

KENNECOTT RECOLLECTIONS
OF
Jean Elizabeth (McGavock) Lamb

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Setting the Stage

The earliest memories of my life are of Kennecott, Alaska, where I lived most of my first 9 years. Both my brother James Robert and I were born "Outside" in Seattle, Washington, as our mother preferred and/or felt it necessary to have her deliveries at Seattle General Hospital where she had trained to be a Registered Nurse. Thus it was that our "coming into the country" at the age of a few months or weeks came about with a week's travel up the Inside Passage to Cordova via the Alaska Steamship Company's ships and the CR&NWR cars to Kennecott itself.

My father, James McGavock, was the son of Irish immigrants who had settled in Denver, Colorado in the early 1880's. Dad, born there in 1883, traveled the country coast to coast in the early 1900's seeking work out of the combination of economic necessity and the spirit of adventure. He had no academic degrees. For that matter, he had not even graduated from high school as we know it. But he was a talented machinist with an innovative bent in matters electrical. August of 1909 found him aboard the S.S. Ohio bound for Cordova, Alaska. The journey north was interrupted when the Ohio struck rocks in Canadian waters - in Finlayson Channel off Milbanke Sound - and sunk. My father and several others were forced to swim the half mile to land and were fortunate to escape with their lives. When he finally arrived in Cordova, he found work related to the building of The Copper River & Northwestern Railroad. He worked the winter of 1909-1910 on the building of The Million Dollar Bridge at Mile 49. He remained in the Copper River basin during the ensuing years either prospecting or working at various mining properties such as those of the Great Northern Development Company both on the Kotsina and at Copper Mountain where he lost his only living brother John in a disastrous avalanche. He has also written of helping to drive tunnels on Elliott Creek, Iron Mountain, on the Kuskulana at Archie MacDougall's "promotion", on the Chickosana etc.. Although I am unsure of the actual date he came to Kennecott, it may well have been circa 1917 or 1918. He served as Master Mechanic for the whole Kennecott operation until we left Alaska in 1937, a year before the final closure.

My mother, Jean Black (Scobie) McGavock, was the daughter of Scottish immigrants who had settled in Roslyn, Washington in the late 1880's. She was born and raised there, leaving home to enter nursing training in Seattle, graduating in 1911. She came north to work as a nurse in the Kennecott Hospital in 1918 and met my father during her Kennecott stay. In 1919 she returned to Seattle for medical attention following injuries received while "on duty". She returned to Kennecott in 1922 to visit friends and married my father at that time. They married in Cordova at St. George's Episcopal Church rectory (by the Reverend Eurstace P. Ziegler) September 14, 1922, honeymooned in Strelna and set up a housekeeping of sorts in the Kennecott Staff House until such time as other housing became available. Ultimately, this union was blessed with the birth of my brother James Robert in 1924 and me in 1928. There were no other children.

The "Younger Sibling" Syndrome

Playmates seemed few and far between in my Kennecott years. I did have doting parents: a father, who, by virtue of being able to walk to his job, was usually home for three meals a day; a mother whose complete focus was her house-wifely duties and the nurture and continuing good health of her children. And, of course, I had a built in playmate in my brother Jim who was four years older than I. He may have spent years adjusting to the fact that, upon arrival, I was not twins and that the one of me was female. That, plus the age gap, probably left something to be desired from his point of view.

So, for me, there were many hours of being entertained in the kitchen with baking adventures, the rolling of cookie dough and the beating of cake batter...and more than a few hours in the living room pricking the fingers learning to embroider tea towels. I even learned to knit and purl with the knitting needles. I had a beautiful doll named "Rosemary" who was given to me one Christmas by my Grandmother Scobie and Uncle George. She was my pride and joy, and I have her yet, tucked away in an old trunk, her wig of human hair thoroughly matted by many years of zealous tender loving care. I think she came with another treasure, a lovely wicker doll carriage. These two gifts were bestowed upon me at the annual Christmas party given by the company at the recreation hall. Mother tells the story of how I was carried home by my father, up the hill in the chill December night, refusing to relinquish my grip on the buggy handle. Then there were the summertime tea parties outside on the grass where my little tea table was set with refreshments for my toys: my various dolls, toy dogs, bunnies and bears. Occasional playmates through the years, depending upon when they lived in camp, were Marvel Whipple, and later, Mary Jean Moore and Billy Larsen. My only classmate for my three years at the Kennecott School was Billy Humphreys who lived north of the mill down by the railroad tracks.

So my brother Jim was often "stuck" with his little sister who usually didn't quite fit in with his free time plans. I did my best to keep up, playing "Road Commission" with Jim's cars and trucks, building roads in the bank under the spruce tree behind the clothes line and wood shed; trying to tag along on his forays down the hill; feeling disgruntled when he managed to give me the slip and left out when I wasn't allowed in his tree house. 'Funny..that I should remember the tree house, but I can still remember climbing a tree down beyond the fire house there on the hill where I could spot the train chugging up the grade from McCarthy. It sticks in my mind that either Dad or Jim whacked a few boards up in that tree so that I could have a tree house of my own. I suppose it got me out of Jim's hair.

The House on the Hill

We lived up on the hill on what is now called "Silk Stocking Row" in the southernmost of the four cottages on the north end. It bore the number "19" and, like all the others of its sort, was cranberry red with white trim, two stories with a covered front porch facing west.

In the living room I remember a Morris chair where Dad would sit in the evenings, and I would snuggle up on his lap for him to read me favorite stories. He would always ask me if I had eaten all my vegetables at dinner, and I would answer that yes, I had tried to, even though I might have left a few. In truth, I hated canned vegetables and did my best to dispatch them elsewhere, sight unseen. And, of course, canned vegetables are what we had all winter long.

Well, back to the chairs.....there must have been others. However, I can't recall a sofa. But we did have a beautiful player piano at which Jim and I spent many a happy hour pumping the pedals through all the various music rolls we had in our collection. Dad loved music but didn't play any instrument, however Mother had studied piano for a good many years and put her music education to good use.

Dad always had a radio in the livingroom. Pictures through the years show a change in sets. I don't remember listening much, but I knew we got radio reception from some very far away places.

At the north end of the livingroom was a glassed in bookcase set into the staircase. And there was a steam radiator standing at the north wall near the bottom of the stair. Mother told the story of how I tumbled down the stairs when I was 2 or 3 and burned my wrist badly on that radiator. The scar is still apparent today.

Behind the livingroom was the dining room where we had a round oak pedestal dining table with captain's chairs. This was the site of family dinners. Mother was a good, albeit basic sort of cook and an excellent baker. My father favored a basic "meat and potatoes" sort of fare, and was fond of standing rib roast of beef, medium rare. I can remember the table set with Mother's Syracuse china and, on occasion, her sterling flatware. I also remember sneaking spoonfulls of canned peas onto some channel in the underworkings of that table just to get them off my plate. Somehow, they were supposed to get into the pedestal...and maybe then, to the floor. (And we did have a dog...)

The kitchen was to the north of the dining room. I remember it with lots of cupboards, the topmost of which housed the Syracuse china which was left behind when we moved outside in 1937. There was a wood fired cook stove over which Mother presided and for which Dad and, eventually, my brother Jim chopped the wood. There was also a small kitchen table where Jim and I would sit for our bedtime snack of dry cereal. I've never forgotten that he stuffed me with things like extra portions of Grape Nuts just so he could get more box tops for his prizes. Off the kitchen was a small pantry or back kitchen and rear entry into the back shed.

Our upstairs was reached by the staircase which had a landing with a window at the turn. On the sill there, Mother kept house plants which would shake and rattle in their saucers when the earthquake tremors came.

Upstairs there were two bedrooms with a bathroom between at the top of the stairs. The front bedroom was Mother and Dad's and faced west towards the glacier. I have always remembered the view from their window.

Besides the sink, the bathroom had an indoor flush toilet and a bathtub with claw and ball feet. I remember Mother telling the story of how my brother Jim got his head stuck beneath the tub when he was a toddler and what a fuss "the rescue" was. The bathroom window faced south along the slopes of Porphyry Mountain.

The back bedroom was shared by Jim and me. The window faced the woods to the east on Porphyry Mountain and was protected on bright summer nights with a dark green shade. Jim's bed was on the outside wall, while mine was on the inside with an overhead bookcase which held the family collection of The Bobbsey Twins among other things. More than once the books fell down on me in my bed. Jim needed excitement, I guess, and, perhaps, I egged him on. There were built-in drawers and closets under the eaves of both bedrooms, and the latter space provided lots of play opportunities on cold winter days.

My father had the only privately owned automobile in camp, so there had to be a place to park it. The garage was to the south of the house and set back a little. It housed the 1924 Buick touring car which was put up on blocks through the late fall, winter and spring months when the few roads of the area were impassable. On the south side, near the Buick, was a work bench under which our dog Ginger had his box with its dogbed for the really cold winter nights. An ell off the back of the garage was the radio room where Dad, a HAM radio operator, indulged in his hobby on many an evening. The radio room was generally "off limits" to me. There was too much dangerous electrical equipment. It wasn't a place to play.

The Other House

There was another house where we lived for a short time during the Depression when the mines were closed and the camp was partially shut down. This was a house down on the railroad tracks just to the north of the power plant and west of the tracks. I thought it was the first house from the power plant, but Jim thinks it was the second. I remember very little about the house except for its crawl space under the house where the steam lines came in. This was a very hospitable area for mice, and my mother wasn't about to accommodate them. I think Jim and I must have spent many a winter evening down there trying to catch mice with sticks. Then, I got to feeling tender about the poor little mice. Somehow, I can't imagine Mother, with all her anti-septic notions, being very happy about us being down there with the mice either. At any rate, that's what we did that winter.

Pictures show that these houses didn't have indoor toilets, just outhouses out at the end of a back walk. But I don't remember our using an outhouse in the time we lived there.

Living there, we were right on the edge of the lateral moraine of the Kennicott Glacier, and I remember lots of days when I played alone down in the rocks making "rooms" and play space with what rocks I could lift. What an eerie landscape it must have been, but I never thought so. It was just my world.

Dad's Office

My father's office was on the south end of the lower level of the power house, and, occasionally, there was some reason for me to visit him there. Such a visit for a 7 or 8 year old would be unthinkable in a modern facility of comparable size, but I do remember walking by the big boilers and the generator turbines while carefully negotiating the steel walkways and stairways around the diesel engines. I'm sure Dad was never far away.

Our dog Ginger loved to go to work with Dad and could often be found snoozing on a warm spot on the floor in the knee-hole of Dad's desk.

The power plant and the machine shop are the only big industrial buildings that I can remember having the freedom of entering. The mill and the leaching plant were certainly "off limits" to me. Of course, the bunkhouses were forebidden, and I was too young to have the opportunity to go up to the mines.

Where We Played

What freedom we had when compared with the restrictions placed on today's urban/suburban children! We had the run of the camp - within reason - although, by virtue of my age and sex, I didn't travel so far afield as my brother.

The board side walk up on the hill was probably my first playground. The boards must have worked moderately well for kiddie cars, tricycles and baby buggies, but they would have been useless for roller skates. But even this experience was arranged by the company, and we skated on the wood floors of the Recreation Hall.

We did have the tennis court north of the mill. I remember going there, but can't recall my having a tennis racket. I imagine the court was intended for employees rather than the children.

Ice skating came easier...and earlier. The baseball field was boarded and flooded with both water and lights for wintertime skating. Most of us "Kids" skated on ice long before we skated on wheels. The ice skates went to school with us and we exited the schoolhouse doors to the rink outside to skate after school. There were some adults in camp who skated well. I would try to imitate their arabesques but not with any great success, I might add. But I did manage to stay upright most of the time.

One winter, when we had a heavier snowfall than usual, Jim and I were allowed to jump off the shed roof into a high snowbank below. For other snow play, we skied and snowshoed, sometimes on the glacier. And I can remember sledding down the hills in dish pans. On occasion, our dog Ginger was pressed into service with the dogsled and harness. Ginger, for all his malemute bloodlines, didn't like to work that much and would often go slinking away when we rang the harness bells.

What We Wore

Relatives living "outside" indulged us with toys, books, and the latest fashions for school and dress up clothing, but - by and large - our playtime was spent in old fashioned, practical overalls, washed no more than once a week in Mother's Savage washing machine.

Winter found us bundled up more with bulky wool snow suits, shoepacs, scratchy winter underwear, and the long lisle stockings which must have been partly wool. I hated the stockings so and could hardly wait for those warmer spring days when, on my way to school and relieved of cumbersome snow suits, I could sneak down the hill path behind the fire house, undo the garter fasteners and roll those stockings down below the knee. Such wicked freedom! I can remember yet how good it felt. Of course, Mother was sure I would catch cold.

Other Vignettes

I remember a visit to the Iversen farm out of McCarthy. It seemed like another world. For some reason I recall Mrs. Iversen's butter! And I remember how scared I was of the bull out in the pasture.

And the mud in the springtime when the snow turned the wagon road to ooze. But it was exciting to see the winter leave.

School celebrations at the school, which was only using one room by the time I went to school. I remember the cooks from the bunkhouse delivering a big wash tub full of strawberry ice cream. Strawberry was special. It was so pink! I think we usually had vanilla or chocolate ice cream when we made it at home.

And the berry picking in the fall. I remember the tin buckets with their bail handles and Jim showing me how to swing the can 360 degrees without dumping the berries. I don't suppose it did the berries much good.

And I remember when Jim and I took piano lessons with "Deanie" O'Neill from McCarthy. We got through at least 2 books of John M. Williams Piano Studies before we left Kennecott in 1937, and, along the way, probably thought of all sorts of reasons not to practice. Ginger helped. We used to put squares of Hershey's chocolate on the keys when Mother wasn't around, so the dog could play the piano too. The state of the keys must have been a dead give-away.

Our dog Ginger, best friend and partner in crime, lick of plates and ice cream bowls and slurper of castaway peas. He was a malemute - springer spaniel mix who looked like the former but had shorter legs. While he made a fine camp dog, he did have a lot of trouble learning to respect the porcupine. Dad had a special pair of needle nosed pliers which we called the porcupine pliers. Certainly, one of my memories is seeing Dad with Ginger clamped between his knees plucking out the quills. Poor dog! He was a loving companion for all of our family. The most difficult thing about leaving Kennecott for Jim and me was leaving Ginger behind. Our friends, the Don Olivers, took him for that last year at Kennecott, and they eventually brought him outside.

Home made ice cream frozen with the glacier ice which was delivered to our ice box. This was a favorite dessert served often. For us in our time it was made with evaporated milk. In earlier years cows had been kept at Kennecott, but they had proved tubercular, and thereafter, milk was either powdered or canned.

Winter time stars, black velvet skies and the hard crunch of of footsteps on sub-zero snows. Going to school in the dark and coming home in the dark were all part of our everyday wintertime lives. It was such a wonder to us when we spent our first Christmas outside in 1937 and went swimming at a beach near San Diego. Imagine!

The 1924 Buick

My father was intrigued with any mechanical innovations and modes of transportation, so it only figured that he would find a way to own and house what I believe was the only privately owned automobile in camp, one I remember as the 1924 Buick touring car. It was a big old thing with spoke wheels and chains on the rear tires, isinglass curtains at the windows, a cloth top and, in a gun case slung over the back of the front seat, was Dad's 30-06 bear gun...just in case we needed it.

Of course, all of this must have been operated at great expense and considerable inconvenience, but it gave us Sunday afternoon mobility to explore what few "roads" there were to be driven and a chance to see the country. Now this was before the age of the jeep, but the old Buick performed admirably on the rough roads filled with potholes and permafrost ooze bridged with corduroy, its high frame taking the fording of creeks all in its stride.

Now, where did we go? I can remember driving to McCarthy and on to Green Butte, once even going on to the Mother Lode. But usually we took the road from McCarthy out to the Nizina River where we may or may not have been able to cross over to the other side, depending upon whether or not the bridge had been washed out with the annual floods. Crossing the bridge was always exciting and a bit scary. I remember times, after the washouts, when we walked on the big beams set on the pilings before they were bridged with decking. I held Dad's hand tight. I can still see the silty water rushing down below. At low water, I remember crossing the far channels, carried on Dad's back, but I can't recall how we got back up on what was left

of the bridge...a ladder, I guess. I had lots of faith in my father's firm footing at the time, but I wouldn't want to do that again today.

If we could drive to the other side, we went on to visit the Murie's at their roadhouse at May Creek. One of my earliest recollections is of Mrs. Murie who gave me a string of pink beads to wear when I was about 3.

And sometimes we went fishing at Baultoff Lake. I seem to remember hours in a rowboat...swatting mosquitos mostly...trying not to rock the boat or fall in. One time, our dog Ginger, a malemute-springer spaniel combination pup who had been left at home chained up, got loose and followed us down the road and across the river all the way to the lake. He didn't think he should miss the fishing. Poor dog! He must have been footsore.

And sometimes we picnicked at Sam Means' cabin somewhere out near the mouth of Chittitu Creek. Sam took a picture of one of our gatherings where we and the Richelsons were all huddled around a smokey fire eating our beans.

But, perhaps, the most vivid memory is of the narrow shelf road cut into the shale on the near approach to the Nizina River bridge spans. Mother was a rather nervous passenger, and Dad knew just how "to push her buttons". If the bridge was "out", Dad had to turn the car around on that narrow shelf.. and it was a fair drop to the water churning down below. So Mother would shout, "Jim, stop the car! We're not going to drown in this river!" He would stop, and she would grab her children, my brother Jim in one hand and me in the other, to exit the car in fear and trepidation, knowing that he was surely going over the side. This must have happened again and again. It was a sort of ritual.

My First Airplane Ride

Dad was very interested in airplanes, and he struck up a friendship with the late Harold Gillam when he first began flying in the Copper River Basin. Eventually, he invested some money in Gillam's business. I took my first airplane ride with this noted bush pilot perhaps in 1932 when I was about 4. I believe that Mother and Jim and I had returned from a trip to Seattle at a time in the winter after heavy snowfall and the train was not running. The only way home from Cordova was for us to fly. Unfortunately, I had become sick on board ship and, in the course of the flight up the river, managed to throw up all over Gillam's cozy down quilt which had thoughtfully been provided to keep us warm in flight.

And Other Modes of Travel

Jim and I became fairly sophisticated travelers in those early years. when we ran the gamut from snowshoes, skis and dog sleds to the rails of the Copper River & Northwestern Railway, the ships of the Alaska Steamship Company and the planes of Harold Gillam.

Mother made a trip outside every few years, so we became accustomed to the experience of traveling on the CR&NWRR to Cordova with an overnight stop in Chitina and lunches in section houses along the way. Cordova meant a stay at the old Windsor Hotel before boarding the ship for Seattle. Alas, I was a poor sailor, for the Gulf of Alaska came all too soon and stayed too long. But I usually recovered for the Inside Passage. The trip meant games on deck, admonitions from the stewards to keep us from falling overboard, bunk beds in the cabin, fancy meals where I was served pasteurized milk to drink. That was something we didn't have in Kennecott by the time we were growing up. The milk was totally foreign to me, and I didn't like it. Mother would "doctor" it up a bit with a little vanilla extract and sugar, so that I would drink it down. And there was always a fancy costume party the last night out. I've never forgotten how exotic it seemed to be able to choose from a whole rack of costumes.

Like all children, we took all this for granted, never realizing what a wonderful and different life we had led in these years before World War II when Alaska was still a territory of the United States. In early June of 1937 Mother and Jim and I boarded the train for our last trip to Cordova and "Outside", leaving the Kennecott scene of our childhoods behind. We left with only our personal possessions, and because of high shipping costs, even many of these were left behind. My father followed us in the fall of the year, thus ending our life in Kennecott. Mother and Dad were never able to return, even in later years, to visit what has become a national relic. But Jim and I are drawn by that powerful call of the north country to return again and again to visit that site of our childhood where, for us, something seems still unfinished.