

KNOWLEDGE OF NATIVE ELDERS

Sumarry by Edward Ramoth, 9/28/89

The elder Tatiana Saunders went to the dentist today, so Eliza Jones the instructor of records showed the class a map of Unalakleet where the reindeer herds were kept. Some of the reindeer were brought to the Yukon River to be shared with the villages of Kaltag, Nulato, and Ruby, a mining town.

Tatiana Saunders grew up on the Koyukuk River and on the Yukon River during the summer. She's been living in Nulato and in camps near Nulato since her marriage. One such camp is the "9 Mile Camp" which is nine miles below Nulato on the north bank of the Yukon River that Tatiana talked about in her stories. Eliza also mentioned that there are Native place names in areas traditionally covered by Native people. She mentioned that there are Athabaskan place names in the Norton Sound area. In the old days people had many camps, and moved as the situation called for.

Eliza passed around model snowshoes, sinew, fishnet shuttle and mesh-measuring board, hide-skinning tool, cutting tool, that Tatiana had talked about, (this was in the last class). Floats is called k'edeegguye by Eliza and K'eelusge' by Tatiana. They are usually made from big spruce root. When netting fishnet the mesh is counted by knots for example 26 knots deep for dog-salmon net and the stretched net is measured from fingertip to the armpit, or in Eliza's case, to her nose. Rocks were used as sinkers, flour sacks and gunny sacks were unravelled and braided for the bottom and top lines.

Someone asked how fishnet were set without a motorboat. She said they had to row very hard into the current. She told a story about a man and wife, who were putting in a net. She tied the net on the beach and set the net then he kept rowing, and wonder how long the net was. He got near the bend and was getting tire, so he yelled out, "How long is this fishnet?" He looked up and found that the net had come loose on the beach and was dragging behind the boat as he was rowing around the riverbend.

She also talked about how everything were recycled, such as gas cans and gas boxes. Boxes were used for grub box and storing things. Gas cans were used for many things including shallow and deep cooking pans, water pails, dog pans, "dogpot".

The three things that had an impact on natives and help made changes were:

1. Miners trading post, people trapped for fur to trade.
2. Men worked for wages at mining camps and on riverboats as pilots and deckhands during the summer. She also mentioned that some men acquired their last names from the line of work they're in such as Pilot and Captain. Eliza told a story about two brothers whose sir names were

Pilot and Captain. When they had a problem with their inboard motor and didn't know how to fix it. The wife of one of them complained, "What do they call you Captain and Pilot for? You can't even fix the motor?"

3. Formal education had a tremendous impact on Natives due to the fact that people had to start living in the villages.

She said a lot of people died of tuberculosis. Also during contact the Native people didn't have immunity against a lot of sickness.

Christianity also had an impact Native people.

Knowledge of Native Elders ANS 401

Tatiana Saunders

Summary by Agnes Sweetsir

October 3, 1989

During the first part of the class, Tassie discussed 'food process', the problem of people experiencing a change in diet when leaving the village. The major part of the class period, Tassie talked about 'toys' and ways that children were entertained during her childhood. In recounting the area she played in which was across Koyukuk she told the story of the channel across Koyukuk was made. There were certain things that children were not allowed to do; sliding down the river bank was one and Tassie shared the sad story of why this was so.

Tassie had some training as a cook; although because she did not want to take someone's job or relocate, she never worked in the area.

Tassie shared with us a personal account and some problematic experiences she had which had to do with a change in diet. All Alaska natives eat different foods. For example, Tassie is use to bear, ducks, moose, and fish. Traditional cooking is done very simply with little salt, pepper, onions and macaroni, rice and/or potatoes. When people, particularly elders come to town for medical or other reasons, they eat foods that they never ate before such as various spices and greens. They are not aware of the ingredients included in what they eat. As a result of this change in their diet, they get sick. Tassie recommends that cafeterias and restaurants have menus for special diets.

When Tassie was a child, there were not toys. They made their dolls out of grass hedges. They would clean them up using the grass for the body and the combed roots for the head. Children use to fight for cans and bottles which were rare treasures in those days. Boys use to pretend they were hauling meat; for the meat they used bark. They use to make snow houses and pretend they cooked the meat and had potlatches. Tassie thinks that nowadays, kids have too many toys. "They get too much and have no time to learn our ways. Kids use to stay in camp and learn the way of life." Kids use to enjoy trapping, fishing, snaring, and hunting.

In recalling her old playgrounds; Tassie shared with us the story of how the channel across Koyukuk was made. The river use to come by Mineelgadza Toh. Across Koyukuk was land. Below Bishop Mountain, the river was very crooked; it looked like the river should have made a short cut through there but it never did. There was an old man who came down from up Hog River. He had lots of stuff in his canoe. He had to drag his canoe and carry all his stuff through the portage. He got tired and mad. In his anger he looked back and blew and spit at the portage. He took off his parka and in native he called for a thunder storm. With that he went across to Koyukuk; at that time it was clear across from Koyukuk. The next day there was a thunderstorm and it lasted one month. The water raised to almost flood level. The current was strong caving the bank and making a new channel. The next summer the river got wider and the current weakened. Tassie believes that the bad spirit that that medicine man put there remains. Once in awhile it appears. She's heard that fishermen who were seining have seen it across Koyukuk. From this time which was about sixty years ago, there has been an island on front of Koyukuk.

Tassie recalls her family being poor when she was young and she had

nothing to sew with. They use to clean and boil the cotton sugar and flour sacks until they were pure white then they ripped them strand by strand to make thread. At one time, Tassie ripped and twisted a fifty-pound flour sack to make her first grayling net. Tassie demonstrated in class how her mother taught her how to make a fish net. She was about 11 or 12 years old when she made this net. She worked on it all winter when she had nothing to do and in the Spring when they went to see her grandparents she was proud to show her accomplishments. Her grandmother was always interested in what Tassie was doing in her pass time. For the floater and sinker lines, she ripped a gunny sack. For the top line she braided the string. For the bottom line she twisted cotton thread with it to make it stronger. Her grandpa made wooden floaters out of cotton wood bark. Tassie either gathered long narrow rocks or bagged gravel for sinkers.

Tassie recounted finding an old discarded beaded slipper and one side mitten while she was cutting grass. She cut off, strung by color and washed the beads. From her mother, she took skin and needles. She saved the last of the candles and made her own candle and each night after everyone was asleep she would get up and bead. After she was done, she proudly presented this too her mother admitting she 'stole' the skin and asking for more to make moccasins. Her mother then taught her to make her first pair of *kkatsu*.

Tassie recalled being forbidden to do certain things. She was not allowed to touch fish, encouraged to keep off the water and not to wash baby diapers. Hopefully this would prevent her from being lazy. Tassie thinks that maybe that's why today she enjoys always sewing, beading, and knitting.

During her childhood, Tassie and other children were told not to play with fire and to watch what they ate. They were never to slide down or play on the river. To explain the danger and reason for this rule, Tassie told the story she heard as a child. This story was about a child who had a fatal accident while sliding down the bank. The child slid into and was punctured by a frozen twig. Despite the efforts to save her life, the child died.