

H96-49-122

Kodiak Oral History Project

SIDE 1

George V. "Corky" McCorkle is interviewed by Dennis W. Thaute on April 21, 1995 in Kodiak, AK. The interview takes place in the harbor master's office. Corky came from Boulder, CO when he was 15. His mother remarried a Navy man stationed in Kodiak. He wasn't too excited about leaving. They came up on the USS O'Hara from Seattle. First they went to Whittier; many military people got off the ship and got on the train. Other troops boarded the ship. There was a lot of snow there. They arrived in Kodiak in May. He couldn't get over how green it was there; he was picturing a snow-covered landscape.

Corky's stepfather said the school was good and that it had a basketball team. They drove up by Aleutian Homes. Corky was amazed at how small the town was. He made a friend, Pat Heitman, whose father's name was August. That summer they took him fishing, his first experience commercial fishing. The boat was named Natuts; they fished for King Crab Inc., over in Middle and Kalsin Bay. He met other fisherman, like Carl Armstrong and Bill Robertson, who he continued to know over the years. Corky made \$300-\$400 that summer, which was a lot of money for him.

He attended Kodiak High for 1 year. He played varsity basketball under Coach Joe Floyd. That was over 38 years ago. Floyd was the commanding officer of the Territorial National Guard, and a well known Kodiak resident. Actually, four of Corky's schoolteachers were officers. They had the largest National Guard unit in the state, over 100 people. When he was 16, he got his territorial driver's license, and also signed up for the territorial guard. After 10th grade, he enlisted in the Army. During high school he got to play basketball in Anchorage...and went with the National Guard to Camp Denali for tactic experience.

While in the Army, he toured Europe, and when released in 1962, he came back to Kodiak, where he got a job with the Dept. of Fish and Game, in salmon and king crab research. He also helped construct the Kitoi Bay Hatchery on Afognak Island for the Fish and Game, building the dam, etc. In 1963 he joined the Kodiak Police Dept., met his first wife, and got married in February 1963.

In the summer of 1963 Corky decided he didn't want to be a policeman, so he went fishing with Lawrence Anderson on the Toots. He also went crab fishing with his father-in-law Henry Sanguinetti on the Leading Lady. Johnny Gregorioff was its owner before he died. Axel Carlson was one of the crew members, a lifetime fisherman from Chignik, along with his friend Walter Stepanoff of Chignik. Corky learned a lot about fishing and the history of Alaska just by listening to these guys talk. He can never forget how Stepanoff could clean a duck. He skinned ducks and pot-roasted them; it was the finest meal Corky had in his life.

Corky was once hit in the back with a crab pot; he thought he'd broken his back but was able to keep working. One day they were fishing on the mainland in Dakavak Bay. A freak squall came and a crab pot turned over on him before it was tied down. Also, while in that area, when volcanoes were erupting you could smell sulfur in the air, and see a little light coming off the mountain during the night. They were talking to the Jaguar (boat); Axel Sedam was the skipper. He said it looked like Katmai or a nearby volcano. Corky recalls returning to Kodiak through Kupreanof Straits and seeing a lot of dead birds and ducks. He thinks it may have been an effect of the volcano sulfur or something. This was leading up to the 1964 earthquake. Signs had been given that seismically something was going on, but being a lay person Corky didn't know much about it at the time.

On March 27, 1964, they were fishing on the flats off of Kodiak. They usually left about 6 AM, but for some reason they were all early to work, and left an hour early. They began picking pots, were catching crab, throwing crab down in the hold...all in a timely manner. When they came back, as they passed Alaska Packers, Corky noticed that the tide was out. Axel, Henry, and Walter were talking about good clam digging. They tied up in the small boat harbor. Corky had a shotgun in his bunk and just happened to grab it and walked up to his house. His wife was cooking meatloaf and his 8-month-old son Shannon was playing in his crib. The windows started shaking; gradually it got more and more intense until it was so violent you couldn't stand. Corky grabbed his son and they opened the door to stand under the doorway. The paperboy was standing there; his eyes were like saucers. No one said anything; they were all scared. It seemed like the end of the world. The telephone wires were making strange noises and the trees were swaying...after it settled down a bit, they turned the radio on. It said to evacuate to higher ground. Their house was on relatively high ground, under Pillar Mountain on High St. A neighbor said to get farther up, but Corky's son was ill and he didn't want to expose him to the elements, so they decided to stay in their house. He recalls looking out the window at the southeast breakwater. Water was coming slowly over the breakwater. It receded back out, and boats were sitting at the bottom of the harbor. Some people were trying to get their boats out. The second wave was the big one, and did the most damage. People out at Cape Chiniak—Rose Marie and Mr. Schultz (music teacher) were killed, as well as a naval petty officer's wife and son. The naval officer lived through the wave. Mr. Schultz's body was never found.

On the night of the earthquake, Corky walked along Pillar Mountain. There was the indescribable smell of the stirred-up sea. At first light he went to look at the downtown area. Different boats were scattered throughout the downtown; the Selief was up by the schoolhouse. The Leading Lady was not in the harbor; he figured it had sunk or was gone.

He went to the Police Dept. to see if there was anything he could do to help. Chief Rind, behind the counter, gave him the ambulance to drive. They hauled all casualties and injured people to Griffin Memorial Hospital and the morgue. There were 19 dead in total. Corky recalls laying the bodies down side by side in the small morgue. Mac McKinley, former U.S. Marshal, was also bringing in victims. They recognized Rose

Marie. It was the first time Corky had to face death like that. They received an air-vac with Mary Shya, from Chiniak, who was pregnant. They took her to the hospital where she delivered safely.

The hospital was in need of A-positive blood, Corky's type. He gave a pint of blood, after having been up for 72 hours. He got really sick, with flu, fatigue, weakness, etc., and stayed home for the next 3-4 days. Once recovered he worked temporarily for the Police Dept., as a security officer downtown. His shift was 8 PM to 8 AM. Looting wasn't really a problem. The Marines had been there guarding initially. After April, he stopped that work, and went out to the base; then he fished that summer on the Commander.

Kodiak had power back after earthquake in relatively short order. Perhaps by the next night. The tsunami went around the generators, amazingly. Mitch Shya, his wife, and baby Scotty came to Corky's house when hospital was evacuated. They kept the baby in the oven to stay warm. People were great during the disaster. Considering the small population (around 500), they really did a lot. The Naval Base probably also had roughly 500 people. The Storis (?) Coast Guard ship was stationed at Kodiak at the time.

Lots of fishing boats went to St. Paul's harbor to weather the wave. Jerry Tilly was on a boat tied to King Crab dock, and said there was a local wave there during the earthquake. The hangars at the base were half under water.

There was a WWII liberty ship brought up after the earthquake when the Alaska Packers Cannery, Donnelley & Acheson, Standard Oil, and Kodiak Oyster were destroyed. The ship later became All-Alaska Cannery (it was beached). That was one of the first canneries to open after the earthquake. That was a good year for crab and salmon. The disaster didn't affect fisheries.

Corky says Kodiak residents are more aware now of tsunami danger. In fact, in the Shumagin Islands, the Pacific Plate meets the American Plate, and when the area has another earthquake, it will probably be at least an 8. The 1964 earthquake was supposed to be an 8.5 at the time. Scientists have now changed that to a 9.2. Duration was 4-5 minutes depending on who you talk to.

At the bottom of the Gulf of Alaska, from Prince William Sound, there was a trench. There was both horizontal and vertical movement. The Kodiak area sank about 6-7 feet. It's been rebounding though, since then. This has been documented by surveyors.

About the size of the harbor...during the earthquake there were probably 250 boats; there are many more now. Federal emergency monies rebuilt Kodiak, Seward, and Palmer harbors. When the canneries got back on-line, the fleet started to grow. Corky remembers when Oscar Dyson bought the Peggy Jo for \$350,000 or so. Spending that much money on a boat was unheard of at that time.

Houses that weren't hit by the wave fared quite well. Kodiak is on rock, whereas for houses on Turnagain Arm, the ground turned to putty. The waves caused the most damage. Kodiak had no fires, like Seward and Valdez did. The death toll was 19. For the whole state, it was around 119. If an event like this happened today, without the tsunami warning systems, there would be big trouble, because of the tremendous coastal populations. During the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, the emergency operations center came in very handy.

SIDE 2

As far as Corky knows, the epicenter of earthquake was in the Prince William Sound area. There was deep movement. The Pacific and North American Plates shifted downward (vertically), as well as horizontally, causing the long-lasting, violent shaking.

They found several tsunami victims along the waterfront, one in the hardware store, and some in boats. There was a tremendous amount of debris; huge boats were up on land. The attitude was that in the big picture, they came through very well.

A scientist with the Geodetic Survey was killed in Akhiok when he went back for someone. Corky remembers that when he was brought in, his wife would not leave his side. They had to talk to her for at least half an hour. That was very tough.

After the disaster, Navy officers came in to relieve Police Dept. members. People pulled 12-hour shifts until things calmed down. The Navy was very helpful, feeding and sheltering people. Fishers went around the island and picked up Native people and brought them to town. Corky recalls Representative Bartlett coming on Air force 1. President Harding sent him up to look at the damage. They started getting federal assistance right away.

When the grocery store re-opened after the disaster, some people tried to buy 4 or 5 carts of food. The Chief of Police went over and had everyone buy in a more rationed way, so there was enough for all the shoppers.

The airport was open very soon after the disaster.

Corky went to work on the Naval Base in the civil service for a while, after the disaster. He worked cleaning up beaches, repairing docks, etc. Then he went salmon fishing. In September 1964 he went back to the Police Dept. until December 1965. Kodiak was a boomtown at that time; there was a lot of drinking and fighting, but not many felonies. The population was growing, with some transients. The ferry was running.

He became harbor master in May 1971. He talks about the importance of being prepared for crises. Emergency personnel are under a lot of stress. To prevent injury to them, too, it's best to be prepared.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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