

ORAL HISTORY
2022-08/09

Katherine Friss Family Collection

(Information from oral history interview with Ed Zapel, Sr. (Katherine's oldest son) on September 12 & 13, 2022 with Karen Brewster at Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, UAF)

Katherine Friss was born in Fairbanks in 1904 to Bernard and Marie Johanna Friss. Bernard was born in Germany in 1865 and apprenticed as a baker. He traveled to the United States around 1885 and jumped ship in New York City. He became a naturalized citizen in 1898. Friss met his wife Marie Johanna Fitzgerald in New York City where she may have been working in a millinery shop. Having itchy feet, they traveled to Alaska for the Klondike Gold Rush, first landing in Nome, and being unable to get upriver to the mining he was in Nome at least a year since he was listed in the 1900 census as a beach miner in Nome. When gold was discovered near Fairbanks, Friss traveled here, but soon realized there was more money to be made running a business than working a claim. So he opened a bakery that later included a coffee shop and a lounge where miners would sit and visit, smoke, and play cribbage, chess, and cards. The "Friss Bakery and Coffee Shop" (at some point also called the "Viennese Bakery") was located just west of the Lacey Street Theatre on a lot that ran between First and Second Ave. The front of the bakery was on Second Ave. There were rooms upstairs in the building that Friss rented out to miners who came to town. He built his own mud and brick oven like what he'd used in Germany, and baked bread, puff pastries with apple filling made from dried apples since fresh apples were not available, pies, and cookies. The bakery was open six days a week and would always sell out. On Saturdays, he'd bake a double batch of bread so there was enough for customers to last them through Sunday to Monday. At some point, there was another bakery by the Adler Brothers' Empress Theater, but not sure if it was during Friss' time or after.

Friss had two women employed as housekeepers to clean the upstairs rooms, and Josie Saunders worked for him in the bakery. Her husband, Frank, helped maintain Friss' house and flower garden, at one point actually living at the house. Bernard Friss had a house on 8th and Barnette Street where he had a large flower garden that was especially known for its tall delphinium plants. Ed Zapel remembers them as being "up to eleven feet tall."

Katherine Helen Friss was born in one of the rooms above the bakery in 1904. Family lore has it that she was the first non-Native born in Fairbanks. A newspaper article elsewhere in the Friss Collection indicates that she was in fact the second white child, with Iris Hinkley being born a couple of days earlier. She married Ed Zapel when she was only 17 years old. He was from Chicago and stationed as a telegraph operator for the US Army at the Alaska Communication Telegraph Station in Big Delta. After Ed was discharged, they left Alaska and lived in Chicago where he worked as driver for the Railway Express Agency and where his brother worked as a dispatcher. After he was laid off during the Depression, the family moved to Wisconsin where they made just enough money to survive by growing potatoes that they sold at the Haymarket in Chicago. And where they could hunt and fish and have chickens to help put food on the table.

Ed and Katherine Zapel had four children: Edwin (now Ed Zapel, Sr.) was born in May 1923; Betty in 1925; Arthur (Art) in 1931; and Mary Ellen around 1933. Grandma Marie came to Chicago to help with the children and delivered Mary Ellen in their Wisconsin farmhouse. She did not want to return to Alaska so moved to a retirement home in Chicago.

As Bernard was getting old and he was now alone, he sent money to his daughter, Katherine, to pay for the family to return to Alaska. In 1935, they took the train to Seattle and then the SS *Yukon* steamship from Seattle to Seward. It stopped at every port along the Inside Passage and then went across the Gulf of Alaska from Yakutat to Cordova. According to Ed Zapel, it was a rough crossing and he was seasick the entire way. From Seward, they traveled by train to Fairbanks, with an overnight stop at Curry. The Zapel family spent their first winter living above the bakery and then built a house at Seventh Avenue and Barnette Street. Katherine helped her father at the bakery and coffee shop, and Ed opened the Tivoli bar in on one of the extra lots owned by Friss. As Fairbanks had been a dry town, the law would not allow the sale of alcohol without food, so they would serve a customer a ham sandwich along with their drink. Many times, the sandwich sat on the counter uneaten, but it meant they were operating legally. Eventually, once it was legal to sell mixed drinks, Ed Zapel opened the Cottage Bar above the bakery and Katherine helped him run it. As a military veteran, Ed was an active member of the American Legion, and became good friends with Bill Growden, who was mayor of Fairbank (1940-1943) and Colonel Gaffney, the commander of the newly constructed Ladd Field in 1940. He was also active in the Oddfellows Temple and the Lions Club, of which he served as president for a while.

Bernard Friss passed away in 1939 on a steamship between Juneau and Ketchikan when he was traveling out to the Mayo Clinic for medical care. He was 74 years old and is buried at the Clay Street Cemetery in Fairbanks. Marie Friss returned to Fairbanks in 1939 to live with her daughter and family. She fell and broke her hip and passed away shortly thereafter at St. Joseph's Hospital. She also is buried at the Clay Street Cemetery. The bakery, coffee shop, and property were eventually sold.

Ed Zapel, Sr. lived in Fairbanks from 1935 to 1941 from the age of 12 to 17. He has fond memories of the time and place, and a great appreciation for how the lifestyle helped him learn to think and how that influenced him for the rest of his life. When he was in the 8th grade, he developed osteomyelitis (infection of the bone or bone marrow) in his right shin that required him to be hospitalized at St. Joseph's Hospital with a cast on his leg and bedridden. He did a lot of reading to keep from getting too bored. He loved to read. Eventually, the other leg was affected and he was sent to Seattle's Childrens Hospital for more specific orthopedic treatment. He returned in May 1938, and completed his high school years at Main School in Fairbanks, graduating in 1941. His friends included Jimmy Hutchison, Irving McCay Reed, Harvey Karnet, Howard Shields, and Andy Miscovich. He was a member of the local boy scout troop, whose leader was his science teacher, William Walden (who the boys affectionately referred to as "Wee Willie Walden"). Ed was taken by science and he and one of his buddies even experimented with making explosives in the school's chemistry lab. Ed credits this teacher and the good schools in Fairbanks for his success. He states that 5 boys from his graduating class went on to get Ph.D.'s. Given Ed's leg problems, he did not play sports in school but was in two plays.

Typical of boys of the time, Ed hunted and fished. He hunted moose in the Birch Hill/Birch Creek and Farmer's Loop hills, and caribou at Cleary Summit and along the Richardson Highway, fished for lake trout and pike in the lakes; and snared rabbits in the area south of town where the current Fairbanks Memorial Hospital is located. At one point, he tried his hand at fox

trapping, when he was given some traps, but was not successful. And, of course, the family did a lot of berry picking since it was the only fresh fruit available.

In the winter, they would ice skate on the Chena River in front of the Cushman Street Bridge. He tried his hand at downhill skiing on wooden skis with a single leather toe strap, but that was not successful. He mostly used trail style snowshoes for walking in the woods in the winter. One cold winter day, Ed and one of his friends, hiked up the river to a trapper's cabin and after warming up by a fire they made in the wood stove, the temperature dropped on their walk home and they got pretty cold and were not able to build a fire; fortunately, they were able to warm up at the ACS building along the way. Ed remembers the Ice Carnival as the big event of the year, and the betting game of when the ice would go out on the Chena River. He said that town flooded regularly during breakup of the Chena River, especially if there was an ice jam by Chena Bluff. He recalled using a piece of wooden boardwalk sidewalk as a raft so he could traverse the streets to get to school.

Ed remembers Fairbanks as still a rough and frontier town. It only had gravel roads and he walked on the raised boardwalk sidewalks to school. Electricity was limited and provided by the Northern Commercial Company's coal burning power plant. There were no refrigerators, so Ed would cut ice blocks from the Chena River to put in their ice box to keep things cold; with extra blocks stored at the house covered in sawdust. Running water was a luxury. They had a well dug at their house, as did his grandfather, but not everyone had this. He remembers going to a Finnish sauna run by his friend Bill Sinpanian's (sp?) mother at Lacey and Front Street. There was a buried city sewer line, but it often froze in the winter as did the line from the house. It was Ed's job to clean out the line in the house!

In the beginning, they burned wood to heat their house. Black spruce poles were delivered to their house and the guy used the motor from his truck to power a saw that cut them into stove-length rounds. They used 6 to 7 cords of wood a year. Later, they had a coal burning furnace in the basement, and it was Ed's job to keep the stoker full and clean out the klinker debris to keep it running smoothly and cleanly. They got milk from the Bentley Dairy who had Jersey cows that provided milk with more butterfat content than the Holstein cows of Creamer's Dairy. The Northern Commercial Company was about the only place to buy groceries, as well as other supplies and clothing. There was no fresh fruit, only dried, and they bought potatoes from farmers out on Farmer's Loop Road. And there was a strawberry farm on Badger Road. There was a man who had a farm with goats on the base of Birch Hill where Ed would stop sometimes when out there hiking around and get a drink of fresh goat's milk. Or he would pick fresh peas that grew along the road in the summer at Creamer's Field as he walked by.

By 1936, the Zapel family had built a small cabin at Harding Lake where they would go in the summer. When Ed was an older teenager, he spent the whole summer there, since his parents had to work to keep the bar operating and it was too far to keep going back and forth. More often, the family would go out for short stays. His father had a small boat with an Evinrude outboard that he would drive with Ed being pulled behind while standing on a piece of plywood like a surfboard. It was nearly impossible to stay on the board when his father made a quick turn of the boat!

Ed delivered the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner newspaper as a boy to earn pocket change, and worked for Pioneer Water Company delivering water to the houses in the Red Light District. He also worked in the back room of his father's Cottage Bar unpacking boxes and sorting bottles of whiskey. In the summers of 1940 and 1941, he worked as a truck driver hauling supplies from the railroad to the hospital being built at Ladd Field. He specifically remembers helping to carry the heavy X-ray room doors up a number of flights of stairs.

In 1941, Ed wanted to attend college at Cal Tech in Pasadena, CA and the family drove out, but got there too late for him to enroll. The family lived in Pasadena for a year while Ed attended the local junior college. He was working with a rocket design program, but left the position to work on his coursework. He later attended Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington graduating in 1952 with both a bachelor's and a master's degree in engineering, and a minor in theology. He was drafted into the Army in 1943 and was trained to work in the autopilot and bomb sight testing operations. He did this work, which included taking planes up for test flights, in Florida and England.

In 1942, his father got a job as a welder building ships in Sausalito, California, and then they moved to Yakima, Washington and eventually to Soap Lake, Washington where his mother operated a hotel with baths of mineralized water known for their healing properties. Ed Zapel died of a heart attack in his 50s having heart damage after childhood rheumatic fever. Katherine Friss Zapel returned to Fairbanks in the late 1970s and lived with her daughter, Betty, and then moved into Golden Towers apartments downtown. She passed away in 1978 after suffering a heart attack on the steps of the post office.

In 1947, after leaving the Army, Ed was working for the Bureau of Reclamation on the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project in Ephrata, Washington and met Betty Jean Adams. They were married on March 7, 1947. In 1948, Ed was working as a surveyor in Hanford, Washington but lost his job when the project was shut-down after an accident. He looked for a job at Boeing but the engineers were on strike so no jobs were available. He found work for the Department of the Interior as a surveyor which brought him back to Alaska to help survey the Taylor Highway in the summer of 1949. The road building technique at the time included skimming off the top layer of muskeg with a D-2 CAT, however, when doing this over permafrost it exposed the frozen ground to melting and it was difficult to lay the road over the muddy mess. You just had to keep adding more fill material and it would bulge up when pushed over by a CAT; it was a waste of time to keep a road in such conditions. So, Ed relocated the entire route of the Taylor Highway uphill onto higher and drier ground than what had originally been laid out to avoid these melted permafrost areas. He laid down trees as a type of corduroy road to get across some of the tough spots.

After graduating from Gonzaga in 1952, Ed got a job at Lockheed in Los Angeles, California in their test department. But the smog was so bad, that they didn't like living there and moved to Seattle where in 1954 Ed got a job with Boeing. While working at Boeing, Ed attended the University of Washington for a Ph.D., but failed his oral exams due to problems with a professor, but did earn a second master's at UW. Ed's wife, Betty, was originally from Bisbee, Arizona and refused to live in the cold of Alaska. They eventually settled on a remote homestead on a mountain near Hobart, Washington, with Ed commuting to his job at Boeing. He wanted his kids

to grow up similar to how he did in Fairbanks and not in a city. Ed worked for Boeing in their testing department where he ran testing operations on planes and parts, such as testing the sheer strength on bolts. He designed a number of patented pieces of testing equipment, wrote articles about his results, trained new recruits, and traveled extensively to places like Washington, D.C. to consult with the military at the Pentagon. He worked for Boeing for 37 years, retiring in 1991 at age 67.

Betty Zapel married Linc Miller, a DJ for KFAR radio, when she was 17 years old. The marriage didn't last long and she next married Keith Harkness, with whom she had 2 children. They lived at his mine at Livengood. She later married Walter Sabourin (sp?) who worked for the Federal Aviation Administration. Finally, she married Paul Olson and had 2 more children with him. They lived in Salcha, Alaska and did some trapping along the Wood River.