

Call number: 94-05-02 Frank Nigro

Name and place: Frank Nigro, Fairbanks, Alaska

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Frank Nigro continues his interview. When the Russians left, Frank got into rotation since he had been in service for 28 months. They rotated him to Free Falls [Great Falls?], Montana, where Frank was again put on special duty. The people who were on special duty didn't eat with the company but they ate at the officers' mess. The money that was allotted to feed Frank was given to him as a bonus for being on special duty. The [Officers'] club at Ladd Field also gave him \$30 dollars more for running it. Frank tells that he got \$120 dollars.

2:08 One day Frank approached one of the officers and asked for a promotion to his military rank, which was when they found out that Frank was earning more than a sergeant even though he was a private first class. They told him that he couldn't get it because he was earning well and if he got promoted in ranks, he would lose the pay. He figured that the war wasn't going to last forever and he would "just sweat it out."

He was bartending in Montana. Then he got an annual leave and got flown to Whitehorse and to Edmonton. He wanted to go see his folks and he took a Great Northern Train [Railway] to Minneapolis and from there to New York. He had a layover of a couple of days in Edmonton.

It was around New Years, and Frank went to Soldier's Club where both Canadian and American soldiers went to.

4:08 Frank's future wife [Pauline] was there [at the club] with her brother and one sister there and Frank asked her to dance. They danced and talked and Frank said that he'd want to take her home with him but she told Frank that she was going with her brother and sister and invited Frank to their place instead.

They started writing to each other.

The two later met briefly in Edmonton before Frank had to return to Fairbanks but they kept writing back and forth. Frank got some dogs for a lady in Fairbanks and had to arrange their transportation with General Gaffney who allowed him to fly with the dogs for only \$35 dollars, and the dogs got to Fairbanks.

9:20 Frank got transferred from Montana and he got to Fairbanks in October where he got extra points for each month spent in Alaska. When he accumulated 60 points, he was eligible for a discharge. He got discharged in Montana and had earned mileage to go see his folks.

Then he called his future wife and proposed. She accepted and so Frank returned to Edmonton, and they got married on December 4th, which was the same day he went in [?]. It was a coincidence. Frank stayed with his wife until sometime in January because he wanted to go back to work for the Nordale Hotel who had promised Frank to take him back.

His wife was still a Canadian citizen and had to wait to get a clearance from Ottawa that allowed her to move to Fairbanks.

11:50 Margaret asks about fire in Fairbanks. Frank tells that he was working a late shift when the fire started at the loft [of the Nordale Hotel?], close to the Empress Theatre. They saved the theatre but everything else burned down since there were lots of wooden buildings. It was -50 below and all the hoses froze up so they couldn't put the fire out. Next day one man went to "salvage" liquor from there and sold Frank many bottles for \$1 dollar a piece.

15:02 Frank got an apartment from across the river from the Garden Island. They charged him \$54 dollars per month for the apartment that was brand new. Frank had stacked the liquor in a closet and when his wife got to Fairbanks, the first thing she did was to open the closet to hang up her clothes and saw all the liquor. She was surprised since she hadn't thought Frank was a drinker, but Frank was able to explain.

Frank worked for Nordale Hotel for most of his working life. Annie Lee was the new manager and Lloyd Pike from Pike's Landing was working there as a clerk until he quit. Frank worked odd shifts as a relief clerk until a couple of people quit

and he took their place. Frank got to be an assistant manager and he stayed at that job until the hotel burned down.

18:48 Margaret says that it's often said that the Nordale Hotel was the social hub of Fairbanks those days and asks who were some of the people who used to come there. Frank tells that fur buyers came in and stayed at the hotel while buying their fur from trading posts. Johnny Schwegler, for instance, made many trips all over the country but not to the southeastern part because the fur there wasn't good. He taught Frank to buy fur and when fur sellers came to Nordale hotel and he was out, Frank could make purchases.

Once Frank got fooled by guys who were selling 34 mink skins. Minks in the Interior acquire longer fur than the ones in south, but Frank didn't notice that the skins weren't from the Interior and gave them an Interior price, which was \$17 dollars per mink at the time. When Johnny came there, he didn't approve of the minks and showed Frank the difference between Interior minks and those from milder climates. They got \$14 dollars per mink and Johnny didn't make up the difference so Frank lost money.

When other fur sellers came in and Johnny wasn't around, Frank bought the fur and sold it to other traders, making a few bucks to make back the money he had lost.

23:28 Frank didn't get into fur business because a lot of the people who were selling fur were poor Natives and the times were tough. The Natives were trying to scratch out a living with trapping and fish wheels.

24:06 Margaret asks if Frank knew Eva McGowan since she was a long-term tenant [at the Nordale Hotel]. Frank tells that she lived there for many years. She was at the hotel with her friends at the night of the fire.

Don Kershner was also a clerk there at the hotel and he had come by to "chew fat" with Frank. They smelled smoke and went to investigate. They saw smoke in the hall and a naked man was standing in front of the room where the smoke was coming from. Frank and Dan raised an alarm and tried to put out the flames with a fire canister without success. The fire took a hold in a building with dry saw dust for insulation and it was soon enveloped in flames.

The safe was locked and there were lots of paintings from various Alaskan painters they had had. Frank saw people jump from second floor windows but he didn't see Eva McGown.

29:06 There were people who didn't make it, like a train crew man who got out of his room too late. He made it to the fire escape window but was overcome by smoke, and Eva McGown who stayed in her room and burned. There were 4 people who died. Another lady perished on the 2nd floor.

31:48 Margaret asks if the fire was on February 22nd, 1972, and says it was an end of an era since the hotel had been the social and business hub for so long. Frank tells that they had sample rooms in the basement for salesmen who came with samples.

Margaret asks about dignitaries who came by and asks if Frank can remember any of them. He tells that the Governor [William A.] Egan stayed there, as well as the Territorial Governor [Ernest] Gruening. A lady's voice mentions President [Warren G.] Harding, and Frank tells that he came to Fairbanks in 1923. They were trying to finish up the hotel before he came in. The Nordale Hotel had been on the 1st Avenue but that burnt down so they built a new one on the 2nd Avenue.

34:28 Margaret thanks Frank for the interview.