

Sandi Bell
Native Elders
02-07-90

Meeting with Peter John And his wife Elsie at the Cooper Lane House, on Tuesday 02-06-90. Introductions to Peter and his wife were made, then the interview with the elder began.

He started out by telling us what is important in life is what you get out of life. Watch out for ourselves. We have to learn what life is and never forget what we're told. Don't make the same mistakes twice, you can't be perfect all the time, but understand and learn from the past. "I beleive in God the Father all mighty, through him I live" Peter said as he began his story telling. Questions and answers going both ways were a great learning session for everyone.

"There was always food on the table and it was hard work to get it too. You must understand, respect, and know the animals. I was a good hunter, never afraid of nothing!" He went hunting with a .22 and a knife. He killed a bear with an ax. To crawl in a cave with a wounded bear was nothing to be afraid of. The kind of animal you want depends on what you look for in tracking. Peter used a muzzle loader, traps, bow-n-arrow, ax, what ever it took to put food on the talbe. and caught caribou in order to have clothing. With the first stores in Minto came cotton clothing and conviennce goods, makes people lazy. Bear grease, fish oil,

and moose grease was used for light. The fires were never allowed to go out. White stone caused the spark to make a fire.

A look back on his life prepares Peter for what he must face in the future. He has been offered money for his life story, but would not take it. He says nobody would believe it, so what's the use. Peter has also been offered 2 trips to Washington D.C. but turned them down as well. The furthest Peter John has been away from Minto is to travel to Juneau.

Peter was very young when he lost his mother and was raised by his father at the age of 2. He attended Saint Marks Mission in 1909 for 5 years. He went through the 3rd grade and is self taught from the books and dictionaries that he bought. By going to school you're helping yourself, that's what you need. Your going to go through the same thing, but not as hard as my life.

A few of the dates that he commented on;

In 1909 the first store was ran by Jimmy Duke in Nenana.

In 1912 a man by the name of Jack, a white man, had the first sote in Minto.

In 1915 sold beaver skin for \$1.00

In 1917 Minto moved to the Tanana River

In 1917 there were no cars and only a few houses on the river bank in Fairbanks.

In 1938 the first school was started in Minto.

In 1938 he was Chief.

In 1964 asked to go to Juneau

The chief is not elected but you have to qualify to lead the people. A person has got to think about all the people he leads, not just think about his own family. You have to look after the elderly and treat them with respect. He mentioned 5 chiefs in the past in his native language. Need to look up the spellings.

The way of the Native is very different from the white mans way. It is a hard life and Peter is the only one left that understands the Athebaskan culture. There is wonder in his mind as to how they've made it. "It is the hardest way to live, but very rewarding" and he would not have his life any other way. He is very open to questions and wants us to all feel free to ask what ever it is that he may know, so that he can share his knowledge. Peter is not against the white man, but says the Athebaskan way of life is so much harder. He worked for 14 hours a day and received \$2.50.

Peter is 90 years old and has been married to his wife for 65 years. They had a family of 3 girls and a boy. The mother is said to have more to say about the children. He is in very good health and used to run 28 miles a day when he was younger. To eat a good healthy diet of alot of fat, no drinking or dope and to live the way you should. He thinks today that young people are lazy and that we spoil the younger ones. He tells his grandchildren the trueth

about life. The way you take care of your body is the way you will end up, watch out for ourselves. Have a healthy family, according to the old customs, girls and women are not supposed to eat beaver or bear.

Medicine men are still around, but it is something that is evil and you don't want to get mixed up in something that's not right.

On 3 occasions Peter was invited to leave Alaska, but turned them down. Two trips to Washington D.C. and 1 to Australia. A fellow from New York by the name of Bill Byers went to Minto to ask questions. He convinced Peter John to go to Juneau in 1964 for the Land Claim Settlement. A Lawyer by the name of Barry Jackson was asked to be by Peters side. As Peter walked into the great hall he saw alot of guns on the walls and Mr. Egan. Mr. Egan told Peter to be carefull of all the guns. Peter made the comment that it was good that he didn't bring his hatchet.

Three Minto's covers alot of land, the ground where the University sets today. In the old tribal ways you required lots of land. Four tribes live in Minto today.

In Athebaskan culture the village over 200 years ago was at Copus Place. In 1917 moved to Tanana River, 1971 it moved to ? River.