

Frank Jones

Interview by Neville Jacobs
Fairbanks Pioneer Home
June, 1971

Frank Jones came from Wyoming in 1911 when he went to work on the riverboats of Alaska.

He came to mine but when a riverboat job came along he hired on as a deckhand and worked up.

Riverboats came to Fairbanks until the Chena was closed off, and then they operated out of Nenana, he begins.

This interview was originally conducted for broadcast on KUAC radio as a part of the series, "Cheechakho Chats." It was not used partly because of background noise, and partly because, in the beginning, I had been misinformed that Frank Jones was a retired riverboat "captain." Later I learned that he had been a pilot, although he did work with responsibility and did often have command of the wheel. Nevertheless, in the beginning conversation, I established that he was a "captain," and he did not dissuade me from this idea. Consequently, I questioned him about his work as if he were in "full charge."

When I later became informed of his different status, I felt I could not broadcast the material without clarifying this point, and to do so would have embarrassed a very likeable man. Consequently, I ~~decided not to~~ forego use of the tape.

6 Before I made that decision, however, I did edit out most of the extraneous noise--Jones had a very bad cough and people came in and out of the room. The tape is thus a fairly listenable account of riverboat life. There is no question of Jones' veracity in describing his life and work on the rivers. To understand the little deception taking place is to clarify his reticence in answering some questions or his lack of knowledge in certain aspects of the work.

Series: Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes

The interview was made not as a biography but to gain information about riverboat life and operation.

Jones describes the different boats that operated, the differences in rivers and river channels; he tells how (on reel one) the sternwheelers were winched through Whitehorse Rapids--later he says, power boats were able to go through easily.

He tells about a trip up the Porcupine River to Rampart House in 1912 to pick up boundary surveyors.

Jones discusses poling the river channels for depth, which was replaced by the use of fathometers. He describes how the boats pushed barges up to 230' in length, two abreast; he describes the pilot's work, picking channels; various details of running the boats.

Jones is freer in conversation on reel 2, and talk is both easier and in more detail.

Between the two reels, the conversation gives many insights into Alaska's early riverboat life. To wit:

"Holy Cross was called 'railroad city' because there was a tramway for loading freight. The boats ran from Nenana to Holy Cross as soon as the ice went out of the Yukon; coming back sometimes in the fall they'd meet a little ice....

I don't think there was ever a time, night or day, that you'd come into Ruby or Tanana or any of those little towns, that the whole town wouldn't be there to meet the boat. It was one of the most exciting things there was at these villages. The whole town would come out."