

# Three very different ghost towns

## The reasons towns end is a longer list than why they form

By SARA WHITNEY

**W**hen profiling any place in Alaska, the first question we ask is what drew people there in the first place, and then, why they stayed. The answer is typically tied to resources — rich hunting or fishing grounds, for example — augmented by cultural ties.

The flip side of that question, which has a longer list of answers, is why people settled but did *not* stay.

Alaska has more than 100 abandoned communities — from small encampments to towns that were once home to thousands — now devoid of physical evidence they ever existed or left as a collection of weathered buildings or ruins.

Settlements have always come and gone, a cycle

that continues today. Multiple villages on the coasts and riverbanks face devastating effects from climate change, with some flooding or sinking because of permafrost thawing or erosion. For example, Newtok, about 100 miles northwest of Bethel, is in the midst of a long-planned and costly move to a new village, Mertarvik. ([See the December 2020 issue of Trends.](#))

While climate change and a global rural-to-urban migration trend are the modern pressures, most communities that disappeared over the past 150 years in Alaska succumbed to economic changes, forced relocations, war, natural disasters, accidents, environmental shifts, or disease.

After a closer look at these causes, this article will detail the lifespans of three vacated historical Alaska towns that ended for very different reasons: Curry, York, and Portlock.



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section



## Ghost Town: CURRY

At left, this railroad waiting area is one of the few structures left in Curry. Since this picture was taken in 2009, snow has caved in part of the roof. (Photo by Flickr user [McGeez](#) under [Creative Commons](#))

Below left, President Warren G. Harding and his entourage arrive at the Alaska Railroad depot in front of the Curry Hotel, where he stayed overnight on his way to drive in the golden railroad spike in 1923. Hotel staff members greet the party. Below right, a locomotive passes Curry train station buildings sometime between 1913 and 1939. (Alaska State Library, Margaret Bone Wilcox and Skinner Foundation Collections, P70-33 and P44-04-267)



## The reasons towns disappeared

Starting in 1880, many villages disappeared with the appearance of whalers, miners, and trappers. Newcomers introduced a cash economy to the indigenous populations, and trading centers became more permanent settlements, pulling in residents from other communities. Similarly, some villages dwindled as residents moved to where schools were.

Others were forced out, such as the Unangan who were pulled from their Aleutian and Pribilof Islands villages — such as Attu, Biorka, Kashaga, and Makushin — during World War II and relocated to internment camps in Southeast or imprisoned by the Japanese, then prohibited to return to their villages when the war ended.

Similarly, on King Island/Ukivok in the Bering Sea, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs closed the school in the middle of the century and forcibly relocated the students to boarding schools on the mainland, leaving the elders and parents to gather food for themselves, something they had relied on the children to help accomplish. Some villagers left to fight in World War

II and those who remained battled tuberculosis. By 1970, the rest of the adults had left the island out of necessity, no longer able to make ends meet.

Some ghost towns were mining centers, or railroad depots that served them, withering as resources dwindled or golden opportunities popped up elsewhere. These included Chatanika near Fairbanks; Amalga and Treadwell near Juneau; the Kennicott Ghost Town; the copper mining town Sulzer on Prince of Wales Island; and the luxury railroad stop Curry, whose story the next section will tell.

Some villages were abandoned slowly because of erosion or other environmental hazards, or quickly after a disaster. Often, they relocated mere miles away. Examples of villages that moved include Mumtrak (which became Goodnews Bay) and Old Minto, both abandoned after continual flooding. Hoonah's residents originally lived in Glacier Bay, but the advancing glaciers pushed them out.

Chenega's original location in Prince William Sound was leveled by a tsunami after the 1964 Good Friday earthquake in Southcentral, and Portage, on Turnagain Arm near Anchorage, sank into the

ground after the quake.

Other disasters include the large fire that crippled the short-lived Flat City (formerly Otter) in the Interior in 1924; the Palm Sunday Avalanche of 1898 that killed 70 people in Dyea, eventually causing the town to fade as it lost its access edge to adjacent places such as Skagway; and the 1788 earthquake and subsequent tidal wave that destroyed the community at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island.



## Ghost Town: CURRY

*At left, children attend the Curry school around 1948. Above, the one-room schoolhouse in Curry, which was built in 1936 and had 11 students in the 1950 Census.*

*(Alaska State Library, Records of Alaska Schools 1931-1951 Manuscript Collection, MS146-03-11-1)*

The eruption of Mount Katmai on the Alaska Peninsula in 1912 leveled the town of Katmai and delivered another blow to the beleaguered Afognak, just north of Kodiak Island, which it blanketed in three feet of ash.

Afognak had already weathered a series of tragedies. Many villagers died when Russians arrived from smallpox, mistreatment, and accidents while hunting otters for the Russians. Eventually, the town was hit by a tsunami after the 1964 quake. All but 11 of the remaining residents moved at the end of that year to a new community on the northeastern coast of Kodiak Island called Port Lions, in honor of the Lions Club, which helped build it. The last 11 people stayed in Afognak until 1980.

Some villages were wiped out by disease, such as those hit by the Spanish Flu of 1918. These include York (which this article will also profile in greater detail) and Pilgrim Hot Springs, where an orphanage was established to house children who survived the flu in other villages, then closed after the children grew up. The villages north of Nome were devastated by that epidemic; for example, 72 of 80 Brevig Mission residents died. The vast majority of influenza casualties in Alaska were Alaska Natives.

Finally, a few ended for more complicated or mysterious reasons, such as Portlock on the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula, the third ghost town whose story we will tell.

When looking at these defunct communities, the circumstances of their abandonment tend to dominate the limited information available. What's harder to pinpoint but often germane to the story of loss is who lived in those towns, and the type of work that brought them there and sustained them.

## CURRY was a short-lived, luxury railroad stop abandoned in 1957

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### **Reason:** Series of fires and explosions, and economic advancements in nearby places

Curry was a relatively short-lived but showy stop along the Alaska Railroad, 22 miles north of Talkeetna. For a brief time, it was not just a convenient halfway point between Seward and Fairbanks on a two-day trip but a luxury resort with a hotel, a school, a golf course, a ski area, and a massive suspension bridge that transported visitors to an ideal spot to view Mt. McKinley, now called Denali.

Named for Congressman Charles F. Curry of California, chairman of the Committee on Territories and a staunch advocate for the railroad, Curry hosted President Warren G. Harding in 1923. Harding stayed at the Curry Hotel on his way to drive in the golden spike at Nenana to mark the completion of the railroad.

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# Curry's workers in 1949 and what their wages would be worth today

Reported occupation	Employer	1949 wage	In 2024 dollars
<b>Median wage in Curry</b>		<b>\$3,500</b>	<b>\$46,320</b>
Armed Forces	Armed Forces	unk	-
Armed Forces	Armed Forces	unk	-
Armed Forces	Armed Forces	unk	-
B and B Foreman	Railroad	unk	-
Boiler Maker	Railroad	unk	-
Boiler Maker Helper	Railroad	\$1,800	\$23,822
Brakeman	Railroad	\$7,400	\$97,935
Brakeman	Railroad	\$6,900	\$91,317
Brakeman	Railroad	\$8,700	\$115,139
Brakeman	Railroad	\$8,000	\$105,875
Brakeman	Railroad	\$6,900	\$91,317
Bulldozer Operator	Railroad	\$4,800	\$63,526
Car Inspector	Railroad	\$5,000	\$66,172
Car Operating Mechanic	Railroad	\$300	\$3,970
Carpenter	Railroad	\$4,000	\$52,938
Chainman	Railroad	unk	-
Clerical Work	Railroad	\$1,100	\$14,558
Clerk in Luggage Car	Railroad	\$1,200	\$15,881
Conductor	Railroad	\$6,000	\$79,406
Conductor	Railroad	unk	-
Conductor	Railroad	unk	-
Conductor	Railroad	\$7,000	\$92,641
Conductor	Railroad	\$7,300	\$96,612
Conductor	Railroad	\$9,000	\$119,110
Conductor	Railroad	\$8,000	\$105,875
Cook	RR Hotel	\$3,000	\$39,703
Cook	RR Hotel	\$5,000	\$66,172
Cook	Railroad	unk	-
Cook	Railroad	\$1,300	\$17,205
Cook	Railroad	unk	-
Cook	Railroad	unk	-
Cook and Baker	RR Hotel	\$4,100	\$54,261
Crane Operator	Railroad	unk	-
Desk Clerk	Railroad	\$1,000	\$13,234
Desk Clerk	RR Hotel	unk	-
Dishwasher	RR Hotel	\$2,100	\$27,792
Dishwasher	Railroad	unk	-
Dishwasher	Railroad	unk	-
Electrician	Railroad	unk	-
Elementary Teacher	School	\$3,000	\$39,703
Engineer	Railroad	\$4,000	\$52,938
Foreman	Railroad	\$2,000	\$26,469
Freight Car Carman	Railroad	\$3,700	\$48,967
Fur Trapper	Fur Trapping	unk	-
Fur Trapper	Fur Trapping	unk	-
Fur Trapper	Fur Trapping	unk	-
Fur Trapper	Fur Trapping	unk	-
Fur Trapper	Fur Trapping	unk	-
Fur Trapper	Fur Trapping	unk	-
Helper at Round House	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Hotel Clerk	RR Hotel	\$3,800	\$50,291
Hotel Desk Clerk	Railroad	unk	-
Hotel Helper	Railroad	unk	-
Hotel Janitor	Railroad	\$3,500	\$46,320
Hotel Manager	RR Hotel	unk	-
House Mother	RR Hotel	unk	-
Janitor On The Train	Railroad	\$2,900	\$38,380
Laborer	Railroad	\$2,400	\$31,763
Laborer	Railroad	\$4,600	\$60,828
Laborer	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Laborer	Railroad	\$1,900	\$25,145
Laborer	Railroad	\$4,800	\$63,526
Laborer	Common Work	unk	-
Laundry Man	Railroad	\$3,500	\$46,320
Laundry Man	Railroad	\$3,500	\$46,320
Lineman	Railroad	\$700	\$9,264
Locomotive Engineer	Railroad	\$7,000	\$92,641

Reported occupation	Employer	1949 wage	In 2024 dollars
Locomotive Engineer	Railroad	\$6,000	\$79,406
Locomotive Engineer	Railroad	\$6,000	\$79,406
Locomotive Engineer	Railroad	\$8,700	\$115,139
Locomotive Fireman	Railroad	\$7,000	\$92,641
Locomotive Fireman	Railroad	\$6,000	\$79,406
Locomotive Fireman	Railroad	\$6,400	\$84,700
Locomotive Foreman	Railroad	\$4,000	\$52,938
Locomotive Machinist	Railroad	\$4,600	\$60,828
Locomotive Mechanic	Railroad	\$1,000	\$13,234
Machinist	Railroad	\$2,700	\$35,733
Maid	Railroad	unk	-
Maid	Railroad	unk	-
Mechanic Helper	Railroad	unk	-
Mechanic Helper	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Night Railroad Foreman	Railroad	\$5,000	\$66,172
Nurse	Railroad	\$600	\$7,941
Painter	Railroad	unk	-
Passenger Car Inspector	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Pipe Fitter	Railroad	\$4,700	\$62,202
Placer Miner	Gold Mining	unk	-
Plumber	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Plumber	Railroad	\$2,000	\$26,469
Plumber	Railroad	\$4,900	\$64,849
Plumber	Railroad	\$4,800	\$63,526
Plumbing	Railroad	\$4,700	\$62,202
Post Mistress	Railroad	unk	-
Power Plant Engineer	Railroad	\$4,500	\$59,555
Power Plant Fireman	Railroad	\$1,000	\$13,234
Power Plant Fireman	Railroad	unk	-
Power Plant Foreman	Railroad	unk	-
Press Operator Foreman	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Radio Technician	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Railroad Telegraph Operator	Railroad	\$3,200	\$42,350
Road Gang Blaster	Railroad	\$4,500	\$59,555
Roadmaster	Railroad	\$6,900	\$91,317
Roadmaster	Railroad	\$5,300	\$70,142
Rodman	Railroad	unk	-
Rodman	Railroad	\$4,000	\$52,938
Section Foreman	Railroad	unk	-
Section Foreman	Railroad	\$4,100	\$54,261
Section Foreman	Railroad	\$6,000	\$79,406
Section Foreman	Railroad	\$6,000	\$79,406
Section Foreman	Railroad	\$1,000	\$13,234
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,500	\$46,320
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,800	\$50,291
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Section Hand	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Section Laborer	Railroad	\$2,500	\$33,086
Station Agent	Railroad	unk	-
Station Fireman	Railroad	\$2,500	\$33,086
Station Fireman	Railroad	\$2,700	\$35,733
Stationary Fireman	Railroad	\$1,700	\$22,498
Telegraph Operator	Railroad	unk	-
Telegraph Operator	RR Hotel	\$6,000	\$79,406
Telegrapher Clerk	RR Hotel	\$2,800	\$37,056
Telephone Line Repairman	Railroad	unk	-
Truck Driver	Railroad	\$1,800	\$23,822
Waitress	Railroad	\$600	\$7,941
Waitress	Railroad	\$2,300	\$30,439
Waitress	RR Hotel	\$1,800	\$23,822
Waitress	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Waitress	RR Hotel	\$5,000	\$66,172
Waitress	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Waitress	Railroad	\$3,000	\$39,703
Waitress	RR Hotel	\$300	\$3,970
Work In Laundry At Hotel	Railroad	\$2,400	\$31,763

**Notes:** Some respondents with entries marked unknown indicated they received income from sources other than a wage or salary job.  
**Sources:** U.S. Census Bureau, Census Schedules, 1949 for the 1950 Census; and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

The hotel, advertised as a “wilderness palace,” billed itself as a place where “accommodations are modern, inviting, and comfortable and the cuisine [is] of the highest order.” By 1925, Curry’s popularity was set.

Starting in 1926, though, a series of accidents set the town back, leading to its abandonment just a few decades later.

## A timeline of Curry's misfortunes

- **1926:** Coal dust comes into contact with an overheated stack, sparking a fire that destroys the engine house and power plant and damages a snowplow and locomotive.
- **1933:** The rebuilt engine house and an older locomotive are destroyed by another fire.
- **1939:** A hotel bigger than Curry's is built in Denali National Park, drawing visitors away from Curry. However, the Alaska Railroad kept investing in the town, which included housing its employees there starting in 1945.
- **1945:** A boiler explosion destroys the power plant again after a hand-fired steam boiler ignites because of its low water level. The town rebuilds and adds a ski area.
- **1957:** The 75-room Curry Hotel catches fire and burns to the ground, killing three. At the time, the Railroad Reporter wrote, “All that remained of the historic structure were smoldering ashes, two tall chimneys, and a tangle of pipes.”

Citing safety issues, the railroad decided to raze what was left, leaving Curry a ghost town. With no roads in or out, Curry is still viewable from the railroad tracks, but all that remains are a large meadow, a crumbling waiting area for the train, and a few interpretive sign boards.

For more than 50 years, the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage has run an all-day ski train to Curry, once a year each March.

## The population and economy of Curry

In 1930, 1940, and 1950, a few years before Curry took its final blow, the decennial census painted a picture of the town’s population and economy. Ninety-one people lived there in 1930, a few years after the first fire. In 1940, after the town’s economic light temporarily dimmed, the population had fallen to 45.

By 1950, Curry’s population had climbed again, reaching 183. That year, the Census found that

## About the data

Population, occupation, and wage details in this article come from handwritten archived U.S. Census Schedules (microdata) from the early 20th century, Alaska Territorial Department of Education records, and other government reports.

Federal documents from that time — Alaska was not yet a state — were of varying quality, with inconsistent categories and missing or indecipherable entries or codes. These numbers should be taken as a general snapshot of these places and a supplement to their other documented history.

nearly all of the permanent residents were working for the then-federally-owned Alaska Railroad, hotel, or both. Nearly all were white lodgers.

While a handful of the entries weren't legible, the Census recorded the occupations and reported earnings shown in the table on the previous page. Those not employed by the hotel or railroad were five fur trappers, one gold miner, and one laborer doing “common work.” Some who didn't list their wages drew income from elsewhere.

Curry workers made a median wage of \$3,500, which would be worth about \$45,550 today and was high for that time. Nationally, the median wage in 1949 was just \$2,016, or \$26,681 when adjusted for inflation.

## YORK didn't meet mining hopes, was devastated by 1918 flu

**Reason:** The entire population died during the Spanish influenza epidemic

York sprang up in 1899 with the discovery that the area was rich in tin deposits. The mining town was established at the mouth of the Anikovik River at Cape York on the Seward Peninsula, 15 miles south of the village of Wales.

Like Wales, Cape York was named after British royalty, but the area was home to Inupiat who had lived in the region for millennia and already populated the surrounding villages.

## Established with big plans for tin mining

In 1900, the U.S. Census counted 25 residents in



## Ghost Town: YORK

*This photo was taken sometime between 1903 and 1913 and is labeled "Cape York, Alaska, where tin mines were first discovered." Eight people pose for a photo with their dog teams in front of a wooden building on the tundra. Logs stand leaning together at left and in front of the door.*

*(Photo by Frank H. Nowell, Alaska State Library Historical Collection, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Perry D. Palmer Photograph Album)*

York, including transient white mine workers and some Inupiat, although it's unclear whether the Native population lived in York proper or an outlying area. The jobs listed in the town at that time were farmer, miner, railroad conductor, cook, bookkeeper, maid, salesman, physician, telegrapher, and blacksmith. Nearly all said they worked just three months of the year.

The Native respondents were recorded as deer hunters, sealers, or domestics.

The town boomed that first census year, then grew more in 1901 when the post office opened. It continued growing in 1902 — but the post office closed abruptly later that year, for reasons not specified.

While stream tin was discovered in the area in 1901 and some gold placer mining took place as well, the town itself failed to reach expectations for tin production despite the broader region eventually becoming the No. 1 domestic supplier of tin in the United States, as noted by the U.S. Geological

Survey in 1922. York also proved relatively difficult to access and equip.

### Influenza burns through the peninsula

There's a big gap in what we know about York between 1902 and 1918 when influenza struck. The Census was inexplicably absent in 1910, and while it's clear that the entire town died in 1918 when the Spanish flu arrived, it's unclear how many people had been living there at the time and who they were. Unlike the other villages in the area, York's death count was reported only as a percentage: 100.

### *IN THE SMALL VILLAGE OF YORK, ALL ARE DEAD*

*"At Igloo there have been 45 deaths, and at Teller Mission 60 Natives have died. In a small village at York, everyone has died. Grave fears are felt for Cape Prince of Wales and the most Western settlement on the mainland. Three dog teams have been sent for relief at Cape Prince of Wales."*

**Alaska Daily Empire, Dec. 7, 1918**

According to the Nome Nugget, the pandemic called The Purple Death burned out on the Seward Peninsula, but not before the villages north of Nome "suffered terribly."

A boy from York reportedly died from the flu and his body was transported to Wales for burial — the implication being the boy's body spread the disease to Wales, where it then exploded "without warning."



## Ghost Town: PORTLOCK

*This photo at left, year unknown, provides an aerial view of Portlock and the salmon cannery. (Photo from the Alaska State Library Historical Collection)*

*Below, few structures remain in Portlock today. (From "In Search Of The Port Chatham Hairy Man," Extreme Expeditions Northwest, LLC, 2018, under 17 U.S. Code 107)*



Within a few days, everyone in Wales was infected. Back in York, the boy's father fell sick quickly, and "every last person in York perished."

According to the Alaska Department of Health, the Nome Census Area was hit hardest in the state by far, with 63.7 percent of its population dying from the 1918 flu as most county-equivalents in Alaska reported death rates in the single digits. Death rates in villages close to York were as high as 90 percent, but only in York did all residents perish.

### A handful of outsiders resettled in York a few years later, but it was short-lived

In 1920, the Census returned to York and reported a population of six white residents, mainly Danish: a family of four and a married couple. The two men were a mine superintendent and a miner, and one of the women was a housekeeper in a boarding house.

Just two years later, the U.S. Geological Survey, in a lengthy report on the area's mineral prospects, reported the only permanent York residents were a single white family of three. Surveyors also noted approximately 500 Natives lived in nearby Wales and Teller as well as one white U.S. Bureau of Education employee and a missionary, and summer typically brought in an additional 15 transient miners and winter about 50 or 60.

Mining (tin and gold) were the main industries listed as well as reindeer herding and fishing. The regional Inupiat population owned some reindeer and fished for salmon and white whales as well as herring in inland waters and hunted in the winter for walrus, seal, and polar bear, "but the takings at York [were] small compared to other parts of the peninsula."

USGS's report didn't mention the disease that killed

the entire settlement just four years earlier, but it did hint at why York's economy never took off as expected, noting how difficult access was, even relative to the other area communities, and how sparse resources were.

"The fuel problem of the area is a serious one," the report said. Coal delivered in 1918 cost \$50 or more per ton — \$1,115 in 2024 dollars — and was imported mainly from Seattle, nearly 3,000 nautical miles away.

Winters were severe, with heavy snow and temperatures of -50 degrees. At the time, a storm had taken out the only telephone line in York. Further, "land animals were once plentiful in the area but have been greatly reduced in recent years," the report said. Most streams were stocked with trout and grayling but contained little vegetation. Geological survey parties had to carry their own horse feed and oil.

The open season was June through September, with one steamship from Seattle providing regular service to Seward Peninsula ports, albeit erratically, so communication between York and Nome, about 100 miles to the southeast, was only by occasional freighter and small coastwise gas schooners. One schooner provided mail service once every two weeks and transported passengers and freight — weather permitting.

It's unclear when the last three people left, but York never again appeared in the Census.

### PORTLOCK was a mostly Alutiiq cannery town deserted in 1949

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#### Reason: It's complicated

There's no question that Portlock was a cannery

town on the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula, established in the early 20th century, and that it was deserted in 1949 except for the postmaster, who left the following year.

From there, though, Portlock's story is largely unrecorded by official sources and the stories behind its demise vary, even among family members. The lore has also grown with time.

The Sugpiaq people, later called Alutiiq, had lived in the area for thousands of years, but the town was named for Captain Nathaniel Portlock of the British Royal Navy, who landed at the site, also called Port Chatham, in the 1780s.

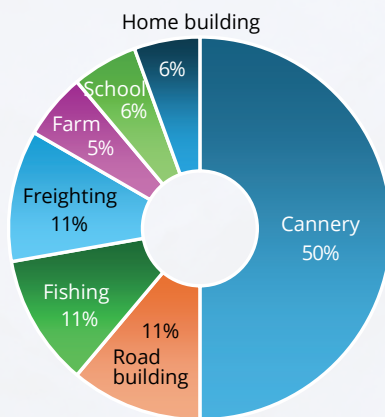
A salmon cannery opened around 1900, and according to the book "Ghost Towns of Alaska" by Mary G. Balcom, a group of halibut fishermen later built a cooperative cold storage there, doing most of their fishing on the Portlock bank. Portlock also had a chromite mine at some point, until chrome prices dropped. In 1921, the post office opened, an official milestone for the town.

All of that might sound like many Alaska communities during that time, but what ended up defining Portlock for the next century was the tale of a large, hairy half-man that stalked the villagers until they fled, some say overnight.

### Whatever the truth was, the fear was real

While colloquially dubbed Bigfoot by some, Portlock residents called the creature "Nantiinaq," which means "giant hairy thing" or "half man, half beast."

## The types of work people in Portlock did in 1939



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census Schedules, September 1939 for the 1940 Census

## Depression-era jobs and wages in Portlock, and today's equivalents

Reported occupation	1939 wage	In 2024 dollars
Teacher, Territorial School	\$1,450	\$32,119
Boatmen, Salmon Tender (2)	\$1,000	\$22,151
Laborers, Cannery (2)	\$900	\$19,936
Foreman, Road Building	\$800	\$17,721
Carpenters, Cannery (2)	\$700	\$15,506
Laborer, Road Building	\$600	\$13,291
Deckhand, Salmon Tender	\$500	\$11,076
Filler, Cannery	\$130	\$2,880
Fish Slimers (3)	\$100-\$190	\$2,215-\$4,209
Carpenter, Home Building	\$100	\$2,215

The following reported they made no wages but received income from other sources: Fishermen (2); Mariner, Freighting; Fox Farmer; Operator, Cannery; Helper, Cannery

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census Schedules, September 1939 for the 1940 Census; and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Some believed he had originally been just an antisocial man who hid in the woods and became bigger and hairier with time. You could smell him coming before you could see him, they said, and he was most dangerous in the fog, so they were taught not to hunt when it rolled in.

A retired school teacher who taught in Portlock during World War II told an Anchorage newspaper in 1973 that cannery workers had gone into the mountains to hunt Dall sheep and bear but never returned. Rumors spread of a mangled body washing up on shore and dozens going missing over 20 years, but there's no official record of any missing people from Portlock and only one such recorded death.

In 1931, logger Andrew Kamluck was killed in the forest by a large piece of equipment. (The 1940 Census confirms a family of four named Kamluck was still living there nine years later.) His death was recorded as an accident, but many insisted no human could have lifted and swung the equipment that struck him in the back of the head.

While residents disagreed on the details and Nantiinaq's nature — some said he wasn't malevolent, he just wanted to be left alone — they agreed that Nantiinaq was real.

The fear was definitely real. In 1905, according to Alaska Magazine, the cannery closed for the season, reporting a disturbance in the woods. Something was "bothering" the camp, and workers refused to return. But the cannery did reopen the next season.

By 1949, residents felt driven further and further from the woods, and all remaining families left,



mostly moving to Nanwalek, about a three-hour small boat ride up the peninsula. Whether they left over weeks or overnight, as the story goes, the exodus was fast, leaving only the postmaster. After a year alone, he closed the post office in 1950 and was the last-ever resident to leave.

Strange phenomena aside, people had other reasons to leave. According to an Anchorage Press interview with an elder whose family left Portlock in 1949, it just wasn't economical to stay anymore, as Nanwalek had more to offer. The article also noted that "the timing coincided with the extension of [the Sterling Highway] to Kenai and eventually Homer, diverting much of the traffic to the road system."

## The site remains a seven-decade curiosity

Just a few dilapidated structures and rusting cannery equipment remain, and while the area has drawn fishermen, "monster hunters," and adventurers over the decades, the former residents never returned.

Many who stopped there over the years also reported Nantiinaq sightings or paranormal phenomena. Others just found it empty and eerie. A couple on a boat trip to Seward stopped there in the early 1970s and told the Anchorage Daily News there was little left, that even the linoleum had been pulled from the floors. The travelers stopped in Nanwalek next and said they were told Portlock was a cannery town where "something was off."

Nanwalek residents, however, kept their distance for decades. Then in December 2021 with the elders' blessing, a team of mostly Portlock descendants returned to the site, which is owned by the Chugach Corporation, to film a reality show for the Discovery Channel. The purpose, the team said, was to investigate the reports of Nantiinaq and make the island safe for descendants to return and, they hoped, eventually resettle Portlock.

Portlock had already been the subject of a 2018 documentary and several books.

## Portlock's population before the exodus

A federal Alaska Territorial Department of Education report recorded Portlock's population as 58 in 1931. The Census didn't arrive until 1940, however, although the town had been established for decades. In February 1940, the Census enumerator for Portlock Village and Elizabeth Island counted:

- 31 people: 10 families living in nine households, seven owned and two rented.

- 20 males and 11 females; 14 were adults.
- 20 Alaska Natives (recorded as "Aleuts") and 11 whites, although people were categorized then by Native and white percentages.

The Census noted that 10 people were employed, six were self-employed, and an additional six were seeking work. Employment status at that time was for "persons 10 and older," but only two of the workers were under age 18.

The 72-year-old school teacher was the highest-paid person in Portlock. See the exhibits on the previous page for what workers did and how much they reported earning that year.

## A well-built, one-room schoolhouse

The Portlock school was built in 1934 for \$4,589, which would cost \$108,583 today.

A territorial schools representative reported in the early 1940s that the school had a capacity for 30-35 students and that it was located on a small hill, 70 feet from the salt water, and was lit with gasoline lamps. It had a good playground, the report said, and drinking water was available from a pipeline or nearby spring.

The report also noted Portlock had a post office, a store, fishing, a cannery, a sawmill, logging, mining prospects, and fur farming that year. The town received one service boat per month but lighterage service was necessary.

The school had 19 students in 1931, even before the schoolhouse was built, a number that began to dwindle in the late 1930s. By 1940 it had 10 students, which dropped to seven by 1943.

## A final ghostly error

After 1940, Portlock fell out of the decennial census; after all, the town had been vacated before the 1950 Census. However, in 1980, Portlock made an erroneous yet somehow fitting cameo appearance.

The long-empty Portlock was reported as a census-designed place (an unincorporated community) with a population of 31 in 1980, noting it had zero people in 1960 and 1970. Portlock fell off again in 1990 and hasn't been seen since.

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