

Interview with Lee Saylor

North Pole, Alaska

December 8, 2000

Interviewer, Connie Friend

CF We'll just start with the date. I thought it was the 9th, December 9th, I think.

LS Okay..December 9th, the year 2000, about 11:30, North Pole, Alaska. I'll see if it is the 9th.

CF And I'm Connie Friend, and this is Lee Saylor and we're doing an interview here in his home.

LS Okay, what uh? It's the 8th, by the way. It's the 8th of December, correction. Now just exactly what information do we need here, Connie? Just go back on Healy Lake?

CF Yes, the history, your perspectives, what, you know, what you see as outstanding and what you see as, you know that was a little bit problematic and the challenges for the tribe and you know, those kinds of things.

LS Okay, the whole thing with Healy Lake ...The first time I was over at Healy Lake, it was in 1966 and that, that was with my first wife, Stella Healy and that was daughter of Johnny Healy and Jeanie Sam. But in 1966 Healy Lake, you know, the village was practically, the old village on the point was abandoned then and you know, Margaret Kirsteater and her husband, Paul they had built a cabin on the next point near where the village is right now and uh really, just them, they were staying there all year around as well as David Joe. And a lot of other people, they would come in seasonally, you know, fish, as we did, go fish and hunt and stay there, but in a way it's as if Margaret and Paul were discouraging people from re-settling Healy Lake because at that time the old Healy Lake people were scattered. And uh, well, Lucy and Frank Luke were in Tanacross and Abe Luke was in Dot Lake. Jennie Healy was at Little Gerstle. Now, Lena had

married Moses Thomas in Tanacross and that was, you know Ruth's mom and at that time everyone was, you know, just scattered all over the place.

And my first wife, Stella, to her, that old village of Healy Lake was... You know she kind of thought of it as... I don't know how you describe it; kind of a mini-paradise that everything, she kind of referenced it back to that, you know, when her dad was alive and you know it's just the way that, a lot of what I know, that is what she'd be. she'd tell it to you so much you'd get tired of listening to her. But, you know, her dad, Johnny Healy he worked on the river boats. He went from Delta up toward Northway and Tanacross. He worked for John Hajdukovitch, and I think for Herman Kessler and other people running goods up the river.

But uh, well, and also in those times there was really two villages. There was one on the point in the lake, the really ancient village site there and the other they used to call it Healy River or fish camp was right at where you go in the river, right at the point the store, the trading post was on one side of the point and then there was the point and kind of a little flat spot and in there is where people, where people lived and... I think it was Paul Healy and his wife and Frank Luke and Abe Luke. Well, Abe had a cabin there. They built a cabin and there was one little settlement there at that time, and then one over at the lake and probably between the two there was maybe fifty, sixty people. Maybe more, I'm not sure. I could dig it up, but...

CF There was a reference that there were about seventy-five children in school there at one time.

LS No, no, no, probably about seventy-five people in the villages. Yell, um hum. But the children, that one teacher from up Tanacross, Mr. Fleischman. He came and just taught 'bout three or four months school at one time around 1940 or so and there must have been around thirty kids that weren't getting any school and you know, like my first wife, that's all the schooling she ever had and well, you ask Ellen. She never had any schooling and Agnes, they grew up there. They never went to school. And uh, so this was, you know they were petitioning for school and actively working to get school there. And that was during World War II and again, all this is what I've, I've been told and I've seen papers and documents from Little Gerstle at that time that that was happening.

CF Do you remember what they were?

You know that was my wife's oldest brother and the territory and also the BIA. And uh, this, you know in 1946 for a little while, everyone from Healy Lake moved over to Little Gerstle because they thought if they went to the highway, they'd get a school. And uh, you know a lot of people died.

Well, in 1943 at Healy Lake probably two-thirds of the people there died within months. And what I've noticed was the ones that died were the poorer families and the ones with really young children and all the old people. It just took the old people right off the map. There was none, none left after that went through.

CF Do you have any idea what that might have been?

LS Well, I think it was, you know, some kind of flu or respiratory, but they tell me that they'd be bleeding out of the nose and mouth and sometimes even the ears and it hit Tanacross at the same time, close, you know close to the same time, but they had the army doctors there. That was the army base right across the river there and the same, like Northway. But the kids and people died then at Tanacross, but it didn't take 'em like Healy Lake and at that time, you know, Stanley Young was running the store there, the trading post and he went out and sent people out several times saying, "Everyone's sick. They're dying in Healy Lake", and no one ever came in to them. It about run its course and there's graves up in that hill that are just unmarked from that time. They could just barely dig a hole and dump people in. That, you know, Mary Healy, she, she died, her daughter and five children, all of 'em. Ellen probably told you about some of that her kids dying and Blind Jimmy and Selene going. Old Sam and Belle Sam and Annie and all those old people. Josie Healy. I've got a little notebook with uh, someplace that Arthur Healy had written in and it was May 1943 and he was saying one place, you know Belle Sam died that day and then uh, Selene died and you know just little notes in that. And uh, you know he was sick at that time with TB. So uh, this uh, that, that thing kind of has, I think it's marked all the people in

Healy Lake and what's been passed down on it and there's another thing that I just kind of uh infer, you know that old chief Healy, you know he died in 1928 you know the year after that big potlatch they put on over there and he kind of ran that territory with an iron hand and you know he did not like any gold miners. You know he didn't, he harassed them and tried to get the prospector just out of his country. A trapper, that was okay or someone like John Hajdukovitch, you know trader and guide, some one who could hire some of these people, but he didn't like gold miners. It wasn't like...Healy Lake wasn't like *Ketchumstuk* where they'd go over to Chicken and work for gold miners and hang around Chicken. But uh, sometimes I think that Old Chief Healy built up some ill will towards Healy Lake at that time by taking that attitude. So I don't know this for sure, but it's just something that I, that I get a feeling that maybe he had.

CF Do you think that disease might be related?

LS No, no, that disease...Maybe no one coming in might have been related, but uh.

CF I was thinking like with small pox blankets and ...

LS No, no, it's just uh, that sickness came up with the army and it spread to the...and I think it's all there is to that.

But anyway, it was there you know, during the sixties that Healy Lake started becoming a village again. Now well, uh, you know my wife had an allotment over there and we started building on it and about that time, you know, Josephine....Well, anyway, it was Margaret's daughter, Josephine was living over there now and anyway her and her husband built a house and David Joe, who was over there at that time started building a community hall. And really the present village dates from that and some of the people that had moved out, started comin' back eventually. But uh, I think that even back in those old days that Healy Lake people kinda tended to disperse. They'd be all there and there'd be something like a disagreement and a bunch would move, move. Well, Sam and them moved up to Sam Creek for a while, there by Dot Lake. Chief Joe made himself another little village at George Creek. Around 1930 you had Healy Lake

Village and a couple people over by the trading post and you had Chief Joe over at George Creek and you had Old Sam up at Sam Lake and some people with each of them. But it was only uh, oh, God, I forget the exact year, but it was 1937 or '38 that everyone from Sam Lake moved back to Healy Lake.

Well, you know, maybe I should ...with Healy Lake, maybe I should go way back. These are stories that I've heard from Jeanie Healy and Abraham Luke who, you know, who learned them from Old Sam and his brother, *Katba*, Little White Man, they called him.. And you know during that time when that sickness hit, he was the oldest man in Healy Lake in 1943, and he died during that sickness. But it, really it goes back to that Old Chief Healy's father and Old Sam's father, the one that they called him *Thek*. I think uh, it sounds like those two were the most important men way back for that area. And another one would have been uh, uh, Jeanie Healy's grandma, her and Lucy Luke and Eva Luke and Lena, their grandma. She was from that Healy River area and she was, you know, a relative of Old Chief Healy's mom. But she married down to Salcha, or it might have been Salcha or Chena, but down river and she was ... and she had three kids down there, two girls and a boy and her husband died. Now like is often the case and I've heard this story from different places with different peoples. Her husbands' relatives weren't treating her good. They were mistreating her and using her as a slave, not allowing her to re-marry or anything. She took her kids and she went back to Healy River.. At that time, from what I gather, is uh, you know, Chief Healy was chief by then. His dad was gone. But anyway, these three kids she had, the boy was, you know, later known as Chief Joe. The one girl was Belle which married Old Sam, well, one of Old Sam's brothers first and later Old Sam and uh, that that one, Belle was mother to Margaret Kirsteatter's mom, Agnes, to Jennie Healy, Lucy Luke, Eva Luke and Lena Thomas. And Chief Joe, his only descendent now is David Joe and his son, Alex there in Delta Junction. And the other, that other sister, she married back down to Salcha and she was the mother of John Joseph and Joe Joesph. And uh, Joe Joesph is Martha Isaac's dad so that's how everyone is related, through that. And then, the other one then, and there again, this is, you know, a relative of Old Chief Healy and that is that Annie. And uh, her husband's who's just named Fred and she was widowed real early and then she took up with one of those miners in Canyon Creek and her daughter, Martha later married Paul Healy and that's where Ray Fifer

and Mike Fifer and Gary Healy. That's where they come from. Old Annie and Paul Healy which was Old Chief Healy's youngest son by his second wife. His second wife was Josie who was sister to Old Sam. I know that gets complicated. But anyway, that Old Chief Healy's dad, you know in those times he was an important man and they were considered rich at that time and I've only heard him referred to as *Chit'ai Theg* which uh, just means kind of a tall old man and Chief Healy was sometimes referred to that way, but uh, you know the story is about it that uh that Old Chief Healy's dad, he was, well they called him "stingy" but he'd save things up and that old muzzle loader that he'd just put a little charge of powder in that ball and he'd be very careful, going right up on a moose and and he'd just shoot it and it'd be just enough to knock it down and he'd go up there and cut it's throat or shove a spear in it and then he'd dig out that, dig out that bullet and melt it and re-cast it again because in those days they had that little deal to re-caste lead bullets. And it was said that if he missed, he'd go look and look until he'd find that bullet and then in the moose where it shatters, he'd get every little piece and re-caste that. And this is the story that I heard that Old Sam and uh, *Kataba*, his brother and Old Chief Healy and probably Blind Jimmy were all young boys at that time and uh, they got a hold of his musket and shook the load out of it and got a whole bunch of powder and put it in and loaded up that way. And, and a moose came out and by golly, the old man... It was brush and he couldn't see so he went up a tree and he always took careful aim, 'caue he didn't wanna miss and he shot and the moose went down and he come flyin' out of that tree and fell down, and you know, was all sore and he was really mad and they kept their mouths shut. No one would ever say who did that.

And also, that old chief, he had two wives. And you know, one was the mother of Old Chief Healy and the other was mother of that Blind Jimmy and that was the brother or half-brother of Chief Healy and that was Ellen's step -dad.

So uh, then I heard a story about that. His second wife, some boys from *Ketchumstuk* was down at Healy Lake and I guess she was messing around with these *Ketchumstuk*, one of these *Ketchumstuk* boys and when they took off to go to *Ketchumstuk*, she went along and that Old Chief there when he saw that, he chased after 'em and he caught up and that one guy that was with them, not his wife's boyfriend said. "Hey, just take this woman back. We don't want any trouble". And uh, instead that old chief, he took out his club and just worked the guy over

bad and you know, took the woman back. And uh, I guess he made it to *Ketchumstuk*, but he was beat up so bad, he died a little, a little while later. So I heard that story from there that he ruled with an iron hand there. And he was a pretty tough old man.

CF That was Chief Healy or his father?

LS His father, yell, because Chief Healy and Blind Jimmy, they were brothers. And then, you know Chief Healy, I could never really figure out how his first wife was related up in *Ketchumstuk* because that's the area she must have come from because she was *Diik'aagiyu* clan. You know, Johnny Healy and Mary Healy and Paddy Healy, they were all *Diik'aagiyu*. And uh, you know, Annie and Chief Healy and Belle Sam and Chief Joe, they were all *Naltsiin*. And uh, that old, old Sam and *Katba* and Josie's dad, I'm not sure about him, but I think he, he might have been on, you know, Seagull side of things somehow, but his wife has definitely gotta be *ChaaZ* because, you know Josie Healy was *ChaaZ*. And Old Sam and *Kataba*. They were all "Athapaskan" say it in Tanacross way. But anyway, those were the ones that Healy Lake came from.

Then Old Sam's dad, that *Thek*. He was supposed to be a real powerful medicine man. And I don't know if you heard about that medicine man up Mansfield, *Deshen Gai* how that they brought him back from the dead. This old man tried it. He was gonna come back from the dead, but right when it was supposed to happen, a dog barked and destroyed the medicine so he stayed dead. And he was buried up at uh, up by Sam Creek and I heard a story about that: that his coffin was washin' out by the river so they went out to re-bury him and it's said that when they, that he looked like he was still alive and that even his beard and mustache had grown while he was in there. They re-buried him anyway.

It just uh, there's just all these stories that people have told me about and sometimes I remember more of 'em and sometimes I don't.

But uh, another thing around the time of World War I at uh, you know Healy Lake petitioned to have a reservation and uh, I guess, nothing came of it. It uh, it was just not what they were doin' in those days. But, you know Frank Luke told me about it and you know, some other peoples...

Well , you know when the land claims was coming along, Healy Lake petitioned to be put as a listed village. And this was turned down. I guess the BIA went and looked see how many kids had been taken out for school there and well, there was David Joe and Sarah Joe and you know, Paul and Margaret's three kids and they said that not enough population there and then uh, you know a lot of people had allotments, you know, camps around there, and uh, you know of the original Healy Lake people and uh, when the land claims come up, enough registered for Healy Lake. After what got to be a little bit of a nasty fight it was, you know certified as a village. And uh, I shouldn't comment on that, that fight, 'cause now lookin' back at it, it was, you know it might have even gone clean... You know some of the feelings that came up might have even gone clear back to Chief Healy. And you know, Chief Healy was probably a pretty arrogant man. And he made his own way, uh, he, he was a medicine man, successful hunter and actually he, at his time he supported a lot of other people in the village. You know he'd get their meat for 'em, share his stuff, but uh, they paid for that. When he wanted work done, it better get done.

But there was, you know Healy Lake people staying at Dot Lake. Abraham Luke, they all signed with Dot Lake and then with Tanacross. You know Frank Luke and his family signed with Healy lake and they had the allotments on Healy Lake and George Lake and then later Louise and them moved back there. But uh, to tell the truth, Healy Lake was, you know, I almost figure there was some kind of old medicine power intervened to let that village get another chance. But uh, you know right around 1972, '73 there. it uh, well, I got uh, I was ready to go up and whip some people, you know up the river. Well, I can see now that...Well there was some people that thought it was a scheme by Paul Kirsteatter to control the land there, which, well if it was, it didn't work.

It just uh, well it's like I told someone at one time, cause this was after my first wife had died that it heated up. They wanted me to register my kids and I had to tell 'em, I said, "Look, I could go with." (you know they want me to register my kids at Tanacross or Dot Lake because, " if you register them at Healy Lake you're not gonna get anything." they'd tell me. I had to tell 'em. I said, "Look, Stella never told me she was from Dot Lake. She never told me she was from Tanacross. She said that uh, you know, " My dad was Healy Lake Chief". He used to run up and down the river, bring stuff back from Healy Lake. I said, "Even if it don't get

to be a village, that's where the kids' name's gonna be". And after that they never bugged me about it. I told 'em, "I'm more scared of a ghost than I'm scared of you guys". But uh, that's what went on right there and I could say more about that, but maybe it's better left unsaid, because people recognize that Healy Lake's now, it's a village. It's come back from that.

Well, from those up at Tanacross that used to go to the Old Healy Lake Village sometimes, they're mostly gone now. Doris Charles and Kenny Thomas, 'cause Kenny worked the boats. I even had a picture of him over at Healy Lake there with John Joseph's widow, there in front of a house. I don't know if he had something goin' with her or not, but uh, but never-the-less, I got his picture standing there.

And then, well, I don't know, there was Chief Joe that was kind of in and out of the Healy Lake scene a lot. He had a house there. Right on the point there where you, it's, you know it's kinda busted down now. I can remember when there was still part of a roof on it. But, you know that was Belle Sam's brother and he was also, Chief Joe that guided Billy Mitchell down the Forty-Mile down the Good Pasture. And at Healy Lake, besides the village there at the mouth of the river they had what they called the old village upriver called Ground Hog or *Gai K'ee*. And then Joe village, Joseph Village was named for that Chief Joe. And the Joseph sometimes, *Ketchumstuk* people and Healy Lake people would be there for caribou. And they had caribou fences on the upper Healy River and over by Joseph Creek and Molly Creek and those places.

And uh, old Chief Healy stayed up at Ground Hog a lot of time. That whitefish runs up the Healy River. He had fish traps there and it wasn't far to caribou. And Jeanie Healy would tell me that he'd show up from up river and stay there in the village for a while. And he wanted people to stay there in that village on the lake instead of over near the store because he thought that was bad influence having to be over near the store especially when Emil Hammer started an illegal still there. 'Course that was during prohibition and of course he was sellin' to miners and people on the river that would come for fur or something, he'd sell 'em. And then that Emil Hammer took up with Old Annie. She stayed with him at the store there. Again this was just stuff that Jeanie Healy told me and

Well, you know that old Chief Healy, he had those three kids that survived from his first wife and that was: Johnny Healy who married Jeannie Sam and then Mary Healy and Paddy Healy. I

don't know if I should go into all that relationship because that really strings out into the Mansfield area, *Ketchumstuk* and...

CF: If you can, do because all those genealogies, how they fit together is really good to know.

LS: Well, anyway . as you know, that was from Old Chief Healy's first wife, then he married Sam's sister, Josie. The only child they had that survived till adulthood was Paul Healy. Now, you know, that Josie, when she married Old Chief Healy, she had two kids, a boy and a girl and they were, you know, born out of wedlock. There was no special father to them, but after she was, you know after uh, Old Chief Healy married her, those two kids, they were walkin' over to the store. It was from old village about a six mile walk on that trail, clean around the head of the village over there and I guess they saw some ducks or something there in the slew. It was Spring. There was still ice and when they tried to catch those ducks and they went in the water and they both drowned. So...That was a whole tragedy there. But, anyway of those children of Old Chief Healy, now Johnny Healy, he was first married to one of Belle Sam's older daughters, Maggie and what Jeanie Healy told me is her sister was just sick, just coughin' up blood and she was with Johnny Healy and it was obvious TB and before she died, she told Johnny Healy not to go off and marry some other woman, to wait for Jeanie to get old enough and marry her. And well that's what he did.

And that Mary Healy, Old Chief Healy's girl, she married uh, a guy named David Charlie from over by *Ketchumstuk*. And I suspect that he was somehow related to *Deshen Gai* or to Belle Abraham's mom. But I don't know. It's so many...When those old people died in Healy Lake in 1943, they took a lot of those exact things with them. But anyway, that's uh, that Mary Healy, that's who she married and had one daughter, Emma. And then after that, she married that old medicine man from *Ketchumstuk*, Old Saul and he was bad medicine man.

Jeanie Healy told me that he was there a little bit at Healy Lake and he got sick and he was dying and she said she was tending him when he was sick and she said he was really bitter about Healy Lake. Says they didn't treat him right or anything and she says he put a curse on the village as such, she says he sees the future where just this whole village, all the houses falling

down and the grass growing through it, which it is right now. But, anyway, after he died, you know Mary Healy, she, that's when she took up with Frank and Abe Luke's dad. That's Old Luke. And so that was her third husband right there, which uh, you know after Old Luke died, her daughter, Emma married John Joseph. That was, you know wife of Joe Joseph, Martha Isaac's dad. You know, Joe Joseph. He was a widower at the time, his first wife was from down river, maybe Nenana, but she died over at George Creek when he was staying there over at Chief Joe's little village. Got buried over there. But anyway, you know, he married to Emma and for a while, I gather that Mary Healy just minded their business and tried to run, run things there, so.

CF: So she was married to two bad medicine men.

LS: Yell, well before she... Well, here's a story about Silas Henry. Yell, well, Mark Henry and Rika Paul's dad. You know when he was just young, he came up from Salcha and wanted to marry Mary Healy. He was just a little short skinny guy and they say Old Chief Healy run him off and said, "I don't want my daughter married to a little skinny runt like you". He says, "I'll decide who she can get married to". But I hear that before Mary Healy died, that Silas Henry was a widower by that time and he just moved in with her for a while, so like he got the last laugh on Old Chief Healy.

Then, you know, Paddy Healy, you know he married another one of Belle Sam's daughters, Agnes. And that Belle Sam, she first married one of Sam's older brothers. I don't even know what his name was, then when he died, she took up with his, you know, Sam which was another brother there, and uh...

CF: Do you know if that was traditional?

LS: Yes, very common and also vice versa and I gather sometimes it was forced almost. They told 'em, "You will". If you want to stay here, you will. It was sometimes that...

Anyway this other daughter, Agnes, she married up to Mansfield first and uh, married Gus Jacob. And that Gus Jacob was Silas Solomon's dad's brother and also Belle Abraham's brother. There were three brothers and one sister there. But they were *Ketchumstuk*.

CF: I thought that Gus Jacob was Titus Isaac and Walter Isaac's brother.

LS: Half.

CF: Oh, half?

LS: Um hum.

CF: So on whose side? I've been so confused about him.

LS: Gus Jacob that, you know the four that were full brother and sister was uh, Belle Abraham, Solomon, David Soloman, *Ketchumstuk* Charlie Demit and Gus Jacob.

CF: So then, is that from their mom? Oh, the mother was Belle Abraham, right? No, she was a sister, so who was her mom?

LS: I have to think about what her name was. I have to ask Nancy about that.

CF: So that mother was with Isaac Isaac?

LS: Yell, see that, I think that was his second or third wife anyway. I think that Old Isaac had two wives at one time and they both died and he married another one and I'm not sure which...or where she fit in to that. Yell, but that was a half- brother.

CF: That helps to explain that. Thank you so much, Lee, I've been going in circles over him for years. Margaret was his daughter, right? Margaret Kirsteatter.

LS: Yes, 'cause her mom was Agnes and they had two daughters, it was Alice and Margaret.

But anyway when Gus Jacob died there in Mansfield, again she was havin' a really hard time of it and Old Chief Healy brought her back to Healy Lake and I don't know if he told his son, Paddy who was single to go marry her, but anyway, it wouldn't surprise me a bit.

But anyway, I remember Margaret tellin' me that she thought when she was a little girl that Paddy Healy was her, was her really dad and it was only when she grew up a little bit, eight, nine years old that she found out that he was her step dad and, you know that she was, he always treated everyone nice and you wouldn't know the difference. But anyway there in the late 20's his wife, Agnes died and there he had those two little girls. And that's when, you know those girls were, you know, they'd stay with Belle Sam sometimes. They'd stay with Chief Joe sometimes and got kind of kicked around a little bit. And Paddy Healy, he went up, said he wanted to get Jessie Isaac, marry her, but it didn't work out and when he was comin' back down to Healy Lake he stopped down at Sam Creek and Belle Sam and Old Sam and them were stayin' there then and they had their youngest daughter, Lena, just in her teens. You know, Ruth Woods' mom. And she was always real hard of hearing. Her ears were bad even then and that Old Belle Sam says, "Well, you know I've got my younger daughter here and she not much good. She don't hear well and a lot of things she don't know, but might as well take her along". And so he did. And they had one child, Steven, and he died and Lena was probably not even twenty years old and a widow already.

And Steven died when he was in his teens. My wife told me about that. It happened at Little Gerstile. It was obvious he had TB. And he was coughing and must have been out playin' or something and he came in the cabin. He was just coughing. He said it was just like meat hanging out of his mouth and blood all over the place. And he died right in front of them

CF: What year was that?

It must have been 1950. But he was just coughin' and came in the cabin and then just bled to death right there. He's buried there at the Little Gerstile.. And after that some others caught it right there. My first wife had to be sent to Sitka.

For a while all of the Healy Lake people were staying at the Little Gerstle. And my wife's two of her sisters died there at the Little Gerstle and they died from bootleg booze. Bootleg booze that some guy up at Sears Lake was making.