

GHOSTS ON THE WIRE

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A standard file storage box of commercial strength has been sitting on a shelf in the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Film Archives office since anyone can remember. When and how the box and contents came to be in the library is somewhat a mystery. At some point someone had written on the box 'Harrie Hughes electronic memory recording wire recordings.' The box was rediscovered in December 2015 when Steve Hormann, a volunteer with the Oral History Collection at the University of Alaska, asked me if we had any wire recordings in our collection. As Curator of the UAF Oral History Program I made a quick search of the over 11,000 recordings in our collection and found we did not, but only being in the position for four years decided to check with Angela Schmidt, the UAF Film Archivist to see if by chance they were in that office. When Ms. Schmidt took over reins as the Film Archivist in 2013 from Dirk Tordoff, she remembered him showing her boxes that were mysteries and sure enough, the Harrie Hughes electric memory recording wire recordings box was one of them.

Hormann is a man who wears many hats. As a retired mechanic he volunteers with the UAF Oral History Program repairing and making operable several of our old reel-to-reel recorders so we can use them for playback and digitizing thousands of recordings in our collection. He is also a volunteer disc jockey at the local Fairbanks KUAC radio station with his own show 'Any Old Time' which airs on the first Saturday of each month at 7 PM where he plays pre-1925 acoustically recorded music on 78 rpm discs which he has digitized. In Hormann's travels to a local record shop he learned of Art Thompson, a resident of Nenana Alaska and a man of many talents. Art is the Voice for Christ Radio Ministries (VFCM) Executive Director and runs KIAM radio station in Nenana. He also restores and builds pipe organs from scratch, runs a Charitable Trust, is a former employee of the Multnomah University radio department in Portland, Oregon and in his early career, was an electronic engineer in Silicon Valley (UAF News and Information 2016). Steve had visited Art's radio station and noticed when he was there several wire recorders. Art explained that he repaired and restored them to a working condition and was able to digitize the wire recordings. Art had become familiar with Wester-Chicago wire recording machines while transcribe Multnomah's wire recording collection years ago. Art agreed to make a visit to UAF and see if he could make our wire recorder operable and set up a system so we could digitize whatever was on the spools.



Figure 1: Webster-Chicago Electronic Memory Wire Recorder, Model 81-I.
Photo Credit: Leslie McCartney

Our wire recorder is a Webster-Chicago Electronic Memory wire recorder, model 81-I, and bears serial number 104946. This model was made to be positioned on a desk and for dictation use. There is no carrying case for it yet the machine is in mint condition. A little research about the machine revealed that the wire recorders manufactured by the Webster-Chicago

Corporation were top sellers in their day. The company specialized in office dictation and the private consumer markets.



Figure 2: Wire Recorder Pamphlets. Photo Credit: Leslie McCartney

Very thin stainless steel wire, about .0002 of an inch in diameter according to a leaflet in one of the boxes; the wire is housed on three sizes of spools - quarter hour, half hour and 1 hour sizes. The wire is tensile strength of 245,000 pounds per square inch for a single strand again according to the leaflet. The wire travels past a recording head that moved vertically and rhythmically at a speed of 24 inches per second. The spools, although only 2 3/4" in width, are heavy. The quality of the recording was reported as very lifelike. One of the problems with the wire is that it would snarl and get tangled and prove almost impossible to untangle. I experienced this first hand with one of our wire recordings.



Figure 3: Photo Credit: Leslie McCartney

Production of these wire records was from 1945 to the early 1950's (Webster-Chicago 2016). When magnetic tapes (reel-to-reel to example) became available, they were easier, tangled less often and were quickly adopted thus eclipsing the wire recorders. In the box with the recorder was a smaller box containing seven smaller boxes of Webster-Chicago Recording Wire along with two spools not housed boxes. Very little legible writing if any is on any of the spools or boxes thus the mystery of what could be on these recordings deepened.



Figure 4: Wire Spools. Photo Credit: Leslie McCartney

The box containing these treasures had the name of Harrie Hughes on it. Harrie Lewis Hughes is no stranger to the UAF Oral History Program in fact we must have over 200 recordings made by him most dating in the 1960s and just when we think we have cataloged the last recording he did, more surface. Harrie himself is quite a story. He was born on April 29, 1899 in Linden, Montgomery County, Indiana (Bostian 2006). He grew up in California and worked in Hollywood building scenery and working on machinery. He was very proud of his work card issued in 1918 by the International Alliance of Theatrical State Employees, Local No. 33. He worked for Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and the Keystone Kops. He arrived in Alaska around 1929 and worked repairing machinery in fish canneries in Alaska's costal fishing communities. From there he moved around the state trapping, mining for gold, cutting logs and building cabins. In 1937 he came to Fairbanks where he ran his own electrical shop and did various and sundry other work such as plumbing, telephone works, repairing guns and jewelry. He also worked on the Alaska Railroad, served as a night clerk at a local hotel, volunteered as a fireman and tirelessly lobbied government to create Pioneer Park in Fairbanks (Cole 2006). Hughes died in Fairbanks at the ripe age of 107 on June 20th, 2006 (Bostian 2006).

Hughes owned and operated Harrie L. Hughes Electrical Service located at several downtown addresses over the years in Fairbanks. In a search of the old telephone directories his business name first appears in the March 1953 City of Fairbanks & Vicinity Telephone Directory and stays active until he is noted as retired in the 1965 Polk's Fairbanks City Directory. Hughes was probably one of the few people in Fairbanks with recording equipment at the time and he loved to record anything. He talked with old miners, residents of many communities in Alaska, pioneers, anyone who was willing to let him record them. He would take his recorder on road trips with him and talk and talk about what he was seeing as he drove down the highway. A prime example are recordings he made describing in detail everything about one of his trips he took in July of 1963 through Alaska into the Yukon, British Columbia, Alberta, North Dakota, Iowa, India, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania all of which is available online for your listening pleasure through the UAF Library Catalog. Technically many of his recordings are poor, low batteries led to voices recorded like chipmunks, extraneous noise makes several of them hard to hear the recorded voices; he very rarely gave a date or the names of the people he was interviewing.

As an interviewer he was far from stellar, interrupting people and frequently pontificating his opinion about something and thus silencing his narrator. He constantly stops and starts recording and thus his recordings are usually choppy and at times, difficult to listen to. Hughes also liked to record phonograph records or radio programs and then record over them. He was also a member of the Pioneers of Alaska Igloo No. 4 and recorded

many of their meetings and lectures.¹²⁹ Furthermore, Harried loved to make copies and copies of the same recording. There has been many times when patrons have brought us in a box of Harrie Hughes cassette recordings only for us to realize these are copies of what we already have. We have learned that if we hear a parakeet in the background, the recording is a copy. He liked to make copies at home and seemed to be oblivious of the fact that the parakeet in the background was also being recorded. But interestingly, in all the recordings we have by him, Harrie likes to describe what he is doing but never does he ever speak of anything of his personal life. These are just a few of the hallmarks of Harrie Hughes recordings and as imperfect as they are on technical and on an interviewing level, they are truly golden in the sense of recorded local history. They truly are a wealth of information about a slice of life in Alaska on whatever day he recorded. For collection and archival purposes, since the UAF Oral History Program was established in 1981, its mission has been to collect, preserve and provide access to audio and video recordings that provide insight into Alaska's history and the people who have contributed to its heritage. Hughes' recordings amply fit this criterion.

On January 22, 2016 Art arrived at UAF and along with Steve, Angie and I to see if the recorder would work. I had also asked George Lounsbury to attend. George is past-president of the Pioneers of Alaska Igloo No. 4 and has dozens of copies of Hughes' cassette recordings at home, copies of course of what we have in the UAF Oral History Collection. When I called to tell him about the wire recorder find, he thought these might be some of the earliest recordings that Hughes ever made. George was particularly interested to hear what might be on one wire recording spool that was in an old and battered Harrie L. Hughes business envelope with Pioneer Hotel Fire marked on it. George remembered seeing the bodies of those who perished in the Pioneer Hotel fire July 1952 laying on the street when he was a child, a very powerful memory for him.

Art carefully removed the bottom panel from the machine, inspected the machine and it appeared that wiring system and tubes at least looked intact. We plugged it in; the green glow on the front panel lit up and the motor started to purr. Art placed one his own spools on the machine, pushed a knob to listen and a switch another lever to play and the air was filled with the sounds of a big band tune from the machine and applause from us in attendance.

We were very concerned that due to how our wire recordings had been stored over the years—that is, not in the best of heat and humidity controlled conditions—if the magnetic wired and playback had been compromised in any way. To find its fate, next to be played was the spool in the envelope or as George put it, to hear the ghosts on the wire. In typical Hughes fashion, the recording starts with him blowing into the microphone and then he speaks to someone by the name of Sally Higgins Little, born in Podunk. The recorder is then turned off and starts again without the mention of date or who we are listening to but we later learn that it is Mary Alice Ovell [sp?] a tourist from Indianapolis who fell out of the hotel when it was burning onto a fireman. She suffered a bruised and cut left foot, the firefighter also suffered bruises. She tells Harrie that the north seems to attract a lot of ruffians and failures along with many fine people. Hughes says he's been in Alaska for about 17 years and has seen tourists from all over the world. And so ends the piece about the hotel fire.

129 The Pioneers of Alaska is a fraternal organization that founded in 1907 in Nome, Alaska to help members survive in the harsh environment. The group provided food, care, medical and legal assistance as well as social and recreational activities. Their mandate is to 'preserve the names of Alaska's pioneers on its rolls; to collect and preserve the literature and incidents of Alaska's history; and to promote the best interest of Alaska' (Pioneers of Alaska). 'Igluos' are the names for local organizations thus Igloo No. 4 is the Fairbanks branch number. (Pioneers of Alaska Grand Igloo – Igloo History).

As per usual, Harrie has recorded over music and when he breaks, the music is heard for seconds until a group of people are recorded just talking, telling jokes and singing ditties. Then at 12 minutes and 7 seconds into the recording, the Hughes has turned on the microphone again and says, "And now we are going to get Little Margie on this thing if we can get her to talk, don't know if she's asleep or not. What do you have to say Margie" and a woman says, "Oh I never have much to say." Hughes retorts that she knows what to say when she's on a microphone out on a stage and she replies, "Thank you, it's a pleasure to be up here in your saloon, I mean the Harrie Hughes Enterprise for Underprivileged Engineers, and Ruby you look enchanting today, looks like you fell in the mud with your feet sticking up in the air." The recording is stopped and starts again, and the woman says in a throaty voice, "This is just for you and Ruby," before she launches into the most beautiful solo of 'Pretend You're Happy When You're Blue'. The quality of the recording is outstanding; you would think it had been recorded yesterday in a sound booth. At the end of the song she says, "This is Margie Gale, from Frisco" and refuses to give Hughes her phone number or address. We all looked at each other stunned. Who on earth was this beautiful voice and what on earth was she doing on a recording with Harrie in Fairbanks?

A quick search revealed the singer was none other than Gale Storm, an American actress and singer who starred in many B movies and in her own television shows in the 1950s; *My Little Margie* which ran from 1952-55 and *The Gale Storm Show- Oh! Susanna* which ran from 1956-1960. In her autobiography, Storm makes no mention of being in Fairbanks (Storm and Libby 1981). She recounts in her book that her first recorded song, 'I Hear You Knockin' was released in October 1955 (Storm and Libby 1981). Our wire recording of her singing 'Pretend You're Happy When You're Blue' was probably recorded in 1952 and thus pre-dates her commercial recording career.¹³⁰

Art rigged up a wire and we inserted into the output jack on the Webster-Chicago and then attached the other end to a jack and inserted it into our Marantz Professional Model PMD660. We set the wire recorder to Output 3, pressed record on the Marantz, turned the knob to play on the wire recorder and this allowed us to digitize the recordings in uncompressed .wav, 44.1 kHz/16 bit. I have now digitized and summarized most but not all the wire recordings (on one spool the wire end is buried in the wire, two others are also proving problematic to play). The digitized spools are typical Hughes recordings. The meeting where the necessity and various locations are discussed to create a Pioneer Park in Alaska is of considerable historical value. Pioneer Park was constructed for the Alaska 1967 Centennial Exposition celebrating 100 years since Alaska was purchased from Russia. Originally called the Pioneer Memorial State Historical Park, the name was changed to Alaskaland in 1968 by Mayor Red Boucher of Fairbanks. Tourists however thought that 'Alaskaland' was a theme park similar to Disneyland. In October 2001 the Borough Assembly voted to return it to its original name of Pioneer Park and in July 2002 it was officially renamed back to Pioneer Park (Pioneer Park, n.d.). The park houses many of the original downtown Fairbanks structures such as Judge Wickersham's house, original cabins, two small museums (Pioneer Aviation Museum and the Railway Museum) as well as the Bear Gallery. It is still a well-used park by visitors and locals and this recording of the challenges that those who had vision for a park faced is of a wonderful piece of history for the community.

¹³⁰ Hughes has marked on the envelope that contained this particular spool the years 1951-1952. The Pioneer Hotel Fire occurred in July 14, 1952 (Fairbanks Daily News-Miner July 14, 1952). Storm's recording occurs many minutes after the story about the fire. One would assume therefore that she was recorded by Hughes after July, 1952. I have spent hours going through microfilm copies of every single edition of the newspaper from July, 1952 to December 31, 1952 and there is no article about Storm being in Fairbanks. As is typical for Hughes, he never bothered to record the date he interviewed Storm and her autobiography offered no clues as to when or why she was in Alaska (Storm and Libby 1981).

But it is the last box of wire recording I put on the machine that is one of the most fascinating. On the box is written May 20, 1950, August 30, 1950. Jack & Aggie Mamage[sp?] – Used not good. On the actual spool is written Ruby.



Figure 5: Ruby Spool. Photo Credit: Leslie McCartney

The recording opens with Harrie giving the date of March 30, 1950 in Fairbanks Alaska (as noted above he rarely gives a date, location or says he who is speaking to on his recordings). Immediately, this recording is different. It appears that he is leaving a recording for his girlfriend or wife, Ruby, to listen to at a later time as she is not present. He turns the recorder off and on constantly leaving messages of love and endearment to her. On June 2nd Harrie says that tomorrow Ruby and Caroline are going home to Louisiana and Texas but one woman (Ruby) says she will be back to Harrie soon and professes her love for him. The recording reveals that Ruby and Caroline met Harry about three weeks prior at the Rendezvous.¹³¹ They discuss how they have had a nice time together, Ruby then sings a song. Ruby professes her love to Harrie and then recites the poem 'Somebody's Mother.'

At 9 minutes and 16 seconds into the recording Harrie says it is August 30, 1950 Ruby is back in Fairbanks to stay and they will be happy for the rest of their lives. She loves the ring he has given her. Now it is Ruby's turn to leave messages. Later, it seems to be at least one year later but no year is given, on September 1st Ruby records a letter to her daughter as it is the daughter's birthday. She lists a number of names and tells them that mother loves them all and hopes they understand why she has to come to Alaska and be with Daddy Harrie. From this day until October 14th (no year) she leaves prayers on the recording, hoping she and Harrie will be happy, reading Harrie poems, hoping one day she and Harrie can go back to her people. On October 14th she says what a dreary day it is and leaves a prayer asking for blessings and asks for blessing for a number of family members and Harrie. Music has been recorded to the end of the recording. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only personal type of recordings we have that Hughes and his wife Ruby made that still exist.

It appears that Ruby was born in Baton Rouge Louisiana in June of 1918. When she met Harrie in March of 1950, Harry would have been just shy of his 51st birthday and Ruby would have been 31 years of age. I did find some unconfirmed documentation that states they were mar-

131 I am assuming they mean the Fur Rendezvous, or as the locals call it, the 'Fur Rondy' or simply 'Rondy'. This annual winter festival, which lasts several days, started in 1935 in Anchorage, Alaska. Games held at the Rondy in the early days included skiing, hockey, and children's dog sled races down the main street (Fourth Avenue). The Rondy is an national and international draw for visitors and is usually held in mid-February each year (Rondy).

ried on September 1, 1950 in Palmer Alaska.¹³² Obviously from the recording, she did not bring her children with her when she came to Alaska to marry Harrie and Harrie does mention on one of the recordings that for all the troubles she has had in her life, he will make it up to her and make her happy. Both Harrie and Ruby are listed as members of the Pioneers of Alaska Index but there is little other information about their membership (1989, no page numbers).

George Lounsbury mentioned to me that Harrie also loved to take moving pictures with his hand held movie camera and he gave me three DVDs of digitized silent home movies that Harrie had taken over the years. They all appear to have been shot from the 1950s to early 1960s. Some are in black and white, some are in colour. The films wander as much as his recordings, parades, moose in the yard, rivers, flowers, local dances, cars on the street, dog mushing races; but scattered throughout the footage appears a red haired woman who looks to be in thirties or early forties. She is always well dressed (or I would say overly fancied dress for Alaska), and she is often laughing (and the Ruby on the recordings laughs often). I can only assume this is Ruby.

Harrie and Ruby are listed in the *Polk's Fairbanks City Directory* from 1960 (p. 152) until the 1964 edition when Harrie L. Hughes is listed as ret.d. and at a new address (p. 137); Ruby is no longer listed with him or in the directory at all that I could find. I am assuming that they separated or divorced in 1963 or 1964. Harrie takes his road trip across American in the summer of 1963 and there is no mention of Ruby on these recordings.

I have yet to find anyone in Fairbanks who remembers Ruby in fact those who remember Harrie could not believe he was ever married. Bob and LaVerna Miller own Arctic Circle Hot Springs Resort. Bob had known Harrie since he was a child. In Hughes' twilight years, he lived at the Arctic Circle Hot Springs Resort in one of their cabins and came to eat his meals at the resort each day. After that he lived with Bob and LaVerna in Fairbanks. In total LaVerna told me they looked after Harrie for 16 years, from about 1989 to about 2005. Bob has now passed away and LaVerna told me that in all that time that Harrie lived with them, he nor Bob ever said anything about a wife or wives that Harrie might have had. In fact, at Harrie's funeral, mourners were very surprised to meet Harrie's grandson, Daniel Hughes, who according to Miller looked just like Harrie. Apparently when Harrie came to Alaska he had left a family in California without a trace and they had been looking for him all those years. With the Internet and obituaries posted online, his grandson had finally found the family patriarch albeit just after Hughes had passed away. LaVerna said there was no doubt about it; the grandson was the spitting image of his grandfather.

According to another local historian I spoke with, Harrie loved the ladies and was married at least five times but would never speak of any of the women he had married. I have no idea what number Ruby was in Hughes' marriage history. I have been unable to trace what happened to her after their marriage obviously ended. I've contacted a newspaper in Louisiana to perhaps help solve the mystery but no results have come to light as yet. I did find a quote by Hughes in a newspaper interview he did for his 100th birthday about being married, "I picked up two lemons and I ditched them both," he said (Cockerham 1999). Local historian Candace Waugaman laughed and said, "Two wives in Alaska maybe."

We will now catalog all wire recordings in the library catalog and they will join the other myriad of Hughes' imperfect but precious recordings that capture a slice of Fairbanks life in a time long since passed. We will also now be able to make the ghosts on the wire digitally available to anyone who requests to hear them. A few years ago I secured from the Pioneers of Alaska a Blanket License Agreement that gives us the right to digitize and provide copies of all their recordings to interested parties. Given that we have no idea where this material came from and assume it was from Harrie directly or from the Pioneers of Alaska where he seem to

¹³² I have ordered a copy of their Marriage Certificate from the Alaska Vital Statistics Office but have not received a copy of as yet to confirm this date.

dump his unwanted cassettes, reels and equipment over the years, I believe this Blanket License Agreement can incorporate this new material.

The mystery ghosts on the wires have now spoken after so many years of sitting silently in a box in the UAF archives. We have managed to play back the medium they were recorded on, managed to digitize and preserve them for future generations but what happened to some of those voices is still a mystery.

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