

HISTORY OF ALASKA
INSTRUCTOR: GARY STEVENS

VAL BENTON
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INTERVIEW WITH NINA OLSEN

- VB: Nina, where were you born and when, if you don't mind telling me the date.
- Nina: I was born in the village of Afognak. My birthdate is January 24, 1924.
- VB: Who were your parents?
- Nina: My parents were Christin Afarie and Christina Lukin. My mother's maiden name was Christine Knagin.
- VB: Do you know who their parents were?
- Nina: My Mom's parents were Helen and Alexander Knagin. My Dad's name was also Alexander Lukin, I can't remember her name.
- VB: Are these Russian or Native names?
- Nina: I think they're Russian.
- VB: What was the size of your family?
- Nina: I had six brothers and sisters, three brothers and three sisters.
- VB: Which one were you?
- Nina: The oldest, there were seven of us.
- VB: Tell me, Do you know if you were born at home?
- Nina: I was born in Afognak with a midwife.
- VB: Do you know who the mid-wife was?
- Nina: I believe it was the mid-wife in Dervina's Daughter We referred to her a Babushka. She was Gregerioff.
- VB: What kind of a home did you have? You didn't have the Barbaras did you?
- Nina: No, I guess it was lumber structure. Cause I remember that house stayed up for many many years. Pete and I stayed in it for a little while after we were married. We fixed it up and stayed in it. Part of it was log.
- VB: You didn't have indoor plumbing or electric?

Nina: No, no electric, no indoor plumbing. We had our out houses and our banyas

VB: Did everybody own a banya, or was that a community thing?

Nina: Everybody, there were very few people that didn't.

VB: Did you have your banya that you heated up on Saturday, How did you do that?

Nina: Yeah, once or twice a week, maybe in the middle of the week, then on Saturday. Everybody got bathed and cleaned up for Sunday.

VB: What was the religious situation in your village? Did you have a church?

Nina: There was an Orthodox Church there in Afognak, that most people worshipped in.

VB: Was there any kind of a protestant witness there?

Nina: Not for many years, it was in the beginning of the 40's that missionaries first came.

VB: So you were probably about a teen-ager.

Well, so can you think of some of your earliest memories? Of life in Afognak? Do you remember before you went to school? or did you go to school?

Nina: Oh yes, I went to school. Yeah we had school from first grade on to eighth grade. Many years before that they had a high school in Afognak.

VB: How long did you live in Afognak?

Nina: Up until I, OK I got married, then Pete was in the Army and then he got out we lived there a year or two. Then we moved here (Kodiak). I think it was in 1945 we moved here and we've been here since.

VB: What year did you get married?

Nina: '43

VB: I'll get back to this later, but I want to get back to what you can remember as a little child, going on up through school.

Nina: The thing I remember as a child, I was the first grand-child, so I spent a lot of time with my grandma and grandpa. My Grandpa and Grandma spoke only Aleutic,

some Russian, but I remember mostly my Grandfather spending a lot of time with him. And so spending a lot of time with him in order to communicate with him I picked up the Aleutic language. I always remember him, being the first grandchild, he really pampered me. I always remember him buying me a little red table, chair and beautiful clothes, blanket, just gifts and things like that.

VB: Now where would he buy those things?

Nina: There was a store. In fact, we had 3 stores in Afognak

VB: Who owned them? Do you remember?

Nina: Well, von Scheele was one, and there was a Pajohman and there was a Petellum.

VB: What was the population at that time?

Nina: Gosh, I don't know.

VB: Did they have two parts to the town then?

Nina: One part of the town, they referred to as Aleut Town. I guess that's where the Aleuts settled, in that direction. And then you walked quite a way and they called that Russian town, where a lot of Russian people who came in settled there. There was a lot of mixture in the village. What I remember is a lot of Scandnavians coming in, the Swedes, the Norwegians and the Danes.

VB: Where most of the people coming in men, coming in to fish?

Nina: From what I can recall they were young men coming up from wherever, and working in the canneries, or fishing. Then I guess they liked the life style and just settled and then married.

VB: Did you have canneries on Afognak?

Nina: Not in Afognak, but there were a lot of canneries in other areas, like Ouzinkie had a cannery, Kodiak and eventually like at the Straights there. We also had herring plants in those years. And then up a ways, where we called Litnik there were hatcheries. There was fox farms also and trapping, my Dad trapped. Another thing I remember about growing up, he took us trapping with him one winter. It was a couple of months or so.

VB: Did you go out on the trapline with him?

Nina: No, he tended them and we stayed at home. I remember there was a house, kind of, and a hill there and it blew a lot. The name of the place was Noisy Island. I don't know if they've changed the name of the place, but at that time it was Noisy Island, and I've always wanted to go back and look at that place. That was fun to me. I always thought that was the greatest trip, being the only ones on that island. And that house there, I always remember the windy days. man you could feel that. And when it got to^owindy and we thought the house was going to blow down we went down hill to kind of a barbara there. And of course we had our banya, and another thing we had there, I don't know what the Aleutic name would be, but they built an underground house, and built a stove for an oven with rocks. They built a fire in there and baked bread when the coals went down. That was the way my mother made bread there. I also remember going out with my father on the fishing grounds and that's the way they baked their bread too.

VB: I've never been in a banya, what is that like?

Nina: What they do today is use like a drum, like an oil drum and build the rocks around it because the rocks hold the heat, they pour water on the rocks. It can get really hot in there. When I look back Val, the banya was cleaning of the body, and I believe now too, for sharing, for mental health, I remember going in the banyas with my mother and some ladies and they would share with each other the goings on in life, their hurts and their pains.

VB: How long would you stay in the banya?

Nina: It could be an hour or two. Just depended, that was what they were for.

VB: So the women would go in at some time and then the men at some other time. Did you sit in there with a towel or naked?

Nina: Of course naked. You had a big basin where you washed yourself and scrubbed yourself. And they used this what you called alder leaf **** for beating your body. They made their own. I've learned since that there's something in that alder leaf that's something for the body, for your aching body.

They used that for a lot of things, for massaging or whatever. They'd take pregnant women there, and beat them, not hard but put

this stuff over their tummy. They would know how the baby was inside the womb, whether it was sideways or upside down and then the midwives would take care of that. If the baby wasn't in the right position they turned the baby.

VB: Actually some of those folk things have turned out to be real wise. How did they know?

Nina: I don't know. Well they trained them I guess, and passed it on. Some women would have hands that were more sensitive than others. I experienced that when I came back from Seattle. I had that surgery in my hips, and when I got home I fell and I really hurt my leg and couldn't walk, but one gal that did midwifery came and massaged me till I could walk again and no pain. They just knew.

VB: While we're on the subject, what about other kinds of medicine. Did they have any?

Nina: Oh yea, they had medicines, where you put it on the body or you boil it and drink it in tea, a different tea and they used it for medicine purposes for colds, for whatever. I think if we knew what to pick out now we wouldn't have to buy prescribed medicine. A lot of people are going back to that now, they seem to be working. Another thing I experienced myself, I had a sore in my leg, and we had a health nurse who made trips around the island, and she gave me some salve to put on there, but that didn't make it heal. It was getting bigger and going down in to the flesh. It was miserable. I was in my teen years and I was so embarassed. I was just getting introduced to silk stockings, and I couldn't wear them cause it was so messy. Then, a native fellow came to me and said, "Why don't you gather some salmon berry leaves and bring them home and put them in hot water and apply it right to the wound". I was desperate by then, so I did. You know Val, in a couple of weeks that whole thing was healed. It never came back again. The scar remained for many years, but that healed it.

VB: Do they have any of that written down?

Nina: No, they're trying to. They have a book here. We had a book here summer before last with some of that. She should have it published, but I don't know when.

VB: So you did have a visiting nurse that came around once in awhile. Probably from Kodiak? Did you ever have doctors that came?

- Nina: Ok, there use to be a government boat that traveled to the villages with a doctors on board and that is when we saw them. And a dentist, so there was a traveling hospital.
- VB: Mentioning a dentist makes me curious. Did they have any kind of false teeth in those day? Any dentures? Or did people go without them?
- Nina: People went without them, but they learned they had a catalog. They would send people these things for your impression and they would send them in and get their false teeth. I guess they worked.
- VB: What if someone had appendicitis or something really serious that was life threatening? or if a baby didn't come out and it needed to be caesarean? Did you just die?
- Nina: You know, I don't remember any deaths from childbirth the years I was raised there. But I do know that if you were really sick, like appendicitis, before we got a doctor on Kodiak they were sent to Seward. It would have to be by boat.
- VB: Something else I want to ask you about. What did you children do for play?
- Nina: I liked to play house. We had dolls. I remember my mother making me one. It was a real nice rag doll and I really treasured that, and one day it disappeared and I never knew what happened to it. They made us rag dolls until Sears Roebuck was introduced then they got them through there. We had tea cups and made tea, and little chairs, the table with that for indoor things. Outdoor games we had too, a lot of fun in the summertime. If you didn't have any, children created their own. Wintertime was sledding, we had homemade sleds, and we had lakes where you could go skating. Some of us kids kind of liked to go trapping too, trap for our own ermine. I had a girlfriend who just loved to do that. I didn't really care to but I'd go with her to check her traps and it was kind of fun too. We'd walk and crunch in the snow, especially if you saw a little animal there trapped.
- VB: That makes me think, did you have bears there too?
- Nina: Yea there are bears on Afognak, but didn't see any in the winter time, but summertime, we were't bothered with bears. I saw my first brown bear in Seattle in the zoo. Then later on a few years after I came back I worked in a cannery and I saw one there and it came up close to the bunkhouse, but my first bear was in

Seattle.

VB: Where did you work in the cannery?

Nina: My first experience in the cannery was in Port William cannery. They called it the Fish and Oyster Company. It was on the north end of Afognak. We went by boat and worked there. I was fifteen. I should have been sixteen, but they allowed me to go at fifteen. Either that or I lied about my age, because I thought it was time for me to go to work. We stayed there during the summer. The second year I went there I met my husband. I was 16 and he was 19. three years later we got married. After working in the cannery, after meeting Pete, I came to Kodiak and I did work in Kodiak housekeeping, just so I could see him once in awhile. He worked out at the base. They were building the base then, during world War II. We got married in 43.

VB: Gary, our teacher is really interested in hearing about World War II. Let's see, about that time. Where you in Kodiak in 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor? Do you remember when they attacked on the Aleutian Chain? Was there anything about that time? Were you having air raids here?

Nina: Yea they warned people and I remember this one night they warned us to be ready to leave, for wherever I don't know. I was at my aunt's place. We got dressed up warm and the signal came to go wherever, my aunt had a little girl and she didn't want to. She wasn't worried about the Japanese she was just worried about being too hot. And then we had a black out. There were no lights to be showing, couldn't be flashlights or nothing like that. As it was we didn't have to go.

VB: Whenever the Japanese starting moving up the Aleutian Chain, did you hear that by radio or newspaper or how?

Nina: Probably by mouth. People that had radios passed the word around. The first summer I went to Port Williams, I remember a ship coming in there with a lot of people from the Aleutian Chain. They just came as you are, but the only thing they were able to carry was a little bag, whatever they could bring along. Thy were just taken from their homes and put on that ship for wherever, I don't know. They didn't stay there (Port Williams) they just stopped there. Probably the boat was taking on some canned salmon.

VB: Was there a lot of fear at that time?

Nina: I think so. I don't think they really lived in fear, but they were warned of what could happen. People kept

them informed, to have caution and what signals to look for. People were just starting to get radios.

VB: At that time was there any newspaper?

Nina: I don't know what time the Kodiak Mirror started. Probably around that time.

VB: Did a lot of young men from Kodiak go?

Nina: Yea, a lot of the boys were called.

VB: Alsaka wasn't a state yet at that time. Would that make any difference as far as being drafted? in to the army? It was still a territory.

Nina: They drafted them. Pete had to go. He decided to go ahead and get in the army cause he knew he would have to anyhow. So he left and I followed him, we planned to get married. He went first to his home, Cordova. Then Cordova sent him to Valdez where he got in the army. and I followed him later to Valdez and we got married there. At that time they only allowed the wife to be with the soldier boy husband a month. I had to leave, if I didn't leave, then they would ship him somewhere. He stayed in Valdez and I came back to Kodiak. They had what they called the Harborcraft, which is being out on the boat. It was Harborcraft detachment. They were soldier boys out on boats traveling around. They traveled down the Chain. Pete went down as far as Canada. He was in the army three years. He stayed in Alaska all that time. When we first got married we were separated 11 months, and then he got a furlough and came home. And all this time he was on this boat. So he came in to town every now and then. We would be separated 5 months, then 3 months and the boat would stop in town.

VB: Some other areas I wanted to ask you about. Back in Afognak, did you have gardens?

Nina: Yes, we had big potato gardens. We grew our own potatoes. They were good sized potatoes. I remember in order to provide we had too, we didn't have no money to buy, or run to the store for them. We also had a vegetable garden. Rutabagers always did real good, we had carrots, we had lettuce, radishes, and people experimented in other ways. We had beans.

VB: Did you eat many natural things that grow wild here, like fiddle ferns, dandelions?

Nina: Maybe some people did, I learned later that those were good to eat. I think we concentrated on potatoes,

vegetables and beans, and putting up fish. That pretty much used up our time to do those things in the summertime. Later on we had deer, during that time we had rabbit. We had duck, we had clams. We ate real good. Deer was planted there later, so was elk after that. People had cows too, in our particular village. No pigs and sheep, but we had chicken.

VB: How about your clothes, did your mother sew?

Nina: Yeah, most of the women sewed. I remember my grandmother sewing me dresses, probably started off by hand. Later on I remember a Singer Sewing Machine ship coming in to Afognak, and everybody bought a sewing machine. I remember my mother buying one. So that was a big change in the way they did their sewing. In those years too their were a lot of halibut boats that came from the lower 48 and were around. Of course they were taking care of themselves, catching halibut and earning their living.

VB: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about school. You had first through 8th. Who were the teachers? Were they local people who had gone out for schooling?

Nina: I remember we did have a local person there, who was a von Scheele girl. Her name was Enola. She went out to school and became a teacher and came back to teach. She was a good teacher.

VB: Did you have more than one teacher?

Nina: Oh yeah, three or four that I know of. We had one building with different size classes, with living quarters for the teacher, for the outside teachers. I remember, when I started school, see I lived in Aleut town so I had to walk clear over to Russian town for the school. Later on they built a new school building on my side of town.

VB: When did you acquire a limp? Were you born with a limp?

Nina: Yea I was born with it. I believe I was born with dislocated hips, and my mother never knew there was anything wrong until I started walking. I started with a limp. Some body explained to her what happened to assist with babies bodies and the midwife didn't do that, so I just grew like that. I complained a lot about my aching legs and hips, so she inquired around if there was something that could be done. That's when I was sent to hospital in Seattle. I was 11 years old at that time. I went alone, there was a nurse on the boat and there were three other kids that were sent

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down there. I was very sad to go so far away. And, I was on the boat for a month before I got to Seattle. When we got to Seattle I didn't want to get off the boat because that had become home to me. I got acquainted with the people on the boat and they were so nice and took care of me. Well what happened we stopped in every community, village to pick up something or to take something. that's why it took so long. When we arrived in Seattle it was pouring down raining and they got me ready to go in a cab to the hospital. Seattle was so big and all of these wires. And that was such a really sad feeling again leaving that boat and going to the unknown, strangers. I don't believe the nurse went with me, she just gave the taxi driver directions what to do and where to take us and who would meet us at the hospital. They got us ready and took us to our own rooms. You go upstairs and you come to this brick building, this great big brick building. It looked so big and so cold. But they put me in a room with other girls. The first two days might have been real hard and sad, but I got acquainted. They did a lot of things to entertain the children. Like the first thing on Sunday morning they had somebody come and sing a hymn for you. That's where I learned my first hymn. I always remember this little old lady coming in and just singing at the top of her voice. And then an elderly man would come around with Bibles, quoting Scripture. He told us if we wanted to earn a Bible we could learn some verses and he would give us a Bible. That's how I earned my first Bible. Then another gal would come and tell us a Bible story. We often had friends from some certain church who visited the children. Those were great people and they were faithful doing that every Sunday. That made it nice. Then we had a lot of entertainment during the week too. So it just became home again. I was there eleven months. I had surgery on both of my hips, not both at one time. I had my first surgery on my right hip and was in a cast for four months. Then they did another and had to.. My right leg is stronger than my left leg, because I behaved myself. I stayed still in my bed and I didn't dare do any monkey business, but my second operation, was the same, I was in a cast, but the kids would dare me to get up and I did. I really think that's why my left leg is weaker than my other. Years ago I was having trouble and I went to see Dr. Bob and he got my records from the orthopedic hospital and it so happens he said, " Nina, the doctors you had for surgery were my instructors". They were bone specialists. He looked at my chart and he said, "They did a beautiful job. With that condition even with surgery there is a limp",. and he showed me, "You are very fortunate, even though you have a limp, it isn't as bad as it is suppose to be for that type of

condition". That made me feel good, to think that here was a doctor who knew. I think it helped me to hear that, that I should be thankful that I can even walk. I think as I got older, I wasn't so conscious of my limp. I was just thankful that I could still walk, that I could still do a lot of things. But it was the teen years that was hard. You know as teen agers how we go through those times, feel sorry for ourselves.

VB: (off the record) Nina, I am going to make this the end of my report, but we can talk informally about some other things I am interested in hearing about. I will leave the tape recorder running if that is ok with you.

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