

Interview with Don and Alice McKee, April 12, 2003. We are meeting at the George's house, 512 Herning Rd., Fairbanks, AK. (*Other voices heard are Bruth and Al George.*)

B: The first thing I always want to know is, why did you come to Alaska?

D: Well, we've been asked that a lot of times and it goes back to—we were dating before I went into the service and I was drafted into the army and wound up over in Europe and followed Patton across Germany. After the war, I was in the army of occupation down in Vienna. We were corresponding back and forth the whole time and she was in nurses' training at Mounds-Midway in St Paul. One night I wrote her a letter from Vienna and told her when I got out of the service I wanted to go to Alaska and two or three days later I got a letter from her saying when she got out of nurses' training, she wanted to go to Alaska. Our letters had crossed. We had never discussed it before. So I guess we were supposed to come to Alaska.

B: So you didn't come up here with the military?

D: No, I got out of service in '46 and we were married in '47. Illegally.

A: Not illegally. I wasn't supposed to be married when I was in nurses' training and I still had fifteen months. We were married secretly, not illegally.

D: She'd gone to work nursing and I had a little shop in our hometown and we kinda abandoned the idea of going to Alaska, too many other things got in the way.

A: No money, for one thing.

D: One evening I was working on a fellow's car, there in the shop on a Saturday night and we decided to go over to the pool hall and have us a beer before they closed up, about 11:30. Walked in there and there was a fellow standing there knew my friend, Smitty, and the fellow as trying to talk Smitty into going to Alaska with him. Smitty had no interest in going to Alaska at all.

I didn't know the guy, I didn't butt into the conversation, and after they got done talking, I told Smitty, "Gee, I'd like a chance to go to Alaska like that." "Well, why do you want to go?" "Always wanted to." "Well, if you go, I'll go."

So Sunday afternoon we went over to visit this fellow. Well, the fellow was Bob Lindy. Bob had been up here the summer of '50 and had made arrangements to drive two rigs back up here. He was driving up a brand new Pontiac Catalina and a new Ford pickup. He'd gone back to get his family and was going to haul all their stuff up in the pickup. Well, his wife flat refused to come up here. She

wasn't going up there and live in any igloo. So Bob was looking for someone to drive a car back for him. So it wound up there were four of us fellows, Smitty, Bob and a fellow name of Ray Kaley and I. We drove the two rigs up. That's how I got to Alaska.

I just came up with a toolbox and a suitcase. Gonna spend the summer and see. She was back there, our oldest son was born in '49 and we were expecting our daughter, June of '51. So she was in no condition for traveling. I went to work in a service station, the old Star Service Station and watched the Northward Building come up out of the ground. It was a hole in the ground when I was working across the street. I was working there in the station one evening and a car pulled up. Here's my sister and brother-in-law. They had decided to come to Alaska. We had no idea they were even thinking about it.

He was a body and fender man and went to work for Rudy Voigt. He and Rudy had their differences of opinion, so Mel made friends with Mike Agbaba who had Checker Cab. My brother-in-law had run a Pontiac garage down in Princeton, Minnesota and since Mike ran all Pontiacs and he was real interested. Mike had control of a shop over on Fourth and Wickersham that was owned by Ernie Shermer. Ernie had left here, gone to Seattle. Mike offered Mel that shop for seventy-five dollars a month, but number one priority was Checker Cabs. He could do anything he wanted to in that shop, but Checker Cabs came first.

I quit Star Service and went in with Mel in partnership in this garage and we ran that garage the rest of that summer and '52. Mike Agbaba lived just up the street and he came in one morning and he asked me "Are you married?" and I said "Yeah." "Where's your wife?" "Back in Minnesota." "Oh, she's got no business being there and you here." So we talked about it a little and Mike left. Little while later, Mike came back to the shop and he said "Hey, Al Polet down at the Nordale Hotel wants to talk to you." "Okay." I thought it was for a car repair job of some kind so I went down to the Nordale Hotel and asked for Al Polet. "Oh, yeah, he's in the office there in the back." I went back there. That was the Pan Am office. Mike had gone down there and signed a contract to fly now and pay later. Wanted me to sign it and send Alice a ticket. I've got a soft spot for old Mike.

A: We came up the day Kathy was six weeks old. At that time, babies couldn't fly until they were six weeks old. Came up in July.

B: *Where did you live?*

A: We lived in a hotel for ten days. Talk about fun with two babies. DeLuxe Hotel, right across from the Greimann building, on Noble.

D: I had made arrangements to rent a house from Dennis White, they called him "Copper," little short red-haired kid. I'd befriended him working there at the

station. He used to bring his car in there and I was the only one he'd allow to work on his car. He took a liking to me somehow. He had a house down on second avenue, down by the old MatMaid Creamery. We'd made arrangements to rent that house, but he couldn't get his tenants out of it so we lived in a hotel the first week, ten days. Finally got in that little cabin. We lived there about a year, then we got a little apartment out on Mary Ann and lived there just a short time. Then we bought a place on 23rd—

A: No, we lived down at the rooming house—

D: Oh, right, that was from old Cecil Wells. He had a rooming house and cabin right beside where the court house is now. There was a little cabin with a big two story log rooming house behind. It's been gone for a long time. They took it down and put a service station in there first, then they moved the service station across the street. We lived there for awhile.

That was in interesting enterprise, running a rooming house. The heating plant was in the basement of this rooming house. To stoke the furnace you had to go down through a trap door. One morning I opened the trap door and I saw a pair of feet. There was an old chair down there and a pair of feet in front of that chair. I don't like to walk into something like that cold and alone. Well, Smitty, my buddy, had the first room in the rooming house. He drove cab nights and he'd just gotten home. I went over and knocked on his door and I said, "Smitty, I might need a little back-up," "Oh, yeah, yeah, okay." So we went down and here's this guy passed out in this old chair. We woke him up and sent him out the door.

Another morning, the bathroom was right at the end of the hall and the door was closed. Well, that was never closed unless there was somebody in there. I couldn't hear anything, no water running or anything, so I got a little curious and I eased the door open. The shower curtain was pulled and here's a pair of feet sticking out under the shower curtain. Again, I went and got Smitty who said, "Now, isn't that cosy." Here's this guy all curled up on the floor in the shower with his jacket under his head, sound asleep. Smitty grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him up and his bottle rolled out of his jacket. Smitty ushered him out the front door. It was an interesting place.

B: *You were in town for six years or so?*

D: Yeah, came out here in '57.

B: *How'd you find your place?*

D: We were living out on 23rd St. and my brother-in-law had a shop on 19th and Gillam Way. He and my sister split up, my sister took off with some other guy and he was kind of beside himself and needed some help so I went over and

helped him with the shop. We were needing a place to live right at that time so we made arrangements to live in his house and I worked with him in the shop. We had decided we were going to leave Alaska. Our kids were starting to go to school. Neither of us were city kids, we were country kids and we just couldn't handle having these kids running back and forth all the time. We have no control over your kids. Your neighbors are either over here or your kids are over with the neighbor kids.

Well, it got to be too much and we decided we were going to leave. We looked at going to Idaho. My folks were in California, her folks lived in Minnesota and we'd kind of be between, so it was all set up. In '57, when school was out, she was going down and find a place and I was going to try to get things together that summer. I went to work for the Highway Department as a mechanic and I'd been there about two weeks when I was sent out to the end of Chena Hot Springs Rd. to service a cat that was clearing the right-of-way.

At that time, the end of Chena Hot Springs Rd. was at about 14 mile. So I drove out the service truck and spent the day with this operator going through his old Eight¹ and doing all the things he wanted done to it. It was a beautiful day, just a beautiful spring day. I told this operator, old Francis, "Gee, it's nice out here, this is sure nice." "Oh, this is nothing. You ought to come out where we're putting the camp in. That's really nice out there." He kept on, so Sunday we borrowed a Jeep from a friend and drove out as far as we could go. We got as far as 16 mile and it drops down into the lakes there, so we parked the Jeep and put on our hip boots and had a sack lunch with us, and took off walking, the two of us. The right-of-way was all cleared and we walked the right-of-way. When we broke over the hill by Bob Hirn's, we could see those big trees and I said, "That's what Francis was talking about." We went down and walked on across the creek to the camp and Francis came back with us. We walked all up around the hill there. "Well, if we're going to file on this, where are we?"

A: Not surveyed.

D: So we went down to the right-of-way and here were stakes with numbers on them, so we took numbers off of some of those stakes and Monday morning, I went to work and my wife went down and talked to old T. U. Wilson, highway engineer, and old T. U. got his map out and projected out the section lines from one of the maps and he said, "Now you go to stake number so-and-so, and you go 150 feet east and so many feet south and that should be the corner of Section 30, when it's surveyed. So with that information, Alice went up and filed on that quarter section, plus the wedge that ran between that and the road, so we'd have the road frontage. Then I got transferred up to Livengood and John Matson was working out at Chena Hot Springs Rd. so John and I switched places. When they sent me out here they sent an Eight with a sled behind it. All our household

¹ D-8 Caterpillar

and personal equipment was on the sled and I had a big old tarp and we spent all day going down the old sled road. It had thawed enough that we were getting stuck and having quite a time with that sled. We got to camp, right on the east side of Jenny M Creek, about four o'clock.

B: This was the construction camp?

A: Yes, they were building the road from 19 mile back to 16 mile.

D: Anyhow, Glen Pruitt was the head mechanic out there and Glen met the sled and said, "Where do you want to take your stuff?" "Well," I said, "Right across the creek to that homestead over there." That night he invited me over to have dinner with him, he had a little trailer out there. Then I went back over and cut some spruce poles and put up a frame work, pulled my tarp over and spread my sleeping bag and I was home.

B: I guess this old school district map doesn't extend out as far as your place.

D: No, but here's Ackerman. And Charlie May's. When we came back from Livengood, we stayed at Charlie May's cabin, she and the kids stayed there that first week. We've known the Charlie Mays for years..... And Risse. Lee and I served on Soil Conservation together. We were on an advisory board for the University at one time. That was when Horace Drury was head of the Farm out there and he was trying to get input on which direction to be going. Anyhow, Lee and I were both on that and there were people from Palmer, Wasilla and Anchorage. One of them was Mrs. Atwood.

Then there was one guy from back east. He was affiliated with a university in Indiana, I believe, and he seemed to be the guy that Drury really listened to. Drury was going off in a direction that Lee and I didn't think was quite the way to go and we couldn't get through to him. So we were trying every way in the world to get next to this fellow. We had a meeting down in Wasilla and there was a tour that afternoon and this guy from Indiana wasn't going on the tour so Lee and I didn't go, but old Horace Drury kept the guy right under his thumb. We never did get a chance to talk to him. Sometimes you have to do things like that.

B: So you had to get a house built, didn't you? I remember your old log cabin.

A: Yeah, we built it, you know, to live in for a year. Twenty years later I told him, that year's just about up. One of the advantages of a log cabin, you can pound a nail anywhere. And they are certainly homey.

D: I tell you one thing, we sure learned how to raise kids out there. The kids had a good education.

B: What kind of heat did you have?

D: Wood. We had a dugout underneath and had a barrel stove down there. The first year we had the stove down there we took a fifteen gallon oil drum and cut the ends out and run the stovepipe through it and put that in the floor for a safety. Then we had a regular chimney safety through the roof. I'd go down and stoke that thing up at night and if I didn't do it exactly right, and sometimes I didn't get it just right, we'd lay there in bed and that stovepipe would start getting red. Well, then you didn't sleep until the stovepipe cooled down.

We moved into that cabin on Labor Day. We had a blanket hung over the door, but at least we had a roof over our heads and a floor under our feet. We were out of that tent.

B: What were the dimensions of your cabin?

D: Sixteen by twenty-eight.

B: You say you were country people.

D: I was raised on a farm but I used to skip school to work in the Ford garage.

A: We both grew up on farms in Minnesota where you raised a bit of this and a bit of that, raised your meat, raised your eggs.

D: You had your dairy cows to get a cream and milk check. The rest of it you raised.

That first winter out there, the road wasn't built but it was passable and we'd have people come out to visit us. We were going to the Lutheran Church at that time and there was John Savelle I worked for the Highway Department and the Raaums, Dufseths and Mays. They'd come out and visit occasionally. They came at Christmas and brought a bunch of stuff for the kids. They kids still talk about that Christmas.

A: That was the best Christmas they ever had.

D: These people would say, "Why in the world do you want to live way out here? Why do you want this worthless land way out here?" We heard that so many times. I think some of them wish they had some of that worthless land.

B: Of course, the roads are a little better now.

D: The story I like to tell about the roads was when they rebuilt it in '62, '64. PK² had the contract and they started down here by Loud's and tore that up and it rained and rained, turned to quagmire and they moved on out and started to tear that up and it rained some more. It was just a total quagmire all the way. There were days when I would leave home at four o'clock in the morning and be late to work at eight. Had to be dragged through. I'll never forget Jim Turner, lived out in the A frame at 20 mile, 21 mile. He drove a Ford station wagon, a pretty nice car at that time. They were towing him through the mud, going home, he heard something, things didn't seem right, and they'd punched a hole in the floorboard right behind the front seat. That station wagon was acting just like a can, scooping up mud. The whole back end of that station wagon was plum full of mud.

A: You mentioned the Kimmels. Our kids rode the school bus, Carl Herning was the driver, and Kathy said Becky Kimmel was always getting into trouble and Carl would just pick her up and give her a few swats on her behind. Can you imagine a bus driver doing that now?

D: It worked, you know, so they had to quit it. No, our little cabin, when we got it closed in, Alice picked moss out of the woods and chinked the logs and then we cut little birch poles and laid in there to hold the chinking in.

A: We had lanterns for light and you'd be outside and look through it and it looked just like a corn crib.

B: How long before you got power out there?

D: We didn't get power until '61, I think. In this cabin we didn't have any lumber to work with. We cut it right out of the woods or we didn't have it. Except I got a real good buy on a bunch of tongue and groove cedar. That's what our floor was. But it was a V groove. That was fun to keep clean. And our ceiling—I got all the crating material I could from the highway camp. It wasn't much—1x4's, 1x6's and we stripped the ceiling with those 1-by's and then we went down to Nerland's and got those big cardboard furniture boxes and that was our ceiling. Then Alice pulled moss and she and the kids covered the whole thing with moss up there. Talk about a fire trap.

That first winter we decided we couldn't fire that barrel stove enough to keep it warm. I woke up one morning when it was 50 below outside and it was about zero in the house. I got ahold of a roll of visqueen and I covered that cardboard ceiling with visqueen. What a difference that made.

Then the next year Tim Morrison homesteaded there by the lakes and he worked out at the base. They were tearing out all of the old wardrobes at the barracks

² Peter Kiewit Construction

and putting in metal. These were all wood wardrobes and they were hauling all that stuff to the dump. Well, Tim being a homesteader he saw a use for that stuff. He started passing the word around out there so they made a deal that any of that stuff that went to the dump we could get for a penny a pound. Well, Tim had a flatbed truck and we brought a whole load of wardrobe doors and those doors are between six and seven feet long and about 13 inches wide. That whole ceiling is wardrobe doors.

A: We finally got rid of the tongue and groove floor, too.

D: Gordie Dufseth had a cabinet shop on College Rd. so he told me one time, "If you need kindling wood"—he knew we were burning green wood all the time, he said "--why don't you come by every week and clean up behind my bandsaw and you can have that instead of me hauling it to the dump." So every week I'd go over with the pickup and I'd load on every size and shape description of plywood, some half-inch, some three-quarters, some five-eighths, I mean everything. Well, we sorted it out when we got home and we sorted all the three-quarter into one pile, so then at night she and I would take this three-quarter plywood and that cedar is all covered with scraps of plywood from that cabinet shop. And there are pieces in there that aren't over an inch or two square. But they fit. And also at that same time Gordie had a box full of nails and Gordie says, "Why don't you take that out of here?" This was a box the guys emptied their nail aprons in at night. And here again, all different kinds of nails. She and I would sit there at the kitchen table and sort nails at night. This floor was all nailed down with headless finishing nails.

B: *So what kind of a stove did you go to from a barrel stove?*

D: Well, we had it all the time, but then we got a cookstove, an old wood cook stove. It made the best bread. Then in '62, our barn burned. That was Thanksgiving Day, just before Karole was born. We don't know to this day what the effect was but Alice had convulsions after that. We tried everything here, couldn't find any cause or reason for it, so about a year later we went down to Minnesota and went through Rochester.

At that time Dale was probably 14, 15, the kids were in school so there was no one to keep the fire going so we bought an electric heater. We set its thermostat up at about 45 degrees so the kids could come home from school and the house would be somewhat warm but it wouldn't be warm enough they wouldn't have to build a fire. We had that for back up heat for a long time.

B: *When did you finally get phones?*

D: Oh, boy. I don't remember, we've got that somewhere in our records. But that was another thing. That bunch out there was always fighting for something. Like when they had the road all torn up, we wrote a letter to the commanding

general at Eielson. They had a Bailey bridge across the river and we were asking permission to go that way. We never got an answer to our letter, but they removed the Bailey bridge.

And before we had electricity out there, we'd been working on Golden Valley and I'll never forget, Kenny Dynes went down there one time when they had their demo kitchen at the Golden Valley office and Kenny told them one day, he was going to send his wife in to check out their laundry service. They knew we were alive out there. And we did the same with telephones. We worked with the city and with North Pole. Well the city said, "Oh no, it's impossible to go out there" but North Pole says, "Yeah, we can do it."

I credit this group out there with doing a lot of these things. When we first went out there we had to go over to North Pole to vote. Our voting precinct was Badger Rd. So we jumped on that one real hard and we got our own precinct.

B: You've mentioned some names already, but who else was out there?

D: The first winter we were there, there was Bob Hirn who was a bachelor at that time, and the Longwiths. We were the only ones beyond the Little Chena bridge that winter.

A: The Longwiths had about the same age children as ours, so we both home schooled. Just that one year.

D: The winter of '57-'58 we home schooled, '58-'59 they went to town, in '59 we had the school, fall of '59. There again, that's something the community did out there. They told us they were sure there weren't enough children to warrant a school. The board felt there were not enough permanent type houses and the people would move away once cold weather set in. We were told if we lost any students, the school would be closed. When school opened, there were sixteen students in grades 1-6. We maintained the numbers so the school was never closed.

(looking at albums) The Davis' were mentioned, Watsons homesteaded what was Lindsay's place, the log mill. They never proved up. Sold their claim to Lindsay. Dynes were right this side of the school.

A: They lived in a tent for seven years. He was a carpenter.

D: Morrison's were right by the lake.

B: Tell me where the lake was.

A: You know where Two Rivers Lodge is. Those lakes.

B: When did you start raising pigs?

D: When we moved out there our intention was dairy. We couldn't afford to buy cows, cows were expensive. I'd go buy calves. I'd get calves from the University, calves from Creamers and we were trying to build up a herd that way. In '62 we bought a cow from the University that they'd surplussed. She'd lost one quarter of her bag, but she was good stock. Nothing wrong with the cow.

In '62 when our barn burned we lost five cows, they burned up in that fire and at the same time we had a sow and a boar and a bunch of fattening pigs that were about 100 pounders. The only animals that survived that fire were the boar and the sow. That boar was a registered boar that we picked up down in Washington and after the fire cooled down—we'd just moved the pigs in from an outdoor shelter—and after the fire cooled down, about daybreak, I heard a noise down there in the old pig pen and here was this boar and sow. They'd broke out of the fire and gone back home. We'd lost everything else.

That old boar had been burned, his whole rump. His tail had been burned off, big holes rump and the sow was burned all down the back, just blistered full length of her back. We had a dugout I'd put some silage in so I tunneled into there and got a bunch of straw, put up a framework, covered it all up and put those two pigs in that shelter. After a couple days the boar couldn't get up. So every morning I'd go out and feed them and turn him over. I'd turn him twice a day. I've got a nurse here—bedsores, you know. So I kept turning him and working him and lo and behold one day I came home at night and he wasn't where he'd been in the morning. He's moving on his own. Short time later that sow dropped a litter of seven pigs. She still had a strip of hide about four inches wide full length of her back that was loose. Just fastened at each end. Here these little pigs nursing would get around behind her and they finally pulled that flap loose. So we cut it off.

B: What started your fire?

D: It was pretty cold and I had a spare battery for my car in the barn and a battery charger. The carcass of one of the cows was not where she belonged and I think she'd gotten loose and gone up there to get in the feed bin and shorted out the battery charger. That's the only thing I can figure.

About that time the creamery had folded up so there wasn't any place to market milk, so why have cows. We started raising pigs. Then we were back-yard butchering and selling half-carcasses to friends in town.

A: We probably got more into pigs because of 4-H. Dale had a pig and did well with it so the Kiwanis bought him a pig, a registered sow, or gilt, out of Washington. She was part of the backbone of our herd.

D: In '68 the state hired a meat inspector and we couldn't market any meat any more. It had to be slaughtered in an approved slaughterhouse. The nearest slaughterhouse was Palmer. So, we were either out of the pig business or into the processing business. Well, Stan Muchewicz was the meat inspector and Stan was about as strict and tough a meat inspector as you could find, but he was fair. He was reasonable and you can work with a man like that. Lot of people condemned Stan for being so strict but it was in the book. He wasn't doing anything he shouldn't have done. It was the same everyday. With his guidance, we built a slaughterhouse.

Just to show you what kind of a guy Stan was, he had other responsibilities and he had to go to Delta and we were going to butcher that day, so we did what was called a delayed inspection. He would come out and check our animals in the holding pen and be sure they were all up and healthy, then we would tattoo the pigs. When we butchered them we had to save the tattoo on the carcass. We skinned the pigs and we had to leave that tattoo on the carcass so we could identify it. We had to save and tag all the entrails and everything to match the carcasses.

Well, Stan wasn't going to be back that evening but he had a military friend, who'd cover for him. So Dick came out that evening to do the delayed inspection. It was cold, the kids had a 4-H meeting that night and we were in a hurry to get done. We'd used all our available hot water to get the place cleaned up. Dick showed up to do the inspection and said, "You got a sterilizer going?" "No." "Well, I can't inspect without a sterilizer going." Well, yes and no. If you run into an abscess or something, yes, he'd have to sterilize his knife but if you never run into one, you don't have to. But he wouldn't touch it until he had that sterilizer going. Well, I didn't have any really hot water, 100 degrees or so, so I put it in the sterilizer and plugged it in and they're kind of slow. When it got up to 160 degrees we went and did his inspection. Well, we'd sat there for thirty minutes waiting for that sterilizer to get hot. He never did use it.

Everything was fine. He was out in the office doing his paper work while I was back in the plant taking care of all the entrails and stuff. When I came out to the office, there's a black lab dog laying there on the floor. I said, "What in the world is that, Dick?" "Oh, I had my dog with me out in the car and he got cold so I brought him in to let him warm up while I did my paperwork." I didn't say a word.

The next morning I got on the phone and called Stan. I said, "Stan, what's the rule about animals around a plant?" "Absolutely none, inside, and if you have anything outside—what are you asking me for? You know that." "I just wanted to hear you say it. Dick had his black lab in the office last night." "He WHAT?" I've never seen Dick to this day. And that's the way Stan operated. If you're right, you're right, if not, you're wrong. I've had people say, "How can you get along with Stanley?" If you do things right you don't have any problem. If more of our bureaucrats were like that we'd all be better off.

What finally got us out of the hog business was the idea we had to have a big plant. That put us plumb out of it. The state had a program going where they were going to develop agriculture throughout the state. They had good sound plans but we have a limit on our administration and when it changed that wasn't part of the new plan. You can't develop agriculture on an eight year plan. It won't work.

When we were in the hog business, we had a setup with Market Basket where they'd take so many cases of loins, every week, so many cases of hams, so many cases of shoulders. We were buying pigs from Bannen down in Delta, twenty pigs a week besides our own to supply that. All of a sudden they quit and boy, our freezer started filling up real fast. We went in to find out why. "Well, Farmlands came in and beat your price." "What do you mean, beat our price? You're the ones set the price and I just said I could produce it for that." "Well, Farmland came in and cut your price by ten cents." Well, I asked them, "Did you give us a chance to compete?" "No, we just figured you couldn't do it so we went with Farmland."

Well, what Farmland did was package it up down in Seattle or wherever, pumping the air out and pumping in nitrogen into these plastic containers and sending it up here under refrigeration. Now it'd be a week or ten days getting here, but it wouldn't age because there was no oxygen. So, it was "fresh pork" but it was ten days old and that was what we had to compete with. Well, they did the same thing with milk. Anytime we can produce anything here, the west coast will figure out how to beat it.

B: So what's going on with your place now?

D: Well, the state wound up with all the frontage, our buildings and everything. When this big development came about, they insisted that we had to have a big plant. I argued and argued about that. I said, "Our plant will handle anything there is for a long time." We didn't even submit a bid, the first go-round. They threw them all out, then came back to us and wanted to know why we didn't bid. "Because for one thing," I said, "there's no guarantee there will be any product to run through that big plant. I can raise enough to keep this one busy but a big plant I can't guarantee to have enough animals to keep it busy." "Oh, no problem. We'll take care of that." We have a contract that says, in 1988 there would be 11,000 hogs available for slaughter. And payback on this plant will be based on the number of animals available. Including cattle and everything else.

So we went ahead and built the plant. By the time we got the plant built, Hammond was out of office and Sheffield was in and they shut down everything. We got the plant all done and ready for operation and called in Hal Ward, the loan agent, and the Director of Ag Bill Heim. Anyhow, I took them into the plant one day and they said, "Oh, yeah, this is nice. When you going to start

butchering?" "I'm not. Here's the keys. You can have it. There aren't enough animals in this state to pay the electric bill on this place." And according to the Agriculture Report in 1988, there were 600 head of hogs in the entire state of Alaska.

Hal Ward, he got real hot over that and he decided if we were going to give him that plant in town, he was going to take our farm out here. We had made up the paperwork properly so that the farm and plant weren't tied up together that tight but we did owe some on the plant we'd built and the barn so they started pushing, adding interest to penalties and penalties on interest. Finally, when we got the next Director of Ag, Frank Milke, from Eagle River, he and I got together and our bill to the state was \$230,000 something and the Borough tax appraisal on our property was over \$600,000. The state was trying to take the whole place. NO, huh-uh. So he and I worked this out. They wouldn't go for the Borough's appraisal, we had to get a separate appraiser in, and we finally agreed to settle for a dollar value. By that time the total debt had grown to over \$300,000.

Well, the kids were all gone—they had to go out and make a living. David and Donny had been working full time on the farm. So we sat and looked at it. We could keep the road frontage and the buildings and get rid of most of the acreage, or we could go the other way. Well, what's going to be worth more in ten years, these old buildings or a bunch of acreage? So we let the State have the house and the barn and the slaughterhouse and all the road frontage, and we kept the land behind it.

B: It must have hurt.

D: Hey, there were a lot of sleepless nights in that house.

A: It was such a relief when it was over, it was just like a load lifted. Looking back, I think they did us a favor. We would have been working there, the two of us alone, not able handle it, not able to travel. Since then, we've made four trips to Europe, we've been to every state in the Union and most of the Provinces.

(Looking at Alice's scrapbooks) Here's a picture of Paul Shoen and his cabbage. He bought Henry's potato equipment.

D: Another name of interest is old Curtis Roberts. He worked for the Highway Department and was an operator. He retired in '57 and homesteaded down at the end of what's now Grange Hall Rd. He was a widower and he used to come up to our place and we'd tease old Curtis. The winter before he retired he'd been working in the welding shop, sharpening a chisel and somehow it caught and run into his hand and tore up a joint and he had a stiff finger. Well, the next summer he was driving a D8 cat and the guys would yell, "What're you pointin' at?" So he had it cut off. Then there was Don Roberts in that election picture, that's Curtis,

his son, then there was another son, Dee Roberts. He still lives here in town. His wife, Ann, is Horace Drury's daughter.

Old man Roberts wanted to raise quail, pheasants, game birds and have hunters out there. He wrote to a seed company in Iowa and wanted samples of grains to raise for these birds. He wrote to them in January or February and ordered seed and wanted it sent by air freight. He come up to our place one day to pick up his mail and here was this letter. This company said they figured there was some mistake because the air freight was going to be more expensive than the seed. Well, Curtis sat down and wrote a letter and said they'd better get it on the way or he'd miss the whole growing season. A few days later he came up to our place and he was hot. He was fuming. He had this letter from the seed company with his check in it. It says, "Sorry, we can't do business with a foreign country." Old Curtis was about to have a tizzy.

A: *(about Bob Hirn coming to their house telling about his new litter of puppies)*
The kids still remember how excited he was about that. Bob Hirn was a fireman downtown. He was one of the most kind-hearted men I ever met.

D: This old Curtis Roberts, he was by himself, lonely old man, he'd come up to get the mail, had to come up to Chena Hot Springs Rd from down at the end of the road. It was closer to come over to our place than back down to his so he came once or twice a week at least. Our kids were small and had these little Golden Books. They got him started reading to them. There was a story about the animals talking to each other. Curtis would read that and this one animal would say, "You don't say." "But I DID say." And this was repeated over and over and old Roberts would get to laughing and tears would roll down his cheeks. After that, whenever old Curtis came, the kids would get that book and want him to read it.

A: The Grange was an example of a community working together. We always thought it was so important for the community to work together, especially being way out in the country like that. We were able to buy the land from the State so we have a patent on that property. The Davises donated the logs, all volunteer labor.

D: We were officially a Grange by '60 or '61. We started the building in '62. Finished it in '67.

A: He says "finished." It's still not finished.

D: It was usable. Talking about Holmes, we were pushing some agricultural program and John Holmes was opposed to it. He was the voice of agriculture, legislator, you know. A bunch of us got together and wrote letters, made phone calls and did everything we could. One morning I was getting ready to go to

work, the phone rang and here was John Holmes. He says, "For God's sakes, call off the dogs." Well, we got his attention.

As to Bert Stimple—I love the story he used to tell about butchering his pig. He had the carcass wrapped in a sheet, laying on the back seat of his car. He was going to take it into the locker plant³ in town. He was coming down past Rainbow Valley and saw Paul Zozula walking along the road. Bert stopped there and put his head down on the steering wheel. Paul came by and wanted to know if there was something wrong. No, no, nothing he couldn't work out. Well, Paul'd like to help him if there was something. No, no. And they kept on and kept on. Finally Bert says "Well, I just gotta work this out. I did something wrong and I gotta work it out." Paul wanted to know what it was. "Well," Bert says, "I just killed my wife. She's on the back seat, there." Paul looked in there and here's this bloody sheet on the back seat of the car. He was going to call the authorities, right now. I guess they didn't speak for quite awhile.

We were talking about Curtis Roberts being down at the end of Grange Hall Rd. That was a "haul" road. When we were building Chena Hot Springs Rd. we were looking for gravel and they went down toward the river and found a good source so they built that road to haul the gravel. And at the end of construction, as far as anyone was concerned, that was not part of the system. To haul gravel over it, they had to build it up pretty good to stand the traffic so the road actually has a real good base. So it was known as "the haul road" for years. Then the Grange bought that piece of property right up at the end of it and built the hall there and now it's officially the "Hall" road. Went from a haul road to a hall road.

B: Did you put in a well on your place?

D: We did, later on. But the water supply for the whole Two Rivers area for years was Jenny M Creek. That was the water and it was good water. Drank it and everything. Now beavers have gotten in there and it isn't worth swimming in.

A: We were told that years ago our property had been logged over and they hauled the logs and floated them down the river.

D: Jeff Studdert told us that. Old man Creamer told me that they used to go out to the springs on the winter trail and somebody had a cabin up Jenny M Creek, up above Chena Hot Springs Rd. He'd come through there and there'd be a note in a tin can, hanging on a bush and money and a grocery list. So his next trip out he'd bring out the groceries and put them there by this bush. He said he never knew who it was.

A: Andy Schwaesdall had a cabin up Chena Hot Springs Trail. He came down and visited us a couple times.

³ Before home freezers, you could rent space in a public freezer.

D: He was a character. Little bitty man, long white beard. When we first knew him he lived in a cabin two, three miles beyond us, up by Valley Center. He had a cabin where Dixon's were at, anyhow, we'd see his old red Jeep and a trailer with building material on it, old tin and such. We were down at the creek getting water for our garden. Here Andy comes, and he stops and he says, "You folks like bear meat?" You don't know, we've never eaten bear meat, but meat is meat. "Well," he says "I shot a bear today. All I want is the hide. If you want the meat, I'll go back and get it." So he went back and got this nice young cub and we took it home and hung it in the crawl space under the cabin.

Andy told us how he got that bear. He'd gone out that morning and the blamed bear had gotten into his cache and got all his groceries. So he decided before he got anymore groceries he'd better get a bear. He strung a wire out around the yard and ran it in through a hole in the end of the cabin and hooked it on to clothes hangers up over his bunk. "I figured, pretty soon those hangers would go, so I dozed off. I woke up and those clothes hangers were just again'. I jumped up, grabbed my rifle and as I stepped around the corner of the cabin, here's that bear. He saw me and he raised up like this, made a perfect shot. I guess that bear was just as surprised as I was. He probably never saw a man without clothes on before."

Transcribed and edited by Bruth George

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

Date _____