

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

Name and place: Martin Ott interviewed by Margaret van Cleave

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The interview continues by Margaret saying that the mission at Holy Cross switched from hand powered to steam powered washing machines. Martin says their water supply was an 80-foot well that was dug by hand and it was operated by a Fairbanks Morris Windmill [?]. They had quite a bit of wind there. They had water tanks as a reserve water supply that was underground so that they would keep from freezing. Even when the windmill wasn't running, there was water available. The water was really good and Martin never heard of anybody getting sick even though it never was tested. Later, they got spring water from a little creek and found out that the spring was high enough that it could be directed to their holding tank by gravity. They didn't have to use the windmill much in summertime. They had the softest water Martin had ever seen and soaps gave really nice lather.

2:04 The steamboats that were running were Alaska Railroad riverboats by the names of General J. W. Jacobs and Chaperson Davis [sp?]. One was going down the river and the other one was going back up river. That was until 1933.

In 1933, they built the steamer Nenana and it made its maiden voyage down the Yukon in the spring of 1933. Martin's older brother Adolph was one of the firemen on it. Margaret says he must have known Captain Adams then. Martin tells that Adolph was firing the boilers for four years until he moved to Fairbanks in 1936 and gave up navigation.

Margaret asks if Martin ever traveled on the steamer Nenana. He says he made one trip in it in 1936 as a mess boy but couldn't take the heat. Being a mess boy, he had to wash all the dishes and the coal fired stove was right across from him. He was sweating for two weeks but didn't want that kind of a life so it only lasted for two weeks.

4:11 Martin tells that he was in Holy Cross when the first airplane arrived in 1928. The company was primarily owned by Rodaba [sp?] in a partnership deal. Margaret asks if that was where Martin's interest in plains started, and he tells that one of the pilots was A. A. Bennett who was a tall, lanky guy and flew the first airplane to Holy Cross. In 1928, he hauled in one of the brothers who had missed the last boat from Fairbanks in latter part of September. Last boat would leave Holy cross in the last part of September and they had to get back to Nenana before the river froze and get beached.

Bennett flew a 5-place Zenith airplane with a closed cabin and an open cockpit in the rear. From talking with old Jim Hutchison, Martin knows that the plain had 220-horse whirlwind engine that he hand propped. Margaret asks if it means getting in front of it and hand-cranking it, which must have been

dangerous. Martin says that it was dangerous, but that he [Bennett] was a husky guy and well experienced. He hand-propped the thing and in cold weather he ran around in his reindeer coveralls. Pilots those days wore high mukluks that were way up their knees in case they had to jump in the snow in cold weather. He had the reindeer suit and his emergency gear consisted of a rifle and a bottle of whiskey.

7:45 Margaret asks if Martin was talking about Bennett. He says he was, and continues that their company sold to Eielson in 1929 and Bennett moved to Idaho. Eielson didn't come through Holy Cross but just bought their company. Bennett was a hired pilot and there were other owners to the airlines. Dick Wood was one of the owners.

Martin says that the second airplane was flown by Thomas Gerard. He had to pick up a wireless operator in 1928 and it was one of the first cabin airplanes that were flown in Alaska. It wasn't an open-top plane but had a cabin. The previous planes were open-top or with an open cockpit. Anyway, Gerard flew there in November to pick up the wireless operator to take him to Fairbanks for medical attention. He had hard time taking off and the airplane when the airplane veered to the left and hit the brush, coming down straight on its nose. It wasn't over 15 feet in the air and nobody got hurt, but Gerard had to spend the whole winter rebuilding the airplane. He flew it back to Fairbanks in the spring.

10:43 Margaret asks what happened to the wireless operator, and Martin tells that Bennett came with his open cockpit plane and rescued him. They were from the same company. He was a wireless operator and could send a message out.

Martin says that the following experience was with a first diesel powered airplane that was flown from Long Island to San Francisco and from there to Seattle. [Phone rings, break in the recording.] The diesel powered airplane was donated to the Catholic Mission. Then Packard Motor-company donated a 220-horse Packard diesel engine. The plane was shipped to Fairbanks from Seattle and it was assembled in the latter part of December of 1930, when it was flown to Holy Cross.

They hired Ralph Wien to fly as a copilot to show Brother Feltes around because he was brand new to Alaska. Ralph Wien was the older brother of Noel Wien. Martin saw the airplane do 4 different flights. In the end of September, Brother Feltes and Wien flew with Father DeLong and another priest by the name of Father Post from Holy Cross to Nome and then to Kotzebue. In October 1930, they were preparing for a return trip to Holy Cross and had warmed the airplane up but a snow storm was coming in so Brother Feltes let Ralph Wien to take the airplane up to show the local priest the country from the air while Brother Feltes watched from the ground. The airstrip was only about 750-feet long and Ralph tried landing two times, but on 3rd approach, he landed straight down on his nose and the airplane crashed, killing the three of them. There was Ralph Wien, Father [William] Walsh and Father DeLong. There was no fire, which was amazing. With a gas engine there would have been a fire bomb and that's why Martin has been partial to diesels.

15:50 Margaret asks how much longer Martin stayed at the mission, and he tells that he left about in April of 1935 and moved to Anchorage. That's where his brother Adolph, who was two years older than Martin, was wintering. In summertime, he was a fireman on the steamer Nenana. Anchorage was the

railroad center. When the railroad repair program started in the summer, Martin was hired to work with a cook in a bridge gang. It was a 16-man crew and Martin got \$60 dollars a month. That was during the depression, in 1935. Martin stayed with the railroad and also got in the extra gang where he worked for Cleary Hotel for a while. Margaret explains that that was the overnight stop for passengers. Martin says he worked there for a while as a mess boy. He was pretty young, too young to get a hard job.

17:40 Martin moved to Fairbanks in 4th of July, 1937 and it's been his home since. 4 days after he got to Fairbank, Mrs. [Belua] Bayless had a job for him because she knew the owner of a mining camp at Eagle Creek. Martin got hired 8th of July at the claims, digging bedrock, breaking rock, hauling rock, tending the sluice boxes and sometimes running the hydraulic giants. They didn't have bulldozers but just a little Caterpillar 28 tractor for moving the heavier giants and pipe around. Everything was manual, like all the sluicing and moving dirt with hydraulic giants.

On Eagle Creek they could only sluice when they had water and usually there was a dry spell every summer so they used to pipe in the dirt from the front and the sides to the sides of the boxes, which was unusual. [Unclear explanation about the sluice boxes.]

19:55 They had up to 9 hydraulic giants set up and about 8 man crew. They were always moving the giants around and it was a lot of pull work pulling pipe and driving pipe. They worked 12 hour days with no breaks and no goofing off. If one didn't perform, they'd get their last paycheck after breakfast and they would have to figure out how to get home.

That was for Berry Holding Company. Martin worked there from 1937 to 1941. In 1938 he worked for Zimmerman at Independence Creek, operating hydraulic giants. That was near Miller House in Circle [Mining] District. Martin also worked at Sourdough [Creek] where Zimmerman [?] moved him. Sourdough was 67 miles on Steese Highway, in Chatanika Valley on "this side" of Twelvemile summit. The following year, Martin went back to Eagle Creek, and in 1941 he worked for the Central Mining Company in Deadwood [Creek], running a D-8 Cat, but he didn't stay the whole year and went back to Eagle Creek. That was his last year of mining.

22:56 Margaret says that the onset of the WW 2 shut down gold mining. Martin got married in Tacoma in 1941, and that year he stayed home, working as a grocery store delivery boy. In the spring of 1942, lots of employees of the FE-Company had been drafted for WW2 and Martin got hired running the dozer at Cripple Creek. His main occupation was to build a road for the 12-yard dragline. They took 60-foot road that had to be level. They were stripping for dredge because the bedrock was deep, and they were running the overburden out with conveyor belts that ran with electricity. Martin's job was to keep the road to the dragline maintained. After the strippings went over the conveyor, it was Martin's job to push them over the bank to keep it from bunching up.

25:38 He worked there for the summer of 1942, after which he was hired out to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Ladd Field. That was as a civilian job. Martin heard about the job from a friend and applied because that guaranteed him a year round job. He ran construction equipment, building a runway that was to be extended from 5,000 feet to 9,000 feet. Another runway next to it was 7,000 feet and they also built taxi ways, hanger sites and there was lots of dirt work to do.

Martin worked there until he got drafted from August 1942 to January of 1944. He got drafted with 7 other men and that's where Martin met Joe Vogler. They flew down to Anchorage with Starr Airways that was the forerunner to Alaska Airlines. They had a 10-passenger Pilgrim airplane and Martin thinks it was the last one in existence and it's now in museum in Anchorage.

28:09 They flew down to Anchorage and the military escorted them to the Quonset Hut which was heated with an oil stove. They had a training area for recruits. Martin and Vogler were assigned to the same hut and Vogler didn't hesitate to tell the people what he thought of President Roosevelt. They thought he was pretty radical. He got the idea that Pearl Harbor attack was planned and of course he hated Roosevelt for being a socialist.

When his turn was to be interviewed by a recruiter, he told them what he thought of President Roosevelt and the recruiters couldn't handle him and let him go. Vogler was pretty well educated whereas Martin was young and naïve, looking up to the president as a father figure. It never occurred to him that the president would "pull a trick like that," to plan the Pearl Harbor attacks. Later, Martin found out that Pearl Harbor was a disappointment since it didn't turn out like Custer's Last Stand. Joe Vogler was right but it was the wrong time for him to express his views when everybody was gung-ho about America first during the WW2.

30:58 Martin served in Fairbanks. He worked in construction in 1944 and that fall he went to work at 6-mile at Badger Road where the surplus is, and worked in that shop for 20 months until he was discharged in June of 1946.

He worked for the Carrington Company as a parts man for a couple of years and worked for another couple of years for the road commission. He was looking for experience in various things. Then he worked as a contractor from 1951 and went back to Carrington where he worked until 1953.

All the time he was able to stay in Fairbanks.

32:38 Then Martin started working at Ladd Field in January of 1954 as a heavy equipment mechanic but frequently they had to work on cars and different kinds of equipment. It kept Martin employed a year round. He retired in June of 1972 and went full-time mining with his boys at Eureka.

34:20 Up until then, he had been mining on his spare time. He had staked the ground with Red Anderson who was an old-timer from Rampart and knew Martin's family from Rampart. He loved to go out and stake ground. One day he gave Martin a call that he wanted to show him a creek out by Eureka, so they drove out to take look at it. Martin had never driven in that area before, and Red showed him some new areas. They staked four association claims that were 660 x 2,640. They found out that it was good ground and Martin is still holding it.

They went out there in August of 1965 and in summer of 1966 they had a little d-4 Cat with which they stripped the ground. They cut down most of the trees by hand. Red was a hard worker even when he was 77 years old.

Martin tells that Red came to Alaska in 1910, pulling a sled from Valdez with two other guys. His friends dropped off in Ester, but Red took the sled and pulled it to Eureka. He got snow blind. He mined in Eureka, Rampart, Manley and in that area. "He was a tough old Swede."

37:26 Red always had a pipe in his mouth and he could handle his booze. They put him in a pioneer home and he died when he was 94. He smoked until that. He could tell a lot of stories and he was a lot of fun. Martin bought him out of the claim in 1967. Then Martin mined "up there" in his spare time with his two boys until 1972. In 1985 he had to shut down because of environmental regulations.

He was at federal ground at the time, and what really shut him down was an environmental lawsuit with 4 Native villages and three environmental organizations, which launched a lawsuit against EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] for not enforcing strict regulations.

40:20 Martin didn't want to continue mining when the lawsuit was on because he didn't know what the outcome would be and there was the threat of getting fined for dirtying the water. They mined just a little bit the following year and Martin shut the operation down in 1985.

Margaret asks how the lawsuit was settled and Martin tells that they couldn't legally mine until the suit was settled.

[End of the recording.]