

How a Gold Rush in Nome Created a Waterfowl Refuge in Fairbanks
A Truly Alaskan Tale

Imagine, you're a young, newlywed couple living down in Washington at the turn of the last century. You hear about this gold struck way up in Nome, Alaska, a small town once inhabited by Eskimos and, later, Russians.

So you are enterprising, hard-working, and want to get in on the action. But, rather than packing up a pick ax and gold pan, you decide to try to profit by providing the miners with more necessary supplies like, say, milk.

Now, just think about the things we complain about today when we travel: delayed flights, long TSA lines, baggage restrictions. And now I want you to think about what Charles and Belle Hinckley might have to complain about as they traveled from Seattle, Washington to Nome, Alaska..

..by boat

..in the year 1900

..and travel time was counted in weeks, not hours

..and their fellow passengers were crazed prospectors with dollar signs in their eyes,

..and a few of the Hinckleys' newly-purchased Holstein cows

A couple of years later, Belle's younger sister Anna joined them in Nome. Eventually, as the gold played out in Nome, there was word of a new strike, in faraway Fairbanks. So what did they do? Loaded up themselves, 3 cows, a horse and some supplies, and embarked on a 27-day journey to the Alaskan interior—across Norton Sound, then up the mighty Yukon and finally up the Tanana River. They sold milk along the way to pay for their passage.

I don't know about you, but I don't think I know many people today with the perseverance to endure either of those trips! Personally, I think I might have returned to Washington after a couple years in Nome.

Hinckleys eventually DID return to Washington, after selling the farm to sister Anna, and her new husband, in 1928. Her husband's name? Charlie *Creamer*.

Over time, the Creamers bought out some smaller dairies, doubled the size of the original barn, cleared more acreage for planting oat hay, and eventually constructed the largest of the two Iowa-type barns still standing today. The larger one was modified from its original design in order to have a loft large enough to hold 165 tons of hay, enough to get 55 cows through the winter. That's 3 tons of hay, per cow, to sustain its existence inside that barn from October til May. Admittedly, a pretty crappy life for a cow.

Once the new, big barn was complete, the Creamers threw a party for the whole town. EXCERPT FROM LOCAL NEWSPAPER ARTICLE 8/22/38:

Young and old, nearly everyone in Fairbanks attended. It is estimated that at least 1,000 people were at the barn during the evening. The cars parked around the building were as thick as at university football games Outside.

Free transportation was afforded many to the dance in a big wagon drawn by four of the big Percheron horses used on the farm. Others came in taxis, buses and private cars. Just before wind-up

of the dance, ice cream cones were served to everyone present who were not too busy dancing. Yes, the whole affair was nothing short of colossal.

The dairy operation continued to grow, ultimately employing between 12-16 people at a time, producing roughly 300 gallons of fresh milk and dairy products daily, as well as 500 gallons of ice cream. There were delivery trucks, selling to residents, businesses, the military, and miners in outlying areas. In the winter, wood stoves were installed in the trucks and wagons in order to keep the milk from freezing. Thanks to the military contracts, Creamer's became "**Alaska's Largest, Most Modern Individually-Operated Dairy Farm,**" and the "**Northernmost Dairy in the World.**" Another perk for area residents was the birds—the annual migration of waterfowl, drawn to the area by the grain in the dairy fields.

World War II was a double-edged sword for the Creamers. On the one hand, the federal government had deemed the dairy an "essential industry" thereby deferring the employees from the draft, protecting the equipment from appropriation and, most importantly, creating military contracts to provide milk and ice cream to Ladd Field, the local Army Air Corps base which is now Fort Wainwright.

However, the downside of this new wartime was expanded air and road transportation to Alaska, allowing freight movement of things like perishable food, which would eventually compete with local products. Add to that Alaska statehood in 1959, which created an oversight body of health inspectors (which found the dairies practices inadequate), the increasing debt held by the family and, ultimately, Anna's death in 1965. The Creamers realized that it was time to close the doors.

What would become of the dairy buildings and the surrounding acreage?

Charlie Creamer envisioned a sanctuary for the visiting waterfowl, but it didn't come easily. The citizens of Fairbanks rallied in 1967; they raised the necessary funds to purchase the land, but the farm buildings and twelve surrounding acres on College Road were sold to a local investment group, who had real estate development in mind. Eventually, in 1982, all the buildings were purchased bringing the entire farm under state protection. And that is how a gold strike in Nome created a 2,200-acre* waterfowl refuge in Fairbanks, Alaska!