

Summary for H87-82-07

Les and Mildred Nerland are interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 11/30/84

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Gayle Maloy interviews Les and Mildred Nerland in Fairbanks, AK on 11/30/84. They are best known as the founding family of Nerland's Furniture and Home Appliance in Fairbanks.

UAF AK and Polar Regions Dept./Oral History has loaned K FAR the January 8, 1947 interview of Mr. Andrew Nerland (Les's father) on the Here's a Pioneer program (H75-14 ORAL HISTORY). This is aired prior to the interview of Les and Mildred.

Andrew Nerland passed away in 1966. Les was born on March 11, 1902 in Dawson, Yukon. Mildred was born in Bellingham, WA on April 21, 1900. Les has only very vague memories of Dawson. There was a children's epidemic of dysentery there though, which prompted he and his mother to move out to Seattle and establish a home in 1903.

Les's father eventually moved to Fairbanks. For many years, he'd come out to Seattle in the fall to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with his family and to buy materials to take back to the store in the spring. His father was intending to make enough money to retire and just maintain the home in Seattle, but with the economy and fluctuation in business he wound up keeping the store year after year.

Nerland's began as a paint and wallpaper store in Dawson. They also did contracting work in homes and businesses, which continued after it moved to Fairbanks. Andrew had 3 partners, the Anderson brothers. The store was actually first known as Anderson Brothers & Nerland, until 1922 when Andrew purchased the interests of his partners. Eventually Les and his mother came to Fairbanks and got into the business.

Andrew, Louis, and Herman were the Anderson brothers. Andrew Anderson was married to Andrew Nerland's sister, Amanda.

In 1926, Mildred and Les were married in Fairbanks, and Les's mother, Annie, moved up that year. Les graduated from the University of Washington in 1924, with a degree in Business Administration. He worked in Seattle, selling advertising and conducting market surveys.

Les and Mildred met in 1918 through a mutual friend. They went on a blind date. Mildred talks about the pleasant times they had, going to dances.

Les talks: Only in 1926 did he get a job that he felt could comfortably support them both (at Frigidaire Corp.).

Mildred talks: On her birthday in 1930, she got a wire from Annie and Andrew Nerland wishing her Happy Birthday and asking if they'd come to Fairbanks for a year and take care of the store while they went to Norway, where they hadn't been since their honeymoon.

Mildred had been to Petersburg when she was 3. When she was 13 her family moved to Petersburg for 3 years. She's one of the only women left in the Pioneer Women organization, which is different than the auxiliary of the Pioneers of AK.

Les talks: They arrived in Fairbanks in May 1930. Fairbanks was entirely different than anything they'd seen before. People were warm and friendly. It wasn't

long before they decided they wanted to stay. When they left Seattle, they realized that it was a depressed economic season. But when they got to Fairbanks, there were no soup lines or people in distress.

Mildred talks: They were trying to find a home in Fairbanks. They'd been staying with Les's folks above the store. They finally rented a small house on 8th Ave., with no modern conveniences. In a drawer, they found divorce papers. A young Southern woman had lived there. It was in very bad shape. But with the help of a young native girl, they got it all cleaned up.

Les talks: Later they bought a house. The president of the First National Bank, George Hutchinson, passed away, and his widow had the house on 9th Ave., which was a log cabin with some additions on it. She was going back to MI where she was from. She insisted that whoever bought the house would also buy her property out at Birch Lake, which turned out to be the best part of the deal.

Les and Mildred had a son, Jerry, born in Seattle in 1927. Their second son, Ron, was born in Fairbanks in 1932 and their daughter, Maless, was in 1940. These two were both born at the old St. Joseph's Hospital.

The main school caught fire in the early 1930s. They used different stores and building, including the Masonic Temple, to hold classes. It took three elections to pass the bond issue for a concrete building, instead of a wood frame building. As a result of that experience, Les figured they needed a change in administration, and he talked a local attorney, E. B. Collins into running for mayor. Les ran for City Council, which he was on until 1938 (6 years). He was then induced to run for mayor, which he served as for 2 terms, until 1940, when he retired from politics.

On Ladd Field: The question was whether an AFB would be built in Anchorage or Fairbanks. Les was eager to see it come to Fairbanks. When Col. Lee came to Fairbanks with the final decision, he said, "Sorry, but the AFB will be built in Anchorage, however, we're also going to build one in Fairbanks." The original Nerland's store was on Cushman between 2nd and 3rd Avenues, where the old post office was located

The folks didn't actually make the trip to Norway until 1935. Les and Mildred had a 1920 Buick in Seattle, which they shipped up to AK. They used it often to go to Birch Lake and so forth. There were no paved roads at the time they came here, though.

While on the Council, federal funds to pave a part of Cushman and 2nd Ave., were applied for (also to install sewers). During Les's term, they were paved, which led to more roads being paved.

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Les talks: The 4th Ave. Line was on 4th Ave. between halfway down the block from Cushman's start, on down to Bartlett. They women were very orderly, they'd come uptown and do shopping, and were good customers. They were not allowed in any bars. One woman, Edith Neal, known as the "Oregon Mare" was very active when the flu hit Nenana, and was credited with saving many people. In her later years, she moved to a retirement home in Seattle. Les and his mother went to visit her there and cheer her up.

They built a new store on 4th Ave., east of Cushman in 1954, and added to it in 1960, because they didn't have enough room to display their furniture.

Andrew Nerland was very interested in AK statehood. He'd spent many years in the legislature, in the House and the Senate. When he was too old to be actively involved in politics, it fell on Les's shoulders to be a delegate for the constitutional convention, held on the UAF campus. The convention met for 60-70 days, recessed, then took up again the next year. (There was an anniversary celebration a few months ago. E. B. Collins was in the constitutional convention as well, but he has been dead for some time.)

When the constitution was finalized, all the delegates had to sign it. Each got a signed copy of it. Les came back to the store and showed this to his father. He said, "We've got the constitution; now we just need statehood." His dad said he was very happy about it. Fifteen minutes later he was dead.

Mildred talks: Life in Fairbanks with Les has been wonderful. She says they've had excellent neighbors: the two Loftus families, the Bill Green family, the Lindeys, the Hughes, the Fravels, and others.

When they moved into their home, she'd do daily washing and hang clothes on the line outside. Across the street, a woman would wave at her and she'd wave back, but she never got around to figuring out whom this person was. One day, two women came to visit. One was Dorothy Loftus, who told her, "I'm the one who's been waving at you every morning."

Maloy mentions that Les has been chosen as this year's Distinguished Citizen.