

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

Name and place: Douglas Colp interviewed by Margaret Van Cleve

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Series: Pioneer Tapes

Douglas Colp continues his story by telling that he's going to back up a bit. In December 1941, he met his bride but they were only married in February 27th, 1943. That was the year when they did all the freighting to Galena and built the Eielson Air Force Base.

He had a unique position with the army engineers. He was a private and soon he became a corporal. He had a powerful paper in his back pocket that indicated that he could get rid of any personnel at 26-mile base who weren't qualified to handle their jobs.

There was a first lieutenant there with no experience on construction and who wasn't qualified to perform the duties he was supposed to do, so Douglas wrote a letter to his commanding officers at Ladd Field and suggested that the lieutenant should be fired or transferred somewhere else. A couple of weeks went by and the lieutenant came to Douglas' office at Ladd Field and slammed down a piece of paper that said that everything in it was true, and that he regrets that he's now being sent to the Aleutian Islands. On his way out of the door he wanted to shake hands with Douglas and said that he never expects to be fired by a corporal again. That was Douglas' first experience in discharging a superior officer.

3:09 After that, Douglas was sent to Nome and he finally ended up in Anchorage, in Mainland Division of the Army Engineers. That was in 1945. Douglas was there for 10 months and his wife joined him for 9 months. Their job was mainly to construct various runways down at Aleutian Islands. He mostly did repair or re-repair of airports along the route.

Douglas was discharged in February 1946 and they asked him to stay in his military position for two more months, which he did as a civilian. In April of 1946 he was discharged completely and he was free to come to Fairbanks.

5:05 Within a week after they got to Fairbanks, they purchased a house and Douglas found a job working for a mining company up at the Koyukuk River. He slept in the house for a less than a week, headed out, and never saw the house again until 3-4 months later. This was in summer of 1946.

Douglas was at the Kobuk River from 1947 to 1950, doing exploration work for their company that was Helicolicon Mines Incorporated [sp?]. Years 1947 to 1949 they spent mostly at the Salmon River and in very remote locations. All their freight had to be dropped off by air or freighted by dog team.

Douglas got lots of experiences about running dogs in those years. They had freighting teams of 110 dogs all in one tow-line, pulling 3-4 sleds at the time. The sleds were loaded with fuel oil and drilling equipment. They had 3 drills going round the clock for months in the summertime and to the dead of winter, but all their supplies had to come in in the spring of the year. Most of their freighting was out of Kiana, which was about 100 miles from their destination. In the summertime they would get air drops for fresh food, meat, and things like that. They'd have a fly-over once a week or so and they would push whatever they had ordered out of the plane. They had radio contact with people in Kotzebue and Kiana, so they weren't completely isolated. They couldn't get any mail out unless they took it out.

8:15 Once a year, between March and August, they wrote letters. Sometime in July, they would have a man from Kiana walk with his dog to carry their mail out so that their wives would get mail once every summer. Their camp would get mail from outside once a week, but their mail didn't go out.

Their mail carrier was a funny guy, an Eskimo, who was an old-timer, remembering the wars between the Whites and the Indians and between the Indian tribes. He used to fire a shot on top of the mountain that faced the camp before he would come to the valley where they were located. One time Doug asked him why he did that, and he explained that he is trying to scare the Koyukukers out of the valley. Years ago, there used to be wars between the Koyukuk people, the Kobuk people and the Noatak people. The man still remembered that, and the memory

was so clear in his mind that he was still a bit squeamish and thought that if he fired the shot on top of the mountain, the spirits will disappear.

10:24 He would come down and rest for 2-3 days. The morning he would leave, he would have a stack of mail that the men wanted to send out and he would lift each letter in the air to decide which one was lighter and which one heavier. The heavier was carried by his dog, and he himself took the lighter one. That continued for hours until he got the whole parcel of mail separated according to weight. It took him three days and two nights to walk out. He never lost a letter and was conscious that the pouches the dog had were waterproof so they could wade streams. It was quite an experience to watch the mail carrier sort and carry his mail.

1948, the second year Douglas was “up there,” was also the year when his youngest son was born. He was born on June 2nd and for some reason, they had radio trouble and he was 3 weeks old before Douglas found out that he was born. He was already 3 months old before Douglas saw him.

12:31 That was also the year when they hired graduates from the University of Alaska. Douglas took in four 1948 graduates from the School of Mining and Mineral Engineering. The four of them got their start at Upper Kobuk. As far as Douglas knows, only one of the four is still alive, Nick Lean, who lives in Cooper’s Landing and has retired from State Highway Commission.

Douglas and his crew were out prospecting in 1947-1949, and in 1950, he operated a dredge for the same company on Klery Creek, which was only 17 miles from Kiana. Kiana is a Native village on the Kobuk River, about 110 miles upriver from Kotzebue. They operated the dredge in 1950.

14:05 Douglas didn’t see the Kobuk River again until 1963. From 1961 to 1963, he operated the same dredge himself. He took a lease on the dredge and operated it on his own.

In 1951 to 1953, Douglas was a superintendent engineer at Livengood for Callahan’s Inc. Led [?] Company under a well-known mining engineer called Bruce Thomas. They were the last people to operate the dredge at Livengood and they found out that the bedrock was so uneven that the dredge was not capable for cleaning bedrock where it rises 10-15 feet and then drops 10-15 feet. To make a

profitable dredging operation, the bedrock has to be flat. The dredge was dismantled in 1953 and brought into Fairbanks. In 1954, it was taken down the Tanana River, down the Yukon and to the Koyukuk, where it was put into FE-Company ground at the Hogatza River that was locally known as the Hog River, and that's where it is today.

16:11 Margaret says they did some unique things with gold at Livengood, such as bricks out of it. Douglas says that it was a policy of the company to not ship anything else but bar gold. It was required that all the gold was caught in mercury and in order to make a bar of gold, the amalgam of mercury that contained the gold had to be refined. It was put in an iron pot that was sealed and heat was put under the bowl. On top of the bowl there was a tube that led into a cooling coil, and as the pot heated up, mercury came out as a steam vapor, hit the coils and run off as a liquid. It was a kind of a distilling process that salvaged all the quicksilver, which was then used over and over again.

After the gold that remained in the pot after the quicksilver was volatilized off was taken out, they referred to it as 'sponge'. That was mixed with other materials and heated up so all the impurities like iron and silica were fluxed off. They form a film on top of the gold that catches all the impurities. Gold will remain in the bottom. When it was of right consistency, it was poured into an iron mold. The other end would have the impurities and the other would have the gold bar. One could hit it with a hammer and slag would drop off. Gold was dated and sent to the bank.

21:05 Margaret says that Douglas was at least closer to home when he got to Livengood. He says that they called that an 80-mile trip and there was no pavement at that time. Some of the trips were pretty hazardous, and many times Douglas spent 4-6 hours on a 2-hour trip because of the glaciers, soft roads and so on, but at the time, they didn't know the difference.

From Livengood, Douglas did lots of consulting work for the Bering River Coal Field in between jobs. In 1956, he started a company by the name of Exploration Services and he also did some work for Usibelli Coal in 1954, working for them off and on until 1965. In summertime, Douglas was in various consulting jobs. He spent three years at Bering River Coal Field and did lots of geological work out on

the Aleutian Islands, at Perendine Bay area, and in the Matanuska Valley area, and a little bit at the North Slope but not much. That was all on coal.

23:11 In 1961-1963, he had his own dredging operation at the Kobuk in summertime, but he was also a superintendent at the coal mine in wintertime. In 1964, he had a horrible experience at the coal mine, at the same year when Emo [Emil] Usibelli got killed. He was killed on Good Friday, at the same day with the earth quake, on March 27th. Emil was the founder and the original owner of the Usibelli Coal mine. He started the coal mine in 1943, during the war, and built it into a multi-million company.

In winter of 1963-1964 Usibelli took a vacation Outside and he came back and the next day he said he would go up in the pit to see how things were going. His hearing wasn't too good and he had a heavy jacket on with hood wrapped over his head. There was a scraper with waste rock coming towards him, he stepped aside to give it room but stepped back as soon as it passed. A few feet further on the operator of the scraper missed a gear and the scraper rolled back about 15-20 feet, crushing the life out of Emo.

26:00 An hour or two later Emo's wife [Ester] flew into camp, as if Douglas didn't have enough to do with arranging for police and other people to come do their inspections. She wanted to see the body, but Douglas told her that he'd rather not let her see that so she could remember him as he was. She agreed to take Douglas' word for the body looking terrible and didn't insist on seeing it.

Then Douglas got Emil's body, the police and Emil's wife to Fairbanks that evening and it was a windy day. They approached the runway several times and all of the approaches were "terribly hazardous." They were in Fairbanks around 5pm. The manager of Usibelli was Bill Waugaman who happened to be in Tokyo on a Chamber of Commerce promotion deal, and Douglas talked with him for a half an hour, from 5 to 5:30, sitting at the Usibelli office on Illinois street, when he was suddenly cut from telephone for no reason at all.

28:31 "Then the street begun to buckle." There was a terrific earthquake in progress. At the time they thought that the quake was local and they tried to reach Anchorage but couldn't. 2-3 hours after that, they heard from the radio that Anchorage was destroyed.

Douglas believes that the reason for the phone call to get cut off was that the telephone cable from Anchorage to Tokyo was severed somewhere around Aleutian Islands. The telephone sounded like the roar that one hears when holding a clam to their ear.

29:58 In 1965, Douglas left Usibelli. That's the year when Joe Usibelli Jr. took over as a manager. Earl Beistline asked Douglas to teach the new Petroleum and Mineral program at the University of Alaska. He was supposed to teach the Natives something about mineral industry in order to qualify them for jobs on the field. He was with that program from 1965 to 1975 and lots of his students are still in the field. Some are at the Red Dog area, and some are still with the oil companies. Some of them even became preachers.

Douglas asked one how he became a priest since he hadn't shown any tendencies towards that, and he told that after hearing Douglas preach for two years, he decided to give it a shot.

32:00 The program gave many students a chance even though not all of them got into the mineral field. They got jobs in various places: there were the two preachers, and some became state police.

One time in 1983 or 1984 a police car drove behind Douglas on Steese Highway with a siren on. Douglas hadn't done anything wrong, but he pulled over and one of his former students came up to him with a big grin on his face. He explained that he had just wanted to scare Douglas a little bit.

Douglas tells that he's proud of the people who went through his class and that he still gets calls from them sometimes. He was able to retire after 1975 and he was 60 years old at that time.

34:23 Then starting from 1974, he represented a mining company out on the Chistochina and did that from 1974 to 1981. That was a big experience, and Douglas saw all the operations out there, did a huge drilling program that involved 5 or 6 drills and then the price of gold was too low for the operation to be economic so they waited until the price of gold started coming up again. In 1979, the price of gold was good again and Douglas designed a 5-section sluice box which eliminated any down time as far as cleanups were concerned.

They were able to handle all the throughputs [?] from the screens. They could close off one section and open another so that they could clean up one sluice box while operating the other. That's how they never had any downtime during cleanups and since then, there are quite a few multiple section boxes around the country today.

36:53 In 1971 Douglas partnered up with 4 people and started a company called Resource Associates of Alaska. That was built into a multi-million dollar company and sold to Nerko Company [sp?] that was incorporated in Portland in 1981. Since then, Douglas has been associated with placer mining outfit GHD around Circle country for a several years. They moved from Circle to Seward Peninsula –area around Candle, where they stayed for 3 years after which they moved to Tofty area near Manley Hot Springs. They were there for about 4 years and closed down the operation “this past year.”

38:08 Margaret says that Douglas has seen a good part of the state, and he tells that that's his sole profession. Most mining engineers do something else too. Out of a class of 30, maybe 10 will get into mining engineering while the rest take up civil engineering or go into other professions. Douglas was one of the few who stuck with it. He tells he has a terrible rating for being away from home 80-90% of the time, and says he doesn't understand how his family stayed together, but thanks his wife for that.

Margaret says that Douglas has also been involved with volunteer work and with Pioneers of Alaska. He was the president last year. He tells that the previous year he was the grand president and had to travel all around the state. There's some 8,000 [pioneers?] in the state and there are 17 Igloos and an auxiliaries. Douglas had to visit each of them and since he was born and raised in Alaska, he knows people from every town.

[End of the recording.]