

## Law Libraries in Alaska

Soon after I arrived in Alaska, my boss suggested that I needed to get out of Anchorage and visit some of the branch libraries around the state. So right after I bought my car, I was off to visit Homer and Kenai.

As a reminder, the population of Alaska is 686,000, with 290,000 in the Anchorage area alone. Fairbanks and Juneau each have slightly more than 30,000 people. After that, there is a dramatic decline in population. The court system law libraries are located in towns where there are superior courts. These locations might have 4,000-7,000 people each.

We provide Westlaw access in all the court system law libraries, though the Internet can be very slow, and the computers tend to be aged. When I visit other locations, I try to meet with the public librarian to educate him or her about our services. I also try to meet with members of the bar to educate them and learn what they need.

I started my drive on a crisp early October morning. I'd made this trip down Turnagain Arm on my first visit to the state; as the mountains rose around me, I was reminded again of the beauty of Alaska. It was already a bit icy and I was probably being over-cautious since it had been years since I'd driven on ice.

Homer and Kenai are on the Kenai Peninsula, famous for fishing. As you approach Homer, there is an incredible view of the town, Kachemak Bay, and the Kenai Mountains. The law library is small—I found (and left on the shelf) a variety of out-of-date treatises in addition to the Alaska primary resources.

Kenai is a bigger town, with more judges and more attorneys. The law library had been downsized a few years earlier, and the attorneys were still angry about it. The library had long runs of mostly cancelled reporters and more treatises. Six months after my visit, this library was put into storage for a year while the facility was renovated. The books haven't come out yet.

In March 2007, I traveled to Sitka, Juneau, Ketchikan, and Wrangell in Southeast Alaska. Each community has quirks. Juneau is the capital and was bustling with the legislature in session. I went to meet my representative so she would have a face to go with my name. Sitka has a large library, again with many resources that are not current. Ketchikan was the original location of the United

States District Court for Alaska, being the closest town to Washington State. It attracts tourists in summer but is quiet in the winter since logging has diminished. This is also where one of the infamous "bridges to nowhere" could be built—the airport is across the bay from town, so travel between currently requires a ferry ride.

Later that year, I was able to visit Kotzebue and Nome in northwest Alaska. This was my first flight above the Arctic Circle. Alaska Airlines flies 737s with the front half of the plane converted to a cargo hold. Each of these towns has

about 3,200 people. My host in Kotz, the local judge, drove me out of town where I saw the dump, the local wind farm, and a spectacular view across the tundra on the way back to town. The law library in Kotzebue is the public computer. Nome has a large law library that is full of long-lapsed regional reporters but also has a current *U.S. Code Annotated* and some treatises.

I visited Barrow, the farthest north jet airport in the world. While I didn't see any polar bears or dip my toe into the Chukchi Sea, I did attend the Rotary Club meeting at the local Mexican restaurant. In Barrow, the sun doesn't rise for over two months in the winter and it has 324 days per year with a minimum temperature below freezing. There is not, however, snow on the ground year-round. In Barrow, a medium-size bag of Ruffles potato chips costs \$5.79 and a jar of Jif is \$5.19.

I also traveled to Bethel in western Alaska on the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta. My trip to Bethel was extended a day because it was too windy to fly out. While the ground was frozen when I arrived, it warmed up so that everything turned to mud. There's a Subway sandwich shop in Bethel, as well as a restaurant that serves sushi and Chinese food.

Fairbanks was a past site of the Alaska Library Association meeting so I went to

the conference and to see the library. It's in a new courthouse and has a full-time librarian.

Palmer is the closest branch to Anchorage—a 40-minute drive. Valdez was my most recent trip and the only time I flew in a smallish plane. The town gets more than 25 feet of snow per year, and its court system library serves the public as well as three or four attorneys in the area.

I wish I could tell you more about what I've learned about each of these communities. The diversity of climates, topography, and economies still amazes me. A common theme is the ingenuity and perseverance of the people who live here. In Barrow, the law clerk and magistrate were taking Chinese classes. There are colleges in these towns, as well as vibrant public libraries.

The Alaska Court System maintains libraries in 17 locations outside of Anchorage, and it's a challenge everywhere to make legal information accessible to residents. I look forward to being able to return to the branch libraries on a regular basis. ■



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