

Yukon Flats Cultural Resource Project

H85-74

Mardow Solomon and Johnnie Thomas w/Matt Ganley in Ft. Yukon, AK in July(?) 1983

Side A

Mardow Solomon says he was a member of the city council when Ft. Yukon first incorporated around 1952/1953. In order to incorporate, they had to have a president/leader. They incorporated in order to have sales tax and their own police department. He recalls that Reverend Marston was the first president. Solomon himself was also elected president at one time. Don Young followed Solomon, and at present Jonathon Solomon is mayor.

John Thomas says he was born and raised in Ft. Yukon. He says one of the reasons they incorporated at that time was that Alaska was still a territory, and the territory didn't pay much attention to native councils and such. Ft. Yukon wanted to run its own show. The only way to do this was to incorporate. They petitioned the territory of Alaska to become a 4th class city. Their budgets were about \$7,000-\$8,000 a year. As time went on, things grew, and there was revenue sharing. They began with a 2% sales tax. Soon they discovered this wasn't enough, and they raised it to 3%. Thomas served as vice president under Don Young. Many people have been involved over the years.

They decided to have a city manager because governing the city with a council that met once a month was unwieldy, whereas a city manager could run things on a day-to-day basis. They had had a deputy U.S. marshal for law enforcement, but they wanted their own city police. The U.S. marshal was more of a federal law figure. Now they have a city manager, a couple police, and many city employees. The population was between 400 and 500, Thomas estimates, when they incorporated. Now it's about 700. Planes came very infrequently at that time. Three flights from Fairbanks came during the week in winter, with daily flights during the summer. Now it's more like 10 flights a day.

There were no electric lights or telephones. Mr. Toussant started with a little light plant. He hooked up two or three houses; gradually electricity was all over. They got telephone service in 1968. Interior Telephone hooked up 20 subscribers originally. As they could afford it, the city put up street lights. Now it's fairly well lit. Thomas remembers that when they started with electric lighting, the minimum charge was \$3. They thought that Mr. Toussant would go broke, but he knew that people would get used to electric power and desire more lights and more electric conveniences.

Solomon says the flood of 1949 caused the people to have to move to higher ground. They had a chief up till that time. After they moved, it seemed things were up in the air, disorganized. At that time they didn't have the government agencies that help villages, or Tanana Chiefs. They decided to incorporate. The first president was Marston; Solomon was the second president. The president and city council were not employed. When Solomon got out of it he took the job of treasurer of the city of Ft. Yukon for \$15/month. That was among the first paid positions. A lot of the people volunteered their time for city positions.

Thomas says that most of their budget went to paying a person to keep a watering point open 2 hours/day, 5 days/week, at \$2/hr. The rest went to part-time pay for policemen. He tells how at one time they had a potential flood coming, on a weekend. He thought they ought to open the water house so people could fill their water, in case lines broke or got flooded. He remembers saying to Mardow Solomon, "We need to get that thing open." Solomon said, "Good idea, but next council meeting somebody will say: Why did we spend all that money to open the water house?" (maybe \$6-\$8.) Thomas was also working for the state as a sanitation technician at that time, so water was his main interest. He told some other council members they needed to get it open, and planned with them to defend the idea at the next council meeting. The council agreed that it had been a good idea, in the interest of preventive measures, even though the flood only affected the waterline periodically, and they were able to use the water house.

Solomon and Thomas agree that the small budget was the main problem after incorporation. One reason to incorporate was to give them some "pull" in Juneau, to get a voice in the government of Alaska. But Thomas recalls how problematic it was to do things with so little money. During one spring they tried to get a village clean-up going. Basically they had to do it with volunteers. They did a pretty good job, he thinks better even than now when the government has all this money.

Solomon says things changed for the worse, overall, with statehood. Thomas says that over time they became more savvy and tried to use their votes to influence legislators. They thought Rev. Marston, educated and from the lower 48, would help them learn the ropes. That's why they chose him for the first president.

Solomon says that after the 1949 flood, the BLM came in and hired Johnnie Melville (?) and himself to survey lots. They just put in lot lines, but didn't allow for right of way or streets. The way they acquired their land was by bidding for it. Some houses were already up, so on those lots there was only one bidder. Thomas tells that before this surveying was done, people just chose a nice spot and built a house on it. After surveying, they bought the land for the cost of surveying, around \$30-\$35.

It caused a lot of dissension, since people had been living on their "lots" for 20 years and now they had to buy them!?! But the cost was minimal. Smaller lots were around \$32. Money was worth a little more back then.

Thomas recalls that when they started fighting forest fires, they didn't have helicopters; they had to go by boat or walk. In 1943 (just before he was drafted into the Army), he went about 90 miles up the Porcupine River with another guy. They brought along some cases of food. Joe Herbert, an old man, also came, with his canoe and shotgun, so they ate pretty well. It was "feed yourself or come back." Joe was Belle Herbert's husband, and old but very active. They got 75 cents/hr. After a week, Thomas came back and had made \$54. That was big money.

Hannah Solomon (?), in the background, contributes a few words.

No council members were paid in the beginning. They started with presidents; now they call them mayors. At some point the state of Alaska said no more 4th class cities--Fort Yukon will become a 2nd class city (that's when they started having mayors). It was really just a title change, though. They didn't exactly elect presidents. The council members voted on whoever "seemed like a sucker" to be president. Solomon and Thomas laugh about this. Solomon says that's just how he became president. Thomas thinks they still get together and talk about who will be elected ahead of time.

Among other reasons why they incorporated, people were all living downtown, by the old AC Company, when their houses were washed away by the 1949 flood. All of the sudden everyone was living up further, and it was a kind of new start. The Red Cross and Civil Defense were there. It helped them realize they were going to need to do things through the legal process. There was no force of law behind rules up to that time; all that held people to doing things was *respect*.

There was no gradual process to become a 4th class city. Suddenly there just were, and the paperwork built up, to write to Juneau and keep track of roads, fire protection, lights, telephones. There was little activity between the council's monthly meetings, so the city manager was left to do things. They think the first manager might have been Richard (Dickie) Carroll.

Another man's voice is heard, and possibly another woman's voice. Everyone agrees it's hard to remember when the first manager came in. Thomas says his chainsaw is in a dozen parts. He says he's got to cut some wood. He has oil, but that went for about \$1.80/gal. last fall.

Around 1965 or so, people started using oil heaters as well as or instead of wood heat. A woman talks about moving to Fairbanks and not knowing anything about oil heat. Thomas says that when Mr. Toussant got his generator going he had to have oil. Since he was an agent for Standard Oil Company, they got a little extra oil and put in a stove. He talks about putting in his own oil tank, and learning how to put in tubing so that it wouldn't freeze up at -60.

Similarly, when people put in propane tanks for their cooking stoves, they discovered that at -45 they would freeze up. So they figured out how to put a little insulated box around the propane tank. Thomas talks about his system for keeping the box/tank warm. There was no such thing as calling in experts for learning how to handle these things. Ft. Yukoners just had to watch others, and learn by trial and error.

At one time they talked about putting a road through to Ft. Yukon. Thomas recalls when Minto moved to a spot where it was practical to put in a road. He says that people tend to forget that a road goes both ways. He thinks if you ask Minto people what they think about their road in retrospect, they'd say it was the worst mistake they ever made. (This is because in addition to being able to go out, people are able to come in.) So seeing the example of Minto, Ft. Yukon dropped the idea of building a road. They don't want just anyone with a pickup truck being able to come in. Thomas acknowledges that it might be

nice to be able to drive to Fairbanks for groceries, etc., but he'd rather take the bad with the good associated with their isolation.