

Knowledge of Native Elders 401
Johnson Moses, April 6, 1989

Today we cut rope. Eliza brought the hindquarter of a moose hide that she had soaked and cleaned the membrane and hair off. First she and Johnson donned lab aprons, then Johnson cut a slit in the middle of the hide, and made a loop for the holder to grasp while he cut.

While Eliza held the loop taut, Johnson slit the hide. There was some problem when it was discovered that the cutting tool was for a left-handed person, but we finally used a filleting knife when we found that all the knife carriers in class were carrying dull knives. Johnson said people usually had a knife that they used for this purpose only. Eliza said it is better to cut rope from a whole hide rather than a quarter, because the rope will be of uniform thickness since the hide thins out on the outer edges. Various members of the class tried their hand at cutting including our visiting anthropologist, Richard K. Nelson, author of Make Prayers to the Raven.

After the rope is cut, it is wound around a drier--Eliza's husband used a twin bed frame as an improvised dryer last week. This kind of rope is used to tie sleigh parts when making a sleigh. The rope is dampened with water, then worked around a post--holding onto both ends to soften. Then, after it is tied on the sleigh, it shrinks and hardens as it dries. It can then be painted over and it will not move.

Johnson says he used to have to hold rope for his mother starting when he was eight. When there is no one available to hold the rope, the loop is wound around a nail while it is being cut. The tensile strength of this rope is very great.

When tanning a moose hide, it is smoked twice. First to roughen the hide in order to get a good grip on it while working on it, and the second time to color the hide after it is tanned.

Johnson got his first pocket knife for Christmas when he was seven as a reward for babysitting for his mother. He was very proud of it and carried it everywhere. He accidentally melted the plastic off the handle.

He was given his first gun--a .22 single shot--that he used on muskrats which were worth 50 cents. He shot two boxes of shells by shooting carelessly and hitting nothing. His grandfather then gave him only five shells and he couldn't get more until he brought in some game. He started aiming carefully and became good at shooting spruce grouse. He disapproves of the current practice of giving young, novice hunters automatic .22s and unlimited shells, believing that they will be forced to learn better, more economical marksmanship with a single shot and a limit on shells they can have.

GROWING UP WITH GRANDPA

He taught so much, he was so smart, you couldn't fool him. He became aware that Johnson was sneaking tobacco out of this store to make cigarettes he smoked on the sly. He confronted him, and Johnson confessed. He gave Johnson a piece of chew for his own with the provision that he only chew once a day. He told Johnson he could have his first at midday while out hunting with his Grandpa. He got sick for the rest of the day while walking. He wasn't even scared when he passed the big trees that he was afraid of because they creaked at night. He came home and went right to sleep and didn't wake up til morning. He tried chewing again a couple of times later on, but never got the habit. "That Grandpa was a smart guy!"

TRAVELING WITH A SLEIGH

In winter, they traveled with a sleigh and three dogs. Grandpa had an air-dried caribou hide with the shaved fur side out for a sleigh-cover. They had to bring it in and rework it to soften it when it got wet. In later years he had a white canvas sleigh-cover. People used to make their own tents when canvas became available. In the sleigh-cover, Grandpa carried his possessions in a wooden cartridge box. They carried caribou skin mattresses that rolled up small. They had a woven rabbit skin blankets with fur on both sides. To make the blanket they cut the rabbit skins into strips and twisted and wove them with the fingers, using a knitting technique. As the fur got matted, the blanket got even warmer. Johnson and his younger brother, Anthony Moses, used to like to poke their fingers up into the spaces between the strips while lying down. Grandpa caught them doing that once and scolded them because it would have messed up the insulating properties of the blanket and made it cold. Sometimes parkas were made like this and tied in front with moose or caribou thongs "very warm."

Everywhere they went, winter or summer, they hauled all their possessions with them. A very important item was the axe(es). He also carried a five foot long drag saw that required much effort to use. "One block of wood took so long to cut--hard work!" Grandpa didn't sharpen it well when Johnson was to use it so he would learn to work hard. When Johnson learned to sharpen the saw, he sharpened it as well as Grandpa did when he was going to be the one to use it. Grandpa's theory was to teach Johnson to work well under difficult conditions so he would be prepared for working effectively in the face of adverse conditions--"He didn't believe in using short cuts."

They carried matches that came in a block of 100 called Chinese matches. Sometimes they would catch fire in the pocket. However, they carried them with them rather than on the sleigh in case they got separated from the sleigh. They carried a bucket made out of a five gallon gas can. When they were out on the trail, they put a stick in the bucket of water to prevent the water from expanding as it froze and breaking the bucket.

Grandpa carried his gun in a moose hide case slipped under the sleigh load lashings where it was secure but he could get to it fast. He cleaned it by means of a short bone with holes on the ends and in the middle. He put bits of cloth in the middle hole and snowshoe lashing material (babiche) through the end holes to pull it back and forth through the barrel to clean it. Later on he had a rod cleaner that he made. "He didn't have that fancy gun cleaner with a rod." Johnson sometimes wonders what Grandpa would think of all the unnecessary junk we clutter ourselves with. "He'd throw it all out." Even big families hauled all their stuff around with them.

They were taught to mend their own clothes and mukluks. Their mother would cut out rounds of moose hide to mend holes in their mukluks and moccasins. "You could see our tracks outdoors with little round spots on them from the patches." Johnson says he never had the knack for patching well. Although his younger brother could sew lasting patches, his came unsewn right away.

Grandpa did the cooking--he wasn't too pleased with the results when Johnson cooked, so Johnson did the outside work in camp. Johnson went down over the bank to the river for water--used a tin lard bucket for a water can. The eight pound lard can with a handle was still being sold in Allakaket in the 1960s. While Grandpa cooked, Johnson packed water, cut wood, and fed dogs all in the dark. After they ate, Johnson washed the two dishes. Then he'd ask Grandpa for a story to go to sleep on.

"Grandpa never told stories about himself, always about other people." He told Johnson never to tell stories about himself. It was dangerous. He never told stories about his success with killing big game. It was up to others to tell stories about his hunting success.

There was an old man who lived on South Fork who would tell Johnson about his grandpa. People told stories instead of watching T.V.

Grandpa and the "Old Guy" would go out and predict weather. They would go out about 4 am--they knew the time without a watch. Johnson's foster brother who had a watch would check them, and said they were always right about the time that they told from the stars. The Big Dipper would point South in the evening at about 9 pm, then would turn around at about midnight. There was a big star that came up at 4 am, followed by a smaller star, and then dawn would come at 6 am.

The two old men would tell stories to each other. If they had not seen each other for awhile, they had a lot of stories to exchange.

Ghededzuyhdlee was the name of the dipper. Boghoyelkkoyee was the name of the morning star.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

When they get really bright, it means real cold weather is coming soon. When they brighten it can indicate that the caribou are very close. Often, when they are bright and close, whistling will make them come closer, and make a whooshing sound. He was told not to do this or something awful wuld happen to him. Johnson is not sure what awful thing wuld happen, but he is sure it is nothing that culd hurt a white man! "You'd better know what you are doing if you whistle at them!"

When they are very far awy long, and very colorful--"like a rainbow" a snow storm will come in a week. Also, when there is a halo around the moon, snow will come within three days.

Marianne Dudley