

PAULA BROGDON, INTERVIEWER  
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INTERVIEW WITH NATALIE SIMEONOFF  
AT KODIAK, ALASKA

PB: So, how long have you been in Kodiak? You've been in Kodiak all your life?

NS: Well, not in Kodiak. I was born on Woody Island, and I've lived here and thereabout in the vicinity.

PB: Your parents, were they from Kodiak?

NS: My mother was from Unga, Alaska. That's down in the southeast - down towards Chignik way - down the Alaska---what is that not penninsula--but the Aleutian Islands. My father was from Uganik Bay. He was born over there. Both of my parents were in the Kodiak Baptist Mission. My mother must have been around 8 or 9 years old, I think. She was raised in the mission and she married papa right out of the mission.

PB: From there did they live on Woody Island?

NS: Well, the mission was on Woody Island...I don't know how -- just what the transition was because they were Baptist and my mother--I was looking at the old - at some papers from the Russian Church records and there's a record in Russian, written in Russian longhand, of Nicholei and Thecla married in this church. So you see, there must have been some sort of transition. Whether they got out of the mission and got married or whether they had some sort of agreement with the priest. But they did get married by a priest--they didn't get married out of the Baptist church. My mother was a Baptist--she loved being Baptist.

PB: Did they raise you as Baptist then?

NS: No, we were absolutely Orthodox....most native people are. The only ones that are affected are the Latter Day Missionary type. But for all of the missionary work that supposedly went on, none of it went out to the people. It was just work on the children...they didn't go out and visit the people....they stayed there and shot at them from the sidelines ...and worked on the children. But it didn't seem to work...many of them went back to their--as soon as they were out of the mission they went back to their own church....

PB: What was it like when you were growing up? I'm sure everything was quite different back then.

NS: It was different. We were just talking about it. We lived subsistence fashion because over on Woody Island there was ...I was born about 4 or 5 years after the eruption. Woody Island had had a salmon stream over there but during the eruption this clogged up the salmon stream and killed off all the salmon. So they didn't have this constant food service so they had to rely on going off to the streams and things like that over here (Kodiak) going over here for ducks, you know. And I remember Papa loading shells, you know, they didn't just go and buy a box of shells. They loaded shells, they made the shot and everything...we had an upstairs attic thing that Papa used to keep his things in and I used to watch him make the molds and things like that. Everything was made from scratch. You did it...We ate duck, we had seal, we ate fish--much fish--and clams--not clams over there but we had all these other things. We dried fish, we salted fish, we smoked fish, we canned fish when canning came into--See, while I was small, you know, all of that stuff wasn't too popular and not much of it crept over into our daily life because we were miles and miles separated from the south 48. We didn't know a whole lot. We knew how to preserve food up here. We dried berries. Our favorite method was to --berries like cranberries and things like that--we put them in seal oil, you know.

PB: Seal oil?

NS: Yes...I remember going off in our back little caledor(?) and there would be these metal kegs of berries just swimming in seal oil.

PB: And that preserved them?

NS: Oh yes. And then some berries that were high acid like high bush cranberry ...we'd put them in water. So you see...and then we made jelly and jam...all by the old fashioned way. When somebody ...I was around 10 or 11 years old...somebody discovered surtol. You should have seen the ladies, they just went mad making jellies.... Surtol has this pectin, you know...you could make jelly and it always set, you know. Before that you made jelly and if there wasn't enough pectin your fruit was syrup--you didn't have any jelly...it was a nice life. We planted out gardens, we had to raise enough potatoes to last us from one year to .....

PB: So, potatoes did grow there?

NS: Yes, Oh yes. Well the Russians apparently were the ones that instructed the people in how to plant potatoes because all the gardens on the island were in a real sunny location, you know. And they were close to where we had kelp beds, you know. See because the kelp was our fertilizer. We would have these gardens and we would - the men would go out and would gather

ribbon- this big heavy ribbon kelp, you know, and we'd dig up our garden and then we'd make a big, kind of a shallow spot and we'd throw this kelp in there and cover it over and we had wonderful gardens...but even then we just planted potatoes, and some turnips. Once in a while we planted cabbage, but most of the time we just planted potatoes and turnips and then we did plant some cabbage for greens...And lettuce, we'd plant lettuce but I remember, I think this was before the day of mayonnaise because we used to eat our lettuce with sugar and vinegar sprinkled over it...We were fed well.

PB: What about vegetables? Were there places(stores) in town where they shipped vegetables to?

NS: No, you could--they did, but then they weren't too prominent either. I mean, you grew them, or you went without. We had lots of dried beans and peas, we could buy those in the store. And we ate--that was our staple of our diet, you know. And we always had salt pork. We always had a barrel of salt pork...we could buy that in the store. Then we had...the rest of our diet was duck and we had chickens. Everybody had chickens and most everyone had a cow...When I was small, we didn't have a cow up until I was about 7 years old but after that we always had cattle and we butchered every year, you know, so that we had meat... and we had our milk...Cause we had better than most because we--my mother was ambitious and a busy person--there were nine of us...my father wasn't too ambitious. But my stepfather, who later became my stepfather, was a very, you know, decent person that took good care of us...we had plenty to eat.

PB: So, as you grew up, you grew up on Woody Island? Did you stay there? Is that where you got married?

NS: Well, we were friends. You know, Kelly and I, our family were good friends, you know. And when we would come over (Kodiak) to visit, we'd come and see them. Of course, I didn't always like Kelly...but we used to come back and forth...you might say that we'd been friends for years...we always--we didn't have engines in those days. Only the very, very rich people had engines...and there were certainly none of these outboards and things like that. That just started to be popular when I was around 10 or 12. You could buy one then...they were affordable...but then most people rowed back and forth to town. We rowed back and forth to town all the time. And it's nothing. I mean it looks -it seems to be such an insurmountable thing. I rowed back and forth to town many times, you know, and thought nothing of it. I'd dump my kids in a skiff and away we'd go...And if one of us wanted to go to town. If one of us needed to go to town for something, we had to come over to get a tooth pulled or something, there's one of our neighbors that was - a german fellow - we called him John Miller. Old John Miller, he

was married to a native woman named Fedora. And John Miller was one of the slowest rowers I ever saw. He never sat in the seat and pulled this way (she gestered showing the normal way of rowing- pulling back) he sat in the seat and pushed this way (she gestered pushing forward) so when you went to town with John Miller you knew you had a two hour ride....

PB: So basically, no one really worked outside of the subsistence living...

NS: No, No...the men did put up wood, you know. They chopped wood for the - they put up cords of wood for the mission because the mission had a furnace. You know they had more amenities I guess if you would call it that. The men would make these cords of wood up...you know you could just go up and chop it anywhere you wanted to. So they would chop wood and they were paid out a certain rate and that was all they ever did....they would also trap ermine and stuff like that...they'd get a dollar and a half or something like that.

PB: Was the school there at the mission?

NS: No, the school was a territorial thing it wasn't a mission school. The mission didn't have a school persay. It was territorial...then after the mission moved off and there weren't many children then we had Indian - Bureau of Indian Affairs school, you know. State run school but only for a short while and then we didn't have any anymore so...by then it was getting kind of bad and Kelly and I had to move over here with our children because they was old enough to go to school and there wasn't any schooling for them. So, after Kelly and I married, we moved over on the island and built our home because...then we moved off of there because the kids couldn't go to school...They promised us a few years later that if we came back that FAA could get in another school...that our children would make just a number, enough so that they could have a school so we moved back to the island...so our history was kind of moving back and forth. But we had seven children and we had to make sure they were getting to school....

PB: Were you old enough--do you remember what was going on when the war came - during the war time?

NS: Oh, the second World War, absolutely. I was an adult. I must have been about 24. I had three-four children, yeah. I had four children during...then we had FAA was pretty prominent then and the CB's - no they hadn't come in yet - but the twelfth battalion of the army you know had that sawmill that they were building up there so that they could outfit various camps around the island. You see these places lookouts and stuff like that I

mean, they were cutting lumber and things like that...so that they were there pretty prominent and we made friends, of course. In fact we had a fellow come here in town, and I was so sorry that we weren't here about four years ago, looking for Kelly. He'd been one of our really good friends...and he had come by... we wrote to them for years afterwards, we got to become such good friends...they knew the children and they would put on a show for them at Christmastime because they weren't home ...Of course, our kids were all the luckier for that because they had a wonderful Christmas.

PB: Did Kelly go in the service?

NS: No, he didn't qualify...well he had four or five children.....then too he was needed here. (home)

PB: Did your way of living change during the war? Was everyone scared?

NS: Well, we were afraid, you know it was the Japanese I think that frightened me more but as it happened I was sick. I wasn't well. I was going through a sort of a bad time in my life. But and the Japanese bombings frightened the daylights out of me. You know, it was frightening then, but war didn't change much here. The only thing is that you had to stand in line to get silk stockings and you had to stand in line to get booze...and you couldn't travel after 4:00 in the evening, you know...they had marshall law - they had under military supervision...and I remember Kelly and my stepfather came out to town to cash our checks and they got drunk and they were going to go back home after...as they got in the skiff Papa slipped and fell and made a big racket...and they were shooting everywhere...they took them to jail....But you see, those were the things that we were absolutely just not used to. When Kelly and I were getting ready to go home on the FAA boat one day and this soldier stops us on the dock and said "Halt". And we kept walking toward him and he was going to shoot us, you know. Because you don't--we didn't--we had no conception what the word halt, you know. We knew it meant stop but we didn't really realize...we were just a couple of skinny kids then....

(Natalie is speaking now of her mother)

NS: ...she was from a native family, was raised in that fashion out in Unga and Sandpoint and she came here up until she was 18 years old she was raised as a mission girl, you know...then she married Papa and moved into the native community again. And then the native community was strictly native, you know. My mother learned how to speak Russian and she learned how to speak Aleut...and this is the way we lived. We didn't live like you do

now...we lived off of the land, and had our own groups, we went to our own church. Of course, we went to two churches. Mama liked her old church, you know. So we would go to our church at 9:00 in the morning and we'd get out around 10:00 and we'd go to the Baptist church and we'd go to Sunday school.....just before this happened, I was about three years old, I guess, in 1919, 1918-1919, when they had the really bad flu epidemic that wiped out so many people throughout the United States and up here, on Woody Island, it just devastated. There was - I don't know what the population was but believe me by the time the flu passed on there was considerably less...they even had to - they had people that were in jail here and take them over to the island to bury people, you know, dig graves and things...it was just devastating. Mama said by then we had moved out to our big house -the big house -Papa's folks had left him. And she said the mission would bring meat and vegetables and she would make great big pots of stew, you know. And papa and somebody else would take them around to the huts and make sure that people ate...she said that we were lucky, she said she didn't - we didn't have anything wrong with us...we were pretty well. So I think it was probably hunger, you know...and cold, it was especially cold season...anyway they covered up some of the people 5 and 6 to a grave you know, just buried them like that. Kelly's family - Kelly had another brother older than he that some people ...on Woody Island took. Native families give children to one another. If somebody doesn't have children, or doesn't - can't have children...they say when I have my next one I'll let you have it. And they treasure these children, you know, I've seen some wonderful parents that weren't really their parents, you know. And this is what happened to Kelly's brother, he was taken by this family and he was just about two years old when he died during the flu...but some of the combinations have been just wonderful. I know one family that raised some of the nicest kids and they were so nice themselves, and just took these children and just loved them...Some kids didn't even know who their parents were, you know. Frank Peterson who ran Kana, my son is head of Kana now, but Frank Peterson had Kodiak Area Native Association. He told me that he was about 16 or 17 years old when he discovered that this lady that he thought was his mother wasn't his mother at all. His mother was another lady. But see, they treat them so well that they never know...on Kelly's birth certificate, no census report, it has him listed as a servant to this Ramana family. But he was certainly no servant because ...the lady, his foster mother just doted on him. You know, absolutely doted on him. He said he slept in her bed until he was 14 years old, you know. And when she died, she died in his arms, because there was such a closeness there, you know. But this is the way it was, they would just take children, you know, that somebody didn't really want awfully bad...whereas in some cases they took children and they abused them just dreadfully,

but those were the more intelligent people. The ones that had - were more sophisticated type...but the more educated type. I know one girl and she was sitting and telling me some of the things that these people did to her. Like making her go carry water in the middle of the winter with no shoes on and stuff like that...and beat her all the time, and scrubbing clothes. Here's this skinny little girl...and further abuses. But these are fortunately - there wasn't very many of them...

PB: Many of the natives were family orientated weren't they?

NS: Very definitely, Oh very definitely. On Woody Island, now...see that was a large community and it was bigger than over here in Kodiak. Kodiak was small compared to Woody Island. The Russian settlement was here (Kodiak) but the mission was over there (Woody Island), the radio station was over there, and the AC Company, you know they shipped ice and things like that. See, when I was growing up - when I was growing up and doing my childhood years was when the community was dwindling...there was about 9 families - kid families - on the island then and our church, you know we had our own church...when we moved over here the last time there was only about 3 or 4 families and now there is only my son...

PB: Now when the war was here, you didn't see any major changes except there was military over there?

NS: Military and we would see the PT boats come through there...we had a radio so we knew all of the world news.

PB: Were there any bomb scares or anything?

NS: No, just this one occasion (Dutch Harbor). But you see we were terribly naive. I'm sure that with all the information we get now, we probably would have been scare to death if we knew maybe how close some of those submarines and things were. We picked up on the beaches canned things and stuff like that and tarred ducks and things like that so we know that there must have been some sort of a submarine or some kind of explosion out to sea or something because we picked up canned hams. Some boat must have been wrecked or destroyed, you know...out there behind Woody Island...

PB: Tarred ducks?

NS: Yes, oh yes, ducks with oil all over them. But we didn't know what happened to them and I'm sure it might have been a submarine.

PB: Now you mentioned there was one occasion here? (Bomb scare)

NS: That was after the war with Japan when they bombed Dutch Harbor. See they were on their way to Kodiak apparently and it was awfully foggy, it was in the middle of the summer, so they got mis - got lost in the fog I guess and just left their bombs in Dutch Harbor. And that was the only incident of bombing in Alaska...Life went on and we were careful about - of course in the summer time it doesn't do any good anyway - but we were careful of our blackouts. We really kept our blackouts...

PB: Blackouts - you mean they had certain times....

NS: We had to use shades on all of our windows. We had blankets over the windows so that there would be no light - no light would escape so they couldn't see - if there were any enemy around they couldn't see anything.

PB: Did they call these blackouts periodically, or just certain times each day?

NS: From the time it began to be dusk, you know, you just wouldn't show any light...but we were used to it...and we didn't pay any attention, we just did it...you wouldn't show any light, you weren't careless with anything...We were pretty careful too. Things that we used to do, like we used to -one of the things, something like the Mardi Gras down in New Orleans only here it's based on the bible history, where Herod was looking for the baby Jesus, the baby Jesus...here they have what they call a masquerade, you know, they have the masquerade week our Orthodox church...right after Russian Christmas is over which is on the seventh of January...by the Julian calendar...we would have masqueraders that would go from house to house, you know, and usually it was just a big fun thing. You'd go to somebody's house and they'd, people would cut up and they would dance and would try to guess who you were and it was just alot of fun. But they stopped all of that. Absolutely would not allow anything like that.

PB: After the war did everybody clear out right away...?

NS: No, you see, Kelly and I had been away for a year in 1937. We lived in Cordova for a year and then we came, we moved back home in 1939 I think or 40--39 I guess. And as we came back Kodiak was starting to build up, you know, from a little one-horse village. All of a sudden here was electric power and all these things and people were moving in...they were building up the base. And all of a sudden there were jobs to be had. Before

that all the jobs were NRA and the WPA works and things like that that were 50 cents an hour. Here were jobs being offered out there that were a dollar an hour. We were simply agast - my goodness. We never heard of such money, you know. So everybody went to work. We moved on the island, we built our house over there and Kelly went to work over here (Kodiak). He tried to get home as often as he could, but he couldn't get home very often. And then I got sick and he had to come home, he had to just quit and come home to take care of me. Then is when the transition started, Kodiak started to change, you know. Here we had elecricity, of course we didn't have electricity on the island we used kerosene lamps... but, we just things were different. They had got in more cars...before they had just had one delivery wagon that just ran over the dirt trails here to go to that store...Erskin store had Stefan Anderson who did the deliveries with a wheelbarrow. He delivered sacks of potatoes and sacks of wheat in a wheelbarrow...there were houses out as far as where Peggy and what's his name Dyson live. There were maybe one or two houses there. And one old fellow lived out by potatoe patch lake...there wasn't anything here, these houses were put in in 1950...HUD you know...there were only houses that extended as far as Hubley's...

PB: Hubley's?

NS: Hubley's is right ... on the level with Sweeney's...there were just cow paths...they called over the bridge "Brookline"...I don't know where that came from....

PB: So then everything started building?

NS: More businesses came in, we had a bakery here in town. Two bakeries I think we had. We always had lots of bars...two stores of course...Krafts and Donnely and Atchinson(?) it used to be Erskin Store before that...We didn't stay over here then. We stayed over at Woody Island and we moved over from Woody Island in 1942 I think...by then they had started housing...Another thing that prosperity brought to Kodiak the the houses of ill repute...I never saw anything wrong with them. If people want to go there, it's their business, you know...I knew some of the people and I liked them...Just because they don't do what I do doesn't mean that they're bad...then they moved them off of there because some do-gooder decided that they were bad for the town of Kodiak so they moved them all out of town...So they moved out into the sticks but when Kelly and I moved over from Woody Island we moved right next to them. We didn't know who they were...and they were nice folks. They didn't bother us and we didn't bother them, you know...they were nice to my children and no way did they make themselves - well, frankly I just didn't know...so, you see, alot of it's in what a person makes of it...anyway, that's

one thing that prosperity brought. Dr. Bob was telling me the other day. He was saying he used to be a delivery boy and he said he used to have to deliver down to the Green House and the Doll House and he said he was scared to death. The other delivery boys used to scare him all the time...

PB: Did things pretty much stay the same then? Were there any other major changes that you can think of until maybe the time of the earthquake?

NS: The earthquake...I think that was...

PB: That was the next big change?

NS: No, crab. King crab. By then we had moved over to the island again and Kelly quit his job over there, during the Eisenhower administration they froze all leaves and he was a fisherman. He always went fishing in the summertime...so we lived apart for awhile. I lived over there and he lived down here and it just didn't work, you know. It was impossible...so I moved to town here. And they were really getting to start to work on the King Crab. There was lots of King Crab...men were making money hand over fist.

PB: And when was this?

NS: This was in 1956 about.

PB: Were there alot of people from outside coming in?

NS: Well, there was alot of people from the outside, there was alot of people from the various - like Seldovia. Alot of people, Kelly's family, most of his family lived in Seldovia. His brother Sunny and all them...they moved over here and his mother moved over here...just whole groups of people. Oscar Dyson moved over here, you know, he was married to one of Kelly's sisters at the time. And then there was a real time of plenty. We worked in the canneries. This was before the Phillipineos - before the exitus of the Phillipineos. The cannery was staffed by mostly people like us. I was a floor girl down there for years and I made good money...and then our whole family, we lived off of it...Kelly worked fishing on the boats, the Hall boats, Dick and Buster we all worked in the cannery together. It wasn't the best wages in the world but it was better than alot you know, and it was work...

PB: So King Crab really brought in alot?

NS: Yes, oh yes...I worked in a plant where we had sometimes 200 workers...we had a night crew and a day crew...and I had a good

job...my boss trusted me too, so we had a really good operation.

job...my boss trusted me too, so we had a really good operation. It was a time of plenty and I could always find a job. You know, I was in demand...and we did research on how to best remove crab from the shell...in fact, they paid for me a paid trip to Astoria to show them how to do the - to show them how to remove the crab...

PB: So that stayed up until the time of the earthquake? Until then it was crab and salmon?

NS: Yes, until the earthquake it was still pretty good... until about 10 or 15 years ago until we started getting these high-tech, big boats and they just raped the sea...

PB: Were you living here when the earthquake...?

NS: No, we were in Uganik. We spent one - when the state of alaska banned fish traps, you know, when they banned fish traps - that was, every company had fish traps, sometimes 5 or 6 of them so that they'd just have these great big traps out there and they just scoop up 45, 50 maybe 100 thousand fish a day sometimes... and when the State of Alaska banned fish traps then gillnetting came into its own again. You could go out there and set a net... and catch fish off of it. Before that you couldn't see because before they had fish traps they had gillnets. But finally the fish traps just won over and wiped out alot of the fishing, like the codfish...he(Kelly) said we'll go out gillnetting. So we went out this one summer and it was wonderful. And we got a chance to stay at one of the plants, a winter watchman at one of the plants...so we moved out there...we built our own home in Mush Bay and we lived out there for ten years... we lost our two boys. We lost - Freddy was killed over in the Vietnamese War, he was a pilot and Peter died soon afterwards. I think probably with a broken heart because his brother was dead, you know...too many memories...so we moved back to be near Mama, ironic because Mama passed away a few days before we moved in...

PB: So, she was here during the eathquake?

NS: Yes, in fact during the earthquake - we lived, our house was do you know where the Elks Club is? That was our house, but over the hill there was a line of houses and Mama lived next to the last house before the breakwater. And after the tidlewave...we started looking for Granny...Dick (Simeonoff) left his family thinking they'd be all right and went over to look for Mama and take her to a safe place. So he was taking her to a safe place and Peggy had, her mother and the babies had moved on up someplace else, you know. Then he had to go look all night long, looking for his family. They had them all up in the schoolhouse up here...but we were in Uganik, we didn't - it wasn't as

devastating - the tide came in really high and the earthquake was really scary...we were sitting down at the table, I had something special for dinner...and I was looking out of the window sitting at the dining room...I said Dick said one of the volcanos blew up, it's strange we haven't heard anything more, I guess it's been pretty quiet and all of a sudden it started to shake.

PB: Was it bad shaking?

NS: Well, it was terrible...there's a terrible frightening thing about having the good old terra firma shaking under you...but I guess it was much worse here in town. They said that you could just see the road just ripple, you know... Ellen said she was here - Ellen lived in - there's these houses that were up past the Baptist Church, you know, on Upper Mill Bay. She said she was trying to run down to Germain's. Germain lived in the house below her and she said..."I couldn't stand up"...it was bad...and after that the tidal wave...it was bad...and of course we lost some friends...Kelly's brother - his mother was living down along the highway and he didn't know what to do with her so he took her aboard the boat with him...and he rode it out...he said his mother said to him "the doctor said I have a bad heart, he's full of bull...."

PB: What about when it was time to become a state? What was the feeling like in the villages? Where were you living at the time?

NS: Here in Kodiak.

PB: ...everybody pretty much wanted it?

NS: Yes, yes, I think so. Some people didn't want it but I always thought, I've always been for progress - but then there were some things that I don't agree with but at the time I was considerable younger and I thought it would have advantages...but then again with advantages comes responsibilities...

PB: Was there a lot of campaigning going on at that time trying to get people to vote for it?

NS: No, not really...most everybody that voted voted for statehood. When did this happen in 1958? Well, that's about the same time they voted out, in fact, I think it was in the same session they voted out fish traps...I think that we were more engrossed with fish traps because that meant our whole way of life for us...the statehood remained to be seen, but we knew that if we voted out fish traps that we would be able to have the ease of fishing and the canneries wouldn't be just making out scott free....