

The Alaska Guides took trophy hunters to Tustumena Lake in 1920-30's

by Gary Titus

Many people have lived on the Kenai Peninsula for years and have never seen one of its most striking features—Tustumena Lake. This huge lake (25 miles long and five miles wide) is almost as big as Kachemak Bay, but it is off the road system and is usually accessed by boat from the Kasilof River. Historical log cabins are found occasionally along on the shores of Tustumena Lake, and the moose, bear, sheep and other game that roam the hills have long attracted the interest of outdoorsmen. Herein lies the story of one such outdoorsman Gus Gelles and his trophy hunt guide business—the Alaska Guides, Inc.

In the fall of 1925 Gelles, a salesman and entrepreneur from Anchorage, flew with pioneer aviator Russell Merrill over the Kenai Peninsula, checking out good hunting and fishing areas. Gelles had the idea of organizing the peninsula's hunting guides into one organization. In 1926 he formed the Alaska Glacier Tours Association (AGTA), with headquarters in Anchorage, and a base camp called "Birchwood" on the northeast shore of Tustumena Lake near the mouth of Bear Creek (formerly known as Birch Creek). In 1927 Gelles changed the Association's name to the Alaska Guides, Inc., by which name the group is usually remembered today.

On August 13, 1926 the Association's first group of hunters arrived from Seattle. They made the trip from Anchorage to Kasilof on the Association's new boat AGTA, and continued up the Kasilof River by powerboat. The party was guided by Alex Liska, Fred Judd and Andrew Berg. After spending a month hunting in the Tustumena Lake area and taking many motion pictures of game, the hunters returned to Anchorage enthusiastic over the experiences they had enjoyed on their trip.

The hunting camps of the Alaska Guides were of the highest standards; at the Birchwood base camp, wall tents were equipped with chairs, dressing tables, rugs, spring beds, mattresses, sheets and pillow cases. Fires were laid each morning and evening. The hunters traveled from the base camp by horseback to moose camps and sheep camps. Packers were sent ahead to

set up the camps with all the comforts, including a cook.

A sure sign of a good hunting camp is the quality of the food. For example, consider this dinner menu served at the Alaska Guides' base camp by chef Andy Leland: cream of oyster soup, cold slaw, sweet and sour pickles, brook trout, tenderloin of moose a la hamburg with onion dressing, served with wild cranberry sauce; boiled ham and cabbage, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, creamed peas, mushrooms fried in butter, Tustumena frijoles, white and raisin bread, hot baking powder biscuits, strawberries, coconut banana layer cake, sugar cookies, doughnuts, molasses drop cakes, creamed Swiss cheese, tea and coffee.

A typical hunt would cost about \$1324, which included round trip from Seattle to Seward via steamer, round trip from Seward to Anchorage via railroad, and roundtrip by plane or boat to Tustumena Lake, complete with guides, food and lodging.

Well-known personalities hunted with the Alaska Guides: Coloman Jonas, the president of the Denver taxidermy firm Jonas Brothers; Captain Billy Fawcett, publisher of "Whiz Bang" magazine; and Van Campen Heilner, field representative of the American Museum of Natural History and associate editor of "Field and Stream" magazine, to name a few.

In 1930 the Alaska Guides was the largest organization of its kind in the world; they employed 45 men and had brought in \$250,000 dollars over the previous five-year period. They had \$25,000 invested in sixty head of horses, saddles and camp equipment.

The Alaska Guides operated in the Tustumena Lake region into the late 1930's, when the company was finally disbanded due to financial difficulties. Today all that remains of the Birchwood camp are a few logs and faded photographs of happy outdoorsmen.

Tustumena Lake still attracts hunters from all over the world for moose, caribou, Dall sheep and bears. Hikers and horsemen continue to explore the vast wilderness. Fishermen test their skills with the wide variety of fish, and all users enjoy the untrammelled beauty of Tustumena Lake, which many would con-

sider the “Crown Jewel” of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

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