

Summary for H87-82-03

Lila Mae King and Lena Phipps are interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 10/19/84

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Gayle Maloy interviews Lila Mae King and Lena Phipps in Fairbanks, AK, on 10/19/84. King came up in July 1924. She had a friend stationed in Grundler (Big Delta). She'd been a schoolmate of his in Louisville, KY. She brought her son with her, Robert Lauren Johnson (formerly Robert Griswald; changed his last name when King married Walter Johnson), who was 5 at the time. King was 24 at the time (born in 1900) and had come from Boston, MA. She stayed in Seattle for 2 years getting the courage and money to come up. Ralph Mitchell was the man who she went to visit; he wrote her wonderful descriptions of AK.

King took a boat to Seward, and the train to Fairbanks. She thought it was really nice. Two months later she and Mitchell got married in Fairbanks by Commissioner Growden (Mitchell had to get permission from the military). He was a radio operator at Grundler. Two year later the stationed closed and they were moved to Seward. After 2 ½ years they got divorced; Mitchell stayed in Seward and King came to Fairbanks with her son. A year and half later she was married to Walter Johnson, a miner and prospector on the Goodpaster River. There were a lot of men around, but many of them were older. Her son and new husband trapped in the winter. Her sister and sister's daughter came up to be with her.

In 1927, Phipps arrived in AK. Prior to this, she was waitressing at Highland Jinx Restaurant in Jacksonville, FL. She was a widow with a young daughter. She took the train to Fairbanks from Seward. She said if she'd had the money she'd have went back. She says there were only about three streets and a lot of mud holes. She was wearing a coat suit. Phipps says she never wore pants until she came to AK. She got her first pair at the N. C. Co. She tried both women's and men's pants to see what fit her better. She was picked up in a car with rumble seats. King had sent her a letter telling her what to bring to wear, but Phipps never received it. One and a half years later the letter arrived.

They all lived up at Central on the Goodpaster River. They built a house together and had fun doing it. Phipps felt lost at the time, but she got used to it. She says they had beautiful gardens, did a lot of canning and berry picking and drying fruit, and had chickens (so they had fresh eggs all the time). They did the laundry with a washboard.

Phipps came back to Fairbanks and put her daughter in school. She lived with Roy Lund and his wife for 2 years, as their housekeeper. Then she sent her daughter to Seattle to three schoolteacher friends. Her daughter then went to college in MI. She became a nurse and went into the service for 4 years. Phipps went out to visit her every 2 years. King's son was taught on correspondence by she and her husband. Only when you had 8 or 9 kids would the government build a school for you. The parrot they had also helped.

In the summer, if anyone came down the river, they'd visit. Their closest neighbor was 20 miles away. King gave the weather 3 times a day on her radio transmitter. She also took messages for ACS. She'd studied weather with Mr. Thompson at the Weather Bureau. At first this broadcasting was voluntary; after her

husband died she got \$2 a day, and more later on. They only drove to Fairbanks once a year for supplies.

Phipps missed all the fruit she'd had in FL. After a time, though she missed AK when she was away. She also worked at the Northern Hotel until it burned down, as a housekeeper and at the desk. Then she went to work for Norman Kessler at the highway trading post at Northway. After that she came back to Fairbanks and worked at the Pioneer Hotel and stayed there until she got married in 1952 to Oscar Phipps.

SIDE 2

Phipps was hunting for her brand new fur coat when the Northern Hotel on Front St. started burning in 1946. Margaret Ostead owned it; she was in Texas at the time.

Phipps went on dates, she says—to shows, dinner (Model Café on 2nd Ave. and 1st), and dances. They had two show houses, the Empress and Lathrop. Square dances and any kind of dance you wanted were held. Only a few people had cars. Women would bring their dresses with them to the lodge and put them on there.

Phipps was working at the Northern Hotel when she met her future husband. He worked for the F. E. Co., U.S. Smelting and Refining, as a powerhouse engineer. They lived on 3rd St. Her husband then retired. Every 2 years they went outside. Phipps's daughter is married, with 4 daughters, who have 2 children among themselves. They bought their house on 3rd for \$2,500. She stopped working after getting married.

Her husband was sick during the flood in 1967. They lost their house, and were picked up in a boat and taken to the UAF campus. Mac Dalton, Jim Dalton's wife, said, "What are you doing here; Oscar looks terrible." They took him to Dalton's house, which was dry, for 2 weeks. Then they went to Portland; the doctors couldn't do anything for him. He said he wanted to come home. He lived for 3 more months. The day he died was the last day that the old hospital was used.

Phipps was made Queen of Pioneers in 1973; Jack Linck was the king. They got to go to Anchorage, and Phipps had a heavy velvet robe and a crown.

King came back to Fairbanks and worked for Pan American during the war as a weather observer. After that, she was married to Al King. Johnson had had a heart attack on the Goodpaster Trail on the 19th of June. She had got to look for him with her snowshoes on after he didn't come back from getting rock samples. Her son was gone in the service, for 12 days at that point. She called on the radio to her friend, John Butrovich; ACS answered the call, too. In a few days, the marshal came up; it was snowing the whole time. She came back down to Fairbanks then, and has lived on 11th St. since 1942.

Al King (in communications) worked on the Slope for Puget Sound, Dreggs, and Green. They were working up in Barrow when President Eisenhower came to visit. King got to meet him.

King says a pioneer is a person who lived out in cabins, without electric, toilets, or a water system. She tells how they packed chickens on their backs up to the Goodpaster on their honeymoon. Their boat froze in, and they spent the night in a place called the Meathouse. Her sister and the kids were with them.

Phipps says she's proud to be a pioneer. She and her husband joined the Pioneers of AK together on the same night.