SKAGWAY: A Word About Our Name

Skagway is one of the oldest towns in Alaska. The name means "bunched up or rough water." Old-time travelers give us more information, further confusing the issue. Old-timer Arthur Church claimed that Skagway means "rough water." And Frank Carpenter, a travel writer in the 1920s, stated that "Skagua" meant "crude wind!"

Julian G. Brady, who was governor during the gold rush, knew a good story when he heard it. He described how the Skagway River got its name in this way:

"The Natives call this stream Skagua. This name has been in use since the crow made the earth and the Tlingits. A woman was drowned in this river and her name was Skagua. On the banks of the river lived a man named Keskomogo, or North Wind. Skagua came to him and became his wife. No doubt those who remain there this winter will find out how close their relationship is to the cold north wind."

Maybe the best definition came out of a 1927 magazine article. The writer, perhaps after reading so many stories behind the name, could only conclude that Skagway was "a word of uncertain meaning."

A BRIEF LOOK AT Skagway, one of America’s great historical shrines, played a key role in the dramatic Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-1898. For several hectic months in 1898, the visitor organization began constructing the White Pass and Yukon Route rail line, which connected Skagway to the Klondike mining area. Later, the railroad was the main industry until the 1920s; since then it has grown steadily into a major economic operation. Tourists first arrived in 1898. The visitor operation has continued this tradition every August in conjunction with Skagway’s Gold Rush Garden Club contest.

In 1910, the Skagway Commercial Club declared the town "Garden City of Alaska." The name has been used for many years, but the title was not official until Governor Steve Cowper signed the garden city proclamation in 1988. The Garden Club is responsible for the row of mountain ash trees on the road to the ferry terminal and many of the flower boxes you see in the Historic District. We hope you enjoy our gardens... they are part of a great Skagway heritage.
1. A good place to start any tour of Skagway is the former White Pass and Yukon Railroad Depot. This massive, colorfully structured building, built in 1908, was a dominant part of Skagway life until 1969, when railroad operations moved to the WPT&YR new buildings near the waterfront. When you enter the depot, you will find yourself in the round, 132-foot-high train shed, which was once used as a passenger waiting area and is now home to the Skagway Railroad Museum. The museum offers a fascinating look at the history of railroading, covering everything from the early days of steam to the modern era of diesel and electric locomotives. The museum is open daily from May to October, and admission fees are charged.

2. The St. James Hotel, presently a hotel, has a long history dating back to the early gold rush days. It was built in 1898 as a meeting place for travelers coming to Skagway and was later converted into a hotel. The hotel has been renovated several times over the years, but it still retains much of its historic charm and character. The hotel is a popular destination for tourists and is known for its cozy atmosphere and friendly staff. The hotel is open year-round and offers a variety of accommodations and services.

3. The Jeff Smith's Parlor, a row of three modest homes, is a popular destination for tourists. The building was built in 1899 and has been restored several times over the years. It is now a museum, and visitors can explore the history of Skagway and the lives of the people who lived there during the gold rush.

4. As you walk up Broadway, you'll find history all around you. The pioneer scene before you has much as it did during gold rush days. Smith, the last of the big-time western bad men, arrived in Skagway in 1899. An advertisement in the Skagway News (September 16, 1898) lists his stock of goods from Skagway to the Canadian lakes. To ease the strain, several tramways were proposed, but the plans were long on promises and short on results.

5. The Smuggler's Cove, located on the waterfront, is a popular destination for tourists. The cove was once a hideaway for smugglers who brought goods into Skagway from the north. Today, the cove is a peaceful place where visitors can relax and enjoy the view of the surrounding mountains.

6. The U-AU-TO-NO-THE-TRAIL, by the mayor and his partner, was a saloon called The Trail. (On the 4th Avenue barracks that once comprised part of Camp Skagway, located two blocks up from the waterfront, there was a saloon called The Arctic Brotherhood Hall. The outside façade of the Arctic Brotherhood Hall underwent a restoration during the winter of 1997 and 1998.

7. The Arctic Brotherhood Hall is one of the most historical buildings in Skagway. It was built in 1898 at the corner of 6th and State, as a saloon, dance hall, and railroad ticket office. The building is now home to the Alaska State Museum, which is open daily in the summer and provides a fascinating look at the history of Skagway and the Klondike Gold Rush.

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11. The Goldberg Cipher Shop was built in 1899 by David Goldberg, a tailor, for his shop from the fall of 1897 through the fall of 1898 and possibly into the spring of 1899. An advertisement in the Skagway News (September 16, 1898) lists his stock of goods from Skagway to the Canadian lakes. To ease the strain, several tramways were proposed, but the plans were long on promises and short on results.

12. The Gault House, a three-story residence as a rooming house, was built in 1899. The building is now home to the Alaska State Museum, which is open daily in the summer and provides a fascinating look at the history of Skagway and the Klondike Gold Rush.

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