

Interview with Ben Deadmon, on December 1, 1993 age 76, recently of Kalsin Bay

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For: Alaska History, Instructor-Dr. Gary Stevens

Subject of Interview: The 1964 Earthquake at Kalsin Bay

Mr. Ben Deadmon was born in North Carolina and joined the Navy in 1940 and retired in 1960. In 1963 he moved permanently into a cabin at Kalsin Bay. He sold cabin to Don Zimmerman and moved into Kodiak on November 20, 1993. His mailing address is P. O. Box 1503, Kodiak, Alaska 99615.

Everything that could go wrong, did, with this interview. First the recorder wouldn't work and after several attempts I thought it was operating ok so did the interview. At end of first side of tape I rewinded to check and found didn't have a thing recorded. So reset switches and levers and got machine working and did the interview over. I thought the first interview was the better of the two but alas it was gone.

Interview with Ben Deadmon, December 1, 1993

WC When did you first come to Kodiak?

BD March 1957

WC Why did you come here?

BD Under orders, I was in the Navy.

WC When did you move here permanently?

BD 1960

WC How did you find the cabin?

BD I found the cabin in 1957 when I was in the Navy. I used it for hunting and fishing out of. Cause you could drive within a mile and a half or 2 miles of it and it made a good headquarters because the lake was another 4 miles farther so I used to stay there. Get off Saturday, worked Tuesday thru Saturday, get off Saturday evening and hustle and bustle to get out there to spend the night and then would either get up and head for the lake to fish on Sunday or hunting. We didn't have to be back until Tuesday morning so we'd stay there. It was nice and warm. We built a fire in the fireplace or we'd take a sleeping bag and go to the lake or do both.

WC What was the cabin there for?

BD Supposedly it was to have been General Buckner's headquarters when he was supreme commander of all Alaska. And I really believe it was because it was hid in the brush, in the spruce. So nobody flying over it could see it. Without smoke coming out the chimney, they say you can't even tell it's there. And there's a lot of field telephone lines that run all over--still someplaces it's in the brush up high, 8 to 10 feet off ground, that went to another place they had fuel stored, ammo stored and whatever. And I really believe it was his headquarters because they had one big room, 26 by 14, bunks in it, fireplace. And they had another 20 by 14 they had their cook shack in. They had a stove that would burn wood or coal. And they had water piped from behind where I had my wood pile--had a 2 inch galvanized pipe in there into stove with a heating coil and a 220 gallon hot water tank. And a shower in the back of it where they could take a shower. 220 gallon hot water mixed with cold would let you take a dozen showers before ran cold again. But old stove had rusted out and I threw it out. It sill laying out there off the road I put in. The old cook shack is about tore down but the other building I added 2 rooms in back, a kitchen and small bedroom in '66. And I piped water into that from up on the hill 890 feet and I put it in deep enough it didn't even freeze the winter it got down to 22 below zero. So I guess I must had did a fair job and I lived there for 30 years, 2 months and about 10 days.

WC Where is the water from?

BD A spring upon hill, well it's 890 feet of water pipe so it has a good pressure to it. It's got more pressure than you got here in town on water mains. It never froze up but it would go dry if you had a dry summer for 4 to 6 weeks but that wasn't no big problem and if I was still a young guy I wouldn't have left. But I'd been there 30 years, I figured that was enough. That road thru the winter time does get nasty. You can't find no wood anymore except green spruce and it don't throw out no heat.

WC Do you know when it was built?

BD The old rancher that was there at where Kalsin Bay Lodge is now told me that it was built in '39, that is what he told me so I don't know.

WC Who was this?

BD Ron Hurst, and he left there-Kalsin- and went to Saltery Cove in the spring of '58 I think. And was over there for many years.

WC How did you get permission to move into that cabin?

BD Well, I got it from the guy that had the lease on it. He told me that I could go in there and stay as long as I wanted to and he give all them people who was working land or running cattle on it, to not bother me.

WC Who was that?

BD T. M. Rock, owned 1/2 homestead and had lease and was working civil service over at Elmendorf Air Force Base. He was an asbestos man. So I stayed there and I liked it and along came the tidal wave.

WC What were you doing when tidal wave came?

BD I was cooking dinner. I had two little boys up there that were for the weekend from the ranch down there. I had a pot of stew and a pot of sweet potatoes on a barrel stove. And when everything started shaking, both went up and hit the ceiling and the sweet potaotes came down upside down and the stew came down right side up. So we had stew without potatoes. And we sat around there for a little while and I found 2 of the little girls was probably down at the ranch alone so we drove down about 1/2 mile from creek you have to cross and parked. I didn't wanna take a chance on losing my vehicle. And we went around to the left and went up on the hill. Them girls had already moved up on the hill. In fact the older sister, that was married, her and her husband came in and taken them up on the hill. We sat there on the hill until 2 o'clock the next morning and watched the waves come in and out. And then I carried them all up to the house. I guess there was the married daughter and her husband, and 2 of her sisters and 2 of her brothers. And we spent rest of night up there. And the next morning I brought them all back

down to the ranch. And I drove all the way Salonie Creek but there was places like Mayflower Beach, had to get out and get logs off the road, and couple blocks of ice. But I had 4 wheeler or 4 by, it wasn't no problem. Had a chain in there and didn't have to move that stuff by hand. So I had an ex-marine with me and we drove to Salonie Creek. And I crossed Salonie Creek and he didn't. And the waves, the water, the tide got to running in and out so fast that he couldn't get across. The Navy had sent out a helicopter on a search, looking for people. And everytime they found some body, they'd set down and ask 'em, where do you want to go. Well I guess this was one of the shortest helicopter rides that ever been. Cause he set down on the side of the creek opposite where I was and asked this guy where do you want to go. He said you see that guy across the creek, I want to go there. He said get in. And he picked him up and set him down right where I was at. So we messed around there for a couple hours. And every time we'd try to get back across that creek, water would come in 6 or 8 foot deep. So I told Frank, alright you get here on the bank, I had on hip boots. And as soon as that water goes out you jump on my back. It was only about 4 foot across the stream. And so he did and just as I got to the other side to dump him off, my hip boots had already got full of water. That's how fast that water come in. Then we drove back to Kalsin Bay and back up to my place.

WC Why did you have to wade creek-wasn't there a bridge there?

BD No, the bridges was all gone. There wasn't no bridges left no where on that road. It teared out all of 'em from Sargent Creek, all the way out to Kalsin Bay, and beyond to some of bridges that went cross road at Chiniak. So where the Kalsin Bay pond is at now, there was never a pond there. There was a little stream that run in there, that crossed the road and had a bridge on it. And now there is a 10 or 12 acres covered in water with 7 or 8 culverts to take care of tidal water.

WC Was Kalsin Bay Inn There?

BD Not the one that's there now. There was a panelboard building just like it about 100 yards from where present is now and it didn't have one stick of it left. And the little bunk house that Mrs. Sargent is now using below the bar and grill there, it come in under the cottonwood trees that are still left there and hung up. And there was an old kerosene lamp setting on a table. Somebody was using it for a house. And there was kerosene lamp sitting on a table and it picked that building up and brought it in there and dropped it. And that kerosene lamp didn't fall off that table. It was still setting on that table after the tidal wave.

WC Where was it brought from?

BD On the beach about 200 yards from where the bar was. But the refrigerator and freezer that was in that cabin was upside down but the lamp that was setting on that table didn't even move.

WC How many people were lost?

BD Six people lost, Ricky (Vosin)?, (Maury)? Curry, the music teacher here in town at time-I think his name was Shultz, his wife and a navy guy's wife and his son. The Navy guy got out of it. He don't know how he got out but he did. And he went over to Omar Stratman's and told Omar he had lost his wife and kid. Omar said he came back and looked in that Nash station wagon 4 times and come back and told him no, there was nobody in there. But evidently she must have been because on Monday morning she was still in the back seat of that Nash Rambler, drowned.

WC What were all these people doing?

BD They had been out towards Chiniak and were all headed home and that first wave wasn't very big and it was very small but it did bring some logs up on the road so they couldn't drive through. And they was out there taking logs off the road when the 2nd wave hit which was the hardest one and I guess if it hadn't been for Mrs. Curry- she was an old alaskan. She had been here for many years. in fact she was one of the 1st telegraph operators over on the mainland. And she knew we would have a tidal wave and she told Mrs. (Voshin)?, there was Beth and 3 of her kids and Mrs. Curry and her husband was in the car. Well when they got stopped and started getting them logs off the road, Mrs Curry told Beth, Let's get out of here because we are gonna have some more waves. So Mr. Curry and one of Beth's kids started to walk back to Kalsin Bay right down the beach because he wanted to get over there and turn his stove out. Beth, turned around and went back to Omar's and just got over there when the waves hit and got Richie (Voshen)? and Pop at the same time. Well the searching party on Monday morning found Richie. He was the first one they found and he was hooked up on a log when the backlash started to take him back to the bay. And the music teacher's wife was the next one that was found. And she had rode a log in probably 3/4 of a mile from where she was hit. They found her with her arms wrapped around a log and she was beat just about blue with the vibration of log against her body. And then the Navy guy's wife wife was the next one found. And there wasn't anybody else found for 2 weeks. The little Wallace kid, around 7 years old. I found him a week later. The Navy had dropped off body bags at this ranch house and he furnished horses so I went back over there and told him I had found this kid. And we got a couple of horses and pack saddle and body bag and went over there. And I must of looked for an hour or hour and a half for that kid and I couldn't find him. So this rancher told me I had been out here too long. You are seeing things. Why don't you go take a nap. He didn't believe I'd saw anybody but I knew I did so about hour and a half later I found that kid again. So we got him in a body bag and got him over to the ranch. And had to go to the Rendevous to call. They had the only communication and I had the only transportation. So I had to go to the Rendevous and called the Navy and they sent out -but I don't remember if they picked him up that night or if it was the next morning. Then 2 weeks to the day that it happened and just about the hour, I found Pop Curry just about 150 yards from where Ohls River bridge is now so he had come in probably a good mile from

where he got hit. And we had looked and looked and looked and I don't know there was many people from town, everybody knew him, come out and search for him and couldn't find him. Two weeks to the day and almost to the hour I found him laying there on a trail I had just walked early that morning looking and didn't find him. When I came back thru there late that afternoon, he was laying right beside that trail just like somebody put him there while I was gone. But they didn't because when I rolled him over and got his-his jacket was over his head-got his jacket down and brushed the debris out of his face, he hadn't been moved. So I don't know, I don't understand these things. Why he couldn't have been found earlier. And Mrs. Curry had moved into the base with Mrs. (Voshen)? and it wasn't easy to go in and tell her that I had found her husband but somebody had to do it so it was me. I went in and told her. And this old lady was sick, she had 4 or 5, I don't know, she was taking a 1/2 dozen different pills and she was already taking it hard, but I really think she felt a little better after he was found. And the guy we never did find, he had two brothers, one in Minnesota and one in California. They came up and spent a couple of weeks. We looked for him for two weeks and never did find him. In fact they think that he was loaded down so heavy with guns and ammo and hip boots that he didn't get in far enough and the backlash carried him back to sea. Cause we did find his jeep in a hole of water. And a diver went down 4 times he says there was no body in that jeep. And I believe he was right. So we come to the conclusion he was loaded so heavy that he didn't come in far enough to get in behind something and tide carried him back. I looked for a long time. Off and on for two years thru the summer I would walk thru and look. I was looking for bones mostly cause they bleach out in that sun and if they-you could find where a cow died-in fact there was 42 head of cattle died in that same mess of brush that night and you could see their bones but I looked and looked but I didn't find anyhuman bones. I really think he went back to sea. About the only thing I could figure.

WC What day did earthquake occur?

BD Good Friday.

WC Why didn't you search for people Saturday and Sunday instead of starting Monday?

BD Because the tides were running so high on Saturday you couldn't get out to do nothing. And Sunday it was nasty. It snowed and hailed and sleeted so there wasn't no search till Monday. There wasn't noway any of them could have survived in there anyway. And there was only six and we had found five of 'em. And they had all been dead since the wave hit them. So I don't think they missed anything by not hunting them. I don't think as bad as the weather was and the way that tide was running we'd ah found anything anyway. So I just liked the place out there so good after that that I just stayed out there for 30 years, 10 months and 10 days.

WC What about wallet you found?

BD One of the guys who was looking for his brother about 2 and 1/2 weeks after I had found the old man. But he hollered and told me he had found a wallet here Ben. I told him to go ahead and pick it up and he said, No I can't cause it might be my brothers. So I said somebodys gotta pick it up. So he said I'll pick it up and bring it to you but I won't look in it so when he brought it to me, it was Pop Curry's. Still had \$21 in it, just what his wife- I had to carry it in and give it to Mrs Curry and she said that was exactly what he had in his wallet but his ID card and social security and everything was still in there but it was out of his pocket and was laying just a few feet from him. So I dont know. There was some things that was just unexplainable. I didn't know then and I don't know now. And now I don't worry about those things happen. I still feel bad at times because there is one guy missing that we did not find. And it wasn't because we didn't look cause-I guess between the time we first started looking and a couple a days before I found him-I guess half of the city of Kodiak was out there at times looking for him. And never found nothing that even resembled where he had been or anything except his jeep and he wasn't in that. You don't forget things like that, they stay with ya.

WC More of the interview is how he gained ownership of the cabin, living out there, etc. continuing on both sides of tape. The earthquake was my main mission and I am tired transcribing.

J. Wesley Campbell

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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