

ALYESKA CHRONICLE



GIRDWOOD HISTORICAL TIMES

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Volume 1



Courtesy of Third Eye Photography

Mr. Girdwood Comes to Glacier City

A letter by James Girdwood Peirce

My grandfather James Girdwood was born in Belfast Ireland in 1862, one of the five sons and six daughters of James Girdwood, a Justice of the Peace and linen merchant, and Bessie Mercer, whose origins were Scotch. A nephew of my grandfather's, Major General Sir Eric Girdwood C.B., C.M.G., was the commander of Northern Ireland British troops prior to his death in the fifties. My grandfather was never in the military, and I can only suppose that his Alaskan nickname of "Colonel Girdwood" was honorary by word of mouth. One of his maternal ancestors was Hugh Mercer, a general in Washington's army, who died in Princeton, N.J. in 1777.

James Girdwood came to this country in 1882 at age 20. He had \$400 in his pocket and went to work as a linen salesman for McCrum, Watson and Mercer, the linen distributors in New York. At the age of 32, in 1894, he had control of over half the U.S. market for Irish linens and sold what were then his interests in the New York firm to his associates with stipulation he would never return to the linen business. He then became interested in Alaska, having heard much about it from Seattle and San Francisco friends, and went there in 1896.

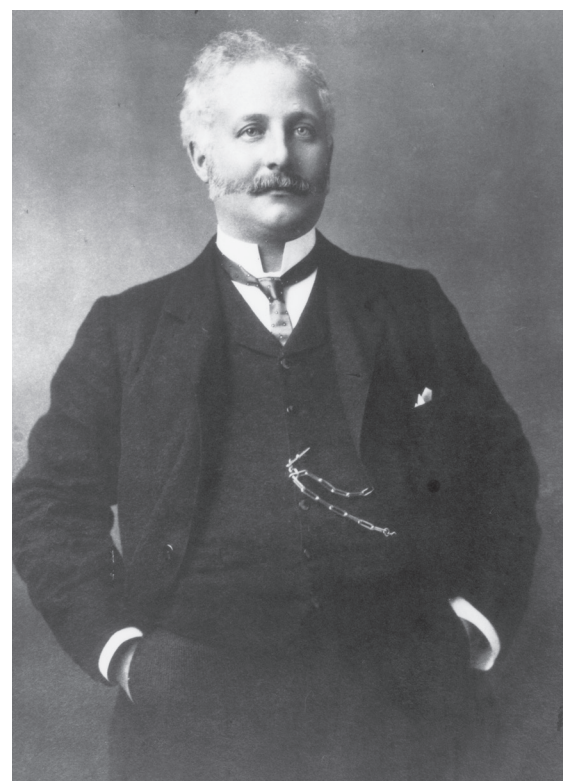
He staked the four claims (Annex, Omega, Alpha and Little Gussie) in 1900 at Crow Creek. He formed the Crow Creek Alaska Hydraulic Gold Mining Co. and by 1907 an annual expense of \$14,868.53 and bullion removal of \$14,318.00 are shown in the mine records. Subsequent years show bullion incomes of over \$106,000

per year.

Between 1900 and 1906 he met and came to know well Paul Niedieck of Loberich, Germany (located in what is now Checkoslovakia and known today as Liberic). Niedieck was a naturalist and a big game hunter. His book *With Rifle On Five Continents* was translated from German into English in 1905 and includes the narrative of his 1898-1904 journey, the last year and one half of which was spent in Alaska. (He and his friend Baron von Plessen shot with smokeless powder, 13 mm rifles weighing 9 lbs.) Niedieck had purchased a minority interest in certain Latouche Island Copper Mining claims in 1901 from Axel W. Lind, an attorney, and Wm. Gibbon.

Lind had filed the blackbird claim at Latouche in 1900 and had sold interests in it to Wm. Gibbon and later to Niedieck. Then in August of 1905, the Lind-Gibbon interest was sold to George Barrack of Valdez for \$45,000, to be paid in "pure U.S. gold bullion". Barrack and my grandfather had, in the meanwhile bought and owned the White Wing, Gravina, Admiralty and Greenland claims, all of which were adjacent to the Beatson claims on Latouche Island. The papers were witnessed by Joseph Fall and Norman W. Rant of Latouche 8/2/1905. My grandfather bought them from Barrack in 1906.

On January 4, 1907 the Latouche Copper Mining Company was formed in New York. The shareholders were James Girdwood,



Roundhouse at Alyeska Museum Archive

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GIRDWOOD HISTORICAL TIMES SPECIAL SECTION

Published Two Thousand Seventeen

Volume 11

Updating the Alyeska Chronicle

Roundhouse at Alyeska Museum Staff

The *Alyeska Chronicle* was first published in 1981. It was designed to give visitors a bit of history about the valley and inform them about the current state of affairs regarding the ski resort, gold mines, community projects and local businesses. Today, more than four decades later, much has changed in the Girdwood area, and this special insert has been created to fill in the blanks.

While the Roundhouse was originally built to house the bull wheel for the first chairlift on the mountain, it has been through various iterations since. The most recent is as the Girdwood area's local museum, chronicling the region's history from the gold mining of "Col." James Girdwood's era to the resort town it is today.

The *Alyeska Chronicle*—and this, its update—are tools to help the Roundhouse tell Girdwood's story. What follows is the next chapter of that story—Girdwood's character in present day and the more recent changes it has experienced to become what it is today.

An early brochure promoting the Alyeska Chairlift depicts the Roundhouse, then called the Sundeck, as a gathering place and scenic viewpoint in both winter and summer.

Mt. Alyeska Took the "A" from the Alps and Put it in Alaska



MT. ALYESKA—
Site of the 1963 U. S. National Ski Championship races and Olympic Trials, is also Alaska's newest YEAR-ROUND resort.

ACCESSIBILITY—
Located in the beautiful Girdwood valley just 40 miles from Anchorage on the paved Seward Highway, Alyeska is easily accessible by private or rental car, bus, limousine, or light airplane.

FACILITIES—
The most outstanding scenic attraction in Alaska by far is the new **DOUBLE CHAIR LIFT** at Mt. Alyeska. Approximately 1/4 mile long, the lift rises almost 1/2 mile above the valley floor. The ride in side-by-side armchair comfort, complete with arm and foot rests, takes you slowly and silently through the heavily timbered spruce slopes of Mt. Alyeska, over cliffs and waterfalls, past rushing glacial rivulets, and emerges in quiet splendor above timberline—a new and different world! Alpine vistas abound on all sides; vast glacial bowls, steep serrated cliffs soaring to 4000 feet, smoothly rolling alpine meadows abounding in wild flowers and moss covered tundra—and then you arrive at the famed **SUNDECK**. This octagon house resting on huge foundations high above the ground (winter snow depths reach 25 feet) is truly an engineering marvel. Constructed of native logs, the **SUNDECK** affords the visitor the most spectacular vantage point in all of Alaska.

SCENERY UNLIMITED—
That's what you see on your **MT. ALYESKA CHAIRLIFT** ride. See the soft waters of the **TURNAGAIN ARM**, rising to the second highest lake in the world; the **GIRDWOOD VALLEY** (one of the first recorded gold strikes in Alaska) with rushing mountain glacial streams and the old sled trail; **8 GLACIERS** in the surrounding Alpine mountains; wildlife in the form of moose, bear, lynx, wolverine, and mountain sheep often seen in their natural habitat; **YEAR-ROUND SKIING** on Mt. Alyeska's Glacier; the rugged grandeur of the Kenai Peninsula, and spectacular Mt. Alyeska itself. The return trip down Mt. Alyeska's chairlift is even more spectacular than the ride up. If you can imagine it. **Our most elderly guest—89 years old—**claimed that in his world travels he had never seen anything to compare; and **our youngest guest—two weeks old—**could only gurgle with delight. We know **YOU** will enjoy it. Light lunches and drinks are available in the day lodge and cocktail bar. Arrangements for Special Catered Lunches or Dinners can easily be made by calling BR 2-4444, 12-5 p.m. week days or long distance to Alyeska.

Camper's Are Welcome
Chair Operates Daily — 10 a.m. - 6 p.m.

*Alyeska—derived from the Aleut (Indian) word meaning "Great Land of White to the East"—from which the name of the 49th state is also taken, is pronounced AL-EESS'-KA.

View of the Sun Deck



All Photos by Finley Photo

The Roundhouse at Alyeska Museum Archive

Restoration completed of the Roundhouse at Alyeska

Various writers affiliated with the Roundhouse restoration project contributed to this article. Originally printed in the Turnagain Times, April 17, 2008.

Girdwood, Inc. has completed the restoration of "The Roundhouse at Alyeska" on Mount Alyeska. A Grand Opening will be held Saturday, April 26, by invitation, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., followed by a Community Open House, Sunday, April 27, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. All are welcome.

U.S. Forest Service interpreters will be on site this summer at the Roundhouse, seven days a week, with fun and informative programs. Artifacts for permanent display and revolving exhibition are being accepted. Volunteer guides and part-time staff are being interviewed now. Contact information appears below.

The Roundhouse at Alyeska winter hours are Saturdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. through April 27 (closed to the public Saturday, April 26). Summer operating hours begin Saturday, May 10, and will be seven days a week, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Group tours or private events may be scheduled by emailing the Executive Director at info@roundhouseatalyeska.org.

Golden roots, golden slopes

Half a century ago, eleven Girdwood residents passed the hat and raised enough money to purchase what became the land base for a ski area. Through initiative and perseverance, the original eleven formed the Alyeska Ski Corporation and developed a ski area that was small in assets but big in promise. The driving force behind this group's efforts was the certainty that Glacier Valley's future lay on its golden slopes.

Alyeska Ski Corporation found a French baron who shared their dream. Francois de Gunzburg installed a poma lift, built ski trails and a day lodge, and built Chair 1—a 5,700 double chairlift that rose 2,000 vertical feet. The upper terminus of the chairlift became known as the Roundhouse.

Today the Roundhouse symbolizes the importance of outdoor recreation to this valley's legacy, much like Crow Creek Mine serves as an icon of the valley's golden mining past.

The move to preserve the Roundhouse

The Roundhouse was built in 1960 on an exposed ridge, 2,280 feet above sea level. The distinctive octagonal building first served as a warming hut and later as a popular mountain

gathering place, complete with restaurant and lounge. Alyeska's Ski Patrol used the lower level as its mountain top headquarters.

In summer, the Roundhouse became a visitor center for people to enjoy the alpine environment and panoramic view encompassing two mountain ranges, seven glaciers, and scenic Turnagain Arm.

The many years of exposure to extreme weather took their toll, and public use all but ended when the Glacier Terminal and aerial tram opened in 1992. The Roundhouse was placed on the National Historic Register in 2003 in recognition of its significance to the development of skiing and other outdoor activities in Alaska.

Girdwood, Inc. was formed in 2004 and undertook as its first major project the restoration of the Roundhouse and making the upper level a visitors' center. The Alyeska Ski Patrol occupies the completely renovated lower level.

A massive undertaking

The Roundhouse renovation began in 2003 with seed money from the Turnagain Arm Kenai National Heritage Corridor Foundation. The Eddie Gendzwill Estate granted sufficient funding to repair and reinforce the foundation and infrastructure. Since then, Girdwood, Inc. has raised an additional \$1.5 million for the project from public and private donors including The Rasmuson Foundation, The Atwood Foundation, U.S. National Park Service, U.S. Housing and Urban Development, as well as many others who have generously given their time, talent and treasure.

Alyeska Resort generously underwrote large parts of this project with extensive on-mountain support and technical expertise. Alyeska Resort continues to support the Roundhouse at Alyeska in many ways.



The Roundhouse at Alyeska Museum Archive
The original construction of the Roundhouse.