

Call number: 94-13-09

Name and place: Mark Ringstad [with Rose Ringstad] interviewed by Margaret Van Cleve

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Margaret introduces the recording and says that Fairbanks was a small, about 2,000 people town when Mark moved in in 1926. She asks what Mark's earliest memories are of Fairbanks. Mark tells that in early days there wasn't much by the way of entertainment, but people made their own fun. There was no TV in town and only later there was a radio station. Entertainment was made by locals. There were the Moose Hall and the Eagle's Hall, where there were dances about once a week. Boxing was quite popular those days too, and the halls would have boxing matches once a week or so.

The kids mostly played sports: hockey and basketball. Mark says that he doesn't know what boys did, but boys played sports unless they were getting into trouble. The early hockey and curling happened at the Chena River underneath the bridge and on both sides of it. People would watch it from the bridge. Later, hockey moved to Griffin Park and then near the Pioneer Brewery that's now North Star Borough building. Later on, the indoor rinks came to University and to Carlson Center.

The curling rink moved from the river to a building in the 800-block on 2nd Avenue. It was there for many years until they built the curling rink at lower 2nd Avenue.

2:39 The school burnt in 1932, and Mark thinks that he was in the 5th grade at the time. Classes were spread all over town, and Mark's classes were in the American Legion building which was right across the street from the present 5th Avenue Building that the borough owns. There's the McKinley bank now.

Margaret says that everything was within a walking distance then. Mark says that it was a large school with all 12 grades there, and it was made of wood, so it burned right to the ground. The concrete school was built around 1934 or 1935. Mark thinks that everybody was happy to see the school building burn. It didn't take long to resume classes, however.

Margaret asks if the school burned at night. Mark tells that early in the morning everybody woke up and there was no school.

4:08 Margaret asks who some of his teachers were and he tells that Mrs. Myers is still around and Miss Olson too. They lost Anabeth Hanlon a couple of years ago due to a car accident and she was loved by everyone. Most of the people had her for a teacher at one point or another. Their 2nd grade teacher was the superintendent's wife, Mrs. Moore. They had Miss Anabeth Renney Parkisson. They had Miss Young, Miss Clayman, and a high school coach Ray [Unclear] who was very popular. Olson W. Walton from Walla Walla, Washington, was their math, physics and chemistry teacher and everybody liked him. He passed away 4-5 years ago. There was their 3rd grade teacher Miss Elarth [sp?]. She later married a man named Pratt who was an accountant for the F. E. Company. The grades weren't combined in those days.

5:57 In those years, one either passed or stayed in their grade and in the first grade they had a fellow who was 5-6 feet tall because he never passed and they didn't let him to second grade. Nowadays everybody passes even if they don't know math or English. Mark thinks it's a bad system. Those days' teachers made one learn.

Margaret asks if kids had to work in those days. Mark tells that there were lots for kids to do because they didn't need a driver's license to drive the car. Lots of the 6-8 grades would drive cars and trucks, but their main industry seemed to be cutting wood because everybody burned wood. That was a local little industry. The kids would cut wood and deliver it and nobody checked if they had licenses or not. They hauled coal, dirt, and gravel with dump trucks and before they were big enough to do that, they would sell newspapers to make a little spending money.

7:33 Margaret asks if Mark did any wood cutting and he tells he didn't, but he got into hauling [wood?] with a truck and delivering it to homes. They hauled long logs and some other guy would saw them up. There was work in cutting the trees,

then in hauling them and then cutting them to pieces. Woodcutting was quite an industry back then and their first power house that the NC-Company had been wood powered. They had a little railroad that went down Barnett Street to Old Week's Field which was the airport in those days. They used it to haul wood for the power house.

Margaret asks if most of it came from Farmer's Loop –area and Chena Ridge. Mark says the wood came from all around town until it was gone.

After wood got scarce, Captain Lathrop got into coal industry. They had a railroad come through. That's what brought Mark's father in: his father was an accountant for the railroad. Coal [mining] was developed and lots of wood burning stoves around town could burn coal at the same time. The town started suddenly burning coal all the time. Then, years later, people started heating with oil, which is what the most of the town uses now.

9:11 Margaret says that she wants to talk a bit about Mark's mother and father who met in Anchorage when it was hardly more than a tent city. Mark tells it was a tent city and that he remembers how his mother told that Captain Lathrop charged \$5 dollars for relocating their tent and belongings for 3 blocks. Later, Cap became quite an industrialist in Alaska. He had a coal mine, theaters and apartment houses in Cordova, Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Mark's father came from Norway and mother from England. She was in Seattle when she met three other ladies who saw from a newspaper that a town in Alaska was giving a price for naming it. The town had been named Anchorage, and the ladies wanted to see how Anchorage was like. They traveled to Anchorage and that's where Mark's parents met.

Mark's father mined across the bay from Anchorage in Hope, and then he came back to Anchorage to work for the railroad that was pursuing to build the railway to Fairbanks. He worked as an accountant. When Mark's parents moved to Fairbanks, his father started working for the F. E. Company and later on he worked for a private accountant in town and did some of his own bookkeeping.

11:07 Margaret asks if Mark's mother went to work after her husband passed away in 1930. Mark tells that she worked in American Hand Laundry, which was

directly behind the Nordale Hotel on 3rd Avenue. They were popular in town and the business continued until the owner, Mrs. O'Gara, passed away and her nephew sold the laundry. Margaret asks if that was the same laundry where Clara Rust worked at, and Mark says it was, and that quite a few of the old-timers worked in that American Hand Laundry.

O'Garas were wonderful people who were always joking and everybody really liked them.

12:06 Margaret asks about the old-timers who were a “holdover from the early prospecting days.” She asks if Mark remembers anyone in particular. Mark remembers the Wien brothers. He didn't know the eldest brother Ralf who died in an airplane accident. The airfield, prior to Week's Field, was a long extension to the Cushman [Street] that went all the way to the Tanana River. Mark didn't know Ralph but he knew Sig and Fritz who were wonderful guys with a quite a history with flying.

[Mark knew] many of the bush pilots. There was Harold Gilliam, Morris King, Bob Reeves and [Unclear] Brennan, Archie Ferguson, and lots of others over the years. They were all great guys who did lots of mercy missions. They would go out on the fields and bring sick and hurt people to town. If someone from a village wanted to get to town, there was always a bush pilot to take him.

13:35 They tell a story that the bush pilots always carried a bottle of whiskey in the cockpit so they knew how the plane was flying. If the whiskey was on the neck of the bottle, they knew they were upside down. Mark says he doesn't know how true that story is. [Break in the recording.]

14:05 Margaret says that lots of the young boys in town were interested in flying and they'd spend time watching pilots take off and land. Mark says that the bush pilots were quite popular and there were a lot of them because there weren't many highways [and hence, air transportation was important]. People were interested in flying and high school children would take flying lessons. Several of them became pilots for bigger airlines later on. Albert Peterson took up flying in high school and became the chief pilot for Alaska Airlines. Eddie Steger took up flying then too and become one of the long-time pilots for Wien Airlines. Terrence McDonald became a chief pilot for one of the airlines in town.

Margaret asks if they would earn money to pay for lessons. Mark says he doesn't know how they paid, but thinks that the lessons weren't very expensive. If a person wanted to fly for an airline, they mostly had to start as bush pilots. Mark says he is guessing that lessons were taken out of their salary when they became pilots. He explains that most people didn't have money to take up flying those days, but thinks that if one was friends with pilots, one could probably fly for nothing. That was during the depression years, around 1932-1936.

16:08 Margaret asks if he did some flying, and Mark tells that he took flying at the junior year of college at the University of Alaska. He didn't want to do it commercially, but just because he thought he would like to fly.

After he graduated, he was busy at the Pepsi Cola factory and he didn't have much time to fly. He felt that if he couldn't fly at least 2-3 times a week, he'd lose the feel of the ship. Every time he went up there, the ship would feel strange because he only flew every other week. He gave it up.

Mark tells that Bachner at Phillips Field Aircraft rented airplanes. He was at Week's Field before he went to Phillips Field. He had an airplane maintenance shop there and he rented planes. After a person soloed, they could rent airplanes any time they wanted. Mark tells that he didn't have an objective to fly, unlike Howard Miscovich, who soloed at the same time. Howard is mining at Poorman and flies into Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Ruby to get mail every once a week, so he had a purpose. Mark didn't really have a purpose and he soon gave it up.

18:00 Margaret asks about Mark getting drafted to the World War 2. He tells that he had just started at the university, and in spring he started working for the FE-Company for one of their drills out at Chatanika. Tommy Paskvan, a friend of Mark's, brought him his draft notice at 11pm one night when Mark was about 5 miles out of camp on one of the drills. He handed Mark the draft notice and since Mark didn't want to be "a ground pounder," he flew out to Seattle the next morning in order to join the Navy Air Corps. He passed everything but the color blind test, which kept him out.

Mark was staying with Wesley Munson, whose father was a captain for the Pan American [Airlines], and he was looking for something to do too. Wesley got into ATT course for civilian pilot training and became a Pan American captain himself.

Mark and some other people signed up for the Corps of Engineers to go to Pearl Harbor, but they got sent to Dutch Harbor and to Anchorage. A couple of months later Mark told his friends that he had gotten the draft notice and that he probably should get into service somewhere. He quit the corps and came to Fairbanks to enlist in the Air Force.

19:51 While he was sitting and waiting to sign up for the air force, Captain Dennison, who had been Mark's ROTC instructor at the University, came along and asked Mark what he was doing there. Mark explained that he had come to enlist at the Air Force, and Captain Dennison asked if he would like to enlist in Air Force reserve instead and go back to school. Mark signed up and went back to University, so he had made a complete circle and was back again.

After 8 months, they were put in active duty and they went to Ladd Field where Mark spent close to 2 years, mostly playing hockey and basketball. Then they were sent to Manchester, New Hampshire, and up and down the East Coast. After the war was over, they were sent back.

Margaret notes that Mark never got away from cold countries. Mark says that Maine is very much like Alaska as far as weather and vegetation go. Margaret says it makes sense to send people from cold countries to cold countries.

Mark tells that they were close to the Canadian border in a small town that had a large Air Force base. They were supposed to go over to the 15th Air Force in Azores, off the coast of Spain, but it got too close to the end of war and they were kept in the States long enough to get discharged. Margaret says that that must have been around 1944.

22:02 Margaret asks if Mark qualified for the GI-bill to go back to school, and he tells that he did. Margaret says that she noticed how the class of 1949 was a lot bigger than previous ones and wonders if many of Mark's class mates were GI's too. Mark tells that they had 32 in high school and 32 in college.

Margaret says that she sees that some of Mark's classmates are still in the area. Mark says that Jay Hammond was a disaster for the State of Alaska. McGhee and quite a few of those graduates are still around in Alaska.

GI bill was depending on whether one was in service or not. If one had been in service and got an honorable discharge, one got it. Margaret asks what the amount money was, and Mark tells that it was \$90 dollars a month, but then he corrects himself by saying that it was more than that money, because it took care of their tuition and books, and they weren't even using all of the money but had \$500 dollars left over. Dr. Ragel at the University was in the Air Force during WW2 and he was a geology professor. He proposed that the money they weren't using on the GI bill would be used in flying instruction. He worked a deal to teach ground courses at the University, and renting airplanes at Week's Field. They got to use the \$500 dollars to flying and lots of the kids learned to fly. Mark was one of those people.

24:32 Margaret asks if they actually issued a check to them, but Mark explains that that was just a transaction to the university and that they never actually saw the money. What they didn't use, they didn't spend.

He didn't sign up to ROTC classes because he figured that it's for the people who like being in the military. About two weeks later, he ran into Dr. Bunnell, who asked him why he hadn't signed up to ROTC. Mark told he thought he would take that in his last two years but Bunnell told him that people need to take it in their first two years. Mark didn't sign up for it and tried to figure a way around it.

Then 10 days later, he ran into Bunnell again and there happened to be stairs at the Administration Building that fell between them. Mark raised his hand and told Bunnell he was just about to go register to ROTC. He climbed up the stairs and signed up.

26:19 Margaret asks if that was a university requirement, but Mark tells that it was a stipulation in the land grant. All land grant colleges had to have two years for ROTC, which is fine for guys who like it. Several of Mark's old buddies who were in 3rd or 4th year graduated with 4 years of ROTC. When the war started, they were on automatic commission. That was nice if one had to be in service, but Mark thinks that nobody liked being in service. If one had to go in, it was better to go as an officer.

Margaret asks if it was a class that one got credit for and a grade. Mark says he doesn't remember getting a grade. It was just a requirement of the university.

Mark had Dr. Bunnell as his business law teacher and he was a good professor. Margaret asks if Bunnell always taught a class in addition to being on top of everything else. Mark tells that he taught business law and seemed to enjoy it.

28:00 Margaret asks where graduations were held, and Mark tells that they were in the old gymnasium, which is now the Signer's Hall. In Mark's day, it had a gymnasium downstairs and a library upstairs.

Margaret asks if Mark met his wife at the University. Mark tells that his wife had done 3 years of university at Michigan State, after which she came to the University of Alaska for her fourth year. She thought she would stay and teach for one year, but they met during Mark's junior year when she was graduating. [Break in the recording.]

She graduated in 1946 and taught for one year in Palmer. They were married in 1947, and Mark graduated in 1949. They had their first daughter when they still had a year in college. After that, they had 8 more children.

Mark graduated from mining engineering when the mining industry was in a slump. Most of the action was in South America. Mark stayed and worked on the family soft drink business, which was Pepsi-Cola and Miller High Life. They manufactured, bottled, and distributed Pepsi-Cola, and had a distributorship for Miller High Life. They served military bases, the University, the town and all the grocery stores and bars with their delivery trucks.

30:28 Because of the plight of the mining industry, Mark stayed in the family business. Margaret asks if he ever did any mining in the summertime, and Mark tells that most of his time was spent in prospecting. He mined at a small creek off of Gilmore [Trail] for 3 summers. He had a helper, sluice boxes, and everything except for enough gold.

Margaret says it must have got pretty expensive with need for big equipment. Mark tells that if one wants to set up a half-way decent placer operation, one has to have around \$150,000 dollars for the washing plant, and then one needs mining equipment like bulldozers and bucket loaders which costs another couple of hundred dollars. Then one has to build a camp. On the other hand, one can have

one or two man operation in shoveling dirt to sluice boxes, and one isn't involved with any of the expenses. Any sizable operations require quite a bit of money.

32:04 There are quite a few small mom and pop outfits that are run by the owners, or with two or three other people. Most of them seem to make a living, but they don't seem to have many large operations like they used to have when Mark was a kid. The FE-Company hired 1,200 people at the time. That was the main industry in town, but WW-2 put a stop to gold mining, and people had to mine antimony. Mark says it is a shame that the National Park Service blew up the Antimony Mine because it would have made a good tourist trap if they ran the park road that way.

Margaret asks if Mark was also involved with the Coal Bunkers and asks if that was a part of the Usibelli mine. Mark tells that after he got out of the soft drink business, he went to work for the Usibelli office in town. Later, they wanted to get rid of the "town end of it," which Mark took over for 5 years, after which he sold it to Sourdough Heating Express. They had trucks running around town with coal and oil, and later on they bought the Coal Bunkers. They are still operating it.

33:58 Margaret says that those businesses have been around a long time, and Mark says that Cap Lathrop started them. Mark tells that his half-brother worked for Cap. When he came back from England, he was about 17 or 18 years old, and he was tamping ties for the Alaska Railroad down in Healy. Cap was walking down the railroad tracks when he saw Mark's brother working and asked if he would like to work for him at the office. Tamping ties wasn't the best job in the world and "he couldn't say yes fast enough." He quit the railroad and went to work for Cap at the office in Healy.

Cap took him under his wing and sent him Outside to take accounting courses 2-3 times. He took charge of Cap's office there and later he became the president of the Lathrop Company. They were big in Olympia Brewery and they had apartment houses in Anchorage, Cordova and Fairbanks. They had theaters too. His [the half-brother's] name was Harry Hill and he became quite active in the company.

Mark remembers the one statement that he always attributes to Harry: He was at the company office one day when Mark and Harry were going out to lunch. Cap turned on the lights and asked Larry if he's the only one who turns on lights. That was quite cute coming from Cap. Margaret says he was called Alaska's first

millionaire, or one who made millions and hung onto them. Mark notes that he also invested his money in Alaska.

36:11 Mark says that he [Cap Lathrop] got his name from a tug boat that ran off the coast of Cordova.

36:27 Margaret mentions that Mark knew Lathrop in different stages in his life. Mark tells that Cap was killed by a railroad car that was coming down the tracks. In those days, the tracks were on a grade, and when they wanted an empty car, they would just cut it loose. When the cars were just coasting down, they didn't make much noise and Lathrop was on the tracks when the train was cut loose. The car hit him and killed him.

Emo Usibelli later became the big coal producer in the valley and he was killed in a similar way. A scraper was going up the hill because of Emo's order, although the driver said it was too steep to go. Emo insisted he will go straight up and the driver did, but the scraper stalled and ran over Emo.

They were both killed by accidents in same location because they were active at the mine. Both of them could have sat at the office, but they loved the work and being around the action, and they both got killed as a result.

38:08 There's a funny story about that coal mine down there. Emo worked for Cap Lathrop and used the blacksmith shop to sharpen his picks. On weekends he went prospecting for coal and pretty soon he found some. He quit with Lathrop and became his competitor.

Later on, Emo Usibelli hired a young engineer, Abe Shallot, from the University of Alaska and when Abe was working for Emo, he'd sharpen his picks at Emo's blacksmith shop and go prospecting for coal. Then he quit Emo and became a competitor for both Emo and Cap Lathrop.

Margaret says that they were talking about early 1960s and asks how Mark's mother [Sylvia Ringstad], who was the mayor of Fairbanks, got into politics. Mark tells that he doesn't know if it was because of her heritage in England, but she felt that people in cities should be active in their city governments and take a part in them in one way or another, and if they didn't, they shouldn't complain about what happened. She wanted to take an active part in the city council and take an active

part in city laws and regulations, and she thought that everybody should do the same thing.

40:29 Everybody used to come to the city council with a big spending program, but Sylvia always asked them how they were going to do that without raising the taxes. That was usually the end of the discussion. One can see the same problem with Clinton today.

Margaret says that Sylvia was the first female mayor. Mark agrees that she was. Then Margaret asks about the dignitaries she got to meet. Mark tells that she met President Eisenhower and Presidents Nixon and Roosevelt. Then she met Senator Stevens and the delegates in Washington D.C. She was always active in Washington D.C. as well as at state level.

42:21 Margaret says that before they started taping, they talked about how the weather has changed from what it used to be. Mark says that when they were kids, they had lots of cold weather. They had -35 to -65 belows [Fahrenheit]. He remembers lots of times looking at the thermometer at the corner of 1st and Cushman on their way to Pioneer Brewery where they used to play hockey, and it was -38 below. They used to say that if they waited for warm weather, they might not play hockey all winter. Nowadays they don't see that weather at all, and if they see some -30s and -40s, it's usually at night. The weather is undoubtedly changing for the better.

Every year there were two exciting happenings: one was the ice breakup time in the spring. The minute someone saw some action on the Chena River, they would get the word to the city powerhouse, who would blow the whistle. Everybody would come to the river to see the ice break up because it was quite an event that usually took the south end of the bridge out and often there were large ice cakes in the front steps of the NC-Company store.

Then if there was an ice jam, the ice cakes and water went all over the place. They always let school out when that whistle blew and all the kids went to see the ice go out.

44:31 Margaret asks if anybody made any bets, like at Nenana Ice Classic. Mark tells that Nenana Ice Classic was in being in those days and says that he thinks it

started really early, at the time when railroad from Anchorage was being built. Railroad workers must have been the instigators of the ice pool. Margaret notes that that must have been around 1923.

Mark tells that the other exciting [annual] event was flooding in Fairbanks. They always had a flood. The streets would be full of water, and the wooden sidewalks would float around, and kids would float around on sidewalks. They had to be careful not to get to the current of the Chena River or they would have to walk back from Nenana if they were lucky enough to have somebody catch them there.

45:41 Margaret says that the 1937 flood was the big one until they had another one in 1967. She asks where Mark's house was at that time, in 1937. Mark says they were probably living at 8th and Cowles. Margaret says it was on a little bit higher ground, and Mark tells that down town was lower, so there was more water. Mark and his family were "high and dry here" during the big flood of 1967, but they had water in the basement. They wanted to have a water filled basement so it wouldn't cave in.

They must have had 100 people "around here" for about a week. They came from all around, from Slaterville, and were taken to Farmer's Loop and to the University. Margaret says that Mark's house is on higher ground and that it must have been very attractive to move to the area. Mark tells that he built high because the state built highways that were elevated so that they were higher than the houses. Now the state is talking about rejuvenating Minnie Street and Mark supposes it would be built a foot or so higher since that's how they usually do it.

48:30 Margaret asks when he built the house, and he tells it was around 1955 or 1956. Rose injects that they moved in in April of 1955. They chose the location because it was close to school of Immaculate Conception that was built after the public school. Their children never had to take the school bus.

Margaret asks Mark to talk more about the characters from his childhood. He tells that the owner of the Pioneer Hotel was once driving down the 2nd Avenue at 3 am on the side walk. He was caught and tried, and at the trial he was the only sober one. The attorneys and the judge were all drunk. Everybody got a big kick out of that.

Then there were three businessmen in town who decided that they were unfairly taxed, and that they had taxation without representation, which caused them to refuse to pay their federal taxes. The next day they were in jail. They paid their taxes and got out. Mark says that they were right, since Alaska was a territory and didn't have a vote in Congress. Margaret says she hears that argument even now.

Mark says that if there would have been as many people opposing the taxes as there was at the Boston Tea Party, they might have avoided the jail, but there were only 3 of them.

51:15 Mark mentions farming in the 1930s and 1940s: There was quite a bit of farming in the Fairbanks area. There was a flour mill that was located where the News-Miner is now, and there was a slaughter house where the curling rink is. They also had three breweries but not at the same time. When one burnt down, other ones were built. Two of them were at the east end of 2nd Avenue and one was where the Fairbanks North-Star Borough Administration Building is.

There were also three dairy farms: Creamers, Bentleys and Hinckleys. They had between 50-80 milking cows. They had trucks that went around town with horses. They had a big bear skin rug over the milk and they went from house to house with a little double-ender sled. Later on, they started doing that with a large van with a little stove in it that allowed them to deliver milk all day. When they used horses, they had to deliver the milk before it froze.

52:41 There was a lot of activity in farming in those days, with lots of truck farmers [?], but mostly [they grew] vegetables. Potatoes were the big market, but they also had cauliflower, cabbage, and all kinds of other vegetables. There was quite a bit of truck farming until the war in 1940.

Margaret mentions Garden Island that is just in front of the Illinois Street. Mark tells that the original Garden Island was just about all greenhouses and vegetables. A slough that is now known as Noyes Slough cut it off.

53:34 Margaret asks about skating on the [Noyes] Slough. Mark tells that they leaned to skate before they learned to walk, and that they went skating on the river from 6pm to 10pm every night. When they got big enough, they started playing

hockey. Can Studio, a musical shop on 2nd Avenue, piped music on the bridge, and quite a few old-timers would skate to the music in the evening.

Margaret asks what they did with lights, and Mark tells that the City put lights down there, but that in early years they skated quite a bit in the dark. They had one or two lights on the bridge and the big lights came when the hockey rink moved to Griffin Field. They put lights on both sides and lighted the whole rink. Margaret asks if that was the location of the old swimming pool, and Mark says it was.

55:16 Margaret asks how long the outdoor pool was in operation. Mark tells it might have been in operation 10 years and its original owner was Ernie Fandler. He had a brother Emil, and they were from Switzerland. Ernie was the original owner of the swimming pool and he had it for 5 or 6 years, and then Mark's family had it for 5 years. The military ran it for a couple of years around 1941 and 1942. Ernie had it around 1937 onwards, and Mark had it from around 1940 to 1950 [?]. Margaret says she thinks it's a loss to the community since they have had lots of hot days when the swimming pool would have been packed.

Mark says that swimming and tennis are much nicer outdoors.

57:12 Margaret tells that she happened to read from the newspaper that Mark's family was selected to be the family of the year in 1988 Ice Festival. [Margaret reads a quote from the article.] Mark tells that they had 9 children who all went to local school. Almost all of them, except for two, went outside to University. They all came back to live in Fairbanks. Mark tells that they have 5 children "here," one in Anchorage, one still in the University of San Jose, one is in Dallas and one in Florida.

Margaret thanks for the interview.

[End of the recording.]