

Wanda Warner
NPS Skagway Oral History Project
Skagway, Alaska
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Interviewed by Karen Brewster

Karen Brewster: When were you born?

Wanda Warner: I was born in Emmett, Idaho and I'm 87 years old, so I was born in 1922.

Karen Brewster: What was your childhood like growing up in Idaho?

Wanda Warner: We lived on a small farm, had lots of animals and we had fruit trees and we had a huge garden and my dad grew a lot of great big watermelons and people would come and I don't know if the people bought the watermelons but they came because we had them. We also had fruit trees and this was an area that had a lot of fruit trees so my mother would work in the places where they sorted the apples or they threw them out or kept them and I was the oldest child so I had to learn to cook and we lived on a farm and we had lots of garden stuff. It wasn't any big deal but my mother enjoyed working in with the other women in these places where they sorted the stuff and then later that was on a 12 acre part and later we lived on an 80 acre ranch and we had fruit trees there also but we also had grains and he grew grain stuff and we had cattle and they had horses that we didn't have big vessels that carried this stuff they had horses so we had a nice country and everyone helped everyone else and if there were any troubles.

Karen Brewster: You say you were the oldest, do you have any brothers or sisters?

Wanda Warner: Yes

Karen Brewster: How many?

Wanda Warner: I had a brother like a couple years younger and another brother to three years younger than that and then I had a baby sister when I was 16 and I got to be there for the delivery and that was nice, that was really nice. She lives in Jerky Oregon now and I will be seeing her when we go out and stay with her a while. I had a really good family and we attended church all the time and were part of the entertainment and the help at the church. I feel like I had a good family growing up and there were never any big fights or there was a lot of yak but never any nastiness between my parents and our family which I realize now that we were really lucky because we knew other kids that unhappy at home. So we had a good life.

Karen Brewster: What church were you a member of?

Wanda Warner: You wouldn't know because it was Amy Simplimenk fersion (???) and I wasn't very old and she wasn't there she was the head of something else not their idol but their example of what they

wanted to be and we did have a nice church it was in town, we lived about a mile and a half out of town and we had a good church, it was called Four Square Church.

Karen Brewster: What denomination was it?

Wanda Warner: It was a new thing; it wasn't the old type like you have the Methodist and all that. This was, it was called Four Square, now I don't know. I was young enough that I don't know what Four Square meant but it was a very nice group and they did a lot of things.

Karen Brewster: Tell me about your education because you became a nurse.

Wanda Warner: I graduated in 1940 from high school and I was looking through this and I was in the upper class and in a position to have help going to other schools or things like that, I was so smart that I got married soon after I was out of school in 1940 and I was married 3 years and then it all fell apart and I went back home and worked different places but I also worked at a bakery a while, and then I went to Leslie Scott's he had a place where you took your meat in an ice house place and I worked for him for a few years and they were Mormon's and he was the one who told me about going to a school over in Boise to be a nurse so to me I feel like I'm forever grateful for him showing me and we have LDS boys come through and I got to tell one because of your religion and your good person way back before they were born of course that I got into the Army Nurse Corp and I was in there 3 years and I was older than most of the girls because I'd been already married and unhappy and all that, so, I was kind of the Momma I guess. It was a good school and then after I was out of there I went to work at the hospital and then I met this girl whose name was Lois Lofsky from North or South Dakota and she said how about if we went to Alaska, that she had seen an advertisement or something similar and I said well, ok, if you will do the calling because we didn't have a phone. I don't know if she did but I think she lived in town so she called White Pass in Seattle and because at the time the other nurses were going back into the service so there were several places that needed help, so they told her that they'd like for us to come immediately. I'd never even been on an airplane and we lived 30 miles from Boise so the family had to take me to Boise and I met her there and I'd worked with her a little bit in another valley and that's how I happened to know her, she was from North or South Dakota. We flew to Seattle got on the plane and they flew us right to White Horse which is 100 miles north and this was the Army still up there and we had a room on the second floor and we spent most of the night watching out the window because there was yelling, hollering, and partying and going on and the next morning we got on the White Pass train and came down to Skagway and the Superintendent and his wife, they were older, came to meet us at the station.

Karen Brewster: The Superintendent of the railroad?

Wanda Warner: Right, yes. And they were very friendly to us and they took us to the hospital and we each had a room there and I believe there was room for 8 patients but we each had a small room. We were there quite a while and when you got acquainted with the people then they often came back in the evening and we sat in the big living room and played cards or just talked because it was a small place and pretty soon you knew everybody and everybody there wasn't any big ruckus or any big exciting things but it was very nice and very congenial and like I said about the little kids, they learned to say

please and thank you or they didn't get the little jelly beans but I just read that in my book that Wayne Snellner.

Karen Brewster: You remember that, that he'd come and get jelly beans from you?

Wanda Warner: Right. You knew everybody, you knew their happiness, you knew their sadness and I must say the town really responds well if you need something. If you need even money or just encouragement I have felt like it's a family all the way through.

Karen Brewster: Now the railroad owned that hospital, it was the railroads hospital right?

Wanda Warner: It was I don't know if it is now because they're building a new one down a ways and over there so I don't think that's the railroads but ours was.

Karen Brewster: Now, the patients you saw were they the people who worked for the railroad or anybody?

Wanda Warner: Anybody, anybody in town was welcomed and we didn't have a lot of patients but we had all the deliveries unless their doctor thought something was the matter and they'd need to go somewhere else. I have enjoyed it and the fact that you know that you're part of the family so to speak, I think it's been a very pleasant life.

Karen Brewster: And as a nurse you were probably considered an important part of the family you were a central part.

Wanda Warner: Right and they knew that we were here and available at the clinic because that's where we lived, we had rooms there.

Karen Brewster: Do you remember some of the things you did to treat patients? Tuberculosis did they come in with tuberculosis?

Wanda Warner: No, if there was any big thing they were usually sent to Juneau. But all of the small things, we took care of the births, some operations, nothing great big but once in a while another doctor would come and they would have a clinic or something but not a lot. We had a good sized operating room and plenty of light and everything worked pretty well.

Karen Brewster: You were able to keep things sterile?

Wanda Warner: Yes.

Karen Brewster: How did you keep things sterile?

Wanda Warner: We had some kind of a machine that you could put things in, it was electric something – like a steamer, can't remember what you called it.

Karen Brewster: Me either, I've heard of it.

Wanda Warner: We always knew the patients because it's a small town.

Karen Brewster: Did you do immunizations, give shots?

Wanda Warner: Probably so but I don't remember, sometimes there would be someone come in from maybe Juneau or somewhere and would hold a clinic for the shots and things.

Karen Brewster: That time there was a regular doctor stationed here, that lived here and you don't have that anymore.

Wanda Warner: No, no. And I think everything has to be sent out if it's something they can't handle right here because there are no doctors. Now if the doctor comes in here I haven't heard about it.

Karen Brewster: At the hospital did they have a laboratory for doing tests?

Wanda Warner: I'm not sure.

Karen Brewster: You don't remember?

Wanda Warner: I'm not sure, there's several room's there but I'm not sure I think they all go back to Juneau.

Karen Brewster: No, when you worked there?

Wanda Warner: Oh, when we worked there. Well...

Karen Brewster: Do you remember doing blood and lab tests, things like that when you were there?

Wanda Warner: No, I don't remember doing that, maybe the doctor did it and all that but not me.

Karen Brewster: So did you mostly do patient care? If somebody was in the hospital bed you were there to take care of them?

Wanda Warner: Yes, got them up and got them dressed and got them back to bed if they needed it and we weren't overloaded because it's a small place and it's always been like a family more or less.

Karen Brewster: Do you remember if there were any big accidents or something that you had a lot to do with patients.

Wanda Warner: If there was anything grave then they'd have to go out, or anything the doctor thought that he couldn't handle then they would send them to Juneau.

Karen Brewster: And you met your husband here in Skagway?

Wanda Warner: Yes, he worked for the people that have the oil and he drove the oil truck and filled up people's things and that's how I happened to meet him but in a small town you just meet somebody often.

Karen Brewster: What was his first name?

Wanda Warner: Nova, N-O-V-A Warner and he was from Canada and he had been on the North Slope working way-way up someplace and had come down through here and stopped and had got work at wasn't the railroad but the people who had the oil company fuel company and he worked for them for quite a while.

Karen Brewster: Was it love at first sight?

Wanda Warner: It's been too long ago I can't say anymore. He was very quiet and neat and clean and no liquor things or anything like that, very calm and he was a wonderful person.

Karen Brewster: Then the two of you lived in the White House and ran that?

Wanda Warner: The white house was many many years old but it's big, you've probably gone by it. He had bought it not long before and it wasn't all paid for but almost because it had been empty for a long time so when we were married they had the kitchen and dining room was all clean and then there was a small bedroom and then a small living room where you could go out the door to the road the front door and there was one bathroom and then the great big room which later we used for a bedroom and then the other ones, there were two great big rooms downstairs for people and then there was where you walked into that side there was big room for people and then upstairs there was two bedrooms and a kitchen and people rented those and sometimes they were just people that stayed overnight and the big rooms downstairs were big enough for families because there were three beds and one room and three in another room and each had a little bath and that worked well but that was just for the summer because otherwise people weren't around.

Karen Brewster: So you rented rooms to tourists in the summer?

Wanda Warner: Yes. I went out to my parents something like a wedding anniversary and took the youngest child with us and the other boys were probably 14, 13, 12 something like that and I called home and the older boy says MOM I already washed 104 sheets and I said good for you. I don't know if he counted them but they did have to do the laundry and they did have to see that the beds were made. I was gone but dad was around but he was working too and they learned to take care of things.

Karen Brewster: Did you have to do all those sheets by hand?

Wanda Warner: No, I had laundry.

Karen Brewster: You got married in 1951 so this was after that?

Wanda Warner: Oh yea, we were there quite a while. I can't remember the date that the fire was now but...

Karen Brewster: In your book it sounded like it was in 1990 so that's what ended that

Wanda Warner: Yea, yea probably. Well, the fire, he was working nights down on the shore doing something and he came he was working until midnight so he came home at midnight and we went to bed and not long he said he thought he smelled smoke so he got up and went around looking and the smoke was under the house at that end and we called the fire department and they came right away but pretty soon it was up and over the top and it did a lot of damage. As he came home, he was working down on the shore someplace there was a man who came with us and he wondered after the fact if the man might have set it but we really didn't know but we had to move out and we had to move up to the other end of town and lived up there a few years.

Karen Brewster: Did you rebuild the white house?

Wanda Warner: No, it just sat there several years and after Nova died a few years these people that are there now they were interested in it so I was glad that we could sell it.

Karen Brewster: And they rebuilt it?

Wanda Warner: It was a well built house and a lot of years old but they have done a lot of things I think.

Karen Brewster: They still use it as a bed and breakfast?

Wanda Warner: Well yes, I'm not sure about the breakfast but I think so

Karen Brewster: When you ran it you didn't provide meals?

Wanda Warner: No, no, we didn't.

Karen Brewster: Do you know what it was used for before your husband bought it?

Wanda Warner: No, I don't. It might have you know what it looks like

Karen Brewster: It's a big building so I was wondering what it'd been built for, what purpose

Wanda Warner: Well, I don't remember, it had been empty quite a while when he bought it and I don't know what the man did maybe I should but I don't remember. It was a good income and the kids were big enough so they could help, so they got a lot of money, not in their hands but it was put away for school.

Karen Brewster: You were working full time job as well as running the white house and how many children did you have?

Wanda Warner: Yes, we had three and we had Stewart a little bit later.

Karen Brewster: so you had four children, worked full time, and ran a guest house?

Wanda Warner: Right.

Karen Brewster: How did you do that?

Wanda Warner: I was younger. Well they grew up knowing and feeling like it was part of their life I think. When I was away, when they called me Nova was home so I knew that he was going to take care of things but I never that was the only time I guess and I took the youngest one with me at the time but I feel like we had a good life and our kids never were in trouble or in bad trouble I mean and they have all turned out really good I think.

Karen Brewster: Hard to raise a large family and work full time and balance that all out, challenge.

Wanda Warner: They worked too, they had to help with the house and the garden and the yard and all of that.

Karen Brewster: After you were a nurse you went and worked at the post office, right?

Wanda Warner: Yes, 21 years but it was the same people so it wasn't like I was stepping into something absolutely new because you just know everybody after a while and I enjoyed the post office too.

Karen Brewster: What kind of things did you do at the post office?

Wanda Warner: Well, we had three places where you could buy stamps and in the summer the tourists were a big a big a lot of people and they bought stamps and we had a canceller machine and we did our own canceling and we packed the outside tourist stuff and it went to Juneau and then our town people had boxes so it was pleasant. There were usually three of us working and it was it was good.

Karen Brewster: So every tourist that came to town wanted to mail a post card?

Wanda Warner: Or buy stamps and the boats would bring us bags full of letters that had to be sent out if they had too many or something or if they hadn't dumped them off someplace else to be canceled. It was a good job.

Karen Brewster: How did you handle the big load of extra mail?

Wanda Warner: It wasn't heavy.

Karen Brewster: No, no, the workload, did that make you have to work extra hours?

Wanda Warner: No, we didn't work overtime at all we sent mail to Juneau and I think that sometimes they still do in the summer because of course there's a lot more boats now than when I first started, we could handle it and we could get them canceled and send them to Juneau and then they sent them out to New York and things, we didn't.

Karen Brewster: Oh I see, so you didn't send them out. You started at the post office in like 1968 or something like that? So were you hand canceling them or you said you had a machine?

Wanda Warner: We had a machine so we ran them through.

Karen Brewster: That's a little faster than by hand.

Wanda Warner: Oh ya, and I did the books but it wasn't overbearing. I think it got to be because there are many more ships now than there ever was.

Karen Brewster: It sounds like you retired around 1989 or so.

Wanda Warner: Something like that

Karen Brewster: Were you the head of the post office for a while?

Wanda Warner: Yes, I guess but I never felt like I was any different from anyone else. I do like the little plaque that I got over there.

Karen Brewster: It seems like in a small town like Skagway the post office is a pretty important place for people. So you would have a lot of people who would come in and out?

Wanda Warner: Well, our mail was shipped in from Juneau and every other place, it came to Juneau and then came to us and we would put out the mail but in a small place that's not a big deal and it's not overwhelming but there's a lot more tourists now than I think there was at that time too.

Karen Brewster: So working at the post office you must have been the center of the universe for what was going on in town, you knew everything that was going on.

Wanda Warner: Probably because everybody would tell you things and it's always been a friendly town and I feel like anytime there's an accident or something terrible happens people are more than happy to go and help and see what they can do, it's more like a family town.

Karen Brewster: It's nice that it's still that way

Wanda Warner: Yes, it is and we have some nice church's and the school is not so big but what our kids can still get out of town and go play basketball and things like that but I think it's been a very calm and friendly place to live.

Karen Brewster: Do lots of people just go and hang out at the post office and visit with each other when you worked there?

Wanda Warner: They'd always visit but they didn't stay very long but we'd always say something if they came to the window but if they just went and picked up their mail we wouldn't see them but they would come buy stamps, get their packages, or things like that. It was a very nice job.

Karen Brewster: Seems like a nice way to be social with everybody in town.

Wanda Warner: Well, both places I worked included everybody who lived in town. That was another plus I guess.

Karen Brewster: Stacy do you have any questions? Or something that we talked about before that I've forgotten?

Stacy I don't think so.

Karen Brewster: Do you remember anything that we talked about before we were on tape and you want to talk about again?

Wanda Warner: No, I don't remember.

Karen Brewster: You gave me a good feeling of what old Skagway was like.

Wanda Warner: It's like a home town and most of the people (we have a lot of summer workers) most of the people have been here quite a while and it's sort of like a family.

Karen Brewster: So you're glad you came up in 1949?

Wanda Warner: Oh yea, yea.

Karen Brewster: Oh I remember, when you were in the Army Nurses Corp. you were a nurse just in Idaho and then you came here, you didn't go during the war anyplace.

Wanda Warner: No, no.

Karen Brewster: The railroad hired you from the army?

Wanda Warner: No, no, because I was working in Idaho.

Karen Brewster: For the Army Corp or you were out?

Wanda Warner: No, that was after.

Karen Brewster: So you were a private nurse?

Wanda Warner: I don't feel like I was ever part of the Army Nurse Corp I worked for the White Pass and if there was anything then I went through the White Pass.

Karen Brewster: But before you came here when you were still in Idaho.

Wanda Warner: I went through their schooling just their schooling

Karen Brewster: Oh and then you went got a separate certificate. Are you glad that you came to Skagway?

Wanda Warner: Oh yes, it's always been friendly and people are willing to help each other and the summer is kind of a mad house because there's so much traffic but everybody kind of gives a big sigh I think when it's over with and then it's time to do family things and a lot of people take a trip and go visit their relatives and such but...

Karen Brewster: Alright, thank you very much it's been a pleasure to talk to you.

Wanda Warner: Well, thank you.

Karen Brewster: You did a great job and I appreciate it.