

# Rebuilding the

## Alaska Railroad

**Col. J. P. Johnson**

*General Manager*

The 470-mile Alaska Railroad from Seward and Whittier on tidewater to Fairbanks in the heart of the interior is a vital link in the defense chain from Alaska.

Mountainous country of unmatched scenic beauty makes operation and maintenance problems in this Arctic country stupendous.

Begun in 1915, the Alaska Railroad, which is Government-owned and Department of the Interior operated, has played a leading role in the development of the Territory. During the war the railroad carried the bulk of the Army's supplies. At the end of 1945, however, the line was in a precariously run-down state.

On assuming managership of the railroad in January 1946, I was convinced after a personal survey of the route that it would have to be entirely rehabilitated to make it safe and efficient and contribute its part to the national defense program. I suggested a 5-year \$50 million project.

The rebuilding program will be pushed through in 3 years. This year will probably see completion of many important phases. The program provides for a wide assortment of work on practically the entire rail line. It includes a new right-of-way with properly ballasted track; 115-pound rail to replace worn 70-pound steel; a modern working plant to supplant the cramped shops that lowered workmen's efficiency and morale; and new rolling stock.

We have been fortunate to obtain about \$2 million of Army surplus rolling stock collected from all over the Nation, at great savings to the taxpayer.

Ingenuity on the part of Alaska Railroad engineers has played its part. For example, we acquired the Denver Remington shell plant from war surplus. It contains about a thousand tons of structural steel. The plant was dismantled last summer and shipped to Anchorage where the 320- by 230-foot building was re-erected. Converted, it is now Alaska's largest building and houses the Diesel locomotive and heavy equipment shops.

With the completion of the rehabilitation program, we envision eventually an 8-hour schedule for the 350-mile run from Anchorage to Fairbanks. We believe that the road will be equipped and prepared to handle the Army's defense material speedily and to service efficiently Railbelt Alaska, the Territory's most rapidly growing section.

Naturally we are delighted to carry tourists over the line to see Alaska's scenic grandeur. Although tourists cannot be accommodated in large numbers at many interesting points, nevertheless far-sighted Alaskans envision the day when the tourist trade will be one of the Territory's principal sources of income.

The Alaska Railroad carries the sightseer from the fjords near Seward, through the Kenai Peninsula where the track passes only a few hundred yards from active glaciers, into the Alaska Range and the "backyard" of Mount McKinley, North America's highest peak.

The rail line winds through both the Matanuska and Tanana River Valleys—Alaska's two most productive farming areas. A visit to either will soon convince one that Alaska is a land of wide agricultural capabilities. The profusion of flowers, root crops, grains, berries, and herds of sleek dairy cows in both the Matanuska and Tanana Valleys belie the legend of Alaska as a land of perpetual snow and ice.

The railroad operates Mount McKinley hotel, a model hostelry that ranks with Alaska's best. The hotel is located on the railroad 235 miles north of Anchorage and 125 miles south of Fairbanks, right in the heart of the wilderness. It accommodates 150 guests comfortably.

McKinley Park's 3,030 square miles make it second only to Yellowstone in size among the Nation's national parks. It is a home for moose, bear, fox, wolves, sheep, and 30 other mammals. Well over 100 kinds of birds nest in the park. Some of the world's biggest caribou herds migrate across the area.

The railroad also operates a hotel at Curry, 135 miles north of Anchorage.

As part of its mission to develop the Territory, the Alaska Railroad also runs steamboats each summer on the Yukon River. These stern-wheelers make the journey from Nenana up-river to Fort Yukon and down-river as far as Marshall, a 2-week 1,500-mile round trip. There are a limited number of accommodations for tourists aboard the river boats.

Working on the 470-mile right-of-way. Below: The "Loop," halfway between Anchorage and Seward.

