

Maggie O. Valley
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Oral history by:

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Sitka, Alaska

Ernest

Hello out there to my friends. My is Joseph ~~Bailey~~ Howard Sr. I was born 1930, September 2nd to Mr. Mrs. James Bailey Howard. My mother's name is Susie, originally from the Glacier Bay area. She belonged to the Eagle Clan settled in Hoonah, Alaska. My father, James Bailey Howard, originally from Yakutat, Alaska. My grandparents also came from Hoonah. My mother's family is known as people that grew in the grasslands of Glacier Bay when before it started to go out where it is today. Before that, it's where the Tlingit nation came, they migrated from Glacier Bay area. Some of them have landed "in Juneau, Hoonah, Angoon, Sitka, Kake, Ketchikan, Wrangell and Petersburg. There are Tlingits from Haines, Yakutat, Juneau, Hoonah, Angoon, Kenakee and all the way to Ketchikan. Both my father and mother were married before my sisters and I were born. I am the only boy out of eight children, I have seven sisters. We are all full-blooded Tlingits and we're are all born and raised in the Sitka area. I was born in our camp known as Huskoo Bay. In camp we lived at camp at least a month and half so that our parents could get enough food like meat and fish for the winter. One only brother I have was way older and old enough to be my dad. He was the only son to my dad in my dad's previous marriage. So he was my half brother. His name was Eli Howard.

I was educated in public schools in Sitka, Alaska in the early forties. I first went to a government school which is right at the village of Sitka. It used to be army hospital, it was towed to Sitka and erected there just at the border line of the Tlingit

village of Sitka. That's where most of us went to school under the government schools of Alaska, Territory of Alaska. We went to the public schools. It was hard for us because we're Tlingits. We weren't allowed to speak our own language and if we did we got into trouble for that. It took almost two years for our caucasian brothers and sisters, of course, we call them now because years ago they were all angry with us for coming to their school. They gave us a bad time for two years. They threw rocks at us, they called us Siwashes, they called us everything. It got so bad I used to tell my sisters that we should carry rocks in our pockets just to get to school. We'd take all the short cuts and stay away from the caucasian kids so that we won't get in trouble.

Years ago, we used to have permission just to go to the store. There used to be a gate at the southeast of the village. Our village people used to have written permission from the Russian guards just to get to the store. Non of our people were allowed to go to the liquor store. Non of our people were allowed to borrow money from the bank. At the theater we had to sit down at the right hand side as we go in. It was kind of hard but like I said it took two years for our caucasian friends to get used to us. Finally, as we grew older in public schools our caucasian friends are today some of our friends today and most of us that went to the public schools are not living any more. And some of us are still living today like myself and I became religious.

Most of the Tlingit people belong to the Russian Orthodox Church since they got established and built the St. Michaels

Cathedral. The Russian Captain which was Baranov called the priest to build a smaller church upon the hill. Just at the southeast of the Indian village upon the hill. Where the Russian fort is now just behind it. That is where they build the priest Russian Church in Sitka. That was in 1838, after that they started to build the St. Michaels Cathedral which was founded in 1840. Bishop Innocent was architect builder of the most churches in Alaska at that time. After the Russian Orthodox, St. Michaels Cathedral was build. The priest went down to the village and took to our leaders like Chief Katlian and all the Tlingit leaders to have our people come to the church. So that's how we got adopted to the Russian Orthodox Church. At the time most of the Tlingit people in the Sitka area were automatically baptized into the Orthodox Church.

Our heritage consisted of how we should put our foods for the winter which we go out hunting. Preserving the meat by smoking the deer meat and preserve it in seal grease. Seal grease is made out of seal blubber and cut into small pieces or chunks and boiled before we start to cook like cooked bacon to get the grease of the fat. And be sure the grease doesn't get burned if it gets burned it turns color. Even it's pure white that's when it's real good. That's how they make seal grease. We could eat the seal fat that's already cut up and fried and get the oil out and then we preserve the deer meat in there, seal meat or bear meat. We smoke deer meat for couple of days and bear for three days because it's much harder and we have to cook it longer then deer meat.

We put up a lot of dried fish. I learned how to put up dried

fish watching my parents, my uncles and aunts during the times we went to camp for two months at a time. We learned to dress out the salmon. We make brine to glaze the salmon before we even start to smoke it and we leave the fish after we cut the heads and guts out. We put the fish in brine for at least twenty minutes and then take it out of the brine. Hang up the fish for thirty minutes so that the brine could stop dripping and then put it in the smokehouse for the fish that's been prepared for smoking. After we put all the fish that are being prepared we start the fires and it depends on how many hundreds of fish we have then. We used to put three hundred smoked fish in there. A lot of hard work had to be done. The menfolks did all the hard work, the women helped by carrying the fish from the boats to where the fish is prepared for drying and after their prepared by getting the fish out. We hang it up, put it on the racks until the brine stop dripping and carry fish from outside rack inner part of the smokehouse from up there. Depending on how many fish we have in the smokehouse. We burn the smoke as we build the fire and make the smoke out of alder wood. It prevents the fish from burning or cooking right away.

Our fathers put up racks three feet above the fire and put ship lops to the racks to keep the heat down from the fish and the smoke spread out evenly. It took about two to three days and then we start filleting it out again. Then we hang it out for two or the days, depending on how you wanted dried fish. After two or three days of smoking we take it down and fillet some more, make the sides larger and kind of thin the meat and take strips out and

those are the best parts of the smoked fish. You could completely dry those strips by hanging them on little poles that strung up interior of the smokehouse. Everybody takes turns keeping the fire going.

In camps there is about seven or eight families depending on how many families come. I have about six smokehouses and six living quarters out there. Some of them would live in the tents for a month and half while we are all drying fish.

Menfolks go hunting on the second day and then have big feast after the hunters come back. A lot of boiled deer meat or open fire baked. It would be good. I know there are families are dwindling down now but some of us are trying to keep the heritage going. I know I taught my friends back home how to go about drying fish. I told them how to do it, fillet it out and how we should cut our deer meat to be smoked and to preserve deer meat in seal grease. I learned all that from my father and my uncles.

Years ago, our families did have their children stay with their uncles and aunts when four years old or older. It was up to the uncles and aunts to teach the younger people heritage of our Tlingit way of life.

Just imagine with about two thousand smoked fish or more and about ten buckets of smoked deer meat preserved in seal grease. This would be enough for the winter and we have potlatches starting in November of every year. These potlatches is the way we thank our uncles and aunts. I belong to the Eagle clan just like my mother. The children of the Tlingit nation follow the mother like

my mother was Eagle and it makes me automatically an Eagle. Nowadays, we still have potlatches.

It is up to the uncles to take care a death of a loved one on the Eagle side. Like this year we lost three Eagles and it's up to the Ravens to get together and help people in mourning. By helping I mean take a lady who lost her husband. She's not allowed to touch a knife for one month. She's not allowed to clean her own house. She's not allowed to do any kind of work for at least forty days. The people in mourning supposed to cover their mirrors for at least forty days. "And there are people appointed to care of them while they're in mourning, they go to their house every morning and do their dishes, housecleaning, makes their beds, cooks for them and tell them stories. This is just a Tlingit tradition for a lot of us are still trying to carry it out.

Nowadays, and now most of our elders are dying off but I know when I go back to Sitka I have to take up my position again. I am Chief of the Eagle clan. I have been a chief now for going on six years. But because of my schooling here at the Seminary I have lost two years of my duties but when I go back I will carry on again as chief. I have been appointed as chief for the Eagle clan because I know the Tlingit heritage. I know the dances, I know the songs when we are in mourning. And all the traditional beliefs that I know, that is why I was chosen a chief. And I speak my language very fluently. That is another reason why I was chosen. My father was Chief of the Raven clan and now I am Chief of the Eagle clan.

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