

OWEN MEALS and NANCY MEALS - Valdez

Aug. 25, 1973

Owen Meals was born Nov. 19, 1891 in O'Neill, Neb.
He died Dec. 26, 1974 in Valdez.

Nancy Sanderson Meals was born Sept. 5, 1895 in Watt, Texas.

Owen came to Valdez on Friday, Feb. 13, 1903. His father Andrew Jackson Meals had come north in 1898 with George Hazlett. Both Hazlett and Meals were friends from Nebraska and came to Alaska together looking for gold. They went over the Valdez Glacier into the Copper River area prospecting for gold. They found little color. Finally, instead of returning to Nebraska in the winters, they moved their families to Valdez. The Meals family in February, 1903 consisted of Mr. and Mrs. (Leonora) Meals, Owen, George, Frank, John, Mary and Bill. Bill was in school in the states and came to Valdez later (at this time George is in New York, Frank in Sacramento, John in Seattle, Mary is Mrs. Mary Whalen of Valdez). Bill died some time ago. Bill was the father of Mrs. Louise Polet, formerly of Nome and Fairbanks and now of Seattle.

Hazlett and Meals kept a diary of their trips over the Valdez Glacier and into the interior country. Meals has a copy of it in Valdez and Hazlett's grandson Calvin (Kirkland, Wash) has the other copy.

Meals tells about the original townsite (where present day Valdez is located). It was surveyed but not settled by stamperers and/or business people. It was easier to off-load in the other site at the head of the bay. Besides, it was about four miles closer to the trail north. The present Valdez townsite was surveyed and laid out when the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad was being started, hopefully through Keystone Canyon (Meals recalls two other railroad outfits building railroad beds at the same time: Alaska Yukon Railroad and Homes (sp??) which was promoted by H.O. Reynolds).

Another survey in 1910 was made of the townsite. That is when Meals and his sons got title for 10 acres. The acres were in payment for their surveying work. It was at this time that Mineral Creek boom had hit Valdez. The elder Meals was a surveyor.

Owen Meals was 12 years old when he arrived in Valdez so he had a good recollection of the town's history. Remembers the snow in winter...no snow removal and paths had high, high banks on each side. Remembers there were 17 saloons in Valdez in 1903 and each saloon had a dancehall. He had a newspaper route so the town became familiar to him and he with the town and its people. The first winter there the family lived in a two room cabin and a 12' by 24' tent that the elder Meals erected next to the cabin. The next spring they got a larger house. In the fall of 1904 Meals built a house for his family.

(more)

Andrew Jackson Meals did surveying work and he had brought two horses and some equipment with him from Nebraska. He and his sons acquired more horses and equipment and worked for the railroad (roadbed work with wagons, scrapers). They also freighted over Thompson Pass.

Owen Meals' seventh grade teacher was Charles Bunnell (later Judge Bunnell and still later Dr. Bunnell, president of the University of Alaska). Owen took his high school and higher education by correspondence courses. He studied mechanical and electrical engineering. He got lots of practical experience in Valdez helping his father surveying and mapping. Also tinkering with machinery.

The new Valdez site: After the earthquake the owners (Meals family and Hazlett family) formed the Port Valdez Company and got shares of stock in same. The Meals had 10 acres that had been deeded directly to them in 1910. The Port Valdez Co. gave 242 acres to the City of Valdez with the stipulation that people owning property in the destroyed town be allowed to move on to a lot at no cost...and the remainder would remain with the Port of Valdez Co "until the property was put into productive use or sold" according to Meals. He says he is in court now over that arrangement. He is charged excessive taxation, he says. Don't know what the other side (city) claims on this.

During the earthquake...or at the time of the quake...Meals owned and operated the Valdez Power Co. The building was strong enough, though it was built of cement block, to withstand the quake with no outages and only a few cracks in the ceiling and perhaps one crack down one side. The telephone lines were shorted out in several places, but those were soon repaired and the city was back in business (phone and lights, that is). Lights never did go out, Meals said.

Meals talks about the building codes in the new towsite. Mrs. Meals talks about the view from their home atop the bluff. She also tells of her desire to come to Alaska and sending an application to Juneau, getting accepted and assigned to Valdez (to teach). Says she was educated at West Texas Normal College and the University of Texas.