

95-55-07

Clara Rust

Neville Abbott Jacobs, narrator and interviewer

1971

Series: Sourdoughs speak

KUAC

University of Alaska Broadcasting and Alaska Communication Arts

Neville Jacobs said among the pioneers known in Fairbanks is Clara Rust. She was 81 years old at the time of the interview. Rust came to Alaska in 1908 at the age of eighteen to join her parents. She was living in Seattle when she received word from her family to sail north. She sailed to St. Michael and then took a steamer up the Tanana River to Fairbanks. Jacobs said they will focus on aspects of life in Interior Alaska that are seldom written about.

Clara Rust talked about seeing the town of Chena at about 5:00 in the evening on September 27, 1908. When they arrived it had snowed a little and there may have been a little bit of ice on the river. They took a steamboat up the Tanana River but they couldn't go any further than the town of Chena because the river was low. Instead of putting the passengers on the train to Fairbanks they decided to transfer everyone to a smaller boat. There was another woman on the boat and about eight to ten men. Just before they got to the town of Chena they were stuck on a sandbar. At Chena there were big sawmills and they had docks built on the edge of the river. The Tanana River eventually cut into the town. There were stores and warehouses there at one time. On her first day in Fairbanks they went uptown. They were in a dry goods store owned by Mary Anderson and Rust was offered a job. Some of the people coming into the store were from the line. These ladies attended a local dances and Rust said they were dressed very nicely. They didn't parade around exposed. Sometimes the ladies would come in during the evening to the store. The lady who owned the store would stay open for them and Rust would go down to the store to help. Sometimes she would take merchandise down to the line on 5th Avenue for the ladies. Her parents were upset when they heard about this part of her job duties. They were worried about what people would think. Rust didn't want to leave her job.

One of the ladies was Edith Neal. She helped out in Nenana during the flu epidemic of 1917-18. Neal went around and took care of people. When Rust would see Edith on the street she would greet her. One day Edith was in the store and told Rust that she shouldn't greet her on the street because it would hurt Rust's reputation. Another one of the ladies was named High Pockets. One of the members of the Eagle's Club ended up marrying her and brought her to the ladies club associated with the Eagles. Rust talked about a few of the other ladies from the line.

Jacobs asked how many women were on the line. Rust thought there were 20 or 30 women on the line. They were located between Cushman and Barnette. There was a fence on Cushman Street at Fourth

Avenue. There were alleyways from Third Avenue and another entrance on Fifth Avenue. Each girl had what was called a crib with a large window and a door going in. Some of the girls lived there, but most of them had other cabins where they lived. Her husband had a friend, Roger, who had opened up a pool room and shooting gallery. This was in 1910-11. There were living quarters upstairs. Roger invited them for dinner and also the new lady barber in town. The barber wouldn't come for a visit unless there was another lady there so Rust went. They had a view of the "line" down below so they watched the men coming in to visit the ladies. She described some of the activity she could see.

Jacobs said most of the women worked independently. Rust talked about one building that had a madam. There was a dance floor with a piano player. She thought this establishment took up the space of three or four of the cribs. At the corner of Fourth and Cushman there was a dance hall. The city hall is now built on the corner of 5th Avenue. The old city hall was at the end of Turner Street on 3rd Avenue. Rust said the line was on Fourth Avenue so the new city hall was on the back end of the line. Rust said some of the women lived with men on 5th Avenue. After the line was closed there was a lady who tried to run something on 3rd Avenue. She was closed down. Rust said in the early days when they had a dance the ladies of ill repute were not allowed to attend. If a man tried to bring one of the girls in they wouldn't let him in. Rust said there was a definite social line in town. Rust said when she attended dances she wore a long dress and wore gloves. The men wore gloves or would put a handkerchief at your neck.

Jacobs asked about Jess Rust and how they met. Rust said when she first met her husband he was prospecting and mining. He was also a market hunter. He hunted moose and sheep and sold them on the market. His mother ran the bath house. There were three or four bath houses in town at that time. There was a big one on Lacey Street. Very few of the houses had running water. They hadn't perfected a way to run water to the homes. Rust talked about her father moving the newspaper business to several places around town. She talked about her father and W.F. Thompson walking down to the town of Chena to get the news. Her father would get chewed up by the mosquitoes. They also had dance halls in Chena. There was competition between Chena and Fairbanks.

Jacobs talked about W.F. Thompson who started the newspaper in Fairbanks which still exists today. Thompson was known for mixing fonts in the newspaper. He was given the nickname "Wrong Font Thompson." Rust's father, Mr. Hickman, moved to Dawson to run a newspaper and later moved to California.