

Stacey Carkhuff interviewing Rachel Thomas.

Fairbanks, Alaska, October 21 2008. (THIS IS A NARRATED SLIDESHOW)

H2009-07-11

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** This is Stacey Carkhuff interviewing Rachel Thomas on October 21, in Fairbanks at her home. And can you tell me a little bit about where you're from, like where you were born, and the reason you drove the highway as well as explaining the pictures that you're going to show me.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** I'll try. I was born in Harden, Montana and my sister and I went on many trips, and we just thought it would be a nice adventure to go to Alaska, and she had just bought a brand new 1953 Plymouth, and our trip took place in 1954. And we wondered about four women going to, on our own to Alaska, but a college history professor who was about to retire just got back, he and his wife had just gotten back from a vacation trip, and we figured if he could make it, anybody could make it. And he assured us that we wouldn't have any problem also. So, we planned our trip. And we left Montana in the first of June in 1954. And with four of us, we were going to stop and see anything that anybody and my sister and another lady by the name of Mildred, no by the name of Mavis did anything that was associated with camping, like setting up the tent, blowing up the sleeping, the air mattresses, spreading out the sleeping bags and then re-packing everything in the carry on, on the top of the car. And Mildred and I did everything connected with cooking, like preparing the menu, preparing the meal, doing the dishes, and putting everything back so it would be ready to go the next day. And we had what was referred to as our ten dollar pot, because it only cost us \$10.00, but it consisted of aluminum ware with one kettle inside of another kettle inside of another to the tune of I don't know 3, or 4, or maybe even 5 kettles. I think I priced one of those the other day, and they came to about \$50.00 so that would be a good investment. So anyway, now that we've covered the highway, I guess this is where you want to go Atlin Lake, which is a trip off the highway, it was a side trip. We just saw it on the map and decided it looked good, and it looked like it was a dirt road, so we went down to Atlin Lake to explore a Native village, actually I think it was an Indian village, a small Indian village and I think they were fishing, the Natives were fishing, and then this picture is going back to, I think its Miles Canyon outside of Whitehorse, and they had a blurb on the side of the road that said how they had built their figured, built their craft of...or their sailing ships. And Miles Canyon was supposed to be one of the big deterrents because it was supposed to be really rough water for the gold miners in the gold rush. But anyways, as we looked at it, we thought "hmm, this doesn't look so bad and in the picture it doesn't look so bad either, it doesn't look like it was that rough, but I guess during high water and pictures I've seen since I've been in Alaska, it was a pretty rough go in Miles Canyon. This is another view of Miles Canyon. You can see it's got a little water, but it doesn't look that bad. But with all the debris here, it must take out a lot of stuff in the spring of the year when the water is high. It looks like it might get a little more rough as it gets narrow. This again is the fireweed along side the road. Some of the road, you can see that the, you can pull off through these rocks and camp at the side of the road if you wanted to for the night, or...You can see, the road is pretty much dirt and gravel, not too wide. Just some of the nice scenes that we enjoyed. We had our share of bad weather- rain, not snow but rain, and when we got to, we decided we would go from Whitehorse to Haines, and in those days the ferry system didn't exist, so if we were going to go see Juneau or Sitka we had to go by plane, and this an amphibian that flew from Haines to Sitka, I think with a stop in Juneau, and we decided well, this would be a trip that was well worth while, so all piled into this plane and of course we'd never, coming from Montana we'd never been in this kind of an aircraft, and when it took off, and all the water went all over the plane, we thought the pilot had done something wrong, and we were surely going to crash- but we didn't. It was a great trip, and we got to take nice aerial views of Haines and the

Matanuska glacier, no, is that the Matanuska down by Juneau? Yea, that's Matanuska down there isn't it?

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Yea...Mendenhall.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Mendenhall glacier, yea. Nice view, and you can see it was much bigger in 1954 than it is today. And we stopped in Juneau, so we got to go out and see the glacier, and we flew on to Sitka, this is an aerial view of Juneau of course before the tram went up the mountain and the lighthouses to guide the boats out in the bay, and in Sitka, this is the old Russian Orthodox Church before it burned, and I forgot the year that it did burn. And this is, I think we're up to Kluane Lake right now, Kluane Lake which is the largest in Alaska [Yukon] and from Kluane Lake to the border practically, is an area of a lot of permafrost and so, as I recall the trip was, had rough roads in because of the broken up roads and when we were over in, last year that was the worst part of the road too- they were trying to widen it and also it was just the usual breakup due to the permafrost in the area. But its, Kluane Lake is just absolutely beautiful. And this is a picture of one of the campgrounds in the Yukon, and as I said they were wonderful campgrounds; they had an adequate supply of firewood. They had little sheds, in this case it looks like it was a little house where you can...they had little camp stoves where you can go in and cook your dinner- you weren't supposed to sleep in them, but you could get warm, and they were every so often there. I mean, we got so that we'd like to stop at every one because they were so nice. And this, I think is Fairbanks. We arrived in Fairbanks. We took a trip down second avenue, and of course it was all full of bars, and even the USO was at the end of the street. And we did visit the main street on a Saturday night, and it was really alive with G.I's and people. And I know, just driving down the street, one of the G.I's was anxious to get in the car, and I couldn't believe it. They were kind of mauling Mildred, and she was the one that was about to retire! And then we stayed out at the, they called them the Northhaven Cabins which were not too far from the University off College Road, and we took a week's introductory course to Alaska, I don't think they teach it anymore. But it was a great course. Dr. Skarland, he gave us an introduction to the anthropology of the area, we went out and looked at a beaver trap, and we panned some gold. And we took a trip up to Circle, because we wanted to be as close to the midnight sun as we possibly could, and so we managed to, well we actually stayed awake to see the midnight sun, so we were kind of tired the next day. Going to Arctic Circle we also went to the Circle Hotsprings, and I baked there, they had a park there, so I tried on my first parka. Oh, this is funny. We saw all these spruce hens, they didn't seem like the, they were too much afraid of you, so I said well, lets have spruce hen for dinner, and they dared me to catch one, so I did.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** What did you do, just chase it down?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Yea, I just chased it, I had been used to chasing chickens, my dad often times would bring chickens home, one time we had a pen for them, but one time they got out, so I had experience; more than one time they got out of the pen, and it was up to me to chase them down. So I had experience chasing chickens. But, we let it go again, we didn't have it for dinner. This is how you'll see it today. You know, this is the Peace River Valley. See the road is good and wide? Good motels.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Is that one of the big differences you noticed on the highway? The changes in motels?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Right, but during the summer you still have um, you still need reservations or you need to stop early, you know so that you get a place to stay. And there, in different places there are a lack of restaurants, so you'd better carry something to eat. Like, this particular place there wasn't a restaurant but they had a little store, so we went into the store and bought, I don't know, tuna burgers or something, and made some sandwiches and crackers. But it, I mean the hotels are...they're primitive.

They aren't you know, like linoleum on the floor, and some of them don't have screens on the windows, and you don't want to open the window because you'll let in all the mosquitoes, so.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** That makes a big difference.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Mhmm. I don't know what they ranged, I would say probably \$75.00 a night, maybe \$100.00, I've forgotten. There was adequate and very up-to-date you know, if you're going into the very bigger towns like Whitehorse, you didn't have to worry about accommodations.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** What about in 1954? Were there any places to stay, or was that why you always camped?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Well we weren't looking for places to stay, but there weren't many. And I have no idea what the prices would have been in '54. But you can see today, beautiful road, like with the lines on the outside and the yellow lines down the inside. But it's beautiful driving. Lots of animals along side the road. There were more than we'd seen before. This has got a calf here someplace. There he is. A kid, not a calf. And some places, you can see the road is still kind of iffy. But this is the road that you're talking about now, there isn't any reason why people wouldn't travel the highway, except for that space between Kluane Lake and the border. And that's, to me that's always gonna be bad because of the permafrost in there.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So the roads- you're talking about the roads are bad in between Kluane? What about the communities, do you think they've changed, like Destruction Bay, Burwash?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Oh, they have. They're nice motels now, they're not just...

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Was it always that way?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** No, not in '54. Oh here's Liard Hotsprings now. And when I went up there, there was nothing but this beat-up looking old, there was this pool that was inviting and a board that stuck out from it, covered in moss, and I was dumb enough to run out on the board. Have you ever been there? In the upper pool I was dumb enough to run off on that board. I slipped on the moss and went into the hot water. And that water in 2007 was so hot I couldn't get into it in that upper pool.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Oh no!

**RACHEL THOMAS:** So, you know I was- the hot water takes your breath away as much as the cold.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** It'll take your skin away.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** So I was lucky to get out. So you can see how its...well there's a board walk all the way back there now, the only thing that you have to fight are the mosquitoes and they weren't really as bad as I expected. And they have a place to change, and this is part of the rocks, the calcium on the rocks that's built up around the pool, but there's a board walk all the way.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Oh, wow that's a nice board walk.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** There's a buffalo, some bison along the road. That's a first. I hadn't, we hadn't...as far as I know, there wasn't any bison in '54. This was the first time I had seen them.

**STACEY CAR KHUFF:** You never saw any in '54?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** No, not on the highway, but there were quite a few in here. And you can see the difference in Watson Lake- this is only half of the signs, there's twice as many on the other side. And there's now a motel/hotel here where you can stay too. There was nothing in '54. See, here's some more of them.

**STACEY CAR KHUFF:** Oh my gosh.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** There's a picture of the road, too. See, the road is not paved here, it was not paved until '07. This was, we had to stop for construction. This is again around Kluane Lake. And they were blasting out a hill out so they could widen the road. Here we are. That's Kluane Lake, and this is the road that they're blasting through there, to widen the road. And people were not as nice. There was some guy that pulled up behind me, and because I left a car's length in front of me, I didn't pull right into the rear end of the person in front of me, they pulled around and pulled in front of me. You know, just obnoxious people. But you can see the traffic, we weren't there maybe a half an hour, and you can see how the traffic built up.

**STACEY CAR KHUFF:** Do you think that before, people were much nicer?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Oh, absolutely.

**STACEY CAR KHUFF:** More willing to help each other on the road?

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Absolutely. If we had pulled off to the road, well, actually for a long time, if we'd pulled off the road, people would have stopped to help us. Actually in '74 we came up with a trailer and we, I think we had 7 flats on this little trailer, and to begin with we only had one spare tire and every time we stopped there was always somebody stopping, can we help you, can we help you?

**STACEY CAR KHUFF:** That's really nice.

**RACHEL THOMAS:** Yea, that's the way it was, I grew up in Montana and that's the way it was in Montana too.