

# Alaska Nellie: A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words



## A MAGNIFICENT BEDLAM OF HOLLYWOOD AND ALASKA

The Creation of Alaska Nellie

by Doug Capra © 2012

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In the early 1950's, shortly before Alaska Nellie died, a woman visiting her lodge on Kenai Lake described Nellie's eclectic collection of Alaskan as "...a magnificent bedlam of Hollywood and Alaska." She probably didn't realize how close to the truth she came in understanding the legend of Alaska Nellie.

Souvenirs from all over the world – scarfs, handkerchiefs, knick-knacks and curios – lay scattered on every shelf and in every corner. Moose, goat, and sheep racks competed for space with pelts of every variety. A bison head sent to her, she said, by Buffalo Bill, hung beside the skin of Bozo, an African lion that had died of old age in the Portland Zoo. Propped up astride Bozo, as if riding him, were Nellie's parka and mukluks. Framed in the parka hood was a life-size lithograph of General Douglas MacArthur's face. Nearby stood the infamous piano she claimed to have bought from a Dawson City dance hall with thirty bullet holes in its back from a gun fight. When she moved this collection to Lawing (23 miles north of Seward) from her Dead Horse Hill roadhouse back in 1923, it had filled two railroad freight cars. That was almost 30 years ago. Since then the collection had grown.

Her trophy room looked like a stage, with its proscenium arch papered with publicity photographs from Hollywood sent by her close friend, silent screen star Alice Calhoun. Photos of cowboys on wild broncos hung between ptarmigan and white owls. A stuffed Brazilian monkey seemed out of place, but Nellie had a story for it. The dress Alice had worn in her first movie back in 1917, along with her other costumes, hung on the wall beside caribou hides.

On a trip to Alaska in the late 1920's, Alice met and befriended Nellie and they became lifelong friends. During the 1930's, Alice traveled to Alaska with her mother several times to visit Nellie. Nellie stayed with Alice occasionally as her

guest in Beverly Hills, where she was wined and dined among the Hollywood elite.

It was Alice who had helped Nellie finish and publish her autobiography. It was Alice who had used her Hollywood connections to send producer and filmmaker James Fitzpatrick to Alaska to make a movie about Nellie.

It was Alice Calhoun, knowing how the Hollywood image-making machine worked, who helped create the legend that became Alaska Nellie. Alice arranged for the publication of Nellie's autobiography, simply titled *Alaska Nellie*, to coincide with the release of Fitzpatrick travelogue, titled *In the Land of Alaska Nellie*. That was in 1940.

Before that time, the little lady sourdough who lived on the shores of Kenai Lake, 23 miles north of Seward had been known as simply Nellie, or Nellie Neal; later as Nellie Neal Lawing or Mrs. Lawing. From 1940 on she would be known as Alaska Nellie.

But even before the film, she was known throughout Alaska Territory and many parts of the Lower Forty-Eight. Alaska Railroad trains stopped at her lodge on their trips to and from Seward to allow tourists a treasured few minutes of her storytelling.

Imagine arriving on the train to meet her in her late years, about 1949. As Nellie hears the train approach, she takes off and folds her apron and changes into one of Alice Calhoun's costume dresses. She leaves her roadhouse lodge and stands by the tracks waiting for the train to stop and empty passengers. Nellie leads them to her trophy room, forms them into an audience, passes a can around for contributions, holds up her autobiography for sale at \$2.50 each, takes a deep breath, and established a stance in the midst of her stage.

If there had been a director, he would have told the cameras to roll. If there had been a sound track, the music would have started. If there had been stage lights, they would have dimmed as the former Nellie Trospen, Nellie Bates, Nellie Neal, Nellie Neal Lawing gradually transformed into the legendary figure she had become -- Alaska Nellie.

As she walked down the steamship *Alameda's* gangplank onto the Seward dock on the evening of July 3, 1915, the waiting crowd didn't notice anything exceptional about

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her. A few inches over 5 feet tall, about 120 pounds, 42-years old – she could have been a newly-hired government school teacher, a wealthy widow looking for adventure, or a businessman's wife returning from a visit Outside. Nellie Neal found a hotel – one with the best view of the bay and mountains – and gazed outside late into the night, thinking, hoping, and praying. She had finally fulfilled her childhood dream. She had made it to Alaska. Like many who venture to this last frontier, she would leave her past behind to forge a new identity.

Not by talk alone, even though her storytelling was legendary. In later years she'd joke: "I guess I'll die with lint in my lungs from chewing the rag." But talk only went so far. Besides, Nellie was from Missouri, so she meant to show them. From the moment she set foot in Alaska, Nellie Neal began to reinvent herself. By 1923, she had created a reputation as one of Alaska's premiere female pioneers.

Most of what we know of Nellie's early years comes from her autobiography. As with most personal writing, sometimes it's difficult to tell what's true, what's embellished and what has been left out. She tells the audience the basic story. It's clear, though, that hers was no easy life. Being the oldest of a dozen farm children, Nellie became a surrogate mother. It wasn't a matter of choice for her. That's just the way life was for young women. She had other dreams, other plans, but they had to be put on hold. Like most of us, Nellie was probably ambivalent about this life. Undoubtedly, she felt a responsibility toward her parents and siblings, but she also wanted the freedom to create her own life.

In her autobiography, she mentions leaving school before age 14 (about 1885). Her next sentence skips to 1898 when she is 26 years old. These 12 missing years may eventually yield significant facts about Nellie. During these years, she may have ventured to places like nearby Topeka, Kansas and worked for the Fred Harvey restaurant chain along the Topeka-Santa Fe line. Her mother died in 1898 and her father remarried two years later. By 1901, Nellie had left home for good to seek her fortune. But not yet to Alaska. She worked at railroad restaurants and boarding houses as she moved westward toward Colorado. Like many independent women of the period, she learned quickly that men craved comfortable lodging and good food in frontier towns. And they were willing to pay well for it.

By 1903, she was in Victor and later Cripple Creek, Colorado, running a boarding house. In 1906, Nellie married a Cripple Creek assayer named Wesley Neal.

Interestingly, the marriage certificate and local newspaper list her as Nellie Bates, suggesting an earlier marriage. For nearly 10 years she lived in what she called "one of the richest and wickedest gold camps on earth."

"I had a hotel in Cripple Creek," she recalled, "and one year a holdup man beat me up, knocked out some of my teeth, and robbed me. After that, I always had a Colt .45 handy. Well, one evening I was sitting in my office reading the paper. A man entered the office, and so I put down the paper, covering the gun. He started to pull out a gun as he said 'Give me your money, lady,' but I beat him to the draw and shot the gun out of his hand. They left me alone after that."

She left Cripple Creek, divorced her alcoholic husband, and headed to Washington State. In 1914 she read of plans to build a government-funded railroad from Seward to Fairbanks. In 1915 she headed for San Francisco to catch a steamer to Alaska, hoping to become the Fred Harvey of Alaska's new railroad system.

Once in Seward, Nellie worked briefly for the Hawkins family. Soon, the Kenai Alaska Gold Mine, 26 miles north of town, hired her to freight goods and cook. When the crew moved to Seward for the 1915 winter Nellie packed her goods, left the train at mile 23, and headed out into "the great white silence." She found and fixed up an abandoned cabin, and for three months she hunted, trapped, earned a grubstake, and reassessed her life.

In the spring of 1916 she became the first woman to get a roadhouse contract from the railroad. Nellie soon named her spot at mile 45 "Grandview." About this time people began to notice her. She could make 60 miles a day with her dogteam, and walk the 45-mile roundtrip to Seward with a 40 pound pack in 11.5 hours. But during a fierce storm in January 1920, the real Nellie legend began.

"I had been waiting for the mail carrier to come over the pass for more than two days," she recalled. "It grew dark and no mail sled. About 8 o'clock I put on my snowshoes, I hitched up a dog team and started for the pass. When I reached the summit, I found the freezing mail carrier lying along the railroad cut, which he had followed because the snow had blocked the trail. I carried him back to my cabin, thawed out his hands and feet, wrapped him in blankets, and then went on with the mail to the next station where a train had waited hours for the mail. It was an 18-mile round trip, and when I got back at daylight the mail carrier was still dead to the world, sleeping off the effects of his close escape. It was not much to do, really. Sounds greater than it was."

As a reward for her courage, a group of Seward pioneers gave her a gold nugget necklace with a small diamond set in a star. She wore it with pride the rest of her life.

In 1918 Nellie took over the Kern Creek Roadhouse not far from Grandview. As the

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rails moved north, so did Nellie. By 1919 she was a Dead Horse (later named Curry) at mile 248. "I dished out as many as 12,000 to 14,000 meals per month, having two cooks, two waitresses and several yard men as help." About this time, either at Kern or Dead Horse, Nellie added to her reputation by killing a record 9 and a half foot brown bear.

As she told it: "One night I went out to my barn to feed my little pet black bear, and I found he was missing. As I went out into the snow, a huge shape lunged at me. I twisted away and ran to the barn. As I tried to shut the door to keep the big brown bear out, he smashed at the door with a paw, and it slammed shut on my fingers. I remained inside for a while, and heard the bear catch and kill my pet. Then I heard him drag the body away to bury it in a snow bank. I couldn't stand it after that. I ran to the house, got my 30.06, and ran back. He reared and started toward me and I had to shoot him six times before he fell dead at my feet."

In 1921, Nellie borrowed a team and entered the annual dog races at Anchorage, competing against three noted male mushers. She came in one minute behind the third team, and although she didn't win a cash prize, she recalled: "I received a huge box of candy and a tremendous ovation from the crowd for finishing the course." When asked what she got out of running the race she answered: "More than I expected. I got back."

About this time Nellie became engaged to Kenneth Holden, an Alaska Railroad shop foreman whose piano playing, singing and wit enchanted her. Shortly after their engagement, he died in a tragic accident. The body came by rail through Dead Horse, and Nellie accompanied it all the way to Seward. When the train stopped at Grandview, Nellie's old roadhouse, she gathered flowers to put on his coffin. Outside, she met Kenneth's cousin, Billy Lawing, and after Nellie returned to Dead Horse the two corresponded.

When President Warren G. Harding visited Alaska in July 1923, to celebrate the completion of the Alaska Railroad, he and his wife wanted to meet this woman named Nellie Neal, "whose signature had appeared on thousands of vouchers belonging to employees of the government railroad and which were received in Washington, D.C." He did meet Nellie and was impressed with her caribou head, musk ox hide, bear hides, moose heads and other big game trophies she had on display.

With the railroad completed, in August Nellie purchased the village of Roosevelt 23 miles north of Seward. In September, she married Billy Lawing on the stage of Seward's Liberty Theater after the show. They stood on one of their

wedding gifts, an expensive rug President Harding and his wife had stood on while addressing the people of Seward. While in Fairbanks, Nellie had her picture taken with another well-known Nellie -- the famous prospector and trailblazer Nellie Cashman. In 1925, the year Nellie Cashman died, Bill and Nellie changed their village's name from Roosevelt to Lawing.

By now, Nellie Neal Lawing was a legend, but her exploits occasionally became confused with Nellie Cashman's. Magazines like *Sportlife* started connecting her with Dawson and the Klondike goldrush. Even the Seward Gateway would reprint such stories with no corrections. Nellie told her adventurous stories to locals who ventured from Seward to spend a weekend at her Kenai Lake lodge, to tourists who stopped at her Lawing museum and trophy room, to newspaper reporters whom she met on her many trips Outside to promote Alaska. An outstanding storyteller, Nellie embellished her exploits, mixed Cripple Creek adventures with those of Grandview, Kern Creek, Dead Horse and Lawing. But even with her exaggerations, the truths of her adventurous life remained amazing enough. A year before she died in 1956 Nellie joked: "I'm pretty tough. About the only thing that could be fatal to me would be lockjaw."

Nellie became good friends with silent screen star Alice Calhoun, and through her with many of Hollywood celebrities.

A letter addressed simply to "Nellie, Alaska" would reach her with no problem. Even at age 60, about the time her husband convinced her to start writing her autobiography, she could walk the 23 miles to Seward through winter snows in less than six hours, beating the ten hour time of two experienced mushers. The wealthy, famous and titled of Europe and America stayed with her at her lodge while on hunting expeditions and sought her advice. She entertained them with stories, and often showed off her famous fishing contraption.

"The kitchen at my place extends out over the waters of Kenai Lake," she would say while demonstrating. "I throw a line into the lake, the hook is baited, and the line is attached to the hood of my range. When a fish bites, a bell rings and I know a meal is on the hook. That is what you call fresh fish deluxe."

Bill Lawing died of a heart attack in March 1936 while cutting ice on Kenai Lake for summer storage. Nellie continued to work on her autobiography. In 1938 she took a 15,000-mile bus tour across the United States to promote herself and Alaska. Under one arm she carried two prize-winning Alaska potatoes in a cigar box. Under the other, the manuscript of her autobiography. She tried unsuccessfully to find a New York publisher for her book. As for the potatoes, she presented them in person to Franklin D. Roosevelt.

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Nellie's estate didn't close until the early 1960's.

So what was she seeking? Why did she come to Alaska and why did she stay? It's not an easy question to answer, but maybe if we reexamine her accomplishments we can better understand who she was: Big game hunter, miner, trapper, business woman, performer, Alaska promoter, writer, and lecturer – a Host. As the Alaska Railroad recognized when they honored her in 1956, "She established a tradition of service to Alaskans." Nellie knew what good service meant.

The Arnold family, after traveling through Alaska in 1935, recalled what Nellie meant to them in a letter. They wrote: "Colored by the Midnight Sun, the glorious beauty of the heavens at Fort Yukon inspires the artist; the wildlife of Mt. McKinley Park attracts the naturalist, but it was at Lawing, at Mile 23, that we found the spirit of Alaskan hospitality crystallized in the lives and personalities of Nellie and Bill Lawing.

"The fisherman's paradise lies at their door, the huntsman's rendezvous is just beyond the mountain, and within the lodge lives the most remarkable woman in all Alaska. Her tales of the Northland are soul stirring and unforgettable. One finds in her the embodiment of courage, gentleness, strength and sympathy. Our memory of her will live long after other experiences have faded." Nellie made an impression on people. People remembered her fondly."

Like many, though, she came to Alaska, consciously or unconsciously, to start a new life, to reinvent herself. She was a charismatic, complex, a representative Alaskan character.

"I've worked, worked, worked and gotten the joy and thrill out of a task well done" she once told a reporter. "I've always had my own philosophy about succeeding. Success is a dream with a solid foundation, and that foundation is grit, courage and determination, backed by high ideals and squareness to your fellow man."

The Seward Gateway editorialized: "When it comes to spreading publicity for Alaska, Mrs. Nellie Neal "Alaska Nellie" Lawing is always somewhere out there in front of the front line offense . . . States, cities, principalities, and whatnots have their publicity departments, their high brow, profound efficiency experts with their corps of trained assistants and clerical aids. Alaska, with special emphasis upon the Kenai Peninsula and Seward, has Nellie Neal Lawing, and in our own humble opinion, she has them all beat."

In 1939, MGM Studios sent a film crew to her Kenai Lake lodge and museum to create a short documentary. *In the Land of Alaska Nellie* was released in 1940 and shown all over the world. That same year, Nellie self-published her autobiography and titled it simply *Alaska Nellie*. In 1941, on book promotion tour of the states, she attended Roosevelt's third inauguration and was honored with special seating. She later presented the President with a signed copy of her book.

In January 1956, Anchorage invited her to town to celebrate Alaska Nellie Day. Shortly after, she signed away her interest in Lawing to the Territory in exchange for an old-age pension. She once told a reporter: "When I die, my trophies will all go to the territory to be exhibited for the benefit of the pioneer women of Alaska." That was not to be the case.

Nellie Neal Lawing died on May 10, 1956 while sitting in her favorite rocking chair at her little house at along Kenai Lake. She's buried in the Seward City Cemetery.

On her death certificate, under "additional information that may help identify deceased," it simply says: "Known as Alaska Nellie."

Then the drama of her estate begins. Nellie's last years had been hard ones. She was in and out of the hospital in Seward, unable to get around or pay even basic bills. Some of her property was stolen about this time, including her precious gold nugget necklace.

Immediately after her death, the Territory, to whom Nellie had signed over her property back in 1949 for an old age pension and medical care, claimed \$6,644. Other creditors in Seward waited in line. Her lodge and trophy room, already in poor condition, started to leak and deteriorate. Her friends tried to save her home and collection to create a museum, as Nellie had wanted, but the attempt failed. A year after she died the Territory auctioned off all her belongings. Those probating her estate learned that Billy's estate had never been probated back in 1936. During that process, they learned that some of the property he had left to Nellie didn't belong to him. It was owned by the Alaska Railroad.

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Most of the sources for this article come from the Alaska Nellie Collection at the Resurrection Bay Historical Society, Seward, Alaska. They have Nellie's original scrapbook, photographs, some letters, and newspaper clippings and articles that Nellie collected over the years. Much thanks must go to the women's organizations in Seward who gathered these materials after Nellie's death to make sure they didn't get scattered. I also must thank Jaqueline "Jackie" Sewell who died in 2007. She formed the Alaska Nellie Historical Society, for which I became the historian. Jackie gathered a large collection of materials, including interviews, that I am now using as I write a biography of Alaska Nellie.

The other major source is *Alaska Nellie* by Nellie Neal Lawing (Seattle: Chieftain Press, 1940).

Over the years, I have interviewed many people who visited Nellie and listened to her stories. The only two who actually knew Nellie are Pat (Ray) Williams and Paul McMullen. I thank them for all the personal information they have given me over the years. —Doug Capra

### **IMPORTANT NOTE TO TEACHERS**

Doug Capra is a historian living in Seward. He is a valuable resource not only on Alaska Nellie but on much of the history of the corridor region and to the Resurrection Bay area. He has graciously agreed to be a resource for students and teachers. He can be reached by email at: [capradr@yahoo.com](mailto:capradr@yahoo.com)