

Alex Capewell oral interview in UAF Rasmuson Library Archives

p. 1/7

Tape H-75-09; recorded 1946-1948

Transcribed 8/28/10 by Ron Inouye

A = unknown interviewer: AC = Alex Capewell

A: Now it's time for Pioneer Cab to bring you "Here's a Pioneer", regular weekly Wednesday night presentation featuring an interview with one of Alaska's real old timers. Tonight, we'll suffice it to say, that the Pioneer Cab, that means manager Joe Coble and the entire staff want to wish one and all of you the happiest kind of a new year.

Tonight's interview consists of 15 minutes of conversation with one of Alaska's real old timers, and I also think this applies to Yukon Territory, his name is Alex Capewell, a well known local figure. And Mr. Capewell, I'm going to begin the interview by asking you when you came to Alaska.

You came to Alaska in what year was that, do you recall?

AC: 1897, 1898.

A: 1897 and 1898. I understand that you began for Alaska some point way down in Montana.

AC: Yes, Belt, Montana

A: How did you get up in this country? Did you come by boat?

AC: No, come with horses.

A: That would seem to me to be the hard way. Why did you come by boat, that would be a lot easier?

AC: Oh, well we was coming the short way.

A: I see, you were saving on space; but eventually I suppose you did not save on time.

AC: No.

A: Ah huh. Well, we'd like to know a little bit more about that trip. You started from Belt, Montana. How many people were there in the party, Mr. Capewell?

AC: There was 5 from Belt. We picked up others on the way. There were used to being (?) ... in Belt there was myself, and there's Joe Doughty, Dave Davis, Bob Lamb, and Joe Lamb, and Jack Schultz.

A: Did you have a great number of hardships on that trip traveling by horse? I suppose you had to cross many streams?

AC: Yes, we had to swim when we come to the big rivers.

A; How long did it take you to make that trip?

AC: Fifteen months.

A: Fifteen months in traveling from Montana to Dawson, that was your final destination?

AC: Yes.

A: Any particular tragedies or real experiences that stand out vividly in your memory?

AC: Yes. We lost a man out of the outfit in the Liard River. It was .. he was ... name is Butler, Jim Butler. The boat got away from him. There were 19 men on the line; he was coming through Cranberry Rapids, and the boat got a run on them, spun out and turned over, threw him into the river.

A: I understand that that was a story that was repeated many times in the old days, a loss in the particularly wild rivers of the north.

Now, will you tell us something of the route that you chose to come. I suppose it was a completely unblazed trail if you could call it that.

AC: Well, we left Belt, and come to Great Falls. and we swam the Missouri River just below the mouth of the Sun River, where Sun River comes in. So we went up by Freeze Out, Choteau, across the Blackfoot Reserve, and swum the Belly River and the Old Mans headed for MacLeod. Then from MacLeod we went to Calgary, from Calgary up to Edmonton, it was pretty well settled. Otherwise there was no settlement between Calgary and Ft. McLeod at that time. There was no fences then. After we left Edmonton there was no fences from then on.

We come over, across the Pendall River, and the Athabasca, and went through the Swanee Mountains over to narrows at Little Slave Lake. Then from there was 90 miles pretty good road over to Peace River – called it Peace River Crossing. I don't know why they called it a crossing; there was nothing there only a big river.

We swam the river there. Went up the north side of that, past Dunvegan to Ft. Saint John. We took wagons as far as Ft. Saint John, that was the first wheels that rolled into Ft. Saint John. But Ft. Saint John didn't stand where it does now. All that was there was a Hudson Bay post down on the river bar, and the banks is very high. The Indians was camped on top.

We went from there to Hudson's Hope (?); we couldn't get through (?) too rough. We

come back and struck NW for the Finley River. Passing through the mountains there we turned due south there for about a half day, I thought it was coming back, we finally found a pass through the mountains.

Followed the Finley up and then across from there up Fox, just where it is I don't know. I'd like to know where it was when we crossed. It cost me lots of time and money trying to find that place.

A: You mean you're not sure now exactly which way you did go?

AC: No. There is a prospect there that I had been looking for.

A: Well, it's generally understood now that you're one of the men who pioneered the trail that eventually became the Alaska Highway. Would you agree with that? No doubt you did follow, to a certain extent, the same route.

AC: No, no. We left that at Ft. Saint John, and we went up the Hackway River. Well, you see, we're south of the present route. We come and cross it again, ... the Liard River at the lower post which is Mile 620 now of the Highway.

A: I see. You wintered along the trip; you didn't come through in one season.

AC: No, we went to head of the Big Muddy.

A: You built a cabin there, at the head of the Big Muddy?

AC: Yes.

A: And what did you do during the winter, and how long did you stay there?

AC: We hunted mountain sheep; we run out of grub. I had one slice of bread in 3 months there.

A: What time of the year was it when you finally came into Dawson?

AC: Well, it was the end of May.

A: End of May, and I suppose you were pretty tired and pretty ragged by then.

AC: Well, it was all rags. I had a pair of shoes there. Sergei(?) Pinsky had a store in Dawson, they wanted to buy them shoes and send them back to the men that made them - they were mostly wire and babiche.

A: (Laugh) Now I'd like to have you tell us how many of your party got through. There were only -- didn't you say 2 remainIng?

AC: Yes. There was only 2 from that whole bunch come through?

A: I see, that's amazing that you got through at all.

Tell us a little bit about Dawson at that time. Was it reaching its peak or it was it past its crest? What was the situation there?

AC: Well I would say it was just about at its peak. Everybody was busy there, going ever which way. Everybody had money, but those that come in - I was one of them.

A: Did you stake any claims there in the Dawson area?

AC: Well, I staked one on Lovitt Gulch, did a lot of prospecting, but I didn't stake any particular ground there. The one on Lovitt Gulch was one, and there was about 50 of them staked.

A: How long did you stay in the vicinity of Dawson, Mr. Capewell?

AC: Oh, I'd say about 2 years.

A: Two years, and then what finally made you move from Dawson?

AC: Oh, it looked greener over the hills. It was Nome, that Nome stampede come.

A: That was a big hill too because it was a long way over from Nome.

A: How did you travel from Dawson to Nome?

AC: Dog team.

A: By dog team all the way. How long did that take?

AC: Oh, that was 33 days.

A: I understand that the airlines are doing it considerably faster job of it now. Will you tell us something of the booming town of Nome. You reached there about at the peak too, didn't you?

AC: Yes. Oh it was booming there. The beach diggings was going, there it was going good. I staked a claim over on Little Creek. It didn't ... it looked too flat; it didn't look ... just like a little trickle of water at that time, so I didn't hold it. But it turned out awful good afterwards.

A: I suppose somebody else came along and really made a fortune on the ground that you had originally staked.

AC: Well a big company come along. Then there was another ... there was Billy Cummings and John Minot, (?), friends of mine, they was rocking over on American Gulch, that's over the hill from Dexter.

When I was over there visiting, Billy Cummings and I was walking back and it was raining cats and dogs, and as we were crossing Dexter, I said, "Billy, let's stake those benches." And Billy said, "Wait 'til it quits raining, we'll come back and stake it."

Well, when we went back there, there was a trench dug there about 3 foot deep. I could see gold in the bottom of it. I jumped down in it and picked up a piece of gold, said, "Look at the gold, Bill". A fellow jumped up with a shotgun, and he said, "You get out of there." And I got out.

A: I imagine that would give you plenty of reason for getting out of there in a rush.

What other sort of work besides mining did you do around Nome?

AC: Well, the steamer Quickstep was sunk in Snake River, and we hired this steamer Riley and brought her along side the Quickstep. A man named Whitehead and myself, we raised the Quickstep. We had the Quickstep just afloat at the time that big crowd came from Seattle with that big barge - I forget what they call her.

A: Did you see a lot of disappointed people around Nome?

AC: Oh yes, there was lots of disappointed people. There was a big crowd come on the boat one day, and a woman reached down and grabbed a handful of sand and shook it through her hands. She turned to her husband and said, "I told you there was no gold here - look at this!! There's no gold here."

A: It was all his fault for coming all that way.

Did you personally locate any really good mining ground in Nome?

AC: Well. No, I didn't have any real good ground; the ground that I wanted they drove me off with a shotgun as I was telling you.

A: I see. When did you leave Nome, and where did you go after that?

AC: I went up to Dawson on the John C. Barr.

A: I see. Was there another strike at Dawson or you just felt sort of homesick for the place?

AC: No, I got tired of that rabble in Nome; they was just fighting over little pieces of town property, and if you put a stake in they were liable to shoot you.

A: It must have been just about the turn of the century when you moved back to Dawson from Nome then.

✓ AC: I just don't remember what it was -- went up the river again. But anyway I hadn't been in Dawson long before the Fairbanks stampede come. The Jap come up there with the news. I was working at the time, and he come - I was cooking at the

time at the Green Tree – and the Jap come in. I went and talked to him. He said, “Yes, there’s gold there.”

A: I’ve heard of the Jap – as you say – what was his name, do you know?

AC: Wadder.

A: Wadder, Frank Wada,

AC: Frank Wada,

A: And he’s the man who brought the news of the strike, on what creek was it over here – Pedro?

AC: Yes. Pedro.

A: He brought the news to Dawson, and I suppose, within the matter of a day or two, Dawson was practically evacuated. Is that true?

AC: Oh, well, you know, they didn’t totally evacuate, but all the loose ones get out – them that’s got the price -- the means.

A: Well, I imagine that you’ve seen a lot of exciting times here in Fairbanks since you’ve been here. What are some of the most exciting?

AC: I don’t know. You was speaking about Wada a minute ago. I’ll tell you what happened to Wada here. When, in the early days you know, Wada was working for Captain Barnette’s store. And I heard some fellows talk’in, “That doggone Wada there, he’s lied and he’s living here, no boom here. Let’s go hang him.”

So I listened, and told myself, “Well, I’ll go and try to cut in – try to stop any trouble if it comes.” So I followed them into the store. They walked in and said, “Hey Jap, there’s no gold here, so we’re going to hang you.” You Jap all rise from around the town and walk right up in front of us and hang, I give a damn [?]

A: (Laughter)) You know there is something else that would like to as you about too. You say you’ve been here for 44 years. At one time there was a rather serious wash out right here in the center of town. Do you happen to know what year that was?

AC: Well, I would judge it was somewhere around ’06 as near as I can tell. Yes, that was bad. There was 2 bridges here. The upper bridge went out and the piling come down and lodged on the bridge about where the bridge stands today. And that turned the current into the bank, and the bank was washing way plenty fast.

A: It got up to as far as the drug store, under the drug store, didn’t it?

AC: Yes, it was under the corner of the drug store, 3 foot under the corner of the corner of the drug store.

A: How did Fairbanks finally get out of that fix?

AC: Well, they sunk a steamer. They sunk a steamer right out in, just above the bridge now, about 50 foot above the bridge. But that wouldn't do it. So Capt. Langley got his boat, and rode up the river and (?) and pulled that piling out. When they pulled that piling down, that relieved, that relieved it.

A: I see. Well our time is growing short now, Mr. Capewell. I understand too that you were one of the operators of the only horse racing enterprise here in Fairbanks. Where was the park located?

AC: It's over where the F.E. {Fairbanks Exploration} Company stands now.

A I see. And at one time how many people do you imagine you had over there in the grandstand?

AC: Well, we had the whole town there, at that time. They just left Fairbanks and went across the river for the race.

A: And you were a jockey on one of the horses, weren't you?

AC: No, no. I never did any horseracing. No, I was pulling the marathon races.

A: How many men did you have in the marathon?

AC: We had 23 starters for 1 race.

A: Twenty-three starters, and how far did they run?

AC: Twenty-six miles -- 385 yards.

A: In those days, I imagine, it amounted to a real celebration, that was on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, wasn't it?

AC: Yes. Oh, yes, that was a good day. We took in \$5,555 at the gate, and half of them went over the fence; they couldn't get in fast enough.

A: All right. Thank you ever so much Mr. Capewell. We've certainly enjoyed sitting down with you and talking over old times that you seem to recall so vividly. Our thanks to you again, Alex Capewell, one of Alaska's real old timers.

This has been a presentation of the Pioneer Cab Company in Fairbanks. Each Wednesday night at 7:30 Pioneer Cab brings you a 15 minute discussion recalling the early days with one of the genuine old timers of the Territory of Alaska.

And now briefly, we'll say in behalf of the staff and management of Pioneer Cab, the best kind of a happy New Year, and we'll be with you one week from tonight with another presentation of "Here's a Pioneer".