

Judy Salas

on

**Life in Alaska
And
The Changes**

by

Michael Kunkel

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for

**Alaska History
Gary Stevens**

TAMC /

I am Mike Kunkel, and it is April 23, 1996, and I am here with Judie Salas.

MK: I am going to start off my interview by asking When did you move to Alaska and why did you move here?

JS: I came to Alaska in a Prop plane in 1960. There were no jets then, to be married, and my husband to be was Ernie, who was hired by the Weather Bureau there in Cordova at Mile 13. Anchorage at that time was really spread out with a population of 80,000. It was like living in the time of Little House on the Prairie. It was a very different Alaska then, and there was honesty and trust and people helped one another. It was also a time of excitement, like driving down the road system and crossing it was a huge brown bear with her 3 cubs. The cubs were curious and they kept coming towards the car, but the mom, she reared up, she was real anxious, just waving her paws through the brush and the cubs casually turned around towards the brush and decided to go back to their mom, but once again, when mom wasn't looking they sneaked back out, and there she was, we hit the gas and we moved. Cordova had these wonderful wooden sidewalks. And then one day after a movie we saw the 'Magnificent 7' and we all did a Yul Brynner walk over these wooden sidewalks and through the middle of the road and we really got in the feel of being in the west. Cordova also had its' first Ice Worm Festival in 1961 and we had a great time there with lots of games. Sidney Lawrence, he was a wonderful painter and captured much of the beauty of Alaska. But the reality of seeing the actual beauty of the Northern Lights rolling across the sky in such an array of colors no words or canvas can really describe and that's what we saw in Cordova. Also the snow glistens as the sun comes up, and just falls across all of the mountains, it is so beautiful and even looking at those mountain goats walk across it. Everyone took life in stride. No one had the pressures and the need to perform there. The Ferry System wasn't in yet. There was only one ferry. I believe it went as far as Skagway. There was an unwritten law that you must pick up a hitch-hiker because of the weather conditions and because you never left a person stranded. And that is how we happen to come to Cordova,

JS: Then we went on to Bethel, and Bethel had perma-frost. Cordova had running water, but not so in Bethel. We had the running water on our compound and that was because there were 46 houses and the government built the well. But in town there was only one well and they had the dip method, and all the water was kept in great big barrels, I understand it is much more sophisticated now, but not at that time. And so while I was there a school teacher asked me, while I was working at the bank, and Bob Mulcahey was the manager there, and he said what did I think of politics concerning the honey bucket system that we had. I had no idea what he was talking about and he realized that and he asked me where I lived. I told him, and he asked me what I had for a toilet. So I described what I had for a toilet, it was square and it was in the bathroom, and it had a little lever on it for flushing. He said "you must have a well." I said yes, and he proceeded to say that there was no well in Bethel and they had this wooden honey bucket truck and as it went it creaked and it had some problems with it and he felt they should be getting a more updated, standard honey bucket truck. We had Honey Bucket lake which all of this honey bucket stuff went into and it was right next to the Catholic church there and we all ice skated on it in the winter time, and no one knew any different. Once while driving in our little V.W. Bug we wound up behind the honey bucket truck. Well, this little man, no bigger than a minute, runs accross to the Swanson apartments, he goes up stair and is gone for a minute, and traffic is kinda' backed up, and he runs back down and runs up this little ladder and dumps in his little bucket. I told my husband, "please lets' stay back" after hearing the story from the school teacher I did not want to have any part of this rickety wooden truck. And once my husband realized what the truck was carrying, he definately slowed down, kept back, and did not try to **get** in the **way of the honey bucket**. And then **there was this school teacher** and she had some depression because the winters were kinda' long and there was one time in the mid 60's the winter went into June and we had snow drifts still at the air port, and break-up hadn't even begun yet. And in the **meantime**, this one school **teacher had disappeared** and no one knew **where she was**, they could not **find her** they did not know if it was foul play or what.. And now break up was coming and it was such a break up because of the ice was so heavy that year that every one who had a boat took their boats to do their grocery shopping and there was such excitement in the town. A lot of us wore hip waiters and everything because after the long winter this was a fun time, we all enjoyed it when up pops the school teacher at Honey Bucket lake. So no one knows to this day what happened.

She may have lost her way, or what but any how the mystery was solved.

And during that time the Kuskokwim river decided to change its' course. Well, the way it was the old cemetary was right there and now all the graves were falling into the water, so they decided they had to move the cemetary. So when they moved the cemetary they moved it to the other side of town. And because of the three (3) feet perma frost in Bethel it took a lot of digging and a lot of movi

MK: Who was it that moved the graves? Was it the government, or who was it?

JS: No, it was just the towns' people. Just different ones' who decided they had to salvage what they had left, because the river had taken quite a bit of their families.

MK: How far off did the river change its' course?

JS: Oh! It moved several feet, ten (10) feet or more, possibly twenty (20) at that time because they built a retaining wall to keep the river from taking any more of the land and the road. They were having to move the road because it ran along side of the river. So in order to save it they moved it back and built this retaining wall to try to stop the erosion.

The Eskimo is very friendly. And, of course, drinking was a way of life though Bethel was a dry town. They always voted it dry and always managed to do that. The Eskimo, most of them did sign their signature with an X. So a lot of them prpbably didn't vote. I was asked to witness their signature on the back of their checks. They always took their time and was very precise. Then the bootlegger realized what a thriving business he could have he was selling the bottles for \$25.00 a bottle. And the Eskimo, or any one who wanted one would go to him. But he was having a hard time finding a secret place for his plane to put down. And he woould always have to have a different place for landing somewhere else. Once when the trooper did get him, the word went around that he beat up the trooper so bad the trooper was asking to get out of Bethel, he didn't want any more part of him. The bootleggers' name was Chet Atkins, and at that time there was a singer named Chet Atkins too. My husband and I were walking and I hit him and I said, "that's Chet Atkins!" And I'm thinking that maybe we should go to a different store, I don't want any part of this situation because they said he was very explosive and my husband says, "oh, the singer?" I said, "no", and I was very concerned, but nothing

happened, it went really smooth. The Eskimos had two types of apparel. They would wear their parkas in the winter time and then they have the kusbuks in the summer. And the kusbuks, if the hood was rounded that belonged to a part of a different area of villages, we'll say like to the north. Then, if they were pointed then they knew they came from the other direction, so from a far off, they could wave to each other and they knew who was there. And they had different colors. And the parkas were always done where they would set the skins up so that they would match. They couldn't just lay the skins any which way. They would have to lay them up so that they would match up beautifully so that they would have a flar to it and creativity and they sewed everything with dental floss. It held the skins together really good. And, of course, we were the chee-cha-kos, or the green horns, or the gusicks, as we were called, and we had no medical priviledges. We were at the mercy of the dentist, the visiting dentist, and at the mercy of any one who did eyes, did eye examinations. Only the natives were allowed to the Alaska Native Hospital. So we had our Dr. Jackson, she looked like a Norse woman. She was a pretty big lady, and so tender hearted. She was a great gal. Then she got married. But she was the one who saw to all our medical needs in Bethel. One time there was a murder. In Bethel if you have a bottle, you drank it till it is gone. It's not like you just take a few drinks. Well, this one time it got out of hand and these brothers were having an argument and one of the twin brothers shot the other one. They sent the body to Anchorage, and the other one came knocking at the door because he had heard the body had been at Dr. Schirmers, and she thought she was seeing a ghost. It just really scared her, she couldn't believe it. And then she realized it had to be the identical brother. He was fine, everything was fine except he could not handle that kind of drinking. And in Alaska when you went on an air plane mostly everyone brought their own 5th. They just did not sell liquor on the air plane. And of course, they brought on their own shot gun, they brought on their own pistols, what ever, because there wasn't any Federal regulations at that time. But of course the tourist were having a fit. They wanted that little curtain to make them first class. So some of the air planes put on that little curtain. My friend, Susan Murphys' mother, Nora Guinn, she was and is the only native Eskimo judge in Bethel and in all of Alaska.

There was a Maggie Lind, and we would buy our furs, and she would make the ruffs on our parkas because it was so cold that when you had first the woverine and then the wolf over it, and you would close it like this having a moisture where you could breathe. The air was so cold you could actually get T.B. in your lungs. So, while we were buying the ruffs from the Eskimo ladies, and everything, and our husbands going to work in them, the teenagers (of the Eskimos) did not want that style any more. So they were going Sears Roebuck, buying leather jackets, not putting hats on their heads, and they looked like they were pretty frozen to us, but sometimes we don't want the old styles and traditions and we try to break it.

Alaska was very iceolated, and because of the running water we had on the compound we took in a lot of nuns, from St. Marys. They would come down in 2's and they had these long skirts. That was the old days of 40 yards of material. They couldn't stay at the Catholic church at that time because there wasn't any really running water, it was still the dip method, and the food wasn't that plentiful it just wasn't a convenient situation so they just lived at our house. They would come in until they could make connections, and we'd take them back right over to the air port because it was just a hop skip and a jump and away. Well, this one time, this nuns' skirt went over the brake and my husband did not want to ask her if he could release his brake and embarrass himself and her so he burned out the brakes on the car.

We had Mushers. And the Mushers showed up and they were all Eskimo. There was no Iditarod as we know it today. There was up to 70 Mushers. They were all in their parkas, and of course they put like a seal oil coating over their skin which protect them from the cold. The dogs were alwas fed just what ever they ate, off the fat of the land. The sleds were kept in the summer time on top of the roofs of the Eskimo houses, who ever had a sled. So that is where they were kept during the summer months. And the Eskimos let their dogs run loose during the summer months, but in the winter the dogs pulled sled over the kuskokwim river. They would go to the trading post and trade their skins. Then they would go to the Fur Roundevoux where the winners would go, and that was held in Anchorage. And Little Joe Cartright from Bonanza, Michael Landing, was there that year and he was leading the Fur Roundevoux parade. My husband had a chance to meet him and he was very down to earth, and very nice.

As he, Michael Landing, was leading the parade his horse slipped on the ice and they fell, but Michael Landing was O.K.

MK: Tell us about where else did you live in Alaska?

JS: We moved on to King Salmon. One time King Salmon had Jimmy Dean, who was singer and noted for his sausages. He came to King Salmon to do all of his fishing and that was always big news for the day.

Also, there wasn't any T.V. in Cordova, or Bethel, but now in King Salmon we were able to have some T.V. It was from the base and we had some hook-ups. But before that there wasn't even any satellite. Believe it or not, we didn't even miss it. Its' a wonder that we kept so busy. Our T.V. would start with the news at 5:00 P.M., and the late show would be 10:00 P.M. that evening. And we had at one time a series of Mae West which non of us even knew who she was. But we had this opportunity of meeting Mae West. And, then we understood why we never knew who she was. It was quite an experience. And we all had to home school our children unto a certain age level at school because we didn't have enough teachers to go around on the compound.

MK: Did you have children in King Salmon?

JS: Yes, we had one kindergarten/first grade, and then we had Mary who was born in Bethel. We got stuck in a snow bank, in our bug, and my husband said, "you better get out and push". I thought at the time it wasn't a good idea. And we did make it in time to Dr. Jacksons' and she was born immediately as we hit her porch. And then in King Salmon, we had Kitty, who was born during 'Gun Smoke', at home. And the neighbor next door had just watched some movies on Birthing, and my neighbor, Gini Philips, had been a nurse 25 years ago. So they told my husband to start boiling water. And after we got everything done in the bedroom, and the baby was just perfect, I said, "why do you have him boiling water?" Because they kept laughing about how he boiling, refilling, boiling, and refilling on all four burners. They said, "its' to keep the husband busy so he doesn't get upset, one pot is for the string and a pair of scissors and then to sit down and enjoy lots of coffee. And then Joe was born but I made it to Dillingham. I flew over in a small air craft, of course, and he was born in the home of Dr. Libby, who was quite popular at the time and Joe came just fast, I went into that office and there he came. And there it was, very exciting and I was ready to get back on the plane to come back home.

King Salmon was very exciting. Priests continually visited us, and performed marriages in our house because if he needed to do a ceremony or something he would just come to the house and he would tell me to be ready in a couple of hours or what ever. The priest had me witness several marriages. And then there was Arnies Bar. Everyone went to Arnies Bar for lunch, or dinner. Any time you went out you either went to Arnies Bar or the base. Well this movie star needed someone to take the meat because he wanted the rack, but he didn't want the moose. So he allowed my husband and our neighbor to use his air plane and they flew to the place of the moose. And both of our families had a freezer full of moose that year. And they didn't have to do anything at all, just bring it in.

We had a shcool teacher that taught three or four grades at a time. Mrs. Wassman had lots of ivory artifacts, and fur parkas, and her son was a bush pilot out of Nome. And eventually she retired, and went to Fairbanks. She was quite wonderful, and we all learned a lot from her.

The base was convenient because it offered bowling, and movies, and a night where you could go to get away. And my husband did have an 18 foot cabin cruiser, and when visitors would come up from Washington D. C. and give Alaska a look-around just to see how it was and they always wanted to fish at King Salmon. So, they would come up and go fishing with my husband and it was wonderful that they always caught their Salmon. And they would go fishing with their slacks on, and their brand new shoes, their three hundred suit, and they really looked kinda' cute. But they got their Salmon, and then they would go back. We kept it frozen til they left. It really was a nice way of life. Not like it is now, its' really different.

MK: How long did you live in King Salmon?

JS: We lived there about three years, and then we went on to Annette Island. Metlakatla, on Annette Island is the only Indian town owned by the Indians. They are the Tsimsian Indian. And we had a Coast Guard Base there at that time. So we had a public school system right there where the base was. A lot of kids from Metlakatla also went to the school. And there was also a school there in Metlakatla. The cooking of the Indians differed from the Eskimo. The Eskimo had agooduk, (Eskimo ice cream) that was made with seal oil and now they have gone to Crisco.

They would beat it until it fluffed, and put some sugar in it and they always had berries. It depended on the type of berries that were in that year, and that determined the kind of Eskimo ice cream you had. And of course salmon was always in and they smoked salmon, and did a lot of stuff like that in Bethel. Salmon was the biggest treat, any which way. They even bury the heads. They would fold the heads in cloth, and when they were ready to have a big soup, they would dig them up, undo them and drop them into the pot, and that was Eskimo salmon head soup.

Going back to Bethel, there was Leans Lodge. About the only place for people to stay. They really didn't have locks on the doors, it was actually a little hook. And people were very honest. I remember in King Salmon too, we had taken a charter there from Bethel, and we stayed at Arnies Bar/Lodge/Cafe. We were told what rooms, and the next thing you know, you walk up there into your room, and Arnie is giving out your room to other people. He was giving permission to every body to have the same room. So, we wound up that night putting a lot of stuff against the door, Arnie wasn't going to give anyone else that room that night, because he had given it out three times more times and the Leans Lodge was the same was. They even had a bear skin rug. It was really lay back. At that time I was working for Northern Consolidated Air Lines, there in Bethel. And one day a pilot from Jimix Flying Service came in and it was cold, white-out, and a very bad situation but it was clearing up and he came in and as he flew in, somehow the plane was having a mechanical problem and it tipped over and he got out through an opening, and here the mechanics, and everyone running towards the plane, and he danced all over the air plane. His arms raised in this white uniform, just like a Superman. It was so funny, and so neat to see this. Once the F-27 was coming in and the wind was blowing, and he kept coming in and he landed with his landing gear, he actually hit the ground, but he knew the iceing conditions were so bad he wasn't going to make it. So he reared back on the throttle, and up he went, and he made it back to Anchorage. None of us still know how he was able to do that. The pressure he put on that poor plane it just shouldn't have done it. They made them good in those days. It was really exciting. And one time the mail truck couldn't make it into Bethel because it was blowing so bad, and the storm was drifting, but the mail had to get to town. So they all took their shovels, and they kept shoveling and it took them, I don't know, to go three miles and it took them hours to get that mail truck into town so that the mail wouldn't be left behind and they said that it was one of the most important days of their lives. They felt they shouldn't have to come back to work after that.

Mr. Jack Weise had been Senator at one time, there from Bethel, and the Governor of Alaska did come to visit Bethel, and he said it was the "mud hole of Alaska" and of course there was no side walks, and just lots of mud. There was also Edie Hoffman, who was a very influential man. He was Eskimo, and wanted the best for Alaska. He did everything to bring unity, and to bring progress, very influential. One time, I remember, having a bake sale in Northern Commercial Co. It wasn't A.C. then. He said, "so, why should I buy your pie?" So, I gave him several reasons. He had already made up his mind he was going to buy it anyway but we had to go through all of the fun things. It was so exciting. Eddie Hoffman did do a lot for the community and for everybody that was there. Basket weaving, our babysitter, Lucy Oscar, from Tununik, did excellent basket weaving. She had to quit because she was going to get married. Then Nancy Hunter came from Scammon Bay. She was there a short time when her aunt, Rosalie Hunter, came. She was pregnant and expecting her 8th. child. Nancy felt free bringing in her aunt, and Rosalie stayed a good two weeks. When she first came and ate, I thought she was going to go into town with her relatives. Well, the next thing I know, Nancy said, "good night everybody". We said, "good night" and Nancy and Rosalie went up stairs to Nancys' room. So, any time Nancy had her friends over, we knew they were staying for a time and we didn't know for how long. We all shared our food in common. We never thought anything about it, one way or another. The priest, Fr. Corigill, brought us a goose, out of season. He was holding this brown bag and we had company. Ernie kept asking him if he wanted him to do something with the brown bag. But he kept saying, "oh no, no, no, thats' O.K." Finally, when the company left, he opened it up and here is this goose. Fr. Corigill says, "I'm coming back at 5:00 P.M. to eat it." But, I never cooked a goose in my life, so I ran around the compound learning how to cook a goose. But, they would just invite themselves to come over, it was just one of those things. It was neat, it was a good life. My husband came home with feathers all over him from plucking this goose. It was something.

MK: Where were you during the '64 earthquake?

JS: We were in Bethel. And that was a very sad, sad day. De Matters had just brought a nun to our home. We were all feeling sick and didn't realize the tundra was rolling. We all told ourselves in our mind that this is flat land, this cannot be happening. But it was so severe we almost fell off our chairs. It was holy Friday. Everyone had ham radios and they kept in touch with every body, that was our only communication. Anchorage had been declared a desaster area.

We on the compound had Morris code phones. If you were one signal, we would take the ringer and turn it one long one. And if our family was one short, we would zip, one short, and where ever we were on the compound, whoever was looking for whoever, you would just go down the list and find their name and what their Morris code was and what ever house you were at, you would just pick up the phone because you knew it was you. They could always find you where ever you were. None of us had regular phones as we were not wired for phones, only the tower. So every one was calling wanting to know what we should do, if anything. One man was under his car in the fire house and his car started swinging over his head and he pulled out of that fire house immediately. He said he had no doubts he was in an earthquake. He didn't care how flat the land was. Later on we all took a Charter to Anchorage and saw the devistation, and Turnagain Arms, and there were many miracles. People that should have been killed in their homes and were not in them. It was 5:00 P.M. and there are many stories as to why they were not in their homes at that time.

I thank you for this interview. Alaska is so majestic, and once you are apart of this land it is always apart of you, no matter where you go. I'm glad to have lived in this Last Frontier.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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