

## Obituary

### Oscar Nictune Sr.

Oscar Nictune Sr., 97, beloved patriarch of the village of Alatna went to join his wife and loved ones in the early hours of Aug. 20.

He was born July 8, 1901, in Alatna, to Dicajok and Peter Nictune who came from the upper Kobuk River area.

Oscar spent many of his early years in the Bettles and Wiseman area amidst the bustle of the early gold rush era. At the early age of 5, he was recruited for school in Bettles where he received his English name, Oscar.

He learned his many subsistence hunting and fishing skills from his father, but above all else Oscar was a sheep hunter. He proudly shared his knowledge of hunting Dall sheep with his relatives.



In 1924 he married Cora Tobuk and they had 10 children. When his wife died in 1942, Oscar supported his family by hunting, fishing, trapping, and various jobs.

In his early youth Oscar worked on the early-day steamboats as cabin boy, deckhand and captain. He also worked as a sanitation aide for the U.S. Public Health Service in Barrow, Anaktuvuk Pass, and throughout the Tanana Chiefs area.

A book about his life, titled "Oscar Nictune Sr.," written by Yvonne Yarber and Curt Madison, was published by the Yukon-Koyukuk School District. Oscar was predeceased by his wife Cora; children Clara, Freddie, and Wallace Nictune; and sisters Kitty, Lucy and Florence.

He is survived by seven children, 43 grandchildren, 115 great-grandchildren, 29 great-great grandchildren, and two great-great-great grandchildren.

Immediate survivors include son Oscar Nictune Jr. of Alatna; daughters, Elma Sam and family of Alatna, Ann Edwards and family of Allakaket, Bertha and Johnson Moses and family of Allakaket, Kitty and David David and family of Allakaket, Betty Fleagle and family of Fairbanks, and Stella Hamilton and family of Fairbanks.

Oscar will be remembered by all who knew him for his generosity and genuine love of people. He saw only the good in all people and helped everyone he met. His great sense of humor brought joy to all around him and helped him overcome all his life's challenges. He was a proud man whose dignity stood tall above all else.

The funeral for Oscar Nictune Sr. will be held at St. John's in the Wilderness Episcopal Church in Allakaket. His final resting place will be next to his wife in the Alatna cemetery.

ANS 401 Knowledge of Native Elders  
Oscar Nictune  
Summary by Fran Friend, April 5, 1988

Oscar Nictune is the third elder to teach in our class. Today is his first day to teach. He is an Interior Inupiaq from Alatna, AK. Alatna is located on the Koyukuk River across from Allakaket an Athabaskan Indian village. He has lived in Alatna all his life. His mother was from Qala on the Kobuk River, but she born in Noyatuq [Notutak] Lake, and his father was from Kiana. He speaks Inupiaq and English fluently and also speaks some Athabaskan. He was born on July 8, 1901. His Eskimo name is Qayaq. His mother told him that she knew he was going to be a lucky man because there was heavy run of salmon when he was born. The run was so there was waves all the way across the river.

Oscar said that the scientists say that they've been living there since 5,000 years ago. He believes that long time ago people spoke one language and crossed the crossed the Bering Sea. He said Athabaskan people used to live on the Noatak and Kobuk River before they were forced out by the Inupiat people a long long time ago.

People were still using bow and arrows when Oscar was growing up. The only kind of gun people had was a muzzle loader. To get big game they put a little ball into the gun, like a buck shot. To make the ball they cut a piece of lead off a sheet which was about 1/2 inch x 1/4 inch and chewed the lead to shape it into a ball. Now a days people have a good modern rifle and they still get hungry. Them days they never get hungry. They get something to eat every day. They also fished for graylings in the rivers in the spring. He talked about peeling standing sandbar willows for fish twine with his mother. He said his mother would cut the bark at the base then tell Oscar to try his luck at peeling off a long piece. His mother would scrape off the outer and inner bark. Then tear the fibers apart and ply it for twine.

Sheep Hunting: There was no moose, and very few caribou on the Koyukuk and Alatna River when Oscar was a child. Sheep was important for both food and clothing. They didn't have motors on their boats. To hunt sheep in the middle of August in the Alatna Hills they had to leave in July. They lined up the Alatna River for two weeks to get to the sheep hunting site. By the middle of August the leg skins are just right for boots and sheep fur is just right for clothing such as mittens, boots, and parkas. They hunt the sheep in the Brooks Range they went up the Alatna and John River. John River is the easiest way and is still used today especially for hunting ram. They are allowed to get only one ram per season now. They are not allowed to hunt ewing lamb. Oscar was a sheep hunter most of his life. They also used to snare sheep. When snared a sheep it was hutlaanee to skin or dress the sheep on its trail. They couldn't drag it either, so they literally lift the sheep and carry it off the trail. It was bad luck to skin it on the trail.

Getting Trimmings for Parkas: In the old days deadfall traps were used to trap wolverine. With wolves it was different. They found a den and took a pup or two and raised them. They say the wolf started howling

in December because it sense that it is soon going to be killed. The wolf fur is prime by December, just right for parka ruff and trimming.

Medicine People: There were medicine people who healed sick people. They had powerful songs to work with. They had songs for everything. Sometimes they used their power the wrong way. They killed people with it. Today there are no more medicine people and it is just as well. He also talked about how his aunt in Point Barrow lured the caribou to Barrow with her medicine power. It is said that she spiritually pulled her pants down. It drove the caribou crazy. He also told how Joe Williams, Sr. shot his brother Arthur by accident when he was shooting at caribou. Arthur was lying there. Joe started talking to his deceased father and uncles saying, "You were all big medicine men, I just shot your grandchild. Do something about it." Arthur woke up and said, "What happened?" Joe told him he shot him.

Trapping and Trading: Athabaskan and Eskimos used to go to Kotzebue to trade their furs for goods, especially ammunition when the ship came in in the spring. At that time Native people didn't dry the fur on stretchers. When they got to the ship they first had to turn the pelts out such as fox, marten, mink, lynx, and otter.

There was an old lady named Tilaqtaq who never did eat bacon, because when she was on the ship turning the pelts out, a sailor walked by and spit. She saw a pig licked up the spit.

They also brought liquor with them by the fifty gallon drum. That's how a lot of those White people got rich quick. A well-to-do Eskimo named Soluq bought the liquor. People from Kobuk River used to come over to Alatna and John River to trap fur and other places in the Interior. They trapped all winter living off the land. They would go back to Kobuk in the spring. Soluq used to give the trappers a dipper full of liquor. The trappers would finish the dipper full and want some more. They had to trade a marten pelt for each dipper full. They got two dipper full for otter, fox and lynx. They also bought leaf tobacco. It was twisted rope-like. They bought it green and when it dried it turned black. They made their pipes with with long stems made of willows.

He also told about how his uncle Selvik Sam traded a very valuable a butcher knife for a pair of boots, because his boots wore out. Later he shot a moose on the Henshaw Creek. He skinned part of it and gutted it using a curved carving knife. Then he went back to Siaz Creek [Siruk Cr. approximately 60 mi. W of Henshaw Cr.] where Oscar's mother and grandparents were. They went To Henshaw Cr. to skin and butcher the moose. Oscar's mother told him they had a crow bar which they partially straightened for scraper. They didn't want to make any hole in the skin. Selvik Sam called one his uncle as a rich man because he had one steel trap. He set the trap whenever they make camp while traveling in the winter. He usually caught a marten in it. Marten pelt sell for two dollars a pelt back then.

He talked about Noyatuq Lake where he went with Annette Clark, they did some archeology dig there. They found some artifacts about four ft. under the ground. They found obsidian tools and other things. That's where his mother was born. There are lots of fat broad white fish in that lake..

Trading: Oscar talked about selling white fish to Miners at Wiseman to buy groceries at the N.C. Store. He sold the fish for a dollar each. That was a lot of money in those days. He'd buy flour, sugar, coffee, tea and tobacco.

First Airplane: The first airplane to fly over Allakaket was in 1927 on Easter Sunday. It was a twine engine airplane. It was later learned that Captain Wilkins was flying it. He had three tons of muktuk on the airplane. He drifted off course by the wind, he was happy to find Allakaket. Everyone ran out on the river. Some of the men wore only white shirts. They were so excited they didn't feel the cold. The pilot dropped a note. They had to find someone to read the note. Lucky for the pilot there was Eskimo who worked on Steamer Reliance who knew which way Fairbanks was. He wanted the people to form a human line pointing to Fairbanks. They did and he flew in that direction. He drifted off course again but fortunately he found Tanana and he landed there. He was low on fuel by then. The wind is always blowing in Tanana so he was able to land on the river where the wind blow the snow away.

Later that same year was when Noel Wien landed in Allakaket with his stinson airplane. It was really exciting to see the plane land. People got scared only when the first plane flew over. The store keeper asked the pilot if he wanted an airfield tramped down. He said no he had enough power to take off. But we tramped down a field for him anyway. From Allakaket he went to Bettles and Wiseman.

Establishment of Alatna and Allakaket: Both villages became permanent settlement in 1906 when the Saint John-in-the-Wilderness Mission was established by Episcopal Church. There were a few families already living in both places then. Alatna is named for the Alatna River called Alasuq in Inupiaq. The -tna was added on which means 'river' in Athabaskan and -kkaakk'at or kaket means 'river or creek mouth' in Athabaskan.

Games: Football [kick ball] was the most popular game played by the people when Oscar was young. There were other game of endurance such as wrestling. He talked about how Kotsebue used to be the gathering place to play games during 4th of July. He heard they are reviving the games at Kotsebue. People from all over used to gather there to play games. He talked about a man from Anaktuvik Pass who traveled all over to wrestle. He used to wrestle with Athabaskan men. He never got beat so he went to Kotsebue and he was still undefeated.

Storing Frozen Fish: About the last part of August people on the Alatna River build a wooden box about 6' x 8' x 2 1/2 ft. deep with willow for flooring so the fish wouldn't freeze to the rocks and ground. Fish were thrown in there to freeze then covered with logs. They quit fishing in October when the river start freezing up.

Did Eskimo travel up the Old Man River?

Yes, but not in the summer. Long ago mostly Indians lived up there. Oscar said was an old man who used to snare caribou in the summer hunt up the Old Man River. That's why it became known as Old Man River. He was the older brother of Old Chief Moses. His name was Axtexighaq.

Oscar said Billy Bergman showed him where the old man used to set snares for caribou in the summer. There was some dried standing willows there. Oscar said he wanted to chop the willows for firewood but Billy Bergman told him no, because that's where the old man had snares. It was hutlaanee for Billy Bergman to cut the willows. The fur is just right for clothing in August. The meat is good then too.

Oscar got his English name when he went to school at Bettles. The teacher named him Oscar after her brother. Oscar said she was an Irish.