

SOPHIA SIMEONOFF/1983

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Narrator: Sophia Simeonoff  
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Place: Kodiak, Alaska  
Interviewer: Joanne B. Mulcahy

JM Today is July 20, 1983. This is Joanne Mulcahy and I'm in Kodiak, Alaska talking with Sophia Simeonoff.

I guess, Sophie, we can begin with where you were born and what year that was.

A:/SS I was born and raised at St. Michael. It's a small island very close to the mainland on the Norton Sound area at the head of the mouth of the Yukon.

Q:/JM That was December 14...

A:/SS December 14, 1929.

Q:/JM What are some of your early memories of being a child? What was the village like?

A:/SS A long time ago it was a Russian settlement. There was a small hill about five miles away, maybe less than that. We called it the Russian Garden because the Russians had a garden there. When I was growing up you could see the old railroad tracks. I don't know if they had any trains or not, but it was used maybe for carts. And I saw old pictures that the other parents had taken when they were young, what St. Michael's was like long before I was born. There were tall houses, tall old houses.

Q:/JM Do you remember what they were made out of?

A:/SS They were made out of lumber. And I think that was during the Gold Rush Days, too, when the people were coming in from the Yukon. Coming in on steamboats. The steamboats in the back of them they had wheels. I seen those old steamboats when I was growing up but they were not in use then. By the time I was, I don't know how old I was, seven, eight years old, all the barges were there. When I was young it was quite a town.

Q:/JM Do you remember what [unintelligible]?

A:/SS No, no I don't. Then gradually it started dying down. There was no more people. There was no more going around, like jobs.

Q:/JM But during the Gold Rush there were?

A:/SS Yeah.

Q:/JM Do you remember when you were adopted?

A:/SS I was nine months old. When I got old enough to understand my adopted parents told me, especially my adopted mother told me that I was adopted when I was nine months old from my original parents. And my real sisters, they were born and raised in St. Michael's too, I think, I don't know. I don't know too much about their background, where they were raised, originally where they were born. But they lived at St. Michael's. But I don't remember. We all got married, got scattered all over

Alaska. [Laughs.]

Q:/JM What were your father and mother's names? Your real parents?

A:/SS My real father's name was Daniel. My real mother's name was Lucy. My adopted parents were Alex Johnson and Maureen Johnson. I was raised as a Johnson.

Q:/JM Did you ever meet your real mother?

A:/SS I saw her only once. I saw her only once, the last time I was at home to visit my adopted father after my adopted mother passed away.

Q:/JM Your mother was in St. Michael's?

A:/SS Um hmm. Didn't even have very much chance to talk to her. I didn't know how to approach her. She was quiet. Quiet type hardly talk.

Q:/JM You said that she had gone back to Portland to a hospital.

A:/SS Yeah. She was there for a long time. She was there for a long time.

Q:/JM Did she go back to St. Michael's to settle?

A:/SS Yes. She's still there. She's still there from what I understood.

Q:/JM In your adopted family, Sophie, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

A:/SS My adopted brothers, they didn't have no sisters. They had four sons. The youngest son I have never met.

I think I was just a baby when he passed away so I only got to know the three of them, Axel, he was the oldest. And Harry, he was the second. And Franklin, he's the third one. I was closer to Harry than I was to Axel and Franklin because they did a lot of traveling. My adopted father had taught them to be mechanics like he when they were growing up 'cause he was an engineer on a mail boat and when they got old enough, he took them along with him and let them watch what he was doing, explaining to the brothers how the engine runs and all the parts with it, what makes it run, what kind of fuel to use and all that good stuff. [Laughs.]

Q:/JM Your father was a mechanic. What about your memories of your mother? What kinds of things did you do with her when you were growing up?

A:/SS My adopted mother?

Q:/JM Yes.

A:/SS There are a lot of things I remember I did with her. She took me out berry picking. Took me out muskrat hunting, out hunting for berries.

Q:/JM Your mother taught you how to hunt?

A:/SS Yes. How to set a trap for a muskrat and how to use a twenty-two. A little twenty-two gun. There's two different shells. You use the twenty-two short or the twenty-two long, but mine was a twenty-two short shell.

And the handle was made just right for me, not too big.

Q:/JM How old were you when you did this?

A:/SS I was about eleven years old, eleven, twelve years old.

Q:/JM Did you like it?

A:/SS I like it.

And we'd go out egg hunting in the spring and we'd pick all the wild greens.

Q:/JM Egg hunting?

A:/SS Um hmmm. Wild ducks, you know like Eider ducks, Ptarmigan eggs, seagull eggs.

Q:/JM Where did you find the eggs?

A:/SS Out in the tundra. Out in the canal way. The crane lays one big egg. Just one. The nest it made was more or less like mud. And the geese eggs, you go to the nest, you look inside, you think there's no eggs because there's the down on top with grass, with straw. You think it's empty but you pull that up. There's the geese eggs in there. the Eider ducks you really have to look for them. They lay their eggs in tall grass close to the lakes. you have to really look. And the Ptarmigan eggs, they lay lots of eggs, between two dozen or more. They have pretty specks on them.

Q:/JM Do they taste a lot different?

A:/SS They taste OK, I don't like 'em fried. I like 'em

boiled. And I like 'em with egg hot cakes. We used to put flour, not too much flour, just hardly nothing, not too stiff, just right. And fry it in deep fat.

Q:/JM What other things did you eat growing up?

A:/SS Dried salmon, dried herring, dried tomcode, salted salmon, smoked salmon, dried seal meat, fresh ones that you boil to make your seal oil, and your wild greens.

Q:/JM Wild grains?

A:/SS Wild greens. There's greens that you can pick from the beach. And there's a wild parsley; there's wild rhubarbs, wild celery, and I forgot other kinds. I don't know the English names for them. Those you find on the side of the mountains, and wild spinach. You get your blueberries, your blackberries, your cranberries. Back home we call it the salmonberries, but some people call it clogberries.

Q:/JM Clogberries?

A:/SS They're orange and some are red. They get orange when they're really ripe. Very tasty.

And the sourdocks you can cook with the beach greens and then you can...Oh, no. The sourdocks you don't have to cook. Just chop 'em up good and mix up together. Before berry picking time you put that in a barrel. Keep it in cool, dark place, cover it good. And then you can pick your blackberries and blueberries and mix it right

in to that.

Q:/JM It sounds good.

A:/SS It's very tasty. It has a kind of a tart taste to it. You can add sugar and milk, if you want to, or add a little sugar and seal oil, if you want to, or with your Eskimo ice cream.

Q:/JM Eskimo ice cream is...

A:/SS [unintelligible] Your Eskimo ice cream is made with the reindeer fat. You dry the fat. You can dry the fat; it takes a little while to dry. After it's dry for winter time you cut it up real small, put it in a frying pan, soften it up, the right, how you call it?

Q:/JM Consistency?

A:/SS Yeah. And you put it in a pan. You wash your hands good. You have your berries all ready. You have your seal oil ready, your little water ready, and your sugar ready. And you whip it with your hand, whip, whip, whip, til the more little seal oil you put, the more little water you put in, the more it gets. You can use only small amount and it gets bigger and bigger, just like you would make an egg white. It gets bigger and bigger like that. And you add your sugar a little bit at a time. And to give it color you could throw in your berries and squeeze your berries and it gives it a nice pinkish color or blue, you know, purplish color, or

whatever. Then you add your berries a little bit at a time. Maybe your black and blueberries, maybe your hogberries mixed with blackberries and maybe wild strawberries with some kind of a, maybe blueberries, and then the white part. Then you let it cool, set it out where it's cold. You could keep that for days when it's frozen.

And the pussywillows, too. We used to eat the pussywillow leaves when they're just starting to grow while they're real young and tender before they start getting that hard fiber in the center. You have to pick lots of it and pack it down in clean jars. Put just a little seal oil in it, right on top of it. Then you put about that much, maybe half an inch or so, just pussywillow leaves and this way it won't cause it to mildew.

Q:/JM Oh, you can keep it like that?

A:/SS Um hmm. Then when you start to eat and you see the mildew on top you just take that off. You don't store those in great big jars, just enough to, you know, that way it won't spoil on you, start mildewing on you. That goes the same way when you put your berries away for winter and wild greens mixed with berries. Always put, like the wild sourdocks, the leaves, put a good thick layer on top.

Q:/JM The leaves protect it?

A:/SS Um hmmm. The leaves protect that from getting mildew before the winter begins. When winter begins and it starts getting cold, you check on it and it's okay. You just take the mildew part away, you still have enough there to protect it. And when it starts freezing that won't happen because the cold temperature protects it. It really freezes. You take a knife or a chisel and you chisel it out when you need it.

Q:/JM Winter must have come early.

A:/SS Yeah.

During my growing up years, all families, right at the first herring season run, it don't get dark back at my home. Everybody's down on the beach. They set their nets out and they get all the herring they can get. They salt their herring. They make dried herring. You can make smoked herring, too. You have to put a lot of it away. And before that, you have to put a lot of seal oil away. When your herring gets dried, you pack it down in barrel tanks, five pound tanks or whatever you want. You lay 'em down neatly and you always have something hard to press on it. Put little seal oil on it, little bit, like that.

Q:/JM To keep it?

A:/SS Um hmmm.

Q:/JM You use seal oil for a lot of things?

A:/SS Yeah.

Q:/JM Do they take a lot of seals at St. Michael's?

A:/SS Yeah. But nothing goes to waste. The hide from the seal you make clothing out of it. Like the sealskin mukluks or sealskin pants, sealskin jackets. You can make things like that. And even the stomach of the seal, you don't throw that away. You clean it out good. Inside and out and blow it up like a balloon and dry it out and that's when you can fill it up with your seal oil and your wild greens and berries into that, too.

Q:/JM Oh, you save it like a sack.

A:/SS Um hmmm. Like a sack. And it don't spoil.

Q:/JM Did the women do that or did the men...

A:/SS Yes, the women did that.

Q:/JM Did your adopted mother do that?

A:/SS Yes. I used to watch her a lot of times. Nothing goes to waste, not even from a salmon. What you cannot use you dry it up anyway so your dog teams could have food for winter, too. And even when you're up laying a salmon for drying, you don't throw the backbones away because there's still meat there and you save that, too, for the dogs.

That's when I first learned how to cook. I was taking care of my brother's dogs one summer and he asked me.... I'm old enough now to learn how to cook and he

showed me, he said, "Just fill it up now with water. The old dried salmon in there, I'll show you which ones. Dump everything in there and don't forget to put a little seal oil in there. Got to have a little fat with it." If it's not seal oil, reindeer fat, or tallow put in it.

Q:/JM Tallow? What's that?

A:/SS Tallow? It's a dried fat. [Plane noise.] In the summer he'd tell me, "Only once a day you cook for the dogs. And you feed 'em only in the evening. And in the day you give 'em water."

Q:/JM Did they use dog teams?

A:/SS Yeah. They use 'em for traveling, maybe going from village to village. They use 'em for eik hunting. They use 'em for many things; those dogs they work hard. Go out and get wood, you know. You have to train the dogs good.

Q:/JM Did they have other kinds of machines and cars when you were growing up?

A:/SS No, no. Just the airplane. The first airplane I saw I was really afraid. I don't remember how old I was, but I was really afraid. I don't remember how old I was, but I was really afraid. I was really afraid.

And my adopted father, he has never been in a hospital. He's never been in a hospital. And he used to tell me, the last time I went home he said, he got sick and I

told him "I think I should go get the [unintelligible] and send you over to Bethel Hospital." He said, "No, I'll get well." He did get well. He used to ask me all kinds of questions, what hospitals were like, how you're treated, what the rules are, what the food is like, and how the people are. I told him, "That's where the doctor and the nurses help you to get well. But you got to help yourself, too, to let them help you get well. Don't be afraid.

Q:/JM Who was the person in the village who helped people when they were sick when you were growing up? Was there a Native doctor, a healer?

A:/SS I don't know. I don't know. Mom used to take care of sick people from what I remember.

Q:/JM She used plants and things?

A:/SS I think so. And we had a measles epidemic and my adopted father had me have blueberry wine, always have blueberry wine. We did have a measles epidemic and to break the measles out, I remember, she gave me two table-spoons or more of that blueberry wine and that helped. That helped.

Q:/JM There were midwives in your village when you were growing up?

A:/SS Yeah, there were midwives. There were midwives. They all had three or more.

Q:/JM And there were healers?

A:/SS I don't know, I really don't know. Maybe they might have been. I really couldn't tell you.

I left home when I was fourteen years old to attend The White Mountain Vocational School. Every summer I'd go home and then I'd go back to school. In the last time I went back to The White Mountain Vocational School, that's the time I took a plane back from St. Michael's to White Mountain. I remember my adopted mother told me, "I think I'll have to send a telegram to the principal of the school that you'll be late going back to school," she said, "because I'm one dollar short and papa's not here. He's on a trip and he won't be back until next week, week and a half, depend on the weather." I told her, "Mom, I think I can solve it out. There's one favorite record I like and I'm going to sell it." She said, "No, you don't do that." I told her, "I think I will, I ought to go back." I did. I did.

Q:/JM Where did you get the dollar?

A:/SS I sold it down to the store.

Q:/JM The record?

A:/SS Yeah. And I told the storekeeper that I told my mom that I'm selling it because she was one dollar short to send me back to school.

Q:/JM Do you remember what record it was?

A:/SS 'The Old Spinning Wheel'.

Q:/JM 'The Old Spinning Wheel'.

A:/SS But I don't know who sang that. I don't know that name of the party who sang that. I didn't pay attention to that. I liked the sound. I liked the tune. That was my favorite record. I think the storekeeper told mom and she bought it back.

Q:/JM What were you studying in the Vocational School?

A:/SS Eighth grade. Eighth grade and ninth grade.

Q:/JM They didn't teach you a particular vocation?

A:/SS No, we were taught skin sewing and bead work and home ec and we had chores, work in the kitchen, helping the cooks in the morning, setting the tables, doing the dishes, always rotating, and then work in the laundry.

Q:/JM You already probably knew some skin sewing.

A:/SS Little bit, yes.

Q:/JM Did your mother teach you?

A:/SS Yes, she taught me.

All of us girls, we all spoke different dialects because there were some students from as far as Point Barrow and as far as the Yukon. No, no, nobody from the interior though. It's more or less from the coastal line, from what I remember.

Q:/JM What language had you spoken at home while growing

up?

A:/SS Yupik. Yupik and a little Inupiaq.

Q:/JM And so when you went to school was everything in English?

A:/SS Yeah, our classroom was in English but then after school we all get together and talk. We talk English to each other, "How do you say this particular word in your dialect?" And then so and so would say, "You say it this way and that's the same meaning." Then I would say "OK, in my dialect it's pronounced this way."

Q:/JM When you were growing up at home, did you learn English?

A:/SS In school.

Q:/JM Was that a village school?

A:/SS That was when it was territorial before it was BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs]. We had no kindergarten. We went right into first grade. It was hard learning to speak English, learning to understand. What I can remember, what I never forget to this day, teacher don't want us to speak our Native language tongue within the school area, otherwise we get punished and write one hundred times, "I will not speak Eskimo. I will not speak Eskimo." Growing up we forget. Whispering, then we get got caught, then, "Stay after school."

Q:/JM What were the teachers like?

A:/SS That's the first time I see blue eyes. [Laughter.] I couldn't get over my teacher's blue eyes. Mr. Ball. His name was Mr. Ball. I just couldn't get over his blue eyes. I just stared and stared. Then finally I recall, I asked him, "Can you see? Your eyes are so pale. Not even ripe like the blueberries, too pale." [Laughter.]

Q:/JM That's funny.

A:/SS Then he told me that he can see, that he is born like that, you know. And he says to me, "You have real dark eyes. Can you see?" And I told him, "Yeah, I can see." And I didn't say no more. And I said, "I can't believe it. I have to look and look at your eyes all the time."

Q:/JM You must have looked funny to each other.

A:/SS I just couldn't get over his blue eye. I went home and I told mom and my brothers, you know. My brother Franklin was very helpful in teaching me how to speak. I was grateful for that.

Q:/JM There was a story someone told me. I don't know if they were from up north, about how the raven got blue eyes. It was a story that they learned as a child. Do you remember that?

A:/SS No, not that one there.

Q:/JM Were there any stories that your mother told

you as a child?

A:/SS I forgot most of them.

I didn't know how to do the Eskimo dance and then the school had a school play and we were supposed to do the Eskimo dance. The two older girls then, they all knew how to do the Eskimo dance and I didn't know how to do the Eskimo dance and my teacher thought I might know a little about Eskimo dance, because he wanted all of us to go like that.

Q:/JM Oh, staggered type.

A:/SS Yeah. I told mom they were going to [be] putting on a play and I need a new kusbuk, an outer parka because we're going to do the Eskimo dance. I didn't know... Here I was making different motions than they were, pretending I was washing clothes, wringing them and hanging them. [Laughter.]

Q:/JM What is the Eskimo dancing?

A:/SS There's a story in every movement you make and every sound, and every drumbeat. The drumbeat might sound like it's all the same but listen close to the tap and the beat, the words that he says. It's more or less, sometimes monotone a little bit....

TAPE ENDS. END INTERVIEW