

Summary for H75-16

Simeon Oliver, Mrs. Luther C. Hess, Mrs. C. D. O'Flanigan, Minnie Brewis, and George Preston, with unidentified male interviewer and Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK 1940s

SIDE 1

An unidentified male in Fairbanks, AK, interviews Simeon Oliver in the 1940s. Oliver was born in the village of Chignik on the AK Peninsula. His mother was Eskimo and his father was Norwegian. His father had found his mother passed out on a sled, while checking his trap line on the Peninsula. Her father had already frozen to death—Simeon's father resuscitated the girl and brought her back to the village. He sent her to be educated in the States, then brought her back and married her. Simeon was their first child. His mother died when he was 2 years old. His father then sent him to a Methodist mission in Unalaska, the Jesse Lee Home (which was later moved to Seward), where he was raised until he was 19.

In his teens, he worked during summers in commercial fishing. He went whaling out of Acutan, spent 2 summers in the Pribilof Islands in the fur seal industry, 2 summers in Bristol Bay in the salmon fishing industry, and 1 summer in the crater of a volcano on the island of Akun, working for a sulfur mining corporation. It was ½ mile across the crater. One wall had been blown away; this hole faced the Bering Sea.

In 1939, says Oliver, the whaling industry in the Aleutians stopped, because of a drastically diminished whale population. In addition, when he was a boy, fleets of boats went out of Dutch Harbor fishing for cod and halibut. But because fishing fields have been found closer to the markets, the Bering Sea industry no longer exists. Clams, mussels, herring, cod, and halibut are great natural resources in the Aleutians, though.

Oliver played piano for the love of it when he was a teenager; after he got to the States, he studied at the Chicago Musical College, then went into radio, and next into the concert field. His scholarship at Chicago was under the "eminent teacher/pianist Magie Bogaslavski." He spent 2 years under him and a summer under the Australian pianist Percy Granger, and the Swiss pianist Rudolf Gantz, now president of the Chicago College.

He gave up his piano career largely due to the death of his first wife. He decided to go into research of the music along the Arctic coast and in the Aleutians. He's devoted considerable time to this since 1936. Folklore and music are linked in native cultures, says Oliver. He pursued the idea of recording this music not only for his own pleasure, but because it is rapidly vanishing. Oliver gives lecture tours, which finance his research tours to AK.

Oliver was in New York when the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor (Unalaska). He enlisted in the Army to serve in AK, and was stationed to the G-2 headquarters at Fort Richardson. He gave lectures to soldiers on foraging and emergency foods in the Aleutians, determining edible and inedible beach and seafoods, before the campaign at Attu and Kiska. Colonel Castner organized the AK scouts.

The war upset the balance of life in the Aleutians, tells Oliver. Natives were evacuated from all the Aleutian Islands, including the Pribilofs. The Japanese captured 42 POWs at Attu and took them to Japan. Twenty-one of them died there, and 4 of 5

babies born to the POWs while in Japan died there. The 1 who survived is living in Atka now. The POWs were returned after the war. Natives had to build a new village at Atka, and Oliver and his wife lived there and helped build—they were connected with the AK Native Service in Juneau. The did research on the side: Oliver's wife gathered 85 botanical specimens of flowering flora for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., the Botanical Gardens in New York, the Research Museum at the University of Michigan, and the Iowa State College. They also gathered what folklore they could while there, but almost all the music has been influenced by the Russian church, which has been in that area for 150 years.

Oliver states that the "true native culture" of the Aleutians is practically gone. The point of his work is to preserve what little culture is left of the Arctic coast and Aleutian natives. Southeast AK, he says, has already been studied extensively by others. He plans to write about his findings and continue lecturing.

Mrs. Luther C. (Harriet) Hess in interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK in the 1940s. She graduated in 1902 from the University of Minnesota. A friend who sat next to her in Pedagogy asked her if she'd like to go to Everett, WA—because her uncle had sent her a teaching application. Hess filled it out. At that time, Emma Yule was the superintendent of Everett schools, and subsequently became superintendent of Juneau schools. She sent out 5 letters asking for assistant principals at Juneau High School. Hess received one of these letters on the 19th of August. Her father said if she had the courage to go he'd furnish the money. She wired her acceptance.

She took a boat from Seattle to AK. After teaching in Juneau for 5 years, a high school was opened in Fairbanks. She eventually became assistant principal of this high school. The first public school was in the old Ford building, on the corner of 2nd Ave. It had 2 years of high school work and all the grades. Julia Bruce was the superintendent. At Thanksgiving they moved into a new frame schoolhouse (on the site of the present school). This building cost \$22,000--there were many complaints about the vast amount of money spent on this school.

She had arrived in Fairbanks on July 14th, 1907. That evening Mr. Luther Hess came to the place she was staying to take her friend to a party. As an aside, Mr. Hess and Mr. Bonnifield started the First National Bank. Goodie Lafun says Mrs. Hess married the first man she met in Fairbanks.

Hess says that the University of AK was Judge James Wickersham's idea. In 1915, he had a bill pass Congress granting 4 sections of land for a site for an Agricultural College and School of Mines, plus \$50,000 from the Dept. of Agriculture. He conceived the idea of laying a cornerstone at the site to encourage people to get excited about the college. Mr. Groves had a large automobile at the time. Reverend Lumpkin, Andrew Nerland, Mrs. Wickersham, Judge Wickersham, and Mrs. Hess drove up to choose the site of the cornerstone in 1915.

Judge Wickersham thought the wooded hill was a beautiful place. Hess marked the spot of the first building by tying a linen handkerchief to a twig. The flagpole is actually located at this site, since they later decided the first building needed to be placed further back from the edge of the hill. This edifice was a large frame building, called Main Building. In 1916, the Legislature gave \$60,000 for its construction. Bob

Summers received the contract for it. It was constructed wing by wing, following each gain of monies to build with.

Nerland, Billy Burns, and Luther Hess worked hard to get the \$60,000 to build a college in Fairbanks. Senator Heckman of Ketchikan thought an agricultural college was implausible in that part of the state, but when he visited the area he changed his mind, seeing the wheat and flowers, etc., that were growing. Dr. Bunnell, the first president of the university, left his position as federal judge and was glad to start the college off. Money is still necessary for the college to realize its full potential, says Mrs. Hess. She mentions that since the veterans have come they've had even less money.

Welfare work in the territory was carried on by a federal judge, a U. S. marshal, and one woman in each division since 1913. This law was discontinued in 1935 when social work was taken over by the welfare board. Mrs. Hess was appointed in 1913 to serve this division of the state, and carried on in this position until the welfare board took over.

Mrs. C. D. (Laura) O'Flanigan and Minnie Brewis are interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK in 1947. O'Flanigan came to AK from St. Louis in 1897. On January 22nd of that year, she, her husband, and young son left Seattle on the steamer Corona. This boat wrecked on Louis Island, and sunk. They were 100 miles off course, and they broke up on the reef of the island. Aboard were 309 people; 2 stowaways drowned, but everyone else got off in the lifeboats. They spent a week on the island before the steamer Humboldt picked them up. They went first to Wrangell, where they stayed until July 4th. Then they proceeded to Skagway, a wild place, says O'Flanigan. Soapy Smith was shot there a few days before they arrived. She visited his grave and put wildflowers on it.

O'Flanigan says they traveled by wagon for 18 miles, camped overnight, and continued on horseback—but that was too rough so she walked to customs at the summit. She carried her year-old baby in a gunnysack on her back. The mounted police took them across a lake, on the other side of which a forest fire was burning. The wind turned while they were on the lake, and they had to cover themselves with wet blankets.

At Lake Bennett, they built 2 scows, for a party of approximately 18 people. They had trouble at Windy Arm (because of the wind, explains O'Flanigan). Subsequently their scow got caught in the whirlpool just before Whitehorse Rapids. Everyone else jumped out of the boat and landed on the bank. O'Flanigan and her son were left in the boat. Those on shore told her to throw the child. She threw him and her husband caught him. Then she jumped out and he caught her, too. Later, they went through the wrong channel at Five Finger Rapids and got soaked. There were nearly 60,000 people at Dawson when they arrived in 1897, says O'Flanigan, nearly all living in tents. Her family stayed there for 8 years, then moved to Fairbanks.

Minnie Brewis came to AK in March of 1899. Her parents were the Wechters; her father had brought cattle into the Yukon. He brought 100 head the first time; he started over the Dalton Trail from Haines, but got turned back by water and wintered in Skagway. In the spring he drove the cattle over the White Pass trail, built scows at Lake Bennett, and floated down the Yukon to Dawson. Brewis and her sister made the trip to Skagway on the City of Seattle. From there they took the train to the summit. They walked to Lake Bennett, where they were to meet their brother who was building a boat

there. They walked the rail ties by themselves, says Brewis. On the boat ride, they passed many wrecked outfits, but they got through Miles Canyon and the rapids all right. Her father had established a meat market in Dawson the previous year. The boys went back that summer to get more cattle, so she and her sister were left alone for the rest of the season. They built furniture out of the scow while the boys were gone. They made a 6'x6' bed, having no idea what the average dimensions were. They'd also brought potatoes, oranges, and lemons on their scow, which they sold for 25 cents each. From 1899-1904 they stayed in Dawson. Brewis also spent time in Iditarod; she mentions that she was lost for 2 days there. Dredges bought up all the ground on Flat Creek in Iditarod, though, and prompting a move to Fairbanks.

George Preston is interviewed by Al Bramstedt in Fairbanks, AK in the 1940s. He's currently the manager of the Fairbanks station of the Northern Commercial Company. Preston was born in Scotland, and lived there until he was 22. He was offered a position as bookkeeper of a mine in the Klondike (on Hunker Creek), operated by a London company. He journeyed to Liverpool, and from there traveled on the Tunisian (an Allen Line boat) to Montreal. He crossed Canada on the Canadian-Pacific to Vancouver, B. C. Here he was held up for a few days waiting for a boat.

SIDE 2

Al Bramstedt's interview of George Preston continues. Preston left on the Catch, a small boat running between Vancouver and Skagway. Because it was early in the season (of 1900), there was a delay in getting from Skagway to Lake Bennett. The White Pass railroad was being built, but was not quite complete. He took a boat from Lake Bennett to Caribou Crossing. The railroad from here to Whitehorse had just been finished. Preston was on the first train that went over it. They went very slowly because the railroad was not properly ballasted. The train consisted of one engine, a passenger coach filled with women and older men, and a baggage car where young men, dogs, baggage, and natives rode (this is where Preston rode).

At Whitehorse, they left on the steamer Yukoner. They left on a Sunday evening, and had just reached Lake Laberge when they ran onto a bar, where they stayed for 2 days. A woman put her fox terrier on a little island of sand kicked up by the attempts to get the boat unstuck. The steamer Canadian came along eventually, and a small boat called the Joseph Closet ferried passengers and baggage out to the Canadian. In a day and a half they reached Dawson. It was 3 a.m. and bright daylight out. There was a crowd of people on the shore waiting for the boat. In Whitehorse, Preston recalls, an old man who was having trouble with his corns sat down between the rails and took off his shoes to "fix his feet." This image, along with the little dog on the island of sand struck him as memorable and unique.

He lived on Hunker Creek, 10 or 12 miles outside of Dawson. To get in and out they had to take packhorses and walk. Here he stayed until 1902, when he came out to Vancouver for the winter, after resigning from the mining company. The following March he came up to Valdez; there had been a gold strike in the area of the Tazlina, a tributary of the Copper River. He went with some friends into this country, taking all supplies in by dog team, over Marshall pass to the Tonsina River, and from there to the

Copper River. He came out to Valdez in September, and stayed for a month to get organized to come into the Tanana country.

He started the day after Thanksgiving for Fairbanks, with one partner, and a few other parties (about 10 men and lots of dogs). They arrived in Fairbanks on January 4, 1904. The Northern Commercial Co. had only been set up a year at that time. Preston and his partner went out to Fairbanks Creek to mine. His partner was a practiced miner, but in the springtime, Preston felt he'd better get back to something he knew about, and got a job with the N. C. Co. The store was only a third the size of the grocery store that is now there. They had woodstoves for heat and kerosene for lighting. The first electric they had was DC current.

It was assumed that the life of the Fairbanks camp would be about 20 years. However, the first franchise of the N. C. Co. with the city of Fairbanks was for 25 years. Now they're finishing the second franchise, of 20 years. An increase in the demand for power makes the power plant the N. C. Co. has, even with the tie-in to the Fairbanks Exploration Co., completely inadequate. They're looking toward a time when a much larger plant will be constructed, says Preston. This matter is up to the town council, because the N. C. Co. wouldn't want to do this unless they were protected by a franchise. It would take at least 3-5 years to install this plant, even if they started building today, says Preston.