

Nancy Sweeney
on
Life in Kodiak
(1944-95)
and
Norman's on the Mall

The following interview was held on April 9, 1995, with Mrs Nancy Sweeney, proprietor of Norman's on the Mall, a gift emporium in Kodiak, Alaska. The interview was conducted in Mrs. Sweeney's home on Patrick Court. The interviewer is Kathy Nugent, student in Alaska History at Kodiak College, instructor Dr. Gary Stevens

KN What were your parents names?

NS Georgia Montford Norman and Leif Jensen Norman

KN When did they come to Kodiak?

NS 1944, actually my Dad came in 1943

KN Did you come with them?

SN UM-hum

KN What was your first trip like?

NS My Mother and I came on the Alaska Troop ship , Denali, We brought a Persian cat with us that got loose in the hold of the ship, and we had to go down into the hold of the ship to look for it. They let us take her into our stateroom, and linens were at short supply and she got on my Mother's pillow and had a little accident on the pillow so Mother had to sleep without a pillow the rest of the trip.

KN How long did it take you?

NS Aw-gee, 10 days.

KN And you started from where?

NS Seattle

KN Seattle to Kodiak only took 10 days, that doesn't seem like very long to me.

Huh...when you traveled for your first time, besides the cat, did you see and marine life, or anything like that, what were your impressions.-

NS Actually, I don't remember that at all,....that was amm..., my memory's more of the Troop ship ,the black outs at night and stuff like that.

KN Why were there blackouts?

NS Ah... we were at war.

KN That was still during the war?

KN Was your Dad coming here to be in the Service?

NS No. He was in the 1st World War, he was too old for the 2nd World War. Larry Wodlinger started the Drug Store here and my Dad was a Pharmacist and a Pharmaceutical Salesmen for Park Davis, and he and Larry knew each other in Seattle so my Dad came to help him open a second store and go into partnership with him.

KN Where was that store? Was it in the same place?

NS No.. It was, Burt's Drugs was the first one, and it was up on the corner of the main street across from Krafts yard. and the second one was down the street, um...try to think how I could tell you where it was,...down the street, well anyway probably a block down the street and it was Wodlinger's Drug, the second one.

KN Hum, Where did you live when you first came here?

NS The house is next to Gary Steven's house now. It was called the Bank house and the only way we got a place to live is my Mother agreed to go to work as um... the President of the Bank of Kodiak's secretary, and she did that hum, Mr. Torgreson. And we lived in that house for hum.. the first two or three years that we lived here.

KN So housing was pretty tight then?

NS Very ,yeah.

KN Were the Aluetian homes here then?

NS No. Huh-huh, huh-huh.

KN What was the hardest thing that maybe would have been an adjustment for you? Were you in High School age?

NS No, I was in the 4th grade and it was a different world, it really was. The Some of the kids were just awful street wise when I first came. and it was like I said a different world.

KN Where was the school then?

NS Hum about where Kodiak Motors is now, there was a hillside there and it was a big white building, two story ah,..., there was two rooms downstairs, one was the high school room and the other was the junior high room and then later on there was Quonset huts around outside of the building for some other high school classes.

KN About what was the enrollment, do you remember, did you have double classes?

NS Well, Betty Springhill just passed away and I was in her 6th and 7th grade class in one room, the first year or second year she taught here.

KN I'm from a small town too, what we had 50 in High School, was that?

NS There was 64 in High School when I graduated.

KN Were there any Natives living in town then?

NS Oh, yeah. The white kids in town were minorities. You know that there was just not very many families from outside with kids my age at that time.

KN Were there sports in the High School then?

NS When I was in High School the only sport we had then was Basketball

KN Did they travel off the Island?

NS Yeah, I was one of the first cheerleaders that they ever had and when I was a Freshmen we went to ...oh gosh....Anchorage. And in our Senior year the girls went with the team again and we went to Anchorage. and we were Class B Champions for many many years. We had a really good basketball team.

KN What did Class B mean? was that...

NS It was school enrollment, size of the school.

KN So you didn't play the Anchorage schools then?

NS Not until much later, ya..... did,..we played the smaller town

KN What were the stores like then? What kind of groceries did you have?

NS There was Krafts and Erskines, there was two stores

KN Erskines, now I've heard that name.

NS They were down now where the Ferry Dock is , you look at the old pictures, they had a whole group of buildings down there, and Mr. Erskine lived in what now is the Museum.

KN O.K. Did your family do any hunting and fishing?

NS No.

KN O.K. Ah.. Was the Navy here then?

NS There was Navy, Army, Marines, Coast Guard. I couldn't tell you what the population of the bases were, but it was fantastic. The amount of military personnel that were here.

KN I'm just now learning that in class. They had a Base out on the Buskin?.

NS Tha.. well there was a Navy base out there , there was Ft. Greeley which was torn down and moved to right outside of Fairbanks, at Delta Junction ah..... Spruce Cape was active, Fort Abercrombie there was men, there was men on Long Island, Chiniak.

KN Because the War was still going on?

NS Un-huh,

KN After the war, how long did it take before they kinda dismantled things?

NS Well...I really don't remember when, I know that the Army base was still there when I was a Senior in High School. Ah.. Marines and Navy until the time that the Coast Guard took over. So it really, you know, it's always been a active military place.

KN How did the town's people react with the military people?

NS Ah it was a friendly thing. They had dances at Blinn's Hall. That I can remember when I was a little girl, Russian New Years, and things like that. and very active USO, and a lot of the ladies would go to dances out on the base, the younger, you know, single gals.

KN USO?

NS Yah.

KN Entertaining the troops.

NS Uh-huh, and there was a USO downtown in Kodiak until I graduated from High School.

KN See this is all new to me, I'm enjoying this class.

KN Um.. What was the medical care like then?

NS We had Dr. A. Holmes Johnson, and there was another Doctor in town, which I can't remember his name. He kinds liked to drink a little bit, if I remember correctly. And the hospital...was there when we came.... And that's where my children were both born too.

KN In the hospital here?

NS Yeah, which is now, Mental Health Center.

KN Oh.. so the hospital has moved, it's a different place?

NS Yah, the Griffin Memorial is down there where the Standard oil tanks are, where the Public Health have their office. That used to be the Hospital, and the Grey Nuns staffed it.

KN Oh is that how the Grey Nuns were first here then. When did they first start the school?

NS Well, there was a Kindergarten, I know about the time the Tom and I had gotten married that ah..... or Pre-school thing maybe, Kindergarten, in part of the old Church because the first time Tom and I went to Mass together he sat on one of these little Kindergarten chairs because the Church was so full on Christmas Eve.

KN And the Church was downtown then?

NS Uh-uh, right next to the Russian Orthodox Church

KN And the Grey Nuns were nurses, rather than teachers?

NS They were, yah, they were nurses.

KN How many were in the convent?

NS Well, they didn't have a convent as such, they lived down stairs in the basement of the hospital Um.. I think there were six or seven of them. when they first came.

KN Um..., how do you think or how do you um... what is your judgment of the medical care, has it improved?

NS Oh. yah, It's come, but we were lucky to have a Doctor the caliber of A. Holmes and Bob, you know, carried the standard all by himself for years and years and years and worked hard in my estimation we were fortunate to have...

KN Dr. Bob

NS Yah..

KN Did you experience the Tidal Wave

NS Tom and I were in Fairbanks. he was a State Trooper and the earthquake was felt really a lot up there. But my folks lost everything they had in the earthquake and they ended up, my Mom was 64 and my Dad was 66 and they had my Dad's Speed Graphic Camera in their car, and that's all they had. And started all over, after, rebuilt and the whole, you know.

KN Their home and their business?

NS They lived in the building where the business was, where Norman's was. and the water went over the top of the building, and came in the back door. the front door held, but force of all the water, it picked it up and moved it out into the middle of the street. And we operated out of that building, picked it and put it back on it's foundation for two years, and there was holes in the walls, I meant you could, you didn't need to open a window because there was so many holes in that building.

KN Was that down where the water front was...?

NS Our old building was about where the Mail Boxes Etc. is now. That was the um.. wellabout where our building is now ..the theater used to be and the main street ran about in the middle of all that.

KN So the little mall like thing wasn't

NS No , huh-huh no that was a main street andthat . and then another kinda little street that went on down to Erskine's Dock. Hard to explain.

KN So how did the town adjust, uh did they pull together?

NS Oh, ya..... And we came back, I think it was the spring of 65 and the town was still an awful mess but everybody, all of my friends said how they took people in during the Tidal wave and, you know everyone pooled their food and worked together.

KN Was that when they moved the schools and all that.

NS Well, the first new grade school was already built on Rezanov. Which is now, what is it , Junior High? That was the first new grade school.

KN That's the oldest building?

NS Um, Um-hum

KN How do you think the Oil Spill affected Kodiak, was it anywhere as much as the Tidal Wave?

NS Well, I was surprised the affect that it did have on Kodiak. You know the, um , it inflated the economy, I mean the oil companies did that. There was just no doubt about . and then when that money was gone, I don't think the town has really come back since then, you know, the fishing hasn't been as good of course, times have changed too, but I really think it was really hard on Kodiak, a lot of people don't realize it.

KN Did the oil actually get here?

NS Oh, yah, it was all over, all around, even out on our beach, which we call our beach,, out where our cabin is at Chiniak, it was oiled.

KN How did they handle the clean up, was it.....

NS Well, I honestly don't know, of course they employed a tremendous amount of people. They had people swabbing the beaches, and boats, you know, hauling the dead birds out and all of this, but I really wasn't involved in any of this, but I really couldn't speak with any kind of assurance that I'm right of what they did.

KN Do you think they'll ever get the money,..... that is promised them?

NS There's a lot of them that would like it, I don't think so.

KN True

KN How did your business of Norman's get started?

NS Well, my Dad and Larry Wodlinger had a big fight andthey never spoke to each other ever again, neither he or his wife. Yah, and Helsels Photo Shop was for sale, that the guy that owned it got drafted, and um that had bought it, the Helsels were gone. and.. so he, my Dad, took he took my Dad in as a partner. And then Daddy eventually bought him out., and then they bought Totem Igloo Curio and Gift Shop which was Charlie Madsen's Gift Shop and that's how Norman's started.

KN Is it still in same little place it is now?

NS No, that, ah..., everything you see down there now wasn't there in 1964, that, it's, we built that building after the Tidal Wave. Courtesy of SBA (Small Business Association) which we almost have paid.... and I think we're the only original landlord down there besides ah..... Ben Ardinger, that's still in business.

KN So do you own your little store , or do you.....?

NS We own the building. Yah.

KN The whole building.

KN Where does your Dad live?

NS. Up stairs, there's a nice apartment upstairs.

KN How old is he now?

NS Ah.....Daddy will be 97 in Dec.

KN Is that right!!! See I didn't know your Dad was still alive.

NS Yeah,... Yeah, But, he broke his hip righafter his 90th birthday and he never really has come back from it.

KN Well, that's too bad.

NS But mentally he's alert most of the time.

KN Well, that's great. Is he still a help for you any way in the business?

NS No. No, he hasn't been in a long time, but he sure as hell directs the family, or at least he wants to.

KN Ah..... Do you get a chance to go to the villages with your business?

NS No. No. I went around the island on Mr. VonShele's Shuyak (the mail boat) in 1948, and that's the last time that I've ever been around the island. Am... I've been to old Afognak since the Tidal Wave, but I've never seen Port Lions, since it's been built.

KN Have you ever gone on the am.... pilgrimage to....

NS Not the pilgrimage, I've gone with other people to Spruce Island and walked up to where Father Herman was buried, but never on the Pilgrimage

KN They do that every summer, don't they

NS Yeah,, every spring. That's the church that's there....that's a Lynn Saupe painting.(Nancy is speaking about a painting she has by Lynn Saupe)

KN Oh.. is that right?

NS Um-um.

KN I'm going to have to do some of this stuff.

NS I think you'd enjoy that. I would, yeah.

KN What do you think um... the business employment,(I can't say this right) the employment opportunities, have they changed through the years?

NS Oh Yeah...a lot, you know there are just so many businesses and Federal and State Agencies have expanded so much. It's really amazing.

KN What do you think about the IFQ (Individual Fishing Quota) am....

NS Well, there again, I'm not mixed up in the fishing industry very much, but certainly everybody is against it, and I'm sure they are right, that it isn't fair, but I can't speak with anyyou know.

KN There was an interesting thing on channel 9. They had recorded that protest..

NS Did they? Well, no body told me yesterday (April 9, 1995) that you were supposed to close your businesses, and I started looking around, and huh...right after noon, and asked why is everybody??? So I turned off my lights and closed until 1p.m., but I felt like a yo-yo, cuz we were the only one with lights on downtown.

KN It was kinda nice little commentary on the news.

NS On 9?

KN Um-um.

NS I'll have to watch it.

KN Well, can you think of any thing that I've forgotten to ask you about old time Kodiak?

NS Um...Well it was a wonderful place to live, I have lifetime friends, that are still friends, from the time that I was in the 4th grade. Tom came in the Navy and I met him on a blind date, and we were married two years later. And both of our sons were born here and went outside to school and came back and they both live here, so we have 4 generations here right now in

Kodiak. I can't really think of any thing, you know you could go on and on, but some of it is neither here nor there.

KN Yeah, well provided the tape recorder worked.

NS O.K. Well, that was painless. Tom said he did this.

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