

Summary for H87-82-11

Earl Cook is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 1/11/85

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Gayle Maloy interviews Earl Cook in Fairbanks, AK on 1/11/85. Cook is best known for his work in real estate in Fairbanks. He's been here since March of 1938.

He was born February 23, 1913; he's almost 72. He was born in northern MN, and lived there until his second year of high school. He had an older brother and a younger sister. The family disintegrated and he could no longer stand northern MN, so he went to stay with relations in another MN town.

He graduated high school in 1930, during the Great Depression. There was no work, but he'd saved enough money to go a year and a quarter to the U of MN. Then he ran out of money and took to the road with a high school friend. They rode the rails west and he'll never forget the first time they tried to hop off a moving train. They wanted to visit a brother of his friend's in MT, who was training as a pilot for Northwest Airlines. They jumped off the train and went along with it, instead of turning to the opposite direction, and he says they both almost went under.

They picked fruit and shocked grain, and sent their money home, hoping to save enough to go back to school. When he got home, Cook found that his siblings had needed the money more than he and had spent it. Cook went to ID and stayed with his aunt and uncle, milking cows; eventually he wound up in Boise, enrolled in business school and cooked in a little café. He met his wife in Boise, and got married in 1936.

He was then working for the Union Pacific Railroad, but was bumped to a lesser position, and was then laid off. They spent the winter of 1938 in L. A. By that time, his sister and brother had moved to AK. They arranged for Cook and his wife to come up to Fairbanks. They came up on an AK Steamship. The menus were illustrated pictures of dogs done by Josephine Crumrine. This fall he met the artist and asked her if she had a set of those menus. She did, and gave them to Cook.

On the train from Seward coming up, there was a very ill woman, who was quite obnoxious, says Cook. His brother and sister had arranged to rent them a house on 3rd Ave. When they got to Fairbanks, the ill woman went straight to St. Joseph's Hospital. It seems the man renting the Cooks the house was her husband (or pimp—they discovered later the woman was part of The Line), and when the sick woman got home they had to move out. They found a little log cabin nearby. Cook's brother went to get the rent money back from the man, who said he didn't have it. The man and his wife got in a fight, and he took a shot at her and grazed her. That was the Cooks' introduction to Fairbanks.

About 2 weeks later Cook went to work in the office of the F. E. Co., where he worked for 5 years, until 1943. He did some office work and some driving work. They were expecting their first baby in 1939, and negotiated for a loan to build a house. In the meantime they moved out of the cabin to an apartment on 2nd Ave. (in Burns Apts.) right by the Co-op. In the spring of 1940 they moved into their current house.

On the boat up they met Jack and Elsie Grebes (seasonal workers for the F. E. Co.), Ann Strand (whose husband was a miner), and Jack Bullock (who got off at Cordova and flew to his destination). Later, Bullock was in Nome and married Edith

Bullock, and they had the Barge Line. Jane Gordon, whose parents owned Gordons' Store, was also on the boat. When they landed in Seward they were all broke. Cook's brother was supposed to send some money to the Mt. McKinley Hotel, but it had not arrived yet. So they all went to bed.

Around 10 pm, the clerk came up and said the money had come. The Cooks invited the people they were with to go to dinner with them. When they got to the dining room, however, it was closed, so they couldn't eat anyway.

When they landed in Fairbanks, Cy Thynan gave Cook his last penny, so he could literally be completely broke upon arrival. They met a lot of young people that night, such as Emma Miller (Emma Vasquez) and the Miller family, through Cook's sister.

At the F. E. Co., Cook made \$150/month. His wife, Pat, went to work also, for Fairbanks Insurance Agency; she worked until 1947. They had live-in babysitters for part of the time.

They got started building their house in 1939. The only bank at that time was First National Bank, which didn't handle FHA loans. Nick Nussbaumer from Fairbanks Lumber helped them get a loan through the Bank of Ketchikan.

They built in Slaterville, where Minnie St. is the main street. Their house was the third to go up there. It was a field, the old Charlie Slater homestead. Cook bought 2 lots from Slater. It was not considered "in town" then. It's the area now between Fairbanks Lumber and the Gavora Mall. The streets are named after Slater's family: Minnie, his first wife, Clara, his second wife, Betty, his daughter, and so on. Well St. was named after the only well at that time that Mike Ursing had at the end of the road the Cooks built on.

The contractor on the Cooks' house was Henry Dale. The interior finishing work was done by Andrew Nerland and either his brother or cousin, Tom. They moved in in June 1940. They had 6 children, expanding the house as the family grew.

Fairbanks during the war years: There were many military personnel coming in, when Ladd Field was built. General Gaffney sent to Washington, DC for secretarial help. Six girls came up, one of who had gone to business school with Pat Cook. She and a girlfriend moved in with the Cooks. On the day of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a car shoed up very early at the Cooks to pick up the girls. Ilner and the other girl didn't know why they were there so early. The girls moved out to the base after that. The Cooks then took in others, an engineer, 2 young engineers, and older fellow. It was a little cramped, but everyone felt they should do all they could to help.

Cook was one of the patrollers during the blackouts. His wife once went into a bar instead of the butcher shop during one of these.

After the war started, the F. E. Co. only lasted 2 more years, since they could not compete with military wages. They asked Cook to stay on and watch the building, but Cook decided to go work for Pollock Airlines, which was later sold to AK Airlines. Hutch was working there at that time, too. Cook went from that job to the drugstore. In 1946 he went into real estate with Ken Murray.

Russians moved into building the F. E. Co. rented to the military, near the Cooks, during the war. Cook said they were nice enough, and very fond of the neighborhood pets. Wilbur and Thelma Walker and Eddie and Myrtle Boggin were their neighbors. The Cooks had a dog and chickens, the Walkers had a dog, and the Boggins had rabbits. One morning, when some of the Russians were leaving, they discovered all the pets were

missing. Pat Cook told the D. A. what she suspected. They said they'd try to get them off the plane, but once the planes were turned over to the Russians, nobody got on (except Russians). So the Marshal said, "It's alright, we'll search them at Nome." But the same thing happened at Nome. "Major Jordan's Diary" tells Russians how to get 4-legged animals out of the U. S., but Cook isn't sure why they took the animals.

There were Russians in Fairbanks for at least 4 years. Some were flyers; some were mechanics. Cook says Randy Accord can tell Maloy some stories about tools disappearing on the base. The Russians were ordered not to have much social interaction with the Alaskans, and men weren't supposed to date AK women.

Cook was out with a group of friends one night at the International Hotel. A group of 4 Russians and 1 American pilot came in. The American was their driver. They ordered vodka. The driver, Johnny White, talked to Cook's group a bit. He said the Russians weren't supposed to see any U.S. women. When they left, White was so drunk the Russians had to lead him out.

The next day, White disappeared. They finally found his body out near Ballaine Lake. The Russians claimed that they wanted to pick wildflowers and while they were doing this, White had gone swimming. White's mother said that he was afraid of water, and didn't know how to swim. The lake was drained and his body found. Many people thought he didn't drown but was killed, perhaps because he knew something he shouldn't have. Ed Forkteer, an intelligence agent at that time, now in Anchorage, has followed the story ever since, and wants to publish it. White's brother doesn't want it published because somewhere in the investigation it says that White's mother was an alcoholic, and the brother doesn't really want that to come out.

One day in 1946 Ken Murray, who worked above the drugstore where Cook was working, asked Cook if he'd like to come work for him. Mary Foran, his employee, was leaving, so there was an opening. The business was real estate/insurance. In 1949, Murray decide he didn't want both businesses, and asked Cook if he wanted the real estate side of it, while he kept the insurance side. So Cook opened his own office in the Lacey St. Hotel. So they became Earl Cook Realty and Ken Murray Insurance.

Cook enjoyed real estate—there were so many interesting places in Fairbanks, and it brought him security. His was really the only real estate business at that time. The next to open was Meyer's Real Estate. Murray had originally gone into business with Hosea Ross, who was in real estate and undertaking, and then branched off into real estate and insurance.

There was a housing crunch when the war broke out, and also in 1946-1948. You could sell anything, because workers on Ladd Field and Eielson, military people, and highway workers as well, weeded housing.

Once he'd shown a house in the old derby track area to two colonels. Both came to his office at the same time and said they wanted the house. They flipped for it.

In those days, there were no mortgages or deeds of trust. Everything was a "contractive" sale (?). It was all much more personal then. Hattie and Jack McFeen wanted to buy a house in the 1950s. Hattie, misunderstanding, brought in the money for the house in cash.

There were a lot of rentals back then, too. Cook felt obligated to take care of houses between tenants. There was only either wood or coal heat so he had to go stoke

furnaces and keep places from freezing, etc. When oil heat came, he didn't have to worry about this as much.

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In more recent years, after the deed of trust came into being, some people from Anchorage called Cook and said they wanted to buy a piece of property either on Airport Rd. or College Rd., to open an electronics shop. The man decided on a piece on College Rd., and said he wife would be up to pay for the property.

She arrived at Cook's office on 3rd Ave.; her name was Steinhilpert. She went out to her car and came back in with a beer case full of \$85,000 in bills. Cook called AK National Bank and asked Bill Cartwright if he had a couple extra tellers, because he wanted to make a deposit before the bank closed at 3. They ran a bit after 3, of course, counting the money.

Lena Ferguson had been a gal on The Line, and was a patient of Dr. Haggland. She lived in a little cabin with a hand pump for water. She was quite elderly and quite ill. She'd had an accident and a hot plate had fallen across her breast, and she'd been in the hospital. Haggland asked her to get a hold of Cook to help her sell some of her property to pay her bills.

They sold a piece of her property, and Cook asked Ferguson what she wanted him to do with the money left after paying her bills. She said, "Earl, you just bring it to me; I love to feel it running through my fingers." Cook said he thought it was a bad idea for her to keep it in her house, but he brought it to her. He went to see her every day after that. This was around the time urban renewal started in Fairbanks, and they wanted to buy Ferguson's 4th Ave. property. Cook was trying to get them to pay her more than they offered her for it.

One day, he went to the cabin and found her laying there. He called Haggland and the ambulance. Haggland said, "She's gone, Earl...let me show you what a job I did patching her up" (from the burn), and flipped her over and showed him.

Cook didn't want to go through her things, since he knew she had that money stashed in her cabin. He called the U. S. Marshal, LaDessa Nordale. They found the money hidden all over the cabin.

Ferguson had died of natural causes. She'd known she was ill and had told Cook she wanted to go home to die. They wrote to her two brothers in New York, but got no response. Cook also sent a telegram, and there was no response. When she died, Cook decided he'd let the brothers know. He called one of them and said she had died. The first thing the brother said was, "Did she leave any money?" Cook said, "You S.O.B.," and hung up. The brother called him back and during their conversation asked if Ferguson could have a Jewish funeral. Cook said he'd try.

Cook knew the head of the USO in Fairbanks, Frank Hill, was Jewish, as well as Bob Bloom, an old-timer. Those two arranged the funeral. They had it in the chapel on 1st Ave. The gals from The Line were all there and "put on a good show." When they went to the cemetery, Cook was asked to be a pallbearer, even though he didn't have white gloves or a skullcap to wear.

Cook was the executor of Ferguson's will. He hated to send her money out to her brothers, but he had to. While she was living, she'd told Cook she was thinking of leaving her money to him. He'd said if she was going to change her will, he'd rather she left it to a local charity. Cook's charity (though it's not exactly a charity) of choice was the Boy Scouts.

Cook was involved with the Boy Scouts before his children were even old enough to be in it. He was also the first president of the PTA at Nordale School. He was Cubmaster of Pact 222, and his wife was Denmother, at one time. The Pacts had contests every year; decorating local business windows was one of their competitions. Pact 222 had the window of Nerland's, and won first place several years.

All of Cook's children were in either the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. All his sons and grandsons were Eagle Scouts. Last year, the Midnight Sun Boy Scout Council named him as the first Distinguished Citizen.