

200 W 34th Avenue, #825
Anchorage, Alaska 99503
February 26, 2017

Testimony
SB 46-Senator David Wilson
Senate State Affairs
February 28, 2017

In researching a story for the 50th anniversary of the ALCAN Highway in the early 1990s, I learned that the Alaska section had been built by black members of the Corps of Engineers who were thought to be incapable of performing on a war front by many of their Army high command. Their task—which required punching through virgin wilderness on a route blocked by the Rocky Mountains and sub-Arctic permafrost, during the roughest winter on record—was initially predicted to require 12 years and likened to construction of the Panama Canal. Yet the black troops performed so well, in such short order, that the road was operational in less than two years and many of the black builders subsequently went on to acquit themselves equally well fighting in war zones around the globe during World War II.

As a result, the U.S. Army became the first government agency to integrate, yet my investigation showed the black builders of the ALCAN had been written out of history. Moving to rectify this, the Department of Journalism, University of Alaska Fairbanks, where I taught, sponsored two reunions for black veterans to document their story, and created a museum exhibit on their feat that toured Alaska, Northwestern Canada, the Black Archives at Tallahassee A & M, and finally—at the insistence of the late Sen. Ted Stevens, and General Colin Powell—the Pentagon.

This show garnered the attention of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and major media networks. In addition, it prompted the making of an impressive documentary by Public Broadcasting and publication of books by major houses. Yet as the 75th anniversary of the highway building approaches, few remain aware of the origin of Alaska's only land link to the outside world, or the extraordinary ramifications of its building.

Please help fill this gap, and honor our highway builders. It's still a mighty fine road.

Lael Morgan, Alaska writer
Currently professor via Distance Education, University of Texas at Arlington
Professor Emeritus University of Alaska Fairbanks
Voted Alaska Historian of the Year, 1998
Alaska Woman's Hall of Fame 2014
Winner of the Evangeline Atwood Award, Alaska Historical Society, 2015

laelmorgan@cs.com
907-248-6356