

Norm and Peggy Sutliff

on

World War II

And Post-War Years

Interviewed by

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For

History of Alaska

Dr. Gary Stevens

NS: We came to Kodiak over fifty years ago, and that experiment station had already folded up. So, it was at least sixty years ago when the Federal Government had an experimental station in agriculture, and they were experimenting to raise beef, because we didn't have very good transportation and no refrigeration. Kodiak Island was an ideal situation. We had lots of grazing land. I don't know what happened to the house, but the barn is still there up on the hill. They had an experiment station in Kalsin Bay with a fine dairy barn. It was a nice one with concrete floors and stalls and a nice farm house. I can't remember what happened to the farm house.

PS: Was that the one Tom lived in?

NS: No. It was still there when I came to Kodiak. There were no roads to Kalsin Bay.

PR: How did people get out there, just by plane?

NS: There were no planes in Kodiak either, you had to row a boat or walk--and later on horse back. I made that trip on horse back many times before there ever was a road. The experiment station cut beach rye at Kalsin Bay, and brought it to Kodiak in big skiffs. There's pictures available of those big skiffs, I've seen them, loaded down with hay bringing them to Kodiak and storing them in that barn. They had some of their cattle in Kodiak, and Wilton White's father was in charge of that. So, Wilton is probably the only man alive today, in Kodiak or maybe anywhere, who knows the details of that.

PR: He would be really good to talk to.

NS: They had bred and raised a prize bull. Over how many years, I don't know. The darn fool--he got his neck caught in the stintion and choked himself to death or broke his neck.

PR: Got his neck caught in the what?

NS: Stintion. That's what holds their necks. I don't know the exact details, but I know he died, and I think from a broken neck. They closed the experiment station immediately. That was the end of it.

PR: Your wife said that she came up in 1940, so when did you come up?

NS: '39. Then when I came, on the Fourth of July the Navy sent three PBYS to Kodiak to look into the possibility of building a Naval Base here. They came up to see what it looked like and to see whether it was feasible. They were looking for an ice-free

harbor, and they thought they had it at the base, but it does freeze over. They were looking for a safe harbor. That was the main thing. They could build a Navy Base around a harbor where they could anchor their ships. I was working at the Fish and Wildlife Service that summer, and so we put out buoys, so they could anchor their airplanes. I have pictures of those airplanes at anchor in front of Kodiak on the Fourth of July, 1949, so I know that's true. Shortly after that, the war intensified. The rest of the summer they surveyed that base, and Tom Nelson came to Kodiak. He was a rancher from Eastern Oregon who'd gone broke during the Depression. One of the finest men I've ever known, and a real cowboy. And he packed for the army. He got a couple horses and he packed the surveyors around while they surveyed that Navy Base. They got it surveyed in October and started working on the base. The first men that came to work were farmers from the Matanuska Valley. See, two or three years before, farmers had come up there, but there was no cash. That was at the end of the Depression. People don't understand what that Depression was that hadn't gone through it. There just wasn't any money, because they just hadn't manufactured it. It was tough. But the first men they needed came from Matanuska Valley. They left their families there and came over here and started that Navy Base. At the same time the road commission put a road through there. It was a one lane bicycle road, but anyway you could get over it with a car.

PS: They had a bus that hung out over each side of the wheels. And if you rode on the outside of the bus you were looking right down into the ocean. It was no fun.

NS: See, the road used to go pretty high up along the mountain, not down where it is now.

NS: Anyway, the first thing they did was build a dock out there, so they could get materials in, and they built a bunkhouse--a cookhouse and bunkhouse combined. Probably they had 40 or 50 men working the first fall, and I went to work in November. There were quite a few of us who lived in town, and they put a bus back and forth. Siems Drake of Puget Sound was the contractor, and I have a copy of the contract that was drawn up between Drake Puget Sound and the U.S. Navy Base to build that base. The highest paid craftsman on that whole base was a leverman for the dredge. He got a dollar forty-one an hour.

PR: And what were you doing?

NS: I was a carpenter. Eventually there was three thousand workmen on that base. That was one of the finest construction jobs under the American flag and, next to Hoover Dam, the biggest at that time. Because it was at the end of the Depression labor was easy to get. They brought in labor from all over the United States, and they were top men. I worked on a crew of 80 men, and 80% of them could have been the foreman; they were that good. They built that whole base in 3 years, and it involved every craft, because we didn't have communications. Communication was radio and it was

terrible, so the decisions had to be made on the job, didn't have to ask Washington. You couldn't build a base today like that 'cause you have to go down through the chain of command. If there was a problem they just went over to the engineers, and they solved it, and you had it done. It was a great job, I'll tell you. Now, Mom [Mrs. Sutliff] can tell you about the Army. The Army came in, and there were 30,000 soldiers on this island at that time. When the Japs went over to Attu and Kiska, Seattle and San Francisco got worried. They were afraid the Japs were going to come right down the coast, and so they fortified Alaska. Kodiak was the main supply center for all of Alaska, and it was a busy place, I'll tell you. There were 30,000 soldiers in Kodiak, and they had a tough go of it. They lived in little bunkers and dug-outs all over the place, up on Pillar Mountain and Narrow Cape and Long Island and up by Ouzinkie; every point they had fortified. They just lived out in weather like this [it was snowing very hard outside during this interview]. Mom can tell you about the hospital they built. How many bed hospital was that, Mom--300 or something?

PS: Well, we had 11 wards. The Army came in, incidently, instead of waiting till they built a base like the Navy did. They lived in tents at where they portrayed as beautiful Swampy Acres.

PR: Where was that?

PS: It was known as Fort Greely, and it was out near Boy Scout Lake. In that area and going on toward the present base about as far as the Buskin was. They built temporary buildings in great haste, and they're all gone now. Fort Greely has been moved up onto the mainland, even the name. But they built a hospital which was designed (they claimed anyway, we never had any bombs), so that a bomb of that day (that was before the nuclears and all those things) could not destroy more than one unit of it. So it was built [with] corridors. They had these long corridors which were just hidden. They were not heated, but they did have a floor and a roof and side walls and then a building. There were 11 wards and operating sections and doctors quarters and nurses quarters and laboratories, each in separate buildings. So when I was working with the Grey Ladies, you had miles to run to get around 11 wards in one afternoon's work, because they were so far apart. The corridors were chilly too in winter, very cold. The buildings themselves were heated but not the corridors. Each ward had I think around (what would you say) 50 or 60 beds, and then at the entrance, two or three private rooms for critically or females.

NS: All blacked out in case of bombing raid, shutters over all the windows.

PS: They weren't shutters. It was black paint. There was absolutely no way to open them and get air or sunshine or anything else into any building on the base as far as I know. They ran around with that paint truck and sprayed all the windows black--I know on the Army Base. I don't know what they did for sure on the Navy Base.

PR: When did they do that? When the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor?

PS: About then, yes. When they hit the Aluetians the first time, to their knowledge. The wards were built with a sun parlor on the end which was no good to use after the black paint. It was supposed to be a place where they could go and sit in the sunshine and read and talk. There was a recreation hall also, another building; that was the Red Cross Center there. They had a group of Grey Ladies, which it amuses me very much, the fall-de-wow they go about giving anybody a pass, to get on a base now, who is trained to go out there. Grey Ladies do not do any nursing service. They are what they call "recreation workers." They wrote letters and gave parties, and we baked a cake for every service man who had a birthday in the hospital, read to people who couldn't see, just talked to people who wanted to be talked to, and had a big Christmas party. I spent a couple Christmases at that hospital. Anyway there were about ten of us, including Frostie Johnson. I can't think of anybody else who's still here. I could dream up most of the names, but they wouldn't mean anything anymore. When we had prepared the thing they took a list of our names and we filled out a form, where we were born and where we came from or something like that, and carried it out to the base, and [they] issued us passes that were good anywhere, on either the Navy Base or the Army Base. And, bing, that was it! Now-a-days it's more than your life's worth to get a pass.

NS: Well, Mom was probably the first patient in that hospital; because we had a blizzard, and Griffen Memorial Hospital was froze up, and she came down with acute appendicitis.

PS: It was not only froze up, the electricity was out.

NS: So, the local doctor, Dr. Johnson (Dr. Bob's dad), called up his friend, Major Yellen?

PS: Colonel Yellen. [Correct spelling not known.]

NS: Colonel Yellen, who was in charge of the Army hospital; this tremendous complex that we described (without any patients). It was built anticipating a terrible casualty list, from Attu and Kiska, which never materialized. So they were just looking after the few casualties of Army boys that was out in these fox holes; they just had a few out there [in the hospital]. But anyway, they just got this great big complex finished, completely staffed, no patients, she come down with acute appendicitis, and they were just tickled-to-death to come and get her, sent an Army ambulance in...

PS: My whole family were Army. There were a lot of names that he could give them they knew. Because before World War II the Army was a small town family. It seemed like everybody knew everybody else--or at least who they were if they didn't know them.

NS: So they sent an Army ambulance in. We lived up on the hill. They couldn't find the road, so they came right up through the

fields, loaded her on a stretcher and took her out there, operated on her. I was working 10 hours at the base. We was working 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, so I couldn't get home with her much. She was the only gal in the hospital with all these soldiers. They were so excited they wasn't going to let her come home. They kept her there all winter.

PS: Not that long.

NS: And they trained her as a laboratory technician. So then she came back to Kodiak. After awhile I thought I wasn't going to get a wife back.

PS: Well, the nurses just loved it. They said, "You know, we've never had a situation where all the boys leap out of bed, wash, shave, scrub, so they can come in and say hello to you!" And there was a constant procession of them going through my room.

NS: See there was hardly any women on Kodiak Island. They shipped them all out. There just wasn't any.

PR: They shipped them out of town, huh?

PS: Out to Seattle. All dependents of the Navy or of Navy employees (I guess there wasn't any Army over here at that time. The Army [dependents] just didn't come in) were gathered up and tossed on a ship and taken to Seattle the minute war was declared. They did not want the men to have their minds on anything but defense.

PR: How did you get by that?

PS: I lived in town and I simply, flatly said no. We were both civilians. They couldn't force us, so they couldn't do anything about us. If he'd been miliary, it wouldn't of worked.

NS: If you kinda get interested in this history, you should read a book called The Thousand Mile War.

PR: I did.

NS: We're talking about the same thing. Mom and I knew a lot of those people that's in that book. For instance when they used to send those squadrons of PBYS from Kodiak out there, that was the only long range amphibious bomber we had. The Navy had never had any experience in these waters, in Alaska, so they tried to run their war by the book. They would decide that on November 2, at 9:30 in the morning they'd send a squadron of PBYS to Attu or Kiska or Old Harbor or where ever...

PS: To bomb.

NS: They didn't have any weather reports, didn't have any navigation. They'd send a whole squadron up and lose the whole

works--disappear--terrible. Took them a long time to finally say, "Hey, we better not run this war on a schedule. We better listen to the weather reports!" This same thing would happen. They would make up convoys here; there'd be several hundred ships, several hundred freighters. Take them a month to get them all together. There'd be freighters and transports and tugboats and barges with all the war materials they would ship in the chain. There again they would start and say, "Well, now on November 2 we'll pull anchor." They might land in one of these terrible blizzards, and they'd lose half of them. There was more ships lost between here and the end of the Aleutian Chain by weather than by enemy bombs--just terrible! Lots of that coast was never even charted at that time. They made one good choice. There was a character in Alaska by the name of Squeaky Anderson. You read about him.

PR: Yeah, I remember the name in the book.

NS: Rough and tough all Alaskan--chewed tobacco, swear--but he knew the conditions of this country. And, by golly, they'd put him in charge--he was a beach master. He was the only one that knew how to organize and slip around the weather and so on, and he was a good man. The Navy sure made a lot of blunders in this country--terrible. Well, another side story that mixes in with this Army Base. The Army also had out posts on all of the points around Kodiak Island, watching for Japanese submarines and so on. They had to supply them from inland. They didn't have boats to go around and take their supplies to them. They were hidden, so they also didn't want to make trails, so the enemy would know they were there. That's why they built these camouflaged fox holes and living quarters. You can still find them around here. General Corlett was in charge--great man--Army general. He hired this Tom Nelson I spoke about a little while ago, to supply his Army outposts with pack horse, and the only contract he had with them was a hand shake. He said, "I'll pack anything except batteries (battery acid will ruin a horses back, you see) and gasoline." Anything else he would pack. He had a string of 20 horses and one soldier helping him and each week he'd go to a different outpost. When he came back one night at midnight, right back where that hospital was, he turned his horses loose to graze. He was such a wonderful horseman, he could just turn his 20 pack horses loose anywhere and in two or three days go catch them. So he just turned them loose, and he had a bell on the bell mare, so he could find them. There was a young soldier on guard duty, in the middle of the night, dark as pitch, and this cow bell kept coming closer to him. He just got scared to death, and he hollered, "Stop or I'll shoot! Halt! Halt or I'll shoot!" Bang! and he shot the old mare right through the neck, but it was a steel jacketed bullet and it didn't hurt her. Within a week Tom had the old mare back in the pack string. So, from that day on Tom didn't think that Army ammunition was any good at all. Can shoot a horse right through the neck and she wouldn't even stop grazing. So, sometime latter, Tom was going down the road with a bunch of soldiers in a jeep and one of their guns went off. That bullet ricocheted around through that jeep, went right through his leg. The soldier said, "My God,

I'm shot!" and Tom says, "Hell, that's nothing but an Army bullet. That won't hurt ya! It wouldn't even hurt a horse!"

PS: They used to have a guard gate right before you go up the high hill beyond Bell's Flats as your going on out into the country. What do they call that? Salome Creek Hill. They'd have one lone marine, and the marines would get bored, and finally they'd get to fooling around with their guns--shooting at targets and practicing fast draws and so on. Finally so many of them shot themselves in the foot, they moved the guard gate close to the base.

NS: Took their ammunition away from them [kidding].

PS: You'd think after the first one the rest of them, you know, would be careful but no, it just kept happening.

PR: How long were you working in the hospital?

PS: Oh, two or three years, wouldn't it be? About. When the Army pulled out we quit. They never had us Grey Ladies in the nurses hospital. When I left the hospital after my appendicitis thing, Colonel Yellen said to me that having a woman around had made quite a difference, I ought to be able to find some women who would come on out and visit with the boys. So, he asked for that, and I went in and talked to Frostie and asked her how we could organize it so it would work. She said we could do it through the Red Cross--Grey Ladies. The disadvantage with the Grey Ladies was that we did have to wear uniforms, the same as nurses did only they were a grey seersucker dress with a white collar, the white belt, and white shoes, a copy of the nurses cap with [the] back grey and the bed white and a red cross right in the middle of the top. At first that didn't do so well, but pretty soon the boys started realizing that we were not nurses and officers who were in the position to heckle them. I mean they had these nurses around, but they were not companions. I think it did a good job. But then I will admit, one Christmas day we were out there going around, delivering presents to all the wards and so on (a couple of us) and the Chaplin came dashing in and he says, "Look what I found!" And, here was this gal; she was from New York City, and she'd come up for a secretarial job of some kind. But she was dressed to the teeth; these great big spike heels (in the snow yet) and a fancy hat and fancy clothes. Styles that had never reached Kodiak by any means. He said I took one look at her, and I told her, "Come with me. I'll show you where you need to go." So she went trustingly with him--after all he was a chaplin. He delivered her to the hospital, and we took her through the wards. After a short time she started cooperating, and you never saw such excitement. It was the one thing we did that really got every boy at the hospital feeling better and happy and excited. Women like this still existed! They didn't all wear uniforms!

NS: We packed rifles in our tool box, for two or three years, and a gas mask.

PR: Your wife mentioned the gas mask. That was handed out. How many air raids or how often were there air raids here?

NS: Had lots of practice air raids. Not very many, we had, I'm sure, some.

PS: It was like the practice tsunamis we had a while ago only they weren't practices. We thought they were real, but no tsunami came.

NS: And mail was censored.

PS: A lot of the censorship was weird. For example if you subscribed to a magazine and it came to you through the mail it would be all chopped up with stories cut out by the censors that they didn't think should come up here where the enemy might have spies. But you could go down to the drug store and buy the same magazine shipped freight with nothing done to it. Everybody promptly canceled their subscriptions and the drug store doubled its orders.

PR: Did they censor private mail also?

PS: Oh, yes. All the mail.

[I turned the tape over and missed a little. Mr. Sutliff is talking about the ski lodge towards Anton Larson Bay.]

NS: That was built originally to train alpine skiers in the Army. The Army had an Alpine Division or whatever. That's what that was built for and then it developed a recreation area for these Army and Navy boys, and it was a fine one--dandy.

PS: It was a great big building with huge stone fireplaces at each end. We used to have Red Cross parties up there during the war. That was a nice place to have them.

NS: That living room was bigger than this whole house, big high ceilings. Then they sort of abandoned it, it went all to pieces, and finally they went up there and burned it down. Now they're building another one.

PS: I imagine it will not be as big and elaborate though.

PR: How many years did you commercial fish?

NS: I fished salmon two years and I fished halibut one year, so I guess three, and I worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for one year.

PR: What were you doing?

NS: Well, we had a patrol boat called the Eider. In fact, that newspaper I just noticed will mention the Eider when it was sunk on its way south. Anyway the Eider was a schooner built in New

Bedford, probably, as a sailing ship and it had been converted to diesel, but we still had the sails aboard. It was used as a patrol boat on Kodiak Island to patrol fish traps. We had lots of fish traps on Kodiak Island in those days. We only had one officer in Kodiak that worked for Fish and Wildlife Service--in this patrol boat. I worked on that boat. We inspected all the traps to see if they were closed on the weekends, we tried to keep the fisherman out of the creeks that were robbing creeks, and so on. We were a territory, not a state, so it was all Federal Laws. I guarded the crew. I was a hunter, and always took my rifle ashore and protected them [from] Kodiak bear.

PS: You were also the cook.

NS: We had a job that probably no one else has ever done. We made a salmon survey that fall of every salmon stream on Kodiak and Afognak Island. [We] walked up the streams, to see how many salmon were there and whether they had a good escape, from salt water to as far as salmon could swim, and we saw a lot of bear. The bears were on all the creeks, you see. That was quite an experience. [In] some of them, the fish go up a long ways, and I packed the rifle. I got quite a lot pictures I took that summer of the Eider, bear, fish and traps. It's a big industry. The skipper of that boat, his name was Scarbo, Captain Scarbo, and he wasn't too old a man. I'd say he was in his forties. He was a good skipper. See in those days we didn't have any navigation instruments except a compass and a pocket watch. That's the only thing you had in coastal waters--and a memory and some charts, but not all the coastline had been charted, and some of it wasn't very accurate. There would just be a great big space where there wasn't...

PS: Nothing.

NS: As the war got started they enlisted Captain Scarbo. He was in charge of the convoy, Convoy Captain. The convoys from Seattle to Dutch Harbor. They'd get a whole convoy together and have to have someone to look over navigation, and he was it. Then he became Port Captain to Port of Seattle. The first flat-top that ever came to Seattle (big air craft carrier) they sent him out as the pilot to bring it in. So, they took him out in the tug boat, he climbed up the ladder, went up to the pilot house, here's the flat-top as long as three football fields. All he's got is a whistle. He whistles and the tug boats do this and do that, pull and push; they went up through [the sound] and docked into the Navy yard. The Admiral who was in charge of this flat-top was sitting back in his cabin while Scarbo was doing this. This is a true story now. When the flat-top was all tied up, the Admiral asked George Scarbo back to have a drink and cigar. The Admiral says, "You know, that was a marvelous job. I couldn't of done that. I wouldn't have even attempted to bring this ship in through here. How many times have you done this before?"

George says, "This is the first time."

"Well," he says, "Are you an atlas graduate?"

He says, "No, I never went through third grade."

"Well, what in the world are you doing Port Captain of Seattle?"

George says, "I've been captain of a boat since I was sixteen years old. I've never missed a season, and I can draw you a chart of the coastline from Seattle to Dutch Harbor that you can navigate with."

The Admiral says, "I apologize!"

He was a great guy, but he sure was a good skipper. Just amazing how he could keep all this in his head. He knew the weather, and he knew the tides. He was just marvelous.

That was a fun summer. We didn't have any refrigeration and we couldn't go to any grocery store to get groceries, so we just had canned stuff. Butter came in kegs.

PS: Kegs of salt--salt water.

NS: So, to get fresh eggs we got sea gull eggs. On Noisy Island, there's sea gull nests in the cliffs. We'd climb up on the cliffs and get the sea gull eggs. A sea gull egg is bigger than a chicken egg--just as good or better, but because they're nesting you got to know which ones to get. Some of them might be a little old. So, you take the eggs out of a nest that there are two in, because that means that they're still laying. When they get three eggs, they'll sit on them. We'd gather a whole wash tub full. Then to give them a further test you put them in water. The good one's, I forget, either float or sink. You could get a whole wash tub full of eggs in a little while. We ate lots of fish, seal liver, sea gull eggs. We'd get bread at the canneries--had a good time that summer.

PR: How many years before you opened the store [Sutliff's Hardware]?

NS: Middle '40's. Somewhere in there--long time ago.

PS: Didn't look a bit like it does now. It was in an old skid shack--right about where the store is now, the far end of it, and he was in lumber first.

NS: I was in the store this morning, and they had three or four computers going, planning all the paperwork they had. I said, "I can remember when we used to do all our bookkeeping on a shingle."

PR: Was your store wiped out by the tsunami?

NS: Yeah. We had a lumber yard.

PS: The first building we built was across the street where the Mirror was downtown, and the lumber yard was in the area below where the present store is. What did you lose, a million feet of lumber, in the tsunami?

NS: [nods yes]

PS: When we rebuilt, we built the store down there, but went into

hardware. We had some hardware with our lumber yard, things like door hinges and so on, but we went exclusively into hardware and didn't handle lumber anymore except for our own use.

PR: Was Kodiak growing very fast after the war?

NS: There was a period of time it didn't do anything. Lots of houses that weren't rented; they fell down. People went outside. Yeah, for quite a few years it didn't grow any. Let's see, what started it growing? King crab fishery, I guess was the first thing. They didn't have any canneries in town up till that point. Had one, Frank McConeghy [correct spelling unknown].

PS: Yeah, down on the dock.

NS: That was originally a clam cannery. It was pretty quiet in Kodiak for a good many years. Then they developed king crab.

PS: And they built the cold storage for halibut. I don't remember the dates, any of them.

NS: The men that started the king crab industry was those brothers in Raspberry Straights. They built the first king crab plant and experimented with king crab. Wakefield Fisheries [correct spelling unknown]. Then they got wiped out in the tidal wave. Then they built a cannery at Port Lions, the natives wouldn't work, and they lost that. They're the ones that really experimented and founded the king crab industry, Howard Wakefield and his two brothers.

PS: Salmon was the only industry Kodiak had up until this time. Summer you work, winter you live off your charge account. At the end of a salmon season you got all your money, paid off all your bills and started again.

NS: There was only one salmon cannery in Kodiak, and that was a small one. The rest were all the way around the island. There was about (I'm just guessing) 20 to 25 canneries around Kodiak Island. Maybe only one or two of them is operating today; that's all. There were lots of canneries and lots of traps, but they moved to town.

PS: Of course, your fishermen fished all around the island too, from town.

NS: Yeah, but only in the summer time. We had a halibut fishery, but there were not many Kodiak halibut fishermen. They came from Southeastern.

PS: The processing plant was in Port Williams, so the money never came to Kodiak until they built their own cold storage along the spit there. The B & C, wasn't it? It became the B & C. I don't think it was the B & C when it started.

NS: It all started after '64.

PR: So, it was after the tsunami.

PS: Then it started growing, and also the ferry came in. A lot of people came to Kodiak by ferry who wouldn't fly. Because of the difference in price of course.