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Al Wright

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Bill Schneider, interviewer

Fairbanks, Alaska

Al talks about the move to New Minto. The frame houses were built and after a few years they were deteriorating. The sewer system had problems. They decided to rebuild the homes out of logs. They imported timber from Canada and made them look like logs. The newer houses were expensive but they were better. They didn't have a landing strip so Al landed on floats. They built a spur road into New Minto that came off the road to Manley. They hired Bill Carlo who made the first trail in there. He cleared out a space on the side of the hill for a landing strip. It wasn't very level and a short strip. They hauled all the other stuff by barge until the road was built. He landed a Helio which could land on a short landing strip. Bob Burcell was flying then. His landing gear snapped off one year. A few weeks later he landed again and just as he turned around a wheel fell off. After that they got some equipment and they built a different landing strip that was better and longer. They operated out of that until the current strip was built. His brother built a strip at the Old Minto site. His brother Gareth build the new strip at New Minto. They improved the road in from the highway to Minto. They had good transportation after that. Bill asked about the Livengood cutoff to Manley. Al said that was in the late 1940s. They had surveyed it for a railroad to Nome which never happened.

Bill asked about Ed Parsons. Al said he was an electrical genius. He could make any kind of radio work. Al said that the Wiens had poor radio communications when they were flying the mail routes except for going to Nome or Kotzebue. They hired Ed Parson. He was one of the guys who invented TV. He had his own airplane and set up communications in the villages. Al worked about four years total for the Wiens. They set up the communication system. There was a radio at Circle, Eagle, Fort Yukon, Beaver, Stevens Village, Rampart, Hughes, and Bettles. Somebody who was the postmaster also ran the radio. They were on twenty hours a day or all the time. With the HF system weather determined communications. They could relay through different places. They operated off of generators. Kodiak had that same frequency. It was one of the places that could be contacted all the time. He once filed a flight plan through Honolulu. Other frequencies were on the radio. It made a big difference finding out what the weather was when you were flying. You could call along the way, too. It improved the safety. Bill asked about navigation changed. Al said GPS is like magic. You know so much with the system. During the war they had range stations set up. VFR. Cone of silence was right over the station. You knew which quadrant you were in by the morse code signal. With GPS you know right where you are at all times. Al talked about someone flying out of Arctic Village who ended up running into the top of a mountain even using GPS.

Al talked about his aircraft. He like the Helio. Some people have problems handling them but he liked using it. He talked about replacing the cross wind gear in Alaska. He discussed flying a Helio.

Bill asked him about his family. Al said he was married three times. He had one daughter from his first marriage. She lives in Hawaii. His second marriage had two children. His son Jack lives in Manley Hot Springs. His daughter died of asthma about ten years ago. His third marriage was to Jeanne Schwartz. She worked for Wien Airlines as a stewardess. They started Wright Travel Service in 1966. It worked out well with his air service. Their building was torn up when a road was built. They gave up the business then. Al had three or four flying services. Wright Air Service was started in 1946. He went out of business when his Stinson burned up. He went into Nenana Air Service with a partner. His partner wrecked their airplane. They eventually had nine aircraft. His partner left the country. Al operated it for three or four more years. Then he got into personnel problems and he quit the business. He went back to construction with his brothers and was still flying for that business. They had a road contract between Kasilak and Soldotna in 1959. The big companies put them out of business. He went back to flying for Wien. He worked for a year or two. Their chief pilot and Al got into a disagreement. Al finally left and started Wright Air Service which is still going. Bob is running the business now. He is a good pilot and has business training. Al said he still flies. His grandson is now learning to fly.

Al said Archie Holdstrom was the last dog team contract to Diamond. He was getting 250 dollars a month to run the mail. Al was getting twenty dollars an hour to run the mail by plane. One time Al landed and two sled dogs came running up without a musher. He loaded the mail and took the dogs back to the roadhouse and found out that Oldstrum didn't want to come out into the cold so he sent the dogs without him. Mail service was shut down about a year later.