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John Butrovich Interview

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The recording starts with Harry Hughes saying that the date is January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1964. He says he is accompanied by one of Fairbanks' most distinguished citizens: John Butrovich of the state legislature and native Fairbanksan. John Butrovich introduces himself and says he has lived in Alaska for almost 54 years. He was born on Fairbanks Street in 1910. He never saw salt water until he was 19 years old. His father stampeded to Alaska in 1897 and came in on the Chilkoot Pass and stampeded to Chilkoot country and he was in there in with Gordon Bettles and Fred Swift and Jim Tobin. Jim Tobin was the father of Emery Tobin who edited the Alaska Sportsman for so many years. He was a prospector who came up to Alaska looking for gold. He didn't find very much and was never a minor, mostly a prospector. When John was 6 months old the folks were mining on Fairbanks Creek and they moved to Fairbanks. They bought the home of Los Benard who was an early day newspaperman up on the 700<sup>th</sup> block on 7<sup>th</sup> avenue. Their neighbors at that time were the parents of Bob Crawford the champ who became quite a composer and composed the air force song. They lived there all of John's younger part of his life even until he was married. The kids went to school in the old frame school building that burnt down in 1932. They were very fortunate because they had a lot of good teachers. If you happen to be in business today and interview people John says you should know what he is talking about. They had fine schools and no school buses. Winters were just as severe then. The economy was completely different. There were so many things in Fairbanks history that are just common place for people nowadays. In those days there were as many horses as there were people. There was only about 1 or 2 automobiles.

At 3:50 of the recording John says he remembers Stanley Steamer. He was good sized kid before the automobiles became popular. They didn't have many roads but people got around. They had the old P. V. Vine railroad that ran out to Chatanika. He says he can remember in those early days driving out to the creeks with Hosie [?] Ross and Fred Parker and right out to Engineer Hill they would have to stop in the fall of the year and let the caribou go by. There are a lot of things that made living in those days real fine. He says he doesn't consider himself a real old timer but at least he was around before the motorized life that people live today. He was almost a grown man before he knew what a flushed toilet was. He says there are a lot of people who lived in Fairbanks who were in the same predicament. He never used a telephone until he was 10 years old. It was a slow moving world but he's been over most of Alaska by one means of transportation but most of it in an airplane. When he gets back from some of those trips he thinks it was pretty tough and then he gets to thinking that his dad walked most of the country that he flew over. John says he knows his dad walked over the Koyukuk 5 times. The last time John's father came out he walked into Fairbanks on Thanksgiving Day 1926. John's father had been gone for there and a half years. John was two and half when his father left and six years old when his

father came back. He was a stranger and continued to be a stranger because he was away so much. John says he was basically raised by his mother. His mother worked. His father was a prospector and not being one of the lucky ones, the family still had to be fed and clothed. John started out working when he was young. When he was 7 he started to work in the truck garden for Paul Reichert. Paul had 80 acres of truck garden and about 6 hot houses in those days. The only fresh stuff they had was what was raised. He can remember in the spring time he would take the cans and dump them in the slough. Now if the garbage man misses coming around every Tuesday there are tin cans all over. It gives you an idea of how they used to live. John says they ate dried stuff: rice, beans, and good solid food. Not much canned stuff except for canned milk. He was 11 before he tasted fresh milk.

At 8:30 of the recording John says he feels bad when they bury another pioneer to think that so much of the history is buried with him. With exception of a few chronicles that was written years ago, very little of the commonplace things are lost. Judge Wickersham captured a lot in his "Old Yukon." There aren't many books like that, though. A lot of the history is lost according to John. There have been a lot of characters in Alaska. One hobby he is into is the collecting of Alaska trade tokens. In the early days there wasn't too much hard money away from the cities. The traders all up and down the Yukon and to the east as far as Eagle and manufactured tin money. It was one way of controlling the trade. It also got away from the business of having to bring in silver money. They did use gold money in those days. He started collecting the stuff about 30 years too late. John brought samples that he is going to pass around. He brought just a few. There is an Austin trading company one in Alakanuk. They have 25 cents 50 cents 1 dollar 5 dollar 10 dollar and 20 dollar. He had a complete set of currency. The currency is hard to come by now. The ones John is showing are Dominic Veneties [?]. He is a Kayakuk and he burned and a lot of his currency went in the fire. There is another set from Alstrom in Kwiguk. The set he has is a real tough one to come by. It is the Norvik Cooperative store on the west coast. Some of them are just about gone. He wrote to a lady in Kotzebue to get a set of Fergusons from Archie Ferguson. She had a set but she didn't want to let them go. The currency had been outlawed and Archie took all of his currency and dumped them in a well. A few of them showed up and people started asking for them and he started to dig them up. A lot of the trading posts burned up. He got one from Dawson and he couldn't figure out. It was a four bit piece from a place that sold fine liquors. The man said he had it for 40 years. On the other side it said Dawson YT "good for: two horse bits." Some of the coins are terrific according to John. He has some that are 60-70 years old. There are about 600-700 sets. People in Juneau have about 500 sets.

At 14:50 of the recording he begins discussing the museum hike that the pioneers are on. There is a lot of history being lost every day that really belongs in a museum. When Gus Conrad quit the country and started to get rid of his blunder he called John over. He asked John if he wanted to buy a black leather swing back rocking chair. John couldn't believe that they made swing back rocking chairs in black leather. Clarence Berry gave Gus the chair. Clarence Berry was one of the miners out in Ester Creek who made a fortune. He put in the longest ditch in the country in the Bonneville country. John has his swing back rocking chair now. He has another interesting item that he is not looking to give away and that is a folding rocking chair that was packed up the Chilkoot Pass. In recent years he spent a lot of time on the Goodpasture River. They have a couple camps and he has a friend that went up there in

1909 and lived up there until 1958. The man kept a diary from the day he got up in Valdez and the diary is about 50 books and all in pencil. He was a stage driver for the NC Company and used to take people across the highway over the river. When John, Frank Young, and Edbee Davis were kids there was no bridge across the Salture River. They crossed the Salture River on a ferry. John says he is sure Frank remembers when Freddy Gory used to drive the ferry across the Munson's which is called Salture now. Birch Lake was an expedition. John says he remembers John Minordale [?] telling him one time he paid \$125 for the privilege of helping push a Ford Model T from Valdez to Fairbanks and it took 24 days. Sometimes when we think we're roughing it we should turn back the pages a little ways. John says he heard something not too long ago. He says he goes duck hunting up on Healy Lake up the Tanana River. When they were kids in Fairbanks before the flu epidemic of 1917 there was a large population of Alaska Natives up in Chena. A lot of the Chena Natives moved up to Sawjacket [?]. At one time there were 2,000 natives at the North of Good Pastor. They eventually moved up to Healy Lake. Mrs. Kirkstader who lives up there now and is married to Paul Kirkstader. After flying over the Good Pastor he asked Margaret Kirkstader what all that stuff was he saw on the river. Mrs. Kirkstader said that it was caribou fence. In the early days when her mother and father and grandparents were living the Alaska Natives made a funnel or corral for the caribou. They took them down for 7 or 8 miles. They built the fences six or seven feet high and the fence was made out of dry poles. It looks just like a farmer's fence. John says big chunks of the fence are still standing located in the Healy Valley. They went in there duck hunting about 20 years ago and they thought they were getting into new country. The trapper they were with said Tom King and he brought a prospector thirty miles up the Healy River in 1914.

At 23:20 of the recording John says that anywhere you go in this great chunk of land you think your out in the middle of nowhere and then you see a rusty old can or see the remains of a fallen cabin. John says that the people who did the prospecting back in the day did an awful lot of hiking and covered a lot of territory. He was up on the Bettles River 4-5 years ago and way out in the middle of nowhere. On one creek he saw the remains of 15 cabins. John's father was up there before the turn of the century and he and another chap by the name of Fred Swift were prospecting. They starved out and the arctic coast was closer than anywhere else so they went up one of the passes and made it to an Eskimo village and John's father said all they had to eat was condensed milk and road hawse. John flew over roughly the same route his father and the other fellow walked over. They had to be tough to make it. John met Fred Swift and quite a few of the people who knew the Koyukuk knew Fred Swift. When they were getting out they hit a dog trail and Swift was in bad shape and he'd walk ahead of Swift and stop to get ready for him. John's dad would bring out the condensed milk and Swift would walk up to John's father and would get a table spoon of condensed milk then walk away and leave him. John's father imagined he was hearing music. They kept walking and walking and finally they came around the bend and there was music playing. John's father had great admiration for the Eskimos and the Natives. John's father said before the white people came along the Natives were fine people and treated him wonderfully well. John says he thinks the Alaska Natives were really fine people before white people disrupted their way of life. John asks if he has talked enough and the people in the crowd tell him to keep going.

At 27:48 a female in the crowd asks John to explain more about his boyhood. John says he was a juvenile delinquent. He says as a child he worked a lot. He doesn't remember when he wasn't self-

sufficient. At seven years old he never asked anyone for anything. He says there has been quite the revival of agriculture. As a child John worked for Paul Reichert and his place started where the West Insurance office is all the way down Cushman St. He had 80 acres. John worked for him in 1920-1924. After school and during the summer he worked Paul. He had a hot house where he raised sweet corn and another hot house where he raised eggplant and cantaloupe. He raised tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers and radish and lettuce. Besides that he had a tremendous 80 acres of truck produce that he sold to people in town and all the way to Chatanika. He was a successful farmer. Paul never had any kind of subsidy of any kind. He wasn't alone because there were a lot of farmers in those days. John remembers the day they laid to cornerstone for the University of Alaska he went down to the University on a horse drawn wagon with Roy Schaeffer. All the places being built up now were cultivated in the early days. Farmer's Loop was under cultivation at one time starting at Bulane's [?] place and going right around. Even down the Tanana between here and Nenana there was produce raised. People here nowadays are just like people down in the states. They like city life. They don't like 3 in the morning to 3 in the morning. The agriculture in the United States isn't the same either. They won't get out and put in the work. Paul Reighardt was a tremendous farmer. They had the experiment station down in Rampart. That's where George Gasser [?] was. Jimmy Reese was up the Chena and Old Harry Badger up the Badger Rd. McCaulley is named. Sam Charlie was across the river. There was even a flour mill that ground wheat and made local flour. It wasn't the best flour in the world but his mother made bread back in that day. John predicts eventually Fairbanks will do the same thing again. It is interesting to know that Fairbanks had a lot of things that Fairbanks will probably go back to. There was a period in between when it went to pot. John supposes that the same things motivated people up here as it did in the states.

At 33:48 of the recording John discusses going on a bingo hike he has been trying to remember a lot of old timers that he knew. He always gets kick out of the Sourdough Express ad that states they have been making sourdough since 1898. The first sourdough John knew was Sourdough Ellis. Frank remembers him. Sourdough Ellis' competitor was Larry Lilocol [?] and Pinkerton had the old express. Someone in the crowd asks John if he remembers when the flour mill was built. John says it had to be before WWI because they were using the flour before WWI. They were "Hooverizing" [President Hoover]. He says as a child he was always trying to make a dollar. Whenever he thinks of Old Martin Nuppy [?] and his partner was August Bergland [?]. John used to go to Ester siting and pick 5 gallon cans of blueberries and bring them in. They would ride a speeder out there on the railroad and it would cost 2 bits each way. John would sell the blueberries to Martin Nuppy and as soon as the grouse season opened they'd go and shoot grouse and before 1924 they would go out and sell them. They used to sell the grouse to Gus Burgland who was the chapter head of the meet. There were different species of grouse being sold and they would pay a dollar for a white meat grouse and 6 bits for a pin tail grouse and 50 cents for goose hens and buy ptarmigan 3 for a dollar under protest. John market hunted a lot. There was an Englishman named Alec Green. He lived up on 5<sup>th</sup> and Lacey Street at a little cabin. Lucilla Alva owned it for a while. Alec Green had the first automatic shotgun John ever saw. John used to go out with a single barrel 16 gauge shotgun. After school John would make the rounds and go to the Merchants Café and US Grill and the Arcade and take the orders for grouse. If John couldn't make the order he'd go up and get grouse from Reed [?] who would hang the grouse in the woodshed and the

grouse would freeze. If he brought in 5 dollars he got a dollar and a quarter for handling the birds. That was a lot of money in those days. John delivered papers for W.F. Thompson. That was an education in itself working around the newspaper establishment because Thompson was an institution. He was a terrific editorial writer for the News-Miner. As John gets interested in collecting the old trade tokens he says he gets to thinking about the old timers like Old Man Hillard who used to have the horse drawn water wagon and Fred Mushard who was the other water man. They used to drive around with tanks and people would buy a dozen water tickets. There was no water in the house until 1950. Everyone used the water tickets. The tickets were cardboard and John says he would like to find some of those tickets. A man in the crowd asks if he ever went out and cut ice and put it out in the summer. John says he never cut ice but they melted a lot of snow. They had 100 gallon wood barrels in the house for water supply. John says when he tried to modernize the old family home his father just about had a hemorrhage because he didn't want any of the modern stuff. He says his family lived up by the old NC wood yard and when he was a kid the steam generating plant was the wood burner and the only kind of fuel there was to generate energy. There was an awful lot wood cutting being brought up to the town the NC used to stack 10-12,000 cords between Gillam Way and Barnett. They ran a car track up there and they used to have little flat railroad cars and they would put a cord on each car and they'd have 15-20 cars loaded and they would take a team of horses and hitch up on the front of the cars and bring them down and the tracks ran right into the old NC power plant on the corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> St. and Turner St. John says he had nothing but wood fired steam boilers back in those days. A lot of people worked by cutting wood for the boats. John says he has seen 6 boats tied up in front of the NC when he was a kid. Old Captain McKenna was his neighbor and he lived on 7<sup>th</sup> St. and Barnett. He was captain on the Yukon for years and years.

At 43:30 of the recording John says he remembers when the boys all went away from Fairbanks and the young people had moved to Fort Gibbon for WWI and they marched everyone down to right in front of the NC and loaded them on the riverboats and moved them to Fort Gibbon at the Army post. The recording stops and returns. This is the second side of the John Butrovich discussion taken live at the Tanana Historical Society at the Chamber Log Cabin. John says in those days Pile Driver Slough was not blocked off and there was a pretty good flow of water through the Chena and at one time they diverted the Tanana to Pile Driver Slough to bring more water. There were good boats that pulled up right to the NC Company. The Julie B. the Yukon and the Alaska and the White Seal and the Swatka are all mentioned as riverboats. Gray's Fisher is mentioned and John says Wallace Fisher was one of the greatest fishermen to ever walk this earth. Another fisherman was Tom Blaylock. Blaylock was a real river man. Patty Dougherty is mentioned and he moved to Richardson when he was an old man. Dougherty would pull prospect outfits from the Richardson roadhouse up to the Shushana. They would put 1500 lbs. from Fred Wilkinson's store at Richardson straight up to the Shushana stampede. John says his trapper friend Lawrence Johnson would take a pole and go right across from shore to shore just like that. Patty Dougherty took the outfits in commercially and that's where everyone outfitted for the stampede. In those days they called Big Delta McCarty. It was McCarty post office and the US Signal Corps was there. When they brought in the first telephone line from Valdez they brought it in to Big Delta. They went from Tanana to Goodpastor River and then dropped over into the 40 mile and Eagle was the court seat in those days. They put the first line into Eagle and then the lieutenant who was in

charge of the phone line was Billy Mitchell of Air Force fame. The trapper's main cabin on the Goodpasture at Goodpasture forks and central good pastor were all cabins built by the United States Signal Corps and Billy Mitchell. That line was only used for a couple years and every once in a while John would run into a moose horn that is all tangled up in the phone wire. There was glass insulators found on a down tree also. After they took the line into Eagle Mitchell took the line into Nome. They went from Eagle to Nome. In 1932 John was up the Good Pastor and it was the first time he got way up there. John says he used canned butter that Billy Mitchell left there and it was 26 years old and still good. John says he is still eating off of Billy Mitchell's dishes at the hunting camp. John says a lot of the people abandoned their cabins and just walked off. Things were salvaged and used for years and years. A man says they tried to put up a telegraph back in the 1860's and John says there was no line laid. A man is discussing a line that went all the way to St. Michaels. The line was 180 miles. A man in the crowd is talking to Frank Young and saying that he walked on Willow Creek and walked on Old Indian Trail. John says the line Mitchell put in, Arnie Dehouse [?] was a packer for Mitchell back then and his boy Arnold House lives in Fairbanks, went right from Big Delta to the mouth of Good Pastor and all the way until it dropped over the divide. The bridges across the Clearwater are old dog team mail trails. The trail went up to Healy but first Good Pastor. There was a big village with a couple thousand Natives at the Good Pastor. In those days there wasn't too much traffic outside of the prospectors. In 1909 when his friends moved to the river there was no game. They used beaver for food and there weren't really any beaver. There were a lot of people and they were living off the country. A lot of the natives would come up from Chena via birch bark canoes. John said he saw the Chena Indians using the birch bark canoes. The Valdez/Eagle line couldn't have possibly gotten near the Alaska Highway according to John. The line came right into Big Delta. A man in the crowd says he followed the line and it went up Willow Creek up to Gold Creek and then right down to Chicken. Another man says he followed an Indian trail from Chicken clear on down to Gold Creek. John says the reason the line was laid into Eagle was because the only Judge in the interior was in Eagle. There was one in Nome and one in Southeastern as well. John says Mitchell was in charge of laying the line but as far as John knows Mitchell wasn't stationed any place. John laughingly says that there is a lot of country in there and when you get to Goodpasture its get rugged. There are sheep in those hills. About 10 miles from where the Quartz was in Tiba [?].

At 57:30 of the recording a man asks what he remembers about the graveyards and villages. The man says he saw Native placing paper flowers on graveyards. John says all he remembers is the Natives were left alone. There was one up in Healy and during the maneuver of last winter they just about put it out of commission. John says you don't bother the graves. The Natives used to put possessions on the graves and John says he assumes you look and don't touch. John says there are "terrific" graveyards down in the Mountain Village area. The graveyards he has been close to are the one like the hill on Healy and the people living up there say that the graveyards were wrecked by an operation where 6,000 military ran all over and there will be about 15,000. John says they knocked the right ways out there that look just like the right ways of the RA line. They bulldozed that country up. Bill Stroker drove right into Healy Lake when it was frozen. A man in the crowd asks John if he remembers much about the school bands. John says no but he always had a school band but he wasn't in it. His brother played the tuba. A man in the crowd asks John if he remembers the old graveyard on Munson Hill. John says yes. That graveyard is gone and John says there is no trace. A man says you can go down the hill and see it.

The Goodpasture graveyard all went into the Tanana. When John went 30 years ago the graveyard was there. John says that Jim mentioned footraces. John says footraces were important. The tug of war between the Russians and the Swedes and they used to bet a lot of money. They were between the Nordale and the wooden bridge. The races would go around the first and second street block. They had a lot of good baseball. The fourth of July was a 3-4 day celebration. Bobby Sheldon and the Model T fords came in and they started having auto races in Weeks field. Tom Gibson had a lot of the old racers and he kept them for years in Wendell. John discusses the Zeplen being by Gillam Way where the Alaska Bowl is. There was a half mile dirt track and he recalls old Roy Lund was an athlete he was a bike rider. Roy has been coming back to Alaska. A man in the crowd says Roy has been dead for two years. John says there were good horse races. Mrs. Cascane [?] always put on an act during Fourth of July from Livengood.

At 1:04:40 a man asks about the dog races and how they used to run them down of First Avenue. John says when he was a kid he doesn't remember dog races. The first race he remembers was 1928. Frank Young says the races began in 1915. There were a lot of dogs around but John says he doesn't remember them racing. Frank Wiseman had a real team. Wiseman was a US marshal. The Government had good dog teams back then. Wiseman was in the justice department. John says when Frank was going to school a schoolteacher better not sign up for a job unless they were able to handle the biggest person in the class. John says he remembers the teachers and the students fighting. John says some of the kids going to school in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade there were kids in high school who were 21 or 22. John says he's got a \$6,000 mining spot in Livengood and never got a color out of it. He had interest in a lot of blueberry patches. At the end of the year they got a little ray of sunshine and there was 8% of a 6<sup>th</sup> of a 3<sup>rd</sup> of copper up in Kobuk and the Kennecott people bought it. He went into Livengood with a bunch of guys and they lost several thousand dollars in a couple of seasons. He had to opportunity to get what he thought was just another blueberry patch and the other day they spent 3 million dollars on December 31<sup>st</sup>. John says most of the places people knew the oil was there. John says he sold Alaska the Katalla Oil at the Standard oil company in 1929 and there was 500 barrels of oil that was refined in Katalla before the refinery burned. John says there was no more oil after that. They're putting together a drilling deal right back at Katalla. There is a lot of activity oil wise. The copper deal on Kobuk is going to be a real important part of the Alaskan economy. It's the biggest news since they hit oil in the Kenai. A man asks how they will get it out of there. John says he thinks they will get it out with the railroad. John says he imagines that right now the people who brought the copper claims would like some cheap power. John says he thinks they will mine copper before they build Rampart Dam. John is thanked and he thanks people. He says he is going to go home and pack to go to Juneau. Harry asks John if he would go into the Pioneer home if they get on in Fairbanks. John says he's not going to retire but if they have one in Fairbanks like the one they have in Sitka. There is clapping. The recording ends.