

# FROM IOWA AND ALASKA TO AN EVEN WIDER WORLD

Robert Dahl

88

Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, my trajectory as a scholar was already established—in an intellectual, not a career, sense—when I completed my dissertation in 1940. It was called “Socialist Programs and Democratic Politics.” By “democratic politics,” I should add, I meant democracy, not the Democratic Party. I don't think any political science department today would allow a student to undertake a dissertation as daring and as open-ended as this was. As I wrote in the preface:

I do not know whether it would be possible for anyone interested in the world of politics about him to treat the subject of this study with the delicate objectivity that is supposed to characterize the doctoral dissertation. I know that I begin with such a strong prejudice in favor of democratic politics that judgment may occasionally take up arms in behalf of emotions. I offer this less as an apology than as a warning. It would be a futile defense of democracy, however, to idealize its strength by pitting it against straw men. I hope that I have presented the various socialist programs as an advocate might have presented them. I hope that in criticizing them I have done so as one aware of critical weaknesses in the economic and political organization of contemporary democratic countries.

(That's a fairly good statement, by the way, of how I spent a lot of my intellectual life.)

Here are the titles of the chapters.

1. Socialism and Democracy: The Problem
2. Marx's Predecessors
3. Marx and Engels.
4. The Prewar Marxists
5. Leninism and the Roots of the One-Party State

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**Robert A. Dahl** was born on Dec. 17, 1915, in a small town in Iowa and grew up in Skagway, Alaska. Upon graduating from the University of Washington in Seattle, he entered the Ph.D. program in the Government Department at Yale in 1936. He spent the 1937-1938 academic year as an intern in the newly created National Labor Relations Board. After receiving his Ph.D., he married a fellow intern, Mary Louise Bartlett, and settled in the Washington, D.C. area, where both were employed in government agencies. In March 1943 he entered the U.S. Army and began service in the 44th Infantry Division as a private first class in the Regimental Reconnaissance Platoon of the 71st Infantry Regiment. He was promoted to platoon sergeant and in France was awarded a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant. At the end of the war, he transferred to the United States Group Control Council, where his assignment was to search for German and Austrian banking officials with Nazi connections. He returned to the United States in November 1945 and the following January was appointed to the Government (later Political Science) Department at Yale. He served as Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science from 1955 to 1964 and as Sterling Professor of Political Science from 1964 until his retirement in 1986. His latest book, *On Political Equality*, was published in 2006. Mary and Robert Dahl had four children; her death in 1970 from cancer was a profound loss to all who knew her. In 1973 he married Ann Sale Barter, whose two daughters he soon came to love dearly. Their daughter, Ellen Kirsten Dahl, lives in New Haven.

6. Stalinism and the Triumph of the One-Party State
7. Parliamentary Socialism and the Fabians
8. Parliamentary Government and the British Labour Party
9. A Parliament of Industry
10. German Social Democracy
11. The Control of Production: Some Recent Economic Approaches
12. Some Implications for America.

Can you imagine allowing a graduate student to write a dissertation like that today? I can't, and probably rightly so. I think, though, that the germs of a lot of what I have written since that time already exist in that dissertation.

Where did this intellectual and, one might say, political and moral commitment come from? And what later events strengthened it, as I think they did? I'm going to mention some factors that were important in my trajectory, and I begin where we all begin, more or less, with my parents. My father was born in 1882 on a farm outside of Grafton, North Dakota. His father, Ivor Dahl, was a farmer who had been born north of Trondheim, Norway, on a farm called Dahl Vestre that had been in the Dahl family for at least five hundred years, when the existing records begin. Because my grandfather was the seventh offspring, it was clear to him that he was not going to inherit the farm. So, along with almost half the population of Norway, he emigrated to the United States, where he ended up homesteading in the northeast corner of North Dakota outside of a little town called Grafton.

Like his own father, my father was one of seven children. He, the oldest, went to Northwestern Medical School and became a doctor. One brother became a lawyer. Another became a dentist. Two of his sisters became teachers, and one became a nurse. That aspiration for higher education in this farm family is rather spectacular, and I've sometimes playfully suggested that they must have been Jewish farmers.

My mother was born in 1889 in a little town in South Dakota called Canton, where her father, James Lewis, of Scottish origin, owned a drug store – for all I know, the only drug store in town. She met my father in Devil's Lake, North Dakota. My mother recalled in later years that when they announced that they were going to get married, her family were rather dubious about her marrying a Scandinavian. Several years ago when I reread *Main Street*, I was struck by Sinclair Lewis's description of the attitudes toward the Scandinavians – dumb Swedes, as they were often called. So here were my mother's parents learning that their precious daughter was marrying a man of recent Norwegian extraction. Fortunately, as they came to know him, they came to love him and he was fully accepted. But I think he had to earn his way into their affections.

When my mother met my father, she was working in a lawyer's office in Devil's Lake and had hopes of becoming a lawyer herself. However, she never did. As my mother recalled in later life, after their marriage my father was embarrassed by her working, and one day admonished her: "I don't think you should continue working

in the lawyer's office, because people will think I can't support you." To which she replied, "Well, you can't, can you?" Later they moved up to a little town in Alberta, where my older brother was born. As I later learned, he could have claimed Canadian citizenship until he was eighteen. However, in those far-off days he never had the slightest interest in doing so.

They then moved to Iowa, where I was born in the little town of Inwood. As I was checking several years ago on the date they arrived in Inwood, I realized that I must have been conceived in Canada. I don't suppose that would have given me a claim to Canadian citizenship.

Then they moved back down to this town in Iowa, a farming community, with maybe seven hundred inhabitants. In Iowa, as in other parts of the United States, farming communities became extremely prosperous during World War I because the demands of the military drove up the prices of corn, hogs, wheat, and other farm products. But in 1919 and 1920, the boom collapsed. As an indirect consequence, my family went from relative affluence to extreme poverty. My father had a large practice in the countryside, probably in part because he spoke Norwegian and there were many Scandinavian farmers around Inwood. Although they obviously wanted to pay him, they lacked the income to do so. Because many of them paid him in farm products—corn, beef, pork, chickens, vegetables—we never went hungry. But when one of us needed to buy, say, a pair of shoes, that became a problem.

Because of Dad's loss of cash income, we had to move from one of the finest houses in that little town to one of the worst houses on the edge of town. It had not much interior plumbing. There were no toilets, so we relied on an outhouse—a memorable experience in the dead of an Iowa winter. There was a water pump over the kitchen sink where my mother would draw water for cooking and so on. But because the well was contaminated, one of the tasks assigned to my brother and me—we called them our "chores"—was to go next door to our kind Scandinavian neighbors' pump to get clean water. On one such occasion, my brother—always the scientist—decided to test the claim that if it was below freezing and you put your tongue on the pump handle, it would immediately stick. He found out that it did indeed stick, and paid for his experiment with the loss of a little skin from his tongue.

Sometime in late November or early December of 1925, just before my tenth birthday, my father came home one day and said, "I've been reading the notices in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and there is a job opening up in the town of Skagway, Alaska. The doctor is leaving. He's the only doctor in town and the hospital he runs is owned and supported by the railroad. He seems to have contracted tuberculosis [which, we later learned, was rampant among Native Americans at the time]. We can't go on living like this, and I think I should take that job."

As my mother recounted the story many years later, she said to him, "You know we were up in Alberta and we moved back here where our families are, yours in North

Dakota and mine in South Dakota. I'm just not going to move again, and I don't ever want you to talk to me about it again."

Sometime in December of that year, he came home and said to her, "I have the tickets."

"What tickets?" she asked.

"The tickets to that hospital in the town of Skagway, Alaska."

"But I told you never to talk to me about it again," she said angrily.

"Well," he replied, "I didn't, did I?"

To which she responded, "I'm not sure I'm going."

He was pretty confident that, in the end, she would come, so he said, "I'll go up and explore the town and find a house."

He went to Skagway and word came back that the town was fine and he had already found a suitable house. Sure enough, by late December we were on a train to Seattle, followed by a five-day trip by boat to Skagway.

Any of you who have traveled up the Inside Passage know how absolutely spectacular that trip is. It remains so, I must say, even in December. Ours was a family that had never seen a real mountain. I can remember waking up on the train when we first got into the Rockies and being overwhelmed by them—the beginning of a love for mountains that I have never lost. In Seattle we boarded our small ship and headed up to Skagway. One of our pieces of luck turned out to be the weather: it was one of the warmest Januaries on record. My father had rented a house owned by an Italian baker named Tropea. As we walked up from the Golden North Hotel to view the Tropea house, as we called it, we saw pansies blooming alongside the front walkway. It was unbelievable! That may have been the only time any flowers ever bloomed in Skagway in January, though perhaps with global warming that will become commonplace.

At that moment, I think my mother began to feel that maybe this remote Alaska village might just be tolerable after all. Twenty-five years later, when my father retired and they moved to Seattle, she had come to love Skagway, as did my father. In fact, the twenty-five best years of their life together were passed in Skagway. If you had ever gone to Skagway and walked up to the north end of town, until recently you would have seen a building labeled "The Dahl Memorial Hospital" and a plaque honoring Dr. Peter I. Dahl.

Growing up in a small town certainly had a profound influence on the way that I came to think about people and the world. A Harvard Law School professor is supposed to have once said that if he had to choose between appointing a committee of Harvard faculty to govern Boston and choosing every tenth name out of the Boston phone book, he would choose the phone book—a sentiment that I find myself sometimes sharing.

In Skagway and later, I came to know persons who contributed to my respect for so-called ordinary people. I want to mention two of them: Dean Story and Willard Pruitt.

Dean Story was a Skagway youth of my age, who for reasons I never knew dropped out of school in the sixth or seventh grade. He was extraordinarily bright and had a sense of humor that was quick and apt. I am going to illustrate that point with an account that, I warn you, some may find offensive.

Like the rest of Alaska, and most of rural America, Skagway had a hunting culture. Like many of you, I later decided that I never wanted to hunt again, or even to shoot a rifle after I returned from Europe in 1945. But if you were a boy growing up in Skagway, you hunted. My older brother and I each owned a shotgun, a high-powered .50-caliber rifle, and a .22-caliber rifle. We both hunted, mainly together. Beginning in late August, when the hunting season opened, we would climb up the steep mountains around Skagway and around the peaks we would hunt for Rocky Mountain goats, an animal so beautiful that it now pains me to think about killing one. Hunting Rocky Mountain goats may be the hardest work I've done in my whole life, but that's another story.

During the summers, every boy in town worked in a parent's store or at manual labor of some kind. From the ages of thirteen and twelve, my older brother, Lew, and I worked for some summers as longshoremen on the docks and later as section hands on the narrow-gauge railroad that ran 110 miles from Skagway to Whitehorse. The events that call Dean Story to mind occurred one summer when we were working on the railroad. One August after the hunting season for Rocky Mountain goats opened, Lew and I, accompanied for the first time by our younger brother, Roger, were sitting on a narrow ledge about two feet wide and fifteen feet long. We had leaned our U.S. Army surplus rifles against the rocks behind us. Aided by our ancient field glasses dating back to the Spanish-American War, we stared at some white spots on an adjacent slope, hoping they were Rocky Mountain goats – though they turned out to be granite boulders.

Suddenly, I heard my older brother say, in a tone of surprise, or perhaps alarm, or both: "Jesus Christ!"

I turned toward Lew and there, just beyond him on the ledge, was a grizzly bear who had rounded the corner of the low cliff behind us. I have always believed that Lew's life, and perhaps mine and Roger's, turned on what happened the next second. All three of us quickly reached behind us to retrieve our rifles. To our great good fortune, as we did so, the bear turned and ran away.

So, you may ask, what did the mighty hunters now do? We swiftly grabbed our rifles and ran up the slope behind us, where we now saw our grizzly running rapidly down the slope. It was already a hundred yards or more away from us when the brave hunters swiftly met this new challenge. We raised our rifles, aimed at the fleeing bear, and shot him dead.

Although in later years I was ashamed and regretful of our action, honesty compels me to report that what I experienced at the time was an uprush of great elation – as was also true, I'm sure, of my brothers. We had killed a grizzly! As we were

skinning the bear, intending to save the hide for tanning, later display as a rug or wall hanging, and endless opportunities for bragging, one of us asked aloud, “Hey! Has the hunting season for grizzlies opened, or is it still closed?”

The fact was, we weren’t sure whether the season on grizzly bears was legally open or closed. We didn’t even have a copy of the hunting regulations with us. So, compounding the iniquity of our deed, we decided to tell the appropriate official, and any others, that we had shot the bear in self-defense – a claim, as we well knew, that no one in Skagway would challenge.

So we finished skinning the bear. I even saved its liver, which I thought I’d heard was delicious. When we got back to the log cabin where we’d spent the night and left our supplies, we nailed the bearskin to the outside wall and took a picture of it with the mighty hunters standing alongside – a photo that still hangs on the wall of my study at home.

When we prepared our supper on the stove in the cabin, I cooked the bear’s liver in bacon grease, under the impression that it was supposed to be a delicacy. I took one bite and promptly ran to the door to spit it out. It tasted like rotting fish. Obviously, that bear had been down near the sea, feeding off the salmon that were then running up the streams and rivers.

The next day, while working on the railroad section, we bragged all morning to our fellow workers about our great hunting triumph. At noon, as we were all walking back to retrieve our lunch boxes, Dean Story turned to my brother and inquired, “By the way, Lew, when you brought down the grizzly, just where did you hit it?”

Without thinking, Lew replied, “I shot him in the ass.”

Without a moment’s delay, Dean commented, “I’ll be goddamned! That’s the first time I ever heard of a grizzly bear attacking anybody ass-end to!”

I want to tell you one more account that will help to give some idea of Dean Story’s qualities.

Among the half-dozen or so men working with us on the railroad section was an African-American whose first name was Joe.<sup>1</sup> Because Joe was a very direct and honest person, I believe his account of his personal history was correct. His parents, he said, had been slaves somewhere in the South, and to escape, so far as possible, the horrible legacy of slavery, at an early age Joe had moved to the Southwest, where he became a U.S. marshal. Later he moved to Skagway, where he was one of two black people in the town.

Dean Story was nominally the head of our little group of section hands. One member had come from a military base a dozen miles south of Skagway, after some years in the Army. He called himself Punchy Anderson, because, he claimed, he had become a little “punch-drunk” from blows he had received as a lightweight boxer when he was stationed in Hawaii. A persistent and annoying braggart, he insisted that he had won the lightweight championship in Hawaii. He was such a braggart that we were never sure when he was telling the truth or inventing a good story.

One day Punchy Anderson fell into an argument with Joe. We began to fear that they might come to blows. Instead, as we were quitting work that day we heard Punchy Anderson say to Joe, who lived in a house about three hundred yards or so from Anderson's, "Joe, I don't want to see you downtown tonight. If you do come down, you're going to be in trouble." To which Joe calmly replied, "Punchy, I have no reason to go downtown tonight. But if you want to come up to my house, you're quite free to come in. I have a butcher knife there, and if you make a move, I'll cut you three ways: wide, long, and deep."

Like the rest of us, Dean Story had heard this exchange, and at the end of work he turned to Anderson and said, "Punchy, I just acquired a new .45 pistol. I'm a pretty terrific shot. I'm willing to bet you ten dollars I could shoot the heel off of your shoe without hurting the rest of the shoe or your foot." Punchy: "Oh no, no, no, don't try that!" Dean: "Yeah, Punch, I think maybe tomorrow I'll just bring my .45 to work and I'll prove I can do it." Punchy Anderson didn't show up for three days, and shortly thereafter he left town. That was Dean Story.

After graduating in a class of six from Skagway High School, I went to the University of Washington in Seattle. There I majored in political science and minored in economics, intending to go on to the University of Washington Law School. But for reasons no longer clear to me, in the summer before my senior year, the high time of the New Deal, I decided instead that I wanted to go into public life. In the fall of 1936, I came to Yale on a fellowship, which the Political Science Department and the Graduate School generously continued during the following academic year. I spent that time as a government intern – a brand-new practice, by the way – working in the Division of Economic Research of a new and highly controversial agency, the National Labor Relations Board.

That academic year resulted in several experiences that had a crucial influence on my later life. In Washington, I met and fell in love with Mary Louise Bartlett, a fellow intern from Wellesley College and an old Providence family, whom I would marry a few days after receiving my Ph.D.

And for the first time in my life, I acquired Jewish friends and acquaintances.

Let me explain. Skagway had one nominally Jewish family, headed by a reclusive widow with one son, Arnold, who was several years older than I and whom I got to know playing basketball, ice hockey, and so on. Arnold, however, was only nominally Jewish. Later he married an Irish Catholic schoolteacher in Skagway and helped to rear their children as Catholics.

While I was at the University of Washington, I didn't have any close friends who were Jewish. However, out of the twenty-five or so members of the Division of Economic Research, I think it would be no exaggeration to say that as many as fifteen, perhaps more, were Jewish. They came from Brooklyn and the Bronx, and, for Mary Bartlett and me, theirs was a whole new aspect of American culture. If they were

somewhat exotic to us, we were equally exotic to them. More important, we became such good friends that they often invited Mary and me to their homes for dinner.

Another way my new friends powerfully shaped my later life was through their politics, political beliefs, and ideologies. Not surprisingly, they were mainly on the left. The parents of some had fled Russia during or soon after the Revolution of 1905 that set off threats and even pogroms against Jews, some of whom had supported the revolution and espoused Marxist views. Among my new friends, I think about every existing leftist party of one kind or another was represented. To this naive leftist liberal, their views opened up another world.

My nominal boss, Maurice (Maury) Weiss, was a Norman Thomas socialist whom I came to admire greatly. In the course of that year, I too became a socialist and actually joined the Socialist Party. Later, my dissertation topic was obviously influenced by my having acquired the perspective of a democratic socialist.

The head of the Division of Economic Research was a well-known labor historian, David J. Saposs. Politically, Dave Saposs was social democrat, very strongly anticommunist, and severely critical of the Soviet Union and its betrayal of socialist ideals. Ironically, Dave Saposs was later portrayed by Joe McCarthy as a Communist.

My membership in the Socialist Party was, however, short-lived. About the time I received my Ph.D. at Yale in 1940, I resigned from the party. I did so for two reasons. Along with other members of the American Socialist Party and its leader, Norman Thomas, I was an isolationist, fervently opposed to American entry into the war in Europe. When France fell in May and June of 1940, I realized within a very few days that my isolationism rested on an unspoken and unacknowledged assumption: that Britain and France would defeat Hitler and the Nazis. Suddenly, that assumption was no longer valid. Within a week, I concluded that the United States would have to go to war. Because the Socialist Party was still opposed to the war in Europe, I decided that I could no longer remain a member and was obligated to resign my membership.

There was also a second reason: in the course of writing my dissertation, I had come to believe that some fundamental socialist policies were based on mistaken assumptions. As you might infer from the title of chapter 11 of my dissertation, "The Control of Production: Some Recent Economic Approaches," I was influenced by a whole new body of literature by socialist economists who persuaded me that in a satisfactory socialist economy the outputs and prices of the products of economic enterprises, whether owned by workers or by the government, had to be controlled by a *competitive market economy*—a socialist market economy, to be sure, but one in which the firms competed with one another. Not only would the nationalization of industry be highly damaging economically, but in its huge enhancement of the potential power of a chief executive, it carried enormous risks to democracy. The solution I came to favor, then, was to develop worker-owned cooperatives in a competitive price system.

Since my views were now fundamentally at odds with those of the Socialist Party, I resigned. Even so, many of my basic goals, values, and commitments remained.

So much for the influence of ideas and programs.

I want to return now to another person who confirmed and deepened my appreciation of those we somewhat pejoratively call “ordinary Americans.” His name is Willard Pruitt.

When I entered the United States Army in March 1943, I was immediately sent to the 44th Infantry Division, which was stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington. On arrival, I was assigned to the 71st Infantry Regiment and immediately joined its Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, which consisted of about twenty-six men. Unlike the turnover in most outfits, except for casualties and their replacements, most of the members of the platoon remained together until the European war ended in May 1945. The result was an extraordinarily close bonding.

Luckily for us, the 44th Division did not go overseas until September 1944 and didn't enter into combat until October, after which we remained steadily on the front line, except for a week or ten days when we were pulled off for some much needed rest and recreation. During our period on line, my reconnaissance platoon did what we were supposed to do: we went on reconnaissance patrols consisting of three to seven men, usually at night. This further strengthened our relationships and provided deep insights into important aspects of the character of the members of the platoon.

One I came to know well, and for whom I developed a deep respect, was Will Pruitt, a superb human being who had not only courage but judgment, prudence, reliability, and a marvelous sense of humor. I had pretty much lost touch with Will until recently, when his daughter called me and said, “My dad would like to be in touch with you.” And so I got in touch with him. Subsequently, Will Pruitt came up from Oklahoma to visit me, along with his wife, Euletta, and his daughter and son-in-law. We spent four days together, during which I learned even more about Will.

Will Pruitt was born in a log cabin in Arkansas, at the top of a mountain in the Ozarks. His father was a farmer – not, I'd guess, a terribly successful one. When Will was ten or so, the family moved to Oklahoma, traveling in two covered wagons. His father believed that Will, whom he intended to be farmer, didn't need much education. As a result Will, who is extremely intelligent, never went beyond the seventh grade.

Yet as I came to know Will in the Army, I developed an extraordinary respect for him, which I still retain. Although he's no longer in terribly good shape physically, his memory is probably better than mine, and he still has his exceptional wit.

I moved up the ranks from private first class to corporal, sergeant, and platoon sergeant. On Dec. 24, 1944 – a Christmas present, you might say – I was given a field commission as a second lieutenant. The previous platoon leader was not very popular because, among other reasons, he happily sent us out on patrol night after night, but never left headquarters himself. Ironically, the only time he ever went out on a patrol, he got shot – in the elbow, I think. He was sent back to a field hospital from which, miraculously, he didn't return until the war in Europe was over. Will told me of the

rumor that one of his own men had shot him to get him out of the platoon. However that may be, we were all greatly relieved to see him go.

My reason for telling you about Dean Story and Will Pruitt is that they greatly deepened my respect for my fellow human beings, and in doing so helped to provide an explanation for my later explicit adoption of two fundamental moral judgments that have provided a foundation for much of my work. Both, let me add at once, were formulated by others well before I adopted them. First, I came to believe strongly that each and every human being born into this world is entitled to have his or her basic interests given equal consideration. Second, I concluded that adopting laws and policies enforced by the state requires the consent of all adults subject to the state because, despite their obvious and enormous limitations, adult human beings are more competent to judge their own basic interests than any other clearly identifiable group of persons who could be entrusted with the right to rule over the state.

History is jammed with cases in which people who believe that they knew what the interests of others were, and when in positions of power to enforce their judgments, neglected or even exploited the very persons whose interests they claimed to be protecting.

Among an endless array of examples, consider the cases of women, workers, and African-Americans. Those who insisted that they were adequately taking care of the interests of these persons clearly did not do so. One basic reason, I believe, is the power of selfishness in human beings and our limited capacity to feel empathy for others, or even to understand their basic interests.

Enough of my philosophical – or, if you like, moral – trajectory. Let me conclude with a few more words about my professional trajectory.

During my first three years as an undergraduate at the University of Washington, I intended to go to law school as a step toward public life. For reasons that are now hard for me to remember clearly, at the end of my junior year I decided I really didn't want to go to law school. Instead, I ended up in graduate school at Yale, only because Yale offered me a little larger fellowship than Harvard did. Even then, however, I continued to look forward to a professional career in public life, a judgment strongly reinforced by my marvelous year in Washington as an intern.

How, then, did I end up spending my professional life in academia? Although I can't fix the precise time or place, somewhere in France or Germany in 1945 I began to reconsider what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, if I survived with my brain intact. I began to reflect about the kinds of things I liked to do and quickly became aware of some obvious ones: I loved to read, to talk about ideas, to write.

The light bulb flashed on. It may have come on a little late, but it was crystal clear: I wanted to go into academic life.

I arrived back from Europe around Thanksgiving of 1945, and joined my wife, Mary, and our two children in Providence. In December I took the train to New Haven to meet with several of my old mentors, hoping that they would help me find a

teaching job somewhere. It so happened that Howard Penniman, an instructor in the Political Science Department, had been drafted in the very last days of the war. He was to return soon, but meanwhile a strictly one-term job was available at Yale for the spring term of 1946.

The rest is history – well, my history, anyway.

98

### Endnotes

- 1 I'm ashamed that I soon forgot Joe's last name and could not recall it in writing my privately published memoir *After the Gold Rush: Growing up in Skagway*. Equally revealing, I have also been unable to find it in a search of my photos and records of Skagway residents.