

## **Bob Cairns**

Interviewed by: Janet Miller 11/16/97

Transcribed by: Jennie Hakes 11/27/00

Cassette tape label: ***Bob Cairns – Klondike Lodge – Janet Miller 11-16-97***

## **Side A**

### ***Introduction***

Janet: This is Janet Miller, a volunteer with the Aitkin County Historical Society. The date is November 16, 1997, and I am conducting a telephone interview with Mr. Bob Cairns, whose parents are on Glacier Lake – Klondike Lodge on Glacier Lake.

*(break in tape)*

J: That took me longer than I anticipated. All my cords are tangled up!

B: OK, are you all set?

J: Yes.

B: All right! First one. *(Reading from the questionnaire)* “My first memory of the MacGregor Glacier Lake area. Where were you born, when did you come to Aitkin County, can you describe your parents, brothers, or sisters?”

### ***First recollections of the Klondike Lodge***

B: My earliest recollection is when I was still just a toddler; I’m not sure how old I was. Maybe three or four years old. I was born in Minneapolis. I don’t remember for certain, but I believe my father already owned the property up there. I think he went into partnership with a fellow named Harry Henry. And there was just one building there, a rather large, single residence type, log cabin, which later became the main lodge building of the resort. He bought Harry Henry out and started immediately owning the resort there.

The earliest recollection I have of the resort itself that I enjoyed, was, believe it or not, a pit bulldog. He was the kindest, gentlest, most affectionate creature there ever was, and he finally at an old age, developed paralysis of the hindquarters and had to be killed. That was done with a gun, a pistol.

My parents enjoyed the resort. My dad was very outgoing and he enjoyed having a lot of people around. My mother was the same. She used to play the piano for singing and dancing. I have a half-sister who is still alive, living in California. We were never very close, and are completely out of touch now.

My family lived in Minneapolis except during the Depression. My dad was laid off from his job. He sold heavy machinery in several states in the upper Midwest. He was laid off, and he rented our houses in town, and we lived on the resort the year-round. I thoroughly enjoyed this. I learned to hunt and fish. We had a lot of ducks. Most of ‘em were locals that fattened up on the wild rice and I remember they were delicious! I was

never real overboard on fishing. I enjoyed eating fish, but I really didn't care to do it too much myself. I did, however, know how to catch the biggest in northern pike, and they were just about my favorites when I did go fishing.

As I grew older, there were only two real jobs I did around the resort; well, three maybe. I did some errand running and sometimes I met the bus in MacGregor and brought people into the resort. But mostly I just mowed the grass. We had a huge sickle-bar mower and I used to mow acres of lawn. And I guided fisherman. And I learned at an early age that most sportsmen aren't. The fishermen I guided weren't very good sportsmen.

J: (Laughs)

### ***Wild pets***

B: And most of 'em weren't even smart enough to follow my advice. And then when they didn't catch fish, they got mad at me. But I survived all that.

The earliest happy memory I have is, aside from that bulldog, the wild animal pets. We had a family of red squirrels move into a martin birdhouse that was on a tall pole. The pole blew down in a windstorm. I don't know what happened to the parents, but I found two babies alive, and if I remember correctly, their eyes weren't even open at the time. I fed them warm milk in an eyedropper, and they grew up and got quite tame. They used to ride around on my shoulders, and I would go into the...there was a showcase full of candy and so forth in the main dining room...and I would go in there and help a package of peanuts in my pocket – I had flannel shirts with large patch pockets – and the squirrels would dive head first into my pockets and come up eating peanuts. And they were real tame and friendly. I had to turn 'em loose in the fall. There was no way to take care of 'em in town. And the next spring, one of 'em recognized me and came down a tree chattering at me, and I held out my hand and he ran down and dived into my shirt pocket again!

J: Oh, really?!

B: I had all kinds of wild pets. Bank swallows that rode on my shoulders. Mallard ducks that were rescued. They grew up and they followed the guests around the yard. When guests sat down on the lawn, the ducks would waddle up into their laps, wanting the sides of their heads stroked. I have photos of only one of my wild pets. It was an osprey. For your information, in case you didn't know, an osprey is the largest of fish hawks. It is as big as an eagle. Some spoiled brat guests went over and, this nest that the ospreys nested in was directly across the lake from the resort – the resort was up on a high hill, and we had a good view of everything across the lake – and there was this old, dead pine tree with this huge nest at the top. And we heard the sound of the people chopping, and went over there, and they were trying to chop the tree down.

J: (Sadly) Oh, dear.

B: And we stopped 'em. But it was too late. The tree was almost through. And sure enough, it blew down in the next windstorm. So I went over there and picked up this osprey, which was almost full grown, but apparently, still had not learned to fly. And that was an interesting experience. To keep him away from people's dogs, I put a, some sort of a line around one of his legs. And up on the tin roof of a shed that was out at the

rear of the property, and I fed him daily with raw fish. And it was kind of interesting. I would hold a piece of raw fish out in the palm of my hand, and at this time, I was maybe 10 years old, something like that. I would hold a piece of raw fish out in the palm of my hand, and his head would just be a blur, scooping that fish up. And strangely, I never felt his beak. He never bit me, he just grabbed the food. I tried to help him learn to fly, and when I picked him up, I sort of cradled him between my two forearms with his head one direction and his tail the other. And I remember thinking, the first time I tried it, this could be dangerous, because he had talons that were just huge! And I remembered how cats often grab hold of someone who picks them up. And he never did that. His legs just hung limp. I finally saw signs that he was learning to fly, and I took him back to the nest site and left him there, and I went back the next day, and he was gone. I was afraid bobcats might get him in the night, but I knew that if they had, I'd find feather, and there were none, so I assumed he flew off and I just didn't happen to see him do it.

If I had been situated differently, I might have tried to keep him as a pet. I really liked him. I have a photo of him somewhere in an album.

### ***The Knutsons, their neighbors***

B: Let's see, "Do you remember friends who were particularly important to you and your family? Business associates? Do you remember interesting stories about them?"

Dad sold Ted Knutson a property adjoining the resort, and Ted built a house there, and moved in. And back in those days, these were not really farms, they were homesteads. And Ted's brother, Paul Knutson, moved in across the other side of the main road. And I learned things from those people. All sorts of interesting things. One thing I learned, and this was fascinating, they had root cellars and they did their own home canning, and all their own home baking.

And one thing I noticed was that they made rhubarb pie. And I thought, "Isn't that quaint? They're up here on their own, with these little tiny farms, and they can't afford cherries, so they make rhubarb pie!" Then one of them told to come sit...I happened to get there as they were eating, and they told me to come and sit down and have rhubarb pie with them, which I did. And after that, I wondered why I ever bothered with cherry pie! So I thought rhubarb pie was much, much better! And I have since learned how to make rhubarb pie, and I think I do a pretty good job of it.

Another thing I noticed was Paul Knutson was a famous bear hunter. And he got me started on bear meat. And to this day, I like it. As a matter of fact, I went up on the big San Carlos Indian Reservation a few months ago, and got a bear with the help of an Apache Indian guide, and I have that bear in the deep freeze right now, and my wife and I both like it real well.

But Paul Knutson rendered bear fat into lard. And his wife used it for cooking. And I thought that was fascinating. Well, back when I was a kid, I hated any doughnuts that were bought in a store. They were greasy and they smelled rancid. But the people there had cast iron wood stoves, and cast iron utensils, and they knew how to handle 'em, and the wives could maintain a real constant temperature, apparently, on those wood stoves, and one day I walked into Paul Knutson's house, and his wife – oh, I can't think of her

name! – he had three daughters and I remember their names, but I can't remember...  
Marge! Marge was her name.

J: Um hm.

B: Mrs. Knutson to me, of course. She invited me in, and she had the dining table piled high with doughnuts. And they didn't have that rancid, greasy odor. And she told me to help myself. And that was a mistake, because I just made a pig of myself. They were the best doughnuts I've ever tasted, and I don't think I've had better till this day! The people had root cellars – excuse me, I've gotta get a drink.

J: Sure.

B: The people had root cellars, and they did home canning. And I remember Mrs. Ted Knutson – her name is Sylvia – (coughs). Sylvia canned peaches. And I remember looking at the peaches in sort of a watery liquid inside these glass jars. And they were sort of drab looking. And I thought to myself, my mother buys canned peaches in a thick syrup. You know what Karo syrup is like? Corn syrup? Well, it was about like that. And they look pretty, but they don't taste good. The syrup, the syrupy liquid that they were in, I didn't like even as a kid. It was just, sort of, I don't know, overpowering, and I wouldn't eat 'em. With the syrup, I would drain 'em, and eat the peaches, but I left the syrup. Well, I watched Sylvia Knutson – Mrs. Knutson as I said I always called her Mrs. – I watched her, and one day she had some peaches and she saw me staring at them, and she read my mind, and so I ate half a peach. And it was delicious. It didn't look pretty, but it was most delicious peach I ever had.

### ***Porky eats a roast sandwich***

B: (*Reading from the questionnaire*) “Do you remember friends important to your family... interesting stories?” Here's a funny story if you have time for it.

J: I sure do!

B: My dad had a friend whose nickname was Porky. I never liked Porky, he was a sponger, a freeloader, self-centered, and so on. I never liked him. Why dad did, I don't know. Dad had known him for years and years. This was after World War II, when I went home and lived with my folks in Minneapolis until I was recalled to active duty again during the Korean War, at which time they sent me to Davis (*unintelligible*) Air Force Base near Tucson. But anyway, this was in between the tours of active duty.

And my dad always went up to the resort after the season ended, to make sure the caretaker and his wife had enough firewood and that all the plumbing in the cabins had been drained, and that sort of thing. And we were late leaving Minneapolis, and Porky came along. And Dad had to stop along the way and do some little errands, and it was the middle of the afternoon before we got up to the resort. And we hadn't had lunch, and we were hungry.

Well, we walked into the caretaker's kitchen, and the first thing I noticed was the aroma of fresh bread, which the lady had just baked. And she, I don't know, maybe Dad came right out and asked her if she could feed us something. Anyway, she made sandwiches. And these slices...she had a large bread tin, a large loaf of bread, and those slices were darn near the size of a dinner plate! And she sliced 'em thick and put some fresh

creamery butter on it, and sliced off this roast that was on the back of the stove. And the sandwich was at least two inches thick! And Porky held that sandwich in both hands, and it moved back and forth across in front of his face like the carriage on a typewriter! And he just chomped up the first sandwich, and was halfway through the second one and Dad looked across the table and he said, “Well, I see you like the bear meat!” And he froze and he turned green and he turned green and he ran out in the back yard and vomited everything! Just heaved his guts out! And came back looking kind of foolish. And later, on the way home, he felt self conscious, and he said, “I sat there, thinking, how can Ralph afford to pay his caretaker enough money to buy better beef roasts than I get for my family in town?! And I thought that was the best beef roast I’d ever tasted!” And that was the closest I ever felt to him.

J: (Laughs)

B: I mean, I almost sympathized with him. (*Reading from the questionnaire*) “What role did you play...” I think I’ve covered that. “When did you leave Glacier Lake?” I met my wife. I love the desert. I had seen it before. I’d driven through Arizona in between tours of duty, and I knew that someday I would like to live in the desert. I just like the wide-open spaces and the appearance of the desert. And I decided I had to have a camera to take pictures of all this, so I went into a camera shop, and that’s where I met Jane, who I later married. And she has seen Klondike. We went up there many times to Minneapolis to visit my folks. And, in any event, I left Glacier Lake when, a year or so after being released from my second tour of active duty. Excuse me – another drink.

J: Sure.

B: A year or so after being released, we moved to Phoenix, where we got an apartment, and then bought this house in Scottsdale, and we’re still here. But, and I still have the camera that I bought in the... at the time I met my wife.

J: You wouldn’t dare sell that! (Laughs)

B: (Laughs) Well, it happens to be a very useful camera. It’s not good for color. But it is fantastic for black and white, and I’ve done some pretty things, photographing ghost towns in black and white. I use a special film – infrared film – and a bunch of filters. And it makes blinding sunlight look like spooky moonlight. It’s kind of appropriate for ghost towns.

J: Oooh.

B: But anyway, I still have it, and bought some more infrared film and plan to get out. Most of my...Jane joins me on this...we both hunt and we both photograph ghost towns, so we have an old Bronco that we go out in the hills with, and most of our photography is in color, but I plan to get going with this black and white again.

Yes, I have photo albums, scrapbooks. I have some slides, they aren’t too good. No home movies. They’re never displayed. However, I can run copies of photos of Klondike...

J: That would be wonderful!

B: Some of those were taken by someone other than me, I don’t know who. When Dad finally decided to retire and sell the place.

J: When was that?

B: Oh, boy, more than a quarter century ago.

J: OK.

B: I'd have to research that to tell you exactly when.

J: OK.

### ***Origins of the names "Klondike Lodge" and "Glacier Lake"***

B: Dad and Mother lived with us the last three years or so of their life, and we remodeled the house to create an office where Dad could write about his experiences in Alaska. He was in Alaska at the tail end of the gold rush.

J: Really?!

B: And that's where the name "Klondike" came from. Klondike Lodge.

J: Oh, that's interesting!

B: And Glacier Lake originally on the map was Turtle Lake. Dad just renamed it Glacier Lake on his stationery. And somehow the name caught hold, and now it is Glacier Lake on the maps. But Dad had some pretty interesting experiences, and he wrote them up. He didn't live long enough to get it published, but I told him when I had a chance I would try and go through it all, and assemble it, and try to get it published. It's really quite a story. I won't bore you with all the details. I could go on a long time about that. But I will get, try to get pictures out of the scrapbooks. Can I send them to you in snapshot size, or do you need larger?

J: No, snapshot size would be fine. We have a copier at the Historical Society, so that if somebody wants it larger, it can be done there.

B: I see, OK. That covers everything except one. I think I could put my hands on a snapshot of that osprey.

J: Oh, really? That'd be great.

B: And I'm in it, and you can tell me who I am, because I am just a silly lookin' guy hangin' on to this thing! That critter had a five-foot, nine-inch wingspread. And at the time I found him, still had not learned to fly.

J: Really!

B: He learned to fly, well, while I was taking care of him. But as I said, of all the wild pets I've had, he's the one I liked the best. And under different circumstances, I might have tried to make a permanent pet out of him. If the nest...if his parents had built another nest, or somebody else built one that he could take over, an eagle or something, if he had come back to Klondike, I would have tried to make friends with him again.

J: Um, hm.

B: But you know they leave for the winter, and it's hard to say where he ended up. But that osprey and that pit bull were the two best friends I had around Klondike. And I'll never forget 'em.

I've about run out of gas, unless you have some questions.

J: Well, just one or two. I just want to get some clarification. You mentioned being a fishing guide. Was that on Glacier Lake, or did you also go on Big Sandy?

B: Also Big Sandy, and Pine Island, and Big Savannah, and Little Savannah, and...

J: Wherever they wanted to go!

B: Yeah. And some of 'em, I spoke badly of 'em – some of 'em were real good sports, and nice people, and I was glad to see 'em come back. And I'll never forget, one fellow wanted me to get him some walleyed pike. So I took him to a special place over on Big Sandy, where I thought the fishing would be good, and there wouldn't be too many other fishermen.

We went over there, and he baited his hook, and dropped it down, and caught a large perch. And he caught two or three more, and I said, "Gee, I'm sorry about this. Let's move and try and find a walleye."

And he looked at me, and just beamed from ear to ear. He said, "Forget the walleye! I like big perch even better!" (Laughs) So that's what we did. And when he got tired of fishing, we went home and he had, I don't know how many, couple of buckets full of large perch. And when he left the resort to go home, he just looked happy as all get out. He was real pleased.

J: Do you recall who the caretaker was that you referred to?

B: Who, what?

J: Who the caretaker was? The caretaker's name?

B: Oh! Well, there were several. The one that served us the bear meat sandwiches... oh, I can't...they worked for us for I don't know, several years...the one we liked best, the one we liked the very best, was Ruth. You know, she lived on Little Savan', still does. And she, I guess is the one, who gave you my name, am I right?

J: Yeah. Ruth Larson.

B: Uh, huh. She...everybody loved her...

J: And I can understand why you like her. (Laughs)

B: Sorry, what?

J: And I can understand why you liked her. She's a wonderful lady.

B: Yeah, everybody did. Very wonderful. And she is the only one, the only caretaker - and she wasn't a caretaker, she was a cook – but anyway, she was the only one whose name I really remember. And I just thought the world of her. And she...I consider her to be a friend and I admire her for the type of person she is. She's independent, and you know, she is self-reliant, she's quite a lady.

J: Yes, she is. Well, I don't have any other questions. I think you've done a wonderful job of telling me about the Klondike Lodge. And I really appreciate your taking the time and effort to do this. And I'll look forward to whatever pictures and things you are able to give us.

B: My pleasure. And one last thing. When you get this all written up, I'd appreciate it sending a copy.

J: I will see that you get one. I certainly will.

B: Well, it may be awhile. I've been very busy lately, but when I get a chance, I'll go through the albums and find the pictures of Klondike. I know where to get them, and I think I can find the picture, the small snapshot, of that osprey, and if I do, I'll send it along.

J: That would be just wonderful! Thank you again.

B: Thank you! And you have a nice evening, and a Merry Christmas!

J: Thank you. You, too!

B: Thank you. Bye.

J: Bye bye.

*(end of side A)*

NOTE: There is nothing on side B