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Ethel Stoneman

Karen Brewster, interviewer

June 26, 2015 cont.

North Pole Alaska

Series: Ethel Stoneman interviews

Karen Brewster said Ethel Stoneman came to Alaska. Stoneman said she came in 1959. They first settled at 6-mile village and remodeled. They showed a photo of Main Street in North Pole from 1959. She talked about the different businesses and buildings that existed at that time. The trading post carried everything. Groceries and mail were at the Santa Club House. The Millers owned the Santa Claus house and they had two boys. She talked about the church in North Pole at that time. The gas station had one pump and Stoneman talked about the owner.

Brewster asked why they came to North Pole. Stoneman said Bell System had moved them a lot and they wanted more stability. They were sure they could find something. Her husband went to see about a job on the pipeline between this area and Haines. Her husband worked on the pipeline. He worked part of the time in Canada. She and the kids were trying to make their house livable. They drove up the Alcan Highway. They drove 200 miles a day. They had a camper built on the body of an old school bus. They also pulled a Volkswagen bus. They took 19 days to get from Colorado to Alaska. They lived in the camper the first summer they were here. They went to Fairbanks and her husband went to the union hall. He got a job right away. Stoneman said her husband never thought you should quit. Brewster asked Stoneman about the Alcan Highway. Stoneman said it was crooked. It wasn't a very good highway but they were used to poor highways. It was gravel the whole way. Their Volkswagen van is now in Nenana with her husband's niece who is restoring it. Glenn worked all summer for Huskey Electric on the pipeline. The phone company started putting up telephone poles. They built a new building but they had worn out equipment. They needed someone to install phones so her husband started installing phones. He was hired as the manager. They needed someone to answer the phone and Stoneman started working for them in the office. She worked for them for four years. The equipment started falling apart. One of the equipment company's financed them and they got Trans-Alaska Telephone Company working well. People didn't like the four-party lines. She limited her boys to twenty minutes on the phone. Her husband stayed with the company for seven years. One of the stateside companies took over later.

Stoneman said North Pole had a four room school near the present-day school. After fourth grade the students went to Fairbanks. There was only one school bus at that time. She went to work for the city. She was the collection officer for MUS. It was telephone, electric and water. They had a red light district

back then. She would shut off people's lights. Everyone knew her as the person who turned off their lights. She said they sold off the utilities.

Stoneman said she worked for the police department at the time of the 1967 flood. They didn't get water at their house. Most of the dog mushers brought their dogs to their field. When she came into the office she was told to man the desk. She did that for seven days. They slept there and ate there. She talked about the location of the police department. She said people's homes were flooded. The police department was flooded. She did whatever had to be done. She knew how to run the switchboard so she helped them with that. At the time she was employed by MUS, but she helped at the police department because they needed the help. It took a full year before the city recovered from the flood. She talked about how deep the water was. When she returned to MUS to work the paper records had to be hung up to dry. She said only three people drowned during the flood. Everybody helped each other. Her husband was at home taking care of everyone's dogs.

Their family ran sled dogs. They had the women's North American competition back then. In later years they combined them. She raced in the races. One time during the races there was a wind storm and it was -30. One of the girls lost their team and she caught the team and helped the other musher. Her husband was upset with her because it was her one chance to win. She had nine dogs on her team. Stoneman said she would whistle at her dogs instead of shouting at them. She raced with Effie Kokrine, George Attla's daughter, and Roxy Wright Champlaine. She raced during the 1960s. They also took the dogs out hunting.

They sold their original house and bought their current property. It was a homestead. [camera pans to show the open-beamed ceiling of the house] They had four houses all together in North Pole. She said if you build a house you never have it done. When they first moved out to the property the original homestead house was rented out. She talked about other houses they had. They remodeled the old homestead house. They built several smaller homes. They took a couple of years to build their current home.

July 2, 2015

Karen Brewster asked Ethel Stoneman what kinds of things she did as a volunteer. Stoneman said when they arrived in Alaska they had to make a choice about where to live. They went to Anchorage first. Her husband was not a union man. He was told if he didn't belong to the union he wouldn't find work. They left Anchorage and came to Fairbanks. He got a job with a private contractor and worked on the pipeline between Fort Wainwright and Haines Junction. Her husband was doing the electronics on the oil pipeline. His background was in electronics and telephones. This was in 1959. They started looking for a place to live. They had drove a homemade camper. They lived in it the first summer. They started remodeling an older building. Her husband's job was over and he started looking for work. They started the kids in school and the very first thing she got involved with was working with the basketball team at Hunter School. Their oldest boy spent the winter with his mother. They were working on their house that winter. About the end of November they knew about the phone system going into North Pole. Her husband got a job with that company installing phones and then he was offered the position of

manager. The company bought used equipment for their system building. She went to work as their office manager. The equipment they bought kept falling apart. Everyone was on a party line.

Stoneman said the first four grades were taught in North Pole and then the children had to go into town.

A larger company came into the phone system and bought new equipment. The service improved. There wasn't a lot of room on the system. They were working on a house at six mile. At eight mile Badger Road there was a man building a house on his homestead. They bought the homestead on Badger Road in 1961. Several houses were built on the property.

Each week she gathered all the boys in town who went to Boy Scouts. A lot of the boys also got into dog mushing. She was the junior advisor for seven years for the Junior Dog Mushing Association. She and her husband also got into mushing. She helped to make sure the races were put on for the Junior Association. The youngest mushers raced one dog and there were three-dog, five-dog and seven-dog class races. She raced with Effie Kokrine. Kokrine's kids also raced. Stoneman talked about the prizes that the kids won. She talked about how her sons did in the races. They won trophies and a sled. Her boys had to take care of their dogs. They fixed their own dog food with rice and meat scraps. She and her husband also raced dogs. They had separate championships for men and women. They raced three days in the championship. She talked again about the lady who lost her dog team during the race. She said if she hadn't helped the lady she would have been in first place. She ended up in fourth place. She talked about Effie Kokrine. Stoneman said her husband was more interested in bigger dogs and freight races. Stoneman said most of the women raced nine or more dogs.

Brewster asked about other things they did with their boys. Stoneman said her husband grew up on a homestead and if they didn't have wild meat then they didn't eat. They had deer and elk in Colorado. In Alaska they had moose, fish and caribou. Her husband wanted them to get their own meat. When the boys were 11 and 12 they took them hunting. The boys learned to hunt and process their meat. They are both excellent hunters. She went along on the trips. She said that was time away from jobs. They always went hunting in August and September. They hunted in different areas of the northern part of the state. They went to the Alaska Range and the Brooks Range. She hunted sheep and caribou and some moose. She told a story about hunting for sheep with her husband. They had to pack their meat down off the mountain. Two wolverines were waiting at the site where they had cached their meat. She talked about having to cross a river while they were packing their meat out. She commented about the hard life of the Natives. She also bought salmon from Natives who had fish wheels. Karen asked about muzzle loaders. Stoneman said her husband had a little fur business in their home. There was a group of men that got into the old ball and powder guns and her husband was active in it. She was still working a full time job, but she would go out on the weekends with them and later became more involved. It was recreation for them. The muzzle loaders would dress up in the old clothes and always had a rendezvous in the summer.

Stoneman talked about the mounted sheep horns on the wall in their house. She talked again about her husband's involvement with the muzzle loader group. She does have an interest in history. She said they used to not have all the luxuries they have today. They discuss how technology has changed since she

was a girl. She said when they first moved out to North Pole in 1961 they had a party line for their telephones. Now everyone has a cell phone in their pocket. She talked about the value of letters and now everyone uses texting. She feels handwriting is a lost art. People used to make things for themselves instead of going to the store to buy it.