

U00-182**Lydia Jacobsen Fohn-Hansen, 1891-1986
Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes**

Lydia Fohn-Hansen is interviewed by the Tanana Yukon Historical Society on January 22, 1970. William Cashen introduces her. He says he knew her in 1930, as the Home Demonstration Leader from the college. She recently retired as Associate Director for Home Economics with the Extension Service.

Lydia says she can remember back further than 40 years, but laughs about the fallibility of memory. They talk about the changes to the Eielson Building (in form and location).

She came to Alaska in 1925, at one of the most exciting and interesting times. She has a few pictures of the trip up. Martha Park came up with her to teach. They were teachers in the Midwest, at Iowa State, and saw a bulletin from Dr. Bunnell requesting two home economics teachers for the Alaska College. She shows pictures of herself and Martha in Ketchikan, a totem pole, and an airplane. These were the pictures she sent home to her parents long ago. The boat they came in on was the "teachers and nurses special." It took a week sailing from Seattle to Seward, and then they went by train to Fairbanks. They were delayed in Anchorage by a landslide, and got into Fairbanks in the middle of the night.

In Fairbanks, they discovered pennies and nickels had no value. A quarter was the smallest change. They lived at a hotel in the beginning. Martha was appointed dorm hostess, so she moved to campus. The men at Nordale Hotel would play a joke on them by saying it was much colder outside than it was, and they'd dress in all their winter gear.

One thing Lydia recalls is walking up the hill from the railroad to the main building on campus. There were dances, the Empress Theater, and games and plays that went on at the university. By 1935 they had added some dormitories, in addition to the main buildings. They had a gymnasium on the second floor of a building.

Lydia and Martha went to Curry for Christmas. (It was described as such a beautiful place.) There were really not many roads, and few choices of places to go.

Lydia says that after the gold rush Fairbanks died out; when the railroad and the college came along, it revived again. In 1925 the Fairbanks Exploration Company was coming in and dredges started being talked about. That's when they had to open the road to Faith Creek, to get water for running dredges.

For the summer they didn't consider going back home; the trip was too far and too expensive. Lydia's future husband suggested they go down river to Holy Cross, and come back up on the steamer. Bunnell said this was very dangerous, and they'd surely drown. Lydia asked Mrs. Carlyle about it, and she said, "Yes, take the trip." So they did, and Lydia has a few pictures from it. Holy Cross was a Catholic mission on the Yukon River. It was operated like a farm. It had a dorm and gardens. The children there

put on a program for the travelers, singing all songs with a French accent, since the nuns were all French-Canadian.

Three men went on this trip with Lydia and Martha. The men continued on to prospect in the Goodnews Bay area. At Nulato they were entertained by the storekeeper. They had fresh fish all the time; they'd buy them from fishwheels along the way.

Lydia talks about a picture of old Fairbanks with the N.C. Company on the riverfront. She shows another picture, of 18-mile Roadhouse, where she'd taken a dog ride.

After she was married in 1927, Lydia's husband worked with a man named Mr. McNeil, placer mining, in the summer of 1928. She talks about how they ran their mining operation. They lived in one of the old cabins at the Gilmore Mine. Rabbits or mice ate the garden she planted. People back home were very curious about what they did and how they lived.

Ben Eielson was lost in 1929. Lydia was the head of the department at the university, and Martha was the assistant, until 1929. While Lydia and her husband were in the states visiting, they read about Eielson being lost.

Hans, Lydia's husband, was a prospector, "always chasing the rainbow." In 1929 he worked for the Kryche and Fellman (?) Company on Fairbanks Creek.

Lydia tells about bringing a 5-pound chicken to the mine on Gilmore Creek, walking with it 5 miles from Cleary Summit. By the time she got there it was so heavy she thought that next time she'd buy a live one and walk it down.

In 1929 they bought the place the St. Georges built, down on 1st Street. It was the next to the last house on the 1100 block. They made several improvements on it. The summer of 1930 Lydia's husband had a chance to prospect in Goodnews Bay. (He had been there before, on the river trip to Holy Cross. Her wedding ring is made from platinum nuggets that he panned that summer there.)

In 1930, Bunnell had got money for extension work. Mr. Lloyd came up from Washington, DC, to organize it. Lydia had charge of the women's 4-H Club work. Mr. Gasser had charge of the Agricultural Club work. Lydia shows a picture, and names the Extension staff.

She organized 4-H Clubs and Homemakers Clubs. Lloyd, Gasser, and Lydia traveled and stopped in Matanuska, getting a feel for what was going on. Mr. Scheeley replaced Gasser when he decided he didn't want to do extension work.

Lydia shows a picture of her husband holding a musk-ox scarf. About that time they brought in musk-ox from Greenland. Lydia started experimenting with the spinning and weaving of it and they had a project going at the university to make scarves. They sold a lot of them to tourists, for \$10 each. They paid students \$2.50 a scarf for weaving them.

With the proceeds they bought two little looms. They were just getting started when the musk-ox were moved to Nunivak Island, so they didn't get much more wool.

Lydia's extension work involved getting around to various areas; starting 4-H work; and giving classes in sewing, foods, and nutrition. In those days people didn't have too much to work with. She recalls that farms in Matanuska Valley were scattered, and they had "institutes" for farmers and to help women to make good use of what they had.

In 1935 colonists were brought up to the Matanuska Valley, during the Depression. Two hundred families were brought. Mr. Scheeley selected the farms they were to get. Lydia stayed in the valley all summer with the colonists. They drew for farms in a lottery. There were 10 camps. The main camp was right in Palmer.

One thing they did, with the help of Reverend Bingle, was to put up a lot of salmon in the spring. At the experiment station, they had a canning operation. (Lydia shows pictures of this.) Mrs. Bell made a spinning wheel out of an old sewing machine. Lydia had an office in a tent in the main camp.

They made gloves, using leather and caribou leather. She shows a picture of the Golden Heart Potato Club in Fairbanks; that was later. She shows a picture of the cabin where Ina used to live in Fairbanks. She names all the people who owned her Fairbanks house before her and her husband. She shows pictures of dog races under Cushman Bridge, and the interior of her house, with loom and handwovens.

She shows a picture of Petersburg, where farmers hauled milk by boat. In Sitka, Lydia found a Russian lady spinning with a spindle. She shows pictures of Sourdough Roadhouse, and the log construction of the house where Ina lived and she lived. She says that a Mr. Irwin wrote a very good book of the history of the early days of Matanuska Valley.

She shows a picture of two native girls from Ft. Yukon and their teacher. They were a 4-H demonstration team that visited the university.

Interesting things happened in extension work, but Lydia resigned in 1935 to go mining with her husband up in Deadwood. She came back in 1940 after his death. Ms. McDonald wanted to leave the Extension, so Lydia took her old job back. She retired in 1959. When she did, the women of Alaska gave her a ticket around the world. She took the trip—her husband's sister in Norway didn't see how it was possible to go alone, but she made it. She stayed with her sister-in-law on her trip, and offered to cook an American-style Thanksgiving dinner. She had to find a turkey, which she kept down in a cold cellar for a few days, and made an apple pie in a square pan. She says they used a lot of cauliflower there, as well as peas, carrots, beets, and potatoes. Lowbush cranberries and rosehips also grow there.

She shows more pictures: the Wilkins expedition; Genevieve Parker (Fred Parker's sister); a Palmer 4-H group; Mr. and Mrs. Sandvik (colonists); the university in 1930.

Lydia says they used to teach fur sewing, and encouraged people to use furs. They were going to experiment with tanning furs at one point, too. Mr. Scheeley had barrels, etc., for this. Someone once sent her seal oil to experiment with making soap. While she was away, though, her husband decided to clean out the garage and threw it away.

Lydia's very first plane trip was in 1930, with Mr. Gasser and Mr. Lloyd, on Coastal Airlines from Juneau to Sitka. The next was a plane trip to Nome in 1934. It was a pretty rough trip. Once she was in Seward and was anxious to get home, so instead of the train she took a plane home. When Dr. Bunnell saw this is her account book, he made it clear she was not supposed to travel by plane, because it was so expensive. They didn't work in many villages not on the road or coast because of this.

They did have two 4-H clubs at Eklutna, a boarding school. They had chickens, pigs, gardens there. Girls learned to knit, sew, and weave. They went to camp in the summer. One girl from there went to the university, and then to school in Washington, and came back to teach home economics at Mt. Edgecumbe.

Lydia says she's got more pictures, which Ina (Hanlon?) gave her. Cashen tells that Lydia was awarded an honorary doctorate of humanities upon her retirement. The meeting and talk now end.