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Tom Alton, Will Mayo and Bill Schneider

Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Bill Schneider said when Heald was working on her thesis on her mother in law's work and life she mentioned that there was a Tanana Chiefs meeting in 1914 in Tanana. Schneider said he argued with her that wasn't the case. She was right. He has found references to the meeting. One of the things that came out in the literature was the fact that the Native people were asking to send a delegate to Washington, D.C.

A question from someone in the audience asked how many years back does the oral tradition go. Mayo said because it is oral they don't know. He said there are creation stories that talk about themes that are found in the Bible. It can go back quite a ways. He talked about the Athabascan law that describes all interactions with humans and other animals. He was taught by his mother.

[comments from the audience about game] Mayo said there weren't moose until recently and the moose came from the east. Caribou have been sporadic.

Question from the audience that can't be heard clearly. Bill said the question is when the chiefs went back to the communities [after the 2015 meetings] what was the impact. Mayo said he welcomed any comments from others in the audience. He said he can't answer what the impacts were. During the meetings they were already surveying for the railroad and shortly after that they were building the railroad. When they got to Nenana the unearthed graves and bones were falling in the river. That actually began some advocacy by tribal leaders to address that issue. Mayo said when Wickersham was a judge he tried a case (the Berrigan case) he upheld that there were unfinished land claims that the Native people still had. His decision helped in later land claims. Mayo said he had admiration for Wickersham. He grew up in Washington where the Pullayup tribe had their land taken from them. [comment from the audience about Wickersham] Mayo said after this meeting Wickersham continued to go around and visit the villages and documented the land use. He wanted to begin to document the real land use and take into account the real subsistence use of the land. Wickersham took that documentation to Congress and asked Congress to settle this and create the reservations. There were four reservations created after the 1936 Indian Reorganization Act in Alaska. One of them included fishing waters and the commercial fishing industry put an end to that. WWII started and the land claims issues froze.

Schneider said the Berrigan case was important in the federal government recognizing it had a responsibility to Alaska Natives in the Interior. Question in the audience about Chena. Alton said going through the Episcopal diaries of Frederick Grange everyone was sick or dying from influenza in 1919. There are gravesites across the river from the town site of Chena that include practically the entire

village of Chena that fell victim to the 1919 influenza epidemic. The village of Salchaket was the same story. Mayo said at the time of the 1915 meeting the estimates of the population were about forty people at Chena. There were some people that survived the influenza.

Question from the audience about the interaction of the Native people and the military. Mayo said Ft. Gibbon was made to support the telegraph line. There was a mail trail connected to that, too. There was a non-Native community around Tanana at that time. He said he hasn't found any kind of discussions with the Native people about the use of the lands. His grandfather, Chief Daniel Matthew, who was the brother of Chief William negotiated with the army base commander. He noticed that the base threw away large amounts of food. The soldiers wouldn't let him retrieve it. Chief Daniel negotiated with the commander to allow them to collect the food and distribute it to the people in the village.

Question from the audience about Native names. Schneider said the missionaries baptized them with those names. They had their native name and the Christian names. Their children took the latter name as their last name. Mayo said even today there are Native families that have last names from the Bible. He also said there was a lot of intermarriage at this time. When the church came the Native people were happy with it and realized later that there was some loss connected to it such as a loss of language. They welcomed the education and health care. They discuss a little bit of the spiritual values at the time of the meetings.

Question from the audience about the emotional tone of the 1915 meetings. Afton said the Natives were deliberate and they knew what their position was before they came to Fairbanks. Many of them traveled together on their way to Fairbanks. They knew that Wickersham wanted a reservation plan and they were going to have none of it. It wasn't a highly emotional meeting. Will Mayo didn't glean any anger. It was very statesmen like. Whenever the chiefs spoke they almost spoke in unison. Afton said the most heated discussion would have come from Riggs. He knew that their land was going to be taken.

Sam Demientieff thanked the presenters. He commented about the first comments about the Natives wanting to live free on their land. An unidentified person commented on the native leaders at the meeting. Schneider commented about the chiefs' knowledge of the white people and how they operated.

Ron Inouye comments about the information at the meeting.