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Elders in Residence Collection. Elder Grace Slwooko from Gambell is interviewed in Fairbanks.

Keywords: Whaling, First contact, Skin boats, folklore, missionaries, education, social life.

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Summarized by Cecilie R. Ebsen

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Length of recording: 00.46.20

00:00:00.10

[First minutes of recording are barely audible, as there seems to be a problem with the recorder]

Grace Slwooko

00:02:24.06

People used to use walrus skin to make boats. At some point they started getting wooden boats instead and then motorboats. However, the skin boats were more durable when hitting ice and so they brought those back. The motorboats were a big change and they made so much noise.

Grace Slwooko

00:04:13.10

[Show on photo where people sit in the boat]

Grace Slwooko

00:05:39.07

When they hunt whales, they don't use motors, but sails so as not to scare away the whales. The white man's equipment was a real help in catching whales.

Student

00:06:11.46

What is the captain's job during the hunt?

Grace Slwooko

00:06:39.18

There are no trees on the island [St. Lawrence], so wood comes from the sea. The captain will go out and get wood that they can build boats from. They soak walrus skin in the lake and then use it to cover the boat's wood frame. The walrus hide is split in half and so the men have to sew it back together.

[Draw on blackboard to explain how boats are made]

A woman handles the walrus skin. She uses an "Ulaq" [sp?], which mainland

people call "ulu". She climbs up on a ladder to stretch the skin. It will be put up to dry for the summer. When sealskin dry, it turns white. They also use walrus hide for housetops and as flooring. It protects them from the cold. They also use it for blanket toss. [Explain the Yup'ik term for blanket toss]

Student

00:12:54.73

How did blanket toss start?

Grace Slwooko

00:13:04.79

In springtime when hunting is slowing down, they have a celebration. They might have gotten a whale and they want to celebrate by doing blanket toss. They used to do it in connection to worship. Some people had dreams where something spoke to them, perhaps a demon or devil. If they didn't do what they asked, death would come and the whales would not. When the missionaries came, they explained that the devil and demons could be stopped which was a relief. One should not ignore the demons because then they would gather and build a fire. Before Grace's father was born, the missionaries came and taught them about God. They already knew that there was a Creator, but they had never heard of Jesus. The missionaries taught them about him.

Grace Slwooko

00:16:22.55

Now they prefer education instead of animals speaking to them [chuckles]

Student

00:16:41.06

Do you remember any stories of animals speaking?

Grace Slwooko

00:16:49.30

She has a lot of those stories. For example, does anyone know why the ground squirrel's tale is short? On St. Lawrence they don't have trees. Their wild animals include squirrels and fox. Occasionally they have polar bears but they avoid people. But the squirrels live in holes in the ground. They gather plant roots and stash them in their holes. People go out and find their holes and take their stashes of roots. They leave a little for the squirrel and take the rest home to eat with seal fat and whale meat. One day a squirrel came home with roots, but a raven was hovering over her hole. The squirrel asked to enter the hole. The raven said no. Then the squirrel offered to sing for the raven so the raven could dance. The squirrel began to sing and the raven started dancing with its eyes closed. The squirrel inched closer to the hole as it sang. But the raven then bent down and got the tail of the squirrel. The raven flew away with the squirrel's tail. The squirrel told her daughters that she wanted her tail back. They went to the raven and demanded the tail back through song. The raven told them that their

mother had to come and get it herself. They squirrel daughters told their mother this. And so up till this day, ground squirrels' tails are short.

Student

00:22:27.39

Before the missionaries came, what did people believe in terms of creation and how man came about?

Grace Slwooko

00:22:42.49

There is a story of creation. When man was made...

[Grace struggles to remember the story. It is in her book].

It is part of the Eskimo stories that she writes. She has written a big book of legends for the local school: Stories of foxes and ravens and other animals talking to each other.

Grace Slwooko

00:26:54.16

Grace is currently writing another book. It is called Precious Memories. She made a song/dance about writing and how wonderful it is.

Various people

00:29:17.41

Talk about future class activities

[Recording is turned off] [It seems that an older recording has been taped over and the rest of this older recording fills the rest of the recording. It seems to be a political meeting about/in Huslia]