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NARRATOR: TOM SHELFORD

JULY 22, 1981

INTERVIEWER: PETER CRAIG

HOMER, Ak.

P: This is Peter Craig interviewing Tom Shelford at his daughter's home on Bartlett Avenue on July 22, 1981. And I was just going to ask you a few questions about homesteading and when you came to the Homer area, and a few questions like that.

T: When I came to Homer? Well, I came to Homer to stay in Homer - I was here in 1926, but I lived in Seldovai for two years and came to Homer in 1930. And been in Homer ever since. For twelve years - well, at first 1930 - 1934, I was fishing with Oscar Munson and carrying the mail, too, from Seldovia over to here. Then Oscar Munson died and I got a boat of my own, and I carried the mail for about twelve years. Hauled coal to Seldovia, and hauled mail and freight back - because there was no stores here. No stores, no dock, no road out to the spit. We just had five miles of road from the school house over to Miller's Landing.

P: Where was the school house located?

T: Well, the same place where this first school house building is.

P: Oh! Down by the Junior High, then.

T: Yes, but that school house - the first one burned down, and the second one is down there mixed up with that there Inlet Inn Motel. And then of course, they started to build newer ones and have been at it ever since.

P: What brought you to Seldovia?

*first impression*  
T: What brought me there? I didn't even know Seldovia was on the map. No, I spent about a year and a half down in Washington to get enough money to pay my fare. I was going to Fairbanks, but so was everybody else. So I . . . a fellow on the boat says, "You better come go to Seldovia with me." I says, "Where in the heck is Seldovia." And he pointed out to me on the map. I said, "Well, okay".

So the only way we could get there, see we landed in Seward - come up on the old steamer North Western. (It was bombed by the Japs out in Dutch Harbor. They took it out there to use the power plant for electricity while they built the base out there. And the Japs they dropped some bombs right down the smoke stack.) So we landed in Seward, and then we took a train to Anchorage. Then we had to lay in Anchorage for two weeks before we could catch the boat down the Inlet. The mail boat down to Seldovia.

We rented a house on 4th Avenue <sup>in Anchorage</sup> for ten dollars a month. We stayed there for two weeks, then caught the boat down to Seldovia. I landed in Seldovia with my wife and my daughter, who owns this place now. She was only ten months old. ~~So I landed in Seldovia.~~

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T: So I landed in Seldovia. It was on a foggy rainy morning, and I looked at that town and thought, "Boy, this is the end of the world." Anyway, I only had twenty dollars left in my pocket. But I thought, "Oh, boy, I better get some money from some place and go back. But I was walking down the street and old man Young, who owns the grocery store was sitting out there on the railing. There was only a three foot sidewalk that was their Main St. He was sitting out there and feeding the pigeons. And I got talking to him, and I asked him if there was any work around there. And He said, "Oh, yeah, here comes a fellow down the street right now, and I think he's looking for some men."

So it was Andy Holmes. He had a herring saltery. And he. . . Young stopped him and introduced me to him, and I asked him if he needed any help. And he said, "Mr. Shelford here is looking for a job."

"Come right on down!" Six dollars a day, and boy! that was big wages at that time. I went down there and was unloading boats, herring boats. I stayed on that job the whole summer until late in November. Then at that time, you didn't need a job no place. You could go out and beachcomb pilings or trap porcupines for the fox ranchers or go trapping or cut trap poles or anything. So after that was over with, the herring deal, why I decided to go up the bay and cut trap poles and sell them to the canneries in the spring.

Before I got going, my wife and I were going to go to a silent picture show there then. But the Marshall came up and got to talking. And he wanted me to take a job as a jailguard. I says, "Heck, I don't want that job. I never been in sight of a jail. I won't know what to do." He said, "You don't need to do nothing. They got to do everything you tell them." So, I didn't want the job, but he talked and talked, and it was too late to go to the show. So about 10:00 pm, why, I says, "Well, I will go down there for a week until you can get someone else." I was there for nine months, and he never tried to get anybody else.

So then in the fall, my wife, she got sickly, and I had to send her back Outside to her folks. The her brother and I went trapping for the winter up at Fox River. We went up there in September and came out the next May. We didn't have radio. We didn't have no communication or nothing. That was the nicest winter I ever put in. Then we came back out in the spring, and we went Outside. And I wasn't out there more than a month and my little boy died. And ten months after that my wife died. And ten months after that my house burned up. And I said, "That's enough of this country." So I came back to Alaska and wound up here in Homer. And been here ever since.

T: I watched this town here grow from the grass roots.

Q: Was it like, the size of the town then?

A: No, there was just that road down there. There wasn't nothing up here. Nothing. Henry Olsen used to have a little narrow trail that he used all his hay up here. They had a lot of cows down there just across the from the school house, and in there where the new road is. The house is gone now. It was a green house that used to sit there. This was all Willard's homestead. Henry Olsen, he was staying there with her and

Willard  
road  
road

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taking care of the cattle and the horses. Then he took care of that blinker light or the navigation light out on the end of the spit. And the only way he could get out there - it was a kerosene light - and he would have to walk out there once a week. There was no road, no way of getting out there, only by boat. He'd go out there once a week and fill the light. And he had a, one of them game-getter guns that has two barrels, one's .22 and the other's a shotgun deal. He took that with him all the time and in the summertime, why he'd come back with a whole pack-load of eight or nine porcupines. They had foxes. They kept them down there - well, it'd be on this new road now. But there was an old log cabin down there facing the slough. The had their foxes down there. See all these homesteaders had foxes as fox-ranchers.

P: What were the porcupines for?

T: To feed the foxes.

P: So then the foxes were fed primarily on porcupine?

T: Oh, yeah! Yeah, oh this country. . . you couldn't leave that door open like that, and you would have a house full of them. At that time they were just thicker than hair on a dog's back. And they were thick all the time. And the fox ranches, they couldn't even make a hole in them. There didn't used to be any coyotes or wolves or anything in this country. Then all of a sudden, one winter, the whole works come down from the Yukon Territory and just took over the whole of Alaska. They just massacred the porcupines and the mountain sheep. You go up in the mountains and you could see sheep hides alying there that the coyotes had killed.

P: So there was a lot of game around then.

T: Oh, yeah, there was lots of game. Oh, you couldn't go trapping in the winter time, and you couldn't hardly keep the porcupine out of your traps. So we used to just kill them and sell them to the fox ranches, 50¢ a piece. There was lots of fur. You didn't have much trouble making four or five-thousand dollars in the winter-time. And at that time dollars was dollars. Yeah, it was a great country then, but it's not so good now - too civilized.

P: What was involved in homesteading? Did it work?

T: Well, yeah, they all homesteaded, but most of them, like Virgo and Freddy Anderson, their dad and Virgo and Freddy, they used to fish in the summer, but in the spring, they had a cabin back there on Tweeter Creek. And they'd go back there in March and kill off about six or seven hundred porkies and skin them out, bring them home and hang them out to dry. And then their mother would take care of the foxes in the summertime.

They would all go fishing. Old Gus Anderson, Virgo's dad, used to work for Libby's on the fish-traps up there on Salamada beach, and Virgo, he worked down there at the cannery for a few years. And then I took him fishing with me. And then Virgo and Freddy built a boat, and then they went fishing on their own. They still got the Tasmania out there in the harbor, so they don't fish much any more. They been selling the place off up in lots.

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P: What did you have to do to get a homestead?

T: Just make an application to the Land Office in Anchorage - \$ ten dollars. Then, after you was on it three and proved up, you're supposed to have, why, ten per cent of it in cultivation. But in those days, you know, why, when you went to prove up the homestead, why, another homesteader, you say, "Well, I am going to prove up one of these days. You vie for me and I'll vie for you!" That's about all there was to it.

Yeah, I homesteaded here down here on Beluga Slough. Yeah, I owned half of that slough at one time, and then. . . So most of it's gone. The house I built down there is right over here now. It was sold after I sold the place. It was sold to Dr. Alexander, I think it was that bought it. Bought it for \$50. Then he moved it up here with a horse team, and it's the second house as you turn to go toward the fair grounds. Yeah, had that down there, then homesteaded that. Had that house down there and the road and the house was fifty feet back from the road. Then I had a garden outside of that and then a root cellar and so on. But all of that's done. Even where the house was.

P: When did you start selling your homestead?

T: Selling it?

P: Yeah.

T: Oh, let's see, 1958. That was the year that I sold. I had Terminal Oil Sales. I sold it to the Edens boys, and they wanted a place for a shop. And that's the first lot I sold. That was in 1958, off and on. I just sold the last of it now. I sold too that Body and Paint shop right behind Sunny's Service. That was mine. Then the next lot, the corrugated iron warehouse - that was my propane. I had a propane business, too. I just sold it. That was my last one.

P: Sounds like you had all kinds of jobs. What else did you do, besides...

T: I should say I've done everything in my life. Before I come up here, I was a railroadman - fire and run locomotives. Yeah. I left in 1944. I had been digging out under the basement of what is now the Sterling Bar, all by hand. I dug that whole thing out and my back got to bothering me, and I went to Anchorage to see if I could get something done about it. And the doctors wound up telling me I had T.B.

I told them they was crazier than loons, but they wouldn't believe me. They finally wound up and said, I had a cavity on the upper right lobe in my right lung. So I told them, "You're all bum-house. I ain't got nothing wrong with my lung. I come up here to get my back fixed." Well, it might be caused from that. So they said, "What are you going to do now?" I said, "Well, I am going to go back home and wait out until the first boat going out."

The boats only come once a month. It was the only way you could get out of here. So I came back home, and they gave me a big long letter to show to the spe. . . I told them I was going to a specialist down in Seattle and they gave me a big long letter to show him.

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T: So I weighed about 157 pounds then, but by the month I had to weigh to get out on the boat. I weighed 180. So anyhow, I went out to this pseicalist and told him I wanted a check up. He said, "Okay", and he gave me a good check-up. And he said, "You're okay." I said, "You're sure about that now." And he said, "Yeah, what makes you think different." I pulled this letter out and showed him, and he said, "I don't know. I think they're mistaken." He said, "You've got some old scars on your lungs," which I knew I had because I had that flu in that big epidemic in 1918. And had those scars. I got the pleuresy afterwards and that was something, but I didn't have no T.B. So then I asked them if they recommend a doctor where I could get my back fixed.

Oh yeah, yeah, that was worse again. They wound up giving me a big steel corset to wear. So I knew darn well that thing is no good for me at all. It might relieve your back, but it will make it worse in time. So I just put in my time going to picture shows, And I get on any bus that come along, and I go to the end of the line and walk back.

One day, I went clear to Alkai Point on the bus. I got off and hiked clear back. It was about twenty miles, and I wound up at the railroad station there. And I went in there to rest awhile before I went back to the hotel. See, I was waiting all the time. See, I had sent for my wife and boy to come down. I had to wait a month on them. So anyway, I had to sit down there and a fellow come sit down alongside of me. He was watching the board all the time, and the darn train his wife was coming in on was fifteen minutes late, then twenty minutes late. And we got to talking, and I told him why I was down there, and "Well, heck! I can tell you where to get that fixed, and I syas, "Boy! If you can, I would sure appreciate it." So he gave me the address of a old chiropractor, and I went up there and shoot!, he had me fixed up in about three treatments \$15 dollars. And I had spent hundreds of dollars on these other doctors.

So then the wife come down, and we went down to Tuscon. We were going to spend the winter there. And I couldn't get a house to live in. It was the war, you know, and Southern Pacific had a big trailer court down there. They were opening up. And I went down there to see if I could rent one of their trailers. "Oh, yeah, yeah, you can rent a trailer, if you can work on the railroad." And they said, "We need brakemen," and I says, "I'll go fire, but I ain't going brakin'." "Okay, we need firemen." And they gave me the housetrailer, of course, to live in.

So I fired down there until around Chirstmas-time, but it was. . . Then I came back up to Portland, then went long-shoring for winter, long-shoring Russian boats during the winter-time. And of course, I come bakk up. It was fun though. When I was going to quit that job and come up, they wasn't going to let me quit. I said, "You ain't going to stop me from quitting and that's a cinch." I said, "I am a commerical fisherman from

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T: Alaska, and I am going back up. So they decided they couldn't stop me from coming, so I come anyway. I fished around here for, well, from 1930 until three years ago. I fish right here in Cook Inlet. Oh, there's so doggone much you could tell about this town now that it's. . .

You know there wasn't nothing at all, There wasn't nothing on Pioneer Avenue at all. It was just timbers. In fact, there was one night the wife and I have been over the East-side. We was living down at the slough then, down on Beluga slough. Coming back after a dance over there, it was at Miller's Landing - used to be a school house there where Mickey's Store is, and we run over a Silver fox right about where that Heady Hotel is. See I had the first truck shipped in here in . . . when did I ship that in? 1932 - '31 or '32 I believe.

P: That was the first truck in Homer?

T: Yeah, and everybody thought I was crazy, getting that big truck in here. It was the old double A ford. It had a one bed rear end. Heck, I used to go all the way down to the coal bunkers and get a load of coal on two-wheel drive. Come back and . . . but anyway, that truck was. . . people thought I was crazy when I came back with a load of coal.

Yes, I could talk and talk all day. It used to be quite a deal here when we didn't have any boat harbor. Only just this Beluga Slough, and then you could only get in there on big tides, and if the weather was good. Well, the boat that was fishing with Oscar Munson on, he had cancer of the stomach, and we had to go to the hospital. And he turned his boat over to his step-son. I went with his step-son - two trips to Seldovia, And I didn't like the way he was boating at all. And I told him, I said, "Fred, you get somebody else on here 'cause I'm not going to stay on here and get drowned." So he got Ed Anderson with him, and then I went and got another boat.

Just figured on hauling coal to Seldovia and fish in the summer-time. So I was going in with a load of coal one day and Alfred Anderson's wife and two babies, well, a little girl about three and then the small baby. They wanted to go to town. And I had just bought this boat, and it only had a five horse and standard engine in it. It was a great big old clunker. So I took her in to town. I had the boat loaded with coal, and the skiff. So I had about ten tons of coal taking it in. Took us about four hours to tow all that to town. And I come up a southwest wind anyhow and it helped me back. It was about four hours getting to Seldovia. And Fred and Ed Anderson were over there carrying the mail with Oscar Munson's boat. So they had gone to town

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T: And they'd been in town a week, and Marion she didn't come back. She wanted to meet her sister. Her sister was teaching in Chignik, and she was going through before going Outside. And she wanted to see Marion's two kids. So Marion was waiting on her. And waiting on her. So I had to make another trip to town. So I saw Marion in town, and I asked her if she was ready to go home. And she said, "No, I am going tomorrow with Fred." I says, "Oh! fine." So I come on home.

The next day it was blowing Southwest to beat heck.. A big storm with twelve, thirteen foot seas rolling down here. And we were sitting in the house - window faced right out to the bay, you know. And Mrs. Walli was sitting there. We was all talking, and Mrs. Walli says, "I wonder if the mail'll be in today." And I said, "Well, if they come, they're not coming in the slough.. They'll go around the spit and come in Mud Bay." So we sit there talking, and pretty soon I was looking out the window, and I thought I seen the big seas rolling. And I thought I seen something come up on top and go out of sight again. I kept watching and I said, "By God! I tell you, there comes the boat!" I says, "Surely they're not trying to go into that slough today."

So they. . . But they did, coming right at it, and they was about an hour and a half late on the tide. And you know, there was no Beluga Lake down there then. That was before they put that road across. The tide used to go clear through, pretty near to M<sup>l</sup>ler's Landing. And when it went out, you couldn't hardly buck it in there with a boat. It was just a terrible current. And they was an hour and a half late, and it was just a boiling out of there. And they got right in the mouth of the slough, and one of them big seas went over and killed their engine. And they drifted right back out into the surf and then another big one come along and turned the boat clear over and sunk it.

And this woman and two kids got drowned there. I was. . . As soon as I seen it coming into the slough and the mast stop, and then start to back out. I beat it down there. But I couldn't do a thing. There was only one skiff down there, great big old coal skiff of Glenn Bowers half full of mud. And I couldn't move it. And pretty soon Alfred come down, the father of these two little kids. And Marion was his wife, but neither one of us was sure that she was on there. But anyhow Alfred gave me a lift with the skiff, and we got it down. And there was two oars in it and a old stock anchor. We got it in the water, and Alfred took one oar and I took the other one, and we pretty got washed up on the bank with skiff.

We got out and I said, "Alfred, there's Fred swimming out there." So we headed for him. Then about that time Ed Anderson. . . The bow of the boat never did go down. There was a air pocket up in

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T: there, and it held it up. And Ed Anderson was hanging on to that. When we started for Fred, he said, "That woman and kids is in here." And boy, Alfred went crazy. I kept talking to him so he wouldn't break that oar, you know. Well, we got over to the boat, and well, the door of the cabin was about seven feet under water. So I took this stock anchor; and everytime a swell would throw us against the boat, I would bang it with that anchor, you know. And finally got a hole in there where I could see. And there wasn't nobody in there. So I told Ed, I says, "Kick the anchor over so it keeps this boat right here. And let it go dry, so we can find out what happened."

So he kicked it over, and then we took him in on the skiff. And when the boat went dry, why the little girl was in the corner of the hull. But the baby and Marion was gone.

So we all went out the spit. Everything goes this way towards the spit out on the beach. We started out on the spit, and I had a dog, a German Shepherd dog, and I had had him for years. And he was going ahead of us, and he found her first. She was clear up in the drift pile. The big seas had thrown her clear up in there. Yeah, that was a terrible thing.

P: Well, that you very much for the interview, and I will have to come back and talk to you some other time.