

GEORGE MAGNUSEN  
ON  
KODIAK, ALASKA, DURING WORLD WAR II  
And  
Kodiak before the War  
His family's arrival in Kodiak  
Kodiak's change of fisheries  
Kodiak after the War

By  
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The following autobiographical interview was held on November 29, 1990, with Mr. George Magnusen, former fire chief, and skipper. Mr. Magausen's wife, Pauline, also contributed to the interview. The interview was conducted in Mr. Magnusen's home. The interviewer is Larry Ellsworth, a student at the University of Alaska in Kodiak.

LE: I'm going to interview George Magnusen at about 7:10 in the evening...I'm at George's house here in Kodiak...George lives a little bit off of Benny Benson close to Rezanof...George would you tell us a little bit about some of the important things that happened to you in your life...not in too much detail but can you give us a rundown.

GM: Okay...like I said I was born here in 1918 and during the '30s I worked on cannery canvas with my Dad and got to learning the boat trade tendering for the canneries and that's about the occupation of Kodiak in those days...it was seasonal, just no winter, worked hardly (?) just in the summer months...that's where I got my start in boating...of course then we developed into the (?), in 1937, I was owning a boat and so was my Dad and we were doing the dredging and surveying for Sims-Drake outfit at the base...to originally start up the base I assume in preparation for World War II and that (?) was the starter and, of course, when the war did start I didn't get into the service directly but I was working for the government and I was running a boat around the island serving all the outposts and troops that were placed in different places...like the searchlight groups and your gunnery placements...and took their supplies and I guess I towed targets for them...that was the extent of my war years here.

LE: Okay, before we get too far into that George, let's answer some of these other questions. One I want to answer maybe right now, you mentioned dredging...where and what were you dredging for? Was that out in Womans Bay or where?

GM: Yes, that was in the bay...that was a shallow fishing bay before and we used to take 33 million fish out of that Womans Bay every summer from anywhere from June 15th to August 15th, that was the fishing season here, the season of work.

LE: George, I want to back up to your family. How did your family end up coming to Kodiak? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

GM: Well, my father came from Norway. He left Norway was he was 17 years old, and her came over here and got in the American Revenue Cutter Service which is now called the Coast Guard and that's how he got his citizenship...and that's when he started out on the east coast and he got on the revenue cutter "Manning" which was serving Alaska theater and that's how he came to the west coast here where he met my mother...my grandfather came from Norway also and that's were that connection came in and, of course, I was born and raised here.

LE: Okay, what year were you born in Kodiak?

GM: I was born December 25th, 1918.

LE: Okay, you've kind of given us a little bit of a picture of about what Womans Bay, at least, was like before the war. How about the town of Kodiak. What do you remember about the town before they started making any preparations for the war?

GM: Well, it was just, it was a fishing, a small fishing town...I venture to say we had between 250 to 400 people and that varied population (?)...and that was only seasonal...it was like, oh, from April to May getting cannery ready and driving the fish traps, and then fishing with the regular fishing for June, July and August as well as the traps...then in September, everything closed up again for the winter...there was nothing else after that, it was seasonal.

LE: How many canneries were here before the war?

GM: Well, right in Kodiak there was only the one. It was called Kadiak Fisheries Company. This island was named, orginally, Kadiak Island, then it got to be Kodiak Island. There was one more, kind of smaller, away from here which was Ouzinkie about a 45 minute haul from here. And there was also the McConnahy Cannery down here at the dock, where the city dock is, not the city dock, but where the ferry dock is now located...actually that was just a small plant, too...they did clams as well as salmon and herring.

LE: Besides salmon and herring, what were some of the other fisheries at that time?

GM: Well, at that time the only three was the salmon, herring, and the clams, locally, you see, but the halibut, the boats would come up from the Seattle area and catch their halibut and go south with everything. The crabs, crabbing didn't come in effect until after the war (wife "60's")60's?...after

the war...and they were big ones, they were 20 to 26 pounders and you couldn't sell them for a dollar and a half apiece for the whole crab...

LE: Uh, huh...times have changed. How old were you when actual war started, you know when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor?

GM: Twenty-three years old.

LE: And what were you doing at that time? Where you actually working on the dredging that you were talking about or...

GM: No, during the summer months, like I said, I had been on the...well, I hadn't been on the cannery...

PM: (Wife - I hate to butt into your microphone...but at that time you were working for Ray Martin and then shortly after the war started then you got started on the boat for the Army.)

GM: Oh, that's right I was...I worked at Kraft's store and then I worked in a liquor store before I got into the Army service. That was in '41? '41 to '44.

LE: And after you did that you started helping by doing what?

GM: That's the time I was in the military service hauling the supplies like the groceries and the ammunition supplies around the different outposts around the island like going to Marmot, Marmot Island, going down to Alitak, and Long Island and Danger Bay and Larsen Bay and Ocean Beach on the east side.

PM: (Wife - Don't forget your submarine duty for two years.)

LE: Okay, yeah, tell us. You can't hear on the tape recorder probably but George's wife says, tell them something about the submarine gates. So we want to make sure we get this.

GM: Well, what we had, we had submarine nets stretched across...we're here not very far from where the nets started, Mission Beach here, right across to Woody Island. And on one end was a anchor (?) wide enough for a boat to go through...and it was metal, metal mesh just like a big salmon net except it was, I'd say, 3 feet by 4 feet...and they were put down for, of course, to keep submarines out of the area. When coming in, of course, it was shallow enough that they would have to surface anyhow...nevertheless, the net

was across here and you could only come through here in daytime...you could not come into Kodiak during the nighttime at all...then at the other entrance between Big Point and Broad Point we call it...that's from the bases' south entrance over toward Long Island was a mine field, and you have to know where you were going to get through that mine field...of course, all the local boats knew where you could go through and where you couldn't...otherwise you'd be in the area and you couldn't cross there for a couple, three years...also I laid the first pair, 50 pair of telephone underwater cable in the Kodiak Island area, from Chiniak to the Long Island, then over to Puffin Island, then over to the base, then over to the Monashka Bay side which is out here just about 15 minutes drive from here...I laid a telephone cable from here over to Seward...I was running a boat at that time and we put, we had, 90 tons on board covering a about a 123 mile run to Seward and that held us until we got about six hours out of Seward and we run at the end of the cable...and, of course, you have to hang on to it, you can't let it go cause it, you have to wait to,...we had a Canadian cable ship in the store (?), she came up along side...and she grabbed that end and they spliced it, it took eight hours to splice the rest of the cable, and then it went on into Johnson Cape and then into Seward, from there over land which was a 20, 25 mile run.

LE: How big a boat did you take out that was laying cable?

GM: Mine was a 35 foot power barge.

LE: Okay, what are some of the other wartime projects that bring back memories for you that happened in Kodiak during the war?

GM: Well, of course, there was rationing here. The one particular thing I didn't care for was towing targets, of course...they weren't too accurate and, I guess, that's why they had to practice...it wasn't very easy towing because on several instances they were pretty close to not only hitting us but they used a HE shell, which is high explosive, which left sharpnel in the side of the boat...and we had to tow going from Cape Chiniak toward Marmot Island because when the bullets came through the rifling they ricochet off to the right so we had to tow north so that the shell would veer off to the south...if you did it the other way you were right line of turning or trajectory.

LE: Huh, I guess a person wouldn't think about that unless, I guess, they had to put up with live ammunition coming from the planes.

GM: No, it was from...

LE: The ships?

GM: No, the shore batteries...from Long Island and out here at Mill Bay Point, Fort Abercrombie...by the way, those guns came off of the ships, warships from World War I...the 6 inch, 8 and 4 inch...then they had the smaller guns that used to use the high explosive trajectory (?)...which was right off, just as you leave the base where you get by Lake Louise and the dump area or where the pits are there used to be a battery of small aircraft or small guns for aircraft, flying into aircraft as you came into the runway...and those were bad to tow for them, too...they were pretty wild...of course you could see the fire coming out of the gun barrel and it was done in daytime but you could see this...then the agony of waiting till you hear the crack, the sound, you know, as it passed you...until that time it's coming toward you...so that's a kind of little bit of the waiting there...you get used to it after a while...we also had rationing...I know that the gals used to stand in line and walk the (?) for stockings and there was a alcoholic line, there was only so many quarts of, cases of, booze and beer and wine, whatever...and there would be one line for three or four houses...of course, it was cleaned out, then they'd wait until the next shipment which could be three weeks, possibly longer...we had tire rationing...food shortage wasn't too bad...it was sugar, wasn't that the shortage, honey (wife - "Yes")...what I remember also, laying at the dock, we'd take some of these rations that evidently had gotten old or they stored, like sugar, 50 pound sacks hardened up and we had almost a half of scow load, a couple three hundred, four hundred sacks worth that we just took it out and dumped it...it was just like cement...kind a bit that they would throw away and people from town were being rationed...then we had an officer with us to make sure we did that, that we didn't...

LE: Didn't want any black market sugar...

GM: Didn't want any...whatever we had.

LE: Which branches of the service seemed to play an important part on Kodiak Island?

GM: This was the Army. That's who I vote for.

LE: Okay, where was the Army headquartered, do you remember?

GM: Well, you know, what is now the base housing area used to be called Fort Greeley...and that's right out here as you cross Lake Louise and these houses that are sitting out here...that's where Armytown was...now we had, now the other thing I did in my spare time, not only running the small 85 foot boat that I was on, but also bringing in the 250 foot, 300 foot, piloting them in here, Kodiak, troop transports, this was for the Kiska, Adak invasion, for the Aleutian chain out there...we had as high as 34 to 37,000 troops sitting out there...they were in tents...of course, also I used to, in the other spare time we had, we took a ride over here to Danger Bay which was about 30 miles from here with a sawmill which was the Army Corp of Engineers...I'd bring in lumber, a load of lumber maybe every three or four days between all this other stuff and they tried building the barracks out here before they got into tents...of all the troops that we had here, possibly 6,000 casualties came back through, but it wasn't from any injury, other than, not from bullets...it was frostbite...most of these boys were from California and Florida, Georgia, Alabama and those places...and, of course, the Kodiak boys that got drafted, they sent them down state to the warm areas instead of leaving the boys up here who knew this country, knew the chain and the climatic conditions and the fog and the snow and all this and were very well acclimated...here they had to go down and fight the heat and bring these poor fellows up from the heat up here to this cold...there was quite a bit of problems with frostbite.

LE: Was there a hospital on the island for those soldiers?

GM: Well, they had a small infirmary. Most of them were transported, brought here and transported out again. The ships came in...oh, let's see, I'd have to go out and pilot one in every second or third day. They came in a couple at a time. They didn't all come at one time. They staggered things so that if there were any submarines there, they had reports of Japanese subs in the area, so they wouldn't catch them all. We didn't lose any of them to the Japanese.

LE: Okay, do you remember any of the more reknown war-time personnel or was there anybody that worked in the services that, maybe he wasn't a general or even an officer, are there any special personnel that you remember that were on Kodiak, and why do you remember them?

GM: Well, one I certainly remember and I've got to say he was an officer was Captain Ole Johnson, who is Gary Stevens (the instructor for this project) father-in-law. He was the communications officer for the 250th Coast Artillery and he was the one that Ben Owen (?) and I were towing targets for. His job was relaying the, he had communications, he was relaying how the bullets were landing in the water whether they were up or down. That's where the trouble is mostly. They weren't so bad with up or down, it was the front and back part we had trouble with because this was the stuff that he was dealing with. On the power barge I had, of course, my own crew. There were four soldiers that had what I call a bow and arrow type of thing like Robinson Crusoe did. It was just a crossbow with a T on it and there was a nail every inch. It had about 30 here and similar amount about 30 off to the left again. It was called a range ranger. They'd stick it like this and they'd watch where the bullet lands behind, they'd see the splashes in the water and then they report, and they signal back shoreside to where this range was working, and this was how they'd coordinate the firing of the guns. Anybody else...Hank, Henry Eaton was one of them that was around here during those times. Of course I know just about everybody locally that was here...Charlie Madsen, Ben Kraft, let's see, who else? Most of the people who were in Kodiak at that time.

LE: One of them I'm going to talk to, I hope, is Betty Springhill. I know she's just a, she wasn't in the Army or anything, was she?

GM: No, she was a school teacher here. When did she come?

PM: (Wife - I don't know, I don't know if she was here during the war years.)

GM: I don't think she was here during the war period. This was after that.

PM: (Wife-She came about 1945 or '46 or something like that.)

LE: Okay. How did the war personally effect your own family? Were there any changes that, big changes in your family, how they lived?

GM: No, the only problem when you're going out on a boat like this and, of course, we always have this happen when the Japanese come over and bomb you and they'd have to leave town and come out here toward

Abercrombie and stay out in there; we were out with the boats we were always spotting too, see, looking for Japanese ships.

PM: (Wife - We had one incident the night our first child was born (?))

GM: Oh yeah, our first daughter was born December 27th, 1941. That was the night, the first night that the sirens blew in Kodiak in preparation for a Japanese air raid at 8:00 o'clock in the evening. She was born at ten minutes to 8:00. So there was a little bit of excitement there for me because then I didn't have any transportation, so I ran all the way from the hospital in town which is the Griffin Memorial, that's the only (?) there, it's just by Standard Oil, ran all the way out here to the Beachcombers, and in those days it was a pretty much wooded area and not many roads and the road we had had big holes in it, to come out to tell my mother and the rest of the family that my daughter was born and that was doing okay, and Dr. Johnson, A. Holmes, Dr. Bob's Dad was the doctor for that and, of course, there was no lights. We, they'd use a flashlight with a green paper over the lens and that's the only light we had there (?)...there was no bright lights or anything. Also we had, when I was home ashore between trips, I joined a patrol here and had a rifle and we walked the beaches to make sure there was nobody coming in. We did that in between times and then was what you call blackouts. This black building paper, roofing paper, you put them over your windows and you couldn't use no lamps at night and, of course, anyone walking around trying to identify ourselves, we'd always say something and we also had our green light - flashlights covered with plastic paper.

LE: How did it change for the citizens of Kodiak. Did they, did this permanently change kinda, like what people did for a living, living through this war, or you described the town as being maybe a couple of hundred people to maybe 450 people. Did the war bring about a big change just from people being here and wanting to come back?

GM: Well, the town started to grow after that, I'd would say we branched out into more commercial, we were getting into the crab industry and the canneries we got as many as, they were starting to move in like I mentioned too. We wound up in the late '50's, 60's with as high as 13 canneries here because of the year around. We got into the crab season for king crab season, then you run into the salmon season, then you run into a halibut season, then there was the herring

season, then you went into tanner crab season, and then you went into dungeness crab. So it turned into a year around occupation like it is today except that it is harder to get what they want. They have to divert the west (?) by so much. Of course, they have all these gears so the town built up fairly fast after that. That's what started it, mostly.

PM: (Wife - There were jobs at the base, too.)

GM: Yeah, there was. There was also the base for building up as a Navy base. There was construction for quite a few years and there was quite a civilian (?) after that. I'd say there was about 6,000 people in all between civilians and military.

LE: Now was the Navy base there right at the beginning of the war or was that something that came along later? I know you mentioned the Army was important.

GM: Well, the Army was more or less in town here, in town section where the city dock is now, what is now city dock. And, of course, General Corlett and Major Corviss (?) and a few of those officers which were Army were up here where the housing area's at. But they didn't have (?), they were mostly Navy that was here. It was originally a Navy base.

LE: What that Navy base here before the war? And, if so, about when?

GM: When we started the dredging in '37, the surveying and dredging, it was Sims-Drake Construction Company, that was being planned for the Navy then, and it slowly developed, I remember. Of course, when the war came around in '40, they most of known something cause...

PM: (Wife - Wasn't there Armytown then right around the bend from Navy?)

GM: That's what I mentioned. This Army housing town here.

PM: (Wife - And then it was almost...)

GM: That wasn't, that was a second. The Navy base was were the Womans Bay area is now today.

LE: The Coast Guard Base today.

GM: The Coast Guard Base, today. The Army was over where this housing project was. Do you know where Lake Louise is?

LE: Or over by the Buskin?

GM: That's right!

LE: Where all those cement pads are? Back along the Buskin road? Was that housing back then?

PM: (Wife - Yeah, where were all those...)

GM: But that was civilian and Navy. That was civilian and Navy. It was not Army there at all.

PM: (Wife - But when you took me to get my teeth fixed, George, that's where it was. Armytown was on this side and then right up around the bend where the guard house is now to go into the Coast Guard that was Navy.)

GM: That's right. That's Navy, dear. Navy was the big park.

PM: (Wife - Nemetz Park was Army where all those four-plexes are.)

LE: Okay, yeah.

GM: But there wasn't many troops here at all. It was Marine Corp and Navy. Army is right. The only part the Army played was like I have mentioned (?) it was called the harbor craft. And it was the protection and hauling of supplies, men, and materials around the island for to protect things. And the Navy was doing their share.

LE: Uh, huh. I want to ask you, too, since you were involved in some of the dredging; there was a submarine base here, wasn't there? Or submarine pens, I'm not sure if it was a repair area.

GM: No. No, no. Any submarine that came in here would have to come in surfaced. There's no way they could get into that base surfaced. Your depth, your water depth today, is not over 35 feet and maybe plenty more than that. In fact, your big ships, like your tanker that delivers fuel to the base, he has to come in at high tide to order to get into the base. Then, of course, when he unloads he can go out (?). It's not any depth, you couldn't bring a cruiser. You could bring a destroyer in there but not a cruiser, not deep enough.

LE: Okay. I wanted to ask you how did the natives on Kodiak, the Koniag natives, how did they, did their lifestyles change because of the war or did it stay

more or less the same for them. How were they effected?

GM: Well, it was universal. They were around here. They worked the canneries during the summer which was seasonal and a lot of them were fishermen, of course, they did the fishing. Life around here for them was pretty good. They didn't have to move out like they did on the Chain, out west, we call that the Chain. They didn't have to move out there and take them down to southeastern like they did when they brought them from Adak and Kiska and them places and they brought them in and put them here, I think it was about 1200 of them that was supposed to get about 12,000 taken away from their homes. We didn't have any like that in the war, in fact, the night the Japs were suppose to fly over here, I never even thought of it, December 27th of '41, the only thing that had stopped them, it turned foggy, the weather was kind of sloppy here, they couldn't very well see there, they were on the way here from what I gather from different people that I've talked to including some of the military officers they were within 45 minutes of Kodiak and they turned back. And one of the reasons why, when they bombed the "Northwestern" at Dutch Harbor, that's one of the boats that commonly came in here, too, when they bombed in Dutch Harbor, the American aircraft came in from the west side and the Japs thought we had another airfield further west. So they retreated. That's one of the reasons that they retreated instead of advancing further this way, from Dutch Harbor this way, and they never come to Kodiak anymore after that one night. And the weather cleared at 3 below. There is always a lot of fog around this country at that time of the year. You wouldn't know it now but (?).

LE: Okay, what do you think the were the greatest changes that happened in Kodiak because of the war? And maybe we answered this before, I'm not sure.

GM: Well, everybody coming in. It was due to the fishing industry you see in port today. It started out in the early '50s and it's been going ever since and one season after another.

LE: Not much to do with the war then.

GM: No, not at all. The war, in fact after Japan (END OF SIDE ONE)...was the shrimp fishing, you could go out here behind Long Island which is about a 45 minute run, you used to go out there and drag, they had big drags instead of pots. They dragged for a hour and a half to two hours and come in with 130,000 (or) 140,000 pounds. Of course, at that time, then these,

knowing the industry we had here, of course, then we started getting more and more outside fishermen coming in all the time. They were quite competitive which brought us into...we had 16 canneries here! And they brought them all in and they brought the price down, too, because the volume was so great that everybody made good money and diversified. And they finished off the shrimp because that poor thing is eaten by halibut, salmon, codfish, pollock, and humans, people, and what do you call these little hairy,

PM: (Wife - sea otters)

GM: Sea otters, they love shrimp, clams also...they're also hard on clam beds just like the bears are. And so the shrimp season didn't last but for 12 or 15 years and they had to go further and further and further. And finally they got so were weren't, let's see, three, four inches, they were down to maybe about a half an inch or three quarters of an inch long, that's the way they are today (?) shrimp fishery, although they multiply very fast (?) and then the same thing with the king crab. You used to drag for king crab with nothing but a big seine in the form of a pot and pulled them up, bring them up and load your boat up in a couple hours. Them days are gone also, that's why we got no pot fishery.

LE: I wanted to ask you, too. You know we said we had a cannery here, and maybe, another same one down by the ferry dock. When did the canneries start bringing Filipino or Chinese help into Kodiak? Was that at the very beginning, the very first cannery or was that later?

GM: Yeah, we...there was no Chinese here. We had, here in Kodiak, first we had Japanese fishermen, believe it or not, cannery workers back in the early '30's. And then they brought the Filipinos in but we never had any Chinese. Now you have Filipinos and you've got Mexicans and you got the other ones...

PM: (Wife - Koreans)

GM: Huh, yeah, Koreans but you also have another group...the big husky ones. Where's Lisa from?

PM: (Wife - Samoa.)

GM: Samoans, there are a few of them here. I don't know. There used to be more and more. You used to go up village street and you thought the whole street used to be nothing but Filipino country, but that was nothing (?) too.

LE: Okay. Is there... We're down to the last question that I have on my sheet, George. And is there anything that you think is important to let me know about regarding World War II that we haven't talked about.

GM: Nothing comes to me right off the bat. That was all pretty routine. We drifted in from fishing, the War era, back to civilian life, and fishing again. That's just about the way it went except the population now is close to 13, 14 thousand and with the military (?) out there it more like 17, 18 thousand so it's just been a smooth transition. The villages around the island, of course, like Old Harbor for instance down the east side, they had a floating cannery there, and over in Larsen Bay this one gave them their livelihood and they just had the seasonal three or four months, too (?). That's the way it's been right up to modern times. I can't think of anything. You don't have any more questions?

PM: (Wife - One hardship we had, you remember, was when people wanted to leave on the boat. We didn't fly out here. They had passenger boats and they never, never knew when they were going to be coming in. They'd just tell you within a few days, they have to come in through the night, you'd have to be all packed up and ready to travel.)

GM: That was your passenger ships. That was all strictly secret. When they came in you didn't know it until they were at the dock and they left at night. But I understand the Japanese had pictures of the ships leaving here and when they got out into Chiniak Bay area they knew they were with women and children but they weren't (?)...this started as a rumor and I never heard anybody say that it was false or otherwise...but supposedly, it's suppose to be well documented that they did when the ship's leaving here. That was the old Alaska Steamship days in the '40s. We only used to get them once every six weeks. One ship every six weeks. We didn't have no fresh beef or nothing. We'd get it in salt barrel, brine, butter in barrels and corn beef in barrels and if you wanted anything you had your own chickens, you had your own eggs, you raised your own cattle, and you have your eggs...

PM: (Wife - Not during the war, George.)

GM: Well, Sargents had their (?). I wasn't a marketing type thing.

PM: (Wife - My Dad worked in the butcher shop.)

LE: If you were lucky enough, huh?

GM: Kraft's had their own. They had two cows. Yeah, there was no butcher shops.

PM: (Wife - My Dad worked in the butcher shop.)

GM: When did he come over, '40?

PM: (Wife - '39. When I came over, yes. I just don't want you to paint a picture of the years before the war.)

GM: All, right. I guess I missed a couple of years.

LE: Okay, well thank you, George. I appreciate you sharing our time here and for giving me this information.

GM: I hope it helped you. If you think of anymore, give me a call.

LE: Okay. (END OF INTERVIEW)

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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