

Donald Mitchell oral histories, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage. Niilo Koponen interview, 1990 February 3. Transcript completed by Denise C. Budde.
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MR. MITCHELL: The 3rd of February. I guess the best way to get into Dr. Forbes and the early years of the land claims movement up in Fairbanks might be just a brief biographical sketch in terms of how and when you got up to Fairbanks and how you met Dr. Forbes.

DR. KOPONEN: Well, when I was a student at college, there was an interesting event at Wilberforce State College. I went to a square dance at Antioch. I'd been admitted to Antioch, but they wanted money so I ended up (laughter). And I sprained my ankle. A charming young lady got me an Ace bandage. And after I no longer needed it, I washed the Ace bandage and took her out for hamburger at Wilberforce, and that was Joan Forbes. And I got to know her family. And we were eventually married in Cambridge at a Friends meeting (indiscernible). And, of course, I'd met --

MR. MITCHELL: What year would that have been?

DR. KOPONEN: Well, we were married in 1951. We met 1959 (sic), I think. Anyway, it's the school year '49, '50. I'm not sure exactly. I think it was that fall, be late '49. And I'd gone to Naushon, which is the isle that the Forbeses have had for a long time, since 1830, I think. And so I met Uncle Harry, Henry and Hildegarde, as well as, it seemed like, hundreds of other Forbeses, and were all conditioned on economic and social statuses and opinions, and the whole bit. But anyhow, I had wanted to come to Alaska ever since having served in Finland with the service committee on refugees, working with the Karelians, actually helping them homestead, clearing land, building cabins in the woods of eastern Finland with the people who were there. We weren't doing it for them. We were just additional hands. I liked that. And so I essentially discussed it with Joan, and that was sort of a precondition of getting married. And so we came up to Alaska, drove up to Alaska with a lot of wedding presents, all which were sort of for homesteading. Nobody gave us a chain saw, but we had everything else, and we homesteaded. I worked for a mining company, the F.E. Company.

MR. MITCHELL: You got up there then in '52?

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah, March of 1952, March 7th. Because the 6th is my birthday, and we celebrated my birthday at the fish camp by the side of the Richardson Highway just beyond Big Delta, you know, crossover. And you go around the hill there, and there used to be a fish camp there. And that's as far as we got that day. We couldn't make Fairbanks. We celebrated my birthday. But the next day we got into Fairbanks. And we stayed with the Griffiths, Sandy and Connie Griffith, in College, and they had graduated from Antioch, where my wife had gone. And then we met some of the Finns in town. It turns out that one of them, Tiny Bodeman, had been actually a babysitter for me when I was a kid in New York. And they helped us locate a place out at -- beyond (indiscernible), and we lived out there a year and I worked for the mining company as a (indiscernible), in the power plant as a condenser plugger, and then later as an electrician's helper, lineman. And in the course of that, of course, I got to be active in the union, and I was the grievance man at the union. Won some grievances, including some for Eskimo who worked at Platinum and had been brought to Fairbanks and were being paid essentially oiler's wages for

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running the dredge. I got to know various -- a real scatter of people. I'd been active, of course, in the civil rights movement in the states in the late forties and early fifties and crossed right into it in Fairbanks. Anyway, between the various labor and other activities and working -- actually, they had a constitutional convention call, working with Dr. Ryan, who was superintendent of the school. He organized a group called the All Alaska (indiscernible) for State Constitution. And we had a really mixed group of people. We broke up into committees and studied constitutional law and made proposals. I was on the civil rights committee with an old-timer from Bethel, and Eugene Jones was a Black electrician, and we put in our proposals what I think were very progressive things. We were more interested in trying to raise the consciousness of people about what should be in a constitution rather than -- plus, of course, there was (indiscernible) statehood, and I testified. But the Anchorage group seemed more interested in using a constitutional convention to kick off a real statehood campaign, and that's essentially what in some ways happened. But that's -- in the course of that, I had political disappointments of seeing what we thought was a very progressive movement, though we got to look at a lot of other people who had been a very straight mix of Natives, homesteaders, labor dissidents, displaced left-wingers, populists, old-time Alaskans organize a political party known as the Alaska Party. And it was really sort of a Home Rule party. We never did agree whether we were for statehood or for independence or for commonwealth, but we wanted, you know, immediate action on a whole bunch of things. One of the people that was involved was Charlie Purvis. His son-in-law was Al Ketzler, who was married to Delois. We had met Purvis in Nenana. The first winter we were up here, we went to Nenana to a dance, and Delois had babysat our boy while we danced.

MR. MITCHELL: Was Charlie and his daughter then living in Nenana? Is that how she got hooked up with Al?

DR. KOPONEN: She was still in high school at that time. So anyhow, they moved to Fairbanks later. Not the only -- there was a whole bunch of other people. I also did surveying in the summer, and I got active in the surveyors union, and we recruited both women and Natives for training. We had a big strike in '57 and got recognized. Couldn't maintain the union because it depended on construction, and when you had only four people working out at the yard in the sixties -- went into the Teamsters, but I didn't. Then I went to the University. And people that we met who wrote us were the Hitchcocks, Ben and Kay Hitchcock, when we arrived up there, and Yule Kilcher and Dave and Phyllis Brown. We were interested in a sort of cooperative community. We looked at different sites, going back and forth. It's all in the period '54, '55. So we were all involved in that and a constitutional convention. And out of that came the Alaska Party. And then the group of labor people put out something called the Labor Defender, which included Ed Teagan, who was from Tetlin. So they had a group of Black/White/Native labor people. And we had a conference of the Alaska Party in -- I think it was Christmas 1956 -- '55, '56 -- in Palmer. And Ben had gotten pneumonia and he came to the hospital, brought him to the hospital. He died, so that delayed the conference. We had about 50 people there. Went out and buried Ben. Among the people who showed up to that meeting besides Al Ketzler and -- I don't think Ed Teagan made that one -- were Walter Charley, Markle Ewan and Oscar Craig. And they were representing the Ahtna, actually the ANB. It was the only, you might say, mainland -- surviving mainland chapter of ANB because of the Ahtna (indiscernible) connection. So they brought up -- we had been interested in pushing the Wickersham claims because we had -- in the

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course of looking for a homestead, I found that those old claims were still on the shelves in the BLM offices in the Lathrop building. Many of them had not been acted on. And, of course, Charlie Purvis knew people who had claims and trying to push them, too, and he was working with those people. And the Hitchcocks had friends who were in somewhat the same position. But the trio from Copper Valley brought in a broader point. They said that they had agreed to the Army using Lake Louise as an R & R site during the war. And now the war was over and they would like to get it back. We realized at that point that it was a much broader question than that. Walter's son became very active in the party. Mrs. Spurgeon, Virginia, I think, started teaching at (indiscernible). Had a strong group there. Markle ran for the legislature one year and got a very large percentage of the vote. And I ran for auditor. I was teaching school and didn't want to campaign, but having somebody on the ticket territory-wise was important to find out where there was support. Coyne and Skaggle wrote us, I know, and William Paul. Anyway, we made a decision at that conference to broaden the issue beyond (indiscernible). Our first contact was with Ted Hetzel of the Indian Rights Association, which was primarily Quaker.

MR. MITCHELL: From Philadelphia?

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah. And he was a (indiscernible). He came up. I should say also that in the meantime we had also organized Quaker meetings in Fairbanks, Matanuska Valley, Cabin Creek, and a smaller one in Anchorage. These were all going on simultaneously, political, the whole schmear. We had first gotten a Friends Service Committee to help us organize a work camp at Beaver to help the village move because the river was threatening. So we had the Beaver work camp, which I think was the summer of '56, if I remember correctly. So that brought in other people like Ruben Hall, who came up to that, and some of the people later went back to the states. Anyway, Ted came up and looked at the situation and said that it was beyond the IRA's capabilities to organize a real native land claim. In the meantime, a number of us were also going to the University taking classes in anthropology, Alaskan Natives.

[Edit from Chena Koponen Newman: Ruben Hall is most likely "Reuben Call" who later moved to Homer, Alaska.]

MR. MITCHELL: Now, did you write to Ted and ask him specifically to come up because of the land claims issue, is that how --

DR. KOPONEN: Uh-huh. And we'd been aware of the Association on American Indian Affairs. We had written them at the same time but got no reply, but I think probably we didn't have the right address or something, because nobody seemed to know. But anyway, Ted put us into contact with them. In the meantime, of course, Uncle Harry got himself on the national board. We didn't know about that. And so LaVerne Madigan came up and Uncle Harry came up. He stayed with us, and we introduced him to various people, Howard Rock --

MR. MITCHELL: Actually, let me stop you for a second. What was LaVerne Madigan like? What were your impressions of her?

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DR. KOPONEN: Very energetic, active. Very dynamic woman. Not always sure that she -- well, I don't know. I would hate to characterize it. Because she seemed so busy, I wasn't always sure that she was listening. But then there were too many things to do at one time, I don't blame her. She had that accident and died. Her successor came. He was much more laid back than she was.

MR. MITCHELL: Bill Byler.

DR. KOPONEN: Yes, Bill.

MR. MITCHELL: So I guess then Harry Forbes and -- I guess LaVerne came up first in 1960, and then the next year she came up with Dr. Forbes in '61, so that would be the summer that they stayed with you guys.

DR. KOPONEN: Well, he did. That was only part of the time. And, of course, one of the things (indiscernible). There were all kinds of side projects. There was one person who was very much interested in radio communication and she --

MR. MITCHELL: Sandy Jensen?

DR. KOPONEN: Sandy, yeah. She was getting equipment all over so that people could keep in touch. And, of course, the northern one was in Inupiaq, which was sort of discontinuous ancestor association. It sort of fractured (indiscernible). And there started to be various other groups organizing, lawyers getting involved and so on. When we went to London -- when I went to London to study anthropology in 1958, '59, that year we stopped in New York and met with Uncle Harry and the group, I remember, down on 23rd Street, the actors or players guild or something like that, a strange place to have a meeting of the Association on American Indians. And then we went down to Washington, and I think Al came there. And then later when I was at Harvard, too, we had -- there were sympathetic congressmen, senators. It was before a senate committee. Some place I've got a picture of Al much younger and slimmer and myself unbearded testifying before the senate committee.

MR. MITCHELL: Now, sometime around that whole era, I know that the first modern Tanana Chiefs meeting was in '62, the summer of '62, and right before LaVerne's death. And it seemed to have been put together -- there was apparently a crowd called the Alaskan Native Rights Association, Charlie Purvis and Hitchcock and Jensen. Were you involved in that? Do you know how that got started?

DR. KOPONEN: Well, that was a continuation of everything with Ted Hetzel. We conceived of ourselves as a branch of -- I mean, you know, within the general -- incidentally, Kay's papers are in the archives at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

MR. MITCHELL: I've been through most of them.

DR. KOPONEN: I've got some, too, but I have never organized them well enough to put them into the archives. I should do that.

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MR. MITCHELL: In '61, that early kind of era, what did Dr. Forbes think about this? Was he just sort of up because LaVerne had asked him to come, or did he have any strong views about what should be done about all of this, or was he just sort of generally being helpful?

DR. KOPONEN: He seemed to be interested. When he was with us, it was more asking questions. He didn't make proposals to me about what our group should do, not very much. He asked an awful lot of questions about all kinds of things. And I remember there was some talk of Oliver La Farge getting involved. I guess he never did.

MR. MITCHELL: Well, La Farge was -- he was the president of AAIA and then he died in '63.

DR. KOPONEN: He wasn't in good enough health.

MR. MITCHELL: He was in pretty poor health. As near as I've been able to figure out, actually even from some of Hildegard's papers, that by the end he was sort of a relatively dilapidated alcoholic and seemed quite embittered, really, about he'd spent all of his life in Indian affairs and, really, in retrospect things hadn't gotten a lot better. And my personal view -- I've read a few biographies and some things trying to get a better feel for all of this -- is that I think La Farge was victimized by success too early in life. He went off basically as a kid in 1930 and won the Pulitzer Prize for his very first book and was 26 years old or something. What did he do after he won the Pulitzer Prize? He went (indiscernible). Particularly, if you're from an old-line family like that, you know, your parents and grandparents are big shots and American culture icons and you start off with this glow of bursting flame and then -- by the sixties when all of the things were starting to really happen in Alaska while he was still president of AAIA, he was living out in Santa Fe and he was really pretty dilapidated. So he wasn't in a position really --

DR. KOPONEN: Incidentally, did you pick up the fact that Uncle Harry, who was at Harvard Medical School, was a classmate of Ernest Gruening?

MR. MITCHELL: Right. He was either a year ahead or a year behind Gruening, one of the -- but they were contemporaries. And yeah, there's correspondence in the papers where he uses that to attempt to go down and talk to Ernest, some sense to him about this land claim stuff. Well, what about how Natives were treated up in Fairbanks and the interior in the late fifties, early sixties? Was it like the way it had been down here in the southeast, or did people get along?

DR. KOPONEN: No. Well, I had a feeling -- well, it very much depended who came from where. But there was actually very much a sort of old-timer -- in fact, it struck me that people who had been in Alaska for a long time or who were born in Alaska, or at least in the interior -- because I didn't know much about the rest -- there was even much more of an Alaskan jargon. Many of the old-timers had what some people think of as a native inflection, a little bit Chicano talk, and I think maybe more clipped, "potatas" "put the kicker on the boat." I remember the term "siwash" was a verb. That meant to rest during the day and travel at night. You know, you're siwashing it over to Fort Yukon. It didn't refer to people. It was a traditional native way of traveling that the Whites had adopted because you don't want to get all sweaty in the middle of

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the day. So you take it easy, swat mosquitoes, and then when it's cooler in the evening, go as far as you can, especially in the north where it's daylight so long and the evening when it's dark at eight. And that tended to change, especially after statehood. Native -- I mean, there really wasn't -- a lot of the people in the interior had come not necessarily from the United States. They were actually European immigrants who had sort of passed through the states en route to Alaska. And so Alaska was their identification, not just the Finns that I knew, but many of others like Tim Wallis. Ralph Perdue would have been adopted. And the Wrights ran their parky shop, and they were a part of it. Beltz ran a carpenter's union. There was a much better situation in the labor unions at that time. There was very active recruitment into all of the sectors. I mean, there were some White groups that were -- the most patronizing attitudes were on the part of southern (indiscernible). The Army had some problems, but they were stepping on it, too. We'd gone through a Second World War, with the antiracism and the whole thing. So there was a much more kind of melded community, I mean, kind of like it is now.

MR. MITCHELL: How about consciousness in the general public about the land claims problem? I've seen the clippings from the first Tanana Chiefs meeting that took place and C.W. Snedden and his people were really quite aghast that (indiscernible). Before that, there had just never been an issue and then that's why they had --

DR. KOPONEN: Well, it had been an issue, but it was just sort of a festering issue. What made it more of an issue around there, of course, was the desire to get -- continue to get access to mineral resources and things like that. There weren't that many others. But also the fact that the Harding administration had put an end to dealing with the pilings that the individual families had made. (Indiscernible) Peterson, for example, on Chena Ridge got his because he was willing to pound away at it. Well, mostly Native families had not been willing to keep pushing the BLM. A few others, too. Charlie Purvis got, I guess (indiscernible). The Episcopal church took an interest rather late. In fact, Bishop Gordon got involved. But prior to that time they had been a very sort of quietus element. They could have mobilized the people that were active. And, of course, I have to say the people that I was with, University people, anthropologists, people in the labor movement, active Native Quakers and others were antiracist anyway, so my perceptions are colored by that. There was a hierarchy, which left Blacks pretty much down on the bottom.

MR. MITCHELL: Below Natives?

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah. I mean, sort of attitudes. Among Natives, there's a distinction between -- Eskimos, for one reason or another, were -- I think because of attitude and the struggles with mechanical ability, thought they were another class of Whites almost. No funnier than the Polacks, so to speak. Actually, they were above the Polacks. And Athabaskans were a step down from -- I'm talking about the attitude that I saw among people outside of the group I was speaking with. But even then, it wasn't -- because after all, they were locals. There were some funny attitudes among people who were part Native, especially like around Eagle and elsewhere. There was a real sort of (indiscernible) between Eagle Town and Eagle Village. And that, I think, over power as much as -- the people in Eagle, the guys who ran the store and ran the school board, were almost all half- to three-quarter Native but they were (indiscernible), and the Village wasn't, but then the Village was tied in with BI

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DR. KOPONEN: And I didn't get very deeply into that because I've never been to Eagle River. But you get to know people and they'd come in and they'd talk. That was the only real place that I saw that sort of attitude. But a lot of people with that sort of mixed background were late getting involved. But when they got involved, they tended to organize their own groups and then go in and assume power positions in both the Chiefs or the FNA, to be in with them.

MR. MITCHELL: Actually, speaking of FNA, one of the really interesting people that obviously left the movement sort of early because he died, but I've gotten fascinated by it, is Nick Gray. Did you know Nick Gray?

DR. KOPONEN: Oh, yeah, the juice-ki-mo.

MR. MITCHELL: What was Nick like in those days? Somebody was telling me, I guess, in Fairbanks during the early FNA years he was sort of like waiting tables at a sort of coffee shop/restaurant where everybody hung out at. He was just some little Native guy in town that sort of wandered around, problems with being a drunk.

DR. KOPONEN: I remember him at the meetings, and he had an interestingly warped sense of humor. Not the sort of shy, very subtle humor that most Eskimos have. I think his description of himself was accurate. Sort of both sides came through. Howard also had a drinking problem. He had a reserved table at Tommy's Elbow Room.

MR. MITCHELL: I talked to Jude Henzler who used to tend bar at Tommy's. Some of the mythology that, bless her heart, Lael Morgan tried to do about Howard, I mean, Howard was a much more human guy than Lael would have --

DR. KOPONEN: That happens to everybody. The book about Otto Geist is so purified, I don't even recognize the Otto that I knew. I was disappointed. I expected Lael to do -- not to try to mythologize him because it's useless. People aren't really interested in that kind of saintly figure that walks above the earth.

MR. MITCHELL: That's my view and I was fairly disappointed. Lael is an old friend, and I sort of understood what she was trying to do, but I thought that was not ultimately a helpful book. Jude was telling me that, I guess, Howard and some friend of his that used to be the desk clerk at the Nordale or something, pretty much every night when Howard would get through with the paper, they'd come over there and sit until five in the morning night after night after night.

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah. I was on the board of the Tundra Times. I put what money I could into the paper, too. Of course, we didn't do anything like what Harry did. The board did not make policy. The board was roughly there to approve what Howard had done and find a way out if they could.

MR. MITCHELL: I sort of get the sense from reading those letters that Harry sort of got roped into the Tundra Times. I mean, he was happy enough to do it at the beginning, but by the end it

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had sort of worn out its welcome with him. It wasn't that he wished anybody any ill, but the idea that he'd sort of become this checkbook to Howard.

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah. I mean, Harry really didn't have that much money for a Forbes. That particular branch on the Forbeses (indiscernible). And he had a good career and a nice, but small, home, in Milton, for example. The fact that they had a place on Naushon Island was an inheritance and not because he was able to afford it. And they had been supportive of things like the Association on American Indian Affairs. In fact, they had been in Labrador, the Grenfell mission and things like that. So accumulating a great deal of money and then distributing it hadn't been part of Harry's life. They were well to do but not wealthy.

MR. MITCHELL: They certainly seemed at the end that "enough is enough" and they'd done their part. Actually, Hildegard wrote me and told me that when they actually got into it, Harry had never had any intention of taking it on and that he'd done it sort of as a memorial to LaVerne. LaVerne had a riding accident in August of '62, and it was like September when Harry gave Howard the go-ahead at the beginning of October, he'd fund the paper. And (indiscernible) had not been on the agenda, and that him and Hildegard had been sitting around one night and said, "You should know LaVerne really wanted to do this, and we gotta do this for LaVerne." So to some extent, there wouldn't have been a Tundra Times if LaVerne hadn't been kicked in the head by a horse, which is sort of how history works.

DR. KOPONEN: The group had been talking about a paper. In fact, I had bought a press which turned out to be from the Lathrop Corporation, which turned out to be the press that (indiscernible) Thompson had used at Ridgetop. When they brought it into town, they just left it under the coal bunker and it sat there. One of the guys in the Labor Defender group was a machinist, and he redid it and put it back together again. They ran off about five or six editions of that on it. And so we were going to use that, but, of course, I was too busy with other things. We didn't find anybody who was willing to do all of -- not just write up things but also actually use the press. The press is still sitting in parts on my homestead. I had offered it to the Pioneers, and they want it but nobody is willing to come pick up the damn thing. There had been that discussion. And I don't remember Howard -- I remember Howard being mentioned as one of the people interested. It was a gentleman's agreement among people, yes, we need a paper. But who's going to do it? Well, why don't you? And I guess LaVerne had picked that up and had started putting it into more a practical form than what our discussions had been in the movement, whatever you call it, the conglomeration that was starting then.

MR. MITCHELL: One of the other characters that I simply count as very important at the end of the Claims Act story, he makes his first appearance, I think, about the time you got to Fairbanks, of course, is Ted Stevens.

DR. KOPONEN: He came in, I think, July '53. He came a year and a half -- just about a year and a half after we'd got there. He was appointed as Assistant DA by Eisenhower. Not an Assistant D

DR. KOPONEN: He was the DA, federal D

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DR. KOPONEN:

MR. MITCHELL: U.S. Attorney?

DR. KOPONEN: And I remember his coming into town. I don't mean that I remember the arrival or anything like that. But very shortly thereafter, he seemed to cast himself as the Tom Dewey of the north, a young Mr. DA, Tom Dewey of the thirties. Strapping on the shoulder holster and going and raiding gambling houses and houses of ill repute. He also arrested Charlie for mistreating a horse that Charlie had rescued. And generally putting his foot in the bucket. He didn't have much patience. And he did seem to be, you might say -- I don't know whether he put himself in the role or the people who helped him get appointed wanted him to get the Alaska Republicans together and tied into the national establishment for the Republican Party. For whatever reason, he didn't exactly endear himself to a lot -- they were split between the Fairbanks group and Boss White's group down here, and they preferred it that way. They didn't like Washington, even if it was a Republican president, kind of approach to things. But when he was solicitor, he kept in touch with all political currents, and he made some deals. You know, for Snedden, the rental of that place. Helped get Atwood and the others who had filed homesteads in Kenai and the oil field mineral rights, thus endearing himself to them forever, but also kept in touch with some of the Native leaders. They weren't leaders. They were people who were interested in the land claims for various reasons, put it that way.

MR. MITCHELL: Was Stevens, when he was the U.S. Attorney for Fairbanks -- was he sort of this short-tempered self that he is today? Was he sort of acerbic the way he is now, or was he mellower? Was he well thought of by the community?

DR. KOPONEN: Well, I didn't have very many dealing with him. His public image was as this rough, tough shorty, and the DA who was going to crush crime and not really taking too much care looking which way he was going when he charged ahead.

MR. MITCHELL: His impetuosity has stood the test of time.

DR. KOPONEN: Yes. It was even more evident than his temper, although the temper (indiscernible), too.

MR. MITCHELL: One thing I didn't realize being a short-timer here, having come in the early seventies, I didn't realize until I got involved in this project that when Kennedy took over and Stevens came back -- he hadn't been here obviously in years -- and the first thing he did was go out and run against Ernest Gruening in '62 for the senate seat.

DR. KOPONEN: He ran against Rasmuson. Let me put it this way. He had more friends in Anchorage because of that Kenai Peninsula deal. And he got there, set up a law practice and ran for the state senate. And then he got elected, no problem. After that, he ran for the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate and lost to Rasmuson, Mr. Charisma himself. We'd sort of indicate that there were some lingering feelings from a hit piece among Republicans in the state about him. That was strictly a Republican contest, because a Democrat didn't cross over. They didn't

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take any of them seriously. But Hickel was one of his -- but in those days, he was a moderate Republican.

MR. MITCHELL: He was a Rockefeller Republican.

DR. KOPONEN: He was a Rockefeller Republican. Larry Brayton was one guy who was involved in the land claims movement at that time. I'd known him from Indiana, and we got him up and he was VA of the technical engineers, the surveyors for a while. Larry ran against McKinley for the Republican nomination. Then there's Andy Edge, who switched over, and others. There was a big fight between the right-wing. The Birch Society had organized. That's when they sort of suddenly showed up on the scene, the national organizers. They sent people in from the outside. They spent an awful lot of money on Alaska. These guys showed up and they weren't supported by locals. Eventually, they got a lot of -- they poisoned the well pretty much in politics. But that was funny. What was it? The San Francisco Republican convention where Alaska went down the line voting for Hiram Fong.

MR. MITCHELL: In the sixties, did you ever have occasion to talk to Bob Bartlett about it in term of what he thought of all of this?

DR. KOPONEN: Yes, I did. And he was more supportive of it than Gruening was, but he was also sort of wait and see. He was more sympathetic. One of the things that was mentioned in one of the conversations was the Oklahoma experience. How do we avoid the situation where some groups get resources that are very valuable and then get it taken away from them because they blow it all very shortly? Actually, that was sort of -- the bill that went in that we all supported did not include the profit-making corporations. And that, I remember, came in as a result of recommendations of a group called the American Indian Enterprise Committee out of Oklahoma. It was headed by a Cherokee, I think, who happened to be vice-president of Phillips Petroleum.

MR. MITCHELL: Bill Keeler.

DR. KOPONEN: I didn't remember the name at all. And we had rather great forebodings about it, especially because the way it was set up, it meant that the communities would not be -- in other words, that sort of division meant the communities wouldn't be able to make decisions about land use or resource use as a community but more as a corporation. In other words, the corporate management control system, the one-share/one-vote rather than one-man/ one-vote and the transferrable proxy and all of that would lend itself to all kinds of manipulation. One thing that we had hoped is that if people organized in boroughs, they would make good use of land use planning, the zoning powers of a borough, but that was a little bit more complicated than just letting the community handle it themselves, and a real possibility of all kinds of problems cropping up, and some of them have cropped up. I think much of that underlays the sovereignty - - push toward sovereignty, which ends up being a fight between a Native-owned corporation's White management and the Native community itself. We didn't like that.

MR. MITCHELL: How about Ralph Rivers in all this? He sort of always seemed -- Gruening and Bartlett so dominated, particularly the Democratic political culture but people forget --

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DR. KOPONEN: Ralph didn't want to cross them. But actually, he was helpful. He was sort of -- I don't remember him ever taking a public position, but if you went to him -- and we did sometimes just in discussion for, you might say, legal advice. Not that we -- he wasn't paid. But just asked him questions, he would help, he'd discuss them. Whether he was being academic about it or what, I don't know.

MR. MITCHELL: I guess the last thing on my list of questions -- maybe I ought to write Hildegarde about this. But I was going through the other day trying to sort of put together from existing sources sort of a brief biography of Harry Forbes, and I can't figure out what his father did in the Forbes hierarchy. His uncles were some pretty prominent guys. And his cousin, I guess, Cameron was the governor-general of the Philippines after, I guess, Taft. Do you know anything about Harry Forbes' father in terms of --

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah. He was also my wife's grandfather. Malcolm -- he really didn't do any business. In fact, that's one reason that that branch of the Forbeses, including my wife, don't really have any money. I mean, they have money but nothing -- just moderate. Because Malcolm, let's see, he was probably the sportsman of the whole thing. He and his brother Will -- his brother Will was interested in this invention that this teacher (indiscernible). It turned out to be (indiscernible). He helped organize, but he didn't trust it enough to put much money in it. It was really funny. Will was president of (indiscernible). And he was one of these guys who preferred to keep his money in trust rather than investing in this newfangled technology, even though he was head of the company. That particular branch of the family isn't in the same boat. Malcolm -- he had a trotting horse farm there which you can see along Route 128 near Blue Hill. That was his ranch. He was interested in supporting ventures. He was a member of the New York Yacht Club. He was in support of the building of the America's Cup Defenders in that period. He put his money into that kind of thing. Put some money into the street railways, which wasn't smart. Incidentally, Cam told me a story one time about himself. The thing he was proudest of was not being governor-general of the Philippines. The thing he was proudest of was putting together as coach the football team in the early nineties that finally beat Yale. He was hired by one of the Boston brokerage houses as a young man out of college and sent up to look at this wild scheme that someone had of building a railway to the gold fields in Alaska. He arrived in Skagway, looked around the hills and decided this is ridiculous. It ain't possible. Got back on the boat. And then shortly after London money built the thing, he got fired.

MR. MITCHELL: This was Cameron?

DR. KOPONEN: That was Cameron. I knew Cameron. Joan's grandfather had long since died and her father had drowned at sea, so I knew her stepfather. None of the kids got along with him.

MR. MITCHELL: When did Malcolm die?

DR. KOPONEN: There was Malcolm Junior and Malcolm Senior.

MR. MITCHELL: Harry's father.

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DR. KOPONEN: That was quite a while -- seems to me that was right about the time of the First World War. Maybe not. His first wife died. His second wife was a Dabney from Faial in the Azores. The Dabneys were originally a Huguenot family that went to England and then came over, three brothers, to the states about the same time the Forbeses did, which was the early 1700s. Two of the brothers ended up in New England. One of them ended up in the south and ended up being a progenitor of a great variety of black and white (indiscernible). The New England ones settled in New Bedford and then got involved in whaling when it really expanded after the revolution. And their son went to the Azores and set up a factory, a factoring station, a whaling station to resupply, where New Bedford whalers would come and drop off the oil and pick up new supplies. They spent three generations there. In the nineties when whaling died, they left Faial and left the Azores and came back to the states, one branch going to Brazil and had really become Portuguese, for all practical purposes. And the other come back to New England. And Malcolm married her as a second wife, and she was the mother of Malcolm Junior and Harry. But Malcolm Senior essentially just left his money in trust. He did put some in Stone & Webster, electrical engineering. The family actually ran Stone & Webster, and a lot of the boys worked for them putting up power companies and trolley lines all over the place. I guess that was about as much as anything. The old family import/export business became a sort of brokerage, J.M. Forbes and Company, it still exists, in investments.

[Edit from Chena Koponen Newman: Dad is wrong that Uncle Harry was John Malcolm Forbes' second wife's (Rose Dabney Forbes) child. Uncle Harry was the son of the first wife Sarah Coffin Jones (Forbes) 1852-1891 and John Malcolm Forbes (1847-1904). Niilo's wife Joan Dabney Forbes (Koponen) was the daughter of John Malcolm Forbes' (1847-1904) son John Malcolm Forbes (1901-1941) with the former's second wife Rose Dabney Forbes (1864-1947). Henry Stone Forbes 'Harry' was born May 27, 1882 and died August 14, 1968. He was married September 23, 1922 to Hildegard Boughton Cobb (1893-1991) who is referenced in this document as corresponding with Mr. Mitchell.]

MR. MITCHELL: I know all the checks to the Tundra Times were drawn off of J.M. Forbes and Company.

DR. KOPONEN: And that was the original John Malcolm Forbes. His father was -- he (indiscernible) tramp steamer captain, trading schooner. He was born at the harbor at Borgo when they were blockaded by the English in 1800 or so. And then the family was broke. His mother was a Perkins. Russell Perkins & Company had China trade, the Yankees who came up here and traded for fur and took them to China. The three brothers -- The older brother, Thomas, was there and went to China to be the local representative of Perkins & Company, and he drowned. They had a 4th of July celebration. They were having a swimming race. The two younger brothers went to replace. Actually, John Murray Forbes was a factor, and the other one, Bennett, became a captain. John Murray married a Quaker from New Bedford, and she -- in fact, I guess, one of Lucretia Mott's nieces. They were Quaker on that end of the family. And that's how they got Naushon, because her father had been taking care of Naushon. When they started smuggling opium on behalf of British company, which had a monopoly, John Murray left and Bennett stayed. So John Murray, thanks to his Quaker and abolitionist wife and all, ended up

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being one of the people who backs Seward and put money into John Brown's little ventures, and helped pay for the packing and purchase of Beecher's Bibles for the Kansas abolitionists. So that's where the family gets quite a variegated tradition.

MR. MITCHELL: There's obviously been a lot written about him.

DR. KOPONEN: He kept journals, that was one thing. He went over as a spy for Lincoln -- not a spy, but an agent for Lincoln to try and buy up the brands of the Confederates, the whole thing. Another cousin, of course, was the commander of the Fifth Massachusetts.

MR. MITCHELL: Well, I guess I'm sort of at the moment out of questions. Do you think there's anything else about land claims, specifically that sort of 1950s, early sixties period we haven't really talked about?

DR. KOPONEN: Well, one of the things, of course, is that coincidentally, we had this sort of community organizing effort, getting into politics and the Quaker "people help themselves rather than doing things for them" kind of approach. That was one of the arguments we had with Bartlett, who figured, well, we can get money for the (indiscernible) which is what happened. You got Bartlett housing. And I never felt that that kind of effort was as useful as the working with the (indiscernible) in the Beaver work camp. Then, of course, when I went to Harvard, I was there when Keppel went off to Washington and the March on Washington against the Vietnam War, so 1963, along with George Sundborg and the rest of them. Anyway, that was all coincidental with getting involved with school integration efforts around this Harvard man and stuff like that, but keeping in touch with what was happening back here, including trying to write people about how to get federal grants on the NVA, trying to write to Zahradnicek, who was the commissioner of education. I didn't know that he was suffering from arteriosclerosis, didn't have any immediate memory, but the strangest responses I got. So we helped -- I alerted many of the people, including Larry Brayton, about the things that were becoming possible on organizing community action agencies and stuff like that and Head Start, which I got very interested in at Harvard, started the more formal Head Start movement when I got back here. People had used grants for summer school the previous summer. So in that period from '65 on, I would say, the organizing community action groups in Fairbanks, in rural villages, Rural CAP and all that provided a training ground for many people, a much more realistic sort of thing than what we'd been doing before, and also brought in a lot of VISTA volunteers, most of whom are still around, and people like George, who worked for (indiscernible). So that was a big impetus, too.

MR. MITCHELL: What about, I guess, that's something --

DR. KOPONEN: It lent a form of solidity to the movement.

MR. MITCHELL: Brought in money, too. Obviously, you can't organize --

DR. KOPONEN: One of the things that happened, however, that is not necessarily very good, it bears on what you asked about earlier. For example, the Wien brothers. I knew the Wien brothers. Some of them were still flying in the fifties, not regularly. They hired local people to

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give them radio call, weather reports at all the small villages. They paid the people to come out and sell tickets, so they provided employment. And if a kid came over when they were tinkering with a plane, they'd asked him to give them a tool and they'd explain to him. And eventually they hired them as mechanics. It was an indigenous sort of thing. The same sort of thing had happened with the carpentry trades during the war and the hiring of local people, who then became union carpenters because of the pressure of the federal government and Gruening to organize the labor movement, an un-racist labor movement. The kids who went to work for Wien became pilots, and eventually Bill English became the top pilot and actually had a reputation nationally as one of the top civilian jet jockeys. He was the pilot's pilot in his approach, flying ability, ability to -- the whole bush pilot. And the river boats. So there was a greater integration in the labor force, but it was hands-on labor, which everybody did. That was one of the things in the interior, at least in the fifties, that if there was a split, it was between those who worked with their hands and those who worked with the seat of their pants in an office or something like that or were merchants. And that was a sort of split.

MR. MITCHELL: Was that a Republican/Democrat split?

DR. KOPONEN: It tended to be, too, but people didn't think of it quite in that term. You had Republican journeymen and carpenters, and you had Democratic beer wholesalers, and some of them are doing very well today. So it wasn't really that much, but it was a sort of social split. In both instances, it was the fact that a Native rose and that wasn't -- it didn't seemed to matter. But when we organized the different corporations, you had more -- there were just too many things to do. And even though you had a larger generation of young people -- because about '57, we found the vaccine to deal with tuberculosis and things like that, which was one of the things I corresponded with Zahradnicek, pointing out, look, these kids are living, they're going to go to school, you have to do something about it. And received a "thank you very much for your" -- but anyway, there was a real generational split. You still had -- I mean, nobody followed Beltz in the labor movement. Nobody followed Bill English. Their kids got -- and the Wright Parkys business. Laura went and died of cirrhosis of the liver in Hawaii, after having twitched her bottom at the vice-president, most intriguingly at the time (laughter). People had created a real place for themselves in the economy that disappeared because the next generation, there were too many things to do, and working like that wasn't the way to go. There was more immediate satisfaction and also money in being --

MR. MITCHELL: A Native leader?

DR. KOPONEN: Or even a board member.

MR. MITCHELL: I've often wondered what would all of these guys be doing today if there had never been a Native Claims Settlement Act?

DR. KOPONEN: They'd be running the economy.

MR. MITCHELL: What would the Willie Hensleys and the Oliver Leavitts and the John Schaeffers, and the people that we all know so well in terms of their domination of --

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DR. KOPONEN: They'd be running a corporation about the same size.

MR. MITCHELL: The last thing, and then I'll let you go, is I just got to thinking, one of the things that's always intrigued me is the 1966 election, because I've talked to Emil Notti and people that they very much planned to have that first AFN meeting, that first big statewide meeting, in October of '66, looking very much toward the November election in terms of who was going to get with the program with land claims and who wasn't. And certainly, the people that went down that year were -- Bill Egan obviously lost to Walt Hickel, and also Ralph Rivers lost to Pollock. It's my view that Rivers got so beat up by Mike Gravel in the primary out in the bush that there really wasn't much left of him for Pollock to have to deal with. And I guess my question is --

DR. KOPONEN: Rivers was not a campaigner. He was an organization man. He never knew what hit him.

MR. MITCHELL: Well, how about Egan? Do you think that Egan's lack of sympathy for the land claims movement in '66 contributed to that loss?

DR. KOPONEN: I think so. I had just come back. You know, I came back from graduate school that summer, and I was just getting interested -- there were a number of things. It was fairly close.

MR. MITCHELL: Hickel only beat him by a little more than a thousand votes statewide.

DR. KOPONEN: Right. One of the things, there had been a combination -- who was the commissioner of community regional affairs or of the local boundary commission?

MR. MITCHELL: In '66?

DR. KOPONEN: Yeah, from Yakutat.

MR. MITCHELL: From Yakutat. Byron Mallott?

DR. KOPONEN: Yes.

MR. MITCHELL: Byron was working for Egan. During the '66 era, he was Egan's sort of main Native guy.

DR. KOPONEN: We had organized for various reasons west of town, Chena Ridge. We were trying to get the right to organize our own town/city. Was that '66? But, anyway, I know it had to do with the Egan election. Anyway, we were not given the right to vote on it. It was a decision on the chairman, Byron Mallott. The local Fairbanks representative, Jerry Ackerman on the local boundary commission, voted for it. But I think -- a lot of pressure from the F.E. Company and United States Smelting and Mining Company, and it had to do with control of the land. People

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wanted to keep it a rural area, and the downtown people were very interested in subdividing. Well, there was a great reaction, even though we had a strong Democratic party there because of Nick Begich. We were organized around Nick Begich's campaign and Gruening's campaign. I remember trying to call Bill Egan and asking to come up and talk to the people. The Democratic vote was high and (indiscernible) dropped out like that. And that was maybe 300 votes. I don't know how many of them he would have turned around, but, in other words, there were -- (indiscernible). Every little thing like that hurt, sort of losing touch with what was happening. I think he was just overwhelmed. I know some people that were more peripherally involved in supporting the Native land claims were particularly angry at Mallott (indiscernible). He was succumbing to the pressure of the real estate people in Fairbanks. And the mining company was pretty powerful and represented by (indiscernible). And I've always thought probably Alex had a little hand in it.

MR. MITCHELL: I've heard a story from Jack Roderick, actually, that when Ted Stevens first showed up in Fairbanks that Ann Stevens, much to my surprise, was actually a card-carrying Democrat and that she much wanted to get into the act. Didn't care what Ted was up to with his egomaniacal ambitions, she was going to get involved in the Democratic party until she met Alex. And she flailed around for a while and says, "I don't want to be part of a party that will have Alex Norr running," and that was the end of Ann Stevens being involved with Democrats.

DR. KOPONEN: Well, actually, it was -- Ted has always been fortunate in that his wives have been both very good, perceptive, intelligent people and we always sort of relied on getting word to Ann about things like (indiscernible). It wasn't worth talking to Ted directly, he'd lose his temper about the stupidest thing. Even when you agreed with him, he got mad at you for agreeing with him.

MR. MITCHELL: Listen, I very much appreciate you taking the time. This has been very helpful to me in fleshing a lot of this stuff out. One of the things I'm doing with these tapes when I'm through with them all -- and I've done a whole bunch of people, Emil Notti, I've done Ted, I've done (indiscernible) and a whole variety of people -- and I'll dump them all off at the University.

DR. KOPONEN: One of my real great disappointments and real outburst of racism was the campaign against Emil Notti's election.

MR. MITCHELL: Do you think the state is prepared to elect Willie to statewide office and do you think that we've evolved? It just seemed to me, aside from the fact that I think Emil was the strongest candidate at that time that they could put up, certainly, I think it's fair to say the state was not prepared to elect a Native to statewide office, period.

DR. KOPONEN: I think we could have, except they formed the usual Democratic firing squad, formed a circle and fired. And I always figured, having been in the Begich group, that the guy who was supposedly from Texas to help Pegge really was a Nixon plant. He was a real sort of disinformation agent. If he wasn't, he was the world's greatest asshole.

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MR. MITCHELL: Actually, also back to these little quirks. If Nick Begich's plane had never gone down -- in many ways the Democratic Party went down with him. If he had lived, he obviously would have moved right into the senate seat. The domination of Ted Stevens and the reconstituted Republican Party never lost the House seat, and the Democratic Party would be much different.

DR. KOPONEN: Do you ever talk to Gene Kennedy?

MR. MITCHELL: No. I hear he's down in Seattle. He's on my list. I talked to --

DR. KOPONEN: Last I heard he was over back in Massachusetts.

MR. MITCHELL: No. I talked to -- You know Mary Lee Council. Vic Fischer is a old, old, friend of Mary Lee's. Actually, I guess I can turn this off. (End of interview). TRANSCRIBER'S CERTIFICATE I, Denise C. Budde, hereby certify that the foregoing pages numbered 1 through 41 are a true, accurate, and complete transcript of the Interview of Niilo Koponen, transcribed by me from a copy of the electronic sound recording, to the best of my knowledge and ability. Dated this 5th day of June 2022. Denise C. Budde Denise C. Budde, Transcriber