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Morris Morgan

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Karen Brewster, interviewer

University of Alaska 100th Anniversary tapes

Karen Brewster asked Morris Morgan how he ended up going back to college to finish. Morgan said he worked for the Ethyl Corporation for ten years. He worked on a lead furnace there. They poured molten lead into a mold. It was very physical work. This was in Louisiana. He enrolled at LSU. His wife was working. He finished his bachelor's pretty quickly and began a Master's program. He worked as a scientific illustrator and a cartographer in the Coastal Studies Institute laboratory. He decided to study geography because the more you knew about the world and its people the more responsibly you can find your way through to an advantage. He believes one of the weaknesses in the U.S. is an uninformed constituency. He believes we should require geography in education more than we do. He cites civilizations who are informed about geography. He feels like there is a minimum amount of information about the world that everyone should have. He talked about why we have long days and nights in Fairbanks because of the tilt of the earth. He said we have the tools not to do things rapidly and accurately. He said he didn't have to learn to type. His wife was a stenographer. The department of geography had stenographers. They would write out their papers in long hand and the stenographers would type them up for them. He was right on the cusp when computers became important. He talked about waiting for months to use a computer at LSU and having fifteen expensive minutes to work. A lot was accomplished in fifteen minutes that would have taken days to do. He never became literate in computers. Karen asked him about the Coastal Studies Institute. Morgan said it was funded by the Office of Naval Research. He used it on the study he did on the Colville River. After getting his master's degree he was asked to come to Alaska with Dr. Walker. With his background in cartography and aerial photo interpretation he worked to interpret some photos of the delta of Colville River. He came up as an assistant. He worked on the sand dunes to investigate as his research for his dissertation. Karen asked about doing illustration and cartography. Morgan said he picked those skills up from his art work. He never took classes in them. He took painting classes. He drew house types and storage bins for corn. He was originally going to go to Mexico to work on his dissertation. He was going to work on the settlement geography of Tamaulipas State in northern Mexico, but he came to Alaska instead. He had always told his parents that he wanted to come to the North Pole. They came up to Alaska in 1960 and 1961. He delivered a paper at the AAAS Conference on his way back from the Colville. By the time he returned home he had an offer for a job at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in the Department of Anthropology and Geography under Dr. Skarland. Brewster asked him what he was studying on the Colville. Morgan said he was studying the origin and formation of the dunes that existed on the Colville. There are some

fairly massive dunes. His problem was to establish the oldest dunes and secondary. Dr. Walker was a geomorphologist. Morgan said he came to the university on a nine month contract. He remembers Dr. Skarland and Hadley West welcoming him at the airport. The university had taken a one bedroom apartment at Fairview Manor and there were three of them living there. He didn't like it. They stayed there a while and then lived on campus. They moved into Dr. Bunnell's residence. The Home Economics Department was underneath them. He had an opportunity to buy his homestead in 1964. He felt like living on campus was handy but it was also a fishbowl. They moved into their house on November 1, 1964. They have added on to their house.

Karen asked about the job offer after he gave a paper at the American Anthropological Association meeting. Morgan said he had not applied for a position. He said they partly based it on his presentation. They were looking for a geographer. This was in 1962. They drove a VW microbus to the west coast from Louisiana and then shipped it to Alaska on the Alaska Steamship Company ship. They flew up to Alaska from Seattle. Morgan talked about Hadley West. West was interested in archeology. Dr. Skarland and Morgan divided up the rest of the classes. Skarland died in 1964. Morgan talked about Dr. Skarland. He said when Skarland died the people who took over anthropology didn't understand geography's role. He realized if geography was to survive it had to be separated. About this time he had an opportunity for a big grant. There was an incident with a student cheating and as a result he lost faith in the administration. He talked about the incident. There were three students cheating during a final exam. One of the students objected to his F for the course and created a controversy. The dean told him there would be trouble because Morgan was from Louisiana. He eventually realized that he had no backing from the administration. There was opportunity to do research elsewhere and he left the university. Karen commented about how he knew the student cheated. Morgan said there was no problem proving that the student cheated. He offered to give the exam to the student again. At first the student agreed to take it and reacted violently when he could answer only a few questions and accused Morgan of discrimination. Morgan said he didn't understand why being from Louisiana was a problem. Morgan said he regrets that he didn't pursue his case deeper into the problem. He was disgusted that he had been questioned and condemned and that was a factor in leaving the university. He wished he had made his case and not quit the university. Karen asked about his class load of five or six classes. Morgan said he did teach all those classes. He did get some help teaching the classes. There was a professor from Wisconsin that helped for a year. Charles Hosley and Erma Gunther came up. Dr. Rasche came up about the time he was leaving. He left the information about what classes should be taught. He thinks he should have fought out the accusations. Morgan said all of the faculty were fairly fluid at that time. A lot of professors would stay for about three years. It was difficult financially. A third of the faculty were drawing on their next month's salary. Housing was scarce and expensive. He said he was fortunate to buy the homestead. He later subdivided his homestead.

Brewster asked him what subjects he was teaching. Morgan said at one point he was teaching every subject listed. For a while he taught the courses that his predecessor taught. He taught Mexico and Central America and Latin America. He taught regional geography of Europe and Africa. He taught the ethnology of Africa. He also taught primitive religions. A lot of the courses fell to the wayside when there was no one to teach them. He stayed up late preparing for his lectures. He made work maps that

were still being used until recently. Brewster asked what his area of research was. Morgan said it was more classroom teaching. It was a natural for him. He was educated pretty well. Brewster said she thought he would have been a good classroom teacher. Morgan said he did fairly well and didn't have any complaints except for students who cheated. Brewster asked if he introduced Alaska centered courses. Morgan said he did such as the geography of Alaska, Pleistocene Alaska, the geography of northeastern Russia, and geography of Canada and circumpolar countries. Brewster asked about classes about economic, political or information about Alaska Native cultures. Morgan said yes and that benefitted him since he later worked for the Tanana Chief Conference when he returned to Alaska after working in Louisiana. He said he got along well with the Native people and he attributes that to his rural upbringing. Brewster asked him when he left the university. Morgan said he left in 1966-67. He talked about the grant project he had. He introduced geography to secondary schools in Louisiana. He had some luck with it, but the state department of education was very political. He was viewed as an invader from Alaska. He was offered a life time tenure if he cooperated with them. He mentioned their dishonesty. They were taking money out of his grant. Morgan had employed a graduate student from LSU. He called Washington to return the money from the grant. He said the educators were interested in geography but the politicians took control.

Brewster asked if he finished his Ph. D. Morgan said he never did. He said he taught some off campus classes when he returned from Louisiana. Brewster asked about his archeology experience. Morgan said yes during the summers. Dr. Skarland realized that he had to live and wanted to keep him so he got him a job doing a general survey of McKinley Park archeological sites. He didn't excavate the sites he found the sites. He found sixteen sites and turned in a report to the National Park Service.

Brewster asked if he was associated with the campus site between the Bunnell and Duckering buildings. Morgan said only vaguely. He wasn't in favor of building over the site of the most important site in North America for early habitation sites. He talked about the different people who worked on the sites. Morgan opposed paving it over. He was also against Project Chariot. Dr. Wood was in favor of it. Brewster asked if the location of the site on campus was under a parking lot. Morgan said he has lost track of it now and he washed his hands of it. Karen asked if his outspokenness had anything to do with leaving the university. Morgan said it might have been. It might have had something to do with Dr. Wood and people close to him might have figured it was better not to have him around. Brewster said you weren't fired, but you chose to leave. Morgan said yes he chose to leave. He said he probably shouldn't have. Karen asked about his return to Alaska. Morgan said he returned at the time they were building the pipeline. Arctic Gas was going to build a natural gas pipeline from Prudhoe Bay to the Mackenzie Delta and then down through Canada. He said Dr. Karl Francis called him and asked him if he knew anyone who would lay out a route for the pipeline. He recommended himself. He got a contract to work on the route. He had just begun to lay out certain physical things needed on the aerial photos and bought field equipment. He hired several people to help. He got a call one day and was told they were closing shop. He was out a lot of money. He was paid by the company. He said he made more money consulting.

Brewster asked him about his role separating geography out from anthropology. Morgan said he talked to the dean about this and his reasons for wanting it. He said two people were told they were going to

take over anthropology. He figured that geography was going to get screwed after Skarland died and Hadley left. He thought geography was looked upon as a troubling thing. He talked to the administrators of the university. One of them said geography should be finished in the fifth grade. He said Rasche did well. Brewster asked if the department had separated after he left. Morgan said it had already separated before he left. He felt like he was trying to keep it alive. The other faculty in geography were Charles Hosley and Dr. Erma Gunthrie. He didn't think geography as a science was sold properly. He said geography could be fragmented to a point where the core geography isn't there. He said there is a method in geography that needs to be followed. He said with the tools today it should be fast. Brewster asked about methods of geography. Morgan said it is the melding of the people and the land. He said they talk about sustainability. He said the planet isn't able to sustain the amount of abuse. He said the core of geography is understanding the possibilities. He said man does dumb things. He feels if people practice geography and find out what could be done the landscape wouldn't be destroyed. He said historically from the beginning civilizations have grown and died. Countries that have studied the most have profited from it such as England, Spain and Holland. He pulled out one of the books in a series called the High roads of geography.