

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

Name and place: Martin Ott interviewed by Margaret van Cleave

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Margaret van Cleave introduces the recording with Martin Ott who's a life-long Alaskan, born to a mining family. He's also been a miner and is a founding member of the Alaska Independence Party.

Margaret asks what it was like to live in Rampart as a small child. Martin Ott tells that he was 7 years old when he left. He had a twin brother, a brother who was two years older, and a sister who was 4 years older. They had a good life with lots of fun when they were kids and not responsible. In summertime the kids used to play with water at the mining operation. Their father was mining with hydraulic giants and everything was manual labor.

2:01 Margaret asks if the mine was outside Rampart, and Martin tells it was 4 miles out of Rampart, on Hunter Creek. They usually lived in town in wintertime and out on the creek during the summer, from the time when the snow started melting and until freeze-up. They had at least 3 months in the whole mining season. Margaret asks if they fished on the side, and Martin tells that their big sister used to take them to Big Minook, which was about a mile below their mining operation. They used to go there fish for grayling.

Margaret asks if they did a little gold panning too, but Martin tells that they were too young to pan. Sometimes they found nuggets that they took to their dad who told them to throw them into the sluice box.

3:50 After freeze-up, they lived in the town of Rampart because Martin's older brother and sister were going to school.

Margaret asks if all the miners lived in Rampart during the winter. Martin tells that some miners, the old bachelors, might stay at creeks either prospecting or working underground. They would haul the dirt out of the shaft and sluice it in the spring, so there was always activity.

Martin's dad had a pretty full-time job keeping track of the children in wintertime because they didn't have a mother. There were 4 children: Martin and his twin-brother Richard, the older brother Adolph, and their sister Ann.

5:58 Margaret asks about facilities in Rampart. Martin tells that at the time, there was a NC-Company [Northern Commercial Company] store and another store that was called Julia's Ram [?] Store, which they used to call the Old Store. Martin's father used to go down there and have a [unclear] sessions off and on in wintertime. Those were the only two stores in Rampart. Then there was the Alaska

Commercial Company store but Julia's store was the one that was usually always open. Sometimes the NC store was closed in winter, but there was a lot of activity during the summer. Both stores were for general merchandise. Margaret asks about the post office, and wonders if that was in the general store. Martin tells that there was a post office there, but he can't remember which store it was in.

7:53 Margaret asks where Martin's house was and if it was right at the main part [of town]. He tells that it was towards the lower end of town, which was spread to over quarter of a mile. Their house was towards the lower end of town that was down river. It was a small log house with a woodstove. Everybody burned wood. They had a neighbor who was a black man by the name of Eugene Swansson. He had a woodcutting setup and he cut wood in the wintertime. They had to carry wood in because that was their only source of heat in winter.

Margaret says there was a coal seam across the river, and Martin tells that there was one in the area but he can't remember anybody ever developing it.

9:36 Margaret asks if Martin knows any other interesting people in Rampart and he tells that he remembers that out in the creek their closest neighbors were Mr. and Mrs. Clemons. He thinks Mr. Clemons [Ted Clemons] was a brother of Mark Twain. They were the closest neighbors. Martin and his brother used to run there to visit every now and then. They were good neighbors. Mr. Clemons died in the winter of 1925 and Mrs. Clemons was a widow from thereon. She left Rampart in 1946, and Martin saw her the last time in Fairbanks.

Mrs. Clemons run the mining operation with her pick and shovel and overalls and she did well until she finally sold out. Margaret says she kept the operation going for 20 years after her husband died.

11:24 Margaret wonders if there were any Native people who were involved with mining. Martin tells that his father used to hire Natives in the summer. Tommy Evans was one of the Natives they used to hire and some from the Mail [?] family too. Martin tells that his father also used to hire Johnny Wheel.

Margaret asks what kind of work they did, and if they ran any equipment, but Martin says there was no equipment to run. The only special equipment they had were the hydraulic giants and all the rest of the work was done with a pick and shovel. If some rocks were too big, they would take a wheelbarrow and roll them out.

Martin says he split lots of rocks later with a sledge hammer. They broke rocks that were too big for the hydraulic giants to move. All the pay dirt was moved by giants and there were no bulldozers or caterpillars. If there was something really heavy, Martin's dad usually hired Tommy Evans' couple of horses to haul pipe and other heavier items that were hard to move by hand.

14:00 Martin says that Charlie Swanson and his wife, who lived 2 miles above them, lend a pipe to Martin's dad. [Martin explains how the pipes were used.] That was the only way they moved pay dirt. Martin's father didn't have to do much stripping unlike the neighbor above them who was stripping mud banks that were 15-20 feet deep. Water would run black when he ran the hydraulic giants.

When the water was running black by their house, their father would dig a gravel hole in the creek close by and they'd be drinking crystal clear water regardless. Martin asks if Margaret knows about that trick, but she says she hasn't tried it. They'd carry water with old 5-gallon gasoline cans. In the wintertime they just chopped a hole in the ice. The creek had a fair amount of water and good, clear ice. They never thought of filtering it but Martin thinks that he wouldn't be alive if the water had been contaminated.

17:27 Margaret asks about sternwheelers. Martin says that there was a tourist boat that ran from Whitehorse to Nenana on the Yukon. When the ice broke, the boats would start running and did their last trips around freeze-up. Steamer Yukon, which was a tourist boat, would run all summer. It carried tourists but also freight to Dawson. In summertime it only went to Dawson although in spring it came from Whitehorse. The tourist run was between Dawson and Nenana.

Margaret says that the tourists probably came by railroad to Nenana and then got in boat up there.

19:00 There was a narrow-gauge railroad that went to Skagway. Margaret clarifies that it was the White Pass Railroad. Martin says that that's how his sister moved out in 1924: She took the steamer to Whitehorse and the narrow gauge railroad to Skagway and so on. In those days, the only boats were from Alaska Steamship Company. Margaret says that was about the only way to get "up here."

Alaska Steamship Company had the monopoly on freight and passenger runs from Seattle to Seward.

20:23 Margaret asks how long Martin lived in Rampart and he tells that he moved to Nenana with his two brothers in 1925. They took a small boat from Rampart to Tanana and from Tanana they took the steamer General W. Jakobs and then Alaska Railroad's steamboat from Tanana to Nenana. That was their first steamboat ride and they lived in Nenana for about a year. They lived with Otto Bayless and Bella Bayless, and their father stayed in Rampart. Martin and his twin brother went to first grade at the public school in Nenana. Margaret asks if it was just the elementary school or if they had all the grades. Martin says it was all the grades.

22:09 Margaret asks if they had any Native students in the school, and Martin says there were a few Natives but they weren't an overwhelming majority. Margaret says that most of the white population was railroad people who were employed by the railroad company and the barge line. Martin says that there were also business people and their families. There was a powerhouse there and the NC-Company hired people in wintertime. Then there were families who hauled mail from Rampart to Nenana to Tanana in wintertime.

That mail was run by horses and they took passengers. Margaret asks if they were on the river, and Martin tells that they were, cutting across the Minto Flats, going to Manley and Tolovana, Tofty, Fish Lake, and then to Tanana. There was one team going and one coming at all times. If they had passengers, they had bricks that they would put on the stove overnight and bring them out for foot warmers in the morning.

24:34 Otto Bayless was one of the drivers for horse teams and in summertime he usually fired the boiler at the powerhouse for steam. The power plant used coal fires at that time, and the railroad was burning

coal too. Steamboats were cordwood fired. They were in Nenana until about July when they moved to Holy Cross. Martin says that they might have gotten into too much mischief so they were sent into a mission.

Margaret asks if there were other people at Bayless house, and Martin tells that there were. There were two older boys and a sister, and then Mrs. Bayless had another baby around 1927. Her name was Mary Bayless [now Mary Roberts] and she lives in Tok. She's the only one of Bayless children who is still alive.

27:10 Margaret says Bayless's must have had a big house to have so many kids in it. Martin tells that it had an upstairs in it. He tells how his siblings are doing: his two brothers have passed away.

Margaret asks about Martin's experiences in Holy Cross, and wonders if that was run by the Sisters of Saint Ann. Martin says it was run by the Jesuits. The sisters of St. Ann served as teachers and supervised the girls. They had about 150 children there. They were elementary school age, but some of the kids were younger. Some were only 2 years old. Some left after they got through grade school, some stayed for a while and worked at the mission, primarily cutting wood and sawing lumber.

29:06 Margaret asks if they had big dormitories, and Martin tells that they did. All their beds were made out of wood and had a reindeer hides for mattresses. There were no luxuries and Martin still likes wooden chairs. Most of their benches didn't have backs on them and especially at the church they had to sit straight up.

At Holy Cross, they went to church every morning. The church bell ran about 6am and they were in the church 6:30am. Then there was breakfast and the school started. In the afternoon, from about 1 to 3:30, the children were sawing and splitting wood and carrying it into places where it was needed. Then they went back to school and did a couple of hours of school. They had to do their chores during daylight. They did wood chopping every day but not all the kids were involved in that. The girls often spent their time sowing, patching, and making stuff. They helped with all the domestic chores, but they also packed wood for their stoves.

31:43 There were 53 stoves at the mission that burned 400 cords of wood a year.

Margaret says that that would strip the country quickly, and wonders if boats brought in more wood. Martin says that wood was cut locally, and Margaret asks if they had to go further and further. Martin explains that they used horses for hauling it in and says that in all those years they didn't have to go more than 4 miles. They got lots of wood from a little valley and hill behind the mission. It was mostly spruce and birch.

Martin tells that in the spring time, after the snow melted, they had to take care of the gardens. They raised 60 tons of potatoes every summer and other vegetables too, so the children had plenty of work to do. They had to weed the gardens and pull potatoes up. They had a few cows so they went to the meadow to cut hay which they piled in stacks and hauled it to barns. They had at least a dozen cows but no chickens. Every once in a while they had pigs and up to 4 horses. They didn't have eggs or any luxuries.

34:27 Breakfast was usually oatmeal one morning and cornmeal the next. Margaret says that that is now considered a healthy diet – low in fat, and Martin says they seldom saw any sugar. They used to have margarine when they first got to Holy Cross, but it was outlawed for a number of years. The government thought that margarine was too much competition for the dairy industry and that's why it was outlawed. After that, they didn't have anything on their bread. They drank their tea plain too. There might have been a cup of sugar in a 3-4 gallon bucket so they could barely taste it.

All their meals were plain and their diet was primarily reindeer and salmon, white fish and lingcod in the winter. They had lots of fish available. Margaret says that they really utilized local resources, and Martin tells that in summertime the boats would bring flour for bread, cornmeal, oatmeal and split peas. They even brought in bales of hay and oats for the horses.

36:50 The boats brought in everything they needed. In wintertime, mail came by dog team from Fairbanks and Anchorage through McGrath and Iditarod. The mail carrier's route was 65 miles each way through flats.

Margaret asks if Martin knew some of the mail men. He says that Frank Walker was one of them, and the only mail man whom Martin remembers. He carried mail for years, even a year or two after the first airplanes arrived and mail was bidden to airplanes. [Break in the recording.]

38:04 Margaret asks who some of the sisters and fathers that Martin remembers were. Father Galana was the superior of the Jesuit order in Alaska. He was a very dynamic speaker and when he spoke from the pulpit, nobody ever fell asleep. Then Martin remembers Father Edward Cunningham who was one of the priests there. Father DeLong had been there since founding of the mission in 1912. He was an elderly man with a paralytic handicap. He was able to walk but not do much else. Every once in a while he gave the mass, but usually he said it in a chapel. There were two chapels: one in the sisters' building and one in the priests' residence.

Some of the people who came and went were Father Paul O'Conner, Father Lakeesie [sp?], and Father Keys. Margaret asks if they also were teachers, and Martin says that the sisters were teachers and fathers only taught religion. Some of the fathers were temporary but some of them were there in permanent residence. Father DeLong had to take off every now and then to visit other communities. He would come to Fairbanks every once in a while but sometimes he also went to Seattle.

40:55 The headquarters of the Jesuits was in Portland. Father DeLong rounded up donations for the mission that was mainly funded by private contributions. Some of the kids were paid for by the government, maximum of \$15 dollars per month or something like that. They had no families. Most of the children were Native children.

There was another family by the time Martin was there with 1/8 Native children who looked white. Martin tells that in 1927 or 1928 Father DeLong acquired a brand new Caterpillar, a 15-gas Cat for hauling wood in place of horses. After they got the gasoline tractor, the horses weren't used to hauling wood. The Cat was much more efficient than the horses that had to be kept warm and hitched. With a tractor one is ready to go easily.

43:33 There was a steam laundry outfit that was out of Fairbanks. From then on they had a steam laundry. Before that, they had wooden washing machines that worked with a lever. They looked like barrel stoves and one operated a plunger inside. The girls used them and they had quite a few in there.

[End of the recording.]