

H97-66-61

Bob Bloom

Bob talked about the history of Fairbanks. Fairbanks was founded in 1902 with the discovery of gold. Wada was sent out by Barnette to spread the news. Bob wasn't a citizen of the United States. The first thing they needed in Fairbanks was recording office. Judge Wickersham was in Eagle and he came down to Fairbanks to establish a court and recording house. He came to Chena first. He asked for a donation of land for government offices. So he came up to Barnette's trading post. Barnette donated land for the courthouse and the recording office. The miners could come and record their claims so no one could jump them. But it did happen some. From then on they built up Fairbanks. It wasn't very fancy. There were log cabins and tents. As soon as the sawmills came in the real building started. They then needed a schoolhouse. The first schoolhouse was built at Lacey and Second Ave. It later burned down. The next school was built at the present school house. They then needed a high school. Judge Wickersham served for two terms and then resigned. He then served as the delegate to Washington. Transportation was much needed. They transported the goods by the river in the summer. The judge was asked to get a mode of transportation for the whole year. He promised to get a railroad. When he went to Congress and delivered a two hour speech and got the railroad. There was much celebration in Fairbanks. It was 1920. The war broke out and the railroad was slowly built and completed in 1920. President Harding came to drive the golden spike. The railroad helped them to ship in goods. The next big need was a place of higher education. There was opposition to the idea, but Wickersham succeeded. He went to Washington and he asked for a land grant college. This was the origin of the college. There were five students the first year. Ed Loftus was one of the first students along with his brothers. Stanley was another one of the students. He was the first graduate at the university. Bob thinks the college will continue to grow. Bob talked about the early museum and the need for more room.

Bob is one of the last early regents. Mr. Snodgrass is also living. He was involved with the Matanuska Project. Bob believes this valley is just as good for agriculture and hopes it will be developed. Mr. Snodgrass and the agriculture department organized the farmer's association. He also asked the road commission to create the Farmer's Loop road. Bob talked about the wheat that was grown in the region. They built a mill for the wheat. Mr. Neal also developed a turnip that grew well in Fairbanks. Bob said he would like to revive the wheat that was grown before. They had a successful year.

Someone from the audience asked him about the Tanana Valley Railroad. Bob said it was started by Falcon Joslin. He started it in 1910. Some of the stock came from the White Pass. It was used to haul the freight from Chena to Fairbanks when the water was low in the Chena. It was later expanded to go out to the mines. The government took over the railroad when they built the wide gauge railroad.

Someone asked about the objections to establishing the college in Fairbanks. Bob said there were arguments about the location of the school. Wickersham picked out the location. People in town objected to the location so far away from the town. He was asked about objections from people in the rest of Alaska. Bob said people didn't think much of Fairbanks.

Someone asked about the Bonniefield Trail and what it had to do with Fairbanks. Bob said it was used as a hunting trail. There was some mining there, too. It was named after Sam Bonniefield who started the first national bank. The other trail went out the Tanana and was used to get to Valdez. Question from the audience about hardships. Bob said he made two trips out to Valdez. When the last boat came in that was all they had for perishables until the following July. Some people went out on the trail to get supplies during the winter. The trail was built by the government for telegraph lines. The trail went to Gulkana and then Eagle. The government would bring in freight with horses. Someone asked how much they carried. Bob said they could haul half a ton of supplies with each horse. If they ran into storms they couldn't get the supplies in and they would lose money.

Someone asked about horse racing at Fox Gulch. Bob said they had horse racing on First Avenue on the Fourth of July. Then when they built Weeks Field they had celebrations out there. That was about the time that airplanes started and horses were not needed.

Someone asked about the price of eggs that were hauled over the trail. Bob said they were a dollar or a dollar and a half a dozen. Oranges were twenty-five cents each. They didn't make a lot of money selling produce. They could make money on the horses that were bought in Seattle.

Someone from the audience asked about the population of Fairbanks in 1902. Bob said there were two, Mr. Barnette and his wife. By 1905 there were about five thousand people.

Someone from the audience asked how he first arrived in Fairbanks. Bob said he walked in from Valdez. He made about six trips over the trail so he knew it pretty well.

Someone asked what goods were the most in demand. Bob said perishables, eggs, bacon, ham, and oranges and lemons. Their main purpose was to bring in horses. Horses were in big demand because they used to haul everything. The horses were 1600-1800 pounds. Most of their feed was shipped in from Outside, hay and oats. It was hauled in by boat.

Someone asked what the amusements were in the town. Bob said in the summer they had baseball. They had basketball in the winter. They had dancing, too.

Someone from the audience asked about choosing the first president of the university when he was on the board of regents. Bob said he didn't want to go into that at this time. Dr. Bunnell did try to do the best he knew how. Bob didn't agree with his methods. Dr. Bunnell couldn't keep his faculty for very long. Many of them didn't stay for more than a couple of years. He was asked again how he was selected. Bob said the first regents just didn't have a good idea how to do things. Bob was appointed a little later. They really wanted to hire an educator.

[break in recording]

Recording starts again with Bob discussing the Chena River when it was just a slough. Someone from the audience asked how he convinced his wife to come to Fairbanks. Bob said she wanted to see for herself what it looked like. He didn't have any problem convincing her to come with him.

Someone from the audience asked who paid for the Cushman Street bridge every time it went out. Bob said the Cushman Street bridge used to be a wooden one. Every spring it would go out and the taxpayer would pay for it.

Someone asked about the horse trail from Fairbanks to Anchorage. Bob said a pack trail could go anywhere. Bob said they packed 300-400 pounds on each mule or horse. Bob said when the railroad bill was passed there were several companies that started trails where they thought the railroad should be. Bob talked about the Knickerbocker Company and which route the government picked.

Someone from the audience asked if there was any farming development on the Bonniefield trail. Bob said no most of the farming was done on this side on Birch Hill. That was the farming center. The Bonniefield trail was a winter trail to Gold Creek. There were a lot of sheep in that country, too. They would haul the meat to Fairbanks.

Someone asked about Chitina and Fairbanks. Bob said Valdez was the regional port. Bob talked about Swatka surveying up to Eagle and the Canadian border. He discussed the border dispute and blazing the boundary. Chitina was the head of the Copper River Railroad until they extended to the mines. When people wanted to go out in the winter they chose to go to Chitina and take the railroad over to Cordova. He was on the first train that ran from Chitina to Cordova in 1911. As soon as the railroad was discontinued then Chitina became a ghost town. Going to Valdez over Thompson Pass was tough so that is why they went through Chitina. He thinks there is still good copper in the Kennecott country.

Someone from the audience asked about the first produce award in the country. Said he had an award that he got in St. Paul for the best vegetable that had been grown in Fairbanks. He talked about the strawberry that was developed in Fairbanks. The first agriculture was started by George Weaver. He was a packer. They weren't sure if anything could be grown here. Newcombe, Idleman and Young were early farmers. Buzby and Rickert were also early farmers. McGrath was a potato farmer. All the people that staked on the loop went into farming. Weaver grew oats. Idleman grew vegetables. Someone asked about O'Connor. Bob said he just had a lot. Hinkley had a dairy in Graehl and when he lost it he staked the ranch where Charlie Creamer is now.

Bob said there was less crime in Fairbanks compared to Dawson where they had the mounted police.