

Obituaries

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Section: Obituaries

Charles M. Binkley

Charles Madison Binkley, known as Captain Jim, died at home on Jan. 3, 2003, at the age of 82.

He was born in Wrangell on May 16, 1920, to parents who were pioneers of the Gold Rush. His father was a riverboat pilot on the Stikine River, and died when Jim was young. Following his father's death, Jim moved to California with his mother.

He joined the Boy Scouts in 1932 and became an Eagle Scout in 1936. After high school, Jim moved back to Wrangell to renew his ties with his father's family. He worked for his uncle, operating riverboats on the Stikine, and then moved to Fairbanks to attend the university. During summers he worked on steamboats, hauling supplies by riverboat to Eskimo and Indian villages along the Yukon River. In doing so, he gained a lifelong respect and affection for their cultures.

A World War II veteran, he served on riverboats in Alaska. After the war he went back to the university where he met his future wife, Mary Hall. They were married on June 15, 1947.

In 1950 Chuck West approached Jim and Mary with a proposal: If they would offer a riverboat cruise in Fairbanks, he would supply the passengers. Jim and Mary bought the Godspeed from the Episcopal Church and began offering tours of the Chena and Tanana rivers. The business grew and a larger boat was needed, and Captain Jim and his partner Bill English built the Discovery in 1955, followed by Discovery II in 1971 and Discovery III in 1987. Captain Jim and Mary's four children all grew up in the business.

Captain Jim also found time for public service. He served two terms in the Alaska House of Representatives from 1960 to 1964, and was active in numerous organizations. He was a champion of the visitor industry, helping create Alaskaland, the Alaska Visitors Association, and Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau.

For over 25 years he was involved in the communications industry in Alaska, serving on the boards of Alascom, Pacificorp, and Pacific Telecom. He received numerous statewide awards, including Alaskan of the Year and Business Leader of the Year. Through his family business, Captain Jim shared his love of Alaska and its Native cultures with hundreds of thousands of visitors to the state, and in the process they gained a personal and unforgettable glimpse of life in the Last Frontier.

Captain Jim is survived by his wife Mary; Skip, Karen, Jon, Jacqueline, and Madison Binkley; Jim, Gayle, and Scott Binkley; John, Judy, Ryan and Sabrina, Kai, Wade, and James Binkley ; and Marilee, Buzz, Michael, Joseph, and Mary Rose Faulhaber.