

ORAL HISTORY
2017-01-08 PT. 1-2

John and Lorna McDermott
12/5/09
Dyea, AK
Skagway Oral History Project

- **This history of the McDermott cabin:** The McDermotts bought their cabin (now owned by the KLGO) from Wes Patterson. It lies on 7.31 acres, and was previously used as a toll house for the Kinney bridge. It was also used as a stable for horses. The McDermotts did not want to change the cabin. The McDermotts moved to Dyea in 1976 and worked on the cabin and finished their current house in 2001. They loved where the cabin was (it has since been moved away from the river) and in the winter, animals often found their way into the house. It was usually a matter of warmth, and was funny.
- **Changes in Skagway:** The buildings are being saved and re-renovated in town. There are now many jewelery stores. For Dyea, the coming of electricity was a big change. They now have phones and computers, but these came later than in Skagway. There were many more year around residents in the 1970's then there are now.
- **John's work for the White Pass Railroad:** John started working for W.P. in 1972 as a brakeman. The RR was run year around. John is now a conductor. The RR closed in 1982. John returned working for the RR in 1994, and generally works as the Fraser train conductor. He has experience working with the rotary snowplow. The Fraser train runs from Skagway to British Columbia, and stops for hikers. It is a one way train.
- **Lorna's work history:** Lorna came to Juneau in 1949 on her 13th birthday. She came from B.C. and attended school in Juneau and Ketchikan. She left Alaska for a while, and returned in 1956 to Skagway. She worked for the RR as an inventory worker in the shops, store worker, and secretary at the wharf shops until 1982.
- **W.P. History:** Currently, the W.P. RR hauls over 430,000 passengers in one season! John notes that the closing of the WPRR was due to the Cassiar asbestos mine closing, and the drop in metal prices around the world. This made operating the Cyprus Anvil Mine very expensive.
- **The rotary plow:** John has piloted rotary plows (now huge bulldozers are used to move snow). John tells wonderful stories of how they were used and their purpose for the W.P. RR. They were taken out of production in 1961-62. He learned much of his trade from Alvin Gordon, another Skagway W.P. (retired) employee. John describes the frog, and how it was used to put trains back on the tracks after a de-railment. The trains only went about 25 mph.
- **Lorna's work as a chef:** Lorna attended Le Cordon Bleu in London, and graduated with her Grande Diplome. She had her own restaurant in Skagway at the Skagway Inn called "Lorna's." Her grandmother and mother also worked for the railroad as cooks at section houses. Lorna's family now has 5 generations of women who have worked for the W.P. Railroad. Their daughter Shannon is currently a longshoreman, granddaughter Savannah works in the gift shop, and granddaughter Jamie is an executive secretary. Many of her children and grand children work and live in Skagway.
- **John's work with the Skagway Historical District:** They set up the standards for new construction or re-modeling of buildings in Skagway. John was the first chairman of the organization. They focus heavily on appearance of buildings and structures. Dave Snow did a good job as the park architect.