

Interview with Al and Bruth George, 26 January 2003 at 512 Herning Rd., Interviewer is Colleen Herning.

C: Would you like to give your name and where you were born and when you were born?

B: All right, I'll start. My name is Bruth George. I was born in The Dalles, Oregon on July 21, 1928.

A: Al George, born Nov. 5, 1923, in Spokane, Washington.

C: What is your first memory or impression of Alaska?

B: Well, I guess my first impression would have been the daylight. The kids and I got here in August of 1956 and of course it didn't get dark at all.

A: Actually, my first memory of Alaska would have been my dad talking about it after he returned from Fairbanks in 1938. He came up then with the National Labor Relations Board to settle a strike at FE. Later, when we decided to go north, I found an article in National Geographic about Alaska. It had a statement by the president of the University saying that they never had any thunder and lightening in the Interior. We discovered that Dr. Patty didn't really know what he was talking about. We had lots.

C: Was he president of the University at that time?

A: Right. The other thing was, you look at the amount of rain the interior gets and it's about 11 ½ inches. The part of Oregon where we came from was about the same, but it was high desert. I was trying to understand how there could be all these trees, as we drove up the highway, with only 11½ inches of rain.

C: How did you get here?

A: Drove. Left from Portland, in our new Chev station wagon, pulling a trailer. In Spokane, my Uncle Louis, joined me. Oh, and I had the family dog, a part black lab who got carsick. And the reason it got carsick was that my uncle, who insisted he had to help me drive up the highway, was feeding the dog canned fish-based dog food, which was giving the dog diarrhea. We were half way to Alaska before I found out what was going on.

C: And how did you get here, Bruth?

B: Well, we waited in Portland until Al found a house to rent, then we flew up about a month later, me, three kids and a cat. That was on Pan Am, before jets, and I think it took six hours from Seattle. But it was direct to Fairbanks.

C: What do you remember about the flight?

B: It left Seattle late at night, so fortunately for me, the kids slept most of the way. We were given bulkhead seats (there were only two on each side of the aisle those days) and Nathan, who was only six months old, had a sort of little hammock that hung on the bulkhead, over my knees.

C: Where did you live when you first got here?

A: We rented from Mary Ann McCall. She was the widow of a geologist who led the rescue effort of a climbing team from the University. One climber had broken a leg and his party didn't have equipment to handle an emergency like this so they pitched a tent for him and left him and most of the food on the mountain while the rest hurried down to get help. McCall was an accomplished climber who led the rescue party up to the guy who spent some seven days by himself in this tent wondering if and when someone would come after him. Well, they rescued the guy but in the process McCall stressed himself and caught pneumonia, which caused his death.

C: Where was this house?

B: Where Hot Licks is located now, corner of College Rd. and Hess. Hot Licks' building stands where our garden was.

C: Al, did you have a job lined up with the University?

A: Yeah, a college friend and his family visited us when I was working as a district clerk for the Forest Service in Bear Springs, Oregon. He had been up here for three years or so. He says, "If you're interested, we've got a job opening at the Geophysical Institute."

C: What did he say that was attractive?

A: Oh, that the salary was twice what I was making in the Forest Service. The job in Oregon was pretty much a dead-end since I wasn't a graduate forester.

C: How did you end up here on Herning Rd.?

B: The College area was building up. After a while, a paint contractor moved a Quonset hut in next to us on College Rd. Then, on the corner of College Rd. and Hayes, somebody built a drive-in restaurant and I don't care how tight you closed up the house, you could hear their juke box. That's when we started looking for a different location.

A: We thought about buying the McCall house which was built by Nick Eidem, business manager for Golden Valley but it was built from all kinds of scrap plywood from Golden Valley crates. Pretty typical building method at the time.

C: Who owned this place where we are now?

B: Fred and Mary Stubbings homesteaded this place, but they also owned and lived in a house across College Rd. from us. I suppose that's how we found this place. We'd looked for something closer without finding anything that we could afford that had a livable house on it.

A: The Stubbings were offering a small log house, 158+ acres, a small crawler tractor and a couple other items, all of which we bought for \$10,000.

B: And a Model T truck, which didn't run. The reason there was less than the usual 160 acres was that Herning Rd., one of our boundaries, is located on the township line and the township line is where surveyors adjust for the fact that the world is round.

A: The two "forties" on Herning Rd. are not really forty acres, so are termed "government lots." Our property is L-shaped, so the two forties that face on George Rd. have the full forty acres in them.

C: Who was here, when you moved out?

B: The first neighbors, coming in off the Hot Springs Rd., were the Eberhardts though we couldn't see their house, then the Lyles. Our house was next, then in another quarter of a mile or so, were Harold and Beatrice Herning. And a mile off to the east were the Severns. Almost forgot that Fred Anderson lived in a dirt-floored cabin on Harold's place. He had trapped down around Nenana at one time and the weather stripping around his door was lynx fur. There were other people in the vicinity, of course, more Hernings, Carl Lindstrand, Joe Kruger, but the ones we saw most were the folks on this stretch of road.

George Lyle and Harold Herning between the two of them, pretty much took care of our road, such as it was. At that time the first half mile of the township road, Herning Rd., wasn't in use.

C: What equipment did they have?

B: Just George's tractor with a blade on it but when we'd have a big snow storm or something, Harold would show up with a D8 that he'd borrowed. Later we had a grader that we neighbors bought together. It was a pony grader hauled behind a tractor, bought from the FE Company. George's tractor was barely big enough to pull it and someone else rode on the grader to operate the blade. We also bought some used culverts from FE and installed them in the township road, in an attempt to make it drivable so we didn't have to cross private property.

A: It wasn't until the Hot Springs Rd. construction job in the mid '60s that the contractors who hauled gravel from the Little Chena through Lyle's property were required to put in bigger culverts and some fill that made Herning Rd. drivable year round.

C: Did you have running water when you moved in?

A: Yes, we had running water but the bathroom wasn't in. The room was there and there was a cesspool, which was plumbed into the house, but the Stubbings had never gotten the fixtures in.

B: We used the outhouse only briefly because we got the fixtures installed before winter.

C: Were you on the old phone line?

B: You mean the one that connected the Herning clan? No, it crossed our property between Lyle's and Coby Eberhardt's at 7 mile, but was before our time. Some of the wire still hangs across one of our ski trails. We didn't get regular phones until 1964 and the service was terrible for years after.

C: Did you do any farming?

A: Not really, though we had Charlie Ward plant barley in our fields for a couple years. We netted a few bags of grain as our one-sixth share of the crop. The barley we fed to a couple pigs which proved to make wonderful meat, especially the hams and bacon that we smoked.

B: Our first piglet was an orphan from the Experimental Farm. Its mother died when the litter was only a week old and the piglets were offered to 4-H kids, but they ran out of kids before they ran out of piglets. This little black pig spent its first couple months bottle feeding and living in our basement until we could get a pig house built and yard fenced. Then we got a second weaner from Charlie Ward. Well, by fall they were good size, but the black pig was walking in circles, always in the same direction, apparently going blind in one eye.

In those days we never thought of taking an animal to the vet—too expensive—but we talked to Dr. Beckley who thought the animal lacked vitamin A because it was taken from its mother too early and he didn't think there was anything to do about it. Well, we read up on vitamin A deficiency, bought a gallon of salmon oil and started feeding this blind porker salmon oil and carrot juice. We wore out a blender grinding carrots out of the garden.

After a while, Black Pig would meet us at the gate with his muzzle in the air, and the other pig got a little pushy wondering where her treat was. To shorten the story, we didn't butcher Black Pig until a warm spell later in the winter, for fear he might have a salmon flavor, but by then he made fine pork chops.

The pigs were sort of pets at first, until Tom was assigned the job of cooking garden vegetables for them. After a summer of this, he was ready to do the slaughtering which we intended to spare the kids. Also, at the Fair that year, Tom thought he could win the greased-pig contest, due to his summer pig experience. When he found out the prize was the porker, he quickly dropped the idea.

A: We had chickens a couple years, too. Butchered them in the fall. Mostly, we just had a big garden and canned and froze vegetables, made kraut, picked berries for jam and jelly. For several years we grew extra produce to sell at the Farmers' Market which was fun but a lot of hard work.

Oh yes, I talked Steve Boinich at the Model Café into selling me a fifty-gallon oak barrel he bought vinegar in. I nearly filled this with sauerkraut, thinking to sell it to him. Then I found out he thought the homemade sauerkraut we'd talk about was such a good idea, he made his own. We ate a lot of kraut that winter.

C: When did you build the cabin where I'm living?

B: We built that in '71, I think. We mostly built it because Nathan at 15 or so needed to get away from his parents and we thought it would be good if he weren't too far away. We had a lot of help from various friends and neighbors, mostly of our kids' ages.

C: Did the logs come from here?

B: No, I wrote somewhere that Al talked to Dick Loud about buying logs down on Bilberg's property. I'm supposing now that Dick bought them from Roy Bilberg who was going to build there at one time. No, we ended up buying three-sided logs from Northland Lumber. The cabin was pretty rough at first, plywood floors, barrel stove, no electricity. Took awhile to even get a concrete floor poured in the basement. The kids hauled the concrete in buckets from the cement mixer here in the backyard. Their arms got pretty long.

Al did most of the block work for the basement. Tom helped some but he was working full-time for college money by then. Nathan did a lot of the building and Jim Lyle was a frequent worker and other kids helped from time to time. It was a good project for keeping teenagers busy.

After Nathan got moved in and had an oil stove for steady heat, I don't know how many of his friends and acquaintances stayed overnight or longer. Occasionally one of their mothers would call and ask if we knew the whereabouts of so and so and would be greatly relieved to find they were here. We weren't always sure we knew what was going on down there, but because we were within hearing distance of outside activity, we hoped things were fairly well under control.

C: You mentioned Bilbergs. Didn't Rudy bring Dorothy here after the explosion?

A: Yes. This was January of '69. The story we had was that Rudy (Bilberg) and Dorothy (Eberhardt) took Bessie (Bilberg) into work and the two came back to stock up the stove, put away groceries, then the propane tank exploded. It was a fifty below day.

Rudy said that while they were there, they made a bowl of soup, then Rudy headed outside to start the car. When the door swung out, it hit this five gallon propane tank and

apparently tapped the tank on the weld. That plus the fact of the fifty below weather, the thing split. Rudy heard it and knew instantly what it was and went tearing on outside. Flames followed him and burned his fanny and the gas flowed into the house where Dorothy was and ignited and blew.

When Rudy got outside, he could hear Dorothy yelling inside the wanigan and so he went back in and got her. They drove up here and in the process of doing that, Rudy couldn't hang on to the steering wheel because his hands were so badly burned the skin was sliding, so he had to stop and put on a pair of mittens.

They pulled into our driveway and beeped the horn. The kids were home from school, and I was trying to figure out, "Whose the smart-ass beeping their horn in my yard." Then Rudy gets out and says, "We need help. Can you give us a hand?" About this time, Dorothy speaks up. I recognized her voice, but not to look at her—her hair was singed, tight up against her head.

We got her into the house and onto our couch and she started to bubble from her nose, indication of a burned throat. There's a formula that first aiders use to determine what percentage of a body has been burned—18% for each leg, 9 for each arm and so on. I later calculated that about 93% of Dorothy's body was burned

We called for the ambulance and, miracle of miracles, the ambulance came. Unfortunately, it got lost, the ice fog was so bad, so it took forty-five minutes to get here but they did respond.

During the time we were waiting for the ambulance, we heard a second explosion. There was a hundred-pound propane tank leaning against the north side of Bilberg's wanigan and we heard it blow. It sounded almost like a siren. That was the end blowing off and jetting straight up into the air. The other side of the wanigan was about all window, and the explosion blew that window out about twenty feet from the building and laid it down on the snow and didn't break one pane of glass.

C: You went out to meet the ambulance, didn't you?

Al: Tom drove Rudy's car out to the highway. That was probably the only car warm enough to start easily. Harold was going to take her in his car. I thought she was going to die right there, and I decided, it's not going to be something that Harold will want to remember the rest of his life that his sister died in his car, so I said "Why don't you wait another five minutes. They'll have oxygen." So he eased off and about then the ambulance showed up.

Later, I asked the hospital to pay especial attention to various body areas because we'd just been working on something on campus concerning burns and cold temperatures. I asked things like "When have you ever seen a burn this bad that was exposed to fifty below weather? Does it make any difference?" The medics I talked to thought I was some kind of a dinky.

C: We should add that Dorothy did die, three weeks later, in a Seattle hospital. On a brighter note, what was the story about the whirly-bird?

B: Well, we were quite surprised, one day, to see this flying banana carcass, H-21 body, being towed into a spot in back of the cabin. If we were asked permission, I don't remember. Anyway, it was huge and the kids involved had to clear a way through the brush to get it in. The owner of this military surplus gem was Vern Bouton, who insulated it with urethane, (unfortunately on the inside) installed an oil heater and lived there for awhile. Then he went north to work on the pipeline, I think, and rented it to Kenny Melville and his girlfriend and their cat.

One summer day, driving home from town, I could see a plume of black smoke rising off to the east as I came over Rainbow Valley hill, and the closer I got, the more obvious it was that the smoke was in our neighborhood. Well, it wasn't Eberhardt's or Lyle's and I was greatly relieved to pull into our driveway to see our house intact, so it must be the cabin. As it turned out, it was the whirlybird burning, because the carburetor had been removed from the oil stove or something. No one was inside except the cat who did not survive.

A: How many fire extinguishers did they use? Nathan and other boys were at the cabin and they used whatever fire extinguishers they kept there and he also got the ones from our house but there was nothing they could do.

B: It wasn't endangering the cabin and I guess it was wet enough that no one was worried about forest fires. Well, then a Trooper appeared on the scene, and what does he see but a bunch of guys standing around watching and unconcerned. It took awhile to convince him that the copter hadn't crashed.

C: Do you have any moose stories?

A: There was the moose that chased the cat into the woodshed. And I thought Fish and Game would be after me for killing a moose when I hit it with a piece of stovewood to chase it out of our raspberries, but it got up and walked away.

B: Then there was the time Al was in bed with the flu. A cow moose charged one of our front windows when I walked up to it. I thought this was worth getting a sick man out of bed and he came grumbling out, walked to the window and she charged again, right up into the flower bed underneath the window.

About then, I called around the neighborhood, because either Ann or Beatrice was likely to be out walking and Ann must have called Dorothy who called Fish and Game. Ann and George drove by to see what was going on, turned around at the corner and when they came back, the moose took out after them. The road was slick, not much traction, and the moose's muzzle was right in their back window. Ann claimed she could hear it growl.

Before long, a Fish and Game guy pulls into the driveway, steps out of the car, and gets chased around the car once before he can get back in. A few hand signals later and a move to the car door closer to the house and the wildlifer makes it in to the safety of the house. Well, in the end, he had to shoot the animal, then call the meat wagon to haul it off. When it was butchered, they found broken ribs so we supposed it had been hit on the highway and was in considerable pain.

Our kids and the Severns boys came walking in from the schoolbus not much later, saw all that carnage on the snowy driveway and thought for sure that our dogs had been in a really big fight this time.

C: Did you ever have any run-ins with bears?

A: We used to have an open garbage dump and we'd hear the tin cans tinkling and know there was a bear down there digging around. I thought, "I'm going to get rid of this animal before a kid tangles with it." I get the .06 and sit down where I can watch the dump and wait. After awhile I realize I've been snoozing so I think, "Oh nuts," and I get up and start for the house but I can see fresh digging in the edge of the garbage that wasn't there when I sat down. We got the garbage dump covered up not long after.

B: There was also the time a wolf attacked Tahtok, Harold's dog. She survived, Harold chased the wolf off, but our dogs were so scared they were plastered up against the screen door so we couldn't open it to let them in.

C: What do you remember about the flood in '67?

A: I was the campus Civil Defense coordinator, a job the Feds required of the University during the Cold War. Several years into this program, the flood happened and created a situation where the University was asked to house a lot of refugees. The campus was designed to handle about 1500 people for beds, water and such. We figured later we had over 8000 people on campus—and their dogs and cats and birds. In this situation, you learn to be very careful how you handle little old ladies and their pet dogs. They're more defensive and aggressive than parents.

C: How were you affected out on Chena Hot Springs Rd.?

B: We had no power, of course. Mark Funk and Bob Lyle made the rounds of different houses with a generator, trying to keep people's freezers cold but we later had to can meat that thawed. A lot of people had refugees in their homes. We didn't because Al was in and out, getting sleep when he could, but we supplied stuff out of the freezer and garden stuff to Wycliff Bible translators (now Camp Li-Wa). They had a lot of people there.

Harold later brought out most of the contents of Carr's Clothing Store. Everyone in the neighborhood took clothing home to dry out. Well, I had a pretty sturdy clothesline,

good heavy spruce supports, but those wet, dirty clothes managed to break one post. We all washed the clothes and took them back to Beatrice who later had everyone come get underwear, T-shirts, shirts, pants, whatever they could use.

C: What about getting food?

B: I had forgotten that someone from either Salvation Army or Red Cross sent a guy around, on a cycle, I think, inquiring about food needs. We weren't short of much, but I'm sure the people who were housing folks from town were glad of any such help. Al, which organization was it that bought out Piggly Wiggly in Gavora Mall, took anything that was salvageable?

A: Salvation Army bought out several of the small stores, Then the Red Cross distributed the food out at KFAR's site on Farmers Loop, after attaching Red Cross stickers to it. Also, we consulted Judge Rabinowitz about means of shutting down bars that were causing trouble. He said a loose reading of the law would say Civil Defense was in charge, so we had the Troopers close down the bar that was located at the corner of Farmers Loop and the Old Steese. People had been bringing liquor on campus from there and causing problems.

On campus, we had four or five guys who were smoking something. They were higher than kites and pretty rowdy. The Troopers had them confined in a room at Hess Hall, just a few doors from where I was located. The guys were getting belligerent, breaking furniture and punching holes in the dry wall and even the Troopers were having trouble handling them.

About then, a nurse, who was volunteering at our infirmary, showed up, and offered to help. A little pipsqueak of a woman, she'd arrived not many months earlier from a drug facility in California where she'd worked for a year or two. She went to the infirmary and talked one of the doctors into giving her several syringes of something that she brought back. Then she sized up the situation, and when one of the guys made a grab for her, neatly side stepped and jabbed him in the shoulder with her syringe. In a couple minutes he's out and before long the others were under control, too. In the process, the Trooper sergeant called in his men to observe "a professional at work."

C: Speaking of natural disasters, where were you when the earthquake of '64 happened?

A: That was on a Friday, right at quitting time, and I was walking south on Noble and I could hear people yelling, but I couldn't see anything. I turned the corner and started across Third Avenue, heading west and I heard something going ta-WHANG, ta-WHANG. Then I hear a bunch of loud yelling from up in the Northward Building and I figure it's one of these "Northward divorces" where the gal takes all the fellow's clothes and everything and shoves them out a window. Only about that time my eye goes a little bit higher and I realize the twanging I'm hearing are the cables on the TV antenna on the roof. Then I hear a bunch of rowdy voices from a bar called the Billikin. Guys are coming out almost in drill formation, each one's got a glass in his hand. Everybody

stands there and looks around. The ground is still shaking and I'm halfway out in the street looking east for the ground roll that's supposed to be visible. About then, one of the bar guys says, "Oh hell, it's just an earthquake," and they all go back inside.

C: Was there something about a community center out here?

B: Yes, there was attempt to generate some community activity. The Domke's offered to donate land and Lloyd and Betty Press out at 12 mile offered logs. A few of the men went out some weekends to fell trees—I know Tom and Al went more than once.

C: Wasn't the 4-H Club raising money for that?

B: Probably, and the Homemakers helped, too. A few men went out to cut logs, but the project never really got off the ground. I think since everyone went to town for church and school and shopping, there wasn't enough need here to keep us interested, unlike Two Rivers.

The Homemakers Club and 4-H were the only community activities that lasted any length of time. The women called our local club "Steele Creek Hoppers" which sounds pretty funny, but most of the members lived in the vicinity of those two creeks. We must have started around 1960 and the club kept going until the early 70's. 4-H didn't last as long, probably because most of the kids grew up before new families with young children moved into the neighborhood.

C: What kinds of projects did 4-H offer?

B: The first project was in gardening, mostly boys who named the club "The Hot Time Hoers." George Jefferson who lived up on the west end of Steele Creek Rd. was one of the more active leaders in gardening and, I think, general organization. I had knitting, and later, sewing. For awhile, Virgil Severns had the boys doing electrical stuff, making extension cords, for instance. Someone offered trapping and both Ann Lyle and Anne Severns had girls doing foods programs at one time and another. There were short spurts of activity in automotive subject, with Lloyd Press, and handicrafts, but it wasn't easy to find adults who had the time to devote to weekly sessions.

It was always hard for kids out here to find ways to earn money and growing and selling vegetables from 4-H gardens was one way. Katie grew, packaged and sold catnip for several years. I remember that Ann Lyle paid her kids and others to collect birch bark, which she used in her root cellar stove and, of course, Carl Herning hired boys from time to time to clean the school buses. Some of the older boys worked for Harold Herning at times.

C: About all us girls were allowed to do was babysit.

Transcribed and edited by Bruth George

We agree to share this information with other interviewees and others interested in local history.

Name _____

Date _____