

The Beginnings of Prudhoe Bay General Store

Jim and Elaine Childs came to Prudhoe Bay with their four sons, in a camper, in 1977, to work in the oilfields. Jim was a mechanic and an asphalt worker, and they figured it was only a matter of time before the oilfield would require paved roads. (The paved roads part has yet to happen, even to this day.) Jim was a mechanic for Frontier, who pioneered the original cat trains that first came to this area.

Eventually Jim and Elaine started their own company in Prudhoe Bay – *Childs' Equipment Services*. Their “camp” became the place to go when people arrived in Deadhorse looking for work or just a place to stay while they got oriented. Out of the goodness of their hearts, Jim and Elaine just couldn't turn anyone away.

So many of the oilfield workers, some who worked 9-week hitches or more, ran out of necessary items, from toothpaste to socks, so Elaine began to carry sundry items in a little four foot glass case, and *Prudhoe Bay General Store* was born.

Located across from the Sag River next to the current home of Colville, Inc., this first *Prudhoe Bay General Store* was a ragtag collection of old camps and buildings collected from around the oilfield. The floor beneath was uneven, requiring a step up here, a step down there, to navigate through the mélange of recycled ATCO units that formed the store.

Lighting was provided by dozens of single light bulbs which hung down from the ceiling. Most of the light fixtures had long since lost their little silver on/off chains, so had to be turned off at night manually - and quickly! - by turning the light bulbs in their sockets.

The amount of business that passed through this dim, homey setting was amazing. Store hours were from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., 7 days a week. When we opened the doors at 7 a.m. you could hear the thunder of bunny boots as oilfield workers ran to make their first purchase of the morning. And on Friday and Saturday nights, people were lined up 30 and 40 deep to cash their payroll checks, buy arctic clothing, greeting cards and cassette tapes, and buy money orders. Back then, when the oilfield was young, and roads and reputations were still being built, the General Store was one of the few places where a person could go to get away from his crowded camp. Thus it became the hub, and the heart, of the town of Deadhorse.

As prosperous times continued, owner Jim Childs remodeled and put in a solid plywood floor. More than one person actually stumbled and fell until he/she got used to the fact that the floor no longer contained steps up and down! Jim also added a huge new building for Sag River Hardware and Video Rental. Prudhoe Bay's first hardware store soon became a Fuller O'Brien paint distributor. Other firsts followed. At one time, a shopper could come to the store and cash a payroll check, select from an amazing variety of merchandise, get a haircut or manicure, see a chiropractor, go tanning in one of five tanning beds, rent a hot-tub room by the hour, buy jewelry or fresh flowers, or hire a clown named Kizzy to deliver balloons or flowers in the oilfield! Most of the peripheral businesses did not become giant

financial successes, but they did provide some nice diversions for the oilfield workers, and some much needed comic relief.

In 1985, Co-op Drug and Photo of Fairbanks (owned by Boots Newlin, who pioneered retail and pharmacy operations before and during the heady times of the pipeline project in the state of Alaska) took over Childs' original retail and postal outlet, and continued to operate it until it was acquired by Colville, Inc. in late 2004. Colville moved the general store to newly remodeled quarters in the upstairs of the Brooks Range Supply facility on Old Spine Road. This locates the general store in the same building as Prudhoe Bay's main industrial and hardware supply source. (This is also the new home of the Prudhoe Bay Post Office.)

Presently, as in the past, Prudhoe Bay General Store carries just about everything the oilfield workers need on their hitches up here, as well as catering to the needs of the Intrepid Arctic Explorers (otherwise called "tourists").

The store carries everything from postcards and snacks to basic work clothing and arctic survival gear. Carhartt, Red Wing boots, Oakley sunglasses, (the arctic glare makes sunglasses necessary even in winter), Nomex and Korbona fire retardant gear, and a variety of other top quality lines are available. Many gift items include Glass Baron roses, little stuffed polar bears, and a wide variety of printed logo-wear. That way, when an oilfield worker returns home after his "shift", he'll have a gift in hand for his loved ones, and a satisfactory answer to the questions, "What did you bring me, daddy?"

About the only exceptions to the vast assortment of goods available are alcohol, ammunition, and weapons, which are not allowed in Deadhorse. Typical groceries are not carried, since the residents of Prudhoe Bay/Deadhorse and the outlying oilfields reside in oilfield "camps" where regular meals are provided to the workers. However, there is a large variety of snack items and non-alcoholic drinks, from Red Bull to Purely Alaska water. New items are being added regularly as the store continues to grow to meet the changing demands of the community. Cassette tapes have been replaced with CD's, and typewriter ribbon has given way to inkjet paper and ink.

What about a post office? In the early days, the only mailbox around was at the Wien Terminal. There the letters were always overflowing onto the floor, so to help the community, Elaine Childs acquired the first post office contract. Childs' Camp then included Prudhoe Bay General Store and Post Office.

The first Post Office operated from a dark, homemade wooden desk. The mail boxes (called "pouches" in Alaska postal vernacular) were cardboard boxes which had originally housed AVON products. (Elaine was an Avon lady who won top sales prizes since the general store customers were desperate for grooming/beauty items.) Oilfield companies paid the government \$260 a year to have a post office pouch, and once their check was presented, the postal clerk with the neatest handwriting would dutifully mark the company's name and pouch number on the AVON box with a big felt pen, such as - "Morrison/Knutsen. Pouch 2-H". People would often come and take pictures of the

cardboard box to send to corporate headquarters to show them what they had just rented for \$260 a year!

There was no cash register in those early days and the “cash drawer” was a cardboard cigar box in a wooden cabinet. Literally millions of dollars flowed through that cigar box. With no bank in town, oilfield workers would cash their checks and buy \$500 money orders every week. The most money in that cigar box in one night was \$70,000 cash on one particularly busy check-cashing night.

Revenues from money order fees, postage, and Express Mails (men sending those money orders home) were so high that postal officials were astounded. At one time the little Prudhoe Bay contract station had the highest revenues of any small post office in the entire western half of the United States. Not one, but two Postmasters Generals honored the little post office by making official visits. (They probably wanted to see how so much revenue could be generated with no equipment and cardboard mail boxes!)

The contract money for the post office never quite covered the expenses, but Elaine was very civic minded, and wanted to help her community. She fought to get parcel post, and won, (and there were times when the huge shipments would arrive that we wondered WHY we had fought so hard to get it!) She fought to get this area its own name and zip code, since the original address was so confusing to shippers - “Deadhorse/Fairbanks 99701” When this area finally received its own zip code, and officially became A Place, Elaine got the privilege of naming it - not “Deadhorse”, but “Prudhoe Bay”, which is why it is officially called that even today. (See link to “How Deadhorse Got Its Name”)

The first Post Office has serviced Deadhorse and the Greater Prudhoe Bay area ever since its humble beginnings. It has developed into an efficient, modern, multi-service post office providing thousands of oilfield workers and local residents with all their postal needs.

When in the Deadhorse/Prudhoe Bay area be sure to visit us—what could now be called the **Colville Mini-Mall**. Beside containing the local post office, the Prudhoe Bay General Store issues hunting and fishing licenses, offers notary service, “Dalton Highway Survivor” certificates, and provides a gathering center for locals and tourists alike. You can hear about the past, find out when and where the last grizzly bear was seen, or where the fish are biting.

You can also buy authentic Eskimo and Alaska Native crafts, for the store still serves as a trading post and showcase for native goods, and yes, we know the artists who made these pieces.

Best of all, you can buy exclusive t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats, and other logo items that you cannot get anywhere else. The store prides itself in original and yes, LOCAL souvenirs, that were created on Alaska’s North Slope, as in the proud tradition of Clara King’s very first “local” t-shirt slogan: “If you think Hell never freezes over, you’ve never been to Prudhoe Bay!”