

Call number: 94-13-12

Name and place: Marjorie Conger is interviewed by Margaret van Cleave

Date: March 9th, 1994. Fairbanks, Alaska

Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen

Date of summary's creation: 07/08/2014

Series: Pioneer Tapes

Margaret introduces the recording, time and place, and states that Marjorie Conger is a postal office worker with a career spanning near over 2 decades, which were times of change within the postal service and the town itself. She asks how Marjorie moved to Fairbanks in 1952, and if she thought she would be there 42 years later.

Marjorie tells that it's been a long 40 years and that she initially joined her husband [Jack Conger] who was going to work in Fairbanks for a year. He thought that Marjorie and their son [Floyd Conger] should come up for the summer, which they did in April of 1952. He even brought a trailer so they could go home at the end of the three months. At the end of the three months, he suggested that they should stay the winter and Marjorie ended up staying 42 years. The summer was beautiful and their 2 year old son enjoyed it. He got acquainted with two good children.

Their boy thought that he didn't have to go to bed because it didn't get dark at night.

2:20 They came up with an airplane and took their dog with them. They had to put the dog in a kennel and it howled, which they could hear in the old Pan Am airplane. At that time, lots of the cargo was placed in front of the plane between the pilot and the passengers.

Margaret asks if Marjorie arrived in April during the breakup. Marjorie told that they arrived in late afternoon and Marjorie's husband took them to Northern on 1st Avenue that was close to Pioneer Hotel. The waitress said to Marjorie that she must be a cheechako and after she came back, Marjorie's husband asked how she knew that. She looked down and said it's because of the shoes Marjorie wore. Her

feet were muddy because the streets weren't paved at the time. Just Cushman street was paved. There were board sidewalks and Margaret says that heels would get stuck in cracks if one wasn't careful.

5:10 Margaret asks if Marjorie's husband had a house picked for her. It was covered with black tar paper and Marjorie was worried for a second, but inside of the cabin wasn't too bad. They had a large living room and a bedroom with a closet at the end of it. In addition, they had a kitchen and bathroom that wasn't completed yet. Marjorie told her husband she could put up with anything for three months.

That was a rented house in 102 Front Street and their landlord lived right next door. Fred Bruner was their first mail man and they had a little mailbox right in front of the building.

Margaret wonders how much they paid rent those days and Marjorie tells that they paid their electric bill but not their oil bill because they only had one tank that they shared with their landlord. Their rent was \$35 dollars a month but it wasn't too much, considering that the winters were so long and it would have cost a lot to heat that place. Houses were smaller those days.

7:41 Margaret asks who were some of their neighbors. Marjorie tells about Ron and Dorothy [Twogood] who weren't neighbors but they were good with children. They took the time to explain everything for the children. Frank and Irene [Dennison] were their landlords. [Unclear.] The people who used to babysit Floyd had a daughter whose name was Winnie Dennison. At that time she was about 13-14 years old. Then they had another rental place but Marjorie didn't get to know the residents who came and went.

After the three months, Marjorie's husband suggested that she should stay for the winter. Winters were long. She went to work for Francis Doyle and she would work from midnight to 8 am. Her son would be asleep that time.

The store was a liquor store and Marjorie became a manager there for \$1.70 per hour. Marjorie's shifts depended on holidays, and on holidays she would get fabulous tips of \$20 dollars or more. The guys would leave her with money

because they trusted her. She was like a bank. The people were making good money.

10:57 At that time, Fairbanks wasn't heavily populated like it is now. When Marjorie worked for Francis Doyle, she was held up. The guy lived just two blocks over. He bought a 6-pack of beer and Marjorie didn't have an opener so she went to the other room and when she came back, the man threatened her. She grabbed a 5th of liquor and told the man that if there's any hitting to be done, she would do it. That was 2am or 3am.

There was a little store in Slaterville where the man had killed a woman by hitting her in the back of the head. Then he got scared because Marjorie knew, and had called the police. The police came to the store and Marjorie told them everything he knew about the man. At the other store, the lady had gone to get something and the man hit her in the head with a wrench that Marjorie saw on him. Marjorie had to go to Juneau for the trial and the man turned out to be a soldier.

13:41 Margaret asks if the trial was moved to Juneau because the man was a soldier, but Marjorie says that it was moved because they thought that he wouldn't get a fair trial in Fairbanks. He was well-known. The police called Marjorie and asked her to identify him and her husband got worried that they would bring the man to their new home, but the police invited Marjorie to go to the station instead.

Even after that, Marjorie didn't take any precautionary measures.

15:13 Margaret asks how much longer Marjorie worked at the liquor store and she tells that she got jittery and didn't work there much longer.

Those days 6-pack cost \$1.50. She got a job from Monty's Department Store but wasn't too happy there so she took a civil service test. Maude Boyle had just left the post office and Helen Bell was the new postmaster, so Marjorie got hired there in 1958.

Margaret asks about the fires that happened while she was working at Monty's. Marjorie tells that the Pioneer Hotel burnt in a big fire. The town was small then

and most of the houses were wooden. Marjorie remembers the old Bailey Bridge that wasn't concrete like it is now [and burned]. Nordale Hotel had another big fire. They watched the Pioneer Hotel burn. Lots of people had rooms there and Marjorie's husband knew people who stayed there so he wanted to go see that they were okay.

18:42 Margaret directs the discussion into Marjorie's time at the post office, and asks if it was in the Old Federal Building. Marjorie confirms that it was there. When she first started working there, she was boxing mail before Bill [Unclear], who was the superintendent of mail, came there. Bill was a Finlander, but Marjorie doesn't want to tell stories about him on tape.

Margaret changes the subject to Statehood Act. Marjorie remembers how Ralph Rivers and a lot of people didn't think Alaska would be better off as a state. Marjorie herself was for the statehood.

Marjorie had a friend who worked with her at the Circus Food Company and she asked how many rooms Marjorie's igloo had. People had misconceptions because they didn't have a television like they do now.

20:55 Margaret mentions a booklet, Reflections on Statehood, and asks if Marjorie remembers the special stamp that came out. Marjorie tells that the stamp had a caribou on it.

She started from the bottom at the post office and worked her way up, and when she was selling stamps, around 1959 or 1960, an airmail stamp cost 7 cents.

Before, the mail used to come by train and it was trucked up to Fairbanks. It took around 47 hours for the truck to drive to Fairbanks. Then the air mail service started.

Margaret says that Marjorie mentioned the mail coming first by railroad and then there was a truck, or a rail [?] car that brought it. Marjorie tells that it was a big van truck. She remembers men opening big doors in the back and having sacks of mail that came through the highway. That was first class mail that was a couple of cents cheaper than air mail.

23:11 Margaret asks if Marjorie remembers what starting salaries were at the post office. She tells that she got \$1.85 for an hour. At that time, one had to work for a year before one became a regular, and would be assured 40 hours a week. Marjorie worked 40 hours a week anyhow.

She says she took women from states to see the post office. The women would ask what all the offices were for since they had lots of little offices there and Marjorie explained what they were for. Marjorie did reception work. Margaret asks if the post office was at the main floor and the court house at above. Marjorie tells that it was so, and that there was a lunch room and locker rooms downstairs.

25:29 Margaret asks if Jack Tripp was a postmaster, and Marjorie tells that when she started, Helen Bell was the postmaster and Jack Tripp came in around 1960.

During the flood [of 1967], Marjorie went to work every day but she was going to University. There was work to be done despite of the flood and people would come to ask how so-and-so was doing, and if they had got their mail. They had enough things to do. Marjorie was the head of the vehicle department at the time, and she had all the trucks that couldn't be driven since the streets were flooding.

A couple of trucks got flood damage when they were on routes, and the trucks that were on special delivery got damaged.

27:55 Marjorie remembers how her assistant, Chester, fell asleep while sitting on a waste paper basket. Chester had some kind of a sickness that made him fall asleep. Marjorie liked him.

Marjorie tells that [Unclear] and she were always going to write a book about their days at the post office. They had a lot of romancing and they thought that the book would have been funny, but she [the other person] passed away.

29:30 Margaret asks what Marjorie meant by romance and she tells that once the superintendent of mail noticed that so-and-so wasn't at work in the morning, and

told them to go wake him up, and wake up Betty as well. He knew [that they were both there]. There were no secrets.

One lady who lived in Marjorie's apartment building had to be talked out of committing suicide at the river because her husband was sleeping around. Marjorie spent two hours telling her that it wasn't worth it. She got her talked out of it.

31:15 Margaret mentions a customer who got locked out of a mailbox. Marjorie tells that that was Eva McGowan. She had lost her key and the post office workers always had to open her box for her.

There was Phil who had a big stick and he woke up people who were sleeping their nights at the post office by hitting them in the bottom of their feet with that stick. Later they started locking the post office at 12am but in the beginning they used to keep it open all the time. That was before there were shelters, and the post office was a warm place to be. Phil was the janitor.

33:48 Margaret asks about Marjorie and her husband's boating hobby. Marjorie tells that Oscar Queen [sp?] had a construction company that built something in Hawaii for 4-5 years. Jack wanted to buy his place at Salcha River, but Oscar just let them use it while he was gone. In the meantime, a bear got into the cabin and made a mess of it. Every Thursday night Marjorie would get the boat packed up and on Friday night they would head up the Chena and Salcha Rivers to the cabin. They had an airboat, because Jack was an airboat fiend. Jack had lost his eye and didn't qualify for flying [?] but he got into air boats. One doesn't need deep water with air boats.

One time they had trouble with corroboration when they went up river. The engine wouldn't fire, but Jack managed to throw a rope over a tree and stop them from drifting. Their son was worried, but they were just having fun with the boat.

36:39 Margaret asks what business Marjorie's husband was in while she was working at the post office. Marjorie tells that he was working for a company from Portland, Oregon. He never wanted to be a business agent but Marjorie helped him to make his mind up about becoming one. He liked being a boss but he didn't

like offices. He got Betty [Unclear], who is an old-timer in Fairbanks, to be his bookkeeper.

When Marjorie's husband retired, they had bought a motor home and they decided they'd take it easy and go to States in order to look for a place to retire. After 7 months, however, they hadn't found a place. Jack liked Missouri, but all the women there had been farmer's wives and homemakers, and Marjorie didn't think she would have been happy there, so they left back to Alaska. Mr. Barnette, the person who almost talked Jack into staying in Missouri, is still living and he's 94 years old.

39:15 Margaret asks if any of the mail got wet during the flood. Marjorie tells that they managed to keep the mail dry and that they weren't getting as much due to airplanes. She doesn't think there was any more loss during that time than there was normally, like letters being torn open by machines. They were good about keeping the mail dry.

Margaret asks about the airport annex. Marjorie tells that after they got the trucks, they [the postal service?] built an annex and they [the post office trucks?] moved out there. They rented a building from Frontier Flying Company who had a big garage. Then later on, they built their own garage for the trucks.

That was during the time Tripp was there and Tripp thought that Marjorie would do well on that job. She didn't know much about trucks, but Chester did and Marjorie was there to see that things got done. She filled work orders for trucks that needed some work to be done, and Chester would take them to Jean. Chester knew about trucks and trouble-shooted them before taking them to be fixed. He also did minor repairs.

42:20 Margaret asks if Marjorie worked 20 years at the post office, and she says she did. Marjorie had got back to claims and inquiries, and she answered the post office telephone. Some people were mad about their social security checks that hadn't come and Marjorie had to be sweet and diplomatic. Then just before she retired in 1974, she was Jeannette Walker's personal assistant. [Break in the recording.]

43:54 Margaret asks about difficult customers Marjorie encountered while working at the claims department. She tells she remembers one in particular. He was a guy who worked for the University and had ordered some bread from San Francisco. Evidently, hadn't got his first notice and the second notice said he needed to pick it up because it was perishable. He came in, got his package, went to claims department and pounded desk furiously. Marjorie explained that she was sorry, but the package wasn't insured and they have no way of compensating for the bread. The post master told Marjorie afterwards that she doesn't have to take that from anybody, but she just had let the man blow off some steam.

Marjorie didn't take things personally. Sometimes they got good feedback, like from Johnny Albright at Samon's Hardware, whom they pampered by putting all the things together so he only had to sign his name. He gave them complements. His daughter was really sweet too.

46:37 Margaret asks if Marjorie knew lots of the business people, and she says that she did. Johnny always went to the Mecca Bar and had "one short one," while waiting for the post office to open. Then he picked up his mail every morning. He was always the first or second customer in Mecca at 9 am.

Mecca didn't open until 10 am but Marjorie thinks they knew Burnettes. Mecca was a ¼ block away from the Post office. June doesn't know what there is now. [Unclear talking.]

48:25 When Marjorie first came to Fairbanks, her sister sent her some bananas because she didn't think they had any fresh fruit in Alaska. She sent them on air mail but not on special delivery and wrote June a letter telling about it. By the time the bananas got to Fairbanks, however, they were over ripe and mushy but Marjorie never told her about that. Those days, it took a couple of weeks for mail to come in.

Lindies' sent lots of packages to the bush, but also Piggly Wiggly's. Marjorie handled their groceries.

50:13 Marjorie was known by almost everybody. They still remember her and she still has to answer mail related questions.

Margaret says that lots of people worked there for a long time. Marjorie says it was a good job. In 1964, things were really slow and there weren't many jobs around town. They were lucky to have jobs then. There was room for advancement if people proved themselves and were interested.

52:09 Margaret asks which jobs Marjorie enjoyed the most at the post office. She tells that she enjoyed the work as assistant person the most because she had people coming and going from the jobs, especially in pipeline days. The Superintendent of Mail would call her and ask for this and that number of people [from a labor pool], and she'd see if the people were still interested in working. Sometimes they got through quite a few people before she found ones that wanted to work. The labor pool was for cases where a post carrier wouldn't show up at work. They'd call the person's home to find out that they had gone work for the pipeline. Two weeks' notice didn't mean a thing. It was trying but interesting. Now people have to take the civil service test in Anchorage.

54:17 Margaret asks if the civil service test was given every three months. Marjorie tells that they were just starting to give it [when she took it?] and out at Fort Wainwright, Lydia Barnes [sp?] used to give it. Radio announcers, FAA, foreign diplomats and people like that had to take it too. Tests were always scheduled on Saturdays and Marjorie didn't like that when she gave the tests. She had to work for 6 days. The tests were given at their lunch room where there was a long table and enough room.

Once Marjorie gave the test to a lady who did her hair and the lady was really nervous. Marjorie said she shouldn't be because that makes people perform worse. Marjorie always tried to put people at ease before the test.

56:15 Margaret asks about Marjorie's retirement party. She tells that that was in 1976. She received an award for excellence in 1964. Mrs. [Unclear] and Marjorie went to San Diego and she received the award on her birthday. Two years later she retired. It seemed to Marjorie that everybody was at her party and John Wilson retired the same day. Marjorie received a clock from the clerks and management and from the Union she received a painting of the Malamute Saloon

in Ester even though she didn't drink. The reason was that she always took people from out of state to see the Malamute Saloon.

Marjorie can't remember where the party was held. Margaret starts closing the interview but Marjorie wants to tell that she's met lots of interesting people in Fairbanks.

[End of the recording.]