



LENA HOWARD

Tourism has played an important role in the history of Denali National Park and Preserve since the 1920's, when the only way to reach the park was by railroad. Just as today, to be successful, the companies providing services to visitors need a dedicated and adventurous staff. This is the story of Lena Howard, one woman who came to Alaska on a whim and ended up staying; who worked to provide hospitality services to some of the park's earliest visitors, and ended up becoming a pillar of the local community.



Lena with MT&T Company Bus.

Photograph courtesy Candy Waugaman Collection.

Lena Lentz (Howard) visited Alaska with a friend, "just tourists," in the summer of 1922. After hearing so much about Alaskan winters, they returned in the fall of 1926 to experience a winter in Fairbanks. Not yet satiated, the two women decided to travel around the state and "have Alaska out of our system." As part of Lena's hobby of visiting national parks, their travels included a visit to Mt. McKinley National Park.

Lena did not get Alaska out of her system, and like other visitors who sometimes become locals, Lena's first summer working at the Mt. McKinley Tourist & Transportation Company's (MT&T) camp by the Savage River in 1928 commenced a lifetime in the area. Her recorded reflections and photographs provide a window into the early days of tourism in the Denali area.

Savage Camp

Savage Camp, where Lena worked long hours as a cook and housekeeper for 12 summers between 1928 and 1938, was the destination for visitors to Mt. McKinley National Park during the park's earliest years.

The camp, located adjacent to today's Savage River Campground, housed visitors in the relative luxury of tent cabins and provided a dance hall, a dining hall, ranger talks, and opportunities to travel deeper into the park by horseback, stagecoach, or automobile. Visitors started each day with sourdough hotcakes and most spent 24 or 48 hours at the camp before returning to the McKinley Park Station depot to continue their travels.



Lena in a field of flowers.

Photograph courtesy Candy Waugaman Collection.



Savage Camp, Lingo Collection, Denali National Park and Preserve Museum Collection.

Early Tourism

Up until 1957, the only way to reach the park was by railroad or in a small airplane. The majority of visitors arrived by train, just as today. Lena's reflections on the early park visitor assumptions, some which may still be true today, included expectations of seeing year-round snow, odd forms of clothing, and lines of dog teams.

As today, many visitors to Savage Camp decried the mosquitoes, left piles of insect repellent behind, and hinged their contentment on whether they were able to view Mt. McKinley. Lena and her co-workers chuckled at visitors' misperceptions yet worked hard to provide a terrific experience, going so far as to keep a night-watch for "the mountain" to come out during cloudy stretches. In tourism, Lena reflects, "You meet all kinds of characters."



Sable Pass outing, 1928. Lena is on the far right.



Lena disembarking Alaska Railroad.

Photograph courtesy Candy Waugaman Collection.

Making a Life

One of the perks for staff working at Savage Camp was the opportunity to explore the park in their free time by hiking, picking berries, and horseback riding. And much like today, seasonal employment also provides opportunities to meet new people which is how Lena met her future husband, Johnny Howard, who was a horse handler, trip guide, driver, and general maintenance man for MT&T.

Most individuals who come to work in Alaska tourism move on after a couple of seasons, but Lena and Howard got married in 1937 and stayed, living near the town of Healy, just outside the park. Lena was known for gifting cookies to local children and where the couple hosted wear-your-best annual holiday gatherings for their neighbors for many years. She lived in the area, until her husband's death in 1971, and played a lasting role in the community. Lena embodies the spirit of early tourism in Alaska which required a pioneering and adventurous character. This spirit lives on in many of the people who work and live in the area of the Denali National Park and Preserve today.



Lena and Johnny Howard's home near Healy, late 1950s.

Photograph courtesy Candy Waugaman Collection.

Sources: Lena Howard Oral History, DENA #506, August 4, 1972, Denali National Park and Preserve Museum Collection. Mercer, Baxter, personal interview, Healy, Alaska, March 17, 2014.

For more information about Denali National Park and Preserve: <http://www.nps.gov/dena/historyculture/index.htm>