



Willow Winter Carnival is Alaskan Gold

Description

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Mt Foraker, Mt. Hunter, Mt. Denali on the approach to Willow during fall.

I look forward to winter all year long; it's the time Alaskans discover our place in the universe. This winter is my 57th consecutive Alaskan winter and yet I only this year discovered the *Willow Winter Carnival*.

An excellent midwinter event!

Save These Dates!

Feb. 17-19, 2023

& Feb. 24-25, 2023

<https://www.waco-ak.org/committees/carnival/>



Two glorious weekends spent celebrating winter in a community one beautiful hour-long drive from Eagle River/Chugiak. Like many of us here, folks there only go to Anchorage when they have to. These are our neighbor Alaskans who live mostly in rugged natural bliss.

The community of Willow puts on this event to celebrate itself, and some old-timers I talked to have been part of it since the first Winter Carnival in the early 1960s.

The kick-off dinner was Friday, January 25, where a silent auction featured art from local craftspeople, selection of a Carnival King & Queen and a fantastic fireworks display. The place was packed with kids! I stayed that night at Alaska Host B&B owned by Jim and Kathleen Houston. They have been running it 25 years, and hospitality is a lifestyle for them. Jim was also the guy who drove his loader to the community center Saturday morning to clear snow for activities over two weekends, starting with the PTA Pancake Breakfast at the elementary school every carnival day.

It doesn't take new Alaskans too long to find out winter

survival requires some routine to stay ahead of natural

environment challenges.

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As a youth in Alaska, I remember cursing the cold and the short daylight days as my invincible peers and I dressed California Cool. Classes in mountaineering at *Anchorage Community College* taught me how to take preparation for outdoor endeavors seriously. By learning to dress adequately, to have safety equipment at hand around the home and in any vehicles, I was able to adapt to the climate as an Alaskan must.

Getting out into the country breaks the routine. An active winter is easily embellished by the lesser seasons of spring, summer, and fall. Reflecting on where you are at any given moment, under the Big Dipper and North Star, might also cause one to savor my favorite Robert Service poem:



The Spell of the Yukon

By Robert Service

I wanted the gold and I sought it;

I scabbled and mucked like a slave.

Was it famine or scurvy—I fought it;

*I hurled my youth into a grave.
I wanted the gold, and I got it—
Came out with a fortune last fall,—
Yet somehow life's not what I thought it,
And somehow the gold isn't all.
No! There's the land. (Have you seen it?)
It's the cussedest land that I know,
From the big, dizzy mountains that screen it
To the deep, deathlike valleys below.
Some say God was tired when He made it;
Some say it's a fine land to shun;
Maybe; but there's some as would trade it
For no land on earth—and I'm one.*

The Drive to Willow!

Before you descend into Willow Valley, on a clear day you will get a breathtaking view of Alaska's crown jewels: Mt. Foraker, Mt. Hunter and Mt. Denali. I stop every time at the pullout there to take one more photo of something I cannot get enough of—Alaska's glorious landscape.

My father came to Alaska as an amateur photographer and left me thousands of now fading color slides of landscapes all over this state. He took those images during his travels working on the White Alice System. Whenever Dad cranked up the projector and showed them on a screen for visitors in our living room, they were boring to me.

Boring!

Recently I removed most of those slides from the projector carousels for placement into protective sleeves. I recall whenever my father showed them to people Outside you might have thought they were watching fireworks from their spontaneous "oohs" and "ahs!" I now consider these photos are timeless.

*You come to get rich (damned good reason);
You feel like an exile at first;
You hate it like hell for a season,
And then you are worse than the worst.
It grips you like some kind of sinning;
It twists you from foe to a friend;
It seems it's been since the beginning;
It seems it will be to the end.*

*I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow
That's plumb-full of hush to the brim;
I've watched the big, husky sun wallow
In crimson and gold, and grow dim,
Till the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,
And the stars tumbled out, neck and crop;
And I've thought that I surely was dreaming,
With the peace o' the world piled on top.*

Fun!

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Parents need a break from routine and kids need new stimulation in the middle of winter. School programs need funds, and everybody needs an opportunity to see how old and young alike are faring in the cabin fever doldrums after the Christmas holidays.

Activities were invigorating as hundreds of Alaskans participated in this state-sanctioned event. Willow Lake was a perfect venue for the Earl Norris Sled Dog Race, Frostbite 5k Run, Kids Sled Dog Races, and the Ladies 5 mile/5 dog Twilight Sled Dog Race. Bikes with fat tires, snowshoes and cross-country skis were in use everywhere. The last day, February 2, featured Vintage Snow Machines on display and in races including a snow machine poker run.

The first day's *Royal Flush Outhouse Race* was comical.

<https://royalflushseptic.com/>
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Homesteader Games of skill over two days using axes, handsaws, and chainsaws drew crowds on the shores of the lake. The bowling ball return was made of highway guardrails, and MTA featured a Telephone Toss.

Activities were continuous inside the ***Willow Community Center***. Vendors provided a variety of wares for sale, and the main stage focused attention on events ranging from square dance demonstrations, Teeland Middle School Jazz Band and the Pilot Bread Band. A no-hands Ice Cream eating contest capped the last day.

The winter! The brightness that blinds you,

The white land locked tight as a drum.

The cold fear that follows and finds you,

The silence that bludgeons you dumb.

The snows that are older than history,

The woods where the weird shadows slant;

The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,

I've bade 'em good-by—but I can't.

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,

And the rivers all run God knows where;

*There are lives that are erring and aimless,
And deaths that just hang by a hair;
There are hardships that nobody recons;
There are valleys unpeopled and still;
There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back—and I will.*

*There's gold, and it's haunting and haunting;
It's luring me on as of old;
Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting
So much as just finding the gold.
It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder,
It's the forests where silence has lease,
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder,
It's the stillness that fills me with peace.*

The Alaska Capital should have been moved to Willow when We the People voted to move it.

[Alaska's Capital Move Efforts: O Ye, of Little Faith](#)

I have heard enough people who have left Alaska and longed for the opportunity to return here. This poem sums up why I will never leave.

Category

1. Alaska Hope
2. Wonder of the MatSu Valley

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