

Summary for H87-82-20

Emily Curly Avakoff is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 4/19/85

SIDE 1

Gayle Maloy interviews Emily Curly Avakoff in Fairbanks, AK on 4/19/85. She was born December 28, 1895 in Chicago. She had a brother who was 14 months older than her, and a sister who was 10 ½ months (older than him?). The sister always wanted to be younger, and the brother older, so it's been a conflict all along. 1884, 1885, and 1886 was when they supposedly came along. Her birthday was spent arguing just how old she was. She never had a birth certificate, so she's always been somewhat confused about her precise age.

Her father was an attorney; he was 50+ years old when she was born. Previously, he'd been in the Confederate army. She only knew him until she was 5 years old. When she was born, he was with the Chicago Title and Trust Company, which he'd been with since he got out of the army. He fought in the civil war on the South's side. His name was George Washington Curly. She says a lot of boys then had Washington in their name someplace. Her mother's name was Martha, and she was born in Washington, DC, ironically enough.

Her grandfather, Major Gwinn, supposedly designed the whole underground of Petrograd. She's been there, and it quite amazes her. Her family wasn't in any way connected with the Russians (though she's ending her life with a Russian name).

She went to grammar school in Willamette, IL. About four towns all went to Nucher High School. They all took a streetcar to school, at 3 cents a ride. When she graduated high school she enlisted at Northwestern University, but she got married instead. She was 16 or 17, and her husband, George Thomas Mullen, was in his 30s. (His family was from Scotland, originally. Their name had been MacMullen, but when they came to the U.S. they dropped the Mac.) Mullen was from Iowa.

Avakoff and her brother, George, had the same 1st grade teacher, Harriet Harper.

Mullen worked as an auditor with the Chicago Northwestern Railroad. When she met him he was a telegrapher with the railroad.

At that time it was not ladylike to go swimming unless you had stockings on. Crochet work was taught from a very young age. During WWI, she'd take sweaters that were knit by women for the soldiers, and rip out the shoulders that weren't quite right and fix them, since she knew how to.

She never played tennis when she was young; it was very unladylike. They played croquet. Once in a while they could get very boisterous and play clap in clap out (sounds like a tag game).

Avakoff mentions that she doesn't drive any more, and this morning was picked up by a very gracious young man, Danny Cruise. She appreciated him greatly.

She had two daughters by the time she was 20. They both died young—one at 27 and the other at 38. They both died of cancer, and Avakoff subsequently put a lot of effort into cancer work.

The younger daughter, Mildred Muller, was just peaking in a brilliant singing career. She was in the Chicago Civic Opera at 7. At 12 she was singing with the chorus and was a featured dancer with the Chicago Ballet. She married Phillip Crane, who she

met in college. They were married in Seattle, and were voted the most popular singers on KIRO. They had a nationwide week on the air, and were on Al Pierce's show. Mildred left behind a 7-month old baby when she died.

Avakoff worked with the American Cancer Society in Fairbanks for many years. She worked for the state office in IL, in the Eastern Star. She was state chaplain for the cancer group. She was also grand officer during Sarah Daniels's time, back in 1929. Avakoff felt she had to get away from the memories of her children, and people she'd been around who brought them back.

Her husband died in 1944. She blamed herself very much for that because instead of going home at noon during a Methodist church luncheon (she was in charge of the kitchen that day), she stayed and ate there with Betty Wells. When she got home, her husband was dead in the basement.

She used to say, "God, how dared you do this to me. I was doing your work." She was bitter. She got so that she didn't want people to come by and talk because all she wanted to talk about was herself. This was how she got started in her career, since people begged her to stop staying home. Of course, it was a disgrace at that time for a woman to go out and work. She had never had a job before.

Martin Victor had a fur company in the Highland Park, IL, and heard Avakoff might be able to help in the office. She said she couldn't, because she'd never worked. He said to come try it. She thinks she was so dumb he thought she was smart. Victor, his brother, and his sister ran the business. Victor then broke off part of the business and brought it to AK. Avakoff came along to answer telephones. She opened shops for Victor in Juneau. The first time she came up, looking things over, was in 1944. Then she came up to open shops in 1946, and stayed on after that.

It was raining in Juneau when she arrived on the Princess Liner. She and a group of schoolteachers stood outside on the deck to see the igloos, which they didn't know there wouldn't be any of.

Avakoff stayed at the Baranof in Juneau for 6 months. There were 75 permanent residents and they'd go down to the lobby at night. She was never alone. It was \$75/month to live there. She was getting \$350/month from Martin Victor.

She knew Charles Bunnell quite well. They often had breakfast together at the hotel. She didn't know "who he was" until quite a while later, though.

Papa Goldstein was an old furrier who used to come up around Fairbanks to buy furs. He'd come down to the lobby at night. He never called Avakoff anything but "girl." Every night before he went upstairs he'd say, "Girl, how about having a pineapple soda with me?" She had one every night for 5 months. Finally she said, "I can't drink another pineapple soda!" He said, "Well, you can have any kind you want!" From then on she had whatever she wanted.

Avakoff went back to IL after 6 months. While she was there, John Meyers courted her. He was a widower and they got married, on the condition that she had to go back to see the friends she'd made in AK.

She tells of going to Anchorage for business (to put furs in Betty's Shop), and happened to talk one night in the hotel until midnight with Cap Lathrop. She met him and Miriam Dickey, his assistant. Cap was killed shortly after that in an accident.

SIDE 2

Avakoff tells about going to the bowling alley in Highland Park one night with some girlfriends. An older man asked her to have a cup of coffee. When Sally came over, Avakoff told her what happened. Sally said, "It's OK. In fact, you can feel honored. That's the owner of this place." It was her future husband, John Meyers.

Meyers was retired from the Bowman Dairy Co. at that time; he opened the bowling alley after his retirement. You could also get a drink in the back of the building, but Avakoff didn't know about that before someone told her years later.

Each time her husbands died, she said she'd never marry again. But she had to eat her words.

Meyers bought her a new car. They went to Mexico first; AK was their final destination. They ended up in Miami at some point, where everyone was fishing off the causeways. Avakoff hooked a big fish, and no one else had one, even though she was not a fisherman. She called for Meyers to help her, but he wouldn't (that was not the sportsmanly thing to do), so she lost the fish. People made fun of her for calling for help.

Later they were in CA. They stopped in Kelseyville to visit some old neighbors from Glencoe, Hattie and Adolph George. They decided to go get something at the bakery.

Meyers said, "I'd like to buy something out here." They went to see a man who didn't have the money to buy into a rope factory. They wound up buying his house in Kelseyville. They had all new furniture. The marriage was abbreviated though to 21 months, when Meyers had a heart attack and died.

Mr. Victor called Avakoff day after day and asked her to come back. She said no, because her life was broken in so many places. Finally Martin and Denny Victor (10 y.o.) drove with Avakoff up the highway to AK.

She'd been here ever since. She went to the Chamber of Commerce one night for a party, where she met Harry Avakoff. The next morning (they both had stores on 2nd Ave. in Fairbanks), Harry stopped in and brought her half a watermelon. She said, "Oh, I love watermelon; we got them 3 for a dollar in CA—I bet they're much higher here." He said, "\$5." She exclaimed, "\$5 a watermelon!?" And he replied, "Half."

At this time she was living in the Nordale Hotel. People often brought her food at the store. One night she came out of the hotel, and Harry happened to be on the sidewalk. She told him she was going to a bar to hear a girl sing. Harry said, "You can't go there alone. If you insist on going, I'll take you."

So they went to the bar. The singer was a lovely person who later married the owner of Jack's Bar. She said, "I'm going to sing a song for a friend of mine who just walked in with Mr. Avakoff," and sang Beautiful Brown Eyes. Emily was quite stunned at this, and at the woman who was dressed so differently than she knew her to.

Some women she knew while living at the Nordale Hotel included Mildred Herman, who helped her get involved in the Cancer Association here. Eva McGown, Edith O'Neill (formerly known as the Oregon Mare), and Avakoff shared a bathroom on the 2nd floor. O'Neill was a lovely old lady, who was not too well at that time.

Avakoff had a fast courtship with Harry, too. She used to say, "I will never marry again. I will never marry a foreigner. I will never marry a short man. I will never marry an Alaskan." Each of these fit Harry perfectly, and he was a wonderful person. He died

in 1973. So now Avakoff gives advice to people: Don't say you never will... because it just may happen that way. Harry had a jewelry store at the corner of 2nd and Cushman. He made an ivory bone inlaid with gold, and other things, that had been presented by Fairbanks to President Taft. Avakoff ran the shop with Harry. She kept it open for a year after his death, then closed it.

Avakoff likes to sell. She gets impressions from people, observes what they're looking at. She says the women up here are marvelous. Someone calls her every day.

Morry Smith announced Avakoff's arrival in Fairbanks on the radio. They used to do that. Lena Phipps walked into the shop that day at 8 am, after working late at the Pioneer Hotel, to say hello. Avakoff still know Lena and Lila Mae (the two sisters). She's listened to every one of these broadcasts and is glad she got persuaded into doing an interview.

She'd glad she gotten this out of her system. She hesitated about going on the air because of her episode with Mr. Wally. She knew he and Lee Russell as youngsters. She was looking for a place for the Cancer Society and was talking to Wally. She didn't know she was on the air; he said, "Tell me why you don't like me." And she did. They're now friends again.