

Alaska Oral History

Kodiak, Alaska

Judge Roy Madson

November 1992

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1Interview with Judge Roy Madson

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by Ann Stone

AS: What do you want to tell about your family background?

RM: Well.. I was born in a village on the Alaska Peninsula, called Kanatak. There is a pass up there leading to Beacharof lake. My father had a store and a trading post there at the time. My mother was actually from Kodiak. My parents were married here, and my two older sisters were born here, rather my three older sisters were born here and then we moved over to Kanat. They were drilling for oil over there at the time and that is why we moved over there. But my father was born in Denmark and left home at the age of 13 years. He signed on a square rig sailing ship, and sailed around the world a couple of times, eventually ending up in the United States. He joined the U.S. Navy when he was about 16, and was in the navy a couple of years and then he went back to sailing again. Things were kind of at a stand still on the Pacific coast and so he came to Alaska in 1903. He was up in the Nome area, that was during the Nome Gold Rush Days. He had a cousin up there and that was what drew him up to Alaska. He didn't get involved in the gold rush but rather went into Fur trading. He was grub staked by one of the merchants up there and bought a small sailing boat which he used to sail to Siberia and the coast of Alaska to trade for furs. He did that for about 14 years. Then he moved down to the Alaska

Peninsula. Where he was from about 1914 till 1918, in King Cove he was appointed special Police and game warden, because cod fishing fleet poaching Caribou herds out there. Then he went back into the fur trading business and bought a good sized schooner. He was returning to Alaska with a load of trade goods, when his vessel sprung a leak, so they came into Kodiak, unloaded all of his trade goods to dry out, during this time people started to come in and buy merchandise from him. Then he met my mother and they were married, and he settled down in Kodiak. He never got any further.

AS: Fortuitus, wasn't she?

RM: She was, Her parents were of Russian origin and Russian Aleutiq. Tracing their history back about five generations to the original Russian settlers. There name was **Metrokin**.

AS: I've heard that name.

RM: She was one of about seven children in their family. Anyway after a couple of years my family moved back to Kodiak. My mother died when I was about four years old. My father had a store here at the time, he gave up that business because they already had two stores in Kodiak, they had Kraft's and W. J. Erskines, which was originally the Alaska Commercial Company. He went into the big game guiding business.

AS: Did they do Bear?

RM: He actually, with his background as a fur trader and everything he used to hunt walrus and polar bear up in the arctic. He took a couple of parties out hunting there from Austria , that came up in their own yacht, after they had hunted walrus and polar bear they wanted to go down to the Kenai Peninsula to hunt moose and caribou so he came down with them and guided them. So that's how he got into the **guiding business**. Then when he was in Kodiak he used to take people out on bear hunts and also for moose, caribou and mountain sheep on the Kenai peninsula, which was still open at the time.

AS: So he got around all over the place?

RM: Yes, and then later on up in the Rainy Pass area he kind of pioneered that, in fact he was one of the first registered guides in Alaska. He and a fellow by the name of Andy Simon were the first and second registered guides in Alaska. He continued that until his death in 1954.

I grew up here in Kodiak and went to grade school here and high school. I started going out on hunts with my father when I was about eleven years old, he started taking me out on his hunts with him.

AS: On the guided hunts?

RM: Yes. I'd leave school early in the spring, before school was out and I'd have to do a bunch of makeup work. Then i'd go out with him, I was kind of a general camp helper. My oldest sister was the cook and I was a dishwasher and cut the firewood and kept the fires going.

AS: Kind of a handy person?

RM: Right.

AS: So then that was, what, in the 20's, 30's?

RM: The first time I went out would have been about 1934, when I was eleven years old. I continued that until I graduated from High School in 1941. Eight years I guess I did that.

AS: So then you were in Kodiak all your teenage years?

RM: Yes,

AS: And then during that time could you tell me something about the important people that were in Kodiak that were considered leaders of the community and what they were doing?

RM: Well, The leaders probably were the founders of Krafts, Mr. **Otto Kraft**, he was of German descent, an old Prussian. He still

spoke with a heavy accent and his house was furnished like you would expect somebody from Germany, very old country, very proper. He owned Kraft's, his son Ben Kraft worked in the store and his another sons also worked there. There were three of them. The other leader was **Wilber J. Erskine III**, he owned Erskin's store, he had purchased it from the Alaska Commercial Co. who had purchased it from the Russians, the Russian American Company. Mr. Erskine had a son and a Daughter, Wilson and Caroline. They are both quite a bit older than I am, maybe eight, ten years. They were the prominent citizens of our community at that time and a fellow by the name of **Blinn**. The B and B bar is a remnant of Blinn's. It is the original building that they were in, he had a bar and a dance hall.

AS: When you were a teenager was there much discrimination against the native people and the white people? Did you see any differences the way people were treated?

RM: Well, you have to remember that when I was growing up Kodiak had a population of less than 500, not even 450 people, my recollection is that the population was 442 from the time the earliest time that I can remember up until about 1939 and there probably was about 12 different families with Russian heritage and practically all of them were interrelated and they were intermarried with the local native population and so no matter who you talked about you might be talking about somebodies relative,

because my family, the **Metrokins**, my mothers family were related to the **Shwravolfs**, the **Walkoffs**, **Kuasnikofs** from the Kenai Peninsula, We are also related to the **Petellin** family from Afognak.

AS: So everybody is tied together?

RM: Yes, then after my mother died and my father remarried, he married Alexandra **Chernoff**, who was related to the **Gregoroff** family, the **Hubley family**, the **Scholls**, and the **Nortons**.

AS: Everybody is related.

RM: Yes, so if you discriminated, you'd be discriminating against your own family. And it was just like one family, actually. There was no wealth in the community, we were entirely dependent on **salmon fishing** at the time. So the only people that really had any money were the people that had the stores. They were the people that could afford to buy things that the others couldn't. Because everybody in town was indebted to them and had to wait until the fishing season to pay them off.

AS: They would charge all year and then at the end of the season pay?

RM: Right, that's Right.

AS: What were you doing right before WWII? You were still in High School?

RM: I graduated in May of 1941.

AS: So you just barely made it?

RM: Yes and I had, the year before that I got my first job away from home, I worked in a salmon cannery over in Uganik. I was 16 at the time I got a job as a trap watchman, they still had fish traps.

AS: Do you want to tell a little bit about **fish traps**, for people that don't know about fish traps?

RM: Well in those days in addition to a seining salmon, all the canneries had stationary traps as differentiated from what they called floating traps down in Southeastern Alaska. Here the cannery crews would come up in early May and they would drive pilings like dolphins for leads and those things could be run maybe a thousand feet off the shore, 500 to 1000 feet. Then they would put wire mesh up on them and the salmon would come in to follow the shoreline, they'd follow this lead and it would divert them up into the trap. Then the trap was arranged like an intricate box, that led them into the inside of the trap, and there was web that hung down from the inside of the trap that you could close. When

the fishing tenders would come in they would close the trap. They had kind of a webbed thing that looked like a hammock on the fishing boat that they would lower down with a boom, right down in the middle of the trap and the fish would swim right over the top of the thing and then they would lift it up and flop them right into the boat.

AS: So they were very fresh.

RM: They were alive and wiggling, the job of the trap watchman was to keep the lead clear of drift wood and kelp and things like that. They had a little house on it not bigger than 10 X 12, thirty feet off the water. You lived in this thing and they gave you a gun so that you could shoot any seals or sea lions that got in and were eating the fish. They gave you a Dory like the old cod fish dory's.

AS: Was that the double ended ones?

RM: Not exactly double ended, they had a very narrow stern. They were Klinker built planks overlaid over each other, very good sea boats, you had that thing tied off the trap and when you shot a sea loin or seal they would float up after a few days and then you'd tow them out of there, that's what you'd use the dory to keep all of the drift wood and kelp away from the leads to the trap. As I said you were about thirty feet above the surface of the water,

so when you had a storm the whole thing swayed, and you lived on the thing and every once and a while you had a big storm. These traps were all out on the capes.

So every once in a while when there was a big storm you could hear the piling pop, the waves would just jar them loose and they would go popping up. If it got to bad you could row ashore and there was a little cabin on the beach that you could stay in.

I did that for about a month, but I really wanted to get on a cannery tender, the one that picked up the fish, I finally did and I did that for the rest of the summer.

It was on Afognak Island.

AS: Oh it was Afognak Island. That was the summer you were 16?

RM: When I was 16 right,

AS: It was probably lonely being alone over there and being a kid.

RM: That's right, I finally got on a **cannery tender** and the oldest person on it was 22, the skipper was 22. They were all college kids from the University of Washington. I worked on that the rest of the summer and then when they went to Seattle I went with them and that was my first trip outside the territory of Alaska, when I was 16.

AS: I bet that was exciting.

RM: When we went in to Puget Sound the whole crew, about seven of them, stood there looking at me to see what kind of expression they'd see on my face when I saw all of the buildings.

I left Kodiak, I worked out here, they were just building what is now the Coast Guard Base, but they were building a **Naval Base** out

there, I worked for a company called the Siems Drake Puget Sound Company. I worked on one of their tug boats. they were dredging the channels, so they had dredges working day and night. and the tug boat would take oil out to the dredge or water and haul barges of gravel back, so I worked on that for the summer. And then I had just decided I was going to go college so I took a ship out of here in August and went down to Oregon, I had a sister down there who had contracted TB and she was being treated down there. So I went down there and enrolled at Oregon State University.

AS: So there was a lot of people had TB in the 40's and 50's?

RM: Yeah, that's right. I think my other two sisters and myself all had a touch of it but we outgrew it.

AS: That's one thing we didn't cover, How many children in your family?

RM: There were eight, five girls and three boys. Actually in my family two step brothers and two step sisters, but we were all raised together. And I think that was about the average size of a family in Kodiak. there were some that only had four or five and maybe some larger families of about ten or fourteen. I know of one family that had about twenty.

AS: Oh, my. All the same mother?

RM: Yes, the parents got married when they were sixteen years old and they had something like twenty or twenty-one kids.

AS: So you went to college in the fall and then World War II started in December.

RM: It started in December and I stayed in college until the next

year. In the summer of 42 I worked in a ship yard down in Portland. Then I started college again in the fall of 42. I went until January of 43, then I went into the Navy.

AS: Ok, and then where were you stationed?

RM: I was sent to Norfolk Virginia. I went in the Navy in Portland and then they shipped me to Norfolk, from there to Maryland, from there to Rhode Island.

AS: Up and down the East Coast.

RM: And then I was shipped across country to Treasure Island and then shipped over Seas to New Guinea, I was in New Guinea for about 6 months and then I was in the Phillipines, I was on a PT boat. I spent about a year and a half in the South Pacific.

AS: And then when you came back.

RM: Then they shipped me back to the East Coast, I was in Boston.

AS: so then you got to see lots of cities?

RM: Oh yes, I was in Boston for a while and I had some leave coming so I asked them if I could take my leave and report for duty up in Kodiak. And with great reluctance and at first they wanted to send me to a psychiatrist because they couldn't understand why anybody would want to go to Alaska from Boston, they agreed that I could do that so I came up here and visited my family then I reported for duty at the 17th Naval District which was here in Kodiak at the time.

AS: what year was that?

RM: 1946, January of 46. and I was here until November then I got out but I spent the last 9 or 10 months here.

AS: What did you do when you got out of the Navy?

RM: I got out in November of 1946, at the time I was married and had two children my second daughter was born here in Kodiak, my first one was born when I was in the Pacific

AN: You got married while you were in the Navy?

RM: Yes, and we had one daughter when I went overseas, in the south pacific. Then when I was up here we had our second child. My wife didn't care for Kodiak, coming from Philadelphia, in 1946 it was quite different than it is now. So I went back to Pennsylvania and tried to find work, I was there from the time I got out of the service in November until about January 1947 and couldn't find a job. It was really hard to find work at that time so I finally came back to Kodiak and went to work for a contractor until spring, **bear hunting season**. Then I went out, got my guides license, and did that with my father for the next three years.

AN: That took you up into the 50's?

RM: 1949. I went the spring of 47, 48, 49 then I left again in August of 49 moved to Oregon and enrolled in law school.

AN: That was quite a change to go from big game hunting to that.

RM: that's right.

AN: What can you describe about big game guides and what they do a little bit?

RM: Well, my father had his business since 1929. He used to advertise in Outdoor life Magazine and Field and Stream. He would travel in the winter months throughout the U.S., and he had taken thousands of feet of movie film of **big game hunting** and he used to

show those to sportsman clubs and different things like that. That's how he got his clients. They'd come up here and when I was guiding with him it was quite different than when I used to go out with him when I was a kid. In those days Kodiak was very isolated we had one ship a month and it took a week to come from Seattle to Kodiak, so it was a very lengthy trip. Then when I started guiding people would fly to Kodiak and we had two week hunts we hunted by boat which got larger and larger over the years, he ended up with one that was 98' long and could sleep 22 people. We might take 4 or 6 people at a time and we would hunt in the Uyak Bay area, Spiridon Bay, Zacker Bay and around there in the spring. When we would start off everybody stayed on the board, then early in the morning we'd drop a guide and a hunter off in a skiff for the day and then cruise to another bay, and do the same.

AN: And each group would have a leader, guide with them?

RM: That's right. and a packer. Using binoculars, we'd scout the mountain sides until we saw a bear then we'd watch it for a hour or two to see if it was traveling or feeding. If it looked like it was a trophy animal we'd plan our stalk. We'd have to start maybe a mile or two to the leeward side of the bear so that you were going into the wind, behind the wind so you could get up above him and then work our way down, we'd have to find places up in the mountain that would be recognizable so that we'd know the approximate place were we'd expect to find the bear.

AN: Then the client would shoot the bear?

RM: That's right and then we'd skin it out and carry the hide down

to the beach into the skiff and then go back to the big boat. then the hide had to be cleaned, when you field dress like that you leave a lot of the fat on the hide and you have to scrape all of that off and that is called fleshing. take all that fat off and salt them down so that they don't rot. if they rot all of the hair falls out and you have to be very particular, you have to skin and turn the ears inside out the nose inside out, the claws, right down to the very claws, you have to go right in there, and around each one, very tedious and time consuming. then the hides are sent out to the taxidermist. We used to use **Jonas brothers**, they had a shop in Seattle and in Denver, they had hunted with my dad back in the 30's, and were knowledgeable, they took the measurements of the animals that had been shot in the field.

AN: After you helped with the guiding for several years you went to law school Were did you?

RM: Well I used to just do the guiding in the spring and fall and I fished commercially up in **Bristol Bay**, I had an uncle that lived up there it was at the time when they still had sail boats up there, they didn't have power boats. I did that for three years in the summer time, then I came back to Kodiak and I long shored until the hunting, the hunting was over in November I worked in Kraft's men store during the winter months, so I had several occupations.

AN: Well I think that happens in small towns where they do lots of different things. So were did you go to Law School?

RM: I enrolled at North Western College of Law in Portland because of night Law School, I had a family and I had to work, I got a job

as a truck driver, so I worked 40 hours a week and went to school nights. for four years.

AN: So then you graduated from Law School when?

RM: 1953, and I was admitted to the Oregon Bar that year. Then I got a job for a Title insurance company as a Title Examiner. I did that for about two years then I got a job as Assistant District Attorney in Cluckamus county. I was the Assistant prosecutor for five years.

AS: Then you came back to Alaska?

RM: Then I came back to Alaska, and started my own practice, I took the bar up here and was admitted in 1962. I had my **own practice from 1962-1975.**

AS: Here in Kodiak?

RM: Yes, I was the city attorney and the Borough attorney, I was the first attorney the borough had, also I represented the bank and some of the local businesses, local contractors and things like that, I was the attorney for the Kodiak Electric Association (KEA). During the **Native land claims** I lobbied for the passage of the land claims act, I was involved in setting up the native corporations when the act was passed and I represented several of the native corporations up until I was appointed to the bench in 1975.

AS: Could you do a little contrasting of when you grew up in Kodiak and then when you came back as a lawyer, and the different people that were here at that time?

RM: When I was growing up as I said earlier, Kodiak had a pretty constant population of about 450 people until 1939 when they

started building the Navy base then our population suddenly rose to about 1000 people in 1940, or 1939. When I came back in 1947 we probably had somewhere around 3000 people, we had one lawyer maybe two. When I came back in 1961, Kodiak had maybe 3500 people at the time, this was the height of the **King Crab fishing** and it really got going in 1961-62-63 these were the hey day years of the king crab fishery. There were a lot of processors that came into Kodiak at that time. I think there were maybe 12 or 15 processors. Then after the earthquake and **tidal wave** wiped them all out there was a lot of construction so the rebuilding of the community and our highways and the break waters and stuff like that, so I think our population increased actually that year to about 5000. It just has grown continually since then. when I was a kid the community was pretty much centered around where the down town area is now. There weren't any houses beyond where the Community Baptist church is. The cemetery was up there but that was it. Where Alaskcom is now that used to be an **experimental station**, so that is why the barn is there. On Mission road it didn't go beyond, where my grandparents used to live, right about, just a little past, KEA. Mission Road didn't exist, the access was on the beach front. It was what they called Tagura Road. That is the original road to that part of town because there wasn't anything on the upper side of mission. because people still had there boats tied up on the water front. As far as the down town part where it is now the city police station there weren't any houses beyond that.

AS: Where the postoffice is and all that?

RM: Right, there wasn't anything down there, where the Shelikof lodge is there was a house down there, but up behind that there was nothing. The only roads that we had, one went to Millbay, but not the present road, it's the old road that goes off up to the right just past the Assembly of God Church and goes down to the beach there, that's known as the **Nachtweih property**, it terminated there. Then the other road as far as going across the Buskin river it terminated right about where there terminal is, there used to be a ranch out there it was called **Abbot's ranch** and they raised cattle out there on that part that is the airport now. That was until the Navy took it over. We did have ranchers that were further out but there were not any roads out to them until I think it was a W P A Project in the 30's that they extended the road out to about where the rodeo grounds are. That was just a narrow trail actually. Before that the ranchers used to have to come in at low tide, either riding their horses, horseback, or by horse and wagon, that kind of thing.

AS: Woman's bay was dredged so that the bigger ships could come in?

RM: Yes, that's right.

AS: So that is not natural, is there anything that you would be able to say about the land claims because a lot of people are pushing now that the 20 years are past, there is a lot of talk about the land claims is there any thing that you could talk about that you think would be of interest?

RM: That is a very complex subject because under the **Alaska Native**

Claim Settlement Act, in order to be eligible a village corporation had to be incorporated, this was a totally foreign type of idea to the native people. and you had to travel around and explain what had to be done, why it had to be done what their responsibilities where and try to find people that could act as a board of directors for a profit making corporation.

AS: So did you do that?

RM: Right, it was very difficult for some of them, every village had to have it's own corporation.

AS: when you were on bench is there anything that strikes you as unusual or out of the ordinary for Kodiak, or that any other judge would have had to deal with?

RM: When I was first appointed **to the bench in 1975** I was not only responsible for Kodiak I was responsible for everything west of Kodiak all the way to end of the Aleutians and South of the Kuskokwim River, so I had something like 57000 sq. miles to cover, going from one end of my jurisdiction to the other would be like going from Seattle to Minneapolis. I had to cover that once a month, I was a circuit riding judge. I couldn't go to all the places I had to cover so one month I would go to Dillingham, the next month it would be Nacknek the next month UnAlaska, or Sand Point or Cold Bay, Saint Paul or something like that. It was an extremely large area so I guess the things that were probably different about it was that in some of the areas I had to have interpetor in the **Upik language**. When I was holding court in Togiak their whole population was Eskimo. When I was in Kodiak we

had a lot of Vietnamese, Koreans, Phillipinos, Hispanics, I had to use interpetors where ever I went. One of the first cases that I tried a person had stabbed another person in one of the local bars. It was called an Assault with a Deadly weapon trial which normally would take two days to try with a jury, it took us five days because everything that was said had to be interpreted from English to Vietnamease to Phillipeno and when the defendant testified his testimony had to be translated to Phillipeno, and to English. When the victim testified it had to be translated to Vietnamease to English. So it took three times as long. Everything was translated three times. They finally ended up with a hung jury they couldn't decide. So we had to try it all over again. Another case I had involved some Eskimo defendants who were charged with illegally hunting walrus on a walrus reserve, on Round Island, they decided to plead no contest, I started the proceeding at 8:00 in the morning I had an interpetror to interpret everything that was said. and at a proceeding that normally would have taken 45 minutes to an hour, took us 12 hours, we finally finished at about 8 that night. When the Yupik people talk, they can't give a yes or no answer they have to explain each response. I had a court trained Yupik interpreter, and had to get an interpreter for my interpreter, that was unusual. My father spoke seven Eskimo dialects, even men and women spoke different dialects.

AS: After the tidal wave you were here working as an attorney, what were some of the problems from a local residents point of view in rebuilding the town?

RM: that was interesting because just before the tidal wave, I think the night before, the tidal wave happened on Good Friday, the 27th of March, On the Thursday before we were, at the borough having a Planning and Zoning meeting, discussing an urban renewal project for the down town kodiak area. The tidal wave came in and accomplished a lot of the basic works of an urban renewal project. the night of the tidal wave, the then Magistrate that we had then, Mabel Finner, was in the hospital, and died.

AS: That was the Optometrists mother?

RM: right, Don Finner's mother. And of course communication was cut off immediately, the city fathers could envision all kinds of serious problems arising because of looting and things like that, so they had an emergency meeting after the earth quake and tidal wave, and they decided that they would appoint me as the magistrate and prosecuting attorney, I was the only attorney in town. Fortunately, they didn't have any big crime wave and Anchorage sent a judge over as a coroner because there were about 12 or 13 people that were killed,so I was off the hook. The city and the borough started having meetings almost daily right afterward. The first thing that they had to consider were the health hazards that were created by all of the buildings that were destroyed, something like 138 buildings in the down town area, getting them cleaned up and getting permits for the people so they could burn what remained of them and the rubbish and things like that to keep people to from picking up the liquor bottles that were floating around free that had been saturated with fuel oil in through their corks, to keep

people from drinking them. So there was always some kind of emergency health problem or another that arose from day to day. Generally getting the town cleaned up and back on it's feet, like first for instance I think that the only store that was open was the City Market because Krafts and Donnelly & Acheson were wiped out.

AS: Were they where they are?

RM: Yes, and getting supplies in so that people were able to live somewhat normally, of course we didn't have any electricity because KEA was wiped out, and getting the electricity back on line again. And water lines cut of.

AS: Then the navy was out at the base?

RM: Yes, we had marines come into town they kind of took over, the marines and the national guard did patrols to keep people out of the down town area and things like that.

AS: There was not much damage at the base then?

RM: No, Not any where near as much as down town, it was very exciting time, I guess we got contractors in and started cleaning up. The planning went on pretty much what they had wanted, there were some modifications because the City Engineer at the time who was planning the urban renewal area before the tidal wave had been talking about, having all of the buildings in the down town area built to resemble a Russian village, the motifs of the old Russian village, so that was not followed, then they had to decide who was going to get what property, who was entitled to apply for property. We had a subsidence of about five and a half feet, the down town

area sank, so we lost a lot of land that had to be recovered by rock fill. I was appointed as Small Business Administration fee counsel because, the Small Business Administration was financing all of the construction down town, they needed somebody to process their loans. That was another job that I took over.

AS: So when did you retire?

RM: Well, about 1990, after about 15 years on the bench.

AS: Was that enough?

RM: Oh yeah that was plenty.

RM: I thought that Kodiak was an ideal place for a child to grow up in. It is probably nostalgic, but it was a small town, although we were isolated, in retrospect, I think that kids that grew up on farms were as much isolated if not more than we were here. I have very fond memories of my childhood days in the community, it was like an extended family to grow up here. Probably much less isolated than kids that grew up on farms. We had contact with outsiders like when Dr. Hartilicka came to Alaska to study and write his book on the anthropology of Kodiak. He stayed with us. He stayed in Kodiak for a period of time before traveling to Larsen Bay. Father Bernard Hubbard who was known as the Glacier Priest, this was the base of operations, he would come to Kodiak and then travel off to like westward, to the Alaska Peninsula and places like that, he would stay with us.

AS: So you'd meet a lot of educated well informed people.

RM: Yes.

AS: I think that in Alaska we meet a lot of well informed people

who have something to say because of our small population.

RM: and because of my fathers guiding business, there were a lot of well to do people who came to hunt up here. So we had an exposure to a lot of people from all over the country

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