

In 1916, he was on the board of directors for the newly established Bank of Anchorage. The following year, an Anchorage newspaper held a contest to name the new railroad siding located eight miles north of Matanuska Junction, about one mile from the former site of Palmer's self-service store. Palmer's name won the contest and was therefore chosen for this small landmark; 18 years later, the Matanuska Colony Project created the thriving town that still bears his name.

When Palmer's main store and attached buildings burned to the ground in 1918, he moved to Snug Harbor. There he and a partner built the first clam cannery on Cook Inlet, but his interest in the new venture was short. He sold the cannery in 1921 and moved to Kenai, where he and partner Truman Parish opened a general store.

Palmer reached the age of 75 in 1930, five years before the Matanuska Colonists arrived. He was in ill health, suffering greatly from chest pain for which local doctors had no remedy. On the morning of April 11, 1930, he took own life with a single pistol shot to the heart. Many attended the funeral at the Elks Hall in Anchorage, and he was buried in the Pioneer section of the Anchorage Memorial Park Cemetery. Though some aspects of his life were unsavory, George Palmer's adventures as a gold miner, entrepreneur, boat captain, trapper, postmaster and freighter qualify him as a true Alaskan

Pioneer. He is remembered today as a fascinating character who had great impact on Alaska's history.



George W. Palmer: An Alaskan Pioneer
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723 S. Valley Way
Palmer, AK 99645
907-746-7668

www.palmermuseum.org

museuminfo@palmermuseum.org

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George W. Palmer An Alaskan Pioneer



The small town of Palmer, Alaska, is named after a rugged, pre-Klondike Alaskan pioneer named George W. Palmer. Born in 1855, he was the son of Amos and Lavina Palmer of Erie County, Pennsylvania. At the age of 38 Palmer was working in the logging industry near Seattle. When economic depression gripped the area, he chose to seek his fortune in Alaska. In 1893, during his first summer in the state, he discovered gold on a small tributary of Resurrection Creek. It was a find substantial enough to help bankroll some of Palmer's first business endeavors.

Brave Entrepreneur

One of those first exploits was a store he constructed in the mid-1890's. The small log building was situated on the bank of the Matanuska River (near present day George W. Palmer Memorial Bridge, which is located just outside of Palmer on the Old Glenn Highway). Because Palmer was directing a variety of enterprises at the time, his Matanuska store was an unattended, self-serve operation.

All of his merchandise was packed in cans to protect it from the elements and vermin. His customers, mostly Copper River Ahtna, took what they needed and left payment. Though he used the honor system, Palmer is quoted as saying nothing was ever stolen. It is uncertain how long the store existed, but it is believed to have been in operation at least until 1910, and possibly as late as 1915.

George Palmer was a true entrepreneur. He also sold beach coal, which he harvested at Point Campbell and Tyonek. Recognizing the need for transportation of goods over Alaska's vast distances, he lightered freight from large steamships at Goose Bay to the beach at Knik, and he hauled freight overland by horse as a service for gold miners of the Willow Creek Mining District.

In addition to his retail and service exploits, he served as the agent for the Alaska Commercial Company at Knik in 1900. When the company concluded its Knik business in 1901, Palmer started his own store there. He continued to expand this very successful trading

post until it boasted more than 10 buildings including his house, the store, several warehouses and a saloon. In 1904 Palmer was officially appointed Postmaster of Knik, after acting unofficially in that capacity for years.

A fearless boatman, Palmer routinely bucked the relentless Turnagain Arm wind and tides in small open boats in order to transport people and freight from Knik to the towns of Tyonek, Sunrise, Hope and Seldovia. The following photograph shows a small crowd gathered to watch the launch of Palmer's 1907 trip to Seldovia.



Volatile Man

Palmer's temper was legendary. In 1894, he severely beat a Russian Orthodox priest for advising a woman she should not live with him out of wedlock. His temper was only exacerbated by his consumption of White Mule, a home brew he began manufacturing in large quantities. By 1906, he was a serious alcoholic with a penchant for brutality towards his wives, his animals and his business

partners. During this time, the Post Office was often closed and his Knik store was closed for lack of merchandise.

Though Palmer was widely known for his alcoholism and temper, he was also well known for his dedication and fair treatment of the Dena'ina population. George Palmer had four Dena'ina wives, many stepchildren and 2 biological children (Annie, born 1897, and John or "Bud," born 1900). The mother of his biological children was Pelageia Chailkhiga of Knik, whose older son Nicolai caused a lot of trouble for Palmer when he beat to death a man called Talkeetna Stepan during an argument near Talkeetna in 1917. Seven years later, Nicolai was fatally shot in Anchorage after he killed Anchorage City Police officer Harry Cavanaugh.

Reformed Public Figure

By 1913, Palmer was drinking less and was acting more responsibly. He purchased another schooner and used it to bring merchandise from San Francisco three to four times a summer. The following photograph shows a ladies' nail-driving contest held in 1914 outside one of Palmer's buildings.

