

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ON WORLD WAR II IN KODIAK

Pete Olsen

On

Cordova, Alaska in the 1920s & 1930s

And

The Kennicott Mines

The Depression Years

Building of the Armed Forces Bases on Kodiak

World War II in Alaska & Kodiak

Early Years in Kodiak

By

Monte C. Pelto

On November 21, 1991

Kodiak, Alaska

Pete Olsen is a long time Kodiak resident, who after World War II settled in Kodiak with his wife Nina.

A retired fisherman and carpenter, Pete still is involved in The Alutic Culture and Heritage Center in Kodiak.

The interview took place in the Kodiak Area Native Association building in Kodiak on November 21, 1991. The interviewer is Monte Pelto who works as a counselor for the Kodiak Area Native Association.

Monte Pelto: The last time we talked, we were tlaking about growing up in Cordova, Pete, tell me about that.

Pete Olsen: Well, I was born in Cordova, May 21st, 1921 and I grew up there. Had not left home till I was nineteen . While I was growing up there it was fun years. As I was going to school, friends and I., summertime we would hike up in the hills and go swimming, in our "nature suits" and then wintertime of course we fell in the falls. My one buddy, close buddy, him and I on the weekends would take off and go hunt ducks or grouse and hike out, out to one of the bays there where, the early in the morning, when the grouse were feeding on fine pebbles, and we pass our time that way. Always something to do. Hunting, swimming, hiking, and wintertime of course, we would do alot of sliding and skating. And life was very interesting.

Monte Pelto: What was, what was Cordova like then ?

Pete Olsen: Well, it was one of the, course I did'nt know how to compare it with any wheres else, but I ah, it was known for the "Friendly City". And people were very friendly there, very friendly and freely opened their doors. I remember years later talking to a fellow, he just came to Alaska and he happened to stop- ed in Cordova, and from the docks to town was a, I believe a thirty five to forty

minute walk. He walked up and he was asking one guy, wheres a place he could stay, cheap place. Guy asked him if he had any money. He said no. Total stranger pulled out twenty dollars, and said well, get yourself a room and something to eat. He had no idea who the fella was but, life was like that. People never locked their doors. People helped one another. It, was it was a beautiful life style. People saved different things bolts, nuts, and odda and ends, because in them days you had to rely on one another. Cause we in wintertime, we only had one boat a month come to Cordova, and was summertime when the canneries were operating, and then one a week. And nobody had money to buy anything in them days, so everybody just helped one another by having something, and he say "well go to my, you go to my shed, and look left hand side of the door there, and you tell you where to find it. And thats the way it was with our life style. People saved stuff because somebody needed it. And in your, in your lifetime, you know the circle was completed, because, if I did not have it, what I did'nt have you had, and so it was "horse trading " . No money and a nobody said well, i'll pay you when I can because every needed something and somebody had something. So like I say the circle completed and a, just a wonderful life style.

Monte Pelto: When did the copper mines open up around Cordova?

Pete Olsen: Ah, if I remember correctly, they started, started around 1906 and I think the first train got up to Kennicott, either 1909 or 1910. I'am not real sure but, it, it was one of those two years.

Monte Pelto: Did the mining company play a big part in the town, or was it to far away to really effect the goings on in the town? Was it a big employer of people in the town?

Pete Olsen: Oh, ah, the mine is what built Cordova, because anyone that was

going to work there, either had to come through ah, highway up Richardson Highway up into Chitna, and then on down to Kennicott, but the rail road came into the Port of Cordova and a, thats where they brought in all the supplies and thats where they shipped out all their ore, right through Cordova. So without the mine there wouldn't have been a Cordova at all. At the time they started building there was one little tiny cannery right there in Cordova. It's up in what they called Odiak Slough. Ah, other than that, other then the natives living down in Eyak Lake there, ah, there was nothing.

Monte Pelto: So, what effect did it have on Cordova when the mining operations stopped?

Pete Olsen: Well, like any other place they a, some of the people stayed there and retired there. But most of them left and, Cordova by then was pretty stable ah, summertime you could get oh, twenty five hundred, three thousand people for the canneries, and then in wintertime it was pretty stable eight hundred people pretty much every year. There was , there was oh, let me see, one, two, three, four canneries right in Cordova then, salmon canneries. And then there was one, two, three, four, within fifteen miles of Cordova. So then thats besides the canneries that were around the sound Prince William Sound. And there was some, there was some crab fishing during the winter a, not a lot, it only oh, there was only about half a dozen boats that fished dungeness crab right there. And in springtime towards the end of March, end of middle and end of April they started digging clams commercially. There was a, couple of clam canneries and a couple of small hand-pack clam canneries, and that usually lasted about a month. We would make four or five hundred dollars, which back in the thirties was a lot of money . You could live a whole year on it.

Monte Pelto: Uh huh, that was . What was it like during the Depression Years?

Pete Olsen: During the Depression years yea. Its a, we knew , we knew what the Depression was through a., course through the newspaper and radio, and also, also you could go to a movie, everytime they was a movie they had a film what they called a Path a News, it was about a fifteen minute film of the happening of the through the United States. And it showed where there was bread lines, we of course life was even at its best was, nobody was rich in them days, but there was lots to live on; there was clams, and crabs, salmon, deer, a, so anybody that went hungry was their fault. Long as you would make enough money to get your staples you know, flour, sugar, milk, coffee and spuds, things, rice. Long as you had things like that you could always have something but, a, we a, we never had ah, what the life style is today. We never ate like today. Lot of food was plain simple old brown beans, or pea soup, but, they would the good sound foods that are good for everybody.

Monte Pelto: Now, what about when World War II broke out? Where, were you in Cordova at that time right?

Pete Olsen: No, no, I was here in Kodiak. Spring, spring of 1940 a, there was a cannery and ah, the cannery foreman lived in Cordova, so he hired us and we came here, Kodiak. That was in May and I worked in the cannery, Port Williams. We first started the, there was a strike on then. Ah, salmon, red salmon strike, so the company put us to work building a cold storage, and just about the time the strike was over, we had it completed enough so they could use it. It was pretty much completed, and then I worked there. I worked there until a, first of November. We, after the canning was done, bunch of us stayed back and we drove a new dock, an expansion program for the company. And, then November I came here and of course lots of work here. My girlfriend was here so I stayed and went out to work out the base when they were building the base there in Womans Bay.

Monte Pelto: Navy Base?

Pete Olsen: Yea. Well, navy, army and of course the marines were with the navy there. And I worked there until a, until February of 1943, and then I quit. I knew I was going to get drafted and, I ah, just felt that I shouldn't be just drawing big pay. Of course, I was, I was only making \$1.31 per hour then, but, we got in some long hours so a, I took home as much as four hundred dollars a week then.

Monte Pelto: Thats alot of money at that time.

Pete Olsen: Yea, but, we worked anywheres from twelve to eighteen hours a day. We were handling dry cement. They were building the, they were building the runways then , and so we were handling on the average of five thousand sacks of cement a day. There was suppose to be twenty of us on that job but, two thirds of the time there was only about fourteen of us. So when that job was finished our boss was well pleased with us that stayed on so, he told us he would recommend any job we want, and my buddy, he was, he had run a jack hammer before that and I didn't know what a jack hammer was. So I went to work with him. And, of course I learned that a, those heavy jack hammers were nothing but hard work. In them days of course we were working out in the , cold north wind., blowing and be around 15 degrees above.

Monte Pelto: What was the feeling like around Kodiak at that time? Did you guys feel the Japanese might be coming anytime, and maybe bombing Kodiak.

Pete Olsen: Well I don't know how most of the people felt, but, I, that Sunday morning went to breakfast and I noticed lot of the foremen were running around. Usually it a, breakfast was only half, half full, but I noticed a bunch of foremen running around to different men and then they eat fast and take off. I couldn't figure out what was going on. So on my way back to barracks I met my

brother, and he said , he is going to work now, the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor. Of course you know we were young and well, in six months that we will have them down on their knees. Then ah, it was a long six months.

Monte Pelto: So how long did you, right after the war you stayed in Kodiak from the time you got here until , until now? I mean the army never shipped you out to any place?

Pete Olsen: Oh, well, when I quit then I, the day I quit my ah, then I got a notice to report home to Port Induction. So I went home and they sent me then to Valdez, and I got a little bit of training there but then not to much. Then they were building up a little stevedore base in Valdez, and that, that camp was right there where the new Valdez is now, and they give me a saw and hammer. I was there, I was there until, what was it oh, the first part of 1944. Right early 1944 they transferred me to Whittier and, and transferred, transferred me to the, Harbor Craft. It was, it was, the army had a bunch of shuttle boats for shuttling between islands for transporting supplies and soldiers and so I was an army boat out of Whittier. There which at that time we would well, we travel down far as Prince Rupert and we were, all along the coast out to Adak. And then in the end of 1945 they shipped me back to Anchorage for a discharge, and , I got discharged in March. I was in, I was in the army just oh, about a week and a half short of three years. Then I got out of the army and Oh, I got married in the army and my wife lived in Afognak, so I moved to a, Afognak since had a wife there and then we moved to, we were there a year, a year and a half. Then we moved to Kodiak, so I could look for work and we have been in Kodiak ever since.

Monte Pelto: Ever since what 1945?

Pete Olsen: Ah, well, I been around Kodiak Island ever since 1940 with the excep-

tion of the three years in the army. Then a, 1945 I was in Afognak. Then I think it was ah, fall of 1946 we moved to Kodiak, and we been here ever since.

Monte Pelto: Well, I think that about should about do it Pete.

Pete Olsen: Thats it bub.

Monte Pelto: We got another side if we can write this down and see what we got.

But this was great.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

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