

ORAL HISTORY 2016-10 PT. 1

William Schneider

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University of Alaska Fairbanks

Richard Seifert introduces Bill Schneider.

Bill Schneider talked about his South Africa Fulbright year. He show a photo of the Voortrekker Monument. It is a monument to the Dutch settlers in South Africa. Too many of the Black tribal people today it represents the time of extreme apartheid. There is a small exhibit at the monument with an article by a Black writer. In the article he states that they must never forget what happened during apartheid and the monument symbolizes that time.

Schneider said this got him to thinking about how we think about the past. He started thinking about monuments and wanted to relate it to his current research. He showed a photo of the Tanana Chiefs when they gathered in 1915. Bill said his interest in the anniversary of the Tanana Chief's meeting was sparked by Ron Inouye. Schneider said he gave a talk to the Tanana Historical Society about Chief Joseph and Billy Mitchell and the establishment of a telegraph line down the Goodpaster. Chief Joseph had accompanied Mitchell on that trip. Chief Joseph was a delegate from Salcha to the Tanana Chiefs meeting. Ron Inouye suggested recognition of the meeting anniversary and organized a meeting. Judge Wickersham had met with Chief Alexander on the Tolovana River. Wickersham had been instrumental in pushing through the Alaska Railroad bill in Congress in 1914. Wickersham and others had been concerned about the impact of the railroad on the Native people in the Tanana Valley. 1915 was a bit of a lull in the history of the Tanana Valley because the initial gold rush had passed, but they were expecting a great movement of people to come.

The Chiefs gathered in Fairbanks and they came from the villages of Tanana, Fort Gibbon, Cos Jacket, Tolovana, Chena, Old Minto and Salcha. They came to Fairbanks because of their concern about the railroad and because of their concern of what they had experienced during the gold rush when people came into the area. It was not the first meeting to occur. Indian people had held meeting before. There is evidence that there was a meeting in Tanana. The Natives were very concerned and wanted to send a representative to Congress. At the mouth of the Tanana where the river flows into the Yukon there is a gathering place called Nuchalawoyya. Each spring the Native people gathered there after the ice went out. They gathered there to trade, celebrate and to talk about land and resources. There is a history that goes back very far. Alfred Starr remembers his mother talking about a huge gathering that stretched for about two miles. There is good evidence and missionary evidence of the gathering there. What is unique about the 1915 meeting is it brought people together with government officials. They came to talk about land. They came to talk about a series of other issues. Wickersham in his opportunistic ways planned this meeting at the same time that the cornerstone was being laid at the university and at the time of the July Fourth celebrations. The Indian leaders were present for all of this. They experienced the American patriotism and celebration. Schneider showed a photo of Wickersham and perhaps Chief

Alexander at Tolovana. Schneider talked about their dress. In the photo Chief Alexander is wearing shoe packs and smoking a cigar. Schneider said our knowledge of the 1915 meeting is influenced by Stanton Patty. Patty captured many of the big stories in Alaska. He was also well connected with the women who ran the Wickersham house in Juneau. He was given a copy of the transcript of the 1915 meeting in Fairbanks. Stanton publicized it at the time of the 1971 land claims. Schneider was focused on the fact that the transcripts talked about land. He said in his research and others continued they found there was more going on at that meeting. He showed a photo of Schneider, Tom Alton and Will Mayo taken at the time they presented a lecture at the Tanana Yukon Historical Society about the anniversary of the Tanana Chiefs meeting of 1915. Schneider said they started looking at the transcript of that meeting. It was a complete transcript. Schneider wondered who would have taken down the meetings word for word. He thought it was Richard Geoghegan, but he found a section in the transcript that said the person taking the minutes was a young man. Schneider said it is important that the minutes are so complete. The transcript is available on the Alaska digital archives. He said the other thing about the meeting that is important is Guy Madara and Paul Williams who served as the translator. There is some indication that Williams worked for the church in Tanana. He played more of a role than just translator. When the conversation began to deteriorate about reservations and allotments Williams said I guess we are done with that topic and suggested they move on with industrial schools. Rev. Madara introduced the conference by saying that the Indian leaders had come because they have important things to talk about. Madara helped to describe some of the conditions that people faced. Madara said there was one very sweet thing about Native life and that is that the Native people help each other and they live collectively. That would not be possible if they were separated and lived on allotments. Madara and Williams play a role in the development of the meetings over the two days.

Schneider took a close look at the transcript and said he will talk about some of the issues described. The Indians wanted to talk about their rights. They were not certain about what rights they had. Chief Charley wondered what the United States could do for them. Chief Ivan said he didn't have a chance to see the government but he heard that it was a good government because they even protect the dogs in the streets. Alexander Williams wanted advisement. Jacob Starr also wanted advisement and wanted Native representation in the capitol. If laws are posted they would follow them as much as they follow the missionary life. Chief Charley said if the people are coming much like the slush ice in the spring then they wanted protection. Chief John had heard about the government and felt like they belonged to some kind of government, but didn't know what it was like. They also asked about new opportunities and ways to protect subsistence. Chief Alexander wanted industrial schools and said he would make his children attend the boarding school if there was one. Chief Ivan said he would make the people in the village send their children. Fair access to labor was asked for by Paul Williams. He said Natives were anxious for schools, medical care and opportunities for labor. There was discussion about wood cutting, and fish contracts. Paul Williams said natives wanted to bid on the contracts. One issue of homesteads or allotments was they couldn't stay in one place and needed to travel to hunt and fish. Chief Ivan said you people are people of books but they were people of the land. Chief Alexander Williams said when the United States bought Alaska from Russia they heard they were in somebody's hands who wanted to do them good, but the government let them live by themselves and he wanted them to continue to let them live by themselves. They wanted opportunity but they wanted to protect their way of life. It was

hard for the white people to understand and accommodate. Schneider said Mayo and Starr asked maybe they weren't rejecting a reservation, but how big a reservation would they need to accommodate the Native's needs. The question was never proposed. The Whites didn't perceive the extent of the land needed. Wickersham and other delegates were listening and when issues failed they were open to the discussion that other things Natives were asking for. Wickersham spent a lot of time asking about the missions and wanted it entered into the record. The record would go to the Secretary of the Interior. There were references to the Alaska purchase. Chief Isaac said that he was a boy when Alaska was purchased and since then there has been no chance to talk with the United States government. Chief Thomas wanted to consult with officials and wanted education.

Schneider said under the 1867 Treaty Accession the people were divided into two categories: the inhabitants and the uncivilized tribes. Most of the Natives were classified as uncivilized and that meant they had no rights. No rights to own land, sell land or vote. The interest in the land was only protected by vague language of the 1884 Organic Act which said they were not to be disturbed in the hunting, fishing and trapping activities out on the land. The prospectors who were streaming into the country wanted control of the land. This became a point of contention. Even in 1915 most of the government officials were unaware of the life of the Native people. The U.S. was caught off guard and didn't know what to do. Schneider asked how that could be. He wonders how their way of life could be unknown. From 1867 to the 1880s life in the Interior was the life of the Native communities. There were a few non-Native trappers until the beginning of the gold strikes. Schneider showed a photo of the McQuesten Store at Circle. He talked about gold strikes on the Yukon and its tributaries at the end of the nineteenth century. Gold woke up the government. The military was called in and the Geologic Survey was called in. They wanted to find a route into the Interior. Captain Ray was sent by the President in 1897 to find out about conditions. Ray's steamboat was bogged down on the Yukon Flats. It carried supplies for the miners. Ray reported to the president. He recommended a fort at Gibbon, Tanana, and Eagle and to make expeditions into the Interior to find a route. Herron headed up into the upper Kuskokwim and was rescued by Chief Sasue who was from Telida and Nikolai. They took care of him and he was led to Fort Gibbon. Another expedition was led by Castner. He went up the Mendenhall River and descended to the Tanana River by the Delta River. He was looking for a route to Tanana. Castner came to Goodpaster with virtually nothing and was greeted. Alfred Brooks was exploring that same year the White River and the Tanana River. Brooks was a geologist. Brooks discovered that the Native people had materials from western life. They were getting these materials from Eagle and Dawson. The Tanana River Indians had an extensive seasonal migration from the trading post to the Fortymile country for hunting and down to the Tanana River for fish. They had extensive contact with white people and then went back to their country and way of life. Schneider showed a photo of Old Sam in the Fortymile country. Schneider talked about Lee Saylor who lived in the Healy Lake area and was married to the daughter of Jeanie Healy. The genealogical connection is very immediate and still alive. 1901 was right at the brink of life changes. Prospectors began to make their way up the rivers including the Copper River. In 1903 Senator Dillingham was sent to Alaska and did the tour down the Yukon and down the coast. He interviewed people including Jarvis in Eagle. He was the customs agent in Eagle. Jarvis said in the 1903 that in every contest for gain the white man had been the gainer. Billy Mitchell established the telegraph line that same year down the Goodpaster. The Natives said the people were streaming down his trail. Mitchell lamented the impact. Schneider said at this time there was a crisis which reached epic proportions on the Copper and Tanana Rivers. Lt. Emmons was concerned about the condition of the Copper River Indians. Oscar Fish wrote that the Indians of the upper Tanana region were starving, but no help came. The Indians didn't have any legal access. Schneider talked about Cherokost and Pavolov who were grubstaked by McQuesten and discovered gold on Birch Creek. They were denied claims. John Manook

was granted citizenship and was a miner in Rampart. He was granted citizenship because of the way he was living. In 1905 Chief Jarvis from the Goodpaster was approached by prospectors who wanted to buy land from him. It was decided by Wickersham in the Beringan case that Jarvis could not sell the land because he had no rights to the land. The legal issue becomes incredibly important. It was the background for the big push that Wickersham and others were thinking about in 1915. Schneider said when we think about the government at this time we think about the bigger picture. We are reminded that this was a period of Imperialism. The country was taking on the Philippines and Cuba. Schneider showed a photo of the inaugural parade for Teddy Roosevelt in 1905. The photo shows the traditional Indian chiefs and the Carlisle Indian School students. He said this image is curious. There were mixed feelings about Geronimo. It was the beginning of the museum development. There was no question where they wanted Indians to be. White society saw itself as the pinnacle of civilization. It was unable to see through other people's lives and ways of being. Schneider asks why the 1915 Tanana Chiefs meeting was important. It was the first public meeting of Indians in the Interior with government officials. It was recorded and preserved. It was publicized in photos, newspapers and the official report was sent to Secretary Lane back in Washington, D.C. It brought leaders issues on allotment to the attention of the government and it demonstrated good will of all the parties present. It was also a benchmark to evaluate what has changed.

Schneider said we should continue to remember the meeting because there has been a lot of change and development. There is a lot more that needs to be done. One of the things that occurred at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the meeting was the production of a painting by Karen Austen. She was able to research the regalia worn by the chiefs. It enhances the understanding of how the chiefs saw themselves and how they represented themselves. Request from the audience to show the original photo. Schneider said these issues are still important today. There are struggles to understand other people on their terms. He said Robert Charlie and Ron Inouye have suggested school children recite the original transcripts or a play be produced.

Schneider quoted an article by Jackie Cowans about replacing Andrew Jackson with Harriet Tubman on the twenty dollar bill. Schneider thanked those that helped him.

Questions from the audience.

Unidentified person asked about Wickersham's motives. Schneider said Wickersham built a house when he came to Fairbanks. He wanted to bring Fairbanks into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Jim Kari asked about the manuscript. Schneider said it is type script and talked about the reproduction. They talked about the possible transcriber of the transcripts.

Pam Miller commented about a playwright, August Wilson and his play, *The Piano*.