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Otto Johansen

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Leslie McCartney, interviewer

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Leslie McCartney introduces Otto Johansen. Otto Johansen talked about his personal background, He was born in Cordova, Alaska on June 26, 1925. He grew up in that town. His father was a failed prospector and dragged him around to different regions along the coast when he was a kid. He thought it was a way to keep him out of trouble. His father was in Dawson, Yukon and had a riverboat business. He transported prospectors to different creeks. He wasn't sure about the size of the boat. His father was into using jerry rigged stuff as they all were. He was successful in accomplishing his ends. He appreciated the fact that his father was that way. It benefitted him in his life. He was a shipwright for many years. There weren't too many opportunities in those days in Alaska and you had to make your own work. Cordova was a copper export port for the Guggenheim Corporation and the Copper River Northwest Railway. It went to Kennecott [Mine]. The sign at the depot said 199.9 miles to Kennecott. It had something to do with the legal framework. He was at the depot when the last train arrived in 1938 when they ceased operations. There were about a dozen people that were at the depot at that time. The moved the locomotives to the roundhouse. They had a car barn for the coaches. The soldiers later burned them down. There was nothing left of the roundhouse. The business office was a separate building. After the war he went into the office area. The desks were still just as they were left ten or twelve years. There was the old calendar on the wall. When the railroad shut down he was thirteen years old. His house was located so he could look down on the railroad and see the ore trains going by. They had ten or twelve cars on them. There were flat cars with burlap sacks that had the concentrates. The concentrates were from powder to pea gravel size. Generally a car was all one size. He thought about taking a sack off one of the carts, but they were too heavy and he never did. They used gondola cars on the flat car and put the raw ore in them. They were self-dumping cars. Most of the communities used them for coal. They could fill up the coal storage in just a few hours. They changed over to oil after the trains stopped running. They also had wood for burning which required a certain amount of drying time. In 1934 his dad's building burned down. It had a store and apartments. He said he was asleep and someone came to get him. Their family lived in back of the store. The insurance policy had just lapsed. It was during the Depression. His father bought the store from George McDonald in 1927-28. He remembers they lived in a different place when he was very young. His mother had a yarn shop. She was Finnish. She was pretty successful in her endeavors. She immigrated into Canada from Finland. In 1964 his father went back to Denmark. His mother didn't want to return to Finland for a visit. His mother migrated from Finland to Saskatchewan and was married to another Finnish person. She realized she made a mistake and took a train to Vancouver. She worked in Vancouver cleaning laundry. She bought a ticket to Skagway and worked in a hotel. She then moved to Whitehorse and then Dawson.

His father came over from Denmark. He was about 38 years old at that time. After his parents married they took a river steamer in 1916. They came through Eagle and got off in Circle. They came to Fairbanks

and his brother was born there. They think one of the cabins at Alaskaland was one his parents lived in at one time. His father worked on the stagecoach that went from Fairbanks to Valdez. His father took care of the horses. His father had been in the military in Denmark in the cavalry and his apprenticeship was with the blacksmith. He would shoe horses in Cordova and was kind of a vet to the horses. He told a story about a horse that had once been used to collect garbage in Cordova and later given to someone who made his own liquor. The horse was very fond of the mash used to make the liquor and would become drunk. He assumed that the bears eventually got the horse.

They stayed in Fairbanks for a while and then moved to Chitina. They tried living in McCarthy, but eventually moved to Cordova. Cordova in the 1920-30s was the premiere town in the area. It was a seaport with access to a railroad. In those days there was a substantial migration of people up and down the coast. There were quite a few that went down to the southeast of Alaska. Cordova was a port that people from the Interior would use. Alaska Steamship was the dominant company. The ships would turn around at Seward. Cordova was the port where the return cargo would be loaded. The people would wait in Cordova for their ships. This happened in the spring and the fall.

When they first arrived in Cordova his father worked for the railroad. He then worked for the transfer. His father was opinionated. He was an independent man. They got the store in the late 1920s and it was reasonably successful until the Depression. In 1935 Johansen was hurt pretty badly. He was in the hospital for quite a while and they had a big bill. When he was in high school they wanted him to play basketball. He needed tennis shoes but couldn't bring himself to ask his parents for the money after all the money they had paid for his hospital bill. The following year he almost cut his hand off. He was a big expense to his parents.

His mother used to give tea to the Native women in the store. Johansen said the Natives would come into town once or twice a year. When he came home from school the whole place would be full of Native women and children. His mother would have tea set out. Every year they would return to their store. He talked about Horse Creek Mary.

His father had built three or four boats. He sold the boats and started to rebuild the building. They finished it in 1938 when the railroad quit. The business climate in Alaska was always tough. His father sold their business in 1945 and went down below.

Johansen talked about the time he was in the hospital recovering from his accident. He talked about how he got his injury. A doctor from the Coast Guard cutter got to him right away. He was carried to the hospital. He was in an intensive care room for four or five days. He was moved into another room. They brought in two other people with burns from steam from the railroad. He could hear them screaming all night. He decided he didn't want to stay there again. One of the burn victims died. He was encouraged to go into visit the other man and described the man. Eventually Johansen was moved into a ward with other people. He talked about one of the men hanging themselves. George Anderson was Native and Russian and was the only Native person in the hospital. The hospital was quite insistent that people paid for their hospital treatment. The railroad backed the doctor in town as well as the doctor in McCarthy. Art Wilson was the doctor in McCarthy.

Johansen told a story about someone who picked up a venereal disease and was proud of it. Antibiotics made a big difference. He said there was always some disease coming around to the different communities. Polio would come around as well as other diseases. The community would limit contact

during those times. Community activities would drop down. It was expected every year. There were several young people who died. He discussed the necessity of immunizations.

They had a baby seal as a pet. They thought he was abandoned and brought it home. He would get food for it at the cannery. At the end of the season his father wanted them to get rid of it since he couldn't get food for it. His brother and sister took it down to the dock in a wheel barrow and dumped it into the bay. Someone shot the seal. In those days the federal government paid a bounty for seals.

There were two people who worked for the Road Commission and had access to blasting caps and powder. They would blast the seals and collect the snouts for bounty. The federal government would pay money for eagles and dolly varden, too. Dolly Varden preyed upon eggs of salmon. This was during a time when the country was new. There was a different mindset. When he chased salmon in the creeks he would get into trouble. He was concerned about fishing at present in spawning grounds. He talked about spawning of the different species of salmon and fishing practices. He is concerned about keeping a healthy fisheries. He talked about the visitor's industry. He returned to fishing in 1973.

He left school early. He had to make a living somewhere. He was fishing for a living but ran out of money before Thanksgiving. He went down to Cordova because they were building a pulp mill and he thought he would get work there. He ended up getting a job in the shipyard at Northern. He worked there for quite a few years. He hadn't intended to do that. His wife was pregnant and he didn't return to fishing. He liked the work but it didn't pay well. He could see that there was an end of the wooden boat. He built his own boat and went back to fishing. Life became a little easier. He talked about the end of the boat building business and about working on an old FS vessel (Freight service Army vehicle) used by the state to service the Native communities in the Bering Sea. Later it was bought by someone from California for touring Alaska and he hauled it after it broke a shaft.

Johansen said he was enlisted with the 714 Battalion. He was with them for a year. General Buckner completed his tour here and went to Okinawa. Buckner put a stop to shipping Alaska boys out of Alaska because they weren't a problem in remote areas like some of the soldiers brought from outside Alaska. The boys born in Alaska weren't a problem this way. When Buckner left they gathered a lot of the Alaska boys and sent them to Texas and then to California to ship out. They worked their way up the coast. They were preparing for an invasion of Japan. When the atomic bomb was dropped they figured that was a solution and they began returning them to Alaska. They were in Port Edwards for a few weeks. He talked about an incident of bias.

When he graduated from high school there were six students. There is one other surviving member of his high school class, Betty Thomas Barber. She was born in Katella and is Tlingit. In Icy Bay there was a Tlingit village. He talked about Doc Chase collecting artifacts which later burned in a fire. Chase was the community health care person.

Another Danish person would come and visit with his father, Taveneus. He was a pilot and associated with Star Airways. A lot of the pilots would end up in Cordova which was considered an up and coming community. He discussed the problems of box stores affecting communities.

He studied at the University of Alaska Fairbanks after he got out of the service. He said job opportunities for young people are not there in Alaska. He discussed the difficulty of getting into the fishing business in Cordova. He went down to Seattle because his folks were there. He had to talk with the manager of

the cannery in Cordova. After returning to Cordova he went down to talk with the manager to get a boat. He was told to see the dock foreman who took him to a pile of wood and told him to build his boat. On the 26th of April the clam season started in Cordova. He got to be a pretty good digger, but went into fishing. He talked about moving to Ketchikan. He wasn't sure about why he came to the university. He attended for two years in civil engineering. He then went down to the University of Washington. He met his wife at the Swedish Club. He talked about the value of dancing. There were several big dance halls in Seattle. In Cordova alcohol was a problem. Prohibition went into effect in 1933-1934 and almost overnight there were twelve outlets for alcohol. He liked the pretzels and salted fish. During the Depression the kids were hungry. He said he was being thrown out of the bars when he was twelve. He talked about alcohol and barmaids. In Juneau they passed a law that no women could work in bars which later was repealed.

More discussion about his time at the University of Alaska. He used to go to Bunnel's house. He was a student employee. He talked about Vince James and his wife. He used to collect the trash on campus. He discussed the eating facilities on campus and insect infestations.

He worked in some of the canneries such as Western Fish. He fished for New England. He was hourly at the cannery. He was working with kids who were on contract and had guaranteed salary. He talked about pitching fish and the time the high school burned. That was right before his last year in high school. He didn't think he had the best education that year. He had a difficult time with English in college, but had a helpful professor. He talked about the canning industry business. He started at the time when there was a labor shortage at the beginning of the war. After he was married he was asked to work for the Pribilof division of the Fish and Wildlife Service. He talked about not getting paid for fishing in Bristol Bay, but the people from San Francisco would get paid. He mentioned Betty Thomas again who attended the University of Alaska and became a teacher and taught in Kodiak and Seldovia. He said a lot of the teachers were concerned about their students. He thought Cordova wasn't a good place to progress.

He talked about the winds in Cordova. In 1943 there were winds measured at 140 mph and maybe beyond. It blew all their windows in. Buildings were knocked over. He hasn't heard of a storm that strong since then.

Periodically they would see war ships. There was a submarine that he toured. The battlecruiser, Houston, was anchored by Observation Island. It was later sunk in the South China Sea. In 1942 his father told him to look out the window. There were two military ships at the dock. There were soldiers everywhere. He had to go through check points to get to school. There were eight ships in Cordova Bay. They would dock two at a time. They were there to put the airport in at Cordova. It is still used today.

He said there were a lot of interesting things in Cordova in those days along the waterfront. Periodically the docks would be full of big barrels of different types of fish. The fish came from Bristol Bay, the chain and other places. Cordova was the transshipment point. There was a ship that was an extension of the Alaska Steamship Company and Cordova was the turnaround point. There were three different ships. There were ships that worked the chain and stayed up there all year long. He remembers the rats on the ships. He said when you traveled up and down the coast you bought a ticket. He would buy second or third class ticket. You bought a bunk in the room that you shared with others. Very often the first class rooms would get washed out in crossing the Gulf of Alaska because it would get pretty rough.

Johansen said he fished again in 1973 until 1989. He told his son he could run the boat when he was sixty-five years old. He came up to Fairbanks and worked on houses. He built six houses altogether. He built four boats. He has traveled. They bought property on Coffman Cove. He didn't want to stay in Ketchikan. He talked about trying to live on the wage structure. When he built his boat he was able to do better. He said Ketchikan was an industrial town. All at once marine businesses in several of the communities in that area went down including Ketchikan. He wasn't sure why but a business decision was made to encourage tourism. Wrangell continued the marine business. Today Ketchikan has room for five tourist boats at the dock. He described what Ketchikan looks like now and the economic situation.

He built a commercial building in Ketchikan. He wasn't able to finish the building in one year and needed another permit. The city would not issue another permit. A friend made him a totem on plywood for the front of the building which interrupted traffic flow. The city was irritated with him. There was a problem with the code. He finally got the building finished and lives in the top level.

Johansen talked about what life was like before Social Security. He said there were a lot of people out of Dawson who had settled there. They got old and ran out of money. Some of them took their own lives. He said they needed money for the basics. Because his dad worked the river for quite a few years his practice was to stock up food for during the winter. His dad had quite a few supplies when the war started. He talked about the different types of supplies they had. He said they always had something to eat. He knew some of the children who had signs of poor nutrition and had poor teeth. He felt the state should have had dental care in the schools. Social Security came in during the 1930s. People didn't know what it was at that time. He didn't think the effect was visible until after the war. He had applied for benefits for his mother. His parents moved to Ketchikan for a while. They had rental shacks for income. His father was excused for not having a business license.

His mother started studying to become a U.S. citizen when WWII started. His father was a citizen by then. His mother took all her documents into the city and they lost all the documents. In 1952 or 53 the immigration department sent the information about her immigration through Eagle. Life in those years was different. The communities managed. There were characters in each community. Henry Crow went from Cordova to Seldovia. He was interested in mining. He flew a glider with a small motor on it and flew all around the area. Crow brought in two wolverines one day and put them in the basement of the hotel. They ate their way out of the cage and were loose in the hotel.

In those days the planes weren't reliable. Kirkpatrick was the original owner of Cordova Air Service. He died in a plane crash during a snowstorm. The medical care was there but inadequate. There was a lot of carelessness with gasoline and a lot of people got burned. They had a slough behind their house and people would pull up there in their boats to overwinter. One of the boat owners blew up his boat and was blown into the mud that was the community septic system. He said Katella had an oil seep. The oil companies never found enough oil to make it worthwhile. They used to heat the school with the oil. The town is empty now.

Johansen said there were 168 canneries in Alaska over the years. The vast majority are gone now. All of the money went out of state. There were a lot of clam diggers out of Oregon that would come up to Alaska for clamming. In Cordova clamming season was the first money to come into the community and it didn't go over too well to share it with people from outside. There was a protest. They went to the processors and told them they wouldn't dig for them if they used diggers from outside.

When he built his boat he used it for one year and then limited entry came in and he wasn't eligible for it. There was no provision for him. You had to have five years of participation to qualify. He had been working in the boatyards for years. He found an old timer and got his license. The age of the commercial fisherman is getting older. The license is expensive. The expenses preclude Alaska participation and he doesn't think that is fair. He doesn't feel the state has helped him. He feels the state doesn't help the locals.

Eric said one of his siblings is here and one lives out of state.

Johansen commented on alternatives for the state. He said most of the people in Juneau are newcomers. The state will need to come up with a tax or something. He talked about the differences between Alaska and the lower states.

Johansen talks about Joe Bernard. Bernard was born on an island in the St. Lawrence Seaway. He was a trader in the Arctic with a little boat, The Teddy Bear. He would travel up to Lancaster Sound and trade with the Natives. He also traded in Siberia. Bernard was in Nome when Amundsen was there. In Cordova Bernard had a place on an island near the town. One winter Johansen and Bernard worked together rebuilding a cannery tender. Between supper and bedtime Bernard would tell him stories. Johansen thought he was a terrible cook. Bernard was his father's best friend in spite of one being Catholic and the other Protestant. Bernard would often come to dinner on Sunday and they would play pinochle afterwards. Bernard would trade furs. He showed up in Cordova in the mid-twenties. He had traded up in the Arctic before that. Johansen said they rebuilt the cannery tender all by hand and it was a hard way to make a living.

Johansen talked about working as a shipwright. They worked with fir wood. There were specialty mills that they would order from. They could get material in any length they ordered. The people he worked with were all Scotch. They had their apprenticeship in Scotland. They were originally Canadian. They serviced the river steamers in Dawson and Carcross in the spring. They would come down the coast after that. They ended up in Ketchikan. Johansen worked for Northern Machine and Railway Company and he wasn't accepted at first. He talked about Murdo and how they cared for the wife, Mary. He discussed the need for caring for the aged. Johansen's wife has been in care for nine years in Ketchikan at the Pioneer Home. The need for aged care and funding for it in Alaska is discussed as well as the state funding other needs. Art and Dagwood Wilson are discussed again.

Johansen said he didn't do much hunting. They used to go all around the Sound with his dad's prospecting. He talked about a multiple murder and trial in Lituya Bay.