

The Elders' Documentation Project: A Yukon First Nations Oral History Project

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After graduating from the University of Alaska-Anchorage with a degree in anthropology, I had the good fortune to find a job directly related to my field of interest, ethnography, and in my own community, Whitehorse, Yukon. Just one day after I finished my classes in December, 1992, I was offered a job as one of the researchers with the Elders' Documentation Project. This is how I began my training in applying anthropological theory to real life situations. This paper describes the Elders' Documentation Project and my personal experiences of working in anthropology within my own cultural community.

Storytelling and oral history are part of a Yukon First Nations tradition, practised as far back as anyone can remember, from time immemorial to the present day. Oral tradition has always played a vital role in the lives of people who perform the stories and this is still the case today. Our stories *are* our past. They link us to our origins and they provide information about lifestyles from the past. They explain to us such phenomena as how the world was created. This is how our ancestors taught children about all aspects of life. Today, we are making every effort to preserve this history.

Traditions of anthropology are changing in the Yukon, and the Elders' Documentation Project provides an example of how Aboriginal people are doing our own ethnography within established anthropological guidelines. One of the dominant themes in the information we gather is the extent to which change has occurred during the last hundred years and the kinds of changes our elders have observed.

Background

The Elders' Documentation Project was originally conceived by the Curriculum Development Branch of the Council for Yukon Indians. During the last fifteen years, staff members working with this organization

have been actively recording oral histories and using them as a primary resource to develop curriculum materials from perspectives of Yukon First Nations. They initially received federal funding from Health and Welfare Canada under the Seniors Independence Program for three months. This was later extended to seven months, and eventually they received funding from the same agency for a second phase of the program from November 1993-1994.

The Elders' Documentation Project Team consists of four Yukon First Nations people. Our co-ordinator is Bob Charlie, a Southern Tutchone man of the Wolf clan. We have a research staff of three: Anne-Marie Miller, representing Ta'an Kwäch'an/Lake Laberge Southern Tutchone people; Josephine Holloway, a Tagish and Inland Tlingit woman of the Deisheetaan clan; and me, of the Dakl'aweidí clan of Tagish and Inland Tlingit.

The objective of our project is to record, document and transcribe oral history from each linguistic and cultural area of the Yukon: Vuntut Gwich'in in the Far North, Han, Upper Tanana, Northern Tutchone, Southern Tutchone, Tagish, Inland Tlingit and Kaska. There are fourteen separate bands in the Yukon. With the exception of Old Crow, all the communities are accessible by road. Our data will initially be used in curriculum development at the Council for Yukon Indians and then be made available to all researchers, students and First Nations.

Research Methods

When our project team originally came together in January 1993, we saw an enormous task ahead of us. First, we set out to develop a research focus. The original research proposal was extremely broad, covering documentation of such areas as dance and song, legends, traditional foods and preparation, trails, traditional medicines, traditional clothing and shelter, language, spirituality, traditional government, traditional justice, traditional recreation, and more. To this, we added a few topics we felt were important, like personal histories and contemporary issues such as Land Claims and social problems. We even asked about the wolf kill.¹ When we got into the field we found it was impossible to cover all these topics in one interview, and also that elders often preferred to talk about issues that especially interested them. This suited us, and so we began to ask elders before each interview what they would like to discuss. This more flexible procedure worked well and allowed each elder to be part of the process and not just an informant. It was also more consistent with our traditions in which elders are decision-makers.

It was important for us to have training in the use of tape recor-

ders, interviewing techniques and tape documentation. This is where our co-ordinator, Bob Charlie, with more than twenty-nine years of experience in broadcasting, film, video, and oral history research, played an important role. We spent approximately one week practising our interviewing techniques with top quality tape recorders.

Finally, we began our travels out into the Yukon. We divided the Yukon into three areas based on the highway system: Klondike Highway, North Alaska Highway and South Alaska Highway. The Klondike Highway area included the communities of Carmacks, Pelly Crossing, Mayo and Dawson City. The North Alaska Highway area encompassed Haines Junction, Burwash Landing and Beaver Creek. The South Alaska Highway area included Carcross, Teslin, Watson Lake and Ross River.

In each community, we made arrangements to meet with a contact person who could assist us by introducing us to people and suggesting whom we might interview. During our initial visit, we asked each elder whether he or she would like to be interviewed and, if so, arranged a date to meet and talk. If the elder preferred to speak in his or her first language we would take a translator with us. While we encouraged elders to speak in their own language and recorded some interviews in Aboriginal languages, the majority are in English; however when interviews are in English, we always asked for names of places and people in the local language.

Our budget allowed us to interview five elders in each community for up to five hours. Normally, an interview lasts for about two hours and then the elder begins to get tired, so a follow-up interview may be necessary. As every ethnographer knows, the interview may unfold differently from the original plan, and because interviews like this usually provide unexpected information we learned that it is better to allow this to happen. All our lives, we have been taught to respect elders and part of that respect involves listening to what they have to say. The significance may not be clear right at the time, but later it becomes clear to us.

Transcribing tapes is a major part of our work and takes about sixty percent of our time. We make verbatim transcripts so that our work can be as accurate as possible. After we transcribe the tape, we bring the transcripts back to elders so that they can verify them. Corrected transcripts go to the Curriculum Development division of the Council for Yukon Indians where staff members use them to prepare units for school curriculum based on a First Nations perspective.

Social Change

The Elders' Documentation Project has primarily targeted men and wo-

men in their 60s and 70s as well as a few elders from older generations. We have interviewed two ladies who are more than a hundred years of age, one from Tagish and one from Dawson City. Almost all the elders with whom we have spoken experienced mission schools, the construction of the Alaska Highway, relocation of old village sites and a fast-paced and changing Yukon.

Documenting events from this period is critical to understanding the issues facing First Nations today—Land Claims, social issues, Aboriginal language issues, cultural and environmental issues. I spoke with one elder who told of his school years, leaving his village of Snag (a now-abandoned community near Beaver Creek) and travelling down the White River by raft to Dawson City, where he attended school. When he finished school, years later, he travelled home on the Alaska Highway to a Snag he no longer recognized. Another gentleman talked about how he was sent overseas during World War II and returned to a very different Yukon. With the introduction of new government systems and regulations, our elders have lived through enormous upheaval. It is important for them to be able to discuss these changes with younger people and with members of their own communities so they can recognize how we benefit from their knowledge today.

Personal Experiences

So far, this has been a wonderful, enlightening experience for me. First, this project has given me invaluable field experience as a student of anthropology. It allows us, as First Nations people, to become committed to documenting our own history. I derive great satisfaction from my work and feel fortunate to have found work directly related to the field of anthropology in my own cultural area.

Although this may seem like a dream come true, conducting research in my own community poses some difficulties. As First Nations researchers, I find that we often assume or take for granted many ideas because we cannot isolate concepts that are so woven into our own lifestyles and thought processes. It is hard, if not impossible, to come to our research with a clean slate, trying to be unbiased. I keep remembering that one of my teachers told us, "You must think like a two-year-old, always asking, Why?, assuming you know nothing in order not to miss something." But I have found that many of the elders sometimes seem a little annoyed with me and with the questions I ask because they seem basic to them and they think I should know the answers. This also makes me feel a little foolish, because I often *do* know the answers but have to appear as though I do not. So I have had to remind the elders that when I ask a question that seems peculiar, it is

because we are preparing simple and basic information for kids and for people who don't know these things.

Another interesting problem I noticed, especially when we first began, was our unrealistically high expectations about what we would be told. For example, we thought we would hear information about all the old, old ways and we expected our elders to have experienced much of this first-hand. Soon, though, we began to realize that this might not be the case. We had to recognize that we were working with a generation of elders different from those interviewed by Kitty McClellan in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s² and by Julie Cruikshank in the 1970s and 1980s. This does not detract from the value of the information we are now hearing but shows that we have to change our expectations.

I think that one of the hardest aspects of this work for me is that so much of our history is lost with the passing of each elder, history that we will never have the opportunity to learn. Since our project began, we have lost twenty elders, three of whom we had the opportunity to interview before they passed on. This is extremely difficult for us to accept. We work directly with elders who are precious to us and we value what they can teach us more than gold. It is a fight against time for us, and we feel great personal loss when we lose an elder.

While there are disadvantages to being First Nations researchers in our own culture, there are also advantages. One of the most obvious is the issue of establishing rapport: establishing a good relationship with our elders is relatively easy for us. People know who we are and when I mention the names of my grandparents, elders are more at ease with me than they might be with a stranger. Simply naming my relatives, my background, my clan, breaks down many barriers. Because all the members of this project grew up in the Yukon, we are very comfortable in a village setting, which is the elders' domain, and feel that the elders are giving us part of our own history. One of the major goals of the project is to do our work in the setting where the elders live so they will be comfortable and at ease with us interviewing them.

The history that we are collecting and documenting is a way of directly connecting ourselves with our past. Much of what we learn has deep significance for us because of the sense of ownership we feel for it. It is exhilarating for me to hear a story and to see the exact spot where it happened and to know that this is *my* history. For me, it has a spiritual significance that conveys the essence of who I am. Discovering our history creates intense motivation in us to work hard and to do the best we can to document our elders. Many of the elders I have interviewed have told me little stories about my family and relatives,

and about my great-grandmother and her life. This is very special for me because I never had the opportunity to ask my grandparents about their lives and history in any serious way. When they were living, I was too young to realize the importance of this. It is clear to me that the elders who work with us are really interested in passing on their knowledge. They want to see the younger generations of Yukon First Nations succeed in a contemporary world, but they also want us to know our history.

Additional Projects

In addition to collecting oral histories, our Elders' Documentation Project has participated in or has sponsored other special events. One of the most exciting was the Elders' Festival held in July 1993 at Klukshu, a fishing village twenty miles south of Haines Junction, Yukon, just off the Haines Road leading to Haines, Alaska. Our purpose in sponsoring this event was to get elders together outdoors and to record discussions about a range of topics such as the potlatch, traditional social systems, childbirth and contemporary issues.

We also set up and videotaped demonstrations of gaffing salmon at Dalton Post, processing fish, building deadfalls, building brush camps, stick gambling, drumming, singing, and storytelling. At a special women's discussion about childbirth, we were shown a girl's puberty hood, beautifully embellished with beadwork, and we were told how it was used. Approximately seventy-five elders, representing all the Yukon cultural areas, attended. Each left with a special canvas potlatch bag that had a set of dishes inside. The setting at Klukshu was beautiful and we felt the event was a great success. The next year we hosted another Elders' Festival at Brooks Brook, just outside the village of Teslin that followed the same format as at Klukshu.

We have also produced a newsletter called *Yukon Elders Speak*. It has promotional value but it also lets elders know about their friends who have been interviewed in the project. The first newsletter featured three elders and included photos of each and excerpts from their interviews. The newsletter was a hit with elders and made our project much more visible.

We hosted the first Elders' Tea and a training session at the Council for Yukon Indians. Two elders joined CYI (now CYFN) staff for an afternoon and spoke about Yukon spirituality. The session was taped and we learned a great deal. One of the elders was a lady of the Southern Tutchone-speaking Ta'an Kwäch'an/Lake Laberge people and the other was from Little Salmon, a Northern Tutchone community. These sessions will be ongoing at the Council for Yukon Indians and

are one way of exposing all staff members to Yukon First Nations cultural traditions and customs.

Conclusion

The Elders' Documentation Project provides one example of Yukon First Nations, on our own initiative, doing cultural documentation to preserve our own oral history. It represents a changing tradition in anthropology in the Yukon. However, I would also like to extend heartfelt thanks, admiration and appreciation to the anthropologists who have worked with our people and helped to create the enthusiasm to do ethnography in the first place. If it weren't for them, we would have great gaps in our history. Every day, we researchers refer to their books and work. The information gathered by our foremothers in anthropology represents the work of elders of an older generation, different from the elders who speak to us today about the changes that occurred since the 1940s. As traditions in anthropology change in the Yukon, so have the lives and stories of the contemporary First Nations today.

Notes

1. An important controversy erupted during the early 1990s over the territorial government's attempt to increase caribou populations in the south-west Yukon by reducing the wolf population. Aboriginal people, like other Yukoners, had a variety of perspectives on this issue.
2. Catharine McClellan, known throughout the Yukon as "Kitty," began her anthropological research in the Yukon in 1947 and has continued her work since then. She has close personal friendships with people in many Yukon Aboriginal communities.