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

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

Narrator: Jeff Kennedy

Bert Sharp of the Golden Valley Electric Association talks about Gruening's contribution to Alaska's development. Gruening was a supporter of rural electrification in Alaska and helped obtain funds.

William Cashen remembers a visit of Governor Gruening to the University of Alaska campus. The war was on. Both the student body and the faculty had been greatly reduced. Gruening gave an address to an assembly. A professor that attended (Herta Ward?) who had been a court reporter took a shorthand transcription of the speech. She was surprised that the speech was so good that the transcript could have been published just as Gruening had said it, without editing.

Cashen continues, saying that Gruening would always, in his message to the legislature, urge them to appropriate funds so that new, non-wooden buildings could be put up on campus.

Fellow democrat Richard J. Greuel recalls Gruening. They met in 1949 but Gruening didn't remember Greuel's name for some time. Gruening was very moral, didn't appreciate people "selling out" and would never use off-color language.

The narrator comments that Gruening said that lobbyists' flag was the dollar sign and were enemies of the democratic process.

In 1947, *Time* magazine features Gruening in its cover story.

When Gruening became governor, Alaska's economy was tied almost completely to the canning industry owned in Seattle and the gold industry owned in the east. Gruening thought that Alaska was being victimized by an absentee government, and absentee industry. Gruening supported taxes on the income of migrant fish and cannery workers and other workers who took their salaries with them outside the state each year. This made him enemies in the salmon and gold industries as well as some Alaskans who regarded Gruening as a carpetbagger. Austin Lathrop charged that Gruening didn't belong in Alaska. Lathrop said that Gruening was screaming for development on one side of his mouth and proposing prohibitive taxes on the other.

In 1949, Gruening's enemies mobilized their forces. Many charged him with striving for personal power at the expense of the best interests of Alaska. Gruening responded to these charges at the Senate Interior Committee and the Senate itself confirmed him for another term as the governor of Alaska.

In 1953 when Republican Dwight Eisenhower replaced Harry Truman as president, Republican Frank Heintzleman replaced the democratic Gruening as governor of Alaska.

A clip of Gruening is played:

Gruening says Alaskans had been paying all federal taxes and this was taxation without representation. Accordingly, in 1945, Gruening proposed to the legislature that they put a referendum on the ballot at the next election to determine whether the people of Alaska really wanted statehood. Absentee interests largely controlled the territory at that time and they didn't want the extra expense that statehood would bring. This was placed on the ballot for the 1946 election which took place the following October. In April of 1945, after the legislature had adjourned, President Roosevelt died and was succeeded by President Truman. President Truman sent out word that he would like the governors to call upon him, Gruening took advantage of this opportunity to ask President Truman if he would, in his first State of the Union address, give Alaska a plug. President Truman said he would and he did. In January 1946, he urged Congress to enact statehood for Hawaii and that, if the people of Alaska voted for statehood in the October election, they too should have a statehood bill. That was the beginning.

Gruening talks about how he would speak to people outside about Alaska and how Alaska could benefit from Statehood. Gruening urged concerned people to support statehood for aka to write three letters: one to each senators and one to their congressman. Gruening was surprised to discover, during these interactions, how few people knew who their congressman was. Hearings began to be held in the house in 1947. A statehood association was organized in Anchorage, largely under the leadership of Bob and Evangeline Atwood. Evangeline Atwood wrote *83 Years of Neglect*. The first hearing was held in the senate in 1950. Committee reports, almost without exception were that statehood would be the right thing for Alaska. But somehow both the House and the Senate would not vote for statehood in the same Congress. People began getting impatient. Three hundred thousand dollars were appropriated to hold a constitutional convention. There were 55 delegates, including Muktuk Marston, to this convention representing a wide kind of representation. Gruening talks about an interesting precedent of how Tennessee became a state. In April of 1956 there was a vote as to whether people would accept the constitution drafted by the constitutional convention. The proposition of electing three Alaskan "Tennessee Plan" senators and sending them to Washington was adopted by the people. Gruening says that the Tennessee method of obtaining statehood in 1796 was used by Michigan in 1835, Iowa in 1846, California in 1850, Minnesota in 1958, Oregon in 1859, and Kansas in 1861.

Gruening elaborates on how Alaska's small population and non-contiguity made statehood difficult for Alaska to obtain. Gruening talks about the changing public sentiment about admitting Alaska as a state and about how the press was almost completely uniformly for Alaskan statehood. Gruening talks about the groups that actively supported Alaskan statehood including the Federation of Women's Clubs, Kiwanis Clubs, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. Gruening tells a couple of humorous anecdotes relating to the struggle for statehood.

The narrator says that once the battle for statehood was won, Gruening began the campaign to represent the state as one of its senators. The territorial senator, Mike Stepovich campaigned as the

republican candidate. Stepovich came out ahead of Gruening in the primary election. Gruening would walk along the streets in Anchorage introducing himself to people as a senatorial candidate.

Secretary of the Interior, Frederick Seaton and Vice President Nixon campaigned for Stepovich. Idaho senator Frank Church and Massachusetts senator John Kennedy spoke for Gruening. Anchorage newsman Bob Kerrick(?) asked Kennedy if it would be better to have one democrat (Bob Bartlett, regarded as unbeatable) and one republican (Mike Stepovich). Kennedy answered that in the next Senate there would be 34 republicans and 62 democrats and that it would not make sense to send a man that would serve on the least important committees. It would be better to send two senators who are already known and respected. On election day in 1958, over 4,300 votes that had gone to Stepovich in the primary went instead to Gruening.

On January 7th, 1959, state senators 97 and 98 arrived in Washington. Bartlett and Gruening flipped a coin to decide who would be the senior senator. Gruening, one month shy of his 72nd birthday, became to junior senator. Bartlett and Gruening then drew lots to decide the length of their first terms. Bartlett drew the two-year term and Gruening drew the four-year term. Nixon swore in the new senators. Alaska had become a state.

End of the first half of the program.

End of the tape.