

Summary for H87-82-16

Lillian Webb is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 3/8/85

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Gayle Maloy interviews Lillian Webb in Fairbanks, AK on 3/8/85. She is best known for her long career in the beauty business in Fairbanks, since 1938. Lillian Mary Webb was born July 9, 1911 in Seattle.

Her parents married in Dawson City, Yukon in 1898. Her father ran a bakery in Dawson. He and Webb's mother's brother became good friends. (Her father came up from Seattle following the opportunities during the gold rush.) He also made candy in the bakery. Webb's future uncle thought it'd be a great opportunity for his sister to work in Dawson. He sent money for her to come up from San Francisco. When she got to Dawson, she worked in the bakery. Les Nerland's father had a store there, as well as Martin Pinska. Both of them later came to Fairbanks.

There were about 30,000 people in Dawson when Webb's parents were married in 1898. People would pay for bakery goods in nuggets sometimes, Webb's mother told her. She would weigh the nuggets, and maybe 50 cents or a dollar was the smallest change given in those days.

They stayed there around 5 years, while businesses were needed. Webb's mother said 1 egg sold for a dollar. Webb's parents came to Fairbanks in 1903, where her father bought a hotel on 1st Ave., the main street in those days. It was called Alaska Hotel; rooms were practically all rented to men (workers). That was when supplies came up the Chena River.

By the time Webb was born, her family had moved to Seattle. When she got out of high school, she went to beauty school. It was 6 months long; she had to get 1,000 hours in. She had always liked fixing hair, curling her mother's hair... She went to Washington Beauty College in Seattle. She says its twice as large now. She graduated in 1931, and went all over town trying to find a job. She couldn't find anything during those Depression days.

She called an older lady, Carlock, who'd been in her class, and suggested the two of them go into business together. Carlock agreed, she'd lost her husband and was alone. Webb had \$50 ("between herself and starvation"). Found a place by Harborview Hospital, got their equipment, and the salesman looked at her and said, "How old are you?" Webb said, "20." He said, "You've got to be 21 to sign these papers." Webb asked her mother to sign for her, and she did.

They got business from lots of the nurses from the hospital. They charged 50 cents for a shampoo and set. Practically all women had short hairstyles in those days, like the nurses and office girls (lots from U. S. Rubber). They did permanent waves and spiral waves, Crokono wave, and different wraps. Now waves are chemical waves; they don't need electric heaters.

Webb's sister had long hair in the 1920s (she was 8 years older). Short bobs had come into style, and her sister didn't ask their mother, but just came home with a bob. Their mother was very angry that she'd done this. Four or 5 years later, her mother cut her hair and had it bobbed.

In 1938, Webb came to Alaska. She had a customer named Thelma Gregor who came every week to get her hair done. Gregor moved to Fairbanks, and wrote to Webb that it was a great little town. She said, "Anybody that works as hard as you do, can't help but make it." So Webb started to save her money. Gregor told her to take a vacation and come stay with her to see whether she liked it.

On May 20, 1938, Webb arrived in Fairbanks. The ice had gone out shortly before, and everyone was talking about the ice pool. Someone pointed out a man who'd won all three ice pools (Chena, Firemen's, and Nenana). The Chena Pool has since been dropped, since the utilities services dump warm water in the river, says Webb. She doesn't know what happened to the Firemen's Pool.

Webb stayed with Gregor when she first got to Fairbanks. She loved it from the first day. Everyone was so friendly and helpful. She thought she might stay, though she'd bought a round trip ticket.

She brought things that she thought she might not be able to get here, for example extra makeup and nylon hose. But she found the town was well supplied. The Co-op Drugstore carried all those things, plus a fountain lunch.

The population was around 3,500 at that time. On the third day in Fairbanks, Webb decided to stay a while and see how she'd make out. She'd leased her shop in Seattle out. The first place she went into looking for work was Mickey's Beauty Shop, on the corner of 4th Ave. and Cushman. She asked to speak to the owner, Mickey McDonald. She said she was a licensed hairdresser from Seattle, with 8 years experience, and asked whether Mickey needed any hairdressers. Mickey said, "Yes. I need someone very badly. If you'd like to work here, you can start tomorrow."

So Webb went to work the next day. She'd brought her own uniforms and rollers just in case she needed them. A shampoo and set was around \$2.50/\$3.00.

Webb says the Line was operating in those days, just around the corner. There were little cabins right next to each other where the "sporting girls" lived. A lot of them came to the shop. They were lovely. They all respected each other for what they were; the sporting girls never gave them any trouble. They also did working women's hair, women who'd come in once each week.

Men went to barbers. Barbershops in those days did not have a manicurist, though, and a few men would come in for a manicure. Milt Oldham, now in Anchorage, used to come to Fairbanks as a liquor salesman, and Webb would give him a manicure every time he was in town.

Webb found an apartment near the shop, which was very convenient and nice. The rent was around \$100/month.

Thelma Gregor was a musician, who played in nightclubs and cocktail lounges—she played the accordion and sang. She owned a bar in Fairbanks, on the corner of 1st Ave. and Cushman, which she later sold. She then opened the Graehl Circle Bar, with food, cocktails, and dancing. It was very crowded on a Saturday night; everyone went there.

Webb says for entertainment they also used to go to all the high school basketball games. That's where she first saw Steve Agababa, a star player at that time. There were also big ice carnivals, one year they built an ice palace near Samson's Hardware. There were also sculptures, lit up with lights.

She remembers the day KFAR went on the air. That was a big day. There was a program at the Lacey St. Theater, and Cap Lathrop gave a speech, though he was a shy man. Everyone ran out and bought radios. Later, KFAR opened a TV station—and everyone ran out and bought TVs.

During WWII, some of her customers were Russian women officers. They were brought into town in a limo. They all had long hair; they could sit on it. Margaret Anderson, who used to work for Webb, says all she remembers for them is long hair, too. When they paid, they had big old American dollars, lots of them, in rubber bands. They were wider and longer than the ones we have today.

They were rather quiet. They did say anything about the Lend-Lease Operations at Ladd Field (Ft. Wainwright). Russians who came to town were known for buying all the caviar and nice things, such as leather goods and watches. Mr. Avakoff, who owned a jewelry store on 2nd Ave., spoke Russian, so they'd go there and ask for information.

Webb was married twice and divorced in Fairbanks. There were a lot more men here than women when she arrived.

Cab drivers would cut across the river to get to Thelma Gregor's in Graehl. That's not safe anymore, though. The Rendezvous Nightclub was also gotten to by taxi.

All businesses locked up at 3 or 4 in the afternoon on the day it was announced that war was over (around 1945). Everyone in town was out celebrating. They went over to Don Hammond's club, The Allies Room, a very popular place.

Webb was there with her boyfriend and girls that worked for her. She went into the bathroom, and a female WAC asked if she could trade clothes with her, just for that night. The WAC was in uniform. So they traded; Webb gave her a business card so that she could give the clothes back. Webb told everyone she'd gotten so patriotic that she'd joined the WACs. They went to the Rendezvous after that, and the Ranch Club on S. Cushman. Everyone looked at her wearing this uniform.

After a year of working for Mickey, Webb went into business for herself. Sig Wold and Dr. Gillespie owned the building her shop was in, where Woolworth's is today, on Cushman between 3rd and 4th Aves. She was there about 18 years; she had to fix it up quite a bit. The floors were very rough, so she laid down plywood and linoleum. It was called Lillian's Beauty Salon.

In the meantime, she bought a house on 6th Ave. She thought, someday this street is going to be zoned for business, and I may want to open a beauty shop. Her wish came true, and she rented it out for businesses right away. She put \$3,500 down and paid the rest in payments, which the renters really paid.

Webb went with Gus Gustafson to see the Cleary Hill Mine. At one time he was an engineer for the mine; when she met him he was manager for Carrington Co. She didn't have any heavy boots or a raincoat. Isabel Harper, who was living out at Cleary Mine, said they just about died when Webb walked in, wearing high heels, hose, a silk dress, and all dolled up. They loaned her boots and a coat. They later told her about their reaction at a dinner party, after she'd had a couple drinks.

They went into the mine and went far underground. Gustafson showed her the gold veins. There were men down there working. It wasn't open for anyone to tour, but since Gustafson had worked there, she was able to go.

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She later went to the dredge at Chatanika; she had to get a special pass from the F.E. Company. The second largest drag line in the world was at Chatanika.

Webb tells about Griffin Park. "Sticky" Griffin was a candy maker, located across from the old post office on Cushman. He was the instigator of the first baseball park, down by the river, upstream from the visitor's center. They used to watch baseball games in the evenings.

She mentions seeing Steve Agababa playing basketball again. Sylvia Ringstad had two sons playing at that time (it's unclear whether they played baseball or basketball), and she never missed one game.

Gustafson used to take them fishing up the Chena River. On the first trip, he sheared a pin and Webb thought they wouldn't be able to go. But Jack said, "Don't worry, he'll fix it," which he did. Webb loved to fly fish; they caught grayling in the river.

Webb joined the Professional Women's Club, and was a charter member. Ruth Forbes instigated a lot of things around town. Judge Forbes was her husband.

She was in Fairbanks 10 years before she went Outside. She sent her mother a round trip ticket to visit once. In later years, her mother lived with her in her house on 7th Ave. Later Webb built a building.

She says any success she's had is because of her mother. Her mother said, "Decide what you want to do, and never quit trying. Go out there and get what you want for yourself."

Webb isn't in the beauty business at the moment. Four years ago her leg went bad; she's had a total hip replacement. The doctor said she couldn't do the beauty work any more. So she took that out of the shop, where she'd already been selling some maternity wear. Now the shop has become just a maternity store.

She used to go up Farmer's Loop Rd. for the dog races. They had Sundays off and they'd go out to the races. They also used to ice skate under the town bridge. Doc Huffman was an excellent skater. KFAR later started dog races under the bridge, and brought bales of hay to sit on. Al Bramstedt worked there in those days.

Webb says she loves Fairbanks, and says Alaskans are still known as the friendliest people.