

Call number: 94-05-01 SIDE A

Name and place: Frank Nigro is interviewed by Margaret Van Cleve

Date: August 17th, 1993, at his daughter's house in downtown Fairbanks, Alaska.

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Notes: Original on a c-cassette tape, master copy on CD

Margaret starts the interview by asking about Frank's early experiences in Fairbanks, starting from 1936. She asks Frank to tell about his reasons for coming to Alaska at that time, and about his trip up. Frank tells that they had the Depression in the 1930s. He was working in an office in New York City, in Manhattan, and the stock market crashed in 1929. People he worked for kept him working until 1932 when bank got so bad that they couldn't afford to pay him \$12 dollars per week. For a while he was looking for work but it was almost impossible because there were too many people out of work. Another fellow and he decided that they should hitchhike to the West Coast to see if they could find work in-between. They kept going on the road for a while and then decided that it was too hard on their feet since they had to walk a lot and they got blisters on their feet. Somewhere in Pennsylvania they saw a slow-moving freight train and so Frank and his friend Pat and they decided to hop the train.

2:45 It was an open gondola car that used to carry steel and stuff like that. They jumped the train and it was so nice to be traveling instead of walking and so they decided to stay with the freight cars that were going west. Frank's mother had told him that there was a friend of hers who was living in Omaha, Nebraska and Frank thought that he might be able to guide them towards some jobs. They went to see the lady who had become a widow. She had a son who had gone to San

Jose, California, and he was working there, and the lady mentioned that they might be able to look him up to find some work. They went to San Jose.

4:02 When they got there, the widow's son was living with a friend in a small apartment. His friend was working in a cannery and the son was a truck driver. They were both making \$ 0.17 ½ cents an hour and couldn't tell Frank and Pat which way to go, so they decided to go to Los Angeles. They were hopping freight trains and when they jumped off the train in L.A., they got cleaned up and went to a small restaurant close by to where they were. There were lots of mom-and-pop businesses those days and they had hot cakes with coffee, butter and syrup for \$0.10 cents.

When they left New York, they had money and they didn't do any bumming for food. Only thing they bummed was rides that would get where they wanted to go.

Trains were reasonable those days. From time to time, they would jump off the trains while the locomotives were getting more water and coal. They didn't have diesel those days but they were steam engines that had to replenish their supplies of coal and water. When they stopped, Frank and Pat would run into one of those mom-and-pop stores to get bread, cold meat, and a container of milk. There were lots of men on the roads those days, looking for work.

6:16 They went through New Mexico and Arizona and went to [unclear], El Paso, and across the border to New Mexico to see a bull fight in the month of June. It was very hot at the time, 115 degrees, and they weren't accustomed to that so it was too hot to see the bull fight. Things were reasonable there too, at Varrayas [?]. They got a room for one dollar that had two big double-beds in the room and pictures of water, even though there was no running water.

Margaret says they sure went a roundabout way in coming to Alaska. Frank continues telling that they went to one of the little stores that they had close to the hotel where they stayed. They bought some cheese, bread and a bottle of wine for \$0.17 cents of American money. They went back to the hotel and had a lunch there and stayed the night. The following day they decided that it was too hot for them and crossed the border again.

8:24 They had to cross a little bridge to get over the border and it cost two cents to cross. Then there was the American immigration who wanted to know why Frank and Pat had gone to Mexico. They told Frank and Pat that there was some kind of an epidemic in Mexico and that they had to be given shots or they couldn't come back to America. The doctor gave them the shots and they had to file forms, after which they let Frank and Pat go. They took a freight train and ended up in Chicago. Pat had two uncles who lived there and both of them were railroad engineers. They invited Pat and Frank to stay there, clean up a bit, and get some rest. One of the brothers took them to the Chicago World's Fair. They enjoyed every bit of it and it was new to them.

The interviewer tells that it was in 1933, and that it took Frank a while to get up to Alaska. Then they [unclear] slaughter houses and it was a very interesting trip to go through the [unclear]. They went to one slaughter house after another and were showed how they killed the cattle. At that time, everything was done by living [?]. Frank and Pat watched them package bacon one slice at the time. It was like Pat and Frank had a job, so they stayed there for a couple of weeks but then they decided to go back home as they couldn't find work.

11:32 They got home and President Roosevelt had instituted a Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC, and after a month or two, Pat and Frank decided that there was nothing else and that they might as well join the CCC. They sent Frank to the state of Vermont and Pat to Montana. That was a good experience for Frank because their project in Vermont was to get up the Mount Mansfield. They were driven to the base of Mount Mansfield with trucks and there they chained [?] them up 2 people at the time. They didn't have the types of saws they have today, and they had one man on one end and one on the other. They also had an ax.

They climbed the mountain every morning. There was a forester who would slash certain trees that he felt like they had to cut down. Their job was to cut the trees down, trim them, and cut the trunks to either 4 or 6 feet lengths so that they could be handled. [Margaret says something unclear.]

13:25 Frank was lucky and he worked with a local old-timer who knew how to sharpen saws. That made the job a lot easier for them. Frank started working for the CCC for 18 months and then he decided he'd do some reading. He came across some material about the State of Alaska. There seemed to be all kinds of opportunities for a new person who would come up to the territory – it was a territory at the time. There was timber industry, fishing industry, and mining, so Frank thought that he should be able to get a job somewhere. [Unclear talking.]

Frank stayed home for a year or so with his folks. His father had a mom-and-pop candy store where Frank helped for a little while until it got too boring and unprofitable. He had made an acquaintance with a man who delivered [unclear] to his father and whose family was into bakery business. His job was to deliver the bread and Frank's folks used to buy one or two loaves per day. At that time, they were only charged \$0.04 cents a loaf. That was around 1934.

15:35 The fellow was a motorcycle enthusiast and he talked to Frank about going to California to try to break a cross-country record on his motorcycle. Frank said that he'd go to Seattle, Washington, with the fellow if there was a side car to his motorcycle. He put in the side car and they both left. It took them 7 days to go from Brooklyn, New York, to Seattle. That was sometime in April.

The fellow took Frank to Seattle and continued down south to California and he was just around Los Angeles when he shipped the sidecar back and drove back to New York while trying to break the going record.

17:10 In Seattle, Frank tried to make arrangements to go to Valdez, since he had heard that there was a mine there. Frank figured that he might be able to get a job there. The way it worked out was that the man that he was talking to at the Alaska Steamship Company asked him some questions about what he was going to do. Frank told that he was going to try to get a job from Valdez and if he didn't get a job, he would hitch a ride from Valdez to Fairbanks and try to get a job there. The fellow told Frank that the roads were closed and that they only opened at breakup time, sometime in June, and that the passes were all filled with snow.

Frank didn't know what was going on in those days. He didn't know that they had so much snow that they couldn't keep the roads clear. While he was talking to the man, there was another fellow of his age, who proposed that they should try to go to Ketchikan. His father was running a crew of timber workers there. Frank said that they should go work there, cutting down timber. Frank decided to go with him.

18:57 Alaska Steamship Company didn't have a boat going to Ketchikan that week so they went to the other company called the Northland Transportation Company and they walked the Steels Passage [I think this means that they booked passage in steerage. Steerage is the lowest grade of passenger accommodation on a ship. RLR] from Seattle to Ketchikan [?] for \$17 dollars each. They left a couple of days later.

That night, about 2-3am, the sea had developed fog. Somehow they lost their way and the boat hit the rocks somewhere in British Columbia. The boat shook when it hit the rocks, and being in the steerage, Frank and his friend woke up. When people ride in the steerage, they don't take all their clothes off for sleeping and the only thing they take off is their shoes. It wasn't too hard to put their shoes on and walk up. It was all dark and they couldn't see anything, and about 3-5am when the sun rose, they could see big trees all around them. Frank thought they had hit an island, which they hadn't, really.

21:02 There they were with tides moving up and down. They were lucky that the water was very smooth. It was like glass, and that was the one good thing about hitting the rocks at that time. The boat went up and down and every time [with every wave] the boat hit the rocks. When it hit the rocks, it got two holes on the bottom and the water was coming in. The boat didn't have enough pumps to pump out all the water that was coming in. In order to get out of there, they had to stop all the engines, but they were stuck. [Unclear talking, quiet.]

There was a steam winch ship that helped them get out of that spot. They lowered one life boat with three men in it and put in the heavy rope that they used on those winches. The winch ship slowly pulled their boat out of there and then they put the lifeboat back on the ship and started out. When they started

going out from the rocks, their ship was leaking so much water that they decided to abandon the ship. They found a spot where they could leave it without it sinking.

24:19 Margaret asks if there were lots of people on the ship at the time, and Frank tells there were quite a few passengers, including women and children. Margaret says that they had life boats to take care of everybody, and asks what the name of the ship was. Frank tells it was either the North Sea or the North Star – he doesn't remember.

They said that they had to abandon the ship and the women and children could go first into the life boats. Then the men could go, but nobody could take any baggage or there wouldn't be room in the lifeboats. Frank had never learned how to swim and he was leery out on the ocean. When the men were allowed to go in the lifeboats, Frank was the first one to go in. The way they were used was to have one sailor on one side of the boat and another on the other end, and they used the ropes to lower the boats into the water. When it was time to start lowering their boat, the one guy did the lowering but the other did nothing and Frank was sitting there all alone because they were supposed to fill up the boats. Frank was shouting to the other guy to stop, they leveled the boat, and all the men climbed aboard.

As they were lowered in the water, Frank noticed that there was a lifeboat ahead of them that was also being lowered and the water was being pumped out from one of the holes that they had on the side of the ship and that water was going inside the lifeboat [?].

27:36 The lifeboats were very [unclear] and the oars took three men to make the boat move. What they did was that they told the men to follow the ship slowly, while they had a SOS out. Finally, one of the coast guard ships caught up with them. They have big nets alongside the coast guard ships and when they got next to one, Frank climbed up the net. There was no loss of life at all.

The coast guard ship lent some pumps to the ship that was leaking. The people were taken to [unclear] where there was a cannery. They decided that they had

enough pumps on the other ship to go on, and that they [who?] would take them to Ketchikan where they arrived very early in the morning.

29:33 There was nothing but boarded sidewalks in Ketchikan, at least by the dock. It was nothing like the streets in New York or Seattle. They found out that the fellow's father had been transported into another camp in the woods outside of Ketchikan, but he had a brother there who did a little fishing. He was in a little cabin at the end of the town, they all got together and Frank stayed there with the two brothers.

It was hard in Ketchikan and Frank walked to town 5 am every morning to see if he could get a job. Finally, he talked to a guy who was a fish [unclear buyer perhaps?] for a fish company and a captain in Seattle. The fishing season had started so he gave Frank a job. He asked if Frank knew anything about fish, but the only fish he saw was at the fish market in Brooklyn where his mother used to buy fish. He had no idea what he was getting into. They showed what he needed to do every step of the way and he learned fast.

31:40 Frank got paid \$0.50 cents per hour and that was good wages for Frank. Then Frank had to get closer to where he worked, about a mile down the road, close to the New England Fish Cannery [?] that was across the street. There were 6 cabins on the side of a big hill and Frank had to climb what seemed like 1000 steps. He asked the owner if there were cabins available and they were going for \$5 dollars per month. Frank thought that was good since he didn't have electricity to pay and there was a stove.

32:34 Margaret says that Pauline Nigro [unclear] and grandchildren are joining them so they have a family reunion. Frank Nigro has been telling about his experiences in coming to Alaska and Margaret encourages him to continue telling about his life in Ketchikan.

Frank says that Pat and he hired lots of college students. Frank was working side by side with college boys and it was very interesting. They were cleaning and processing fish in a cold storage plant they had at the fish dock. It was a heavy catch of fish that year, and lots of the boats that came in were too heavily loaded.

They took too many fish [unclear]. From time to time, the fish that they caught was spoiled because the processing plant couldn't process it fast enough and all the fish had to be dumped out. When tides went out, all the dead fish were laying on the beach.

34:58 In those days, it was always about supply and demand. If the supply was too great or the demand wasn't there, price of fish would go down. The prices changed every day. The owner told the fishers every day how much he would pay for the fish. He'd open the hatch and say \$0.10 cents, \$0.12 cents for each fish. They didn't go by weight but by head. The only fish that were put on the scale were the big kings. They were paid per pound since there was more demand for the kings. That's why they couldn't get more than \$0.50 cents per hour.

The owner had a couple of other guys there. One of them was Norwegian and the other one was from Sweden, and they were good carpenters. They couldn't find work in their professions so they worked on the fish dock and got paid \$0.60 cents per hour. The owner had smoke halls where he smoked fish on his own and was putting an extension to the smoke house because he had lots of demand for smoked salmon.

Frank remembers that they had anything from 15 to 20 days to smoke that salmon. They had a little fire down below and the fish was on the smokeries, and they smoked very slowly. The way they worked was to put the fish in tierces [tiers?] with salt, and after 4-5 days the fish was taken out, rinsed with cold water, and then put onto racks where they were smoked. There was a lot of demand for that smoked salmon from all over the world.

38:17 After the [unclear] was over, Frank heard about mining that was going over in Fairbanks and the following year he went to Fairbanks. That was in 1937. When he got to Fairbanks, it was too early. There was a lot of snow on the ground and 5 or 6 feet tall piles of snow on the roadside. [Unclear talking.] Frank had to wait until the snow melted, the rivers opened up, and mining begun again. It was mostly hydraulic mining. It was another long wait.

39:51 Finally, mining opened up and miners were hiring people. The F. E. Company was the biggest employer at the time and had many camps. Frank walked every morning to the F. E. Company offices at Illinois Street and checked in if they were hiring any kinds of laborers.

Point driving was a hard job, driving points in the hard ground. The gravel and overburden that was [Margaret asks something unclear]. In the meantime, there was a flood in Fairbanks in spring of 1937. Frank went to F. E. Company office. He always walked around town, looking if he could find a job, and he had pestered a person from the Northern Commercial Company who was in charge of the utilities. There was a utilities office on 2nd Avenue. That evening, when the water was getting higher there was one warehouse that had a lot of food and stuff down in the lower levels [on the river bank?]. They decided that in order to save that, everything had to be taken out of there.

[End of the side A.]