

Interview of Wilda Marston by Mike Dunham

Transcript

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Mike Dunham: My name is Mike Dunham. We are speaking with Wilda Marston at her home in Turnagain. The date is June 29, 2013. A couple of things to cover; one is the purpose of what we're doing today, which is to record the memories of people who remember Anchorage in previous years, and- for the purpose of creating a record that can be researched and accessed by the public at some future date to get the picture of what really happened, at least as best as we can remember it. So, um, if- if you're ok with that, I just want to make sure you understand what we're doing and we have your assent to do this.

Wilda Marston: You do.

MD: Very good. Let's begin with your life- where were you born and when?

WM: I was born in Woodburn, Indiana, on August the 8th, 1930. It was the smallest city in Indiana. I mean, the smallest accumulation of people under a formal government situation. So its called- prided itself on being called the smallest city.

MD: And what did your folks do?

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WM: My father worked for the International harvester Company in Fort Wayne and my mother was a housewife.

MD: Ah, what was your upbringing like? Was it a, a small town-

WM: Three hundred and fifty population. It has now boomed to one thousand.

MD: The, uh- when did you, um, did you graduate from high school there, or did you-

WM: Oh no. Uh, we moved to, um, Fort Wayne, which is a much larger community, uh, in 1942. My father was working -it seemed like eighteen hours a day- the International Harvester was building military trucks.

MD: And did you attend college after graduating high school?

WM: Yes, I graduated from Concordia High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1948. And then from Indiana University in Bloomington in 1952. One week later, I arrived at Elmendorf.

MD: What brought you to Alaska?

WM: I was looking for a job. And I had an uncle here.

MD: Who was your uncle?

WM: Albert Lindemuth. He came to Alaska in 1937 and worked at, uh, Kennecott.

MD: How did you arrive- you flew to Elmendorf, what kind of plane?

WM: A Stratocruiser. Very fancy airplane.

MD: Those giant Boeing things?

WM: Well, it was quite nice. Um, in fact I don't know an airplane today whose quite that nice- which is quite that nice unless you have a private jet.

MD: And you landed in- on Elmendorf?

WM: Yes, because Anchorage Airport was not. (laughs)

MD: What was the city like, that you-? What were your impressions when you got off the plane?

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WM: Well, my uncle, um, and aunt and three little kids met me, and we went to, um, Merrill Field, where they had two apartment buildings. And that's where I lived, the two years I lived here. He was teaching flying to, um, young men, uh, under the G.I. Bill. He was a flyer.

MD: What job did you get?

WM: Well, I wanted to teach school, because I intended to go to the University of Chicago and get my Master's Degree. And I'd already been accepted, so it was a matter of finances. My father paid my way through college, and I thought I was grown up now and I should pay my own way through graduate school. And so I applied for a job in the Anchorage school system. And I was, uh, favorable received, but the superintendent said, "I don't have a job, but don't leave town." And I thought, "This is very strange way". Anyway, um, there was a teacher who had become pregnant. And the next week I was called and I was offered the job of teaching

History and English to 7th graders at the Anchorage Junior High. And I taught in the building that, well, its now gone. Its where the, uh, Performing Arts Center was. It was built as a grade school- where my husband went to grade school in 1941.

MD: And so that was the old Anchorage School on 6th- uh, 5th Avenue.

WM: 5th Avenue. And the next year I taught the, um, 8th grade, and- because that was the high school when I came. That we had built, West- that we now call West High School. And then I, uh, had been in contact with the University of Chicago, and I said I would- wanted to do my thesis on the Alaska Railroad. And they said "fine". So I decided that that summer I should go up to the university and find out what there was there. So I took, um, the History of Alaska and U.S. Diplomatic History. Brooke Marston was in my Alaska History class. I never went to the University of Chicago. I got married instead.

MD: And that was at- what we now call UAF?

WM: Mmhmm.

MD: Right.

WM: It was quite small then.

MD: Yeah. About how many buildings?

WM: Well, I stayed in the one dorm. It was called Harriet Hess Hall. It was for women, I don't know where the men slept. There must have been another dorm somewhere. But it was the concrete building. Mmhmm.

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MD: The concrete building?

WM: Yeah. And- it was certainly different from Indiana University. (laughs)

MD: The rest of the structures were wood, primarily?

WM: Yeah, well, the library was, um, near where the gym is now. The old gym, that is. I haven't been there for a while.

MD: Uh, did you get into the city of Fairbanks much?

WM: Oh yes.

MD: What was that place like?

WM: Much as it is now, only it was busier!

MD: (laughs)

WM: More frantic. The downtown was, um, crowded, and, and the high point was the Mecca Bar, and the Co-Op Drugstore. But there was a boo- a bookstore; it was Adler's Bookstore. And it was a good bookstore.

MD: So you married Brooke and moved back to Anchorage with him?

WM: No, we went outside- my mother insisted- we went Outside and we were married in Fort Wayne, Indiana. And I taught at Concordia High School where I graduated, for a year. And then I taught another year at Indiana Technical College. Then we came back, and my husband taught school- I was at this point pregnant with our daughter. Now you do understand that in those dark days women-pregnant women could not be seen by children in the classroom. I don't know where they thought babies came from, but anyway. So that's how I got my job, and so- I had been accepted to teach, but when I became pregnant I said, "Sorry to tell you, but". And we bought the old Lynn Ary homestead house from Brooke's parents, which is- was down here where the ballpark is now. The ballpark was at this level before the earthquake. So we were quite happy.

MD: Um, what was that house like? It was their homesteaded house?

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WM: Yes. It was Russian. It was built by a Russian- Finn, I- Finnish Russian I think. And all the logs dovetailed. It was actually a rather big log cabin. It had a front hall, it had, uh, a big living room, a big kitchen- dining room was included in the kitchen- and two bedrooms and a bath. And the bathtub was chiseled into the logs. It was really funny. It's been- we moved it after the earthquake, over on 31st or 32nd; right now I can't remember which. And its been remodeled and so forth, and I keep reading the ads for this Swedish-built house.

MD: (laughs)

WM: Anyway. It was a wonderful house. And we thought we would live there forever so we put a second story on it and.

MD: Um, did you have your own water supply?

WM: We had just hooked on.

MD: Wow.

WM: To the gas company and the water supply, and paid off our mortgage, the 1st of March, 1964.

MD: The- and what were you doing when the earthquake struck?

WM: I was babysitting friends' children. It was the Easter holiday and our friends had gone Outside to a teacher's conference. And so I had, uh, three of their kids, and I had some- two of their kids, and I had friends' from down the street's child, and she was trying on hats, because they were supposed to be home and they weren't. And so I was distracting this little girl who was about three years old. And, uh, I was putting on different hats on her, and we had a full-length mirror, um, on one of the doors, and she thought it was very funny. And all of a sudden it hit and I knew what had happened. And I looked outside and my car- we had a circular driveway- I looked outside and my car was disappearing, and I thought, "Well, we're in for a big time". Meantime the rest of the children were upstairs. And I had to get them down a spiral staircase, which we did, and we went out the front door, went leaping over little empty spots, and I found a place for them on a big piece of ground, and y'know, threatened murder if they so much as moved, and went back in the house and got boots, and a blanket, and their outdoor clothes. And made, uh, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And waited.

MD: Outside.

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WM: And Paul Cruise and other people came along with a helicopter, ask if we needed help, and I said, "No, go help somebody who needs it".

MD: How long were you outside? Of there.

WM: Oh, I don't know. Uh, eventually our friends who lived down the street came, and Brooke came, and this- Brooke was trying to come home, the road kept collapsing in front of him. So he got a rope, climbed down, and rescued us.

MD: Where did you go after- afterward?

WM: Our friends' house. And then the, uh, National Guard came by, and, um, said, "You have to leave". So we went to our friend's- Alex Combs, you remember Alex Combs?

MD: Yes.

WM: Well they lived out at Sand Lake.

MD: Sure. The house there.

WM: So we had thirteen people in a VW bus. Not including Brooke, Brooke was over at his office trying to help people who were, shall we say, frantic.

MD: And you went- all moved over to- to Combs' house for a while?

WM: That night.

MD: (laughs)

WM: Its one of the more interesting nights of my life. (laughs) Anyway. Nobody was hurt. That was my attitude. Nobody was hurt.

MD: Right.

WM: And I was definitely in shock.

MD: Um, if we can go back to when you came back to- to Anchorage from Fort Wayne there, uh, how did you occupy your time now that you're back at the house, uh, pregnant and having a child?

WM: That was very traumatic for me, as a matter of fact. Because ever since I was six years old I had gone to school.

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MD: Mmhmm.

WM: And so, the League of Women Voters and statehood found me. And, um, I wrote letters about statehood to every minister in the state of Arkansas, (laughs) urging statehood for Alaska. That was my assignment. So that's what I did.

MD: What were the, uh- what were some of the things people were saying about statehood? I guess both pro and con, that you remember hearing.

WM: All our friends and everybody I knew was pro-statehood. There were of course people who were not, but the vast majority of people were in favor of statehood.

MD: What were the feelings when it finally passed?

WM: Jubilant.

MD: Yeah.

WM: Muktuk organized a huge bonfire downtown on the park strip I think. You've probably heard of that. Which we did not attend, incidentally, we stayed home and

had a private party. It was madness down there. At any rate, it was an exciting time, and there were opportunities- we just knew that there were opportunities all over the place.

MD: Yeah.

WM: And there were.

Bob Curtis-Johnson: May I interject for a second? On the bonfire question, I'd heard a rumor, or at least some folks remembered that, a day in advance or two days in advance, that someone had lit the wood that had been collected and they had to re-collect wood, does that-

WM: I don't have any memory of that.

BCJ: I'm not sure-

WM: I tried to stay far, far away from public events like that. (laughs)

BCJ: I just wondered if, if you'd heard anything.

WM: No.

[01:13:33:00]

[00:13:24]

MD: So, that puts us, um, in the summer of 1958, when the Senate passed the statehood resolution, still a few months off from rubberstamping it, but. Um, what was Anchorage like at that time? What was the city like, and what did you do for-shopping, for instance, where did you shop?

WM: Piggly Wiggly, on, uh, Spenard Road. Do you remember that?

MD: Yes.

WM: Mmhmm.

MD: And, uh, Ben Franklin's was right next to it.

WM: Yes, mmhmm.

MD: And Monkey Ward's/Caribou's. (laughs) The, um, the, uh, and, so did you do most of your shopping in Spenard, or did you go to the other shops too?

WM: I met Bill Sheffield, who lives right down here, because he was running the, uh, Sears Roebuck office. Which was quite near Piggly Wiggly. It was a much smaller

place, when I look back at it now we knew an awful lot of people who have grown in stature and public service to the state.

MD: Um, what was the town like culturally?

WM: Oh wow. That is very funny. When- or at least I find it humorous. My aunt was busy, she eventually had six kids within- I don't know however many days- years it was. But at any rate she was too busy to do anything, but she said, "You have to make up your mind", and I said, "About what?" She said, "Whether you're going to follow Evangeline Atwood or Margot Hobbins. Well I didn't know either one of them, and I said, "Well, what's the difference?" Well, she said, "One is interested in crippled children, and helping them, and the other one is interested in international affairs and business and history". And I said, "Mmmm"- I, being a history major, tended more towards the Evangeline Atwood type. As fate had it, she lived just down the street from us when we moved in Turnagain. And my husband and I were both involved in, uh, Alaska World Affairs Counsel and all- etc. So yes, we knew them. So I guess I made my decision!

MD: What was- what was Evangeline like?

WM: Evangeline was very, um, organized person, a very bright woman. And she knew what needed to be done, and she could organize people, and she expected you to follow and do your assignment.

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[00:15:51]

MD. Um-

WM: And she gave assignments.

MD: I've seen photos of her house, with the organ?

WM: Oh, that was the most beautiful log house. I loved that house.

MD: Did she play well?

WM: Actually I never heard her play, but I heard other people play when we were guests there.

MD: And, um, your house over here in Lynn Ary Park, was it- well, you say you moved it, so it must have-

WM: Well, our Culligan man- do you know what Culligan is?

MD: Uh, the water softener?

WM: Yeah. Um, loved that house, and soon as we tried to sell it, he bought it. And it took him thirteen years to get it back in alignment. But it did not fall apart. It was a log house with- and so he remodeled it. And when it was finished he invited our family over to see what he had done. I can't remember his name. He was a good man.

MD: The, um, with the World Affairs Council and these things, what were some of your activities? What were your assignments?

WM: Well, on one day I, um, it was- in the middle of a snowstorm, this is Evangeline, uh, we had, uh, I was to pick her up and we were going out to the base to do some research on something with the military. And, uh, I was to pick her up. And I did, and we went out there, and I said, "Evangeline, I have never been on the base except to land in an airplane", and she said "Never mind, I know what I'm doing". And she checked us in, got the lead general, whoever he was then, and people just appeared and did whatever they were told to do. We were researching something, I can't even remember what. And my husband was President of the, uh, World Affairs Council for years. So we were deeply involved with that.

MD: The, um, were you involved at all with politics during the early years of statehood?

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WM: No, not politics as you mean it, but I was deeply involved with the League of Women Voters, which studied public issues, then voted, and then went and testified. Which I think is a marvelous way to learn about government.

MD: What were some of the issues that you were-

WM: School districts- (laughs) was, is, and ever will be a public issue, I believe. Yes. And, um, I, uh, was anointed- appointed- to, in 19- in the late sixties, to go to Kodiak to start a League of Women Voters there. So once a month I went to Kodiak. And that was an interesting experience.

MD: What was- what was Kodiak like?

WM: A roaring fishing town. And they- they had a few people who were interested in improving the- the town, and the government and so forth. So it was a wonderful experience.

MD: Mmhmm. Uh, you'd fly over, not take the ferry?

WM: No. Flew.

MD: Yeah. Have you traveled around the state very much?

WM: Uh, well, I've been, I think, everywhere where the road goes. I've been to Nome. I was appointed, um, to the State Library Board. And then I was made, uh, the spokesperson for a series of what they called, uh, "Speak out for your library". So I went to Fairbanks, I went to Nome, I went to Juneau, I went to Ketchikan. Uh, and I was the chairman of a meeting where people came and told what they wanted, uh, a library. And the whole state needed a new and improved library, so that was an interesting experience. And I was involved then with the state library, and I, um, became involved with the local library. Jack Roderick, uh, who was, uh, the mayor of our borough, appointed me to the borough library. Then George Sullivan, who was mayor of the city, uh, appointed me to the city library. And then they amalgamated, you remember that, and, uh, I became definitely The Library Lady. And I, uh, lobbied very, very hard for funds for a new library. I went to Juneau, and I saw everybody who represented the city and bureau from miles around, for new libraries. Now you have to remember, the oil was discovered and we were awash in money. And George Sullivan had organized all these big projects, which we call Projects 80 now. And we had some money, not much, but some money for a new library. And I realized, along with some other people, that this town had just, y'know, exploded, and we needed a bigger library. So I went down and lobbied for it, and then we had to vote. The Anchorage citizens had to vote on these Projects 80. And the library came out number one. 'Cause most people use the library. So that. And then I became head of the effort for the building, I was appointed to the building committee. We had an international contest for, um, an architect. And George Sullivan in his wisdom called um and said, "Well, you're going to be the building committee". So for about five years the same people who were on the library board, we became very well acquainted (laughs), because we spent two nights a week, if not more, working on Lousacc Library. Which is, y'know, the love of my life.

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MD: Right.

WM: As far as buildings are concerned.

MD: Um, the old libraries, how would you'd describe those when you got here? The old library. What was the system like in that-

WM: Well, I have a memory of it of being a big, uh, Quonset hut across from Kimball's. Other people tell me it was a tin warehouse. I used to march the 7th graders in my classroom- threatening murder if they so much as thought about walking in the street- to that library.

MD: And what was- what was inside there? What did it look like when you-

WM: Uh, leftover books from the base. I mean it was rather pathetic.

MD: Right.

WM: And then, Loussac, who was the mayor- and he was well-to-do by Anchorage standard in those days- and he, um, funded the library, The Loussac Library that was on F Street. So, but- oh, it was nothing. I mean, we- it could not cope with the number of people we had. So we started building branches. And so eventually we had branches all over. But we didn't have a headquarters library.

MD: Right.

WM: And so in the '80s we built Loussac.

MD: And for a while there you had to put the books on 6th Avenue.

WM: Oh yeah! That was our storefront library while we were building Loussac, yes. Oh, that was wild. Very wild.

MD: Um, what were some of the con- concerns you had, or things you wanted when you saw the new library was going to be built?

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WM: Well. First of all the needs. And we needed everything. But I wanted it to be a significant building- I was not alone- for this community. And so, uh, Brooke is a very generous man, and he and I visited Boston, Dallas, Houston, Seattle, Chicago- what the big headquarters libraries should look like. And I know how to do these things, I made appointments with the person, explained my situation, and, "What are the good things and the bad things about this library, and what would you recommend for somebody building a new one?" So, we, we did our homework. And we worked hard, and we came up with this. Now. Then, where we were going to put it? That was the big deal. Where were we going to put it. And we had many a rough time about that. And eventually George Sullivan found the property where it is now. And its on 17.29 acres, and I love every one of them. I can't believe its 17.29 acres but that's where I read somewhere in the last two days. At any rate, so its the only one of the Projects 80s that has a proper setting. Because we always used municipal space before. So I love it dearly.

MD: Mmhmm. The, uh-

WM: It needs to be refurbished now, of course, that was thirty years ago.

MD: Which is, I think, longer than the old Lousacc Library was in existence. (laughs)

WM: Yeah, well, George bulldozed that down to make way for other things.

MD: The Egan Center.

WM: Yes.

MD: Um, did- did you ever meet former Governor Egan?

WM: Yes.

MD: What were your impressions of him?

WM: A marvelous man who remembered everybody.

MD: And um, I'm trying to think of other movers and shakers. Uh, Senator Gruening?

WM: Oh yes, I knew him well.

MD: What was he like?

MD: No-nonsense, very, um, bright man, very bright wife, with a will of iron. And definitely liberal. More liberal than I was.

[01:26:10:00]

[00:26:02]

MD: Yeah.

WM: But I respected him.

MD: Yeah. The, uh, and then- they named the auditorium at the library after you.

WM: Yes.

MD: I believe you're the same Wilda Marston, right. (laughs)

WM: Yes.

MD: Where you ever involved with the performing arts the way you were with the library?

WM: No. Except that, when the Performing Arts building, uh, we were involved, we went to Concert Association and all those things. We were very concerned that, uh, and we suffered the downturn- the economy had definitely suffered in '86, and when the, um, Performing Arts Center was finally finished we were very concerned that it would not make it. So we went to everything. (laughs) We went to all the

performances in the beginning, trying to encourage people. We bought our seats there. After all, I'd sold the library seats to everybody I could. And, um, it- it is a great asset for us, but we were very concerned about it.

MD: The, um, do you remember any particular programs, shows, concerts that you attended- either at the new PAC or previous venues that-

WM: The best things I have ever attended in Anchorage along that line I attended at West High School's auditorium.

MD: What were some of the things you remember there?

WM: New York Symphony.

MD: With Leonard Bernstein?

WM: I mean, all the top performers who traveled the world stopped here because we were on the great circle route. This town, even with its enlarged population, could not attract some of those people. No. We benefited from them. And one of the joys in my life is to sit back and watch how the people who love West High School refurbished that auditorium. I think that's grand, just grand.

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[00:28:12]

MD: Yeah, its really beautiful now.

WM: Yes.

MD: Why- why were you so interested in libraries particularly, in books? What was your...?

WM: I'm a reader; I read two or three books at all times. And its natural to me, if you're going to improve yourself and learn about the world, and escape the immediate, you must read. And I've not changed my mind even though we have gone to gadget books now. I still read real books.

MD: And, uh, an interesting concept, "to escape the immediate". Were books like an escape for you as a child?

WM: Yes. Definitely.

MD: Yeah.

WM: And it opened up the whole world. I went to a very small- I was the only girl in my class for six years! I went to a very small, parochial school. And incidentally my

children think that explains a lot about me. But. So, yes. I like libraries. And as a high school student I worked in a library. In fact, an interesting fact. Uh, when our library board got together, and we worked so much together, and we got to know each other very well, and finally I said, "Ok, I'm doing a survey. How many of you worked in a library?" And everybody but one had worked in a library, either a college library or a high school library.

MD: Hmm. Its a wonderful place to work.

MD: Yeah.

WM: If you're interested in books.

MD: Um, how have you seen the city change, lo these sixty-some years? (laughs) I know its a very large topic, but-

WM: Well, let's see. When I came, there were only two paved streets. 4th and 5th. So obviously that kind of thing has changed. And I have seen, uh, housing finally catch up. It was pretty awful when I came here in '52. People were living in garages. They could not find proper housing. And this was the boom- military boom, because they were doing the DEW Line and all of that. So there were jobs for the men but- they worked double shifts, sometimes more complicated than just double shifts. So it was a frantic place then. Um, and the place to live was, um, Rogers Park. They had nice homes along Bannister Road. My aunt used to say, "Now this is where The People live, (laughs) the rest of us are just trying". And then Brooke's dad, and, um, another man whose name's gone out of my head at this moment, uh, started this Turnagain subdivision in '53.

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MD: Mmhmm.

WM: And my aunt said, "This man has gone mad. Its clear out here, but let's go look at it." So we came out here and the only interesting thing I saw, from my viewpoint, was that log house, I liked that. And people just thought Turnagain was wonderful. It had paving, sewer, water, streetlights! It was wonderful. And then it started building- subdivisions started building. And some of them were pretty small and not well done, and some of them were better. And it kept going. And my husband became involved in real estate. He was teaching school but we did double shifting. Double shifting means that you went to school in the morning, and there was another school that had classes at your school, we had to do that for a while. And so he gradually took over the, uh, real estate that his father had started because his father was getting older. And he was a great salesman, one of the world's best salesmen, but the people he worked with were getting more and more difficult. And so gradually he had to make a decision, so he stopped teaching in, uh, January 1st,

1960. And that's when our son was born, January 6th of that- so we have two children, a girl and a boy. They're both attorneys.

MD: Um, I noticed that- as I was driving here one of the things that struck me was how all of these trees had grown up, where once it was just lawn and shrubs.

WM: Not this lot. Uh, this lot nothing had ever been built on, and we moved here after the earthquake, we built this house. And, um, well, I've already taken out nine trees. I mean, we had this house in a forest, so to speak. And, um, yes. We have pictures of the early days too. And those trees were- mmhmm. Its kind of fun to grow up as an area. And I went someplace, and somebody said, "Where do you live?" and I said, "I live in Turnagain". And they said, "Oh its so quaint". Now, of all the words in the English language, I don't think I'd describe this area as quaint! But it is to people who are used to the west and the newness of everything.

MD: Mmhmm. Well, because its an old part of town?

WM: Mmhmm.

[01:33:49:00]

[00:33:41]

MD: Right. Yeah. (laughs)

WM: (laughs) That's one reason I like it!

BCJ: Steve McCutcheon has some wonderful films that he shot, "Turnagain By The Sea" when it first opened as a subdivision, and what I'm struck by is how broad the street vistas seem because the trees are now fully grown, but in those days they weren't there or they were seedlings. So everything seems further set back, and now when you drive down it seems a little closer.

WM: I think that's why she thinks its quaint. Because new ones of course don't have that.

BCJ: If you see those films, y'know, he's got-

WM: Oh, we have early pictures, yes.

BCJ: -cars motoring down these wide, expansive streets, there's a different feel to it.

MD: Oh, it was very classy, it was very Lower '48.

WM: Mmhmm. And that's what some people wanted. Yeah.

MD: Not the mud of Spenard. (laughs)

WM: Spenard was interesting. Colorful, as we say. I wouldn't let my children say bad words, and so I'd say, "Its either colorful or its interesting. That's- those are your two choices."

MD: Um, what was the road like going from way out here into town?

WM: Old- Old Spenard Road. Of course, Northern Lights just went over here to, um, what was it, KFQD? And, uh, by the way, we bought that property and built, uh, rental houses on it, rental apartments on it, and it had one of those, um, oh, what'd we call it? We built them when we were afraid the Russians were going to-

MD: Oh, a bomb shelter?

WM: Bomb shelter! And so we took our children over there and said, "People were so frightened, and this is what they put here." There are some along this street I happen to know about too, but you could hardly knock on the door and say we want to see it, so we showed it to, uh, the kids, that our country was so frightened.

[01:35:39:00]

[00:35:31]

MD: And that was at KFQD's old studios?

WM: Mmhmm.

MD: Yeah.

WM: Oh yes. Uh, when we would go downtown, and every New Year's Day we went downtown because friends of ours had a New Year's Party, it looked like a fairy town, going down. It was cold, and the smoke was going up, and it looked like a little fairy town. And now of course we have the Minnesota Bypass.

MD: Um, now in addition to the library, um, are there any architectural things you've seen happen that seem very striking to you?

WM: Oh, well I spent a great portion of my life, when I wasn't at the library, at the museum. And so the museum has had several expansions that I've lived through.

MD: Right. What do you think of the new one? Of the current add-on?

WM: Its, um, not what I expected, but it works well. In fact, we were down there, uh, this week at a farewell powwow for the director- were you there? It was so funny! He had Plains Indians in magnificent costumes doing dances out on the lawn. It was very different. But, uh, it works well, it has room for wonderful exhibits. Have you seen the planes- there's one on airplanes down there now?

MD: yes. The exhibit that-s- they have that Stearman biplane-

WM: Yeah.

MD: I remember that from the Aviation Heritage Museum. Um, and, uh, you- you were mentioning Alex Combs' house as being a place you went to after the earthquake- did you know him very well?

WM: Quite well.

MD: The artist.

WM: Mmhmm.

MD: Uh, how did you meet him?

WM: Through the big social activity for young married people who didn't have very much money. There was this wonderful thing called Foreign Films. And it was a foreign film society started by Nellie and George Moore. And they showed foreign films once a month in the old Sydney Lawrence Auditorium. We'd hire a babysitter- this was a big night out. And we'd go the Foreign Films, and then we would go off to the Hofbrau, remember the old Hofbrau downtown?

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MD: Sure, on 4th Avenue.

WM: Yes, and we'd discuss the films. And so that's how we met them. And we became very close friends. And, um, we wanted to get away from the Inlet, in the- we had sense enough to do that. And Muriel and Lex were more than hospitable. Muriel served French toast the day after the earthquake- earthquake on a two-burner camp stove to twenty-one people. That was her highest moment. She prided herself on being a hostess, I said, "You were never better than then."

MD: And did you know other artists?

WM: Ah, Kimura, and-

MD: Which Kimura? (laughs)

WM: Yeah, right.

MD: William?

WM: Yes. He was a good friend of the Combs'. And that's how we met, uh, um, Pat and Aaron Wolf. Pat Wolf was the Director of the museum for a long, long time. And we knew other artists too, uh, and of course we had a very modest budget in those days. And we had a small Combs oil which my son told me he'd always admired, and out of the generosity of my heart and because I needed space, I gave it to him for Christmas last year! (laughs) So now I've figured out, give what I have, then I have room for more. It took me all these years to figure that out.

MD: And, um, the Machetanz, as you said.

WM: Actually, I met them a few times because they were close friends with Muktuk.

MD: Um.

WM: Yes, and they were nice people.

MD: Um, how did, how did- was, was Fred- he sort of developed a, a quiver in his later years.

WM: Yes, yes. I don't know, uh, what happened in the later years. After they were socially active, I don't know what happened to them, really.

[01:40:11:00]
[00:40:04]

MD: The, um, were you familiar with Bob Atwood as well as Evangeline?

WM: Oh, yes. I thought he was a wonderful human being.

MD: The, um, the publisher of the Anchorage Times, what was he like? I mean, besides a wonderful human being- what made him wonderful to you?

WM: He was warm, caring, and very intelligent. And he worked hard for what he believed in. And he managed to stay married to Evangeline all those years, and she was a very directive person. And he smiled through it all.

MD: He always was smiling.

WM: He was a- he always smiled.

MD: The, um, the people who were here when you got here- did you have any idea that the city would grow into what it's become at that time? When did you begin to realize that we weren't going to stay a small town?

WM: When the first oil people came- the field people came. And they- the people who went out to look for the oil. And they were used to fine homes. And the biggest

homes around were in Turnagain. So we met some of those people. That's when we knew that this was going to change. And then when they found the oil down in the, uh, Kenai, definitely things were changing, and then, uh, we built the pipeline down there, and then of course in '68 we knew we were gonna go really big. Yup. We knew we were in a boomtown. And that had some advantages- all the Projects 80, for sure. Its a much better place to live now.

MD: Were there any, uh, growing pains that you encountered while the boom was on?

WM: Not personally. I sort of lived here n my own little corner of "quaint Turnagain". The, uh, it put a real burden on our schools. And we kept up. Uh, I'm dismayed by what's happened to our schools now. Its, um, what, 96 different languages are spoken in our schools? Who could keep up? But we have a long way to go with our schools.

MD: Um, do you have any feelings about what's needed to improve the school system? Some people say more money, some people say its a change in attitude and direction.

[01:42:41:00]

[00:42:34]

WM: Well, I think that, uh, the dedication of teachers has changed.

MD: Hmm.

WM: And the, uh, the attitude that we- society must solve all problems. I don't think that we thought that in the 50s and 60s. But somehow or other we seem to feel that if you have a problem the government will fix it for you. Or at least try to. And I'm not sure I believe that. And we do our best but sometimes we really mess up. But the schools face problems that we certainly didn't face when I taught school. Just- our grandsons and granddaughter, we got three grandsons and one granddaughter, they went to West High, and it was the most- they were a minority in their own neighborhood. We have- this is a very cosmopolitan city! And I don't think we understand- with being cosmopolitan comes all kinds of problems. And the schools have not been able to cope with all those problems. That's what I'm talking about. And yet, West High has the most Merit Scholars.

MD: Yeah.

WM: Its amazing!

MD: I think it set a record for the number- percentage of merit scholars in '68, '69- I just remember seeing that in a newspaper or something. (laughs)

WM: Well and it has now something called IBF, International Baccalaureate, and so, uh, before that we had Advanced Placement. When we went to school we didn't have any of these things. You either took College Prep, Business, or General. Well now we have all kinds of things. But, uh, the- not everybody fits into the slots. That's the problem. And we need to revamp some of that. Our daughter is quite dedicated to helping West High even though we don't have any kids in school over there. She feels very strongly about that.

MD: A lot of us old West graduates do. (laughs) Sentiment. Um, and along those lines, are there any corners of the town, either buildings or places that had a sentimental attachment for you? I suppose besides the library.

WM: Yes. The Westward. Now known as the Hilton.

MD: Mmhmm.

WM: It was, uh, the only place in town, and it did survive the, uh, earthquake, although there was quite a differential in the floor for a while. Uh, I always feel sentimental going down there and, "What have they wrought here?" (laughs) So to speak. And the other place I'm quite sentimental about, although it came later, is Wally Hickel's Captain Cook.

[01:45:59:00]
[00:45:52]

MD: Mmhmm.

WM: I admired that man so much. He did it. With- this town was devastated, and he just went right ahead. He had faith, and he did it. One of the biggest parties I ever attended- the most joyful party I have ever attended, was when he opened that Captain Cook. We were all just so happy. The town was still, y'know, trying to recover. He did it.

MD: Yeah. Um, and what was he like, to speak with.

WM: Wally?

MD: Yeah.

WM: He was never in doubt about anything. He was very forceful.

MD: Right. The, um, the Westward- do you recall going there when they still had an elevator operator? At the Westward hotel?

WM: Well, I went there in '52. I had my hair cut by the Westward barber. My hair was short like it is again after all these years. Um, for people who are in the interim

years here, the, um, the Westward bar was a fascinating place for me. I came from Indiana. They had overstuffed furniture in it. So it was like walking into somebody's big living room or a lounge. It was, uh- and, uh, when you went to pay for your drink you got change in silver dollars. Which was very awkward for an old lady, carrying all this stuff around. But, yes.

MD: Um, um, where would you go for, like, having your hair done or, uh, good fashions?

WM: Oh. Um, it's where the Artique is now, it'll come to me. They had the better fashions than the town I came from in Indiana. We- which we thought we were pretty up to date. Uh, no, she had no designer clothes there.

MD: Hmm.

WM: Yes.

MD: And was there-

WM: There were other good stores- women- women were very well dressed in this town.

[01:48:29:00]
[00:48:22]

MD: And, uh, and how did the men dress?

WM: Well, that's another story. (laughs) Not as well as the women! And when I first came the, the, Alaskan tuxedo was very prominent. They, they actually thought they were dressed up wearing it. Y'know what I mean.

MD: The engineer jacket?

WM: Yeah. Eisenhower jacket I call it. Yes, yes. But they could get dressed up in formal clothes too. Mmhmm.

MD: What was the occasion that would get a man to put on a tie?

WM: A dinner party. A real, old-fashioned dinner party. And of course, um, funerals, receptions. And I have no idea what happens to men up here, but they just get this idea that they don't have to dress up. And they have to be convinced of that by right thinking women.

MD: (laughs) Yeah. Um, transportation- was it difficult driving around in the town, um, back in the '50s and '60s when the snow would hit, or?

WM: Well, we had something called chains. And I was trying to explain them to my grandson. He said, "What is a chain?" And I said, "Well, you do know what chains are", and he said, "Yes." I said, "Well, you sort of threaded them together and put them on the tires, and that's what you had to do to go up to Arctic Valley, if you wanted to go skiing, or if you wanted to go out and visit your friends who were homesteading someplace. Yeah. I didn't drive out in the hither and yon. I drove around town. And we lived where the ballpark is now, so we had our own little lane that we had to maintain. So it was- that part was an interesting challenge. I can remember having, uh, a committee meeting of women who were getting ready to honor the, um, governors- yes. Egan was entertaining the governors. And it was going to be held at the Elk's. See, we didn't have all these facilities then. And so, Marilyn North, Marilyn Wilkins, she was another artist, she came in, and her car had gotten stuck, and she walked into my house and she had mud up to her knees. And I said, "You can't come in here like that, I'm going to get a bucket of water and throw it on you!" (laughs) Which I did. We had fun. We had lots of fun.

MD: Was, was she the wife of the-

WM: Doctor Wilkins. Who chose most of the music that was heard in this town. Yes.

[01:51:12:00]

[00:51:06]

MD: Right. Yeah, with the Concert Association.

WM: Yes.

MD: Um, I'm trying to think of other interesting people you've- you've probably met an awful lot of them. Who are- we've talked about movers and shakers and politicians, but where there oh, common blokes, or? Well, our friends originally were schoolteachers, and then when I became active in the League of Women Voters, they were the people who formed our group of people. For example. Molly and Charlie Trick. Paul and Betty Cruise. That's how I met the Crittendens. The Blairs. The people who, uh, Saul Faulkner. (?) Barry White. Jack and Martha Roderick. These are the people who we associated with. And we were all involved in world affairs. The big deal was the World Affairs Council Ball. That's when the men got dressed properly.

MD: And, um, Arliss Sturgulewski said she was also involved with the League of Women Voters.

WM: Yes she was. And the interesting thing, after the earthquake she and her husband built their house in College Village. Of course we were not planning on building anything, but we did. So we were building our house and they were building their house same time. We go out to see- they were ahead of us. Well, we

wanted an old-fashioned house, so all the millwork had to come from Outside. So we had to special order everything.

MD: Yeah. Um, was there a lot of things that had to be ordered from Outside in those days?

WM: Well, all the woodwork. The windows. Most of the things here. But then, we knew what we wanted, we were pretty specific about it. And the difference is- 'cause she told me she had to go home and hire somebody to put on her storm windows, and I said, "Why do you have storm windows? You could have gotten Andersen windows, Thermopane". She said, "Don't ask, that has been a sore subject in my life ever since 1964". (laughs) Ah, well. So it goes.

MD: Right.

WM: Arliss is a wonderful person.

MD: Um, what about food? Has the, I mean, the type of food that we get up here, has that changed since the '50s.

[01:53:48:00]

[00:53:42]

WM: Definitely. Um. We have a much better variety. Um. Larry Carr and, um, Mr. Gottstein. The Carr's was a wonderful, wonderful grocery store. It beat most ones Outside for a while. I don't think its doing as well now that its been sold to Safeway. My daughter and my husband tell me its not- I haven't been in a grocery store here since 2002. I have bum legs, that's why I'm in this chair.

MD: Right.

WM: So I don't do shopping anymore. But they had things from all over. Now, you paid for them. But why not? But they were here. And we used to have- we didn't eat this, but I know that we used to have a store that featured Native foods. I think it was out in Eastchester. Uh, and you could- if you were Native you could get special Native foods there.

MD: Um, such as walrus, and?

WM: Muktuk.

MD: Muktuk, yeah. The, uh, have you traveled much?

WM: Well, that's a comparative word. We think we have. We've done most of the Northern hemisphere. And we've done, uh, Australia and, uh, New Zealand. We've been to China. We've been to Russia eight times. We've done all of Europe.

MD: We're you able to get to Russia before the Iron Curtain came down?

WM: We went to Russia the first time in 1972. And, uh, then we went on the Trans-Siberian in '87, and after, uh, things got better we've been on the Volga River three times, we've been to the far east two or three times here. I also collect Russian books, which are in another part of the house. I had bored housewife syndrome or whatever so I went out to AMU and took the History of, uh, Russia. So I became interested.

MD: And, uh, how- how has Russia changed since '72?

WM: Well, it was- it was in the process of, uh, losing communism the last time we were there. In fact, we were in Russia, remember, with Yeltsin and the White House-

MD: (inaudible)

WM: We were there then. And, uh, now I'm not sure I want to go to Russia. I still read from time to time, and its, um, still in transit, I would say, from whatever it was to whatever its going to be. It was pretty pathetic country.

[01:56:49:00]

[00:56:43]

MD: Um, have things improved though?

WM: I think so, for some people.

MD: For tourists?

WM: I don't know, I haven't been there since the mafias taking over or whatever. But, uh, we enjoyed it. My husband and I read a lot and we think its, uh, was the major political example of people under Communism. And they give it a try for seventy-five years and it didn't work.

MD: Um, is there in your estimate any, uh, leftover connection between Alaska and Russia? The former Russia America and the, what was once the mother country here?

WM: Uh-

MD: We talk about it from time to time, but- talk it up-

WM: Yeah, the Church, the, uh, Orthodox Church, if- you would be better served asking some of those people whether there is a connection. The, uh, let's see. The first time we went to the Russian Far East we went with a charter on, um- and there were business people, there were cultural people. And then there was Brooke and

Wilda, I guess. And, and the rotary people had collected a whole bunch of English books. And so I was appointed- once I was on the airplane, I had no knowledge of this beforehand- to present these books to the librarian in Khabarovsk. So y'know, I pulled myself together and did that. Well it turns out to be a young man, very young to have such a prestigious job, and the library was in an old merchant trader's house at #1 Karl Marx Avenue. (laughs) It was very impressive. And he and I became friends. And we visited twice, and I think he visited us twice, and we became friends.

MD: Um, what, what would you like to see happen? Do you think that we need to do anything with our libraries, literacy, in Anchorage or in Alaska as a whole?

WM: Yes. Um, our library now needs to be refurbished. And it has space where we used to, um, rent out videos up there on the 4th floor. Well know I think that could be used for computer labs, which seem to be necessary. Um, I am told we need more community meeting rooms. We have one in the basement. I'm not entirely sure why that's the responsibility of the library, but there might be room for that. Um, I read national library things from time to time; I'm still interested in libraries. Uh, and they are all struggling, they're not quite sure what their function is now that people go to Kindles or whatever the name is. So they're searching for a way. Seems to me, in a community where we have ninety-six different languages in a school, that we could have tutors over there. After all, when we had immigrants in the United States coming in through Ellis Island and all, the libraries and the Y's had classes for English, isn't that correct? That's my memory of it anyway.

[02:00:43:00]

[01:00:37]

MD: Yeah.

WM: From reading. So yes, I can see that the libraries could do that.

MD: The, um, if you were to project into the future how Anchorage may change, what would you see?

WM: I think more people staying- I think it's a more stable place now and I think it will become even more stable. There are people who love this place. I'm one of them. It, um, has all the things that you could want. It has beauty. I mean, I would live here for no other reason for beauty. And the, uh it has opportunity if you're an outdoors person you can do whatever you want to do. I love the mountains. I, um, if you're an outdoor person or have a job that involves outdoors you'll love this place. It used to be- I don't hear this anymore but I don't get out much anymore- but men would love it and women would say, "I want to go home, I want to go home, I want out of here!" I don't hear that anymore. There are people who have come, they have made nice homes, because for a long time they lived in these little houses and they didn't have help, and it was not a pleasant place for them to be. Now it is. More and more people live in more and more better housing. So I think that's one reason more

and more people will stay. And, uh, as the world turns, uh, and we develop more resources, I think Anchorage will continue to grow. Be the headquarters, as it is for the oil companies and the Native, uh, corporations.

MD: Um, anything else to add that I'm neglecting? Or overlooking, or?

WM: Yes. I would like to go on record saying how full my life has been. In that- because I was a volunteer, uh, in the library and the museum, and I was involved on the advisory council at the university, I have been able to meet interesting people from all over the world, and entertain some of them. And I think that the rewards for helping build a community go on and on forever.

MD: These interesting people you've met- not necessarily from Alaska but-

WM: Daniel Boorstin, head of the Library of Congress. Billings, Billington, he's now the Librarian of Congress.

[02:03:44:00]

[01:03:38]

WM: They come up here and, uh, find you? Or you find them?

WM: Well. Do you remember Ted Stevens?

MD: Yes. (laughs)

WM: He was a great library person. And we named- I called him and asked him first, of course- but we named the reading room the Ann Stevens reading room. Well, that captured his interest in the library. So he invited the librarians of congress up, I had a reception for, uh, Daniel Boorstin. The next time he came, I had a dinner party and invited authors that I knew, like Jack Roderick, he'd just finished Crude Dreams. And, y'know, things like that. And, um, in my ordinary life I would not meet people like that. And I thoroughly enjoyed it. And especially I suppose with the library, but also with the museum, I have met, uh, interesting people, ah, some from Russia- and they were thrilled no end that you had been there, because they didn't expect that Americans would travel as much as we had, let's put it that way. Uh, also we met interesting people from all parts of the world through the, uh, World Affairs Council.

MD: Ambassadors and so forth?

WM: Yes. And, um, in fact, my husband was president when we still lived in the log house, and a Russian came, and he was to speak out at AMU, and he invited him for dinner. Brooke picked him up from the airport and brought him back through the woods to that house, and I don't know wha- he was frightened. He was a frightened man. And I had, y'know, a very nice dinner, and then we went out to AMU. And it was one of our most embarrassing times, because the AMU students were not polite

to this Russian at all. They were not sophisticated enough to be polite, and that- we were embarrassed about that. But anyway, we've had all kinds of interesting experiences. Which I'm not sure if I'd stayed in Fort Wayne Indiana I would have had.

MD: Very good.

WM: Mmhmm.

MD: Well, I don't believe I have any further questions.

WM: Well, I think your project is worthwhile. I hope I've helped.

MD: Thank you very much.

WM: Mmhmm.

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