

Interview of: Gretchen Saupe a nurse in rural Alaska

Interviewed by: Mary James

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1957 I came to Alaska. I had graduated from the U. of Washington, I had happened to be in a classroom with a not so interesting instructor and I was taking some course to be a public health nurse. One class was rather dull and I was talking to a lady beside me and she was talking about that she was working on a masters degree and that she had been in Ak. It really peeked my interest and I uh, asked lots of questions and I started writing and of course I wanted some adventures. Some of my friends, they were teachers and they were going to go up and teach but when it came time to really go, no one showed up and I have this job. I had written away and found out about this job working in Eskimo villages with the Department of health service and it was actually a part of health research. I was a field nurse for them so I was not working for the state health department. The reason they had a team of nurses working in the villages is because of tuberculosis was so rampant and they did not have hospital space for all the people that need the.. that they were trying to follow, that they were trying to case follow to treat and hopefully minimize the amount of people that tested positive and were infectious to others and needed to hospitalize. So I was on a team of nurses. I was sent to Bethel Alaska and coming from Seattle where I was raised and graduated from the University of Washington, I flew in one of those.. they didn't have jets in those days, one of those Constellations. I flew in and thought Anchorage looked pretty small to me.. In 1957 yea know. Then spent a little time there at the Native services Hospital and learned about the types of things that were happening there... in Eskimo villages. Then I got on a plane that was even smaller and I went to Bethel Ak. which had an airport on one side of the

river then you got out of the plane and got into a boat...this skiff. I think I was kinda dressed up that day and you came across this river and got into this old truck that tootled you on to the hospital. But from there of course, I would then even go to smaller villages.

*Were you scared or*

Well, at the time I was thinking what in the world did I do! But I knew I wanted an adventure but I thought Oh my goodness!

*This was pushing it?!*

But I thought I made this commitment, I better do it and then going to the villages and you would be dropped off and be the only Caucasian person in this village. In those years not many of them spoke English so I thought my goodness, what did I do! I did stay with school teachers in many of my villages, many of my villages had school teachers, I would either stay with the school teacher or the ah Eskimo family that ran the store.

*Wow!*

They would have an extra bed or a corner or I took my sleeping bag, and in one village I rolled it out on this little store counter and sleep there, I'd sleep wherever. And of course it wouldn't be the things we would be used to like running water. Coming from the other way then, Bethel looked pretty big. Then when you went to Anchorage it looked Really big. By the time I went back to Seattle, boy of course that looked really big. As I did say I came up to Alaska for TB nursing. It was very rampant in those years. People were dying. We had the medicine iadizen (unsure of spelling) to treat those people that had the germ in their body. So Arctic health had this study going that had been going I think in Puerto Rico, they were really trying to control tuberculosis. So what we did was try and go into the villages and TB test everybody to find out who actually had an infection and they would also be followed-up by x-ray teams that would come out several times a year, to villages to try and x-ray everyone and it

was our job to see that people were taking their medication, and following them. If the x-ray showed that they had a more serious case, they follow these sputums, you know you'd have to teach them, you'd have to give them this little can and teach them how to cough up this sputum. This sputum would then be checked for TB germs. Now if you had that present in the sputum, then why you'd know that that person would be infectious, and the others too that were in the house.

*oh.*

You know in the banyas or small places they would congregate, in tight areas ... so it was important that we try and separate those people from the villages. It would be very hard sometimes, you'd have to go and tell a young mother that she'd have to go to the TB center or perhaps the father would have to leave the village and uh know, go on the airplane to Bethel and from Bethel go onto to a tuberculosis clinic.

*I bet that was hard.*

At that time they sent them to Ferlands, which is outside of Seattle. And I think Mt. Edgecome has a hospital and there was some space in Anchorage... and I believe a hospital outside of Portland. And you could see the adjustment it would be for those people to have to go or you would have to take their child or the young people ... I think in my experience way back then, the young people had the hardest time, they would go out and be in a hospital for 6 months, a year whatever until they were deemed ... treated. Then they would come back to their villages and everything would seem so foreign to them and it would be a very hard adjustment they were used to life out in the cold tundra now they had been around hospital with T.V.'s and cars radios and all those things and all of a sudden to be plucked back and I think others wouldn't quite understand the experiences they had had so I think it was a very difficult thing. I always felt very bad if you had to go and tell some father that he had to go to a hospital and then you'd

worry... in the village though, people were very supportive so then others would help support the family but still it would be very hard.

*I bet.*

It would be really hard for a mother to leave her child or children to have to leave their mother...parents. So it was a hard time. Yes, we stamped out a lot of the TB but in the mean time there were a lot of other problems of course created. I think a lot of the young people had a very hard time of adjusting back after being out.

*So were you at risk of getting it? Is there anything you could do to prevent...*

Yes, as a nurse or any kind of medical work you're at risk of getting but you try and use good technique, I'd try and make sure people wouldn't cough in my face, wash my hands a lot and I would have TB tests every 6 weeks just to make sure, just to see. Interesting enough, I've never converted. A lot of people will have contact with the TB germ and become positive on their skin test, doesn't mean they have an active case. This is something people need to understand, you may be positive and when I do testing here at school now, I want children and adults to understand that even though the test is positive it doesn't mean they have an active case it just means they have come in contact with the germ and the body is setting up antibodies to fight that germ but generally for children what they do now is put them on isoniazid or a TB drug just to make sure and x-ray and that's kinda the name of the game... is to find it early and get it treated and then people are fine. It's a little frightening now because we are getting some strains now that are very resistant to the drugs that we have. I think a lot of what we have is because of noncompliance, people haven't taken their drugs as regularly as they should. Unfortunately we now have some strains that are tough to kill. So, we thought we had it pretty stamped out there in the 60's and well controlled. Now it has raised

it's ugly head. With so many people that have immune problems with Aids... people are prone to get TB too. But in those years I lived in Bethel, outside of the hospital working right closely with the Doctors in the hospital. I would go out and test all the people and make sure they were taking their TB medication. At the time I was there, we were doing and iadizen study. What they were doing was that they were putting the whole village a profalasis (unsure of spelling) of the drug... so the whole family would have the drug to take and the purpose of that was to keep them from breaking down with tuberculosis. This program proved to be quite successful and they are using that research that they did... they're using it now. So now when children convert to positive they give them medicine now. So it was kinda an important time. We were glad we could control it and treat people before they got to a point that they didn't need to be hospitalized... and those that were active cases, we tried to get out of the villages right away and into treatment so that it would stop the spread but almost everyone in those villages tested positive in those days because there was so much exposure.....Lets see, I lived in a little quonset hut outside the Bethel hospital, they had a little quonset hut, I thought it was a neat little place. Bethel is very flat tundra if you've ever been there.

*No, I haven't.*

Very flat lots of winding rivers, it's right there on the Kuskokwim River. And my area was the lower Yukon River. So I flew by the old Norsten plane, the old Norsten plane which of course is now in the museum. It was this very slow moving plane, and would fly up to the Yukon River and my area was mostly the Yukon river. I had villages such as Elukanuk, Queduk, Monuk, (unsure of spelling) and....

(We were shortly interrupted by a student that needed an ice pack for a hurt knee.)

So I had the villages on the lower Yukon and I would try and visit my villages every three months. I would follow families making sure they were taking their pills. While I was there I would also do things, I worked closely with the Health Department and Public Health nurses so I would immunize kids too. We'd always have our little clinics, open clinics so people would always come and see us with all other aches and pains not just TB so there was always things to be dealt with. You were always pretty busy when you were in the villages....

*Delivering babies or anything like that?*

Well actually, I never had to do that. Interestingly enough their would be.. like one father in the village that wouldn't want to wake me up so they would have me come in the morning and check out the baby, weigh the baby and put little drops in the babies eyes. It was.. they were just like that. They just had babies, it was just a very natural thing. That's the way it was. As I said, I tried to go the each village about every 3 months and follow people as closely as I could especially with tuberculosis. Later on there was an eye disease called plektenular\_\_\_\_itis and don't ask me how to spell that PKC they called it and they were doing the research on it, the researchers were thinking that it had something to do with tuberculosis in other words, you would get eye infections and when the eye infections would heal you would have like a scaring on the cornea and of course would interfere with your vision. It would be like looking through a foggy window. You know your cornea covers your eye and your pupil there and you'd get these spots. So we'd kinda examine everybody' eyes. We were trying to teach or train everyone to go to the health aide. Each village had a little health aide, perhaps a little Eskimo women that was very good at that maybe was the midwife or whatever and they had a certain amount of medication that the hospital would give to these people so if would teach mothers if their kids' eyes were infected or red or anything to go right and

get it treated. The treatment would keep it from getting cloudy so you would not see these scars. You would see older people, a lot of them would have these scars on their cornea so we were trying to prevent that problem too. So there was a variety of things, while you were there you were trying to do a little teaching... on nutrition, preventative... covering your cough things of that nature. These people were Yupit Eskimos that I primarily worked with.

*Did you do anything with the school, go into the schools?*

Yes, I'd do lots of little things of course the TB testing and shots. I'd use the school for a clinic. Now they were not as nice as the schools now. Since statehood now they have gotten much, much better. Some of the schools were pretty primitive, the old BIA schools. I shouldn't say primitive they were not as nice as they are now... and I would use that facility, whatever facility I could as a clinic, I'd set up a clinic anyweres I could. Sometimes in the summertime I'd have to go out by boat to fish camps. They would all go out on rivers, I would hire a villager to take me. I'd have to pack my stuff, my gear and we'd go up and down and find all these different families because in the summers they would get their fish so they could get enough for their own subsistence... to eat and then also to sell it to the canneries. There would be several canneries in that area or salturies. There were some canneries but they also had like Sheldons Point had a saltry which was kinda dug into the tundra or they'd store it in huge barrels, they'd take this wonderful king salmon... because Sheldons Point is right at the mouth of the Yukon river and the king salmon so huge and fat as they would come in and people would catch those fish and they would salt them and sell them to the market in New York and also they would go and sell the fish to the canneries and in exchange they would have credit there to buy some of their staples, they lived off of the land...subsisted but they also could buy dried milk and flour, sugar, things

of that nature. They kinda worked for the cannery and fished also for themselves.

*Wow.*

Then I would also travel by dog sled in the winter because some of the families live away from town. Most of the villages had people clustered around but some of the families lived aways out... or if I connected up with some villages, I would take a dog sled from one village to the next... and that was before the Ididarod, dog sleds were quite a common thing. That was their way of getting around. They were just starting to have a few snow machines around in those days, they weren't as sophisticated as they are now and often times would break down or run out of gas. The dog sleds would always go. If it was a storm dogs could always get you home. your lead dog would know how to home so it was probably a little safer. You do read about machines getting lost now, well if it had been 30 or 40 years ago those dogs would have got um right through that blizzard and right home.

*Or you could have cuddled up with one and kept ya warm!*

Right, right. So what else here...

*Did you have a boss or something or how did?*

Oh, we had a chief nurse, she was in Anchorage. Well, That's about it.

*This is Mary James interviewing Gretchen Saupe, April 3, 1995.*

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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