

The following autobiographical interview was held on November 29, 1993, with Mrs. Barbara Hochmuth, a Native of Karluk, AK, and current resident of the town of Kodiak, AK. The interview was conducted in her home by Laurie Verbitsky from the Alaska History class at Kodiak Community College.

LV: Describe the village that you grew up in.

BH: There were about fifty or maybe sixty people in the village.

Everybody knew everybody. I went to school. The BIA ran the school. All we did was play. I learned how to tie knots one year. To tie knots. That's all we learned all winter long.

LV: Was it useful?

BH: I guess when I went fishing, yes.

LV: What did most of the people in the village do?

BH: The men fished and the women just stayed home.

LV: Any particular method of fishing that they used?

BH: Beach seining. When the fishing was poor and they didn't get much fish they went out on big boats and went to the mainland to fish there.

LV: Did you ever go out on the fishing boats?

BH: Not until after I got married. Then I went fishing. It was a beach seine down in Larsen Bay in the bay. It was too rough down in Karluk. That was another thing. When we were small, it was never rough out there. In the summer it was calm. Just in the winter we'd get some pretty good northeasters. Sometimes it would wash over the spit. When I went to school we had the school down in the village. Then when the BIA lost the school, when the State took over, the school was on the Old Karluk side and we had to walk over there. It was quite away. We had to

walk through snow and ice. When I was in the seventh grade, I never missed one day of school and I wasn't late and I was so proud of myself. I had set myself a record, a goal. And then I broke it by getting sick.

LV: What did the land look like in Karluk?

BH: There was small brush, but to a child it was quite big. And we had planks for our walkways that stretched over the village. The bridge crossed the river that we crossed to school. The school was on the other side in Old Karluk on the other side of the river. The River Karluk runs right through the village. On one side is Old Karluk and on the other side is New Karluk. There are mountains all around the village.

LV: Tell us a little more about the school.

BH: It went up to the eighth grade. They (BIA) fed us macaroni and cheese and graham crackers. It was nice. I liked it because it was all in one room. From first grade on up to eighth grade they all stayed in one room, but in different sections. It was a big building.

LV: Were the teachers there Natives, or locals, or were they brought in?

BH: They were brought in. I don't remember much about them. Except for one teacher I had in the sixth grade. We took spelling and I couldn't spell the word "because." He made me sit in that room all day and made me practice that word. There were some teachers that when we did wrong, misbehaved, or made noise or something in the classroom, they made us sit in the corner and put a box over our heads. My sister and I got in trouble at the same time and when my dad heard about this he was pretty angry.

He got the people all together and they put a stop to it. That wasn't good punishment for kids.

LV: Did they teach much Native culture in the schools?

BH: No. I do remember Curious George and Dick and Jane though.

LV: Who would you say was the most influential person in your life?

BH: My grandma, Katie Melcolie. She was the one that raised me since I was five years old. She used to tell some good fairy tale stories. Half the time I didn't understand her, but I understood some because she'd speak in Russian-Aleut. I'd look at my sister, "What'd she say? What'd she say?" And she knew what I was doing and she'd get mad at me and scold me. There was one fable that I liked. How the fat lady got into the eye of the needle. That just really fascinated me. How she ever did that I don't know., That was the only part that stuck with me and that she used to tell some stories about a lady who turned into a bear and how the raven got its blue eyes. That one I kind of remember. He goes up in the mountains and is picking blackberries and tried them on and says "uh-uh." They didn't fit him so he threw them away and got some cranberries. He tried them on and "uh-uh", didn't like them either. I don't know where he came across the blue ones, but he put the blue ones on. He liked the blue ones. We used to love that. We'd say "Grandma, can you tell us some stories?" We would sit and we'd comb her hair or rub her back and she'd tell stories. She'd be sitting there darning some socks. And she worked by kerosene lamp. The down hill house had running water and lights.

LV: What else do you remember about your grandma?

BH: Well, she raised us in keeping a house. She taught us how to cook, clean, and bake. I never did learn how to cook, but I watched her. It always fascinated me though, because she was blind and she knew if anything was out of place. If someone came to the door she knew who it was before they even entered the house. Just by their walk and their smell. She was a midwife. She delivered half the kids in the village. And she just knew. I don't know what it was about her. They just respected her.

LV: Were there other reasons besides age that a person would be respected?

BH: We had a chief and he took care of the men. Kept them in order. Cause I always remember, one time, during the Lent time we cleaned the whole village preparing for Easter. We cleaned the whole thing. The house, inside and outside. We cleaned everything, I mean everything. The attics, everything was cleaned up. We threw everything away and burned everything. There was one time, I guess I was eleven, maybe twelve. You know, the fishermen they used to come to Karluk all the time to fish and we'd have boats all over down there, fifteen to twenty and sometimes thirty boats, and they'd come down there to fish in the Shelikof Straits. One of them came down and he wrote on our school, and you know you don't do graffiti down in our village. He wrote on our school, I mean he did the whole thing. He marked the whole school. Our school was red and he used a chalk. Our chief got a hold of him and he had to clean the whole thing. Everybody was just laughing. All the kids, you

could see them just laughing and this kid here. He figured he was going to come and destroy our village, but the chief got a hold of him. Because right away the chief asked who did it and they knew who did so they got him. He didn't do it after that.

LV: What other responsibilities did the chief have?

BH: Keeping things running smoothly on the church and the village and he was the chief of fishing. There was two sides of fishing. Down on the Improvement Side and then the Karluk side. There were two seines. They'd divide the men up to both sides and take care of them. My dad was a straw-boss. He sat there and waved his arms when it was time to pull the seine in or which way to let the boat go. And then he ran the winch that pulled the seine in.

LV: What about the housing?

BH: Some of us had running and some didn't have running water. Some of the houses had pumps and some didn't. Some had to pack water and when it rained you put your barrels outside to collect the water for washing clothes. My grandma used to wake us when we washed the sheets early in the spring, we'd wash them and then we'd put them on the grass and I wondered why. It was to make them nice and white.

LV: What other chores did you have as a child?

BH: We had just about everything that she couldn't do like pack water and chop wood for the wood stove.

LV: Where was your house located in the village?

BH: We had two houses. One was up on the hill and then one was down below. Down the hill house was summertime house and up the hill house was the wintertime house, because it was closer to

the church. For church, Grandma had to be on the upper hill in wintertime. It was too far for her to walk on the steps. There must have been about 116 steps up the hill and to the church. Rather than climb those steps every Saturday and Sunday we moved up to the other house. That one I didn't care for very much because we had to pack water. It didn't have running water, that house. But it was pretty tight in there, nice and warm for winter. In winter time we had to close the windows and the shutters at night to keep the drafts out. And we had an oil stove and a wood stove up there too. Most of the time we used the oil stove. And the church was right there. Well, for us it was a hop, skip and a jump, but for my grandma it was quite aways because she was blind. In the summertime we moved down the hill where it wasn't so bad. The down the hill house, my dad won that playing "ukchuk" I guess it's called. It's shooting a dart at a little tiny fish hanging from the ceiling and it's just like it's hanging in the air and you have to hit that. My father won the house that way.

LV: Was this a special game that was played at a special time?

BH: Yes. Just certain times it was played. I think it was during Lent time. Easter time the church bells would be ringing all day long for three days and then they played maiachi and the men played baseball and they played archery and then they played that on the island. There was an island that separated Old Karluk from the village side. It was right in the middle. They played down there and that was always pretty neat there. They had grownups here, teenagers here, and little, younger kids down here. They were all playing different games at the same time.

Then someone would start ringing the bells, and we'd run full speed all the way up to go to church. We'd drop what we were doing and go to church when they rang the bells at four o'clock.

LV: What else do you remember about the church?

BH: It was very strict. We couldn't turn around. The elders always watched what we were doing and we'd have to stand like a stiff board, just staring straight ahead. If you so much as turned your head your ears got pulled. You couldn't turn this way or that way or somebody was always there to pull your ears. You couldn't do anything. You'd just stand there and look straight ahead. It was pretty boring. I think I got my ears pulled once. My grandma lectured me before we'd go to church. We'd always have to set a good example for the other kids. My grandma, her being the oldest lady in the village, everybody respected her and they always came to her for advice. So we had to set a good example for the other kids. It was kind of hard. Sometimes you just wanted to just be a kid, you know, and goof off. Couldn't do those things though. She was pretty strict, my grandma.

LV: When did you leave Karluk?

BH: When I was fifteen. I went to school down at Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka. Then I came back. I went there for a year and then I went down to California. I went to school there for three months, four months. I couldn't get along down there. There was just too much prejudice. I just didn't fit in with the crowd or anything, being from Alaska. It seemed like every class I went to, they found out I was from Alaska and I had to get up. This was back in 1959. I had to get up in the classes

and tell them about Alaska. I'd tell them we have cars, we have running water, we have houses, we have TV, we have movies, but they wouldn't believe me. They just said that I was a liar. They said that we lived in igloos. I said "No we don't live in igloos." And every class that I went to I had to do that, get up. And I got criticized and everything from kids.

LV: What did you do after that?

BH: I was going to join the service and then I met my husband. I didn't get to join the service. I met my husband and got married. He's from Massachusetts. I was down there with my sister. She was expecting her first child and she had to be put to bed because she was having difficulties and so she sent for me to help her. During that time her husband's brother, he came down there. So two sisters married brothers.

LV: Did you run into prejudice being married to a non-Native?

BH: No, we didn't. At home when we came back up here I didn't run into that. In Anchorage we ran into it a little bit and then when we went back East. My husband didn't notice it, but I did. Cause that's his people. He just mingled right in. But I was always left out. So I said, that's fine. I just let him enjoy himself. He comes from a big family, ten kids. But my husband was accepted right into our family with no problems. My grandma met him on the bridge and just grabbed his hands and started dancing with him on the bridge. I will always remember that.

LV: How is Karluk different today?

BH: There is a lot of difference. Back then I think there was more respect for the elders. And they had more respect for themselves too. Now it's just too much alcohol down there. And

too much free, free, free. Before you had to work for your living. They were paid like two cents a fish and my dad, he used to fish. He brought in like eight hundred dollars for the whole season and we lived on that for the whole winter. And we lived off the land. We'd go hunting ptarmigan and ducks and go fishing. Spear fishing under the ice. Cut a hole in the ice and get the fish. Sometimes we'd get pretty lucky and get some fish in there. Most of the time it was flounder. And we lived off of that. We put up a lot of fish. We salted fish, we smoked fish, we dried fish. And we ate like that. My dad would buy bulk stuff and store that for the winter.

LV: Do you remember alcohol being a problem when you were young ?

BH: Not till I got to be ten or eleven. The planes started flying to the villages delivering the mail once a week instead of coming by the boat. Before, we had mail once a month on the Shuyak. It was run by Bob Schiele. He ran the Shuyak and got the mail. It was a good time for us because we got groceries and fresh fruit, apples and oranges. I think I was eight years old when I flew. I was on the very first plane that left Kariuk and we almost hit the mountain. I was on my way into Kodiak to have my tonsils removed. We didn't have doctors. Hygiene used to come around. The doctors they'd come down there on the boat and we'd all go out there and the doctors would give you a complete physical. They'd pull teeth and check your ears and eyes and X-rays and everything. One time I went out there and I came home and told my grandma that everything was fine. Then, I don't know how the rumor started that I had TB. Right now, my grandma heard that and she put me to bed. I said "But I'm fine.

I'm not sick." That was the thing. Putting you to bed. I had to stay in bed for about two days till my dad found out that there was nothing wrong. Just some kid decided to start a rumor that I was sick and I had to go to bed. That was the worst thing they could do was to put me to bed. The only one, I remember my grandma made a feather bed, from the ducks. We had one big one and I liked that one. That was the best bed. Wintertime. Summertime was too hot. I used to get on the end of the bed and fall right back down and the bed would come right over me. And a blanket on top. And she always had a habit of changing the rooms around. One year we'd have the back bedroom be a bedroom and the next year she'd have it into a kitchen. She switched them around all the time. She loved to do that. Switch the rooms around. The back bedroom became the kitchen and the kitchen became the back bedroom. Not so much the down the hill house though. She never changed that around. Just up the hill.

LV: What have you noticed in the difference between the values of when you grew up and what you see now?

BH: A lot of people when we were growing up, the church was the center. And people don't go to church that often anymore. Only on like Easter and Christmas, do you see them in the church. On Saturdays, my grandma used to say was the most holy and then on Sunday mornings we used to go to church. You don't see very many people doing that anymore. As a child, growing up, there was maybe one or two people that wouldn't be in church at all. And at Easter, I used to love that time of the year because during Lent time everything in the church was always dark, just

dark. And when we would go around the church and sing Easter songs like Christ is Risen and we'd come back and the church was all lit up. It was just bright and beautiful and we'd sing happy songs. I didn't understand them, but they were happy. They had a more lively tune to them and it wasn't sad like during Lent. That was the best time of the year. And people were all dressed up in light colors. But, now I don't know. Half the time they don't even go anymore. And when they do go like on Good Fridays, they've already started to drink after staying sober all those seven whole weeks and they don't care. It seems like they're just drifting away from church and tradition and the Lord.

LV: How else does alcohol affect their lives?

BH: They're neglecting their children. And passing it on to their children. The children already are drinking at a younger age than when we were growing up. It's sad. I never saw any kids drinking. We might have tried to smoke. That was the big thing. But we always got caught cause we never realized for a long time. How could they know we were smoking? We didn't realize the smoke was going up and they could see.

LV: What do you think caused this change toward alcoholism?

BH: They got too much free stuff from the government. Before they had to go get what they wanted. In order to eat, they'd either have to grow it or go hunt for it. Now it's just they wait for it in the mall. It's free. They don't have to work. Why bother working when it's free. I think the government should change that. Now they have white man's medicine, the booze. They don't make their own alcohol anymore. There's very few of

them that make their own brew. They just buy it and they charter Kodiak planes to bring it back to the village. I think the government should stop the free welfare and the free this and that.

LV: How do you see the influence of the church having changed over the years?

BH: The parents aren't as strict as they were. They made us go to church whether we liked it or not. Nowadays, the kids rule the house and the parents are afraid of the children. They need somebody that they're afraid of and can take authority over them. Like a chief. Somebody that they look up to and respect.

LV: What advantages do you have living in Kodiak versus living in Karluk?

BH: We don't have to walk. I can get in my car. Down there we had to walk. But now they have the four-wheelers. When I was growing up we didn't have those. If you wanted to go from one place to another you used a skiff. You rowed or even we ored. And here in Kodiak, we just turn the lights on.

LV: What advantages did the village have that you miss here in Kodiak?

BH: I miss the closeness of family being together. I remember when I was growing up when a child had a birthday the whole village came down. We cleaned the whole house up and had perok (fish pie). We never understood it but the person who had the birthday was always the last one to sit at the table. They always made the adults, the elders, sit first and then went down the line. My grandma always celebrated my birthday each year. The whole village would always come. You don't see that anymore

because they're always competing with each other. I got this, I got that. It's better than yours. If it's not better than yours they try to go out and get even better. They don't help one another. When someone was sick or something down there they used to go down and help them. They'd clean your house, watch the kids and cook for them and clean up the place. And they always stayed there at the house when the person was sick and gave them a lot of support.

LV: You mentioned that you liked the closeness of village life. What did they do to encourage that closeness or how did they get together?

BH: As kids we used to play Kick the Can. That was our favorite pastime. The whole village would get together and it didn't matter how old you were. From the little kids up to the big kids. In the evenings or late afternoons the kids would play. It was always centered right around the school. The school sat right in the middle of the village. The houses were around the school. We played and the parents watched as we played there. And they kept an eye on their little kids and the big kids too. They kicked it and you had to bring it back. And then somebody would call out. If you'd catch them all then it was the first person that you caught to have a turn to get the can. A lot of times you were at it a long time, cause there's a lot of kids playing and you'd be going around the building and some kids would come from the other end and there goes the can. And you'd have to go back and get it again and start all over. We enjoyed that. Being together and laughing and having fun. And

if we didn't play that they had movies down there and we got together on those. And we'd watch one movie maybe three or four times. Then we'd go outside and act out the movies, play cowboys and Indians. In winter time families would go up the river and they'd go ice skating and in the evening build a bonfire and sing around the bonfire. It was always together. And we don't do that no more. One goes here, one goes there and we don't just do it as a family.

LV: Would you ever go back to the village?

BH: I'd like to. Since I became a Christian I would like to go back and help those young kids to know the Lord. I don't think they even know who the Lord is. They go to church but they're just going, because that's what they were taught. They don't know anything else. When I was growing up we had a missionary in the village and she used to preach the Word. We'd go to this church and yet she's preaching something else. I used to kind of wonder about it, so I was exposed to it at an early age and they don't have anything like that. They need someone to let them know that there is a God up there and they don't have to live the life they're living.

LV: How do think it would affect their lives?

BH: They would try to better themselves and go and say we don't need a handout from the government and just do it for themselves. Rather than depending on "Why should we work when it's free?"

LV: How many kids do you have?

BH: I have five.

LV: What did you notice about the difference between their schooling and your schooling?

BH: They had a lot of homework. It was like the teachers were more with the parents, working with the parents, rather than how I was brought up. It was just with the kids. Didn't associate with the parents. Here they had the PTAs and everything. The teachers were always calling to let me know how the kids were doing and associating with us rather than us just sending the kids to school. And every so often we had to go up to find out how they were doing and how they're progressing in school. That was not like that at home. We brought home the report card and that was it. And they got into that modern math. I just said, "I'm sorry. You're just gonna have to ask your teacher to help you with that. I don't understand it." I still don't understand it. It didn't make sense to me. A lot of times I said "Why are they teaching you all of this stuff? All you need to know how to do is read, write and arithmetic." But they got into everything else.

LV: Do your children have an interest in their Native background?

BH: Yes, they want to know about their family. And when they're going to get their land. We keep waiting for that too, though. Land that the government was supposed to give us and never did. I don't think they ever will. One way or another the government's going to get it back anyways.

LV: They don't give you the land, but they give you the things that...

BH: Yes. And they take away a lot of things too. The religion, the faith.

LV: What other aspects of the Native culture to you regret seeing disappear?

BH: Our Native language. That's disappearing completely. I was brought up with Aleut-Russian, but I just never did pick it up. I understand it. I can listen to other people talking, but I can't speak it. I was five when I went to my grandma's and I spoke English. I was never encouraged to learn it I guess. Because when we went to school it was all English.

LV: Do you think raising a family is more difficult now?

BH: Yes, there is just too much. We didn't have TVs. We had radios. We listened to the radios. And we always had something to do. We never sat around idle. We always had to pack wood, pack water or get ready for winter. Always doing something.

LV: Are your parents still living?

BH: Just my mom. My dad passed away when I was fifteen. My dad's name was Nicanor Melcolie. My mom's name is Clyda Christensen. She got married again. My grandpa's name was Oscar Norell and my grandma's name was Daria. My dad's dad was Oowak. My grandma on my mom's side, she was full-blooded Aleut, Dad's dad was full-blooded and my grandma Katie was too. She outlived five husbands. They figured she was close to a hundred when she died. They didn't know how old she was. She came over from the mainland somewhere. She remembered the Russians being here in Kodiak and everything. How they took the women as slaves and made them wash their things. She said that in Larsen Bay there's an island where the Aleuts used to fight with spears. I'd sure like to find that island.

LV: Overall do you have good memories of your childhood?

BH: By springtime our groceries and supplies would be pretty low. APA ran a store down there, Alaska Packers Association. And they'd bring skows down full with groceries and have all kinds of pop and all kinds of candy and gum. And they used to bring the food down and the canned foods. I don't remember how they got the meats down there if they brought them cold or frozen. It was so good when the men would accidentally drop a box and there'd be candy all over. All the kids would be just running there. Free candy. The storekeeper, he'd clean out the bins like the apples. And he'd throw some apples out. The kids would all be grabbing the apples. Cause he would give us good apples. He was a good storekeeper. Joe Brown was his name. Wonderful man. He was storekeeper for about twenty-five years. There's some bad times too, but you don't dwell on them. You dwell on the good times.

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