

Summary for H87-82-21

Emily Curly Avakoff is interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 5/3/85

SIDE 1

Gayle Maloy interviews Emily Curly Avakoff in Fairbanks, AK on 5/3/85. This is her second appearance on Meet a Pioneer. She was born December 28, 1895. Jim Sackett brought her into the studio. Avakoff is 5' 2 1/2."

There is a short recap of Avakoff's childhood, etc., that is, of the interview in April, and how Avakoff started to work for Martin Victor. She transferred to the Fairbanks shop from the Juneau shop, some time after 1946.

Avakoff met Harry, her future husband, at the Chamber of Commerce Dinner. A man she didn't know very well asked her to go, but being so new she didn't want to go with him. The young couple running the S. O. S. Office Supply, who she'd met before, asked her if she'd go with them, since they didn't know anyone there. So she accompanied them to the dinner.

At some point Harry Avakoff walked in; he'd just come home from the Mayo Brothers, who said he had a kidney stone. He was sitting for a while before he came over to talk with them. He lived to dance, but with his health, he didn't dance at that dinner. About 4 months later, Emily and Harry were married.

Harry once made her a pair of earrings and brought it to her in Juneau. He also once brought her a beautiful nugget bracelet he made especially for her. She wouldn't take it because it was so nice—she couldn't accept it. Then he said, "Well, I thought you'd take it just as a friendship gift." So she accepted it, and as he took it back out of his pocket, a wedding ring also fell out. He was quite sure she'd marry him, though she had no intention of marrying again. She's not sorry she did, though. He was a fine person, very easy to get along with. She thinks men are easier to live with than women.

Harry was born in Ningingee, Armenia at the base of Mt. Ararat, where the Arc is supposed to break loose one day in the flood. He said his mother was tall and blonde. His name was Haritune Bakshian Avakian, but the Russians changed the last name to Avakoff, which he kept all his life. His mother's name was Bakshian, which makes Emily think she was Armenian.

He always wanted her to see his family, but he was afraid to go back because he had run away from Russia around age 17. He was going into the army or something and didn't feel that the Russians had done anything for him, so he deserted the country. (When Russia conquered Armenia, they'd left the deserts to the Turks and Arabs and kept the Caucasus, which made Harry a Russian citizen.) By this time he was a diamond setter with excellent training in jewelry making.

Harry, a 5' 7" boy, got in a fight with two Russians and was thrown in jail. During his stay, Lenin was accused of being a communist and was thrown in the same jail. So when they went back to Russia, it was very important to Harry to see Lenin in his tomb.

Harry was the interpreter when the Russians were in Fairbanks; he could speak several dialects.

He was a great traveler. They went to 18 countries together, even though Emily didn't even want to leave the U.S.—she thought there was so much to see here. But she enjoyed her international travel thoroughly.

Harry took a boat from Seattle to Valdez, and walked to Fairbanks from there, with a group. Once they were crossing a creek, and Harry was too short to wade it, so another man carried him on his shoulders. The man slipped and Harry fell in the water. He didn't even have a pair of socks to change. He had 25 cents in his pocket when he arrived, which was in 1905. He was about 19 years older than Emily, so he was born around 1876.

He accumulated property, so he was an investor, but he was also a great giver. He treated Emily very generously, too; nothing was too good for her. Harry had landed in New York from Austria. From there he went to San Francisco where he worked for a jewelry store. Then he came up to AK with the group.

They were married in 1951. Harry hadn't been back to Russia in 63 years. He had a sister he hadn't seen since she was 7. He'd been afraid to go back for fear they'd keep him there. He finally decided to go over when he heard his sister was still living. He asked Emily, "What can I bring you from Russia?" She asked for a samovar, a kind of teakettle. Harry thought she'd said caviar, so he also brought back 2 buckets of caviar. She can't even stand the smell of caviar.

Harry made a gift for Fairbanks to present to President Taft. It was a walrus tusk with a gold mounted dog team on top, with inkwells fashioned into it, as well as the midnight sun. It was in the museum at UAF, and was stolen (when Taft died, his family had sent the piece back to Fairbanks).

The gold was taken off, but it was recovered. The tusk was never found. A piece of wood in place of the tusk was brought to Harry to fix the piece, but he wouldn't do it.

SIDE 2

1960? Harry's team won the blue ribbon in curling, and they celebrated at the Elks. Harry loved to curl.

They moved a little house from the schoolyard next to their house. Ivan was there. When the curlers came to town, Harry felt it was too expensive for them to stay in hotels, so he'd set up cots in this next-door house for them. Each year, he made each member of the winning team a gold nugget ring.

They lived in the little place right across the street from Penney's, on 6th and Cushman. It was called the Kaiser's Castle or Crown. It had a 4-sloped roof, with a replica of the Kaiser's crown on top. The German that put it up was honoring the Kaiser. Then the country went to war, and the crown was taken down.

Harry was very excited to own that home. Emily belittled it because it was old. But she got so that she liked it very much.

Emily's accident: She wasn't supposed to go to the store until 10. She had just crossed 4th Ave. when a car coming in the wrong direction hit her and broke her leg in 4 places. Somewhere along the line the hospital forgot to call Harry and tell him she was there, so no one knew where she was all day. Eisel Ditch was working for Harry at that time, too. Emily had a long recovery from that accident.

Diane Ray, who Emily met around 1959, was the nurse who helped her. She limps just a little bit but she has no pain in the leg. Dr. Lindig was the doctor who set the leg. Her heart also began to act up at that time, but here she is, all these years later, still with a good heart.

Clara Rust had her cabin across the street from the Avakoffs. She had a sign up welcoming visitors. Emily watched the Penney's store being built from her porch during her recovery.

When she and Harry were married, they went to New Jersey and New York, and when they came back, a doctor across the street, whose house the curlers congregated in, and the curlers had decorated their whole house with garlands of toilet paper, and brought over a whole turkey and ham, and had a party for them.

They liked to dance. They'd all meet at the Elks Club on Saturday nights. Angie and Al Johnson and the Andersons, among others. About 12-16 of them had a table there every night. Harry dance like they dance now, alone a lot. Emily just knew how to waltz and 2-step.

Harry was King Regent for the Pioneers one year. Muriel Johnson was the Queen Regent. Emily and Muriel's husband got to go everywhere the King and Queen were invited that year.

One time, Harry took a fall and hit his head during lunch. At that time his heart was bothering him a little. Harry came in looking for something, but he didn't know what it was. Emily called the doctor, who told her to get Harry to a brain specialist that afternoon. So they flew to San Francisco that day, and didn't come back for 3 months.

Harry had a brain hemorrhage, and they drilled a hole in the side of his head to release the blood that was there. He didn't ever seem bothered by it all the years he lived after that. (After he'd hit his head on the concrete, he didn't remember anything, he didn't even know who Emily was. He recovered from this amnesia.)

Emily has spent many years working for the American Cancer Society. She was chairman for Fairbanks under Mildred Herman for 4 years. She met Herman when she was living at the Baranof in Juneau. When she came to Fairbanks, they'd have coffee at the Model Café. She wanted Emily to help. Emily had lost her two daughters to cancer. She's had her picture taken with many important people who came up for cancer drives.

National Bank of Alaska bought the property where they used to live on 6th and Cushman. That's the bank that's there now. She and Harry rented the old building next to the Empress Theater, Mrs. Ford's old place, which they eventually bought. Then it was torn down, and they had a shop/cabin at 9th and Cushman, and then lived at the Northward Building for 2 years while a new store was being put up. Harry only lived 3 months after they moved into the new place (they had an apartment built in the store). She thinks he worked and worried too much over that place.

Their first house (where NBA is now) was bought and moved out to 10-½ mile Chena Hot Springs Road. Mildred Mathews had kept saying they'll go out and see it, but the snow has been so deep they haven't gone yet. It was a showplace in its time, but Emily, coming from the new Frank Lloyd Wright home in CA previously, thought it was rather insignificant at the time.

She used to play dominoes with the servicemen at the jewelry counter. She and Harry had a lovely companionship with the men from the base. They had a lovely set of ivory dominoes. One soldier left her a pair of bunny boots, and another a radio.

Emily was once asked to talk to 4th graders and they went to Alaskaland to do this. The boy in front asked, "What was Fairbanks like when you got here?" Her answer: She didn't know anyone here during Golden Days, and she was walking along a wooden sidewalk near Woolworth's in high-heeled shoes, and the shoes would catch in the sidewalk. She said she soon learned to wear low-heeled shoes. The boy said, "Wow, you are old, aren't you?" And she'd thought she was pretty young at the time.

When she knew Eva McGown, she thought McGown was ancient, but now of course, Emily is past her age. She says, "I know I'm an old lady, but I don't want someone else to tell me that."

She and Harry donated a lot to the hospital, where they were always treated very well. Emily gave them chairs, as well as \$27,000 one time. A boy once asked her to come down so he could show her the hospital and she said, "Heavens, I own the place."

She also gave a cupboard to the Wickersham House. It belonged to Emily's great grandmother. She donated it in Harry's name.