

100.7



At Bird Creek
27 Miles South
of Anchorage
on the
Seward
Highway

BIRD HOUSE

Log Cabin Hatched in 1916

Saw Dust Floors & Old Alaskan Decor

Serving Alaskan Mixed Drinks

STRICTLY FOR THE BIRDS

From Alaska Travel Guide – 1967



The Bird House in 1967

Photo by Jeanne Waite Follett



Birds of varying descriptions are seen along the Seward Highway southeast of Anchorage.

Above and left — One of the area's "institutions" is the Bird House Bar, a rough-hewn little place at Bird Creek, 25 miles from Anchorage. (Sharon Paul, Staff)

Right — Potter Marsh, just southeast of Anchorage, is a favorite bird-watching spot. (Tim Thompson)

Far right — Canada geese, photographed at Potter Marsh in spring. (Nancy Simmerman)

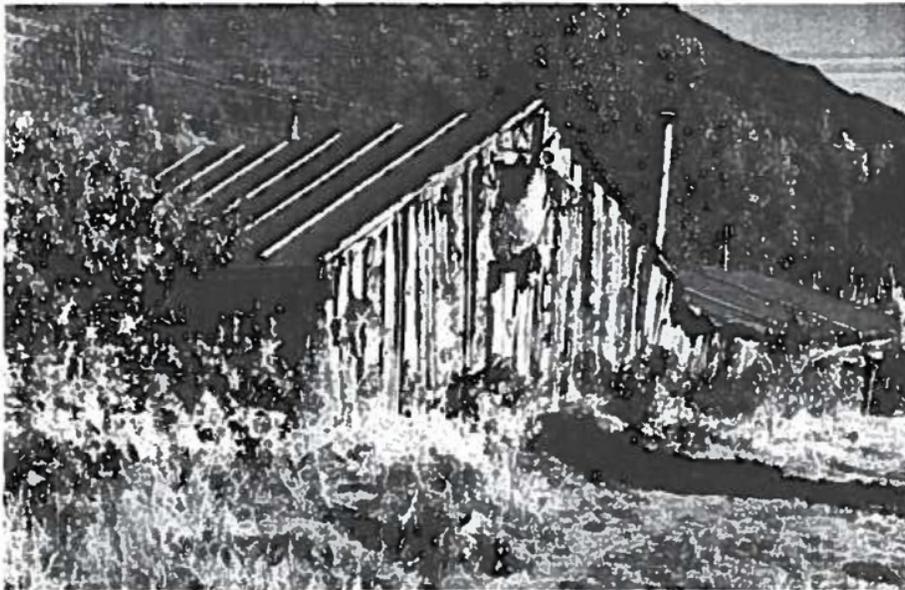
From Cook Inlet Country

Alaska Geographic Society, Volume 5, No. 1 - 1977

The Bird House

Without a doubt, the Bird House is the most curious, out-of-the-ordinary log lair of the Municipality. This structure is, in actuality, a combination of two cabins. Their rustic logs conceal the zany interior and impassioned memorabilia of what is now the internationally famous Bird House Bar. Semisubterranean, it may be the only watering hole which features a sawdusted, sloping floor, and has a history to boot.

The original log building there is said to have been built by a Bird Creek prospector in 1903. As was typical of the era, the cabin probably served as the base from which he ran his



The Bird House, c. 1903.

trap line during the winter. During the railroad construction era, 1916-1917, three additional log buildings were erected, including a bunkhouse, a cook house and stable. They were abandoned around 1918 when the railroad was completed along the Arm. During the 1920's, Gus Bystedt began working placer claims along Bird Creek and homesteaded the site where the original cabin stands. Eventually, he joined the older structure with the remaining railroad era cabin. The structure later became the home of his daughter and son-in-law, Betty and Earl Mathewson. In 1963 Cliff Brandt purchased the cabin and created the Bird House Bar. The present owner is Richard Delak.¹⁹

From Patterns of the Past: An Inventory of Anchorage's Historic Resources

by Michael E. Carberry

108 *South-Central Region (SC)*

as a railroad museum. Located between the highway and the railroad tracks, it is accompanied by an outhouse, coal shed, meat cache, and vegetable garden, giving a sense of the place.

Girdwood Vicinity

SC042 The Bird House

c. 1903. Mile 100.5, Seward Hwy., Girdwood

Perhaps of more immediate interest to bar-hoppers than to architectural historians, the quaintness and dubious charm of the Bird House derive from its architecture and bawdy interior decor. The one-story, gable-roofed building was apparently built in three sections. The oldest is constructed of round logs square notched at the corners. Built on boggy ground, it has sunk so far into the ground that the sill of the window is now below ground. An addition was constructed of round logs, saddle notched at the corners, and another addition of vertical half logs. The sloping floors and slanting walls of the semisubterranean building contribute to its rustic quality.

A Bird Creek prospector probably constructed this building as a base for his trap line operation in about 1903. During construction of the Alaska Railroad near here, other buildings were erected at the site. In the 1920s, after the railroad was completed, Gus Bystedt homesteaded the site and eventually joined the original building with one from the railroad era. In 1963 a new owner, Cliff Brandt, opened the Bird House and began the eccentric collection of calling cards and memorabilia that is freely stapled to the walls. Thirsty architectural historians will easily justify a trip to the site.

From *Buildings of Alaska* by A.K. Hoagland



Photo by Cathy Hiebert – 1989



Photo by Cindy Pendleton



Photo by Cindy Pendleton



Photo by Mark Welker



BLAZE PUTS END TO BIRD HOUSE

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Monday, February 19, 1996

Author: STEVE RINEHART Daily News reporter; Staff

The Bird House, a tilt-floored Turnagain Arm tavern famous for its practical jokes and sarcastic hospitality -- not to mention the underwear tacked to its ceiling -- went up in flames early Sunday morning.

The quirky log cabin and wood-frame building, so ancient at 93 years that its floor had sunk several feet into the earth, was burning hot when Anchorage fire trucks arrived about 4:30 a.m. By the time crews doused the blaze, the landmark was reduced to a steaming charcoal hulk.

Gone were generations of business cards, some inscribed with their owners' physical measurements. Gone were the assorted props and gimmicks -- the boneless chickens, stinky pickles and raunchy postcards -- that amused or suckered tourists and guests from out of town.

Gone, too, was the infamous "ptarmigan call"; blow hard into the horn and coat your face with flour.

No one was hurt in the fire. The Anchorage Fire Department said the cause was not known. Fire, though, was always a worry, bartenders Juanita Triboulet and Jan Berkhahn said.

Triboulet said she closed the bar about midnight Saturday, making sure as usual to turn off all the switches. The interior had been treated with fire retardant, Berkhahn said, and the owner, Susan Delak, had recently had the place rewired.

Delak was traveling, Sunday, and could not be reached for comment. Her former husband, Dick Delak, took over the Bird House in 1968 and was given general credit for its unique character. He died in a plane crash in 1993.

"It's gonna be missed by people all over the world," Berkhahn said. She came to work at the Bird House for one summer, in 1986, but stayed on. "I loved this job," she said, even though a customer once "came over the bar and almost broke my neck."

He had "called the ptarmigan," gotten flour under his contact lenses, and did not immediately appreciate the humor.

The bar's final gig was an ordinary one, Triboulet said. Small groups of people had been coming and going all evening. "Everything was happy. They were having a good time."

The weekend had brought a run of bachelor and bachelorette parties, she said. "We had six girls come in together. A couple of them hung (panties on the ceiling) while they were here."

She and Berkhahn and stood guard at the ruins Sunday afternoon, greeting mourners who drove in to take a last look, trade stories and condolences.

"I just had to come down and pay my respects," Nick Hornshuh said. The Bird House was one of a kind, he said: "That slanted bar, and all the tricks they pulled on people."

"It was always fun. It was a good place for a laugh, especially in the winter when there's nothing much to do," Steve Duggan said. He thought back over 23 years of visiting the Bird House. The stories ran together; the details liberated by time and intoxicating beverages.

"I remember coming in here once and there was a topless woman standing right there next to the (carved wooden) bird, getting her picture taken, like it was nothing," he said. "Then she came in and ordered a drink."

Bird House patrons were renowned for their occasional disregard for clothing. "We had nineteen and a half nude people in here once in the 80s," Berkhahn said.

She said she did not know if the Bird House would be rebuilt.

Another car pulled into the parking lot; the driver stepped out with his camera.

"Last call," Duggan told him.

Edition: Final

Section: Nation

Page: A1

Record Number: 114729

Copyright (c) 1996, Anchorage Daily News

METRO NEWS: BIRD HOUSE WON'T BE REBUILT

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Friday, April 19, 1996

Readability: 6-8 grade level (Lexile: 1000L)

Author: Staff

The owner of the historic Bird House bar said she will not rebuild the Turnagain Arm tavern destroyed by a fire in February. Susan Delak said Wednesday she's ready to leave the tavern business. "It's time for me to get on with other things," she said, although she hasn't decided what she will do next. Shortly after the fire, Delak said she would rebuild. But a new Bird House would not be the same as the old one, known for its practical jokes and raunchy atmosphere, she said Wednesday. "If you can't do it like it was . . . all you've got is a stinky old bar like everyone else's," she said. Delak declined to comment on whether insurance covered the damages, estimated at \$700,000 by fire officials. Fire investigators in February said faulty electrical wires most likely caused the fire. Delak managed to salvage the landmark bird that hung outside the bar's front door. "It will show up someplace in the future, I'm just not sure where," she said. The bar was vacant at the time of the fire.

Edition: Final

Section: Metro

Page: B3

Record Number: 67341

Copyright (c) 1996, Anchorage Daily News

Personal recollection from Doug Vandegraft: Like so many other Alaskans, when family and friends visited, I had to take them to the Bird House. In 1983, I chose a spot on the wall adjacent to the bathroom door -on the right- where I stapled my Coconino County (Arizona) Library Card. My guests followed my example and posted a variety of personal items (checks, business cards, dollar bills etc.).

I was in the Bird House one Sunday afternoon with my buddy Gary Nichols when a tourist bus stopped by. Gary said to me “Time to play the Pussy Cat Song.” This classic bawdy song by Connie Vannett was a favorite on the Bird House jukebox. The song hadn’t even finished and all of the tourists -seniors mostly- had already made a hasty exit. The woman bartender said to Gary “Thanks a fuckin’ lot.”

BIRD HOUSE TAVERN, RISEN FROM THE ASHES

Author: Patti Epler

Published May 25, 2011 - Anchorage Daily News

Updated: September 27, 2016

Talk about a blast from the past.

The quirky old Bird House bar that burned down in 1996 lives on inside another venerable Anchorage-area watering hole, Chilkoot Charlie's on Spenard Road.

If you were one of the thousands of 20-somethings who flocked to Alaska in the '70s looking to just get off of that L.A. freeway, you probably also made the pilgrimage to the Bird House Bar, the funky, circa-1903 miner's cabin halfway between Anchorage and Girdwood at Bird Creek.

Prankster-turned-bar-owner Dick Delak took over the place in 1968 (he died in a plane crash in 1993) and made the tavern into a must-do for pipeliners, hippies, skiers, tourists and anybody who wanted a unique Alaska experience.

The Bird House went up in smoke in 1996; faulty wiring, the fire inspectors said. It's a wonder it took that long. Its walls were covered -- literally covered, inches thick in some places -- with business cards and women's panties. The tilted wooden floor was always thick with sawdust or peanut shells, and people were packed elbow to elbow in the tiny one-room establishment.

Flash forward to 2011 and a Friday evening on the north end of Spenard Road. Chilkoots is not yet humming, and the cavernous log-sided nightclub is weirdly quiet inside. But wander through

the cavernous interior, past the long wooden bars and the bouncers guarding their special sections, and you'll come upon a small doorway. Step through and you're back in the day when hitchhiking was still cool and you could make \$50k a year as a maid in a pipeline construction camp.

It seems Chilkoots' longtime owner Mike Gordon once owned a piece of the Bird House, and he didn't want to let it die. He bought the name from Delak's widow, Susan, and set about re-creating the low-ceilinged, dimly lit dive inside the ever-expanding Chilkoots. He and his crew studied photos and other available material on the old bar and got a lot of help from folks who had tended the bar there, either from behind it or trying to find a comfortable spot on one of the butt-gouging log bar stools. Yes, those stools live again, and so does the bar that is so slanted you'll want to keep your hand on your beer mug to keep it from sliding down the counter.

Also still very much alive are the pranks that the Bird House was famous for. You can still try to call the ptarmigan to the small window put there just for that one, stroke an oosik, or eat a pickle or whatever -- Dick Delak had a lot of things up his sleeve. The original "Bird House Bird" statue (or one just like it) sits outside on the 25th Avenue side.

The walls are once again thick with business cards and other personal paperwork that people still plaster as they get plastered. Like the women's -- and men's -- underwear that are shed right then and there and pasted up by their owners. A current bartender explains that it was kind of hard to replicate the exact look because thongs have replaced bikini briefs in women's fashion, so Gordon and his artists had to look a little harder for the old stuff.

It's still one of a kind. And it's still, like they used to say, the only place you can rob with a Bic lighter.

Contact Patti Epler at patti@alaskadispatch.com