

Call number: 02-00-64-04

Narrator: William (Bill).K. Keller

Interviewer: William Cashen

Date: 10/15/1970

Place: Bill and Dorothy Keller's apartment in Portland, OR

Summary created by: Varpu M Lotvonen

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

Series: William Cashen Collection

In the very beginning there is a recording of an anecdote, in which an experiment on developing a combination milk and beef producing herd of yaks [the experiment involved cross-breeding Galway cattle and yaks to see if a northern-adapted bovine could be produced. Unfortunately, the "Galyak" was deemed a failure] ran out of money and Bunnell served the cattle as food in the school kitchen. Meat "was tougher than nails, just real bad."

Official recording begins with an introduction in which the interviewer [probably William Cashen] explains that the Kellers are long-time Fairbanksans who are associated with the University [of Alaska]. Keller was the superintendent of the schools in Fairbanks. Keller tells how his employment in Fairbanks was an accident. He had just finished his master's degree in Washington State College and accepted a position as a high school principal in Oregon. Few days after arriving to Oregon, he got a call from Mr. Alexander from Idaho who told him that there was a vacancy in Fairbanks. This was in 1921. Bill accepted the position.

Bill borrowed enough money to get up to Fairbanks. They went to Seattle and found out from the White Pass and Yukon office that the way to get to Fairbanks was to take a ship to Skagway and across the pass to Whitehorse by the White Pass Railroad and then by a riverboat down Yukon and then to Tanana. They didn't change boats at all since the riverboat Tanana was big enough to take them all the way up to Fairbanks.

Docks [in Fairbanks] were by the old NC-Company store.

Bill doesn't know when the school was originally established [in Fairbanks], but presumes it must have been 1905 or 1906. There were nine teachers in the whole school [from grade 10 to high school]. Bob was the superintendent. He also taught physics and mathematics.

The [frame] building was in the corner of 9th Avenue and Cushman Street. Interviewer remembers it burned down in 1932 or 1933, and Bill confirms it happened in 1933. Bill tells that the first graduating class was in 1913. Dorothy was a student at the time.

Fairbanks was isolated in winters. The Alaska Railroad hadn't been completed yet and it didn't go over the pass yet [Broad Pass mentioned a little while later]. The Railroad was being constructed from both ends. It was possible to take a horse team "between steel", but mail from Valdez was still transported over the trails and stages were still running from Fairbanks to Valdez.

They could have taken the trip from Valdez, but decided that going through Dawson was a better way around, and most of the traffic went through Dawson at that time anyway.

Ben [Carl Benjamin] Eielson came to Fairbanks in 1922, a year later than Bob. Ben was looking for a job and they [the school] were looking for a teacher. He had worked in the Congress as a page-boy and he talked with Dan Sutherland [Daniel Sutherland was a delegate for Alaska Territory] who wrote a letter in favor of him. Also, he looked like somebody who might fit "so we brought him up."

Ben taught with Bill for one year, after which Bill left to be a superintendent in Juneau in 1923. His Jenny ["Jenny" is a type of airplane] came in that summer and in fall Eielson was flying the mail so Bill couldn't say if he taught for one or two years, but no longer than 2 years.

They started basketball teams in [Fairbanks] High School in the winter of 1921. Ike Taylor, Charlie Fowler, Earl Borland and some of the rest of them played with the kids, giving them some exercise and competition. When Ben came in the next year, they had a full team. He [Bill Keller] made it the city team, too. They used to play with the kids. Ben was the coach of the high school team, and played in the city team.

They played in a place that's called the Old Armory, in Downtown. They had a 10-foot ceiling and it was certainly not regulation court, but it gave them a lot of exercise. That was about in the corner of 6th Avenue and two-three streets east of Cushman. Interviewer notes that there have been so many fires [in Fairbanks] that the place has probably been lost in one of them.

Discussing the College [Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines]: According to Keller, the people of Fairbanks thought that it was an excellent project, and he thought so as well. It opened in 1922. Bill was around only for one year when the school was in operation.

Bill didn't have many dealings with W.F. [William F.] Thompson, the newspaper man [editor and publisher of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner]. They only had one contact and according to Bill, it wasn't worth recording. Bill knew him quite well.

Bill recalls a story about one of the boys who were living in creeks and had never been to school, but whose mother wanted him to move to Fairbanks and go to school. The boy was about 12-years-old, and a son of a miner from Shaw Creek. His mother wanted to enroll him even though he had never been to school, or even to town. Bill called W.F. Thompson and asked if the boy could work as a news boy and Thompson had an opening so the boy worked for about a month to get used to kids and town life before enrolling in school. Later on he became a business manager at the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, and was later in politics, being one of the main political figures in Juneau. Bill can't remember his name.

Bob Bartlett and Vide [Violet Marie "Vide" Gaustad, Bob Bartlett's future wife] were both in high school when Bill was there. They graduated while Bill was there. Interviewer is telling about Vide's current life news. Cashen goes on to talk about how the University Archives is really something. In addition to the Bob Bartlett papers, the Archives also houses the Gruening papers and Dan Sutherland's as well.

Bill lived close to Dr. Bunnell and knew him quite well. One thing that Bill remembers was impressive about Bunnell was that he was about six months ahead of everybody else, regarding any problems that would arise. It didn't matter what the problem was, he had already thought it through. He had tremendous vision. Interviewer tells about how Bunnell worked ceaselessly, and Bill confirms that Bunnell was always working on something.

In 1923 Bill moved to Juneau and stayed there until 1933, being a Superintendent and a Commissioner of Education. In 1933 he moved back to Anchorage. Interviewer talks about the previous Commissioners, mentioning Henderson and Leo Brewer. They had a Territorial board of education, but politically things were in state of flux at the time, and Bill was the first elected commissioner. They changed the law so that commissioners of education had to be elected instead of appointed. That was in 1930 since Brewer was the last appointed commissioner and Bill was the first elected one. Bill served the two years until Karnes was elected. Karnes [Anthony Edmund] stayed until 1942 or 1943. Talking about his recent death. [Karnes died in 1970, about 6 weeks before this interview].

Interviewer talks about being in high school at the time and that the elections seemed odd to him. Bill says that having them was a way to increase democracy. In addition to the Territorial Legislature, the Auditor, the Treasurer, the Attorney General and the Commissioner of Education were the four principal offices [which were elected]. Bill thinks that that [them being elected officials] was possibly due to the fact that the Governor was appointed by the federal officials and they [who? Possibly the people of the Territory or the Territorial government] were trying to counteract that influence with elected officials. Bill didn't approve of it and, apart from the Commissioner of Education, he never ran for the other offices.

The Commissioner of Education was paid \$5,000 dollars a year which was considered high pay. The treasurer made a little bit more than that since he had other functions as well and the Attorney General and the Auditor made \$5,000 a year.

Walstein Smith [Walstein G.] who was a treasurer was a secretary of the Territorial banking board and some other financial things so he got a little extra, \$500-\$600 dollars a year.

Tony [Anthony Edmund] Karnes was a Democrat, and Bill ran on a Republican ticket [for the Commissioner of Education] in 1932 which was a Democrat land-slide year. Bill was first elected in 1930 and two years later he was beat, so he and Karnes ran two races [against each other]. Karnes was his opponent in the 1930 election as well. Karnes was the last elected [Commissioner of Education] and he changed it back to being an appointed position. Bill thought that was idiotic [reversing the office from an elected, back to an appointed one]. He [Karnes] served around 10 years and was succeeded by Jim [James Cecil] Ryan.

Bill went from Juneau to Anchorage to be a superintendent there. Anchorage was economically one of the most promising [Alaskan] cities at the time. It was a theater [of operations] for the railroad and the airplanes were starting to come in. Bill always rated Anchorage to be a key location for economic expansion in Alaska. The school system consisted of 17-18 teachers and about 400 students. Bill stayed there for 6 years. Anchorage had about 900 students when Keller left so the city was showing steady growth.

Interviewer talks about the story on how he got hired as a teacher by Bill in 1937 or 1938, despite their qualification requirements: M.A. or B.A. and three to five years of teaching experience. Bill explains that they were flooded with applications from unqualified applicants due to economic depression at the time. Cashen relates that he was quite upset by Keller's form letter, but he talked to Jim Ryan and Ryan told him to fill out the application anyway and that he [Ryan] would write Cashen a letter of recommendation.

Bill had talked with Bunnell, telling him that one of the best opportunities for the University [of Alaska] would be to start training teachers for the Territory. Bill thought that the Territory's schools could hire all the teachers the University could prepare. Their intention was to employ Alaskans in the schools.

Bill talks about how he hired Vy O'Neill [Violet Lundell O'Neill]. He simply called Lola Tilly [the professor of home economics at the University] and asked her to send them a good home economy teacher. She sent Vy down. Same thing happened with Winifred McDonald. Bill called Lola Tilly and asked her to send down "a good one". He did the same thing with Ryan [probably the Jim Ryan referred to above] and probably with the interviewer too. He probably called Ryan and told about their job opening, asking for a good candidate. They hired University of Alaska people into Anchorage schools. Interviewer talks about how they "broke the ice" because Anchorage [schools] were well respected. Bob says that they wanted to break "the invidious cycle" of always sending to Seattle or Chicago for teachers when there were plenty of people looking for work [in Alaska].

They brought Gertrude Schlotfeldt down [to Anchorage] when they were in need of a teacher. Again, they called Lola [Tilly] and she mentioned Gertrude, who happened to be Miss University at the time. Bill called Lola back that night and told her she [Gertrude] is the girl they want and that they "can stand little good looks along with teaching ability." All three-four teachers came down because of those phone calls.

Interviewer is talking about Bill's letter to him as a response to interviewer's job application. Interviewer also has a letter from Bunnell that tells him to come to College. The one from Bill Keller started with "Dear Bill [William Cashen]." Interviewer didn't know Bill [the interviewee] personally but they knew of each other. The letter explained that they didn't have high school vacancies, but that one 7th grade teacher was asking for a leave and they could hire Bill [the interviewer]. The letter arrived a week after the interviewer had send his application, and he thought Bill was moving fast. There was a handwritten post-script that stated that the salary will be \$155 dollars for a month for 9 ½ months, for a total of \$1,472.50.

30:37 Bill talks about the Juneau-Douglas rivalry since Cashen and apparently Violet were both from Douglas when he [Keller] was a superintendent of schools in Juneau. Nobody ever heard good words about each other. When people got away from the situation and the air cleared out a little bit, "everybody found out that everybody was a human after all."

31:50 Bill remembers when Vi Lundell O'Neill came down after Bill had called Lola Tilly. She told Bill about Vi and she was from [unclear, Douglas?] and they send her down. Vi came down and when they had their teachers' meetings, or after it, Vi came into the office because Bill wanted to see her. He told her that she had been selected because they thought she was pretty good, and that she was an expert on her field and nobody in the institution was an expert. Bill added that what she said was a law at her department and anything she would say or do was "how it's going to be." She looked at Bill and could hardly believe it. She also coached basketball.

Bill resigned in 1939. He was offered the superintendancy in Fairbanks in 1937, but ultimately declined it. He went to Fairbanks and talked with the board, but he turned the job down because he had other things planned at that time. One of the things was that he was planning on buying a [Gastineau] Hotel at Juneau, which he turned down after he thought about it for a while. He stayed as the superintendent in Anchorage for a couple of more years.

Bill resigned from Anchorage to complete his doctor's degree. He did it in combination of Washington State University and Columbia University. He completed the degree in Washington State because he had a resident requirement there, but most of his work was done with Professor Anglehart [Engelhart?sp?] at Columbia University, but they transferred the credit to Dr. Stone who was Bill's major professor.

He was also a supervising principal at Wharton, New Jersey, 45-50 miles out of New York City, for one year. That was a fill-in position while Bill was doing research work in Columbia. He did a year of research work on public housing that was just beginning to be vogue and needed to be researched. He wrote about 200-page report on that.

Then the war came on, and since the Government froze all use of resources such as paper, the research was never printed out. Bill suspects it's still in the Library in Columbia [University] in type-written form. The topic was public housing. "They were replacing 5-story slums back there with 13-15-story slums."

After completing his research, Bill went to work for the University of New York State as a Supervisor of Adult Education. He had quarters at the Syracuse University, but was there for a relatively short time when Mr. Thompson from the Bureau of Indian Affairs [BIA] in Washington D.C. called him and asked him if he would like to do special work for them in Pine Ridge [/Rosebud] country and Dakotas. "As far as I was concerned, they could give the whole of Manhattan back to the Indians."

They lived in Syracuse for several months and decided to move to Dakotas, where they arrived in spring. They moved to Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and he was there for about a year. Bill had told Mr. Thompson that he would work for the BIA if they sent him south-west whenever there would be an opening. That is in Arizona and New Mexico, and Mr. Thompson agreed to that. Thompson had been to Alaska in BIA-business, and they had met before. When they had an opening in the South-West in about

a year or 15-months, they sent Bill down to be in charge of Elko, Nevada, to be in charge of Utah, Arizona –district. Bill worked for them for a little time, until the war started and Bill started feeling that the war effort was important.

Industrial Relations Council, a group of some 200 employers in Salt Lake City, was looking for a labor negotiator [/statistician], a jack of all trades who could work with the employers in labor matters. They contacted Bill, had an interview, and so Bill went up to Salt Lake City as a secretary for the Industrial Relations Council. Practically all the principal employers in Utah, Southern Idaho, and Nevada were members of their group – they handled labor relations.

39:30 Big companies like Kennicott and [Anaconda] had their own personnel to handle their relations. Bill's group worked with them in advisory capacity, but handled labor negotiations with all the rest of them. They were [fortunate] during the war period. They only had a one strike during the six years Bill was in, and that was one involved 25 miners, and it lasted for about 60 days.

University [of Alaska, Fairbanks] was looking for a president and Bill was contacted. Dr. Patty was selected, but Patty found that there was a vacancy at the education department and asked Bill to take it over. That brought Bill back to Alaska.

That happened in 1953 and Bill stayed until 1960. Patty's 7 years and Bill's 7 years coincided, mentions the interviewer. Bill was in retirement-age, and they wanted to do some things they hadn't had the chance to do earlier. It was a good time to take a break since a new president was coming in with new policies and new people.

When interviewer was working with Bill, they made the initial steps with teaching legislation. Bill was the elected president of the Alaska Education Society. It was some years earlier. Due to discontinuance of the Alaska Teachers Institutes, they [the Education Society] never met again to re-elect officers. Through a technicality, Bill continued being the president until they could elect a new one, after two or three years. Then they conducted an election by mail, which had no justification in the rules. It seemed to meet the approval of the officers at the time.

Interviewer remembers how in 1938 Bill asked the interviewer and two elementary school teachers, Mrs. Ester Oliver and May Brady to come up with raw sketches on what the law might be [what law?]. They had a difficulty with tenure bill. Bill remembers how they asked A.B. Philips who was a superintendent of schools in Juneau to "carry the ball" down to the Legislatures [act as advocate/lobbyist for them]]. He did a good job about that. Some people who didn't see what they saw were saying that they [Bill's group] were trying to freeze teachers into of their jobs] permanently. They got a little publicity. They got the minimum salary [bill] through. They introduced three bills: teacher tenure, teacher retirement, teacher salary. When Bill contacted A.B. Philips, he made clear that what they really wanted to go through was the salary bill and the others could be used as bait and thrown away as a compromise. They got the salary bill, sacrificing the other two.

They asked for \$1,800 minimum, going up step by step as a teacher went further up north. Interviewer recalls that it went up to \$2,100, Fairbanks was around \$2,300. Interviewer thought at the time that the pay increase was pretty big. They were “young turks.”

Bill recalls that teachers were becoming politically wise. One year Bill “practically had to get down on my knees with the School Board and beg for a \$50 increase.” When the board decided they weren’t going to give a \$50 increase to the teachers, but they were willing to give Bill a \$250 increase, he told them to divide it with all the teachers because they [the teachers] really needed the money more than he did. The board was a little bit embarrassed and the teachers were granted the \$50 increase.

Bill is talking about “certain supporters from the Third Division” who would help them. Ed Coffey [Edward Daniel] was one of them, and Bill remembers doing most of the work with him. They [the teachers] prepared the three bills, and they understood that they were willing to sacrifice the two.

Interviewer mentions that the retirement bill has been improved. Bill says that unfortunately it doesn’t apply to those who retired a while ago. He didn’t get the increases.

Bill wants to mention that during his time from 1921-1940, the schools moved from being pioneer schools, due to Henderson’s basic work, into well developed and excellent school system. Washington State University sent a team to Juneau to conduct a survey during the year when Bill was the Commissioner of Education. They pronounced the Juneau schools, where Cyrus Raven was superintendent, to be one of the best school systems in the Pacific Coast. Bill doesn’t mention this because he would have been any way involved with it, but because it represented a system where Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Cordova, Seward, Anchorage and Fairbanks were all good school systems compared to the ones in States. Interviewer agrees.

[The tape ends abruptly.]