

George Van Volkinburg
 Prince William Sound fisherman
 dual tape with Henry Fisher,
 Bristol Bay fisherman

Interview by Neville Jacobs
 Palmer Pioneer Home
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Two men were sitting at a table in the men's wing of the Palmer Pioneer Home, talking. I set the recorder up between them, and it became apparent that Henry Fisher was terrified of the machine. After I interviewed his friend, Van Volkinburg, for perhaps a half hour, Fisher overcame his reticence. The first half of the tape then, interviews Van Volkinburg with attempts to draw Fisher out; the second half focusses on Henry Fisher with some conversation from Van Volkinburg. Both interviews are autobiographical with anecdotes and discussion of their mutual occupation--fishing--its techniques and hazards.

Biographical summaries:

George Van Volkinburg came from Aberdeen, Washington, to Alaska in 1927. He came in April to the mainland of the Alaska Peninsula on Shelkof Strait, across from Kodiak Island. Some hundred men camped on the beach to dig clams commercially, until the salmon season began.

George describes how they dug for clams and delivered them to the tender. During the salmon season they continued to work from the beach with seines. They rowed their dories out to the tender which was sometimes so full that by the time they reached the barge, they were rowing with the skiff actually under water.

In the 1940's, George moved to Cordova. In the big quake of 1967, he was completely wiped out of his home. He saw the tidal wave come up and sweep everything away. He suffered a severe shock, and since then has been living at the Pioneer Home, first at Sitka, but recently moved to Palmer.

Fishing techniques in Prince William Sound in the 1920's to 1940's ~~are~~ discussed.

man

Henry Fisher was born in Germany. In World War I he served in the German Army but was captured by the Russians. The Russians sent Henry to prison camp in Siberia.

After the Bolsheviks took over in 1921, Henry managed to secure his release from the prison camp. To get out of Siberia, he rode on the top of a freight train to Western Russia.

Finally, after adventures, Henry got on a ship that sailed to Florida. Here he jumped ship and signed on another ship to Alaska. Again he left the ship, and settled in Kvichak, in Bristol Bay.

(The question of citizenship never arose, and it is possible that this is why Henry was so alarmed at first, by the recorder?) In Bristol Bay, Henry fished with boats under sail. He describes the life of a fisherman in Bristol Bay.

Henry saw many dangers and lives lost. He says the most important thing to learn is to stay away from the river bars, for it is the bars that swamp the boats--they become stuck in the sand, then waves come in and wash over them.

Later, off tape, Henry talked briefly and reluctantly about his family. He married a woman from Kvichak and had many children. Some of them live in Anchorage and some still are in Bristol Bay.

This life is meat for a book; at least the mysteries implied suggest much more to the story that fictionalized treatment could fill.