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Shirley Gover

November 3, 2014

Nicolai, Alaska

Shiaki Kondo, interviewer

Shiaki Kondo asked Shirley Gover about her dog racing experiences. Gover said she ran in two mid-distance races in the 1980s. She had a dog team and 54 dogs. She raced in the 200-mile race. She also lent out several of her dogs to other racers in Nicolai for that same race. They used to have a dog musher's association. There used to be about thirteen dog teams in the village. Every Saturday they would have point races. Whoever had the most points at the end of the year won the trophy. They had a lot of local races going on. During the spring carnival they had a kid's race, women's dog race and open class dog races. She raced in every class since she had so many teams. Shiaki Kondo asked about her strategy. Shirley said since she had such a big lot she ran her dogs every day and she could choose the best dogs to race. Shiaki Kondo said open class was eleven dogs. Gover said or more. She was so small that she didn't want so many dogs that she couldn't control them. Shiaki Kondo asked about routine work when she was taking care of dogs. She said she started at six in the morning. Her dad would start making broth. She would give them their morning soup. She would make them fish and rice soup later in the day. At nighttime after running them it would be late at night and she would feed them late at night. Shiaki Kondo asked her when people started running snow machines instead of dog teams. Gover said that happened before she started racing. She thought snow machines came in about the 1970s. Her dad had two snow machines when she was growing up. Before he had snow machines he used dog teams for transportation. Shiaki Kondo asked if she just used the dog team for racing. Gover said that she also used her dog team to haul wood. She would also use the dogs to check her dad's trap line. Shiaki Kondo asked what she does when the Iditarod teams come through Nicolai. Gover said she goes down to watch the top teams. She tries to help out with things like taking their dog food over. She said it is a big family event. Usually the whole village comes down to the checkpoint.

Shiaki Kondo asked if she remembers the mushers. She said she always remembers Joe Redington, Sr. He started the Iditarod Race. The first year that the Iditarod came through they heard about it on the radio. Her dad packed them all up and took them to the Salmon River to see the first race. There used to be a very large cache at Salmon River. They used to sit on the cache to watch for the dog teams. Shiaki Kondo asked about Miska Deaphon. Gover said he was very traditional. He used to tell them stories after they went starrng for Russian Christmas. Everything was spoken in their Athabascan language. She remembers him telling a story. He spoke three different languages, English, Athabascan and Russian. Shiaki Kondo asked her about the priests. Gover said she remembers the first priest come, Father Michael. She talked about Father Guest who would come during hunting time. Shiaki Kondo said he heard that

people would attend church every Saturday and Sunday. Gover said that stopped after the housing came in. It has gotten to the point that there aren't any church services unless someone dies. She said they built the new houses in 1977. Shiaki Kondo asked her about Father Nicolai, Guest and Michael. Gover said she knew Father Michael and Father Guest. They never had a regular priest. Father Guest would come for service. They would come at least three or four times a year. Gover said flying there was expensive.

Shiaki Kondo asked about the chief taking care of the church and why the village council didn't organize church activities. Gover said the village council was not organized until about the 1980s. The church used to determine who was going to be chief. They were not elected. Shiaki Kondo asked about the village council. Gover said they didn't get started until the early 1980s. She said they were run by Tanana Chiefs who requested an organize village council. She was hired as the office manager. She talked about the room she used as her office. Shiaki Kondo and Gover talked about the village council.

Shiaki Kondo asked if she knew anything about medicine people. Gover said she remembered Gliman Esai was very powerful. She remembered that he cursed his grandmother. He told everyone that he was going to disappear. He left on the plane to Anchorage and disappeared. Shiaki Kondo said he heard the Esai's mother was a medicine woman. Gover said Grandma Esai was a medicine women. She never met her. She heard from other people that she was a medicine women. Usually she hears the bad stories about medicine people. Shiaki Kondo said he heard the same thing. She said that Gliman Esai used to favor her and her sister, Bev. Her dad used to always honor them and fix them something to eat. He taught them to take care of their people.

Shiaki Kondo asked if the medicine man heals people. Gover said after her grandmother had a stroke or something like that she thought it was a curse. After her grandmother made something for him he healed her. Gover said there were stories about the big war. There was a shaman fighting the Eskimos on the flats by the Salmon River. He was a powerful shaman who was being invaded. He had four wives who were fighting.

Shiaki Kondo asked about the location of the war. Gover said it was between the Salmon River and the mountains. She said there was war over the food. She said the cache always used to be full of salmon. They stored their food in caches. Her people would travel around in the area.

Shiaki Kondo asked her if she remembered the name of the medicine man. Gover said she doesn't remember. Shiaki Kondo asked if she had stories about the hairy man. Gover said her grandmother would tell her stories about Bigfoot. She used to try to scare them so they wouldn't go out at night. She said it worked most of the time. Shiaki Kondo asked if there were stories about people meeting the hairy man. Gover said not really. There used to be other stories from Bertha who owned a store at Medfra. Jack Smith was running the store. There were stories about an ex-convict running around down there. They called the ex-convict wild man. Shiaki Kondo asked if she heard any ghost stories. Gover said she would tell him one. A few years ago when her grandmother died she came back to Nicolai. She was living in Anchorage then and she brought her family. She was staying in her sister's house. A few years before that one of the girls

from McGrath that was staying with one of the local guys was staying in that house. The girl committed suicide. She was in the bathroom in her sister's home and all of a sudden the washcloth started flapping up against the wall. She said something was there visiting. Shiaki Kondo asked how people explain ghosts. Gover said she knows that that was not something natural. She wasn't scared. She knew that something was trying to scare her. She rebuked it in the name of Jesus. Her Aunt Joyce was also there and they prayed together over the house. She thinks it might have left. Tamara said they still see things happening up that way. Gover said Tamara was walking home and something was coming out of the woods. It ran back into the woods.

Shiaki Kondo asked if she knew any traditional healing. Gover said for aches and pains her father used stinkweed in the summer. He gathers the plant. When she was pregnant she was sick one time. Her father gathered stinkweed and had her take a bath in the stinkweed. She was also told to make a tea and drink it by Philip. She wasn't sure about drinking the tea.

Shiaki Kondo asked about Philip's power. Gover said she thought he wasn't sure that he was going to make it and she talked about him. Gover said that he was very knowledgeable and had a spiritual gift. She said he was a good hunter and taught others.

Shiaki Kondo asked him where her ideas for talking circle in Nicolai came from. Gover said at one of her trainings they used a feather and she borrowed that idea. Tanana Chiefs came out to teach at Nicolai. Shiaki Kondo asked about spiritual healers. Gover said there was more than one healer. One healer could check for bones and make sure they were aligned. She knew traditional ways of healing. There was also a counselor that would listen. Shiaki Kondo asked about attending pow wows and potlatch. Gover said she attended pow-wows around Anchorage and Eklutna.