

Call number: ORAL HISTORY 02-00-64-14

Narrator: Earl R. Pilgrim

Interviewer: William Cashen

Date: 9/1/1970

Place: Fairbanks, Alaska

Summary created by: Varpu M Lotvonen

Date of summary created: 8/13/13

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

Series: William Cashen Collection

Earl R. Pilgrim was the first professor of mining engineering when the Alaska Agricultural College and the School of Mines was opened in 1922. Earl is visiting town from his mines. Cashen mentions Bulletin no. 1 that came out even before the College was opened.

Bunnell had been a teacher in Alaska, at Valdez. Then he got a law degree, which was quite easy to do those days. Then he got into politics and ran against Wickersham for a Delegate and he was defeated but that made him a good Democrat. Wickersham proposed the Alaska Agricultural College, or introduced the bill that established it as a land grant college. Money had to be furnished by the Territory [of Alaska] and when it was operating, it would get \$50,000 which was to be paid to the faculty for salaries and equipment. They were not told about this by the president until after they arrived – he might have thought they wouldn't come. Cashen clarifies: Bunnell hired them but didn't tell about the deal with the pay. Pilgrim says it's like if you told miners that they will get paid after the clean-up.

They had to wait until well after Christmas until they got paid. The merchants were very understanding and let them buy food and clothing and everything like that on credit [with the understanding that they would be paid when the salaries came.] Earl's wife got him a watch for Christmas that was not paid for until later.

Cashen says they had to do that or the faculty would have run away. Earl says that they were all in favor of the College.

Discussing the whereabouts of the other members of the early faculty: Earl doesn't know where Professor Morgan is. Elizabeth Kirkpatrick married a deputy marshal in Fairbanks, but she had a heart attack and died as a very young woman. She was a lovely lady too. She taught home economics and English. Bruce was younger than the most of them, younger than anyone except for Miss Kirkpatrick. Cashen says he just got his master's degree from Lafayette in 1922. Cashen thinks he is still alive and he has retired as a professor of chemistry. Archie Truesdell was also from the University of Washington and

Earl believes he is still living. His daughter, Lola, lives in Fairbanks. Cashen thinks he might have passed away, but Earl thinks he is down in Arizona.

Earl tells that he gets the Alumnus –magazine every month. He is an honorary alumnus and Cashen asks if Audrey Loftus did that when she was secretary? Earl indicates that she did.

Cashen tells that [Ernest] Patty is in Seattle, but Kay [Kathryn Stanton Patty] passed away a several years ago. Patty remarried, and they [the UAF faculty?] hear about him every once in a while. He was up in Fairbanks a year or so ago.

“And Pilgrim, he seems to go on forever.” Miss. Brail [sp? Trails?] and her husband George Keyes [unclear if George Keyes is Miss Brail’s husband or if the husband is someone else.] live somewhere in Samoan Island but they have their address in Washington [State].

Earl was from the University of Washington. Seems like when he [Bunnell] was recruiting he hit the University of Washington. Milner Roberts was the dean and he recommended Earl Pilgrim who was in Harbor City, outside of Los Angeles [California]. He was a superintendent of a zinc oxide smelter. The dean wrote for him about the job and he had been to Alaska seven years ago at the Treadwell Mines. Cashen tells that it was his birth place. Earl worked there for four months in 1915 as a miner under the ocean and he was there when a cave occurred. They thought it was the ocean coming in. It was in the Mexican Mine [one of the sub-sites in Treadwell]. It was a year ahead of the big cave-in.

8:51 It emptied a reservoir full of water, that is the 770-level had been dammed up with a concrete wall. Their pump down on the 1770 wasn’t weak enough to pump clear the surface so they pumped the 770 thousand feet and relayed it onto the surface. That was full of water and this cave occurred clear to the surface but the Mexican part of it was away from the ocean and the ocean didn’t come in but the water came pouring down and they thought it was the ocean. After waiting there for a half an hour, Earl noticed that the water diminished and the shift boss came down and told them it wasn’t the ocean yet. Cashen thinks it was one of the major tragedies there since they still had lots of ore. Earl says the ore had become lower grade the deeper they went and it was also more difficult to mine. They had great spaces full of nothing.

They had Livingston Wernecke as an engineer. He was a Washington man who worked at the mine for several years, trying to figure out the economic plans to fill the stoops [?] so that they could protect it without excessive cost. They hadn’t reached that point yet. If they had started pumping tailings in – and they had some 1100 stamps or more [stamp mills for crushing the ore] dropping down on the island – they could have filled those stoops and protected them. Cashen clarifies: The holes, the voids that they had in there made it [the ground] unstable. Earl confirms: That’s right. There were big spaces where the vein [of gold] was over 100-feet wide. One could go up through raises and look out [through] the intermediate openings into some of those empty stoops. One could throw a rock out there and listen and it’ll be a long wait and then one would hear it hit [the bottom] way, way down there. There are 200-feet between levels and stoops are 400-feet long and in places they were 150-feet wide. “Just imagine that space underground.” It was completely dark.

That was quite the tragedy tells Cashen. His father was a blacksmith at the mine and his grandfather was one of the mill foremen, Nick King. He was a superintendent for the 300 or 440 stamp mills.

Earl was in California when he got a word from [unclear] Roberts who asked him if he wanted to go to Alaska. Earl said he would take the job. Then he received a letter from Judge Bunnell – they called him judge – stating that he was coming to the States and would interview people, and Earl was one of them. Around the same time, a school mate of Earl's asked if he wanted to partner with him on oil refining business. Earl thought about it a great deal and finally he decided to go in with him. Los Angeles was a growing city and full of opportunities. He was about to send a telegram to San Pedro that told Mr. Bunnell that he won't accept the job and the telephone rang and it was a telegram from him, a night letter, saying that he was taking the boat next morning up to Alaska, and would see Earl there. Earl thought it would be a dirty trick to not come up when Bunnell was depending on him so he didn't send the telegram but came up to Alaska.

He was married. They traveled up to Seattle. Ernest Patty and his family with two baby children of whom youngest one is still living were on the North-Western at the same time with Earl and his family. They didn't know each other from school, and Patty was a year or so younger than Earl in school so he doesn't remember Patty at all.

First winter Earl's family lived on 5th or 6th and Lacey, and then they moved into the little log house near the Episcopal church in Front Street and were there for three or four years, as long as he was with the College.

When they first came up to Fairbanks via railroad, they had to cross the Nenana River at Nenana. There was no bridge there and they crossed in a small gasoline boat. Cashen suggests they were working on the bridge, but Earl says they weren't yet. That winter they used the ice for support.

Cashen explains that the train used to run from Fairbanks down to the North Bank [of Nenana]. Earl says it was the narrow gauge, but they changed it that winter. Cashen says he heard that they put another rail on the ties, so there were three rails and it could carry either the narrow gauge or standard. Earl doesn't know how long they used the narrow gauge "but they straightened it all up."

[Someone comes in and there is a break in the recording.]

Cashen asks if his years at the University were the ones when the little trolley car ran up to University. At first everybody had to walk. Then the railroad manager, who came up from Panama when they started building the railroad, moved lots of the equipment to Alaska, such as locomotives, rolling stock, donkey engines and shovels. When they started building the railroad, they moved a lot of equipment from Panama Canal. They contracted lots of the railroad building, but Earl of course didn't see the building of it. He [the railroad manager] helped out any way he could when the College first started. First they had a steam locomotive that hauled one car "out here." They built a little gas car in Anchorage. Cashen asks if that was called the brill car or if it was an earlier model. Earl says that the brill cars were manufactured Outside, but this was home made. It ran for more than one year.

Earl taught for four years. Cashen tells that it always amazes him that they were able to offer so many courses with the faculty of 6 people, and wonders if Earl doubled up as anything. First semester Earl had hardly anything to do. He painted the president's house, put in wallpaper and fixed it up for him. He installed equipment there at the foot of the hill to put in the power-line. Earl started a little tunnel there so the students could get practice in mine timbering and such. [Break in the recording.]

Cashen says that there weren't of course any upper classmen in mining, since all the students were practically freshmen. When Earl arrived, he was quite disappointed. He had visualized "something a little bit stronger." He wished that he had told Judge Bunnell that he didn't want the job, but there he was. When they started up there were 6 faculty and 5 students and later 2 or 3 arrived. That first semester he didn't have much to do but later he made himself useful by whatnot. They had no equipment for mining or [unclear?] work or metallurgy or anything like that. They had to order everything and it took a while to get. Judge was busy trying to scrape up money to buy any equipment or material for the institution.

Cashen says he was trying to get the \$50,000 dollars. The College had to be open and established before he could get it. Earl says that they realized his handicap. Even the \$50,000 wasn't much money.

Cashen tells about Wickersham's dedication of the cornerstone in 1915 where he told that the College wouldn't cost the Territory much at all and that the \$50,000 dollars was going to be a handful when one takes all the acreage that was given in the land grant and lease it at dollar an acre.

23:48 Earl says they had the dedication "out here" and some of the musicians came out from the creeks in their old mining clothes. Cashen clarifies that this was the day when the Governor [Scott] Bone was there to give the dedicatory address. This was five days before the registration opened. [Earl says something unclear.]

Cashen and Earl are looking at a picture of the Board of Trustees, mentioning: Paul Rickert, Mrs. Luther Hess whose husband was an attorney who didn't practice much, but devoted his time in investing in mining. She was a very intelligent lady. Bob Bloom had a hardware store. Cashen tells about his interview with Bob Bloom that he found very interesting. Earl tells that Bob was a Republican, Mrs. Hess was a Democrat and Earl doesn't know about Rickert who left after the first year. After about a year, E. M. Keys took his place says Cashen. McIntosh was a Democrat, Bob Lavery a Republican, Snodgrass was a Democrat and about Nordale Earl doesn't know. Nordale left after one year and Earl thinks he was a Democrat. The governor must have appointed Keys.

The first year the board of trustees consisted of: Hess, Bloom, Lavery, McIntosh. Cashen talks about another list that was the trustees as of 1924. Talking about some Anchorage man.

At the end of the first year, they planned on building an addition, a wing. Earl and Judge Bunnell talked a great deal about it and Earl drew the plans for the wing. They had a meeting in early June and the president of the board was an attorney, Cashen interjects that it was Stevens, who was very intelligent but quite an alcoholic. When the meeting was called one evening, they were presenting building of the addition [?]. Bloom and Lavery wanted to build a power-plant separately and Earl wanted to have a little 5 or 7 kW steam engine taken off of some riverboat. That was in the basement of the central building,

says Cashen. Earl and Bunnell wanted to get the addition built. The meeting was called but they couldn't find Stevens. They had Charlie Thompson, an underworld character, looking for Stevens and he finally dragged him out from a bordello and brought him in, whiskers all over his face. They brought him right into the meeting and he was in an awful state, blurry-eyed. Bob Bloom said to him that he is a fine looking specimen to be president of the Board of Trustees so Stevens pointed his finger to Bob and said, "You're nothing but a goddamn dirty Jew." That's the way the Trustees meeting started.

Bunnell explained to Earl that they had planned on firing him [Bunnell] and putting Snodgrass to be the president.

Mrs. Hess was the secretary so she had to listen to all that. It was probably a little bit embarrassing to her although she was a pioneer to the country and all that [seems to imply that she was accustomed to coarse men.] Out in the hall Mr. Keys, a newly appointed trustee who was a practical miner who had been mining in Alaska talked to Earl, wondering about Steven's shape. He was a morally fine man who was wondering if Stevens was fit for representing the College. He said he was tempted to vote against him. He was a Republican.

Earl talked with Judge Bunnell and said they were going to fire Bunnell and elect Snodgrass as president "and there goes your school of mines." Earl didn't attend the elections, but they did vote for Bunnell to be the president for another year and then he got it fixed so he wouldn't have to be voted for each year but that they would have had to bring a cause to remove him. Cashen clarifies that it was a continuous appointment rather than an annual one. They got the wing built.

Cashen asks if they had more students in the second year. The second semester Earl and [Ernest] Patty started a short course [in mining] and they gave two short courses that winter. On a second year Earl thought that a little bit longer short course would be better and make the men more qualified for mining and prospecting. He was overruled by Patty and the President. As long as he stayed there, it remained two short courses.

Patty was a professor of geology and mineralogy. He wasn't the dean of the school of mine those days. 36:36 Patty and Earl had a little bit [unclear] with some of the other faculty members because Earl got \$300 dollars more per year than any of the other faculty members. Cashen says that Earl was an experienced man who was wanted for that particular job.

Truesdell was a more experienced man, a civil engineer, and Earl got along well with him and all the rest of the faculty members. Earl got along with Patty just fine. "Once in a while we rubbed a little bit." Cashen says they were too close together there.

One thing that might not be good to publish in a book was that the first winter a telegram arrived from Tom Acen [Aken? Aiken?] who was a placer miner in the Iditarod country. He had learned mining in Cripple Creek or Leadville, Colorado, in the early days and then gone to Klondike. Then he came here and made money in most places he mined in. He was well-fixed. Earl had talked with him about giving some money for the mining society, which consisted of students, for grub. He telegraphed that he had uncovered a complete skeleton of a mastodon and asked if they wanted it. Bunnell told about it to Earl.

He always rushed in to sit on Earl's desk and tell about all the scandals that W. F. Thompson telephoned him early in the morning. He told Bunnell all the scandals, like adultery and anything like that, and Bunnell told the news to Earl who wasn't the least bit interested in that. Once Earl told him he didn't want to hear all those things. [Break in the recording.]

When bones dry out, they crumble and he[Tom Acen?] told Earl that it wasn't his concern but Patty's. Many of the bones crumbled up into dust. That fall Tom Acen came with a dog-team to Fairbanks and he rushed out to inquire [about the mastodon] from Earl whose heart sunk since Tom Acen was expecting to see the skeleton. It was a good skeleton too, fairly complete. Earl was giving a lecture and wondered what to say to him and finally when the class was over, Earl told Tom Acen that he will be very disappointed. Earl didn't have the heart to go with him to see the skeleton. After a while Acen came back, didn't say a word and sat in Earl's room until the end of the day. Patty rode in on gas car and bustled up to talk to him, but Acen wouldn't talk to him but turned his back. That ended Tom Acen's connection with the University.

Cashen says those things happen sometimes but that it was too bad that the bones weren't taken care of properly. Discussing how to preserve bones: varnish or something. Cashen says that when ivory dries, its internal pressure sometimes causes it to explode. The bones just crumble like dust.

Earl says they had various students those early days, but one day the McCombe twins came in. They came from Ontario and Earl doesn't know whether they had been kicked out of college there. They were short but husky fellows. They had barely enough men for basketball team and Earl undertook to coach them. The first game they had was with high school and at the end of the first half, the high school was way up ahead. Ben Eielson played forward on the team and Earl played the guard on the second half. Ben played the whole game.

McCombes were very close together and decided between themselves that the best way to guard another man was to bell one in the stomach [unclear?] so he would be out of business or weakened for the rest of the game. Once Ike Taylor, who was in charge of the Federal Road Commission, came to Earl and said that if Earl doesn't stop "those goddamn twins" he's going to stop the game and murder them. Cashen says the feelings ran high in those days. Earl says that they controlled the McCombes a bit but they still did elbowing. Cashen says they were more rugby football players.

They were also natural hockey players. Once they went on a jamboree and Cliff Iceberg was a young fellow who came from Tomahawk, Wisconsin, the same place than the Loftuses. They all lived in a cabin "down here in the woods." They played basketball in town, and the boys would go there after class to practice basketball in town and then they would walk back home because the college car didn't run. Sometimes they run in with the little gas car and walk back.

Cashen asks about Earl's life after he resigned in 1926. Earl says he didn't resign, he was fired. The year before he had taken an option on a bunch of placer claims that showed promise for a dredging operation. Earl withheld signing up for the next year at the College until late in the year and asked Bunnell to wait until Earl was sure about if he was coming back or not. Earl had rubbed horns quite often and on various things. Bunnell didn't get along with everybody and Earl didn't either. Once Bunnell told

Earl something was bullshit and Earl told him that: "You are the biggest bullshitter in all of Alaska." Earl admired his energy to work long hours. Cashen talks about Bunnell wanting the college to succeed. Earl wanted to have a tennis court somewhere behind the Old Main [Building] and students wanted it, but Bunnell said they couldn't have that because it would be too noisy. The very next year he started building a tennis court right there.

Earl's lateness in signing the contract might have had something to do with him getting fired, but Earl's contract wasn't renewed. It didn't break his heart too much [but it didn't feel too good either as Earl implies]. He tells that he had never been fired in his life and he had had good, responsible jobs. Discussing how harsh Earl was with Bunnell sometimes.

After leaving the College, he worked for the Territorial Mining Department for two summers and then he took an option on a Newsboy mines at the gold quartz property near Cleary Summit. He spent six years there. Cashen says it was a quartz operation there. Earl said it was a larger vein, but lower grade than others.

Then Earl did some consulting work, staying in Fairbanks. Even when he was working on claims at the Newsboy, he had only two summer vacations for the Territorial Mining Department. Once he was in Valdez where he climbed around on glaciers and made reports, and one summer he was up at in [unclear] and Nabesna area along the Highway.

Earl started in 1936 on his Anemone property on Stampede Creek.

Mr. Kirk from the National Lead was the manager of the Yellowpine Mine in Goodsprings, Nevada and Earl went there as an engineer. They had a strike there because of the ship boss whom Mr. Kirk refused to fire. Finally they asked Kirk to resign and Earl suggested to him that he should check on the silver business in Hollywood, off the hypo-solution.

Earl had started recovering silver from hypo solutions in the University of Washington, saving the used hypo from all of the photograph studios and precipitating the silver which had been previously thrown down the drain. He shipped it to Tacoma Smelter and it was an easy way of making a little bit of money. Earl made \$75 per month for about 5 hours of work. Cashen asks if they recovered silver from the silver nitrate, and Earl explains that it was an early metallurgical process that they used in silver mines in Mexico. They leach it with hypo and dissolve the silver out of the ore and then they precipitate the sodium sulfate and leave the hypo ready to be used again. Kirk came back and said he had met a man who was doing that and had a \$50,000 dollars a year business out in Hollywood [so there was no room for another]. Kirk didn't start a silver business, so Earl suggested re-smelting used battery plates. He looked that up and found out that there was an ample supply of used batteries in Los Angeles. He made litharge out of it and it could be used by the rubber tire companies in Los Angeles. Earl stayed at the mine for 2 or 3 months to finish up his work there and went down to Los Angeles. Kirk had made some test-litharge and submitted it to Goodyear Company who said it looked fine, but contained so much [sound like antimony] and they hadn't tested it extensively so they were afraid to use it. Kirk had a little bit more money than Earl did so he stayed at Los Angeles.

Earl went up to desert and started working for a silver company until it closed down. [More talking about this, not summarized.]

Kirk had started a zinc-oxide company for which Earl worked for as a superintendent until he returned to Alaska. More about Kirk's successful lead-recovery businesses.

Earl was glad he came to Alaska and didn't stay in the smelting business because now at least he has his health. He is 78 now. Mr. Kirk is dead now, and his son Paul Kirk is retired as the president and their grandson is now running the plant. Talking about a letter from the grandson who wanted to meet Earl after having heard so much about him.

[Closing the interview.]