



## The “High Line” Road

### *A Summary of the Decision to Build the Park Road into the Mountainside at Polychrome Pass*

Cultural Resource Report 2019-DENA-014



**ON THE COVER**

Photograph of Bus going over the “High Line” section of the Park Road  
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service (DENA 2262)

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# **The “High Line” Road**

## *A Summary of the Decision to Build the Park Road into the Mountainside at Polychrome Pass*

Cultural Resource Report 2019-DENA-014

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The Alaska Road Commission (ARC) began the process of building the trans-park road into Mount McKinley National Park in 1922. That year, the ARC brushed a trail across the park via Sable, Polychrome, Highway, and Thorofare Passes to the foot of Muldrow Glacier, then to the McKinley River and the north out of the boundary towards Wonder Lake and on to the Kantishna Post Office located near the confluence of Moose and Eureka Creek.<sup>1</sup> The process of road construction followed this rough 1922 alignment for the next sixteen years.



In 1922, the Alaska Road Commission brushed a trail from McKinley Park Station to Kantishna. They erected tripods and mileposts to mark the trail and also erected eight 10'x10' tents for shelter at 12 to 15 mile intervals. This tent was located near the site of the current East Fork Cabin. ARC maps indicate that the initial trail was on a lowland route through the Polychrome Area. (Photo by George Flood in 1923 or 1924, DENA 10501).

Detailed road plans were never drafted, but the National Park Service's (NPS) desired road standard was documented in 1924 correspondence between Assistant NPS Director Arno Cammerer and ARC President James Steese. Cammerer wrote:

The Service [NPS] desires to have observed in the location and construction of this road; namely, that special attention be given to its location to the best advantage in giving the visitor going over the road the best possible views and vistas of the country, avoiding straight line in road location and consequent cutting through hillside and forest growth merely to constitute it the shorter way between two points; in other words, in our road projects in the parks we desire to avoid long straight lines that some road engineers in this country have considered desirable in many cases . . . You, Major Gotwals, and I discussed

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<sup>1</sup> "1923 Report of Director of National Park Service," Bill Brown Collection, Box 31, DENA Museum.

this while you were here, and we were all of one mind in this matter. I am merely mentioning it here to put it on record as a reminder of our chat.<sup>2</sup>

ARC leaders began using Cammerer's 1924 letter as the road standard. Malcolm Elliott, who succeeded Steese as ARC President, wrote a 1928 road report to the NPS emphasizing that the road was "located with a view to developing the scenic possibilities of the route." In the same report he indicated that the road was constructed to Mile 40 but the location west of that point was undetermined.<sup>3</sup>

A major recommendation regarding road placement occurred when NPS Landscape Architect Thomas Vint arrived at the park in August 1929. The mission of his visit was to identify a location for a park hotel and to inspect road construction.<sup>4</sup> By 1929, ARC had built the park road as far as the East Fork River and was set to build through to the middle fork of the Toklat via an area called Polychrome in 1930. Several months after his visit, Vint drafted a report, and much of what is known about the decision to construct the park road up high alongside the mountains in Polychrome Pass comes from this document. Vint was ultimately adhering to the scenic values stated by Cammerer five years prior.



Thomas Vint visited Mt. McKinley National Park in 1929 and made the decision to build the "High Line" road over Polychrome Pass. He traveled with ARC District Superintendent M.C. Edmunds, Park Superintendent Harry Liek, Mt. McKinley Tourist & Transportation Company President Jim Galen, and Judge Albert Galen of Montana (Vint Report, RG 79, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Entry 10, Box 373, NARA College Park).

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<sup>2</sup> Cammerer letter to Steese, April 9, 1924, Bill Brown Collection, Box 30, DENA Museum.

<sup>3</sup> 1928 Alaska Road Commission Annual Report to the National Park Service, Bill Brown Collection, Box 30 DENA Museum.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Vint, "Report on Mt. McKinley National Park," (San Francisco: 1929), 9.

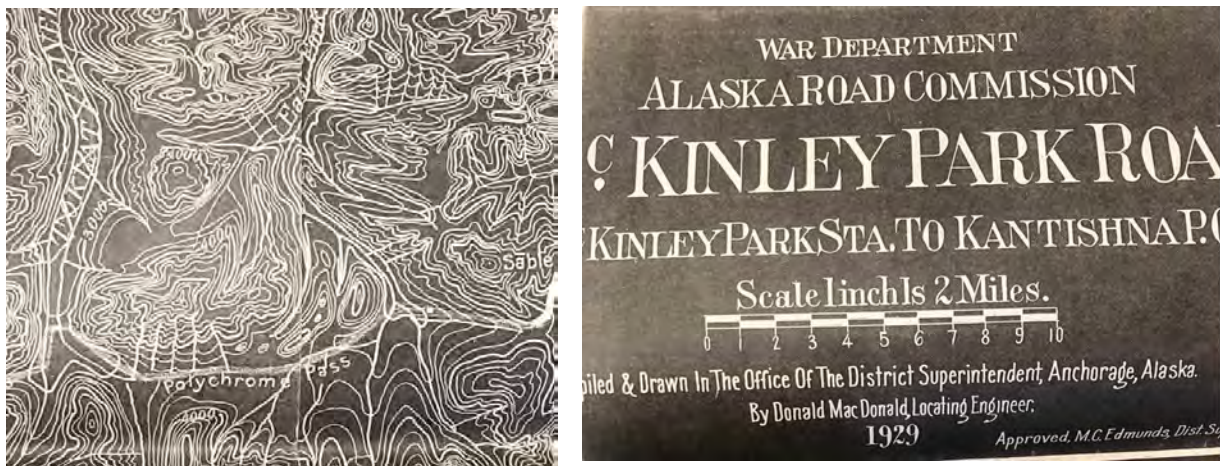


Before Vint discussed the alignment of the road, he detailed the lack of ARC road construction plans, “Like many organizations that do both engineering and construction, there is a minimum engineering work done. Sufficient surveying is done to supervise the construction, but no road plans are prepared and no quantities are available.”<sup>5</sup>

Vint also described road building challenges:

Construction is difficult and unusual in this type of country. It is first necessary to remove the moss cover and build ditches along the right of way to allow the subsoil to thaw and drain, for a season. The next season the grading is done. For several seasons following the subsoil continues to thaw and settle so more or less grading must be done each year until the grade is established. Stage construction is necessary due to these special conditions. The standard of width is a one way road with turnouts. This is ample for the traffic that will be using this road for many years to come.<sup>6</sup>

In judging the road work that still needed to be accomplished, Vint outlined the necessary approach. He wrote, “The serious point of the road program by the Road Commission is the matter of engineering standards. From a park viewpoint and a landscape viewpoint this is important as we should avoid building sections of road that will be rebuilt. The location should be made according to the best standards in order that as far as we can foresee we will have but one road scar in the park.”<sup>7</sup>



A 1929 Alaska Road Commission map shows the Polychrome road alignment between the East Fork and the main Toklat River. The map shows the proposed road taking a lowland route. Vint recommended a “High Line” scenic route after his 1929 visit and the road was built into the Polychrome mountainside (1929 Alaska Road Commission Annual Report to the National Park Service, Bill Brown Collection, Box 30 DENA Museum).

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<sup>5</sup> Vint Report, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Vint Report, 12

<sup>7</sup> Vint Report, 12.

## *The “High Line” Decision*

During Vint’s visit to the park, road construction was almost complete to the East Fork River, but where the road would be built next was not clear to him in the ARC plans. Vint made a recommendation that became known as the “High Line” route:

At present no plans are available to see what is planned. The survey stakes are all preliminary and few seem to be along the route of the survey that will be used. One section, between the East Fork Bridge and Polychrome Pass crosses two streams to avoid some heavy work. In discussing this, it was agreed that the road would finally be built on the location requiring the heavier work. The difference in cost is not known as both routes have not been surveyed. The heavier one is shorter, eliminates two bridges and is on a permanent location. I recommend that you authorize the more expensive line . . . Superintendent Liek and Superintendent Edmunds of the Road Commission, know the conditions and the location being herewith recommended.<sup>8</sup>

By early 1930, NPS Director Albright supported and authorized Vint’s recommendation in his report regarding the “High Line” route. Albright praised him for his report on Mount McKinley National Park which he described as “the most useful report that has yet been submitted on this park.” In written correspondence, Albright informed Vint that the NPS was implementing his recommendation, “the more expensive location of the road between the East Fork Bridge and Polychrome Pass.” The ARC engineers were “advised to stay on the same side of the stream throughout this section of highway.” Albright also sent a telegram to ARC President Malcolm Elliott, which approved “relocation of highway between East Fork Bridge and Polychrome Pass which avoids all stream crossings but takes heavier excavation per Vint’s discussion with [District Superintendent] Edmunds.”<sup>9</sup>

Malcom Elliott wrote a letter to the NPS in August of 1930 explaining additional costs associated with building the “High Line” route and added praise for selecting the alignment:

The increased cost due to the adoption of the high-line location is estimated by Mr. Edmunds at \$30,000 but we cannot be certain that this will cover it as the amount of work will be dependent on the volume of rock which will be put in motion by cutting into the loose material along the bluff. . . . I completed recently an inspection of the work in McKinley Park and am very pleased with the progress. The high-line location at East Fork is going to be a very picturesque route and I believe well worth the cost.<sup>10</sup>

In his letter, Elliott also included the following seven photographs:

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<sup>8</sup> Vint Report, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Albright Letter to Vint, March 17, 1930, RG 79, Central Classified Files, 1907-49, Box 373, NARA College Park; Albright Memo to Elliott, January 18, 1930, RG 79, Central Classified Files, 1907-49, Box 375, NARA College Park.

<sup>10</sup> Elliot Letter to NPS, August 4, 1930, RG 79 Central Classified Files, 1907-49, Box 375, NARA College Park.



*Foot trail on permanent road location. High Line, McK. P. July 1930*

Figure 1. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)



*Foot trail on permanent road location. High Line, McK. P. July 1930*

Figure 2. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)





High Line, McK. Park July 1930

92

Figure 3. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)



High Line, McKinley Park, July 1930

92

Figure 4. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)



*High Line, McK. Park, July, 1930. Drilling*

104

Figure 5. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)



*Grading High Line McK. Park July 1930*

105

Figure 6. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)





*Compressor on High Line, McK. Park, 1930*

Figure 7. Malcolm Elliott High Line Photos (RG79, Box 379, Central Classified Files, 1907-1949, Roads Budget, NARA College Park)

A 1930 report of the NPS Director described the slow progress being made on the road and also expressed satisfaction with the route selected:

From Mile 43 the road extends along the side of a mountain for a distance of about 5 miles and as 8 miles of this are heavy roadwork, the progress has been rather slow in this section. This part of the highway is the first in the park from a scenic standpoint, and is known as the High Line, as it reaches an altitude of about 1,000 feet above the rivers and affords an unexcelled view of Mount McKinley and Muldrow Glacier.<sup>11</sup>

NPS Director Horace Albright arrived at the park in 1931 to inspect progress on the road and also looked into potential park hotel locations. Albright commended Vint for his recommendation to build the scenic “High Line” route, “I inspected the so-called ‘High-Line’ road between the East Fork Toklat and the main Toklat River which you suggested two years ago when you were here. This road is on a splendid location, and is one of the most scenic highways in the National Park system. I want you to know that I am immensely pleased with this road.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “1930 Report of the NPS Director,” William Brown Collection, Box 31, DENA Museum.

<sup>12</sup> Albright Letter to Vint, Aug 18, 1931, RG79, Central Classified Files, 1907-49, Box 273, NARA College Park.



Building the High Line route (Alaska State Library, Alaska Road Commission Collection, 61-2-230)



Blasting the High Line route (Alaska State Library, Alaska Road Commission Collection, 61-18-127).



In his letter to Vint expressing praise, Albright reaffirms his commitment to the road standards in place but also admits that the “High Line” is an exception to the standard, “I shall hold to the present standards of highway building, except, of course, in the case of opportunities such that you seized between the East Fork and the main Toklat.”<sup>13</sup>

The 1931 NPS Report of the Director proudly described the new section of the road that was completed that summer, “The new Polychrome Pass section was opened late in August, and is one of the great sections of national park highway. Built to all modern standards, except in width, this stretch of road affords a spectacular outlook over Polychrome Pass, the Alaska Range, and the branches of the Toklat River.”<sup>14</sup>



High Line Road being built in 1931 (Edmunds Collection, Box 1, Anchorage Museum)

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<sup>13</sup> Albright Letter to Vint, Aug 18, 1931.

<sup>14</sup> 1931 Report of the Director of the National Park Service, William Brown Collection, Box 31, DENA Museum.



High Line Road being built in 1931 (Edmunds Collection, Box 1, Anchorage Museum)



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