



Fred Seaton and President Eisenhower on the campaign trail.

A Kansas Native Led the Politically-Challenging Campaign to Create the Arctic Wildlife Range/Refuge

Article by **Dick Seaton**

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeast Alaska is the largest refuge of its kind in the United States. With 19.3 million acres, it contains the greatest diversity of plant and animal life of any protected area inside the Arctic Circle.

The refuge began in December 1960, when the Secretary of Interior, by administrative order, set aside 8.9 million acres as the Arctic National Wildlife Range. In 1980, Congress doubled it in size and changed it to a “Refuge.”

The Secretary of Interior in late 1960 was my uncle, Fred Seaton. Fred had grown up in Manhattan. He later moved to Nebraska, and was always active in Republican politics. He served four years in the Nebraska legislature and briefly filled a vacancy in the U.S. Senate. He traveled the country with Eisenhower in the 1952 campaign and Ike appointed him Assistant Secretary of Defense, then Administrative Assistant to the President, and finally in 1956, Secretary of Interior.

Fred had graduated from Manhattan High School and Kansas State University, and always retained close ties with Kansas – both family and business.

The movement to establish a wildlife refuge in Alaska was much older. It began in the Teddy Roosevelt era, but the emerging environmental movement in the 1950s gave it new impetus.

Many of the powers in place in Alaska opposed preservation of the area by the federal government. Alaska had achieved statehood in early 1959. By 1960, the state legislature, the governor, both U.S. Senators and the lone Alaska House

Member all opposed a federal refuge. On the other hand, as you might expect, all the national conservation organizations supported it. This led to objections in Alaska about “outsider” interference. There was also hostility toward the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a strong preference on the part of some for state agency control of the refuge.

The editor of *Alaska Sportsman* magazine even called it “socialism,” and one letter to the Fairbanks paper said it would better be named “*Seaton’s Ranch*.”

In spite of the opposition, a bill to establish the Refuge actually passed the House of Representatives in 1959. But it was bottled up in the Senate by Alaska’s own Senator Bob Bartlett.

Fred Seaton had preferred congressional action to create the refuge, and in fact his department had drafted the legislation. Ted Stevens, later a long time Senator from Alaska, was then solicitor for the Interior Department. He advocated long and hard for passage of the legislation.

In the presidential campaign of 1960, Fred campaigned for Nixon in Alaska. But Nixon lost there, as he did in the nation. After Kennedy’s election, and before his inauguration, there was a “lame duck” session of about two months. Congress had failed to act and Republicans were about to depart. On December 6, 1960, Fred signed the administrative order setting aside 8.9 million acres as the Arctic National Wildlife Range. In the same order, he also set aside 1.8 million acres in southwest Alaska and 415,000 acres on the Alaska Peninsula as additional Wildlife Ranges.

“The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders.”

– Edward Abbey



Map provided by and ©University of Alaska Press. Used in the LAST GREAT WILDERNESS, The Campaign to Establish the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge published 2006.

Douglas Brinkley, in his book *The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom*, extols Fred for his last-minute action, and says he is among the most “underrated Secretaries of the Interior in U.S. history.”

Following the designation, he said, “I felt it my duty, in the public interest, to move as promptly as possible to take the steps administratively which would assure protection and preservation of the priceless resource values contained in the proposed Arctic National Wildlife Range area.”

Twenty years later, in 1980, under President Carter, Congress enlarged the area to 19.3 million acres, and renamed it the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. It was at that time that Congress also designated 1.5 million acres along the north coast for study, looking toward the future of petroleum development. However the legislation requires congressional action before drilling can begin. This has been the focus of recent political wrangling about drilling in the arctic coastal plain in Alaska

In addition to annually hosting the Porcupine Caribou Herd and Central Arctic Herd in summer, totaling substantially over a hundred thousand caribou, the refuge is an extraordinary expanse of arctic biodiversity and wilderness.

The 1980 legislation designated the remaining 8 million acres of the original Range as Wilderness. The 10.1 million acres added at that time was designated for “minimal management.”

Interestingly enough, Ted Stevens, in his capacity as Senator from Alaska and who had supported the earlier set aside of 8.9 million acres, led the charge against the 1980 legislation to enlarge it. Of course the political winds are constantly shifting, but I’m sort of glad that his old boss Fred Seaton was no longer around to see that. Fred died in 1974.