

Summary for H75-13

Myrtle Feiner, Harry Karstens, Jack McChord, and James A. Seller with Al Bramstedt and unidentified female interviewer in Fairbanks, AK 1940s

SIDE 1

Myrtle Feiner is interviewed by an unidentified woman in Fairbanks, AK in the 1940s. She's in AK on a sightseeing tour, before returning to her home in Milwaukee. Feiner was just on a buying trip to New York, for new fashion for her store in Milwaukee. There have been significant changes in the styles for this fall, she says. The present average skirt length is 14 in., varying from 12-15 in., depending on stature and personality. Feiner thinks longer skirts are not just a fad. They've been accepted all over. CA is wearing them longer than anywhere else.

A full sweep in garments, especially coats, is noteworthy this season. Since the L-85 restriction has been lifted, designers are using their freedom to use more fabric again. Jumbo pockets on coats, large Puritan collars, and fur-trimmed suits are some of the trends that will be seen. After the lean war years Feiner and the interviewer are happy for the return of personality in fashion. "Jap" mink and beaver are used lavishly this year.

Suits have won a niche for themselves, according to Feiner. They're a classic; women are always well groomed in a suit. Gabardine is still a top fabric. Wine tones, deep green, and browns are strong colors this season. Of course, black is always good. Feiner states that designers dip back into history for color and design, and that dark hose are in this season.

She submits that smaller towns in AK are probably not style conscious, but she finds that Fairbanks shops carry very fine merchandise and well-known names, and that Fairbanks women are very well dressed. Feiner came up to AK with two other women from Milwaukee. She marvels at the long daylight hours, and tells that she and her friends panned for gold at Livengood, where the dust in the air was very prominent.

Harry Karstens is interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK in the 1940s. Karstens, originally from Chicago, is well known here as one of the leaders of the Karstens-Stuck expedition to the top of Mt. McKinley. He came to AK in 1897, after Windy Bill came down into Montana talking of the gold rush and excitement in Dawson City. From Dyea, Karstens and his young partner, having very little money or supplies, packed for other people over the scales toward Lindeman, in August and September of 1897. They gained food this way. From Lake Lindeman they whipsawed lumber and built a boat to sail to Dawson. It was rough sailing the lakes, and they ran into ice on the way. They had quite a time getting through at White River, but they landed in Dawson on November 1. They following morning "the river closed" and their boat was gone, though they were safe ashore.

Supplies in Dawson were scarce and dear; flour was \$125 a sack, milk was \$2.50 a can, butter \$5 a pound, and it was hard to even find them to buy at these prices, says Karstens. He got some food for lower prices from Mr. Schutz of the NAT Co.

Karstens stayed in Dawson until February. He tried to record claims on Skookum Hill but wasn't able to. So he went downriver to Mission Creek and laid out Eagle City

and staked some claims there, proceeded down to Seventymile and staked more claims there, then turned to Dawson.

Karstens took the first mail out of Eagle, toward Valdez, by dogsled, about 250 miles. It was in the fall, and he was an inexperienced young man with hills (though he had done a lot of work with rivers) and had to find his way through the Fortymile country. He went from Steel Creek, up Mosquito Fork, to Tanana Crossing, where he met people from further south with the returned mail. He turned around and headed to Eagle with the new mail. When he got to Steel Creek, the river was closed below, so he had to go cross-country. The dogs he was mushing couldn't handle the sled, so Karstens rigged up an old cowhide behind the dogs as a toboggan, with the mail and food riding inside it.

Karstens talks about Fairbanks in 1903. He says it was quite a little town then, though there was no money in it--no gold mines, only Pedro had some low-grade ground. He states that more than a dozen buildings were here at that time.

Karstens made a trip with Charles Sheldon of New York and Washington, a big game hunter working for a biological survey, getting mammals and birds. Karstens took him into the McKinley range for four months during the summer of 1907. While there, Sheldon had the idea that that place would make a wonderful game sanctuary and park. The next year, 1908, Sheldon came back and stayed an entire year. They traveled all over, with horses in the summer and dogs in the winter, gathering data on all game. Eventually, in 1917, Sheldon's proposal of a wilderness preserve was passed by Congress. Sheldon asked Karstens if he'd like to be the first superintendent of the park. Karstens accepted.

Originally, Sheldon had asked Karstens if he wanted to ascend Mt. McKinley with him. Karstens had said sure, but when Sheldon went Outside and got married, that spoiled his going on the trek. Later on Karstens agreed to make the climb with Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, who'd been after him about it for years. Karstens had never felt like he had the money, but in 1912 he agreed to a joint venture.

In the summer of 1912 Karstens took provisions in by boat, as close to the mountain as possible, up the Bear Paw. The following March, Stuck; three dog teams; Mr. Tatum, a 20-year-old; Walter Harper, a 20-year-old; Karstens; and two 15-year-old native boys (to help with the work), picked up the supplies from caches at the head of the Bear Paw, and freighted them in to the base of the mountain, where Willow Creek is at the foot of McGonigal Pass--which leads onto the Muldrow Glacier at about 5,000 feet, Karstens estimates. From there they used dogs to 11,500 feet at a certain basin, the name of which I could not distinguish. They transported supplies and wood up to this camp. On the last trip they took up the tent, and when they arrived saw that their cache was on fire. Their silk tents, clothing, and other things were ruined. They salvaged a lot, however, and boys were sent down to base camp for the sleigh canvases. For the next 3 weeks, they made socks, mittens, and a tent. They had plenty of kerosene and supplies, save for clothing. The climb wasn't too difficult, says Karstens, except for the northeast ridge, now called Karstens Ridge. Previously, on a climb made by Herschel Parker, the team had gotten within 500 feet of the top of McKinley, but had to come down because of the strong wind of a storm. When the party got down that night there was an earthquake that shattered Karstens Ridge at the lower end, which broke off and fell into

the valley, leaving a cleavage of 50 feet of ice halfway up the ridge, at about a 45-degree angle. This was what Karstens team had to work around.

When they got to the top of the mountain, it wasn't that they were tired, but were exerting themselves trying to get oxygen. Walter Harper was in the lead on that leg of the trip, so he was the first to the top. The interviewer comments that he was a 20-year-old native boy.

The trip down took only 2 days. They traveled so quickly because they built snow bridges across crevasses, willowing the lower glacier. This was in 1913.

Jack McChord is interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK in the 1940s. Jack McChord, a member of the Explorers Club, was born in southern Iowa. He left Seattle for AK on the steamer Yucatan, belonging to the Northwest Steamship Co., now the Alaska Steamship Co. Kayak Point was the first land he saw, 17 miles outside of Katalla in Controller Bay.

McChord came steered to AK, intending to work in the El Mar Copper Mines, but while on the boat, a stowaway told him not to work there, because a strike was going on and he's be a scab. He convinced McChord to get off with him at Katalla, where a railroad to the Interior and the Kennicott copper and coal mines was going to be built, up the Bering River and Copper River.

McChord got on a survey party; he also checked material from boats. There was one instance in which a promoter from Chicago tried to get in the way of the railroad and charged considerably for the use of his right of way. This conflict lasted several days; one man was beaten up and another shot, but not badly. McChord's next move was to Valdez over the trail.

When McChord arrived in the Interior he got a cabin in Graehl. His prospecting partner took him over to a tributary of Fish Creek, called Solo Creek, to sink a hole. They pulled their sleds there by hand and sank 2 or 3 holes. They found no gold.

Several years later, in 1910, on the Hammond River in the Koyukuk, McChord found the second largest nugget in the territory. Previously, he'd made trips to Circle City, Fort Yukon, and the Chandalar (walking and with dogs). When he reached the Koyukuk he was joined by Mr. Kinney from Aster Creek, and their company took about \$107,000 out of 4 above the Hammond River, including that second largest nugget, which brought about \$2,600 at that time.

McChord expresses his love for the Koyukuk country, and he often visits friends there. He lives now in the district adjacent to Kodiak, underneath the AK Peninsula in the Japanese Current. He doesn't consider this part of the Aleutian Islands. It's free from the fogs and cold winds off the Bering Sea, protected by the mainland and the Japanese Current.

He tells how he came to live in this region. He was in the AK Peninsula area with a geologist of the U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Standard Oil, Associated Oil, and another petroleum company. While they were in Kodiak, an old sea captain named MacDonald kept telling McChord about all the grass, boys, waterfalls, ducks, clams, and berries on Sitkalidak Island. Eventually he went to see it and fell in love with it. On March 4, 1927, after 6 years of having a bill in with Congress, President Coolidge signed McChord's lease for 20 years of that island.

McChord worked with Charles H. Fry, owner of Fry Packing Co., who owned many cattle in Montana and loved to pioneer with McChord. He was the president and treasurer of McChord's company until he died. McChord got breeding stock from Fry's stockyards in Seattle and brought them to the island. He brought purebred and black Angus cattle and sheep there.

Mr. Wechter of Wechter Meat Market was a big customer of McChord's. Also during the war he sold his cattle to the army and navy. There are about 400 head on Sitkalidak Island at the time of interview.

He leases another island too, the historic Chirikov Island, named for Lt. Chirikov by Vitus Bering on their explorations funded by (Catherine the Great). McChord has 1,200 cattle there, semi-wild, short-horned. They graze year-round, and have been let alone, mostly. Now that there's a market for them, however, McChord has begun to cross them with Hereford bulls.

The biggest change in AK since McChord came is in transportation, he maintains, with all the roads, airplanes, and airfields that exist now. McChord's views on statehood are changeable, but he believes we're not ready for statehood at the time of the interview. Because AK is a connecting link between Asia and North America, the federal government spends a lot of money here, building highways and airports and military bases, constructing weather stations, dredging harbors, owning the railroad, and "taking care of the natives." If these responsibilities were thrown entirely on the territory, he doesn't think AK could handle all the work of developing the land.

McChord was acquainted with Lowell Thomas, Billy Mitchell, and Rex Beach. He didn't know Mitchell at the time Mitchell came to AK (he built the telegraph line on Gulkana Cutoff to Tanana Crossing as a young army officer), but became acquainted with him in Washington, DC, about the time the first flier flew around the world.

James A. Seller is interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK in the 1940s. Seller was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. He left in 1885 for New York, where he lived until he was 20. An uncle of his, who'd come to the north country in 1898, traveled with Seller from New York on February 4th, 1901, headed for Seattle. From here they took the steamer Victorian and a train to Whitehorse. Then they took passage on a freighting outfit with horses and sled over the old CD Cutoff to Dawson. The cost was \$250 per person and they were limited to 40 lbs. of baggage each. They both wore two layers of clothing so that they could take more baggage. The trip from Whitehorse to Dawson took 2 weeks. Most nights they slept indoors. Seller says there was plenty of beans, mush, and sourdough hotcakes at roadhouses along the way; meals ranged from \$1.50 to \$2.00 each.

In Dawson, they got a cabin near Moosehide Mountain (at the north edge of Dawson) and waited until breakup. After breakup, they took the steamer City of Seattle out to the Koyukuk. The trip began well but when they reached the cutoff they saw a big chunk of ice coming downriver at them. The boat turned around and ducked into the first slough. The ice passed and they headed upriver again, ending up at Bettles. Here, from 5 am to 9 pm they worked at mining. (Interview continues on Side 2.)

SIDE 2

(Continued from Side 1.)

If Seller had it to do over, he wouldn't change a thing. After the summer of mining, he came down to Bettles to get a tent outfit for the winter, so he could spend the winter prospecting. At Bettles, though, Falney Richmond, manager of the N.C. Co. store there (after coming up in the summer of 1901 from St. Michael's to take over for Howard Turner, who then began operating for AK Commercial Co.), asked Seller to be his bookkeeper, though Seller had no experience with such work. Seller worked as the bookkeeper for the winter, but in the spring began to get the itch and wanted the \$15/day he got mining. Richmond, however, persuaded him to stay, as storekeeper instead, with a raise of \$50/month. Seller remained with the N.C. Co. until the fall of 1915 when he left Bettles.

Seller tells the story of an old steamer, the City of Paris that had a lot of dried fruit in its hull. Several tons of it were damaged during the trip, and it was unloaded at Bettles and put in the warehouse. Previously, in 1900 a little steamer from Boston, the Prospector, came into the Koyukuk and got as far as Peavey before it had to stop for the winter. In the spring they tried to get it back out on the water, only to discover that it had no pipes. All the copper pipes had been taken for use in local stills. Seller describes the abundance of alcohol that winter. Men would come to the store and ask for the damaged dried fruit (ostensibly for "dog food"). Everyone knew, though, that along with the sugar that was also bought, this fruit was going through the stills.

In the spring of 1905, the camp ran out of both tobacco and liquor. The population went without these for 35 days. The "staff of life, as it were, in those days, was tobacco and whisky," Seller relates.

Seller also recalls a time when he was going upriver by dogsled and saw some natives off to the side in a semicircle. He went closer and saw that they had trapped a wolverine by the front foot and were poking sticks at it. The idea was to distract it so that Foxy Sam, a Kobuk Indian, could jump on its back and choke it to death. There's a superstition about wolverine hide, Seller states, as well as a wolverine dance, and these men didn't want to use a gun to kill the creature. Foxy Sam stayed with that powerful and vicious animal, Seller says, and came out without a scratch.

Seller recently joined the Pioneers of AK, together with his oldest son on the same night. Bob Seller is his son's name, and he operates Birch Tree Gardens in Fairbanks at the time of the interview. He was born in Wiseman on the Koyukuk and his sister was born in Bettles. They were at that time among the few White children born north of the Arctic Circle.

Seller greets all his friends in the territory including John Butrovich, Jack and Dave Muchler, Ed Marson, Jess Allen, and Marie Miller. He spent years mushing dogs and he recently bought a plane. The difference in modes of transportation in AK very much impresses him.