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KODIAK ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Introduction:

When I first came to Kodiak I was fascinated by the art work of this area, particularly that done by Alaskan Natives. I was fortunate through the suggestions of Carol Yakisha and Joe Kelley to meet Grace Harrod. A Native of Nunivak Island, presently a 20-year-resident artist of Kodiak, Grace is a wonderful woman to interview. Honest, humorous and open, she welcomed me to her cabin and talked about her life with candor and charm. Unfortunately, this transcript reflects only a portion of our meeting. Much information, such as how she prepares the dried grass for weaving, thought about her Native Yupik language and some recollection of her early schooling, is not part of this document.

Yet this interview encompasses a fairly detailed overview of Grace's life, with an emphasis being her fine art work, the beading, skin sewing and her beautiful baskets.

Thank you Grace.

In Her Own Words:

I was born in a little shack house and a lot of White-People think that we live in igloos. Actually, the first time that I ever seen an igloo, I was about in the seventh grade and our school teacher came from Seattle, WA, his name was Mr. Gibson. He was a

real good teacher and we were reading about these Eskimos live in igloos and we said, "We don't know what igloo looks like", so at recess time, he taught us how to build an igloo. I was about thirteen or fourteen the first time I ever seen an igloo. We don't live in igloos, it was a White-man that taught us how to build an igloo.

Dad used to have a lot of dog teams and he was a great hunter and he was a great provider and we were never hungry. We used to travel to seal camp about this time of year, in April from Nunivak to the south side of the island where my dad grew up. Dad used to hunt lots of seals and springtime we would lean them up and we take the seal blubber and dried meat and take them to the Kuskukwim and trade, you know, barter and once in a while, he would take us kids and mom. I love it, to me, Bethel was a big city like Anchorage; it was a small place, maybe three or four stores but to me, it was a big city.

In Nunivak, there was quite a few people, there was over 400 close to 500, but when you start become a teenager, about 15 or 16 or so, you see things differently. Here I was caught between two cultures. You either have choice of staying home, get married to a person that is appointed by your father or you could go against him and go educate yourself. My cousins, they got arranged and got married, I said, no way. What my dad said, and I'm his oldest daughter and my mother died when I was just a little girl when I was three years old so, I was his girl. So, he said what you want?

I said, I want educate, go to high school. I heard of this high school, you can become whatever you want to be, School teacher, Nurse or whatever. He was real sick with tuberculosis at that time, epidemic in the early 50's.

Well, back to seal camp, we used to barter all that seal oil and we would get all these furs and parka squirrels, wolverine, cow hide cloth and he gets lots of cloth for my mom's "kuspuk" and cannery boots for us kids and lots of crackers and lots of flour, sugar and coffee, candy, oranges, things you don't see the south side of the island when I was growing up. It was like a big ship just come in when we go to Bethel. Dad had a little boat, a 35-foot-boat. We used that as transportation in Summer time. But, in Winter time, we used dog-teams for transportation. Dad had one of the best. Dad had the best in almost everything.

After Dad getting married, we ended up getting about ten boys, I think, and my little sister, Lola, she was ----- my mom, my present mother, she had her tubes tied, she was the only girl they got out of ten boys, I think. There's about fourteen of us all together, then one passed away three years ago in a snowmobile accident. My present mother had a boy and a girl when dad remarried her so, we're a big family, one of the biggest on the island.

But, I don't remember being hungry until I left on my own in Anchorage and I knows I was hungry. I couldn't find work for a

whole month and I finally found/land a job at the ANS hospital, I was a nurse's aid. I left the island in 1954 and I went to Mt. Edgecumb boarding school in Sitka. My first plane ride, it was terrible. First of all, I was scared to get on the plane. When we got on our plane, our pilot got lost going from Nikoyak to Bethel and in one of them old Cessnas that hold about eight of us passengers in that plane. One of my cousins got sick, he got air sick and he just puked all over our sleeping bags. We spent a night just smelling that puke and I never want to see a little plane, gosh, it was sick. Our clothes stunk, my first plane ride, it was terrible.

Then, we got to Anchorage, it was more scary. All these cars and it was real scary. They put us in the Salvation Army. There was a bunch of other girls, big girls, were headed there. They were the Juniors and Seniors from Unikleet. One girl I met, it was her first year away from too, Ruth Manek. She had braids and I had braids too. We had something in common. She had blue eyes but she had braids and we became best of friends.

Then I really felt out of place. I know I had T.B. cause I was spitting blood and after about eleven days, I couldn't take it no more and so I told my Matron. I landed in the hospital and I was in the hospital for almost a year and a half. While I was in high school, I was real sick. I was spitting blood and everything So, I was in the hospital for about a year and a half and they cut my lung and took some out.

Then I went home, Dad was a very religious person. When I got home, I was about 19 from boarding school and both Dad and Mom were at the Alaska Native Hospital in Anchorage and they got home too. By the time we got home, me and my older brother, so he said I was learn too much sin so he took me up to Nome and I wanted to go to school cause I was doing so good down in Mt. Edgecomb, I was A-B student and honor roll student. He took me away from my boyfriend and we went up to Nome and by our little boat again to see Grandma and Grandpa.

We had real hard time up there. I learned how to drink while I was still in high school. That was a mistake and from them on, I drink every weekend after that. Even I was in Senior year, I was alcoholic already. So, even I got job in Anchorage after I finish high school in '59 from Nome, when I got to Anchorage, I really was drinking real heavily. I just quit my job as a nurse.

I got married when I was 24, worked as a Nurse's Aid again after my first kid. I had two more kids. I started drinking real heavily after about four years, found out he was on dope. I started drinking real heavily. That was when we broke up. I drank so much I kept landing in, even I got married, I keep on landing in jail. My sister put my three kids to foster home, two boys and one girl. I got them back for about six months, they were in foster home for a year. I sobered up and got a job as a cook. Everyone went to fish camp without me and my three kids and everybody was drinking at Fourth of July and my landlord told me to get out of the house

so I packed my kids and went to Anchorage. Sold everything.

I started back drinking again and I called the lady that took care of them before, I said, come and pick-up my kids. I never got them back. I kept on drinking and she adopted them. About 20 years ago, Native Land Claims came up. I got a little bit of money round trip ticket to Kodiak, it was only 80 bucks. I said, this was better than 4th Avenue, I'm going to see how Kodiak is.

I met Jim at one of the bars, he said that I could stay with him as long as I want. I've been here ever since, I'm married to him. He was the one that encouraged me to find that I was real artistic. I sent for my grass in Anchorage and I would not let him see me work. I thought he was going to make fun of me. So, I was real self-conscious cause he's White-man and I'm native. I'm used to being make fun of. You get very conscious, especially if you're native. Other people in Anchorage they used to make fun of me, especially you're Native. So, I thought he was going to be that way to me too.

So, he'd be gone all day working and when he's ready to come home, I just hide my work away but I just show him what I done that day. He says that's beautiful. Finally, he started praising me. First, I was bashful to work in front of him and he said I don't know how you do it. He watched me then he started encouraged me like this big basket here, he said, "Put it in the State Fair", they have that State Fair thing out in Bells Flats. So, he let me put

it in and I won two ribbons. This is one of my very first one put in a show.

I used to try to sell them in the bars. He finally got sick and tired of me and he said, "I wish you could give that to me" when I sobered up, I said, "Are you serious?" He said, "I'm serious. Give it to me. So you won't have to sell it." Everytime I come in to town, I'd say, "Joe, could I borrow your basket?" So, it's his. I cannot use it unless I ask him. He's a White-man, not my same nationality and you're very aware of it that he's not from the same race and I thought he was going to make fun of me, but he didn't. He was and still encourages me. He is my greatest supporter. He helped me a lot. He used to say when I was drinking, "You're so talented, I wish you'd quit" and I quit four years ago and four months.

The door really has opened for me. I used to go to Joe Kelley to sell my little baskets. When I sobered up, he got to know me and we started talking about God and we found out we got the same interests. He asked me if I would be interested in starting a kayak. For several months, I thought about it and he used to ask me a lot of questions that I take for granted and he seen my work and we'd sit there for half-an-hour pretty soon, we start talking about the kayak. He put me to work and we work together, Joe Kelley and I and another girl. Her name is Charlotte--- she lives here in Kodiak, a native girl.

There's our first kayak here. Bud Rozelle made the frame. He'll cut the skins for me then I'll sew all the skins together. They're made of Sitka White Deer hide about 10-12 of them. The first one there went to Japan, it went to museum. My Dad told me it will sink and I told him it will be in a museum. Then he told me, "Then, you're safe". The second, went to Munich, Germany and the third one, KANA bought it. I believe that's the one there on display. So for my Vocational Rehab, he's been really helpful, he gives me the go sign.

Vocational Rehab, Joe Kelley, he helps them and if people are good with their hands, he'll put them to work if they'll work with their hands. Like, he knows I'm good with baskets so he asked me if I could work with Joey, he's disabled mentally and I taught him in October or November and we just a month or three weeks ago, I believe. He used to sell his baskets. He's my very first student.

You were never forced to work when you were growing up. You just do it on your own otherwise you'll hate to do it because you're forced to. You're mother's working real hard to cut fish and you just cut two fish for practice and she'll praise you. When you get tired, you can put it down and play on the beach. You're never forced to work when you're small, you were just a kid. Same thing with making Native arts, making clothes, making baskets, she never asked me to make baskets. I did it on my own. I wanted to be included, I wanted to start growing-up, I think that's the

feeling. I want to be like my mother, she makes it good, I want to be like her. Then you try. First she'll supervise a little bit, pretty soon you get tired, you put it down for several days or months then try it again. My mother made baskets to sell. She made some mats at a dollar each when I was growing up but now they sell those for over 100 bucks.

My favorite past time is making earrings and bracelets, I love it. With beads. You use your imagination.

Fish camp. You travel by boat for several hours or all day long. You pitch up a tent close to where the fish are coming up from the ocean. You have fish racks and you stay there for a couple week to a month until the fish is dry or you can take it home half dry. The whole family works together. It's like a vacation. It's really fun to be at fish camp. Lots of mosquitoes but when I was growing up, I hated shoes and muckluks, went barefeet all summer. But now, barefeet even on the porch is "ouch."