

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No:	2016-15-10_T01
Date of Recording:	1955
Length of Recording:	00:13:39
Original Media:	Dictabelts (red)
Digitized By:	Northeast Document Conservation Centre using IRENE method
Digitization Date:	December 2024
Narrator:	Clyde 'Slim' Williams
Interviewer:	It would appear that Richard 'Dick' Morenus gave Slim Williams the Dictabelt recorder and Slim is just telling stories into the machine by himself. Dick is not on the recording at all.
Others Present:	N/A
Recording Location:	Chicago, Illinois
Transcriber:	Leslie McCartney
Transcription Date:	January 31, 2025
Access:	The dictabelts were donated to us by the great-nephew of Dick Morenus who inherited them from his mother (Dick's niece). Slim and his wife never had children so there is no next of kin. We have a signed Letter of Transmittal on file from Dick's great-nephew. For public/electronic use.
Where to Find this in Text:	These recordings were made by Clyde 'Slim' Williams so that Richard 'Dick' Morenus could write Slim's story in book form. It was published as <i>Alaska Sourdough, the Story of Slim Williams</i> by Richard Morenus (1956). New York: Rand McNally & Company. The book is available on Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/alaskasourdoughs0000rich/mode/2up or in the Elmer E. Ramuson Library, F909.M75 Alaska Collection. Where possible, the pages of where some of the transcribed stories appear in the book are noted.

(00:00:00)

Slim Williams: [Slim starts off away from the microphone and difficult to hear; recording starts mid-sentence] ... just insisted on us stoppin' knew everybody [inaudible] real lonesome. Well the next two or three days I loaded on about 1000 pound of moose, more than I should of course with that 25 miles of new trail but I started back, intended to stop with this [inaudible] go there. Well I just about killed

meself and my dogs too, it was cold, it was I would image 30 below and we just all worked our cussin' heads off to get to that cabin. And when I first come in sight of it there was somethin' that looked kinda odd to me. I couldn't tell what it was but it was odd. As I got close the darn thing looked like a [inaudible] globe. He had went out to that fresh water stream and dipped water and just throwed it all over that cabin and it had froze. Well I thought, gee, that's funny, that ain't now way to do, but anyhow I went out and stopped my dogs and knocked at the door, no answer, and I could see smoke comin' out. And, surely he was in but I just opened the door and walked in and there he was layin' on his bunk on his back and he had an old magazine and he was just thumbin' that magazine like crazy, he didn't waste his time just as fast as he could thumb.

00:01:22

Then he'd raise that up close to his face and look at it. Then he'd take it down and he'd thumb it again. Boy he would just thumbin' that magazine through and through and through and through. And he just kept doin' that. I talked to 'im and he never answered me, never looked at it, paid no attention to me whatsoever. Well I knew that it was some many people goin' crazy those days that I knew he'd lost his mind. Poor devil. And, well as we went over I noticed that he didn't have any gun. And then again, soon as I saw he was crazy I commenced lookin' for a gun. None in sight. And, ee, I thought it was kinda funny a man out there like that and didn't have a gun so many did, but occasionally you'd find 'em didn't so I didn't think anything of it. Well I went ahead and got my supper and ask him to come and have some with me but he just thumbed his magazine, that's all there was it to. Never ev ... never even paid not attention whatsoever. Well I fed my dogs and spread out in my sleepin' bag and crawled into it. Well when I did that, he blew the light out at the head ... he had a candle at the head of his bed and one at the foot of his bed, two candles burnin' all the time. Well, he blew out the one at the head of his bed, he reached down beside of his bunk and he pulled out a brand new 30-30 rifle and he shot the light at the lower end. Well you don't have to give a light like that, you shoot it within 4 inches of it you know you put it out. But anyhow, I did wait to think or you just don't think when you do things like that. I just rolled, that was all there was to it. And when I stopped I was right at the door goin' outside. And, I listened. I could hear 'im putting the rifle back and I knew I couldn't lay there asleep all night or wake all night it just couldn't be done. I knew I was too tired too all in I knew I'd fall asleep.

00:03:13

So I gotta wonderin' what the devil I was gonna do. Well I laid there and just dyin' for sleep and but I was restin' some and but scared stiff. And finally I heard 'im breathin' hard. I knew he was asleep. I thought well I got one chance. So I sneaked outta my sleepin' bag and crawled over his bunk and sure enough, just as I reached down beside of that bunk I felt the rifle. I pull it out just as easy, no noise, no nothin' just slipped out that rifle out so easy it surprised me and I crawled back over to my bunk ... my sleepin' bag and I put it under me. And I crawled in and I went to sleep. I couldn't do anything else. Well it is daylight next mornin' when I woke up. He was layin' with his back to me and his face to the wall. I got up, I spoke to him, not a word, he never let on, I knew he wasn't asleep, but he was pretendin' he was. Well I went ahead and got my breakfast and got things all fixed up, his dishes washed, everything, some kindlin' whittled, everything nice and clean and went and rolled up my bed and I rolled his rifle up in it and put it on my sled. I hooked up my dogs, I had 'em tied to a tree close by and I went back in to see if he was alright and spoke to him again, no answer, he's still layin' facin' the wall [inaudible] out with that rifle on my sled. Well when I got to town I told the Marshall he went out and got me ... got 'im, but they told me after that he never spoke a word to anybody from that until they got 'im to Des Moines side in Oregon. [dead air from 00:04:54 to 00:04:58]

00:04:58

Well I think beyond a doubt that was the toughest winter I ever see in the north. When I come out that sudden change and I come out over the trail not long after that and there was seven people froze to death. One frozen to death in the ... stage was going all over, a father had froze to death and son froze to death. There was one man walked 75 miles on feet, just frozen solid. When he got into Fairbanks he ... they had to take 'em both off ... just below the knee. A man had a lot a crust to do that I'm telling ya.

00:05:36

But you know about this time there was a ... here's where I learned I wasn't a cook. About this time they was puttin' a second line from Valdez to Fairbanks. A friend of mine come to me and I was outta job. Broke of course. And he said Slim do ya want a job. I said yeah. Well he said there's a cookin' job out on the telegraph line. Well I was a pretty fair cook and decided I'd take it and they told me that the cook is quitting. And I didn't know who he was. So I started out, it was about 150 miles to where they were and well he said you get out there they can't fire ya because he said the [inaudible] won't catch ya. He said their gonna be outta grub I'm afraid but he said do the best you can.

00:06:25

So I went out and sure enough the cook was a very good friend of mine, they call him Beaver Dan Bob and he was an excellent cook. He was noted for bein' such a good cook. So I said to 'em what's the matters Bob, you're quitin'. Well he said there's no grub, he said there's just nothin' to cook and he said that a man that's cooks ya this summer he said he's gonna get himself an awful name. He said he's never gonna be able to get enough job. Well I says I don't care well I get another job or not and I'll ya what I'll do. I said do you wanna go on with the outfit? He said yeah, I'd like to go on but he said but I won't cook. I said alright, you know Bob I'll cook, I'll be the cook and take all the blame and the cook was getting' a dollar more than the flunky was. So I said we'll split the dollar and you can help me with the cookin', I'll help you with the flunky and I said we'll just have a good time this summer. Well he was a swell guy, I liked him a lot. He was an Englishman and you know the only thing that I didn't like about 'im the ice was freezin' out of the lake and it would be froze 10 or 15 feet from the shore. He'd go out in the mornin' when he first got up and he'd dive into that water, swim out on the ice and climb up on it, dive back and swim back to shore. Then he'd come in and tell me how good that made 'im feel, you know, for me to do it. Well I figured if that was all it took to man feel good, I just wasn't gonna feel good that's all there was to it.

00:07:47

But anyhow we went on through the line. No grub ever got to us. In fact the trail was so tough they couldn't make it and so we just had to depend on what we could get from relief stations along which wasn't much. It was pretty tough grub. But we went done a lot of huntin' we even killed about 50 of them little squirrels and made a pie outta 'em one day. We just done everything we could. We had lots of cornstarch we'd pretty much cornstarch puddin'. We had lots of milk. But sometimes we'd be so cussin' short of flour ... oh no, we just short of everythin' all winter and we did live. Well anyhow we was outta clothes too. One fella got a piece of canvas and made him a pair of overalls. Boy if he wasn't a comical lookin' thing in them overalls. It was just made like two sacks. Anyhow, we got the line finished and started back to Valdez. Well, it gettin' late and the time we got into Valdez why will was just a raggedest bunch that had ever hit it and there was a fella by the name of McCarty. He had a bad foot, born that way I guess but he was an awful nice little fella and he strung our wire for us. He had a horse. He'd hook that horse on the end of a wire, wire on the spool of course, and he did strung the horse and away he'd go cross that country. Where it wasn't possible to take a horse of course they'd take it by

hand. But anyhow, he was about the first one into town on his little horse and I went to my cabin and kinda got cleaned up and decided I'd go downtown.

00:09:23

I wanted into the saloon and here was little McCartney just hangin' onto the bar. He had to hang on because he couldn't stand up. He'd let go and ... he looked at me for a while he says, well, come on Slim. Let's go and have a drink. Well I was a very poor handed drinkin' but you gotta treat your drunk man right and a drunk man always tells the truth too. And so I wen to have a drink with 'im and he kinda looked up at me and kinda stupid and he says, Slim, he says I like you. Says the fact is all the boys like ya. If they hadn't of they'd of killed ya 'cuz damn you, you can't cook. [dead air from 00:10:05... to 00:10:13]

00:10:13

Near this I'm so mixed up on dates you can't remember but I and my partner stood on my ... our sleds and watched Haley's Comet. Now we didn't find out when that went through there but that was a quite a sight. Watchin' that thing skid across the sky, beautiful sight and lit the country up quite a bit. We outa be able to find out if we want use [Slim moves away from the microphone].¹

00:10:42

Well early in the spring of '10, no '11, I was .. I was up at Seward and I gotta talkin' to a young Indian fella there. And he gotta tell me about the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. Well until this winter he'd never seen it but he said my papa seen it. It was Windigo there. And none of 'em went. But he'd like to see it. And he kinda thought it would be nice if we'd go see it. So we did. We got on the old [inaudible] and went over and didn't take much outfit. But we went to the see the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. Well that justa good a name of the sight I can think about. It was a honey. It was about 5 or 6 miles long and I'd say about a mile wide, in a crater, and it was just marvelous vegetation and everything, beautiful thing and water just as cold as ice and water just you could boil coffee on it, just as hot as a 45 that's all there was to it. And well sir I liked that and I just decided that I'd go back and get some grub and some outfit and go in there and build a cabin and trap during the winter of '11 and '12.

00:11:58

Well when I got back to Seward by there's a letter there from my partner and he'd got a lay on some ground maybe been tryin' to get a lay on. He had ... it was good ground but short of water. It was a good summer and warm and lots of snow in the winter why you could make some good money there and we knew it. But of course if was dry why we'd just be out here like that's all there was to it. So I just decided I'd leave the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, go for a few years and go back. So I went back and went in with Hazlitt [?] that I was tellin' you about that his boy died on a trip and spent the summer. Well, we didn't do bad, done pretty good and but along, in the middle of the summer, we begin to hear blasting down below. It sound ... we wondered what was down the road commissioned just where was it ... that blastin' goin' on you know. And finally one morning we got up and our picks and shovels looked all like copper.

00:13:07

Well about that time somebody come in and told us that Katmai had a blowed up. Well now at that time we was about 500 miles from Katmai but never the less the ashes come in. If I'd a been on top of that I'd a been a pretty mess today I'm tellin' ya. But that was '12. Well, that winter we went into the Wrangell's again, built us another cabin and trapped. Good country, boy it was nice trappin' and [end of recording]

¹ Transcribers note: According to Wikipedia, Haley's Comment could be seen on April 10, 1910.