

H97-66-47

Robert Sheldon

November 29, 1962

Fairbanks, Alaska

Tanana Yukon Historical Society meeting

Frank T. Young is introduced. He came to Juneau, Alaska in 1896. His wife's name is Dolly. He is 70 years old. He traveled from Juneau to Skagway in 1898 as a young child. They traveled to Dawson in 1899 and came to Fairbanks in 1905. Because of a throat condition he will be having another speaker take his place.

He had been requested to talk about the first electrical power in Fairbanks. He introduces Robert Sheldon. Robert said he can give the pioneering history of electricity in Fairbanks. In the beginning there was no light except candles and kerosene lamps. When the Northern Commercial Company took over the Barnette Trading Post they salvaged a few brickyard boilers and direct current generators from boats. They installed it in their station for steam heat and light their store. There was development around the NC store and they wanted heat and electricity, too. This overloaded their electric plant and they had to salvage more boilers from boats. Little by little they added to their electric plant. The NC Company was not an electric company. They were a wholesale liquor company to begin with and gradually established trading posts all over the country. They had a direct current plant. In 1908 Robert took over the operation of the plant. He had been the chief engineer of the Skagway electric plant. He started working at the Skagway plant in 1903.

He came to Fairbanks to dig gold and found out that he didn't like digging for gold. He applied for the engineer position at the power plant with the NC Company. Mr. Richmond gave him the job in 1908. He worked there until 1913. The first year he worked under Mr. Matthews. Bob Mentley^{etc} was the bookkeeper. The NC plant kept growing and growing. They kept adding second hand direct current machinery. They had to have copper wires to send direct current. The wires were strung all over town. They operated that plant until it was sold out to the city. Everyone had little meters that cost a dollar a month to rent. The income for the meter rent practically paid for the operation of the plant. There was agitation among the people to buy out the private company that was robbing the people. Everyone thought they would get cheap electricity. The highest electricity rate in 1909 was Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory where they paid 50 cents a kilowatt. The chamber of commerce in that town made the electric light company reduce their rates. Fairbanks had it reduced to about 25 cents a kilowatt. The people thought having the city buy out the NC Company it would be cheaper. It didn't turn out that way. He talked about the expense of the current power plant.

Someone in the audience asked about the Gordon Power Plant. Gordon owned a roller rink and was mad at the NC Company for charging so much. He decided to put in his own plant. Alec Kerr was his chief engineer. They installed a direct current plant. It was around 1910-1911.

He talked about having an automobile business in town when the first plane came to Fairbanks. He brought a lot of people in from the creeks. He made 1250 dollars in two weeks. He found out there wasn't as much money in the automobile business. He had the

first garage in town. He was overhauling Ford cars. He talked about the people that weren't paying their bills. He had a lot of money on the books. He sold the business to Paul Griemann. He then established a transportation business to the coast. He was very happy to get rid of the garage business.

Someone from the audience asked about fuel for the power plant. Robert said there aren't many trees left around the hills above Fairbanks. Men would cut wood and haul it in after the first snow. He would scale the wood as they came by with their teams. He measured 10,000 cords of wood every year to put into the wood pile for the power plant. He never had an argument with the wood cutters but he caught someone leaving with some of the wood that he was just paid for. The wood yard was located on Barnette Street. The wood was cut into four foot lengths. They had six boilers going at one time. Whenever they had a fire he would order a few crates of bacon to throw on the fire.