

## KNOWLEDGE OF NATIVE ELDERS - Margaret Eskilida of Chitina - April 14

During this class we viewed slides of Chitina and the surrounding area taken by Caty McClellan during the summers of 1954, 1958, and 1960. Some of the comments made by Margaret concerning the slides were as follows: After soaking a moose skin it was hung up to dry and a sharp rock was used to scrape it clean. Birch bark baskets were made by <sup>heating the</sup> bend-<sub>bark</sub>ing the corners without cutting the bark - spruce roots, willow, high-bush berry bush, knik-knik and dyes were all used for decoration. Old time baby carrier/ hanging cradle was made out of birch bark and lined with grass, moss, sheepskin or blankets. The rough edge of a tanned hide was cut and used as rope - sometimes they would weave several strips together to make a long rope. Nothing was ever wasted. Rabbit skin/ fur and sometimes squirrel were used to line boots, mittens and coats. Girls entering womanhood wore fringed hoods that used to be made of fine skin. Margaret's mother made Margaret's of felt, and it was decorated with buttons, etc. Margaret wore it for three months. Women used to wear a "uehl" (sp?) - a string worn around the neck that they tied a new knot in each day. After thirty knots were tied (a month) they would begin a new one. Girls had to wear a belt around their waist (a string). There was much work to be done - hauling water and wood, lots of sewing, making things - you had to be fast and neat and not wasteful. Once you started something you had to finish it - this was all part of the training to be passed on. Margaret recognized many people in the slides including Tinas Charlie (sp?) wearing his chief's coat with many buttons and dentalia shells. In earlier times people used big Russian trade buttons that they got from the Russian store in Cordova, or from trading with southeast people. Tinas Charlie was Margaret's father's brother - her uncle. He was chief (head man) of the Copper River area. His father (her grandfather) was from Salcha and spoke a different language. People (women) used to pierce their noses and wear rings or feathers in them. They also used to play a game called "denbah" (sp?) that was something like checkers. Pieces were made out of birch or willow. Margaret said it was a very old game and that it had a story and a song that went with it. In the old days people didn't share their names - children would not know their parents' or grandparents' names. When people first arrived in Margaret's area of Alaska (Copper River area) there was one tribe. People then separated off, because of disagreements or other reasons, into the Nelchina group, a group that headed up in the mountains Cordova way, and a group that remained in the Copper River area. These people were said to have engaged in "lots of dancing," and used feathers

in their dances. The name of the plant fireweed (in Ahtna) is similar to their name for themselves - is associated with the story of the <sup>different but equal</sup> tribes. Drum sticks were made of birch - Bill Joe still makes them today. Kids learn songs more quickly when they sing with a drum. Women used to sit with their legs underneath them or with them stretched out straight in front of them. When Margaret was little her family winter camped, but when they built the school then they only did fish camp in the summer. At fish camp they often had to worry about bears, high water - flooding. They camped on a sandbar, so they were always ready in case the water started rising fast and they had to leave. They built sturdy fish racks and marked the water with a stick during the day and checked it again at night and the next morning. They would listen at night for noises that might indicate a flash flood. Margaret worries about all the people who come to Chitina to fish and park down by O'Brien Creek. She wonders what would happen to all those cars on the sandbars if there were to be a flash flood. She said the "tourists" don't bother them much except for some trash left behind/sometimes and an occasional campfire they find with the coals still hot. The fire danger in Chitina is very high because of all the dry brush in the area. When they go to fish camp they take tents, a stove, dishes, pots, a grub box, etc. June is usually the only time they fish - in July the fish are wormy and spoil easily and there is no wind. They use a fishwheel mostly but do some dipnetting too. Margaret said "There's no place like fish camp for kids. They really like it." She takes them around and teaches them what is good to eat, etc. They dry their fish 2 or 3 days & hang it up high but sometimes bears still get at it. She said when they come around banging together gas cans or frying pans is a good way to scare them off.