the dairy land with the exception of the farm buildings and the twelve acres surrounding them. Don and Charlie wanted between $100,000 and $200,000 for the dairy buildings and adjacent land, while the State assessed their value at only $28,700, so the buildings were not included in the sale. ACS held the option on the 247 acres while the State of Alaska appropriated money for the actual purchase. The contract was to be binding until 15 April 1968.209

In early 1968, ACS initiated a property assessment through Meyers Real Estate. This assessment arrived at a value of between $210,000 and $271,000 without the farm buildings and

209 Ibid., 3.
equipment. The low price reflected the option of selling the land as a whole to a sub developer, while the high price factored in selling it in individual lots with roads and utilities provided. ACS then approached Don and Charlie with a modified contract and they agreed to adjust the purchase price to $225,000.210

**State and Federal Revenues Finalize the Sale**

The land purchase proceeded smoothly thereafter. State Senators John Butrovich and Paul Haggland, both of Fairbanks, introduced Senate Bill 368 on 17 February 1968 requesting that $56,250 from the Legislative General Fund be appropriated to ADF&G for the state’s 25% match of the purchase price.211 The bill passed the State Senate and the House and Governor Hickel signed the bill into law on 17 April 1968. The state monies came from a fund financed by the sale of hunting licenses for the purpose of enhancing access to and quality of wildlife resources.212 ADF&G then applied for and received $168,750 from the Pittman-Robertson fund.

On 29 May 1968 the 247 acres on College Road became the property of the people of Alaska, and ADF&G assumed management of the new Fairbanks Wildlife Management Area (FWMA). In June of the same year, ADF&G applied for the transfer of 1,520 acres of adjacent state land. The transfer came through in 1970, and its addition to the FWMA brought the management area to nearly 1,800 acres.213

The members of the ACS were ecstatic. The timing could not have been more critical, as oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay in the spring of 1968, and land prices immediately began to climb. Celia Hunter later stated that with the “subsequent, frantic development that went on in Fairbanks, we would not have had a prayer of holding that choice piece of real estate along College Road in a nature preserve. We got that area at probably the last moment that it was possible to get a large chunk of land as a green belt along College Road.”214

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210 Ibid., 7.

211 Celia Hunter, public meeting, 4 May 1985, tape recording, University of Alaska Rasmuson Library Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska.


214 Hunter, public meeting, 4 May 1985.
Uses of the Land as a Wildlife Management Area

When the state assumed ownership of the wildlife management area, Charlie and Don Creamer still owned and inhabited the farmhouse and the surrounding buildings, and the only road into the newly acquired management area was essentially their driveway. In 1969 ADF&G and the Department of Natural Resources, working under an interagency land management agreement, provided a parking area just off College Road where people could park to view the ducks and geese on the fields.²¹⁵

Because the fields had lain fallow during 1967, the Tanana Valley Sportsmen’s Association, ACS and the Fairbanks Bird Club donated grain to spread in the fields for the incoming birds during the spring of 1968.²¹⁶ Thereafter, the Borealis Kiwanis and North Pole Future Farmers of America assumed the responsibility of providing grain.

Area volunteers began organizing community events at Creamer’s Field soon after the land came under state ownership. As early as 1967, naturalists Mary Shields and Gail Mayo organized walks for local school children. Initially called “Spring Migration Bird Watch,” Mary and Gail offered the event to children in kindergarten through second grade. Over time they developed activities for older children with an emphasis on bird identification and behavior, and the annual event became the “Fifth Grade Bird Watch.” Over the ensuing years thousands of students have lined the edge of the fields to learn about the behaviors and needs of migrating waterfowl.²¹⁷

To better educate the public on the many birds using the front fields, local artists Bill Berry and George West made signs in the late 1960s for the south edge of the fields. On 21 April 1969 Charlie Creamer presided as judge of the first Annual Goose Classic, which KFAR radio station sponsored. The event provided a cash prize to the person who most closely guessed when the first goose would land at Creamer’s Field each spring.²¹⁸ This became an annual event for many years until the late 1990s.

Meanwhile, Don and Charlie Creamer, having been paid in full by the State for the land, returned the $6,800 earnest money they had received to ACS. After some deliberation, ACS decided not to attempt to return the money to different contributors in the community but rather to

²¹⁵ John Wright, interview with author, 14 May 2003, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Regional Office, Fairbanks, Alaska.


²¹⁸ Ibid..
set it aside for future educational purposes. ACS put the money into a separate savings account where it drew interest, and over time they forgot about it.\textsuperscript{219}

The next construction project to take place on the fields left no doubt as to the role of ADF&G in the management area. The State Court Building on Barnette Street housed ADF&G staff, but space became increasingly limited as new staff joined the Department. The management area provided an attractive site for a new regional office building. Controversy arose, and centered on concerns that the 11,700 square foot building would destroy the pastoral value of the farmlands and disturb migratory waterfowl. ADF&G countered this argument by stating that its presence on the management area would thwart some of the vandalism and harassment of wildlife that occurred there.\textsuperscript{220} ADF&G built a $750,000 office building directly south of the farm buildings with easy access to College Road, completing the project in 1972.

\textbf{What Became of the Creamers?}

While ADF&G and various community groups contemplated how best to utilize the newly acquired management area, Charlie and Don Creamer worked about their 12 remaining acres to clean up and conclude 40 years of living there. They sold off the farming equipment at an auction and continued to seek a buyer for the buildings and the remaining land. On 28 May 1968 Charlie set out to tidy up around the buildings by burning the weeds and overgrown grass. The blaze got out of hand and, before Charlie could suppress the flames, Don’s house caught fire. Don was asleep in the house and he awoke in time to snatch up a few belongings before running from the burning building. The fire department was called, and eight fire trucks eventually responded to the blaze. At first the wind blew to the east, but then it shifted west, raising concern that the barns would ignite.\textsuperscript{221} The fire was finally extinguished but Don’s home was reduced to a smoldering shell, so Don moved into the old farmhouse with Charlie.\textsuperscript{222}

Don found work driving a school bus during the winter and in the summer he drove a tour bus in Denali National Park. Jeannie Creamer returned to Fairbanks after several years away at

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{220} Wright, interview, 14 May 2003.

\textsuperscript{221} \textit{Fairbanks Daily News-Miner}, 29 May 1968.

\textsuperscript{222} Creamer-Dalton, interview, 19 April 2003.
college to find that much had changed. But the birds and wildlife had been a wonderful part of growing up on the farm and she felt glad to see the land remain open for them.223

In 1970 a land investment company run by Wally Burnett, Nick McWelsh and Cliff Burglin bought the farmhouse.224 They used it primarily for storage, and the buildings, already showing their age, fell into disrepair. In May of 1973, a city tax inspector visited the property to assess its tax value and, according to his note, he talked with Wally Burnett. He wrote that the buildings “reflect much damage and disrepair.” Wally explained that the investment company only insured the bunkhouse and the small foreman’s house, as those were both wired for electricity and in working order. They rented out the bunkhouse some years to the Bureau of Land Management for summer quarters for the fire fighters. The inspector stated in his notes that “Mr. Burnett said that they plan to tear down building 3 some time this year.” Building 3, according to a small stack of photos taped into the tax files, was none other than the farmhouse.225

For reasons unknown, the investment company did not burn down the farmhouse. It continued to stand, all but abandoned, with its once white exterior fading to gray as the paint flaked away. Then, in 1977, despite their degraded condition, the National Park Service placed the farmhouse and barns on the National Register of historic places. This served to underscore their significance to the community and gave them a measure of protection.

Charlie moved to the Fairbanks Pioneer Home in 1973. He knew many of the residents living there and shared stories and memories with everyone who asked. His warm laugh and sense of humor never left him. He was 85 years old when he died on 14 December 1974.226 Don lived out the remaining years of his life in Fairbanks. He died from a stroke on 19 August 2003.


224 D. Creamer interview, 1 July 1988.


CHAPTER EIGHT: MANAGING CREAMER'S FIELD AS A MIGRATORY WATERFOWL REFUGE

Fairbanks changed rapidly during the 1970s, due in large part to the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System and the jobs it created. The influx of pipeline workers and associated industries drove up land prices throughout the Interior, with property near the city center fetching premium prices. Amidst a rapid transformation from woodlands to suburbs, the open fields of the wildlife management area provided an opportunity for wildlife viewing and recreation.

Area residents frequented the trails throughout the year, but found access during the summer months greatly restricted due to the marshy condition on the northern half of the management area. In 1974 the Tanana-Yukon chapter of ACS applied for a grant from the American Bicentennial Commission to fund a boardwalk trail. In October 1975 it received the grant with the stipulation that the Tanana-Yukon chapter would provide matching funds. At about this same time, area manager Jerry McGowan skimmed an announcement in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner notifying banking customers of inactive accounts. There, well down the page, was the account that had been established with the nearly $7,000 dollars in earnest money that the Creamers had
This money provided the matching funds needed to construct a boardwalk through the forest. The state drew up plans for a two-mile long interpretive trail (now known as the Boreal Forest Trail) based largely on an ecological survey conducted by University of Alaska graduate student Michael Andrew Spindler. Construction took place over the next two summers, with Gail Mayo as project leader. The Youth Conservation Corps provided the manpower, the grant covered the cost of materials, and Gail kept the job moving along and supplied lemonade and cookies on hot afternoons to keep the young workers motivated.

In 1979 the management area became part of the state refuge system and assumed the new title of Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. In 1982 the Alaska legislature appropriated $2.5 million to purchase the farm buildings and the twelve acres surrounding them, and this too became part of the refuge system. Just fifteen years earlier, the State could have

\[227\] Mayo, interview, 5 May 2003.

\[228\] Ibid.

\[229\] “Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Interim Management Plan” (Fairbanks: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, March 1993, photocopied), 3.
purchased the property directly from the Creamers for a fraction of that amount but saw little value in the old buildings.

Arctic Audubon voiced its concerns about the condition of the buildings almost as soon as the state took ownership. Pam Bruce and later John Wright, both with ADF&G, sought and received state funding for the renovation of the farmhouse, which took place between 1988 and 1991. Volunteers from ADF&G, Arctic Audubon and the Borealis Kiwanis Club gutted the building and salvaged the original trim to reuse on the finished interior. With the guidance of the Alaska Craftsmen Home Program, contractor Terry Duszynski and later ADF&G Refuge Assistant Jim Chumbley, oversaw the reconstruction effort.  

Volunteer Activities on the Refuge

As the farmhouse neared completion, a number of individuals outside of ADF&G expressed interest in utilizing the building for an environmental education center. ADF&G asked Jim Chumbley to organize a group of about thirty people. This group (which later became the Friends of Creamer’s Field) brainstormed and “dreamed big,” according to Susan Grace Stoltz, who attended that first meeting in the farmhouse. They saw a need to offer free educational programs to the public, thus making the refuge an integral part of the Fairbanks community. ADF&G gave much support, thanks in large part to wildlife biologist John Wright.

Other developments unfolded on the refuge as well. Susan Grace organized the first summer camp to be held on the refuge. In operation for six weeks each summer, Camp Habitat offered innovative environmental education to area children through hands-on experience, including hikes, games and special projects. Also in 1991, ADF&G hired Kris Hartnett (later Kris Nemeth) to oversee the funding for and development of a nature center. Kris established a spring training program for volunteers in preparation for a series of summer walks to be offered to

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230 Ibid.

231 Mayo, interview, 5 May 2003.


233 Ibid.

234 Ibid.
area and out-of-town visitors. These walks began in 1992. Chris also raised grant money and
drew upon the knowledge of interpretive experts to design an interpretive and educational facility
within the newly remodeled farmhouse.

Over time, a nature center took shape in the small farmhouse. Interpretive displays of the
refuge’s natural history and farming now fill the front rooms in the farmhouse, once the dining and
living rooms of the Creamer’s home. In what was once Anna’s kitchen and office, new shelves brim
with field guides and books on natural history, plus an assortment of bird nests and other hands-on
artifacts. With state funding, the Arctic Audubon Society obtained telescopes and binoculars. Kris
Nemeth eventually moved on and in 1996 Mark Ross filled her position. He continues to develop
and oversee educational and interpretive programs for a growing number of school children, and in
2002 he conducted educational programs for 3,207 children at the refuge. (See Appendix B:

In 1992, ADF&G invited a young biologist, Tom Pogson, to develop a migratory songbird
banding station on the refuge. Tom trained a staff of highly motivated area volunteers and college
interns, and his fledgling organization, the Alaska Bird Observatory (ABO), set up a series of nets on
the refuge. ABO has continued it’s operation ever since. Throughout the spring and summer
(beginning in late April and concluding in early October), a crew of yawning, blurry-eyed ABO bird
banders gather at what substitutes for dawn during Alaska’s summers. At four-thirty or five each
morning, they are busy opening mist nets, sometimes slogging through wetlands created by the latest
rainstorm, and always waving away the infernal mosquitoes. For their efforts, they are rewarded
with tiny songbirds that flutter like colorful leaves trapped in the nets. These birds are identified,
measured, and fitted with a numbered leg band before being released, and  they contribute to a
growing volume of knowledge that will help signal declines in some species and surges in others.
This research, conducted on the refuge near the seasonal pond, is shared with the community by
ABO staff through slide shows and walking tours, augmenting the educational opportunities at the
refuge. (See Appendix C: Average Date of First Arrival for Interior Alaska Migrant Birds.)

Initially, Tom Pogson ran the operation out of a Fish and Game office he shared with John
Wright. Operations moved to the second floor of the farmhouse as ABO staff increased, and Nancy
DeWitt stepped in as executive director when Tom resigned. ABO shared the farmhouse with
Friends of Creamer’s Field volunteer staff until March 2002. In 2001 – 2002 the Fountainhead
Development Inc., designed and constructed a spacious new office, complete with classroom space,
to meet ABO’s growing needs. Located just outside the eastern boundary of the refuge, the new
location is convenient to Refuge visitors, and ABO staff has easy access to the refuge. The staff
continues to monitor nets and to play a key role in refuge education.

235 Wright, interview, 14 May 2003.
Meanwhile, the farmhouse has become the gathering place for a number of year-round events organized by Friends of Creamer’s Field. Starting the year with *Owling Night* during the twilight hours of mid-March, and *Spring Open House* each April, the dedicated volunteers then provide a seven-week lecture series, titled *Volunteer Naturalist Training* in April and May. Volunteers who complete the training present nature walks to area visitors throughout the summer. *History Day* in June offers events like the Anna Creamer frying pan throwing contest, watermelon seed spitting and the Charlie Creamer milker’s arm wrestling match. At the end of August, Friends of Creamer’s Field hosts the annual *Crane Festival* -- an eight-day celebration of the fall crane migration, with lectures by recognized crane experts. This event has become increasingly popular, drawing several thousand visitors in 2002. For Halloween it is *Creepy Critters* for the kids, then *Thanksgiving for the Birds*, and finally the *Christmas Open House* with the lighting of the big spruce tree outside the farmhouse and the singing of Christmas carols.
In addition to scheduled events, members of Friends of Creamer’s Field are reviving some of the farm’s history. In 1995, when ADF&G delivered topsoil from land cleared for an addition, volunteers began a community garden on the site of Anna Creamer’s once prolific garden plot. The new garden, planted in lettuce, potatoes, peas, onions and more, is highly productive. Woodchucks are fond of the new garden and in 2002 one moved right in and dug a burrow there. At the end of the summer Friends of Creamer’s Field harvests the garden and donates the produce to a local soup kitchen.\(^{236}\)

Other historical preservation projects include the restoration of the 1935 Case Model L tractor Charlie once drove. David Nester on Chena Hot Springs Road had purchased the tractor at the farm auction in 1967 but it needed a great deal of work. Friends of Creamer’s Field bought the tractor from Nester and through a stroke of good fortune, Robert Moore, a retired farmer and active Case Tractor collector from Missouri, willingly restored it to operating condition during summer visits to Fairbanks in 1998 and 1999.

In 2000 - 2001 Friends of Creamer’s Field facilitated the restoration of the Chalmers convertible that Charlie Creamer had inherited from his father. The old car had been relegated to Don’s garage because of a burned-out clutch. Sam Patten of ADF&G oversaw the project, with

\(^{236}\) Stoltz, interview, 9 May 2003.
Carl Gaul from the Vintage Engine Club as the lead mechanic. Don Creamer rode in it during the next Golden Days Parade in Fairbanks, as his father and mother had done in years past.

In an effort to direct future progress, Friends of Creamer’s Field Board of Directors developed a strategic plan in 2002. The plan states that “the mission of Friends of Creamer’s Field is to inspire environmental stewardship and lifelong learning through experience, awareness and appreciation of the natural and historical resources of Creamer’s Refuge.”

The goals outlined include complete renovation of the barns, development of an auditorium in the creamery, and the construction of additional trails. Friends of Creamer’s Field has a growing membership that numbers 280 individuals at the time of this writing. According to ADF&G’s John Wright, “Friends does a lot of things the Department wants to do but doesn’t have the money or staff for.” Most notably, Friends of Creamer’s Field enables the refuge staff to meet their stated objectives for public education.

The farmhouse is a meeting place for a diverse range of other groups as well. The Alaska Trappers Association, the Tanana-Yukon Valley Historical Society, the Noyes Slough Action Committee, the Audubon Society, the Alaska Skijor and Pulk Association and the Northern Alaska Environmental Center all utilize the farmhouse.

ADF&G Manages Farmland for the Birds

Managing the fields and new ponds for the benefit of cranes and waterfowl is, of course, the primary objective of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game at Creamer’s Field. By clearing snow from the fields and spreading grain, the Department provides a safe feeding stopover for thousands of weary birds each spring. All other activities undertaken on the refuge are secondary.

Encouraging waterfowl to nest on the refuge is increasingly a management objective. For although the refuge attracts waterfowl in the spring and fall, historically it has lacked the ponds needed for shore-line nesting sites. Many years before the state purchased the refuge, peat extracted northwest of the farmhouse resulted in a hollow that fills with water each spring and supports a lush growth of sedges and other natural vegetation, but once the lake bottom thaws in June, the water percolates into the soil. Hence the pond is known as the Seasonal Pond. It is

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238 Ibid., 6.

239 Wright, interview, 14 May 2003.
attractive to spring waterfowl because it is rich in aquatic life, but by summer it is unsuitable for nesting ducks and geese that seek the safety which open water provides for their young.

In 1984 a neighboring farmer to the north, George Domath, approached ADF&G asking for permission to drain water from a wet field onto the refuge. ADF&G consented, and the resulting pond retained water throughout the summer and drew a number of nesting birds.\textsuperscript{240} This success prompted ADF&G to add additional ponds. Using state duck stamp funds to match a $35,000 grant from Ducks Unlimited, ADF&G built six ponds on the northeastern section of the refuge in 1987.\textsuperscript{241} Designed with small islands towards the center, these one to three-acre ponds provide desirable nesting habitat and encourage waterfowl to remain on the refuge throughout the summer. Seed crops planted around the perimeter of the ponds provide forage. The ponds have been successful in attracting nesting birds each summer and are a favorite spot for hunters during the fall.\textsuperscript{242}

In March 1988, ADF&G entered into an agreement with the Fairbanks International Airport, the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Agriculture and Land Resource Management, the United States Army Corp of Engineers and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The agencies formed a joint task force to address concerns about cranes and waterfowl at the airport. Located adjacent to the Tanana and Chena Rivers, Fairbanks International Airport has a float pond, sloughs and flooded gravel pits that offer appealing habitat for a variety of waterfowl. The University of Alaska agricultural fields, just two miles west of the airport, have traditionally supported migrant waterfowl and cranes. These birds typically flew over the airport twice a day, roosting in the evenings along the Tanana River and flying back over the airport to feed at the University fields during the day. The task force agreed to “eliminate attractive habitat for sandhill cranes at the Airport and to develop replacement habitat”\textsuperscript{243} at the refuge.

Under the agreement with the airport and other concerned parties, ADF&G built a pond northeast of the farmhouse in 1989, which came to be called the Crane Pond.\textsuperscript{244} Used by cranes and a variety of waterfowl, the pond offers the birds a diet of plants and aquatic insects and allows for preening and bathing while trees along the edge of the viewing fields provide seclusion. As an

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{241} “Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Interim Management Plan,” 12.

\textsuperscript{242} Wright, interview, 14 May 2003.


\textsuperscript{244} “Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Interim Management Plan,” 12.
added measure, the managed fields and sandhill crane pond are under greater restrictions than the rest of the refuge and are closed to access in the fall to avoid disturbing fall migrants.\textsuperscript{245}

The success of these ponds lead the Department to consider ponds in the front fields along College Road. The majority of waterfowl using the refuge in the spring and fall are drawn the front fields because of the grain spread there and because the open fields allow the birds to watch for predators. In 1998 ADF&G cleared brush from a natural depression in the east front viewing field and formed the Kessel Pond (named for UAF professor and ornithologist Brina Kessel). Then ADF&G built a series of three additional plastic-lined ponds; building a 150,000-gallon pond in the fall of 1999, followed by a 210,000-gallon pond in the fall of 2000, and a 150,000-gallon pond in the fall of 2002. ADF&G has plans for additional ponds over the next several years in an attempt to attract more fall migrants and to increase the numbers of birds nesting on the refuge.\textsuperscript{246}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Canada Geese and Swans Feeding at Creamer’s Field During the Spring, Herb Melchior Collection, Fairbanks, Alaska}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{246} Jason R. Caikoski, “Farming Operations 2002, Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Alaska” (Fairbanks: Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation, December 2002, photocopied), 6.
Refuge Field Management

Because uncultivated fields in interior Alaska revert back to forested lands without continued farming, ADF&G initially leased the refuge fields to area farmers for haying. From 1983 until 1993 the North Pole High School Future Farmers of America harvested hay in the fields. ADF&G assumed all farm management in 1994 (when Future Farmers of America moved on to other projects) and now produces much of the barley that attracts the birds each spring and fall.

In April, when snow still covers the fields, a grader pushes the snow into furrows, exposing the dark soil to speed up snowmelt and to produce melt-water ponds. Volunteers from the Borealis chapter of the Kiwanis Club spread barley on these open furrows. In 2002 they distributed 5,000 pounds of grain, with Fort Wainwright and ADF&G sharing the cost of any feed purchased. Fire hoses are used to fill the front ponds when snowmelt does not adequately do the job, and as the first of May approaches the birds begin to arrive. On an average spring day 2,000 - 3,000 birds utilize the fields, vocalizing, feeding and moving in and out of the ponds. Yellow school buses pull up front and school children step down and line up along the fences to view the birds.

ADF&G annually rotates crops in each field to grow mature barley, which is planted in the spring, and sprouted barley, which is planted in late July. The mature barley is mowed in the fall and left in the fields to provide food for cranes, geese and ducks, while the sprouted barley is grazed by geese. ADF&G farms the fields without pesticides or herbicides and the waterfowl provide adequate fertilizer. Soil nutrients are monitored to determine levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and soil acidity. Ten years of soil testing indicate stable nutrient levels. In 2003, ADF&G planted 61 acres early in the season to produce mature barley stands, while 74 acres planted later produced barley sprouts and 44 acres remained in pasture. This represented a sharp increase over the acreage planted in previous years and reduced the need to purchase grain for spreading in the spring.

Increased barley planting and the addition of ponds have resulted in an increase in waterfowl and cranes at the refuge during the fall migration. In 2003, daily tallies peaked at 2,300 cranes and 4,400 ducks and geese. ADF&G estimated a total of some 3,500 cranes and 6,000 waterfowl used the fields during the fall of 2003. Most birds remain on the fields for two or three

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247 Ibid., 1.
250 Ibid., 5.
weeks, with little turnover in population. The effect of refuge management practices on spring migration numbers is more difficult to determine because of conditions, such as late breakup, that birds encounter on their trip north.

Figure 18: White Fronted Geese Rest at Creamer’s Field, Herb Melchior Collection, Fairbanks, Alaska

Managing the Refuge for Multi-Use

During the first few years of operations ADF&G turned down a variety of requests by the local business community for permission to set up businesses on the refuge, including a gravel operation, a golf course, a driving range and a skeet range. However, the refuge does host a number of groups with different and sometimes conflicting interests. Even without factoring in

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251 Jason R. Caikoski, interview with author, 23 September 2003, Alaska Department of Fish and Game regional Office, Fairbanks, Alaska.

252 Wright, interview, 14 May 2003.

ABO’s bird banding activities, Friends of Creamer’s Field events, Camp Habitat and visiting school groups, the refuge is a busy place.

The Alaska Dog Mushers Association (ADMA) has had one of the longest relationships with Creamer’s Field. ADMA has maintained mushing trails and conducted races on the Creamer’s fields and the surrounding State lands since 1946. Each March, these trails are run by many of the best teams in the world during the Open North American Championship Sled Dog Races. These trails also benefit many skiers, skijorers and snowmachiners.\footnote{254}

![Figure 19: Skijor Fun Race at Creamer’s Field (circa 2002), Alaska Dog Mushers Association Archives, Fairbanks, Alaska](image)

Various forms of hunting are allowed on the refuge. Trapping of fur-bearing animals is allowed with a permit in designated areas. Traps must be labeled with the registration permit number, and a harvest report must be filed.\footnote{255} Bow hunting for moose is allowed with a permit.\footnote{256} Waterfowl and cranes are hunted on the refuge with shotguns and muzzleloaders. Hunters must follow state regulations for dates and times of harvest. Duck hunting with falcons also occurs on the refuge and at the time of this writing, four local falconers use the refuge during hunting season.

The use of off-road vehicles is prohibited except during the winter months, when snowmachines are allowed on refuge trails. Because of its central location, the refuge provides access to trails which link to Goldstream Valley, Chena Hot Springs Road and the Chena River. Without

\footnote{254} “Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Interim Management Plan,” 60 – 61.

\footnote{255} Ibid., 47.

\footnote{256} Ibid., 50.
access to refuge trails, riders would be required to travel many miles out of their way to reach these trails.\textsuperscript{257} However, snow machine use on the refuge has long been a source of contention among user groups and refuge staff. Agreement has yet to be reached among refuge advisory members as to the continued use of snow machines on the refuge.\textsuperscript{258}

Future Management Plans

In 1993 ADF&G completed an interim management plan for the refuge. This plan constitutes the template for management practices at the refuge until ADF&G develops a final management plan. The management goals for the refuge are:

1. To protect and enhance the quality and diversity of habitat for wildlife with special emphasis on waterfowl and other migratory birds.
2. To protect and enhance the opportunity to view, photograph and gain an understanding of the ecosystems, including wildlife species, plant species, geological and other features typical of Interior Alaska.
3. To encourage opportunities for public education about terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, wildlife, habitat, historical resources and other related topics.
4. To allow other public uses that are consistent with the above statutory purposes and management goals.\textsuperscript{259}

In the 1990s building improvements, access and better public facilities became the focus for the refuge. When heavy snows damaged the barns in September 1992, refuge staff realized it needed to shore up the historically significant buildings or lose them altogether. The tremendous weight of the winter snows forced the walls of the older, taller barn to bow outward and bullet holes shot through the roof several years before left the interior of the barn vulnerable to water damage. The Federal Highway Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (or ISTEA) provided funding to shore up the damaged structure, and in 2001 both barns and the creamery were re-roofed. Much work remains to be done if the barn and creamery are ever to be used for exhibits and classrooms, but for now the buildings are in stable condition.

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 41.

\textsuperscript{259} "Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Interim Management Plan" 8.
The ADF&G district office building also underwent changes during the 1990s. Staff numbers had increased since 1971 when the district office relocated to the refuge, and new office and storage space needed to be found. In addition, access from College Road to the refuge office and the dairy buildings posed ongoing traffic concerns. The Alaska Legislature appropriated funding in 1995 and an addition went up to the north side of the building, nearly doubling the square footage. The addition was completed in 1997.

Along with this renovation, the entrance to the refuge was redesigned, allowing cars to enter at the Danby Road traffic light, west of the original entrance. Overhead utility lines leading from College Road to the dairy buildings were relocated underground in order to restore the original appearance of the dairy. ISTEA funding covered these costs. ADF&G added viewing platforms and interpretive panels along a walkway on the west side of the main front viewing.

Figure 20: Aerial Photo of Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, Refuge Boundary in Red (2002), John Wright Collection, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Fairbanks Regional Office

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260 Ibid., 6.
Over the years ADF&G has made additional land purchases, adding 56 acres purchased from the Sherman Trust in 1999 and another 40 acres purchased from farmer George Dornath in August 2001. ADF&G is in the process of purchasing an additional 12 acres of land with direct access to the refuge off Farmer’s Loop Road. These additions will increase the size of the refuge to just over 1,900 acres. 

Many people offer visions for the future of the refuge. Refuge staff see a need to better manage waterfowl hunting pressures, and are considering building duck blinds and requiring hunters to register. Friends of Creamer’s Field dreams of the day when the lovely old barns are restored and will once again host a community barn dance. And Friends hopes to see the creamery upgraded to allow for a large classroom and laboratory. In addition, members The Alaska Skijoring and Pulk Association would like to see a warming hut for winter use. As these improvements are funded and implemented, the refuge will continue to undergo modifications according to the vision of people who value both the needs of summer birds and the recreational opportunities offered within the heart of this northern city.

Figure 21: Creamer’s Farmhouse in Winter (2000), John Wright Collection, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Fairbanks Regional Office

261 John Wright, interview with author, 5 June 2003, Alaska Department of Fish and Game regional office, Fairbanks, Alaska.

262 Wright, interview, 14 May 2003.
CONCLUSION

A hundred years ago, give or take a few years, a small dairy built of logs from the surrounding forest operated near the tiny community of Fairbanks, Alaska. Through the toils and hardships and quiet pleasures of the Hinckley and Creamer Families, the dairy prospered for many years. In its decline, a new purpose for the land took shape. By good fortune and grassroots determination, a small vestige of pioneer Alaska remains.

With its carefully cultivated fields and boardwalk trails, Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge is not a wilderness. Yet it offers residents and visitors access to the natural world just minutes from most homes and offices in the city. The 2,000-acre refuge gives Fairbanks a rural feeling that belies the city's actual size. Without question, Creamer's Field has helped to shape a town that is purely Alaskan -- where dog mushing occurs in town in the winter and birds congregate each spring after traversing the continent. The city is evolving with a refuge at its core, incorporating wildlife, recreation and environmental education into mainstream urban life.

The refuge incorporates many values, and people are drawn to it for a variety of reasons. For some, it provides a sense of belonging, as Creamer's Field offers many community-based activities. Others value the solitary adventures they have mushing, skijoring, hunting, or bird watching, to name a few. For some, the history, best represented by the farm buildings, provides a tangible connection to Fairbanks' pioneering past. Certainly the history provides a reminder of how easily this land could have been put to other uses. All of these values lend themselves to the sense of place people feel for the refuge.

Fairbanks is a city surrounded by wilderness in all directions. But open space worldwide is fast disappearing, and even here development will eat away at our open lands. As Fairbanks expands, this land will continue to offer the community a ready means of protecting and enjoying the wild things we treasure.
APPENDIX A:

Fairbanks Average Annual High & Low Temperatures, Precipitation and Snowfall

Source: National Weather Service

Period of record: 9/1/1949 to 12/31/2000

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<th>Average annual high temperature</th>
<th>Average annual low temperature</th>
<th>Average annual total precipitation</th>
<th>Average annual total snowfall</th>
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<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX B: Mammals of Creamer’s Field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arctic Shrew</th>
<th>Porcupine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masked (Common) Shrew</td>
<td>Marten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pygmy Shrew</td>
<td>Least Weasel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Brown Bat</td>
<td>Ermine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snowshoe Hare</td>
<td>Mink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodchuck</td>
<td>Lynx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Squirrel</td>
<td>Wolf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Flying Squirrel</td>
<td>Red Fox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaver</td>
<td>Black Bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Red-Backed Vole</td>
<td>Brown Bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tundra Vole</td>
<td>Moose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meadow Vole</td>
<td>Caribou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muskrat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Bog Lemming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meadow Jumping Mouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Visitor Center Visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995 (Opened June 1995)</td>
<td>3,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>5,193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>7,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>7,742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>8,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8,262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>11,021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>11,693</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Main Trailhead Access Count

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995 (installed counter in October 1996)</td>
<td>No Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>45,862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>59,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>57,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>68,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>59,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>56,576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: Average Date of First Arrival for Interior Alaska Migrant Birds

The information for this list was compiled by Brena Kessel and Dan Gibson of the University of Alaska Museum.

- **March**
  - 18 Snow Bunting
  - 25 Golden Eagle

- **April**
  - 8 Bald Eagle
  - 12 Rough-legged Hawk
  - 13 Common Goldeneye
  - 14 Lapland Longspur
  - 15 Canada Goose; Northern Pintail; Red-tailed Hawk; Northern Harrier
  - 17 Mallard; American Kestrel; Short-eared Owl
  - 19 Trumpeter Swan; Herring Gull
  - 20 Greater White-fronted Goose
  - 22 American Wigeon; Sandhill Crane
  - 23 Northern Shoveler; Ruby-crowned Kinglet; American Tree Sparrow
  - 24 Snow Goose; Green-winged Teal; Mew Gull
  - 25 Redhead; Canvasback; American Pipit; Yellow-rumped Warbler
  - 26 Barrow's Goldeneye
  - 27 Varied Thrush
  - 28 Rusty Blackbird; Fox Sparrow
  - 29 Sharp-shinned Hawk; Violet-green Swallow; Tree Swallow
  - 30 Red-breasted Merganser; Lesser Yellowlegs

- **May**
  - 1 Common Snipe; Bonaparte's Gull; Northern Flicker; Hammonds Flycatcher; Savannah Sparrow; White-crowned Sparrow
  - 2 Solitary Sandpiper; Hermit Thrush
  - 3 Golden-crowned Sparrow; Lincoln's Sparrow
  - 4 Horned Grebe; American Golden Plover
  - 6 Red-necked Grebe; Semipalmated Plover
  - 7 Orange-crowned Warbler
  - 8 Ring-neck Duck; Pectoral Sandpiper; Least Sandpiper; Belted Kingfisher
  - 9 Lesser Scamp
- 10 Common Loon; Pacific Loon; Long-billed Dowitcher; Arctic Tern; Townsend's Warbler; Wilson's Warbler
- 11 Say's Phoebe; Cliff Swallow
- 12 Surf Scoter; Whimbrel; Swainson's Thrush; Northern Waterthrush
- 13 Upland Sandpiper; Yellow Warbler; Blackpoll Warbler
- 14 White-winged Scoter
- 15 Oldsquaw; Grey-cheeled Thrush
- 16 Wandering Tattler; Lond-tailed Jaeger; Western Wood-pewee; Olive-sided Flycatcher
- 17 Spotted Sandpiper
- 19 Bank Swallow
- 20 Black-bellied Plover
- 23 Stilt Sandpiper
- 25 Alder Flycatcher
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