

Call number: 01-74-27_PT._1

Alaska's Flag at Half-mast: A Commemoration of Ernest Gruening

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Date(s) of creation of summary: Sept. 30, 2013

Notes: Originals on 7 inch reels. Master copies on CD.

Narrator: Jeff Kennedy

A sound bite is played of a man praising Ernest Gruening for his integrity, the force and logic of his opinions, his fight for others and not for personal gain.

A voiceover of the host introduces this as a radio program as a commemoration of Ernest Gruening. Gruening came to Alaska as a carpetbagger in 1936 and served the state for the next 32 years. He was a doctor by education, a journalist profession and a Federal administrator by appointment. His direct contributions to the state began when Gruening was 49 years old. Gruening retires from formal service in 1968. Gruening both began his service to Alaska and ended his service to Alaska involuntarily. Gruening lived February 6, 1887 to June 26, 1974. He was born in New York City. His father was a Russian-born eye and ear specialist, Emil Gruening. Gruening and his sisters were able to travel and be schooled overseas. Gruening stayed in French schools long enough to learn French and in Germany long enough to apply the German he learned from his family. He and his sisters went to private schools in the United States. Gruening went to the Hotchkiss School in Lakeview, CT later to Harvard University and then to Harvard Medical School. During his last year of medical school he began to worry that such intense specialization would be confining to him. Gruening began to become involved in journalism. A summer job for the Boston Herald Traveler led to other things and he did not begin his planned medical internship. He never practiced medicine for a living. He had a 21 year career as a reporter, editor and managing editor. Gruening fought for free press and the publication of controversial stories. As early as 1912, he wrote an editorial against laws that banned information about birth control. His boss stopped the presses and aborted the editorial. Gruening felt strongly that a newspaper is not just a business enterprise but has an obligation to its readers to be an instrument of public service and that an advertiser does not buy special privileges in the news or editorial columns.

Gruening's support civil rights for women and for black people led him into politics. In 1928, he supported Albert Smith for president and later urged Fiorello La Guardia to run for mayor of New York.

A sound bite of Gruening speaking on his "crusades for social justice" outside of the United States is played:

Gruening speaks his concerns, which arose in the teens, about the diplomacy that was being carried on Latin America. He was concerned that Marines were being sent into Haiti, Dominican Republic and Nicaragua and intervening in other countries. He felt that this was in conflict with Woodrow Wilson's pronouncement about the self-determination of small nations. Gruening managed to get an

investigation started into the occupation in Haiti and the Dominican Republic which had been carried on under strict censorship. Gruening speaks about the Harding administration's failure to recognize the Obregón administration. Gruening was sent to Mexico to write some articles. Gruening was horrified about how little had been published about the Mexican Revolution. He worked on a book on this topic for several years. He published *Mexico and Its Heritage* in 1928. When the Roosevelt administration came in, Gruening was asked to be the advisor to the United States delegate to the 7th Inter-American Conference in Montevideo.

The sound bite ends and the narrator speaks saying that Gruening stayed in the Roosevelt administration in another job that brought him both to the tropics and to Alaska. A sound bite of Gruening is played:

Gruening says his first connection with Alaska came in September 15, 1934 when he was about to be appointed Director of Territories and Island Possessions of the Interior Department. President Roosevelt briefed Gruening and said he wanted perhaps 1,000 people from the drought stricken agricultural areas to move to Alaska to help the farmers, to stimulate agriculture in Alaska and to increase the population in Alaska.

The narrator says that as Director of Territories and Island Possessions, Gruening worked with, under and sometimes against Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior. At times he clashed with Luis Muñoz Marín (who later became the Puerto Rican governor) because Marin rejected both statehood and independence. Gruening thought that a Democracy had no business owning colonies.

In 1936, Gruening combined a fact finding trip to Alaska with a speaking engagement on the University of Alaska campus. Dr. Earl Biestline recalls the incident:

Bunnell invited Gruening to give the commencement address. Gruening arrived the night before and spent the evening with Bunnell. It was a historical meeting of minds. After this first meeting, Gruening played a fairly important part in supporting the University of Alaska politically.

William Cashen recalls meeting Gruening during this visit:

Before this time, a local had always given the commencement address. Cashen was the president's driver at this time and the editor of the college newspaper. Because of this Cashen was able to meet Gruening. Gruening was interested to learn that Cashen was Alaskan-born and commented on how lucky Alaska is not to have crowded slum conditions such as those in Puerto Rico.

The narrator says that upon returning to Alaska, Gruening renewed his campaign to reduce the colonial status for U.S. territories and possessions. Gruening was surprised when Ickes offered him a post as governor as Alaska. Gruening didn't want the post because Alaskans opposed a non-Alaskan governor. The president convinced him, however, saying, "Ernest, Alaska has lost touch with the New Deal. You know what we are trying to do. You know your way around Washington. You know how to get things done. You can do a lot for Alaska. I wish you would make up your mind to take this."

But Gruening was right about Alaskans not wanting Gruening as governor. The narrator reads the text of a telegram than Anthony Dimond sent to the president requesting the appointment of a resident of Alaska. The president nominated Gruening anyway. The narrator reads the text of two of the president's replies to Dimond's telegram stating his reasoning and justification for nominating Gruening rather than an Alaskan resident.

On December 5th, 1939, Gruening arrived in Juneau. The narrator reads the Juneau newspaper's description of the controversy surrounding Gruening's arrival. The mayor, Chamber of Commerce officials, and others including prominent Democrats and Republicans were barred from attending the inauguration.

A sound bite is played of a woman saying that Gruening didn't have the backing of the major newspaper in southeastern Alaska.

The *Anchorage Daily Times* reported that Alaskan legislators repeatedly insulted Gruening during his tenure and ignored his attempts at social reform.

Rusty Heurlin recalls how he was invited to insist Gruening in organizing the Territorial Guard along with Major Marston. Heurlin recalls some anecdotes including how Gruening would go into bars, invite the bar owner to have a drink with him and then ask the bar owner to take down the "Native Trade Not Solicited Here" sign down. Heurlin comments on how Gruening would always write in very simple, accessible, and beautiful English.

Alaska S. Linck recalls on how her first day on the job, Gruening requested to talk with her. She went to his office confused as to why he wanted to talk with her as she was such "small fry". They had a very pleasant conversation and it turned out that he was trying to find out if she was already set on being his political enemy or not. She wasn't, although she came to dislike the way he would pressure legislators on voting a certain way on a bill. She feels that governor Gruening was the most astute governor Alaska has or will have: he was intelligent, a brilliant conversationalist, and even an excellent photographer.

Political opponent John Butrovich recalls Gruening. Butrovich was one of the two Republicans in the senate. Butrovich didn't have some of the trouble with Gruening that some democrats did, as Gruening realized that if he could pick up one of the two Republican votes in the senate, it was a bonus vote. Butrovich and Gruening saw quite a bit of each other. Butrovich recalls a couple of anecdotes about Greuning. He finishes by saying that though he lost to Gruening in the campaign for the Tennessee Plan senate job, he never felt bad for losing. Indeed, he felt honored to be in the same race. Gruening's passing is a personal loss to Butrovich.

The tape ends.