

KEVIN ARNDT

ON

KODIAK, ALASKA FROM 1964 TO 1996

ON

1964 Earthquake

Changes

Business

Sitkalidak Island

By

GERI ARNDT

On April 11, 1996

At our home in Woodland Acres

Editor

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Restrictions, None

**UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA
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This autobiographical interview was held on April 11, 1996, with Kevin Arndt, my husband and business man in Kodiak, Alaska. The interview was conducted in our home in Woodland Acres on Curlew Way.

GA: What year did you come to Kodiak?

KA: Approximately June of 1964, right after the earthquake and tidal wave.

GA: What did it look like when you arrived here?

KA: It was a mess. We kind of had an idea of what it looked like. I was eight years old when we got here. We heard, living in Wisconsin, what had happened in Alaska, mainly Kodiak. So we knew what to expect. When we got here we flew in on PNA, it was the only airline and it wasn't daily service. It was twice or three times a week.

GA: What is PNA? Do you remember?

KA: Pacific Northern Airlines. We flew in and landed at this old WWII era building. It was small. My dad was here to pick us up. We drove to town in some old car. We went through town and it was still a mess, even in June. They were still cleaning it up. There was still boats up on land that they were working on to get off. It was a real mess. Muddy, mud everywhere. Nothing was clean. We went out to Island Lake, where we were going to live and the house was almost done, still had wood floors and the doors weren't up.

GA: Now you said your Dad was here. Was he here during the earthquake?

KA: Yes, He was at the house during the earthquake when it started. He got outside right away and went over to the pick-up truck. He said it was just like a bucking bronco, because it was on rubber tires and it was just bouncing all over the place. He hung on to it as long as he could. The earthquake lasted approximately four to five minutes. Many people thought the world was coming to an end.

GA: What other kinds of things do you remember when you first came to Kodiak, besides all of the boat up by the town and all the mud? How many people were here? How was it developed? What kinds of things do you remember as a kid?

KA: Well, at that age you don't really care about how many adults there are, it's kind of how many kids there are. Who there is out there to play with and make friends with. There was a lot of adults, a lot of cars, a lot of trucks. Nothing but muddy roads.

GA: No pavement?

KA: No, not that I remember any pavement. No the base road was paved. The town was just a mess mainly because of the tidal wave and the outlying roads. We lived three miles from town and there wasn't much on the way out. There was quite a few houses, but the closer you got to island lake there wasn't much. I remember there was no harbor, but lots of boats.

GA: Was that because of the tidal wave?

KA: Yes, it had taken out the breakwater, the docks, the stalls, piling, everything. It was completely turned around. Third grade was my first grade, which was a couple months after we got here, we started it. There was a lot of construction going on and cleaning up. It was pretty active. We didn't get down town much. Probably once a week as kids. We would go down shopping. One thing I do remember is going through the store right after we were here and they had canned goods that you could get for...I think it was 10 cents a can or a nickle a can. All the wrappers were off from it. The water had taken and cleaned everything off. It was still good stuff, but they didn't know what it was. So they put it in a big area and you would pay a nickle a can. And whatever you got you got. I remember we bought quite a bit of it. The floor was muddy and dirty.

GA: In the store?

KA: Yes, in the store because the water had gone in and out of it. I don't know if it was the original Krafts building. They might have set up temporarily. We went shopping probably once a week. They had a good supply of food. It wasn't where everybody is buying it up as soon as it got to town. I do remember that. That's pretty much about it. There wasn't a whole lot of people. There wasn't traffic. I remember down in the states there was traffic you were always fighting and we didn't have traffic up here. You would always see a lot of people walking. You get introduced to people that my dad would know. We would go look at places, because he was a carpenter. They would want him to help out doing something.

GA: So, did he have a business here in town?

KA: I don't know if you would call it a business. What brought him up here was him and my uncles were building domes for radar sites up in Nome and Kotzebue. All over Alaska. He would get contracts to do it and he would go up there and do it. He liked Kodiak and they had a contract there on the Navy base and he decided to stay. My uncle

decided to stay in Homer and the other one didn't want no part of Alaska other than to work here.

GA: So you have an uncle that lives in Homer and your dad lives here and the other one...

KA: He used to live in Wisconsin. He died in probably 1991. He used to commute up here every summer for about four or five months and work for either my dad or my uncle in Homer.

GA: He would fly up here?

KA: No, he would drive. Between the two of them they would usually always want a new vehicle and you could get a good deal in Wisconsin, so he would be the one to drive it up. Load it up with whatever and come up.

GA: Now you had mentioned something about...of course you guys went to school and you had brother's and sisters. What kind of a school did they have here?

KA: Well they had a new school. They had the old one that was down town. It was sitting on a knoll. It was a big wooden structure with old windows. It was built during the war.

GA: And that was an elementary school?

KA: It was an elementary school. Oak floors. I had only been in it a couple of times. It was mainly for the town kids. My experience with the town kids when I started school was they were all no good. So we kind of just hung out with the kids that lived out of town. We went to main school and there were a lot of kids there. That was third grade I started there and by the time I got up to fifth grade they were building a new school.

GA: And what school is that?

KA: East elementary. In fifth grade they were running two shifts of school.

GA: How did they work that?

KA: We would start at 7:30 and would go until 11:30. The next shift would start at 12:00 and would go until 3:00 or 4:00. And this happened for about five or six months of school and then we moved over to the new school, East elementary; the kids that lived in that general area and we lived a mile from it. So we got to go to it. I went through for fifth and sixth grade and then went to the Jr. High after that, which is still the Jr. High.

GA: And then they had the High School too, right?

KA: I think the High School at the time was still in the main school building, where I went to third and fourth. The Jr. High and the High School was in there too. The original building is still here.

GA: What kinds of changes have you seen in Kodiak as far as growth? Kodiak has obviously grown a lot in the last forty years. What kinds of changes have you seen since you've been here?

KA: Well, probably the same type you would see just about anywhere. One of the main things I remember; up til I was probably in High School. If you ever flew anywhere went to Anchorage on the plane you knew everyone on the plane. It was nice.

GA: Just the way it is now.

KA: Now you don't know anyone. It's very rare you will know somebody that is on the plane. There is just so many more people here. I think there was probably about, maybe 3,000 total on the island then and now there's 10,000-10,500. Then we got jet service and that was a big deal. More paved roads.

GA: Was that Wein?

KA: Wein came in here first. They were the first. We just loved it. I remember urban renewal was probably the best thing that happened after the tidal wave. That's when the Fed's come in and they start rebuilding the town. They redesigned it, how it's going to be layed out. They would give or sell property to businesses that were in town originally and were wiped out. They would get federal money and build a new store. They put the mall in and outlying lots. Banks got to buy parcels, big parcels. It was layed out pretty well. A lot of construction.

GA: That's when a lot of the business came in?

KA: Yeah, a lot of them were already here though and they just continued on. That took probably about five years.

GA: Right around what time period was that?

KA: Probably the early seventies, late sixties is when it started. People would put up small buildings to begin with, temporary housing. I remember Kraft's built a temporary building right on the water front. It was a good size and then they planned out their big store. The one that they have now or had; just recently sold out. And when they moved out of that building, it was probably about 80X40.

GA: The first one that they had?

KA: Yeah, I remember my dad bought the building when they were done with it. They had a bakery in it for a while and then the city decided it

was going to be a parking lot. It had to go, because it was temporary anyway. They took chainsaws and cut it into four foot sections. They took it apart and lifted the trusses out.

GA: Did they utilized them anywhere else?

KA: Yes. My dad sold the building and we still have a bunch of the old glued laminated trusses that were home built.

GA: At your dad's house?

KA: They are still there. The last little part of "old" Kodiak.

GA: And you said that was on Island Lake?

KA: Yes.

GA: Now you have told me a little bit about Sitkalidak Island and the history of that. Tell me a little bit about the time you went down there with a friend of yours, when you first got out of high school. Is that right?

KA: Yeah, back in 1976. It really hadn't been taken care of down there. On Sitkalidak Island there is a homestead; 160 acres. My uncle and my dad bought it. They felt there was an opportunity to make some money with selling cows or ranching or whatever. They both owned landing crafts, 130 foot landing crafts and they figured that was the key to the operation.

GA: So you can ship things down to the Island?

KA: You could get the cows off from there or whatever you need to do. So they had bought it. It had been kind of sitting idle for about a year and the fisherman and the natives around there were utilizing the cows. Fisherman were utilizing them for bait, free bait. Shoot yourself a 500 pound cow, drag it on the boat, butcher it up and it would last quite a while as bait. The natives would use it to sustain, basically they would get a few of them every so often. It probably worked out well. Then David Johnson, Dr. Bob's son and I went down (a friend I graduated with). We went down in '75. I think it was '75 or '76 that they bought it. Right after that we went down there to kind of watch the place. We spent about a month and a half down there, not knowing, being dumped off from a plane with two 3-wheelers and enough food to last us for two or three weeks. I didn't know how long we were going to be down there, but we figured at least a month and we figured they would bring us some more supplies. So, we'd never been down there. We got dropped off in an area that at high tide you can't get off, on a little knoll. The plane drops us off there and leaves, so by dark we are able to get off of this knoll. We put the bikes together while it was

light and headed over to the buildings. We figured which we'd stay in the small one. Nice buildings. Nice cedar homes, that were built right after the tidal wave, 'cause the tidal wave washed that place out too. It's only about ten feet above high water mark, going back about 500 feet where the buildings are. We stayed down there and kind of cleaned the place up. It is some really pretty country down there. We met a lot of the natives from Old Harbor and became...well, we were friends with a lot of them because we went to school with them. So they were coming down there quite often.

GA: They would come over to Sitkalidak?

KA: Yes. We were down there in March. So it was kind of the time where the snow was starting to leave, but we got a lot of snow while we were down there. We spent our days cutting wood and hauling water and just checking the whole area out on the 3-wheelers. Just ride and ride and ride. It was kind of fun.

GA: Did you have any encounters with bears?

KA: No, we didn't even have any idea there was ever even a bear on there. And if they were there, we were not thinking about it, but thinking now, looking back on it there were probably all hibernating. So it's not something we ever ran in to. Fox and dead cows and lots of live cows.

GA: And you've been down there recently. Maybe you can share a little bit about that.

KA: Yeah, we went down in as recent as Thanksgiving, four months ago, five months ago. Five and a half months ago, we went down there just to get away from it. So happens that a year ago it was put up for sale, my dad and uncle put it up for sale. So, my brother and I bought it.

GA: And who's your brother?

KA: Brent. We decided we were going to try to get into the lodge business. It really is nice down there. I don't think there is another place on the island like it. There's a beach down there that's about two miles long, white sand, well the color of ash. I guess you could call it white. We call it the Maui beach. It faces Hawaii. You can't see it but it's out there somewhere. It's really nice. It's a nice place to get away. You don't have to deal with traffic. You don't have to deal with nothing. Take your supplies and just go down there and enjoy.

GA: Now you said your plans for it are doing a lodge. What kind?

KA: Probably fishing lodge, sight seeing. There's about 14 miles of road down there and 12 to fourteen that go to two different locations.

GA: Where do they go?

KA: They go to different bays. There is just a lot down there to see. I don't know much about fishing, so that is what someone else would have to handle. As far as sight seeing down there and take people out whale watching.

GA: That is the same place Jack McCord...

KA: Jack McCord started it. He decided that Alaska needed more open range and public lands for grazing. They should be all over the United States. He knew a lot of congressmen and he ended up getting stuff passed. He got the grazing leases or grazing act passed in 1930 or something. And he decided Sitkalidak. He would come to Alaska. He ended up in Kodiak for a bit and went down the Sitkalidak and Cherikof. He started cattle ranches at both places. He patented the land in 1940, 160 acres. It had sheep down there. They raised fox down there. He sold out in '62 in fifty percent to Rocky Rothwell. He moved in mink. They would farm mink down there.

GA: Mink?

KA: Mink is just a little rodent type animal that they make coats out of.

GA: I didn't know we had those here.

KA: We do. There was a lot down there. They ended up turning them loose because they had an epidemic of some sort that started killing them off so they let them go. The fox population thrived for a bit. During the tidal wave Rocky flew down to see what was left down there. They were flying over the place and it was just destroyed. He had a heart attack on the way back. He survived but it was a total shock to him. Then right after that in '65 or '66 they built a big house, four bedroom house. Cedar home. And a one bedroom.

GA: The Rothwell's?

KA: Right. And an 80X80 metal building with a concrete slab for a slaughter house. They were going to start doing all the slaughtering down there. And bring refrigerated boats and vans and haul them out. I don't know that it really did well. I don't know they got anything out of there. They had a lot of equipment down there to build roads and stuff.

GA: And it's still down there isn't it?

KA: A lot of it's still there. Another note I should add is on the east side is where the village of Old Harbor was located before the tidal wave. It got completely wiped out after the tidal wave.

GA: On the east side of Sitkalidak?

KA: Then they moved over to the mainland, which is only about a half a mile of water between the two. That is when they started the village of Old Harbor. There are still a couple of structures over there that are left from the tidal wave.

GA: I guess we could go back a little bit to what you were doing after high school. What kinds of things when you were into business. I'm curious to hear a little bit about what you encountered in the business field and what kinds of businesses you had. What thrived and what didn't.

KA: I guess you had to be ambitious. There was a lot of opportunity back then. Somebody who wanted to get into a certain field and follow through and see it through. I got into excavating right out of high school. So I worked for an excavating company because I always wanted to learn how to do it. From there I decided that maybe there was more to doing it on your own than for somebody else.

GA: What company did you work for?

KA: A place called North Pacific Construction. It was a new company. It had only been in business for less than an year when I went to work for them. I really didn't know how to do much. I could run dozer a little bit, because I had a friend of mine who had a dozer and he let me play on it. I learned a little bit and the other guy let me run 580. So the 580 I was a little more proficient at than dozer, but i've always wanted to learn to drive dump truck. I just loved the idea of being in a big truck. So that's who I went to work for. I worked for them for about three years. Then the first year I got into working with them I got into selling mobile homes because there was a demand for it. There was only one guy doing it. He had a trailer court and he was selling a lot of them. So I got in to it. My second year or first year out of high school I had seven trailers come in, at once. It was busy getting them set up. I did that for probably two years, brought them in a few at a time, set them up and sold them, did excavating. There was a lot of opportunity. A lot of people doing different things and doing more than one thing. There wasn't a whole lot of people that liked Kodiak and wanted to stay. Only that had certain skills. I know electricians and plumbers were hard to find. There was a lot to be done. I loved it. I loved it here, the summers. The winters I never did care for. Summers I love, that kind of why I am still here.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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