PEOPLE SAVING PLACES

FALL 2016

# preservation

The magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation

URBAN RENAISSANCE

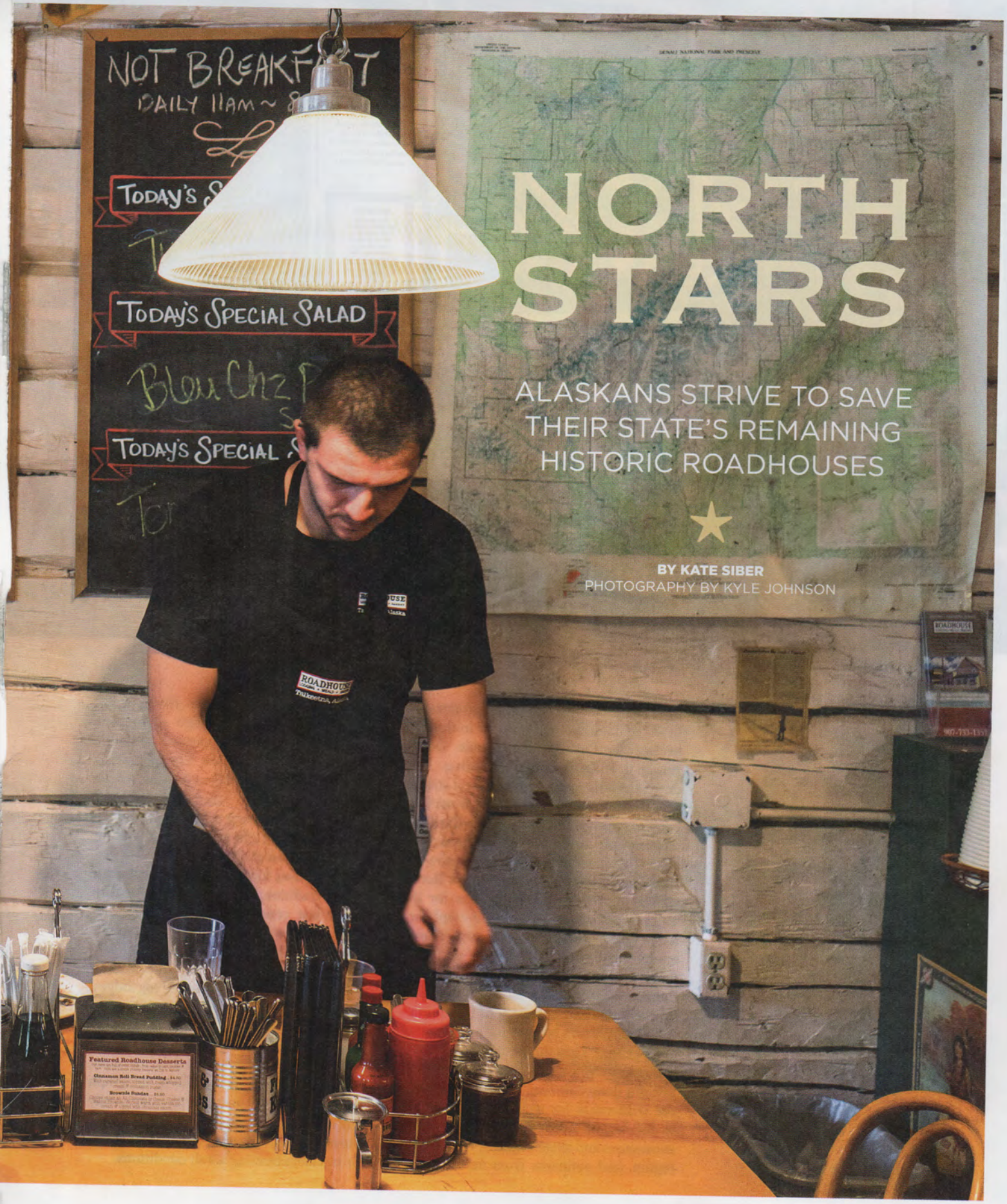
ALASKA'S ROADHOUSES

AT HOME IN WATERFORD, VIRGINIA

## BRANDYWINE *Idyll*

EXPLORING A HISTORIC MID-ATLANTIC LANDSCAPE


바 자 울
BAJAWOOL ALPINE CLUB
Second Search Party for Naomi Uemura
the ROADHOUSE FOREVER
MAKOTO NEGISHI
KOREA
BREAKFAST
SUMMER: 7AM - 2PM DAILY
WINTER: 8AM - Noon Weekdays, 'til 2pm SAT & SUN
FAMILY-STYLE SEATING
GRAB AN empty CHAIR. Couches & Game tables are for lounging, playing & waiting FOR CHAIRS at tables set FOR service.
MENUS ARE ON THE TABLES
A SERVER will come to the table to welcome you, Explain the MENU and take your ORDER
JUST GETTING BAKERY ITEMS?
GOODIES CAN BE ORDERED at the COUNTER and ENJOYED in the LOUNGE AREAS IN SUMMER, ANYWHERE IN WINTER!
TODAY'S SPECIAL HOTCAKE
DENALI BREWING
CHULI
STOUT
TALKEETNA, ALASKA
ROADHOUSE
Thunder
Chips
Why Climb a Mountain?




# NORTH STARS

## ALASKANS STRIVE TO SAVE THEIR STATE'S REMAINING HISTORIC ROADHOUSES

★

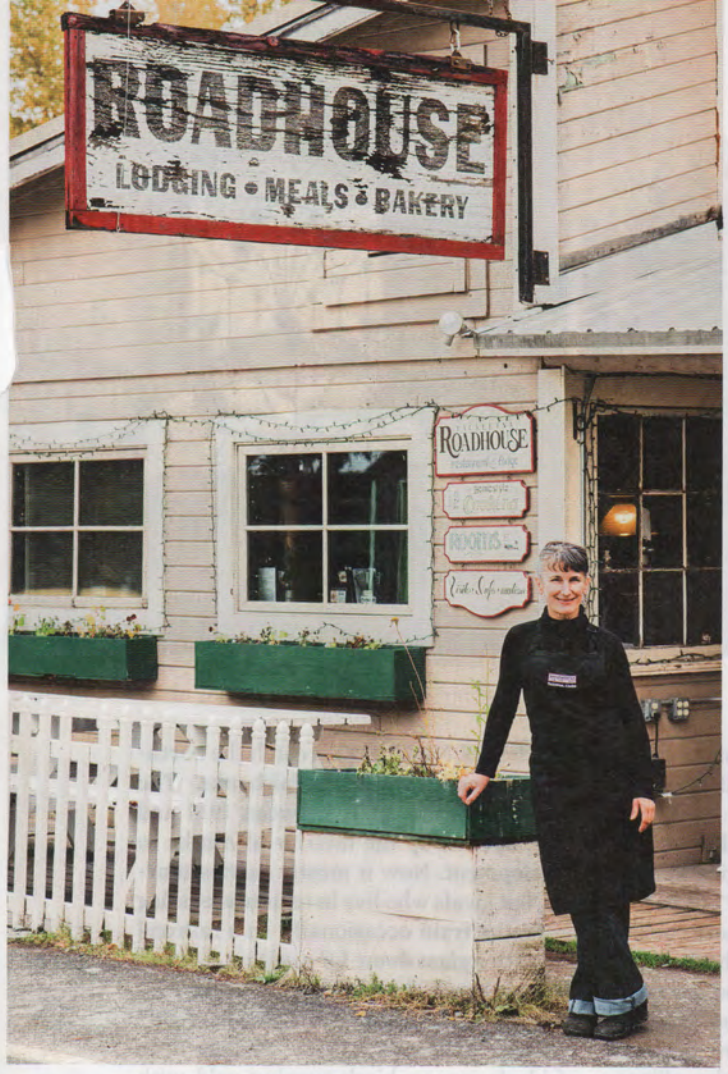
**BY KATE SIBER**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE JOHNSON


> *"[ALASKA] CAN FEEL A LITTLE DAUNTING AND SCARY FOR PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT STARTS GETTING COLD ... HERE, YOU CAN FEEL LIKE IT'S WARM AND COZY AND YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE."*
>
> —Trisha Costello

BY 7:30 IN THE MORNING ON A TUESDAY in September, the dining room in the Talkeetna Roadhouse, just outside Denali National Park, is already bustling. I sit down at a long table next to perfect strangers—three young mountaineers from Wisconsin, two women from North Carolina, and a couple from Anchorage. "Been there since '51," says the Anchorage gentleman, sporting a cap reading "Old Guys Rock." This is hardly an unusual scene for the Talkeetna Roadhouse, a log-and-clapboard lodge built between 1914 and 1917. Travelers have gathered around these tables for decades, swapping stories, wolfing down home-cooked meals, and shooting the breeze in the classic roadhouse tradition.

"A half portion is good for a really hungry person," says the waiter as I peruse the menu. "You want a full portion if you just got done climbing and you've been in the wilderness for weeks." He leaves me to decide, and I take in the scene. Antique snowshoes and skates, maps, photos of the region, and pennants from mountaineering expeditions clutter the tilting walls. Games, puzzles, out-of-date magazines, and *Reader's Digest* condensed books lie strewn about the tables. The floors sag and creak from decades of hosting Alaska characters—miners, trappers, railroad workers, and, starting in the 1940s, Denali climbers. I feel right at home as I wait for my half portion of eggs and toast.

Roadhouses like Talkeetna's are a great Alaska tradition. Starting around the turn of the last century, as gold rushers and other fortune seekers streamed into the state's hinterlands, hundreds of roadhouses, ranging from ramshackle collections of tents to beautifully constructed log lodges, popped up to cater to their needs. Owing to their remote locations, roadhouses were not just restaurants, saloons, and inns, but also de facto hospitals, morgues, veterinary offices, post offices, telegraph stations, trading posts, and community centers. Usually situated about a day's journey apart, they were welcome sights for travelers braving harsh conditions.





"The whole idea is when you land at a roadhouse, you want to be able to feel like, 'Oh OK, I'm going to figure out where I'm going next, reflect on where I've been, probably talk to other travelers,'" Trisha Costello, the owner of the Talkeetna Roadhouse, tells me over coffee later. "It's a big state and there's big animals and it can feel a little daunting and scary for people, especially when it starts getting cold, you know? Here, you can feel like it's warm and cozy and you feel comfortable."

Over the decades, many of Alaska's roadhouses have burned down or crumbled under the harsh elements, but a disparate group of Alaskans, including Costello, are fighting to preserve the few that remain, running them as lodges, restaurants, stores, and museums. I have come to Alaska to meet the preservationists behind these beloved Alaska institutions, following a loop from Anchorage to Fairbanks by train and car. By experiencing the old roadhouse tradition, I hope to catch a glimpse of Alaska's true spirit.

*Opposite:* Maps, currency, and old photographs adorn a corner at the Talkeetna Roadhouse. *Clockwise from top left:* Proprietor Trisha Costello; A simply decorated guest room at the roadhouse; Travelers linger in the dining area.

*I HEAD BACK TO FAIRBANKS AND VEER SOUTHEAST ON THE RICHARDSON HIGHWAY, WHICH FOLLOWS THE OLD VALDEZ-FAIRBANKS TRAIL THAT LED GOLD RUSHERS FROM THE COAST TO THE MINING FIELDS.*

WHEN I FIRST arrive at the Talkeetna depot on the mid-morning train, Costello is there to greet me with a huge flatbed truck that seems at odds with her petite frame and delicate features. On the short drive, she points out salient landmarks in town, which was the inspiration for the 1990s television program *Northern Exposure*. There's Nagley's Store—a red log-and-clapboard building, now festooned with antlers, that's been operating since 1921—and the 1923 Fairview Inn, still a popular watering hole for locals.

Costello pulls into the dirt alley behind the roadhouse and cuts the engine in front of the old barn on the property. "The barn is 100 years old," she says. "The more cookies I sell, the sooner I'll get it finished." She is in the midst of stabilizing it, and the roadhouse is a constant project, too. Nothing about it is square or flat anymore. It sits on a combination of concrete blocks, pilings, and dirt, and hosts thousands of visitors every year, between the inn and the restaurant. And yet, it persists. It even weathered the infamous 1964 earthquake that, with a magnitude of 9.2, flattened many other buildings in Alaska.

The Talkeetna Roadhouse has had numerous owners, including Carroll and Verna Close, legendary characters famous for their fried chicken and no-nonsense rules—no cussing, no tardiness, no late-night shenanigans by obstreperous young men. The Closes would tell customers they could order eggs any way, but the eggs always came out scrambled. Costello upholds that tradition.

Now, the roadhouse still acts as a community gathering place, hosting meetings, knitting circles, and kids who do their homework and eat snacks after school. And it still attracts visitors who have been coming for decades.

"What warms my heart is when people show up and they say, 'Oh, I've been coming here for 40 years and the town's changed, but the history of it is intact somehow,'" Costello says. "That's important to me."

THE NEXT DAY, I catch the northbound train to Fairbanks. The railroad, built between 1915 and 1923, opened up the interior of Alaska to development. Now it mostly carries tourists, but locals who live in remote areas flag down the train occasionally. In a railroad car with a glass dome for a ceiling, I watch the sun break through the clouds in rays like a Renaissance fresco. Outside, a gargantuan landscape rolls by—endless lines of black spruce, birch turning gold with autumn, meadows tinted purple with fireweed, and braided rivers milky with glacial silt. Off in the distance, Denali exults in sunshine. To those first European and American settlers, this landscape must have seemed both full of possibility and fraught with danger.

I stay overnight in Fairbanks, then continue my journey by car 150 miles west to Manley Hot Springs. The road is so covered in frost heaves and potholes, it resembles lumpy dough. And for the last 80 miles, it turns to dirt. Huge mountain ranges loom on the horizon, already covered in snow. Gold foliage freckles the hills, and lakes sprawl over the land.

Manley, originally a mining town, is a remote outpost of about 90 residents known for its hot springs. I have come here to stay at the Manley Roadhouse, a handsome white clapboard building with green trim, built in 1903. I step into a living area with tall ceilings, historic photos and antlers on the walls, and dusty antiques such as an old school desk. It has a sort of rundown charm, as if fragrant with good times—and perhaps a few bar fights.


*Opposite:* Rika's Roadhouse, part of Big Delta State Historical Park; A former guest room at Rika's is furnished with period-style items and open to the public. *Top:* Volunteer Bruce Grossmann at the Sullivan Roadhouse, built in 1905.

A man's voice suddenly booms from the saloon. Laughter. Mumbling. I hesitate, then timidly step into the back room, which has a U-shaped bar, a pool table, an upright piano, and impolite decor such as the taxidermied rear end of a deer.

"Are you Kate?" asks the wiry, gray-mustachioed man behind the bar, who, I later observe, acts as hotel clerk, bartender, waiter, and short-order cook. He handwrites a ticket for my stay in one of the upstairs rooms.

I spend the evening in the bar, as, apparently, do most of the locals. Lisa Lee Owens, the owner, sidles up next to me on a barstool. Her husband, Bob, bought the place decades ago and adored it despite the constant demand for upkeep. Together, they put a foundation under it, installed new windows, and even built a new well house. "You name it, we did it," she says. Bob died several years back, and now Lisa is trying to sell the roadhouse, mostly because she is exhausted by the responsibility. I ask her what she'd do if it sold. "Oh, I'd probably still work at the roadhouse—just for someone else." She smiles.

I see why. The Manley Roadhouse is still the lifeblood of the community. Over the course of the evening, a wide array of characters appears: a gray-bearded, camo-clad man with Coke bottle glasses, tall young men with dirty hands who drive large trucks, and pretty women nursing Bud Lights. An easy camaraderie naturally arises, and people trade stories about moose-hunting season, the road conditions, and politics. Perhaps, I think, patrons were doing nearly the same thing here 100 years ago.

THE NEXT DAY, I head back to Fairbanks and veer southeast on the Richardson Highway, which follows the old Valdez-Fairbanks Trail that led gold rushers from the coast to the mining fields. The empty road winds through hillsides dusted in reds, yellows, and rusty oranges. Moose amble about the side of the pavement.

In Delta Junction, I stop at Rika's Roadhouse, an elegant, two-story log lodge built in 1909. It's one of the best-preserved roadhouses in Alaska, with a floor made of old kerosene crates. Alaska State Parks now runs it as a museum, and a volunteer named Richard Hurst, an affable, enthusiastic fellow, gives me a tour, telling me stories along the way. The original owner, John Hajdukovich, was a restless soul and, before his forays into the wilderness, he would simply leave goods on the counter with a ledger. "He wasn't a terribly successful entrepreneur," Hurst says with a grin.

A few miles down the road, I stop at the

*STAYING AT THE LODGE AT BLACK RAPIDS FOR A COUPLE OF NIGHTS, I BEGIN TO SEE THAT EVEN IF GUESTS NO LONGER STAY IN THE ROADHOUSE, THE TRADITION OF "FRONTIER HOSPITALITY," AS TRISHA COSTELLO CALLS IT, IS STILL THRIVING.*

Sullivan Roadhouse, a long log cabin with an uneven roofline, green trim, and a shock of flower gardens. Inside, Bruce Grossmann, a volunteer with a wide-brimmed hat, glasses, and unruly white hair, sits in a chair and holds court next to the original Yukon barrel stove, weaving stories about John and Florence Sullivan, who built the cabin in 1905. Back then, dogsleds were likely pulled straight in the front door and unloaded, Grossmann tells me and other visitors. I walk around the dark, cozy log rooms and imagine what it might have looked like decked with Mrs. Sullivan's frilly wall hangings, fine china, and Victorian furniture.

"I'm one of the few people left in town who stayed here when it was out across the river," says Grossmann, who visited in 1982, when he was enlisted in the military and the roadhouse was little more than an abandoned shelter. In 1996, locals moved it log by log from a fire-prone location to the center of town. They stabilized the structure, added new floorboards, and opened it as a museum. Now, a dozen volunteers run it all summer, telling stories to visitors as they pass through. "We think it's pretty special," says one of the volunteer gardeners as I peruse the flower beds.

Driving in a cold drizzle, I continue south along the Richardson Highway about 40 miles to the old Rapids Roadhouse, a log cabin built in 1902. For years after it ceased operating, locals stopped here, peered into the dark, spooky rooms, and picked about the wreckage. By the late 1990s, it was collapsing and decaying thanks to the constant abuse of high winds, dust, ice, snow, rain, and earthquakes. But its condition didn't seem to matter to Annie Hopper, a Fairbanks social worker who, with her husband, Michael, and their two children, had hiked and skied in the area.

"When we found the roadhouse, it was a piece of crap, falling down," says Annie after I arrive. "But I said, let's keep it! It's historical!" Michael, she says, protested. The couple bought the property anyway and built a beautiful timber-frame inn, now known as the Lodge at Black Rapids, on the hillside overlooking the old roadhouse, a huge glacial valley, and rows of unnamed peaks.

Then they went about restoring the roadhouse to use as an art gallery, museum, and outdoor center, where they plan to rent gear and give travel advice to visitors. Annie, sporting glasses and cropped hair with a purple streak, exudes warmth and friendliness, and on a Saturday afternoon, she spreads out an array of binders, books, and historic photos. She loves telling stories from the roadhouse era, and occasionally old-timers will stop by and spin new tales for her. "What was it like to wake up every morning and get your meat from the cache?" she asks, letting her mind wander. "But first you got to hunt for it and go up on that hill and skin it—all in a dress!"

In 2000, the Hoppers secured a listing for the two-story roadhouse on the National Register of Historic Places. Two grants from the State Department of History and Archaeology allowed them to clean up the site, stabilize it, and disassemble part of the structure for future restoration. Over the years, the couple installed a concrete footer and replaced rotting logs with timbers from a nearby creek that looked almost identical. Volunteers helped them saw the logs and use hand axes to mimic the original construction techniques, among many other projects. There is still work to be done, such as installing windows replicated by a historic window specialist. But already, last year, the Hoppers held a concert featuring a local band inside the roadhouse, and the cavernous space rang with music for the first time in decades.

Staying at the Lodge at Black Rapids for a couple of nights, I begin to see that even if guests no longer stay in the roadhouse, the tradition of "frontier hospitality," as Trisha Costello calls it, is still thriving. By day, I venture out into the wilderness stretching behind the lodge, hiking through tundra alive with glowing red shrubs, minty green lichen, and leaves turning yellow. Come evening, the lodge offers a comfortable respite, with big leather armchairs next to a fire. Its open spaces invite conversation with other travelers and, on Saturday night, dinner is served family-style, accompanied by live music.

One night in Black Rapids, I wake up at 2 a.m. and peek through the shades. An ethereal glow lights the sky. I pull on boots and tiptoe outside. A luminous green orb morphs into long green bands undulating overhead. A giant barcode on the horizon flickers with fringes of violet, and curtains of light wave and disappear. Some Native Americans believe the Northern Lights are dancing souls. What, I wonder, did the first Western settlers think of these miraculous illuminations?

The next day I head south through gold-speckled hills to my last destination, Gakona Lodge, which comprises a 1929 boarding house, saloon, and restaurant as well as a 1904 barn and a roadhouse in midcollapse. In 2014, Clif and Rebecca Potter, an energetic couple in their 30s with four kids under the age of 9, bought the property, hoping to establish a thriving lodge and outfitting business that would take visitors into nearby Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.

"I say we found the place, but it kind of found us," says Clif Potter as he shows me my room in the disheveled boarding house, rumored to be haunted by a cigar-smoking ghost. "We came out here and fell in love with it ... " he trails off. "We'll see what happens."

The place needs an almost endless amount of work. Potter seems both overwhelmed and smitten with the possibilities. He hopes to one day get the roadhouse on the National Register and secure grants to stabilize and restore it. Will that happen? Who knows, but his outsize resolve seems in keeping with those prospectors and fortune-seekers who braved these trails so many years ago. P

*Freelance writer* **KATE SIBER** *is a frequent contributor to* Preservation. *Her last story for the magazine, on the ghost town of Animas Forks, Colorado, appeared in the Spring 2015 issue.*

*Opposite:* Rapids Roadhouse, owned by Annie and Michael Hopper, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places; A detail of the roadhouse's log construction. *Top:* A view from the Richardson Highway, south of Rapids Roadhouse.

For more photos of Alaska roadhouses, visit **SavingPlaces.org/magazine**