

Stacey Carkhuff interviewing Polly Hyslop
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POLLY HYSLOP: My name is Polly Hyslop [Upper Tanana] Polly Hyslop Upper Tanana] Floyd Hyslop [Upper Tanana] Bertha Dimet [Upper Tanana] Elija Dimet [Upper Tanana] I'm just saying that my name is Polly Hyslop, and my mother's name is Polly Hyslop, and my father's name is Floyd Hyslop and my grandmother's name is Bertha Dimet and my grandfather's name is Elija Dimet. And this is on my grandmother's side. And I'm saying how are you, I'm fine, and that, lets see... A little bit more about me. I was born in the place called Fish Camp, located near, located near Northway, on July 25, 1956 which makes me 52 years old. Which makes me being born, I think, years after the highway...42..14 years after the highway was built. I, my birth, my mother was there, of course my mother was there, my grandmother, her mother, the preacher's wife, and another clan's sister-cousin. So I was one of the last of the home-births generation. Um, when I was growing up, I lived here. My mother is from here, and my father is from Michigan, but I don't know my father's family. So, my mother, I know my mother's family very well. I know all her brothers and all her sisters, and I don't know my grandfather's side of my mom's dad's side. I don't know him very well, I know he's from Kechemstock. But my, we call ourselves usually the Fish Camp Indians because I...There are two different communities here, although its been all conglomerated, conglomerated into one community called Northway which is the village located about five miles from the Fish Camp area. I now live about a mile from where I was born, off a place called Moose Creek which traditionally has been named [Zeetinee] and that name has lost it's meaning over the years, but I still I identify with the people from the Fish Camp area. My clan is called the [Nisu] clan we come from the Canada side. I know most of all my clan members, in this village and outside the village. The clan is passed on through the mother, and on my side of the clan there are three of us, three clans- [Nisu, Nultsi and Altsa Dinea] and I've learned through the years some of the rules about clanship and I really respect what the meaning of clan is for us. For us.

I came home in 1995- we left home when I was quite young because my father worked for the FAA. But I remembered like here, for the first eight years, we didn't have electricity, TV, running water, all the amenities of modern day life. But as children we had a lot of outdoors to play, I had three brothers and two sisters, and we had all the, all the space in the world to play. We had a creek that ran out through the front of our house- the house in front of our house and all the trees, all the sky, everything that a child should want to have. All the dirt- we didn't have much by way of toys, because you know everything that we got was, had to be ordered through the Sears catalog. For Christmas, the only time we really had, we really enjoyed toys, and we only had, like received like one doll every year, and it was at Christmas. And we didn't think for a second that we were deprived of anything.

I was the generation group with books, I was the first generation to graduate from high school, and actually in my family, on both sides, well, I actually can't speak for my dad,

but my mom on her side, I am the first generation to graduate from college. And in a few months there's going to be another graduate in my family, my son. He graduates from college with a degree in business and in communications. My degree was in print journalism, and I've travelled. I lived in New York City for several years, but...so I've come home with a more worldly view and also I've read a lot of the history of my, of the people here I call my people. And I can see from listening to the elders, and about my life today, the major changes that came about because of the highway. I say because of the highway. I think having the highway carved through the Indian country here was the most major impact, one of the most major impacts. In fact, I would say still the most major impact on the life of the Native people. Before then there were flues brought in by the gold rush, there was epidemics that literally wiped out villages that I've read about, and I've heard about through my aunt, who's still alive today. Ellen Dimet, who came out of Healy Lake, and how her village was devastated by the flu right before the war. So it may have been an impact from scouts that came through, or well, it was actually during the war that she came through the highway, so everything was sort of like, evolved around the highway. And so, but as a child I remember my dad having a car, and having jobs. We were never- we never thought we were deprived of anything because we didn't really know life outside our village. We didn't have a television, we couldn't compare ourselves.

We had a Sunday school bus that came and picked us up every Sunday and took us to church. We had a Pentecostal church and we children went to church. Actually, I went to church. My brothers went to church, took the church bus but they didn't go to church. I'm tattling on them now. And Pentecostal church, was quite active in those days, and we had a very big congregation there of people going to church. Then I went to a small two room school at age 6, we didn't have anything like kindergarten or head start in those days. I remember my father being actually being quite literate, read to us a lot, so our imaginations were always sparked before we went to school. I had two older brothers who went to school before me, so they came home with books, so I went to a two room school and learned how to read and write there. Learned that being a little Indian girl wasn't the biggest asset in the world, because I had a lot of...That school was actually for white kids. But we just happened to be living in the right area, off the road and possibly because my father was white. Although there was some kids, children that went to school there that were full-blooded Indian people, but I think it was because we were living- we were not in the village, it was more because we were not in the village. The village kids went to BIA school. And um...

STACEY CARKHUFF: Did you have a white teacher?

POLLY HYSLOP: Yes, I had a white teacher from the beginning; I've never had a Native teacher. So I've learned really early that something, that "White was right" and so being the little ambitious girl that I was, I hung out with the white kids, but I still was treated differently. In retrospect. And um, I was always kind of ignored- I was a very ambitious little student. And I didn't really apply myself, but I always, I always kind of came out with average grades because I, I didn't really know what the benefit of excelling was. And plus I didn't quite get it. A lot of the things we were being taught was about

pilgrims and things that were outside of our reality. I mean it was fun, but it wasn't real for us.

When I was growing up, our family clanship was quite strong, and our language was spoken quite readily. I remember my mom and her sisters, and her mom and other clan women from the area, from Fish Camp area getting together and talking and laughing and having a great time, and all spoken in the language- fluently. But they wouldn't speak around white people, and my mom was married to a white person, so she didn't teach us the language. But I remember this having such an impact on me, because I could hear it when I was growing up. It was just a...over the years the language has died with every person, every fluent person speaking it. And that's to me a major shame, because that's the only thing that we really own, that's really our own. Everything else has basically been taken from us.

I don't remember hearing any words of protest against anything that was imposed upon us. The regulations, I've heard, I've heard stories about how the Native people would hide their caches of meat, and there's a place called high cache, where they built a cache high enough where it would blend in with the trees, so when the game warden what they call the game warden- Fish and Game would fly overhead they would not be able to spot the cache. And that's basically one of the only stories of protest that I actually ever heard about the imposition. I suppose you'd call that upon this country here. I didn't hear it from my mom, I didn't hear it from her brothers, I didn't even hear it from my grandmother. What I did see though was my grandmother never learned to speak English, and I think that was kind of her way of keeping the language in tact. She just chose, while her peers started speaking English, she never did. She had a few words, but didn't know much. So when I came back from New York City I asked her to speak to me in English because I was what I call [" "] and that means "I'm a white woman" and my grandmother just laughed at me- she wouldn't change. She couldn't really, because she wasn't fluent English speaking.

So the changes have been just incredible on this community, and in fact were still...Now what we have today are what I feel are like fragments of our culture that we're keeping. Its changing constantly. I don't really know what the originally Potlatches were really like; I've heard so many stories, it's so different today. We have potlatch that lasts way into the night, where traditionally, potlatch never lasted until sundown, you know. There's just so much change over the years from...In one context its getting better, because we were the lost generation, I believe, because we were raised with a lot of alcoholism in our village. I was fortunate I had a father who didn't drink, and he was a steady pillar in my life, and in the life of my brothers and sisters. But, a lot of people my age, in this age group grew up in a very, very alcoholic environment. I remember potlatch just being one big drunken party. And I'm not saying all potlatch; I'm just saying the ones I attended, where my mom would bring us home from Potlatch. Especially for a funeral potlatch. Now, alcohol is not accepted in the community, or in the community hall during potlatch, if a person is out of hand, they're gently led out, and its an understanding that out potlatches don't have alcohol accepted. We don't have as much alcoholism as we did when I was little, so on one hand it's getting better. But on the other hand we've lost a lot

of...of our language and of our traditions, and of our traditional knowledge. I speak, I have two sons who never lived in the village, who know of their, of their clan roots but who will never, probably ever, will never know the language. Who live, who both- one is going to graduate from college real soon, and one lives in New York City as a graphic artist.

So in four generations, so much change. I sometimes wonder if this is just the way things are supposed to evolve, where we'll just be...I'm not sure where we'll be. It's like; we question the importance of our identity. I believe strongly that we should know where we're from, our history of our people, and never be ashamed of who we are. Because the world, outside there...there's so much stereotype, prejudice, racism I guess people would call it. Especially against Native people. I've been out into the outside world, out of the United States to know that a young person, any person leaving the confines or the shelter of the community of the village really needs to have a strong foundations of their, of their past. Because when it does hit, it will hit, they will know who they are and be proud of who they are. The history of the Native people here is a very, is a history of very proud, hard working people who looked after one another and who had their laws intact. They had their own laws, their own religion, religion? I wouldn't call it religion, but they had their own spiritualism, their own medicines to heal, to heal their own medicine men. They had a viable working culture. And I think what's worked...To me its like what worked against the original people with the original impact were that they were kind- they were very, very kind. And they would never turn their back on anybody. They brought in Gold Rush people starving to death, they helped people...originally, that's one generation, that's the generation of the impact. They protected their own people. But today it's just, there's a lot of choices about how we can live now.

It's interesting for me because I made the choice of coming home. It's interesting for me because everything that I, I think all people now have, we have to take what works and leave the rest. There's just been so, there's been so...people as we know them or the tradition as we knew it, culture as we knew it is gone. But the spiritual teachings, or the traditional teachings are still in tact. Its universal teachings. So you know, be kind to one another, help one another. It's not something that's totally isolated to this area for sure. It's universal. I'm not quite sure in 20 years exactly what's going to happen, I'm not quite sure if it's right to try to hold onto something that's quickly dissolving, because our elders have made that choice of saying they're not going to teach us our traditional skills, or our language. I say that because, and I'm not trying to blame anybody, but what happened today, what happened then was a matter of choice. Whether I was going to...If I were going to be impacted by a bunch of strangers plowing down my traditional land. You know, could I have chosen to say "No, enough," like they say here. That's not going to happen to us, or, or because our leader said it was OK, do I have the choice to say it was not OK? And was the impact of the highway that, I mean, it came... A lot of change came about, but in the whole scheme of things, was it that detrimental, because change was going to happen anyway. I'm not sure...preferably I would, ideally I'd always want to say that I wish the highway didn't come through. But today it would just make it more difficult to get to Fairbanks or to Whitehorse. We love the convenience of the highway today, but it has changed so much. We don't...our potlatch for example, a memorial

potlatch, years ago, if somebody attended a memorial they were invited from what I've learned. They were invited- runners would go out and invite them. They'd come, and it would take them weeks to get there and then they would spend weeks there. So it's a lot of camaraderie, a lot of being...The social network was a lot tighter. Now if we got attend a potlatch, we get in our cars, go to the potlatch which is an hour or two hours away, eat the dinner, eat the food, dance if there's going to be some drumming and then go home. There's not a lot of visiting, not a lot of just sharing and carrying on. So, that's changed tremendously. The social fabric of our, of our Upper Tanana area and our community.

Yea, and even learning our language is a choice. And today there are a lot more people choosing not to learn the language which is to me very sorrowful. I feel very sad- I actually went through a difficult time where I was real depressed, I was really depressed because I had to acknowledge that something that was so beautiful, a world view that will die with every speaker that dies is dying, it's going to be gone really soon. Within the next decade we won't have a fluent speaker alive. To hear one say...our language has such a close relationship to the land, its so, it's so human. Because my culture, now, there's so many of us so out of touch with the land, and traditionally the land and people were one in the same. We could hear the birds, and we knew what they were saying, you know, if there was an animal nearby. One of the elders in the community taught me to listen to birds, and this is really great. In fact, sometimes I think I'm crazy because I'll talk to the birds, and they actually respond, the birds do. And I talk to the [Tatzahn] to the crow, the crow or raven? To the raven, and they're the most responsive birds I know and they actually answer me back. But I've learned to listen to what's being said in the woods by being with an elder. Because when I first moved home, I didn't know how to listen, I didn't know how to hear them. And that's why its so sad for me because my grandmother used to say, well it's not happening now, but when the trees get all frosty, when the willows get all frosty she used to say in our language, "the trees are all dressed up, now they're ready for winter." It's so beautiful. One elder I was with yesterday said that about the willows but since then they've undressed. They've undressed because they're not frosted anymore. And the relationship to the land I don't see any of that relationship to the land now, with people in my generation.

I think my whole, because I've travelled a lot, I feel like I'm a voice for Indigenous people. I can't even say indigenous. Because I'm a journalist, so I think that my contribution on earth is important because I can actually...be able to...be a voice where there is no voices. So I don't believe that I'm a total failure as a native woman. Although on the other hand, it depends who you ask. I've gained the trust of a lot of our elders here, because I've worked side by side with them, I've gone into their homes, I've worked as a respite provider for years for that very reason, because I didn't have a connection with our elders. And I, through the years they've trusted me because they know that I protect them, that I'll speak their voice and that I'm honest. That's really important, is that I'm honest with them, and I don't have any ulterior motives. I don't believe that they would ever think that I would try and get rich off of our culture. Its just...so I feel like there's, there's so much change, but the change is necessary too, in order to survive or to be able to be productive in both the village or rural Alaska. For me it's the village, and in the city. I have the education that will let me, allow me to have jobs in the city, but now I have a

relationship to my village, and the people in my village, and the people in, in Upper Tanana. But it's taken me years, because I moved home in 1995. There are people who really like me, and there are people who really don't like me. But I guess if you're going to stand for anything, you're not going to be liked by everybody. And I don't actually think that that's such a bad place on earth to be.