

H85-114

KUAC Chinook Radio Series: Ptarmigan TV parts 1 and 2, Carol McTaggart, Bob Walker

Part 1:

Chinook Patterns

This program focuses on Ptarmigan TV, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by the Center for Cross Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Schoolchildren in four areas of the state are participating in this project which began last November and will finish this May. High school television classes in Barrow, St. Paul, Yakutat, and a class from Tanana Junior High in Fairbanks are making video tapes about their communities. The project director is Ron Inouye and the curriculum developer is Carol McTaggart. McTaggart explains that the idea for the Ptarmigan TV project is based on the Foxfire idea, which is a magazine that was put out in Appalachia and the teacher who worked with the students to put this out thought that the students would be more motivated to write and learn if the basis of that writing and learning could be their own community. And in Appalachia, Eliot Wigginton had his students work on things like interviews of local people, folklore, preserving a lot of the customs that were sort of dying out in Appalachia. Ptarmigan TV is not quite the same. Ptarmigan TV involves video with some high schools and it also involves other kinds of projects like writing, picture taking, and things like that. The idea is not to do a magazine but to do a curriculum about the students' own area. Hopefully the materials they develop through video and other methods will be put in the curriculum throughout the state, because now there is a real lack of curriculum about certain villages and towns in Alaska as far as resources for teachers and students. So we ask the students to do some video tapes and written materials with the idea that they are explaining to the other kids in the project about their area. The end result will be, loosely defined, a curriculum. Basically what they're hoping they have is a package they can send out with various written materials and a certain number of tapes, about five twenty-minute tapes in them that will tell the story of that particular site from the viewpoint of the kids. You could call this curriculum more of enrichment. When the project is done it will be available through the state library so they will be available to anyone in the state. So if someone were to wonder what life is like in Barrow they could look at these materials. The kids seemed very interested in the way the other kids depict their surroundings. If you're looking for motivation to study Barrow, instead of opening a book or a magazine and saying: "let's read about Barrow", you could say: "let's see what the students in Barrow think of Barrow". The students are issued in a lot of issues that we consider current event issues, like whaling, the image of Barrow, for example: is it hostile, is it a violent place. The kids there would like to present an alternate view. The communities will be presented through research, talking to elderly people in the community and so on. Here in Fairbanks they're interested in talking to some of the senior citizens as far as finding out about some of their experiences in the earlier days, not just in Fairbanks but going around the state. We have some contacts made already and they're hoping to start videotaping some interviews. The kids are really getting into history; they've been through the archives and everything, and they're really getting into learning about Fairbanks history so that's one method. In Barrow they're interested in talking about the whaling issue so they'd be interviewing people involved in whaling. In Yakutat they're interested in presenting some of the geography of the area. As far as diverse cultural issues go, they are very aware of their culture. They hope showing this will allow kids to compare one site with another and how they hunt or get their food and whatever other differences. Video was chosen as the method of delivery

because it has been becoming very popular as a teaching tool, not so much in Fairbanks, but around the state. Also in Alaska the best and most immediate way for people to talk to each other is through video and a lot of the sites have some sort of video access where they can transmit to the community and by exchanging tapes through the mail. This is something that really speaks to the TV generation. Also it was chosen because a lot of these sites have equipment. For instance, in Barrow they have equipment and they have a TV class but this is a way to give them a content area. Ron was interested in motivating teachers not just to have the kids play with the equipment but to direct it towards a real project in mind. The kids in St. Paul especially, are really impressed with the idea that this is a real thing, this is something that is going to be communicated to other real people, possibly statewide maybe on this station. The kids realize that this isn't just play. This is something that is really real. And that's what is neat about it. And the idea that it's their own community they're talking about makes them more motivated. For instance, in St. Paul a lot of those kids have been off the island maybe once or twice and they know their community really well. This is the case with all the small communities. The kids are centered on that particular community. So they're hoping to come up with insights on their community that an outsider would not have. There have been criticisms of TV in the bush in Alaska in that all these programs from the big networks in the States are coming here and what impact do they have on the culture of those small villages and towns. Part of the idea behind Ptarmigan TV is to give kids access to TV so they'll understand it from the inside out. In using the cameras, making editorial decisions, and doing editing and things like that we're really asking the kids to look at TV in a very active, rather than passive, way. Hopefully they will understand a lot more about how a TV show gets made and perhaps do some very constructive criticism on what they do see. Again, a lot of communities have access to their local broadcasting so they will be able to become part of the programming. Maybe they'll understand that they can make a difference by presenting their point of view and that TV isn't just something to sit back looking at with sort of glazed eyes but that it is a something you can really actively do.

Part 2: Chinook Profiles

This program is the second part of a series on Ptarmigan TV that begins with kids involved in the Ptarmigan TV project in St. Paul asking questions. A student from St. Paul wants to know what type of edible fruits and vegetables grow where the other people live. A student interested in flying in the Navy wants to know what the other people do in their spare time. A student interested in photography and recreation wants to know what kinds of recreation and what kind of discos the other people have. A student originally from St. George Island who now lives in St. Paul wants to know what kind of hunting the other people do. A student who plans to join the Air Force wants to know is what the other people do for a living. These students are participating in this project along with students in Barrow, Yakutat and Fairbanks, exchanging videos about their communities. In Yakutat television production is nothing new. Students have been using it already to present local news. They're quite issue oriented. In Barrow, kids want to show what life is really like there. They feel that Barrow hasn't been treated fairly by the media lately. In St. Paul the students are interested in their Aleut heritage and in displaying it proudly. In Fairbanks, kids are busy researching the town's wild and woolly past. Carol McTaggart and Bob Walker have been traveling to the Ptarmigan TV sites to see what the kids are doing with television and

what TV is doing to them. Bob Walker explains this by explaining that television is widely accepted in all the communities. Both Yakutat and St. Paul have mini transmitters there and they're on a satellite television network. Even though that only broadcasts commercial television eight hours a day on one channel with no other alternative channel, some households have as many as five television sets. When he asked in the television classes how many television sets were in each house, of thirteen people he asked only three of them had two television sets and the rest had more. That was also true in Yakutat, which was his first exposure to this situation where people would have three or four television sets where there's only one alternative in terms of a channel. That means that they're quite addicted to television, that it's become integrated into the communities of Yakutat and St. Paul. This is also true in Fairbanks. These communities have also integrated it well into a means of communication for the community between programming that comes across by satellite. There's always a bulletin board set up where any community news is passed along. Also in Yakutat, the kids at the high school ran their own news program once a week. This consisted entirely of local news and some state news. Walker says the most interesting thing that happened there was a large controversy that happened last year in the springtime when in the course of broadcasting that news program the students went to the city council, they got the police record of who's been arrested that day and were reading it over the air. It was just names and what the charges were, which is public record. It turned out it was some relatives of influential people in Yakutat and a big hubbub followed. As a result the six o'clock news produced by Yakutat went off the air. The story was picked up by the "Wall Street Journal" and other national news sources. A lawyer in Juneau volunteered to defend the students in a court case but when the question was put to the class whether or not they wanted to pursue it on legal grounds they decided against it. They decided to just drop it. They said that it wasn't worth the fight and that it was polarizing their community too much; there was just too much bad feeling in a community of five hundred people and since they had to live there and work there it was better just to drop it. They are back on the air and they do still produce the six o'clock news but they don't read the police report. They are finding quite an outlet in television. They have access to the transmitter at all times in Yakutat and in St. Paul. In St. Paul while he was there, the kids put together an advertisement for a dance they were going to have and as soon as they got through with it they walked up to the station and handed it to the lady who stopped the program that was in progress and put it on. The same thing happened when they did a piece of animation. One of the students just did some really simple animation that was quite good and imaginative. He took it up there and at the next break she ran that animation. This is immediate gratification for the kids. The kids are wildly encouraged by this support. Almost everything they shoot they immediately ask if it's broadcastable. They're thinking in terms of all the tapes they do for the Ptarmigan TV project which will be broadcast to the community to let them know what's happening and also to showcase what the kids are doing in school. In Barrow they have the same kind of accessibility to the media. They have a station that broadcasts nothing but community input though there's not too much on it right now, they have a lot of things like announcements. But the students in Barrow have access also. It will be interesting to see what kind of access the students get in Fairbanks. Fairbanks is ironic in that it has the most TV stations and the least access. That's a great advantage in the bush communities that they have access to their own media and that's very important. This is a main value that will come out of this, besides research skills, and study skills for the students. They will be trained both to critique and produce material about their own community. In Barrow, Yakutat and St. Paul television is an important part of their lives. In Barrow, when it's dark and cold what do you do? McTaggart assumes and Walker

agrees, that that's one of the reasons it's become an important part of their lives. Walker talked to some kids in St. Paul and they can remember back to when the satellite television started and how much it changed the social life in the community and how community get-togethers still occur on a regular basis, but with less frequency and they're less well attended because people are now spending their evenings with the rest of their family at home watching television. Television has really changed social patterns in the villages it's been introduced to. Someone asks whether or not people in St. Paul or Barrow who are watching things on national network TV feel like these things are strange to them. In St. Paul where they've had the satellite now for four or five years they're quite used to it. The same is true in Yakutat. They've had it for two and a half years. They're used to it. But they definitely have a sense of "this is not reality"; what they're seeing on the television. Walker says this seems to him to be accurate to him. They have nothing to do with "Starsky and Hutch." In a way, it's like a fairy tale. They enjoy it in that way, that it's a fairytale. Commercial television is designed to be entertaining and distracting and it succeeds in St. Paul. People in the rest of the country might be interested in or don't know the fact that people in these isolated communities are watching the very same programs that they're watching. It would be really fascinating to watch people's reactions when they find out that the kids in Barrow are singing the same songs and have the same teen idols and have much the same immediate taste. In Walker's experience on St. Paul, when they have a disco dance the music that is played is almost the exact same as in Anchorage. They're perhaps a month behind, but that's all.