

Theda Pittman

Interviewed by Hilary Hilscher

July 21, 2001

Tape 1, Side A

Hilary: I'm Hilary Hilscher and I am talking with Theda Pittman. We are at the Loussac Library and it is the 21st of July in Anchorage. So, Theda, tell me the story about how you happened to come to Alaska.

Theda: Okay. I was finishing up graduate school in August of 1967. I probably had two weeks to go and I was majoring in speech communication and my job had been to supervise the undergraduates who actually worked at the campus FM station every day. As I recall I had my resume listed with the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, which is what we called ourselves in those days. And there was a job in Manhattan, Kansas, at the state doing cooperative extension radio programs. I had gone to school in Wichita four years and it didn't exactly sound like what I was looking for even though I didn't know what I was looking for.

I got a phone message at the radio station saying I should call this Charles Northrip in Athens, Ohio, and I thought Ohio, what's in Ohio? So I looked what was in Athens, Ohio, and I thought, hum, that might not be too bad and I tried to call him back. His wife answered the phone. No, he's not here. Can I take a message? We played phone tag several times. Finally I was at a friend's house and I got this phone call and this very deep voice says, "My names is Charles Northrip and I'm from the University of Alaska." My friend said that my jaw just dropped open 'cause I was expecting somebody from Ohio. He was in Ohio. He was working on his graduate degree.

"I don't want to rush you, Miss Pittman, but we are kind of in a short time frame here and I would like to know as soon as possible whether you would like to have your hat in the ring and if you would like to be considered?" And I said "Okay, how about if I call you tomorrow?" "That would be fine." So I called him the next day and as soon as I told him, "Yes, I would like to be considered for the job," I was absolutely convinced that they would never want me. And about two days later, on the television they started showing pictures from Fairbanks, Alaska, of water all over the place. [Ed note: she is referring to the Chena River flood of 1967.] And I thought, I wonder about my job. Well, he did indeed call me. He did tell me he would like me to go to Fairbanks and be there by the 1st of September. I asked whether if I should go as there was all this water. "Well," he said, "I haven't talked to anybody in Fairbanks but the University is up on a hill and I'm quite sure it will be all right. Yes, you should plan to do that." I got out of graduate school. I went back to pack up all my stuff to my aunt's house. And one of my aunts said, "Well, Fairbanks, it must not be such a bad place. They've got a nice Penney's store." Bless her heart, I'm glad she liked it. She bought my plane ticket so that I could go to Alaska.

Hilary: And then what did you do when you got up there? What was the condition of radio at that time? It was KUAC.

Theda: It was the university (that) had an FM educational station that had been on the air a number of years. It was one of the wonderful things about Alaska. People in town loved it. It had a big, big following even then. People who were replacing their furniture after the flood would call up and say, "Now you are all going to be in stereo before long, right? 'Cause I want to make sure I buy stereo set." Uh-huh. That's just great for your ego. I thought, (in) Washington, D.C., nobody calls up and asks if you're going to be in stereo because they are so anxious to appreciate what you have to offer.

Hilary: And what was the programming that was on KUAC at the time?

Theda: It was classical music programming, a variety of music programs, and once a week we received a box of seven-and-a-half inch reels of audio tape which came from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters and that was our network. In fact, one of the reasons I knew I could do that job was because of what I had done in graduate school (that) involved running the organization between NAEB and those boxes of tapes and understanding how those people coded things and what you had to do to make sure that you got your next shipment of tapes.

Hilary: Were you connected with other radio stations at that time in Alaska?

Theda: No, at all. There were no (other public) stations. Fairbanks, the university's KUAC was the first noncommercial educational radio station in the state and had a lot to do with helping the others get started. The two first were KUAC and KTOO in Juneau. KTOO in Juneau was created by a woman named Elaine Mitchell and she published a book called *How to KTOO*. And they were good examples of the difference because it (KTOO) was strictly a community-based station with a nonprofit corporation and KUAC was institutional in the sense that the licensee was the university.

Hilary: Forgot all about that book, *How to KTOO*, yeah.

Theda: But I got to do things like go to Kotzebue and talk to the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) advisory school board because at that time the BIA thought that maybe they would be interested in helping them to underwrite a radio station in Kotzebue. It was a very important experience for me because all of the members of the advisory school board I thought were incredibly patient listening to this young white woman (who'd) come to town to talk about how wonderful it would be if they had one of these radio stations. The visiting... it was the first time I was ever a "visiting fireman" [*Pittman note: The phrase "visiting fireman," as I understand it, used to refer to government officials or other do-gooders who would come to a village, describe all kinds of wonderful things and then disappear, never to be heard of again. Sometimes there was a constant stream of visitors wanting the attention of the village and its backing for some proposal or another.*] in

Alaska and came to recognize the syndrome quite well, but they were very patient and very polite.

Hilary: And what did they think?

Theda: You know, that's not part of the interaction. That was not how things were expected to happen. What they thought they discussed among themselves.

Hilary: Uh-huh. And so they did end up eventually taking that route?

Theda: You know, there was a delay. It didn't happen right away.

Hilary: 'Cause KOTZ came in later?

Theda: Yeah. It didn't happen right away, but it did eventually happen. I went to Valdez to talk to the Chamber of Commerce and there were people in Valdez that wanted something besides a relay of the commercial stations, but I also had at that luncheon a couple of people who had come from Glennallen that day and said, "You know, the only radio service we have is a religious radio service. Is there any possibility that we could get a station?"

Hilary: You were talking earlier... you started to tell a story about going back to the beginnings of public radio, National Public Radio, tell me more about that.

Theda: The first year '67-'68, I was program director. The next year, Charlie Northrip went back to finish his Ph.D. and so I was acting station manager and that meant that I was working for the station when the Corporation for Public Broadcasting released its first -- or the Carnegie Commission released its first report and said we should call this thing "public broadcasting" as the difference between public broadcasting and instructional broadcasting, and indeed KUAC was not doing instructional broadcasting. We were doing programs for the public, and when they analyzed the stations that were on the air all over the country, KUAC was one of the 97 that was among the first wave of "you are already there". You are already doing the kind of thing we think public broadcasting should be doing. So it was a tremendous high.

I got to meetings at which they discussed the creation of PBS and NPR. I went a couple of years and heard people talk about Sesame Street and they showed us one little clip of something they were going to do, and people would go, "Well, what else you are going to do? What else are you going to do?" And they'd say, "Well, we are going to teach kids the alphabet. We're going to teach them to count." You know, that just didn't have the impact of watching that one little clip so we wanted more examples, more examples. And they weren't prepared. They didn't want to do that at that point. The issue of Alaska being in its location with respect to the communication satellites and the difficulty in getting signals from those was the subject of much discussion at those meetings.

Hilary: And how did you present Alaska's position with this?

Theda: Well, I knew -- we knew -- that Alaska more than any other state needed the services that National Public Radio was going to provide live across the country. There wasn't any

other community that would benefit from that (more than) Alaska because we were (in some) locations in the state the only service. How could it possibly any more important? And so... but the engineers were talking about, "We don't know if we're going to be able to do live service to Alaska. The satellite is going to be too far east. Alaska is pretty far up on the horizon. We just don't know if you'll get it or not." And I can remember one meeting there was a guy named Bert who worked (at a station) in Pullman, Washington. He was sitting right in front of me and we were both in the back of the room and for about the umpteenth time the engineer who was standing up in front of the room was saying, "Well, every station will have live programming from the network, except Alaska, of course, (which) was just kind of a special case." And Bert stood up and said, "Miss Pittman does think Alaska is a special case."

Hilary: And you need to serve it.

Theda: And you need to serve it.

Hilary: Which is what you kept saying. Now Dick Dowling was one of your engineers.

Theda: Dick Dowling and I went to Fairbanks at the... in 1967 for the first time. We were the new kids on the block. He was there a year and then he went back to America Samoa for two years and came back. He was principally there to build a TV station. But consequently he is the first engineer I ever met (who) you could talk to. He was the engineer. He was making... trying to turn KUAC into stereo when I got there, and he was rebuilding the control room, and he walked in and he said to me, "What kind of programming are you going to do?" And I said, "Huh?" He said, "What kind of programming are you going to do?" I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well, if I'm going to build this control room and this studio so that it will do what you need (them) to do, I have to know what kind of programming you're going to do. I never had an engineer in broadcasting say that or act like a program director. Back when I was in graduate school I had an engineer tell me that it was impossible -- that I could not possibly have seen sparks fly from one point on the patch panel to another. And talk about driving me crazy! So Dowling, I used to say, he drove me crazy in the sense that when something wasn't working and I would call him he would walk into the room and it would start to work. I would say, "I can't believe this and (it) makes me angry." And he would say, "Well, it's part of the way we keep our reputation."

So Dowling was working for the governor's Office of Telecommunications (in) the year of '78-'79 (when) I was the executive director of the Alaska Public Radio Network. That was the first year the network was incorporated. I was their only staff person. We had 11 public radio stations in Alaska at the time. And we were still talking about whether we were going to get live service. And the real problem was Kotzebue. Kotzebue was a fully qualified public radio station. It was, according to the paperwork. It was, according to the criteria and, by God, as far as I was concerned fully qualified.

Hilary: Those are the words, right?

Theda: A fully qualified public radio station. So it better get service from National Public Radio or (we'd) know the reason why. And Dick was a great deal of help to me, of course, because I'm not an engineer. I would be having these phone conversations with these engineers who were designing the satellite and the antennas for NPR and they would be telling me, "Well, we just can't do that, you know." And I'd hang up the phone and I would call Dick. I'd say, "Dick, Dick I just had this conversation with so and so and he said blah, blah, blah..." And Dick would say, "Well, I think they're really thinking about doing X, Y, Z." And so the next day I'd call the East Coast and I'd say, "Now that I got you, I just wonder if you're thinking about X, Y, Z..." And I used to, another thing... I was actually just a puppet.

Hilary: A mouthpiece for this engineer.

Theda: A mouthpiece for this wonderful, wonderful engineer who knew as well as I did that Kotzebue ...if any place in the country deserved it, Kotzebue did.

Hilary: Tell me about APR (Alaska Public Radio) Network at that time. Why was it important? What was going on with it, '78, '79?

Theda: Really, I think I had two... there were only two jobs that I had. One of them was: we leased a circuit so we had one line that all the stations could pick up and we didn't program it all the time but we would have to decide periodically if somebody offered us something (whether) we wanted to put it on the circuit or if we wanted to try to make arrangements for something (else) to go on the circuit.

Hilary: And you're talking about among your stations?

Theda: Among those 11 stations.

Hilary: Rather than... okay.

Theda: My job was to call, poll those 11 stations and get six votes. And there were a couple of people... like there was a guy who was hot for sports and he always wanted more sports, let me get some more sports on that circuit. We got a very kind offer from KNOM in Nome with respect to the Iditarod and I'm calling around about the Iditarod. I call this guy in Ketchikan, and (in his) just beautiful sort of bass voice he says, "Well, Theda, you know, this is kind of the banana belt. We don't get too excited about those dogs."

Hilary: It was probably pouring rain at the time.

Theda: Perhaps.

Hilary: So did you carry it that year?

Theda: Yes.

Hilary: So that's when coverage really got going?

Theda: Yeah. They had done... the Public Broadcasting Commission [*Pittman note: The Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission was formed in about '70 and later became the Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission*] basically gave them gifts from time to time. If something became available and they wanted it, the broadcast commission would pay for it and broadcast commission in Juneau would hook it up. They had like a 15-minute report every day during the legislature. And they would have a reporter that worked just during the legislature and used KTOO's facility to put the feed on.

Hilary: How was the network funded at that point, money from the stations?

Theda: No, it was from the broadcast commission (Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission). The other thing that happened was just at the end of that year, just as I left, sort of in the summer of '79, they were starting to work on the prototype show for Alaska News Nightly. They wanted to have their own show, but it was how to get there?

Hilary: And they were just starting?

Theda: And they were just starting. They were going to do a sample show, a pilot.

Hilary: We were talking about something at lunch that I'm going to go back to, too, and that was when you first went to the broadcasting commission, was that you had been up at KUAC and is that when Mike Porcaro was at the Educational Broadcasting Commission at the time?

Theda: In '78-'79 when I was at the network, Mike was...

Hilary: Mike was at the commission?

Theda: Uh-huh. He was at the commission and the commission was over on G Street. They moved to Gambell (St.) right at about the time... just shortly after I began in the fall of '78.

Hilary: And what was the relationship between the commission and this?

Theda: I think, well, you had this situation: you had the 11 stations and they weren't all unanimous. They didn't all have the same vision for what the network might do for them and I think some of them realized that it cost them money. [Tape off.]

Hilary: So let's talk about that again.

Theda: So the stations definitely wanted -- they were used to getting -- coverage (a daily report during the legislative session) from Juneau. That was real important. Because there wasn't that much coverage in Juneau, period. So that was really important. But they had been Alaska Public Radio Network in name (only), not as a separate entity.

Hilary: You mean under the broadcast commission.

Theda: And so the broadcast commission staff had paid for stuff for them and their agents for feeds of things they wanted. They were used to kind of being the friendly helping hand. "Yeah, we knew you guys need help we'll do this, we'll do that." They were not at all sure they wanted a public radio network that was separate from the broadcast commission. That might just be too much competition. Plus it would deprive them of the fun that they had because at that time Mike Porcaro, director, he had been in commercial broadcasting so he enjoyed working on the feeds and putting stuff together for them and he did not want, I think, just to give that up.

Hilary: Now this was still the Educational Broadcasting Commission at this point or was it the Public Broadcast... do you remember? Or I can look it up.

Theda: It was probably the "public" because... It was the "public".

Hilary: Yeah. Right. Okay.

Theda: So he didn't want to give up that fun, and the 11 stations were in a situation where they got grants from the commission but they wanted to be able to make independent decisions about what the network was going to do.

Hilary: Sure.

Theda: And 11 people who -- 11 managers from all over the state -- would get together twice a year maybe.

Hilary: If they're lucky.

Theda: It isn't like they had a unanimous decision about what they wanted to do, but I do think that... I mean, by the summer of '79 it was clear that they wanted their own Alaska News Nightly. Some of them had news departments, had really active capabilities to produce a segment for (a) nightly show. Some of them would say, "Well, I don't know how we'd ever do that. We don't do much of that kind of stuff ourselves." So it was different circumstances.

Hilary: Do you remember any other issues that you had to deal with at the radio network? Were there differences in programming? Were there any other major issues? There was funding -- probably always funding.

Theda: Well, there was funding and the broadcast commission wasn't kind to us that year and I think that had a lot to do with the fact that the commission staff didn't want to let go because several years later when the network was having one of its annual dinners, Stowell Johnstone, who had been the chair of the Public Broadcasting Commission, when he was making remarks basically apologized to me for the fact that he thought in retrospect that they had not been very supportive of the network at the time I was there.

And so that goes to (inaudible). But there was the five-kilohertz circuit that was enough. We used to say it was really three-kilohertz circuit that material could be sent around to the stations. There was... (there were the questions of) whether NPR was going to solve the problem for service to Kotzebue, and when were the other stations going to get their feeds from NPR live. And I mean, we did use that circuit for the basic NPR stuff. And then there was this thing about, well, you saw... How much autonomy are we going to have from the commission? Are the stations going to start paying out of their share of the budget? Are we just going to keep asking the commission to cough up an extra amount of money for the network? And how much is there on what we are going to do? And, of course, they've come a million miles since then in terms of their development capabilities, the money that they raise. They have managed to get through that period of time. And the Anchorage station KSKA now has its own development fundraising efforts and here's APRN threatening to go after development money as well. And now we're into another station in Anchorage, so it has come very far.

Hilary: When you first came to Alaska there was one, and through that time... what were some of the big milestones that sort of helped public radio develop over that time? You mentioned (live) feeds. You were first getting tapes and then you were actually getting feeds.

Theda: There was a – well, in terms of the evolution of stations, there was KTOO. There was a guy named George Homan in Bethel who thought this would be a really good idea to have a radio station and not only a radio station but a TV station. Anchorage built a TV station. I'm sorry Anchorage built a radio station and went forever to get a TV station because the legislature was not all that hot about it. *[Pittman edit: I misspoke on tape. Anchorage built a public TV station first – it took some time before we got KSKA because Anchorage legislators did not seek the money that was available at the time.]* When we built KUAC-TV in Fairbanks, there were only three states in the country that did not have a public TV station. And the federal government wanted a TV station in -- at least one -- in every state. And they had a program, the equipment broadcast facilities program (where) they paid for 75% of the equipment we bought. I remember the Ampax (?) quad videotape machine.

Hilary: Oh, yeah.

Theda: Rolling down the ramp! I remember. This was great. We got the cameras. We got the tape machine. We put one camera... we put a camera and videotape machine on a flatbed truck, pulled a generator, and we were in the Golden Days Parade. We were at the head of the Golden Days Parade.

Hilary: With the equipment?

Theda: With the equipment. And then when we got to the end of the parade route, we pulled out of the way and turned around and shot videotape footage of the parade going by us. And

you know, people loved it. People were just like, “What is that?! And you did what with – I don’t know what it was, a \$75,000, \$100,000 videotape machine – you did what?”

Hilary: And it was the perfect use for it. It was perfect.

Theda: Yeah, it was wonderful. It was just such an introduction. We’re here now. We’ve done it. We here now.

Hilary: And we’ll show you.

Theda: Which made it even crazier for Anchorage to take so long.

Hilary: Yeah. What else... what did you do after that?

Theda: I think I actually have that backward.

Hilary: You what?

Theda: I’m trying to think, I have that backward.

Hilary: Okay, so what happened after the year at APRN?

Theda: I went to work for the government, the real government. I went to work for the Alaska Public Offices Commission, where candidates have to file their campaign disclosure reports and their lobbying reports.

Hilary: And then you did the ATS-6 (Applied Technology Satellite) chronology.

Theda: No, that was way before that.

Hilary: That was before the APRN?

Theda: The ATS-6 chronology would have been about like ’75, ’76.

Hilary: Yeah.

Theda: What year was ATS-6?

Hilary: Well, I was just trying to think when ATS-1 left, you know, to go to India... or ATS-6 left to go to India ‘cause it had been promised over there.

Theda: Well, I’ll just go through the whole part fast. Actually it starts with ATS-1 because Glenn Stanley and Bob Merritt were doing the medical stuff on ATS-1 but they gave us, I think, an hour a day for educational and community stuff and originally and there was a big thing called the ETC, the Educational Telecommunications Consortium. That was the policy body for this education use of ATS-1. Duncan Reed was their first project director and we handled the production at KUAC in Fairbanks for that hour a night and we were

doing things like people... There was a lot of land claims negotiation going on then and people in the villages would say, "What do you want to hear on the radio?" They would say, "We want to hear Harry Carter. We want to hear Morrie Thompson. We want to know what's going on." And so we produced those programs. And then I went to work for Genie Chance. Then I took about six months off, and then did the ATS-1 education stuff. So I was then sort of the combination of the project staff person plus. I still had an office upstairs from KUAC and did all that stuff for the big consortium. And there was... like 20 people and they used to make me introduce everybody at the table. It was like a little test. Let's see if Miss Pittman can stand up and introduce every one at the table. It was funny.

The one guy was a local attorney here in town – who, I can't tell you why -- but he just thought that we were not being good to the Natives and I can remember being... and him calling on the phone and screaming at me about why was I f---ing the Native people and he just used that word over and over again. And was just sort of a bad tempered person. So then in the meantime, there was all this stuff about Bob Walp and ETC's working and there's this question about ATS and here is this thing called ATS-6 instead of ATS-F.

Hilary: ATS-F, before it was launched.

Theda: And it's going to India. The government is sending the most advanced communication satellite in the world to another country and...

End Tape 1, Side A

Tape 1, Side B

Hilary: Controversy. Okay talking about ATS-F first.

Theda: I mean, nothing against the people of India, but how on earth could it be that NASA is doing this advanced satellite? And this satellite was so powerful. It was going to be so powerful and of such a magnitude of power greater that we would be able to use little earth stations in the bush, little earth stations that we could afford. Little earth stations that we could put up, that you could do the logistics of installing and they would be able to see this and wow! And so, of course, then, as Alaskans have done for several years, they called Senator Stevens and Senator Stevens said, "Why is it that Alaska has village after village after village with nothing in the way of communication abilities and America is doing this most advanced satellite in the world and we're giving it away?"

And so for a long time... I went back to KUAC and I didn't hear... I knew these folks, and I'd hear these stories going back and forth, but I wasn't involved in it. And the one story that I remember that I loved the most (of all) ATS-6 programs, of course, they used puppets because they were very concerned about what their production costs were going to be and how are we going to produce that many programs that fast, that had to be

written and, da, da, da. And so Joe Princiotta and Bob Walp went to DC. They were supposed to do a presentation, which would help people in Washington, DC, to understand what Alaska would be doing in the way of programs with its share of the satellite if Alaska were put on the satellite. And there they are in this hotel room in Washington, DC with a big roll of butcher paper and the next day at the meeting they put up the old butcher paper and Princiotta, who was such an artist, draws on the butcher paper and they describe what it is Alaska is going to be doing with this wonderful capability and they were wonderful.

The puppets were wonderful. People thought it was crazy but they were wonderful. And as soon as they got the stuff on the air you could go to the villages and the kids would be running around the school yard going, "Meep-Meep, Meep-Meep," because that is something the puppets on *Amy and the Astros* said. *Amy and the Astros* was the English-as-a second-language program. Amy was a stewardess who worked part time doing these TV shows. And the moose and beaver who were the puppets that were involved in the health education series were named Rex and Charlie for Charlie Northrip and Rex...I forget Rex's last name.

Hilary: Rex Taylor.

Theda: Rex Taylor. And then the adult show was Alaska Native Magazine and Mark Badger, Mo Wassilie, Molly McCammon. I mean they got to do "60 Minutes" in the Bush.

Hilary: That was exactly it.

Theda: That was exactly it. And you know it's still Jeannie Green, now it is...(who) still struggles to keep a show on the air that... well, to let you know what's going on out there, on TV.

Hilary: Right. Because on radio it is so much easier to do. That's right Mo Wassilie and all those folks. Oh gosh, faces coming out of ... yeah. So then what? Your next...?

Theda: Then, let's see, I did KUAC-TV, produced TV shows and I was... I guess I must have been the head of radio and TV production, but it was administrative work and then we hired people to come in and produce and direct those shows, except for people like Badger and Wassilie. I mean, we hired them but they were local people but we had three or four people from outside who had production experience.

Hilary: You talked about going out to the Bush and hearing the kids parrot some of that. Did you get feedback on the shows from the people in the Bush? Did you go and get feedback? Does any of that come to mind?

Theda: I'm not sure how they did it but I had the impression that OT (Office of Telecommunications) in Juneau did that. Because they were only on for a year, a school year, there was very little... I mean, logistics would have been difficult and it could have been done but you would have had to put money into it and there wasn't money to my

knowledge put into it for that kind of thing. The evaluation money went to the telemedicine stuff and this stuff that actually... that Jim Orvik (?) and Kathryn Heckt and... What Jim Orvik did was really more a combination of history and policy. So it wasn't program development and probably nobody knew that. After that year, nobody was going to produce those kind of shows anyway.

Hilary: We did talk before about you and Heather putting together a couple of projects, three projects, and you ending up with job (inaudible) two of them? What were those?

Theda: The '75 -'76 was between the work I did on the chronology... and that year I taught full time at the university -- two broadcasting courses, two speech communication courses -- and so I got done with that in the spring of '76, went on vacation, moved to Anchorage in the fall, worked on Genie Chance's political campaign and that winter -- so we're talking '76, '77, Heather (Hudson) was here and they were... I think they were doing finalizing work on the telemedicine evaluation stuff. But Heather was a woman with a great deal of enthusiasm and lots of ideas and so we had talked and talked and talked. And there were a list of like... there were at least three people who should be sending some money, who should be doing something in addition to what's just been finished.

So one of the projects had to do with (this): what is it that the Public Broadcasting Commission should be doing with respect to its radio and TV stations that it funds and how should it go about in the future extending the service that's available? Then there was also the question of what was OT going to recommend to the governor and legislature with respect to... well, fine, we have had this year of super technology that allowed us to do some things, what should the next phases be and Chuck Buck had left OT, George Shaginaw and then Bob (Walp) left.

Hilary: Well, Bob left, and Mark (Badger) was in there for a year in '77, '78.

Theda: The part that I remember the most was that when I was actually doing work Shaginaw was the director. And then the third one was something involving AFN (Alaska Federation of Natives) wanting... AFN committees... and I kind of forget what that is. I think that... so we worked these up and Heather left town.

Hilary: And left you with the

Theda: And she left me with the work. I mean, actually I got some work out of all three of those ideas. The third one was the smaller and I don't exactly remember what that was. It was a really short term but for the broadcast commission. I visited with the stations and I did interviews with them and questionnaires with them...

Hilary: And what did they want?

Theda: And wrote that report. And actually the biggest concern was sort of like (this): we have now covered the population centers with full-fledged stations so what are we going to do about the areas that are too small to build big stations, but that still deserve some service?

And so there was a lot of discussion about a small repeater kind of things. Preferably that could be interrupted if local community wanted or needed to, but (it) would not have a full-fledged (service). Actually what happened was there was probably at least two, maybe three (earth) stations that were built after that. I mean, you know, it just kind of depended on the political clout and what Stowell Johnston called the pork situation. So I don't believe that the report had much impact actually. The next one that I worked on, which was the educational recommendations for OT -- the education and health recommendations -- had even less impact. I mean it was like dropping a lot of paper down a well.

Hilary: And why was that? I mean, did they not care what should be done? Did people not want to see that happen? What do you think?

Theda: I think there were a couple of things. I think there was a lack of vision. I think there was a lack of vision in the governor's office. And then I think it would be worthwhile to compare where the state was with respect to its oil money and what it was doing with its oil money. Because as I recall, I might be wrong, '79 was the year the \$900 million bonus sale.

Hilary: I have that...

Theda: Nobody... Well, so then you have to conclude that a couple of things happened. One was that there were lobbyists lobbying for it because, from that point on, what the job of lobbying in the state was simply to go down and present your requests. You didn't have to be much of a lobbyist and lobbyists themselves have told me that. So I don't feel bad saying it. It's much harder to be a lobbyist now than it was then. And I do think there was -- I've been told more than once -- there was a lack of vision...that the (Gov. Jay) Hammond people didn't see. They must not have been listening to Fran Ulmer. I don't know. I can't tell you. The other thing

Hilary: I think she being director at that point, during the first Hammond administration, of Department of Policy and Planning and Development and then she moved into the legislation and then she became Mayor of Juneau for two terms.

Theda: The other thing is that they kept Jennifer Wilkie on after ATS-6. Jennifer and I traveled together and we did presentations before health groups and education groups and we tried to talk about what could be done and I believe that is correct that it was after the experiment or maybe it was even when they were getting ready for it. But I mean you would have to conclude that people did not have a vision, that they weren't in agreement. Nobody had appropriately sold the thing. We all kept talking about community information centers and community information centers would have changed the state.

Hilary: And how would those work?

Theda: The idea was basically sort of like a more sophisticated legislative information office. A place where you are allowed to walk in the door and send a fax, to get on an audio conference, to get on a video conference that somebody... You know, now a video conference (is available in) half a dozen places in the state. You can get on them and somebody has to be willing to pay certain amounts for you to get on. But really I've always just imagined it as a sort of information drugstore. You can just walk up to it and of course there are lots of unanswered questions. Who to shovel the snow in the winter? But really it could have made a big change. But it wasn't... there was no shared vision for that and, I think, the rest of it like TV in the schools. There was a lot of rivalry between the school districts. Anchorage School District sets their curriculum and they want to pick their TV programs and they don't want nobody coming in and telling them. And as far as the rest of the state is concerned: too expensive, too expensive, too expensive. But you have to ask yourself, would it have made a difference in what we are going through right now with respect to... it took a paintball incident. You know we are in court on the Katie John case on an issue that we should never have been in court in and that if the will of the people had been listened to, then subsistence would have been in place and the Feds would have been told go home.

Hilary: So the potential was there for that cross-cultural communication, as well as, sort of, making more communication among all the rest of this.

Theda: We are now sending... I mean, there's a really wonderful project being formed as they are sending urban kids to the Bush and Bush kids to town. And those young people's lives will never be the same for having had that opportunity and we could have provided opportunities if we had been wise enough to use that.

Hilary: When you and Jennifer... yeah, go ahead.

Theda: I was trying to think we had this before. I did a stint (as executive director) at the Alaska Women's Resource Center which has a halfway-house for (recovering alcoholics) and it is intensive work. It is, well, "Tiffany" expensive: maybe it costs \$12,000 a year for every woman to go through the facility and this is a small facility. And that counts for the washouts as well as the successes, but the success rate is 60 to 65 percent and it is because there is, first of all, an understanding of the need and then they get information about childcare and they get information about checkbook balancing. They get information about meal planning. All kinds of stuff which they never had because they were busy drinking at the time and their families couldn't reach them to teach them these things.

And so I think when we talk about what could technology have done? Why wasn't more done? You know, at one point we had two TV channels. We had RATNet (Rural Alaska Television Network) and we had an instructional TV channel, but do you think that instructional TV channel really had the support it needed to succeed? Do you think it really had the people to advertise what it was doing and what its successes were or the mechanism for finding the audiences that could have really benefited, would have really

wanted to use that and show you how great it could be? Huh-uh. No. You finally gave it up and then they said, “Well, you know that technology is so much better now and we can get more on one channel than we used to get on two. So now, you know, we have a TV channel and we have a couple of... let’s see, we have four channels now, you know -- and the public TV stations they have a channel, and they put Gavel-to-Gavel on and we have RATNet and we have this. But you know what: the broadcast commission has one staff person or two. I don’t know. Are we really giving it a shot at what it can do?”

Hilary: When you and Heather did this last paper, what had changed from when you first met her and you were both working up here?

Theda: I believe that one of the things I thought had changed was that there were more players and things are decentralized. And there are more players who have managed to find independent sources of funding so that they don’t have to cooperate, communicate, whatever. They are just doing their thing. They have visions and they’re trying to get their visions to work and I don’t say whether that... I mean, I just can’t say well that’s bad, but it is ‘cause you go around and talk to different... and it bothered me a lot that it seemed to be so difficult to find out what the university was doing. Now, I mean I know Steve Smith in Fairbanks. I know one of the things that they have done is that they have really helped with this business of libraries and the databases, shared datas and stuff. I know they have been part of that (network). But you know here in Anchorage... I know more... so how is the University of Alaska Anchorage on TV? And I don’t know. You get on the net (Internet) and you find the right place and get a glimpse but you don’t really know. It is almost like it is invisible. It’s invisible and yet each one exists. So that bothered me.

People bad-mouth other things of course. They always do that, but when we went out and talked to, gosh, I can’t remember, the guys on Diplomacy (Drive) -- oh, Carl and Beth Landin -- were doing some work for them. We talked about this big project [*Ed note: the Afghan Project*] where every village is going to have [*Ed note: the same equipment and, thus, the same*] capability. Now I think that’s fantastic. On the other hand, if you did overlays of the state you will find now it isn’t the same ballgame it used to be. Now GCI has various levels of service in some areas. I think some of the regions, like Calista, have done things themselves and of course now they control the hospital so they have (consolidated). So they are doing some things because ...

Hilary: Where is

Theda: They have that responsibility. Well, it is called independence. And now we overlay this huge federal project, which is going to give everybody the same set of equipment whether they need it or not, and it is easier to do it that way. But I heard the evaluator describe (it): “Well, we’re divided into five regions or five districts and we’re going to go through and do this assessment and then the equipment people will come along...” And da, da, da. There are assessment people are that far ahead of the equipment, plus which, I mean, yeah, there are differences in how you install it and, you know, are the rooms 300

feet apart or 500 feet apart? But it was my understanding that everybody is getting exactly the same equipment.

Hilary: Whether they need it or not.

Theda: Whether they needed it or not. Maybe, you know, maybe their little part of the world would be immeasurably improved if they could use their share for something different, but again that's complicated. The situation with the payments, you know, the FCC's payments for the schools and (education). We spent a lot of time talking about that and I wanted to explain that... and yet I think about the community in which the child at school works on the Internet and at the end of the school day comes home and describes what he or she has been doing. And it is illegal for that parent to even go in and use email now. I'm sorry, but somebody should have called Senator Stevens and asked for an exception because that is just unreal, of course. And somebody else started talking about that the other day -- I don't why this came up -- he just shrugged and said, "Let me know what's happening," and he walked away. Well of course, it is happening anyway.

Hilary: But at least a parent can walk into their office and look at what a kid is doing on the computer. You mentioned a few minutes ago that wonderful image again I'm going to go back to that, the kids in the village, parroting the TV programming. What other little snapshots like that come to mind when you think of your background in Alaska with communications in all its various forms that you have touched?

Theda: I think of AST-1 and that (channel) that was supposed to be devoted to community (well-being) and so the radio could be received in the clinic or the health aide's home. I'm sorry, the radio could be received at school or at the health aide's home or clinic. And so seven o'clock in the evening, eight o'clock in the evening, we're going to offer an hour program and we're talking 21 or 22 sites. And I think of those health aides who spend all day providing the only health clinic to the community, maybe even have spent that day on the radio talking to the hospital in Tanana desperately and it is eight o'clock in the evening and people from the community come trudging up the hill and say "can we come listen to your radio tonight?" (Something about their favorite entertainer was supposed to be on that night, that kind of stuff.)

I think of those health aides...and part of the reason I think of it is because the health aide program was created like very close to the time that I came to Alaska. I was totally unaware of it until I was doing public radio stuff. I was totally unaware of until four or five years later when I found myself doing these programs, which is just amazing to me. It is also... it's a communication thing -- not a technical, technological thing. But... I was in Kotzebue... I was in Nome about three years ago and it was a domestic violence conference and the domestic violence council and the troopers had gotten together and they had gotten a grant, so they did these conferences at four sites and the people who were invited to the conference were the VPSO (Village Public Safety Officer), the health aide, and they tried in places where there were hospitals to get someone from the hospitals. But just like the fact -- like in Nome there were 30 people there -- and just over

and over again they said, "I never get to talk to her like this, as professionals." The health aide and the VPSO will have to work the most traumatic incidents in the villages and they are never given time or the recognition that they need to communicate with each other. And it would be helpful to both of them and to the community. And it was just like a revelation for some of those people to say we never sit down and talk about this stuff.

Hilary: And you have referred to this several times before now that we've been talking is what of value there could be in using the radio and the television and technology that is out there to let people be in touch with each other to help them solve their own problems in the villages or at least talk about them.

Theda: And the thing of it is, that you mentioned, (that is it's) fragmented. I mean in addition to the statewide providers, carriers, then you've got the little regional phone companies and you know they're trying to figure out what their piece of this Internet/email-puzzle is, and how much it should cost, and so on and so forth and so really... But there still is an awfully lot of things which are paid for by either the government or some institution, some bureaucracy like a regional corporation or the regional non-profits. And do the people who are in charge of those institutions have the wisdom to understand that even if you don't know, it would be helpful to you, and we're going to make it possible. We're going to encourage you to do that. Then, you know, if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. It doesn't help, it doesn't help. But somebody... it's like if you've never had that opportunity, how do you know that it wouldn't do you any good? And that is really what was lost at the end of ATS-6.

Hilary: It was never picked up to the extent that it could have been, the educational television.

Theda: People who all of their lives have been able to pick up a telephone and as soon as pagers were invented, have pagers and have seen those fax machines, have fax machines, and as soon as PC's had PC's and so on -- have always had that, (they) just take it for granted. And it's really bad when they're in positions within these bureaucracies where they should be thinking about this. Although now, you see, I think, you got me all excited... but now I think it's like a lot of things. It is way too complicated to think about it. Like I don't... it's way too complicated to buy a plane ticket. It's way too complicated to figure out who you want for your phone company. People think I want to spend this much time picking out a phone company: I've got news for you.

Hilary: And now they're deregulating electricity. You can choose your electric company.

Theda: Gosh, I can hardly wait.

Hilary: Go ahead.

Theda: That whole group of people at the educational telecommunication consortium was supposed to be overseeing ATS-1. There were a great many of those people who were afraid of the task and did not want us to ask the villages, "What do you want to hear on

the radio?" Because they were afraid that the requests would come back and there would be

End Tape 1, Side B

Tape 2, Side A

Hilary: Let's start that again, that business about "I don't want to ask..."

Theda: During the AST-1 project when I was the program director for that evening hour and I would come to Anchorage for meetings of the education telecommunication consortium - and there were wonderful people in that group, wonderful -- and it was a huge group and there were people who had had a lot of experience in Alaska. I mean, people from state-operated schools, people who had just you know -- I mean they were very savvy, but it was clear more than once that they didn't really want us to ask people in the villages what they wanted to hear on the radio because they were afraid -- the group was afraid that the request list would come back and it would include things we couldn't provide and that then they would be the bad guys because we would have to go back and say, "I'm sorry I can't get that for you and I just..." I never understood that. But maybe part of the reason I never understood it was because I was on the radio. Students who worked for me were on the radio talking to Valdez, talking to different people. It was very clear to me that we were human beings talking to each other and that if I said, "I'm interested in knowing what sorts of things you'd like to hear on the radio," and I had to say, "I can't, you know, I can't do" that item or whatever that they would understand that that is how life is. You know people... nobody, I don't know of anybody who is in a position where they always get to do what they think needs to be done or should be done. But it was so irritating. It's like, "What is the harm of asking?" At least in asking you respect people because you acknowledge that you're not just trying to feed things into their brain out of speakers.

Hilary: It's a great image, speaker for the brain. (What were) the kind of things they were afraid of? Would it have been like network programming that they couldn't provide? Or what do you think they were afraid to hear that they thought they couldn't provide?

Theda: Well, what I believe is that somehow it wasn't... it didn't even go as far as the content of the program. It just was... had something to do with communicating with strange and different people and that was scary and who knows what they will ask for? Who knows how they will react if it can't be provided? There is a place and I'm familiar with this, I've been there where, you know, you don't want to know because it might be bad and so you can just head that off. But it's a devastating thing to do in a project like that where you're trying to demonstrate what can be done. And honestly, people, of course... the telemedicine got started on ATS-1 -- that's how it got started. People understand that health is important. And it was a little irritating to the guys when they had to add the

equipment so that there would be an outlet in the school and then they had to have somebody at eight o'clock at night monitoring when we did the feed-ins and what is this all about? But of course, to us radio people, it was: this is a different kind of thing. This isn't health but this is a different kind of thing. I never felt so wonderful as the times when Harry Carter would come and say, "Oh, yeah, I'll come and talk on the radio.' It was just wonderful.

Hilary: And people were so excited.

Theda: People were excited. People were grateful.

End of Tape 2, Side A