

NO TAPE

Knowledge of Native Elders ANS 401
Summary by Howard Sparks Nov. 17

SUBJECT: Eliza Jones will discuss burial customs of the Koyukon-Athabascan People.

Upon the death of someone, family and friends would go to the family's home or the community hall if the house isn't big enough, take food, stay with the family members. They sit around and talk, tell stories, tell funny stories. Play cards, sing hymns and pray usually in the evenings. Sing native songs, and share memories of the deceased. This was kept up until the funeral. Someone was always awake during this period. They kept a 24 hour vigil where food was always available. Visitors and especially family members are urged to eat (as they are eating for the deceased). Family members burn food at least once a day to feed the deceased.

The men in the village make a coffin unless family members buys a commercial one. The women make hand knitted socks, gloves or mooseskin gloves or mittens, boots, and sometimes a parka for the deceased burial clothing. On the Yukon River villages they put a hand made bag with toiletries in the casket. The body is kept in the deceased' home or the community for up to five days, usually 2 or 3 days. The casket is usually kept open unless there is a reason not to. A dish of candy and cigarettes are available for visitors. Children also come with family members to view the body.

If the burial occurs during the winter, a hole is dug in the frozen ground by men using PULASKIS.

Burial usually follows a funeral service or mass. While the burial is taking place some of the women stay home and cook for the food potlatch that's held later the burial. At every food potlatch people make speeches before the food is blessed and served.

After the potlatch people from surrounding return leave, but some people stay extra few days to keep the family company.

In times of epidemics in the past a traditional burial could not be given, with many dead put into mass graves. There was a story about how a dying father, alone in camp with his children, instructed his children to dig a grave for burial of their dead mother. He also instructed his children to bury him in the same hole when he died. The children were later picked up by some whites who were passing by.

The elders usually prepare for their impending death by preparing their burial clothing. The elderly women usually put away hand knit socks,



hand made boots and mittens, a parka and a set of new clothes. They also talk openly about their death.

The elderly usually instruct their children and other family not to cry to much for them. It is believed that crying to much have an effect on the deceased person. Eliza remembers when her uncle Chief Henry talking to his grandchildren before his death. He told them to take care of their grandmother. She remembers he joked with one grandchild, telling him, "you have to take care of the your grandmother. You know Jacob (another grandchild) couldn't take care of her because he has to many girl friends."

The traditional belief of the travel of the deceased is "up river". Everything in Athabaskan life is referenced to the river. In most villages the graveyards are upriver from the village as they believe the deceased may pass through the village on their upriver journey and may take a villager with them.

The people always observe Memorial Day by performing maintenance in the cemeteries. Afterwards they have a picnic, burn food for the deceased and then return to the village for a potlatch.

The graves are fenced with sheetmetal roofs over the graves. In the older graves there are little houses that contain valued possessions of the dead. In one of the villages there is a story that people went to the grave before a dance to borrow an accordian. They burned some and said they are going to borrow the accordian. They returned it the next day.

A memorial potlatch is usually held by the family about a year after death.

Two villages on the Yukon Kaitag and Nulato have a sacred memorial ceremony called the "Stick Dance". It can't be practiced anywhere else.