

**Call number: 74-11**

**Sam Gamblin interviewed by Magdalene Cassidy**

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**Series: Tanana-Yukon Historical Society tapes**

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

William Cashen introduces the recording from a regular meeting of Tanana-Yukon Historical Society: They have an interview with a prominent Alaskan and Mrs. Magdalene Cassidy will conduct the interview.

Margaret introduces Sam Gamblin and tells that Sam has visited her home although he doesn't remember it. Then she asks where Sam was born. Sam says he's an ex-Canadian from [Unclear] Canada. He was born in 1895. His father's name was George W. and his mother's name was Hannah. They had 12 children, which, as Margaret interjects, was about the average those days. Sam tells that he went to school in New Brunswick which is 15 miles from St. John. He went to school until he was 15. [Unclear talking.] Sam left home on Easter Sunday in 1910 and went to New Hampshire where he stayed for three months after which he continued west to Idaho. In Idaho, he worked on a "Magic Dam" which was a big irrigation dam. There he worked for three months. Then he became machine [unclear, machinist? Machine operator?] in railway shops and over a year later he became an overhead crane man. They lifted the big locomotives up and put wheels underneath them. Later he belonged to the machine shoppers. They all went on a strike and closed the arm down [It's not entirely clear what Sam is talking about].

Sam worked around and later he became a carpenter's apprentice. He joined a union as an apprentice in May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1913 and "I've drove nails off and on ever since." He couldn't get rich so he decided to tackle something else. He went to

Anaconda, Montana, but [unclear] concentration was too high for his wife [?] and so Sam went down to Utah and worked in Salt Lake [City] for three months. WW I was on and their foreman was a German who didn't think much of Sam because he was a Canadian. The feeling was mutual.

4:55 There was an old guard there and a [unclear]. If it ever broke down they'd call boys from the town. Sam got into a habit of going to Salt Lake and staying with his brother-in-law. He was in one time when "it" broke down and they needed all the carpenters they could get. Sam wasn't available then [due to being in Salt Lake City?] so the old man [unclear]. When Sam went back, he had to have a discussion about his availability to work. He didn't go to work. Next, "they" were building something and Sam got a job as a carpenter with an hour less a day and with a \$1 more of pay in money. Sam went to tell the news to the old man and [unclear] and he resigned.

After they finished the steel mill, Sam went to work for the Utah Copper and helped to build Utah Copper link concentrator [?] and the leaching plant. There were 700 carpenters and they didn't know if anyone could go high [do above ground work].

6:59 The carpenters came to ask who could go high. There was a little Englishman there who had been in the union when Sam was an apprentice and together they did the high work, 108 feet in the air. The Englishman worked inside and Sam outside. They had a thing of scaffold outside and Sam worked there. Once one of their helpers picked up a sheet of [unclear] and the wind started blowing. It blew him right off the building. Sam told the helper to let go of the sheet which he did. The sheet landed somewhere half a mile away.

Sam was looking up one night after they quit working and saw one of his steel workers cut a pole line rope on his [unclear]. [It made the harness unsafe?] Sam told about it to the superintendent and when they went to see it they noticed that he had cut right through in the middle of the pole line, 300-feet of rope. Company Police paid him a visit.

9:13 Sam tells that he moved to Seattle where he worked around town for a several years. Then Seattle got over-built and Sam moved over to Carnation Company for three years after they had bought out the company that Sam was working for. He couldn't get rich on a milk truck, but he did 11 years of house to house delivery. When he left Seattle, he had the biggest retail route in Seattle. He was making 330 stops in 8 hours. "It was more or less of a dog truck."

When Sam decided to go north and go prospecting, he was as hard as nails. He could run 2 or 3 miles [unclear]. He came to Cordova and [unclear] with Harold Gillam to Chitna and he came out the highway just at Chistochina. While he was there, he met a man who claimed to be a prospector with a very rich creek. The prospector wanted Sam to come up [to his claims] and Sam didn't know anything better than just to join in. He bought grub. One of the road commission cooks came with them and three other guys. It was in 1933 when he came to Alaska.

They went over to Mount Sanford, which is across from Chistochina, with a 6-dog team. They traveled for 5 days until they came to the creek. The prospector Sam had met in Seattle was quite a talker, but not much of a worker. When they got to the camp site, he got lame. They were camping a mile and a half up the timber line. Sam snowshoed there to get tent poles. When they got set up, Sam opened the end of the cook tent and joined it with another tent.

The first night Sam went to find some game for them to eat. He had never seen a caribou, but saw a bunch of horns on the sky line. Sam thought that it couldn't be anything else, but caribou so he hid and waited. When they came all around him, he had his 30-30 Savage and when the caribou were all around him, he noticed that his rifle was empty [of bullets]. He was slightly disappointed. Another herd was coming by the next night and this time Sam got his share.

13:40 The dog musher was also the cook. He harnessed the dogs up and went where Sam was. When the dogs got there, they were all crazy about caribou. They got pretty close and the dogs ran away, sled bouncing on niggerheads [grass tussocks]. The musher went to Sam and the dogs came, too, so they loaded the sled and took the caribou to the camp.

The next day they started sinking a hole on the creek and the guy who had got lame was too sick to work. He said he'd be the cook and Sam became the guy who did the digging. They worked like that for two or three days and the other three boys went up the creek for a ¼ mile. The creek was rich and the nuggets were as big as walnuts.

Then Old Barney asked for pliers and said he had a tooth ache. One fellow had small open-jaw pliers. Sam had heard a story about scaring a guy so that the tooth would stop aching and thought that he'd try it. He said to Barney that the pliers were their best pliers they could find and that he would do the best he can. Then he asked Barney to lie down, explaining that he wanted to be able to hold Barney in place while he pulls out the tooth. Barney was pinned to the ground and all of a sudden Barney felt a lot better [?].

At 16:47 Sam says that he went down 19 feet and there was no color. He didn't know anything about panning so the cripple did the panning.

Sam was in the bottom of the hole and started working on the other one. It had 12-foot of wet, fine, sand and Sam wonders how it didn't cave in. He refused to go down there after a while. They put in another hole where the hole should be shallower, about ½ mile away. They had big rocks there and had to pull them out with a rope. The cripple was the panner and "them rocks take chips off of a pick." The panner was panning and dumping the cleanup in a sack. Once he left gold in the gold pan and when Sam looked at it he saw rust [it was iron instead of gold?]. They held a meeting and voted to quit digging. Then they came out and that was Sam's first experience as a prospector.

19:05 They came down to Chistochina, across the river at Copper. It was just before break-up. Sam says he could run the dogs and run on snow shoes. When they got across the river, one of the Indians came with a shovel and sounded the ice. It didn't sound good to them and there was [unclear] upstream and downstream. Sam couldn't swim worth a dime. They went to the woods and cut poles that were 20 foot long. They tied the poles to the sled and then the dog owner crossed first with his team. Then he sent the dogs back to get the rest of

them, one at a time. The poles stayed on the sled in case the ice would break, so the dogs could pull them up. They got [safely] back to camp.

They were down to one load of grub and they had 2 loads up at the hunting cabin that was there so they could get meat for the mine in the fall. One of them could talk Indian and he invited the Indians to come eat with them which they did.

A fellow at Chistochina was from Norway and thought there was big money to be made running a fish wheel. They could fish for dog feed, smoke them, fry them and so on. Sam's group decided to go to Chisana which was an old camp at the time. There was one creek that might hold some money too. Sam got busy on the truck and worked for about 2 months hauling food for the roadhouse. At the same time he was hauling food [?] for different prospectors along the highway. Altogether they had 2 tons [of food?].

They were going to Chisana, but the trail was closed and [unclear] had ore trucks on the road. The only way they were going up was if they were empty [?] and they gave Sam's group a ride. The road went only to Caribou Creek so then they bought "the best part of a dog team." They needed more dogs.

Sam was in Valdez where there was a dog who stayed at the Cliff Mine. The people wouldn't let the dog stay in town because he barked so much and the guy wanted to give the dog away. Sam only had to pay for the hauler and the chain. He was a big, black, and smart husky and Sam decided to take the dog. Sam was going over the Valdez Summit alone. When they closed the trail, Chitna Cache Store had around 50 or 60 tons [of food] in Valdez and they had to get it over before the trail closed for 6 months.

Sam had the dog chained on the [unclear] of the cab. When there was the 12-mile Hill, he had about 3 tons on his truck, which was quite a load. He was in low gear a long while and every once in a while he looked at the dog [who was running besides him?]. He had to drive for a long while to find a place that was smooth enough to stop in.

Then he got out but couldn't make friends with the dog so he shot it and took the body in a snow bank on the side of the road.

24:35 Sam drove up the road for about ¼ a mile, following the summit. Carl Lavelle [sp? LaVelle? Lavellee?], who used to own the Black Rapids [Roadhouse], had dual-wheel tires and Sam had singles and since the ground froze hard at night, Sam slipped into the ditch. He couldn't get out so he decided to sleep there a night. He curled up on the seat and was woken up by ptarmigans. It was a bright, clear day and ptarmigans were flying all around him. He got out of the car and the ground was still frosty so he put chains on his truck and put the load back on. He started thinking about skinning the dog that he had shot and making a dog hide parka. The dog was a half wolf and that's why he went crazy.

He stopped at the first Road Commission camp and, of course, he knew all the cooks on the road. He got fed and told that he was stuck on the road. The dog had bit Sam 14 times when he was trying to make friends with it. He knew that Epsom salt was the best thing he could put in the wounds. After the Road Commission Camp, he continued down the highway.

At 27:02 Sam continues: Prospector Fred Greece was at Ernestine. Sam stopped there because he had a ¼ beef for him. Sam didn't charge for it, but told the story about getting bit by the dog that was a part wolf. Fred told that when he was a kid he had been bitten by an otter and his mother had put onions on the wound. They didn't have fresh onions but decided that dried onions were just as good. They put on a dried onion poultice and Sam went on.

At Copper Center, Sam soaked his arm in Epsom salt water for an hour and a half. He took some salt with him and continued on to Gulkana where he soaked his hand again. While he was loading up his truck, he learned that the Indians had about 1.5 tons of Red Cross supplies in Valdez that they wanted somebody to haul up, but nobody would do it unless they would get paid. Sam told them he would do it. When Sam went to the Copper Center Indian Village, the Indians unloaded the supplies and Sam didn't want any pay and continued on with his trip. When he came back the next day, there was an Indian watching Sam on the road. The Indian Council had decided to have 1 or 2 Indians to ride with Sam while his hand was healing. The Indians would do loading and unloading and help Sam until his hand would get better. Sam had one man who helped him for a month and a half

and Sam paid his room and board. Ever since that time he has been in a good standing with Indians all over the territory.

They started up towards Nabesna to continue towards Chisana overland with a dog team. Sam's partner was with him. His name was Bill Falson. He died on the Canadian side. Before that, Sam was driving the roadhouse truck and taking the lady of the roadhouse to Valdez sometimes. They built two fish wheels near the mouth of the Chistochina River on the Copper River.

30:30 Sam wanted his partner to go with him. They had a long, narrow boat and Sam wanted to go back with a boat and [unclear] come after him. He wouldn't do that. Sam went and dragged the boat way up in the alders because in spring the currents can eat up the banks and Sam didn't want to take that chance. They were in Valdez for a week and came back. The road was washed out and they had to [unclear]. There was a slough that came from Chistochina and went into the Copper [River]. The water was only to Sam's ankles. When he got over there, it had rained almost all the time while Sam was gone and the water had started eating the bank where they had their camp. It was a couple of hundred feet inland and he had cut lots of trees down. They had "a ton and a half of bad timing". He spent 4 days up on the scaffold, waiting for the water to come down. "He learned his lesson."

They went on up as far as Cabin Creek [?], down at the end of the road. There was a shelter cabin that was built by the government. There was about 8 inches of snow and it turned out -50 below. "Well, that wasn't too bad." They sat in the cabin, which was built in a hurry and wasn't very good when it was very cold.

There used to be Lady Dragish [sp?] in Valdez who gave Sam lots of magazines. Sam sorted the magazines over and got 3 gunny sacks full. They were there at the Jack Lake Cabin and everything was frozen so even though Sam hated to do it he used them for [unclear] so that they could live in the cabin. The wind would flicker the candles and sometimes blew them out, but that couldn't be helped [Apparently they used the magazines for fuel in heating the poorly insulated cabin].

Meantime, Bill was on the dog team. Wind was blowing snow so it was like hail. One night Bill's lead dog scratched the door and Sam let him in [with Bill]. Bill was "blind as a bat" for two days, but the dog team ran him in. While Bill was getting better, Sam made a water carrying sled [?].

34:34 Sam got a letter from his son who said that everybody "down here" was out of work and Sam better get there and go to work. So he went down [to the Lower 48] with Tommy Hike [sp? possibly Tommy the Hike?] who just passed away last fall. He was an old-timer in the Copper River Valley. Sam didn't have much with him, but his snow shoes. [Unclear] Brown used to fly out of Cordova and Chitna with passengers, and knowing that the boat didn't always stop in Valdez, Sam wanted to get to Cordova. He helped to pack the baggage and got a ride for a price of his snow shoes. He sent a wire to get some money and so he got his ticket Outside. That was in 1934.

Sam came back the next spring. He went to Chisana, but [unclear] his rifle the fall before with a dog team. He only had a .22 pistol. In the spring, the bears were coming out, but Sam figured that he could rattle a tin can so they wouldn't bother him. There are lots of bears at the Notch Creek across the Chisana, but Sam didn't get bothered by them. His partner was camped up there. He had food down, but he had left.

Sam doesn't remember the name of the creek, but its lower end was worked a bit. And they worked the upper end [?]. They worked there for 3 weeks until Sam got into clay up on the flat, just above Bonanza. That was in Canyon Creek. He got down to real sticky clay. [Unclear talking.] They went to check up on the grub and they didn't have any. Sam wanted to know why and found out that he [Sam's partner] had been peddling food to the Indians all along the way and had arrived with only little bit. Sam thought it was a "time to split the banquet," which they did.

The fellow whom he was staying with owned a Chistochina Roadhouse. He was working a bench on a side of Bonanza Creek and he was cleaning up some bedrock. Sam helped him with the cleanup that was big. Sam had pans with an inch of gold, better than \$400 dollars. That was the first gold Sam panned.

38:58 Sam stayed there for a while with the roadhouse owner who was also working for Dean Patty up on the Woodchopper and Coal Creeks as a watchman. He told Sam about some hard rock [claim] and said there would be more [gold] than in a placer [mine]. Sam and him staked some hard rock and worked on it. General A.D. McRae from Canada [unclear] flew there and got interested in the property – he was a millionaire – so they worked there for almost 3 years. They found a bunch of veins, open cut and traced them. [Unclear] was a geologist who came to examine them. He found the claim good enough and wanted to put in a [stamp] mill.

Dean Patty was an operating engineer and said that they were too far from transportation, about 100 miles from Nabesna. The Road Commission had already put in a road with two bridges across the Nabesna River and from Chisana to Chisana Town. The deal went down and Sam came out from the creek to work in town, but he also prospected in Cordova and Prince William Sound. Each fall he put up grub and gasoline for about 2-months trip to go around looking at old prospects that were all over. There was a river down at Naked Island route. Mrs. Clark had 6 children and a blue fox farm. There were several blue fox farms around. Everybody who could would give her deer, goats or something so that their family would have meat. Sam did the same.

41:43 At one trip they went down to Montague [Island] where there were deer in the fall. When they left Cordova there was a young baker for the FE-Company who had come to Cordova a month early and didn't know what to do. He didn't drink and wanted to go deer hunting with Sam's group. Sam said there was room in the boat for the three of them. The boy volunteered to cook and said he could bake. He couldn't get a rifle, but borrowed a Ross [Mk. III] rifle that is the ex-Canadian army rifle. They had 3 shells and the boy said he'd get more if he could. [Unclear] is a little harbor inside Montague. He was the first one on the shore. [Unclear talking.] They got a deer, but when they were rolling up their sleeves the deer ran away [?]. [Laughter.]

44:01 They didn't get deer so the captain said to Sam that Tom, the widow's oldest son who was 16 years old and whom they had taken along, could shoot

with captain's .22 Special gun. Sam agreed to take Tom with him and explained him their plan to drive deer towards their camp. They did that, but they saw a hollow tree in which they suspected a bear might live. They followed the trail right beside that tree and noticed "a pile of fresh dirt" but didn't think anything of it. Sam ran into a big hole that was a bear den. Sam shot the bear right behind the ear but the bear ran after him a little bit before it collapsed. Sam didn't want to take chances so him and Tom stood back to back and waited for a while to see if the bear moves but it didn't. They saw that the bear was dead but when Tom moved its head it breathed again giving Sam a scare. They took some bear meat with them as well as the hide.

Back at the camp, nobody had deer. The half-breed Indians who were pretty smart asked what they were going to do. Sam said they were going to eat it, but the Indians said they couldn't. Sam cooked the meat and Tom ate it. Sam had sprinkled cinnamon on the stove to change the taste. Tom complained that the bear tasted fishy. Sam tasted it and it was fishy. Later they got some deer.

50:31 Sam says he returned to Cordova and started working. A cannery bought a marine boiler over at Katalla, on Bane River [sp?]. They sent a tug boat and a scow after it. Sam wasn't doing anything at the time so he went along as a deck hand. The captain drank all night and the next day was the big salmon [unclear, possibly a cannery fish trap], about 60-70 foot long. The captain went to sleep and the cook had to navigate. They got over to Bering River and there was a big cannery that was not in use anymore so they got the big marine boiler loaded to the scow and were about head back the next day.

Sam wanted to go to the beach and find a bear because black bear would be good to eat. The captain said he'd go with Sam, but Sam didn't want him to come so he said the Captain didn't have a rifle. He said he had a shotgun and could hardly stand up, but Sam took him with. They went to a skunk cabbage patch and there was one black bear. Sam got as close as he thought he could and shot the bear. The bear only got wounded and it ran into the brushes, going up the mountain side. Sam trailed the bear while Captain stayed back. Sam got up there and just as Sam was giving up, he saw the bear again, shot, and then he saw a little cub. He

wouldn't have shot had he seen that. The cub was crying like a baby so Sam shot it, too, in order to prevent it from calling in more bears. He skinned the bears and brought them to the ship.

They started back to Cordova and to Copper River when the tail line broke. The scow with the boiler was bashing around in 8-10 foot high waves so their deckhand dove in [?] and got the scow connected back to the ship.

54:43 That fall Puget Sound Target and Barge had a tugboat that they had been towing around at Prince William Sound. They had done some work at Breakwater [?]. They got in a storm and got blown to the shore at [Unclear, possibly Kayak Island although Kayak Island is not flat at all], which is about 60 miles below Cordova. The island was practically flat and there were such strong waves that the shore was flooded. There was a man there by the name of Cap Lagaffa [sp?]. He salvaged [the boat?] Polar Bear and had it in Cordova. He was a diver and salvaged the tugboat [unclear]. Sam went along as a deck hand.

It was a small boat this time. When they got down there, they found the boat with water all around it because it was high tide. On low tide, she was sitting on a sand bank for about ½ a mile inland. On high tide, she might float enough so they could pull her out. They tried it, but there must have been something underneath. Sam built a coffer down the hatch. They found lots of canned goods from the cabin.

Captain went around with a diving suit and never got them some grub [from the boat]. They tied [a rope?] around the mast of the sunken tugboat and Captain would dive underneath on high tide, but never brought any grub up. Then a storm came up. They had sounded a passage to Katalla and took 50-gallon drums and cabled them to heavy weights along the channel so if they had to run for shelter they could make it.

The storm came and "boy, we headed for home." When they got over towards Katalla, they had to abandon the ship.

58:24 They stayed in Katalla for 2-3 days where they met two men who had a small boat with a cabin on it and about a 7-foot rowboat. The other man's name

was Fitz Gibbet [sp? possibly Fitzgibbons?]. They waited until “we” [the crew] were ready to cross and went with them. They started south with the two men following them, but the men’s engine broke down so the crew towed them. At the mouth of the Copper River, the wind blew them in a slough where it turned so cold that everything froze. There were ice cakes everywhere, but the crew stayed calm, slept well and worked on the boat, getting it ready to go. The next morning they could continue and the two men took off.

[End of the recording.]