

IDITAROD TRAIL INTERVIEW - BOB BALDWIN

August 16, 1980
Alaska Gold Company
Nome, Alaska

BLM Interviewer:

Tom Beck

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INTRODUCTION

INTERVIEWER:Historic Trail interview with Bob Baldwin of Nome, Alaska. The interview was conducted at the Alaska Gold Company on August 16th, 1980. The interview was conducted for the Bureau of Land Management by Tom Beck.

Bob Baldwin is the son of Reverend Baldwin, the first Methodist missionary to the Nome area. Reverend Baldwin came to the Nome area on his honeymoon in 1909. He started an orphanage at Sinook, Alaska, 26 miles west of Nome in 1909 and later moved the mission to Nome in 1912. In addition to a children's orphanage, Reverend Baldwin was also the head of the Eskimo Church and the Methodist Hospital.

The Methodist Church acquired the roadhouse, the Cape Nome Roadhouse, around 1920. It was used in the summers as a children's retreat from June until September. In the winters it was used as a roadhouse and run by an old German sea captain, Cap Schriener, for the Methodist mission. In the late 1920s the mission in Nome was closed, and the roadhouse was disposed of.

Bob Baldwin was born in Nome and his lived all of his life here, except for a brief period in Fairbanks. He started with the Hammond Company, a division of U.S. Smelting Company, in 1935. In 1974, the company's name was changed to the Alaska Gold Company, and it was formed as a separate company.

More information about the Cape Nome Roadhouse can be found in the Iditarod National Historic Trail interview with Bonnie Hahn, conducted on August 4th, 1980.

(Off record at Log No. 0186)

(On record at Log No. 0189)

INTERVIEW

Amissionary here for the Women's Division of the Methodist Church. And they'd started an orphanage at Sinook in 1909, and then it was moved to Nome in 1912.

Q And where's Sinook?

A Twenty-six miles west of here.

Q Oh. Okay.

A At the mouth of the Sinrock River. And there were quite a few orphans around due to different white man's diseases, and then there were -- we had that epidemic of 1918, and there were quite a few hundred died of the disease in this area and up the coast. So.....

Q Was that small pox, or do you know?

A That was dipth- -- no, that was the flu.

Q Oh, was it?

A 1918, yeah. Yeah. The orphanage they had in Nome, I would say they had a maximum of 40 children. When I remember it, that would have been in the -- say, the '20s, there probably were 20, 25 children there.

Q Did your father come up to -- was he the first Methodist missionary here?

A Yes. Yes.

Q So he started the mission?

A He started the mission, and then the women's division also had a hospital here, so he was in charge of the orphanage, the Eskimo church and the hospital. The Cape Nome Roadhouse, just when they acquired that, I don't know, but I would say very close to 1920 because I couldn't have been more than five, my first recollection of the roadhouse. Normally after school was out, all the children would go down to the Cape. Quite often you'd have to wait for the road to open. I remember one time we went down by a Coast Guard cutter because there was a delay in opening the road.

And the roadhouse was used as a summer camp. They'd stay down there until, say, the first part of September when school started, and then they'd move them all back. And in the wintertime it would be used as a roadhouse. We had an old German sea captain, Cap Schriener. He'd done quite a bit of mining up in the Candle area. He moved down to Nome in the early '20s. And he would take care of the roadhouse in the wintertime.

Q It was actually then owed by the mission?

A Yes. Yes.

Q And he would sort of -- he would run it for the mission?

A Right. There weren't too many -- there wasn't too much traffic at that time between here and down the coast.

Q Oh.

A The mail team would come through once a week, and other than that, there'd just be very few travellers along the route.

Q This was in the '20s?

A This was in the '20s. I was trying to remember when it disposed of, but it must have been in the very late '20s or the early '30s. The mission was closed in the late '20s, and then the roadhouse was disposed of. But the name of the man that bought it, I've been trying to think of it, and I don't know.

Q All right. Does the name Frank Martin -- does that ring a bell at all? I was talking to, I think Pete Curran, and he mentioned that it might have been a man by the name of Frank Martin, or something like that, bought it and then sold it to the CAA, I guess it was eventually sold to.

A Yeah. They -- the CAA had it during the war, but yeah, I knew Frank Martin. He was a fur trader up here. He might have been involved in it, but I was pretty sure it was a fellow by the name of Sparrow or -- it was about the time there was quite a bit of interest in mink mining.

Q So in the late '20s, early '30s?

A Yeah.

Q Do you know when it was built or any of the history about this place?

A No, I don't. No, I don't. But it must have been built, I would say, in the very early 1900s because there was, you know, after the gold rush there was considerable travel between -- mostly between Council and Nome.....

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

Aand all up into Nome. And that was the only -- the

only methods of travel was by dog team or horse team and boat.

Q Hmm. Did you -- do you remember the roadhouse going up or were you still pretty young then?

A No, I remember the roadhouse, yes. It's been changed quite a bit.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A The FAA, or CAA, changed it an awful lot. I can remember -- you've been done there?

Q Yeah. I.....

A You know, you're sitting in the front room, on the west wall it's all blanked off now. That's where the FAA had quite a bit of equipment. They blanked off the windows there. But there was a long window on that wall and you could sit at the table and look out at the Cape. And -- well, in those days there was just so many cars, you know, that I can remember sitting there, you look up there and see a car come down, and just as soon as it came into sight you knew he was coming.

Q Hmm. Was the upstairs pretty much the same?

A No, the upstairs -- they've changed the stairway too. The stairway took off from the living room, or the front room. It went up, and then to the right -- there was a door to the right and it dropped down. It was kind of a -- there was a great big long room. Now that was the girls' dormitory -- it was the girls' bedroom. And up the stairs to the left, the front half or the front three-quarters, was the boys' dormitory. It was just one big room. And then on the north wall there was -- I think there were three rooms.

Q Did they have that dog stables there and.....

A Yeah, they had -- it was mainly horse stables.

Q Horse stables?

A But they'd always have dogs in there too, yes, but I think at that time there were probably stalls for, oh, maybe a dozen horses.

Q Was there a lot of horse travel at that time in the.....

A Yes, there was a quite in the summertime, yes.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Yes.

Q Between Nome and Cape Nome and down.....

A Between Nome and mainly Solomon.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A That was quite a mining town and everything was traded either by coastal boat or by horse team.

Q What do they do with the kids down there? Did they take them hiking or what did they do down there?

A Well, in those days kids knew how to play without being taught how like they are nowadays. No, we'd just roam up and down the beach. We'd go swimming, we'd go out hiking the hills, going out picking berries.....

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

Ain the fall.

Q It's a nice spot down there.

A Then there was always wood to saw. That was before you had you chainsaws, and you'd do it with your six-foot or eight-

foot saws, you know, (indiscernible). You had to split your wood.

Q (Indiscernible.)

A Yeah, yeah. That was the only fuel we used, was wood. Communications -- we had a telephone. We had a party line, which everybody had a different ring, and everybody listened in.

Q Yeah.

A Yeah, I can remember Cap Schriner listening in once. There was a telephone call from Nome to Safety, to the Safety roadhouse. He listened in. Somebody up here was telling Charlie Dalquist that there was a revenue agent on the road down there. Cap Schriner didn't say anything until, oh, some time later, but I notice that when this car drove by with a stranger in it, he called up Charlie, told him, 'Well, he's going to be there within an hour.' Charlie had quite a reputation for making home brew.

Q That's what I hear. Did you know him or.....

A Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Q He ran the Safety roadhouse?

A He ran the Safety roadhouse.

Q And the ferry?

A And the ferry. His daughter used to be the captain on the tugboat sometimes, pulling the ferry across. She's in town.

Q Yeah, Mamie.

A Mamie, yeah. One thing I saw they did away with down at Safety was that wireless tower.

Q Yeah. When was that removed, do you remember?

A No, I don't. It -- I'd say in the '50s or '60s. It was a tall tower. It must have been -- well, it must have been at least three feet around the (indiscernible).

Q Was it?

A I mean, in diameter.

Q How long did Charlie run that roadhouse there, do you know?

A Oh, I'd say until the time he died, I mean, he lived down there.

Q Yeah.

A Of course there wasn't much.....

Q Yeah.

Abusiness in those late years.

Q Right. Oh, was that in the '50s when he died?

A '50s or '40s, yeah.

Q When was that -- the ferry landing on this side, you know, is that where the bridge is now pretty much?

A Yeah, pretty much so, yes.

Q How much did they charge, do you recall, to go across there?

A No, I don't. I don't. That used to be quite a drive. I don't know. I drove down there -- drove down to Solomon. And to drive to Solomon and back again, it was a day's journey.

Q Is that right?

A You drive to the Cape. That stretch wasn't too bad. Then you'd keep on going for, oh, maybe three miles, and then the road just started getting bad. You'll see that sand spit it just sand with a thin layer of tundra. The road commission

didn't maintain it very well, and it would have been a long haul to take gravel in there. So there'd be trails leading every which way, and you'd pick out the one you thought looked the best and you'd go for a mile and there'd be a sand trap in front of you and you'd have to make your own course around that.

Q Hmm.

A Then you get the ferry. You might have to wait half an hour, an hour before Charlie would come down and take you across, or he might have been -- be on the other side. And then the road from Safety to Solomon River, it was the same condition along that spit.

Q Was there gas available down there in the winter -- Solomon or anywhere?

A Oh, I think you could have gotten gas, yes. They wouldn't have had a gas station. They would have had it in 5-gallon cans.

Q Did your father -- what did he do then when the mission -- was the mission closed?

A Yes, the mission was closed in the late '20s. He just retired, I mean, he was ill.

Q Where did he come up from?

A He come from New York state. My mother came from Boston. They came up on their honeymoon.

Q Hmm.

A When I think back at what brave ^{Soviet} soles they were in those days, you know, nowadays you come up here on your honeymoon and you don't like it or your wife doesn't like it and you hop the next plane.

Q Well, it'd probably be a lot fewer people around if they had planes in those days because.....

A Oh, yeah.

Qthey had to stick it out. Was he assigned up here or did they just come up voluntarily or -- do you know how that worked?

A Well, he was interested in -- became interested in Alaska -- when they were going together, they worked -- see, they worked down in Martha's Vineyard in.....

Q Hmm.

Asome of the resorts there. I think Dad was working in the kitchen and my mother was working as a maid or something between the school years. That's where they became acquainted. And they used to go to these, what, (indiscernible)?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A And one of the speakers was Reverend -- I can't think of his name. He started Jesse Lee Home down at Unalaska.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A And they talked with him and learned all about Alaska and they became interested in coming up and doing work among the Eskimos, so they asked for this assignment -- an assignment in Alaska. They were given Sinook.

Q When did they move from Sinook to Nome?

A 1912.

Q And they got here in about 1909, you said?

A Yes. They landed in Nome in the first part of June in 1909 and then went up by coastal boat to Sinook.

Q It must have been quite a trip.

A Yeah. Yeah, it was. Then my mother became pregnant and would come down to the doctor, and come down by skimboat, go back by skimboat, get storm-bound heading up to Nome. They had to stop halfway up at Alldredge (ph) Landing.

Q I wonder how they got across the country, did they tell you -- from New York to Seattle, I suppose?

A By train.

Q Did they?

A By train, yeah. Yeah. They landed in Seattle. They were in Seattle I think about a week. And at that time, the -- was it the Yukon Alaska Exposition?

Q Yeah, the.....

A I think that's what was going on in 1909. Yeah.

Q So you were born here in.....

A Yeah.

Q You lived here.....

A Except for 12 years in Fairbanks.

Q Do you remember much about Cap Schriner? Was he -- you said he was a German.....

A Yeah, he was a German sea captain.

Q What was he a captain on?

A A square rigger.

Q Hmm.

A Now when he came to Alaska, I don't know, but I would say it probably was around the turn of the century. But he'd been all over the world -- South America, China, India.

Q Hmm. Was he a whaling captain?

A No, no. He was a merchant marine.

Q Mm hmm (affirmative). Yeah, and talking to people, I'm amazed at the number of Scandinavians and, you know, Germans (indiscernible).

A Yeah, there were an awful lot of Scandinavians. I would say that -- oh, say in the '30s when I started working for the company, close to 80 percent, or 75 percent, of the population here were Norwegians, Swedes, Danes.

Q Hmm. Was the company -- Alaska Gold Company, when was that founded?

A We started out in about '23, '24, because I can remember Consolidated Gold Fields, the branch of the U.S. Smelting, Refining and Mining. And then it was changed to U.B. Industries. U.B. happened to be the stock market symbol for U.S. Smelting. And then in '74 it became a separate company, Alaska Gold Company, owned -- or 85 percent owned by U.B. Industries.

Q So Hammond -- I've heard two names -- Hammond was actually a subsidiary or branch of.....

A Yes.

QU.S. Melting?

A Yeah. Yeah, same as in Fairbanks. It was the Fairbanks Exploration.

Q Hmm. And you've been working with them ever since then?

A Yeah. Yeah, since '35.

Q I bet you've seen a lot of changes with the conditions up here, huh?

A Oh, yes.

Q Mining activity.

A Excuse me.

Q Things are picking up again?

A Well, we're trying to. We're trying to help it move along.

Q Basically the same kind of mining now as when you started?

A Yes. It's just about identical.

Q Do you work in any dredges?

A Not right now, no. No, we're just thawing the ground down.

Q Yeah, it's (indiscernible) or something. Was it the Alaska Gold Company that thawed and then pretty much ran out of ground?

A Yeah.

Q Why is it that you can't thaw enough in one season, or prior to one season, to.....

A No. I think the main thing is that their productivity nowadays is so much lower than it was before.

Q People aren't willing to work?

A The manpower. They don't want to work or maybe they don't know how to or they'd never have to.

Q That's probably it.

A Nowadays you don't have to work and you'll get buy with food stamps or some kind of assistance, and then you have your unemployment compensation. But in the early days they never had -- if they didn't work, they'd have to maybe tighten their belt.

Q Yeah. I spent some time down in the McGrath area this summer. I've been talking to some of the real old-timers and, you know, the wages they worked for. It's really amazing -- and the hours too.

A Yes. But it was the same way up here. When I went to work for the company they had just switched from 12 hours a day to 10 hours a day, seven days a week. And as I remember, the laborer's rate was 77 cents an hour -- well, board and room I think was a dollar and a half a day. But a laborer could work all summer long, and with the few hundred dollars he'd saved, he had enough for transportation out, say, to Seattle, and he could live reasonably well and still have enough for his transportation back the next year.

Q Hmm.

A And it's pretty difficult to do nowadays with -- even with the wages, you know?

Q Mm hmm (affirmative).

A Transportation has gone up so high, and the cost of living is tremendous.

Q Are most of the people unionized?

A Yes. Yes.

Q It makes a difference, doesn't it?

(Off record at Log No. 2523)

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