

Summary for H87-82-08

James T. "Hutch" Hutchison, Sr. is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 12/14/84

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Gayle Maloy interviews James (Jim) T. "Hutch" Hutchison in Fairbanks, AK on 12/14/84. He is known as a pioneer in mechanics of the AK aviation industry. He was born February 14, 1900 (February 14 is also Maloy's birthday).

Maloy reads Ted Stevens's letter to Hutch of February 28, 1973, congratulating him as the AK Air Carrier Mechanic of the Year. He says he's written to the FAA Administrator John Schaffer, recommending Hutch for the National Award.

Hutch was born in Williamsburg, PA. He came to AK in the Army in 1919, stationed in Haines and Valdez. He enlisted in March of 1919, arriving in AK in May. There was a post at "William H. Seward" in Haines. He came upon the City of Seattle and arrived May 30, Decoration Day (flags were flying and a band was playing).

They talk about a picture from Valdez in the winter of 1919, of the ice-free bay. The men were on an icebreaker called the Algonquin, going over to Valdez to put on a show. They only got a third of the way when they had to turn around. The next day they cleaned out the ice in 4 ½ hours. It had been down to Dickson Straits.

Hutch met his wife at this time. She was a telephone operator at Valdez and he was a telephone operator at the post. She (Helen) was born at Ninilchik, and has never lived outside Alaska.

Hutch came to Fairbanks in May 1922. He got a hold of Charlie Fowler, the manager of the ball club, and Fowler said he'd give Hutch some money to come up and get him a job if he came up and played baseball there. He played ball until about 1928. He was the short stop for the Fairbanks team.

He worked first at the Independent Mill, then at Sampson's Hardware for Jim Varick. He started as a delivery boy, unloading freight, and stocking. In 1925 he started to work for the F. E. Co. He was there until 1929, when he started working for AK Airways.

He's lived in a house on 1st Ave. since 1925. He talks about how the surroundings have changed. There used to be a flood every spring, until they built a dike at Moose Creek, cutting out Badger Slough, so only the Chena was running through Fairbanks. The only flood since then has been the big one.

In 1924, Hutch met Ralph and Noel Wien. Ralph had made a trip to Wiseman and came down on the Toklat. He ran out of gas in a snowstorm, landed on a sandbar, tied the plane down, and walked 3 days to get to perhaps Dunbar (on the railroad) or Nenana. Ed Young, Dick Wood, and another man took a boat up the Kantishna to the Toklat, to where the airplane was. Young flew it back, though the lower wings were full of sand. Ralph asked Hutch to help him change the wings. Then Noel took Hutch for a ride, at 20 minutes to 12, Hutch recalls. They flew for 10-15 minutes. This was in 1924.

This was the start of Hutch's aviation career. Ralph started teaching him how to fly then. Ralph was later killed in Kotzebue. Hutch took this opportunity to think about the 5 kids he had, and decided he better get down from the air, and just work on planes on the ground. Ralph and 2 others died in that crash.

Hutch never went to school, he just picked mechanics up, welding and watching other guys. He talks about what planes were built out of, the metals and flammability of the materials. His learning evolved with the industry as it quickly advanced. He says the CAA was present before the FAA.

AK Airways was Wien's hangar. Ben Eielson later bought it out, along with Bennett-Rodebaugh, and others down in Anchorage. It was on Weeks Field, off Cowles St. This field cannot be built on because it was originally designated as a recreational area, says Hutch. It used to be a racetrack. The Arctic Bowl building used to be a hangar, put up by Pan-American.

Hutch tells about the Nanuk. It was a wooden trading schooner, owned by Swenson (the main office was in New York). It had a load of freight to trade with Russians in Siberia, and it went up into the Arctic, up a river as far as it could go. They unloaded their freight and took on \$1 million of furs. They were frozen in at North Cape, Siberia. Another, Russian, boat was frozen in about 5 miles away, the Stavropol.

Noel Wien, with his mechanic Doc Kreit, made the first flight to the Nanuk and brought out a load of fur. Then Wien sold his show to Eielson, who took on the job of hauling the fur out. He flew a big Hamilton plane that nobody else wanted to fly. "Earl" was with him. They carried their skis on the plane. Frank Dorvandt was already in Teller with a Stinson and they stopped there, put the skis on the planes, and flew over to the Nanuk and returned successfully.

Since it was all ice over in Russia, with very little snow, they decided to do the next trip using wheels, not skis. The weather got bad and they were waiting in Teller for 3 or 4 days. Finally, his frustration building, Dorvandt said he was going to go. Eielson followed him. An hour and a half later Dorvandt was back. Eielson never made it back (he was killed).

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On the Nanuk there was a radio operator, Bob Gleason, who sent in regular weather reports. Dorvandt was called back to Fairbanks. In the meantime, Joe Crosson went to look for Eielson. Harold Gillam, who only had about 50 hours of solo time, joined him. They flew to Teller (north of Nome). When they arrived, the weather got very bad. It was a whole month before they got over to Siberia. They searched all through December of 1929.

They found Eielson's airplane in January. Crosson spotted a shadow on the snow. The plane was covered with snow, and only the wing stuck up, casting a shadow. In the meantime, American Airlines had hired several Canadian pilots to help. It was very cold in Fairbanks. Swartman took off first. His engine quit and he busted the brand new airplane all to pieces. Pat Reed flew next, and Matt Nieman was third.

Gillam had broken something on his plane back at the Nanuk. Hutch flew with Pat Reed to fix it for him. They got lost in the mountains near Unalakleet. They broke off 5 ft. of the wing. Bill Hughes (another mechanic) was also with them. Nieman had flown back to Nulato. Hughes and Hutch ran out and picked up all the pieces before the snow covered them.

They covered the plane and made ready for the evening. They got out a bottle of rum and a delicious sandwich made by Mrs. Weiner (Earl Boilin's mother-in-law). She'd made them a big box of food, and they couldn't eat it all in a week.

There were no radios in planes then. Hutch heard dogs one day; there were 2 dog teams coming, native trappers from Unalakleet trapping on the Ungalik River. Hutch wanted to send a message with them, but Reed didn't want to. So they continued fixing the plane, and flew it out one week later. Sam McCauley was Nieman's mechanic, and they had had the engine repair parts with them. Hutch had the airplane repair parts, minus nails. They carefully saved the nails from cases of gas they'd brought along, though, and used these in fixing the wing.

Because Hutch arrived at the radio station late today, the interview was cut short, says Maloy. She asks him to come back next week and continue his story. The Huchison Career Center is named for him, she mentions.

Hutch used to sing with Don Adler at the Empress Theater and at weddings and other events. He also sang on KFAR for the first day of broadcast in 1939. Maloy shows him the article about this.