

Call number: 94-13-07

Name and place: Rudy Voight interviewed by Margaret Van Cleve

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Margaret introduces the recording and asks Rudy about his reasons for coming to Alaska. Rudy recalls that he didn't even think about Alaska until he saw a movie that featured possibilities for hunting and fishing. Rudy has always been a hunter and a fisher ever since was a kid. At the time, he didn't have enough money to get a guided trip, so he decided to become a resident and go hunting then. He planned on staying in Alaska only for a short time, but has stayed for 45 years.

1:35 Margaret asks Rudy to describe his trip up the Alaska Highway. Rudy tells that he came up with three other fellows who were all coming to work because workers were paid well in Alaska. Eielson Air Force Base was being built and Rudy decided to become an apprentice carpenter.

Rudy and his friends bought a 1944 Chevrolet van truck that had very few miles on it, but the tires were old and they had 21 flat tires coming up the road. The road was rough, muddy, and curvy but it has straightened out since. Every time the truck stopped, someone would get out from the cabin in the back and they knew it was a flat tire. They bought used tires on the way because they didn't have that many tires with them. Also, they bought a couple of hundred dollars' worth of groceries because they had heard that eggs were \$1 dollar a piece.

It took them about 10 days to drive up the highway and they didn't have problems other than flat tires. Margaret asks if it was in June, and Rudy says he thinks it was.

3:24 Margaret asks what they did with housing when they got to Fairbanks. Rudy tells that there was hardly any housing but they lived all summer on their truck bed. They stored their groceries in the truck and worked jobs in town.

Rudy tried to get a job as a carpenter but there was a strike going on and nobody was working. He noticed an ad for a body and fender man and as a test, the owner asked him to assemble something that the previous fender man had taken apart. It took him a week, but he made more money than he had made in his home town the month before.

4:38 Margaret asks if his family in Minnesota was waiting for him. Rudy says that his family was in Minnesota and Rudy stayed in Alaska for 3 months before he went to get them. By that time, he was working at a body shop and the shop owner said he can't have the shop being idle for that long and asked Rudy to pay rent for it. Rudy rented the place for \$150 dollars a month, and told the owner that when he got back, he wanted to just rent the place instead of paying a percentage. They agreed.

The man who was renting the place relied on the rent for his income and soon he wanted more money, so he demanded that Rudy rents out more stalls from the garage. Rudy told he didn't need more space, but agreed on renting them in order not to lose the spot. He paid \$300 dollars now. There were 6 stalls in the building and each of them could fit a car, but after he was asked to rent the fourth stall, he said he'd rather find someplace else.

7:02 The fellow's name was Al Holth and he's not alive anymore. He spent a lot of money and didn't make enough with driving a cab so he took all the money from Rudy that he could. About the time when he was looking for somebody, the owner of the building came in and asked Rudy how he was getting along and how much he paid for the space. Rudy told that he was renting 3 stalls for \$150 dollars each, and that he has to pay for fourth stall if he wants to stay.

The owner said they wouldn't need a middle man [Al], and Rudy agreed. The owner wanted Rudy to buy the place instead, and they worked out an agreement that Rudy pays \$1,000 dollars right away and then \$60,000 in \$3,000 dollar increments. Rudy agreed. They made the contract on a piece of newspaper, signed the papers, and after 20 years, Rudy had the place paid off with 6% [interest].

By the time Al came to tell him that he had found another renter, Rudy was able to say that he's not moving out because he owns the building now.

9:09 Margaret asks if that was in 1949-1950, within the first year when Rudy came to Alaska. Rudy tells that it was in 1950.

Margaret asks what things Rudy remembers about the life in Fairbanks in the 1950s. He tells that the town had 9,000 people and it was a small place. It didn't have other body shops and anybody who wrecked their car had to go to Rudy's shop. Eventually another body shop opened up.

The streets weren't paved and they oiled the streets to keep the dust down. Rudy tells that there was so much glacial dust [silt] that one couldn't see anything when a car went by.

Fairbanks was "a little one horse town" where everybody knew each other. Rudy had a friend whom he had met a month ago and he lend Rudy a several hundred dollars to get started with his business. He didn't know Rudy but trusted him. That never happens anymore. They also never used to lock their doors.

10:37 Everybody who was in Fairbanks in those early days remembers the prostitutes at 4th Avenue. They had little houses everywhere and they sat in front of them. That's all gone. Margaret says that that's about where Woolwards and JC Penney's is now. Margaret asks if there was a fence around that area, but Rudy says that there wasn't. It was wide open.

Margaret asks where Rudy's body shop was located. He tells it was on 11th Avenue and a half a block from Cushman. They were there for about 20 years. Then when the pipeline started they got so busy that they had cars waiting for a month ahead. That's when they built a bigger place, the one they are now in. Rudy lived in a house that was in the same block than his shop. There were three houses on that block and one of them was moved to Gold Stream Valley. Rudy's son lives in it now. The other one got sold. Rudy could walk home for lunch in two minutes.

12:42 Margaret asks if people put in their cars up for the winter and explains that in early days, lots of townspeople just put their cars up for the winter. Rudy says that by 1950s they were driving around all winter. It was as soon as the circulating heaters that keep the cars warm were developed that they kept driving all year around.

Margaret says that in early 1950s, there was a lot of talk about the Statehood [Act] and asks what Rudy remembers about the political climate of Fairbanks at that time. Rudy tells that the conservative people didn't like the deal that was made for statehood because they thought there would be too much government. Rudy voted for statehood because he thought that would bring more people in and more customers.

Margaret asks if Rudy ever had the chance to do hunting and fishing as he intended. He tells that he hunted every fall and got involved with game guides, first as a client and then as a guide. He decided to become a guide too. He had to pass a tough test but it was nothing like they have to do today.

14:44 While Rudy was guiding, he would take a month off from his business and do guiding while his son ran the business. They were hunting bear, moose and caribou. Rudy had a vacation and a ball doing that. Margaret asks where he hunted and Rudy says that it was mostly around Arctic Village, a couple of hundred miles north from Fairbanks.

He had his own plane. They had a little fall out with the plane when they put oil on the plane but forgot to put on a cap. On their way home, the windshield got splattered with oil that came from the oil filling hole and they couldn't see forward. Rudy had to land and wipe the oil off before he got to Fairbanks in order to avoid collisions with other airplanes. He found a lake that looked good but when he got closer, he crashed on the lake. The water was too cold to swim in so he had to spend two nights at the plane. He had some empty cans in the airplane that he tied together with his shoe laces, and finally floated to shore. They were 5 gallon empty gas cans.

17:27 A little airplane flew over and it was the first Rudy had seen in days, so Rudy waved an empty can over his head and the pilot saw Rudy. The mosquitoes were so thick that Rudy couldn't keep them off of himself, but in an hour and a half or two hours, he fell asleep under some spruce boughs where the mosquitoes didn't bother him. Then he heard a chopper and was rescued.

After that, he bought another plane. He wrecked two planes during the time he was flying and when he was 70 years old, he decided that he better stop flying.

Margaret asks if he did hunting for a long time then, and Rudy tells that he was guiding for about 20 years, but not always with an airplane. He used an airplane when he had one. Margaret asks if he was partnered with other people, or if he was guiding by himself. Rudy tells that he was guiding by himself. They had certain guiding areas that were assigned to them. Margaret asks how they were assigned, and Rudy says he doesn't quite know. Rudy had a cabin where he was guiding, and when the area was assigned to someone else, he quit guiding.

19:33 Margaret asks about the 1967 flood. Rudy tells that they lived at 11th Street at the time of the flood. The flood came up so high that at the Northward Building, the water was 8 feet up the wall. 11th Street was over the flood so that the water didn't rise above the sidewalk curb. The streets were full of water but the sidewalks were clear.

During the flood, for about 3-4 days, they were running a riverboat through town, picking up people from buildings. They hauled medicine and ladders and their boat was running 24 hours a day for 3-4 days. After the flood, 75% of the cars in the area had to be cleaned or pickled. In pickling they drained the oil and filled the car with diesel fuel so the cars wouldn't rust while they waited to be cleaned. Lots of cars were destroyed because of the water damage. They started smelling and didn't dry properly. Margaret says she remembers the flood smell that lingered for quite a while.

21:59 Rudy tells that he was on a trip with his riverboat, crossing the river from lower 2nd Avenue and down the river a ways when he hit a concrete basement with his boat and one of the rods that they use in reinforcing concrete went through the bottom of Rudy's boat, cutting about 2-foot gash there. That was right in the center of the river. Rudy ran the boat towards where the Armory is while it was filling with water. When he got to the Armory where there was only 2 feet of water, the boat sank.

If it had sunk in the middle of the river, Rudy wouldn't have made it because "the river was really boiling". Margaret says that that was the "hundred year flood," and they are off the hook now [as a flood that bad will likely not happen again very soon].

23:12 Margaret asks what the pipeline did to Rudy's business. He tells that when the pipeline road was being built, there were big trucks running big loads up and down. His business had to have big towing trucks so they bought a couple: one 40 tons and another 25 tons. The road was muddy and slippery and sometimes when they went out and pulled someone from the ditch, there might be hundreds of rigs behind there, just waiting to get through. The trucks were busy for 24 hours a day and they had three shifts running the trucks, with two people on each truck. They had a good reputation and it was the towing business that helped them financially in building the new building.

People's wages rose because everybody had to have pipeline wages. When the building of the pipeline was over, it was hard to tell employees that their wages had to be cut. Margaret tells that there was a jump in prices of housing.

25:38 Margaret asks if most of Rudy's business in pipeline times was towing people off the road. He says that that was the only way they were involved. They didn't do any repairing on pipeline rigs but they did realigning, re-balancing, and alignments. They had more work they could handle because there were more people and more cars in town. It was too much to handle for them in their little building and they had to move.

Margaret says that she remembers reading about Rudy being involved in Populist Party. She asks why it became a political force at the time, and Rudy explains that at that time, the United States was gearing up for New World Order that's being formed. There were lots of people who were against that because it was going to take sovereignty away from America. The Populist Party was against moving towards New World Order and they wanted to keep America free.

Rudy was involved with the Populist Party because he believes strongly in America and he isn't quiet about it. He got a reputation for that at the time. The Populist Party was small in Alaska but big in the United States. Rudy traveled to one of the bigger meetings of the Populist Party and there were several thousand people there.

28:22 Margaret asks what relationship it had with Alaska Independence Party and the Libertarian Party. Rudy tells that the Libertarian Party has a platform where they could legalize drugs and so on. They had some good points, like taking the

profit out of it, but Rudy never believed in that. One of his friends, the head of the Libertarian Party, went to a big meeting in Seattle and while he was speaking, he got drunk on the marijuana smoke that was so thick one couldn't see around. He quit the libertarian party and that's the same reason Rudy was never in it. He doesn't believe people should take drugs.

The Populist Party was for less government and more individual responsibility. Margaret says it sounds like the Alaska Independence Party. Rudy tells that that was also different. Populist Party was for saving America, but the Independence Party was for saving Alaska. It was quite a bit different.

29:59 With the establishment of One World Government, they certainly wouldn't have let Alaska to leave the Union.

Margaret asks who were some of the other people who were involved in the national level in the Populists Party. He says he doesn't remember the names, but locally they had Dee Roberts, Jay Pett, Wayne Pepler, Warren Prax, Lynn Funk, Dick Randolph, John Ritter, and Glenn De Spain. Margaret asks if there was a group in Anchorage too. Rudy says there was a group there, but he never went over there.

31:17 Rudy tells that he was in the Grand Jury when Ted Stevens was the district attorney. Rudy got to know him personally because they were in the grand jury for 9 months. Some of the other people he knew were Leslie Nerland and all the rest of the people in the Nerland family. Warren Prax was an early resident in Fairbanks. There was a fellow who owned the cab company in town, the father of Brown and Sons', who was called Brownie. Mr. Bob Campo is dead, but his son is a [unclear] store now. Gene Immel, the father of the two boys who run the [Unclear].
[Unclear.]

There's another fellow who used to be a banker out of his back pocket, Mr. [James] Barrack. He was a well-known individual in Fairbanks and many people borrowed money from him. When Rudy borrowed money from him, there were no papers made, it was just a handshake. Alaska was a nice country at that time.

33:03 Lony Hall owned the Ford Garage and before that time, [Unclear] Welch ran the General Motors garage, the Cadillac Garage. Ernie Genter was "the original

man in the Chevrolet Garage.” His son, Robby Genter [sp?] is running it. Margaret says that there are lots of businesses that have second or third generation people running them. Rudy’s business is one of them.

Margaret says that according to an article that was published in Tow Times, there are actually three generations of Rudy’s family doing the towing businesses. Rudy tells that they all work at the building as mechanics. He works as an owner and runs the business, and his son and grandson work at the shop.

34:20 Margaret tells that Rudy is called the “oldest heavy hooker left in Alaska,” in the article. Rudy tells that he talked with his doctor one day and said to the doctor that there are not many people his age driving a wrecker, to which the doctor said that there aren’t because they are all dead.

Margaret says Rudy’s business is easy to find because of the large American flag and recalls that Rudy mentioned it being 20 feet. Rudy tells that it was the biggest flag in Alaska for a long time, but now there is one in Anchorage. That flag is not the same flag they had 17 years ago, but the 17th flag they have. The wind whips them out every year and they have to put a new flag out. They usually replace them around 1st of July so that they are up for the 4th of July. When the tourists come, they see the new flag.

Rudy says he spends a little bit of money for proving that he’s an American. He likes the country.

35:50 Margaret wonders if anybody has wanted to borrow the flag for ceremonial purposes. Rudy tells that surprisingly enough, the Eielson Air Force Base has borrowed the flag twice. Last year Mrs. Connie Seekins borrowed it for a high school graduation. There are a lot of people who wonder where the Motor Inn is and they are told it is where the big flag is.

Margaret asks if it’s an unusual size or if it is used for a specific purpose. Rudy tells it’s a garrison flag for the military. Most flags are 10x14 or something like that because it requires quite the flagpole to hold a big flag like that in heavy wind. Rudy’s flag pole is about 14 inches diameter, and it is 85 feet up in the air.

37:16 Margaret asks what Rudy’s toughest jobs in towing business were. He tells that one tough job was in 1963 or 1964. He got called to North Pole and when he

got out there, there was an automobile was stopped in the middle of the road because it was so cold it couldn't run anymore. The temperature was -77 below on Rudy's wrecker's thermometer. Rudy hooked onto the back end of the car and started pulling it in. He was going to bring it into the shop to warm it up, but he drove only about a half a mile until something didn't feel right with the back tire. He stopped and saw that the back tire had disintegrated and the wire inside of the tires was exposed, rubber being in little pieces like it had exploded from the cold. In that weather, tires are like glass. He turned around and drove the other direction another half a mile until the front tires went. He had a little dolly with which he loaded the car with those little dolly tires and brought it in [?]. Those tires held up because they came from a warm shop. Rudy thought that he was going to have to buy the man a new set of tires and that he was not going to like it. He talked with the owner of the car who told not to worry about the tires since they had a warranty. Nobody got hurt except for Sears-Roebuck who bought him brand new tires.

39:46 They had another job that was a "little different." A man was clearing dirt with a D-6 Caterpillar Tractor. He was driving along the snow and got to a place where he fell into a 20-foot deep hole that was filled with water. He got out of the cab and swam to the top and when Rudy was called to recover the tractor with a wrecker, it was difficult. They didn't know how close they could drive to the hole without driving the wrecker there. They stayed back about 10 feet and had 25-40 ton wrecker. They pulled the cat out with the two wreckers and it took them about 2.5 hours just to lift it up 20 feet. They pulled it to the side, it was drained, and the fellow drove away.

That was one of the more difficult wrecker jobs. They've had 100-ton loads in the ditch and have seen many things during the 15 years they have dealt with heavy wreckers.

Margaret says that she noticed the pictures "in the front." One of them was about an airplane that had gotten tipped over into a ditch. Rudy tells that the man was towing his airplane that had its wings tied to the side. It rolled over from the trailer so Rudy's company had to get it back on the trailer.

42:14 They have got some of the worst weather. Rudy has been up to Atiguin Pass with snow 20 feet above his truck after Caterpillar snow tractors have plowed the road. One wonders if one will get past or if the snow is going to fall on one. And it's cold.

Margaret asks if he has had many jobs at the Atiguin Pass, and Rudy tells there were many. They have had jobs all the way up to Prudhoe Bay fields.

Margaret asks if Rudy ever thought he would stay "this long" in Alaska. He tells he was originally going to stay for 3 years. He has been back [at lower states] a lot of times and every time he goes over the road, it's a bit better. He's driven over it about 40 times and has been to quite a many other states. He's always ready to come back to Alaska and there's no other place in which he would like to live.

Margaret thanks him for the interview.

[End of the recording.]