

**Visit with Julie Wood, March 14, 2001.** Nancy Kuhn, Bruth George and Al George are the other parties. We are meeting at Julie's house on Steele Creek Rd. Her husband, Russ, died in 1985.

*B: When did you all come up here?*

J: '55.

*B: So you came up as military?*

*N: On Ladd?*

J: Yes.

*N: What was your husband doing there?*

J: He was a master sergeant. He was on MATS, Military Air Transport out of McChord. The first two years we were here, that's what he did. Then he got nervous, they were going to transfer him to SAC. He didn't want on flying status anymore.... He knew he'd have to go overseas. He didn't want to fly anymore. So he got out of the Air Force.

*N: Did he retire or quit early?*

J: He quit.... After sixteen years.... They couldn't talk him out of it. He wanted to farm, of all things, so we farmed.

*N: Did he ever regret not staying in for twenty?*

J: No.

*N: How'd you find this piece of property out here?*

J: Oh, he worked for Bert Stimple that lived right up here. That big field over there was Bert's.... Russ drove tractor and potato trucks.

*B: So he wanted to farm bad enough that he was willing to work for somebody else....*

J: And he liked Bert. He got along with Bert good. Bert was quite a character.....

*B: Did you homestead this piece of property?*

J: No, we bought it from Patrick, Voris Patrick.

*N: How long had he had it?*

J: He had bought it, too. Funk originally homesteaded it.

*B: Is that right?*

J: I was surprised when I heard it, too.

*B: Don Herning said Funks homesteaded where Brice's are now, Maranatha.*

J: I don't know. Patrick didn't homestead it though. He worked on base.....

*B: How much area do you have?*

J: Well, a hundred and fifty acres. Ten acres Patrick sold to Dr. Johnson, the eye fellow, his father. Ten acres up there above the road. Then we bought from Bert, fifty-five acres... Then during the veterans' sales, for the state, Russ bought sixty acres and I bought forty acres.

*B: So you've got, altogether, about three hundred? How much of that is under cultivation?*

J: Just fifty-five acres.

*N: Were the banks lending money to buy any of this land back then?*

J: *(small snort meaning "No!")* It was hard to pay for it, really it was. People say, "You have all that land---" But it seems like we worked like the devil to get it, gave up everything and worked night and day on those potatoes. It wasn't that easy. Usually we had to buy second-hand equipment. You sure couldn't afford new stuff. Then Russ got to the point that if he had one vehicle and it was in good shape, that was all he cared about. So he'd buy a new tractor. But it was hard to pay for.

*N: Did he ever contract out his equipment, or himself and his equipment?*

J: No. In fact, his boys were pretty old before they were even allowed to drive tractor. He was that way, with it.

*N: Where'd you garage it...?*

J: Usually, it sat out..... We had contoured stripped hay and potatoes in the other strip.

*B: By the way, you came in '55. Was the Hot Springs Rd. through?*

J: It was dirt, yeah. So was the Steese.

*B: Yeah, I know. They were just paving the Steese when we moved out in '58...*

J: Well, Steele Creek was done before the Hot Springs was. I can remember the Hernings telling that they always came Steele Creek....

*B: So you had hay and potatoes?*

J: And then we farmed out here, too, I don't know, maybe altogether (*another*) thirty acres. Russ grew vegetables and sold them.

*B: You belonged to the co-op, then? That was the farmers' co-op? Because there was the Matanuska Co-op, too, we're told.*

J: That's what it was called.

*B: There was just a single co-op, then?*

J: Yeah.

*B: Was that their root cellar that Pete Aiken bought? (on Old Steese just north of Trainer Gate)*

J: Uh huh.

*A: And this was the same root cellar where the kid was killed in the fire?<sup>1</sup>*

J: Yeah....

*A: The implication was that one of them was a dairy co-op and maybe they handled a little bit of feed.*

J: Well, they had that creamery down there. I considered this all potatoes down there where Pete Aiken bought.

*N: Where was that? I don't know where Pete Aiken had his (root cellar)....*

J: Across from Ace Plywood.... Big Daddy's barbeque....<sup>2</sup>

*N: Was that a building above ground that they had to move earth to cover? Or was it actually in the ground...?*

*A: Some of both.*

J: They moved dirt around it, but the roof showed.....

*N: It served all the farmers in the area?*

J: If they wanted to belong to it. And most of them did, either that or they didn't sell potatoes, if I remember correctly. There was nothing real mean about, but there were farmers here who didn't agree with other farmers, especially on prices of potatoes. Russ and Henry got along good, but there were some who didn't and they would cut prices and after you worked all that time---

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<sup>1</sup> One of Pete and Velma Aiken's sons.

<sup>2</sup> On the old Steese, just north of Trainer Gate Rd.

*B: Apparently, there was one year when it was really bad, from something Lee Risse said.*

J: It was bad....

*N: What else did you grow in the vegetable line?*

J: Celery. We put out so many celery plants. And cabbage. We sold a lot of cabbage and the moose just loved it. And lettuce, radishes, that's about all.

*N: How did you care for your celery? I haven't heard of anybody who's had a lot of luck---*

J: We bought plants out of Washington. We had a machine. We planted out cabbage by machine, too. Bert would help me and Russ would drive tractor and we went along, you had the plants on your lap. You put them in just like they planted tobacco down in the southern states.

*N: Where were you getting your plants from?*

J: Down in Washington. They were fairly cheap. You could never have raised 'em that way. One year we grew twelve thousand celery plants. We put all of them in and we kept watching them and everything and we went out one night and Russ said, "I think we ought to cut that celery tonight." I said, "The moose won't get into it. Just leave it go until tomorrow. It'll be a little bit bigger." They mowed it right down. All that work. All I could think of was the knees, how terrible they hurt, planting that.....

*B: Did you hill up around them to turn them white or didn't you worry about it?*

J: The machine did that.

*A: We've found a new thing that works pretty good. They don't like roman candles.*

J: They used to have them over in the field.... Russ complained to Fish and Game and they suggested putting those---

*A: Those were cracker shells, twelve gauge shotgun and when it got out to the end of its range it would explode.*

*N: You never tried an electric fence?*

J: Some of farmers out in North Pole had electric fences. Had to be pretty high and pretty expensive. My son has an electric fence up there 'cause he had cows and the moose would get in where the cows were and get in the hay and all that. But it is expensive.

*N: Did you have any home remedies for dealing with the moose?*

J: We put blood meal all around and that sort of helped, one year. We tried everything that was suggested, but Fish and Game really couldn't come up with anything except the electric fence. And the moose even went through electric fences....

*B: What kind of hay did you grow?*

J: Brome.

*N: Who bought it?*

J: Oh, there always seemed to be a market for hay.

*B: Well, there was dairying going on.*

J: We didn't really have the equipment for hay. Russ would get somebody out, Gadbury did a lot of haying, and he and Russ would work on (*shares?*). He'd come out and do it. Russ cared about potatoes. That's what he cared about.... But Danny's got all the haying, now. He's got all the equipment. Some of it's used but he's got twice as much as his dad ever thought of having. Danny just grins. I said, "There you are. Four tractors and your dad got by with one." He says, "Yes, we were never allowed to drive them, either...."

*N: When did you tap the springs here?*

J: They were tapped when we came here. Danny has a big pump house, he's improved on it,<sup>3</sup> and we have another spring down here. People came here and got water. They had big tanks and filled them up from the one spring here.

*N: Did that influence the price of the land, that you had these springs?*

J: I don't think so. None of this was subdivided, not right in this area where the pump is. Out further, it's subdivided and then all that up there (*north of Steele Creek Rd.*).

*B: You're talking about your subdivision?*

J: Yeah.

*B: But at time you bought it, they didn't expect more because it had good springs on it?*

J: Well, things were different back then.

*B: Yeah, but if you look at the number of places where the water's not good and the wells hundreds of feet down, a good spring is a blessing.*

*A: I know people who had a spring and all they could think of was, "How can we shut the damn thing off."*

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<sup>3</sup> Danny Wood operates "Twin Springs Water," delivering from the home place.

*N: I see you have a water cooler here. Is that because the water coming into the house is different.*

J: Well, Russ would never have a well. And we had problems. We had a return line going down to the spring and coming back and we had a lot of problems with it. Well, after he passed away we had problems all the time. I said to Danny "I'm going to have a well drilled, hope for good water." He said, "I don't blame you, at least you'd have water." So we had it dug right up behind the house and we only had to go sixty feet but it was bad water. So I've got a thing to make it good water, you know, but when it comes to drinking, I hate it, so Danny brings water here.... Down at the other house, we used it (*spring water*) and when we used to grade potatoes, all the water came from the spring, too.

*N: So did you wash your potatoes?*

J: Oh, yeah....

*N: When you and your husband came to Alaska, the first year you were here at Ladd, you must have had opportunities to go other places. He was a master sergeant, so he could pick and choose.*

J: He flew up from McChord Air Base. He wasn't on assigned skeds (?) but he was a mechanic and they'd fly him up and he'd work on a plane and head back. It wasn't a big outfit out here at Ladd, like some of the others. It was cargo, you know.... They had an opening up here and they wanted him to be in charge of mechanics and he was all for it.

He came up for awhile and he bought a place up here. He put down a payment on a place off Badger Rd. We made plans. We went back east to see our folks and then we came back. We went to that place in springtime, it was May, and the slough had come between the house and the backhouse. It had a backhouse. He told me that and I said that was fine but you couldn't even get to the backhouse.

Who was that, Meyers Real Estate? Russ bought it from him and we headed to him and he gave us the money back. So we went looking for signs on Badger Rd. and we found another place and the fellow wanted a thousand dollars down. I said, "We don't have that." He was painting it and he said, "Anyway, I have to finish the painting." I said, "Well, we'll finish the painting. We've got eight hundred dollars and we'll give you that on it." He said OK. He was a GI. So that's how we got our place out there. We fixed it all up and sold it, two years after that, and moved on base....

*B: How old were your kids when you came up?*

J: Russie was four and Danny was a year.... Russ was in such a hurry to get here. He figured he'd be late and gosh, we were up here way ahead of time. Poor Danny had diaper rash so bad. "Never again, never, will I ride without taking real good care of this kid, just because you have to get up there."

*N: So you drove up the Alcan? Wouldn't the military have brought you up here since it was a permanent change of station?*

J: I guess, but we had a new car. He just drove and wanted to see the country.

*N: How long did it take you to get here?*

J: I think it was five or six days. About six days, coming up....

*B: You came out here in '55 or you were in Fairbanks?*

J: No, we came out here in '59.... Young Russ went to school on base, first.

B: So Carl must have been driving bus up through here by the time you moved out.

J: Yeah, he and Charlie Ward....<sup>4</sup>

*N: Did Russ ever consider, when farming was tough, going into mechanics for civilians around here?*

J: Yeah, he did. A couple times. You know, every year wasn't real good. There were bad years and one year it was so cold a lot of the potatoes froze. There was no way we could keep them, in the root cellar. And we weren't the only ones, everybody was in the same boat. I went to work for BLM but I only worked for a year.... Then he became a carpenter and he liked being a carpenter.

*N: Did he build houses?*

J: No, he worked for Gilmore Tracking Station. Ten years he worked up there.... And, in the seventies, he worked up north on the pipeline, as a carpenter, before he went up to Gilmore.

*N: So he farmed for quite some time before he became a carpenter. Then, when he was being a carpenter, you were being the farmer?*

J: No (*with a chuckle*). No, I guess we left the field to somebody else, like Gadbury. I really can't remember what we did with the field. I know we hadn't subdivided this out here yet. We did that after the pipeline.

*B: So, how many years were you actually, more or less, subsisting on the farming?*

J: Well, from '59 till the pipeline.

*B: So, early seventies.*

*N: Did you build your own house, the one we're in?*

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Herning provided school bus service to the community. Charlie Ward drove for Carl when two drivers were needed.

J: He built the downstairs and then he wasn't feeling well and friends of ours built the rest of it. Oh, Russ worked on some of it. We lived in the downstairs for awhile. For several years.

*A: Cora said, "If you farm, you have to have a job to pay for it."*

J: They all say that. But some people just like to farm. Russ was raised on a farm and he liked it.

*B: Where? You said you went back east.*

J: Pennsylvania.

*N: And where did you come from?*

J: Pennsylvania.

*N: Were you raised on a farm?*

J: No, no... Little town. Emporia. Northwestern part, up in the mountains. Then I met Russ. We both worked for Sylvania Corporation.

*B: Maybe we ought to take a look at the map (1953 school district map which showed property ownership)... Here's the Steese and Steele Creek coming off of it. Here's Patrick Creek. You bought from who?*

J: Patrick, V. M. Patrick, Voris Patrick. This is a school section up here. When they had the veterans' sale, they took that land out of here (*from the school section*).

*B: Out of the school section? You acquired some of that?*

J: Yeah, a forty and a sixty.

*N: That was kind of nice to be able to pick up land contiguous with yours.*

*B: Oh, do you have any idea who Steele Creek was named for?*

J: Well, that creek over there, I suppose.

*A: But who was Steele?*

J: I don't know. An old miner, I suppose.

*B: What about Bennett? Know anything about him?*

J: No, except that Russie loved to go up and talk to him. "Mom, he's the most interesting man there is. He tells me stories." I think at one time—I might be wrong—he was a pilot. Years before that. He had a little cabin up where—what's the doctor's name, the oncologist? Maybe it'll come to us.

*N: Bert didn't have a very big piece of land.*

*B: He bought Fitz's, didn't he?*

J: Yeah. Then Henry bought it from him. That's where all those houses are, on the hill over there (*above Steele Creek Rd.*).....

*N: I see on the map we have this creek.....*

J: Columbia Creek..... Any water left over from our springs flowed into Columbia Creek...

*N: Who did your children play with?*

J: Well, right around here there really weren't any. There was a boy on Bennett Rd., Mike Simpanen, and Willie Luopa on Gilmore.....

*N: Finally, it makes sense, why one road is labeled Spudwood.*

J: Russ named that Spudwood. He wanted to call it Woodpecker and I said, "No way, no way. Pick a different name." So we went with Spudwood.

*N: So, did you think this was a good place to raise your children?*

J: Yeah, I did. Russ, the oldest boy, he was the one who liked trapping and dogs and being outdoors in the wintertime.... Yes, he trapped on our property on that part up there, on the north side.... At that time we had lynx around here. And probably fox. We had a pond down there and the kids would monkey around and get frogs in the springtime. Then, with their dad, they built a little boat, and tipped over, all of them, even Russ. What's that stuff? Swimmers' itch? I've never seen people take so many baths.

N: How did you heat, out here?

J: Well, we lived down there at the root cellar part, for a long time, until this house was built. Down there we had an old army cook stove, and we used it to heat and to cook on. But I wasn't very good at building a fire.

*B: Wood stove or coal?*

J: Well, we used wood. I remember Russ saying, when he left in the morning I was sitting by the stove and when he came home at night I was still sitting by the stove. I hated that thing.

*N: How long did you live with it?*

J: I don't know. Russ put a furnace in then.

*A: Unfortunately, those things were so damn well built, they almost lasted forever.*

*N: It could be sitting out in the field right now, right?*

J: No, I'll tell you who bought it. Marvin Bushey bought it years and years ago. I don't know what he did with it? Is he still living?

*B: I don't think so, but I can't remember for sure....*

J: I see her (*Jane Bushey's*) name on the map.

*B: I didn't remember that her mother's name was Rasmussen and it wasn't by the time I knew her. Is that Jane Reno and Ruby Rasmussen (on the map)? Was Jane's name Reno at that time?*

J: She was married several times. I don't know, though.

*B: Anyway, that ended up Bushey's property, eventually.*

J: Young Russ came by here the other night and we drove Chena Hot Springs and we very seldom do that. I looked over (*at Rainbow Valley*) and I said, "Do you remember when they had picnics and parties, there? He says, "No." And I said, "Well, they did. They had picnics for different organizations and things."

*N: You're talking about Rainbow Trailer Court?*

*B: No, not the trailer court, on beyond (east).....*

*N: If they took some of the land from the school--- Weller School is not on school land, right?*

*A: Most of the schools are not on school land. The idea of school land was to earn income for the schools, not to (build on).*

*B: You wonder then, if some of this went to veteran's preference, did the government buy that land?*

*A: I'm sure they didn't....*

*N: So all the school land in this section has been sold....*

*B: Here's Gilmore (on the north edge of the school section)....*

J: Henry owned that subdivision up there. A lot of that was Henry's.

*N: Did he also get veterans' preference?*

J: Uh huh.

*B: What were you allowed on that? How did it work?*

J: Well, you could each have a section of land. Russ got sixty acres, I got forty.

*N: So there was a provision in there for spouses?*

J: Well, I was in service, too... for three years.

*N: Were you a Wave, a Wac?*

J: A Spar. Coast guard... I signed to go to Hawaii but my mother broke her back and I had to go home on emergency leave, then they said, "You can go to Alaska," and I didn't want to come up here, then. But I should've.

*N: What year would that have been?*

J: '42? No, '43.

*N: What was your job?*

J: Storekeeper. You know, \_\_\_\_\_, purchasing. I enjoyed it.

*B: When were you and Russ married?*

J: '47.

*B: So, he stayed in.*

J: No. He got out in '45, I got out in '46, we got married in '47, but he stayed in the reserves and he was called back in '50, the year Russie was born. He went to Japan.

*N: Was (joining the Spars) a patriotic act on your part?*

J: I wanted to go to architect's school in Pennsylvania and I figured I'd save my money and go, my folks couldn't send me. But you know how it is saving money. You gotta have clothes, you gotta have this, gotta have that. I didn't want to stay in this little town, so I wound up in the service....

*N: What year was this upstairs constructed?*

J: '76, I guess..., after pipeline.... Russ liked it out at Gilmore, he did. He was the only carpenter and he didn't have to work real hard....

*B: Here are aerial pictures of Fairbanks in 1949 and 1999. A company<sup>5</sup> in Anchorage did it and they sent a whole bunch up to the map store at the Geophysical Institute....*

J: Somebody gave me this. No, mine is 2000, I think. Anyhow, on that you can see our fields....

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<sup>5</sup> AeroMap U.S.

*A: There's the Ladd runway, here's Weeks Field and the present airport was being built (in '49).....*

*B: I think Cora figured this clearing was Loud's.*

J: I'm sure it wasn't Henry's. Douglasses<sup>6</sup> homesteaded some of that land and then Henry homesteaded in there, too. But he bought from John Holmes, all that stuff north of the road.

*A: That straight line, is that Chena Hot Springs Rd?... It's clear enough that somebody was using it with mechanical devices....*

*N: What kind of vehicles did you have for getting back and forth to town?*

J: We weren't as fortunate as people are now days. We had an old 4-wheel drive International truck that we bought from Bert. Believe it or not, Russ built a back on it, put a little stove in it and delivered potatoes in it to town, to stores. Ten pound bags.

*N: Burlap bags or plastic?*

J: No, they were plastic. Oh, we were hep! People back in Maine still used mesh bags and we were using plastic.... Later on we put them in paper baling sacks, five to a bale.... During harvest time, I delivered. Sometimes I'd have one of the boys to help offload. The boys really worked, especially young Russ. He could lift. You know, that's hard on kids. I look back and think, "Gee, he could have hurt himself doing that lifting." And Danny would tell me, "Mom, I just can't lift...." But Russ seemed to figure that they could. They loaded the truck, they worked in the field and they never had time, like other kids had, to do things. And they didn't have vehicles to go to town like they do now....

*N: When did you get your phone?*

J: Well, that was quite awhile.... We paid for a phone, \$700... Mrs. Brice was on the party line. In the morning I had to call in and get orders from the stores and that's when she wanted to talk to people. We had some fights.... I said, "Mrs. Brice, I just need about fifteen minutes in the morning to make these calls, then I'll be done. But that's when she wanted to talk.... She was alright, though....

*N: Were they also farmers?*

J: They had hay. But it was like gentleman farmers....

A: They ran a sawmill in Florida. What the Brice's wanted was get a federal grant, through Bob Bartlett, to put up a kiln to dry lumber. The local lumber was, as we used to say, "pond dry."

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<sup>6</sup> Max and Helen Douglas were Henry Gettinger's father- and mother-in-law

*N: Getting back to being a homesteader out here. Did you have cows, horses?*

J: We had a calf. Russ got a calf from Marvin Bushey for the boys. Cause they wanted one.... And young Russ had pigs, an old sow that had little ones, and they had birds, like quails.

*N: You used them for food? No? So, what did you do with the meat?*

J: I don't remember. Lot of kids were that way, wouldn't eat what they raised..... Bruth was the first one I worked elections with... Long time ago.... I remember the trailer court over on the old Steese. Remember, we had elections there..... We were at a lot of different places.

*B: Where else? Oh, the old Sunday school. We had elections there some years.*

*N: What Sunday school?*

*B: Up on the old Hot Springs Rd. when you first came off the highway. Surplus building.*

J: My kids went to Sunday school there.....

*B: Seems to me you were one of the pinochle playing group at one time.*

J: No, I wasn't. Russ was. I hate pinochle. I hated all those cards.... We used to play with Pat and Henry. We played Five Hundred all the time. They'd come over here, we'd go over there. We really enjoyed that.... In this book (*Bert Stimple's Fun on the Farm in Alaska*), you'll read about Ruth Zozula and working up at Bert's....

*N: Do you have any other books written about this part of the country?*

J: Don't think so.....

*N: Were there any people out here who were artists?*

J: Ruth Zozula was. She painted that sheep over there.....

*End of interview.*

*Transcribed and edited by Bruth George*

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

\_\_\_\_\_ name

\_\_\_\_\_ date