

Call number: ORAL HISTORY 02-00-64-01

Narrator: Forbes Baker

Date: 7/22/70

Place: Pedro Monument (Fairbanks, Alaska)

Summary created by: Varpu Lotvonen

Date of summary created: 7/01/13

Notes: Originals on cassette tapes. Master copies on CD.

Series: William Cashen Collection

Recording begins with introduction: Forbes Baker wants to tell about the names and places that memories are made of. Forbes talks about his personal background: His family traveled from Seattle to Skagway in 1902. After five years in Skagway, they journeyed to Whitehorse and then on to Fairbanks. Mr. Baker made that trip alone in 1905 when he was 12 years old. He was placed in the custody of the Commissioner of the Yukon. The two were introduced at the railroad depot in Skagway and that was the last time he [Forbes] saw the Commissioner until they arrived in Dawson City.

They traveled from Skagway to Whitehorse, then took a boat to Dawson, to the Tanana and then up the Chena in July 1905. The narrow gauge railroad from Chena to Fairbanks had just been completed; the rails were just laid in tundra, no attempt to level them, "roughest possible ride you could imagine".

Mr. Baker talks about how he wants to pay tribute to Felix Pedro. The Pedro Monument is on the spot, near as can be determined, where the Discovery shaft was sunk. Cleary Creek discovery was the first one Pedro made, but he considered it to be of little consequence. The Cleary Creek discovery was recorded in Circle on September 11th [no year given].

Mr. Baker talks about the people who were contemporaries of Pedro and starts listing names: Judge Wickersham, the first federal judge in the Fairbanks district, who was later delegate to the Congress from Alaska. Frank Cleary was a watchman for Barnette and his stock of goods down on the banks of the Chena in the early days of Fairbanks. Cleary Creek was probably named after him.

Fred Parker, Frank Noyes, Roy Rutherford, lumber men who started mills supplying lumber for the needs of the creeks and in town. Noyes's [sawmill] was on the Front Street, and when his saw carriage moved back and forth, it stopped traffic on 1st Avenue. Teams were waiting there

to pick up the lumber that fell off the sides, dripping wet, and they hauled them to the creeks and used them. Even 40 years ago [about 1930 or so] you could see the results of nailing up wet lumber: cracks in the boards as wide as the boards themselves.

Clarence Berry and his brother made a fortune in the Klondike. Then they came to Fairbanks area and prospected on Ester Creek while everybody else was at Goldstream Creek, Fox, Gilmore or at Cleary Creek. They made another fortune there at 7 Below Ester Creek after which they moved to California to make yet another fortune in oil. Dick Grothenburg was the secretary of the Pioneers Igloo, and he grubstaked Pedro numerous times when he went into the Circle Country. Don McCarthy [McCarty?] made a discovery at Fairbanks Creek. He later developed one of the first [unclear, sounds like: parent lob lies] at the end of the creek than there was in the camp. None of them turned out too good but he sure made a try. Andrew Nerland, man who brought painting and paper-hanging to Fairbanks, and later on to Nenana. Mr. Baker mentions Tom Gilmore along with Fanny and John Quigley. One time Forbes and Fanny were at dinner and she was served beef roast. She took a taste of it and told them to throw it away since the beef didn't have any taste to it. She was used to moose meat.

Ed Stroecker worked at the drift mines in Fairbanks and got his start there. Stroecker was a bookkeeper for E.R. Peeples, who had a store where the Nordale Hotel was. Stroecker later became a president and owner of the First National Bank. Bob Sheldon was a pioneer of automobiles. He built his own automobile in Skagway out of old junk. He didn't know anything about differentials so he had to lift the back end [of the vehicle] to make it turn. Bob Bloom brought a pack into Dawson on his back, later became a store owner and realtor in Fairbanks. Forbes mentions Hosea Ross, but doesn't talk about him any further. Endless names and people who contributed to Alaska. And women backed up these men.

NC-Company [Northern Commercial Company] was early in the game. They bought out Barnette's stock. There were very little money in the camp since people had just arrived and used their money on their first grubstakes. The NC-Company was very generous in extending credit.

There were mail routes, first with horses and then with dog teams. Windy Jim was the first one to carry petitions to the Congress, seeking mail routes from the coast to the Interior. Billy Burke was famous for his 28-dog teams. He was still living at the time of the interview. Leonard Seppala made history with his dog racing.

Elam Harnish used to live up on Dunkel Street. Jack London made him famous by referring to him in London's book, Burning Daylight. Harnish wasn't a big man, but he was quick and moved all the time. [Engine noise in the background]. John Paul and Ed Bartlett were mail carriers in the Circle Route. Ed Bartlett was the father of Bob Bartlett and carried mail on the Circle Route. Outside of Fairbanks, the trails were bad and/or non-existent so the mail carriers followed the valleys instead.

There are three bridges over the Chena River in Fairbanks, and Fort Wainwright has a couple of more, but back in the day there was only one bridge. Bridge was built on pilings. It was where the foot of Turner Street is now and it was washed away in the spring. After the ice was gone, there were two barges operating on the river. One was at the upstream end of Wendell St. and the other one where the Chamber of Commerce is now. They were current-operated and charged people 2 bits to go across. New bridge pilings were put in during the summer. They [the pilings] were good when there was no high water or lots of drift wood that would knock the bridge off.

Narrow gauge [railway] was extended to Gilmore [town site]. One could go across the water and pick up the narrow gauge and save yourself a walk. Gilmore Station was on the junction of Gilmore Creek and Pedro. Gilmore was quite a little town then. Train ran from Gilmore over the hills to Dome and Chatanika. That was great for everybody who needed to travel, since there were very few stages, what stages there were were expensive, and it was a day and a half hike for a poor walker. Good walkers could make it in a day. Forbes says that he once walked 24 miles out to Chatanika to collect \$5.00 from a guy who owed him money. The Narrow Gauge railroad went to Chatanika, Chena, Fairbanks, and then to Gilmore. It went no further than Nenana, maybe the funds stopped, and there was no bridge over Tanana. In the winter time, they laid rails on the ice and the trains crossed the Tanana.

In 1915 the completion of the railroad was made, and it was possible to go from Fairbanks to Seward and from Seward to Seattle, and with good connection one could make it in 7 days. Nowadays one can make it in 3 hours via airplane. Talks more about the route and how it compares with flying.

1915 President Harding arrived on the scene. There was a golden spike in Nenana that marked the completion of standard gauge railway from Seward to Fairbanks. 1915 also made history when the cornerstone of the Alaska Agriculture and School of Mines was laid on the campus, nowadays known as the UAF. The railroad ended the isolation of Fairbanks from the outside world, since even people with little money could access the (other) states year-round.

There is a lot more to the Interior of Alaska than the gold that people came to mine. The completion of the standard gauge railroad was the end of an era. End of speech.