

Summary for H87-82-13

Henry Brockman is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 1/25/85

SIDE 1

Gayle Maloy interviews Henry Brockman in Fairbanks, AK on 1/25/85. Born April 2, 1896, Brockman has been in the Fairbanks area for nearly 60 years.

One of Henry's secrets to health is bike riding, though only indoors now. He used to ride up and down Chena Hotsprings Road. He started biking when he was about 12 years old. He used to ride about 7 miles along Chena Hotsprings Rd., for exercise. He stopped doing that about 3 years ago (when he was 85). He got nicked by a fast little car and decided after that to stay off the road. A younger woman used to ride with him and couldn't keep up. He thinks that was Mrs. McGee.

An old fellow told him he could get rich digging razorback clams at Cordova, while he was working for the highway department in Washington State. That gave him the idea to come north. He was born in Texas, but he left during WWI, and then worked in the copper mines of Arizona. Miners got \$5.50/day and mockers got \$5/day, around 1919 or 1920.

Brockman wanted to get rich like everyone else, so he went up to AK. He bought his ticket to Ketchikan in 1926. There was lots of work in Ketchikan; lots of fishing going on. It took him 4 years to get to Cordova, where he didn't dig clams, but worked for Copper River Northwestern Railroad.

He was mostly in Juneau during the prior 4 year, helping repair city docks. He also decided he wanted to be a forester, and went to the forest service office. There he met a representative of Zellerbach Pulp and Paper. He wound up working for them for 2 summers, and this was the best job he ever had in AK. They lived on a scow, ran line through the woods for 2 weeks at a time, looking at timber, then they'd go on to the next anchorage.

They went all the way around Prince of Wales Island, which is over 300 miles long. And they went around part of Chichagof and Baranof, in the Glacier Bay district, and anchored in Bartlett Cove. They explored quite a bit around there. Wild strawberries grew at Strawberry Point. Sand dunes were all around that the glacier had shoved out. Fox and owl dens covered the dunes. Brockman saw the ice of the glacier from the top of the dunes; he'd like to know if the ice is still in sight from there.

They lived on a 50-foot barge; a 64-foot boat towed it. This lasted until 1929, when the Depression started and the company almost went broke. After a summer in Washington, Henry was back in Juneau and ran into someone he once worked with, who got him a job with the Copper River Railroad.

When he was in Cordova, Brockman knew Woody Johansen, who worked for the phone company as a young man. Henry worked on the wooden railroad bridges doing pile driver work. The wooden bridges are almost all gone now.

About 30 miles outside Cordova, he helped jack up the bridge across the Copper River. He talks about lifting one end of it, which weighed 285 tons. Rollers allowed the bridge to expand and contract, but there was so much sand in the rollers, the bridge was lower on one end, which is why they had to jack it up. This bridge was there to get to the

Kennicott Copper Mine. The bridge was built when the ice was thick enough to work through. In 1911 they called this the Million Dollar Bridge.

Brockman worked on the railroad for three seasons, a season being about 7 months, from spring until September. They lived in railroad cars and bunk cars. An engineer pulled the workers around. The pile driver had its own car. When the Copper River Railroad closed down, the Alaska Railroad bought the pile driver and Brockman saw it working out at Ladd Field.

Brockman talks about how a bridge over the Copper River was destroyed. Another bridge over the Chitna River was out, too. There was lots of movement and attempts to get a line across the river, and a boat overturned with 5 men in it. They all drowned. One, Jim Swalley, a strong swimmer, swam to a bar in the river where he was only waist deep in the water, but he didn't make it from there to the shore. Big Eric Nelson men saw swimming down by the bluffs of the Chitna River, but they never saw him after that. The other 3 men never came to the surface. This crew was doing Brockman's crew's job.

Fred "Shorty" McMichael said that made 26 men since the beginning of construction on the bridge. These 5 drowned in 1932. Most of the others fell off the bridge and drowned. Brockman says they've never picked a body out of the river yet. It's a wild river.

Brockman decided after this to take the short course in mining at UAF. He told the railroad he'd be back, but it took him 31 years to get back to Cordova. He met a couple in Cordova. The man was a crab fisherman. They dug clams when they wanted them, though they didn't have a good boat for it. Brockman attempted digging clams but didn't find any.

Brockman tells about a waiter he knew in Ketchikan, during his first job in Ketchikan. Brockman had applied with a mining company, but they didn't have anything available just yet, so he went to work slinging hash. A little Swede worked there, and he couldn't speak any English. Brockman tried to teach him English using the funny papers. After 3 days, the mining co. said a position was open. The Swede, Thule Yanssen, cried when Brockman left. The timekeeper and his wife ate with the kitchen crew; she used to call him Johnson and he'd say, "No, no Yanssen" (as there's no J in Swedish).

During WWII, Yanssen got a contract building housing for the government. Brockman inquired about him years later. He was told, "He got rich and moved out to the States."

In Cordova Brockman knew Mr. Warren Taylor, Sr., a railroad engineer who took a correspondence course in law. The old-timers laughed at this. But obviously Taylor became quite a success, since Brockman says its history.

In 1931 or 1932, Brockman put his cabin in Juneau up for sale. A Swede, David Simonson, wrote him about it, and his return address was Yuneau, Alaska. He sold the cabin to Simonson and Taylor made out the papers. While at Taylor's office, Brockman looked through some old WWI papers, and read about Sgt. York, who captured a lot of Germans in France. He would shout in German that the war was over, and the Germans would come to him like sheep.

Brockman came to Fairbanks in 1932 to take the short course in mining. He knew there'd been a lot of mining around here. He'd had 5 months working in the Juneau mine as a timber man. He talks about blasting and mining, and people falling in chutes

300 ft. deep. One time a man was missing. Someone noticed steam rising from one of the cars. The man had been drawn out of the chute and loaded on top of a car headed toward the crushers, without anyone noticing.

Treadwell was closed down at some point, says Brockman. Frank Kelb (who lives now at an apartment near Samson's Hardware) and Brockman were baching together in Juneau once, and were out taking a walk. There was a Southeaster blowing. Treadwell caught on fire and Kelb and Brockman watched it burn up in about an hour. The Alaska-Juneau Mine bought it and set up their own foundry, and cast everything they needed right there.

Treadwell Mine was on Douglas Island, just across from Juneau. It was a hard rock mine. The gold was actually below sea level. The mine kept getting closer and closer to the ocean, and eventually it caved in on itself. The workers were changing shifts at the time, and supposedly no one was in the mine when it caved in. That's when the AK-Juneau Mine got going and they bought all the steel on Douglas Island and made all their equipment.

The course in mining in Fairbanks was a couple months long. Wilkerson and Hugh Hinton were some of the instructors. Ernest Patty was the president. Bunnell was also a headman. Brockman had a job cutting cordwood for the college. He cut 225 cords. They were burning coal and wood in those days.

Brockman worked 27 years for Fairbanks Lumber. He remembers the bitterly cold winter they used to have. (Maloy says they've been having mild winters lately.) He recalls when Ladd Field was being built. He was checking lumber at -50. He wore a big parka and mukluks, and stomped from one foot to the other to stay warm.

He tried mining after he got out of the short course and "that's when the Depression hit" he laughs. He started on Ester Dome, on Happy Creek. He says he damn near starved. If it hadn't been for choking rabbits and shooting moose out of season, they would have starved.

It was a placer mine, with dry ground, so water didn't have to be pumped out. But there was no gold in it, either. As one of the boys out there said, "It's got a beautiful name, but it doesn't make us happy." Brockman worked the mine for two winters. His first partner had enough of it after the first year. The next winter he got two guys from Ester to help him. They had a good time, but made no money.

An old fellow, Doc Berg, lived down at Happy Station, says Brockman. He went to visit him in the bright moonlight one night. On the way back he shot three rabbits. He'd watch them hop and shoot at the spot where they stopped. Hitting white rabbits on white snow, at night, was quite a feat.

The interview seems to cut off at the end of Side 1.