

# Not Quite a Sourdough

*Conversing with Mike Fisher over coffee at the Talkeetna Roadhouse or while leaning on a bike on Main Street or after a slide show or community gathering is anything but sour. I have had the pleasure of getting to know this long-time Alaskan over the last few years I've lived in Talkeetna, probably because he appreciates good bread and I am a baker. So it seemed fitting that when I sat down to interview him for this article, if somewhat indirectly, bread came up almost right away when I asked him when he came to Alaska.*

*In the early spring of 1962, Fisher "first set foot in Alaska;" he went to Anchorage and started working in a shop that overhauled aircraft engines. "That was just shortly after statehood," he quipped, "a real hardcore sourdough has to have arrived here before statehood. I just missed it."*

*This term "sourdough" is one that many pioneering Alaskans are proud of. But I would say that Mike Fisher is just too nice, too worldly, too positive a person to have the kind of "crust" or the puckering sour taste that is found in both the bread and some "sourdough" settlers. I asked him to share some of his memories of the early days of aviation in Alaska as well as some of his thoughts about living in Talkeetna for almost 40 years.*

## **AG: How did you first start working in aviation?**

MF: Well, let's see. I was born in Detroit in 1936, if that means anything, and I always liked machinery. And the airplane in many ways, if not the ultimate machine, it's certainly close...And the good jobs, in those days were mostly with the airlines, but they wanted you to have a college education. I never liked school very well, but I did sign up for this school for a year to get an aircraft and power mechanics license. That was really what you had to do in those days to get your toe in the door with aviation unless you had a lot of money. Because...an aircraft mechanic had access to a lot of airplanes and you could normally trade your mechanical skills for flight time. It was something that almost anybody could do. Those were earlier happier times...before there were so many rules...

Regulatory and insurance requirements make it much harder to get a start in aviation. Full pilot credentials and 1,000 hours flight time are required before you can even get started...The \$30,000 investment required to reach this point puts flying out of reach for many. That was not the case when I got my start. A love of flying, the ability to get the job done without wrecking anything and a good work ethic to complete the many side tasks which go with running an air service would always get you a job...I feel privileged to have gotten in on the very best days of Alaskan aviation.

## **How did you end up in Alaska?**

I found out from being in the Army [Fisher was drafted in 1959 and was a crew chief on a DeHaviland Beaver for the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, KY until 1961]...and from friends that they weren't too fussy in Alaska about credentials. They just wanted to know if you could get the job done...this was well before the oil pipeline hit or anything...and the questions they would ask you up here if you wanted to go to work as a pilot were mostly how many crashes you had and how many airplanes you wrecked and whose fault it was...If you had a clean record and weren't a drunk...which were both true in my case...they would hire you.

## **When did you start flying?**

I was 27 years old when I started flying and flew pretty steadily all those years, not only in Talkeetna...I flew around Fairbanks for a while and I did a few other things. Prior to the pipeline there wasn't all that much money around here. It was pretty hardscrabble, but nobody really noticed because everybody was on about the same level. The prime jobs and the people who had money were mostly employed by the government. But you didn't notice it so much. Just because you couldn't afford a fancy car, an airplane, a boat...nobody else could either. Those were definitely earlier happier times.

## **What landed you in Talkeetna?**

A friend who is still around, Lynn Twigg had come up much before I had...we lived in the same little town in Michigan and he really liked Alaska. Twigg got his start working for the railroad...Don Sheldon had only been here for a couple years and he met Don Sheldon in Talkeetna...Because I knew [Twigg], he said, "you really should go up there and look around," that was his advice to me and so I did that and I met Don Sheldon and liked him and he put me to work first as a mechanic. And then when he found out I could fly, had a clean record, hadn't wrecked any airplanes...one day he was just booked up to the hilt. For all his flying experience, he didn't have much experience in training pilots other than just getting the job done. In those days we had Cessna 180s and Don had 180s and Supercubs. I was flying the Supercubs. But one day he was booked up beyond capacity.

## **With climbers?**

In those days, climbers were maybe 30 percent of the business and tourists maybe 20 percent. But miners were a big part of the business. So one day he said, "You got any experience flying these Cessna's?" And I really didn't. I'd flown other high powered airplanes, but they were mostly crop-dusters and things like that. He said, "You think you can handle one of those Cessna's? This plane has 230 horsepower." And I said I thought I could handle it. There was no training program, no checkout. "Well," he said, "load these guys up and take them over to Glennallen." And so I made a couple trips around the pattern just to satisfy myself that I could land it OK without getting into trouble and I felt comfortable in it. And I got there and back without scaring anybody. From that time on, every time Don had overflow traffic, I would handle the overflow. And there was a lot of overflow. When I wasn't flying, I'd be maintaining the airplane. It worked out for me to be busy for about five months. Usually when the season was over I'd go and do something else, just to stay busy and I had a couple pretty good years which enabled me to buy the materials to build this little house that I still live in.

## **Did you build it yourself?**

Yeah, I did. I didn't know much about building, but nobody else did then either. So I just bought some boards and built this little house. And it was in the process of building it when Suzanne came up.

### **When was that?**

Suzanne and I married in 1968 and we were together until her death in 1991. Suzanne was well known and well liked in Talkeetna. I don't know anybody who didn't like Suzanne. She was a mail handler in the Post Office. And Suzanne was a gardener. Suzanne was very bright...Ironically, we grew up within 20 miles of each other, but we never met each other until she came to Alaska. The way she got here was one of her friends where she worked at Cornell University said she had a brother near Talkeetna who had a farm. And I think in the spring of '67...she had a job as a farm hand and this little farm was producing garden crops and eggs and dairy...

### **So you started living in Talkeetna year round in your little house and just flying for whoever needed you to fly?**

That's right. I was mostly working for Talkeetna Air Service which was Don Sheldon. I started working for Don well before he met Roberta....About '65...somewhere in there. The business really improved after Roberta was on the scene because she was more businesslike than Don. Don was a good pilot, but Roberta was the one who made sure that the payroll was met and the customers were happy...she did all that while she was raising three little kids...Don died in 1975... I was still flying for the air services on a kind of hired gun basis which is stuff that you can't do anymore. In those days you could fly for several air services and when they needed you they would just call you up and say, "Well, we've got a lot of flying today, can you come over and give us a hand?"

And after that...the economy was really improving. It was right on the edge of the oil money coming in. And I sensed that there was opportunities to make more money out there than you could make at flying. So I went to work as the facilities chief for the earth station out here. We had the big dish and at that time, MEA didn't have power out there so we had to generate our own power...We had a 1,000 kilowatt diesel plant out there and I was in charge of the diesel plant. I did that until I got a little bored with it.

Then about that time, regulation wasn't so heavy handed and the state government would give essentially free flight training...and a lot of other people qualified for military flight training. What that resulted in was that the market was saturated. So, students came my way...I was just an independent flight instructor. And people were coming my way that I seriously questioned whether I should be instructing them or not. Without getting too moralistic about it...I always viewed the airplane as a very useful tool for good work and I had to ask myself the question how are these people going to use this airplane after they learn how to fly it. And in a lot of cases I didn't like the answer...

### **You really wanted them to do something with it...**

Some of the freshly trained and licensed pilots who come my way have impressive knowledge of regulations and air traffic control procedures but they are very weak in basic "seat of the pants" airplane control... The best, eagerest and most enthusiastic students I ever had were young native kids. The native kids just loved to fly and they were just naturals. They loved the country and they didn't have all the phobias and fears that the white guys had.

### **Are there any pilots here in Talkeetna that you trained?**

Yeah, there certainly are. Jay Hudson is essentially Hudson Air Service. He's a man in his mid 40s now and I soloed him on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Jay's record is squeaky clean. He doesn't wreck airplanes, he doesn't hurt people, he does a lot of tough flying...people like to fly with him because they're comfortable with him. And I take quite a bit of pride in having trained Jay Hudson.

Probably my highest profile and best known student was Kitty Banner, cofounder of K2 Aviation. Doug Geeting, when he first came up, was a pretty experienced pilot but he didn't have a Single Engine C [a float plane rating], so I got him his Single Engine C.

### **You must have a million stories. Can you share with me one or two memories you have of flying? Interesting passengers or places you went?**

One of my favorite passengers, a man that I flew all over Alaska just died. The man's name was Joe Rychetnik. He lived in Alaska for many years. He was the *Time/Life* staff for covering anything that happened in Alaska. He was one of Don Sheldon's best customers. Any time anything was happening we were his pilots and he would always give us a call. Things were always interesting around Joe. He was a great photographer and a great people person.

One time we made this charter up to a place called Wild Lake... There was a retired college professor up there who had gotten completely burned out with academic life. He was an older guy with a younger wife and had about four or five little kids. Lived in this crude log shack, trying to make a living in the wilderness out there and really didn't have the wilderness skills. And we just happened to drop in. I was flying this float plane...covering the North Slope. They were making these little bongo drums laced with moose hide. He had been a full professor at Berkeley or somewhere and just dropped out. He was doing a bunch of non-prescription pharmaceuticals back there....Don had kind of an eye for Native art and he bought this whole airplane load of bongo drums and we flew these things back to Talkeetna. I think that Roberta still has one or two of those around. That was the wild-eyed professor.

### **Did the danger ever bother you? Did you feel like you were risking your life?**

I never felt it was that dangerous. But you know, anybody that flies for a long time is going to be scared a few times and have some close calls...But there's times when you are flying in the mountains, it'll be a beautiful, calm, clear day, and those days are fairly rare up in our part of the Alaska range, but those days will encourage you to let your guard down and you get too relaxed and every once in a while if you're really going to get a scare it might be on a day like that....

The two accidents we had, Mike Jacober and Kelly Mahoney, just both extremely well regarded Alaska pilots, both perished recently and inexplicably. They were people you would say shouldn't have died in airplanes. But they did and nobody knows why.

I once read the classic book "Fate is the Hunter" by Earnest Gann and there's a famous quote in that book that comes to mind every time you're luckier than you really deserve to be...you've got by with something... "There's a certain degree of mercy beyond which any man is rude to inquire." I just recently got in a major crash with my bicycle. It was pretty bad. I had ridden my bicycle in ten foreign countries around governments that were somewhat hostile to the United States, bad weather, snowy passes, slippery roads. And this recent accident was the worst thing that ever happened and it happened on a beautiful sunny day, light traffic and just hit the loose gravel...and I could have died from that, you know. Because the front end of my bicycle helmet looked like you'd held it on an abrasive disc. I was extremely lucky.

That's the way I feel about these accidents. If the people who recently perished were drunks or drug abusers or had terrible records...but these guys weren't anywhere near that category. It really doesn't make sense.

**You found a real niche for yourself with your machine shop.**

I don't advertise but I have a modest amount of machine shop equipment that's been bought and paid for for a number of years. Once I did a heart transplant on the bread mixer at the Deli. The main shaft just fell apart. Dawn Jones called me up with tears in her voice. I worked on that thing for two days...had to build all new guts for it.

**It must be a neat feeling to know that you can just fix anything. Very self-reliant.**

It is. I like it. But sometimes I have to give people lectures that just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should* do it. I'm 67 years old and I can still pick up a 175 pound propane tank and load it in a pick-up. I can do that. But I shouldn't. And I don't. And the same thing with using four hours of skilled machine time on making this replacement part when you can send it to the factory for 20 percent less than what it would cost me to make it here. People appreciate that...honesty.

**So you've been all over the world now. That's what you've done in the last 20 years or so.**

Since I've been self employed, and at slow times, rather than just sit around, I make these travels around the world. I always considered that the bicycle was the ideal means for that.

**Why?**

Well, it opens doors that would not otherwise be opened. I mean, if you are going through in the fall in Amish country, and you're driving around in a Winnebago, you'll never experience Amish culture. But if you arrive in these places riding a bike and when they're harvesting hay...you offer to help them to work, these people will take you in like relatives and show you around and feed you. You can't do that if you arrive in a Winnebago or on a tour bus or something like that. I look around here and I look at people my age and I think, if I was really mad at somebody, I'd buy 'em a ticket on a tour bus.

**What's the most interesting place you've visited?**

Well, I really liked Eastern Europe. I would go back there. Another interesting place was the People's Republic of China. I would like to go to Cuba. Before the Winnebagos and the McDonalds and all that stuff hits.

**So, what's your secret to being so fit and having the energy to do it all?**

I don't know. Just luck I guess. Genetics and luck. I'm not a big health freak, but I don't smoke and I don't drink much. I stay busy. I just figure I'll keep on doing it as long as I can. There's some old song that goes, "she's gonna keep on doing it until time pulls the reigns in on her..." and I think that's a nice philosophy. If you quit flying, you shouldn't do it because some government agency told you couldn't fly any more. You should do it because you know that it's just not right for you to fly anymore. There should be a phased withdrawal from the flying of airplanes.

**Like an addiction?**

Well, yeah... "I'm only going to fly airplanes that I really understand in weather that I can easily handle." Then you do that for a few years. Then you say, "Well, I'm still going to fly, but I'm not going to fly passengers anymore because I just don't feel comfortable being responsible for a whole plane load of people." And then eventually, you'll probably scare yourself because of misjudgment or something, and you'll say, "You know I really should quit flying" and at that time just hang it up. Do something else.

**I'm curious what you think about Talkeetna and the way Talkeetna has changed over the years. Where it's at now and where it's going.**

Contrary to most of the old pterodactyls and dinosaurs, I kind of like it. The people that I see coming in now, most of them are high energy, a lot of them have educations, they all have dreams. And this is the first time in memory that a bright, motivated graduate from the [local] high school and maybe hopefully a college...can actually consider living in Talkeetna because there are things to do here now.

People grumble about too many crowds and stuff, but it's centralized in probably less than an acre. And if you consider how many acres there are in Alaska and how easy it is to get away from the crowds, if you don't like crowds, you don't even have to get on a bicycle, just walk for 20 minutes and you're in the wilderness.

**That's something I think you really notice from the air.**

Yeah. From the air it's just a little spot. There's woods and lakes and forests and trees. Talkeetna is kind of unique because it's built on a river flood plain. And if there wasn't all this tradition behind it Talkeetna probably wouldn't even be here. I draw parallels to a lot of other villages in Alaska built on rivers that flood, where they've tried to get them to move into housing on a ridge above the village...But they move back down...it's where the food is, it's where the fun is, it's where the people are and if it floods once in a while...well it's been doing that for 1,000 years, we can cope with that. I think Talkeetna's on the right track because there's a degree of sensitivity down here...artistic sensitivity, environmental sensitivity. When you have a little town where a very legitimate business owner paints his business in a color that not everybody loves, it inspires comment. There's not a big fight over it. It's one of the purest forms of democracy. If you don't like what the neighbors are doing, you just say it. You don't write a letter to your Congressman. You just go to the guy and say, "I don't like this."

**You must be pretty excited about the new bike path.**

Oh, Talkeetna is going to be a world class bike destination...Non-motorized trails paralleling our highways will soon make it possible to bike from Talkeetna to Anchorage and beyond with almost never mixing in traffic. And it's going to be great.