

KENNECOTT KIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH

GEORGE SULLIVAN

JUNE 16, 1990 KENNECOTT, ALASKA

Interview Conducted By

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(tape 1, side 1)

Logan Hovis, June 16, 1990, interviewing George Sullivan.

Hovis: Just for the record, your name?

Sullivan: George Sullivan.

Hovis: Your age?

Sullivan: I'm 68 years old.

Hovis: And you were born?

Sullivan: In Portland, Oregon.

Hovis: Portland, Oregon. How did you come to Alaska, George?

Sullivan: I came back when I was six weeks old. My family was at Valdez. My mother had gone out because her mother was not well in Portland and there was no doctor in Valdez at that time and she was about eight months along and she took the steamship out. It took about five and a half days to get to Seattle and then the train on down to Portland.

Hovis: You have family in Portland?

Sullivan: No, I don't have. My grandmother was there at the time, back in 1922 and, as I say, I came back. I was about six or seven weeks old. We came back up on the boat. I don't hardly remember the trip.

Hovis: Oh, I wouldn't wonder at it. You mentioned earlier that you worked here at Kennecott when you were a young man.

Sullivan: Yeh, I was 15 years old, came up here in 1937 and worked for the summer up in the tram. It was an interesting job but you worked 10 hours a day, seven days a week. Needless to say, when I went back home in the fall, back to Valdez, I was in pretty good shape.

Hovis: When you say you worked at the tram, there are several places along there, you worked at the top of the mill building?

Sullivan: I worked at the top of the mill building, yeh. We had ore buckets come one every 52 seconds and

there were about 750 pounds of ore in each bucket and you caught it as it came in and practically ran over to the grizzly and you dumped it down the grizzly and that was the process starting into the mill for grinding up the copper. I was telling someone earlier today that on a day like today, when it was wet, the great big mallet there - I don't know, the thing must have weighed about eight pounds - and you had to pound the bucket about three or four times with that big mallet because the ore was being held in there towards the bottom, about a third of it would be there, and you had to pound that loose and then you took it over and put it back on a cable and send it out, that was one end of the building, you had to run back and by then another bucket was there. So you did that all day long.

Hovis: Were the buckets unhooked from the traction cable automatically?

Sullivan: Yes, when they came off, they came on to a rail. You took them across on the rail, then when you took them back on again you had to insert them into the cable in order to get them going back up. It wasn't much of a trick but you had to kind of catch on to the idea. I had a little trouble at first but I guess everybody did. In fact, I remember one day the fellow who was shift foreman for me was Oscar Watsjold, he's here today too, and he - when you went to tip the bucket, you would take the latch off it and you'd give it a little bit of a swing to the left and then a heavy one to the right to dump it. Well, about the third day I was there, I lost control of it to the left and it dumped all the ore on to the floor of the deck and not down the grizzly on the right hand side where it should have gone and of course he had to come out of the foreman shack and I had to then take the bucket back out again back out again because you had to keep the tram going. He was shoveling it down the grizzly and cursing and mumbling at me under his breath all that time. Yeh, I remember another day I was working there that it was a wet day like today and I stumbled and fell down into the grizzly and the grizzly had great big huge teeth that took this ore and ground it up as it started down the process. I just happened to catch - if I'd gone in there, of course it would have chewed me up in just a few seconds but I happened to catch the edge of the grizzly timbers and was hanging there, and of

course by this time the buckets were starting to come in and nobody was stopping them and this Oscar came running out and well, he couldn't see me, you know. Of course, he didn't know where I'd gone and the buckets were everywhere and I'm trying to pull myself up off - this heavy metal is wet and slippery and finally got back up and of course he was mad, but he was kind of scared for me and I was scared to death. That was quite a thrill.

Hovis: Did he just put you right back to work?

Sullivan: Yeh, oh yeh. That was your fault. I had stumbled on my own. In fact, I remember you just didn't get any time off at all. He'd come out, you know, if you had to go to the bathroom real bad. We went to work at 7:00 in the morning. We worked till noon, then we had a half hour break for lunch and we were back to work at 12:30 and worked till 5:30 and you'd get maybe one 10 minute break to go to the bathroom during the day and that was it. Then you'd go down after work and - I stayed in the upper bunkhouse there, I roomed with another fellow and by the time you had dinner and everything, get ready for bed, cause you were up about 5:30 in the morning, and get going again. But every day, you know, you were doing that so...

Hovis: Was the food good?

Sullivan: It was good, yeh. It was a good camp here, a good camp. I remember one thing that always sticks in my mind. I knew some of the miners, they had been around Valdez. Valdez had a lot of hard rock gold mines and some of those fellows were up there working. I can remember seeing miners come out of Erie or Jumbo, those were the names of the mines. They'd go down to the lower bunkhouse, they used to have some poker games there. And I've seen guys go in there - cause I would see them when they'd come in. I'd catch them - they'd come down on a low bucket, about half full, and they'd ride down. They'd go in there and they'd maybe play poker for three or four days straight, day and night, lose everything they had. They maybe were up at the mine for 12 or 14 months, hadn't even been down to this camp, lose all their money gambling and turn right around and go back to the mine. It was a pretty short and expensive holiday. And some of them that didn't do that would go to McCarthy and stay there five or six

days and spend all their money in McCarthy on the girls and a little boozing and maybe they were heading outside. They'd never even get to Chitina, they'd never even get to Cordova, you know. But they made big money, the miners did. They worked by contract up there. They'd make 10 or 12 dollars a day, which back in the '30s was a lot of money. So they'd come out of there - they'd been up there a year, you know, and they'd be rolling in pretty good dough.

Hovis: And cabin fever or whatever you want to call it.

Sullivan: Right, right.

Hovis: Were miners normally in the lower camp here?

Sullivan: No, they were all up in the mines and, you know, they would come down. Like on the Fourth of July they'd have a big celebration, have baseball games, races and all those kinds of things would take place. They participated in that and, you know, they could come down every six months and go to McCarthy or go on into Cordova, go on outside if they wanted to. They'd catch the boat out of Cordova for Seattle and they were down there in five days and spend a couple of weeks and back up here.

Hovis: How did you get your job here?

Sullivan: My brother-in-law was the timekeeper here in the office and he and my sister had been here for a couple of years, working and I was looking for a job for the summer and he wrote and said he was sure he could get me on up here. I was talking to a fellow last night named Frank Morris and Frank is about three years older than I am. I said to him last night, "why didn't you work at the mine." He said, "I wasn't old enough." And I said, "well you're older than me." And he said, "I never knew this." He said, "there was a lot of talk around camp because you were working here." I said, "what do you mean?" He said, "well you were so young, but," he said - I was about 180 pounds, I'm heavier than that now but I was in pretty good shape for that age - "but," he said, "the comments were that well, you look husky enough if you can handle a job they let you go ahead and do it." And evidently I did. I never knew that I was part of the gossip of the community till last night

after 53 years It was tough work but it was good for you.

Hovis: Was there any sort of social life that was around the camp?

Sullivan: Oh, there was. They played cards and pool and that kind of thing. I played a little bit of baseball but really didn't have much time to do anything. The fellow I roomed with - his dad used to be the head of the mine, a fellow by the name of Presley - David was here working for the summer. He was gonna go to the University of Washington that fall and he was on the opposite shift from me. He'd come in about 2:30 - 3:00 in the morning and invariably we, you know, in the same room, he'd wake me up and then we'd sit there and talk and then I'd fall back to sleep and then when I was suppose to be up at 5:30 I'd have a hard time doing it. But, you know, by the time you finish working and cleaned up and ate and maybe read a little bit or wrote a letter or something and walked down to the store - they had the store down here and you bought everything - you'd buy a \$10.00 or \$20.00 book of scrip which was used to make purchases at the store. They didn't take cash. At the end of the month they would deduct from your paycheck the amount of scrip books you bought.. And you used scrip if you wanted to buy candy, cigarettes, whatever you wanted to buy, some pop or ice cream. I'd walk down there, you know, occasionally after dinner. But it just seemed like the time went so fast. You were no sooner in bed and you're back up chasing buckets again.

Hovis: How long did you do it for?

Sullivan: For the summer. I was there for three or four months I guess, from late May until the first part of September.

Hovis: Was there any sort of physical examination?

Sullivan: No, none at all, none at all. Well, that's odd too that you ask that, because I don't recall taking one although there was a doctor and a hospital and nurses and everything. But, of course needless to say, there was no child labor and that's true. I don't recall taking one.

Hovis: Did you ever go into the hospital (?).

Sullivan: No, no, not at all. No, the only goof up I ever had was this Presley coming in like he did in the morning - he had been here nine or ten days working and this one morning I had fallen back to sleep again. I didn't wake up and the night shift foreman came in the room and said, "what's the matter, can't you take it." And, you know, I woke right up and said, "what are you talking about?" he said - they thought I'd petered out. I said, "oh God, I just didn't wake up." I ran all the way up to the top, no breakfast or anything, you know, and went right to work and, of course, Oscar was shift foreman and he was grumbling at me all day long cause he had to catch the buckets till I showed up.

Hovis: Okay. While you were catching the buckets, what did Oscar normally do?

Sullivan: Just kind of kept track up and down the line, made sure the cable was in good shape. This Morris' father, Jack Morris, and his uncle, Dan Morris, were in charge of all the cable and the trams and everything and I went up a couple of times and worked out of the mine, up by the Jumbo mine, and we were supposed to go down and do a bunch of splicing one day and I'm not a real great fan of heights and it was a rainy day like today was with pouring down rain and we waited and waited. In fact, we overnighted at the mine up there, stayed there and then the next day it was still pouring down rain and Jack said, "oh, the hell with it, you go on back down and chase buckets again," and I was very relieved. This splicing you know, you can go up there a couple thousand feet and you're just hanging on to a bucket that swings and sways. So, I was kind of glad to return to lower camp.

Hovis: I've walked the Jumbo tram line and I think I know what you mean.

Sullivan: You know what I'm talking about. People riding down used to take copper and throw it down trying to hit the rabbits. There used to be a lot of rabbits down there.

Hovis: What was it like staying up at the mine for those couple of days?

Sullivan: It was all right, yeh. In fact, I saw two or three guys I knew, Egan Petrokoff and Johnny, oh gosh, what was Johnny's last name. There were

several of them that were old Valdez hard rock miners. There is a lot of gold mining out of Valdez. There were a couple of - Mike Sullivan was the mine superintendent, but he was no relation. But he knew my dad, who was Harvey Sullivan. My dad was a U.S. Marshal for the whole Third Division. In those days, that was the only kind of the law up here. It was territorial days and there weren't any state police or anything like that.

Hovis: That was a question that occurred to me too. Was there any sort of police force or company police to handle small crimes or anything in the camp?

Sullivan: No. They had a Commissioner at McCarthy and they had a Marshal at Chitina, a Deputy Marshal. In fact, my uncle, Howard Conrad, was at Chitina for a while. He was mostly in Latouche as a Marshal. There weren't any right in the mining area that I know of.

Hovis: Do you remember any occasions when you might have been in need for one?

Sullivan: No. Very little drinking took place in properties here. You know, they might have a drink in their own cottage and that type of thing but they'd go to McCarthy to do their partying and everything. They probably had a special deputy in McCarthy, I don't remember, I wasn't drinking or anything in those days. I know they had a Commissioner there, a fellow name of Chamberlain was Commissioner there for a long time, Alan Chamberlain.

Hovis: How much did they pay you, do you remember?

Sullivan: Somebody asked me that last night and I don't remember the hourly wage, but it seemed like it was probably around 70 cents. I remember my checks would be about, well, they could be anywhere from about 108 to about 112 dollars for the month. But see, they took room and board out of that and then they took what little purchases I made at the store out of that. So, I could have been making, I don't know, 130 to 135 a month.

Hovis: So, basically you worked and slept and talked to a few people and that was it.

Sullivan: Yeh. Well, my sister and brother-in-law were here. I'd go up to see them and then Ida and

Rubin Johnson were here. I knew them and the Morrises, Jack Morris and Frank. So, you know, I'd go by and my two nieces were here. They were just one and three years old. So I'd visit with them and I'd go down to the rec hall or go down and shoot a little pool and played a little baseball. But the time just seemed to fly really. Well, you know, if you got off at 5:30 by the time you washed up and - by the time you got down there it would be 6:00, washed up, it was 6:30, you went and ate, you know, it was probably 7:30 or a quarter to eight. Well, you're gonna be getting up at 5:30 in the morning - you're probably in bed by 9:30 or 10:00. But I was still building muscles in those days, you know, at that age I was - eight hours of sleep I needed.

Hovis: Did you ever work in any other mines after you left here?

Sullivan: Well, I worked down out - well, out of Valdez I did in '39. I got on Gold Stream and that was just this side of Cliff Mine in Valdez. I worked down there with Roy Dieringer and Jack Cook. It was a badly misnomered stream, Gold Stream, because there was no gold in it. We got some colors and worked our tails off but - Gold Creek was what they called it rather than Gold Stream.

Hovis: What did you do there?

Sullivan: Ran a cat, a little cat, a little cle-track we had down there, oh, just did everything that you do around a place like that.

Hovis: It was a placer operation?

Sullivan: Yeh. Jack Cook had mined up in the Rough and Tough Mines. His father had hard rock mines around there and Jack had worked out at Platinum down in Goodnews Bay and also worked up around Fairbanks but he was a very experienced miner and he always felt that gold very likely could have leaked out of and come down Gold Creek into the water. And we got down to bedrock and everything, but boy, there wasn't any gold, well, there was a little bit of gold. I don't think - I got about 120 a month and I guess he maybe took the same out for himself and paid for the expenses and if he had, after the season, 500 dollars, he had a lot of money. I don't think he even had that amount. It was too bad because they were really hopeful

that they would find something. I had an uncle that mined up out of Nome in the - well, my dad and four of the brothers came up in the gold rush. They came up through the Chilkoot and all that and they had mined all over Alaska and then this one, Uncle Joe Sullivan, went up out of Bluff, out of Nome and went in there in February and did it for several years, took great big blocks of ice out of the bay and then they drag lined stiff legged the dirt from there to the shore and worked it, the Bluff River had run all this gold down in there and he just became very wealthy. He and his son and their family worked it. Sullivan and Crabtree was the name of the company and it did very, very well. My wife's family, of course, she was raised in Fairbanks, out on Fairbanks Creek. They were all miners. In fact, our nephew, John Cook, still mines up on Fairbanks Creek. Earl Beistline, former Dean of Mines at the University of Alaska, he'd take people out to Cook's place cause he thought that was a good example of mining. He put in all the right ponds and did all the right things, you know, that's required these days.

Hovis: When you were here, would you describe Kennecott as a happy place to work?

Sullivan: Oh, yeh. Well, you know, I worked with the Road Commission in their camps, also on the start of the Alcan Highway and was down in the Aleutians in World War II, as I mentioned. You know, most places are a happy camp and I've noticed though, sometimes a guy will come in that's just trouble and pretty soon he's complaining about the food and then a few guys will say the food isn't any good or something like that (?) and really the food is good. The people here they worked hard, you know, hard working people and they didn't have time to worry and complain if it was a company operation. But I think they treat their employees very fair and provide year around work for them. Those that worked in the offices or had positions, it was an excellent job for them. They had their cottages and their families. Those that didn't, you know, they'd get leave to leave when they wanted to and they always seemed to be welcome back if they were half way decent workers. Didn't want any trouble makers around. Of course, you know, there were a lot of people in those days who were happy to have a job, things weren't too good and you like to eat. You get up there quite a bit you say?

Hovis: I do.

Sullivan: I heard you talking to Oscar about the fishing (?). Are you going to try another lake?

Hovis: Did you ever get a chance to get out on the glacier.

Sullivan: Did yes, uh huh. I went out there one Sunday evening. In fact, it was just a beautiful night. Several of us hiked up on the river and I was just saying that one of the things I really noticed was the fact that the glacier has receded. Well, I haven't been in there in 53 years and I was talking to someone that's in the group here and he hadn't been here for 15 years and they really noticed it. Fifty-three years it just seems like it's just impossible. It was the same thing in Valdez. You know, the Valdez Glacier used to come right, I think, fairly close to town, you know, maybe about a mile and a half away and now you can't even see the thing. It's gone up back around the arm there in Valdez.

Hovis: I guess about the only thing I have to ask is if there is anything you would like to say about Kennecott.

Sullivan: All I know is it's fine to be back and I'm surprised some portions of it have deteriorated badly but other portions haven't, which surprised me, except that, you know, it's 53 years and some vandalism, of course, has taken place and deterioration just from the weather that takes place. When they built this place - you look at the mill and the timbers and everything and the way they put them in and the strong supports. They built it to stay and last and it certainly has for a long time. The same thing in Latouche though. Of course, they built the properties in Latouche and they built them the same way. The cabins are all gone there, they tore those down. I have a picture of Latouche at home - a big long one, like this, and it shows all the houses all the way across the water there. They had houses around the arm there, beautiful setting, right on the Latouche Bay. But they built good camps. Of course they invested heavily, they made good money and it was a great thing for the, you know, they owned the steamship company and they had a back haul of salmon and copper and a front haul of passengers and, of course, groceries and clothing

and everything that we brought north, building materials and all those things that had to come north.

Hovis: And you moved in on the railroad when you came in, I presume.

Sullivan: Yes, I took the boat from Valdez to Cordova and had to wait about two days for the train. I stayed with a family in Cordova, the Lydick family and got the train and came on up. It was quite an experience.

Hovis: Would you come back here again?

Sullivan: I don't know, I really don't. I may. I've been going to come up here for a long time and, of course, the opportunity arose and it seemed like a great idea to come back here.

Hovis: Did you keep in touch with any people who worked here before?

Sullivan: Oscar Watsjold occasionally and Frank Morris about the same - oh, and Phil Holdsworth. But I've gotten some names of people. In fact, about three months ago I was going through a few old pictures. I lost a lot when, our home burned up in Nenana. We lived there years ago. I was a Federal Marshal there back in the forties and early fifties and we lost a lot of pictures but I saw one - there was a girl here, her name was Mary Ellen Duggan. Her dad was in charge of the mill and stuff and so we had the Duggan family, the Presley family and the Sullivan family all in our yard in Valdez. I saw this picture about three years ago and I'm gonna see if I can't get some pictures made. She gave me Jean Presley's address so I'll send her one and I'm gonna send Mary Ellen one to her and her sister, Jean. It has her mother and dad and everything in it, you know. So at least - and it's been nice to talk to a lot of people and former employees. Course I see them occasionally.

Hovis: I thank you very much.

Sullivan: You're welcome.

Hovis: These tapes we make will be deposited in the University of Alaska, Fairbanks for access by the public. Any photographs that people brought we will be making copies of them and I believe the

local museum - I'm not sure of this, but I think the local museum will get copies of the photographs.

Sullivan: Yeh, they said this morning that probably they will not be able to do it now but they could write back up for it and get their (?).

Hovis: Oh, that's good.

Sullivan: Yeh, there is a lot of memories going on around here. See, I don't know so many of the pictures that they have down there because these kids that grew up here of course they all went to school together and they all remember one another. Well, I was just here for the summer, you know. Some of them remember my brother-in-law and my sister. In fact, the Jensen girl [Inger Jensen Ricci], she remembered me she said when I worked here that summer. Evidently they were talking about me from what I heard.

Hovis: Maybe you were a strapping young lad and a possible eligible bachelor.

Sullivan: Well, not at 15 I don't think.

Hovis: That may be the cause for the gossiping - oh, he's too young.

Sullivan: He's too young. That's right. Yeh, in fact in the bathroom there's a sign in there about Cremal for your hair, and the ad is in '38 and in '38 I had as much hair as you have. I was sitting on the john this morning and I was thinking I should have used that Cremal in '38. It shows a bald headed guy, you know, if I had used it in '38 I might still have a good head of hair.

Hovis: There is one for Wildroot down in the lower bathroom that makes the same claim.

Sullivan: Oh, does it?

Hovis: Okay. In the bunkhouses. I'm sorry to say thank you and then come up with another question, but what you said just sparked it. In the bunkhouses, do you remember (?).

Sullivan: (?) In fact, I was trying to remember the size of the room. Like the store, I would have swore was

twice the size it is and the bunkhouse there too. But it seemed to me that - in fact, I probably will walk up there before I leave just to - if I can get in there.

Hovis: You can.

Sullivan: Oh, you can, the upper bunkhouse?

Hovis: The upper (?).

Sullivan: Yeh, that's where I stayed.

Hovis: The bottom floor is covered with silt and gravel.

Sullivan: Jim Haroway is a good friend of mine and owns most of this property with Tony Oney and Mike Daring. They are also buddies of Jim Baldauf. I had open heart surgery in '80 and Baldauf, who is a cardiologist - he's also my wife's cardiologist. But the room I would guess - I know there was two beds in it. But it seemed to me it was about this size. Well, you've been in there. Was the room this size?

Hovis: About half this size.

Sullivan: I'll never forget - I hadn't been in my home in Valdez, oh gosh, for years. You know, we had moved from our home and moved downtown. My mother and dad bought a store and then we had an apartment up above, where we lived. Then I left and I was gone for a long time and then I drove truck out of there. I never went by the house and I went in it after the earthquake and I couldn't believe my room. I would have swore it was - well, my room was probably two thirds the size of this room. I would have swore it was twice the size it was, twice the size of this one, you know.

Hovis: You were half the size (?).

Sullivan: That's true. But you know, there was a closet in there and a chest of drawers and I pulled it open and pulled the drawer all the way out for some reason and way stuck in the back was a slip in my dad's handwriting signed by H. P. Sullivan and, God, I thought - he'd been dead since '36. He died when I was 14. I just couldn't believe it. It almost felt ghost like. And then the people - after the earthquake they were gonna burn all the places there and so we got two chests of drawers,

a china cabinet and a big oak table from our old house. The chest of drawers we use, the dining room table I've never gotten fixed yet but I did the china cabinet. The china cabinet, when my folks first had it, didn't have a nail in it, everything was wooden pegs. I gave that to my daughter. I had it fixed up at a furniture store in Anchorage and gave it to her.

Hovis: Well, you say your father died when you were 14. Was there a real financial need for you to be working up here?

Sullivan: Oh, there was, yeh. My mother, the next year she came down with cancer. She died when I was 17. I had two older sisters but they got married. I was kind of on my own when I was 17. But with the store, you know, times were tough and the store didn't do well.

Hovis: Did you send your money home?

Sullivan: Oh yeh.

Hovis: Did your mother give you an allowance?

Sullivan: Oh, yeh. Oh, yeh. She was very nice to me, but things were so tough. I'd work in the store after school. In those days people would come in and they'd charge everything and you'd haul out their purchases and sacks of sugar to them and cases of canned milk and all that stuff. We delivered all the groceries, in the wintertime with a sled to their residences.

Hovis: Do you remember if most people were U.S. citizens or were there a lot of people other than (?)?

Sullivan: Well, there were Irishmen, there were Swedes, there were Greeks. Most were either citizens or became citizens while they were here. That was a big thing in those days, you know, they wanted to become citizens and a lot of them did. I don't know if they had the green card situation in those days or not. I think they just came in and went to work and after they spent a little time, you know, they...

Hovis: What were the citizenship requirements?

Sullivan: You applied after one year and I think after two years you went in and took a test and if you passed it then you were eligible (?).

Hovis: Several years ago I walked down to the cemetery here and there are several Japanese buried there. Do you remember working with (??)?

Sullivan: No. I remember a Walt (?). There was a Walter Ing and Frank ...Minano maybe...and a bunch of them were up here and some worked in the laundry, some worked in the kitchen. I don't remember any working in the mine or in the mill or on the tram. Of course, a lot of those people came up and they worked in the cannery, Filipinos and Chinese, Japanese (??).

Hovis: I guess there weren't any (??).

Sullivan: Not here, no.

Hovis: Okay. Thank you very much.

Sullivan: You bet.

(end of interview)