

Call Number: ORAL HISTORY 88-49-157

Narrators: Fred Demit and Eva Heffle

Date:

Place: Fairbanks, AK

Series: Potlatch Radio series

Size of reel: 7 “ reel to reel tape

Length: 30 minutes

(Opening Song: *Stand by Your Man* by Henry Mancini and Orchestra)

Moses Wasillie takes a trip to talk with longtime Tetlin resident, Fred Demit. Demit has worked in the civil service for eighteen years while his wife worked in the local post office for six years. Tetlin is an Alaskan village established on a reservation since 1934. Demit believes the reservation has allowed the subsistence lifestyle to stay alive. Although the subsistence has been plentiful, Demit is asked whether he thinks the gas pipeline will come to affect that very lifestyle. According to Demit, he feels the gas pipeline will not affect the reservation, but also suggests that there is no avoiding the construction.

Wasillie then asks if anything else will be affected by the pipeline. While Demit’s response seems positive with mention of incoming jobs, he also realizes that alcohol may be more present. Currently, Tetlin workers have had to travel away to campsites as being their only opportunity to work. Demit explains the economic cycle of how some Tetlin men have had to survive in traveling to campsites to work construction during the summer months, collecting unemployment during the winters, and living off of the land with trapping and trading.

Demit’s thoughts of living off of the land leads him into briefly mentioning the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Tetlin Reservation was not a part of the Land Claims Act and Demit believes they wanted to remain as they were with the possibility of gaining interests from mining or timber companies. According to Demit, the geographic expanse of Tetlin Reservation has so much to offer with surrounding waterways to travel back and forth.

Though Tetlin’s potential for development seems less at risk, Demit discusses some of the traditional language challenges that have occurred over time. As an avid bilingual teacher at one time, Demit has seen the language loss increasing with little to no funding for bilingual teachers within the classroom and lack of storytellers. Demit strongly believes that the Tetlin people will be able to culturally sustain with its traditions and dancing still in place, but is fearful that the language will someday be lost.

(Interlude: *Sunshine On My Shoulders* Instrumental by The Living Guitars)

Similarly, Eva Heffle shares her experiences of keeping her cultural traditions alive through arts and crafts and working at the Association of Interior Eskimos, Inc. Heffle is originally from Kotzebue, Alaska, but spent the first part of her marriage in Seattle. After moving back to Alaska, Heffle's husband worked at the University of Alaska Fairbanks while she developed an interest in doll making at home.

Upon receiving two wooden doll heads from her grandmother, Heffle began her journey of crafting dolls. After fourteen years of traveling back and forth to Kotzebue, she eventually crafted twenty-two Eskimo dolls that are representative of the Eskimo culture. Initially, she started making baby slippers from a moose hide that her husband brought home. Her enthusiasm for doll making seemed to help her pass time, but Heffle also mentions that it was her way of keeping the Eskimo culture going. Each of the dolls resembles the Eskimo way of life, relating to such activities like hunting and dancing. Although some of materials are harder to get, Heffle discusses the importance of using all Alaskan furs.

(Break: *Poems, Prayers, and Promises* by The Living Guitars)

Heffle feels that her value for authenticity and gift for doll making was something that she was born with. Her innate ability for doll making seems to have grown from her visits with her grandmother and Ethel Washington. Over the years, Heffle's doll making has not only been self-satisfying, but also provided physical therapy for her hands. Heffle has suffered from arthritis since her teenage years and doll making has truly brought a sense of relief.