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Jim Loftus

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Dan O'Neill, interviewer

Dan asked Jim about coming to Alaska. Jim said he didn't have a clue when he left the Bay Area. He was off for an adventure. He had seen photos of a truck driving to Alaska and thought that was beyond his horizon. He was asked by Jim Ringstad to drive with him up to Alaska. He had not even heard about the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. They drove up the highway and there was thirteen hundred miles of gravel. It was a slow trip. They got up to Fairbanks and stayed with Jim's family for a while. He got a temporary job working for Continental Van Lines moving furniture. He had applied to the engineering firms in town but there wasn't any work. He went down to the union hall for a short call for moving furniture. There was work usually about one day a week. He rented a room on Wendell Street for twenty-five dollars a week. There was an advertisement for surveyors for the pipeline and his friend, Jim, got a position. They were surveying for the campsites south of the Yukon. He kept working at Continental Van Lines. Later that fall the surveying company called him up for work in the north. They needed surveying done for the center line of the pipeline and road through Atigun Pass. He was the rodman. The camp had a care taker, cook, helicopter pilot, mechanic, and four surveyors. They would fly up into Antigun Pass and walk the pass and start surveying the center line of the road. Jim said it was a spectacular job. They worked seven days a week for twelve hours a day. After that they flew down toward the Yukon and did some more surveying. After two months they came back to town. The Haul Road had to be built along the work pad for the pipeline. The road went up to Deadhorse. He said this was pristine country. The USGS maps didn't even show the contours. It was uncharted territory. Finding a path for the road was difficult. It would take hours to hike with equipment on their backs. They set one or two points a day. This was in 1972. The job ended and he flew back down to San Francisco. He paid off a large part of his college debt. In February he was called back to Alaska to start designing access roads from the road to the work pad. This was in February of 1973. Dan said he came up to Alaska in 1972 to see Jim, but he wasn't in town. When Jim returned from Alaska Dan said he looked very different, big beard and larger in size. Jim said the food was very good in camp. He used to go out into the shop and lift heavy items for his workout. He was building up his muscles. Jim said he grew up in a lot of ways. Dan talked about corresponding with Jim when he was living in Alaska in 1972. Jim said he stayed up in Atigun Pass for the whole month of September and was down on the Yukon River for a couple of weeks. When he was there they were totally detached from current news. He returned back to Fairbanks and worked in the office until the spring. He returned back up north. There were five survey crews with one engineer in charge. He ended up working as the assistant to the engineer, Harry Hermanson. He enjoyed working with Harry. He spent the summer closing traverses and operating the air station for the pilots. It was at the tail end of old-fashioned surveying. They used a simple calculator. It was archaic, but state of the art at the time.

Calculators came out when he was a senior in college. He knew how to use a slide rule. Within a few years the calculators became much more complex. He worked the whole summer and into the fall up north. The season closed down at the end of October. He drove the FBT out to Boston with friends. The FBT was the fine brown truck which was a 1951 Ford truck. He talked about the different wrecks they had along the way. They returned to San Francisco in January or February. He went into the Bechtel Office to visit Jim Ringstad and they were designing the work camps for the pipeline. He had to go to Mexico for a visit. He started in Bechtel designing camps. His friend Steve was working in the public library and then became a logger in Taylorsville, California. Bechtel transferred him up to Fairbanks in June or July. He worked for about eighteen months designing the camps north and south of the Yukon. Jim and Dan were roommates at the time he worked for Bechtel in San Francisco. He said San Francisco is a wonderful place for young people to live and work.

Jim said working for Bechtel was his first exposure to more structural engineering and writing specifications. It was more of a real engineering job. He was involved during the construction of the camps and inspected the construction. When the camps were done Alyeska needed engineers to work on the pipeline itself. He was hired to go up north on section 5-6 to be a construction engineer. He was working as an inspector, monitoring and coordinating position. He worked for Dean Elston who was a pipeliner from Canada. He was living out of a duffel bag for 18 months. He started out at Franklin Bluffs camp in 1975. There were two engineers working for Dean. He kept an eye on the contractor who was a large conglomerate with a large section of the pipeline to build. It was a good job with a lot of exposure to construction and a lot of experienced gained. It was a wild time to be in Fairbanks and Alaska. The legends during the pipeline were probably all true. There was a lot of money. He worked seven days a week and 12 hours a day. They had two weeks off after eight weeks of work. He remembered being exposed to the power of the unions and their ability to control things. There were strikes and walk-offs. There were parties every night with lots of alcohol and other things. All the things that they tried to keep out of the camps were there if you wanted to find them. The bars all along Second Avenue were packed with pipeline workers, prostitutes and dancers. There were good competent workers, too. There were intelligent men who were putting this project together. It was a difficult job done under difficult conditions. Weather could be difficult. Machinery could break because of the -50 degree temperatures. Maintenance was a lot of work. There were skilled workers. He said the art of pipeline construction is under appreciated. He talked about the size of the pipe used in the pipeline and the difficult conditions getting the pipe in place. It was incredible team work to see all of that go together.

One of his strongest memories is Pat Osborne working on the pipeline. Pat was from Oklahoma. He was well respected in the industry. He was an assistant superintendent. One time they were lowering in the pipeline at Chandalar Shelf. They had to drop a long piece of it at once. Pat spent a lot of time planning how he was going to do it. He set up the men and positioned himself on a hill. Everyone was spread out over half a mile. Every man was good at his job. He put a white glove on and gave the side boom operators directions. It took half a day to get the pipe from the side of the ditch and into the ditch. He had it lowered at a very controlled rate. He got the pipe into place perfectly.

Dan talked about coming to Fairbanks in 1975 and meeting Dean Elston. Jim said Dean Elston was his first experience on the construction site of the pipeline. Dean was the Alyeska rep for a section of the

pipeline and Jim was the assistant. Dean was an old time pipeliner from Canada. Jim said Dean had a good sense of humor and knew everything about pipelines. Dean was Jim's mentor. Jim talked about Dean's work ethic and characteristics. Jim said there were a lot of experienced people on the pipeline. Dean came to Jim's wedding in 1979 in Fairbanks. Dan asked about any eventful moments in construction. Jim said at the end of his time up on the pipeline there was a big reorganization. There were two critical sections on the pipeline: Atigun Pass and Thompson Pass. They were the last sections of the pipeline to get built. Atigun had a lot of rock, water and permafrost. They were having a hard time stabilizing the pipeline. They were going to encase it in concrete and insulate it. They had to build a batch plant at the top of Atigun Pass. It was a 24 hour operation from the top of the pass all the way down the side. This was in the middle of winter. It was very challenging work. They were attempting to keep the heat from the pipeline from thawing the permafrost and keep the water away from the pipeline. This did not work and Jim said he was involved many years later to repair that section. The first design didn't keep the water out. They never had any breakage but it was high maintenance. Jim was up there six months without leaving. At the end of 1976 he quit working on the pipeline. He spent five consecutive Septembers in Atigun Pass.

Jim said every night in the work camps was Friday night and every morning was Monday morning. Most of the guys were young men like he was. He enjoyed meeting the pipeliners from all over the country. They had a completely different outlook on life than he did. Jim said he never had a problem becoming friends with people from all over the country. He talked about enjoying different types of music including country music.

Jim talked about being influenced by all the people we meet. Jim met John Paulson when he transferred to Santa Clara. He also met Jim Ringstad. John was from the Sierra Nevada Mountains and a brilliant guy. He had a scholarship at the university. John was a good student and helped Jim. John went to graduate school at Berkeley and worked in California for a while. John got a job up in Alaska and later worked for Jim as a structural engineer. They had a long career together. Jim and Dan talked about licensing and certification in engineering fields. John died in 2007.