

2016-16-06 PT. 1

Richard Estelle

May 27, 2015

Palmer Museum in Palmer, Alaska

Series: University of Alaska 100th Anniversary tapes

Richard Estelle talked about how his family came to Alaska. His father is from Indiana. Both his father and mother were associated with the University of Alaska.

In 1898 a man named Len Smith came to Alaska during the gold rush. He later became a marshal in Fairbanks. Smith returned to Indiana for a visit and Richard's father, Howard Estelle, talked with him about Alaska. Len proposed that Howard come to Alaska and attend the college at Fairbanks. Len would give Howard a job in the jail until the creeks opened up in the spring. Howard came back up to Fairbanks with Len in 1930. Howard had two degrees in general science and agriculture.

Dr. Georgeson from Kansas State University was establishing a new experiment farm in Sitka. He recruited one of his agronomy students to help him in 1898, Robert William DeArmond. He worked for a year and then finished his degree. He returned to Alaska in 1903 and worked in Sitka at the experimental farm. By 1907 he was president of the school board. The school board hired a teacher named Elizabeth Davidson. After a few years DeArmond and Davidson were married. They had three children, Robert, Ruth and Harriet. Ruth DeArmond grew up in Sitka and went off to college in Corvallis, Oregon. She graduated and then took advanced courses in Michigan.

In 1935 the Colony was formed in Palmer. The government wanted a home demonstration agent. Lydia Fohn-Hansen was good friends with Elizabeth DeArmond in Sitka and knew Ruth. Lydia offered Ruth a job and she came to Palmer in 1936. Ruth was hired to help the Colony women to adapt to this country and to plan balanced meals. Most of the colony women were young. They didn't have a lot of training. Ruth helped form homemaker's clubs throughout the valley and would visit each week to teach skills. Ruth also worked with the 4H groups. The extension agent left and the job came open. Howard Estelle applied for the job. Bunnell wrote him a letter and said he was qualified for the job, but Howard wasn't married. They gave Howard the job anyway. He came to Palmer in 1938 and in a very short time Howard and Ruth were married. The government didn't want two people to have a government job. Ruth quit her job. They started a family in 1940. In 1942 they left the extension job and moved down to a little farm in Spenard. Richard was born in Anchorage. In 1947 they moved to Wasilla and in 1948 they bought a colony farm in Palmer.

Richard graduated from high school in 1960 and he was expected to go to college. Not many people in the valley had college degrees. He had a scholarship to study agriculture. He discovered that he was the only person enrolled in agriculture. His first term was bad. He had a

low grade point average. He had to go to see the dean of men. Earl Beistline was the dean. Beistline knew his parents. He didn't get kicked out of school and continued there for three years. He was studying to go into forestry. He transferred out to Oregon State and decided to study landscape design. He returned to UAF another year. He and his fiancée were invited to teach in the Bush. They were married and they were assigned to teach in Tanana. They arrived the morning school started. They got their assignments. His wife had a teaching degree. They taught there one year and then went back to Oregon so Richard could finish his degree in horticulture with an emphasis on landscape architecture. He was hired by the U.S. Forest Service and later returned to Petersburg. After retirement he returned to Palmer. He lived in the house with his mother. His mother lived until 102. Richard talked about what his mother did in Palmer. Richard started working at the visitor center in Palmer.

Leslie asked Richard if he lived on campus. Richard said he lived on campus for the first three years. He lived off campus when he returned to the campus. He talked about the buildings on campus. He said he lived in Nerland Hall. There were three dorms on campus. Wickersham was a fairly new dorm in 1960. The commons wasn't built there when he first attended the college. The building program was starting the year he returned in 1964-5. They built the gym. The library was in Bunnell. Constitution Hall was the cafeteria and the bookstore. They also had a lounge. He talked about some of the teachers he had. He said when he first arrived they had orientation. They could meet all of the professors. He met Lola Tilly. Lola Tilly already knew who he was. He met Ivar Skarland. His father and Ivar had been classmates. One summer his father and Ivar were hired to guard and herd the muskox. He talked about the beginning of the musk ox program. There had been a big enclosure built up in Goldstream Valley and the muskox and some reindeer in it. They opened up the fence when caribou were coming by and captured some caribou. His father and Ivar lived with the muskox and guarded them. They traded off the watch. They did shoot a few bears.

Other instructors he had included Buswell, his advisor. Dean Dean was the dean of wildlife. He said the class sizes were not big auditorium sized classrooms. The campus was much more compressed. The gym was in Hess Hall. Most of the classes were in Bunnell and Duckering. Some of the old wooden buildings were still there. Old Main had just been torn down. The ROTC had a wooden building. The dorms and geophysical buildings were the buildings furthest to the west.

Leslie asked about his father's farm. Richard said his father bought his little farm at Spenard. They farmed there from 1941-1947. They stayed at a homestead for a short time. When they bought the colony place it was a big step up from the homestead. He talked about getting electricity. His father always wanted to be a farmer. The colony farm was a combination of two pieces of two other farms. They lived in a colony house on Baily Hill. It was not insulated. They had a wood stove in the basement. It was always cold in the upstairs. Palmer was where they attended school. His father was a vegetable farmer for a number of years and then they had a dairy. Dairy farming was on a decline. His father later became the superintendent of the parks department for the city of Anchorage.

Leslie asked about history of the colonies. Richard talked about the Matanuska Colony Project. During the depression many people were in dire straits. Many small farmers were failing. One of

the New Deal programs transplanted some of these people to another location to get started over in another situation. There were about 100 programs. Some were agricultural and some industrial. One of the biggest was a resettlement of farmers from Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin who were on relief. The government recruited over 200 families to leave their states and resettle in Alaska. They came up by troop transport. There was some indication that agriculture was possible here. There were very few people in the territory at the time. The experimental farm established that agriculture was possible. People in the lower forty eight didn't have a good opinion of Alaska. Roosevelt was worried about Alaska being taken over by Japan or Russian. He wanted to increase the population in Alaska. He figured if Americans were living in Alaska then there would be support in case of an invasion. Roosevelt was also hearing that agriculture was possible for Alaska. That is why they selected Alaska for the project. There was proven land and the railroad came through the area. In 1935 all the people showed up. When they arrived there were no houses. The land was surveyed. They brought up a bunch of workers to prepare for the people's arrival. Everyone moved into tents. Lots were drawn for land. All that summer construction was going on for houses and barns. They cleared land and roads. The government built a community center. Three churches were built. There was a store that the government expected them to do all their trading. Each month they were given so much to buy supplies at the store. The Kosloskis started the store. The government issued their own money to be traded at the commissary. It was supposed to stop people from going to other establishments across the track. The colony was a close knit group. The scheme was to start an agricultural colony. The farmers had a thirty year note to buy their property. The day to day operations was dictated by the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation which was set up to run the colony. It was very socialistic. Richard said this was during the Depression. People were out of work and the system wasn't working. The colony was an experiment. It worked to some degree. Over half of the people left within a year. They recruited replacement colonists. Some left the colony and stayed in the Territory. For the people that left it wasn't a success. The people who stayed and managed to make a living it was a success. The others who stayed in Alaska it was a success. As a result of the colony the road system in the valley was started. They formed a co-op the Matanuska Coop for electricity. The Matanuska Telephone Association provided phones. There was a farmers co-op. There weren't a lot of markets. The biggest were military bases. The individual farmers couldn't compete until they formed their co-op. All the members pooled what they could produce. They had a creamery. They had some storage facilities. The colony project started the town of Palmer. The first fair was held in the gymnasium.

Leslie asked about colony families in the present day. Richard said there are some. They still have their colony farms. Colony "kids" are in their eighties now. They have an organization with an annual get together. The Palmer Historical Society acquired one of the houses and refurbished it in the style of the era. They are open as a museum in the summer. Most of the docents were colony kids. He said a lot of the control of the project was turned over to the co-op. The ARRC manages the land. Richard said this was a unique program. There were other resettlement communities around the country. Richard said people talked about leaving the lower forty eight to come to Alaska and not expecting to come back. They had a lot of shared experiences. There were plans to build just one church and the people protested. There were three churches built. There was a Catholic, Lutheran and Presbyterian Church. The last church is the only one still existing. There were a number of organizations, too. There were always activities going on. The first fair was in 1936. Leslie commented about the local geography. Richard said the railroad was

the only way in and out to begin with. They later put in a road to Anchorage. People went together to go fishing. They would go out to Goose Bay to catch salmon. He described setting up the nets. They also went out to Fish Creek to fish for salmon. Women would can the fish.