

**Call number: 74-14**

**William Cashen addresses the Minnesota Historical Society regarding the history of Fairbanks**

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

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

The recording begins by a travel escort [Mr. Brown] introducing William Cashen, a math professor [at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks], a historian, and the president of the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society. [Sounds of cutlery clattering, like people are having dinner during the talk.] Cashen thanks Mr. Brown and addresses the members of the Minnesota Historical Society. He says he's been teaching 33 years and therefore little noise doesn't bother him and people can keep eating their dinners if they want.

Cashen greets the people in behalf of Tanana-Yukon Historical Society and apologizes for the weather. The weather was hot and forest fires were blazing during the summer so people were praying for cool weather and rain. Cashen jokingly apologizes that they overdid it.

He says he's going to talk about Fairbanks and tells that he was born and raised in Douglas, which is a little town across from Juneau. He moved to Fairbanks as a freshman student at the University in 1933 and feels like Fairbanks is his adopted home and considers himself an authority in history after his move to the area. Cashen is especially fascinated by early days and founding of Fairbanks.

He goes on telling that Fairbanks was founded as a result of a meeting of three individuals: a prospector Felix Pedro, a trader, E. T. Barnette, and a judge, James Wickersham. Cashen is sure people have heard of Wickersham already. He was one of those larger than life individuals. Fairbanks was founded in 1902.

4:45 Felix Pedro was from Italy and he was one of the hundreds of prospectors in the Interior. Gold had been already been discovered along the Yukon and in the beaches of Nome and many prospectors thought they'd better look somewhere in between. There were probably 100 or more professional prospectors going up and down the Yukon River and into the byways with their gold pans. Felix Pedro came over from Circle country and was prospecting "here" around 1901.

Barnette was a trader and one of those adventurous sorts. Ever since the purchase of Alaska, the traders would get together staples and supplies and go down rivers to trade with Natives for fur. Barnette had an idea to establish a trading post on the upper reaches of the Tanana River, at Tanana Crossing, which is in midways between Valdez and Eagle. That was on the trail to the Interior those days. In order to get there, Barnette had to travel up the Yukon and into the Tanana. He chartered the boat by the name of

Lavelle Young and its commander was Captain Adams. Adams was supposed to take him as far up the river as possible. Nobody had ever taken a boat that size that far up the Tanana.

When they reached the Bates Rapids, a few miles below Fairbanks, they couldn't get through. Captain Adams had heard that if he came up the Chena Slough, he could bypass the rapids and connect back with the Tanana later. He came up the Chena Slough, but when he was about a mile above the town, he couldn't go any further. Adams was going to unload the supplies and trade goods there and leave them with Barnette while he would go home. Barnette persuaded him to go down a little bit to an embankment and they unloaded the supplies where the NC-Company [Northern Commercial Company store] is now.

8:28 Cashen continues the story: Pedro saw the smoke from the vessel and started going towards it since he hated the thought of walking 140 miles to Circle to get supplies. But supplies were being loaded on the bank of Chena, so Pedro purchased some and continued prospecting. Barnette settled down for the winter after deciding that it would be the best to stay there and trade with the Indians that were around and continue his plan the next year. His wife and three partners went overland to Valdez in March, traveled to Seattle, and got new supplies that they shipped to the mouth of the Yukon where they built another boat called Isabel. They traveled towards Tanana Crossing, but by that time, Pedro had already found gold. This was in 22<sup>nd</sup> of July in 1902. Word spread like wildfire and the gold rush started. When Barnette came to load his supplies and continue on, most of the supplies were used up and so he decided to open his trading post there.

Wickersham was a judge who was assigned to be a judge in Eagle which was a port of entry from Canada. He had gone to Nome to settle disputes about mining claims and on the way to Nome one time, he ran into Barnette who told Wickersham about his plans about establishing a trading post. Wickersham said he hoped that if Barnette establishes the trading post, he'd name it after Charles Fairbanks who was a senator from Indiana, a friend of Wickersham's and a member of the Alaska-Yukon Boundary Commission.

Barnette decided to name the town after Fairbanks who later became a vice president.

11:33 Wickersham got a word from Washington that his court should be established in the center of action. When Wickersham got to the area, Chena City, which was 7-miles out of present Fairbanks, already had a telegram line and a better landing spot than Fairbanks did. It seemed logical to have his court there, but the people in Chena put in a high price on the property he wanted to buy for his court. Secondly, according to another story, the people of Chena were making rude remarks about the seamanship of one of the steamboats that got into trouble in front of the City. The captain of the ship decided he wouldn't stop there, unloaded half of his freight and continued on, getting the other half later.

Barnette offered Wickersham a free lot and he decided to establish his court in Fairbanks. Fairbanks was established as a center of all the mining activity.

13:32 Fairbanks boomed and several towns were built on the creeks: Fox, Chatanika, Cleary and several others. There was little railroad [unclear] built to supply the creeks. There must have been 20,000 or more people in the area during the height of the mining season around 1907. The better paying ground was mined out gradually and many people moved back to United States again and Fairbanks became a quiet little town with seasonal mining.

Transportation was always a big problem. In summertime, the rivers provided transportation down from Dawson or up to St. Michael and Nome area. During the 8 months of winter, Fairbanks was closed off except for the trail that extended all the way to Valdez and took 7 days to travel with a horse-drawn sled and wagons. It took 23 days for a man to walk the distance.

Fairbanks didn't completely decline, but settled to a 2,000 people town. The WW I was the first blow that took the young, healthy and ambitious young men from Fairbanks. They never came back. There were some hopeful signs too, such as the building of the Alaska Railroad, which took place from 1914 to 1923. This made communication and transportation easier. At the same time, Alaska Agricultural College [and the School of Mines, later University of Alaska Fairbanks] was started on the College Hill in 1922. 6 students registered on the first day and they had 6 faculty members to greet them. Now UAF is expecting an enrollment of 2,200 students.

16:23 Although pick-and-shovel mining methods were exhausted, Fairbanks still had gold in the ground. Fairbanks Exploration Company bought the ground and by the use of large dredges they were able to make a pay. For the next 20 years, the Fairbanks Exploration Company was the basis of the economy of the Interior. In the 1930s, the airplanes started flying and the Interior was just the kind of a country that airplanes were built for: vast distances and lack of surface transportation increased the appeal and pretty soon everything that could possibly be loaded up into the little airplanes was traveling by air. Communications were a little bit sad although they had a telegraph from since 1906 or 1907.

Fairbanks was a quiet little community when Cashen came in in 1933. They got a radio station in 1938. Belatedly, the U.S. Government recognized that the Interior of Alaska would be a good place for some defense in occasion of another war. The Air Corps put in a little test station known as Ladd Field that is now known as Fort Wainwright. With the advent of war in 1941, Alaska was really in the frontier. The Alaska Highway was pushed through in 1942 and 1943 to supply the military in Alaska who had come in only a couple of years ago.

One of the interesting things was that Alaska was the transfer point for all the material such as fighter planes and attack bombers that were going to Russia. They were flown in by American pilots and Russian pilots would take them to Galena and Nome and onto Siberia. Within a few days, they were fighting in the front. They had Russians all over the town. The Russians were a part of the transfer of so-called Lend-Lease materials. At the end of the war, the importance of Alaska for the defense structure had been realized. The bases, Ladd Field, Eielson Air Force Base and Fort Greely were made into permanent structures and the temporary buildings were replaced by permanent ones. That helped the economy and still does.

20:22 Gold mining never survived the war. The ground that was able to be worked was worked for a couple of years after the war, but with the price of gold being \$35 dollars, mining wasn't profitable. The defense structure helped with the economy as did the University that was growing. It was the second largest employer in the vicinity. Of course, tourism is an important part of the economy too.

During the 1950, those were the main economic things in addition to the DEW-Line [Distance Early Warning System] and the White Alice [telecommunication network] that were being constructed. Now Fairbanks is the jump-off point for Prudhoe Bay oil companies at the North Slope.

Members of the Tanana-Yukon Historical Society don't know what's on the horizon, but have a great faith in the future of the community. Cashen thanks the audience. [Unclear question] to which Cashen says it might have been in 1905 or 1906. [Unclear talking.]

The tour guide thanks Professor Cashen and says they wonder if UAF isn't making a mistake in having Cashen teach math instead of history of Alaska.

The tour guide continues that they came from Minnesota up to Alaska and says it's more or less of an Aboriginal country and thusly, they brought with them a weapon which they want to give it to Cashen. [The speaker is presenting something, audience laughs.] It's a tomahawk peace pipe that relates to the saying "let's bury a hatchet." Hudson's Bay Traders manufactured the items which cost them \$0.45 cents and they traded them to \$140 dollars' worth of furs. In their peace treaties, the white and the Indians would take the tomahawk and drive it into the ground, leaving only the peace pipe. They present Cashen the hatchet as thanks. Cashen thanks and says they will take a good care of it.

[Unclear talking.] Closing the event. [End of the recording.]