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Tom Brower, Jack Frantz

Barrow storm of October 4, 1963

1960s

Jim Cassaday, interviewer

In March Jim Cassaday was sent to Barrow for a job and he was able to take photos of the aftermath of the storm. Tom Brower was in Browerville at the time of the storm which is about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from Barrow. Jim asked Tom to describe his experience during the storm. Tom said that the morning of the storm he was awakened by strong wind gusts. He realized that the storm was approaching so he woke up his boys and started moving equipment that was close to the beach. He didn't realize it would be the worst storm that Barrow has ever had. By six in the morning the waves were coming closer and closer to his house. He went for fresh water and within an hour the sea had started breaking close to his house. His landing craft which had been put up for the winter were floating and smashing large petroleum barrels. They saw the sea started lashing the old trading station. His family rushed down to the station and started moving artifacts and some paintings before the storm worsened. A big wave came and took off the wall of the building. The waves were now coming into the building and filling up the first floor. They escaped the building, but he wanted to salvage some more things from the building. He was right next to the building when he was lifted by a wave. Jim asked about a painting of his father, Charlie Brower. Tom said they found the canvas about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away from the building. It had to be restored by Rusty Heurlin. Jim Cassaday asked about the size of the waves during the height of the storm. Tom said the gusts were up to eighty miles an hour. He thought there were waves that were ten to fifteen feet high when they first started coming. He saw six buildings that were completely lifted by the waves. He thought about six or seven homes were lost in his neighborhood besides the trading station. Jim said some of the GVEA people told him that when they drilled for poles in Barrow they found pure ice in some places. Tom said the permafrost is from four to six feet below the surface. If there is undisturbed tundra the permafrost is eight to twelve inches under the surface. Jim asked how long the storm lasted. Tom said it lasted about twelve hours. It started abating gradually. Jim said Wien Airlines lost thousands of drums of aviation fuel. Tom thought he had two thousand drums and every drum was washed away along with equipment and materials. He lost \$45,000-50,000 worth of equipment. At the end of the storm he was able to pick up half of the petroleum drums. Jim commented about his trip with Sig Wien in 1944 to Barrow. He remembers Charlie Brower not wanting the CB camp built in a certain place because he thought someday it would fall into the lagoon. Tom said his dad had lived in the North country for many years and could predict that something like this would happen. He talked about the ice conditions changing in the last fifteen years. He said the old ice usually comes into the area in the fall and also north and northwest of Barrow. He said the ice has receded further north and there is more open water. Another thing that he lost in the storm was part of the Will Rogers plane.

Jim asked Tom about preparations that saved his home. Tom said the North Star had come in the first week of September with all their freight. Due to the BLM survey program of the village of Barrow he knew that he needed to move his buildings and business over to the Barrow side of the village. He had warehoused all of his freight received over in the back of his home. He had about a thousand cases of milk that had to be put in warm storage. He had stored it in his living room and that weighed down his home. He believes that saved his building during the storm. He also placed plywood over his windows. The waves were pounding on the house. He knew they were being undermined, but the pilings were four or five feet apart under the building so he was sure they would ride the storm out. He said 1964 had been one of the coldest years. It was down to minus 63 that year. The insulation had been torn out and they could feel the cold air coming into the house. Jim asked how high is the ground level of his home and how high the spray reached. He's about 12-15 feet above the sea level. The tide is only six or eight inches. He estimated that the waves were reaching four or five feet on the wall of the house and spraying over the top of the house. His hotel behind their house was also being battered. He said there was a tank full of diesel fuel that was broken and the fuel was leaking out into the water. There were drums of jet fuel and gasoline coming from Barrow towards Browerville. They were warned by radio to put out their stoves. The oil stuck to the outside of the homes and it was difficult to clean.

Jim asked Tom about a polar bear incident when he was a younger man. During the year 1921 he was trapping east of Barrow. He ran into a family that was living on the Jones Island. A polar bear had come into the camp one night. The bear was wounded by one of the boys and escaped. Tom Goose was also at the camp and hunting. After wounding the bear they started following it the next morning. They followed it out to sea. They both carried Winchester rifles. The bear was ten-eleven foot. It was moving quickly and heading toward the opening in the pack ice. The lead was closed but had holes here and there. The bear started swimming across. Tom Goose went around the lead and got in the path of the bear. When the bear reached the other side of the hole it started to climb up. Tom Goose started firing at the bear but it wasn't stopping the bear. Tom Brower told him to hold his fire and if the bear opens his mouth shove the gun in his mouth and shoot it. That bear reared up and opened his mouth and Tom Goose put in the gun and fired. They later found the rifle was bent.

Jim asked Tom to give him some information about himself. Tom was born in Barrow. His father was Charles Dewitt Brower and his mother was Mary Ellen Brower. He was the oldest of his dad's second marriage. His full name is Thomas Paniattaaq Brower and he was born on March 25, 1905.

His wife's name is Katherine. Her father's parents were named Umarook. He and his wife had six boys and four girls. Six are surviving. The names of children are Maddie, Dora, Charles Dewitt, Edith, Thomas Brower, Jr., Kenneth, Ronald, James Frederick, Dorcas Jane, and Stanley David. All of the children were given Eskimo names, too. Charles Dewitt was given the name Masaak. The story behind the name is Masaak was a hunter who was known for his shaman skills. He and two or three others were drifted out to sea and given up for dead. In the summer as the floe ice was coming in this same group landed on the coast. No one believed what they saw when the group came in. They claimed one of the group turned into a polar bear that brought food to them. When they came back to shore the people in the group claimed there was a bear with them. The people on the coast were afraid of them. The polar bear turned into a man again when he came back to the mainland.

Jack Frantz describes his experience in Barrow during the big October 1963 storm. He was in Barrow working in the powerhouse. The wind was increasing and the sea was running high, but they weren't worried, yet. At about 8:30 in the morning they noticed that the water was advancing to the powerhouse. They still didn't think much about the storm. They moved some equipment up to higher ground. When the water kept increasing they quit work and started to help move equipment. They realized that the water might get into the transformers. There was a low area between the powerhouse and the town that was filling with water. They realized they needed to leave the powerhouse since the water was getting deeper. They kept moving the equipment up to higher ground. They went around the village and helped salvage belongings from people's houses. They never realized the water was going to get so high. There was a lot of spray coming into the village. There was fuel oil mixed in with the water. One of the fuel tanks had broken and was spreading fuel all over the village. He watched a tank move down the beach. The Wien tower fell down. There were a lot of loose fuel barrels that were a hazard.