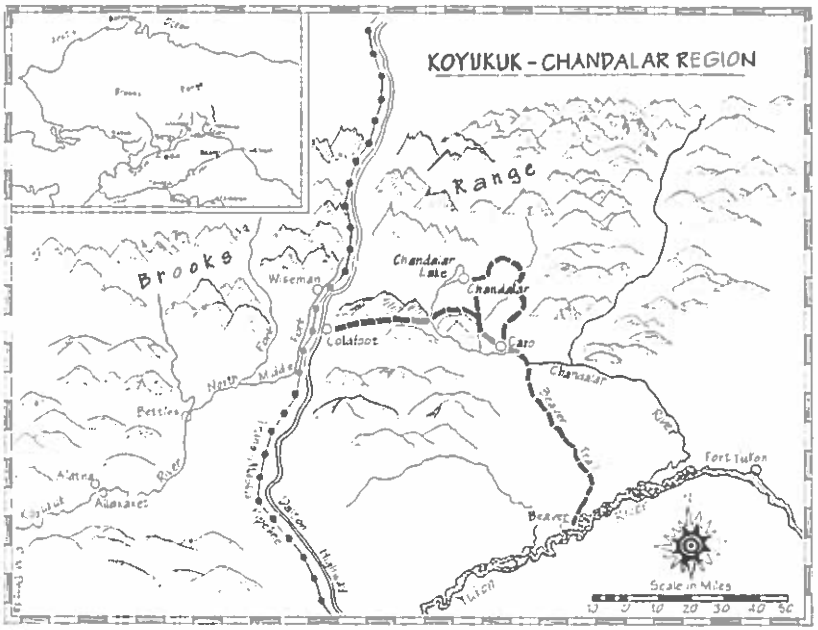
When the Stories Keep Pounding in My Ears: A Study in Personal Narratives

WILLIAM SCHNEIDER

My Introduction to Koyukuk Region

In the early years of this century, shortly after the Klondike and other big gold rushes, paying quantities of gold were discovered on the Koyukuk River, in the Brooks Range of north-central Alaska (see map). Soon the communities of Wiseman and Coldfoot supported a number of profitable operations that included hunting for meat to sell, mining and freighting supplies. Eskimos from the Kobuk River and the North Slope were attracted to these communities by the opportunities for employment. Some also held profitable mining claims.

Before 1970, you reached these historic gold mining communities



Koyukuk-Chandalar region of Alaska. Map courtesy of R. M. Drozda.

in one of three ways. In the early days, the prospectors and their supplies came in summer by steamboat up the Koyukuk River to Bettles, then by horse-drawn scow the next sixty miles to Coldfoot. In winter, overland trails left the Yukon River from Tanana and Beaver. The Tanana trail went north to Allakaket then on up to Bettles and Coldfoot. The Beaver trail went to Caro on the Chandalar River and to the mines at Chandalar Lake. From there, a branch trail ran west to Wiseman and Coldfoot. When airplanes came, in the 1930s and 1940s, they provided fast but irregular service north from Fairbanks and, in time, replaced many of the overland dogteam trails.

Today, the Koyukuk is only a dusty six-hour trip north from Fairbanks on the Dalton Highway, the supply line for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and North Slope oil fields. Coldfoot and Wiseman have changed a great deal since they were formed. Coldfoot serves the truck and tourist traffic and Wiseman residents are living a subsistence life, hunting and trapping. Wiseman is a young community with fifteen children under the age of 18. The area still supports some mining but the old miners who first worked the ground are gone.

I'm quite sure that this dramatic contrast between the old and the new escapes most visitors to the area. There is little to inform them of the change. For me, however, it was a major shock, largely because my understanding of the area was so deeply etched by stories of the old days. Those stories just didn't match the seemingly continuous sound and sight of big trucks working their way along the highway and the relatively easy trip by road into the country. I kept thinking about the old stories of gold miners, freighting with horse-drawn scows and dogteams, and Eskimo families selling meat to miners.

I first learned about Coldfoot and Wiseman twenty years ago when I was living in Beaver. There are a few old wagon wheels and some of the cabins along the government trail still stand but it would be easy to visit Beaver today and never learn about its heritage as the terminus of an important supply line north to the Chandalar gold mines. The primary reminder of that part of the community's heritage comes from the old timers and their stories. They shaped my first impressions of the Koyukuk. As I listened to them tell about the mines, freighting supplies on the overland trails and prospecting in the hills, my sense of geography became profoundly shaped by the social and economic ties that linked Beaver and Wiseman in the past.

But now I have driven the six hours, toured the Coldfoot truck stop and camped on the Middle Fork, probably close to where the scows unloaded goods bound for the Coldfoot stores. Already, the precious few remains of the old settlement, decomposing and rusting in the willows, have meaning for me. They have a place in my imagin-

ation, molded by the stories I heard from Turak Newman, an Inupiaq[1] Eskimo originally from the Arctic Coast, his son-in-law, Moses Cruikshank, an Athabascan who settled in Beaver, and Tishu Ulen, an Inupiaq woman who lived most of her life in Wiseman. Their stories about the Koyukuk keep pounding in my ears and make me wrestle with what I see and with the power of those old storytellers who shaped my introduction to the country.

Personal Narratives and the Audience

Many of the stories told by these three old-timers are what folklorists would call personal narratives, that is they are about personal experiences and are told in the first person (Stahl 1989: 12). Unlike ancient texts or even community lore, personal narratives are an intimate invitation into the experiences and character of the teller. These stories prompt us to ask several questions: Why is this story told to me now? How does the way this person tells the story influence me to remember and re-tell the story myself? How does my relationship with the storyteller influence my recall of the story?

* *

I know that personal narratives often get incorporated by a folk group as lore and that those who know, and gather to tell and listen to the stories, share meanings that reinforce who they are and what they value. I am sensitive to this dynamic but also know that stories, particularly personal narratives, are often told to us individually, not because the teller wants to insure that the account becomes common lore but because he or she wants us to hear it. The stories discussed in this paper are best known within each elder's family.

I start with that which prompts me to remember and re-tell the stories of these three oldtimers. I emphasize that the process of self-examination should be taken up by other researchers as well, because the stories (personal narratives) are told to us and are understood by us against the backdrop of our experiences. For those who write about oral history, I think we have a responsibility to tell our readers not only how the folk group understands and relates to the story but also to explain how our experiences and relationships with the narrators influence our understanding.

These questions could be asked of different types of stories, such as ancient texts deeply embedded in the folk tradition but my sense is that by starting with the personal narrative, we are getting at something more basic, the construction of narrative from experience. Some (like Bauman 1986: 5) suggest that storytelling can be seen as actual

construction of events, that the story becomes its own event. Whether we see stories as events or about events, we can agree that in the personal narrative, events get selected and constructed into narrative by the speaker from his or her experiences, memory, and perceptions of how things happened. The advantage of this type of story is that we can often very easily recognize connections between the action described, the teller's personal experience, the speaker's perception of our interest and our particular understanding and identification with the story and the speaker.

If all stories start as personal narratives and depend upon the dynamics just described, then clearly the researcher must first ask how he or she comes personally to know, recall and understand and then ask how that compares to the experiences of others. What follows are my efforts to address the first question, why and how I recall particular stories about the Koyukuk River.

Turak Newman, Moses Cruikshank and Tishu Ulen

Although Turak, Moses and Tishu knew each other, their experiences in the Koyukuk were quite different. Turak was there first, when he was a young boy. As a young man, he returned there with his partner, Bob Winer, to get supplies for their big trip back to the Arctic Coast. Later on, Turak freighted goods by dogteam from Beaver up to Chandalar Lake. Moses grew up in the Fort Yukon area and his introduction to Wiseman came many years later from a prospecting partner, Sam Pingalo, who grew up in the Wiseman area. Tishu grew up and spent most of her life in Wiseman. Her parents and grandparents lived a semi-nomadic life following the caribou. When the prospectors and miners came into the Koyukuk region, Tishu's parents hunted wild game and traded it to the store for supplies.

In no way do the accounts reported here constitute anything more than fragments of the past. Yet, as I float down the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River looking for some sign of historic use, I'm hungry for visual connections to that old way of life, to the stories that first shaped my understanding, stories about scow operators, hunting, and freighting with dogteams. I realize how much my perception of the "old way of life" on this river is influenced by my experiences with these storytellers. Yet, how well can I articulate how my relationships and experiences with elders influence what I know and the ways I know about the past? Robin Ridington (1988) and others have demonstrated this skill elsewhere in the North. Unfortunately, more often this question goes unexamined despite the fact that it is the basis for determining how we know what we know.

Turak

I met Turak Newman in the summer of 1972, when I first arrived in Beaver. At that time, and on subsequent trips, he shared his home and the stories of his life with me. I recorded his stories and later edited them into the volume *One Man's Trail*. His own efforts at writing had ended when a house-fire destroyed his papers. I think he welcomed my interest in his history and, in general, my efforts to help him get his story into print. He invested a good part of a year freely sharing his stories with me. Turak and his parents were from Barrow on the Arctic Coast. As a young boy, he travelled with them to the Interior gold mining areas of the Koyukuk and Chandalar. He lived on the Koyukuk with other Eskimos attracted by employment opportunities. Eskimos freighted supplies, worked on the scows and worked in the mines. Turak's family spent part of a year in Allakaket, where he went to the Episcopal Mission School. Eventually, they settled in Beaver. Turak's life continued to be intimately connected to gold mining and the attendant freighting of supplies. His successful mining claim funded a trip back to Barrow in 1917. On that trip, they stopped in Coldfoot to buy an outfit.

Each time I return to his work, *One Man's Trail*, I vividly recall his telling and re-telling of the old stories. His accounts of the traders, the supply boats, and travel is an intimate and personal view of Eskimo life on the Koyukuk. His story of the 1917 trip back to Barrow begins with straight description and background but then turns to detailed dialogue between characters, interspersed with just enough description so unfamiliar listeners can orient themselves. The dialogue is enriched by his recall of the questions they asked each other and by his re-creation of their speech patterns. Imagine the three characters all with separate voices: Turak, his partner Bob, and the store owner, Jim Sibley. They're getting the outfit together and negotiating for a new stovepipe:

> "When we left Beaver, we had a lot of supplies at the head of Big Creek.
> Plenty of grub.
> Plenty of dogs.
> So we just took enough to get up to Coldfoot.
> We figured that we would buy our stuff there.
> We went light.
> Jim Sibley had a store at Coldfoot.
> That's on the North Fork of the Koyukuk.
> They had a store adjoining the roadhouse.
> His wife was a good cook.
> She's from Kobuk and he's a White guy, oh pretty well in years.
> Her name was Kitty.
> They had a pretty good-sized store there.

So, I asked him,
'You got a tent?'
'Oh, yes.'
'What size though?'
'We wanted ten by twelve, isn't it Bob?'
He said, 'Yes, but we want ten ounce.'
Then we wanted a Yukon stove without oven.
We wanted it fairly long so we could stick a stovepipe inside the stove when we were moving.
'If you give me time,' he said. 'If you stay here tomorrow, I'll make a telescope stovepipe for you boys.'
I said, 'Ok, build us one tomorrow.'
So we got a tent and stove from him." (Newman, n.d.: 31)[2]

I heard this and other stories many times over ten or more years and I always focused on the content and imagined the events he described. But now I see how his use of dialogue immerses us into the conversation and how effectively he integrates their thoughts and reactions to each other. Turak doesn't use much "he said" or "she said" to indicate who is speaking. Rather, he changes his voice and tone to re-create the actual exchange of dialogue. At the end, Turak leaves out his last question to the trader and goes directly from his thought ("We wanted it fairly long so we could stick a stovepipe inside the stove when we were moving.") to the trader's response. "If you give me time," he said, "If you stay here tomorrow, I'll make a telescope stovepipe for you boys." This shorthand move from thought to response keeps the focus on the participants' intent and avoids the interruption that a question would make. Turak was masterful in changing his voice and intonation to imitate each of the characters and also in giving me a sense of how they were thinking. The overall effect is to make me feel as though it were 1917 and I'm with them, in Coldfoot, listening to the conversation.

The last time I saw Turak was in 1981. He sat in my office and retold the story of the Glenn brothers and how they freighted with horse-drawn scows on the Koyukuk between Bettles and Coldfoot. The river upstream from Bettles has shallow spots and riffles. The deepest places are narrow stretches where the swiftest current runs. The scow operators had to work their way upriver, driving the horses to the places where they had enough water to float the scows, avoiding the really deep, swift places where the heavy scows could get sucked into the fastest current and drag the horses into places where they could lose their footing and have to fight the volumes of on-rushing water. It was dangerous work and one time the horses did get caught in the swift water. Despite their efforts to help, the freighters couldn't save them from drowning. I recall vividly Turak's tall, wiry frame, one arm

in a sling, the other waving to emphasize the command, "**Cut the rope! Cut the rope!**" [The cover photograph shows Turak at that particular moment of the telling.] It was as if he were there and he were the scowman giving the command.

A month or so after that visit, Turak was dead. I remember other times he told that story but none as clearly as the last time. Old-timers often know when they are going. I should have known that back then. Maybe I just didn't want to accept it. Whatever the case, his last visit and story are etched deeply in my mind. Now, over ten years later, as I float down this river, each riffle is alive for me with his story of the Glenn brothers and I try to imagine how the scow operators worked the river.

Moses

Moses Cruikshank is Turak's son-in-law, an Athabascan Indian from the Black River, northeast of Fort Yukon. He is married to Turak's daughter, Ruth. I first met Moses when I was staying with Turak. At holiday time we were invited up for dinner. When the dishes were cleared, Moses would tell stories, often about searching for gold. A large, dignified-looking man, serious and earnest, a model in the way he lived his own life, I sat in awe of this man; he had done so much and commanded such respect from everyone present. At those times, I always wanted to hear more. The storytelling always seemed too short to satisfy my curiosity. I remember one time at his house, his sister's son was there and Moses was telling stories. Eager to hear more, I asked questions. The nephew, impatient with my breach of etiquette, made it clear that it was not my place to ask for more. I didn't realize that stories are a gift to be appreciated when given; it's not always appropriate to press for more.

Years later, at a different time in both our lives, when he was ready to have his stories made more public and he knew me better, Moses and I worked intensely on his biography and I got to hear the stories many times over. I didn't understand the changes in our relationship then but now it seems quite natural that with age comes a growing willingness to be more public and that Moses had reached that point in his life.

Back when I first knew him, a prelude to storytelling at holiday time was often the story of his father-in-law and how well-respected he was as a miner. When the dishes were cleared, and with his father-in-law seated nearby, he'd begin:

> "And then of course there was Turak Newman.
> He was one of the people that came into Beaver from Wiseman and from

Moses Cruikshank at Elmer Rasmuson Library Archives. Photo by Dave Nelson, ca. 1988. Used with permission.

the coast there early days.
He's well-known in that area.
He raised a big family and I'm married to his daughter, Ruth.
Turak Newman worked for years over in Chandalar as a miner.
He had the reputation of being a first-class miner.
He's one of those guys that just knows just where to put your point and everything like that.
He's one of those guys that just seems to know just what to do.
Everybody wanted him to work, work for them, because he was a good workman.
Anyway, he was working for Mello and Mr. Mello was just about ready to quit, you know, and Turak told him it looks good so we'll put in one more thaw.

Turak drove in the point there and when they clean out that thaw, that was one of the richest discoveries made over in there.
From that discovery, that's where Mr. Mello made a stake." (Cruikshank 1986: 42-5)

After that introduction, any number of other stories might follow but certain ones often led to others and there was frequently a moral message or judgement. At first I didn't notice the ordering or the judgements but, when I began to think about arranging the accounts for his book, *The Life I've Been Living*, I realized that he has ordered the stories in his mind in particular ways to chronicle his life and to reinforce what he thinks is important. Over the years, I came to realize that Moses' stories are not solely about events. They are about universal meanings and the stories are a format for introducing themes.[3] He conveys meanings in the way he portrays people and activities, in his descriptions, and in linking stories together to reinforce meaning. This is well-illustrated in two prospecting stories he tells. The first is about Old Adam, his sister's husband's father. Old Adam found gold in the Hodzana country and, with his Whiteman partner, kept its location a strict secret. Until the day he died, Old Adam wouldn't tell anyone, not even his son, because he had promised his partner. This story is often followed by his own accounts of prospecting that often led to his story of a trip with Sam Pingalo:

Old Adam story:

"And those old-time Indians, you know,
they'd die before they'd break their word.
They're a different class of people from the Indians you see nowadays.
So he would never tell nobody just where that gold was. And I don't know where it is,
And I trapped and prospected up in there all these years.
So far as I'm concerned, it's still up there,
But I don't know where it is." (Cruikshank 1986: 93)

Wiseman Prospecting Story:

"As I said, after I got out of the Service, Sam Pingalo and I headed out to look for a lost mine.
Sam was quite a prospector; he did a lot of prospecting. . . .
It seems that way back in 1914, -15,-16 around there, Sam was over in the Koyukuk, he and his family, his mother and dad.
And that was the time the country was just booming over there, gold in every creek I guess.
Well anyway, all at once World War I came along and things kind of got quieted down and people were being called back to their countries.
And one of the men called back to his country was a young German man

who got to be well acquainted with Sam Pingalo and his family. . . .

According to what I learned from Sam, stories, you know,
This German knew where this place is, and he took out a lot of gold,
but he didn't tell nobody, you know. . . .
Anyway, the only people he told was Sam Pingalo's family, those Eskimo people there.
He trusted them, you know.
He told them where it is and all that.
Them days, Sam, he was just a youngster then.
His folks wouldn't tell him where that place was because those old folks,
they promise somebody they wouldn't tell where it is, they won't.
Those old-time people, they kept their word, you know.
Well, anyway, that German fellow never came back,
And after all those years, oh, I don't know, twenty-five, thirty years,
Sam said,
'Let's go look for it.'" (Cruikshank 1986: 93-4)

There are similar themes that tie the two stories together: the search for gold, the early White prospectors and the old time Native way exemplified by Old Adam and the Pingalo family who kept their solemn pacts with their partners. I think Moses remembers the stories this way to reinforce the importance of keeping your word, as epitomized by Old Adam and the Pingalos. For me, the common themes not only reinforce Moses' point about keeping your word but they also tie the two geographic areas together in my mind. I keep thinking about Moses' experiences in both areas and the many opportunities he took to preserve in narrative the lessons learned over his life. He bridges the vastness of the country between Beaver and Wiseman and I see that the stories that guide his life were forged over many miles of travel.

Most of Moses' stories have a strong moral message and this is one of the main reasons he tells the stories and, in the long run, I think that's why we remember them as important. They reinforce the values he thinks are important. Sometimes the message reflects justice—the way people ought to be treated—and sometimes they reflect personal qualities—the way equipment ought to be cared for or, in the case of his father-in-law, the way you ought to do that work. Frequently, individuals are pointed out as exemplary for their abilities or their ethics. Phrases, such as "old time Alaskans," "old Indian way," or "old Native way," reflect his moral code. I think, too, that this moral code is a main reason why Moses believes his experiences are important. His travels in the Wiseman area have a clear place in his life and telling about them is important not so much for what they tell us about Wiseman but because of the moral lessons contained in them and the obvious

parallels with the stories Moses heard about Old Adam.

Moses is widely recognized as a storyteller and I think this is because his stories are about adventures all over the Interior of Alaska and they are exciting. I also know that people respect his knowledge and judgement and Moses is known as a man who lives by a strong moral code. I don't know, however, whether most listeners are conscious of the judgements that permeate each story. I only recognized the judgements after many years of thinking about the stories and analyzing the ways he describes people and how his stories reinforce particular themes. For me, the judgements have come to complement my impression of the man, the events he describes and the values he promotes in the way he lives his life.

I don't suppose that he consciously orders his stories, just as I don't think that Turak thought much about re-enacting dialogue, but in both cases they use these techniques to convey their message more memorably. With both these storytellers, it took me years to understand what I now think they were really trying to tell me.

Tishu

Unlike Turak, whom I knew well, and Moses, whom I've known for close to twenty years, I hardly knew Tishu Ulen. Unfortunately, I was only able to do one hour of recording with her; we planned to do more but I was too late and Tishu's health failed. The interview we did was conducted in her apartment with her grandson, Ben Ulen, and her good friend, Roger Kaye. She wasn't feeling well but she agreed to try. I suspect she went on with the recording because she didn't want to disappoint Roger.

The impetus for my interview with Tishu was a contract to make recordings with people in Gates of the Arctic National Park and to document their observations on the history of the area. Her stories provide one of the few links to the days before the White prospectors and to the time when Inupiat Eskimos supplied the miners with meat. Today, the Inupiat heritage of Wiseman survives primarily in stories of a few old-timers, like Tishu, who used to live there. It's a fragile thread that connects an important part of the local history. The short recording we did touched on several themes in the Park's history: the tenuous nature of the food quest,[4] an historic travel route of Inupiat people to the Northwest Coast of Alaska, and the relationships between the peoples in the Koyukuk region.

I've returned repeatedly, back to a story about a starvation time before she was born—when her parents and grandparents were camped on the Arctic Coastal Plain, apparently not too far from the timber. At

Tishu Ulen on the day of the interview. Photo by William Schneider.

first I was interested in the famine but now, after many hearings, I see how the story is in fact about her grandmother, who became more important in the story than the famine.

In Tishu's telling, she summarizes the experience by saying they were starving; the men went out and got caribou and that's what saved them. Then she goes back and tells the story in detail, highlighting her grandmother and what *she* did:

WS- What attracted your father to come to Wiseman area?
TU- Oh they go around looking for game.
They went all the way from the Kobuk into Alatna and up Alatna into the Arctic—the whole family.
And they almost starve to death up there, first year.
There was no caribou.
But, he went out, he and two other guys went out.
They got eleven caribou.
That's what saved them.

And, huh! my grandma, she's a great big tall lady; she's tall, big.
WS- What's her name?
TU- My father's side and the old lady's worried about her daughter and my mother.
There's only two girls and there's six boys she got.
And she said,
She told my dad
"Why don't you take the girls down to the timber and maybe you find something to eat for them down there."
And he never says anything to my grandma or grandpa, you know.
But this time, he ask,
"What are you going to do after we leave?"
"Oh," she said,
"Don't worry, we live long enough" (chuckle).
"Get the girls down there in the timber,"
"you might find something" (chuckle).

So during the night they left. . .
she thinks it's around eleven o'clock or maybe ten o'clock they left.
They were gone all day and late in the evening they hear them coming.
The way they were walking, they were heavy.
They got pack on their back,

'crunch.'

And here comes the skin door flapped open and a big pack came in, lot of meat.
Grandma start cooking right now.
She start boiling and going- (anticipating laugh)
My mother said this is, she felt funny.
Instead of give her man something to eat, she serve the girls first.
The girls came first with her.
Nothing could be said about the girls either or she'll jump them.
(full laughter)
That's my grandma!

Then she fed him.
That's what save them.
That year a lot of people died, starve.
Got away too far, too far out from Barrow, can't make it back. (Ulen 1991, n.p.)

What first struck me as important about this story was the graphic description of the hunters' return and how the women predicted their success by the sound of their steps on the snow. Now, with yet another

listen, I am impressed by how much pleasure Tishu had in recalling memories of her grandmother. Despite the fact that she wasn't feeling well, Tishu seemed to perk up when talking about her grandmother. Her chuckles and laughter signal her pleasure in the story and her good humor highlights her pride in this strong-willed woman whose unusual, comical, yet endearing way invite us to remember her and how she handled the hard time. Tishu's telling also invited us to remember her, Tishu, this frail, old woman in a robe, hardly filling the chair, my link to that distant time. Her story about her grandmother is, for me, a personal connection to a particular time, involving particular people. It isn't just any grandmother and just any famine. It is her own grandmother that Tishu presents; it is that woman's personality that makes me know and remember this particular starvation time.

Much as the starvation theme forms the backdrop against which to talk about her grandmother, the supply theme appears as the backdrop against which she describes how her parents cared for their children as they worked to supply the miners. Laughter again intersperses her account:

> "See, he goes ahead, like in the morning,
> He starts out.
> And she comes with the dog, 4 dogs, and 2 kids she had in the sled.
> She drive it, and she pitch the tent and get the fire going.
>
> —the kids are crying (laughter)
> hungry!
> She makes out though.
> Sometimes he didn't come home that night.
> He be out too far,
> So he make a big campfire and stay by it,
> Get a porcupine or something to eat.
> He miss, maybe miss that game, their moose.
> But they double trip back;
> They turn and they double-trip back.
> They're hauling the meat in.
> They take it to the store and leave it there.
> And that's the way it gets sold." (Ulen 1991, n.p.)

The family side of supplying the miners with meat has received little attention in the literature. Most accounts focus on the person hunting. In Tishu's story, however, the rest of the family is central to the story. The text of the story is supplying meat to the miners but, for me, the story Tishu tells is about the family and how her mother met their needs. From now on, I will have the image in my mind of families, not individuals, bringing in meat to trade.

Today, the hard, uncertain line of supply has been replaced by a stream of ten-wheeled trucks rumbling along the haul road day and night. The few broken-down cabins buried in the willows and fireweed are all that is left of the historic Coldfoot that Tishu knew so well. For me, the modern scene stands in striking contrast to Tishu's account and, because it is so different, makes me cling all the more tightly to her story as I try to comprehend the gulf between then and now. I realize how important it was for me to know Tishu, even though it was in a small way.

The Mark of the Teller

As I travel down-river from Coldfoot, views of the haul road and the sound of trucks compete with my desire to see a bit of what Turak, Moses and Tishu have known. The closest I come is the shallow river.

Back in my office, I revisit their words on tape and in print. Reviewing their stories, I come to a new awareness of their skills, keeping the old stories alive. I realize how much of what they have chosen to talk about, the way they have told their stories and my growing knowledge of each of them has shaped my understanding of the Wiseman/Coldfoot area.

Each account bears the personal mark of the teller in the ways they make sense of an experience or of stories told to them. Turak uses dialogue to re-create the setting and to show us what the characters said in their own voices. He surrounds us with a host of people, each with a separate voice, and permits us to become acquainted with them. Moses personalizes his accounts by emphasizing lessons to be learned and by linking themes from one story to the next, inviting us to translate the particular experience beyond the telling to our own lives. Tishu presents her family's hardships through the personalities of her mother and grandmother, the characters most fully developed in the narrative. Chuckles and laughter indicate her feelings about these people and add new dimensions to our appreciation of what life was like.

Each of these storytellers generously shares their personal point of view. I don't think that Turak was present when the horses drowned, yet his use of dialogue makes it sound as though he were within hearing distance. Moses heard the stories about Old Adam and the Pingalo family and retells them with his comments on the moral strength of the old time Native. Similarly, Tishu wasn't present during the starvation time she described in her story but she tells us plenty about how she feels about her grandmother.

My point is that these, like all stories, take on the personality of the narrator who tells us what they mean by the way they tell the story,

the dialogue they re-create, the moral messages they include and the people they choose to emphasize. My understanding of their stories grows as I come to know them better because it is not only the text of the story that I learn to value but also the way they consider the characters and their actions. This takes listening to the stories many times and coming to know the speakers well before I can speculate on what they mean.

It seems to me that the value in their stories lies in their personal perspectives and our coming to appreciate the emphasis they place on certain events or people. When Tishu says, "And he never say anything to my grandma or grandpa, you know," this is based on her knowledge of the people and on what she has heard and deemed correct. Tishu may have been told this about her grandma but we are also getting *her* judgement. If we stop to ask ourselves whether those people actually said those words, we miss part of the story's meaning because we remove two of the elements the teller introduces to the story—judgement and feeling.

Beyond sharing what happened, these three narrators give us a great deal of themselves—how they remember the characters, their feelings and sentiments, and the lessons they want us to learn. In this way, the narrators invite us to remember them, the storytellers. They are a personal, human link to the past and through their stories we are able to learn much about them too.

The Retelling

As a listener, the stories don't end when the storyteller stops and the telling is over. The stories get washed along in the river of my life. At times they glisten in the sun and I take notice, at other times they are buried in the sands of experience. It may take a trip back to the Koyukuk to dredge up the old stories.

A trip back, however, may not prompt retelling though it will inspire recall. There must be people eager to hear the old stories. There must be a resurrection of the connections between the original teller and the event. When I retell the stories I have to convey a sense of how I know Turak, Moses and Tishu or the listener will be left with the event only and have none of the personal connection that lead back to the original tellers and the way they saw and described the events.

Unlike stories that circulate in a folk group, where people are related and know each other well, stories told to "outsiders" are not likely to be remembered and passed on unless those outsiders can establish a personal connection, an identification, between their own experience and the original teller. The original teller's folk group may

have a lifetime of association with the speaker and draw upon this and their common culture to make sense of what the teller is *really* talking about. There is no assurance that I, as an outsider, can duplicate that, that I can adequately pass the gift on to others. It seems that if we are to both be and create that link then we must give of ourselves, explaining how we know the teller, how he or she has touched our lives and the lessons we have learned from their stories. Only then, and with skill and listener interest, can we hope to have our audience make the connections necessary to keep the old stories alive. Clearly this is what Turak, Moses and Tishu have given me.

As narrators and as listeners we become inextricably part of the story.[5] We both extract and infuse meaning based upon our background and experiences and the people and places where we choose to share the knowledge.[6] So, I can explain why the stories keep pounding in my ears but I can't guarantee that that will be the case for others.

When I repeat Turak's scow story, I remember his words so clearly because *I* can imagine and relate to the event described. In part this is because of the way Turak tells the story, his skill as a storyteller and the meaning he ascribes to the events and in part because of my associations with him. He introduced me to oral tradition in Alaska and this is the last story I remember him telling. My associations with him and the context in which I last heard this story have, for me, become part of the story and, inevitably, a part of my retelling whether I consciously know it or not. And now, as I float down this river, I can't forget that frail old man, arms waving—*"Cut the Rope!"*

William Schneider is Curator of Oral History at the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer Rasmuson Library, and Associate in Anthropology, University of Alaska Fairbanks. He has lived and worked in Alaska for over twenty years where his life has been enriched by elders such as those described in this paper.

Notes

1. "Inuit-Inupiaq" refers to the major language spoken by Eskimo people living in Alaska from the Seward Peninsula north and east and also across Canada, to both east and west Greenland. There are many different dialects but there is usually mutual intelligibility between neighbouring groups (Woodbury 1984: 56). "Inupiaq" is also the term used by Eskimo people of Northwest Alaska, the North Slope and the Brooks Range to refer to themselves. The plural is "Inupiat."
2. Coldfoot is a short way upstream from where the North Fork of the Koyukuk River joins the Middle Fork.

3. Julie Cruikshank, in her work with Yukon elders (1990), makes the point that stories are a way people teach life's lessons. Retelling the old stories brings meaning to modern issues; old stories are not just about the past.

4. The title of William E. Brown's history of Gates of the Arctic National Park is *Gaunt Beauty. . .Tenuous Life* (1988) and is a reference to the difficulties of making a living in that country.

5. This point was made clear to me by Edward "Sandy" Ives in his book *George Magoon and the Down East Game Wars*. In it we learn that the stories about Magoon are important not because they are true or false but because of the reasons people have for telling them. The stories are more than the text. They serve to reinforce feelings about oppressive game laws and the plight of the rural poor in Maine. Similarly, Alessandro Portelli, in *The Death of Luigi Trastully and Other Stories*, demonstrates how stories can change over time to meet the needs of tellers and listeners and how the "history" of such changes is an important record of social attitudes. I am not, of course, denying the value of determining the validity of such claims (see for instance, Allen and Montell 1981: 67-87) but am emphasizing the dangers of losing information by dismissing accounts that either don't lend themselves to such tests, as in the case of Tishu's judgements about her grandmother, or fail them outright because the stories have changed over time.

6. Sandra Stahl (1989) uses the term "literary folkloristics" to describe how listeners understand and relate to accounts differently. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (1990) have been helpful in their discussions of how storytelling context is shaped by both listeners and tellers.

References

Allen, Barbara and Lynwood Montell (1981). *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History.

Bauman, Richard (1986). *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies in Oral Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bauman, Richard and Charles Briggs (1990). "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19: 59-88.

Brown, William E (1988). *Gaunt Beauty. . .Tenuous Life*. Historic Resources Study for Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (limited production). Anchorage: National Park Service.

Cruikshank, Julie (1990). *Life Lived Like a Story*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Cruikshank, Moses (1986). *The Life I've Been Living*. Fairbanks: University of

Alaska Press.

Ives, Edward "Sandy" (1991). *George Magoon and the Down East Game Wars: History, Folklore, and the Law.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Newman, Turak (n.d.). *One Man's Trail.* Anchorage: Anchorage Community College Adult Literacy Laboratory.

Portelli, Alessandro (1991). *The Death of Luigi Trastully and Other Stories.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ridington, Robin (1988). *Trail to Heaven: Knowledge and Narrative in a Northern Native Community.* Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre.

Stahl, Sandra (1989). *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ulen, Tishu ([1991]). [Tape recording #H91-30-01 for the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.]

Woodbury, Anthony (1984). "Eskimo and Aleut Languages." In *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 5, The Arctic.* William Sturtevant, Gen. Ed. David Damas, Vol. Ed. Washington: Smithsonian Institution: 49-63.