

Call number: 74-10

Edby Davis talks to the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society

October 24th, 1970 at Pioneer Museum, Fairbanks, Alaska

Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen

Date of summary's creation: 11/19/13

Series: Tanana-Yukon Historical Society

Notes: Original on 7-inch tape, master copy on CD

The tape is introduced as a meeting of Tanana-Yukon Historical Society at Pioneer Museum at Alaskaland [Later known as Pioneer Park] on October 24th, 1970. Edby Davis is their guest and he'll speak about the town of Chena. Edby starts by thanking the president for asking him to speak. He says Edby and Frank Young were school mates in Dawson and Fairbanks. Boyd and Stella Hering were school mates of his brother and he knows Mrs. Clara Rust as Mrs. Hickman.

In 1894 there was a panic in USA and in 1896 Carmack discovered gold in Klondike. 100,000 people came into the area by the way of Skagway, Wrangell, Edmonton Trail, Dyea and Cordova. Best [traveling] was when they got on the boat that went to Nome or St. Michael and up the river to Dawson and Whitehorse.

Edby was born in Seattle in 1894 and last Sunday he turned 76 years old. His father came to Dawson in the spring of 1899. Edby and his mother followed that fall. Edby says he was invited to talk about Chena, but he could talk about Fox, Little Eldorado and Chatanika, which are all ghost towns now. It's hard to realize in 1906 what roads there were: it went from the railway that was built in 1905 up to a place that was called Golden. It was just about where the Pedro Monument is now. Then the road took an 80-degree turn and it went to Chatanika in 1907. The stretch was called Climbing the Mountain. The number 1 locomotive "here" had just enough power to haul a line of freight cars and it was used from Fairbanks to Chena and out to Golden.

3:46 In 1901 Captain Barnette left St. Michaels with the steamer Lavelle Young. They went to Tanana where he got an Indian guide to help them. Then he got up to where Fairbanks is or rather where there is a sandbar, right opposite the St. Joseph's Hospital. Captain Barnette established his trading post just about where the Nevada Bar is now. In 1901 Felix Pedro left the Circle City with 5 or 6 other people. They prospected around and found ground at Cleary, which wasn't good, but Pedro struck it rich where the monument is now. After striking it, they walked up to where the Cleary Summit is and saw smoke. They went down to look and found Captain Barnette. Now it was 1902. Captain Barnette had come up with Steamer Isabel with the intention of taking the freight he had left there and to go up to Tanacross where they had a road going from Eagle to Valdez. When Felix Pedro told them about the gold, Barnette changed his mind and decided to stay right there. The news of the gold strike spread like wildfire.

At 6:24 at 1903 Edby tells how Judge Wickersham, who held a court at Eagle, was given orders to establish a court house in the Tanana Valley or Tanacross or somewhere in the vicinity. He came up the river and he stopped at Chena and wanted to change that name to Fairbanks. [Charles Warren] Fairbanks was Teddy Roosevelt's vice president and Wickersham's friend. The settlers there objected to it and when Wickersham moved up the river to Barnette's trading post, Barnette agreed to the name. At one time, Chena had 2,000 people, three saloons, a dance hall, a school, a telegraph station, [7:43] a round house, a Chena Sawmill and [unclear, weaves? Probably wharves or wharfs] where they pulled up 3 boats. They've seen 6 boats being pulled up from water below the present Municipal Power plant in Fairbanks.

They left Fairbanks on a boat that was similar to Mississippi-style. At Tanana they transferred to a boat similar to the steamer Tanana. Above the Chena, they transferred into a steamer Koyukuk that was still a smaller boat and then on the other end all the freight was loaded into barges at St. Michaels and pushed up by Mississippi –style boats. The boats went as far as Tanana where a lighter draft boats would take the barges separately and push them up the Tanana River. At times, they'd have to make them lighter on account of having low water in fall. Then at Chena there were times when they couldn't get up to Fairbanks with an empty boat so they carried all the freight up on the Tanana Valley Railway.

9:55 Edby says it hasn't been published before, but Judge Wickersham wanted the name of Chena changed to Fairbank,s but it didn't so he came "up here." It's not in print, but Edby heard it around 1908 or so.

In 1917, there was a big boom at Nenana and lots of places at Chena were torn down and moved there. Edby wishes that Monty Hanson would be in his place [speaking instead of him] because he's the brother of Arnold and Tommy Townsend who lived there in 2 years in 1907 to 1909. Edby remembers that they had a school there with 16 [students?]. There was a Catholic Church and another church. Then in 1939 Reverend Armstead and some 6 others went there. They left their cars at the Chena Pumping Station and walked to one church there. They got hymn books out of the boxes and there was no roof in the church and they sang hymns there. When they were done singing, there was hardly a dry eye in the crowd [Unclear what this story is about. Possibly a visit to the old Chena town site?].

In 1939, Johnson and Hall who were loggers went to where the International Airport Way is now and cut off [trees?]. They went to the main town of Chena and up that Chena Bluff Hill. They built that. They went onto Pearl Creek where they logged a million feet of lumber that was sold to Independent Mill. First time Edby and his wife went "there" was in 1937. They saw the steamer Reliance and Minneapolis there, but the steamers were of no use because the roads had been built and aviation had begun. Also, the Tanana Valley Railway was "a rolling stock" of the White Pass [& Yukon Railroad Company]. Railroad depots at Chena, Fairbanks, Golden, Little Eldorado and Chatanika were the entire same blueprint as the ones in White Pass. Also 4 of the employees of the White Pass came "here." One of them, Robert Taylor, was the first worshipful master of a Tanana Lodge Masons in 1907.

Edby tells that the first automobile went to Chena around 1943. They had an electric light plant in conjunction with the saw-mill but it only ran during the night-time. People didn't have toasters or

electric refrigerators at the time so they didn't run the power plant during the daytime. That was owned and operated by Martin Harris [Harris?] who owned the saw-mill and was a Democrat. In 1913 he instigated a stamp mill and if one goes to the boat Discovery, one can see the three big, concrete piers. One was for the steam engine and at Stamp Mill, there were 5 to a block and they had 10 stamps. It ran, but the first runoff they had, they had trouble and first man was thrown to jail because he gave a police a black eye. The idea was to ship all the ore from Cleary and so on to the Stamp Mill, but it didn't pan out that way. Martin Harris ran as a delegate against James Wickersham and was defeated. Then he went to Valdez and McCarthy and married Mrs. Keenan who was a former school teacher. He was a commissioner there and when he died, Mrs. Harris took over.

17:02 Edby thinks that Wickersham made a mistake by insisting that Fairbanks should be where it is. They could have had Fairbanks at Chena so they wouldn't have had to lighten the boats for freight and they wouldn't have to use the railway for freight. Of course, there were no automobiles or highways, but wagon roads that all led towards the railway. Everybody burned wood, even the locomotives. Guggenheims and other big engineers decided that they need fuel for a central power plant, but that didn't materialize until 1922 when the railway came through Fairbanks and opened up the mines in Healy. Davises [?] have been down there. Once Edby was down there and saw a pump that had steam on one end and water on the other. That was used at the round house. Edby took it to make [unclear] and down at the Alaskaland at the mining layout.

There was Mr. McDormit [McDermitt, McDermott?], a chief of Police. He worked there for salary. They couldn't pay him and he worked as a policeman for nothing. He came to Fairbanks and was a chief of police, or rather the only police, when President Harding came to Fairbanks. In 1930, Edby was talking to him and he told that there were 3 people living in Chena that time. In 1937, Edby's wife and Edby left their car to the Chena Pumping Station and walked down there with a lunch to look around the old things. It was wonderful.

20:26 Edby is not bragging, but in 1947 he found the heirs of Chena Bluffs [unclear, owners of Chena Bluffs property]. Through lots of correspondence, he bought the 289 acres for \$150 dollars. 3 years ago Edby and his wife closed a deal for \$58,000 dollars. Log cabin that Mr. Sigsby (sp?) had has been replaced by a home that Everrett Hep built. Fairbanks has changed. [Discussing briefly how long Edby has already talked.]

The NC [Northern Commercial Company] had a store there and the Alaska Railroad tore up the rails around 1922. It connected up at the Government Farm and when they tore up the rails, the NC Company closed their store there. At one time there were 3 rails out of Fairbanks to Happy because there was a narrow gauge [railroad] to Chena and Chatanika. Then the standard gauge went to Nenana. They tore up the 3rd rail around 1938. Looking north from Tolovana Road one can see trestles and other items of the Old Tanana Valley Railway.

[Unclear question.] Edby says it's on road going to Livengood. One can see the bridgework, or could when Edby was there the last time. [Unclear talking about the railway remains.] Someone asks where

the remains of the stamp mill are and Edby tells that one can take a boat from Mr. Binkley and he'll point it out. It's about ½ up the hill. 5 stamps that were taken to a mine where Mr. Pilgrim was the manager and according to Edby's knowledge the other 5 are still lying on the ground.

Edby tells that the only quartz [mining] that materialized in Fairbanks is the Rogan Hill [sp? Rogan Hill? Regan Hill?] mine that afterwards turned Gustafson mine. [Unclear talking about the stamps.] Edby doesn't know where they are. One can go to Cleary or wherever there was a stamp mill and see they scattered because they all were a failure and now the (should be name of the mine) is a failure.

Edby tells again about Wickersham wanting the city named after Fairbanks and again talks about the advantages of the location of Chena. "But we all make mistakes."

At 26:40 a lady's voice asks about farms in the area. Edby tells that there was some, but most of the farms were at Farmer's Loop Road. [Unclear talking about farmers.] Bulk of the farming was at Farmer's Loop Road where the farmers could cut wood and sell it and farm in summer. They raised hay for horse feed and hauled wood in winter. It went fine until they tried to turn that oat hay into gasoline tractors. Then they had trouble. [Unclear talking about somebody who had a great garden with raspberries.] Edby says they had lots of excursions there when the governor or some celebrity would visit Fairbanks. They'd go down to greet them. They didn't have enough coaches, but they put in seats in flat cars.

In wintertime when they opened up the stamp mill, they didn't use flat cars for the men who stood up in the box cars while the regular coaches were for the ladies. [Unclear question about Lavelle Young.] Edby says it was owned by Charlie Adams "when it came up here" and afterwards it was bought by the NC-Company or rather the Northern Navigation Company. Then around 1912 they took it to St. Michaels and to Kuskokwim and its bones are still somewhere along there.

31:22 Edby says there are 3 people buried in Chena: Gus Conrad, Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Brooks. One time Edby tried to find them, but he couldn't. A forest fire had gone through and those days they used wooden grave markers. [Unclear questions and talking.] Edby talks about the steamer Atana (possibly Ahtena?), which was a private boat owned by Captain Langley. It was on the Yukon around 1912 when business got slack and Langley went to Kuskokwim River. The NC had a boat called the Elta which they took from to the Kuskokwim and to the Yukon. It was of a lighter draft. Edby has made a list of 100 boats on the Yukon and Tributaries and knows a man whose list was 300 boats. There was a Willie Chisam (possibly Chishum?), a great freighter, who had the biggest freighting boat around the world. It was used until around 1910.

It's hard to realize that there was a roadhouse every 15-20 miles from Valdez to Fairbanks to Nome. In summertime they would cut wood and sell it to the steam boats. Then they'd shoot moose and cook that for the passengers. [Unclear talking.] Edby says there's corrugated iron building where once was a slough. It was called the Moose John Slough. It had a good body of water which is all filled out now, but they'd all turn around there. There was one boat that went to Dead Man's Slough to turn around. That was the steamer Apower [sp?]. [Unclear talking.]

36:13 There was a fish camp run by “Fisherman Mike” as they called him. As far as the wages on the boat, a deck hand got \$75 dollars a month and if one stayed through the season, the company would pay one ticket to Seattle and back if one wanted to continue to work. The captain of the boat got \$2,500, the Pilot and the Chief Engineer got \$2,000 and the second engineer got \$1,500 and so on. That was in the early days. [Unclear talking.]

When the men were drafted into the army in 1918, they took the steamer Jacobs to Chena. There was the first draft and the second draft. They had high water and took the boys from Fairbanks.

They had three stages in water. There was the steamer Julia B that was Mississippi-style [I suspect that Mississippi-style means paddlewheeler or sternwheeler] boat with 3 barges. They waited for high water and came “all the way up here” with three barges. They made 3 trips a year. Julia B. was of Dawson. Then there was Seattle no. 3, Schwatka, and one with no name on it. A lady tells that [unclear], the big boat, only came to Fairbanks when they had such a high water in 1909. When the chunks of ice [unclear]. They didn’t make money in Alaska but had to take it down to some river Outside where it made money for the owners “back here.”

39:47 a man’s voice asks if they had a bakery at Chena. He says there was. Edby says that Shawn N. Sterling was there and Mr. Tonsas [sp?] was the head warehouse man. In 1909 they came to Fairbanks and had a store at the corner of 1st and Lacey [Street] where the laundry is now. The man asks if there were churches in Chena and Edby tells that there was a Catholic Church and a Protestant Church. They also had a social hall, 2 saloons, and a newspaper. The man asks if the [newspaper?] building was located right to the east of the News-Miner and says that the 2-story log building was moved from the Chena town site. Edby says no and tells that there was one [church?] in the corner of Illinois and Pennsylvania Avenues that was moved from Chena, but it burned down. They had a school in Chena but Edby doesn’t remember any of the names of the teachers. He wishes that Monty was present because he could talk more. [A woman’s voice says something unclear.]

Edby’s father was on the school board. They had a school at Garden Island, which was financed by the territory. They [the Territory officers?] told them to build the school house and they’d supply books and teachers. Fairbanksans could select the teacher, but the teacher had to be compliant with the Bureau of Education standards. In Fairbanks Creek and Chatanika, they had a building that was 1/3 of the size of the Pioneer Museum [unknown dimensions]. The school teacher lived there. They needed to have 9 pupils or more to get a teacher and the teacher’s salary was \$175 dollars a month. They also got \$35/month for janitorial work. The school was in such a location that nobody else would want the job as a janitor. Lucille Lavery taught in Wiseman for one year.

43:47 A man asks if there was a commissioner or a U.S. Marshal and Edby says there was a commissioner and wherever there was one, there was also a Marshal and a jail. One time they had 2,000 population.

[An unclear question about points.] Edby tells that the telegraph line was installed before wireless was and it started in Valdez and came down to Fort Gibbon, then to St. Michaels and Nome. The government insisted that wherever they had a post, they had to have a telegram line. It could also be used by private

individuals. It came around 1905 and it was run by the Signal Corps. [Unclear question.] Edby says something about 1912 and that he knows when they built the wireless station in Fairbanks which is the big, high tower. They had a similar one in Circle City, too. The telegram line went from Tanacross to Eagle and then into Dawson. The newspapers would get a sheet of paper that was all abbreviated. Now they get the news more "from the horse's mouth." A woman's voice says that the newspaper was printed at the [unclear] by the speaker's father. Edby says that that was afterwards and the person he speaks about is George Bellows. That was before the time of which the lady speaks. [Unclear talking.]

47:05 W.F. [William Fentress] Thompson [also known as "Wrong Font" Thompson. That's a printer's joke] had the Chena Miner as they called it. He jumped into the transportation companies so hard that they bought out the Fairbanks News in order to shut him up. He came "up here" and called it the News-Miner. [Unclear talking.] Edby wants to talk about how Fairbanks was started and that if Wickersham had decided to stay on Chena, things would have been different. [Unclear talking.]

At 49:09 someone asks what happened to the Saw Mill. Edby says that there was one [saw mill?] started near the steam boat slough. It was run by Harry Marsh and somebody else. It's a left hand saw mill. There was lots and lots of lumber at Salcha Slough and before he started, Mr. Noyes had a mill there for a couple of years. Edby worked for both of those mills in 1917, but the one that Marsh started didn't have a big enough of a boiler.

A lady wants to know about Chena Mill. Edby says that that saw mill was the Chena Lumber Company's Light and Power, owned by Martin Harris. He was a good man even though he was born and raised in Russia. The lady continues by asking if he ran the saw mill or if he worked there. Edby says he didn't hear the name. The lady explains that the person came from Kodiak where he had a saw mill and he also had a saw mill in Seward. She wants to know if he ran the one up here. Edby says he never heard the name and says that he may have been. [Unclear talking.] Lady says his name was Hodges to which Edby says he doesn't know him. Edby says that it was the Independent Mill more than likely. He continues that on 5th and Cushman they had a bridge there over a slough. There was a track for horses and two on the sides for people to walk on. There was a slough there that is all covered up. There also used to be a slough in Graehl where Fairbanks Purlings [sp? Not sure what this is referring to, Fairbanks Curling Club perhaps?] is now but it's all covered up too. There were also good size sloughs in the front of [unclear] café and at further on there was a railroad bridge.

[Unclear question.] Where the Chena Stamp Mill was there was there was a whole lot of [unclear] in front but now it's all washed away. The channel changes all the time. [Talking about some pictures.] Where the railway was on 1st Avenue is just about washed away. In 1937 one could see the [unclear].

[End of the recording.]