

Call number: 94-13-08 PT. 1 SIDE A

Name and place: Douglas Colp interviewed by Margaret Van Cleve

Date: January 20th, 1994; Fairbanks, Alaska.

Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen

Date of summary's creation: 06/02/2014

Series: Pioneer Tapes

Margaret introduces the recording with Douglas Colp. She says that Colp is a mining engineer with experience from survey crew work for the army corps of engineers during the WW-2 to being a superintendent at the Usibelli Coal Mine in Healy, and an instructor for the School of Mines at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Marci Colp, Doug's wife, is also present at the interview.

Margaret says that Douglas grew up in Southeastern Alaska, near Petersburg, and asks what it was like to grow up living in an island without nearby neighbors and conveniences that people take for granted today. Douglas says that they take for granted the same things [unclear] but they didn't know any different. They lived only 5 miles from Petersburg but didn't see anybody else for months at the time. Sometimes the fox farmers who lived on Sock Island, only about a mile away, visited Colps, but in wintertime there were stormy seas and Douglas' family didn't visit often. They had other neighbors 7-8 miles away. They saw everybody every summer a several times, but during the winter they were more or less isolated from the world.

02:11 Margaret asks what were his recollections about caring for the foxes. Douglas tells that his father started the ranch in 1916 and they had it until 1928 when they had to get out of the business for economic reasons. The life on the farm had been excellent and they enjoyed every part of it. They had lots of work to do in keeping the silver foxes that required lots of attention. They cooked feed in 50-gallon open furnace, a steel bowl that was embedded into their concrete furnace. The ingredients in the feed were mainly fish, suet, and oat meal, corn meal, and so forth. They would let the food cool and take it out in 5 gallon buckets.

4:05 Margaret asks what time of the year they usually marketed the fox, and Douglas tells that that happened in the spring of the year. They would pelt the foxes in the spring when the fur was prime and fox fur buyers would accumulate in Petersburg. All the fox farmers would come there and sell their pelts.

In the summertime they accumulated all the feed for the foxes. They set nets to catch thousands of fish and cleaned them. They had a 10 stories high building that was about 20-feet high, and had room for 10-20 stacks of fish. It was about 20x20 feet in diameter in area and 20 feet high and it would give room for several thousand fish at the time. They put the fish in, smoked and dried them, and then stacked them to be used for fox feed.

6:07 Margaret says Douglas' father was in business for 11 years. Douglas says that that is correct, and continues by telling that his father started in 1916. The peak of the fox ranching business was in 1925. Smart ranchers bailed out that time and sold their ranches. Some of them made fortunes. The ones, who weren't that brilliant, decided to sweat it out and lost their money. Douglas' father always says that skin game skinned him. They didn't get out of the business until they lost almost everything they had and were forced to move to Petersburg for work.

Margaret asks what they did for school while they were living at the fox farm. Douglas tells that their mother taught them for 5 years and on 6th year they had a lady come in and teach them during the 6th grade. Then they moved to Petersburg for the 7th grade.

8:00 Margaret asks if Douglas and his younger brother were the only students in the school. The school was in their home for the first 5 years, and then it was in a separate building for the 6th grade, which was where their teacher lived.

Margaret asks how they lived, and Douglas tells that their house was partially a log and partially a frame building. It was built alongside of big spruce trees and held up on two spots [?]. It was a two-room house. Kitchen and living room were probably 14x20 and the bedroom in the back was about 10x12 or 10x14. They had bunks there and their mattresses were made of spruce branches. The bunks were built 6-8 inches high, and the inches were filled with spruce boughs. It took savvy and experience to make a bed that was comfortable and "didn't puncture your ribs at night." Of course, the branches had to be replaced a couple of times per year.

They didn't have facilities. They carried their water in and out and they got their water from a creek that was 100-feet away. They had an outhouse on the creek below their water hole and it was an experience to go there in the winter. Snow shoveling kept them warm as well as cutting wood and burning wood. They were busy all the time.

11:14 Margaret asks what they did for staple foods. Douglas tells that they bought flour, sugar, milk, and a few things like that, but they raised most of their food and put up all the fish that they wanted by salting and drying. They had fresh, salted or smoked meat. The beach in front of their house was loaded with clams and at any low tide they could go there and get a bucket of clams. Their garden had always cabbage, potatoes, turnips, beets, carrots and things like that. They had a root cellar with sand in bins where they put all the vegetables from their garden. The vegetables kept well, and Douglas remembers very little spoilage. They made sauerkraut from the cabbage in 20-gallon wooden barrels, and they also had 25-30 chickens that gave them all the eggs they wanted. They were pretty self-sufficient, ate well, and never missed a meal.

13:28 Margaret asks Douglas to tell about his experiences going from a one room schoolhouse to be with other kids in a classroom with 12-15 other students. Douglas says that it was certainly an adjustment, and doesn't recommend it to anybody. He was one of the exceptions, but had an awful lot of trouble trying to adjust himself to other people. He had never been around kids his age, and all his friends were grown men and women. He had no knowledge of how to get along with peers and during his 7th grade; he probably spent more time in the principal's office than he did at the classroom. He was strong and big and used every bit of muscle he had. He doesn't know why he wasn't expelled, but thinks that they might have known the source of his bad behavior and tolerated it because he was the greenhorn from a fox ranch.

15:16 Douglas' father was working on one of the shrimp boats. They had purchased another home in Petersburg. Douglas' sister was born that year and the family never spent time at the fox ranch anymore. They went out there for a week or so, but Douglas, who was big and strong, started working at fishing boats when he was 13 years old. He was gone every year for about 3 months in the summer, and then he went to school in wintertime.

Eventually he graduated from Petersburg High School, but actually he didn't graduate from high school until he was 20 years old because of his first year disaster. That was in 1934.

16:47 Margaret asks Douglas to talk more about his parents. He tells that his father didn't come north for the gold rush but because he wanted to prospect, and felt like Alaska was the place to do it. When he was 16 years old, he left his parents at Puget Sound area and went to Wrangle, Alaska, which is about 35 miles south of Petersburg. He had a brother in Wrangle and they used to go prospecting up to a tributary Stickine River that was called Iskoot River. They made several trips there in 1898.

He came to Alaska in 1898, and Douglas' mother took care of his [unclear] mother for many years and the two corresponded throughout the years. In 1912 Douglas' mother wrote to him in Wrangle that if he wants her, he needs to come get her, since she's not waiting any longer. Douglas' father went Outside and that was the last time he ever did that. They got married and he took her to Petersburg. Their wedding supper that night happened to be popcorn balls on 9th of December, 1912.

19:07 Margaret asks what Douglas' plans were after high school, and if he had to go to college right away, or if he worked for a while. Douglas tells that he had decided several years ago that he didn't think he wanted to be a fisherman or a logger for the rest of his life. He decided that eventually he would go to college, but didn't know for sure. As a kid, he had wanted to be a chicken farmer, but later on he decided to get into forestry or mining. His cousin graduated from forestry and Douglas thought that that was a good profession.

He had followed his father around the hills too, and was very much interested in breaking rock, panning, and other things related to mineral industry. He talked it over with his folks in the fall of 1935, and decided to work for a few years to get enough money to go to university. Then his mother said he wouldn't have to wait but he could go right away.

He had given extra money to her mother, thinking that she would need it, but she was stocking it away instead of spending it, and so there was some \$400-500 dollars. That was enough to get Douglas started at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

21:38 At that time, there was only the one college in Alaska.

Douglas corresponded with other colleges, but University of Alaska was the most reasonable one. They almost guaranteed students work during the summer, and a lot of the students were able to work during the winter as janitors, coal haulers, snow shovelers around the campus, and that's why Douglas chose Fairbanks.

In fall of 1935, he came up from Petersburg with a steamer and came to Seward. A two-day train trip took him to Fairbanks and he started at the University of Alaska in 1935.

22:56 Douglas met Charles Bunnell, the founder of the University, almost immediately. Bunnell was a great guy, but too lenient with some students who would pull pranks on one another.

Margaret says that Douglas had \$400 dollars to start school with, and asks if he got a job right away. Douglas tells that he got a job as a janitor, which gave him a board and room, almost immediately. The spring semester of 1936 he borrowed \$400 dollars from the student loan fund, and that summer he got a job with the Fairbanks Exploration Company and made enough money in the mining field that year to pay back his \$400 student loan and accumulate enough money for the following year. That's what he did during his 5 years of school, and he graduated owing only \$400 dollars. He was almost debt free.

24:54 Margaret asks what his living accommodations were like. Douglas says he lived in the dorms most of the time. One semester he tried living in a yertch, which was a mud abode that was made with moss cut in 2-3 foot diameter pieces and stacked one on top of another so that they formed a dome shaped structure. There was one window and about 8-10 inch ventilator that stuck out of the roof for ventilation. The entrance had two doors, in other words, the place had a storm entrance. Those yertches were very warm and only required stoking the stove once or twice a day. That furnished enough heat for cooking. There were 25 or so yertches at the foot of the College Hill and today there's none available. They were located probably along the University Avenue from Wolf Run or Geist Road to the College Road – those roads didn't exist at the time. That was the approximate area.

27:04 The railroad had a once-a-day train and there was no stop signs so everybody [who crossed the tracks] had to watch out for themselves.

They lived mostly on moose meat and rabbits. They cut down their own wood. Dr. Bunnell owned most of the yertches and charged \$5 dollars a month for rent. Douglas remembers that the kerosene bill for their lamp was around \$6 dollars per month.

Margaret asked if the yertches looked like big igloos, and if they were about 10-foot in diameter. Douglas says that they were 10 to 12 foot maximum in the inside, and maybe 7 feet high. They had head room, but not too much.

They burned kerosene lamps. Some people tried burning Aladdin lamps but the cabins were so well insulated that the mantels would blacken and they were more or less useless. Kerosene lamps required less air too.

28:49 Margaret wants to know if Douglas had time for sports. He tells that he always had time for sports and that he was in the ski team. Then the experienced skiers graduated and Douglas was able to win a first class prize in cross-country. He always loved skiing. They had a little ski cabin that they all used almost every night. That was out on Ballaine Road which, at that time, stopped at the Farmer's Loop. At the foot of the hill was the cabin, somewhere near the Pearl Creek Farm where Gordon Harrid has a strawberry farm now.

Margaret asks what they used for illumination. Douglas tells they had carbide lamps and they skid out there many nights. There was always somebody ahead of them and they would ski out for a cup of coffee and then ski back. On colder days, water in their carbide lamps froze and their girlfriends knitted the head lamp parkas. It took them an hour to ski to the cabin, depending on how dark it was and if there were obstacles along the way. They considered that a 3-mile run.

Douglas says he was the manager of the hockey team for one year, and the assistant manager for basketball another time, so he was involved with sports. He was never good enough to get into a team.

32:17 Margaret asks if Douglas remembers any of his professors or any stories about them. He says he remembers several of them, like Dr. [Ervin H.] Bramhall who was their physics professor. Dr. [Alfred W.] Bastress was the chemistry

professor. Douglas remembers that not all of the students had enough background in chemistry to keep up with him. He would put a long formula on the board, look at it three times, say that it was obvious, and erase it immediately before the students could copy it down.

Their mining professor was [Ray M.] Hendricksen and George [Hugh M.] Henton was the metallurgy professor. Lester Dawson taught math and Russ Huber was their military science professor. There were several others too.

33:58 Margaret wonders if military science was a required course and if it was something that Douglas did only one semester. He tells that it was a 2-year course and it was compulsory to take, although one didn't get credits from it. They had to wear what they called monkey suits that were green and blue gabardine uniforms with matching shirt and pants. Douglas says he doesn't think there is anything colder in the world than those uniforms, and of course they had to parade up and down the 1st [Avenue] and Cushman [Street] in Ice Carnival time in spring.

Douglas remembers one time when Russ Huber dismissed them right in front of the Chena Bar on 1st Avenue, downstream from Barnette and 1st Avenue. He realized his mistake too late, so Chena Bar had 20-30 military science recruits in there with rifles stacked all over the place. They always thank Russ for dismissing them there so they could get out of the weather.

35:50 Margaret says it was still pretty cold in March which was the carnival time. Douglas says it was well below -0 most of the time.

35:59 Margaret asks what Douglas did after graduating with the class of 1940. He tells that he worked for the mining companies around town before graduating. He worked for two years for the U.S. Smelting and Refining Company that was known as the FE-Company. In 1938-1940 he was with Ted Matthews at American Creek, and he worked on a dredge there, then at the point field, and the thaw fields. He got lots of experience in placer mining in those years. First year out of school, in summer of 1941, he helped to build a dredge at Caribou Creek. That was owned by two fellows by the name of Bricker and Johnson. That was the last gold operation Douglas worked on before the war.

He came out from Caribou Creek in November, 1941 and of course the war broke when the Pearl Harbor happened in December 7th in 1941. They were told ahead of time that there would be no more mining for gold or non-strategic minerals for the duration of the war.

38:08 Douglas tried to enlist but he had a bum left eye and they decided he wasn't eligible, so Douglas went to work for the army engineers at Ladd Field that is now known as Fort Wainwright. He worked for them until 1943 when his draft number came up. Douglas went from being a civilian boss of about 50 field surveyors to a PFC [Private First Class], who earned \$60 dollars a month, but he kept his same job. Outside of changing his uniform and his pay, nothing changed. He had his crew and his job to do.

In 1942 they started building Eielson Air Force Base that was then known as 26 miles Satellite Field. Morsen Knudsen was the prime contractor on that field and Douglas was the liaison or the project engineer. He was a go-between the resident engineer at Ladd Field and the contractor. They built two 5,000 foot runways with birch wood hangers and quite a few support buildings. It cost \$7 million dollars. It was Douglas' first, and from thereon he had a rating of a construction supervisor. From thereon he was in the runway construction for the duration of his service. He served in Northway, Galena, Nome, and finally he ended up in Anchorage in mainland division.

40:47 In the meantime Douglas was also involved in freighting mainly from Tanana and Yukon rivers to Galena. That was the year of the big flood and Galena was being rebuilt on higher ground. They contracted for a lot of fuel to go down the river by a boat and much of the fuel had to be floated down in log containers. There were not enough barges to freight all the fuel. Many native people who owned boats with outboard motors were given small contracts to float the barrels down the Tanana and the Yukon, catching them at Galena.

They only lost 10% of their fuel, which was considered pretty good record for about 400 miles of river transportation. Many times a whole raft would get stuck on a sand bar and had to be pulled out and the [unclear] would have to be yarded together again. It wasn't a small task but the devotion to duty made it all possible.

[End of the recording.]