

Morris Tells of Life In Arctic in 1920's

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Retired fur trapper and trader, Oliver Morris, was the guest speaker at the monthly meeting of the Tanana Historical Society meeting last week.

Morris and his wife, who now make their home in the Fairbanks vicinity, went to Teller in 1920. After two years they decided to go to Herschel Island in the Coronation Gulf in the Eastern Arctic region of Canada to set up trap lines there. Mr. and Mrs. Morris traveled in a 12-ton schooner to their destination.

"The first winter was a tough one," Oliver said. "We had taken only one bag of coal with us expecting we would find lots of driftwood to burn. There was very little driftwood, so we burned blubber, animal bones, anything we could get our hands on to keep warm."

When summer came Morris bought coal from the Hudson Bay manager on board the "Baychino," later called the "Ghost Ship of the Arctic." The coal was \$500 a ton, Morris bought just a few bags.

In the 1920's white fox was worth about \$70 a skin. Mrs. Morris did the trading with the Eskimos while her husband ran

the trap line. The Eskimos were known as the "long haired people." The men and women had long black hair worn waist length. Their parkas were designed like swallow-tailed coats.

During the winter Morris trapped white fox on the island. He kept 24 dogs and used large teams when traveling his trap line which took two days to cover. Morris told how he would make a snow house when traveling between his main camp and the trap line outposts.

"After a lot of practice it took me about 45 minutes to make a snow house out of chunks of ice," Morris said. He always carried a 14-inch snow knife with him to do the job. "A newly made snow house is very warm. We cut an airhole in the roof to get oxygen."

In the summertime Morris shot seals and caught Arctic char fish for dog food. The caribou crossed Coronation Gulf to Victoria Land in the spring and back again in the fall. The herds numbered in the hundred thousands and even the millions, Morris said. Morris would spear seals through the ice in the winter.

After 10 years of hard work Mr. and Mrs. Morris moved to Pt. Barrow to start a trading post.

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Tape recorded by Tanana-Yukon Historical Society
from speech