

Pete Sovalik
Nunamiut Eskimo, Barrow life
2 tapes
note: long leader on tape one
age: about 64

Interview, Neville Jacobs
Barrow Village
Sept., 1974

Pete Sovalik has worked at the Arctic Research Lab for many years and understands English well. He is a jovial and intelligent man, and the tape reflects not only the explicit material, but implicitly, the contrast of forces at work within Eskimo life--the traditional "old ways," and the new western ways of workaday week, time consciousness, settled village life--Pete Sovalik is the product of both.

Pete's parents lived, traveling, on the Colville River when Pete was born. They were true nomads, interior people, who ranged from the Itkillik River to the Colville and up into the Brooks Range. In the fall, Pete says, they would leave their "canoe" (umiak) and take their dogs up into the Brooks Range..

In mid-July they went to the mouth of the Colville from the mountains to meet Brower's traders from Nuvuk (Barrow) to get trade goods. They traded skins including fox and caribou for tea, flour, sugar, whatever.

Pete remembers well since 1917, when he was a boy with his parents trading on the coast.

Pete talks at length about life as a boy, when his parents traveled over the Brooks Range, hunting, trapping, following caribou. Regularly they ran out of trade-goods, groceries, and lived as the Eskimos always had before the white man, eating caribou, sheep, fish, rabbit, ptarmigan, whatever greens they had gathered.

In winter they made a house by putting up a frame of heavy

willows. They tied the bows together and covered them with a tent or tarp of caribou hide. They heated rocks in the fire and then put the rocks in the tent for heat.

In the winter they stopped to camp at a creek that was open water all year--a "warm" springs--where they could get water and fish. Pete discusses the food they ate, how they hunted, gathered, preserved their foods, and how they traveled.

He discusses hunting as his father taught him, and how to stay out of trouble, avoid danger, what to do to scare away a grizzly bear.

Pete describes how the medicine people, or "angatkut" practiced their skills among the Nunamiute. He tells about many specific beliefs--tabus, customs, ~~practices~~--of the Nunamiute relating to supernatural--magical practices.

Tape Two:

Pete continues with a story about a mountain located near the pass where the Noatak and Colville Rivers come together. Here, this certain mountain has a magic summit. Any man who climbs the mountain and looks into the top will be struck dead immediately, by being propelled into a hole or a lake. When Pete was a boy, one time there was a gathering of people by this mountain, and three shaman men decided to test the legend. They climbed to the top and one decided to look while the others held his legs. He saw a magic lake...and more.

(Later on ---, Pete took an old photo from his desk, of a large group of people at Barrow--probably at Nellikaturuk--and pointed out the men who were the shamans in this story.)

Pete then tells about life working at Arctic Research Lab. At one point he mentions that during his work with scientists,

he was helping to gather biological specimens from streams in this area, and he kept hoping the airplane would fly by this mountain so he could see into it and see the lake, but he never had a change.

Pete goes back to early days toward the end of tape 2, and tells about a time when his father built a cabin on an offshore island along the coast. One day they saw a dog team coming. It turned out to be Steffansson. Staffansson stayed with them for quite awhile and Pete's mother repaired his skin clothes. Staff. was gathering Eskimo songs, and especially wanted magical songs. Pete's father had inherited some very powerful magical songs, and promised never to use magic again. but recently he had become a convert to Christianity. Steff offered Pete's father a hundred dollars for his song, and Pete's Uncle told his father, "You're a fool. Sing any song, he won't know the difference, and take the money." Pete's father said no, that wasn't his way. He couldn't sing the song, and ~~that~~ was that. So the songs were never collected by Steffansson.

Pete, however, had hunted with his father, and had learned his father's magic songs. Pete now says, I still know these songs. I have never sung them since my father became a Christian. No one ^(today) has ever heard these songs. I am not under my father's promise not to sing them. I will sing them now, for you, if you would like.

Tape two ends with the magic hunting song, plus another, very powerful Eskimo magic killing song.