

THEN  
AGAIN

# ED RUCKSTUHL



*Ed Ruckstuhl returned to Fairbanks for his 50th class reunion in September 2013. While on campus, he gave an oral history interview with archivist Leslie McCartney, curator of oral history with the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives in the Rasmuson Library. An excerpt follows. The complete interview is available for checkout. Visit <http://library.uaf.edu>.*



Photo from 1963 Deneff yearbook.

*After graduation, Ed worked all over the world doing what he learned to do at UAF: building a runway in Barrow for the Alaska Division of Aviation; constructing offshore platforms and pipelines in the Gulf of Mexico for Conoco; dredging canals in Indonesia and a base for operations in Madagascar; and building facilities in other places, including Louisiana, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Thailand, Norway, the North Sea and the Republic of Georgia. Ed retired in 2001. He credits his time at UAF for setting the stage for his success. College, he says, is meant to prepare you not just for a job but for life.*

# HL, '63



Barrow expedition image courtesy of Ed Ruckstuhl.

**Leslie:** How did a Southern boy from Louisiana end up at UAF?

**Ed:** I was attending school in the South when I had a car accident, so I took a semester off. In the meantime my father had gone to Alaska to work at the ballistic missile site in Clear, in charge of the power plant. On one of his visits home, I returned with him and my mother. We drove from Louisiana to Fairbanks in December of '59 and I started at the university in January. It was quite an experience, as I'd never really seen snow before. My first challenge was learning how to walk wearing leather shoes. The solution: Throw the leather shoes away.

It was a totally different culture here. I was raised in a segregated society [in Louisiana]. Coming to Alaska, segregation did not exist. Things I had been raised with, I found wasn't really society, it wasn't how we should act as human beings. That really changed my perspective and I think helped make me a successful person. Everyone on campus was so open. We had students from every state and five or six foreign countries. We had less than 500 students total but to have that vast difference in people and cultures was a great experience. I'm really so glad I came here for that.

Our classes were small and we knew our professors on a first-name basis. They had us over for dinner. It was almost like we were their children. We had George Knight, Professor Mendenhall, Hal Peyton, Professor Burdick, a really great group of men. In those days salaries were very high so the university probably had their pick of who would come here to teach.

My largest class was an English class in the Bunnell Building auditorium, maybe 40 people.

**Leslie:** Did you live on campus?

**Ed:** Yes, I spent time in Nerland, MacIntosh and Hess. The Hess I'm talking about no longer exists.

**Leslie:** What buildings were here when you were here?


**Ed:** Back in those days you had men's dorms and ladies' dorms. The ladies were all in Wickersham. The original Hess Hall was right next to Wickersham. Eielson was here, and the Old Main building, which was the university building when I first came but was only here for the first year and a half. Across the street to the north, another original structure housed the rifle team and ROTC and perhaps some of the wildlife [department]. The basement and first level of the engineering building were built while I was here, and the Bunnell Building was here. Down campus you had MacIntosh, Nerland and Stevens, which was the newest dorm. We were the first graduating class to use the new gym [the Patty Building] for the ceremony; the program even said "commencement services will be held in the new gymnasium." I don't think it had been named yet. The Tilly cafeteria

was under construction. The old power plant was across the street from where the bookstore is now, and the new power plant, now 50 years old, was under construction.

**Leslie:** What about Signers' Hall?

**Ed:** That was the gym. That was where Starvation Gulch used to be held. That's where tradition came in and the Tradition Stone. Just prior to my coming here, Starvation Gulch was the biggest function on campus for the students. It was the freshmen's responsibility to provide the alcohol, or home brew, to serve at Starvation Gulch. One year they apparently did such a good job that people dressed up in their mining outfits, [complete with] firearms and bullets, and the result was the loss of some light bulbs, windows and other possible structural damage to the roof. It was decided after that function that alcohol should not be allowed on campus.

**Leslie:** What other types of social activities were there?

**Ed:** Engineer's Day was held on St. Patrick's Day. The miners would detonate a bit of dynamite to wake everyone up at five in the morning. One year it was cold, 30 below, and the detonations in the cold air broke several windowpanes on campus. There was usually some sort of rivalry between the engineering and business administration students. One year the head of business administration was kidnapped, put on an airplane and dropped off in a remote village. There would be a tug-of-war and to make it interesting they'd define the line with manure from the experimental farm — [all] in front of the cafeteria [Constitution Hall]! 



John Sigler Photograph Collection, 2004-11-791, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

**Volleyball match, Signers' Hall. Signers' was the gym in the '50s, when this photo was taken, and in the early '60s when Ed attended UAF.**