

# The Old Chena Townsite: Early Day Railroads and Mining at Fairbanks

NLUR Field Interview with Niilo Koponen  
Fairbanks, Alaska - August 29, 2004

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January 19, 2005 review comments by Niilo in italics

Niilo Koponen - NK  
Pete Bowers - PB  
Robert Betts - RB

RB Today is Sunday, August 29, 2004. I'm in Fairbanks, Alaska. This afternoon Pete Bowers and I are going to go out with Niilo Koponen and look at the old Chena Townsite and possibly some other historical locations around Chena Pump Road and Chena Ridge. Niilo is going to take us on a tour of locations he's familiar with of historical interest. It's been a real smoky summer here in Fairbanks, one of the worst fire seasons the interior has ever experienced. In fact the worst in 101 years, the hottest summer and the driest August ever in Fairbanks.

Recorded in Pete's Chevy Suburban while driving:

NK Actually at Gold Hill [Ester Area] that's also where they washed out the baby mammoth that is in the deep freeze at the American Museum of Natural History [New York].

RB I think they brought that one back. Just a few years ago. That was just the trunk and foreleg?

PB It was on display temporarily [at UAF Museum]. They sent it back home.

NK It was just the front of it, the rear half had been eaten by Dire wolves. It probably panicked, ran away, and fell into a crevasse.

PB That was found on Gold Hill?

NK Yeah. Actually there's one circle of bison heads, all facing outwards that we uncovered down by Cripple sub-level *when we were working on the dragline*. What I think happened then is of course they formed a defensive circle in a sand storm and all smothered. I never did find out where ... I just saw the skulls and some of the bones, perhaps they had been slaughtered by Natives and then dragged into that position but I don't think so.

- RB At the museum on display are some bone projectile points. Those were supposedly washed out during hydraulic mining. Do you know anything about where those were found?
- NK No, not those. I did know one old miner who claimed that he found a frozen mastodon and then fed the meat to his dogs. He said he tried some of it but it tasted like a boiled string mop. Anyway, right back at the [railroad] crossing on the left hand side going in is where the old station used to be.<sup>1</sup>
- RB What station was that?
- NK Ester siding, also known as Ester Junction. Back in the woods there was where the Panama Canal drills were.
- PB We're at the confluence here of Sheep Creek Rd. and Sheep Creek cut-off road. The berms we're looking at there – is that quite likely part of the original berm of Ester siding?
- NK I don't know, could have been. When they first built – extended the narrow gage all the way to North Nenana and then in 1922 they standard gauged it. Then it was from Happy Siding down at the other end to Fairbanks – it was three rail. Then in, I think, 1920 they abandoned the Chena Branch, but then in 1932 they abandoned the narrow gage stretch and stopped using the Edison Beach battery car which they called the “College Electric Car Service.” When I came up here in '52 the sign “order board” you know – chalked in – “Train 1 to Seward” such and such a time, “Train 2 coming in” at such and such a time – you know the McKinley Park shuttle. Underneath there was a section of the sign *that said* “College Electric Car Service.” Jim Hitchcock tore apart the old railroad station and I bought a lot of the stuff.
- PB That was the railroad station at Chena?
- NK No, at Fairbanks.
- PB The original Fairbanks station?
- NK No that wasn't the original one but that was the original federal one.
- PB That would have been built about 1920?
- NK 1921. Somebody chalked in “Service Temporarily Suspended.” Actually, the narrow gage, the electric car, the battery charged....quit *in 1932* .... and disappeared - I've been trying to figure out where it went to - but then they got a Brill gas car and that lasted until 1935 when the Matanuska Colony went in and

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<sup>1</sup> We are driving north in Pete's Chevy Suburban at the road intersection between the cut-off road from the Parks Highway and the T-intersection with Sheep Creek Road that goes east to the University and west to Goldstream Valley. We park in the vicinity the railroad tracks crossing the cut-off road near the intersection. .

so they needed some way to get from Matanuska to Anchorage, there was no road at that time, and so “ding, ding, ding, back and forth.” And of course there was a regular train out to the end of the line, to the coal mine. That was torn up I think during the war, although the service had been discontinued beyond Palmer. It ran another 13 or 14 miles beyond Palmer.

PB North of Palmer?

NK *No, West. There was an anthracite [coal] mine that the Navy was developing at Chicaloon but then they switched to oil. There was also a branch north from Sutton to Eskka and the Evan Jones Mine from the Chickaloon branch.*

PB The crossing here at Sheep Creek Road, you mentioned that there was another track that was narrow gage? I always assumed that what we see now, the present Alaska Railroad wide gate track, followed exactly on the old ballast of the narrow gage railroad.

NK It was further up the hill. When we go back and head towards Chena...the narrow gage line to Fairbanks started out at the old junction between Chena Pump and Chena Ridge Road. And so, it went from there to College Station, which still exists – it’s been moved and converted into a house.

PB Now where is College Station?

NK Where the bridge is now is very close to where the station was and there’s a photograph of them using ..... to load dirt and fill on the narrow gage cars when they were building north. You can tell the location was right there where the bridge was.

PB Is that the bridge across Noyes Slough?

NK No, this is the Fairbanks Street bridge. So the station was..... in fact you used to be able on the Fairbanks Street bridge to look toward the junction and see the right-of-way where it was, but that was many years ago. I mean it’s been plowed over and trees have grown up and its disappeared. But it was there.

[Break in Recording]

### Old Chena Townsite

PB What did “Strawberry Joe” do there?

NK Oh, he was an old timer, he homesteaded there, I think only 40 acres or something like that. Maybe more. He had a log cabin there and grew strawberries (*still there in the 1950s*).

RB [We’re on the Parks Highway, just before the U of A Museum sign - the old railroad right of way crossed what is now the highway at this location]

- PB That's the original narrow gage [right of way]? From that point its headed out towards Chena?
- NK Yeah, through the junction - and the other went up that way through the woods. And the Old Chena Road went to Fairbanks. From College Station it went directly - both right-of-ways are the same. To firm the right-of-way and broaden it a lot of the old narrow gage equipment was dumped in and then filled over.
- PB As part of the ballast?
- NK Yeah. So this is the right-of-way of the old Chena branch.
- RB [Now we're heading down Chena Pump Road]
- NK The Chena branch was built several years before the Fairbanks branch. It started at Chena because they brought the equipment in by riverboat. This dip was washed out by the F.E. Company with hydraulics in order to carry off the [hydraulic mining] runoff.
- PB Oh, they widened that ditch by Palo Verde Road?
- NK Yeah. This is where the old road went across. It also, right here - where now they're trying to fill again - the rumor is they want to make a golf course there, but that used to be a homestead in the early days. A very small one, apparently owned by a black .... who ran a small restaurant there. There was enough people living around here. And this is of course the Pump Station.
- RB [We're just passing the Pump House Restaurant]. How long did that pump station operate - until when?
- NK It kept operating until I think, 61 or 62. (*I worked on the pump motors in '55 and the ditches - 2 of them carried water at least until 61*).
- PB They had that pump house running right up until the last dredge was operating out there at Ester?
- NK You had pipe going up Chena Ridge and there were two ditches, the upper ditch was right along the top and was primarily [for] washing away the over burden. The bottom ditch was to carry water for the dredge pond and also for some of the other stuff. And then, of course, the original homestead down here belonged to the Bishop of the Mormon Church. He was a partner in the dairy operation with Joe Lawler. They both had homesteads. His son developed a degenerative disease of the hip bones and so they sold the homestead and moved outside to a warmer climate. The road from Chena to Goldstream didn't parallel the railroad [but] hugged the lower part of the hill [Chena Ridge]. The railroad grade was still here when we came, and there were still old railroad ties coming up every spring in frost heaves.

PB Right through the railroad bed?

NK Yeah.

PB When was the railroad grade turned into an automobile road?

NK I don't know. Let's go down [to the Chena Pump Road Recreation Area] because the railroad went straight here [at the turn off to the recreation area] so that part of the road there is part of the old railroad grade. That's Ludecker's there – a Native family.

PB This is Ludecker Street here, I think they call it.

RB [We just turned off Chena Pump Road onto Ludecker Street]

NK My God, it's paved!

PB They just paved it this summer.

NK This part here that's clear was the old site of the Chena Light and Lumber Company which was a sawmill that used a steam engine. The railroad went on there to the Ludecker's house. A lot of the shore [of the Tanana River] has been washed away since then.

PB I forgot to bring a map. I've got a map that superimposes the modern day river bank over an old townsite map.

NK So this was the other part of the town. Anyway the Chena Light and Lumber Company must have been moved away. There were some old railcar remains.

RB We just came back on Chena Pump Road again.

NK Some of these cabin sites are built on the old sites of cabins. What happened, of course, was the guys who owned Sampson Hardware came here and they junked out the old boats that were along the shore and also whatever metal they found and sold it. An this is the park [Chena Pump Recreation Area] which is built over most of the old townsite. At least you can see along the shore where it was and you can see the uneven ground where there were more cabin sites and stuff like that. The Island was Wendricks Island. Wendricks was a German. He homesteaded and he actually grew crops and things like that but then a flood came and washed him out. So I don't know if there's anything left over there.

PB Supposedly Hindrick and Belt had the original trading post out there. Supposedly they preceded Barnette apparently, 1899 or something, they had a trading post out there somewhere. It always looked to me on the early maps I looked at that it was on a pretty ephermeral gravel bar that probably was long since washed out.

RB Quite a bit of the old Chena townsite has been eroded away?

NK Yeah. The building that was moved to Chena – you know the old Rose Building.

PB Oh, Ok, so that’s where the Rose Building was?

NK Yeah. The old timers told me that the Rose Building was moved from here relatively late and I can remember the size of the thing.

PB The Rose Building – OK, that was moved to downtown Fairbanks, what was it, in the 1930s or something?

NK Yeah. Well it was taken apart. It was a log building but you could take it apart just like I moved the old Pedro cabin<sup>2</sup>.

RB [We’ve left the main state recreation park area now and are now driving [along the shoreline] downriver toward a parking area for boats]

NK I think that probably up that way – the stamp mill is up there [inland].

PB On the hillside?

NK This side. I don’t think we can get in this way. This is all new.

RB The stamps up at the museum? This is where those stamps came from?

NK Yeah.

PB Is that the so-called “Citizens Mill?”

NK I think so. And the railroad did go that far [to the stamp mill location]. Rock was brought in along the railroad too, that was one of the reasons for building the town here. But there was a hardrock mine up on the side of the hill called the “Pyramid Dome Mining Company” which lasted until about 1923. I don’t think it was ever very profitable.

PB My understanding of the “Citizens Mill” was that it was a kind of cooperative where individual miners could bring their material in to get milled as opposed to a big company mill.

NK Yeah. It wasn’t a big mill. It was a sixteen stamper or something like that. But in two units. When they discontinued operations here they took it up to Golden City off the Steese Highway and half of it got taken to ... down the river to Ruby, I think it was Ruby. And I think the part that is up at the museum is the part that was at Golden City. The Highway Department persisted in going through all of

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<sup>2</sup> Niilo bought the old Felix Pedro cabin in the 1950s and moved the building from the Fox area to his homestead where it is now used as a sauna attached to the Koponen house. Niilo He thinks the cabin had already been moved once before he bought it.

the towns like Golden City and [taking down] as many as the old buildings as they could to do it – really made me furious.

RB [At this point we leave the truck and continue on foot along a path]

NK There was a little ship [repair yard] on that side [on a slough on the opposite side of the highway, across from the state recreation area.

PB Really? To haul the steamboats up there? Just for maintenance in wintertime?

NK Yeah, something like that.

PB So would that have been about where this big culvert is now?

NK Yeah.

PB So the base of the stamp mill would be up on the other [uphill] side of the road?

NK No, its off in there [in the dense brush and willow on the river side of the highway] and pretty much at this level [of the path through the brush].

PB I always pictured it was up more right on the hillside, on the slope more.

NK Yeah, sort of.

PB At the base of the slope?

NK Yeah. Its not all the way at the base of the slope. We used to walk in – that's many years ago that I walked in there and the thing is you'd have to cross this creek. The way I often used to do it was to go down off the slope.

PB So, if somebody were to walk along the south side of the road and then cross over this culvert and then down, you could get to it from over there?

NK Yeah.

RB What would you expect to be left there after they moved the stamps? Would there be foundations or something>

NK Yeah. Very large concrete foundation box. Actually they're sort of separate. Say from here, and they're square, to about here and they're sort of slanted in, and about that tall.

RB Two or three feet high?

NK Yeah. Well, they were all at the same level, so covering the ground they were at slightly different heights you know, six or eight inches difference [in height]. So

- they probably had either heavy timbers - given its Alaska they probably did use timbers rather than steel or something like that as a foundation.
- RB So, with enough bushwacking you'd be able to find those in there?
- PB Well the concrete pad would still be there. That'd be interesting to find that. When you look on that Sandborn Map with the modern erosion, it looked to me like there were several areas of the townsite that might still be intact and one thing that was specifically marked on that map was "Bushan's Warehouse." John Bushan had a trading company up and down the river and I'm assuming it was John or Andrew Bushan 's warehouse and I wonder if there'd be anything left of that?
- KN I've even got some photographs of Chena Townsite plus a color post card of it. I will look for some of that.
- RB [We're back in Pete's vehicle on Chena Pump Road again, just going up the hill from the state recreation area]
- PB That little fenced road there, where did that go?
- NK It goes into the rest of the Chena Townsite, the whore house district and all that - the church, the telegraph office. The telegraph wire was left in place and of course wound up falling on the ground and all the way down the river you can stumble across the steel wire.
- PB I remember when I used to mush my dogs down to my brother's place down at Tolovana and that's part of the old mail trail. We found several places where you could actually see the remnants of the tripods with the green insulators on them and that number nine copper wire strung through the bushes. So that Chena telegraph station was back in here and went up over Chena Ridge to get downriver.
- NK There's the dumps where people would dump stuff, in there slightly off to that side possibly.
- PB Slightly to the west of this little road going in there, that's where the town dump was?
- NK Yeah. You'd find fancy umbrellas the girls had and there was old stoves. Very good Champaign - the large bottles of it, I mean if you're going to pay the freight on it you might as well get the good stuff. And similar sized bottles of Schlitz [*Aka: the Beer that made Milwaukee Famous - or "furious" when the moved away*] you know, I mean nothing small. Medicine bottles and all kinds of odds and ends.
- RB You said there was a church back in there. Just a foundation?

NK No, it had been there – its on the map. I couldn't tell which foundation was which but there were actually cabins and there were fences, picket fences, and of course out houses because the snow doesn't collapse them as rapidly as other things.

PB So when you first homesteaded your area, moved to Faribanks in the early 1950s, a lot of those cabins were still standing here. Were people still living in any of them?

NK No, but [later] people did move into them and rehabilitate them. There's one story in *All Alaska Weekly* about a fire that we fought in one of them – with snow shovels until the guys came with the hoses. And then, roughly where that sign is that says "No Parking" [on Chena Pump Road] there was a road that led in to the Pyramid Mine and the rails were still coming out of the hill – but it [the mine portal] had collapsed.

PB So that little narrow gage railway....

NK It wasn't a railroad, it was the mining rails....

PB Oh, just a tram – did that come down.....

NK I don't know, the ones I saw just came out of the hill – there may have been more. It would seem reasonable that they would have trammed stuff to the stamp mill.

RB How long did the Pyramid Mine last?

NK Until 1923, I'm not sure when it actually started. But anyway, if you're going on that road and you get in three or four hundred feet and you look down and there is, where the old creek used to be, there is a piece of level ground over the creek and that is the cemetery. I think there were supposed to be seven people buried there. There were at least five places that looked like slumped in graves.

PB Were there any crosses or headstones or anything?

NK No headstones. There were a couple of what I think were the remains of wooden crosses.

PB And that leads off from that "No Parking" sign – that trail?

NK We could walk up there.

[At this point Pete parks the truck and the three of us walk up the trail on the north side of Chena Pump Road]

NK It's right across there, and then you have to get across the water.

RB [We came into a place here “Old Chena Mercantile” a log structure, several log buildings – we came to the end of the road and Niilo says the graveyard is just beyond these buildings here and across a slough or creek. We can’t get across]

PB Don Hopkins? I’ve always heard it called “Hopkinsville”

NK Yeah, but Hopkinsville goes on that way, there’s a hell of a lot more of it. Is Don still alive?

PB I don’t know, I just remember years ago there used to be a lot of “student housing” here – he rented out. It was kind of a slum area for student housing.

RB [We’re walking now [along Chena Pump Road], we just passed the “No Passing” sign and up to another little turnout here by a rock outcrop on the right. Niilo says the “Adit” sign for the Pyramid Mine has fallen in. We’re following a track in here]

NK [looking at the slough off to the right of the trail] This is much wider than the original stream so that tells me that graveyard is now drowned. It would be right under here [same side of the slough as the trail.

PB At the very base of this hill [slope]?

NK Yeah. You used to have to cross and come up this way.

RB [We’re just off Chena Pump Road, on the west [north?] side of Chena Pump Road walking in on a track here with a wooden stairway up to the left. Niilo says that the old graveyard is on the west side of this slough here that Niilo thinks has been dug out for boat repair slips]

NK [looking across to the far side of the slough] These are obviously sort of rectangular [slips].

PB Oh, there’s another one there. So these were essentially dug out to bring little steamboats in here to work on?

NK Yeah. Smaller boats, the “mosquito fleet” that’s what there were called actually. Some of the real big boats couldn’t get in to Fairbanks. They eventually got much larger ones – the thing was to unload [at the mouth of the Chena River]] and take cargo up the Little Chena. There was mining earlier than the foundation of Fairbanks up on the Upper Chena, the Little Chena.

PB John Cook had located a bunch of information on this guy named Fred Carrier who had a little outpost up there in 1898. He was prospecting up there.

NK One of the libraries in Ohio published a book on a group who came up there.

PB I just got that! I haven’t even looked at it yet.

- RB [According to Niilo the graveyard was at the base of a steep slope on a little bench just above the water level – five or seven graves. This trail that we're on now along the slough to the east of us, is the trail that used to lead into the Pyramid Mine and then continued beyond the mine. It's pretty overgrown now. We came in a couple of hundred meters or so and there's a cabin here, a wood frame shiplap sided cabin. The main trail heads uphill, there's a side trail into this cabin to the right]
- PB [talking about the old Chena Townsite] All the bigger structures had been dismantled or scavenged or something?
- NK A lot of the stuff was moved down to Nenana. The warehouses and big stores ended up in Nenana.
- RB [I missed taping Niilo saying that 50 years ago all the main structures were gone, the outhouses and fences were still here, along with some boardwalks]
- NK The Native settlement of Chena was on the other side of the river. In fact, that's where Binkley's boat stops.
- RB Is that right across from the mouth of the Chena River]?
- NK No, it's down stream a little bit.
- PB Is that pretty much where Howard Luke has his place?
- NK Yeah. He's moved in on the ancestral home [laughs].
- NK .....which was the original 360 area claim of F.T. Sigbey who was the brother of the Captain of the Maine that sank [in Cuba]. [*Efraimt Sigsbey – brother of the commander of the US Battleship "Maine"*]
- PB What was the subdivision name?
- NK Ednella. After Ed and Ella. They bought the original property and they wanted to sell it for about 600 dollars a month so they'd get retirement. Of course I didn't have 600 dollars. And Sigbys house – he was not called Efrim, he was called Bill by everybody. But he was one of the people who got the township started even though his property was never thought of as being part of it .... he nevertheless had a seat on the city council and stuff like that and was very much in favor of expanding it.
- PB When would that have been, about 1910?
- NK Earlier than that.
- PB That's when the rivalry was going on between Fairbanks and Chena?

NK Yeah. Anyway, Bill's homestead is up on the hill. Judge Hepp bought it and since Sigsby died in '35 - before that he used to keep the homestead - he also had people that came there because the winds up and down the river made this one of the most mosquito-free places. A lot of the old timers in Ester would come here to take a break. It was also known as "Bootleggers Bluff." Anyway when Judge Hep bought it, he bulldozed into the river the old buildings and Sigby's grave and everything. I don't figure there's anything left. But that's on the river side of the road when we go up to the top of the hill.

PB Why was that called "Bootleggers Bluff?"

NK Probably because there were people who brought refreshments in out of Fairbanks that in addition to the mosquito-free atmosphere may have been another attraction for vacationers or something like that.

NK Businesses moved their warehouses and stores on barges down to Nenana so that made an instant town out of Nenana. There were still about 30 people according to the census living in Chena in 1930. The paper that used to be published here moved to Manley Hot Springs and used to be published there for a few years. I guess other people from here [Old Chena] went to Manley as well because of the hot springs.

RB When was Chena founded?

NK Actually it was founded before Fairbanks because there was a mission school set up here.

PB There's a trading post set up across the river, the Hendrickson - Belts Trading Post. Supposedly - it shows up on a map dated 1898, it was just there for a short time. What I remember reading in one of the old journals was that when Chena got set up they moved the trading post over to Chena and that would have been right about the same time as Fairbanks [got started] about 1902 or 1903.

NK There were people who were gold mining up the Little Chena, North Chena Branch even before Felix made his strike. Wickersham named the town after the vice-President of the United States, one of his political supporters. So it got the publicity even though Chena was here first. But since the stamp mill was here [at Chena] they kept bringing the rocks down.

BP That stamp mill - parts of that were made at the original Sampson's, in the foundry they had.

NK Some of the other mines like Cleary Hill, they had their own stamps.

[Break in Taping]

- NK [Discussing the Koponen home: an “hysterical monument”] ... the old railroad station, most of the spruce boards are from the old main building at the university when Jim Hitchcock tore it down. All of the aluminum on the roof comes from the old Main building [*first building on UAF campus*]. Some of the windows come from there. The homesteader’s slogan was “scrounge!”
- BP .... so this was a station that was ... the Tanana Railroad? Or was this the federal railroad?
- NK The first name was the Tanana Mines Railroad.
- BP Where was that station you were talking about?
- NK Ludecker’s. See the railroad went here then went south to Ludecker’s [*Road over Chena Ridge to Ester*]. [*Teamsters hauling freight to Ester*] used to load up a wagon, when they got to the top of the hill they would chop down a couple of trees and put them on as drag behind them so they wouldn’t be going all the way down. And there used to be a bridge over Cripple Creek that I remember, even in those days, but it wasn’t passable in the ‘50s.
- RB [Now we’re turning off Chena Pump Road onto Rolland Road].
- NK I ditched this road with my bulldozer, my OC3. I’ve still got the plow. I don’t know who named it Rolland Road.
- RB [We’re going right on East Chena Hills Road].
- [Now we’re at Niilo’s Homestead on Chena Ridge in the old Felix Pedro Cabin – looking at Niilo’s photographs of the Felix Pedro cabin before it was dismantled and moved to Chena Ridge]
- NK [speaking about the Felix Pedro Cabin ] [*Beside the cabin I also bought a shop fulding, which had a 14 ft. by 14 ft. “formens shack” with a big window for the boss*] to observe everybody over the hill to see that they weren’t picking up too many nuggets.
- PB Where was this original site? [where the cabin was when Niilo bought it]
- NK On the hillside.... above the [Felix Pedro] monument. On the left side going up.
- PB How far up from the monument?
- NK There was also a road on this side of the old road. And this [looking at a black and white photograph] is the cabin as it was.
- PB Before it got moved?

NK Yeah. You can have one of those [copies of the photograph of the Felix Pedro cabin before being moved].

PB Who owned that [cabin].

NK The F.E. [Fairbanks Exploration] Company. I bought it from them.

RB Now you say you think it had been moved once before?

NK Yeah.

RB From down on the creek somewhere?

NK I don't know. Haven't a clue. I think it was probably down on the creek. Maybe.

RB How much did you have to pay the F.E. Company.

NK I think it was \$ 200 dollars.

[Break]

PB I'm real interested in .... you mentioned that strike in 1908.

NK Yeah, well the mining companies, and they didn't have dredges, they had people working underground in permafrost and they required them to work twelve hours at the face – so that meant they would be thirteen or fourteen hours underground. They were only paid right at the face. And of course there was carbon monoxide gas, and just plain rotten work – cold, wet – a lot of people got sick, a number of people died. So they went on strike for an eight hour day and the companies went to these labor contractors in Seattle and they ordered up a bunch of strike breakers. One large shipment of Croatians – Catholics, with their own priest to keep them in line – and they got the army to defend them from any unseemly entrance... you know here came the army and the strike breakers ... and these guys [the local miners], instead of throwing bombs or anything like that, went and filed on the claims at the mouth – actually all the way up – from the mouth of Dome Creek out into the valley including the “niggerhead” and “Shakespeare” Association where were larger and that's 194 feet down – so they had to work in a larger group. But from Olns<sup>3</sup> to Dome they pretty much had individual mines. Some of them had families. Most of them were Finns or Scandinavians. Some of their descendents are still in town here. The ones who were married. So, in '52 I got to know these people. We were living out on the “Niggerhead Mine”<sup>4</sup> and they made an arrangement – I don't know it was Max that early but certainly sometime in the '20s, Max had taken over the Fox general store and he delivered all around the creeks.

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<sup>3</sup> Olns – a station on the Tanana Valley Railroad (T.V.R.R.) it was named after a Norwegian homesteader (miner) - Oil Ness. Olns served both Dome City and, after 1914, the trail to Livengood.

<sup>4</sup> The old timers called the grass tussocks “Niggerheads” – the mine was ... in the marsh.

- PB Max Reedy?
- NK Yeah. And come spring – well in the winter as I said they would go down in their shafts, sometime in pairs, you know partners, and sometimes more people. This old guy I told you about that says “I been on strike since 1908”, he pointed to the gravel dump and said “that’s my bank – don’t trust the sons-a-bitches in town.” Anyway, he’d wash out enough gold in the spring to pay Max and lay some money aside for booze and ammunition or whatever. There was one Irishman who we called the “Mayor of Olns” He grew potatoes - he had a garden – and so he’d sell garden truck at the Olns Store. Then there was an old German by the name of Wagner – Wagner was a meat hunter. And of course the fact that the law had changed and he couldn’t hunt – he didn’t know about that.
- PB Was he was one of the guys who would go out to hunt moose or caribou to bring into town for the restaurants?
- NK Or to sell it to the old guys. To save them a little trouble. The rest of those guys were all Scandinavians. The majority were Finns. The had joined the I.W.W., the Industrial Workers of the World but, unlike the Industrial Workers of the World, they were individual miners and they did have an informal workers co-op and they subscribed to the “*Industrallisti*” which was a Finnish Industrial Workers of the World paper published in Duluth. The only [Finnish] paper that made any money – not much, just a few thousand - but it never went broke. The editor reached the age of 93 and decided that was enough, he was going to fold up the paper. They went down to Florida and bought some property in Lantana – Lake Worth area – and there had been a farm. They camped on the grounds and they built – you know with cooperative labor – they built a new Finn Hall with the best collection of old Finnish I.W.W. literature that I’ve ever seen. The hall still goes on. It’s a dancehall now.
- PB Now, where’s that hall?
- NK In Lantana, Lake Worth area [Florida]. There’s several Finn Halls down there. There’s a Finnish joke that the old timers thought that Lantana was a Finnish name and that’s why they settled there. But anyway, the old guys in Dome Creek they stayed there. They wouldn’t sell out to any of the mining companies so the mining companies never got to go beyond Dome City.
- PB This includes even the F.E. Company?
- NK The F.E. Company legally could sluice Dome Creek itself to make it deeper to carry the muck from the upper Dome operations but they never .... did they bring a dredge in there?
- PB Yeah, there’s a dredge there now. Just about a quarter of a mile up from the Dome City townsite.
- NK That dredge went in very late, I wasn’t even working for the company anymore.

- PB It looked like it was one of the later ones. I went through it about five years ago. It might have been the last one.
- NK They were going to move it when they [the F.E. Company] decided I'd won too many grievances and they wanted to rearranged the electrical department so I wasn't needed anymore.<sup>5</sup> The old timers mostly stayed there – Herman Maki was an old bachelor there, in the summer they'd do some work around there, but most of them owned their claim, they had proven claims. But anyway the F.E. Company did sluice Dome creek and it put too much water through so it flooded the "Niggerhead Mine". The guys – Peterson and others – who had dug 194 feet down to bedrock and they cross cut - and all this muck came pouring down and flooded their mine and they sued the F.E. Company and they collected I think \$ 40,000 dollars in 1940. They wanted to use the law against the corporation and they won. But they were the only ones that did that. But of course most of those old guys – Herman had a sauna and he had a Victor "talking machine" winder, and he had a whole bunch of records, actually they were American Victor gramophone records but they were Finnish ethnic songs. There was one about mining at Cleary Summit [Niilo starts speaking and singing in Finnish] .... ending with the translation "and then we go dance with the Floradora Girls. [More Finnish].
- PB One thing I'm really interested in, you know when we were doing that historical work in downtown Fairbanks about ten years ago, we were excavating the old Miner's Home Saloon right across from the News Miner in Sampson's parking lot there. The upstairs of that was the headquarters of the Miner's Union. I guess when that strike in 1908 took place it was a big brew ha ha. out there, right outside the Miner's Home Saloon and the federal marshals were out there and I guess there were some shots fired back and forth and everything.
- NK Yeah, I actually have an article from a little magazine which was sort of a scientific National Geographic sort of thing written by the Englishman who was the, you might say the B.A. of the Western Federation of Miners. I've got a copy of that in my files – I'd have to dig it out.
- RB Were the miners out there on Dome Creek successful in getting better working conditions?
- NK No, they lost the strike and so they just figured out how to block the mining companies so they could work for themselves and thumb their noses at the mining companies.
- PB So the companies brought up all the Croatian strike-breakers.
- NK Yeah, they had been replaced by Croatian strike-breakers. The mining sort of died out - later the properties were taken over by the F.E. Company because they

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<sup>5</sup> Niilo was a labor union representative for the Electrical Workers Union.

were never quite able to get over – the old laws wouldn't let them survey or anything. The only thing they could legally do was to sluice the creek beds – make it deeper, which they didn't do very well. Cost them \$ 40,000 in addition to their actual wage cost.

PB So they could sluice upriver? [*Chatanika*]

NK What they were doing – the creek down at the bottom of the hill, they cut it so the [runoff] water would go into the Chatanika – because they were pumping the water up and then the runoff [came back downhill]. The first time they cut it, they cut it right into the bend on the Chena which was perfect except that the water from the started to run up so then they had to cut it further down to the bridge on Chena Pump Road. [*This is a later discussion about the Cripple Creek drain across Chena Pump Road*].

PB Did any of those old timers you talked to ever talk about what was going on with the strike downtown? Were they in the middle of that crowd.....

NK No, these guys were pretty well out there [in the camps]. In fact, most of them like Herman had made a good strike early on and had gone to Seattle and then he blew most of his money but kept enough – had enough sense to stop right there, and he bought a wheel-barrow and supplies, shovels, and a ticket back to Valdez and got off the boat in Valdez, dumped everything in his wheel-barrow and walked up the whole Richardson trail with a wheel-barrow to Fairbanks – thumbing his nose at Fairbanks, not even stopping for a drink, and going to Dome Creek to his claim. There had been a group of Finnish miners that had built on a creek much further north up towards [Faith Creek?] but most of these guys moved down after cleaning up most of [Faith Creek?] so nobody every mined there afterwards. They moved closer to town where there was more grub. Olns - which was named after one of the Norwegians, Oli Ness - was of course the take off point for Livengood after 1915.

PB Right, when they put the highway in there.

NK A number of them went up there too. Anyway, when Herman retired he went out and settle near Astoria in Oregon and didn't mine but I guess he had a nest egg or something and he finally passed away. He was pretty old by the time he left. I got to know him when he was still actively mining in 1952, 1953, 1954 and so on. He retired before the end of the '50s and sold his claim. I guess that was resold. There's one family who are in town, the guy's son or grandson did wash out the dump and make quite a bit of money and a couple of other people did. One of my friends, Gill Monroe, washed out the dump at the "niggerhead" and made more than a summers wages washing that out.

RB Did they dredge Dome Creek?

NK Well, they did bring a dredge in. I don't think they ever got an economic....one of the things was the company....there was one of these Wall Street sharks, can't

remember the guys name - it doesn't really matter - and he was in the habit of having his buddies buy the stocks mostly of New England companies. One of the things about New England corporations was that they were very conservative, typically incorporated in Maine. But instead of borrowing operating capital from banks, even though the Shawmut National Bank in Boston owned a large number of shares of United States Smelting, Mining, and Refining Company, the United Shoe Company, *Eastern Mass. Street Railway*, and some others. Their mining plan was written by a woman mining engineer in the 1920s. It was very good, very rational you know – you drill first, you figure out how much – if the price of gold, which of course varied between \$ 18 and \$ 20 an ounce in that period - that's one thing when Roosevelt got in and raised the price of gold to \$ 35 an ounce you suddenly had a great number of “gold bug” Democrats. Anyway, as the price was too low – they knew what the price of gold was – they would just cut out that section and go on to another. In other words they drilled and panned just about every sixteen feet to figure out [what they had in the ground]. They drilled first and panned the gold and then they thawed the ground with cold water thawing. They had to use both electric and steam thawing, the only time they continue to use steam thawing was in the spring when they wanted to start the season early. And then, of course, they had to clean the dredge pond of frozen [ice every spring] – they had a crane on the dredge that brought it up. They would dynamite some of the ice and they torpedoed Dredge #2 up at Fairbanks Creek that way. Put the dynamite too close to the dredge and blew a hole in the dredge.

PB Was that the one on Fairbanks Creek?

NK Yeah. Well, they drained the water out of the pond and welded the hole and flooded it again. It was a bit of a disgrace. But anyway, the Wall Street shark [Pozner] would get his front men to buy shares and of course they went to him and then he would – when the company had its annual meeting – he and his lawyer would show up and say “we're sorry we don't agree and we happen to have this many shares of stock.” The F.E. Company caught on that this was happening and so the price of the stock went from \$ 45 a share where it had stayed for generations or more. It was sort of a “widows and orphans” stock, that always paid a dividend. But it was always the same dividend and all that. Anyway, the stock went up but he managed to cop enough of the stock that he took over the company. He started off with Bridgeport Brass, that was one of the companies, and some of his buddies also took over the New Haven Railroad for the same reason. They weren't interested in the railroad, what they were interested in was the real estate downtown. The rail yards and all that sort of stuff. They'd sell the rail for junk. The same thing happened to the mining companies. They shut them down and started selling them off. Then the price of gold went up to \$ 800 an ounce [about 1980] and they got all excited and they tried to get some of the dredges reconditioned and get things set up and he did have the dredge out at Nome rebuilt. The only problem was they had to take the stacker off another dredge and put it on.

PB Is that the one east of Nome?

NK Yeah. Anyway, it was very funny because the dredge floated like that [at a slant] because the stacker was much heavier than the previous one. I went up there when I was in the [Alaska State] Legislature for hearings and I decided to go out to the mining company because I wanted to see the dredge. I walked up to the mining company's office and this guy comes out and he says "You're Niilo aren't you?" "Christ you've grown old!" He had been an oilier on Dredge #6 here [in Fairbanks] in the days when I was [working for the F.E. Company]. He was [now] the Dredge Master, but that was the sort of thing – this guy [Pozner] had laid off all these people and they got other jobs and when he wanted them to go back on the dredge they said "up yours" – he couldn't get hardly anybody, he got a few people but not enough to get skilled people, especially since he was a cheapskate and wasn't willing to pay them enough anyway. He did that too often to too many different companies and the Securities and Exchange Commission caught him taking from one of his companies – maybe it was the Rock Island Line, he sold a lot of their passenger cars to a commuter operation elsewhere, without bothering to get his buddies together to hold a board meeting, and put the money directly in his pocket. And he got tried and convicted but his lawyer argued "he's an old man ... a senior, so he got, I think, four years of community service. And Dan Egan, in town, who was the head of the machine shop at the F.E. Company...."

PB Pete Eagan's dad?

NK Yeah. So, Pozner got community service [*rather than jail*]. Dan Egan said "I think his community service is teaching bookkeeping to embezzlers" [laughs].

RB So, how long did you work for the F.E. Company?

NK About four years. I was an electrician, and then I was an electrician for the university and meantime I was also taking courses. I also worked "on base" as an office machine repairman but then when I decided to run for the [Alaska] Constitutional Convention I went to the university and worked for them and their shop because on Civil Service you're not supposed to run for office.

PB We were looking through those photos earlier, Leonard Seppila, how much did your path cross with Leonard Seppila – wasn't he a ditch tender out there or a superintendent?

NK He was the ditch boss. The ditch crew boss. Actually most of the people working for the ditch crew – the old timers – all spoke Finnish. They weren't necessarily Finns but they spoke the language. And of course he wasn't a "Sami", he was a Finn. Actually there are four Saunni languages and seven dialects and there are only 50,000 of them. Each valley has it's own dialect because they herded the reindeer up and down the valley and never went over the hill to talk to the guys over there so the languages drifted apart. And there's the Russian Saunni that is spoken in Finland a little bit. The original Sami were probably fishermen along the coast. There are people in Norway who are considered Finns because they are fishermen in the north. There are four villages that speak Finnish. The reindeer

came in from the east. The Sami earliest settlers were fisherman and mitochondrial DNA traces back – not everybody – traces them back to the Pyrenees of all places. They inhabited the forests and plains of what is now the northeast and they're probably the same people that when the water started rising headed for high ground in the Shetlands, Orkneys, Ireland, and Scotland because all of those well-built stone shelters are very comfortable for anybody less than four feet high. Otherwise you have to wear a hardhat. My ancestors are Karelian. My grandfather, my father's father, and his two brothers left the homestead because among our people the homestead – the cattle, the barn, and the fields are inherited by the woman. By the oldest daughter. It's not exactly a matriarchy – the one who really "gets it in the neck" is the son's wife, the daughter-in-law because the mother-in-law is in charge.

RB So that's why so many Finn's came here, left for the New World – they couldn't inherit property.

NK Actually, only about five percent of the American Finnish population came from Karelia (*Karjala*). Most of them returned to Finland. Both of my sets of grandparents went back to Finland. The people who came over here were primarily from *Ostrobothni* which was a Swedish dominated area where an awful lot of them had to be tenant farmers of upper middle class Swedes which they didn't really appreciate. Of course Russia has taken over most of Karelia. Everybody left. That's why I went over there [after WW II in 1948] to help build houses] with the Friends Service Committee to help them homestead which is probably what got me started to come to Alaska. But that wasn't my immediate thought, but it was helping them clear land and build houses before winter.

RB Well, thanks for taking us around today. We've got a lot of what you said on tape. We'll make a transcription and get you a copy. I'll probably do that this winter when I get home.

End of Interview

Transcribed January 6, 2005 by Robert C. Betts, Sandpoint, Idaho.

Revised / corrected January 24, 2005 after comments from Nillo.



Pete Bowers and Niilo Koponen at Old Chena Townsite in August 2004.



Niilo Koponen drawing a map in the dirt of Old Chena Townsite for Pete Bowers in August 2004.



Niilo Koponen and Pete Bowers inspecting the logs of the old Felix Pedro cabin. The cabin, now used as a sauna, was moved to Chena Ridge by Niilo in the 1950s.



Niilo Koponen and Pete Bowers in the old Felix Pedro cabin examining Niilo's collection of historical maps.