

HISTORY OF ALASKA
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Kodiak Community College

presented by Kathy Duprey

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I'd like to introduce Mary ^{Cichoski}~~Chinoski~~, who would like to retell some of the stories and memories of growing up in Kodiak...

I was born in Kodiak at the Griffin Memorial Hospital on May 16, 1951. I grew up as the oldest child, but, one of my first memories, probably the very earliest memory, was asking my mom about the picture of the baby boy on the wall, and I was told that was my brother who died when he was fourteen months old. Later, I had a sister who was born in 1953. A memory that is like a photographic memory is...I was sitting on the counter looking out the window, I can remember the white lacy curtains, and I had to have my feet in the sink to be able to look out the window. I was watching my dad who'd been taking care of me. In those days, the women were kept in the hospital for three or four days after they had a baby. So it seemed like a very long time that Mom was gone. Dad went out to meet the cab, and I was so happy to see my mom, but I wasn't so happy to see that little bundle that they were fussin' over so much. But it was very good growing up having a companion that was my only sibling.

Most of my memories are of being outside, because we had a really tiny house, and we just grew up outdoors, always on the beach. We lived on Mission Road, on Shahafka Cove. My mom/s house is still in the same place, but the old house washed away in the tidal wave. It's kitty-corner from the Salvation Army and it looked so different then. Our house was on a little hill, with a grassy lawn and a big garden in the back, and a creek ran right through the property. also, I grew up with an older boy cousin , who my mom and dad sort of

raised, because his parents were working all the time, and we played together a lot. Another memory I have is when we had my sister in the baby stroller, and we said it was an accident, but I think we purposely pushed her down the hill to the creek. That was a big deal that the family will never forget.

The creek was a big part of our life, too, because the salmon went up it in the Fall. There were sticklebacks to catch and perform experiments on...like freezing them in the freezer and thawing them out, {to discover that} they would still be alive, only to prove what someone had said. There was a muskrat who lived under a big tree in a bend in the creek. The neighborhood kids all played in the creek, too and on the beach, and the climate was different back then, because we spent the summers in the water just all the time, going out wading. We never did learn how to swim. All the other kids in the neighborhood knew how to swim, but my sister and I never did learn. So it was kind of scary for us to go out in skiffs and stuff.

Most everybody was a fisherman. My dad was a fisherman, all the neighbor people were fisherman, too. {There was}...salmon in the summertime and crab in the wintertime, it wasn't anything like it is now. It was a small fishing fleet and everyone was real close, and knew everybody. The town was very small... gee I don't know how small, I'd have to research that. The neighborhood... we had the Sargeants in the back, on the water, and the Chudochins were Tyonics, and were our neighbors by the lake...and then the Chichenoffs, and Kaba Chichenoff. Everyone else got to call her Kaba, but we had to be very proper and call people Mr. and Mrs.. So I always felt funny having to call her

Mrs. Chichenoff, when the other kids, even the ones who weren't her grandchildren, got to call her Kaba. It was just how my mom was raised, to be very proper, and to have respect for the elders.

My mom was born and raised in Bethel and my dad went up to do some construction there and then he met her, and they were married. Then they went to Anchorage where he also worked construction. Anchorage was very tiny then, too. They lived there for a while, and then he came to Kodiak to build the Army Base. It was [] years ago. A lot of land was opened up outside of town and they went out to stake the land, but the property that they really wanted , which was on the point there, the Sargeants had beat them to that. So they had to settle for the next best thing, which was the one right next to it. Dad thought that he had to pay way too much for it because he had to pay fifty dollars.

Before I was born, my parents raised cocker spaniels, and they only had one left when I was born. My parents took lots of baby pictures. We should go see Mom and sit down with the baby pictures and the ones of me growing up, that would be fun. The pictures were some of the very few things besides clothes that were salvaged from the tidal wave. My dad and I sat down with buckets of water and rinsed all the salt water off of them, and dried them and pressed them in books, and saved that part of our memories. Oh yeah, these pictures are so important to me.

I grew up close to Nature, [I] always played on the beach... We figured out that we could take a small rock and draw on the big

rocks with them like chalk, and we did that a lot. There were two different colors of sand; the grey sand and the ash sand from the volcanic eruption in 1912. So we would trace with our fingers in the dark sand made and then pour the light sand in to make outlines and designs. We made a lot of mud pies with the two different sands, they could have filling because of the two different colors of sand. We chopped up a lot of plant material for them and then we used elderberry leaves for play money. Money really did grow on trees back then, and it kept coming back every year.

It seemed like Summer lasted almost forever back then, not like now. It seems like it's here and then it's gone, but it seems like I remember endless summers out on the water, and taking hikes with the neighbor kids. It was even a big adventure just to go to Mission Lake and go on the other side because there were no other houses around then. The Sutliffs were living on their property over there, but there were no other houses around. The biggest adventure of all was to go on a real small trail and go up where the college is now. There was an old lake there with dead trees in it, and it looked prehistoric. Our excuse was to go fishing. We had our little fishing poles and hooks and things. I think everyone knew there were no fish in there, but it was just so grand to spend the whole day on those big dead logs, and feel like you were in prehistory.

And berry-picking was always fun. We picked so many berries. Beverly Horn made dandelion wine, and she sent her kids out with shopping bags to pick dandelions. We always joined in and helped with that, and that was real fun. Mom always made jelly with the berries.

When Dad would go fishing, he would go places where there were a lot of cranberries. He would bring pillowcases full of berries back with him. He used one of those wooden scoops with hand-carved tines, and when you use one of those you get a lot of leaves and sticks and stuff mixed in with the berries. Dad would set up a little processing line with slanted boards. We would just let them roll down the board and most of the leaves and sticks and things would stay on the board. We'd spend days and days cleaning these berries for the freezer.

My dad went to the mainland to go moose hunting. He got a lot of deer on the island, too, but it was a big deal to have moose. Moose meat was my favorite. Of course we had a lot of salmon, 'til eventually, a few years ago, I got tired of salmon. When I lived in the states, I missed it a lot. So now I like it again. One time, he got a halibut; it must have been one of the biggest halibut that there ever was. He was six foot four, and it was as big as him. We had it sitting on the lawn all day while the neighbors came by and just cut off chunks and took it away. That was real fun.

My dad's name was Adam John, but he was never called that. Everyone called him Tiny. My mom was the one who was tiny, as she is about five feet tall. Her name is Ann. I was pudgy as a child and my sister was skinny, so we were always referred to as the big one and the little one, since there were just two Chihoski girls. I didn't like being the big one.

When I was five years old, Mom took a trip back to Bethel. She took me and my sister, and it was so different when we got there. I

don't remember if it was Spring, Fall or Winter, but it was all snowy, and it was so flat. As soon as the plane landed, I asked if we were on another planet, and I really believed it. We went for a ride in my grandpa's dog sled, I can remember. I also remember playing with my cousins and meeting lots of relatives.

It's really hard to identify where Dad came from because he was from Newburg, New York, and it just seemed like worlds away. He had a sister there who was a seamstress and she never saw us kids until we were grown, by then I had kids of my own. She made dresses for us all the time, which were identical. I don't know how she did it without ever getting measurements. So my sister and I said we were twin dressers, though we didn't look alike at all.

Until 1960, my Uncle John and Aunt Mary and my cousin Bob lived here. The two sisters, my mom and Mary, spent a lot of time together. Aside from always looking alike, another thing we didn't like was having our hair permed. That was such a big thing for Native people; I think that they would like to get rid of that straight hair. So they sat us down, and Auntie would do one of us and Mom would do the other one. We would have to endure the pulling and the smell. We were so glad when they decided we were old enough that we could decide how we wanted to have our hair. In the early sixties, Mom decided that the pixie hairdo was real cute, and that's what Clare could have. I just let my hair grow, and I've kept it that way, pretty much, ever since.

Like I said, Kodiak was really small, and all the neighbors were like an extended family. We spent a lot of time at their houses and the neighbor kids spent a lot of time at our house, too. Everybody

really did know everybody, and you didn't just know'em by sight. You knew a lot about them.

When I was thinking about what I was going to say, I was thinking about monumental things that happened to me when I was a kid. There wasn't really anything; like I said, we played on the beach a lot.

When I was really little, I was wading along the shoreline. We were always told, "You don't go over your boots!". So the thing to do was to get as close to going over your boots as you could without actually doing it. So I was doing that, and watching the top of my boots, and I didn't see a hole. Sometimes when people came up on the beach with their skiffs the kicker would make a hole in the sand. So I was watching my boots, but not watching where I was going, and I fell in and just got all wet. I was so afraid that my mom would be mad at me for falling in the water, that I stayed outside as long as I could. I just about got hypothermic. I was so scared that I was going to get in trouble. Of course she was so glad to see me, half frozen to death but still alive, I didn't get in trouble.

The crab pots were like a playground for us, like playground equipment. They were the big six foot rectangle ones for king crab. We climbed inside them and on top of them. It was fun. Sometimes you'd find a little piece of something that was different from what you'd usually find washed up on the beach; a different kind of shell or a little crab. It was neat.

We had a good garden..always a lot of potatoes and rhubarb and carrots. When I got old enough, I got my own garden. I thought I was the greatest gardener in the world. Once I forgot to pull up a radish,

and it got huge, just like a baseball. Of course it tasted just like wood, you couldn't eat it.

Some more memories of downtown Kodiak before the tidal wave... There was only one cannery dock; there was only one cannery. The dock was located about where the ferry dock is now. The cannery was owned by Halfer ty's. There was a Donnelly and Atcheson Store there, and in the middle of the dock was a pronto pup booth, which I think I single-handedly kept in business sometimes. It was fun to go down there and be on Dad's boat . He didn't think it was good luck to have women on the boat, so I can only remember one time that he took the family out on a trip. We went to the other side of Monashka Bay before there were roads or anything over there. It seemed really far away... just to a place where he used to go deer hunting.

His boat was called "The Skippy". A lot of people still talk about it today. They always mention that it was green, and that it was bad luck to have a green boat because green was the color of the land. If you had a green boat, it would end up on the rocks, which it did. When I was in high school, he was taking a group of hunters out to Afognak and ran it up on a rock.

The boat dock was on the other end of town, by the end of the breakwater where the float planes are now. There was just a single float that went down there then.

The school that I went to, St. Mary's School, was in a quonset hut. I started First grade at the age of five, and First and Second grade were together. I can remember learning to count money with play money.

One fun thing about the Wintertime, the Police Department closed off the hill next to the school. You have to understand that the island sank and a lot of fill dirt was put in. There used to be a pretty steep hill right next to the Fish and Game. The road between Fish and Game and the apartments there was the road that went by our school. There was a gravel playground, and I still have gravel in my knee from falling down on that playground. I skipped fourth grade, and we had to line up by grades every year. One year I was in the third grade line and the next year I was in the fifth grade line. I remember all the kids saying, "You belong in the other line," but I didn't.

There was a bus called The Shopper, and that was the transportation to and from school. Ray Shannon, who was one of our neighbor's down the road a little ways, owned the bus. I think he made two trips a day, and took people shopping. It cost twenty-five cents to ride the bus. I remember the very first time I did it, and set off all alone to school on the bus, feeling scared, but pretty important too.

Downtown, I think the hub of all activity was the Belmont Cafe. It had a dark interior with wooden floors and a big bar with stools. Everybody went there to eat and just to meet each other. It was approximately where Cross Fox is now, on that street. Next door to that, going down to the mountain, in a yard, was a donkey. Every time we went downtown we had to stop and see the donkey. Sometimes guys would come out of the Belmont, and they would make the donkey drink and get him drunk. But he lived a long time, nevertheless.

My dad was gone a lot. I just remember he was gone for birthdays

and holidays. One year, I remember we were waiting for him, we were expecting him for Thanksgiving. For some reason, I don't know why, but he decided he wasn't going to come home. We were real sad. But the plane that he would have been on crashed, and if he had been on it, he would have died. He always used to tell us that when he was fishing in November or December, that he caught Santa's reindeer in his crab pots, so we wouldn't have any Christmas that year, but we always did. I think we believed him when we were little, he perpetrated that story every year around that time.

Some of his crewman became real close family friends, when they were in. I remember Harry Nightengale, an especially good friend of the family. He came to dinner a lot, and when our turtle died, we had a funeral and took up a funeral collection. We had a nice funeral for the turtle and he contributed to that.

None of the roads were paved here for really a long time. Growing up next to Mission Road there was dust, dust, dust. A place we used to go a lot was up to Mill Bay. It was almost at the end of the road, because the road ended at Abercrombie. We went to Mill Bay for picnics a lot. In about third grade, Cybil Naughton and I became very good friends, we became best friends. Her grandma's house was a big log house there, and her dad had a little log cabin up on the hill where the trailer court is now. Those were the only two houses out at Mill Bay. They raised chickens; they had a place further back for their chickens. They also tried to put in an apple orchard on the hill, but the apples didn't work out.

More than Mill Bay, we loved to go out to the end of the road at Fort Abercrombie when we were little, for picnics and stuff. We liked the cliffs, and a lot of times we couldn't go, so we found a place back behind Neal and June Sargeant's house, the property next to ours. There was a cliff there, and my sister and I called it "Pretend Abercrombie". When we couldn't go to the real one, we could pretend.

Some of the stories that I remember Mom telling... She liked to talk about the cannery work that she did before we were born, and how it was piecework. They got paid for every fish they cleaned, and she was the fastest one. Also, in Bethel, they had foot races, and she always won the girls' foot races. I just have to think about that sometimes, when I take her to Safeway, and she's walking so slow and I have to go ahead and get things for her. I have to remember that she used to win those races.

Another story that she's mentioned to me in the past few months, about the time she was a teenager, she went out with her boyfriend on a dog sled, way out on the tundra, and they saw the dance of the whooping cranes. Just having been to Bethel myself, and seeing the tundra I couldn't really imagine before. It just touched her so much. She said what a true spectacle it was. It's just flat on the tundra, there's nothing there. The whooping cranes were right there. They just came upon them.

She used to make up stories when it was our bedtime. She read to us a lot and really instilled a love of books in both of us, and also in Nature and the natural surroundings and animals. The hero in all

our stories was always the same little squirrel. They were just simple stories; the squirrel went out, and he did this and that, and he had his friends, and did every day life kind of things. I tell Mom that I really liked the stories that she liked to tell, and she said, "Oh, but they're always just the same."

I remember when I was seven years old and Alaska became a state, and I remember that my parents were adamantly opposed to statehood. That was a real big deal when we became a state. It was big change and it was fine as a territory. Now with the talk of succession, other people are having the same thoughts, I think.

Well, I guess I was gonna tell the story about the Tidal Wave. My mom had just learned to drive and everyone knows it was Good Friday. We were coloring Easter eggs at the time, ... Mom was out in the shed, getting something out for dinner. When the ground started shaking, she thought that a car had bumped into the shed, because the shed was very close to the road. Oh, man, inside the house, it being up on skids, it was really shaking, so she came right away to get us out of there. We just stood out in the yard, watching rocks bounce around on the ground, and we had a couple of chickens that we rescued from the ax at Naughton's. The chickens couldn't even stand up, they were falling over and flapping all around. Our dog Taxi was bouncing around and barking at the sky.

The trees were just whipping around like you wouldn't believe.

Neighbors were yelling at each other and coming out of their houses. I looked at the bay and it was sloshing around like water in a bowl. It all seemed to go on forever and ever; five minutes is really a long time for the Earth to be shaking. As soon as it stopped, someone who was over at Mrs. Chichenoff's said, "With all this shaking, there's going to be a tidal wave. We all have to get out of here." So we wanted to pack up every pet we owned, but Mom said that we could only take the dog.

We still had our pajamas on and we didn't even change. We just put on our coats over our pajamas, and got into the car and went to the High School parking lot. The High School then is what the Junior High is now, except its been added onto a lot. We were gonna sit out the tidal wave right there, but I was the most paranoid of all. The only picture of the tidal wave I had seen before was the Japanese print of the tsunami, and it's this huge thing. I was crying, saying, "Mom we're not high enough, we have to go higher." She was a nervous wreck just from driving that little bit from Shahafka Cove up to the high school. But she had no choice, but to agree to go up on Pillar Mountain. Well everybody else in town, just about, was up on Pillar Mountain, too. There was a line of cars all the way to the top. Our place in the line was about where that new power station is there. It's not very far up the hill, and some people had a view. It was getting dark already. All we could do was hear buildings and boats and things crunching around together.

When it was all over and they sounded the all clear, every car had to go up to the top of the mountain, and turn around and come back

down. The road was real narrow, it's wider in parts now than it was then. I think I mentioned before that my dad was out fishing at the time when all this happened, so we didn't know what happened to him. We had just gotten turned around and past the point where we had been, waiting it out facing uphill, here comes Dad walking up the hill to look for us, 'cause he had heard that's where we went.

He had been coming around Cape Chiniak on his boat, and saw the cliffs caving into the sea, but he was so far out, that he didn't feel any strange tidal action at all. Also, he didn't know what was going on. When he got closer to town, he found his house floating out in the channel. He didn't know if his family had gotten out or not, so the first thing he did was tie up to the house and go inside and check it out. He tried to tow the house with his boat, but it didn't work.

Even as young as I was, I was twelve years old, I could notice that my parents did visibly age after that. People who were able and willing to take people in, put their names in up at the high school. We had to spend one night in the gym. They set up an emergency shelter up there. The very next day, we were taken in by Smokey and Lois Stover and their small children. Their kids were two years old and eight months old then. We stayed with them for six weeks, that was over on Island Lake.

They brought the Corps of Engineers to guard everything, and every day, until a designated time, they let people come and salvage anything they could from their homes before they were all razed and burned. I really, really wanted to go help, but I wasn't old enough. So most of the houses in my neighborhood ended up in Potato Patch

Lake. The shed had a thin six-inch cement bottom, which was actually picked up and floated up into the middle of Urdahl Circle.

Interviewer: How far did the tidal wave go? Did it go into Potato Patch Lake?

Narrator: It went into Potato Patch Lake and washed out the road. That's how the Beachcomber ship was moved. It was sailed into the channel created by the tidal wave, before they repaired the road. The road wasn't passable at high tide. When the tide was low, you could go in between there. There was a river opened up, between the lake and the Bay. I remember Dad almost got stuck in there once. It was pretty deep, but we made it out.

So the place had been ransacked, all his guns were stolen. About all we salvaged was clothes and blankets. These things had to be rinsed several times in the river between Dark and Island Lake. It was handy to have that there, because a lot of sand and silt in them. Somehow Dad found the photo albums, and saved them. I don't know where he got the idea to do it, but we rinsed them in clear water, and patted them dry, and pressed them in books. They were okay.

I had a little, a very little coin collection of foreign coins that I'd gotten here and there. One was a three ml piece that I got from Cypress, that I was really proud of. When I was in line at the concession stand at the theater, I noticed that someone was giving change. I noticed a coin that looked like the size of a penny. I thought that it was copper, but it had a different design on it. So I quickly calculated a purchase that would give me back four

pennies, and I got that coin back as a penny. That was kind of a prize thing. I asked my dad if he had found match boxes that were glued together. I used them to keep my coin collection in. He said that he had found it, but it was empty, so he just threw it away. Really, no personal belongings were salvaged.

We got to go out on the boat right after the tidal wave, probably the second time that the whole family got to go out. I just remember, well, if you can imagine, the contents of this house floating out there. Then the contents of all the houses and all the stores, and it was incredible. The food and furniture, cars and boats, houses. It seemed like it would never, never get cleaned up. It was real nightmarish. We didn't have school for really a long time, which was nice for the kids that weren't impacted.

When my Aunt Mary and Uncle John and cousin Bob moved to the mainland in 1960, they just left their house vacant. Actually, there was a lot of furniture and stuff in it. We got in touch with them and they said that we could live there. Their house was on Alder Lane. It was the last one that they most recently burned.

We weren't allowed to go there and clean it up, either. But Mom and Dad had a heck of a time cleaning mice out of drawers and getting it habitable. When we did move in, everything was still a big mess downtown. There were still boats sitting up on dry land, and you couldn't go across the closest road at high tide because the area by where the new mall is now just turned into a giant puddle. But it was kind of interesting having that vantage point and being able to see the progress; to see that they actually cleaned everything up when it

seemed totally impossible at the beginning.

Interviewer: People come here now and say, " Oh well, Kodiak doesn't have a real mall", but they don't take the time to realize how it got to the point it is now.

Narrator: Yeah, they could have put a lot more character into the town when they built it back, but they didn't. They put all the roads straight; all the roads had been windy before, and there were some little hills. The Post Office was on a hill, and you just can't imagine how much it's changed unless you were there before. Being the kind of person I am, I can't look at the place and not see it how it used to be. That will always be there.

The bank building, the First National is "the bear bank," well, the bank then was really the bear bank. They had about four bears. They had a mother and a cub, and another one that was standing up, and I think they might have even had a polar bear. It was so different, I just remember how hilly it was, and the windy roads. There were so many more Cottonwood trees. Downtown Urban Renewal wiped out all the Cottonwood trees; they just plowed them down. Everyone was upset about that...where those apartments are and the Job Service and all that stuff. What's left at the Russian Orthodox Church is just kind of part of that little forest of Cottonwood trees.

I always knew when it was about time to go back to school when the leaves turned yellow and blew across the road. I really enjoyed being there around the Cottonwood trees, because our school was just across from the Russian Church. It would be in the present day Fish and Game front yard, real close. The Russian Orthodox people didn't

really associate with the Catholics then, like they do now. We were right across the road from each other, but we might as well been worlds apart. Everything that was going on there was completely foreign to us. Now things are much different, they have a real good relationship. For Easter holiday, they extend holiday greetings to each other, and it wasn't like that back then.

The festivities that I remember the most when I was growing up was how great the Crab Festival was, and how different it was from now. It was so much better, there weren't even any carnival rides for a long time. Then finally they did bring in a ferris wheel on a barge, and put it in the parking lot of the hospital, which is the Griffin Building now. They actually had King Crab then , you know. They served crab burgers that were really delicious. Yeah, that was a big hit. They also put King Crabs in the boat harbor for divers to catch in a contest. Whoever got the biggest one got the prize.

They had an old-fashioned diving suit with the bell helmet, set up by the harbormaster office, with a microphone inside it. Kids could go talk to this faceless, headless diver, which we thought was real cool. Finally, someone put a balloon in there, with a face drawn on it. I liked it better when he didn't have any face.

There were lots of fun games, and games were really easy to win back then. I remember throwing the penny on the cigarette packs, and if it landed on the circle of the Lucky Strike pack, you got a prize. There were real cool prizes, like those bronze horses with the key chain bridles. There were useful things, too, like a juice set with a

pitcher and glasses, so you could win something for Mom that she could use. I remember I was proud to be able to give Mom that.

There was a much more festive atmosphere than there is now. It's too commercial, most people are there to get your money, and people are selling things for outlandish prices. There was none of that back then. It was just the community getting together and celebrating the crab harvest. That's the way I remember it in the late fifties and early sixties. I'm of the opinion that they should change the festival name now to something else. I have been, for quite a few years now, just in memory of how it used to be.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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