Transcript

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00:00:00
Angelia Schmidt: … allow access to my microphone – now recording, okay. Good afternoon. My name is Angela Schmidt and I'm here today with Lynn Lara. We're both from the Alaska and Polar Region's Collections & Archives at University of Alaska Fairbanks. Today is July 23rd, 2026 and we're in the Rasumusen Library on the UAF campus interviewing Robyn Russell.

Robyn Russell: Hi.

Angelia Schmidt: And Robyn your name is spelled R-O-B-Y-N R-U-S-S-E-L-L, correct?

Robyn Russell: That is correct.

Angelia Schmidt: Thank you. Thanks for being here today. So, you have expressed an interest in recording your memories of early childhood growing up on your parents' trapline in the Fort Yukon region in the 1970s?

Robyn Russell: Yes.

Angelia Schmidt: 1970s, early 1980s?

Robyn Russell: Yes.

Angelia Schmidt: Okay. And then later making a transition to town life and that's going to be the subject of our conversation today.

Robyn Russell: Okay.

Angelia Schmidt: As you know, this interview will be archived with the Oral History Program at UAF alongside interviews that your mother and father, William and Lori Russell, made in 1997 and 1998.

Robyn Russell: That's correct.

00:01:11
Angelia Schmidt: So first of all, growing up on a trapline, why is it important to you to tell this story and have this interview archived?

Robyn Russell: Well, I wanted to be, you know, when my mom and dad, you know, did their interviews, you know, they were both still, you know, pretty much at the prime of health. You know, they remembered a lot of details. My father told stories that I hadn't heard. So, I wanted to capture my memories now while I'm, you know, still relatively of sound-minded body. Although I have spent, you know, 30 years with the university. So, you know, that some of that may be called into question there.

Angelia Schmidt: Well, why don't you start? Let's reel back the years. Tell me about your parents, a little bit of the history of your parents and your brother and like, you know, where you fall in the lineup there.

Robyn Russell: Okay. Well, my father is William L. Russell and my mom was is Loretta Lori Russell, L-O-R-I. And they met in Fort Yukon. My father was a trapper and who also worked construction. And my mother was a school teacher although when they met, she was actually working over at sort of behind the desk at Wien Airlines. And she tells the story that, you know, my father would come in and, you know, kind of chatter her up and she said to her boss, he says, why is this guy coming in? Because he likes you. And that was sort of the beginning of their courtship. They got, let's see, I was born in ‘66. So, they got married in ‘65. I was born in ‘66, a year before the great flood. And my brother is two years younger than I am. And he was born in ‘68. He was actually a flood baby so …

Angelia Schmidt: Your mom tells that story on her interview.

Robyn Russell: Yes she does. So, that was the whole family there. After they got married, my mom taught for a while. She sort of finished out her teaching career with me. She taught out at Nenana School. I think that was her last posting. And then, you know, she raised us kids and taught us kids and did a whole lot of logistics for our trapline way of life. And my father, like a lot of guys, you know, back then, a lot of people back then, had both a winter job and a summer job. His summer job was as a construction oiler, or grease monkey, as they call themselves. He was with Local 302 for about 30 years. And his job was to keep the big machines, you know, the trucks, the belly dumps, the, you know, the bulldozers, what have you, greased up and, you know, operational. Usually he would be out of town for the summer. You know, initially he

would be, you know, at camp when they were, you know, working various road jobs. Later on, he worked up on the pipeline and various camps up there.

00:04:32
Robyn Russell: And then, when he would come back into town in the fall, we would then go up to the trapline and that was sort of way of being a busman's holiday for him. And we would trap all winter, come back into town in the spring, usually about in April or so and sell the furs. He would wait to be called by the union and then he would go off again. So, so that was sort of our seasonal rounds, as it were.

Angelia Schmidt: And how long did that last for you?

Robyn Russell: That lasted, I was there, I, my mom first took me up to the trapline when I was a toddler. So I probably, I was born in '66, so that probably would have been around '67 or so. And then my last time on the trapline, I had, I had just started college in '84. And I come back home for Christmas vacation. So '84, you know, probably '85. And then I had gone back to school, you know, for, for this, you know, the start of the spring semester in '85. And soon thereafter, my mom, you know, came into town with my brother, because he was, you know, he was 16 at that point. So, he would, they had something called the Rural Student Vocational Program, which I had also gone through. And that was, you know, sort of a work study kind of thing where you got to try out various jobs. And so, after that, you know, we pretty much stayed in town. I had, you know, I was either, you know, studying or, you know, working. And, you know, my brother was, you know, started to move into his working life too. So, so we wound up, so we wound up staying in town. My father still went out on the trapline. But, and he eventually retired and spent some time there. But then he moved into Fort Yukon for his, you know, final year or so.

Angelia Schmidt: Got it, got it. So, when you say in town, you don't mean Fort Yukon, you mean Fairbanks?

00:06:47
Robyn Russell: Yes, I mean Fairbanks.

Angelia Schmidt: Okay, okay. Yeah.

Robyn Russell: We did have, we actually had several houses in Fort Yukon. We had a main house, that was usually where we stayed. And we had two small cabins that were rented out. And we eventually sold all of those off. And we have no more, you know, property there. So, but when we were in Fort Yukon, we were typically staying in our sort of our larger house. And that was, that was probably, I remember it as being close to the airport. But don't ask me, I'm not familiar with the layout of Fort Yukon anymore. Or then, to be quite honest, I was a kid. So, I was listening to my mother's interview, and she mentions that we stayed in Fort Yukon for a little bit there when he was out, my father was out on the trapline – and right at the beginning of their marriage. And I do remember going to Fort Yukon school. But I didn't go there very long. And I don't have any strong memories of that.

Angelia Schmidt: Okay. So what are some of your earliest memories? Do you remember your mom being a teacher? Or do you just remember being out on the trapline?

00:07:58
Robyn Russell: Well, I remember. I don't remember my mom in the classroom setting. But she certainly was our teacher. And you know, we went by school through correspondence study, centralized correspondence study, which is now Alyeska Central School. But it was at the time it was Centralized Correspondence Study out of Juneau. And at that time, the laws were a lot stricter than they are now. You could only go to Correspondence School if there was no other, you know, school, you know, in your area. Well, obviously, there wasn't any school, you know, anywhere close to us. So, we went to Correspondence Study. And our mom was our teacher, you know, all the way, you know, from, you know, kindergarten all the way up to 12th grade.

Angelia Schmidt: Got it. Do you remember life before you started school?

Robyn Russell: Not very much. I have, let me think about that. No, not very much. I was thinking about school and schooling. I remember that I must have been maybe about five or six and we had, I had just started kindergarten. I thought that was okay, but not an experience I would want to repeat. And then I remember being up on trapline, and my mom was unpacking these books. And I said, where, what are these books, you know, where they come from? And she says, Oh, I, I sent to Juneau and asked them to send me some books for my school books for my little girl. And I'm like, the betrayal. The betrayal. Little did I know. There was another 12 years of schooling ahead of me.

Angelia Schmidt: Do you remember what it is that you would have preferred to be doing at that time?

Robyn Russell: I don't know. But I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure that at [inaudible]

Angelia Schmidt: So tell me more about your parents' trapline. How did they acquire the trapline? And yeah, what was that? What was that like for you?

00:10:10
Robyn Russell: My father bought the trapline from another man, whose name I'm not sure of. But he bought it on, you know, exchange of money and handshake deal. And that was, that was how you did things back then. And the other guy showed him, you know, sort of the limits of the territory. I believe we, we, our trapline was up in the foothills of the Brooks Range on the Chugach River, and it extended up to about Haystack Mountain. And I'm not sure what our southern limit was. And you, you potentially, I mean, you potentially, you could, you know, trap quite a bit out to the sides there. But, you know, there were also, there were a lot of other people trapping at that time. There were people on the Coleen [River], there are people on the Porcupine [River], you know, so you had to be careful not to, you know, step on other people's traplines. And that was, if you, if you want to, you know, a source of tension in rural Alaska is stepping on other people's traplines, you know, because your, your property rights are only as much as, you know, people remember them and, and you exert them, you know, you assert them yourself by, you know, using the place.

00:11:30
Angela Schmidt: Do you remember having issues around that?

Robyn Russell: Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: And what were those conflicts like?

00:11:34
Robyn Russell: More passive aggressive than anything, you know, my father would come back, you know, from, you know, a trap, you know, a trapping trip up to our line cabin, Deagle Cabin, D-E-A-G-L-E, and named after a man called Frank Deagle. And, and that was actually an older cabin built in 1930s, probably. He, my dad said that he found magazines in the chinking that were dated from the 1930s. And, but he would come back and he would say, it looks like these, you know, I think somebody's been, you know, you know, settings, you know, traps or so on, you know, close to, you know, close to where we are. And eventually, you know, he'd ask around for, you know, for Yukon and the word would come back. Oh, the James boys, they were, they were out there, they were trapping. And now, you know, whether there was any sort of confrontation or whether it was just sort of, there wasn't a, you know, physical confrontation, or I mean, I don't think he ever spoke to them. But, you know, the, you know, the word would come to him and then the word would go back that, you know, Bill knows it's you, you know. And he doesn't like it.

Angela Schmidt: So, what did living on the trap line mean for you? How did you, first of all, how did you get out there? And were you staying in one place? Or did you go with your father?

Robyn Russell: Oh, gosh. Well, it was, it was a, it was a major effort. I mean, my mother, generals have invaded countries with less planning than my mother. What I remember, she talks a little bit about how there are some, you know, supplies would come up by barge. I don't remember that. That may very well have happened in the early years. But what I remember is that we would be at our house in Fairbanks, which was on 3901 Geist Road. This is part of the McDonald's parking lot now. But at the time it was a big wooded lot and with a small sort of log cabin structure on it. My father had bought that from a man called Bill Bimmels. I want to say, I think that's him. I could be wrong about that name. That may have been somebody who owned a place in Fort Yukon. My father had bought this cabin, the house in Fairbanks from a gentleman, an elderly gentleman who was a painter. And we actually had several of his paintings for years and years.

Angelia Schmidt: Oh, like an artist.

Robyn Russell: Yeah, yeah, he was an artist. And it couldn't have been that big. It couldn’t have been that big, probably was a little less than an acre. But, oh my gosh, to kids it was this amazing wonderland of forests and big mature spruce and low-bush cranberries underneath and so on. It was heated by coal, so there was sort of a coal hut in front of it. And this was in the days when the coal truck would come to your house and actually load up your coal bin for you. And then you used the coal to run the hot water heater and then we had hot water heat inside the house. Well, what I remember, you know, from getting ready for trapline, was that the sea land truck, and this was a small semi, would pull up to the house. The guy would open up the doors. He'd put the ladder with the little wheels on it. He'd start rolling down box after box after box after box. And my mother, we would cart all these into the house. My mother would repack some of them so that there were fewer boxes. She kept track of everything. She numbered all the boxes. There were notebooks that she kept track of, the contents and so on. And this was 2,000 pounds of supplies, yeah, that we would get. And this is just our food, mind you. This is just our food.

00:15:47
Robyn Russell: You know, to see us through the winter. Canned vegetables, canned fruit, some canned meats, spam, corned beef, a ditty more beef stew, I seem to remember that. And, you know, other things like, you know, sugar and flour, you know, staples kind of thing. For meat, we were usually reliant on my dad getting a moose and, you know, any fish that we could caught in any, you know, small game that we could catch. So, this truck would arrive. All these supplies would be there. Mom would pack them all up. And then, of course, you know, she had to have, then we had all of our personal stuff that we had to bring. When we got older, I seem to remember that my brother and I were limited to a rucksack apiece, you know. One of those duffel bags, you know, those big green Arby kind, yeah. And then, you know, it was, I mean, my parents, us, the dog, all our supplies would be flown into to Fort Yukon. Sometimes we had to stay there for a couple of days, depending on the weather. Other times, it was, you know, a fairly quick transition. We would get off the, it was usually a bigger passenger plane that took us to Fort Yukon and then flew Fort Yukon to Fairbanks. And this was usually sort of a multi-passenger plane. And there was, it wasn't the smarter prop planes that are today. I seem to remember flying in a DC-10 or something like that. It was this older gray metal plane and there was no flat surface in there. It was all tilted up, so you had to sort of climb uphill to get to your seat and then kind of strap yourself in.

Angela Schmidt: Yes, yes.

00:17: 43
Robyn Russell: The dog and the freight were strapped in the back, you know. But, so we would get into Fort Yukon and then we would have our stuff transferred to a smaller Cessna and then that would fly out and that was about a 20-minute flight. And that would fly out, land on the sandbar down below our house and then we would have to unload the plane and then trek everything back up the hill to the house.

Angela Schmidt: Wow.

Robyn Russell: Our cabin was located, I was trying to think if there was like a flat surface anywhere on that, anywhere around our house. Basically, no. It was sort of a semi-island is a way to think about it because the river cut around, pretty much all the way around and the house was sort of set back a little bit from the edge of the riverbank and then the river was right there and the main channel cut right in front of the house. And then, so if you were facing towards the cabin, the landing strip would be on your right-hand side and then the rest of the island would be on your left-hand side. But the landing strip was a very nice long sandbar and it was mostly straight. There was a little hook up around the bend and that was always the tricky part to negotiate for the pilot coming in. But most of the time they were able to land without an incident. There was one time we were landing and this wind came up and it started to knock us sideways and we're going towards the river and we're going, ah!

Angela Schmidt: Oh my.

Robyn Russell: Fortunately, the pilot stopped the plane and we didn't wind up in the water but that was particularly the riverbed, if you're not familiar with it, it's not uniform. There's deeper

areas and there's shallower areas and we were headed towards one of the deeper sections so we're glad they stopped that.

Angela Schmidt: Oh no.

00:19:57
Robyn Russell: But yeah, those planes weren't very big so there would be freight in sort of the tail section. There would be about four seats so it would be my brother and myself, my mom. The dog would be sitting on our lap. Pilot would be up front. And my mom and dad never flew in the same plane if they could possibly help with the idea being that if there was any sort of crash there would always be one parent left.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. And my father usually went ahead and he would at least start the stoves and open up the cabin and try to start warming it up. And we usually arrived there in late fall, in October. One year we did actually come up earlier. We came up in September and that was really fantastic. It was really beautiful. All the leaves were golden. The sky was blue. It was all reflected in the river. It was just magnificent. There was also an unbelievable number of biting flies and mosquitoes and bugs of every kind. And we were having second thoughts about the whole of this until there was a frost. And so suddenly they're all gone. And I was like, oh my God, so much better. But yeah, so once we were there, you know, my father usually boarded up the place mostly to keep the bears out because bears like, they like what humans like. And you know, when a bear goes in one way, it'll go out the other, as my father would say. So, they tend to smash things up and make a big mess. So, we usually tried to keep them out. And we usually had, thanks to my mom, we had a really magnificent wood pile. So, we usually had wood available. So, you know, get the stove going, you know, get the bedding aired out. And, you know, we would sort of settle in for the winter time at that point. And then in the springtime, we would sort of reverse the process. You know, we would, you know, get ready to go. We'd be packed up. Waiting for the plane was just such a torture. You know, you would go out and listen, listen for the plane. No, no. Back we go. Sometimes they wouldn't show up because, you know, the weather would be bad or, you know, what have you. But, you know, we would hear it. And, you know, we would, you know, rush down, you know, to there, load up. In that case, the process was usually reversed in that, you know, mom and Rafe and I, that's my brother Rafe, R-A-F-E. We would go first to Fort Yukon. And then, and then, you know, transfer over for the plane to Fairbanks. And my father would follow after boarding up the cabin.

00:23:09
Robyn Russell: So, and, you know, usually by that point we were, you know, partially boarded up, you know, and we had, you know, put any supplies that we, you know, wanted to save and protect from bears into these big 50-gallon oil drums. And we had put the lids on those and, you know, that kind of thing. So, yeah. So, yeah, it was quite a process. And, you know, that doesn't include, you know, our school books, you know, or the things that we sent back and forth to Juneau. We also had a charter each month that would come up, bring our mail, take away any mail that, you know, we had to send out, usually our school lessons and things like that. And it would also bring up, you know, a small amount – we had an account with Alaska Commercial Company. And they would bring up, you know, a small amount of fresh produce, which was fantastic at that point because we hadn't seen fresh produce in a long time. And, just, you know,

just the simplest head of iceberg lettuce, you know, tossed with a little, you know, homemade dressing. I think, mommy used ketchup and mayo, I think it was.

Angela Schmidt: Wow.

00:24:20
Robyn Russell: It was fantastic. You know, we had fresh eggs because we couldn't keep fresh eggs normally. We had powdered eggs. And powdered eggs are really designed to be cooked with. They are not designed to be eaten on their own. I speak from experience here. So, we had fresh eggs and we would also, my mom baked, you know, and so we always had, you know, bread and biscuits and things like that. But with the bread, you couldn't slice it thin enough to really toast it well. So, you know, we would always slice it thin and then we would toast it well so, you know, we were always happy to see some commercial bread, which was sliced very thin and we could have, you know, toast and things like that. But, yeah, you know, just, you know, the oldest apple was, you know, a treat. And, yeah, and, you know, when I was thinking about what I thought about trapline, food comes up quite a bit. We had, I mentioned that my father, well, part of the thing when we came in in the fall is he would wait until the snow had fallen because you had to, we had no freezer. So, unless the temperatures were cold enough, you couldn't keep your meat. So, he would wait until the snow had fallen and then he would be out looking for moose. And he would go out every day until such a point as he got a moose. You know, because that was, you know, a thousand pounds of meat. And, when we were younger, you know, that, you know, that took us pretty much through the whole winter. When we got older, we were eating a whole lot more. So, we needed sort of a moose and a half and we would wind up with sort of left, we would get two moose and we would wind up bringing some into town sometimes. So, yeah. But, it was definitely a little outside the bounds of, you know, hunting season.

00:26:25
Robyn Russell: So, but, you know, it was, you know, subsistence. And, you know, sort of critical to our survival. So, he went ahead and, you know, did it anyway. So, yeah.

Angela Schmidt: So, he went out and prepared the cabin and shot the moose and then sent word for you to come?

Robyn Russell: No, no, we were already all there by then. We all flew up together. We all flew in together. And, well I should say, we flew in in succession. He came, he went ahead and then we were right behind him though.

Angela Schmidt: Oh, not by days.

Robyn Russell: No, not by days, same day.

Angela Schmidt: Okay. Same day. And then did the airplane fly in several times? You mentioned 2,000 pounds of supplies.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. They, they would make several trips and usually I think, I remember that being, I don't remember that going over more than one or two days. I seem to remember that they got all of our stuff up in the same day. And, you know, it would be there on, there, and you

know, well part of the other thing was, you know, if there wasn't any snow, we were, you know, packing this stuff on foot.

00:27:34
Robyn Russell: If there was snow, my dad would get the Snow Traveler going and then he would come down and we would load up the sled and, you know, push it up the, you know, he would pull that up the hill with the Snow Traveler. And, when there wasn't quite enough snow, that was, you know, part of the interest in getting a, a three-wheeler. Three, three-wheelers, particularly those with only three wheels are extremely tippy. And we were in hilly country. I guess the four wheelers are, are a little more stable, but they weren't quickly available then. So, we went with that. But we would use that and we would pull things, you know, load it onto there and try to, you know, pull stuff up with that. Anything to avoid carrying them up the hill. But, carry stuff we did. So, yeah.

Angela Schmidt: So, gasoline must have been part of the supplies that came in too.

Robyn Russell: Oh yeah. Yeah. gasoline, and also kerosene. Kerosene, Blazo, would arrive in these square wooden boxes, two to a box. They were square canisters, so you'd pull them out and then you'd have a box, which was the basis for all of our furniture and good for just about everything. I mean, for a storage box on the sled, for seats, for small tables. We had several of them stacked together and they were our shelves. Eventually, the Blazo Company switched to round canisters and they quit sending them in the square boxes, and I'm like, no. Because that was a major source of furniture for us. Like I said, good for everything, a Blazo box. Then the square kerosene things, when they were empty, we would clean those out. Those are also extremely useful. We used those for our water buckets also.

00:29:42
Robyn Russell: Part of my father's daily chores was going down. This bank was fairly steep. It was about 20 feet, I'd say. He would cut steps down to the ice. He'd go out a ways, he would hack through the ice with a big double-bited ax, and then sometimes with an ice chisel because that ice was thick. Back then, I should add that the winters were a lot colder than they are now, and they were a lot drier also. He would go down and this ice would be two, three feet thick. He'd hack through that. The water would come bubbling up. Then he would dip it out, fill these buckets. He usually brought up four every couple of days. That was our drinking water and so on. Then once he had finished dipping the water out, he knocked some snow over onto it so it wouldn't freeze as deeply. Then he had a wooden yoke, and he would hitch up the water there and just carry it right up the hill. My father was a pretty strong guy. He could pack two at a time. The rest of us, not so much. We could maybe get one of them up the hill if we had to stop and rest for a bit. He would usually bring four up. I don't think he was going every day, but he was going every couple of days because that was our water for drinking. These were four, five-gallon kerosene canisters. This was our water for drinking, for washing, for cooking, all of that. On washing day, which was about once a month as I remember it. My mom talks about washing once a week, but I think that was when we were kids, babies. Because later on, we did it once a month, and that was a whole thing. That was a whole production also. My father would bring up, in addition to the drinking water, he would also bring up easily six to eight more. Again, of these five-gallon canisters of water, these old kerosene cans. Then we would heat them on the stove. We'd pour them into this big, it was a washing machine that had a small gas motor on it. We had that motor vented to the outside, and the machine would, you had to warm up the

water, but it would churn the clothes itself, and then it had a ringer, and you would run the clothes through the ringer, and that would squeeze out the extra moisture. Anything heavy, pants, anything like that, blue jeans, what have you, that would go outside, and the cold winter air was so dry that it would just suck the moisture right out of it.

00:33:00
Robyn Russell: It would be stiff as planks when you brought them in, and then when you thawed them out, they were dry as a bone.

Angela Schmidt: Wow, wow.

Robyn Russell: Everything else was hung in the cabin to dry, so it was very humidified out there for a bit.

Angela Schmidt: I want to talk a little bit about the division of labor with this project. Was your whole family working together on all these projects, like a little team, or was it relegated, like you'll do this, and you'll do this, and you'll do this chore?

Robyn Russell: Oh, there was a division of labor, but obviously there was a lot of stuff that we had to all pitch in to do. Usually, my brother and I all had designated chores. For example, getting in the kindling for the wood stove, and these were chunks of wood that were probably about 12 inches long there. You know, they were chopped up, and we would bring those in. I had a job, as the eldest, to empty out the slop buckets. This is sort of what we would see as gray water, and also the black water. And there was a big gully behind the house. We had sort of a relatively flat surface there where we had built our cabin, and then back in the trees a little way, there was also a big gully that came down there, and we had one sort of designated tipping area where we would pour this stuff over. It was winter, of course, so nothing really smelled. It would just freeze over there. We also had a designated burn pit, and my mom would deal with that, where we would burn tin cans and things like that. I'm not sure that it really got rid of them, but it probably got some of the food waste, which was probably the point. And then my brother and I had our own little trap lines that we would run, and my mom would usually come along with us.

00:35:08
Robyn Russell: But we had a line around the island there that was probably a couple of miles, at least a mile, maybe two. But we also had longer lines. As we got older, we had longer lines across the river, and also, well, I should say, straight across the river into the spruce. And then we would cross the water down towards what we would call the point, which is more of a spit, that was down towards the south, and that was the Old Martin Trail. The Martin Island over there is what we called it. And I always thought it was named after the actual marten, but my mom says it was actually named after a guy named Martin, and I'm like, well, I don't know who this guy was.

Angela Schmidt: And what were you trapping?

Robyn Russell: We were mostly trapping, strangely enough, marten.

Angela Schmidt: Oh, okay.

00:36:05
Robyn Russell: That was actually what we would, some people actually specialize. They only trap certain things. We trapped, we would trap anything that would leap into the trap, mostly marten. That was probably our biggest earner. Occasionally, we would get mink, not very often. Mink were hard to find, occasionally we would get ermine or weasels. Again, not a whole lot, but they weren't hard to find. Fox were probably the second most common. There were red fox, there were silver foxes, which are black, sort of with the silver tips. And there's a cross fox, which is sort of a combination of both. It's red and it has sort of a black stripe down the back and then across the shoulders that forms a cross. That's why it's called a cross fox. That's why it's called a cross fox. And mostly fox. Lynx would come and go. They're very tied to, you know, the cycle of rabbits. And the sad part with, the frustrating part with trapping lynx is that when there's a lot of them, the prices are down. And when the prices are up, you can't hardly find them. So, you know, we didn't get a whole lot of link. We did get wolves on occasion. And we did get some wolverine on occasion. But my brother and I weren't trapping the big stuff. We were trapping marten. And, you know, occasionally we might get a fox in the trap. My father, you know, was trapping the bigger game. You know, wolves, you know, beaver.

00:37:46
Robyn Russell: We didn't trap muskrat at all. I think there didn't seem to be a whole lot. I think that we did have, you know, the occasional muskrat. We would occasionally get an otter. Although that was always a shame because the otter is so much fun to watch. And yeah, so we trapped a variety of things, you know, so.

Angela Schmidt: Did you check the trap line daily?

Robyn Russell: We, the ones that were close to the house, I think we checked either daily or at least every couple of days. You have to check these things on a regular basis for a couple of reasons. One, if you've got, you know, an animal in the trap, you know, nothing else can get into the trap. So, you're missing your chance to potentially get, you know, other animals. It's also that, and sometimes this would happen, you know, when the weather was really cold, we couldn't get out and, you know, check it for a couple of weeks. The voles and the squirrels would, you know, get there and, you know, decimate the pelt. And you didn't want that either because, you know, we were trying to sell these things, you know, for money. And the, you know, if the pelt is damaged, it's not gonna bring as much. And you might not be able to sell it at all. So, depending on what, you know, the fur buyer thinks.

Angela Schmidt: What kind of traps were you using?

00:39:16
Robyn Russell: We were using, I believe we were using number two. Traps for the most part. We had a combination of traps of various sizes. These would be metal spring traps. And you would have to, if you were somebody like my dad, who was fairly strong, you could just squeeze the springs and they would come apart. We had to stand on them to get the jaws apart. And, or sometimes pry it open with the blade of an axe. And then there was a little lever that you had to put over the, you know, the one side, or the one jaw of the trap. And then there was a little pan that you would put up against that. And that's when the trap was open. Sometimes it would spring back and get you.

00:40:06
Robyn Russell: Which, it's not gonna kill you, but it's really painful. It's more of a painful pinch than anything. And then, and we would, you would set up the cubbies. You would attach the trap to a fairly heavy log. I would say when we were trapping marten, we were probably wrapping the chain around a log that was about two to three inches, you know, wide. And it's something that couldn't be dragged off easily. And so, we'd have the log. We put the trap in front of that. The idea is to encourage the animal to step over the log and into the trap. We would then create sort of a little lean-to. I would say sort of a little teepee-like structure that's called a cubby. And this is built with sticks, usually up against something like a tree. And in the back, we would put a small stick with either a cotton ball that was dipped in scent. And they had, they would sell different kinds of scents for, you know, different kinds of animals. They were all really whiffy.

Lynn Lara: That makes sense.

Robyn Russell: And, you know, for good measure, we might put like a half a chunk of grayling in there. And that would be the bait. And the idea was the animal would step over the log in its eagerness to get the bait in the back.

00:41:26
Robyn Russell: And usually, you know, you know, we would catch, you know, what we're looking for, but sometimes you would find a camp robber or a squirrel that has, you know, sprung the trap and gotten itself caught. Not very often. And then sometimes you would get bigger game than you thought. We came to one cubby and we found a fox that had been caught with, you know, its paw. And it was still alive. So, we had to shoot it with a .22.

Angela Schmidt: Did you carry a gun?

Robyn Russell: We took turns carrying that .22, yeah. And both my brother and I went through gun safety class. And we were both taught by Joe Nava, Sr. Who is sort of a well-known locally as a rifle instructor. He judged in the Olympics and he probably taught half of Fairbanks too, to shoot at some point. Nava, N-A-V-A.

Angela Schmidt: Okay. So you and your brother were always together when you went out to check your smaller trap line?

Robyn Russell: Yeah, yeah. My brother and I were usually together. As my brother got older, my father would take him along on some of his longer trips. And sometimes he would take both of us when he was going down to check the beaver sets or something like that. And that was always fun. Because we got to ride along on the back of, we had this sled. We had a couple of different kinds of sleds. My father had what he called an Accio [sp?], which was sort of a low sled that was sort of oval shaped. And it looked kind of like an Umiak, if you're familiar with that. And that would be packed, you couldn't ride on the back of that. You could maybe sit on the load, but you couldn't do too much with that. But our main sled was one that had metal runners. It had a wooden body. It had sort of a metal step in the back and a handle that you could hold on to, handlebars. And then it had sort of a metal hitch in front. And that was sort of the main one, because you could pack a lot of things in there, wood, supplies, whatever you were carrying around that day, and just lash it down. And then away you could go. And now you

did have to do a certain amount of steering with the sled by leaning from side to side while you were making the turn. Otherwise, and that sound was the sound of you colliding with a tree or something.

Angela Schmidt: No.

00:44:05
Robyn Russell: Yeah, I remember we were out wood hauling once and we came up and when we were hauling wood, we were cutting down dead trees and trees that were leaning or had already fallen down. And we came up, we clipped this tree with the sled and it went over like anything. And we were like, whoa, that was a little close. But it must've just been leaning just right.

Angela Schmidt: When you went out with your dad, was it a several day adventure or was it?

Robyn Russell: No, usually when my father went out, he would go out and he would come back the same day. And when you have a Snow Traveler or snow machine, Snow Traveler or Sno-Go, we call them, you can travel quite a distance. So, he would go out and he usually would come back the same day. When he would take us out to check the beaver sets, we would go from the various houses that he would set and we would usually be back before the sun had set. Now he would take longer overnight trips up to the line cabin. That was the Deagle Cabin that I was talking about earlier. And don't ask me how far up that was, but it was at least a day's travel away from where we were. And it was a major expedition. Initially, my father would go up on his own. As my brother got older, he would take him along to kind of show him the ropes and so on. But my father was an old school guy. I mean, there was things that guys did and things that girls did.

00:46:03
Robyn Russell: I mean, sleeping bags, food for a couple of days, rifle, traps, everything in there. And then off he would go and he would be gone. He might be, depending on how long he wanted to stay up there and trap, but he might be gone several days. And then he would come back. But he would take off early in the morning just as the sun was starting to come up and it was still mostly dark, and travel. So, he would get there before the darkness set in. And you could camp out at night, but you don't want to if you don't have to. And then he would get up to Deagle Cabin and he would stay there, he would trap. And then he would come back with whatever he had caught.

Angela Schmidt: What volume of animals was he bringing back? I guess what I'm asking is, how many animals did you trap throughout a season? And then how did you process them while you were at the cabin?

Robyn Russell: Oh, well, how many we got was really dependent on the season. And how we process them was usually, if they were still alive, my father would shoot them. If the marten was still alive in the trap, we would club them. But often when we got there, they were frozen. So, we would just take them out of the trap, reset it, bring back the frozen marten to the house. If they were already frozen, we would have to bring them in, thaw them out. And then my father would skin them, which was, I tried that and I never took to it because that is remarkably difficult to get the hide off of these things. Well, it's difficult to get the fur off without damaging

it, yeah. My father would start at the toes, usually at the feet, and skin down the legs. And then he would skin up the belly. And he would usually start at the tail and work his way down. And then the skin around the head would be the last thing to come off.

00:48:26
Robyn Russell: And once he cut that off, then it was time to turn the skin. Because once the skin is off, it's basically a tube. So, you would turn it so the fur side was inside and the skin side was outside. And then we would put that onto a stretcher. A stretcher is, stretchers came in different sizes. And they were usually sort of what you probably, it was two pieces of wood and sort of with a base and it was sort of a triangular shape. So, you would put the skin on over the stretcher, pull it down as tight as you could, and then either tack or nail the hide in place. And then you would let that dry. Once it was dry, you would take the tacks out, turn it back inside out. And sometimes that was kind of tough to get going because the heads tend to be kind of, the head, the skin around the ears tends to be kind of tough. And then you roll that back in. So, you had the fur side now on the outside, and then you would put the fur back on there and tack it back into place. And once it was sufficiently dry and you had brushed it out a bit and made it look good, then you could take it off the stretcher and you would hang it in the cache or in there. So, by the end of the year, I think I got some photos of us where we're holding up the cache. And so, you'd have a whole bunch of pelts of different sizes because different animals there to show off. And then once the fur, we did not tan any of our furs. Some people do actually tan them. We did try that one year and it was such a process.

00:50:18
Robyn Russell: My father, I think my father got this kit from the back of the Alaska Magazine and they called for some sort of vat of water and acid that you had to soak this in, it was disgusting. And then you would take the hides out and then we would have to scrape them on the table. And when I say scrape them, we had these scrapers that were made from moose shank bones. You would split the bone and then notch the end. And then you would use that to scrape the hide with. And so, we're scraping and scraping and scraping and trying to get these things to be, because you're looking to get them very supple and nice. And oh my God, that took forever. We said, after that, my father said, nope, nope, nope, nope, we're selling raw. When you sell untanned hides, you're selling raw fur. And he says, we're selling raw fur.

Angela Schmidt: Who was buying it?

Robyn Russell: Oh, well, we would bring some, it depends. There was always a fur buyer of some sort. Sometimes they would fly out to your cabin and they would buy straight from you, straight on the trapline. More often than not, you had to bring them to town. We, I remember that we would sell to the Alaskan Commercial Company. Our friend Grafton Bergman was the head fur buyer. Well, he was - in

Angela Schmidt: Fort Yukon.

Robyn Russell: Fort Yukon, in Fort Yukon. Was the manager for the, at the time he was the manager for the, I believe, the Alaskan Commercial Company or the NCC, Northern Commercial Company. He was the manager for the main store there in Fort Yukon. I'm sorry. And he would, so he would sort to the fur, and he would give you a price on that. And you have the option to either take the price or not take the price.

00:52:10
Robyn Russell: And then he would purchase the fur and he would give you a total. And that was your sum for the year. And that might be several thousand dollars. Now, most of the time we were lucky to break even. Sometimes, in a very rare occasion, we would actually make money on that. Sometimes, we would wind up losing money on that. So that was, it was, it wasn't a process that you could get rich by. It was a process that you could make some money on. You know, it was a process by which you could live off the land and make some money on it. Because you need cash to live off the land. This is one of the truisms of rural Alaska. I remember one year, another time, we sold in Fort Yukon to Grafton Bergman, but we would also bring them into town later on and sell in Fairbanks. And I believe that was to Dean Wilson at the time. But I do remember one year, this fur buyer, we had, that year, we had gotten a wolverine, but wolverines are very hard to catch. And they're absolutely ferocious. Well, I shouldn't say ferocious. They're highly energetic, and they will destroy everything in their attempt to get away. And this poor guy had sawed his so much that the snare had cut through, cut into his neck. And my father skinned it. You know, the head separated from the rest of the hide. And he was just gonna give up and toss the thing out. And mom said, no, no. She says, let me try sewing the head back on. You know, and you know, well, at least maybe we'll get something for it, you know, instead of nothing. And so, she sat down and she actually stitched the hide, you know, back on, the head back onto the rest of the pelt. And it was, I mean, you could tell there was a bit worn there, but it looked better than it was.

00:54:17
Robyn Russell: So this fur buyer comes up, and immediately we mark him as some sort of dude because, or a poser, because, this is the reason, because he was wearing a pistol on his hip. And now, in this society, you know, in rural Alaska, everybody's got guns, but we all have rifles, you know. Because, you know, you don't carry around a pistol. You know, what are you gonna do with a pistol, you know? Yeah, you know, I understand that you can actually, you know, kill a bear with it if it's really close to you. But, you know, if you're close enough to kill a bear with a pistol, that bear is too close. Bear is more likely to pistol whip you with that pistol than you are to kill him. So, we immediately marked him out as a dude. So, we have our fur spread out. He's in the cabin. Pilot's there, you know, they've got their coffee, you know, we brought out the furs, they're spreading the fur out, you know, for them to take a look at. And this fellow looks over at this wolverine that we got here. And we're all, you know, we've got our lips sewn together here because we figured he'll probably pass it by, but we're putting it out there. And he looks at it and he says, well, it looks a bit worn about the neck, but I'll give you a something, something. And we're like, okay. Oh my goodness.

Angela Schmidt: Did you have any notion about what the furs might eventually be used for? Or did you even think about that?

Robyn Russell: Well, people did use fur, but not very often. Well, I should say at that point, you know, not very often. Because it's a certain amount of skill to sew fur. Because the hairs tend to get caught in the seams and so on. And you also have to, you know, be careful as you cut them and things like that. My father had a beautiful pair of beaver over-mittens that were made for him and for Yukon by a lady there. And they had, I should explain that over-mittens are essentially big mittens that come up almost to your elbow. And you typically use them when you're gonna be out in the cold for a long period of time. If my father was going someplace on a Snow Traveler, and you know, say he would be driving a lot and he was holding like a cold metal

bar, he was definitely wearing those. wearing those and they were really beautiful. They were mostly made of beaver.

00:56:57
Robyn Russell: They had a section of beadwork, you know, over the wrist area and he had a yarn harness that, you know, went over the shoulders and then, you know, long ties that attached to each mitten so that he could take them, turn, you know, spin them around, twist them behind his back when he wanted to work, you know, with his smaller gloves and then he could, you know, untwist the mittens, put them back on and, you know, drive off and do the thing. People in the 70s, marten hats were very much the rage. Again, stuff that we never had. We trapped the fur, we didn't get to wear any of it, you know, but marten hats were very much the rage and these were the trapper hats with the ear flaps that you hear so much about and then we never had one of those. Honestly, I think the closest we came was probably having a bit of a fur trim on our parkas, usually wolf, but wolverine is really the best if you can possibly get it because wolverine keeps the frost away from your face. But these weren't things that, you know, we had tanned or caught ourselves, to the best of my knowledge. These were things that we had purchased. But yeah, we were, you know, aware that other people were wearing fur, it just wasn't us. In much the same way that, you know, car mechanics, children, you know, never have a running car.

Angela Schmidt: I think we're coming up on an hour. Did you want to take a break or should we keep going?

Robyn Russell: Oh, let's keep going.

Angela Schmidt: Let's keep going. Fantastic. I just wanted to make sure everything was going well. Let's see. I want to know a little bit more about this arrival at the cabin. When you would leave Fairbanks in the fall to go to the cabin, was that something that you looked forward to or was it something that you had a mix of emotions about?

00:59:08
Robyn Russell: Oh, that was very much something we looked forward to. Gosh, yeah. You know, after, you know, we, you know, after I, you know, went to college, you know, we stopped going up. You know, I would still get, you know, kind of sentimental in the fall when you see the geese going over and going, oh, you know, there's, we should be going, you know, we should be packing for this. But no, it was very much something we enjoyed doing. And, you know, for kids, it was a great life. I mean, you know, we, that was just, you know, fun for us. For my parents, that was an unbelievable amount of work, which is something that I did not appreciate as a kid. But looking back now, you know, as an adult, I'm like, how did they do all that? Yeah, you know, because it was a terrific amount of work. I mean, my, you know, my mom, you know, sort of was the logistician, you know, the logistics person. And I mean, she would order, in those days, there wasn't, you know, a warehouse like, you know, Sam's Club or Costco or anything like that. You had to order from, from Seattle. So she would, and I remember getting the catalogs, which were just, you know, just these, you know, computerized printouts, you know, they would say things, you know, like peaches, you know, so she would order from that, you know, the stuff would arrive, she would have to, you know, repack it, at least, you know, to try and consolidate it, keep track of everything. And, you know, get us all out there. You know, she was responsible for our

lessons and, you know, making sure that the, you know, got those, you know, got them in and, you know, on time and so on.

01:00:59
Robyn Russell: And, you know, she was, she did all the baking. I remember that we used to get coffee in these five-gallon cans, you know, these five-gallon Folgers cans, she filled those with cookies. I mean, we had, we had, that's how many she would make. And, you know, bread, a special kind of bread called bannock, which no one else seems to bake. But it's basically a baking powder biscuit dough, but with more milk in it. So, it becomes more of a cake batter. You add, you add enough milk to make it a cake batter, you add about a cup of sugar, and then you add cinnamon and raisins, and you bake that. And then when it's baked, it's a fantastic travel bread. I mean, it's good fresh, but you could also, you know, wrap it up, you know, freeze it, you know, it unthaws well, it was, it was the stuff that we took, you know, when we went on, you know, when my father went on any sort of trip or anything like that. But yeah, bread and, you know, biscuits, you know, buns. Sometimes she would do donuts. She would roll out the, it was, it must have been sort of a cake donut, because she would roll out the batter. Her old Betty Crocker cookbook, she would roll out the batter. She would roll out the dough and, you know, cut out the dough rings. We had, you know, a, you know, round cutter and little holes. And then, you know, us kids were instructed to stay the heck away from that hot oil, you know, and then she would, you know, feed them in. And once they were golden brown, we would take this out, let them dry, let them drip, and then shake them in a bag with either cinnamon sugar or with powdered sugar. You know, sometimes we did both. And my God, they were good, but they were heavy.

Angela Schmidt: When did you find time to do schoolwork?

01:03:06
Robyn Russell: Well, school was really, our whole day was really based around, you know, how much daylight we had. So, you know, we would get up early. I was listening to my mom's interview, and she mentions we were, my father wanted us up at six, you know, and in bed by nine. That was the rule. So that meant that, you know, we'd be up, you know, we'd have, you know, breakfast, we'd get, you know, washed up, a little sponge bath, you know, to get us going there. And then we would do as much school work as we could. And then we would break that daylight period, which, you know, in December is only about three or four hours. That's when we would get out, you know, get the wood in, you know, do, you know, check the traps or, you know, take a little walk or something. And then we would be back in. We would usually have dinner early, about 2, 2 p.m., and we usually had, like, you know, two main meals. We'd have breakfast, and we would have dinner, and then we could have, you know, snacks later on if we wanted stuff. And then, and then we would have, after dinner, we would do, you know, some more school work, and then we would have off, you know, in that period. But with Correspondence Study, you know, if we wanted to push ahead, you know, do more lessons, you know, and, you know, finish up this unit before moving on to something else, we could do that. We weren't, you know, trying to divide our time necessarily between, you know, a whole lot of other things. Or, you know, if we wanted to, you know, do several different, you know, lessons, we could do that. But yeah, my mom was a strict taskmaster. That's how we got stuff done. And getting stuff done on trapline actually wasn't hard, because you had nothing else to distract you. It was a lot harder. When we got older, when we were younger, you could finish up all the

school work that they had sent for you, you know, by the time we were ready to come in in the spring. As we got older, well, we wound up with lessons that we had to do in the summer.

01:04:28
Robyn Russell: And, you know, that was tough. Because, you know, we had TV now. We had, we had friends, you know, people to play with, you know, we had stuff we wanted to do. And I should add that, you know, we went through Correspondence Study for, you know, most of the winter. But in the summer, my mom would always make it a point to enroll us in summer classes at the Tanana Valley Community Center, which was headquartered up here at the university at the time. And they would have, you know, things like, you know, nature camp for kids or, you know, theater, you know, theater camp or, you know, little, little courses like that, you know, do a, learn to do a play or things like that. And we would, so we would have a chance to socialize with, you know, other kids, you know, and because we weren't, you know, socializing, you know, with them during, you know, the bulk of the year there.

Angela Schmidt: How old were you when you were doing that?

Robyn Russell: Oh, gosh. You know, probably six, seven, eight.

Angela Schmidt: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Still quite young.

Robyn Russell: Yeah, still in elementary school. Yeah. Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah, okay. Yeah.

01:06:41
Robyn Russell: But yeah, that was, that was a lot of fun. I remember us doing a play up here at the Schaible Auditorium and, and about kids at summer camp, at Camp Wendigo for some reason. And we had a nature camp. We would go, well, nature class. And this poor young woman named Nikki, she, it was a nice young, you know, a bit of a hippie, you know, college student. And, and, you know, she would, you know, point at this plot and she said, what is this? What do you think this is? And I would go, blah blah blah, I knew exactly what that is. I was, I was like a total Hermione Granger. I was a total know-it-all. But I knew a lot about plants because, you know, we, that was important to us.

Angela Schmidt: Right. With the lessons that you were taking, the correspondence courses, could you relate to all of the various lessons? Or did, you know, like, I'm just thinking of if you had to read a Dick and Jane book or something like that, it would maybe seem like a life that was far removed from what you were living.

01:07:50
Robyn Russell: Well, I did actually have to read a Dick and Jane book. We were at the very tail end of those who were using the Dick and Jane Readers. And mostly I remember being envious of Sally. Was it Sally? Alice? A young woman had a, well, it wasn't the youngest one, but she had a pink dress. And I thought that was really cool. And I wanted that. You know, when you're a kid, you don't question these things, you know. And so, you know, I would read about it and it was to be no more or less fantastic than anything else, you know, that, you know, the Grimm's Fairy Tales or anything else that we would read. The one thing that I really identified with was Robin

Hood, because Robin, you know, lived in the woods, like me, and he had my name, and he got to do cool stuff like, you know, shoot bows and arrows and, you know, fight with swords and, you know, things like that. So, I probably identified a lot with Robin Hood. And we had, in addition to, I mean, we had so many books, and we had a lot of magazines. My parents never stinted on, you know, reading material. We had a battery-powered record player.

01:09:13
Robyn Russell: And we had LP records. And we had, you know, all sorts of, you know, Disney ones. We had, you know, the soundtracks in the various films. We had also a whole set of storytelling ones called Let's Pretend. (Sings) The joy of storytelling to all we do extend. So, give a cheer, cause look what's here, another Let's Pretend (end of song). And these would be sort of, you know, dramatized stories. We had one where it was a dramatized story of Robin Hood. And at one point, you know, there's the fight, you know, the famous fight between Robin and Little John. And the fellow playing Little John says, you have quite a lot of courage, Bantam, in that little frame of yours. We thought it was Phantom for a while, though we didn't realize that Bantam was a tiny rooster.

Angela Schmidt: How was this phonograph powered?

Robyn Russell: It was it was powered by a couple of D batteries, I think. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, we didn't have anything there that wasn't powered by batteries. Because no electricity.

Angela Schmidt: And your cook stoves wood?

Robyn Russell: Yeah. Yeah, we had actually three wood stoves. We had sort of a flat top kitchen range. And you fed, it must have been, don't ask me how they got it onto the plane or got it up to the cabin, because this thing had to be close to 1000 pounds. And it had at a flat top, and it had sort of a firebox section, you would hook a little metal hook under there, lift up the lid, you would feed the kindling into it, set that on set that on fire, and then get it to going, and then it would heat up. And it was a real science trying, I didn't appreciate this at the time, but it must have been a real science for my mom to kind of predict how hot the fire was going to get and how much time she would need to cook various things on this, and bake them in the oven, which was right underneath the range.

71:35
Robyn Russell: Then we had a stove made from a 50-gallon oil barrel, and those used to be all the rage, because everybody had a 50-gallon oil barrel, and they would actually sell little kits where you could transform it into a stove. The kit would be four metal legs, and a metal door, and then sort of a metal collar for the top of the stove pipe. So, we would usually, I mean, we usually had the oil barrel, and then dad would have somebody in Fort Yukon do the welding, and then we would bring it up on the plane and then set it up in the house. And at one point, we had a double-barreled oil stove, and this was a second 50-gallon barrel that went on top of the other one. And the idea was that it would help trap the heat, and so on. I don't know if it did that any more effectively than a single barrel one, but it did trap the creosote, so my dad had to bang that out as well. There was none of this clean burning wood stuff. We were burning whatever spruce we had, and the spruce gives off a lot of creosote, which is sort of black stuff that coats the inside of the stove pipes, the chimney pipes, and you have to clean those out periodically because otherwise they can catch on fire. And that actually happened to us one year. We were-

Angela Schmidt: That's scary.

01:13:13
Robyn Russell: Yeah, very scary. We were at home, cold winter's night, and suddenly we hear this roaring, and we look outside through the window, and the snow is pink, and there's flames coming out of the chimney. We never killed a fire so fast, because we immediately opened up the stove, and we threw in salt and water, and shut that, and cut off the oxygen to the fire, and then we took that, after it was out, we had to take that down, and bang that all out, but that was a scary proposition, and that was certainly, probably one of our greatest fears, is that if you have a house fire, and you go out in a remote area during the winter, you have lost both your shelter, and a lot of your supplies. And that, I mean, that can kill you. Even if you don't die in the fire, you can die from exposure.

Angela Schmidt: Okay, I wanna go back to, you're doing homework, and no electricity. Were you doing it by lantern?

01:14:22
Robyn Russell: Yeah, we were doing, I don't know if you've seen these little kerosene lamps with the hurricane shade, but that's exactly what we had. And you would fill them up, they had a wick, you would set that, light a match, set it on fire, and then you would put the lampshade over the top of that, and that would be your light, and you could turn it up, or turn it down, that is, encourage it to wick up more fluid, or not. You always had to keep an eye on those, because periodically, they would start, set themselves on fire. And then you would have to, you'd be going along, and suddenly you would realize that, why isn't this light, light's on fire again. So, you had to turn that down, wait for it to burn the soot accumulation off, and then you could, you know, crank it up again. We had one that, we had some very basic ones, and they were pretty reliable. We had one that was a little fancier, that had, you know, more of a base to it, and it had, it had, instead of a wick, it had sort of, I would describe it as maybe a little netting, a netted sock, you know, that would be in place of a wick, and that's what you would, you know, set on fire. Well, that one loved to burn, and it would crisp the, it would turn it to, turn that little netted sock to, you know, charcoal on a regular basis. You would have to turn it down, and wait for it to burn off.

01:16:03
Robyn Russell: If you were foolish enough to touch that, touch the charcoal sock, it would just crumble into dust, and you would have to put out another one. So, but yeah, so, yeah, reading in the evenings was, you know, a fraud activity.

Angela Schmidt: Wow. Wow.

Robyn Russell: So, we had the kerosene lamps for light. We had candles too, as sort of a backup, but we didn't use it for light, not really. They were more, you know, sort of a special, you know, Christmas candle kind of, you know, thing. And then my father had a Coleman lamp that he would, and that was sort of our main source of light. And you had to pump those up, which was really difficult. Like I said, my father was a strong guy, but I mean, you know, my brother and I both tried this, and it was tough. You had to pump it up, and then, again, they had sort of little socks, you know, for wicks, and you would carefully light those, you know, put the flame underneath those.

01:17:11
Robyn Russell: And then, you know, it usually had sort of a glass cover that would shut, and then you could hang that up, and it would, you know, throw off the light. And that's what we used for light. I would say that, particularly during the daytime, that when we had, you know, sort of a break, and we could go to reading, there was a mad scramble to get the good seats next to the window. So, you could see.

Angela Schmidt: Your whole family was readers?

Robyn Russell: Oh, my whole family was readers. Yes. Absolutely. My father was, you know, I was, my brother, you know, all of us. That was sort of our main source of entertainment. We had the radio on also most of the time.

Angela Schmidt: Where was the radio coming from?

Robyn Russell: The radio was, we were mostly picking up Fairbanks stations, but when the weather was good, we could pick up, you know, Canada, sometimes even the East Coast, Boston.

Angela Schmidt: Wow.

Robyn Russell: Larry Glick in Boston.

Angela Schmidt: Oh, that's remarkable.

01:18:10
Robyn Russell: Yeah. Yeah. And now we didn't have a two-way radio. We just had, we just had a regular radio. And, back in those days, particularly on Saturdays, I think, they would run old radio drama programs, you know, the Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet, you know, sometimes we would get X Minus One, you know, in the theater of your, this was a, this was a science fiction show. And this was in the theater of your imagination, you know.

Angela Schmidt: Did you listen as a family?

Robyn Russell: For some of them we did. The Gunsmoke, we always listened to that. And Paul Harvey, you know. And, in, in the springtime, we always, always, always followed the dog racing. Particularly, you know, the, that it was broadcast. And we would, we would keep track of the times, you know, for the Open North American or the Fur Rondy, you know, as people were doing. And we would, sometimes we would bet on the races, you know, amongst ourselves. But that would be something, spring was sort of the wood cutting season. So that would be something we would check on, you know, as we were, you know, coming in from, you know, hauling wood or cutting wood or, you know. Yeah. You know, bringing the wood in. So.

Angela Schmidt: So, did you feel pretty connected, even though you were in a fairly remote situation?

Robyn Russell: Yeah. Yeah. We were, we were very connected. Well, I should say, we were very, thanks to the radio, we were very alert to, you know, what was happening around us. My mother followed Trapline Chatter religiously. So. It's just.

01:19:50
Robyn Russell: But I mean, we listened to the news programs, certainly. And, and we got, you know, the news magazines of the day, we got Newsweek and we had National Geographic, we had Reader's Digest. So, you know, we were aware of what was happening, you know, outside. That wasn't always the case. And my father was initially trapping I mean, he didn't have any of these things and he actually didn't find out that JFK had been assassinated until he got to town. Yeah. Yeah. But you have to remember that, you know, back in those days, Alaska was still like on a 24-hour lag, you know, we would, you know, see, we wouldn't see the Wizard of Oz. I always think, I always think of the Wizard of Oz as a spring program, but I understand that in other places it was actually showing around Thanksgiving or something like that, because we wouldn't see it until the spring, you know, that's where the stations would run it. For the nightly news, for the national news, that would, that would be on a day's delay. And that didn't, that didn't only changed when, you know, when I was older.

Angela Schmidt: Are you talking about television?

Robyn Russell: Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah. And you didn't have television in the –

Robyn Russell: Oh no, no, the trapline. Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: This is back in Fairbanks.

Robyn Russell: This is back in Fairbanks.

Angela Schmidt: Do you remember your first television like when you got it?

Robyn Russell: I do.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah? Tell me about it.

01:21:13
Robyn Russell: This was, this was one that we had in Fairbanks for, obviously it was black and white. And I always thought it wasn't very big. It probably was, I'm thinking maybe 16, maybe 18 inches. It wasn't, it wasn't a big screen. And I was convinced as a young person that there was probably a little team of men, because I probably, because I had seen this on one of the, the, the kids shows, you know, Sesame Street or, you know, or one of those things, that there was a little team of men, you know, and work, and work overall. So, you know, in the TV that we're probably making it go.

Angela Schmidt: So you were little when you got –

Robyn Russell: Oh, we were little. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Well, there was, yeah, I mentioned I was born a year before the great flood. Well, you know, our whole household went through the flood and of course they're, you know, they're my mom and dad are in Fairbanks. They're, they're trying to, you know, open stuff out and clean stuff out. And, and apparently, and I was, you know, a toddler at that point. So apparently, I went over to the TV set that my father had open. I was trying to dry out and I reached in and I pulled out a bunch of wires.

Angela Schmidt: Oh no.

01:22:32
Robyn Russell: And this was something I was never allowed to forget or live down. Well, over 30 years. Apparently I thought I was helping him.

Angela Schmidt: Do you remember any programs that you watched or that your parents watched?

Robyn Russell: Oh my goodness. We, well, let's see. Sesame street, certainly Captain Kangaroo. We, what was the heck? That was some sort of Electric, something Electric Company. Yeah, there we are. It was, was the seventies was a cheesy? Was it on the TV? We watched the movies of the week. Okay. There was a time friends when you didn't, when you didn't watch movies on, on, you know, whenever you wanted to, you had to wait for the, you know, the movie there to show it on a special day at the right time. And if you missed it, you couldn't see it again. But yeah, there was movies of the week. I remember seeing a little of Dark Shadows of all things which was a little scary. It was scary to the vampires. And I remember watching a little bit of Star Trek, the classic when it was originally running on there. Apparently, Mr. Spock was very important, you know, was a very, was very important to both my brother and myself. And, and yeah, pretty much anything that was, you know, on the TV that was on the seventies, you know, we watch and it was a black and white. So, you know, it was real shocker to see a color TV and, you know, so we're looking at this and going, oh my gosh, you know, these actors are old because you can see every sort of imperfection, you know, and blemishes. And we're going, oh dear.

Angela Schmidt: Right. That's funny.

01:24:20
Robyn Russell: My mother actually grew up without a TV and the first TV she ever saw was when she was a school, when she was growing up and she went into the Nordale Hotel and they had one in the lobby. This would have been probably in the late fifties or so.

Angela Schmidt: Wow.

Robyn Russell: Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Wow.

Robyn Russell: Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: So, they were adapters of technology.

01:24:44
Robyn Russell: Oh yeah.

Angelia Schmidt: They enjoyed these, the radio and the television.

Robyn Russell: Oh yeah.

Angela Schmidt: As well.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. My, we never had a ham radio. My father just didn't felt it was probably more, you know, problems than it was worth. Because you, you know, you couldn't just, you know, flip that on. You had to have a license and, you know, be tested for it and so on. And we didn't have a generator either. And I, I think that was also because he thought it would be too much of an expense. So. so, and hard to keep up, so.

Angela Schmidt: Did you ever have any emergencies at the cabin?

Robyn Russell: Oh, yeah.

Angela Schmidt: And how did you deal with those?

01:25:30
Robyn Russell: Well, well, you know, being a kid, when I look back on it, how any of us are still alive? To be quite honest. I mean, you know, you know, the stuff that we did, you know, and the remoteness of it, and yeah, I'm not sure how the heck we managed to survive it, to be quite honest. But probably the biggest medical emergency that we had was my mother's miscarriage. She, you know, we were kids, so we understood that she wasn't well, but we didn't quite know why, you know? And, you know, apparently, you know, she had been pregnant. She started bleeding. You know, she lost the fetus there. She lost quite a lot of blood. And I remember her being in bed, and you know, my father cooking breakfast, which was a shocking development. I wasn't aware that my father could cook, OK? Yeah. And then when the plane came, she went in, and you know, she went to the doctor and was checked out. And you know, she arranged to, you know, send a special message for us over Trapline Chatter, you know, that we listened to. And then, you know, she was fine after that. But I mean, that could have easily gone very badly, so.

Angela Schmidt: Absolutely.

Yeah. And let's see. I was trying to think. We didn't have any accidents. The biggest, my mom did fall in Fairbanks. My mom fell off a ladder and injured her shoulder. And when she was still in an arm sling when we went up to trapline, and I had to do her physical therapy, which was painful for her, painful for me, you know. It was just really tough, because I had to push her arm back. And you know, that hurt quite a bit. There were a lot of adhesions there. And the good news is she was, you know, did make a full recovery and was able to, you know, regain her strength in that arm. But that was really tough, you know, is doing her, is hurting her, you know, because it was hurting me, too, you know, to do that. That's it. But yeah, I think we were very lucky in that,

you know, we didn't have any major, well, you know, in terms of sickness, we were usually pretty healthy.

01:28:11
Robyn Russell: Because, you know, we were, you know, breathing lots of clean air, and there weren't any other people around. When we came into town, though, that was a different story. Because whatever flu or, you know, bug or cold, we would get it with a vengeance. And, you know, some of my earliest memories are, you know, lying there on the couch, drinking, you know, tepid Seven-Up up and watching various game shows, which I always associate with illness. Bob Barker was still on the Price is Right.

Angela Schmidt: So tell me a little bit about the transition away from that lifestyle then. What was your last year on the trapline? Did it happen suddenly? Was it, you know, did you foresee that it was going to be your last year, the last year you were out there?

Robyn Russell: Well, no, I didn't, actually. I thought, you know, at that point, I was making the transition to college. So, I thought I'd probably be, you know, visiting, you know, them for a couple more winters, maybe. But no, I didn't think that that would be the case. I was going to say that coming into town was always a transition for us. And there was a certain amount of culture shock. You know, you would look around, and there'd be all these cars, you know, all these things happening, all these sounds, you know, planes and things going over, you know, cars making sounds. The air smelled different. It was just very unreal, and you would spend a couple of days in sort of a dreamlike state, you know, until you got used to it, and then you accepted it as your reality again. You ignored, you know, a lot of the sounds that were going on, and so on.

01:30:00
Robyn Russell: And then, you know, after, and then a few weeks, you were, you know, fine, you know. Yeah, this was normal. But yeah, that transition was always, transition from town to country was fine. But coming from the countryside into town, that was always more of an adjustment. And then, so that last year, I had graduated from high school in May of ‘84. I had immediately gone to, into summer sessions. That was sort of my own version of, you know, college orientation. And then I had started school in the fall of that year. And making that trip back for Christmas was a big deal, because this was the first time I would be making that trip on my own, you know. Went really well. You know, came up to Fort Yukon, chartered plane was there, hopped on there, went up there. I was treated like a guest, which was great. Instead of one of the workers, which was, you know.

Angela Schmidt: Wow.

Robyn Russell: That's great. Yeah, you know, spent Christmas holidays, it was great. And we must have spent New Year's there. And then I had to come back for the start of the semester. And, you know, as far as I knew, I mean, you know, I was aware that, you know, my brother would be coming into town later that spring. But I didn't realize that that was gonna be the last, you know, the last time I'd see, you know, the trapline, so.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah, yeah.

01:31:50
Robyn Russell: But it's a transition that we, you know, would have had to have made, you know, sooner or later. Because, you know, at that point, you know, I was either going to school, you know, all the time, or I was working, you know, during the summer. You know, my brother was, you know, starting that also. He was, you know, starting to get summer jobs, and starting to get summer jobs. And, you know, he was also getting ready to, you know, move on to, you know, his next level of schooling also, so. And I think, you know, my brother is the pilot now. I like to tell people that we're a statistic, because every, one out of every two Alaskans is a pilot. And, you know, there's two of us, and he's the pilot.

Angela Schmidt: He's the pilot, yeah.

Robyn Russell: But, you know, he started off as a freight handler, over with, I think, Wright Air. And, you know, they would take him along to, you know, pack and unpack the plane. And, you know, eventually the pilot said, you want to take the wheel for a little bit, and he did. And he liked it pretty well. And so, he went to flight school, and that was sort of his college.

Angela Schmidt: Got it. Yeah. So, after both of the kids kind of flew the coop.

Robyn Russell: Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Then the parents, it wasn't a sustainable lifestyle for them. Is that kind of how that worked?

Robyn Russell: Well, my father continued to go out, but he was going out on his own.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. And, you know, we would, you know, pack up his boxes, you know, and send those out. And, but my mom and my brother and I stayed in town. After my father retired, he stayed out on the trapline for a bit. And, you know, he trapped on his own, but eventually he wound up coming into Fort Yukon. And I think it was just, you know, it's a very physical lifestyle. And I think he was just finding it a little bit too much at that point. And he was living at the big house in Fort Yukon.

01:33:40
Robyn Russell: And he would stay there all winter. I was going to say that it's unusual that we stayed out as long as we did. I mean, from October to April. You know, more, you know, other trappers would, you know, come into town, say for the Christmas holidays and, you know, and might stay there, say in Fort Yukon for a bit. And then we'll go out, you know, and then come back in the spring before, you know, the rivers, you know, unthawed and that kind of thing. But, yeah. But, you know, we went out and we stayed out and then we would only come back, you know, when we were, when trapping was over. So, yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah, I can hear your voice start to go a little bit.

Robyn Russell: My voice is starting to go a little bit, yeah.

Angela Schmidt: So, yeah, we can start wrapping up. But one observation I had when listening to your parents' interviews or their oral histories was that they're both storytellers.

Robyn Russell: Oh, yes.

Angela Schmidt: Right, and your dad especially can spin a yarn, can't he?

Robyn Russell: Oh Oh, yes, he can.

Angela Schmidt: Yes, and there was lots of laughter. Your mom is so funny.

Robyn Russell: Oh, she is, she was, she was.

Angela Schmidt: She's, yeah, such a stitch. Oh, yeah. I just wonder, like, as you were living your lifestyle in Fairbanks or out on the trapline, was there a lot of storytelling in your household or a lot of laughter about the stories or is that something that came more in retrospect?

Robyn Russell: Oh, no. You know, storytelling was very much part of that. You know, my mom would, you know, tell stories about, you know, growing up on, you know, the farm down in Iowa, you know, about her brothers and sisters, you know, and my father would tell stories about, you know, growing up in Waukegan and then in Grayslake, Illinois, and, you know, talk about, he actually ran a little trapline, you know, of his own, and he had a pet raccoon named Mickey, and he told the story where Mickey got ahold of his mother. A mother had, you know, white sheets strung out on the lawn, and Mickey came up and just, you know, clap, clap, clap with his little muddy raccoon paws, and so there was, you know, sheets with, you know, little raccoon paw prints all over them.

01:36:10
Robyn Russell: And, but yeah, and he would tell stories about, you know, being in the Navy, and a lot of those revolved around food. He told this story about, they were, you know, a bunch of young guys, and they're always on the lookout for, you know, more calories than they were getting, and so, and he, they were loading up with these, this tinned cheese. And yeah, that's what I said, but apparently, yeah. And so, and he and a couple of other guys arranged to divert some of the cans for, you know, the radio crew. He was a radio man, and so he diverted some of those for the radio crew, and, you know, there was a big ship-wide search, and, you know, no one's saying nothing. You know? And so, on night shift, you know, they're making themselves cheese sandwiches, he says, and then this lieutenant wanders in, and the lieutenant says, is that some of the cheese? And they're going, yes, sir. He says, give me a sandwich. And that was his bribe to keep quiet. But yeah, no, there was always a lot of stories, and both of my parents, you know, talked a lot about, you know, growing up, and, you know, their stories, and, you know, stories about, you know, teaching out in the village, and, you know, stuff that, you know, working on the job, and then, you know, whenever we would have, you know, the pilots by, yeah, sometimes the pilots would just come, offload the stuff, and go, but if they had time, they might hang out, you know, have a cup of coffee, have some cookies, and then you get to catch up on all the good gossip, you know, and that was, that was critical. And they would have a, you know, a good chat, you know, about, you know, people that they knew, usually in Fort Yukon, you know, and what was going on, and, you know, what things were happening, so.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Another observation that I had about your parents is they were a little bit older than typical parents when they had you. And how remarkable it is that your father knew some people who had come up in the original gold strikes in Alaska, the gold rushes in Alaska.

01:38:41
Robyn Russell: Yeah, well, my dad, when he mustered out of the Navy, he, you could, you could muster out early if you had a job offer, and he had received a job offer from Pan Am. They needed people who knew Morse Code to handle the radio traffic, because there was a lot of, you know, air traffic. So, the first place he was assigned, and that was an 18-month assignment, was Nome, and so of course he didn't actually know people who were, you know, a part of the gold rush, you know. And meet people that were part of the gold rush. And, I'm sorry, I've lost the track of the question.

Angela Schmidt: That's fine. I just think it's remarkable that your, so probably the stories that you grew up on were stories that stretched way back.

Robyn Russell: Oh, yeah. My dad told me a story about the lost gold of the Sheenjek. And I don't know how true it is or not but he told me that this is something he had heard my impression was this is something he had heard from you know folks in in Fort Yukon or Arctic Village but these fellows had jumped ship from a whaling ship and they had made their way you know across to the Sheenjek. They had found gold at some point there had drawn a map of it, made it to civilization, went outside, died of course leaving only the map. Then no one knows where it is, but it's not impossible that there might be gold up there someplace. But who knows? No my, my dad, would before my dad didn't trap alone. he also had you know trapping partners and he had a trap with Don Delima. And I believe this is the same Don Delima who eventually went to Manley Hot Springs although, I'm, I'm not sure but he had quite a few stories about Don.

01:40:52
Robyn Russell: Don was my father's words almost a genius, the key word here being almost. Don was a very smart guy but like a lot of smart people he wasn't always you know good at dealing with dealing with the minutiae of everyday life. And, and, Don and dad were on this trapping trip up to the line cabin. Don was behind with the dogs. They were running dogs at this point so Don was behind with the dog sled and, you know, the supplies. My father who was more lightly laden was on his snowshoes. He was out in front breaking trail. Well he finishes you know breaking trail gets to the line cabin before Don and the others, gets you know gets the fire going. He's waiting around for Don to show up. Don doesn't show up, now, and they wait some more and Don still hasn't shown up. So, at this point he's getting a little worried because you know starting to lose the light here. So, he doesn't have his rifle he's got his he's got his axe. So, he goes down the trail to see what the heck is you know keeping them. And he's going along and pretty soon he hears this strange sound dingle dingle dingle dingle dingle dingle dingle dingle. And he's like what the heck is that? And it's getting closer dingle dingle dingle dingle dingle. And then he. So, he steps off the trail he's got the axe he's waiting you know for the strange creature to, to appear. And it's the dogs, and they're coated in ice. And he says the dogs didn't even stop they just looked at him and they just kept right on going. They just went right straight to the cabin. And eventually Don shows up he's coated in ice. He had decided, Don had decided that you know the dogs were pretty much on autopilot and they were doing pretty good so he was just gonna hop into this the sled basket that is, you know into the sled and the sled is big

enough to hold. You know a person you know if you want to have a little nap in there and he was gonna hop on that sled and have a little nap while the dogs pulled him along.

01:43:10
Robyn Russell: Well that was doing great right up until the trail made us you know a turn and the dogs kept going straight ahead over the bank into the slough crash of the water. Don woke up at that point leaped out of the sled managed to cut the dogs loose. So, they were you know pulled underneath you know. But you know when you get wet in those cold dry temperatures it just freezes right on here. It's like a suit of armor. So, then they had to walk you know back to the light cabin. I, I guess they did manage to retrieve most of the supplies. The sled hadn't sunk in that far.

Angela Schmidt: Stories of survival.

Robyn Russell: Stories of survival yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Well maybe that's a good story to end on unless is there something that we glossed over that you wanted to talk about today?

Robyn Russell: Oh gosh well we've talked quite a bit today gosh. Yeah, you know when I was listening I was sort of reviewing some of my, my mom's stuff and I was thinking because I wanted to make sure that I had like details, because you know you know my memories are kind of you know glossy you know as a kid, and I was thinking well you know they've kind of hit the sort of the big parts you know the big outlines if you know our life on the trapline. So, I was going to concentrate a little bit more on, you know, more of sort of the detail kind of things, you know we talked about. You know getting you know kitted up to go outside. Well you know that was a whole process you know you had to put on you had your socks on, you know just regular socks on, then you had to put on wool socks with the you know the felt liners inside. Then you put on your boots. Boots that my mother made by hand. She made two pairs of boots for each of us plus one pair for herself because she was usually exhausted at that point. But that's 17 pairs of boots I'm sorry not 17, 14, 14 pairs of boots for friends every year every season because you would wear them out you know going through there. And we always had the best-looking boots on the trapline.

01:45:24
Robyn Russell: The Fort Yukon style of boots is actually very plain. It's just you know a moose hide bottom and a white canvas top and then you have a wool felt lining that ,that, that is separate from the boot itself and this can go up to your knee or can go up to your, you know instead of your calf. And what we did. We had calf, calf high boots moose hide sole sort of polyester fiber fills sort of a quilted file polyester in the inside we had an elasticized cuff at the top to keep the snow from getting in and then we as kids could always pick out our you know patches or trims that we were going to go on there but our arts or our boots were always short and colorful. And the hardest part of making those was, was working that moose hide and you particularly trying to pleat the top pleat the, the top you know near the toe so it could all you know go around. And, I remember mom you know use it you know having to you know pull the needle through with you know pliers and we also had a treadle placed one of those old fashioned Singer sewing machines with the treadle pedal that would go up and down and she would sew with that.

Angela Schmidt: In Fairbanks?

01:46:54
Robyn Russell: No, no on the trapline yeah, yeah. And yeah, but she made two pairs for each myself my brother, my father, one pair for herself because she was exhausted by that and these things got a lot of wear. I mean they were lightweight and they were warm but you know they would wear out eventually. You could patch them but it didn't feel too good. So, we always had a second pair. You know that that we had to get that. We needed to go through and or to get through the winter and so, so, regular socks, wool socks with a felt liner in that, boots over the top of that, you would tie them at the at the ankle, and then your snow pants went over the top of that. Sometimes you had suspenders and then you know when you throw on you know your heavyweight parka, and by this time you're getting a little warm. And then your scarf which was usually a hand knitted one that that we had done. My mother had broken her left arm as a young girl and part of her physical therapy was learning to knit as she only ever learned a garter stitch though. So that was that was how she taught us. So that was how we did and we usually knitted our own scars. They were they were just warmer. And then, you know, a cap. Sometimes you know just a regular stocking cap sometimes a hat with the glove you know with ear flaps. Sometimes we had a ski mask which you know made us look like little hoodlums. The ski masks were bad but they would frost up you know around your mouth. And, and, then you know you'd either have mittens or depending on what you were doing you might have you know finger gloves, you know depending on if there's you know sort of fine work. You know mittens were usually pretty good for, for, most of what you were doing. And then out you go. And in the spring the you know the outfit was pretty much the same where you probably had you know like a lighter weight coat or something like that on. So …

Angela Schmidt: What was too cold to go outside?

01:49:14
Robyn Russell: Ah it was never too cold to go outside, not even if 40 or 50 below but we didn't stay out for very long. We would usually go out you know long enough to do our chores and you know maybe stop around a little bit and then it was back inside. But yeah you never had lived through cabin fever until you've been through like an actual cabin. I remember some of the stuff we would do because we get so bored. I would, and I didn't realize that then but this was probably like a proto librarian you know in action but I would , we had this whole set of encyclopedias. Basically, I was particularly fond of the World Book ones and I would just follow one topic from book to book. You know whatever you know caught my eye. This this is internet searching before the internet, but yeah that's what we would do there.

Angela Schmidt: One room is what your cabin was.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. 20 by 22. And then as we got older we added on a little bedroom and I think that was probably about half the size 10 by 10 by 13 10 by 16 something like that.

Angela Schmidt: Whose bedroom was it? Or was it for all?

Robyn Russell: Well for, well for my mom and dad, they shared the one big bed. Then for me I had my, my own you know little twin bed and a little bunk bed that set that we took apart and

then my brother had these bachelor quarters. It is a little twin bed in the front room yeah so, so, we had a little more space that way. Yeah, we, my brother and I a young when we were younger slept in you know bunk beds and honestly if there's ever something that has made key, you know, for people to fall to their deaths, as the as the oldest I got the top bunk yeah so yes that's how that works.

Angela Schmidt: Super well I think you painted a real picture of what it's like.

Robyn Russell: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Angela Schmidt: That's remarkable.

Robyn Russell: Oh my goodness.

Angela Schmidt: Anything else?

01:51:28
Robyn Russell: Ah well, uh I was you know thinking back on, on, you know what we're talking about. I was thinking back on you know our Christmas celebration.

Angela Schmidt: Oh yeah.

Robyn Russell: Yeah, we always had a turkey for Thanksgiving and we usually had a ham for Christmas. And for Christmas my brother and I were charged with getting the tree. You know we were. We are in the middle of this giant forest so you think one thing that this would be. So, it's such a hard job but it was because these were all you know giant trees. So, you had to go out find a clearing where they'd be smaller trees and then we'd have to, and we're wading through snow that's like at least knee-deep and you know was often hip deep you know. So, we had to wade around through the snow until we found one that you know wasn't too tall, had you know branches all pretty much on the same side, and it was light enough for us to carry and then we could chop it down, and then we would drag it back home, again, up the big gully or up the big hill you know to the house. My father would, made a little brace for it to keep it upright and we had a little tin can full of sugar water and that that would keep it you know alive. For the Christmas holidays. We would always string popcorn. My mom would pop up a batch of popcorn and we would you know have a regular needle and thread and we would just you know string that on there you know, one piece for us one for the string, and at the end of Christmas we will put the tree out and the popcorn will be for the birds you see. And we also made paper chains to decorate the tree, the strips of paper and glue in you know a circular form all chained together and yeah, and we had a star cut out of cardboard and covered with aluminum foil and we also had sort of a mix of, of, you know purchased ornaments that you know we had put on there as well, and mini candy canes we would usually hang those on the tree and we made Christmas cookies but we did not but we did not actually hang them on the tree. They wouldn't have made the last very long, right? But my mom would roll out the sugar cookie dough and we had all sorts of cookie cutters and, you know, camels and, you know, Santa shapes and, you know, that kind of thing. We would cut them out, bake them, and then usually we left them plain, but sometimes we would decorate them with frosting made from icing sugar. So, yeah, but yeah. And usually ham for Christmas and, oh, always, always a fruitcake for my dad. He was

the fruitcake fan. And we would order that from one of the Christmas catalogs that were put out by Sears or J C Penney's or Montgomery Wards. Those Christmas catalogs, they used to advertise them as dream books. And these were the publications my brother and I poured over.

01:54:45
Robyn Russell: My mother would say, remember, you can't order everything you see. But we would go through and, you know, we'd ponder, you know, the importance of, you know, this one versus that one, you know. We'd circle what we wanted, you know. And, you know, my mom, she always planned for the holidays, you know. But, you know, she would send out the order and then, you know, the presents would come in and, you know, wrap them up and put them under the tree for us. But she always had things like, you know, Christmas, you know, commercial Christmas stockings where they would have all these candy in this red net that, you know, that was, you know, sock shaped. And, you know, she would put those out and, you know, these would be Santa's elves that brought these, you know. Oh, and we would always hang up our regular socks, you know, our stockings, so, yeah. Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: What kind of things would you get in your stocking?

Roby Russell: For the stocking stuffers, they were usually really small things. They might be like, you know, toothbrushes and stuff like that. For, you know, the bigger presents, and, you know, all of these toys, I should add, we're on a one-way journey. So, you know, the stuff we got is, you know, toddlers we still had, you know. Years down the line. But we had, my brother one year got a radio-powered police car with a siren. That was not a big hit amongst our family. Our brother and I loved it, but, you know, our parents didn't like it so much. I got a giant three-foot doll at one point. And I remember an old, what was called a three-foot doll, what was called an old Speak-and-Say. You would pull the little, the cord, yeah. And it was, the arrow would spin around and it would land on, you know, say, A is for Apple, B is for me, you know. Things like that.

01:56:51
Robyn Russell: And my brother, we usually had, you know, we never had a shortage of board games. We had all the games in the world. My father, we had a ‘70s style chess set. These big pieces, you know, maybe about four or five inches wide. They could actually grasp. All made of plastic. And in this red velvet, you know, case, it was just a big red velvet box, you know. And my father showed, my father only knew like certain rudiments of chess, but he showed us enough that we could play. We played Battleship. We played Old Bade. We had all sorts of card games. We played, I mean, we knew all sorts of card games, yeah. And, you know, just with a regular deck of cards. We played Battleship. We had one called Risk. There was also one called Slap Happy, where you slap, had to slap these suction cups down. Excited our dog a little too much. He didn't like that. And what were some of the others? Well, you know, Cootie. You know, where you had to roll the dice and build the bug. And the one where you would tap out the little blocks of ice until the fishermen fell in.

Lynn Lara: Icebreaker.

Robyn Russell: Icebreaker, yes. Yeah. And gosh, what were some of the others? Oh, Operation. Operation, yeah, always. He had Battery Eye. That funny bone was the hardest thing to get. Oh, my goodness.

Angela Schmidt: You had cool games.

01:58:36
Robyn Russell: Yeah. Well, my parents never stinted any sort of board games for us. For the toys, you know, we were always cautioned that, you know, you can't avoid everything, you know.

Angela Schmidt: Did they play with you or?

Robyn Russell: Oh yeah, we all played, yeah. And oh, my mom was a big one for puzzles. She would always have a puzzle out on the table, on the kitchen table, and we would all take turns, you know, working on it and putting it together, you know.

Angela Schmidt: Wow, amazing.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. Oh, my goodness. Yeah. Yeah, you know, just regular jigsaw puzzles, but we also had one where you had sort of the map of the states. Alaska was never in the correct position. It was always somewhere down off the coast of California, you know.

Angela Schmidt: You mentioned a dog. Was it always the same dog?

Robyn Russell: Oh yeah.

Angela Schmidt: Okay.

Robyn Russell: Yeah, our main dog was Kelly. He was a German Shepherd and Husky. And my mom got, he was advertised for, you know, in the News Miner in those days, they had a free column. And he was advertised as a free puppy. So, we came out and we looked at the puppies, all these, you know, little lanky dog, lanky little puppies with, you know, giant ears. And that was the one we picked out. My brother wanted to name him Christmas Tree. That was vetoed.

02:00:00
Robyn Russell: But we had seen this Disney program. Walt Disney, you know, was a big deal. We always watched that, you know. And they seen this Disney program where there was a German Shepherd named Kelly Girl. And so, he was named Kelly Boy.

Angela Schmidt: Nice.

Robyn Russell: Yes. And that was our main dog growing up. And yeah, he would, he would go to school with us. He would lay under the table when we were doing our lessons and scritching with our feet. And he would always, you know, follow us around and accompany us on any of our adventures. So, you know. The only thing he would not do is he would not pull a sled for anything.

Angela Schmidt: So, your transportation or your dad's transportation was mostly the snow machines.

Robyn Russell: Snow machines, yeah. Yeah. Dad ran dogs for a while when he was up on Nome and a little bit, you know, when he was trapping. And he said he eventually realized that the biggest dog on the team was him. That was it.

02:01:07
Robyn Russell: It is quite a bit of work, you know. With sled dogs, you have to keep them, you know, fed and watered and exercised through the summer. You know, with a snow machine, you can just sit there. So, yeah. Yeah. But yeah, that's pretty much what, I've come to the end there.

Angela Schmidt: Okay, okay. I know that there's a million more stories.

Robyn Russell: Oh, there are. Yeah.

Angela Schmidt: And we can always do a round two, but.

Robyn Russell: Okay. Yeah. I feel good.

Angela Schmidt: I appreciate your time today. That was really, that was very interesting.

Robyn Russell: Yeah. Well, it was fun to talk about it.

Angela Schmidt: Yeah, thanks.

[end of recording]