

Elder-in-residence, ANS 401
Tassie Sounders
Summary by Sally Hale 10/10/89

On this day Tassie sang several songs which she composed. She explained that some songs are composed in honor of an individual who is deceased. These songs are sung in public for the first time on the occasion of a memorial potlatch or Stick Dance. Preparation time for the Stick Dance may take a year or more. The women sew lots of items and new songs are composed. On the first night of the Stick Dance all the new songs are sung. They end the evening by singing old songs, some of which are very old.

Tassie described how difficult it is to compose a song. Most difficult is finding the tune, this could take a long time. After the tune is found, words are put together in verses. In the verses the words speak of some of the individual's good qualities and speak of something the individual did in life. Tassie said when composing a song she tries to put easy words into the verses, so that it would be easily translated. Tassie said it is more difficult for her to compose a song when she is asked to, but when she is doing it on her own it comes easier. Tassie told of having difficult time finding the tune to songs she was composing for Vivian Peter and Andrew Demoski. Finally she was in her kitchen cooking when someone drove pass her house fast on a snow machine or four wheeler. Right then the tune came to her. Tassie ran to the bedroom where she had the tape recorder ready and began to record the tune, just as she was putting the words into the tune she had to stop, because in her excitement Tassie forgot to turn off the stove, and her cooking was burning s

The first song Tassie sang was one that she composed in memory of Vivian Peter. Tassie was in her teens when she first met Vivian. Vivian was so kind and spoke so sweetly to everyone. From the first meeting, Tassie thought of her as a mother figure. Vivian Peter used to put up lots of food, more than enough for winter survival, so she can help others with the surplus food. When winter came and someone had a need for food they would come to her and ask and Vivian would willingly give. In the song Tassie said "mama" as if Vivian's daughter was singing the song herself. Vivian became ill shortly after her husband's Stick Dance. The last time Tassie saw Vivian, she encouraged Tassie to be happy and that she was only going for a test. Shortly afterwards Tassie heard that Vivian had died in Fairbanks. Thats what the last verse is say, "You went away telling us to be happy."

The second song was for Ethel Brush and two brothers, Ginger and Tony Semaken. Ethel Brush had five daughters and one son. She raised her children alone, her husband had left her years before when the children were small. Ethel did not have a job, but she would work for people in the

village, in this way she was able to provide for her children and raise them. Everytime there was something going in the village, like dog races and basketball tournaments, Ethel would open her home to the visitors from out of town. She would cook from morning to night. The two boys Ginger and Tony would organize the activities to be held. They did this by going around the village and find out what each house was preparing for potluck or potlatch. They would also build a fire in the Community Hall and making sure the hall gets cleaned up. Both Ethel and the two boys did not have parents, they were orphans. So in the song Tassie said, "There is no one who did things in the same spirit."

The third song she sang was what she composed in memory of William and his father Andrew Demoski. William went down to Grayling with some friends and stayed there from spring to early summer. While in Grayling he drowned. His father Andrew Demoski was the Chief of Nulato. He built the high school in Nulato, which was later dedicated to him. He was also instrumental in moving the village to the new town site. Here again he wanted to do something for the people. The next project he planned on was to get running water in the new village. But before he could begin this project he became seriously ill and passed away. In the song the main verse asks, "Why didn't we celebrate his leadership? Why didn't we try to cheer him up?" For the son, William, Tassie said, "He went downriver in good spirits". She sang another song that she composed for Arthur Peter and his nephew Rudolph Esmailka.

One song Tassie sang was a very old song which has been handed down from one generation to the next. This is an example of how songs are passed on.

The last song she sang was a song she composed for Pauline Peter's son who died while in the army.