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Mary Rowley, state public health nurse

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Mary Rowley talks about when she first came to Alaska. She arrived in 1948 and worked for the Episcopal Mission on the lower Yukon River. She was born on September 21, 1906 in Rochester, New York. She lived in Rochester, New York until 1940. She worked in Miami, Florida as a first aid nurse. Her mother was Catherine Maley and was Irish. Her father was Dutch and was a finisher for the American Piano Company. She is single and has been a nurse since 1923. She graduated in 1929. She had had tuberculosis for two years. Her hobbies include reading, knitting and gardening.

She wasn't sure what made her decide to come to Alaska. She was influenced by Deaconess Bedell and her stories about building Stephens Village and the village of Tanana and her travels down the Yukon River. Mary arrived in Alaska on August 15, 1948. She traveled to Seward and Anchorage. At Anchorage she took a plane to Anvik. Jimmy Hoffman was the pilot. They landed in the Yukon River and she never wanted to fly again. Tony Schultz took her on a mail run with many stops along the way. After that trip her fear of airplanes was gone. She enjoyed her three years in Anvik. She learned to do without many things. She had her own dog team, she hauled ice and water, she learned to knit a fish net, she had to cut fish for her dogs, and she learned to sew skin boots. The people in the village taught her to do all these things. She thought she was going to the village to teach the people and they taught her. Agatha Chase taught her many things. She learned to set traps to catch rabbits. After three years Bishop Gordon thought it was time for her to visit her family. She didn't want to leave. Anvik was a mission village so the BIA was not involved with it. Many needs were not being met. She attended a workshop in Anchorage with the Territorial Department of Health and the BIA medical department. The mission nurses were invited. Jean Aubrey from Nenana joined her there. At the end of the workshop she told Dorothy Whitney that her assignment was finished in Anvik. Dorothy asked her to join the Territorial Department of Health. She went to the Bethel area. Edna Backon and Anna Duporter also went to the Bethel area. They each had ten or twelve villages, but by the time they finished visiting the area they each around twenty villages. There were villages that Juneau didn't know about. They were doing case findings. Tuberculosis incidence was very high. There were only 175 patient beds at Mt. Edgecombe Hospital. It did not fill the need. The patients usually died before there was a bed for them. There was a high incidence of crippled children. They made out many referrals. In 1954 the ANHS hospital opened.

After two years in the Bethel area there was an investigation by Washington, D.C. to see what kind of medical needs were in Alaska. The surgeon general came up with a group including Ruth Fielding. Mary did not have public health training or a college degree. The Territory offered her a scholarship to go back to the University of Washington to get her degree. It was a difficult year for her. She thought she was much too old to be a student. She missed Alaska. When she returned to Alaska she was sent to Saint Lawrence Island. There were many people there for research. The people there were very anxious to learn. Dr. Helen Whaley came out and examined all the children on the island. After many types of tests Dr. Whaley found many heart defects in the children. There were cases of club feet. When the children left for the hospital the parents were very upset. She stayed on the island for two years. She then went to the Matanuska Valley. She worked out of the hospital. She held well baby clinics which were very popular. Palmer had

three resident doctors. They resented what the public health nurses could do. She did the case finding and turned the case over to the doctors. She visited the farms in Wasilla. They had dairy herds in the valley. She helped the farmers with their medical needs. She then worked in Sitka. It was a new experience for her. She worked with different organizations. The Lions Club was active there. She visited the logging camps and the school in the logging camp. She also worked with the Soroptimist Club. She visited Sheldon Jackson School. She talked about the amount of rain in Sitka. She then worked on a new nursing service in Juneau. It was the Welbee program. It was an immunization project. They started their clinic in Juneau. They gave immunizations in Juneau and Ketchikan. Their supervisor wanted them to create a coloring book for the children and she decided to work in the field. Helen Hardington gave her a list of vacancies. She chose the community of McGrath and the villages nearby. She traveled to the lower Yukon and was able to visit Anvik. There were many changes in the villages in fifteen years. The young married couples were now educated. They all understood and spoke English. The housing was better and they had electricity. They used propane for cooking. Grayling was a federal project. It was once on the Innoko River and it was washing away the old village. The community decided to move to the Yukon River. The Bureau of Indian Affairs built a school there. The people were very proud of the village. The federal government installed a sewer system in the village.

Shagoluck was a village on the Innoko River. It was a poor village. Many of the students didn't stay in high school very long. This village was moved further down the Innoko River. The federal government built a school in the new village.

Mary talks about the community of Holy Cross. There was a boarding school for orphan children. It was a very self-sufficient school. Many of the children later married including Eskimo and Indian couples. At the time of the interview Mary said many of the children were leaving the village after attending school. Mary talks about celebrating her birthday in the village and having 300 people attend the party. She talked about the village of Nikolai. The school had a difficult time keeping teachers. Mary talks about the problem of alcohol in the villages. Mary talked about the improvements in the village including installing a well. The village is all Russian Orthodox. Mary thought that the village of Nikolai had great potential.

Mary talked about visiting the gold mines around McGrath. She said that the fishing was very good in McGrath. While she was in McGrath she had a fall and broke several ribs. She had to travel to Anchorage and stayed in the hospital for several weeks. She had a heart attack while she was in the hospital. She returned to McGrath for another year and a half. She talked about her trip to the South Pacific. She talked about the benefits of immunization in Alaska and the improvements in health since she first arrived in Alaska. After several years in McGrath she transferred to Fairbanks. She served the Tanana area. She visited the villages of Rampart, Manley Hot Springs, Tanana, Huslia, Hughes, Ruby, Galena, Koyukuk, Nulato and Kaltag. Mary said many of the villages have had close contact with the military and miners, and they have become much worldlier. They wear western clothing and are much familiar with the western culture.

Some of the things that she has noticed the most in the twenty years she has been in Alaska are the advances in medical care. She has noted how quickly the Native people have adapted to western culture. The young have been exposed to western ways since they attend school. She believes they will go a long ways in governing themselves. She worries that the Natives are losing their sense of pride. She talked about the large families that some of the Natives have and acknowledges that it takes a lot of money to raise a large families, but she believes that the Natives should be paying for some of their education. She talked about a program that provides

glasses to the Natives and requires that they pay part of their care. She talked about more of the Native people going to the university and others becoming teachers. She is no longer working in public health because of her health.