Moose Creek and the engine was skidded to the Buffalo Mine Road. There it was loaded on a lowboy trailer and trucked to town to be set on a short section of narrow-gauge track beside the rails over which it had been hauled north more than thirty years before.

Engine #5 is now owned and maintained by the City of Palmer and exhibited in recognition of its historically significant contributions to the development of our area, having faithfully served on both the first narrow-gauge rails in the district at Eska, and those of the district’s last operating mine at Premier.

The story of the little locomotive resting today in downtown Palmer begins even before it was built, with early discovery of high grade coal in the northern hills along the Matanuska River. Around 1900 the U.S. Navy needed a source of coal on the west coast to fuel its Pacific Fleet. They determined the Matanuska Valley anthracite coal would fit their need, so in 1916 the government built a railroad line up the valley to bring the coal to tidewater.

This standard-gauge branch line extended from Matanuska junction, south of present-day Palmer, along the Matanuska River as far north as the...
developing mine at Chickaloon. Within a few years, however, the Navy converted from coal to bunker oil in its ships and the initial need for coal declined.

But with the growing town of Anchorage, and its adjacent military base, demand for Matanuska coal remained high for heating and power generation until the mid 1960’s. Several mines were developed, and small communities emerged within the coal field. A railroad spur was constructed from Sutton Station on the main line up to the Evan Jones and Eska mines around the Wishbone Hill formation. The initial line built to Eska was “narrow-gauge”, with lighter rails than standard-gauge tracks, and rails set 3 feet apart instead of the standard 4 feet, 8-1/2 inches.

It was on this narrow-gauge line to Eska around 1924 that Engine #5 apparently began its Matanuska Valley service hauling coal from the mine down to the main branch line near the river. But by this time the little engine was already a veteran of the rails. Engine #5, construction number 34958, was built by Baldwin Locomotive Works of Philadelphia & Eddystone, Pennsylvania in July 1910 for the U.S. Government. It had a coal-fired boiler that supplied steam for a pair of cylinders with 9” bore and 14” stroke. The engine was configured as “0-4-0T”, that is, with no lead truck or pony wheels up front, four drive wheels, (at 28” in diameter and spaced 36” apart for the narrow-gauge track), no trailing truck or wheels, and the “T” indicates the water tank and fuel bunker are carried on the locomotive rather than on a separate tender car.

The engine is thought to have first been used in dam construction and land reclamation projects in Eastern Washington State. In about 1914 it was shipped North by the Alaska Railroad connecting Seward, on the coast, to the interior city of Fairbanks. While that 470 mile main line was not completed until 1923, the Matanuska River branch to Chickaloon, was in place by 1916.

About the time the Navy ceased needing Chickaloon coal and that mine shut down, the mines above Sutton were opening up. Engine #5 was used on the narrow-gauge track to Eska until that line could be upgraded to standard-gauge. The little locomotive was then hauled down to Moose Creek about 15 miles north of Palmer, where tracks were being laid upstream to the Premier, Wishbone Hill & Buffalo mines. T.A. “Hardworkin” Smith, who later homesteaded the area that would become “North Palmer”, was an early mechanic and engineer on Engine #5.

The initial tracks up the narrow Moose Creek valley, built in 1925, were again narrow-gauge. The Premier Coal Co. purchased Engine #5 and used it to haul coal from the Premier and Buffalo mines downstream to the tipple and junction with the main branch. In 1926 the lower 4 mile portion of Moose Creek narrow-gauge line was replaced with standard-gauge track reaching to a short distance above the Premier mine. Engine #5 then continued to run on the remaining narrow-gauge line serving the upstream mines, delivering their coal down to the standard-gauge section.

A 1942 flood in Moose Creek washed out large sections of both the standard and narrow-gauge tracks which were never replaced. Engine #5 apparently continued operating between Premier and the upper mines after this time, but it’s unclear for how long.

In 1956 several local men found the locomotive abandoned at Buffalo Mine and determined to bring it to Palmer. The Matanuska Valley Bank contributed $500 to the effort, a caterpillar tractor was secured from the railroad, a temporary bridge was built across