DISPATCHES

FRONTIERS

After the Oil Rush

In Alaska, dwindling reserves forecast a statewide identity crisis

By Charles Homans

The culture of Alaska tends toward optimism. If this has something to do with the people who live there—now as ever a conglomeration of migrants, idealists, last-chancers, and get-rich-quick schemers—it also owes much to the state's modern history. Alaska achieved statehood in 1959 in a kind of noble but dubious experiment: hobbled by geographic isolation, a near-absence of development, and a forbidding climate and landscape, the Last Frontier had no serious economic prospects to speak of. Then, nine years later, geologists found the largest known oil reserves in North America on the state's North Slope, at Prudhoe Bay. By the time the 800-mile TransAlaska Pipeline System was completed, in 1977, connecting the North Slope to the southern port of Valdez, oil prices had spiked beyond all modern precedent. Alaska, only recently removed from its benighted territorial past, had become one of the richest states in the union. But Alaskan optimism has its limits, and one morning in July, I went looking for them, driving out of downtown Valdez on a two-lane road that hugs the forested coast of Prince William Sound. The view was something out of a cruise-ship brochure: cottony skeins of fog caught on the tops of spruces, bald eagles picking through driftwood on the beach, a grizzly bear nosing around in the tall grass near the road while her cub stood on its hind legs sniffing the wind. Five miles, one background check, and one Secret