

FINAL REPORT

**Oral Histories
of
Four Gwichya Gwich'in Elders
ARCTIC RED RIVER**

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1. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK DONE

1.1 Introduction:

The aim of this project is to tape record the oral histories of four Gwichya Gwich'in Elders. Arctic Red River is a small community situated on the banks of the Mackenzie River with a population of 100 people. The oral histories of the Elders includes life stories about (1) their birthplace; (2) the seasonal camps and related activities; (3) place names and associated stories; (4) information on use of local plants and animals for health purposes; (5) woman and man's year round activities; (6) genealogical chart and relationships; and (7) stories about an influential and memorable Gwich'in person. The interviews were all conducted in the Gwich'in language in the homes of the Elders.

The ages of the Elders range from 79 years old to 70 years old. They include two women and two men. Three Elders, two men and one woman, were born and raised around the Arctic Red River area while one woman married into the Arctic Red River group. The Elders tell their stories in the Gwich'in language.

1.2 Methodology: the collection of the oral histories and how the actual field research was conducted. This summary includes the positive and negative feelings experienced during the field process itself.

During the pre-interview process I learned that the eldest on my list, Mrs. Lucy Bluecoat, an 87-year old Elder was to be hospitalized for a few weeks. Another candidate Pierre Tazzie, a 77-year old Elder

(deceased 23 Mar/90) declined due to poor hearing. This left three elders from the original list to work with. I explained the purpose of the tape recording and the collection of the histories to each Elder carefully. I received consent from 79-year old Hyacinthe Andre, 76-year old Joan Nazon, and 75-year old Andre Jerome. Later I spoke with Annie Norbert to see if she would provide me with her life stories to which she consented. The selection of Annie as the fourth candidate was based on gender and also because I learned from other elders that she spent a great deal of her childhood around the Big Rock area in the Delta and that she was known to be an excellent storyteller. The final selection was therefore based on the Elder's age, their knowledge of the land, their ability to detail the woman's man's perspective at the various seasonal camps.

I began the initial interviews at the end of July, 1989 and completed the tape recorded stories in late March 1990. The taping sessions produced twenty-nine hours of oral histories. I prepared my tape recorder, clip-on mike, notepad at home before going to the Elders homes to do the interviews. The recording times varied from 8:30 in the morning to 11:00 at night. The times of the recording were pre-set and it was always at the Elders' convenience.

At the first interview session with each Elder in July, I explained again the purpose of my interviews. Before starting the tape I asked them to begin their stories by telling me what year they were born and where. I made sure they were comfortable. A typical interview session would consist of the following sequence. I would arrive at the Elder's home at

the designated time. If there were other things happening at that time and it was obviously not a good time to interview, we would agree on another time. I was flexible. Otherwise, we could greet, chat and generally talk about how things were going. I always made sure the Elder was ready before setting up the tape recorder, plugging the cord to an outlet, clipping the mike to their shirt and getting my notepad ready. During the interview I took notes while they spoke (this did not appear to bother them). I stopped the tape recorder when they finished their story or at their hand signal. We stopped the tape recorder for interruptions and loud background noises. After each interview I rewound the tape to make sure it had recorded okay. We would chat some more and set the time for the next interview. I did not push them beyond their desire to tell me stories. I returned home to label my tapes and write in my field journal.

My worst experience in the field happened when my tape recorder started acting up during a taping session with Joan Nazon at her fishcamp in July. I was visibly upset about this ordeal and swore on the spot that I would purchase a new machine the first chance I got. The tape recorder incident did not bother Joan as much. She was willing to tell the stories that did not record over again but at another time. I was relieved and grateful for this attitude. Other observations, not of a negative nature, worth noting included the Elder talking to the tape recorder rather than to me when they were telling their stories. The Elders talked like they were being taped for a CBC Gwich'in Program. Joan Nazon was the only Elder who spoke directly to me when she told her stories. It was hard not to laugh out loud during the

taping sessions with her because her stories were of a humorous nature. A concern had been with Annie Norbert and her obvious stop/start storytelling routine. I know she is knowledgeable about life on the land and can contribute a lot to the information already collected. Later I learn Mrs. Norbert is exceptional when you prepare her with specific questions. She waits for the taping with prepared notes.

Throughout the interviews I felt awed at the willingness of the Elders to tell stories anytime of the day. The willingness to share their life experiences, the knowledge about the land, the clarity and vividness of details is commendable. The easy acceptance and willingness to retell a story when the tape recorder did not record is another positive point. The Elders were cute when they would take the clip-on mike from my pile of equipment on their table and clip it onto their shirts.

After a few days of tape recording the Elders generally started on their own with their story telling. I did not try to steer or prod them. I learned that persistence pays off. In July, there was a four day lapse in taping Andre Jerome. I kept going back at the designated time, he kept rescheduling, I would return, something else would happen, and finally after four or five days, we finally tape recorded the last hour of his stories.

1.3 Summaries of the Oral Histories

The following common themes run through the four stories told by the Elders about the lifestyle of the Gwichya Gwich'in. In the stories told by Hyacinthe Andre, Joan Nazon, Andre Jerome, and Annie Norbert there is a definite pattern to the seasonal camps. The moving from one camp location to another was a way of life for the Gwichya Gwich'in throughout the year. The stories on the tapes are told around this seasonal pattern.

Seasonal Camps:

The following areas were important and significant for hunting and trapping during the winter season. Some families moved up the Arctic Red River in the fall to trap furs. Upon arriving at a certain destination, families would disperse and spread out to different areas to trap. Some families would remain in the area, others would travel with dogteam further into the mountains as far south as Snake River, while others travelled in another direction. Other Gwichya Gwich'in families would move their families up the Mackenzie River to the Travaillant Lake area. Depending on the family size, the men would sometimes bring a load ahead and return to town to pick up their families and make the final trip to their chosen trapping destination. Some families wintered right on Travaillant Lake while other families stayed at the trading post located at the mouth of the Travaillant River. Men would travel to the trading post by dogteam and return with supplies. Still other families would travel to the Delta around the Big Rock area to trap. At various times before Christmas, men would travel to the

settlement of Arctic Red River by dogteam from their respective winter camps to trade in their catch of fur and return home with supplies. These trips were made only by the men. At Christmas whole families would make a special trip to town to celebrate Christmas by attending the midnight mass, visit with relatives and friends, attend a community feast and dance before returning to trap some more. The latter part of winter was spent hunting caribou and the women made drymeat, bone grease, etc. In intermittent years, a family that wintered around the Travaillant Lake area would winter up the Arctic Red River instead and vice versa. Being close to relatives was usually the determining factor of where families located themselves for the various reasons.

After the winter trapping and hunting season was over, most families would return to the settlement of Arctic Red River again in time for the Easter mass celebrations. They spent a few days together before heading to the Delta area for the spring ratting season. This was during the months of March, April, and May. Families would stay in this area until spring river break-up which occurred in early June.

Families who did not move to the Delta for spring ratting, those that wintered around the Travaillant Lake area, chose instead to move to well known muskrat and beaver lakes north of such places like Tree River and Pierre's Creek. The families who wintered up the Arctic Red River moved to town briefly before moving to the Delta for spring ratting. They would travel to the Delta by dogteam in early March, on the Mackenzie River ice.

In June, once the Mackenzie River was clear of ice, families would travel to Aklavik by boat to trade in their muskrat skins, buy supplies, and return to Arctic Red River. After a brief stop in the community, families would move to the well-known fishing eddies located up and down the Mackenzie River. Families were known to return to the same spots yearly while other families moved around fishing at one spot one summer and fishing at another place the next summer. Families simply decided to fish at a particular spot or they were invited by relatives who had permanent camps to fish with them. Fish camp life meant preparing for the winter months ahead. Different species of fish was prepared and dried for human consumption as well as for winter supply of feed for the dogs. Both women and men worked when the fishing was plentiful, otherwise the women worked with the fish while the men work at getting wood for the stove and smokehouse. Sometimes the women were able to manage the wood gathering chore with help from the older children. This freed the men to work at cutting cord wood for the mission, Hudson's Bay Company, N.T. (Northern Trading), or the RCMP detachment for a price. After the women finished cutting fish, they often worked at preparing and working with mooseskins or caribou skins which they used to sew winter shoes and clothing. For an outing, women and children went picking blueberries, cranberries, and other seasonal berries and gathered medicinal plants such as spruce cones and gum.

As the fall season approached, families prepared to move back to their winter camps up the Arctic Red, up the Mackenzie River to the Travaillant Lake area, or down river to the Big Rock area. Some

families moved directly to their winter camps from their summer fish camps while others travelled to Arctic Red River briefly to restock with supplies before moving to their trapping destinations.

Terms of Address, Terms of Respect

Throughout the stories, the Elder's always referred to those individuals whom they were talking about by the correct "terms of address". An individual was rarely spoken about by their given names, "John Getsey joined our camp after Christmas". Rather it was stated "My uncle or my grandfather John Getsey joined ...". Individuals were addressed and spoken about with respect.

Another similarity refers to the names given to the older generation since people in those days did not have names like "Winnie, Caroline, Robert, etc." Instead they had Gwich'in names. If individuals had a Christian name, the pronunciations were "Gwich'inized". There were two individuals named literally "Little Old Woman" and "Little Boy". They were known by and referred to by these names. Of course, when these individuals were spoken about in the Elders' stories they were to as "my grandmother, Little Old Woman".

Place Names

Throughout the stories, there is reference made to "place names" of geographic areas only by their Gwich'in name and not by their English names. Martin House was referred to by its English name once but immediately followed by its Gwich'in name. All well known locations have a Gwich'in name even those that are not in use today.

Family Roles

It is very clear that women stayed and worked around the camps working with fish, hides, sewing, gathering wood, setting snares. The men worked the traplines, went on hunting trips, hauled wood, went to town to trade and purchase supplies. The older children looked after their younger siblings while their mother gathered wood. The girls were expected to learn how to sew, how to prepare moose or caribou hides, how to make dryfish and drymeat. In all the stories, more was said about the girl's role than the boy's role. Also, men and women who worked well in all areas of camp life were referred to as a "smart" person. This meant she or he was capable of working well under all conditions.

1.4 Biographical Information and Tape Contents

Mr. Hyacinthe Andre, 79 years old, was born on the land and he was raised around the Arctic Red River area. After he got married he moved to the Travaillant Lake area to hunt and trap. He moved into the Delta for the spring ratting season in late March, early April and later moved to the Big Rock area for summer fishing. However, he lived most of his hunting, trapping, and fishing life in the Tree River area. He recounts caribou hunting in the mountains far up the Arctic Red River around Snake River which is in the Yukon.

Mrs. Joan Nazon, 76 years old, originally from Aklavik was born around the Fort McPherson area. She married a man from Arctic Red River so as a young woman, she moved into the area in the early 1940s.

Her accounts include when she travelled into the mountains with her parents as a young child, humorous stories, and travelling with her husband from one seasonal camp to another. As a young woman she learned bush skills from her mother and other women at the camps.

Mr. Andre Jerome, 75 years old, was born and raised in the Yukon. He moved around and lived at various locations during his trapping, hunting life up the Arctic Red River and up the Mackenzie River around Travaillant Lake area. He recalls hunting stories, moving from one camp to another, and his days as a special constable with the RCMP.

Mrs. Annie Norbert, 70 years old, was born around the Arctic Red River area. She lived around the Big Rock area with her parents most of her childhood. As the youngest child left to live with her parents, she learned the skills of both man and woman. She recalls names and stories of prominent elders of her days. She remembers moving from one camp to another and names of individuals who were in the group.

1.5 Subsequent Changes Made to Project

I had originally hoped to collect the life histories of the five Gwichya Gwich'in in the community of Arctic Red River. However this was not possible because one Elder was hospitalized and another was hard of hearing and he did not want to be tape-recorded. Therefore I received consents from the three on my original list plus a third Elder was selected to make four Elders.

The workplan originally established was unrealistic. It turns out the collection of the life histories on tape, the translation and the transcription, the typing of the transcripts has taken more time than I anticipated. What is manageable now is the collection of the information, the translation and the typing of the transcript. What can be done later is the work connected with the publication.

1.6 Conclusion

The community of Arctic Red River is my home town, I grew up and lived in the community for a third of my life. Today I continue to return home to visit. With respect to fieldwork, I have the advantage over an outside because my experience living inside the community, knowing the people, the language and knowing the culture. Because of this I already have the trust and cooperation of the Elders. There was no problem sitting down with each Elder to explain the project and to get their consent during the pre-interview process. It was obvious from the start that the Elders were comfortable with tape recorders and clip-

on microphones mainly due to their past experience with such equipment. This too was a plus.

It has been an interesting and rewarding experience listening to the stories while they were being told, when I reviewed the tapes for content and again when I read the completed transcripts. The richness of the culture and the language comes through very well in the oral histories. Overall I have collected a lot of valuable knowledge and material.

I concluded the following after I listened to the tapes and reviewed the first typed transcripts. I collected the following information on cassette tapes from the four Elders during the July sessions:

- their birthplace
- their seasonal camps and stories
- lots of place names
- some woman's work
- genealogical information (family tree)
- some stories on influential Gwich'in person

I also concluded there is more taping to be completed. I returned to each Elder, over the next few months, with specific questions and collected additional information on:

- work activities at seasonal camps (men, women, young people, grandparents)
- with Annie go over "terms of address"/relationship
- more details to stories on influential Gwich'in person

- care of children and teaching of work and moral values
- customs re womanhood, manhood
- styles of seasonal travel (summer tracking, sail, dogpacks, boats, walking, etc.)
- from Hyacinthe, tea dance songs
- from Joan, Herschell Island and other stories not taped this summer
- the Elder's favourite legend.

To be realistic, the publication of a book which will include illustrations of seasonal activities, maps depicting place names, genealogical charts, and the Gwich'in and English version of the oral histories will need to wait until April 1991. It now appears work towards the publication of material will occur between September 1990 and April 1991 after all the tape-recorded stories have been transcribed.