

KENNECOTT KIDS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH

ELEANOR TJOSEVIG EIDEMILLER

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Interview Conducted By

Sandra M. Faulkner

National Park Service

Alaska Regional Office

Anchorage, Alaska

(tape 1, side 1)

This is Sande Faulkner, National Park Service, June 17, 1990, at Kennecott interviewing Eleanor Tjosevig Eidemiller.

Faulkner: Well, Eleanor, if you could just introduce yourself and give some background, where you were born and vital statistic information.

Eidemiller: Well, I was born in Kennecott in 1922 and lived in McCarthy until I was about nine and a half years old. Part of that time - school months I was in [McCarthy but we also lived at the Green Butte Mine which is eleven miles from McCarthy.]

Faulkner: I'll probably ask you things that we already talked about over the days already, but we'll go over it again for the tape. What brought your parents to Kennecott? You were born at Kennecott at the hospital and your parents lived at McCarthy?

Eidemiller: Yes. There was no hospital in McCarthy so everyone came to Kennecott. My father came up here in the very early nineteen hundreds but I don't know what the actual date was. [He left Norway as a young seaman at a time when many Scandinavians were looking for a better life in America. His older brother was first a captain in New York and then on a schooner in Alaska but I don't believe Dad ever sailed again after he came ashore in Valdez. Whether he participated in the Gold rush or not I never heard but he freighted over the glaciers and spoke about Tonsina and Copper Center quite often.] When Kennecott started developing he moved into the McCarthy area and prospected in various areas around here.

Faulkner: For gold?

Eidemiller: For copper. I presume. At least he ended up with patented copper claims near Green Butte, which we still have and always have hopes for.

Faulkner: Over the years you've always had hopes for it.

Eidemiller: My mother was fond of saying, "well, it will never happen in my life but it may in your life, children. You will see that it will develop again." [Mr. Hancock, who was a consulting mining engineer, wrote a very favorable report on it and

Dad was made an offer on it but refused to sell at that time. So we've always felt that the ore is there but times are different now.]

Faulkner: Do you have claims anywhere else?

Eidemiller: No, we don't. Those were sold at various times during my father's lifetime.

Faulkner: What was his first name?

Eidemiller: Nils.

Faulkner: When did he meet your mom?

Eidemiller: I think it was in the summer months of 1919.

Faulkner: Where was that at?

Eidemiller: That was in McCarthy. Her father had come up here and opened a blacksmith shop and he and my father had become very good friends. Grandpa was very excited about the fact that his two daughters were coming to visit him. That was quite an adventure, you know, to come from the midwest up here.

Faulkner: All by themselves?

Eidemiller: Yes.

Faulkner: How old were they then, about...

Eidemiller: [I think she was thirty-one and her sister twenty-nine.] Before their arrival, Dad looked at a picture that Grandpa Underwood so proudly showed him and he immediately announced that Jean was the girl he was going to marry. [And they were married in 1920.]

Faulkner: So when she was coming up it was to visit or...

Eidemiller: Yes, just to visit.

Faulkner: And she ended up staying.

Eidemiller: [I don't know.]

Faulkner: They probably were married at McCarthy?

Eidemiller: Yes, they were.

Faulkner: Was there a church there?

Eidemiller: No, there was a Commissioner there who married them. It was probably just done in his office. Their very good friends Hilda and Robert Marshall, who owned the hardware store, were there with them when they got married and remained their friends ever after.

Faulkner: Did your mom ever tell you stories about the wedding?

Eidemiller: No, no she didn't.

Faulkner: A wedding in McCarthy, what that involved.

Eidemiller: I don't know what all it involved [but in their case it was a very simple wedding.]

Faulkner: So you were born in 1922 and your dad was still blacksmith, what about your grandpa?

Eidemiller: Grandpa died in 1921. He drowned in the Nazina River, crossing the river on horseback. They might have been going on a hunting trip. There was a string of horses and supplies going across and he was the last man and inexperienced at doing this. I heard later that he should not have been put in that position, he should have been up further in the group, but he was the last man and that contributed to the accident. So I never met him.

Faulkner: What about your grandmother?

Eidemiller: She died back east when my mother was very young.

Faulkner: What do you remember most about the early years at McCarthy?

Eidemiller: I can't say I remember anything really outstanding. We spent a lot of time at Green Butte as well.

Faulkner: Oh, you did?

Eidemiller: Yes. In fact, it ends up probably just about half and half. To start with, because of the work he needed to do on his claims and while I was too small to remember much of it, my mother and I would accompany Dad to his base camp. He had to do so much work in order to patent the claims and Mother would help in any way she could. At first he set up a tent and eventually [built a one room

cabin in front of and attaching to the tent. The tent portion became our bedroom.] Then later on when the Green Butte Mine closed down they hired my dad to maintain [the buildings and roads, etc. We then lived at the mine at the bunk house nearly all the time until I was old enough for school.]

Faulkner: Winter as well as summer?

Eidemiller: Winter as well as summer. It was just our own little world there and it was lovely I thought.

Faulkner: Where would have been your nearest neighbor?

Eidemiller: McCarthy, 11 miles away. We would travel down there once a week for mail and supplies.

Faulkner: How would you travel?

Eidemiller: In the summer by Dad's Model T and in winter by dog team. But I don't remember much of that. I remember some holidays there, for instance Christmas.

Faulkner: Oh, what would Christmas at Green Butte be like?

Eidemiller: [When the mine operated the ore was hauled to the railroad in McCarthy by sleigh in the winter and wagon in the summer. And when they closed the mine it was with expectations of opening up again so they left two horses in our care. Dad would prepare the charcoal foot warmers, Mom would get the heavy blankets out and when the horses were hitched to the sleigh we could go out in search of trees...one for our family and one for my dolls....the tallest trees we could find.]

Faulkner: What did you decorate with?

Eidemiller: [The doll's tree was completely my project so it was decorated with whatever ideas we could find for colored paper, yarn and foil we'd saved from wrappers.]

Faulkner: What was the population of Green Butte?

Eidemiller: There was none.

Faulkner: Three of you.

Eidemiller: Three of us.

Faulkner: Just the three.

Eidemiller: Yes. That was all.

Faulkner: So you three made Christmas.

Eidemiller: Well, we had visitors sometimes, we had company. [Usually it would be a single male friend of my father's who had no family to be with. And sometimes we spent the holiday in McCarthy. But I liked being at Green Butte and Dad always thought of some special way to surprise me. He was wonderful with children. One Christmas Eve he suggested that we put carrots and hay in the barn for the reindeer because he knew they would be tired when they reached us and it would surely be the best place to rest. He even left a note for Santa telling him that there was a pot of coffee on the kitchen range. Of course I was excited about this and very thrilled the next day when we checked and found that all our treats were gone. They really had rested there.]

Faulkner: Oh, wonderful. When you started school, you moved to McCarthy to stay?

Eidemiller: To stay, at least for the winter. Dad still stayed at Green Butte but would come to town on the week-ends and in the summer we would all be at the mine again. In the winter, Dad traveled by dog team...a rather scroungy looking team. There were three dogs of different breeds and only one looked strong enough to be working but, they managed. Sometimes they borrowed dogs from the Watsjolds.

Faulkner: So, when you started going to school, what did you wear to school?

Eidemiller: [Long stockings, dresses and boots and snow suits.]

Faulkner: Did your mother make your clothes?

Eidemiller: No, we sent to Sears or Montgomery Ward, whatever. And it was really exciting to get a package, you know, to get our spring clothes. Not so much our winter clothes cause that meant being all wrapped up again. Getting the spring dresses, anklets and knee high socks, even cooler pajamas was fun.

Faulkner: Did you have special party dresses?

Eidemiller: [Yes, I remember one with ruffles.] Our parents had very nice clothes. You'd be surprised at the beautiful dresses that women wore.

Faulkner: Oh, really.

Eidemiller: Yes, lovely things. And particularly here in Kennecott because they had regular dances and things going on all the time that the ladies dressed up for.

Faulkner: Would they invite McCarthy families?

Eidemiller: No, I don't think so. We had our own hall in McCarthy, our own Christmas parties and other events. Everyone dresses up some. The women wore hats for many occasions. Well, you saw some of those pictures where they'd go on a picnic and wear a nice hat and the men were dressed in suits.

Faulkner: Yes, I remember that picture. So, we've talked about Christmas at Green Butte. What about Christmas at McCarthy?

Eidemiller: The thing I remember most about the tree is the small metal candle holders with candles that we weren't allowed to light.

Faulkner: Was there a school play or a community Christmas party or anything?

Eidemiller: I don't remember being in any school play but we all attended a big party at the community hall where the children were given gifts. There was dancing afterward and my dad would dance with me and I was so proud. He would play Santa Claus and come to our home when we had other children there. He had many bachelor friends who would come by, maybe have a drink with our family or stay for a meal. They usually brought gifts for me and usually candy for my mother.

Faulkner: What about the school at McCarthy? Was that a one room school?

Eidemiller: Yes. I remember having a water bucket there and we each brought our own special cup from home. There were hooks to hang them on near the bucket.

Faulkner: Was there one teacher?

Eidemiller: One teacher and there were seven kids when I went to school.

Faulkner: What grades?

Eidemiller: [One through eighth I think. I don't think they had to go anywhere until they started high school and then they sometimes boarded in Cordova.]

Faulkner: Do you remember any teacher in particular?

Eidemiller: Well, I only had one [and her name was Mrs. Harrais.]

Faulkner: You came to Kennecott to school because the McCarthy school closed?

Eidemiller: Yes. [It closed because the parents in three families were unhappy with Mrs. Harrais and by making other arrangements for school they eliminated all but two pupils.] We lived right here where the lodge is in the center apartment. Dad still continued at Green Butte and he didn't come to visit us every weekend because it was a longer trip [and Kennecott discouraged dog teams except on an emergency basis.] John Watsjold, also from McCarthy, boarded with us, his sister and their brother, Oscar, moved to Seward with [Mrs. Garrity and her son.]

Faulkner: A disruptive change to you, to have to leave your house in McCarthy?

Eidemiller: No, I don't think so. I had been so much alone in Green Butte and had so few playmates in McCarthy that I was very shy and hesitant around so many other children. But some of them I was already acquainted with and Inger and I were good friends already. I felt hesitant about going to a new school but I didn't mind leaving home.

Faulkner: What about your mother? Did she ever talk about that move?

Eidemiller: Not that I recall.

Faulkner: She didn't care one way or the other?

Eidemiller: Well, I'm sure she did. [Being at home she would have seen Dad more often and our home] was more comfortable than these small apartments. There



were two bedrooms upstairs and a very narrow stairway, a small kitchen and a tiny living room.

Faulkner: You did individual cooking?

Eidemiller: Yes.

Faulkner: What about laundry?

Eidemiller: Yes, I suppose most of it went to the laundry here, unless there was something fine that she hand washed. [My sister wasn't even a year old when we moved here so there was lots of washing for her.]

Faulkner: Then you got to move back to McCarthy?

Eidemiller: Well, no. From here we - well, not directly, I'm sure we went home for a week or something like that but we left Alaska completely and moved to the states.

Faulkner: Where did you go?

Eidemiller: Seattle.

Faulkner: What did your dad do there?

Eidemiller: He retired.

Faulkner: He retired?

Eidemiller: Yes. He really had worked very hard. It was time for him to take it easy. He had high blood pressure and heart problems and they didn't have all the medications that we have today. And then she wanted more education and more opportunity for we girls, so that's why we moved.

Faulkner: Where was your sister born?

Eidemiller: She was born in Kennecott too.

Faulkner: Do you remember it?

Eidemiller: Yes. I remember I was awakened early on a dark, winter morning and hustled across the street to the Watsjold home where I was to stay while Dad took Mom to the hospital. I believe he rented a taxi team and whisked her through the snow to Kennecott.

Faulkner: Do you have any idea how long she stayed in the hospital?

Eidemiller: [Probably ten days or two weeks] as she had some complications and at that time they kept women a very long time after childbirth.

Faulkner: Do you remember McCarthy, your home there, was it a log house, a frame house?

Eidemiller: It was a frame house that my father built.

Faulkner: It's still standing?

Eidemiller: It's still standing. It's one of the more sturdy ones in McCarthy. So he did a good job. It's owned now by Nancy Simmerman and she has taken good care of it and when she talks to me she calls it "our home" which pleases me. She's letting us stay there now for a few days, after we leave Kennecott.

Faulkner: Has it changed much?

Eidemiller: Not much. [The wallpaper, for example, is the original wallpaper. Nancy had one of the inside walls taken out so as to enlarge the kitchen. That was an improvement.]

Faulkner: In what ways have you seen McCarthy change?

Eidemiller: Oh, it's nothing like it was. There were so many buildings that are no longer there and the trees have grown up so you can't even imagine there were building ever there. Unless you study old pictures, you can't visualize how it was. You'll see that there were not nearly the number of trees. It was much more open even in the land around town. Now its difficult for the people to get rid of the garbage and big items they don't need or that don't work so it's just abandoned and looks very messy. [I'm sure we had problems of that sort too but it bothers me much more now.]

Faulkner: Let's approach it from this way. Why did you decide to come back for the reunion?

Eidemiller: Well, I think I've been back seven times already so I had no trouble deciding.

Faulkner: So why not one more.

Eidemiller: Yes. I'll tell you that there is something so peaceful and warm about these mountains and it always makes me feel like I'm coming home. I feel good here and I always meet so many nice, friendly people. It is fun to come back.

Faulkner: If you had to - we talked about your life in the country as a great deal of love. What do you think made it so special to grow up there?

Eidemiller: Well, I think in both Kennecott and McCarthy kids were few and they were very special, you know. Everyone treated us well and we [had the freedom of the outdoors. A little less so in McCarthy because there were a couple of areas where the children couldn't go. Taxi dog teams were tethered in a place beyond the houses. They were not loved and taken care of as pets so they were vicious.] And then there was, of course, the girls on the line. I always found enough to do. My dad built me a little dog sled and I had my own dog. If I were going out on the road and he thought I could do all right, he'd let me have two dogs, but I think that was usually in Green Butte. In McCarthy I was most usually restricted to one dog. It usually happened on Sunday because he would be in town for the weekend so I'd take a ride out Green Butte Road a ways. Often times afterward Mrs. Watsjold would think I needed warming up so she would give me and Stella 50 cents each to go buy lemon pie and hot chocolate.

Faulkner: What was social life like?

Eidemiller: [There were often dances in the community hall.] My parents played cards often. [In the winter I remember taking the dog team and going about 3 miles to Iverson's farm for an evening of cards. Sometimes the night was so clear and bright it was almost like traveling in daylight.] In the summer they had picnics and fishing trips up the Nicholi River. And when we were in Green Butte people from Kennecott would occasionally hike over the mountain and maybe stay all night with us. Inger would come up and spend a week. [There were wagons and sleighs, an old truck and many odd pieces of equipment that set our imaginations working, but cowboys and Indians was probably our favorite. We visualized many a rough ride before we reached the barn.]

Faulkner: Did you wear pants for play?

Eidemiller: Sometimes. Not all the time. Sometimes I think we wore very feminine things simply because life was so rugged.

Faulkner: Is that why you think they dressed up for (?)

Eidemiller: Uh huh, because they didn't want to lose all that. It was nice to be very feminine when you had the opportunity.

Faulkner: Do you remember your mom too maybe putting little touches in the home to make it less rugged or seeming to be less rugged?

Eidemiller: Oh, I think so. [Lace curtains, print cushions, artificial flowers when fresh ones weren't available. Mother had some fine pieces of cut glass and china although our dishes were very ordinary. But other people had beautiful sets of china figurines, lamps and table cloths. I was very impressed with the beautiful things that Mrs. Watsjold brought all the way from Norway. We made trips to Seattle and come back with nice things. I don't think they ever did much about changing the furniture but we would come home with clothes and books and records and other little things that added to our comfort and enjoyment.]

Faulkner: Would you go out to Cordova at all?

Eidemiller: Not often. Most of the time we went to Cordova only when we were on our way to Seattle. People from Cordova would come up and visit us...usually in the summer. There were two different families there whose children would come and spend a week with us. I imagine I could have stayed with them too but I was too shy to do it.

Faulkner: When you went outside, would you and your mom go alone or would your dad always go?

Eidemiller: No, he didn't always go.

Faulkner: What were the trips like?

Eidemiller: On the ship?

Faulkner: Yes.

Eidemiller: The trip was wonderful [except for crossing the Gulf which was always too rough for me. But that was only a few hours out of the entire trip which

took five or six days. We would have a nice stateroom. There would be a little dance band, midnight buffet, shuffleboard and cards. Everyone enjoyed the inside passage because it was so smooth and of course very beautiful.]

Faulkner: Would it make stops?

Eidemiller: Yes. Not always the same places each time. Only once do I remember stopping at Wrangell and the Indians in their native dress were standing and sitting by the warehouse building on the dock selling their baskets and other arts.

Faulkner: And then you'd go to Seattle?

Eidemiller: Yes.

Faulkner: Did your mom have family there to visit?

Eidemiller: No, [but we had friends. We always rented a small apartment for a month. The two things that most impressed me were the stores and the green grass. I loved to go to the parks.]

Faulkner: Where was your mother's family from?

Eidemiller: From Illinois.

Faulkner: Where.

Eidemiller: Kewanee, which is a little bit south of Chicago.

Faulkner: Did you ever go back and visit them?

Eidemiller: [Not until after we moved to Seattle. We kept in touch with them and friends there and also with Dad's family in Norway but no such long trips until later years.]

Faulkner: Did you feel much tie to relatives, to aunts, uncles, cousins, the extended family?

Eidemiller: Not particularly while I was up here. Later some of us got reacquainted.

Faulkner: That's life, to Alaskan families anyway.

Eidemiller: Yes.

Faulkner: Do you remember, was school mandatory in McCarthy? Did kids have to go to school?

Eidemiller: I don't know [but I rather think so.]

Faulkner: You didn't know of any comments about kids...

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Faulkner: We were talking about the schools being mandatory.

Eidemiller: All the little kids went to school. I don't think all the older ones always did. Some quit early.

Faulkner: You were one of the littler ones.

Eidemiller: Yes, [the littlest one for all three years that I went to school there.]

Faulkner: Was there a library or reading room in McCarthy?

Eidemiller: There may have been but I don't remember it [and I think we would have used a library had there been one.]

Faulkner: Or maybe the school?

Eidemiller: I can't remember the school having a library. There was a minister that came in occasionally, maybe once a month or less than that. He would have services at the schoolhouse.

Faulkner: Would everyone go regardless of denomination?

Eidemiller: I don't think so.

Faulkner: Well, is there anything that you'd like to say about life in McCarthy that would be important for people to remember or know?

Eidemiller: Well, McCarthy has such a bad reputation. You hear it now when you're interviewing people, or you read about it. They talk about the workers in Kennecott wanted to whoop it up in McCarthy and getting in trouble and then they would often lose all their money. But you don't hear much about the good people who also made up the town.

Faulkner: Do you feel it was almost two separate communities?

Eidemiller: No, but I don't like to hear about the reputation that it has, even though part of that is certainly deserved.

Faulkner: I guess, for example, the people from the wild side of McCarthy...

Eidemiller: They didn't always associate a lot with the others.

Faulkner: They wouldn't be likely to call on each other?

Eidemiller: [Probably not unless there was no other way.]

Faulkner: I suppose there was one store, right?

Eidemiller: There was the O'Neale store and then there was the Marshall [store which was later purchased by the Watsjolds.]

Faulkner: Were both of those general stores?

Eidemiller: Pretty much so. They call the Watsjold store the hardware store but it wasn't strictly hardware. It was groceries and meats as well. When the train came in with all the fresh fruit in the summer time we were sure to be there on time so we could get [grapes, cherries, watermelon, etc...whatever good things arrived. It never lasted very long. We ate it up pretty fast and started waiting for the next shipment.]

Faulkner: McCarthy traditionally has the big Fourth of July celebration.

Eidemiller: Yes.

Faulkner: Did they then as well?

Eidemiller: Oh, they did. It was wonderful. I do remember it, and all those buildings that are no longer - we called it Front Street, they had put wide streamers across the street and all the buildings decorated. We also decorated our home [with flags and banners.] There were sack races, potato races, fat man races, everything they could think of. [And later on in the day the big baseball game with Kennecott.]

Faulkner: Oh, on July fourth?

Eidemiller: Yes. And we would get our cap guns and our firecrackers first thing in the morning and run around trying to scare everybody. I remember one time we were coming in from Green Butte for the big celebration. My mother and I were dressed up,

my dad was wearing a suit and hat and as we were driving along he slowed down and finally stopped beside the start of a well hidden trail. My mother was suddenly angry with him but he paid no attention, stepped out of the car and headed up the trail so nicely dressed in suit and hat. I was sworn to secrecy as he came back with booze from a still. [It wasn't his still but he'd promised his friend to make the pickup. It was vital to McCarthy's celebration. Actually, I don't think prohibition was ever successful there.]

Faulkner: Do you remember your mother talking about her attitudes after living here, or your dad's, after they left? Was this home to them too?

Eidemiller: It was home to my dad, very definitely. I think he hated to leave in many respects. When we left, he and I stood on the observation deck of the train and I was crying. And I'm sure he was feeling sad too. I promised myself that I would be back as soon as I was able but that took a long time. My first return was in 1974. But Dad was a true Alaskan. He spent so much time here and enjoyed it, so it was home to him. I think it was just fine for my mother for quite a while, but eventually she wanted something easier, a place with more advantages, so she was happy to leave.

Faulkner: Did she keep a garden?

Eidemiller: Mostly a flower garden. [We got some fresh vegetables from Iverson's farm.]

Faulkner: Where was your dad's family from?

Eidemiller: Norway.

Faulkner: Was he born in Norway?

Eidemiller: Yes. [A lot of people immigrated from there in the early 1900s. Norway has kept good records but those that might have shown what year he went to sea were lost in a fire.]

Faulkner: Well, do you feel we have covered McCarthy, given McCarthy its due?

Eidemiller: [Well, I've covered it some from my childhood point of view but there's more history there than we will ever know.]



Faulkner:       Okay, well thank you very much.

Eidemiller:     And thank you too, Sande.

(end of interview)