

H97-66-01 Pt. 1
Ester Zimmerman
April 24, 1969

Ester Zimmerman talks about where she was born in Negaunee, Michigan. Her father's name was Tom Hawkins and he was born in London, England. Her mother's name was Margaret Murphy and she was from Michigan. She worked as a housewife. Her first husband was George Harris. She met George at the home of Len Shepherd. She was married in Seattle, Washington on November 2, 1920. Her husband left for Alaska before she did. She left Seattle on June 16, 1921 and arrived in Fairbanks on July 8, 1921. There was a seamen's strike on at the time she traveled. She first arrived in Skagway and then traveled to Whitehorse. At Whitehorse she boarded the Tanana river steamer to Dawson. She then traveled in Nenana. She took the narrow gauge railroad from Nenana to Fairbanks. She found the village stops on the Tanana River interesting. She commented on the lack of people and how primitive everything was. She went to live out in Goldstream where her husband was an engineer for Henry Wagner. Her first home was a cabin about a mile and a half from the Fox water tank. This was where the narrow gauge train would stop for water on the way to Chatanika. She lived there for several years. She then moved to Fox until 1928. She moved to Fairbanks and her husband died in 1935. In 1940 she married A.A. Zimmerman. He mined in the vicinity of the Pedro Monument. He also mined in Circle, and on the Steese Highway at Sourdough Creek. He was the biggest single operator at that time. He struck it rich, but died broke in 1952. She said they would have to negotiate over the highway during the spring floods. In the fall the summit would be closed until it was plowed out.

At the time she arrived in Fairbanks in 1921 there were about 1500 people. There were no sewers, water, or street lights. Burning wood was their source of heat. All the mining was done by wood firing. All along the river they stopped at places to take on wood for fuel.

Her husband, A.A. Zimmerman donated the land for the Birch Hill Cemetery. Felix Pedro was gone but she knew Mrs. Pedro. Mrs. Pedro wasn't mining at that time. A.A. Zimmerman mined part of the Pedro property. Her husband built a camp at Sourdough. They had gravity water. They used wood for their fuel. The interviewer asked if all the mining they were involved in was placer mining. She said it was all placer mining, but HiU Mine, Cleary Hill and the McCarthy Mine were all hard rock mines.

Interviewer asked about the business establishments in Fairbanks when she first arrived. She said the only bank was the First National Bank. Dick Wood, Mr. Hutchkins and George Wesch all worked for First National.

The interviewer asked her the railroad coming into Fairbanks in 1923 or 1924. Ester said the narrow gauge went into Nenana. She was in Alaska when President Harding came to Nenana.

The interviewer asked about her husband's arrival in Fairbanks. She said he had to stop in Curry overnight.

Ester talked about her husband mining. In 1936 in six weeks with eight men they took out 35,000 dollars worth of gold. It was on Twin Creek near the turn-off to Gilmore. It was above what they call Gold Mountain. Her husband bought a roadhouse. He also mined in the Circle District.

Someone from the audience asked what Fox looked like when she first arrived in 1921. She said from Fox to her first cabin there were several people mining. There was a store, post office and one phone run by Lou Madigan. There was also a restaurant and rooms run by Whitehorse Smith. Leo Hardy's parents had a little farm on the hillside at Fox. There was a school in Fox run by Mrs. Roy Maddox. Her first neighbors were Mrs. Ernest Chermer and Mrs. Fred Parker. They both lived on the railway. The railway went as far as Gilmore and then over to Chatanika. The railroad would carry wood, passengers and freight. Henry Wagner was mining on Goldstream between Fox and Gilmore. Her husband worked for him.

Someone from the audience asked about horses. Ester said her husband owned a couple of horses. Her husband later bought Ford vehicles from Jimmy Gerick who owned Samson Hardware.

Someone asked about water tanks for the horses. Ester said no, everyone had to pack water for the horses.

Someone asked about the road from Fairbanks to Fox. Ester said it was there before she arrived and it wasn't much of a road. She remembers when the road from Chatanika to Circle was finished. Donald McDonald, Sr. was the engineer. When the Davidson Ditch was put in by U.S. Smelting it helped to get the highway in.

Someone asked about the Chatanika railroad and when it was discontinued. Ester said it was still going when she arrived. It might have been discontinued in 1926.

Someone asked her how many men were working for them in Circle. Ester said there were three shifts with four to five men at Independence Camp. It was three miles from Miller House. Later they had a camp at Ketchum Creek which is eight miles from Circle Springs. She said it was beautiful country. She said at Independence Creek, Bob Bartlett and his mother were mining. And on Shaw Creek Hamilton was mining. The Clarence Berry outfit was placer mining on Mastodon Creek. She talked about the cranberries and blueberries were plentiful in that area. They heated their water in a copper boiler on the stove. She talked about hiring Bill Thomsenson. One spring she was in town and trying to drive back to camp. There was a glacier at Eagle Creek that made driving the road difficult. It took her twelve hours to drive from Fairbanks to Miller Creek.

Sometimes she would be the cook for the camp and she said it was easy to cook for the men. They just wanted plain food. Someone from the audience asked her about keeping fresh food. She said they had a cache that was built out of lumber and mosquito greens. There was also a cache that was built into the window. One time a bear cleaned them out of their breakfast supplies. One of the hired men eventually killed the bear. At Sourdough they also had bear problems.

Someone asked if they bought wild game. Ester said they weren't allowed to use wild game in camp. They bought all their meat. They always had a turkey at clean up.

Someone asked how often they had a clean up. Ester said if they had two clean ups a season they were lucky. Usually you cleaned up at the end of the season. Then they started to prepare the ground for the next year. She said they had a good pipe man. When they are mining they can usually tell where the best pay is located. Someone asked if they ever found nuggets. Ester said there was one nugget that sold for \$265.00.

Someone asked about their operation. Ester said her husband used a scraper and a boiler. The scraper would take the tailings away. They fired with wood. At the end of their mining years they had to pipe their tailings. They used a drag line.

Someone asked her how many buildings were still standing. Ester said at Sourdough they were still standing. At Pedro the buildings had been burned down. At Independence Mine every thing was just taken.