

## Transcript Alaska Oral History Charles Stephens

[The narrator, Charles Lester Stephens(1899-1987), was a gold rush baby in Juneau. He lived there until age seven (1906.) He describes life in Juneau at that time.

His mother died in 1906 as the result of an accident. The family was cleaning out the attic and somebody unknowingly tossed blasting powder on a bonfire.

His father was unable to take care of the young child and shipped him off to relatives in Oregon and Idaho where he lived the rest of his life.

By the time he made this recording, he had been recording himself on his travels for at least ten years, so the recording is reasonably coherent and of good quality.

The transcript has been lightly edited to remove "ums" and repeated words.]

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This is November the 17th, 1983, Portland, OR.

This is about the Stephens' family history from Charles Stephens' point of view. I was born in Juneau, Alaska, December the 29th, 1899. And, at the age of seven years old, on my 7th birthday, we came down to Portland, Oregon and then on to Dilley, Oregon [unincorporated].

Back up.

My father, John Stephens went to Alaska during the gold rush days. And I went. Apparently landed at Juneau. Went up over the White Horse Pass. As I understand near Dawson City.

And he and a partner, Judge Rudd, built boats. They both had been doing carpenter work. These boats were probably 12 to 16 foot skiffs, three or four feet wide. And a foot or so deep. That were used by the miners to float down the Yukon River towards Nome, where they panned gold and looked for gold along the riverbeds on the way down.

Father said he could he could, they could each make about \$50 a day. But a sack of flour cost him \$50 and a sack of sugar cost \$100. They also were able to get fresh strawberries now and then, but they were five dollars a box. Other food prices were about the same.

There was no sawn lumber except what they sawed themselves. So, they cut down the trees. Probably spruce. Because there's a lot of Alaska spruce in that area and then cut them into lengths, of say 12 to 16 feet long, whatever they needed them.

And then whipsawed them out. As I understand, whipsawing, it takes two men. The log is held over a pit on a frame. And the one man stands above, and the other below in the pit. And they pull a saw more or less vertically up and down until the log is sawn endwise into a thin board. With the use of adzes and other carpenter tools they were able to make pretty fair boards and fasten them together using tar or otherwise.

And those boats they sold to the miners. I don't know how many boats the two of them could make in a day's time. But apparently once they got the lumber sawed out, the boat was built together very fast.

I remember my grandfather Stephens, doing somewhat the same thing, that is building the boat out of flat boards 12 inches wide and 12 to 14 feet long. An inch thick.

After working more or less that way for several, for a year or so, Father came back

to Juneau where he established a dairy. And then came down to Dilley, Oregon. Got my mother, Laura Stephens, my sister Jesse Stephens and my brother John William Stephens. And took them to Alaska. I don't know much about the history of them while they were there. But any rate, why I come along December 29th, 1899. At about three days before the turn of the century.

And finally, probably the first thing that I remember was something about the summers and winters and the rain. There was snow in the winter time. In the, during the spring and summer time there were birds, squirrels. There were flowers such as buttercups and violets, dandelions and other kinds of flowers. There was also berries such as huckleberries and salmonberries. Highbush cranberries, apparently these grew on a tree a ways.

Our place at Juneau was about a mile and a quarter west of Juneau. Beyond the white Cemetery and Indian cemetery. And I believe our property was next to the Indian Cemetery. Between that and the Bay. I suppose it's probably about 10 acres. It was Father, Father had these barn down over a cliff of probably 10 or 15 feet high and a couple of silos.

A walkway went from the top of the bluff to the loft of the barn. House was built back on the bluff. We also had a garden. Between the house and the edge of the bluff had a chicken house. And a little garden with some berries, like some currants and gooseberries. We raised potatoes, carrots, many of the cabbage and many of the vegetables which could withstand the cold weather.

I don't believe it ever seldom ever got below 0 Fahrenheit at Juneau. And the bay round Juneau was open the whole year round. So that boats could come into Juneau and could go into Seattle. That's one thing that's kept it as a capital and seaport all this time.

The potatoes we raised were Burbank potatoes. That was the time when Luther Burbank was doing his hybridizing down in California. And it was one potato which could stand the cold weather. I don't think we had very much trouble with bugs as far as that goes, it is probably too cold for them.

At the place we could look down look toward the east, I suppose, towards Juneau. and I see they and look across the Gold Creek. At which came out of a Silver Bowl Basin, one of the gold mining areas. Ran down into the ocean.

We could also see from our place Treadwell Island. Where one of the large open pit mines, gold mines, which was called Glory Hole. A great hole in the in the earth. Went down hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of feet. A dugout where the gold been taken out. It had gone down so far it was getting hot. They could only work 15 or 20 minutes at a time and then they'd have to come up for air. The, it'd been flooded with water several times. They had to pump it out and then something would happen again and it flooded again.

About wo and a half years after I was born, my younger brother, Frederick Henry Stephens came along. And sometimes we got along alright together, sometimes we didn't. I guess we were just kids. My sister Jesse is about seven and a half years older than I was. My brother Will was about a year or so older than Jesse was. She always felt he was kinda time mean to her. I guess he was. I don't know. I don't remember him that much.

I do remember that during the summer time, why my brother or Father would herd the cows up the beach away from Juneau. On about five miles from Gold Creek was Salmon Creek and then another five miles beyond Salmon Creek what was known as Lemon Creek. And there was good grass around Lemon Creek that Father and another man that landed there used to combine their teams together, go up with a mower and cut the grass. It was wild, free for anyone who wanted it. They'd load it on a barge, bring it down and Father would put his share in his barn

and the other man would take his on down to Juneau and put his in his barn. I don't remember too much about it except up in the loft of the barn there was a hay fork for lifting the hay up off of the barge, which could be brought in fairly close to the barn. Actually, during a high tide, the water would come up into the gutter of the barn.

I remember we had a dog. I don't even remember the name of the dog now. We also had a horse, the name of Dan. At that time one of the famous racehorses was Dan Patch. I think that's where he got his name from.

During the winter there was snow. It was apparently wasn't too deep at Juneau or at our place, but Father would, still had to take his milk into Juneau, which he did on a wheelbarrow. On a, couple of five- or 10-gallon cans on a wheelbarrow and wheeled over to Juneau. And then delivers his milk by hand, for which he got five cents a quart. And then came back home.

He didn't have any trouble getting the customers. Jesse said that Mother always went around and did the collecting because Father was too easy on people. I guess he hated to collect.

Father finally got a wagon, which he pulled by the horse. It had, it was more of a carriage I guess, and he had runners which would go on the, sleigh runners, which would go on the place where the wheels were that he could use to haul his milk to Juneau during the winter time.

I don't remember the people in Juneau now too well. It's been over 70 years and I know there were people there and all that, but. There also was we could look back behind our place and look up into the high snow peaks around the Rocky Mountains. Which was the Canadian divide went, just back of Juneau. Not too far from Juneau was the Mendenhall Glacier.

There were trees all around. That woods and so forth. There was a road wagon, or wagon road that went from our place into Juneau which is about a mile and a half, kind of curving around. When I got old enough the last year, why I went to school in Juneau. My brother and sister. I don't think Fred ever did ever did go to school, you know?. I don't think he started til later -- down in the states.

At that time, we said down in the states because at that time Juneau was a territory, Alaska was a territory belonging to the United States.

I remember in the fall or sometime there were lots of ducks on the bay and Father and my brother used to go and kill all the ducks they wanted. I don't think the laws were very stringent at that time. Later, why, there was the game laws but not then.

I also remember that finally Father got a 16-foot motorboat. I guess he always did have boats around of one kind or another, but he got a 16-foot motor boat with a inboard gasoline motor. And seats along, each running lengthwise along each side. Under the seats were batteries called Leclanché[?]wet cells. And, they were turned on by a very cute little switch. And I remember that I apparently went down to the boat. Turned the switch on. Left it on. And when Father got home, I got a switching. It wasn't the same kind of a switch.

Also, during the summertime, I remember there were also birds. Although I don't remember the birds too well, I do remember the red pine squirrels which used to run up and down the trees back of the house.

One year or several years, Father apparently built a house at Salmon Creek. That's five miles or so from the house we lived in. And because I guess probably a better feed up in that area and so saved driving the cows those extra miles every day to get feed. And, we lived in a house-- Salmon Creek, I remember one or two winters. Looking at I slept in a room upstairs. Look out the window with the snow on the window and you'd see it outside. Otherwise, why that didn't make too much of an impression to me.

There were boats went up and down the channel in front of, from Juneau past

our place they. The Admiralty Island was a long island which went parallel to the coast, probably three quarters of a mile from the shore we lived on. A very narrow island. And, so that made part of the Inland Passageway. They smoked from the side we lived on to a thin mudflat on out to where probably 30 or 40 feet deep. And then, then the last quarter of a mile before you came to the island was a deep channel where large boats could go along. That was the Inland Passage. It was possible to go round the outside of the island, but that was usually a pretty rough trip.

One other thing I remember is the supplies that Father would have shipped in from Seattle. Evidently, he would send down to a commission man in Seattle who'd buy the necessary food, both for cattle and for the humans. And it would be shipped up on a barge, towed up to Juneau. Two or three of the merchants would join together and pay for the towage of the barge. And they each get their supplies that way, Father also.

And I remember the barge coming out in front of our place and beaching on the beach, anchoring there and Father would go down with a team or my brother would and haul the stuff up from the from the barge. That would consist of chop and some straw I suppose. Salt for stock, various other stock feed. While I remember for us, there was crackers --soda crackers and there'd be Sunny Jim breakfast food. Which more like chaff I suppose, or something like that. Various other kinds of foods, I suppose raisins, rice. You name it, we had to get it. And it was stored in one of the, what would be. There was three bedrooms, 1,2,3 and it was stored in the middle bedroom. I believe my brother and I slept in one and my sister slept in the other. I expect my brother Will slept up in the attic. I don't remember too much about that. Later, I remember sleeping up there with him too.

I think my father liked Alaska very, very much. He could usually find work there and he had friends who lived there. Jesse said that my mother was afraid of the wind. And that the, apparently the sound of the wind and so forth worried her. And at times Father would go with a group to some mines out among the islands. And once or twice they got stalled on the island. The wind blowing and they couldn't get away, from blowing right against. And it was blowing up from Juneau toward the island. They couldn't get away from the island for Father said for nine days. The main thing they had to eat was clams a lot of the time. There was deer on the island, but they had a .22 and it wasn't heavy enough to shoot the deer. One of the other guns they had was all fouled up with lead so they just got kind of hungry, but they finally got a way back to Juneau.

I remember we had running water, that is Father. There was a spring across the road, and back into the hill aways. And Father, got pipe, metal pipe, and piped it down to a trough. So that the. While it wasn't near the house, it was a close enough that we always had fresh water and the water ran all the time except when it froze up in the winter time I suppose.

I remember in the winter time there was also some icebergs that would come down from one of the glaciers and float down towards Juneau past our place. Sometimes one or two of them would get stuck out in the mudflat. It'd be probably several days before they'd get away. Next high tide.

Also, there was cake ice. Which as I remember, would be probably be three or four, maybe two or three feet thick. Maybe, oh, 10 or 15 feet more or less irregular in diameter that would come down on the beach. Beaches also get covered at mudflat. In the winter time it would be covered with ice, a thin coating of ice as the as the water came in and went out.

And, I believe my brother and sister used to skate around on it. Although they didn't have skates, the type that we have nowadays. So. And during the time I was growing up, if I wanted toys why, it was for us to kind of make them. Although

Father and Mother did provide a Christmas presents for us. I remember I had little iron, wrought iron train, with iron wheels on him. I suppose an engine and a couple of cars. What happened to it I don't know. I really don't have much of things we had in Alaska.

I don't remember us youngsters actually suffering from the cold. Because, I guess Mother was able to provide warm clothes for us. And probably kept us in during the cold weather.

I remember we had, I had measles and mumps. I guess it was measles and mumps. And probably all of us had them. One thing I remember was back away from the house maybe a quarter of a mile or so is what they call the pest house. It was a large house with beds in it. Where someone who is dying of smallpox or chicken pox or some other, one of the fevers or whatever. Could be put and nourished, but one wouldn't have to actually come in contact with them. I remember we used to go and sneak up there and look in the windows, but didn't pay too much attention to it.

The flowers were just gorgeous. There were several kinds of violets, blue violets and purple violets. It was gorgeous. Yellow dandelions. And butter cups. Lots of them.

Father, Mother had chickens. But they had to be under cover so the Father got to keep the hawks from taking them, so Father got chicken netting and built up a wire fence. And covered a roof over the chicken wire so the chickens could would be safe under that. There was also a building where the chickens could be kept during the winter time.

And, also there's a place that's more sheltered from wind. Jesse says that that Mother used to take us down there during the heavy windstorms. I suppose I'll think of some more things, but right at the present that's about the main thing I remember.

The accident, that is my mother had an accident. The miners, they were going up, ,en who were going up to the mines or prospecting. They'd come by and leave their stuff at our place. And usually, Father would just take it and put it up in the attic, all different kinds of things. And after a year or two, why, they didn't come back, I assume they just weren't going to come back, I guess.

The end of tape one.

Turn over tape.

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[If a tape two was made, it has not been found]