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**Bon Davis with moderator Jerry Reinwand. KUAC-FM: University Of Alaska Radio Forum**

**Summary created by: Summer Dougherty**

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**Series:**

Bon Davis is the subject of today's show. He is a long time Alaskan who homesteaded in the wilderness outside of Fairbanks in the early 1940s. Eventually, his 160 acre site grew into the town of North Pole

Bon Davis and his wife Bernice started out their married life as teachers. For the first 3 years of their marriage they taught in 2 and 3 year room schools in the lower 48. Over the next five years, Bernice had two sons, Neil and Lewis. She left her teaching job to devote her time to her family. Mr. Davis continued teaching for several years but eventually left for a more lucrative position in a coal mine. After that job ended, the family travelled around the West and Midwest, seeking work. Bernice and Bon both found employment in Chicago.

About 9 months after their arrival in Chicago, Bon was offered a construction job on a defense project near Excursion Inlet, about 70 miles from Juneau. Because of wartime travel regulations the Davis' two sons could not make the trip to Alaska. They stayed behind with relatives. Bon left for Alaska and Bernice followed seven months later. No women were allowed at the Excursion Inlet project. She stayed in Juneau. Bon visited her there every three months.

A recording of Bon Davis is played. He recalls an experience in Juneau:

Bon decided to take Bernice out to see Mendenhall Glacier. He bought an old, cheap box camera - the last available in Juneau - and he and Bernice took a bus out to Auke Bay and proceeded to walk toward the glacier. There were signs posted everywhere: "No photography!" Bon kept taking pictures, despite his wife telling him it was forbidden. They got to the glacier and climbed over a ledge to get to it. Bon took more pictures and they climbed back down over the ledge. He climbed down first and as she is climbing down with his help, standing on his shoulders, they hear a bullet hit near them, then another and another. Once they climbed back over the ledge, they walked behind a moraine that had been pushed over by the glacier. Eventually they realized that they were in the middle of a rifle range. They made a run for the lake where a truck was picking up ice.

Bon knew the truck driver. The driver asked why he was carrying a camera, since picture taking is forbidden in the spot. The truck driver took the camera since if someone saw Bon with the camera, on might be put in jail for it. Bon insisted that the driver take his picture first and the driver did.

Later, Bon took the film to the Davis photography shop in Juneau. Bernice picked up the pictures and the man at the shop said she had better not try and take the pictures out of Alaska, as she would be subject to a \$10,000 fine and banishment from Alaska if the Army cared to press charges.

Bon says he still has the pictures to this day.

When the Job at Excursion Inlet was over, Mr. and Mrs. Davis moved to Skagway. Bernice suffered from a severe asthma attack and a Skagway doctor advised that the climate of Interior Alaska would be better for Bernice's health. After staying in Whitehorse, Mr. and Mrs. Davis came to the Fairbanks area to select a homestead site.

Bon describes picking out a site:

They saw a ridge of timber at 15 mile and at that point part of the old Richardson trail joined the new part. The snow was cleared from the old trail. They got out of the car and started walking, following the trail. It was very beautiful. The further they walked the more they liked it. They both knew that was the spot to pick.

They filed for a homestead site, around mile 14 of the old Richardson trail. Bon describes building a log cabin:

He knew nothing about log cabins. He didn't know how to fell a tree or even what tools he should have. Once he had the trees felled he had to get them to his house site. He did this by skidding larger logs across poles laid on the snow.

He did not know how to lay the logs on top of each other to build the cabin and was under the false impression that one had to leave room in between the logs to leave space for the chinking.

Some of his logs were too short so he would up a window in next to them. If the log was a bit crooked he would turn it to one side and they would use more moss for chinking. When he was done they had six windows and two doors in a 15x20 cabin. They added on another 15x20 when their sons came the following summer. They made fewer mistakes on the addition than they did on the original cabin.

Bon and Bernice had originally thought that getting their sons to and from Fairbanks for school would not be a problem. However, their car broke down and they realized that it would be. Because there were no school buses or anyone to carpool with, they enrolled their sons in a correspondence course. Bon describes:

The boys were enrolled in Calvert home study courses. The courses were well designed and the language was graded to the age of the child. The boys' papers were gone over carefully and paragraphs of feedback were sent back to them. The boys learned the subject matter, but Bon felt, maybe more importantly, they learned to study on their own.

Bon says that in the fall, besides attending to their studies, the boys would help gathering vegetables and berries and getting wood ready. But when the weather got really cold, the boys were happy to focus on their correspondence courses, so they made good progress.

Bon describes how his family used to have family discussions during the winter. All topics were covered: geography, history, government, human nature, religion, and even sex. Nothing was considered taboo, and Mr. and Mrs. Davis didn't evade any subject. Mrs. Davis would also devise games with educational value for the family to play.

The announcer says that the oldest son, Neil, went on to earn a doctorate in geophysics and was assistant director of the geophysical institute at the University of Alaska. Lewis received a bachelor's degree at Parsons College and was teaching school at Long Island, NY.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis developed their land. Eventually 26 acres were under cultivation and they were raising some animals for their winter meat supply.

The couple realized they had picked a good spot for their homestead. It was attractive to others as well. Some people approached Bon with cash in hand hoping to buy a portion of his land. Bon wanted to subdivide his land.

Bon describes his land's location as a convenient spot halfway between Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force Base (then Ladd Field and Satellite Field, respectively). Bon describes the state of Richards Highway and talk of paving it. Bon says his land had pretty good water at a shallow depth. Due to financial constraints, Bon did not subdivide his land as he had hoped to, but rather sold most of it to Dahl and Gaske Development Company. He later realized he could have gotten more money out of the land; it was worth more than he asked for it.

Bon sold most of his homestead to the Dahl and Gaske Development Company. The land developers decided to change the name of the homestead site. Bon describes the name change:

Bon says he had named his land Davis, because of his name and because the railroad switch there had been named Davis. The developers thought the name North Pole was more marketable and would attract more tourists and manufacturing. Bon wasn't too keen on the idea but he went to the U.S. district court at the developer's request to change the name. U.S. District Judge Harry Pratt issued a decree which made it officially known as North Pole. Shortly after that, Bon left the North Pole area and came to Fairbanks.

In Fairbanks, Bernice got a job at the U.S. Marshals Office. She found her husband a job. He accepted the new job doing general work around the jail. The Federal Bureau of Prisons had just taken over. At first Bon was hesitant about taking the job since he was scared of being attacked, but he discovered that the prisoners were mostly ordinary people. Because Bon was missing some fingers off his hand, there was some doubt as to whether he would be able to pass the physical exam.

Bon became an assistant supervisor at the Fairbanks jail. He really liked his work. Later he had a chance to become a supervisor at the Nome jail. He and Bernice moved to Nome, thinking they would stay for a

year. They ended up staying for over 16 years. During that time, he had a chance to transfer back to Fairbanks, but he liked Nome.

Bon got mining ground in 1956. In the summertime, he would take time off from work and mine for gold.

Bon worked for the federal Bureau of Prisons until statehood and even a little past statehood. After the state took over, Bon was out of a job. He could have transferred to a prison in another state but he chose not to. After 7 years with the Bureau of Prisons, he quit. It was hard leaving the network and camaraderie behind. In 1960, after statehood, he became a probation officer and continued mining gold. He never made any money mining, but he didn't lose too much on it either. He did get just enough gold to keep him interested. He only stopped mining a few years ago because of his age and health.

Nome talks about Nome. He says Nome wasn't founded; it was just dumped on the beach. People did not come to Nome to build home; they came to "hit and get." Some people did stay, but they had been accustomed to living in minimal housing. The town was a shack town.

Bon really liked the people. Once you met a stranger, you had a new friend. He talks about socializing over coffee. Bon doesn't know any other place quite like Nome.

The program ends.

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