Alaska days recalled (draft)

Anne Gaynor

Mr. and Mrs. George Keys played a role in the early history of Alaska. Now residents of Anacortes, they both helped establish the first University of Alaska, then known as the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mining, in 1923.

"I went to Alaska in 1899," Keys said, "My father was up there mining, and I joined him in Dawson. In 1904 we went by canoe to Fairbanks, following the gold stampede."

Keys worked as a miner and Mrs. Keys proudly reminded him that in 1910 he was the Alaska champion in rock drilling. What is rock drilling? "They see who can drill the deepest hole in a granite boulder in 15 minutes," she said, "And they do it by hand -- not power tools."

Keys and his brother were the first Alaskans to join the aviation section of the Signal Corps when World War I broke out, and they received front-page coverage in a Seattle newspaper. The paper detailed their journey through Alaska in 50 degrees below zero weather. They became engine mechanics, not pilots, because, "You had to have a college education to fly and we didn't have that," Keys said.

Discharged at the end of the war, Keys found himself broke with no way to return to Alaska, although he wanted to get back to some mining claims. Always resourceful, he became a boilermaker and eventually returned to Alaska in midwinter.

"There is no gold mining in the winter," he said, "So we started up a coal mine in Suntrana. Then I heard that the university was being started, and I thought I might take some mineralogy and geology classes, so I went to Fairbanks to sign up."

Fairbanks was to be the downfall of his mining career because that is where he met his future wife and settled down. "She said no more mining," he said, smiling, "I thought it would be better to have her."

Mrs. Keys was living in Spokane when the president of the Alaskan college, upon the recommendation of the president of the University of Idaho where she graduated, came and asked her to be his secretary.

"I was the first one of the staff to arrive on campus, that was in 1922," she said, "My official title was secretary to the president, but I was also registrar, bookstore manager, librarian and assistant accountant."

She helped get the school ready to open and recalled that when it opened on Sept. 13, 1922, "There were six students registered and eight people on the staff--six teachers and two administrators."

Meanwhile, Keys had discovered that the college's heating system left a great deal to be desired. "Half the radiators were frozen up in the building," he said, "It was 60 degrees below."

He approached the college president, got the job fixing the heat and eventually became chief engineer for the school.

Keys still chuckles when he recalls how he got his first date with Mrs. Keys. As one of the few women in Fairbanks, she was naturally besieged with requests, but Keys used an attention-getting approach. "It's your first and last chance," he told her after asking for the date, and she accepted. They were married in 1925.

After living in Alaska for almost 10 more years, the Keys were ready for a change. "We'd been there long enough," Keys said, "We wanted to live where there were fruit trees and it was warmer."

They started to look for a new home. "We were looking for something on an island," Mrs. Keys said, "Something more like Alaska. We were afraid of getting into anything city-like." They bought a 10-room house and a 267-acre farm on Orcas Island, where, for 38 years they farmed, raising sheep, cattle and chickens.

Farming wasn't their only activity, however. While in Alaska, Keys began experimenting with making jewelry using fossilized mammoth and walrus ivory. He used mammoth tusks that had been unearthed in mining operations.

The fossil ivory jewelry making has been the Keys' main source of income for many years. Keys designs and makes the jewelry himself; Mrs. Keys does the bookkeeping.

Mrs. Keys said that, even though they are supposed to be retired (he is 84, she is 81 years old), "The ivory still keeps us very busy." The run a full-scale wholesale jewelry business from their home.

"Make sure you say it is wholesale," Mrs. Keys said, "We don't do any retail business here."

They sold the farm in 1973 and moved to Anacortes. "We were getting too old, had too big a place," Mrs. Keys explained.

Both are delighted with Anacortes and enjoy their life here. "When we came here, we didn't know a soul," Mrs. Keys said, "But we're in the most wonderful neighborhood, we have the most wonderful neighbors. We like Anacortes, and we're not kidding."

This story was transcribed from a news clipping in the UA Archives, LarVern Keys collection. It is undated and the heading of the newspaper is missing, however, it appears to be from the Anacortes American.

Real-life Alaskan pioneers recall adventures (draft)

Gene Murphy

In a memento-filled house in Anacortes live two real Alaskan pioneers -- George and LarVern Keys -- who have stories to tell that won't quit.

Each of them has seen enough and experienced enough for several people. Put together, their stories are almost overwhelming.

George took part in what he called the "biggest stampede in the world," when he went to the famous Klondike gold fields in 1899. He was all of 7 years old.

LarVern was a latecomer. She embarked on the two-week trip from Seattle to Fairbanks in 1922. She had been hired by the president of what was later to become the University of Alaska to help him start the institution.

The pair lived in and experienced Alaska until 1935, when they moved to Orcas Island.

George's story first.

He moved to the Yukon's gold fields with his mother and two brothers (one 12 years old, the other 4) and an aunt in 1899. They joined George's father, a miner from Helena, Mont., whom they hadn't seen in four years.

The five women and children took a steamer in July 1899 to Skagway, on the Alaskan panhandle. Then on to Whitehorse, in the Yukon Territory over the infamous Chilkoot Pass.

George describes this pass as "solid with people" making the arduous climb. By this time the Klondike gold rush was two years old and a narrow-gauge railway had been built up and over the pass. At that time it took the baggage, but people still had to hike up.

Then they had to walk 10 or 15 miles from the pass to Whitehorse. "The ponds of water along the way were full of mosquito larvae," he remembered. "But we drank it anyway, straining the mosquito larvae out with a handkerchief. It's a wonder we didn't get sick."

At Whitehorse George's mother was able to arrange passage down the Yukon River to Dawson, the town nearest the goldfields.

"When we arrived at Dawson City, my father was waiting for us," said George. "That was a great reunion for we hadn't seen him for four years. Sure was wild! No docks, we just landed on the beach. It sure was a wild looking bunch of men, not many women or children."

George's father took them to his cabin in town. A few days later, they walked the 10 miles to his mining claim on Bonanza Creek, the heart of the gold fields.

According to George, his father's claim was "one of the richest on the Klondike." Unfortunately he didn't make a killing with it because "litigation always seemed to lick him."

Other miners moved in, said George, and by the time his father's lawsuits were heard back in Ottawa, "they had tunneled through and taken all the gold."

During this period in the Yukon, George had his one year of formal elementary school education. He was able to go to the sixth grade in a school, built by his father, on Cleary Creek.

In 1904, his father threw in the towel and moved his family to Fairbanks. "We lashed a couple of canoes together and went down the Yukon catamaran style," George recalled. A steamer picked them up after four or five days and took the family the balance of the way to its new home.

The family went back into gold mining in the Fairbanks area. George claims that during those days, both in the Klondike and in Fairbanks, they took out some $1.3 million in gold, which was then selling at $16 an ounce.

However, they only "made a living," George said, pointing out that between 1899 and 1906 they had to burn some 16,000 cords of wood to thaw out the ground so digging could take place.

The family mined in Fairbanks until 1917. "We were employing up to 80 miners at a time," said George.

George was right in there working along with the other men. Until 1917, when he quit to join the Army, he worked 10 hours a day as a hoisting engineer, operating the engines that raised the gold ore up the shaft to ground level.

When the U.S. entered World War I, George and a brother traveled 375 miles, by "sleds and horses," to get to Cordova so they could leave Alaska. The pair went to Kelly Field, Texas, because "I wanted to be a flier."

However, he wasn't accepted because he wasn't a college graduate. So George settled for being an airplane mechanic in the 172 Aero Squadron, which served in France.

Included in the many photo albums the Keys have put together over the years are snapshots taken overseas during George's Word War I days. Many precede that period as well, and of course many follow it.

Back in Fairbanks after the war, George and a brother went into "contract mining," opening up a coal mine. They spent about two years on that job, and then George decided since he was "short on education" he would take some classes in mineralogy and geology at the newly formed Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines.

Which brings us to soft-spoken LarVern, who keeps insisting that George's story is the interesting one.

A graduate of Spokane High School, she went to the University of Idaho.

During her college years, she taught typing, corrected papers, served as secretary to the dean and worked in the registrar's office.

LarVern finally graduated, at age 26, in June 1921, with a bachelor's degree in political science. She was second in her class of 80.

There was no Phi Beta Kappa chapter on the campus when she graduated, but when this honorary society appeared in Moscow, in 1928, she was made a member. This is unusual, she explained, because normally membership is not granted after graduation.

The institution that was later to become the University of Alaska was being put together just then and its president was out looking for a staff. He inquired at Idaho and LarVern was recommended to him.

He interviewed her at her home and hired her on the spot. She was to be his secretary and keep the books, as well as be registrar, librarian and bookstore manager.

Within weeks she was on her way to Alaska. She stopped over in Seattle long enough to buy necessary accounting books, registrar's materials and library materials for the new college.

"I must have had an awful lot of gall to think I could pick out all that material," she said.

At the end of her two-week trip to Fairbanks, she found "one building sitting in a hayfield." The power plant for the facility was in the basement. (That's a key point in our story.)

LarVern found out that she was the first of the eight-member staff to be hired -- there were six professors and two administrators. When they were finally ready to open, she "registered six students on the first day." There were eventually 23 students in the first class.

"We charged $2 each and the first day I put the $12 in a Van Duke Cigar box and took it to the basement to find a safe place for it," she recalled. "I put it on a shelf in the engine room." She turned and smiled at her husband. "There he was."

George had gotten a job in the college's power house because the pipes kept freezing and he volunteered to fix the problem. He did and was hired on the spot.

He worked at night and went to school during the day. He later became the university's chief engineer, staying with the school for 12 years. She remained with the college until 1924, when she and George became engaged.

The couple was married on Jan. 3, 1925 in Seward.

Ten years later, after further adventures in Alaska, for which they have photographic evidence and for which there is no room in this story, they "came to the States."

Several years before, George had begun to make jewelry out of ivory, using both the ivory from long extinct mammoths (which was being uncovered in gold mines) and more recent walrus ivory.

"I learned how to do it myself," he said. He liked doing it so much he decided to make it "my life's work."

The Keys began to buy ivory in large quantities. When they left Alaska and moved to their new home on Orcas Island, they brought with them some 16,000 pounds of the material. It is this ivory that George turned into jewelry sold throughout stores in Alaska and elsewhere, and which has provided their livelihood until now.

The 38 years the couple spent on their 267-acre Orcas Island home is yet another chapter in their lives. More stories can be related about their life and times there, but this is not the time nor the place.

After searching for four years, they found their present home in Anacortes, and moved here in 1973. Yet another chapter to be written someday.

This story was transcribed from a news clipping in the UA Archives, LarVern Keys collection. It is undated and the heading of the newspaper is missing, however, it appears to be from the Anacortes American.

Building the First Power Plant

LarVern Keys was the first Secretary for the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. She was asked to compile some of her memories of her experiences while there. Her husband, George Keys, had a large hand in the building of the power plant to accommodate the growth of the college.

By LarVern Keys

"We are growing! Two wings have been added to the building, a boys' dormitory is in progress, more heat is needed, more electricity, and more water. A new power plant is needed!" So mused President Bunnell back in '23-'24 while listening to the electric generator buzzing away in the miniature power plant located in the college basement.

Jack Sullivan had operated the plant -- consisting of a boiler, and electric generator, a water pump! He started with a 7-kw generator. As demand for power increased, a 15-kw generator was installed. Then when the decision was made to build a new power plant, a 50-kw G.E. generator had been installed. All this in the cramped quarters of the original "power plant" in the basement of the "College."

Jack Sullivan had some mining claims he wanted to develop, so he wished to leave the College. George Keys was attending the Mining Short Course and handling the night shift. President Bunnell asked him to become Chief Engineer, plan the new power plant, equip it, and then run it using student help. George agreed, providing he had full control, could select his own helpers, hire and if necessary, fire any of them. The president's only restriction was that the boys keep their grades up. George prohibited smoking, drinking, and visiting while on the job. He permitted a small amount of studying if it did not interfere with their work.

Since the decision to build the new power plant had been made, things began to happen. In October, the tunnel, which was to connect the College and the new power plant, was planned and begun. In November, the president decided to go to Juneau and then on to Washington D.C. —no planes then—a four-day trip by rail from Fairbanks to Seward, steamer to Seattle, and then by rail to Washington D.C. He wanted to take with him detailed plans for the new power plant and, from George, a detailed list of equipment, machinery, electrical equipment and supplies— everything—even right down to the amount of nails, pain, everything. He was allowed $18,500 for the building, equipment, supplies. That was the total!

George and the two civil engineering men, Archie Truesdell and Roland Chase, who were working on the plans, and a number of the rest of us worked all that night —a cup of coffee at our elbows, a pencil "glued" to our hand and a sheet of paper in front of us.

Anyway, the next morning saw President Bunnell on his way with several brief cases loaded with material on the new power plant.

George had had a hard struggle with Truesdell and Chase (the professors authorized to draw the plans). They did not want to plan for a wide door at the back corner of the building. George insisted on a six-foot door through which a load of four-foot wood would be brought in for the boiler. He maintained that a five-foot door was absolutely necessary and he preferred a six-foot door! His reason: in order that too much time would not have to be used in loading the wood on the cart. Since he was doing so much alone, time required on various jobs meant a lot. He got his six-foot door! The wood was green and there was no time to get it dry. Regrettably, that meant using green wood.

While the president was away on his business trip, the plans were completed and work began on the new building. A tunnel from the College to the new power plant also began. It had to be about 180 feet long.

While a trench some ten feet deep was being dug, George took the College truck and with two students—Albert and George Dickey—drove to the "Fourteen Mile" for sustainable timbers. They chopped down one fir for a sixty-foot gin pole. Then they felled and trimmed sufficient trees for the timbers in the new tunnel.

The tunnel was soon taking shape. When completed, it was six and a half feet high, four feet wide, and the length was one hundred eighty feet. The sides and roof were completely timbered with a packed dirt floor.

Besides its own lighting system along one side, it carried two electrical cables, a water line, two six-inch steam pipes, which were 180 feet long, a return line from the radiators, a telephone line, and a fire alarm line.

A good fire door was installed halfway up the tunnel.

There was an electrical switchboard in the former power plant in the College building. The same location was kept for the new switchboard. Professor Brown of the Civil Engineering Department helped with the installation.

And so, when the President returned from his trip to the States, the tunnel had been completed, the area resurfaced, the road reopened and cars were passing over it as though it wasn't there.

There was only one regret! If only it could have been a concrete tunnel! This one answered the purpose but every so often, some timbers had to be replaced, repairs had to be made to keep it in working order.

Well, there wasn't the money to make a concrete tunnel! So everybody did their level best to make something that would meet the need -- and they did it. The tunnel was still operating satisfactorily when George and I left in July of 1935.

As for the power plant itself, George planned to move the boiler down from the College as soon as the cement floor was ready. He had been busy getting the boiler ready for its new location. It weighed about 20,000 pounds. He had disconnected it, raised it onto rollers. He tore out a space in the wall of the building, made an incline up to the ground level, then, using hydraulic jacks, moved the boiler up the incline and across to the power plant. Sounds easy, doesn't it? But...well, I was glad to see that boiler calmly waiting to be "hydraulic jacked" into its new quarters. When the foundation was ready for it in the new building, with cables, a Spanish Windlass—and a lot of "beef" —it was moved through the large "to be" fuel door into the building and onto its new foundation.

I learned the president (with all due respect, we often called him "the Prex."!!!) didn't think George could possibly do it. I will admit it just looked impossible to me—but I will also have to admit I was very proud of my husband and greatly relieved when I saw that boiler resting safely and securely on its new foundation.

George and the Prex. had disagreed over the smokestack. Finally the president had insisted on ordering the cheaper and lighter-weight stack. Later, due to having to burn green wood, that smoke stack buckled from an accumulation of creosote and had to be replaced, this time with the heavier and better-grade stack. That stack was still in place and giving satisfaction when we left on July 1, 1935.

However, remember only $18,500 had been allowed to build and equip that new plant, so it took considerable figuring and cutting of corners to come up with a workable and satisfactory power plant. We continued to "grow" and several years later a "twin" boiler, an 80 hp. Ames, was purchased and placed beside "No. 1."

There was a 50-kw General Electric turbine generator, direct current, also one 25-kw De Lavel generator. A glass partition had been added to provide a dust-free room for these generators. The reason we ordered direct current generators was the saving in money. We used turbine instead of engines so there would be no oil in the return water, that water was to be used in the boilers. The boilers were hand fired for several years, and then automatic stokers were used. Other equipment included a vacuum pump which pulled the water back from the radiators in the building; a pump for the well under the new power plant area in the building; and a pump for the well under the new power plant.

One day, we had a surprise. A cat had appeared from "nowhere." It was cold and had wedged itself in the power plant. Residents on the campus were not allowed to have a cat or dog. However, since it was so very cold, George permitted the cat to stay in the power plant until the weather was warmer. That was a fun side issue in the power plant that winter.

So we went along for several years. We were continuing to grow, so we changed to coal for fuel. The coal was delivered by the railroad from the Healy River coal mine. The railroad placed a carload of coal on the siding at the College Station. Then the coal haulers, Tom Ek and Joe Flakne, principally, using the College truck would take over, unload the car and haul the coal up to the coal bin at the power plant. Later, when we were using more coal, Carl Weller, Harry Lundell, Bob Hoppe, Bruce Thomas, Paul Wickstrom and Jim Johnson joined the coal gang as extras. The coal car had to be emptied in three days, so that meant work—and how! The boys worked on a contract

basis. It was hard work—but they were workers and made good money—if they stayed with it and organized their time.

A number of the boys who worked for George were with him for the full four years of their college careers. A number of them are gone now, but in this last year, 1983-84; he has had letters and phone calls from four of those boys.

As soon as the power plant was ready for the "this and that" installations, the carpenters moved upstairs to complete the apartment for us, and I feel they did themselves proud.

There was a long hall in the center— living and dining room at one end and the kitchen at the other end. On one side of the hall was the bedroom and a wider hall area at the head of the stairs.

Glory be! Was I happy! Such a roomy, light, and convenient apartment after being cooped up in three tiny basement rooms with three tiny windows, out of which all I could see was feet!

The kitchen was a nice big room with four windows. It had a sink and two water faucets, that was all! There were no cupboards, no work counter or shelves, and no chimney. George hustled around and found a couple cupboards with class doors that had been discarded in the Home Economics Lab. We bought a kitchen table and four "ice cream" chairs, some linoleum—but there was no chimney! We had to eat! Finally, we bought a gasoline range. Gasoline! Of all things in a power plant! But we had to have something to cook on. Electricity was not allowable because of the amount of power it would take. We used that gasoline range until we left in '35. George enclosed the sink and put in cupboards below it. Next to the sink, he rustled some wall cupboards, put in two laundry tubs below them with a nice counter top. That was my "work table" and "laundry" department. We bought an electric washing machine and put up four clothes lines in one end of the room—and we were all set for that department. There was no way to send out laundry and we were trying to save our money.

The bedroom was small, but large enough for a path between the bed and the dresser. The living room was large. I had bought a little furniture in Spokane before coming north, so when we moved into the apartment, we had enough for a "starter." I had bought a table which could be used as a library or dining table. It answered the purpose very well in our living room.

As for the bathroom! That was the only bathtub on campus—outside of the one in the president's residence! At first, we had lots of requests for bath privileges. Of course we had steam heat and we were very comfortable and happy there. The equipment in the power plant below made it noisy but that was part of the deal. I didn't mind it as much as George did, but he had the responsibility 24 hours a day and knew every little sound! In fact, we finally turned our bedroom over to one of the girl students, Rosamond Weller, who was helping me, and slept away from the apartment. Those last years—1930-35—I was back in the president's office as secretary, registrar and what have you.

After we moved into the apartment, no refrigerator. We needed some place for perishables. George dug out an area off the side of the tunnel and made a nice cool storage room for our vegetables, supplies, and what have you.

The college, in time, built a steam heated garage, so then we had a car and a nice warm stall for it.

George decided he wanted a hotbed. He built it alongside the windows of the generator room. The heat from that room was sufficient for lettuce, radishes and so on. Since we were on a twenty-four hour long shift, you might say, the hotbed was a little relaxation and we enjoyed it. As another diversion, an "entertainment," George built a birdhouse attached to the windowsill right above the kitchen sink, leaving it open on the window side so we could watch the birds in the nest. They got so used to me at the sink, they didn't mind and they were lots of fun. Something happened to the little wife. The male stood our on his porch and yelled until he attracted a second wife. She moved in and tore out everything, built a new nest, laid her eggs, and they raised a family! It was fun to watch and they didn't pay any attention to me.

There were times when the restrictions got a bit trying! Sometimes, in the winter —we would take some beans, wieners perhaps -- and other food -- down on the flat -- build a fire, and "eat out" -- perhaps at 20 degrees below zero. Sounds crazy, I know, but we enjoyed it and it was a relaxation to get away from the power plant.

One day, when George was coming back from a creek where he had been chopping out some ice for our improvised "ice box," he passed a lady and five little girls. Inquiring where they were going, the lady introduced herself as Mrs. Robert Bloom and the little girls as Girl Scouts. They were out for a nature walk and were on their way to the College.

George invited them to come to the Power Plant for hot chocolate.

I was taking a correspondence painting course and was in the middle of a "lesson." This interested Mrs. Bloom, who was very active with the Girl Scouts. She asked if I would take a painting class. The outcome was a weekly class of five girls "painting" in my kitchen, and we continued the class for over two years.

Some 50 years later at a University Alumni dinner, a little short plump lady came to me: "You won't know me, but I was one of the five girls in your painting class." I remembered her, also, all the paint those girls left on the chairs in my kitchen. But it was a lot of fun and wonderful to meet one of them again, now a University graduate and a contented grandmother!

The College was growing! More water was needed. The Sturgell house had been moved to become the "Dean's" house. In the area between it and the power plant, a building holding a 50,000-gallon water tank was constructed. That solved the water problem -- for the time being at least. And so the "new power plant" had been built and was operating.

However, it did not remain the "New Power Plant" for long. The College was growing. In 1935, the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines became the University of Alaska. There were more students, more buildings, more need for a larger power plant and water storage.

In 1937, the territorial Legislature appropriated $125,000 for the construction and equipping of a reinforced concrete power plant during the summer of 1938. Concrete storage bins sufficient for 200 tons of coal, a steel water tank, capacity 60,000 gallons,

under-ground concrete conduits for water and heat distribution, a new 175 hp. Babcock and Wilcox water tube boiler, and a 60KW turbine-generator were added to the plant. The main building of the power plant was 58 by 54 feet. Provision was made for the additional equipment as it became necessary.

The University continued to grow, and finally George's dream of a Power Plant below the road became a reality. The account of the development and building of that power plant I must leave to someone else. I understand the present plant "went on line" in January of 1964.

Then, in 1934, while Secretary to President Bunnell, I assembled all the important scholastic material I could get together and sent it to Dean Bolton, Dean Emeritus of the College of Education, University of Washington. Dean Bolton used this material especially to gain membership for the University of Alaska in the Organization of Northwest Colleges and Universities.

We both consider it to have been a great privilege— and a lot of work, heartaches, and more work— to have been associated with the University of Alaska.