

Interview with Mattie Lee Herning (Mrs. Carl), 10 November 2000, at 512 Herning Rd. Interviewers are Colleen Herning, Bruth and Al George and (later) Nancy Kuhn. Mattie, 83, still lives on the Herning homestead near 5 mile Chena Hot Springs Rd. Carl died in 1988. All mileages given are for Chena Hot Springs Rd. unless otherwise noted.

M:so I wrote three letters, three applications, one to Univ. of Alaska, and I didn't know where that was, had to get the book out, it was in College, Alaska. And then I wrote another letter to Hawaii (I was gonna get way off), and then I wrote the US government for a military job. Well, the first one that came through was the military and they wanted me to be at a certain period in San Francisco on a certain day. Well, that was just before Okinawa and all that war. Mother and Dad just absolutely threw a fit.

B: So this would have been during World War II?

M: Yeah. I gave that up, sent 'em a thing and told 'em I wasn't going to be able to make that. And then after the war, I got a letter from a Dean Duckering. And he wanted to know if I would teach in Fairbanks and could I come the second semester? So I wrote right back and accepted that. And he sent me this letter, telling me what I was going to make and the whole bit—and then he died. I never met him.

I had to leave in January down there in Amarillo. We went to town and bought the heaviest duty clothes you could buy in Texas and they weren't half big enough, wide enough or warm enough. When I got home from here after teaching half a year, I got a letter from Hawaii and they'd offered me that job. So in those three letter, I got three job offers.

C: How did you decide on Alaska?

M: Oh, I'd already met Carl. And he kinda took you off your sweet feet, you know. And was really a nice guy, to me.

C: How did he sweep you off your feet?

M: Well, he went to the same church. Somehow, Dad wrote a letter to the preacher up here. He knew I was coming and they didn't have anybody playing the piano..... And so I met Carl the very first Sunday. Of course, they've always got a nice guy here they want you to meet. They already had me all spotted and I thought, "Oh, goodness."

C: What was your first impression of Carl?

M: That he was Hillbilly #1. He had on these bunny boots, it was January, and he drove this big old maroon-colored van with no windows. He was using it as a bus picking up the Funk kids, taking them to school. He didn't impress me very much. But I must have impressed him. He stayed with it. And then, I finally got to see the ground. After all of January, February, March and April, and May, you could sorta start to see what the ground looked like. That's a miserable time to come up here, January.

I had to go back down to Texas and resign from this little (*school*)..... Portales, New Mexico, was where it was that year. And I'd only been there half a year. I'd taught three years before that in this little country school.....commercial stuff, bookkeeping, shorthand, typing.

At that time, we had to do the war stuff. They had the teachers do all these extra jobs and they wanted these books—what were they, now? Ration books. We had to go back to school on Saturday and Sunday and do those things. And then this woman would say she had ten kids, well, they had 'em all listed or they'd stand there and you could count 'em and then they'd get ten ration books.

I'd never ridden a plane and, of course, I'd gotten into Seattle in the middle of the night (Dad and Mother drove me to Seattle), and we went down to this place where they were selling tickets in Seattle. We didn't even have a ticket to get up here. And at that point, no one said anything about buying tickets in advance. Anyway, when we got to the end table, it was Pan American and it was about a \$75 ticket from Seattle to Fairbanks. We got the ticket and I got on the plane with my boots and everything on and I thought, "Gee, that's gonna be hot," but when I got on the plane it was not hot. It was a cold plane, cold ride.....

All the soldiers were excited about coming back to Fairbanks. Most of them had been up the year before and had just gone home for Christmas. When they let us off the plane out there at Ladd Field, these soldiers were all standing around in these funny looking clothes, with nothing much showing but eyes, and holding up these big fluorescent lamps. They had two or three bulbs in 'em. And that's what the plane landed with. They didn't have any lights on, on the field. Everything was off, they'd had a real snow storm....

They had a little ten by twelve house sittin' there that they used as a ticket office (*for bus transportation*) and they said if you're going to the university, first you gotta go to Fairbanks..

C: What time of day was this?

M: It was in the middle of—well, I guess it would have been in the middle of the night, no matter what time it was. It was all black. And this kid in the bus, he must have been a high school kid. It was Greimann's son and he got everyone on that was goin' to Fairbanks and he wanted \$4, I think. I only had about two five dollar bills by the time I'd paid this and that and the other to get that far. I didn't start out with that much cash in the first place. I thought well, I had a bank account.

There were only about four of us that went to town on the bus. The rest of them got on other buses and went to Eielson and all these strange names. And I didn't know what Eielson was.

So when I got off the plane, they brought me clear into Fairbanks in this bus, this old yellow school bus. It had a heater in the back end with a stovepipe stickin' out the back and it was somewhat warm in there.

And then when we got to Fairbanks, I never saw such a road in my life. It was jump, jump, jump, hittin' the top of the bus—he was going just normal speed or real slow, I think, with this school bus, but it was a terrible road and he said, "They've had a fire. The Co-op Drug just

burned down," and there were hoses all over the street and frozen solid. It was about thirty below. Rough? And that was Cushman and Second Street, I think.

I went up to the hotel manager or whatever he was, his name was Nigro. I found out because I taught his kids after that. And since then his daughter became a teacher, but at that time I guess she was a high school student. So he said, "We don't have any rooms here. All the miners are in town and they're not going to move until mining season opens up again and that's in the middle of June."

C: Which hotel was this?

M: Nordale. It had not burned yet but the Co-op Drug. And that's why the street was so rough, all those hoses strung out and frozen and he was takin' this bus over the whole thing, just like that. Really a rough ride. Then the guy in the hotel said they didn't have a room, there was no room in the whole town and if I was gonna' work at the University, here was the phone, call out there.

I think about that time it was two in the morning. The hotel man hunted up the number. I think they had only two phones out there, and I got Dr.----- who was the president? Terris Moore. He said "Well, come on out here, I'll call Miss Fish." And I thought what a strange name..... I never did know anybody by the name just Fish. He said, "I'll call Miss Fish and I'll have her meet you at the door. You take a cab out here and go to Hess Hall, that's where everybody lives. And that's where we've got a room for you." The first thing he said was, "Are you still in Texas?", so he knew I was coming.

He said take a cab and come out to the University. Well, I didn't know where there was a cab, but this guy at the hotel says, "There's a kid here's got a car and he can drive you out to the University." And he went out to this little ol' Chevrolet just like one I left at home.

The kid put me in the front seat 'cause he couldn't open the back door. I had two suitcases and I'd already sent a trunk of stuff up here. He said, "I can take you out to the University. I think I know where it is. I haven't been out there, but I can get you there." So I got in the front seat with him and he piled the two suitcases in the back.

There was not a light anywhere on campus, but finally we drove around and saw one 60w bulb up on top of a—it looked like a water tower, but it was all cased in—and it was on top of the old gym... And he said, "If there's a hall named Hess I don't know where it is, so I'll just have to drive around and find it." So we drove around and he said, "There's Hess Hall."

So we got out on the side. There's a front door, but he went to the side. The stairway there only went down to the basement. And we were walkin' around, bangin' those suitcases on all the doors and every one of the doors had a man's name on it. The taxi driver said, "I thought you was gonna live in the girls' dorm." And I said, "Well, that's what I thought."

Then I saw all those signs that'd say AC, then the next would say DC, next one would say AC and DC, all over the place, which meant nothing to me. Then she (*Miss Fish*) came down, she heard us rummaging down there. She said, "I'll take you back upstairs. Your room'll be on the main floor."

Then she said. "Now, it's between semesters and the girls have brought their sheets down and washed them." These were old Maytag washers, about six of 'em, just old antique wringer washers..... She said, "They've got 'em hangin' on these lines....." and about ever six inches there were lines all across the basement. And she said. "We've got to crawl under them." So we bent down and crawled under those old wet sheets. At two o'clock in the morning. She knew right where I was goin' and took me up to the room and there was my trunk.

They'd closed this room all up except nobody remembered to close the vent way up in the top. From the vent down, clear to the floor was a stream of ice.....

I opened up my trunk, there was my—it wasn't a fuzzy blanket—but a sheet that had wires in it..... When I plugged it in, wham, bang and all the lights flew out. I thought well, I wondered what AC and DC mean. I found out right quick, so that was the end of the blanket. It got hot in that room, really hot, but you wouldn't dare open a window 'cause you couldn't close it back, 'cause of that stream of ice clear to the bottom.

The next morning, over comes Minnie Wells. What a name that was. Minnie. Wells. She introduced herself and she was smokin' a cigarette in a big ol' cigarette holder, and she had on pants and I was from schools where women didn't wear 'em. They had to wear dresses and nobody smoked. Here she was, smokin' up a storm. So she says, "Well, get your clothes on and I'll take you over to where you're gonna teach. Tomorrow you have to be there."

So we walked across to this old building. The snow was piled up five feet everywhere, just a trail. So we got to this building, it was an old, old building and she said, "Now you'll be having an axe to be in charge of." An axe. "And if the thing catches afire, why, you can....." And here's a bucket of water sittin in the hall, two or three more buckets, down the way, and it didn't make sense to me. I couldn't imagine heftin' up a pail of water and throwin' it. And the floors were all these oiled floors, they were dark brown. Boy, it'd been there a long time. And there was a certain bucket I was supposed to man.

Minnie Wells said, "I think this is the room you're gonna be in." It was a huge room. It had ten typewriters here, it had ten desks for secretaries there, and ten other desks for bookkeeping—all in the same room..... She didn't know which stuff I was gonna' teach or what I was gonna' teach but she knew that was the room and she said, "I guess these are the books," and I recognized all the books. It was the same old stuff I'd had. And then here came the preacher and he took me downtown.

C: How did he find you?

M: Oh, dad had written a letter to the First Baptist Church up here..... It was so cold, 30 below... oh, it was 60 below.¹ He said, "If you'll just spend the night with us, I'll get you back out to the class." So I stayed all night with them and they had about ten kids.

C: This was Mr. Carey, the preacher, that came and got you?

¹ Officially, temperature readings around Jan. 21, 1951 ranged from a high of -48 to a low of -53.

M: Yeah, Carey was the preacher and Mrs. Carey with all these little kids. Three or four of 'em, anyway. And she had yellow² sheets. I thought, man, they must be payin' this preacher pretty good, 'cause I hadn't seen such nice colored sheets but I never said anything. She put me in a nice little room and they had about six bedrooms because they had all these kids upstairs at the church. It was a nice church, brand new. It hadn't been built long. Carl was still workin' on the church.

Who was the (*school*) superintendant? Ryan. Ryan called Carl to come in. He said, "I see you're getting here everyday at time for school and you're bringing kids. Why don't you just pick up the Funk children and we'll pay you....."

Anyway, I got to see where I was gonna' teach and what I was gonna' teach but the head of my department was in Seattle having an operation and Dr. Moore was taking an airplane—and it was parked right out there by the window—and he was gonna go get this Washburn.....

B: Brad Washburn?

M: Yeah. And they were gonna go do something on Mt. McKinley. So I didn't have anyone there that knew anything at all. When school started the next day, I had ten girls, that was a whole bunch, that was all the girls in that school.³

C: All the girls that were at the University?

M: There were only ten. And they were all taking typing and bookkeeping, so I had 'em all in two classes. And I think one class met at about 10 in the morning for an hour and then along about 2 in the afternoon, the other one met and that was it. And I thought there surely oughta be more than this, just two classes every day.

Christmas was still goin' on but at that point they only gave the kids four days because they got out early so they could go headin' down for Mt. McKinley and get those jobs before the kids all came up here from the states. So they only had three or four days for Christmas.....

They were a nice bunch of kids. Everyone of 'em were real nice girls and they all lived right here in Fairbanks. And all these boys were there from the army. They'd started back.

C: They were taking university classes?

M: Uh huh. There were only two hundred students altogether. With ten of them being girls.

B: So these girls were all from Fairbanks? They didn't live on campus?

M: Some of 'em did, the ones that lived in Hess Hall but they didn't all live there.... There was no bus system here so mothers and dads, had to come and get 'em every day (*if they didn't live on campus*). It was really kind of a primitive place.

² Mattie called that evening to say she'd forgotten to finish the story about the yellow sheets. A couple years later, she'd mentioned them to Mabel Carey who said, "Oh, those were just white sheets washed in Fairbanks water."

³ Mattie found later there were a few more girls.

There was a PE teacher, now, what was her name? Bonnie? Billie? She went into the public school system after retiring from the University, I think. Billie Brooks. She married one of the students there and they kinda frowned about that.

So I was getting' around, playin' that piano at the First Baptist. I kept wonderin' what the ground looked like 'cause I hadn't seen any of it, you know. Carl had just shot a buffalo and I think he was on his last steak. So he asked me if I'd ever eaten buffalo and I said no. So he invited me out, but he didn't invite me for the next Sunday. He waited about three weeks. And I said, later on, "Why did you wait so long." He said, "Well, I had to get that house cleaned up and I had to get Dorothy and Anne⁴ over there to do it." He did have it cleaned up—but he didn't even have a front door—just a blanket.

And he had both his sisters there. He wasn't gonna just have me out there by myself. And I thought, well, that was pretty nice because I didn't know him and he looked like, well, he looked like these Eskimos with these bunny boots and big old coat, you know. Anyway, he didn't make much of an impression on me.

C: Was Carl's mom living with them at the time?

M: She was already dead. I never met her. But I met Anne and Dorothy...

B: Well, how long had he been out there, then?

M: Just that very year. He'd just got the blanket on, it was a big ol' military blanket.

B: So he and Harold⁵ must have both homesteaded about the same time?

M: Oh, Harold wasn't here yet. He hadn't moved in yet, but I did meet him. He was out there workin' on the road into his place. He was chopping all those trees down and trying to get a house built. And the mosquitoes were so black, so thick on his face, you couldn't see it. Was really a strange situation.

B: So Carl was the first one of the Hennings to settle out here.

M: Well, his mother kept saying, "Well now, you guys have got to get a homestead." Without her he'd have never done it. She went in and signed up the papers for him.....

C: How long did you teach at the University?

M: Three years. Three and a half.

C: Did you live in Hess Hall the three years that you taught up there?

M: I lived up there two years before I married Carl and then I moved out here.

⁴ Carl's sisters

⁵ One of Carl's four brothers, Others were Earl, Bill and Don.

C: How did you decide on Carl?

M: It wasn't easy, I went through a lot of problems thinkin' about it..... He was such a hillbilly. He didn't even have a suit. But he finally got one or two.

C: What clinched it for you?

M: I don't know. I guess.... I don't know. He...

B: When were you married?

M: '52....February 22.⁶ Was that a holiday? Washington's birthday. We both thought we'd have that day off but he had to go to school and take the kids and so did I. So we didn't have the day off. But we did get married at the church and when we went there, we didn't plan anything fancy, and everybody got mad at us because we didn't have it fancy. We didn't spend a penny and they expected a big fancy wedding with all this food and cakes and stuff and we just didn't do it.

C: Did you have witnesses?

M: Yeah, they were there cleanin' up the church. It was a Friday and the preacher and his wife had on their old clothes, cleaning and stuff.....

C: That was the Careys?....Mabel and....

M: Orland.....

That very summer Cashen⁷ was in charge of summer school so he offered me a job for the summer. Well, I wanted to go home and see Mother and Dad 'cause I'd been up here four months by that time, and I thought maybe they'd come back with me and I could bring my little car back, which is what we did..... I drove all the way back, clear from Amarillo....

C: What kind of a car was it?

M: It was a little Chevrolet. Just like what that kid in the cab drove me out to the college with.... Mother and Dad came with me and you couldn't find a room in town, no place to live, so Carl said, "I've got that upstairs, they can come and sleep in that." So that's what they did. It was just an attic but it's got windows in the ends. It was a nice big room. They enjoyed it but they thought, oh, man, what a hillbilly.

C: What did they say to you about Carl?

M: Oh, they didn't like him because I was gonna live up here. And Mother never did forgive me, never. But Dad did..... Oh, he thought this was the place to be. And all this land was selling for forty dollars an acre, everywhere. He told Carl to find him so many acres and Carl

⁶ A Friday

⁷ William Cashen was Dean on Men at this time.

got out and found all these different places. On Love Road, the whole thing was for sale. I think they wanted \$4000 for the whole thing.⁸ Carl had it all listed and when Mother found out, that ended the whole thing. Dad never bought another piece, any of it.

C: So how was it for you to move from Hess Hall out here?

M: It was kinda neat. I liked it. But, man alive, the roads were terrible. Carl had to park up there where those igloos are (*at the top of four mile hill*) and, a lot of days, walk down, 'cause that was the rainiest summer they'd ever had and the roads were impassable.

C: What summer would that be?

M: '51? Rain, rain, rain.

B: After you moved out, were you driving on what's now the Chena Hot Springs Rd.?

M: Steele Creek Rd., all that big loop and that great big hill (*4 M hill*). Half the time I'd have to back down it, 'cause I wasn't use to drivin' up here—or anywhere else—and I'd back down. I had a wreck or two.

C: You mean, in the winter you had to back down the hill?

M: Oh, every winter, nearly every day there for awhile, because I couldn't get up enough speed from our driveway. It was just a little thin road. In fact there was no bridge there. I guess Tilly would get out and put her planks down to drive her tractor over Steele Creek so she could carry her eggs to town to sell 'em.

C: Would she leave the planks so everybody else could cross?

M: Yeah, pretty much. But that tractor was an old John Deere.....it was rubber-tired and it didn't fit my little car.....

C: When did you guys get running water?

M: Oh, years later. Carl was gonna do it himself, you know..... He borrowed this guy's equipment and set it right there in front of the house. He had to get the bus and go get the kids, so this friend said, "Just go ahead. When you get back I'll have water for you." So Carl said OK and he said, "Remember, I got all those tools borrowed and I gotta get 'em back by Monday." When Carl got back they had the tools all hung in the bottom and they could not get 'em out....

C: So the drill and all that stuff was in the bottom?

M: And still is. So we ended up having to pay that \$4000 or \$5000 back, you know.... They were down about 100 feet.... Or maybe two. I think our well's 200-somethin' feet.

⁸ Probably a 160 acre homestead.

B: You're using the same well?

M: No. After we paid for the lost parts—it took us awhile to get that paid back—Carl got Swan or somebody out there to drill a well.

C: What about electricity?

M: Well, he had one light bulb already.... Tilly and Henry⁹ had gotten Golden Valley out to their place. Carl had one light bulb and a plug-in for his radio. And he had a set of batteries, for the radio, big enough to fill up this whole room. He was a modern. Kept up with all the country. He had one light bulb and a refrigerator.

B: What were you cooking on?

M: I don't think I ever cooked on the wood stove. He had a wood stove in there. But I never did get the hang of that. I'd burn everything.....

C: So did Carl do the cooking?

M: I don't know what we did there for awhile. Musta starved. 'Cause the last year I taught school I was out here. I didn't do much cookin'..... Oh, I remember Carl would go out in this nice fresh snow and bring it in. He had a string or a rope tied to a brand new washtub.....and he'd drag water into the house, the one room we had. But the very next year, he put another room on. Then we added a room nearly every year..... Then we got an electric stove.

You know he worked for Pan America and they would furnish food to their attendants as well as their passengers and every time, some of the passengers would get so sick they couldn't eat.....air sickness. Pan American said, if you've got any friends, take this food home. So everybody, all around—there were a whole bunch of men out here homesteading—Kruger, Lindstrand. Two Lindstrands, Bob, Bob—

C: You mean Bob Straight?

M: Bob Straight. And all of them would come over to Carl's place, 'cause Carl would bring all this food home. They were always comin' over there eatin'. At first I thought, well, which one is my husband. They were all the same.....

C: Grubby, huh?

M: And ready to eat. And he'd bring all this fresh butter and fresh milk that people were paying an arm and a leg for in town. They'd give to anybody, and so Carl would take it and bring it out here and all these guys would come around eatin' time..... Johnny Kalina.....He was there. There were a lot of them—eatin' all this Pan Am stuff.

One time I went up in an airplane and looked all around, and here was our house, and all these little trails, comin' off from it.....

⁹ Brockman, near 6 M.

C: What do you know about Joe Kruger? He was the one I remember the most.

M: Oh, he was over there all the time. And the funny thing was, if I wasn't over there cookin', he'd just take whatever we had, anyway.

C: He'd just walk in and take whatever?

M: Uh huh. Two or three of 'em did that. We'd buy bread, I wasn't makin' bread then. We got to the point where I was makin' about twenty loaves a week...

C: For these guys?

M: Yeah. 'Cause my family was a little slower growin' than all these guys and they were there nearly every day. But I guess that came with Carl. Because he'd been feedin' 'em all this stuff. If they didn't eat there, they took it with them... *(Nancy arrives)*

N: Well, was there reciprocity there?

M: Well, one or two of them did. Carl Lindstrand always did something..... He had a tractor and a saw..... He saw that wood was sawed, in the right length and stuff.... *(the saw)* was hooked into this Farmall tractor..... We used every kind of fuel you can use when we were first up here, kerosene stoves, wood stoves, coal.

N: How did you get your coal? Did everybody have a pickup?

M: Everybody had a pickup.....

N: So what kind of a stove did you have?

M: Every kind. We started out with a regular old, huge cook stove, and in that size house that would heat the whole place..... I never did learn to cook on that thing. I was burnin' up this, or didn't get it done..... Then we bought a little electric stove..... And then we had some kerosene stoves—Younger or Junger—that Lee Risse was selling. Remember when he used to sell those kerosene heaters? Fifty-one or two or fifty-three..... But when we got that little electric stove, that was my style.

N: That's when you started baking bread for all these bachelors?

M: Kids and bachelors and everything. Twenty somethin' loaves a week..... I wasn't used to any of this kind of cookin'.

A: Did they pay you anything for a loaf of bread?

M: No, don't remember ever collecting anything. Except Lindstrand, now, he paid back by work. And so he was there a lot, so I always kinda liked Carl. But none of the rest of 'em ever did and on top of that they'd take the gasoline. Carl had his gasoline just sittin' in the barrel, but he never could catch 'em. He'd try, but he knew who the gas was goin' to.

B: How were these guys supporting themselves?

M: I don't think a one of them had a job. I don't think so.

N: Did you know any of these guys?

M: I never saw any of them before. Carl knew 'em all.

C: Did they all start homesteading about the same time?

M: I guess. Pretty much the same..... About halfway through that road business, we sat down and figured about how much that road cost. \$41,000 we'd spent on it...

C: On Chena Hot Springs Rd.?

M: No, just on my driveway up to our house. Because it was right in the swamp, comes off Chena Hot Springs, right in the lowest part and he had to cut trees down and lay 'em like this.....corduroy. Then he said he put 20 feet of gravel on top of that. And it all had to be paid for. Since then we've added probably that much more to that road because he had to have that road good enough to do all these buses. So we've spent an awful lot on the road, don't have a piece of concrete on it.

N: I want to take you back to the bachelors. It's interesting that Carl knew these guys and they just show up but supposedly Carl would have met them.....

M: At different jobs. Well, Carl worked at FE Co. on just miniature jobs, not miniature jobs, they made a big deal out of them, but just the lowest ranking.... He'd just stand there and hold a hose to squirt water all over.

C: So he ran the big hydraulic hoses that washed the bank?

M: Yeah, he did that and somethin' else, with points.... Yeah, thawing the ground. So he met 'em out there.

N: Where were the houses of these guys that were showing up at your back door?

C: They were all on homesteads, contingent.....

B: Bob Straight was a little farther away.

M:but he had a car, a pickup. He was there a lot, too. And then on Funk's road, back in there, there were two more guys and I don't think they even had a homestead back there.....

B: When did Funks show up out there?

M: I think they might have been here—I think they homesteaded over at Brice's. That was their homestead..... And then Brice's bought it, from Funks, I think.....

B: Maranatha was over there, that's where Brice's bought and that's what's on this map.....

C: Harry Denton? Was he one of the guys who came over?

M: But he wasn't very friendly. They didn't like him.... He was a nut.

C: What did he act like?

M: He acted okay to me.

C: Dad said he used to chase people off with a gun.

M: Oh yeah, he'd stand out there with a gun in his hand and threaten you and all that stuff.

A: Who was this? Because Bob Straight had a gun, too.

C: But Bob never threatened people.

M: Well, they were afraid of him, part of the time. Bob Straight could come apart, yeah....

C: Well, Dad said Denton was blind, almost blind.

M: Might have been. But Denton was farther out....

C: Denton was at the creek.

M: Well, that was way later. He was out here, closer to—there's a lady has horses out here. He was close to that....

B: Just this side of the Little Chena, maybe?

M: I think so, yeah.....

C: Mattie, when did you start teaching high school? You were at the University three years?

M: Then I was out eight more years, with kids.....

C: Oh, when you weren't working.

A: Carl must have used up several cases of Kleenex, 'cause he was the only bus driver in the district that would wipe a kid's nose before he could get on the bus.....

C: Really? Was that one of Carl's rules?

M: That's the way he did it.

B: When did he first buy a school bus?

M: He ran the old maroon panel one year. That was before they even had bus districts. Then Ryan says "Why don't you just drive these buses. You're here all the time. I can set my clock by you..... We'll pay you so much a kid." Funks had only two or three kids, so he wasn't makin' much money. Then right after that he got a regular school bus, but it was too little because by that time two children's' homes had opened up out here.

N: What brought childrens' homes out here. This seems like a strange place....

A: Land.

N: Who gave the land for them?

A: Government....

M: Then after he got this little bitty bus, it was too little because Maranatha Childrens' Home started, then they brought in twenty kids and just about broke 'em¹⁰, because Ryan said, "We'll pay you by the kid." Two or three dollars. So Carl kinda lucked out there, for one year.

B: So, did he get a bigger bus then, the next year, after that?

M: The next year, yeah.

A: He eventually went to what?

M: I think he had six.

A: Charley Ward was a driver for years.

N: This was in the fifties?

M: He retired in about '80.

C: Were you encouraging him in doing the bus thing?

M: I hoped he did somethin'.

N: What was the name of your school bus company?

M: Herning Bus Transportation.... No, just Herning Transportation.

N: In any of that time, in the summertime, were the school buses used for other things like down in Denali?

¹⁰ the school district

M: Nope. He took on special tours. If anybody wanted to take the Home Ec club somewhere, why he'd give 'em a rate. He did a lot of that in the summer.

N: Did you have competition—someone else wanted this great opportunity?

M: Yeah, he had a lot of competition. Chuck Reese was working for the competition, whatever that was. He had to bid every year. But it got to the point where we couldn't afford the insurance.....

C: Did you buy most of your groceries from the N.C. Co.?

M: Yeah.

N: Did you buy with cash or....

M: No, we had credit.

N: How often did you have to pay?

M: Once a month. Our bill for the month would be about \$400. Started out \$400 a month for groceries, right off the bat.

B: Well, you were feeding half the community.

C: Well, Carl always had a history of being a generous person, huh? Did he ever resent those guys?

M: No, it was just me. I resented 'em.

N: If you wanted seven grown men in your life, you'd have married 'em, right?

M: I wouldn't have married all seven of 'em.

C: And not that seven anyway, right? Maybe Carl Lindstrand, the one that worked.

N: Did you ever get any of those guys married off?

M: I don't think so..... There weren't any girls up here.

B: Not out on homesteads, anyway. Well, who else was out here? When did the Risses come out? They were out here before we came out, a couple of years at least.

N: He said he dug Harold's septic—well, he dug his outhouse, 'cause he told me about how he dug that.

M: That was Lee Risse did that?

N: Yeah, that's what he told me. He was explaining in great detail how you could dig this trench, how deep it had to be and how wide it had to be and there was big, strappin' Lee makin' a big bit of money, diggin' an outhouse hole.

M: I know who built ours—Don.

C: Dad built the outhouse over at your house?

M: Really fancy..... You walked into it and there was a partition and you walked around that aways and back here was a place to put the rakes and hoes and whatever else he had outside.

C: That was a nice outhouse. It that still down there?

M: Yeah, but I got to close it up or lock the door 'cause the floor's rotted out.....

N: So how many years did this outhouse have an existence?

M: Still workin'.....if you could make your way into it.....

C: I remember loving to go into your outhouse..... It was the fanciest outhouse I'd ever been in plus it had this really picturesque calendar with all these women on it, I think.....

B: You got plumbing before too long, didn't you?

M: Yeah, after we paid off to fill in the hole. We got water after two years, maybe. I think we got plumbing after two years. Altogether, maybe four.

C: That's not too long.

M: Seemed long to me. I came out of a house with three bathrooms and five bedrooms and all that kind of stuff, in Amarillo.

B: You mentioned Tilly. I remember hearing that they had to drive a tractor, I thought, from the top of the hill, the top of 4 mile hill (to their place at about 6 mile).....

M: I think they drove it clear into town..... 'cause they were gathering up quite a few eggs and takin' 'em in nearly every day. I don't know how she hauled 'em in a tractor. I never did see her on the road. But we had to go 'round thataway (*via Steele Creek Rd*), you know, instead of just comin' through. They didn't even have the Steese Expressway. Where the old Steese intersected with Steele Creek Rd., there was a big hill. And half the time I never got up it. I'd have to back down it and I'm not a very good backer.

Carl kept saying he had a brother named Earl, but I never met him even though Earl was living out here, in a concrete block house (*at about 7 M*).

C: You never met Earl while he was here?

M: Not at first, I only met Carl, Dorothy and Anne and their husbands.

C: Not Dad?

M: And not Don, but I met Harold and Beatrice. And right after, Harold was out here workin' on this road, cuttin' these trees down....to this house he was gonna build. And he was gonna make it one big room and that's what he did. And Carl said, "Why are you making all these windows here?" And he said, "Well, I'm gonna make a shop out here and I'm gonna put the house on top."

But there wasn't any shop there, it was just that first room. And with a big cook stove in there. Then an old oil barrel heater. It was pretty primitive. Then they moved out here, I guess maybe in '51 or 2.... I thought it was odd that he built that house way off the road but that's what he did.¹¹ He was gonna have the basement for his shop and live up above it, but he never, ever got that done.....

C: So, was this like having an adventure, to live in a primitive way?

M: Mother and Dad..... Dad could understand anybody wantin' to stay up here. This was the place to make money. He knew that. But when Mother found out, she never did forgive me.

B: How did you dad make his money?

M: When he and mother first married, they bought a little ol' piece of land, two sections, right off the pampa¹², ten miles out of Pampa, Texas..... One section was farm land, one section was real rough and he started leasin' it to oil companies and I'm still getting money off of that.

B: Famous Texas oil well, huh?

M: Uh huh.he had lots of bad luck. He and mother went to town and bought fifty cows, little calves. He brought 'em home and... every last one of 'em died and he had to skin 'em and took the skins to town. So he had the debt to pay off. I think that was right after World War I and it took him forever to get that paid back. Kinda like our well over here, when we had to pay for that.

C: Did you ever think about leaving Alaska during the homestead days?

M: No, never did. I was right where I wanted to be.

C: What would you say kept you there?

M: Oh, I guess Carl. He lost his contract one year. I can't think of that other bus company's name. They came in with a lot of other buses and we lost the contract.

Well, Carl was getting up in age and he didn't want to go back to carpenter work though he could've built anything around. So we went down to Texas to see what we could do back

¹¹ Much of this is now Herning Hills Subdivision, view property.

¹² Pampa—Spanish "prairie"

there, 'cause Dad still had these two sections of land. He was rentin' 'em out, he would've been glad to have Carl or anybody else who would tend to anything. And we decided we'd like to move back to Texas. Well, Dad and Carl got to talkin' and Carl said it looked like we was gonna have to make a change, we couldn't keep the bus route. We just couldn't go down low enough to make any money off it. But dad said, "If I were you, I'd go back up there and make them give me that bus contract." So we knew then and there that Daddy wasn't gonna support anybody else. So we came back and Carl went in and he negotiated a couple-three more years.....

Oh, I didn't tell you about Earl. I was trying to make that turn (*from the Steese onto Steele Creek*), where you had to go up that great big old hill. We were at the bottom of that hill and I'd already backed down once. Well, I got out and there were two other cars backed up and this guy came up and said, "This hill should have been eliminated, long ago," or somethin' like that and he was fussin' about that hill and how many times he'd backed down. And he said, "I don't believe I know you." And I said, "I'm Mattie Lee Herning." He said, "You're Carl's wife?" Never said another word. Got in the car and drove off and I never saw him ever again.

C: He never came around to your place? What was his big beef?

M: He and Julie were mad.

C: At Carl?

M: I don't know who he was mad at. Wasn't me 'cause I'd never seen him before. And it was such a shock, standin' out there in the cold, waitin' for that car in front to get up the hill..... And I was behind him and he was out there lookin' to see if these cars were goin' up and he didn't say, "That's my name, too."..... So when I got home, I said, "Have you got any other brothers around here?" And he said, "Yeah. Earl?" "Well, that's what he said his name was."

C: Did you ever find out what he was mad about?

M: Yeah, religion.

C: Was that the feud?

M: Uh huh, and Don, Don wasn't in it....

C: Oh, Dad wasn't in it?

M: Well, he was but he was on Earl's side, so I hardly knew Don, either.

C: I heard that us kids weren't supposed to wave at the other kids when we went by in the car. Did that happen to you?

M: Oh yeah. All the time..... They just wouldn't speak to you..... I'd wave but they didn't. That didn't bother me at all.

B: This was different churches they belonged to or what?

M: Earl went over to Hawaii and he came back with a little strange thing, wasn't church, wasn't Baptist, wasn't even in the Bible..... And Harold and Carl didn't agree with him. But when he died, Carl wanted to go down to his funeral. Carl and Don both went.

C: Well, Earl had come to visit since then.

M: Uh huh.....

C: When Dad would go over to Harold's, us kids would have to hide behind the rain barrel. It was our feud. We had our feud.

M: Well, it was mostly Earl's doing. Earl and Julie, both. I never got into it or out of it, either. I was just there. And he never did come to our house, not until they finally decided that was kind of a dumb thing to do.

C: Didn't he lose his homestead?

M: He sold it for nothin'..... And Don and Harold and Carl, all three, would have given him twice what he got. But he didn't tell anyone he wanted to sell it and leave. He just left. Packed up and left. Threw everything out in a big garbage hole..... Everything. We went over and dug out some of it. Some nice lamps. Carl and I. And Harold.

B: Getting back to Carl Lindstrand, Beatrice said, "I think he could smell my cooking from a mile away."

M: If he didn't eat at our house, he was over at Harold's.

C: What about that trapper that lived on ESRO road, who died of a bee sting? What was his name?¹³ Was a bachelor, trapper....

M: That's all was out here. No woman in her right mind would live out here.....

B: We tried to get a community club going once.

M: We tried to, we tried to two or three times..... There was the Steele Creek Hoppers....

C: That was name of your Homemakers' club?

B: Sure, we had Hopper Creek on one side and Steele Creek on the other.

M: And we'd meet ever so often, once a month or somethin'.... We've got that big ol' quonset hut, out there, so the kids could ride their bicycles and tricycles. The Homemakers would meet out there. We had more than anybody could get in their house.

B: Well, we did meet in houses, though. I remember meeting up at Mary Lindstrand's and over at Greta's¹⁴.

¹³ Louie Burdon

C: You came to our house.

B: Then we had 4-H which the Homemakers sort of sponsored..... And we tried to start a community club out here one time. Were you in on that? It never went very far.....

M: Yeah, think so..... We even had that trouble with the Steele Creek Hoppers and that was kinda fun. I don't know what happened there.....

B: Well, our kids grew up and left and some (of the women) went to work, I think. We didn't have new members coming in, was the problem.

C: I sure enjoyed 4-H. That was the high time of the summer for me, all of the 4-H meetings.

M: Was it Nathan that I took to kindergarten? We had to take 'em if they went to kindergarten.

B: One way. (Kindergarteners could ride the school one way.) And Martha Lindstrand. Three of those kids were of an age. (John Herning, Martha Lindstrand, Nathan George)I used to walk Nathan up to Lindstrand's and you and Everett took turns taking the kids in, didn't you? I didn't have a car at the time unless Al was out of town and if he was, then I took a turn.....

N: You were all on party lines back then, because it wasn't until the eighties.....

M: I still got my old phone hangin' up by the door..... This was our own line.¹⁵

C: That line is still there.

N: What do you mean, "your own line?"

M: A phone line, running along the ground.

N: Well, there's part of the land phone down in the lower field, here at the George's, right?

B: Yeah, it must have gone over to Coby Eberhardt's, I think.

M: Yeah, I think it did.

N: So who strung that?

M: The women did. We wanted a phone pretty bad.

C: So, did Dorothy and Anne go out and string those lines?

M: They're the two did the most of it.

¹⁴ Risse

¹⁵ The line ran cross-country from Don Herning's at 5 M, to Carl's, Eberhardts, Lyle's, then across to Coby Eberhardt's at 7 M.

C: Did you, too, Bruth?

B: Oh, no, that was before our time.

N: So you got this telephone that hooked up just these ladies who sorta bought into the concept.....

B: It was family, basically.

M: Earl had a phone on that, too, I think. How it got over to Earl's I don't know.

N: Did you hook up into town, at all?

M: Oh, no.....

N: Well, it was just like having the old tin cans.....

M: That's right..... Every time a moose would go across, he'd drag his feet and wreck it. Dorothy or Anne or somebody would walk the line and patch it up.

C: And everybody had a certain number of rings that you knew was yours, and you couldn't pick up the phone unless it was your ring.

N: So did you give up that phone when you got the commercial phones?

M: No, I think we kept it part of the time, even then.

B: The way those first phones worked, it was smart to keep it, because those first phones (TransAlaska Tel. Co.) were pretty bad

N: When did you get commercial phones out here?

M: Carl went around to get everybody to hook up to Fairbanks and then here came North Pole and offered a phone to Gettinger..... And we got North Pole where we had twelve people on the party line.....

B:when it was working.

N: So that's why, if you live at Rainbow Trailer Court, you have a number that's in town, but if you live near Gettinger's you have 488-.

A: Except I think Gettinger is now city.

M: He was then. He took the line, so he got the city phone.

B: So, he stopped North Pole from going any farther (west).

M: Carl was awfully disgusted with that.

B: Of course, North Pole, when they came across the flats, (near where Nordale Rd. is now) went east before they came here. For awhile, we could go over to Day's¹⁶ and use the phone..... Then it wasn't too much longer before they extended it back this way.

M: And the phone bill was \$80, then. And we had twelve people on a line..... (End of interview)

(Transcribed and edited by Bruth George)

I agree to share this material with fellow interviewees and others interested in local history.

¹⁶ near 7 M

