An Oral & Written History of the Russian Jack Community:
Past, Present, & Future

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Nestled within northeastern Anchorage, AK, Russian Jack is a primarily residential neighborhood with strong links to Anchorage’s history, its colorful past and diverse present. What follows is a mixture of historical research and oral history that tracks Russian Jack’s development. Twelve residents with significant ties to the community were interviewed. They shared their past experiences, present concerns, and future hopes. As the narrative enters living memory, historical touchstones are accompanied by the thoughts of residents, forming a dialogue on Russian Jack.

The housing stock is largely older, “Everything was built in the 70s and 80s.” High-traffic thoroughfares bound the neighborhood. To the north is the Glenn Highway, dividing Russian Jack from the Mountain View community. To the west is Bragaw Street, dividing Russian Jack from the Airport Heights community. The southern border follows the curve of Northern Lights Boulevard. And to the east Boniface Parkway separates Russian Jack from more recent residential expansion, Nunaka Valley on to Muldoon. Debarr Road bisects the neighborhood. Commercial centers cluster at the intersections of Bragaw and Debarr, and Boniface and Debarr.

Many if not most residents, particularly in the northern half of the neighborhood, do not call their community Russian Jack. “I’ve never even heard it referred to as Russian Jack…you could say that Reka Drive area on the other side of the park would be of the Russian Jack area.” The most common name is South Mountain View, a term with some historical and geographical support. “[It’s] South Mountain View and that goes back to when we first came over here. That’s what we were told, [that] is North Mountain View and this is South Mountain View.” “I call it South Mountain View. Just in my interactions with some different organizations, I’ve tried to use the term Russian Jack, but in my head it is South Mountain View.” City documents from the 1950s and 60s refer to South Mountain View. Area voting precincts are still named South Mountain View. Some residents are more prosaic, describing themselves as living in relation to local landmarks: “behind eastside Costco” or “near East High School.”

However, the Russian Jack name has a more official claim. The Anchorage Municipal Code divides the city into community council regions, establishing the previously described boundaries and the Russian Jack name. The park that dominates the landscape of the community, an
elementary school, and many other establishments are named after Russian Jack. In 2007, local community council president Ed Leach chastised the Anchorage Daily News; “First, we are not South Mountain View, but Russian Jack, as we have been for 30 years.” For consistency, this paper will refer to the neighborhood as Russian Jack.

**Jacob Marunenko**

What is now Anchorage was for generations the home of the K’enaht’ana regional band of the Dena’ina Athabascans. When the Alaska Engineering Commission (AEC) first established their headquarters along Ship Creek in 1914, they generally ignored the K’enaht’ana fishing camp at the creek mouth. Russian Jack at the time was simply one marshy part of the expansive and wildlife-rich K’enaht’ana hunting grounds.

The name Russian Jack derives from the nickname of one of Anchorage’s earliest and most colorful settlers. Jacob Marunenko was born in 1883 in Parevka, Russia. Later in life, he would maintain that he was in Anchorage in 1915, though the earliest documentation shows him working in 1916 as a laborer for the AEC, the organization charged with constructing the Alaska Railroad. In town, he was known by the more American sounding Jack Marchin.

Circa 1920, he became the proprietor of a pool hall on Fourth Avenue that doubled as his home. Much of the local labor force moved on to new opportunities after the railroad was completed in 1923. But Marunenko stayed in Anchorage. By the mid-1920s, he moved to a cabin he built outside of town in what is now Russian Jack Springs Park. His only official claim to the land was a permit to harvest lumber. Homesteaders Peter Toloff and Nicholas Darlopsalos, who held the claim for the 320 acres that became the park, allowed Marunenko to live there.

In 1915, the manufacture and consumption of alcohol were banned in Anchorage and would remain so through the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. Despite its illegal status, alcohol remained widely available in Anchorage, and “Russian” Jack Marchin became notorious as one of the city’s many bootleggers. Moonshine, often called hoochino or squirrel whiskey in Alaska, was brewed in numerous hidden stills. Marunenko likely hid at least one such illegal distillery near where today’s Anchorage residents jog, bike, and ski through the park. A mixture of caution and public acceptance defined his operation. His customers ranged from prostitutes to social elite, and they received regular deliveries. Anchorage historian John Bagoy recalled Marunenko hiring a “woman to push a baby buggy with a doll and a jug of moon underneath it.” Despite his notoriety, Marunenko was never arrested or charged for bootlegging.

After Prohibition, he made his living with carpentry and odd jobs. But on March 22, 1937, Marunenko’s story turned darker with the shooting death of Milton Hamilton, a local taxi driver. He never denied killing Hamilton but plead for understanding. The fatal shot was blindly fired after Hamilton assaulted him from behind. This was the second time that evening that Hamilton had attacked him. Hamilton, who possessed a nasty reputation in town, had quarreled with Marunenko regarding a female friend. Marunenko claimed self-defense, and he indeed bore several severe wounds including a fractured skull.
The killing and much of the subsequent coverage were front page news in Anchorage, and many Outside newspapers also carried trial notes. The trial took place January 10-17, 1938. The jury found Marunenko guilty but was somewhat swayed by his story. Instead of first-degree murder, they returned a verdict of manslaughter and recommended leniency. The presiding judge sentenced him to two and a half years, rather than the maximum twenty, at the McNeil Island federal penitentiary outside Seattle.

Sometime after his stay in prison Marunenko returned to Anchorage. With the construction of the military bases and later opening of the Alaska-Canadian Highway (Alcan), Anchorage swelled during the 1940s and early 1950s with thousands of new residents seeking their fortune. Despite his lengthy criminal past, Marunenko was accepted as a local character, a colorful link to Anchorage’s past. During the 1948 Fur Rendezvous, several local businesses campaigned for the election of Marunenko as the King of the Mardi Gras Ball. Though he lost the election, officials proclaimed him as the event’s prince. He also was a quote machine for newspapermen, an easy source for commentary regarding the changes in Anchorage. A 1951 Seattle Daily Times article noted his disdain for the traffic-choked Fourth Avenue and that he “used to hunt moose there.”

Marunenko finally became an American citizen in 1954. Sometime after 1959, he left Alaska for good, eventually settling in the small, desert town of Arvin, CA. On October 28, 1971, he died of heart disease. In Anchorage, his name survived his reputation. Newer residents, arriving after the murder trial, far outnumbered their established counterparts. From 1940 to 1950, Anchorage grew from over four thousand residents to more than 30 thousand. These newcomers were more likely to know Marunenko in his position as a relic of the past rather than as a criminal. One Anchorage resident from this time recalled only that “the homesteader was of Russian heritage, and nobody could pronounce his last name so he was called Russian Jack.” And in the places associated with him, the name became a part of the geography. A park, school, street, community, and many other Anchorage fixtures.
Rise of a Residential Neighborhood

From the initial 1914 tent city along Ship Creek, Anchorage quickly expanded into the surrounding terrain, what is now parts of the downtown, Government Hill, South Addition, and Elmendorf neighborhoods. In June 1940, construction began for Fort Richardson and the Elmendorf airstrip. At the time, sparsely populated homesteads separated Anchorage from the military bases. As construction workers began to arrive, these homesteaders seized upon the opportunity and began to subdivide and sell off parcels. Norman Lange, one of these homesteaders, optimistically named the new neighborhood Mountain View. And as Mountain View grew, it expanded south into what is now Russian Jack.

Lange packaged his parcels with an offer of naming a street after the new owner. Other new streets were named after longtime residents. Many of these streets survive, crossing through Mountain View and Russian Jack. Bliss Street is named for contractor Harry Bliss. Bragaw Street is named for Robert Bragaw, a territorial legislator and the city’s first commercial photographer. Harry Hoyt of Hoyt Street owned one of the first Anchorage car dealerships. Lane Street is named for hotelier Harry Lane. In addition, Klevin Street is named after Norwegian emigrant Nels Kleven, one of the original Mountain View homesteaders.

As of 1952, only the northwestern and southeastern corners of modern Russian Jack were developed. The single-family, two-family, and trailer park homes in the north were a natural extension of housing and streets in Mountain View. “It was just older homes where people lived.” Largely undeveloped land divided Mountain View from the Bonibrook development in the south. Mountain View itself was an independent town with electricity provided by the Mountain View Public Utility District (PUD). However, areas outside Anchorage city limits lacked police service among other municipal perks. After a vote by residents, Mountain View west of Bragaw Street was annexed by Anchorage in June 1954. Having lost a significant portion of its subscribers, the Mountain View PUD initiated plans to dissolve.

Fearing a loss of service, residents of East Mountain View presented the Anchorage city council with a petition for annexation in May 1954. By the August public hearings, approximately 500 of the 1041 property owners listed on the school district tax rolls had signed the petition in favor of annexation with Anchorage. On October 5, 1954, residents of East Mountain View narrowly voted in favor of annexation, 95 to 84. Within Anchorage, voters overwhelmingly favored the annexation by a margin of 1247 to 332.

At the same time as western Mountain View, the city separately annexed Annexation Area #4, which included Merrill Field, Airport Heights, and portions of what is today southern Russian Jack. The addition of East Mountain View, which included the northern section of modern Russian Jack, stretched the city limits east to Pine Street. With East Mountain View’s 400 acres, the city encompassed 10 square miles. For comparison, the Municipality of Anchorage today covers almost 2000 square miles.

For several years, Mountain View’s commercial district along the Palmer Highway, now Mountain View Drive, was a vibrant destination. Businesses such as Brewster’s Department Store, Caribou Wards, and a Piggly Wiggly grocery were built after annexation, providing the
necessary and desired goods for the nearby population. Some of those establishments, like Jamico’s Pizzeria and the Mountain View Car Wash, have been in operation since their openings in the early 1960s.

“Of course, right next to where Red Apple is, that part where the bingo hall is, that used to be a Payless Drugs, which was a big deal when they opened up there. I mean, they had everything, you know. You could buy fishing stuff, everything.” “The Safeway was up in North Mountain View, that’s where we went for groceries.” During the Mountain View’s commercial heyday, many Russian Jack residents lived without having to journey into Anchorage’s downtown core. “Usually we shopped at Brewsters … we only ever were around these people. We didn’t go uptown and visit people or anything like that. We stayed in this area right here.” “We didn’t travel that much. I mean, we’d go when they opened up Sears.”

It was a safe neighborhood. “My mom would tell you get out, go play all day, and, you know, don’t come home until you’re hungry or whatever and we would. They never worried about us.” Said another longtime resident, “It was always safe around here, you just had to, you know, once in a while be careful of cars coming, but there was hardly any traffic here.”

The Good Friday earthquake of March 27, 1964, that devastated downtown Anchorage caused only minimal damage in Russian Jack. “The house made it fine through it. But the only thing, I mean stuff came out the cupboards … but there was no real damage other than the sidewalks. All were cracked afterwards.” At the time, only the northern half of Russian Jack was extensively developed. Sewers were in place by 1965, but only portions of 2nd Avenue, Park Street, and Hoyt Street were paved. “We’d roll our bikes out there onto the streets, and they were okay, but every year they’d come and put the oil down on the roads, stinky oil… I can remember the smell of that oil, trying to keep the dust down, but, yeah, we rode the street, years on no pavement.” “You just didn’t bring your shoes in. You didn’t walk on [the oil].” The majority of streets in Russian Jack were not paved until the early 1970s.

After the earthquake, the city implemented a plan to realign the Glenn Highway to its current position, a change that fundamentally altered the adjoining neighborhoods. At the time, the path from the Anchorage downtown, past the military bases, and into the Alaska interior followed the Palmer Highway through the Mountain View commercial core, what is now Mountain View Drive. The wider, busier Glenn Highway, named for Captain Edward Forbes Glenn, an Army officer who explored south-central Alaska from 1898 to 1899, divided Russian Jack from Mountain View. Many of the formerly prosperous business closed due to the loss of traffic. “None of us kids who lived south of the new highway into town were allowed to walk home from Clark [Middle School]. Once the highway sliced the south residential part of Mountain View from the retail strip along what is now Mountain View Drive, it was considered too dangerous for kids our age (junior high) to make the walk we had previously performed daily at a much earlier age.”

South of the Glenn Highway, residential development continued. The Spanish named streets north of where Costco now stands—San Ernesto, San Roberto, and San Antonio—were developed in 1966 and, according to local legend, named for Spanish investors. San Antonio
Park, constructed in 2004, is named for the adjoining street. Apart from East Anchorage High School, built in 1954, and a stock car race track, most of the land in Russian Jack south of Debarr Road contained marshes that required drainage and filling before development.

Apartment buildings began to appear in the community, altering the landscape. “When they started building these apartments here, my mom…and my neighbors here, and I think some other people on the road tried to get them to stop. Building these big apartment houses on the streets. We didn’t, they didn’t want them on this road.” In 1972, neighborhood residents successfully fought an attempt by an Outside developer to place a 100 apartment, low-rent tower near Wonder Park Elementary.

Through the 1960s and until 1975, the Anchorage bowl was divided between two civic authorities. The City of Anchorage contained the original townsite and subsequent annexations, south to Northern Lights Boulevard and west to Boniface Parkway, including most of Russian Jack. The Greater Anchorage Area Borough, which included the northeast and southeast corners of Russian Jack, served residents outside the city limits. After years of acrimony, the city and borough merged in 1975 to form the Municipality of Anchorage. For the first time, all of modern Russian Jack was unified under a single authority.

**Russian Jack Springs Park**

The Homestead Act of 1862 required claimants to develop their holdings, a process called proving up. To obtain a legal title, homesteaders had to build and farm the land for five years. Neither Peter Toloff nor Nicholas Darlopaulos proved up on their homesteads, the land that became Russian Jack Springs Park. In 1943, the U.S. military seized the land for possible expansion and compensated the former homesteaders $4300. In 1948, the City of Anchorage bought the land was sold as surplus for $16,000. At the time, the city primarily viewed the springs on the land as a potential water source. But several studies noted that the spring was an insufficient water source. However, the land remained reserved for future use, as the site of an eventual greenspace and park.

The first significant use of the land by the city occurred in 1951 with the construction of a prison farm meant to alleviate overcrowding in the city jail. Initially consisting of three Quonset huts that housed an average of 40 inmates, the site grew to include several wooden buildings, a dog pound, and a warehouse for long term city storage. Prisoners who were convicted of misdemeanors, primarily alcohol related, were eligible for the farm. Their work included growing produce, cutting firewood, and serving as prison labor throughout the city. The 26-acre farm became self-sufficient, productive enough that its crops were a crucial complement to the budget for the cash strapped city prison. By the early 1960s, the prison provided 93,000 meals a year, all including some of the potatoes, peas, cabbage, beets, and carrots grown at the farm.

Many Anchorage residents viewed the prison farm as a vacation resort for drunks. Longtime reporter Mike Dunham recalled:

“We even had people come into the police station, some of these people that were homeless and down and out and so forth, sayin’ ‘I wanna go to the farm.' They'd come in
and ask. And I can remember one case, this guy came in, we all knew him. And it was getting towards fall, it was getting a little cold outside, and he says ‘I wanna go to the farm,’ and, uh, the officer told him, ‘Well, y’know, you haven't done anything wrong.’ So he picked up the cash register off the counter, slammed it onto the floor, and he says, ‘Now can I go to the farm?’ [laughs] Well, he did! He went to the farm.”

When Alaska became a state on January 3, 1959, a judge seized upon the spirit of rebirth and pardoned the 50 inmates then serving on the farm. Within two days, most were arrested again. Some begged police for a return to the farm. However, prison officials vigorously denied that life on the farm was an easy assignment. The first farm jailer, Roger Gidney, noted that prisoners were required “to do a reasonable amount of work” regardless of the weather. The prison farm remained active until 1968, when it was relocated near Point Campbell, inside today’s Kincaid Park.

Despite the prison farm, the area was an increasingly desired recreational destination. In 1952, local Girl Scouts leader Marjory Bailey established Winding Trails Day Camp. At the same time, city officials began to plan for the development of the land into a “potential glamor spot,” a multi-use destination for outdoor enthusiasts throughout the city. Though not official, municipal reports were referring to the area as Russian Jack Springs Park as early as 1954. In 1957, the city council agreed to donate some of the land if funds could be obtained for an on-site zoo, a proposal that lingered into the 1960s. The city officially extended city limits to include the park in January 1958.

The 1960s were marked by a succession of improvements to the park. In the first half of the decade, the Nordic Ski Club began building trails in Russian Jack Springs Park with city permission. One of the Club members, 1960 Olympic biathlete and later school principal Dick Mize, noted that “we didn’t have a trail system, but Russian Jack was close by and we simply used what is the parking lot now for our technique practice.” “It’s very gratifying for me to see others enjoying these trails for walking, running, skiing, and mountain biking, and to know I had a part in their development,” said Mize.

In 1965, the Lions Club completed the first loop of a camper park that they then donated to the city. By 1967, construction had finished on a ski jump and began for a greenhouse. Completed in 1971, the greenhouse in Russian Jack Springs Park provides the flowers placed by the city in other parks and hanging baskets. Roads, another camper loop, restrooms, a day camp shelter, and the ski chalet were completed in 1968. A nine-hole golf course opened in 1969. The fairways utilized land previously cleared by the prison farm inmates, what had been

Advertisement. June 1, 1971.
Anchorage Daily News
their cabbage and potato patches. Due to its bouncy, fast, and moose-proof artificial turf, the course is among the most unique in the country.

**Modern Russian Jack**

In 1968, oil was discovered at Prudhoe Bay. In response to rising oil prices, construction on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) began in 1974 and completed in 1977. Alaska, and Anchorage especially, experienced another economic boom as thousands of new arrivals sought a piece of the oil money. But the influx of people also brought changes. In response to a housing shortage, apartment buildings became more common in the city. In the decades that followed, Anchorage expanded to fill the bowl and along the Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley.

In Russian Jack, roads were paved, and the southern half of the community developed into the commercial and residential zones of today. Many longtime residents note the opening of the pipeline as the most important moment in Anchorage history, when everything changed. “That's when all of Anchorage went downhill. I think that was the first time I ever thought, ‘Oh my god someone was murdered in Anchorage’…people were crazy.” “When the pipeline came, you could see things starting to change. Back then there was very little crime…but after the pipeline came in you could see all kinds of different things, I guess. Different people. And that’s when the crime rate started to go up.” “We started seeing different types of gang insignia and stuff like that, which at the time we didn’t know what that was, we just figured somebody was out screwing around with a paint can.”

Some of the most notorious murders in Anchorage history occurred in Russian Jack. In 1982, Charles Meach murdered four teenagers inside Russian Jack Springs Park.

“He came by in the early morning and walked through Russian Jack Springs Park there, and he, he saw their little tent, and he was in there going through their tapes and so on, and, and the young people came, came back and surprised him. And so he stood up and he was Almighty God with a gun, you know, and he just wiped the [four] lives out.”

Meach had previously killed a grocery clerk in Alaska in 1972 but had been found not guilty by reason of insanity. Meach was remanded to a psychiatric hospital but was eventually granted several unescorted passes outside the institution. “My friend was his nurse at API [Alaska Psychiatric Institute] and said that he was crazy. He should never have been on work release.” “I remember that guy that killed all those people up there, killed those kids up there in the park. One of the girls, she lived right next door to my friend.”

In 1985, 14-year-old Winona Fletcher, with her 19-year-old boyfriend, Cordell Boyd, killed three elderly residents south of Russian Jack Springs Park. “That was the Tom’s Plumbing people. We knew them, cause we always used to buy plumbing supplies. It was all shocking cause it was people you used to see at their plumbing supply store all the time.” Fletcher was tried as an adult and initially sentenced to 297 years, later reduced to 99 years. She will become eligible for parole when she turns 60.
In a city marked by pervasive high crime rates, residents emphasize that crime in Russian Jack is relative. “I’ve lived in other parts of this town, too, throughout my life and there’s just as much crap going on everywhere.” “I call it the hood, my hood. And you know a lot of people when you say you live in [South] Mountain View, the first thing they think of is ‘crime-ridden.’ Well, you might think that because you don’t live over here. There’s crime everywhere, but there’s not as much over here as there is on the north side.”

The presence of crime also illustrated community bonds and the resilience of residents. The key to Meach’s capture was a tip made by a Russian Jack resident who noticed a stranger riding a blue bike and acting strangely. “All that evidence we recovered from that park that night didn’t amount to that one tip, that blue Schwinn bicycle. That got us Charles Meach,” noted an Anchorage police officer. In 1979, an arsonist torched the Russian Jack Springs Park ski chalet, but it was rebuilt. After a 1998 electrical fire at Russian Jack Elementary rendered the school unsafe, community members fought for and won a new, safer school, not a partial rebuild. Local churches, such as St. Anthony’s Catholic Church, have provided a multitude of social services, including home and personal safety trainings.

During the 2000s, Russian Jack residents participated in a broader East Anchorage rejuvenation project. The federal Weed and Seed program was a multi-pronged approach to community revitalization that emphasized public safety and crime reduction via expanded community engagement. “It [Weed and Seed] was defunded under Obama, which is really surprising to me. It was very active up until that.” Despite a loss of funding, the potential within the community remains.

Many of the institutions in Russian Jack only arrived in their current form via the intervention of residents. From its central position, Costco is a neighborhood fixture. “I do the Costco thing.” “Of course I go to Costco.” But when initially proposed in 1991, the building was to be a simple warehouse. “It’s 414 feet long, 30 feet high and made of white sheet metal. It’s worse than ugly,” described then Russian Jack Community Council president Cheryl Clementson. “They wanted to put in a building that was just a warehouse, and we wanted something that was welcoming into the neighborhood,” claimed another resident present at the time.

Due to land-use restrictions, the developer was required to undergo a public review. After heated opposition by residents, the design for the store was revised into its current form,
incorporating landscaping, covered walkways, and a mixed-material façade. “It turned out to be the best Costco for even Costco as a corporation by all the amenities that we insisted they put in.” In addition, the developers agreed to construct a new road that would funnel residential traffic away from the commercial site. As a joke, the lead developer named the new road San Clementson after the council president, his nemesis during the negotiations. “I go out of my way to drive down the street,” said Clementson at the time.

In 2008, the city constructed an overpass that carried Bragaw Street traffic over the Glenn Highway. Eighteen adjacent parcels were cleared, including several older, multi-family residences in the northwestern corner of Russian Jack. At the time, proposals for the land included the creation of a community garden, but progress was halting. The city finally built four garden beds on the site in 2010 but did not maintain nor open the land to public use. In 2012, the Anchorage Community Land Trust (ACLT) assumed responsibility for the project, opening the Gardens at Bragaw to the public and adding several capital improvements. Local students provided artwork. “It’s a kinship thing about digging in the dirt.”

The community garden was not the only Russian Jack green space to receive upgrades in recent years. San Antonio Park, a pocket park between San Ernesto and San Roberto, was built in 2004. Dave Rose Park received a new aviation-themed play space in 2015 and a Samoan cricket (kilikiti) field in 2017. Most notably, a new playground, with an adjacent skate park, was added to the northwestern edge of Russian Jack Springs Park in 2013. The playground’s centerpiece is its slide where children descend through the open mouth of a polar bear. The site quickly became known by locals as the Polar Bear Park.

Residents praise the addition. “That [Polar Bear Park] that they built on Pine Street was the best invention they ever had…we went by it even today, and I’ve been watching it since they built it, and before salmon season hits, that park is full of parents and children. It’ll just be loaded on a sunny day.” “It’s the best investment they could have made as far as the park goes” “That just changed the whole dynamic of the neighborhood.”

However, community leaders had to fight for its placement. Anchoragites from across the city utilize Russian Jack Springs Park. As a result, “It’s considered a city-wide park.” Other, non-Russian Jack residents, sought to embed the playground within the larger park, away from residences. But, as former council president Kathleen Plunkett notes, “It needs to be front and center, near the road where kids can see it.” As implemented,

**Lidia Selkregg Lane** and **Lidia Selkregg Chalet**: Named for Lidia Selkregg (1920-1999), the longtime Anchorage geologist, professor, city planner, and Assembly member.

**Mann Leisser Memorial Greenhouse**: Named for Mann Leisser (1921-1992), the longtime Anchorage greenhouse and gardening enthusiast known for his numerous television appearances and two volume *Alaska Gardening*.

**Reka Drive**: *Reka* is Russian for river.

**Williaww Elementary School** and **Williaww Park**: A *williaww* is a rush of cold, dense air descending from mountains towards a coastline. A *williaww* can also describe a sudden, violent storm at sea. Gore Vidal popularized the term in *Williaww*, his 1946 debut novel of an Army ship stationed in the Aleutian Islands.
the playground is across the street from homes, in direct view. The current location is more open, safer, and encourages use. “It’s a point of pride with the neighborhood.”

Indeed, many residents believe that their neighborhood has improved in recent years. “Now I’m seeing more families. When we bought this place, you didn’t see families walking the streets. You didn’t see families hanging out at a playground. Mothers and strollers. You didn’t see that.” Homes remain affordable and desirable, and the population has increased. “It’s cheap to live here, so I stay.” “If you have kids, you’re going to be close to an elementary school.” “Now the neighbors at least know each other.” One resident calls the neighborhood the “green ghetto. Green because there’s so many parks and trails. And we live so close to the trails. And it’s like, it’s like a hidden secret. It’s a gem. I ask why don’t more people live in Russian Jack? They’re crazy, the park is amazing.” “I’m right near the trails, which is really nice”

Assemblyman Forrest Dunbar is one of the Anchorage residents drawn to Russian Jack, recently relocating from further east in the city. “It’s comparatively affordable,” said Dunbar. “You can get downtown. You can get to the university. You can get to the hospital.” As for the reputation of high crime, “the ice cream trucks had bullet proof glass where I was living in Washington DC, and there was this kind of feeling of violence in the air…and I don’t feel that in Reka.”

In addition, the community is increasingly diverse, attracting Hmong, Filipino, Dominican, Korean, and Sudanese emigrants among others. According to research by University of Alaska Anchorage professor Chad Ferrell, the northern half of Russian Jack is the third most diverse community in the nation. Adjacent Census tracts rank first and second. “I think in this neighborhood we actually got a pretty good mix of people.” “I would much prefer a neighborhood with character, and you like say hi to your neighbors, and a diverse population, and affordability for really nice spaces.” Clark Middle School and East Anchorage High, which service Russian Jack, are the most diverse middle and high schools, respectively, in the nation.

Williwaw Elementary, in the heart of Russian Jack, is the 12th most diverse elementary school in the nation. Principal Likka McCauley stated that “there’s been a little bit of a demographic shift here. This school has largely been known as having a very high Hmong population, and we’re starting to see more people coming from Spanish speaking countries. I think most notably we’re seeing a lot more families coming here from the Dominican Republic.” As she notes, “the language barrier is sometimes there.” But the diversity can also be a strength. Said McCauley:

“My perception is that our diverse cultures have long been very respectful of each other, coexisting peacefully. One shift I am seeing is increasing interdependence of relationships, with more families showing warmth and embracing closer relationships with those of different backgrounds that they live amongst. Our multicultural family night, which culminated in the friendship dance in which participants held hands in a large circle, was a great representation of that.”

Russian Jack community members share the same fears and concerns as most Anchorage residents. Snow removal and traffic. Crime and the economy. “They’re just working people like everyone else. You stand out here at 6, actually five in the morning, there are a lot of people who work for the city that leave at 5 o’clock in the morning here.” “I know most of my neighbors.”
“I’ve never had a feeling of this is not a safe place to live.” Whatever its reputation, Russian Jack “gets a lot worse rap than it deserves.” The neighborhood has the potential, power, and engagement to embrace its past and improve its future.

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Sources


“30 Go Back To Jail For Warmth and Food.” Anchorage Daily Times, January 5, 1959.


