

Kodiak Oral History Project
By Jennifer K. Lagasse
With Ruth Breckberg,
and Dan Olsen

J: How did you come to be in Kodiak?

R: I came a long, long time ago to visit a friend. I met my husband here and then I got married. This was in 1943. I came from Fairbanks, I was working there. This was during the war years. I had a friend who was coming here and I came along with her for a visit. Then when I met Swede, I didn't go back for many, many years. We got married before my friend got married. She too got married later very happily.

J: What family do you currently have here?

R: There's just me. My husband and I had three children all of whom are living in other places. One in Washington D.C., one in Honolulu and one in Anchorage. I'm the only one who's here because Swede died ten years ago. So there's just me and a lot of friends. You know now I don't have to stay here but this is home and I'm not going to leave. This is the best place. I never even think of leaving. I go on trips but I like Kodiak very, very much.

J: What did your husband do at that time?

R: My husband was a carpenter on the base at that time, and he was until he retired.

J: So when you came here the war was going on? Do you recall exactly what was going on in Alaska?

R: My friend and I had been roommates in Washington D.C.. She wanted to come to Alaska and I had always wanted to come to

Alaska. So we did. We went to our homes and then we met in Seattle and got jobs in Juneau. We were with the war department and had a really neat job with the war department. It was called the Juneau Port of Embarkation. At the port they were in charge of all of the army in Alaska. Both my friend and I worked at the same place. We were cryptographers, which means we would have messages come in on the teletype to the army from other places. Then we would decode those, because you see in war years you cannot have messages going over the airwaves. These were messages from other military bases and this was vital information. We decoded, every day we would have a different coding business. So we just played games all day. We would take the teletype messages, decode them and send them to the port. Then the officers there would encode their messages to go back. It was fun, it really was fun. This was when the war was coming to the westward, later on Kodiak was the place that was the headquarters for the western push. But at that time when we first came it was Juneau, so we stayed there only a few months and then we were told we could transfer to Excursion Inlet or to Fairbanks. And she and I both went to Fairbanks. So we had worked there for a little while when we came down here and then I simply didn't go back to my job. And she didn't either for that matter. So that's why we came here and later on I did work here after my marriage, I worked for the navy here at the base. I didn't do cryptography there, but I did work there for awhile. Then the children started coming

along, we had the three of them. We had come to Kodiak because of all the naval activity. It was just getting more and more so. When I got here they had gone through this period of fear of the Japanese coming over and bombing. They bombed Dutch Harbor of course, they never bombed Kodiak but we didn't know. So they had advised civilians to pack up their wives and children and send them out back stateside. And there were all kinds of houses that were just empty because they had gone along with that recommendation. So when I came and I got married, I certainly was not going to leave my new husband and go away. And in the end there wasn't any reason to.

J: So you were here when they were having the blackouts?

R: To one extent, but we were coming closer to the end of the war. Now we had our first child in 1945. She was born in June, the war came to an end then. So a lot of the things I heard were more about what had happened rather than what was actually happening. I had not come yet when they were sending out the women and the children, that had already happened. I was here when those houses were empty and when people would start looking for a stove or something and pretty soon the houses were just a wreck. So it was sad that those people had to leave.

J: Do you remember anything about Kiska and Attu being attacked?

R: Yes, I'd heard about them. In those years we had papers, the base had papers and there was all of this that was going on all the time. So this was what was going on in our lives. And we had the submarine base here at one time you know. My husband

was here, he was not a Simms-Drake man. The Simms-Drake people were the ones who were the company that built the base. There were many people who were up still building the base when I came. Most of it had been done however, and Swede was not a Simms-Drake man. He was a civilian who worked for the carpenter shop.

J: So where were you when the earthquake and the tidal wave occurred?

R: Well by the time my children had grown. Svaya was the oldest and she was off at college. Bonnie was in high school and Robert who is our youngest was in grade school. We had all kinds of things that we did when the tidal wave came. It was a very strong earthquake or shock. We were at home, I was teaching at that time and it was Good Friday. We were just about to sit down to dinner when these tremors came. So I can remember the neighbor calling, she said, "Do you think they will still have bowling after all these tremors?". We didn't know, we weren't going bowling, but she was thinking about it. So she said she was going to go down and we will see. At that time the Elks Club was across the street from where the waves would later come in. In other words, it was not where it is now, it was still pretty close to the water, but at that time it was right across the street. It was not a building that was built at ground level, it was just a basement. And that's where people went to bowl. When they went that night there was a lot of glass breakage, because they served drinks down there in the Elks bowling alley. When

Ellen said she was going to go down there, we knew where she was. And later on things got worse, so my husband said he was going down there and tell Ellen who has this new car to turn it around. Because if the wave does become a tidal wave she will probably lose her new car because things are going to happen fast. So she did what he told her to and moved the car and that saved the car. They were not aware that anything was happening until it just came up silently. It came up across the road and started dripping right down into their basement. And of course everybody ran out. And the cars that were pointed that direction and had not been moved as hers had been, they just simply lost their cars because it was that fast.

J: You had a feeling there was going to be a wave just because of the size of the tremor?

R: Well it was a possibility.

J: Were their radio broadcasts announcing that everyone should go to high ground?

R: There were radio broadcasts that said it had happened in Seward and Valdez. You know these were the places that were hit first. It just made sense to go ahead and get out of a place like that.

J: Where were you living at the time?

R: We were on Mission road no too far from here.

J: You were not above high ground?

R: Well, what is now considered high ground is anything above

one hundred feet. The house where we were living would have been one hundred feet. We were on high ground, but the talk was not at that time about that. It was just talk about get out of here and get high. So people went across where the school is now. We watched from there as the waves came in. There were people who were saying this was the end of the world and so on and so forth.

J: Were people trying to bring their worldly possessions with them?

R: They didn't have time for any of that. You just went.

J: Were all of your family members present and accounted for to make the trip up there?

R: Well we went just to the school, we did not go up on the hill. A lot of people went clear up on pillar. We had just the two children who were here at that time. Svaya was off at college. There was a time when it was reported that the whole of Kodiak had sunk. That's the report she was having. Actually she wasn't at the school, she'd gone off on a skiing trip to Colorado. It was through friends that we finally got in touch with her two days later. Communication was very hard there for awhile.

J: So did you happen to know anyone who was adversely affected by the tidal wave?

R: Before we get off on that, let me tell you a funny thing that happened. At that time we didn't live on the water as we do now. The house was about a block from the water, you could see the

water but we weren't right on it. When people came, many people stayed that night at the high school. Bonnie was the one in the high school and she worked with the food because they gave food to everybody. And we also knew something about the clothing situation. I can remember one time, three or four days after all this happened we sent boxes of clothing to Ouzinkie, and that very same day we got clothing from Ouzinkie because they had heard about our need as we had heard about theirs.

When the tidal wave came and here we were up on the school grounds looking at it. The water would be sucked completely dry in the channel. Then it would go around some neighboring islands and come back. We had a friend who did not go up on the hill and he saw all of these little clams sticking up their heads. And he loves to go clam digging, so he got his little bucket, his little hand shovel and he went down the bluff and started out to dig his clams. It was a crazy time! He hadn't gotten very far when he heard this tremendous roar because what had gone out was ultimately going to come back. And so he could see way, way in the distance this wall of water. He lost his shovel, he did not lose his bucket and he did not lose his life! He just ran up this hill that he would never be able to run up at any other time, but he did make it up that bluff! Most of us weren't thinking to straight! Afterwards there were after shocks, this continued on into Sunday. It came on Friday, there were after shocks on Saturday and by Sunday it was beginning to get to

people. Until then people were taking it in stride, but by Sunday people were beginning to think, Oh my goodness. After it was all over we didn't have phones for awhile, we did not have any kind of communication. There was a paper that was put out and distributed. But I can remember in our household we had a brick outdoor fireplace, and we would put water out there to boil because we didn't have electricity. We had that for the whole neighborhood, the whole neighborhood came and cooked on that brick outdoor stove.

J: Did fishing impact your family at all?

R: In my own family, not really no. Because my husband was a carpenter who never fished. Actually even sport fishing he didn't do. Rob and Bonnie are the fishermen in the family.

The people who are here tonight are Danny Olsen who is a fisherman so it has very much impacted him. So this is Danny Olsen.

J: When did you start fishing?

D: I started fishing when I was 15 years old and I'm 51 now. During the high school years just the summers for salmon, starting in 1959/1960.

J: So then at what point did you become a boat owner or did that become your mainstay for survival?

D: I think it was when I was about 26 years old I became a full time fisherman. I went to a couple years of college and found fishing had more of a romance, probably more excitement.

At the time it appeared to be more lucrative in terms of a lot of frontier to fishing then. This was the time when crab was in its heyday, we harvested 90 million pounds of crab. I experienced those years, when those began to decline, the boat owner that I fishing with, Oscar Dyson, I fished with him for 4 years, we went into shrimp fishing. We experienced that from the very beginning pioneering days til its heyday until its collapse. There were about four real good years of it. Maybe even a total of 6 or 8 that made up the fishery. When we were fishing if you kept the net down for more than 20 minutes you feared you'd catch so many shrimp you couldn't get them back aboard. Your talking 20 to 30 thousand pound hauls. There was no limit to how large of a net you could tow, you'd just fill it up. And there could be boats in the bay just down from town such as the one around Chiniak, Ugak Bay. As many as 20 boats or more could be making a circle in that bay at a time. And they did it day after day after day for months on end. They'd bring in up to 100,000 pounds per trip. There are some phenomenal stories! But now we don't have a shrimp fishery and we don't have a king crab fishery and we don't have a tanner fishery. So were going to be the cod capital of the world now!

More on tape...

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