

## **Chapter 4**

### **FAIRBANKS**

Delta Junction was the Alaska Highway's official endpoint, but the Camerons followed the Richardson Highway on to Fairbanks.

Fairbanks had been established in 1901 after gold was discovered nearby. At the height of the ensuing rush its population peaked at 18,500, but by World War I the easily available gold had played out. The town then experienced a bust as folks left to seek gold and jobs elsewhere. Enlistments for the war and the 1919 flu epidemic further depleted the population, so that by 1923 there were only about 1,000 residents in the town and the surrounding area.

The University of Alaska at nearby College opened its doors in 1922, and the federal government completed the Alaskan Railroad in 1923. These developments led to another boom, driven in large part by the introduction of dredge mining. The new technology enabled miners to extract more difficult-to-reach deposits on a larger scale and required more workers than the simpler methods of earlier decades. The possibility of steady employment and the rising price of gold during the Depression brought new growth, and the town continued to thrive.

When World War II began in 1939, the Army Air Corps' cold weather experimental station at Ladd Field became a small air base as part of the Northwest Staging Route and the Alaska-Siberia Lend Lease operation that moved planes to Russia for use in the war effort against Germany. This brought another increase in population and employment to nearby Fairbanks.

By the time Oliver and his family arrived in 1951, the population of the area had rebounded to 6,000. Ladd Field had been renamed Fort Wainwright and had become a training center. As the Fairbanks, Alaska Information Site notes:

The troops participated in large-scale winter exercises, while at the same time guarding against the Cold War threat of Soviet aggression. The terrain, climate, and over 870,000 acres of available training land make it an ideal location for conducting training from the squad through joint task force level.<sup>1</sup>

Oliver's first order of business was to find work and shelter for his family before winter set in. After setting up the tent, he fell back on his mechanical skills and experience and landed a job as a garage mechanic. He then purchased a one-acre plot for \$108 from someone who had

subdivided a homestead, paying half down and making payments on the balance. He moved his family into an old farmhouse temporarily while he built a road into the property and relocated the tent.

While working as a mechanic, Oliver also began helping a local farmer and doctor, Dr. Fitz, with his potato growing business. When Dr. Fitz and his wife decided to leave for a time to visit the Lower 48, they asked Oliver and his family to stay in their house. Oliver noted that, “If there wasn’t somebody living on a property, people would start to dismantle it little by little.”



Dr. and Mrs. Fitz, circa 1952. Photos from the Cameron family collection.

Oliver and Rene’s duties included hauling coal dust to spray over the fields on the doctor’s farm on the Steese Highway, about eleven miles out of Fairbanks. The dark dust caused the snow to melt earlier and warmed the soil so that planting could be done earlier. Also, someone needed to be there to maintain the potato cellar. The potatoes had to be stored at the proper temperature.

By early spring Oliver began to cut logs and build a small log cabin on his own property. But even as he and Rene focused on work, shelter and food, they were also taking in their new environment. They were awed by such things as the almost nightly displays of the northern lights, which Rene described as “a multicolored ribbon in the wind.”

At some point Oliver lost his position as a mechanic, so once again he created his own job. At the time Ladd Field was transitioning to a Cold War posture. Many people were leaving Fairbanks, and there was a lot of surplus military equipment on sale at good prices. Oliver purchased a one-and-a-half ton military truck for about \$100 and began cutting and selling firewood, in partnership with two young adventurers from France who were attempting to travel as far north as possible and then drive to South America:

*In the winter time when there was the most demand for firewood, there was a lot of snow and drifting. The Steese Highway was open most of the time, but the Chena Hot Springs—they weren't so good about keeping that open. With that 4X, when I chained up, I could plow through a lot of snow. That's the way I was making a living.*

By April of 1952 the family had the beginnings of a cabin on their own land. Their house-sitting days were numbered because the Fitzes were returning. They also realized that they needed to make a trip back to Idaho to get their furnishings and other belongings. Oliver didn’t want to

take his car out, because he planned to get a pickup truck in Idaho for the return.

Instead, he worked out a deal with the Frenchmen. As it happened, their plans to travel to South America had been waylaid when they found it necessary to make a trip home to France. They planned to drive back down the Alaska Highway in their Jeep station wagon, and they agreed that Oliver and Rene could ride along if he would pay for gas and Rene would do the cooking. They drove straight through, stopping only to eat, fill the gas tank, and other essentials. Rene cooked quick, simple meals of oatmeal and pancakes, tailgate style.

Back in Idaho, Oliver found work at a sawmill at Tamarack, about 115 miles north of Nampa, and set about building up his financial reserves before buying a pickup and trailer. In September of 1952 he and Rene loaded up their household goods and their two small children and made their second trip up the Alaska Highway. Rene was four months pregnant with their third child.



Jessie, Dell, Pansy, Ed, Phillip, Eula Mae (Phillip's wife), Rene and Oliver with Phillip holding daughter Deana. Dorene, Richard and Lynne (Phillip's) next to Rene. Tamarack, Idaho, 1952.



Getting ready to return to Alaska, 1952.

Oliver's sister Jessie accompanied them in hopes of finding work in Alaska. The family again camped or slept in the car, with the occasional treat of a stay in a roadhouse. Oliver drove the whole way because Rene's license had expired and she was waiting to get a new license in Alaska. On their arrival, they discovered—much to their amusement—that Oliver's license had also expired.

Dr. and Mrs. Fitz insisted that the family stay with them for the two weeks it took Oliver finish the log house. With help from friends and fellow church members, Oliver finished laying the floor and chinking the walls. By October, before it got really cold, the 20x24 house was ready for occupancy. It had a living room-kitchen and two bedrooms, with rugs on the bedroom floors and a good heating stove.



Dorene and Richard Cameron, Fairbanks house, 1952.

Oliver again worked as a mechanic for a time, but for much of the winter he helped Dr. Fitz. He also tried his hand at watch and clock repair, since “lifting sacks and whatnot” was bothering his back, but his main source of income that winter seems to have been cutting and selling firewood.



Rene, Oliver, Jessie, Dorene, and Richard. Christmas, 1952, Fairbanks.

Sister Jessie found work at the Fairbanks hospital, where Gerald Jon, third and youngest of the Cameron children, made his appearance on February 27, 1953. Jessie worked long enough to save up some money before returning to Idaho.



Rene, Oliver, Gerald, Richard, Dorene, Fairbanks, 1953.

When spring came they planted a big garden. At harvest time Oliver dug a cellar for the vegetables they grew, which included cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, radishes, lettuce, turnips and rutabagas. Lorene made sauerkraut. They also had plenty of potatoes from their continuing work with Dr. Fitz. They harvested local high-bush cranberries, free for the picking, and as usual Oliver brought game meat to the table—everything from rabbits to caribou and an occasional black bear. Rene, meanwhile, learned to compensate for foods they missed from the lower 48 by learning to make mock applesauce and ketchup out of the hi-bush cranberries.



Oliver, Lorene, Gerald, Richard and Dorene, Fairbanks, 1953. Right: Richard and Dorene picking cranberries, Fairbanks.

Their neighborhood in Fairbanks was close-knit and friendly, with frequent birthday parties and other social occasions. People helped one another as needed. Rene was invited to join a neighborhood club that met monthly and learned new skills via courses furnished by the extension service at the University of Alaska.

It was through this group that Rene learned to sew furs. Using her newfound knowledge, she bought an old fur coat from the Salvation Army thrift store and fashioned it into a parka for Richard, which was later passed down to both of his siblings. Rene would make good use of this skill during her years in Alaska, making hats, gloves and mukluks for the family.

Oliver once did some work for a neighbor in exchange for a hive of bees. One morning the hive split and swarmed, and Oliver captured the second swarm in a homemade hive box. He and Rene got other needed equipment, such as honey jars, from a family that was cutting back on their honey business, and when the time came to harvest, they borrowed an extractor. That year the two hives yielded about 90 pounds of honey.

Although food was plentiful in their neighborhood, Oliver had to haul water from a famous local spring at a place called Fox. He improvised a workable means of hauling and storing the water for his family, using a 55 gallon drum.

He also built a dug-out garage behind the house for their car and pickup, with a workbench and a kerosene heater. The shop was much cozier after he installed tight wooden doors to replace the tarp that he'd been using to cover the opening.

One afternoon he staggered into the house and collapsed on the couch, telling Rene that his head was spinning and that his arms and legs felt rubbery. When she offered to get a neighbor to take him to the doctor, he told her he didn't feel up to the trip. He felt a bit better after sleeping for a while, but he wasn't able to do much for the next three days.

When Dr. Fitz dropped by, he listened to their story and informed them that Oliver had nearly killed himself with the fumes from the kerosene heater in the garage. Those tight wooden doors did not allow for adequate ventilation.

The family attended the Nazarene Church in Fairbanks, as did Dr. and Mrs. Fitz. Rene was active in church affairs, singing in the choir and playing the piano.



Dr. and Mrs. Fitz, Lorene and Oliver, Gerald, Dorene and Richard circa 1955.

When Oliver found that his watch repair work would not generate enough income, he again took a job as a mechanic, this time at the Oliver Tractor repair shop. He lost that job when shop went bankrupt, and the company owed him back pay. Instead of cash, he took equipment, including a generator, a big electric welder and a buzz saw.

Oliver continued to spend many hours working for Dr. Fitz on the farm, and had been instrumental in several improvements. He and Rene were kept busy harvesting, sorting and

grading potatoes.

By 1955, when baby Gerald was about two years old, the doctor offered Oliver part ownership of the farm. To Rene's disappointment, he hesitated. He was hearing a different call:

*I was reading the Bible one morning before going to work. The pages just faded out. Instead there was a map there in the Bible, and there was a bright line shining right from where we were to Kotzebue. I'm not especially superstitious. I knew at that time and still know that there are two sources of influence. They can be God or can be Satan. I wanted more evidence before I took that too seriously. It was completely out of the realm of possibility as far as I was concerned.*

At the time, a lot of people were leaving the Fairbanks area as the military continued to downsize Ladd Field. Oliver took a lot of equipment off their hands. Other people started showing up on his doorstep offering to buy various pieces of equipment, even though he was not advertising anything for sale. Then, when a friend offered to buy his house if they ever wanted to sell, he began to see signs that it might be possible to make the move after all.-

He and Rene pared down to bare necessities, since everything would have to be flown to Kotzebue. They sold their car and their pickup, and gave away household items that they had brought up the Alaska Highway—including wedding gifts, to Rene's dismay. They sold their house, purchased a tent, and moved onto the Fitz's farm. They camped there for a few weeks and took time out for Dorene to have her tonsils removed, and then they were ready to go.

*So we bought tickets and went to Kotzebue, just barely taking what I thought we had to have.*

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<sup>1</sup>“Fort Wainwright” <http://fairbanks-alaska.com/fort-wainwright.htm>