

WINIFRED COGHILL -Nenana

July, 1973

REEL 1

Mrs. Winifred Coghill of Nenana is the mother of John B. (Jack) Coghill and Bob Coghill of Nenana and Bill Coghill (Colonel, U.S. Army), comptroller for the U.S. Army, Alaska, Ft. Richardson

She tells of Bill being injured in Korea. His knee was blown off. He was taken to Tokyo and was on the critical list for three months. When he finally was able to travel he went to Walter Reed for three or four years. Talked the Army into going to Harvard Business School from which he graduated. Also graduated from the Army War College. West Point graduate and career Army man. Lost leg but his brain is as good as ever, Mrs. Coghill observes.

Bob Coghill is second son and is currently manager of the Coghill Corporation. Jack is the Union Oil consignee in Nenana. Also Jack is mayor of the town. Chairman of the Republican Party for Alaska as well. All three sons belong to Veterans of Foreign Wars. All three are lay readers in the Episcopal Church.

Mrs. Coghill arrived in Alaska in September, 1919. Her husband was already here. He was an apprentice printer and had lived with her family "whilst" he was in training. They knew each other in England. (Jack uses that "whilst" term, too).

In March of 1919 he left Nenana by dog team and went through the canyon to the coast and caught a boat for England. In June they were married in England and headed back to Alaska. They had not seen each other for 13 years.

Mrs. Coghill prepared some notes on her husband which are read into the tape: William Alexander Coghill was born in Shrewsbury, England on Nov. 28, 1884. Scottish parents. Finished training as journeyman printer and left England in 1907 for Canada. Worked in Vancouver, B.C. and then Seattle. In 1908 he went to Valdez. Walked to Fairbanks and chopped wood at roadhouses for a bunk and meals. In Fairbanks he was employed by William F. Thompson (Wrong Font Thompson). He carried papers to Ester and sold them for \$1 per paper. One thing led to another and he soon found that he was running errands for the miners. He managed to buy a horse and buggy. Later he acquired a one cylinder Brush auto. He was jolly and well liked. Known as the English Kid. Became an American citizen and got his papers on Jan. 14, 1918. Bought into a general store in Nenana in 1917 when the railroad building was beginning. Nenana had about 6,000 people then. In March 1919 he left by dog team to Talkeetna, took railroad to Seward, boat to Seattle, railroad to New York and boat to Liverpool. Married Winifred Fortune June 18, 1919 after a five year engagement. A first child, a girl, died in infancy of flu. Three sons: William Fortune Coghill, Robert Alexander Coghill and John Bruce Coghill.

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William was born in Swansea, South Wales in 1923 and brought to Nenana in March 1924. Educated in Nenana and University of Alaska. Graduated from West Point in 1947 and is a career Army officer. Married and has two sons, William and Thomas.

Robert Coghill was born in Nenana, educated there. Attended the University of Alaska. Served in Air Force. Went into business in Nenana with his father and is manager now of the Coghill Corporation. Father died in 1947. Has two children: Robert Alexander and Marilyn Elaine.

John Bruce (Jack) Coghill was born in Fairbanks. Served in the Army during World War II. Mayor of the town. GOP Party, too. Served many years in the Territorial and State Legislatures. Consignee for Union Oil in Nenana (and up and down the Yukon). Married and has six children: Patricia, John, James, Gerald, Paula and Jeffery. Served on the Alaska Constitutional Convention drafting commission 1954-55.

Mr. Coghill died in May, 1947. Belonged to the Arctic Brotherhood, Pioneers of Alaska, the Blue Lodge and Knights Commandre. Tanana Chapter of the Masonic Lodge.

Jack's wife is Frances Gilbert Coghill, third generation Alaskan. Her grandparents were Mr. and Mrs. Nels Peterson. Peterson operated the pump station here when the railroad first started.

Bob's wife Gladys came to Nenana as a nurse with St. Mark's Mission. From Philadelphia.

Bill's wife was from Chicago: Geraldine Stevens. Met while Bill was going to West Point.

As of now Mrs. Coghill has 10 grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Mrs. Coghill talks about her husband, how they kept in touch (he with her family for she was still quite a young girl to be courting) as he moved across Canada to Alaska. Thirteen years later he came back. In the mean time he had said he wanted to go back some day to marry Winifred. She and he corresponded. Jack very much the same personality as his father, Mrs. Coghill says. She adds that Jack and Frances both finished high school after they were married. In the fall of 1946 the senior Mr. Coghill went outside to visit Bill at Westpoint and to get a physical. Had high blood pressure. He died six weeks before Bill graduated from West Point. Died of heart attack at his home.

Bob now manages the Coghill store as does Mrs. Winifred Coghill. She does the bookkeeping. In England she worked in freight office of the railroad for four years.

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REEL 2

Mrs. Coghill tells about her trip to America...took 10 days by ship from England. There were 10,000 troops aboard the same ship. Headed for Halifax. Visited in Seattle. Bill told people he had married a "Miss Fortune". Took inside passage to Skagway, over the White Pass to Whitehorse. Arrived on the last boat of the season in September...the Old Tanana...from Tanana. Couldn't remember the name of the sternwheeler from Dawson.

Describes Nenana in 1919. Work force on the railroad strong. About 400 Russians there doing some of the hard work. Coghills had a big store there. Opened 24 hours a day. She tells about Russians intrigued with punch board gambling...for prizes of candy...and giving her all the candy they won.

Nenana was headquarters for the northern construction of the Alaska Railroad. Railroad commissary, meat market, dormitories, hospital, main offices, round house, narrow gauge track from North Nenana to Fairbanks.

A narrow gauge track had been laid during the construction of the main road. In winter rails were placed on the ice where the auto bridge is now...ferry across in summer and take the narrow gauge to Fairbanks. While rr bridge was being completed, the narrow gauge railroad was being widened. Mr. and Mrs. Coghill were on the first passenger train that ever went across the bridge - 1923. Mrs. Coghill went to England in early March...no April. The couple's first child had died and she was expecting Bill so she went back to England to deliver the baby.

President Harding's visit in 1923? Mrs. Coghill was in England.

Besides the flu epidemic (which took the life of their girl and almost killed Mr. Coghill), there were other hardships. There was a major fire in their store. An earthquake and flood that left 2 feet of water in the store.

Tells of Bill's birth in July in England and lots of trouble he has had proving his American citizenship over the years.

Back to arrival in 1919....she and Mr. Coghill lived in a log cabin and didn't know a soul except Bill (her husband). A little Italian lady who was friendly and good to Mrs. Coghill, but she had a terrible time understanding her. Lived in the log cabin until Christmas and the thermometer went down to -72. She said she got very lonesome because Bill was in the store until 2 or 3 a.m. Finally they built an apartment over the store. Lived there until the fire of 1936 that destroyed the place.

Fire: 15 buildings went up in that fire of 1936. Coghills lost their complete store and everything they had. It all went in an hour and a half. Started in building at the corner opposite where their store is now. Restaurant...explosion. Wind blowing. Coghills

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had a carload of groceries coming up from Seward on the railroad so they started in all over again.

After the railroad construction Nenana began to shrink. Left were trappers and mail team headquarters. Coghills bought and sold furs. Dog team mail before the railroad.

Nenana went down (in population) rapidly. There have been many disastrous fires since. Most buildings in the old town have been moved or ~~town~~ down. N.C. was moving out so the Coghills bought them out...about 1940.

In 1948 they built the new section of the store. Flood in 1948 almost washed them away. Clif^{te}tele changed gradually from trappers to more of a supermarket trade. Now they have the propane distributorship all the way up and down the Yukon River (and Nenana). Still had river business: passengers and freight. Three big boats and a few smaller ones. Hotel here today? No.

Dog mail teams: Had three mail outfits. There was old Mike Cooney who ran the mail to McGrath. Two others: went to Tolovana and Flat. Would hook up 20 dogs at a time.

When she first arrived her husband said one or the mail drivers needed four dozen dog moccasins. He showed her how to make them out of sail canvas. Dog needed protection when they went over river ice and overflows. Ice would cut pads of their feet. Used to make dozens of those things! Not for warmth but for protection.

(Mrs. Coghill had to get back to the store and could not continue the interview. Dalton's intention to return and get her together with son Jack for another hour or so of reminiscing)