

Vernon Bookwalter

Two tapes. Voices on these tapes are Vernon Bookwalter, his wife Esther, interviewer Mike Dalton and John Poling. Poling is 1974 president of Igloo No. 1, Pioneers of Alaska, Nome.

REEL ONE

John Poling was in Skagway in 1935 when Vern Bookwalter and his wife went there first. Poling was working a section hand on White Pass Railroad. Bookwalter had been hired to fly a route between Skagway and Dawson. White Pass had hired him.

Vern said he started to fly in 1919. He was in the Army but learned his flying from Army pilots "on the side". He remained in the Army reserve but was never called up. He learned to fly in Spokane, Wash.

Vern flew the first air mail on Sept. 15, 1926 between Vancouver, Wash. to San Francisco and Los Angeles. The mail was "trained" to Vancouver because planes were not flying at night back in those days. Mayor Baker and Postmaster Jones of Portland handed Vern the first bag of air mail. He has pictures of that. The company Vern worked for was Pacific Air Transport

He knew Bill Boeing and Boeing's pilot Herb Mudder. Mudder actually flew the first air mail by going from Seattle to Victoria, B.C. and picked up mail that had come off ships coming in from the Orient. This way the mail got to Seattle a day or more earlier. The same for out-going mail. He flew mail to Victoria from Seattle the day after the outgoing ships left Seattle and stopped in Victoria.

Poling interjects that Mudder was a Nome, Alaska boy. Also Jimmy Doolittle. Poling has pictures of the two when they were about six years old...pictured with classmates.

Vern flew from Skagway to the Stewart River and on to Dawson. Took him 2 3/4 hours versus the five days by stage (horses and sleighs in winter and boat in summer). Flew mail to Dawson for eight years. Used a Ford Tri-motor aircraft. About 1943 he and Esther left Skagway and went first to Idaho and did charter work. Returned to Alaska and flew most every summer, mostly in Southeastern Alaska. Worked many seasons for Fish and Wildlife. Also worked for Alaska Coastal Airlines. Again worked for Fish and Wildlife as mechanic.

Vern was born in Corvallis, Ore. on Nov. 19, 1892. His wife was born in Missouri.

The Bookwalters came to Nome to mine gold. Has mining property 50 miles out of Nome and more property about 10 miles out. Vern still flies his PA 12.

He talks about his flying license No. 2530. That's an early one because the numbers now reach into the millions (licenses for pilots).

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He also has several sports and stunt flying licenses. Before the CAA and FAA there were flying associations (in very early days) Two of Vern's certificates are signed by Orville Wright.

Forced to retire from Fish and Wildlife (civil service) mechanic job at age 70 so he and Esther went to Kenai Peninsula and homesteaded. Talk about days in Skagway when he started a road from Skagway to Dyea. He borrowed a cat and started building the road. Later Governor Ernest Gruening gave Skagway \$80,000 to complete the road to Dyea.