



The Face of Fillmore

By Sherry Shepard
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This week the Face of Fillmore is about comparisons. In all honesty, I had not planned to write a column this week. My mind has been hundreds of miles away, but while there, an interesting thing happened. My husband and I spent a few days visiting the town of Wrangell, Alaska. I began tallying up the similarities and differences in our two towns and thought I'd pass a few on to the readers that might be of interest.

Wrangell is a town of 2400 people nestled in a protected cove on the northern tip of a 30 mile long island, 750 miles north of Seattle. It is the only town in Alaska to have been ruled by four different nations: Tlingit Indians, Russia, Great Britain and the United States.

Here the comparisons began. While a similar size to Fillmore, Wrangell is located in the opposite type of terrain, with its houses built up the side of a steep hill near the dense Tongass National Forest. The climate is very different as well. Wrangell's temperatures seldom get below freezing with rain more common than snow. The highs are in the 70's, a refreshing change for us.

While Fillmore is located on a major highway artery leading to unlimited miles in any direction, Wrangell has only 14 miles of paved roads with its only access to the outside world by plane or boat.

Landing at the Wrangell Airport is not at all like landing in Fillmore with the wide expanse of flat land in any direction, should your pilot misjudge the runway. As we made our descent to land in Wrangell, all we could see was water, since the airstrip is surrounded by it on three sides. We dropped lower and lower and just as I saw the edge of dry land, the wheels hit. With all the braking power we had, the 737 came to a halt just a few yards shy of the end of the runway and more water. Someone compared it to landing on an aircraft carrier.

We gathered up our luggage and waited a few minutes for our ride into town just over the hill. While waiting, a man asked if we needed a ride into town. That was just the start of the friendliness we had been told about in Wrangell.

Becky, the co-owner of Rooney's Roost, picked us up in her van and took us to the Bed and Breakfast. Staying at this charming spot and enjoying the hospitality and amazing gourmet food was certainly one of the high points of our trip.

After showing us to our room, she said she was going to the grocery store before it closed. We tagged along to pick up sandwiches for our next day's excursion up the Stikine River on a jet boat. Businesses in



Wrangell open late – generally 10 a.m. – and close early – 5 p.m., except for the grocery store which stays open until 6 p.m. No late night grocery runs there.

The young man who piloted the jet boat we took up the river reminded me of the young men in our community who served our country in the Middle East. As he dodged floating icebergs at thirty miles per hour, he told of a few of his experiences when deployed to Iraq, among them the way he enjoyed stormy days as the enemy was less likely to shoot at them when it was storming.

Perhaps the greatest similarity in the two towns, besides the friendliness of the residents, is the interest in preserving the history of the communities. On each of the older businesses in Wrangell, there is a framed history of that building, or the one that stood in its place, along with a picture of it in years gone by. Walking from store to store, one can get a feel for the early settlers of that area. While the area had a gold rush, lumbering was the main industry for many years.

Wrangell is a newer community than Fillmore as it was incorporated in 1903. It was developed from a trading post between the Tlingits and the early white settlers. Fillmore, established in 1851, has many of the original buildings still intact while Wrangell has seen two devastating fires in its history, which completely decimated the main section of town. One of those was in 1906 and the other in 1952.

While these two communities are hundreds of miles apart in location, it was encouraging to know that people all over the country are interested in preserving their local history, just as we are here in Fillmore.