

Tom Streb
on
Nome as a Child
and
"64" earthquake in Eagle River
Vietnam and Alaska
Alcan Highway

By
Ginger Streb
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Via telephone

Editor
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Oral History Project

The following oral history interview was held on April 14, 1996, with Mr. Thomas Streb, a cement plant foreman. The interview was conducted over the phone between Anchorage and Kodiak. The interviewer is Ginger Streb, student of Kodiak College.

GS: Hello Tom, I'd like to thank you for doing this interview with me. The first question I'd like to ask is how long have you lived in Alaska?

TS: Since 1959.

GS: Well why was it that you came to Alaska in the first place?

TS: I came with my aunt and uncle, I lived with them at the time.

GS: And why were they coming to Alaska?

TS: He was coming up here to become a member of the FAA.

GS: When you first came here where was it that you stayed?

TS: Well we stayed in Anchorage. We got to Anchorage, and we stayed here for two weeks in a motel, and we flew to Nome.

GS: What was it like living in Nome?

TS: Well, it was a lot different than anything I had experienced in my life. Nome was a very, very small town. It was probably 75% native and 25% white. We lived outside of Nome in government housing. We got to Nome in the middle of winter and it was dark, and stayed dark the whole time, when all of a sudden it became summer and then it stayed light. Probably one of the worst beatings I ever got in my life was when my aunt told us to come home before it got dark, and it never got dark. We didn't show up until the

next morning, she was kinda angry about that.

GS: Were there many hardships you had to endure, besides the light change?

TS: Well not as a child, as the adults they has to order their food a month in advance, so I imagine it must have been kinda tough trying to figure out meals for thirty days, because all food came in on a charter aircraft once a month. As a child it was one of the greatest places in the world to be.

GS: Did you have flushing toilets?

TS: Yes. In the government housing we had flushing toilets, but the town of Nome, and even the school I went to they had what was called honey buckets. Honey buckets were just a bucket that was dumped every day. The village itself didn't have any water, the water had to be all hand carried, but the government had all the modern amenities.

GS: What were the schools like? Was it a one room, or did they have different grades?

TS: We had different grades. There were twelve rooms, each room was a different grade. There was a cafeteria, there was a nice big gym, and the gym was probably one of the vocal points of the community entertainment. Everybody in the school belonged to the basketball team, or something like that. The school was split into two shifts, morning shift and afternoon shift. I went to the afternoon shift, I went to school at one o'clock and got off at four thirty.

GS: It sounds like there was a lot of kids. What would you say

was the population was at that time.

TS: The population in Nome in 1959 was probably about eight hundred (800).

GS: Wow, a lot of that must have been kids.

TS: Most of them, yes.

GS: What was it that you did for entertainment back then?

TS: Well, like I said we all belonged to a basketball team or something. I belonged to a team called the Nome Nuggets, and we took second place that year.

GS: In the whole state of Alaska?

TS: No. Just in the city of Nome, but that was quite an accomplishment for a bunch of people who didn't know what a basketball was.

GS: Do you remember much prejudice towards you or the natives?

TS: As a child, no. There was no prejudice among the children, we played, kids were kids. After I left Nome and grew older, then I had heard that there was prejudice between the adults, but as children I don't remember any prejudice between us and the native population.

GS: Were there any gold miners left by that time in the city of Nome?

TS: There wasn't a lot, but there was still the gold claims and the old miners that were out. They'd come in once a year and bring their gold in and have it assayed. We used to go down to the beaches. One of our field trips was to go down to the beaches, and the beaches of Nome are rock beaches.

We'd go down there and dig around and we'd find gold, and that was one of our field trips.

GS: What other kind of field trips did you take?

TS: Well whenever the whaling captains would go out and beach a whale the school would let out and we would go down there. Of course as a white person we weren't involved, but we'd watch the natives butcher the whales.

GS: Where the native children involved in the butchering process?

TS: Definitely, they all had their jobs to do.

GS: Do you remember the native children living a lot differently than you did, like friends that didn't have the clothing that you wore?

TS: Back then they wore more or less the native traditional clothing where we wore the store bought. In fact, actually we were kinda jealous because they had a lot better looking coats and stuff than we had. They had the furs and the mukluks and we just had old brogan boots.

GS: I'd like to stop and go back for a minute, and find out how you came to Alaska?

TS: Well like I said, we came to Alaska because my uncle was employed with the FAA, and his duty assignment was going to be Nome Alaska. We left from where he went to school in Oklahoma city. We left Oklahoma city driving a 1956 ford two door coup. there was five children and two adults in that car.

GS: It must have been pretty crowded. Did it cause any

problems?

TS: It was very, very crowded. Three children sat in the back seat, and one child sat on the floor, and one sat up front with the two adults.

GS: Have you driven the alcan since then?

TS: Many, many times.

GS: What change have there been since you did it the first time?

TS: A tremendous amount. When I first came up the alcan it was a little biddy two lane dirt road. Course at the time we came up in November so it was all snow and ice. It was a little biddy, just a trail through the woods. There were no stores, gas stations were very, very far and few between. You never passed a gas station without getting gas, cause you didn't know how far the next one was going to be.

GS: Did you have to carry gas in cans so you wouldn't be afraid of running out?

TS: Yes, well we were pulling a homemade little trailer that we carried a few gas can on just in case. It was very cold that winter, as I've said we came in November and I remember 40 below to 50 below zero temperatures. When we left Oklahoma, of course we knew we were coming to Alaska so we bought some winter coats. Well, in Oklahoma winter coats are probably equal to about spring coats in Alaska. One time my uncle was tired of driving, there was no hotel or motel to stop at so we just pulled beside the road and we took a few hour nap. Even with the car idling the radiator froze up. I remember having to take a water jug

up the road a little ways to a farm house. By the time I got back it was cold my nose was bleeding.

GS: Were you by yourself?

TS: Yes. it was only about maybe a quarter of a mile up the road. Actually it was backwards, we had passed the farm house, and I had to walk back to it carrying the water jugs.

GS: How old were you at the time?

TS: Nine

GS: So what were you expecting Alaska to be like at the age of nine?

TS: The greatest wilderness in the world.

GS: And did it disappoint you?

TS: No it sure didn't. It would be probably the most magnificent thing I've ever seen in my life. The mountains reach the sky. Nobody will ever drive the alcan like I seen it. It was a pure untouched wilderness, it was gorgeous.

GS: Did you see many animals on the trip?

TS: Many, many. We saw wolverines, wolves, fox, moose, caribou, and bears. Back then there wasn't enough travel to drive the animals off the road corridor. We stopped many times with a bear sitting in the middle of the road. He wasn't about to move and we weren't about to make him.

GS: How was it that you ended up going by: did you just have to wait till he got off the road?

TS: Wait, we'd just wait till he decided that it was time for him to move on, and then he'd walk away and we'd drive past.

GS: Were you the only one out of the entourage that thought it

was fun or did everyone enjoy the trip?

TS: Well, all the children enjoyed the excitement of the wilderness trip and the adventure. I think my uncle was probably concerned and worried about being out in the middle of nowhere with five children, but as a child it was one of the greatest experiences of my life.

GS: What did you have to eat on the way up the alcan?

TS: Well, we'd stop at some of the, if you'd want to call them, lodges. There was no menu, you'd go into a lodge and they'd maybe have moose stew or what ever they had available. There was no menu's you just ate whatever they had cooked for the day. For breakfast sometimes they'd have pancake. There were no eggs, cause eggs were a premium. you couldn't hardly get an egg on the highway then, but we'd have pancakes and coffee. If we had milk it was always powdered, because there was nothing fresh along the road.

GS: Had you been used to eating wild game?

TS: Something we'd had to get use to. I had never eaten moose before. I'd never had no idea what it was like. When i'd first tasted it, it was a little strange, but I liked. We ate bear too. I remember one place had bear stew. another place had moose steak. For a child it was very challenging.

GS: You had stated before that you have traveled the alcan many times since. Did you ever consider leaving Alaska permanently?

TS: Not permanently, no. I've always left knowing that I'd

came back. This is the place that I love. I imagine some day when I retire or something that maybe I'll go out for the winters and be what they call a snow bird, but no I'll be back.

GS: After the two years you spent in Nome where was it that you went?

TS: We left Nome, came back and we lived north east of Anchorage in a place called Eagle River. I lived there basically until I went into the army. Way back then it was just a tiny little place. There was one little shopping mall and a little ice cream stand. I was the first grade that every went to Eagle River Elementary. It was pretty primitive back then, we had no running water. We had running water, if that's what you want to call running to get it. It was very nice. It was 14 miles into Anchorage which was quite a long ways to go back then with the transportation that we had. My uncle was still working for the FAA. After living in Nome it was totally different, because Nome didn't have any trees. It was a barren country, and then come back and live in Eagle River, and it was all wood. It was the first place that I ever went moose hunting. In fact the place that I shot a moose, there is a shopping center built there today.

GS: When you say that you went to the war, was that Vietnam?

TS: Yes I went to Vietnam. I was one of the few young men that went to Vietnam from Eagle River area. Contrary to the rest of the country, Alaska was very patriotic. I was held on a

pedestal because I did go, and when I did return from Vietnam, I was treated very well. A lot of my friends that went back to Los Angeles and other places like that, were treated like it was wrong. When I came home I was treated extremely well, and thanked that I did my duty for my country.

GS: Were you in Alaska during the "64" earthquake?

TS: Absolutely, it was quite something. When it first hit, we didn't know, we thought it was kinda funny for a second or two then it got a little stronger and stronger, dishes and things started falling off the walls. Eagle river didn't get hit like Anchorage did. At that time I was no longer living with my aunt and uncle, I was living with a friend. She was a HAM radio operator at the time, and she became Governor Egan's personal mobile HAM. There was no communication with the outside world except for the HAM radio. It was quite thrilling and scary. Every day after we kept expecting another one that would be even worse, but it never did come. As a child I didn't realize the damage and the destruction that it had caused. It was just something that I had remembered to be very awesome, and to this very day I am kinda a little scared of earthquakes.

GS: Did it cause destruction as in loss of running water, electricity, or any thing of that kind?

TS: Yes, we had no electricity for about a week or so. Like I said we had no water anyway, we had to carry our own water. There were no supplies, the only food that was available

was what was in the little grocery store at the time, which was called Piggley Wiggley, because the highway was completely destroyed between Anchorage and Eagle River. Within a matter of hours there was nothing left in the store, because everybody went down and grabbed everything they could get a hold of. It wasn't as bad as some people make it out to be. We had plenty to eat, we were warm, we had no problems.

GS: What did you do when you returned from Vietnam?

TS: Well, I guess for a couple months or so I just kinda bummed around, and didn't really have any meaning or nothing to my life. I was just trying to get my head straightened out after Vietnam, when I was offered a job at the Borough Fire Department, to be a fireman. I guess every boys dream is to be a fireman, so when I got the opportunity I joined the fire department.

GS: Do any calls when you were with the fire department stand out in your mind?

TS: Yes, one in particular. I was working out of the Eagle River fire station, and of course we had a ambulance there, and I was a trained Emergency Medical Technician. There was a call that came in that a lady had collided with a moose. That particular night that the call came in, every fire station was giving a class on first aid to any civilian that wanted to come to it. Of course all the radio transmissions are monitored in every station, and at that time the borough had seven fire stations. We dispatched the

ambulance; I was driving, and my partner was in the back. We arrived on the scene, and it was a pretty bad accident. This lady had definitely made hamburger of this moose. She wasn't hurt very badly, but she definitely needed to go to the hospital. We put her in the back of the ambulance, and I'm driving down the road and the next thing I know I hit a moose. I called the dispatch, which was called fire patrol and said, 'fire patrol this is rescue 11, and please be advised that I just collided with a moose, but I am continuing to the hospital with the patient, and could you please have the fire chief meet me at the hospital to fill out the papers because I had an accident'. So we get to the hospital, and this lady is a little slightly hysterical because she just hit a moose and then all of a sudden the ambulance she was riding in hit a damn moose. I filled out the paper work, and then on the way back I had to stop and wait for the Alaska State Troopers to get there to fill out an accident report at the scene. We pulled up and there were military police cars sitting there. We drove a big white ambulance with a red cross on the side. We pulled up there and the MP comes walking over and he says, 'are you the Salvation Army, or the Red Cross come to pick up the dead moose?'. We said no, we're the dummies that hit it. Then all of a sudden he just shook his head and went back to his car and then the State Troopers pulled up behind me and he walked up and says, 'just what in the world is an ambulance doing with a dead moose?'. We had to explain to

him that we were the ones that hit the moose and what had happened. We filled out the report and went back to the station. Again, all of the radio transmissions that had taken place, every body in the city had heard. The next morning when we woke up somebody had put a little moose sticker on the big dent in the ambulance. (the kind they give out to kids at school when they've been good). Consequently there is a magazine called the "Alaska magazine" that we were involved with. They got a hold of the story and next to the lady's name it said, 'after hitting a moose, while being transferred to the hospital, the ambulance also hit a moose. It then gave me and partners names, and said that she probably wouldn't be interested in see any more moose for at least a month or two'.

GS: So you got to be famous for awhile?

TS: I believe the word is infamous.

GS: So Tom, what changes have you seen in Alaska since you first came here?

TS: Well, when I first came here, it was wilderness, and very backwards. I've seen a change in modernization and technology. I mean, when I was young people lived in cabins without running water. There was very little public service. I've seen a tremendous change in the growth of the state, and the size of population. I'm not exactly sure that I'm happy with it, because I've always dreamed of it as being the last frontier, like when everybody had the

pioneering spirit. I see Alaska now as basically, especially the Anchorage area, as just another metropolis. We do have a lot less problems than you hear about in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. I think were getting there but with the Alaskan spirit, and the new 'can-do attitude' I think were going to solve our problems a lot quicker than some of the other cities are doing. When I was young we never locked doors, and left keys in the car. If somebody needed to use the car all of a sudden you'd look out the window and the car would be gone, but a half an hour later it would be back, and the gas tank would be filled up. If you came home to find that the lights were on and somebody was in the house, you didn't worry, because it wasn't a burglar, it was just a neighbor needing something. Since then the times have changed and we all got caught up with the 20th century. I think it has changed from a very rural state to a metropolitan state, it's been very traumatic. People are not quite use to it, but I think their learning.

GS: Have you seen a change in peoples attitudes?

TS: A little bit. Once somebody's been in the State for a few years, and they kinda catch the Alaskan spirit, I think their attitude changes. I mean, lets face it, all white Alaskans are basically outsiders, but I think once you've been up here for a certain amount of time your attitude changes and you become a lot friendlier. I think Alaskans are probably some of the friendliest people in the world. In fact, you ask any tourist, and they'll tell you that.

They say that were the most friendly, colorful people in the world, unless you meet us on the road and then it's kind of unlitely.

GS: What are you doing now Tom?

TS: Well, now I am the foreman of the only cement plant in the state of Alaska. I've been there for 15 years. I worked my way up from just a general laborer to foreman. I have four more years before I can retire. I enjoy my job, but I am looking forward to retirement because there is a lot of Alaska that I haven't seen. There's probably some tourist that have seen more of Alaska than I have. When I retire I plan on doing a lot more hunting and fishing, and going all over the state and seeing things. Right now I'm married to an Alaskan Native. She comes from the village of Sleepmute, on the Kuskokwim, one of the greatest fishing spots in the world. I hope to get up there and spend some time, and learn a lot more about the native culture than I know now.

GS: Is there any special place in Alaska that you plan on retiring in?

TS: Yes, I'm thinking about when I retire. I have some property up in Talkeetna area that I've owned for 20 years. As a matter a fact, this is the anniversary of the 20th year I've owned it. I would kinda like to go up there maybe and reside for a few years, live off the land, and plant a garden. Kinda like regressing back to what it was like when I was a child, and daydream about days gone by.

GS: So what do you think Alaska has on store for the future.

economically and politically?

TS: Well, I'm not a seer of the future, but I see Alaska as a very growing state. It has tremendous opportunities for our young people. I see Alaska as trying to give opportunities towards older people and retiree's. Back when I was a young boy, most people when they got a little older they left the state. I see Alaska trying to keep their older people here. I'm planning on staying here myself. Politically I think our government officials are doing the best that they can. I don't always agree with what they say, but I think Alaska has a tremendous future. I see great opportunities for our young people to stay in the state, with higher level education available without having to leave the state. I see where they can turn around and put that education to use in Alaska. I see Alaska as a rising star.

GS: Thank you Tom for your cooperation with this project. I wish you many more happy years.

TS: It was my pleasure.

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