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Narrator: Paul Banks

Date: July 21, 1981

Interviewer: Gordon Keffer Place: Paul Banks home, Homer,
Alaska

G. When and why did you first move to Homer?

P. Well, when I first came here, I decided I wanted to Homestead, I had been living in Anchorage, I came here in 1940, in the fall of 1940. I stayed there in Anchorage there all winter and I decided I'd kind of like to Homestead, well I'd heard about the Matanuska Valley but it wasn't, they had started a colony there, I think, in '35 or '36, somewhere in there and I decided I wanted to Homestead and I got hold of a guy who had been surveying down here in Homer and he said, "Boy," says, "you want a good place to Homestead," say, "go down to Homer," says, "good country, good rolling hills, little clumps of Spruce trees here and there," says, "boy, that's the ideal country." Well he got me so darn excited that I said, "Well shoot, I think I'll go down there." so that's basically how and why I came down here to begin with.

G. Did what that guy tell you, is that actually what you saw?

P. Yeah, when I got here it was pretty much what he had told me, yeah.

G. How did you choose your land that you did Homestead, and where is it?

P. Well, when you get a piece of land in those days, you just had to go out there, in the country, and, they had surveyed all this off and they put stakes, on the section lines, on the section, half sections, you had to go out there and find, you had to find the stake of the piece of land you was interested in, you had to find some kind of survey stake, and you had to, section marked on the survey stake, so you find the piece you wanted and you have to come down here to Mrs. Barry, she ran the lower store, there was a store down there and she ran this lower store, and she was sorta the homestead lady around here. She would, you'd give her the information of the stake you'd found and she would radio that, there were no communications much between here and Anchorage, no telephones or anything in those days, she'd relay that information, to Anchorage and in a few days, why, they'd send the papers down and you were ready to start homesteading. You had to sorta halfway guess where your land was, that was the only thing you could do about it.

G. How long did it take you to get your land?

P. Well, you were supposed do it within three years, you had three years to prove up. You were supposed to cultivate one-sixteenth, I think, of the land before you could get your proof, one-sixteenth, or, no, it was ten acres, out of one hundred and sixty. You had to cultivate ten acres before you got the title.

G. What was the hardest thing about homesteading, was it cultivating, or what?

Hardships of homesteading
P. I just tramped all around the hills 'till I found the piece I thought I'd like. 'Course that's hard country to walk in. I walked, spent about four days I'd say along the Anchor River and crossing the hills there by Beaver Flats and all down through there and I camped and looked. I saw some land that looked pretty nice but I got down on it and it was nothing but a swamp. Sure looked neat you know, all that grass down there. I thought that'd be a neat place for cattle and stuff. I got down in there and started wading around in that swamp, I said, "Boy, I got to get out of here." so I came up out of there then. I climbed upon the hill this side of Beaver Flats and I looked over this particular spot there and I liked it so I said, "That's where..."

G. Was staking your land just putting in four stakes?

P. Well, yeah, not having any way to survey it you know, you just have to step it off and estimate. Say you want to cut a square, say you decide to take your land in a square, well then you just find a survey stake and you know pretty much where that corner was and go from there and stepped it off, 440 stips, well you know, that's not really accurate in that kinda country, 440 steps, that's, 440 yards, that's a quarter of a mile each way, wouldn't be a square you see, and if you decide to take it in a 'L' shape or 'T' shape that's even that much harder because then you have to go so far this way and this way and you just put, drive a stake in the ground, mark a tree, anything like that. And you say that's the corner of my land, well, you don't really know for sure because it's never been surveyed. You haven't got it surveyed yourself but you got the regular government survey, the live that goes down, but that's all you got to go on. You just got to guess at that time, even to this day I don't even know for sure exactly where my corners are because it's never been surveyed.

G. How did you cultivate your land?

P: Well, I just, you just have to find a spot that isn't too - got too many trees on it, and . . . You're going to build a house, for example, or an open spot, and just kinda cut the brush around there and just - with an ax. That's all we had was an ax and saw.

G. You mentioned you only had an ax and a saw. How did you start to cultivate your land?

P. I didn't have to, like I said. I went, I got mine under the G. I. Bill. But the people that had to cultivate, they just - if they didn't have anyway to do it, well, - they couldn't, that's all. There was just no way.. But see, in those days, there were no vehicles in here. When I got to Homer, there were - oh, probably three or four cars and no tractors, no cats, nothing like that.. No way to break that land. Finally a guy came in, Old Belnap over here was the first guy I know of that had a breaking plow - had a great big breaking plow. And he had a cat that he pulled that plow with. He could break land, he could turn this sod over and people could cultivate. But until that time there was just no way, you just... Maybe a guy would go out and scratch around with a hoe or something, throw a few seeds in there. But ten acres - that's a lot to cultivate by hand. I think they were more lenient with the early homesteaders because of that..

G. You had very little transportation. You said about two or three cars. How did you get from your homestead to get your supplies?

P. You had to walk.

G. Where were your supplies, then?

P. Well, they had a road. They pushed a road over on West Hill it ended. There was, I don't know, it was past - it is up around the water works now, if you know where that is. And the road ended up above there and that was as far as the road went on the West Hill. There was no road up the East Hill at all, just a trail. But Mrs. Walli had a big truck, she had a grocery store, and she would haul your groceries up to the end of that road and set them off under a tree there or wherever you wanted them at the end of the road there, and you had to walk and pick them up and pack them on your back.

G. How about your mail?

P. You had to come to town. Had a Post Office, Tom Shelford (Was it Tom Shelford? Yea) He had a - him and his wife had a Post Office that had a house there, right above where the Sterling Bar is now. They had a little post office there and you could pick your mail up there.

G. So a lot of this stuff was actually in town??

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P. Yeah, anything you needed just about was in town. Everything else out there was just wilderness.

G. So you were coming into town a lot?

P. Oh, I didn't come in too often. I'd come in if I ran out of supplies or something. Then I'd come in and pick up my mail or get supplies or whatever I needed. If you couldn't get anybody to take them out for you, you just walked. Put them on your back and walked out. Packed them home.

G. What did you do for entertainment this whole time?

P. Well, of course, not too much to do. There was a - they'd have dances. I wasn't down here in Homer too much. I stayed back in the hills mostly till I went off to the army but, in those days when people wanted entertainment, they'd just get together. Two or three'd get together - maybe they'd have a party or you know, somebody could play a fiddle or something, or they'd get together and play or have a dance or something.

G. Did you ever play at one of these parties?

P. I used to play. I had an accordion. I didn't play until I got back from the army. Then I had an accordion with me. We had some real good times there, after '46. Well, I came after the war in '46 and was back to homesteading again. We had a big cabin below, the Straub's cabin there, that was sorta the center of activity around that part of the country. Of course, quite a few cabins, people living around there. And we'd all go down to this great big cabin of Straub's and have parties. We'd dance and sing and eat and have a good time till early in the morning sometime. Just really a good time.

G. You mentioned the war. Were you drafted, or did you join?

P. I was drafted. Yeah, when I was working in Anchorage there, the draft started in 1940. The fall of '40, they started the draft. Well, I had to register. And then I came down ~~then~~ in the fall of '41 to Homer here, and in the spring of, in '41 is when the war broke out, and in the spring of '42, I was drafted. Then I had to go out.

G. Did you notice, did the war actually change any of Homer?

P. Yeah, it had really changed. I - well, let's see. I was drafted from here...well, I didn't know the war was on until some guy finally come over to my cabin and told me there was a war on. Well, I knew I was going to be drafted and I didn't even have my cabin finished, so I had to drop everything and pretty soon I had to come to town to get my mail. It was in February, January, about January

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of '42. And I got my mail, and there was a draft notice that I had to report. So I went on out and went to Anchorage. That's where my draft board was. When I got to Anchorage, the lady there in the dress, she was in charge of the draft, she said, "Well," she said, "Most of the young guys in Alaska are from outside. We're giving them a chance to go home and see their folks and everything before they go into the army. And they'll have to report in to the nurse." So I went back to Colorado, that's where I'm from. Then I went into the Army. Then I went down to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and I went in the army there, Fort Sill.

G. How long did you stay in the army?

P. Three and a half years. I was out of Alaska about four years, but I was in the army about $3\frac{1}{2}$ years.

G. When you got back from the war, had Homer grown a lot?

P. Yeah, when I got back from the war, there was - oh, quite a few more cars here. There were vehicles all over and roads. They were getting a few more roads pushed in. I think they had started, had a road up this East Hill here by then and before that they hadn't anything but a moose trail. And out East there wasn't nothing but just kind of a wagon trail. When I got back there was cars and people running all around - a lot better. They were getting more stuff in.

G. Did you get a car or did you stay with walking?

P. Well, when we first came back, my sister came back with me, and we lived on the homestead there and we had a couple of horses. And I bought a couple of horses and so we had those to ride to town for two or three years. Then after that we finally got us a tractor that was another story about getting this tractor. You see, there wasn't any, wasn't roads or anything between here and ~~there~~ Anchorage in those days, so if you got a tractor, any kind of equipment, you had to get it, bring it in on a barge, and that was expensive, so most people didn't have it. Finally a couple guys got tractors on the East Hill, some of my neighbors there got tractors. And they,, pretty soon I got one. I went over to Seward and picked one up and brought it over.

G. And that started to make things a little easier?

P. Yes.

G. How long did you work?

P. On the homestead?

G. On the homestead.

P. Well, I was there about seven years. Then I got married, went

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P. (cont) Outside and came back up here and then I didn't stay on the Homestead anymore after that.

G. How long did you work everyday?

P. Oh, there was no set timang. You get up in the morning and work, by golly, 'till it got dark at night. In summertime, you know those long days, you just work. There's always a lot to do, you know, around the homestead. Building or working or cutting hay or something, always something to do.

G. When did you finally start to feel comfortable with your homestead, after you kind of got it started?

P. Well, I never did really get much out of that homestead. It, it really wasn't very great. I finally got enough where we could, had chickens and a cow, had a cow and a couple horses and this tractor and I plowed a little ground up and planted this stuff. And we were getting by pretty good, but never really making any money, you know. Those homesteads don't really make much money there. At least in those days they didn't. You just barely scratched out a living up there. Most guys had to go out and work to really make a go of it in homesteading.

G. Did you go out and work?

P. I finally had to go to work, yeah. Well, after I got married, of course, then I had to have more, and I, we went outside to the States for a year or two and came back. And I stayed on the homestead that winter, but we weren't getting by very good so I had to go to work. Well, I went over here to Red Mountain - they had that chrome mine. I worked over there one summer. Then I just followed construction, whatever I had to, what I could get around town.

G. Do you remember much about the coal mining?

P. I don't, no I don't know too much about the coal mining. That was an operation that a guy had, named Jones. I think, was here, had this little mine out East her or out West on the road there. I don't remember too much about that operation except he finally quit, closed up the mine and went to Anchorage somewhere. Guess he opened up another one, but I don't - I never heard - got in on too much ot that coal operation. Think they did have a coal operation in the early days before I ever came here. They had a mine, and they were getting coal our to take out to the boats. Load it up to take it somewhere, I don't know, Hope or somewhere. They had a gold operation going up there had to find coal for that. But I never paid much attention to the coal operation.

G. You did work in a mine once?

P. Yes.

G. Okay, what did they do there? How did they work?

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P. Well, it was underground. It was an underground tunnel that shaft there. It was over here right across - you go up past Jackalof Bay and back up in there is what they call Red Mountain, and they had chrome. It was one of the only chrome mines in the United States, that the United States controlled. It was one of the only few. I think there is another one in Africa. But we had this one chrome, and it was real good chrome. And they were getting alot of chrome out of there and quite a few guys from Homer and ~~Chas~~ Anchorage and stuff were working there. And I got this job, I worked on the washer, where the ore comes down and you wash the ore and it goes up this belt. Well, I was on the washer, but they had a very good operation there. Yeah, just regular underground mining. And these guys would work, they'd work the clock around. We'd work, I started there, let's see, in July or June, I believe it was in June. Worked right up-till the snow got us in October. First snow in Ocotber we had to get out of there. It gets pretty deep in there and couldn't help it.

G. What did you do to wash the chrome?

P. Well, I had this, see they had this pump set up there, they had this water pressure, water coming down from, and they had this hose and what they do is dump, this guy works on what they call the skip they have a great big hopper where they bring the ore out from the mine and they dump in this hopper and then this guy has this, what he called a skip, it's a bucket on a cable, and he runs this bucket over above where I was working and he dumps the ore into this other kind of a hopper thing and it came down and I had to feed that out of there on to the belt and as I was feeding it out there was water spraying on the ore it was spraying right into the hopper there where I was working, water would spray right in there and would wash all the mud and cruel and stuff out and all that would go down through a screen down underneath, and just the clean ore would go onto the belt and they'd take it up to these other guys and they'd pick out all the odd stuff and let the regular ore go over into this other big box, hopper there.

G. This whole time were you working on your homestead still?

P. No, I had given up.

G. You'd given up?

P. Given up the homestead by then yeah, I couldn't make it up there.

G. You said something about a hopper, what's that?

P. Well, a hopper is a big box that they construct out of wood. It's usually 'V' shaped, big square box but it's 'V' shaped, it's shaped like this, you see, so the ore slides down, and there's an opening at the bottom this guy, he pulls a trap door and let's the ore drop out, only so much, and he shuts her up, just lets so much ore out.

G. Kind of like a funnel?

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P. Yeah, sorta shaped something like a funnel, yeah.

G. Did you have somebody that would help you get started in Homer, getting back on the subject of Homer.

P. No, I was on my own, never had much help no, pretty much on my own.

G. Then you had to do alot of work right at first?

P. Yeah, yeah well everybody in those days, it seems, of course, now, people were good in those days, if you needed help your neighbors would always help each other just like any town or anyplace you know. If you're really hard up, you can go to a guy and if he's not too busy, he'll give you a hand and you'll pay him back some other time. I didn't do too much of that, I was pretty much on my own in those days and, but it was , that was the way people were yeah, they'd help each other.

G. You mentioned Mrs. Walli's store, what did she supply in ther, was it just food?

P. Just everything, you could buy, Just about anything there in Mrs. Walli's store. Whe had groceries of course, she had other supplies she had, picks and axes and just about anything you can find, it was an all around store because it was the only thing there was, only place there was to buy anything there were two stores, there was hers and Mrs. Barry's which is down where the Inlet Trading Post is now, they also supplied people but it was pretty much all around stuff, just about anything that a guy needed for homesteading or fishing, they had fishing gear there, and you could find most anything you want from Mrs. Walli and if you couldn't get it, if she could order it and sometimes she'd get it for you bring it in on a boat or something.

G. You used Mrs. Walli's store more than you did Mrs. Barry's, I take it.

P. Un huh, yeah, I did, I traded quite a bit there at Mrs. Walli's.

G. Did you ever do much, did you ever fish?

P. Yeah, I went out with my brother-in-law when my sister got married, and I went out with him in '53 and fished-unintelligible- and then, then I went out, well, when I, my mother took sick in '57 and she, well, she died in '57 and I came back up here in '59 again then I fished again, I was shrimping when they were first startin' to shrimp out here they, Robert Moss was, and Joe, they were fishing together and they took me along as a deck hand and I was learning and they didn't know too much about shrimping either, you know, they were just learning to shrimp in this country and they were trying all different kinds of methods and stuff and experimenting around, and so I went out with them about the first time they started dragging out here. I was out there with them. I worked one summer, that summer with them.

G. How did they trap, catch the shrimp?

P. Well, what they do is, they had this great big net, it's a big long bag shaped net and they, they have what they call doors, those are two great big wooden doors, they looked like doors, and they have them on each side of the

stern and they drop these overboard and what these doors do they drag them, they have a chain that goes along and what the chain does, it ruffles the shrimp up see, the shrimp beds lay on the ocean floor and this, and they drag these doors along and the doors and the chain rouse the shrimp all up, well, when the shrimp all rouse up, then there dragging this great big bag net behind, see, and the shrimp come up in a big cloud and they go and the net comes along and scoops them right in. So, when they get ready, they drag for, oh we were experimenting, we'd drag for two hours, then we'd pull in, well, you got these wenches and cables and stuff and so you pull, pull in and when you see, the doors come up, then you realize that you bag is right there. So then they have, I forget it's been so long since I did that, but it seems like when they did that, then they hooked on to the bag and swung it around to the side of the boat and they hoisted that bag up and suspended that over the tray there, and this great big bag, it'd be that big around.

G. How big around?

P. Oh, I'd say about four feet across or so, and they'd, it probably be about six, eight feet long. They'd hoist that thing above, then you'd pull a rope at the bottom and it would open up the release, open a hole in the bottom. All these shrimp would pile out on the deck. There was alot of shrimp there too but they were just experimenting there on different things and it'd be a pretty good operation.

G. Have you noticed any change in the fishing, not the techniques but the amount of fish coming in?

P. Oh, they're getting alot of different kinds of fish now, things that they didn't even bothere with in those days. Now, I think they're saving it. We'd get all kinds of stuff like Irish Lords and all that kind of stuff there, of course, I don't think they, Irish Lords, now we were getting all kinds of different kinds of fish that I imagine they'd probably use now.

G. Like the cod.

P. Yeah, whatever.

G. Do you, I know Homer has changed alot in the four years I've been here, you've noticed the change, but do you think it's good or bad?

P. Well, it's hard to say whether the change is good or bad, you know, it's just a matter of opinion. I think there's more people here but there's probably more work, and there's alot more work now than in the old days because there's more things going on but there's more people to take the jobs too, so really I don't know if economically if we're any better off than we were before.

G. How about just an overall, say, the development that, with the land and everything?

P. Well, it's become modern, yeah. It's getting populated and, I don't, I think in some ways it might be doing all right it's, they're running out of land the only thing is you see, land for the taking isn't here any more. I mean, that's all gone so people can't just go up and get them a piece and it's just about as bad, now, here as it is down in the states to get a hold of a piece of land, it's so doggone high and people don't have very much money to

invest in land so that's another problem, that's one of the problems here too. Of course, this high interest, high rate of interest, it's making a big difference in whether people can buy a piece of land or not and of course, the big land boom that's going on all these years, put the price of land way up, to the point where, young people, people who don't land anymore it's so doggone high, and that's hard on people moving in here trying to find a locate, try to live here, they can't find a piece of land that doesn't cost a fortune, that's one of the problems.

G. So, back when it was just homesteading, you go out and you (jumbled)

P. Stuff is all relative when you get to thinking about it because in those days the land was for the taking and there was thousands of acres just to go out and take a piece. You can take any piece you wanted but you didn't have, you had to struggle around to make a living on it, in that sense, it was hard. The land was there and the, and the opportunity to get a piece of land was there, but maybe you didn't have enough mone and maybe you had to go to work somewhere to pay to live on that land. Now there's lot of jobs but there's not much land, it's kind of a hard, it's like civilization always does, it moves in and takes things over and then before long, it, things have their own problems, different set of problems.

G. It's kind, from my understanding, it's about the same, not the problems but the same amount of problems and alot...

P. You'll always have problems, ther's no escaping them, either their physical problems like we had with, with fighting the land and the elements and all, or there's economical problems, like people are having now, not enough jobs, not enough money, you know, not enough land really, for everybody.

G. O.k., I think that's about all the questions I can think of now, we've covered about everything. Thank you for the interview and I'll probably be back again.