



Government Hill

Yesterday and Today

An oral history of life on Government Hill as told through the people that lived it.



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October 1, 2012

Municipality of Anchorage
Community Development Department
Planning Division



Government Hill

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Introduction ~

- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v
- PURPOSE 1
- INTERVIEW PROCESS 2
- PRESENTING THE INTERVIEWEES..... 2
- GEOGRAPHIC AREA 8
- THE FIRST PEOPLE 10

What We Talked About ~

- HOW GOVERNMENT HILL GOT ITS NAME..... 11
- WHY WAS GOVERNMENT HILL SO SPECIAL? 11
- IMPORTANT COMMUNITY ELEMENTS 12
- NOTABLE PEOPLE OF GOVERNMENT HILL 15
- HOUSING ON GOVERNMENT HILL 16
- RAILROADERS 19
- GROWING UP ON GOVERNMENT HILL 21
- MILITARY MOVES TO GOVERNMENT HILL..... 24
- URBAN RENEWAL 27

- CIVIC AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT..... 27
- GOVERNMENT HILL AND THE PORT OF ANCHORAGE..... 29
- ALASKA STATEHOOD..... 30
- CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1960s)..... 31
- THE EARTHQUAKE OF '64 32
- THE NEXT ERA (1970s to Present)..... 35
- NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERS..... 35
- CHANGES ON GOVERNMENT HILL..... 37
- EXCITING THINGS WE STILL TALK ABOUT 38
- CLOSING THOUGHTS 39

Appendices ~

- A: NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT..... 43
- B: GERLEK'S HISTORY OF GOVERNMENT HILL..... 45
- C: "NO HOMEBODY"—AUSTRID GARRETT 47
- D: REFERENCES..... 49
- E: INTERVIEWS 51





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The story of life and growing up in Government Hill can only be told by the people who have lived and worked here, who helped found Anchorage, Alaska, through their work, personal commitment to the community, and friendship to many.

Thank you to the special people that agreed to be interviewed:

- Mrs. Mary J. Barry
- Ms. Bobbie Bianchi
- Ms. Sidney Billingslea
- Mr. Tom Brennan
- Mrs. Marjorie Ellis
- Mr. Weaver Franklin
- Mrs. Austrid Garrett
- Mr. Stephen Gerlek
- Mrs. Lucile Halfacre
- Mrs. Mavis Hancock
- Mr. Darrel Hess
- Mr. Brian Hoefler
- Mr. Jack B. Karterman
- Ms. Melanie Ellis Lynch
- Mr. John Nelson
- Mr. Jerry Peters
- Mr. Stephen Saunders
- Mr. Stewart E. White

You've done your community proud!

Richard Porter and **Aaron Leggett** provided the history of the Dena'ina Athabascans from the *History of the Dena'ina Athabascans of Upper Tikahtnu (The Upper Cook Inlet)*, which was used for information on the pre-history of the Government Hill area.

Government Hill Community Council:

- Bob French, President
- Stephanie Kesler, Vice President

Anchorage Historic Preservation Commission, who contributed their comments and expertise to this report:

- Bobbie Bianchi, Artist and Historian
- Debbie Corbett, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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- Darrell Lewis, National Park Service
- Richard Porter, CEO, Knik Tribal Council
- Michelle Ritter, Chair
- Kim Varner Wetzel, Planning Consultant

Municipality of Anchorage

Community Development Department:

- Jerry T. Weaver, Jr., Director
- Carol Wong, Long-Range Planning Manager
- Rachel Wintz, UAA Intern
- Susan Perry, Principal Office Associate
- Joni Wilm, Government Hill Neighborhood Plan

Thank you, **Mayor Dan Sullivan**, for acknowledging the importance of and supporting historic preservation in Anchorage.

Kristine Bunnell
Senior Planner | Project Manager





PURPOSE

The purpose of the Government Hill Oral History Project is to capture and relate the personal histories of the people living and working on Government Hill, and to tell and preserve the stories of this special place for future generations. We hope that you enjoy this compilation of Government Hill history, memories, and events.

The Government Hill neighborhood is the oldest neighborhood in Anchorage, known from Dena'ina stories and legends for its salmon runs along Ship Creek; contact with the Russians, British, and Americans; homestead farms and tent dwellings; the Alaska Railroad; the military build-up; the 1960s Urban Renewal; the 1964 Earthquake, and its present-day renaissance. It was established to supply housing for workers building the Alaska Railroad and evolved to provide land and resources for Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Richardson. This neighborhood and its residents have played an integral role in the founding of Anchorage as Alaska's largest and most prosperous city.

An ever-changing community of over 100 years, Government Hill has accommodated a variety of populations with a wide array of life experiences. Government Hill has a unique history that is communicated through its people, architecture, and natural environment; these elements all contribute to an exceptional and cherished quality of life.

Government Hill means many things: "Elnena" or Dena'ina Country to the Dena'ina Athabascans, home, community, neighborhood, family, friends, school, play, hunting, fishing, work, trust, and taking care of each other.

As Bobbie Bianchi said: "I wouldn't live in any other place . . . Government Hill is my home."



INTERVIEW PROCESS

Eighteen people were interviewed for this oral history. They were asked several questions, including: Name, birthdate, birth location, where they grew up, and when they came to Government Hill. These questions prompted memories about life working as a railroader, serving in the military, or as a civil service worker.

What was it like for the family members? They talked about how they enjoy the views, natural surroundings, community atmosphere, kids playing in the streets and on the ski hill, and neighborhood friendships. Government Hill families formed tight bonds through their work and community involvement. They played, fought for their community, supported each other through good and bad times, and even vacationed together.

All interviews were transcribed and are available electronically from the Municipality of Anchorage, Community Development Department, Long-Range Planning Section or in the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) Archives at the UAA Consortium Library, Anchorage, Alaska.

PRESENTING THE INTERVIEWEES

The people quoted in this report include four who were born in Anchorage—one who claimed Government Hill as his first home. The others moved to Government Hill either alone as adults or with family. The families moved there for employment with the Alaska Railroad or a station assignment at Elmendorf Air Force Base or Fort Richardson. They were born between 1911–1959, and their residency on Government Hill began as early as 1923.



Mary J. Barry was born in Seward, Alaska, in 1928. She moved to Government Hill with her husband Melvin Barry in 1951. Mary's father was a German expatriate and traveled back and forth between Germany and Alaska to work for the Alaska Railroad.



*Mel and Mary Barry
—Barry Collection*

He worked on river boats that delivered supplies along the Yukon River. He married Mary's mother, whom he met in Germany sometime after World War II. They returned to settle in Seward, where Mary and her siblings were raised.

Mrs. Barry met her husband Melvin, whose family was part of the colony project in the Matanuska Valley, while visiting a friend in the area. "Well, I had gone to the Matanuska Valley to visit a friend . . . so we went camping over the weekend . . . then she said 'they're having a dance in Palmer. Would [you] like to go?' And I said 'yeah!' That's where I met my husband. I was still going to college at the time . . . and I had two years to go. Well, he very patiently waited until I was through."

Mary wanted to take Journalism at UCLA, but they didn't offer the program at that time, so she majored in English literature, which was "the next best thing." She wasn't sorry afterwards, feeling that "you get exposed to this great literature, and why did these people last while others didn't." Mrs. Barry has written and published eight books during her writing career, including five Alaskan-themed histories, two humor, and one about the Russian samovar (teapot). *Mary provided: Jack and Nellie Brown Pioneer Settlers of Anchorage, Alaska-by Mary J. Barry*

Bobbie Bianchi was born in McAllen, Texas, and moved to Government Hill with her husband and two children in 1975. They lived in the Hollywood Vista Apartments until base housing was available. She returned to the Government Hill neighborhood in the early 1980s and bought Cottage No. 12 in 1990.



Photo—Brian Braunstein

Bobbie is an artist and local historian who is enthusiastic about sharing the history of Government Hill and the surrounding area. Bobbie participates in many community efforts, including membership on the Anchorage Historic Preservation Commission. Bobbie is routinely consulted on many aspects of past and present life on Government Hill, including the creation of the beautiful new Government Hill logo by Alaskan artist Barbara Lavallee.

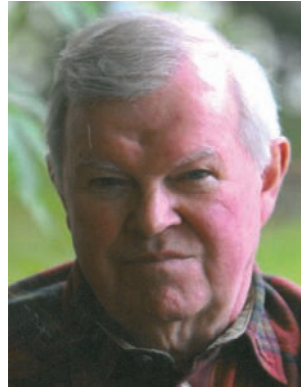
Sidney Billingslea was born in Anchorage, Alaska, in 1959. The Korean War brought both of Sidney's parents to Alaska. Sidney's father was a soldier and her mother was a nurse in the Air Force. Sidney's parents met at the Officers' Club at Fort Richardson. Sidney moved to Government Hill in 1988 after living with her parents in Anchorage and Soldotna. "I always loved the smaller neighborhoods of Anchorage, and Government Hill was the perfect small neighborhood downtown." *Sidney provided historic photos for this report.*



Photo—Brian Braunstein



Tom Brennan came to Alaska in 1967 from Massachusetts. “My wife and I got married and decided that we didn’t want to settle down in the east. We were looking at either Alaska or Australia. So we bought an International Travelall and a houseboat on wheels and towed it up.” Since that journey, the couple has raised two sons. Mr. Brennan has lived in many areas of Anchorage but has settled down to live on Government Hill.



Photo—Joni Wilm

Marjorie Ellis, mother of **Melanie Ellis Lynch**, was born in Missouri in 1918 and moved permanently to Alaska in 1950. Melanie Lynch was born in 1960 in the old Providence Hospital in Anchorage. Their family lived on Government Hill with their “white Siberian . . . this dog was the best babysitter I had ever had. He just really didn’t realize he was a canine.”



Photo—Joni Wilm

Weaver Franklin was born in western Nebraska in 1922. He moved to Government Hill with his wife around 1950. He was a contract worker on the Alcan Highway. Weaver then went to work in the Aleutian Islands for about 16 months. “I hired out to the Alaska Railroad the first day of 1946.” Mr. Franklin worked for the railroad for 37 years, raising his family on Government Hill “living a simple life.”



Photo—Brian Braunstein

Austrid Garrett was born in Minneapolis in 1912. She moved to Government Hill in 1945. Austrid’s husband was with the Northwest Air Transport Command, a civil service position at Elmendorf Air Force Base. She joined her husband, who was already in Alaska, by bravely traveling from Minneapolis with her two children, three and six years old. She accomplished the feat while six months pregnant! The little group travelled by train to Seattle, by ship to Seward, and then by the train again to Anchorage. Austrid wanted to find a good life for her family. Mrs. Garrett still feels fortunate that they were able to buy the home that she lives in today. *Austrid provided historic photos, letters, and an article for this report.*



Photo—Brian Braunstein

Stephen Gerleck was born in Winchester, Massachusetts, in 1953 and grew up in the suburbs of Boston. A job with the U.S. Public Health Service and the thrill of adventure brought him to Alaska in the late 1970s. Stephen made his home on Government Hill in the early ’80s with his wife and three children. *Stephen provided historic photos and a history of Government Hill for this report.*



Photo—Brian Braunstein



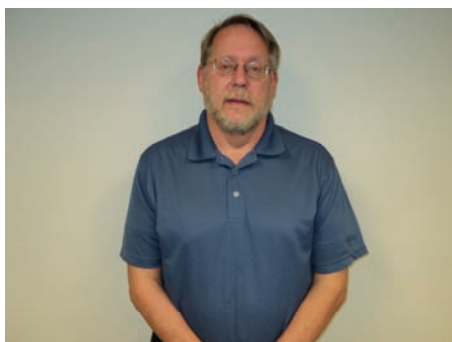
Lucile Halfacre was born in Garfield County, Montana, and grew up on a ranch. She came to Alaska in 1944 “on a one-year contract with the government . . . I had a friend up here and she liked it. I always had kind of been interested in Alaska so I came up and I liked it too. So I’ve been here ever since . . . and that was 64—no, more than that—about 68 years ago! By golly, it doesn’t seem that long! [Laughs] We were unable to photograph Lucile at the time of her interview.

Mavis Hancock was the second child in a family of eight siblings, and was “born in rural West Florida, out in the country near a little town called Laurel Hill” in 1932. She came to Alaska with her husband and two children in 1965. Her husband was transferred here with the United States Air Force. Mavis was a math teacher in the Anchorage School District and taught many of the kids on Government Hill.



Photo—Joni Wilm

Darrel Hess was born at Edwards Air Force Base in southern California in 1952. He moved to Government Hill as a teenager with his family in 1965. They came from San Antonio, Texas, where Darrel’s father was stationed at Lackland Air Force Base. Darrel had two siblings, a brother and a sister. The Hess children thought that “Government Hill was an interesting and fun place to live.”



Photo—Brian Braunstein

Brian Hoefler was born in Anchorage in 1959. His first home was with his parents on Government Hill. Brian’s father came to Alaska during World War II after finishing his university education in 1941. “He just had this life-long dream to move to Alaska. His family, both his mother and father had died so he didn’t have any family back in New York State where he had come from. . . . As soon as he finished college, he picked up and moved to Alaska.” During the winter, Brian’s father would return to New York until Alaska eventually “took,” which was after he met his soon-to-be wife in Nenana. “She met my father there and one thing led to another.”



Photo—Brian Braunstein

Jack B. Karterman was born in the Territory of Alaska on October 27, 1946. His “father came up here in 1936 from Seattle . . . to go sport fishing and hunting” and ended up staying and working on the Alaska Railroad. Jack’s mother came to Alaska in 1937. “She was a registered nurse, X-ray technician, and a lab technician, and she worked for the Railroad Hospital.” Mr. Karterman moved from downtown Anchorage to Government Hill when he was about four years old. Jack lived with his brother and his parents—along with a dog and a parakeet—in a Quonset hut at 510 Cook Street until 1963.



Photo—Joni Wilm



John Nelson was born in Anchorage in 1923. His first home was Cottage 14 on Government Hill, where the family lived until 1940. His father was from Pennsylvania and headed west, seeking work in the oil fields after serving in the war. An oil company offered him a job in Alaska at an Eska Jones coal mine operation. He went to work for the Alaska Railroad after the coal mining experience.



—Nelson Collection

Mr. Nelson’s mother came to Anchorage from Vancouver, Washington, with a Presbyterian church group. She went to work for the Alaska Railroad, and that is where she met Mr. Nelson’s father. The couple were married in Seward in 1923. John was born soon after. Mr. Nelson had a brother and a sister who have both passed away. Mr. Nelson received a degree in economics, served in the military, and then returned home to also work for the Alaska Railroad.

Jerry Peters was born in Oelwein, Iowa. As support for the war effort was winding down in the Lower 48 and jobs were being phased out, Jerry’s dad “saw the writing on the wall” and started looking for a new job. “. . . he saw an article in a machinist, ah, union magazine that said they were looking for machinists in all different crafts to come to Alaska and work on the railroad.” It was a one-year guaranteed job with transportation paid both ways.



—Peters Collection

“He told me he had to fill out all this paperwork . . . and get some medical work done to make sure he was healthy enough . . . they accepted him and he went up there.”

Jerry and his mom followed the next year, in 1947, after his dad had finished building their Quonset hut from a kit. “He told me once or twice that he wished he had gone up there a lot earlier. He thought about it, but it just wasn’t the place to go before the war.” *Jerry was interviewed by phone and provided the picture of their home through email.*

Stephen Saunders moved from Seattle to Alaska on October 28, 1966, with his wife and newly adopted son. He transferred from the Lower 48 to work for the Standard Oil Company. He “. . . was originally supposed to be up here for two years, and as of right now I think we’re at the 46-year mark!” [Laughter]



Photo—Port of Anchorage Website

The Saunders have three children and live in Alaska about seven months out of the year and down in Arizona for five months of the year. Mr. Saunders was our only interviewee who didn’t live on Government Hill. He represents the business community, and the Port of Anchorage that supports Government Hill and its small businesses. *We interviewed Mr. Saunders on his winter sojourn to Arizona and have not been able to obtain a photograph at this printing.*



Stewart E. White was born in Weed, California, and came to Alaska in 1948. Stewart was working for the Southern Pacific Railroad in California when his father told him that Alaska was a great future for a young guy like him.



Mr. and Mrs. White
—White Collection

Stewart wrote the Alaska Railroad and “they offered me a one-year contract and property on Government Hill to build a house. I was only going to stay for a year.”

“Then one day out in Clear Sight this beautiful girl boarded the train with two young kids. And I said, ‘Who is that little girl?’ And [the superintendent] said, ‘That’s the second foreman’s wife’s sister, and she’s too young for you so don’t mess with her!’ [Laughter] So I wound up marrying her.” [Laughter] When asked if it was love at first sight, Mr. White responded “for me anyway.” He knew then that Alaska was going to be his home.

Stewart worked for the Alaska Railroad for 34 years and together with his wife raised a family of two girls and two boys. The girls moved down the street from their parents, staying on Government Hill; one son lives next door with Stewart’s grandson. The other son lives elsewhere in Anchorage. Stewart loves many things about Government Hill. He is happiest, most of all, because his children have been able to live close by and be an active part of his golden years. Mr. and Mrs. White also enjoy their cabin on the Kenai River and spend many happy hours fishing and enjoying the river. Mr. White provided family photos for this report.



Wedding photos of Mr. and Mrs. White
—White Collection



GEOGRAPHIC AREA

Government Hill is located north of Downtown Anchorage, situated on top of the steep slopes and the northern bluff overlooking the confluence of Ship Creek and the Knik Arm. Government Hill is one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Anchorage because of its prime location with 360-degree views.

New development continues to occur on Government Hill with the construction of modern apartments, townhouses, and custom homes. This new development, along with the churches, commercial core, and recreational amenities, plays an important role in building and sustaining the small community environment found on Government Hill.

The Government Hill neighborhood is accessible from Downtown Anchorage via East Loop Drive and from Elmendorf Air Force Base via Arctic Warrior Drive. The Government Hill neighborhood is subdivided into western, central, and eastern areas.

Each of these neighborhood areas were influenced by different historical events, which resulted in the construction of diverse types of housing and patterns of development.

This report also references activities in the areas surrounding Government Hill at the Alaska Railroad main yard, Port of Anchorage, and what is now Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson. These are areas where our Government Hill interviewees lived, worked, and played.





- 1 Government Hill Elementary School
- 2 Site of former Government Hill Elementary School
- 3 Curling Clubhouse
- 4 Square and Round Dance Club
- 5 Water Tower
- 6 Wireless Station
- 7 Brown's Point Cottages

Government Hill Oral History Project

2010 Aerial Photography

Alaska Railroad Corporation
Port of Anchorage

Parks and Open Space
Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson



0 250 500 1,000 Feet



THE FIRST PEOPLE

“Five different tribes, consisting of 400-500 people, inhabited the Upper Cook Inlet region. Approximately 1,650 years ago, Dena’ina Athabascans migrated to the Anchorage area from south and southwest Alaska (Strohmeyer 2001). The Knik Arm Dena’ina people were the first known people in the Government Hill area, and established fish camps near the mouth of Ship Creek and on the Ship Creek Flats. The fish camps contained tents, smoke houses, and steam baths, among other temporary structures. The Dena’ina people were semi-nomadic and traveled to hunt, fish, and trade with other tribes. Captain James Cook was the first to describe the Dena’ina people in the Ship Creek area of Anchorage in 1778 (Strohmeyer 2001; Naske and Rowinski 1981).

“The Dena’ina Athabaskan of the lands and waters of Upper Tikahtnu have seen millennia of changes within Dena’ina Elnena (Dena’ina Country). The Dena’ina had established many villages and was a thriving, highly populated cultural group in Tikahtnu. They are a part of the environment and equal with the animals who call the Dena’ina “Campfire People.” Interaction with Western culture and technology was largely detrimental to their population; however, they adapted and still maintained traditional hunting and fishing methods while using Western technology. The factors that decimated the Dena’ina were primarily diseases in addition to the encroachment and colonization of their traditional territory, and loss of traditional hunting and fishing rights. Although they have had to endure hardships over the past 200 years, the Dena’ina people still have a strong sense of traditional values and responsibility. The Government Hill area contains over 240 historic Alaskan sites, including buildings, locations, Dena’ina place names, fish camps, and village sites including Tak’at, an important fishing location below the bluff at Elmendorf Air Force Base.

“This was the area for the First Salmon Ceremony held by the Athabaskan People to bless the “Kings” (salmon) on their annual return to the Cook Inlet and Ship Creek. Hunting and fishing are still an important part of Native traditional activities in the Government Hill and Ship Creek area that have bound people to this land for hundreds of years, both as the Native subsistence way of life and as something we all do in this uniquely Alaskan culture.

“Pre-history structures built by the Athabascans disappeared with Euro-American settlement in Anchorage, beginning with the initial displacement of Athabaskan people in 1915 when construction of the Alaska Railroad began near Ship Creek.

Shem Pete:

From Mackenzie across to Dgheyay Leht (Ship Creek) used to be a short distance, like a river, they used to tell me. They cut fish with an Ulu knife out there. They used to speak to them and toss the Ulu back and forth, they told me. “Impossible,” I told them. But then it happened that it got wider. It might have eroded about a mile. But before, the banks were close together and they used to toss the Ulu back and forth. I heard that from those old people’ (Kari, James. Shem Pete’s Alaska).

“As visitation and exploitation of the area’s many natural resources expanded, the Dena’ina People were displaced, giving way to settlement and development of the Anchorage area, including this important outpost now known as Government Hill” (*History of the Dena’ina Athabascans of Upper Tikahtnu—The Upper Cook Inlet - 2011*).



—UAA Archives



HOW GOVERNMENT HILL GOT ITS NAME

The earliest newspaper reference to this area called the site “the plateau of the flat.” Soon after, “Government Hill” became the area’s place name. Government employees first lived on the Hill; however, the confirmed story of the origin of the name comes from the Panama Canal workers who relocated to Alaska to build the railroad. The plateau was said to remind them of a similar site in Panama, so the nickname soon stuck as the 1915 cottages were ready for occupancy (Carberry and Lane, 1986).

Bobbie Bianchi seems to have validated the story when conversing with a couple in Anchorage who were visiting from Panama in 2011. Bobbie asked if there was a Government Hill in Panama City. The wife said, “Yeah, that’s where the government offices are.” Bobbie replied, “Good, because I’ve always heard that but I’ve never been able to confirm it.” Bobbie told the couple, “You’ll be interested to know that Alaska has a history with Panama.”

WHY WAS GOVERNMENT HILL SO SPECIAL?

The small-town atmosphere, longevity in occupation, diverse population, access to outdoor activities, neighborhood stability, and feeling of safety all contributed to the desirable quality of life on Government Hill.

Mary Barry

When the Barrys first moved to Government Hill, they stayed with Mel’s sister who lived on Manor Avenue in one of the apartments. They moved here for Mel’s job as a conductor on the railroad. They bought their cottage on Harvard Avenue in 1952. Mary also recalled having “some very interesting neighbors” and making close friends. Government Hill was “. . . well, it was kind of quiet. There weren’t so many houses. There were a lot of empty lots in those days and all the people seemed to have lived here for a long time.”

Jerry Peters

Jerry likes Government Hill because “. . . it’s still kind of isolated by itself in the middle of everything, but nobody knows it’s there. You got the base on one side, and you got the port on the other side, and the railroad on the other side. That about takes care of it. It’s just a nice little place. I wouldn’t want to change anything.”

Lucile Halfacre

“Well, I think it’s a choice place to live. And quite a few residents have been there a long time, which makes it kind of nice. It’s a convenient location being close to the base and close to downtown.”

Brian Hoefler

The Government Hill neighborhood was considered working class by many of its residents, and populations were classified mostly by where they worked. There were “a lot of blue collar people, [and] a few people from management. My father was a manager [for the railroad]. . . . A lot of people were in the military . . . and Hollywood Vista was more transient . . . so there was kind of three populations.”

Darrel Hess

“It was a kind of enclave of diversity in a pretty un-diverse town,” says Darrel. He liked the diversity that Government Hill offered through the different segments of population that made up the neighborhood. Government Hill felt like a “kind of isolated neighborhood . . . because at the time there was one little bridge . . . and that was the only access between Government Hill and Anchorage. But it always had this sense of independence because it was remote and not so accessible.”

Darrel, among many of the long-time residents, misses that sense of familiarity, as people are busier now and always in a hurry to get somewhere. Life was simpler back then and Government Hill was a nice, quiet place. “You may not know somebody by name, but you would know them by sight because you would see them all the time. Everybody would stop and say ‘hi’ on the sidewalk.”



Melanie Ellis Lynch

“As you get older, older areas that become more accessible financially to young families as they’re starting out and I think that’s an important thing to think about with Government Hill. Because for a young family to be able to come into an already established community with a park and with a school, with immediate access to downtown, but still affordable housing that helps create stability in a community.”

IMPORTANT COMMUNITY ELEMENTS

Many features unique to Government Hill help contribute to the community’s character. Some of these elements are manmade and some are natural. Government Hill would not be the same without each and every one of them.

▣ **Water Tower**

Between 1947 and 1948, a new water tower was built on Government Hill. The new water tower was constructed from steel and contained a wood housing. It supplied water for fire protection.



Photo—Kristine Bunnell

Jerry Peters

Remembering the construction of the new tower . . . “when I was a little kid they were building it new. It was just a fascinating thing to watch them pick those great huge pieces up and put them up there . . . way up high.”

Brian Hoefler

Some of the Government Hill kids used to brag of climbing the tower. “I never [climbed the water tower] myself, but I knew several people who at least claimed to have done it.”

Sidney Billingslea

“You tell anybody in town, ‘you know, it’s over by the water tower’ and they’ll know what you’re talking about —visible from everywhere.”

▣ **Wireless Station**

The historic Wireless Station was built in 1917. It was originally operated by the Alaska Engineering Commission, and was able to send and receive messages within a radius of 500 miles as the only link to the outside world. “News of World War II came through this building.”



—Patterns of the Past

Darrel Hess

“I like the Wireless Station . . . it’s important because way back in 1917, that was the only link to the outside world. People would have to trudge all the way, I mean trudge, all the way to Government Hill to get news from the outside world or to send news . . . you know a birth, a death. I always thought that was a fascinating story.”

▣ **Curling Club**

The Curling Club had its grand opening on March 3, 1962. It is home to the [Anchorage Curling Club](#) that was established in 1954. Events and regular practices are still held here.

▣ **ARRC Teen Age Club or Railroad Employees Club**

Alaska Railroad employees built the Club in 1952 with labor and supplies donated by railroad workers. The building served as a social hall for the Government Hill community and featured ballroom dances, live music, banquets, and other social events. The building is currently home to the [Square and Round Dance Club](#).

▣ **The Sledding Hill**

Melanie Ellis Lynch

“I just remember the sledding hill over across on the other side of the hill and you can see it as you leave Government Hill . . . my friend and I taught some of the littler kids how to ski over there.”



■ **Brown's Point Cottages**

Brown's Point, named for Jack and Nellie Brown, provides some of the best views of the Knik Arm, including Mount Susitna and Denali, the highest peak in North America. This was a prime location for watching the inlet in case of invasion. Anti-aircraft batteries were placed on the site after the Pearl Harbor bombing.



Photo—Kristine Bunnell

The Brown's Point Cottages are two Cape Cod-style cottages built in 1941 for the families of the Area Engineer of Alaska and the Resident Engineer of Fort Richardson: Captain B.B. Talley (later Brigadier General) and his commissioned assistant.

The cottages were listed on the National Historic Register in 2004 as Civil Works Residential Dwellings. The Brown's Point Cottages are now owned and maintained by the Municipality of Anchorage and are leased as residential housing. The period of historical significance associated with these properties begins when the Talley family occupied the cottage, and ends when they left Anchorage in 1943 (www.waymarking.com).

Mary Barry

"During World War II they were an outlook place . . . to watch for possible submarines and some other enemy boat . . . 'cause the engineers [that stayed in them] were military."

Photo—Kristine Bunnell

■ **Ship Creek**

Ship Creek has been important from pre-history to present day for both people, bears and other local wildlife. It was the location of the First Salmon Ceremony by the Dena'ina.



As Ship Creek transitioned into "Tent City," the Dena'ina fishing lodges were removed to make way for the early 1900s development. Government Hill residents enjoyed the easy access to the creek and the bounty that it provided then and now.

Mary Barry

Mary remembers Ship Creek to be "really popular. In fact, we helped out with their . . . contests for the biggest salmon. One time I was in the little building where the people would check in to buy their tickets, and this one woman was all upset because they had raised the price a couple of dollars. Then she finally bought the ticket. She went out and caught the biggest fish of the women that day. So . . . we paid her extra two dollars." Mary enjoyed "just getting out in the open, really. And we enjoyed the fish afterwards. Of course . . . never did fish there. I'm a little afraid of all that . . . sticky, gooey mud!"

Jerry Peters

Jerry loved to fish at Ship Creek and used this natural resource to its greatest extent. "I used to do that when I was a little kid; I'd go down with a snagging line and bring home fish once or twice a week for Mom. She'd freeze them in the old Kelvinator®."



—White Collection

Weaver Franklin

"We fished in Ship Creek when nobody cared about how many you caught. You could catch as many, and you could use snag hooks if you wanted to, but this was in the '40s and '50s. Pretty soon . . . people started watching you. But it was at one time you could do whatever you wanted to do for fishing."



▣ **The 5 Remaining Quonset Huts**

Iconic housing stock left over from an earlier time, these Quonset huts are the last standing reminders of the temporary housing furnished during World War II by the Alaska Railroad and the United States military on Government Hill. At one time there were over 50 Quonset huts used for housing prior to the '60s Urban Renewal.



Photo—Joni Wilm

▣ **Parks and Trails**

Government Hill has several community parks and a historic trails system established by the first settlers to the Hill. These neighborhood amenities are important assets that bind the community together. They are well loved by the community inside and outside of Government Hill.

▣ **Brown's Point Park**

This park is marked by a very interesting totem pole and the memorial to Stu Hall.

Stephen Gerlek

“Stu, who lived here forever, was really interested in . . . native art and believed he had sort of an eye for important pieces of art. . . . There is a totem over in the park over here. . . . [He] thought it was some sort of historic relic that needed to be protected.

“So [he] started to get the museum involved... to figure out what this thing was. Because really people didn't understand the prominence of it, I mean it had been there forever but they really didn't figure it out. So Hazel, who used to live over here . . . stood up and said well apparently it was from a Boy Scout troop she led. And it was just a telephone pole that they had carved. And when you actually go look at it, it's like Rocky Raccoon characters.”



Photo—Kristine Bunnell

“And so there was this big effort to try and preserve something that was entirely different than what they had originally thought it was.” The totem pole, after enduring years of harsh weather, was recently restored.

▣ **Suzan Nightingale McKay Memorial Park**

Originally named McKinley Park in 1954. Suzan Nightingale McKay Memorial Park has been improved and expanded many times. It was renamed in honor of a beloved writer, journalist, and teacher who passed away in 1996.

*Sydney Laurence Memorial at
Suzan Nightingale McKay Memorial Park
Photo—Kristine Bunnell*



▣ **Sunset Park**

Sunset Park is located on the southern bluff and former site of the Government Hill Elementary School. The community lost the school and adjacent property next to it during the '64 quake. Community advocates saw the property converted to park in the late '70s.

▣ **Al Miller Park**

Was originally, “just a big hole right down there.” Geologists who were in the know [said] that hole was able to absorb a whole lot of shaking during the '64 quake. Therefore less damage was done to the houses around there,” states Mavis Hancock. The park was developed in partnership with the community and Government Hill Lions Club. Al Miller was a club member who worked with the Parks and Recreation Department to develop a park plan for Government Hill.



NOTABLE PEOPLE OF GOVERNMENT HILL

There are several Government Hill properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places because of events or notable people. These notable people contributed in a variety of different ways to the early development of Anchorage area, and some to Government Hill in particular.

▣ **Jack and Nellie Brown**

These famous residents of Government Hill and early pioneers of Anchorage landed at Ship Creek on June 10, 1912. Jack and Nellie Brown disembarked from the gas-powered boat “Alaska” to their new post on the Chugach National Forest. Jack and Nellie pitched a tent for the summer near Ship Creek, which served both as home and as Forest Service headquarters. That winter they found shelter in a nearby log cache built by the Whitneys. They are considered the earliest couple to dwell permanently at the future site of Anchorage.

The Browns migrated from their first cabin on “L” Street to their homestead [Alderbrook] near Green Lake on what is now Elmendorf Air Force Base. They moved to their AEC cottage on Government Hill around 1927 after Alderbrook was acquired for the base (*Jack and Nellie Brown Pioneer Settlers of Anchorage, Alaska-Mary J. Barry*).



Jack Brown at work for the U.S.F.S.
—UAA Archives



Nellie Brown's Homestead
by Sydney Laurence
—Courtesy Wells Fargo Bank Museum

Tom Brennan

“Brown’s Point is named for Nellie and Jack Brown. They were living in a tent in 1915 when the crews came to build the Alaska Railroad and that’s when Anchorage was established. . . . When we came up here in 1967, Nellie used to hang around Club 25, which was a restaurant and bar. . . . [She] would be there very often, sitting at a table nursing an Oly [Olympia Beer]. . . . Nellie would tell you stories about the old days if you bought her a drink. So you would say ‘Murk, give Nellie a drink.’ And Nellie would put down the Oly and say ‘Murk, make that a Chivas Regal!’ . . . every time she would sit down. She was a very colorful character. She told marvelous stories.”



Nellie Brown and Sydney Laurence
—UAA Archives

Jack Karterman

“Old Lady Brown, her . . . spirit is still there. That is where Brown’s Point is and the area was named after her. . . . Kids would go park there and make out and she would come out and pound on the door with her cane and whatnot. . . . this one friend of mine was there and she was pounding on the door with her cane and telling him that she’d been here, I don’t know how long, and he in his wisdom said, ‘Well, smell me!’ and then she was really mad; it was funny.”

▣ **General Talley**

Bobbie Bianchi

“General Talley . . . built the two little houses at the end of the street. And he worked directly for [General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr.] who was the ranking officer and who came up here to build the bases on the Aleutians. He went to General Buckner, because at that time he was a Major, and he said ‘I need to have a place to live; I want to bring my wife up.’”



“And so at a cocktail party one night General Buckner said to the guy who was in charge of the railroad at the time who I think was Oldham, he said something about I have to find some property to build a couple little houses for my chief engineer and his aide. And Oldham says, ‘Oh we got some places up on Government Hill; we have a parcel of land that you guys can build your houses on.’”

“So General Talley, [Major] Talley came up and he built two houses on the end of the street here, which I’m very proud of that I helped get put on the National Historic Register.”

▣ **Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Mears**

Lieutenant Colonel Mears was one of three commissioners appointed to the Alaska Engineering Commission. Mears, William C. Edes, and Thomas Riggs were charged with the construction of the Alaska Railroad. Mears partnered with Andrew Christensen, the chief of the Alaska field division of the General Land Office to plan the development of the surrounding area in 1914. At the request of Frederick Mears and William C. Edes, the Pioneer School was built in Anchorage in 1915. Mears lived in Cottage No. 6 on Government Hill.

▣ **Charles S. Harvard**

Charles S. Harvard completed the first survey plat of Government Hill in 1934. He named the streets after former railroad employees. He took “surveyor’s license” and marked the major east-west street Harvard Avenue (Carberry & Lane 1986).

HOUSING ON GOVERNMENT HILL

Tents provided the first housing on Government Hill. Some of the tents were replaced with the Alaskan Engineering Commission (AEC) Cottages in 1915. Later, Quonset huts were built as construction of the railroad continued.

The railroad assisted with housing for railroad families to entice railroaders to stay on the job. The only permanent structures located on Government Hill were the thirteen original AEC cottages, a wooden water tower, and a wireless transmitter site built by the railroad. This was from 1915 through 1940 (Braund 2006).

Eleven of the thirteen original AEC cottages are still standing on Government Hill today. Some of the interviewees were either raised in or still live in the AEC cottages; they include Bobbie Bianchi, Brian Hoefler, and John Nelson.

Homeownership was important to the residents of Government Hill. Today, as in the past, it is one of the best places to live and own a home in the Anchorage area because of its beautiful views and quiet streets. In the early days you could buy a house for a \$100 down payment and \$700 total.

Sidney Billingslea

“It’s a close-knit neighborhood of eclectic people who live in eclectic houses. It’s not a cookie-cutter neighborhood at all. . . I think all the neighbors share the quality of being good neighbors . . . which means looking out for each other.”

What Was It Like To Live In A Cottage?

The AEC cottages were all built the same; one and a half stories tall, measuring 23 feet wide by 43 feet long. The cottages had three rooms, a kitchen, and a veranda on the front. They were faced with clapboard siding and sash windows. Heat came from a coal heater.

Coal was stored in the shed built behind each cottage. The railroad survey team located the cottages for the nice view. There were no platted streets, so the cottages were assigned numbers.

The cottages are still referred to by those same numbers today. Additional cottages were built and numbered sequentially after the original 13 cottages.

Brian Hoefler

“We lived on Harvard Avenue, 109 West Harvard. It was an old World War II vintage little cottage. And it had an identical home right next to it owned by Oakley Brown, Oakley and Louise Brown . . . I believe they jacked it up and built a foundation under it, which is almost exactly the same today as it was when they built that in 1960.”



Living in a cottage was very convenient for railroad workers. “My father was a lifer at the Alaska Railroad. At that point in time, many people with the railroad lived on Government Hill and it seemed like a good place. He being of a conservative bent didn’t like the idea of driving a long way to work every day. So, he was able to walk down; there was an old stairway built by the railroad where you could walk down the stairs into the rail yards and off to work. And that’s what he did . . . I believe that’s the reason why they moved there.”



Photos—Kristine Bunnell

John Nelson

John recalled that his father put a bid in on Cottage No. 14. “I would guess maybe between six and eight hundred bucks!” It was a bargain.

“Five of us lived in that one building. My dad was interested in a lot of things . . . he bought a coal mine and mined coal, and then he started a mink farm. The mink farm was in the back of the building . . . that kept us busy. My brother and I . . . had a trapline; we used the catch to feed the mink . . . [We] were much involved by furnishing food for the mink . . . That was pertinent in the winter time. We’d bring coal to the neighbors who burned coal in winter to keep from freezing to death. We shared . . . some of the meat my dad shot; moose meat and fish as well . . . so it was kind of neighborly fashion for all of us who live on Government Hill at that time. It was 71 years ago or more.”

What Was It Like To Live In A Quonset Hut?

Immediately following the end of World War II the military auctioned Quonset huts and Loxtave houses to the general public in Anchorage. The Alaska Railroad provided the land and the Quonset huts.

The Quonset huts and Loxtave pre-fabricated houses were built along the alleyways of the newly platted lots as temporary housing. Owners were allowed up to five years to build permanent structures. Duplexes were also built along the main streets including Manor and Harvard Avenues. Most of the early railroaders lived in Quonset huts, including Jerry Peters and Weaver Franklin. Mr. Franklin said that many in the community were “sad to see them go, which happened during the thrust of urban renewal in the mid 1960s.”

Mavis Hancock

“There must have been . . . 50 Quonset huts here.”

Lucile Halfacre

“And when we first moved there most places were Quonset huts. And they were placed on the back of the lots so you could build a house on the front of the lot, and that’s what we did.”

Jerry Peters

“My dad bought a lot . . . from the railroad . . . and he got a Quonset hut kit and the tools and stuff, and he built his own place. And that’s what we moved into and lived until 1957.” The Peters’ Quonset home was 20 feet by 36 feet with two bedrooms. There was a big front room, kitchen, and dining area.

“They were like a half stove pipe, you know, being [in] a Quonset hut. But I remember it was really cold in those years, but the huts were nice and warm. We had a Lang oil range in the kitchen end, which would have been the northwest, and then a Coleman heater in the living room on the other end. . . . It was always nice and warm, nice and toasty. Everybody else around us was pretty much the same except the people who had the wooden log walls that were also military houses. . . . I loved it as a kid.”

“I remember one Thanksgiving the winds were blowing like hell, and mom was cooking and the power had got off. . . . During the wind, the smoke stack for our stove at the end of the house, or Quonset, had blown off. It was banging on the side of the hut with the guy wires. So my dad says, ‘Why don’t you go out there and fix that.’” [Jerry was about 12 at the time.]



“So I went out there; I got all gussied up with the coats and gloves and all of that. I was able to go out and walk out on the road, because it was by a car lot. I could walk straight to the top of the hut on the drift that was on the house . . . I pulled the stove stack back and put it where it belonged, and wired it back up again. I’ll never forget that.”

Jerry’s father was a machinist for the Alaska Railroad, and his mom was a nurse at the old Providence Hospital. Two brothers were added to the family during the 10 years they lived in the Quonset hut. Both boys were born in Providence Hospital.

In 1958, they moved to their new house, addressed at the time at 700 East Manor, across from the Calvary Baptist Church. There were two Quonset huts located on the property; both were moved off to make room for their new house.

Jerry stated that his father was “very good at doing just about anything.” They made their own cement blocks, which they used to lay the foundation of their new house during the summer when the weather was good.

His dad also installed the plumbing and electrical for their new house. Self-sufficiency was important in those times even when it came to fixing your own cars. Jerry’s dad “rebuilt one of his cars under the clothesline one winter in the back of the Quonset hut with blankets hung [over] the line, so he wouldn’t get snowed on. “He taught me all that stuff.” Jerry earned enough money from making cement blocks to get “a hundred-and-ten-dollar Chevy, 1949 Chevy coupe . . . with the frontend bashed in,” which he had to fix to “make it go.”

Weaver Franklin

The Quonset hut was the first home the Franklin family owned. Weaver’s family of four, including his wife, daughter, and son, all lived in the hut until they built their home in 1959. “All the Quonset huts was almost exclusively railroad people.”



Photo—Joni Wilm

He added that the simple life of living in a Quonset hut was “nothing spectacular.” The drastic change came to Government Hill [during urban renewal] as the Quonset huts were replaced with “modern homes.”

Stewart White

The Whites lived in their Quonset hut on Cedar Street, building the home they live in now during urban renewal “when cheap loans were available for new home construction.” The Whites’ home on Cedar Street is a prototype for additional homes built on Government Hill. The remaining Quonset huts on Government Hill include three residences and two that are used for storage. They are a reminder of World War II development. However, to many of the early families, the Quonset huts represent a simpler life during the early years on Government Hill.

A majority of the Quonset huts had been removed from Government Hill by the time Alaska was voted into Statehood in 1959.

They Also Built Kit Houses!

Mavis Hancock

“Then we had kit houses. This one was a kit house . . . they called it a kit house because that’s precisely what it was; it was a kit. . . . The Army had brought them up here not knowing that the war was going to end pretty soon.”

“And those kit houses were to be transported out into outer Alaska to make barracks for soldiers, and the war ended and we didn’t need to do that. So they put those kit houses up for sale.”

“They were all stored down in Whittier, I understand. This one was purchased in 1946 and it was put together on a lot. It’s down at the corner of Manor and Delaney. After it was put together down there, it was bodily moved to this place in late 1946 and it’s been here ever since.”



“At that time it simply was a box, and that’s all the kit houses were: boxes. This one was one of the larger ones. It was 20 by 48 feet. And there are a couple of others around that I know that were about 20 by 30 feet.”

The eclectic housing on Government Hill demonstrates the progression of the neighborhoods’ historical periods. Housing both drove the development of the area and was a product of the interesting settlement pattern experienced here in Anchorage. This is especially evident on Government Hill, which also includes railroad duplexes, Alaska-style log cabins, bungalows, and ranch-style homes.

ARRC Duplex-Braund Report



Photos—Kristine Bunnell

RAILROADERS

The Alaska Railroad is one of only two railroad projects built by the foederal government. If you were called a “railroader,” that was usually your life-long career, and in Anchorage you worked for the Alaska Railroad. Most of the railroaders interviewed were employed for over 30 years in several different railroad positions.

Railroaders walked to work most days from Government Hill and lived next door or down the street from their co-workers, or even their boss. The mother in a railroad family usually stayed home with the children until they were old enough to be on their own. The kids would all play together and roam “the Hill” for hours. Many of the railroaders interviewed lived on the same property for their entire time on Government Hill.

Railroaders were considered professionals in their field of work. The many positions included conductors, engineers, machinists, carmen, and superintendents.

“They made the railroad go,” says Weaver Franklin. They lived a simple life, got paid once a month, and raised their families in a safe, neighborly, small-town atmosphere.

What Was It Like To Work For The Alaska Railroad ?

Stewart White

Mr. White drove steam and diesel engines for the Alaska Railroad, including Engine 556, located on the Delaney Park Strip. His first job at the railroad was stoking the steam engines with coal. He was promoted to Engineer after he “learned the road.” Stewart was stationed out of Whittier before moving up to Anchorage. . . . In the old days, everything came out of Seward, you know. There was no dock down there then [meaning the Port of Anchorage].

Railroaders worked between Seward, Anchorage, Fairbanks, Healy, Jonesville, and Sutton on 15-hour, 59-minute jobs.



Most railroaders worked six days a week. Shoveling coal for the steam engines was back-breaking work and one of the lowest jobs as a railroader. Because it was a federal job, they weren't allowed to strike. "I was working fire for this old engineer, Dennis O'Neil; he was an old-timer. And I told him, you are not going to see me in the morning. I'm quitting this job and never coming back here. [Laughter] He would have a big grin on his face the next day; I would be there."

"In the early days, of course, everything was pretty antiquated here. They had 70-pound rail, which was pretty light . . . and a lot of stuff came up off the old Panama Railroad Of course today, why, we got the most modern locomotives there is down there. . . . You'll see them as you go down the hill."

Having the opportunity to walk to work was one of the most important benefits for the railroaders. "It was easy to live here. Things were close by and I could walk to work . . . I enjoyed it. It was a good experience; something different every day you know. Time went by fast. You're on the road of course; the day went by quick."

Railroaders who worked the trains were usually met by a retirement celebration as they finished the "last run" of their career. Stewart's last run was held up by a fatal train crossing accident at Parker Pass as his train was returning from Fairbanks. Stewart expected a group to be there to wish him well. However, no one was there when they arrived back in the yard close to midnight.



Stewart White / Engine 16
—White Collection

This was many hours after Stewart's expected arrival. "I figure it got too late and they all went home." Mr. White received his gold nugget key during a small retirement ceremony at a later date. The gold nugget key is a treasure among the many photographs, mementos, and memories of a career well spent serving his family and Alaskans. Stewart noted that Weaver Franklin was his boss for over thirty years. Stewart hasn't been on a train for years; he recalled only taking two train rides since retiring.



Mr. White's gold nugget key
Photo—Brian Braunstein

Jerry Peters

"My father got a job as a railroad machinist on the Alaska Railroad, and he came up in October '46. My mom followed in May of '47 . . . It was kind of a come-on I guess to get people up there and work because they were rebuilding the railroad after the war because they wore it out during the war. And so they were asking people to come work like my dad, and trying to get him with some extra bennies [benefits]. You know, here's some land, here's some quarters [place to live]; we'll help you build sort of a deal. And it was right there

My dad walked to work for the first 20 years he worked there, and I walked to work; well, I worked there until I retired also."

Brian Hoefler

Some railroaders took a different path. Brian's father "found a job on the riverboats originally up in Nenana, which of course in those days were owned by the railroad, so that was a railroad position. And he worked summers on the Nenana River, or I should say the Tanana and Yukon River, on riverboats for the Yutana Barge Lines, which still exists today by the way. Then he took a job in the warehouse in Anchorage, and eventually moved into management for the railroad."



Jack Karterman

“Back in those days, the Alaska Railroad had hotels from Seward all the way to Fairbanks, [so] I got to spend quite a bit of time up at McKinley Park when I was real small Because my Dad worked for the railroad, they didn’t enlist him in the Army, which was smart. . . . I remember them talking with John Manley, general manager of the railroad. He had to do some arguing, but he said, ‘I’m not going to take some green horn buck private and put him in a big steam locomotive that takes them to Fairbanks.’”

“Back then the way it worked was that even though it was federal, it had to run off of its own income. There were times when they couldn’t make payroll. . . . They had a commissary there and so they just let everybody run a tab . . . I remember that we ate a lot of moose” that the trains hit in the winter, to the extent that “hamburger was a treat.”

Mary Barry

“Oh, my father came to Alaska in 1915, and he worked for the railroad, but not building the railroads. He worked on the river boats that delivered supplies up and down the Yukon River for railroad building.”

Melanie Lynch

Railroaders were a very tight-knit community. Melanie remembers “being over at one of the other railroaders houses and it would be like being at a family member’s house because they knew your dad, they worked with your dad, they were buddies with your dad or your mom or your sibling. . . so there was that sense that you were known; your family was known; you know, there wasn’t the anonymity that we tend to have now and certainly not the apathy. I mean everyone was pitching in to raise those kids.”



Alaska Railroad Yard and Chugach Mountains 2012
Photo—Kristine Bunnell

Weaver Franklin

The Pipeline had an effect on the Alaska Railroad and its workers. They were short engineers and conductors “. . . so they improvised . . . cut down sometimes on the experience [required to] . . . do the work.” Mr. Franklin was a road foreman, train master, and worked in the Audit Division. “I shuffled a lot of paper moving pipe from . . . Whittier, Seward, and Valdez to Fairbanks and all the way up to the North Slope. I mean, we were busy, fourteen hours a day for six weeks.”

Weaver contends that Government Hill really ran Anchorage for about thirty years; the railroad owned all of the utilities. “They owned the water and the telephone and the power line.” It was the original railroaders who had the greatest influence on the development of Anchorage. “They [Alaska Railroad] owned it all and they billed the people and got paid from it. That’s the thing not many people know about and discuss.” Even with all the changes Government Hill has seen, Weaver feels that the things important to people thirty and forty years ago are still the things that are important to people on Government Hill today.

GROWING UP ON GOVERNMENT HILL

Children got to spend their play time outside exploring the bluffs, the surrounding forest, the base, and Ship Creek. They were pretty much free to roam to their hearts’ content. Kids would play in the woods “constantly.” They were up and down riding their bikes back and forth. The “gulley” was on the backside of Government Hill. It had a little dip with a playground that used to flood. The kids would play in the water and go sledding there in the winter. No matter what the pursuit, they consistently played outdoors.

What Was Government Hill Like For Kids?

Jerry Peters

Kids usually walked to school; however, in winter with the snow, it was harder to walk and very cold. The weather is warmer now; back then it was “cold all the time.”



Jerry remembers waiting for the bus and thinking that he was “going to die.” “Over by the water tower area, what used to be Railroad Hill, it would blow. The wind would blow drifts over the edge of that cliff . . . we would dig [snow] houses back in there 10 or 12 feet deep! And it would be solid snow, hard snow. I haven’t seen anything like that for years and years and years. . . . So yeah, the weather has gotten milder.”

Jerry also liked to fly model airplanes and would use the area where the Curling Club is now located [Harvard Park]. The kids did a lot of bicycling all over the place. They would go out to the base and roam for miles. “I used to put up snares on the Air Force Base and catch rabbits once in awhile.” Kids would “just walk out back there, right across [from] some of the old stuff . . . where the Browns had their homestead . . . and found their old mink cages. . . . It was the Browns who were the originators of Anchorage basically,” and Jerry Peters was their paperboy.

“I liked it before TV because all us kids got out and played. We’d play all night long in the summer, and we weren’t distracted by television. I never got to be much of a TV watcher; I didn’t care much for it. I get bored watching TV. The edge of the Hill was all woods and so forth, and the military was right next to us there at the Air Force Base, and us kids had all of that to play on. We played everywhere. We were all over the place . . . on the base, down at the docks. It was just a real good life for a kid.”

Marjorie Ellis

“I can remember one adventure . . . when we were all still in the Quonset huts . . . the military decided that we would have a little battle on Government Hill. The opponents had really unique uniforms; it was very obvious that they were not the regulars. Nobody thought to alert the kids up here. Jerry [her son-in-law] was one of them; he was about 11. These boys thought that their homes were being attacked. They surrounded and defeated this bunch; it was hilarious. My oldest son-in-law still lives in the area and we still laugh about that. They were armed with sticks and rocks and anything they could get their hands on.”

Brian Hoefler

In the early ’70s, “you could drive your snow machine in Anchorage too, and so we would take snow machines out and we’d drive out [to] Elmendorf and go for hours back there. . . . Just kind of open access . . . just having fun and enjoying the winter.”

Darrel Hess

“We played all over the back of the base and on the bluffs behind Government Hill. There were all kinds of jeeps and things . . . it seemed like the military disposed of a lot of excess goods by dumping them over the bluffs. We used to climb down those bluffs and find K-rations from the ’40s and ’50s. I still remember the cinnamon rolls were a little dry, but they were pretty good considering how old they were . . . it was quite a play area for us; all the bunkers out there and military equipment.”

Mavis Hancock

“My youngest son grew up in what he called the ‘old man store.’ It was an older gentleman who had a toy store. . . . the year he was nine he had difficulty learning to read in school, and he decided that he wanted to [buy] a new comic book every day. And he came to me, ‘Mom, can I have another quarter? I want to go to the old man store and get this book.’ So he went back up there and got a new book. And that’s how he taught himself to read.”

Melanie Lynch

“The places that stood out most in my mind were the sledding hill of course, but also before they put the park in where the Government Hill School went down, there was a big gravel pit area. And if you went just past the gravel pit area . . . when I was a kid, you could find wood frogs. And you could find a little wooded area. And that gravel pit was so much fun to play in because it was mysterious; it had the essence of danger from the earthquake; it had these great big cliffs that you could go running up and because of the gravel you’re not going to get hurt falling into it.”



“So for me that was the grandest adventure imaginable was that unstructured free time And being able to have these areas that were safe to play in.”

“I remember one night walking to a friend’s house and this car was following me and I was just a kid and it scared me. But I knew I could go into..the Flemings' house or the Kaisers' house or the Greens' house. . . . I mean, you knew the families at every single one of these houses. . . . You knew because it was like a big community.”

John Nelson

The Nelson kids walked, ran, or took their bicycles back and forth to the downtown grocery store on 4th Avenue and to go to school. Anchorage had the theatre, so they saw movies about twice a week. There was only one radio station: KFQD, and no TV.

“There was a bowling alley and basketball court in a small gym in the winter time that accommodated commercial and high school basketball leagues.”

“You skied or skated in wintertime to keep you busy and shoveled snow [laughter] to make things a little bit easier . . . that’s just about it. That was the nature of our livelihood There is a tremendous difference in our livelihood in 1940 and what [it] is now.”



—White Collection

Marjorie Ellis

“You had a community watching out for you.”

Where Did They Go to School?

Where the parents worked was a factor in where their kids might go to school. Most kids with parents in the military attended schools on the base. Orion Junior High School was on the base and the military kids would crawl under the fence to attend school there each day.

As Anchorage developed and more schools were built, Government Hill kids often had to change schools depending on which school was the closest. The schools in Anchorage were located on 5th, 9th and 10th avenues, Denali Street, and E and F streets.

John Nelson

Mr. Nelson went to school on “5th and F Street, the only school in town” at that time. “It was a three-story building . . . [that held] eight grades.”

Jerry Peters

Jerry went to school at Chugach for fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, before switching to a school that operated from a few Quonset huts on 10th and E. “There seemed like a lot of kids in all the classes I was in. There was probably 30 kids in each class, and probably a dozen of those in each building I was probably the second class that started Anchorage High School, which is now West Anchorage High School, and that’s where I graduated.”

Jack Karterman

In addition to the state-built schools, Government Hill had its own unique school that, while it adhered to public education standards, had its own, very different character. Jack “went to kindergarten in a Quonset hut that was across the lawn from our Quonset hut. . . . One of my best friends . . . hated school. So he used to skip school when he was in kindergarten. . . . There was no way I was going to get away with it because my mom could look right out of the kitchen window and see where I was All the neighbors and whatnot bought all the stuff for it. . . . It wasn’t that it wasn’t sanctified by the school district, but it wasn’t one of their projects at all. So it was fun.”

Marjorie Ellis

Marjorie Ellis described the changing school situation as part of the “mayhem” occurring on Government Hill.



Marjorie Ellis

“For that first year [early 1950s] we didn’t have school buses. . . . We had a grocery down on 4th Avenue called Lucky’s. That is where the bus stop was. These children would walk all the way from Lucky’s to Chugach School; that is where the elementary school was then.”

The Anchorage School District had a difficult time keeping up with the growth and the many new students as development continued all over Anchorage. This situation impacted Government Hill students in several ways, including lack of transportation, limited school buildings, and teachers. The children persevered despite this “mayhem” and many accomplished artists, musicians, engineers, lawyers, doctors and others graduated with promising careers.



—White Collection

MILITARY MOVES TO GOVERNMENT HILL (1930s – 1960s)

Alaska was recognized for its strategic importance as the federal government prepared for the Second World War in 1938. President Roosevelt designated over 43,000 acres of land to the north and northeast of Government Hill for a new military base in 1939.

The site was chosen because it had relatively flat topography and ideal location near the railroad and the Cook Inlet. Anchorage has been a strategic location for the ongoing war efforts through World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and today.

The War Department formally designated Elmendorf Field as Fort Richardson on November 12, 1940. The Army moved its operations to the new Fort Richardson after World War II. The Air Force assumed control of the original Fort Richardson and renamed it Elmendorf Air Force Base.

How Did the Base Change Government Hill?

The federal designation of land resulted in acquisitions of homesteads and Alaska Native settlement locations. The Native People lost their fish camps at Ship Creek and Tak’at. They lost hunting and gathering areas located on the forested bluff. In some cases people were threatened with legal action in the taking of their property.

Mary Barry

Jack and Nellie Brown received the patent to their homestead “Alderbrook” in 1923. Alderbrook kept the Browns busy as they completed improvements and tended to their garden and animals. They also entertained many visitors at Alderbrook, including Sydney Laurence. Alderbrook was acquired for the military base. “We received \$2,500 for our land and buildings,” Nellie said. “They were worth more than that, but we wanted to do our part. Besides, we believed that after the war was over, we could repurchase our land. That never happened.” (*Jack and Nellie Brown Pioneer Settlers of Anchorage* by Mary J. Barry)

Sidney Billingslea

“World War II is what really got Alaska on the map for being a military outpost, and what started the military money. [The] Korean War, of course, added to that, and every war from Vietnam to the Cold War to the Gulf War has continued to add to Alaska’s importance in the military.”

“And it has certainly added to the size of Elmendorf and the number of flights that take off from there every day.”



Brian Hoefler

The placement of the base and the growth that followed surprised many. “During the World War II era, that was when a lot of the growth, particularly with Elmendorf and Fort Richardson coming into being in that era, [increased] substantially. And you know all of a sudden we had military people there [who] seemed to be on three- to five-year rotations; they would come in for a few years and then move on.”

The growth of the base is generally seen as positive. “I actually played baseball on Elmendorf. Again, it was closer than the city leagues. I was probably one of very few civilians who played baseball in the Elmendorf league, and we were always allowed to do that. And yeah, it was great having Elmendorf right there; I had a lot of friends. We would go out to the gym and we’d go swimming, we’d play baseball, and we’d go bowling and just take advantage of all those things that you could do. Our Boy Scout troop was very active and at least half of the people in our troop were military, so we were always going on campouts there. So, having all those facilities from that post World War II era right there was great.”

What Was Military Housing Like?

Richardson Vista, Hollywood Vista, and Panoramic View apartment complexes provided temporary affordable housing to military and other families on Government Hill. Military families usually lived there while waiting for base housing to become available. The Richardson Vista and Panoramic View apartment complexes were constructed on the east side of Government Hill in 1951. The Richardson Vista Apartments, now North Pointe Apartments, were built on military land.

The Panoramic View Apartments were built on railroad reserve land and consisted of 12 buildings containing a total of 250 apartments. Panoramic View looks pretty much the same today as it did in the mid 1950s. The Hollywood Vista Apartments served the community from 1952 through 1996, when they were demolished.

Austrid Garrett

Austrid’s family moved into Richardson Vista Apartments when they first arrived in Government Hill. Soon after that they bought their family home. Having access to the base was a new experience for Austrid, who had never been on a military base. She went on to find work as a civil service worker, employed by the Air Force like her husband. She worked in a variety of jobs over her 23 years of service.



1946

—Garrett Collection

Darrel Hess

Like the Garrett family, the Hess family moved to Richardson Vista upon arriving in Anchorage. “I remember this being an interesting complex. There was quite a maze in the basements where they had cages for people to store their goods. . . . As kids, we played in the basements. There were a lot of families stationed at Elmendorf that lived at Richardson Vista.” The Hess family’s neighbors included the Hostetlers, after whom Hostetler Park is named. Darrel also recalled Colonel Sumnerbank, who worked for the Corps of Engineers, and the Ligosis family, whose son Tom went on to medical school. The Hess family lived on Government Hill for five years before moving out to Eagle River.

Bobbie Bianchi

The Bianchis’ first home was in the Hollywood Vista Apartments. “Nobody wanted to rent to anyone with children or dogs; we had a small dog. So we were stuck. We had to get an apartment immediately, and so we ended up with this one and it was pretty bad until we got base housing.” Most of the time folks would get to know their neighbors as the kids played, attended school, and the parents socialized together. If you were a short-timer waiting for base housing, socializing was a little different; and once you moved on base, your focus was on things associated with your life there.



“I didn’t get to know any of my neighbors . . . at the time because . . . the ladies in the center of the building were ladies of ill repute as we discovered when the Navy came for Fourth of July that summer. . . . The Shore Patrol showed up at one o’clock in the morning. I went out on the front porch and watched as the Shore Patrol was chasing Navy guys out of the center stairwell where the girls were in various stages of undress. . . . I had a ball just watching! So, I didn’t get to know my neighbors very well initially up here. It was exciting!”

What Was War Time Like For Government Hill?

War times meant opportunities for civil service jobs. Darrel's mom—Mrs. Hess, Bobbie Bianchi, and Austrid Garrett helped to support their families and served their country through their employment on the base. Marjorie Ellis’s husband was civil service, as was Austrid Garrett’s husband. Elmendorf Field was busy transporting troops and goods to support operations from this important Alaska location. Takeoffs and landings occurred as quickly as they were allowed during the height of the war operations.

Darrel Hess

Darrel’s father had been to Vietnam before his military transfer to Alaska. Elmendorf Air Force Base assisted the Vietnam war effort through troop and supply transports. “. . . there was a plane taking off or landing, a supply plane going to Vietnam . . . at Elmendorf every fifteen minutes. We used to play behind the fields . . . there would be guards out there with rifles and German Shepherd [dogs], and we would be playing out there in the bunkers.”

Stephen Saunders

“All the C-130s were landing there at Elmendorf about every 20 minutes coming in from southeast Asia bringing in wounded and dead from the Vietnam War. So, they had a lot of airplane noise and so forth to deal with.”

Lucile Halfacre

Having the military on Government Hill changed the physical environment there as well. “There used to be foxholes on Government Hill. . . . Close to half way down Harvard Avenue . . . there was one big one.”

Jack Karterman

“They towed targets sitting in airplanes and they [would] sit and fire from [the bluff]. And the kids would go up and sit and watch right beside this big gun fire, louder than hell. And it didn’t seem strange because that’s all you know. . . . They did not ration things up here like they did in the lower 48. You could get tires and you could get whatever you want. . . . One of the things that was interesting about Government Hill was even after the war they had these . . . blackouts. You had to turn off all your lights; you had to run these little blue bulbs. And you could get fined if they caught you running the white light.”

Bobbie Bianchi

“When I first came to . . . Government Hill, there was no fence between the military and Government Hill You go there now and there’s this huge big fence. For awhile there was one with razor wire over it When I first moved here, you could walk from Government Hill to the base . . . it was one big neighborhood. It was only after the commissary was robbed and the guy escaped on a snow machine through Government Hill that they put up a fence. Government Hill and Elmendorf have always been good neighbors. . . . The other side [of Government Hill] didn’t really exist before the war; there was Quonset huts all over the place on this hill Government Hill wasn’t part of Anchorage until ’48, after the war. This was all railroad property.”

Mary Barry

“They had kind of a cement foxholes along the edge of the Hill They used them for outlooks too in case of invasion. But they were finally closed up. Our boys when they were young used to play in them with all the other kids. . . . It wasn’t safe for the kids any more, so they just buried them. . . .”





JBER Gate today on Government Hill
Photo—Kristine Bunnell



Elmendorf Field before the fence
—White Collection

URBAN RENEWAL

The federal government passed the American Housing Act to facilitate reconstruction and urban renewal projects in 1949. The urban renewal program provided infrastructure, housing, and commercial improvements to low-income neighborhoods. The program advocated the removal of substandard buildings, construction of new single-family and multi-family housing, and commercial and public facility projects. Approximately \$15 million was appropriated by the federal government to build over 6,000 buildings across Territorial Alaska.

The American Housing Act enabled the Federal National Mortgage Association to conduct business here. The Territorial legislature authorized the Alaska Housing Authority loan approvals for mortgages. Government Hill was replatted and cleared for Anchorage's first urban renewal project funded by \$750,000 in federal grants, public improvement credits, and the City of Anchorage funds.

The project replaced 55 Quonset huts with 65 new single-family and multi-family houses. Public utility services and street and sidewalk improvements were constructed. Government Hill was completed by 1963.

Marjorie Ellis

“With that urban renewal, I had friends that sold their Quonsets with the idea that they would be able to buy a house. They found, I think it was . . . that they were not eligible.”

Stewart White

“The urban renewal had taken this area over. They were going to upgrade it and offer very cheap interest rates on home mortgages. So, anyway I had a Quonset hut on this thing and had the house built on it in 1960 and we moved up here in November '60 . . . They moved [the Quonset hut]. In fact, the guy . . . bought it and took it up to the Palmer area . . .” The program made Government Hill “more modern, of course. We got streets and street lights and things that we never had in the old days . . . that just came along with the progress, I guess.”

CIVIC AND COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The residents of Government Hill were a community of walkers. As noted earlier, they walked to 4th Avenue for groceries or whatever shopping they needed to do and they walked to work. They thought nothing of walking to the movies once or twice a week. Or walking to catch the school bus. The community was able to enjoy the modern conveniences of shopping and doing business locally when commercial development came to the neighborhood.

What Kind Of Commercial Development Was There?

One of the first known commercial enterprises was located next to the owner's residence at 255 Harvard Avenue. The building was operated as a grocery store during the 1940s.

John Nelson

“The boom started in '40 when they built Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Rich, and the railroad put something like \$80 million to rehab. Then things really began to pick up.”



Jerry Peters

“There was a little store on the Hill called Thompson’s Store. Johnny Thompson and his wife ran it. And it was kind of like a Quik Stop of the era, and mom and I used to go down there frequently to buy stuff. It was about a four- or five-block walk.”



—Gerlek Collection

Mavis Hancock

When Mavis Hancock was asked what stood out most in her mind [about new development], she mentioned the public laundry built in 1965 “. . . because I didn’t have a washing machine [laughs] and I had to use the laundry for my family laundry.”

▣ **Hollywood Shopping Center**

The Hollywood Shopping Center was constructed at the intersections of East Loop Road, East Bluff Drive and what is now Arctic Warrior Drive. It is said to be Anchorage’s first strip mall.



—UAA Archives, Archives & Special Collections

The Hollywood Shopping Center provided modern conveniences to the community, including a grocery store, post office, and bank. The shopping center had large, covered walkways and large storefront windows. The center also featured a bowling alley, a gas station, restaurants, a Tastee Freez, beauty shops, and a catalog store.

Marjorie Ellis

“ . . . the little Piggly Wiggly was the first grocery.”

Melanie Lynch

[Referring to the location of the Piggly Wiggly] “. . . and then next to that was Lee’s Jewelry, and then next to that was Sherry’s Beauty Salon . . . the barber shop.”

Brian Hoefler

“Weaver Franklin’s wife Colleen was the bank teller down there . . . and I remember traipsing along with my mother every payday when she got my father’s paycheck and went down to cash it . . . They’d sit there and gossip for half an hour while I stood there bored to tears.”

What Types Of Civic Development Took Place?

Brian Hoefler

“The only thing I know about the government is when they came in and paved the streets one day. Before that we had dirt roads that got muddy in the winter.”

The Cavalry Baptist Church was built to the west of the commercial district. The fire station and the first elementary school were built on east Government Hill in 1956.

The military built an ACS toll building for telephone communications and a White Alice Communications System on Government Hill in 1953.

Marjorie Ellis

Before this development took place, Government Hill residents “didn’t have any kind of shopping district. We had a great big Quonset hut and it was used for all the community activities.” This wasn’t to say that those activities were not just as enjoyable, though. “In the wintertime, the firemen flooded a big area and we had one of the biggest skating areas you would ever want to see.”

As you can see, they had to be a bit more inventive with their recreational activities and much more resourceful. “The Presbyterian church was a kit ,and the husbands and fathers put that up in one day.”



They put that up in on day and then all of us painted it. Whoever could handle a paint brush. It was strictly a do-it-yourself project.”

GOVERNMENT HILL AND THE PORT OF ANCHORAGE

The Port of Anchorage is located just to the west of Government Hill. The area was originally home to Lathrop Dock, which was built in 1915. There has been a substantial amount of growth from the high shipping demands in Alaska and the Anchorage area. The Port of Anchorage moved to greater prominence for Alaska after the '64 earthquake when the ports of Seward and Valdez were destroyed.

Stewart White

“ . . . In the old days everything came out of Seward . . . ” but during the 1964 earthquake the dock was destroyed. “There was no dock down here then. In fact, they thought they would never get a ship in here because of the shoal.”

Stephen Saunders

Mr. Saunders assisted with the development and operation of the Chevron station on Government Hill known as “Hollywood Service.” He spent a lot of time between Government Hill and the other service stations in town as a “jobber” (what they call a middleman in the fuel industry) and then as a field manager.

Chevron’s headquarters and bulk plant were located at the Port of Anchorage, giving easy access to Government Hill for management of the Chevron station and for lunch visits. The Government Hill bowling alley was a popular lunch spot for port employees, as are the Subway and Chinese restaurants today. Government Hill and the Port of Anchorage have worked together over the years as the Port has expanded. Before the establishment of the Port, “most of the freight came over the highway by truck and trailer out of Washington State. And the rest of it came by barge. And then when container ships came in there, of course that changed the whole area.” One issue that has arisen is the closing of Bluff Drive after 9/11 to ensure security of the tank farms, which “was mandated by the Coast Guard.”

The increase in container shipping has affected everyone, especially folks living on Government Hill. The Port has worked with the Government Hill community to establish an acceptable schedule of operations between the Port and the Railroad to minimize noise impacts to the residents. “The Port has obviously been a great boom to the City of Anchorage, and it provides about 85 percent of the total freight for 90 percent of the population in the State of Alaska.” Mr. Saunders is a Commissioner for the Port of Anchorage and believes that the Port of Anchorage expansion project is a benefit to Government Hill because it moves operations further out into Cook Inlet. “We are actually building land . . . that should be really good for Government Hill.”

Their fears turned out to be wrong, as is evidenced by the continued growth and statewide support of the Port of Anchorage.



Photo—Kristine Bunnell

Port of Anchorage Historical Photo



ALASKA STATEHOOD

Alaska officially entered the United States of America on January 3, 1959. Not everyone on Government Hill was supportive of Statehood. They feared that Alaska would change. However, most everyone now agrees that Statehood was a very important and positive step for Alaska.



—UAA Archives

John Nelson

Mr. Nelson “was in favor, but cautiously [chuckles] in favor. . . . We got through it, I guess, but there was just as much difficulty with keeping a good, honest person in a, [chuckles] in a job running either on the assembly or whatever they had, all the way up to the governor.”

Weaver Franklin

“I voted against it. It came up for bid three times and I voted against it all the time. I didn’t think it was necessary. . . . Then, I had a poor opinion of politicians. I thought they would take advantage of Alaska and its resources and everything else.” This was a “very controversial” issue at the time.

“The Native Corporations voted against it unanimously. All the Natives in Alaska voted against Statehood, and then a lot of people like myself. Jay Hammond who was governor, he voted against it and was real verbal. He had a great deal; he voted against it every time it came up. And he was about probably the smartest governor we had . . . that we’ve ever had. But he voted against Statehood I don’t think [Statehood] had any effects on [Government Hill]; nothing of interest. Cause it just hummed right along, Statehood or no Statehood.”

Jerry Peters

Jerry was too young to vote at that time, but that didn’t mean he was unaware of this important issue. “I heard a lot of people discussing the fact that even though now they would have the opportunity to vote for the president and et cetera, and have representation in Congress; is an awful expensive thing to pay for with the additional taxes and so on and so forth. I remember my folks talking about that. . . . I was about 14 then, and I remember all of the celebrations and a big bonfire down at the Park Strip; and, well, there was bonfires everywhere it seemed like; fireworks all over the place; and everybody was really happy we were going to become a state.”

Mary Barry

“Most of the activities took off downtown, of the actual celebrations. . . . First they had the big bonfire. They were saving wood up for several weeks beforehand and guarding it so nobody would prematurely light it or anything. So they had that. And then they had a ceremony downtown where they put a star up on a flag. They climbed up then Miss Alaska to put up the star.” Life changed after Statehood “because before that people didn’t have to pay taxes when they were out of the city limits. And now they did because they had these boroughs that covered much more area.”

Stephen Saunders

Along with Statehood came the politicians. Mr. Saunders “had an old [gas] station over . . . on Romig Hill at the time. And I remember we got a big snowstorm and of course Bill Egan, our first Governor and so forth, would go over there and Lowell Thomas, Jr., and those folks . . . and I had all of them in the station at the same time—our congressman and so forth.”

“And we had a classroom on the station where I actually trained the guys who were going into the service stations to follow our service procedures. And so, we opened up the training session, and I always used to accuse them of having their political meeting in there, in our service station at that time . . . they went in there and just waited patiently while we got their snow tires on and that type of thing.”



“It was kind of interesting. Because of my job, I got to service Bob Atwood and all of those guys’ cars for them. So, I got an opportunity to meet those, and some of the shakers and bakers in the State at that time. And it was very interesting . . . and a bunch of really nice, down-to-earth people, you know?”

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1960s)

Civil rights and integration didn’t seem to be a big deal for many on Government Hill. However, it did seem to help to make for a more open society.

Mary Barry

In Government Hill, there were “the Caucasians, of course, and the Native people. But there weren’t a lot of Asiatic or African Americans in the town at that time.”

“But I think the civil rights made people aware that that these are people too [and] should be treated the same as them. So I think the civil rights just made a more open society.”

Brian Hoefler

“We were a very integrated community. There were a lot of Natives in the neighborhood. There were a lot of blacks in the neighborhood. We all got along well. I had a lot of friends, multicultural friends. It was a multicultural place given the military and the transient population and the railroad population . . . everyone got along really well.”

Melanie Lynch

“We had a large population of Alaska Native kids. I had friends who were Russian, and then on Government Hill we had a Danish family across the street. We had German families. We had, you know, black families, and families from all over the world . . . and so I think, that in a sense, and this is just my opinion, we were more insulated from that as perhaps some of the other stateside communities that were . . . closer to the civil rights issues. Kind of more cosmopolitan if you think about the size of the community, which isn’t very big at all because of the location . . . I think we have a better blend.”

Mavis Hancock

Though it seemed that racial issues were not as prevalent in Government Hill, the civil rights movement did affect the neighborhood—just at a different time than in the rest of the United States. “It was another 10 years or so before the minorities began to move in. And that is something that David Koch [the minister of the Presbyterian church] worked on while he was here. Even though he left in 1971, one of his real goals was to see a diverse population. And it did happen, but it did not happen in the 1960s during the civil rights movement. . . . They came in the ’70s, ten years later. So, in that sense you could certainly say that the civil rights movement was the backbone of it. . . . It took a long time. And, that’s to our detriment. But, it did happen. There has been a change in the fact that we have a large minority population, which we did not have, and the reason for that is because in the early years only white people came up to work the railroad, and those people stayed and . . . populated Government Hill for a long, long time.”

“Then about 1985, I would say . . . my youngest son had friends who were part Japanese and part black, and he grew up with a mixed group of children. He still has those same friends, but prior to that time . . . there weren’t very many minority children around when they grew up. So that’s been a positive thing for the neighborhood.”

Darrel Hess

“It was pretty diverse. At that time Anchorage, you know we moved from San Antonio, which is a very diverse community to Anchorage, which at that time was ninety-five, ninety-six percent Caucasian and there wasn’t a lot of diversity.”

“And one of the things I appreciated at that time was there was a lot of diversity on Government Hill. Government Hill and Fairview at that time were probably the primary areas for African-Americans lived [living] n Anchorage. And there were a lot of other minorities and cultures that were stationed . . . at Elmendorf that lived at Richardson Vista also. So it was kind of an enclave of diversity in a pretty un-diverse town.”



Bobbie Bianchi

“We have probably the most ethnically diversified group of people in one neighborhood. . . . If you go over in the summer and you see the gardening that is being done by people from Thailand and Vietnam and stuff, we have a lot of ethnic people up here, which is I think great. We have a target school that has . . . the Spanish immersion program.”

THE EARTHQUAKE OF '64

After the 1963 completion of the Government Hill Urban Renewal project, the largest earthquake ever recorded in North America struck Southcentral Alaska on March 27, 1964. The earthquake measured 9.2 on the Richter scale and damaged many buildings on Government Hill.

It was Good Friday for many fortunate Government Hill families. Schools were not in session. Each person interviewed had a unique experience of this earth-shattering event that still resounds in their memories today.

Mary Barry

“Well, we were downtown . . . our boys were that big at the time. So we decided we should really make some kind of provisions for their care in case, you know, an accident happened or something. So we went to the lawyer to make out a will. . . . While we were sitting in the waiting room . . . all of a sudden we felt this shaking. . . .”

“. . . [We were in the] 4th Avenue Theatre building. So there’s about four or five floors, I forget how many. But, you could hear all this stuff falling down over your head, which was kind of alarming too. You think what if this breaks? What if this building falls apart?”

“So, anyway, it kept getting worse. And, then finally it slowed down a little. We thought it was all over. Then instead it just started again. And, it was even harder. Well, it finally quit. . . . So we went up the stairs and water was pouring down [from] broken pipes.”

“We got out on the streets. And that’s when we really saw what the effects of the earthquake. Because there were people lying down on the ground getting up and crying. And, the buildings had broken windows. So Mel said, ‘we better get home before they declare martial law or something.’ So we were driving home. We went past the Penney’s building, which a big chunk had fallen off of it and fell on the cars parked nearby . . . all the chimneys, ours too, had . . . broke apart and fell down . . . for a few years afterwards, whenever there was a hard wind blowing, my older boy would get frightened. And we couldn’t figure out why until we finally figured out that it was the noise of the earthquake. It was so much like a hurricane or a storm. Because it wasn’t quiet.”



*Downtown Anchorage
—Wikipedia*

Austrid Garrett

“I just came home from work, and the TV in the room fell over. My husband was an artist and all of his shelves of oils fell over and the light on top. . . . [I was] in shock. And I went to the front door to get the mail, and my husband was just coming home from work.”

“He does not know how he got there because the roads sunk My husband saw a crack in the soil, but really no damage . . . there was a crack in the road, and maybe it went underneath the house.”

Stewart White

“March 27th is my wife’s birthday and she was frosting a birthday cake. . . . There was a chandelier . . . and I was hanging onto that and the kids were on their knees praying. [Laughter] And the house was getting with it.” [Laughter] The White home only “popped a few sheetrock nails.” The house is located on a “good gravel base.”

“The entire community lost water and power for a few days.”





Government Hill Elementary School 1964
—UAA Archives

Along the bluff, which is comprised of old Bootlegger Cove Clay, “it was like jelly and it shook right down Some of the houses slid right down the hill with it. They were lucky because it was Good Friday and there was no school that day. The school over here was right on the edge of this bluff and it literally shook right down into the ground; it was just a roof sticking out on some of the buildings.”

Weaver Franklin

“Well, there was nothing spectacular; I had my daughter on my lap and we had hardwood floors and they was polished.”

“My mother-in-law was in a rocking chair and she scooted all over the house . . . she was frightened something scandalous, you know. She could use profanity. [Laughter] She wanted to get the thing stopped . . . but it went a long time.”

“The water tower was going back and forth; twenty feet both [sides]; you would expect it to fall down. But it didn’t. It withstood the earthquake, and that is about all there was to it. Then of course [there was] the rehab. “The railroad had to do a lot of work I was in Seward most the time or Whittier after the earthquake to get things back running.”

Brian Hoefler

“Well, I was only four years old at the time, but I remember it very distinctly. I was home . . . we were watching Fireball XL-5 on TV and all of a sudden the TV went off and the room was shaking. By coincidence, we had a babysitter who happened to be a geophysical student at the University of Alaska, and we got a nice lecture of what earthquakes were. [Laughter] . . . the house was shaking around, and you were trying to catch things falling off of the shelves. It went on and on.”

“The television jumped across the room and went all the way back. . . . then we went out when the shaking stopped; we went over to the bluff on Government Hill and looked across at all the fires and the damage and everything that had occurred over on 2nd, 3rd, 4th Avenues of Anchorage. It was a very scary time, but I didn’t appreciate the gravity of the situation. . . . it was more of, this is kind of interesting. My mother was down at the Hat Box, so she was standing next to the Hilton Hotel . . . swaying back and forth.”

“She was wondering if she was going to make it. She eventually had to walk home, and everybody made it home safely, which was great. We went for—it seems like at least two if not three weeks—cooking in our fireplace . . . it was our means of heat and to cook our food.”

“And, we melted snow that we found to drink water. It was like living in the woods almost.” Brian’s brothers attended school in the portion of the building that “broke in half and went down the hill . . . who knows if they would have survived that . . . of course they weren’t [in it] so it was a ‘good’ Friday for us. I might not have my brothers.”

“Following this time . . . I believe it was the Cannikin nuclear experiment out in the Aleutians . . . we all had to leave school and stand out in the playground for a couple of hours—wondering if there was going to be an earthquake . . . we were in an earthquake zone and had all these things happening around us.”

Bobbie Bianchi

“For a long time there was no school in this town on Good Fridays because if there had been school that day there would have been a lot of kids hurt or killed. And so, for years they didn’t have it until somewhere along the way they said ‘you can’t mix religion and education’ and so they couldn’t have Good Fridays off anymore. But that was the biggest impact on Government Hill, and so the military stepped up and said, ‘We have this property over here that you can have’ [for the school].”



Darrel Hess

“We got here right after the earthquake. We had friends tell us what it was like during the earthquake with no power, sitting in your house with no heat . . . my sister, brother, and I used to sleep with our shoes on when we first moved here. There were some pretty good-sized tremblers for a year or two after the earthquake. Los Angeles and New York would call them earthquakes; we would call them tremors . . . they were pretty strong. We were ready to run out the door.”

John Nelson

“I got out of the barber shop and went home and turned the stove on . . . to make some coffee. It started going and I was in the Sherwood Arms, which is a block north of the Hilton Hotel, and the building started going like this. [Mr. Nelson motioned side to side with both hands.] And I opened the door, the metal doors and jammed it open. A woman was down the hall . . . had a son that came in from school, and she started screaming. And I says, ‘Do you want to go out?’ And I says, ‘You better come with me.’ . . . Then I ushered her out. We went up an outside stairwell next to the building.”

“The building was like this [Mr. Nelson held his arm at a steep angle from the ground] and the Hilton Tower. When we got out, the trees, the birch trees across the street from us that are twenty feet high, they were doing [Mr. Nelson continued to make a long sweeping motion from side to side], touching the ground on that side and then touching the ground on this side. . . . When you looked at the tower you almost got seasick watching it sway. A woman was driving a car down going away from it. She opened the door of the car and fell out of the car and couldn’t stand up when she got out.”

“And I just took a look at that and my landlord came out and just kind of fuddled with the gas . . . turned the gas on. And I said, ‘Sir, you’re not going to have gas for another eight or ten weeks so you can forget that.’ [Laughter] Gas lines were ruptured . . . power went out . . . many things happened all at once. It was several days before we got our senses back, you know. I had to vacate that. Everyone in the building had to vacate. It was a 35-unit apartment building.”

“We had some sizable aftershocks. I mean six or seven on the Richter scale.”

Mavis Hancock

“When we came 18 months later, the trees were sideways. I mean they were still growing in every direction here on Government Hill, and that didn’t change . . . those trees never did come back up and stand straight . . . they rotted and died off or somebody decided they got tired of looking at them that way and cut them down, which apparently did happen. . . .”

“I’m not just sure who or why or what . . . at any rate . . . those trees stayed that way for quite awhile. [Also] we have Sunset Park now where the school used to be.”

Sidney Billingslea

“My house . . . used to be on the east side of Government Hill . . . it was built in 1960. In the 1964 earthquake the bluff where my house was located as undermined. And the owner of the house at the time was a contractor . . . [who] moved his house to the lot where it stands today. . . . He built a foundation . . . that is 17 inches thick because he said that’s the last time the house is going to get moved.” [Laughs]



Sidney’s house today
Photo—Brian Braunstein

Marjorie Ellis

“Ordinarily that playground would have been covered with kids. The school would have been filled with teachers and parents. The custodian was the only one there and he had some cleaning. He thought with all the kids out of the school would be a perfect time to do it. . . . There wasn’t a soul in the school . . . except him on that whole area. It was God’s blessing that we didn’t lose one soul.” Marjorie went on to explain that the school custodian was okay. “Certainly his feet kinda got moved around a bit!”



From Weaver Franklin’s perspective, there was “nothing unusual” about Government Hill until the 1964 earthquake and “then things changed a lot, you know. . . . We was all in Quonset huts living a simple kind of life. . . . Then of course the rehab, the railroad had to do a lot of work . . . to get things back running.”

The earthquake resonated with most of the folks interviewed. All were thankful that no lives on Government Hill had been lost that day. A temporary school was set up and, in the long run, the base offered the property where the new Government Hill Elementary School is located today. The old school was demolished and the property was later transformed into Sunset Park.

THE NEXT ERA (1970s to Present)

Government Hill has been an area of evolving change and growth. The community has worked together to save homes and their school, reduce industrial impacts, and effect change where they could to preserve the neighborhood and its important quality of life.

Stephen Gerlek

“I would describe it as a neighborhood that is constantly redefining itself and rediscovering itself. It’s not like a static suburb of Anchorage. And there are a lot of forces that swirl around this neighborhood beyond its borders that cause impacts here on who lives here, how we live here, how we coexist with the industrial development around us.”

“In the ’70s the bridge was coming across, and this was really the first . . . industrial conflict with the neighborhood . . . when this bridge came in, the original plan was to cut through Harvard—not have such a hard curve on it there. But it would have wiped out a whole bunch of houses there.”

“And it was the particular pastor of the Baptist church down here who took that up as his calling and said, ‘Look you’re going to kill this neighborhood. Isn’t there a way to engineer that so that you can keep this neighborhood intact?’”

“Back in the ’80s when I was having a family . . . [due to] the lack of children the school actually teetered, the Government Hill School, on closing down. And it was through the efforts of a couple of individuals in the community council to keep the school from being shutdown. And that turned out to be a wise choice because then we were able to evolve it into a Spanish immersion program that has gotten certain notoriety, and now people have to bid to get into it.”

NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERS

Leaders in the neighborhood have never been shy about standing up for their community, and their community has loved them for the efforts they made and continue to make to preserve and support Government Hill.

▣ **Stuart Hall**

Tom Brennan

“The one that really stands out is Stu Hall. He was the state Ombudsman for years. . . . He was just the kind of guy to take charge. He was a good friend and neighbor . . . and I always enjoyed talking to him. But the thing that really sticks in my mind is that when they shoot off the fireworks down at Ship Creek . . . all the neighbors come in . . . the best place to watch the fireworks was at Brown’s Point Park. Of course, all the cars are flooding in there. Well, Stu would get out there with his flashlight and he had a parka with fluorescent stripes on it. And he would just be directing traffic, you know. No authority whatsoever, but he was just telling them what to do and he looked very authoritative, so everybody would do it.” [Laughter]

Mary Barry

“I think the most outstanding [leader] was Stuart Hall,” an attorney who “would go down whenever there [was] something that the people on the Hill disagreed about . . . or didn’t want . . . [or] wanted to improve. He’d go down to City Hall or wherever you have to go and speak up.”



Bobbie Bianchi

“Stuart Hall, I think we lost count of how many times he was the community council president, but Stuart Hall was a graduate of Harvard and Stanford and he was just the most brilliant man. . . . all you had to do is call Stuart and he would take care of everything. . . . I always called him the governor of Government Hill. . . . After he passed away . . . we decided to do something down at Brown’s Point Park. . . . What we came up with was a concrete walkway with a man’s footprints and a dog’s footprints so it looks like Pal and Stuart.”

- ▣ **Lee Reynolds, Thomas Pease and Susanne DiPietro, and Bob French**

Bobbie Bianchi

“Lee Reynolds was big Thomas Pease and his wife Susanne DiPietro who are a young couple; she’s an attorney and he’s a school teacher. They’re very active. Robert French, Bob French is extremely active in everything.”

- ▣ **Hazel Davidson**

Marjorie Ellis

“She was very active in the PTA. She was also active in doing anything for the community. I held my breath ’cause every time I turned around she wanted to ‘let’ me do something.” [Laughs]

- ▣ **Tyler Jones**

Mavis Hancock

Tyler Jones began work on a community council for the Government Hill area in the 1970s, although “it was not a continuous project until in the ’80s.”



Brown’s Point Park —Memorial to Stu Hall and his dog Pal.
Photo—Kristine Bunnell

- ▣ **Vannie Davenport**

Marjorie Ellis

“Anybody whose in Pioneers would know who Vannie is. She worked for the National Bank of Alaska. She took care of the museum part time because she knew firsthand what all of this was about . . . just a fascinating lady. She’s from an old pioneer family; her dad had the coal mines—Evan Jones Coal Mines. She was the daughter of Evan Jones . . . she was here when Anchorage just became a city . . . something like 1915. Yes, she’s a real pioneer.”

- ▣ **Stephanie Kesler**

Tom Brennan

“Stephanie Kesler has been great. She is one of the most active members of the community council and she has just done great things.”

Mary Barry

“ . . . then there was a woman named Stephanie [who] was very active with the community council, and the community council has kept a lot [of] undesirable things out of our neighborhood.”

- ▣ **Railroaders**

Weaver Franklin

Around the time of Government Hill’s establishment, the leaders in the community were the general manager of the railroad and the various superintendents of different railroad crews. It was the people who “made the railroad go” who led the rest.

- ▣ **David Koch**

Mavis Hancock

“The first leader that of whom I am aware was the minister at the little Presbyterian church [David Koch] that . . . is now the daycare center on the other side of the Hill. And when he saw a need to, when he saw that there was a need for something to be done in the community . . . we had one liquor store and we didn’t think we needed another. . . threat of a new liquor store coming in . . . he would organize us and we worked for that specific kind of problem.”



“And, then once we solved that problem, then that issue was no longer something to worry about. So we didn’t deal with it any more.”

“And he did that for two or three of the major issues, when they put in the road, well, when they put in the bridge over here, okay? It [the road] was originally planned to come straight instead of making that sharp right turn at the end of the bridge and coming up Loop Road and into the light there.”

“It [the bridge] was originally planned to come straight up the hill just slightly to the right and come into Harvard right over here and go on down through Harvard and they were going to take all the houses on Harvard from Anderson all the way down to the light. So, he set to work and he pounded the pavement here, talked to people, and got the community organized. We just pitched such fits about it that they had to change the way the road would go. . . . He is an unsung hero. And very few people in this community know what he did for the community.”

CHANGES ON GOVERNMENT HILL

Some folks lamented the changes they have seen. Some changes are welcome and show signs of a neighborhood constantly growing and developing from its small beginning as the first neighborhood in Anchorage.

Mary Barry

“When we moved in they hadn’t arrived at the idea that this was a historic neighborhood. Everything else was in very bad shape. . . . There weren’t as many houses; there were a lot of empty lots in those days.”

Jack Karterman

“Well, of course the earthquake made a big difference . . . a lot of stuff was improved on the roads and ,of course, we picked up Sunset Park. . . . Putting in that big overpass; that made a big difference.”

Mavis Hancock

“The roads were not paved. So, that was a big difference to have the roads paved. They were paved in 1967. It was a dirty, dusty mess until they were paved.”

Stephen Saunders

“We didn’t have a viaduct back there in those days. . . the Bridge Restaurant that was built on the old bridge that used to connect the port with C Street. And if you go over the viaduct today, you can see the cut where C Street continued. And it was a pretty steep grade.”

Melanie Lynch

“Government Hill, because it is one of Anchorage’s oldest communities, I think it is going through at this time a renaissance. You see a lot of remodeling going on in the other side of the Hill.”

Weaver Franklin

“I think that Government Hill has improved over the time and I wouldn’t want to reverse myself back. . . . It has changed in respect to half of the people now are retired. The rest are employed by a variety; they no longer work for the Alaska Railroad, all of them.”

Stephen Gerlek

“It’s gone through these series of generations [First were] the pioneers They’re in their late 80s and 90s now. Then there’s the second generation. A lot of times their kids are people that came in”

“[Then] the urban pioneers . . . at this point the housing stock was pretty much turning over. The first generation of kids had moved through, and they saw an opportunity to come in . . . kind of live in a neat, interesting neighborhood downtown. They were, like I said, mostly lawyers and [Anchorage Daily News] newspaper types. . . .”



“Then there was the next generation which is what I was a part of. And these are the people here who leapfrogged on these folks and started to redevelop and sort of gentrify the neighborhood and bring in a whole new crop of kids for the school and redevelop the school. And there was the . . . young urban professionals. Here’s another group of people who started to move in.”

“And now we have what I am calling the ‘new hipsters,’ the people who bring in the chickens and, you know. So, the neighborhood is constantly evolving.”

(See Appendix B—Stephen Gerlek’s *History of Government Hill*.)

EXCITING THINGS WE STILL TALK ABOUT

The most memorable event was the earthquake, followed by the fires and visits from famous people, including Bob Hope, the Beatles, and the Pope. The time between these exciting events was sustained by the little things on Government Hill that make life on the “Hill” so great.

Jerry Peters

There is the night in January 1949 when one of the shops burned down at the railroad . . . “one of the big huge wooden buildings.”

Wearing his footy pajamas, a robe, and a coat, they stood outside at the top of the hill and watched the fire below. “I would turn to stay warm just by keeping one side to the fire; it was that big of a fire!”

The spring following the ’64 earthquake there was another fire.

“The Chevron plant caught fire and there was, you know, tanks were blowing up, and 55-gallon drums flying through the air.”

Austrid Garrett

There were many exciting events that Austrid recalled; she saw a baby bear in the neighborhood that was captured, and she took care of the neighbor’s dog “who came running from across the street after the earthquake.” Then there was the neighbor who accidentally shot his wife. Mr. Abbey was not charged for shooting his wife but eventually sold his house and everything in it. “There was a cute pink chair in the house” that she [Austrid] liked.

It was sent to her as a gift a few days later with a bottle of champagne. She assumed it was an anniversary present because it was close to the Garretts’ anniversary.

Brian Hoefler

“One of the things that we lived maybe a little in fear of . . . is the tank farm down below the Hill . . . I do remember [there] one time being a big fire.” One of the tank farms at the port caught on fire in the early 1960s and they were ready to evacuate. “As it turned out, they got the fire under control before we evacuated.”

They would also hear sonic booms as kids, which “don’t happen too often today.” Sometimes they felt surrounded by industry with the port, the railroad, and Elmendorf, “so we had a little oasis of a town.”

Darrel Hess

Darrel recalls being fascinated at Fur Rondy (officially called Fur Rendezvous) as a kid, with “the dogsled races, the blanket tosses, the fur auctions, the Native carvings, the singing and dancing,” which all seemed “exotic.” There was always something happening downtown and they could walk there to enjoy it.

The Beatles had a layover in Anchorage due to engine trouble in 1966. They were on their way to Japan and the Philippines. Darrel and his friends snuck into the Westward Hotel and “actually got to meet them.”

The Pope came to Anchorage and held a large mass on the Park Strip in 1981. Darrel managed to get in the front row for the mass. Darrel thought that it was the largest crowd that he had ever seen in Anchorage.

Robert Kennedy was scheduled to visit Anchorage, but he was assassinated two or three days before this visit.

Darrel has felt isolated up here at times with all the political stuff going on in the Lower 48 (as Alaskans call the contiguous United States).



“When we would get world events like the Pope coming or the President stopping in, I think it meant a lot more to local residents because it was always us and them . . . we felt like we were different.”

Stephen Gerlek

“I would say the tank farm issue was something that I was highly involved with the community council, and did affect a lot of folks here You had this sort of group of tanks surrounding this . . . or growing up around the neighborhood without any good zoning. So we tried to enact some zoning laws about how close tank farms could be to homes—not only for some sort of explosive but also for fumes And the people didn’t realize that the community was here first and all of this grew up around it.”

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We asked if there was any special wisdom that the folks would like to leave for the next generation in closing the interviews ~

Brian Hoefler

“Know your neighbors. Get along with them; it’s a community. Enjoy the good times.”

Stewart White

“It’s a pretty good spot . . . like one guy said . . . Government Hill is the best-kept secret in Anchorage . . . because it’s accessible to everything; you can go downtown in two minutes . . . anyway, I’m glad I’m here. I have no intention of moving any place else.”

Sidney Billingslea

“I think that Government Hill should always pay attention to its neighborhood value . . . it’s the oldest neighborhood in Anchorage, and for that it’s intrinsically valuable. I think people should value the difference in their houses. The future shouldn’t get too excited about having all the houses look the same and the yards look the same and having a lot of rules about what you can build and what color you can paint your house.”

“It should be a neighborhood that is for people who live here and not for some external view point of how a neighborhood ‘should’ look.”

Darrel Hess

“My mom and I, until she passed away recently, we used to at least once a month drive up to Government Hill. [I would] just drive her around to look at the neighborhood. And it just seems to me, although it is a little more hustle and bustle, it is still a very quiet neighborhood. It seems like a peaceful, quiet neighborhood. I hope they continue the fight, the battle, the struggle to preserve the heritage of the neighborhood. There are some incredible homes that have a lot of history; you know the Brown’s Point cottages, the Sears and Roebuck homes, the Quonset huts. It’s just a little snapshot of what is Anchorage’s original neighborhood.”

Austrid Garrett

“Why aren’t the kids finishing high school?”

Stephen Saunders

“Be good American citizens, support our constitution and our way of life of staying independent as we are as Alaskans I used to have some hats that I would make and I think that I am going to do it again ‘Alaska, home of individuals and other endangered species.’ Be individuals and give your best to a state that was built by individuals and pioneers that give it their all to give us such a great place to live in.”

Weaver Franklin

“Well, I think from the time I first moved here, well it’s been a drastic change. It’s gone from Quonset huts to modern homes . . . good, nice homes. It’s a very stable community . . . they don’t come and go very often. It’s just a good place to live . . . probably the best place to live in Anchorage . . . maybe I’m prejudice. There’s just no crime here. I haven’t found anything missing in 55 years. You trust your neighbors. I got the keys to my neighbor here, and I have keys to my neighbor there . . . and when they go, I take care of their house, and when I go, they take care of mine.”



“If there’s an improvement, they should adopt any improvements. They should embrace it, you know. I think they are going to continue to build good homes. It’s a wonderful place for work, anybody working for a job. . . . I hope that Government Hill remains about the same as it is.”

Stephen Gerlek

“This is the 8th generation in. There is more to come with this neighborhood. There’s more external forces that are going to cause us to change and morph. . . . And now we have what I am calling the new ‘hipsters,’ the people that bring chickens and you know. So, the neighborhood is constantly evolving . . . and there are all these external influences. And you look out into the future; there’s even an article today [11/7/2011] about the bridge . And so our neighborhood is impacted by stuff that; I mean that could have a big change in how this neighborhood feels.”

Jerry Peters

“Don’t build the bridge.”





Appendices



Government Hill

Yesterday and Today





Appendix A—Section 106

SECTION 106 – NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT

Steven R. Braund and Associates completed a Section 106 Report to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act prior to this project. The Braund Report was produced during the completion of an Environmental Impact Statement for the Knik Arm Crossing Project in Anchorage, Alaska. This report is a compilation of photos, survey work, maps, figures, determination of eligibility, and recommendations regarding properties throughout the study area—or Area of Potential Effect, which includes Government Hill.

The Braund Report discusses prehistory sites, and significant historical periods or themes that influenced the development of Government Hill.

The report also identifies prominent building types associated with the ensuing periods in time and the important people that lived in them. The Braund Report was submitted to the Alaska State Office of History and Archeology and published for public information and use.

This work is very important to the Government Hill residents, and Anchorage as a whole, because it identifies several properties within the Government Hill area which may be eligible for nomination to the State of Alaska and the National Historic Registers. These properties include buildings and groupings of buildings (called historic districts). The Brown's Point Cottages were put on the National Register in 2004 (entitled Civil Works Residential Dwellings).

Several mitigation projects were also identified through the Section 106 process. The Government Hill Oral History Project, including interviews and this report, is one of the important mitigation elements that will assist the Government Hill neighborhood in the preservation of its unique and valuable history.

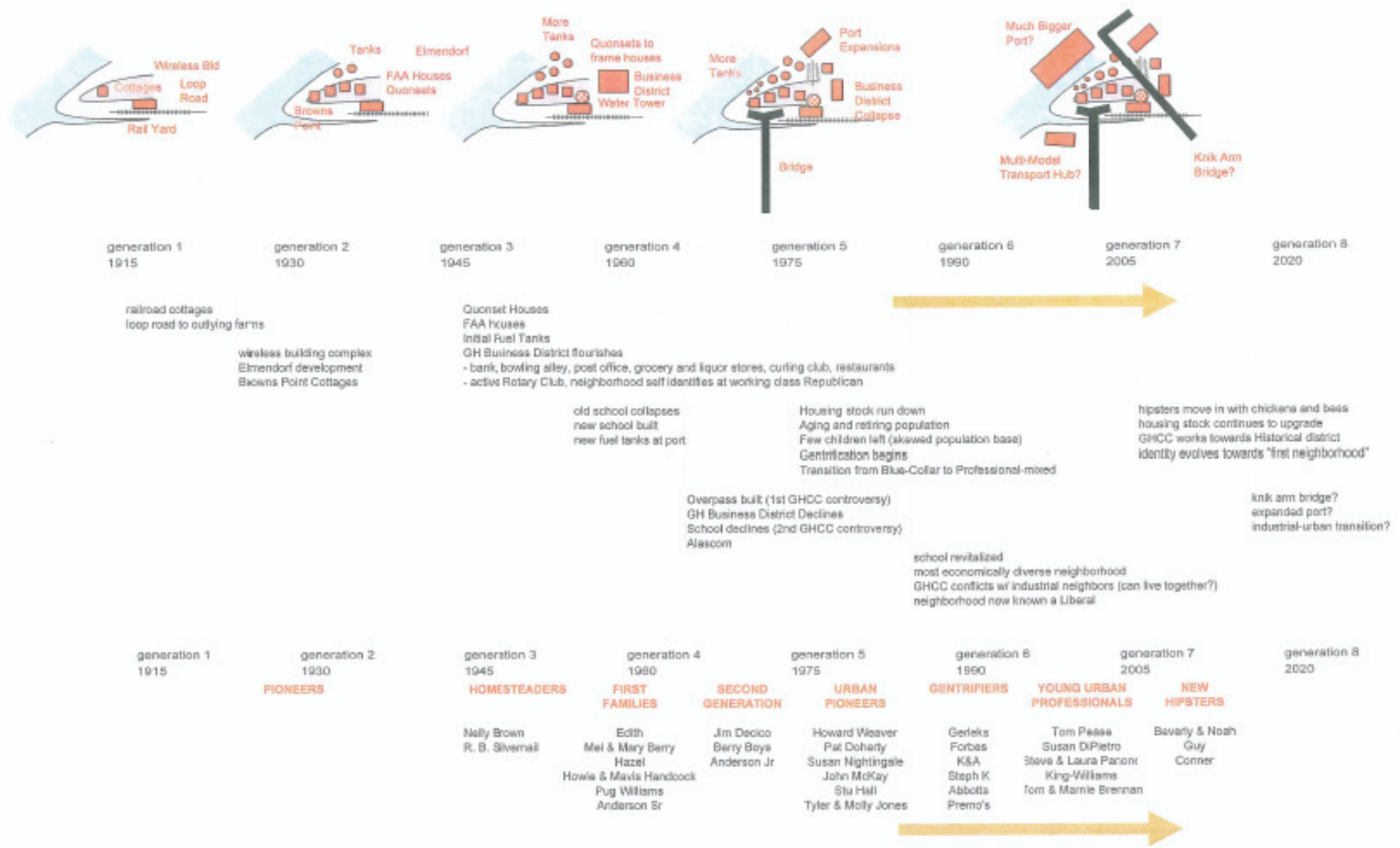
The Historic Preservation Plan for Anchorage's Four Original Neighborhoods (HPP) and Consolidated Inventory Report identify and confirm several properties within the Government Hill neighborhood that maintain sufficient integrity to be nominated to the National Historic Register. There has also been the potential to nominate four historic districts also identified in the HPP zone district that includes the Brown's Point Cottages, which is already moving forward from the State Historic Preservation Office in Anchorage to Washington, DC, and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (as of July 2012).

It is anticipated with the Historic Preservation Plan, in partnership with the Government Hill Neighborhood Plan, that the impacts anticipated by the Knik Arm Crossing project will be mitigated.





Appendix B—Stephen Gerlek’s Government Hill History





Appendix C— “No Homebody Austrid Garrett”

No homebody AUSTRID GARRETT

Interview by SHARON BUSHELL

(Published: December 14, 2003)

My parents were Norwegian immigrants who came to America in the early 1900s and were married in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

I was born in 1912 in south Minneapolis, near the Mississippi River and Minnehaha Falls. There were just two children in our family: my brother, Stanley, and I. Our father was the foreman in a flour mill, and our mother was a skilled tailoress who made men's custom suits.



Austrid with daughters Lois, Lynne and Roberta in 1946 in Anchorage. (Photo courtesy of Austrid Garrett)

I had a happy childhood. I had several neighborhood girlfriends. Playing paper dolls in our back yard was our favorite activity. Frequently my playtime was interrupted by Dad's insistence that Stan and I dig out dandelions in our yard, a chore we did not care for at all.

I graduated from Roosevelt High School in 1930. I enjoyed the honor of being the secretary of my class and president of the Norse Club.

I went to business college briefly, where I avoided shorthand and concentrated on mathematics, a subject that greatly interested me. Soon thereafter I got a job with a company that made huge synchronous motors for Westinghouse and General Electric. Before long, I was making \$22.50 a week, which was quite a lot of money.

I had many friends in church, including Vance Brown. He and I began dating and were married in 1936.

My husband was not one to be tied down, and as a result, he changed jobs frequently. He worked for Northwest Airlines Air Transport Command in 1943 in Edmonton, Alberta, and was soon transferred to Whitehorse. A year later he was transferred to Anchorage.

He wanted me to join him there, but I was pregnant with our third child and wanted to stay in Minneapolis to be near my obstetrician. We bantered back and forth through censored (because it was wartime) letters. He insisted there was a very good hospital in Anchorage and even sent me a picture of the old Providence hospital on Ninth and L. The upshot of it was that I was soon on my way to Alaska.

One of my girlfriends told me, "Austrid, look at it this way: It's a brand-new experience, and you're going to meet a lot of new people. How many chances will you have to take a trip like this again?" But I was scared to death. I'd only been out of Minneapolis twice, and with two little children and six months pregnant, I didn't feel particularly adventurous.

I had to pack, sell or throw away most of our possessions, plus find a tenant for our apartment (I thought we would be returning fairly soon). I then traveled by train from Minneapolis to Seattle with our daughters, 6-year-old Roberta and Lois, who was almost 3 years old.

In Seattle, we boarded the SS Columbia and arrived in Seward a week later in March of 1945, then went on to Anchorage by train.

My first impression of Alaska was not at all favorable. When we got to Anchorage, we took a cab from the train depot to Elmendorf, where we had quarters. The fare came to \$5.75. In Minneapolis it would have been more like \$1.25. I thought, oh my goodness, how will we ever get by?

The next day, Vance took me to town. Remember, I was a big-city girl, so of course I dressed for the occasion in my black Hudson seal coat, a stylish black hat and white gloves.



We were walking down Fourth Avenue near Varra's Variety as a woman was coming out of the store wearing an oversized red sweater and jeans. She was quite large, and her hair was dyed a brilliant shade of red. I thought to myself: What a poor excuse for a lady. I had a lot to learn about Alaska, and it began that very day.

Soon my husband was sent on TDY (temporary duty) to Fairbanks. One day in his absence, I was washing and ironing clothes, listening to Ruben Gaines read Robert Service's poetry on the radio. I'll never forget, when he got to the line, something about "... You hate this godforsaken country, but you'll return," I was bawling into the wash water, thinking this is one person who's not going to return.

Our third daughter was born in June. Vance was working the swing shift at the base. When he came home, I said, "I don't think you'd better go to bed." We went straight to Providence, and Lynne was born at 5 in the morning.

In Minneapolis in those days, you stayed in bed for two weeks after having a baby. I had a rude awakening after Lynne was born. The nurse said, "We'll have you up and walking around soon. We don't lay around in Alaska."

Then, to horrify me even more, Vance brought our oldest daughter, Roberta, to visit me in the hospital on a borrowed motorcycle. I thought, oh my heavens, we don't live like this back home.

In 1950, I got a job on Elmendorf as a telephone operator. In 1951, I began working as a material dispatcher for reciprocal aircraft engines.

I began to learn all sorts of mechanical-type things that I had never had any knowledge of, and I discovered that it was fun to work in a man's world.

They had a reduction in force, and I was transferred to base supply as a warehouse worker. I had been a dress-wearing city girl all my life, but now I was wearing slacks and earning good money, and my life felt like it was expanding. I realized that I was at the right place at the right time and that a good

job -- one that I also enjoyed -- was a very valuable thing. In '57, I was promoted to a supply inspector position, and I also became the shop steward for the employees' union on base, which I very much enjoyed.

This was about the time that Mr. Brown and I separated. At that point, I went to Personnel and got permission to live in Richardson Vista, a housing project that still exists. In those days, if you had a government contract, you could live in there.

I had known Jim Garrett, an artist and business owner, for some time. He was the sign writer for base supply, so he and I had crossed paths many times on the job. He and I married in 1958 and bought a home on Government Hill in 1961. I've been here ever since, and I dearly love my little home. I worked on Elmendorf for 23 years and retired in 1973. By then I had made a career out of my job, and I had come to treasure it.

After my retirement, Jim taught me quite a bit about painting, so that became my hobby. He and I spent many happy years together, and I'll always be grateful that he coaxed some bit of artistic talent from me.

Stateside, I was just a homebody. Here I had an opportunity to be in the business world and have a challenging career. As I always say, Alaska has been very good to me. All those many years ago, I never dreamed that I would stay, but I've been here almost 59 years. I can't imagine ever leaving.

Sharon Bushell lives and writes in Homer. Her books, "We Alaskans" and "We Alaskans II," feature her stories about Alaska pioneers that have appeared in the Daily News. For more information, visit her Web site at www.wealaskans.com.



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Appendix E—Interviews

Oral Histories

Mary J. Barry	53
Bobbie Bianchi	65
Sidney Billingslea	75
Tom Brennan ..	81
Marjorie Ellis and Melanie Ellis Lynch.....	89
Austrid Garrett	103
Stephen Gerlek	111
Lucile Halfacre	119
Mavis Hancock.....	123
Darrel Hess.....	133
Brian Hoefler.....	141
Jack B. Karterman	149
John Nelson and Weaver Franklin	161
Jerry Peters.....	173
Stephen Saunders	181
Stewart E. White	187





Mrs. Mary J. Barry Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

I am Kristine Bunnell with the City of Anchorage and I am here today on January 13, 2012, to conduct an oral interview with Mrs. Mary Barry in her home located at 323 West Harvard in Government Hill. This is regarding her knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community and the people that have lived here.

Mrs. Barry, could you please tell me your full name?

Mary Jane Barry.

And what is your birthday?

Uh, February 5, 1928.

So you're coming up on a birthday?

Yes, very soon. [Chuckling]

All right! What, uh, where were you born?

In Seward, Alaska.

And where did you grow up?

In Seward.

In Seward? When did you come to Government Hill?

Well, basically, in 1951.

And, why did you come here?

Well, I had, uh, gotten married to Melvin Barry.

And did you come here for his job or you were just settling here?

It, we came basically because of his work. Headquarters was, were in Anchorage.

So could you tell me a little bit, where you went to school when you were down in Seward?

Well, there was grade school and high school were in one building. And, I went to all 12 years in this one building. The William H. Seward School. It no longer exists. They tore it down when they built the, uh, the, well for training, training for jobs.

The, that, uh, combination of. . . .

Job Corps or something like that?

It's, uh, for Alaskans, I guess mostly. It's, uh, because they come from all over Alaska. . . . And they learn different trades like cooking and boat handling, and other things.

So kind of like a technical school?

Yeah, it is a tech, a vocational school, they call it.

So you told me a little bit about what your school was like. Um, so you lived in Seward when you were younger. And then when you moved up to Government Hill, where did you move to?

Well, first we stayed with, uh, Mel's sister who lived on Manor Street in one of the apartments there. Her husband was conductor with the railroad.

Okay, and then did you move into this house after that?

Yes, we bought it the next [year], in 1952.

So, was it just you and your husband when you first came here? Or did you have any kids at that time?

No, we didn't.

So, this is, you, you bought this house. Was it a smaller home when you bought it or did you?

Uh, definitely smaller. It was one of the original houses. But it was in very bad shape because it has been rented out for years. So we started remodeling. Then as the family grew, the house grew. And our interests changed, so the house grew. [Laughs]

So, this is one of the, this was one of the original cottages then?

Yes, it was.

Do you know which cottage it was? I know they were all numbered.

Oh. Well, I could look that up. But I don't.

Okay.

If you're curious, I could get this book that shows, if you, I just can get it in a sec.

Sure, go ahead. [Tape turned off for a minute.] So you had, that's, that's one of the original *Patterns of the Past*.

Yes, it is.

Good for you.

Let's see if it shows Government Hill here.

I think it shows Government Hill like on page . . .

Oh, here, or somewhere.

101 or something?

I don't have it handy. [Long pause] Seventh Avenue. [Long pause; tape went off]

Bobbie Bianchi's [house is here].

One's on the corner. And then the next one to it. They, and then, uh, this, one next door here . . . the uh, contractor that purchased it and lives there, uh, modernized it, but he kept the original shape of the house. And, that put his additions on the back where it doesn't show. When we moved in, they hadn't arrived at the idea that this was a historic neighborhood.

Well, when you guys moved in, it was, it had only been about 35 years since the cottages . . .

Everything else was in very bad shape.

Yes, since the cottages had been built.

A lot of people just tore them down. But I didn't, we didn't want to tear it down.

So, while you're looking there, do you want to tell me about your neighbors when you first moved in?

Well, we had some very interesting neighbors. [Laughs] A Greek fellow lived in this house at the time. And, then he sold it to a railroader. Uh, Mr. Davidson, who was kind of an official on the railroad. And they lived in there, oh, until very recently. Just a few years ago.

Okay.

And, uh, the other side when we came was a man that worked as a trucker with the port and around town.

What was his name?

I don't remember any more.

Okay. So, the Greek gentleman sold out to somebody that was a railroader and then on the other side this guy was a trucker for the port.

The Greek man was formerly with the railroad.

One of the questions that we have on here is how you would define Government Hill? So, how would you? What was it like for you when you came here?

Well, it was kind of quiet. There weren't as many houses. There were a lot of empty lots in those days. And uh, most of the people seemed to have lived here for a long time.

There were several families that occupied, especially, the, the, uh, duplexes on the next street. And, they were rented out quite often to people from the military looking for a place close to base. It was off the base. Actually, they didn't have that many living quarters on the base at that time. So there were a few of those. And we got acquainted with some of them. Made good friends.

What were their names? Do you remember that?

Well, our closest friends there were the, the Monk family. And he was a sergeant at the, uh, I don't know what they called it, security or police, anyway. . . . And, they were originally, she was from, uh, Wyoming originally. He was from the South.

So, tell me a little bit about your family then?

My original family?

Tell me about your original family, and then let's talk about your kids.

Oh, my, father came to Alaska in 1915 and he worked on the railroad, but not building the railroads. He worked on the river boats that delivered supplies up and down the Yukon River for the railroad building. Then came World War I and he was German; he was not an American citizen yet. And they had so many restrictions on foreign people from the other side that he went out to the states and worked in California and Arizona. Worked on a railroad and also worked in mining on that very famous, uh, Nevada silver mine, Comstock Lode. Then he, he always liked Alaska though. So, he got married to my mother when he made a trip to Germany to visit his relatives. And they all, they came back and settled in Seward. So, that's where we grew up.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Just two brothers . . . one was older; one was quite a bit younger.

Are they still down in Seward?

Well, my brother is now in Anchorage. The other one, I never hear from. So, I don't really know where he is.

Is that the older one or the younger one?

The younger one.

Okay. So, how did you meet your husband?

Well, I had gone to the Matanuska Valley to visit a friend of mine. She was taking care of her parents' farm, she and her husband. So we went for a camping trip over the weekend. And, and then she said they're having a dance in Palmer. Would I like to go? And I said, "yeah!" That's where I met my husband. I was still going to college at that time. And I had two years to go. Well, he very patiently waited [laughs] until I was through.

What did you, what did you take in college?

Well, I was interested in journalism at the time. I went to UCLA; they didn't have journalism, uh, program at the time so I took the next best thing, which was English literature. And I wasn't sorry afterwards because you get exposed to this great literature and "why did these people last while others didn't?" [Chuckling] So you learned a little bit about that. What, what might, uh, survive through the years.

So, so, you met your husband at the dance and then he waited for you to graduate from college. And then where did you get married?

We got married in Seward.

Why don't we talk a little bit about what it was like here for the kids? You didn't say how many children you had.

We have two boys . . . and, uh, I thought it was nice for them because it was kind of a quiet area and they could roam around the Hill. They had friends from school.

And they could do a lot of things that they might have not been able to do in other parts of town. They had a tree house across the road. And at that time you could go on a sled on the hillside. And, uh, there wasn't a lot of traffic at that time. So we had a yard from them to play in. We had animals, cats and dogs and even a couple of goslings, once.

That sounds fun. Did the goslings . . . were they like your watch dogs? Did they make sure everybody stayed out of the yard?

Well, we didn't keep them until they grew up. Mel, his folks still had a, well, they had a farm in the Matanuska Valley, although they, and they were still doing some farming. So we took the goslings out there when they got half grown. But they were kind of cute little things.

Yeah, they are, aren't they? So, um, what do you . . . how have these things changed? What's different now from what it was back then?

Well of course, there's more houses and, uh, more activity. And some of the nice activity is that people seem to like stroll around the Hill. You see people every day almost that, sometimes with their dogs, or they work in the telephone building and they probably get, glad to get away from their computers for awhile so they hike around the Hill on their lunch times, breaks. And occasionally they have, uh, someone in the city or on the Government Hill, uh, would organize a race, and they come running all around the Hill. So it was something to look at as they go by. And of course, they started the, uh, the, the square dance, of course that was a little after our time. I mean our boys were grown up by then. And they have the Curling Club. So, there's a few activities that take place on the Hill too that are special.

Did, do your sons still live in town?

One lives in Fairbanks; the other in California.

Do you have grandchildren that live in town?

No. They're in Fairbanks also.

So, what do you think has been most important to the people of Government Hill?

Well, I think people like to keep it as it is. They don't want any big changes. They're afraid of the bridge, uh, the way they, the bridge itself doesn't concern us that much. But how they want to run it right through the center of Government Hill does because their taking away buildings that, very nice building on the corner, when you turn the turn the corner to come onto Harvard that they remodeled a few years ago. And, it's, and it's, uh, it just looks good and a nice place. And the apartments, they don't see to put much value to them. But we found them handy when visitors would come and want more privacy. They stayed at the little apartments there because they used them as a hotel too. And, so I think, I'm sure people live there all the time besides, so I don't, I think they're an asset.

And we just got the Subway, and it's so popular! People would really be upset if they took it away. In fact a lot of the military people come there just to get a break I guess from their regular food there. So they come to Subway all of the time.

Well, it's convenient too.

It is. It's right on the corner.

It's convenient for them to get to.

And I discovered it's healthy. When I first heard about the Subway and health, they had a little article about a man who ate Subway food mainly for almost a year and lost all these pounds. And I thought "a fast food place losing pounds?" But when I went there, they have all kinds of veggies and stuff that they put on your sandwich if you want it. So you could have a healthy meal there if you just decide on what you decide to have.

Yeah, it's kind of fun, isn't it? Who do you think the leaders have been on Government Hill?

Well, I think the most outstanding one was Stu Hall. You probably heard about him. He was, uh, he was an attorney actually. So he knew the laws. And he would go down whenever there something that the people on the Hill disagreed about or didn't want or wanted approved. He'd go down to City Hall or wherever you had to go and speak up for the city. And then there was a woman named Stephanie, and I can't immediately think of her last name. But she was very active with the community council. And the community council has kept a lot undesirable things out of our neighborhood. And so we have to give them credit for that.

Yeah, they're doing a good job. So, um, what places in Government Hill stand out most in your mind?

Well, first of all, the historic ones. The two engineers' houses on the edge of the Hill. At least that's what they originally were built for. And during World War II, they were an outlook place also 'cause the engineers were military, and to watch for possible submarines [laughs] or some other enemy boat.

An invasion?

Uh-huh. So they, they have, they are definitely part of the World War II history. And then they have a, uh, building that was a weather station. And that also, I think, dates from World War II. And, they don't have them anymore, but they had a kind of cement foxholes along the edge of the Hill.

Oh, okay.

The trees weren't so big in those days, so they used them for outlooks too, in case of invasion. But they were finally closed up. Our boys when they were young used to play in them with all the other kids. But they closed them up because they thought uh, you know, people like—I guess you might call stray people were moving into them. It wasn't safe for the kids anymore, so they just buried them, I guess.

I don't know. We'll have to look into that. I hadn't heard about those before.

Oh, another person that, uh, going back a little, another person, oh, I got to think of his name. Anyway, he made the path down the Hill and cleared off a lot of the brush along the way, at the other end of the Hill just by the water tower.

And, I'm sure somebody else will think of his name. He was, he was a former farmer, and he just, he was older than the rest of his family. But he was used to doing things, working with his hands. So he did all of that.

One woman said, "Oh, why did you cut down all of those trees?" Uh, by the water tower . . . and he said "Well, isn't it safer for you to walk around at night with the trees down?" She had to agree with that. So anyway . . . wish I could think of his name. I should . . . I know it so well.

Well, you can, if you think about it later, you can send it to me. That will work.

Uh-huh.

What about the Browns? Now, were the Browns still here when you got here?

Yes, they were. They lived on the corner—the house that's being remodeled right now. So, they were only two houses away.

Did you work and your husband work after you moved here?

At first I stayed home for awhile. And then the first job I got was at the Native Hospital in the Personnel Department.

And what did your husband do?

He was an electrician.

For the railroad?

No, oh, private. Mostly worked for City Electric for many years. But he also worked for other companies too.

Oh, good for him. Well, that's good. So, you guys were here when the earthquake happened?

We were.

What happened that day?

Well, we were downtown. And, uh, we had, our boys were about that big at the time [indicating how tall her boys were]. So, we decided we should really make some kind of provisions for their care in case, you know, an accident happened or something. So we went to the lawyer to make out a will. And we had done that. Then they said to come back in a week to get it signed and so on. So we came back, and that was the time the earthquake started while we were waiting in this office. [The phone rings. Tape went off.]

Go ahead and, and tell me a little about that day you were guys were downtown. And your boys were young. How old were they?

Well, they, one was, uh, one was I think, yeah, three years old at the time and the other was two. And, uh, while we were sitting in the waiting room, a couple of other people were also waiting to see the lawyer.

And all of a sudden we felt this shaking. Of course, it's not too uncommon. So nobody got excited at first until it started getting so heavy that it could just barely, we were sitting on the seats, and we had to hold on to them to keep you from falling down on the floor.

And, uh, meanwhile the lights went out because the power, the wires got broken probably outside. And, so there we were in the dark with all this, all these books and shelves and other things falling down. And it was in the . . . 4th Avenue Theatre building. So there's about four or, for or five floors, I forget how many. But, you could hear all this stuff falling down over your head, which was kind of alarming too. You think what if this breaks? What if this building falls apart? So, anyway, it kept getting worse. And, then finally it slowed down a little. We thought it was all over. Then instead it just started again. And, it was even harder. Well, it finally quit. And the theatre building had their own light system, for emergencies of course.

So that came on so we could get out there. The attorney said we better get home to see what happened to our families. So we went up the stairs and water was pouring down. And, broken pipes. We got out on the streets. And that's when we really saw what the effects of the earthquake, 'cause there were people lying down on the ground getting up and crying, and the, buildings had broken windows.

So Mel said, "We better get home before they declare martial law or something." So we were driving home. We went past the Penney's building, which a big chunk had fallen off of it and fell on the cars parked nearby. And another car had a woman in it. At first some people thought she had died in the crash. But, actually, uh, they, well first people ran over after the earthquake stopped, and tried to lift the car because it got smashed down about, until it was about a couple of feet for the woman in there. Well, they couldn't, they couldn't make much headway. Then somebody finally came with tools to lift it up. And they took her to the hospital. She survived, but she was in there for, oh my, about a month and a half I guess, recuperating.

So anyway, we kept going on 'cause we were worried about the boys. And, when we got up to the Hill, they weren't home. Well, the woman that was, uh, looking after 'em while we were gone was the mother of the woman next door. So after the earthquake, she took the boys over there and they [laughs] all kind of recuperated from all of that. She got under the kitchen table with the boys while this was going on, which was a good idea; it's a sturdy table.

And, so they were okay. But, for a few years afterwards, whenever there was a hard wind blowing, my older boy would get frightened. And we couldn't figure out why until we finally figured out that it was the noise of the earthquake that was so much like a, like a hurricane or a storm. Because it wasn't quiet. Even outside it made a lot of noise.

So anyway, all the chimneys, ours too, and all the chimneys across the street in the, in the duplexes, broke apart and fell down. And they all fell down in that direction towards the east. And we were kind of, in one way we were kind of lucky that we were downtown because bricks landed just where our car was usually parked.

Oh, okay. So did, other than the, uh, the, for the fireplace, the stove, did your house get any damage, other than that?

Well, a few things had fallen and broke. But, we had some sliding windows on our cupboards at that time. We still have those cupboards, by the way; they're from the '50s. But I thought I was so happy to keep them. We put some others up, but we put latches on them. Most people don't do those things.

But it makes a difference. We only lost a couple of dishes. And the reason we lost them was because I hadn't closed the sliding doors completely. [Laughs] And they managed to get out.

So, your boys were two and three. We didn't talk about their names. What are their names?

Oh, Ronald and Richard.

How do you think historical events have affected your family and here on Government Hill like, like the earthquake or the wars or things like that?

Well, the war was definitely an influence because they also had, uh, Quonset huts like you mentioned. For years they were there. And most of them after the, or after the military had gone on to their own base and everything, they sold the Quonsets to different people. And actually they fixed them up so nicely inside—most of them, anyway the ones I ever was in—you wouldn't even know you were in a Quonset hut. They were really neat.

And they were kind of sad when the city said you had to get rid of your Quonset huts or you weren't going to be allowed to do any work on them or anything, so they took them down.

And you only see a few scattered around used, to use, I guess, as sheds. Not as living quarters any more. But . . .

That's when the, what was that, when the urban renewal came and . . .

Well, I don't know if that was part of the urban renewal or just the city wanting to make regular houses.

So, one of the things that I forgot to you ask about, when after the earthquake happened, how did you guys cook and all of that?

Well, my husband was enterprising; living on a farm for part of his life, I think made him more self-sufficient because he got the furnace going. And we got fresh water from a, an artesian fountain; and a lot of people, I don't think ever, availed themselves of that and it doesn't exist anymore. It was down where Worthington Ford has his main car lot—in that kind of hollows area.

So we had that. And we had a few devices that, you know, you have a little heater under them. So we used those for cooking. So we made out for those days when the lights were out and the water was off. We didn't have gas at that time. Of course, we couldn't use the furnace with the chimney gone. So we just made out okay.

Okay. Good, good. So, um, you were here when we became a state. What do you remember about Statehood? Do you remember much about that? Or . . . ?

About what?

Statehood?

Oh, well, actually the most of the activities took off downtown, of the actual celebrations.

Did you attend any of those celebrations?

Oh, yeah. We went to see them because it was, uh, unique. First they had the big bonfire. They were saving wood up for several weeks beforehand and guarding it so nobody would prematurely light it or anything. So they had that. And then they had a ceremony downtown where they put a star up on a, on a flag. They climbed up. The Miss Alaska put up the star.

Okay. I hadn't heard that before. You think it changed life for you guys when Statehood happened?

Well, I think it, it, uh, kind of uh, probably changed more of the things outside of the town because before that, uh, people didn't have to pay taxes when they were out of the city limits. And now they did because they had these boroughs that covered much more area. And, uh, so that was a change for them. But, it didn't, uh. . . . For a while we had two governments in Anchorage, a borough and a city. Then they decided to merge them. So the city is actually part of the borough. In the, oh, their laws and, uh, taxes and other things.

What about, um, we have a question on here about civil rights. Do you remember anything; can you recall anything about civil rights and anything about Government Hill?

Well, I think, uh, we had kind of a mix in population up here. We had, well, the Caucasians, of course, and, and the Native people. But there weren't a lot of Asiatic or African-Americans in the town at that time. But I think the civil rights made people aware that, that these are people too . . . should be treated the same as them.

So, I think the civil rights just made, uh, more open society. And of course now we have the school with, with many different nationalities and have special programs. Uh, our school has Spanish as a second language studies and some others have, I think, Japanese and Russian. So I think, I think in general, it was a good movement.

How do you think, we talked a little bit about the wars and how the area could have been affected, did you see, I mean, I know, people come and stay for a few years and then they go when they're in the military. So you mentioned you had friends in the military and . . . Some of them actually, when they got out of the Army, stayed in Alaska or came back. So . . . especially the ones who liked outdoor activities.

So, did your sons join the military at all or . . . ?

No, they were sort of in between. The Vietnam War, when they got old enough, was over with. And we hadn't gotten involved in so many of these other things that we have to now. Well, it became, uh, a volunteer Army and they were going to the university at the time so, afterwards, I mean; but the war was over by the time they got older, old enough.

So do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill?

Well, it's not strictly Government Hill but we have the Sleeping Lady Mountain over there, and they had that legend. Well, it's supposed to be a legend anyway about how this was the, the Indian woman waiting for her warrior to come back. But actually that was a made-up story. There was a woman who had written a little book based on the Sleeping Lady and, and . . . one time . . . the funny thing is, I was over there one time at that Captain Cook lookout, and a tour bus came up and this fellow there was telling them all this Sleeping Lady and then he told this legend. But uh, the tourists wouldn't know any different, you know. But actually there wasn't any legends concerning this Sleeping Lady at all. I guess the only legendary characters on our Hill that I can think of is was Jack and Nellie Brown.

Okay. And I get more information about them out of your book.

Yes. And, uh, when Mel was, when we came into this house, the yard was just a bunch of grass and weeds. So, when my husband was digging up an area where there was some raspberries and he ran into a, an Indian, or a Native artifacts. It was . . . I don't know just exactly what it was.

It looked like it was something that it was used to cut, hides maybe. And it seems like, a, Native artifacts in Anchorage are kind of scarce.

So did he end up, uh, making a garden there for you guys or . . . ?

Oh, yes. We had a garden for years. When the boys were younger, we had a vegetable garden. They liked to work in it. And the raspberries grew, survived. And, we always had flowers in front. And we had a rose bush, which was found by accident. He was, where he was digging in front of the house, he ran into some wood underground that was white. So he said, “well, that’s either an apple tree or . . .” So he started watering it and it turned out to be a rose bush, and it had been buried for years. Nobody even knew about it. I was amazed that it would live so long, just being underground.

So, your husband was a farmer or his family were farmers?

Well, actually they came up from Wisconsin and they had a business, uh, a general store. But during the Depression, people who, in those days people would charge things when they bought ’em and pay it at the end of the month. Well, they couldn’t pay at the end of the month. So they stopped even coming to the store. They were ashamed, I guess. So the store just went out of business. Just at that time, they had this, uh, Matanuska Colony project. And before that, he was already thinking of coming to Southeast Alaska because they use to get fish sent in from there, and the fellow there said, “You should come to Alaska.” But then this Matanuska Valley thing come up so they came to Alaska with it. And it didn’t work out too well because by the time they got their house and outbuildings, they had such a small amount of land that couldn’t sustain the animals and everything. So, they left the Colony and bought their own, bought a homestead that was for sale, and stayed out there and farmed it for many years.

So, it had a lot more land to it?

Oh, yeah.

Homesteads were what, 640 acres or something like that?

Well, it wasn’t that big. But it was bigger than, now you only get 160 acres. But this was 320, which was the standard, I guess, at that time. And, the government one was only about 40 acres. It wasn’t enough, nearly enough to raise plants and feed animals.

That’s not big enough. Did your family hunt and fish when the boys were all together?

Well, I think, oh, yes. We used to; we had a boat for a while. It was out of Resurrection Bay and we’d go out and get salmon or bass, or other fish. And then we’d go sometimes fly fishing or bait fishing in the streams. Mostly in the north.

Okay. Did you guys ever go down and fish in Ship Creek very much or . . . ?

Never did fish there. I’m a little afraid of all that . . . sticky goeey mud.

Yeah, yeah, that’s true.

Well, it’s really popular, in fact, we were, we helped out with their, uh, with their program that they had there, contests for the biggest salmon. One time I was, I was in the, had a little, little building where the people would check in to buy their tickets, and this one woman—she was all upset because they had raised the price a couple of dollars. Then she finally bought the ticket. She went out and caught the biggest fish of the women that day. So she caught . . . well, we paid her extra two dollars.

That’s cute. Did you like to fish?

Oh, I enjoyed it. Just getting out in the open really. And we enjoyed the fish afterwards, of course.

So, you talked about, uh, you guys had a garden here and then the family had their farm out in the Matanuska. Did they have, um, a lot of animals out there besides the geese that you took out or . . . ?

Oh, well, they had at various times; they had cattle of course and a couple of horses. When they first came, the horses were part of the, part of the, 'cause they didn't have motorized tractors. They [tractors] existed but they didn't get them. They had to buy their own. But, anyway, uh, oh, they had sheep at different times. They had goats, but they didn't work too well. They were eating the wool off the sheep and other things [laughing] and getting into mischief. Goats have personalities. [Laughing]

They do, don't they? They, they're kind of mischievous. So you're a writer.

Yes.

How many books have you written?

Uh, eight.

Wow, that's a lot.

Yes. Over a long period of time, though. It takes a long time to write a history.

So have all your books been histories?

No. There's a couple of humor books. Well, one on folklore and then a humor book, and then . . . one on samovars, the Russian teapot, and the others are history.

And did you say they're available in town?

Well, most of them. The history, it all depends on if they buy them in these stores. I don't know. I don't know if you will see it on some e-books or what. But it's not as easy to sell books any more.

So you said that you . . . when you got your first job, which was at the Native Hospital, did you then become a teacher or anything like that?

No. Uh, the next job was with the Civil Service giving their exams in order to qualify for different jobs. And then I quit for a while when our boys were born. And then, uh, I worked for the, went to a class for older people on computers. And, one of the requirements was to go out and get a job. And it said, not a make work job, but a real job. So I got a job with the university. And at first it was transcribing the talks by the different people that were educating—was in the, uh, Center for International Business; and they were trying to get Alaska products into foreign countries, so they had all these different speakers.

Some of them foreign countries and some of them local ones that had experience. So I was transcribing them. And then I got into setting up their publications. And that's what I did until I quit, finally.

How long did you work there?

I don't know . . . two or three years, I guess.

So what made you decide to become an author?

Well, I always was interested in writing. And I did, before I wrote the books, I wrote articles for, what they called Alaska Magazine. It was the Alaska Sportsman then, and some of the other Alaska magazines. And an airplane magazine once. Mostly on Alaska subjects so . . .

Can you think of any kind of like fun stories when you were doing your research or anything like that?

Well, I think the most enjoyable thing was just talking to these people who had such interesting adventures. And, uh, and getting acquainted with more of the history because you always have to do some research on certain things.

So what is what is a favorite memory from living here on Government Hill?

Well, that's hard to say. I think one of the favorites was our friends across the way that, that were in the Air Force at the time. And just raising the kids on the Hill. We enjoyed it. And, when I was younger, I enjoyed getting out in the cold. So I'd put the boys in a—Mel had made a wooden sled for them—I bundled them up because it got below zero in those days quite a lot of the time; so I had them all bundled up and I'd take them for a ride around the Hill. One time we were out walking on the other end of the Hill. They didn't have as many houses up there then. So I heard this, uh, this happy noise. I looked over there and there was uh, three or four ptarmigan and they were sliding [laughing] in the snow and having a ball. [Laughing]

Oh, that's cute.

They were so cute.

That's really cute. So how often do your boys come home?

Well, I see the one from Fairbanks more often, of course. The other one doesn't come up too often. But I see, I was going to, we were going to California quite often because I would have reunions with my former housemates—not the alumni but the housemates because we got to be well acquainted. And one or the other would hold this reunion, so I got to see a lot of different parts of California that way and also visited our boy whenever we got near him.

That's nice. Is there, do you have any advice for, for the community?

Any?

Any advice, any thoughts?

Well, my main thought is like some of the other outspoken people [laughs] that we like things as they are. We like the place to be kept up. They did add some touches on our streets that made them look nicer. We could use a sidewalk on the side if they ever get around to that so people wouldn't have to walk in the road, especially in the winter when all of these snow banks come up.

Yeah, you guys have some big ones out there. And they didn't plow the road completely out there. I was surprised about that.

Well, we are on a school bus route now which it wasn't years ago when they didn't plow our roads for maybe for a week or two. We used to have these ruts and then they'd freeze. But now they do a good job on keeping the road. So many other streets are kind of narrow. But I can understand that they're busy. This year especially.

Yeah, I think they're pretty busy. Well, any other thoughts that you'd like us to know or anything like that?

Well, I'm just glad that they're taking an interest in the Hill and its history and realize that it's a unique place in a way.

It definitely is.

It's kind of an island because we have the base on one side, railroad on the other, industrial things on the waterfront, which weren't there when I first came. They were all, uh, tidewater—grassy; and now it's pretty well filled up.

Okay, well then with that, I'll just turn the recorder off. Is that okay?

Yeah.

Author's note: Mary shared photos of her and her husband, family and friends, including Nellie Brown, following our interview. She noted that the community loved her husband Mel. He had a kind and happy heart . . . "everyone loved him." Melvin Barry passed away November 24, 2011. In speaking with other community folks, it was said that "He will be missed."

Bobbie Bianchi Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on September 30, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Ms. Bobbie Bianchi at her house, which is one of the original cottages on Government Hill, regarding her knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Ms. Bianchi, please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Bobbie Bianchi. I was born January 28, 1948, in McAllen, Texas.

And where did you grow up?

All over the world. My father was in the Air Force. I lived in Germany. I lived in D.C. I lived in California. I lived in South Dakota. So a little bit of everywhere.

When did you come here to Government Hill?

My husband was transferred to Elmendorf in 1975 . . . March 26, 1975.

And so, I assume that is what brought you here, the Air Force? Was there anybody else that came with you and your husband?

My two children. They were 3 and 5 at the time.

And what neighborhood or community did you live in first?

The first place we lived was on Government Hill in apartments that have now been torn down. It is the old Hollywood Vista apartments over on Tamarack where they have just built some luxury condos.

Do you know why they tore those buildings down?

Because they were really, really bad. They had been built when the base was being built. They were, rumor has it that they were actually experimental base housing and they did not pass the engineering test for the military so they just said, "Okay, you guys can have them." They were multi-unit; it was like three big, long, almost like barracks, old military barracks where they had three stairwells on the building and then one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments. And, they were the lowest-end rentals you could get, but you have to keep in mind I got here in 1975. The pipeline was going and nobody wanted to rent to anyone with children or dogs, and we had a small dog. So, we were stuck; we had to get an apartment immediately and so we ended up with this one, and it was pretty bad until we could get base housing.

Okay, how many people lived in your home then? Was it just your husband, yourself, and your two children?

It was the four of us.

Did you have any other family members in the community?

Not at that time.

Did you initially own or rent your home?

We rented and lived on base.

What do you remember about your home, in the early days when you first moved in to the community, and also about your neighbors' homes?

Well, I didn't get to know any of my neighbors on Government Hill at that time because most of them were. . . . The ladies in the center of the building were ladies of ill repute, as we discovered when the Navy came for the Fourth of July that summer. And the shore patrol showed up at one o'clock in the morning. And I went out on the front porch and watched as the shore patroller was chasing Navy guys out of the center stairwell when the girls were in various stages of undress, and I had a ball, just watching. So, I didn't get to know my neighbors very well initially up here. It was exciting.

Well, that sounds quite interesting. How would you describe Government Hill at the time?

I didn't know that much about it, with Government Hill being divided in half with the road, that side of the Hill was mostly apartments and stuff, and to be honest, I didn't have anything to do with anyone on that side. We were just waiting for base housing. I didn't discover the west side of Government Hill until the early '80s when I initially found a place up here to live.

What do you remember about major local events when you first lived here?

You mean in town or in Government Hill in general?

Both. Mostly in Government Hill, but if there were any major events in Anchorage in the area.

Well, it was just that it was pipeline. It was a pretty busy time here. But being a military wife, once we moved on base, which was that summer, I was involved on base. I got a job and started working and I had two kids, so I wasn't too involved with Anchorage until I got divorced in 1978. And then I became a little more aware of what was going on off the base.

Okay, what do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill when you were first here?

Actually, I don't miss anything about that and I was not upset when they tore down the Hollywood Vista Apartments.

Well, how have you seen Government Hill change over your lifetime, other than tearing down the buildings?

There are children. When I first moved on Government Hill in, I think it was 1980, I lived in a little duplex, a government duplex around the corner.

And the one thing I noticed at that time is that you never saw any children up here because all of the people that lived up here had been up here for a long time. There was quite a past of old timers up here that had been railroad workers that had been government workers and they just stayed and their kids had grown up and moved away. So, the thing that you notice now is that we have lots of kids up here because the families and older folks have died and younger families have moved in and it's made a big difference. It's a generational change from being a neighborhood where there is lots of old people to a neighborhood now that is basically feared by most of the legislators because we have a lot of attorneys that live up here, we have engineers, and we have kids. There are kids all over and I have my share of kids that hang out in the neighborhood because my grandchildren come up here now.

What was most important to the people in Government Hill in the early days when you first moved here?

I think just maintaining the Hill. At that time we had an active little shopping center up there. We had Lee Reynolds had her jewelry store that had been there for 30 years. And when I first moved up here there was a grocery store and post office on Government Hill. The Grocery store in the back had a little counter that they were basically a post office contractor. So, you could go in there and you could mail packages and you could like that. They didn't have mail to give out. But you could go in there and take care of mail business. And then the little grocery store was very, very nice to have and it closed down.

Well, what killed the Hill as far as that shopping center was when the post office pulled out, the grocery store closed, and then there was a bank. We had, I think it was NBA up here and they closed up, and after that the little shopping center went to rack and ruin. It changes all the time down there now.

Do you miss those conveniences?

Oh, absolutely. It was nice to be able to, if you wanted fresh fruit and vegetables, you could go down to that little market instead of getting in the car and driving across the bridge and the first one you can get to is the one over on Gambell you know. So, yeah, it was very convenient to have a grocery store up here.

Are there any Government Hill leaders, community leaders that stand out in your mind from those early days when you first moved here?

Lee Reynolds was big. She was, I think if she is still with us, I think she is living in the home out in Palmer now. We had a guy that lived right behind me here, Stuart Hall. I think we lost count of how many times he was the community council president, but Stuart Hall was a graduate of Harvard and of Stanford and he was just the most brilliant man. He didn't have much common sense, but he was a brilliant, brilliant man and he was very strong up here. Stuart, after he passed away unexpectedly, someone said that Government Hill had lost the two lions at the door like at the library in New York where they seem to be looking over everything. So, he is sorely missed.

Ms. Bianchi, you mentioned that you miss some of these conveniences, the shopping centers, jewelry store, grocery store, post office. Are there any other places from Government Hill's early days that stand out in your mind?

Oh, we had a barber shop and a beauty shop too. I forgot those two.

Any other non-retail type places that had an important factor?

There was, uh, at one time up there on this side of the shopping center, there was a hobby shop that had been here for many years. It's now moved across from REI, but it was a place that a lot of people came from across town to go to because they had a little bit of everything for hobbies.

Besides the retail establishments and opportunities that you mentioned, what other type of work opportunities existed in Government Hill or nearby communities when you first came here?

There wasn't anything other than retail. I mean, that's pretty much all that's been in that shopping center. We have a daycare center on the other side of the Hill that has been there for a very long time. And at one time there was a fire department, that I think it was the Fink Administration, and that was a blow to Government Hill—when they pulled the fire department out of here.

Which historical events do you believe affected your family and the Government Hill community since you first came here?

I don't think there has been any big, other than this ridiculous bridge, I can't think of anything else that has happened up here that has caused, politically caused a big problem.

Oh, wait. I have to take that back. We had the battle of the tank farms. The government back in the day built a tank farm over here on the north side of Government Hill. It was the defense fuels tank farm; most of them were underground. None of this stuff by the way, I have to precede all this, none of this industrial stuff around me has ever bothered me. It was here when I bought my house. So, it's not like someone came in after I bought my house and said we are going to make this all industrial behind you and everything.

So, I don't have a lot of sympathy with people who raise cane about this. But, there was a lady that lived over there, who I like very much, but she started the band wagon about getting rid of these because they basically were in her view and she did not like it. And so they came up with all kinds of different reasons why they had to go.

The military finally got tired of dealing with them, and because I know the guy that was in charge at the time, and they pulled the defense fuels out so that there has been this huge big fence. They found out some of the ground was contaminated, which this is not a big mystery; those things have been there for 40 or 50 years. You know you got to have a leak once in awhile. But that was a huge deal up here.

And then of course they then started in on they wanted to get rid of all the ones down here. That's where they offload. We have no other port where the tankers can offload fuel. My personal thought on this, because they used to come around with. . . . There was one lady that used to come around constantly with petitions to get them to stop, got to get rid of all of those, got to stop the planes from Merrill Field from flying over Government Hill because it was waking her baby up. I said I have a news flash for you. It is already against the rules for them to fly over the top of Government Hill, but they always figure well they can take a little shortcut here and nobody ever gets the tail numbers and turns them in.

But she had constantly things that they wanted changed, but this was after the younger people moved in. The older people . . . they grew up with this stuff around so it never bothered them. But, since I have been up here, we have seen the tank farms go. They also now monitor the air because of the trains dieseling and stuff down there because people complain that they can smell diesel once in awhile. It's like, well, you live above a tank farm, you're going to smell diesel once in awhile.

Ms. Bianchi, you mentioned a little bit about the railroad and the air monitoring and so forth, and we just heard the whistle blow a few minutes ago. Are there any other impacts from the railroad that you think have on Government Hill?

No, I love the railroad as a neighbor. Um, the thing I find ironic is these people that make all these fuss and things. One of them lived next door, who shall remain nameless because they still live up here. They had a house next door, and they told them bring the sensors over, and they put the sensors up on top of their house.

And then they tried to sell the house. And people would say, "What's that for?" And they would say, "Oh, because we monitor the smells and fumes coming off the railroad." Well, how fast did they sell this house and finally one day they came over and we were talking, and I said so did you ever think about taking that sensor off the top of your house so they don't have to ask that question. And they finally did and the house sold right away. You know, but there are still a couple sensors up here because when they do the change over from the tanks to the trucks or something it gets in the air and stuff. I've smelled it, but it's not . . . we live in a very industrial area. It goes along with the territory. I have a million dollar view, and once in awhile it smells like fuel out here, but I can live with it.

You mentioned a little bit about the oil industry, the impacts on Government Hill. How do you think the different cycles of boom and bust in the oil industry . . . have you seen that have a significant effect on Government Hill during the time you've been here?

I don't think so except for the rental properties on the other side of the Hill probably. Not on this side so much, because most of the, I mean we have some rentals on this side of Government Hill but predominantly it's . . . on this side of the Hill is pretty much owned, privately owned. There are some rentals, some duplexes and stuff.

The other side of the Hill, there are some of the little, some duplexes, but there is these large apartment complexes. I think the one that used to be Richardson Vista, which was like really in bad shape has been taken over by North Pointe. And we have probably the most ethnically diversified group of people in one neighborhood. I think we probably vie with Mountain View because those apartments, if you go over there in the summer and you see the gardening that is being done by people from Thailand and Vietnam and stuff, we have a lot of ethnic people up here, which is, I think, great. We have a target school that has Spanish as the, um, it's got the Spanish immersion program so we have all kinds of kids living up here now. I think it's great. I think it's super—from a neighborhood that didn't have that many kids before and now it does.

A lot of pipeliners lived in those apartments over on the Hill because they were just here for a short time. They were making money and heading out of here. They didn't want to spend a lot of money on housing and stuff, so they just rented the cheap apartments.

Well, obviously you haven't been here since Statehood, but have you heard any historical facts about how Statehood might have affected Government Hill?

No.

How about the '64 earthquake? Were you here for the '64 earthquake?

No, I wasn't here. But I do know that, um, I need to find that too. I have a letter that was typed single space. It's like three or four pages long, and it talks about someone that came down through the train area. I think they were trying to get to Government Hill. You do know that the Government Hill School was wiped out by the quake? Um, it was on the other, as you come up the hill where the Tesoro is, to your right there, there was a wonderful single-story school. And when you look at the pictures of it, it is completely broken in half and slid down, and it is now Sunset Park. And for a long time there was no school in this town on Good Fridays, because if there had been school that day there would have been a lot of kids hurt or killed. And so for years they didn't have it until somewhere along the way they said you can't mix religion and education, and so then they couldn't have Good Fridays off anymore. But that was the biggest impact on Government Hill.

And so the military stepped up and said "we have this property over here you can have." When I first came to Alaska and lived on Government Hill, there was no fence between the military and Government Hill. There was, there was no fence there. You go there now and there's this huge big fence. For awhile there was one with razor wire over it and stuff. But when I first moved here you could walk from Government Hill onto the base. You know, it was just one big neighborhood.

And it was only after a commissary was robbed and guy escaped on, uh, a snow machine through Government Hill that they put up a fence. But Government Hill and Elmendorf have always been good neighbors, as Elmendorf is with Mountain View—same thing. But they gave us the property up here where the Government Hill School is . . . was originally Elmendorf property.

Can you remind me again what year it was when you came here?

I came here in '75.

So, I guess you were pretty much past the civil rights movement in the 70s there. Do you recall any stories or anything about or associated with the civil rights movement, and how it might have affected Government Hill?

No.

How about government today? How would you say government today differs from the government when you first moved here?

As far as Government Hill has gone?

Yes.

I was not that involved when I first moved up here. And it's only been pretty much since I bought the house that I started paying attention to what was going on. Les Gara is our representative, and he's just, he's my hero because he watches everything. And, uh, I think that the people we have here on Government Hill now—we all watch closely.

The people that come up here to do any surveying or anything for the railroad or for the KABATA or whatever . . . they say that they were warned about us. Because this is the only place they say that they come and start—they will set up a tripod to start surveying and people will come out of their houses and say, "What are you doing here? What's this for? What is it all about?" And he says we go other places in town and nobody says a word, but he says on Government Hill, they are going to ask you why you're here.

Have you heard any information from others that may have been here longer about how the various wars affected the Government Hill community specifically?

Okay, now this one I can help you . . . because years ago I met General Talley, B.B. Talley. And he built the two little houses at the end of the street. And he worked directly for General Simon R., Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., who was the ranking officer and who came up here to build the bases on the Aleutians. He went to General Buckner, because at that time he was a Major, and he said I need to have a place to live; I want to bring my wife up. And so at a cocktail party one night General Buckner said to the guy who was in charge of the railroad at the time, who I think was Oldham, he said something about “I have to find some property to build a couple little houses for my chief engineer and his aide.” And he says, “Oh, we got some places up on Government Hill; we have a parcel of land that you guys can build your houses on.”

So, General Talley, Major Talley came up and he built two houses on the end of the street here, which I’m very proud of that I helped get put on the National Historic Register. But for years, they were in rack and ruin. For years the property belonged to the railroad. The houses belonged to the Army, which all worked out fine when the railroad belonged to the federal government. But when the railroad became a state entity then you got property owned by the federal government; houses owned by state government, and so nobody wanted to take care of them. And so they sat empty for a very long time. And every time I would run into General Talley he would say, “So, what are they doing with my houses?” And so, over the years, the Army got tired of being the landlords for this property, and so they deeded it over to the city. And the city let them sit there and go to rack and ruin for a very long time. They rented them out; no sort of care was taken of them, and so it got really bad. And only in the past ten years has anything been done to work on those houses.

But then—I have a photo which I will dig out for you guys—that if you looked at an aerial of Government Hill, this side of the Government Hill, ’cause the other side didn’t really exist before the war, there are Quonset huts all over the place on this hill. I think at one time there were 40 or 50 of them. That’s where people were living. There was no housing in Anchorage. And so these Quonset huts—and we still have some that are still being lived on. You can drive on up through the alley and see them.

The war really impacted Government Hill, but one of the things to keep in mind is Government Hill wasn’t part of Anchorage until ’48, after the war. This was all just railroad property. And there’s a quote in [Patterns of the Past](#) that I’ve always liked. I forget who was talking, but he said, “The people on the other side of the creek seem to think we’re jealous of what they have. On the contrary, we like it the way it is on Government Hill.”

It’s always been us and them I think is the whole idea here. It’s like now we’re a part of Anchorage, but it’s still us and them. [Laughs] But the Army was very important up here on Government Hill. Lots of military lived here. Lots of military got out of the military and stayed and went to work for the railroad or went to work for the base. These houses over here on Manor were built by, um, I think it was the Civil Air Patrol. So lots of government up here, and it’s just part of, of what we are.

And, uh, I don’t know if you know about how Government Hill got its name. When the railroad built it, the guys that came up here with the Alaskan Engineering Commission actually came from Panama. They had just built the Panama Canal and they’re next tasking, ’cause they were Army, was to come up here and build a railroad. So when they got here, they built these houses so their families could have a place to live, and they called it Government Hill. Two theories were: one was because it was obviously all government up here, but the other one was that there was a place in Panama called Government Hill.

And so, when they saw this place and they started building the houses, they just called it Government Hill.

Last week I ran into a guy from Panama, and I said I've got a question for you. Is there really a place in Panama City or in Panama called Government Hill? And his wife said, "Yeah, that's where the government offices are." I said, "Good, because I've always heard that but I've never been able to confirm it." So that's where I think it came from—was from the Panama Canal, which is kind of a strange. . . I told them you'll be interested to know that Alaska has a history with Panama.

You mentioned that you think Government Hill was annexed into Anchorage in 1948. Do you think there's any folks living in Government Hill today who would prefer to have Government Hill separated from Anchorage?

Oh, absolutely! [Laughter] We've thought of it as succeeding from the Union up here you know [chuckle], well, because it does seem to be always. We had a mayor just I think one mayor ago . . . his idea of something intelligent to do is lop off that corner of Government Hill where the two cottages are, and the park, so he could have a high-speed access road to the port. Okay, how logical is that when the port is a dead end? You're going to have a high-speed access to a stop sign! You know, I mean, and he was pursuing it. That was his idea of a brilliant idea was to lop off this part of Government Hill and make it into a high-speed access. So it's always us against them. They don't like us. [Chuckles] "They" being anybody in charge.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about our town, about Government Hill in particular?

Um, I had a couple of old guys, I'm going to try and find the tape for you, but I had a couple old guys come up here and sit with me and a tape recorder one day. And I never knew until then that we have a park over here that used to be a gravel pit, Al Miller Park. I always wondered why we have this park in this thing. And they told me that this next road up here, Colwell which dead ends right over here on Manor used to go all the way through to the gravel pit.

We have great gravel up here. They love our gravel. So that was a big business up here. The next area over here was a huge fox farm. And, um, most of this was moose browse, from Manor all the way around. You can look at aerial photos and there was nothing up here, except these houses and the wireless transmitter site, for a long time. So people pretty much made do with what they had. The little building around the corner—the rumor is that it was the first post office on Government Hill. That the railroad would bring the mail up and put it in there and the people that lived up here would go over there to get their mail. There were several huge, what we used to call truck farms, up here where people would produce a lot of vegetables up here in the summer, and then that building was later used like a little grocery store. So they were pretty self-sufficient on Government Hill.

Did your family have a farmstead, or have any animals or gardens or anything . . . ?

Uh-uh. Uh-uh. [Ms. Bianchi indicating no.]

How about fish and hunt, did your family do any fishing or hunting?

Oh, my son is an avid, he's a fish guide as a matter of fact up here.

Okay, where would he fish, anywhere local?

All over, Montana Creek up north and down to the Kenai and down on the Russian River and that sort of thing. All of the regular places that Alaska kids go to fish. And also out on Elmendorf. When I worked out there when he was a teenager, I would come home and pick him up at lunch time and take him out on base and drop him off at one of the lakes 'cause the state government, I think they still do, stock the lakes on Elmendorf.

So, you don't have any ancestors that were here before you?

No, I am the ancestor. [Chuckles]

How about your descendants then? It's just your two children?

I have two grown children and five grandchildren here in Anchorage, and a sister, a niece, a couple of grandnieces and nephews. My sisters, all three of my sisters at one time or another lived in Alaska because of me. They came up; two of them have now moved back to the South, but one of my sisters still lives here.

And where did they come from?

Arkansas mostly. That's where my dad retired out of the Air Force.

And do any of them live in Government Hill?

No.

You mentioned Stuart Hall before. Are there any other people in the community that are important to you or made a difference to the community?

He's just the number one that comes to mind because he was so active. We have Thomas Pease and his wife Susanne DiPietro who are a very young couple; she's an attorney and he's a school teacher. They're very active. Robert French. Bob French is extremely active in everything. So these are people who currently, um [pause] Stuart just covered a large, time. You know, it was just, he was always here for many years. It wasn't like anyone else was because all you had to do is call Stuart and he would take care of everything.

And can you tell me again about the monument you have to him?

Oh, after he passed away, it was just decided that we had to do something because Stuart was such a stalwart Government Hill supporter. And so we decided to do something down at Brown's Point Park. I always called him the governor of Government Hill because it was pretty much the way he was, you know. And, ah, so they were talking about putting up a stone; well, first of all they didn't know how much it cost to do bronzes and things, and I did because I work at an art gallery and have for a long time. And so that was their first thought. They wanted to do a monument to him and Pal. So what we came up with was a concrete walkway with a man's footprints and a dog's footprints, so it looks like Pal and Stuart.

But I have not known anyone else in all the time that I have lived up here that, that was the immediate response was that we need to put some kind of monument up. So as much as Stuart aggravated, he was also dearly loved.

Ms. Bianchi, is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to add at this time? Some other stories? Anything that you would think would be of interest?

It's always dangerous to get me going on Government Hill. Um, those guys that were here that day to talk—like I said, I will look for that tape—but one of the things I found interesting was that I asked them about the house next door and the little house on the other side.

The one that's been rumored to be a post office, which we have not been able to confirm that, and a grocery store, they said that in the '20s it was a garage. Because, and that would make sense, because it's only about this wide. [Ms. Bianchi moved her hands closely together signifying how small the building is.] But they said at that time people of who had cars could only drive them in the summer. So in the winter they would just get put up on blocks, and they said that was the kind of building that was built.

Um, I have a mother-in-law apartment here on the side of the house that is also a concrete, has a concrete slab floor. I suspect that's what it originally was. Where they put the car for the winter, was in out of the snow. Um, I mean there are just all kinds of things up here.

These guys were going through and naming different people. Um, Frederick Mears lived up here for awhile. He is the one who built the railroad. He had a cottage around the corner, and then he moved down to I think it was 2nd Avenue, where his house is now. It has just been an interesting, interesting neighborhood to live in.

What wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

Keep it. You know, the idea of them tearing out the center part of it here. I just, the whole idea of the bridge is like there's a bunch of guys that sit around and come up with ways to spend money, but they don't stop and think logically. You know, they are going to bring this bridge across through this historic neighborhood and have it end up on A Street.

Okay, that bridge was still being built when I got here; so it's 30, 35, 36 years old. And they're forecasting, that was the last thing I read, 35,000 cars a day will come across KABATA's bridge. And then they're going to end up on this bridge that was intended for a lot less traffic than that. And it's going to end up stopping at 3rd Avenue, 4th Avenue, 5th Avenue, 6th Avenue, 7th Avenue, 9th Avenue, and you're going to back 35,000 cars up on a bridge that was made for just four or five thousand. Has anyone thought of just these logical things? That doesn't make any sense. I'm not an engineer. I'm just a common-sense person. This is just plain stupid! What are they going to do with all of that traffic when it hits downtown Anchorage, and all these stop lights?

And we have enough double-tandem trucks coming out of the port, going across and trying to get out of downtown Anchorage without bringing 'em from Fairbanks down onto that bridge, and landing 'em in downtown Anchorage. It's just, the whole thing is just nuts. I just can't imagine why someone with above-average intelligence would think this is a smart place to put a bridge.

I'm not arguing that there's another, something has to be done about getting another avenue here because Glenn Highway gets closed down. But it should be coming out somewhere up north, and then hooking into the highway up that way, not in downtown Anchorage.

That's just ludicrous, and I'm hoping that smarter heads prevail somewhere along the way and they say, "Whoops! What were we thinking? We can't do this." It just doesn't make any sense. It's like nobody thought past this intersection up here. You know, we'll get it across and land it in Government Hill and then we're not responsible from past that. I think that is why the city has finally said "Wait a minute." [Chuckles] "Let's stop and think about this. This doesn't make any sense."

I think that bridge has been the most divisive thing that's happened to Government Hill, in a long time. I mean, I don't think you'll find too many people on the Hill who think that's a great idea.

The people who have their homes up here . . . the lady that lives up on the corner up there just hates life. The one that had it before this one got up in the community council one night and broke down. She said I've been trying to sell my house. These people keep coming up talking about . . . nobody wants to buy the house because someone is going to come along and bulldoze it. And I think it's just, it's just nuts.

Well, thank you very much, Ms. Bianchi, for sharing your reflections with us today. We really appreciate your input.

You're welcome.

Sidney Billingslea Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on November 7, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Ms. Sidney Billingslea at her office regarding her knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Ms. Billingslea, is that how you pronounce your name?

Yes.

Please state your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Sidney Billingslea. I was born in March of 1959 in Anchorage, Alaska.

And where did you grow up?

I grew up in Anchorage and in Soldotna, Alaska.

When did you first move to Government Hill?

I moved to Government Hill as an adult in, when I bought the house at 217 East Harvard, in 1988.

And what made you decide to buy a house in Government Hill? Was there a particular reason?

When I lived here in Anchorage as a child, we were at Nunaka Valley and then at Rogers Park. My parents built a house at Rogers Park. And I always loved the smaller neighborhoods of Anchorage, and Government Hill was the perfect small neighborhood downtown, and the house was a perfect house that had everything I was looking for.

And where did you go to school?

I went to school at Rogers Park Elementary and Soldotna Junior High and Kenai High School.

And what brought you down to Soldotna?

My dad worked for the Port of Anchorage, and he had a business opportunity to go into private business as a heating oil distributor in Soldotna at the Union Oil heating distribution place. And so we moved down there for that.

When you first moved into Government Hill how many people lived in your home?

It was just me and my brother in 1988.

And no one else besides the two of you?

Right. He lived downstairs in the—there's 217 and 219 East Harvard at that address—and, uh, Everett lived down in the apartment and rented from me and I lived upstairs.

Did Everett ever move out of Alaska and come back, or was he always here?

He lived here until, gosh, maybe 1990 or '91. And then he moved to Seattle and got married, and he continues to live in Seattle.

And what do you remember about your home and the neighbors' homes in Government Hill?

I remember that my house particularly used to be over on the east side of Government Hill—the structure of it. And it was built in 1960. In the 1964 earthquake, the bluff where my house was located was undermined and the owner of the house at the time was a building contractor; he asked Jack Green who lives two doors to the, who lived two doors to the east of that address—217 East Harvard—if he could buy one of the two vacant lots to the west of his house.

Jack agreed and the gentleman who built my house moved his house to the lot where it stands today. He flipped it around so the front then is the back now. He built a foundation. That house has a foundation that is 17 inches thick because he said that's the last time the house is going to get moved [chuckles], and so that's where, that's where it landed. Jack and Naomi Green owned several lots on Government Hill, and they both passed away in the last five years or so.

And who were your neighbors when you lived there?

My neighbor to the east was, is a man who still lives there. His name is Jay, um, I can't remember Jay's last name. He works for Raytheon, and he's lived there for a long time. And to the west, a quite elderly woman named Lucile lives there; and she's lived there for a very long time as well.

Do you know what the occupations were of your neighbors?

Um, Jay works for Raytheon, and Lucile I can't remember. I want to say she is a retired school teacher, but I'm not quite sure of that.

Talking with some other folks from Government Hill, there seems to be a predominance of railroad workers in Government Hill. Do you see that too, and is that still true today?

The people on the corner in the brown house, uh, the eastern corner of East Harvard and Boyd I think, worked for the railroad. He's a retired railroad guy.

How would you describe Government Hill?

It's a close-knit neighborhood of eclectic people who live in eclectic houses. It's not a cookie-cutter neighborhood at all. But I think they share, I think all the neighbors share the common value of being good neighbors, which doesn't necessarily mean being in each other's business, but looking out for each other. I know that, almost a trivial example, my brother drove off with a book on top of the roof of his car one morning on the way to work and a neighbor put it together and took the book back to my brother that evening. And other times there have been notes on people's doors saying be on the lookout; there's some suspicious people in the neighborhood, and, um, somebody got their car broken into. So it's a neighborhood that looks out for each other.

It's also a neighborhood that there's two 4-plexes that were converted for AIDS hospice care over on, closer to the Inlet side. Um, they're on, they're off of Manor Street I think. And those, it's the neighborhood that voted for letting, at the time when there was a lot of prejudice against people with HIV and AIDS, our neighborhood, Government Hill neighborhood voted to have an AIDS hospice care center in the middle of the neighborhood. It's that kind of a neighborhood.

Do you recall any major local events either when you first moved there or before that when you lived in Anchorage?

Well, Statehood, and [pause] I think the biggest local event for Government Hill over the last 25 years or so has been maintaining a neighborhood relationship with the military and the port. The [pause] we as a community have worked pretty well with the military on things like cooperation on flyovers and when they are going to do the drills and the noise kind of noise abatement for compatibility with the neighborhood.

Also there are jet fuel storage tanks that were basically under the Hill. Working with the Port to try to be good neighbors with them and have them be good neighbors with the Government Hill community for their industrial noise, their hazardous waste storage, their transportation, their truck traffic, and so on.

I think the political, um . . . the political event that is going to be the most moving for Government Hill literally and figuratively is whether or not the Knik Arm Bridge gets built.

And that's cohered the community for years, and there's a core group of people that are better able to discuss that than I am. But that's definitely been a cohesive thing for the neighbors—whether or not that bridge is going to get built.

Obviously you weren't around when they appropriated the lands for the military bases; have you heard any stories about that?

I haven't heard stories about that.

What do you miss most about the early days when you first moved to Government Hill? Has it changed significantly? Do you miss anything from the early days?

You know, it was a little quieter. I mean obviously I lived there in the '80s, but when I was a little kid there used to be a more vibrant shopping area in the community of Government Hill. And my mom used to get her yarn there. There was a knit shop—I think where one of the Chinese restaurants is on the east side of the street. There used to be a good yarn shop up there and some other community-type shops and it was a little bit more vibrant shopping area.

So, and I think there was a little bit less train traffic, a little bit less Air Force noise, a little bit less port traffic. But with progress, I mean the neighborhood is an industrial—it's in the middle of an industrial area that you have to know it's there to get home. It's no surprise, but I kind of miss the quiet.

What do you think is most important to people of Government Hill, maybe in the early days versus today? Is there anything that is different that's important to the local community?

I think that, you know, I can't speak for the people who homesteaded up there and had their vegetable gardens and horses.

And mink farms.

And little farms, mink farms. I can't speak for them, but I think that just in general the fact of community and the fact of preserving the neighborhood has been important to Government Hill residents since the beginning. And the beginning for Government Hill was 1917 I think. So [pause] it's always been a neighborhood and I think people like that. It's not a big neighborhood, but it's a good one.

Do you know who some of the earlier leaders of Government Hill were, and what they did for the community?

You know, when I came over there Stu Hall, Stuart Hall who died probably 10, at least 10 years ago now, was a community leader. Bob French, Peggy Mentel and her husband Bob Manley. I know they're second-generation community leaders, but those are the people that I'm familiar with. Susanne DePietro, her husband Thomas Pease have been stalwarts in the bridge, the bridge activity, the community, and the port activity. But those are the names that come to mind first for me.

Are there places in Government Hill that stand out the most in your mind?

I like Lions Park where the kids go sledding all the time. It's a great park. I like, the water tower of course is a landmark. You tell anybody in town, you know, it's over by the water tower and they'll know what you're talking about—visible from everywhere. On the east side there was a nice park. I think there is a housing development there now, but that was another good place to go sledding down the bluff.

What type of work opportunities existed for Government Hill residents when you first moved there? Is it different than today?

No, when I first moved there it was the '80s. It was the same as everybody else in town. People worked everywhere. It seemed to be mostly, when I first moved there, it was mostly retirees and downtown workers and a few military people. To a large extent, it's the same; although what I see now is what I have seen in other neighborhoods like Turnagain and Rogers Park, which is the second generation coming in, of younger people.

Are there any historical events that affected you or the Government Hill community?

You know, as a Government, not for me as a Government Hill person coming in in the late to mid '80s. I'm a latecomer.

How about the oil booms and busts, do you think those have had a significant impact on Government Hill?

That's a good question. I think the port, just in general the growth of the state; the affluence of the state has had an impact on Government Hill because port expansion, railroad expansion, military expansion has all eaten away a little bit at the quietness and the privacy of the neighborhood. But no one has gone up there and built grand homes. Everyone lives relatively modestly up there. So . . .

Did your parents tell you any stories about Statehood? You were too young to remember it directly.

Yeah, not specifically. I remember we saved the headlines. I still have the newspaper with the big 'We're in' headline, and the picture of the bonfire that was down at the bootleg, what's now the hotel that's in front of the other building that matched the McKay building—over on 4th Avenue.

The Inlet Towers?

Yeah, the Inlet Towers building. There was a big bonfire down there. What I mostly remember, my take-away memories from being a little kid here, was Fur Rendezvous, was a big deal, a very big deal. It was all downtown and there was George Attla and Roland Lombard and their annual rivalry for who would win the Fur Rendezvous dog sled race, and the carnival would come. It was a big winter break thing for us.

Do you have any memories of the '64 earthquake?

I do. We lived here. At that time we lived in Rogers Park. And my dad worked for Alaska Sales. And at that time Alaska Sales is where, was where Glacier BrewHouse is now. In fact where they make the beer in the back is where the auto shop was for Alaska Sales.

And they had just built, Alaska Sales had just built their new building out on the edge of town on 6th Avenue, but they hadn't moved into it and that was a good thing because that building pancaked and everybody in it would have been pancaked with the concrete roof because at the time the roof, when it was built, was concrete and they'd park cars on top of it. So they avoided what would have been a disaster because they hadn't moved yet to the new building.

So the earthquake happened and my dad was at work, and my mom was getting ready for the babysitter because my godfather from Boston was flying in and so then they were going to go out for the evening on Good Friday. So we were waiting for the babysitter and the earthquake happened. And [pause] everything, all the power went out. And so mom started a fire in the fireplace and dad walked home. And eventually my godfather, who had flown from Boston and had to land at Elmendorf, and of course he's from the city arrived in a cab. [Chuckles] How that happened I don't know. He got out of the cab with his 1960's suit on with his narrow tie and his hat and his trench coat.

And we spent the next four days I think melting snow and for water and cooking over the fireplace and using the camp stove and just staying warm. And it was kind of a party 'cause the little kids in the neighborhood thought it was great, and it was kind of a party. Everybody else was I don't' thing quite so party oriented, but that's what I remember from the earthquake.

Well, we heard from Weaver Franklin who lives across from the water tower that the water tower was swaying quite a bit from side to side. Are you aware of any other effects of the earthquake on Government Hill?

Other than the fact that the house I live in is where it is today because it was undermined by the earthquake over on the east side of Government Hill, I'm not aware of anything in particular.

How about the civil rights movement? You weren't in Government Hill yet, but do you recall that having any effect on Anchorage?

I don't. I was, I was a kid in the early '60s to the, I mean, I was basically 1 through 11 in the 1960s.

How does government today differ from when you first moved to Government Hill?

Government today? Um . . . it comes and goes. You know, we've gone through the various administrations from Mystrom to Fink to Sullivan to Wuerch and, um, Anchorage is to one degree or another either dustier or not dustier, plowed or not plowed, depending on whose idea of saving money comes into play at any given time.

I remember Mayor Fink said that we should get rid of the sand, the winter sand on the road by just letting the wind blow it away and save money on sweeping.

And then there's been mayors who've said that we shouldn't put the flowers in the flower pots or grow the community gardens because that would save money. So just, politics will always roll on that roller coaster and affect communities in the same way.

How about the wars' effect on Government Hill? Obviously you weren't here during World War II, but the subsequent wars—do you see any effect on Government Hill or the Anchorage community as a whole?

Well, the Korean War is what brought my parents up here. My dad came up as a soldier, and my mother was a nurse in the Air Force and that's how they met up here during the Korean War. And Fort Rich and Elmendorf shared an officers' club at the time, and that's where my parents met. And that's where . . . you know, I think World War II is what really got Alaska on the map for being a military outpost, and what started the military money. Korean War of course added to that, and then every war from Vietnam to the Cold War to the Gulf War has continued to add to Alaska's importance in the military; and it has certainly added to the size of Elmendorf, and the number of flights that take off from there every day. And it's added to the port facility.

I think I remember my dad saying that one out of three dollars at Alaska Sales and Service is a military dollar.

So, was your dad in the Army or . . . ?

He was in the Army.

And after the Army, did he work somewhere else besides Alaska Sales and Service?

Yeah, after the Army he went to college on the G.I. Bill and came immediately back up to Alaska . . . married my mom on his Christmas of his freshman year. Then as soon as he graduated, they packed up and came back up to Alaska.

My mom was a nurse at the old Alaska Native Medical Center at the time, which was down on 4th. My dad worked at Wayne's Furniture at, for a company called Alaska Oil Sales, and for the Port of Anchorage, and for Alaska Sales and Service variously. Sometimes he had two jobs. Sometimes he had three jobs until 1968 when we moved down to Soldotna.

Sidney, do you recall any great stories or legends about Government Hill or Anchorage?

Um . . . [long pause] not really any great stories or legends. I mean all the stories that I have are sort of just personal; making a note of getting the first McDonald's, making a note of how it got cleaned up after the pipeline boomed. You know, a lot of changes have come to this town. It's not the most beautiful town in the world, but it used to be a lot uglier. [Chuckles] But it never . . . it never felt ugly growing up in it and around it because it was the biggest city.

So, it was the most exciting place. And it had the most going on and there was always a sense of possibility and prosperity. We always had, Anchorage for all of its trashy 4th Avenue life I think in 1980 spent . . . I think the Arts budget for Anchorage in 1980 was 1.5 million and this year the Arts budget for Anchorage is like \$150,000.

So the sense of possibility and the money that we had to do things then was so much greater than it is now. Which is kind of what either brought people to Alaska or kept them here.

Did your family hunt or fish growing up?

My dad did a little subsistence fishing out there off the boat ramp in Cook Inlet, and uh, but no hunting. And then I worked in the canneries when I was in High School growing up so there was plenty of fish.

Did you have a garden or a farmstead or any crops or animals?

Down in Soldotna we had a garden, but didn't raise animals.

So where did your parents come from originally?

My mother came from New Hampshire and my father came from Texas.

Did they ever talk about their early times here in Anchorage?

Yes, they both came up as I said because of the Korean War through the military.

Did they have any interesting stories to tell you that you can recall?

Yeah, they have lots of stories to tell about going out to Tip's Bar in Eagle River with the gang. It used to be "the place." And then mom would get, because she was an Air Force nurse, she would get to go up and fly around a lot. So she remembers flying over pieces of Alaska and looking down and seeing the mountains and the tiny little place that was Anchorage and the aerial views and [pause] watching the town grow; watching the state grow. They have interesting—she has interesting stories.

Do you have any other ancestors or descendants living here in Alaska?

No.

Well, is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to add at this time?

I don't think so.

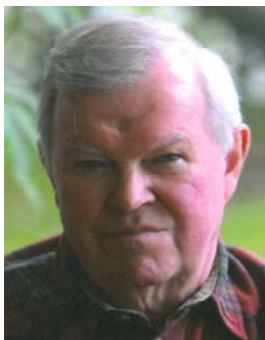
What wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

I think that Government Hill should always pay attention to its neighborhood value. It's got, it's the oldest neighborhood in Anchorage and for that it's intrinsically valuable. And I think that people should value the differences in the houses. The future shouldn't get too excited about having all the houses look the same and all the yards look the same and having a lot of rules about what you can build and what color you can paint your house. It should be a neighborhood that is for people who live there and not for some external viewpoint of how a neighborhood "should" (Ms. Billingslea expressed the universal quotation sign with her hands) look.

With that, we'll conclude our interview. And thank you very much for your time, Ms. Billingslea.

Well, you're most welcome. Thanks for doing this.

Tom Brennan Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Joni Wilm with the Municipality of Anchorage, Long-Range Planning Department [Division]; and I am here today on May 18, 2012, to conduct an oral interview with Tom Brennan at his house regarding his knowledge of historical events within the Government Hill community.

Please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

Tom Brennan and my birthdate was February 17, 1937, in Ayer, Massachusetts.

And where did you grow up?

In Massachusetts.

When did you come here?

Ah, 1967.

Why did you come here?

Well, my wife and I got married the year before, and we decided that we didn't want to settle down in the East without having seen a little bit of the world and so we were looking at either Alaska or Australia.

We could come to Alaska without a passport, so we bought an old—well, not old then—International Travelall and a houseboat on wheels and towed it up. It was not actually a good idea, but I didn't know that at the time before I started. [Laugh]

So you came up here with your wife. So going back a little bit, where did you go to school?

Well, I went to the elementary and high school in Massachusetts and then the University of Massachusetts for a degree.

And what did you study there?

English was my major and when I got out of college, I realized I was perfectly qualified to read novels but I couldn't find anyone that would pay me to read novels, so I went into the newspaper business.

When you were going to school in Massachusetts, what was that like, your school?

It was very enjoyable. U Mass, it was a very good school. Drank lots of beer.

So when you first moved to Government Hill, how many people lived in your home?

When we first moved to Government Hill, my wife and I and I think . . . we have two sons. I'm trying to remember if they were . . . they were going to college, and I think they were still staying with us. Yeah, I'm sure . . . Peter would have been in college and my youngest might have been in high school; I can't remember exactly. So there were four of us for a brief period.

Did you live in Government Hill first, or what neighborhood or community did you live in here in Anchorage?

We lived out in Muldoon briefly and out in South Anchorage and then we lived in a log house down on 10th Avenue by the Park Strip for a number of years. Then we bought a house on 9th Avenue and we lived there many years. Then we lived in a condo down in Inlet View.

And we came here. Not to this house . . . we owned a house over on Harvard for many years, and we just bought this house about three years ago. So we moved around the corner.

What do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

Maybe . . . there's something I probably ought to mention since it might be useful before I answer that. Ah, you know, Brown's Point is named for Nellie and Jack Brown. They were pioneers. They were living in a tent in 1915 when the crews came to build the Alaska Railroad, and that's when Anchorage was established. And she wound up, or the two of them wound up, with a house over there right by Brown's Point. I think it's owned by . . . it's owned by Stephanie Kesler.

But Nellie, when we came here in 1967, I don't know if you were living around here then or not, she used to hang around Club 25, which was a restaurant and bar. The building is, I think it is still called Club 25 but it's a store now, and it was moved—the whole building was moved. It used to be up west of what was then the Anchorage Times and is now the courthouse office building. Anyway, we, ah, the reporters for the Anchorage Times used to go to Club 25 to have dinner or lunch and a drink after work. And Nellie would be there very often and she'd be sitting at a table and nursing an Oly [Olympia Beer], and Nellie would tell these stories about the old days if you bought her a drink. So you'd say "Murk, give Nellie a drink." And Nellie would put down the Oly and say, "Murk, make that a Chivas Regal!" Every time she said that. [Laughter]

But she was a very colorful character. And she told marvelous stories. And then she . . . we have some paintings that were . . . I think that it . . . we have one that was done . . . I'll show you . . . I think it was done by Sydney Laurence. And Sydney Laurence and Nellie were a couple. Jack was still around I think, but I don't know what was going on there. In fact, Sydney Laurence did a nude painting of Nellie that's been available down at the Artique. In fact, are you going to interview Bobbie Bianchi?

She's already been interviewed. Yeah, she has been.

She's great. She's been here longer than I have. Now what was the question?

When you first moved to Government Hill, what do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

Well, it's just a very pleasant neighborhood. People are very friendly with each other here. . . I think more so than other parts of town I lived in. And, um, it's . . . it has a very low crime rate because the sort of limited access to it. It's not a gated community because you can come in and out, but the entrance and the exits are very limited, so we don't attract a lot of criminals because they are taking a real chance on, ah, not getting away.

Is there anything specific about the homes here that you've noticed?

One great thing, a lot of the housing dates back to pre-war times. In fact, some of them were . . . you know, this is Anchorage's first neighborhood; it was built . . . the lots here were sold when they had the land auction in 1915 and a lot of the people who had been working for the railroad or who were here for that construction bought lots up here and built them. The second phase was over on the other side of Ship Creek and those are all lawyers' offices now. But these are all residential.

And some of the houses, some of the buildings, the original buildings are still here. And one of the nice things that's happening is that a number of people like Jim Dunlap are really very interested in restoring them and have done that.

Jim Dunlap, okay. Is he a historical preservation person?

No, he's an architect and he lives over there on Harvard right next to Stephanie. In fact, he's the architect, I think, on the reconstruction of Stephanie's house.

At one time, this used to be the place where all the Anchorage Daily News reporters lived.

Really? I didn't know that. So they were all kind of up here on the Hill?

Hmm hmm. In fact, even though we were Times people, although it was only for a couple of years initially, I worked for ARCO for a number of years. There was a . . . oh what the heck . . . I can't remember their name, there was a husband and wife that lived in Stephanie's house in one of its previous incarnations and they used to come over all the time and we'd play some stupid game like Monopoly. I can't remember what it was.

Do you remember the year/period that the News Miner folks lived up here?

You mean the Anchorage Daily News?

Yeah, sorry, the Anchorage Daily News. Sorry, I'm thinking Fairbanks. I'm from Fairbanks.

Well, when we came here, there were a number of them living here, including Howard [Weaver] and I, and we came here in 1990.

So, kind of in the '90s maybe?

Uh-huh. I can't remember when Howard went to McClatchy.

Do you remember who your neighbors were? You probably just told me some of them, but any other specific neighbors?

Our next door neighbor, neighbors were Mel and Mary Barry. Mel died this past winter. Um, and they had been there for many, many years. And she's a historian and she has written a number of books about Alaska's history. And I always used to say that—you know, I've written five books and that's my main preoccupation these days—but I used to say, you know, that with Mary next door I couldn't even claim that I was the best writer on my block. [Laughing]

It would be interesting to see your books before we leave.

Sure.

What were the occupations of your neighbors? Do you remember what they did?

I think Mel and Mary were pioneers from Matanuska Valley. I think they came up with the Colony. I don't remember what year that was, but I remember they, they... was it the Roosevelt Administration? That's how things first started going in the Matanuska Valley. It was during the depression, and I think it was Franklin Roosevelt wanted to get—or his administration—wanted to get some growth going out here in the Matanuska Valley because it just had the appearance of being very fertile farmland. And the Midwest was pretty terribly hurt by the depression. So, they assembled this colony of farmers from the Midwest and brought them up and placed them up here.

And I know Mel and Mary were in a number of businesses when I first ran across them; they had a bar up on—I can't remember which lake it was but my wife will know if you need it—but a lake up in the valley; and it was a bar and a restaurant and we had our houseboat on that lake and we used to go over to "Barrys' Resort" all the time.

How would you define Government Hill?

It's a great neighborhood and it's Anchorage's first neighborhood—probably the basic definition of it. But I've heard people who were new to the neighborhood say, "Gee, this is really an interesting neighborhood, a great neighborhood; people wave to you and you don't even know them."

Friendly.

Yes.

What do you miss most about some of the earlier days on Government Hill?

Oh, it's only been 22 years so it's really not short [long] enough to miss anything. There hasn't been . . . ya know, I miss a few of my friends who have died or moved away, but that's all.

How have you seen Government Hill change over the time that you have been here?

Well, the biggest thing is the remodeling and upgrading of the houses here and the remodeling and restoration of some of these older places. I don't know how it's going, but Jim Dunlap was trying to get a historic district going over on Harvard; and there have been several blocks of buildings that have been restored or restoration is in the works. [Phone rings.]

So, we were talking about the upgrades to the homes. Do you remember what brought about the changes? Was it just new people moving in and wanting to make a change?

Yeah, before we moved up here—to Government Hill—I was not aware of it at all. But my wife was driving around with one of our employees. We had an advertising agency at that time. And she was looking for a place for an employee. She had the employee with her looking for a house, and she saw this house was for sale over on Harvard . . . the big one with, I think, nine gables. There's a couple of lawyers . . . a husband and wife lawyer living there now. We sold it to them, and she just fell in love with this house and she had to have it. She says, "Bury me in the cellar when the time comes."

But then when we were living here for a number of years, and she walked by this house—walked by, drove, drove by—she said "Oh, I've gotta have that house ; gotta have that house, so if that becomes available, we need to buy it." So it finally became available. That was three years ago and so we jumped on it and sold our house. This one is much smaller than the other one, so that worked out pretty well.

[Mr. Brennan's dog Clyde interrupts for a few seconds of attention.]

Well, this is a beautiful house and the layout of it.

One of our neighbors told me that the house was built around 1950 and it was the first house on Government Hill that had a sunken living room—until the earthquake when everybody had a sunken living room. [Laughter]

[Clyde comes for more attention.] We just came back from a trip back to Massachusetts and we took her with us and she is kind of traumatized by it.

What was most important to the people in Government Hill?

There is a strong sense of community here and people really worry about what happens on Government Hill. And so, ya know, if there's going to be big changes to a park or any major development then they're gonna be very interested; they'll be all over it.

The biggest thing in recent years has been the Knik Arm Bridge. The original proposal would have taken it through Government Hill just a few blocks from here. And that was . . . it was terrible because it would have . . . they were going to cut it and then build the tunnel underneath and then cover it back up. And so that would be sort of a little park on the surface, but , gee, they were taking some very old buildings that belonged up here. And then they finally—the federal government finally decided to move it a block to the other side and it became much less of a problem. Government Hill—an awful lot of people are still opposed to it, but it doesn't make me as crazy as it did.

I can only imagine how upsetting, you know, that would be.

Those buildings have been . . . like the square dance club . . . those buildings that are . . .

The Curling Club . . .

Yeah, the Curling Club. Those building have just been here for a long time and this is like . . . the community is like a historical society. They go crazy, ya know, if someone wants to do something like that.

Yeah, absolutely. So it is important to retain the historical character of the community to the folks up here.

Yes.

Do you remember . . . who were or are some of Government Hill's leaders and what did they do?

Well, Stephanie [Kesler] has been . . . she's been great. When she wasn't president, she was still one of the most active members of the Community Council, and she has just done great things.

The one that really stands out as a Government Hill leader was Stu Hall. He was the State Ombudsman for a number of years. I think he drove people in the department crazy because he was not a good supervisor. But when he didn't have people to supervise, he was sort of the unofficial mayor of Government Hill. And he was just the kind of guy who would just take charge. He was a good friend and neighbor and he had a couple of dogs and I always enjoyed talking to him.

But the thing that really sticks out in my mind is that when they shoot off the fireworks down at Ship Creek. . . and I think that's during the holidays, maybe Christmas [New Years Eve and Fur Rondy] . . . all the neighbors come in Our house was perfect. We could just stand out on our upstairs deck and watch it. As a matter of fact, we always had a fireworks party. But the best place to watch it was right at this Brown's Point Park.

Of course, all the cars are flooding in here. Well, Stu would get out there with his flashlight and he had a parka with fluorescent stripes on it. And he'd just get out there be directing traffic, you know. [Laughter] No authority whatsoever, but he was just telling them what to do and he looked very authoritative, so everybody would do it. [Laughs]

Stu Hall, I will have to look more into him.

And there is a memorial for him down in Brown's Point Park.

What places in Government Hill stand out the most in your mind and why?

I guess the two houses I've lived in. Then after that would be the parks.

Any particular park or just . . . ?

Well, Brown's Point is . . . I have always loved that, and this one right across the street is, ah . . . that's named for Suzan Nightingale. Suzan was a reporter for the Anchorage Daily News. And her husband owns a little log house up here and he still lives there. It's been quite a while since Suzan died. Did I mention the park is named for her?

Yeah, that's the one that they were trying to pass a resolution on last night to adopt . . . it's a yearly process to adopt it into the community to do maintenance and whatnot.

The woman that . . . Mavis Hancock. Did you talk to her?

Yes, I interviewed her last week.

Well, she is just wonderful. She loves flowers and she takes care . . . You know, she owns that whole half block. Her husband just died in the last year or so too. But she takes care of this end of the park and she plants flowers over there and tends to them.

Oh, that's another thing. Ever since I've been here, it's a great place for walking dogs. I've had about four dogs since we've come here and you can just . . . walking through the park is very nice, and, of course, you get a view of Mount McKinley and the Inlet and Susitna.

But the walkway through the park has almost always been plowed before the streets were plowed. Because we're residential, we don't get a real high priority so the city's plows will come in like three days after a storm, unless it's a . . . you know, something . . . an emergency where you can't get through. You know, everybody's got four-wheel drive or the ability to drive through snow and once it gets packed down, almost anybody can drive through it. And the city is very good about plowing it out. We usually get it on the third day.

But on the first day . . . and, it's done by a volunteer . . . he's got a little four-wheeler with a plow on it, and he plows the park. AND with the nicest touch—I have four young grandchildren—he plows out the playground equipment at the other end.

He plows access to that so not only can you walk through it, but you can get right up to the swing and the slide and everything else. Oh, my grandchildren love it. They're not always here; but when they are, they always want to go.

Does the man who plows the strip, does he live in the neighborhood too?

Yes, he does and . . . Stephanie told me what his name was. I've got it here somewhere on . . . somewhere if you want it.

Okay, yeah, maybe if you find it or if you think of it, you can just email me.

In the last 22 years or so, what types of opportunities, work opportunities existed in Government Hill and/or in neighboring communities?

Umm, well, you know we have our little business center in town there and that's about it. Umm, and I'm not sure that a lot of those . . . there's maybe a Korean family that owns a bunch of those businesses. As of first of year we have a Subway, which they're threatening to take for the bridge and that little service station and they have a nice little grocery store. The Korean family has a nice little grocery store and liquor store that I patronize when I can. But otherwise, you know, there is a lot of market for kids who want to snow shovel. And there is a kid down the street that shovels our walk and I pay him twenty bucks every time he does it. And he's very prompt; he comes over right away. This winter has been incredible. I think I paid for his first two semesters in law school. [Laughter]

I know. This winter was crazy.

How have historical events affected your family and the Government Hill community?

Hmm. Well, you know, I guess the most obvious is, ah, and it's not real heavy impact but it happens at Elmendorf because Elmendorf is our neighbor and, you know, when those airplanes come in here they . . .

you know, I've gone for a walk and seen . . . they don't do it too often, but those F22s can go straight up like this; and you're walking and I've seen a couple of them do that and go [demonstrates with noise of F22s] . . . and when you look at it, it's like being at Cape Canaveral and watching a rocket take off.

But the military is a very good neighbor. Except for special occasions, they do all their flying sort of between 9 and 5 so they're not waking people up with noise.

Right, right. So they're good neighbors?

Oh, yeah, very much so.

Well, they've been real cooperative throughout the whole planning process, so that's been really nice.

Oh, you asked about historical developments. You know, all the activity going back and forth to Southeast Asia, with the aircraft coming through here . . . it would come here and refuel. I don't think we get as much traffic here anymore because they have longer-range engines and fuel capacity, so they don't have to stop here. But when the President is going to Tokyo or something, he'll stop by here at Elmendorf.

Oh, right! Someone just . . . Harriet mentioned last night she saw . . . she was at the park here the other day and she saw Air Force One land.

Yeah.

I didn't know that. I didn't know that the Air Force One came through here.

Yeah, yeah.

Just as an aside, did you hear about the christening of the USS Anchorage that's going to happen at the Port next April?

I've heard about it but haven't heard anything lately.

Steve Ribuffo is the Port Deputy Director and he is usually at the meetings. He was mentioning that again last night.

One thing I love. Before we lived on the south side of Government Hill and we had a view of the city and that was great; we loved it. And we could see the fireworks and everything. But over here we can see the Port of Anchorage and when those cruise ships come in, they go right up to the middle of your dining room window . . . I mean, living room window, and you see them go back out. As a matter of fact, all the ships when they come and go, you can see. We love to see the cruise ships, but it's hard to do now because they come in about six o'clock in the morning and go out at midnight, which is before I get up and after I go to bed. But it's just like having them in your picture window.

What do you remember about . . . well, were you up here when Alaska became a state?

No, we came just, ah It became a state in '59; we got here in '67.

So you weren't here for the earthquake, but do you remember . . . are there any specific things, like post-earthquake, that you remember about Government Hill?

I'll tell you this, but this has nothing to do with Government Hill. But, you know, when they set aside Earthquake Park because that is where all these homes were destroyed when the land slid and they decided to make that into a park and just keep it as it was. The land was all jumbled. Someone told me they was on a tour bus some years later and when they went by Earthquake Park, the tour guide said, "This is Earthquake Park, and it used to really look like something but the city just let it go." [Laughter] What are you supposed to go in there and blow it up?

Do you remember how the civil rights movement affected the Government Hill community?

I don't. I was involved in it back East, but it was over by the time I got here.

How was the Government Hill community affected by the wars?

Well, a lot of our history relates to the wars. In fact, down by Brown's Point there are two cottages there that . . . one of them was owned by . . . the colonel that was in charge of the military here. And the other house was his guest house. Colonel . . . that was where the commander of the military lived. And, 'course, we have these buildings down the street that were part of the communication systems and the people were trying to break Japanese codes and wanted to Japanese . . . radio traffic were operated out of these buildings. And they've been unoccupied since I've been here. I believe they're trying to decide what to do with them. I think they might be restored and put to some use.

These two house across from Mavis there that are owned by, ah . . . what is it, Catholic Social Services? Anyway, they use them for families that have been, you know, displaced by domestic violence or something like that. And the kids that they've had there have really been dynamite. I don't know why, but they are just very, very nice.

You know, when I go walking with Clyde, they'll come running over and say "Can I pat your dog?" And so then they'll give her a big lovin' and hug and pat. Then they go back, and you go back to your walk.

There were two of them. See, one of them lived there and one of them was Jaden, who's, ah . . . he's 7 or 8, but he's Bobbie's grandson. And they were all upset because there was a loose dog that was running around here and somebody picked the dog up and said, "Look! If we don't find the owner of this dog, I'll have to take it to the pound." And so they were all upset by that and they were running around trying to find the owner. So I said, "If you can't find its real owner, we'll take it." But I guess it finally found its way home so they didn't have to. But they were so concerned that this dog from Government Hill was going to be taken to the pound.

And of course the kids come around all the time selling stuff to raise money for the schools.

So there is a lot of familiarity with those kids?

Yeah. You know, we don't . . . other than being trash generators—kids will drink a can of pop and throw it on the ground—other than that, the teenagers aren't a problem, except driving too fast.

Were you or are any of your family in the military?

Well, I was in the National Guard for six years; and my dad was in the Army for several years during World War II and right after. He was at Okinawa after the invasion.

How were you and your family affected by the wars?

Well, I sort of grew up between wars. I joined the National Guard in 1959 when I got out of college. It was either that or get drafted, and so I spent my six years in the National Guard. And we've had all of the activity at the military base through here, so it's been very active . . . a lot of stuff coming through here.

It's a big fixture.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill?

Um, not that I haven't told you.

Did you or your family fish or hunt?

Ah, yes, not here; you can't do it on Government Hill. I do, and both my sons do.

And where do you fish or hunt?

Well, many, many times to the Kenai River. That's our most popular.

Did you have a garden or farmstead?

Nope, just a lot of flowers. My wife raises flowers. And Miss Clyde here is my farm animal [referring to his dog]. [Laughter]

Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to add?

I don't think so. I think I've kind of gotten it all in.

Government Hill, it's just a great place to live. You know, I have lived in a number of places in Anchorage, mostly in the downtown or close to downtown, but Government Hill is just great because a real sense of community.

Moreso than other places you've lived?

Yeah, very much so.

Yeah, I can see that.

And it's a great place to walk a dog!

Well, that's it then. Thank you so much!

After the interview, the conversation continued and Mr. Brennan showed Joni Wilm the books he had written.

Marjorie I. Ellis and Melanie Ellis Lynch Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Joni Wilm, and I am with the Municipality of Anchorage, and I am here today on May 24, 2012, to conduct an oral interview with you at your house regarding your knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

[Mrs. Ellis] Marjorie I. Ellis. I was born near Concordia, Whiteman . . . Knob Noster, K-N-O-B N-O-S-T-E-R, Missouri.

And what year were you born?

[Mrs. Ellis] 1918.

How about you Melanie?

[Ms. Lynch] Melanie Ellis; my current name is Melanie Lynch. I was born here in Anchorage in the old Providence Hospital. My birthdate is July 7, 1960.

Where did you grow up?

[Mrs. Ellis] Missouri and Oklahoma.

[Ms. Lynch] I grew up here . . . in Anchorage, yes.

When did you come here? Or have you always been here?

[Mrs. Ellis] 1950.

[Ms. Lynch] I have always been here.

Why did you come up?

[Mrs. Ellis] My husband was employed with the Alaska Railroad, and we were coming BACK to Alaska.

Because you had been here before, or . . . ?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes, in 1946 and 1947 in Fairbanks.

So you came up with your husband. That was it, just the 2 of you?

[Mrs. Lynch] Yes, yes.

This will be for you, Melanie. Where did you go to school?

[Ms. Lynch] I started my elementary school at Government Hill Elementary and then my middle school was at Central Junior High School. I was the last year of ninth graders at Central, so when I went to West High School I didn't have to go through being a freshman. It was very nice.

What was your school like?

[Ms. Lynch] Which one?

I guess maybe both your elementary and your high school?

[Ms. Lynch] Um, to be honest, they were pretty rough, pretty rough, yeah.

Why is that?

[Ms. Lynch] Well, this is while I was in elementary school during the '60s and in middle and high school during the '70s. And there wasn't as much attention paid to a bullying and, you know, um, mediating issues between kids or groups of kids, and so I was the youngest in the classes and small and shy, and so it was, it was pretty rough. But I had, I had my group of friends and so we hung out together.

And the same kind of in high school? I mean, I guess maybe that was more in high school.

[Ms. Lynch] It was all the way through . . . because you see, because Government Hill fed into Central which fed into West; you had the same groups of kids. Now Central there were some other schools that fed into it and then you get up to the high school and you have even more schools that feed into it.

What neighborhood or community did you live in first?

[Ms. Lynch] I've only ever lived in Government Hill.

This is for both you. How many people lived in your home . . . while you were here?

[Mrs. Ellis] Let's see . . . Judy and Marilyn was both alive then, so by the time you [referring to Melanie] were born though, Marilyn was the only one . . . four people. Um huh.

And who are Judy and Marilyn?

[Mrs. Ellis] They were my older children . . . they are just both deceased.

[Ms. Lynch] They were my older sisters.

I am sorry to hear that. I did not know that. And so there was four of you together?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes.

And your husband was still living in the house then?

[Mrs. Ellis] Pardon?

Oh, was your husband still living in the house with you then?

[Mrs. Ellis] Oh, yes!

So five of you. And there was no one besides your immediate family that lived with you?

[Ms. Lynch] Not in the house.

[Mrs. Ellis] From time to time my grandchildren, sometimes.

[Ms. Lynch] Well, uh, my oldest sister died in 1969, and from time to time we would have her two children stay with us. And then when my other sister died in 1972 and she had a very young son . . .

[Mrs. Ellis] Five.

[Ms. Lynch] He was only five and so we would, we would have him here. Not all the time. But, you know, it was a supportive role.

Did your family own your home?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes.

What do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

[Mrs. Ellis] This is going to take a little time.

That's okay.

[Mrs. Ellis] We built our own home. We had signed a contract with the Alaska Railroad that we would build a livable dwelling within a three-year period. Everybody else had either Lockwalls or Quonset huts. We had a Quonset and so did our neighbors.

The urban renewal situation went in primarily to remove the Quonsets; however, the Government Hill School had built. . . they were right over here on where the park is now, and they had built an addition . . . well, what they claimed to do for two years they would tell us, because we had the only house built here.

Max had a basement on the corner and uh, let's see . . . Christensens also had a basement; now that did not, that did not comply with the government . . . the Alaska Railroad contract. Because we had, had a . . . actually, we had finished with it; and for two years straight they would come up here and say, "We are going to condemn your property and move you out to Turnagain." If we had wanted to move to Turnagain, we'd have bought at Turnagain in the first place.

But like I said, they kept pestering us. Our house was built under this direct supervision of the City Engineering Department, Clarence Epps. And every time they would say “we are going to condemn your house,” I would call Clarence and say . . . He said, “Marge, if I have to condemn your house, I’m gonna have to go down and condemn about half of 4th Avenue!” Well, finally, they just made life miserable for us. I mean they would pull little disgusting things.

Anyway, finally, I said, “All right! We will sell to you providing in a ten-year period if this hasn’t been used as a playground,” (this two-block area is what they were claiming they needed for this new addition), “okay! If within a 10-year period it hasn’t been used for a playground, it will revert back to the original owners and any amount of money that is paid shall be considered as rental.”

They didn’t want that, I mean that wasn’t . . . it doesn’t take a very intelligent person to realize what they had done. They had gone through and renumbered all of these lots. Up until that time, we were 208. Now we’re 710. Kathy Dale next door is 720 . . . and, and so forth. And across the street is of course within it . . . which is a riddle, that’s all . . . ten units to each lot here.

[Ms. Lynch] That’s also why if you look around you will see some properties are at a little higher elevation than the street level. Those are some of the original properties.

[Mrs. Ellis] Well, the Alcan Pacific homes were the ones that built these homes. And, what they did, the first thing they did . . . come in and they scraped out all the topsoil and sold it to Elmendorf. We’re sitting up here on this . . . we were on the original what was everything. As you can see, this is not a happy subject for me.

Yes.

[Mrs. Ellis] Would you believe that the part of the Government Hill School that went down in the ’64 earthquake was the part that they claimed they needed for this two-block area.

Also, I want to be sure and say because people don’t say it . . . there was not a child on the playground, there wasn’t a soul in the Government Hill School. Frances Wolf was the principal. She was a very devout Baptist lady, and this was Good Friday; this is why there wasn’t a . . . there wasn’t a soul on the place.

Ordinarily that, that playground would have been covered with kids. The school would have been filled with teachers and parents. The custodian was the only one there and he had some cleaning. He thought with all the kids out of the school would be a perfect time to do it. He came up and there was a, a cement, a big cement area there, with what he was going to be cleaning. That’s where he was. There wasn’t a soul in the school; there wasn’t a soul except him on that, that whole area.

Yeah, that was a lucky, lucky break.

[Mrs. Ellis] It was God’s blessing . . . that we didn’t lose one soul.

And the custodian was okay?

[Mrs. Ellis] Oh, yes! He was fine! He was out up here on the cement area. Certainly his feet kinda got moved around a little bit. Things were a little disorganized.

And we have another question a little bit later on about how the earthquake affected this neighborhood, so we can expand on that too a little more with that question, but that’s really interesting.

Who were your neighbors?

[Mrs. Ellis] Before the earthquake, with the Quonset owners, now some of them, people on both sides sold and moved away before the quake. Afterwards of course. The first neighbors we had on this side were the Cutchers. And he was a builder; Mrs. Cutchers was from England, and a delightful lady . . . absolutely. And the people, the Dales’ side, it was, uh they used it as a military rental so I really never got acquainted with a lot of those people.

[Ms. Lynch] Didn't the Rices live there? Was this before the Rices?
[Mrs. Ellis] I mean they had yoo-hoo people there before they moved in.

So the Cutchers and the Rices are the main folks you remember?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes, uh the Rices were not the first; I just don't remember who it was because they were military people. The Rices were from South Africa. That should be sufficient for what they need [referring to interview information].

Yes. The next question is what were their occupations? Sounds like the Cutchers were a builder . . . and the Rices did . . . what did they do?

[Mrs. Ellis] He was a builder, yes. Ah, what's that insurance company, the guy who always buys your paintings before anyone else gets a chance? Ah, New York Life.

I think that she was a stay-at-home mother, a hard-working lady. They were delightful people; I just loved them. And they had the nicest little boy who thought you were a little boy.

[Ms. Lynch] Once he figured out I was a girl, he quit picking on me.

[Mrs. Ellis] His mother said, "You don't hit little girls." No, then why are you hitting Melanie? "He's a girl?" he exclaimed. She was just three.

That's funny and you were of the same age?

[Mrs. Ellis] No, no, he was five; she was three; he was five.

[Ms. Lynch] I was just so miserable to wash my hair; I had short hair. I still struggle. [Laughs]

[Mrs. Ellis] She had naturally curly hair; it was short . . . either that or it was a nightmare to shampoo her hair.

How would you define Government Hill? This would be for both of you.

[Ms. Lynch] I could field that one first if you want.

[Mrs. Ellis] Go ahead; I have one word. No.

[Ms. Lynch] Maybe you should go first. Okay. Well, because of the railroad families up here I would define it as a tight-knit, blue-collar community, but the, ah, some of the administrators at the railroad . . . the head of personnel and benefits . . . also lived up here. And, because of that, because our families worked together at the same place . . . I think it was very unique in that feel. It was, it was not, not as tight as an extended family but it definitely had that essence.

And, if you were at someone's house, as a child I remember being at one of the other railroader's houses, and it would be like being in a member of the family's house because they knew your dad. They worked with your dad; they were buddies with your dad or your mom or, you know, a sibling.

And so, there was that real sense that you were known, and your family was known; you know, there wasn't the, I think the anonymity that we tend to have now, and certainly not the apathy. I mean you were like everyone; everybody was pitching in to raise those kids.

So like a community?

[Ms. Lynch] Very much so . . . In fact, you've probably heard this but the Round and Square and Dance Club down there was originally built as the employees club.

[Mrs. Ellis] That was ours, yes.

[Ms. Lynch] That was the employees club for the Alaska Railroad employees.

[Mrs. Ellis] Not only did we own it, but we built it literally.

Interesting, I didn't know that . . . for the Alaska Railroad employees?

[Ms. Lynch] Uh huh, it was called the Employees Club.

[Mrs. Ellis] Which is what I still call it.

[Ms. Lynch] I know. Okay, your one word.

Okay, Marjorie, your one word, Marjorie.

[Ms. Lynch] Summing up the community.

[Mrs. Ellis] Mayhem. [Laughing]

Mayhem? And why do you say that?

[Mrs. Ellis] Besides everybody knowing everybody else, if there was a problem, we took it to our community council. Never the twain shall meet . . . Across the roadway is the old area. We are the new area and the big kids used to fight. My oldest daughter and the man she was going to marry, whom she hated when she was growing up, she bounced a rock off his head. I mean that was dividing line, as for us. Other than that, I would say . . . most of the time we agreed.

So there was a competitive streak between the old neighborhood and the new neighborhood?

[Mrs. Ellis] One thing, Government Hill was like the red-haired stepchild of the district. When I first, when we first came to Alaska in 1950, my oldest daughter was seven years old.

She was in the A-part of the second grade in Denver. They have two actually an A-part and a B-part and they're separate in both, in all their elementary grades.

We don't have anything like that. Our Government Hill children for that first year took the city bus. We didn't have buses, school buses. And these old buses, you hoped when you got on one that you'd be able to go all the way . . . because nine times out of ten you're gonna walk half way. Anyway, we had a grocery store down on 4th Avenue which was Lucky's and the bus would stop at Lucky's. And, these children would walk all the way from Lucky's to Chugach School; that's where Government Hill was then. Then they moved Government Hill children to uh, Denali. That's the one down on 9th, isn't it?

[Ms. Lynch] Uh-huh. It's the Denali Montessori now after they gave it a major face lift.

[Mrs. Ellis] That's where the Government Hill children went then. And they uh, in junior high they were fine with that . . . Then they went to the junior high downtown and they went to West.

Well, then when my middle daughter, who would be 64 this coming June, if she were alive, by that time they had sent Government Hill children . . . we had, when we started, the school wasn't quite finished . . . so they had all of the classes down in the Employees Club. And they had them sectioned off and one poor teacher . . . it was her first year of teaching and if you can imagine, here you have people talking over here; here's another group whose singing over here. And then this poor teacher trying to get through to these little kids who were, they were not very happy . . . I mean everybody was rather crowded in and they were rushed to do everything. That first year was a nightmare. But then we just about lost, the teacher was . . . we got to be real good friends because I was very active in the PTA with the school. And she was ready to give up teaching. She said, "If this is teaching, I'm just not built for it." Anyway, we had finally got into the school here of our own.

But, they had moved Government Hill, the junior high [students] out to Clark. They started Clark in their senior year. Now these kids had all started school together, from, you know, from elementary all through. They wanted to move Government Hill children from East back to West. And the only way . . . the kids just, I mean they just rebelled! that's all. All of the clubs and everything was there at . . . at East. My daughter was quite a vocalist; she was in the, what they called a Camareta choir; she was in Thespians; she was in every, I would say, every play that she ever started at when she began school.

And, I was trying to think of the bands . . . the kids that played in the bands . . . I mean you don't just take people out of a certain music group and plunk them into another one. That was just one item.

Anyway, they decided, the school district decided that they would let them go to East, but the parents would have to furnish transportation, which we did for everything. Of course, for some reason they could have been sent to West, but I think it was a little bit of discouragement. Anyway, that was just one of the things.

Creating mayhem in the neighborhood?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes, and it was just it had happened like I said from Chugach to Denali. It was just . . . and we . . . the Government Hill, when they went to Denali, the Government Hill PTA bought the playground [equipment]; took a Saturday and the men, the husbands, fathers erected everything. Well, when they moved us from Denali, we couldn't take any of that [playground equipment] even though we were the ones that had bought it and erected it.

[Ms. Lynch] The playground equipment.

[Mrs. Ellis] We were just, it was just another I would say, a slap at Government Hill.

[Ms. Lynch] I think sometimes when a community's growing, there is discord, and things . . . you know the saying about chaos tending towards order, order tending towards chaos. And I think that was very much true of Anchorage in the '60s and '50s and probably had always been in, I mean in comparison with some of the stateside cities of the same size. Anchorage is very young, and with Government Hill, because it is one of the oldest communities in Anchorage.

[Mrs. Ellis] It is the "oldest." It's the oldest.

[Ms. Lynch] I think it is going through at this time a "renaissance," and, you'll see a lot of remodeling on the other side of the hill. So, it might be difficult to think about as an old area and this is the new area . . . but I think too, you can see more of the renaissance happening on the other side of The Hill with the bigger structures and the remodeled houses and then over here you are still seeing, you know, the, the downside of the ageing community before its starting to come back up.

Which I think is starting to happen on this side . . . you can see the changed structures and the remodels and so in that sense, I think it's just at that point in its lifetime of going into the community renaissance. Which I am not that familiar . . .

[Mrs. Ellis] That new housing area out in the apartments.

[Ms. Lynch] Those are very nice. Right those are very nice homes. I think that . . . I don't know; I'm not a city planner. But, it seems like that is a typical life process in a community. As you get the older, older areas that become more accessible financially to young families as they're starting out and I think that's an important thing to think about with Government Hill, because for a young family to be able to come into an already established community with a park and with a school and with immediate access to downtown, but still affordable housing that helps create stability within the community overall. Because you have families that are able to own their own homes and start to build on that foundation. In that sense I think Government Hill is a very important community simply because of its ability to be a, a keystone in the overall fabric of Anchorage.

Not too unlike Nunaka Valley and Fairview is going through a renaissance right now. Turnagain had done its renaissance. Spenard is starting to go through its own.

You know, some of these older communities. Commercial developers may have a keen eye to it, but I really believe, and this is just my opinion, that you get the stability and you can build the tax base when you give people the opportunities to grown within the community.

And to not to be transient . . . [Inaudible].

[Ms. Lynch] And to not be transient, I, that really weakens the community; it tears down the tax base. And, that's my soap box! I'm sorry. I have many. [Inaudible] [Laughs]

That was well said. I couldn't agree more.

[Mrs. Ellis] See, this was one of the . . . with that Urban Renewal, see, they primarily . . . and I had friends who had sold their Quonsets with the idea that they would be able to buy one [a house]. Well, they found out, let's see, what was their names . . . Mildred and . . . ?

[Ms. Lynch] Autry?

[Mrs. Ellis] No, not the Autrys. [Inaudible] Mildred and . . . They weren't the people that had \$15,000 they had saved and were told . . . he had the barbering, the barber shops, the franchise for Elmendorf and Fort Rich. But, they were told, I think it was that they weren't eligible for buying into this. Lunts . . . Mildred and Chester Lunt, and then the Bollings had 10,000, and they weren't eligible because he worked for the Alaska Dairy.

[Ms. Lynch] Right, so where have we gotten to?

We were on 15, so then 16; and maybe Melanie you can speak to this . . . What do you remember about major local events as a child here in the neighborhood?

[Ms. Lynch] Oh, just in the neighborhood?

Or, no, citywide too.

[Ms. Lynch] Well, the major local event for me in the neighborhood would have been at the Government Hill Elementary School and at Central and West, and they were primarily . . . oh, folk festivals and songs. I remember as a child being part of an ice capade program where we all dressed up in costumes and we went down to the sports arena. Now the sports arena at that time . . . ah, do you know where Arctic Office Supply is? That building? That was the [emphasis on "the"] sports arena. [Laughs] That was the big woo-woo place to go for sports events.

Let's see here . . . what major local events? We had um . . . no, it was primarily the school, the school events, the spaghetti dinner, which I think still goes on up there; they have plays, and these events were open to the communities.

Fur Rendezvous was a big deal. I'm trying to think of any other events. I really can't think of any. It's interesting how at that time in the '60s there weren't that many big local events as there are now. I can remember when I was in middle school that the biggest thing going on was West High School had a pool. You know, at one time that was like a big deal.

[Mrs. Ellis] Well, we had a pool for the kids just on the opposite side of that Moon Valley Park [Valley of the Moon Park].

[Ms. Lynch] Oh, yeah, I remember that.

[Mrs. Ellis] That's where the junior high . . . the kids from Clark, no from Central went down for their swimming lessons.

[Ms. Lynch] Let's see, I'm not sure that was a good answer.

No, no, that was very, very good. There was a lot of things in there. So here's one for both of you, I guess. What do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

[Ms. Lynch] Kids playing outside. I just remember the sledding hill over cross on the other side of the hill and you can see it as you leave Government Hill. It's just this little hill.

[Mrs. Ellis] That's where all the kids learned to ski.

[Ms. Lynch] There used to be a lot of kids over there. Yeah, my friend and I taught some of the littler kids how to ski over there. It used to be full of kids. There was a basketball court down there that the Municipality, and I don't know if they still do this, would flood as an ice rink, and that was full of kids. And there were kids outside playing and I don't see that as much now. But I think that was an important presence.

[Mrs. Ellis] I think you don't see it as much because the schools like junior high have their own ice rinks.

[Ms. Lynch] Well, I think that difference too is that was in the '60s, and this is 2012, and we have a lot more working parents and before-and-after-school programs and there's less of, less of an unstructured time for kids to get out and go do that. I mean, our, our kids are pretty booked up. But, I'll leave that soap box over with. [Laughs]

No, that's okay; that's interesting. I just want to make sure on the location of the park or the hill.

[Ms. Lynch] The sledding hill?

Yeah, where is it now again?

[Ms. Lynch] It's um . . . as you are going down Government Hill and you look to your right, that hillside slopes down.

Okay, so right where or behind the Curling Club area . . . is that too far over?

[Ms. Lynch] If you keep going straight . . . if you just look straight out there. It's, it's . . .

[Parts inaudible – all 3 talking at once]

[Mrs. Ellis] What do they call it now? Square Dance Club?

[Ms. Lynch] No, that's not where the sledding hill was.

Are there trees there now?

[Ms. Lynch] There's still a bare hillside, a little bit of a slope. And then if you look at it, it slopes down and you can see a pathway where it kind of heads down the hill. Well, before they cut this new road in, we had another one closer to the roadway at the base of that hill that came down, and I think you can still see that and we used to called that "Suicide Hill." Then there was "Deadman's Curve" and then there was "Little Suicide." Which was . . . but when the roadway got cut through and widened out, that took some of that sledding hill area. But, and I'm belaboring this point, the kids were out there with their community space . . . and you knew if . . .

I remember one night walking to a friend's house and this car was following me and I was just a kid and it scared me, but I knew I could go into to, to the Flemings' house or the Kaisers' house or the Greens' house. Or the . . . I mean, you knew the families at every single one of these houses. You didn't have to have the "Safe Sign" in the window. You knew because it was like a big community.

[Mrs. Ellis] You had a community watching out for you.

[Ms. Lynch] A close, tight-knit community, and I can still, you know, I still know these families over there and we'll see them from time to time. You mentioned Mavis Hancock. Howie [Hancock] and I went to school together, her son. You know Mavis; she taught my, one of my, one of my ex-husbands . . .

[Mrs. Ellis] Math at Wendler; she taught math at Wendler.

[Ms. Lynch] Yeah, she also taught at SAVE [alternative high school]. And so, these were people that were not just a "neighbor" but they became a part of your life and affected your life because they were going to be, would be your "teachers." You know, you might have one kid's mom or dad that was your pediatrician or you know the school librarian. So, it was a very interwoven community and I don't know if any of us even exist anymore.

Right, Jack, I was just going to mention Jack Karterman; I did him last week and he was mentioning how the community . . . [Inaudible]

[Ms. Lynch] The Kartermans lived right over here in the yellow house around the corner on there Sunset Drive, didn't they?

[Mrs. Ellis] Later, yeah, Edith lived there.

[Ms. Lynch] Oh, yeah, that's right; that's where Edith lived.

[Ms. Lynch] By the way, she's deceased now. She died last [Inaudible] . . . these are friends we've known for years.

Yep, yep. Okay, let's see . . .

[Mrs. Ellis] There is one thing I would like to add while I am thinking about it. At one time where the shopping district is, we didn't have any kind of shopping. We had a great "big" Quonset hut and it was used for all the community activities. Well, in the wintertime the firemen flooded a BIG area, and they had, we had one of the best skating rinks you'd ever want to see.

[Ms. Lynch] Was that in the '50s, do you think?

[Mrs. Ellis] That was in . . . yes, the early '50s, early, early '50s.

[Ms. Lynch] And that was right up here at the shopping complex?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yeah, where the shopping is now, the shopping center.

I'm also working on the Government Hill Neighborhood Plan so it's neat to hear these ideas about the sledding hill. I can't remember if that was brought up in the workshop or not, but we could certainly get it included in the plan.

[Mrs. Ellis] The Hillcrest Presbyterian Church, was, it was a kit and the husbands and fathers put that up in one day . . . your dad and Howie Hancock.

[Ms. Lynch] It's the daycare down there, and there used to be a fire station across the street.

[Mrs. Ellis] Rich Shaker . . . They were all . . . they put, they put that up in one day and then all of us painted it . . . whoever could handle a paint brush. It was strictly a do-it-yourself project.

That's definitely worth noting. Let's see, how about, I think we talked a little bit about what brought about the changes. Melanie, we were talking about the road coming in, maybe how things have changed over your lifetime. How about what was most important to the people in Government Hill, do you think?

[Ms. Lynch] I would say the railroad. Because that's where most of the people worked. [Laughed] The railroad and the school. You know their place of work and where their children went to school.

[Mrs. Ellis] We also had things that we worked with the military too, because a lot of military families, and they were "dear" to us. They were part of the family . . . you know, part of the neighborhood family.

Who were some of Government Hill's leaders and what did they do?

[Mrs. Ellis] Hazel Davidson.

Hazel Davidson?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes.

And what did she do?

[Mrs. Ellis] Uh, she was very active in the PTA. She also was active in doing anything for the community. That was a little bit before your time [referring to before Melanie was born], but she was . . . I held my breath 'cause every time I turned around she wanted to "let" me do something. [Laughs] He was . . . Mr. Davidson was assistant to the commissioner, the head of the Alaska Railroad.

[Ms. Lynch] I was thinking of Pug Williams too. He was, wasn't Pug kind of a mover and a shaker up here?

[Mrs. Ellis] No. Pug was DOD. [Assuming meant Department of Defense]

[Ms. Lynch] Did Russell Mack get involved?

[Mrs. Ellis] No, Kit and Harry Jones; Harry Jones was a personnel manager.

So, what places in Government Hill stand out the most in your mind and why?

[Mrs. Ellis] I think with me it would be the Government Hill School in the '64 quake. Everything else is kind of . . . because it did have quite an impact on . . . see, we immediately had to find out schools.

[Ms. Lynch] For me? Oh, well, I was a kid so the places that stood out most in my mind were the sledding hill of course, but also before they put the park in, where the Government Hill School went down, there was a big gravel pit area. And if you went just past the gravel pit area . . . of course now you will find homeless camps. But, when I was a kid, you could find wood frogs. And you could find a little wooded area.

And that gravel pit was so much fun to play in because it was mysterious; it had this essence of danger from the earthquake. Uh, there were these great cliffs you could go running up. Well, I was kid; it seemed like a cliff; it was this big embankment you could go running off and because of the gravel, of course you're not going to get hurt falling into it. So, for me that was the grandest adventure imaginable was that unstructured free time.

Yep, do you hear my drum beating back there? . . . And being able to have these areas that were safe to play in

That's so interesting these spaces that are just such great adventure lands for us when we were kids.

[Mrs. Ellis] I can remember one adventure; it didn't happen to me. This was when we were all still in the Quonset huts and the military decided that they would have, you know, a little, little battle on Government Hill. The opponents had really unique uniforms; I mean it was very obvious that they were not the regulars.

Well, they didn't tell . . . nobody thought to alert the kids here. And, Jerry was one of 'em. He was about 11. These boys thought that, that their homes were being attacked. And they, they surrounded and defeated this bunch; it was hilarious! [Laughing] But it was very embarrassing for the military.

My oldest son-in-law still lives over in the old area and we were just laughing about that lately. He said, "Boy, we thought, 'These guys, you know, they're the enemies . . . we've got to do something!'" So they really attacked them. They took them captive!

Wow! Were they armed and stuff too?

[Mrs. Ellis] With sticks and rocks and anything they could get their hands on. It was about, I would say, maybe a dozen kids.

I know a bit about the work opportunities that existed in Government Hill. I know railroad, JBER . . . any other ones that stand out in your mind?

[Ms. Lynch] District Corps of Engineers. Well, when Alascom came in and then all the little shops. Oh, there were a couple a gas stations up here . . . and these little shops from time to time.

[Mrs. Ellis] We had, we had a bank.

[Ms. Lynch] That's right; we had National Bank of Alaska.

[Mrs. Ellis] And we had a post office. We don't have either now.

[Ms. Lynch] A little grocery store

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes, the little Piggly Wiggly was the first grocery

[Inaudible, all talking at once]

[Ms. Lynch] And then next to that was Lee's Jewelry and then next to that was Sherry's Beauty Salon and then let me think; next to that was the barber shop. And then Janaan Kitchen, a local artist; she, I don't know if that was when she had her art shop.

[Mrs. Ellis] Oh, she had her art shop . . . over on this side.

[Ms. Lynch] I mean, that little shopping center has hosted a wide variety of businesses that have come in. I would love, you know just me, Melanie, personally, I would love to see a little grocery store come in. Especially with all of the . . .

That was a strong desire in the public workshops for the plan too. A lot of people expressed an interest in a grocery store.

[Mrs. Ellis] One of the downsides to that is that it is so close to Elmendorf, and they have so many things that they can get; it doesn't cost them anything and that is pretty hard to compete with.

I think gas is still the same for them though; they don't get any break on gas. I know a lot of them frequent the Tesoro down here too.

Ms. Lynch mentions that she has to get back to work.

How did the civil rights movement affect Government Hill?

[Ms. Lynch] I was born in 1960, and oh, but now that you mention it, when I was in elementary school and middle school, it wasn't that much of an issue and I remember one of my best friends in sixth grade was a black girl named Melinda. And she and I were two "Mels." I do remember there were racial issues at West High School when I was there. And, that was actually in the '70's. I graduated from West in '77.

But it wasn't broad; it wasn't widespread. It would be, I would say more than anything, you would have like a white kid getting upset with a black kid, and that would become, you know, this little "my friends against your friends."

As I said earlier the bullying issues . . . now they call it gangs, back then it was every bit as much of a gang against another one, but I wouldn't say that spoke to racial issues in a broad sense. Because, my attitude when I was in middle school and high school . . . that never would have entered my mind, that because a person had a different skin color they had any other differences. We had a large population of Alaska Native kids. I had friends who were Russian, and then on Government Hill we had a Danish family across the street; we had German families; we had, you know, black families, and families from all over the world. And so I think, in that sense and this is just my opinion, we were more insulated from that as perhaps than some of the older stateside communities that had, uh were closer to the civil rights issues.

[Mrs. Ellis] I think a lot of that is the fact that we integrated our military families and we had [*conversation drops off*].

[Ms. Lynch] Kind of more of cosmopolitan if you think about the size of the community, which isn't very big at all because of the location, you know, Alaska being where it is, and because of the military base in close proximity to Government Hill, and because of the large population of Alaska Native kids too. I think we have a better blend. A little more cosmopolitan feel to the community within the schools than you might in the, you know, the old communities that had maybe harder lines drawn.

[Mrs. Ellis] I think Alaska is just much more accepting of other people.

[Ms. Lynch] Well, I sure hope so. You'd think, but, you know, it seems like, I don't want to get too political.

[Mrs. Ellis] I don't think race has anything to do with it.

I grew up in Fairbanks and there were a lot of black kids in my high school that were from Eielson. It's just so different up here. Everyone is just trying to stay warm all the time, there's no time for that other stuff.

[Mrs. Ellis] Well, we're from someplace else and we are more accepting of somebody who's from some other place.

[Ms. Lynch] Yeah, that's a good point.

That's true too. A lot of people up here are from someplace else because it's so young and so new. That's a good point.

[Ms. Lynch] I need to run back to work.

Well, thank you so much. I'm just gonna finish up here with your mom. Is that okay? Can I stay and finish the questions or should I go? I am not sure what's comfortable for you guys.

[Ms. Lynch] Well, I don't know about my mother but I think you are more than welcome to stay. [Laughter by all]

[Mrs. Ellis] And if she is right from Fairbanks, she's good people.

[Ms. Lynch] Okay, there you go; you got an in. [Laughter]

Thanks, Marjorie. Well, thank you so much, Melanie, that was great to have you in. We really appreciate that.

[Ms. Lynch] And if you like, if you have a moment, we can actually see the sledding hill from the backyard there. I can take you out there if you want.

Sure! I'll just leave that running. [recorder]

[Ms. Lynch] Because when I was a little kid that was how I knew to come home. My mother would turn on the bathroom light and I could see it from the sledding hill.

Oh, that's handy.

[Ms. Lynch] There were times my father had to come get me because I wasn't paying attention. I would have the lecture all the way . . .

[inaudible]

[Mrs. Ellis] The next time you paid attention.

[Ms. Lynch] Well, it was better to have Daddy come get me than you.

[Mrs. Ellis] That's what I'm thinking.

[Ms. Lynch] You were a woman of short words and fuse.

[Ms. Lynch] I'm going to point out the sledding hill to her.

[Upon return to the house and before Melanie returns to work, Joni prepares to take a photo of Melanie Lynch and Marjorie Ellis.]

Wow! Are you a horse person? [Joni notices a picture of a young Melanie with a horse.]

[Ms. Lynch] Not now. I was in 8th grade. I think when I was in elementary school I wanted to grow up to be a horse. Imagine my disappointment. I was a horse-crazy little girl.

I was too. I definitely was that.

[Paused to take picture.]

Thank you, Melanie. We will see you later. We will send you updates for the Plan, the Government Hill Neighborhood Plan.

[Ms. Lynch] I love the idea that people wanted to see a store up here, especially the folks down in the apartment areas that, um . . . Yeah, I see the moms with the little kids and I think a store would be so helpful for them.

[Ms. Lynch departs for work.]

We have just a few left. So now we are getting into a little more history. Do you remember the wars and how they affected Government Hill? You moved up in 1950, so you remember the end of the World War II. Did that affect the neighborhood?

[Mrs. Ellis] World War II? I wasn't here in World War II. The only war that I remember while I've been in Alaska was Vietnam. Well, we had the Korean War. We had the Korean first and then the Vietnam.

My husband was a reservist for 23 years.

What is that . . . a reservist?

[Mrs. Ellis] It meant that once every two weeks, I guess it was, they had a meeting at Fort Richardson. He and Colonel Cassidy started the Civil Affairs Group at Fort Richardson. And Colonel Cassidy lived on the other side of the Hill. He was the attorney for the Alaska Railroad.

And the Civil Affairs Group, what did that do?

[Mrs. Ellis] If we had to go into a foreign country after it's been defeated and take over, they set up the . . . all of the governing facilities. My husband would have been an attorney because he finished that kind of training in the military.

Were any of your family members in the military?

[Mrs. Ellis] Let's see. My own brother was career Air Force. But he didn't live up here. No, my grandson who did live here has been career Navy . . . Navy Air and is right now . . . is employed as . . . doing for the marine pilots what he did for 20 years in the military. His wife's a marine.

And my younger grandson was almost killed in Iraq. He's 80% disabled; he has a wonderful outlook on life. I just wish the very best for him. Now, my great grandson is Navy. He hasn't lived here but he certainly visited me often enough.

And his, my grandson's daughter, my only great granddaughter—I have yoo-hoo great grandsons— one great granddaughter has just completed medical deal in her university and her dad says he has just lined her up . . . or she's going into the Air Force. I don't know what she is going to be doing; but she has a little girl.

So quite a few family members in the military then.

[Mrs. Ellis] Oh, yes, yes.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill or Anchorage?

[Mrs. Ellis] Let's see. I think maybe . . . the house next door . . . beyond the one next door, the duplex, was owned by a woman who was a very old Alaskan, Vannie Davenport, and anybody who's in Pioneers would know who Vannie is.

What did Vannie do?

[Mrs. Ellis] She worked for the National Bank of Alaska. She took care of the museum part because she knew firsthand what all of this was about . . . just a fascinating lady. She's from an old pioneer family; her dad had the coal mines—Evan Jones Coal Mines. She was the daughter of Evan Jones. They're really a very, very old pioneer family. She was here when Anchorage just became a city . . . something like 1915.

Wow. That is early.

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes, she's a real pioneer.

Did your family fish or hunt?

[Mrs. Ellis] My husband, we came to Alaska the second time because he LOVED to fish and hunt PRIMARILY! Where do you go in Alaska? I mean up the line as far as Sheep Creek—he went hunting there. And I don't know where all. Because they have certain areas, certain permits for hunting in certain areas. He was a very, very law-abiding man and he had very little use for people who weren't.

Did you have a garden or farmstead?

[Mrs. Ellis] Oh, yes! Always!

What kind of crops did you grow and did you have animals too?

[Mrs. Ellis] No animals; well, we did have a dog . . . who thought he was a person.

As most dogs do.

[Mrs. Ellis] We had a white Siberian who was from the original team. I can't remember what's the man's name but he was quite famous in the early days. They were the big sled dogs, and this dog was the best babysitter I ever had. [Laughs] He just really didn't realize he was canine.

Looked after the kids?

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes.

Is there anything else we didn't talk about that you would like to talk about or add?

[Mrs. Ellis] Well, I'm wondering. See, we actually literally built our own house. I did all the painting on this one and I also nailed about as many nails around as Frank did. My daughter, you met her . . . she painted that; she painted her daughter's portrait; she painted my puffins.

Oh, wow! She's quite a painter.

[Mrs. Ellis] Yes, she is . . . she is good.

Well, if there is any of these questions . . .there's more starting here. I am thinking we probably did pretty well. We got a lot of good information in. So I think we are good. If you see something that you want to talk about later, just feel free to give me a call or have Melanie give me a call or email.

[Mrs. Ellis] I depend upon Mel.

And she has a copy too. Thank you so much!

[Mrs. Ellis] You're very welcome.

After the interview, Mrs. Ellis talked more about her family and about her love of history and reading and two books by David McCullough, one of her favorite authors.

Austrid Garrett Transcribed Oral History Interview



Fort Richardson, August 1952
—Garrett Collection

Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on October 31, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage, to conduct an oral interview with Austrid Garrett at her house regarding her knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mrs. Garrett, please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Austrid Garrett. I was born in Minneapolis, and my birthday is September 13, 1912.

And where did you grow up?

Minneapolis.

When did you come here to Alaska?

March 17, 1945.

And when you first came to Alaska, did you come right here to Government Hill, or did you live somewhere else first?

I lived on base first.

You didn't ask me why did I come up here.

I was about to ask you that next. What brought you up here?

Okay. My husband was with the Northwest Airlines Air Transport command during the war. And there was quarters available for me and my children.

So he was part of the Air Force.

No, we were civilians.

Oh, okay. And how did you like living on base?

Well, it wasn't my way of living. It was . . . no, they did the best they could.

So who else came here with you? Was it just you and your husband?

My husband was already here. I came from Minneapolis alone with a six year old, a three year old, and six months pregnant.

That's quite a feat to come all this way. Did you drive or did you fly?

No, I took a train, a three-day trip from Minneapolis to Seattle. And in a week on a ship to Seward. And from Seward to Anchorage by train.

And when you first moved into Government Hill, did you move into this house or somewhere else?

Oh, an apartment over on Richards—it was called Richardson Vista. It's about two blocks from here.

And were you renting or owning it?

We were renting.

At Richardson Vista.

It's an apartment building.

And then you came to this house? Did you own your house at first here or did you rent here?

No, we bought it—with a hundred dollars down and moved in.

And how many people lived in your home? Was it just you, your husband, and your three children?

No, my, that was my second husband and [pause] my youngest daughter.

Was there anybody here beside your immediate family that lived here with you?

No.

What do you remember about your home when you first moved to Government Hill—well, when you first moved into your home here or your apartments over at Richardson, and the neighbors' homes? Do you recall anything of special interest from the early days of the housing here?

I thought it was pretty nice. I thought it was awfully big; and every box that I brought in, it got smaller.

That happens a lot. I understand that . . .

Yeah.

Do you recall who your neighbors were?

Yes.

Do you still stay in touch with any of them?

I stay in touch with those [pointed]. And they lived across the alley in a duplex. But she's been my neighbor for 40 years.

Do you know what their occupations were?

He was retired master sergeant, and she is Japanese.

Okay, and when you first came to Government Hill, did you have an occupation or did you stay at home?

No. I worked for the Air Force for 23 years.

Was that over here at the base?

Yes, just a block away.

And how would you say the base has changed since you first worked there?

Well, I don't go on base anymore so I really don't know. But I liked the work that I had on base.

What did you do?

I was an . . . I had a few different jobs. I started out as a telephone operator, then as a material dispatcher, then as an expediter, and then as a supply inspector. What else . . . but I liked my work.

How would you characterize the base when you first worked there?

Did you think it was everything you expected it to be?

Well, it was all new to me. I had never been on a base before.

And how would you describe the Government Hill neighborhood when you first moved in? Was it much different than today?

Yeah, we don't have the shopping center like we used to.

When you first moved in you didn't have a shopping center then?

Yes, we did.

Oh, you had a shopping center then, but there's none now?

Well, it's all churches now. Korean churches.

What kind of stores did they have at this shopping center?

Everything. They had a bank. They had a clothing, man's clothing store. They had a shoe store. They had a grocery store. They had a jewelry shop. They had a hardware store. They had . . . did I say yarn shop?

No.

A bowling alley I think.

That sounds pretty convenient. Did you do much shopping in Anchorage then or mostly here in the local shops?

There.

What do you remember about major local events as a child? I guess you weren't here as a child, but came here...

Oh, I was about, what, 35? Something like that.

Thirty-three according to the years you gave me.

Yeah.

Okay, well can you remember any local events in the mid '40s when you first came here?

Yeah, we got to see Bob Hope.

That's pretty exciting. Was he entertaining the troops then?

A USO show.

Was that right here at Elmendorf?

Yes.

Did you go to the show?

Took my children there too.

Was his wife with him? Dolores?

No, oh, I don't know.

What would you say you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill? I guess you said the shopping, you miss that. Anything else?

Oh, repeat that question.

What do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill, from when you first moved in? Is there anything that you miss besides the shopping convenience?

No, because the hairdresser—I can still see her.

How have you seen Government Hill change over your lifetime? You mentioned again the shopping center is gone and there's churches and so forth there now. Any other changes that you can think of?

We don't have a bank on the Hill any more. [Mrs. Garrett's phone rang.] [Pause]

What do you think was most important to the people in Government Hill in the 1940s when you moved here? Was there anything that was special to the community or was important to the community?

No, but I got to see a baby bear that was being held by a guy. The bear had been on Government Hill and they called us, "Come and see a baby bear." That's nothing.

Do you recall who the leaders were in Government Hill in the early days, in the '40s or '50s? Were there any special leader?

No.

None that you can recall?

No.

Okay. What about places in Government Hill. Are there any specific places that really stand out in your mind that you remember?

Nellie Brown's house.

Why was that important?

Because it's changed, and I was given to understand that Nellie Brown was the first white child born in Anchorage.

Was she still living there when you moved here?

Yes.

Did you get to meet her?

No, my husband did. No. [Pause] That was my second husband.

What type of work opportunities existed in Government Hill and maybe nearby communities in the '40s and '50s? Do you recall besides the base? Obviously a lot of people worked on the base.

Oh, they did.

Any other opportunities nearby?

No.

Just the shopping centers maybe?

I would say that's all.

What historical events affected your family and the Government Hill community?

Nothing that I can think of.

How about the oil booms and busts that have happened over time.

Did they have much of an effect on Government Hill?

I don't think so.

What do remember about Statehood? Since you were here when we became a state, do you recall much about the activities associated with Statehood?

I think [pause]. No, that was when the war was over. No, I don't remember.

Well, what happened when the war was over? I bet that was a big celebration.

When the war was over, my husband went downtown to, thinking he could earn extra money by working in a bar. That's all.

Okay, so do you remember did they have any bonfires after Statehood . . . or big celebrations?

Not that I know of because I was just at home with the children.

How about the 1964 earthquake? Did you experience that? Were you here, and how did that affect you? What happened?

Okay. I just came home from work, and the TV in the room fell over. My husband was an artist and all his shelves of oils fell over and the light on top. The ground was just going like this. [Mrs. Garrett motioned with her arms.]

Were you in the house when it happened?

Mmhmm.

This house?

Mmhmm.

Were you scared?

In shock. And I went to the front door to get the mail, and my husband was just coming home from work. He does not know how he got there . . . because the roads sunk.

The roads right in Government Hill here?

No, along the ridge here. Oh, you don't know that. [Laughs] Okay. The duplexes went down. The school went down, and I mean dropped!

Yes.

And the little dog across the street came over to my house.

Did you have any damage to your house?

No, I think my husband saw a crack in the soil but really no damage. You know, maybe there was a crack in the road, and maybe it went underneath the house. But, ah, no, I don't know.

How about the Civil Rights movement, do you recall that having any affect on Government Hill?

[Mrs. Garrett motioned.]

How would say today differs, the government today differs from when you were first here in the mid '40s? Do you see much difference in the way the town and the city is run?

It's getting too big!

So that's a big change that you've seen . . .

Too big.

. . . Just growing and growing.

How do you think the Government Hill community was affected by the war, wars?

I really don't know.

I guess there were a lot of people who moved here when the base was getting big?

[Pause] Well, see Elmendorf when we first came up here was Fort Rich. And when Fort Rich was completed, then that was Elmendorf.

And now they're combined.

Mmhmm. And did you know that the Park Strip was the Merrill Field then?

Yeah, I didn't know it was called Merrill Field, but I know . . .

No, it wasn't.

. . . But they had airplanes there.

Mmhmm.

And a golf course before that I heard. Did you ever visit? Was it a golf course? I think they said it closed in 1941.

Oh.

So, that would have been before you got here.

Yeah, but I didn't think they had a golf course in '41.

I couldn't believe it either, but that's what I heard.

I doubt it. I doubt it. Because there were four blocks of sidewalk when I arrived in Anchorage. Four blocks of sidewalk!

That's all that they had of sidewalks?

Well 9th. The Park Strip was a landing equivalent to Merrill Field. Where are you going to have a golf course then?

I guess it went south from the . . . it wasn't just on the Park Strip but it extended south. At least that's what our researchers told us. We will have to send you that information.

How was your family affected by the wars?

No.

No effect?

No.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill from before you moved here or afterwards or the town itself, Anchorage?

Uh-uh.

Did your family do any fishing or hunting?

No.

Did you have a garden out here or anything?

No, not really. I played with, you know, I played with carrots once, but I didn't have a garden.

Your daughter lives here now? Does she live in Government Hill?

No, she does not live in Government [Hill]. But the man she married lived on Government Hill . . . in a Quonset hut.

I heard there was quite a few Quonset huts here in the early days.

There were. I was never in one, but I understand that they can be very comfortable.

And, are your other children . . . do they live in Alaska?

I have one daughter that lives in California and Tucson, Arizona. The one daughter that lives here has just stayed here. And the third daughter I just lost here a couple . . . a year and a half ago.

I'm sorry to hear that.

Well, is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to add? Some other stories you have or any other interesting information?

[Chuckles] Well, one of them is there was a retired master sergeant, and he worked as a bailiff in the court. They were both alcoholics but he could pull himself out of it. And one day he, he was recovering and he told his wife—he went and got his gun and he said, “I want you to get yourself cleaned up and sober or I'm going to shoot you,” and the gun went off.

Oh, no.

Killed her. And when I went back, when I was at work, uh, one of the military came over and he said, “What kind of neighbors do you have?”

And I said, “What do you mean?” “Well,” he said, “the one next door just shot his wife.” And I says, “I can't believe it!”

And I called my husband, and my husband left work to go and see him. And, uh, he was not in jail. He did not stay in jail; and, yes, the wife was killed.

So, then he's going to sell everything and leave Anchorage. And friends of ours we talked to, and they bought the home. And because it was a full house of furniture and everything, our friends said, “Well, come on over and see if there's anything you can use.”

So we walked over there and I saw that little chair that's next to my TV [Mrs. Garrett pointed to it], the big little brown chair. So I told Fred, I said, “Oh, I would like to buy this.”

He says, “You can't afford it.” And I says, “Bet me!”

And so in a few days a cab pulled into my driveway and had a great big pink package. And he sent the chair and a bottle of champagne 'cause it was close to our anniversary.

Aw, that's nice.

Do you think that man didn't go to jail because of his connections working there as a bailiff, or . . . ?

I think there was a lot of connection there. And when he came over to say goodbye to us, I said, “Mr. Abbey, why didn't you take her to the hospital?” Well he didn't like that I told him that. [Pause] But evidently his . . . I don't know, I don't know.

Okay. Any other stories you can think of? Anything else of interest that we didn't talk about?

No, but when we were on Elmendorf, I was a skater as a youngster, and they had a place flooded for us to skate on. Things don't work like you do when you're younger. No, I don't.

Did you ever go skating on Westchester Lagoon?

No, no, but that's lovely.

Has that always been, I know they skate there today, but did they skate there in the '40s also?

Oh, that I don't know. And there weren't very many cars up here in those days.

When your family first came here, did you have transportation? Did you own a car?

Not at first. But we got one. And, uh, at first I rode the military bus to town . . . southwards, not Government Hill. And the bus depot was on 4th and C. We had beautiful stores in Anchorage . . . right on 4th Avenue.

Do you remember what those stores were exactly?

Yeah, dress shops, jewelry store, Jay Vech Brown [spelling], and, uh, Welshes, and the treasure shop I think is still there.

Where did you get most of your groceries?

Okay. I think more or less on Government Hill. Otherwise, on base when we lived there.

Besides ice skating, were there many other recreational activities available to you? You said maybe there was a bowling alley here, you think?

Oh, there was, over here, yes.

Did you like to bowl?

No. Oh, for a while, but we were busy working, taking care of the house and the kids.

How about movies? Was there a movie theatre in Government Hill, or did you go to movies in Anchorage? I guess the 4th Avenue Theatre has been there awhile.

Oh, that was beautiful. That was beautiful.

Well, what wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill?

All right, now repeat that question.

Well what advice do you have for the next generation of people living in Government Hill? For the younger people that are living here now that are growing up and raising their families. What advice could you give them?

Why aren't the kids finishing high school? [Noise of dog shaking]

That seems to be a big problem?

I think so.

What about preserving the community? Would you like to see the houses preserved and not taken down and building different newer homes?

Oh, there are 23 homes on this side of Government Hill that are tied in with this contractor. And when he came up to sell these homes— first of all, there was a couple that lived in here for three months but didn't qualify. And so one day when I came home from church, my husband said that he wanted me to go for a walk with him, and I thought, "Him walk?"

So, anyhow, he had heard on the radio that Jack White had homes for sale with little or nothing down. So we walked on that block, and as we were headed over here, my husband saw Jack White and he knew him. And Jack said, "What are you doing up here, Jim?"

And he said, "I heard on the radio that you're having these homes for sale with little or nothing down and I'm interested." And we moved in with a hundred dollars down. We had an old Cadillac car. They didn't even take the engine serial number.

Quite a bit different than today.

[Chuckles] I know. Oh, and then when we went to make the paperwork, I knew the mother that did the transaction. And she told us that the house would be paid for in 1996. And, uh, okay, what was it Jim said . . . "If you're going to be here, I'll be here to take the last payment." Or something like that.

Well, is there anything else that you would like to add before we end the interview? Is there anything else that you can think of?

I don't know. Can you think of anything?

Well, I think I've asked you most of the questions on the list. So, umm, did you always have a television or radio in your home when you first came here in the '40s?

Just a telephone.

Just a telephone? So, how did you get your news?

On the radio. Had a little radio.

**What do you remember about the early programming on the radio?
Were there types of shows that you liked to listen to or did you
mostly listen to news or music or . . . ?**

Oh, I think one of the, what is there . . . was "All My Children" on the radio? Was that one of the programs?

**That's one of the television shows now. Maybe did it start on the
radio?**

I don't know. I'm not much of a television watcher, even today.

Were there many channels back then, on the radio? Many stations?

I don't know.

Probably not too many.

Okay.

That's it?

Okay, well, we appreciate . . .

That's all right.

We appreciate your information.

That's okay.

Thank you.

Stephen Gerlek Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on November 7, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Mr. Gerlek at his house regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. Gerlek, could you please tell us again your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Stephen Gerlek, G-E-R-L-E-K. I was born July 7, 1953, in Winchester, Massachusetts.

And where did you grow up?

I grew up in Lynnfield and Bedford, Massachusetts, which are suburbs of Boston.

When did you come to Alaska?

I came to Alaska in the late '70s . . . 1970s.

And what brought you to Alaska?

Adventure and a job with the U.S. Public Health Service.

Who did you come up here with?

Just myself.

When you first came to Alaska, where did you first live?

I lived in Turnagain on Clay Products Drive.

And when did you move to Government Hill?

Um, in the early, I don't have the exact date, but it was in the early '80s.

When you moved into Government Hill, did you first own a home or rent a home?

Yes, I bought this home here.

Okay, so you lived here since you moved to Government Hill?

Uh-huh. [Indicating agreement]

Did you move in with anybody else when you first moved into the home?

My future wife . . . ah, she lived with me for awhile here.

And how many people lived in the home here over the years?

We had three kids; a girl, Alena, and two boys, Peter and Sam.

Was there anybody other than your immediate family?

My mother-in-law lived here for awhile, um, and, you know, various friends and so forth that would come to visit through.

What do you remember about your home when you first moved in and your neighbors' homes? Do you have any special recollections of the neighborhood at that time?

This neighborhood is a neighborhood that's been in transition for a number of years. And I remember the—what was interesting, there were very few children at that time.

They were sort of a generation that had gone through, and the group of folks that came in at that time started having kids and sort of recreating a next generation. So it seemed like there were a lot of older folks here. The housing was kind of getting dilapidated, and there were very few children.

Do you recall who your neighbors were when you first moved here?

Uh-huh, Stu Hall who lived across the street here and Edith who lives next to him.

We've heard a lot about Stuart Hall. Was he kind of a leader in the community?

He was a character, yeah . . . very much so.

Do you know what your neighbors' occupations were in general?

Um, there were a lot of folks who were retired from the, uh, the railroad. Um, at that time, also, there were a lot of people moving in who were, like myself, young professionals starting to kind of homestead a community that was in its sort of next wave of redevelopment.

Steve, how would you describe Government Hill—I guess both then and today, overall?

I would describe it as a neighborhood that's constantly redefining itself and rediscovering itself. It's not like a static suburb of Anchorage; and there are a lot of forces that swirl around this neighborhood beyond its borders that causes impacts here on who lives here, how we live here, how we coexist with the industrial development around us.

Do you recall any major local events when you first moved here in the '80s?

I think what was interesting to me is that the business center had . . . was in severe decline. I think the '50s and the '60s was sort of the heyday of that. And then as, um, the city grew and population centers went elsewhere that . . . the need for that business district up here kind of withered.

There used to be a bank and a post office, grocery stores, restaurants, a liquor store there, and all of that just kind of unwound.

And the very first year that we were here was the last year that the Government Hill Rotary Association put on a kids carnival. This is something they had done for many, many years down by the curling club. They brought in some rides . . . sort of the precursor to Fur Rendezvous almost on a very, very small scale. And I remember going there and it was like empty, I mean, because all the kids had basically left and the businesses were folding up.

Do you miss those amenities here?

Um . . .

The businesses?

Sure, yeah, we have to cross the bridge to get pretty much . . . although Subway has kind of, you know, helped out.

Is there anything else you miss about Government Hill in the '80s? Has anything else changed that you missed?

Oh, significantly in terms of the industrial issues . . . and that's something that we can talk about on this piece of paper here [Mr. Gerlek presented the Government Hill timeline, included as Appendix B in this report] on how the community coexists with the railroad, the military, the port—all the other various forces around us.

Are there any other aspects that you've seen that have changed Government Hill over the years since you've been here?

Well, the city of Anchorage has grown and matured since the '70s . . . since the pipeline, the boom days then. But as specifically in this neighborhood, I think the continuing development of the railroad and the revitalization of Ship Creek, the port, what goes on there, the tank farms, the military . . . all have an influence on the character of the neighborhood.

And, what do you think brought about these changes?

Um, world politics . . . for instance, World War II had a big impact on this neighborhood with the Quonset huts and the redevelopment after that. The Cold War in terms of the refueling exercises at the base and the whole tank farm debate had an impact on us.

What do you think is most important to people in Government Hill, both back in the '80s and today?

I think it depends on who you are. Back in the '80s when I was having a family, it was important to have the school here. And as I mentioned, when we first got here, the lack of children, the school actually teetered, the Government Hill School, on closing down. And . . . it was through the efforts of a couple of individuals in the community council to keep the school from being shut down. And that turned out to be a wise choice because then we were able to evolve it into a Spanish immersion program that has gotten certain notoriety, and now people have to bid to get into it.

Who were some of Government Hill's leaders back in the '80s, and how do they differ from the leaders today?

Back then, there was a group of people around who were some of the earlier homesteaders of that, you know, once the housing stock needed to be redeveloped. And there was a lot of lawyers and Anchorage Daily News professionals: Howard Weaver, Tyler Jones, Suzan Nightingale, John McKay. Those sort of, uh, folks were sort of the first wave of redevelopment. And, they had a strong opinion, strong voice about the community so it was changing from the railroad, a sort of blue collar people who had built the first homes here into this more sort of renewal type.

Are there places in Government Hill that stand out the most in your mind and, if so, why?

I would say the parks; the unique pocket parks they have here.

Do you see any particular work opportunities for people in Government Hill or nearby communities other than what we talked about? We talked about the railroad and military.

Um, and Subway. [Laughter]

Okay, sandwich makers.

Um . . . no, I just think with the traffic corridor in Anchorage, you can live anywhere and work anywhere.

You mentioned a little bit about some of the effects of some historical events on Government Hill. Were there any historical events that particularly affected your family?

I would say the tank farm issue was something that I was highly involved with the community council and did affect a lot of folks here. There's a lot of, you know, from starting at the redevelopment after the earthquake, building the first tank farm there . . . well, actually started with World War II, but that began them; and then with the redevelopment after the '64 earthquake and then with the continual involvement of the airport, the additional need for fuel in town, the railroad transporting fuel here, and so, and the military base . . . You had this sort of group of tanks surrounding this, uh, or growing up around this neighborhood without any good zoning. So we tried to enact some zoning laws about how close tank farms could be to homes—not only for sort of explosive but also for fumes. They don't have vapor capture systems, so there's a problem with benzene and all the various constituents that come off of them. So there was a lot of testing that was done here, and it was actually found that it was quite high. And that something needed to be done. And we worked really hard with Senator Stevens to actually shut down some of the military ones that were very, very close to Government Hill. When they refueled those from the port, I mean, it just smelled like a gas station up here.

How are the benzene levels today?

Um . . . there is still work to be done in that regard. But some of the closest tanks in that had no floating lids on them . . . that were just basically pools of gasoline, those have been dealt with.

But it took a lot of work and a lot of energy. And people didn't realize that the community was here first and all of this grew up around it.

Well, speaking of oil, do you believe the oil booms and busts have had a significant effect on Government Hill?

Well, I think that they have had a significant impact on all of Anchorage.

Obviously you weren't around during Statehood, but have you heard any stories about it as it relates to Government Hill?

Ah, no, I haven't.

Or Statehood in general?

[Mr. Gerlek shook his head casually indicating no.]

How about the '64 earthquake? Again, that was before you were here, but have you heard any stories about how that affected the area?

Right. Um . . . only to the extent that the school was demolished during that event, and, uh, had to be rebuilt.

Okay, how about the Civil Rights movement? Have you heard anything about how that went in the '60s?

Hmm . . . no, I haven't.

How would you say government today differs from when you first came to Government Hill?

What do you mean government?

Well, I guess local and the city government . . . community council, has that changed? Have you been involved with that much?

Uh hum. There was about a 10-year period that I was heavily involved in that . . . much more sporadic now. I think Government Hill has a local reputation as being, uh, a sort of a liberal neighborhood. And I believe that gives fits to conservative mayors, um, who don't share the same agenda.

Were you or any of your family members in the military?

Um, the U.S. Public Health Service actually is the fifth branch of the service, reporting to the Surgeon General.

So I was in the military and I forgot.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill or about Anchorage?

Um . . . oh, there are just tons of them. I'll tell you a funny one about Stu. So Stu, who lived here forever, um [pause], was really interested in sort of native art and believed he had sort of an eye for important pieces of art. He collected cars, antique cars and so forth. There is a totem over in the park over here. I don't know whether you've seen it that, uh . . . Have you seen it in Brown's Point Park?

I think so.

Okay, all right. So, he had always had his eye on it and thought it was some sort of historic relic that needed to be protected so started to get the museum involved and sort of turning up to figure out what this thing was because, really, people didn't understand the prominence of it. I mean, it had been there forever and ever but they really didn't figure it out. So Hazel, who used to live over here—she's dead now—she stood up and she said that well, apparently it was from a Boy Scout troop that she led and it was just a telephone pole that they had carved. And when you actually go look at it, it's like Rocky Raccoon characters. And so there was this sort of this big effort to try and preserve something that was entirely different than what they had originally thought it was.

Do you or your family fish or hunt?

Ah, a little bit of fishing.

Ship Creek . . . ever?

Um, I have done that once or twice.

Have you had a garden or a farmstead since you've been here?

Um, yeah, backyard gardens.

Do you have any other ancestors or descendants living here?

No.

Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't talked about? This is the time we are interested in any stories that you have.

Okay, do you have other questions?

No, we are pretty much wrapping it up. My last one was . . . it would be what wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

[Laughs] All right, well, let's look at this then. [Mr. Gerlek unrolled the map that was briefly introduced earlier in the interview.] This is how I tend to think of the neighborhood. When you look at the sort of geopolitical events in Alaska all the way back from the Civil War to the Cold War, the Gulf Wars, the industrial changes in society here. You've got the railroad pushed to the interior moving freight, transfer to the State, fuel handling, and so forth. You've got communications. You've got roads. You've got port development here. All of these things play a factor on Government Hill when you look at the economic development.

This was the span of how the railroad impacts us: railroad development, real estate development. Because it turns out that the land they own down there makes more for them than actually hauling the freight. And then, the military here, the earthquake, and the various other redevelopment activities.

This is a picture of Government Hill. So, here's the Inlet. Here's Ship Creek. And this is the bluff and mud flats around it. So back here in the early times, the Alaska Natives actually had settlements here. And some of these guys who, like Mel 'specifically, were saying for his kids when new homes were built here and they were digging the new foundations, the kids would go over there and they would find artifacts and bring them back, just because this prominent point here was such an important place for the Natives.

I would suspect that in today's world you could never site a neighborhood here without an extensive archeological survey being done.

Then as we move on here to World War I, the railroad, we've got the cottages; we've got the railroad yard being developed. Now you've heard about Loop Road, which was to go out to the farms out here.

Uh hum . . . [Bob stated in agreement]

And then in the '30s as the telegraph started picking up, we had the wireless building. You probably heard about that. Did you talk to Mavis or Howard Hancock before he passed on?

No.

He actually worked there. And, I believe news of World War II, you know, came through that building to Alaska. Then, and that to me is the first generation, starting about 1915.

And then, the tanks started being developed there. Elmendorf was being developed, and that's where Loop Road, you know, going out to the farms, and Nellie Brown coming back and living here. The FAA homes were put in before the War, and the Quonset huts . . . more tanks. And then you had the Quonset huts converting to homes. I don't know whether you heard the story about that, but they actually built them on the alleys with the idea being that, that's where people would start out. But on the front side they would build a more proper home. And eventually tear those down so that you wouldn't have to see them here.

I understand that there's two Quonset huts left.

There's still two left, yeah. And I hope they, I hope they stay. They are actually kind of charming—kind of alley fronts. And, then this was the heyday of the business district. And then the water tower was built here. Then in the '70s, the bridge was coming across, and this was . . . really the first, that I know of, industrial conflict with the neighborhood.

And these days here, it was small enough; to them it wasn't big enough, and a lot of times the people like worked there. Like R.B. Silvernail, the guy who owned this house here, used to go down to the railroad, and there was like a little stairway and he would come back.

And when I bought this house it was much smaller. It's been developed [since] then, but the upstairs electrical system was all done in 5-foot pieces of Romex[®] cable with junction boxes. It turns out that at lunchtime he would bring home little bits, enough that he could fit in his lunchbox, of a, of cable, and that's how he wired his house.

When was this house built?

This was . . . in 1947. So, most of the people at this point worked in these environments here, and there wasn't a whole lot of conflict with what was going. But when this bridge came in the original plan was to cut through Harvard; not have such a hard curve on it there. But it would have wiped out a whole bunch of houses there. And it was the particular pastor of the Baptist church down here who took that up as his calling and said, "Look you're going to kill this neighborhood. Isn't there a way to engineer that, so that you can keep this neighborhood intact?" And it was pretty much through is efforts that you know, at least kept the neighborhoods together. And as far as I know that was sort of one of the very first conflict with the neighborhood realizing that there was something here to protect.

Then it moved on to the tank farm issues; the continued development of the uh, the railroad, the port expansion. And we're looking to the future; you know the Knik Arm Bridge is a possibility here. Sheffield is trying to build this giant port here. You got continued activity on the base. The railroad is working on this multimode of transportation [inaudible]. This is the eighth [8th] generation in. There's more to come with this neighborhood. There's more external forces that are going to cause us to change and morph. This is my period here. So I don't have the ancestors. And, when I look back on this time here I don't know much about it, but I do have some pictures [pause]; let me show you these. [Mr. Gerlek shuffled through a small stack of old photographs.]

This is my house in 1947. This is the porch that you came in on [picture below].



Here is looking toward the bluff [picture above].

This is the first grocery store in Anchorage. This is the one right on the corner here that, that pokes out [picture below].



And I'm not sure where this building is, but there's another one. You can see the cars [picture below].



So you can see the vegetable . . . there's vegetable gardens; there's cars all over the place. I don't have any memory of this, I don't know people that know this; to me, it's just kind of a sterile, you know, museum kind of piece.

When we get into this area and my house gets built, the only two things that I have from R.B. Silvernail are this, which was in the garage [Mr. Gerlek presented an object], which looks like some sort of packing thing. And this lid here . . . R.B. Silvernail, that's the Alaska Steamship Company. So he actually got something from Montgomery Ward that was packed in a box. And then, his legacy was all the Romex[®] cable [laughter] upstairs that we eventually sort of built around.

And, then you get into sort of this phase, and that's where we can put on here. [Inaudible as Mr. Gerlek shuffles through several papers] You can read it if you wish, but this is just sort of a narrative of the things that go on here. So these are the pioneers I don't know much about. These were the homesteaders: Mr. Silvernail, Nellie Brown.

Please Refer to Appendix B for Mr. Gerlek's Government Hill History.

Here's the first families . . . they're still alive. You've already talked to some of these people. They're in their late 80s and 90s now. Then this is the second generation. A lot of times their kids are people that came in. Jim DeCicco, who I bought the house from, grew up here and hung around with these guys. And, here are the people that I was talking about, the urban pioneers. This is, at this point the housing stock was pretty much turning over. The first generation of kids had moved through, and they saw an opportunity to come in; kind of live in a neat interesting neighborhood downtown. They were mostly, like I said, lawyers and newspaper types; Stu was here, Tyler and Molly Jones.

Then there was the next generation, which is what I was a part of. And these are the people here who leapfrogged on these folks and started to redevelop and sort of gentrify the neighborhood and bring in a whole new crop of kids for the school and redevelop the school.

And then there was the, uh, the young urban professionals, here's another group of people who started to move in.

And now we have what I am calling the "new hipsters," the people who bring in the chickens and, you know. So the neighborhood is constantly evolving. It's gone through these series of generations, but the waves haven't collided enough so that the, the pack of kids, there's always a constant level of them. There's always a group of kids and then they'll die off, and then another group and then another group. And there are all these external influences. And you look out into the future, there's even an article today about the bridge. And so our neighborhood is impacted by stuff that . . . I mean that could have a big change in how this neighborhood feels, especially if it bifurcates the neighborhood. And then we have this east and west thing goin' on.

Well, I guess that would conclude our interview. We appreciate your time and thank you very much.

All right, you're welcome.

Lucile Halfacre Transcribed Oral History Interview

Introduction:

My name is Joni Wilm I am actually with the Municipality of Anchorage, not BGES, and I am here today on May 11, 2012, to conduct an oral interview at Lucile Halfacre's daughter and son-in-law's house regarding her knowledge of historical events in the Government Hill community.

Please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Lucile Halfacre. My birthplace was Garfield County, Montana. My birthdate was November 25, 1921.

And where did you grow up?

I grew up in Eastern Montana. In Garfield County. On a ranch.

When did you come here?

I came to Alaska in 1944 . . . Moved to Anchorage, or Elmendorf. I've been in this area all the time since then.

Why did you come up?

Well, I had a friend up here. And she liked it. I always had kind of been interested in Alaska so I came up and I liked it too, so I've been here ever since. Actually, I came up on a one-year contract with the government . . . and that was 64—no, more than that—about 68 years ago, I guess. By golly, it doesn't seem that long! [Laughs]

So were you with anyone when you came up?

No, I had a friend here, but I didn't come with anyone.

Okay. And where did you go to school?

I graduated from Montana State College in Bozeman, Montana.

And what was your school like?

I don't think there was anything particularly distinctive about it.

Was it very big?

No.

Do you remember how many people in your graduating class?

. . . um, I'm not sure. It seems like it might have been 600. Somewhere in that neighborhood.

What neighborhood or community did you live in first?

You mean, when I came to Alaska? I grew up in Eastern Montana, but when I came up here I came to Elmendorf Air Force Base. And I've been in this area ever since.

So you lived on base?

Yeah, I did for a while.

How many people lived in your home on Elmendorf?

Um . . . this gets kind of confusing. I lived in a barracks on Elmendorf for awhile.

By yourself or with others?

Well, in a barracks there was . . .

What was the barracks like? I mean, was it one single-occupancy room?

Yeah, it's a lot of rooms in one building, but each one was a single occupancy.

Like a dorm style? So you were by yourself in the barracks, and I guess you were renting?

Yes.

Do you remember anything specific about that or maybe the homes around the barracks?

Well, there were family homes for some of the military. They provided housing on base.

Who were your neighbors?

Well, I lived in a women's barracks, so my neighbors were other women that worked on base.

So, they worked on base. Do you remember their specific occupation?

We were just clerical workers.

So, how would you define Government Hill?

Well, I think it's a choice place to live. And quite a few of the residents have been there a long time, which makes it kind of nice. It's a convenient location being close to the base and close to downtown.

Any other specifics about it that you like? Is it walkable?

Well, downtown it'd be quite walkable, down to 4th Avenue area. Some places on base you can walk to pretty conveniently too.

Do you remember if it was much more walkable when you first moved to Government Hill than it is now, or is it harder to walk around now?

I would imagine it would be easier now because of the overpass. You used to have to walk down across Ship Creek bridge.

Oh, what about just within the neighborhood?

Oh, well, it's about the same.

What do you remember about major local events when you moved to Government Hill? Where there any big local events going on that you remember?

I can't think of anything in particular.

What do you miss the most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

Well, actually, I don't think Government Hill has changed an awful lot. It's still a friendly environment.

If there were any changes that you can think about or that you know about, do you remember what brought the changes?

Well, Government Hill used to be owned by the railroad, I believe. And then they turned the lots over to the people that were living on them, or the railroad employees that were living there. It was mostly railroad employees originally.

What is the most important to the people in Government Hill, do you think?

I don't know how you would answer that —what is most important to most people. [Laughs]

Well, that is a hard one to answer. Is there anything that is most important to you . . . why you lived there?

Well, the reason why we originally got the place there was because it was close to base and we both worked on base.

So, convenient?

Yes, convenience.

And when I first moved there, most of the places were Quonset huts. And they were placed on the backs of the lots so you could build a house on the front of the lot, and that's what we did. We lived in the Quonset for several years and then built a house on the front of the lot.

Who were some of Government Hill's leaders and what did they do? Mavis mentioned a couple church leaders who did quite a bit in getting the overpass to come up in a certain way that was originally going to take out a bunch of houses, and they re-routed it or something like that. Is there anyone you remember, as a leader type?

Not particularly. I guess they probably had the community council there for a long time.

What places in Government Hill stand out the most in your mind and why?

Well, the shopping center up near the gate to Elmendorf. And the bowling alley there used to be a very active place. There was a Presbyterian church and there's a Baptist church.

And these stand out in your mind because they were frequented by the residents often?

Yeah.

What types of work opportunities existed in Government Hill and/or nearby communities . . . let's just say, when you first moved there?

A lot of people were in the military or worked on the base. [Clock chiming]

How have historical events affected your family and the Government Hill community?

Well, I don't think anything different than they do anywhere else.

Okay. Anything particular about the earthquake that happened there? There was an urban renewal project I know.

Oh, let's see. The earthquake didn't really do any damage on Government Hill other than, I think, it knocked down a few chimneys or something like, but nothing very serious.

Oh, well, the school, it did destroy the school.

Oh, well, yeah.

What do you remember about Statehood and what effect did it have on Government Hill?

I don't know that it had any different effect on Government Hill than it did everywhere else in the state.

What are the most significant memories that you have surrounding this event?

I don't remember anything particular about it. I don't remember anything outstanding.

How did Government Hill change after the 1964 earthquake? We know about the school.

Yeah, that was the only major thing—was the school. And then the new school was built on the edge of Elmendorf Air Force Base. I think it's actually on base property, but that they either gave it to the school or permitted them to build there anyway. [Laughs]

Do you remember how the civil rights movement affected the Government Hill community or Anchorage in general?

It didn't have any different effect there than it did anywhere else, I guess.

How was the Government Hill community affected by the wars?

There used to be foxholes on Government Hill.

Oh, really? Where were those?

Well, there was one in particular. Ah, do you know Government Hill at all?

A little bit, yes.

Well, it was about probably close to half way down Harvard Avenue, between that and the hillside, there was one big one there; and I'm not sure whether there were others. There probably were but I can't remember just where they were.

So, foxholes Were you or any of your family members in the military?

I wasn't in the military, but I worked for the military.

What about your husband or other family members?

He worked for the military too, in aircraft repair, but he wasn't in the military there.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill?

No. [Laughing] Did Mavis remember anything for that?

I'm trying to remember. Ah, I don't think she did actually.

I can't think of anything.

Did your family fish or hunt?

Ah, some. We ate quite a lot of moose meat.

Do you remember where you fished or hunted?

Well, the moose hunting, I think, was mostly just up in the valley.

Like around Palmer area? Wasilla area?

Yeah . . . probably more Wasilla than Palmer. But anyhow, in that general area And we use to go to the Anchor River sometimes to fish. I don't remember if we fished very much in the valley or not.

Did you fish for salmon in the Anchor River? Salmon were coming up Ship Creek then, weren't they?

Yeah, they do come up Ship Creek some. I guess, I think you could get edible ones there, but by the time they get way up to the heads of the streams there, usually they turn purple and are not very edible.

[Laughs] I think we probably fished for trout and for whatever else was in the streams—and some up in the valley but not too much. We went out on halibut charters sometimes . . . in Homer.

Did you have a garden or farmstead?

No, the most I ever did was just plant a few old things in my yard, like radishes and things like that, [laughs] carrots—and raspberries.

Raspberries are good.

Oh, yeah. They grow real well here, and strawberries do too I bet. A strawberry bed that if you keep the grass out of it enough to find the strawberries, you have lots of strawberries.

Yeah, strawberries can be tricky, I know.

Did you have any farm animal or animals?

Never anything but a dog.

And we are on the last question already. So, is there anything else we didn't talk about that you would like to add or talk about? Then there's these other questions too. If you want to talk about any of these, we can.

I can't think of anything offhand that I want to add.

Okay.

[Long pause; paper rustling] Did you want answers to any of these optional questions?

If you see any on there that look like something you want to talk about. Otherwise we don't have to.

[Pause] I don't see anything that looks like it would be of great importance. [Chuckles]

I can leave this with you as well and if you see anything that strikes your fancy, just feel free to give me a call and I can pop back out or you can answer a few of them over the phone or whatever you feel like.

Okay.

Well, thank you very much!

Mavis Hancock Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction (To be read at start of interview):

My name is Joni Wilm, I'm with the Municipality of Anchorage's Long-Range Planning Department [Section]. I am here today on May 4, 2012, to conduct an oral interview with Mavis Hancock at her house, regarding her knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Mavis Hancock. My birthdate is January 27, 1932, and I was born in rural West Florida, out in the country near a little town called Laurel Hill.

Where did you grow up?

Essentially, I grew up in that area with a two-year sojourn in southern Alabama.

Why did you come here, or have you always lived here?

I came here because my husband was in the military, and he was transferred here.

Why was he transferred here?

The Air Force sent us here.

Air Force. Okay, with whom? Your husband?

With my husband and two children at that time.

Where did you go to school?

Okay, I went to school at the Laurel Hill School, which was K through 12, about 300 students. And, somewhat backward . . . we didn't have enough . . . well, my graduating class had 18 in it. So that will give you something about the size. Two of them were veterans from World War II, who had come back and were finishing their high school under the G.I. Bill.

What was your school like?

It was just a little country school. Even though it was in a village . . . a small, very, very small town, it was still a, a country school. Mostly farming. Most of the families came from . . . most of the students came from farming families.

What neighborhood or community did you live in first?

Ah, a little community called Clear Springs. It has never been big enough to have a post office.

Even now?

Um, yes.

And that was in Laurel Hill?

That was in West Florida. Uh, it was about 10 miles from Laurel Hill.

How many people lived in your home?

Well, depending on which child was born, there were ten people in my home after all of the eight children were born.

How do you place among the eight?

Where am I? I am the oldest. I am the second oldest child and the oldest daughter.

Was there anyone besides your immediate family that lived in your home?

No.

No?

No, thank God.

You think that was enough?

That was enough.

Did your family own their home or rent it?

For the last half of my growing up years, they owned it. Prior to that, they had not been able to own a home so they had rented one farmhouse after another.

What do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

Well, when I grew up, there was only one house in the community that was painted until we painted ours. Ah, most homes you couldn't afford to paint. And, that was true in the rural areas all over the southern part of the United States. Um, John Grisham . . . is he the novelist that writes about legal mysteries?

Yes.

Okay, he wrote the "Painted House" about . . . and his is set in 1951. Well, then in 1951, most of the houses in our community were painted, but in my earlier growing-up years in the '30s and early '40s, most of the houses were not. And when I married and my husband and I went to visit where his father had grown up, those houses had never been painted either. And this was way up in the 1950s. So it was not unusual if you drove through the South to find most houses were not painted. People simply couldn't afford paint. It took all they could do to afford food . . . and clothing . . . whatever they needed to farm. So that's the way it was.

Did they treat the wood with anything to protect it from weathering?

It weathered, but frequently they built with cedar, and if they didn't build with cedar, they built with oak and both of those are very sturdy long-lasting woods.

Right, I love cedar.

Who were your neighbors?

Other farming people . . . families, similar families. Quite a few of them could not afford their own homes, so they did what my family had done in their earlier years; they rented a farm house and they did all the farming and they gave the land owner half of their crop. It's called sharecropping. In those days, most people were sharecropping. And the folks who could own their own farms were fairly few and far between. That improved dramatically after World War II. We got catapulted into the 20th Century. And prior to that time, we'd been living in the . . . way back a hundred years earlier; things hadn't changed much in the previous hundred years until World War II, and then they did change over that four-year time span. Pumped so much . . . so much money was pumped into the South to establish military bases and shipyards, and war time factories . . . that it, it just changed the whole nature of the rural South.

And that was over a four-year . . . I mean, over the four-year period?

Yeah, World War II, in 1941, prior to Pearl Harbor, we were still very backward. And by the end of World War II, most of those people had gotten good war time jobs. And they learned how to save, and most of them had saved and socked away money. And then after the war, the military bases stayed there.

They're still there today. And that whole section of Florida is very prosperous now . . . has been pretty much since World War II. Same thing is true of southern Alabama . . . Mobile.

So people saved money working for the war and then after the war they used that money to buy farms?

They were able to improve . . . [clock chimes] yeah, they were able to go out and buy farms. They were . . . and they got jobs in the military bases and kept them. So it just, like I say, we got catapulted into the 20th Century. It changed the way we live . . . the way we look at things . . . and just changed everything.

I'm sure there been a lots of books written about it because it was a major, major upheaval in our national history. Atlanta was just a little old stop on the side of the road practically. It was, well, it wasn't that small, but it was the state capital, of course; but, um, it was nothing like it is today. I mean you have about 4 million people around Atlanta today. And those days, I remember when we went through it in 1953 when we first married. It was just a country town.

Who were your neighbors; what were their occupations? I think you answered.

Yeah, they were farmers, and then during the war they got jobs in the military.

And either kept them or after the war went back to farming?

Yeah, they kept them or went back to farming. Um, but they had some money then.

So, this is taking another . . . or a little step away from that into current surroundings . . . so how would you define Government Hill?

Oh, my goodness. Well, that's interesting. Government Hill has never been a coffee-klatch neighborhood. You don't find groups of people who get together for coffee in the morning . . . mainly because most of them are working. Most families here on Government Hill are two-salaried families and always have been since I've been here. And, consequently, that cuts down a great deal on the social back-and-forth, give-and-take; but, nevertheless, this is a community where, uh, people really care [emphasis] about their neighbors. And that has always been a characteristic of this community also.

Ah, we don't . . . there are lots of, lots of neighbors that we never get to know simply because we don't ever get together. But, there's also been some close friendships made between neighbors. But like in a brand new subdivision, there's a whole different dynamic working there.

This is an old established neighborhood, and its rules have been set, so to speak. Whereas in a new subdivision you've got, um, completely different dynamics at work. So, yeah, Government Hill is a strange bird. It's really a combination. It's a combination of every kind of community really. You've got . . . you've got diversity here. I suspect that it's about 50% minority, but I'm not sure. You've got diversity in the kinds of homes that we have; most people who . . . who have bought these older homes have done what we did—totally remodeled them so that there's no . . . no relationship to what it used to be . . . what the house used to be. They're almost all changed.

What do you remember about major local events as a child?

Oh, in my home where I grew up?

Yeah.

We didn't have many local events because there wasn't time when you were farming. Your days and nights were pretty much occupied. Um, as a small child I remember May Day in school where we had the May Pole Dance. And that goes way, way back in history. And I have not ever been aware of there having been a May Pole Dance since my childhood, but we had them in those days.

Strangely enough, one of the bigger local events back in the . . . before I was born . . . was a hanging. When there was a hanging, the whole countryside came to watch the hanging, to the county seat. Don't ask me how they got to there because in those days most people travelled by mule and wagon. And, that's probably how they got there. It was nothing to hitch up a mule and ride 10 miles to the nearest town. So like I say, we were still back in the 19th Century.

There weren't a lot of local events. On the 24th of June, there was a Masonic celebration at a little town about 25 miles away. And, people would get there on their mules and wagons . . . and the parades and the kind of festivities that you would expect in Fur Rondy here. But it was 24th of June. And, strangely enough I never got there but once because my family was usually too busy in the cotton fields or corn fields or something at that time.

Hmm, what do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

Well, I don't really; I shouldn't say that I miss it necessarily; I just remember when things were quite different here. We had the bank and we had . . . I don't know if we ever had a post office up here or not. There may have been, but there wasn't one when we came. There was, however, a bank, a laundry, a dry cleaners, a grocery store, and beauty shops—three of them. There's always been several beauty shops up here. A lot of people . . . and a TV repair . . . a lot of people were . . . they didn't have vehicles, especially during the war and that period right after the war. So the fact that they could walk to the grocery store and buy their groceries was really important. And the family that ran that grocery store died within the last ten years. They lived over on Harvard and they died within the last ten years.

So, there was a grocery store up here for a long time?

Oh, absolutely, a big grocery store. Oh, yes, it was.

I didn't know there was a grocery store up here.

Oh, it kept . . . they kept people supplied.

And, then, of course, there was a liquor store . . . always been a liquor store and always been a gas station, but it was located differently. Um, all kinds of other little shops here and there.

My youngest son grew up in what he called the "old man store." It was an older gentleman who had a toy store. And my son is now 42, but . . . uh, the year he was nine, he had had difficulty learning to read in school; and he decided that he wanted a new comic book every day. And he'd come to me, "Mom, can I have another quarter. I want to go to the old man store and get a new book?" So he'd come back up there and get a new book. And that's how he taught himself to read . . . from those comic books. But, at any rate, yes, the toy store was there.

The Chinese . . . there's been a restaurant there where China Town Restaurant is. There's been a restaurant there for a good 40 years, if not longer . . . in that same spot.

Jeepers, I can't remember what the other stores were. But, there was a barber shop in addition, in addition to the three beauty shops.

But, it was a self-contained little place and it served a major purpose because people didn't have vehicles to go into town over there [indicating downtown]. And, what started the demise, of course, was the introduction of Sears and J.C. Penney's . . . and then after that, the big box stores. And, that pretty much took care of it. And, then people began to go elsewhere for their hair treatments. And that is what ultimately killed off some of the beauty shops.

There was at one time a specialty women's store. And, I bought quite a few clothes there. Beautiful clothes for real good prices. That was in the '70s and '80s. And, then she couldn't . . . she couldn't make a go of it any more so she opened one in Dimond Center and that didn't work. So, yeah, that's what I essentially remember about it.

Now, when we moved in down the street, we lived up and down again over on Manor, the roads were not paved. So, that was a big difference to have the roads paved. They were paved in 1967. It was a dirty, dusty mess until they were paved.

I bet. So you kind of described how things have changed a little bit. The next question is how have you seen Government Hill changed over your life time? So you have talked already about that. Is there anything else you want to add to that question?

Well, there has been a change; there has been a change in the fact that we have a large minority population, which we did not have. It was . . . and the reason for that is because in the early years only white people came up to work the railroad. And those people stayed. And they are the people who populated Government Hill for a long, long time. And then, ah, about 1985, I would say, uh, one of my youngest sons had friends who were part Japanese, and part black, and he grew up with a mixed group of children, and he still has those same friends. But prior to that time, the two older children, our two older children, there weren't very many minority children around when they grew up. So that's been a positive thing for the neighborhood.

The mix of different cultures?

Yes, the mix of different cultures. [Clock chiming]

Who are some of Government Hill's leaders and what did they do?

Well, I can't speak for before 1965 because I was not here. But, the first leader that of whom I am aware was the minister at the little Presbyterian church that is now the daycare center on the other side of the Hill. And when he saw a need to . . . when he saw that there was a need for something to be done in the community . . . for example, ah, we had one liquor store and we didn't think we needed another. So there was a threat of a new liquor store coming in; he would organize us and we worked for that specific kind of problem. And then once we solved that problem, then that issue was no longer something to worry about. So we didn't deal with it anymore.

And he did that for two or three of the major issues. Uh, when they put in the road . . . well, when they put in the, ah, bridge over here, okay? It was originally planned to come straight instead of making that sharp right turn at the end of the bridge and coming up Loop Road and into the light there.

It was originally planned to come straight up [emphasis on up] the hill just slightly to the right and come into Harvard right over here, and go on down through Harvard, and they were gonna take all the houses on Harvard from Anderson all the way down to the light.

So, he set to work. And he pounded the pavement here and talked to people and got the community organized. And we just pitched such fits about it that they had to change the way the road came. Now, granted, it's much more dangerous now than it would have been had they come that way. But, it was a whole lot cheaper to do it this way because they didn't have to buy all those homes. That was an enormous number of homes to buy and an enormous number of people to . . .

To displace?

Yeah, to be displaced. And so, he took that on and worked with us and over a two-year period, we . . . you see that it was successful.

What was his name?

His name was David Koch, K-o-c-h. And he lived at the corner of Degan and Harvard, at that time. And then he left here when the church closed as a church in 1971 he left here. But he is an unsung hero and very few people in this community know what he did for the community. And it's had long-lasting results. So, yeah, he was . . .

And, I don't know, the first . . . Tyler Jones . . . Tyler and Molly moved into the house that Stephanie Kesler now owns. And they remodeled it . . . and I want to say in '72 or '73. And he got started working on a rudimentary community council. It was on again, off again for quite a long time. But, I don't remember when and I'm not privy to those records. Never thought about trying to figure it out but . . . I don't know when we got, when Government Hill Community Council became a going concern. I would say somewhere in the '80s. But that's just my stab at it. I know that Tyler Jones worked on it some in the 1970s. But, I don't think it was a . . . I believe it was not a continuous project until in the '80s.

Okay. That's when it became active . . . more active?

Yes. That's my thought.

So what places in Government Hill stand out most in your mind and why?

Well, strangely enough, the laundry in 1965 because I didn't have a washing machine [laughs] and I had to use the laundry for my family laundry. And I was not happy about that. I was very glad to get into an apartment where I could go buy a washing machine.

Yeah, that's nice. I remember my first in-house washing machine too. It is pretty darn exciting. [Laughing]

Yes, right!

What types of work opportunities existed in Government Hill and/or nearby communities while you were . . . well, let's not say while you were growing up, but when you first moved here?

Well, it was pretty limited because we didn't have much industry here. And, so there was, of course, the bank. Uh, and clerk shifts in the stores, clerking in the stores. And, the person who ran the TV repair had to have some knowledge. Mr. Veeter owned the laundry and something else. I've forgotten what. So you either owned the business or you worked in the business or you hired clerks under you who worked in the business. Ah, those of us who were in the professions, like nursing and teaching, we could, we got jobs. And Elmendorf—a lot of people who were civilian workers up on Elmendorf lived here because it was close by.

Okay. Lived here rather than lived on Elmendorf or . . . ?

Oh, if they were civilian workers, they couldn't live on Elmendorf.

Oh, right.

So they had to . . . the only ones who could were the engineering civilians; and there were a few civilians who had special privileges, but it was very rare. And the only reason that happened is because after World War II there was simply not enough housing here in Anchorage to house the engineers they needed on Elmendorf.

And so they set aside some little dinky apartments over there. Thank goodness they've long since been taken down. And these families of engineers worked and lived, while they worked in the engineering office, but they lived right there. They were located over by Aurora School. But, those are the only civilians that I know of that lived on the base.

However, quite a lot of civilians who worked on the base lived on Government Hill because it was convenient. So, consequently, they made good salaries. So that's when people began to buy up all the old Quonset huts and take them down and build new houses on them.

When I . . . when we first came, there were numerous Quonset huts still in use here on the Hill. And now there are four left, I believe, in this back alley here. We took ours down, the one next door here; we bought that in 1980, and we rented it out until 1995. And then we couldn't rent it anymore; it just was too far gone. So we used it as storage. And then we took it down in 2007.

But, there must have been, right after World War II, there must have been 50 Quonset huts here. And somewhere around I've got some of those old pictures, but I couldn't lay my hands on them . . . for anything. I don't know where they are. But yeah, it has changed.

The other thing that we have quite a few of was basement houses. I think the last basement house that we had was the house that is now Steve and Laura Pannone's house. And that was a basement house. And when Steve bought it, he was single at the time, he turned it . . . he built on top of the basement part of it and built the upper floor. Now there was a big family that grew up in that little, tiny two-bedroom basement house. Their name was Watkins . . . Watson. Watson or Watkins? I can't remember which.

Yeah . . . and my daughter's . . . when my daughter grew up, her best friend, their family lived in a basement house. And there were others also.

One of my teacher friends had grown up in a basement house here on Government Hill . . . and, actually, was still living in it when I came here. So, ah, it was a strange looking, much, much different. Although we still have three or four, maybe five of these tiny little houses that were the norm in those days.

Ah, there's still one down at the corner of Colwell and Harvard that it's just super, super small. I would say it's maybe 200 square feet, not any more than that. And there's another one at . . . up on Cunningham, ah, at the corner of Cunningham and Manor. That's a very tiny house.

Then we had kit houses. This one was a kit house. We still have . . . I can think of three kit houses right off the bat. Ah, they called it a kit house because that's precisely what it was; it was a kit. And the Army had brought them up here not knowing that the war was going to end pretty soon. And those kit houses were to be transported out into outer Alaska to make barracks for soldiers. And then the war ended. And we didn't need to do that. So they put those kit houses up for sale. They were all stored down in Whittier, I understand. And this one was purchased in 1946. And it was put together on a lot that's down at the corner of Manor and Delaney. And after it was put together down there, it was bodily moved to this place [pointing at floor] in late 1946. And it's been here ever since.

And at that time, it simply was a box and that's all the kit houses were: boxes. This one was one of the larger ones. It was 20 by 48 feet. And there are a couple others around that I know that were about 20 by 30 feet. Um, and there were kit houses not just here on Government Hill, but there are a number of them that are downtown in that area from 10th to 15th and C to I. In that section, there are quite a few kit houses. And then . . . then the next [clock chiming] group of houses that are these railroad duplexes we called them. Actually, these two buildings across the street were railroad duplexes. And all the ones down Manor over there [clock bonging] . . . the western end of Manor, those were railroad duplexes. Um, they all . . . they all were built the same pattern.

Well, that's not true. There were two different patterns used. But, but from the outside you would not be able to tell the difference. The difference was in the layout on the inside. Anyway, those, those houses were put up by the railroads and I do not know, I would say in the '40s, right after World War II, but I could be wrong. It may have been before World War II.

Ah, I'm sure that, that book that Richard, I think his name was Stern, did when KABATA first came out . . . and there is a piece in it about every house on the Hill. And I'd love to get my hands on that book. That will tell you when those houses were built. But, I'm not absolutely sure.

Let's see now. How have historical events affected your family and the Government Hill community?

Well, World War II had a profound effect on this community, just as it did in rural west Florida because up until World War II, this was a small, small town, small area. And then, once the potential for military development became . . . once the country realized how important it was to have these military establishments in Alaska . . . and Elmendorf was started out there and Fort Rich was started, ah, Government Hill is precisely what it says—a government community between the railroad, which was owned by the government, and Elmendorf, which was owned by the government. This community has been totally dependent . . . back in the early post-World War II days.

Now as years have gone by and the shopping center has changed and more people have moved in here just because they like Government Hill, um, we have . . . somebody said not long ago that we have . . . if you spit on Government Hill you're gonna hit a lawyer . . . or an engineer or a lot of professional people moved in here in the years since I came. But prior to that, it was almost totally government.

So, that's been a big change, the type of people who lived here . . . the occupations?

The occupations of the people who live here has changed drastically over time. Yes, it has.

Um, let me see . . .

Writers. We have had a large component of writers live on this Hill. Writers, lawyers, engineers . . . ah, teachers . . . lot of teachers up here.

Really? Teachers. I know Barbara Lavalée has a house here as well.

Oh, does she? I didn't know that she lives here . . . I didn't know that until not long ago.

Yes, she has a house on . . . I didn't know that either until I was . . .

On Government Hill? We have another artist right over here who's made her living on . . . with her art all of her life.

Oh!

Uh huh, her name is Janaan Kitchen. And, she was president of the Saturday Market group for a long time . . . and has had something at Saturday Market to sell for many years—very accomplished artist with a degree in art . . . and so And there's Paul Laverty, who is a potter, an engineer turned potter; um, but he makes his living with his pottery.

So artists?

Yes.

What do you remember about Statehood? What affect did it have on Government Hill?

Well, I can't answer that because I wasn't here. So I really don't know. I'm not sure there's anybody living . . . Weaver Franklin might be able to tell you something like, about that. But, or John Skook's dad, but I don't know how good his memory is. Marge Ellis, Marge Ellis is still with it enough that she could tell you. And so could Lucile Halfacre. Those . . . they're in their 90s. And they could tell you.

Does Lucile live here still?

Yes, she has a house on Harvard.

Do you happen to have her phone number? Because Bob gave me a list of folks . . . maybe when we are done here.

And she's on it . . . yeah.

How did Government Hill . . . oh, were you here for the '64 earthquake?

No, but I could tell you what it was like 18 months later.

So the question is how did Government Hill change after the '64 earthquake?

Well, we have one house that slid 60 feet. And, of course, the school was destroyed. Now this end of the Hill suffered very little damage because we had this huge excavation . . . well, over the years. I . . . I don't know how it started, but just a big hole right down there where Al Miller Park is. And it has since been filled, which geologists who were in the know say that was the worst thing we could have done. That . . . that hole was able to absorb a whole lot of the shaking and therefore less damage was done to the homes around it.

But, for some reason, I am not aware of any damage down at this end. However, when we came 18 months later, the trees were sideways. I mean, they were still growing in every direction . . . here on Government Hill. And that didn't change until . . . those trees never did come back up and stand straight. When they rotted and died off or somebody decided they got tired of looking at them that way and cut them down, which apparently did happen. I'm not just sure who or why or what. Could be the railroad because it was the railroad's property And, so, at any rate, those trees stayed that way for quite a while.

Any other big, obvious differences or changes?

Well, we have Sunset Park now where the school used to be and that was . . . we had a family that moved in over here on Harvard and Colwell—not Harvard, Manor and Colwell—and they became interested in making a park out of that. And so, he became president of the Government Hill Community Council.

Now this was in the '70s, the late '70s, early '80s. And, he kept pushing until we got a park out of that . . . Sunset Park.

Sunset Park, right?

Sunset Park, right . . . from the old school site.

[Mavis, referring to the interview] Now someone is going to take all of this and meld it together? I would assume.

We are going to have a transcriber, um, transcribe this oral interview. I am just writing notes just in case any of this gets lost or something. And then, we will take excerpts from your interview and put it in the report, and then the whole interview will be saved and documented probably in an appendix somewhere.

So, we are getting close.

Do you remember how the civil rights movement affected the Government Hill community?

No, because . . . I'm not sure that it did . . . at that time. The real transition of . . . of different minorities moving into Government Hill took place . . . another . . . it was another 10 years or so before the minorities began to move in. And that is something that David Koch worked on while he was here. Even though he left in 1971, one of his real goals was to see a diverse population. And it did happen, but it did not happen in the 1960s during the civil rights movement.

Now, there may be some people who will say, "Oh, yes, we have a lot of blacks coming in." They did not come in; they did not come in the 1960s. They came in the '70s, ten years later. So, in that sense, you could certainly say that the civil rights movement, movement was the backbone of it. But if, if people want to, want to say that, that the civil rights movement can take credit for integrating the neighborhood, it didn't happen [emphasis] that way. It took a long time. And, that's . . . that's to our detriment. But it did happen. And it's been, it's been a good thing.

My son's . . . one of my son's closest friends and will be his life-long friend . . . and he never would have had that friendship otherwise.

How was the Government Hill community affected . . . well, we already talked a lot about this . . . how was the Government Hill community affected by the wars?

Yeah, it was greatly affected by the wars because it set the stage for the post-war development here. And from, from 1945 to 1965, in those 20 years before we came, it had been kind of . . . was pretty stable but not enormous growth. Of course, it was the pipeline that spurred the enormous growth.

Right, exactly, the pipeline, yeah. What about . . . I guess the wars they are probably referring to is World War II, but what about . . . do you remember anything from the Iraq War or Afghanistan? I guess they mean something more recent.

I couldn't answer that. The Iraq and Afghanistan has been . . . the only way that I could see that those have affected Government Hill would be if some of the families had lost. And I'm not aware that anybody has, so . . .

Were you or any, obviously it looks like your husband was a member of the military, of your family members in the military? [Clock chiming]

My husband was, yes.

And what was again was his role in the military?

He did a number of different things. His last career path was in what's called procurement and contracting. And that's what he was in when he retired from the military and what he went back to work doing as a civilian.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill?

No, I don't. I can't help you there. [Ms. Wilm chuckles.]

I do know this. I know that over on the bluff there are . . . oh, gosh, what do you call those things? They had gun emplacements on the bluff right over here . . . and we still have. There's at least one or two still left over there.

Okay, I know what those are called; it's not coming to my mind.

Batteries . . . gun batteries.

Did your family fish or hunt?

Oh, my husband did both! And, my son does also.

Did he supply your family with lots of . . . like my dad hunted a lot . . . and salmon and moose and all that?

Oh, yes! Oh, yes. We didn't eat . . . the only meat we ate the first four years we were here was ground beef. Anything else in the meat line . . . well, chicken, of course . . . and, any fish, we never ever bought fish. He supplied us with fish, and he supplied us with moose and caribou and Yes. I'll tell you it really meant a lot in those days. But I'm not sure we saved any money even then because he flew out to the hunting grounds. [Laughing] That cost a little bit.

Expensive, I know.

He didn't have a guide. He just had a good friend who had a plane so he went on that.

You were eating about as organic as you can get.

Oh, you got that right. Yeah, we were.

Okay, sounds like he flew in to hunt. Do you remember any specific places where?

Yes, he went into the Talkeetna Mountains. And we . . . he staked off a homestead up there. But, in the Native Act, that land was given to the Native groups and we weren't able to pursue that. I don't know what we would ever have done with it. It was at the top of the Talkeetna Mountains, so Not too far above Talkeetna, but that's not the way they'd go in. They went in through Chickaloon and over the Chickaloon Pass.

Did you have a garden or farmstead, and what crops or animals did you have?

The only animal we ever had was a dog. Um, we . . . I grow flowers, not vegetables. I have some fruit and flowers . . . but no, no gardens. We did not depend on what I was growing for food. Otherwise, we would have starved.

[Laughing] Okay.

Okay, is there anything else we didn't talk about that you would like to add?

Boy, I can't think of anything. I think that is just about it.

Okay. Great. Well, thank you so much, Mavis. I'll leave this here with you. There are other questions on here if you want to or feel like answering them.

If I see that there is something Do you have a number?

I will put my number on here for you. Mavis, it has been really nice. Thank you for your time and interview.

Darrel Hess Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on October 4, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Mr. Darrel Hess at his office regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. Hess, would you please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace?

Darrel Hess; November 9, 1952; Edwards Air Force Base, California.

And where did you grow up?

I lived in Edwards until I was eleven months old. Then my family moved to Germany for three years, and then we moved to Texas. We lived there for three years. In 1965, August 1965, we moved to Anchorage, Alaska.

Is it safe to assume that the military brought you here?

Yes, my Dad was in the Air Force.

Who else came here with your family?

My dad, my mom, my older brother Bob, and my younger sister Linda.

And where did you go to school?

When we got to Alaska in August 1965, I was just getting ready to enter junior high school. So I attended Orion Junior High School on Elmendorf Air Force Base . . . and at that time Junior High was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. You earned high school credits in ninth grade, but ninth grade was part of junior high school.

So, was it a small school with just the three grades?

Yes.

What neighborhood or community did you live in first? Were you always Government Hill?

We lived in Government Hill from 1965 when we first arrived here until 1970. My parents purchased a house in Eagle River.

And how many people lived in your home when you were in Government Hill?

There would be the five of us.

No one besides your immediate family?

No, it was just the family

Do you know if your family owned or rented their home at that time?

We rented the home. We lived in Richardson Vista. It was building 9, apartment 195.

What else do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

I remember it as being an interesting complex. There was quite a maze in the basements where they had cages for people to store their goods. And as kids we played in the basements a lot . . . a lot of fantasy playing down there. And it was pretty diverse.

At that time Anchorage, you know, we moved from San Antonio which is a very diverse community to Anchorage, which at that time was ninety-five, ninety-six percent Caucasian and there wasn't a lot of diversity.

And one of the things I appreciated at that time was there was a lot of diversity on Government Hill. Government Hill and Fairview at that time were probably the primary areas for African Americans lived in Anchorage. And there were a lot of other minorities and cultures that were stationed in the; families that were stationed at Elmendorf that lived at Richardson Vista also. So it was kind of an enclave of diversity in a pretty un-diverse town.

Do you know much more about your neighbors, who they were at the time?

I remember two of our neighbors were Mr. and Mrs. Hostetler, and Chet Hostetler was on the Anchorage City Council. It was before the municipality was the city of Anchorage. As a matter of fact just a few blocks down the street here is Hostetler Park that was named after him. And I still remember the day he passed away. His wife came home and found him deceased. He had had a heart attack.

And then I remember Colonel Sumnerbanks who worked for the Corps of Engineers and his wife and their daughter were our neighbors. And then there were the Ligosis, and I was friends with their children Tom and Diane. And Tom later went to medical school and became a doctor and moved back to Anchorage and practiced here for several years.

What would you say were the most prevalent occupations of your neighbors?

I would say that the majority of them were either in the military service or worked for the civil service, worked for the Federal Government in one form or another.

How would you describe Government Hill?

Government Hill . . . as it is now to me is kind of an isolated neighborhood. It's . . . you're part of Anchorage but at that time Government Hill and Spenard and Mountain View were thought of as pretty much separate communities from the city itself.

And one of the things that was really interesting at that time was the sense of isolation from downtown Anchorage, from the rest of Anchorage because at that time there was one little bridge which is now the Bridge Restaurant and that was the only access between Government Hill and Anchorage. And if there was a problem with that bridge, there was no access from Government Hill to Anchorage.

Did that happen frequently, or . . . ?

It happened a few times . . . weather conditions, accidents . . . where there was no access to and from Government Hill. You would actually have to drive all the way through Elmendorf to come the roundabout way to get downtown. So you be, could feel pretty isolated up there sometimes with just that one little bridge.

I suppose in those days the security at Elmendorf wasn't what it is today?

It was pretty lax. We actually when we walked to Orion we cut through, there was an opening in the fence because Richardson Vista is outside the base, but there were openings in the fence for us to walk into the base to attend school. We played all over the back of the base and the bluffs behind Government Hill. There were all kinds of old jeeps and things . . . you know. I think it was a little less politically correct, incorrect then. It looked like the military just disposed of a lot of excess goods by dumpin' 'em over the bluffs. And we used to climb down those bluffs and find K-rations from the '40s and '50s.

I still remember the cinnamon rolls were a little dry, but they were pretty good considering how old they were. But it was quite a play area for us . . . all the bunkers out there and the old military equipment. A lot, lot more lax than it is now.

What do you remember about major local events as a child?

I remember when we lived here, downtown Anchorage was the center of the community. And I remember Fur Rondy being fascinated when I was a kid and we just moved here. The dogsled races, the blanket tosses, the fur auctions, you know, the Native carvings, and the singing and dancing.

Some of it was pretty exotic to me, and it seemed like there was always something going on downtown: 4th of July parade, Fur Rondy. And I think, you know, we lost a lot of that in the '80s, you know, when a lot of businesses starting moving out to the malls. But it seems like we've recaptured a lot of that.

I remember when the Beatles had engine trouble. In 1966 they were on their way to Japan and the Philippines. They stopped here and me and some of my friends, we snuck into the Westward Hotel and we actually got to meet them.

Um, I remember when the Pope came, 1981. I managed to be in the front row at his mass on the Park Strip. That was the largest crowd I had ever seen in Anchorage. I think at times we felt . . . I felt isolated up here.

You know, with all the politics going on in the Lower 48, you know, the Vietnam War, the protests.

The 1968 election, I remember looking forward . . . Robert Kennedy was supposed to visit Anchorage and he was assassinated just two or three days before he was supposed to visit here. So I think sometimes we felt isolated; so when we would get world events like the Pope coming or the President stopping in, I think it meant a lot more to local residents because we were, you know, it was always us and them. It was us and the Lower 48. It's like we were . . . we felt we were different.

What do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

I think I miss . . . life seemed a lot simpler then. You alluded to the security on the base; I mean, you didn't have all this security and security checks everywhere you went. And Government Hill was a nice, quiet place.

Everybody . . . you may not really know somebody by name, but you knew 'em by sight because you would see 'em all the time and everybody would stop and say "hi" on the sidewalk.

There was just . . . right now it seems like a big hustle bustle. It seems like everyone is in a hurry to get somewhere everybody's too busy to say "hi." I miss that. It was kind of like Mayberry [laughter], North Carolina, in Government Hill. It was a nice, quiet place where everybody said "hi."

Other than that, how have you seen Government Hill change over your lifetime?

You know, I haven't lived there for years, but when I worked for the city economical community development, I, I had some projects up on Government Hill. I have some friends that live there. My mom and I, until she passed away recently, we used to at least once a month drive up to Government Hill . . . just drive around and look at the neighborhood. And it just seems to me, although it's a little more hustle bustle, it's still very, ah, quiet. It seems like a quiet, peaceful neighborhood. I live in Fairview and, you know, you got a lot of traffic and a lot of noise. Government Hill still seems really quiet. What I like is they've improved . . . Richardson Vista's been remodeled inside and out. Panoramic View's been remodeled. A lot of the smaller, older houses have been fixed up.

So I think from that point of view, it just seems like the infrastructure of the housing is in better shape than it was then. And I think there's a lot more diversity on Government Hill now, and I appreciate that also.

And what do you think brought about the major changes that you have seen in Government Hill?

I think it was the lack of decent, affordable housing. And, you know, Richardson Vista and Hollywood Vista, which was torn down, and Panoramic View were all built during World War II when you had the growth of the military bases and they needed some fairly decent, affordable housing. And those structures had aged over the years to the point that Hollywood Vista was torn down. And I think people looked at it and said, you know, if we want to preserve this housing stock, which is important to Anchorage, this fairly affordable housing, quite a few units between Panoramic View and Hollywood Vista, that we have to improve it; we have to do some major renovations.

I know NeighborWorks Anchorage, I used to serve on their board, they actually owned Panoramic View and they spent a lot of money over the years fixing it up.

What do you think was the most important thing to the people in Government Hill in the early days when you first moved here?

I think it was the sense of independence. And, there was also the big brew-ha-ha to always have a Government Hill Fire Station, which the residents there managed to preserve that for many years. And the argument was always, well, if you got that one little bridge and if there is an issue, you know, the trucks can't come from downtown. So, when they improved the access to the Hill that was one of the negatives . . . is that it led eventually to the closure of the fire station.

Who were some of Government Hill leaders, and what did they do for the community?

You know, having been a kid at the time, I don't really remember who would be community leaders at the time.

Are there places in Government Hill that stand out in your mind? If so why?

I like the wireless station, and which is of course now unoccupied and there is an effort to preserve it. When I lived in Government Hill it was still in use by the Government. And some of my neighbors had told me the story of the wireless station, and how at one point back in 1915, that was the only link to the outside world was the wireless station. And people would have to trudge all the way, I mean TRUDGE, all the way to Government Hill to get news from the outside world or to send news, you know, a birth, a death. And I always thought that was fascinating story. And at the time it was being used I think by the Geologic Survey Service, USGS at the time, but it wasn't being used as a wireless station. But a lot of people that lived in Government Hill were familiar with the history of it.

Was that used by the military initially?

I believe it was the military, the Corps of Engineers that originally operated it.

What types of work opportunities existed in Government Hill and or nearby communities when you first moved in?

I think that's one of the reasons it was such a sleepy community. There weren't a lot of businesses on Government Hill. We had, I think, the first strip mall in Anchorage ever developed, which is still there, was on Government Hill.

And at one point there was like a little grocery store in there, and I think an electronic store. I remember when the pizza parlor opened, and there was a gas station.

But there weren't a lot of businesses to generate very many jobs. So the overwhelming majority of people who lived on Government Hill worked elsewhere. A lot of them worked on the military bases and some worked downtown. But at that time it was interesting in the mornings the majority of traffic from Government Hill would be going through the base gates instead of heading downtown, especially in the end I lived in. Now the other end on the west end, there were more people who worked in the downtown area; a lot of people worked for the railroad.

Which historical events affected your family and the Government Hill community?

We got here right after the earthquake and we had friends that told us what it was like during the earthquake with no power, and sitting in your house . . . no heat, no power. But of course by the time we got here in August 1965, that was almost a year and a half after the earthquake. I can't remember any major events that really affected Government Hill or our neighbors. We had a . . . I know right after the earthquake, we used to—my sister, brother, and I—used to sleep with our shoes on when we first moved here because there were some pretty good sized tremblers, you know, for a year or two after the earthquakes. You know, Los Angeles and New York would call them earthquakes; we would call them tremors. They were pretty, pretty strong. We were ready to run out the door.

How about the oil booms and busts? Do you think they had an impact on Government Hill?

I don't think that the oil booms and busts had a significant impact on Government Hill other than raising the occupancy level rates for, you know, Panoramic View and Richardson Vista. Because, by that point in time they were starting to get older, it was before they put money into renovating them, so they were fairly inexpensive. So it provided some housing for persons who were working in the oil industry.

Mr. Hess, you were here slightly after Statehood. Did you hear any stories about Statehood? Do you have any feelings about how Statehood, you know, what affect Statehood had on Government Hill transitioning from before Statehood till after Statehood?

Nothing . . . I haven't heard any stories about how [Statehood] affected Government Hill. I have heard a lot of stories about Statehood, obviously the bonfire on the Park Strip and the battle for Statehood. And over the years I've had conversations, you know, one of the things I really appreciate about Alaska and Anchorage is you could run into the governor or ex-governors, or senators or ex-senators in the grocery stores here. It's not like a larger city or state, and I remember listening to Bill Egan, Wally Hickel, and Ted Stevens telling stories about the battle for Statehood . . . and Bob Atwood. You know, it was quite a struggle, quite a battle.

How about the civil rights movement? Do you recall how those events, world events, affected the Government Hill community?

I really from my perspective living on Government Hill between '65 and '70, which is, you know, it's the peak and then the downhill of the civil rights movement, I don't see how it affected it directly.

I know just before we got here in 1965, there was a march in downtown Anchorage supporting civil rights, and over a thousand people participated in it. It was led, led by Chief Flanagan from Anchorage Police Department. At that time in 1965 over a thousand people . . . that was a pretty good-sized march. So, it was a fairly active segment of the population who supported civil rights.

And of course with Elizabeth Peratrovich, Alaska, you know, was ahead of the rest of the country as far as civil rights.

You mentioned that you didn't know too much about the leaders being a child at the time. What about the government itself? Do you have any feelings for how government has changed at either the local or city level between then and now?

I think I've always been fascinated by government and politics and obviously working for the city and being a community council president and community activist, I have interacted with a lot of our elected officials. I think government has become larger and less personal, and it seems more combative. I remember the years ago like with the city council, George Sullivan was mayor, and he and some of the council members would be going at it tooth and nail . . . really arguing over an issue. But at the end of the meeting, they'd have their arms around each other and would go have a beer.

It just seems that as government has gotten larger at the local level and state level that it has become a little less personal and a little more political. But, but with that said, I think we still have a great opportunity here to interact with our elected officials that you just don't experience in many places in the country.

Well, you moved here during the Vietnam War. How would you say that war or any other wars that you've heard about before or you have experienced since has affected Government Hill?

I think the way that it affected Government Hill was the impacts on the lives of many of the residents because so many of them worked for the federal government or were in the military. A lot of our neighbors were transferred out actually to Vietnam. My Dad had been to Vietnam before we moved to Alaska. And, I remember at one point there was a plane taking off or landing, a supply plane going to Vietnam was taking off and landing at Elmendorf like every 10 or 15 minutes.

And we used to play out behind the fields, because like I said you could walk right through the gates. We would go out behind the airfields, there would be guards out there with rifles and German Shepherds and we would play out in there, you know, and check out the bunkers and things that all said “off limits.”

I think that out of all the wars in my lifetime, the one that impacted Government Hill the most would have been Vietnam, simply because so many of the residents worked for the federal government or served in the military.

Were any other members of your family besides your dad in the military?

My brother joined the Navy in 1968, and he went to Vietnam and he served on the U.S.S. McMorris, which was a spy ship. It was the sister ship of the U.S.S. Pueblo that was captured by the North Koreans. So, he had a lot of interesting stories to tell.

Did he freely share stories with you? Did he have a rough experience where he didn't want to share stories?

Well, you know, he told me some stories, like as one example, the Russians were shooting off a missile. They were testing a missile. The United States wanted to recover that. So the Russians are sitting fifty miles away from where it's gonna hit the water in the Pacific Ocean, and the Americans' ship, his ship is like ten miles away, so [laughs] which didn't really seem too smart at the time.

And he told a story about how they were doing some surveillance off the coast of red China. Their sonar and radar went out, and when it came back on they were within red Chinese waters and they could see the Japs on their radar heading toward them. He had some pretty interesting experiences. I'm sure our government denied all of 'em.

One of the fun things he told me was he was a golden shell back, which is where you cross the international dateline and the equator at the same time. And they have an initiation ceremony.

Somebody is dressed up like Neptune with the fork, and he was in his underwear and had to crawl through garbage. But he said it was a lot of fun. He was, he was the youngest member of the crew. He was like seventeen at the time and they called him the “kid” and they always watched out for him.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about our town, about Anchorage, Government Hill?

I don't remember per se any stories about Government Hill other than the stories about the wireless station. Which, like I said always fascinated me. Then of course there were stories of Bootlegger's Cove. You know, and a lot of people don't realize that it got its name because the bootleggers used to have caves out there that they hid their product in.

So, uh, Anchorage over the years, it was a pretty wild town. Someone told me the stories we went through, I forget the city went through several fire chiefs in a very short period because several of them were found to have criminal records. Because that was back in the day you didn't have computers and you didn't do background checks and a lot of people, you know, Alaska and Anchorage were the end of the world, and people would come here to start over. I remember one of the stories, there was a gentleman who was the chief of police in Anchorage for many years, and after he passed away his sister came to Anchorage to the funeral, and she was African American. They didn't . . . never had realized it, that he had passed for white. So, we actually had an African American police chief; I think it was back in the '20s. I learned of that story taking the summer solstice tour at the cemetery.

Did your family fish or hunt?

When we first got here, we fished quite a bit. My dad was quite a fisherman, but he didn't like the combat fishing. I fished for a long time; I'd go to the Russian River. I gave it up as I got older. I figured out that, you know, mosquitoes, dirty, smelly, I just bum fish off my friends that go fishing now, but I used to go quite a bit. I used to go backpacking a lot . . . hike the Crow Pass.

I went backpacking to Mount McKinley several times, but as I got older I became more of a city boy. Now my brother was a hunter. He hunted quite a bit.

Any fishing in Ship Creek locally?

Yes, actually we used to. It is interesting on the base, you know, Ship Creek down from Government Hill and over by the Boniface gate, there used to be, fish would be so thick in there people would wade out in the shallow parts and catch 'em with their hands. I mean that's a true story. I witnessed it. It was just, there were so many fish then; and hopefully I think we are getting the stock back up again, but we're still not nearly where we used to be.

Did your family have a garden or a farmstead?

No, we did in Texas. It finally was blooming; the corn and everything was ready and we had to "move" to Anchorage.

You talked quite a bit about your dad. What else do you remember about your parents at that time?

I remember my mom had been pretty much a stay-at-home mom. She'd never really worked. She got married when she was 17 . . . had my brother when she was eighteen. And when we moved here, there was more opportunity because at that time it was a fairly small population, so there was a lot of opportunity for women to work here that you may not have found in other states because of the small workforce here. So my mother actually went to work for the civil service and started working full time, and she loved it. It was interesting because my dad was kind of old fashion and, you know, my mom's name was never on the title of the car or anything. And after she got a job, she got her own car; and I think that was hard on my dad for awhile till he got used to her being more independent.

Did you parents ever talk to you about their youth or share any stories with you about their lives?

Yes, they were actually, my mom was a farm girl. She was one of eleven children. Her father, my grandfather, was one of twelve children. And she told me stories growing up in the depression.

I remember she told me one story about how the girls, my aunts and her, would take turns picking out the flour sacks so that my grandmother could make their dress out of it. Of course, I'm thinking of these burlap bags and I told her, "Well that must have been awful itchy." And she explained to me that during the Depression, flour came in large bags that had print patterns on it. It was a nice material because everybody during the Depression—poor families, farm families—they made dresses, the kids dresses out of the material from the flour sacks. I thought that was fascinating.

Do you have any other ancestors or descendants living here?

I have never been married. I don't have any kids. My mom passed away, and my brother both passed away last month. But, I have my sister-in-law, my nephew, and then my niece and her husband and their two kids still here.

Where did they come from?

My niece and nephew were born here, as was my sister-in-law.

Mr. Hess, is there anything else that we haven't spoken about that you would like to add at this time?

Well, one of the things I remember about Government Hill was that I used to love to walk from Government Hill to town. I would go visit Penny's. I would go down to the Book Cache, which had the stamp cache inside. At the time I was a stamp collector and liked to read. But that's what the younger people back then. You know, cars weren't as prevalent with teenagers back then, especially when you were 16 and 17. Before I was 16 and 17 even, I used to walk down the large bluffs through the railroad yard . . . you know, those long bluffs. We'd walk down the bluffs. Then we would walk across the bridge, which is the Bridge Restaurant now, and then up into town. We'd do that to go to Fur Rondy or just to find something to do because Government Hill was a great place to live in many ways, but for a young person it was a little boring. There wasn't a lot to do. So we would just walk downtown.

How long would that take you to walk?

You know, I think it'd take me about 30 minutes.

Was there any other form of transportation available . . . and buses or anything?

I don't remember city buses then. That's curious. I've thought about that quite a bit over the years. I don't remember seeing city buses then. There may have been some, but they were probably pretty infrequent and didn't . . . you know, there probably weren't a lot of routes because I never saw a city bus on Government Hill.

It was interesting because I went to West High when I lived on Government Hill, and we would take the bus, and there was no Minnesota Bypass. Hillcrest Drive, which is kind of windy and narrow, it was two way at the time, and we would go up Hillcrest Drive and back down when you would leave. So it was an adventure sometimes going up and down that hill in the school bus during the winter.

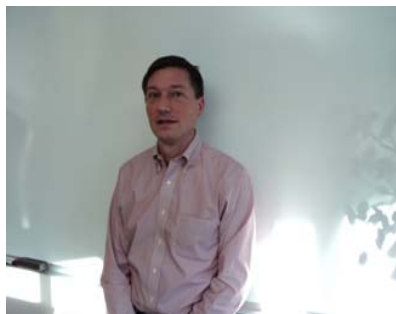
What wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

I think they . . . the future generation of residents of Government Hill, I hope they continue the fight, the struggle, the battle to preserve the heritage of the neighborhood. There are some incredible homes up there that have a lot of history—you know, the Brown's Point cottages, the Sears and Roebuck homes, the Quonset huts. It's just a little snapshot of what was Anchorage's original neighborhood.

Well, I think that concludes our interview. Thank you very much for your input. We appreciate it.

Well, thank you.

Brian Hoefler Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on November 18, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Mr. Brian Hoefler at his office regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. Hoefler, could you please tell us again your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Brain Hoefler. My birthdate is December 23, 1959. I was born here in Anchorage, Alaska, at the old Providence Hospital.

And where did you grow up?

I grew up on Government Hill.

So you were born and moved right to . . . born while you still lived at Government Hill?

Yeah, my parents lived at Government Hill, and I lived there for the first, well, 18 years of my life. I went away to college; I guess I still called Government Hill my home at that point in time . . . so until I was about 22.

When you were growing up, where did you go to school?

Government Hill Elementary.

And what grades did that school have?

Okay, kindergarten I actually went to All Saints Episcopal Church, a private school down on 8th and F Street. So beginning first grade through sixth grade, I went to Government Hill Elementary. Then I attended Central Junior High for seventh through ninth. Coincidentally, I was the last year ninth grade was at middle school, and it is now seventh and eighth only, as I think most people know, and then West High from tenth through twelfth grade.

And what was Government Hill Elementary School like when you attended there? Do you recall about how many students?

Boy, I couldn't tell you the number of students. It seemed like there were 18 classrooms and they were all pretty full.

How many people lived in your home while you were growing up?

There were five of us; there were myself, my two older brothers, and my parents.

Did you have anybody besides your immediate family living in your home at any time?

No, not other than some dogs we had.

Do you know if your family rented or owned their home?

We owned the home.

And do you know when your parents first came to Government Hill?

They first moved to Government Hill, I believe, in 1951.

Do you know what brought them to Government Hill?

Well, my father was a lifer at the Alaska Railroad, and at that point in time, many people with the railroad lived on Government Hill and it seemed like a good place. Um, he, being of a conservative bent, didn't like the idea of driving a long way to work every day.

So he was able to walk down. There was an old stairway built by the railroad where you could walk down the stairs into the railroad yards and off to work. And that's what he did. So he could walk, and I believe that was the reason why they moved there.

And how about your mother? Did she work?

No, she didn't; she was a housewife.

What do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

Well . . . what I remember is that I believe our home that I grew up in was . . . we lived on Harvard Avenue; 109 West Harvard is where I grew up. It was an old World War II vintage little cottage. And it had an identical home right next to it owned by Oakley Brown . . . Oakley and Louise Brown. Um, and my father bought that home; my father and mother bought that, the home at 109 West, and at 109 . . . I'm sorry, 101 West [Harvard] that was owned by Albert Koontz, who sold it to Oakley Brown early on. My parents then, I believe, when I was born as a third child, they renovated the home. They took the old World War II vintage home and, I believe, they jacked it up and built a foundation under it and built the rest of the house under it, which is almost exactly the same today as it was when they built that in about 1960, that was done.

So they went through a major expansion and renovation then. And it was largely unrenovated until we sold it in 2006, I believe, or maybe it was 2005. We sold the home, and they did some interior work after that, I understand it. But, uh, it's, uh . . . at least the footprint and the floor plan is the same as it was from 1960. Um, the house at 101 West now went through some renovation too, and they went on a different track and a different floor plan there. But, uh, both of them were originally World War II cottages.

When you sold the home, is that when you moved out of Government Hill?

No, my father had lived there until he passed away in 2006.

My mother died in 1990, and they both lived there, you know, from 1951 until they passed away. Um, I had moved away back in 1982. Although my father still lived there and I was a regular visitor to Government Hill for all those years, um, and in his later years, I was looking after his affairs and, uh, we were basically looking after the house for him.

Do you know what the general occupations were of your neighbors, most of them?

I do. Lot of railroad families lived on Government Hill. It was the, uh, it was a working-class neighborhood. A lot of blue collar people, a few people from the management; my father was one of the managers. Um, and that was a, a lot of people, a lot of the people were in the military. I had a lot of military friends. Interestingly enough, the friends from my early years that I keep with, keep up with today, were largely from Central and from West. Most of the Government Hillers moved away because a lot of them were military families that just moved on. So there was a lot of, of rotations of people through the neighborhood. Um, and then further down on the other side of Government Hill, down in what we call the "apartments" . . . the old Hollywood Vista kind of area, that was much more transient. And, uh, those people were, uh, came and went quite a bit. So there was kind of three populations is how I thought of it: the railroaders, the military, and then the transients.

How would you generally describe the Government Hill community?

Pretty tight knit . . . everybody knew everybody . . . lotta kids, lotta families, pretty active in the community. There was always some little issue like a new liquor license down at the, you know, um, one of the clubs there on Government Hill that the neighbors were all rallying around. And it was, it was a nice set of folks.

What do you remember about major local events as a child? Does anything come to mind?

You mean like the earthquake? [Laughs]

Well, we're going to get to the earthquake eventually. Anything else?

Um, well, another big event I know, again another Government Hill rallying cry was the construction of the overpass down there across the railroad yards . . . to reconstruct the Government Hill access road back in, I'm gonna say it was '72 or around that era. I don't remember exactly, but it seems like it was early '70s.

How did the folks in Government Hill get out of Government Hill before the overpass was constructed? Did they take the Loop Road?

Yeah, Old Loop Road which went down along the base of Government Hill, and the overpass at least for the eastern section, really in the western section for that matter too, is right on top of Old Loop Road. And they kind of evened it out. It was literally a loopy road that followed the contour of the base of Government Hill going down into the railroad yards, and then you had to wait at each of the railroad crossings to get to town. Of course, there was the back way out too down, and I don't remember the name of the road now, um, off the back side of Government Hill that we took quite a bit of the time too. Um, back of course in those days too, it was open access to the port, which in the post 9/11 era that was all shut down. But, uh, we used to come and go from the Port of Anchorage all the time too.

Did it go through base . . . any of the base property?

Um . . . no, there was not . . . on a bicycle, sure. We went in the back way and up the back route through the port onto behind Cherry Hill on the base. Um, again back in the era before there were fences around Elmendorf [chuckles], we used to come and go from base a lot. Um, but there was no road that I'm aware of where you can just drive up there.

Speaking of which, that was another thing, that in those days you could drive your snow machine in Anchorage too, and so we'd take snow machines out and we'd drive out on Elmendorf and go for hours back there . . . just kind of open access . . . just having fun and enjoying the winter.

Brian, what do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

It was a much simpler life. Um, it was a tight-knit community. Um, everybody looked after each other. Um, you knew all your neighbors. Um, it was, um, it was very peaceful living there . . . on Government Hill.

And how have you seen Government Hill change during your lifetime?

Well . . . I think just society in general is a lot more fast paced. Um, people don't know their neighbors as well as they did back then. Um, it's a lot of the old families have moved on and aren't, you know, the people that all went to work together every day, aren't there anymore.

What do you think brought about these changes?

I think just the natural evolution of society and, uh, more people have discovered Government Hill and if you wanted to move there . . . um, and, yeah, there's people from all over. I think they enjoy that community atmosphere that they have there.

Let me mention another event that I just was thinking about when you mentioned that. And I recall this, one of the things that we lived maybe a little bit in fear of is, um, growing up in Government Hill, is the tank farm down below the Hill. And I do remember one time there being a big fire. I don't remember an explosion in particular, but it was probably in the early '60s. One of the tank farms down in the Port of Anchorage caught on fire. And yeah, we were ready to evacuate. As it turned out, they got the fire under control before we evacuated. But yeah, you did; Government Hill was surrounded; it's got the railroad yards; it had the Port of Anchorage; it had Elmendorf Air Force Base. And, you know, you used to hear the sonic booms as kids. The jets would take off from Elmendorf and boom! There would be a loud noise. And they don't do that anymore, but back in those days they did. Kind of interesting as a kid, but it was a little obnoxious as a neighbor.

Um, and so, you felt kind of surrounded by industry, you know, on all sides. So we had a little oasis of a town. Of course we were hit very hard in the earthquake, as I know you know.

What do you remember about the earthquake?

Well, I was only four years old at the time, but I remember it very distinctly. And in retrospect, the part of Government Hill I lived on was the part that was on Elmendorf Moraine, a gravel deposit which shook but didn't slide. It wasn't that Bootlegger's Cove clay that a number of other . . . you know, if you went down to the other part of Government Hill a lot of the neighborhood slid. We did not.

But I was at home, of course, as every other kid was doing at that point in time. We were watching Fireball XL-5 on TV and all of a sudden the TV went off and the room was shaking, and, by coincidence, we had a babysitter who happened to be a geophysical student at the University of Alaska and we got a nice lecture of what earthquakes were.

[Laughter] Um, but the house was shaking around, and you're trying to catch things falling off of the shelves; it went on and on and on. The television jumped across the room and went all the way back. Um, and then we went out. When the shaking stopped, we went over to the bluff on Government Hill and looked across at all the fires and the damage and everything that had occurred over on the 3rd and 4th Avenue area . . . 2nd Avenue area of Anchorage.

It was a very scary time, but I really didn't appreciate, you know, the gravity of the situation. It was more of a "Huh, this is kind of interesting!" You know, when you're four years old, you can imagine what you're thinking. Um, but I remember my father of course coming home, 'cause he was at the railroad and he could walk home.

My mother had been down at the Hat Box, which you may recall was right there next to the Hilton Hotel. So she was standing next to the Hilton Hotel, or at time the Anchorage Westward, swaying back and forth wondering if she was going to make it. And she eventually had to walk home as well from there, and everybody made it home safely, which was great.

Um, and we went for . . . it seems like at least two if not three weeks . . . cooking in our fireplace. We had a fireplace in the house and that was our means of heat and to cook our food. And we melted snow that we found to drink water. And it was like living in the woods almost, [laughs] which, as you know, we called that the woods across the street, the bluff going down to Loop Road between Harvard Avenue and Loop Road. I believe that was our sanitation then too during the, in that post earthquake era before utilities were back. So, yeah, it left a big impression. Of course it was Good Friday and no kids were in school. I was preschool age at that point in time, but both of my brothers were in the part of Government Hill Elementary School that broke in half and went down the hill. And who knows if they would have survived that. But of course they weren't in school that day, so it was a "good" Friday for us. And, uh, I might not have had my brothers, so . . .

Do you think experiencing the earthquake has affected you today when we have earthquakes? Are you more nervous?

Oh, yes! You notice we don't have an office building down there on the bluff by 3rd Avenue. I could not go to it, go to work down there in that area. I'm just nervous around the bluff in Anchorage. Um, I couldn't live there; I couldn't work there. Um, and when an earthquake does happen, I mean, I know myself more than others, I'm, yeah, I am definitely affected by that 1964 earthquake.

What do you think was most important to the people in Government Hill when you were growing up . . . the early days?

I think piece of mind. Um, I'll tell you another thing I remember growing up on Government Hill. Again a broader context . . . but it was when, I believe it was the Cannikin nuclear experiment out in the Aleutians and we all had to leave the school and go stand outside in the playground for a couple of hours when they had that . . . um . . . wondering whether there would be an earthquake. There was question as to whether an earthquake would be set off if in fact that nuclear device triggered one.

Um, but, yeah, that, that when I think about peace of mind we had the military base there, but we were in an earthquake zone and we had all of these things happening around us, but we had our own little oasis there on Government Hill where we felt safe.

Was that the testing in Amchitka that you were talking about?

Yes, yes.

Do you know who were some of the Government Hill's leaders in the early days when you were growing up, and what they did for the community?

Gosh, I don't really recall. I know my mother was pretty active in the Government Hill Community Council. I don't really know that we really had leaders per se. It was more of a committee of people who were active. Louise Brown our next door neighbor was active. Edith Fleming . . . I don't know if you're talking to her; she was, she was active.

Are there places in Government that stand out most in your mind, and if so, why?

Well, you know, as kids growing up there we played in the woods constantly. In fact, I still have a scar on my lip from falling out of a tree house there and ripping my lip open as a child [laughs]. But we were up and down and back and forth riding our bikes. We called it the gully and the back side of Government Hill had the little dip and there's a playground down there now that used to flood.

Um, and, you know, we would play in the water and go sledding in the winter. Yeah, just all the outdoor things . . . we were always outdoors.

You talked about many people working for the railroad and the military. Were there any other particular types of work opportunities that existed in Government Hill or nearby communities?

Um, not really . . . I mean the people of course; the big the Alascom building was down there, but I didn't know anybody from Government Hill who worked there. There may have been, but I didn't know them.

Um, there were people who worked down the shopping district down there on Loop Road. For instance, Weaver Franklin's wife Colleen was the bank teller down there. And I remember traipsing along with my mother every payday where she got my father's paycheck and went down to cash it. And they'd sit there and gossip for a half an hour while I stood there bored to tears. [Laughs] But, yes, so there was opportunities just down the street for some people to work.

You mentioned the earthquake and the nuclear testing. Are there any other historical events that affected your family and the Government Hill community?

[Long pause] Not that come to mind clearly; not in the era I lived there. The other kind of big thing I remember was the construction of that overpass because the original plan was for it . . . and we used to say the plan was to send the road right through our living room. Um, and there was a big move afoot to encourage the city to redesign the project, or the state, I'm not too sure who it was, but to redesign the project to its present form to avoid taking out the Government Hill neighborhood.

Originally it was going to come basically at a flat grade all the way across and land right at the bluff on Government Hill, take out that front row of homes, and end up at Elmendorf. And they ended up redesigning it. And that was, that was a big event for the people that were gonna have their homes affected.

And of course today, there's a lot of discussion about the access to the Knik Arm Crossing Bridge going through Government Hill, um, and the same kinds of issues . . . so looking for redesigns of that road.

Do you believe that the oil booms and busts have had a significant effect on Government Hill?

You know, not in a direct way but in an indirect way. Where, for instance, working for the railroad and my father, you know, I just remember him coming home and saying, "Well we're going to ship a bunch of pipe on the railroad." And the pipe would come up and we'd all see all the pipe for the Trans Alaska Pipeline being shipped up on the railroad up north.

And then he'd come home and talk about how they're gonna build a drill rig down in the railroad yards, and then we'd watch them build a drill rig. The railroad would rent them some space to do that. Um, so there were a lot of, you know, be it, the railroad benefitted a lot from the pipeline construction days. And my father was, being in the marketing end for the railroad, was involved in a lot of that. So there was a lot of business spawned off, but in terms of direct jobs, people working on the pipeline . . . actually now that you mention it, I used to take care of the house and the dog for a lady who worked on the North Slope. I didn't know what she did, but all I know is she worked on the North Slope. And she would be gone for one to two weeks at a time and I'd watch her dog and shovel her walk. So, there were people there that did that but, you know, as a kid growing up I didn't really know what they did.

Well, you were born right about the same time as Statehood. Obviously you don't have memories from that event, but what do you know from what your parents told you?

About Statehood . . . hmm, I don't know a whole lot about how they were affected by Statehood. They never really talked about that that much. I'm sure it was a momentous event. Both of my brothers were born when Alaska was a territory. I was actually born just barely when Alaska was a state. But no, there wasn't a lot of discussion of that.

Although I do remember growing up in elementary school that we studied that and talked about it. Um, but I don't remember a whole lot from that.

How about the civil rights movement? Do you see any effects on the Government Hill community?

No, no, I think we were a very integrated community. There were a lot of Natives in the neighborhood. There were a lot of blacks in the neighborhood. Um, we all got along well. I had a lot of friends, you know multicultural friends. It was a multicultural place given the military and the transient population and the railroad population. We were all . . . everybody got along really well.

How does government today differ from when you were a child, both in the community level and in the city level?

[Pause] Well, I wasn't that tuned into government as a kid growing up. I understand very well how it operates today, but back then, you know, for instance, one day I remember when they came in and paved all the streets. We had dirt roads: dusty, dirty, muddy. And then one day all of a sudden they were paved. [Laughs] And the government did it. And I didn't understand how all that worked but it . . . it happened. So, I don't know that I really have an opinion on how government was different today than then.

How do you think the Government Hill, the Government Hill community was affected by the wars? Do you think it was affected significantly?

Oh, yeah. I think Government Hill, even though I didn't really live there in the World War II era, that was when a lot of the growth, particularly with Elmendorf and Fort Richardson coming into, into being in that era, they, they grew substantially. And, you know, all of a sudden we had military people there who were, you know, they seemed to be on three- to five-year rotations. They'd come in for a few years and then they'd move on.

I actually played baseball on Elmendorf. Again, it was closer than the city leagues. I was probably one of very few civilians who played baseball in the Elmendorf league, and we were always allowed to do that. And yeah, it was great having Elmendorf right there. I had a lot of friends. We would go out to the, the, um, the gym, and we'd go swimming and we'd play baseball and we'd go bowling and just take advantage of all those things that you could do. Our Boy Scout troop was very active and at least half of the people in our troop were military, so we were always going on campouts there. And, uh, so having all those facilities from that post World War II era right there was great.

Were you or any of your family members ever in the military?

No.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill or the Anchorage area?

You mean like climbing the water tower?

That would be interesting. [Laughter]

I never did it myself, but I knew several people who at least claimed to have done it. [Laughs]

Did your family fish or hunt?

Oh, yes.

Did you fish in Ship Creek?

You know, I never did. I don't know anyone who really fished in Ship Creek back in those days. People probably did, but no. We, um, you know, another thing about having a lot of railroad families is many of us had cabins up in the valley, particularly at Nancy Lake. There were a lot of railroaders with campers, with cabins at Nancy Lake, including a whole bunch of people on Government Hill. And to this date, I still have the cabin my parents, um, you know, got the patent on the land and built the cabin. And we still go up there regularly and use it actively. Um, so we all fished and hunted up in the valley.

Did you have a garden or a farmstead or anything at your home?

We had an active garden. Yes, we did and grew . . . well, as everyone else in Alaska does . . . grew a lot of rhubarb. But, you know, root crops: carrots, radishes, potatoes, always active. We had a nice crabapple tree in the front yard.

What do you remember about your parents? What, what brought your . . . you said your father was from Alaska?

My mother was from Alaska. Yes.

What brought your father to Alaska?

He came up in World War II. I'm gonna say it was '41 or so. He had just finished University. And I met somebody many, many years later who told me a little bit of that story. Um, he didn't talk a lot about why he came to Alaska or his past, but I've heard from other people. Um, he had just had this lifelong dream to move to Alaska. His family, both his mother and his father had died. So he didn't have any family left back in New York State where he came from. Had a lifelong dream, and as soon as he finished college, he picked up and moved to Alaska. He worked summers. He found a job on the riverboats originally, up in Nenana, which of course in those days were owned by the railroad. So, that was a railroad position. And he worked summers on the Nenana River, or I should say the Tanana and Yukon River, on riverboats for the Yutana Barge Lines, which still exists today, by the way.

In winters he went back to New York and then eventually he took . . . he met my mother in Nenana. Eventually they were married and they, um, started to live . . . they were still going back and forth between New York and Nenana, and then eventually he took a town job for the winter in Anchorage working for the railroad. So he started on the, uh, the riverboats for the railroad, and then he took a job in the warehouse in Anchorage, and eventually moved into management for the railroad. So that was what helped . . . got him to stay.

But yeah, he loved to hunt and fish, the outdoors, the freedom, the land. You know, it was much more congested back in New York even though he was from the Syracuse area, Upstate New York. Um, he, uh, he enjoyed the freedom you had in Alaska.

And your mother, did she grow up in Nenana?

No, she grew up, uh, she was born . . . she's got quite a history too. She was born in Wiseman up in the Brooks Range, mining town. She had an Athabascan mother; actually her mother was half Athabascan and half Japanese. There's a story there too from the North Slope.

Um, her father was the U.S. Magistrate in Wiseman, uh, sent up by the President to be the magistrate in the mining district up there, the big gold mining area. They got married . . . had three kids. He was quite a bit older than she was, my grandfather. Polka Green was his name . . . or Jacob Green. He died and then that left my mother, or I'm sorry, my grandmother with three young kids. She was not able to handle that situation so she eventually, when my mother was, I believe, six years old, she went off to boarding school . . . or foster care really . . . in Seattle and then later on San Francisco.

So she grew up earlier in Seattle but really in San Francisco. She went off to college at Berkley. When she finished school, she wanted to go find her roots. And so, she thumbed a ride up the Alcan to Alaska . . . ended up in Nenana. Where, ah, she came from polite society in San Francisco and now she's in Nenana, as you can imagine back in the '40s It was slightly different than it is today—not quite as sophisticated as it is today. [Laughs] And, um, yeah, she met my father there and one thing led to another.

Were there any particular activities that your parents enjoyed?

Well, the gardening you mentioned. We come from a very active cross-country skiing family. Loved to spend time at our cabin up at Nancy Lake, hunting, fishing. I mean, they really were Alaskans. They liked Alaska. We went to Homer every year. That was our vacation. We drove down there for a week and, you know, went out on the boat fishin' and went crabbing off the dock and all those things.

Again, that was a bunch of Government Hill families. Every year about three or four of us would go down and rent, you know, little rooms at Land's End. And, um, the women would have a big pot of water going on the beach, and the men would go catch crab and throw 'em in the pot and cook 'em. And, yeah, so there was, you know . . . they just loved being in Alaska.

Do you have any other ancestors or descendants living here?

Oh, yes! All over the Interior I have a lot of family . . . um, given my grandmother's roots, you know, in Native culture.

Is there anything else that we haven't spoken about that you would like to add at this time?

Hmm . . . about Government Hill. No, it was a great place to grow up. The old-timers there . . . I knew Nellie Brown, you know, and some of those people who are no longer around. And I just love the folks like Weaver Franklin and, um, Johnny Nelson that you mentioned that were old friends from way back. And, uh, yeah, it's just it was . . . the era is moving on, and it's great that you guys are capturing part of that here.

Well, speaking of that, what wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

[Laughter] Know your neighbors. Get along with them. It's a community. Um . . . enjoy the good times.

Well, thank you for your time. That concludes our interview with Brian Hoefler today.

Jack B. Karterman Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Joni Wilm with the Municipality of Anchorage in the Long-Range Planning Department [Section]. I am here today on May 15, 2012, to conduct an oral interview with Jack Karterman at his house regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My full name is Jack Bailey Karterman, K-A-R-T-E-R-M-A-N.

And your birthdate?

October 27, 1946, and I was born in the Territory of Alaska.

Territory of Alaska . . . do you know where specifically?

Yeah, old Providence down on 9th over by the Park Strip . . . my Mom was an RN and whatnot. We lived like three blocks away from it then.

You are a true sourdough. So, where did you grow up?

First over on the other side; well, first was downtown until I was probably four or somewhere in there. Then we moved up here to Government Hill. And we lived in a Quonset hut at 510 Cook Street on the other side of the Hill, until . . . I think '63. Then we moved here.

Up to the Government Hill house here?

Well, the Cook Street was Government Hill too. It was just the other side of the Hill. And then that was a Quonset hut, and then this wasn't built, or a house but . . .

So, you lived in one of the original Quonset huts?

Yeah, well, lots of people did. In fact, I'd like to have one. [Laughs] They aren't real comfortable, but it would make a cool cabin.

So, you've always lived here?

Well, no, I lived outside for three or four years.

Okay, where was that?

The Seattle area . . . school and whatnot.

Maybe since you were born here, I guess we can ask why did your parents move here?

Well, my father came up here in 1936, from Seattle. And he came up here with the intent of sport fishing and hunting and whatnot, but he had more fun on the Alaska steamship than he thought he would. So, he had to stay here for awhile to get some money wired up from an account he had in Seattle. But at any rate, he ended up working up at Hatcher Pass at the Lucky Shot Mine. His first job was washing dishes on the Alaska Railroad [laughs] . . . which gave him enough money to go fishing and hunting for awhile.

But, at any rate, um, then he got hired to work up at the mine, and when he went to work he was what they called a marker, which is when they blast you shovel the rock into the car. And by the time he left there, he was the radio operator, he ran the assay office, he ran the general store and the post office, and made more money than the guy that was the manager. [Laughs]

Then he came down here and went to work for the railroad. And he was in charge of, back in those days the Alaska Railroad had hotels from Seward all the way to Fairbanks. All along, you know, because they took longer going there than they do now.

And . . . it's funny 'cause I got to spend quite a bit of time up at McKinley Park when I was real small. But that was back where you could go and drive in the park wherever you wanted to go . . . nobody cared. But, anyhow, he worked for the Alaska Railroad, and when he retired he was in charge of procurement and supply. And, ah, they lived here all . . .

Well, she, Mom came up in '37. He met her . . . she was an operating registered nurse, X-ray technician, and a lab technician. And, she worked at the Railroad Hospital, which used to be right straight across on that bluff about where 3rd is. And there's actually some stuff in the newspaper. I think I have clippings of it. She was interviewed a few times and rather funny some of the stuff she'd talk about because she told me . . . I remember being here when she was giving a talk about it. They'd had some trapper, I don't remember what his work was, or whatever it was, he came into town and got so drunk that he got delirium tremens, so they had to strap him in the bed and give him sedatives or whatever. And by the next morning, he was back to himself, so to speak.

When was that about do you think?

Probably '38 . . . and then, we had the, after they got married, I'm thinking '40 or '41; I could look it up, but at any rate . . . because my Dad worked for the railroad, they didn't enlist him in the Army, which was smart because they did enlist a lot of people down in the Lower 48 like railroad engineers and stuff like that. 'Cause I remember talking with, well, John Manley, the general manager of the railroad. He said they had to do some arguing, but he said, "I'm not gonna to take some greenhorn buck private and put him in a big steam locomotive and tell him to take it to Fairbanks." They were doing it down there and the thing . . . they were making mistakes how they run it. If you, they [make a] mistake on a [unintelligible], say run it dry and then give water to it, what you have is a bomb. They blew trains to pieces—I mean did a better job than Germans would have. But, anyhow, they were lucky about that. They did not [unintelligible] ration things up here like they did in the Lower 48.

You could get tires and you could get whatever you want. It was less trouble and I don't know what all. This is an aside, of course.

But then, um, so I came along in '46. But, and Mom was still working as a nurse, and she worked as a nurse for a long time. And then she worked for the, ah, where you go get your car licensed and whatnot.

Oh, the DMV?

Yeah, in fact she was working there during the quake.

So where did you go to school?

That's a long list really because to look at the list of the schools I went to you'd think I acted up a lot and actually got thrown out, but the fact was living on Government Hill. We went, let's see where did we go first. Ah, think, well, I went to kindergarten in a Quonset hut that was across the lawn from our Quonset hut, and one of my best friends—it's kind of amusing—when he was, he lived maybe a block away from me and he hated school. So he used to skip school when he was in kindergarten. I thought that was kind of the world's record. I mean there was no way I was going to get away with it because my mom could look right out of the kitchen window and see where I was; and I actually didn't mind it. [Laughing] Anyhow, it seems to me the next place that we . . . yeah, for grade school it was Denali School downtown... or part of grade school. And then we got moved to Central, which is where the Performing Arts Center is now. And then . . .

There was a school there?

Yeah.

What school?

It was Central. It actually was grade school through high school at different times. I mean I don't know what on earth they did to figure out this stuff. Then, at that point in time that was pretty much going to school with kids that would end up going to West High. Well, then all of a sudden for junior high, they moved me to Orah Dee Clark, a school in Mountain View.

And, let's see what was it? Now I was like in the fifth grade, I think. Yeah, I was in fifth grade at Denali, and was going to go to sixth grade. Well, they transferred me, me and everybody from up here, to, what was it, Orah Dee Clark . . . and then Orah Dee Clark went to ninth grade.

Well, the year before I was going to get out of that, they changed the way it worked so I finished eighth grade there; then ninth grade ended up being, I think at West High. So then I changed to another school. Then they built East High and we got switched over to there. I think that was the end of the whole, I mean I graduated from East High in 1964. They'd already celebrated it with an earthquake. So anyhow, that was the way it was. It was kind of a bad deal because you get switched that many times, you get so you really don't give a hoot about whose team wins anything, because, you know, I still have more friends that went to West High than East and it didn't make much sense. West High was closer to us than East High. And, so anyhow that. . . .

What was your school like? All those schools? Maybe you can emphasize the one on Government Hill, the kindergarten you went to.

Well, the kindergarten was, ah, a really nice lady and the local, it was like all the neighbors and whatnot bought all the stuff for it. I don't know, you know, it wasn't necessarily . . . it wasn't that it wasn't sanctified by the school district, but it wasn't one of their projects at all. In fact, I don't think too many people did that sort [unintelligible] went to kindergarten other than me at the churches, but it was fun; I mean, it wasn't a long hour from home or anything.

The neighbors bought the supplies?

Well, they bought a Lionel train, blocks, and all that kind of stuff.

Was Government Hill the first community that you lived in?

Well, I lived down at 8th and G right near the Park Strip, but I was, you know, in diapers for most of that, I think. I can't remember when we moved exactly to Government Hill.

But it must have been . . . I might have been four or five; I guess I would've been out of diapers by then. But at any rate, it was. . . . I don't remember when we moved. Let me think. Yeah, I might have been five; I think I was younger than that. In fact, I could have been three or four, for all I know.

At any rate, we moved there and then, oh, let's see, as far as what went on in Government Hill; one of the things that was interesting about Government Hill was even though the war was over, they'd have these . . . what do you call it . . . blackouts. You had to turn off all your lights and you had to run these little blue bulbs. And you could get fined if they caught you running a, a white light.

Although, my Dad was in charge of Civil Defense [laughing] here, he didn't even . . . [laughing] couldn't come up with a real good reason why they were doing it. And a couple of his friends were fighter pilots and bomber pilots, and they didn't know why the hell they did. Because, and then they had right on the bluff . . . you know where it drops down, where it drops down to where the oil docks and all that are, they had a raised-up place that was an anti-aircraft gun. And it was pretty strange 'cause they towed targets with airplanes and they would sit and fire from there. And the kids would go up and sit and watch right beside this big gun firing louder than hell. And it didn't seem strange because that's all you know.

Anyhow, now that I'm thinking about it, I don't remember, I think I went down . . . I actually went down to Central then to Denali. It's hard to tell. Even at the time it was confusing. But anyhow it was one school after another.

How many people lived in your home?

Four . . . me, my brother, my mom, and my dad. And one dog and a parakeet. That was at the Quonset hut.

Okay. So, there was not anyone else besides your immediate family that lived with you?

Ah, no. I mean, there were occasional people who visited that stayed.

Did they rent their home?

No, they owned it.

Do you remember anything specific about your home or your neighbors' homes?

Well, I can remember we had power outages right and left and sideways; and my Dad had three Coleman lanterns set in strategic places. I remember when some friends from down at Seward came and spent Thanksgiving with us and we had a power outage; and I think my Dad had the Coleman lanterns up and running in like two minutes. And, of course, we used . . . we had oil ranges and oil stoves for heat and that's a gravity feed thing and doesn't use any electricity so we were warm if nothing else; but I remember we got a lot of snow that night because I had to go out the kitchen window to dig the front door out.

And also I remember they had a daughter and a son and they brought them along and we were all asleep in the bedroom for all the festivities and whatnot. Dad, I guess he had quite a bit to drink. I can remember this distinctly that he was eating butter toast with garlic paste on it, and I mean that is a strong . . . well, he had dragon breath for a week. Anyhow, we had people visit like that. And then, let's see what else. Then somewhere along . . . yeah, I'm sure we moved over here like '62 or '63. And that's pretty much for the school around here.

Do you remember who your neighbors were?

Well, not . . . I can't remember the names that well . . . or at all. One lady was single that ran the kindergarten, and then the people next to us on the other side were... ah, well, originally some guy that was in the military, and then, I should know the names of the other ones. Oh, their names was McVetty. I don't know where they went. They had this poor dog that was tied up and would bark and bark and bark and bark.

And, of course, I had this large mongrel, and the only time he ever got tied up was if . . . he didn't like anybody in uniform; I think the GIs must have teased him or something . . . so, when the postman would come . . . he had a big heavy doghouse—must have weighed 200 pounds—he would be on his chain dragging this thing like . . . looked like something out of what you expect out of some sort of dire wolf. Other than that, that was his only prejudice.

And he was good at herding moose. That was his other skill. I have often thought that they should do that because dogs can herd moose if they know what they're doing. I can remember my Mom getting called one day and saying Skip was herding six moose off the hill. And he didn't—he'd bark at them—he didn't bite them or anything else, but he would make them go wherever he wanted them. And I think he had the idea of it in such a way that he did it to get them away from cars, get them off. He was a very smart dog. The moose weren't necessarily doing anything wrong, but you were forever having someone hit one and break its legs and then you had to shoot it and all that.

Do you remember the occupations of your neighbors?

Ah, well, like the one, was a soldier. I don't remember what the other one did at all. He probably worked on the railroad for all I know.

How would you define Government Hill?

As far as what?

I think that's a pretty broad question? Are there any specific qualities that stand out?

One of the things that was fun [phone went off]. . . . Anyhow, where the water towers are or where the water tower is now, there used to be two water towers. One was wood. If you look to where they've got the tennis courts down below there and then they've got the place where they have the shuffle board or whatever they call that.

Curling Club.

Yeah, they have that and then they have the square dancing thing. Anyhow, the square dancing thing was the kind of, that building was the employees club. We used to have movies there for free on Saturdays, which was good in the winter and whatnot and, ah, I don't know, cartoons and whatnot.

And then the other thing that was neat there was from where, the towers are here and then you have part of that bluff over there above where the tennis courts are where you can see straight across the street, along in there we had a sled riding hill that went down and then went clear down to right by the road, and it was a lot of fun because like on Friday night there would be I don't know how many kids out there sliding. And one thing, I never ever remember anybody bothering kids. It was a tougher place then. If you bothered some kids, you probably would have ended up in the Inlet with nobody the wiser. [Chuckling]

Oh, I see. You mean as far as abducting or kidnapping?

Yeah, anything that even smelled like that.

And the other thing was that it was a pretty long sled ride, but it wasn't real steep, and it was fun. And then up toward the water towers, there was this kind of like a valley that comes out. It's kind of interesting to walk along the bluff over there—but if you go by that and then come this way on this side of the water tower, there is a little gulley that goes down. The people, I mean kids—I think everybody had a toboggan plus their sled. And toboggans, I don't know but I guess there are people that can steer them, but I never met anybody that could. I remember being down below—'cause it comes out the side of the bluff like this—and I remember seeing kids coming bombing out—three or four kids on—the toboggan turns upside down flying out through the air and all these kids would drop like bombs. It didn't hurt you but it knocked the wind out of you—but it was a fun ride while it lasted.

There was also a place over towards Brown's Point that is still kind of a gulley and we'd sled ride there sometimes too. It was fun but not a nice long run. I am kind of surprised that kids don't do it anymore because it's a really great place to sled ride or cross-country ski or whatever.

And then other than that . . . oh, yeah, I forgot I went to East High; I went to Government Hill School one year. I forgot about that. No, I must have gone three years. I forgot all about that. So that fits in there somewhere. It fits in before I went to Orah Dee Clark I think, because I had gone to Central and then they built this school and I went there then. I don't remember. It's one of those things juggling around.

And then when I was in high school—I can't think of the principal's name; she was a really nice lady—and I would go over on Saturdays in the place where they had their lunch room and gymnasium and all that . . . and I would run movies for the kids because it was cold enough out and stuff that they really didn't have anything to do but stay home and drive their parents nuts. That gave them something to do. Yeah, I remember doing that.

Do you remember any major local events as a child growing up here that happened on the Hill?

Well, of course, there was the quake. That happened everywhere. Not especially. There were odds and ends. There was some stuff going on with the Government Hill School. Nothing really fabulous I would say. I can't think of anything.

Well, they had that deal about "High on Government Hill" and whatnot; that's later though.

What is that?

That was just a deal that kind of was to bring Government Hill to the forefront as a place to live and whatnot.

A lot of people don't really realize the advantages of living up here because, like if you live downtown, you're at work in no time and it's not even a big deal to walk down. And the other thing is that generally going to and from here you're going the opposite direction of the traffic.

What do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

Hmmm. I don't know. Probably wouldn't be just Government Hill, but some of the type and kinds of people that are showing up up here aren't quite what we used to have. I mean, in the apartments, I mean, there were a lot of people that didn't have much money but they weren't—I don't think anybody had an awful lot of money—but the thing is they weren't a bunch of thugs—any place will be sprinkled with a few—but that wasn't happening. But talking with some people I know that still live over that way, it has changed quite a bit in the apartments.

But back then, it was rather pleasant. Since I lived here that long, I preferred it over most places I visited around town.

I mean in some cases, like one of my close friends, they had a house right as you look at West High and you look back this way, there is kind of a big bluff up there—that's probably the most expensive place you can have a house in this town. The property I think is worth more than any and they had a really nice place up there. His bedroom was bigger than this house I think and certainly bigger than the Quonset hut. It was nice up here.

Quieter?

Yeah, it was quieter. Most of them—between the railroad and the base—that's where most of the money came from . . . some from fishing. I mean, where people got their salaries and whatnot.

How have you seen Government Hill change over your lifetime?

Well, 'course, the quake made a big difference. Well, putting in that big overpass . . . that made a big difference. Now people rarely drive down to the railroad yard.

Although I remember when I was going to school at Central, at one point in time, they had a hobby shop here on the Hill but there was a hobby shop downtown; and I would walk home because I could stop and pick up any supplies I wanted and then go through the railroad yards. It was a long walk but having grown up around the railroad I knew how they shifted trains and what to watch for and all that kind of stuff.

And then when you got to the other side, the original road just came down and crossed the flats, but there used to be a stairwell, or staircase, that went from down at the level pretty much of the railroad, all the way up to the top. Wooden, you know, wooden stairs. It was one hell of a climb, I can tell you that! [Chuckling]

Wow! Yeah, and that's gone, right?

Oh, yeah, I imagine, well, it would have been expensive to maintain and, of course, now you'd get sued at the drop of a hat if somebody slipped on it. 'Course that was true across everywhere. There was a lot of stuff you were left on your own about.

But I know one time—and I still to this day don't remember what we did but I was going to school at Central and we made the teacher so mad, and I even—I can think at the time it happened that I didn't know what she was so mad about. And anyhow, she held us after school, which meant we had to walk home.

Well, no big deal. But it was a big deal because out of the kids that were there was me and three or four or maybe five other boys that would walk down and across. The girls were crying and stuff and I told them, "Don't cry. We've done this before. We can do it." And I got them calmed down. And so we got about two blocks and a police car pulls up, and I thought "Boy! She really was mad." [Chuckling] And they said that they had three other police cars coming and a bus 'cause I guess she nearly got fired because everybody was wondering where the hell their kids are; and I mean we probably looked like something out of a Peanuts cartoon. [Chuckling]

It was kind of funny. I know I could've gotten everybody across and up to the home without any problem at all, but ah. . . .

The parents didn't know . . .

No, and this was pre-cell phone and stuff so you couldn't call up and leave; you just had to go.

Those were the good ole days.

Yeah.

Who were some of Government Hill leaders and what did they do?

John Manley, he was the superintendent [general manager] of the Alaska Railroad. Oh, like Pat Cook. I can't remember; he was quite a ways up on the Railroad. I can't remember what her first name was but Old Lady Brown. Well, her house is no . . . the spirit is still there but it is no longer there, but that is where Brown's Point is and it's named after her. And the thing is, if you go over there in that area, you will see these older houses with kind of patterned tar paper outsides and stuff; there are not many of them left, but hers was like that and somebody bought it after she died and completely—you couldn't even see—they reworked it such that you have to have a good eye to even figure out what part of it was still left. And now somebody's bought it again and now they're doing another changeover, so it's for all intents and purposes long gone.

I remember, ha, she used to, I mean, kids would go park there and make out [laughing] and she'd come out and pound on the door with her cane and whatnot. I remember this one friend of mine was there and she was pounding on the door with her cane and then telling him that she'd been here, I don't know how long, and he in his wisdom said, "Well, smell me!" [laughing] and then she was really mad; it was funny. [Laughing] I don't think you need to tell them that one.

What places in Government Hill stand out most in your mind and why?

Hmm, well, the Quonset hut because living in it was a trip of its own. And, then, well, this house, and the quake caused a lot there. And then like me doing the movies at Government Hill School. I was in Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts. My mom was a Cub Scout leader. I remember that I had so many badges on my Cub Scout uniform that I looked like a Russian general. [Chuckling] I still keep finding them.

That deal about "High on Government Hill"—somewhere I've got something. I'll call you if I find it.

I've got like all these dishes from the Fur Rendezvous and stuff. There are more that never got put up. I'm going to take them down. I know they are kind of collector items and I shudder to think if we got a good quake, they'd probably—even at face value, there's quite a bit of money there.

Yeah, they're neat.

What types of work opportunities existed—well, you talked a little bit about this already with the Railroad and stuff—what type of work opportunities existed in Government Hill and or nearby communities while you were growing up?

I don't know. On Government Hill that would be real hard to say. There really wasn't. Well, I suppose there has always been like the Quik Stop type of stuff but there really hasn't been an industry up here per se.

You've got the JBER and the Port.

Well, yeah, if you consider that being Government Hill, but that's a different thing altogether. I mean, I worked on the Alaska Ferry System one year and the Tustumena actually used to come into Anchorage and heaven knows why because of the way the docks are made, you could not unload or load cars. Well, you could have but it would have been one hell of a job.

I wondered why they came here and now they are coming here and I suppose they're probably making pretty good money because of the tourist stuff. The Tustumena was at that time the only ferry they had designed for the Gulf of Alaska and stuff. Even that, it was better than the perfect storm on the thing and that I remember brilliantly. And one of my best friends from college was over out of Kodiak was out in it too, but that doesn't have anything to do with Government Hill.

How are we doing on time?

I don't care.

What do you remember about Statehood and what effect did it have on Government Hill?

I don't know how much it did really. I do know that according to the stuff I have read that if they hadn't permitted the people that were up here with the military to vote that it wouldn't have made it.

Really?

Nobody wanted it. Well, somebody wanted it. I don't know who. One thing that is interesting is that growing up here, like I had friends, a lot of friends that were, we'll call them army brats; well, their parents were in the Air Force and Army and they were over on base, and I used to go on base with my bicycle and whatnot and I remember one time going out there to this one friend of mine's place like on a Friday or Saturday. But at any rate, I went to ride back to come off the base and the base was shut. There was something that was going on and I didn't know what the heck I was going to do.

The MP took me back to the guy's place and so I spent the night there. I thought my dad was going to be mad but he laughed. Before he died he said, "I knew you were afraid." He said, "It wasn't your fault that you were out there." And it was fun.

So they wouldn't even let you come back through at all?

No, well, the thing is if they go to an alert, they don't want . . . they may have something going on, but the civilians they want to keep in one spot probably. I mean, there is the concentration camp but . . . I do remember that.

The other thing I do remember about up here that I didn't find amazing or anything else was I knew a lot of kids that mom was white, dad was black, vice versa, Hispanics, you name it. And I never knew that was a big deal till I was out to college in Washington, and they had this professor hired at the college that he was black and his wife was white and a bunch of people were really upset about it and they were blown away 'cause I asked them . . . I said, "What's the problem?"

My dad talking about it one time, he said that there were so many people that came up to Alaska like in the '30s and whatnot that had things they were getting away from outside that whether you were black or green or whatever, they didn't give a damn. They had bigger fish to fry. That was one of the things . . . was there wasn't a concern. There might have been stuff that I didn't notice, but I was rather ignorant at that.

How did Government Hill change after the 1964 earthquake?

Um, well, you know, a lot of stuff got improved on the roads and whatever because this used to be mostly gravel and whatnot. And, of course, this . . . we picked up Sunset Park because there was fencing around the Government Hill School grounds, but there wasn't like locked gates or something; there weren't even gates. But that was mainly, I think, trying to keep the moose out of there. We get moose around here.

Then one time . . . with the Airedale I had previous to that one was named Pluto. We were out for a walk in the end of October, let's say, and the ground was frozen and it looked like it had snow but it hadn't; it was frost; and it was pretty dark out but because of the snow, it cast some light.

And I was over here like up on the bluff here looking that way, and my dog was running down this way and I saw something coming along at the bottom of the fence and I thought it might be a fox but it looked pretty big and it was black, but I didn't know what color the fur on a fox looks like under moonlight. And then I realized it was a wolf, so I called Pluto and he came. That dog, or the moose, moose [chuckles], the wolf turned around and started up this way and then changed his mind and jumped that fence, completely clearing it. I mean he went over that one landing and jumped up over the hill. Then all of a sudden he came back through—there was a hole in the gate, I mean, fence—and he came here and I think he went up to Quik Stop to hit the garbage cans.

And I've got a cabin down at Kenai Lake and I see . . . I run into wolves quite a bit out there. And, ah, I don't know . . . this one good friend of mine, his parents are Tsim. . . well, he's Tsimshian, Indians on the Southeastern tribes, I can remember like one time I was down at the cabin by myself and I'm listening to the shortwave radio, listening to what's going on in Russia or whatever. I got up to go out to the—I have a shed on the back of the cabin—I started to walk out of there and I opened the door and I almost stepped on a wolf. And I told, ah, I remember I kinda said “shoo” and he backed up and went over and sat with his tail wrapped around . . . because it's cold out. And I went out and came back and I went back out again later and damn near stepped on him, so that time I, you know, he scooted back and then I fired a round into the tree and he backed up because I, I . . . my problem with it was that they carry rabies and stuff; he didn't snarl at me or anything but I sure as hell didn't want to shoot him; I mean, I just wanted to make some noise.

But, uh, then I've been out cross-country skiing out on the lake and had a pack running beside me. But this friend of mine, his dad told me, he said, “Were you carrying your gun out when you were out skiing?” And I said, “Oh, hell yes!” [chuckling] because he said your totem must be wolf because normally wolves won't get that close to you.

Yeah, they're pretty shy.

And I know this one guy that has a shop in town here that has an almost 100% wolf dog. I was in his office, I don't know, General Motors I think. But at any rate, I'm sitting there and this female wolf, for all practical purposes, comes up and puts her nose on my, puts her chin on my leg and then puts her paw on me, sits there and looks at me. After a minute I kind of rubbed her ears and she walked off and went upstairs. And he looked at me and says, “You know, I had her six months before I could get anywhere near her and you sit here and she comes right over like it was a collie or something.”

Wow! That's pretty amazing.

But seeing a, but seeing a wolf up here was something, and I have had kids tell me they've seen bears down there occasionally. I know if you walk along that fence on Government Hill going out that way, you'll find bear sign generally.

Okay, yeah, so there is some activity.

Yeah, and then there's fox and that's about it; everything else is squirrels and rabbits and whatever.

I'm going to jump to our next question since we're coming up on three. Were you or any of your family members in the military?

I was in the Air Force just for a short time because I had an ear infection and they booted me out. I mean I was out on medical. I told them I had this ear infection that flairs up and flairs up and always have had. Anyhow, I got to enjoy doing basic training. I actually didn't mind it that much.

How were you and your family affected by the wars?

Well, my brother was never in the military. My mom had. My dad was in the National Guard down in Washington for two tours when they were horse mounted. [Chuckling] The funny thing is he liked to ride horses but he told me, he says, “Until I got in there, I didn't really know how to ride them that well.”

He says when he made friends, there were a bunch of Cossacks that were in there that if they served a tour, they could get citizenship, you know the Russian . . . they were expatriates. He said they could ride, they could sing, they could shoot, and he says they could drink anybody under the table. But he said the riding tricks and study. He learned quite a bit of it. The funny thing he got up here and I don't think he ever rode a horse again. They got him to where he was good enough to play polo.

I'm no horseman, but this one lady I know that helps people choose real expensive horses said if he could ride polo, he's a good rider. Like up at the mine he was a radio operator, and I have pictures of it. That was back, of course, in the '30s, and I have pictures of all that stuff. I even have some parts of the radios. Actually the two lower things are power supply.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill?

Not really, I don't think.

Did your family fish or hunt?

Oh, yeah, but fish mainly. My dad used to like to duck hunt, and I've been out moose hunting and stuff. But see, when we were in the Quonset hut, I don't know how many moose the railroad hits per day or whatever in the winter, but it was probably substantially more than it is now. And I don't know for sure what they . . . 'cause now if they hit a moose they give the carcass to I don't know who.

But back then, the railroad was such that the way it worked was such that even though it was federal, it had to run off its own income. I mean, so there were times when they couldn't make payroll. And my dad, they had a commissary there, and so they just let everybody run a tab. But I remember that we ate a lot of moose. I mean, such that a hamburger was a treat.

And I remember riding up to Fairbanks one time during wintertime. I think it was like the end of the deal right before Christmas; my dad and one of his, ah, one of the other guys that were in charge of most of the rail, 'cause he was up... his job position was just below John Manley's and whatnot.

And, ah, anyhow, he says, "You want to go to Fairbanks?" And this friend that he worked with, his son Johnny was a real good friend of mine. And so they were hauling . . . had this custom, this custom-built coach that's called the B1 and it's like a parlor car that's just for the general manager and they were taking it up to Fairbanks, so Johnny and I had the run of that and I remember we got part way up there . . . or we were up in the flats and we got a call from the engineers asking if we want to come up to the locomotive.

And it was cold; it was probably 30 to 40 below out, I don't know. It was really cold and we're going along and it's night and they had the old locomotives that had the kind of streamlined front.

Well, there's a door right in front and they open the door there and there was a door in back of the locomotive ahead of them, or . . . no, there's a door on the baggage car and then there's this door under the headlight, and, of course, there's [unintelligible] going like this, the snow's blowing, and they handed us across like a couple of sacks of mail.

And then I, we got up in the locomotive, and, of course, you're walking by this big diesel that is just roaring, and we got up in the cab and, ah . . . I know at one point they'd go slow through there and they'd cut out places for the moose to get out but a lot of the time they were too dumb to figure it out. But we did have a wolf running in front of us for a bit. But they tried everything they could. There was no . . .

I remember going to a train wreck where they hit a moose and it got kicked under the trucks and knocked the whole locomotive and everything off. I mean, they could do serious damage.

But that was kind of fun going along and then back and, of course . . . that B1 was pretty plush, king-size beds, big brass-mounted speedometer on it.

See, we are down to our last two questions here.

Did you have a garden or a farmstead and, if so, what crops or animals did you have?

Well, I used to have a garden behind the Quonset hut, but all I got to grow were radishes and carrots and the occasional peas. 'Cause it wasn't a good place to have it . . . because it had more shade than it needed. But I didn't raise anything other than dogs, but they are not an industrial product.

Is there anything else we didn't talk about that you would like to add?

I can't think of anything. If I do, I'll call you.

Yeah. Well, thanks so much! This was great.

I don't know how much good this will do you.

Well, there are some great stories. I love the story about Brown's Point, the make-out point. That will be really funny.

After the interview, the conversation continued and Mr. Karterman showed Joni Wilm his motorcycle and some of the projects he was working on.

John Nelson and Weaver Franklin Transcribed Oral History Interview



Mr. John Nelson

Mr. Weaver Franklin

Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on November 4, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Mr. Weaver Franklin and Mr. John Nelson at Mr. Franklin's house regarding their knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. Franklin and Mr. Nelson, I guess starting with Mr. Franklin, please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

[Mr. Franklin] Weaver Franklin, and my birthdate is November 22, 1922, so I am almost 89 years old. And what other?

Your place of birth?

Nebraska, yeah, western Nebraska.

And John, Mr. Nelson?

[Mr. Nelson] My name is John Nelson. I was born here in 1923 in Anchorage. I was only resided in Government Hill from '23 until 1940. I think that should be made clear.

Okay, and where did you grow up?

[Mr. Franklin] I grew up in Nebraska. Yeah.

And when did you come here, Mr. Franklin?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I came here, worked on the Alcan Highway for a while, for a contract. And then I went to the Aleutian Islands, and I was out there for 16 months, in the Aleutian Islands. And then I came into Anchorage and that was that was in '45. I hired out to the Alaska Railroad the first day of 1946. I worked for the Road Commission for one, one, one season, and that was 1945.

And when you first came to Alaska, or to Anchorage area, did you move to Government Hill or did you live somewhere else in the area?

[Mr. Franklin] Oh no, I was in, in with a construction group, you know; and they was, they had furnished their own housing and so forth and so on, you know. And it was self-sustaining by themselves and all of this. It's the, uh, Alcan Highway moved from one place to another rapidly, you know; they was building the highway. It was so, I was just, I was there, that's all.

But when you settled down after the construction, after you were finished there, did you live in Government Hill at the beginning of your time here?

[Mr. Franklin] I, yeah, I did. Yeah, I lived in the apartments over there for, uh, for six months or so. And then I came in, in 1950, I think it was. I moved here, right here on this Government Hill.

And, Mr. Nelson, can you remind me again when you came here . . . when you were born here?

[Mr. Nelson] I was born here August 13, 1923.

So, Mr. Franklin, what brought you here originally? Did you come to work on the Alcan?

[Mr. Franklin] Yes, yeah, that's the first, yeah, the first time I was in Alaska. Came into Skagway, and then went over to the old, uh, Skagway Railroad, and then into Whitehorse and that's where my headquarters was, yeah.

Did you come with any other family member or friends?

[Mr. Franklin] No, no.

And how old were you here when you came up?

[Mr. Franklin] I think 21 years old. Yeah, about 20, yeah.

So, you didn't go to school here then?

[Mr. Franklin] No, no, no.

But, Mr. Nelson, you went to school here?

[Mr. Nelson] Yes.

Where did you first go to school then, and where was your elementary school?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, it was about Fifth and F. Fifth and F Street, the only school in town.

And what was it like going to school? Was it a small one-room building or was it multi . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] No, it was a three-story building, and it was the only school in town. It was . . . I don't know what to say.

[Mr. Franklin] How many grades was there, John?

[Mr. Nelson] Eight.

[Mr. Franklin] Eight grades, okay.

And then after that, did you go to high school here?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, it was included there.

Oh, okay.

[Mr. Nelson] I graduated from high school in '41.

Did you move right to Government Hill, or you lived here; you were born in Government Hill and you stayed here until when?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, I moved off Government Hill in 1940.

And when did you come back?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, I've remained in town all these 89 years.

Oh, so you still live outside Government Hill today?

[Mr. Nelson] Oh, yeah!

And, Mr. Franklin, how many people lived in your home when you moved into Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I was, uh, just my wife and myself. And then I had two children, a boy and a girl. They have passed on. They are no longer here and my wife is no longer here.

I'm sorry to hear that.

[Mr. Franklin] It's okay; go ahead.

And, Mr. Nelson, how about you . . . did you have brothers and sisters who grew up with you here?

[Mr. Nelson] One each.

Do they still live in the area or are they . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] No, one passed away; the other one . . . both of them passed away. Their families are in the south 48 now.

Okay.

[Mr. Nelson] But, uh, one of them just died in a hospital in Silverton, Oregon. That was my sister. My brother died in Homer in 1981.

Okay, I'm sorry to hear that too. Did you have any other people living with you besides your immediate family . . . Mr. Nelson, I guess, first?

[Mr. Nelson] Um, no. When you say living with you, do you mean on a permanent basis or semi-permanent basis?

Yeah, semi-permanent.

[Mr. Nelson] No.

Okay, and, Mr. Franklin?

[Mr. Franklin] Nope. Just, just, just the family.

After you moved from the apartments, Mr. Franklin, and you moved into your first home in Government Hill, did you own or rent the home?

[Mr. Franklin] I owned it and it was a Quonset hut. And I, uh, stayed in that until we built this home in 1959, and I have been in here ever since. Yeah, and it hasn't changed a whole lot.

And, Mr. Nelson, what can you tell us about your home when you were growing up here up until 1940?

[Mr. Nelson] I'll show you.

Okay. Can we talk about it first so we can get it on the tape and then we'll also take a look? It's this one here?

[Mr. Nelson] Um [agreeing].

So it's an Alaska Engineering Commission cottage?

[Mr. Nelson] Right.

Number 14?

[Mr. Nelson] Right.

Is that still there today . . . this house?

[Mr. Nelson] Yeah, it's been added to and modified.

Mr. Franklin, what do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, they was all railroaders, you know, professional railroaders, conductors, engineers, and . . . and professional men, machinists, and so forth. That what was . . . was all up and down here. All the Quonset huts was, was almost exclusively railroad people. And, that's [chuckles], what else should I . . . ?

Well, is that how you got to know Mr. Nelson, or when did you . . . ?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I went, we met on and off for 40 years now. I met him, you know, on the railroad 'cause he came back to work for the railroad immediately after; I guess you was in the military.

[Mr. Nelson] Right after the war.

[Mr. Franklin] Right after the war he came; and he, I guess, he went to the University and got his degree in economics. And then he came . . . then he come and worked for the railroad.

And, Mr. Nelson, what can you tell us about your recollections about your first home here and your neighbors' homes? I mean you showed us the pictures

[Mr. Nelson] All I can say is that's it. And I don't recall too much. Five of us lived in that one building. My dad was interested in a lot of things. Uh, he bought into a coal mine and we mined coal, and he started a mink farm. The mink farm was in the back of the building [pointed on map] back here. And, uh, that kept us busy. My brother and I were much involved by furnishing food for the mink. And, uh, we'd bring coal to the neighbors who burned coal in the wintertime to keep from freezing to death.

So when you were here, Mr. Nelson, did the neighbors have similar occupations as to what Mr. Franklin said?

[Mr. Nelson] Yeah, similar; that's true, but I can't speak for them because we shared the coal with them and we shared, in some respects, some of the meat that my dad shot . . . moose meat and fish as well. Uh, so it was kind of neighborly fashion for all of us who lived on Government Hill at that time. That was 71 years ago or more.

Right, but their occupations . . . were they . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] They worked for the railroad.

Most of them?

[Mr. Nelson] But we did not.

Mr. Franklin, how would you describe Government Hill over the years?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, it's a . . . it's a purely residential but it's all, was all professional employees; they was railroad employees. And they was all, you know, they covered the whole field of railroading, you know, from the conductors and engineers and machinists and carmen.

And, uh, we could walk to work, you know. Our, our, the shop was right close by, or I could walk to the yard office, which is a little farther up the street. So I didn't even have to have a car, you know. I could walk wherever I was going.

So, did you always work for the railroad when you lived in Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] Yeah, that's right. Yeah, oh yes, I worked for 37 years I worked with the railroad, yeah.

And, speaking of walking and not necessarily needing a car, did you uh, did you walk over to downtown area very much?

[Mr. Franklin] Oh, yeah, you could; oh yeah, it was, yeah, it was nothing unusual to walk over town. But, uh, and to get your groceries there . . . it's on 4th Avenue. You know, the grocery store was on 4th Avenue at that time. And, uh, everything you needed was on 4th Avenue . . . just about.

And how about you, Mr. Nelson, did you . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] We walked and ran and ran our bicycle back and forth to get our groceries . . . go to school.

So, in the early days when you were here growing up was it . . . were there not too many shops in Government Hill?

[Mr. Nelson] None.

None at all? They first came in . . . do you know when?

[Mr. Nelson] Just what you see here is all you see . . . 14 of those.

[Mr. Nelson points to map.]

[Mr. Franklin] Well, the, uh, shopping center probably was in the early or late '40s or early '50s. That's when, uh, that when . . .

[Mr. Nelson] See, that was after my time.

Right.

[Mr. Franklin] Yeah, and of course then they had they had, uh, become quite a lot . . . a little community had a bank and a post office and . . . and, uh, grocery store and a clothing store.

Someone mentioned a bowling alley. Was there a bowling alley here?

[Mr. Franklin] They had a bowling alley here. Yeah, yeah.

And, Mr. Franklin, what do you remember most about major local events when you first moved here?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, the local, the local events, I really There was nothing spectacular about it. You worked, that's all; you know, you worked every day. And, uh, but there was nothing unusual until the big earthquake come along, you know, and then things changed a lot, you know. The neighbors were all about the same. We was all in the Quonset huts . . . living a kind of a simple life you would call it. It was . . . it was nothing, nothing spectacular. You got your wages every, you know, once a month. That's about all there really was to it.

Mr. Nelson, how about you? What do you remember about major local events as a child?

[Mr. Nelson] You mean on . . . just on Government Hill?

Government Hill or nearby community of Anchorage?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, Anchorage, you know, had a theatre. So we saw movies once or twice a week. They had a radio station, KFQD.

Just one channel, one station?

[Mr. Nelson] One station . . . no TV until late in the '50s. And they had a bowling alley, and, uh, there was a little . . . in the wintertime, there was basketball in the gym, and the gym was pretty small. It was in the basement adjacent to the school and there was a commercial league and a high school league.

That's the outlet we had; and then for the rest of it, it was all personal. You skied or you skated in the wintertime to keep you busy and shoveled snow [chuckled] to make things a little bit easier. Uh, that's about the . . . that's the nature of our livelihood.

Mr. Franklin, what do you miss most about the earlier days of Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I think that this Government Hill has improved all the time and I wouldn't want to reverse myself back. I think it's doing just fine. It's, uh . . . it's, uh . . . it's an ordinary community with, you know . . . but it has changed in respect that half of the people now are retired. The rest are employed by a variety. They no longer work for the Alaska Railroad . . . all of them. There are just a few, you know, who still work for the railroad, but it's generally they are scattered out all over. Some work for the military on the base, and . . . well, they just, they're just, you know, just workers, that's all. And they're all good people. You know, they're not, uh . . . they're involved in the community. I think that's about all I can say . . . really nothing spectacular.

And, Mr. Nelson, do you . . . would you have things that you miss about the early days?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, see you're talking about this place. You're not . . . I don't recall too much other than what I just told about my experience on Government Hill 'cause it ended in 1940. [Chuckles]

Okay.

[Mr. Nelson] Uh, I can't really add much to it.

You can't compare to what you have to being here now, so . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, of course there is, you know, a tremendous difference between our [chuckles] our livelihood in 1940 and what it is now. The boom started in '40 when they built Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Rich, and the railroad put in something like \$80 million to rehab. Then things really began to pick up.

Okay. What do you think was most important to people, uh, Mr. Franklin, in the earlier days in Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I think it was mostly the railroad and we was all associated with the railroad almost, you know. And, uh, it was, uh, yeah, it was . . . I wish I could say more, you know.

We were just with the railroad and there was no big, uh . . . they had the curling club and they had the teenage club. And that's where they square danced and had dances down here. And, uh, that was, and it was, uh . . .

Do you think there is anything different that is important to the people that live in Government Hill today versus . . . ?

[Mr. Franklin] No, it was very similar to what it was 30 and 40 years ago.

How about you, Mr. Nelson? Do you think . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] I would say just what he said.

Okay. Who were some of Government Hill's leaders, Mr. Franklin? Do you recall any of the early leaders when you first came here and what did they do for the community?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, it was the general manager of the railroad was generally, in one, in one of the houses. But all, all of the houses that John mentioned was . . . was occupied by professional people. They were, and they worked for the railroad most of them. It was superintendents of shop and the superintendents of this and . . . and, uh, they . . . they made the railroad go. It was officers who was in these 14 houses, you know. They was . . . was the bosses of the railroad. That's about all you can tell. You know, they filled their jobs.

Which historical events affected your family and the Government Hill community do you think the most, Mr. Franklin?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, the fact that they . . . everybody started building in their own homes and doing away with the Quonset huts. And, uh . . . I don't think there is anything spectacular happened other than when the earthquake came along, and then, uh, then things changed a little bit but not a whole lot.

The school went down in the earthquake; it broke in two and went down over the bank and several houses went over the bank, you know, during the earthquake.

Do you recall where you were during the earthquake?

[Mr. Franklin] I was right here in this house.

Did you experience any damage?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, there was nothing spectacular; I had my daughter on my lap and . . . and we had hardwood floors and they was polished. And my mother-in-law was in a rocking chair and she scooted all over the house and it was . . . she was frightened something scandalous you know, and she could use profanity, you know. [Laughter] She wanted to get the thing stopped, you know, but it went a long time. Four-and-a-half minutes, you know, is a long time for an earthquake.

And the . . . and the water tower was going back and forth; 20 feet both . . . you would expect it to fall down. But it didn't. It withstood the earthquake, and that's about all there was to it.

Then of course they rehab. The railroad had to do a lot of work to get the, get the, Seward . . . I was in Seward most the time, or Whittier, after the earthquake, you know, to get things back running.

How about you, Mr. Nelson, where were you during the earthquake?

[Mr. Nelson] [inaudible] Uh, at the time of the quake was about 5:47 on the night of March 27th. And I got out of the barber shop and I went home and turned the stove on to heat some water to make some coffee. It started going, and I was in the Sherwood Arms, which is a block north of the Hilton Hotel, and the building started going like this [Mr. Nelson motioned side to side with both hands], and I opened the door, the metal doors to jam it open.

A woman was down the hall; she was an architect. She had a son that came in from school, and she started screaming. And I says, "Do you want to go out?" And I says, "You better come with me." And she tried to go up the stairs because there was no elevator, and then I ushered her out. We went up an outside stairwell next to the building.

The building was like this [Mr. Nelson held his arm at a steep angle from the ground] . . . [inaudible] the Hilton Tower. When we got out, the trees, the birch trees across the street from us that are 20 feet high, they were touching the ground on that side and then touching the ground on this side. [Mr. Nelson continued to make a long sweeping motion from side to side.] That's how violent

[Mr. Franklin] Violent, terrible violent!

[Mr. Nelson] . . . And when you looked at the tower you almost got seasick watching it sway. A woman was driving a car down going away from it. She opened the door of the car and fell out of the car [chuckling] and couldn't stand up when she got out. And then I just took a look at that, and my landlord came out and just kind of fuddled with the gas, turned the gas on. And I said, "Sir, you're not going to have gas for another eight or ten weeks, so you can forget that." [Laughing] Gas lines were ruptured. The power went out. So many things happened all at once. It was several days before we got our senses back, you know. And I had to vacate that. Everybody in the building had to vacate. It was a 35-unit apartment building.

Did either of you feel more worried the next time there were aftershocks because of this big one?

[Mr. Franklin] Oh, yeah

[Mr. Nelson] We had some sizable aftershocks! I mean six and seven on the Richter scale.

Do you think your experience going through the big earthquake affects you today when we have an earthquake?

[Mr. Nelson] Uh hum. [Mr. Nelson stated with affirmation.]

[Mr. Franklin] Yeah, you hope you never see another one.

[Mr. Nelson] Yeah.

Mr. Franklin, do you believe the oil booms and busts have had any significant effect on Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] Oh, yeah! It had an effect on the railroad and Government Hill.

Yes, it had, uh The construction of that highway and the pipeline kept the railroad extremely busy. And they was hard put to get enough employees to go around. Because it was short of engineers, short of conductors, so they had to improvise to, you know, cut down there sometimes on the experience that they had to go out, go out and do the work. So they had to abbreviate their, their, uh, their training. And I got involved in that some, you know.

Mr. Nelson, did you have anything to add to that?

[Mr. Nelson] Uh, no, we were busy. He was active as a . . . I don't know; you were a locomotive conductor at one time?

[Mr. Franklin] I was a road foreman and training master and

[Mr. Franklin] I was in the audit division so I shuffled paper. We shuffled a lot of paper moving pipe from both Whittier, Seward, Valdez to Fairbanks and all the way up to the North Slope. I mean, we were busy fourteen hours every day for six weeks.

Mr. Franklin, what do you remember about Statehood?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I voted against it. It came up for bid three times and I voted against it all, all the time. I didn't think it was necessary and I, uh

What were your concerns with Statehood?

[Mr. Franklin] I was . . . I figured that politicians would be It was being managed by the federal government, the State of Alaska, you know; and I thought it was doing very well. And anytime I had a poor opinion of politicians. And I, uh, I thought they would take advantage of Alaska . . . and its resources and everything else. And I might have been right. [Mr. Nelson chuckled.]

How about you, Mr. Nelson?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, I was . . . I was in favor but cautiously [laughing] in favor, but, but I, uh [laughing] but I can't help but agree with him in some of the aspects of it.

But we got through it, I guess, but there was just as much difficulty with keeping a good, honest person [laughing] in a in a job running, uh, either on the assembly or whatever they had, all the way up to the governor. In fact, our governor has been in trouble so many times.

[Chuckling] In fact, he's now in trouble down here on the dock.

[Laughing]

[Mr. Franklin] Yeah, oh, yeah, yeah

[Mr. Nelson] So, you know . . . it goes on and on.

[Mr. Nelson and Mr. Franklin] [Inaudible]

So, do you think many people at the time were . . . was it a big controversial issue?

[Mr. Franklin] Very controversial. Oh, the Native corporations voted against it unanimously. All the Natives in Alaska voted against Statehood, and then a lot of people like myself. Jay Hammond who was governor, he voted against it and was real verbal. He had a great deal; he voted against it every time it came up. And he was about probably the smartest governor we had . . . that we've ever had. But he voted against Statehood. And, uh

Do you think Statehood had any kind of specific effect on Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] No, I don't think it had any effects on it . . . nothing, nothing of, nothing of interest. 'Cause it just rambled right along . . . Statehood or no Statehood. I don't . . . it was . . . no, I don't think it had any effect on it. If it was, it was minimal.

Mr. Franklin, do you remember how the civil rights movement affected Government Hill? Was there any effect on Government Hill?

[Mr. Franklin] No, I don't think there was any, any, any at all.

Mr. Nelson, do you?

[Mr. Nelson] Same thing . . . it never touched us up here. We only had one black man that I know of before 1940, and that was a guy who was our fire chief: Tom Edwards, a good gentleman. He was a great guy, highly thought of.

So, Mr. Franklin, how would you say Government Hill differs today from when you first moved here?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I think from the time I first moved here . . . well, it's been a drastic change. It's gone from Quonset huts to modern homes and good homes, nice homes. And a stable . . . it's a stable, very stable community Government Hill is. They don't come and go very often. It just, it's a good place to live. It's probably the best place in Anchorage to live, Government [chuckles] that's what I would say [chuckles] I don't know; maybe I'm prejudice.

There's just no crime here, on this side of the Hill. I haven't found anything missing in the 55 years I've been here. I've never seen anything stolen and nothing missing, you know. You trust your neighbors. I got the keys to my neighbor here [Mr. Franklin pointed] and I have got the keys to my neighbors there. [Mr. Franklin pointed toward the other neighbor's house.] And when they go, I take care of their house; and when I go, they take care of mine [inaudible]. He's got a great big thermostat, so I can read if his house is cold or hot. I can read it and if it's cold, I can go in and take care of it or call someone who can.

How about you, Mr. Nelson? Do you see any other changes?

[Mr. Nelson] Well, if you're focusing just on Government Hill, you got to keep me out of this because I don't even live . . . I haven't lived here for 71 years.

Well, sure, but you've lived close enough by that you can have some observations.

[Mr. Nelson] Well, that's a long way over there.

Okay. Well, Mr. Franklin, how was the Government Hill community affected by the wars?

[Mr. Franklin] By the war? Well, the late wars or the early . . . the big one?

Well, starting with, I guess World War II?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, yeah, it was a big boom town. It built the bases, and it built the airfields. And, uh, down there fighting from Anchorage, you know. The Aleutian Islands there was a lot of airfields built, and then they was bombing Japan from the airfields out in the Aleutian Islands. But that, uh, Anchorage was never hurt by the war, you know. It never was nothing spectacular.

So, Mr. Nelson, when you were first born here, were the bases constructed at that time?

[Mr. Nelson] No, the base didn't come into effect until World War II.

So do you recall how when they procured the land for the bases?

Was that a controversial subject with the . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] Uh hum. [Mr. Nelson said in an agreeing manner.] Yeah, I had a neighbor named Andy Ohles and his family was on the east, or the west end of Elmendorf Air Force Base. And I don't remember how many acres they had there . . . maybe two or three hundred acres. They ran a milk farm. And the military, the Air Force came in and acquired it. And the settlement was somewhat unsatisfactory to him, and he made quite an issue out of it. And a friend of mine's father represented him in court and the settlement wasn't satisfactory either, so he was kind of bitter. And he moved his family out of Alaska at that time. And later they came back and I got quite, uh, acquainted with one of his sons. And he went into contracting in Anchorage and built a number of facilities here . . . the Elks Club for one, and I don't know how many others. But anyway, that was kind of . . . uh, I didn't hear about any other issues with regard to the Army or Air Force acquiring land, but that was a major one.

Mr. Franklin, were any of your family member involved with the military?

[Mr. Franklin] No, well, I have brothers that were in the military, yeah. They was in Europe or in the Pacific. Yeah, three of . . .

But they weren't in Alaska?

[Mr. Franklin] No, no, they was not.

And, Mr. Nelson, did you have family member in . . . ?

[Mr. Nelson] Yeah, I went in here. I went into the service here. My brother went into the service here. He was two years behind me, and he was stationed in the Aleutian Islands, Shemya, one of the Air Force bases. And I went south from here to California to school, and by the time I got out of school, the war was over. So, I got in late . . . too late in order to get active, which probably saved my life. [Chuckles]

Mr. Franklin, was there any effect on you or your family from the wars?

[Mr. Franklin] No, no, nothing . . . nothing other than I wound up in Alaska. The war, you know . . . building the highway and building the bases and so forth . . . that's why I was involved with that.

Mr. Franklin, do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill or the Anchorage area?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, uh, well, I think that Government Hill was, the houses was built here was, uh, was occupied by professional railroaders. You know, they knew how to, uh, to build railroads. And uh, the railroad owned all the utilities in Anchorage. They owned the water and the telephone and the power line. The railroad owned them and they built 'em. And, therefore, I think Government Hill really run Anchorage for lots of years.

It was those people who was a, who was a . . . had a great deal of influence on Anchorage. It was the original railroaders. And they did, you know, they owned . . . can you imagine the Alaska Railroad, and this wasn't for just a little while, it was for many, many years—20 or 30 years that they had the power plants and the telephones and the water. They owned it all and they billed the people and they got paid from it. That's the thing; not many people know about and discuss.

Somebody recently proposed an idea to move the railroad yards and connect the downtown with Government Hill. How would you feel about that, Mr. Franklin?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, I think it would be silly, yeah.

And, Mr. Nelson, do you recall any great stories about, you know, Government Hill or Anchorage?

[Mr. Nelson] Not during my term up here. Like I said, I'm out of it in 1940, but subsequent to that I was across it, on the other side of the Hill. But there was an awful lot of changes made over there, but I don't think that's pertinent to this.

Mr. Franklin, did your family fish or hunt when you first came here?

[Mr. Franklin] Yeah, oh yeah, I did, yeah. Yeah, all my family hunted and fished . . . yeah, yeah.

Down in Ship Creek did you . . . ?

[Mr. Franklin] Oh, yeah. we fished in Ship Creek when nobody cared how many you caught. You could catch as many, and you could use snag hooks if you wanted to, but this was in the '40s and '50s. Pretty soon it become . . . well, people started watching you. But it was at one time you could do whatever you wanted to do for fishing and hunting. But hunting was a little bit different, you know, but . . . You could get one moose or a half a dozen caribou or . . . Yeah, it was pretty much wild. It was still a remote country.

How about you, Mr. Nelson? When you were a young boy, did you hunt and fish?

[Mr. Nelson] Yeah, my brother and I had a trapline. We used the catch to feed the mink. And that was pertinent in the wintertime. And in the summertime we fished . . . quite a bit. And my father was a great hunter. He would get a moose, usually one moose every year. And my brother and I helped him . . . or tried to.

Mr. Franklin, did you have a garden or a farmstead or any animals or any crops when you were . . . ?

[Mr. Franklin] I still have a good garden, yeah, yeah, and it's, uh, in a subsistence manner you know. I do raise potatoes and stuff that I use.

And, Mr. Nelson, how about you?

[Mr. Nelson] Same thing. Yeah, we had a good garden too.

This would be directed to Mr. Nelson. Did your parents grow up here or where did they come from?

[Mr. Nelson] No, my father came from . . . let's see . . . Ridgeway, Pennsylvania. My mother came from Vancouver, Washington. And they didn't come together; they were up here.

My father arrived first, about 1921. He was . . . he got on the ship that was headed for France for the war. And after the war ended, he went back to New Jersey, or wherever it was that they docked, and he went home for about two weeks. And he was headed west and stopped in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to see if they could get a job with an oil company. And the guy at the counter says, "No, but we got places for you to go to work if you want to mine coal." And he says, "I'll take it." And then they told him where it was; it was Eska Jones up on the branch line from Anchorage. And he said, "Anchorage? Where's Anchorage?" And they told him, "Alaska!" Well, he headed to Seattle and took the boat up there and got to work at Eska. And he worked there until he transferred to the Alaska Railroad and then came back to the Alaska Railroad in Anchorage. And that was about in 1923.

And my mother came from Vancouver, Washington, and came up here with a church group, a Presbyterian church group. And she went to work for the railroad too. Both of them worked for the railroad; then they got married . . . married in Seward.

And when your parents first came here, did they live in Government Hill?

[Mr. Nelson] No, when they first came here, my mother lived with, uh, this church family and I'm kind of vague about where that was.

And my dad started up at Eska and they furnished the employees up there a bunkhouse. So that was his first housing in Alaska. And then when they came . . . let's see, when they came back to Anchorage, then he rented some place and I'm not sure where it was. I think it was on 7th Avenue somewhere, but I can't describe it to you. And that was temporary until such time as they put these homes that I showed you here up for sale by the railroad, and he bid on one and got that 14 cottage.

Do you know what he paid for it?

[Mr. Nelson] He asked me awhile ago, and I was thinking about that last night and I thought surely they're going to ask me. I would guess maybe between six and eight hundred bucks.

[Mr. Franklin] A bargain. [Laughter]

Mr. Nelson, do you recall any stories that your parents told you about their early days?

[Mr. Nelson] [Groan] A hundred of 'em. It would take too long and I got to go here in about five minutes.

Okay.

[Mr. Nelson] I'm sorry . . . some other time maybe.

So, I guess for both of you . . . do you have any ancestors, other ancestors, or descendants that are living here in the Anchorage area in Alaska?

[Mr. Franklin] I do not have anybody. Nobody, uh . . .

[Mr. Nelson] I've had my brother's family moved up and then moved back out to California, but that's the last. The rest of us all either stayed here or died in the south 48.

Okay. Well, we have just two more questions here. Mr. Franklin, is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to add at this time?

[Mr. Franklin] I don't believe so. I just think that, uh, I hope that Government Hill remains about the same as it is. I think it's a good neighborhood, and I wouldn't want to change it. I think it should be just, uh, a small community. It's Government Hill. It has lots to offer.

Mr. Nelson, is there anything else that you would like to add at this time?

[Mr. Nelson] No thanks.

Final question, Mr. Franklin, what wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

[Mr. Franklin] Well, other than continue with your . . . if there's an improvement, they should adopt any improvements. They should embrace it, you know.

I think they're going to continue building . . . building good homes and you're going to see . . . like myself and John, we're in our late eighties, so we're not going to be around very long, you know. And I know who is going to buy my house. It's a broker uptown.

He likes Government Hill schools 'cause they teach Spanish and he's got children. He says, "Don't sell it to anybody. I'll buy it no matter what." So, so, so I got no problem there. And that's probably Government Hill's property is, is, being just close to the base, you know, if people want to work on the base or if they want to work in town, they're right in the middle of it. So, it's a wonderful place for work, anybody working for a job.

Well, thank you very much, Mr. Franklin and Mr. Nelson. That concludes our interview today.

Jerry Peters Transcribed Oral History Interview



420 East Manor

Photo courtesy of Mark Musial, present owner

Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on November 7, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage, to conduct a phone interview with Mr. Jerry Peters regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. Peters, would you again please state your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Jerry F. Peters. Let's see, I was born in Oelwein, Iowa. And, uh, it was September 30, 1942.

And where did you grow up?

I grew up on Government Hill, Anchorage, Alaska.

How old were you when you moved to Government Hill?

4½ years old.

What brought your family to Government Hill, to Alaska?

My father got a job as a railroad machinist on the Alaska Railroad, and he came up in October of '46. And my mom and I followed in May of '47.

Did you have any other relatives up here?

No, my dad had a few friends from the same area in Iowa, but no relatives.

Where did you go to school when you were here?

Uh, I started out with, uh, Chugach, the old Chugach School that was out on 9th Avenue; well, actually it was about, what the heck was that, 13th Avenue and I Street, or E Street. And then went to some Quonset huts at 10th and E. And then went to the basement of the old junior high school down on, uh, between 5th and 6th; well, where the PAC building is now. Then I was probably the second class that started Anchorage High School, which is now West Anchorage High School, and that's where I graduated.

And when you were at Chugach School, how many grades were there?

I'm thinking there were three at that time. Because, okay, and I left out . . . I went to, uh, oh, what the heck is the one, Denali over there on 9th Avenue and about Cordova. I went there for three years. I think it was fourth, fifth, and sixth.

About how many students did the schools have when you were in elementary school?

Ya know, I couldn't really tell you too much. There seemed like a lot of kids in all the classes I was in. There was probably 30 kids in each class, and probably a dozen of those in each building.

Were there multiple floors in the school?

No, no, they were a single floor.

Was there anybody else in your home at the time besides your mother and your father?

No.

Do you know if your family owned or rented your home when you first moved to Government Hill?

My dad bought a piece of, uh, bought a lot, basically . . . from the railroad or through the railroad or however that worked, and then he got a Quonset hut kit . . . an old military, an old World War II military, and the tools and stuff and he built his own place. And that's what we moved into and lived in until 1957.

So, you were in a Quonset hut at first?

Yeah, ten and a half years in a Quonset hut.

Is that particular Quonset hut still there in Government Hill?

No, my dad built another house on the same lot, and he was one of the fortunate ones who was able to sell his Quonset and it moved away.

What do you remember about your neighbors' homes and your home?

Well, they were like half a stove pipe, you know, being a Quonset hut. But I remember is that it was really cold in those years, but the huts were nice and warm. We had a Lang oil range in the kitchen end, which would have been the northwest, and then a Coleman heater in the living room on the other end. And, uh, it was always nice and warm, nice and toasty. And everybody else around us was pretty much the same except the people who had the wooden log walls that were also military houses, ex-military. Uh, but a great time, I loved it as a kid.

Were there any drawbacks living in the Quonset hut?

Well, it was small; I mean, it was 20 by 36 is what I remember the length, or, yeah, 20 by 36 is, uh, how big they were. And we had two bedrooms, and, uh, I had my own then; mom and dad had theirs.

Then we had a big front room with, uh, half of that end of the hut was a front room or a dining room, and the other side was the kitchen part that was 20 foot wide by . . . I don't know . . . 20; maybe not that much. It was just a nice comfortable home for the family we had.

And my brother was born. My first brother was born while we were living there yet, 1953; but we were moving. We moved to the new house and lived there when my last brother was born in '58. It was . . . it was great!

Do you remember the addresses of these houses?

Well, it used to be 700 East Manor Avenue . . . 702 Manor Avenue it was. But now, I think it's 400 East Manor. It's right across the street from the Cavalry Baptist Church, right on the corner.

Do you recall who your neighbors were?

Yeah, we had a number of neighbors next door. I remembered two of the first ones were a family named Applebee. He was a cat skinner for the railroad. And then later on, the Everts moved in. He was also a railroader. Umm, across the alley was the Foresters. They had a house that was built, uh, a regular house that was built on a timber foundation. And let's see, there was a guy named Eskason, Eskie Eskason. He was a blacksmith for the railroad. And, Johnny . . . oh, gosh, I can't think of his name, who was an engineer, a motor engineer. Then there was C.O. Oakley Brown down the street, down from us; he was a general foreman for the shops at the Alaska Railroad. Then there was a guy named Renner. I didn't hardly know him hardly at all. I knew one of his boys who was older than I, but, uh, he was a brakeman, a brakeman or an engineer for the railroad. And, you know, mostly there were railroaders in that area.

Were there many other occupations of the people in Government Hill at the time?

Not that I know of. Uh, it seemed like everybody at that time was connected with the railroad. There may have been, but I couldn't tell you who they were.

There was a family that lived down in the old Alaska Communication Systems building there, and they were military, and I remember one of the kids was a bigger kid . . . one of the big kids in the area. And I don't remember their names anymore. That was way back in the late '40s.

Then, let's see. There was some houses called the FAA houses way down at the far end on the point. What they call Brown's Point now. And, I guess, there were some general aviation people who lived there; it was CAA there at the time. And I didn't know them. I had the paper route there in the '50s, but you know it's amazing what you can't remember. [Laughs]

How would you describe Government Hill growing up there?

Well, just kind of like our own little town. There was a little store on the Hill called Thompson's Store. Johnny Thompson and his wife ran it. And it was kind of like a "Quik Stop" of the era, and mom and I used to go down there frequently to buy stuff. It was about a four- or five-block walk. The edge of the hill was all woods and so forth, and the military was right next to us there at the Air Force base, and us kids had all of that to play on. We played everywhere. We were all over the place . . . on the base, down to the docks. It was just a real good life for a kid.

Did you go into Anchorage much or into Anchorage?

Not much. I used to go down once in a great while when I got a little older, and I would go down to the Daily News and buy some papers. Then I would go out on the streets and sell them, but I didn't do that very much. I used to go walk across town to buy groceries once in a while with my mom. But that was when I was younger. There was no real good reason to go uptown . . . unless you wanted to go to a movie or something. That's about all.

What do you remember about major local events as a child?

I remember when the back shops burnt down at the railroad. That was pretty exciting. I think that was January '49, or something like that . . . right in the middle of winter and it was a really cold night.

And we were standing on the edge of the hill looking at this shop, which was pretty far out there . . . all wood, big huge, wooden building burning. And I remember I had on one of those . . . what do you call 'em . . . those kind of pajamas kids wear with feet in them. . . and I had a robe on, a coat on, and all that stuff. And I would turn around to stay warm just by keeping one side to the fire. It was that big of a fire. Let's see. I remember the earthquake, but I wasn't living there. My first wife and I were living out in near Turnagain when that happened in '64. That's about the only thing major I can remember.

Well, let's back up just a minute. You said you are in Arkansas now. Do you live in Government Hill in the summertime here?

Yeah, I got a house there, but Anchorage is my home. I built my house about a block and a half from my Dad's place. And I have been living there since. Well, I bought the land in 1968. I built the house . . . started in '73 and moved in . . . in '76 and have been living there ever since. That is home! This Arkansas is a cabin. It's nice to come for a break from the winter.

What do you miss most about the early days of Government Hill?

You know, I think that we didn't have TV until like early '50s; you know, like around '53 maybe is when it got started; KTBA and KFI and all that. Well, I liked it before TV because all us kids got out and played. We'd play all night long in the summer, and we weren't distracted by television. I, uh, never got to be much of a TV watcher 'cause I didn't care much for it. I get bored watching TV.

How have you seen Government Hill change over your lifetime?

Oh, boy, that's . . . most of the old houses are gone, of course. They did the same thing that I did. They built the new ones and tore the old ones out. For a long time there, I would say up until about two or three years ago, mostly the residents were older people because they grew up kind of there and just stayed there and their kids left. I see that they must be renting out some homes nowadays because you see some newer people with younger kids running around. It's just gotten to be older.

It's still kind of isolated all by itself in the middle of everything, but nobody knows it's there. You got the base on one side, and you got the port on the other side and the railroad on the other side. That about takes care of it. It's just a nice little place. I wouldn't want to change anything.

What do you think was most important to people in Government Hill in the early days?

Most important? Um, boy, in what respect do you ask that?

Well, I guess were they involved in politics? Was it important to be isolated living in Government Hill? Was it important to be close to where they worked?

Yeah, I think that's it mostly. First of all, it was originally Navy property, I guess, before World War II; and somehow when the war started, the railroad ended up with it. And it was kind of a come-on, I guess, to get people to go up there and work because they were rebuilding the railroad after the war because they wore it out during the war. And so, they were asking people to come to work there, like my dad, and trying to get him with some extra bennies. You know . . . "here's some land; here's some quarters; we'll help you build it" sort of a deal. And it was right there, you know, my dad walked to work for the first 20 years he worked there, and I walked to work; well, I worked there until I retired also. I walked to work until, oh, the 10 or 12 years I worked there.

So, you were probably pretty young or you moved there after the land was appropriated for the bases. Do you recall anything associated with the appropriations?

Oh, no. Heck no! The appropriation took place in, I think, 1938 or '39. And it was ten years later before we got there just about . . . eight years. The bases were all built already.

Do you recall who some of the Government Hill's leaders were, and what they did for the community?

Leaders, boy . . .

Did you have a community council in the early days?

You know, I can't remember anything like that . . . because I was never a political person, I never did much with that. I do vote, but I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it.

Are there any places in Government Hill that stand out most in your mind and why?

Well, the old water tower . . . that kind of stands out because I remember when I was a little, little kid they were building it new. And it was just a fascinating thing to watch 'em pick those great huge pieces up and put 'em up there . . . way up high. And then they built the shopping center. And before the shopping center had been on that lot, it was an ice skating rink in the wintertime and a playground in the summertime and then they built the shopping center. I remember that, and, um . . . but really nothing really earthshaking, you know, or something that was really memorable; it was just a really good life.

What type of work opportunities . . . we talked about the railroad, but besides the railroad . . . existed in Government Hill or nearby communities when you were growing up?

I remember Mountain View, and it seemed to me from some of my friends that lived out there, their folks were associated with the, uh, Merrill Field and the aviation stuff because it was close to them. And, uh, oh, I guess that's really about it. Downtown . . . I didn't know hardly anyone downtown. Like I said, I never went there.

Are there any historical events that affected your family and the Government Hill community?

Hmm . . . historical . . . Statehood, I guess you might say.

What do you remember about Statehood?

I was about 14 then, and I remember all of the celebrations and a big bonfire down at the Park Strip. And, well, there was bonfires everywhere it seemed like . . . fireworks all over the place, and everybody was really happy we were going to become a state.

Was that a controversial issue at all, or was it pretty much everybody was in favor of it [Statehood]?

Well, I heard a lot of people discussing the fact that even though now they would have the opportunity to vote for the President et cetera and have representation in Congress, it's an awful expensive thing to pay for with the additional taxes and so on and so forth. I remember that talk. I remember my folks talking about that.

Were your folks in favor of Statehood?

Well, you know, I think they were kind of . . . somewhat ambivalent. They could see the good points. They could see the bad points. I think, maybe, they were just tended . . . tended to be a little more in favor of it than not.

How about the oil booms and busts? Do you think they had a significant effect on Government Hill?

I, no, not, you know . . . I think they affected the area pretty much, every town, you know, part of the town equally. Because, uh, most of the problems that we had with anything like that was property values. And everybody was suffering from that a couple of times [inaudible], the whole town. So . . . but I think the oil has been good for the state.

You mentioned that you were away during the 1964 earthquake. How did Government Hill changed after the earthquake?

I don't think that it did change after the earthquake . . . because, uh, my folks were will living there. I was living out in, like I said, near Turnagain at the time, so, you know, I don't think anything changed there. The following spring, the Chevron plant caught fire and there was, you know . . . tanks were blowing up and 55-gallon drums flying through the air. But, other than that, there wasn't really anything there that changed.

Do you recall if the civil rights movement affected the Government Hill community?

No, I can't. I remember it occurring, but I can't remember any specific thing that touched the neighborhood.

How does Government Hill today differ from when you were a child?

Oh, you can see that it's an older place now. You know, it's more manicured and the streets area all paved and the street lights all work and everybody's trees are getting big in their yards. It has just become an older place. It hasn't changed a great deal other than that.

How about the effect of the wars on Government Hill? Would you say there was much of an effect?

Well, my son went to 'em. His son is doing it now. Uh, you know, that sort of thing. There was some military living in the area but, uh, nobody really. I don't know; there wasn't a great effect that I could see because we've been connected with the military since I can remember up there.

Were you or your parents in the military?

No, but my mom was a nurse in the area, and she had friends that she worked with whose husbands were in the Air Force and so forth. And they would come over to the house when I was a kid and have dinner or talk and do stuff that people do. There was some military around there but not many.

Was your mom a nurse at a private place or at Providence Hospital, do you recall?

She worked at Providence Hospital for a while. She worked at Community which was on 9th and L Street, or used to be. And the old Providence, she worked there a long time. And after that she worked for private doctors like Vernon Cates; she worked for him and Dr. Whaley and Dr. Stars . . . and some other I can't think of right now.

Do you think that the movement of Providence from the original location . . . did that affect the community significantly?

Aw, I think we were sad when they closed that old building 'cause . . . you know, both my brothers were born there. It seemed like it was a waste and it sat there for a few years before they finally tore it down. But, my first wife worked at the New Providence, so I guess it didn't affect anybody that much. It took further to drive, that's all.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill or Anchorage?

Oh, boy, stories or legends, well You know, I don't think I do really.

Did your family fish or hunt, Jerry?

Yeah, I used to hunt with my first father-in-law. We would go up to Willow area and around there on the railroad. My mom, dad, and us used to always go fishing up in Willow a lot. And they would catch salmon right there and we would can 'em on the spot.

Any fishing in Ship Creek nearby?

I used to do that when I was a little kid. I'd go down with a snagging line and bring home fish . . . oh, once or twice a week for mom. She'd freeze them in the old Kelvinator®.

Did you have a garden or farmstead . . . any crops or animals when you were growing up?

No, I used to put up snares on the Air Force base and catch a rabbit once in awhile, but that was about it.

And, what do you remember about your parents?

Well, my dad was just a hard-working machinist, and he was very good at doing just about anything. We made our own cement blocks. It's how I earned my first car—was making concrete blocks for my dad by hand in the backyard in the summer times. And I got a hundred-and-ten-dollar Chevy, 1949 Chevy coupe out of the deal . . . with the frontend bashed in. I had to fix it and make it go.

He rebuilt one of his cars under the clotheslines in the winter in the back of the hut with the blankets over the line so he wouldn't get snowed on; and he rebuilt the engine in the car. And then we built the hut . . . or the new house.

Dad did all the block laying and the whole nine yards and all the wiring . . . did all the carpentry, all the plumbing and heating . . . the whole nine yards. He taught me all that stuff.

Did your mother and father grow up in Iowa?

Uh, yeah. My dad grew up in Oelwein, which is where the railroad that his dad worked for was, and my Dad's apprenticeship was. And my mom grew up in Bellevue, Iowa. And then she got her nursing down at Davenport area. They met in Oelwein.

And, what brought them to Alaska?

Well, when the war was over my dad was a set-up apprentice; in other words, he hadn't gone all the way through his apprenticeship yet. They just said, "Okay, you're now a journeyman; we're going to work you like one." So, that meant that he was at the bottom of the totem pole in seniority. So, when the war was phasing out and getting over with, he could see the handwriting on the wall; he figured that all the trains are going to stop basically because there wouldn't be all the war production and troop train thing going on after that.

So, he started looking around and he saw an article in one of the machinist, ah, union magazines that said they were asking for or looking for machinists in all different crafts to come to Alaska to work on the railroad. And it was a guaranteed one-year job. And they'd pay transportation both ways. So dad wrote to them, and they sent him back a bunch of stuff he told me. He had to fill all this paperwork out and get some medical work done to make sure he was healthy enough. And they accepted him and then he went up there. He flew up. And that's when he became a machinist there. And started building our house, and that's when mom and I went up, in May of '47. But that's how they got there. He told me once or twice that he wished he'd gone up there a lot earlier. He thought about it, but it just wasn't a place to go before the war.

You mentioned that you did some fishing and hunting and you went to the movies once in awhile. What other recreational activities were available for you and what did you partake in?

Oh, boy. I liked model airplanes a lot. So, I used to fly model airplanes down where the, uh, what the heck is it . . . the curling club area is now down in Government Hill. And let's see, I did a lot of bicycling all over the place. I used to roam around . . . just get on the base and we'd just go for miles . . . just walk out the back there, right across some of the old stuff before . . . from before the base took over where the Browns had their homestead back in there . . . and found their old mink cages and so forth. And it was the Browns who were the originators of Anchorage, basically; John and Ellie [Jack and Nellie Brown]. I was their paper boy.

What about your parents? What kind of activities did they enjoy?

Fishing, mainly . . . they loved to go out fishing. So, every chance they got, they would go out fishing. They'd go to Willow or they'd, later . . . in the later years, we'd all go down to Seward and some of the other places to salmon fish, mainly.

Do you have any other ancestors, any other relatives or descendants that are living here in Alaska?

Not at present. Both my kids left, because, uh, in '85, when everything turned bad, the kids had no jobs, so they left. My son joined the Navy, and my daughter went to Texas to work for the State of Texas!

[Kristine] Jerry, can I ask you a quick question?

Sure.

We kind of heard through some of the Native representatives that some of the Native kids would come and stay with some of the families in town in the early days, so that they could go to school. Do you know of any kids that came in from the villages and stayed in town there or anything like that?

No, I grew up with some Native kids that lived right there and some of . . . a couple of my best friends were three-quarter Native kids.

And, uh, I just grew up with them. I don't remember. I know what you are talking about, but I don't know of any of those people.

[Kristine] Okay, great. Thanks. Sorry, Bob.

[Bob] No problem. Jerry, have you noticed any climate change occurrences since you were a child?

Yeah, and this is kind of interesting; I was thinking about that before you called.

It's a lot milder up there now, it seems like to me. Because I could remember when I was a kid we would have these hellacious snowstorms or windstorms, and it would make great big drifts everywhere. And, I remember one Thanksgiving; the winds were blowing like hell and mom was cooking and the power had gone off.

And during the wind, the smoke stack for our stove at that end of the house, or Quonset, had blown off. It was banging on the side of the hut with the guy wires. So, my dad says, I think I was about 12 or something like that, he says, "Why don't go out there and fix that?" So, I went out there; I got all gussied up with the coats and the gloves and all that, and I was able to go out and walk out on the road because it was a corner lot. And I could walk straight to the top of the hut on the drift that was on the house. And I pulled that stove stack back, and put it back where it belonged and wired it back up again. I'll never forget that.

And it was cold all the time. I remember waitin' for the bus and thought I was going to die waiting for it to get there when I went to high school. Just . . . the climate has gotten a lot warmer, you know. Now it's just sloppy. It used to be cold.

Over by the water tower area there, what used to be the railroad area of the Hill, it would blow—the wind would blow drifts over the edge of that cliff right there and we would dig houses back in there—10 or 12 feet deep!

And it would be solid snow . . . hard snow. I haven't seen anything like that for years. . . years and years and years. So, yeah, the weather has gotten milder.

Well, Jerry, is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you would like to add at this time?

No, you know, it's real hard. I think of stuff, but then I can't remember it later. My wife says I should start writing this stuff down. I just might start doing that. I remember when, you know? You kind of got me thinking, to sit here and think of stuff that I guess I should write down. Your questioning has helped . . . drag up some of that stuff.

Kristine talked to Jerry about writing his stories down because there would be time to add more information still. Jerry said he had a lot of black and white pictures from Government Hill that he would be willing to scan and share.

Well, Jerry, what wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

Don't build the bridge through Government Hill!

Anything else? [Inaudible] Okay, well, thank you very much for your time for this interview, and we will turn the recorder off now.

Okay!

Stephen Saunders Transcribed Oral History Interview

Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on February 16, 2012, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral phone interview with Mr. Steve Saunders regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. Saunders, could you again please tell me your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

My name is Stephen, S-T-E-P-H-E-N, Saunders. My birthday is 3/7/1938, and I was born in Seattle, Washington.

Okay, and where did you grow up? When did you come to Alaska?

Well, I grew up in the Seattle area . . . well, L.A. and Seattle. My father went to medical school during the Second World War in L.A., and so we were there for a short period of time, but most of my growing up was done in the northern part of Seattle. And, uh, I came to Alaska on October 28th in 1966 in a transfer from Standard Oil Company of California in Seattle to open a new company-operated service station at what is now Benson and the New Seward Highway. It's not even there; I outlived it. [Laughs]

So your company moved you up here then?

My company moved me up here. I was originally supposed to be here for two years, and, as of right now, I think we're at the 46-year mark! [Laughter]

And when you came up, did you come up alone or did you come up with family at the time?

I came up with my wife and a new adopted son. I got transferred up here two days after he was born [laughter] . . . and then I stayed, uh, I don't know; if you . . . Go ahead.

What community did you live in when you first came to Alaska?

I lived down in the Muldoon area in Chester Valley. Um, I think the house I was told that I had out there was the 38th house in the area.

And when did you move to the Government Hill community?

Actually, I didn't. What I did was, uh, Chevron, which is now Chevron but was Standard Oil Company of California, built a new terminal in the Port of Anchorage after the 1964 Good Friday earthquake. Our major terminal prior to that for this area had been in Seward. And the tidal wave took that terminal out. So, our facility here in Anchorage was, uh, very new when I first came up here.

Okay, so you worked down at the Port?

Uh, actually, I worked at the station for awhile, and then I moved up through the company as a field, as a trainer actually, for the State of Alaska. And I was on loan also to the Yukon Territory through White Pass Petroleum, which was the Chevron jobber in the Yukon. And then I, uh . . . was a field manager for marketing . . . actually handled their marine business and was responsible for their coastal tanker up here, which I sailed on to deliver product in the Gulf of Alaska as far south as Ketchikan and west to Dutch Harbor . . . and all the little fishing ports in between.

Anyway, uh, we had a major terminal there [Anchorage] so, uh, which you know of, and then in 1986, I retired from Chevron and took over the company's business there with the business partner and started Inlet Petroleum Company. So my . . . my history down in that area is basically in the petroleum business, and then I ran my own business for a number of years. And, uh . . . worked around the port because we used to be one of the bigger customers when I first came here because we brought product in there from either Nikiski, our own refinery, or finished product, as such as gasoline and so forth came from the Lower 48 by tanker into the Port of Anchorage.

Do you still own Inlet Petroleum Company?

No, in 2005 we sold Inlet Petroleum Company to Saltchuk, which is the parent company of Totem Ocean Going Traders, and I worked for 'em for a year in the transition. My business partner Rocky Bruce still is the president of that company.

So your familiarity of the Government Hill neighborhood relates to your work in the area.

That's exactly right. And, uh, of course we used to go up the hill to the bowling alley a lot for lunch years ago. It's been a lot of years since that bowling alley has been operational, I believe. I was, for a while, the retail representative in my field experience. I took care of all the retail stations, which we had a lot of Chevron stations in town, and we did have one located at the top of Government Hill there, uh, Hollywood Service. So, I spent a lot of time between there and the bulk plant and the other stations in town.

How do you think the station at, uh, the Hollywood station did business-wise compared to the other stations in the area? Was there much or any difference?

Well, they changed the mode. It used be a full-service station. Mike Spacely was an old-time Alaskan. He owned and operated that station for years. Then, um, I can't recall if the company actually owned the property, but it ended up being sold or re-leased to Tesoro; and there is a Tesoro Station there at this point in time. And I don't have really any idea what their, uh, their, uh, business is up there.

But back when it was Hollywood Service, did the people of Government Hill appreciate having the station there? Was it convenient for the local residents?

Oh, I'm sure they did, you know. I've run into people all over town that remember that old station and, uh, Chevron, from a historic standpoint, started out in business up here in 1889. So, they had a very big presence here in Alaska for many, many years.

That's pretty early for Alaska!

Pardon me?

That's a pretty early start for Alaska.

Yeah, it was. They went to Nome to supply kerosene to the gold miners. And that's how they got started, and then they started building bulk plants. And, uh, one of my latter jobs, along with most of the field people up here, was to liquidate those bulk terminals, which we had 42 of them total in the State of Alaska. And most of them were . . . a lot of them were in western Alaska. And we pioneered all of those sites.

In fact, we were in a situation where, ah, company was quite concerned as business grew there was room for competition out there, which there hadn't been earlier, and we didn't like having to prove our pricing policies up there those many years ago all the time, so we sold those off to individual jobbers. And throughout that program, that's one of the reasons when I retired after over 25 years with Chevron, I decided to be a jobber distributor and started Inlet Petroleum Company with my business partner.

Did you know many of the residents of Government Hill, or any of the residents?

Yeah, in fact, one of my best friends Carl Anderson owned Cook Inlet Tug and Barge, and his family I knew quite well. And I have a love for the, uh, for maritime. And had the responsibility of the Alaska Standard, which was Chevron's tanker.

And, uh, traveled between Valdez, our home port, and the Aleutian Islands and clear down to Dutch Harbor and then around Kodiak Island and Valdez, Cordova, and all those different places. [Pause—background noise: sirens] The oil companies business . . . you still there?

Yes.

Oh, okay. Sorry, I heard a little noise in the background.

Yeah, an ambulance going by it sounds like.

[Chuckles] Oh, okay, very good.

How would you describe the Government Hill neighborhood as far as how it was when you first moved to Alaska and how it is today?

Well, obviously Elmendorf wasn't as big back in those days. 'Course, Anchorage was a pretty small town in reality. And Government Hill was a . . . obviously had been built up around the port area, and our port at that time was not as active really as it is today or did as much freight coming through it. Most of the freight came over the highway by truck and trailer out of Washington State. And the rest of it came by barge. And then when container ships came in there, of course that changed that whole area.

And, uh, I think Government Hill in itself, you know, is an old established community within the City of Anchorage . . . and, ah, probably one of the first ones. And, uh, we had customers there at the bulk plant, at times there wasn't a lot of businesses that we had requirement for the type of business we were in. But until the fiasco of the bombing of the Trade buildings in 2001, we had Bluff Drive [that] was a major traffic . . . ah, traveled road for Government Hill, along with coming across the old, uh, or the, uh . . . viaduct up to Government Hill. So . . . and of course that was closed down after Nine One One [9/11] because of the security of the tank farms.

Yes. What do you miss most about how things have changed . . . about the earlier days of Government Hill or the port area?

Uh, why I tell you what, I think it's, uh . . . You know, I don't know exactly how to answer you on that.

Okay, well what do you think was most important to the people living in Government Hill in the early days in the '60s when you came here?

Uh . . . I don't know that I can really answer that question. [Chuckle]

Okay, that's more designed for a resident, I suppose.

Yeah. You know, the terminal manager for Chevron that ran the actual tanks there, we . . . in our business had the warehouse, and of course our trucks were, and trailers were, parked there but . . . he and I both spent time going to the community council up there trying to be good neighbors. And, uh, we resolved issues with security and so forth, especially after Nine One One [9/11].

And my experience really has been more with the port at the base of Government Hill, um, not only because we moved a lot of containers into our building because we were a major petroleum distributor of lubricants and other types of bulk product.

And then I got very interested in the port, and I've actually served as a port commissioner since 1999. And so, when we got started with that, then I got more involved in the port as a volunteer in setting up the security for the Port and so forth under those types of conditions, which were mandated by the Coast Guard.

Well, you mentioned before about the old Hollywood Service Station there. Are there any other places in Government Hill from the early days, from the '60s or '70s that stand out in your mind?

The bowling alley . . . the bowling alley had a really good restaurant. And we had a lot of people . . . and when I became a field representative, I moved from the station that I was assigned to, and we also had one that had a classroom attached to it over on Romig Hill. Ah, my office ended up at the terminal building of Standard Oil Company at the base of Bluff Drive there going into the port. So, we would, uh, move up to . . . go up there to lunch a lot because it was close to the port. And, of course we didn't have a viaduct back in those days, you know. We had the old, where the, uh . . . what do they call it? The Bridge Restaurant was built on the old bridge that used to connect the port with C Street. And if you go over the viaduct today, you can see the cut where C Street continued. And it was a pretty steep grade.

So did many people who worked down at the port and live in Government Hill . . . was there much foot traffic from local residents and people working in the port going to the downtown area?

Basically, the traffic that we get into the port is all port traffic because we do have security checkpoints going into the port. And Bluff Drive now is gated so you cannot drive up there, unless there and in case there is an emergency, and we had to evacuate the traffic from the port to Government Hill to, uh . . . in case there was some type of major disaster there.

Are there any particular historical events that stand out in your mind that have affected your family and/or the residents in Government Hill?

Ah, well, I know that affected all of our families when the first container ships came into the Port of Anchorage. Originally, quite frankly, between Union Oil Company, which had a terminal across the road from the Standard Oil Terminal, it was basically tanker trade, as I recall, that came into the port. And we had a lot of that.

And of course as the port grew, bulk containers of cement and so forth came in there. So, the port has obviously been a great boom to the City of Anchorage, and it provides about 85 percent of the total freight for 90 percent of the population of the State of Alaska. And the container ships come in here now, and that was a major issue as we grew in population and commerce—the building of the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline and so forth.

Well that leads me to my next question. I assume you agree that the oil booms and busts have had a significant effect on the Government Hill and the port and so forth.

Oh, absolutely. You know, and our major tank farm so, is so 100 percent of all the fuel going to Elmendorf Air Force Base and so forth comes through the port, and about 65 percent or 70 percent of the fuel that is going to the . . . Anchorage International for the commercial jets that come in there, for the air freight terminal.

So it has a very big impact on, uh, the city and the state because it really is our regional port.

So, when you first came up here was about only seven or eight years after the Statehood. Did you hear any stories about how things went at the time of becoming a state?

Oh yeah, I did. I'll tell you a little interesting thing. I had a station over in Government or, uh, on Romig Hill at the time. And I, and I remember we got a big snowstorm and of course Bill Egan, our first governor and so forth, lived over there, and Lowell Thomas, Jr. , and a bunch of those folks. And we had a big snowstorm and I had all of them in the station at the same time . . . our congressman and so forth.

And we had a classroom on that station where I actually trained the guys who were going into the service stations, ah, to follow our service procedures. And so we opened up the training session, and I always used to accuse them of having their political meeting in there in our service station at that time because they went in there and they just waited patiently while we got their snow tires on and that type of thing. It was kind of interesting.

So I got . . . because of my job, I got to service Bob Atwood and all of those guys' cars for them. So I got an opportunity to meet those and some of the shakers and bakers in the state at that time. And it was very interesting . . . and a bunch of really nice down-to-earth people, ya know?

Yeah.

How about the Civil Rights Movement? Do you recall how that movement affected the Government Hill community . . . or Alaska in general?

You know, I really don't believe that we had a really much of a problem with that here, and that there was really any big stink about it. I don't recall, uh, that there was any problems with that.

What about the effect of the wars on the Government Hill community and the vicinity?

Oh, very much so, because as you know, all the C-130s were landing there at Elmendorf about every 20 minutes coming in from Southeast Asia bringing in wounded and dead from the Vietnam War. So, it was, uh . . . they had a lot of airplane noise and so forth to deal with.

And, ah, ah, I think there was, of course there was . . . probably a fairly quiet community and more and more traffic was going to Government Hill. We just had a two-lane bridge over there until they built the current overpass that goes over there. And I can't recall the date that went in . . . that they abandoned the little bridge down over Ship Creek. But anyway, I'm sure that it did make a difference.

Were you or any of your relatives in the military?

I was in the Air National Guard back in the '50s. But I just, uh, I missed out being in the Korean deal by about two years. I actually went to boot camp the night I graduated from high school.

And where did you say you grew up originally?

In Seattle.

Seattle area, okay. And do you currently . . . do you live in Arizona part of the year and Alaska part of the year, or what's your current status?

We are snowbirds recently since I sold my business, we spend about seven months in Alaska and about four or five months down here [in Arizona]. And we do own a home here.

We have kept our family home, which is in South Anchorage. And, uh, two of our boys live in Anchorage . . . and the youngest one unfortunately lives in Washington State. He's a doctor down there, and his family live in Vancouver area of Washington State.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about our town?

Oh! [Pause] This goes back to my high school days. [Laughter] But anyway, Morrison Knudsen came up here; they built like East High School, I think, and West—or maybe it was West. But the construction guys that came up as foremen on those jobs got me really interested in coming up here. But anyway, it was pretty wild town, and they came up in the '50s and obviously I came up in the mid '60s so . . . but growing up in Alaska [note: Mr. Saunders most likely meant Seattle] always wanting to come to Alaska, and then I got the opportunity and, of course, it's home.

Did your family fish or hunt?

Oh, yes!

Any in Ship Creek? Any fishing?

Uh, I have never fished in Ship Creek. [Laughs] As many years as I've gone over the bridge there, I never have. But I like to fish. I used to hunt big game every year and I enjoyed bear hunting. And . . . our family really loves the outdoors. We have property up at 92 Mile on the Parks Highway . . . and off the road. Our oldest son and us each own property up there. So, we try to spend as much time as we can in the out-of-doors. I'm also a mariner, and I think I'm on my 19th boat in the last 50 years . . . so.

Wow!

Do you have any other relatives besides your immediate family that live in Alaska?

Yes, I do . . . a niece. And she and her husband have been with a mental health services, and they are now stationed in Glennallen. They have been in Kotzebue and Nome and various . . . Kodiak was their last deal. They have been up here for quite a few years.

Then I have two boys. One's with the Alaska Railroad. He is a computer scientist. He's been there for quite a few years.

And, my other, my stepson and his family own Sappore Coffee Company; and they're in the coffee business in Anchorage. They have a number of retail stores as well. They're wholesale distributors and have about 40 employees.

Well, I have two more questions. First, is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about at this time?

No, I'm glad that the Muni is working on our port expansion project. As, uh . . . I don't know how much you've been involved in that in your type of business, but as you know, we are building . . . trying to build a new port to replace our 50-year-old port. And, ah, it's very important that this job gets done. We are seeing bigger and faster ships to move as our state grows, and the potential of other minerals being developed in the state.

We need to get this job completed. We've been set back with some issues, but the worthiness and how much better off we are now even in the project as it's going forward. We need to have a deeper port, so we're moving out to sea to take care of the new types of ships. The container ships now can handle 14, 15 boxes wide. We can handle 9 [boxes] where we are right now, and we need to move out to a little deeper water.

And we are actually building land, and , ah, so . . . that should be good really for Government Hill. I could say that I'm 100 percent for that project. [Chuckle] But of course I've been working with the Port Commission for a number of years. And, ah, also I serve on . . . I am a lifetime member on the board of directors of the trucking association.

So those are what I do now that I'm retired.

Okay. Well, Steve, what wisdom would you like to leave for the next generation of Government Hill residents?

Ah . . . be good to American citizens. Support our constitution and our way of life of staying independent as we are as Alaskans.

Uh, I used to have a hat made up, I'll tell you this—you can probably edit about half of this stuff out but that's fine. I used to have some hats that I'd make up and I think that I am going to do it again . . . *"Alaska, home of individuals and other endangered species."*

Be individuals and give your best to a state that was built by individuals and pioneers that gave it their all to give us such a great place to live in.

Okay. Well, thank you very much. I think that will conclude our interview now.

Stewart E. White Transcribed Oral History Interview



Introduction:

My name is Robert Braunstein and I am with BGES, Incorporated, an environmental consulting firm located in Anchorage, Alaska. I am here today on November 28, 2011, on behalf of the Municipality of Anchorage to conduct an oral interview with Mr. Stewart White at his home regarding his knowledge of historical events associated with the Government Hill community.

Mr. White, could you please state your name, your birthdate, and your birthplace.

Yeah, I'm Stewart E. White. I'm 87. I was born in Weed, California.

And where did you grow up?

Well, I grew up there, and I got into the service. Then I came up here, and I've been up here ever since.

Do you recall what year you came up here?

1948.

And that was to join the military?

No, I came up here after the service. I got discharged from the service after World War II, and I worked on the Southern Pacific Railroad, and I decided to come up here and see what it was like. And my old man told me it was a great future up here for a young guy.

So, I wrote the Alaska Railroad and they wrote me back and offered me a year contract. And if I'd stay for a year, they would pay my way back to my origin of hire.

But you decided to stay and not go back?

Yeah, never got money enough to leave. [Laughter]

And what was the community like when you first came here? What was the neighborhood like?

Well, there was all Quonset huts up here. And railroaders, of course, on this side because the Alaska Railroad offered people, uh, the lot and a Quonset hut. If they would stay for a year, they would give them a quit claim deed to it. They were having a tough time keeping people up here, especially families and people that were . . . oh, not itinerants, more or less, you know . . . they were willing to stay, but, generally the wife would say, "I'm heading back home. Are you going with me?" And the husband usually would go with 'em. [Chuckles]

So, did you take advantage of that deal? Did you get the property that way?

Well, yeah, I got two. But, uh, one guy offered me the place for seven hundred dollars; it was that cheap. And I finally bought another one for five thousand. And, uh, got another one so I got in on the tail end of it.

And how long did you work for the railroad?

Thirty-four years, yeah.

How many people lived in your home when you first moved here?

Well, when we first came here, I got married and, uh, we went to Whittier and stayed for six years—1954 to '60. And then the urban renewal had taken this area over. They were going to upgrade it and offer, uh, fairly cheap interest rates on mortgage, home mortgages. And, ah, so, anyway, I had a Quonset hut on this thing and, uh, had the house built on it in 1960 and we moved up here in November '60.

Was the Quonset hut torn down or did they move it?

Yeah, they moved it. Yeah, in fact, the guy by the name of [inaudible] bought it and it took it up to the Palmer area.

And so you and your wife moved in here?

Right.

Did you have children?

Yeah, we had two, three children.

And was there anybody else living with you besides your immediate family?

No, nobody else, just us. And, uh, we had one other child born. He was born in the earthquake—1964 earthquake year.

So what do you remember about your home and your neighbors' homes when you first started living in Government Hill?

Well, when I first came up here I didn't live here, but I had friends up here. I'd come up here and have dinner with them and hang out with them. And then I rented a spot in the house in the back over here, in the Quonset hut in the back, and I stayed there for about a year. And, uh, then I finally wound up—I went up to Healy and Fairbanks and Whittier and all over the place. And then, of course, when I got married like I say, I came back up in '60 and have been here since then.

So your children grew up here in Government Hill?

Right, yeah, all of them, yeah.

And do they still live here, any of your children?

Yup, I got one daughter across the street down there and a couple houses down. And, uh, another daughter lives in Eagle River. And I got one boy renting from me.

And what do you recall about your neighbors in the early days?

Well, there was a lot of kids here at one time. And I don't think there's any kids around here anymore. But, uh . . . I've only got one other long-time neighbor . . . Williams over here.

He was here when I came here. And, uh, all the rest of 'em have moved gone—lots of military in this area at the time. And, uh, places have been sold a lot of different times up through here. I guess I'm by far the longest guy in this neighborhood and—on this block anyway.

You mentioned that there were a lot of military personnel and certainly railroad personnel. Were there many other occupations for your neighbors?

Uh, I don't really know. The only ones I knew were mostly railroad, and Williams down the road there worked for the Corps of Engineers, which is right up the road here. And, uh, other people were, oh, short-term people that didn't stay around too long.

Mr. White, how would you describe Government Hill?

Well, it's a good quiet neighborhood, I think. It's easy access to downtown, and I'd been here ever since. It was certainly handy for me to get back and forth to work. I can walk down the hill and I was at work.

What do you remember about major local events when you first moved here?

Oh, none come to my mind that I can think of—right offhand anyway.

Is there anything you miss about the early days of Government Hill when you first moved here?

No, I don't think so. I think everything's been pretty advantageous around here, with the . . . you know, the suites [inaudible] and the . . .

What about the shopping malls? There used to be more shopping and things to . . .

Well, there was a little shopping mall down the street here that's pretty well . . . I don't know it's kind of dissolved now, I guess. There's not much left to it, but . . .

Did you do much of your shopping locally here in the, when it was active?

Oh, yeah, there was a little grocery store down there and we patronized that, yeah. And, ah, of course, there was no big stores around here at that time, you know, in the earlier days but . . .

So did you do much shopping in Anchorage then?

Yeah, well, all of it, yeah, actually, yeah. We had NC Company down there was probably one of the bigger stores. It's been gone for years now.

Is there anything you miss about the early days of Government Hill?

Oh, I kind of liked the idea there wasn't too many people around, but outside of that, why, I guess not.

How else have you seen Government Hill change over your lifetime?

Well, it just become more modern, of course. We got streets and the street lights now, and, ah, things that we never had in the old days. And, uh, it seems just, that just come along with progress, I guess. One thing does get me though that I remember the earthquake here the day it hit here.

March 27th was my wife's birthday and she was frosting a birthday cake right there. It was a different kitchen then. And there was a chandelier similar to this one, and I was hanging onto that and the kids were on their knees praying. [Laughter] And the house was a getting with it. [Laughter]

Were you home at the time?

Yeah.

Does that make you more nervous now-a-days when you experience an earthquake having lived through that?

Well, you wonder, you know, you really know what could happen, you know, and there's no kidding around about that.

Did you have any damage at your home?

No, very little. It popped a few sheetrock nails, and, uh, we were really fortunate in this area right here. It's a good gravel base evidently, and it's pretty stable. Down along the edge over here along that bluff, why, it was all part of the old Bootlegger's Cove clay—part of the ocean, for millions of years ago. And of course it was like jelly and it shook right down. Some of the houses just slid right down the hill with it.

Were any of your children of school age then?

Yeah, they were and they were lucky because, uh, it was Good Friday and there was no school that day. And the school over here was right on the edge of this bluff. And it literally shook right into the ground. It was just a roof sticking out on some of the buildings.

And how did your children feel about having their school being demolished?

Well, they didn't like it of course, but they figured themselves pretty lucky that they weren't in it that day. Of course, it was started about 5 o'clock or a couple of minutes afterward. They would have been out anyway, I guess.

And where did they go to school after that?

Well, they put a school in across over here right on the edge of the base over here, which is here today. And, uh, it's, uh . . . so it worked out pretty close—it was a lot closer actually.

Do you recall how long they were out of school after the quake?

Ah, I don't recall that, you know, come to think about it. If I remember right, they set up some temporary buildings and got kids back in school pretty quick . . . as far as I know . . . as far as I recall, yeah.

How about the utilities being repaired? Do you recall how long that took after the earthquake?

Uh, it took a couple of days. We were pretty lucky here. We lost our water and, uh, lost our power for awhile, but it didn't take too long and they had it back up.

So what do you think was most important to the people in the early days of Government Hill when you first moved to the community?

What was most important? [Pause] Well, I can't picture anything other than just [pause] just . . . sweet, clean living here as far as I know, but nothing special that I can think of.

Do you recall any of Government Hill's leaders when you first moved here; head of the community council or any other . . . ?

Yeah, they had, uh, let's see who was it, Tyler Jones was here; he was a community council. And, uh . . . I can't think of his name, Woodruff. . . he was a councilman later on or assemblyman. [Mr. White possibly meant Charles Wohlforth.] . . . And this one guy was connected with the Anchorage Daily News. He was on the other side of the Hill. He's just left here. And, uh . . .

Did you or any of your family members get involved with the community council or the local government?

My wife was a precinct chairman up here for several years, yeah. But, uh, not on a local level here. I mean not for the municipality or community council or anything.

Are there any places in Government Hill that stand out in your mind from the early days?

No, not really. They just, uh . . . No, I can't think of anything that sticks out.

What types of work opportunities existed here in Government Hill or nearby communities other than we mentioned the military and the railroad? Were there any others?

Well . . . a lot of people of course later on they worked at different occupations and professions I'm sure that lived up here that I never met. But in the early days when I was first here, why, of course, this pretty much were all railroad. In fact, the Department of the Interior had all of this land with the Alaska Railroad was under the Department of the Interior at that time, before they made this the Department of Transportation. So that's why we wound up with all this land up here.

We talked about the '64 earthquake. Were there any other historical events that come to mind that had an impact on Government Hill or surrounding communities?

No, I can't recall any, no.

How about the oil booms and busts? Do you think that had a significant impact on Government Hill?

Oh . . . not that I can point to, no.

How about Statehood? What do you recall from Statehood times?

Well, I remember that because it was 1959, I guess. I remember that. I was in . . . in Whittier at the time when Eisenhower made it a state.

How did you feel about that?

Well, at the time I wasn't all . . . wasn't all that that keen about it. Since then I realized that I was wrong. [Laughter]

Do you think Statehood had an effect on Government Hill?

No . . . not that I can . . . no, not that I can figure anyway.

Did you attend any of the celebrations around Statehood?

Oh, they had some celebrations, but we weren't in on it. We were down in Whittier and that's pretty isolated. [Chuckle]

I suppose at that time that was a pretty isolated location?

Yeah, yeah, it was at that time. Yeah, there was a train in there six days a week; and if you didn't get that train, you were stuck . . . unless you wanted to sneak through that tunnel and walk twelve miles. [Laughs]

How about the civil rights movement? Do you recall that having any effect on Government Hill?

No, no, I don't . . . I can't . . . there was no effect that I know of.

What about government today? Do you see any differences from today's government versus when you first moved here?

Oh, boy, that's a tough one there. I'm sure there is but, it's kind of, uh . . . it'd be kind of slow and insidious, you know. [Chuckles] I don't think you could pinpoint [inaudible].

What about the wars' effect on Government Hill? What do you think their effect has been?

You mean the Korean War or [inaudible] . . . Vietnam War?

All of them, I guess . . . any of them. Obviously World War II . . . the base was built around that, just before then.

Yeah, the base has been upgraded. Of course the base was here when I came here, but it's been upgraded. I'm sure they've . . . you know, it's one of the major bases in the country so . . . it's part of . . . part of keeping up with the defense, I guess.

Did you hear any stories about how the land was obtained over there? Did you know anybody who lost land when they . . . ?

Well, I didn't know him personally. I guess a guy name of Brown and, uh, they had a homestead over there. 'Course they took that over. In fact, I think Brown's Point is named for that over here as an old-time family.

Were you or any of your family members in the military?

Oh, my brother was in the Navy. A couple of cousins and whatnot were, but that was during World War II.

Was your family affected by the wars personally, then?

No, not as far as I know.

Do you remember any great stories or legends about Government Hill community or about Anchorage in general?

Well . . . no, I can't think of any spectacular incidents that came about.

Did you . . . did your family hunt or fish?

Yeah, I've done quite a bit of hunting and fishing, yeah. In fact, I still fish a lot.

Any down in Ship Creek?

Well, I fished there a couple of time but generally down on the Kenai is where I do my fishing now. In fact, that's where my wife hangs out. She's hanging down at our cabin down there. I can't hardly get her back up here. [Laughter]

Did you have a garden or a farmstead?

No, no, I never did do much gardening up here.

Do you have . . . you mentioned you have some sons or daughters that live here. Do you have any people that came before you . . . any, ah, descendants that you came from?

No, no, nobody. I'm the first one as far as I know.

Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't spoken about? Anything you can think of that might be of interest?

Well, not offhand. I suppose after you leave I'll think of a half a dozen things. [Laughs]

[Kristine Bunnell] You mentioned that you met your wife up here.

Where did you meet her at?

Well, that's kind of a good story all right. I was up here and I was in Whittier, and they changed the layover days on this yard job. And I liked the job, so I filled a bid out to bid the job back in. And I started to drop the bid in the bid box, which I was a cinch to get the job, and this old road foreman, which had been retired, Henry Noose up on the north end, told me he said, "Kid I want you to learn the road. You'll never be an engineer unless you know your road." So I thought maybe I better do that.

So, it was summertime and nice and I was, you know, free to move anytime I wanted being single and all. So I crumpled the bid up and took my bunk that I had . . . that's railroad jargon . . . but I could bunk at any job that I could hold.

So, I went up to Clear Sight and, uh, got off the train and, uh, and, uh, met a friend there, Bob Davidson who just became superintendent. And this young girl got on the train with two little kids. And I said, "Who is that little girl?" And he said, "That, the second foreman's wife's sister and she's too young for you so don't mess with her!" [Laughter] So I wound up marrying her. [Laughter]

[Kristine Bunnell] So was it love at first sight then?

Yeah, it was for me anyway. [Laughter] I'd still [inaudible] . . . Of all the places to meet your wife, that was probably the last place.

[Kristine Bunnell] So, was that down in Whittier?

No, that was in Clear—way up north there on this side of Nenana. And, uh, it was such an isolated spot, you know. And I went up there on this work train. Smith, Browner, Rube [inaudible] was rebuilding the Alaska Railroad, and they had these gangs. And she came up to help her sister for the summer, and that's how I ran into her.

[Kristine Bunnell] Oh, that's nice.

[Kristine Bunnell] So you guys have a cabin on the Kenai?

Yeah, by Siriski [spelling]. Yeah, or, uh, Anchor Point . . . just this side of Anchor Point. We hang out there quite a bit.

[Kristine Bunnell] Oh, that's nice.

[Bob Braunstein] How long have you had the cabin?

Eleven years. We had the property for a number of years, and my wife wanted to build a cabin on it. And so we did, and I haven't seen her since. [Laughter]

[Kristine Bunnell] So she said if you want to see me you got to come down to the cabin?

Yeah, that's right. She was just here a couple of days ago for Thanksgiving but she headed back down. I was supposed to go down today, but I didn't do it.

[Bob Braunstein] Well, is there any wisdom you would like to leave for the next generation of residents in Government Hill?

No, it's a pretty good spot. Like one guy Gordy said, uh, Government Hill is the best kept secret in Anchorage, you know, because it's accessible to everything; it's close; you can be downtown in two minutes. And, uh, just some of the isolated places way out here, you got to drive thirty minutes to get anywhere, you know. Anyway, that's . . . I'm glad I'm here. I have no intention of moving anywhere else.

[Kristine Bunnell] You mentioned your kids were still here; your daughters are still down the street here.

Yeah, my daughter went to school here, and went to UAA. And, uh, she's a CPA here in town, in Anchorage here. And my youngest daughter works for, uh, Army National Guard—been with them for a number of years. She lives in Eagle River. And the boys are here locally.

[Kristine Bunnell] So that must be nice to have your family close by.

Yeah, it is. I got grandkids there, and in fact my one grandkid is staying with us right now for awhile. His brother is an air traffic controller. He went to school in Government Hill, and went to Central. In fact, he got a free ride at UAA. His grades got him a free tuition there. He hired out. He's an air traffic controller in Colorado, in, uh, Longmont, Colorado, now.

[Kristine Bunnell] So, none of the kids followed your footsteps to the railroad then?

No, I'm the only railroader. I enjoyed it. It was a good experience—something different every day, you know. Time went by fast. You're on the road, of course—the day went by pretty quick.

[Bob Braunstein] Okay, well, thank you very much for your interview today, Mr. White. We really appreciate it.

Well, I don't suppose I contributed a whole bunch. I got another old-timer here, Weaver Franklin; the guy that's been up here longer than I have. He was my old boss for 34 years. And he has lived on the other side of the Hill. He'd probably be an interesting person to talk to.

[Bob Braunstein] We spoke with Weaver.

Oh, did ya—already?

[Bob Braunstein] And John Nelson . . . did you know John?

Who?

[Bob Braunstein] John Nelson . . . he lived here from the '30s to the '50s, I think.

Nelson, Nelson . . . God damn, I do! I remember him all right.

[Bob Braunstein] Another railroad person.

Yeah, yeah, I can't remember what he did.

[Kristine Bunnell] So, when you worked on the railroad, did you mostly haul coal, or was it, uh . . . ?

Well, of course, in the old days everything came out of Seward, you know. There was no dock down here then. In fact, they thought they would never get a ship in here because of the shoal. Oh, we worked out of Whittier. Union Oil Company had their oil in Whittier. Their gasoline and diesel fuel—we hauled that in. In fact, when I was in Whittier, that's what I did . . . was haul stuff from Whittier. And the military was there, and, of course, we would service them. And then they'd haul stuff out of Seward. Everything came out of Seward and came in on ship. It came in and, uh . . .

We hauled coal from Jonesville. Of course, the railroad serviced Fairbanks out of Usibelli out of Healy. They hauled lots of coal out of there and went north to the military bases in Fairbanks. And we did down here at the bottom of the hill with the old power plant; we used to get coal from Jonesville.

That's the one they're trying to reopen up here that Wishbone, in Sutton. That was, uh, that was a 16-hour, 15-hour-and-59-minute day job. I remember working six days a week on that job. And I was working fire for this old engineer, Dennis O'Neil. He was an old-timer here. And I told him, I said, "You're not going to see me in the morning. I'm quitting this job; I'm never coming back here."

[Laughter] He'd have a big grin on his face the next day; I'd be there.
[Laughter]

[Bob Braunstein] Were there any strikes during your time at the railroad?

Pardon?

[Bob Braunstein] Did the workers ever go on strike?

No, no, we were under a federal clause here. We couldn't strike if we wanted to so. . . . It was a federal, uh, federal law here.

[Kristine Bunnell] Well, the Alaska Railroad was kind of an entity into itself. It wasn't like the Southern Pacific or the Santa Fe or anything.

No, it was a government-owned railroad. Of course, this was civil stuff you worked for, a civil service employee or federal employee. And it, uh, it was a good railroad.

And in the early days, of course, everything was pretty antiquated here. They had 70-pound rail, which is pretty light, and a lot of stuff came off the old Panama Railroad. And, uh, of course today why we got the most modern locomotives there is down there; these big Macs that are sitting down there in the railroad yard. You'll see them as you go down the hill.

[Bob Braunstein] Do you ride the trains much these days?

No, I haven't been on the train for years. In fact, I think I've been on two since, uh, which I have been retired for thirty years in February.

[Kristine Bunnell] Oh, yeah, so you don't ever take the trip down to Seward just for the fun of it, huh?

No, no, not really. I guess when I climbed down off that thing, my uh In fact I got a picture over here of my wife when she came down. And on the way from Fairbanks, why the crew hit a pickup on a crossing up there by Parkers Pass and killed a guy and, of course, that caused a big delay in that train. So I came under my last run, I was about five hours late. I came in about midnight down here in the yard and, uh [Pause] I got a couple of pictures here. I don't know if . . . I got a slide, but I don't know if you're interested

[Bob Braunstein] Yeah, we sure would be. We'll close the tape now and thank you for the official interview.

I don't know of anything else I can think of here.

[Kristine Bunnell] What did they . . . did they have a ceremony on your last day when you guys left the railroad or what did they do?

Oh, they, uh, got together and they had people that retired . . . they kind of group them together, and then they'd have a retirement party of some kind.

But the time I retired, there was four or five people came down but . . . and like I say, the train was about five hours late getting in that night. It was about midnight, and most people had lost interest by then [laughter] . . . if they had any at all. [Chuckles]

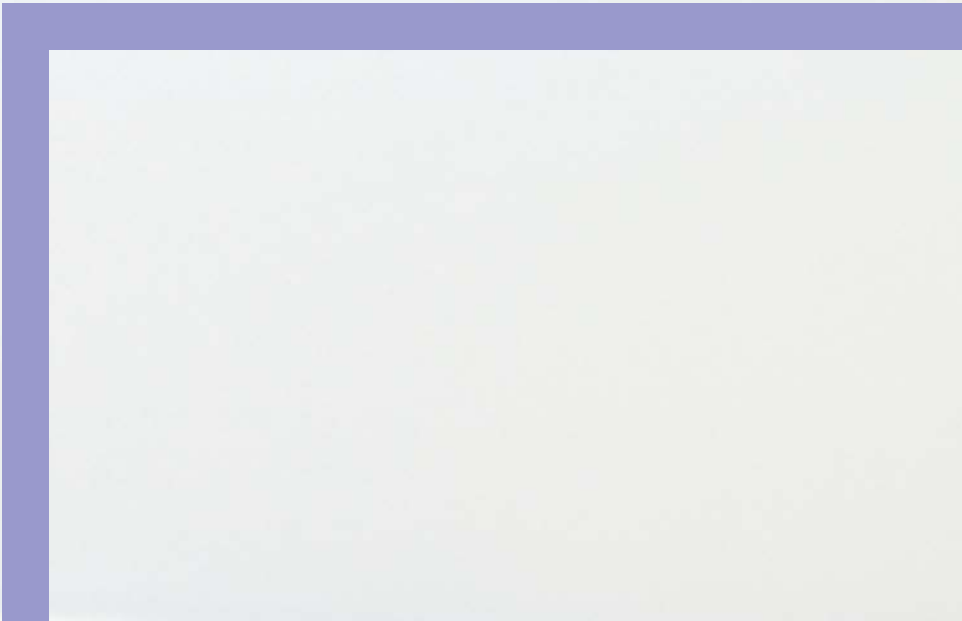
[Kristine Bunnell] So, did you guys get a gold watch or what did you get for that?

I got a gold-plated, gold-flaked switch key.

It was mentioned that a picture of the switch key would be nice. Mr. White then offered everyone coffee. We spent time looking at photos and taking pictures. Mr. White also offered an album of digital photos.

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