

Summary for H87-82-15

Roy Larson is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 2/22/85

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Gayle Maloy interviews Roy A. A. Larson in Fairbanks, AK on 2/22/85. Moe Samuelson called KFAR this morning to remind Maloy that it's Roy A. A. Larson. He was originally named Roy A. Larson (with no middle name). When he started at the University of Washington, he was mixed up with a Roy E. Larson who made his E like an A. So Larson just added another A initial to his name. The original A stood for his two grandfathers, Andrew and Albert.

He was born in Granite Falls, WA on June 21, 1914. He grew up in Everett, WA, and graduated high school in January 1932. In the winter of that year he cut pulpwood. This was at the bottom of the Depression, when supposedly there was no work, but anyone that wanted to could cut pulpwood, says Larson—falling fir and hemlock trees, limbing them, sawing them up into 4'6'' lengths, chipping bark, and splitting them into pieces no more than 7 ½'' across, and stacking them in piles no more than 4' high and 8' long (one cord).

Larson averaged one cord a day, he says, because he didn't smoke (and therefore didn't have to take breaks). A day was about 10 hours. Everybody wanted him as a partner, but he didn't want a partner. The pay was \$1.50/cord for fir, and \$1.75/cord for hemlock. Out of this wage, he bought a used truck for \$30. He had the best tools and clothes he could buy, and still had money in his pocket, says Larson.

In the spring he went to MT, where he had an aunt and uncle. He worked for them all summer, and was paid \$30/month with board and room. In the falls they didn't pay wages, you just worked for board and room. He didn't get paid, even though the price of wheat was going up. His uncle wouldn't sell the wheat to pay him, nor give him wheat either. This irritated Larson, so at Christmas he saw an ad that you could go anywhere on the railroad during the season for 1-way fare plus 25 cents. He went down to see his grandparents in NE. He didn't like NE; there was nothing to see but flatness.

When he got back to MT, his uncle had hired another man to take his place, so he found another job. His employer gave him a horse for his work during the winter, but he tied his saddle mare beside Larson's mare, and the saddle mare was wearing court shoes (horseshoes with ¾'' spikes) to help walk in frozen ground. The saddle mare kicked Larson's mare, and she got blood poisoning and died. Larson said the man ought to give him another horse, but the man didn't agree. So instead of working there that summer, Larson went back to his uncle's and worked for him again. In the middle of the summer, the other employer had changed his mind, and gave Larson another horse. In the fall he sold the horse to the neighbor kids for \$2.50 and a worn out .22. He says the horse was worth about \$5.

In the early 1960s, Larson was at Eielson working on a safe, and man came into his store looking for him. His wife said he was out on a call. He came back an hour later, and said he was the owner of the horses. His daughter, as it turned out, is Jack Bucher's wife (of Bucher Glass).

Work is good for you, says Larson. After MT, he picked apples in WA, and came back for the winter and ate apples. He worked in a lettuce warehouse in WA the next summer. Then he worked in the Pacific Produce warehouse for the next 2-3 years.

Larson talks about how kids worked pruning and picking apples during the spring summer and fall, and then went to college in the winter. So he decided, if they could do it, so could he. He decided to be a mining engineer, simply because some men who worked in Everett's stoveworks took the summer off to go up to Caribou country in Canada to mine.

To go to college, he had to go back and do postgraduate work. He went to University of Washington for 2 quarters each year for the next couple years, and got into working for the dean of the School of Mines. In the winter of 1937-1938, Larson looked for work in mines, and there wasn't anything going on in WA. So the dean guaranteed him a job at the Alaska Juneau Mine, but he didn't want to work underground in a massive operation.

His girlfriend, Eva, who worked for the Swedish hospital as a nurse and they would visit people on Sundays who had been to AK. These people said he should go to the Interior, and they could go to school in the winter and work in the summer.

They decided he was going to go to AK on a Tuesday. Eva said, "If you're going, either we get married now or it's over," since she wasn't going to wait all summer to see whether he'd send for her. They were married on Thursday; Larson left on Saturday. He sold his car for \$60-\$65, and had a few bucks beside this.

It cost him \$40 to come up on AK Steamship to Seward, and about \$10 to come from there to Fairbanks, as long as he didn't get a hotel room at Curry (since it took 2 days to get to Fairbanks). He arrived on April 21, 1939. He was 25 years old. (His bride, by the way, was named Eva Kaylie Larson.)

Larson knew several people from the boat, and no one else in Fairbanks. He had \$20 on him. Another guy from the boat who was in the same financial situation and he stayed in the basement of the Pioneer Hotel that night (where the Greyland Hotel is now). It was just a series of bunks, a flophouse, for \$1/night.

The next day they tried to find cheaper and cleaner accommodations. They went from house to house asking if there was any place they could stay. On 5th Ave., at Otto Bayliss's house (he was a Road Commission foreman and ran a ferry at Delta in the summer—his son, John Bayliss, is in Copper Center now). It cost them 50 cents a night to stay in the dining room.

To eat they went to Friss Bakery, in the Chena Building on First Ave. The bakery had a famous long counter that went up and down, a copper coffee pot always full of good coffee, and they made three kinds of sandwiches on thick homemade bread. A sandwich cost 50 cents. One sandwich and 2 or 3 cups of coffee was their meal for the day.

Larson went over to the F. E. Co., and talked to Mr. Earling about a job (Earl Cook was his secretary). Earling told him to keep coming back every day to see what turned up. On the fifth of May, there was a ditch breakup on the Davidson Ditch along Medicine Creek, on the other side on Long Creek. About 20 men went up to repair it. After that the men were transferred to Chatanika as point-drivers.

Larson spent the summer at the camp in Chatanika, working 10 hours a day for 79 cents/hr., 7 days a week. Woody Johansen was on the program, Maloy says, and he said

point driving was the hardest work he ever did. Larson says it wasn't that bad, and laughs. Point driving was done to thaw ground for gold mining. Larson describes in detail how it was done. He says men were the in best physical condition possible.

The men paid \$45/month for room and board, and were fed very well. There were three kinds of crews at the camp: the dredge crew, that didn't do much physical work; the bull gang, which moved pipes around; and the point drivers. When the others had left the table, the point drivers had already gone through their second helpings, and would divide up the rest of the food among themselves. There was never any food left on the table. Larson and his wife were writing letters at this time.

Larson's hair got long out at Chatanika. There was a guy who would cut hair for 50 cents. One night they decided he needed a haircut, so the "barber" took his clippers and started at Larson's forehead and went right over the top of his head. Then he evened it up, so Larson turned out bald, he says. To make a joke out of it, they wrote his F. E. number on a sign around his neck and took a picture, making him look like a convict. He didn't show this picture to Eva until she got to AK.

The F. E. Co. was a department of the U.S. Smelting and Refining Corp., which was owned by "three little old ladies in Boston," who were descendants of the Yankee clipper ship folk. This outfit had smelters and mines all over. They owned Hammond Co. at Nome, with two dredges there; a chunk of Butte, MT; big mines in Chile; and probably operations elsewhere.

Eva arrived on September 1st. Larson told her she should call Eva and Clyde Collins (a phone operator and a mechanic with the Road Commission) when she got there. She was supposed to come in at night on the train. Instead, she got on the Brill car, which was like a streetcar for passengers and perishables. The railroad was like Tunerville Trolley, and stopped over at Curry, because the trip was so rough. The Brill car, however, went from Seward to Fairbanks in 12 hours. For 2 days, Eva was staggering around trying to get her balance back.

She got in at 7 am, and called Eva Collins. She gave the operator the number, and the operator said, "We never use numbers, just give me the name, because she might not be home." Clyde went to get Larson where he was staying. Eva Larson took a cab, with five other people with different stops, and paid 50 cents to get to the Collins's. She and Larson met again for the first time in 4 or 5 months.

They were just hunting for a place when Everett Patton came in from Chatanika (he ran Chatanika Trading Post; his father was Bob Casey, who ran Circle Hot Springs). The light plant had gone down at Circle Hot Springs and Patton was going to go work on it for 10 days. He wanted the Larsons to stay at the store with his wife Helen and the kids. So they did; that was sort of their honeymoon, keeping the store out there.

When they came back, Mrs. Brandt, a well-liked phone operator who owned a lot of property, had a cabin across from the coalbunkers next to where Kelly's is, up for rent. At that time, that was outside the city limits. A slough runs under Nita's Café toward the railroad yards—that was the city limits. Slaterville was partially divided up at that time. Earl Cook had built his house there that summer.

Larson went back to school and Eva went to work in the old hospital (St. Joseph's) for \$96/month. She had made \$82.50 at the Swedish hospital in WA.

Bunnell was the president when Larson went to the Fairbanks School of Mines. He recalls that other students at the time were Doug Culp, Earl Beistline, Ernie Will,

Olga Steger. Paul Grieman ran the bus, which they called "Nuts and Bolts," because it always seemed about to fall apart. They walked the train track to get home sometimes. Others were Evelyn Baker Melville; Dwayne Hall; and Francis, Terry, and Pat O'Neill from Anchorage. There were about 350 students and about 35 or 40 teachers. The winter of 1939-1940 was when he started. Then he went in the fall of 1941.

He dropped out after that to work for the F. E. Co. in the warehouse. He'd changed his major from mining to civil engineering, but got discouraged about setting up his calculus problems. They bought a house, and his daughter Nelda was on the way, so it was better to go to work, he says.

Years later his calculus professor came back into town and said, "Why did you quit?" Larson said because he couldn't apply his calculus in the field, and the professor said that's why he was teaching—he couldn't either.

When Nelda was born, Eva was working for Dr. Hagglund at the clinic. Fourteen months later, the Larson's son Milnor was born, and about that time, Dr. Hagglund had twin boys. He came around very proud, and said to Larson, "You're not so hot. It takes a man behind the gun to get twins."

Larson went from the F.E. Co. to hauling coal for a year and a half, for Ernie Schermer and Larry Reed. They broke up, and Reed bought the Pioneer Express. Reed took the good trucks to Edmonton and hauled stuff for the Canol Project pipeline from there and Circle. Larson kept the town trucks and ran the Larson and Reed Express business, and hired out the first snow removal truck. He used to bring snow to the river and slam on the brakes to get the snow to slide out of the scoop. He'd get out about 30 ft. on the river; everyone was waiting for him to slide into the river, but he never did.

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When Reed got through hauling pipe, he sold all his equipment to Al Ghezzi. He set up a ready-mix cement plant and Larson set up the gravel pit. When Lloyd Pike started his homestead and Pike's Landing, he wanted Larson to homestead on adjoining land, but Larson was too busy. That 160 acres is now the International Airport.

Larson had a week's vacation at Donnelly Dome and broke up with Reed, and began working for Francis Holmstrom, on the condition he'd teach Larson how to make jewelry and the jewelry business. He had to go back into the truck business to pay off his bills while working for Holmstrom, going to school. Fairbanks Trucking Association got a contract to haul goods down to highway camps, as far down as Northway. In 1946 he got on a job hauling gravel at Ft. Wainwright (Ladd Field). His partner, Mulder Lundgren and he both cleared \$1,600 and had no work ahead for the winter.

With that money, Larson started his business in the basement of his home in Slaterville. He made gold nugget initials that winter. He thinks he made at least two initials for every woman in Fairbanks. The locksmith, Van Damme, was also the bartender at the Pioneer Hotel, and was a drinker with a filthy mouth, at times. Larson started making keys, too, around 1950.

The military came in and wanted him to open safes for them. In the early 1960s, Red Boucher came to town with his Pan-Alaska trophy business, and the Goldpanners baseball team. Boucher supposedly said he was going to take over the trophy business.

Larson didn't like that, so Eva took \$2,000 to Chicago and got a set-up for trophy making.

Larson wound up with three businesses, trophies, locksmithing, and jewelry. He only had a few helpers in the beginning. When the pipeline came along, he had 17 employees. He's cut back to 14 people now.

Work is a man's best friend is what he was taught as a youth. "If you're willing to work, you can make it in AK," people told him when he came here. They said it was a young man's country.