



December 1 was the date set down to complete the Alaskan Highway. But it opened for traffic well ahead of schedule, and caught us, like everyone else, unprepared. In this article for "The Listener," A.M.R. tells part of the story . . .

About This Alaskan Highway

THIS Alaskan Highway is not the Alaskan Highway. That was a brainchild of E. H. Harriman nearly half a century ago, and consisted of a Super-Trans-Continental Grand Trunk Railway, bridging or tunnelling the 56 miles of Bering Strait, and linking all the rail systems of the world. Neither is this present road The Alaskan Highway as it has been advocated through the intervening years—notably by Donald McDonald and his six husky sons and sons-in-law whom the films showed as in at the death (or should we say, birth?) of this construction. McDonald and his fellow-agitators did not desert Harriman's scheme as fantastic—since, after all, on a global world (as Mr. Willkie might put it), Tokyo is nearer New York on a "Great Circle" passing over the Yukon than it is by any orthodox rail or sail route thither. But McDonald and fellow advocates modified Harriman's enthusiasm to suit a road-minded age, and to overcome prejudice. For already there was a short, cheap, safe, scenic highway to Alaska constructed by Nature—the deep-water "Inland Passage" up the coast of British Columbia, well sheltered (from Pacific storms and from enemy submarines alike), by long chains of over-lapping islands. As late as August, 1940 even the Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, was explaining that any overland route in addition would be "of negligible value," and it was only 13 months ago that he was far enough converted to give the plan a "long-distance low priority."

Enter the General Staffs

But that plan was still not the present road. The orthodox Alaskan Highway was still on March 5 last the line through the bear-infested, spruce-forested trough between the Rockies and the coastal ranges which had carried the first stages of the "New York-London Overland Telegraph" until the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable in 1868 knocked that project on the head. But the joint decision of the United States and Canadian General Staffs on March 6 disregarded all previous literature and all local advice. Not Seattle but Edmonton, Alberta, they chose as southern terminus: one justification that sounds paradoxical to us, being that there was "not enough snow" on any route seaward of the Rockies. That is, they feared the impassable "mush" that warm winds from the Pacific sometimes create. And now events have justified the military mind.

It must indeed be a world's record to have in so few months reconditioned 449 miles of existing disconnected stretches



THE NEW ALASKAN HIGHWAY, a life-line of the United Nations in war, and in peace perhaps a golden gate to success for dispossessed "Dust-bowl" farmers and thousands of other refugees

of highway and built 1051 new miles—especially as the new part has cut across rivers rather than followed them, crossed one high mountain pass, and traversed several hundred miles of treacherous, undrainable, mosquito-infested "muskeg," all completely away from civilisation except for occasional missions and the Hudson Bay Company posts. Uncle Sam provided the means, and promised full war-time upkeep for this present to Canada: on the principle that "whatever the cost (ten million dollars was suggested), it is less than the price of the Arizona, a total loss in Pearl Harbour after 15 minutes of fighting life."

Liability or Asset?

"Good News for Russia" perhaps summarises New Zealand's opinion. But no: the Alaskan Highway has been built for Alaska ultimately, though it has been built now against Japan.

And why worry about Alaska? This is what the United States Democrats have been asking over the whole 75 years since Secretary Seward (of Lincoln's Cabinet), purchased "Seward's Icebox." Replying, Republican oratory points out that Alaskan gold has many times over repaid the seven million dollars that the Russians got out of "the greatest Real Estate deal in history." The Democrats have a quick comeback: "You forget two hundred million dollars of upkeep since. And, anyhow, when half-a-million square miles support, after all this coddling, a mere 60,000 people, half of them natives, it is just plumb plain that it's a no-good deal."

The conventional Republican reply has been to liken Alaska to its geographically opposite number in Europe, Scandinavia. And the resemblance is, if anything, in Alaska's favour. Both have long, high, glacier-fed, indented, sea-warmed Western Coasts falling away inland to plains frozen in winter but hot enough for cereals in their brief, fierce, 20-hour-day summer. Both front the world's best fisheries. Both hold enormous forests. Both have forage for great herds of sheep, cattle, and deer—especially deer, reindeer. And both have mineral resources—especially Alaska. Nevertheless, for every six hundred persons that Scandinavia supports, there is but one single solitary European in Alaska.

A Golden Gate

It is an extraordinary situation, and yet very simple. Europe's refugees, the embittered Joads from the "Dust-bowl," the hordes of frustrated ex-farmers in America whom amalgamation of farms has deprived of living and of life—all these would, after initial privations, make good in Alaska and in that great forest region of Canada that the Alaskan Highway has opened up. But when in the Depression the cheap venison from Alaska's herds—which would have been four millions strong to-day—began to come on the American market, beef interests drove it off. When years ago railway companies planned to make the Hay and Peace valleys (which the Highway traverses), into a second Ontario and Manitoba combined, the Canadian Government had to point out that it had on its hands already more wheat than it could possibly sell.

Now military necessity has swept all those obstacles away. And when the war is over, the Alaskan Highway will itself be a golden gate, one of the realities into which the people of America will convert the Atlantic Charter whatever vested interests try to do with it.