Summary for H87-82-01
Stan Bennett is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 9/15/84

SIDE 1

This is the first program of KFAR's Meet a Pioneer. Gayle Maloy interviews Stan Bennett, KFAR's first engineer. He is best known as an engineer in television and radio. On September 15, 1984, they met at the KFAR studios while Bennett was in town for the AK Broadcasters Convention. The interview is broadcast on 10/5/84.

Bennett first came to Fairbanks in 1939. There had been no radio stations in interior AK up until this time. There had only been 2 station, Anchorage's (250 watt) KFQD, and KINY in Juneau. Short-wave radios were in use, but due to the aurora and other magnetic fluctuations, reception was spotty.

Capt. Austin Lathrop decided to build a radio station. His personal secretary, Miriam (Dickey) Kinsey, planted this idea in his mind. She said a signal that could be heard reliably in outlying areas of AK was a service to the public. Lathrop was about 75 years old at the time. There was not an economic justification for it. The population of Fairbanks was around only 5,000. Lathrop owned many businesses in town, so running a profit-less radio station didn't bother him.

Bennett, who'd built two small radio stations in Oregon, with partner Augie Hiebert, heard about Lathrop's proposition through the consulting engineer, Jim Wallis. Bud Foster, famous for recreating sports events on the radio in Juneau later joined the team.

ACS related messages from Seattle to Juneau to Anchorage to Fairbanks by Morse code in those days. They wanted to get daily news broadcasts at the Fairbanks station. Bennett found out there was a news service called Trans-radio Press, out of New York City to the West Coast. They could subscribe to it, and just had to translate the dots and dashes, which came in at about 40 words/min. One had to type quickly and accurately. Fadeout due to magnetic storms was, and still is, a problem. Bennett consulted Oaf's Dr. Lloyd Barker, on leave from Washington, DC. He was installing an ionosphere station at UAF, measuring the height of the ionosphere layer. He helped determine ideal frequencies to transmit and receive with. They designed special antennas out of Farmer's Loop Rd. for the station.

In 1939 the station had 5 news broadcasts per day; it went on the air in October 1939. (Al Breasted wrote to the station reminding them their 45th anniversary is coming up.) The first staff were Miriam Dickey, acting manager; Bud Foster, announcer from Juneau; Bennett, engineer; Al Bramstedt, announcer (later worked as manager of KENI in Anchorage); and Augie Hiebert, assistant engineer. All were under 30 years old.

Maloy shows Bennett some archival photos from KFAR. He talks about the dual diversity receiver. There is a picture of Hiebert with a dog over his shoulder, and Charlie Fowler's hayfield across the street from the transmitter building. Fowler worked for the F. E. Co. In those days there was no tape, to record a voice you had to cut an acetate-coated aluminum disk, with a ruby or diamond stylus. Until about 1945 it was this way. The Germans actually had the first tape. There's a picture of someone at the board in the studios at the top of the Lathrop Building, with others at the piano and singing. They did quite a lot of live broadcasting then.

One of their first shows was live music from the Empress Theater. Don Adler was a good organist who used to play there. Bennett saw him recently. Al Bramstedt read poetry, while Adler played the organ around 1939-1941. They had hit parades and popular songs to complement the news. This stuff was sent to them by mail.

Most of their supplies came up by the AK Steamship Co. to Seward, then up the AK Railroad to Fairbanks. Lighter things came in by airfreight; the service was Pan-American, a 10-passenger Lockheed Electra once a week. It took Bennett 2 days to come by AK Railroad from Seward to Fairbanks in 1939.

SIDE 2

From Seattle to Fairbanks, it took about 7 days for shipments, so you had to think of what you needed ahead of time. One plane per week came in, if the weather was good. (It was all contact flying then; no electronic navigation aides). The original transmitter was 1,000 watts, says Bennett. The third year he was here, he helped build a 10,000-watt transmitter, which enabled them to get out to the bush. Lots of that equipment is still in use. Bennett says he frostbit his fingers setting up some equipment that first October.

Tundra Topics, which communicated with bush areas, began as a news program, called something else, at 10 am. (Weather forecasts were made only after airplanes were able to fly.) It was originally designed to let villages know which airplanes would be able to make it out that day (e.g., Lavery Airways, Jim Dodson Airways, North Star Airways), so they could go out to meet the pilot. If it had snowed, they'd have to clear the runways, so they announced something like this on the radio: "Please clean the runway at Chicken; Dodson will be flying in at 10:30."

Bennett talks about his trip to Barrow. In 1940, there had no been an airplane in Barrow in 3 years. They were out of weather balloons and needed an emergency flight to Barrow. Harold Gillam was the most experienced man to do it. He had used planes to measure temperatures at certain altitudes in bad weather, radioing the information in (used Weeks Field). Bennett knew Gillam well since he'd fixed his radio.

When Bennett went to Barrow, there were 5 people besides the natives there: Stan Morgan (radio operator) and his wife; Clark Hopper (Presbyterian minister) and his wife; and the school nurse. About 500 natives people lived there. Their plane was a single engine Pilgrim, from 1932. It formerly was used by American Airlines in the first mail route in the lower 48. It was a 10-passenger plane. Bennett was in the back with the freight, wearing his parka since it was very cold.

Once, over the Endicott Mtns., the motor sputtered and started to fail. They landed on the frozen Kuskokwim River near Bettles, where they filled up with gas. They landed on a lake at Barrow; 300-400 people turned out to greet them.

Bennett notes that there were gasoline drums buried there for Russian pilots trying to fly across the North Pole to use. On a previous trip, Gillam had gotten lost and landed on a lake 100 miles from Barrow. Gillam described the surroundings over the radio to Stan Morgan. Morgan then translated this to 5 of Barrow's most skilled hunters. Each man thought they knew where he was from the description; none of them agreed. Each loaded a 50-gal. Drum of gas on a sled and started out on a 2-day trek to find him. One out of those 5 found Gillam, and they put the gas in the plane. Bennett got to hear Gillam and Morgan reminisce about this. Gillam's son was later the mayor of Fairbanks.

Bennett tells the story of the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. By coincidence, he got up early Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, to copy Trans-radio Press so he wouldn't have to do it in the afternoon; he was going to church later. At 9-10 am, he started copying, and kept getting flashes saying, "Pearl Harbor is being bombed." The first thing Bennett thought was that someone broke in the Press office. So he tuned a short wave to a station in Manila, where they were broadcasting live to NBC that there was a bombing going on in Manila. The story was that Pearl Harbor had been bombed a couple hours earlier.

General Gaffney, the head of Ladd Field at that time (now Eielson AFB), was called by Bennett and Hiebert, and told they had important information for him. He came over and told them to put the station on the air, broadcasting emergency messages, and telling Army personnel to get to base. Notification from the Dept. of Defense didn't reach Gaffney until 2 days later. Bennett feels good that he was able to give him a heads up an hour or 2 after the event took place. National guardsmen were placed outside the KFAR transmitter, because they were expecting key communication sites in AK to be captured as well.

Bennett Engineering Associates is Bennett's business in Seattle.