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Fred Hupprich

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Series: Pioneer Park Aviation Museum lectures

Pete Haggland introduces Fred Hupprich. Hupprich said his story begins on November 3, 1926. His mother was in Nenana and was having a problem. She was told that she would have to go to Fairbanks to deliver her baby. His dad, George, walked down to the railroad depot and got on the phone. They got in touch with Ben Eielson for a ride from Nenana to Fairbanks. Ben always kept his airplane warm under a canvas. Eielson landed on the river in Nenana. They brought his mother over to the airplane. She was covered with caribou robes in the plane. He made it to Fairbanks in forty minutes and they took his mother up to the hospital where she had a caesarian section. He was the third boy in the family. He was left at the hospital for six weeks because his mother didn't want another boy.

Hupprich talked about Ben Eielson. He stayed in Nenana when the weather was bad. His mother told him the story of his birth when he was about eight or ten years old.

He took up flying when he was eighteen years old at Weeks Field. He learned from Al Olson. Fred was working for Wien Airlines at the time. Frank Barr flew him out to help replace an engine out of an airplane. They took off to return to Fairbanks on a bad day and Frank dropped from 4000 feet down to 8-900 feet. This caused Fred to bleed from his eyes and he had to be hospitalized for a few days.

He grew up with the Coghills, Wright brothers, Robinsons, and Ketchlers. They were a menace to the railroad. They would get a flatcar that was hauled behind a speeder. They would push it and ride it for a long ways. They went caribou hunting with one. They would return the flatcar to the yard. He talked about the launch of the Nenana in 1934. The whole town went for a ride down to Minto and back. They once got a five gallon can of grease and greased the railroad track. The train couldn't make the grade.

They had the only transportation in Nenana at the time. They had two model-A trucks. His father got into the transportation business. He hauled coal from the railroad and distributed it. They hauled cordwood. There were mission kids who cut wood. They had a contract with the railroad for 600 cords of wood. His father hauled the wood from the woods to the train. His father was a meat cutter and clerk in the C & C Company. He and his brother, Bob, hauled the wood into the railroad yard. They picked up another truck. They would haul six cords of wood in a day. He said Nenana was a great place to live.

He was once dared to walk over the top of the railroad bridge. The other boy walked at the same time. They would get up on the bridge when the railroad train went over the bridge for fun.

Glendor Lake was down below Nenana. They would go down there to go duck hunting.

The Wright brothers had a fish wheel on the slough close to the railroad tracks. They would catch 40-50 pound king salmon in the fish wheel.

He started flying part-time. Al Olson had cub airplanes. He got in about six hours of dual and then he was drafted. He bought a chief and finished up his flying time in that. The last plane they had was a Cessna. It was 12,900 dollars brand new.

[Sound goes out for a few minutes] He talks about a mail route contract up and down the Yukon, Tanana, and part of the Koyukuk. He said the BIA drilled holes in the ice to hold the Jenny airplanes in place. Fred Milligan was an airplane mechanic that worked on the airplanes. Pete asked if the airmail went out of Nenana. Fred said it would come by rail from Seward. They hauled the mail to the NC Company. They had a heated room where they stored the mail. They would also haul the mail to the railroad.

They would put up five tons of ice every winter. They sawed it out of the Tanana River. They would wait until the ice was 24 inches thick. He described cutting the ice. They would chain the ice and pull it out with the truck. They had an ice house and they put four layers of ice in the house. They insulated it with sawdust. They sold the ice to the steamboats. There was a big cold room on the Nenana. He remembers bringing back king salmon from the mouth of the Tanana River and bringing it back on the boat.

He described the construction of the Nenana bridge. In 1923 President Harding came to Nenana to set the spike on the railroad. At one time from Healy to Nenana there were 10,000 people. There was a large bunkhouse for the railroad personnel. They had a hospital there, too. Fred talked about one old timer who worked for the railroad and lived on the river. The man gave him a photo album of the building of the Alaska Railroad. The photo album was destroyed during the 1948 flood.

The older boys and Fred were given an old boat. They fixed it up and put a Model A motor in it. They had a wood burning stove in it and bunks. Jack Coghill was their cook. They would take off from Nenana at the NC warehouse. They would travel upriver as far as much as they could because if it quit they could float home. One time the kids took it to Fairbanks. Jack Coghill and Billy Berry came home and burned out a bearing in the engine. They floated all the way back to Nenana. Hupprich said they would take the girls for a boat ride. They took it hunting a couple of times, too.

Someone asked about a time when people were trying to cross the river on the ferry. [sound quits for a short while] Fred talked about a group of people confiscating the ferry at Delta Junction to cross the river. Charlie Simmonds, Rogge and others were part of the confiscation. It was the only connection between Valdez and Fairbanks. He described the cable ferry across the river.

Fred said the Fourth of July was a big celebration in town. They had races. He said the NC Company had a refrigeration unit in town. They jacked up a truck and attached their five-gallon ice cream maker to the truck wheel and make their ice cream. Then they would put the ice cream in the refrigeration unit until the Fourth of July. They sold the ice cream in front of their store. People from up the river and down the river would come to the celebration. Pete said ice cream was very popular on the river. When he was in

Emmonak in 1967 when the ice cream machine was going there would be long lines. Fred said they also made candy apples and homemade root beer for the Fourth of July celebration.

Pete said he has known Fred a long time. Pete talked about caribou hunting with Fred. Pete destroyed Fred's cigarettes when he heard him huffing and puffing. Fred said he stopped smoking when he was fifty.

Fred talked about line driving out of Valdez. He said they would go to the dock in old town and throw out some crab pots. They would get king crabs. They would boil the crabs in a large pot. They would then drop them in cold water. He said he worked for Clark and Ward Trucking in the late 1950s. They hauled freight for local people. West Coast Grocery was one of the biggest customers. He drove three trips a week. He drove down one day and came back the next day. He said parts of the road from Fairbanks to Birch Lake was blacktop and most of it was gravel. There was a lot of construction on the Richardson Highway at the time. When Ghezzi was putting in a winter road from Eagle to Victoria Island in Canada (they were doing the Dew Line sites) they had six big Mack trucks and low boys. Each truck carried 200 tons and fuel. He was driving a caterpillar tractor. They got out to Coronation Gulch and one of their trucks starting falling through about five and a half feet of ice. He described how the truck fell into the ice. Allen Steel was on Victoria Island. They came back to pick up the freight. He described unloading the stuck truck and the trips across the ice. They were cutting the road and crossing rivers. He said the trucks had rear- end drive. They had to pull the trucks up every hill. He was in a smaller tractor without heat. He worked on that for three months. The trucks were taken back by barge.