

Stacey Carkhuff interviewing Curley Graham  
Whitehorse, YT November 7th, 2008  
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**STACEY CARKHUFF:** This is Stacey Carkhuff interviewing Curley Graham, November 7th, 2008 in Whitehorse, Yukon, and we'll be talking about the Alaska Highway, and the work that you did at the airstrip and any other things that you would like to talk about. So just a little bit of a background on you, can you tell me about when you were born, and how you ended up here in Whitehorse?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, I was born in 1920, moved out west here, ended up going up north in 1935 with my family.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Ok. And why did you family decide to move north?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** My dad moved up to Atlin there, 120 miles from here, or some such thing.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Is it...It's south, right?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Yeah.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Ok, so you were talking a little bit about the air strip here in Whitehorse, and a little bit about the history of Whitehorse. Did you want to kind of embellish on that?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Uh, I don't know if you'd be interested in the history of Whitehorse, I'm not a real historian or anything like that.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Just your memories. The things that you experienced here in Whitehorse.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** You wouldn't like that.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Things within reason of your memory.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, it was just a small town, it had the railroad and the start of the river. Started the boats in the river, I should say. The old town when it was built- you're not interested in when it was built and all that kind of stuff, so.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Yea I am.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Pretty well everything would be information.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Well, can you tell me what Whitehorse was like before the highway came through?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well I never spent any time in Whitehorse.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Atlin?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, outside of just before the highway came through.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Ok.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** That's where I come from, Whitehorse from Atlin to see what was going on, and then me and a buddy of mine, we joined in with the company that had just come up north from [?].

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** And what was the name of that company?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well I come in under contract with White Pass and everything, and we got hung up on the boat, the boat broke down on the lake so we couldn't get in here until late, and when we got in here, well they'd already gotten another fellow from outside. So. They wanted me to do other things, but I wasn't interested, so I joined up with the, the company here that was working up on the airport, [well, my buddy, did] he went up and checked what they wanted and hired they hired us that day.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Oh.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** And they were just getting started, [didn't have anything.]

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** What was the name of the airport company?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Oh, White Airport Company.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** And do you know about what year that was?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** 1942.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Ok.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** I left Atlin on the 1st of July, and I didn't get in here till several days later, quite a while later, the boat broke down [and blew me off?]

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** What lake was it?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Tagish Lake.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Oh, Tagish Lake. Ok.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So what was it like working for the White Airport Company?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Bennett & White?

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Yea, when you were working on the airstrip, what was that like?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Oh all I was in charge of was looking after the equipment and do equipment maintenance. And naturally you're always [fiddling around] the old other stuff there, and there's no way you can do it. And another thing, after we got started on the airport here, after a couple got going on the airport, well then they went down to, now I can't remember which they went to first. They went to Teslin and Aishihik but they were not too far apart, and by the time they left, you now now I can't remember which one started first. We had to back and forth between these places to look after whatever they needed. So that's about it on my part of it.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Oh, Ok.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** After the, '43 there, early in '43, we had another fellow there with deal going with the two governments to haul stuff for the military, I shouldn't say the military, for the operation of the highway operation and all the rest of the stuff up in here, the highway and whatever. Whatever they needed, to put it that way.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** How were things moved?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Oh, by truck. By that time they had the pilot road in. The first big convoy that went through for the opening of the highway I guess that's what they call it, was somewhere around between Christmas and New Years in '42. They say that they convoyed trucks up from down south to go to Fairbanks. A Lot of them didn't make it but a few did.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** And how long did you work on that, moving equipment?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well we went right through until they fairly well saturated on the stuff we were doing. That'd be in the late fall of '43. That's about that. After that there, well I worked for myself all my life, so I just started up a shop here, and some of the guys got together, and I ended up keeping going, and they evaporated. Took off to wherever they wanted to go. [That's all there is to that.]

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Ok.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** We did all kinds of goofy things, you know.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So, when the highway came through, did you, were there like newspaper reports, and people telling you about the highway coming, or was it kind of a surprise?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** No, everybody knew what was going on, but some of the stuff was military secret, they claim, but I don't think there was anybody in the public that

didn't know anything about it if they were alive. If they were dead on their feet, well they wouldn't maybe.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So you heard about it in the news, on the radio...

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** We never bothered with that stuff. Too many things to do to bother with playing around. Once in a long while we'd hear trying to get some music or something, information on a station on the radio. Well we could if we wanted to, but most times we didn't bother. We've got too many things to do besides listen to somebody yackin'.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Cool, Ok. So, So would you consider your work with the airstrip and the highway to be something that benefited Whitehorse?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, put it this way, we were just employees to the company, and what they needed. They were the ones that had the contract, and of course naturally when you develop and airport in a place it always either benefits or takes away. In this case it happened to assist the situation.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So while you were working on watching the equipment and keeping repairs done, did you ever have any events that happened that were memorable, or anything funny like, or dangerous, anything like that?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, I don't know what you call dangerous or funny, in a modern sense. We used to get a kick out of stuff that was usually work oriented, nowadays its pretty hard to find anybody to work unless he gets anything [funny he owes you?]

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Or memorable, like anything that could happen happened.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Oh, there was all kinds of things that happened. Somebody would drop a truck or a machine into a ditch or something like that, and you have to go salvage it, and oh! That was just normal everyday happening, and nowadays it happens more than it did then!

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** That's probably true. People drive faster now too.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, the thing is that they don't know how to drive. They just get in there and the steering wheel, the brake pedal and the throttle, and they put either one of them quick down to the floor, or awful close. After the war there when they went on home, we work for, whatever necessary in that time. I know that [Jacobs was out there] for a little while we looked after, worked up at the airport and fix stuff there and one thing and another. And that came to an end, and they finally got the personnel up here to look after it. Better take the guys that want do do something and knew what they were doing. He just died here not to shortly.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So, in looking back on Whitehorse and just this whole are of the Yukon, what do you think some of the biggest are since 1942 and now?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well basically I guess, the biggest change is in transportation. Before it was by rail, up to boat up to out to Whitehorse [?] it was the head of river transport, and the head of the rail. Nowadays they just load up trucks and go most anywhere.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Do you think that having a paved highway connecting the lower 48 almost to Canada to Alaska kind of shrinks North America?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** I wouldn't want to get in on that there.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** I mean a lot of people talk about how Alaska and the Yukon are getting smaller because the highway connects them, you can fly anywhere ...

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Yea that sounds like modern conversation there. They gotta have something to say, so they try to fit it into some kind of picture. You stretch the picture or you shrink it. That's about, that made it so there was a heck of a lot less time spent. You take the old timers, they took sometimes years to get up here. Nowadays it only takes about 16-18 hours to come up from [?] to Whitehorse with your own vehicle.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** It's a lot shorter of a drive. Its a lot shorter of a time to drive.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Have you driven the whole highway?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Many, many times.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Really.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** When we were trucking it back there in the military there, we went up here quite a few times, back and forth.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Ok, So you were riding on it back before it was even handed back over to Canada and well, well.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** It was during the war days.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** But you were never drafted?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** No, no last time I was in there they turned down, gave me a piece of paper so I wouldn't be called up or anything like that, and told me to get the hell back up here.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Alright.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** I guess I shouldn't have to them that, up around there they, soon as you do something wrong they [start an attitude?]

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So did you ever work along with some of the soldiers, or civilians from Canada, the engineers that were working on the road?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Oh yea.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** How did you find that?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, they were people that had never run into anything like this in history. They were doing the same as all the rest of, got to apply the work, the machinery to match them up I should say and they made all kinds of flub ups, and all kinds of stuff. They pursued it in such a way that time was more or less of the essence, so you couldn't [initiate man power for nothing?] you'd be pushing more it.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Because they had, they built it in nine months, so it was a little ill prepared trying to build a highway that fast?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, it wasn't a matter of being ill prepared, they didn't, there was nothing here to start with that was going to amount to anything, So everything had to come in where ever they bought it from. Some of it came in down through via railhead from Dawson Creek and some come in through Skagway, and Haines Road wasn't even built then, and some come through Alaska, and some come up by different rivers here and there. And finally they got some links coming. That's about... Well there was all kinds of things that went on in the days they were building the highway, but that's [long] even today. There's things that happened, as you were working something happened here, or something happened there, well that's just normal. The difference in those days, is the guys would just turn around and dig in and straighten it out on top and get going again. You couldn't wait for a whole bunch of people to come in from some other part of the world to tell you, "That one there's a green there, you're not supposed to have a green one, you're supposed to have a red one, or a pink one or something."

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** So back then it was more of a fix-it-yourself, or no one else is going to do it type of mentality?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, that's the way you lived in this country. You did your own thing.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** That makes sense. Ok.

Alright, well, we've covered a bit of your history, how you got involved with the airstrip and the highway, was there anything else that say, for anyone researching Whitehorse or the history of the Alaska Highway that you think is something important that people should know about the area?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** I don't know, there's been so much written on it, and well its just. I'll give you a small example. On the Canol road when they put it in, that was supposed to be a military secret, well everybody up in the country knew all about it there, before they really got started on it, and so forth and so on there. And well, I knew the highway, me and one or two of the boys were mixed up with it a little bit, and years later, well this is in the last 10 years or 5 or 10 years and stuff, we've had young fellows in their 50's and so forth come in and tell us all about the Canol road, and we got kind of interested about how they got their stories, so we listen to 'em, and some said "we were there" and all this kind of stuff, and I'm just talking to them. "Oh, we know all about it, we did this and we did that." After we'd get them going good for a while, we'd say "Well don't forget, you're having difficulty to understand this because this all happened there about 10-15 years before you were born."

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Why would they pretend they were, there, why would they ...

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Just normal. It's some kind of history, and [and they take a few cuts?] they made a couple of trips up there or something like that, and listened to a bunch of tales, and maybe got a little more grass or a bit more booze and ...

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** That's funny.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, it's a [backup] You'd be surprised at how few people know the North up here don't use gas of some kind or another. Maybe I should say it the other way around.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Surprised how many people do ...Yea. So would kind of consider that a problem here?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Nowadays yeah.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** That's what Babe said.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** that's been going on for quite a while. It has been for quite a while.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Do you think that's because of the easy access? They can just drive, just go anywhere and get it?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, no. You can't nail it down to something like that, that it was...It was built up, a lot of that stuff. The war days caused a lot of it, I guess.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** How do you mean?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, you take the guys and gals coming back from all over the world, eh? And I mean I'm not saying every individual was all over the world but as a group, they covered the world, more or less. And they found out that it was big world,

lots of people out there, and a lot of them are damn smart. And they didn't want to have their little Johnnys and their little Janies getting caught in the same boat where they didn't know what was going on. Prior to the war, basically speaking, school boards were made up of business people and or professionals. People knew what you have to have, what you have to know to get along in the world, and to do different things. But then the other folks came in, they finally took over the school boards and after they got in there, then they started looking for curriculum and "Oh, they don't have to learn this, they don't have to learn that, they don't have to learn the other thing." And by the time the last of the 40's and the early 50's come along, they pretty well killed the curriculum. You don't see much improvement since.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** what kind of things did they take out of the curriculum that were so important?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Just about everything.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Like history ...

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** History, and geography, and even the methods of teaching.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** Where did you go to school?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Me? Many different places. A lot of my schooling was by correspondence, that's why now some of the people that are having a little trouble, get a correspondence course, because by the time they finish the correspondence course they've learned how to use the language, how to read write and spell just from the fact that they've got to communicate. And they've got to be able read the people that are looking after this course, they got to be able to read that stuff. And then the people that look after the course have got to be able to read their stuff.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** That's a good method of teaching.

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** Well, that's one of the better ones. There's something things, like chemistry and things you can turn around and do a certain amount of it, but then you'll need somebody around that knows what the score is there [?] But that's basically, say because not too many people in Whitehorse have any true knowledge of how Whitehorse was came about.

**STACEY CARKHUFF:** You think that's because it's not taught properly?

**CURLEY GRAHAM:** No, well you can't say that. It's mostly because well, mostly because the people who come up here came from outside and they're not a damn bit interested in it. Haven't been for a good many years. Now they want to turn around and be talking about it; they don't know any of the basics. You talked to Babe Richards there, well, she can tell you things that happened then back in those days and everything else. I

Don't know if she'd back off on the a lot of the stuff, talk a lot of the stuff that happened as long as she doesn't turn around and try to hurt people's feelings but ...stuff like that.