

Interview of Norman Elliot by Mike Dunham

Transcript

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Mike Dunham: My name is Mike Dunham. I'm speaking today with the Reverend Norman Elliott. It is the 4th of June, 2013. We are in Anchorage, Alaska and we're going to be speaking about Anchorage in the past, Father Elliott's experiences here, and in Alaska in general. Um, we've discussed what the parameters are, I think, and you have- we have your consent to be recording you, am I right?

Norman Elliot: You do.

MD: Very good. Um, let's begin with your- with where you're from. When were you born, and where?

NE: Well, I was actually born in Plymouth, England on February the 2nd, 1919. And my family migrated from England to Detroit, Michigan in 1923, and so I really grew up in Detroit, uh, went into the army April the 7th, 1941, and came out 19- April the 21st, 1946. And immediately after that I finished up college, working during the day and going to college at night in Detroit, and then went to seminary in Alexandria, Virginia from 19, uh, 48 til' 1951, and in 1951 I came to Alaska.

MD: What was- uh, what did you do in the military?

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NE: Well, I was in, uh, first Lieutenant in charge of 4 Howitzers in the 89th Infantry Division, 341st Field Artillery Battalion, Baker Battery as it was called. Uh, and we were in the ETO.

MD: European?

NE: Yes.

MD: Yeah.

NE: 3rd army.

[00:01:51.15]

MD: What made you decide on the- pursuing a career as a minister?

NE: Well that's a long story, it really is, and it goes back to, uh, my moving from what we in Detroit called Intermediate School- I think you now call it Middle School- into High School. And I had a teacher who said, uh, "I have to know what you want to be so that I can assign you to the correct high school", because in Detroit we had three. We had the Cass Technical High School, so if you wanted to be an engineer or a mechanic, that's the school- the high school you would attend. We also had Detroit Commercial, and so if you wanted to be a secretary or do secre- that type of work, you would go to the commercial. And if you wanted to be anything else, than you would go to the, you might say, ordinary, regular school, but, ah- and prepare for college we'll say.

And so, being a very impressionable age, I felt that once I told her what I wanted to be, I was stuck with it for life, never even thinking that of course I could change my mind. And in those days I debated over a number of professions- chemist, and I forget what all. And every day she would say "Norman, what are you going to be?" and I would say "Well I don't know", and she would say "Well I must know in order to assign you to the right school". And so one night I thought, "Well, I have to tell her tomorrow, that's the final day. What am I going to say? Chemist? Or what?" And all of a sudden it hit me- "No! You're going to go into the ministry; you're going to go as a foreign ministry- missionary. " And it hit me, "Well of course, you idiot, that's what you've always known", and I fell asleep and the next morning I went and told the teacher "I'm going into the ministry". Boom, that settled it. And so, again, I felt, "Well, I'm stuck with it for life". And I have been, its true. But I'm very happy that I have been stuck with it for life.

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MD: What- what was the situation that brought you to Alaska in 1951?

NE: Well, again, it goes back to the Church, that, uh, to be appointed to go into an area- we used to call it missionary districts- you had to be approved by a board, and, uh, one of the representatives of the board came down to the seminary just a month or so before I was graduating in 1951, and uh, said, uh, "We're making appointments, where do you want to go?" and I said "India!" and he said "Well, we have no positions opening in India but we do have in the Philippine Islands." And I said, "Well what's the job about?" And he said, "I can't tell you, but write to the Bishop of the Philippines and he can inform you". And so I did.

Well, shortly after that, the Bishop of Alaska, Bishop William Gordon, came down to the seminary and interviewed me personally. Told me what he wanted to do in Alaska and so on. And that he wanted me to go to a village called Eagle on the Yukon River at the border. And so I considered that. And then, the agent from- representative I should say- from the national Church came and said "Look, we're making the appointments tomorrow, I have to know where you wanna go or it'll be six months before we meet again, and so you'd have to go back to Michigan and do whatever the Bishop there wants you to do until we make the second choice". And so I said "Well I don't know anything about the Philippines, I haven't heard, so I'll

have to say Alaska". So that's how it happened. And I later discovered that the Bishop of the Philippines had written a letter to me telling me what he wanted me to do, but his secretary unfortunately had sent it surface mail instead of airmail. So by that time I had already committed myself to Alaska. And so I came, and although I'd come on the idea that I was going to go to Eagle, just prior to my coming the Bishop asked me if I'd be willing to go to Nenana instead of Eagle, because the minister in charge of the mission at Nenana had drowned. And since it was a village that had a school for children, Native children, about 20, it was more important that I go there than that I go to Eagle. But that I could go to Eagle immediately following someone was found for Nenana. So in '51 I was at Nenana, and in '52 they did find someone for Nenana, but the Priest in charge of Fort Yukon, which had a hospital and so forth, had- was retiring, and so the Bishop said "Well instead of going to Eagle, would you go to Fort Yukon until we find someone for Fort Yukon", and so in '52 I went to Fort Yukon. But in the meantime I'd learned to fly here at Merrill Field, and that was all part of the understanding when he came to visit me at the Seminary, and so I went to Fort Yukon, and flew from there to the villages that I was supposed to visit, and in 1953 did get to Eagle, and so forth, so.

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[00:07:16]

MD: Now, were you single at the time? Yes, I finally married in 1957. When I married the Bishop's secretary, who had arrived in 1955, from New York. What was her name?

NE: Stella.

MD: Stella?

NE: Stella Burton was her full name, Stella Aldine Burton.

MD: B-u-r-t-o-n?

NE: Yes.

MD: And, um, how did you get to Alaska from the Lower 48?

NE: Well, I, if I remember correctly I took the train to Seattle and then I came up on the old steamship Alaska to, uh, Seward, and then from Seward by train to ah- Nenana.

MD: And what was Merrill Field like? What did you learn to fly on?

NE: In 1952 I learned to fly on a Cub.

MD: Ok.

NE: And then later, at the end of that year, transferred to a Piper Pacer. And that was the plane I flew until 1958, along the Yukon.

MD: Was the field paved at that time?

NE: Yes, it was paved, I'll put it that way, yes.

MD: Right. And somewhat out of town, I would take it?

NE: Well, yes, not too far though, in fact it was Safeway Air that I- which I-where I learned to fly, that was the name of the company. Ralph W. Lindsey was the instructor, I still remember his name.

MD: What was Eagle like when you arrived?

NE: What was-

MD: What were your facilities like in Eagle?

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[00:08:53]

NE: Oh, in Eagle in '53 I had a nice house in town which was, actually, adjoining the church itself, which was a small, a very small building, but a beautiful two-story home with hardwood floors and so on, quite an elderly- old building, I should say. But very beautiful, and right at the bank of the Yukon River at the bend of the river. So that I could look out my front room window and look, uh, downstream, which was actually looking northeast. Because of that sharp elbow bend there at Eagle Bluff. And because there were only seventeen adults in the town at the time, and its an incorporated town, one of the oldest in Alaska, they had to have a city government. And with only seventeen adults, and many of them quite elderly, like nearly all of them quite elderly- no youngsters at all, I became the town clerk, the town attorney, and the town assessor. Well, I'm not an attorney, I have no knowledge whatsoever about being an assessor, but I could send out the tax forms as a clerk. (laughs) That was, uh, the government of the town in those days.

MD: And how long were you in Eagle?

NE: I was just in Eagle that year, but again because it was '53 I was flying out of Eagle to the villages along the Yukon, and then returning. And I, uh, finally settled again in Eagle at the Native village in 1958. Which is three miles upriver from the town of Eagle. It's the village which was destroyed a couple of years ago by ice.

MD: That's right.

NE: And, uh, I taught- it was an emergency, the schoolteacher had suddenly resigned in December, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, on the phone, asked me if I would fill in until May, so the children would not lose their previous records, you might say. And so I did, and it was enjoyable, I had seventeen students, grades one through seven, all in one room, and I was the teacher. And I'm not much of a teacher but the children were easy to teach. They wanted to learn, and since we were the only village- only building that had electricity in the village at those times, they would come back at night and ask if they could come in and read. Because we had electricity. And of course these were the days long before television came into the village, or even telephones. And so it was quite a pleasant time. I enjoyed it, and the children were excellent.

MD: And when did you come to Anchorage? As a permanent assignment.

NE: Permanently, you might say I came into Anchorage in 1962. Uh, in 1958 I went to Ketchikan, again at the Bishop's request, and I stayed there for 4 years at St. John's Episcopal Church. And then came to Anchorage in July of 1962 to take, uh, to become Rector as its called, of All Saint's Episcopal Church down to- 8th and F St, in Anchorage.

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MD: Um, and what was Anchorage like in '62? How would you describe the city if you were writing a letter to someone back home?

NE: Well, physically of course it wasn't very large. I remember my wife and I looking up on the hillside and seeing a light, and saying, "Who in the world lives up there and how did they get there, and why would they live there in the first place?"

NE: And I remember that, uh, we would be driving South there, and "why would they live there in the first place", and I remember that we would be driving South towards what is now Girdwood, and we would see signs, Lot For Sale, Lot For Sale, and we would say "Who in the world lives out here?" Well of course that's where the Dimond Center is in South Anchorage, and, uh, Potter Marsh and all those beautiful homes are along that vicinity. So that's how rapidly it has changed, you might say. Actually, I- I believe that may really have started in the late '80s, though, that, that began to boom. Uh, right after, in fact, after the earthquake in '64, we began to see an increase of population. And I've often, uh, when I've been asked why, I've said "well, maybe its because -and its a big maybe- maybe its because when people were viewing scenes of Anchorage because of the earthquake, they realized that we didn't live in snow houses, igloos, that we had important businesses, hotels, theatres, shops, and so on. And uh, suddenly said "Well, let's take a look", and came.

MD: Uh, where did you live when you first came here?

NE: When we first came here we lived on Knick Avenue in Turnagain, which is near Northern Lights Blvd. And I put it that way because when the earthquake happened, we did have hairline cracks in our house and the chimney fell down, and things were tossed around, but we were not near that area, uh, we were far, uh, South of the area where the houses went into the inlet.

MD: Right.

NE: And most of the damage was towards the waterside.

[00:14:39.22]

MD: And where did you get groceries?

NE: Pardon?

MD: Where did you get groceries? Where did you go shopping?

NE: Well, in those days, we could- Northern Lights was a narrow la- road, but at least it was a paved road, and so we would come in to Caribou's, I think it was near Spenard Road. That was one of the big shopping- I think Sears just had an airmail- a mail order office in those days, they didn't have a shop.

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MD: And what all was at Caribou's?

NE: It was Caribou's, it was a regular department store you might say, uh, yes- there was, in the 60s there was a g- Safeway on Gambell and 9th, and so forth, and, uh...and other stores, Mountain View had a shop and so forth. And Penny's of course was here during the earthquake; it was one of the large buildings.

MD: Right. The, uh- aside from the growth, have you noticed any change in the way people think or live in Anchorage over the years?

NE: Well. I suppose I could dwell on the sad part, and that is that when I took over the church as Rector in 1962 and again I retired in 1990, from that position, uh, we never locked the door of the church. We had no reason to lock it. I mean, uh, later on in the '60s, '70s and so forth, uh, much later, we finally had to put in an alarm system, because, uh, inebriates would come into the building and, uh, sleep it off. Well, we didn't object to that, except that we would find where they had cigarettes that they were smoking and we were always afraid that someday someone might set the church accidentally on fire. And that's the reason we had the security.

But they would come in and break down doors and so forth, trying to find money and wine, you might say, so that happened. But that wasn't too bad. We

didn't have to fear about drugs, we had no fear of gangs, uh, it was safe to walk down the street, and that's where I find, as I say, a sad story, that we've changed, uh, well, morally, you might say, perhaps? Or in some way we've changed so that nowadays we have things that never occurred much earlier. Every morning you pick up the paper and someone's been shot on the street. Or someone has been deliberately run over, as we've recently had. And, uh, none of those things- there's a violence that's occurred, flared up you might say, much, uh, later than the 60s. But nevertheless that's Anchorage today, and it has to be said.

I often joke and it isn't- shouldn't be a joke, but when they picked the motto- Big. Wild. Life. As a motto of Anchorage, I thought it can't be because we have on occasion a moose or a bear even in the streets of Anchorage downtown, but because of the violence that occurs in the town. That's the big wild life. And unfortunately I'm saying it that way, and I know I shouldn't. But, uh, it's my opinion that that is our wild life, and it has- its been not good. Now, on the other side there's tremendous improvement in so many things. Beautiful buildings, and our, our performing arts center, our libraries, I could go on and on about how we've improved, and how there are wonderful organizations in town which are doing so much for people. So there's that good side as opposed to what we see the bad side coming out.

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MD: You've been involved with some of these civic improvement groups?

NE: Well...

MD: To one degree or another.

NE: One degree or another, for- yes.

MD: Any, any particular advancements or achievements that, uh, you're very happy to have been associated with over that time?

NE: Not that I can think of offhand, I was on the, uh, neighborhood commission, and we were involved in the development of Karluk Manor, but that again is still a controversial issue, and I don't know. I wish we could find a solution to the, uh, the camping people, I'll put it that way.

MD: Right.

NE: I, I don't know if we ever can, because there are those who prefer to camp, and you can't say "well you've got to stop camping and move into a house", but at the same time, there has to be some kind of consideration about the sanitation and the, uh, lawfulness of camping. And, uh, that's an issue.

MD: That wasn't such a problem back in the, back in the 60s?

NE: No, I don't recall any of that in the 60s, of people camping out- oh, yes I can, in a sense, but not to the extent that it is now. Uh, we had in fact a huge tree, a fir- spruce tree, at All Saint's Church, had big spreading branches, the lower branches. And occasionally we would find someone camped out under the tree. In fact, one year- or one morning, I went out and found that they'd moved a sofa in! Under that tree, so we had to put a stop to that. And then unfortunately there was a giant wind that came and blew down the tree, and well that took care of the, of the job. But, uh, yes...but there wasn't the amount that I recall of people camping. Of course we didn't have the population, so that's true too.

MD: What was the- going back to the earthquake for a moment.

NE: Mmhmm.

MD: Following the earthquake, what did you have to do at All Saint's, what was the mood of the congregation like? I suppose the mood of the city?

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[00:21:14]

NE: Ha. Well my, my, my most famous story you might say of the earthquake is how it happened and when it happened and where it happened, is that, uh, like many churches, during the season of Lent, we have on Fridays what's called Stations of the Cross. And the Stations of the Cross actually is- began with the crusaders, who when they were in Jerusalem, decided to mark either from fact or fiction, spots that counted for Jesus being condemned, first of all, that's the first station, and moving on to where he was crucified, that's the 12th station, and then the events between those such as falling- picking up his cross, falling three times, meeting his mother, having his face washed, and so forth, by Veronica. And, uh, then as again the 12th station is Jesus dies on the cross and the 13th he's removed from the cross, and the 14th he's buried. And so that's what the crusaders decided to mark, and when they returned to their homes in France, Germany, England, they decided they would also put up stations, sometimes outdoors, and oftentimes inside the churches, and that's the way we do it now, and many churches do, you enter and you'll see around the walls those 14 stations. They can be either pictures, or they can be actually carvings, whatever, uh, but you'll find them, in both the Episcopal churches, Lutheran, Methodist, and so forth, many churches, including of course the Roman Catholic Church.

And so on that particular good Friday, since we'd had services every Friday beginning at 5:15- and we chose 5:15 because in those days it allowed people to come from work. And I won't say the attendance was huge, it never was, but on that particular Good Friday, we had about 35 or so who attended. We began at 5:15. Well, I got to the 12th station. Jesus dies on the cross. And I made that statement. The 12th station, Jesus dies on the cross. That moment happened to be 5:36. And the moment I said those words the earth quaked. Well, the thing is that in Matthew's

gospel, Matthew says the earth quaked when Jesus died on the cross. And, so you might say we had the first reality show! But the building began to rumble and roll, and nearly all of the congregation staggered out onto the lawn, and they couldn't stand out on the lawn, because it was not a shaker, it was a roller. Uh, there's a difference. I think in the Experience Theater you get shaken, shaken. Uh, but, the actual earthquake was a roller. And, uh, so it went on for 2 or 3 minutes.

And I stayed in the building, because an elderly couple were in there and the wife went berserk and was heading- instead of going and following the rest of the congregation, out of the main door onto the lawn, she was heading out toward the altar, and out to a door which would have led to an alley, and in those days we could see through plain glass windows that, uh that there were wires that were snapping around, and it would have been extremely dangerous for her to go out. And so I staggered up to stop her, and she ran into me and I hung onto what we call the pulpit area, and we rocked and rolled for the entire, uh, shaking or rolling of the quake. And the walls were coming forward, and the chandeliers were swinging and hitting the ceiling- in rhythm. And, uh, the noise was a roaring sound; it may have been fro the wind that was caused by the walls coming back and forth. But I'm happy to say that following the- when it ceased, we had no broken window, broken pipe, or broken wire. Because the building was built with laminated beams, which absorbed the rolling motion. So we were most fortunate in that the building sustained actually no damage at all.

There were, in the basement, two huge slabs of concrete for the foundation, and they had a gap of about an inch between them. Well, the quake shoved them together, but the tile on top didn't have that kind of a gap, so it broke off. And so for many years I could take tourists down and show them this crack across the center of the floor and say, "that's the result of the earthquake", you know. And another thing about that parish hall is that in those years the Jewish congregation didn't have a Synagogue or a place to have their services. And so since Friday is- is their service day, the, uh, they'd have their Sabbath services in the parish hall of All Saint's, and that Good Friday they were setting up the Seder meal while- downstairs while we were having our service upstairs, and so they too came out and, well, fell around the lawn along with the Episcopalians.

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MD: The, uh, you have been associated with the military.

NE: Well yes, I was in- I came- I went into the service in April the 7th 1941 and came out in April the 21st '46, and this watch I'm wearing was given to me the day I went in the service and the date's on the back, 1941. And it still runs well. But, uh, I was not a military- I was in charge of 4 Howitzers, not at all in the mil- in the ministry.

MD: Yeah, but uh, here in Anchorage, working with the people on base.

NE: Yes- (speaks over Mike saying something unintelligible) All Saint's was actually under contract with the department of the army in 1965 for me to have services at Fort Richardson. And so, uh, every other Sunday I would go to Fort Richardson and we would have a service in the Catholic Chapel. And we developed a good congregation and eventually it moved off base and became St. Christopher's Church in the- at Dubin(?) and Oklahoma. But that was the start of St. Christopher's.

MD: Um, so how many children do you have?

NE: Well, I have three children and eight grandchildren.

MD: Do they all live in Anchorage, or...?

NE: No, my daughter and her husband live in Fairbanks, where she is in charge of graduate studies at UAF. And her son is working with the communication department up there. And they have two daughters, both of whom are college graduates, the youngest just graduated from Willamette and the oldest one graduated in- from Western Washington and then went to Washington D.C. and got her Masters in Catholic University, and now is studying at another university to get her second master's, and working part time at the state department. So that's that family, and my second family, my second daughter lives here in Anchorage, and uh, her husband and her son and daughter all work for the same plumbing firm. And, uh...

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[00:29:29]

MD: Which one is that?

NE: That's Pamela. Laura's my oldest daughter, and her husband is Gary Bender, and Pamela is Pamela McKinney whose father-in-law used to be port director, Bill McKinney. And, uh, she has two children and an adopted child. And then, uh, my son lives in Corvallis, Oregon, and he has three boys, one of whom has just entered Oregon State, which is rather amusing because my son is a graduate from Oregon. So there's the ducks and the beavers in the same family.

MD: What was it like raising kids in Anchorage?

NE: It was good. It was good. They attended Rogers Park- uh, Turnagain, Rogers Park, and then East High. And, uh, that's another interesting there then, is that, uh, one day the principal at Rogers Park called and told my wife that our son Sidney, uh, was caught throwing food in the cafeteria and that he could do three things, and she could tell him which one. One he could send him home for a day, two he could have him eat his lunch sitting on the steps of the school for a day or two days, or three he could spank him. And my wife said spank him. And when he came home he said "You told them to spank me" and she said, "Yes. You would a hero if you'd have been

sent home or eaten your lunch on the walk, you're no hero now because you were spanked." Well nowadays of course you can't tell a teacher to spank, that's not possible at all, that's child punishment- cruelty, you might say. So. But it does- I mention that because we've changed a little bit in our attitude of how we- how the schools are able to teach or treat children. Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad, I know that there could have been teachers who would have been very, uh, harsh in their spanking, but uh, well. Most of them wouldn't have been, I'm sure.

MD: What kind of family activities did you have with the kids?

NE: Oh all sorts, the usual. My, uh, my son especially was interested in running, and he even ran in college, as well as in East High School. The girls were not too much interested in sports at all; they were more, uh, doing things at home.

MD: Um.

NE: We took trips of course, across the country to see my wife's parents and my family. Things like that. But other than that, no. We, we were not hunters or fishers, so we- once in a while my wife and I- she let me, I'll put it that way, go- take her to go fishing. But that was about it, down on the Kenai River or something, but it was rare that we did anything like that; I think we went camping once, that was it.

[00:36:02:00]

[00:32:59]

MD: Uh, did you have a lot of game that you ate in Eagle, or out on the Yukon?

NE: Well yes, I- I have to say I never once did I hunt. I used to hunt grouse, willow grouse and so forth, but I never went moose hunter, or caribou or anything like that. Uh, my reasoning was "Why should I have to go and drag a 1,500 pound moose out or something" when the Native people would come up and say to me "Would you care for some moose? Would you care for a duck? Would you care for whatever?" And so they were very kind, and I was very happy to accept their offerings, so.

MD: The, um, what was there- early on there in the 60s I suppose was there ever um, issues with getting fresh food in Anchorage? Or was that never a problem?

NE: I don't think there was ever a problem that I recall. No. There was always the added expense because of the cost of bringing it in. But uh, no, wherever I've been, Ketchikan and so forth, there was never any trouble getting fresh food.

MD: When, um, people from the church came up to visit you for inspections or whatever, what were there reactions to- "Norman, why are you here?" What were there thoughts about Anchorage when they would come in and see where you were living and what you were doing, and the situation, did you ever get an odd reaction-

NE: No, no, no, no one ever criticized me or said "Why in the world are you still here". No, not at all. In fact I think some of them wished they could have stayed. Yeah.

MD: So it was a good post.

NE: It was a good post. And it continues- although, in the Episcopal Church, when I retired you were required to retire at the age of 70; now I think they've changed that to 72. Now by retiring- mandatory retirement doesn't mean that you can no longer work. It simply means that you can no longer stay on in the same position that you've held. And so I retired in 1990, and, uh, I did so because I wanted to, I felt it was time after all those years in being a Rector, to, to move on. And so I fill in wherever I wish, or wherever I'm asked to fill in. I also spend much of my time visiting the hospitals, especially the Native hospital and Providence because I'm familiar with so many of the Native people. And then I'm on two or three commissions and doing things that I like to do, so I keep busy, but as I say to people, "when you retire you quit one job and you're handed 14". (laughs) And that's, many people who are retired agree with me, that they've found that same experience.

MD: When you first got to Anchorage and traded in the Piper Pacer, what were you driving? What was the vehicle?

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NE: I don't recall now what that vehicle was that the church owned, because I didn't have a car of my own, not in the '50s, and in fact it wasn't until, ahhh, you might say the '60s until I first had a car of my own in Anchorage, and that was a little Corvair. Nor a Corvette, but a Corvair, which we bought in Connecticut and drove back to Anchorage with two children and a- my wife and I and all our baggage in that little tiny car. But we made it. And then we had an American Eagle, and so on and so forth.

MD: Um, when did you stop flying?

NE: I stopped in '58 because when I went to Ketchikan there was no reason to fly. There would have been all float plane anyway in those days, and in fact if you wanted to go to Seattle from Ketchikan, or anywhere out of Ketchikan, you boarded an amphibian Grumman Goose of Ellis Air Lines and you were flown over to Annette Island and then boarded the Pan-American or whatever plane to go to Seattle or Fairbanks or so forth. And so you took off on the water and landed on land, and boarded a land plane, and on the return you landed on land on Annette Island and then boarded the amphibian and landed in the water in Ketchikan. And that was always an experience, in fact one time I was fl- I'd landed, I'd come back from somewhere, Seattle I think, and boarded the amphibian plane, and the young woman sitting next to me was joining her husband in the coast guard in Ketchikan and as we started to drop down she was sitting looking out the porthole-type

window, and I noticed she was getting a bit nervous, and I said, uh, "Miss, I want you to know we're going to land in the water" and a moment later we did land in the water and it splashed and she said "Thank you for telling me, I would have thought we had crashed!" because you're not- you don't expect them unless you're warned ahead of time, of course.

MD: Its a big wave they throw up too.

NE: Oh yes it does, yes it does.

MD: Um, let's see...we have plenty of time left here. Any other anecdotes or observations you'd care to share?

[00:42:08:00]

[00:39:05]

NE: Not that really much that I can think of. Uh, I, well, here's a - I've been puzzled by what's happening on the, uh, Yukon River with all of the flooding, because in the 50s, when I was around Fort Yukon, uh, when the Porcupine and the Yukon where they come together would often jam and then Fort Yukon would experience water of the flood coming in from the Porcupine behind the village, and then in front of the village the Yukon would be spilling in. In fact one time I was flying some women back to one of their villages and I had to land at Fort Yukon, and as we came over the river across, crossing the Yukon to land at Fort Yukon, I realized that the water was going to flood, so as soon as I landed I ran to the hospital, which was right next to the landing strip, and said "Get the Farmall and get my plane up on high ground before it floods!" because I didn't have time even to gas up. And so we did, there's- Fort Yukon has several levels, its not entirely flat at all, and so we put the plane up on higher ground and by the time we had done that, we to take a boat to get to the hospital, across from where I had landed.

But what- my main point is that in those days, I think it was the Air Force, it had to be, would bomb the jams and break them. Now today, they know these jams are forming and where they're going to form, but never have- I've never heard of them bombing, with all our precision bombing, I can't see why that hasn't been done. That's just a question, and probably I'm going to get a good answer from the Air Force or somewhere, but I've yet to hear- find an answer.

MD: Right. Yeah, I remembering reading about that, bombing the ice flows.

NE: Yes. Just to break the jams, and then the water would not back up and cause such flows. And flooding like Galena and those places. It- its tragic when they could have been prevented, but again I may be quite wrong. [00:41:28.26] And, uh, another thing that's rather interesting is that the billions of mosquitoes- and its a true story, we do have billions of mosquitoes in Alaska, especially along the Yukon Flats- and one- back in the 50s, Colonel Reese Syler lived with me on Fort Yukon, and he had been setting traps to collect mosquitoes and black flies for two years,

and he said the more snow you have, the more water you have, the more mosquitoes you will have. Because there are more ponds for them to breed. And he even introduced me to a magazine called Mosquito! Which I'd never heard of. And it's a very scienc- or was, I don't know if it's still being issued but- or published- but it contained technical articles about precise measurements of getting flies and mosquitoes. For example, someone would write, uh, at, at precisely the exact time, temperature, air condition, atmosphere you might say, moisture in the air, all the rest of it, uh, using a net of such a diameter in mesh, uh, one swipe of so forth collected so many black flies and mosquitoes, put my arm in, it was bitten by so much and so forth, all this written out as a technical advice. And I don't know as I say if that magazine's still in existence or not, but that was the- he introduced me to it.

And on an amusing side of it he had a photographer that would photograph through a microscope the, uh, mosquitoes and so forth and black flies so there'd be perfect identification, and he was quite a person, a character. He took a picture of a mosquito as though it were flying and then he took a picture of a Native standing outside his house swinging an axe, and he superimposed the mosquito on top of that picture, and he said "Whenever I give a lecture I'm going to introduce it by saying they have huge mosquitoes in Alaska". (laughs) And it looks like an eagle attacking the- the trapper.

[00:46:57:00]

[00:43:54]

MD: Did they ever spray your neighborhoods here in Anchorage?

NE: Not my neighborhood, they don't spray no, not here in Anchorage, no. And of course in the villages they don't spray at all. But, uh- no, I've never been really badly affected by mosquitoes in Anchorage. It may be that they are controlled, but that I can't say for sure, I've not heard of any commercial spraying or municipal spraying.

MD: After Fort Yukon, Anchorage doesn't have mosquitoes. (laughs)

NE: No, that's right. Well, along a village like, especially Fort Yukon wasn't too bad, but some of the villages like, one time I was in Hughes, and Hughes is a- in those days a, it was a- the houses were all built right along the Koyukuk River, and I decided I wanted to take a picture of the whole village. So I had my camera on a strap around my neck and I walked up to the end of the strip where the plane had landed and stepped off into the brush to get a picture of the village. I never took a picture because the instant I stepped off into the village -into the brush, the mosquitoes zoomed up and I ran. Now that's a true story, it sounds as if I'm exaggerating and I'm not. That's how fast- how furi- well how many there are.

MD: Any close calls? That you recall either from living in the bush or in Anchorage?

NE: Close calls?

MD: Close calls, brushes with- closer to you maker than you maybe wanted to be at that moment.

NE: (laughs) Well I guess the closest I had was when the canvas ripped off the top of the plane and I had to crash land in the tundra between Venetie and Fort Yukon. I can remember the date, June the 13th 1957. It was a Thursday, because my remark was "first time a Friday the 13th ever fell on a Thursday". And I had just gotten engaged, and word got to Fairbanks that I was missing, and my wife-to-be was told, and she thought she was a widow before she was married. Uh, but it was a beautiful day and I had flown a doctor and a nurse to Venetie, which is only a 45 minute flight from Fort- less than that perhaps- from Fort Yukon. And so we were returning on this- and it was a beautiful day- and all of a sudden there was an explosion like a hand grenade had gone off over my head, and the canvas had ripped back all the way from the windscreen to the tail. And I could hear it flapping. Well, I think I- looking back, I think I could have, we might say, stood it up on its tail and got it into Fort Yukon 20 miles away. But because of that flapping I thought "wait a minute, if this wraps around the fuel the tail assembly we're finished, there's no way", and so I elected to land in the tundra.

And unfortunately we had small wheels, and we had almost come to a stop when the wheels sank into the tundra and we went tail-over-nose. But no one was hurt. And, uh, finally we were located. We did try to set a fire and smoke, but the wind- was just a breeze- kept the smoke way down and a Wien Airline pilot we knew would be coming over happened to fly directly over us, and so he couldn't look straight down and see us, and he didn't spot us, and so then they began looking for me on the gravel banks of the river, and I wasn't there of course, I was back on the tundra. But finally a large aircraft from Elmendorf found us and dropped a radio by parachute and asked if I needed anything or if anyone was hurt they had a paramedic aboard. And I said "No, what I do need is mosquito netting, we have mosquito dope but the mosquitoes are- it would be better if we had netting". And so the pilot said, "Well I'll drop you a canister", so they dropped it by parachute, a canister, and the first thing I pulled out was a carbine. And so I radioed up and I said "But they ain't that big yet!" and then he radioed and got a helicopter to come and pick us up. So that was my closest you might say to, uh.

[00:51:22:00]

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MD: How long from when you went down to when you were picked up?

NE: About seven and a half hours because as I said I was directly on the flight plan.

MD: Right.

NE: And they knew my flight plan but they thought that if something had happened I would have landed on the sand bars or somewhere or gravel bars. And of course I

hadn't and so that's how they missed me. We could hear them looking for us. But they weren't high enough to spot us.

MD: Was the plane ever recovered?

NE: Yes, they finally recovered it and I flew it again. Then the fellow that followed me unfortunately, well, he crashed it and instead of trying to recover it they just abandoned it. Word got out to a church in New York who immediately sent money to buy a Cessna 180. I often said if I'd known that was going to happen I would have set a match to- over my shoulder to the one when I crashed! Ah well.

MD: Very good! Well, uh, I really have no further follow-up questions, um. Getting close to lunch. (laughs)

NE: I know it is. No, Anchorage has been good to me and my family. And I've enjoyed living here, and I intend to stay on. That's the best I can say.

MD: Would you ever have seen yourself here, as a young person?

NE: No, I can't say that! I don't know what I would have done as a young person. I will say when I first saw Anchorage in 1951, when I landed here- or '52, it had one paved street, and that was 4th Avenue from K I think to the cemetery, and 9th avenue was the firebreak between the town and the homesteads, and all the rest were dirt and gravel streets. That's how small it was in those days. So we've really mushroomed.

MD: Yeah. Well thank you very much!

NE: My pleasure.

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