

## **H85-196 Chinook**

**Chinook Radio Series Eskimo Heritage Program Savoonga Walrus Carnival  
Kittiagruk Inupiat Corporation. KUAC radio host and producer Karen Michelle  
McPherson interviews various people in Alaska (primarily Alaska Natives)**

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**Recording date: 1981-1982 [sp?]**

**Summarized by: Cecilie R. Ebsen**

**Summary date: 07.28.14**

**Length of recording: 00:43:00**

00:00

[Wind blowing, seagulls screaming]

Narrator introduces Chinook as a warm and changing wind and as a program for and about Alaska Natives. The program looks at how things are and how they got that way in regard to Alaska Native heritage.

Karen Michel McPherson is the host and producer. She explains how there is a growing movement to validate Alaska native cultural heritage and ethnic pride in their cultural ways. In northwest Alaska there are two model programs. The Eskimo Spirit Movement of the Northwest Arctic Native association and school district, headquartered in Kotzebue, and the Kawerak Nome-based Eskimo heritage program. The Kotzebue program is mainly focused on Inupiaq heritage. The program in Nome covers a more ethnically diverse group within the villages of St. Michael, Stebbins, Savoonga, and Shishmaref.

01:35

This program relies on the work of people like King Islander Margaret Segana [sp? Last name] of Nome: fieldworkers. Segana explains how they interview elders to document what people did before the missionaries and schools came and that knowledge will later be used in education programs in each village.

02:37

There are two fieldworkers in each village who are supervised and trained in documentation techniques by folklorist Judith Schumlensen [sp? Last name]. Schumlensen explains folklore as capturing the essence of a particular cultural group. There are great differences between the villages in the region, but people have a tendency to assume that village life is the same throughout Alaskan villages.

03.14

[Old-school phone dialing, teleconference conversation with fieldworkers begin]

Folklorist Judith Schumlensen and project director Mary Alexander have problems communicating with fieldworkers in the villages because flying out to them is expensive and unreliable because of the weather.

Mary Alexander explains how they have been in contact with them over teleconference network twice a month and now, during the summer, they contact them once a month.

[Teleconference continues]

Two fieldworkers: Eleanor and Ines [sp? Name possibly Inez] in an unidentified village, are introduced to a new fieldworker: John Penatak [sp? King Island last name probably Penatac]. He explains how he just started working and he finds the work interesting. He talked to an elder who makes kayaks and is willing to teach others, younger people, how to make kayaks. He is also going to document elders' dances.

06:30

Slides are used extensively for documentation. One of John Penatak's first dance projects includes a slideshow of the King Island dance group performing Wolf dance at the Bering Strait Elder's conference in February. It was the first time in 50 years that the dance was performed and a number of people videotaped and took photos of Penatak performing the dance. Penatak is in his early 40s. His counterpart in Nome is Margaret Segana who is older. Her boys are Penatak's age and she has been with the project since it began.

07:04

Segana explains how when John came to work with them he was asked to join the Elders' committee. They gather every Friday and Mary [Alexander] and Judith [Schumlensen] wanted to find out what knowledge they [Elders] believe is culturally important to preserve. Those gatherings brought back a lot of memories for John from when he used to see those Elders on King Island and when he was among the people. There were things he had forgotten that he now remembered again.

Segana spent three years as a bi-lingual instructor in the Nome elementary school before joining the Eskimo heritage program. She explains how the children do not have the Native spirit and what they have gone through is very different from what they would have gone through if their parents or grandparents had raised them for at least six or seven years. Instead they are taken into the pre-school very early and they do not get the experience of being part of Native culture. Now what they are trying to do is to integrate the young people with the elders. To find ways to have the youngsters mingle with the elders.

09:52

Through teleconference conversation it is discussed how the King Island elders do not have a place to meet after a flood destroyed their previous meeting place. They need a place where kids can come freely to watch and listen to the elders because they learn from watching and listening. Another woman [Eleanor sp?] comments saying how they have some documentation in terms of slides and interviews that show people sewing and making skin boats. They are teaching high school children how to make skin for boats. McPherson narrates about how what they are doing is trying to figure out how to put together slideshows of the cultural activities that the fieldworkers document in villages. Slideshows are just one medium.

12:17

Judith Schumlens explains how they are also collecting oral history, stories, narratives of traditional knowledge and video taping dances and story telling and any other folklore event as it goes on in the villages such as ceremonies and celebrations.

An elders' committee in each village decide what is collected, when and from whom. The heritage program comes to each village to explain the program. In some villages all elders form the committee while in others it is five or six elders. The program has one more year of grant funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. If the federal funding does not continue, Alexander and Schumlens hope the villages will take over. Regardless there will be a group of trained fieldworkers across the region. Other projects will be able to hire the trained Native fieldworkers to do work in these villages, which give the people in the villages control over the information that leaves the village. It is important to see local people as resources.

14:50

#### **NEW CHINOOK PROGRAM [sp?]**

[Bells ringing, wolves howling]

McPherson narrates. These are sounds from the 1982 Savoonga walrus carnival. The village of Savoonga is on the north coast of St. Lawrence Island. The native language of the nearly 500 residents village is Siberian Yup'ik. The Russian coast is less than 100 miles away while Nome is 130 miles distant.

16:00

A man is heard ordering people to go to the west beach at two o'clock. A number of events including marriage ceremony, allstar [sp?], spear fighting, where some will die and come back to life, and then they will have a house burning down: all sorts of activities. This man is Jerry Wongittilin, Senior [Later acting mayor of Savoonga (2007) ] and he is the father [founder] of the Savoonga walrus carnival. It all started around 1964 when he entered [the idea] into the city council and they turned it down. In 1965 it passed and from then

on they had the annual walrus carnival. He came up with the idea as a way to attract tourists to Savoonga. It is working very well.

[Sounds from the village are heard]

18:23

Some women are discussing whether they have to touch a seal. They are having a good time. Jerry Wongittilin Sr. explains how they have demonstrations of a walrus hunting scene, Eskimo dances, drama plays, and field hockey contest.

[Sounds from one of these activities are heard]

19:35

The weather is exceptional this year. Usually more of the events are indoors, but this year they are able to do them outdoors.

Volunteers place themselves around rectangular tuuruq [Yup'ik word] skin blanket to prepare for blanket toss. Jerry Wongittilin counts to three and they throw the blanket upwards as practice. Now someone is selected to be tossed up in the air on the blanket.

[Yup'ik choir sings]

22:30

[St. Lawrence residents' names are read out loud]  
McPherson explains how four of the ten members of the Savoonga comedy players perform often during the walrus carnival.

[Comedy players heard performing]

One of the members explains how they were trying to make money for Head Start and asked the city council if they could demonstrate a hunting scene. They started in 1977 and were so popular that they were asked to perform again and again all over Alaska. When they do it at the walrus festival it is different because people there know the Eskimo way of life and they have a great background for performing hunting scenes.

[More sounds from the comedy players accompanied by drumming and singing]

26:22

Jerry Wongittilin wants to attract tourists and feel good about outsiders coming to the village. They order ivory carving and they now know where to get it. The walrus carnival will hopefully become even bigger and he cannot imagine a time where too many outsiders come to the village.

27:50

## **NEW CHINOOK PROGRAM {sp?}**

[Telephone conversation]

McPherson narrates that Al Adams is both an important state legislator, chairing the House Finance Committee, and president of one of the most successful village corporations formed after ANCSA. KIC, Kikiktagrug Inupiaq Corporation is the village corporation for Kotzebue. It is the Inupiaq name for the town. Village can choose for-profit and not-for-profit status. KIC is a profit-making, share-holding, corporation. Al Adams explains how the village corporation has a nine board of directors, investment, scholarship, and land committees. They try to keep administrative costs at a minimum with only him and a bookkeeper. They are half-owners of the Sunshine Plaza located in Anchorage and that is the only investment outside the region. They have the Eskimo building leasing offices among other things [Lists all the other things that they have]

31:46

They try to help in any human services as well by directing people to them. One thing they do not have is way to take care of their elder people. They are trying to find out what programs they are eligible for so they can direct them better.

In ten years the corporation has done well. It has a profit of almost \$ 800,000 [year 1981] this particular year while Al Adams predicts \$ 1 million in profits next year [year 1982].

They do all their accounting themselves as well as consult their investment committee.

Some of their activities are not for-profit but more in the social service area. That is because they would like to make sure that their children are educated, so they can take on the corporation in the future and they would like to take care of their elders: preserving the cultural knowledge they have.

The only thing they can really do to bring up new leadership is that they have a non-profit set up for the whole region called Maniilaq that they direct towards.

34:24

The relationship between KIC and NANA and Maniilaq is very good. They serve the same people and they have to work hand in glove. For example the village corporation has loaned NANA money on some of its ventures.

In terms of the land situation there are not that many resources to fight over in that region of Alaska and therefore there is not much tension over land sharing at this point. They have not found much oil for example.

There are 164,000 acres of village corporation land. The land committee consists mainly of elderly people. They are working on a set of policies that points towards them holding on to their land.

The most important role of the village corporation is keeping the 2021 shareholders informed on their activities. They have a radio program after each board meeting; they have an informal meeting, and formal meeting before elections: and they inform people as best they can about what is happening with the corporate funds. Being active and keeping shareholders informed is the most important thing.

Al Adams has been president for three years. He has taken a real tight control of management and investments. Before he took over, the corporation was losing \$ 300,000 a year.

As a member of the state legislature, Adams' time has to be divided between Kotzebue and Juneau. That creates some problems in terms of continuity because he is gone from the village corporation. Instead they have an interim president for when Adams is gone. His name is Bill Fridge [sp? Last name].

39:27

Ten of the eleven village corporations in the NANA region have merged with that regional corporation. KIC is the exception. They decided not to merge with NANA because they feel that they can manage their assets and control them from Kotzebue. They can do more good for the people in Kotzebue by not merging. Adams is happy to see the smaller villages merge with NANA because in the long run it will be beneficial to their village corporations and their shareholders.

McPherson asks what Adams sees for 1991. Adams believes that in the next ten years they need to prepare a plan for retaining ownership of stock and land. By 1991 he hopes that their assets will be great enough that they will be able to look at purchasing others outside the region. There is going to be failure with stock and land throughout Alaska and they should be ready to investing outside the region.

Adams describes the last ten years as a learning experience. None of them were prepared to run corporations: village or regional. They have not been trained for that particular expertise and field. Despite the lack of professional training, the region has provided a number of Native leaders such as Willie Hensley, John Schaefer, and Al Adams among them.