

William Van Wechel  
"Whisky Bill"  
portion of one hour tape

Interview, N. Jacobs  
Palmer Pioneer Home  
September 1974

"Whisky Bill" was in a small lobby area adjacent to the dining room when I sought him out in the Pioneer Home to tape conversation with him. He indicated that he was waiting for the dining room to open--an hour or so later-- but that it would be all right if I wanted to set the recorder up on a nearby table. When confronted with the mike however, Bill suddenly became mute. As conversation proceeds it generally becomes more two sided. If the initial interview sounds like a monologue, nevertheless, the following information emerges:

Bill came from Montana in 1922 to the Nome area. Why? To get away from people, he says.

Bill worked at mining and construction for the last 52 years. Later, off tape, it became clearer that he had worked as a grader operator for the Road Commission and Bureau of Public Roads for some 30 years.

Bill's first trip to Alaska was to bring a sub-chaser to Alaska, to Petersburg, probably to be used as a fishing boat. Bill was the engineer, and he "broke in the engines" for the purchaser of the boat. During World War I Bill had been in the Navy where he learned seamanship.

At Nome, Bill worked on a tailing stacker. He said when he arrived looking for work, he found this tailing stacker at a particular mine to be out of operation so he "got the engine going, and the job was his."

During WW II Bill traveled by freighter to Attu to work in construction, then moved on to Anchorage, Fairbanks and

other sites of construction, but always wound up back at Nome. He says he got his name when he worked at Elmendorf Air Force Base during the early 1940's. He belonged to a payroll pool there, and as there were so many "Bills," eahh one got a nickname--with that he shifted in his seat and indicated a pint of whisky tucked into the seat cushion at his hip--"that's how I got mine," he said.

Bill is more present-oriented than past, and in spite of his 70-odd years, when many "old-timers" enjoy reminiscing about past experiences, Bill continuously turned the conversation to the present and the future--not much use for historical documentation, but perhaps an indicator of sorts as to the qualities of character and personality which underlie the Alaskan pioneer.

Series: Tanana Yukon Historical Society Tapes