

Lena Metrokin

on

Kodiak

by

Jaana Hernandez

on

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Oral History

Alaska History

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The following autobiographical interview was on March 18, 1993, with Lena Metrokin, a retired eighty five year old resident of Kodiak, Alaska. The location of the interview was at her Bay Terrace apt. The interviewer was Jaana Hernandez a graduate student of the University of Alaska.

Upon entering her home her grandchildren are just finishing up their dinner and about to leave. Her home is decorated with several paintings of Alaska. Her grandson is an artist and has many of the same paintings in studios. There are also all types of yarns around. She has several items she has knitted. On the tape you will hear about them. Upon looking at her face, one sees lines of wisdom. She was very cooperative through out the interview.

JH: How long have you been on Kodiak island?

LM: 66 years

JH: Since 1927- What brought you to Kodiak?

LM: Well, I married a man from Kodiak. He had worked here a long time. He was from Chiniak.

JH: What is your origin? Where are you from?

LM: ~~Chiniak~~ Chignik

JH: What did you do when you came to Kodiak?

LM: I was busy with babies. My oldest daughter was eleven months old. Later two more babies were born.

JH: So you raised your family here. What was Kodiak like when you first came here?

LM: A small, quiet and little town it was. Also it was very peaceful.

JH: What was the population then?

LM: About 450 people lived here then.

JH: What was in the town?

LM: There were only two stores. The church was here. The Baptist Mission was here.

JH: When I talked to you last time, you said you had church on Wednesday night. What religion are you?

LM: Russian Orthodox

JH: Do you go to the one right next door?

LM: Yes.

JH: What makes the Russian Orthodox church different from other religions?

LM: Well, it is sort of like a Catholic church.

JH: Can you tell me what the cross symbolizes- the three bars?

LM: The father, the son, and the Holy ghost are what the cross stands for.

JH: Yes, but why does the bottom bar have a slant in it?

LM: There are two different explanations. I believe it is how Christ layed his feet on it.

JH: That is very interesting.

LM: There was an old church here. It burned in the 1940's. It was even bigger than the one here now.

JH: How did it burn?

LM: No one knows. We went to church that evening. It was a wooden log church. That night it burned down completely.

JH: What is the biggest holiday for the church?

LM: Christmas and Easter both are special.

JH: What do you do for Easter?

LM: There is a lot of church service. There are three holidays in the church. You are in church for the whole time.

JH: Are there any specific traditions?

LM: Right now during Lent, a lot of people are fasting. I think it is hard for a person my age to fast.

JH: Was your husband involved in the church?

LM: Yes.

JH: What business was your husband into?

LM: Well, he was from this area. He worked as a sales clerk for many years. Later he did some fishing when other jobs were tight.

JH: When you first came to Kodiak in the 1920's, was fishing a big industry?

LM: Oh, no fishing was a very little thing. Fur trapping was a big deal. My husband hunted red foxes, silvers, <sup>s</sup>crosses, and land otters.

JH: What about seals?

LM: No, that wasn't a big thing. He did mainly land animals. He got a good price for foxes. I had a beautiful fur my husband made for me from a cross fox. You could just see the cross on it's back. I sold it when I needed money for my three babies.

JH: How did Kodiak change in the 1930's? 1940's?

LM: The 1930's were the same. But in the 1940's World War II started.

JH: What was it like during WWII?

LM: Well, there were a lot of service men. Not to long after the Dutch Harbor bombing, we had to have our windows black every night. This kept the light out.

JH: Were you afraid of being bombed?

LM: Yes we were. We had to trench our house so we could go under it. We knew an old man who had a cabin out in the woods. We would go there if we were scared. After Dutch Harbor was bombed, we went to hide there for a few days. There was such a thick fog here right after the bombing. I am sure that is what saved Kodiak from being bombed.

JH: Was Kodiak ever actually bombed?

LM: No, the fog protected us.

JH: How long was Kodiak under threat to be bombed?

LM: A very long time. I made my first trip to Seattle in 1948. The passenger boat, the <sup>Denali</sup> ~~Denah~~, was still blacked out. There was no peace. It took a long time to get back.

JH: What were you doing when WWII began?

LM: Nothing but I was very upset. I listened to the radio.

JH: You said there were a lot of servicemen then. Has that number changed?

LM: Yes, there are hardly any now. I do not know for sure. There were Marines, Army, and Navy men here. Mainly Army men were in Kodiak.

JH: What was Kodiak like after the war was over?

LM: It was very lively. Lots of people were coming in. There were lots of jobs. There were about 2000 people in town. The city grew a lot.

JH: How was Kodiak in the 1950's?

LM: It slowed down a lot.

JH: In the 1960's, what was the tsunami like?

LM: We did not know it was coming. I was working in the crab cannery. (which was completely destroyed in the storm) I had been working three weeks with out a day off. It was Thursday afternoon. The superintendent

said you girls can go home now. Come back to work on Saturday morning. I went home.

JH: Where were you during the actual tsunami?

LM: I was home reading the newspaper that came only once a week. I told my grandson Jimmy, to stop shaking the table. He said he was not doing it. Suddenly, it got stronger. I had something cooking on the stove and it fell over. We didn't have much damage because our house was on top of rocks. Some people's water lines broke. Ours did not.

JH: How high was the water?

LM: It came so fast and went back out. The channel got sucked out. I took the three boys up to the high school for shelter. I turned on the radio. It said take to higher grounds immediately. There is going to be a tidal wave in less then thirty minutes. I met my husband. He said it was going to be bad. I stayed at the school until 3A.M.

JH: What areas were damaged the most?

LM: Kodiak was pretty bad. I tried to walk to town two days later and couldn't get through. Everything was damaged. It was terrible!!!!!!

JH: Did a lot of people lose their lives?

LM: I think seven people did.

Some bodies have never been found. People in the boat harbor did not get out in time.

JH: How long did it take to clean up Kodiak?

LM: Quite a while. At the school there were so many people. Someone took my radio. I was looking all over for it. A teacher took it. I looked out the window. I saw a giant white wall of wave. The wave took a huge chunk of land with it.

JH: How long did the tsunami last?

LM: It lasted several days. We had after shocks for a couple of years.

JH: Have there been any other earthquakes on Kodiak?

LM: Yes, there have been a few. The high school was so full of Orientals I couldn't get in.

JH: What was the first school on Kodiak?

LM: I am not sure. It was an elementary school.

JH: Have you been to any of the schools or worked in them?

LM: Yes, I worked at the Peterson school before the tidal wave. I was a cook in the kitchen.

JH: Have you noticed any changes in the weather on Kodiak?

LM: It rains more now.

JH: I have heard that it used to be colder here. They used to make ice here and sell it. Do you know about that?

LM: I have heard about that. I do not know anymore about it.

JH: What was Kodiak like in the 1970's?

LM: Many stores came and went. Sears was big then.

JH: Did people use credit more back then?

LM: Yes, I did. I still do. My husband used to sell and trade furs and fish to Krafts. Krafts (department store) was good to us. I still shop at Krafts. Living here is handy. I go shopping with the driver of the senior center. There are no more Kraft family members on Kodiak.

JH: What was the 1980's like?

LM: I moved here to this apartment. I sold my big lot and house to my daughter. It was expensive. It was \$400.00 for five weeks of oil to heat the place. This place is so small though.

(She now stops to show me her knitting projects.)

JH: How often do you go to church?

LM: I go several times a week. The first week of Lent I go twice a day. I don't go every time because my hips start to hurt.

JH: Are you more active in the church during Easter time?

LM: Yes. Do you go to church?

JH: Sometimes I do. I am Lutheran.

JH: Do you know why the shape of the church is the way that it is?

LM: No, I do not know why. I am sure there are a lot of meanings to it. At Christmas time, the church choir goes around singing Christmas carols in town.

JH: Have you travelled to mainland Alaska?

LM: No, I haven't been there much. I haven't even travelled a lot on Kodiak.

JH: Have you hiked?

LM: Yes, but not here. I have when I picked summer berries.

JH: What kinds of berries are found here?

LM: There are salmonberries and blueberries. You can't pick to many in the city because there are too many buildings.

JH: Have you seen any bears?

LM: I haven't seen any. My husband was also a bear tour guide. I am afraid of them. Bears around here are tough.

JH: Where did your husband do most of his hunting?

LM: He did some on the island and some all the way up to Anchorage.

JH: I have heard that bears often get cattle.

LM: Yes, this happens a lot.

JH: Did cattle used to be a big market?

LM: Yes, there used to be several ranchers. I do not think there are too many left anymore.

JH: Are there any traditions or celebrations on Kodiak?

LM: The state fair was fun. I used to make things for it. Other women would bring things from their gardens. I used to have a garden every summer. Things always grew well.

JH: What did you grow?

LM: I grew lettuce, tomatoes, peas, and once in a while other vegetables. The summers are nice here. Raspberries are my favorite. I always made raspberry jelly

JH: Have there been many plane crashes on Kodiak?

LM: Yes, I have heard of several. The fog and tall mountains are bad.

JH: What are some of your favorite things about Kodiak?

LM: The climate is nice. Two of my daughters still live here. One daughter lives in Seattle.

JH: What don't you like about Kodiak?

LM: Nothing- this is all I know.

JH: Is there a lot of crime here?

LM: I don't think there is a lot. Although, I have read bad things in the past few years.

JH: Who were the natives on Kodiak when you first came here?

LM: There were no Eskimos left.

JH: What kind of people lived here then?

LM: There were a lot of Russians.

JH: Do you speak Russian?

LM: I could if I had to. I understand it all.

LM: What are the roads like to Bell's Flat?

JH: They are not as bad as in town.

JH: How long have there been paved roads on Kodiak?

LM: Quite a while, at least twenty years. They are in poor shape now.

JH: What is the senior center like?

LM: It is nice. The lounge is right there. (She points out her window.)

JH: I notice you have nice art on the walls.

LM: My son Alvin painted them. Alvin is now a professor at the University of Alaska.

JH: Is there anything special about Kodiak?

LM: The people are so nice. If it is cold it is not too cold. There are a lot of nice beaches.

JH: Isn't the water too cold to swim in?

LM: The lakes are nice. I used to go often. I even had rings of ice around me. The lakes are all blocked now.

JH: What is the warmest it gets here?

LM: 90 degrees

LM: Kodiak has the nicest trees I have ever seen.

JH: Where I live, there are not too many trees. (Bell's Flat)

LM: I remember a man had a big dairy farm in Bell's Flat.

We used to all get our milk from him.

JH: Did people used to ride horses in the city?

LM: Yes.

JH: For how long?

LM: Well a man that did all the time died two days ago.

JH: Did you have any horse drawn carriages here?

LM: NO.

JH: What and when was the first car brought here?

LM: When I first came here I rode in a Model T.

(I sense she is getting tired now.)

LM: There used to be a little bank down town. The bank book was small only two inches big. Now things are easier I guess. I ride the taxi a lot. The thing that scares me the most is the ice on the roads. I am afraid to fall.

JH: At your church, is it a priest, pastor, or pope that preaches?

LM: Our priest is Father John. There are priests that travel from church to church. He goes back and forth to Ouzinkie.

JH: Thank you for your time Lena. I really appreciate it.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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