

Austin E. “Cap” Lathrop: The Father of Modern Alaska and the Father of The Fourth Avenue Theatre



Many people came to Alaska in the 19th and early 20th centuries to live in the wilderness; to commercially fish in the summers; or with hopes of finding quick mineral riches and then returning to the Lower 48 states for a life of luxury. However, a few Alaska pioneers envisioned more for Alaska and worked their entire lives to achieve it. One of the most influential and successful of those visionary pioneers was Austin E. “Cap” Lathrop (1865-1950).

Looking for new opportunities after the Panic of 1893, Lathrop became interested in frontier Alaska in 1895, after hearing that gold had been discovered in the Turnagain Arm section of the northern Kenai Peninsula. It was not the lure of mining gold that attracted him, but the business opportunities in shipping and freighting that a gold rush provided. Through a loan from A.E. Barton of the Fry Meat Packing Company, he jointly purchased with Captain (“One Eye”) Kelly and John O’Neill the L.J. Perry, a small, two-masted schooner, and piloted from port to port in Alaska, carrying passengers and freight. Beginning in 1907, he expanded his businesses into transportation, construction, coal mining, and broadcasting. After seeing the potential of the Copper River & Northwestern Railway, he started his Alaska Transfer Company in Cordova, the shipping point for the rich copper mines at Kennecott. He set up a draying business in Cordova, and contracted to haul all supplies from the docks to the railroad working areas. In 1915, he relocated his Transfer Company to Anchorage to handle the business created by the building of the Alaska Railroad. Lathrop formed a chain of Alaskan theaters in the years between 1910 and 1929, starting with the Empress at Cordova in 1915. His other theaters included Anchorage’s Empress (1916) and Fourth Avenue (1947), and the Empress (1927) and Lacey Street (1939) in Fairbanks, and others reportedly in Ketchikan, Nome, and Valdez.⁴ His interest in the movies led him in 1922 to co-create the Alaska Moving Picture Corp. that in 1924 produced “The Cheechahcos,” [sic] the first feature-length film shot entirely in Alaska⁵ that in 2003 was selected to be included in the National Film Registry.⁶ In his later years, Lathrop expanded his economic domain, with new interests in the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, Healy River Coal Mine, and his development of the broadcasting industry in Alaska, with KENI (Anchorage) and KFAR (Fairbanks)—the forerunners of what became the Midnight Sun Broadcasting Company.

As noted by historians Bruce Parham and Walter Van Horn:

He was the single most powerful businessman in the Territory of Alaska and its richest resident. He has been called an ‘industrialist,’⁷ ‘the builder of modern Alaska,’⁸ and ‘Alaska’s first homegrown millionaire.’⁹ Remembered as a man of great drive, vision, and the capacity for work, Lathrop was in the forefront of development in construction, transportation, communications, and mining. He built a substantial portion of its pre-World War II infrastructure that facilitated the admission of the 49th state into the Union. Over the course of a fifty-year career in the Pacific Northwest, forty-five of them in Alaska, Lathrop gradually extended his diverse interests to Cordova, Suntrana, Fairbanks, Anchorage, and other parts of Alaska. He owned a chain of movie theaters throughout the Territory, a coal mine at Suntrana, a newspaper, and two radio stations in Anchorage and Fairbanks. Other enterprises included banks, major buildings, apartments, and a model salmon cannery.¹⁰

During the first half of the 20th century, Lathrop was widely recognized “as the leading public figure”¹¹ of the Territory. He was a member of the Alaska House of Representatives from 1921 to 1923 and for a number of years represented Alaska on the Republican National Committee (1928 to 1932; 1948 to 1950). For 18 years (1932-1950), Lathrop was a member (including vice-president) of the Board of Regents of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines, renamed in 1935 as the University of Alaska. He was esteemed as a self-made man who stayed and reinvested his profits in Alaska rather than outside.¹²

4 See, Evangeline Atwood, Anchorage: All-American City (Portland, OR: Binfords & Mort, 1957), 51; and “Work Begins on Empress Theatre,” Cook Inlet Pioneer, May 11, 1916, 1.

5 <https://www.alaska.edu/uajourney/regents/1932-1950-austin-lathrop/>

6 Chris Beheim, “The Cheechahcos,” <https://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-film-preservation-board/documents/chechahcos.pdf>

7 Evangeline Atwood, Anchorage: All-America City, 52.

8 “‘Cap’ Lathrop was Pioneer,” Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, 17th Golden Days Edition, July 1969, A-24; and Elizabeth A. Tower, Alaska’s First Homegrown Millionaire: Life and Times of Cap Lathrop (Anchorage: Publications Consultants, 2006), 5.

9 Elizabeth A. Tower, Alaska’s First Homegrown Millionaire: Life and Times of Cap Lathrop (Anchorage: Publications Consultants, 2006).

10 Bruce Parham and Walter Van Horn, “Lathrop, Austin E.,” Cook Inlet Historical Society, Legends & Legacies, Anchorage, 1910-1940, <http://www.alaskahistory.org/biographies/lathrop-austin-eugene-cap/> (accessed February 28, 2017) Copy attached as Exhibit 4.

11 “Fourth Avenue Theatre,” National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, December 31, 1984, AHR Site No. ANC-284, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/nrhp/text/82001620.pdf> (accessed February 26, 2017).

12 Claus M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, Alaska: A History (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011), 225