

Alaska Native Elders
Chief Peter John of Minto
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by Teresa Johnsen

The past is hard to explain how the Athabascan people were before the "white" man.

Chief Peter Johns great grandfathers never stayed in one place because they had to feed the family. Everything now is done by machine, then they didn't have them. If you use your memory you will understand the true meaning. Now everyone writes everything down.

The things his great grandfather lived by is what he calls the history. How he kept track of the days, months, and years. Where they got the names for things is very important in life. Your grand children are going to one day ask these questions and what if the answers are not in the library?

Peter John remembers when he talked about where the Athabascan Indians picked wild potatoes. This has an Indian word with special meaning. All the Indian names and the things that are connected to life is important to the Athabascan. The Athabascans say that the moon covers the dog with his blanket because they are so close together. When the moon does this they are expecting cold weather. This is an understanding that the weather is changing. When the sun is setting it shines on the land that already past for a reason. There is going to be bad weather.

It is very important to have these things written down for our grand children even if they don't seem important right now.

How can you tell if it is going to be cold weather?

The northern lights, when it comes down and starts to move. It's kind of a red light. There is a song by the Athabascan Indians concerning the northern lights. "The first electricity down in Nenana there was a song for, 1917."

Before the post office came to Alaska the Athabascans already had a song for it. How they got it was hard to understand.

1929, when he first saw the airplane he didn't know what it was. "People were going crazy wondering what was going on."

If your going to live by the country you have to understand the surroundings and the animals. The "white" people say if your going to lead a Christian life don't talk about the animals. He believes that is wrong.

You are foolish if you play around with grizzly bears. One time he shot one with a 30-30. "It was like feeding him candy." His great great grandfather use to talk to the bear in his Native tongue. "When they see it coming they talk to it like they are talking to a man, when they say things they give it everything they got." Now if you stand up to grizzly bear you won't think you are

going to live through that day. Then it was nothing for them. Then his grandfather depended on whatever he caught because it was something to eat, he didn't turn back for anything. They lived like this many years ago, not because they're great, but because that was they way they were trained.

If a person joins the army he must be healthy and strong, if he falls down he is not going to make it. When the American soldiers landed on Attu, some of the soldiers were Athabascans. The Army didn't tell them what was going to happen or where they were. One of the boys told him one night he heard a crow. When you hear a crow that means trouble. Its going to mean sickness or war. That was how they got their message.

When an owl comes to camp bringing a message you say an Indian word that means you don't understand what your saying and have the owl repeat the message. The owl doesn't bring the message for the whole village but to a single person, then he leaves. The Athabascans depended on these types of messages from the animals of the land to understand what is happening in this world. When the fox comes to camp and starts to make noise that mean he's bringing a message.

What are other ways to tell about the weather?

The animals and little creatures of the land should be respected. Everything in this world that is made is based on the creatures of the land.

When it is fall time and the animals are ready to hibernate you can tell what kind of weather it is going to be because of its house. If the hole in the beaver den is covered that means it is going to be cold all winter. This is related to what the "white" people do today to prepare for an atomic bomb, making a better shelter. The beaver also prepares for a long winter by putting a lot of feed into the water.

There are superstitions about the beaver. A woman is not suppose to drink while carrying a baby. In the Athabascan way, a woman is not suppose to eat beaver because the babies are not born healthy. The beaver is water animal and it hibernates.

A woman is also not suppose to eat bear meat because it hibernates. The bear cleans itself out before it goes into the den so it can prepare itself for the winter sleep.

There are too many things in the Athabascan culture that has been forgotten altogether. Suppose if an airplane drops you in the wilderness these things (understanding the true meaning of life) will help you. When he used to go out hunting without a gun and see a rabbit the way he got it was to throw a stick into the air and run to hole that the rabbit went in to then set a snare there. There is always a way to do things. You may not always have it written down when the situation comes. You have to have it in your head.

How do you help yourself when your out alone?

You have to prepare. He camped out before in 35-40 below zero without a blanket. Don't expect anyone to give you one. He has seen many people camp out without no food. Those days can happen again, and people are not prepared.

When you went out how did you set up camp?

[shelter]

There are several ways to set up camp. Put up spruce and bank bank it with snow and have a fire. Sometimes when you have a big fire you take the hot ashes away and cover in with green, then you fix your bed. If you get a caribou or moose you can sleep in the skin, but you have to be careful it doesn't freeze to the ground with you. To make sure you don't you drape the hide over sticks.

If your going to make camp what kind of place do you pick?

A lot of time you don't have time to look for a place because it is too late. Dry spruce trees is good but it throws too much sparks. Dry willow wood also has too much sparks. The best is dry cotton wood for a good fire.

Peter John remembers long ago when he went camping and the people had nothing to eat, just tea and sugar. They camped out without blankets and breakfast and supper. The next morning the people did not get a caribou except for himself. The people gathered around it and then there was nothing left. They cooked the whole thing. That was the way it was back then, almost starvation.

The Athabascans don't like to talk about because they don't want to live through that again.

Was everything saved from the game?

Yes, everything. In August the people went out to hunt because they had to have clothes and tents. They traveled all the way to Canada, even the women. The women that went with the men had to tan all the skins that the men got because tanning make the skins lighter and they could pack more. It had to be done right away.

Then they had warm blankets not the kind of blankets we have now but a knitted blanket of skins. Nobody practices this now.

When the tribe moved they consisted of about ten families. They did this to help each other and the old people. When the hard times were over they made a big potlatch. It was held on a Sundays. To keep track of the days they had a stick for each day and on the Sunday they crossed it. On that Sunday they picked the best meat and made Indian ice cream. While the ice cream is being made the caribou song is sung. You are not suppose to dance this song. The song is made by the caribou and someone is singing it for the caribou. You have to understand the meaning of the song before you sing it for it to mean anything.

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The Indian ice cream is made out of marrow and dry meat. It is made by women and men. The men mix the ingredients and the women prepare the ingredients. A long time ago it was made in a water proof birch bark basket. If you are going to make it with caribou you sing the caribou song, if you are going to make it with moose you sing the moose song.