

Narrator: Ed Herndon

Date: July 21, 1981

Interviewer: Brian Swisher

Location: Herndon Home, Homer

B. This is Brian Swisher, interviewing Ed Herndon on July 21, 1981. When did you first come to Homer?

E. In 1937.

B. Why did you come to Homer?

E. Well, I had an old friend up here. He had the homestead back there where the dam is now and carried on a correspondence with him for several years. And he wrote me what it was like. I was just a young fellow then, and I wanted to move. I sold my cattle so I could move somewhere else. That's how I came here.

B. Where did you stay when you first came to Homer?

E. Well, I stayed on a little cabin down on the beach that belonged to Tom Shelford, near the beach - way down, for a few days. Then I went back looking for a homestead and homesteaded. Well, I didn't homestead right then. I went on north and came back the next year - 1938, and homesteaded. I went to Anchorage and then up north and worked in the mines all summer. The drag lines.

B. Where was your homestead at?

E. Oh, where the towers are. Up on the Diamond Ridge Road.

B. Do you still have your homestead?

E. No, I sold it years ago. Probably twenty-five years ago.

B. What was it like on your homestead?

E. Well, it was wonderful, that is we thought so. Of course, when the war came along, I was gone for five years. You know, through the war. And when I came back, why I was married in the meantime, brought my wife back. We lived up there and had to pack everything in on our backs, you know - no roads at all. We really enjoyed it. Quite a few homesteaders around, and we'd go day or night - it didn't make any difference. Had a dog team and we'd go places and play cards or dominos, and just have a good time in the wintertime.

B. How far was it back to your homestead?

E. Seven miles.

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

B. Where did you get your food and supplies?

E. From Mrs. Walli, where Proctors' store is now. The old warehouse they have there was her old store.

B. Did you have any water on your place or did you have to carry it in?

E. Yes, we had a spring right near the cabin. We packed water from the spring.

B. What kind of heating did you use, coal or wood or what?

E. Coal mostly. There was a coal ledge right by the spring above where the spring broke out. We dug coal. I spent half my time digging coal and carrying it.

B. How did you get to town?

E. Sled, skis, dogsled, snowshoes - according to what the weather was.

B. How did you get to town in the summer?

E. Walked.

B. When you first saw Homer, did you have any doubts about living in it? What was Homer like?

E. No, I didn't have any doubts. When we came in on the boat and saw these green hills back here, I said "That's the place I want to live." It took several years to get straightened out. I homesteaded in 1938 and then, of course, I was gone through the war years. And then finally got my wife and little boy back up here in 1945, the last part of '45. And we lived up there for two or three years and finally bought a place downtown, right down on Main Street down there, and lived there for several years until, well, lived there twenty years. That's close. But it was too rough when you had children, you know. The youngest boy, the one who has the construction company here, Larry, was born on the homestead. No doctor. I delivered him myself and that was quite an experience too.

B. In what ways has Homer changed since you lived here?

E. Oh, people.

B. How have people changed the most?

E. Well, when I first came here there was about two miles of road up towards Millers Landing, a trail, that you couldn't get over. And we finally bought a Model A. Had it shipped up from Seattle and unloaded

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

on the dock out there. And I built most of these roads in Homer, I mean the old roads. The Diamond Ridge Road.

B. You built them?

E. Yes, I did! And the East Hill Road that goes up back there and the West Hill Road - I built all those roads.

B. What did you use to build them?

E. We had cats and brought cats in with the old Alaska road commission. See, it was federal land before it became a state. And we had several cats, and that was later years, of course, when we started the Sterling. Why, we built all these roads.

B. How long did it take you to build a road like Diamond Ridge Road?

E. Well, it was stretched out. First, we go through and clear the timber. Then peel the tops all off and make it so you can drive on it at least part of the time. When it was wet, you would walk. Mud was ankle deep - knee deep. All these roads are very much the same. Of course everybody lived on homesteads or right downtown, you know, and practically all the people we had to build a road with were homesteaders that came in - farmers, what have you. Teach them to run a cat and go to work.

B. When did you first gravel the roads?

E. Well, we first started graveling in, let's see, about 1948 or '49. Started on the Sterling Highway as it went through, see, and then eventually got Diamond Ridge Road.

B. Did Homer really shoot up, you know, grow when the Sterling was finished?

E. No, not at first. It went for, oh, I would say 15 years. It didn't hardly grow at all, and then it just exploded! And the last five years have been the biggest.

B. Did you want Homer to change like it did?

E. No, I'd like to see it like it was, like I first saw it. But you can't hold down progress. And it's not so much the people, but it's the different kind of people we get now. Most of the Old Timers were honest. Go off and leave our cabins for six or eight months at a time, and nothing ever touched or bothered. Maybe quite a few people come in and stay all night, cut kindling, put in wood for the next one, leave our guns.

B. So people would come in and live in your homestead?

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

E. Well, no, just came through and stay all night or something like that. You see, they wouldn't live there - you know, traveling. Maybe some homesteader would be out hunting and get caught in the dark and would come in and spend the night or step in and cook a meal.

B. It would be neat if you could still do that.

E. It sure would.

B. How did you support yourself?

E. Well, I run heavy duty equipment most of my life. I was a cow puncher to start with, heading cattle ranches. Learned to run dog lines and cats. Well, I worked two summers in the mines back north of Fairbanks.

B. What were you mining?

E. Gold.

B. Did you have to do other stuff to support yourself on your homestead?

E. Oh yes!

B. So it was hard to make a living on a homestead.

E. In fact that's all I did for twenty years. Be gone all summer. See my family maybe twice in six or seven months. Through the summer months is the only time you worked, you see, and on construction. And I worked for one construction outfit for ten years, Chris Berg. Built all the air, practically all the air, all the air landing fields. Practically all of them in Alaska. Like these towers on the hill, Olson Mountain. I went to work for them when they built Olson Mountain. Then I stayed with them for eleven years. Back in the Arctic, Kotzebue - all over the Arctic.

B. So did your wife and kids take care of the homestead while you were away?

E. Oh, yes.

B. What did they grow on the homestead?

E. Potatoes, vegetables, cabbage, strawberries, that kind of things. Everything.

B. So did they grow the main foods on the homestead?

E. Yes, my wife canned up practically everything. She canned turnip greens. Canned all the fish, moose meat. Canned practically everything we ate, except sugar and coffee and things like that.

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

B. Did you do much hunting to get your food?

E. Well, when we needed it. Back in the early days they didn't pay much attention to the game, you know, killing moose out of season and things like that. And we'd usually kill a moose in the fall - hunting season. And of course, we'd have to can it. We didn't have electricity or anything at all. You know, just gasoline lamps. And we had a canning machine, tin cans, canned everything up. Case after case of food, you know. Can away, can up - we had our old potatoes and all that stuff.

B. Where did you get the cans to can with?

E. Sear's and Roebuck. We'd order them through Mrs. Walli's store.

B. Where was the main post office where you got all this stuff?

E. I don't know, just right next door to the library, I believe. Well, the first one was back on this side, Mrs. Walli's side where the filling station is, near Proctor's. And then it moved right across to where the library is now, you know?

B. Did Mrs. Walli's store serve as a place where stuff would come through?

E. That's right. That's where everybody. . . Mrs. Walli is one of the greatest people I ever knew. When I came in here I didn't have too much money and she used to carry people a year at a time. From one fishing season to the next, that's the way. They didn't have a bank here; she didn't want money. As long as people would pay it in a year, well, that's all she wanted. And I traded with her for I think seven years before we ever finally settled up. I didn't know how much I owed her. Finally my wife had to go in there - she's a bookkeeper. She finally had to go down and get things straightened out. And I think Mrs. Walli still owes us \$700. You know I just sent her checks.

B. So did a lot of people do that?

E. Oh, yeah, everybody did in those days, all the fishermen, practically everybody that homesteaded in the hills. They'd go work in the canneries or, you know, in the summertime, do something.

B. Do you know if your homestead is still standing?

E. As a homestead?

B. Yes, the house.

E. The cabin, I believe, is still standing, the little cabin. And where those towers are on Diamond Ridge. The big towers. Well, it's. . . that's on my old homestead. And the cabin is the first as you go up West Hill

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

E. Road. The first turn off before you get to the towers turns in there just over the hill, probably 300 yards. It breaks over to the south. The homestead is right in there, and the spring.

B. Do you ever go visit it?

E. No!

B. How much land did you have?

E. 320 acres.

B. And you sold it all?

E. Yes!

B. What made you sell it?

E. Well, as I said, the country just ran along the same for years. You know, never changed. And it was too hard to walk back and forth and pay taxes on it. And had to have someplace, you know, didn't have to walk seven miles when I come in from somewhere with all my baggage.

B. What was involved in getting your homestead?

E. Checking it out. Finding the corners and giving the location, which is on the upper stakes. And then send them into the land office in Juneau. Cost me \$18 for my homestead. And you were supposed to improve it in three years. A house and so much land cleared. But when the war come along, then there was no. . . wasn't able to do, you know, anything. Everybody went somewhere. And it was about seven years before we proved up on ours. And I had forty acres in timothy and. . . hay, you know, timothy hay. Had it cultivated and "triple-hill". And I decided it was too rough and moved to town.

B. When did you move to town?

E. Nineteen and fifty. . . I believe it was 1951.

B. What was the spit like in the '40's?

E. Well, that's - that's the most beautiful piece of land I ever saw. It was from three quarters of a mile wide at the end.

B. What, at the base?

E. At the base, and then tapered out. And a quarter of a mile wide out in the end. And all solid in wild peas and wild barley.

B. Was there an abundance of trees out there?

Ed Herndon/Brain Swisher

E. Driftwood drifted, you know, up on both sides. But there was an old railroad grade right down the middle of the spit. When they hauled the coal in the early days. But that was all gone when I came here. But I pushed the cross ties off this old railroad grade to make us a road out there, with a cat. When the first cats came to Homer. There was only three cars in town and they would drive around the gravel at low tide.

B. I've heard stories about farms out on the spit. Are they true?

E. I don't think there was ever. . . if there was ever a farm out there, it was long before I came here. Because it would have been impossible, because of all the driftwood. . . drifted - driftwood on there. Logs four feet through, completely rotted away you know. And I don't think it was. . . They might have been, but it was long before I came here.

B. How did people get across Beluga Lake?

E. Well, there was no lake there.

B. There wasn't?

E. That was a slough. There was only water in there at the high tide. The way we went down, we went down to the lower store, the lower store down there.

B. Yeah.

E. Around the beach. That was all a slough and big gulleys. Water would go way back in where Beluga Lake is now, see.

B. So, it wasn't a lake then.

E. No, we built the lake. When we started the Sterling. In fact, before we started the Sterling, we built that fill across there and put in the big culverts, you know, for the water to go in and out. Later they dammed it off except for the overflow.

B. Why did they want it to be a lake?

E. Well, to me it was a wonderful idea. Place for boating and swimming. We used to swim in there all the time.

B. Until the aircraft came?

E. Yeah, and at that time the only aircraft that came in landed on the little lake out on the bypass road. Landed on the ice in the wintertime and floats in the summer. You know, small planes.

B. When you first made the road out on the spit, was the dock there?

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

E. Well, we built the dock in 19 and thirty. . . Nineteen and thirty-eight. All the old homesteaders went out, and went across the bay and cut the timber and they rafted over. One of the canneries furnished the driver to drive the piling and everything. There was about twenty of us who built the dock.

B. Has it always been in that same spot?

E. Yes, but it went out about three times. The ice has taken it out. They took out the first dock, oh - shortly after the coal people quit, left the cannery, you know. But when we started on the old dock there was still railcars out there, you know, rails. . . everything on the end of the spit. It was. . . the spit was beautiful. And when I came here they pastured a hundred head of horses on the spit in the winter time. So you can imagine how big it was.

B. Yeah.

E. But the wild rye and the wild pea. . . The Alaska guides, the horses belonged to the Alaska guides. In the summertime, they would take them all over, you know. Took them up to Kenai, raft them across on barges. Take them over to Twin Lake and all the country north.

B. Why did you bring the logs for the dock from across the Bay?

E. Well, they didn't have the timber here. The right kind of timber. None of those long straight poles, you know.

B. So it was easier to get it there.

E. That's right.

B. When did you first meet your wife?

E. Back in New Mexico in about nineteen and thirty-three or thirty-four. She came up and we married in Kodiak. When they started to build the base in Kodiak, I went to Kodiak. And I was a foreman on the job and all the foremen had houses built. The company built houses for their families. And I had a house built and we were married in Kodiak.

B. When you first came to Homer did you bring any relatives?

E. No.

B. Just you?

E. Yeah, I came up here to spend one season and then I was going back.

B. Then you really didn't plan on staying?

Ed Herndon/Brian Swisher

E. Oh, when I saw Homer, I decided I wanted to stay here. It was three years before I got my wife up here. She came up in 1940, came up to Kodiak, and we were married. We stayed there til the war started. When the war started, they evacuated all the women and children off the naval base. They didn't have any choice when the war started. They put them on boats and took them to Seattle.

B. What did she say about living in a homestead?

E. Well, she liked the homestead, but she didn't like Kodiak.

B. Why not?

E. It rained all the time. She's from Texas where it is dry.

B. Did she want to stay on the homestead?

E. Well, she wanted to stay on the homestead. She stayed Outside until. . . let's see. . . she left Kodiak in 1942, and she didn't come back until 1945. And I met her in Seattle. I was down there on the Chain, Attu and Kiska, and all, when the war was on and the war was practically over then. I worked with the army engineers as a civilian, a paid civilian. They didn't want me in the army. They didn't want me in the service at all. They wanted me so they can send me where they wanted me. They wanted me. They sent me to the Al-Can Highway first. I put in almost two years up there. And then from there to Attu on the Chain as soon as they kicked the Japs off the island.

B. So you've gone all over working on roads?

E. That's right. Roads and runways and. . . just a bit of everything with equipment.

B. What was the biggest road that you ever built?

E. Well, I don't know now of course. I had a couple of men over me in the Sterling. Superintendents you know. But I did all the handling of the men and ran draglines and all that stuff. I guess the Sterling was the biggest and hardest job. The Al-Can was rather a tough one too, but of course I was just an operator - run draglines and dozers and stuff like that.

B. Well, thanks a lot for the interview.

E. You're welcome.