

Call number: 94-13-17

Name and place: Charlotte [Carly] Ames, interviewed by Margaret van Cleave

Date: May 25, 1994 recorded at home of interviewee

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Date of summary's creation: 8/12/2014

Series: Pioneer Tapes

Margaret van Cleave introduces Charlotte (Carly) Ames who is a longtime Alaskan whose parents came north during Klondike Gold Rush

[Margaret:]? What do you recall of what your father said about Klondike?

Charlotte says that he might not have said too much since when he got up there, the gold had been mostly taken up. Prior to going to Dawson, he had been in California where he was a cooper (assembled barrels for beer and wine but also for the steam trains).

He was born in Germany and at 14 years old he came in company of two younger boys to US. The boys were to meet their father in U.S. [Charlotte says:] I'll read now a letter that he wrote to his parents in 1884 in German. Adolf Stock who is German, translated the letter. Charlotte's father's name was Adolf Wehner, and he wrote: "Dear parents, with our Lord's guidance I arrived in Chicago well and healthy [...]" The letter continues by saying that he did not mean to worry his parents by not writing for so long. He describes the weather and the atmosphere at the boat. The letter was dated in July 2nd, 1884. Four days before landing injured both my knees. They considered themselves lucky to arrive in New York after 15 days at the sea, but the city did not appeal to Adolf.

They left toward Chicago by train and experienced a collision at an airport crossing and were delayed in arriving. They got to work right away at Mr. Geyes' but didn't want to stay because pay was very little, 28 marks every 14 days. Adolph tells that he was not homesick at first, but he is now. He writes to his father that he earns more money than his father, but would not want his parents to move to America,

for he thinks they wouldn't enjoy it unless conditions in Germany deteriorate. He promises to send his parents whatever money he can and sends greetings.

7:26 [Margaret:] ? Sounds like quite an adventure. Margaret asks how he went to California.

Charlotte tells that he had some growing up to do before coming to North, and that from California he came up, arriving to Dawson in 1898. Charlotte starts telling about how her mother got to Alaska, but Margaret interjects a description of a photo that has a dog sled and wooden cabin.

Charlotte's mother had to promise her mother that she would only be there for one year, but her mother [?] said she would open a hand-laundry for the miners to have their clothes washed. She cleaned and even delivered the laundry. They stayed for several years in Dawson. Charlotte's mother got married but the marriage was not successful. She had Charlotte's two half-sisters, Eranie and Will. Now her older sister is 91 years old and in a "rest home up here". Other siblings are out of state.

Charlotte's grandmother then wanted to come to Fairbanks because the gold rush was leveling off. Charlotte's mother divorced her first husband and they came to Fairbanks.

10:22 There was a meeting place in a hall on Third Avenue where one could go to dance and drink a little bit of beer. Charlotte's mother met Charlotte's dad in that place. He was a good dancer. They'd had a piano in there and it was a big heavy Kimball, but Charlotte doesn't know how it disbanded [the organization that was like Eagle's Lodge and ran the dance hall?]. Nobody wanted to buy the big Kimball, so it was given by the officers to Mr. Waechter because he had daughters.

13:23 [Margaret:] So this is the piano that came from Dawson originally? Charlotte doesn't think so, and says that there's been stories' going round about that. She couldn't tell because she was too young to remember the details. Mr. [William] Gorbracht was the music teacher, and Charlotte's dad played trumpet or clarinet and Gorbracht directed the whole thing [the band].

[Talking about a photograph.] Margaret mentions that the photo says it was taken around 1912.

The big lanky fellow is Dan Bandman [sp?], who was another piano player, and there are the Nordale boys. And today Fairbanks City Band is started up again!

15:32 So with the piano in the household, were you all anxious to play it?

That big piano had to be able to fit into our little three-room log cabin. [They have a picture of it.] The front room had had a folding bed that went into the wall, a Murphy bed, and they had to take that and other things out. Charlotte was happy to have the piano there regardless.

Mr. Gorbracht was giving lessons to her older sister Louise. Charlotte was just playing along, and Gorbracht said to Charlotte “you made a mistake there.” And Charlotte had to say that she had no idea where she was in the music, but she had an ear for playing and could learn the sound. Sometimes one doesn’t learn the music right without reading notes. Gorbracht asked “Why can’t you read those notes?” to which Charlotte answered that that was how she heard Louise practice it. She was just playing by ear. Anyway, she did finally learn enough that she started playing for the crowd in Fairbanks.

18:13 They had a band who went to Anchorage to play at the Fur Rendezvous. Margaret asks if Gorbracht was from Germany. Charlotte says that he was, and that music was his job. Charlotte took lessons from Gorbracht later while Louise dropped out. Charlotte started the lessons when she was 7 or 8. She had a lot of fun during her career and she tells that she wants to talk about that and about what happened to the piano.

Margaret asks if Charlotte ever gave recitals but she says she didn’t since she wasn’t a fancy piano player. She thinks she had a good rhythm and she played a lot. When she was 19, she played around Fairbanks and the biggest group they played with was in Anchorage.

21:07 The Fairbanks Folk Dance Club was organized and Charlotte played for them with Verta [Siebenthaler]. She hardly looked at the piano and just watched people dance. She also played weddings and funerals, but not too many funerals because she had “too much of a bounce in her music.”

Being a musician was fun but she missed out on dancing. They had a folk festival during the Winter Carnival and they did square dancing. That was around 1930.

[Looking at a newspaper article about Charlotte and Verta who played for Folk Fest with some musicians from Kodiak.]

23:23 [Margaret looks at a picture of Charlotte in the first grade in 1919.] Margaret says that the school that burnt was in the picture and it was called Fairbanks Public School. Charlotte's sisters are in the picture too. Charlotte mentions Helen Bell, whom Margaret knows too. Charlotte thinks that the Old Main was a beautiful school but it burnt down during Christmas season.

[Break in the recording.]

24:41 Margaret asks about spending holidays. Charlotte tells that winters were hard times and sometimes there wasn't enough work for the men. She remembers her dad going out to shoot rabbits. That they didn't have fancy celebrations but the spirit was there and they always had some music.

[Looking at another picture of lady curlers.] Charlotte says that she enjoyed curling and there are pictures of winnings of teams at the Fairbanks Curling Club.

Charlotte is in a couple of them although they never won but got third or so. The picture was from the early curling rink that was at the 2nd Avenue. They wore galoshes and put something on their shoes so they wouldn't fall down. Now Charlotte went to watch curling and noticed the new shoes that allow one to slide.

27:52 Charlotte is looking at an article from Heartland from December 21st, 1986. It was a resume of things that Charlotte had done and she reads the article aloud. It describes the Christmas decorations in schools and how Christmas presents had to be ordered 3 months in advance. Sears-Roebuck catalog was "like a bible".

Charlotte's family got their gifts in Christmas Eve and all of them believed in Santa Claus.

Charlotte describes how they had an early dinner the night before Christmas Eve and the children had to go to sleep while their father brought in a Christmas tree. The presents were under the tree. They got presents from old-time miners who were invited to their home for Christmas, and after wrapping papers were put away and everyone was gathered around, they'd light the tree. Charlotte describes their Christmas tree decorations. An old German lady baked cookies that they hang from the tree and the candles had to be carefully placed so that they weren't underneath

a branch that could catch fire. Once Charlotte's sister's dress caught on fire and their dad beat the flames out.

After the Christmas tree candles were blown out, they had a table full of Christmas foods. After dinner, the children went to bed. On Christmas day they had turkey for dinner.

33:59 Charlotte's brother Chuck Waechter [probably Waechter] got his driver's license when he was 14 years old and started earning money by selling Christmas trees. He did that about 3-4 years. He sold the trees for \$1 dollar per foot and he'd deliver them if the customer wanted. He would even make a tree stand if ordered.

Charlotte remembers one bachelor, Jack Bailey, who was friend of theirs who got the Waechter family canned milk, a sack of flour, sugar, and certificates for a pair of shoes for them because they had a tough year. Quite often they got clothing for gifts and not too many presents.

36:17 Margaret says that people didn't have much but they appreciated what they had. Charlotte agrees and says that sometimes it was very cold. Margaret asks if people went caroling when the weather was mild. Charlotte says they didn't when she was younger, but last Christmas she got carolers.

[Looking at another item that is of the office of the mayor of Fairbanks [?]] Margaret mentions it is signed by Bill Walley. [Charlotte reads the thing that is like her curriculum vitae, listing all the reasons why the Mayor chose her to be the Fairbanks Senior Citizen of the year.] She got the title of the Fairbanks Senior Citizen of the year in 1985.

39:38 Margaret asks if Charlotte did lots of blueberry picking when she was a child. Charlotte says she went with her mother. They took a picnic lunch with them and picked blueberries, raspberries and cranberries. Charlotte doesn't like high bush cranberries. They picked low bush cranberries along highways. When she was a child and they didn't have cars, they went out with horse and a buggy to pick berries but now one has to go further because the town has spread.

Margaret asks if they gardened, and Charlotte tells that gardens were planted every year. Margaret says she had a picture of Charlotte's childhood home and instead of a lawn, they had gardens in front.

Margaret explains that they had a water tower and asks if they mostly relied on Fred the Waterman to deliver water. Charlotte tells that her father dug a well at their place and talks about how the town has changed. When she was a child, there was almost nothing around, but now there are lots of buildings.

43:27 Margaret asks if there were bear incidents in town, and Charlotte says there were none in town, and when she has been blueberry picking, she only saw a bear going away. She's scared of bears.

Margaret talks about an article clipping from 1936 that said there was a garbage dump on lower 2nd Avenue where one would turn on to Lathrop Street. Margaret continues that it was a gathering place for a black bear or two. Charlotte says it was a mess, but it was then leveled out and now there are houses on it. The newspaper article says that bears were numerous at the dump. A black bear that weighted more than 400 pounds was shot there by Adolf Waechter, Charlotte's father, who was the sanitation engineer and got tired of being charged by the bear so he shot the bear.

45:43 Margaret asks if Charlotte played the piano at USO [United Service Organization], and she tells that she did that every Monday night when they had dances. It was just her and Verna and once they had a drummer – hardly a band. Charlotte and her sister sang duets and they sang at funerals. Charlotte didn't like singing at funerals but felt that it was necessary so she did it. She has only sung at a couple of her friends' weddings.

47:09 Margaret asks about Charlotte's siblings. Lillie Angerman lived in Fairbanks for most of the time, but Charlotte's oldest sister, Irene, is out in Seattle. They were both born in Dawson. Irene married Earl Borland and they had two sons who have died. Borland was a mechanic who flew up to Nanook to get the soldiers who were frozen in there. Soldiers were getting furs from up north but the weather got bad. Borland was with Eielson when their plane crashed. When that happened, Charlotte was 16 years old. She knew all the pilots and some of them took them for little airplane rides. She flew with Dor Bant [sp?], and with others whose names she has forgotten. When she worked at the Circle Hot Springs for three seasons,

she flew there. There was a man lost, Johnny Lons, who had been flying a plane there but she forgets if he was ever found.

50:47 Margaret asks if Charlotte's husband worked as a pilot for Pan Am[erican Airways] but Charlotte says he was a mechanic and he had worked for Pan Am for 43 years. They could have flown for free but Charlotte didn't like flying at all so they didn't. Charlotte talks about her son flying to Costa Rica.

Margaret talks about how Fairbanks was a small and sheltered community. Charlotte mentions people from her curling club photos: Dorothy Spring has died, Alaska Linck as well. She knew the girls from Rust family fairly well, and tells who is still around. Margaret mentions Clara Rust's book This Old House. June Rust has been named the Golden Days Queen Regent. [Break in the recording.]

54:10 Margaret asks if Charlotte would consider leaving Alaska. Charlotte says she's going to stay and that she'll be buried in Fairbanks. There's something that makes her want to stay.

She's got some tape recordings of her music and she still writes to her friend Verna Siebenthaler who used to play accordion. They had fun playing for dances. The largest band they played with was a 9-piece.

Margaret thanks for the interview.

[End of the recording.]