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FORUM



New Fiction by Eowyn Ivey | Ben Huff: The Last Road North | Tlingit Macbeth | General Grants

The Last Road North

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY BEN HUFF







(page 26) mile 367: road and pipeline, 2009
(above) mile 316: waiting trucks, Chandalar Shelf, 2011
(right) mile 286: Steven and Alice, 2011
mile 173: outhouse, Finger Mountain Wayside, 2009





(above) mile 249: Kevin, 2011

(right) mile 56: Griz, 2009

mile 175: sign, Old Man Camp, 2008

(front cover) mile 330: musher's truck, 2011



The Witness

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN HUFF

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LASKA ROUTE 11, the James W. Dalton Highway, is known colloquially to Alaskans as the North Slope Haul Road, or just the Haul Road for short.

It was built in 1974 to be a supply route for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and the Prudhoe Bay oil fields. From Livengood, Alaska, a tiny settlement about 80 miles north of Fairbanks, the Haul Road points north 414 miles to Deadhorse. Unpaved, it's one of the most rugged, isolated and treacherous roads in North America. The Haul Road's few road signs bear the nicknames given to certain sections and features by truckers in decades past: the Roller Coaster; Oil Spill Hill; Beaver Slide; Oh Shit Corner.

The Haul Road crosses the Yukon River, the Brooks Range, the Arctic Circle, and the Continental Divide as it parallels the oil pipeline through spectacular wilderness, cutting the lone manmade groove between the boundaries of national parks and wildlife refuges

to either side. These include Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). It passes through seasonally inhabited Prospect Creek Camp, site of the coldest temperature ever recorded in the United States: 80 degrees below zero on January 4, 1971. With grades as steep as 15 percent, the Haul Road's altitude ranges from just above sea level to 4,739 feet at the top of Atigun Pass.

Featured in the History channel series *Ice Road Truckers* and the British Broadcasting Corporation show *World's Most Dangerous Roads*, the Haul Road is driven by approximately 150 to 250 large trucks every day. Since opening to the public in 1994, the northernmost road in Alaska has also drawn adventur-

ous souls from all over the state, the Lower 48 and abroad. Few, if any, have driven it as often as professional photographer Ben Huff.

Roughly two years after moving to Fairbanks with his wife in 2005, Huff decided on a whim to drive up the Haul Road to the Arctic Circle, which is about 115 miles north of Manley Hot Springs. Driving back from that day trip, Huff yearned to drive the Haul Road again as soon as possible, this time all the way up to the shore of the Arctic Ocean, and to make photographs along the way.

ONCE WASN'T ENOUGH. Huff developed a serious Haul Road habit.

During the next five years, he drove it dozens of times, in all seasons, sleeping in his truck under the midnight sun and in noon darkness.

"The Last Road North," a solo exhibit of his resulting photography, opened at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau earlier this year. Huff is currently at work on a book of photography and text of the same title, and shopping for a publisher.

This issue of Forum presents the print debut of a selection of photographs from "The Last Road North" on pages 26-31. Huff granted Forum the following interview in April.

"I went looking for the frontier that was promised and found a complex landscape, and a road that served as a physical and psychological line between wilderness and progress," Huff writes of "The Last Road North."

"I went, like the others, to drive as far as I could drive. To see for myself. I hitched my wagon to the great American need to point my wheels toward the Western horizon. When I ran out of West, I went North."

Driving back to Fairbanks in summer of 2007 during your first trip on the Haul Road, what was going through your mind? What about it captured your interest enough to spark this project?

The Arctic Circle is a monumental geographic line, but it's also very nondescript, and photographically not all that interesting. So on the way back to Fairbanks, I was really struck more by what I hadn't seen than what I had — what does the Brooks Range look like, or the North Slope, the oil fields? Where were all those trucks going and why were they in such a hurry to get there?

Anytime you're on the Haul Road you're encountering trucks, lots of trucks, that are driving that particular road for one specific reason: they're going all the way up. Very few vehicles on the Haul Road are going just part way, so turning around at the Arctic Circle, long before reaching the oil fields, felt like cutting short a mission.

So the original inspiration was really just this romanticism of imagining what was further up the road, wrapped up in this need to drive and see what there is to see.

Also, I've always driven long distances. I've driven all over the Midwest, all over the West. Being in a car and driving long hours has just always been part of my existence, and the Haul Road was the first place in Alaska I found that scratched that itch.

Once you'd driven the Haul Road two or three times, why did you go back? What did you find so interesting about a dirt and gravel road in the middle of nowhere?

I think mainly it was the conflict inherent to the relationship between the road's purpose and the path

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Ben Huff makes a photograph on the Haul Road. *Dave Hyllton*

it travels. The Haul Road is totally unique. There's no other road like it anywhere in the world. It crosses the Arctic Circle, the Brooks Range, and the Yukon River; it traverses the heart of some of the most pristine and visually striking wilderness in the world, and it does all this for one reason and one reason only: oil.

That's a fascinating dichotomy to me. I was always very aware of the fact that I was burning a ton of oil driving up and down this long road doing something that in the end of the day may not be worth a damn thing. At the end of the Haul Road I could sit in my car at the North Slope, burning oil to stay warm and comfortable, and watch the Porcupine caribou herd through my windshield.

How absurd is that? How fortunate, but also how completely ridiculous. That dichotomy, that absurdity, is representative of the complicated relationship between wilderness and oil in Alaska that is symbolized

by the Haul Road, and that I wanted to sort of figure out and puzzle through as best I could in making these photographs.

How many trips did you make up and down the Haul Road?

Unfortunately I didn't keep precise records. I wish now I would have. Practically every weekend for about five years, I was trying to head up the Haul Road. I made a push north I'd say about every two weeks. Sometimes it was just a day trip where I only made it as far as the Yukon River [*ed. note: about 55 miles up from the southern terminus*]. But I made it to Deadhorse, all the way up, at least 10 times. And I turned around at Coldfoot, which is about halfway up, just south of the Brooks Range, about 20 other times, so I covered a lot of miles.

How did you decide when and what to photograph along the road?

What I was really looking for, paramount to everything else, was a sort of melancholy, after-the-boom, quiet feeling to the work. There aren't any radio stations to listen to when you're driving the Haul Road, and your cell phone doesn't work, so it can be a very lonely environment when you're by yourself, in a similar but at the same time very different way than when you're hiking through a vast landscape. You're alone with your thoughts, but engine noise is your constant companion, and you can't let your mind drift completely, because it's a challenging road to drive. It's exhausting, and I kept coming back to wanting to make photographs that captured this certain road-weary, almost regretful feeling I found myself and others experiencing on the Haul Road, asking myself, "What does that feeling look like? What are the colors of that? What are the shapes?"

Also, when I first started making photographs for this project I didn't know exactly what I wanted, but I knew what I absolutely did not want, which was photographs of big, wide-open, mythical, sweeping landscapes that romanticized the view from the Haul Road. I didn't want that because it was too easy.

What do you mean by "too easy?"

Well, the reality is, when you're driving the Haul Road, the oil pipeline is basically either on your right or on your left, so it's very easy to pull over, stand on the side of the road opposite the pipeline, and make a pretty, tourist-y photograph of a vast Alaska landscape that looks very similar to what you'd get if you were standing in the middle of the Brooks Range, 200 or 300 miles from the nearest road, vehicle or structure. I had no interest in letting myself or the viewer

off the hook by making photographs of vast, pristine landscapes where there's a road and a pipeline just out of sight. I wanted the viewer to always know and for myself to be always rooted in the fact that even if you drive the Haul Road through all this incredibly beautiful wilderness, and you reach the edge of the Arctic Ocean, the fact is you drove there. I wanted that uneasy awareness to always be simmering in the background. That's why, even with the pure landscapes I made for "The Last Road North," there's always a little bit of road showing at the bottom of the photograph. There's always at least a little touch of something in them that's manmade.

The photos in "The Last Road North" were taken year-round. How is the Haul Road different in the dead of winter versus the summer, other than the obvious differences in weather?

Surprisingly, in a lot of ways it's a lot easier to drive the Haul Road in the winter. It's certainly faster, because the road doesn't get all rutted up in the winter. There are no washboards or potholes. And when it's really cold, like 20 or 30 below, the surface actually gets kind of tacky, which is a safer way to drive. The flip side, of course, is that it's often so cold on the road in the winter that if you get in trouble you can really be in trouble. But just the physical act of driving the road in the winter is actually kind of great. It's serene, like you're cruising along in a toboggan, even though it's important to always keep in mind there's danger there, lurking.

Did you ever go off the road or crash?

I did. I was very, very lucky in how it turned out. One of the first winter trips I made, I ditched the car off the road into a snow bank in the middle of winter

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in February. It was dark, and I'd probably been behind the wheel for longer than I should have. I came over a high point and then around a corner and there was a snowdrift completely across the road that caught me by surprise.

Fortunately, a convoy of semis passed by, and one of the drivers spotted my car off the road. He popped me out, no problem. It was amazing how nonchalant he was about it, while I was a bit out of my head.

The act of going off the road, though, helped me put the road itself in a different perspective, in that I felt a little less alien and a little more part of the tribe. I felt like I'd earned a stripe in a way, like I was more a part of the culture of the road once I'd been confronted with these circumstances I couldn't control and that at the time seemed pretty dire.

Where did you sleep? Did you camp?

I tent camped some in the summer, but I slept in my vehicle. In the winter I'd just have tons of sleeping bags and I'd find a place to pull over and go to sleep until the cold woke me up a couple of hours later, then I'd run the engine until the interior warmed up, and I'd just keep repeating that cycle, and of course burning more oil, until I felt like I could start driving again. It wasn't the most restful sleep, but it did enable me to check every hour or two to see if the light was doing anything interesting, so that was a plus.

The people you met and photographed on the road whose portraits are part of "The Last Road North" – who were they? What were they doing there?

The ones I was really drawn to were the ones who were driving the Haul Road for the same sort of reasons I was — to see what's up there. To bear witness.

Initially I was making photographs of the guys who work on the trucks and drive the semis on the Haul Road, and they are really interesting people in a lot of cases, but they were also there primarily to do a job, and some of them really didn't want to be there at all. They were on the road because a paycheck was waiting for them at the end.

I became more and more interested in making photographs of the people who were bumping along the road more or less just because they could, who were headed north for a reckoning of the space and the road for themselves. The seekers. I'd ask them why they were there and the most common reply was, "I don't really know." They couldn't articulate a clear reason, but the light and the landscape and the moose they just saw were reason enough.



Dennis Wilmer

You describe the Haul Road as “a psychological barrier between wilderness and progress.” How so?

First of all, I want to stress that this work's not about politics and it's not about oil. I didn't want it to be too didactic because I don't think that's where the strength of the work resides. But I do also feel like the Haul Road for me really encompasses and represents a certain struggle between competing priorities that will determine the legacy of this state within the next 50 years.

On either side it's bookended by state and national preserves and parks, wilderness spaces that are cut off from development, but that are the subject of a lot of pressure and political fights about whether to open them up for oil exploration. And there's the Haul Road, driving straight up the middle of these lands, for the purpose of extracting oil from the North Slope. The Haul Road is a bridge between the land we have left untouched and the land we are exploiting, and I don't use that word exclusively in a derogatory way.

Just as I wanted to stay away from pristine landscapes, I also didn't make photographs of pump stations or another heavy-handed images of infrastructure. I made very few photographs of the pipeline. I made very few photographs of the trucks. For the most part I wanted to stay away from the physical evidence of the industry but still allude to it in a way that reflects the ambiguity and internal conflict a lot of Alaskans feel when it comes to issues of wilderness versus resource extraction. I was always trying to pull back from being too specific, always trying to hit that sweet spot of photography, that gray area between fact and fiction that allows the viewer to come to their own conclusions.

In the end, I want my work to be read as sincere. These photos as are as close as I know how. ■

■ www.huffphoto.com