

ORAL HISTORY 2013-20

Edward Ruckstuhl

Leslie McCartney

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Leslie asked Edward Ruckstuhl where he was originally from. Edward Ruckstuhl said he was born and attended grammar school in New Orleans, Louisiana. His father decided to move the family to Talisheek, Louisiana. There were 250 people in the community. He spent one year at Hammond, Louisiana for college. He was hospitalized after a car accident and missed a semester of college.

His father had come to Alaska to work on the Clear Ballistic Missile Site. He was in charge of building the power plant. Ed decided to return with him to Alaska to attend the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He wasn't sure about his major at that time, but was leaning toward engineering. He drove up from Louisiana to Fairbanks in December of 1959 with his parents. It was quite an experience for him. He had to get a different type of shoe just to walk on the ice and snow. His first eye opener was the view from campus. That opened his eyes to a lot more. It was a great place to be. When he started university his mind was being challenged. He was in a different culture. He had come from a segregated society. In Alaska it did not exist. He said things that he had been raised with he found really wasn't society -- that was not how we should act as a human beings. Everyone on campus was so open. It was a small campus with a vast difference in cultures. It was very diverse.

Edward Ruckstuhl said his classes were small at the University of Alaska. They knew their professors in the engineering department on a first name basis. The faculty invited their students to dinner. It was a unique experience. It was a good foundation for his later life. His professors included George Knight, Professor Mendenhall, Hal Payton, and Professor Burdick. It was a really good group of men. Salaries were high for professors in those days. The university could select who they wanted to come to teach.

He said he lived on campus. He lived in the several dormitories including Nerland, McIntosh and Hess Hall. He came back for his fortieth reunion which was ten years ago. He has returned to campus several times since then.

He said he enjoys seeing the students. On this campus students smile and say hello. It is an open friendly campus.

He said his second year roommate was Ron Anderson who was an avid cross country skier. He ended up on the cross country ski team. He enjoyed the experience. They were invited to go to Old Crow in the Yukon Territory for a ski meet. The community was very friendly and welcoming. He remembers how wonderful the northern lights were and experiencing the local culture. They landed on the frozen

Porcupine River. He participated in the cross country ski race. He learned to ski through lessons and trial and error. They had to ski from the university up to Cleary Summit to get on the team.

Leslie asked him about his engineering education at the University of Alaska. Ed said it was very good. The accreditation department came one year and the university was scolded because the material being taught was considered graduate-level material. He said when he tells people where he was educated they are always interested in Alaska and the university. He has told everyone what a wonderful experience it was. He is still friends with some of his college classmates.

Leslie asked him about some of his experiences at the university. Ed said one of the memorable experiences was the trip to Old Crow. Another unique experience was working on a project with Professor Hal Payton who was studying the structural properties of sea ice at Pt. Barrow. The engineering classes were flown to Pt. Barrow to help him collect data. The Navy flew about twenty to thirty students up to Pt. Barrow. They went out on the Arctic Ocean to cut out a block of sea ice to test for structural properties. Ed talked about the formation of sea ice. The sea ice is pure water. The ice crystals had to be tested for their strength. Some were stronger than concrete. The research was useful for offshore platforms that were built in Cook Inlet and it enabled the Nautilus [nuclear-powered submarine] to make its trip under the Arctic Ocean. The Nautilus had to be strong enough to surface up through the ice. He said it was a very interesting project. He was up at Pt. Barrow for about two weeks. He talked about testing the ice. To keep the ice cold the laboratory was kept at -20 degrees most of the time.

For summer jobs he worked with his father's company building the power plant at Clear. Another summer he spent at Galena Air Force Base. He also spent time at Barter Island and Umiat. After graduation he went to work with the Alaska Division of Aviation. He went up to Pt. Barrow where they were building the new runway. He was working in civil engineering. He was supervising the construction.

Leslie asked him about the research on the sea ice. Ed said Professor Payton published his data. One of his fellow students said the trip was one of his most memorable experiences in school. In those days the Arctic Research Laboratory was quite a distance from town the town of Barrow.

When he was working at Pt. Barrow for his civil engineering job he wasn't feeling well. He needed to go to Anchorage for medical care. He was told that he had contracted the mumps. At that time he had a draft notice and told the doctor to write an excuse for him.

His parents moved back to Louisiana after the construction of the power plant at Clear was completed. He would occasionally go back to Louisiana to visit his parents.

Leslie asked him about graduate school. Ed said during his last year in school he jammed a lot of things together so he could graduate in 1963. He really didn't feel like attending graduate school. He got into the working world.

Leslie asked him about his other work experience. Ed said he worked in New Orleans with Conoco. His boss was in charge of the construction of offshore steel platforms and pipelines in the Gulf of Mexico. Ed

said he was on helicopters all the time and on work detail for forty-five days at a time. They were busy. Sometimes he had a helicopter assigned to him. Later he was transferred to Houston, Texas. He worked in Production Engineering Services which put him in the worldwide engineering scope. He went to London to put in a North Sea structure for Conoco. He then went to build a runway in Madagascar in anticipation for exploration work. He then went to Indonesia for pre-engineering for the drilling operations on the island of Borneo. He met people that had been head hunters. They were dredging canals to bring in drilling equipment. When he looked in the water he could see all sorts of species of tropical fish. On the island where he built the base camp there was a sanctuary for monkeys. Some of the monkeys were proboscis monkeys. He also spent time in Thailand building platforms. The projects took between six months and four years. Indonesia took six years. The structures he built are still being used today. There were platforms in the Northern Sea in the British, Dutch and Norwegian sector.

Leslie asked if the civil engineers return to the structures. Ed said they do inspect and follow strict regulations that the companies have to follow. A lot of his structures are still producing.

Ed said in 1997 he went to his last job in the Republic of Georgia. The platforms were in the Caspian Sea and they needed a pipeline going from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. The most interesting thing about that project were the people in the Republic of Georgia. When the Soviet Union collapsed it collapsed from the external to the internal. Georgia was on the external. Their hardships were some of the worst. Everyone in a group of people was taken care of if just one person in the group had a job. There was a great respect for humanity everywhere he went. He had been taught different things about Russian behavior. Stalin was from the Republic of Georgia. His mother attended church services every day. It has been the religion that has kept Russia together all these years. The Republic of Georgia has its own language.

Leslie asked if he picked up languages. Ed said when you are in a country everyone wanted to speak English. The pipelines had hundreds of employees. Ed talked about the Nobels and their involvement with oil. The project he started in the Republic of Georgia was to refurbish an old pipeline. The old pipeline still had oil in it which the people used. They had to completely build a new pipeline and remove the contamination of the old line.

When he was in Pt. Barrow in 1963 people working for BP came up there. There was only one hotel in the village. He met Michael Savage there who later became the president of BP Alaska.

Ed said he spent ten years with Conoco and twenty-eight years with Unical which is now Chevron.

He said students have to learn to communicate. You have to have an interest in people and get along with your fellow workers. Ed said learning communication was a natural result of attending the university. He said students have to be in classes that they enjoy. Life is more rewarding that way. He thinks that the professor's intensity and their enjoyment of teaching made him want to learn. He had contact with other professors besides engineering.

Leslie asked about the buildings on campus when he was attending school. Ed said there were men's dorms and women's dorms. The women stayed in Wickersham Hall. Hess Hall was right next to

Wickersham. The Eielson building was here. The Old Main building was still on campus for the first year and a half he was on campus. To the north of Old Main was another original wooden structure that had the UA rifle team, ROTC and some of the wildlife. The first level of the engineering building was built while he was a student. The Bunnell Building was already on campus. The dorms were McIntosh, Nerland and Stevens. They were the first graduation class to use the new gym. The Tilly cafeteria was under construction. The old power plant was across the road from the bookstore and the new power plant was under construction. Signer's Hall was the gym. Starvation Gulch used to be held there. Ed said Starvation Gulch was the biggest function on campus. The freshmen had to provide the alcohol for Starvation Gulch. One year was very rowdy and there were damages. After that alcohol was banned from campus and that was when tradition was hit. When he was a student people would have a quarter of a moose hanging out of their windows. People would cook in the dorms. He doesn't remember anyone having something stolen or fights on campus. Leslie asked about Starvation Gulch. Ed said it is to remind people of the old days -- of the gold rush. It keeps that part of Alaska alive. It still demonstrates that living here can be tough. He talked about the message of Starvation Gulch.

Leslie asked about other social activities on the campus. Ed talked about Engineer's Day which was on St. Patrick's Day. The miners would detonate a bit of dynamite to wake everyone up at five in the morning. There was a bit of rivalry between the engineering students and the business administration students. Things would happen to the head of the business administration. One year he was kidnapped, put in an airplane and dropped in a remote village. There would be a tug of war. People would go down to the farm and collect manure to put between the two teams. They would hold the tug of war competition in front of the cafeteria. They would select Miss Slide Rule. Way back they used to put a chemical into the water system that would change the color of one's urine to green. That is no longer part of the festivities. One year it was very cold and the dynamite and shock waves were destructive to window panes.

Leslie asked him if he stayed in Fairbanks during the summer. Ed said during the summer he would be in some remote area with the Corps of Engineers or something like that. He would stay in Alaska most of the time.

Leslie asked if he had any professor that was an influence. Ed said George Knight was a great professor. They were George's boys. There was a men's clothing store in Fairbanks called Sacks. Ed was asked to model some of the clothes. George Knight let everyone know in class that Ed was modeling. It was a close knit group. Ed thought some of the smaller classes today would still be like that. He commented about the new Murie building and their eating arrangement. He said that encourages people to work together and be more productive. Ed had a tour of the current engineering building.

Ed said when he was at Pt. Barrow there were Native students from Barrow. He was taken walrus hunting with them. He sampled walrus meat.

Leslie asked what Fairbanks was like when he was a student. Ed said it was a busy little booming town. There was a lot of influence from the military at that time. His mother was upset at the prices at the grocery store. Since his parents were living here at that time he would go home to visit his folks on the

weekend. He met some local people through them. Ed talked about working at Galena Air Force Base. He said his quarters were at the noncommissioned officers quarters. He met some of the enlisted men who later transferred to the base in Fairbanks. He has photos of Galena with the original log houses that might have been built by the Russians and Native graves.

He talked about his fiftieth graduation anniversary, Tom Far, Bill Crannick, and Wayne Britton.