

H78-06

Al Doyle

Catherine "Mike" Dalton

Nome, Alaska

Recorded in 1974

Al Doyle is the airport manager and maintenance superintendent of the Nome airport. Mike asks her how long he has lived in Nome. He has lived in Nome for forty years. He came in 1932 and 1933 and then returned in 1935. He was born in Seattle. He arrived in Soldovia and the region. He came up to Nome with friends who were mining in the area. He describes Nome in 1932. He said since the fire the main streets have been widened out and the population was much smaller.

He took over as the maintenance superintendent when the state took over the airports. He had been associated with construction and mechanical work in the past.

Mike asks if there were any of the pilots left from the early period of aviation in the area. Al said John Cross and Frank Raley are still around. He still sees Frank occasionally. He still sees Bill Munz and Jack Jefford who is still flying out of Anchorage. Hans Mirow had a flying service. Hans flew for Northern Air Transport. NAT was operated by several people. The Wiens operated as Wien airlines. He talked briefly about Noel and Sig Wien. He said Charley and Harry Lewis were associated with the Wiens when they were going to high school. One of them works for Alaska Airlines. Al didn't think they were active in flying anymore. He briefly mentions Willy Foster.

Mike asked if Al was here during WWII when the Russians were flying here. Al said yes he was. The program was called the roads and runways. He worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The airport was called the Marks Airbase at that time. Al thinks it was named after a colonel in the air force. He was operating the airport almost the entire time during the war. He said sometimes there were close to 400 airplanes at the airport. They would stay at the airport until the weather cleared. The types of aircraft he saw were fighters, P-39s, P-63s, A20s and B25s. Al said by the time aircraft got to Nome they were piloted by Russian pilots. Al said the airfield was paved and wider than it is now. They had a control tower at the time. Al points out several buildings that were left over from wartime. They were built in 1943 and 1944.

Mike and Al talked about John Cross from Kotzebue who was an aviator during WWI and WWII.

Mike asked about the procedure with the Russian pilots landing in Nome. Al said they didn't stay on the ground for very long and they kept the same pilots. They would bypass Nome on the way back. There were Russian interpreters at the airport. If the pilots had to stay here they stayed in the Russian barracks. They usually stayed close to the airport. Al said they lost quite a few of the planes. They would fly in fairly bad weather. Mike asked about the weather in Nome. Al said it was pretty variable in the winter.

Mike asked if Al has ever flown over to Siberia. Al said he has been as far as Big Diomedes and no further. Mike and Al talk briefly about Eielson's disappearance in 1930 or 1931.

Al said that aviation has changed the country. The passenger ships stopped coming up to Nome just after the war. They still have the barges coming in.

Mike commented about all the beer and wine she saw coming into town. Al said there is a lot of beer consumed. He said they have always had a lot of saloons.

Al talked about the big fire in town. He said it burned a great deal of the business part of town. It went from Stedman Ave to C or D Street.

Al talked about the daily flights into Nome. He said there were two flights a day with Alaska Airlines and Wien had one flight a day as well as the Bush operations. He said Foster Aviation and Munz Northern Airlines operate out of Nome. Nome is a hub for freight, mail and passenger operations. Most of the airstrips are small and the large airplanes can't come in. St. Lawrence Island can accommodate a F27. They talk about the Russian plane that came down at Gamble recently.

Mike commented about the number of state and federal people coming and going. Al said there were a lot of BIA employees that come to Nome. There's also the FAA installation in Nome.

Mike and Al talk about Vern Bookwaller. Mike talked about coming to Nome with Ben Stevens. Vern was given a citation that night. He still holds a pilot license.

Bob Benke was present at this time of the interview. He was also a pilot with a current license.

Mike talks about flying in small airplanes a couple of times a month. Al talked about taking flying lessons from Frank William in 1939.

Mike asked about tourists in Nome. Al said there were quite a few including senior citizens. Al talked about a tourist operation that Herb Ingstrom that is a mining operation. The tourists are bussed out to the site and they can pan for gold and watch a dredge at work. Mike asked about the gold dredge near the airport. Al said there are plans by the U.V. Industries to dredge in the spring. Walt Duvinovich is the representative of the company.

Mike asked about Archie Ferguson. Al said he was up at Davidson's Landing (near Teller) at an army camp. He was waiting for a military plane to Point Spencer. The army had put in an airstrip to accommodate B29s. This was just after the war. Archie wanted to go down to Point Spencer and he didn't have a permit to land. He took Al in his plane and while they were up about 60 or 70 feet and the plane caught fire. Al was planning to bail out of the plane but Archie managed to get the plane down. They landed and fixed the radio wires that had caught fire. Archie ran a Bush service out of Kotzebue. His brother Warren drowned in the late 1930s. Mike has asked if anyone has written Archie's story. Al thought he was mentioned in Jean Potter's book (Flying north). She did part of a chapter on Archie.

Mike and Al talked about Gene Jounner's newspaper (Tundra telegraph) in Kotzebue. Al said that Gene still flies.

Mike asked how Archie learned to fly. Al thought he was self-taught. He was a gold miner, too.

Mike asked about Jack Bullock. He was a gold miner in the area.

Mike asked about the Northstar. Al said they did stop here but also stop at all the villages on the coast. Al said they have commercial barge service in Nome.

Mike asked about break-up in Nome. Al said it is usually June before the ice breaks up. He said the shore ice is pretty well anchored until break up. He talked about being out over a mile offshore and it was very stable. They were prospect drilling. They talk about the oil exploration in the Kotzebue region.

Mike asked if Al had actively mined. Al said he prospected over at Council for several years. He talked about the expense of mining. Mike asked if there was still mining. Al said there were a few small operations. Peterson has been operating since after the war on old Lomen property. They talked about the Lomen brothers. They talked about Pioneer membership and conventions.

Al said his wife, Betty was born in Gollivan. Lincoln Ost her brother was born in Elam. He was commanding officer at Fort Wainwright.