

H97-175-40
John Butrovich
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Fairbanks, Alaska

John Butrovich has lived in Alaska for almost 54 years. He was born on Fairbanks Creek in 1910. His dad stampeded to Alaska in 1897 and came over the Chilkoot Pass. He went to the Koyukuk country with Gordon Bettles, Fred Swift and Jim Tobin. He was a prospector who was looking for gold. He didn't find very much. When John was about six months old his family moved to Fairbanks. He lived on Seventh Ave and his neighbors were the parents of Bob Crawford. John lived there all of his younger years. They attended the old school that burned in 1932. He said he was fortunate to have good teachers. They all walked to school. The economy was completely different then. There were many horses in early Fairbanks and very few automobiles. The narrow gauge railroad ran out to Chatanika. He remembers going out to the creeks with Josin Ross and Fred Parker and some of the old timers. In the fall of the year they would have to stop many times to let the caribou go by. He didn't use a telephone until he was ten years old. It was a much slower world back then. He has been all over Alaska mostly by plane. He thinks of his father walking over much of that country. He remembers his father going away for prospecting and coming back years later. His mother also worked. When he was about seven he started working in Paul Rickert's gardens. Paul had about 80 acres of truck garden including six hot houses. The only fresh produce they had was raised locally. He remembers taking tin cans and throwing them into the slough. They ate a lot of dried products like rice and beans. They had canned milk. He considered it a good life. He thinks very little of the everyday history has been documented. A lot of the information has been lost. He collects Alaska trade tokens. In the early days there wasn't a lot of hard money around. The traders manufactured their own money. They did use gold money, too. He saw a lot of it as a youngster. He had tokens from the Austrin Trading Company. They had different denominations. They are difficult to find now. Archie Ferguson, a trader, had tokens in Kotzebue. The tokens were eventually outlawed. John has about 100 sets of tokens. John talked about a chair that was owned by Clarence Berry from Ester. Berry was a successful miner on Ester Creek. John talked about having a camp on the Goodpaster River and knowing a miner who lived there from 1909-1958. The miner kept a diary of his life in Alaska that John now owns. He used to take people across the river at Big Delta for people on the Richardson Highway. John said there was a ferry across the Salcha River at that time, too. Teddy Gray used to run the ferry. It was quite an expedition just to go to Birch Lake. John talked about having a duck hunting camp on Healy Lake which is about sixty miles up the Tanana River above Big Delta. Before the flu epidemic there was a large Indian village at Chena. A lot of the Natives were killed by the flu epidemic as they did at a lot of the other villages. A lot of the Chena Natives moved to up to Salcha. There was a village of 2,000 Natives at the mouth of the Goodpaster. They eventually moved up to Healy Lake. Mrs. Paul Kirkstetter told him about the caribou fences. They made the fences like a giant funnel. The fences ran for seven miles. You can still see the fences when you are flying over that area. They are located in the Healy Valley. John said anywhere you go in Alaska you run into evidence of past prospectors. They did a lot of walking. He said on one creek on the Bettles River

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he saw the remains of fifteen cabins. His father and Fred Schrifft prospected in that area. They made it to an Eskimo village on the Arctic coast. All they had to eat was condensed milk by that time. John flew over the same route and it looked like a rugged journey. John's father said Schrifft was in pretty bad shape by that time. His father had a great deal of admiration for the Eskimos and the Indians. They always treated him well. Someone in the audience asked him about his boyhood. John said they worked a lot. He was a very self-sufficient child. In the early days there was quite a bit of agriculture. Paul Rickert had eighty acres along Cushman Street. He worked in the summers and on Saturdays for Paul. He raised sweet corn, eggplant, tomatoes, cucumbers, cantaloupe, and peppers in the hot houses. He sold his produce in town and up and down the river. He wasn't the only farmer. Wyatt Schaeffer was another farmer on Farmers Loop. Most of that country was in cultivation at that time. There were two or three farmers along the Tanana between Fairbanks and Nenana. There was an experimental station at Rampart. He talked about George Gasser. Jimmy Wiese was up the Chena. Harry Badger was out on Badger Road. Sam Charlie was across the river. There was even a flour mill in town. He hopes there will be a revival in farming in the area. He said the flour mill was used before WWI. He talked about Martin Neffie. They used to pick blueberries at Ester and sold the berries to Martin. They used to shoot grouse and sell them to Gus Bergland. He shot several types of grouse and ptarmigan. He did a lot of market hunting. Elick Greeding used to shoot grouse with one of the first automatic guns. John also delivered papers for W.F. Thompson. It was an education working around the newspaper establishment. Thompson was a good writer and newspaperman. Old Man Herman and Fred Mushard were the water men in town. They didn't have water in the house until 1950. Everyone used water tickets to get their water or they melted snow. They also had barrels of water in the house. They lived close to the NC wood yard. The steam generating plant was a wood burning plant. There was a lot of wood brought into town. Wood cutting on the river was a big deal. A lot of people were employed cutting wood. They would cut wood in the winter to be used by the boats in the summer. He remembers seeing six boats tied up on the river where the NC was located. Captain McCandliss was their neighbor. He was the captain of the Yukon for many years. Piledriver Slough was not blocked off. At one time they diverted the Tanana River through the Piledriver Slough. There were some pretty large boats that came to town. John talked about some of the polers. Walter Fisher was one of the greatest riverman who lived in Alaska. Tom Baylock was another good riverman. Paddy Doherty hired out and poled prospecting outfits from the roadhouse at Richardson up to the Chisana. Big Delta used to be called Big Delta McCarty. When they brought in the first telephone lines they brought them to Big Delta from Valdez. Then they went up the Tanana and Goodpaster Rivers over to Eagle. Eagle was the court seat instead of Fairbanks. Billy Mitchell was working for the signal corps at that time. There were many cabins on the Goodpaster built by the signal corps. The same line went from Eagle to Nome. In 1932 he went up the Goodpaster. They found canned butter that had been left by the signal corps. Discussion in the audience about the telegraph line. John talked about one of the packers, Arnold D. House. John said the telegraph line that was put in by Mitchell went from Big Delta up the left side of the Tanana and up the Goodpaster. It went over the divide and over to Eagle. Someone asked about the Clearwater. John said that was an old dog team mail trail that went up to Healy. In 1909 when their friends moved to the river (Goodpaster?) the game had been cleaned out. John

talked about people using the birch bark canoes. He said the Chena Indians used them all the time. More discussion about the telegraph line. John said the line went to Eagle because that is where the judge was located. Mitchell was the one who was in charge of the construction. John said the head of the Goodpaster is pretty rugged and up to 5,000 feet.

Someone asked about Native graveyards. John said there was one up in Healy. He understood that you didn't touch them. When the military operation came in they wrecked the graves.

Someone asked about the school bands. John said they always had a band as far as he could remember.

John said the Goodpaster graveyard went into the Tanana River. The river moves around a lot.

John talked about the foot races and the tug of war games on the Fourth of July. It was a three or four day celebration. They started to have auto races with model Ts on Weeks Field. John talked about Roy Lund. John talked about the use of dog teams in the area. Frank Wiseman had a team. The last five minutes of the tape are difficult to understand.