

**Call number: 90-18**

**Name and place: Ericka Byrd-Belka, Bess Byrd at the meeting of Alaska-Yukon Pioneers**

**Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen**

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**Original on audiocassette**

The recording begins with the Alaska Flag Song, sung by Ericka Byrd-Belka.

At 3:05 a woman's voice [Bess Byrd] tells that her grandfather came from Sweden and went to San Francisco where he married Bessie Serene [sp?] who also came from Sweden. That was in 1884. In 1897 they owned a chain of 7 restaurants in San Francisco, had 5 children, a nice house and an English governess for the children. Adam had a brother in Alameda, [California], whose name was Uncle Nils. Uncle Nils did some strange things and Adam had to go straighten things out sometimes. Uncle Nils had decided to get on a boat and join the Gold Rush in Alaska so Adam was sent over to talk him out of it, but instead Nils talked Adam into it.

They left on a boat and when they got to Cordova, about a dozen of the passengers got off and went up the Copper River while the rest of them continued onto Prince William Sound to Valdez Bay. The passengers got off across the bay from present town of Valdez, near the place where [Unclear] used to go. The other passengers didn't stay and got back to the boat, but Bess' grandfather decided that he liked the looks of the place and that it looked like a good place for the gold seekers to cross the glacier in order to get to the Interior.

4:47 It was 10<sup>th</sup> of November in 1897 and eventually Bess's grandfather went to the head of the bay and decided that that was a good place for a town and he built the first house. When people started arriving, they bought lots for \$2.50. The town never boomed like Bess's grandfather thought it would, but he built lots of houses. They used to say that when Adam Swan [sp?] goes to town with a stovepipe on his shoulder, he's going to build another house.

In the meantime, while he was gone [from San Francisco] came the big San Francisco earthquake. Bessie and her children lost everything so they took their hand baggage and went to Denver. Bessie died that year. Bess's mother, Eleanor and two of her brothers joined their father in Valdez.

5:53 Bess's father lived in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin and he had an uncle, Benjamin Franklin, who was called Grand Old BF Mallard. He was in partnership with warehouse in Wisconsin that was into logging business. They decided to expand to the West and went to Seattle. It was the Gold Rush time and everybody was talking about rush to Alaska. The uncle couldn't resist, so he took his son and they landed in Valdez. They drove a herd of beef cattle from Valdez to Fort Egbert that was at Eagle, on the Yukon River, and the trail they used is known as Mallard Trail. Then he leased two hard rock mines, the Cliff and the Granite, and made about a million dollars before he got through. In the meantime, he

became Alaska's first territorial senator from 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Legislator and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Legislator in 1913 and 1915.

7:08 Bess's father, Frank Mallard, decided to follow Uncle Ben and went to Cordova where he first worked on the dock while they were building the railroad, and then he went to Valdez where he met Bess's mother. They were married in 1910. They had a little boy who died when he was 6 months old. She got pregnant again and on 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, 1913 Bess was born on the dining room table. [Laughter.] She weighed 1.5lb and she was 6.5 [unclear] baby. They wrapped her in cotton and put her in the oven. They had to keep the house at 86 degrees for 6 weeks or so.

During the birthing, the Bess's father was sitting in the kitchen and doctor went to tell him that he doesn't think that the mother and the child will make it and asked the father to get a bottle of 5-star Henderson from the saloon because the doctor needs a drink. He put the brandy on the table and the doctor came soon to tell that everybody was surviving and asked about the brandy. The bottle was empty. Bess's father had drunk it all.

8:38 Valdez was a wonderful town to grow up in. It was very social with dances every Saturday night at the Moose Hall. In the summertime, everybody would bring their babies and put them in the ladies' room in buggies. In wintertime, they were in baby sleds and when they got big enough, they would slide on the floor between dances. When they got big enough to dance, they danced with their parents. In Christmastime, nobody had to cook dinner if they didn't want to. There was a big dinner for everybody at the Moose Hall and they let the prisoners out of the Federal Jail to do the kitchen work. Bess's father supervised the kitchen work like cooking the turkey. Santa Claus would be there and everybody would bring presents that would be distributed to their friends.

There was lots of snow in Valdez. They shoveled their sidewalks and horses traveled on the road right by one's head [intended as a joke?].

One of the highlights of speaker's life was when she was a little girl and handed President Harding a wilted bouquet of flower and he said: "Thank you sweetheart."

10:03 Bess's father was with the road commission when they first started building the Richardson Highway. They only had horses, wagons, and hand shovels, and one can imagine how long it would take to build a highway.

There were lots of glaciers and streams coming from glaciers, and the town had a dike around it. There were 23 bridges in the first three miles of the Richardson Highway. The 23rd bridge was called the Crooked Bridge because it made a turn right in the middle of the stream. They used to go there and have picnics.

Bess's father was also in charge of the Chitna end of the office and they went to Chitna when Bess was 4 years old, and again when she was 10. They stayed there for a year each time. Bess has a picture of Billy Cameron who is pulling her on a sled when he was 6 years old and Bess was 4, so she always tells that Billy was her first boyfriend. [Laughter.]

Then her father was transferred to Juneau with the Road Commission and Bess went to high school there, graduating in 1931. In the summertime, they had a job going to Eagle and brushing out the winter trails, and in wintertime they worked at the office. Bess went to Eagle one summer, and after she graduated from high school, her mother continued going there every summer but Bess herself went just once.

11:33 She got some secretarial work to do and then, in 1937, she was the engrossing clerk for the territorial legislature in the Senate. In 1939, she became the secretary of the territorial senate. After that, she decided that she needed a vacation so she went to Fairbanks to visit her friend Breese Butrovich. She liked Fairbanks and wanted to stay, so Johnny Butrovich suggested that she should go see an accountant named Harold Bird. She applied for a job but Harold didn't have anything for her but later on he told that he didn't give her a job because he didn't want to marry anybody he employed. [Laughter.]

She got a job as George Preston's personal secretary. Preston was the manager of the NC-Company and the most delightful man. Harold and Bess got together and they both loved to dance. Harold was the member of the Sourdough Dance Club. He took Bess to the Sourdough Club and they were members for 35 years.

They were married on 29<sup>th</sup> of December, 1939 and the following day they went to Livengood because he was going to be an accountant for Livengood Placers. That was a nice time. They skied in the moonlight to the mining camp. Their time there didn't last long since the operation was suspended and they went back to Fairbanks where they bought a home on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and both went to work at Ladd Field [now known as Fort Wainwright]. Bess was the American secretary for the Russian Commission, who were stationed there for 3 years during the land lease program. There were some 300 Russians there, and the ones that were permanently in Fairbanks had their families too. After the war was over, they left, but by that time they had been thoroughly Americanized. They thought that there's going to be a bridge to Siberia.

14:08 They had to take some English lessons and Bess took Russian lessons. When the Russians first came to Fairbanks, they saw some soldiers playing baseball outside the window and had never seen baseball so Bess explained the rules by pantomime.

After the Russians left, Bess went to work as a secretary to the commanding officer at Ladd Field. She was there for a couple of years but then they decided to go to a mining camp at Flat. They had some dear friends of Harold's with whom they were in business with. While she was there, she took a trip to Nenana, then down the Yukon to St. Michaels and back up to Holy Cross from where she flew to the flats. She took one other trip where went to the State of Washington to deliver her girl, Christiana. She brought her home with a steamer when she was 11 weeks old. They went to Juneau from where they flew to Flat. Then Bess took a dog team from the airport.

15:36 After Flat, they came to Fairbanks where Harold worked one year for a bank, after which they went to the University of Alaska where they lived for 20 years. Harold was a business manager there and in 1954, when they had been there for a year, Bess was 7 months pregnant with Erika. She got polio on

the last big epidemic but the baby was fine. It took Bess 2.5 years to recuperate. Then she stayed at home and raised her kids since she didn't want to work. She had had a pretty good career and she didn't feel like she missed anything.

She taught square dancing for children from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade and by the time 5<sup>th</sup> grade came along, the boys didn't want to touch the girls. The girls didn't want to stop, however. They were called the Dandy Dancers and Bess had another group that was called the Senior Riche's Solimentes who were ladies only. They had a program every year at the end of the season.

When Erika was in Junior High and Christie was in High School, Bess went back to work since the kids weren't at home anyway. She worked in High School for 6 years and in 1963, she "closed the book on Alaska after 60 years in Alaska."

[Applause. End of the recording.]