

Ray Renshaw

Ray Renshaw
Oral History Project
Juneau, Alaska
October 21, 1999
Interviewed by: Jim King

[Please note: Ray and Vivian Renshaw are both in their 90's. Mr. Renshaw's health has failed in the past year and Mrs. Renshaw helped with the interview when she could. Since the interview, and before the tapes were transcribed, Mr. Renshaw passed away]

Jim: We're in the home of Ray Renshaw, who flew for the Alaska Game Commission back in the late 1930's and early 1940's. We are going to talk a little about those times. Ray, do you recall going down to get the Fairchild's with Sam White? When did you start working with the Game Commission? Was that in the 30's that you started doing that? That was before there were any Grumman's around. I know Sam White was pleased when the Service got hold of those Fairchild airplanes. Where was it that you had to go?

Ray: [inaudible]

Jim: You must have known Clarence Rhode well in those days. Do you remember any stories about Clarence? I started working for Clarence in the early 50's and I know we all thought a lot of him and he was really an excellent boss to have in those days in the Game Commission.

You flew five years for the Game Commission but then you flew many years after that, until you were in your 70's?

Ray: Yes

Jim: You flew Grumman's for years. I know you had a great career flying in Southeast Alaska.

Ray: Yes

Jim: Then you flew for logging companies for awhile? You did about every kind of flying in Southeast. It is a great area to work in. It is a privilege to have been free with an airplane. That is what I always thought and Southeast is just such a beautiful place and pleasant people. I know you had friends in every community in Southeast Alaska. I remember flying over to Angoon with you one time and when we stopped at the dock; it seemed like everybody that came by stopped to say "hello." You probably had flown everybody in Angoon at some time or another.

Ray: Yes.

Jim: Did you get in on any of those fish patrols trying to see whether the fish traps were open in the closed periods?

Ray: Yes.

Jim: Can you remember any of the game agents that rode with you?

Ray: No.

Jim: Those were interesting times. The fish business has certainly changed since then, hasn't it?

Ray: Yes.

Jim: You sure have a pretty view out here. You must have to get out and clip all these bushes every now and then. Do you have any stories you can think of from the days of the Alaska Game Commission?

Ray: [inaudible]

Jim: Those fishing periods always started early in the morning. Did you fly for Alaska Coastal during World War II?

Ray: Yes.

Jim: I think Clarence Rhode flew for Coastal during the war years.

Ray: Yes.

Jim: I know he loved to fly a Goose. He thought the world of that airplane. The airplanes were certainly the lifeline to all the small communities, even Sitka and Ketchikan.

Ray: Yes, and Petersburg, too.

Jim: Did you fly the Grumman's on instruments? I know one of the nice things about the Grumman's were if the weather got down, you could land and taxi through a fog bank. Nobody does that anymore, I don't guess. I remember going to Sitka one time, being on the water for half an hour. Do you ever see any whales out in front here?

Ray: Occasionally.

Jim: Lots of boats out here in Auke Bay in the summer time. It is sure nice to have a wonderful view like this.

Ray: Yes.

Jim: Did you learn to fly in Southeast Alaska?

Ray: In Seattle.

Jim: But you came to Alaska as a young man? It is a different world here in a lot of ways than it was then, as far as the people are concerned. It's a nice place to live. Mary Lou and I like it, even with the rains. We live where we can see the airport there at Sunny Point. I saw a couple of floatplanes taking off this morning. I like to watch the airplanes.

I hope you get to read the report from Sam White. That was a recording made quite a few years ago. He tells about flying for Fish and Wildlife way back then. Did you know Al Crop?

Ray: No.

Jim: He flew during World War II also. That was nice that Evelyn Brown got to talk to Sam White before he died. She was able to get some stories from him. He certainly got around in his day.

There is still a picture of Noel Wein and Sam White down in the Red Dog Saloon. I have to stop every once in awhile just to look at it. They have some other pictures from Wein Airlines.

I had a nice chat with Jay Ellis the other day. You must have known him for a lot of years. He is a nephew of Bob Ellis? They must have worked for Ellis Airlines.

The guy that is collecting a lot of nice flying stories around here is Jim Ruttsala(??).

Vivian: Yes, he has been to see Ray several times. I wish now that I had listened more closely to a lot of these stories that Ray has spun over the last 20 years.

Jim: Things change slowly from year to year but when you are looking back 50 or more years, it is way different!

Vivian: This past year, Ray's memory has really been affected. It happened rather suddenly, actually.

Jim: Memory is always a problem, isn't it?

Vivian: Right!

Jim: Even in high school.

Vivian: I can remember having lots of trouble in school with tests. That's when my memory always seemed to fail. I've spent most of my life dealing with numbers so I guess that has reinforced it a little.

Jim: You were involved with groceries for a lot of years.

Vivian: Yes, since 1938 when we opened our first grocery store in Juneau – Case Lot Groceries(??) – were you here then?

Jim: No, in 1938, I was in grade school in New England.

Vivian: Well, we are a little older than you. We just had our 90th birthdays. Ray's was on the 26th of September, and mine was October 7th.

Jim: Well, you both look in good shape.

Vivian: We are doing pretty good. On my birthday, some friends invited me to go to lunch and when the lady came to pick me up, we saw this double rainbow all across the

Bay. I have a picture here, which didn't turn out too good but you can see the doubleness. I thought it was a pretty nice birthday present.

Jim: You have a great view. I'm sure it is different every day, never the same. We see the tides come and go. We see the boats coming through the channel and occasionally, they get stuck in the mud.

Vivian: Is this a project that you have been working on for some time?

Jim: Almost a year now. The first person that I talked to was Malcolm Gruening. He has passed away since then. I had a pretty good chat with him down in Oregon.

Vivian: I remember Malcolm very well. He was taking a bunch of pictures in Juneau. It must have been in the early 40's for Holiday Magazine. It was the first issue and he was trying to get pictures of companies that were run by husbands and wives. Of course, that covered Ray and me and Mr. and Mrs. Hammer across the street, Wilbur and Dorothy Irving, and just a handful of other people. When the issue came out, it didn't have anything at all about that. We were all pretty excited.

I remember he took some pictures of Juneau from Willoughby Avenue looking up on the mountains. When it came out in the magazine, everybody said, "where in the heck is that?" It was really strange, just one of those odd shots that he took. To Malcolm, it was expressive of Juneau but to most people, it was just a peculiar location. That magazine is long gone, you probably don't even remember it.

Jim: No, I don't remember it at all.

Vivian: I hope Ray was able to tell you a little bit about some of his experiences.

Jim: It is fun to talk to him. He remembers all those things. I'm sure he is the senior surviving member of the old Game Commission flying crew.

Vivian: Also, he is the senior member of the Alaska Coastal Airlines. Ray flew for Alaska Coastal for a long time. He had to retire after Alaska took it over when he turned 60.

Jim: But he flew quite a while after that, didn't he?

Vivian: Oh yes, he flew several years for Champion when they were talking about putting the pulp mill out here. When they decided against that, he went to give Dean Williams a hand at Southeast Skyways. They were having pilot trouble, and Ray said, "well, I'll stay with you for 6 months." He was with them for 5 years. He flew quite a bit up until the time we were married. He had just turned 70 when we got married and I turned 70 the next week. It has been a wonderful life for us.

Jim: Did you know Clarence Rhode?

Vivian: Just slightly. Ray, of course, knew him real well.

Jim: I remember someone saying that Clarence Rhode was the second most important person in Alaska after Earnest Gruening back in the 40's. I have been trying to get some stories about Clarence because people have forgotten that name. They don't know anything about him.

Vivian: Of course, when he was lost in that plane crash, it was a big event but it was 21 years before they found the wreckage. By then, a lot of the people who had known him were already gone. Clarence and Ray were real good friends.

Jim: He was quite a guy. I worked for Clarence for 8 years when he was the Chief before he disappeared. I flew some on the search. I think those of us that worked with him back then still miss him.

Vivian: Of course. I understand that he was a very nice man.

Jim: I think it is real neat to be able to visit with both of you here in your lovely house.

Vivian: I hope we can remain in the house. It is sometimes “iffy” when we get to be our age. Sometimes changes are in the offing and we keep our fingers crossed that we can manage to stay here. We had somebody staying in the house with us for awhile but she had an emergency with her family back East so she had to leave. We are trying to work around the situation now. My daughter lives here in Juneau and Ray’s daughter lives in Ketchikan so they come and see us often. You know, the interesting thing about getting old is that you remember the influential people in the community - when they were little kids and sometimes the memories are pretty sharp, too.

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