

Adelle Deville Smith
Katalla and Cordova

Interview at Smith apt.
Anchorage
Sept., 1974 N. Jacobs
1 hour

Adelle Smith was born in San Francisco, daughter of Pierre Deville ("French Pete") and his English wife. Adelle was reluctant to tell the story of her father at first, then explained that she wanted it understood that the story was verifiable, she believed, because Edward Keitahn, curator at the Juneau museum, had told her documents existed in Juneau which would substantiate it. This is the story she then tells:

Pierre Deville was a Frenchman and adventurer. In the 1870's he sailed a schooner from France and eventually arrived in the Juneau area where he prospected and found a body of ore. Perhaps because of citizenship problems, he entrusted the staking of his claims to a partner, and left for France to raise money to develop the mine. When Pierre returned two years later, he found the ore body was now a working mine--developed by his "partner" Treadwell. Pierre Deville was forgotten as the Treadwell Mine grew into one of the world's most famous gold mines.

Pierre returned to France and England, found a bride in the latter country, and brought her back to San Francisco. Here he engaged for a time in business with Jack London, then when the Katalla oil boom came along in 1902, Pierre once again followed the call of the north. Adelle was born that year, and she and her mother joined Pierre in Alaska in 1904.

Adelle grew up in Katalla. Her father had a store and sawmill, and invested heavily in developing the city. It had no port facilities so he built a breakwater so tankers could load oil offshore. Katalla was to be the terminus of the Guggenheim

railroad from the Kennicott mines. In 1909, the Guggenheims decided the lack of port facilities was too great a hindrance, and they then laid out the port of Cordova. Coincidentally, new Washington policy on Alaska oil lands forced the closure of the oil fields. Katalla became a ghost town in a season. Crystal-chandeliered ceilings and velvet-draped windows in the lavish boom-town hotels stopped tinkling and rustling, and Deville, broken again, died.

Adelle's mother baked bread to raise her children. In 1912, Adelle moved to Cordova to go to school. World War I brought a military garrison in 1914. One of the soldiers, William Smith, married Adelle and remained in Alaska. (Their son, Bill Jr., is a bush-airline operator at Dillingham.)

The Smiths lived at LaTouche, now abandoned, but once a thriving coal town near Katalaa, and also Anchorage, where William worked for the Alaska Railroad. For many of their first years, however, the Smiths lived in Cordova where he worked on the Copper River railroad.