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Sammy John, Sr.

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Nikolai, Alaska

Shirley Gover and Shiaki Kondo, interviewers

Series: Edzeno' Spirit : Traditional Beliefs and Russian Orthodoxy from Nikolai, Alaska interviews

Sammy John said when he was living in Crooked Creek he would use a dog team. He had forty dogs, two teams. When he left he gave away half his dogs and came back with pups. He used his dogs for trapping and cutting wood in Nikolai. He enjoyed running dogs. He said you don't get bored when you're working with dogs. You put them in harness and cooked for them. It was a lot of work caring for dogs. Sometimes he trapped with his dogs with Nick Dennis. He has worked with dogs on trap lines all over Nikolai. He said snow machines go faster, but they break down and you have to walk back home. With dogs they sleep for an hour and they are ready to go again. He grew up with dog teams. At some time snow machines came along, but he still had a dog team. He likes cooking for them. He still has a dog that eats his scraps.

Sammy John said he raced dogs. A lot of the other teams passed him. He said there are all kinds of races in Nikolai. There were cross country ski and snowshoe races, too.

Shirley Gover asked him about when he first came to Nikolai in 1961. Sammy John said when he first came to Nikolai mining was closed. He didn't have a house, but he knew how to build a house. He was young and strong. He likes Nikola. He goes hunting and fishing with people. He got a job cutting brush. He would also go firefighting. He talked about building his home. He went upriver and cut logs. He now has two log houses. He cut the logs in the wintertime. He hired high school students to help him.

John talked about cooking moose and mallard duck over a fire. He used to go hunting with Miska and learned things from him. He said a lot of the old timers are gone. He talks with the high school students.

Shirley Gover asked if he is interested in teaching tradition to young people such as how to cook duck over a fire. Sammy John said he does talk to them before he became first chief. He said it is hard to be chief. He wanted to be second chief, but they would not let him. He said there are women chiefs, too. Now they have a better education. He talked about getting along with people.

Shirley Gover asked him if there are certain things he wants the young people to know. He said he passes along information. He stops by and talks at the school. He wants them to know how to

survive in the winter. He said people used to walk long ways. It was a tough life, but it was better than today. He would like to pass along the knowledge about how he grew up. He said after eating moose you shouldn't throw the bones around your yard. It might give you bad luck. He learned these things from elders like Bobby Esai. They would tell stories at night. His first wife was Deaphon Miska's sister. He said now there isn't as much of a problem with alcohol. He likes seeing everyone sober.

Shirley Gover asked what the role of the traditional chief. John talked about the role of the chief. He said he tells people they will be happier if they stay sober. He said he tries to be nice to everyone. He was second chief for a long time. Nikolai has grown. He said when he first came to Nikolai everyone used to go to church, especially when the Father used to come by boat. Now there are just a few people going to the church. He wonders what happened. He wants people to be happy. He talked about church service.

Shirley Gover asked about traditional chiefs from the past. John said he only met Deveon. He said he didn't know him very well so he can't talk about him. Carl Sasooee was a good chief. John said he could not understand his language. He said he has learned lots of different languages. He learned when he was firefighting. He said it is not easy to be chief. He prefers to talk to people one to one and not in meetings. He talked about being worried about being able to speak. He asks God's guidance. He said he preferred to be second chief.

Shirley Gover asked about his travels. John said he didn't travel to other villages. He has been to Washington.

John talked about large mining in the area.