

Binkley matriarch recalls early days of Fairbanks before statehood

Fairbanks Daily News-Miner (AK) - Wednesday, December 31, 2008

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Section: Local News

FAIRBANKS — Mary Binkley is the matriarch of the Binkley family, which has owned and operated the Discovery riverboat touring company since 1950.

She has vivid memories of when Alaska unofficially became the 49th state during the summer of 1958.

Fairbanks had a few men who tried to dye the Chena river gold in celebration of Congress' approval of statehood that August.

"Something went wrong, and it turned the river green for a few days," she said.

By January 1959, when Alaska officially joined the Union, Binkley had already accepted the statehood news and was too busy raising four young children, attending classes at the University of Alaska, and acting as a den mother for the Cub Scouts to remember much else.

"I remember that we were all really excited about statehood, but I mostly remember the summer celebrations," she said.

During the next few years, federal money slowly trickled into the state, and the Binkley Riverboat business really took off as Alaska's popularity increased and visitors from around the world came to the new state.

When she arrived in Alaska in 1944, the university's student body consisted of fewer than 100 people.

As a student at UAF, Binkley remembers Charles Bunnell, president of the university, also serving as janitor, postmaster and registrar as he struggled to keep the school running during World War II, before federal money trickled in.

"It was a busy time for all of us both in Fairbanks and in Juneau," she said. "I think we all must have had a lot of energy back then."

In 1961, her husband, Captain Jim Binkley, began his two-term career in the Alaska Legislature, leaving Binkley home to operate the family business.

"My husband never got to come home and was gone from April through mid-January while he worked for the state," she said. "Over the next several years, the Legislature changed drastically and that brought a lot of positive change to Fairbanks."

Binkley said during her husband's tenure, delegates received a small stipend for stamps and little else.

"They had no secretaries and had to answer all their own letters," she said. "It was even considered improper if they didn't turn back in their extra stamps after the session ended."

Binkley's husband lived in a small apartment with two other legislators who barely earned enough to make rent and buy groceries, according to Binkley.

"It was such an exciting time to be here," she said. "It was a challenge, but always fun and I never once regretted being in Alaska."