

Narrator: Gene and Marion Browning

Date: July 22, 1981

Interviewer: Isabel Ingram

Place: Browning Home, Homer, Alaska

I. First question, when did you all move to Homer?

M. June,

G. 1948

M. No, to Homer '49.

G. I came down in late '48 but didn't move down until, I think the last of August or first of September in '49, I don't remember the date.

I. What made you decide to come to Homer?

M. Well, I'll answer that one, we were living in Mobile, Alabama and we got the Saturday Evening Post, and they had ~~articles in it on Alaska,~~ for quite a few weeks,

Matanuska Valley, and different places, so we kind of got interested in Alaska and, so just one day out of the blue my husband said, "Let's go to Alaska." , and I said, "o,k," so, we came to Alaska. We got a large truck and we enlarged the bed, ~~was~~, to make a trailer with everything because by then the road was terrible, the AlCan Highway, and we had our stove and everything and, so, we left Mobile, AAlabama and arrived in Anchorage on July the 7th, 1948.

I. And what did you do when you hit Anchorage, did you just..?

M. Well, the first thing we did was to look around for a place to park our trailer, ~~you know,~~ and we found a trailer park and built a great big lean-to on, got settled, and then my husband went out ^{looking} for work. And he found 3 jobs in one day, because he was a journeyman lineman, you know, an electrician. But, at that time he worked for Fort Richardson.

I. Oh, that Air Base up there?

M. Yes. And in the evenings I went to work for Snow White laundry as a packer, ~~you know,~~ But, that was our introduction to Alaska,

I. And how did you learn about Homer?

M. He better answer that question. *He did the talking w/ a friend of ours.*

I. Did you come down here mainly to Homestead?

M. We came to Homer mainly to Homestead, yes. We wanted ^{and} to get out of the rat race, ~~you know,~~ just kind of slow down a little bit, in other words.. And we were expecting our fourth child, I was about 3 or 4 months pregnant coming up

room, we wanted

M. here. We had our fourth child in Anchorage in '49, it was a boy.

I. Were there many homesteads at that time?

M. There was quite a bit of land open at that time, yes. Good, ~~you know,~~ available land, and my husband did all of the flying in, looking, ~~you know,~~ with a friend of ours, ^{by the of} named Bob Hodel, they flew down, he had a friend already down here, Bill Fletcher. He took him up on the hill, and looked all around, and he chose a homestead.

I. What, would you say, was a women's role in the Homestead?

M. A women's erole on the Homestead? Well, I guess you would have to have a pioneering spirit, it was quite a change from all of the modern conveniences that I was used to. Washing on the rub board for a while, no electricity for a while, out houses, baking bread, which I have never done in my life before I hit Homer.

I. Alot of new experiences?

M. Yes. And cooking on a wooden coal stove, but, ~~you know,~~ -it we weew- were happy na and we just had a real good time, the homesteaders all visited teachother and we makde our own entertainment, you know, playing music, and singing, and skiing, and, ~~you know,~~ birthdays, and all that sort of thing. It was alot of work but it was well worth it, and we were very-saf- satisfied. This is our my daughter, Dixie.

I. Hi, I'm Isabel.

General Family Discussion

M. This is the lady interviewing us about our Homestead. Dad'll have to answer that question about how he picked it out.

I. When you were living on the homestead, what kinds of things ~~1~~ did you do, like, as far as working on the Homestead?

M. Well, we built our house, and we had it up, I think, in about 2 weeks. We brought all of our equipment, from Anchorage, on the barge then known as the "Yeintna", it was owned by the two brothers ⁱⁿ from, what's that place up there? ^{bottle} HOPE I always want to go off and see it, coming ~~down~~ ⁱⁿ from Anchorage. *ma*

Dixie. Hope?

M. Yea, Hope, Ma The Mathison brothers. We So we put everything on that barge, 3 families together, and came ^{down} to Homer. We were 3 days in a storm up there, everybody was sick, except a few of us. And, of course, the baby, he just drank his bottle and was happy as a jay bird, didn't make him sick at all. And then we landed out here on the Homer Spit because there wasn't any roads in and out of Homer at that time.

I. Going to Anchorage, you mean?

M.. Yes. We brought our truck with us to haul ^{all} the stuff. And ^I looked up at those hills, and I thought, how beautiful, "I love it, and I don't think I've ever changed my mind."

I. So, did you have to find work at other places?

M. Well, yes, my husband right away, got work at Homer Electric Association, ~~you~~ ~~know~~, and it wasn't very long before they started putting lines into Homer. And we got electricity, which was wonderful. But there was many a time that he had to walk to work. We used to get snowed in at 2 weeks at a time, maybe 3 weeks at a time. You walked, or tracted where you could, and you walked the rest of the way. Of course, there was the matter of school. You know, ^{they} we had all children up there. And, luckily, one of the homesteaders was a teacher, Mrs. Mead. So we had school in a little old log house up there for quite a few years and she taught all the grades, from 1 to 7 or 8, I ^{believe} think it was. We had 10 boys and 1 girl in the school, my daughter. And ~~so~~ ~~many~~, and then more people came, and we built a school house.

I. Up on the hill?

M. Up on the hill. And then we used that until the roads got open. They would not send a bus up and down the hill to take our children to high school because of that hair pin curve, now they do, they didn't then, so we had to move down town so our children could go to high school. You know, lose so much time going to school.

I. And that's how you moved down here?

M. And that's why we moved down town.

I. Do you still have that homestead up on the hill?

M. No, when we moved down town, we sold the homestead. 'Bout the same year.

I.

General Family Discussion

I. Did you have alot of hardships up there, like, did you run into alot of problems with the homestead, building it and getting yourself situated ^{up there} ~~up there~~?

M. We didn't have any problems because we had most of our stuff on the barge when we came, you know, we had our lumber and our aluminum, we had aluminum sidings, and our windows, and our stove, we brought practically everything we needed, you know, to, it was open and rustic and then the rooms were closed in at first, ~~you know~~, but we did have the basics. And, of course, we had 3 families living with us for about 3 months because they, you know, are friends of ours, and they all homesteaded around us, and then they worked for months peeling logs for the other homesteads because they all had log houses and we just had a wooden-aluminum one. ^{you know} And there was alot of problems making sure you had enough coal and wood and, ~~you know~~, making sure you had enough water in the house. Every Saturday was bath day and the kids had to haul it all in and haul it all out, you know. And the same with the boys, every Saturday was chopping wood with their dad, all day long, you know, chopping trees, and wood, I mean. But they liked it, and they liked to go hunting, which was good then, ~~they could~~ ^{they could} go out and get Spruce hens and Ptarmigan, rabbits. The boys enjoyed that.

I. Did you have problems hauling coal up here?

Mr and Mrs. Bfowning interview. cont'd

high ? (4)

M. Well, not then, not then. A bunch would go together when the, you know, when the tide was just perfect for coal, you know, after a big storm or something. They'd gather tons and tons-ef-coal and tons of it and we'd all share, ~~you know~~. But between times we had a tractor, that's what we started out with, a tractor with a big box on the back of it, you'd haul the wagon, you know, and load that up. We were pretty well off with coal and wood that way. We had good water, in fact, better water than they have down town. It was really good water from a well.

I. So all the homesteaders up on the hill sort of stayed as a group and helped each other.

M. Yes, we had what they called the Kachemak Farmers Association, ~~you know~~, we grew oats and stuff, and you know, we had a little association. Somebody had a farm of chickens, and once a month we'd meet and that would be a good social time. You know, if someone had a birthday we'd bake a cake and ski it over in the winter, or whatever.

I. Did you have gardens up there and stuff?

M. Uh huh, we had beautiful gardens, yes.

I. Who did you sell it to?

M. Well, see, to prove up you had to clear so much land, you know, and we'd have a big tiller come in and till it and my husband would plant the garden, with potato potatoes and cabbage and whatever. It was good and to grow stuff, of course, we picked alot of berries in these days and we went all around ~~and~~ downtown, or whatever. We took advantage of ~~everything~~ Alaska had that way, you know, fish. My husband was a fisherman, too, back then and we had boats and they went salmon fishing. And so we had fish to eat and then, of course, the moose, you know. So, all in all, I ~~could~~ say we did pretty well, ~~you know~~, as far as food.

I. So you did most of your own stuff?

M. Yeah, we did alot of canning and, ~~you know~~.

I. How did you store things without a refrigerator?

M. Well, most everybody then, you either canned it up, ~~or~~ most everybody canned it up, or you smoked it, ~~you know~~, like people smoke the fish and stuff. But we didn't have refrigeration, but like I say, when it's cold, you have so many cold months, all you had to do is put it outside and you had a refrigerator, you know, we had a big box and, even in the summer it's not that hot, we ~~just put~~ keep it in the box outside, you know, covered. To keep the animals away, and stuff like that.

I. Well, how about like dairy products, like milk or..?

M. Milk? Well, I'm trying to think, Milk. Canned milk we used alot when we made ~~also~~ snow ice cream, and, of course, alot of people used the powdered milk, ~~you know~~. We were lucky enough to have, ~~we'd~~ get fresh milk every so often, ~~you know~~, of course, the babies had formula and I didn't drink much milk then, so milk wasn't a problem. ~~We'd~~ get fresh milk, we'd drink it right up, you know. So, the kids would have ~~Kool-Aid~~ or juice, or something alike that.

I. Did you ever get stuff from Seldovia, you ^{got} got alot of stuff barged in?

M. Now, the boat used to come once a week, I think, or once every 2 weeks, I'm not sure, ~~from~~ ^{bc} Sea²ttle and bring the fresh stuff, ~~you know~~, all the vegetables and stuff like that, and as soon as everybody knew the boat would come in, well, went right down town and loaded up, about once a week, you know, ~~the boat~~ ^{the boat} would come in and everybody would get what they needed, if you were lucky and get there early enough. The famous saying in the old days was, you'd go to the store and ask for something, "It's on the boat coming.", ~~they didn't have~~, ^{now it's} it's on the boat. But we'd manage, I mean, it was a different way of eating and living, but it was a good, healthy way, ~~you know~~, and, the kids ~~would~~ were healthy, we tried to bake alot of goodies, too, ~~you know~~, everything was homemade, ~~you know~~, you made your own hamburger rolls, hotdog rolls, you learned to do ~~it~~ all, you know, cinamon rolls. But, it was ~~a~~ alot of work, but I enjoyed it. I wouldn't want to do it now, ^{now} I enjoyed doing it then.

I. So, you like the modern conveniences, ^{now}?

M. No^w, yes, at my age, I enjoy the modern conveniences, ^{you do}.

I. Well, ~~which~~ way do you like Homer, now, or how it was then?

M. I have mixed feelings about it, ~~I~~ like some of the things that we had before, such as ~~the~~ ^{new} new people, you know, and you did alot of things as a family or, you know a group, ~~you know~~, you make your own enjoyment. We'd have big ski runs, and we'd have a ski party and then go and have, you know, hot chocolate and cinamon robls and, I mean, ~~it was close~~, ~~you know~~ it was like it was close, ~~you know~~, and you didn't have a whole lot of money, but it didn't matter, ~~you know~~, as long as you could pay your bills, ~~and~~ Yeah, you give up alot, you know, like the spit, since the earthquake had changed, you know. And then it's so crowded now, but like I ~~said~~ say, everybody likes it just like we do so you gotta give them a chance too, ~~you know~~. #

I. Did the earthquake have alot of effect on you, and your lives?

M. Yes, we lost our whole basement and everything in the house turned over. I would say we probably were, we had suffered the biggest loss. We lost our new cannery overnight, when the spit sunk, we had just built a brand new cannery. And the next day they found water, ^{10-2 x 10-2} all through it, we had ~~the~~ Alaskan Sea Foods then, we had the cannery. So we lost that overnight and also our whole basement, it was just ~~as~~, you know, a few blocks in the front saved it. ^{all out} But everything ~~else~~ in the house, I lost all my dishes and ~~just~~, ~~you know~~, everything, jellies all over the floor. But, nobody got hurt, and that was, you know, you can replace the other things, so we were very thankful for that.

I.. Has Homer changed alot, do you think?

M. Yes, Homer's changed quite a bit since we first came, I mean. Well, for instance, we were the only house here, and now there's houses all over and around. We had one little grocery store, and then another smaller, and now we have super markets, you know. Of course there's growth, you know, you've gotta have growth. And we had ~~we had~~ ^{we had,} there was no way to have a baby in Homer then, there was no doctor here. You'd either have to fly to Seldovia, or take the big trip to Seward, which I would do, you know, and back, to have your baby. So, I'm really thankful that we have good medical care now, you know, for everybody. Good hospital. Gene, will you tell her how we you chose our Homestead, because you did it with Bob. I told her you would answer that question. And what do you like about Homer now, or what don't you like, that used to be, ^{here.}

G. I like everything here, there's nothing I don't like. As far as how, she probably told you, we came up here not knowing, you know, just we's- where we's going, but we's going some place, but we didn't know where.

M. To Alaska.

G. We got in Anchorage and we stayed there a few months, and I got acquainted with a fella that was, had homesteaded earlier down here and met one or two, two other families that were planning or contemplating coming down here and, of course, at that time the Anchorage Papers used to carry a series, that is, or section in the newspaper, pertaining to the Kenai peninsula and Homer, particularly, Homer always got more than its share of publicity, I think, but anyway, we read about it and I came down, they had a small plane, charter planes, you know, operating between Anchorage and here, and so I came down looked at it and talked to several people and, just on a map, I'd never seen it before, I picked out a section, that is our quarter section, and of land, on the hill, on the Ocean Mountain road there, that was, at the time, had never been filed on, and I went up and we found a couple of the corner stakes and it looked good and so I said, "that's it" .

M. And I said; "No neighbors!!"

I. so that's how you moved here, and decided to come on down, and...

G. Well that's, yea, I decided to make Homer, instead of somewhere else.

M. Where did we almost go, ~~on-that-map?~~ when that man? talked?

G. Oh, he was talking about going down towards Valdez, or, you know, towards Chitna, on the Valdez road, down toward on the Copper River. Now, and they were doing some Homesteading in there at the time, and a few people were moving in there. We ~~talked~~ talked about it, but ~~nothing~~ then we never, nothing serious did come about it, I mean, actually HOMER, this area, was the choice from the time we first, we knew we were just temporary in Anchorage

and that was, we picked Homer, and never changed.

I. So you like Homer, just as much as your wife does.

G. Where's a better place?

LA-I. ^{Really,} And you worked with HEA?

G. Yea, after we got down here and got our, there was two other families and we kind of pooled our resources, or our labor force, anyway, and built each one of us a cabin or a house, in fact, two of them were log and the other one was a frame build and got them built, we were all practically broke any way so, HEA was just getting started then, they had just formed a corporation and started, and they didn't have many people around and I had had some, you know, electrical training in fact, I had been in it for some time, I went to work with them and worked off and on with them for several years, but after I started the business, I continued to working with them, for a while but, eventually I had to quit one, so I quit HEA and just stayed with the business out on the spit.

I. Do you know much of the story of how HEA got down, how the people got HEA to come?

G. Well, that's, I guess, like everything else, there was a need for it, two or three people around had small generators, in their you know, for light. But other than that, everybody had to use Blazo lanterns, or Kerosene lights, or something, and, you know, there was getting enough people in the Homer area, that is, congregating, figuring it was time to get something besides each person having their own individual generator to, which wasn't very successful or very practical anyway, they were expensive and they didn't work half the time, so a bunch of the people, I wasn't one of the originators of it, I was one of the first employees, but there was six or seven other people that was here, they formed a corporation and applied for long, through the rule electrification association, which is, the operating in the eastern part of the United States and other places, and got a loan and just started from there and just.

z i. Did you get electricity on the hill right away?

G. No, it was two, three years after we had got the, you know, the people here in town service, then they started, we had quite a good sized, well, fair sized population up there, I think there was about 50 or so people within a just a mile or two on that east hill up there. We came down then and applied for service up there and so we got a line put in and got electric up there, and from there we went out towards anchor point, and from there then on to Ninilchik and Clam Gulch, and eventually on to Soldotna.

I. How about the communication, was there any communication, like, from down below to up on the hill?

G. Well, we had a little local telephone company, which, I mean, telephone system, you know, when a line runs & strung from one house to another, and when one guy rang it, everybody's phone rang, and everybody could listen in on it, it was nice, it served there for some years and most of the people that was close, everybody, if somebody wanted a phone you went out and trammed a tree up, or hung a wire from this tree to that tree, and put a pole up, where there wasn't a tree, and strung a wire to somewhere where they had the phone in and you had a phone, I don't recall a charge, it was a monthly or yearly charge, it wasn't but very little, it was just a couple of dollars a month just to maintain the system after, that is, a wire getting knocked down by snow or a moose run through it or something else but it, that worked for quite some time, and then finally a fella came in and started a little, well the present telephone company, we have now, which is he started in just servicing people right close around and spread out, he grew and grew, and, of course, now he it's, you know, been sold a time or two, and.

I. Did you do much hunting?

G. Hunting?

I. Uh, huh.

G. We hunted every year. We depended on our hunting for meat for quite a long while, fact is, we still do, I still hunt every year. With some of our boys and so far we've been lucky enough to get moose most of the time, anyway.

I. How about mail, how did you get mail?

G. Mail?

I. Right.

G. They had a man that came who had a truck, he called, after the road, that was a year before that what mail came in, came down by little planes, but then they, in '49 or '50 they opened the road up between here and Anchorage and Although-I- the fella had a little trucking system and he'd haul and he'd pick up the mail weight either in moose pass or W Seward or wherever they could haul it to and he'd haul it down here and they had a little Post Office that would distribute it.

I. Well, thanks.

M. She asked me about coal the coal.

G. About what?

I. Coal.

M. Getting Coal.

G. Coal.

M. I told her, yeah, everybody went together and went

G. Well, ~~everybody-went~~ during the first, I'd say up to the end of 1950, 8, or 9, I think 75 or 80% of the people here burned coal, and most of us hauled it off the beach down here, we'd all either have tractors or 4 wheel drive trucks, and go down on the beach after every storm or wind and pick up all the coal and ~~all-the~~ haul it off. Eventually, of course they got the oil deliveries set ^g up here and a few started getting oil ~~and~~, eventually alot of them broke away from that and got to the point where it was harder to get coal, the more people there, the less coal there was to pick up. After we moved here, we burned coal for, I don't know, probably four or five, six years before I finally put in oil and I was, I didn't have the ~~etime~~ or anything else to put in to get the coal and so it was easier to buy oil and not have that worry.

I. Yeah. ~~No~~, it wasn't too much longer after you moved ^{up} here that you got electricity.

G. No, it was only down in town here about a year, year and a half after that, ^{lets} see, '59, or '49, '50, I think about 1950, it was only about a year, year and a half, anyway. Of course, ~~i~~ ~~sets~~ started right in working ~~wife~~ for them and we got, you know, part of the ~~tim~~ town, that is, that we'd just take a section of it and build that and then go somewhere ~~else~~ and just ~~a~~ keep expanding. The first was probably either late '49 or early '50 was when the first people here, in Homer here got power.

I.. Did that bring about a big change in H^Umer?

G. No, I don't think it was any big change, I mean, we had no, let's say change. There was ~~la~~ little ~~growth~~. growth, but, you know, ~~gradual~~, but there was no great change for quite a number of years. Of course, you know, you could tell there are, ~~you know~~, you could see the additional people and so forth.

I. What do you think did bring ^{about} the biggest change?

G. Just the fact that it's a good place to live. When most people came in here, didn't come to, like I did, because, to make a living, ~~m-~~ most people ~~tha~~ came in here because it's a nice place to live they had, a big lot of them are retired people, or heading businesses elsewhere and have moved here for, you know, the convenience and it being just a nice place to live. I'd say there's been nothing that brang it in, ~~you-knew~~, because although-~~there~~, you know, although there is ~~some~~ more business here, over that many years, I mean, that's a very slow growth, I, you know, for what businesses are here and., I would think most ~~ef-~~ ~~this~~ come is just because they've heard of ~~it~~ and it's a nice place and they can get along, probably, here better than they can ^{some} anywhere else.

I. That's right.

Mr. and Mrs. Browning interview. (10)

I. Well, I guess that's all.