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Land Use Hearings, Dinah Larson

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Notes: Original in 7-inch tape, master copy on CD. Produced by Roger McPherson. THESE TAPES WERE PRODUCED AS A PART OF AN EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM NOW DEFUNCT AND WERE BROADCAST OVER THE RADIO FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.

A woman's voice [Dinah Larson as indicated in the tape case] says she's going to talk about mid and late 19th Century because that's when things started happening "up here" [in Alaska]. One of the first things that happened was that the economy changed from subsistence lifestyle to partially cash dependent one due to introduction of trade goods. They traded Alaskan trade goods, mainly fur, and Native people were introduced to firearms, iron, steel, matches, sheet copper, beads, blankets, various western foods and so on. [Break in the recording.]

1:17 [The recording begins again] The recording continues with the lady talking about Western goods that were adopted into Native society: Some items, such as alcohol, were introduced without the Western social context. The whalers and Russians didn't sip liquors or drink fine whiskey but they drank the worst kind of alcohol, and they drank to get drunk. Following their example, the Natives felt that that was one's way of coping with alcohol products. On the other hand, many other items that were imported were used by Native people in their own particular way. They took western products and turned them into something uniquely their own. Blankets and buttons were brought into South-Eastern Alaska and they weren't used just for sleeping but were made into ceremonial costumes where blankets and buttons joined with traditional designs. The examples are almost endless.

Dental floss was used widely as sowing material. Oil drums were used into making all different kinds of things. The Natives showed a great deal of ingenuity in thinking of new, adaptive ways of using the products.

4:00 Trade between the Natives and whites moved slowly from bartering to general growth of cash economy, which fixed prices for almost everything. The speaker reminds people that she is generalizing greatly and that different things happened at different times in different parts of Alaska. The closer the Natives were to a white town or an area, the more they became involved with the cash economy.

Some stores and companies introduced the use of tokens as an exchange for Native products and they were generally redeemable only at the stores of that company. They had sort of a captive trade audience. Many stores also extended credit and many Natives found themselves in perpetual debt to store owners. As more and more white people moved to Alaska, cash and gold became the general medium of exchange. Natives had a variety of opportunities to earn cash and the opportunities were better the closer one was to the White communities.

The Russians had trained clerks and accountants, the school introduced manual training, home economics, and many other things [to Native people]. There were also many people who worked part time, or for jobs that only took a certain amount of time, such as spending a couple of years on a whaling ship. They worked in various occupations. Most people were still dependent on subsistence way of life or on combination of subsistence and cash.

6:14 Being involved in a partially existing cash economy meant that most of the Native economies were subject to market fluctuations. When fur prices plummeted, Native trappers suffered without knowing why. Any kind of depression that was happening on the Outside was felt even more so in Alaska. When prices went up outside, they went even higher in Alaska.

Another effect is one that's not often thought about but it's mentioned: that's the concept of time. The average American live is regulated by clocks and calendars but the lives of the Alaska Natives were regulated by changing seasons, weather, and the movement of birds, animals and fish. That bred an enormous amount of patience and willingness to work for an immediate reward, such as in hunting.

Life was hard and chancy, and Alaska Natives didn't spend time worrying about the distant future when survival demanded that they concentrate on the here and

now. The two opposing views of time have clashed many times in Alaska and will continue to do so in the future.

8:08 Another factor that had an enormous impact on Native people in Alaska was disease. In fact, someone has said that the American Aborigines were conquered by disease. When the first Europeans arrived, they brought in various diseases with them, to which the Alaska Natives had very little resistance to. In certain areas, entire populations were decimated in the periodic, unchecked epidemics that swept over Alaska up until 20th Century. Survivors were forced to band together in new villages that were usually built around a trading post and later around schools and missions. That was the beginning of consolidation of Native groups into larger and permanent villages.

Missionaries established homes to orphans that were taken care of and educated and trained in many White man's ways. Russians introduced small-pox vaccination into the areas of Alaska that were under their control, but that was done to protect the workforce rather than for humanitarian motives.

9:40 When the Russians arrived at Southeastern Alaska, they wanted to convert the Tlingit to Christianity. The Tlingit, observing the Aleuts who were Christians and slaves to the Russians, said that they weren't interested. In 1836 there was a small-pox epidemic that swept the areas around Sitka and the Tlingits observed that the Aleuts and the Russians weren't affected. Of course they were vaccinated. Finally, the Tlingit asked for help and after that, they were much more receptive to Christianity too.

After Western medicine and sanitary practices were introduced to Alaska, the death rate among the Natives started falling dramatically and the birth rate started to fall too. This in turn led to economic problems since it's more difficult to support 12 children than two or three that might have survived in the past.

Certain practices that were introduced by Americans as progress often had hidden traps in them. Building of frame houses was encouraged as the proper thing to do, but many of the houses, especially in the Arctic areas, were flimsy and drafty and one had to have the stove hot all the time, which lowered the humidity and helped spread respiratory diseases.

One thing that should be also talked about is intermarriage. Many men who settled in Alaska married Native women who were a very powerful force in acculturation process. The men helped people cope with the new way of life and they could explain the white man's ideas and encourage their children to go to school. Their children also had a head start in adapting into a new way of life. The men were buffers between the two cultures.

12:14 Many families combined the best of both cultures and there were also individuals in both cultures who met as equals with each learning from the others. One can learn more from a friend in a different culture than one can ever learn from textbooks, talks or the like.

Marshal's book Arctic Village is a good example of a small face-to-face society in which members of different cultures respected and liked each other and got along very well.

Another factor in White-Native relations was the introduction of a different, more remote and impersonal form of government. In late 19th Century, most Alaska Natives found that they no longer set or enforce all the standards of daily life. New concepts, new laws, and new systems of rewards and punishments have been introduced and opposed by members of the dominant culture. Laws generally came from Washington D.C., from people who hadn't set their foot in Alaska. Fortunately, most of the White authority figures in Alaska, the teachers, missionaries, government agents and marshals were much more practical in their interpretation of the law.

In the past, offenders of a particular Native group were punished within the group by means of ridicule and gossip that are still important factors of social control just like they were in any small face-to-face societies. They could ostracize people, banish them or use force in the case of murder. In most Alaska Native groups, murderers were mostly killed by the members of the victim's family and in some cases it ended the problem but in other cases it led to family feuds. In some cases a man was considered so dangerous for the whole group that the whole village would rise against him.

White man's laws seemed arbitrary in view of Native ways of solving problems in face-to-face situations, especially when Natives noticed that there were two systems of justice: one for the white man and one for the Natives.

15:03 Natives didn't bother to note many offenses and handled the situations themselves in the village. American Indians and Eskimos weren't full citizens of the United States until 1924 but previous to that time, under the provisions of the Dawes Act or Allotment Act that was set up in 1887, an Indian or Eskimo who was living so called civilized life, could apply for a full citizenship. If the Native did convince the court that he was "civilized," he'd then become a full citizen with a right to vote.

Last topic is the formal education and the introduction of Christianity. One can't divide the two topics, because early missionaries provided the teaching staff in Alaska. In non-literate societies, watching, listening, and doing were the main ways of learning. The children watched their parents do things and heard them talk about them. They heard stories, myths, and explanations from their grandparents and other elders. They were given miniature adult tools and weapons with which they could practice with because some day, their lives would depend on the skills.

17:17 Young children were indulged and enjoyed but they were expected to incorporate into the adult society when they grew up. Games were an important way of learning. All of the Native groups had competitive games, tests of strength and endurance that can still be seen in Eskimo Olympics. Children were encouraged to improve their own skills rather than compete directly with others. This caused some problems in classrooms where children were encouraged to compete against each other.

When a boy made his first kill or when a girl brought in a basket of berries, most Native groups made quite a fuss over the child. They were now considered to be ready to contribute to the group. One of the most important things [in child rearing] was to emphasize the positive and ignore the first few mistakes one made.

A several years ago, the speaker was in a kitchen in an Eskimo village in Northwestern Alaska and the 6-year old daughter of the house tottered in with a bucket of water. She spilled the most because she was a little girl with a big bucket. Most white parents would pointed out that wasn't the way to do it and that

the little girl shouldn't "mess around" with those things but the father of the little girl thanked the girl for bringing water and didn't mention the water all over the floor.

The speaker thinks that this is one place where the white people could learn from the Natives in encouraging the positive instead of harping on the negative.

19:48 Religion among the Native peoples is an enormous topic and what the speaker will say about it is general and superficial. In general, the Native people of Alaska felt that everything had its own spirit. People had spirits that were entrapped or bewitched by evil spirits or witches, as in southeastern Alaska.

The shamans were the buffers between the real world of suffering and the spirit world. All groups in Alaska had a variety of customs and ceremonies and believes that had to be carried out to protect people and to ensure the renewal of the food supply. Most of the ceremonies in Alaska revolved around renewal of the food supply.

In Southeastern Alaska there were a big variety of ceremonies, many of which had to do with redistribution of property.

Formal education was introduced by the Russians and it was primarily to benefit the Russians, and to provide clerks and worker for their companies. Russians should be given credit for the time after the purchase of Alaska by the United States. The Russians were the only people who provided any education in Alaska. That was noted by Governor [Alfred P.] Swineford, who was territorial governor in 1887. He pointed out to the Secretary of the Interior that the despotic Russians spent over 60,000 dollars a year maintaining schools while United States provided nothing. This was 20 years after the purchase [of Alaska].

22:19 After the purchase of Alaska, Russians withdrew some of the teachers and they weren't replaced by Americans. In general, Russian education in Alaska lasted from 1785, when the first school was established at Three Saints' Bay in Kodiak, to 1916 when Girls Boarding Home closed in Kodiak. The Russians didn't bother too much with what Americans did, but kept on with their schools. During the early American period, some very interesting things happened. During the presidency of Ulysses Grant, the control and education of Indian tribes were taken

out of the hands of the military and given to various religious denominations within the United States. The areas were divided between the denominations and to some extent this was also true in Alaska.

Sheldon Jackson was an important figure in Alaskan education. He came to Alaska in late 19th Century as a Presbyterian missionary. He was very upset for the lack of educational facilities in Alaska and through letters and petitions and public lectures Outside, he finally helped the passage of the Organic Act which provided for local rule in Alaska and made provisions for education of both white and Native children.

24:20 The Presbyterians arrived in Alaska in 1877 and the Moravians came to Bethel area in 1885. The Roman Catholics came in 1888, and there were also Protestant, Episcopalian and Methodist schools and churches, as well as the Friends, and the Swedish Evangelical church that was also represented in Alaska.

By 1888, there were 13 government schools, two schools that were still maintained by the Alaska Commercial Company, 17 Russian schools, and 11 schools by other denominations.

The speaker corrects herself: Harrison Bill was passed in 1884 and that, among other things, provided that there should be local school boards, a commissioner of education, and that “Alaskans could take a hand in the education of their own children.”

That was a staggering job, given the distances in Alaska, climate, and transportational difficulties. Teachers who came to Alaska had to put up with isolation since they might be the only English speakers in a village. They got supplies once or twice a year and were expected to do a tremendous number of things, such as: oversee sanitary improvements, teach English, reading, writing, arithmetic, democracy, hygiene, cooking. Many of the female teachers had to teach shop [?] since there were no male teachers available. They were also expected to do all the paperwork concerning the village. If there were reindeer, they were expected to oversee the reindeer herders even if they had never seen a reindeer before.

26:44 Fortunately, Alaska was quite lucky to get a number of high-caliber teachers. Every profession has its less fortunate practitioners, and unfortunately some of those teachers succeeded only in embittering the local Natives by their high-handed methods and ideas that everything must be done in a different way. The teachers were also suffering from poor textbooks. They were written for children outside of Alaska. However, in some schools they used the idea that one can't teach English to Non-English speakers the same way one can teach it to Native speakers of the language. The university is now involved in a program where children will learn to read and write in their own language first and then learn English.

In 1885, Dr. Jackson was appointed to being a general agent of education in Alaska. At that time, contracts were lent to missions to run various schools in Alaska. The missions provided teachers and the territory provided the money. Most villages were eager for education. They realized that they needed special training to cope with white man's world that had appeared around them and most children were eager to go to school.

One of the biggest problems in early Alaskan Education, which has lasted to the present day, is that people have to send children outside of Alaska for higher education. They were sent to a completely foreign environment where they had to speak a foreign language and were in some places punished quite brutally for speaking anything else. The children were kept away from home for years. Some Eskimo and Indian children were sent to Carlisle in Pennsylvania. They might be kept there for 4-6 years and when they came back, they had a terrific adjustment to make. Some of them didn't make the adjustment but left the village, while others were just unhappy people who never fit into either culture. On the other hand, there were children who did well and managed to combine the best aspects of both worlds.

30:35 The general effects of education and Christianity included the development of feelings of inferiority among the Native people. Many missionaries told them that their ways were totally wrong, their beliefs ignorant, and their ideas all wrong. Because of the technologies the white men had, some Native people thought that they also have the command over spiritual realm. Native people were

forced to give up dancing and various ceremonies and all sorts of things that were a part of their traditions.

Lastly, the speaker has a little quote from the 1908 report to the commissioner of education. It's a quote from a teacher in Wainwright, Alaska. That young man came to Alaska with ideas about how he was going to change things, but after a year in the village, he said that his idealism shattered and that the dreams and theories that work in the South, die in Arctic solitude. He wrote that civilization can't be crafted "upon these people," and that they have to cherish the good that's found from Native societies and lead onto other things. They have to be slow in advising the Native people to abandon their customs and ethics that have been developed in thousands of years.

[End of the recording.]