

H74-09

Arthur and Sophia Stevens

Tanana Yukon Historical Society meeting

Fairbanks, Alaska

February 26, 1970

Magdalene Cassady introduced Arthur and Sophia Stevens.

Arthur Stevens said he was born in Eagle, Alaska in November 4, 1904. His father was called Big Steve Simon Stevens. His mother died when he was six years old and his father raised him. After his mother died he went up to Fortymile in Canada. His sister's name was Martha and his brother's name was Charley. His father hunted in the area. Arthur talked about the food he had when he was growing up. They didn't have fresh food. He talked about having bannock, fried bread, rice and macaroni. It took two years to collect items for a potlatch. The family returned to Eagle for the potlatch which lasted one week.

Member of the audience asked about the custom of potlatch, if everyone had potlatch or just chiefs. Arthur said all Natives have a potlatch. Member of the audience asked if there were missionaries there. Arthur said yes. Arthur said there are stories he heard from the elders from the mid-1800s. He talked about Big Chief Charley from Eagle who died in 1904. The chief gathers the people to listen and straighten out problems. Since he was fifteen he has been on the council of his village. He has served as chief.

Member of the audience asked about the white people in the settlement. Arthur said there was an army post named Fort Egbert in 1902.

Member of the audience asked when Arthur went to school. Arthur said they built a school in Eagle in 1908. They didn't have paper but used slates.

Question from the audience about the type of teachers at the school. Arthur said they had missionary Episcopal teachers and when the public school started in 1908 they had government teachers. The church was built in 1904. One of the early teachers was Mr. Evans.

Question from the audience about families of the military men. Arthur said there were some officers. There was a telegraph line from Valdez to Eagle. Arthur remembers the telegraph line being built. Arthur said they had relay stations about every twenty miles. Question from the audience about the reason they went to Fortymile in Canada. Arthur said it was a good area for hunting. They sold the meat in Dawson. His father also trapped. They traded for other goods. Arthur said the women would tan the skins. The meat would be cured by smoking. The bones would be saved and the marrow would be eaten.

Question from the audience about name of the tribe in Eagle. Arthur said they were Yukon Indians. Hon Gwich'in. Yukon River Indians.

Question from the audience about traveling around in the area. Arthur said he has been all over trapping. He said he met his wife on the steamboat. They have been married for 46 years and they are still good friends. They were married in 1923 in Eagle.

Question from the audience about him joining the church. Arthur said he has and the tribe has joined the church.

Question from the audience about how he made his living. When he was first married he bought things on credit. He cut wood for the steamboats.

Question from the audience for Sophia about what they had when they married. Sophie said they had a small Yukon stove and very little else.

Sophie said she was born in Circle in 1904. Her mother died when she was eight years old. She had two younger sisters named Eva and Annie. Her maiden name was Andrew. The teacher in Circle took in Sophie. After that she moved to a boarding school in Nenana mission. She stayed there for four years and then moved to Fort Yukon mission. She then went to Tanana. She was raised in the mission schools.

Question from the audience about her family. Sophie said they have three boys and one girl. Her children's names are Andy, Freddy, Silas and Martha. Martha has eight children and lives in Eagle.

Arthur said after he was married he also trapped to earn a living.

Audience member asked them how long they have been living in Fairbanks. Arthur said because of health problems they moved to Fairbanks in 1966. They are closer to doctors in Fairbanks.

Audience asked about other things he did for a living in addition to trapping. Arthur said they fished in the Yukon River and put up smoked salmon. They also raised a garden and picked berries. Arthur said you can make it in the country if you work at it.

Arthur said he worked on the riverboats from Dawson to Nenana when he was younger. Some of the boats he worked on were the steamer Yukon, steamer Alaska, and the Tanana. He was right hand man to the captain and first mate. He said he showed them he could work and he didn't have any trouble. He also worked for the highway department for 16 years. He worked in Eagle and Fairbanks.

Question from the audience asked about the first automobile in Eagle. Arthur said the first one came in 1952. There was a road to Eagle put through at that time.

Question from the audience about the size of Eagle. Arthur said Eagle is much smaller now and people need to go where the work is.

Question from the audience about the school in Eagle. Arthur said there were about 30 students in the school.

Question about the women preparing the moose skins. Arthur said they worked hard on the skins. They would use moose brain on it. They would smoke the skin to make the skin soft. Sometimes it would take two weeks to tan it. They would take the moose brain and mix it with water and roll up the skin in a sack. This would soften the skin. Then they would hang it up and ring out the water. Then it is hung from a pole. The hair is removed from the skin with a knife before this process. They would flesh it out with a bone.

Question about using wood ashes on the moose skin. Arthur said yes they do use ashes to take the hair off. Sophia said they would make slippers, boots and mittens with the skins.

Question about beadwork. Arthur said they would trim their slippers with beads when he was a little boy. Arthur said they used beads in place of money in the 1800s. He said beads were used for trading. His father and a cousin received two thousand dollars in trade for a claim that was worth much more.

Question about sickness and treatment. Arthur said they had medicine men who were powerful. They would treat colds with spruce. He would chew spruce gum when he was a child to take care of his teeth. One of the medicine men was Little Paul. Sometimes people would go to the army doctor.

Question about the population of Eagle. Arthur thinks the largest number of people living in Eagle was about 700-800 in the mid 1800s.

Question about the type of houses they had. Arthur said most of the houses are low cabins with straight timber for the floor. Arthur talked about hunting caribou. In the Fortymile country they have fences built to get the caribou. They drive the caribou into the fences. They used the caribou for meat. They depended on the caribou meat, preserved fish and berries throughout the winter. The caribou meat was also traded in Dawson. Arthur said he would hunt with bow and arrow when he was a little boy. He would use the bow and arrow to catch small game.