

ANS 401 Knowledge of Native Elders
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Summarized by:
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Effie Kokrine, Elder-in-Residence

The Missionaries came down river in the summer by boat. On the way, they stopped at all the camps and took census of all the people, married people, and baptized people. If you had an Indian name, they would give you a Christian one.

Sometimes ministers would travel by dog team, but not as often. The center for the Episcopal Church was in Nenana, and a man named Moses Cruikshank, who lives in Fairbanks now, was once a dog handler for the Episcopal priests there. He tells alot of good stories, because he remembers things like they happened yesterday.

No, the ministers didn't try to change our beliefs. They just tried to make us understand religion--realize between good and bad. They tried to understand Native beliefs, and make our lives better. There was bound to be alot of changes for everybody when the White Man first came.

There was very strict law against giving a Native a drink in those days. You could go to jail. A native man was so used to work all the time, not recreation. When he had a drink, alot of times he couldn't handle it. So there were very strict laws against it.

2) What kind of makeup did Indians use?

There was a red paint that the men would sometimes use for dressing up-- kind of like war paint. Women would pierce their ears or put marks on their chin (charcoal tatoo mentioned earlier). Mostly, the women wore their hair pulled back, and they always wore a bandanna. Alot of times the older women pulled them forward to protect their eyes from the sun, because there weren't glasses. Hardly anyone had glasses, unless they really needed them. You never saw children with glasses.

3) Did the women wear long dresses?

The women always wore long dresses. You did not show your legs--even the shape of your legs (by wearing pants). Women wore pantaloons and bloomers for warmth, and long parkys. The weather was much colder then; you always needed mitts and mukluks. Underwear was made from blankets, or double flannel. Bloomers had elastic at the knee, which held your stockings up. They could be made out of blue flannel, like Effie's were as a child, and really kept her warm. White man brought in wool yarn, which was used to knit long socks.

4) Beads

Beads were brought in by White Man, from Canada. Before that, porcupine quills were used to decorate fancy items. Beads, brought in about 100 years ago, were real popular,

because everybody sewed anyway. There were lots of decorative clothes. The moccasins were usually decorated with braid around the edges. It was better for scraping off the snow than beadwork.

Styles of beadwork have changed. The traditional beadwork patterns were very uniform. They often had curliques between these floral designs. Beads were carefully counted for these designs and they were kept perfectly uniform. Also, each bead was sewn down individually.

Nowadays, patterns are more free-form. Often, every 2 beads is sewn down, except on tight corners. Beads are still counted. In the old days the beads were very small, so the work looks very fine. The beads are bigger now, and are still growing in size. Effie uses a #8 needle with single thread to sew down beads and a #10 needle for the stringing thread.

They used to make really fancy gun cases, with bands of beadwork on black felt and fringes all along the bottom. This was used to hold the gun on the sled or in the house. There was often a wall bag hanging in the house with a decorated flap, and even sled bags were decorated in beadwork.

4) Footwear

Moccaasins were worn in the summer, and boots--mostly of caribou leggings--in winter. There were different kinds of boots for different purposes: Traveling boots which were big to hold lots of insulation, working boots, and most men had slippers for inside the house. There were rubber shoes for summer (no sneakers) and special hunting boots.

In the big traveling boots, rabbit skins were used as wraps over wool socks, and gunny sack was also quite useful for wrapping the feet, since it draws moisture. A burlap bag breathes, unlike the rabbit skin. Just a square can be folded up around the foot, and hangs easily to dry. Burlap bags had many uses!

Also, the fine grass from around lakes or under spruce trees was gathered, molded, and used as insoles. These dried out easily, too, and were good insulation.

There were specially made shoes which were used for hunting, called _____, (water moccasins). They were especially lightweight (for silence) and wrapped around the ankle (so sticks and so on would not get in). They dried out fast and were very comfortable.

A great hardship in winter was the cold wind. Since there were no snowpants or zippers, extra thicknesses were sewn into clothing to protect from the wind. A lucky man had a rabbit skin loincloth.

Effie and her family used to make 50 mile trips by dogsled in winter down the river. Rabbit skins inside the parka helped to cut down the wind. When she had children, the church gave (all new mothers) a layette, and she used to keep a couple of those flannel diapers tucked in her parka. They protected her and were warm for the baby when it needed to be changed.

Traveling by dog team is slow and was hard for the kids. Bottles were given to the babies while traveling, but before

those were available, the hind-fat from a moose knee stuck on a stick made a good pacifier and teething ring. Also, rice boiled up with sugar added would be wrapped in a clean rag for the baby to suck.

Children's clothing was made from yearling caribou calfs hunted in late summer. These had fine hair, were lightweight and pliable. Adult parkas were made from full-grown caribou, which was both heavier and more durable.

Rabbit fur was used for lining in some childrens parkas and blankets, but it tears, so it was quilted really finely to the cloth on one side.

An ambitious woman would save duck feathers in the spring for mattresses, pillows and blankets. One can be comfortable anywhere on a caribou mattress, rabbit or feather blanket and feather pillow!

The caribou parka was worn mostly with the fur side out. This type of skin doesn't breathe very well, so it had to be loose. Then, after the fragile hair, which is hollow, breaks off, you could turn the fur side in. Even after the parka is pretty worn out, it can still be used for a windbreak with a new cloth cover on it.

Men usually didn't wear much decoration on their parkas, except one wolverine tassel with a wolf tip hanging in the middle of the back. Women would dress up their parkas, if they were able, with tassles. White man brought in calfskin, which was used to make intricate decorations, but before that only wolf and wolverine were used.

In those days, NOTHING was thrown away. A use could always be found for it. Burlap bags were sometimes unraveled and made into boot liners. Mitts sometimes had moose skin liners, or blanket liners, or even rabbit skin, though that doesn't last long. Booties were used on the dogs' feet in the spring when the snow was icy. These could be made from thin skins, such as old moccasins, or more recently of canvas. The man's new clothes were made first. Then pieces, such as the back of the shirt which were not worn, would be used to make the children's clothes. Even a small scrap of skin could be used to patch a hole in a boot.

An absolutely essential item to a woman was her sewing bag, which usually contained 2 or 3 pockets and was rolled up and tied with string. This was taken everywhere, and held sinew, needles, scraps, scissors, and other small items. Buttons were sometimes made of wood.

Men often spent time carving, sometimes making things such as small bow and arrows for the children or floaters for the fish nets. They usually cut the wood, but women didn't wait around if something needed to be done-- they did it.

5) Do you think that it's sad that the old ways are dying?

It's the responsibility of the younger generation to keep the culture, but they don't LIVE it like we did. The kids went to school, where the talked English, and then they didn't talk Indian to their kids. After WWII, people moved to Fairbanks because of jobs and schools, and they left

behind the ways of the 4 seasons-- fishing, hunting, and trapping. Once your culture is dropped, then your kids don't know-- they only know modern life. Now, except in Huslia, you don't hear Indian spoken.

When you are living it (the Indian life), it has more meaning than learning it in the classroom. If I say "Get a stick of wood," if you are doing it, it has more meaning and you remember it more. In a classroom, you have to memorize it to know it.

5) Now that some parents don't speak the language...

The language is dying and it is Sad. Too bad that we can't be like the Eskimos. You get a bunch of them together and they speak the language. But, except in Huslia and Minto, people don't speak it. We just don't live it anymore.

6) Wash hair

As far as I know, there was no soap. And women didn't expose their body. Girls were not supposed to go swimming. Even in more recent times, my mother gave a bath to a woman and she thought it made her sick. Men used to wipe their fingers through their hair. But there were no bathtubs-- only birch bark baskets or carved wooden bowls.

7) Burials

We buried our own. In the old days, before White man brought tools for digging, in winter, sometimes bodies were put up into a tree or burned. In summer they could be buried. We made our own coffins and lined them ourselves, and dug the hole. After religion came, we had our prayers. It was only recently that there was even registration of deaths. Often, a person's favorite belongings were put with them. A story from Eliza's Grandmother:

"Once, there was a man who was an accordion player. His accordion was put with him, in a house on top of his grave. When the people of the town had a dance, they would go out to the grave and "borrow" his accordion!"

When a person died, you kept a light burning for 3 days, maybe more. And you burned food to feed the spirit. Also, you took the fins from dry fish and scorched them and then hung them around the children's neck to keep the spirit from choosing to take a child with them. You wanted to send the person off with a happy spirit.