

World War II

Jim and Marie remained in Seward some months after their wedding. I used to think that the formal entry of the US into WW II was the point at which civilians were driven out of the town. I learned further, however, from mom that the militarization of Seward had been going on for some time before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This doubtless had to do with the fact that Seward was the only access to the interior of Alaska, and to the military bases already in place. To lose Seward as a deep water port would be to paralyze those critical bases in a



Figure 1 From Mary Barry Seward, Alaska Vol. III



Figure 2 From Mary Barry Seward, Alaska Vol. III

region of the world that was closer to Japan than any other part of continental US. It was crucial that Seward be protected and kept open. If the Japanese ever tried to enter Alaska, Seward was alone as the key to the movement of munitions and supplies.

Later I discovered that Fort Raymond was started in June 1941, the month after they married. The plan was to create an installation that would house 3,000 men and women. Initially it was a tent camp which was a pretty miserable existence during the winter before framed housing was available.

As the size of the military increased, the presence of enlisted men also increased. The basis for mom's departure was the things that happened in the streets of little Seward, not the declaration of war in Washington D.C. The way mom put it, "It got so that a woman wasn't safe in the streets with all of the military around," and "That's when your dad kicked me out." So she and Rachel scraped enough money together to return to Naples to set up housekeeping with grandpa and grandma Merrell. Remember those words, "kicked me out of the house."

My original version of the story had them leaving Seward in Dec. 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, going directly to SLC where I was born in March 1942. But my mom says she left Seward earlier than I had imagined. Indeed, she must have because dad stayed behind "because he had a good paying job at the Alaska shop" [sure] after which he moved out to Naples to be with her. After a few months in Naples, they moved to SLC where he could take the government training program to become a machinist, which is where I was born 03-31-42.

Dad tried to join the military but he was refused. The Sea Bees was the group I remember him petitioning, but mom doesn't have that specific recall today. She said that the enlistment offices in Alaska had more than filled their quotas with unmarried men so were not interested in taking married men. At the point war was declared, the federal government converted the tiny town of Seward into a major military installation. That actually makes great sense.

Seward was the railhead for the Alaska Railroad which supplied all military bases with materials. It was doubtless to establish and maintain absolute control over the entire town to ensure that shipping was safe, was not sabotaged. At that point the only people who were authorized to remain in the town were military or government or railway personnel. Obviously. Dad and mom wanted to stay there, probably because they had designs on that homestead location north of town. But since they had not filed to become homesteaders they had no status to claim the

right of remaining in Alaska. The build up of Seward for military purposes actually started well before the declaration of war occurred, so the military presence was large enough to affect everyday life. That, as noted above according to mom is the real reason that she left Seward, at which point Dad stayed behind for a few months before he, too, moved to Naples.

Return to Naples

Naples turns out to have been the haven, the sanctuary, the home base for Jim and Marie. I didn't realize this until the last week when I was discussing their peregrinations with Dee, trying to understand just what happened, what they did and when they did it and in what order they did it. Slowly the realization dawned on me that they had relied, albeit unconsciously perhaps, on the stability and security in the knowledge that grandpa and grandma Merrell were in Naples and that they could return there whenever they wished. They engaged in flights of fancy and courageously embarked on various enterprises. Yet they knew behind it all that whenever things got too tough for them, whenever they lost their way and livelihood, all they had to do was to return to Naples where in the womb of Marie's family they could re-group and re-organize before embarking again on whatever enterprise they wanted. I obviously don't know whether or not they consciously thought this way but the evidence cannot be denied.