

For thousands of years, the Sutton region has been part of the U-shaped Matanuska Valley created by the glacier-fed Matanuska River forming a natural corridor between the Talkeetna and Chugach Mountain Ranges through which caribou and other large animals passed. This corridor was inhabited and traveled by the Ahtna Athabascans who had permanent and seasonal dwellings throughout the Matanuska River corridor.



*Matanuska River; photo provided by Jessica Dryden-Winnestaffer*

The Ahtna Athabascans were a highly migratory people

following caribou herd migrations and adult salmon migrations, and trapping furbearers in the winter. They had camps along the rivers and streams for various kinds of fishing and then moved up into the mountains for berries, ground squirrels, caribou, sheep and bears.

The site of present day Sutton was in the middle of the Ahtna Athabaskan's Traditional Territory which extends from the Wrangell Mountains into Canada, and north to beyond the headwaters of the Susitna and Copper Rivers, south to the beginning of the Copper River Delta, and west into Cook Inlet. This Traditional Territory overlapped with the Dena'ina Athabaskan's territory and with other Tribes who also needed to utilize these areas for subsistence purposes.

The Ahtna Athabascans would trade upland subsistence resources with the Dena'ina Athabascans for beluga and other marine resources, sometimes joining together to harvest these resources. The Chickaloon River area was a central point of trade for copper, sheep and goats from the interior, and salmon, beluga, herring oil, fur seals and dentalium shells (a commonly used currency) from the coast. One of the substantial settlements of the Ahtna Athabascans was Nay'dini'aa Na', a descriptive place name meaning "where the logs cross the river." Nay'dini'aa Na' was renamed Chickaloon by Euro-Americans after contact with Chief Chicklu who lived at the confluence of the Chickaloon and Matanuska Rivers.

It was not until Castner's 1898 expedition under the command of Captain Glenn that the Sutton area came into focus by Euro-Americans. Attached to the expedition was Mendenhall, a geologist who reported the evidence of coal-bearing rocks in the vicinity of Hicks and Bubb Creeks northeast of Sutton. Sergeant Mathys, also of Glenn's expedition, reported outcrops on Chickaloon and Boulder Creeks. Thoroughly investigated in 1905 by Geologist G. C. Martin, the region's potential as a coal producer was realized. He analyzed and reported coal outcroppings on Tsadaka Creek (now known as Moose Creek), Eska Creek, Kings Creek and its tributaries, Chickaloon and Coal Creeks, and on several smaller tributaries of the Matanuska River. He also pointed out two distinctly different types of coal: the hard anthracite coal northeast of Chickaloon and the "coking" bituminous coal in Chickaloon and the Wishbone Hill area.



*Two Coal Miners;  
Photo by Wendy Zake*

Soon after the discovery of coal, a few individuals attempted to mine. However, lack of transportation and leasing issues stymied production, forcing many to abandon their original claims. Anxious to find a western supply of good steam coal for their Pacific Fleet, the United States Navy became interested in reports of bituminous "coking" coal located in the Matanuska region. Following the declaration of Alaska as a territory in 1912, the Navy took steps in testing the Matanuska coal. Jack Dalton freighted 800 tons of coal by sled down the frozen Matanuska River to Knik from Frank Watson's mining operations in Chickaloon. After resolving leasing problems in 1914, the government set aside 7,680 acres in the Matanuska coal field with the provision that they could be mined for governmental purposes at a later date.

Several independent mines soon went into production between Tsadaka Creek (now known as Moose Creek) and Chickaloon. One of the most important incentives to continue mining was the government's decision in 1914 to sponsor a railroad from the Port of Seward to Fairbanks with a branch line built to the coal mines of Matanuska. One year later, on August 17, 1916, the first load of coal left Doherty Mine (on Moose Creek) by rail to Anchorage.

Coal requirements for the new railroad town site of Anchorage and for the railroad steam engines kept demands for coal production high. Small independent mines were unable to keep up with the demand. This prompted the government to buy out one of the struggling mines at Eska in 1917 to ensure a steady supply of coal for the burgeoning town of Anchorage and for the

railroad. The government, however, not wanting to be in direct competition with independent coal mines, promised to operate only when production could not meet demands. Sutton was the name given to the railroad station at the junction of the spur line built to the Eska mine from the main railroad branch between Anchorage and Chickaloon.

On October 24, 1917, the Matanuska Branch of the Alaska Railroad arrived in Chickaloon and six days later the first 60 tons of coal from the mine arrived in Anchorage. The coal was loaded aboard the USS Maryland which shipped it to Seattle for a barrage of testing. Proving to be ideal for their steam-powered Pacific Fleet, the Navy continued to invest in Chickaloon coal. In 1920, the Navy received an appropriation of a million dollars from Congress which they poured into construction at the new coal mining town called Chickaloon. The mine and associated town was built on two river terraces above the Chickaloon River. The town site was considered modern for its day with state-of-the-art equipment.

According to Tribal oral history of the Ahtna Athabascan Chickaloon Tribe (Nay'dini'aa Na'), before contact with Euro-Americans there were several hundred indigenous people that called Chickaloon home. Due to many facets of rapid acculturation, when the Euro-American population of Chickaloon soared, the indigenous population and traditional culture came close to eradication. It was after the railroad was built that Ahtna Athabascans from Chickaloon started to move into the Sutton area in individual family groups instead of in small bands or groups utilizing the area for seasonal subsistence activities like in previous generations.

Evan Jones, former supervisor of Doherty, Eska, and Chickaloon mines, decided to open his own mine, Jonesville, in 1920 with private backing. The mine, situated north of Sutton and west of Eska Creek, depended on the Eska spur to carry coal to Sutton until an additional spur was built directly to the Evan Jones mine. Between 1921 and 1922, Sutton became the site of a gigantic building, constructed by the Alaska Coal Commission, to house a power plant and coal washery. It was the most ambitious construction of its time. On February 21, 1921, the Anchorage Times announced:



*Coal Washing Plant, Oct. 1921  
Photo found at <http://vilda.alaska.edu>*

“A huge eleven ton dynamo for delivery to the Alaska railroad at Seward will be shipped on the Victoria sailing from Seattle tomorrow.”

“This dynamo is for the Sutton coal washery... it is one of the largest ever shipped to Alaska. The Sutton washery is one of the most modern of its kind in the world and has a capacity of approximately 1000 tons of coal every twenty-four hours.”

Sutton, a central location, was chosen in hopes the washery would serve both government mines and several independent mines of the region. Only a few thousand tons of coal was ever processed before the building was closed due to faulty construction. Some years later, already partially dismantled, the building burned to the ground. The Navy’s interest in the region ceased in 1923, spelling the demise of its new town site at Chickaloon. Their investment in Chickaloon coal proved too costly. A cheaper fuel, called oil, had been struck in California ensuring a western supply of fuel for their Pacific Fleet.

After the Chickaloon coal mine discontinued operations there were less than 40 indigenous people remaining in the Chickaloon area. Although the Euro-American population decreased dramatically, a new influx of colonists moved into the area and the territorial government forced the removal of many indigenous children from Chickaloon and Sutton to attend boarding schools. As a result, the language, religion, clan structures and the traditional economic activities of the Chickaloon Tribe’s surviving families were further undermined. According to Katie Wade, Chickaloon Tribal Elder, many Ahtna and Dena’ina Athabascans living in the area lost their families, Tribal identities, cultural roles and responsibilities, relationship with the natural world and they stopped passing down their oral traditions. These losses continue to impact the indigenous people today.

After the Chickaloon mine closed, Sutton continued to be an important freighting location for the coal mines of Eska and Evan Jones. Once Evan Jones proved it was capable of providing a regular supply of coal for the railroad, Eska mine closed, thereafter serving as a stand by operation in times of need. During World War II, the Eska mine went into production with the Evan Jones mine, and even with both mines working full time they could not meet demand.

As part of World War II preparedness, Elmendorf and Fort Richardson military bases were constructed near Anchorage. To keep up with demands of coal for the bases and an increasing population in Anchorage, enlisted men worked in both Eska and Evan Jones mines keeping production at full tilt. At the close of the war, coal-fired railroad steam engines were phased out in favor of diesel. Eska mine stopped production, leaving Evan Jones mine to continue supplying the military bases near Anchorage.

Until World War II, Sutton was connected to the lower Matanuska Valley by rail or wagon road. The wagon road was an unimproved pack road which a few hardy individuals tried to drive with a vehicle but found too rough for a regular commute from Palmer. Coal mine employees who were married men with families in Palmer stayed in bachelor quarters at the mines until the weekend. The Superintendent lived at the mine with his family as did several married miners. However, most of the employees were bachelors living in on-site bachelor quarters. Palmer was visited on weekends via train or wagon.

In 1941, also, as part of its military preparedness, the United States government authorized construction of an extension of Glenn Road to the Richardson Highway, thereby, connecting Anchorage with air bases in Fairbanks and the open port at Valdez. One million dollars was allocated the first year. The Road Commission, under the direction of the War Department, hired civilian workers from the new settlement colony at Palmer to begin construction. Many young teenagers in high school had summer jobs driving supply trucks to work camps along the new highway. Two sections of road were chosen to construct with crews starting at either end simultaneously. Crews in the southern section started from Moose Creek and crews in the northern section started from Glennallen. Sutton became the base camp and winter quarters for the southern crews.

Temporary camps consisted of wanigans (trailers) on runners which were transported from camp to camp by caterpillar. In addition to temporary lodgings, a powder house for dynamite and kitchens were built. As Sutton crews worked north they challenged the Glennallen workers heading south to see which crew would cover the most ground before connecting. The road north from Sutton to Chickaloon followed the former railroad bed. Although the railroad tracks had been removed previously, the arduous task of pulling ties remained. The ties proved quite useful for constructing the Sutton cookhouse.

One of the biggest challenges for construction crews were the large bedrock formations which had to be blasted through prior to road construction. After dynamiting the cliff face, men in harnesses and slings were lowered over the cliff's edge where they proceeded to jackhammer, loosening the rock face. As many as 600 men worked on the road in three different shifts during peak construction. The road, following portions of Castner's original trail, wound its way into higher elevations before passing through Eureka Pass to Nelchina Ridge into Glennallen and beyond to Tok. Crushed gravel formed the road base with coal-fill from the mines applied to the surface. The coal fill proved to be a challenge to drive on since it became slippery when wet and extremely dusty in dry weather.

Anxious to hook Alaska with the lower 48 states, authorization to build the Alaska-Canada Highway (the Alcan) occurred in 1942. Consequently, the Glenn Highway was extended to Tok. Due to war security concerns, civilian travelers were not allowed past Chickaloon without a permit. Although soldiers were stationed at all bridges, the road to Sutton opened access to the mines, allowing miners greater freedom to live in and commute to the lower Matanuska Valley. Sutton also became more accessible to homesteaders who filed for homesteads between 1946 through 1949. However, out of 26 applications only 8 received a patent.

Construction of the Glenn Highway took the duration of the war to complete. Once the road was finished and opened to the public, it was not uncommon for a traveler to experience car difficulties due to the long, rough winding condition of the road, and the great distances between towns. As soon as Glenn Highway construction was completed to Tok, enterprising citizens built and operated lodges, restaurants, and inns on land where construction camps once stood. The O'Neills of Sutton, being no exception, opened the Alpine Inn which offered visitors cabins, good food with homemade pies, a cocktail bar, and a liquor store. Complete garage and wrecker services were also available for the traveler experiencing road trouble. All traffic, which included long distance haulers to and from Fairbanks and the lower 48 states, traveled through Sutton. Over the ensuing years, the Glenn Highway improved. In 1953, the road was widened and paved.

After the war, the Evan Jones mine continued to operate and upgrade its equipment. A work force ranging from 140 – 177 employees, the mine remained a major employer for the whole Matanuska Valley. In 1952, the Evan Jones mine started to change from underground operations to strip mining. No longer operating underground by 1960, their work force changed dramatically from a high of 138 people in 1959 to 67 employees in 1960.

Sutton, however, became a thriving small town with a post office, an inn, and a general store. During the 1950's and 1960's, construction of private homes increased as more people chose Sutton as a place to live. By 1967, the work force at the Evan Jones mine had again increased with a high of 136 employees, but the forecast was grim. The mine's major clients, the military bases, changed their energy source from coal to fuel oil in 1968. That same year the Evan Jones mine closed its doors and auctioned off its equipment.

With the closing of the mines, the miners drifted away in search of labor elsewhere. The small community of Sutton survives as a community for businesses in the lower Matanuska Valley and Anchorage as well as supporting state, local and Tribal entities, small businesses and home-based businesses. In recent years, attempts at resource extraction have been explored.



After the completion of the George Parks Highway from the Glenn Highway to Fairbanks in 1974, traffic between Anchorage and Fairbanks ceased traveling through Sutton and the upper Matanuska Valley on the Glenn Highway. However, the tourist industry, with motor homes and recreational vehicles, has increased along the length of the Glenn Highway. The original Alpine



*Alpine Historical Park photo found at <http://alpinehistoricalpark.org/>*

Inn burned down in the 1960's and no longer serves the community as a lodging facility. However, other recreational opportunities now beckon tourists to the Sutton Community.

Phil and Jean O'Neill exchanged 6.5 acres of land in downtown Sutton for other Borough land with the intent of an Alpine Historical Park,

which would illustrate the community's rich history of coal mining, Alaska Native

traditions, and Glenn Highway construction. Most of the old mining buildings have been demolished. Equipment from several of the surrounding mines has been donated to the Alpine Historical Park where it is exhibited by the local Alpine Historical Society. Within the grounds of the park, situated on their original location, stand the ruins of the old coal washery in testament to the unfulfilled dreams of the Navy's investment in Sutton and Chickaloon. Also standing in its original location, as a reminder of the men who worked around the clock during World War II, stands the small powder house which harbored the dynamite used in blasting through the rock cliffs during mining. A tour of the park will acquaint the visitor with the region's history.