

LLOYD BENTON
ON
KODIAK "YOUNG LIFE" OUTREACH

AND
Real Estate
Economy
Independence

by

RICHARD HOFFMAN

On March 30, 1996

At Richard Hoffman's Office

Completed April 13, 1996

KODIAK COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The following autobiographical interview was held on March 30, 1996 with Mr. Lloyd Benton, a real estate broker in Kodiak, Alaska. The interview was conducted in the office of Mr. Richard Hoffman. The interviewer is Richard Hoffman, Student, Kodiak College, Kodiak, Alaska.

RH: Good morning, Mr. Benton, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and when you came to Kodiak.

LB: Good morning, I came to Kodiak in the fall of 1971. I came as a pastor for the Bible Chapel in Kodiak. It didn't take long to discover that theologically I didn't have a good mix with the board, and in about six months I left that. I liked Kodiak very much and because my background had been in construction, I saw a lot of opportunity for development in Kodiak. I looked around and there was a job open with the City and Borough for a building inspector, and I took that job. It gave me a good opportunity to get acquainted with the setting of the community. In a very short time I saw a real need for a lumber company. At the same time, I became acquainted with a fellow who had a sawmill for sale. So, I bought this sawmill and right away it was a real great demand for material, and I was trying to do both jobs. That didn't work. I was trying to run the sawmill on the weekends or evenings, so I stopped working for the City, and at the same time I kept being impressed with the need for a lumber company in town. There was one; the fellow owned the business, the land but the prices were very, very high and didn't have much selection. He was able to charge a very high price for what was there. If he didn't sell it, it didn't make any difference because nobody had any other place to go. So, I started the lumber company out by Island Lake, and it just jumped right off

in full swing. In three months, we were doing \$200,000 a month. In the third month, it was going full speed and it never stopped.

RH: When was that?

LB: In 1973. Business just took right off. Maybe fortunate for me, the competition didn't change its pricing system. That enabled me to take the lion's share of the business. He started specializing in high price things, and continued with what he had been doing. That was a very good start for me. I was always looking around, talking to other people about what this town needs. I can think of some that came to be. I said I think this town is big enough for a shoe store. Finally somebody did start one; it didn't go, so maybe I made a bad analysis on that one but I remember saying I think this town is ready for a sweet shop or something like that, and maybe a year later Beryl's started up and has been a very successful candy and sweet shop. It's always been my interest to look at what economic opportunities were there; not that I was going to do them all, just that I liked to watch them develop. So, I've seen a lot of businesses start in town that I thought were needed here and most of them have succeeded. I for a long time thought we needed a good fisheries supply store. I can't remember when that finally came to town. I thought it was a great business. I don't really know what happened to it. It was split up and there are still fisheries supply stores but the one that started up, I thought would be a winner and it didn't continue going. It was where the Arc and Spark Welding is located now. It was all one big fisheries building. I was very surprised to see that not continue.

RH: About what time did that come along?

LB: I'm thinking it was around '85, something like that. A man by the name of Egglass came in and started up the Bile Dry business, so whenever that started, after Bile Dry was established. Bile Dry is the common facility for all the canneries for dehydrating the waste from the fisheries and making fish meal. And when that job was finished, he had made partnership with somebody to start this nets and supply business which I thought would be a great business, and maybe it was but eventually it was sold or split up, and today we've had people try to run just the nets development. We've had the fisheries supply, and parts of it are still here but it was all one company. I thought that would be a great business. My own business went very well. My real interest was a spiritual interest. I was very concerned with the youth situation in Kodiak, so I started a group called Young Life which is an outreach group for high school kids. My son David was a senior in high school, so that would be about 1978, I think. That fisheries business must have started before '85 because that must be back closer to '80. I think it was 1978 that I started a youth group here for kids from all the churches called Young Life and we developed a committee and had people on that board, and built up a program for kids. We met every week and then we had summer camps that we took them to. I did that until '86, I believe. My wife wanted to get her Master's degree and we went outside for two years. I turned Young Life over to somebody else and eventually it dissolved. So, I need to back up from my

lumber company. I had this real interest in youth and I was putting at least 40 hours a week, sometimes 50, and here I was supposed to be running a lumber company. Spenard's Lumber Company came to town looking for a business, and was talking to me about buying my business. My real interest at the time was youth, and even though the money was with the lumber company, we made an agreement and I sold the lumber company. Working with the kids I got a little bit of pay but it wasn't enough to live on, and in the last few years when I had been working for the lumber company, I bought and sold a number of tracts of land or lots, and built spec houses, those types of things. I was seeing the need for a realty company in town.

RH: There was no realty company?

LB: No. All this time, I must have purchased and sold some 20 properties here in town. This was all the way from 1971 when I got here till about maybe '82. While I was still working in my lumber company, I was doing a little reading and I thought it would give me the freedom I wanted, and just about the time I was making that decision to say OK, I think I'll close down the business and start up a realty company, somebody else started one. It was probably my naiveness but I thought with another two sales people there, it'll be too crowded; there's not enough room for another one, so I continued my lumber company. It kept going for a couple, three more years. But when I finally sold the lumber company, I built one more house from the material I had left over. I kept thinking that's probably what I want to do, and by then I could see that there probably was room for another

Realtor in town. It turned out that one of the teachers in town was a broker and was interested in starting business, so I studied for my license. Laura Bealy studied for her license, and we both together with Toby Cook started Island Realty. The criteria for me was that I had the freedom to be with kids. That gave me the opportunity for every Thursday to take off from work and go with kids. I traveled with the sports team, a lot of times I drove the busses for the teams as they traveled from Anchorage to Homer to Fairbanks. Back in those early days, we would fly to either Homer or Anchorage and charter a bus and then drive our kids in order to keep the cost down. I lose track of the years but it was during the time that we were doing Young Life, probably around '83 that the school board passed a rule that we could no longer take the bus for safety reasons. They wanted us to use point to point plane transportation. Instead of going to Anchorage and bussing to Fairbanks, they would have us fly to Fairbanks. It increased the cost but their concern was all of the hours that we spent on busses probably was costing the kids school time and it was maybe more dangerous. I'm not sure that it was; we never had any accidents. Nevertheless, the possibility was there when you're in a bus. I guess you're not as safe as in a plane. Anyway, that decision was made and we quit. I traveled mostly with the wrestling team, mostly from about 1980 till '86 when we left for her to get her Master's degree. The philosophy of young life was not to preach to kids but to become a friend to kids - "Earn the right to be heard." We really worked at that. All of the other leaders we had

stressed that; become a friend, share what's in your life and I found it very effective. It's the best program I ever was in. If I had known when I first came out of school, that's probably the organization that I should have been with. We had a very good program. We ran on an average about 45 kids in club, and taking 25-35 to summer camp down in California or Canada. Every year I put on a banquet to raise money for camp. A lot of people say we put on some of the best seafood banquets ever put on. Good entertainment, good speakers. It was a very good time of life. The things I hoped from real estate worked out. I was able to take my time. Very few Realtors have not worked weekends but it so happened that no one had started working Saturdays and Sundays in Kodiak, and it fit me really good because I was just giving up Fridays normally. So I had Friday, Saturday and Sunday to travel with the sports teams. I've gone with the choral groups to the State things. Any group that was traveling and they needed a chaperon, then I got to go. Those were really good times for me. Real estate went really quite well. Much more volume than I had ever thought the potential for. By that time, the other office had developed into five people or so, and we were three yet everybody was really busy. I just didn't realize back a few years earlier that there was such a demand. Wish I had made the decision a little sooner. Now that I'm out of working with the youth, because physically I can't keep that pace up, and I have kind of let my own property, my own house fall down around me, I have the time to get my house and yard in order. So that was the development switching from the lumber

company over to the director of the Young Life and then into real estate.

RH: When you were involved in the Young Life program, were there similar programs in Kodiak?

LB: There were no other similar organizations. Each church, of course, has a youth program but my observation at that time was that none of the churches had an effective youth program. By bringing in an organization like Young Life, designed to work with high schoolers, we were able to draw from all of the churches. So, instead of each church having five to eight kids, we were able to bring together 45 kids and make that a really fun time, and then about once a month have something special. My task as a director was to introduce to each church what Young Life was and what it wasn't, that we weren't trying to become a church for kids. As we had kids make commitments to Christ, we tried to feed them back into the logical church. By that I mean, if they had a friend who they were running with, we would encourage them to go with that person. There wasn't any steering of kids to any particular church. That's probably what kept it strong because then the churches didn't think that we were just trying to build up our own Bible Chapel. That was a risk because I had at first a majority of the people on my board were from the Bible Chapel. We had to be careful that we weren't just doing this to try to build up our own body.

RH: Did you have cooperation and a good following from the people?

LB: I think that we had good cooperation. There were some who

were leery and we really only had one or two churches that were hesitant. Nevertheless, we got a large turnout. Out of the 45 or so kids, 10-15 came from this particular church. We had another church in town that told their kids they shouldn't come, yet we got four or five kids who came back continuously. It was where the action was, and they were with kids their own age, and they were being spoken to in a way other than preaching.

RH: Tell me about one or two of the success stories, if you will.

LB: I'm trying to avoid names. We had a boy who was really ready to go off the deep end; any kind of bad activity that he desired. He started coming to the club, at first very reluctantly. Let me back up a little. Because I spent time with the wrestling club, and put my emphasis on establishing a relationship, there were times when we had all but one or two of the wrestlers coming to our meeting each week. It was in that process that one of the last boys to come invited him and he showed up. It was not very long until he became very enthusiastic about hearing what was being said and offered. I really saw his life turn around and he became a happy person, and stopped in the direction of destruction. For me, certain things are successes. Success to me is when someone came to Christ and then lived for that commitment. There were a number of kids. We have a number of Christian families that are a result of kids having come to the Young Life program. Very significant to me were a couple of girls who made commitments and then in three months one of them drowned. It's really significant that this girl had made a commitment and then had been consistent with her life. It's a

real success story when you have that kind of turn around. There are failures. You can work with kids, and work with kids, and they come and enjoy the gathering and then they get out of high school, and their life is just wild and out of control. It seems that religion had no significance in their life. It's disappointing but that's the way it is when you have no control over it. There are others. I had a girl who just needed somebody to talk to because she was in such a dysfunctional family situation. I felt we really contributed to her life; that she had somebody else to talk to and lay it all out, and we could talk with her and encourage her. Now I see her in church ten or fifteen years later, with a husband and child. She was going through extremely difficult family times. We don't know how she would have gone through it if she hadn't found us. Maybe she'd have found some other way but certainly it turned out for the good.

RH: When you were looking at the Young Life program in the late '70s and developing it, did you see a big problem in Kodiak with social values?

LB: That was exactly it! We saw high school kids out of control. Our high school made a very wrong decision back around 19... I'm not sure when, 1974 or 5 we had a very open campus - so open that you didn't even know if your kids were in school. There was no reporting back from the school to the parents. If they took role it didn't mean anything and a lot of classes didn't even take role. We had a lot of kids who were supposedly going to school and not going to school except maybe for tests. That did change

but during the time that I was starting to watch my own kids start into high school, I was seeing this complete lack of control that the school had over the kids because of this open campus policy. I had high school kids, and we found that there was nothing for these kids to do, no spiritual guidance at all. None of the kids were going to church and we just read the system as really being in need of help. I think today we find the same with parents being concerned with kids and we have this parent advisory group in school asking, "What do we have for them to do?" That's the same kind of thing I saw back then and my solution was to provide spiritual outlet in the group. The best solution is to provide things like the open gym after wrestling, I think that's just great. I think they needed something to do and parents taking an interest in providing for the kids.

RH: We have "Students' Night Out" now. Did you see anything like this in the community back then, or is this the first time something like this has come along in Kodiak?

LB: Yes, it's the first time. Through Young Life we made other pushes. At graduation time, we provided alternate activities for kids - getting the bowling alley open, getting a free movie and set up those kinds of things which have been picked up, and people don't even realize we started that back then through Young Life. It offered an alternative to kids other than going out to the beach and party. We had reasonably good response to that. We would get half or so of the graduating class taking part in the activities, where only ten percent of them were involved in Young Life. So, we got a lot of kids on those special nights,

which confirmed that we needed something special for them to do.

RH: In general, why do you think the community didn't act on these needs?

LB: When you see the need is when you have your own kids in school. My wife and I, and some of the committee people saw the need and we tried to develop this sort of thing. I believe we will always see this. As new people see their kids as juniors and seniors, they see the turmoil. Kids are going to create their own things to do. I can't answer that except that you see some parents concerned enough that they step out and say they've got to do something about this. We have gone through some times when some of the people have said, "I wish something was being done about this" but nobody was taking the lead. This hasn't happened overnight. They've had this parent advisory group going on about two years. They have speakers come to them. I go to them usually to talk about issues in the school, have kids there to give their input, what they think. Obviously, time and time again the issue of alcohol comes up. You have a lot of resistance to cutting that out of the school system. They just want to have some way to party every weekend.

RH: When you were developing the Young Life program, were drugs a problem in the community?

LB: Alcohol was the main problem. Marijuana starting making an impact in about 1980. I can think of people in the '80 group that were definitely using because we had some conversations with them. That was back when kids were arguing that it wasn't harmful back before we had all the medical information on

marijuana. We talked about it at club meetings, and some kids would defend their positions. Every year we brought speakers in, particularly from Athletes in Action for the banquets each year. I brought people in who spoke on the theme of drugs, and we had them in the schools, the assemblies, things like that. The attitude was that marijuana wasn't so bad. We had a couple speakers who did a good job of maybe changing people's minds. Had one boy who was very popular and was very much involved with marijuana. We brought in an assembly speaker and he made an impact on this boy. At spring break that year we held a camp over on Woody Island. As a result of that camp, this young man made a commitment to Christ, and his life really turned around. He stopped using and cleaned up a lot of other things I'm sure his parents didn't even know he was doing. There was another boy who I don't know where he would have gone. He was very smart, and no doubt going on to college but he was so involved in things that his parents didn't even know about, that I don't know whether he would have made it or not. That was about 1983 or 4. By then, we were certainly contending with marijuana. It wasn't until the last year, '85 or 6 or so, that we had kids in club that we knew were using cocaine. That's the last year that I was effectively involved in it. We tried to revive it but unless I get in and really work at it, it just doesn't go on its own. You have to have people involved or else you're just establishing another meeting where you invite kids and then you preach to them, and that's just not effective.

RH: Do think that the appearance of drugs in Kodiak was an

isolated movement or a cultural spin-off in the U. S. that had finally hit Kodiak?

LB: I think it was here more than I knew even before that. By doing what I was trying to do in establishing myself as an adult friend to kids, it was very interesting that after you establish this relationship, kids will treat you almost as an equal. They will talk to you about things that you thought that would never tell you. They will do their natural thing in front of you. Once you establish this buddy relationship, the bars go down and you really get to know the kids. I know that in the group of '78 at least two or three of the kids were smoking marijuana but it really was not strong until I got up a little later. It maybe had to do with the relationship. Kids will talk. I don't know how much I want to put on this now... Kids will talk about the real struggles they're having once they feel safe. And we told the kids that anything thing we knew about them was safe unless it was life threatening to yourself or somebody else. With that, it takes time for them to believe you but pretty soon you're finding out about their struggles with sex, with alcohol; their frustrations, their desires. I have fifteen grandkids, and I'm really happy to see this Parent Advisory group coming along. I hope that giving the kids a place to go will help them.

RH: Tell me something about the recurring theme that I'm hearing in Alaskan history of freedom and independence.

LB: We hear this often. I guess the best place to observe that is at Borough meetings when it comes time to establish controls or laws. I don't know that I have really experienced it in any

way that it had an effect on the decisions I made or what I did.

It may be an attitude about how we do it here but I really don't know how we differ.

RH: You were talking before about need for discipline of our children and their accountability. How does that relate to adults in a community at large?

LB: Maybe this has something to do with independence that we were just talking about. Let's take the issue of drinking. In about 1980, I became aware of the fact that in some homes there were weekend parties where alcohol was provided by the parents. As I got more involved with kids, I started to find out who some of them were, and it came as a shock to me that any adult could have that attitude. I think it still goes on today, and there are some parents who think that kids are going to drink, so let's do it in a controlled setting. So, we're fighting a difficult battle, where we say you're not supposed to do this sort of thing yet not all parents feel this way, therefore they actually hurt their kids. That was hard for me to take. I was more of a policeman. I checked up on my kids. I knew it was embarrassing but they knew I was going to show up. There are people who think kids should have a lot more freedom than I do.

RH: What did Young Life do "inside" - in Kodiak?

LB: Each year we took kids deer hunting. Various boats volunteered for three or four days. Sometimes we flew to Afognak. We had three or four adults, and we would take 18-20 kids. We had a friend who would let us use the facilities over the holidays. The fellow there would take us out in a truck and

string us out over 10 miles of road so each had his own area. For some kids that was a first. Actually, from town we would pick up kids after school and we could go out either direction. We were responsible for kids getting their first deer. That was always a great thing. The kids looked forward to it, and they knew that was something they could do in Young Life. In winters, we'd have ice skating parties and try to have something each month. We started each year with a hay ride the first full moon of the school year. I had two large wagons from my lumber company, and would load them with hay where they would hardly move. Every year we had at least 80 kids and we'd have a program they loved. We'd go out just camping. We had a disastrous campout out at Anton Larsen that kids who are now adults still talk about today. It was great but it was just disastrous. It rained all night, tents blew down, people running around in their underwear soaking wet. Because it was so disastrous, it was a hardship they all suffered through together. It was memorable and they all thought it was just great. Even today, people will talk to me about that camping trip.

RH: Was Young Life ever involved in community service?

LB: We made ourselves available to the community in the area of trying to raise funds trying to take them outside in the summer. I don't think we ever did community service just as a project. We went up to the hospital and do visiting and have singing groups but we never really had any community volunteer things where there wasn't a fund raising aspect that I can think of.

RH: Would you like to talk a little about the development of your

realty business in Kodiak?

LB: As I was trying to buy and sell properties when I had my lumber company, for the lack of a real estate company, I had to find out how to do this sort of thing. Just by doing some reading, learning about forms and how to do contracts, how to get them recorded, I simply did it. I saw the need for someone to accumulate all of this in one spot. I suppose Bishop, who was an accountant, saw the same thing because he started a company and he and his wife ran that. Within a couple years, another lady got someone to be the broker, so there were two ladies in that company to start with. They did quite a volume of work, and, again, I was watching this thing, thinking the field was taken care of. We as Island Realty started with three. Highliner Realty didn't go well. I'm trying remember the name of the second realty company.

RH: Tell me about the ups and downs in the realty business in Kodiak.

LB: When I first came to Kodiak in '71, you could buy property through the Borough for an acre lot in the \$4,000 range. By '75 or '76, the prices were up about where they are now. A huge immediate jump. I believe that was created by the lack of available land under government or Native tie up, that the prices immediately were bid up. As soon as it came on the market through land sales, as the town started to grow, prices mushroomed up immediately. There wasn't anything gradual about it. As the value of land increases, it obviously cuts some people out of the market. Had there been more land available,

the price wouldn't have skyrocketed. Now we're seeing it creep up from there, with a steady increase in population of two to three percent per year. Back then a lot of people were doubled up in homes. The Aleutian homes, particularly, were packed in. When the land was available, it gave freedom to expand, so we went through major development in the mid to late 70s. It was related to crab and shrimp. There was a lot of money, and after these seasons, we'd see a spurt of people building new homes. We had a lot of building. The period of '75 to '80 I sold a minimum of 10 house packages per year. I was always working up a set of plans on my desk. It was a real boom. In general, the economy was really expanding.

RH: What did the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 do for Kodiak?

LB: We thought it would be good in that it would put land into the hands of those in the community. We got some things we didn't count on. There was a long delay. And some held out for top dollar in some areas that didn't warrant top dollar. The impact has been negative rather than positive. They have land and we're looking for land, but it hasn't been released to the public. There's some great property between the base and town along near Boy Scout Lake that I wish they'd sell. It would be great property to develop. It would be nice if we could get a septic system instead of all big lots, but they could produce some land that would relieve pressure. There isn't much land. Some OK, some not so good, and people are subdividing it. We need more property.

RH: What did real estate do after the '75-'80 boom?

LB: We have held basically steady with the economy growing two to four percent a year. The year of '86 when the oil prices fell, the rest of the nation and Alaska took the dip, ours was very, very short. The people in Kodiak soon discovered we are not part of the economy of the rest of the nation or Alaska in general. Our economy is timber, fish and government based. The oil drop had only the slightest impact in Kodiak.

RH: What impact did the Exxon Valdez spill have in Kodiak?

LB: It was an economic Godsend. I do not think that it hurt salmon fisheries in the years that followed but that's an analysis that a Fish and Wildlife person would have to make. I recall seeing these gobs of oil mass down by the dock and seeing little salmon eating off the bottom of these things. I don't know if they lived or died but they ate it. The years following we had normal returns of fish. It seems a lot more susceptible to the storms and wash out of streams that ruins the gravel beds. Oil probably affected waterfowl and sea mammals. The spill employed everybody in town to clean up the oil. They made more money than they would have in fishing. They turned around and got paid for fish they didn't catch, but they made better than average livings, so they're getting paid twice. Economically, I don't think anybody got hurt.

RH: Did it do anything for real estate?

LB: It brought some rather large chunks of money in. We had people buying land because they had money to work with. We always see an increase in sales after the fisheries seasons in

October. We saw that in the year of the oil spill; people with big chunks of money making down payments. I saw more business in the year of the oil spill.

RH: Tell me a bit about the self-reliance and independence you see in people in the "Kodiak frontier."

LB: I'm not picking up on what your seeing because maybe I'm guilty of it, therefore not identifying with it. Things that I like are innovation. One of the things I really liked about running the sawmill was an opportunity to find new ways to do things and to do it better. I take pride in being able to solve problems with what I have to work with. I liked running my lumber company because my goal was to be more efficient than my competition. Later there was another lumber company, and both of us sold out to Spenard's at the same time. Northstar Lumber Company started later. I have always like self-reliance to figure out how to do something better. Before I came to Kodiak I worked in methods engineering to help discover better ways to do a task. That's in my natural makeup. That's independence, too, so solving the problem with what's available. That attitude is here and I maybe that's why I feel so comfortable here. I saw so many opportunities to employ ingenuity to do things.

RH: That's leads back to the first question I should have asked. What brought you to Kodiak in the first place?

LB: At that time, my wife and I had served as missionaries overseas, and we were with a group where you have to raise your own support. I had four children already. I was finding it extremely difficult to raise money to support us for going

overseas. We were just about at the minimum level of what we needed to go back when the Kodiak Bible Chapel gave us the opportunity to come up here as Pastor. I was tired on trying to raised money. I'd spent almost a year going from church to church, speaking four times a week. So, I just said, "I don't think this is what God wants us to do." When the opportunity came up to get up here, that's how I got here. It was the economic environment that kept me here; the opportunity to develop and the need that I saw in high school kids that made me change over from the lumber company to the emphasis on kids.

RH: So this has continued to be your own Kodiak frontier of innovation.

LB: I always enjoy doing things that require innovation. That could almost be the way you could sum up my life. I like to find a better way, a different way to move a log across a field. I can recall as a teenager figuring out how to change a tire without a jack.

RH: What is your most outstanding invention?

LB: I invented a layout for my sawmill where I could run it with one man. I could run a thousand board feet on a weekend by myself then haul it all in and sell it during the week after work. That was part of the challenge. Two people, then three ran the operation, while the competition had five. It was really challenging to me. Inventory was always a big issue. It was probably one of the things that made me most successful. Never running out of things, but almost being out. Minimum inventory with maximum turnover. That's where the money is. Those were

the innovation things that I liked. I like going out helping a fellow build a cabin and figuring out how you're going to put in running water by digging up the hill a half a mile. Solving problems.

RH: Let me say I appreciate your time and your sharing, Mr. Benton. Thank you very much.

LB: You're very welcome.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

96-49-01_I01.pdf