

Summary for H87-82-14

Celia Hunter is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 2/15/85

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Gayle Maloy interviews Celia Hunter in Fairbanks, AK on 2/15/85. She's best known for her work in conservation, and as a pioneer woman aviator. She was born January 13, 1919, making her 66 now.

The first time she flew in an airplane was in 1924, when she was 5 years old. She doesn't remember it very well. An ex-WWI pilot came to Arlington, WA with an old Jenny, and she and her mother went for a ride in it. Hunter's father wouldn't get in. Her mother loved it. It was an open cockpit plane.

In 1940 she was working at Weyerhaeuser Timber Company in Everett, WA. She used to drive by the airport and kept thinking about Amelia Earhart, her girlhood hero. Eventually she stopped in to see about learning to fly. She was making \$90/month as an invoice clerk. They fell on her, because private pilots were desperate for business.

The plane she learned to fly in was a Taylorcraft; it went 60 mph at top speed. It was January 20, 1940, the first time she went up and was able to take the controls, flying over western WA. For \$75 they would solo a person. It took her 4 months to get the \$75, and on April 1st she soloed.

Hunter was born in Arlington, WA in Snohomish County. She lived there until she was 13. Then her family lost the house during the Depression, and they moved to a little shack that her mother owned on 15 acres of land at Getchel Hill, near Whisky Ridge (named after moonshiners who used to make liquor there). She graduated from high school in Marysville, and went to business college in Everett. She graduated high school in 1936.

Most people she knew who lived through the Depression came out with one of two conclusions: "I'm never going to be poor again, and I'll never let my children be poor, so I'm going to make as much money as I can"; or (Hunter's opinion, as well as friend Ginny Wood's) "Hey, we can still survive—being broke isn't so bad; it's not the worst thing in the world—because we're free and whatever comes our way, if we're resourceful and determined, we can get along." This latter realization gives one a feeling of absolute freedom, says Hunter.

After WWII, Hunter went to the University of Stockholm and traveled through Europe, during which she sent back articles to her hometown newspaper, the Everett Daily Herald. She sent back 2 or 3 articles a week from all over Europe. There was a university in Stockholm that catered to GI students. Hunter and Wood didn't have GI privileges, since they weren't in the right branch of the service, but they went anyway, because they had enough money saved up.

They got bored with Scandinavian countries, and then went to Austria and skied for a month. Next they went to Italy and bought bicycles. They traveled for 10 months by bike, train, and ferry. They went all the way from Italy to Lapland. To get home they went to Norway and hitched a ride on an oil tanker. This took place in the late 1940s.

Post-war Europe was very nonviolent; Hunter thinks because all the countries were just so spent and devastated by the war. She says it was much safer then than now. There were no terrorists, but many displaced persons. They stayed in hostels, and

roomed with Estonians, Latvians, Czechs, and Lithuanians, for example, many of who could never return home. They also slept in haystacks, Swiss hayhuts, and on decks of boats. They felt perfectly free, with their packs on their backs and their bikes, they went where ever they wanted.

Hunter says the environmental movement, per se, didn't really start until the late 1950s, early 1960s. The Sierra Club started as an outdoor activity club, and the Wilderness Society (c 1935) began to protect the Blue Ridge Mountains from road construction. The idea of conservationism is rooted in frugality, Hunter thinks, and these early organizations grew into the modern definition of conservation.

Ginny Hill Wood learned to fly in 1940 in a course sponsored by the government before the war. They put people through groundschool, and had classes of 10 people each, comprised of 9 men and 1 woman. Both Wood and Hunter were in WA at that time, so they knew of each other. They both went to Sweetwater, in west TX, training as Air Force women pilots. Wood went to Long Beach afterwards, though, and Hunter went to Delaware.

After the war, they flew surplus airplanes from storage depots into Portland, OR. They flew with buddies (each in her own plane) because the planes were so unreliable. Hunter once had a forced landing in Nebraska. All the women flying behind them thought they had to land, too. Then the mechanic, Jack Mifflin, came along, and landed, too. Hunter took his plane and he stayed there to repair the broken plane.

They got paid about \$200/month by the Civil Service. The WASPs (Women Air Force Service Pilots) were never militarized. They were finally honorably discharged in about 1978. Hunter was in the Air Transport Command, the WASPs worked with the Ferrying Division of this. They ferried different planes, working up from small to large.

Later, Hunter and Wood came up the Inside Passage in a sailboat. It was so interesting, it took them 3 months to get to the end of Vancouver Island. Wood had saved money during the war and bought a little 26-foot Seabird yawl in 1945. She doesn't get along with engines, so she invited Hunter along to be the engineer; another ex-WASP from MO joined them. Boating males were confounded by this crew, because they could see there were no men aboard. It only slept 2, so one had to sleep on deck most of the time. They stopped in every little inlet and fjord along the way. They went aground the first time they tried to sail at night, so they only sailed during the day after that.

When they got mail at Victoria, "Pete" discovered her boyfriend had married someone else, Wood found out the man she was going to work for when she got back had been killed in a crash, and Hunter was offered a job with Weyerhaeuser Timber Company. They promised each other they would get to AK someday.

A friend of Wood's in Seattle said there was a plane going to AK. Gene Jack, a miner in Candle, AK with Mr. Robins, had learned to fly, and wanted to start a roadhouse in Kotzebue in competition with Archie Ferguson. He was in Seattle, picking up things to stock the roadhouse, and buying airplanes. He flew a Cessna, Hunter flew a Stinson for him, and Wood Flew an L-5 with no heat.

This was in September of 1946. They'd been temperate zone pilots so far, and hadn't flown in the cold. Jack had lots of ideas. Raleigh Livesley was his friend; he used to run Fairbanks Cold Storage. AK Steamship was on strike just then, and Livesley and Jack thought they'd buy a semi and bring good to AK to make money, so they sent the

girls to find a good truck. Jack also sent them to find darkroom equipment for his trading post in Kotzebue. They bought calico for making kuspuks, though they'd never seen a kuspuk in their lives. He asked if they were checked out on B-17s. Wood had been, but they said he shouldn't buy one. Finally on December 8, 1946, they took off for AK.

A firepot is a kind of stove used to warm up the airplane under a canvas. Jack threw one in Hunter's plane. Jack's mechanic, Les, flew with him. Hunter had the mechanic's wife as passenger. She was a real Rosie-the-Riveter type, and came to the airport wearing open-toed shoes and velveteen slacks to fly to AK. Wood and Hunter had sheepskin jackets and boots, of course. Jack said Les would operate the firepots, but they never saw those guys after Dawson. So they learned how to run the firepots and gas the planes themselves.

Hunter says pilots are an accepting lot. They learned a lot from other pilots during that trip. It took them 27 days to get there, because they stopped for 3-4 days at every landing. That was one of the coldest winters ever. So they had to wait out the weather, and there was only 3-4 hours of daylight per day to fly in. They got to Northway on New Year's Eve. They went to a party even though they were exhausted. (Here Maloy talks about a picture of Hunter from the 1940s.) It was a wild night; the girls begged off at 2 am.

Every night on Tundra Topics there'd be an update on where Gene Jack's two lady pilots were, so when they got to Fairbanks, they found they were very well known. They landed in a snowstorm, nearly landing at Kremer's Dairy because it looked like an airport. They landed at Weeks Field, at the edge of town (the old Pan-Am hanger is now Arctic Bowl). There were about 5,000 people in Fairbanks at that time. It was a very friendly place. They went to the USO, and went skiing at Birch Hill.

They were interviewed on KFAR by Chuck West, who had just quit Wien Airlines, and was starting Arctic AK Travel Service. He had a show called Wings Over the North. He found that they knew a lot about airline routes, so he hired them to work for him. The first office was behind the Lathrop Building, and it later moved to the Empress Theater building, where Co-op Drug is now. They just stayed for 8 months, and then took off on their trip to Europe.

In Fairbanks, UAF was full of ex-GIs. Some of their friends were going to climb Mt. McKinley that summer, including Gordon Harrod, who now runs the Pearl Creek Strawberry Farm. This crew made all their own food. They'd been living in a Quonset hut on Vulture Flats before moving onto campus.

During the war, the military said women pilots couldn't fly past Great Falls, on the ferry route. Men would take over from there and fly planes to Fairbanks, where they were picked up by Russian pilots (who were often women, says Hunter). That's why she and Wood were so eager to fly to AK, because they'd been forbidden to during the war.

SIDE 2

Hunter and Wood left for Europe in September of 1947, and came back to Seattle in December of 1948. They got in touch with Chuck West, and were soon back in Fairbanks working for him. His business had expanded, and Wien-Kotzebue Tours had started. Hunter talks about flying cargo from Fairbanks to Galena to Kotzebue in

January and February. She told friends about these places, and people wanted to do tours.

Hunter started a radio program called Village Sketches, because she was fascinated with the little villages and how they got there.

In 1950 they had to start a roadhouse because Archie Ferguson got mad at tourists at the end of 1949 and closed his roadhouse, as well as Beulah's Restaurant (Beulah Levy was the Eskimo gal that he was associated with). They set up a big old building as a hotel, with blankets for partitions between rooms. They started daily trips to Kotzebue, and stayed out there that whole summer. Wien Airways didn't like tourists; they'd rather have cargo or regular folks to transport. Hunter and Wood had also been doing charter flights for Bob Rice, at the same time they were flying for West in 1949.

Hunter recalls taking Walt Johnson up to Wiseman. He and Bill English owned a roadhouse at Wiseman.

West got a Desoto suburban to do sightseeing tours of Fairbanks. In 1949, he offered to give that part of the business to Wood and Hunter, but they didn't want it. Everett Patton took that part over; he could work on his own buses.

Camp Denali was Hunter and colleagues' answer to the McKinley Park dilemma of the hotel being so far from the mountain. Hunter wanted to build a place so that whenever the mountain was visible, people could see it. They located a ridge above Moose Creek and staked the land (north of the park boundary). They built it up from scratch between 1951 and 1975, when they sold it to Wally and Jerry Cole, who operate it now.