

Summary for H75-07

Father Bellarmine LaFortune, Luther Hess, and Cecil H. Clegg are interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1947. E. B. Collins talks about history of Fairbanks and the Pioneers of AK.

SIDE 1

Father Bellarmine LaFortune of the Society of Jesus is interviewed by Al Bramstedt at St. Joseph's Hospital in Fairbanks, AK on 8/6/47. He speaks with a French accent, and is 78 years old at the time of interview. He was 34 when he came to AK in 1903. He's an honorary member of the Pioneers of AK; he belongs to the Nome Igloo.

He came from Quebec, Canada, arriving in Nome in 1903. The population was about 2,000, mostly white. It was like a large village. Nome was headquarters for him—he traveled extensively throughout the region. The natives were happy people, and lived in a comfortable manner, he says. They could speak a few words of English, but not much. The average size of a native family in the 1940s was 5. Tuberculosis was very prevalent: 95 out of 180 natives die of TB, he says.

In 1900 there was an epidemic all around the coast. He doesn't specify the disease of the epidemic. It mostly affected the natives. In Nome, out of 1,000 who died only 1 was white. Whites who took care of sick natives did not get sick themselves. In 1918, there was an epidemic largely around Nome. Again, he does not specify illness, probably the Spanish flu.

Little Diomedede had seasonal rounds of natives. People of the Diomedes would like to travel to the big cities, but can't afford it. They enjoy looking at the news goods displayed in the stores. People of the Diomedes have contact with folks in Siberia. There are families from the Diomedes who now live in Siberia and vice-versa.

The King Islanders are good carvers, hunters, hide-workers, and boat makers. They have good mechanical aptitude—they can take things apart and rebuild them.

LaFortune relates an anecdote about a King Island chief's daughter who at the age of 7 or 8 contracted pneumonia and became very ill. On her deathbed, she was shown a clock and asked at what hour she wanted to die, whereupon she pointed to 3 pm. And she died at 3 pm, the same hour as other relatives?

LaFortune met Roald Amundsen, in Nome and Fairbanks. This was the only explorer that he met.

The Father traveled by boat, dog team, and on foot. The fastest dog trip he took was from Teller to Nome, about 90 miles in 9 hours. He has never gone to the lower 48, and has no particular desire to return to Quebec or go to the lower 48.

Luther Hess is interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK on 8/13/47. Hess was born in Illton?, IL in 1865, and came to AK in 1898 when he was 32 years old. He came because of depressed economic conditions in the States. Hess's father had mined in Placerville, CA.

Hess formed a small company with 8 people, bought an outfit in Seattle, and sailed up to Dyea on the SS Alliance for the Klondike Gold Rush. Dyea, at that time, was a small tent village.

Hess describes climbing the Chilkoot Pass. An aerial tramway had been built to convey goods to the top of the summit. Hess and his outfit contracted with the Dyea-Klondike Transportation to take outfits to the summit for 5 cents/lb.

Lake Bennett? was still frozen when they arrived. They whipsawed logs to make lumber to build a boat—a pretty good boat. They had no problem in making it to Dawson. The boat had a square sail. When they were halfway across the lake, the wind of their particular section of the lake stopped. Hess could see more than 150 boats becalmed, moving about. Assuming each boat had 5-6 people aboard, that made 750-900 people in that flotilla.

They made it through the Whitehorse Rapids largely without incident. One man on the bow caught his oar in the current and came near to being thrown overboard, but recovered.

Dawson City was very crowded. The shore was lined with boats 4-5 deep for a mile or more. To get ashore, you had to climb over 2-3 other boats. Hess considered the prices very moderate on the Chilkoot Trail, taking the freighting conditions into consideration. Food prices in Dawson then would not have been out of line with food prices in Fairbanks in the 1940s. From Seattle to Dyea, 1st class steamer fare was \$20.00 and freight was \$16/ton.

Hess and his party stayed in Dawson about 2 weeks, traveled around the creeks, did a little panning and concluded that there wasn't any opportunity in Dawson. The party split up, with 4 of the men continuing on to Eagle, AK. At Eagle, after the court was established, Hess was admitted to the bar and later invited to join the district attorney's office.

Hess came to Fairbanks in 1903. The population was about 3,000-4,000. Tents were everywhere; there were few completed buildings. The only two buildings he remembers being finished were Barnette's Trading Post and a little log cabin next to that.

Sam Bonnifield asked Hess to form a bank in Fairbanks. In 1905 he and some other partners formed the First National Bank. Hess feels that the economic future of Fairbanks will be tied to how long the gold mines continue to operate and how long and to what extent the military post (probably Ladd Field, although he doesn't specify) is maintained. Hess is against statehood.

SIDE 2

E. B. Collins is not interviewed. Instead he talks about the history of early Fairbanks and the Pioneers of AK on 9/16/47. Chapters (Nome, Candle, and Saint Michael) decided to form the Grand Igloo in 1908. Otto Nelson, and several others who attended the initial miners meeting in 1902 to name the camp were still alive in 1947.

In 1909, there was a meeting held to form the local chapter of the Pioneers of AK; 278 people signed up. Bill McPhee was chairman; Harry Quib was secretary. Collins also goes on to list the distinguished members of Pioneer Igloo #4. The Pioneers of AK chose the Forget-Me-Not as the state flower.

Cecil H. Clegg (Judge) is interviewed by Al Bramstedt on 9/24/47 in Fairbanks, AK. He came to AK from CO. His 2 brothers had stamped to Klondike and told him

that there would be an opening for an attorney in Nome. Clegg had just been admitted to the bar in 1899 and was working at the office of Charles H. Toll.

Clegg took the steamship Ohio from San Francisco to Nome in 1900. It had about 600 passengers. Leonard Seppala and Pete Peterson (guard at the Federal Jail) were both fellow passengers. Once they reached Nome, they were quarantined for a week or two because of the threat of smallpox from the ship to the town. Passengers could not go ashore until they had been vaccinated and some became ill from the vaccine—or the threat of being vaccinated.

He arrived in Nome in the latter part of June 1900. Clegg pitched a tent at the first handy place, which turned out to belong to someone else. The next morning he was ordered off. Clegg went to work in the office of Judge Charles S. Johnson for 14 months. The bulk of business was defending original stakers of Anvil Creek and Dexter Creek against claim jumpers. This case was described in Rex Beach's book *The Spoilers*. Clegg feels that Beach's description was very accurate. Clegg stayed in Nome 2 years.

Clegg was appointed by Judge Wickersham as the first U. S. Commissioner at Nushagak (Bristol Bay region). Canneries were surprised and none too happy to see a revenue cutter. The next year (1903/04?) he was sent to Valdez by Judge N. B. Harlan, U. S. attorney 3rd Division. From Valdez, he went to Seward as it was becoming populated due to the railroad.

He came to Fairbanks in March, 1907. It was a real town, largely rebuilt since the fire of 1906. Clegg was Assistant U. S. Attorney. He served as Special Assistant Attorney in Iditarod during the rush and at Ruby (1911-1912). He saw pretty much all the gold strikes that happened in AK after 1900.

Clegg was judge of the 4th Division for 12 years. He was instructed to go out to villages to naturalize citizens—McGrath, Bethel, Wiseman, and Ruby. He traveled by dog team and plane. The price by plane from Fairbanks to Bethel was \$1,500 round-trip.

Seventy-five to 100 Athapaskans used to live at Sakhakaket or Harding Lake. They all have (at the time of interview) died out. Clegg first visited Harding Lake in 1921. The Salcha Indians used to visit Harding Lake for fishing purposes, but had suffered so many drownings that they viewed the lake as being inhabited by evil spirits and kept away from it. Clegg pioneered Harding Lake as a summer resort for Fairbanksans, and a road was built to it.