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## *Annual Conversion Issue*

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# Private Motor Coach Goes to Alaska

Article and photos  
by Patty Lonsbary

Ed Lonsbary is shown above at a rest stop enjoying the view of the Alaska Range. The photo was taken while traveling from Paxson to Cantwell, Alaska, via the 114-mile long and very dusty gravel Denali Highway which is closed in the winter. In spite of the fact the photo was taken near midnight, the sky is still bright because the sun does not set at these latitudes at this time of the year.

**P**atty's Charm logged more than 10,000 miles June through July for a trip taking Mimi Cocks of New York through Alaska and Western Canada. Cocks is a 50-something, single woman who travels, bicycles, hikes, meditates and enjoys photography. A previous trip on *Patty's Charm* took her round trip from Pennsylvania to Yellowstone National Park in 2001. Now, with a second trip past, Cocks will tell you with her distinct "New York" accent that she just loves living aboard the bus for weeks at a time.

A rendezvous on June 16 in Seattle, Washington, joined Cocks from her cross-country flight out of New York with *Patty's Charm*. Private Motor Coach, Inc. and owner-operator Ed Lonsbary had deadheaded from Whitehouse, Texas, to Seattle with a load of Cocks' stuff – bicycle, cold weather wear and favorite foods – that had been shipped a month earlier.

During the first days of the trip, Lonsbary drove from Seattle to Prince Rupert, British Columbia. There he loaded *Patty's Charm* aboard *M/V Kennicott*. The *Kennicott*

is the newest vessel of the Alaska Marine Highway fleet. She is 382 feet long, 85 feet wide with nine decks. This marine vessel crosses the Gulf of Alaska along the Inside Passage, a natural protected waterway extending from the state of Washington to Skagway, Alaska. With *Patty's Charm* tethered in the hull of the ferry, Lonsbary and Cocks cruised the Inside Passage with only one stop – Juneau, Alaska's capital city.

At the stopover in Juneau on June 24, Cocks saw her first glacier and Lonsbary's wife Patty joined the travelling pair. Patty

Ed is photographed with *Patty's Charm* on a Haul Road 10 miles north of Valdez, Alaska. Although this is a total wilderness area, it is still easy to reach. The view is near the Chugach Mountains and the Matanuska Glacier which feeds the adjacent stream.



Patty Lonsbary stands beside her namesake, *Patty's Charm*, in the cargo hold of the Alaskan ferry, *M.V. Kennicott*, while enroute from Prince Rupert, D.C. to Valdez, Alaska, via the Inside Passage. This was the only motorcoach on board at that time.



had flown to Juneau four days earlier to begin her first time exploration of Alaska. She had toured the Alaska State Museum and the Last Chance Mining Museum, visited St. Nicholas Orthodox Church and the Shrine of St. Therese, and ridden the Mount Roberts Tramway. Yet, nothing impressed her greater than the natural beauty of hiking and exploring the Mendenhall Glacier. At her recommendation, Cocks hopped a cab to experience the Mendenhall Glacier. This popular attraction is massive with a face 100 feet tall, 1½ miles wide, its length is more than six miles cut through the mountain peaks Juneau with its dense ice. After this short sampling of Alaska's glacier phenomenon, Cocks returned to the *Kennicott* with awe and excitement. She was ready for more Alaska scenery.

Due to the fact Southeast Alaska is not connected by a road system, the people of Alaska use the state ferry system as a vital part of their transportation. During the two-day ferry trip from Juneau to Valdez, Cocks, Ed and Patty watched for marine wildlife and coastal scenery from the solarium and forward observation deck. They enjoyed long visits in the cocktail lounge with other tourists and Alaskan residents who could share more about life in Alaska than any visitor's guide book.

In Valdez, the wheels of *Patty's Charm* would begin to roll. Off-loaded from the ferry by a massive lift, Ed resumed driving the bus a short distance to boon-dock along a stream and mountain pass just outside town. For a couple of days, Valdez offered hiking, bicycling and the sights of an Alaskan town – fishing boats in the harbor, shops for outdoor enthusiasts and T-shirt hunting tourists and more. A museum commemorates the 1964 earthquake that left the town in ruin. Unique to Valdez, it is the terminus of the Trans Alaska Pipeline System which transports crude oil from the oil fields on Alaska's North Slope across 800 miles of



Mendenhall Glacier is the largest of 38 glaciers which flow from the Juneau ice field. Juneau can only be reached by air and boat. It is one of only two U.S. state capitals which cannot be reached by driving from another state.

tundra, rugged mountains and rivers. At the Valdez Marine Terminal, crude oil is loaded into tankers for transport to refineries on the U.S. West Coast. On the afternoon of June 28, *Patty's Charm* wound from Valdez to Paxson along the Richardson Highway (Alaska Route 4) to connect with the Denali Highway (Alaska Route 8) for a dusty ride.

The Denali Highway extends 134 miles from Paxson to Cantwell, Alaska. The first 21 miles from Paxson and the last three miles to Cantwell are paved; the rest is gravel. Surfaces ranged from good gravel to rough and rocky. The occasional passing of car, truck or bus, stirred dust so much you could taste it. Vehicles behind *Patty's Charm* were quick to pass rather than follow a cloud of dust.

Unusually clear skies offered views of the Alaska Range and summits such as Mt. McKinley, Mt. Sanford, Mt. Hayes, Hess Mountain and Mt. Deborah. Large, paved turnouts made it easy for Ed to stop the motorcoach for photographing lake and glacier scenery or simply the quiet pleasure of seeing forever off in the distant mountains.

The Milepost book describes campsites along the Denali Highway as primitive, but traveling in *Patty's Charm* could hardly be "primitive." The diesel-powered generator creates electricity for microwaving "Ed's famous tuna potatoes" and stovetop cooking. The same generator runs heat and air conditioning (We used both in Alaska). Holding tanks on board make for a full func-

Customer Mimi Cocks from Levittown, New York, stands next to *Patty's Charm* at a campground in Spences Bridge, B.C. Nearby is the famous Frazier River which is the site of large salmon runs each year.



*Patty's Charm* is photographed at Milepost #1 which is the start of the Alaska Highway to Alaska. From this point in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, it only take 1,221.8 driving miles to reach Alaska.





tioning bathroom and hot showers to rinse the road dust away.

The closest to primitive camping came about one evening when Ed built a campfire. Since it never really got dark (daylight lasted for 18 hours or more throughout the trip) and it was not really cold that day, the fire was just for "the effect." Besides that, Ed needed the space in the bus bay where he stored the firewood for other stuff. Hence, we had a fire.

The fire produced one of Cocks' most memorable meals of the trip. When the embers were glowing, Patty foil-packed left-over beans and placed them into the fire ring to heat. She balanced a two-foot by two-foot square of plywood used for leveling the bus onto Cocks' lap to serve as a table, and plopped the hot bean pack on the makeshift table. The steam and the spicy aroma rose out of the opened foil pack. Cocks dug in to the beans then asked for seconds saying, "This is gourmet."

After two days of "primitive" camping, *Patty's Charm* settled into the Denali RV Park. Now, we could rely on a 30-amp power connection not the generator. This became base camp for three days to enjoy excursions for wildlife sightings, a dog sled demonstration, hiking and bicycling in Denali National Park.

In Talkeetna, we camped under the cottonwood trees near the Talkeetna River. While Cocks took a ride on the Talkeetna train to see the countryside, Ed and Patty tested their angling skills in the river. After several successful casts, Patty said, "Watch this," and cast out into the middle of the river, snagging a huge log. Determined not to lose his new \$7 lure, Ed stripped to his jockey briefs and waded into the icy river water. (Someday ask Ed if the water was cold.) He got the lure, and Patty got a good laugh.

You could hear Ed chuckling once in a while from inside the bus, but he was not laughing about retrieving the lure. He was reading a book about Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, and the early company history reminded him of his own follies in founding Private Motor Coach, Inc. Patty, who found joy in reading several paperbacks from the library book exchange, was surprised that Ed's business book could generate chuckles.

When the books closed, Patty and Ed visited the Talkeetna Historical Society Museum documenting the history of the town. Talkeetna survived through the years as gold prospectors and miners, fur traders, riverboat pilots, aviation pioneers and railroad workers sought services. Now the town thrives as an outdoor recreation center for hunting, fishing and recreation enthusiasts. In Talkeetna, you can also take a summer dog-mushing trip and fly over the summit

*Patty's Charm* was photographed on a simple Haul Road just north of Valdez, Alaska. Note the clouds touching the mountains in the background. In many places in Alaska, wilderness areas can be found not far outside the cities.



of Mt. McKinley to land on a glacier. Cocks did both.

By contrast, Anchorage is like any metropolitan city with shops, restaurants, hotels and entertainment. A Saturday open air market offered samplings of Russian cabbage rolls and other ethnic foods, crafts, jewelry and furs. A short drive from the city is Iditarod Headquarters in Wasilla, the sled dog racing capital of the world. Anchorage is home to the Alaska Native Heritage Center. The displays, exhibits, films, performances and demonstrations present the tra-

ditions of Alaska's indigenous people. We visited each place knowing that the natural scenery of Alaska we had experienced far exceeded the city and museum centers. Not to be outdone, Anchorage had a surprise in store.

Just before midnight on the 4th of July, the booms of fireworks woke us, and the sky – though not fully midnight black – became lit by the cascades of lights reflected on the building and high in the sky. This was Alaska's grand finale. □

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