

Call number: 94-13-20 SIDE B

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

Date of summary's creation: 08/28/2014

Series: Pioneer Tapes

Margaret and Catherine continue talking about the WW-2 time in Fairbanks, and difficulties it imposed to businessmen. Catherine tells that it was impossible to get in freight that hadn't been broken into or that was good to sell. Canned food came through well but fresh produce was a nightmare. People who wanted fresh produce had a standing order with a store and they would get a cut if the produce was worth selling. It took everything 8 days to come up by train until they started having air freight and one could never know if they got produce up in shape that it could be sold. They got magazines that were over a month old.

1:14 Margaret mentions having a radio that was for news, and Catherine says they had a fairly good idea about what was going on from listening to KFAR.

Talking about rationing: They didn't have rationing for meat and sugar like the rest of the country but they didn't get any meat in. If the grocers got any meat in, it was divided equally between people who had orders in. States had the sugar rationed to two pounds. Prime deliveries of things went to the armed forces who got their supplies first.

3:39 Margaret asks about local farms that were operational at the time. Catherine mentions Creamer's Dairy and Bentley Dairy that were both operating at the time. One could get fresh milk when it was available.

Margaret asks if there were any chicken farms, and Catherine says there weren't but some people had their own chickens. One had to know a chicken owner well to get fresh eggs. Margaret mentions "boat eggs" that were flavorful and ripe but not

commercially good. They had local carrots and potatoes that were stored in root cellars.

Margaret asks if they had acreage in Graehl. Catherine tells that it was just city lot size but almost anybody would be allowed to raise a garden if they wanted to. They had victory gardens all over town. They grew lots of carrots and potatoes and things that stored well.

5:58 Margaret asks if Catherine remembers when the war ended in August, 1945. Catherine tells that she remembers the V-day since the whole town was delighted that the war had moved to Europe. Everyone was in the streets and it was as big of a celebration as the one that occurred when the rest of the war was finished. V-Day was a turning point in hope because prior to it USA had to fight in two different fronts.

Margaret asks about the time after war when Catherine and her husband opened their first pharmacy. Catherine tells that they rented a building from Huldah Ford that was on 2nd Avenue and opened a drug store. Huldah Ford was a town character. She owned a lot of property that she had bought when the people felt that the mines were going to close and wanted to sell their lots. She financed their trips Outside and took over their properties.

9:27 Margaret tells that the opening day was festive and asks Catherine to talk about preparations and the event itself. Catherine tells that “they” [the town people] didn’t think Fentons would ever get the store open and in the meantime the rest of the stores in town were bought up by one company and they were all within just a couple of city blocks. They had trouble buying drug store fixtures so they worked for a year trying to get “the thing together” [their store?].

Margaret and Catherine discuss what the drugstore was like: It didn’t have a soda fountain, but there was one at the Co-op. They sold drugs, science supplies, and sundries. For the opening day they didn’t have to invite people but they just came by and showered their store with flowers. They had 20-30 big bouquets of flowers that were sent to them. Everyone had been skeptical about whether they could open the store since merchandise was short and getting it to Alaska was even more difficult.

11:39 Margaret mentions war-time shortages that continued after war, and Catherine confirms that one didn't know what one could get and when. There wasn't much air freight before the winter that followed the one when they opened up the drug store. They started an airline that was strictly for shipping. They shipped lots of merchandise that way but one had to know what was worth the air freight.

The first year when they opened the store, there was a boat strike and they didn't get any freight in for quite a while.

Margaret says that the Alaska Highway was open for commercial traffic and Catherine tells that they could ship by boat and by train and if they knew somebody who did hauling with a truck, one could ship goods that way. If one shipped by train, it would take 10-14 days to get it and by truck one might get their freight within a week if one was lucky.

14:01 Catherine explains that when they started building a road to the States and airfields down the Richardson Highway, the stuff to build those airfields was hauled in by truck. It was built 2-3 years after Pearl Harbor happened. Margaret tells that it was completed in 8 months and she and Catherine agree that the road was not a good one.

Catherine's husband worked hauling freight over the highway for the Air Force and for the highway construction. That was before they opened their drugstore. Catherine tells that she had ridden parts of the highway. She and her friend drove a car in from Detroit. One could get through the highway but there were limited accommodations. That was in 1947.

16:30 Margaret asks about spare tires, but Catherine tells that they had a brand new car and the road wasn't too bad so they had to change a tire only once. They didn't even have to change the tire themselves because a gentleman stopped and offered to do it for them. It was customary to not pass anybody who was down on the road without making sure they were all right and if anybody was walking and the weather was cold, one would offer a ride since there weren't many stops where one could get assistance.

Margaret asks if Catherine worked alongside with her husband at the pharmacy and she tells that she did and that both of her children were born after that. She worked “a good deal” even when her children were born. She did everything that needed to be done.

18:30 The Northward Building was built and in 1952, tenants were let in. There were commercial companies in the building, including a grocery store and a bank. Their store was 3rd or 4th one to open there. They didn't live there, however.

Margaret tells that the Northward Building was an architectural feat of 8 stories high. It was called the Ice Palace perhaps because of aluminum siding.

Their business in Northward Building was almost 3 times as big as their old one that was only a block away.

20:38 Margaret asks about moving to Northward Building. Catherine tells that they were stocking the building for over a year since it took that long to get merchandise. They had to get counters and racks and other fixtures shipped from Washington and paint the interior. Even stocking the shelves took a long time.

Margaret asks if Catherine opened her beauty store at the same time, but she tells that she didn't. She opened it after quite a while. There was a lot of talk that a person who wanted to sell cosmetics would have to have a cosmetologist license and so Catherine went out of Alaska to get her license. She had been selling cosmetics and had training from individual brands but then she got interested in working with customers directly and opened a beauty shop at the 3rd floor of the Northward Building.

24:08 Catherine's daughters started working at the drug store when they were about 12 years old. Her youngest daughter Kate had to stand on a box to wrap Christmas packages. They started with dusting and worked to stocking shelves and to doing whatever was needed. They came to work after school and it was good training for them.

25:06 Margaret asks about any memorable customers. Catherine tells that at the time, almost everybody in town was their customers. Then when the town grew, it wasn't so anymore. They had a lot of charge business at first and people worked

from one year to the next since summer was the employment season. People put their winter's shopping on a charge card and paid when they got back to work.

Some people were honest and paid when they got money. Margaret says that trust was essential for the survival of the town since lots of families were unemployed during winters. Catherine tells that economy was based on mining and the mining companies only paid the key employees for the full year.

27:34 Margaret asks Catherine to tell about the young boy that her husband helped to save and mentions Terrance Cole who wrote a column about it. Catherine tells that the pharmacy [unclear] was at the back of the store and the candy counter was in the front. Mack looked up and saw a boy choking. He called the clinic to tell that he'd bring in an emergency and carried the boy to the clinic that was at 4th Avenue. He carried the boy dipped head down to keep his airways open and a gum ball came out just as they were climbing steps.

Margaret asks Catherine to tell about the dog who was a permanent fixture in the area. She tells that both of the dogs were permanent. The other dog walked down the hall towards the candy counter if there weren't anybody there and he took a certain type of candy bar, after which he walked out the front door. He was very nonchalant about it.

30:27 They had a customer who brought his dog in. The dog would lie down and wait until he was ready to leave and he didn't have to call the dog when he was ready to leave.

Dogs were town characters. There was one who used to catch the bus to Ladd Field and he knew where the bus would load. He would be in Ladd Field for a while and then take the bus back to town. There was one who hitched rides with bush planes and Catherine wonders if that dog knew where he was going.

32:04 Margaret asks about 1967 flood. Catherine tells that 1964 was shaky too and there was the earthquake in Anchorage. They felt it in Fairbanks too, but the damage was along the coast. It was a rolling type of an earthquake that didn't shake off merchandise from the shelves. There was a difference in the way that the earthquakes shook.

When the Anchorage earthquake happened, Fairbanks was in good financial shape and did a lot to refinance Anchorage.

Margaret asks how much water they had in store during the flood. Catherine remembers that the basement in which they stored the merchandise was full and they had over 18 inches of water in the drug store. Catherine tells that the announcements in the radio told how fast the river rose, and if one knew how high one was, one could have judged accordingly. They messed up the estimate where the river would crest. [Break in the recording.]

34:54 Margaret says that some people had to get out with riverboats. Catherine tells that their car was totaled by a riverboat while being parked in front of their store. Their car's windshield and hood were above water and they didn't see what was underneath.

Margaret says that the people who were in that area were hit the hardest. Catherine tells that they had water in their house, at the drugstore, and at their warehouse. During the time they were in business, they had two boat strikes, two fires, three earthquakes that affected the store, and the flood.

36:58 Margaret asks how long it took for them to get back to business after the flood that happened in August. Catherine tells that it took a long time "to get everything straightened out" and that they were paid off in 10 years. They got SBA [Small Business Administration] loan. When the flood hit, they had Christmas merchandise in addition to regular. Christmas was 2/3 of one's total business in a year and one had to have merchandise to do that. The flood wouldn't have been nearly as costly as it was if it had happened in spring.

38:36 They were in business for over 30 years. Mack worked in the Co-op building pharmacy after Fentons had closed their store down. He was well known in the community and was asked to work there, which he did until he felt like he wasn't able to be on his feet that long.

They never had just 8 hour days but the store was sometimes open for 16 hours and it was open 7 days a week.

Margaret talks about how Fairbanks changed and lots of the small businesses are gone, having been replaced by chain stores from Outside. Catherine agrees that

downtown became more impersonal and people started buying houses on the hills. It was nice to know everybody whom they were dealing with, customers and other business people in Fairbanks.

Margaret closes the interview. [End of the recording.]