



# Northwest Epic: The Building of the Alaska Highway

*By Heath Twichell*



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A chronicle of the building of the Alaska highway describes the explorers, aviators, soldiers, and laborers who toiled throughout the early 1940s to build 1,500 miles of gravel road through the uncharted land of Alaska.



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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

In response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Army in early 1942 began a colossal and controversial undertaking--the feverish construction of a 1500-mile gravel road through largely unmapped and rugged northwest Canada to Fairbanks, Alaska. Overcoming ice, racist attitudes, morale problems and other obstacles, the project was rushed to successful completion in two years at a cost of \$500 million. Twichell ( Allen ), spurred by the unpublished memoirs of his father, who, as an Army officer, worked on the road, provides the most comprehensive history of the Alcan yet written. The author's powerful treatment of the project--combining the CANOL oil pipeline and Northwest Staging Route for airplanes in one dazzling road--rages from explorations in the region in 1789 to Sen. Harry Truman's star-rising probe as head of a commission investigating Army projects and Twichell's findings as he follows the route a half century later. Photos not seen by PW.

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#### From Library Journal

Historian Twichell has produced a highly readable and exhaustive account of the massive effort during World War II to build the emergency supply road to U.S. bases in Alaska that eventually became the Alaska Highway--at \$500 million, the most expensive construction project of the war effort and one that received little military use. Conceived in the post-Pearl Harbor frenzy of wartime activities, the highway soon took on a life of its own, a life well documented through interviews, official records, and oral and personal histories. This book should appeal to those with an interest in Alaska, U.S.-Canadian relations, and war activity on the homefront--an interesting if esoteric confluence.

-*Mark L. Shelton, Athens, Ohio*

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#### From Kirkus Reviews

Plodding, statistics-clogged account of the construction of the Alcan Highway, hacked out of the Canadian/Alaskan wilderness by the US military and private contractors during the early, anxiety-filled days of WW II. Twichell is a former West Point history teacher whose father was an Army officer involved with the project. Begun immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Alcan Highway, Twichell explains, was intended to provide a relatively safe supply line to the then-Territory of Alaska. Four routes were proposed, each supported by local boosters eager to share in the promised economic bonanza. White and black regiments of the US Army Engineers, mostly ill-trained and ill-equipped, were dispatched to the area. Twichell does a fine job of capturing the tensions and rivalries that accompanied the use of these rigorously segregated troops. But when he turns to an almost mile-by-mile, bulldozer-by-bulldozer, mountain-by-mountain account of their progress, his narrative pace falters, only quickening when he incorporates anecdotes into his story--tales of the grizzled guides, the seat-of-their-pants bush pilots, or the black enlisted men who helped build the highway. Also of interest are Twichell's reports on the backbiting common among top brass; a brief discussion of the Senate investigating committee--headed by future President Truman--that blew the whistle on Army excesses; and a look at the delivery of Lend-Lease planes to Russia over the arctic route. Such bright spots, however, are infrequent as the author devotes page after page to catalogues of distances covered, the number of automotive breakdowns, troop allotments, and other ledger-sheet matters. WW II-era historians may benefit from the welter of facts and figures; most readers, though, will find Twichell's account as tedious as a Yukon winter. (Illustrations--not seen.) -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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#### **Rebecca Beal:**

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