

ORAL HISTORY 75-05

Arthur Schaible

March 25, 1971

Fairbanks, Alaska

Series: Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes

Dr. Arthur Schaible said he hoped he had something to contribute. He was born a thousand miles north of Cape Town, South Africa in a little fishing village, Walvis Bay, Namibia. They were in a small enclave belonging to Great Britain. The surrounding territory belonged to Germany. They spoke English at home. His father was an American from Michigan. His mother was the daughter of an exploratory missionary. His maternal grandfather was the first white man in the Skeleton Coast area. This was a desert area of shipwrecks. Dr. Schaible grew up in an isolated area. They didn't have a school. He was sent to school in a German community. He didn't speak German. Soon after he started school the war broke out between Germany and England. His father sent a donkey cart to pick him up and take him back home.

At the age of fourteen in 1921 his family moved to Michigan. They went to Cape Town, South Africa and took a steamer to South Hampton and then to New York and Michigan. He attended school in Michigan. He attended college in Elmhurst, Illinois and then Northwestern Medical School in Chicago. He graduated in 1934 and then did a year internship at Charity Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana. He went into the Army and served in Walter Reed Hospital. He worked in the officer's ward which also had congressmen and others as patients. Robert Feckner was a patient. He was the head of the Civilian Conservation Corps and had just returned from Alaska. Mr. Feckner talked to him about Alaska and Fairbanks which had just had a bad flood. Dr. Schaible said he was on reserve status in the Army. He was a bachelor at the time. His pay wasn't very good. He talked to congressmen who had had junkets to Alaska. He was told to go down to a certain doctor who could put him in charge of a government hospital some place in Alaska. Dr. Schaible thought this sounded like a good idea. The doctor had a map of Alaska on his wall and said he could go to Pt. Barrow, Tanana and a few other choices. Dr. Schaible chose Tanana. There were a lot of delays and he finally arrived in Fairbanks. He spent two days in town. A Wien pilot flew him out to Tanana. It was in September of 1938. He was put in charge of a 30 bed hospital. He took care of the Natives. He covered the Lower Yukon area, Nulato, Ruby, Galena, the upper Yukon, and Ft. Yukon. He would visit all those areas and went as far as Eagle and over to Allakaket. He also covered the upper reaches of the Tanana. Patients were also brought into Tanana for treatment. There were about 15 employees when he first arrived including nurses and aides. He had an interest in surgery. When he was out in the field and he saw cases that needed surgery he would ask them to come into Tanana. There was a backlog in surgery cases from over the years. He did quite a bit of surgery. He didn't have any help. There were some procedures that he had to review. He used cadavers for practice surgery with the family's permission. The patients appreciated him. He had to be resourceful. They would have to improvise for some equipment. When he made field visits he would use the local school to see patients. He might do six tonsillectomies under local anesthesia. It was very different from

conventional surgical procedures. The anesthesia was either a local or spinal anesthesia. They used drop ether.

He traveled by airplane. He would travel by boats in the summer. In the winter he might use skis. He talked about getting second class mail by dog team. Ambrose Kazelnikoff would bring the mail every Saturday afternoon. Dr. Schaible said he would spend Saturday nights reading his magazines.

The hospital building in Tanana was part of the old Ft. Gibbon. The old hospital was replaced with a new building after he had been there about a year and a half. He supervised the construction of the new hospital and it was still there in 1971. Ft. Gibbon was abandoned in 1925 and had been in existence since the turn of the century. Tanana was thought at one time destined to be a larger community. They thought the terminus of the Alaska Railroad would be in Tanana instead of in Fairbanks. The Yukon was deeper and riverboat navigation would be more constant and steady than the Tanana. The sandbars in the Tanana were always shifting. He talked about riding on the Nenana steamboat on his rounds.

They did use dog teams for some travel. They mostly used the airplane for travel. The hospital had its own dog team. It wasn't very good. He entered the dog races and was always last. Dog teams were the mainstay for trappers. There were many more fish wheels on the river in the past because they had to keep the dogs supplied with fish.

Dr. Schaible brought the first automobile into Tanana. It was a yellow station wagon. Many people still tell him that was their first automobile ride in his car. He ordered a phonograph from the Sears Roebuck catalog and it was a big hit.

An unidentified person asked Dr. Schaible what his father did in Africa. Dr. Schaible said he was a missionary. He was born on November 15, 1906. Dr. Schaible said medicine was his original career choice. He was asked about traveling to Tetlin. Dr. Schaible said he still remembers the flight schedule into Tetlin. On June 10th Wien airline pilots would fly up to Tetlin and circle the village. They would land in a lake close to the village. He and his equipment would be hauled by truck from the lake back to the village. Dr. Schaible said the people in Tetlin were the least exposed to the ways of white people. Herman Kessler and John Hajdukovich had been to Tetlin. A public health nurse had also been into Tetlin. He said there was a high incidence of colloid goiter in Tetlin which he corrected with surgery. He was asked what year he came to Fairbanks. Dr. Schaible said he came to Fairbanks in 1941. He joined the Fairbanks Clinic at that time. He took Dr. Gillespie's place. When he came to Alaska his salary was four hundred dollars a month. He started at the clinic at five hundred dollars a month. Office calls were three dollars. Method of treatments have changed. Tuberculosis was quite a scourge. He did surgery for tuberculosis. They now use chemotherapy. The general health of the Natives has improved in that respect. He concentrated on general surgery. He talked about the formation of the Fairbanks Clinic. He became a partner in 1943. The clinic was located near the railroad area and then moved above the First National Bank. They later relocated to the old Legion Building. He was asked about serving on the Board of Regents at UAF. He said he served for eight years until 1970. He also served on the Board of Health and the Medical Board of Examiners. He was appointed by Gruening. Dr. Schaible said Dr. Wood, Bill Cashen and others made the university tick. Dr. Schaible also serves on a bank board. He talked about

Phil Johnson. He was asked about medical service in Fairbanks. Dr. Schaible said doctors had to be resourceful and do their best for the patient.

Dr. Cashen commented about improvements in travel. Dr. Schaible said it does help. Communications have improved and helped quite a bit.

Unidentified person asked about radio communication. Dr. Schaible said they did not have it in Tanana. He said some of the Natives were trained to be nurses and did quite well. He discussed performing stomach surgery. He was asked about his self-education when he was in Tanana and unable to consult with someone. Dr. Schaible said he said that is true in anything you want to do.

Unidentified person asked about his mother's family. Dr. Schaible said some of his mother's relatives are still in South Africa.

Dr. Schaible said he had living quarters at the hospital. The new hospital had living quarters, too.

Mrs. Schaible commented about a trip her husband took. Dr. Schaible talked about Bart LaRue who was a dentist in the Yukon country. He went into the villages and worked hard. He would drink after he was done with his work. Dr. Schaible took a trip from Eagle to Ft. Yukon on the Yukon steamer. He saw patients at Ft. Yukon. As he was leaving Bart LaRue stopped him and asked him to see some other people. Bart LaRue said he would take him in his own plane to Beaver where he would meet up with the boat. When he was finished he found Bart LaRue intoxicated but Bart still got into the plane and took off. He could smell the rum on Bart. Bart told Dr. Schaible to take over the control over the plane as they were flying. They landed safely at Beaver. He made it back to Tanana in time for a meeting.

Dr. Schaible talked about the mission at Tanana in response to a question from someone in the audience. When he was in Tanana the Natives still lived at the mission. They have since moved into town. Someone in the audience talked about Dorothy Pitka.