

Kodiak Oral History Project

Director of the Project: Dr. Gary Stevens

INTERVIEW WITH MR. DOUGLAS DAWSON

Content: Personal account of Kodiak--the early years

October 28, 1993

Submitted by Bruce C. Adams

**OCTOBER 28, 1993 INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS DAWSON AT THE
ADAMS' HOUSE**

INTERVIEWER: I thought I'd ask you about the early years in Kodiak. Feel free to say whatever you'd like to--I just want to hear what you have to say.

DAWSON: We arrived here in October 1941. My dad had a job at the Bank of Kodiak (now NBA) at that time. He had previous experience at a bank in Seattle which had connections with this bank here. Then we moved back to Montana before deciding to come up for a year or two to Kodiak because he had a hard time getting a job back there in Montana (it wasn't too easy in the early 40's with jobs--not too long after the depression). We came up on a steam ship--my father arrived several months earlier--and we were very fortunate in the fact we had a house to live in. Some families lived in basically a tent down by where the City Market is today. People built a kind of a platform with a frame and then they put a tent over the top part so you had a little 8 x 10 (I don't know what the exact size was)--they weren't very large but a couple of people or so could stay in the place.

INTERVIEWER: Were there a lot of people in those tents?

DAWSON: No, seems to me there were about three or four of those that were in that area--two side by side. A family moved out and went out on the boat we came in on so we were very fortunate for that situation. I don't remember all the details but possibly because my father had come up ahead of time he arranged it--but I don't know if the bank had anything to do with it or not.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe if you all had come up together you might have been living in a tent.

DAWSON: Could be, but anyway my father worked at that for awhile and then changed jobs and ended up working for the civil service at the naval base.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other banks in town?

DAWSON: No, that was the only bank. There were basically two doctors at the time--a Dr. Jones and A. Holmes Johnson (Dr. Bob's father), and they had the hospital over where the Health Center is now (the white building on the channel). It was a good thing to have a hospital at that time with the lack of beds and things. A couple years later--I'm not sure of the exact sequence of time--they had the Grey Nuns who came and staffed the hospital for many years.

INTERVIEWER: How many people were in Kodiak then?

DAWSON: I imagine around 1,400-1,500. A number of years later the population was around 1,700 so it had grown a little bit during those years. We had basically one first grade, one second grade on through so all the students knew each other from early on. I was seven when we came--in the second grade--and we were located in an area that's down where the apartments are next to the old Dr. Bob's clinic. That whole area has completely changed.

In fact, most of the area of Kodiak that was there when we first arrived is gone because of the subsequent tidal wave and the damage that was done. They decided to go along with the urban renewal project and basically leveled almost all of downtown Kodiak.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any landmarks left?

DAWSON: There are a few structures still in existence. Next to Wodlinger's Drugstore is that building that has all those pinball machine games--that was Kodiak Commercial Building before--and was about the only building in the area that was kept.

INTERVIEWER: And then buildings were added/built on to it?

DAWSON: If you look there's a liquor store there and several other things that are all part of it. It's a big concrete block building. Everything else there to the side--the Breakers Bar, the apartments, etc. are all new but because of the tidal wave the whole area had settled in, at high tide the whole region--everything--would be flooded and so they filled in a great deal and leveled it out, also straightening out all the streets. If you look at old Kodiak pictures, the main street downtown wandered quite a bit. The only straight street basically was the one that comes up from the ferry dock.

INTERVIEWER: That's Center Street now.

DAWSON: The museum was on one side and down the other side were the Native Association of Kodiak (KANA) and also what used to be our post office. Everything else has been changed. Kodiak had a kind of interesting, picturesque charm in the early days. If you remember seeing movies of the old westerns where they had a square false front of a building, almost half or more of the downtown buildings had that kind of a facade. Of course, the streets were dirt and there were board sidewalks.

They got wet and very muddy until many years later in the mid-40's when they started paving and that in itself was quite an event--people came up and watched as they paved the sidewalks and main street of downtown Kodiak. We didn't have any telephones to speak of. There weren't many people, of course, outside of the area of downtown Kodiak and people living out along Mission Road--and only about halfway out along Mission Road were there a number of houses.

INTERVIEWER: How about Mill Bay Road?

DAWSON: There were a few people. A couple of houses were out by where St. Mary's is. The sisters lived in a house which had been there a long time. There was a family called the Hollands--three boys, one was a little younger than myself and the other two were older (only one's living today--the oldest). They had kind of a homestead out there, and I think they were the ones that sold it and it became church property.

A couple of places were alongside of what they called Big Lake where we used to go swimming and where all the float planes are now--Lily Lake--with houses on either side now. There was an area on the edge of the lake where there was a kind of clearing and we'd come and congregate and build a fire. So the town was really quite small although we did have two drugstores--Wodlinger's and Bert's (which was eventually taken over by Wodlinger's). We also had two movie theaters--the Orpheum which is still in operation (under different ownership in those days) and the Lyric Theater which later burned down one night. We were able to get most of the movies fairly quickly so we were able to keep up with most things.

In those days it was a lot different than it is today because it was more of an event to go to the movies and see the newsreel, then the cartoon, and then the movie. If they didn't have the cartoon there wasn't a movie--it didn't matter how good the movie was as far as I was concerned.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember a movie back in your childhood that made an impression?

DAWSON: One that they keep releasing from time to time called Fantasia by Walt Disney--now they have it on videotape--and of course, the Wizard of Oz. That was a good film to see--that came out in 1939 and so it took a little while to get here. We saw quite a few other things but just on a delayed basis.

INTERVIEWER: How far did the road go--Rezanof goes all the way out now but was that there then?

DAWSON: Well, the military built the road out to both points--what is Abercrombie now and Spruce Cape--they had installations on both places so a road went out to Spruce Cape but from the Mill Bay side (not from where you go now). Two brothers, the Solverg brothers, had come here many years ago and they had homesteaded. One homesteaded the area around Island Lake (I think about 160 acres), and the area around Spruce Cape was given to the other brother who filed for it--then they eventually sold those two pieces to other people. But the road went out through what is now filled with new houses going out there beyond Nockway's house (Gene Erwin stays there now). And if you go along there on one side, you'll notice it's closed off--there's a gate because of the military.

INTERVIEWER: That's the same road then that we'd call Woodland Drive?

DAWSON: I think so. The other side was at Abercrombie which had a large installation with more facilities. There was at least one big gun--they have a facsimile of that now. The road ended at what is Mill Bay until the military came. And, of course, the military built the road out to Chiniak. I'm not sure exactly when, but I do remember in the early 40's we were able to go on the road--we had to check through all kinds of gates and then we went out beyond the area to what is now the Bell Flats area.

On the far side just before you started going up that gradual incline, there was another gate--so you checked through the gate located at the end of the road before you started along the road going up to the base until you ended up leaving the coastal area where you can see the water and started coming up to the area where there was another gate for you to check in. The marines manned the gates and they gave you so much time to get from there to the other gate. There was plenty of time, but they didn't want you wandering around the base itself during the war time (it was particularly closed off during that time) and it wasn't open to the public until after the war--about 1945.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the military coming or were they here when you got here?

DAWSON: They had a small amount of people here but not a large number. They really built that up during/after the war broke out. We arrived in October and the war broke out on Sunday, December 7, a few months after we were here. They did evacuate some people--but we were not evacuated.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember how people reacted to the war here?

DAWSON: Well, we were all surprised and shocked naturally. The first thing they did was they had an air raid practice that night. Lights were turned off.

That was fairly easy to do in those days because the electrical power was basically a large generator in the back of a truck near what is now the oil company there next to the ferry dock (they had a lot of dock facilities wiped out with the tidal wave) and that was the generator for the whole town so not everyone had electricity either. During those years, we knew when the power was about to be turned off, usually about 9 o' clock, so you'd have to get out your lanterns or candles or whatever you used. They'd flick a switch and the light would flicker and you knew you had five or ten minutes to get ready. They'd hit the switch and the power was off. That first night they did have people going around and checking to make sure that everybody's windows were properly sealed so no light would escape and give the Japanese an indication that anybody was here.

INTERVIEWER: So people really felt that the Japanese might come here?

DAWSON: There was a possibility they might come. They did eventually arrive on the islands out on the end of the chain--Attu and Kiska--they occupied them for awhile. They also made a run on the Dutch Harbor area--dropped a bomb or two--Mrs. Fletcher (with her sons) who ran the theater downtown was there at the time and she had some pictures of one of the Japanese zeroes that had been shot down. Mostly everywhere else, everybody had ration cards, but we didn't have that because we were in a different area. Naturally there were limited supplies, but we didn't suffer a great deal during that time and managed to get by.

INTERVIEWER: Did the soldiers stay pretty much out on the base, or were they in town a lot?

DAWSON: They were allowed to come into town but they weren't allowed to take any liquor back. They tried to control that a great deal. I remember some of the people we got to be friends with strapping bottles to their ankles and trying to sneak them on to the base. I don't know how successful they were, but they were trying on a fairly regular basis so coming to town was primarily to get some alcohol to drink in the many, many bars downtown. Most of the bars in existence today weren't in existence in those days.

INTERVIEWER: When the military came, did that give a lot of business to the bars?

DAWSON: The bars were already there, but of course they increased their sales quite a bit. They had that control on them. At various times there were quite a few bars. Hank Eaton has written some historical articles during that time because he was older and more experienced and directly involved in that. This was something of a staging ground for some of the activities that were going to go on further out on the chain--some were bivouacked in a sense. Basically where most of the old housing is located is where the original military/army was located.

INTERVIEWER: Are you talking about the base?

DAWSON: Yes. You had the naval base which was a separate entity, and the runways (pretty much the same ones now although they have increased the

length), and I think there were a couple submarines out there--not sure of the details because it was very restricted to civilians. They set submarine nets and things out across from the base out toward Woody Island which would hopefully catch any submarines that were trying to come through. Out beyond the base in one of the bays, they set up a bunch of lights--little boxes--and they'd turn those on at night. The idea was that if the Japanese popped out of the clouds, there would be this nicely layed out city and they would bomb that and wipe out all those light bulbs and the town would be safe. Sort of a decoy. During those years we did have two alarms when we went up to the hills and stayed for the all-clear signal.

INTERVIEWER: What triggered the alarms?

DAWSON: They were rumors about vessels, or a submarine, or an airplane popping out of the sky--I don't know how accurate they were--I just remember hearing they had spotted some kind of a ship and that was one of the reasons for one of them. The other one was some kind of a Japanese zero appeared and indications were that the pilot might have been just as surprised as anybody else and got back out and looked for cover--may have been scouting but we don't know. The rumors may have had some validity but other than that there wasn't any real extensive alarm. Occasionally, men would come back with their wives--there was one couple that was married here in the Baptist church (the only protestant church at the time). He was stationed over on Long Island but because she was military she had to leave, so they were just married and left.

They came back about two summers ago to try to remember all that but the only thing they could relate to was the orthodox church which was here too (but was burnt in the 40's and then rebuilt), the museum which was a private home at the time belonging to people who had the store called the Erskine's, and the church on the hill.

INTERVIEWER: What was the main industry back then--fishing?

DAWSON: It was salmon fishing during the summer. That's what everybody depended on. They had a fairly large cannery (don't remember the name) working down on what is the city dock now, and where the ferry dock is located they had the Whitney Fidalgo Company where a lot of people worked. The Alaska Steam Ship Company service was provided out at the city dock where Sealand and all those boats come in. We didn't have any plane activities in those days--no airlines coming in--just the military. Once a week, one of three different ships would come in and that was an event--they came back and forth between here and south eastern and over to Homer. People would often come down to the dock and see who was coming or going and that was how the bulk of our mail came in those days too. There were a lot of people (after the war especially) who would take roundtrips because it brought passengers as well as trade, and that in a sense was our only connection with the outside world in the early 40's. Then the Alaska Steam Ship Company went out of business eventually, primarily because of competition with Sealand. They continued the passenger service and still did the freight for quite a few years until the late 50's/early 60's.

INTERVIEWER: What about the population and the people--were there more native people here then in the salmon industry living in town?

DAWSON: No, they didn't make up any real significant portion of the population. Naturally because there was a smaller community at that time, they made up a larger percentage of the population than they do now (I'm not sure what the actual percentage was between the two groups). When I went to school, I didn't notice any serious discrimination between the native kids and the white kids--they were just your friends. You went through first grade on through and everybody was just in the same class and we grew up and had no difficulties getting along with any of them, except for the usual rivalry with kids that age. None of the classes were terribly large in those days. You had the grade school upstairs and then in the lower part of the building (which was not a complete two-storey structure) they had the junior and senior high. As the school got larger they brought in quonset huts and put them around the perimeter of the building. We outgrew our facilities and eventually they built Main Elementary (in several stages) and what is now the junior high so they had the two schools. In those days, we also had a school out at the base, but in the first years of the war everybody came into town. After the war, the base had its own high school and so we had friendly basketball rivalry between the two schools. There was a gym out at the base most of the time since we had arrived, and we played our basketball games against the navy teams there. All the different units out at the navy base had their own teams--some were college players so our high school kids played against some pretty good basketball players.

INTERVIEWER: Was basketball the same then as it is now?

DAWSON: Oh, in many ways I think it was the same. Just like everywhere the boys were taller than we were. Only boys played--not girls--the girls didn't come until many, many years later and when they started playing, they played by a different system. It was more static and slower, not very interesting to watch. That changed in the 70's when the format of having three girls on one side of the court and two on the other (three on the offense and two on the defense) and so the girls didn't go back and forth as they do now (they didn't have to run much). And, of course, their skill levels weren't very good because they had never been encouraged to play at an early age as they do now with Little Dribblers. I do remember in 1952 (the year I graduated from high school), the navy base team beat us in one of the regular games during the season and that was really quite an event. They had a photographer come down and take an official team picture and then we went up for the tournament in Fairbanks that year. There were class A tournaments with Anchorage and Fairbanks and some of the larger schools, e.g. Palmer. Then they had a B league which included Kodiak, Seward, Nome, and some other smaller schools, including the base team. The Kodiak boys got first and the base team got second. Then the Kodiak town team got the sportsmanship trophy so we got all the trophies as well as some allstars. Kodiak really cleaned up. It wasn't too many years after that when they combined the high schools. When I graduated there were 14 of us in the 1952 graduating class and about 60 students in the high school. After the two schools came together, it almost doubled the population at the high school to over 100.

That was sometime in the mid-50's when I was going to college so I don't remember all the details.

INTERVIEWER: I'm wondering about roles of women during the war--did they change? Did they assume different responsibilities?

DAWSON: Well, some of them naturally did. Kodiak didn't seem to be much affected. At the time, the only occupation a lot of the women could have besides working at the stores was working in the canneries. And I don't know how many women were at the base--probably not a large number--most likely would have been military people because they didn't want to have too many civilians. During the war years, fishing went on and the older men were still running the boats, and the young men had gone off to fight. We did have a Filipino bunkhouse down where the NBA bank is located today, and they would come up during the summer when there was work. Then when the fishing began to diversify, more people came and more boats came and everything changed. My mother was involved in various activities before she got involved in the school system--she was a manager of one of the stores for awhile, but we probably weren't as affected by the war like people working in factories and elsewhere. The salmon canneries operated during the summer. Boats from Seattle would come up for halibut so they weren't many local people going out. Primarily it seemed to be people of Scandinavian descent (mostly Norwegians) who traditionally came off the boats and would get ice and supplies from us here. They did their fishing and then headed down when the season was finished. Then in the early 50's, they began to experiment with king crab.

They weren't sure what kind of commercial value it had, although it was here all along.

INTERVIEWER: Did local people eat king crab?

DAWSON: Yes, but not in any great quantities. It became a delicacy more during the 50's. It was more of a curiosity at first because they were so large. Some really big king crabs were photographed with people holding them out to give an idea of the size --like a big spider--and that was probably much of the interest in those days. Then they began to develop the technique for catching them in significant numbers to make it commercially feasible. When they developed some ideas and worked out the problems, then it became a huge industry--a major industry for awhile with so much money in it. I guess no one knows even today why it died out in this area. Overfishing is probably part of it, but there seems to be a lot of other factors tied into it.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned some young men going out in the service to fight in the war. Did basically all the young men the right age go off?

DAWSON: I imagine quite a few.

INTERVIEWER: Were they conscripted, drafted, or volunteered?

DAWSON: They were either drafted or volunteered. Dr. Bob who was at that age went into the merchant marines, and Emil Norton was drafted and served overseas in Italy and some other places.

INTERVIEWER: Rudy Lorensen served here, didn't he?

DAWSON: There were quite a few that served in a scout program and since they were familiar with the area, they worked on a patrol system throughout the chain. A lot of the natives were relocated out on the chain and that was a tragedy in itself because it was not done well. They were located down in south eastern where it was a totally different environment for them and they were not properly treated. A documentary was made on the transfer of the Aleuts down to that area--you might have seen it. I think they have a copy of it in the library here and it was put on channel 14 (the college channel), so they may have a copy of it there also. Some of the people who lived during that time were interviewed--women, old men, and the children who remembered. The men were fighting/working on these patrols. They thought they were more valuable to keep some of them here in the territory because they knew what the area was like.

Mr. Dawson needed to leave for a prior commitment so we concluded our interview at this point. This assignment allowed me an interesting, informative, and enjoyable time for gleaning information on early Kodiak.

Douglas Dawson, longtime Kodiak resident, is presently retired. He taught history at Kodiak High School for many years and has traveled extensively throughout the world. He is quite well informed on various issues and has many stories and insights to share from his many travels.

Special thanks to Mr. Dawson for his willingness to sit and share with us his personal account of those early Kodiak years. We appreciated him taking the time.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

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