

Tape # ORAL HISTORY 85-100, Part 1

Interview with Chuck West by Ronald Inouye on February 4, 1985 in Fairbanks, Alaska

RI: Today is February 4th, and I'm interviewing Chuck West, founder of and formerly with "Westours" and now with his new firm "TravAlaska Tours." He has consented to this interview, and I'm very grateful for him to talk not only about some of his personal background but also of the role of Alaska tourism in which he's had a very significant role.

I would like to thank you very much for allowing the interview, and I hope that we will be able to have all the material on the tape available for public use, so that if you feel that things are a bit sensitive we can turn the tape off, but we would prefer to pretty much have the material as it's recorded—available for transcription and for researchers to use too.

CW: That's fine.

RI: First of all, I wonder if we could start off with a little bit of personal background, starting at the very beginning, things related to your birth and your parents, where and when that occurred.

CW: ...it began with me on November 27th, 1914, in Des Moines,

Iowa. My father was Louis LaFlore West; my mother was May Bigham before she married. My father was a Southerner from Mississippi as was my mother, a Southerner from Missouri. They met in St. Joseph, Missouri, and traveled to Des Moines

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with my dad, my mother did, when I was born, as she was a shoe salesman --- a traveling shoe salesman.

But my background on my parent's side was Southern; both of my grandfathers were Confederate soldiers and fought in the civil war and [I] can relate many experience from that side. So, I'm a rebel at heart, it's characterized all through my life I think. But we moved to California just as the War began.

I was born as I say, in 1914. In 1917 we moved to California; my Dad took a commission in the Army as a First Lieutenant. Because he had family -- my older sister and I, and his wife -- he did not leave the country, he was kept in the United States. and served out the War as an officer in the Army here on the continent. But we live in Los Angeles with my grandmother and grandfather when my father was gone, and started my education there and continued to live in Los Angeles area through graduation from high school.

I graduated from Hollywood High School in 1932 and went to work at that point because of the fact it was the middle of the Depression, and Roosevelt was just coming into office; and, those who remember those days know that young men had the choice then of going to the CCC camps or into the Armed Forces. Or if they were lucky, finding a job someplace; and I was one of the fortunate ones, I was able to find a job in a bank.

RI: What kind of work was that?

CW: Well , I was messenger boy in the bank to start with. Graduated through all those menial chores to finally become a teller in the bank...During that time I went to school at night - took night courses -- I was unable to go to college because of economics.

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But I ended up with 2 and a half years of college credit altogether which proved to be useful later.

RT: Were you aiming for a particular degree?

CW: No. Well, just a college degree; I was hoping to get a B.A. and whatever in business. I never did achieve that.

But chronologically, I'm trying to move quickly, my life really began when I left the bank and went to work for United Airlines. I say life began, my interest in pursuing a career in travel began then, that was 1937; I started work for United Airlines as a traffic salesman.

RI: What is a traffic salesman?

CW: Person who sells tickets to people who want to travel. Part of my work was to be in the office behind the counter selling tickets to people coming in to buy the tickets. And the other part of my work was to go outside and solicit air travel with business firms...I enjoyed that, the public contact. And I moved to Assistant District Sales Manager, and then left United Airlines, and went to Western Airlines as District Sales Manager.

RI: When was that?

CW: 1940.

THE WORLD WAR II YEARS

CW: ..So I had a rather rapid rise for a young man. And I was with Western when Pearl Harbor occurred, which changed, again, changed my life. I was single at that time and vulnerable to the draft because of being single and being healthy. So I elected to

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leave the sales position that I had with the company and go into pilot training.

I was already a private pilot. Went to St. George, Utah, to take a civilian pilot training course to prepare me to be an instructor in flying for the Air Force, Air Corps then. And before getting my commission, when I was about ready to sign for the commission, the chief pilot of Western Airlines for whom I'd worked, called me and said, "Don't sign up for the commission; I have a job for you as pilot under a contract division of Western Airlines called the Air Transport Command."

And they...started operation of what they called "Sourdough Service" into Alaska for the Government, flying military airplanes and supplying the Russians through Alaska. Flying planes and material from Edmonton, Alberta, to Fairbanks and Nome. I was civilian but under contract to the Air Corps at that time.

RI: So had you completed your military obligation at that point?

CW: I did not have a military status. I was under just at the point for signing up for a commission Forces after completion of my civilian training, and I did not do that, as I said. I was held

Kelly's suggestion that I stay

contract to the military. So I was wearing a military uniform, but I was actually a civilian flying for an airline.

RI: That's a unique situation , isn't it?

CW: That was unique, and providential for me.

RI: Were there other people like that...

CW: Oh, yes, yes. Western had a contract, Northwest had a contract, Pan

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American had a contract; most of the civilian airlines were brought into the military under military contract operation. So the supplies going to Alaska from Canada were flown by both military planes and civilian contract planes. Interestingly enough, the “Sourdough Division” of Western Airlines had a perfect safety record and carried literally millions of tons of material, cargo and so forth into Alaska for transfer to Russia. And it helped Russia, really, win the war against Germany, because they had supplies coming from us across the Arctic. But it introduced me to Alaska; that's how I first became acquainted with Alaska.

RI: Just out of curiosity, what percentage of the transportation was done through private carriers versus military?

CW: I would say probably half of it was civilian.

RI: Oh really. I had no idea it was to that extent.

CW: Oh yeah, very great extent. And they just simply took advantage of the personnel and the expertise which the civilian operators had and brought them into the military. And kept their pilots and ...not their airplanes because their airplanes were military, but their expertise in flying was utilized. And seeing that was a training ground for other pilots.

RI: So, you were training as well as...

CW: I was being trained, and yes, and we had military with us, we had military personnel with us as well, being trained. And that, if I can in chronological order explain why that was important later, I was a copilot; but I has all of the ratings of a Captain. I got an air transport rating, an instrument rating, and although I was in seniority, was

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down the line considerably,

to being promoted into a Captain, which is a first pilot's position, I was qualified as a Captain. I could see reaching that status was way up ahead of me, and I furthermore, did not really think I wanted to be an airline pilot after the War. I'd been in sales, and I liked the sales end of the business.

RI: When was that?

CW: That I'm talking about right now?

RI: Yes.

CW: 1943 , `44.

RI: Why did you seem to enjoy the sales versus the actual ...

CW: Before the flying, I was in sales. I was with United Airlines, and with Western Airlines. I was District Sales Manager, and I had something like 35 people working for me, directing the sales program for Western Airlines. And back into that, part of my work there was creating the package tours for Western Airlines in the National Park system. I set up package tours for Western in Las Vegas, which was Hoover Dam then, and Death Valley; and Salt Lake which was the Wasatch Range out of there; and Provo---Zion National Park, and then up into Yellowstone and up into Glacier National Park. All those tours were a part of Western Airlines' system. And I set those up and became acquainted with what it took to package tours.

RI: Did you enjoy that public contact, rather than flying?

CW: I enjoyed that. Yes, I enjoyed the public contact, meeting people, and convincing people to follow my suggestion; and flying, I don't depreciate what it takes to

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be a pilot, but it's a rather monotonous position. I mean-it's...mechanical, it takes ability, but it's coordination and mechanical ability more than anything else. And judgment, too.

But I like to express myself; I like to talk and meet people, and being a pilot was far from that. So I didn't really have the ambition to be an airline Captain. This brings me to the point of decision because I was telling my boss, who was the Chief Pilot, about this. And he says, "Why don't you take advantage of an opportunity which is coming up right now in China." And I said, "What is that?" And he said, "The Flying Tiger groups are being reformed into a civilian transport division like what we're doing here. The Chinese government is creating an air transport command division, and they want to start with a nucleus of America-trained pilots who can fly the airplanes which we are providing to them. And," he said, "the pay is very good. And you would qualify as a Captain because you could move right into a first pilot's position, flying for China." "And," I said, "What's the rest of the deal?" "Well," he said, "It'll pay you \$2,000 a month." I said, "That sounds good . "

RI: What would have been the average wage for a U.S.-based pilot?

CW: Well, a \$190 was a copilot's pay, plus...when I was flying in Edmonton I had a cost of living add on, so I ended up getting \$440. But \$2,000 was quite a bit beyond that.

RI: Now, was that part of Chennault's initial group?

CW: Yes, well it's...true. The Flying Tiger group were originally Chennault's group, and then when he went into the Air Force--Air Corp--...he and his pilots, were given the option of taking commissions in the Air Corps or staying in China and flying

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for the Chinese government, as civilians. And of course they went over as civilians, and they could stay as civilians if they flew for China. And that was a group, they split. And the group that went to China for the Chinese government was the group that I was asked to augment. They still called them Flying Tigers, but they were flying for China with Chinese uniforms with Chinese Chung on the airplane, and etcetera.

So anyway, I was married then to Margaret Lee, who was a former Queen of Alaska, by the way, and we had one child by then. It was her decision, as much as mine, that we do this. And I said, "We got to build a nest egg for the future, you know." And I said "If I can survive this, save my money, why not? Take advantage of the opportunity." So, she consented, and I volunteered for this, and was accepted, and went to China.

RI: What year was that?

CW: '44. Yeah, spring of '44. And I put in a 153 missions over the Hump and was given the rank of full Colonel in the Chinese Air Force, whatever that means. I had the uniform anyway.

RI: What was it like flying there? The stories are...

CW: Rough, rough, rough! Himalayas are the tallest mountains in the world, and the crossing from India to China required crossing that terrain between, over India to Burma to China. And we had very little weather forecasting which did not help us at all because... let me figure what was the deterrent, the weather would come from the west to the east, as it always does, and the west side was Russia, and China. We weren't getting any forecasting at all, so we'd run into some extremely high winds, that would -- we never knew when we were going to hit 'em. If you don't know what your wind direction

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velocity is, if you get into it, it could carry you off course very quickly. And our ground navigation equipment was only DF, direction finder stations, DF stations they called them. And they were 60 watt DF stations located 60 miles apart. And you had to hit 'em right; if you miss one, you'd better get the next one, or your lost.

So it was navigation, primarily, that was the important thing to understand and know, and that's why my training was good, the airline training. So I think navigation was the most important ability that a pilot needed to survive over there, the ability to navigate. Pushing throttles, almost anybody could do that, but knowing, having the judgment to know where you are checking drift, checking your weather, and estimating your progress across the Hump was extremely important.

RI: What was the survival rate, amongst people...

CW: Well, I'll just say this, [when] I went over there...when I arrived in Calcutta, we had a 100 pilots in this little company and 27 airplanes. And when I left, we had used a 100 pilots and 27 airplanes. So the attrition rate was extremely high. Now there's some of the same airplanes still there, some of the same pilots were still there, but we'd had that much attrition. So that was a rather high rate.

RI: Were there other pilots who had been with you in Alaska who also were offered a similar kind of...

CW: Yeah, there were a couple, there were a couple.

RI: Who were some of them?

CW: Well, they did not stay. They did not come back to Alaska. Oh, gosh, I'm trying to think of their names. I'll have to come back to that, I don't remember right now,

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but there were a couple of young guys that followed me over there and stayed; they never came back to Alaska. I came back to Alaska after that.

RI: So when did you finish that stint as...

CW: Well, I came back in February '45, on what was called an "R and R", rest and recuperation. And also it was timely for me because my wife was expecting when I left---I didn't know she was -- and I came back to find another daughter born. And I came to Nome, Alaska, and my wife was from a gold mining family in Nome, and she had gone to be with them while I was in China. So I returned to her and my children.

That was in February '45. At that time, we knew the War was being won, we knew we were well on the way to winning the War, certainly in Germany, and as it proved later, Japan, as you know in the history. And I was supposed to go back to China, I was supposed to go home for a leave, and then go back.

JOINING SIG WIEN

CW: When I arrived in Nome I met Sig Wien, the former president of Wien Airlines; he was a bush pilot then. And he said, "Are you a multi-engine instrument-rated pilot?" and said, "I certainly am." "That's just the guy I need," he said, "I'm getting two airplanes that are both engine instrument-type airplanes; I need pilots who can fly 'em." And I said, "Well, the only problem that I have is that I'm supposed to go back to China." And I said, "However ...what kind of work is this?" He said, "It's for the Navy, opening up the Pet 4 (Naval Petroleum Reserve 4] project in Pt. Barrow." I said, "Well, that's considered to be essential isn't it; I mean it's, you know, War type?" [He] said, "Yes it is." I said, "Well, if you can get me released from China on this project, I think I can stay but

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you'll have to get Washington to do that.”

So he got ahold of the right Navy people, and I got a release from CNAC, China National Aviation Corporation, to Wien Airlines on their military operation. Wien had a small military operation too, in that they were flying supplies and personnel to Pt. Barrow, creating the first airports.

RI: How large was Wien at that point?

CW: Oh, small. They had...buying these two Boeing airplanes was a big step for them. And they were mostly just bush planes, they had small single engine planes. I'd say they probably had 8 or 9 pilots all together. Very small company by comparison to what it finally grew to be, before it expired.

Sig was a pilot himself and flew regularly all the time. So that, I'm doing this very quickly, but that's how I got back to Alaska in '45, and stayed because I got a job flying for Wien. And it's from there, from the cockpit of the Wien planes, that I became enamored with Alaska and the beauties and attractions that I could see from the cockpit window, and wanted to bring those experiences to the general traveling public and utilize my sales background. I still thought I wanted to be a salesman. I was flying, it was expedient to fly, I could make more money flying, and I was qualified to be a pilot, but I always had [in] my mind [that] I would like somehow to get into the business of selling and be in my own business. And so this opportunity presented itself from there.

RI: Now, when you were flying with Wien, and initially, was it pretty much just a route?

CW: We flew, well we flew everything. I flew from Fairbanks to Bettles, to

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Umiat to Barrow, and I flew from Fairbanks to Hughes, to Galena to Hughes to Kotzebue. And then over to Nome, and back, St. Michael and back, Unalakleet all along the way, and I flew mail planes into Eagle and Tanana and Big Delta, and Fort Yukon and Beaver, and Stevens Village -- name 'em all.

RI: So you got to know that area intimately.

CW: Oh, yes, I went everywhere.

RI: Did you work south central, and southeast at all

CW: No, no. Wien's operation was always Arctic. They were a line from Ft. Yukon to Fairbanks, to Nome, and then north of that would be their operation. And so that was the area that I operated in, as a pilot. But that is the Arctic area, and that is the area that I began selling. I first started selling tours into Arctic.

RI: Now, had there been other packages for other parts of the State?

CW: No, no.

RI: So you started...

CW: There were no package tours at all, and I was aware of that. And I also was aware of the fact that the War had created airports, military airports, all the way through Canada to Alaska. Where before the War there were just bush fields now we had paved runways for the military.

RI: Do you know anything about the construction of those runways and airports? I heard an interview with R.J. Sommers, who at one point was the Territorial Commissioner of Highways, and as an engineer, he had responsibility for putting in some fields there, Nome and in Galena.

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CW: Well, I was flying into them while they were being built, during the War. And I don't know how the, I don't know anything about the mechanical side of that, but I know that they were being built. And that brought a lot of employment to Alaska. And I mean after the War they built...26 Mile, Eielson Air Force was built after the War...they expanded Elmendorf in Anchorage, and the Nome airport was built for the Army. I mean the original airport. I flew into Barrow before they had an airport there, I flew and landed on the lagoon, and to bring the people in to do the survey work for the airport.

RI: [You were] there nice and early.

CW: Yeah, really early.

RI: How long were you with Sig Wien?

CW: Okay, I started flying, as I say, in spring of '45. And, I flew all that year of '46. I flew until November of '40. And it was that point that I left elected to leave Wien and go on my own into the tour business. I just decided to, and my wife [agreed] to take the step because I was convinced that there was an opportunity. Alaska Was waiting for something like this -- company, or an individual, or an organization that could package tours for the people coming to Alaska. It was a right idea.

RI: There always has been a, I guess, a trickle of people who have been coming through...

CW: Yeah, not organized, not organized; not promoted, should I say. Promoted with travel agents, outside, and there's the key to it. The marketing of the product was the key to it.

They trickle in, and they find their way to the places, but...it wasn't advertised and

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sold to them as a preconditioned type thing. Catches happened to be there so they would visit these places, but it wasn't organized where there were advertising brochures and packages with all the ingredients put together in a package tour. So that was the opportunity; I mean to lead these people in, and precondition them to come, not just wait until they go there. Sell 'em at the home.

RI: Well, wasn't that sort of a risky thing to be doing at that point in time?

CW: Yes, it was, yes it was.

RI: I would think the economy of the outside areas would have been relatively...

CW; Well, it didn't start off with any, you know, any great big crashing success. It was gradual, but it did start, and everything starts from something. And it happened to be that the Arctic was the area I wanted to present first, because I knew the Arctic from being a pilot.

And the story of that is that I asked Mr. Wien to let me go on the radio program "Wings Over the North" and talk about the Arctic, and Wien Airlines which I would fly. I would take the people myself on a tour to the Arctic, and Sig Wien said, "Well, we are flying there; if you want to go with us we have a ticket.

I said, "No, Sig, I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about having a tour that goes as a tour. Don't just get on the airplane and fly where we are going; they are taken to these places, and they're deposited at these places and then they are shown the sights when they get there, and they're fed a meal, and they're given a dog team ride, and they're given an umiat ride, so forth. They're shown, they're escorted around and brought back with a narration all the way of what they're seeing; it's a tour! Not just sit in an airplane

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and take a ride; it's a tour!"

He had a hard time understanding that. I said, "Let me try it, just let me try it, and if it's no good we'll find out in a hurry; if it's good then we'll find out." So...[he said]

"All

So I set up a Saturday departure, Saturday morning. [I] announced this tour,\$75, a tour from Fairbanks to Galena, to Kotzebue, to Nome, back by the midnight sun view of Mt. McKinley. "One-day trip, 75 bucks." I filled it up like that. I had ten people in a hurry, local people. They [had] never been there, [but had] lived in the Arctic, lived right there and never been there. And I put 'em in the airplane, and I flew them myself.

RI: And did you present the whole thing to them...

CW: Yes, I did. I did. I did the whole thing, and personally escorted them up the beach in Kotzebue, showed them the fish drying on the racks, and showed them – smelling the carcasses of the seal and the whale on the beach, and so forth. Bought 'em a dinner in Archie Ferguson's restaurant, and flew them across, between the Diomedes islands, we could do that then. And they could see the homes up on the stilts there, you know...over to Nome, took 'em down the gold beach to Nome, showed 'em where the pioneers mined the sand' put 'em back in an airplane, and flew them, literally by the midnight sun, via McKinley, back to Fairbanks , and they were ecstatic! And they talked about it! And it took off,

RI: Now, when was that first tour?

CW: ' 46. July of ' 46. I was still a pilot for Wien. And I said, "Boy, that's got it; that's got to be it." And I said, "I want to do that more," and Sig says, "We're too busy; we

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got our regular business.” Sig said, “We can’t handle all that business.” “Well, Sig,” I said “...we can buy more airplanes, you know, we can buy more airplanes, and bigger airplanes.”

RI: Well, what was the price break, between carrying freight and carrying passengers on tours like that...

CW: Well, on this day, we took in \$750. That's a good day for that airplane. That was a passable day. [If] you could do that every day...it'd be a good, that'd be great, that would be all the airplane would have to do. But Sig felt he wasn't ready for it. Sig wasn't ready for it ...he was concerned he would not be able to take care of his regular business, and that he had an obligation to the trappers and the miners, and the school teachers, and the government people and so forth, who were his bread and butter, and he couldn't put them out and devote his airplanes to tourism.

And I said, "Boy, oh boy." So, I just felt that it was an opportunity. I just could sense it, I could feel it, you know. I know it's there, and I just cannot be defeated by this attitude...Sig's attitude. And I say this, and I say it publicly, Sig didn't understand.

He does now. He did later.

RI: Well, did you do more of those kinds of tours then when you...

CW: So, I said to Sig, "Alright, I want to do this for you, Sig. I want to set it up this winter. I want to set up a program for next year." And I said, "I can pre-sell this

business, so you'll know how much business is going to be here. Let's be in on it. I want to do that for you.”

“No,” he said, “Chuck, we need you back in that cockpit of the airplane, we have

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a lot of contracts this winter for the Arctic and so forth. We need you in the cockpit, but we can't spare you to do this. What you want to do?" I said, "Then you have my resignation. I'm going to do it anyway." So, I said, I'm sorry, I cannot accept your lack of interest. I know it's an opportunity; if you don't want to go along with it, I'll do it myself. So, goodbye." And I quit in November right in the beginning of winter.

THE TOUR BUSINESS BEGINNINGS – THE NON-SCHEDS

CW: ...But I knew I had to pre-sell it, I couldn't wait until next spring to sell it. I had to do it ahead of time -- still true, you promote it ahead of time. I happened to be solvent, I wasn't wealthy, but I had couple thousand dollars in the bank, and I owned a little log cabin where we had our family. I was young and I was go-go, and so was my wife. [She said,] "Do it. If you don't do it now, you're never gonna do it. And if you don't make it, you can always go back to flying, you know." And I said, "Okay, we're gonna do it."

So I quit. And I opened a little office down on First Avenue, a warehouse ...Luck was with me, God was smiling on me because Alaska Steam had a strike and all the goods that would come by ship into Seward were not coming in...then by rail to Fairbanks. And the merchants needed certain, priority type items: food, fresh food, all kinds of things they needed. So they started a flow of non-sked [non-regularly scheduled] cargo planes coming into Alaska. First one coming was American Airlines, the DC-4's, and bringing in produce, primarily produce. Items that would demand a higher freight price than canned goods. Produce type things, ice cream, produce, milk. And I thought "Boy, these guys are coming in here with those airplanes, they need help".

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So I phoned the president of American Airlines in the Cargo Division, in St. Louis, Missouri, a guy named Jim Wooten who later became president of Alaska Airlines ... "Jim," I said, "I'm Chuck West; I'm a pilot" and gave him some of my background. I said, "You need someone like me up here to service those airplanes when they come in to chock the wheels, and get the gas truck out, and arrange for the pilots to have a lunch, get a briefing for the pilots, get the flight plans for 'em, see that the cargo is unloaded, get the trucks in ...I'm your guy, I'm the ground man."

And he says, "Well, sounds alright; what do you want to charge?" I said, "\$20 a trip." "Twenty dollars a trip?" he says, "that's a buy—you got it." Twenty bucks a trip. I had to go out and meet the planes. They would radio it in, and the tower...would call me. I did the whole thing, went out there and energized those engines under the prop blast, and those engines. You know, energizing, you gotta help them start. ...boy, colder than a son of a bitch. But I got \$20 a trip, and so I was in beans; I wasn't going into my savings, you see. That helped, I mean I was doing it.

RI: Now, this was all out at Week's Field?

CW: No, it was Ladd Air Force Base.

RI: Ladd, Ok.

CW: Then Ladd Air Force Base, now Ft. Wainwright. And no...

RI: How many planes would be coming in?

CW: Oh, Hell, a couple a day, at least. That wasn't too bad. And then they started, more started coming, other planes started coming. And I thinks to myself, thinks I, hmmm. "These airplanes are unloading their cargo, turning around and flying back

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empty." They all had what they call "bucket seats," they fold down along side in the military type airplanes. And they fold up for seats, they're raw metal seats. Pan American was charging a \$1495.00--I remember the price very well--for a one-way ticket on a DC-3 to Seattle, Seattle from Fairbanks. I said, "I'm going to see if I can sell bucket seats for 100 bucks."

So I went to one airline, Golden North Airlines, the first one. I went to a guy named Walt Calhoun [who] was the president. I said, "Hey Walt, I'll put people on your airplane south; I'll charge 'em a 100 bucks; and I'll give you 80, I'll take 20. I'll put some people on your airplanes south." He says, "Sounds good." There were no regulations then. So I said, "Fly to Seattle, \$100."

RI: I bet you had a booming business.

CW: Right away, bang! I mean I was the agent for the non-scheds. And, heck that was better than \$20 a trip, you know. I was making \$20 a head.

ARCTIC ALASKA TRAVEL SERVICE

RI: Now, is this the point at which you opened your agency?

CW: That's right, that's when I...

RI: You were next to the Coop [Drug Store], or...

CW: No,...later. First, I was down on First Avenue...in a warehouse down there; I took the name "Arctic Alaska Travel Service." There's a picture on the wall out there of me in the first office...

And that went well--it went very well. Matter of fact, I was selling one hell of a lot of tickets. I was not an authorized [agent]; I was not authorized by Pan American. I

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got an authorization from Northwest, who was offline; they were operating out of Anchorage. And they made me ticket agent, they appointed me as an agent in Fairbanks. But Pan American and Alaska were the big carriers out of Fairbanks, Pan American being the dominant one. And they did not want to appoint me as an agent.

[Of] course I was a competitor at that point. I was selling on the non-scheds against them. Well, I made \$23,000 in 1947.

And you know, that's a lot of damn money in those days. That was a lot of money, I mean I was really rolling ... I even went out and bought a suit; I didn't...but have my military clothes when I got back. I can remember that, that was just, just really wonderful! And I knew that I liked it, because I was selling, I was doing something.

So--back to this---I had the idea of the Arctic, anyway, in that summer of '47. I'd charter these airplanes when they came in. (INTERRUPTED BY PHONE CALL...)

CW : I was talking about, at that time, there were a number of non-sched cargo carriers as well as outside carriers. And there was General Air Cargo out of Portland; there was Northern Airlines out of Boeing Field, Seattle; there was Golden North Airlines out of Fairbanks; there was Lavery Airways out of Fairbanks; there was Pollock Airlines out of Fairbanks, there was McKinley Airlines out of Portland again; gosh, there was just a whole mess of them, not counting American-The skies were filled with these cargo planes coming in ...The Alaska Steam strike kept on, and the consolidation of freight in these planes-became more important.

...I must digress a minute and say I started another business called "Alaska Air Cargo Consolidators." I was helping consolidate the freight for the merchants and bring it

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in on these planes. And then I had more control of the plane, because I was actually chartering it. And I did this business with a fellow by the name of Herb Pickering who had a grocery store in Fairbanks, and we started to form a little partnership under that name. And that gave me the enter to having close, intimate contact with these companies.

So, I bring an airplane in on charter with freight, right? Instead of turning it around and sending it back empty, I first of all, would charter the airplane to the Arctic in the summer. And I took the first planes, myself; I went along as crew member to show them where it was and to help fly the airplanes and filled those airplanes with tourists on Arctic tour ...Then when they came back to Fairbanks, I loaded 'em up with passengers for Seattle. So, I was making money on the cargo coming in, on the tour to the Arctic, and on the trip back. I got three hits on those planes. That was an idea [that] just really hit.

RI: Didn't you have a lot of imitators who were trying to...

CW: I had a lot of imitators who were trying to imitate selling tickets, but no one who imitated the tour. The tour was mine. Lot of 'em trying to sell tickets but when I controlled the airplane, I controlled it all...There's never an idea that someone doesn't try to imitate, but I...they were only trying to sell the tickets on the southbound trips. I had the tour portion...

RI: Did you find a lot of interest just among local people for those tours too?

CW: Yes, Yes. Yes, matter of fact the majority of almost all of the business at that time ...were local people, made up of local residents, or more predominantly, the people who were working at the Air Force Bases on these cost-plus contracts. They were

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building Eielson Air Force Base, and they were rebuilding Ft. Wainwright; and there were thousands, literally, of people working up there. And on employment on these contracts, who also brought their wives and families in to visit them. So we had a nucleus of people right there who wanted to do something while they were in Alaska.

One of my [techniques] in promoting--which I am kind of amused to tell you about--I thought, where are these people? I said, they're out at the Air Force Bases." So I got a bunch of little folders, one panel folders, and I had a hole punched [in them. The folders] simply said, "Fly to Seattle--\$100. See Chuck West at 'Arctic Alaska Travel, Empress Theatre Building (then Second Avenue), Fairbanks." And then I took these things, and I got a hammer and some nails, and I went out and nailed these things up over the urinals. I said, "Well, a guy has one hand free and time to read. And literally, they'd come in with these things in their hand-What a marketing idea!

RI: That's a very good one.

CW: It worked, it worked. And it got their attention. So, anyway that was the heyday; I was just really making it.

RI: Well, at that point, you probably had to add quite a few people, to help...

CW: Oh, yeah I had to add staff. Sure I kept adding staff. And at the same time, I recognized this was a flash in a pan, this could not go on...First of all the strike would end; secondly, Pan American's gonna have enough of these at some point. As it's proven today, the big carriers will knock the little guys out. They'll beat their fares and eliminate them." I said, "Pan American's gonna get wind of this, and I don't want to be known as the non-sched king of Alaska. My future lies with the dependability and reputation of

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established companies. And as a tour operator, I have to change my M.O. if I want to bring in tours on airlines I know are dependable that will operate year after year; I want to develop a tour program that has a little higher class image."

RI: By M.O., you mean mode of operation?

CW: Yes. So, I almost [felt]...it was beginning, I was getting these snipers coming in anyway..."Okay, time has come for me to go upstairs, or go uptown," should I say. So I went to Pan American, and I said, "Look, I am controlling one large amount of business. I'm willing to stop selling the non-scheds, and go first class, go uptown and sell your product." And they said, "Okay." So they appointed me as an agent. And I stopped selling a non-scheds, and started advertising Pan American service.

RI: When was this then?

CW: '48.

RI: '48. How long did that strike last?

CW: Well, it lasted, gosh, it was all winter '46, '47, and, yeah, it was at least 6 months. It was a horrible thing. And matter of fact eventually down the line Alaska Steam finally gave in to that and quit. The unions just put them out of business.

RI: Well, it's interesting because we have some recordings that KFAR made of representatives of the community making this plea for the strike to be settled. And I had no idea of how that resolved itself.

CW: Yeah, well, the unions had 'em by the you-know-what's. Well, I took the name "Arctic Alaska Tours," and I wanted to have sightseeing. Let me see now. I go back just a bit. '47, that same summer, everything happened all at once it seemed like. While I

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was still on, across on First Avenue, I had two ladies walk in to see me--schoolteachers. And they said they wanted to know if there's any sightseeing tours. And I said, "Well not that I know of. What do you want to see?" And I said, "Well, I've got a Plymouth Sedan out here, "1936 Plymouth; I'll take you around, show you what there is to see." I, by then had two girls working for me. I said, "Girls, mind the office. I'm going to take these ladies for a little ride around the area." I put 'em in the back seat of the Plymouth, took them out to the University of Alaska and showed them the Museum out there. Charles Bunnell was still there.

...[We] went around Farmer's Loop, and a guy named Paul Elbert had a farm there ...I went up and got a bucket of water from Paul and a salt shaker and went down in his garden with his permission, pulled some radishes out of the ground. They were just beautiful, big, delicious radishes--washed 'em off, salted 'em, gave 'em to the ladies to eat. And they were crisp, juicy radishes [like the ladies had] never seen anything like it.

And I took them up on the hill, let them pick some blueberries, and back into town, showed 'em the gold dredges around Ester and so forth...had a flat tire, got eaten up by mosquitoes.

RI: People loved that experience.

CW: They loved it. Came back to the Nordale Hotel-They said, "What do we owe you?" I said I don't know; you're my first sightseeing passengers. How about \$20?" They handed me a \$20 bill. I said, "Great." So _ rushed back to the office and said; "Girls--we're in the sightseeing business. Get a sign made-"SIGHTSEEING - \$10".

RI: That's a great one!

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RI: You mentioned there was a little bit more to that story. Can you continue?

CW: Yes. So what the girls did--the 2 girls were Ceila Hunter and Ginny Hill, maybe you know who they are. Those are the two girls. Ceila Hunter still does an article for "Alaska Magazine" and Ginny Hill is in Alaska, in Fairbanks, and they both live out in Dogpatch. They owned Camp Denali; anyway they worked for me for several years.

I think it was Ginny who said, "I'll go down to the meat market." [She] got a big old paint brush, and painted on it, "Sightseeing \$10.00." We put it right across the window.

RI: Did you get a lot of walk-in traffic?

CW: It was surprising. That's all the sign we had, and it started coming. I said, "My God, this Plymouth is hardly enough." But what happened was that George Coble who owned Yellow Cab over on Second Avenue came rushing into my office, bursting in the door. He said, "What are you doing with this sightseeing business?"

I said, "I'm selling sightseeing." "No you're not, he said, that's my business." I said, "Well, I didn't know you had an exclusive on sightseeing in Fairbanks." He said, "Well, I sure do; I've handled sightseeing in this town forever. It's my business and you have no right to take it."

I said, "Wait a minute Joe, what do you mean it's your business?" He said, "Well, I've always had it and I don't want someone to take it away from me." I said, "When are you going to develop it?" He said, "Well, I take people who want to go sightseeing." I said, "Who drives the car?" He said, "All my drivers." I said, "Wait a minute, Joe, most of your drivers are drunken slobs who haven't anything else to do but drive cabs, they're not

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worth anything else, they can't talk, they're stoned half the time. Is that representative of Alaska? You want those people to represent tourism for Alaska?"

I said, "That's not the kind of tourism we need. We need people who are trained to be escorts--dressed decently, talk decently, don't have liquor on their breath, and are courteous. That's what we have to have. Can you provide that? If you can, I'll do business with you; if you can't guarantee that, you got another problem because I'm going to be in the business."

He said, "You can't be in the business." I said, "Why not?" He said "'Cause you're not licensed." [I said,] "Well, I'll go get a license. You tell me I can't do it, that's just why I'm going to do it." I went right down to City Hall.

I said, "What do I have to do to get a license to drive for hire license. I don't want to be a cab, I want to be on-call; I didn't want somebody to call me and have someone call me and say 'take me home', I want to be a for-hire license for point to point sightseeing." They said, "Buy a for hire license, that's all you have to do." [I asked,] "How much?" [They said,] "Ten bucks." "Boom!"--I said, "give me a license."

I walked back to Joe Coble [and said,] "See that? I'm in the sightseeing business." All I had was this permit, but I said to Joe, "I you want to do it, do it right. I'll work with you; get a limousine, get a nice car, put someone in a uniform, have them shave every morning."

RI: Did he ever?

CW: He said, "Aw, BS, I don't need to do that." I said, "Well, that's the way I have to have it."

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So what happened, coincidentally--God's always smiling on me--I'm going by Lavery's Meat Market, and here in front of the store is a beautiful, brand new DeSoto Suburban 7 passenger limousine with a rack on top. I said, "My 'God that's a beautiful car. I always liked cars anyway.

The guy sitting in the seat, white leather--his wife was in the store – had a trailer hitch on the back of the car. And I walked and Said, "Hi; this is a beautiful car. Do you want to sell it?" He said, "Well, I'm a dealer, a DeSoto/Plymouth dealer in California. Yeah, I'll sell it; I'm in the business of selling cars. What have you got to trade? I go to have something to pull my trailer back home. I got to have a car that's able to pull that trailer."

I said, "Well I happen to have a Plymouth. You're a Desoto/Plymouth dealer, I've got a real fine Plymouth sedan that I think is in good enough condition to pull your trailer. Let's go take a look at it."

So I showed him the Plymouth; we made a deal. I gave him the Plymouth, I agreed to pay him \$3,500 plus the Plymouth. [But] I didn't have \$3,500. So I went to my banker Bill Johnson who was president of Cap Lathrop's bank--I later became a stockholder and still am--but anyway I went to see Bill. I said, "Bill, here's what I want to do." Told him the whole story about the sightseeing. I want to do it," I said, "you know I can do it." "Yeah," he said, "I think you can." I said, "I need the money. "And he said, "Well." I said, "I got the down payment, the Plymouths the down payment, I just need you to finance the balance. [He asked,] "How much you got? How much cash?" [I said,] "I'll give you \$500; you finance \$3,000, the guy gets the Plymouth and I'll pay it off in a year

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at your local interest rate which is usurious, but I'll pay it anyway." He did it.

The kind of bankers in those days bet on the idea and the guy; there should be more of that these days. I bought the DeSoto, it was almost mid-summer when I bought the DeSoto in '47; I paid for it that summer. That summer I paid for it. That was a beautiful car, and I got "Sightseeing Tours" banner along the rack up there and parked it in front of the office, and boy we got some business. We put 7 people in there at \$10 a head--70 bucks. It doesn't take long.

RI: What generally did people like to see? Was there anything in particular?

CW: The same things they like to see now. They want to see gold dredges which aren't operating now; but they wanted to see the farming country; they wanted to see the University of Alaska; the local residential area; the Episcopal Church then--it burned and was built again. Just the environment--how people live.

People had gardens, log cabin town in Graehl--pretty much what we do now. Farmer's Loop Road, University of course, the Museum was always good. And then with small group: we could do some things which you can't do with 14 bus loads. That is let them get out and really sight see, smell, and feel the country which you can't do with large crowds. You can't put 150 people through somebody's garden; they'll trample everything to death. You can take a small group into a person's home garden, and they'll love to have them. The people love to show their places off. And so that was the kind of thing we gave them.

RI: Did you continue to lead those tours?

CW: No, no I had to get help. I did some of it, but I had to have help; I was doing

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too many other things.

RI: So were you actively doing a lot of promoting prior to...

CW: Outside promotion which I'm talking about. In '46, the same winter that I quit, in January of '47-- I want to get this right now-- in January of '47 I left my log cabin home and took an non-sched airplane to Seattle and went down to Del Mar, California, where the first post-war ASTA meeting was being held. Do you know what that is? The American Society of Travel Agents.

I had heard about this meeting in the trade press, and went down to Del Mar, California--it was February, 1947--left my wife and children in the log cabin with 65 degree weather, minus 65 my wife loved that--I went down to sunny California. Part of the job, you know, got to do it.

I talked to some of the people I knew because I had been with Western Airlines in California, and I knew a lot of the people, that is my peers in the business--I knew the travel agents, the airline people, so I went down to meet with that group. I said, "What do you need from Alaska to help you sell Alaska?" They said, "Give us a brochure with some package tours in it at a price, what it includes-- descriptive."

So I came home, and I got hold of Paul Solka-- do you know Paul Solka? Paul Solka was a friend of mine, we were Jaycees together, and I said, "Paul is what I need, he's a printer." He was working for Jessen's then, I think, and later went to the News-Miner. He's an artist.

He said, "I'll do you a brochure." He drew a block print of an Eskimo head for the cover. We called it Arctic Alaska Tours, and it printed it for me, and helped me with the

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copy—he's a hell of a guy. My first brochure Paul Solka produced for me. I put that in the mail to these people that I talked to, and that started it; that started the interest Outside in package tours from there, and it just grew. Everything grows in proportion; it starts out slow.

The first year would have been '47, I think I sold [tours to] maybe about less than 100 people. Nothing! I mean my business was primarily Fairbanks, the people that were there. The people coming in were very small in numbers. It was primarily the people already there that I was selling on trips in Alaska, sightseeing, the Arctic, etc.

But everything has its place. Paul Greimann comes into it in the fact that he had the University Bus Lines operating buses to schools, and I needed bus service. And a guy named Ken O'Hara of O'Hara Bus Lines had gone broke, and had been serving Valdez and serving the border connecting with the White Pass and Yukon [Railroad] and the border. So I asked Paul if he would fill that void and would he put buses on the highway and change the name of his company from University Bus Lines which, I used the word, I said, "It sucks, Paul." That word doesn't mean a thing to the Outside world. Put a name "Alaska" on the bus, call them Alaska Coachways, I gave him the name, and painted them blue and gold, and let's make this a real Alaskan operation.

Paul's a great guy, and he agreed to this. He bought a couple of Beck buses, brought them in, changed the name of the company to Alaska Coachways and [it] was made available to me as a charter bus operation. Paul and I were close, but we were still at arm's length. He never owned a part of me; I never owned a part of him. We worked at arm's length of each other; there was a good relationship. I ran my travel agency, I ran my

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tours; he ran his buses.

RI: His buses serviced all the areas that O'Hara had previously served?

CW: Not all of them, and he was smart not to do that. He was losing too much money. He just served the areas that were profitable, and in particular the charter bus operation which I set up with him going down to Valdez.

I'm going to go back now and say that one of the things I did immediately was to talk to Alaska Steam about reviving the "Old Golden Belt Line Tour" which they had operated prior to the War. Alaska Steam had called it "Old Golden Belt Line Tours."

RI: And what did that consist of?

CW: They came into Seward by ship, train to Anchorage to Curry, McKinley, to Fairbanks and then bus down to Valdez and connect with another Alaska Steam Company ship south. Or reverse that, into Valdez and come back to Seward -- that's the "Golden Belt."

And they were using charter buses themselves; it wasn't Paul, it was -- as far as I could remember it wasn't Paul -- it was Bobby Sheldon whose name comes in your history. Before the War the tour wasn't that big, there wasn't that much service, there weren't that many buses, there wasn't that much traffic; they offered it, and they also offered what they called the "Alaska-Yukon Circle." Which would come in the same way to Nenana, Seward -- train to Nenana -- riverboat all the way up to the Yukon River clear up to Whitehorse, train down to Skagway and connect again with a ship south. That was called "Alaska-Yukon Circle Tour." That was a more popular tour by far than the "Golden Belt" -- a great big circle tour, and it was all surface: ship, ship, ship, riverboat,

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train -- there were no planes there before the War.

RI: What would one of those tours cost?

CW: Three or four hundred dollars.

RI: And how long would they take?

CW: The long one would take a month, and the short one would take 2 weeks. I sold the first tour for \$99. From Seward through to Valdez for \$99 including hotels and and transportation, and I made money. I paid a commission and made a profit. Things were different.

I thought to revive the "Golden Belt Line" tour with Paul's help. [I said,] "I'll sell it," Paul, "I'll sell the people on the package; I'll use your buses, I'll get the train space and hotel space -- I'll put all that together, and you run the buses, and I'll run the tours and do the rest of it. I'll put the sightseeing into it. I had my own, sightseeing then in Fairbanks, and then I ended up having my own sightseeing in Anchorage -- I went down and did that again.

Anyway, that's the way it started. "Golden Belt Line Tours" were the first really packages tours other than the "Arctic." The "Arctic" was the nucleus, the beginning -- the "Arctic." Then this came into it, the "Golden Belt Line."

Now I'm still in Alaska receiving people in Alaska; I'm receiving them on tile docks in Valdez and Seward, receiving them at the airport in Anchorage or Fairbanks. I'm having to pull them into Alaska; I'm not pushing them, I'm pulling them in. It developed into a pretty substantial business just on that basis. Staying up there, advertising from Fairbanks and receiving people when they got there. I had nothing to do

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with the Alaska Steamship Company other than connecting with them. I provided a service that connected with their ships. But I was the catalyst, I was the one who put it all together.

RI: Now how did Alaska Steam react to the fact that you were doing that when they had a similar, operation?

CW : They, let's say, vacated that to me; they didn't revive it.

PROVIDING VISITORS' ACCOMMODATIONS

CW : ...One of the reasons they [Alaska Steam] did not want to do it, I remember this very well--they could have, I think--is that they were concerned about hotel space. Hotel space was at a premium right after the War, really harder than hell to get. And they were concerned that people would be stranded without hotels, and they didn't want the responsibility for it.

One of the key things I had to sell then was that I would take care of that. "I will take care of the hotels, I'll see that they get a bed every night. It may be in a private home, but I'll see that they get a bed. I'll guarantee the bed." [They said,] "Okay go ahead." So what they got was the revenue on the steamers -- what they wanted. They didn't want the hassles.

So here I am, a guy who said, "I'll do it." I'll see that they get entertained, met, and taken care of. Providing beds was a bit of a problem -- a bit of a problem. I'll tell you there were a lot of hassles with that one. It's a story all by itself, the development of tourist hotels in Alaska.

Eva McGown was a great help. You ever heard her name? Eva McGown was a

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great help to me because she was the Chamber of Commerce hostess, and she would sit at her little desk in the Nordale lobby until the last person was put to bed. Tremendous, wonderful lady, Irish lady -- gracious, friendly, wonderful – she was a help to the whole community, and to me.

I'd say, "Eva, I got to have a couple of beds tonight." [She's ask,] "Chuck, who are they?" [I said,] "Mr. and Mrs. Smith." [She say,] "I'll take care of them; what kind of people are they?" They were all nice people. [She'd call people in town and say] "Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Jones, I've got a lovely couple for you."]

RI: It's really good that she was able to do that because everyone benefited.

CW: In those days it was tough. The Nordale Hotel was "the" hotel. Behind that was the Fairbanks Hotel which was way behind. We had the Fifth Avenue Hotel, Bea Whispel ran that -- do you know who Bea Whispel is?

RI: No.

CW: A gracious lady. And then Paul Greimann had apartments above his garage so we used the Greimann Apartments too.

RI: So that was about it, then?

CW: No, the pioneer hotel which later burned out on First Avenue, the ??? Hotel which was a dump. That was about it until I built a hotel; I built the Fairbanks Inn. Before that I had a place called "tent city."

RI: I've heard about "tent city." Why don't you tell us a little bit about that.

CW: Okay, here I am; people coming to Alaska -- no beds. The flow starts, and it's beginning to show some promise, this flow of people into Alaska. I think the year was

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'49. No it was '48.

Phil Johnson, my buddy and friend, the banker -- I said, "Phil, I'm in deep you-know-what. I need beds, and I'm not going to get them; the hotels don't have them -- won't give them up. I would like to buy some land on South Cushman which was coming up for a subdivision, on the highway which was dirt then, and put a trailer court and some tents out there (frame tents) for the summer.

I was thinking about McKinley Park where they have the tents out there at Camp Eielson; there were tents out there. If they used tents out there, why can't we use them in town? They're cheap. Navy, army and navy had surplus tents available for sale with the cots and blankets and the whole thing -- like portable camps. You could buy the tents and everything that would go with it -- little iron stoves as well, I could get those things at surplus.

And we could get Paul Elbert, my old farmer friend out there who has a hand as big as a watermelon, and he's a carpenter, to come in and knock those boards together.

Phil asked, "What's it going to cost?" [I said,] "I don't know -- \$25,000?; it should be done. I want you to help me finance it." So Phil said, "I shouldn't do this 'cause I'm a banker, but I'll help you personally. I like the idea, but the bank won't buy it."

So Phil and I became partners outside the bank.

RI: How many people were you accommodating?

CW: We were going to have 20 tents, and there would be 40 people -- 2 to a tent. Well, disaster struck! We got the tent houses built on these wooden bases, and we built a little utility house out back with men and women's (toilets) and showers, a board walk

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going down by the tents to this utility house. And we got the stoves in, had to have wood for the stoves, and had to have all that good stuff. We had no food.

It was one of the rainiest summers that Fairbanks had ever seen. And the mosquitoes came with rain, and it was horrible! The boardwalks were tilting; people were sliding off into the mud, and the fires wouldn't start and when they did, they smoked. And people just weren't happy. They were staying away in droves as they say. I mean, they were just going to kill me or lynch me or drive me out of town on a rail. Just the last thing we worried about was happening.

I thought, "Well, oh boy, here it goes. If this happens to me, I'm dead. Alaska Steam will stop the program 'cause I told them I'd give everyone a satisfactory bed, and I'm not giving it to them." So I went down to Grace Hagburg; Grace Hagburg then owned the Fairbanks Hotel, and she was a relative of Bud Hagburn who used to be Wien Airlines -- he passed away. I don't know if Grace is still there or not.

Anyway, I went to her, and I pleaded with her. I said, "Grace, you have a 3 story hotel; I just need some help. I will pay you full cash in advance for the 3rd floor rooms, the walkup rooms -- pay for them right now -- just set them aside for me for the summer, and I'll pay you right now."

I said, "Here's my situation: I just got this -- it's tourism..." She's a part-Eskimo lady and a real wonderful person, and she said, "Okay Chuck, I'll help you out." She gave me the two -floor.

That plus Eva McGown helped me; I just closed "tent city" up and move them all into town and save the summer. But from that I recognized that people, no matter who

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they are, have to have comfortable accommodations. It doesn't matter who they are or where they are, they want comfort.

So Phil and I then bought some surplus buildings across on the other side of the river at a place called Graehl; they were the dormitories for the nurses corp, and we -- they were surplus sale -- we bought them and cut them in half, put them on skids and pulled them across the river in winter, the winter of '48, pulled them across the river on skids, took them out to the same place and set them up in an "H". The [cross-bar of the "H"] had the utilities, and these were rooms without bath, so in the center we had the utility rooms. The front side was an apartment. Kenny and Mary Anne Friske became the managers. Friske is a Cadillac salesman in Fairbanks right now.

We started Tanana Court on the site of Fairbanks Inn. They were warm, clean, comfortable -- not rooms with bath -- but they were clean. We had a little lobby area, and we served a continental breakfast in the morning so they didn't have to go up town for breakfast; we got their blood going in the morning. And then we would transport them into town for sightseeing and dropped them off for lunch.

RI: So that was quite a ways out.

CW: Sixteenth and Cushman. It was way out of town.

RI: How many people could you accommodate?

CW: We built 36 rooms; it was good. Small rooms, twin beds, but they did the job. That was the first tourist hotel in Alaska -- strictly tourist hotel, just for tourists, nobody else.

RI: And then what would you do in the off season?

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CW: Shut her down.

RI: So your season was how long? About 4 months?

CW: Yeah. We would take people off the road as tourists; but it was strictly [a] tourist operation. The beginning of the hotel chain which I mention, developed for Westours. Everything has to have a beginning. It's kind of fun to think back about it, the misery of the time.

RI: Do you have any photographs of your "tent city?"

CW: No I don't; I wish I did.

RI: That would certainly be a conversation piece.

CW: You had heard about it?

RI: I had.

CW: I'm still living it down.

RI: Were there other bumps of that sort [which] had you rethink your assumptions about the business?

CW: yeah, there were bumps – some service bumps which all led to progress. The one of Alaska Steam Ship going out of business was a bump, and that happened in '54, when I grew to depend upon Alaska Steam; and by [that] time had moved my office out to Seattle and was selling several thousand people a year on tours and still operating travel agencies in Alaska, and still operating sightseeing.

ALASKA HIGHWAY TOURS & ALASKA CRUISE LINES

CW: That bump created two things: it created my own bus company, Alaska Highway Tours; and it created my own cruise line, Alaska Cruise Lines, because here all of a

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sudden – bang -- these ships weren't there. In '54 they quit; in '55 I tried to operate air tours without the Inside Passage, and the decline started fast. In '56 the decline continued; I could see myself going out of business. It was just sssshhhhoomm, going down to nothing. People wanted the Inside Passage.

In '55, coincidental with the Paul Greimann, seeing the decline of the ships, thought the tour business was not going to be good -- and he was right -- and he sold out to Russ Swank in Anchorage, the Matanuska Valley Lines. He talks about that in his narration, he sold out to Russ Swank.

There I was with my ally Paul Greimann gone, and having sold to a guy named Russ Swank who I didn't really trust -- I hate to say this but I didn't trust his integrity nor his word. Russ told me to that he was going to take care of my business, and I asked him to show me the equipment he was going to use to take care of it, and I found out he really didn't have it which I thought was misrepresentation. [I thought] "My God, he's going to hang me on a hook. I don't have steamers and now I won't even have good bus service."

I went to San Francisco, and I bought 4 used buses, flexible buses. I bought all the spare parts they had laying around the garage, it was a Greyline garage. [I] hired 4 firemen who could time off and brought those buses to Alaska. When I got as far as Tok, I sent 2 to Fairbanks and 2 to Anchorage. Brad Phillips was working for me then. I said, "Brad, meet them at Palmer and put them out there on McKinley's farm." Bill McKinley's father was a dentist.

I went with the buses to Fairbanks and parked them out at the Tanana Court on the

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highway. I went in to see Paul Greimann. I said, "Paul, here's what's happening. Russ is not true to his word. You sold the company to him, has he paid you?" He said , "No, he hasn't paid me a nickel." I said, "Why don't you repossess the company, repossess it and I will lease these buses or sell them to you -- let you operate them. We have to have the buses."

Paul said, "Okay." And he and I flew down to Anchorage, and he went to see his attorney and his accountant in Anchorage, and they said, "Don't do it. Don't repossess the company -- the liabilities are far in excess of the assets. You do that, you're picking up the liabilities."

So Paul said, "I can't do it. I can't take the company back." I said, "then I have no choice but to form my own company." And he said, "You're going to have a hard time doing that because Russ has the authorities, the state of Alaska authorities." I said, "Well, I guess I'm going to go get more authorities then."

RI: It's like getting another license?

CW: Like getting another taxi license. I didn't trust Russ, and I wasn't going to give him the buses. To avoid that situation, I wasn't going to give him the buses so I flew down to Juneau, and I got ahold of the Attorney General and the State Auditor and the Secretary of State -- 3 people who formed the Commission. Hugh Wade was the Secretary of State. I asked Hugh to call the meeting, I told him what it was for, explained the whole situation to him, exactly the way it was -- about Paul, about Russ, everything, the whole story, my buses.

I said, "I'm talking about tourism, and I've already seen people go broke. O'Hara went

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broke, Greimann sold to Swank, he's broke." I said, "Tourism is hanging here by a slender thread. I can hold it together if I can have the authority to run these tour buses, not point to point regular route, [but] tour 'closed door' to the public – 'closed door.' I won't take any business away from regularly scheduled carriers. 'Closed door,' only tours on those buses."

They went for; they gave me the authority -- temporary authority they called it then. The Alaska Transportation Commission gave me a temporary authority to operate 4 buses, so I started operating 2 out of Fairbanks and 2 out of Anchorage, and continued this service to the border and to Valdez. There was no highway then between Anchorage and Fairbanks.

I got a hold of White Pass which was running a bus from Whitehorse to the border at Scotty Creek. "Frank Downey," I said, "Frank, I'll be making the connection with you. People on my buses are the tours only. The Russ' lines down there [are] with regularly scheduled service, but I'm going to bring the tours down, and the same people I bring down are the people I already sold on your service. I want you to take my tour people on your bus both directions. Tours. I'll direct you to the names of the people and sell the tickets; I want you to haul in Whitehorse and Skagway. I'll meet them."

[He said,] "Okay." Of course I was bringing them in by train too, so I was a source of business for him. He was interested. [He said,] "Okay, we'll meet your buses, we'll meet that schedule."

So we started that and about the third day underway Russ Swank had an injunction to stop me. He got an injunction to stop my buses; it was a temporary

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injunction but it still stopped me. I went down to the Courthouse in Anchorage, and I said to Russ Swank on the steps of the Courthouse, "Russ, you're not going to get those people. I've sold them, I brought them to Alaska; I want to handle them. If you think by default you're going to force me to give you people, you're wrong. I'm not going to do that." I said, "I'll fly them first."

So I chartered C-46's from Fairbanks and flew people over the highway, flew them from Fairbanks to Whitehorse. My people, I call them "my people;" they didn't belong to anybody else, I brought them there, and they were mine." I got the White Pass to agree that they would turn them over to me, so I flew them back and forth. That only went on for about less than a week; I got the injunction lifted.

RI: So the injunction was in effect for just a week?

CW: Yeah. And I flew the people during that period. The injunction was lifted, and I went back on the highway; that was the beginning of Alaska Highway Tours, that's how it really began. It wasn't big, but it began. In '55 and '56 we weren't doing that much business unfortunately.

RI: Were there other people who tried to pat roadblocks in front of you like that?

CW: No, [but] there's always somebody.

RI: Those were the major ones, I'm sure.

CW: One of the things that irritated me -- I guess I call it a roadblock -- the major hotel owners in Anchorage were not all sympathetic with the tourist business, people who owned the Westward Hotel and the Anchorage Hotel, they were the big hotels. I was forced to use the Parson's Hotel and the Fifth Avenue Hotel and the other "nether" hotels;

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I mean they were certainly 3rd class compared to the main hotels; I could not get people into the main hotels. They just did not want my tourist business. And they told me that, "We don't want your tourist business. We're full up with our regular clientele; we don't want to put them out for you. Tourism is going to have to wait."

Unfortunately that was the way it was for a long time, and they still do so to some extent. Tourism is not considered to be as important as other industries, at least it wasn't then.

I had to go out to Palmer with people; I had to take them all the way out to Palmer, out and back, for overnight accommodations. It was a real tough row during the early days until the hotel owners finally came around to recognizing the value of tourism and supported it to some extent. That was always a battle. Rooms were always a battle. And that's why I ended up building the hotels I did, because I had to have them.

RI: It's interesting that you have creative solutions for most problems. You just took the bull by the horns ...

CW: That's the only way to do it: go for it. Like on the highway, at the border. Business was getting good, and I was using two hotels that were 20 miles apart, one was at Beaver Creek on the Canadian side and the other was Scotty Creek on the Alaska side. Neither one were able to handle a bus load so it was awful. I had to unload some here and drive the rest of them up here; and go back the next day and get them -- back and forth.

I said -- the Scotty Creek operation was a fellow named Fred Lappi, his wife Betty, he's a Finn -- and he would like to have the business but his water was poor. He had to haul his water in, and it was an old converted highway maintenance camp. It wasn't really

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first class at all.

Fred Wann who owned Beaver Creek had a nice hotel; it was new, built in '55. But he only had something like 13 rooms. I went to Fred, they're both Freds, and I said to Fred Wann, "I would like to ask you to build on to your hotel so I can put a whole bus load in here, build another wing." He said, "Naw, I like it the way it is. I'm happy."

So I went back to Fred Lappi, and I said, "Fred, let's be honest about it, you've got a bad situation with water, your buildings are not the best. Would you consider building another hotel further away under a different location?" I said, "I'll help you." And he said, "Yeah, I'd consider that."

So he went up to Deadman Lake – you know where Deadman Lake is? -- and there is a view sight there; the water wasn't the best but it was a good view sight and then he could have homesteaded that, he could get a business site. He went up there and filed on it -- business site. He took a caterpillar up there and cleared some ground.

Well, Fred Wann heard about that. I told Fred Lappi, "Don't do anything because I really want to be down there at Wann's where I have good water, and the customs office is right across the street. It's much better for me." "But," I said, "go ahead and do that for yourself anyway. If it comes to it and I need to, I'll help you." I was honest with him.

I went down to see Fred Mann. I said, "Hey Fred, either you do or I'm going to be across the street, right across the border." I said, "You won't have any of my business ; I'll be over there. I gotta buy more space."

So he said, "Well, I just don't see putting my money into that." I said, "Would you sell?" He said, "You couldn't pay me [enough. I asked, Would you] like it in cash?"

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He didn't want it in cash. I knew he didn't. But anyway, I bought Fred Wann's facility -- Beaver Creek and immediately built onto it. That's -- I don't if you've been down the highway or not -- but that's the largest establishment on the highway. That's where it started: good water, good location and in Canada which is better from several standpoints -- cost of labor is less, and so that created that facility.

Another one, and we'll talk about hotels needed more hotel space in Skagway. There were ships coming in and unloading in Skagway, and a number of them had to overnight; they couldn't run on the train. We wanted to stage them that way too; have some come in and go, some people come in and stay. You stage them through.

At that point I owned, I'm getting ahead, but I'm telling about hotels -- I had 2 ships going in there. I wanted the people who owned the Golden North Hotel, the gal's name was Edith Lee and her husband, and I said, "Do you want to sell the Golden North Hotel?" They [Skagway] only had the Golden North and the Sourdough; the Sourdough was a converted theater owned by Bill Feero. She said, "I would sell it." So we negotiated a price, and I gave her earnest money.

Norm Kneisel, I don't know if you ever heard his name or not, was a tour operator. He wasn't as large as I was, but he was a tour operator [who] got wind of this; he went to Skagway and convinced Edith Lee she should sell it to him for more money. Now that was illegal; she already had an earnest money agreement from me. But she agreed to it, and he did it.

I got, and I use the word "pissed off" about that, and I let them both know how I felt about it: that it was unbusiness-like, unethical, and illegal, and I could have held her

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to the deal. I said, "But if that's the way you want to do business, take it." I said, "but, I'm going to build a hotel in Skagway." That was in the winter. I said, "If that's the way you're going to do it..." He [Kneisel] said, "You would deprive me of hotel space." I said, "Norm, you never asked me. If you would have asked me for hotel space ...I wasn't going to hog [space] to deprive you because you were a competitor and not give you space. That's not the way I do business. If that's what you thought, if that's the way you're going to operate--fine. You got the hotel; now you're going to see a competitor."

I went right across the street and bought the corner lot for the hotels. The White Pass and Yukon owned it; I said, "I want that land; I want to build a hotel there." [They said,] "You can't build a hotel in the middle of the winter. I said, "I'll build a hotel this winter. Sell me the land."

They sold me the land. I sent Kent Friske down there, he was managing the Fairbanks Inn, and we put a plastic dome over the ground, heated the ground, and drilled it in the middle of the winter -- it was frozen. Put the foundation in under plastic with heaters working in there. I had the thing open in May. That was the Klondike [Hotel].

Tell me I can't do something, and that's when I do. Screw me around a little bit, and that's when I get mad.

RI: It sounds as though those are the kinds of stimulus's that a lot of people need.

CW: You either accept it and lie down, or you fight it. I never mind a fight.

RI: I notice it's just about 12 [noon], and you have an appointment, so what I'd like to do is terminate right now, and we can pick up later.

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