

Interview between Corinne Wilson
and John Miller about Kodiak
during World War II

Corinne Wilson: I had came back to Kodiak in May of 1941, I wasn't mature enough, I guess, to be away from my family.

John Miller: How old were you when you came back.

CW: Well, I was born in 1916 and 41' would be 25.

JM: You were born in Kodiak.

CW: Oh, yes. All my family were born in Kodiak and my mother and father both were born in Kodiak. I would say I'm a fourth generation Alaskan that it couldn't be on the Aleut side. Further then that nothing on paper to substantiate that. So, I'm eleventh generation American on my grandfathers side.

JM: I don't even know your name yet.

CW: Corinne (Spells name) and my father named me and he always called me Corinne (Core Reen), but I think a teacher, by the spelling, thought it should be Corinne (Core Rin) so all my family, except for Papa, called me Corrin. You can choose either one. I think Coreen is prettier.

JM: What is your last name ?

CW: Wilson. Just like the president.

JM: What was it like to live in Kodiak back then.

CW: Well it was very busy. I had only been gone one year and then I decided to come back. I was pregnant with my third child, so I was really homesick for home. Being from a large family that makes a difference about how a person feels.

JM: How many people were in the family ?

CW: I have six brother and four sisters... We lived right downtown next to the museum. You see were that park is, Sergeant Park. Well that's were our house was and barn and wood shed. So when I came back, my daughter was born at the end of July. I went right to work soon after that, within a month. In 1939, is when they started building the base. The Marines had come first in 1940, I believe it was March 1940. Then, September, the GI's came, the Army came and lived in Swampy Acres in tents.

JM: Where exactly is Swampy Acres ?

CW: Swampy Acres is before you get to Boy Scout Lake. There's a little hill on this side, it was over that way. I went back to work as a waitress and so gradually there became so many people and things were building up. My folks had property in different places in town. Do you know where Krafts Store is? That was Gramma Chichenoff potato garden was right there. Gramma's house was right at the corner of just above where the stoplight is. At that time there was much value for the property so I think they sold one lot for \$200.00, That was a lot of money then, in 1940. Probably the other one for maybe \$500.00, I never was around so I don't know. The GI's and the people who worked at the base, there were a lot of people that came from Montana. Because they thought that they could stand the winters here in Kodiak. There were a lot of Montana people. I remember one of the remarks I heard. I stayed up for three days waiting for it to get dark and it never got dark. They came in June of 1940.

JM: Was there a lot of interaction between the two, between the military and the civil population.

CW: Oh yes, because the GI's came in town for entertainment and of course they had the bars. But, we also had a dance hall where we had dances and that's where you met the fella's at the dance hall.

JM: Was the USO sponsored or was it private?

CW: I'm talking about before the war started. There was a school teacher and Mrs. Erskine, that used to live in the Erskine House, which is the museum now, and some other ladies who went together and formed a group so to entertain the soldiers, because they were getting so many. Thousands, there was supposed to be 30,000 GI's around this area.

JM: Is that about right, about 30,000 (troops)?

CW: I would say, we never did know.

JM: Did that include Chiniak and Pasagshak and everywhere?

CW: Ouzinkie and Afognak. The army bought lumber from Afognak. When the war was declared they restricted the soldiers from staying over, 8:30. 8:30 was their curfew.

JM: They danced until 8:30 and then go back home.

CW: They started having Sunday afternoon dances.

JM: Did the building of the base bring a lot to the economy?

CW: I would say the first time in history. The people that worked on the building of the base had an income and the income was substantial. This was the first time anybody made over a \$100.00 a week for instance.

JM: Did they hire the civilians in town ?

CW: Oh yes they did hire civilians. Then people from the villages came and they settled here. The husbands and fathers worked at the building of the base. They never had that income before. It was just fishing season, salmon and that was it.

JM: Halibut wasn't in then ?

CW: Oh, No.

JM: Nobody really knew about halibut ?

CW: Oh, yes they knew about halibut but it was the Canadian fishermen that used to come here for it. The halibut boats (fisherman) and sometimes they would come to our dances before the military was here and they would dance in their rubber boots. No, halibut wasn't anything.

JM: Was there a big fleet like there is now ?

CW: Oh, NO ! I mean there was no boat harbor until 1958.

JM: So there was just a minimal presence of the fishing fleet.

CW: Yes, well some people had. My father had a fishing boat. My brothers did. My father had a steady job. He was a Deputy Marshal with the, well it was the territory until 1959.

JM: How many people were in Kodiak at that time, civilian wise ?

CW: The 1930 census..... There was 286 people then, 1930. I would say at the most 400 people.

JM: In the town. You said that people would come in from the villages and the lower 48 to work.

CW: Well they did from Ouzinike and Afognak. That I remember. By 1941 they were needing the civilians because the draft was on. I forgot when the draft, military draft, selective service.

JM: The buildup began in 1939 ? The buildup of the military bases.

CW: Well, that was the start-up of it. They said it was a sub-base. We thought it was submarine.... It was accessory to other bases on Kodiak. The reason we were chosen. President Roosevelt knew that there should be a jumping off place from San Francisco or Seattle to Kodiak and then on to the chain.

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CW: They always had a trouble with the Japanese interfering with the fisheries in the Bering Sea. I can remember when I was a little girl, they talked about it.... Kodiak was chosen because of the natural harbor and the ice free port all around the year. The ice free port and the good drinking water.... The natural harbor was the one of the main features.

JM: I heard there was a gate a Dead Man's Curve and you couldn't go past that.

CW: After war was declared they finally had a gate downtown.... Just about the other side of Krafts Store. The road leading to the base.

JM: Nobody else was allowed out there.

CW: One had to have identification, even to go on the dock. During the war we had to have identification, a card issued by the city and authorized by the military police.

JM: You really couldn't go out there (toward base) to go fishing and hunting.

CW: Well, No! It was closed off.

JM: Did you ever get out there and see.

CW: Well, certainly belonging to the group, we didn't call it the USO, but it was like that, entertaining the troops. Any time somebody opened up a building... The officers came in their command car and would come after us and, to the gate and escort us to the vehicle and the same, brought us home at night. After the social function.

JM: Is the base pretty much the same or has it (changed) ?

CW: Well it, it is bigger now.... The first hanger, the first one on the right. We went to the opening of that, it was a Navy hanger.

JM: What year was that ?

CW: Oh gosh, 44', I think.

JM: It's a pretty structure to be standing for 50 years. I don't think there are any plans to replace it yet either.

CW: Well, I came back after being gone for 14 years, in 1958, and I was amazed at all the roads that the army built everywhere. That surprised me. We didn't know were they were and the same with the outposts. For instance, the backside of Pillar, there were outposts out there, GI's. Many places.... We weren't aloud on the docks unless we were going out and everything was screened.

JM: Was that the docks in town.

CW: Yeah,.... the docks at Cannery Row. That's where they unloaded the freight, there.

JM: Did the incoming military freight bump a lot of your freight off.

CW: I don't think so. We couldn't question anything. The military had preference.

JM: Was there any noticeable impact on your life on the way supplies were received.

CW: You just had to wait till the next boat for it to arrive... They didn't have a supervision over the food stuffs because they were already, because of the war, no ship could leave Seattle and come to Alaska without having an Army escort. We had blackouts. When I left in December 44' there were GI's on the ships and all the windows were blacked out.

JM: Were there blackouts in town ?

CW: Oh, yes. When the GI's would leave by 8:30 they had civilian patrol and if there was any lights shining after. I know that we had blankets over our windows....

JM: Were there anti-aircraft guns and military installations in town itself.

CW: There were soldiers guarding the, you know where the oil tanks are down here. There were soldiers guarding there. There were soldiers guarding the docks because any incoming ship had to identify themselves. They had the name and the number had to be X high. I forgot how many inches high. If they didn't stop, the GI's would fire, whoever was at their post, would fire across the bow.

JM: Did that ever happen ?

CW: When I lived with my folks down by the museum, you could hear all that. You'd hear, oh oh, some boat didn't stop and here's a gun.... The civilian patrol designated the places we had to go, the people in town. You have to visualize that the town was, you know where the cemeteries are up on Mill Bay. That was the end of the town, there wasn't anymore town after that.... Downtown to the cemetery and maybe a little on Mission Road.... In order to be protected, the civilian patrol, they designated the people to evacuate the town and go to their designated place. I lived on Mission Road and I would have a lot of the Malutin family that lived downtown and come out until the all clear was sounded.

JM: So you had a lot of evacuations.

CW: Quite a few, because the unidentified aircraft and that ment to us that Japanese would fire on us. So quite a bit.

JM: Were there a lot of scares like that ?

CW: Yes, I would say there was quite a few. I would maybe half a dozen during the winter.

JM: So you would just evacuate, not just, but you would evacuated.

CW: The church bells would ring, on the old church, that burned in 43', the church bells would ring and the people that were Orthodox would go there for a prayer before we would go.

JM: So you are Russian Orthodox ?

CW: Oh, Yes (she shows me medallion) definitely.

JM: Did you hear about the bombing in Dutch Harbor ?

CW: Oh, yes. Someone that I knew, the Malutins, the family that used to come out to my house during the alerts, had a daughter that was there June of 1943, was there when it was bombed and the Japanese bombers came twice over them.

JM: Did you about that right away or was that hushed up by the military censors ?

CW: Well, you heard it right away.

JM: The impression I got was that they quieted it down for the rest of the people in the lower 48.

CW: Well, by this time a few people had telephones.....

JM: How about the invasion of Kiska and Attu, did they pass that along ?

CW: No, well see, knowing so many GI's here, from their buddies that were left here. We had people in our house all the time because we had fresh milk. That is one of the things GI's were missing..... Any of them. They would come into the kitchen and Mama love to tell stories. They had fresh milk and I had two younger sisters that were teenagers and they had a lot of fun.

JM: Were there any other war preparations made in Kodiak other then the guards and alerts ?

CW: You couldn't go around with a flashlight unless it was covered with cellophane because no street lights. Keeping your windows covered and then having . You know what a calidor is ? (No) It's an old Russian term for a vestibule. Before you get to the main part of the house the vestibule and the outside door. Well, you had to close the inside door first, before you could open the, keep the light from going out. People checked, they had different areas the civil patrol to check about lights.

JM: What was the penalty if (caught) ?

CW: They were nice about it. They just knocked on the door (and said) there is a light on in the bedroom. Cover it up, turn it off.

JM: Were there provisions made for the civilians if the war escalated ?

CW: Well, I understand, I didn't know this because there was some communications were cut off to the town people. That they evacuated a lot of people from the base, the families. They put them on military ship and shipped them out. This I found out after I came back in 58' I didn't know about that. A lot of things were secret. The base people and the town people didn't mix that much, you were a different breed of cat.

JM: Were there a lot of military families there ?

CW: How do I know. After I came back in 58' I found out a lot of things were happening that I didn't know about.

JM: You didn't really realize the extent of the buildup out there and all around until you came back and they opened it up.

CW: We knew that some of the civilian workers that worked out at Chiniak and some from the base. It filtered down. We got a lot of information because Papa being a deputy at the jail. The Marshal would give them instructions.

JM: Was your Papa kept busy during the war ?

CW: Oh yes, there was a lot of the drunks.

JM: Were they military ?

CW: Well, civilians.... That's the first time in history that they were working in winter. It's a new way of life for them. Even though alcohol was rationed I should say because there weren't that many boats coming up here to bring the alcohol in. I remember standing in line for nylons but I didn't drink in those days....

JM: Were there a lot of bars in town ?

CW: There were about 4 or 5. The Belmont, Ships Tarvern, Mecca and the, course it was out of town then, then there's the place you have diner and there was a bar too, out by the school, were they play ball, right up there. Past the second light out there.

JM: Did the civilian authorities take care of all the civilians even the ones that worked on base, when things happen or did the military cover them ?

CW: For instance for what ?

JM: For when they got drunk and rowdy.

CW: That was the Marshals responsibility.

JM: Your Papa as Deputy....

CW: He worked the night shift, 6 at night till 6 in the morning and that was for the federal conflict.

JM: Was the curfew for them too or just for the military ?

CW: Oh yes, it was more or less for civilians too. I don't think they much trouble with the civilians.....

JM: Did you get to travel around at all in the state during that time ?

CW: We couldn't travel. We didn't have the money. When I went Outside in December 44' I took my children and myself it wasn't hardly a hundred dollars. But the hundred dollars would be like having a thousand dollars.

JM: That (the trip) was by boat then.

CW: It had to be by boat. There wasn't any airplanes. It had to be by boat. Across the Gulf of Alaska in the middle of winter but its a nice trip.

JM: Do you remember when you heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor ?

CW: Yes, I was working in that five and ten cent store on Center Avenue..... Someone came and told us and they closed the store. We went on home. It was around one o'clock in the afternoon I think.

JM: It had happened at eight o'clock in the morning.

CW: By the time we got it and by the time they had given the news to all the bases and it filtered down to the Marshal and they, someone came in and told us that war was declared.

JM:Was there a movie house and the newsreel ?

CW: Yes, we had two movie houses. The Orpheum and the old Learic Theater.... They showed newsreels there but I don't know remember when they had any Pearl Harbor.....

JM: Do you have anything you want to add ?

CW: I would say this that World War II and the army and the base changed Kodiak forever. It was a sleepy fishing village and everybody knew everybody else, there customs.... That way it changed.

JM: Is that good or bad ?

CW: You can't stop progress.

JM: Do you like the changes ?

CW: We were in the majority before this happened now we are in the minority and that helps with something.... The Kodiak people had to adapt to the ways of the people from the lower 48 because out numbered....

JM: So it was a boom time for Kodiak as well as the rest of Alaska.

CW: Oh, yes. Out on Mission Road in one area there was tents in the empty lot where the old day graveyard was, that they would build there little cabins over night.....

JM: What kind of stuff was in town then, store wise ?

CW: Erskine Store was down near the ferry dock. That is where they traded and then Kraft's Store was opposite the same place that it was, smaller.... General stores, five bars and there were restaurants.

JM: You said about phones, was there phone service to Kodiak ?

CW: They had a USO club right down here, maybe the area where the Fish and Game building is, there was a USO Club there. The GI's went there and the phones were free to call anybody you wanted to....

JM: Did you get to use the phone ?

CW: We'd just go to the USO club..... We didn't have to pay for it.....

JM: Was the Daily Mirror in then ?

CW: Yes, the Daily Mirror I think started in 39'. There's a lot of people here so they wanted paper and news and what was going on.

JM: Was Armed Services Broadcasting the only radio available ?

CW: There was a radio on base that had a station.

JM: Did you listen ?

CW: It wasn't that important.... News wasn't that important there was so much of it going on....

JM: You worked at the restaurant, which one was that ?

CW: I worked at the Belmont, I worked at the Kodiak Island Cafe and the Brown Bear.... There all gone now, another era.

JM: Do have anything else to add ?

CW: There was a lot of activities. A lot of activities all the time because of the military being here. My sisters would have dates for almost everything during the day. They could go out for breakfast, have a breakfast with a boyfriend. Then for lunch something else, then super someone else, then go to a movie..... There was no rationing. When I left to go to San Francisco, they told me to be sure and have plenty of shoes for my children and myself because shoes were rationed, Outside..... The war effort was first.

JM: Why do you think there wasn't any (rationing) in Alaska, or Kodiak ?

CW: They didn't need to. They had plenty of supplies, they were all the military.....

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