



The Buzby Family

Harry & Louisa Buzby, Pioneers in Alaska



Buzby overview

Like most of us Alaskans, Harry Ephraim Buzby was unafraid of adventure. In pursuit of employment he ventured to scenes and settings that demanded study, skill, and nerve. His path across the continent from New Jersey to Washington, then on to Alaska demanded exploits of consistent hard work as well as calm in the presence of danger. From hunting buffalo in Montana at age 16 (ca 1879) and narrowly escaping a stampede, to staking a claim in Nome, Alaska, only to have his partner sell it out from under him, Harry pursued his fortune on several frontiers, and eventually settled into ranching in the Fairbanks area.

Members of the Buzby family still reside in Alaska, as well as in the lower 48. The offspring of Harry and Louisa's four sons live predominantly in this state. Their two daughters, Bessie and Marian, married and eventually moved to Washington and California, passing on the lineage through the Spencer and Crowell surnames. Bessie Spencer's son, Ted, remained in Alaska, and his children and grandchildren continue to contribute to Alaska's life and culture.

The Buzby last name originated in England, with a group that temporarily settled in Denmark just long enough to pick up the unique "Buzby with a Z" spelling, then returned to England. After emigrating to America in the early 1700's, the Buzby family became established in New Jersey. The Harry Buzby family line was transplanted to Alaska, when Harry set sail from Seattle to seek his fortunes in the Nome gold rush, 1898.



Harry at the Fairbanks ranch.

Loisa Hunt, her mother, and sister.

Harry Buzby was born in New Jersey in 1863 in Burlington, New Jersey. He moved westward with parents to Illinois, then Nebraska. At age 16 he moved on to Montana and hunted buffalo in 1879, with a partner named Monty, a Civil War veteran who'd served in a Wisconsin regiment. They received \$2 per hide, and 2 cents per pound for meat. During this employment, Harry was once in a buffalo stampede, as described in the following excerpt from

Early Days in Montana – Reminiscence by Harry Buzby:

“A small bit of excitement came my way that winter. A few days after we began killing I took an ax and my rifle and walked down a draw about a mile from camp to cut some dry cedar wood that stood in the bottom, with a steep shale ridge on the south side - some of the trees were more than two feet in diameter at the base but not over ninety five feet in height. They had been dead five years and made excellent fuel. Monty started for [the far side] of a high hill. I heard him shoot a few times after I begun chopping. Thirty minutes after the last shot I heard a muffled roar and listening for the cause became aware that the Buffalo were pouring down the steep hillside.

I had placed near a large sound tree close by. I grabbed the gun and hugged that tree for dear life yelling at the top of my lungs for all that I was worth. There were between 300 and 400 buffalo all pouring over that hill in a bunch, crowding each other as they came and actually shook the tree I was behind. I tho't that it was all off with me - but the tree stood and in a few minutes they had passed and were gone. Some of the smaller trees were broken short off at the ground. I could in no position to shoot without being knocked down and trampled and chances are would have done no good. Some of the animals scented me and snorted so that as they passed I felt their hot breath. It was indeed a close shave and left me rather a weak pair of knees.

I didn't care for any more wood at that time, believe me, so went back to camp none too slowly. Monty came in shortly afterward, said the buffalo stampeded but he had no idea how near they came to tramping my light out.”

Onward to the west and northwest . . .

Harry later moved on to Willamette, Oregon, and married Louisa Jane Hunt in 1887. Harry and Louisa had four children in Willamette, when he decided to investigate the Nome gold rush. Arriving in Nome, he and a partner staked a claim. Harry's signature appears on a mining claim title deed in the Nome District Recorder's office dated 1898. Harry then traveled to Skagway, where his name appears in the 1901 census of the area. He worked on building the railway from Skagway to Whitehorse, and hunted wild game for the prospectors and railroad workers. He then returned to Willamette to bring Louisa and the four children to Alaska. While enroute, traversing the Seattle docks, he passed his former partner who informed him that he had sold the Nome mining claim. Despite the unexpected news, Harry and the family proceeded to Skagway where he worked at the Clifton mine for a year. Harry and the family eventually made their way to the Fairbanks area. By 1905, Harry Buzby had claimed a homestead on the Chena River a half mile upstream of Fairbanks, on land that is now near the entrance of Ft Wainwright. In 1909 and 1911 Elton and Robert (aka Elt and Bob Buzby) were born in Fairbanks .



Harry, daughter Bessie, Louisa

Louisa, Bessie, Harry,
Elton, Ted, Bob

As homesteaders and pioneers, the Buzbys were involved in many necessary ventures, such as raising hay for livestock, running a dairy, operating a sawmill, keeping a commercial greenhouse, hunting commercially, and trapping as well as raising mink, marten, and fox for the fur market.



The following report is Harry Buzby's account in the *Annual Report of the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1907*. (Courtesy of Spencer Bryant buzbyfamily.com)



Hay crop on the Buzby Homestead.

. . . Last season was a little cool here, but no frost after the spring frosts were over until September 1.

There were great quantities of farm produce raised in this part of the Tanana Valley. The only question now is to bring the soil to as high a state of cultivation as possible and plant the very best seed and plant early.

I planted potatoes April 29. They had been started in the greenhouse and had sprouts well developed; those potatoes were the best we had. We planted at intervals until June 1. Of all the root crops the first plantings were the best in every instance.

The property included a three-room log house, agricultural buildings, cleared fields, and fences. Despite meeting the requirements for a homestead patent, and having lived 15 years on the property, the Buzbys had not obtained a patent by 1920 . At that point Harry decided to sell his interest in the property and moved to California and later Tillamook, Oregon. After five years away, Harry decided to return to Alaska to operate a dairy business. While in Tillamook, young Bob endeavored to learn everything he could about the dairy business--even how to make boxes for cheese.

From 1926-early 1930's they operated the Buzby Dairy. Harry bought a patented homestead (the Lou Joy place) a quarter mile east of his original property. The family stayed there until 1939 when the military purchased the land for Ladd Field.

Buzby Homestead House

Photo courtesy of Spencer Bryant



The homestead house, where the family lived in the 1920-1930's, was a three bedroom cabin.



Bessie, Bob, Elt,
and Marian Buzby



Louisa, Bessie Buzby
Spencer, baby Lois,
1914



Marian Buzby
(Crowell) in
California, 1928



Jay Buzby driving a team on the
Richardson Trail, ca 1910.

H Wesley Redhead, interviewed Jay and wrote an article entitled "Winter on the Valdez Trail" for the *Alaska Sportsman Magazine*, Volume XXIX December 1963 Number 12. The following is an excerpt from the article.

Jay recalls one trip that he made alone from Valdez to Fairbanks with four horses pulling eight double-enders. A double-ender was a sled about 10 to 12 feet long and about 4 ft wide. A single horse can pull two of these loaded with about 1500 pounds of freight.

He had been told that someone would be waiting at Valdez to assist him on the trip. But the promised help did not appear, and he had to pull out by himself with the train of horses and double-enders. "Boy how I dreaded that trip alone," Jay says. "It's a job to take care of a bunch like that."

"I particularly dreaded crossing those glaciers."

The waterfalls along Keystone Canyon froze during the winter, building up glaciers that sliced at a 45 degree angle along the sled route. Before proceeding across, the driver had to chop a deep rut on the uphill side for the runners of the sled to track through. The horses were sharp shod with calks about an inch long on their horseshoes for traction on the ice.

"I didn't take any chances," Jay recalls. "I cut that rut pretty deep."

The journey through the canyon was the most rugged part of the whole trip. The sides of the canyon are composed of uptilted sedimentary rock which forms almost vertical walls on both sides. Those walls also act as a funnel through which the wind whistles unmercifully, driving the snow before it.

"I've seen a horse and double-ender turned completely around by the wind in the canyon," Jay says.

The road at that time followed along the left side of the canyon going north. It can still be seen clinging along the side of the mountain from the Richardson Highway which follows the old Valdez Trail.

Jayson Buzby, WW1 veteran

In 1918, Jay walked from Fairbanks to Valdez on the Richardson trail with a backpack on his back and shipped out to Portland so that he would serve overseas rather than within the state. He was inducted at age 24 in Portland Oregon in April of 1918, and later was discharged from Camp Knox, Kentucky in February of 1919.



He served during the second year of the United States' involvement in the WW1. He was part of the allied offensive that helped push the Germans out of France. Germany signed the Armistice 11.11.1918. The war officially ended with the Treaty of Versailles, June 28, 1919. During WW2, Jay served in the Army Reserve as a guard along the Chena River near the Ft Wainwright gate.

The Buzby and Spencer families, who were related by marriage, maintained a little riverboat landing as a float plane tie-up. In this photograph taken August 15th 1935, Will Rogers and Wiley Post had stopped in Fairbanks. Rogers and Post then flew south to Harding Lake to refuel, before embarking on their fateful journey toward Pt Barrow.

Float planes operated by Pacific Alaska Airways would land on the straight stretch of the river near the Buzby and Spencer properties, often making use of the Buzby-Spencer float dock.



Floatplane landing/tie-up on the property

Tiny Buzby (in "Trapline 50 years")

One day in August of 1935, Will Rogers and Wiley Post landed on the Chena River and tied up at our dock. We were interested in their airplane, and they were interested in Alaska. They had dinner at the ranch and were really nice fellows, totally down-to-earth, common-day people. We didn't have any idea they were landing there. They flew into Harding Lake, then took off the next day for Barrow. They crashed there. We were some of the last people to see them alive.



The Buzby Dairy operated from 1926-1930s.

Kathy Price (interviewed Bob & Tiny at their home in Wasilla, for the US Army history of the ***Homesteads on Fort Wainwright, Alaska***):

Dairy operation

Bob B:

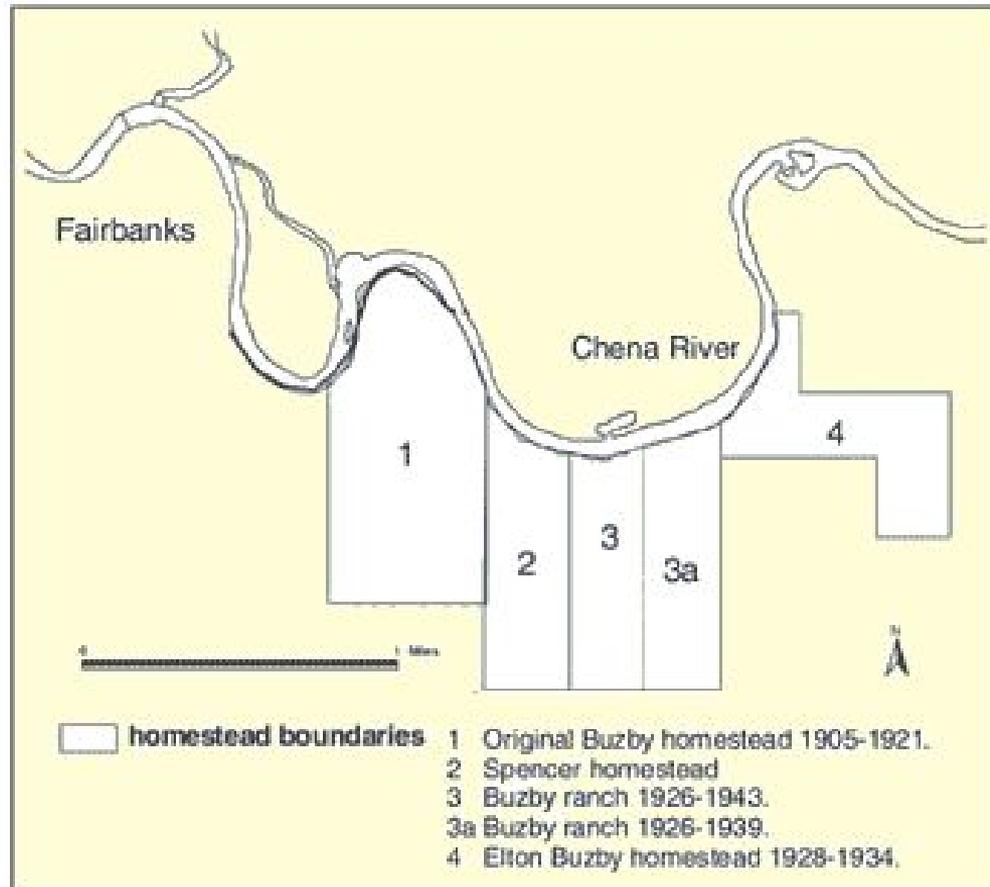
My father came to Alaska to Nome in 1900. After that he went to Skagway and then helped build the railroad from Skagway to Whitehorse. He ended up coming down to Fairbanks and he homesteaded in Fairbanks in 1905, and I was born in 1911 in Fairbanks. I was the youngest of the family. After a trip to California, then Tillamook OR, and then my dad rounded up a bunch of dairy cattle and brought em to Fairbanks. So we had a 1926 - early 30s we had a dairy in Fairbanks and my job was raising hay & delivering door to door the old-fashioned way. And once upon a time I thought I knew everyone in Fairbanks. Now it's a rare occasion to meet anyone I know. Anyway, this homestead he took in 1905 was where I grew up after a while and . . . eventually the military bought our place, my dad's place, we had another place by that time . . . it became Ladd Field, and Ladd Field now is Wainwright.

BB: My life began when we got the dairy because delivering milk in bottles to houses was the way it was done. There were three dairies in Fairbanks of which we were one of them. The usual thing was delivered with a horse and wagon in summer and sled in winter, and eventually we had a vehicle as well and that was a good vehicle, a 1914 Dodge. (laughs)



RANCH A PART OF THE BIRDY CLAY.

1935





Bob & Tiny Buzby; he won the Signal Corp dogsled race three times in a row.



Ted & Clara Buzby,
Bob Buzby



Elt and Liz Buzby, 1970

Important Endeavors, as described in interviews by Elt, Bob, and Tiny (Mrs. Bob Buzby)

Kathy Price (interviewed Bob & Tiny at their home in Wasilla, for the US Army history of the *Homesteads on Fort Wainwright, Alaska*):

Mining & Hunting

Bob B:

When I was going to school, my dad was a hunter, a hunter for the markets. Usually to prospectors, to the miners. He had my two brothers with him, and the principal of the school was going to have him arrested for having the kids out of school, so they sent me to school to take up the slack. (Laughs.)

Elt (In *Faces of Alaska: Elton Buzby*) My Dad, he came up to Nome before the storm of 1900. He fell into the Fairbanks area in 1905 and it's been our home ever since. My Dad was interested in mining, of course, that was his main reason for coming north. He came into the Circle country in 1903 from Skagway out from Dawson, and worked for the Berry & Hamlin people. He hunted for them because the only way they had to survive was eating wild meat.

Sawmill

Tiny B: Wood was your heat. In the winter you had to have wood. And that's what a lot of people did. A lot of people worked when they could in the summer at whatever was open, like road commission, things like that. And then in the winter, they went and got wood and hauled it in, because they could, because of the snow, for the people to use for the year.

Bob B: I can show you houses today in Fairbanks that we, . . . lumber, that we supplied.

Fox, mink, and marten farming/trapping

Elt: (In Faces of Alaska: Elton Buzby)

In the early days, we had one of the first fur farms. We had mink, and tried raising marten, and we had lots of foxes. My Dad bought live furs for stocking the Alaska Silver Fox and Fur Farm in Lake Placid, New York. We learned how to buy, and spent quite a lot of time going all over Alaska buying fur.

Tiny: We could take the dogs out if it wasn't colder than 40 below, but we had temperatures at 50, 60 and 70 below. During cold weather, after you holed up in a cabin for a week, you had to do something. Even the dogs wanted to get up and move.

One time during Christmas, Bob got sick. My oldest boy, Bill, who was 14 at the time, went out with me to check the trapline. It was a four-day trip to run the whole line. I was on skis in the front, and Bill was on the sled brake. I knew there was something in the set, and around the corner the dogs came and landed on whatever was in there.

I made my way forward, and I came face to face with a wolf. He was in the middle of the dogs, and here I was just reaching out to grab him. I started going back the same way I came. I told Bill to bring the .22, and we shot it.

Ranch and animal husbandry

Elt (In Faces of Alaska: Elton Buzby): We always had lots of horses and other stock, so we had to learn about taking care of stock and feeding it. It was quite a chore. In the early days they used to drive stock in from Valdez, live, into Fairbanks where they had a big slaughterhouse. That was the only way to get fresh meat. They would have regular drives; a cattle boat would come up to Valdez, and then they'd drive 'em in. When they'd get here they'd have a lot of horses that the boys used for riding, some of them good and some of them not so good, and they'd hold an auction. We'd always take what money we had as kids and go down, and if a horse came up for bid we'd bid five dollars and eventually we'd get one.

Bob B: . . . We always had about a dozen milking, and we were always raising a few. One incident which might not be of interest to some people but it was to me, we had a bull that was Jersey and not the petting kind, and my dad was riding a horse, driving the cattle in and this bull gored the horse, right in the chest. Upended him, and knocked my dad of course ended up on the ground. I had the ability or the privilege, what ever you want to call it; I killed that bull the next day. The remedy for such a thing as that, my dad went in and got a part of a sack of flour and filled that wound in the horse with flour, and that was probably a couple of months before that horse was usable . . . but he did recover.

[Two weeks later in 1931, Harry died of a stroke, suspected to be a result of the fall from the horse.]



Elt, Ted, Bob, and Jay Buzby





Jayson Buzby Family



Jayson and Isabel Buzby

Manley Hot Springs, AK

Jay and Isabel ran the Northern Commercial Co in Manley for eight years.



Jay
Isabel
& children
from
eldest to
youngest:

Barbara
Betty
Esther
George





Jay & Isabel, Barbara, Betty, Esther, George, Sam





Scotty



*Bob Sam Row
Lynn*





