

**BETTY SPRINGHILL:  
A PIONEER IN SHAPING THE SCHOOLS  
OF THE  
KODIAK ISLAND BOROUGH SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**Interview conducted by**

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Today is December 4, 1994. I am Lisa Stroh, and I will be interviewing Betty Springhill who was a teacher and a principal in the Kodiak Island Borough School District.

Hi, Betty. Would you please just explain to us a little bit about the years that you were involved in education and some of the changes you have seen over the years?

Well, I came to Kodiak to teach in 1944, and my certificate was from the territory of Alaska and the territorial schools were run from a central office in Juneau. There was a very capable Commissioner of Education who was called, for the territory, Ryan. He controlled the schools all over the state from Juneau. We were instructed, and we sent our schedules in to the state office. I keep calling it a state, but it was a territory. Then you would say what time you were teaching math and so on. You would post that on your door and all over the territory every school in the territory would have these schedules posted on them. If they were lucky enough to make a surprise visit (airplanes were not common at that time), but if they were able to get in, you'd better have your schedule posted AND you'd better be doing what [you] said. If you said you were doing math at 10:00, you should be doing that at 10:00. Now this sounds crazy, but it wasn't. It was, as I recall back over the years, it was an *extremely* wise way to try to insist that teachers were doing these things all day, every day. In addition to that, we even had textbooks published and sent to each teacher, in the territory, a group of novels from first to twelfth grade in every subject matter. There was about three inches thick. I wish I had one now because it was marvelous. And if you just taught from *that*, the kids would learn something.

**Who wrote that guide?**

Ryan, Dr. Ryan.

**O.K. He was the Commissioner?**

He was the Commissioner--a very, *very* clever outstanding man. He was here for many years. So I was teaching. When I came, I taught fifth and sixth grade combination. I had thirty-five students and then I got all the music that was taught in the school. I taught it out in the hall.

**O.K.**

And we were pretty well packed into a badly ventilated room, with very poor lighting, and somehow we managed and the kids just never seemed to get sick. They came every single day to school. They were predominantly native children at that time.

**Was this here in Kodiak?**

Oh, yes. Just right down there (as she pointed to a location near current downtown Kodiak, a few blocks from her house).

## **The Downtown School?**

Yes, the Downtown School. We had the grade school on the main floor and the high school was in two rooms downstairs and that went very well. Then we had to bring in some auxiliary rooms. We brought in some quonsets from the base to use as auxiliary classrooms. And they used them. They built a building for Home Ec. and it was pretty crude--what we had. BUT, for some reason, nobody noticed. I didn't even really feel put upon, but I had thirty-five students practically and then was asked to do the music. It didn't even occur to me to question it. I don't know if I was stupid or naive. We were just there to teach, and the children were there to learn. And we did.

**So, how many students did you have K-12?**

Let me see. It would have been about--I can't really remember the exact amount--but it was over 400.

**So about 400 and then about how many teachers did you have?**

Well, there was about first, second, third, fourth. Then I taught combination fifth and sixth. Seventh. Eighth. So that was seven teachers and then about four or five high school teachers.

**Probably about eleven or twelve teachers then?**

Yes.

O.K.

So it was a happy time. Everybody loved school and as I say, I never did understand why they wanted to come every single day to school and never even stay. And I talked with some of them later, who are older people now and they said, well, that was the heart of their existence--coming to school. Their friends were there. We had something going that they loved.

**Lots going on during the day.**

Yes, yes! They were busy every day. And they were good--just as good as they can be.

**So you didn't really have many discipline problems?**

No, No! We had a superintendent who had an office in the building. . . He was the only administrator. And we had no counselors. No psychologists. We just flew by the seat of our pants. And sometimes we had to make decisions we were really not equipped to make because you had no resource. And nobody was injured as a result of it.

**Did you go to school nine months a year?**

Yes.

**And then were you off during the three months?**

Yes.

**Was the school day pretty much the same as it is today? Like 8:30 to 3:30? Or was it longer or shorter?**

We went until 4:00 in the upper grades. But in the lower grades, they got out earlier.

**Then the kids, I suppose, just brought their lunch to school?**

They could go home if they wanted to. We were all in the downtown area. There was nothing out there where the Main School is now. It was all trees.

**How did they get to school?**

They walked. [Sometimes] somebody had to come for them.

**How long were you at the Main School? Is that what they called it?**

No, they called it the Downtown School.

Oh! O.K.

And we had that building up through the Tidal Wave. We even used it after the tidal wave. I was then going between the two buildings--Main and Downtown. By that time Main had been built. Now Main was built in about 1953. So in 1953, when they built the Main School, they still had the Downtown School. We kept it [Downtown School] until it was condemned and we had to get out.

**About what year was that?**

It was in about 1965.

**So was that right after the tidal wave?**

We must have kept it at least two years after that. And during this time my school history was that I taught fifth grade, then I had groups of seventh and eighth. And so all through this, I was teaching down there. Fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and music. Those were the different classes I taught. And so then, they decided we were getting big enough, we had better have some administrators. So I had the position without the credentials. I went to the University of Washington and got my masters degree. And I got that in the sixties.

**O.K. Did you go to school during the summers and get that or did you take a few years off?**

Yes, four summers. Four long, hot summers! But I made the choice to go into administration. And I was never sorry because I enjoyed teaching--and administration--almost equally. Sometimes I thought I missed the classroom more, but I got such a brief experience with staff and students before it got ugly, you know, that I don't have anything other than very pleasant memories of those years. They blend in to one another.

**And even though you are an administrator, you still keep really close tabs on those kids. It isn't like you are just removed from all those kids.**

Yes. So when we became a state--By this time, we were making transition, and I was a member of the Territorial Curriculum Committee to make the transition to statehood. So I wrote my thesis on that period--that decade--those ten years of transition. We were planning for. We knew they were going to come. We made the transition very easily to a state Department of Education and by this time we were not such a rural situation. By this time we had a superintendent, and we had a junior high. We had the high school, but there was a long period of time when there was a regional high school where the high school is now. It was a regional high school. And the concept was that they would bring the native children from different areas to attend here together. And there were dormitories.

It flopped!

**They brought kids in from the Aleutians, right?**

Yes, from the mainland and everything. And they fought. The Eskimos fought the Aleuts. It was a disaster. They had to give it up. So the building then reverted to the borough. And by this time, after statehood, we divided into boroughs. We were a borough school, which would be like a county school outside [in the lower forty-eight states].

During this period, the adjustments were gradual enough that nobody was jarred or startled. Everything went in good order. And so we made the transition from a territorial system, to a statehood system, to the borough system, and somehow along the way we had good leadership--excellent leadership. We had a Superintendent of Schools that was so wise that he was way before his time. He guided us through all of this.

**What was his name?**

Ivor Schott. And he was Mr. Kodiak Education and he handled it so wisely--and so well. And during this period, we were all settling up the borough, and it was not an easy task. Defining the school district lines. And we fought having the

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