

A Showcase of Alaska's Frontier - The Copper River Region

by Brigitta Windisch-Cole

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The geography of the Copper River region, the vast northern section of the Valdez-Cordova census area, encompasses a land-mass of 24,663 square miles. This is an area comparable in size to the state of West Virginia, but with roughly one-six-hundredth the population. No political boundaries enclose the region and no community boundaries surround any of the 14 major settlements. (See Table 1.) Neither the newer communities nor the traditional Athabascan villages, some settled over 7,000 years ago, have established local governments. Therefore, only a U.S. Census Bureau designation, subdividing rural regions into block numbering areas, identifies the region statistically as the Copper River Census Subarea. Although it is remote and sparsely populated, many travelers pass through the

region— an Alaskan display of glaciers, rich salmon streams, and four mountain ranges.

A logistic center

Traffic routes have crossed the Copper River region since the early settlement days. Alaska's early history tells of the Athabascan Indians using the river system of the Copper River region as a travel route. The Copper River and its tributaries became home to the Ahtna people who often settled at the confluence of rivers. Some of these settlements still exist, but only about 19 percent of the region's population are American Indians. (See Table 4.)

During the gold rush years, prospectors venturing over the Chugach Mountains and using the Valdez-Eagle or Valdez-Fairbanks trails crossed paths near Gakona. After World War II, modern roadways replaced the old trails, and the new roads became the Glenn and Richardson Highways. The Glenn Highway is the main road link between Alaska's Southcentral region and the Lower 48 states. In the North-South direction, the Richardson Highway parallels the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. The pipeline traverses the Copper River region for its final 200-mile-long stretch.

A roadhouse economy

Although two of Alaska's major roads run through the Copper River area, no large cities have developed along its highways. Over half of the population of the Copper River region resides within a 25-mile radius of the Glenn and Richardson Highway junction. Two of the largest communities, Glennallen and Copper Center, are in this area. (See Table 1.)

Glennallen, which stretches along the Glenn and Richardson Highways, has become the regional hub for the surrounding settlements. It offers travelers and the local pop-

Table • 1

1996 Population Estimates for the Copper River Region

CDPs are Census Designated Places	Copper River Census Subarea	3,134
* Alaska Native Village Statistical Area	Chistochina CDP*	58
Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section.	Chitina CDP*	82
	Copper Center CDP*	538
	Tazlina*	283
	Copporville CDP	187
	Gakona*	90
	Gakona CDP	23
	Glennallen CDP	491
	Gulkana CDP*	100
	Kenny Lake CDP	498
	McCarthy CDP	33
	Mendeltna CDP	64
	Mentasta Lake CDP*	108
	Paxson CDP	27
	Slana CDP*	61
	Tonsina CDP	45
	Remainder of Copper River Subarea	236
	Chisana	14

ulation the broadest range of services. Restaurants, retail establishments and lodging places have located along the highway. This commercial strip serves as the economic center of the Copper River region. Glennallen is also headquarters of the Copper River School District, the largest single employer in the region. Among the largest employers of the area are several Alaska Native corporations.(See Table 2.)

Copper Center, a traditional Athabaskan settlement and an economic center during the gold rush, lies a few miles south of the intersection on the west bank of the Copper River. Although about equal in size, its slightly off-road location may be the reason why economic activity has shifted to Glennallen.

Private sector employment gains ground

The public sector is the dominant employer in the region, employing over 30 percent of the work force. However, in 1991, more wage and salary workers were on the public sector payrolls than in 1995. (See Table 3.) For the past four years, the private sector, growing on average 6.4% per year, has fueled job growth.

Most of the growth has occurred in the trade and service sectors, particularly within the visitor industry. Tourism has been a basic sector industry for many years. Tourist traffic passes through the area en route to other popular Alaska vacation spots, such as the Denali National Park, Valdez or Anchorage. In recent years, an increasing number of visitors has selected the Copper River region as a vacation and recreational destination.

The number of visitors to the Wrangell Saint Elias National Park has more than doubled in the past 10 years. (See Figure 1.) As the largest national park in the United States, it includes nine peaks over 14,000 feet and the largest group of North American glaciers. The Malaspina Glacier is larger than the state of Rhode Island. This park has opened business opportunities for area residents.

The manufacturing industry, too, has be-

**The Largest Employers during 1995
in the Copper River Region**

Rank	Employer	Annual Avg. Employment
1	Copper River School District	123
2	Copper River Native Association	61
3	National Park Service	39
4	Copper Valley Electric Association	26
5	Ahtna Construction & Primary Products Corp.	24
6	Crossroad Medical Center	22
6	Alaska Department of Transportation	22
7	Send International of Alaska	17
8	Ahtna Inc.	16
9	Mentasta Lake Village Traditional Council	15
9	Service Oil & Gas Inc.	15
9	Copper River Basin Regional Housing	15
10	American Village of Alaska Inc.	14
10	Mt. Sanford Tribal Consortium	14

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section.

**Copper River Wage and Salary Employment
1991-1995**

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Total	772	796	789	802	896
Private Sector Employment	483	502	507	532	620
Agric., Forest. & Fish.	0	0	2	5	6
Construction	41	27	32	32	30
Manufacturing	0	0	0	1	30
Trans., Comm., & Util.	53	50	50	58	61
Trade	118	135	119	138	160
Wholesale	27	26	25	28	30
Retail	91	109	94	110	130
Finance, Ins., & Real Estate	56	54	42	38	44
Services	213	222	254	252	278
Miscellaneous	2	10	1	1	2
Government	289	290	278	267	273
Federal	54	59	59	58	61
State	86	92	91	91	89
Local	149	139	128	118	123

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

Source: Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section.

Figure • 1

Visitors to the Wrangell Saint Elias National Park

* Estimate
Source: Department of Interior, National Park Service.

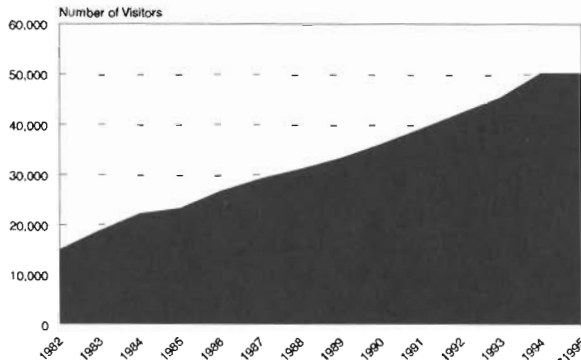
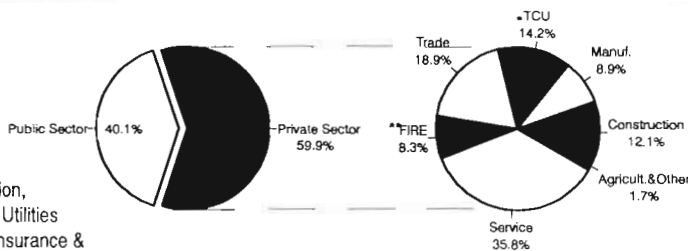


Figure • 2

Where Copper River Residents Earned Their Paychecks in 1995

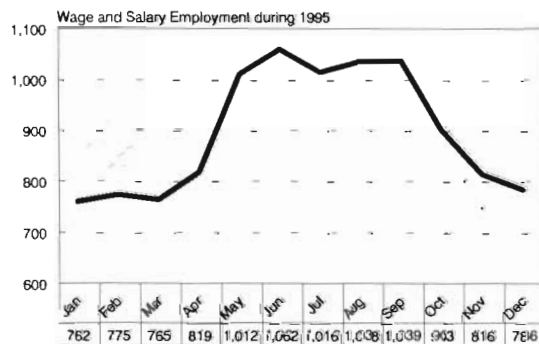


*TCU= Transportation, Communications & Utilities
**FIRE= Finance, Insurance & Real Estate
Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section.

Figure • 3

Employment Leaps During the Tourist Season

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section.



come a new provider of jobs. Logging companies, harvesting on native-owned land around Chitina, created jobs in 1995 and contributed 8.9% of the total private sector employee earnings. These jobs have added diversity to the regional employment picture. (See Figure 2.)

Entrepreneurial opportunities arise with tourism

Self-employment has played an important role in the Copper River region. The 1990 U.S. Census indicated that the proportion of self-employed workers was higher than the statewide average. Then, 11% of the resident labor force derived its income from self-employment. (See Table 4.) With the development of tourism, this proportion may have become larger. Cottage industries, from bed and breakfasts to river-guiding businesses, have emerged in recent years. This coincides with the growing number of visitors to the Wrangell Saint Elias National Park.

Entrepreneurial activity can be observed best in McCarthy, a town of 33 residents. During the summer months, they provide a full range of services to visitors attracted to the Kennecott Mine. Visitors fly to this remote location, or travel 60 miles on the old roadbed of the Copper River-Northwestern Railway. The Kennecott Mine produced \$200 million worth of copper ore when it operated between 1911 and 1938. The mine and its ghost town have become historical landmarks.

More visitors require more services

Although the Copper River region has abundant attractions for visitors, it has its limitations. Future expansion of the visitor industry will require infrastructure investment. Only two roads, the Nabesna and McCarthy roads, neither suited for high-volume traffic, provide access to the Wrangell Saint Elias National Park. Larger scale tourism will depend on investments in hotels and other facilities to accommodate an increasing number of visitors.

Subsistence economies are important

Limited year-around job opportunities and lower average payroll earnings combined with high food prices explain why subsistence economies play an important role in the lives of Copper River residents. In September of 1996, food costs for a family of four in the region were about 32 percent higher than those in Anchorage. Fishing and hunting activities stretch the Copper River region's food dollars.

A large portion of the Copper River workforce relies on income earned during the short tourist season. For example, in 1995 the workforce grew by about 28 percent between the "off" season and the tourist season. (See Figure 3.) Regional unemployment rates also accentuate the seasonality of job markets.

Annual average wage and salary earnings reflect this seasonality, as well as the visitor industry's pay scales. In 1995, average annual payroll earnings in the Copper River region were \$26,305 - almost 19 percent below the statewide average. (See Table 4.)

Although seasonal employment has helped put residents on local payrolls, employment opportunities have remained scarce in the Copper River region. In 1990, the U.S. Census found that about 63 percent of persons over 16 years of age were part of the workforce compared to the statewide participation rate of about 75 percent. The regional poverty rate, showing a higher percentage than the statewide average, also reflects the lack of economic opportunities. (See Table 4.) Therefore, subsistence activities not only describe traditions or lifestyles but also are an important income supplement for the people of the Copper River region.

A summary

A place of incredible beauty and dramatic Alaskan history, the Copper River region has yet to become an important visitor destination. The seasonality of employment and the subsistence lifestyle will continue. The visitor industry, creating payroll jobs and stimulating self-employment, has opened windows of opportunity for the Copper River region's people.

T a b l e • 4

A Statistical Snapshot of the Copper River SubCensus Area

	Alaska	Copper River Region
Land area (square miles)	570,374	24,663
Population Statistics:		
Population 1996	607,800	3,134
Population growth since the 1990 census	10.5%	13.4%
Demographics From the 1990 Census:		
White	76.5%	80.0%
American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut	15.6%	19.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.7%	0.3%
Black	4.2%	0.3%
Other Races	1.2%	0.0%
Hispanic	3.2%	1.7%
Median Age	30.0	34.3
1995 Average Annual Wage and Salary Income		
	\$32,288	\$26,305
Median Household Income	\$41,408	\$26,989
Less than \$ 5,000	3.5%	6.4%
\$5,000 to \$9,000	4.8%	11.5%
\$10,000 to \$14,999	6.4%	12.8%
\$15,000 to \$24,999	13.3%	15.9%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	13.6%	15.2%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	18.5%	13.6%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	23.1%	12.1%
\$75,000 to \$99,000	10.9%	7.9%
\$100,000 plus	7.7%	4.6%
All persons below poverty level	9.0%	16.2%
Housing		
Occupied	81.2%	48.4%
Vacant Housing Units	18.8%	51.6%
Vacant for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use	38.7%	60.7%
Labor Force		
Persons 16 years and over in labor force	74.7%	62.6%
Unemployed	8.8%	22.5%
Self-Employed	6.8%	11.0%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section.