

H74-04

Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes

Sam O. White w/unidentified interviewer, December 2, 1961

SIDE 1

Sam White is interviewed by an unidentified male(?) on December 2, 1961. This tape was originally part of the Sandy Jensen Collection. It was accessioned by Oral History as part of the Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes.

The first few noises are indistinguishable. Sam says he came in the summer. He became a guide when he was a little older, and started guiding and working in lumber camps in the winter. Finally he got to be a scaler.

He worked for the International Boundary Survey when that came through, then went back to guiding. He worked for the Survey until 1917, then he went into the Army for WWI. In 1919 he worked another summer for the Survey, then transferred over to the Coastal Geodetic Survey.

In 1922 he came to Alaska as a recall man for the Coastal Geodetic and was here 4 years. They left in 1941. He worked in Minnesota and New Orleans for them. He didn't like that country so he came back to Alaska and went to work for Fish and Wildlife. There was a terrific transportation problem here that cost them a lot of money. Dog team was the first transport the world ever devised, he says. So Sam got interested in airplanes. He had seen them and been shot at by them in WWI.

Noel Wien had started flying in 1924. Sam bought an airplane in 1929 while he was stationed in Fairbanks, and Noel Wien taught him to fly it. It was a Leblond powered Golden Eagle, and very unsuited to this country, he found. He sold it for \$500 (it'd cost him \$3,500) and bought a smaller one. That got him out into the country. He got the airplane patrol started and carried on for 5 or 6 years. He did some unheard of work. People who lived in the woods, unethically using game, couldn't defend against an airplane. He also dug out illegal aliens. For some reason though, he didn't go over so well with the Game Commission. So he got discouraged and decided to lay off flying for a while.

There was the sealing of beaver: Fur buyers used planes and were angry when they went to buy furs but they couldn't buy them until they were sealed. So then the Game Commission got interested again. Sam was hired to fly out and do the work a few times. The Commission bought their own plane, and then he was really able to get around, quickly and unannounced, and that kept game violations down.

Fur was one of the life bloods of the country at that time. The Commission got a couple more pilots and another plane. They didn't have much money for flying, however, and jealousies cropped up over the airplanes. Sam got discouraged, so he decided to quit. He went to work for Noel Wien. He got a much better pilot's salary than a small government salary.

About that time, WWII started, and the Coastal Geodetic Survey came back to Alaska. For the first time, they wanted to try using airplanes, float planes. They wanted Sam to fly for them since he'd worked for them before. Since he was working for Wien, they got the flying contract. The work was even more effective for the Survey than they thought it would be.

About 1941, the Army Air Corps came to Alaska and discovered there were hardly any maps of the state, and that pilots here were trained to fly without the aid of radios. They put on a program of using stars to make maps, which could only be done in the fall and winter. They got Sam's name from the Coastal Geodetic Survey, and since he was still working for Wien, Wien got that contract, too.

They had pictures taken by plane from 20,000 feet. They were numbered and corresponded to a map key (top secret). They thought a lot of places and sites and cabins were towns with hotels. Sam had to disillusion all of them, and they had to take tents. There was a soldier, officer, and enlisted man in each party, usually. They would use a _____ with a pool of mercury. They had to have a clear night of stars, and warmer than -70 temperatures. Of course they found that mercury froze at -35. Sam convinced them they could live comfortably with a Yukon stove in a tent. They would go out for 3 or 4 weeks at a time, with no radio—that was forbidden. Sam trained them to pitch the tent but never could teach them to set up the stove properly.

They had to stay until they could see the stars, and figure their position on the map(?). In Bettles, they were going to Chandler Lake. They made up a star list. Sam told them how far away the lake was, but their star list was no good. They had a 9-day blizzard; good thing they had plenty of stove oil.

They went all over the place, to the Kuskokwim, Yukon, Koyukuk, Chandalar, and Arctic Slope, putting in those star points so men in the Air force could navigate. They got caught east of Arctic Village one time in -60 weather. They couldn't work. An officer from Texas really wanted to get out of there. So when it got up to about -50, they got out of there. He went back to Texas.

They wanted to make a point where Old Crow crosses the border. They were trying to find a monument. They didn't believe Sam could find the monument, but he knew where it was, and showed them from the plane. He then landed a few hundred yards away, and they went over and checked the numbers.

They worked their way west, landing every 25-40 miles to do the next star chart. Then they got to Arctic Village and it got so cold. The inside of the tent frosted up, except right over the stove. They came up determined to work a certain area, which was their mistake. They should've worked in a warmer area at that time. Sam had to take off when they had the best light.

In 1944 Sam went out on his own. [Indiscernible speaking.] He had Coastal, Air force, and Geological Survey contracts. He was in the mapping business. 1955 was his last summer on it.

CAB badgered the life out of independent bush pilots. They had to get lawyers, and accountants to do their books. CAB demanded reports. People from the Outside started bidding on contracts and some bid really cheap. Some that got hired and came up went broke because they bid so low, and didn't know what they were getting into.

Then Sam got disgusted and quit that, but wound up working 2 years under private contract anyhow. One of his best summers, Bob McGraw sent him up to the Arctic Coast. They just had a verbal agreement, and stood by it. Nowadays verbal agreements aren't so good. He flew 8 or 9 hours a day when the weather was good. The Arctic Coast is a miserable coast for weather. After this Sam came home and "sat down." He was 55, and thought he'd take a rest.

In 1952 the Geological Survey was finally going to the Kobuk. They finally had money to charter a plane for the whole summer. There were two botanists, a man and wife; and two young male geologists. The Kobuk valley is one of the most beautiful valleys in Alaska, says Sam. They didn't know all that could be done with the airplane. Sam made suggestions for how to drop off and pick up both teams all day.

They were ill equipped, and hadn't known what to buy. They were using two burners. Sam suggested a Yukon stove. They didn't have the money. Sam had them stored in caches all over the place, and thought he'd go pick one up. On his next 100 hours trip in, he took back two Yukon stoves, one for his tent and one for the other, with an oven. The woman did all the cooking and was making pies, roasts, and cakes in that oven.

One day they had to go up on the Maniluk. They took the stoves with them, but there was no wood up there. Sam and one of the geologists went down in the plane and chopped up wood. Sam hauled a load up every time he went back and forth in the airplane. The botanists were Mr. and Mrs. Robert Sigafos. The geologists were Art Furland and Don Nichols. It was one of the most congenial parties Sam ever took out.

[Here the words of interviewer are indistinguishable.]

They had been in Alaska one season before. But they just had an airplane drop them off at a lake and come back to that lake to pick them up. Sometimes the plane would be 3 days or a week late. They got much less ground covered this way. With Sam they got the whole Kobuk valley done in one summer, including Walker Lake and Selby Lake. He'd take the geologists up near to the headwaters of tributaries with their boats, and they'd come down to the river, maybe in a week. Sam would pick them up at the Kobuk and bring them to camp. He'd also fly up and check on them, and drop fresh supplies to them. Sometimes they lived on C-rations, so they appreciated fresh food.

Sam had dropped eggs and frozen meat to other camps before. He once dropped a front quarter of beef onto a drafting tent. They said they lost about \$1200 worth of instruments. Sam says it was their own fault though; they pitched camp between the lake and the river, and didn't mark out a place for him to drop. He had to drop between the lake and river, of course. It was raining and the ceiling was low. George Dawson was the one who shoved it out the door on Sam's command. The rope around it caught on the door handle of the Stinson. The plane started keeling sideways. Sam flew back around to the camp and overcompensated a bit when they cut the rope, and the meat landed on the tent.

Another camp was Tok, and the camp was solid timber. They were supposed to make a cut where he could drop but they didn't. When they went to drop meat in the willows, they saw a man's face looking up from every willow bush. They held the meat until men got out of the way. They dropped about 10 pieces of meat, and Sam doesn't know how they ever found it all. But they did; they had 35 men to look for it, and 2 dogs.

A different time he dropped meat to a camp, and they got all the pieces but one. They said he'd dropped it in the river. Sam said he hadn't. A week later they found it in the moss.

Sam spent 2 years on the Peninsula. Brown bears are not as vicious and unpredictable as grizzlies, he says. All he had was a .22 rifle. He used to go by a camp at a lake. It was bad weather so the men were sleeping. Sam came to bring them something and saw a big brown bear smelling around the tent. He shoed the bear off. A few days later the men said they didn't even know he'd been there, or the bear, either.

Two other guys were on a lake. They went up a mountain and had a light up there. A bear came over the mountain, and walked right up to them. They started running, were wearing rubber boots and coats...the bear was chasing them. Halfway down the mountain one guy peetered out. He sat down and took off his boots and sweaters...the bear sat down too. As soon as he was done he started off running again and the bear with him. As soon as they got to their camp, they ran out into the lake instead of the tent. The bear sat on the shore. They were up to their waists in the water for a long time. Finally a plane came along and chased the bear away.

Sam's been forced down by weather at times. At Dillingham they had a mud bar right behind the docks. At low tide they'd land on the mud, right up to the beach, on floats. If it's slippery mud it's alright. If it has sand on it, you'll wind up on your back.

He wound up in the blueberry bushes one time. He couldn't take off from this lake unless he had a good wind. He was on the lake, trying to take off. It was evening and the light was poor. He couldn't gauge the distance of the grass at all. He thought he'd just gotten one float out of the water, when he landed in the bushes.

SIDE 2

It took 2 or 3 hours to turn the plane around and get it back toward the lake. They were pooped. Other fellows were out looking for them. They didn't see them in the bushes, and went back. A couple hours later they came again and saw them this time. They landed and then of course they were stuck, too. They all spent the night there and drank tea and told stories. The next morning the wind came up and they got out of there and went back to camp.

Once on the Coastal Geodetic Survey, between Platinum and Hagemeister Island...he was on the Togiak and the weather suddenly got bad. He had to stay overnight. He took off the next day, hopping from lake to lake. It took all day to go 80 miles, as the weather favored. He put some men out on Hagemeister Island. The waves were too big to pick them up, so he dropped them some food for a couple of days.

Flying now is not at all like it was in those days. Sam says no one is flying to lakes and rivers now; they go from airport to airport. (There are more airports now.) Everything is more or less per season, on the hour. Now there are not so many people out in the woods, like trappers and prospectors, who needed to travel in summer and winter.

Sam and the interviewer talk about a landing field that has been smoothed out, and someone who crashed there and got cut up. "No matter which way you landed you wound up going downhill," was the way that field used to be, says Sam.

When Harold Gillam first started going to Barrow, he brought three polar bears back to Fairbanks, and some buffalo for them to eat while they adjusted. He built a pen outside his hangar with a trough and a pool of water. The bears got big. One was mean and foxy. If someone got close to the fence he'd act like he didn't even see them and then scare them half to death. Every so often they'd get loose, and wander off back of town. That made everyone pretty nervous. Harold would give them sleeping pills in a piece of blubber, they'd go to sleep, and he'd take them back to the pen in a truck. He had them for 2 or 3 years. They must have cost him a lot of money, Sam observes.

Sam had a polar bear cub in his back yard once, too. Archie Ferguson pushed him on him. He said the papers were all made out for the cub to go to the Baltimore Zoo. Sam threw steak out into the yard for him. He was as big as a sled dog. Sam found out there was no paperwork done with the zoo, so he had to keep him for 2 weeks.

Some guy had sled dogs and one got loose. He spotted the bear and the bear rose up on his back legs. He hit the dog, who landed in the street. The dog got up and ran in a circle—in every direction, before finally taking off and never coming back. The bear was pretty mean. Sam would feed him eggs and hamburger. He'd bite Sam before he could even give him the food. He tore up a lot of his clothes.

Sam figured somebody was going to get hurt. So Ted Swanson, who had a shop with a wire fence around it, turned the bear loose in the shop. The bear took to sleeping in a box of cylinders on a shelf on the wall instead of on the airplane cushions that were lying

around. Finally he busted a hole in the wall(?). In another 2 weeks he was sent to the Baltimore Zoo.

When old pilots get together they have a lot of good stories.

Gillam was one of the best tough weather pilots Sam's ever seen. He said he could hear the echo of the motor coming off the hills. He knew where all the hills were, so he didn't have to see them. This was how he found the runway.

Temperature changes: Sam was flying at Umiat in 90 degree weather. Thirty minutes later, it was 30 degrees. On an overcast winter day sometimes the sky looks just like the ground. Whiteout conditions are strictly for instruments. One time a guy took a picture up and a picture down from the airplane. The only way they could tell the down picture was because he got the ski in.

Sam was supposed to be gone once for 4 or 5 days. He was gone 2 weeks. [Can't hear what he saying very well.] It was around Barrow. He had to land many times because of fog, and was running low on gas. This was around April 9th, 1943. The temperature went down to -55 that night. They got the plane turned around. When they were almost out of gas, Sam saw a black object sticking out of the snow. He thought it was an iglu, so they landed right there. Sam checked the gas and there was less than a quart left. They were about 35 miles from Barrow.

The boy(s?) he was traveling with looked in the iglu and reported, "It's horrible; it stinks; it's messy and dirty." Sam said it was a palace. There was seal oil and blubber stored in chambers along the passageway. The tunnel was about 30 feet long, then they got into the iglu, which had grass on the floor. They set up the oil stove. There were a few gallons of oil left, which they burned 1 hour in the morning and 1 hour in the evening, for cooking and keeping the iglu warm. A blizzard came that night. They brought the battery in and got it hot, then rushed it to the airplane and used the radio to make a call. Stanley Morgan told them where they were. Sig came out to them in 3 days, after the blizzard.

[The interviewer says he'll turn the tape over now.]

[Ron Inouye has added here: This was a December 2, 1961 interview of Sam White by Sandy Jensen. The second side referred to is not existent on this cassette, and was never found.]

[End of recording.]