

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No:	2016-15-23
Date of Recording:	1955
Length of Recording:	00:13:49
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:	February 6, 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 mid-sentence] and when we'd build a fire in there, just as soon as we got a fire started just so darn hot we did have to get out that's all there was to it, so we had to cut a hole through the roof and put a trap door in and we had that trap open, but anytime we had a fire we had to have trap door open. And, of course our stove, we let ... had ... let it set right on the ground so that

warmed up the ground too and our cabin stayed nice and warm. Well, we didn't do much round ... one stayed with the cabin about all the time because we didn't know then that the Eskimo wouldn't steal it of course, and well, their first trip up there, they would come up just prowlin' around it seems and we couldn't talk to 'em, we couldn't ... that old sign language wouldn't work and I couldn't understand a word they said and they couldn't a word we said and motion didn't seem to make any difference, and so, I give one of 'em a plug of tobacco. I figured that was about the way to get at 'em and next day here he come with fox skins and he brought me two for that plug of tobacco.

00:01:09

Well they was worth about six dollars apiece, they was old skins that he'd caught the year before, in fact he got a lotta old skins but they was well kept and not well stretched but we stretched 'em over and made a pretty nice lookin' fur out of 'em. But, then we learned how. They would come up and we'd give 'em tobacco or sugar or anything they wanted and next day they would come back with a darnedest load of fur and ivory you ever seen. I got one piece of ivory that was just, I dunno, I figured this was awful valuable. It was walrus tusk and an awful big one but it was dark brown and on it was something that looked like a leaf and it was awful near black. That must a been an awful piece of ivory. But now I don't know about their dogs over there. There wasn't over a half a dozen dogs in that village and I don't remember now seein' a sled in that village. Now there mighta been, or they might not of used many dogs, I don't know, or it mighta been like it is on our side, come a tough winter, come a tough winter, sometimes a lot of their dogs used to starve to death, they didn't have enough to eat themselves and their dogs would starve to death.

00:02:23

Now they mighta had a spell like that on the other side and that might not have ... been the reason why they didn't have dogs. Another reason might have been that they ... just rough county and they didn't use 'em. I don't know. I couldn't say about that. But I think there was about 30 Indians altogether in the camp and the men would be gone quite a bit, no doubt out trappin' so we never got a good look at 'em, it was about, oh, maybe 12, 15 of 'em. That we got to know when we seen them at least. Women didn't monkey around as much and when we'd go there they'd kinda stay outta sight but what I think happened, when that ... when them darn Russians come up there, they come up to trade, of course, that's what they come up there for, and they see these overalls and shirts on these Indians because gee, they wanted 'em. We was sorry that we didn't bring lots of 'em 'cuz they was nuts about them and what they wore was ... looked like homemade stuff. It was wool I'd say, but I'd say it was all homemade. Of course they wore a ... had a lot of skins, tanned skins that they had clothes made of and then of course they had their own fur but they did have some trousers and some shirts.

00:03:42

That looked like they'd made 'em themselves and looked like ... it was no material that I'd ever recognize, and it so dirty you wouldn't recognize it anyhow. But, anyhow, the ... they would go out and be gone, oh, it seemed to be a quite a long time at one time, and no doubt after fur but, well, come spring, we had a quite a bit of trade goods left. We'd went over there for gold and fur of course. We figured we'd trade for fur and mine gold and what have you, well summer didn't come until ... we got there late in the fall, was begin to freeze up and we had to get somethin' up quick before it froze on us. Well, we decided that we'd go back with the fur we had and after this bunch come down river, I don't know how far up they were, but after they come down the river in their big boat, and we traded for all of their fur and give 'em everything we had, why we decided we'd go back home, over the other side and get a better boat and a better outfit and come back and really trade and make a great big barrel of money. And that's what we figured, now when the Russians showed up, course when they showed up

why we just didn't do anything, they come in and took about, oh, two-thirds of stuff I think, just took it all where about and threwed it [inaudible] and they started away and didn't even get outta sight and they just turned around and come back. They had a little steamer, potbellied thing, five men on it and course of they stood guard with the rivals, they had two of 'em throwed our stuff onto their boat.

00:05:28

Well they come back then, we had that little dingy that we went ... we'd go from our boat for sure,[inaudible] during the winter but ... to get it outta the ice, but, we was all ready to come back. And these folks would come down river and left again. They had no women with them. And they was about 12 of 'em I believe and ... but lots' of fur so we just figured that we had panned a little and got gold but none no big amount, nothing big at all yet it looked awfully good. So, we figured we'd go back and get us a better boat and everything and come back and really make a fortune. I think I would have if it hadn't of been for them darn Russians comin' in. Well, when they took everything and peeled out, we did have enough at shore in our cabin to live about a week and a .22 rifle, and a quite a bit of ammunition so we wasn't really stuck, but, the lucky thing for us that those Inj ... Eskimos was plumb tickled with that little dingy. They used to look at it a lot and stand around it a lot and they was awful interested in it. They'd pick up the oars, just little short oars, about six-foot-long, they'd pick up them and look at 'em and boy they did admire that little dingy and the boat, well of course when the ... after the Russians had left us there, why the Indians come up and they seemed to be awful mad, I don't know if they was or not but I suspicion they was.

00:06:56

They didn't like the way the Eskimos had treated ... we just figured the Eskimos didn't treat them so good anyhow but anyhow we finally traded our little dingy and the .22 rifle and the ammunition for one of their walrus skin boats. They're all lashed together too and they're made of driftwood, most of it, some whale bone in it, not much, but most of it was driftwood I'd think, there had to be, it couldn't be anything else. But, they had split and hewed out and made this frame then put the walrus hide over it. You know, they use that walrus hide on their boat for a year or a summer, then that winter, they put it with the flesh out and then that winter, why they use it for the soles of mukluks and thongs and things like that but they use it on their boat a year, I don't know why that is. That ... the salt water seems to do somethin' for it or take that grease out or what it is, I don't know. But, on both sides of there, on our side and the Russian side, they use these walrus hides, either leave 'em layin' in the salt water all summer or put 'em on the boat all summer, then use 'em for tow lines and well, everything that they use raw hide for. Its ... I've often wondered why and I've often wondered why those Indians over there ... now the dog over there, was a the blue-eyed Siberian. He was just the same as the dog on our side far as you could see. There was all ... everything village I'd say had a different strain I'd say of dogs. And this was still a different strain over there.

00:08:44

But those over there were all blue-eyed. Now the country was very mountainous and very rugged. We didn't get back into the mountains at all because, oh, some of course, but not enough to really find out what is what, but, we ... after the boat left why we did a little more panning and we got some pretty good results. I believe a man go there really find a lotta gold and while the fur over there is white fox mostly and mink, they have some other of course but most of it is white fox and mink, they get a few wolves but don't seem to be many. But, I just can't tell too much about them folks over there, they're religion and way of thinkin' and the like because well, I just couldn't talk to 'em, never did get used to talkin' to 'em all the time I was there. I've gotta put on another reel now Dick and I'm really gettin' a kick

outta this so don't worry. I think I'm goin' to try and get ya three reels out on this ... at this one time and so I'll put on another reel now and get after the dog teams [dead air from 00:09:58 to 00:10:05]

00:10:05

[Slim starts mid-sentence] ... and for several years and I just fell in love with the country, I liked it a lot and it was awfully good fur there but I come into Copper Center and after I'd been up and fixed up my cabin for the winter and had my dogs packed and followin' me, so I hooked up a sled on the very first snow and soon as I crossed the Copper River, come down to Copper Center for a load of provisions. Now just get some stuff and get some mail and one thing and another and there was a ... got to talkin' about some fella in Nome, his name was Groshaw [?] and he was gonna drive from Nome to the Centers of Progress in Chicago. Now there'd been several tried that trip and none of 'em had made it and of course then I went to shootin' off my mouth, I said oh, he can't do it, he's drivin' huskies, there's only one dog in the world that will make it and that's the wolf and you know everybody in Alaska that's got a little pooch under each arm, he's got the best dog team in Alaska. Some of 'em old prospectors there, you know old fellas just, pretty slow and a team ... a dog get too slow for a good team and oh, maybe seven, eight years old and they'll give 'em some of the old prospectors [inaudible] make ya a good home.

00:11:32

He'd have three or four of 'em and they'll go along, oh, five or six miles and hour, and old fellas ya know kinda stiff and he thinks he's got the best dog team in Alaska, he'll tell ya everyday about it. Well that's how everybody is so we don't disgrace about braggin' about your dogs. Anyhow, I just went into hysterics about Groshaw, he just couldn't make and I had the only team that could make and kept on braggin' and finally somebody said hey, yours are darn good, why don't ya do it? I said I'm gonna. I ... just what I'm out for. I said I'm just goin' back now and getting' my outfit and I'm gonna head out, just when the snow gets good. Well, I just braggin' just ... never thought much about it and I went back up river and was gone about ten days and I come back out and Lord, about the first thing I heard on the radio when I come out that Slim Williams was gonna drive his dog teams to Washington D.C. That raised the ante on me about nine hundred miles, paper was full of it and I had a stack of mail there that you couldn't [inaudible] and some from automobile ... The Highway Association from in Alaska that had ... they had got up an association and was workin' to get a highway to Alaska and Donald MacDonald was at the head of it, he was a very good friend of mine so he had me a half a dozen letters, why don't you go and you gotta go. Well I was in such a fix that I just couldn't well back out and about the only thing was to do was to go or get kidded out of Alaska.

00:13:12

I had no intention to go to start on but I thought well by gee, after all, why not and so I just hooked up my dogs and started, kinda straightened things up there a little bit, didn't take long. Well Indians around they old Indians around Copper Center of course I knew 'em, traded with all of 'em, friends with all of 'em and they heard about it and now any place that when you start for the states cross country, they think you're goin' into the big flat country. They don't quite understand the map but there's a [end of recording].