



Copper Valley Telecom: 50 Years of Service to Rural Alaskans



Left: CVT lunch servers pose for a photo. Left to right: Tiffeni Hodne, Becky Smith, Tabitha Gregory, and Jody Morgan. Above: Sam Eleshanski-Villalon, of Tatitlek, enjoys a CVT hamburger as part of her 4 year birthday celebration.

Photos courtesy Copper Valley Telecom

By Tabitha Gregory

Low clouds hung over the Port of Valdez and rain drizzled steadily from the sky. But despite the gray morning, an enthusiastic group of Copper Valley Telecom employees and board members gathered at the Valdez small boat harbor and busily shuttled boxes of hamburger buns, coolers of soda, pounds of burgers, and tubs of table cloths and paper plates down the ramp and onto the *Lucinda Rose*, a 42 foot aluminum landing craft.

The occasion was Copper Valley's first community picnic of its 50th anniversary year and the destination was Tatitlek, a Native Alaskan village with a population of approximately 100 people, where residents come and go by small airplanes, an occasional ferry, or water taxi such as the one being used by the Copper Valley picnic crew.

Most of the time, when Copper Valley crews travel, they carry spools

of copper wire, DSL modems, and hand tools instead of hotdogs, cookies, and chips. For the past 50 years, Copper Valley Telecom has provided telecommunication services to rural communities, like Tatitlek, located within a vast 9,600 square mile territory. Telecommunications technicians install and maintain an extensive high-tech network that provides residents and businesses with products and services that rival those in urban areas: telephone, long distance, high speed DSL Internet, and CDMA and 3G wireless phone and data.

"When you fly, drive, or boat across our service area all you see for miles is uninhabited mountains, forests, tundra, and ocean. Sometimes you see more moose than people" Dave Dengel, Copper Valley's CEO said from his seat on board the *Lucinda Rose*. "Then, you'll

take a turn and there will be a community – maybe it will be a town with a store, gas station, and school or maybe it will be a small group of cabins situated on a lake. Sometimes it's just a lodge standing alone along a quiet gravel road. We provide telephone and Internet to some of the most remote customers in the United States."

The boat ride to Tatitlek proved Dengel correct. The 28 water miles from Valdez took an hour and a half to traverse, and the only other signs of civilization seen through the fog were an occasional fishing boat and a cruise ship in the distance.

In Tatitlek, a recent installation of fiber optic line throughout town and construction of a microwave system allowed Copper Valley to offer community members Internet speeds of up to six megabits per second (mbps). Many in

Tatitlek have already found ways to use these connections to the Web to improve their lives. The village medical clinic, which is staffed by a health aid, uses a high speed Internet connection to facilitate remote office visits. Using a sophisticated tele-med cart, a doctor located at the Chugachmiut Health Services office in Seward can speak face to face with Tatitlek patients, listen to heart beats, examine ears, and conduct a wide range of other medical observations. From this distance, the doctor can write prescriptions and schedule procedures.

Other examples like this abound throughout Copper Valley's service area. In communities like Copper Center, Paxson, and Gakona a plethora of independently owned tourism businesses use Copper Valley's wireless system to take reservations, advertise specials, and process credit card transactions.

In Prince William Sound and along the Copper River, a fleet of commercial and sport fishermen access the mobile 3G network to watch weather, stay in touch with their families, and call for emergency assistance.

On Thompson Pass, a ski and snow machine destination legendary for its huge quantities of snow, recreationalists rely upon Copper Valley's system for communications as well. In 2010, a group of unfortunate skiers used their cell phones to call for help when a member of their party was injured in an avalanche.

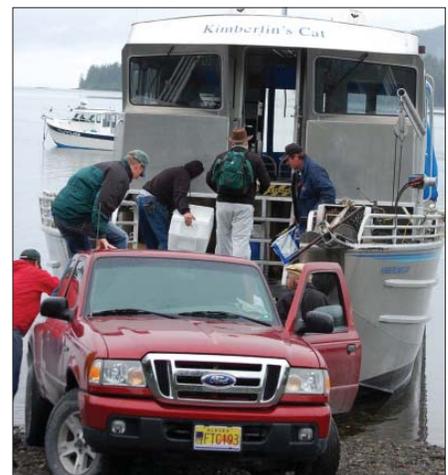
Residents also access distance education programs provided by universities in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and the Lower 48, to stream lectures and attend on-line seminars. "We are constantly planning, upgrading, and maintaining our system" Jim Gifford, Copper Valley's COO, stated. "And just when we have finished one upgrade, it's time to start planning and budgeting for the next upgrade. Communications technology is changing and improving so rapidly, there's never a month or a year that goes by when we are not involved in a major system proj-



ect. Three years ago, we finished installing fiber optic lines to Chitina and last year to Mentasta. This year, we're building a microwave path to McCarthy and adding cell sites. Each time we upgrade, the services to the communities improve: faster Internet speeds, clearer voice quality, wider ranges for cellular signal. Our goal is to keep our system in a condition that will support the growing demand from rural residents for access to the world."

Funding projects of the size and scope of those Gifford described is no small task. Copper Valley uses revenue from its customers to help pay for the system upgrades, but according to Dave Dengel, most of the funds come from the federal Universal Service Fund. The Tatitlek microwave was funded by a Community Connect grant from the Rural Utilities Service, a branch of the United States Department of Agriculture.

Back on the *Lucinda Rose*, Captain Brad Kimberlin nudged the bow of his boat up onto the stony beach and the ocean water washed over slick seaweed as he lowered the gate. Clad in raingear, rubber boots, and warm hoodies the Copper Valley picnic crew disembarked with their supplies and loaded two pickups, driven down from town by welcoming residents. The party headed hastily



Top: CVT's communication towers are placed strategically throughout the Copper Valley and Prince William Sound regions. Above: Crews load up leftover picnic goods and head back to Valdez.

Photos courtesy Copper Valley Telecom

for the picnic location, fired up the grill, and laid out burgers to cook, sending a rich aroma of barbeque wafting through the streets. Residents arrived and the crowd milled about, visiting with Copper Valley employees and board members, offering suggestions, getting help with handsets, chatting about apps and Androids and waterproof cell phones. The rain let up and a faint golden glow penetrated the dark clouds: the perfect beginning to Copper Valley's 50th anniversary picnic season. ■