

Call Number: 02-00-62-07

Bill Burke Interview from January 21, 1963, No Location

Summary created by: Jacob Metoxen

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Notes: Original on 5 inch reel, copy on CD

The recording starts with music playing. At 1:05 of the recording Harry Hughes begins speaking. It is January 21st, 1963 in Fairbanks, Alaska. It is 1:15 pm. He has Bill Burke at his house. Burke is an old time pioneer. Also there is Frank Young. Bill came to Alaska in 1907. He arrived in St. Michael. Bill was in the Army. He was in the 10<sup>th</sup> infantry. He came from Honolulu from Valdez and around the coast. The old military post at St. Michael was called Ft. "Get there". He doesn't know why the post was called that. He guesses that the fort was called "Get There" because it was "Get there or die." There were outfits there before the 10th infantry such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Calvary. His outfit went to the fort in 1906. He was in St. Michael until June 1910. He bought out and worked for the Army as a civilian. He carried mail and worked for the Army for 8 years. He went back in the Army during the First World War he was in the signal corps and was there for 4 years. He's been in Nenana since 1929. He carried mail in those days for 8 years. He carried mail from Flat to Nenana. He made the trip with the mail once a week. There were five teams. Free Milliam [?], Lars Nelson, Fred Clark, Jack Lamont, AC Olgram [?] all carried mail. Charlie Armor, Fred Lemons, Peter Demoski carried mail with Bill. There was an old timer name Charlie Croning and Pete Snow, who carried mail. The coldest bill ever traveled was -62 degrees. He made 40 miles in that weather, roughly 10 hours. The dogs didn't die. The cold bothers their long. There'd b blood on their hair from pulling and breathing so hard so he'd cut them loose and let them run behind. Some dogs work lots harder than others.

Frank says he would like to discuss the notorious "Black Bear Case" which was a post office robbery that happened on the trail from Nenana to Flat in the vicinity of Shermeyer's Road House. The robbery was located 19 miles from the Iditarod River. Bill says the mail was a payroll shipment going to Takotna to a man name Tom Ashum [?] to pay off his dreg crew. The mail carriers lost it. They took the long trail and lost it in the woods and came back for grub and dog feed. Frank asks how the mail carriers got lost on the trail because the trail was a well-known trail. Bill says the trail wasn't a well-known trail and that there were actually two trails. The mail carriers took the wrong trail. They took the right hand trail instead of the left hand trail. They left on the wrong side of the lake. They didn't know. They went as far as they could then got food and dog feed. They wanted to get back to Lake Machumna [?]. They cashed the mail sacks on the trail and they thought they were going to come back. When they got back it had snowed and they couldn't find the sacks for two months. There was a prospector named Gasten St. Clair who was prospecting and trapping in the area. Frank says St. Claire wrote a story called "Old Dog" which he considers a masterpiece. When they got the mail back to Lake Matumna [?] they brought the mail back to Mcgrath and the post master said she couldn't unlock the lock. They sent it to

Flat and put an ordinary lock on it. When they brought the package back to Iditarod they left the mail outdoors and it was stolen. Shermeyer was running the Road House where the mail carriers were and Nelly Bates was the mail carrier and Duffy Bates was a passenger on the mail. The mail was robbed that night it was left out. Frank asks if Bill has any details on how it took place. Bill says that during the trial it came out that Nelly had taken the mail into the road house and gave it to Shermeyer. Shermeyer went on with the mail and went to the post office in Ofer and Ofer is the ones who claimed the mail was missing. Frank asks Bill if it is a coincidence that happened where old Shermeyer took the mail sacks that night took the money out and laid them on the trail after. Chester Brink drove by and didn't see the mail sacks. In the meantime the old timer went and retrieved the mail sacks and burned them on a stove. He took the locks and all of the hardware and dumped them towards Flat against birch trees. He remembered where he threw them because a couple years later he led the post officer investigators out there and got them. \$30,000 was in the shipment. There were no bills bigger than a \$20. There were one thousand \$1's and the rest were \$5's and \$10's. According to the way it came out, Nelly Beaty told Shermeyer that Duffy would get blamed. Duffy was the mail carrier. Shermeyer and Beaty gave \$5,000 to Duffy, who didn't know anything about it. Nelly mined and the next winter she went outside. Shermeyer stayed over there for a year or so he worked for Harry Duran by taking care of his garden. Shermeyer worked the next year until he got sick. Shermeyer had the money in a flashlight. The money was wrapped around the wire. He steamed the label off a Prince Albert tobacco container and crammed the money in then put tobacco on top and put the stamps back on. The Marshall and mail clerk in Nenana packed his things and put them on the train for him. Shermeyer, Black Bear Nelly and Bates [Beaty] all got out with the money to the states according to Hughes. Nelly Black Bear never went out though says Bill. Bill says she kept the money and she marked some 20 dollar bills and put them in circulation. They went through Fairbanks and nothing happened. She said "To hell with the serial numbers, they don't know nothin'." She paid off her crew right out. Frank says that the post office detectives had been working a couple years on this case. Finally the old man when he was going to die, he turned state's evidence. Bill says he knew the mail inspector because he talked to lots of them. They never questioned Shermeyer. Shermeyer went outside and he started playing in horse raises in California. The talk was they put 3 post office detectives on him in California. He finally got so run down that he was going to die and so he sent for the inspector in Seattle and told him that there was a man in Fairbanks blamed for the mail robbery that had nothing to do with it. Shermeyer confessed and then Lynn Smith arrested Nelly and Duffy. They were arrested in Iditarod and brought to trial in Fairbanks.

At 21:00 of the recording Frank says he remembers them having the smartest criminal lawyer. His name was Tom Markham. Frank says the Black Bear and Duffy were acquitted. Bill says Shermeyer was so bitter that he was jipped out of \$5,000 that the jury figured he was just out for revenge on someone. Shermeyer was 72 and the jury thought a man that old getting in with a young woman doesn't sound right. Frank says all of them are dead. Bill says the mail carrier Duffy lost the mail. Duffy was never on the witness stand at no time during the trial. Nelly the Bear got tried again. Frank says Nelly was a lady of the evening and Bill agrees. Frank says she was nice looking and Bill says she was lady like in every way. Bill says he bets she spent \$2,000 every spring buying ice pool tickets for the old timers. Bill says he laughs at the witnesses coming in because they'd come in and buy fish. The witnesses were all paid for the stay in Fairbank and Bill finds that hilarious. Jack Whitaker from Shermeyer's even gave them the

bill for his laundry. Frank thanks Bill. Bill says Virginia Howard was at the Shermeyer Roadhouse the night of the robbery. The name of the roadhouse was Shermeyers Roadhouse, 19 miles from Flat on the Iditarod Trail. Frank asks if Shermeyer was convicted. According to Shermeyer's age and him turning state evidence he got one year in jail. The state farmed him out to the railroader at Curry hotel and he was a gardener. Bill says he saw Shermeyer there in 1949.

At 28:34 Harry Hughes begins asking Bill questions. Bill was born in Clinton, Illinois in 1887. His father and mother's names were James and Joann. He had six half-sisters and one half brother and one full sister. Half Brother named James Burke. Half-sisters were all married: Newt Samuels, Lawrence Murphy, Richard Ball, Clive McDonald, Anson Bowers, Allen Reynolds, Ed Corrigan from Omaha, Nebraska. Bill got married the first time in 1912-1913. Her name was Anna Brush. They split up and then in 1923 he married Rosie Bigjoe. Bill has six children: Bill, Rosie, Marie, Johnny, Joe, Altona. Four of them are married. He says his two youngest are not married. He's got 14 grandchildren. The time is 1:50 pm of January the 21<sup>st</sup>, 1963 in Fairbanks. The recording stops.

The recording resumes at 33:35 and the recording a continuation of questions about the Black bear Robbery. Frank Young is doing follow up questions with Bill Burke. Frank says he is always asked questions about the Black Bear case. He asks bill how Nelly had the name the Black Bear. Bill says it's because she had black hair all over her body like a Black Bear. Frank asks Bill what year he was out with Singlecorps. Bill says from 1919-1922. Bill's station was Tanana but he was all over. Bill says he was never on the Eagle Trail. The Eagle Trail started in Valdez and came up to Sulinus and through Tanana Cross. Billy Mitchell's expedition is mentioned. Bill said Mitchell went all the way to St. Michael. Bill says Bob Sworthouse went over there while he Bill was at Toke and Bob said some of the land was good just sitting there. They put a cable from Unakleet to Nome in 1900. Harry Lucky was down there then. The rabbits kept eating the cable so then they put a ground cable in. The ice took the ground cable out. They put a wireless station in then. There was a landline from Valdez to St. Michael. He believes it was 1904 when they put the wireless in. Fred Million's brother built the wire. The brother was a cracker jack radio man and went by the name Wilson. He's the only man in the history of the army that ever made master sergeant electrician in his first enlistment. Frank asks what the wages were that the plain GI got in the Signal Corps or the infantry. It was \$13 a month. The sergeants got \$5 a month more and the corporal got \$3 dollar more a month. \$10.85 up in Alaska if you're out on the line for extra duty. 10% for foreign duty. Expert rifleman got \$5. Bill says he was getting \$60 a month. Bill says when he first joined in St. Louis he was paid cash and there was a Jewish person taking pictures and he had a Calvary outfit and the recruits all go to get their pictures taken. Bill says there was a Jewish tailor in Tanana and he'd make the soldiers' beds and shine shoes and do a lot of work. He would do this for \$2 a month. He finally opened up a tailor shop and there was a short fellow named Mason. He and a tall man named Ridgeway were at the officer's ball. The Mason wanted his pants pressed and cleaned and the lieutenant got a new suit so they took him over to the tailor so he cut off the short one and pressed the tall one. The lieutenant came over to barracks and told them he didn't want any of the soldiers to pay to the tailor for the month. Frank asks Bill if he knew Frank Alba. Bill says yes he did. Frank says little Frank Alba used to play different instruments. Bill says there was a barge that was 12 feet wide on the bottom and 24 feet wide on top. He was hauling 900 pound barrels of tar. He was hauling for

freight. They sent a drag line up and he had no one to help load. Frank Alba was hollering for them to stop because they kept dropping barrels of tar on him. This was in 1944. Frank asks what else he knows about Frank Alba. Once he came down to Tanana to load Hooch. He came down with Moser and George Bailey and Frank got drunk and gave it all away. The people he gave the whiskey too got caught and had to do 6 months in jail. Frank Alba came from Spain and he had a lot of relation over there. Bill says Frank Alba was cooking for the road commission once. Pete McMullin is discussed. Pete hired Frank Alba to be the cook and Bill tricked Frank Alba into thinking there was a fire and Frank Alba got fired for that.

At 49:17 Frank asks Bill what he remembers about Old Sandy, the woman who used to cook in the camps around. Bill says he never knew her. Frank says no one would give her a job in Fairbanks so she got a Vanagon and pulled it into where Griffin Park is. She started selling food and could only seat four people at a time in front of her counter. Frank says he remembers when she set that up. Bill asks how the old lady Walker is. Bill says he never danced with her. The recording stops.

At 50:25 Harry Hughes says he is at his home at 215 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Fairbanks, Alaska. Mrs. Joann Wold of 231 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue Fairbanks, Alaska. Mrs. Wold made a request to use the tape recording that Harry made during the week of January 20<sup>th</sup> about the Black Bear mail robbery. The letter is addressed to Bill Burke. She says she enjoyed meeting with Bill and hopes to meet in the future. The letter has an addition from William Burke dated 1, 28 1963 saying that the permission is granted to use the tape. On January 29<sup>th</sup> 1963, Bill Burke signs the tape over to Joann Wold. Igloo Four voted to allow a transfer tape to be recorder for Mrs. Joann Wold at her expense. Hughes says there are a number of laws for recordings and transcripts from individuals. He says the person using this tape will have to take full responsibility as Igloo Four and Harry Hughes and Frank Young. He says no responsibility will fall on Igloo Four Pioneers of Alaska. The date is January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The recording stops.