

Transcript Summary

UAF Oral History Call No: 2024-01-01 PT. 2

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Narrator: Willie Hensley

Interviewer: N/A

Others Present: N/A

Recording Location: Presumed to be the University of Alaska Fairbanks Campus

Transcriber: Micki Sievers

Transcription Date: (02/12/2024 MS)

(00:00:00)

(Random class instruction)

(00:01:34)

Hensley discusses an Athabascan man who was a part of the Alaskan Federation of Native Associations and his view of how things have changed. Byron Malaska [?] from Yakutat Alaska is mentioned as a potential guest speaker.

(00:04:25)

Hensley discusses the Settlement Act War [Settlement of War Claims Act ?] and the confusion residing in Native identity. He mentions he just went to Kotzebue Alaska and held the 5th Elders Conference, where they discussed many topics much of which focus on old history. Examples of survival methods are provided, such as how drinking water was created in winter and how fires were created.

(00:09:37)

Hensley suggests that future speakers should be asked why they are trying to transfer power from some of the youngsters. He mentions some elders are illiterate, have no idea of business, and more, so he prompts the class to answer why would they want to remove youngsters.

(00:10:34)

(Students give replies and they discuss for a while.)

(00:16:20)

Hensley begins to give a final response to the class's prompt by saying he agrees with their points that the spirit of the people has been driven down. New controls are now descending upon the people, before it was environmental but now there's more. Hensley describes that some see him as assimilated

because he got educated in the American way and became a businessman. He believes people don't care much about business and instead are focused on their land and continuing their ways.

(00:20:10)

Hensley mentions in the present day suicides are increasing, more people are on welfare, and economics are worse. He prompts the class on what things are now better in Native communities. Some students suggest material things have improved like housing, one student mentions church but the conversation is mumbled.

(00:22:11)

Hensley begins discussing that in 1966 young men could see how the new systems were moving in and changing life while many didn't notice and understand fully what was happening. Most people continued their normal lives and focusing on survival but the government started to turn the screws on the traditional ways.

(00:24:10)

Hensley tells a story of a missionary who went to Kotzebue at the turn of the century and the people thought he was unintelligent and needing to be taught how to use an axe. The missionary thought the Eskimo dances were fantastic. He met some of the Nuataami people who own a village on the north end in Noatak who hunt beluga. They were fairly nomadic people who the church couldn't really nail down. So missionaries would hustle out there to check out their soul. They held a wolf dance celebration for their visitors in Napaktuktuk Alaska, which takes place in a dark location and the wolf's eyes move to look as though the wolf is alive during the dance. Unfortunately, the missionaries were scared of the practice and decreed there would be no dancing. The dancing was banned for approximately 40 years and began to return in 1938.

(00:26:55)

Hensley says Paul Greene [?] had family at the dance that the missionary decreed no more dancing and he pushed for the dances reintroduction to the community. They had to find a location to perform, and create their own drums which was difficult as much had changed.

(00:29:58)

Hensley discusses how strong ideas and the mind are and how it can affect people. One participant in the old folk's conference had attended and got carried away during the dance and he started dancing. Then he didn't come back the next year, and when he finally came back, he admitted he'd spent a year repenting after the dance because he felt he had sinned by participating. He ties this into the young people had been given the chance to lead, hoping for the best that the young people would not do anything drastically wrong. However, in reality young people have tried to function without the benefit of their knowledge and wisdom. So they want people to consider advising elders more.

(00:32:02)

Hensley states with the absence of a tribal board and tribal government it is hard to arrange the method in which people function. So they've asked the elders to provide a forum to come and ask for advice, particularly focusing on leadership. Asking about leadership is important because it outside the normal channels of corporate activity.

(00:33:35)

Hensley prompts the class on what information do they think they'd be looking for from elders. He mentions that a goal would be to elevate the status of being a board member and values associated because there needs to be a level of confidence in the board members. Historically if the government couldn't get what they wanted through real leadership, they would go to someone who didn't have real responsibilities and wasn't strong in character. So the people who hold positions of power need to be trusted that they can maintain the needs of the people.

(00:37:44)

Hensley mentions the board is at the receiving end of all angers with how things are going, so the plan is to create a supreme court of elders. This concept is still a work in motion as details like what elders would be selected and the process of who is selected, has not been decided yet. When some discussion had occurred, the women conceded that when it comes to survival, it is the men's responsibility to deal with. One of the next big focuses of the group will be bilingual aids in the school system.

(00:42:45)

Hensley states the problem varies area to area and leadership from different regions state it's not an easy problem to focus on because people don't understand their function and role. If people believe their only focus is to make money and keep happy clientele, then all the other issues won't be attended to unless there's an institution dedicated those issues of language and identity.

(00:44:17)

Hensley mentions a story of him just being in Anchorage for a meeting after the Elders Conference. One young man who is the chairman for the region, he saw Hensley discussing spirit, identity, and traditions of the people that he felt angry because the previous people in power were so focused on shareholders. Hensley admits he didn't fully understand what the man was talking about with shareholders, but he felt it likely was no involving the preservation of the people.

(00:45:53)

(Recording goes silent)

(00:47:38)

Hensley discusses the different impacts put on by the state. He discusses who's to say what's right for people to do, for some engaging in business and finding a place in society where they can function happily, is a primary function. They might have lost their nativity, but have a strong identity with their corporation. While in some groups it's very mixed of a whole variety of different Native groups living together where there is no real tribal cohesion. So what mixed groups might do, might be a little different. He asks the class where they originally are from.

(00:51:04)

Hensley mentions old annual reports he has from companies and how some are tribal run and how they might just look like other normal companies at first. Then goes on to discuss spirit and the morals/ethics people should show. Maintaining ones spirit should help impact people views of these outside forces and allow them to keep their values even if they utilize the outside forces. Hensley says maintaining language and connect with environment will help maintain continuity to traditional ways.

(00:56:45)

Hensley states that the plan is to hire elders in the school system to teach traditional ways. That there needs to be a stop to hiring outsiders to come and teach Indigenous ways, they are welcome to teach

English, mathematics, and such, but they should not be teaching what the elders can already teach. Children need to be taught traditions and values immediately in school or else they will lose their sense of identity and assimilate them to the Western values that tend to promote individualism, which in most normal communities the community is incredibly important.

(00:59:43)

A student asks Hensley about how does spirit and tribal identity emerge in a corporate structure. Hensley says he is interested in this topic because of its necessity to occur. He mentions the need to trust those working below you. The spirit emerges because of economic consideration, because how does a group make wise decisions, especially if you're a hunter, fisher, or gatherer who knows nothing about the business world. You must know who you are and where you're going to be able to maintain this spirit.

(01:04:15)

Hensley mentions in their corporate philosophy that the development of people, pride, and community are the priority. If you're going to be involved in the building up of your people, that that's going to influence where you invest your money. They've invested millions in Kotzebue to bridge the gap between old and new, they invested in reindeer so people could remain in nature. They also built a multi-use facility that holds business spaces, museum, and cultural sources. So apart of the program is to employ people, which requires investing in the region, but you can't go overboard because investing in outlining areas there is a minimal market and hard cost. In Kotzebue, there isn't a high profit, but it helps employ people, but most people prefer to place their businesses in places like Anchorage for a higher economic gain.

(01:07:50)

Hensley mentions they have the Alaska Heritage Foundation, designed to be culturally oriented and work with elders. Shareholders of every group have to deal with this, if they want their people to just be businessmen then they won't preserve their people.

(01:10:01)

A student asks what is success to the corporation. Hensley says it is based on the corporation, because a business in the Bering Strait could lose everything but still succeed depending on their goal. Perhaps their goal is to maintain their histories and develop themselves without outside help. If they lost all their economic power, then they'd lose everything except their land and identity, which is what most tribes have, so maybe they'd start from scratch. Perhaps one group hits oil and then they're all running around in Cadillacs and they're all rich, but they don't survive as a people, they are disintegrating.

(01:13:15)

Hensley mentions they are dealing with a very fluid environment and this is an example of how one region is trying to deal with all the currents of change. He doesn't suspect it's much different than what the older tribes tried to do in the past, if the group had survived they had to do it however they can. Some groups went to war to defend their sense of identity, many were defeated and some were obliterated. He provides examples of the Seminoles and Cherokee. He mentions their problem is to survive as people in a civilization that tended to destroy the people.

(01:15:50)

Hensley mentions the Russian American company was a corporation, somewhat ruthless if that, but less ruthless than the numerous private companies that began functioning in the 1740's till the 1790's. A half

century of unbridled exploitation that virtually enslaved the people of the Aleutians for profit of the sea otter and fur seal. There was an exchange presumably of human labor for some form of economic value. So now they are trying to use corporations and presumably improve lives and if economic improvement is of great value, then they are going to try and use it to improve the people's lives.

(01:18:15)

Hensley provides another example of how the spirit of a person might emerge in the management of a corporation. It is important to have competent shareholders and upper-level power. Management of corporations today are all over the place and out of desperation have hired top-notch managerial types to save them from bankruptcy. If that person runs it just like any other corporation, they might not do things that are beneficial for the people and shareholders. They might remove jobs that have helped smaller communities and villages because they are focused on the profit and not the individual and community. If you have spirit and a sense of where your people are going, you'll make better decisions on what is important for the company.

(01:21:15)

In the are of key native managers you'd have to be far gone to be controlled by a corporation, to have to give yourself to an institution if you grew up in an environment where you were somewhat free and enjoyed your sense of being. To sit in a cubicle all day and be content with a restricted life, it is not how it should be, but you've felt forced to participate in this life. You can still create a corporate business, but you need to run it with values that accept and promote traditional life. The system has glorified economic success.

(01:24:45)

Hensley gives an example of Japanese corporations like Mitsubishi who have had employees marry in a Mitsubishi chapel and you are being groomed to attend a Mitsubishi kindergarten and hope to get into the high school and university where all the Mitsubishi guys go. Then when you get out of school they'll give you a job, and even bury you. There's a sense of belonging and Hensley believes is a part of the ancient Japanese culture. A consequence of the American system is there is no security there to ensure you will be ok.

(01:27:15)

A student asks how is the spirit expressed in land use policies. He states that they've already gone through the process of the act itself and the regulations. The people in the communities were a part of the process of the land selection program. The people with the greatest familiarity of the land have been a part of the process. But for the future, they will need to develop their own rules for the use of the 2 ½ million acres. There will be substantial pressure from those who missed out on the allotment process who did not get any land, like himself. So they will present this to the older people and determine a solution, and they will discuss how to handle areas that have religious or historical connection.

(01:29:23)

A student prompts a question about what if one corporation in the group suddenly achieved extreme success, he mentions the professor's community believes no one gets ahead too much. If one corporation really had the chance to be incredibly profitable, what would happen? Hensley states this is a concept that is applicable in American society because in what people see as problems that the villages are going through are nothing new, they've been happening to Americans since the beginning. He mentions when the Irish came they probably drank like crazy and haven't stopped, the disorientation

and disconnection between individuals and their heritage is a process that has been ongoing. Consequently, there is a difficulty in managing this country, there's a series of spirits of people coming from different countries who have a common sense of happening in their past. The Native person had already been there and had a sense of identity, but others had lost this and lost that part of their spirit.

(01:33:38)

(Recording cuts off as Hensley speaks)