

H76-27

Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes

Clara Rust w/Neville Jacobs, October 1974, Fairbanks, Alaska

Clara Rust is interviewed by Neville Jacobs for the Tanana Yukon Historical Society in October 1974 in Fairbanks, Alaska. Clara used to work in a dry goods and dress shop on 5th, across from where City Hall is now, called Gordon's Store. Some cabins were located here, too.

The "Line" started in 1905 or 1906, Clara guesses. Any time there was a new community, those girls would be there to set up a little Line. When Clara came in 1908 the Fairbanks Line was going strong. She has a picture somewhere. It was active until the 1940s.

Clara was 18 when working at the shop. Sometimes girls from the Line would come over after daytime hours, and Clara would have to go back after supper to help the proprietor fit girls for clothes. When a girl "had a live one," she might call up and say she was coming over.

Out the back door was 5th Ave. There was a large building they used to call the Fast Track. Clara would sometimes get sent out with coats, etc., to deliver to people. There was a parlor at the Fast Track, with a piano player, madam, and girls. Clara thinks she only went inside the building once.

Then she'd go down an alley to get to the back doors of the "cribs" on 4th Ave. Sometimes she'd leave the things, and sometimes she'd wait for the ladies to finish their business.

When her parents heard about this, they said she had to quit the job. Marianne and Clara both talked to them.

One girl from the Line told them that "if it weren't for the married men in this town, half of us would starve." Sometimes Clara would collect money from the girls directly, and sometimes they'd say they'd get it to them the next day (after they got paid). Men from the creeks would come in with their pokes of gold. Clara says they'd spend almost their whole month's wages drinking and being entertained.

The cribs were right next to each other. A couple of girls built duplexes. They'd have their "workbench" in the front room, and a bed where they slept in the back. The front room would be decorated, with drapes, a dresser, and fancy things on the walls. They did a lot of embroidery, so there would be embroidered pillows, etc.

Two thirds or half the girls had dolls on the bed or dresser. A lot had either had children at one time or wanted a child. They seemed to long for childhood or a child, Clara says. They were pretty simple people. Some used rough language, but two thirds did not.

Nowadays people swear more in general. When they came into the store they were dressed up very fine (never "showing anything").

Different girls had different stories of how they wound up on the Line. One woman had been married in the states and her husband came up to mine, and "put her over there." Another girl was supporting her mother and a little sister. With no education she felt it was the best she could do.

Edith Neile had her place on 3rd Ave. (not right on the Line). Her sister was married to a doctor, who died tragically. She sent for the sister to come live with her. They ran a bathhouse on Cushman between 3rd and 4th Ave. The sister rebelled against working the Line, and became an alcoholic. She married one of the Road Commission fellows, Joe Strang, who had a son by former wife Margaret Young. So she helped raise the son, though the Young family was very scandalized by it and tried to prevent it. They built a house on Cushman between 10th and 11th, which was later a music mart, and is now a real estate business. It's next to the Fejes's. The Ted Loftuses lived there for a while.

Edith Neile also went to Nenana to nurse people. She died in Seattle. Lots of Fairbanksans went to her funeral. Chuck Hoyt wrote a very complimentary obituary for the News-Miner, which some people thought was terrible. Eva McGown proposed making her a member of the Pioneer Auxiliary, in another uproar.

Clara's husband, Jess, used to fix Neile's pipes and do work on her cabin, and he had a great admiration for her. He also knew Rockwell Kate (Klondike Kate), but couldn't say a good word about her. He was working in Dawson while she was there.

In 1948 Clara and Jess went down to Dawson on the boat. Kate was there and the captain was dancing with her. "That's Klondike Kate." Jess said, "This makes me sick; I'm going to bed." Kate died a good Samaritan, too; she was supposed to be a great person. Jess just didn't care much for her Dawson days.

Jess had worked at the Regina Hotel, where a girl once had a "bath in champagne" after her man came in from the creeks. Half of it was water, though (the staff filled some bottles with water and sold the champagne—they couldn't see all that champagne going to waste). Another guy once bought up all the eggs in town so his girlfriend couldn't have eggs for breakfast. It's hard to imagine these things taking place when you see Dawson now. The balustrades and chairs at the Palace Grand used to be covered in velvet.

Back to the Line: Bergie's first wife was a prostitute called Highpockets (such long legs and short-waisted). He was an Eagle so she became part of the Ladies Eagles. Her name might have been Edith Bergie.

Frank Taylor, who bought the Fast Track, had a girlfriend who was a barber in Bob Courtermarsh's barbershop. He invited her to dinner, and she played very innocent and said she couldn't go alone. Later he found she wasn't so innocent. Clara and her baby

came to dinner, too, to chaperone. Frank ordered the dinner from the Model Café. They sat on his balcony after dinner watching the activity on 4th Ave. The girls would be outside playing like kids in their silk kimonos, or sitting on their couches in their windows, naked, to draw the men in. This barber girl was all eyes. She and Clara wanted to keep watching the action. Frank used to own a pool parlor, on 1st Ave. near Lacey. Then he moved up into 4th Ave.

In 1912 when Wickersham started mentioning a railroad, Fairbanks started picking up again. In 1917 the bill was passed for creation of the railroad.

Lila (Clara's older daughter) was about 6 months old at this dinner with Frank Taylor. After a few drinks, Frank insisted on pushing the baby buggy home; Clara was afraid he'd dump it over. Later Frank found out the barber girl was seeing other men, so that broke it off for them. Frank later married a woman named Clara and moved out to Oklahoma. Now they're both widows.

On 4th Ave. there was a big board fence with a gate, between Cushman and Barnette. There's nothing in there now but a city parking lot. The Flora Dora dance hall used to be there, and had a back door opening on to the line. It was only a quarter the size of Eagle Hall. It closed in 1909. In 1910 the Alaska Market was in there.

There was a big place called the Fast Track, and then there was Frank Taylor's place across the street they called the Fast Track, too. There must have been a different name for the big building with the madam and piano, etc. The girls would be inside all dressed up (but not exposing their bodies the way they do now in Golden Days). Dance hall girls never went outside on the street with a short dress on either. Their outdoor skirts were always right down to the ground.

There was a little coffeeshop/restaurant that served just the Line. There was also a repair shop near the Line. There was a fire hall on 3rd Ave., with an alley. The Fast Track was right on the alley. When it burned down about five people died. There were singers at night, such as Della Bell and Fannie Hall, "The Songbird of the North."

Charlie Thompson was a saloon keeper, who brought in five or six French girls at one time. When the authorities found out they started to ship them out. Thompson held on to one, called Mignon, though, and they must've married. He sold out and they went to Mexico. No one ever heard from them again. They had a lot of diamonds because she was always covered in diamonds. He was one of the men who helped start Eagle Lodge, which was started by gamblers, saloon keepers, and a few lawyers.

Clara says they could hardly understand the French girls; they were cute. Maybe French Jews?

A certain lawyer had a girl on the Line; he also had a wife, and a son who went to school with Clara's kids. Joe Smith (of Smith's Gun Store) also had a girl on the Line. He built a house for her on Cowles between 5th and 6th. His wife was housed on 1st Ave. Beth

Clossum came up in 1910 and bought that house from Joe Smith with her husband-to-be. Joe, George, and another brother owned Smith's Gun Store. George had a house on Noble St. that was torn down for the Northward Building. Several different people had had restaurants in there, like Ma Walker and Mrs. Frank McGarvey.

Clara mentions the Shaw House at 2nd and Wickersham. There was a tennis court in front of it.

She shows a picture of 1st Ave. between Cushman and Lacey. Lots of saloons. These are the second buildings, says Clara, since everything burned in 1906. The Tanana, Seattle, and Eagle were all saloons on this street. The Arcade Café was beside the Model Café. Clara's mother-in-law ran a bathhouse; that's how she and Jess met. They did a lot of sobering up of men there. Dr. Olegarde had a place on 1st and Cowles.

She shows a picture of the Lavelle Young, Barnette's first boat. Jess worked on the Rock Island from 1902-1905. Barnette and his wife brought up the Isabelle the next year, after Lavelle Young.

She shows pictures of the Nordale Hotel burning down; the town of Chena; President Harding's visit; Kitty Hensley; Mrs. Frank Clark; Minnie Cremer, Charlie's mother; Mary Rapp; the Cremer twins; Frank DeReid; Lila Rust.

Clara came up to Alaska on the Northwestern. She shows pictures of Cleary City in 1907 and the steamer Nenana at Nulato. There was a train from Fairbanks to the town of Chena. They used to go to dances there.

Clara's brother was shot in the hip at Keystone Canyon, during the railroad feud. The next year he drowned in the Chatanika crossing the ice. The railroad feud was over the right-of-way of the Cordova Railroad, between the Guggenheims and the Chena people(?).

In 1910 Captain Barnette went south with the money of Fairbanks. That was the main dramatic incident that Fairbanks has had. He was another that disappeared in Mexico. Barnette's wife's brother mined out at Cleary. Her sister was married to a dentist here.

Clara shows a picture of the inside of Shaw House, very fancy. The Fosters later took it over. It had a big parlor, settee, high ceilings, tin roof, and dining room.

Clara talks about other buildings, and pictures of her brother and herself.

Mary Anderson went to Ruby when it was supposedly struck in 1911-1912. She came back with all her goods and Clara helped her re-stack her shelves.

A picture of Jess with a hoist for gold. Ellen Clausen, her husband...

Clara and Jess trained dogs for the Muries's trips down the Yukon. They were neighbors. They trained the dogs to run tandem. The dogs were from Victoria and originally. Jess bought the team and he and Clara named them. A man named Fred who made sleds and snowshoes made one of the sleds.

They talk about Kennedy's Pack Train, coming in from the mines with gold. Clara talks about streets and transport routes and shows more pictures. Clara and Jess's homestead was on Badger Road.

When the N.C. Co. closed, they gave their stage to Alaskaland.

[The tapes fades out here.]