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Interviewer: Peter Craig
Person Interviewed: Robert W. Stevens

PC/RS/1
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Place: Homer

P: The first thing I'd like to ask you is what was the aviation like in Homer when you first started?

R: Well I came up to Alaska in July 1946 to work for Woodley Airways which has just changed its name to Pacific Northern Airlines Inc. and part of their routes consisted of flying from Anchorage, Kenai, Palmer, Kodiak and back the same way, they flew Anchorage, Kenai, Iliamna, King Salmon and also Anchorage, Cordova, Yakataga, Yakutat, Gustavus and Juneau, and I often flew the Kodiak run coming into Homer. We had a smaller airplane a bush route that ran down this way also stopping at Kenai, Ninilchik, Kasilov, Homer. That was operated via a Gullwing/Stenson by pilot Don Dorothy, and later on they had a Travel Air on it a twin-engine Cessna a single-engine Cessna. And it was somewhere around the latter part of the 40's, Dave Kellogg was a pilot flying it then and they when she ceased it. But speaking of flying into Homer, we were using DC-3's, Pacific Northern got the last three DC-3's off the Douglas production line, brand new airplanes very plush. They took more Assets Administration parts that were left over from WWII and built these three airliners and they were the last DC-3's that Douglas produced. So we had good airplanes and we'd come from Anchorage, Kenai down to Homer, landing here. There wasn't any buildings out at the field other than the CAA radio shack and low frequency range for instant approaches here at Homer on the gravel runway. We'd go on down to Kodiak and we'd come back and stop in Homer. and we did this twice a day, it was pretty good service for the community and it's not as good now I understand but you have to understand that they have now built a highway from Anchorage to Homer, a lot of the traffic comes over the highway, and the airlines are not able to get the trade that they used to get. But however there was no road when we were flying down here and we did operate twice a day successfully.

We never left anybody in Homer that was sick or ill, we took injured people, sick people, pregnant women into Anchorage. and after they were well, I remember one instance that it was rainy, and drizzly and grim looking a flatbed truck came out of the brush, three or four soaking wet men, they had a boy on a mattress laying under an old gray tarp under this truck. He had fallen on his bicycle and cut his groin on his handle bars and we just took the mattress off the truck and slid it into the aisle of the airplane among the passengers. Took off and took him to Anchorage, to the hospital.

Another time a man came to the field on the back of a couple of his friends, he had his foot badly cut with an axe, he was wild-eyed, and his foot dripping blood and with a towel wrapped around,

a man was holding a shoebox under it to catch the drips and they put him on the airplane w/ his foot in a shoebox. and when we got to Anchorage, we got a cab, put him in the cab w/ his shoebox under the dripping foot, sent him on into Providence hospital, the old hospital. But we, regardless of the weather, we never left anybody that was in trouble.

And the people appreciated that. There wasn't a market for produce much then, seafood, vegetables, there was a man here called... we called his operation Homer Gardens, they used to raise beautiful fresh vegetables. We take boxes of them to the Officers club down to Kodiak Naval Air Station. But the people would come out to the field, they'd give us salmon, kegs of berries, fish, clams, crab, the crews never never wanted for anything like that. Like I say, they didn't have too much of a market for it then, today this practice doesn't exist anymore. In return, we'd do shopping for them in Anchorage and bring them prescriptions they needed. There was no hospital and doctors in Homer then, a couple of the wives who were registered nurses and they helped out medically.

Sometimes we had a hard time getting in here. Alaska Airlines also flew down here, not real big airplanes, but they had to run from Anchorage to Seward, came on down here w/a Gullwing Stenson. The pilot that was flying that at the time, his first name was Forst and also Sid Crogstaad flew. Prior to that time there were many pilots that flew the Homer run. They didn't have so much service as them and it was more on a bush basis.

2, The first airplane in the Homer area was 1923, there was a naval survey, had two Davis-Douglass float planes on a naval tanker and they went as far out as close to Cold Bay and they'd hoist these over the side and they made photographic surveys of all the harbors. And they worked in toward Kodiak and then they came in and anchored the tanker at Port Graham and they surveyed Kachemak Bay w/these airplanes. It resulted in Homer's first airplane wreck over there in Bear Cove. A pilot named Chaste taking off w/the Davis-Douglass on floats, something happened it crashed on the water. They salvaged the airplane and brought it into Port Graham on the USS Turner, a Coast of Geodesic Survey Vessel and hoisted it aboard and they departed for South Eastern, down through Seward, Cordova, Yakutat, Prince of Wales Island. About Sitka and Prince of Wales Island, about this time they did get that airplane rebuilt, so when they finally ended up in Seattle they had both airplanes operating again.

And that was quite early, the next airplane that was anywhere near Homer was 1925, Roy J. Davis and Russell Merrill came up here w/the Curtis F Flying boat, and they came across the Gulf of Seward into Anchorage. Gus Gillas, an Anchorage broker chartered it to go down into Kodiak and they went down the outer edge of the Kenai Peninsula and on successfully to Kodiak and on the trip back they left there and they landed at Chugiak Islands, outside of Port Graham, where there was a fur farm.

They'd deliver a package there to a lady and they'd park the airplane on the beach, going to spend the night, the weather came up and rolled the airplane up in a ball. A fishing boat took them into port Graham and they caught a boat into Seward. And Merrill did salvage the airplane, taking a fishing boat out of Seward and going up there and got the remains of it and took into Anchorage and it was stored in Brown and Hawkins warehouse there down there at the mouth of Ship Creek. Whatever happened to it from there, I don't know. But this is very early and these incidents are mainly forgotten.

And 1929 Anchorage Aircraft to Port Duc was started up in Anchorage. Rus Merrill came up to fly for them and... I take that back... it was 1928, and Wan Cope was a mechanic and Rud Merrill used to occasionally fly down to Homer were usually on floats landing down near the spit. And he was lost in 1929, disappeared on a flight to Nyac mine out of Anchorage. And they never did find him, although they found some wreckage of the airplane. Do you have any questions, Peter, you'd like to ask?

P: When was the first time that you ever came to Homer?

R: July 1946 probably around the twentieth of the month. That's when I started flying for PNA and started coming in here. I also flew w/the other section of route in 1951. We got the certificate to Seattle, I never went south of Juneau before that and then we got the certificate to Seattle we were flying from Anchorage to Seattle. And in 1950 through 3 we began flying Juneau to Seattle, Juneau, Canada and then Seattle.

There is another pilot upon the hill, Peter, that retired from Alaska Airlines. He didn't fly consistently into Homer but he homesteaded down here and he flew in here from time to time. GENE Jean Hefler, he's up there now developing the Bayview Subdivision since he doesn't fly anymore. You might be interested in interviewing him sometime.

P: Yea. Well what major changes have you seen since you've come here the first time?

R: Well, Homer has grown. It was quite a small village, we had an agent down here... I think he was a hog rancher in Homer. And he represented the airline and he'd meet us at the airport w/ whatever mail there was. Incidentally this property over end here, the old Kranich property. The Homer post office was here originally in that old garage that old weather-beaten garage next door here. That was the post office first, and then later the small room on the west side of the building there, that is built on to this old house, was the next

post office. And I can remember in '46 helping our agent, Bob Smith at the time, drag the mail sacks in the back door of that thing and leave them for Mrs. Kranich. As long as I can remember, she was always post mistress until she retired. Then they built the building next door which has the Italian restaurant in it, that was built for a post office and leased by the Federal Government and operated for many years as a post office until they built the new one down the street there.

P: Well, was the runway as long as it is now?

R: Well the runway was not as long, we could operate very well w/ DC-3's on the 3,000 foot runway. And as I remember, that was about the length then.

Then we started flying the DC-4 in the air which was rather tricky and they extended the runway 3,500 feet which was about the minimum you need for that w/the lighter gross weights we operate down here w/. Then later on, I flew the Lockheed Constellation in here w/ the three tails and we had a speed pack on the belly like a big boat. You could tow it under the airplane on wheels, hook the cables up to the belly of the airplane and raise it up against the belly of the airplane w/ the electric hoist that was intergrilled w/the airplane. This was a very good thing for Alaska, we could haul long pipe in the speed pack and up to 8,500 lbs. of freight in it. We could get rolls of cable and quite a bit of big stuff in it that you'd never been able to haul in airplanes before. It would have to come in by boat. You'd had steamer service into Homer, Alaska Steamship Company. That;s too bad you don't get it back again. This is a good natural seaport for ocean going vessels. But you need a heavier dock to handle them, and hopefully, one of these days it will work out that way.

Homer has grown slowly; there are more people coming in here now. In 1979 the Homer area, not just the city, but the area around it had the highest growth rate of any community in the judicial district which Homer is in. They had over 30,000 people, I believe there was about 3,100 additional residents came into the general Homer area in 1979. It is continuing that way and this is eventually going to have an effect on the town.

P: Well, has the runway always been located in the same place that it is now?

R: Yes, it's always been there. Initially before they had a field, like I say, Rus Merrill would land down near the spit on floats. When they dammed up Beluga Lake and made^{it} larger and deeper by doing so, they had a spillway, a culvert that went under the

road that goes out to the airport now and that spillway or stanplate kept the lake at a certain level. There you had a nice lake for operating float planes off of that was sheltered and not subject to tidal action. And it is being used today by Kachemak Air Service, Beluga Air Service, some of the private airplanes. Incidentally, Beluga Service runs a good op..., correction, Kachemak Air Service, I'm not familiar w/ Beluga, but Kachemak runs a good operation here. They've got an Otter and a Beaver, good load, good airplanes, and for service out of Homer to the outlying spots and so forth by water; it's good equipment.

P: Did you ever make your residence here in Homer or have you always lived somewhere else?

R: Well, I lived in Anchorage for years. I was in Homer a lot. I used to come down here and go moose hunting and fish and spend a lot of time here. I always liked the place. We had a PNA agent here that...by the name of Bob Smith. He was the original Grand Exhalted Ruler of the local Elks Lodge much later on, but he liked to hunt and fish. I used to go out w/ him quite a bit. We would go to Bradley Lake or into Caribou Hills near Caribou Lake, various places, and I knew about everybody in town; I can't say that now, but at one time I did.

You know pilots were... It was a very good feeling, people looked up to you. They looked to you as a source of news, a place to get the things they needed and that they couldn't get quickly otherwise. We did many errands for them, and they'd reciprocate. We'd come into town and there would be people trying to get us to stay w/them so they could talk to us and get the news and have a new visitor.

And sometimes, we'd get weathered in here. I remember one time, going to Kodiak, unable to get in there and came back to Homer w/21 passengers. We stayed in Homer for two days. The... let's see...the Heady Hotel, was going then; that's where we'd always stayed when we were layed over. And Sterling Bar was next to it, Sterling Cafe and there was the Sterling Bar. We roomed there and the owners shook the bushes and got a guy by the name of Anderson that played the guitar, a man that played the accordion, and a man that played a musical saw w/a violin bow. Pretty soon they had the orchestra going and the passengers were all in there enjoying themselves, and we stayed around there for two days that time w/all these people before we finally got into Kodiak.

P: So about how long have you been flying?

date?
R: I flew for 38 years. I retired Pacific Northern into Western Airlines in 1967. So I became a Western Airlines pilot, and I retired at age 60 as you are required to do by the Federal Government on May 22nd, 1928. And at that time I was flying the Douglass DC-10, probably the finest airplane I ever flew. I flew it six years before I retired. So I flew a total of 38 years and a total of 32 years in Alaska and to and from Alaska.

P: Well, thank you very much for this interview. I'll have to look you up some other time for some more information.

R: Very good Peter, thank you.