

**Call number: 94-13-20 SIDE A**

**Name and place: Catherine Fenton is interviewed by Margaret van Cleave in Pioneer Home, Fairbanks, Alaska**

**Date: April 25, 1994**

**Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen**

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**Series: Pioneer Tapes**

Margaret introduces the recording with Catherine Fenton who came into the country in 1940 and established a drug store with her husband [Richard McAllister Fenton].

Margaret asks about Catherine's trip to Alaska. She tells that she took the McKinley from Seattle, which was one of the old steamships. They stopped in lots of the villages along the way and got to Valdez. There was a road from Fairbanks to Valdez and Catherine didn't want to take the extra days to take the boat to Seward where she could have taken the railroad. From Valdez, she could get to Fairbanks 2-3 days sooner, and there was a bus service to which her husband had sent her a ticket. The bus driver didn't find Catherine but she got a ride with a station wagon.

When Catherine told the driver that she didn't have money for the ride, the driver told her that it was all right since her husband had a job in Fairbanks and they could pay him there.

2:25 Margaret asks what bus Catherine was supposed to take and she tells that it was Billy Ruth's. They left the boat early in the day and traveled the rest of the day, stopping at Tonsina to eat and continued driving with a car that kept dying due to trouble with water and gas. They waited for the other station wagon to catch up to try to see what was wrong. It was slow going and the mechanical problems persisted.

By the time they got to Rapids Roadhouse, the driver was exhausted and decided to stay there for the night. They had taken a part of the passengers to the other station

wagon and there were 3-4 people left on the other. Sue Rubell was running the Rapids Roadhouse and Catherine didn't have enough money to pay for a room but Sue told that it was all right and that she could send her the money later. Margaret asks what the room and board cost, and Catherine says she doesn't remember. She didn't have the money since she had had to pay for her meal in Tonsina but hadn't expected to have to do that. The drivers were exhausted because they had to stop and drain the carbonator every time they got water into it.

6:19 They were lucky to be able to buy gas at the time when the roads were without good road service and gas was pumped out of barrels. The road was gravel. Catherine was raised in a mountain country and she had traveled over some rugged roads so she wasn't bothered as much as some other passengers like a man who complained about the road and the driving until the driver finally stopped and asked if he wanted to walk instead.

Margaret asks if Catherine remembers some of the people she traveled with and she tells that Gladys Morris was in the same station wagon that she was on and there was a young fellow from Dartmouth who was going to go to work "up here." Mary Berglund was in the other station wagon.

8:05 Margaret asks if buses were a fairly common way to get around. Catherine tells that the buses weren't bad but not terribly comfortable either.

Margaret says Catherine arrived to Fairbanks just a couple of days after the longest day of the year and asks what her first impressions of Fairbanks were. Catherine says that her husband had been to Fairbanks for over a month before Catherine herself got there. It was terribly dirty and the streets hadn't been surfaced at all. Near the breakup there were 6 inches of loose dirt on the road and the only concrete in town was on 1<sup>st</sup> through 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. The store windows were dusty but Catherine enjoyed the daylight and was glad to be back with her husband.

Margaret asks what housing was like, and Catherine tells that her husband had rented an apartment above the Silver Dollar Bar that was on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, about 3 buildings from Blanche Field Alley. There were several bars along that street. It was rather noisy but they just learned to tone it out.

10:45 Margaret asks if Catherine's husband, a pharmacist, went to work for another firm. Catherine tells that he worked for a store called McIntosh and Kubon, which was owned by John Clapp and Mr. Kubon. It was right on 2<sup>nd</sup> and Cushman where the Key Bank is now. Mr. McIntosh had had the store in Old Chena [a town established downriver from present day Fairbanks] and when they moved the town up to its present location, he moved the drug store. Mr. Clapp went into partnership when Mr. McIntosh was dead.

Margaret asks if Catherine went to work as soon as she got to Fairbanks but she tells that she didn't. They were building Ladd Field and were hiring out there, and Catherine was accepted to the job when she heard that her mother was very ill. She went to take care of her mother. Catherine and her husband had already lived in Seattle for a year when her husband decided to go to Fairbanks.

They weren't originally from Seattle. Catherine had gone to Seattle with her sister and brother-in-law and she had gone to high school there.

13:14 Margaret asks where her home originally was, and she tells it was in Southern Utah. She went out during the fall of that year. They had decided to move out of their apartment since it was noisy and they rented a cabin over in Graehl Front Street. Catherine went out to take care of her mother so she was in the States when Pearl Harbor was hit.

Margaret asks if it was difficult to get back to Alaska and Catherine tells that it was. She got onto one of the early flights. It was a two-plane flight. One flew from Juneau to Seattle and they traded planes there. Catherine flew the Lone Star to Alaska. They stopped overnight at Whitehorse and spent the Christmas Eve there. They got to Fairbanks the next morning and Joe Kobuk was at the airport and took Catherine to her house.

16:33 Margaret wonders if planes routinely went through Canada, and Catherine tells that they weren't capable for the long flights and had to stop to refuel along the way. Later, flying was made more difficult by an agreement that international flights could only come in during daylight hours. On one flight Catherine had to stay in Whitehorse for a week because of limited daylight hours. It was difficult to take off during those hours.

On that first flight she was allowed 15lb of luggage, but she had bought her husband a shotgun that was 9 pounds of her luggage.

18:30 Margaret asks about housing shortage in Fairbanks during the WW-2. Catherine tells that there weren't many houses that had bathrooms and running water. She tells that if one wanted to rent a cabin with outside plumbing, it wasn't hard to find, but most everyone bought their water by the jug. People hung a sign on their window on how many bottles of water they wanted and the water deliverers brought it in.

Margaret tells that not many people had their own water supply and Catherine agrees. Out of rental places, one was lucky to get a place with running water and a bath and even then sometimes the quality of water wasn't really good.

Margaret asks if there was a big well downtown. Catherine explains that nearly everybody had their own wells and there were a little stretch of water pipes from the NC-Company [Northern Commercial Company] that went to some houses, bars, and hotels.

Margaret asks where the waterman got his water, and Catherine tells that he had his own well with clear water and that's why people bought it. Most wells downtown had orange colored water. Catherine tells that one could dye white sheets orange by using that water.

20:55 Margaret asks Catherine to describe some other features of life in Fairbanks at the time. Catherine tells that one got acquainted with people simply by proximity and people would do anything for one, but they never infringed on anybody. It was up to each individual to prove themselves to be worthy of friendship. People were very nice but would never bother one. Catherine had the feeling that they just sat back to see what the newcomer was doing. Margaret injects that they were sizing one up.

Margaret asks what the town did with undesirable people. Catherine tells that if they had been in trouble a lot, they were just sent outside with "blue ticket" which meant that they weren't supposed to come back. Catherine doesn't know who arranged the blue tickets but recalls that it worked. Only way to come in in winter

was by train or by flying. There wasn't employment in winter but in summer the mines were operating and there was quite a bit of employment that way.

23:30 Margaret asks if some people left for winter, and Catherine tells that lots of people who could afford it went outside for winters. Margaret suggests that life in winter was very quiet and very low in auto traffic. Catherine tells that there was very little auto traffic and the stores all had delivery wagons with which all the groceries in town were delivered. One either took their order in or phoned it to the store and delivered it. There were very few houses that were beyond one mile from each other. That time 10<sup>th</sup> and Cushman was almost out of town and 1-6<sup>th</sup> Avenues were built with houses.

25:18 Margaret asks about Catherine's work at the telephone service and she tells that she worked there right in the middle of the war. At the time, the NC-Company owned the telephone, water and electricity systems, and they supplied steam for lots of the buildings downtown.

Margaret asks what it was like to work as a switchboard operator. Catherine tells that the board was a manual one, operated by hand. [Catherine explains how the switchboard worked.] There were usually 3-4 people working at the time.

Margaret asks if Catherine worked with Clara Rust. She tells that she didn't. She worked with Cora Weare, Ann Crites and Rosy Boyle and Eva Collins. They had 8 operators at the time and 24hrs telephone service. One operator handled traffic alone after midnight. Sometimes it was a busy time.

27:55 Margaret asks what shift Catherine usually worked. She tells that she worked when they told her to work, like working relief in the summer when the woman who had been the night operator took her vacations. The rest of the time she usually worked one of the positions on the board, but it depended on when she was needed.

They memorized the numbers and names so that one would know whom they were talking to when the light came on.

Margaret asks how long the numbers were, and Catherine explains there were exchanges like East, Harvard, and two others. Margaret clarifies that a phone

number might be “Harvard 236.” Catherine tells more about how the board worked. The board operators got to know people and where they lived.

20:38 Margaret mentions emergency calls. Catherine tells that doctors had house phones. The fire alarm was number 51 and if they plugged into that number, there was a fire alarm all through downtown. If the fire wasn’t major, one would call the fire chief or the fire department to let them know what was happening but 51 would be dialed for the whole town fire alarm.

There were 3 really bad fires: the year after they opened the drugstore, the Co-op burned alongside the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, and before that there had been the Smith’s Gun store that burned with all kinds of ammunition exploding. Margaret mentions that it sounded like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July going off. Catherine continues that Ann Waechter’s Meat Market was right next to it and it was very difficult to contain the fires. That’s why fire alarm was like a call for help all over community. People would do what they could to help, which might include moving merchandise and saving what one could.

33:45 Catherine tells that without city water system, they had to pump water [from private wells?] or lay a hose to the river. In wintertime they couldn’t do that but they had pump trucks that carried quite a bit of water. Catherine and Margaret wonder if they made a hole in the ice for getting more water in the winter, and Catherine remembers how one had to be careful to not drive over a water hose.

During the war, the Kubon Drugstore, where Catherine’s husband had worked, was closed since Mr. Kubon sold the store to another druggist in town. Later, after the war, Catherine’s husband went to work for Mr. Dunham in Red Cross Drugstore and worked for them during the war [inconsistency in the recording].

Catherine says that “they” couldn’t decide whether they wanted her husband in the war or in the pharmacy. He and Catherine went out twice since they had told him to report for induction but didn’t want him after all since they figured he was more useful as a pharmacist.

36:24 Margaret asks if Catherine’s husband saw lots of the military personnel in town and Catherine tells that he did. They had machine guns that were shipped up after Pearl Harbor, but they didn’t have mounts for them. Catherine’s husband had

taken some ROTC classes at the University and had knowledge of machine guns so the blacksmith at the Base asked him to help design a mount for the machine guns since they were preparing for fights in the streets.

Alaska was felt to be very vulnerable without many defenses since Pearl Harbor with all their defenses was successfully attacked. The Japanese had manpower and could have taken all of Alaska. Margaret mentions that Ladd Field was up and running at the time, but Catherine thinks it was very inadequate.

38:37 Ladd Field was never well prepared and that was frightening. “They” didn’t realize how vulnerable they were. They had few planes. One of the things that saved the country was that when Japanese planes flew over Alaska, they saw a number of planes that were sidelined down by the coast which led the Japanese to believe that the whole of Alaska was armed and had that many planes.

That’s when they were in the Aleutians and in Dutch Harbor. They didn’t have good weather forecasting and the only news came from Aleutians. Margaret says that it wasn’t like having satellites today.

40:44 Margaret asks about the blackouts in Fairbanks. Catherine tells that the town was “good and black.” Catherine tells that the businesses had blackout curtains in windows and people were strict about it. Catherine tells that the policemen maybe checked that no lights were shining and that the men who had businesses were on guard duty on buildings that were considered to be of major importance. The men carried rifles and guarded places like the NC-Company.

[End of the recording.]