

ORAL HISTORY 2019-01-02

Mike Dalton with Libby Dalton present

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Karen Brewster, interviewer

Series: Kathleen "Mike" Dalton Life History Recordings

Mike Dalton mentioned some of the names of the women in Barrow when she lived there. Trudy Buck owned a boxer dog. Dorothy Wiggins was a lab assistant for her husband who was the director of the Arctic Research lab. Trudy Buck's husband was the head of the cat trains. He stayed in the base camp all the time. He could run any kind of equipment. He knew where all the D8 tractors were. Dalton said cat trains were typically five to six cats and sleds. If they were carrying drill pipe or fuel oil it would be different weights. The cat train was organized with usually the cook shack and bunk house first behind the cat. Each cat would have a different load it was carrying. The cat train would have a lead tractor with a plow on it. It carried the cook shack and bunkhouse. Discussion about cat trains while they are looking at photographs. Karen Brewster asked where the cat trains were going when they left Barrow. Dalton said they would travel to Barter Island or Cape Simpson or south to Umiat. Each cat train would have different things depending where they were going. She talked about the use of drilling mud and drilling. When they went out to Barter Island they brought fuel and matting to build an airstrip. The Navy provided fuel at first. It was a logical place to establish. There were people there they could hire for work. Fuel and equipment oil would come in the summer and it would be stored in Barrow. Dalton said the drivers of the cat trains were Navy at first and then Arctic Contractors employees. They were generally from Fairbanks. They were men who worked in construction or mining and knew how to run equipment. Some of the Native guys from Barrow probably came along as guides. Dalton said the USGS had been up there since the early teens and they had a good idea of the topography. Before they drilled they had exploration. The first exploration was surface. Then they did geophysical exploration. They were geologists working there one way or another.

Mike Dalton said Marcella Larson's husband was part of the construction crew. Margaret Hanna was in the lab. Her husband, Dallas Hanna, was in charge of the lab at one time. They lived in Palo Alto and were from the California Academy of Science in San Francisco.

Brewster asked her what they did for entertainment and socializing in Barrow. Dalton said she learned to knit. They would get together to play card games. She knit scarves, hats, and sweaters. She knit a dress, too. Most of the women weren't allowed to work. Those associated with the lab could work. Her husband went out on cat trains in the field and she would be left alone. Sometime the cat trains would break down. They sent out another cat train. Sometimes they sent out a plane with parts. When her husband was gone it could be a day or a week or longer. Umiat was a hundred miles from Barrow. They built a camp there in 1948-49. She would go over to Barrow village. They were allowed to go to test sites at times. She went out to the Umiat test well. There were a couple of others closer to Barrow. She talked about Cape Simpson where there were test wells. There had been oil seepage there for centuries. It is east of Barrow. She talked about her adze which was found at the mouth of the Colville.

Brewster asked her if she ever went out when a whale was harvested. Dalton said she would go to the mess hall for breakfast. They would hear about a whale being caught. She said the Natives could read the ice and see where there was an open lead by looking at the clouds. Marcella Larson, Dorothy Wiggins and Dalton would go out to where the whale was caught. They would walk out. They had a whale season in March and in the fall. Every year was different. Sometimes the ice would stay all summer. A big storm would push it out to sea. In the summer if there was open water they would hunt seal, ducks and walrus. Fish and Wildlife tried to impose hunting regulations on the Natives.

Dalton said the population in Barrow was six or seven hundred in the 1950s. Sometime the camp would be as large. The population was perhaps bigger in the summer. A ship would come in during the summer. It brought supplies and equipment. This was just for the camp. At first they had five or six ships come in when the Navy was in charge. They look at a photo of three ships at Barter Island. They look at another photo of a tanker recharging fuel oil from 1950 and photos of test wells on the Topogruak River area.

Brewster asked her about walking out over the sea ice when a whale was caught. Dalton said they would follow a trail. When a whale was caught the whale captain would put up their flag. In the village they would put up a flag on the captain's house. Discussion about workers when a whale was caught.

Discussion about photographs dealing with drilling and cat trains. Dalton said the Navy did a good job of explaining their photographs. They had photos of their Quonset huts. Dalton said the wind blew east in the morning and west in the evening. She had hot plates and a roaster oven when they were working for Arctic Contractor. In the DEW line days they did have a kitchen. She said the food was good at the mess hall. She talked about what they read. Brewster asked if she ever felt isolated there. Dalton said cabin fever did happen. She and others would walk. The men had work to do. Cabin fever was more of a problem for the women. They were supposed to stay in their Quonset hut. The last time she walked out on the ice it was a thirteen mile walk. The villagers were glad to see them when they visited. The first restaurant in the village run by Al Hopson's wife. She served caribou with an ulu. Dalton tried muktuk and Eskimo ice cream. She attended the whale festival in the spring as did other people from the camp. Mention of Ned Nusunginya's wife, Faye and Amy Telluk. She would stop and visit anywhere in the village. They were very friendly. Discussion of other photographs from 1950s.

Brewster asked about holiday celebrations. Dalton said they had a special meal at the camp and would invite employees from the village. Christmas was celebrated in the village. The Presbyterian Church organized holidays. The lab people had their own celebrations, too. They didn't have health care at their place. Indian Health Service had a doctor and nurse. They came out to the camp to help. Once in a while someone would be injured and the doctor came out to help. Sometimes people would be flown to town for treatment. There were always planes around. The village had a hospital, but they wouldn't allow anyone to use it unless you were Native. The contractors were very safety conscious.

Dalton said she would leave Barrow for a few days in the summer. She moved to Barrow in 1950 and left in January 1954 when they were closing down the camp. Her husband returned later that year in December to work for the DEW line and she went with him until 1957.