

*The following autobiographical interview was held on November 6, 1993 with Mr. Roy Madsen, a retired Kodiak Superior Court Judge, lifelong resident of Kodiak of Koniag-Danish descent. The interview was conducted at his home in Kodiak. The interviewer is Laurene Madsen, his daughter-in-law, and student in Dr. Gary Stevens' Alaska History course at Kodiak College.*

LM : First, tell me about your childhood, where were you born and raised?

RM : Well I was born in a village on the Alaska Peninsula not too far from Katmai National Monument, called Kanatak and lived there till I was 3 years. old and my family moved to Kodiak and my mother was originally from Kodiak, so this was home to her and I was raised in Kodiak, went to grade school and high school here

LM : And your mother's name was?

RM : Metrokin

LM : So her family was here, and you had cousins and grew up with lots of family?

RM : Yes we had aunts and uncles and lots of cousins

LM : Who were your brothers and sisters?

RM : There were 8 in our family, I had a brother Alf, sister Elizabeth, Rose, Thelma Johnson, myself, my sister Alice, and my mother died when Alice was an infant about one and a half years old. My father remarried a lady by the name of Alexandria Chernof and I had a half sister and half brother, Raymond and Germaine. My stepmother was related to the Hubley family, Mrs. Hubley was her sister, Mrs. Norton was her sister, Mrs. Sholl was her sister, it was quite a large family so that kind of extended our family in other directions with that marriage, because we were all considered related, although not by blood, we were very close.

LM : Did you always live in the town of Kodiak? or did you live out in the villages?

RM : We always lived in the town, but we used to travel to the hunting camps in different bays . My father was in the bear and big game guiding business had bear

camps in Mush Bay in Uganik and Kariuk Lake and we used to travel out to the camps in the spring for the spring hunts and in the fall.

LM : Did you go out hunting with them, or did you remain in camp mostly with your brother & sisters?

RM : Well my father first started taking me out when I was 11 years old and I stayed in the camps till I was 13 or 14 or 15 and then I started going out on the hunts with them. I'd carry extra jackets and binoculars and things like that, sort of the gopher

LM : Did famous people come to the bear camp, was it a well known thing in the states?

RM : Well this was during the Depression, so only wealthy people could come on this kind of a hunt. It was quite lengthy Most people had to travel by train to Seattle and there was one ship a month to Kodiak, then they'd travel out to our bear camp and they would stay for three weeks, so it was a long, long time, and most people were wealthy.

LM : Did the Depression affect Kodiak as it may have other places?

RM : Oh definitely there wasn't any money in Kodiak and there weren't any jobs course it was a fishing town of 450 people so people were still fishing but prices were so low that nobody had any money and they had to grow vegetables like potatoes, carrots and turnips and buy a lot of staples like flour tea and sugar and coffee. They lived a subsistence lifestyle: they shot ducks and caught fish and ate a lot of clams, nobody went hungry, it was a pretty monotonous diet, lots of beans

LM : Do you remember the 20's a boom time for Kodiak ? Was commercial fishing as important to the community as it is today?

RM : Kodiak was always a fishing community, we had a cannery in town where King Crab is now, and everyone in town fished, that was the only industry in town other than the school and the business was good as far as the hunting business was concerned, up until 1929 when the stock crash happened. Then it became little bit leaner after that.

LM : How did World War Two change Kodiak?

RM : Kodiak started to change before World War Two happened, because the United States started to build up its defenses in the late 30's and they came to Kodiak about 1939 and looked the place over, and decided it was a good location for a Naval Base and so they started to build what is now the Coast Guard Base in 1940 and so there was lots of construction going on and it doubled the size of the community immediately and there was a lot of construction workers. I graduated from high school in 1941 and worked out on the base on a tugboat that summer and in the fall, left home and went down to Oregon to go to college. I wasn't here during the war years. I left in August 1941 and didn't come back until January, 1946, after the war was over.

LM : Did your father continue his bear camps during those years?

RM : No there wasn't any hunting during the war years, travel was restricted and in fact it was restricted to war time supplies and things like that and the Army and Navy took over everything on the island and defenses around here. My dad had before the war started our house into a hotel because it had originally been built as a 3 story log house and he had general merchandise store in the downstairs. and when he went into the guiding business he closed the store down and use it to store all of his tents, canoes, stoves, and things he used in the hunting business and when the only hotel in Kodiak burned down, there was no hotel, so he remodeled the downstairs and made rooms and made it into a hotel. When the construction started on the Navy Base he branched out into the curio business he had a little store. He had spent a number of years up in the Arctic so he had good contacts, so he could buy mukluks and parkas and all kinds of ivory. He used his contacts there to keep supplies and sell souvenirs. So he did that during the war years.

LM : Is that the home that is on Mill Bay and Kashevaroff Streets, that Gerry Markham now owns?

RM : No, that house that I grew up in was in the Urban Renewal District. and was torn down it was quite large, on the corner, across from Kodiak Motors, where the Cherrier and King Building is.

LM : During the War you were able to go to Oregon to go to school How did you travel to get down there if travel was restricted?

RM : Well, this was before the War, in 1941 I went down to Oregon on Alaska Steamship, the only way to get out of Kodiak then. We didn't have any aircraft. I did go down the year before, in 1940 and I worked on a cannery tender in Uganik for the summer and at the end of the season, went south on the boat - a 50' boat we picked up fish from gill netters around the island. So I went south . That was my first trip out of Alaska. I was 17.

LM : So you didn't get on the steamer often as we do today get on the ferry and go on a trip?

RM : No nobody ever did that, it was too costly.

LM : During the days you worked on the tender, was most of the fish canned or was it salted?

RM : No it was all canned here in Kodiak.

LM : Here in Kodiak? or did they take it down to the states?

RM : Actually on the tender I worked on called San Juan Fishing and Packing company in Uganik there were two canneries in Uganik and one in Larsen Bay and one in Alitak, one in Kodiak. The fish was canned out there.

LM : Were the villages in those days much larger than today?

RM : Yes they were quite a bit larger, but Old Harbor wasn't as large as it is now, Afognak was quite a large village, in fact, they had three stores and Kodiak only had two, but they had three. It was a bustling community.

LM : Did the canneries keep the villages going, or was it just that there were more people who lived there?

RM : The people who lived there were industrious, they were all fisherman or they worked in the cannery.

LM : You yourself went fishing when you returned to Kodiak after the War, where did you fish?

RM : I fished up in Bristol Bay for salmon.

LM : What was that fishery like?

RM : I guess in order to put the story in context, I should tell you that during the time I was growing up, every son wanted to emulate his father, and my father had been born in Denmark and left home at 14 years old he was a sailor on a square rigger, so he was a sailing ship sailor very tough life, he used to tell stories about sailing around Cape Horn and how tough it was, climbing up in the rigging and things like that. In growing up in Kodiak, it was a small town, and everybody was involved in the fishery locally seining or gillnetting for salmon. But there were a few people who used to travel to Bristol Bay and fish up there. They were kind of set apart from the rest of the community, they had a mystique about them because they made a lot of money in a short period of time and up there they still used sail boats, they didn't allow power of any kind. They were different from the rest of the fishermen in our community, they'd come back with stories about the people that fished up in the Bay, Corsicans and Sicilians from San Francisco, Finns from Astoria, and I recall these men would leave Kodiak and go up to Bristol Bay on the ship that used to stop here, and when they'd come back there'd be a lot of excitement in the community. Knowing that the Bristol Bay fishermen had come back and that they were loaded with money. In fact you know how different things peak your interest, I saw one fellow come back one year, wearing a pair of leather hip boots. This was not uncommon, this is what the Finish fishermen would wear. Their hip boots were made out of leather instead of rubber. It was just different, and of course my father had been in the Navy. I thought I had to go into the Navy, and spent three years there during World War Two and I came back and I guess I was trying to prove to him that I was as tough as he was, so instead of fishing locally I had an uncle in Bristol Bay, and I wrote to him and asked him if he could find me a job on a boat up there. He did. So I went up to Bristol Bay and fished on a sail boat, instead of using power, and that's how I got involved in the fishery.

LM : Did you do it for several years in a row?

RM : This was in 1948 my first year up there. The fellow I was fishing with was a man in his 70's and he was Estonian. He had a master's license in steam, so he was an excellent sailor, but he was also a heavy drinker. So he had a hard time finding partners. So that's how I was able to get on board with him. He never left the cannery without a fifth under his arm. We'd sail out in any kind of weather. Many times I recall when it would be blowing like mad there, and my partner would say, 'Come on Roy, we're going out', we'd get on the boat, and my uncle would be standing on the dock saying 'don't go out with that damned fool, you're going to get drowned' nobody else would be going out except us. We would reef the sail down real tight, so there was just enough to keep us moving and we'd sail out there. His boat was 32' long and we lived on it when we were away from the cannery. It didn't have a cabin on it. They're open boats. We'd put the mast down, and put the sail over the mast and slept in our clothes, and made a tent out of it, cooked on a Swede stove, and ate nothing but canned food.

LM : How did you fish, with nets or troll?

RM : Gillnets, drift gillnets, we'd put them out three shackles of gear, about 900' feet of net, we'd put those things out and let the tide carry us out to sea and then we'd pull them in and pick the fish out put them back out again, and drift back in with the tide . There were scows that were anchored out in the Bay and we'd sail up to them and unload our fish.

LM : You showed me a picture of a whole line of sailboats being towed back to shore, why were they being towed back?

RM : About twice a week, they'd have closures and so during the closures, instead of staying out there in these boats that didn't have any accommodations, the little tugboats would tow us into the cannery where we could take a shower and eat at the cannery, instead of eating out of cans and such.

LM : What was the scariest experience you had with this crazy drunken 70-year old fisherman you went out with?

RM : Believe it or not, we used to do a lot of night fishing. We'd put our net out and we'd drift and drift. On this particular occasion, we'd drifted all night and I got up in the

morning and couldn't see any land. Of course it's very flat out there and there was no wind, so we couldn't sail. We had 2 pair of 14 foot oars, and you had to put a board athwart ship and stand on this board and row. I rowed that boat all day long, and hardly made any progress, and we were drifting out in the Bering Sea. We were out of the Bay. Finally some wind came up and we started to sail, and pretty soon we could see the land.

LM : How many years did you go fishing up there?

RM : Well, I just fished two years, the first year that I fished there we had a terrible storm and 14 fishermen were drowned, which is a terrific amount. They'd get their boats loaded and the boats would swamp, the water's very silty and you dressed so warm. I wore heavy wool underwear, wool sweater, wool pants, and then I wore a sheepskin coat over my shirt, and hip boots and oilskins on top of that. We didn't have any life jackets on the boats, and if you fell in, you just went right to the bottom and , your clothes would fill up with sand. A lot of times at night we didn't have any lights on the boats and a power boat would come in and crash right into them and cut it in pieces. There were a lot of boats that were lost. Or they'd go aground on the sand bar, it's very shallow up there, like Cook Inlet, and muddy and you went ashore, you couldn't get out, you just had to wait for the tide to come in - very strong and heavy tides. So there were a lot of men lost, and I questioned my sanity the first year, but I went back a second year and then after the fishing finished for the summer, I decided I wasn't going to fish anymore and decided to leave Alaska and go back to school.

LM : What kind of prices or crewshares did you get in those days?

RM : We got paid 25 cents for red salmon per fish and 75 cents for King salmon.

LM : Any other species caught besides reds and kings up there?

RM : No, I think the most I ever made, I used to go up there before the fishing started and I would work when the ships would come in with the supplies for the canneries, longshoring, and then I would stay after the season was over and longshore loading all the canned salmon onto the ships and cleaning up the boats and things like that because my uncle was the head of the beach gang and I think the most I made was

\$2300 working June, July and August.

LM : When you came back to Kodiak in those years, before you went to Oregon to go to school, did you find work in Kodiak?

RM : Oh yes I used to longshore here too, I did that during the summer months, and during the winter time I worked in Kraft's Men's store. I worked the year 'round. I guided in the spring and fall with my father. My father still had his bear camps, I got a guide's license and I used to go out with him. I'd go out the first of April and guide until June, then I'd go to Bristol Bay, come back and longshore in September, then go out guiding until November. Then I'd work in Kraft's Men's Store from November to April.

LM : You were supporting a family then, both Leza and Mary Jane born then?

RM : Yes

LM : In those early days, was King Crab ever caught?

RM : No, believe it or not, I first saw a king crab when I was 6 or 7 years old. One of our neighbors brought a King Crab over to our house and gave it to us. I remember we had it in a washtub and that thing was sitting over the edge of a washtub. That was the first and only king crab I saw until I was back here in 1961. They must have been here. I never saw one and it wasn't a part of the native diet.

LM : Did your father's bear guiding business have a peak was there a time when it "had its day". For example, after the war, did the guiding business reach a successful time and continue on until his death, or did it fall off after a certain number of years?

RM : After World War Two, when he took up guiding again, I think it was in 46, it was very successful until the time he died in 1954 He had his own boat, the hunts were 2 weeks then, he'd take parties on his own boat and his boats got successively larger. He had a forty two foot boat, then he had a sixty five foot boat, then a ninety six foot boat. So he was real successful.

LM: Tell me some more about your fishing experiences.

RM : I told you earlier that I fished up in Bristol Bay in 1948 and 1949 and just after I left the fishery they passed a law permitted them to use power, so in 1950 I think it was or 1951 they started use power in the boats. Here's a picture.

LM : What's the reason for not letting them use power before this?

RM : Conservation, because the water is real muddy like in Cook Inlet, silty, and if they permitted power, they were afraid the boats would just wipe out the fishery and you've probably read about the record fishery in the past couple of years, they've managed to sustain their yields pretty well. It's a very valuable fishery, still. The first attempt at power they put an outboard on of those sailboats and that didn't work very well. Outboard motor was added without success, so then they started building little boats, specifically for Bristol Bay and bringing them up on a big ship.

LM : Would the ship be the tender eventually?

RM : No it was a freighter that would bring the supplies up and then take the pack back down in the fall. They didn't have any place to store the boats. The canneries had their own place, but these were brand new and they were built in Seattle. The original boats that I fished on were called Columbia River boats because they originated on the Columbia River, that's the kind of boats they fished in on the Columbia River in the 30's.

LM : They're mostly "double-enders"?

RM : Double enders right.

LM : So did the adding power to the fishery did it make for smaller catches because there were more boats, or they were faster, did they have quotas in those days?

RM : No they didn't have quotas, just whatever the canneries could process they'd allow them to catch. I never remember the canneries being so full that they wouldn't take fish.

LM : And so, did the fishery change much when they added power?

RM : Oh very much, it has changed tremendously because the original boats were just modifications of 32 footers, and now they're built so that they're larger than 32 feet and have detachable stern and they're very wide so they have all kinds of room and they have power rollers. like when I was fishing you pulled the net over the stern roller by hand, now they have power rollers and they have big drums that the nets go onto so you just haul them up like that. Everything's power nowadays, much easier.

LM : Bristol Bay is still a lucrative fishing grounds, the permits are very expensive.

RM : I think the last that I heard was \$250,000 for a permit. The modern boats sell for \$250,000 too, with the modern electronic gear on them, they're very comfortable quarters, they can live right on them.

LM : During that time here in Kodiak did they have a seine fishery? Has that always been in existence since they've had power boats?

RM : Oh yes, they had little seiners, when I was a kid, the seiners were probably thirty two to thirty four feet long and as things have progressed, they have what they call the limit seiners fifty eight foot long they're worth three quarter of a million dollars. They have big power skiffs, and their nets are much bigger because they seine off of the capes around the island.

LM : They didn't used to do that in the old days?

RM : No, the boats were too small to carry nets, they were very shallow, they fished in the bays. Of course all the canneries had traps, fish traps, around the island, and the fish traps were in the best spots.

LM : The canneries had the fish traps?

RM : Oh yes, they owned them, they built them, I didn't mentioned that to you, but my first job away from home was trap watchman in Molina Bay in Afognak Island when I was seventeen years old. I got this job with the cannery over in Uganik, and I spent the summer over there. This trap was built on pilings, about thirty feet above the water and has what they called a lead that goes into the shore that's fifteen hundred feet long like

chicken wire. When the fish hit that they follow it out to the main trap and then they go into what they call the heart of the trap, and they're trapped and the salmon tender comes along and used to purse the heart up and brail the fish out into the tender.

LM : How long did they use traps?

RM : Oh they were outlawed, from the turn of the century until statehood, they were outlawed at the turn of the century.

LM : They caught a tremendous amount of fish, is that why they were outlawed?

RM : Oh yes, they were very efficient and the canneries didn't have to rely on the fisherman, they caught most of their fish in their traps.

LM : The traps were competing with the fisherman?

RM : Yes they were.

LM : Thank you very much. It was interesting talking to you and I appreciate your time.

RM : Thank you.

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