

Oral History Interview  
Of Betty Springhill

To Fulfill Requirements Of  
Alaska History Class

Dr. Gary Stevens  
Fall 1993

By- Theresa Baker

Theresa Baker(T) interviewing Betty Springhill(B)

T- Where did you go to school?

B- I went to grade school , through 7th grade in midwest Wyoming. My father worked for Standard Oil in Indiana. we lived there till I was in 7th grade and then we moved to longmont Colorado. I went from 7th grade through graduation there. Then I went to the Univ. of Colorado my freshmen year. I decided I wanted to become a teacher and transferred to what was then the Colorado State College of Education Greeley. It's now called the Univ. of Northern Colorado. I majored in literature, languages and music. I got an AB degree from there. Then I taught for three years in Kirkwood Colorado where I was born. Then I went to Cheyenne Wyoming where I taught for three years. During that time I had a chance to come to Kodiak. I came in 1944 to teach school.

T- You came by yourself?

B- I came by myself during the war. It was a wild time here. Anyway I taught my first was a combination 6th and 7th grade. 35 students. then I also taught music out in the hall. We gave programs and we had a wonderful time. never in my life have I seen kids that were so willing to learn and loved school. They hardly would stay home if they were ill. I never saw kids like it in my life. The

school was so important to them. The result was they were absolutely wonderful to teach.

T- Do you remember how many kids were in the school system at that time?

B- Well there were eight grades and then the highschool was downstairs. Then later on when we outgrew that. We pulled in Quonset huts and put them beside the school.

T- Where was the school located?

B- Right up here across from your grandmothers. I've got a picture right here.

T- Was it located across from the Johnson clinic, by those brown apartments?

B- Yes, that's where it was located. It was on a hill there. We had combination grades a lot because we didn't have enough room. The Home Ec room was that building to the side. They had another building over there where they taught shop. But the point was there was a feeling of respect and love for the school. They really loved that school. We didn't do a whole lot of social things. But when we did they just enjoyed it thoroughly. I had the Rotarians ask me if I would prepare a program for Christmas. So we took the children out in the hall and we practiced. We had a Christmas nativity one year. Another year we did it, and it filled the Orpheum theater twice- we gave it twice.

T- Is the Orpheum in the same place?

B- The old Orpheum theater was bigger than this one I think. They sang and it was no strain to train them because everybody responded. Everybody wanted to do well. Discipline was something that we didn't even think about. I just can't believe that children felt that way about school and their teachers. They did. You can ask some of them now who were in that class- Nancy Sweeney, Donna Fitzgerald Jones, Carly Molly. Those people will tell you how they felt about the school. It was just a really amazing thing. We didn't have all these peripheral things however. We had no guidance counselors what so ever. Wouldn't know what to do if we had them. Psychologist were just absolutely by the board, I remember, realizing of course I had had some brief Psychology courses in college. I remember I had a girl who couldn't read. I'm sure that now they would have said that she was dyslexic, but I didn't know what was wrong with her. She had a very wise mother. I called her in and we talked about it. I said "I don't know what's wrong, I have no way of analyzing this. I don't have the tools to do it, but I know there's something wrong. I would love to see you take her to Seattle and have her evaluated." She did. They found out she did have learning problems. She went to a private catholic school where they tutored her -Forest Ridge Convent. That woman is a successful adult here now.

T- What about other types of specialists like resource teachers?

B- We didn't know what that was. We did it all. However there is one thing we did not dwell on and that was what's happening at home. I didn't know whether their fathers were falling down drunk or whether their was incest or all of the things we here about now. If we knew it, we didn't pry and nobody told us. So what we did was spend the day on what we were supposed to be doing-teaching those kids. And there was something kind of refreshing about that. I don't know exactly how to explain it. Because I'm not saying you don't need all these peripheral assistance you get know. I'm not advocating you go back to the way we did it then, I'm just telling you how it was then.

T- Right now they are pushing or advocating to go to the inclusion model. Where all the kids, no matter if they're learning disabled or autistic, or whatever their disability is, that they are in the classroom. How do you feel about that?

B- I remember when mainstreaming first came into being. The teachers were horrified by it then, and many of them still are. In that situation there are students who are really a detriment to the classroom, and the other kids have to suffer. That I don't approve of. Don't know the answer. I'm not saying that I know the answer, but I'm just saying that I've heard the teachers talk about it. It was just started when I retired. It was becoming a federal law. You had to do it. I remember the first time we put a special Ed. class here. We were told by the government that we had to.

We didn't know what we were doing. We didn't have a room for it. We didn't have a curriculum. We didn't have a teacher. We were absolutely winging it ,and it was a strange result.

T- What did they do before? Did they just not bring them to school?

B- No they sat in the classroom.

T- But they didn't really expect anything out of them?

B- That's right. Just let them participate as they would, and didn't expect them to. There wasn't any one of us that had at least two in our class that would fit that description. I could name two right now that I had. I simply never embarrassed them in any way, never caused any attention to them. They did what they could, but mostly they remained inconspicuous. We had large classes. And I'll be frank to tell you they got very little special attention.

T- What do you mean by large classes, how many?

B- I had 35 when I first started, then 36. This was not uncommon. That was too many.

T- How many teachers were here at the time?

B- Well lets see, there was 1st, 2nd, 3rd, they had 4th 5th combination. Then I had the 6th 7th , and eight was alone. Then they had the four years of highschool downstairs. Very crude, very rural. It was a small town. It was a rural school is what it was.

T- You said you arrived here during the war. What was it like because of the war going on?

B- When I would have perhaps had almost all my students were native or part native, there were at least 10-15% who would come with their parents, civil service jobs or businesses that were coming into town. An example would have been Nancy Sweeney. Her father came here to be a pharmacist. In her class there were about 10 all white students and all the rest were native or part native.

T- Do you know if that was the first influx of caucasians?

B- It was, yes. The only other people that had been here before was a very small nucleus of professional people. Maybe 2-3 doctors. Then there were the people I lived with-the Coons. They had the Standard Oil. Some of the nurses, and the cannery workers who just passed through here, but who lived in Seattle. And it was- you're absolutely right- the war is what brought the white people here for the jobs and so on.

T- So they had classes together, the whites and the natives.

b- Oh I never even knew the difference.

T- Yes there was some stuff in history that talked about them not having school together.

B- Oh indeed they did here.

T- Was there a bias towards the natives.

B- Never. Never. I didn't even know. Didn't even dream of that. I came here from the rocky mountain area which is

really quite provincial and <sup>bigoted</sup> biggited and it never even occurred to me that these children were any different because of race.

T- They could speak english pretty good?

B- Pretty well. The only thing was they were very shy and they talked low. I thought I was loosing my hearing my first year here. I thought I had lost my eyesight when I went home and screamed. Because we had four dropcord lights with bulbs for lighting. It was weird. The windows were our ventilation, and sometimes it got pretty ripe in there. As a matter of fact I had a boy in my class that year that fell asleep every afternoon. See Marrion Lynch was the health nurse for the island. She came in one afternoon and I said "Marrion I'm worried about this boy. He's falling asleep every afternoon." Turned out he had a wild active case of T.B. She got him out of there. He exposed every single one of us to T.B. I still have scars on my lungs-I was exposed.

T- What did they do back then for T.B.

B- They hauled him out of there. That was another thing, she went around the town. She didn't get full cooperation, because she went around and said he was not to be served, he was not to go to the movies, he was not to be served at the fountains. His father did take him to a sanitarium, where he ran away and he came back. Isn't that something, he's recovered. He exposed all of us to T.B.

T- Did anybody else get T.B.?



B- I don't believe so, but we had three strange maladies that year. Here I was my first year in Alaska and Raymond Madsen got Leukemia. We didn't even know what leukemia was- we were in 1944 now remember. Leukemia was just an exotic word. If you got it bye-bye. There was no hope. He sat there in my class, and he lasted almost the whole year, until they finally took him to Portland. The way his disease manifested was a huge enlargement of the lymph glands, really was sad. Another darling little girl, Lucy Gregarioff was her name, contracted tubercular meningitis. Never even heard of it. Wow she was terrible. I think her mother still lives here. Darling little lady. Lucy was your grandmother's neighbor. My first experience of going into a home where the body is laid out in the living room-they did that. Your grandmother did it with Raymond. They brought them home, and laid them out in the living room. People came and visited, paid their respects, very touching. So then to come back to education, it was highly centralized. fascinating the way they did it. It was a territory. We had a very strong education department in Juneau. Dr. Ryan was the territorial commissioner. He had a theory that every single school in the territory should be teaching the same thing every hour of the day. You had to have a sign on your door, if your sign said I'm teaching math from 8:00-9:00 you better be teaching math from 8:00-9:00. Because if they happened to make a surprise visit-and they did by steamship and funky planes if they

could get hold of them—they would come and check you in what you were doing. But we did it automatically, because we had this feeling that maybe this was the best way to handle this. It was just like a center with all these tentacles spreading out to every corner of the state. We went ahead and took it very seriously. Beyond that he wrote a curriculum. The curriculum said what we should be teaching. the basic subjects are what you taught. If you didn't teach that within the year you felt that it was all over. I had a terrific compulsion to follow that territorial guide. If it said you were supposed to teach so many words in spelling in a year, I taught those words. We really had a strong urge to do whatever was happening in Juneau. It wasn't fear. It was kind of a security because you knew if you were doing that, you were doing what you were hired to do. Anything else you did was fine. I wish I had a copy of that curriculum. It was the most amazing thing I have seen in my life. It was about three inches thick and he took every single course from first grade— never mind kindergarten in those days— just 1st through 12th. If you were teaching 6th grade, you would turn to the 6th grade curriculum. Spelling, arithmetic, reading, language, geography, history, it was laid out there for you and you better cover what was in there or you were cheating those children, that's how you felt.

T- Is that the first time they had a curriculum?

B- I don't know. I came here when that was reality, and he had been here for two or three years before I came. He was a strong administrator. His name was A. A. Ryan, I never will forget it.

T- Who was the principal at that time, when you first taught?

B- We had a superintendent principal. His name was Harry Holt. He was a good man. I can remember those primary teachers doing a fine job.

T- How were the supplies for teaching?

B- Very very sketchy. We had enough books. We had to be very careful. Our budget was very low. I don't know how much local support we got, this wasn't even an incorporated city at that time. So it came from the territory. We had adequate textbooks. That's another thing, they had a centralized textbook supply. If you dare order a social studies text that wasn't on the textbook list, you wouldn't get reimbursed for it. You would have to pay for it yourself.

They were perfectly good. They were carefully chosen. But we didn't have anything extra to fool around with. We were careful. Extremely careful. Then as we went on it never seemed to improve. The whole time I was connected with the school we were so frugal that it is just amazing to me now to see the unlimited supply. And the freedom you have for choosing textbooks and things like that. So I'm not saying

it was better, I'm saying it was different. This is the way we coped and we got the job done.

T- When did you become a principal?

B- In about 1960.

T- Are there teachers you taught with that still live here in Kodiak?

B- Gyneth Cessna, Ruth Breckberg, Madeline Poland, Chet Hagel. I really had such a good experience teaching.

T- Did you like teaching more than being principal?

B- I enjoyed them both tremendously, and one evolved into the other. As the need for an elementary principal grew and Mr. Shot asked me to do that, I had the job without the credential. I had to make a decision whether I was going to trot off to the university in my 40's and get a masters degree or not. I elected to do that. I never regretted it. I did it in the summers.

T- How many years were you principal?

B- About 12 years.

T- Did you teach music to all the grades or just your class?

B- One year I did half time principal and half time grade school music. I had a piano on wheels and the kids would move it from room to room for me. I loved teaching music. That was such fun. I'm very resentful of teachers who I don't think put into it what I think should be. Because you can destroy the love of music very easily, and that I'm very sensitive about.

T- How did you meet John (husband)?

B- Well the first year I was here I had a wonderful social time dating the army and navy boys. I never dated a marine. Army mostly.

T- What kind of activities did they have going, socially?

B- Well it was pretty limited. We'd ride in buses out to the base and dance and go to parties out there. There was a little more freedom if you went with an officer. They could take you to the officers club. But I preferred to date enlisted men.

T- So the army and navy were here.

B- And the marines and the CB's - navy construction crews, and the airforce, and the submarines were here. The only ones I dated were the army and navy mostly. Wonderful social life we had. Then I went home in May because my father had died while I was here. I brought my mother back with me to Alaska. We went on the steamship Yukon. John was on the ship. He was up to sign the papers for Bob (his son) to go into the navy under age. Bob was 18. Then I got married the next year.

T- Were there any other nationalities besides the natives?

B- Nothing that's all. We didn't have one black child, we had no orientals. As a matter of fact we didn't have hardly any blacks or orientals the whole time I was connected with the school.

T- What was your favorite grade to teach?

B- I liked 8th grade so much. A lot of the students quit at the 8th grade and didn't go on. So I had this terrible compulsion that if I didn't teach it to them, they would never know it. I remember doing a unit on Shakespeare with those kids. Every student had to learn the Seven Stages Of Man speech before they could get their grade. It was a riot. Attitude was the whole name of the game. I remember I had one boy who had a little problem with this. Milton Suttor who's a judge in Anchorage now we were laughing about this. He said " say Mrs. Springhill, do you know who I saw in the street the other day? I saw Pupa!" I thought oh my gosh Milton. This kid would sit in the back and never would do anything. I said "I'm going to call you pupa because you're always in the resting stage." And they still call him pupa.

T- What was it like during the tidal wave, especially for school?

B- You never in your life saw anything handled any better, the way the school was handled. We closed school for about a week because so many kids were flying out of here on Red Cross planes and it was just bedlam! They turned the school into a shelter. People could go there to sleep and eat.

L.Legrue who use to run the Beachcombers and his wife cooked up there day after day dispensing food in the soup kitchen. As soon as we got back to school one of the first things I had to do was see what had happened to our enrollment. I had so many kids that had left, I had to make up special

withdrawal slips. Then when they started coming back I had to make up special re-entry slips. We did have some special help from California. They came and gave us special instructions with what to do. One day there was a terrible aftershock. I really thought it was over. I remember I ran so fast down that hall, I don't know how I did it. Just to access what was going on. Every single one of those teachers had those kids on the floor and doing what they were supposed to be doing. Marvelous the way they handled it. The only kids who freaked out were in the highschool. They'd run out of the building screaming and carrying on. It was hazardous going home from school. The roads were all torn up, muddy, miserable. There were huge trucks from the reconstruction crews running back and forth. I thought for sure kids were going to get killed. But we lucked out. It could have been a disastrous time, but those teachers and Mr. Shot were a real strong influence. He was the superintendent and we all reacted to his solid, common sense approach to everything. There was no hysteria. Those kids were wonderful.

T- How long did it take to get the sewer and everything running again?

B- I think the sewer was all right and we had water. It was electricity, that knocked your heat out see. It was several days before we had electricity. That was tough. That was another reason people left. They had nothing in their houses. The rest of us, we used lanterns and whatever

we could get. It was cold and clammy and awful, it was very cold during that period. It was a dirty sloppy messy time. I don't know why I can remember the mud so bad, it was just awful. Streets were just behind the school. A boat called the relief was grounded up there. It was full of crab. When that crab rotted—oh boy! But the way they got it down the hill was like the time of the pyramids. They put rollers under it and they rolled it down. It was really a feat. Then when they got it down to the street they rearranged the logs and pushed it on down the street.

T- What was the fishing industry like this whole time that you've been here?

B- Amazing, absolutely amazing. When I came here the biggest acts in town were out about the island. The Kadyak fisheries was a growing scene in the summer. Then nothing happened in the winter. You had several fishing families, the Olsen family, the Nelson family. Those families fished all summer and they made a good living. They had nice houses. They were just comfortably prosperous. This went on for many years until the tidal wave, then they got 3% money. One of the first was Oscar Dysons boat the Peggy Jo. That was a huge boat to us then. We couldn't believe the size of it. He got it with 3% money. The Sudams came, the Hiners came, from Seldovia, Cordova, Seward, and those places. They started getting these big boats through the government with 3% disaster money.



T- So the money wasn't just for people on Kodiak, it was for anybody who wanted it?

B- Anybody, Particularly if you had lost a boat.

T- So was there a drastic increase in school population when that happened?

B- Yes, oh absolutely. All of these things affected the population especially at that time. It was a viable industry. But these people wouldn't have had, you know how would they have gone from a 45 foot boat to a 300 foot boat or whatever, if it hadn't of been for some artificial shot in the arm. And that is what the government did. People took advantage of it and did very well, and got very rich. Yes the school was definatly affected. Because then they needed more fish and wildlife people and more protection people, and banks. Money brings all these things. That's why we're feeling it now. Because if the fishing goes out, we're going to crunch.

T- When you first got here did they have village schools?

B- They did. They were territorial schools. They were run by the territory. After we became a state they became state operated schools. They were operated from Juneau. Some of the teachers were paid by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and some by the state of Alaska. It was a big decision to make when we were to become a borough. Some of us who were involved in any kind of suggestion said "don't make the whole island a borough. We cant take care of those village schools, It'll brake us, just make it the road

system." They said, "either you take it all or we'll even include something along the mainland." So we were blackmailed into making this the borough. We then had the schools. However if I remember right the state did help with the funding. It was a gradual transition. Softened the blow a little bit of being responsible for those seven villages. That was rough.

T- Were you principal at the time?

B- Yes, I was on the Borough Assembly too. Strange times because we didn't know how we were going to have the tax base in town. The villages had no tax base. We paid the taxes here in town. So that meant a small group of people were going to be responsible for the entire island. Some people said, "foul ball, we cant do this!" However I don't know what extent the state support was. They've come through I think fairly well.

B- My full name is Elizabeth Carter Springhill. I was born May 28, 1916 in Cripple Creek Colorado. My father was a gold miner. He died the first year I was here. His name was Floyd Boehler. My mothers name was Augusta Julia Boehler. They were both German. I have a brother Carl.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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

96-49-01\_I01.pdf