

Helena Schwiete

on

Growing up in Candle

Gold mining on the Seward Peninsula

Gathering foods

Bird Hunting and

Building a home in Chiniak

**An interview conducted by Judy Phillips in March, 1995
for the Kodiak Oral History Project**

Kodiak Oral History Project: Helena Schwiete

Helena is known to friends and neighbors as an authority on almost any subject pertaining to subsistence living in the 90's. From child raising to sheet rocking, clam digging to tanning hides, Helena has willingly shared her expertise. She and her husband Jack have supplied many a family through the winter from their potato gardens. Helena's prowess as a veteran berry harvester and keen sense for how to use them has been an inspiration to us all.

"I was born in Candle, Alaska, a mining town on the Kiwalik River, on the North side of the Seward Peninsula about 225 miles North of Nome; 10 miles inland from the Kotzebue Sound. Candle was a gold rush town at the turn of the century and that's all it ever was was a gold mining town until WW II broke out and then everybody left either to work for the government or war effort or going to the service. After the war was over, finally it was renewed and people still mine there but they were only there during the summer during the mining time.

I was born Jan 9, 1928. My Eskimo name was Emook, my English name is Helena. My mother was Enongalook, born in 1902 at Safety which is a little Southeast of Nome, and my father was Curt Evern, born in Germany, emigrated to this country via South America. No other of his relatives ever came to this country. My grandmother was Awienwenuk

and my grandfather was Fred Tippleman, also an immigrant from Germany. Other than my grandmother's children, she had no other living relatives and no one of my grandfather's parents came to this country. In fact, my grandfather, I never knew him to speak a word of German after he came to this country. My grandmother had three children, Grace who was 18 years older than my mother, and Jack Tippleman who was 10 years older than my mother, who was born long before my grandfather ever came to this country. His (Jack Tippleman's) Eskimo name was Ungeek. I don't know what Grace's Eskimo name was but she was dead long before I was born. She had four children that, if I remember right, her husband had a Spanish last name.

My grandmother died when I was four and a half a half years old but I remember her very well. My grandfather and her owned a roadhouse on the Kiwalik Spit. He also ran a lightering service from the freighter ships to the beach and from the beach up the river to Candle which was 10 miles up the river, the Kiwalik River. My grandmother was a go-getter. She did all the subsistence- type stuff like hunting and fishing, gathering the wild berries and greens and all that and tanning her own hides and sewing, besides cooking for anybody that came over and the crews that worked for my grandfather. They had a one room area for cooking and dining plus their bedrooms. The actual outbuildings were bigger than the house was for storage. Plus the fact that a lot of times

the river was frozen up, well all of the time, it was frozen up by the time the last freighter came in and all freight had to be hauled by dog sled. My grandfather had quite a few dogs for which he had a big barn like most of the farmers have these days except it was not for horses or equipment, it was for dogs and their feed. Which my grandmother put a lot of it up. He had a tugboat which he used to pull the barges. He called it the Flat Iron and that's exactly what it looked like, a flat iron. He had ocean barges that were about three times as big as the river barges were. They drew a lot more water than the river barges did too.

My grandmother was known to everybody as Queen and that is the name she went by because most of the people that lived in the area were white people and they called her Queen. That's the name she was buried under. She died in 1932. My grandfather, after she died, gave up the roadhouse and the lightering service to another family and went into working as a store manager for Boris Magidits Company. Then when their store burned down he went gold mining and that's what he did until he ended up having a stroke. He died in 1939, October of 1939.

My mother didn't grow up as a female native. She grew up as a helper to her father with the freight and the dog teams and the river, etc.. She married my father in 1923. My oldest brother was born in December of 1925. I was born in January of 28. My next brother was born in Sept. of 29, next brother was born in 1930. My twin sisters were born in 1934. My

youngest sister was born in 1936. There were 7 of us. My oldest brother died in a fire-caused accident. He wasn't burned, but died of asphyxiation in December of 1941-- the year the war broke out . My younger brother was killed by crashing jet in Anchorage in 1954. My second brother died from natural causes when he was 60 years old. That leaves just my three sisters and myself living now.

My father was born in 1892. When he was 18 yrs. old he left Germany, dodging the draft, and went to Chile and worked there as a cowboy. He came to Alaska in 1904 which was the first time he saw my mother who was born in 1902 ...and then he went back to San Francisco. He was there during the earthquake and then he came back to Alaska. He never left again until he moved the family to Puyalup in 1951. My father had a gold mine on Quartz Creek which is about 40 miles South southeast of Candle. About half way there we had our winter camp. I don't know when this was established, this gold mine, but he had a partner Frank Warsing, who we called Uncle Frank. We called his wife Aunt Warsing. In the winter time we lived in this camp half way between Candle and the mine . The mine was on barren ground but this winter camp we had was in spruce trees and there were two reasons for it: it was cheaper to live there because we could get our fuel and also they cut the fuel during the winter for the mining camp for the summer. Then we'd go out to the mine in May before the snow was gone and stay there then until it started to

freeze up. In them days we were traveling with a dog team. Well eventually, as time went by in later years, we stayed in town during the winter. I know we must have been in town at some time because I remember very distinctly , visiting my grandmother. I don't know whether dad had this mine before my grandmother died because I remember being at their place quite frequently.

My father came this to this country and he went to Skagway. He portaged stuff up over the Chilkoot Pass for people, then went on to Fairbanks and worked there as a caribou hunter selling meat to the miners. He looked for a claim, but never found one. Then he went to Nome where he first met my mother who was only 2 years old at the time! And went back, didn't get rich in Nome either. He must have done some prospecting. All this is vague to me because in later years he did talk about his life but not in the earlier years and by the time I was ready to listen I guess he wasn't there. But when he came back from San Francisco in 1906, he came to Candle which was already a pretty well established mining area because the hospital, which wasn't built immediately when the town was set up, it was built around 1905 or maybe a little before. But the picture I saw recently said it was taken in 1905. It is one of the few buildings left in Candle now after the fire swept through here about 10 years, 15 years ago.

After my older brother and I started school, (which we were

only a year apart even though he was 2 yrs older than I was) my father and his partner bought a Catapillar tractor . After that he got rid of the dogs and we traveled by tractor with a horse sled behind it pulling freight for the mine. The family didn't have to go then because we went overland. All we had to do is keep the tractor on the other side of the river (cause that's the side you had to go out on), and other than them going and hauling the wood to the mine in the winter time with the tractor, the family didn't leave town till the end of April or 1st of May. I always left school at least a month early and always got in about 2 weeks late so I never had a full year's school until I was 9 or 10 years old.

The year my mother was pregnant with the twins in 1934 my brother and I were the only ones who went with my father and if I remember right, there was Johnny and Burt working for them that summer. But the next summer it was just my brother and I and Uncle Frank Warsing and Dad working the mine. They just weren't getting enough out of it to hire anybody so my brother helped my dad with the loading and unloading of the pipes and I ran the Cat moving the pipe. It was pretty hard because I was a big kid for my age but, they're built for grown people and I just sat on the edge of the seat to reach the pedals and the gear shifts. We got through that summer and the next spring when they were getting the wood cut and out to the mine about a quarter of a mile out of town the engine blew up on the Cat and that ended that. I don't remember exactly what

was done that summer but next spring they had a D6 come in but I think they never took it out. Some of these years are vague to me. Anyway, then my father went to work for Arctic Circle Exploration, which was a big mining company there in Candle and that's where he worked until he went to work for the FAA in 1941, just a few months prior to the war breaking out. In February of '43 I went to Fairbanks and I stayed there until May. I went back to Candle for the summer then went back to Fairbanks in August and I stayed there all winter again. In June I went home to spend a little time and when I got there I found that my family was moving out. They were going to Nome for the summer and they told me to meet them in Homer in the fall. So in August of 44 they moved to Homer and they lived there until their house burned down in 1951 when they moved to Pualyap. I stayed in Homer as I was married and had a family.

As far back as I can remember we've always lived more or less a subsistence lifestyle, as what the country had to offer. It was all summer long picking berries, from the time the berries were mature, not necessarily ripe, we'd start making jam and jelly all day long, pick berries, put them away in butter barrels, which were oak barrels our butter came in, and store them in perma frost shafts in the ground. Also in the spring was picking greens, fireweed, wild rhubarb, wild onions, just everything that was edible. In the fall going and robbing mouse nests for the "masu" which is a root, what they call Eskimo potato these days .

Hunting ducks in the spring until they started nesting and then rob the nests a few times and then leave them alone until the young flew then start hunting again. Same with the ptarmigans and rabbits. My mother had a reindeer herd and every year she'd have 15 to 20 head butchered for her. And some years after the kids got a little older and I could take care of them, she'd go and work the reindeer camp to help defray her expenses for the butchering. And a couple of times when the camp was close to town I'd go out there on Saturday and Sunday and punch hides off the deer just for the fun of it.

The years my father worked for the Arctic Circle Exploration Company, in the first year he worked in town on a dredge and after that they gave him the foreman job in a mining camp 6 miles up the road. We either camped at the mining camp in a tent or in one of the upper camps that had a house on it. It was about 6 miles from town. Not having a very good stove for baking, I would walk to town in the morning and bake bread and catch the truck out in the next morning with the bread. It was just too hard to make bread in the stove when the oven was no good! (chuckle) I started baking bread when I was 12 years old, and that was 32 loaves at a time. My father walked to and from work by the ditch line which was shorter than the road. He always picked berries on his way home every night, blueberries, which grow profusely along the ditch line. I don't ever remember ever picking berries without a baby on my back after my twin

sisters were born, for at least 4, 5 years, probably.

In Homer we did both an agricultural as well as a subsistence type of living. We had chickens and ducks and gardens, strawberries and raspberries and cows and pigs. To say nothing of having to have a dog, which we always had when we lived up North, and a cat to keep the mice out of the grain shed. Then there was moose and fish and the clams. We survived mediocre years of finances .

Going back to my years in Candle, from the time I was 10 years old, the biggest problem was getting water. We could haul our water (ice) in the winter time with a dog team. In the summer it required packing. When I was 10 years old my dad bought me a yoke, fit to my shoulders, which was the Dutch type thing that they carried buckets of milk in except that I carried water in them. We had about 2/3 of a mile to carry our water from May till the oh probably the middle of September. You'd have to break the ice on the edge to get it in September.

Once the river froze it was the dog team every other morning. It was hitch up the dogs and load the sled with ice buckets and go get ice about a mile and a half up the river . I had three dogs and that's what I did every other morning was go get the half-a-ton of ice. Of course in the summertime it was pack, pack, pack all the time, especially wash day. Finally the mining company put a pipeline through town up into a ditch that they put up on the hillside above our house. They put faucets in that

you could connect a hose to all along the pipeline. That was a godsend to me.

My brothers did not pack much water. Eskimo men did not do menial labor! They were hunters, except that none of my brothers hunted! My older brother didn't like to hunt and the others were younger. So, I was the hunter. Hunting in the spring for the ducks, in the fall, and all winter hunting for the ptarmigans. There was no big game. Rabbits. I never did get a rabbit that I remember, but I did kill a lot of ptarmigans and a lot of ducks. My girlfriend and I, she was a little bitty thing. I don't think she stood over 5 foot tall, probably soaking wet weighed a hundred pounds, but she always hunted with a double barreled 12 gauge shot gun. I hunted with a .22 so we'd go hunting, we'd come up on a flock of ptarmigans and I'd pick off as many of them as I could with my .22 and then she'd let fly with the shot gun. One day she got excited and she pulled both triggers at the same time and that just layed her flat on the ground!

I had a shotgun and I thought well, I 'm going to take my shot gun duck hunting. So, I took it and I didn't get a thing that trip. I shot at one teal duck in a pond about 12 by 12 nine times and I never hit him once. The shot just went all around him. and that was the last time I ever took a shotgun hunting!

I moved my family to Kodiak in 1963 because there was more work here than there was in Homer. I worked as a cook in the restaurants

and as a clerk in the grocery stores also as a seamstress, laundress and store clerk. After the tidal wave I ran a cleaning establishment where I shipped stuff to Homer to be cleaned and then distributed.

In 1964 I married my present husband and we bought this place in Chiniak from the state under the mental health plan. We started a cabin out here with scrounged lumber. It didn't snow the rest of the winter. We had the frame work up for a 16X24 story-and-a half cabin, then we decided to build a stone fireplace. By the time we got the foundation done, we decided it would not give us much heat on the outside of the north side of the house, so we had to step up 18 inches because of the steepness of the hill, and added a 10X12 room behind, which served as a half-bath till our addition in 1990. This was all done in the evenings and weekends.

In 1968 the construction from the tidal wave fell off and my husband was unemployed and I couldn't make ends meet with cannery salaries and the children were all gone from home . One was out in the states with my husband's mother going to school, another one had gotten married, and my oldest son had gone off by himself with some other bachelors to camp out in a house by themselves, and my youngest son had gone back to Homer to finish school.

Jack and I moved out here in December 1st, 1968. The wind was blowing 60 miles an hour and the thermometer was 0 degrees! The house had sheathing on the outside, we had gotten the roof on that fall. It

was a 16 by 24 building. There were no windows, the doors were in. We put double visquene on the windows and stuffed the walls with newspapers and put cardboard boxes for wall boards over them. Until we got that done it was very cold in here. If we could keep it up to 45 degrees...we'd built a stone fireplace which had took up the better part of one summer when we were working on it then a wood stove and an oil stove. Then we had catalytic heater, gas camp stove, gas lanterns, kerosene lanterns, anything we could get to burn and put heat in here until we got the newspapers and stuff on the walls. While I was working inside he was working outside tacking building paper on the outside of the walls and by the time we got all this done, every time we went by the dump we checked to see if there were any old carpets in there and we had double carpets on the walls. We had some 1/4 inch plywood. Actually, not too long after we came out here he did get a job for a couple of weeks. I put down 2 layers of 15 lb. tar paper and the plywood. We had put down on the floor what rugs we had and some of them even run up the walls because we never passed the dump without looking if there was something in there. The Navy was pretty good at throwing stuff away. So by Christmas with just the stoves and the fireplace we could keep it up to 65 degrees in here and we were comfortable but the kids came out for Christmas and they thought the place was terribly cold! Of course they were used to 72 degrees and that does make a lot of difference. One thing,

during that time we never had to worry about what we ate because the cold burned it all up!

The years we lived in town we made good money but it was impossible to save any money. Of course we had bought this property and well as another piece of property in town that we were paying on time so that ate some of our money up plus other things and you can't live in town and not spend money every time you turn around, it's impossible! I had never lived in town and I wanted a garden and there was no place in the place we rented to fit a garden and I couldn't afford another debt to build a house on the lot we'd bought in town so we decided to move out here. Well, the clams are close by, the fish are close by, I had plenty of room to build (not really plenty, as the trees were pretty dense) but there was a chance to have at least a small garden on this place. In the summer we also were working on making gardens as well as the other subsistence work. In December of 1969 I filed a native allotment claim across the road from where the Post Office is right now where I had potato patches and rhubarb patches and berry patches as there were very few small trees over there. We just kept the small garden that we have on this place. We have three acres here but we can't get to better than half of it because of a deep canyon. But there is also a creek running through that canyon which gives us water, we can't drink it but it gives us water for other things. I keep my vegetable garden in the yard here because it has to be

tended. And between the deer and the gardens, the clams and the fish we have managed to save a little money in these later years in our life to where we're not suffering too bad in our retirement....well, actually we're not suffering at all (chuckle) unless prices keep going up like they have been, especially health insurance. It might get a little tough again.

So anyway as the jobs came up and we had money we eventually put in windows. The first year we bought insulation, took the cardboard down and took the newspaper out, put in insulation, put the cardboard back. It was 5 years before we could afford the sheet rock for the house and the windows but eventually everything got in here. We had no bathroom until 4 years ago but we had a banya. We had a cesspool with a bucket, it was kind of precarious in the wintertime to get down there and empty it but it was better than an outhouse. I still don't have running water the year round. I have running water in the summer we put a surface line down to the creek to pump water up during the summer, as soon as it quits freezing too hard we put it up and when it starts freezing in the fall we shut it off. But hopefully this year we'll have the basement done under the new section of the house that we built 4 years ago, to be able to put a stairway in and a bathroom in. Before that we just had a attic type stairway that we use to get upstairs to our half-story bedrooms. We have a 900 gallon cistern that should take care of us during the winter if it continues to rain during the winter.....like it has always

rained in the last few years. So it's bucketing water from freeze up through thaw as far as the bathroom is concerned not having a shower and stuff but it's better than having to go out and build a fire in the banya.

When we first moved out here wood was very easy to come by but when the oil embargo went on everybody converted to wood stoves and now you can hardly find a stick of wood on the beach. We've been burning spruce, cutting down trees over on that native allotment claim for wood or any windfall trees that we could find. A lot of the lumber that we built this house with was scrounged lumber from old military buildings, construction jobs that my husband was working on, packing crates. We also bought a chain saw mill and cut a lot of the lumber from some of these trees and the waste went to firewood. Most of the time for the first 10 years we lived out here you could go down to the beach and find almost anything you needed. Like if I needed planters I could always find plastic containers to make planters out of. When we were putting in our foundation for our generator in the generator building we needed some 6X6 material to mount it on to put into the concrete base that we'd put in, so we just went down to the beach, we found a 6X6 piece of mahogany. It was perfectly fine for that. But now it's just not that way anymore. All you find is trash. I feel for people that have to scrounge to live. I've never drawn a cent of welfare in my life no matter how poor I've been and I but I have a feeling that's the only way people can survive anymore and I feel

for them. When I first came to Kodiak I had no furniture. I bought beds, that was necessary. But for dressers and other things it was just strictly wood boxes. Well, there isn't even a wood box around anymore. I scrounged as many kerosene and wooden gas boxes for shelves and dressers until I could afford to buy dressers. I still have them and I still use them. Whiskey boxes, anything I could get that I could make a shelf out of or a cupboard out of and I still use them because to me they're handier even than any custom made furniture is. But you can't hardly get a cardboard box anymore. Everything is wrapped in plastic anymore. So, like I said, I feel for people because there's no way, unless they have a little money to buy something at the Goodwill store, the Salvation Army, the Baptist Mission or something like that, where I bought my clothes for a long time, until I learned to sew, that there is just no way out for them, except welfare.

In 1976 we started a 32X36 two-story house on my native allotment claim. Over the years as we acquired lumber, time and money, we got the exterior finished with a lot of help from friends and neighbors. To live a subsistence type living when the time is right you have to do it no matter how you feel, how tired you are, or how much you would rather be doing something else."

END OF INTERVIEW/ JP

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