

Pageantry And Paddlewheels

On our way to Fairbanks we stopped at Nenana, Alaska, for lunch. Nenana is a neat little town with some interesting attractions. The Taku Chief was the last commercial wooden tug to ply the Yukon and Tanana River basins. She began her career in 1938, the year Jerry was born, and retired in 1978. We were living in Montana at the time and didn't retire until 2002. People work longer than boats, but we may have had it easier. Those rivers are cold!

Nenana boasts an annual Ice Classic, featuring a contest to guess the exact date and time of the Tanana River ice breakup. Prizes run into at least five figures. When the surging ice on the river dislodges a tripod connected to an official clock, the breakup time is recorded.

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A railroad museum is located in the 1923 depot building, and nearby is St. Mark's Mission Church with hand-hewn pews and a raised altar decorated with Native beaded moose hide trim.

Once in Fairbanks we enjoyed the Alaska Salmon Bake, a massive outdoor buffet with salmon, halibut and cod, plus chicken and beef, and a fabulous salad bar. The evening was capped by "The Golden Heart Revue," a humorous musical salute to the Last Frontier and some of the colorful characters that helped build the state.

Another day we boarded a paddlewheel riverboat for a voyage up the Chena and Tanana Rivers. Traveling with us that day were five contestants in a pageant (and for the life of us we can't remember the pageant's name) that was open to members of the Native cultures. Their costuming reflected their Native heritage, and they represented themselves well on the trip.

Early in the riverboat cruise we were treated to a demonstration of bush pilot float plane takeoffs and landings. Next we stopped at the riverfront home of veteran Iditarod dog musher Susan Butcher. She took first place in the 1990 race with a time of 11 days, 1 hour, 53 minutes and 23 seconds. Susan told of her racing adventures and how she raises and cares for her dogs, then ran some of them through their paces pulling her on her ATV around a course ringing a small lake.

Later on there was a walking tour of a representation of a Chena Indian village. There were displays of various dwelling styles ranging from a simple lean-to to a fairly modern looking log cabin. One lady displayed beautiful clothing she makes from moose, caribou, fox and beaver pelts. At least one of her garments is on display in the Smithsonian.