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Bill Estorffe

Neville Abbott Jacobs, narrator and interviewer

Series: Sourdoughs speak

KUAC

University of Alaska Broadcasting and Alaska Communication Arts

Neville Jacobs said they will be discussing the mining camp of Livengood. The town is located about eighty miles from of Fairbanks on the Elliott Highway. She will be interviewing Bill Estorffe. He mined in the Fortymile country and the Bonnifield Region. He still operates a mine in Livengood in the summer with his wife Thelma. Bill came to Alaska in 1921. Estorffe said he sailed from Seattle to Valdez and then walked the trail into Fairbanks. He prospected with Mike Minton on the Salcha River. His partner used to call it the Salchaket River. They panned the sandbars.

Estorffe talked about going to Livengood. He went there with Old McMandish. There used to be two Hudson brothers who were joined by a third brother. They mined up at Ester on quartz. A geologist came through and told them to go over to the Tolovana. Livengood and Tim Hudson went over to the area and prospected along the draws. They named some of the draws after women in their lives. He mines on Lucky Creek. After prospecting they found good prospects. That started a stampede [1914] over there. About one hundred or one hundred and fifty joined the stampede over in that area. At first they called it Brooks after the geologist. There was another little town down the Tanana River also named Brooks and the mail was getting mixed up. They decided to name the town after Jay Livengood. There were others like Pat O'Connor who joined too late to get in on the creek claims and staked up on the bench. They put down a hole and hit the main pay of deposit of gold. That really started a stampede. The people who helped the miners were paid five dollars a day and room and board. There was open cutting on the draws. One claim paid over a million dollars. Sometimes a pay streak would widen out. He talked about the point man who did the steam and driving points. They did this all year round. They hoisted the pay dirt out. He said at that time the people were all nationalities. He talked about some of the other miners. There were Germans, Italians, Swedes, Russians and others. They were all good hearted people. Mrs. Walker used to cook for him. He said they used to have dancing at night. Mrs. Walker would dance all night with them and then fix breakfast in the morning. Sometimes there would be fighting.

Neville Jacobs asked if there were women in the mining camp. Estorffe said the Hudson wives were there. They were all married people. The women used to prepare celebrations like the Fourth of July. Neville asked how they got their supplies. Estorffe said they used to come up by boat until they got to a log jam. They couldn't get past this point. The Road Commission put in a tramway for them. He described the tram and the trailers behind it. Old Dave Creamer used to run it. The mail used to come in that way in the summer, too. He walked in several times. The tramway vehicle didn't have any brakes on

it. Sometimes it would come off the tracks and everyone would go down and put it back on. In the winter they would use a team of horses and sleds. Most of the freighting was done in the spring of the year. In the winter they would stop at Chatanika. From there they would go on to another roadhouse and from there they would go to West Fork and then to Livengood. Sometimes they had snowshoes on the horses. The snowshoes were about a foot wide and the horses used to walk with those. Estorffe said he stayed in Livengood about twenty years until WWII.

Jacobs said many of the stories old timers tell are about cross country trips when there were few airplanes and few roads. They used dog teams or walked. Bill said they would put packs on the dogs in the summer. They could carry fifteen to thirty pounds on each side of the dog. He was traveling to Beaver once when he heard the howling. The dogs were staying close to them. It turned out there were a bunch of wolves around. He would have five or six dogs with him. Neville asked him what he carried with him on a trip. Estorffe said he had rice. There were always enough fish in the creeks to feed the dogs and you could hunt game at that time. They had a sourdough pot, but didn't take it with them. They would mix up flour, baking powder, sugar and salt to make bannock. They would also carry bacon. They were going toward Beaver once following a caribou trail. They decided to make a camp and make tea. He looked behind him and recognized the spot where they had camped the night before. They had walked all day and made a big circle. It had been so foggy they couldn't see where they were going. He usually used landmarks for travel. Neville asked if they ever used a compass. He talked about why he didn't use a compass in this country. He said when you've traveled a lot it just comes natural to you and you know where you are. He has walked all the way to the Fortymile which took several days. He knew where he was going and he could see the stars

Estorffe talked about some of his sled dogs. He had one dog who couldn't be chained down. He had one lead dog who was three fourths wolf. People did try to make wolves work as sled dogs and it didn't work out. His wolf/dog female turned out to be the best lead dog and hunter he ever had. She would herd caribou in his direction. She also retrieved birds for him.

Estorffe talked about Two-Step Louie. Two Step would dress as a girl in Dawson and all the young men would want to dance with him. Two Step made several fortunes at Nome and on El Dorado.