

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA BERNICE VISGER  
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By Her Daughter, Margaret Bernice Visger

**Introduction:** Martha Bernice Visger was born in Anchorage, Alaska on April 3, 1921. Her family came to Alaska in 1917. This interview tells of our family history in Alaska and Martha's childhood here.

**Margaret:** ...I'm going to conduct this as kind of a family history. Tell me a little about Grandpa.

**Martha:** My father did not have a middle name, I don't know why. His name was Evan Jones and he was born in Aberdare, Glamorganshire, Wales, in 1880. He lived there in Wales. He probably was 12 when he first went into a coal mine but only as a trapper boy, a boy that lifted, opened and closed, the doors so they could take the coal through, because they had to keep the doors closed because of the ventilation. He had a step-mother; he wasn't very happy with her so he left home and emigrated to the United States. That would probably be about 1895, I imagine.

**Margaret:** Did he start working in coal mines in Canada? Is that where he learned his mining skills or did he go to a mining school? How did he come to know so much about mining?

**Martha:** Lots of this I have to get from notes my mother left. She was in Canada and he was there and he was probably about 20 years old and she was about 13. Their family knew my dad. She said that he started a correspondence course with the Bureau of Mines in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and he became a fire boss, which means a man in charge of the dynamiting and seeing that all the shots had gone off and all the air was clear and the men could come in again. That was at Frank, Alberta. They served rather an apprenticeship in those days. They went from one job to another, gradually up to the scale where they could be a superintendent of mines, which was what he was, or the equivalent of a mining engineer.

**Margaret:** So he worked in Canada and the United States.

**Martha:** That's right. Lots of places in the United States. Iowa, Missouri, and of course around Ravensdale, (Washington), there were a lot of mines around Ravensdale.

**Margaret:** When was Grandma born?

**martha:** Grandma was born in 1887 in Iowa. Her name was Bronwen Morgan, and I don't think she had a middle name either.

**Margaret:** Was she Welsh also?

Martha: She was part Welsh and part English.

Margaret: Were her parents coal miners?

Martha: Her father was born in Tredegar, Wales, and he emigrated to the United States. His family settled in Iowa and he had majored in music, a music school in Wales, and he was actually a music teacher. He always led the choirs in church and then when that didn't pay enough he worked in the mines on the side. So that's how my mother met my dad, he (Bronwen's father) was conducting this church choir and my father sang in this choir because he had a good voice. And that was probably when Mother was about 13 and Dad was about 20 because there was 7 years difference between them. That was in Alberta, Canada, where we talked about the Frank slide in Frank, Alberta, when the men were buried inside the mine and Dad was one of 17 miners, I think, that escaped from that mine out of probably 100.

Margaret: Do you remember how long they were trapped in the mine?

Martha: I understood from my Dad that it was three days. And mother's memoirs said that it was about three days too...And that they did have to kill the horses that were in the mine because the horses would take up too much air.

Margaret: Did they dig out eventually?

Martha: Yes.

Margaret: It seems like quite a bit of the town was wiped out in the slide too wasn't it?

Martha: That's right. The whole Turtle Mountain fell on top of the town, buried the town and the mine, and as I said, there were only the 17 men that did dig their way out, just by hand.

Fritz (Martha's husband): Weren't most of the residents of the town buried by the slide?

Martha: That's right. Now Frank and Carol (Martha's son & daughter-in-law) were up to see that slide this summer on their vacation. It's quite an attraction because it was such an unusual geological event.

Margaret: Grandma and Grandpa met in Canada. Didn't they get married over by Ravensdale?

Martha: Yes, they were married in Ravensdale. I believe in 1906.

Margaret: So Grandpa was working over there at the time?

Martha: Yes, there was a Ravensdale mine and, let's see, he had been up into Montana fighting a fire in a coal mine, in Red Lodge, Montana just before they were married. There was lots of coal mining around then more.

Margaret: How did they happen to come to Alaska?

Martha: Well, he and mother were married and they had two children, Vanny and Vivian, Vivian was about four and Vanny was about nine and Dad was working in a mine around Ravensdale. He heard about Alaska, that they were interested in coal mining there, from George Watkins Evans, now another good Welshman, who was the state mine inspector for the State of Washington. So Dad went up in the Spring of 1917 to the one mine that was in operation then, it was on the other side of Wishbone Hill. It was called the Old Dougherty Mine. But the coal wasn't real good. It was kind of what you'd call a dirty coal. And at this time the Alaska Railroad had been built by the Federal Government, since Alaska was still a territory, and the railroad ran from Seward to Anchorage to Fairbanks. They had steam engines and they were having to import coal from Korea and Japan on barges, which was very expensive. They wanted to open their own coal mine in Alaska so that they would have coal for the steam engines. So Dad heard about this and he talked to, I think it was Colonel Mears, who was in charge of the railroad then and lived in Anchorage; and Colonel Mears commissioned him to open a coal mine for the Alaska Railroad at Eska. Dad did this and there were probably 100 men working there. He sent for mother and she and the girls came up in the fall. Now Eska was a very nice town with homes for the employees. They lived there for about four years and Vannie and Vivian went to school there. I think that's where they met Ora D. Clark, (a well-known pioneer school teacher). Well, this was a real interesting town to live in. There was a large community hall and my mother and dad used to go fishing an awful lot. The trout fishing was just tremendous in those days. They also had lots of dances at this community hall. It was a fun place to live. Well, then my Dad decided to open another mine and that's when he formed the Evan Jones Coal Company with Z.J. Loussac and Oscar Anderson and I can't remember the third man that was in it, and Bob Courtney was the bookkeeper. (Bob Courtney's son later married Evan Jones daughter, Vanny.) They opened the mine at Jonesville and I was born just about a year after the mine opened. (Martha was born in April, 1921.) I was born in Anchorage in the old railroad hospital there. Then I was taken out to the mine when I was about 6 weeks old. We lived there about 4 or 5 years and then somehow the folks decided to go back to the states, they had to see what was out there. Of course, they missed Alaska; they were ready to come back. The lure of Alaska and black diamonds ...coal... inspired them to come back to Alaska. Well, this time my Dad met Cap Lathrop in Seattle and Cap opened the Healy River Mine at Suntrana, Alaska, which is probably 10 or 15 miles from Healy on the Alaska

Railroad. It's more towards the Fairbanks area, and that's where my first memories actually begin, at Healy, or Suntrana. (Often both names were used to refer to the same mine.) We had a nice house there and Vanny and Vivian went to school in Anchorage and lived with some friends. That was also a real interesting place because Cap Lathrop was quite a well-known philanthropist in the Alaskan area. He had the Empress Theater in Anchorage, I think there was an Empress in Fairbanks too. He had a screen set up in the community hall at the mine so we had a show once a week that was a big event. We had a lot of dances and I was allowed to stay up for the dances, though I was about 6 or 7 years old. Oh, they had a big Christmas celebration and they had a great, big, huge Christmas tree and Santa Claus gave out these presents. I didn't find out til about four years later that my Dad was Santa Claus, the one that gave out the presents to all these kids. One event that stands out in my mind there was my mother became ill and they told her she should go to a doctor in Fairbanks. Fairbanks was the nearest town, and there was no train coming up. That's one thing I noticed in my life in Alaska at that time, we were very dependent on the train, on the railroad, that was the only means of transportation. Anyhow, the train on the main line went through every day (but) it just came up to the coal mine once a week. So mother and I were loaded in John Colvin's sled. Now John Colvin had a team of dogs and I can remember very vividly my mother getting in the sled with me between her knees and we were both wrapped in bearskins because it was pretty cold and the Healy River was completely frozen. Boy, we went that river fast with the dog team. John Colvin was very fond of his dogs. The lead dog was "Mother" and "Mother" was a good lead dog, but she was getting older and when she got tired, "Mother" was retired to the basket and her daughter, "Sister," took over and became the lead dog. We went that way to Healy and then got on the train to Fairbanks. My mother went into the hospital there and discovered that mother's serious illness was a little sister that was going to be born in the spring. We came back to Suntrana then. And my sister (Margaret) was born in Fairbanks. I think that was 1928 (when) she was born. She was raised in Suntrana also. Vannie and Vivian were there in the summertime. Now, from there we went to Admiralty Island; well, we rented a house in Juneau and dad was interested in a mine on Admiralty Island. That was a beautiful place and we were there for the summer. We came back to Anchorage and mother and dad bought the house that you know, that our family lived in, the house that sits in the Palmer Fairgrounds now.

Margaret: Where was that located (in Anchorage)?

Martha: That was on 5th & H Streets in Anchorage. And it's at the Palmer Fairgrounds now, it's called the Jones House. It was right in back of where the Times (Anchorage Times newspaper) building is now and was moved by Bob Atwood. (Instead

of demolishing the house in the 1970's, he had it moved to the Palmer Fairground to be a historical exhibit.)

Margaret: You said they (Jones family) went outside. Was that for a couple of years?

Martha: No, I don't know exactly how long it was, but I don't think it was much more than a year.

Margaret: You talked about Grandpa opening all of these different mines. Did he decide on the location for these? Did he prospect for these? How did he choose the locations?

Martha: That's what has always amazed me. You have seen Wishbone Hill: it's a big hill, has trees and grass and whatnot on it and he did prospect up there but I think he could smell coal. He was the one who decided where to dig and they dug the first tunnel where he said and they found coal. And the same thing over at Jonesville. In fact, I think Vivian said she moved the first shovelful of dirt for the Jonesville mine.

Margaret: How many other mines did he do this at - actually establish the mine?

Martha: I really would have to sit down and count them. The one at Healy was already there, or the one at Suntrana. There was a mine at Chickaloon also. When he was at Eska he was in charge of both mines. For some reason, I think the Chickaloon mine didn't work out too much because it was very hard to transport the coal from there. That's the one deposit of anthracite coal in Alaska that I know of. But he just had a feeling for coal. Of course, he prospected and he had his compass and all those things. He would talk about the conglomerate and the shale, and the syncline and the anticline. He was just a smart little Welshman I guess.

Margaret: Did he establish the mine at Eska?

Martha: He established that. He opened the first mine this side of Wishbone Hill.

Margaret: How long did Jonesville operate?

Martha: I think it closed in 1955. Now actually, my dad sold out to his partners after he had been there about 4 years, probably in 1925 or 1926. For a long time Oscar Anderson ran the mine and they had a lot of trouble after that. I remember there was one fire that they had that they had to call and ask my dad to come back. There were a lot of men trapped inside the mine. I remember this so vividly. I think my dad was back at Eska, so it was in the winter, and he called my mother to tell her that there had been a fire at Jonesville and they had

asked him to come and try and get the men out because he knew the tunnels. I can remember going to sleep and my mother walking the floor. I guess she walked the floor all night till the next morning he called and said he was safe and he had gotten the men out. It's funny the things you remember. Dad was at that mine again after I was in the States going to school. I think they asked him to come back and run it again because wasn't doing good. And then he got out of the mining business for a while and they moved to the States. They moved to Ashland, Oregon for a while, but they went back to Alaska again.

Margaret: For how long (were they outside)?

Martha: Fritz says they were there a year. Now, Dad (Fritz) came up, Dad (Fritz) was on a ship going to the Phillipine Islands at the time, and he came up. (This must have been 1945.) He docked in San Francisco and came up to Ashland and my sister Vivian and Walter and the children, were living there (and) my mom and dad. I came down from Kennewick (Washington) and we had a reunion. My mother and dad met Fritz for the first time there. Vivian and Walter had met him in Seattle, but the rest of my family hadn't.

Margaret: So they lived outside for about a year then and they had to go back?

Martha: That's right. You know how it is with Alaska - you don't forget it. But, the mine was eventually sold to someone that did strip mining there. I think you saw it while it was being strip-mined and the tunnel is all closed off now. The main tunnel is cemented shut. There was a sign there saying that this was the site of the Evan Jones Mine.

Margaret: Did you ever go to Homer? I had heard that Grandpa mined at Homer.

Martha: I was married then and living in Kennewick. But Dad did go to Homer and Homer is famous for having beach coal. There are actually lumps of coal they can collect on the beach. He did open a mine there, the Homer Coal Co., and mother and he lived down there. Now at this time, the only transportation was by plane and the coal that he mined he sold to the Homer people, the people that lived in Homer. And that is where he died. Now there was no hospital or doctor there. He died in his sleep. Mother woke up and discovered Dad wasn't breathing. She called the airlines and they ordered a plane out to pick Dad and Mother up and she took his body to Anchorage.

Margaret: What year was that. Do you know?

Martha: I know very well because it was a few weeks after Frank John's (Martha's son) first birthday. It was in 1950, March, 1950, that he died.

Margaret: He started out at Eska, then Jonesville, and then Suntrana, Admiralty Island and Homer; were there any other places that he mined?

Martha: Yes. On the other side of Wishbone (Hill) from Eska and Jonesville, there was the Pioneer Coal Company, and Wishbone Hill. And at the time, just before I came outside to the States to go to school, he was at Houston, which is on the railroad going towards Fairbanks and there was a coal mine there. And that's where they, Colonel Olson, came, I remember, and asked Dad if he would open up Eska again because the Evan Jones Coal Mine wasn't producing enough coal. So Dad went back to Eska, and we all enjoyed living there for a while. Then I came out to, of course, to the University and I guess that was probably the last mine. He retired from mining after that. Then he came outside, that was to Ashland and then back again and they went to the Homer coal mine after the last time he came back.

Margaret: Was most of the coal sold to the railroad?

Martha: Yes (and) it was sold in Anchorage. You heated your home with coal, you cooked with coal, and Walt's Transfer delivered your coal, Walter Teeland (Martha's brother-in-law).

Margaret: You even cooked with coal?

Martha: Now, it was pretty cold in Anchorage in the winter and we had a large coal heater in the living room and in the kitchen there was another coal stove that was the cookstove and also the hotwater heater, the pipes ran through the coal stove. Now most all the people that lived in Anchorage burned coal. The only other source (of heat) would have been wood. Fritz says that Fort Richardson burned coal too when they were first started there. ...The mining kind of petered out after the railroad switched to diesel locomotives and I think that Fort Richardson eventually went to diesel oil too. Another thing I noted about growing up in Anchorage, you were in a small town with no roads, your only transportation was on the railroad. There were no roads except the one that went around the town. We depended a great deal on lodges and civic activities and things for our entertainment. Now, the Elks Lodge was the site of everything in town. I think they had all the big dances, our high school prom was there, our graduation was in the Elks Hall. And also the churches. There were the Presbyterian, and across from that was the Episcopal and then there was the Catholic Church. And they all provided a source of entertainment for the young people. There were clubs. The Masonic Lodge also had a lodge for young girls, as you know, the Rainbow Girls, and the Elks Lodge had the Antlers Lodge for young boys. So our entertainment was a lot in one town. We didn't go visiting to another town except when they went up to Fairbanks to play basketball or to Seward or something like that.

Margaret: How many years did you actually spend in Anchorage?

Martha: We moved to Anchorage when I was about 7 years old. And I went through school there and graduated from high school in 1938. I was 17 years old, and I left for the States in the Fall of 1938 to go to the University of Washington.

Margaret: But you spent your summers at the mine.

Martha: Yes, we always spent our summers at the mine.

Margaret: How far did town (Anchorage) extend then?

Martha: Well, there was a road we called the loop that went around the town. Now it was 5 miles from the edge of town to Lake Spenard and we could walk to Otis Lake. I don't actually know what the boundaries were at that time.

Margaret: How far were there buildings?

Martha: Now the Bootlegger's Cove area, where the earthquake affected so much, that was land where we went to picnic. There were no houses there at the time. Strutzes lived probably the farthest out of town and the Strutz family had a small, almost like a farm there. Governor Hickel's wife is Ermalee Strutz. And her sister was in school with me, Clella Strutz. The population was about 3,000 people.

Margaret: Were there homes or businesses down by Ship Creek?

Martha: No. There were homes up on Government Hill and you walked from Government Hill over the Ship Creek Bridge to get to Anchorage, to downtown Anchorage. Actually you got to the railroad depot first. I think the railroad depot was at the end of C St. I think that's where it is now too.

Margaret: Did you know the Usibellis?

Martha: Well, yes, Emil Usibelli, his sons run the Usibelli Coal Mine now which is at Suntrana, which was formerly the Healy River Coal Corporation (the mine Evan Jones ran). Emil Usibelli worked for my Dad at Jonesville. It's just rather interesting, Margaret, that Joe Usibelli stopped in at the Carter Mining Co. in Gillette, Wyoming (where Martha's son Frank works) and Frank met him and he left kind of a newspaper explaining about the Usibelli Mine because they have really gone for sophisticated mining now, they have large mining machines there. Frank John sent us the newspaper ..which is rather a booklet and on the back of it is kind of a chronological order of mining in Alaska. It did mention that Emil Usibelli came to that area to work in Jonesville and then he later somehow, quite a lot later, I don't know the circumstances, became the owner of the Healy River mine after Cap Lathrop was killed.

Margaret: One thing I remember as a kid, was that Grandma always had African Violets at the mine.

Martha: Well, she had African Violets (but) the first ones I remember were geraniums. She always had geraniums in the house too on 5th & H Street, and at night when it was real cold she put up the card table by the coal stove in the living room and gathered all the geraniums from the window and set them on the card table so they wouldn't freeze at night. And then in the morning she would put them back in the window. She also grew narcissus bulbs so that they would come out in the house in the spring, and that wonderful fragrance, you know, and there was still snow on the ground but there was still a promise of spring coming. You could smell the narcissus bulbs she raised. My dad always had a little garden out at the mine for radishes and lettuce and onions. And he usually had a fence around this garden of birch poles and the rabbits would get in and dig a hole in the corner and eat the produce. So my dad would stick a milk can in the rabbit hole and the next night the rabbit would dig another tunnel alongside and so on it went. But we did get some lettuce and good onions and radishes out of it.

Fritz: Didn't you use the mine opening for an icebox (refrigerator)?

Martha: Yes, there were a lot of old prospecting mines around there and we did use that (the tunnels) to keep apples there and if we wanted to make ice cream we'd go in the tunnel a little father and chop ice and make homemade ice cream.

Fritz: And the bears used to get in the cookhouse an awful lot didn't they?

Martha: Yes, I'm afraid they did. And it wasn't just what they ate, it was what they destroyed. They would go in one window and always come out another way, another door or window, but not the same entrance. These were, of course, little black bears but they still could be quite destructive.

Margaret: Did you have many moose in the area?

Martha: Yes, (but) there were more moose around Houston. I don't remember many moose around Eska. I can remember coming on a moose in the woods. I think it was in the woods around Wishbone, and I thought it was a horse for a minute because it was so big. But I think there are more moose around there now and they're also more belligerent. We only had trouble with the moose in the mating season in the fall. It was the only time they would bother a person, but I understand now they're on the outskirts of Anchorage and the people invading their territory have made them more hostile and they will attack people easier.

Margaret: Were they still using horses in the mines?

Martha: No, they didn't use them in the mines. We usually had one or two horses at the mine to haul maybe logs out of the woods, maybe to haul supplies to the cookhouse. There was always a horse kept there. My dad had one horse named Nellie that was at Jonesville when he opened the mine there and somehow later on he had Nellie at Houston. I think she was 21 years old by then and in the winter Nellie got down like a horse will do when she is old and sick and she couldn't get up. And my dad had the men light bonfires around Nellie and one man had to stay out there all night long and keep the fires going so Nellie wouldn't get cold. And I guess in about 3 or 4 days, Old Nellie got up again and walked. My dad had a lot of affection for animals.

Margaret: Did the depression affect your family, or did it seem to affect the area of Alaska you were in?

Martha: Well, I wasn't really conscious of the depression. I heard about it. But it didn't affect Anchorage too much because you had to have so much money to get to Anchorage, to pay your steamship fare and rail fare and all to get up there and yet we had a video tape from Walt & Vivian (Teeland) the other day and Walt mentioned that during the depression he lost his job at the Alaska Railroad. He was working in the stores department at the railroad then so the depression must have affected us to some degree, of course I must have been only about 8 years old and I wasn't too aware of it. Now, your father is much more aware of the depression because of the people that rode the rails and the soup kitchens. He can probably tell you more about that.

Margaret: Were you there when the Matanuska Valley colonists arrived?

Martha: I was there and we were in Anchorage, this must have been in high school. In fact I think they must have come up about 1935 because, I've always told you how we walked so much, we walked, the whole...student body... walked down to meet the colonists. The town put a big dinner on for them and the Rainbow Girls were the waitresses at the dinner. (Martha was a Rainbow Girl.) So we got to meet the colonists and welcome them. I think they were only in town for a couple hours and then they were taken on to the Matanuska Valley. But another time we walked, the whole school went down to the railroad station, was when Will Rogers and Wiley Post were killed in an airplane accident around Pt. Barrow. You have probably heard of Will Rogers. His body was flown to Fairbanks and then the two bodies were on the train coming through Anchorage. The school closed and all the children walked down to the railroad depot to kind of salute Will Rogers and his memory.

Margaret: How did Alaska feel about the colonists' coming?

Martha: I think we were all kind of thrilled and happy for these people and we always thought the Matanuska Valley was a beautiful place. We also were looking forward to getting more fresh produce, and potatoes and cabbage and those things the colonists expected to grow. Of course the colonists had to live in tents when they first came until houses were built for them and some of them got disillusioned and went back but lots of them have stayed on. You probably have met some of them around Wasilla. Rod Cottle's parents were colonists. (Vivian's Son-in-law)

Margaret: Did Palmer or Wasilla exist very much then?

Martha: Wasilla was an important stop on the railroad. They had a large railroad depot there and Matanuska was a fairly large place. Palmer was not too large. It was more a stop-off place, but it became more important with the move of the colonists in. These people came from the interior of the United States. As I remember, they were people from Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, that area, and they had gone through the dust bowl, lots of them, the depression too, and lost their farms and they were paid a certain amount of money to homestead in Alaska and the government agreed to support them for so long. By the time I was ready to graduate from high school I think there was one road from Anchorage to Wasilla because I remember on our senior sneak we did drive up this road towards the Independence Mine, but that was the only road, there was no road to Seward or Fairbanks at that time, just the railroad.

Margaret: When did you go outside?

Martha: My first trip outside was in 1938, well, the first one I remember was in '38. I probably went out as a child, I think probably twice, but I don't remember those at all. ...I wanted to tell you about my mother's and dad's and two older girls' first Thanksgiving in Alaska, this was before Margaret (Martha's sister) and I were born of course. They arrived in Anchorage probably in September or October and went out to Eska and they were there for Thanksgiving. My mother had ordered a turkey. The train didn't get through, I think there was snowstorm or something. They had a ham, a big ham, so mother fixed ham and beans for their first Thanksgiving in Alaska!

...The Alaska Steamship Co. was the only way of getting to Alaska, there were no planes that flew from Seattle to any place in Alaska, but you went on the Alaska Steamship Co. I had finished nurses training in Seattle and the war had started at this time and I wanted to make a trip home. It was very difficult, I couldn't get any passage, they wouldn't allow any civilians, only military or army or navy. Well, finally a friend of mine suggested that I might be able to get on the relief trip as stewardess. The stewardesses on the boat at that time

each had to be a registered nurse. So I did find a registered nurse that did want a trip off and I had to get a Coast Guard permit, I had to get a union permit, and at 7:00 in the morning I appeared at the SS Denali to go to Seward and to discover that the Army had taken over the ship and instead of civilians we were taking 400 Army personnel to Seward. It was a little different trip! After we docked in Seward, I tried to get a plane from Seward to Anchorage and I was talking to my folks and I said our ship leaves tomorrow and the operator (said) do not give out any information on ships coming or going. You really almost forgot there was a war on, and it was, and they were very careful in Alaska. All the portholes were painted black. But anyhow, the first mate got a ride for me in a small plane and I think Noel Wien was the pilot and he already had a passenger, a young soldier, but the soldier said he would ride on the baggage behind the seat so I could sit with Noel Wien and go over to Anchorage. So I was over there for one day with my family and I came back the next day, and came back as stewardess on the steamship again.

Margaret: You were only there for one day?

Martha: Yes. That was just to see my folks. And then in 1944 after Dad (Fritz) and I were engaged, my sister was to be married in Anchorage and asked me to go up and be her bridesmaid. So by then they did have some airplane transportation and I flew Pan American from Seattle to Juneau and then we stayed overnight in Juneau and flew Alaska Airlines to Anchorage. And then I got stuck in Anchorage, I couldn't get out again, because this was 1944 in the middle of the war, and it was the same thing: no civilian transportation, only military. My dad did finally get a passage for me on a steamship and it turned out to be the Denali again, the ship I had come up on before, so I knew an awful lot of the crew members. It was an interesting trip back. Besides Dad (Fritz) was waiting in Seattle for me.

Margaret: Tell me the story about how you and Dad almost lived next door to each other.

Martha: Well, I'm going to let Dad tell that one because that was really surprising.

Fritz: Well, my Dad decided to move the family to Alaska, it was either in 1928 or 1929, I believe it was 1929. He accepted a job with the Anchorage Drug Company (he was a pharmacist) in Anchorage and the man who owned it was Mr. McCormick, who owned the Alaska Steamship Line. Dad went to Alaska, to Anchorage, Alaska, and took over this drugstore for Mr. McCormick and we in turn moved from Spanaway (Washington), we were living at Spanaway Lake, into Tacoma, in preparation of moving to Alaska. My mother had sold everything we didn't need and given things away to other relatives. We received a cablegram, it was in the fall, not to come because my dad had hurt himself and was

in the hospital in Anchorage. He had shattered his ankle. He was going up the stairs in the old drugstore and someone had dropped a pencil on the stair, the staircases were open, and his toe caught under the step above and he fell backwards and just shattered his ankle. They operated on him in Anchorage but it wouldn't heal. But he had in the meantime rented a house which was just two doors away from where Martha and her family lived. It was right behind the Times building in what is now a parking lot. He had rented this house and we would have been neighbors. But Dad wired us not to come, he had sent us the steamship tickets, and we were to go on as soon as we could to join him up there. So later on Martha and I met at the University in Seattle. When I took Martha home to meet my folks my dad remembered her. She used to, in 1929, come into the drugstore with her friends. My dad remembered her and remembered Mom's (Martha's) family. So we almost became neighbors, but then Dad had to come back to the states because Dad's ankle wouldn't heal in Anchorage. This must have been in 1928 that he went up there because I think he was there during the crash in 1929. He came back. He couldn't work for a long time because he couldn't walk. His ankle was so bad. But (when he originally went to Alaska) he went up on a boat that was the flagship for the Alaska Steamship Line called the Aleutian and he got off the ship in Seward in the daytime and the boat went on to a cannery somewhere beyond Seward, hit an uncharted rock and sank in just a couple 3 minutes. And he had just gotten off the boat. Of course, we had read about this in the newspaper and my mother was quite excited wondering if my father had gone down with it. There were no telephone communications between Alaska and the lower 48 then, but they could send a cable or radiogram somehow and dad sent a radiogram that he was all right, that he had gotten off the ship just before it sank.

Margaret: Aunt Vivian and Aunt Vanny married native Alaskans. I wonder if you could tell me briefly who they married, what were their backgrounds and what they did in the early part of their lives as young married couples. Because I know they were a part of Alaskan history. Didn't Aunt Vanny's husband's father go over the Chilkoot Trail?

Martha: Yes, this was Bob Courtney that was the bookkeeper for the first Evan Jones Coal Co., Ralph's father. Ralph and Vanny knew each other when they were 10 and 12 years old at Jonesville. His father had come over the trail. Now the story I have heard is that he and another man brought a load of pigs over the trail to sell the miners and when they came to Lake Bennett at the end of the trail, they had to cross this lake. They built a barge to carry the pigs and the barge sank and they lost all their pigs. Now young Ralph (Aunt Vanny's son) did climb the Chilkoot Trail, probably 10 or 15 years ago, to follow the same path that his grandfather had taken. One part that was rather bad about this: Bob Courtney kept a diary about this trip but he kept it in shorthand because he was an

accountant, so not everyone can read that story. Vanny and Ralph were married in Anchorage. Vanny was teaching school there, she taught 5th grade in the Anchorage school, and she and Ralph were married, and of course married women couldn't teach, so she didn't teach school anymore. And later, a couple years after that, he worked for the NC Company (Northern Commercial Co.) and they went into Takotna first and they ran the NC trading post and store at Takotna, and from there they were transferred to the NC store in McGrath and ran that store for a good number of years. They finally decided to come back to Anchorage. They got a little tired of living out in the bush because they wanted to raise a family. So they came to Anchorage and Ralph worked for the Star Airlines until he developed what is known as Adson's Disease. It's a disease of the adrenal glands. At that time there was no cure for it. Nowadays they cannot cure it, but it's treated with adrenal cortex hormones and Ralph did have some kind of shots he had to take because he came out to the Mayo Brothers Clinic and he was on some kind of adrenal hormone because I taught Vanny how to give the injections to him. He lived probably five years after that, and he died about 1949...But then Vanny had to support herself and her children and she went back to school teaching. She taught at Healy on the Alaska Railroad and that's where she met Larry. He worked for the railroad, I think he was car inspector or something, and she married Larry Davenport. I believe it was the day before Christmas and all the little Teelands said Vanny got a new davenport for Christmas. I think your Uncle Larry died in about 1972 or 1974. And Vanny kept working, by then she was...working at the Bank of Alaska and then she was in charge of the Heritage Museum there (at National Bank of Alaska) for a long time.

Margaret: So Ralph's father did go over the Chilkoot Trail. Did he stay in Alaska, did he mine or what?

Martha: He stayed in Alaska, he came to Anchorage, he was an accountant and he set up his own accounting office there...I believe his wife, and ...two other children were there for a while and then they separated...I knew his wife and Bob Courtney's other daughter in Seattle.

Margaret: What about the Teelands then? Do you know about Uncle Walt's father?

Martha: Yes, Uncle Walt's father came to Alaska, I can't tell you the date, but Uncle Walt is 84 years old so you can figure out when he was born (1907). He was 84 years old last March. He was born on Cleary Creek near Fairbanks but he was brought up in Ruby which is on the Yukon River. His father was a blacksmith, I believe. His father's name was John Teeland and he met Mrs. Teeland in Seattle, they were married there and he took her up to Alaska. He would have been Norwegian and she was Irish. They had a large family, I think five children probably and they lived on the Yukon River. It is something

to me that seems almost an impossibility but Vivian got hold of a newspaper that was printed at this time...it's just a small newspaper made up in Ruby, Alaska, and it said John Teeland found a well-preserved mastodon or mammoth while he was placer mining on the Yukon River and he had sold the jeweler in Ruby the tusks from the mastodon for the ivory and they had cut up the meat and sold it to be food for the dog team dogs. I have that paper and someday I'll give it to you Margaret, it is something that should be passed on. I mean if it had happened now there would be a trio of scientists from the University of Alaska going up there to inspect this well-preserved mammoth. I think Walter was on his own by the time he was 16. He was supporting himself, he had worked as a mechanic on the railroad and then he had worked in the stores department of the railroad. When he and Vivian were married he had started Walt's Transfer and they were very active in Walt's Transfer for years and actually when they sold Walt's Transfer, I can't remember the name of the man who bought it, but he is the head of the Anchorage Refuse Co., his sons are running it now. It developed into a very big project, the Anchorage Refuse Co. now, it has a lot of money behind it. Tom Culhane. Tom Culhane's son was a pilot, and I think that Tom Culhane's son and his grandson were killed probably in the last year or two in an airplane crash somewhere near Anchorage. Vivian had written to me about it because they had remained friends over the years. Walter worked in Seward too. Walter went back to the railroad and worked again. The children were born in Anchorage and then they bought a grocery store up towards "D" Street. It was called Lucky Baldwin's Grocery and they bought it and ran it and discovered after they had it for a year that Walter had tuberculosis. Now that's something too, out of the 100 students in the high school that I went to (the original Anchorage High), I would say that at least 10 of them died of TB at this time. There was no cure for it then like there is now. But anyhow Vivian and Walter came out to California and Walter was in a TB sanitarium for a year. They advised him not to go back to Alaska, and that's how they settled in Ashland. But of course they could never forget Alaska and so after a year they went back to Alaska. And I think Walter worked for the railroad for a while but that's when they bought Herning's store in Wasilla from Mr. and Mrs. Herning (and made it into Teeland's Country Store). They (Teelands) had had that store I think 25 years in about 1965, I'm trying to think when they did buy it. About 1946. About 1975 is when they sold it. Maybe 1972.

Margaret: I've exhausted my questions, if you have anything more to tell me, go ahead.

Martha: One thing I've probably told you, our family always did a lot of singing and that, of course, was because it was a small town. Out at the mine in the summer we would walk the railroad tracks, that was another way we were connected with the railroad because there were no roads to walk, but we would

sing as we walked the railroad to scare the bears away. Also we would go berry-picking a lot. There were a lot of wild raspberries and blueberries and currants and we would take a can with rocks in it and rattle that can to scare the bears away, because if you were going to find a bear, it was very often in the berrypatch or crossing the railroad. We always enjoyed singing. I learned songs from World War I because my mother would sing these old songs...You've always said I enjoy walking and I think that was probably the reason. They walked so much. I asked Walter why did so many people put their cars up in the winter, not run them in the winter, and he said it was because there wasn't any anti-freeze to put in your radiator. The people that did run them had to drain the radiator at night, and sometimes they used rubbing alcohol, filled the car (radiator) with that, but that was pretty expensive. I didn't realize that they didn't have antifreeze in those days. That was one reason so many people walked. Of course there was a lot ice-skating, sleigh riding and crosscountry skiing in Anchorage; that was a lot of fun when we were growing up.

Margaret: Why don't you drop some names of people who are famous now. You knew Ermalee Hickel's (the current governor's wife) sister?

Martha: Yes, I knew her sister, Clella Strutz. You know Mulcahy Park--I knew Alice Mulcahy, she and I were in school together, her dad was some kind of official on the railroad, I don't know what. And of course, Pat James that had the Kobuk Coffee Shop in Anchorage for so many years. She and I were editor and co-editor on the high school annual, the Anchor. Pat James was active in Pioneers (the organization). Bob Atwood (owner of the Anchorage Times) taught me to write headlines in 1938 for the school paper. In fact I received a letter not long ago, they're having a big reunion for the Class of 1942 and all classes of Anchorage High School that graduated before 1955. They're having a reunion in June in Anchorage and one of the highlights is a picnic at the Hickel residence. I knew Johnny Johnson that has the accounting service in Anchorage. Oscar Anderson (whose home is a historical site in Anchorage) owned a meatmarket and Z.J. Loussac (Loussac Library in Anchorage) was a pharmacist and owned Loussac's pharmacy and I'm sure there was a third man but I can't remember who it was (all three were partners with Evan Jones in the Jonesville Mine). I knew Ray Peterson's wife, Tony Shoddy. (Ray was founder of Northern Consolidated Airlines which later merged with Wien.) Sonny was their son. Gottstein of course and the fellow who worked for Gottstein too. His folks had a dairy farm. There was only one dairy farm in town then, Olds' Dairy...Asa Martin's father owned a dairy there. Asa Martin became a doctor in Anchorage later on. Oh and there was one radio station in Anchorage, KFQD, it's still there. It used to be operated in the evenings but now it's a full-time radio station. That was the only station we could get on the radio at night and your Uncle Walt

read the news on it for a long time, in the evening. Your Uncle Walt was a volunteer fireman so we always knew where all the fires were because the telephone operator would call all the firemen and tell them where the fire was and where to go. It was an interesting small town.

Margaret: Merrill Field wasn't there. It was started while you were there, probably in the 30's? Wasn't it the main airport.

Martha: Yes, it was the main airport. Now I knew Merrill and they had two young boys, I remember he and his wife, and Merrill Field was named after him, he was a bush pilot too.

Margaret: Thank you so much! This has been fascinating.

Martha: You know Evan Jones' mother's name was Margaret, that was one reason you're named Margaret.

Fritz: And my Great-grandmother Ranus was named Marguerite.

#### Prologue:

Evan Jones died near Homer, Alaska in 1950. Bronwen Jones lived a full life in Alaska until her death in 1981. Vanny and Vivian are still living in Alaska, Martha lives in Eugene, Oregon, and Margaret lives in California. Martha received her R.N. degree from the University of Washington, where she met her husband Frank (Fritz). They raised 4 children in Washington and Oregon, and eventually moved back to Anchorage for several years in 1977, before retiring in Eugene, Oregon. Grandson Frank (Martha's son) keeps the coal mining tradition alive with a master's degree in geology and his work at an Exxon-owned coal mine in Wyoming. Granddaughter Margaret (the interviewer) fell in love with an Alaskan pilot, married him and moved to Alaska in 1978.