

Walter Blue
B. c. 1920
Seward
1 hour tape

Interview by Neville Jacobs
Anchorage, Sept., 1974

Walter Blue was employed by the U.S. Army as historian at the time of the interview, which was conducted in Mr. Blue's office at Fort Richardson. Mr. Blue was terminating his employment with the army the week of the interview, and he planned to write his autobiography, so was reluctant to talk about his life in the interview. He agreed to tell about "life in Seward", however, and he recalls many personalities in early-day Seward in this tape about his boyhood home.

6 The tape opens with conversation about the validity of oral history as history. Blue maintains as a historian that material must be subject to test, documentable, and wonders if oral histories are not just "ancillary material." Some of this discussion came about as I set up the machine and as he protested my interviewing him. He did finally relax and enter into discussion easily.

Walter's father was a 98-Rusher to Nome. He returned to his family in West Virginia, then moved back to the west coast where he opened a book store in Tacoma. Soon, his business partner left with the store's funds, so Walter's father returned to Alaska again. This time he came to Seward to work on the building of the Alaska Railroad in 1905-06.

Blue says the railroad was begun to gain access to coal lands in the Interior; Seward was founded as the railhead in 1903.

The first family to homestead in the Seward area was named Lowell, said to be related to the Massachusetts's Lowells. They homesteaded at the head of Resurrection Bay. This Lowell married a native Alaskan woman and had several children. Blue knew the

grandchildren. Blue talks about some of the descendants of the Lowell family.

Blue points out that Alaska Methodist University professor Jay Stoddart has researched Seward History; mentions that Seward archival material was moved to Seattle but is expected to be returned to Alaska.

Blue describes transportation out of Seward as the railroad was being built, then turns to discussing railroads in Alaska generally; then back to Seward and his father's life.

Walter's father opened a laundry, and this leads Walter into a digression but interesting story of the laundry and its next owner. A Japanese who had opened a hand laundry bought out the equipment his father owned, and ran a major laundry business in Seward until World War Two. At that time, Kawabi was interned and people said he was a "spy." After the war, Kawabi moved to Seattle, opened an import-export business and became very wealthy. He then endowed a retirement home for Japanese in Seattle. Thus the Seattle Japanese home owes its origins to a man who "got his start" in Alaska.

In Seward, residents always expected that Seward would become the "San Francisco of the North," Blue says. The mountain grade between Seward and town to the North prevented a boom economy from developing, yet Seward people always expected it would arrive "any time." Seward gradually declined, but the Seward Salmon Derby has kept it alive as a recreation town.

Blue next talks about various Seward residents, occupations, unique events, with a digression to the problems of the professional historian. There is a need to fictionalize history to create

dimensions for documentation. (The interviewer failed to point out that oral history, which may be subject to variations of memory and imagination itself, may be closer to the spirit of the truth than an after-the-fact historian imposing fiction to "create dimension!")

Blue goes back to Seward, talks about the "Line." He describes personalities of women on the line colorfully, and explains he knew them because his paper route took him there.

Discussion develops about the philosophy of prostitution, its problems and merits, then turns to bootlegging and prohibition and the problems of making whiskey.

Finally, end of tape, conversation about fur traffic, fur trade, the lack of it in Seward, and on to other businesses which were variously successful and unsuccessful in Seward.

Although the conversation touches upon many topics, there are several colorful anecdotes about people on the tape. In its entirety, the interview generates a fairly comprehensive picture of Seward from its founding to the 1967 earthquake which destroyed most of the city.