

Summary for H87-82-09

James T. "Hutch" Hutchison, Sr. is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 12/21/84

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Gayle Maloy interviews James (Jim) T. "Hutch" Hutchison in Fairbanks, AK on 12/21/84. Hutch is back again (he was on the show last week). Maloy does a short synopsis of the previous interview: Hutch's birth, coming to AK in the Army, meeting his wife, moving to Fairbanks (to play baseball, though he didn't get paid to do so).

Hutch bought his house in 1923 (he incorrectly said 1925 last week). His daughter Marion was born there in 1924. Hutch has 8 children. The first-born was Jim, then Ruth, and then Marion. He still lives in that house. It cost him \$75 dollars (?). The lot was 60' x 90' and he bought the lot behind it and half the lot on the east side, too. He added on to the house as the children were born. He thinks it was originally built for the manager of the AK Steamship Co. (where the power plant is now used to be the shipyard).

Here Hutch picks up the story of the search for Ben Eielson and Earl Borland. Eielson was a schoolteacher in Fairbanks. Hutch played basketball with him. The court was on 4th St., across from where the Northward Building is now. Hutch says he heard they used to flood it sometimes in the winter to use as a skating rink.

The high school didn't have quite enough players to make a team. The Moose Team (which Hutch played for) and the Signal Corps's team said Eielson could play for the high schoolers. After he started playing, the other two teams never won a game. Once Hutch picked a ball up and hit Eielson in the head and broke his nose (Hutch's).

Hutch is possibly the oldest licensed A & E mechanic in AK. 9381 is the number on his license.

Hutch tells how Borland and Eielson were parked at Teller, along with Dorvand, after their first successful round trip. They took their planes' skis off and put wheels on. They sat around for a couple days, then Dorvand got edgy and took off. Eielson took off 30-40 minutes behind him. In an hour and a half, Dorvand was back, but Eielson didn't show. They heard nothing from the Nanuk radio operator, either. By night they knew something was wrong. They waited through the next day and the next, and finally decided to go look for him.

Crosson, in a Waco, and Gillam in a Steerman flew to Teller. They didn't make the Nanuk on the first day. They had to overnight with some Chukchi natives. The next day they were separated in the clouds, and Gillam kept going to the Nanuk, but Crosson got worried and came back to their camp. The next day Crosson made it to the boat and was happy to see Gillam. For 3 weeks or so, the weather was too bad for them to search. The crash site, too, was being buried with snow (Nov.-Dec. 1929). They got about an hour of search in per day.

In January, the sun came out a bit, and Crosson saw a shadow cast by the wing of the crashed plane. He and Gillam were about 5 miles apart. Gillam came over and they both landed and confirmed the crash. They went back to the Nanuk and the news got out that they'd found the plane.

Then followed a difficult search for Eielson and Borland's bodies, because they'd been thrown out of the wreck. It took days to dig through the 4-5 feet of hard packed snow. Russians had a boat frozen in the ice 5 miles from the Nanuk and they recruited all available men from it to help. The Russians came in flying a couple Junker airplanes. Finally the bodies were found and flown to Fairbanks.

Eielson and Borland had bacon and a case of eggs they were delivering to the Nanuk. The eggs were dug out and not one of them was broken. The company that built the case wanted it back, so it was shipped back to them.

American Airlines had organized a big search; they had three Fairchilds shipped up, and hired Canadian pilots who were supposed to be well versed in Arctic flying. Major Deckard was in charge of them; second in command was Captain Oaks. A couple of the pilots were Swartman and Pat Reed. Bill Hughes was one mechanic and there was another from Nova Scotia.

The planes were shipped in cases and put together in the hangar. Swartman broke up the first plane on takeoff. Pat Reed and Matt Nieman (from Anchorage) flew the other two. Gillam had busted up his plane a bit at the Nanuk and needed someone to come over and do a little welding on it. So Hutch, Pat Reed, and Bill Hughes were in one plane. Matt Nieman, McCauley, and Major Deckard were in the other. After Nulato, they ran into a snowstorm in a pass in Kaltag, on the way to Unalakleet.

Pat Reed landed on the Ungalik River. He busted 5 feet of the wing off, they went through overflow and snow but were able to taxi onto the bar. Hughes and Hutch picked up the pieces. The Fairchild had folding wings, so they folding the wings; drained the oil; put the engine cover on; and took everything out of the fuselage. Mrs. Weiner, Borland's mother-in-law, had made them a huge box of food, with sandwiches and cake. They had 3 bottles of rum, too (strictly for medicinal purposes). They had a meal and crawled into the airplane to go to sleep. When they woke up, there were 6-8 inch icicles in the plane (from their breath). They had to break these out, and hang their sleeping bags under the wing to dry them.

They had three gas cases with them full of supplies. They used the nails from these to repair the wing. They also used pieces of the boxes; and made ribs out of some willows. A couple natives came by with dog teams. Hutch tried to send a message with one of them but Reed said there was no reason for it.

They taxied the plane far back up the river. They camped there another night. A week later, the weather very clear, they started the plane and flew out. They were gone 1 week in total. While they were missing, Hutch's mother, back east, got a hold of Pennsylvania's Congressman, who got a hold of Alaska's Congressman. They were going to get the military to search for them. Hutch had 5 children at that time.

They went to Unalakleet, where they stayed 4 days; then went on to Nome, and fixed the wing in a big barn there. Reed flew over to Siberia, ferrying passengers. On his last trip, people were celebrating something and had a big fire. Reed thought it was a signal to land. It turned out he landed in the roughest spot around, and busted up the airplane badly. He came close to hurting himself, too.

Crosson flew Larson, a mechanic, over to fix that. All the new parts had to be taken in by dog team, 90 miles. When he was done, he said they needed a welder to fix the landing gear. So Hutch went over; they landed at the site about 11 am. At 11 that night they taxied the plane out of the hole. At noon the next day they flew it to the

Nanuk. Hutch had only been home a week (Swartman took him) when they called for him to go back to the site and fix Reed's plane. He'd loaned all his cold weather gear to Larson, who didn't have any (sealskin pants and parka, mukluks, gloves, cap). He had to go over with his regular clothes. He never did get his gear back.

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Weeks Field: Hutch worked for AK Airways, which worked out of the Wien hangar. He started there in 1929. Hutch made \$225/month working for AK Airways. He worked 6 days a week, with no regular hours but an average of 8 hrs./day. Working at Samson Hardware 10 hrs./day, 6 days/wk he made \$120/month. He went over on Sundays and cleaned out the shop for free, in addition. He was just happy to have a job, though, he says.

The Wien hangar was at 10 St. Weeks Field went from Cowles to Barnette. The N. C. Co. had a railroad track along Barnette St. They had cords of wood stacked at the end of the field. Planes had to take off over these. The field was originally a racetrack/ball field. The owners rented it to the city for \$1/year. If it's not used to entertainment sorts of activity for the city; it reverts to the original owners. The Noel Wien Library is on one edge of it.

In 1934, Hutch rebuilt a plane for Bill Lavery. He built it over at the old Fairbanks Aircraft Hangar on Cushman St. There was a field southeast of Gaffney and Cushman. Wilkins flew off of that. Another field was located near the Bearmark subdivision, too, which was only used in the winter.

When Bill Hughes made his round-the-world trip, the Cushman field was extended to Growden Park. Afterward, everyone used that field. It was later used by Wiley Post (?).

WWII years: 5,000 planes went through Ladd Field. Ladd Field was built as a cold weather testing station, right before the war. Pearl Harbor was bombed 12-7-41; the Japanese invaded the Aleutians soon after. In Fairbanks, Hutch was working for Frank Pollock then. A few of Pollock's mechanics quit and went to work for Ladd Field.

General Gaffney was perturbed at this because he said civil aviation was just as important as building that field. He told men to stay where they were. The military supplied them with ammunition for their personal weapons and everyone on the field had a job to do if the Japanese invaded, for instance driving their cars onto the field to block it. The guns were for shooting paratroopers, etc.

Hutch never worried much about this. But some people sold out and left the territory. Fairbanks was around 1,200 in 1922. After the F. E. Co. came the town grew. Hutch was also asked to be a warden during the war. He had to check whether people were covering their windows, for one thing, in case of a nighttime air raid. They used to have blackouts. Hutch just checked out his own neighborhood.

Russia was a U. S. ally at that time. Fairbanks was a stop-off point for planes being shipped to Russia (that's where the figure 5,000 comes from). Russians would come to town occasionally to buy things. There wasn't much fraternizing between the two, though.

Hutch had a whisky-tenor voice. He used to be in a "barbershop" quartet. Cully Wittner and his brother Paul had a barbershop by the Model Café. They used to go there,

pull the blinds, and sing. Cully was the baritone, Bryce Howard had the lead (he was the AK Steamship Co.'s Fairbanks agent), Hutch sang tenor, and Mr. Ross provided the bass.

Hutch also used to sing with Don Adler at the Empress on Wednesdays. It was mainly to try to get the audience to sing. There was no bouncing ball, but they did put the lyrics on the screen.

He also sang live on KFAR when they went on the air. He was working at the N.C. machine shop at the time. He changed his clothes there and came up to sing with a pair of "shoe-packs" on (it was winter). He was pretty embarrassed about this. That was in the Lathrop Building. Hutch doesn't remember what they sang.

One time, Hutch was supposed to sing for an Easter service at the Presbyterian Church. Bill Lavery had a pilot bust up his plane over at Deadwood. Hutch said he needed to sing at the Easter program. Lavery said it'd be OK; he'd take him over early to fix the plane and get him back in time for the service. They left at 4 am. Hutch fixed the plane. Albert Peterson was going to fly it back. They let him go first, then they took off.

When they got back, Hutch ran home to change his clothes and take a bath, then he had to walk from his house to the church. He got there just as the choir was entering the church. Anna Beth Renny was the leader, and she had a fit, because he had a lot of solos to sing, and they had to get a choir robe on him and so forth.

Maloy asks Hutch to sing the winter carnival song; Hutch says it's pretty early to sing. He sings the song anyway. The words were written by Mrs. Huffman, Doc Huffman's wife, and Mrs. Murray. Don Adler put the music to it. Hutch used to sing it at the Empress Theater.

Hutch says he knew a lot of the old pioneers and says he feels funny about being called one himself. He was in on pioneer aviation, though, he admits. He just didn't come over the Chilkoot Pass, or at the turn of the century, and had a wage-paying job.