

1947

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Al Cosslett Interview in UAF Rasmuson Library Archives

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Tape H75-10, 1947

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UAF Rasmuson Library Archives

A + unidentified announcer: AC = Al T. Cosslett

A: 7:30 on a Wednesday evening is time for "Here's a Pioneer". It's a program brought to you every week at this time by the Pioneer Cab Company, operated by Joe Coble. The telephone number is East 10A.

This week we have with us in the studio a man who is on the verge of going outside, who has no particular interest in returning except for an occasional vacation. He certainly has spent a long time in the northland; his name is Mr. Al Cosslett. I believe Al is known to hundreds and hundreds of you. And Al, the first question that I would like to put to you is how old are you?

AC: I'm 76.

A: You're 76 year old member of the Pioneers of Alaska. What year did you come north?

AC: 1897.

A: What was your home state down south?

AC: I was born in Colorado, then I came from Wyoming to Alaska.

A: How old were you when you decided to come north?

AC: About 27, I believe.

A: Twenty-seven. You left Seattle, I presume, by boat?

AC: Yes, we left on the old Topeka.

A: And where did you settle when you came up here first?

AC: I settled, near, since the winter of '97 and spring of '98 in Skagway.

A: Did you know anyone up here before you came? Did you have any connections in Alaska?

AC: I had a brother in Skagway.

A: What sort of business did you engage in, in Skagway?

AC: I ran a restaurant there.

A: I imagine you were busy then supplying a lot of the miners and prospectors, people who were there to go on up over the pass.

AC: Oh yes.

A: How about the prices of meals in those days, how did they compare with what we have today?

AC: They're about 50 cents a meal there; a regular meal was about 50 cents.

A: Any specialty would be a little more.

AC: Something like a dollar.

A: Were the prices well received? Was fifty cents regarded as high?

AC: Well some of them thought it was pretty high.

A: How long did you stay in the restaurant business?

AC: Well, 'til long about spring, I don't just when we closed the restaurant; I sold out then, and I shipped in horses from Wyoming. Later on I sold the horses there, and later on I sent to Seattle and got some big teams, 5 big teams.

A: What did you intend to do with them up here?

AC: We were freighting there. And then I sold the teams, sold 3 teams and I kept 2 teams and came over the Dalton Trail to Five Finger Rapids.

A: Did you have any particular difficulties going over the Dalton Trail?

AC: None whatever.

A: How about down through Five Finger Rapids?

AC: Well, we didn't go through the rapids; we went over the trail, the Dalton Trail and we landed just below Five Finger Rapids. Then there was a sawmill there. One of our party was a sawyer, so we contracted to put in logs there and made \$10,000 in less than 2 months.

A: I bet you thought you were really in the land of big money. How come you didn't stay with that for a while?

AC: Yes. Of course there was a demand for lumber because they were shipping in cattle and beef down to Dawson, and as soon as they were supplied the demand for lumber was over.

A: Where did you go after you got out of the logging and sawmill business?

AC: We built a raft and went down, floated down the (...? Fork Selkirk) . While there, I bought everything from the partners, and I took over. Then we sold our lumber to the Canadian Government, they were building a post there — they had a post there — and then I bought a bunch of sheep. A fellow was short of money, and I bought 5 of his sheep. We loaded them on the steamer "Caro", we were out just a short time when we hit a sand bar, and we was on there for about 20 days. I killed the sheep, then sold them to the steamship company, and then took a scow and put my one horse that I had left. We floated into Dawson, got in there the 18<sup>th</sup> of October.

A: I see your outfit was pretty well trimmed down by the time you got to Dawson. What did you do around Dawson?

AC: I prospected during the winter on Bear Creek and didn't find anything, and then worked in the different places. I worked in the meat market there, and in the restaurants, then I ran a road house up on Bonanza Creek, and I sold it. One of the men I sold it to is here, that's Billy O'Leary.

After I sold, when the spring of the excitement of 1902 all over this strike in here, in the spring of 1903 I started in here with 2 horses.

A: Then Al, you were one of those who followed the word of the Jap Wada who came over to Dawson and said that a rich strike had been made in this area.

AC: Yes.

A: Well, Fairbanks in 1903, I believe that you are the earliest one to come to Fairbanks that I've ever talked to. I don't think I'm wrong about that. What was it like here?

AC: Well it was just a town of tents and stumps, and it was pretty hard to get along First Street there on account of stumps.

A: Stumps and maybe a lot of mud too.

AC: Yeah.

A: What do you suppose is the population?

AC: In winter is when I got here. At one time it was high, there was 10,000 people here, I should say, maybe more.

A: But in 1903, how many do you think there were?

AC: But in 1903 they were coming in all the time; it was pretty hard to judge what the population was. They were divided pretty well between the town of Chena and Fairbanks. Chena, at the mouth of the Chena River here, they were trying to get the town built there.

A: What was the terrain like here? I understand it was heavily wooded.

AC: Oh yes. I was on Cleary when the fire burned through there the first time, that was all heavy timber through there.

A: Now, where did you pick your camp?

AC: About, first camp about where the Nordale Hotel is.

A: That's unbelievable now, it's been a long time - 44 years.

What were some of the first buildings here in town?

AC: Captain Barnette had a building that was his trading post

A: That' the N.C. Company now.

AC: That's where the N.C. Company is now, that same building that N.C. is still using. Then there was - Petrie had the Pioneer which is the same building they had at that time. Then the Senate Saloon was running when we came here or shortly after I came. Herb Vessey was building around.

A: There was a sawmill here too wasn't there?

AC: That was, came in after. We passed that sawmill on the sail.

A: It was on the move then.

AC: It came up the Goodpaster, up the Forty Mile and down the Goodpaster. It was Carolyn Parker, Fred Parker's still here, Carolyn I believe has passed away. They were running, that was running, Pete Malone had his store right back in there somewhere.

A: Were there some industrious women in the community at that time?

AC: Yes, there was one that worked there for Carolyn Parker. Her husband, he was kind of a - he didn't very care much for work.

A: We better not mention his name.

AC: Oh no (laugh)

At any rate, she had made arrangements so that she was getting \$100 a month, and his board and her board and sleeping apartment. So one morning she said to him, "Jim", she said, "won't you get up and start a fire for me?" He said, "No, I won't. You suppose that 2 of us is gonna work here for \$100 a month?"

A: (Laughter) It just couldn't be a good deal.

I imagine there was no organized charity in those early days. How did you take care of ...

AC: When anyone was sick, we or someone started a petition. We went around and collected the money.

A: Can you give me an example?

AC: There was one little case on Ester, and I've often wondered if someone didn't say something about it before. There was a man who was killed in a drift [mine] over there, and so after his body was taken out of the mine, they looked through his effects to see where his folks lived. And looking through was a letter from his wife. In that letter was a little baby stocking, this little baby had been born since he left. As soon as they discovered that baby stocking - Mrs. Fred Parker was there - and she said "Give that stocking to me."

I asked what she was going to do with it. She said, "I'm going to fill it with gold." She took that baby stocking, and it was filled with gold, more than - they had to fill it stitch it together - and then there was a good many bills besides that. I don't know how much money they got out of that of baby stocking.

A: I guess that dates back to the beginning of the "golden heart" of Alaska, it should.

AC: Yes it is.

A: Now, I understand that there was a serious flu epidemic not as early as was mentioned so far, but...

AC: That ( ? happened) right before the first World War. It didn't strike Livengood. Right as soon as it struck Fairbanks and Nenana, but in Livengood the whole, everyone had the flu. They had no doctor there. I had organized a Chamber of Commerce of Livengood; they elected me president. After I could get away, everyone closed their stores, and after I could get away - my wife was very sick at that time - I went down to Bill Main's (?) Store and told him we would have to have a doctor here. Someone suggested one doctor, but I said, "No, we'll send for Doctor Sutherland. I know that he'll come." Dr. Sutherland, I considered one of the greatest men to ever live in Alaska.

A: I think there are hundreds and hundreds that agree with you on that.

AC: It made no difference why you called to him. He didn't ask "who" or "what" they were, whether they had any money or anything. He just left (?), and he left. They had to hire a dog team or a pack outfit, anyway that he could get there. And brought many in that he never got a dollar for. And so when I sent a wire - they had a wireless station there - I sent a wire to Dr. Sutherland, and I got a wire in less than an hour "On my way, meet me at the low dam (?) with a dog team".

I had a team, Jack Irwin's, took his team and went to meet him. He came there. He never stopped until he had treated every person in a cabin or anywhere but the sticks that he could find.

There was a lot of Indians over there, so they were down with the flu. When he took a fellow by the name of Frank Bowers, another wonderful fellow, and the went over there, and some of the Indians - the bucks were sitting around making the squaws

do the work - Frank Bowers took a club (?) to the bucks and made them get out and (?). So when the old doctor came back, he told me that, he said that "two people I don't believe I can save." He was right, they died with pneumonia and were buried in (Livengood?).

A: I can understand it; Dr. Sutherland would certainly deserve a lot of credit.

I just have a second to two here, I forgot to ask you one point about that charity business. Sometimes weren't there cases of misdirected charity?

AC: Yes, we had one fellow we took up \$1500 for.

A: What did he do with it?

AC: He went out and started a saloon.

A: Well, we'll have to make that the parting shot, Mr. Al Cosslett.

Friends, you've listened to an interview with Al Cosslett who first came to Alaska in 1897, and is now in a few days leaving for the outside.

"Here's a Pioneer" is brought to you each Wednesday evening at 7:30 by the Pioneer Cab Company located across from the Nordale Hotel. Their telephone number is East 10A. Be with us again next week, same time for another program of "Here's a Pioneer".