

H97-66-03 Pt. 1
Charlie Mayse
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Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes
Fairbanks, Alaska

Charlie Mayse talked about the reasons he became a trapper. He wanted to be able to work for himself and not be working for someone else. He had visions of sitting beside the cabin door and watching the river flow by. He has never worked harder for little rewards when he works on the trapline. He has been asked why he goes into the Bush. He said there were several authors that influenced his choice of profession including London and Service. In 1949 he bought out another trapper. He thought this would avoid loss of time and avoid conflict with other trappers. He had prepared himself by reading material on Alaska, talking to old timers and had trapped in the Missouri area and on the western slope of the Rockies in Colorado. He had talked to Jim Berry who had worked on the Kuskokwim. He mastered the snowshoe after a bit of difficulty. He learned how to drive dogs. He knew how to work with farm horses and he sees a great similarity between dogs and horses. He ended up on Beaver Creek about ninety miles by water outside of Beaver Village. He had a main cabin and several line cabins. He arrived July 4, 1949. He had contacted Dick Morris by mail. He flew out of Fairbanks. He learned to dress warm even in the summer on the river. Dick Morris was a big strong man. He sold out to Charlie. Dick had a 16 by 18 cabin with a good radio. There were two caches. Dick had been in France in WWI and had drove mules. He had spent 28 years on the trapline. Charlie never had an injury or sickness on the trapline. Dick once had rheumatism and needed help. Charlie talked about the importance of having several years' worth of firewood on hand. A lot of fuel goes up the chimney in a very short while. Charlie chose to be alone. He never found anyone who could get along with him for any length of time.

He talks about his time on Beaver Creek. Some years were good and some were bad. Some years he made a profit. He talked about the different cycles of the fur bearers. Lynx, rabbits, and muskrats had good and bad years. He found good crossings to put his traps. Beaver houses were good places to put traps. Many of the traps for outside were not good for Alaska. He also used snares. The killer traps were harder to set. He said a thermometer was a valuable piece of equipment. When it gets down to -45 he stays inside and keeps the fire warm. There's always something to be done inside such as stretching furs, fixing dog harness, repairing snowshoes, and sewing. His trap line years were those of mild adventure. He was never frozen seriously, lost beyond the point of getting home again, never had a bad bear encounter, moose problems or chased by wolves. He once fell through ice and didn't know if he was going to get out. He had a canoe upset but his life jacket saved him. Being alone he didn't take any chances. A forest fire came through his area in 1953 but the area has regrown. People have asked him if he is lonesome. He said of course he is at times but he is always busy. The last good fur year for him was 1946. He received 75 dollars for red fox, marten and lynx went for 40-50 dollars and beavers were a dollar an inch. Since that time prices have gone down. He is resigned to the fact that prices probably will not improve.

Someone asked when he would go back to his trapline. Charlie said he hoped to go back as soon as water opens up in the spring. When the birds return and days get longer it is a good feeling to be out there.

He said he had between 250-300 traps as well as 200 snares. He very seldom had them all working at once. You don't bring the traps in at the end of the season. They are just hung up in trees. It took him four days to get from his main cabin to the trapline cabin furthest away. He would run branch lines from the overnight cabins. He had four line cabins and sometimes he would use a tent for a temporary place. He used four dogs most of the time. He knew Jim Berry in 1936. He gave Charlie a lot of information about Alaska.

Charlie said summers are spent cutting wood, preparing trails and gathering supplies. His dogs were fed with a variety of food.

In 1965 he was alone on his trapline from the middle of September until the middle of March. He came back in the middle of April and then returned until the middle of June. He has never had a motor boat. He doesn't like them for a variety of reasons. He didn't have a snow machine either. He said Fabian Carey had one but there were times when he couldn't use it so he had to travel on foot.

He was asked about challenging animals to trap. Charlie said the wolves would be the most challenging to trap. The fox is also difficult to trap.

He took his furs to Fort Yukon to sell and sent some out to the Seattle fur exchange. The fur market is diminishing all the time. He said there are a lot of imported furs from Russia. He said it took several years to build up the lynx cycle.

Someone from the audience asked him how he felt about killing off the animals. Charlie said that you do have a few qualms eventually especially if you make a big catch. From a practical standpoint they are a product to be harvested. The wildlife is put there for our use.

He had moose meat to eat. That was his primary essential. He had fish, rice, beans, canned food, dried fruits and vegetables and cheese. He had a varied menu. He never cared much for sourdough. He didn't think scurvy was a problem.

He would skin the animals and put them on a stretcher. Moths aren't much of a problem for furs in Alaska like in other places. Spruce squirrels can be a problem.

Someone asked about line cabins. Charlie said generally you're there overnight so they don't have to be much.

Dick Morris told Charlie during WWII there was a bad forest fire. He tore out the floor and took out the windows in the cabin and put them in the river to save them. He knew he could build another cabin if he had windows and cut wood for the floor.

Someone asked about how the forest fires affected the fur animals. Charlie said the fire near his place was contained so it didn't have any effect on the animals in his area. It did catch his cabin on fire several times. He had quite a chore getting it out.

Someone asked about trapline feuds. Charlie said it wasn't a problem for him. There was a feud at Fort Yukon that he knew about. He said most trappers respected each others line. The country can produce only so much game so there's not enough room for two people. He thought maybe in the past when fur was at a higher price there might have been feuds. The profession is almost gone but even now it is a million dollar industry in Alaska. He believes there will always be trappers to take the fur.

Someone asked Charlie about his trip from Old Crow to Beaver. He was in a boat about thirteen feet long. This trip was in about 1951-or 2. He got a ride to Old Crow and took

his canoe along. He went as far as New Lampart House. The Frost family was traveling from Old Crow to Fort Yukon for supplies. He traveled by canoe from New Lampart House to Fort Yukon. He said it was beautiful country.

He never had problems with game wardens. They would tag the beavers in the spring. They had to seal the beavers to be sold.

Someone asked about current prices for fur. Charlie said he could guess that it was down. He sold fox skins a few years before for four dollars. The area he was in had been prospected years before and he didn't think there was any gold in the area. Joe Ladoux and others spent a winter prospecting on Beaver Creek. People from the audience talked about fur prices.

There were both black and brown bears in his area. Caribou had not been in the area for thirty years or more. He didn't think there was much caribou moss in the Beaver Creek country.

The spruce squirrels and lynx had fleas. He would let the animals hang out in cold weather to get rid of the fleas.

Someone asked about cooking some of the fur animals. He said he never got hungry enough to eat lynx. He didn't care for beaver. The spruce squirrels are very good to eat. Muskrats taste like duck. There were lots of ducks and geese in the area.

He didn't use packs on his dogs in the summer. He did use one dog to carry traps. During the summer he would board his dogs in the village.

There weren't many porcupines in his area. One of his dogs got a mouth of porcupine quills.

Someone asked about mosquitoes. Charlie said you learned to live with them. He said some years there were hardly any mosquitoes. They breed in the little tundra pools. He talked about the different types of fish in his area: pike, whitefish, and a freshwater cod.

Someone from the audience asked about dog food. Charlie said he fed his dogs cornmeal, fish and tallow. He might use moose scraps, too.

He talked about upsets on the canoe. He was crossing the Yukon River one time with too heavy a load. The wind caught him and he lost gun, cameras and clothes.

Someone asked him if he always carried a gun. Charlie said he usually carried a gun when he left the cabin.

Someone asked if he ever regretted his ten years as a trapper. Charlie said he wished he had started earlier.

He would feed his animal carcasses to the dogs or dried the meat for later use for the dogs. If the blood is washed off then flies aren't attracted to it.

Fabian Carey is on the last two minutes of the tape.