

**Draft Transcript of Interview, Evolyn Melville with Kathy Price  
16 August 2002, Fairbanks, AK**

*Ladd Field oral history project, Ft. Wainwright, conducted under contract by CEMML CSU. Original tape and release deposited with University of Alaska Fairbanks Rasmuson Library Alaska and Polar Regions Dept oral history collection.*

Transcribed by interviewer

KP: This is August 16, 2002, and this is Kathy Price talking with Evolyn Melville at her home in North Pole, Alaska. We'll be talking about Ladd Field in World War II and the Fairbanks area in World War II for a Ladd Field history project. Thank you very much, Mrs. Melville. It's nice to meet with you this afternoon.

EM: Thank you.

KP: I was wondering if you could tell me just a little bit about what we were talking about off the tape, about living in Fairbanks right before Ladd Field came in, and where you were and where that was in relationship to where the airbase went in later, and on from there.

EM: Well, I've been in Fairbanks, the Interior, since 1921. I was four months old when Dad brought us back to Fairbanks, cause he grew up here, prior to World War I. Anyway, I was married in 1940 and we were given a piece of property out on the railroad tracks that went from the main railroad from Seward to Fairbanks, the Alaska Railroad, and they built an extension of that railroad to what was called then Ladd Field. Our home was right alongside that railroad. We built ourselves a small home there in 1941. The morning of Pearl Harbor our first child was born. Kind of a shocker, when I woke up Sunday morning, December 7<sup>th</sup>, and Mom said war was going on. It was quite a shocker. So, in due course of time, I went back to my home with a baby, and my husband was working in a position where he could not advance anymore. He was frozen in the job because of the war, so we stayed right there in Derby Tract several years.

One of my fondest recollections—the way our house was situated, we were in the landing pattern for aircraft going into Ladd Field. The flights of aircraft, A20s and other craft would come in over Birch Hill and they'd go right over our house into the landing pattern for Ladd Field. Our young son was out in the yard a lot, and his first word was "Airplane." Cause that's what he heard and saw all those first months when he was able to be out and about, crawling around out in the

front yard, stumbling around when he finally learned to walk. So Ladd Field kind of played an interesting part of our lives, those of us that lived along the railroad tracks out to Ladd Field. We spent a lot of time wandering up and down the tracks, those of us that lived out in the area. There were several of us that had small children, and we'd do a lot of walking along the tracks. There was also a road of sorts that paralleled the tracks, and it went out and crossed the bridge across the Chena between the rails, for people that wanted to take that method of getting out to Ladd Field to go to work, etc.

KP: Do you remember, did they have a guardhouse out there at that entrance?

EM: They had a guardhouse of some sort, I know, but I don't recall too much about it because I never tried to go...well, I did once, but I don't remember much about it. We ourselves didn't try to go out to Ladd Field; we had no reason to. My husband was busy with his job, and I had a small child to take care of. We did a lot of walking in the area but I don't know if I mentioned this earlier or not, but I'll mention again. I've lived in the Interior of Alaska since August of 1921, when Dad brought Mother and I up from Brooklyn, New York, where they were married and I was born in 1921. I just lived in the Interior all my life.

KP: Do you remember that rail corridor being very active? It sounds like it wasn't real busy if you were walking along the tracks, but was there a lot of construction? A lot of trains coming through there?

EM: There was regular scheduled trains [that] would come through from probably down below, Seward area, Anchorage, bringing supplies and stuff and coming up to Ladd Field. I don't remember at this point in time a lot of the trains that went through. But there were trains. We would walk from the back of our house out onto the right of way of the train, the railroad, and we'd walk out toward the Steese Highway. The railroad crossed the Steese Highway just a block from our house. And we'd walk out there. I remember during Carnival times and dog races, we'd walk out there and watch the dog mushers go by. Of course, the trains didn't go through when the dog races were going on. But it was interesting. I had lots of neighbors, both on my side of the track, and across the tracks. Some of the families I had known all my life. I knew of them, because where we lived in Fairbanks before I got married, when I was first there as a youngster, lots of families I knew and several of them moved out to the same area, what we call Derby Tract. It was....

KP: I understand there had been some homesteads out in that area when the Army came through to purchase the right of way for the railway...

EM: I don't know about homesteads out in that particular area. There probably were, closer to the river, and they probably bought property from Bentleys. They had a lot of property out in the area. They had a big dairy farm.

KP: I believe that was one, yes.

EM: I really can't recall any homesteads, except closer to Birch Hill there were farms, but that didn't affect the people along the railroad.

KP: I imagine that was just the legal landownership, I think, showed original owners.

EM: Right.

KP: Probably it was just undeveloped area, mostly?

EM: A lot of it was undeveloped area. I remember walking out to our place from Fairbanks with my Dad one time, and we were walking along the highway from Fairbanks, and there was what I thought was a big dog in an area that had been used for a gravel pit. Dad says, Now take a good look at that, that's a wolf. It was a huge critter. OK, so that was a wolf. And then we kept on going. We were going out to where he had this property in Derby Tracts. Like I say, when Johnny and I got married, why Mom and Dad gave us another lot that they had purchased along with it to try and develop. The Derby Tracts was developed to try and raise money to have the winter carnivals and the dog derbies in Fairbanks, so that's why it was called Derby Tracts. And there are still a few people around in this area that have property out there in Derby Tracts. And part of it was Hamilton Acres. That was developed after Derby Tracts. You'd have to get a map of the area to look and see what that's all about. Hamilton Acres was something else.

KP: When you went there, was it towards the beginning, when there were just a few homes out there?

EM: There were just a few homes in Derby Tract. And then Hamilton Acres was developed and it was closer to the...and had access across the railroad tracks, and a lot of people that lived in Hamilton Acres used that access to get to Ladd Field because they worked out there.

KP: So Derby Tracts was on the north side, or the south side of the tracks?

EM: South side of the tracks. But part of it lapped over into the north side. And then there was Hamilton Acres the same way. It was originally on the south side, but it was developed on the north side of the tracks, too. And it became a bedroom community, so to speak, of Fairbanks. A lot of people coming into Ladd Field to work, and servicemen coming in and deciding when their service time was up, to stay and build homes in the area. They liked the Fairbanks community. A lot of people that came to Ladd Field as servicemen stayed on and made homes in the area, and a lot of them are still here.

KP: I understand in certain cases, in particular some of the officers, would select a house and make arrangements to possibly purchase it, and then go back down south and convince the rest of their family they should come back!

EM: (Laughs) I imagine there was a lot of that, because to most people in the lower 48, Alaska was the end of the world, and there was nothing there but snow and ice. It wasn't a comfortable place to live. It didn't have any of the nicer things that people expected, living in the lower 48. They didn't think we had electricity; they didn't think we had roads and cars, and all that good stuff. They just didn't know, until they got here, and then they were surprised. Pleasantly surprised, in a good many cases, cause they stayed on. But as far as Ladd Field's concerned, I wasn't out there very much. I remember one time after my husband had been transferred down to Delta Junction to work for the Alaska Road Commission, we moved down there. We lived down there one winter, and he decided that wasn't for him, and we decided to move back to Fairbanks to our home. We still had our property at Derby tract. My sister was kind of going with a military man, and she convinced me one time while I was waiting for my husband to come up from Delta, that I should go out to this party with her at Ladd Field. OK, so Mom said she would take care of our child, who was less than a year old at the time, and we went out to Ladd Field. Now I don't remember going out there, I don't remember how we got there, I assume somebody took us in a car. But the one thing I remember about it, and I'll never forget it. We had to go to this certain spot, and we got in a building and went down into corridors. They were underground corridors that led all over Ladd Field. And I remember my sister and I walking through these corridors with these people that we were with, and then going upstairs into buildings. I never forgot that. I wasn't afraid of it, but it was just...that was

the way they worked out there because they didn't want people driving around at Ladd Field for security reasons. So we did all this walking around in underground corridors.

KP: I remember talking to someone who said they came to work in the winter—it was dark. They worked in a basement of a building and they walked around in the utilidor corridors during the day. They never saw the sun at all, went home in the dark.

EM: I can imagine. I can imagine. But I'll never forget that. It wasn't scary, but it was just such an unusual way to go to the party, per se.

KP: Was it a surprise? Did you know that there were utilidors out there?

EM: No, I never knew that. So that was all a surprise to me. Something new and different. I just went along with my sister. When we finally got back to the house, pretty late at night, my husband had come in, and I wasn't there. We were staying with my Mom because we couldn't get into our own house right away, and he was pretty upset that I wasn't waiting at home for him, and that I had gone out to Ladd Field with my sister. He was very upset. But we ironed that out. We didn't split up or anything. (Laughs)

KP: Did you see a lot of soldiers and airmen around town as you were going about your business?

EM: Well, a good part of that time, like I say, when my son was about nine months old, we moved down to Delta for my husband to work on the road down there. So there was quite a bit of time that I wasn't around Fairbanks, because I was busy taking care of my family in Delta. I remember driving to Fort Greely which was being established as an Air Force base at the end of the Alaska Highway.

KP: Was that still being built at the time, or that was operating by then, I imagine, in 1942....

EM: It was being constructed in those first years in '41, '42, when I was living down in Delta with Johnny. We were there from... Trying to pin everything down to a time and a date after sixty years or so is kind of awkward. I have it all written down somewhere, but...

KP: Well, I was thinking more of what you might recall about what was going on, about the airbase down there while you were there, did you see...was that under construction....

EM: We saw the troops come in, I mean military cars come in, and Johnny and I used to drive up and down the road a lot, because fall time we'd go hunting. We'd go by the airbase, and we'd go on further down the Richardson, and we'd see all the activity, the things that they were doing around the area.

KP: Such as...

EM: I don't know what all they were building, but they had sites for the military to inhabit and keep an eye on things. There were a lot of those around, in the flats between Fort Greely and Donnelly Dome.

KP: Like observation posts?

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KP: And then you returned to Fairbanks a year later.

EM: And then we moved back to our house. We stayed there until...

KP: Did you ever see any of the Russian airmen in town?

EM: Oh, yes. I remember one time going into, it was called Gordon's store. It was a clothing store. You could buy shoes, you could buy all kinds of clothing and stuff there. I remember going in there one time, I've forgotten what I was looking for. But there were all these military people in there, and they were buying up shoes like crazy. And a lot of them were the Russian people, and they'd buy dozens of pairs of shoes to send back to their folks, their families in Russia. And we

used to see the Russian planes going over. I don't know. In retrospect, I can't remember that they made that much of an impression. They didn't bother me, they weren't part of what I was doing. Our second child was born in 1944 and from then on, I was kept busy, because I had a young son and a daughter to take care of. But there was always lots of activity coming over Birch Hill and going into Ladd Field. All those times when we were living there at that house in Derby Tracts. It was always a lot of activity.

KP: Was it mostly daytime activity, was there night flying over there?

EM: I don't recall. What I remember mostly, there was a lot of daytime activity, of people coming and going, flying in and out of Ladd Field. But that one time, when I went out with my sister to a party, and got down in those utilidors, I'll never forget that. That was something else. I didn't know such things existed around there. My sister was working at the base, because she graduated from high school and she had particular talents. She worked out there for quite a while.

KP: Did she work at one of the offices out there?

EM: She worked in an engineering office because she had taken certain courses in high school: engineering drawing, and that sort of thing, that she could utilize. So she worked there.

KP: That sounds a little bit unusual for a young woman to be doing at that time. Or it was an opportunity she might not have had otherwise? Was it more office work or engineering work, drafting work?

EM: It was actually in an engineering office, and she was very adept at doing things like that because she had taken classes in that sort of thing in high school because she was interested in it and she did well at it.

KP: One of the things as I read through material on Ladd Field, there isn't a lot written about what the women were doing out there, which is the reason I'm asking what type of job that was. I understand there was a Women's Army Corps unit out there the last year of the war, and that there were a lot of civilian women working in the offices in various capacities. So I find that interesting.

EM: Well, apparently there weren't all that many jobs for kids right out of high school, and most of the guys went into the service. I can't remember for sure if my sister tried to go to college; she probably did, but at this point in time I'm not sure what all...but anyway, she wound up working out there at Ladd Field. A lot of the girls did, the high school graduate girls because they needed the help out there. Our students graduating from Fairbanks High School in those days had a lot better training than the average. I can recall some of the teachers saying the kids in Fairbanks are a heck of a lot smarter and better trained, better educated than the kids from the lower 48. We got more practical training I guess, in education, but we worked hard at school. A lot of them took engineering drawing and that sort of thing. That's what my sister did.

KP: I didn't realize that was part of the offerings up there.

EM: You mean in Fairbanks?

KP: I mean at the high school level, yeah.

EM: Like I say, when we went to high school in Fairbanks, we could get a real good education. I got an excellent education, and a lot of the fellas that graduated from high school when I did in 1939, went into the service, because things were getting kind of hairy then. I went to college; spent two years at the University of Alaska. I didn't graduate, I didn't get a degree in anything. I got a lot of good education. I got my MRS. degree; I got married in 1940! A lot of people say, MRS degree, what's that? She got married! And Ladd Field was always there.

KP: Did you notice the city changing a lot as the war went on and more and more servicemen came in?

EM: Oh, yeah. Things were always growing and developing, because more and more people came in and stayed. People that came in as service people. They came in; a lot of them married local girls and stayed here. There were social activities. There were always a lot of servicemen brought in by locals. I wasn't in Fairbanks all that time. We moved to Delta in '42 and we were down there for several months, and we came back to Fairbanks and moved on with our lives. I'm trying to remember the sequence of events. It's a little bit difficult. We did have a home in Fairbanks. Our first two children were raised there.

KP: Did you feel that there was overwhelming change that happened with the growth of that base, during the war, after the war, or kind of a normal pace of change, or...?

EM: I don't know. Trying to think back and remember all that, it's just a bit much, because that's all water under the bridge. That happened a long time ago, an awful long time ago, because my son is sixty. I don't know, I have to get down and get a piece of paper and pencil and write it down. He was born in 1941, it's now 2002, so time marches on.

KP: Well it looks like we've covered it pretty well. If you have anything else you'd like to add, please go ahead.

EM: Well, when Ladd Field ceased to be Ladd Field and became Fort Wainwright, everything changed, as far as I'm concerned. Of course, like I say, it didn't interest me that much. I wasn't that concerned with Ladd Field or Fort Wainwright. I had no connections with them. My only clear recollection of Ladd Field that remains in my mind is that trip up there with my sister going through the utilidors, cause we just didn't go out there. We had no reason to. My husband never worked out there. We just did our thing. I worked for the Territory for a while, when it became a State I was still working in the Department of Transportation for twenty-two and a half years. But all of that, there's too many interludes there, to try to tell you everything that happened from the time that I got married to the time I moved out here. Because I lost my parents, I lost my husband, just lots of things happened. But Ladd Field, all those servicemen coming in really made an impression on Fairbanks because it was a whole different group of people, servicemen. It really made a big impression, a change in Fairbanks. There's no doubt about it at all, none at all. And it wasn't bad, it was just part of change. Have I done you any good?

KP: It's been very helpful. Thank you, Mrs. Melville.

EM: Well you're more than welcome.

END

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One of my fondest recollections—the way our house was situated, we were in the landing pattern for aircraft going into Ladd Field. The flights of aircraft, A20s and other craft would come in over Birch Hill and they'd go right over our house into the landing pattern for Ladd Field. Our young son was out in the yard a lot, and his first word was "Airplane." Cause that's what he heard and saw all those first months when he was able to be out and about, crawling around out in the

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KP: Do you remember that rail corridor being very active? It sounds like it wasn't real busy if you were walking along the tracks, but was there a lot of construction? A lot of trains coming through there?

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KP: And then you returned to Fairbanks a year later.

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KP: Did you ever see any of the Russian airmen in town?

EM: Oh, yes. I remember one time going into, it was called Gordon's store. It was a clothing store. You could buy shoes, you could buy all kinds of clothing and stuff there. I remember going in there one time, I've forgotten what I was looking for. But there were all these military people in there, and they were buying up shoes like crazy. And a lot of them were the Russian people, and they'd buy dozens of pairs of shoes to send back to their folks, their families in Russia. And we

used to see the Russian planes going over. I don't know. In retrospect, I can't remember that they made that much of an impression. They didn't bother me, they weren't part of what I was doing. Our second child was born in 1944 and from then on, I was kept busy, because I had a young son and a daughter to take care of. But there was always lots of activity coming over Birch Hill and going into Ladd Field. All those times when we were living there at that house in Derby Tracts. It was always a lot of activity.

KP: Was it mostly daytime activity, was there night flying over there?

EM: I don't recall. What I remember mostly, there was a lot of daytime activity, of people coming and going, flying in and out of Ladd Field. But that one time, when I went out with my sister to a party, and got down in those utilidors, I'll never forget that. That was something else. I didn't know such things existed around there. My sister was working at the base, because she graduated from high school and she had particular talents. She worked out there for quite a while.

KP: Did she work at one of the offices out there?

EM: She worked in an engineering office because she had taken certain courses in high school: engineering drawing, and that sort of thing, that she could utilize. So she worked there.

KP: That sounds a little bit unusual for a young woman to be doing at that time. Or it was an opportunity she might not have had otherwise? Was it more office work or engineering work, drafting work?

EM: It was actually in an engineering office, and she was very adept at doing things like that because she had taken classes in that sort of thing in high school because she was interested in it and she did well at it.

KP: One of the things as I read through material on Ladd Field, there isn't a lot written about what the women were doing out there, which is the reason I'm asking what type of job that was. I understand there was a Women's Army Corps unit out there the last year of the war, and that there were a lot of civilian women working in the offices in various capacities. So I find that interesting.

EM: Well, apparently there weren't all that many jobs for kids right out of high school, and most of the guys went into the service. I can't remember for sure if my sister tried to go to college; she probably did, but at this point in time I'm not sure what all...but anyway, she wound up working out there at Ladd Field. A lot of the girls did, the high school graduate girls because they needed the help out there. Our students graduating from Fairbanks High School in those days had a lot better training than the average. I can recall some of the teachers saying the kids in Fairbanks are a heck of a lot smarter and better trained, better educated than the kids from the lower 48. We got more practical training I guess, in education, but we worked hard at school. A lot of them took engineering drawing and that sort of thing. That's what my sister did.

KP: I didn't realize that was part of the offerings up there.

EM: You mean in Fairbanks?

KP: I mean at the high school level, yeah.

EM: Like I say, when we went to high school in Fairbanks, we could get a real good education. I got an excellent education, and a lot of the fellas that graduated from high school when I did in 1939, went into the service, because things were getting kind of hairy then. I went to college; spent two years at the University of Alaska. I didn't graduate, I didn't get a degree in anything. I got a lot of good education. I got my MRS. degree; I got married in 1940! A lot of people say, MRS degree, what's that? She got married! And Ladd Field was always there.

KP: Did you notice the city changing a lot as the war went on and more and more servicemen came in?

EM: Oh, yeah. Things were always growing and developing, because more and more people came in and stayed. People that came in as service people. They came in; a lot of them married local girls and stayed here. There were social activities. There were always a lot of servicemen brought in by locals. I wasn't in Fairbanks all that time. We moved to Delta in '42 and we were down there for several months, and we came back to Fairbanks and moved on with our lives. I'm trying to remember the sequence of events. It's a little bit difficult. We did have a home in Fairbanks. Our first two children were raised there.

KP: Did you feel that there was overwhelming change that happened with the growth of that base, during the war, after the war, or kind of a normal pace of change, or...?

EM: I don't know. Trying to think back and remember all that, it's just a bit much, because that's all water under the bridge. That happened a long time ago, an awful long time ago, because my son is sixty. I don't know, I have to get down and get a piece of paper and pencil and write it down. He was born in 1941, it's now 2002, so time marches on.

KP: Well it looks like we've covered it pretty well. If you have anything else you'd like to add, please go ahead.

EM: Well, when Ladd Field ceased to be Ladd Field and became Fort Wainwright, everything changed, as far as I'm concerned. Of course, like I say, it didn't interest me that much. I wasn't that concerned with Ladd Field or Fort Wainwright. I had no connections with them. My only clear recollection of Ladd Field that remains in my mind is that trip up there with my sister going through the utilidors, cause we just didn't go out there. We had no reason to. My husband never worked out there. We just did our thing. I worked for the Territory for a while, when it became a State I was still working in the Department of Transportation for twenty-two and a half years. But all of that, there's too many interludes there, to try to tell you everything that happened from the time that I got married to the time I moved out here. Because I lost my parents, I lost my husband, just lots of things happened. But Ladd Field, all those servicemen coming in really made an impression on Fairbanks because it was a whole different group of people, servicemen. It really made a big impression, a change in Fairbanks. There's no doubt about it at all, none at all. And it wasn't bad, it was just part of change. Have I done you any good?

KP: It's been very helpful. Thank you, Mrs. Melville.

EM: Well you're more than welcome.

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