

NEIL SARGENT
ON
WW II IN KODIAK (AND ALASKA)

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KODIAK COLLEGE
ALASKA ORAL HISTORY

The following interview was held on 27 Nov 1990, with Neil Sargent, a retired Kodiak resident. The interview was held in the Sargent home at 303 Wilson St., Kodiak, AK. The interviewer is Richard D. Gaines, Student in the Fall 90 Alaska History Course by Dr. Gary Stevens.

RG: You were born on Kodiak?

NS: Yes, my parents were to. I was working for Fugent Sound starting in 1940, started as a flunky and then as an apprentice carpenter.

RG: At the naval base

NS: At the Kodiak Navy Base and in the spring of 1941 I got into the carpenter apprentice program and worked on several of the big buildings like the hangers, cold storage plant, and worked on a thousand tent frames for the army.

RG: Was that for the tent city that was in Swampy Acres?

NS: No, most of it was where Mark Air Airport and apron and the runaway didn't extend in there.

RG: Was that called Fort Greeley?

NS: Fort Greeley was the area where USA Homes (Nemetz Park) is now.

NS: The original contract which covered the three main hangers, cold storage (current on base) and supply plus the fourplexes. The contract was for four million dollars and included two short runways, the sea plane ramp, a temporary dock, and main pier.

RG: Would that be the Nimons Pier or the one that's closer in?

NS: Closer in.

RG: The Cargo pier then.

NS: Yea but that was all built for four million dollars!

RG: That wouldn't build one of those hangers today.

RG: That four million dollars, did that include the upper government hill duplexes and the tower?

NS: No, there was no tower. There was no tower, just the houses closer to the Womans Bay area.

RG: Those are fine buildings.

NS: I'll say, every thing was first class material. All fir construction. I also worked on the barracks on Fort Greeley and like I say those tent frames and the cold storage plant that's by the Buskin River.

RG: That's just a warehouse now.

NS: Yes.

NS: In the summer of forty one I was working night shift so that during the day I had time to spare and started building what I thought would be an office building but it turned out that there seemed to be a need for restaurants in town so I made it into a restaurant. Then I quit the Navy Base job and opened the restaurant. As soon as I did that I was fair game to be drafted and was in October of 42. I went over to Anchorage for about six weeks of training. They put in the 177th engineers and Feb 43 we loaded on a train, went to Seward, and loaded on a Liberty ship to ship for Amchitka. But, we made a little stop outside of Spruce Cape and made a few turns around in that area. I thought I would be able to go home and visit my parents. But no luck, they had a submarine net from Chihofka Cove to Woody Island.

RG: Chihofka Cove?

NS: Over by the Beach Comers. Anyway went on out of there and picked up an escort and went on out to Dutch. And at Dutch we weren't allowed inside the net either. It was really wild out there and it was snowing and blowing and you could see those little outposts up on the hills above the harbor.

RG: Were those the concrete bunkers?

NS: Well, I don't think they had any concrete bunkers at that time. But, after a few hours we picked up another escort and went on out to Amchitka. When we got there a pretty good storm was brewing and we stayed behind an island for about half a day until we could get into Constantine Harbor. Then we got off on a barge; we went down on those nets on the side of the ship. It was nice weather the first day we got to Amchitka and the 813th regiment was already there and they had built some roads and a small dock that we landed at. We stayed in pup tents that first night and woke the next morning with about five inches of snow on my sleeping bag. That was mild compared to some of the weather we experienced out there.

RG: Yea that far out the chain it gets kind of nasty. Did you help build the runways out there?

NS: Our battalion helped build the runways, the hangers, the fuel farm, and a bunch of warehouses about the island.

RG: Have you been out there since?

NS: No, I went out to Dutch last summer.

RG: How long were you out there.

NS: Just under two years.

RG: At Amchitka?

NS: Yea.

RG: Pretty crowded?

NS: Not too crowded. There was one or two infantry companies, our battalion, the 813th Regiment, there was a port company, the 250th Coast Artillery was moved from Kodiak, an Air Force anti-aircraft outfit, and that's about it.

RG: The engineers that you were a part of, the 177th, was most of that Alaskan?

NS: No, it was made up of Coast Guard from New York, Vermont, New Jersey, Ohio, and Mississippi. They took in a few specialists from different organizations like bulldozer and crane operators.

RG: Did you go in as a basic carpenter?

NS: I was a Message Center Clerk. I don't know how it is now, but they didn't seem to pick people for what they were trained for but what they need.

RG: Its still the same.

NS: Our battalion clerk was a professional photographer, and one of the company clerks was an aircraft mechanic.

RG: What did you do, as the Comms Center Clerk?

NS: I picked up the mail, the messages from head quarters and distributed them around the battalion.

RG: I've done that!

NS: I got a kick out of this. The first time I went down to the general tent, he had a head quarters about as big as this room (about 12 by 16 feet). He's talking to one of his aids and I see these holes in his tent and thought "they" had been shooting at one of our generals. What it was, was the coal stove; they give off sparks and they catch on the tent.

RG: Can you tell some about the changes. Before the Navy came in.

NS: One of the good changes was I got a job right away. When I started carpenter work I got 55% of Seattle scale. Carpenters got 1.25 per hour.

RG: Was that a good wage for Kodiak?

NS: That was good.

RG: What did you do before that?

NS: I was twenty years old when I got the job, well nineteen.

RG: Did you fish or work construction before that?

NS: Before that I went fishing with my brothers but it was just short timing, two-three months in the summer.

RG: Can you give me feel for what the community was like before all these federal dollars came in and made it big?

NS: Well, it was a pretty sleepy community except for the fishing. Our family had cows and my job was to milk them. We had a barn right in town. Our barn door opened right onto the street and we just let the cows out on the street.

RG: I've seen some pictures of Kodiak. What was physically here and there were some buildings down around cannery row. Of course the breakwater wasn't here.

NS: Yea

RG: Krafts wasn't located where it is now.

NS: No, it was located where the public toilets are.

RG: Sutliffs was up on the hill wasn't it? (above current)

NS: No, it was about where Kodiak Auto Center is.

RG: So, he got wiped out too?

NS: No, not really, he just got moved!

RG: In the down town area, the number of buildings, has it doubled or tripled?

NS: Oh yea its ten times what it was.

RG: How many people were here before the war?

NS: I imagine about three to four hundred.

RG: So, we had about four to five hundred people here before.

NS: And then before, say in the 30's, when Kodiak fisheries ran their cannery down past the boat harbor. They imported Japanese as workmen in the cannery. They would get ahold of saki and try to get into town and the local people didn't want them in. The Japanese

knew that, but when worked up on saki they would try to get into town anyway.

RG: Just like drunks all over the world.

NS: Right. Before the boat harbor was thought of there was a nice beach in front of town.

RG: I've seen that in pictures.

NS: Yea, and when the Coast and Geodetic Survey came making charts of the area they formed baseball teams. They would have a team and the town would have a team. They played hard ball on that sand and gravel when the tide was right.

RG: So, how much did the population jump and was there any conflict or a cultural shock for this sleepy community.

NS: I think before that the halibut fleet coming in was quite an influx. They'd come in and tie up before the season opened. And so the bars were busy. I think that had quite an influence. My mother and father were both teetotalers, but not so their boys. Six boys and five girls.

RG: Was that an average family?

NS: Yea, ten-twelve, that was kinda normal.

RG: With all this money and jobs when the Navy showed up then it was all welcome and go to work and another source of income?

NS: Yes, the depression was still on and it was a shot in the arm.

RG: Kind of a God Send then?

NS: Yea, and it attracted a lot of people up from the Seattle area. The first thing they would want to do after a paycheck or two was get their family up. In those days, it was still a territory you know, and there was a judge in town who saw that everybody obeyed the laws and also married people. There was a demand for land to build houses on, so he started selling pieces of land around for 500 square feet for 5 dollars. That was the price of the land. I'll show you a spot. (points to one of the small lots on the hillside adjacent to down town).

RG: So, 5 dollars bought a small piece of land in the thirties.

NS: Yes, the late thirties.

RG: You left in forty two and returned in forty four. What kind of changes took place while you were gone? What did you see when you got home?

NS: The navy base was still operating.

RG: Increased in size?

NS: I'd say it was still being improved on. One thing that they did was build the airport tower then in 1953 I worked on the transmitter building and towers (Buskin Lake). I also worked on the 450ft tower that was built later (opposite side of river from building).

RG: That's all being consolidated now.

RG: What happened to town in terms of growth?

NS: It kept growing. Some people that came in when the navy base was built stayed here. They Navy base provided a lot of employment, there was new shops being built to support.

RG: I remember reading one of the jewelry stores that's now on the square.

NS: Norman's; he came up as an employee of the Navy base. Business wasn't that good at first though.

RG: He made himself a home!
Did the community size change?

NS: After the war the population was about eight hundred, I guess. The fishing industry (Salmon) got better because fishermen got a better price. In 1937 we got three and a half cents for each Red and Pinks were two cents. But the traps were still in.

RG: How and where were they used?

NS: In Karluk and approaches to Olga Bay like Cape Alitak Cape Hepburn, Uganik, Uyak, Raspberry Straits. They were driven traps.

RG: Whats a driven trap?

NS: Driven piles and hung webb from the piles. But they had to remove them every year. (Discussion about what removed meant. Results were to remove the web)

RG: Did that hurt the Salmon industry?

NS: I think it hurt the fisherman the worst because all they needed was a watchman and the boat would come in every day and scoop out the trap.

RG: What was it like fishing off a boat back then?

NS: Everything was by hand.

RG: Did the have purse seiners back then?

NS: We'd make a round haul. But about 1935 they started with a purse seine.

RG: Did they have some kind of gitney engine to haul back?

NS: No, they had a wench that was powered off the main engine.

RG: So, they had some kind of hydraulics?

NS: No, just mechanical davits. The wench would drive the davits. The net would be pulled in by friction.

RG: Then you had to hand brail?

NS: The davit had a block on the boom we used to brail in.

RG: Sounds like a lot of hard work?

NS: Anymore its easy.

RG: Anything else you can think about WWII?

NS: During the time I was working at the Navy base. When Pearl Harbor happened I was deferred for that work. One time in the winter, 1942, we had been given access to rifles to be used in case of invasion. If an alert was sounded, we were to get these rifles and go with an outfit up into the hills. I was in this movie when the alert sounded, at the time of the Midway battle, and the Japanese sent ships toward Dutch Harbor, they had hit Dutch harbor and the fleet was headed towards Kodiak. They were turned back because of this little plane base that Roosevelt had built at Umnak. I never did find the outfit and never did get up into the hills.

RG: Was there much fear for a local invasion?

NS: Yes there was. After Pearl Harbor the town was blacked out at night. Especially after they bombed Dutch Harbor.

RG: Kodiak ended up pretty well fortified?

NS: From Narrow Cape out to Shuyak. Long Island, Spruce Island.

NS: I remember one incident about the time I was drafted. This First Lieutenant was really chastising his non-com because of not being alert. He was in charge the outposts on Pillar Mountain. The army had a little road up the mountain. It was so cold, about 10 degrees. I was impressed by how serious he was.

RG: How was the clothing then.

NS: They didn't have my size when I was drafted. When I went on leave one time in Anchorage I wore a borrowed army jacket with civilian pants. An MP made me go back to base.