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Just Reminiscing... Things in Fairbanks Have Changed Quite a Bit in Fifty Years  
By Lola Tilly

(Editor's note: The following is the principal address at the Felix Pedro Monument Rededication ceremony, 17 Mile, Steese Highway, on Sunday, July 22, 1984.)

Good afternoon, fellow Pioneers and friends.

We are here to reminisce, which reminds me of a cartoon of an elderly couple sitting in their rocking chairs. The man says to his wife, "I so looked forward to reminiscing when I got older, but now I can't remember a danged thing."

Early in 1929 when I was teaching at the University of Minnesota, the President, Charles Bunnell, of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines came to interview teachers, from Washington, D.C. where he had been on legislation.

He offered me the position as Professor and Head of Home Economics. It was intriguing but I told him I could not stay but one year, which would not be fair to him. He said that was all right, if I didn't want to stay a second year, he wouldn't want me.

So he left, with no commitment, to attend the legislature in Juneau. There, he met with opposition. One legislator said he would not vote for Dr. Bunnell's "50 thousand dollar woodshed" – the only building on campus. It was a Land Grant College and the Federal Government appropriated \$50,000 with the land grant.

Two weeks later, he wired from Fairbanks the contract with a salary of about \$3,000 and asked me to bring another teacher. I hired my office mate, Allene Sewell. Those were the days of no job advertising, no selection committee, no affirmative action and no tenure. Women were not paid as much as men.

It was a big decision. I was happy in my position, but I like challenges and a change might be good- which reminds me of the Catholic priest who was so depressed; confessions were disturbing, finances were in trouble and there were other problems.

So he consulted his psychiatrist who said he just needed a change. So he said to just take off that clerical collar, put on some old clothes and go out on the town. He did just that.

At the first stop there was the cutest little cocktail waitress, who said, "What will you have, Father Flannigan?: He said, "How did you know I was Father Flannigan?"

She said, "I'm Sister Theresa and I have the same psychiatrist as you have."

Well, I was not depressed, but I have a sense of humor and a great deal of faith. My one year extended through 29 years.

I had to borrow the money for the trip which took two weeks from my home in southern Illinois by train to Minneapolis, Pullman to Seattle and Alaska steamship to Seward, stopping in every port. The two day train from Seward included overnight at Curry. We arrived August 24, 1929.

At the college station Vema Sammons, the dormitory hostess, boarded the train to accompany us to the Nordale Hotel and the Model Café as Dr. Bunnell's dinner guest in absentia. Later he came to the hotel to greet us.

Since he did not drive, his student chauffer picked us up the next morning for orientation at the College. After that we took the railroad Brill car and walked up the hill to the old main building.

The friendly conductor, Art Marsh, always watched to see if we might be late crossing the Cushman Street Bridge. If so, he would back up and wait – typical of the casual way of life.

Transportation by Paul and Flora Greimann's bus came much later on the dirt road with one way traffic through the peat bog. There were three houses enroute.

Sometimes faculty and students walked the three miles on the railroad track. A .22 rifle was handy to bring home a grouse or rabbit for dinner.

Since there was no campus housing, we lived at the Nordale Hotel on Second Street – single rooms with hall bath at \$45 per month, and ate a la carte at the Model Café across the street. The only way to get a balanced meal within reason was to share with another. Bernie Carr, Pete Despot and Lil Angerman were very helpful.

Food prices were high. No weekend specials. Nothing by air, so the eggs were sometimes a little high. Later we had three kinds of eggs, ranch, boat and airborne – priced accordingly. The butcher shop cut frozen whole carcasses by electric saw while the customer waited.

Frozen chickens were shipped, dressed but not drawn with head and feet on. We learned to use evaporated and dry milk and dried eggs. There were no pennies until the Piggly Wiggly came in much later.

I went into Bredlies Shoe Repair to buy a pair of shoelaces. He threw down two pair. Said I might as well take them. The price would be "two bits" anyway, - no nickels and dimes.

Hal Bailey of Lavery and Bailey Grocery, 2<sup>nd</sup> and Cushman, liked to fool the tourists who complained about high prices. When a local customer asked for a dollar's worth of grapes, he very carefully cut off one grape, put it in a sack and took the dollar. Of course, it was a silver dollar since we had no paper money.

Since there were no florists, instead of corsages, men sent baskets of fruit to women friends. Martin Pinska always bought cakes at the church bazaars and had them sent to the hotel for the teachers.

Among those teachers were Anabeth Rennie Hanlon, Sylvia Earth Pratt, Laura Lee Carr and Mary Benjamin Adler. Anne Robinson Wien and Beth Green Wackwitz rented Mrs. Hell' log cabin without plumbing.

You know Mrs. Hess, later a member of the Board of Regents, was the one who selected the site for the College by tying her handkerchief to a bush on the hill.

She loved to tell about tourists passing her house on Cushman, peering in and saying, "Why they even have carpets on the floor," These same tourists wrapped their legs with newspaper or toilet paper as a deterrent to mosquitoes.

There were four churches, Episcopal, Catholic, Christian Science and Presbyterian (now at Alaskaland). I taught a Sunday school class there at 7<sup>th</sup> and Cushman. There were no paved streets; no city water and sewer systems; no radio or T.V.; very few cars; only one or two blacks; no Eskimos; only one bank – First National and no dial phones.

You just gave the name to the operator who might say, "Well, dear, this is Mrs. Hess' bridge day. Shall I call her at Minnie Clark's?" What service! Bless their hearts! Mrs. Hering, Brandt, Wien, Edna Lawson, and others.

The Empress Theater on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue showed black and white, silent films. I remember the first sound film was Al Jolson. Don Adler was the organist.

In addition to the church programs, there was no end to community activities. Ice skating was under the Cushman Bridge where the dog races started and the carved ice palace was erected for the ice carnival.

The ski trail was warm-up hut was where the cemetery is now. There was no military base. The *News-Miner* published the passenger list of the weekly train.

It was customary to meet arrival and departure trains. Eva McGown, with her "cherrio", was always there.

My work at the College involved long hours, a heavy schedule. No private office, no secretary, no budget, no phone. But classes were small – sometimes on a one to one basis with a chance to adapt courses to the needs of students.

Money was on the dole system. We had to present the need and verify it. We used kerogas stoves with portable ovens. That required management. There was one electric stove, one Hobart Mixer, all on D.C. current, of course.

No electric refrigerator or freezer. The great outdoors, fire escape and window boxes substituted.

Dr. Bunnell had a garden on the hill in front of the old Main. When I said I needed vegetables for my class, he did not reply, but when I returned from lunch, the vegetables were in the lab. Can you feature the College president digging and delivering vegetables?

But he was like that, very supportive of Home Economics, interested in research. He obtained enough canned salmon for my classes to experiment and develop original recipes, which were published in an attractive bulletin entitled "Canned Salmon Delicacies." He wrote the foreword.

We worked up specific recipes and published a bulletin on Sourdough. We developed recipes for local low bush cranberries, which were published in a New York newspaper.

Birdseye Frozen Foods were not yet on the market. We did some work on freezing food. Local potatoes were not fully accepted because they were said to be too sweet. With some chemical tests for sugar and starch we found with proper storage, local potatoes became more acceptable.

Another challenge was the opportunity to work with Otto Geist, Archaeologist, who brought Eskimo artifacts from diggings on St. Laurence Island. I wrote four articles on Eskimo food habits, clothing, shelter, and children's toys, which Dr. Bunnell hand-carried to Washington, D.C. to be published in a series on the National Journal of Home Economics.

The University offered short courses in order to serve townspeople and increase enrollment. The miners short course brought in prospectors and miners during the "freeze up: to live in the dormitories and register in various courses.

One man chose to live in a shack above the hill.

The popular cook, Anne Luke, saved leftovers in No. 10 cans, which she just sat outdoors to freeze until he picked them up.

He stacked the frozen blocks on stumps and boxes outside by the door. When he decided on his menu, he just hacked off a portion of each frozen pile. You could observe cross sections of baked beans, spaghetti and meatballs, sauerkraut and

wieners, stew or mashed potatoes and gravy. There would be a stack of sourdough hot cakes and biscuits. Very handy! No shopping at the super market.

One popular course was my camp cookery. Early on, one burly old prospector asked me how to make biscuits in the bush with no utensils.

I explained how to roll down the sides of the flour sack, make a well, add baking powder, salt, fat and dry milk; add water mix well with a clean stick to make a soft dough and bake on a stick to make a soft dough and bake on a stick or improvised reflector. He sat on the edge of his chair, listening and nodding.

When I finished, he said "That's right. I just wanted to see if you knew."

Little did he know that was "old hat" for me, since I had been teaching camp cookery to the forestry students at the University of Minnesota. But he had to test the young professor. I was accepted and could do no wrong after that.

Of course, there was the credit course in camp cookery with Tim Twitchell who got a job as cool with the road commission that paid for his entire four years of college; Allie Murphy, who held responsible jobs on the Dew Line; Jack Mabee, the famous Sourdough Jack of San Francisco who sent me an autographed copy of his book Sourdough Recipes; and Leo Mark Anthony who used it, teaching the University mining short courses after graduation.

Recently I had a letter from a former student which I'd like to quote:

"Back in 1932 there were 3 young men students of the college, batching in a cabin at the foot of the hill, belonging to Professor Gasser."

"Someone suggested we enroll in your camp cookery. I'll never forget how you taught us the making of baking powder biscuits, the cooking of green vegetables, cabbage, etc., the making of pies with dried apples; gravy, etc.

"In planning for Thanksgiving, Ken McClarty had sent outside for a 10 pound frozen turkey which we took to your lab and you showed us how to make the dressing, stuff and truss the bird. So we took it down to the cabin and put it in the oven to roast."

"It was a Thanksgiving I'll never forget. Ken and his brother, Herb, had invited two old sourdoughs living nearby to have dinner with us. The night before Ken had made 3 dried apple pies. We made 2 quarts of ice cream, (freezer, courtesy of your lab). We flavored it with wild cranberry juice. We had mashed local potatoes with local cabbage, cooked quickly according to your instructions to preserve the green color. We had cranberry jam with those baking powder biscuits I made. It was one heck of a memorable Thanksgiving Day dinner that lasted all afternoon." It was from Jerry

Knox of Olympia, Wash. I haven't seen him for more than 50 years. That's one of the fringe benefits of teaching, - the appreciation of former students.

It was an informal campus with an exceptionally well qualified faculty, offering a degree program that was accepted for transfer any place, full accredited. It became the University of Alaska in 1935.

Dr. Bunnell was a man of vision. His standards were high and he was a hard taskmaster.

No student could drop out because of finances. He could always create a job or arrange a loan, often using his own money. He was keen and perspective. One time some one was turning off the lights on the trail from the college station to old Main. He suspected young 6 year old Ernest Patty Jr.

He merely said "What time did you turn off those lights last night, Ernest?" Ernest, quickly said "about six o'clock" before he realized the trap.

During the summer he wore old clothes and sneakers to the office and showed tourists around the building. They thought he was the caretaker. He accepted the dollar tips with glee.

He kept the college open in spite of the budget cuts in the early thirties. We took voluntary cuts in salary. Miss Sewell took the semester off to finish her Masters.

I doubled up to teach her courses and I taught a summer course at the University of Minnesota to supplement my income.

The first trip outside was by train to Nenana, by riverboat to Tanana, and up the Yukon to Dawson, pushing a barge with freight and dogs, stopping at all the villages. We exchanged sternwheeler at Dawson, enroute Whitehorse where he took the narrow gauge train to Skagway. Then a Canadian steamship to Vancouver and Victoria.

On the return trip in the fall I disembarked at Valdez and took the stage over the Valdez trail. The stage was a 7-passenger Cadillac with no other passengers and an overnight stop at Copper Center.

My father was so intrigued with my hunting experience that he ordered a .22 rifle from Sears for me. It was still in the package but the driver assembled it and spotted the grouse and stopped for me to get out and aim.

I arrived in Fairbanks with enough grouse to share with friends.

In 1937 on commencement night I was married to Gray Tilly at the Presbyterian Church at 7<sup>th</sup> and Cushman. He served in the Navy in World War I. Later, he was an engineering student at Washing State University.

In 1923 he took "weekend" cruise to Southeaster Alaska, expecting to return to Seattle. But it turned out to be a long "weekend."

He worked as pursor on the old Estabeth mail boat out of Ketchikan; worked in the Juneau Treadwell gold mine; mined in the Chestachena area until gold "pay dirt" ran out and the food supply was down to beans and blueberries without sugar on sourdough hot cakes. Eventually he arrived in Fairbanks travelling for days by dog team.

We built our own house on Kellum Street, to the amazement of all who expected to retire outside. Then came the war and Gray thought he should fight a second world war.

Dr. Bunnell called me immediately and I went to work the same day. He created a job for me in the Extension Service that included 4-H clubs, Farmer Military food market, radio program, newspaper column, writing bulletins and giving demonstrations.

The military took over the campus with a hospital in the girls dorm, barracks and mess hall in old main. We were moved from the top floor to the basement and I went back to my old job as Professor and Head of Home Economics until I retired at age 65 in 1963.

That's when I started substituting in the public schools in Fairbanks not only because it was a challenge, and I like students, but it was an economic necessity.

The University would have been closed permanently if it had not been for Dr. Bunnell. After the military left the campus, we were moved back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor with expanded, renovated quarters. Until funds became available to finish the Eielson Building.

Since we were on the blue prints we eventually moved into the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of Eielson with new modern equipment in about 1950. We added the nursery school teaching lab on the same floor. Then set up the Home Management lab.

No funds for new constructions were available so the old president's house was moved and remodeled.

It now stands in the vicinity of the Fire Station known as the Bunnell House – the only one left of the original buildings.

I was fortunate to serve under the first four presidents. It has been exciting to be part of history in the making and it still is exciting to be a pioneer of 55 years through 25 years of Statehood.

But let's not live in the past. I salute you, my fellow pioneers. I cherish you love and concern. Thank you for joining me today!

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