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Sam White

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Fairbanks, Alaska

Tanana Yukon Historical Society

The very beginning of Sam White's talk was not recorded.

Sam talked about taking off in his plane one evening and there was fog on the field. Jimmy and Sidney Huntington were with him. He saw something in the middle of the field. It was a grizzly.

There was a question about flying in the Arctic. Sam said during the war time he was flying when it was hard to get parts. There was a lot of ingenuity involved. They were straightening out the map of Alaska. A lot of the coastline was just guessed. The Geodetic Survey was working in the winter because they were using the stars for control points. They were using photographs that were shot at 20000 feet. The survey party was from Washington, D.C. They depended on Sam's knowledge of the area. They had problems with their instrument when it was lower than 32 below zero. The mercury would bunch up into a ball. He talked about some of problems surveying in the arctic. They were stuck in their tent next to Chandler Lake for two weeks during a blizzard. They could hear the caribou passing by. They couldn't see them. They were twenty-five miles west of the pass. Sam talked about the nomadic nature of the Inuit of the area. He first saw Paneak in Fort Yukon in 1928. They pitched their caribou-skin tents and could make green wood burn. They would carry two small bundles of wood to start their fires. He talked about some white kids that were being raised in Barrow.

Sam talked about life in Scammon Bay. He thought maybe life had improved lately. The people lived half way underground. The people make their parkas out of salmon skin. They also use walrus for parkas. You had to be careful with the parkas around dogs. He described how they used caribou skins for bedding. He has slept in igloos in Barrow and it was comfortable enough and the people were very friendly. It was close to freezing in the igloos.

He describes the problem of the compass become magnetized. They could be demagnetized but they would become magnetized again. He was flying a survey team and they were headed back to Barrow when they ran into white out conditions. They landed and had to stay three nights. They had to build a ramp to get the plane up the side of a mountain to take off. He was worried about using up gas. He had to fly through a blizzard on the way back. He had to coast down after they ran out of gas and stopped near an igloo. His crew didn't want to stay in the igloo. Sam had to ration the oil for the stove. They were only thirty-five miles from Barrow and they were able

to use the radio. Because of the weather conditions they had to stay there for a few days. After the blizzard cleared up Sig Wien brought them gas. They were back in Barrow in an hour.

He talked about being on the Porcupine at the coldest time of the year. They were sleeping in a tent and it was fifty below. They had rabbits everywhere, it was the height of their population peak. They were trying to chew off the ropes of the tent. They had to pepper the tent ropes to keep the rabbits away. They had to hang their snowshoes up in the trees to protect them. He caught one of the rabbits and put it in the tent to stir things up.

He came down from Circle one March or February with a dog team. It was a hard time for the old timers. One of the old timers gave him a big dog. Sam put him with his dog team. He was a good worker but he would fight with the other dogs. He came into Fort Yukon and everyone noticed that he had a new dog. Old Curtis offered him money for the dog. He took most of the money back to the man in Circle.

He talked about working on a recon team in 1925 with six horses. Once they left Shaw Creek they didn't see another person until they made it to O'Brien Creek near Eagle eight weeks later. They kept running into soda springs that would bubble out of the ground. The moose would come to them to drink. The wolves would hang out in the shrubs. The moose would be cautious since they knew all the wolves were around. After drinking the moose would belch. Sam didn't like the water because it was bitter but the moose liked it. There were mountain sheep and lots of moose in the area. The animals didn't have a lot of fear of man. The prospectors had been in the area. The Indians had been killed by epidemics. Sam thought the country looked much better before the road came through. He said there was a mine near the soda springs. They would send out a hunter and then a pack horse two hours later. Someone asked about sheep. He said there were sheep on all the ranges near Eagle. They were plentiful in the 1920s. Now all the sheep are broken up or gone. There are still sheep in the White Mountains. He talked about the different places where sheep are found. Someone asked about moose on the Arctic coast. Sam said they could be found within ten miles of the saltwater. He said moose have been on the Arctic coast before. The Eskimos have hunted them. In 1955 he saw moose out on the tundra. They eat out of the lakes and they eat willow and other browse. They wander the rivers during the winter. He talked about the moose being killed during the war at Umiak by the military. Sam said it was a shame. Comment about the small caribou on the Alaska Peninsula. Sam said he worked in that area for three years. Sam talked about seeing many bears when he was flying. He would drop off supplies at lakes and the bears would be curious. He could see bear tracks from the air. He said they weren't terribly aggressive. He commented about hunting guides using airplanes to hunt and how unfair that was. There were bootleggers in the area too. The cannery people didn't like them. The bootleggers would steal gas from Sam and also Ken Armstrong. He talked about bootleggers using his tent at Iguigig. Because of the topography the weather could be bad in that area and they would often be grounded. They would have bad fog in that area that would interfere with flying.