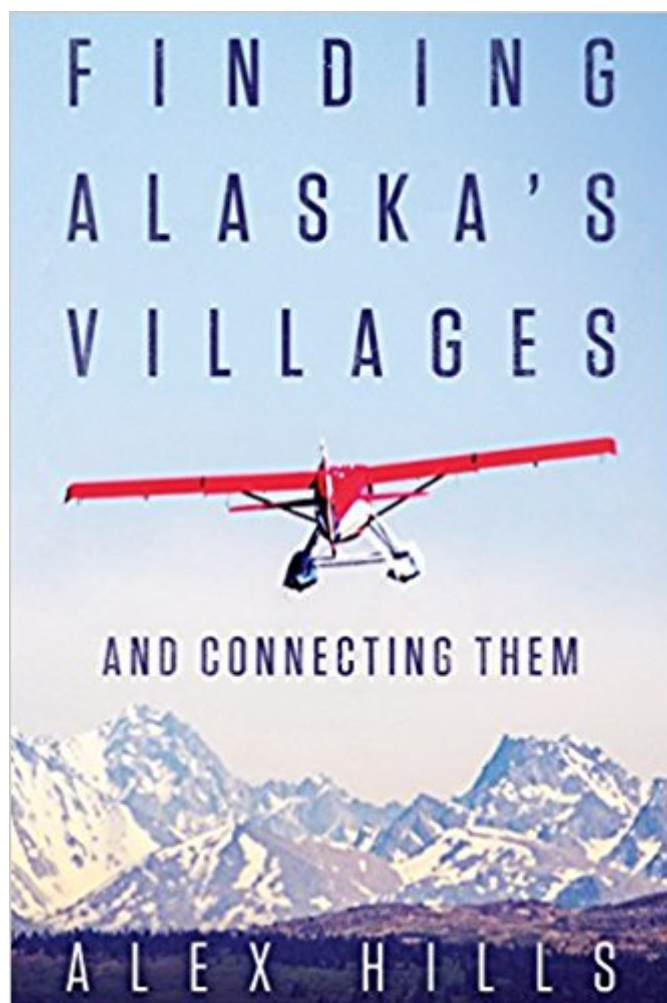


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# Finding Alaska's Villages: And Connecting Them



## Synopsis

In *Finding Alaska's Villages* Alex Hills tells how he traveled Alaska by bush plane and snow machine, braving extreme weather and rough terrain to bring telephone service to small villages across the big state. Alex and his team battled the wind at Little Diomed and used some creative thinking to bring phone service to that remote village. He arrived at Little Diomed at the same time that some Inupiaq Russians appeared on the sea ice nearby. Alex later took charge of KOTZ, Kotzebue's new public radio station, which he shaped into a valuable information resource for the people of Alaska's huge northwest region. At each step along the way, Alex made friends with Alaska's village people and developed a deep respect for them. In *Finding Alaska's Villages* Alex also describes how he helped the state's telecom pioneers bring about an innovation that would forever change rural Alaska. It took some creative technical work -- and some convincing of government officials and corporate executives -- to make it happen. Soon the needed telecommunication services -- two-way medical communication, a phone in every house and business, and radio and television programs -- were available in Alaska's villages.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Finding Alaska's Villages* is a quick read, enlivened by Hills' amiable writing style and his readiness to credit a great many people for their roles in connecting the farthest reaches of the state to each other and beyond. While a personal memoir, it tells a much bigger story than just the author's experiences...Hills' enthusiasm, generosity toward others and focus on the

human side of the story with a minimum of clearly explained science and engineering help make it an accessible read for anyone interested in an important part of how Alaska got where it is today. - David A. James, Alaska Dispatch News

Alex worked in villages from Port Alexander in southeast Alaska to Kivalina and Noatak in the northwest, providing modern communication services as he went. He fell into the rhythm of life in the villages, and he met Yup'ik and Inupiaq elders, learning about their strongly held values...It's a fascinating story, and it's all in Alex's new book, *Finding Alaska's Villages: And Connecting Them*. - Alaska Business Monthly

It's people who care that shape the world. That's the main lesson of Palmer author Alex Hills' new book, *Finding Alaska's Villages: And Connecting Them*. The autobiographical look at Alaska's telecommunications history in the 1970s identifies the major players in bringing telephone, television, and radio to rural Alaska. The story, which bounces back and forth between descriptions of harrowing plane travel, tech work and poignant human moments that typified Hills' work on rural Alaska's first phone and radio projects, reveals the mind of a man who gets along with both man and machine. - Mary Lockman, The Frontiersman

A new book by former public radio GM for KOTZ and KSKA, Dr. Alex Hills, tells the story of the early days of telecommunications in rural Alaska, what it took to connect the villages and who was doing the work. The book is called *Finding Alaska's Village: And Connecting Them*. - Lori Townsend, Alaska PublicMedia

Alex came to Alaska with the perspective that anything is possible if you keep working the problem. He puts no limits on his thinking, and he uses his imagination. He's as comfortable in a Silicon Valley boardroom as climbing a tower in Bethel. Reading this book told me more about Alex than I'd learned over coffee in the last 20 years, and helps me understand the human element behind our phone systems, more than any other account of telecommunications in Alaska. Now I'll be sure I don't take for granted that phone call to rural Alaska - ever! - Mead Treadwell, Alaska Lt. Governor 2010-2014

Alex Hills helped everyone who lives in northwest Alaska when he shaped public radio station KOTZ into an invaluable service for the entire region. The station quickly became a vital source of news and information -- and a new way for villages separated by great distances to come closer together. Then Alex worked to bring modern telecommunications services -- telephone, television and two-way medical communication service -- to the region and to all of Alaska. And he played a key role in creating the region's OTZ Telephone Cooperative. His new book tells the story, and it's a

good one! -- Doug Neal, CEO, OTZ Telephone Cooperative

Today, technologists are working to bring modern communications networks to underserved towns and villages around the world, sometimes finding their efforts at odds with the interests of politicians and corporate executives. Engineers who find themselves called to these challenges of building our new, interconnected world would be well served to read this account of Alex Hills and his work in the 1970s to bring telephone and radio service to Alaska's most remote communities. In *Finding Alaska's Villages*, Alex expands on the story of his early career in Alaska where he advocated for and helped build Alaska's "bush telephone program." Frustrated by corporate indifference to the program's expansion, he turned his sights to public radio, taking on the role of chief engineer at KOTZ and, somewhat less probably, "Alex in the Morning." In all his work, Alex approached his successes and challenges with the heart of an engineer and the savvy of an executive who knew that connecting Alaska's villages was not just an engineering problem. Whether you're involved in bringing technology to those who need it most, interested in the history of communication systems in Alaska, or just love a story about a young engineer trying to make a difference, you'll find Alex's latest book both instructive and entertaining.

This book by Alex Hills is a must read for people who love technology and how it can benefit people. Alex Hills, it turns out, is one of those "hands on" kind of engineers who is not satisfied to just design new devices and test them in a lab. He went to Alaska and took on the difficulties of installing VHF radio links in small villages so native peoples could have a connection to the outside world. This involved flying in small airplanes and trekking to a remote transmitter using a "snow machine" (snowmobile) all done in subzero weather. I have read Alex Hills book on radio and Wi-Fi (*Wi-Fi and the Bad Boys of Radio*) and this book on Alaska shows him to be a very resourceful engineer willing to tackle not only difficult problems of working in Alaska but even to tackle problems of confronting a large corporation, RCA, which was not performing up to its agreement to build a network which would serve all of Alaska. He starts out in the employ of RCA to install VHF radio connections between villages and the existing telephone network. When he leaves he corresponds with an RCA executive to try to get RCA to live up to its commitment. Later he works on one of the first public radio stations in a small village, helping to get it on the air and then becomes a morning disk jockey. He always maintains the attitude that the best technology needs to be brought in to connect the villages of Alaska and this puts him into work involving satellite links to the villages to bring reliable

connections to telephone, radio and TV through specially placed earth satellites. There is a map of Alaska in the front of the book that has all the small villages indicated, and it shows that Alex Hills was indeed at some very remote locations in Alaska. This is a remarkable story well worth the read. It has some great photographs and is an excellent compilation of Alex Hills's time spent between his graduate degrees on his way to becoming a professor at Carnegie Mellon University. How fitting that he gave his life to the people in the rural villages of Alaska and then to educating students to go and do the same.

I thoroughly enjoyed the book. (Full disclosure - Alex & I were at RPI together and active in WRPI, the student FM station). My first job though was in Sitka Alaska in the mid 60s, so it gives me some feel for the conditions then.. We left Sitka about 4 years before Alex arrived but it was the same era and Alex's stories ring true. It was a great time to be there.

A lively, first hand account of the evolution of how an empathic engineer with determination and good communication skills can bring progress to remote areas that are typically not commercially viable but who deserve to benefit from emerging telecommunications technologies.

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