

Summary for H87-82-27

Ruth and Roy Olson are interviewed by Gayle Maloy in Fairbanks, Alaska on 10/4/85

SIDE 1

Gayle Maloy interviews Roy and Ruth Olson in Fairbanks, AK on 10/4/85. Today is the one-year anniversary show of Here's a Pioneer. Stan Bennett was the first guest. The Olsons just had their 50th wedding anniversary, on September 7th. Their daughters put on a real gala affair for them at Circle Hot Springs. One of the highlights was having Charlotte Ames play the piano, as she used to back in the 1930s, when they used to dance there--it brought back all those great memories.

They wed in 1935, up on Deadwood Creek, about 12 miles from the hot springs, at Ruth's parents (where they were mining). The commissioner stationed at Circle Hot Springs, Harry Greep, married them. It was a small gathering. In attendance were Roy's sister, a few people from the Road Commission, a few miners, and Frank Nash, the district engineer.

Roy was born in Seattle in 1910. He was raised there and in Arlington, WA. His father worked in the logging camps north of Everett. Their farm was on the Stillagowomish River. The town swimming hole was on their property.

Roy came to Fairbanks because he had an uncle working at a mine at Chatham. He had a small dredge. Roy has two of the buckets from it. He was 18 in May of 1928, when he came up. He had just graduated high school. His uncle had said he had a job for him if he could drive a Model T Ford truck. Roy stretched the truth a bit. It was quite difficult to drive a Ford truck in Alaska. He carted about 6 or 7 loads of coal a day in it (to fuel the dredge). He had to shovel the coal in and out, as it wasn't a dump truck.

He worked for his uncle for 3 summers. During the winter he went to business college. He took a job with Sans Motors, in Seattle, a Studebaker dealer. The pay was nothing compared to what he'd been making, though, so he came back to AK and stayed.

During his school days, Johnny Contento from the Family Shoe Store went to school with him. So did the beautiful Irene Palmer, who had long blond curls. She sat right in front of Roy and he remembers dipping a curl in his inkwell. He was scolded by the teacher. Ruth says he still gets into mischief if she doesn't watch him.

One of Roy's first jobs when he returned to AK was for the Road Commission. In the winter, they were re-decking the old Cushman St. Bridge, which was a very cold and drafty job. He stuck with winter work for quite a few years. That bridge is now at Cottonwood, north of Nome. It was near St. Joseph's Church, like the current bridge. The trotting rhythm of horses on the bridge would endanger the structure of the bridge—so there was a sign that said "Please Walk Your Horses."

Roy and Ruth went to dances, at the university, Moose Hall, or Eagles' Hall, every Saturday night. They met at Moose Hall through a mutual friend. There was a gallery at Moose Hall where the mothers of most of the schoolgirls sat to chaperone. Ruth's mother wasn't there, though. At that time, Ruth was living with a different family in Fairbanks.

Ruth was born in July 1915, in Dawson. About a month before she was due, her mother took a horse and buggy from Deadwood Creek to Circle City, where she took the

sternwheeler to Dawson. She brought Ruth home a month after she was born. Ruth's parents were from Norway. They'd known each other all their lives.

After Wisconsin, Ruth's father went up to Dawson, and then to Deadwood Creek in 1904. There were 7 partners on this piece of ground on lower Deadwood. One was Nels Rasmussen, from Circle. Two of his daughter, Elsie O'Leary and Lillian Heilman are still Ruth's best friends. Her father was part of this group. It was called the Swedish Syndicate, thought there was only one Swede, and the rest were Danes and Norwegians.

Deadwood Creek is in the Circle District, 9 miles from Central, between Circle Hot Springs and Central. When her father brought her mother over from Norway, she stayed with a cousin of hers in North Dakota that winter, and in the spring she came up to AK. She didn't speak English very well, and took everything that people said literally. The man that brought her out from Circle said he liked Mrs. Larsen and she could put her shoes under his bed anytime. Mrs. Larsen turned to her husband and said, "Now why would I want to put my shoes under his bed?"

Soon Mrs. Larsen learned the language. Some older ladies on the creek taught her American cooking; she made an excellent lemon pie. There were quite a few women on the creek at first, but as the years went by there were less and less. The Princess Sophia boat also went down, and several people from the Circle District were lost. For the last 3 years on the creek, Mrs. Larsen was the only woman. Ruth was the only child.

Ruth had been around very few children except for those at Miller House in the summer. Madeline Wilkinson is still living in Seattle.

Ruth was spoiled with attention—her father's especially. Everything for Christmas was ordered since there were no stores. Everyone would gather at their house on Christmas Eve, in the Scandinavian tradition. One of the miners would dress up like Santa for Ruth. She didn't think it was strange that he had a Norwegian accent, since most of the people she knew had one. Jens Langlow was Santa.

She had two tiny sluice boxes that her uncle mad her and a hose and barrel, which she cleaned up gold from every day (her ground was salted by the miners). Riley Ericksen planted a quarter in the ground one day to see what she'd think. She knew something was up.

The postmaster on Deadwood was a retired teacher, Charles Taggart. He taught Ruth a bit of reading and writing but she had no formal schooling until her family went back to Norway, and she went to school there for a year and a half. Her mother became ill with pernicious anemia. They settled in Bellingham, WA until she got better. It was 5 years until they could come back to AK. Ruth went to school in Bellingham, from the 3rd to 8th grades. She had left Deadwood Creek when she was 7.

SIDE 2

The men on the creek were all Ruth's childhood friends. When she had to leave, she cried and said she wanted to stay with her "boys on Deadwood." Ruth talks about staying with relatives in Wisconsin. She spoke with a Norwegian accent then, too.

Her parents stayed and mined while she came into Fairbanks to go to school her junior year. She stayed at the Joe Crosson home. That's when she met Roy at the dance. Her sophomore and junior years her mother came to town with her.

She went to college for one year at UAF. She tried to get a job in the dining room. A girl who had a scholarship, who was living in town, said Ruth was welcome to use the scholarship. That's how she came to go to college that year. She married Roy September 7, 1935 at her parents' 2-room cabin.

Roy talks about the Road Commission in those days, about carving new roads into hard-to-reach areas. It had more of a pioneering spirit then. Roy used to haul supplies to camps, and he found it quite challenging and enjoyable. The Livengood road, Steese Highway, Richardson, Donnelly Dome, and Hickel Highway were some of the roads he worked on. Some of the men he remembers working with were

Lloyd Lounsbury, shop foreman

Clarence Bergland, assistant to engineer

Frank Nash, district engineer

Woody Johansen, the only other district engineer

Elmer Parkeson

Alan Brown

G. Q. Wilson

Bill Cameron

Ollie Backlund

George Vincent

Going through frost areas and rock, and crossing summits were a few of the many difficulties. One of the most difficult pieces was the road to Sagwon, which was built in the winter. It was hard to get a road made for trucks to get there to build the road.

Roy worked for the Road Commission a total of 28 ½ years. First it was under the War Dept. under the federal government, then the Dept. of Commerce, then the Dept. of Interior, and then under statehood the Dept. of Transportation.

Roy bought their first car while Ruth was in the hospital having their first child, Sylvia. He went down to Service Motors and bought a Chevrolet sedan for \$1,250. In those days, you didn't have to make payments in the winter, and there was no interest. You just started making payments in the spring when you started working. He says he just wanted to bring their baby home in a new car.

Ruth talks about wireless communication from Circle. In the 1920s and before, this was the way news came to the creeks. Mr. Barnett was the operator she recalls. The Rasmussens owned the phone company at Circle.

There were phones that were rung for role call at 8 pm. If a person didn't pick up, the neighbors would go check on that person. One night this happened and her father and another man went and found the neighbor dead of a heart attack. They paid \$5/month for the phone service.

Wanda Richman had Maloy ask the Olsons to be on the program.

Maloy talks about a picture of a young Eva McGown with 13-year-old Ruth. McGown brought her sick husband up to Circle Hot Springs to see if it would help him. (Arthur McGown owned the Model Café, Ruth thinks.) Couples would often stay for all or part of the winter at the hot springs. Ruth's parents sometimes would do his. So would the Zimmermans and the Bartletts, and they'd have a good time with parties, dances, and cards. That's how Ruth got to know Eva McGown.

When they moved into town, the Olsons' two older daughters were school age, and Ruth was expecting their third daughter. She taught the girls for a time herself out at Circle Hot Springs. Their daughter Sylvia is married to Dick Bullion, and their children are Jackie, Tom, and Amy. Louella is married to Fred Heprich, and their sons are Roy, who works at Northland Dairy, and Noel. Their daughter Laura is not married now, and lives in Anchorage.

Three years ago the Olsons thought it was time to move back to Fairbanks, and the people who now manage Circle Hot Springs, Bob and Loretta LeRude, asked if they could buy their place and make a business of it. So the Olsons bought a house in Fairbanks. They still have a summer home in the Circle country, though.

Roy had a couple mining ventures in 1939, 1940, and 1946 on Switch Creek, a tributary of Deadwood. He really enjoyed it; it was small scale, not like big equipment mining. It was a good wholesome life.

The first time Roy came to see Ruth at Deadwood Creek, he had the Road Commission truck, which he got stuck in a mud hole. Ruth's father and a few other men had to go down and get him out. Ruth was afraid he'd never come back.

Roy's boss from that time, Frank Nash, is now in a rest home in Seattle, and is 92. He and Roy's sister are the only two people now living who were at the Olsons' wedding.