

WHERE THE RIVERS MEET:
THE LIFE STORY OF THE REVEREND HELEN PETERS OF TANANA

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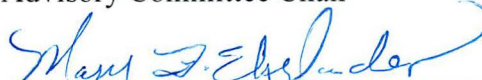


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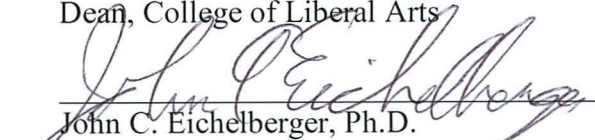
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WHERE THE RIVERS MEET:
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A
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Abstract

This thesis presents the life story of the Reverend Helen Peters, an Athabascan woman whose life exemplifies how faith in God can help a person to overcome great obstacles and trauma. The western view of leadership is very different from the concept as understood among Alaska Natives. Leadership of Native elders is the embodiment of their character, their conscience, their family history, traditions, language ability and spirituality. At every gathering the elders are expected to discuss these concepts in order to instruct and guide the people. In this way, they lead by example and find any and every opportunity to impart wisdom and knowledge. As an elder of Tanana, Helen understands the responsibility she has to lead the community. To this end, she wanted to tell her story, discussing difficult life experiences of substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault and suicide. These are the pressing subjects that she is most concerned about for her family and for the Native community at-large. Through personal experience, she understands that the silence surrounding her own story has kept her locked within herself and her family mired in the healing process, unable to move forward. She wanted to break that silence. In revealing these disturbing events, Helen courageously opens the door of dialogue that she hopes will lead not only to healing from past traumas but to confronting current situations in Native communities. She is attempting to lead the people to a place where it is permitted to talk about these difficult topics. This is her gift to her children and the community at-large. It is my goal to facilitate her intent and to offer Helen's story as an example of faith-based courage to overcome extreme obstacles. Helen's life also serves as a model of courage in taking a stand against alcohol and substance abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. May her candor inspire others to speak out so that the future is brighter for today's children.

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The creating of a thesis has not occurred in a vacuum. Over the past three years many people have offered words of encouragement and insight. Some people were willing to tramp through the weeds and climb hills to poke around in dusty buildings and overgrown grave sites. Some dug through old files to retrieve bits of information that had not been viewed in a long while and one drove me in a boat so we could explore historical sites on the Yukon River.

The contents of this paper will undoubtedly be difficult for some people to read as they will stir up unpleasant memories. My hope and prayer is that in the stirring, these readers will be able to make peace with the past and move boldly forward into the future.

I would like to thank every person by name, but I know that I may overlook someone, so I will focus on key contributors. To everyone who participated in some way or other, please know that your contribution is appreciated.

A hearty thanks to Helen for being such a willing participant in this process and for entrusting me with the telling of difficult memories; it has truly been an honor. She was fully engaged and took the lead in what she wanted to discuss. The telling of the story is hers. My role was to record, listen and digest. I take full responsibility for the assembling of these materials. Should anything be misrepresented, the fault is entirely mine.

Thanks to sisters-in-law Faith and Kathleen who helped pull family, tribal and Tanana information together and who also helped me process some information and put it into perspective. To my Graduate Advisory Committee members – Terrence Cole thanks for being the instigator and insisting that this be the project I focus on; it was the right one. Mary Ehrlander, without your encouragement, guidance and insight, this project would not have been completed; thank you. Bill Schneider, thanks for your wisdom and perspective in piecing

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Chapter 1: Introduction – Helen Peters: A Woman of Faith



Figure 1: Helen Peters in 2012 at Tanana Winter Carnival.
Courtesy of Faith Peters

Helen Peters is a strong woman whose life story illustrates faith-based courage but also illustrates another kind of courage by summoning the strength in her twilight years to speak out on topics that traditionally have been taboo. Her life represents many challenges that are often glossed over in other narratives. What makes her story different is that most elders highlight the pleasant subjects of traditional living like hunting and fishing practices, or political aspirations. Helen chose to discuss the more raw and

traumatic life experiences and bring them to the light of a public medium. The difficult issues of trauma, loss, suicide, domestic violence, substance abuse and sexual assault are prevalent in Native communities. Yet, public discussion of these topics remains largely taboo and a code of silence remains in effect. An open discussion about suicide prevention is gaining traction, but sexual assault and domestic violence remain the elephant in the room. A few people have attempted to open that discussion but these efforts have to date been unsuccessful. According to Lynn Adams, author of *Oral History Theory*, it is not usual to discuss traumatic experiences due to the residual shame and guilt associated with them.¹ As a respected elder and minister, Helen can speak freely of these experiences with authority and confidence. Because of her position in the community, people will listen.

¹ Lynn Abrams. *Oral History Theory* [eBook]. Taylor and Francis, 2010, Internet, available from <http://UAF.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=547347>, accessed April 5, 2014.

Helen's life experiences were varied as she navigated uncharted waters without mentorship or guidance at many junctures of her life. She exemplifies tremendous resilience, resourcefulness and ability to adapt to new situations and a constantly changing environment. In many ways, Helen has been a trail blazer, becoming one of the first Native women to leave home, develop a career and buy property. Women who came of age in the late 1940s and early 1950s were not expected to exhibit such independence or determination, but she did so as the need or opportunity arose.

Helen Sarah Joseph Peters is a Koyukon Athabascan woman of the Caribou Band, *Toltsina* or "Big Water" Clan, and is enrolled as a member of the Tanana Tribe.² Helen was born to Elijah and Helen Joseph on June 11, 1929 at Mission Hill, the second youngest of eleven children. Before her family settled semi-permanently at Mission Hill in Tanana, they traveled in a wide seasonal circuit throughout the Middle Yukon and Denali Park area. In the spring time, her ancestors participated in the annual trading festival at *Nuchalawoyya*, near the present-day village of Tanana. Her father and grandfathers traveled extensively trapping and trading and participated in other trade festivals held along the Arctic coast.

The story of Helen and her ancestors dramatizes the transition of an Athabascan Indian band of nomadic people into Western society. Initially, the changes came slowly and were readily incorporated into nomadic life. Later, the changes came so rapidly that the pressure nearly broke the family in pieces. As Helen recalls certain episodes of her life, resilience of mind and spirit emerge as a dominant character trait. Helen cherishes the old ways, yet she embraces the new and is eager to learn new things. Her life has not been static, but rather quite dynamic. Her story is a testimonial to the power of faith in God.

² This is one of the several Athabascan tribes of Alaska's Northern Interior.

Helen's life became marked by poignant transitions. In spite of many losses, she considers her childhood to have been a relatively happy one, although there were times of extreme loneliness. When she was four years old she lost her mother, who died from childbirth complications. Her father drowned in the Yukon River three days after her thirteenth birthday, leaving her an orphan to be raised by an elderly grandmother and Episcopalian missionaries.

With her family gone and no one to guide her, Helen moved to Fairbanks at the tender age of sixteen and lived alone until her marriage at the age of nineteen. To Helen, who was fresh off the river, Fairbanks, bustling with GIs and other workers who had come to build infrastructure during World War II, seemed like a large, frightening place.

While yet in Fairbanks Helen married Don Andon, a white man with whom she had three children. He was not a participant in their marriage and left her before the third child was born. Helen returned home to Tanana to begin her life anew, once again finding work at the Tanana Hospital. The nurturing love and support she received from the members of the community helped her find her footing as the community took great care of one another. Men hunted for her, young girls babysat her children so she could work, and many women became lifelong friends.

In Tanana, Helen met and married the love of her life, Hardy Allen Peters, with whom she had six more children. Both Helen and Hardy practiced the subsistence activities of hunting and fishing while maintaining full time jobs and raising a large family in Tanana. They were prominent community members, serving in a variety of ways in addition to pursuing the spiritual calling and studying for the ministry. Their lives were marked by hard work and hard partying, which sometimes led to violence in the home. Spirituality is central to the theme of her story and it was through the prompting of the Lord that she quit drinking alcohol. When a daughter was

murdered in 1981, it was only through her relationship with God that she survived the gut-wrenching grief and confusion that consumed her.

Helen is a keeper of traditional knowledge that she readily passes on to others. As a young mother, she performed traditional dances with her family. Since then, along with good friend, Pinky Folger, she has taught her children and the children of Tanana, Fairbanks and the Native community at-large to sing Native songs and dances. The photo of Native dancers greeting visitors at the Fairbanks International Airport is of her family.

When we were taping her story in 2011, Helen spoke about difficult life events that she had never before told anyone. As she shared the trauma, loneliness, isolation and profound loss she had experienced, she regained her voice and her spirit became emboldened. The anchor of her soul all of these years has been her faith and the testimony of Jesus Christ in her life. Hearing about the power of God and matters of faith makes some people uneasy. Yet, faith is a matter of life and death for Helen. As a young girl she often sensed a presence guiding her. For a long while, she thought it was the spirit of her mother guiding her. Later, she recognized the presence as that of the Holy Spirit. She hears the voice of God speaking to her and every day He tells her, “I am with you.” The voice may be likened to a “gut feeling,” intuition, or a sense of knowing. This presence has served Helen well and helped her through a series of traumatic and life-altering events. Without such guidance, she acknowledges that she might not be here.

When she was young, loneliness, confusion and anger took their toll on her personality, and Helen developed a feistiness that was quite formidable as she aged. She did not hesitate to take a swing at someone, or put someone in his or her place. It would take an encounter with the Holy Spirit to soften her. The ministerial grace that she exhibits today was formed in the crucible of life.

When asked what kept her going all these years she said that, as a young girl while still at home, she discovered *Psalm 139* from the Holy Bible, which became guiding words of comfort throughout her life. When she encountered hardship, these words would come to her, and she knew she could carry on:

⁷ Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
⁸ If I ascend into heaven, *You are there*;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, *You are there*.
⁹ *If I take the wings of the morning,*
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
¹⁰ Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"
Even the night shall be light about me;
¹² Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
But the night shines as the day;
The darkness and the light *are both alike to You*.³

1.1 Why Her Story Matters

Helen's life story is remarkable for several reasons but the primary reason why her story is important is that she is breaking the silence surrounding the dark traps of sexual assault, substance abuse, anger and violence that have claimed the lives of so many Alaska Native people. We did not begin the interviews with the intent to write a story about trauma, but this is a theme that emerged during the months-long process. As New York Times Op-Ed Columnist David Brooks wrote recently, "When people remember the past, they don't only talk about happiness. It is often the ordeals that seem most significant."⁴ Helen courageously took the lead and discussed specific instances of abuse and trauma that have only been alluded to previously in

³ Ps. 139: 7-14, (New King James Version.)

⁴ David Brooks. "What Suffering Does." The New York Times. Internet, available from <http://www.nytimes.com>, accessed April 8, 2014.

narratives about Native people. Through personal experience, she understands that the silence surrounding her own story has kept her locked within herself and her family mired in the healing process, unable to move forward. She wants her experiences to be known, so that people will begin to acknowledge and confront the harmful behaviors that for too long have been taboo. She hopes that this process will lead to healing and a brighter future for today's and tomorrow's children.

Secondly, Helen's life story is important because of the traditional knowledge and practices gleaned from her ancestors, first-hand insight of medicine men and woodsmen, and carefully handed-down potlatch practices unique to the Tanana Tribe. And finally, Helen's life experience is partly a product of generational cultural change influenced by Episcopal missionaries.⁵ My goal is to facilitate her intent and to offer Helen's story as an example of faith-based courage to overcome extreme obstacles. As a woman of deep faith, Helen's story is a powerful testimony of how God has kept her, healed her and transformed her life, and therefore it will be interesting to many. It is our mutual goal to publish her story in book form so that it is available to a broader audience.

1.2 Methods

My research method is a case study in the form of oral history. In my case, I studied a single person over the period of her life which qualified for a waiver of the Institutional Review Board requirements. Within the case study framework, oral history is a widely accepted practice of gaining historical knowledge, particularly of indigenous people or minority groups.⁶ It is

⁵ Janine Dorsey addressed the role of women missionaries in her dissertation "Episcopal Women Missionaries as Cultural Intermediaries in Interior Alaska Native Villages, 1894-1932."

⁶ Bruce L. Berg and Howard Lune. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Science*, 8th Edition. (San Francisco: Pearson Education Inc., 2012), 38.

considered the first type of history recording, but it has not always been embraced by the scholarly community mainly because oral history relies on memory and human memory is well understood not to be entirely reliable.⁷ Yet, skeptics have become firm believers of the methodology.

Anthropologist Ernest S. “Tiger” Burch was skeptical of the power and validity of oral history as a viable method until he corroborated a story of Eskimo battle practices over a period of time. He provides an argument for the benefits of oral history in scholarly (anthropological) work and for its place in truth telling. Of particular interest is his remorse for not having understood the power and importance of oral histories for most of his career, especially as it relates to Native history and a sense of place. He felt that had scholars understood better the value of human witness to history the historical record would be more complete. In 1991, after his “conversion” he urged people to tap into Alaska Native historians “before it is too late.”⁸ This recognition of the wealth of knowledge held by Alaska Native elders in particular may have been the genesis of much of the oral history work done in Alaska today. Alaskan oral historian, William Schneider confirms that in Alaska’s Native community in particular, there is tremendous value of oral tradition, and that the importance of storytelling in the Native community is paramount.⁹ Schneider is a leading researcher and pioneer in the discipline of oral history, and his books are invaluable to the researcher studying Alaska Native people.

Oral history is both an action and a product. According to oral historian Lynn Abrams, oral history as a practice or method of research is two things; it is the process of conducting and

⁷ Abrams, 5.

⁸ Ernest S. Burch, Jr. "From Skeptic to Believer: The Making of an Oral Historian." *Alaska History* Vol., 6, no. 1 (1991), 9-16.

⁹ William Schneider. "Some Considerations About the Oral Tradition and Writing." *Alaska Quarterly Review* 4, no. 3&4 (1986), 16-18.

recording the interview with living persons and it is the product of the interview.¹⁰ Oral history is becoming a popular research method and has become a “crossover methodology” used in a wide range of disciplines and situations.¹¹ Oral history has gained importance through its use in reporting and truth committees such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa after the collapse of apartheid.¹² Oral history is a powerful tool for repairing damage. Perhaps one of the most important benefits of oral history is that it provides “voice” to people whose primary source of authority and reference in terms of truth and trust is oral narrative.¹³ Through the process of personal narrative, the oral history method aids in recovering the sense of self.¹⁴ Oral history also aids in filling in information gaps in the historical record. Burch notes that facts can be corroborated, and he provides an excellent example of researching historic Eskimo military acumen by piecing together oral narrative with observations by Arctic explorer Frederick William Beechey in 1826-1827.¹⁵ Schneider agrees that these personal narratives often access an untold dimension, filling in important information that has been missing from the record.¹⁶

Steps taken in the process of gathering information, particularly during the interview, greatly impact the outcome of the final product. Reliability in oral history has its foundation in the integrity of the interview process. The interviewer must recognize his or her power and operate in as much of a neutral position as possible and be able to respond and adapt to the

¹⁰ Abrams, 2.

¹¹ Abrams, 2.

¹² William Schneider. *...So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History*. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2002. Abrams, 2.

¹³ Berg, 318-320); Abrams, 154-155.

¹⁴ Abrams, 52.

¹⁵ Burch, 7, 4, 11.

¹⁶ Schneider, *...So They Understand*, 73.

information provided.¹⁷ It is extremely important for the researcher to be well-prepared, not only with questions but with as much background information about the subject as possible. Crafted questions should be open-ended, using who, what, where, when and how type questions. While conducting the interview, the narrator should be made as comfortable as possible to facilitate an environment where he or she feels comfortable talking. According to oral historian Ronald Grele, the interviewer must tailor the flow of questions to allow the narrator room to construct the story, express feeling and recall.¹⁸ The interviewer must keep an open mind and pay attention to body cues. In addition to the act of collecting the interview material, the researcher must have a plan in hand regarding the rights and storage of the data collected, as well as a process for cataloging the materials.¹⁹

According to Abrams, episodic memory is the memory system most called upon during oral history interviews that enables narrators to recall not only particular events or incidents but their place within it.²⁰ Oral histories tend to be autobiographical in nature, and as such one of the pitfalls can be the memory of the narrator. However, the narrated text can be corroborated and the data triangulated through the use of existing historical material including archival documents, newspaper articles, vital statistic records, tribal records, photos, old phone books, or any other such materials available to the researcher.

A potential conflict may arise because the collector and the user of the data tend to be the same person. Through the transcription and coding of the collected information there may be a conscious or unconscious attempt to sanitize or secret away certain portions of information.

¹⁷ William L Lange and Laurie K. Mercier. "Getting It Down Right: Oral History's Reliability in Local History Research." *The Oral History Review* 12, (1984), 81-99.

¹⁸ Ronald J. Grele. "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction." *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (Sept. 1987), 570-578.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Abrams, 83

Collectors may not view themselves as historians and may not take as much care with the collected materials as warranted.²¹ Another conflict may be the loss of subjectivity by the interviewer. The interviewer may become so absorbed in the story that her own voice is lost or he may have such negative reaction to the narration that he is unable to maintain the integrity of the information.

Most oral history interviews are captured on some form of taped or digital recording. The presence of recording equipment in the room has the potential to change the dynamic of the interview and draw undue attention to the interviewer.²² It is the responsibility of the interviewer to minimize potential impacts. The issue of rights can also be a factor if the interviewer borrows equipment or has someone assist in the interview process, as the technician may require access or rights to the captured material.

Special consideration must be given to minority groups, and especially in my case, Native American groups, as many historical scholarly practices caused harm to American Indians and their communities. In "The American Indian Oral History Manual" the authors Charles E. Trimble, Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan provide clear guidelines for how to approach Native subjects.²³ They remind readers that, although there are many similarities among individual Native American perspectives, there is no single Native voice. To this end the narrator must be carefully selected. The person must have the respect of his or her

²¹ David Henige. "Where Seldom Is Heard a Discouraging Word: Method in Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 14, (1986).

²² Lang and Mercier, 81-99.

²³ Charles E. Trimble, Barbara W. Sommer, and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The American Indian Oral History Manual: Making Many Voices Heard*. (California: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2008).

community because often Native people are understood to be speaking on behalf of the community.²⁴

A relationship based in trust and respect between the interviewer and the narrator is essential to maximizing the potential of the oral history process. To that end, the interviewer has an obligation to protect the narrator from harm and must seek a balance between protecting and not distorting the information presented. The interviewer must be able to put aside strong personal opinions or emotions in order to understand the narrator's perspective. Clarity of roles - and boundaries is essential, as is having clear understanding of why the interview is conducted, where it is going, and who may have access to it in the future.²⁵

This thesis is a combination of a life story that emphasizes the spoken word of the narrator using her words to tell a story, and a life history that provides analysis and contextualization derived from the narration in order to enhance understanding for the reader.²⁶ According to Schneider, life histories based on the oral history method are a specialized genre of writing wherein the writer seeks to preserve the words of the narrator.²⁷ The narrator drives the process by discussing the life events of his or her choosing, which means there may be gaps in the biography. The University of Alaska Press in Fairbanks specializes in this genre and began an Oral Biography Series in 1986 predominantly featuring life stories of Alaska Natives.²⁸ Stories are periodically added to the collection and it is my hope that Helen's story will be one of them.

²⁴ Trimble et al., 12.

²⁵ Yow, 51-66.

²⁶ Moses Cruikshank. *The Life I've Been Living*. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1986), 121-122.

²⁷ Schneider,....*So They Understand*, 109-121.

²⁸ Ibid., 114.

1.3 My Relationship with Helen and Our Process

Helen is my mother-in-law. It has not always been the easiest of relationships. In the early years of my marriage to her son, Guy Peters, she did not like me very much. As a white woman married to an Athabascan man, I struggled with the cultural transition, not knowing what was expected of me. Over the past fourteen years, we have developed mutual respect and affection for one another. Dr. Burch's directive to collect as much oral history of Alaska's Native people before it was too late resonated with me, and I have considered his words as our family attended funerals of tribal elders. With each person's passing valuable traditional knowledge was lost. A desire in our family to capture Helen's remarkable life story grew and finally, we (my husband, Helen and I) realized that we could write the story.

In the case of Moses Cruikshank's story, *The Life I've Been Living*, the time for him to convey his story became right as a result of age, and after much time considering the possibility.²⁹ This is also true for Helen. In the spring of 2011, the timing was right and we began to work on her life story. Helen had made previous attempts to tell her story, but these did not come to fruition. Partly this was due to the simple fact that she was not ready and partly because she had enlisted a daughter to assist her, but family familiarity became an inhibitor to the process. Although I am part of the family with some familiarity with the family's story, there was a greater distance between us. Because I was using her story as part of my degree requirements, Helen felt that I would know what to do with the material. She trusted me.

Throughout the preparation of this thesis, Helen has been and remains an engaged collaborator. My husband, Guy, became the third collaborator on this project with the role of cultural interpreter and guide for Helen and me. He spent much time patiently explaining cultural

²⁹ Ibid., 121.

or process nuances to one or the other of us. We began our project by improvising a studio in our basement where I spent many hours interviewing Helen while capturing the interviews on video tape. Initially, Guy joined us with the purpose of helping her be at ease in front of the camera and comfortable telling her story. However, we need not have worried about that, and Guy's involvement dropped off. As soon as the camera rolled, Helen perked up as though she were a professional on-camera person. The interviews became more intimate after his departure.

Because I am part of the family, I had inkling that we might encounter sensitive subject areas and I wanted to protect Helen's story from others. Thus, rather than hiring experts, Guy and I became our own lighting technicians and sound and camera operators. I felt that I had an ethical obligation to do this, because I did not want others privy to her story before we had time to sift through it and discern what information we would use for the thesis. I had to separate out what Helen wanted the public to know and what was background for me and therefore private. Making these decisions was difficult. I refer readers to Valerie Yow's excellent paper "Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research," for a nuanced discussion of such considerations.³⁰

Helen eagerly participated in the process, and most days she would come with a plan of what she wanted to discuss. She wanted to tell her story for her own satisfaction and to provide a legacy of her family and culture. It was a humbling experience and an honor that Helen entrusted to me life events that she had never before told anyone. These moments were cathartic for her. As she released the pent up memories, her countenance transformed as the weight lifted from

³⁰ Valerie Yow. "Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research." *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (Summer, 1995), 51-66.

her. This is not surprising since one of the products of oral history for the narrator is one of empowerment, especially for those whose voices had been silenced.³¹

Helen understands that it is not Native tradition to speak directly about certain events or experiences or to speak at all of certain topics. Alaska Native people tend to share an ingrained code of silence about deeply personal or shameful matters. This norm, coupled with years of generational trauma, has caused many voices to be silenced. Helen understood that she would be breaking that code, particularly in telling of her experience with sexual assault and domestic violence. Most days the dialog flowed smoothly and the hours would fly by. It was through the process of telling that she remembered some of the darker, more traumatic events of her childhood. On these days, she found it difficult to speak about those events and we spent many moments in silence as she processed the memory. Periodically, I asked if she wanted to stop and she courageously continued, saying, *It has to come out. Now that it's known, it has to stop*. She never once suggested quitting.

In addition to the formal taping sessions in 2011, Helen and I spent many hours together over the course of several years. Although she has her own home in Tanana, whenever she came to Fairbanks for shopping or other activities such as Doyon³² shareholder meetings in March, Helen would stay at our home. As time went by, winters became increasingly difficult for her to manage in the village, so she stayed with us, sometimes for several weeks at a time. The spring that we conducted the formal taping she experimented with living on her own in an apartment in Fairbanks. It was a difficult transition for her, but one day she declared that she was no longer afraid to be alone. The quiet of living in this apartment allowed her to unscramble her thoughts

³¹ Abrams, 154-155.

³² Doyon, Limited is one of the thirteen corporations developed as a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. It is the largest private landowner in the United States.

and prepare what she wanted to say during the interviews. During the winter of 2012, Helen spent several weeks with our family and then returned to Tanana for the summer of 2013. In the fall of that year, it was determined that her house in Tanana had numerous structural problems, so it was closed down and she moved into our home for the entire winter.

Sometimes, during the course of being together – cooking meals, washing clothes, driving in the car or shopping – we would stumble into a conversation of relevance and I would grab a scrap of paper or notebook to note the recollection. Other times I would overhear her in conversation with her friends and make notes of points they were making. These spontaneous moments of conversation were extremely enlightening and often contained links necessary to understanding various aspects of her story.

Once the taping of the formal interviews was finished, I transferred the tapes to a disc format. From these discs I carefully transcribed the dialog, including every um, ah, repeat, mispronunciation, pause and so forth. Helen tended to speak episodically and sometimes we recorded more than one telling of the same story. From the original transcription I rearranged the dialog first chronologically and then by broad subject areas. I also cleaned up the text, taking out repetition where it did not contribute to the story, and I edited some mispronunciations and grammar. I left in colloquial forms of speech, as I felt that they captured Helen's voice and personality.

During the interviews, Helen was very clear about what she knew and did not know. Sometimes I would present information to her that I found in books or in articles while digging through materials. If it did not ring true for her she would clearly state, "Well I did not know that" or "I never heard that." I did not include such bits of information, but I included contextual information that Helen corroborated. Because eye-witness accounts of traditional practices are

somewhat lacking in the literature, I felt it was important to share stories of first-hand experiences with medicine men and woodsmen, and her visit with a young woman participating in a menses ritual, as well as to record as much as possible about her ancestors. I was committed to maintaining the integrity of her voice.

In order to gain a sense of place, I traveled with my husband and children to Tanana in June, 2012 to stay with Helen in her cabin. Although I had been in Tanana several times prior, the focus of this trip was to do research, and I began to view her life from a different perspective. While there, we looked through old photographs, perused documents at the Tribal offices, tramped around the old Mission site and graveyards, and spent several hours on the Yukon River visiting other historic sites. I wandered through the town of Tanana, taking photos and absorbing the ambience. I also spent time with Tanana's historians – Kathleen Peters-Zuray, Patti Elias, and Mary Edwin – gleaning information from them.

Making sense of the volume of material was extremely challenging because I had to juxtapose a wealth of original material in Helen's stories with cultural nuances that my husband Guy was instrumental in helping me understand. Dates were difficult to verify, as in many cases the information had not been recorded and some of what had been recorded (on census documents for example) had been a guess at best. Some "official" documents recorded different dates for the same event.

During the writing of the thesis I struggled with the structure of the document because there were some gaps in the telling as Helen was unable to discuss certain periods of her life. I had chosen not to interview others about her because I wanted this story to be Helen's story and not what others thought her story should be. Thus, some periods of time are not as complete as other periods. I also struggled with language. I had lost subjectivity, which came as a shock to

me. I was so immersed in Helen's story that I had fallen into her patterns of speech and I had a tendency to present information like she did, which was to allude to a topic or incident but not tackle it directly. It took some coaxing from my committee to pull me out of this mindset. The other difficulty for all of us – Helen, Guy, and me – was the uncertainty (and some trepidation) as to how this story would be received.

To enhance fluidity of the story for the reader, I dispensed with quotation marks and block quotations for Helen's words. All of Helen's words, as well as Koyukon words, are indicated with italics. In the literature one will find the spelling of Athabascan in a variety of ways; Athapaskan and Athabaskan are the more common alternative spellings. When I quoted from another source, I spelled out the term as it appeared in that source. In my own writing, I spelled Athabascan, with a "b" and a "c" in keeping with a resolution adopted by the Tanana Chiefs Conference in March, 1997 designating this as the preferred spelling.³³

1.4 Literature Review

The literature that supports this study includes explorer's journals, anthropological studies, biographies and life stories, as well as biographies of people who lived and worked in the area. Little has been published about the history of the village of Tanana itself, even though it has played a pivotal role in Interior history as a trading site and transportation hub. Situated at almost the geographical center of Alaska, until the second half of the nineteenth century it was for outsiders impossibly remote and inaccessible, falling in between the furthest reaches of the world's two greatest fur trading empires, the British Hudson's Bay Company to the east (Fort Yukon) and the Russian American Company to the west (Nulato). "There are few

³³ The Name "Athabascan,." Available from <http://www.uaf.edu/anlc/resources/athabascan/>, accessed March 27, 2014.

lonely places in this world,” pioneering naturalist and explorer Henry Wood Elliott wrote in 1886, “and the wastes of the great Alaskan interior are the loneliest of them all.”³⁴

The journals of early explorers to the Interior constitute the first literary pieces that set an ethnographic and linguistic foundation for understanding Native inhabitants of the Middle Yukon. From 1836 early Russian explorers began to make their way up the Yukon River from the west. Andrei Glazunov, a Creole from Alaska’s Southeast who was in Russian service, explored 1,400 miles of the lower-middle Yukon and established Russian Mission; he recorded his impressions in a journal which was published many years later by anthropologist James Van Stone.³⁵ Lavrentii Zagoskin, a naval officer in service to the Russian American Company was sent to explore the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers in 1842-1844. His journals were published in Russia as *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844: The First Ethnographic and Geographic Investigations in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Valleys of Alaska* and constitute the first ethnography of the region.³⁶

In 1867 the United States sent the naturalist William H. Dall and British journalist-artist Frederick Whymper to Alaska on the Western Union Telegraph expedition. They traveled by boat from Nulato to Fort Yukon and back to Nulato. Upon their return in July, they found that the United States was now in possession of the territory. They raised the U.S. flag, and the Telegraph Expedition suspended its activities because it had received news that the Atlantic Cable had been laid. Dall remained in Alaska, undertaking the first systematic examination of the

³⁴ Henry W. Elliott. *Our Arctic Province: Alaska and the Seal Islands*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), 76.

³⁵ Jonathon Macauley Nielsen. Focus on Interior History: Alaska’s Past in Regional Perspective. Alaska Historical Commission, 1980. 35-36, and James Van Stone. "Russian Exploration in Interior Alaska: An Extract from the Journal of Andrei Glazunov." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* Vol. 50, no. 2 (Apr., 1959), 37-47.

³⁶ Lavrentii A. Zagoskin. *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844: The First Ethnographic and Geographic Investigations in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Valleys of Alaska*. Translated by Penelope Rainey, Edited by Henry N. Michael. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967).

territory for the United States after its acquisition and spending the next few years studying along the Yukon and other rivers, recording many ethnographic and scientific observations. His seminal work was published in 1870 under the title, *Alaska and its Resources*. It has withstood the test of time and remains an important resource on the history of Alaska's Interior region.³⁷ Whymper published his journals of the expedition in 1868 titled, "A Journey from Norton Sound, Bering Sea, to Fort Youkon."³⁸ According to linguist, Michael Krauss, it was Whymper who coined the term Koyukon, which had originated with a Russian spelling of an Eskimo term for river, and applied it to the people of the Middle Yukon.³⁹

The United States sent several military expeditions to the Interior to investigate its new acquisition. The reports recorded by these military men contain valuable eyewitness accounts of the river systems, topography, and observations of customs and practices of the people along the river. The following are often-cited works. Captain Charles P. Raymond's 1869 *Report of a Reconnaissance of the Yukon River* established *Nuchalawoyya* in the literature as a historic trading site and determined Fort Yukon to be within the United States.⁴⁰ Lieutenant Henry T. Allen's "Report of a Military Reconnaissance of the Copper River Valley, 1885" includes the expedition's traversing the Tanana River where it meets the Yukon near *Nuchalawoyya*.⁴¹ Captain P.H. Ray's "Report of the Relief of the Destitute in the Gold Fields, 1897" established

³⁷ William H. Dall. *Alaska and Its Resources*. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870).

³⁸ Frederick Whymper. "A Journey from Norton Sound, Bering Sea, to Fort Youkon (Junction of Porcupine and Youkon Rivers)." *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* Vol. 38, (1868), 219-237.

³⁹ Michael E. Krauss. "Koyukon Dialectology and Its Relationship to Other Athabaskan Languages." In *Koyukon Athabaskan Dictionary*, edited by James Kari. (University of Alaska Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center, 2000), 1.

⁴⁰ Captain Charles P. Raymond. *Report of a Reconnaissance of the Yukon River, 1869*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 29-38.

⁴¹ Lieutenant Henry T. Allen. "Report of a Military Reconnaissance of the Copper River Valley, 1885." In *Compilation: Narratives of Explorations in Alaska*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900).

Tanana as a strategically important site.⁴² One of the more interesting results of this military contact with the Athabascan people is that it forever changed the style in which the “chief’s coats” are made. These coats for men continue to be patterned after the military-style jackets that the Athabascans observed the men in these expeditions wearing.

Early anthropological work that took place throughout Alaska provided foundational literature regarding customs, language, and practices of Alaska’s Native people shortly after western contact. For the Middle Yukon area, Tanana in particular, there was little direct anthropological work conducted, although the research of leading anthropologists Cornelius Osgood, Wendell H. Oswalt, and James Van Stone regarding Northern Athabascans in general provides strong foundational work regarding this region. Their findings corroborate early explorer and military accounts regarding the people groups, customs and language.

Anthropologist Cornelius Osgood became a leading expert of Northern Athabascan Indians, and, according to Michael Krauss, his short article "The Distribution of the Northern Athabaskan Indians," became influential in establishing academic literature about the area.⁴³ Of particular interest is the work done by noted anthropologist Fredericka de Laguna. In 1935, she made a historic archaeological and geological research journey by boat along the Tanana River from Nenana to Holy Cross on the Yukon River, passing through Tanana. She published two books were published regarding her research on this trip; *Travels Among the Dena: Exploring Alaska's Yukon Valley* chronicles the expedition and provides explicit descriptions, photos, maps and drawings of villages, people, practices and customs along the river. Of particular note are a

⁴² Captain P. H. Ray. "Report of the Relief of the Destitute in the Gold Fields, 1897." In *Compilation: Narratives of the Explorations in Alaska*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900).

⁴³ Cornelius Osgood. "The Distribution of the Northern Athabaskan Indians." *Yale University Publications* 7, (1936). Krauss, *Koyukon Dialectology*, 1.

photo and information about Helen's grandmother *Gaalno* and grandfather Rampart Joe.⁴⁴ The second volume, *Tales from the Dena: Indian Stories from the Tanana, Koyukuk & Yukon Rivers* is a collection of short stories, tales, legends and myths of the Athabascans, including two each from Helen's grandparents, as recorded by de Laguna and her assistant Norman Reynolds.⁴⁵ Additionally, in the introduction, de Laguna provides excellent information about the tribes' habits of fishing, travel, transportation, and tools, as well as a discussion about schooling and health. Geologist Alfred Hulse Brooks' *Blazing Alaska's Trails*, published in 1953, remains a foundational book on Alaska's history.⁴⁶ Donald J. Orth's seminal *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names* also remains as a key foundational resource for students of Alaskan history.⁴⁷

Biographies, articles, pamphlets and newsletters illuminate the history of early missionary work and Athabascan life on the Yukon River. These offer unique and varied perspectives, depending on the person and the denomination that they represented. Many early texts such as the writings of John Kilbuck provide ethnographic accounts of tribes in their environment prior to westernization. Anthropologist Anne Fienup-Riordan preserves his writings in two publications, *The Yup'ik Eskimos: As Described in the Travel Journals and Ethnographic Accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck 1885-1900* and *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Frederica de Laguna. *Travels Among the Dena: Exploring Alaska's Yukon Valley*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 73-75.

⁴⁵ Frederica de Laguna and Dale DeArmond. *Tales from the Dena: Indian Stories from the Tanana, Koyukuk & Yukon Rivers*. (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1995), 151-160, 163-174.

⁴⁶ Alfred Hulse Brooks. *Blazing Alaska's Trails*. Second ed. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1953).

⁴⁷ Donald J. Orth *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names: Geological Survey Professional Paper 567*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1967).

⁴⁸ Ann Fienup-Riordan. *The Yup'ik Eskimos: As Described in the Travel Journals and Ethnographic Accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck 1885-1900*. (Canada: The Limestone Press, 1988); Ann Fienup-Riordan. *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck*. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

Although the focus of these books is the Yup'ik Eskimos, Kilbuck had encounters with Indians that he described in great detail.

The beloved Jesuit priest, Father Julius Jetté arrived in Nulato in 1898 and spent the rest of his life between Nulato and Tanana living among the Koyukon, writing stories, observing ethnography and recording the language. He had a linguistic gift and understood the nuances of Koyukon well enough to comprehend Athabascan humor in the Koyukon language. His contribution to the linguistic record is tremendous. Unfortunately, much of his work remains unpublished. Many years after his death, in 2000, the Alaska Native Language Center published the *Koyukon Athabascan Dictionary* which was only possible owing to Jetté's painstaking recording of the language. Koyukon language scholar Eliza Jones brought his notes to life.⁴⁹ Materials written by Archdeacon Hudson Stuck, Bishop Peter Trimble Rowe and missionary Clara Heintz Burke provide important accounts and documentation of the changes that took place on the river. Their work has been cited elsewhere in the thesis.

An emerging body of scholarship is proving extremely valuable, as these works fill in many gaps of the literature. Richard K. Nelson's *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*, provides important information about the Koyukon world view.⁵⁰ Because Athabascans passed their historical record along through oral tradition, song and dance, there has been little scholarly work written by Native people, although this is changing. Among these emerging Native scholars are Phyllis Fast and Adeline Peter Raboff. Fast's book, *Northern Athabascan Survival: Women, Community and the Future*, is important to understanding the

⁴⁹ Jules Jetté and Eliza Jones, *Koyukon Athabascan Dictionary*. (University of Alaska Fairbanks: Alaska Native Language Center, 2000).

⁵⁰ Richard K. Nelson. *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

effects that western change has had on a traditional community.⁵¹ Fast did an interesting and comprehensive study about the people of Fort Yukon and their contemporary life in the village. She is one of the first Native researchers studying Native people and at times provides an insider's point of view. She provides a breakdown of clan/tribal social and economic infrastructure as a result of exposure to epidemics, miners and missionaries. Adeline Peter Raboff's book *Inuksuk: Northern Koyukon, Gwich'in & Lower Tanana 1800-1901*, makes sense of Athabaskan oral tradition in regard to old tribal boundaries, oral traditions, travel and trade patterns, and tribal relationships and warfare patterns.⁵²

Theses and dissertations provide valuable scholarship of historical issues and themes in the Tanana area. Among these Janine Davis Dorsey's dissertation "Episcopal Women Missionaries as Cultural Intermediaries in Interior Alaska Native Villages, 1894-1932," is one of the first scholarly works to analyze the history of the Episcopal Church and its impact on the Alaska Native people by highlighting the lives and work of four Outside⁵³ missionary women and their efforts in establishing the first Episcopal missions in Interior Alaska. These women labored among the Athabascans during times when epidemics had devastating effects and the life of Athabascans changed from a nomadic one to a stationary one.⁵⁴ Mary Moses Edwin is working on a manuscript called "Northern Athabascans and the History of the World," which will be the first work specific to Tanana's history. She is especially focused on documenting how Tanana

⁵¹ Phyllis Ann Fast. *Northern Athabaskan Survival: Women, Community and the Future*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁵² Adeline Peter Raboff. *Inuksuk: Northern Koyukon, Gwich'in & Lower Tanana 1800-1901*. (Fairbanks: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2001).

⁵³ "Outside" is a term Alaskans use for people who come from the Lower forty-eight states of America.

⁵⁴ Dorsey.

came to be populated and is recording where people came from and how they came to live in Tanana.⁵⁵

Statistics about abuse and trauma in Alaska Native communities are widely publicized, but the personal stories themselves have only recently begun to be told from a Native perspective as Native authors willing to approach these difficult subjects are emerging. Velma Wallis delicately approached substance abuse and child abandonment in her book *Raising Ourselves*.⁵⁶ Loretta Outwater Cox discussed the shame surrounding infanticide in *The Winter Walk*,⁵⁷ a book about her great-grandmother. Jan Harper-Haines discussed the often traumatic crossing of the divide between cultures in *Cold Water Spirits*.⁵⁸ Harold Napoleon was the first to address directly the effects of generational mental and physical trauma experienced by Alaska's Native peoples in *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*.⁵⁹ Three works focus on women of Helen's generation and how they coped with hardship and change: Jennie Carroll's dissertation, "Maybe an answer is in there: Life Story in Dialog," Joanne Mulcahy's book, "Birth and Rebirth on an Alaskan Island: the life of an Alutiiq Healer," and finally Annette Freiburger's thesis on the life of Effie Kokrine, which is the only other life history written about a person from Tanana.⁶⁰

Many books and papers have been written about elders in other regions, but none about Tanana elders except for the recent thesis about Effie Kokrine. Other relevant works include the

⁵⁵ Mary Moses Edwin. "Northern Athabascans and the History of the World." (2013).

⁵⁶ Velma Wallis. *Raising Ourselves: A Gwich'in Coming of Age Story from the Yukon River*. (Epicenter Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ Loretta Outwater Cox. *The Winter Walk: A Century-Old Survival Story from the Arctic*. (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books, 2003).

⁵⁸ Jan Harper-Haines. *The Legacy of an Athabascan-Irish Family from Alaska's Yukon River*. (Epicenter Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ Harold Napoleon. *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*, Edited by Eric Madsen. (Fairbanks: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2005).

⁶⁰ Jennifer L.L. Carroll. "Maybe an Answer Is in There: Life Story in Dialog." (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2010); Joanne B. Mulcahy. *Birth & Rebirth on an Alaskan Island: The Life of an Alutiiq Healer*. (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2001); Annette J. Freiburger. "The Life History of Effie Kokrine through Personal Recording." (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2013).

story of Moses Cruikshank from the Fort Yukon area in *The Life I've Been Living*; the memoirs of Poldine Carlo of Nulato; the story of Evelyn Alexander and her life on Minto Lakes by Joshua Weiser; and the Yukon-Koyukuk School District project of the 1980s that created biographies of Native people from various locations.⁶¹

Thus, many gaps remain in the history of Tanana and there is a need for scholarly work in this field. While Helen's story is a life story and not a history of the region, the thesis will complement the literary record. Although Stuck and Burke discuss the issues of alcohol in the Native community in their books, and Fast discusses drug abuse in her book, there are no scholarly works that I could find that directly discuss the problematic issues of suicide, domestic violence, and sexual assault in the Native community from first hand experience. For this reason, Helen's story makes a tremendous contribution to the literary record.

1.5 Arrangement of the Thesis

As a life story, the thesis is arranged loosely in chronological order of Helen's life history, around major themes such as loss, loneliness, suicide, violence and her spiritual journey. Sometimes she would mention a subject such as a memorial potlatch or some other cultural practice or expression that warranted an explanation. The longer explanations are interspersed throughout the narrative.

Chapter one includes the introduction, an explanation of the methods, the literature review, justification as to why Helen's story is important, and the arrangement of the document. Of particular note is section 1.3 where I explain my relationship with Helen. Chapter two provides a short history of the Middle Yukon and interjects a bit of the Native perspective in the

⁶¹ Cruikshank; Poldine Carlo. *Nulato: An Indian Life on the Yukon*. (Fairbanks: Poldine Carlo, 1983); Joshua Weiser. *Evelyn Alexander: A Life History in Her Own Words*. (Fairbanks: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2007).

form of the 1847 battle where the actions of Helen's great-grandmother *Bedzidehoodeno* had an impact on the history of the area. Because the Episcopal Mission at Tanana was so instrumental in the foundational era of Helen's life, I provide a brief history of the Anglican/Episcopalian missionary work of the area. In section 2.4 I carefully record the steps to establishing both the St. James Mission at the mouth of the Tozitna and its subsequent move to the town of Tanana, as well as the establishment of the new Mission of Our Saviour, one mile upriver from Tanana. There is much confusion in the literature about these two sites that are often referred to interchangeably or even as the same entity.

In chapter three I introduce Helen's grandparents, as they were instrumental in her upbringing. They are also important to the literary record and information about them is found in scholarly materials. In the Native community, lineage is very important to a person's position and status in the community. At events, one introduces oneself by stating who one's parents are rather than what one does for a living. I felt it was important to include as much information about Helen's ancestors as possible to preserve the information for the family and future researchers. Helen's narrative begins in chapter three with stories of growing up at the Mission, early life with her parents and other important care givers, and stories about traditional practices. This provides the foundation of Helen's upbringing. She also discusses the loss of her mother which had lifelong consequences for Helen. The impact of her death on Helen's life is a running theme throughout her story.

Chapter four relates Helen's encounters as a young person with medicine men and other traditional practices or figures that have been reduced to legend over time. They are first-hand accounts of interactions with these subjects that have been recorded as such. I felt it was important to preserve this information. Chapter five is one of the more traumatic chapters, as this

contains the information about Helen being sexually assaulted as a young girl, as well as Helen's flirtation with suicide. Chapter six discusses the major transitional moments of losing her father, the death of her grandmother and the closing of the mission. With this, Helen had no place to call home, and as a teenager she had to make a way for herself, which is discussed in chapter seven. Chapter seven moves quickly along by relating her marriages, and her return to Tanana to rebuild her life and raise a family. Here, Helen introduces the substance abuse and violence in her home and in the community. Her own life veered out of control until, as she relates in chapter eight, she had an encounter with the Holy Spirit that changed her life. Chapter nine presents a pivotal chapter in the lives of the Peters family when time and life as they knew it was interrupted by the murder of Helen's daughter Marlene by a serial killer. The death of her husband Hardy followed soon thereafter. It was difficult for Helen to process what happened after this period of time and the family is still processing these losses some thirty years later. Helen's memory of life events after these losses is fragmented and she was not able to piece together enough of a story beyond those traumatic events so our interviews ended here. The family has remained in the emotional healing process since 1982 even though many good things have transpired and many of her children and grandchildren have gone on to have successful careers. A synopsis of her activities throughout these years is included in the conclusion.

To help readers understand the relationship Helen had with the people discussed in the interviews, I created a family genealogical chart beginning with her great-grandmother *Bedzidehoodeno*. These are located in the appendix. Information gleaned from this task was quite interesting, and several patterns emerged. Firstly, although it was customary to give young girls in marriage to older men, this was not always the case in Helen's lineage. Secondly, it was not unusual for both men and women to have multiple spouses or partners. After the loss of a spouse,

people tended not to remain single for very long; this could have been because in order to survive people needed help. Lastly, adoption is a recurring theme in the Peters family. Adoption carried no stigma and was usually an open process with the decision made over a shared cup of tea. It reflected the people's interdependency. Family units needed other people, including children, in order to survive and maintain the lifestyle. It was not uncommon for someone with many children to gift someone who did not have the same good fortune with a child. And lastly, when a family liked a certain name, several family members would be given that name. For example, there are at least five women named Helen in the Peters' extended family.

Chapter 2: Nuchalawoyya: A Brief History of Tanana

The beauty of the land in and around Tanana and the powerful Yukon River and its tributaries are important influences in Helen's life story. Contrary to Elliott's statement about the Interior being a land of waste, the land and rivers sustained the life of Helen's ancestors and her family for hundreds of years and, as such, are akin to breathing.⁶² Legends of her ancestors, songs, dances, traditions, folk-lore, stories and memories are recorded in the eddies and hills of the region. A brief history of the place is offered here in order to gain perspective on Helen's life.

As one of North America's largest rivers, the Yukon stretches nearly 2,000 miles from its source in Canada to its mouth on Alaska's coast. The river meanders south to north in the Canada portion, and east to west in the Alaska portion. In the geographic heart of Alaska where the Tanana River flows into the Yukon River, lies the village of present-day Tanana. At one time the area was called *Noochuloghoyet* by Koyukon Athabascans. It is now known by the modernized name *Nuchalawoyya*, meaning "where the two rivers meet." *Nuchalawoyya* is the name used to describe the Tanana area in general as well as the name given to the annual trade fair. Historically, tribes lived along the tributaries of the Yukon River where winter temperatures were more favorable and game more plentiful. Many families spent summers fishing along the banks of the Yukon. Tanana was neutral ground where Native bands from along the Yukon, the Tanana River and the upper Kuskokwim River met for trade and other purposes in the spring time.⁶³ Sometimes Inupiaq Eskimos from the North also attended.⁶⁴ Of the *Nuchalawoyya*

⁶² Elliott, 76.

⁶³ Raymond, 29; Hudson Stuck. *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled: A Narrative of Winter Travel in Interior Alaska*. 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 152.

⁶⁴ Clair Rudolf Murphy and Jane G. Haigh. *Children of the Goldrush*. (Boulder: Roberts Rinehart, 1999), 152.

trading festival Helen says they *came in spring time to trade, everybody met at the Mission – brought blankets and beads and stuff, trade with fur. Have a good time. Dance and talk and sing, and what not, visit.* In addition to trade, tribes conducted business, played games, and performed marriages.

In 1833 indigenous life on the northwestern coast of this continent began to experience a cultural shift after the Russian American Company established the trading post St. Michael at the mouth of the Yukon with the intention of furthering its fur business and interrupting the trade that Eskimo middlemen were conducting in Siberia. The Russian American Company established a post at Nulato, about 220 miles downriver from Tanana, in 1839 to ease the Russian transition to the Interior. This became the first trade point on the Yukon River established by non-Native people. The Indians burned down the first post, which was rebuilt as a fort in 1841. Laurentii Zagoskin of the Russian American company mapped the Yukon, Kuskokwim and Innoko Rivers from 1842 through 1844. In June 1843 he made it as far as the upstream tip of Edith Island at the mouth of the Nowitna River, missing Tanana proper by only a few miles.⁶⁵ He also left behind an extremely detailed account in his journals of Native life that he observed on the rivers.

On the Upper Yukon, near the Canadian border, Alexander H. Murray established a Hudson's Bay trading post, Fort Yukon, where the Porcupine feeds into the Yukon. Knowing that he had encroached on Russian territory, Murray did not do extensive river explorations and lived in fear of the Russians. Simon Lukeen, a Creole in Russian service, was the first to navigate

⁶⁵ Alaska Satellite Facility, Geophysical Institute, email Confirming Zagoskin's coordinates. December 18, 2013.

the entire length of the river in 1863 to spy on the Hudson's Bay traders.⁶⁶ According to Dall, Lukeen pretended to be a deserter from Russian Service.⁶⁷

From the establishment of these two forts in western and eastern Alaska, until the United States took possession of the Territory in 1867, Indians and traders respectfully coexisted. Native trade networks were well-established and far-reaching, long before first contact. According to oral history, Koyukon middlemen traveled to the coast to participate in the large trade fairs held in those regions. Among them were members of Helen's family. These new trade centers in relatively close proximity to their traditional trapping and hunting grounds quickened the process of replacing traditional items for western ones.

2.1 *Bedzidehoodeno* and the Battle of Morelock

During the time that Zagoskin was exploring the Yukon as far as the mouth of the Nowitna River, Indians who inhabited the area around *Nuchalawoyya*, or Tanana, engaged in intertribal conflict over trade routes and alliances. Helen's maternal great-grandmother, *Bedzidehoodeno*, who is widely known within the oral tradition as a rescuer of her people, played a critical part in the outcome of a historic battle. She was born around 1830 and utilized the area near present day Tanana. Prior to 1847 the Middle Yukon, above present day Tanana village was under the control of the Gwich'in, according to historian Adeline Peter-Raboff.⁶⁸ One evening, a large war party descended upon a sleeping Koyukon encampment. *Bedzidehoodeno* had a gift of hearing from far off (and perhaps in the spirit realm), and her name is considered to be very powerful; it means "person who can hear." She is credited with diverting

⁶⁶ Brooks, 234.

⁶⁷ Dall, 276-277.

⁶⁸ Raboff, 6.

tragedy and saving her band from likely genocide owing to her superior hearing. This is the story as told by Helen Peters:

It was early in the morning – 3:00 or 4:00 in the spring time. Bedzidehoodeno took care of things, she took care of people. She was walking the beach, probably picking up wood for fire. Then she saw the edge of the river, [it was] like heavy things was on it, it was going up and down. Waves of heaviness. Then she stood there and listened. Then she heard the water – water – people paddling. It sounded like a lot of canoes. She went up the bank, went to all the tents, and woke them up. She told them to put things in their sleeping bag to make it look like all the men were in bed. She had the men take all the women and kids over on the other side of the river into the woods. She told the men to go out and surround the camp. Some went on the bank. When those canoes came, they had a stick with fire on it to go into those tents to burn them down. They sent a man ahead, checked on a tent and shot an arrow into the sleeping bag. He went and checked; there was nobody in there. Instead of waiting on the beach for the scout to come back, they all ran up the bank. That was their mistake. The [Koyukon] warriors came out and attacked the men. Someone must have survived to tell the story.

It is not clear whether this battle, which was fought over trade alliances between the Gwich'in, Tanana (of Minto area), Northern Eskimos and Koyukon, was in the *Nuchalawoyya* (Tanana) area or closer to the Rapids located about thirty-five miles above Tanana on the Yukon River. The warfare ended with the great battle at Morelock Creek about 1847 and forever changed ethnic boundaries.⁶⁹ The Tanana switched their alliances and rallied with the Koyukon to push the Gwich'in and Northern Eskimos out of the Middle Yukon. Customarily, men had

⁶⁹ Edwin, Mary Moses, 24-25; Raboff, 143.

special trading partners with whom alliances were made. These bonds were a strong brotherhood that was ceremonially acknowledged, so the change of alliance was quite dramatic. In 1848, after this decisive battle, the place names in the area changed from Gwich'in to Koyukon.⁷⁰ Tanana remains a natural ethnic boundary between the Tanana, Koyukon and Gwich'in Indians.⁷¹

The legend of *Bedzidehoodeno* persists, and this story is likely told among the descendants of those who come from Tanana, Cos Jacket, Minto and Stevens Village, as these villages are closely connected to one another through ancient hunting, fishing and marriage patterns.

After 1847, when Fort Yukon was established, *Nuchalawoyya* took on greater significance, as it became the neutral trading ground between the Hudson's Bay Company traders traveling down river and the Russian fur traders traveling up river, and finally the Americans after 1867. The location has been discussed by many explorers and researchers and is often referred to as *Nuklúkahyét* in the literature. The term *Nuklúkahyét* is a misnomer that resulted from poor understanding of early traders of the Athabaskan term *Noochuloghoyet*, or *Nuchalawoyya*,⁷² or another, similar word, depending on which of the several Native languages was being represented at the point of contact.⁷³ Confusion in the literature arises because both Tanana and the trading post at the mouth of the Tozitna were referred to as *Nuklúkahyét*. Orth defined the term as the area between the Tozitna River and Mission Hill, which is a span of eight or nine river miles.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Raboff, 104.

⁷¹ Charles Campbell. "A History of the Episcopal Mission of Our Saviour in Tanana, Alaska," 1; Michael E. Krauss. "Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska Map." (Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2011).

⁷² Hudson Stuck. *The Alaskan Missions of the Episcopal Church*. (New York: Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 1920), 42. *Noochuloghoyet*, as Helen refers to it is the older language term for *Nuchalawoyya*.

⁷³ Krauss, ANLC Map; Mary Edwin.

⁷⁴ Orth, 708.

2.2 The Americans

The 1867 transfer of the Alaska Territory to American rule ended the monopoly that the Russian American and the Hudson's Bay Companies had enjoyed. Alaska entered a period of military rule from 1867 to 1877, and several military exploration teams were sent to the Interior to do mapping and reconnaissance. Also at this time the independent trading/prospecting trio of Arthur Harper, Alfred Mayo and Jack McQuesten began to make their way into the Interior to establish private enterprises. All three men married Athabascan women. Harper and Mayo married Koyukon cousins from Tanana and raised their families in the area. Mayo married a woman named Margaret in 1873 and established a trading post in Tanana that same year.⁷⁵ The men moved their enterprises to various locations on the river in order to keep up with the demand. Tanana became a central hub of activity.

In 1869, the U.S. Army sent Captain Charles P. Raymond to the Yukon River to investigate whether Fort Yukon was within the United States. He determined that it was and confiscated the fort. In his *Report of a Reconnaissance of the Yukon River*, he made key observations of camps along the river and mentioned the importance of *Nuchalawoyya* as a historic trading site.⁷⁶ In 1883, the Army sent Frederick Schwatka to do reconnaissance of the Yukon. In *Along Alaska's Great River* he relates encounters with Indians at camps along the river where the expedition obtained fresh salmon. Near Fort Yukon, he met the infamous Gwich'in chief, Senatee, who had been defeated by the Koyukon at the Battle of Morelock many years prior. He also visited the trading post at *Nuklúkahyét*, which now was located near the

⁷⁵ Murphy, 37; Thomas K. Bundtzen and Charles C. Hawley. Alfred Mayo biography, Internet, available from <http://alaskamininghalloffame.org/>, 1998, revised 2009, accessed 12 February 2014.

⁷⁶ Raymond, 29-38.

present site of Tanana where he met Alaska Commercial Company trader Arthur Harper, who had an impressive vegetable garden there.⁷⁷

Until the 1897 discovery of gold in the Yukon Territory life on the Yukon River had been stable but the rush of miners along the river in search of gold put a strain on the long-established trade relationships as well as on the natural resources. In response to criminal activity associated with the gold rush, the United States sent Captain P.H. Ray, U.S. Secretary of War, on an expedition to investigate in 1897. In his report, “Report of the Relief of the Destitute in the Gold Fields, 1897,” Ray recommended that three military forts be established: Fort Egbert near the Canadian border, Fort Gibbon at present day Tanana, and Fort St. Michael at the mouth of the Yukon. Ray selected Tanana for the army post over other locations because it was accessible to heavy-draft river boats. He was so confident of the worthiness of this site for meeting future needs that he staked ten square miles for military purposes on the spot. He believed Tanana would become the future capital of the territory due to its strategic geographic location.⁷⁸

Although Tanana’s role as Alaska’s capital never materialized, and it never became a major center in the mining industry, it was a large and busy town that became a central hub for steamers plying the rivers, as most freight and passenger traffic was transshipped there.⁷⁹ At one time Tanana had Victorian-style houses with picket fences as well as a four-story hotel.

Tanana developed as a town largely as a response to the influx of miners and other immigrants along a three-mile strip of land comprised of three distinct sites with three unique purposes in close proximity of one another. Looking downriver from *Noochuloghoyet Point* on the right bank, the first section is the Episcopal Mission of Our Saviour, more commonly

⁷⁷ Frederick Schwatka. *Along Alaska's Great River*. (Chicago, New York: George M. Hill Co., 1898), 77-83.

⁷⁸ Ray, 530.

⁷⁹ Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles*, 151.

referred to as Mission Hill, established sometime between 1892-1899 by Jules Prevost. About two miles downriver from the Point is the middle section where the town of Tanana sprang up around the post office, which was established in 1898 on Front Street. The third section was Fort Gibbon, with its ugly yellow buildings, established in 1899 to provide law and order among the rowdy miners.⁸⁰ The fort ceased as an army post in 1923, and in 1933 all buildings were abandoned and demolished.

In the 1940s Tanana regained its strategic military importance with a Distance Early Warning (DEW) Line station, a White Alice site, and a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) radio tower.⁸¹ In 1940, the Indian Health Service built a regional hospital there and in the 1970s, the regional high school attracted students from all over the Interior.

2.3 Church of England – Missionary Efforts

In 1888, the Church of England sent the Reverend Thomas H. Canham to the Yukon River with the charge to establish a mission called St. James Mission, sixteen miles below Tanana near the mouth of the Tozitna River near the trading post that Francois Mercier established in 1868.⁸² This trading post was sometimes called *Nuklúkahyét*, and known in later years as Fort Adams or Old Mission.⁸³ Here, Canham spent many years translating the Bible, Prayer Book and hymns into local Native languages, particularly Koyukon.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles*, 150.

⁸¹ As a matter of national defense after WWII, DEW Lines were operated from 1957-1980 in the far northern region of Alaska and Canada. The White Alice Communications System (WACS) was constructed in Alaska during the Cold War by the United States Airforce.

⁸² Brooks, 475; Peter Trimble Rowe. "Historical Data of Alaska Missions." *The Pathfinder* Vol. I, no. 11 (September, 1920), 2.

⁸³ Thomas J. Turck and Diane L. Lehman Turck. "Trading Posts Along the Yukon River: Noochuloghoyet Trading Post in Historical Context." (*Arctic* Vol. 45, no. 1 (March, 1992): 51-61), 55.

⁸⁴ Dorsey, 45.

The Indians trading at *Nuklúkahyét* had a long history with the Episcopal Church. Many of them had received the Gospel in 1866 under the efforts of Anglican missionary Robert McDonald at the annual trading fair *Nuchalawoyya*. When the Reverend Vincent Sim arrived in *Nuklúkahyét* for the 1884 trading fair, he found the Indians were able to recall the lessons learned from McDonald many years prior, even though no missionary had visited their home territory in the intervening years.⁸⁵ By 1896 when Bishop Rowe visited, many Natives who welcomed him knew the services, some had even been baptized, and they had Bibles and Prayer Books in their own language.⁸⁶

Helen's maternal grandmother, *Gaalno* was one of the first converts under these ministries. It is not known when she became a Christian or whether she was a resident or a visitor at the Old Mission site at the time she gave birth to her first child there in 1888.

Although many Native families continued to live at camps on the tributaries of the Yukon and travel their seasonal circuits, a sizable Native community had developed in the late 1800s around St. James Mission and the nearby trading post. By the recording of the 1900 census this mission had grown to 161 inhabitants, all of whom, except for the Seldon missionary family of five people, were Native or mixed.⁸⁷ Helen's family is not enumerated among them.

Early missionary goals were to convert and baptize, and to this end, the Episcopal Church was quite successful. By 1910 most Athabascans considered themselves to be Christians and readily participated in the faith. According to the Venerable Walter Hannum, "all Indians in the

⁸⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁷ Archive.org. 1900 St. James Mission census documents, Internet, available from, <https://archive.org/details/>, Accessed 12 December 2012.

upper Yukon were Episcopalians.”⁸⁸ But not all people embraced this new religion wholeheartedly; some continued to practice the old ways while giving the outward appearance of cooperation.⁸⁹ Others rejected the church’s paternalistic attitudes and were fearful for the well-being of their tribe. At Old Mission, in the early 1900s, some elders met in council for several nights before deciding that a group would vacate the mission site and move upriver, closer to the newly established Fort Gibbon.⁹⁰

In 1890, the Church of England transferred its Alaska mission sites to the American Episcopalian Board of Missions. The Reverend Jules L. Prevost replaced Canham at St. James Mission, located eleven miles below Tanana at the mouth of the Tozitna River, becoming the responsible missionary on the Yukon in 1891.⁹¹ Canham remained for another year in order to finish translation of the *Book of Common Prayer* while Prevost visited thirty-two Indian villages in the area by boat or dog team. Prevost also established a school at Tanana under contract with the Bureau of Education.⁹² In 1895, Peter Trimble Rowe, was named as Bishop of Alaska. Rowe had a long tenure and did much to advance the Gospel in Alaska’s Interior until his retirement in 1942. He was fondly remembered by many elders who have since passed on.⁹³ In 1896, Prevost and Rowe decided to move the St. James Mission (also called Old Mission) to a new location due to Indians vacating the site in favor of the newly established trading post at what is now Tanana.⁹⁴ St. James Mission was transferred from its old location at the mouth of the Tozitna River, to the new town of Tanana as a church to be used by the town’s white

⁸⁸ Carol A. Phillips, ed. *A Century of Faith: Centennial Commemorative - 1895-1995 - Episcopal Diocese of Alaska*. (Fairbanks: Centennial Press, 1995), 88.

⁸⁹ Fast, 7-18.

⁹⁰ Tanana Tribal Council. “A Short History of the Native Village of Tanana,” 15.

⁹¹ Rowe, 2.

⁹² Tay Thomas. *Cry in the Wilderness: Hear Ye the Voice of the Lord*. (Anchorage: Alaska Council of Churches, 1967), 40.

⁹³ Phillips, 9-10.

⁹⁴ Campbell, 3.

inhabitants.⁹⁵ And, three miles upriver on Mission Hill, a new mission called Mission of Our Saviour (or Tanana Mission) was established.⁹⁶ Mission Hill is the hill across from, and directly overlooking, *Noochulohoyet Point* which means in Athabascan “the point of the big river peninsula,” where the Tanana River flows into the Yukon River.⁹⁷

Prevost set to work clearing land and erecting buildings at the new mission site. A benefactor, Mary Rhinelander King of New York, financed the building of the new church.⁹⁸ The distinctive shake and gabled structure was completed sometime between 1899 and 1905.⁹⁹ By 1910, the Episcopal Church had received patent to 485 acres surrounding the church building for missionary purposes.¹⁰⁰ The property eventually supported a church, hospital, sawmill, cemetery, rectory, school reserve and several Native houses.¹⁰¹

Several publications suggest that the Native village sprang up around the Mission site and formed a vibrant community after the Mission had been created, but a curious line in Tay Thomas’ book about Alaska missionary work suggests that the Native village existed there prior to the Mission being established.¹⁰² This would explain the reasoning for moving the mission from the downriver site to the present location. However, I could find no further documentation verifying this. It is not clear why Native families chose to move to the Mission site, but the U.S. Government education policy and the toll of epidemics likely contributed to the decision. Athabascans may have sought the services provided by the mission personnel.

⁹⁵ Rowe, 2.

⁹⁶ Ibid.; Brooks, 475.

⁹⁷ Turck and Turck. “Trading Posts Along the Yukon River,” 52-53.

⁹⁸ Rowe, 2; Campbell, 3.

⁹⁹ Nps.gov/nr. U.S. National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places. Internet, available from <http://www.nps.gov/nr/>, accessed 15 December 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Andrews, 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Tay, *Cry in the Wilderness*, 41.

According to Elizabeth Andrews, Native families were encouraged to give up living in their subterranean homes at traditional sites and were “allowed” to build their own homes on Mission land.¹⁰³ By the 1930 census, twenty two Native families, comprised of thirty-seven adults, two missionaries and fifty-two children were enumerated at the Mission of Our Saviour.¹⁰⁴ Helen’s family was listed among them. The 1930 census enumeration of the town of Tanana one mile downriver lists twenty-four white adults, eleven Athabaskan adults with eight children among them and eight Eskimo adults with nine children among them.¹⁰⁵

Mission Hill, known to Helen as *Bedochtōlidlenah*,¹⁰⁶ is a historically important and sacred place to Athabaskan people. It was used prior to missionary contact for ceremonies, and Athabascans from all over the Interior brought their medicine men to be buried there.¹⁰⁷ Today, Helen’s ancestors are all buried in front of the old church building or in a row further up the hill.

Not only was Helen’s family among the original permanent residents of the area, but the early seeds of Helen’s faith were planted here. Her grandmother, *Gaalno* was considered to be a strong Christian woman with a cheerful disposition and a generous spirit. She had a large grub box that always contained food, and anyone who came by was welcome to eat. She was instrumental in Helen’s upbringing and greatly influenced Helen spiritually. *Gaalno* and her husband Rampart Joe were strong believers who readily instructed the young Helen in Christian principles, and other relatives served the church in various ways. In their home they were conscious of listening to the voice of the Lord and her grandparents would ask each other, “What did the Lord say today?” Helen recalls church services being filled to overflowing on a regular

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Archive.org. 1930 Fort Gibbon District Mission of Our Saviour census documents. Internet, available from <https://archive.org/details/>, accessed 12 December 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Archive.org. 1930 Fort Gibbon District Tanana Census Documents. Internet, available from <https://archive.org/details/>, accessed 12 December 2012,

¹⁰⁶ This name was told to Helen by Teddy Luke.

¹⁰⁷ Tanana Tribal Council, 15.

basis. When her family traveled to fish camp at the Rapids, church services continued to be conducted at camp. The host family would fire a gunshot in the air, signaling the start of service at their camp. Hymns were sung in the Native language. Mission Hill continues to hold a special, almost sacred place in the hearts of Tanana people.

Today, some Alaska Natives view Christianity as a “white man’s” religion that is not to be trusted. Christianity itself brought many teachings that wrongly identified some Native ceremonies and practices as shamanistic and devilish in origin. Thus, Alaska Natives are divided as to what spirituality means to a Native person, whether it be Christianity or traditional spirituality, or a blending of the two. Generally, despite some differences, the relationship with the Episcopal Church and villages in Alaska’s Interior where they ministered continues to be one of mutual respect. Historically, although it may have discouraged Native dancing and singing or potlatching in some places, the Episcopal Church did not force these traditional practices out of existence in the Interior as other denominations had done in other Alaskan regions.¹⁰⁸ Helen clearly recalls how deeply her grandparents internalized their Christian beliefs.

¹⁰⁸ Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles*, 189.



Figure 2: Mission of Our Saviour Church Building, Photographer Unknown, Richard Frank Photograph Collection, 1913. UAF-1997-122-23. Alaska and Polar Regions Collection and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Chapter 3: Growing up at the Mission

Helen's Indian name is *Jehut'la Chudinow* which means baby animals that play a lot; one is a bear and one is a beaver. She grew up in a large house that her father, Elijah ('Lige) Joseph, built on Mission land. The Native families that settled there had used Mission Hill as part of their traditional habitat during seasonal rounds. Now, they had the use of the Mission's saw mill to cut their own lumber. Each family built their own home and by 1929 subterranean sod houses had been replaced by wooden homes all in a row on Mission Hill. Reference to Mission Hill and the Tanana Native Village prior to 1945 are often spoken of synonymously. She was raised primarily by her father in a busy household with five older brothers and one sister. Helen's maternal grandmother *Gaalno* lived with her third husband, Rampart Joe, in a small cabin next to her sister Annie, some distance behind Elijah's house. Extended family, who also lived nearby, as well as Deaconess Sterne, was instrumental in Helen's upbringing. Blind Joe, as he was referred to by Helen, was the only grandfather she knew.

For many years, the Mission of Our Saviour was a lively place and Helen's memories of it are happy ones, almost idyllic. Native families on Mission Hill were industrious and most had large gardens. With Sterne's help, the Josephs had a large family garden. One time, the fearless Deaconess pushed a visiting bear out of the garden with a broom. It was common for women to trade beaded leather items with the Deaconess in exchange for supplies or donate beaded leather items to be sent Outside to be used as fundraiser items for the Mission. At the Mission, Helen played with many children and there was no lack of creativity as they made their own fun. Her best friends were Virginia Roberts, Bessie Grant and Dorothy Pitka. Helen recalls her childhood setting:

I'm Jehut'la Chudinow from Tanana. I'm going to talk about the little village I grew up in. It was a small place, there must have been about maybe one hundred fifty, two hundred people there, and they had a saw mill there where they can build. In the summer or in the fall, that's what they did, they built themselves caches or homes. Whatever they needed to build there they cut their own logs. Grandpa Justin and them had big house. I don't know why they had big houses, big porch on there too. Next to them was this little house, my grandmother's house. I know my father built a good big house because he needed a big house. They had electricity at the Mission. The deaconess had electric light, and the school did, and the church did. The village did not have power, neither did downtown; just the people that could afford their own power. We used lamps and lanterns. When I was with my grandmother all we used was a lamp because we did not want to have that gas type because it would be dangerous.

It was just the simple little village and to me everybody was so busy. That's what I remember about people being busy. And people were happy. Men always talked and joked and laughed. Women too, they went to each other's homes and sewed together and just be with each other and did things with each other and probably for the community and for the church they did things. They helped keep the church up. The women sewed and the men did the wood and other things for the church. It was one big happy family, seems like to me as I was growing up. That's what I saw.

To me every day was so busy, everybody was so busy taking care of themselves and taking care of each other. In winter, everything had to be done in the short light span. Ice had to be cut from the river, haul water for drinking and cleaning, and cut wood for fire. They made everything. They were really concerned about taking care of each other; they wanted to take care of each other. And they did.

We had a lot of elders in the community. I remember them coming to my dad's house and eating there after church Sunday afternoon. They'd have a gathering there and talk to each other and tell each other what they did for the week and what they can do for the next week, kind of planning things together, men and women both. They were very important to our lives because I think we thought that was our way of life. They were concerned about each other; they took care of each other. It was not just the family; they took care of other people. Next door neighbor they helped take care of. Just like one little village that was just all together. The elders were very, very important people for us. As young as we were, we knew they were people we could look up to.

Native community life revolved around seasonal occupations (hunting, fishing, wood cutting, and trapping), and the church. Everybody attended church, especially the men. Natives from around the area contributed to the construction of the church building by donating \$2,900 toward supplies and participating in-kind with labor and seating contributions.¹⁰⁹ Helen's grandmother set an early example, beginning every day with a word from the Bible and a prayer. Helen loved to listen to her grandmother pray in the old language. *Gaalno* and her sisters Annie and Eva knew all of the old hymns in Athabaskan. At church, Henry Moses served as interpreter. Helen's brothers cut wood for the church as a donation.

3.1 Grandmother Gaalno

As Koyukon Athabascans, Helen's ancestors followed a matrilineal genealogy which means that generally, the cultural expression of the clan or tribe is passed through the mothers. Property ownership was matrilineal within an exogamous clan system. Traditionally, married men were to follow the wife's family, but this has not always been the case. Maternal uncles

¹⁰⁹ Campbell, 9.

were important to the raising of children and they readily participated in passing skills on to them. Although matrilineal, Athabascan society is not a matriarchy. Band leadership fell to the men. Athabascan communities generally follow a democratic process. Although women were not allowed to speak on matters of importance,¹¹⁰ some women had freedom of expression to influence decision-making as portrayed by the quick thinking of *Bedzidehoodeno*, which elevated her to a highly respected position in the community. Leaders were expected to promote the common good. According to anthropologist Cornelius Osgood, “Even among the aristocracy of the Tanaina, the leader was expected to be very paternalistic and concerned about the community’s need, and his action had to be confirmed by the council.”¹¹¹ The Koyukon follow this practice. Moreover, leaders only had authority over their immediate bands and not over other bands or camps.¹¹² Regional authority is a modern concept.

Helen’s maternal great-grandmother, *Bedzidehoodeno* had four children presumably fathered by the same man who may or may not have been a Native man. Three of them, *Gaalno*, Chief Matthew, and Annie Edwin were tall and had a light-colored complexion. The fourth child, Eva Dick Jordan was much darker. Helen’s grandmother, *Gaalno*, is thought to have been born in 1844, which means she would have been three years old when her mother averted tragedy for her band at Morelock Creek.

Gaalno’s birth is an intriguing story. According to family history, her father was a man with a big red beard. Where he came from remains a mystery. He likely was a trader, as he was gone for long stretches of time. He appears to have adopted the Native way of living, as most

¹¹⁰ Moses P. Gabriel. *Gwich'in History: The Handed Down, Oral History of Alaska's Gwich'in People of the Fort Yukon Area*. (Fairbanks: Yukon/Alaska Publishing Co., No date), 13.

¹¹¹ Wallace M. Olson. "Minto, Alaska: Cultural and Historical Influences on Group Identity." (College, Alaska: University of Alaska, 1968), 81.

¹¹² Ibid.

early traders living among the Athabascans did. *Gaalno* related a story to her granddaughter, Helen, that one time she saw a man walking toward her and asked her mother why the man was walking backwards. Unused to seeing facial hair, she thought the beard was the back of the man's head. *Bedzidehoodeno* told her that the man was her father. It is possible that he went by the name Daniel as *Gaalno*'s Christian name was Sarah and her surname was Daniel. She was also known as "Big Sarah," perhaps due to her height. The family refers to her by her Athabascan name.

Bedzidehoodeno raised her children according to traditional practices. When the children were young the band would travel far in seasonal cycles, which could take up to two years to complete, caching meat and other food supplies at strategic locations along the traditional route. They traveled to Denali, McGrath, Koyukuk, and Nikolai. In the chill of winter many Athabascan bands, including Helen's ancestors, would meet on the north side of Denali in the valley along Primrose Ridge that was warmed by the balmy coastal winds and where sheep, herds of caribou, and a variety of fish and birds were plentiful.¹¹³ Many camp sites have been found in this area. Grandma Abbie Joseph, a contemporary of *Gaalno*'s, and Helen's aunt by marriage, recorded stories of traveling to Kantishna each winter.¹¹⁴

In keeping with the custom of the time, *Gaalno* was given in marriage at the age of twelve or so to a much older man. She had three husbands during her lifetime. She gave birth to her first child, Helen's mother who was also named Helen, in 1888 at the age of forty-four at

¹¹³ "A Short History of the Native Village of Tanana by the Tanana Tribal Council, 7. Alaskans prefer to call Mount McKinley by its Native name, Denali, which means "the great or tall one." Roy Folger reminisces about his ancestors living at Denali in "Denakkanaaga Elder and Youth Conference Program." Tanana, Alaska. June 7-11, 2010. Abbie Joseph also discusses living at Denali in the document below. Guy Peters worked as the first Native interpreter at Denali National Park and shared this information with park visitors.

¹¹⁴ Dianne Gudgel-Holmes. *Native Place Names of the Kantishna Drainage, Alaska: Kantishna Oral History Project: From Stories Told by the Late Abbie Joseph, Tanana, Alaska*, 1991. Helen Peters assisted with the interviews with Abbie which were conducted in 1982 in Anchorage where she was residing at a rest home. Kantishna is a traditional area in the Denali Park Preserve.

Hododochlaten,¹¹⁵ or Old Mission which had just been established. Due to her advanced maternal age, the family speculates that her first, much older husband was unable to sire children and that upon his death she married a man named Luke and had two children with him: Helen Luke¹¹⁶ and Bessie Luke. As an older woman *Gaalno* married Rampart Joe.¹¹⁷ Helen Peters remembers that he had some sort of accent and she thinks he might have been from Nulato or Koyukuk. In 1935, anthropologist Frederica de Laguna met Helen's grandparents and wrote about them in her books. She records that Joe, also called "Kobuk Joe" or "Old Blind Joe" was primarily raised on the Koyukuk River and also spent time on the Kobuk, confirming Helen's recollection of his accent. De Laguna refers to *Gaalno* as "Mrs. Joe" and records that she grew up primarily in the Tanana area. De Laguna considered the two to have been the oldest residents of the Mission, and she made note of the canes that they both used which had "nicely carved knobs."¹¹⁸

3.2 Helen's Parents – Helen Luke and Elijah Joseph

Helen did not know her mother, also named Helen, very well, as she died when Helen was only four years old. Helen Luke, born in 1888 at Old Mission, was the first of only two children born to *Gaalno*.¹¹⁹ She was raised, along with her sister Bessie, according to the traditions of their ancestors. At a young age, Helen married Elijah Joseph, who was five years her senior.

¹¹⁵ This Koyukon name was told to Helen by Teddy Luke.

¹¹⁶ Helen Peters always thought her mother's last name was Pitka or Daniel. She was surprised to learn that her surname had been Luke, which was confirmed by her death certificate.

¹¹⁷ Rampart Joe is sometimes referred to as Blind Joe, and is recorded as such on the 1930 census documents. The 1940 census documents list his last name as Pitka.

¹¹⁸ De Laguna, *Travels Among*, 74-75.

¹¹⁹ Helen Luke. Certificate of Death Registrar for No 0707 record in Book 3, page 69 dated August 16, 1933 and marked as having been received in Juneau September 15, 1933.

Elijah Joseph, referred to as ‘Lige, was born around 1883 on the Red River.¹²⁰ He was an avid trapper, dog musher, fisherman, wood crafter, trader and wood cutter. As a young boy he accompanied his father on seasonal trading trips to the Alaskan coast. He knew the routes and sometimes would be gone four months or so. They traded furs and always brought a load of goods back home. According to Helen, her father and his brother, Edgar knew how to dance in the Russian style with



Figure 3: Helen Luke and Elijah Joseph with Baby - Photographer Unknown.

guns held high in the air. Russian traders were active on the Yukon from the mid-1800s through 1867 when Alaska was purchased by the United States. How the Joseph brothers learned to dance in the Russian style is a mystery since Russian American Company trading posts would have been closed by the time the Joseph brothers were born. Lone Russians could have remained in the territory, or, the practice had become so embedded within the Athabascan community that the dance was naturally passed along in a similar fashion as the traditional Indian dances. Certainly, Russian words were incorporated into the Athabascan vocabulary, so it is possible that other cultural elements like dances were passed on long after the Russian presence had faded. ‘Lige’s brother Edgar also resided at the Mission with his wife Abbie Joseph.

Helen and Elijah had eleven children together: seven boys, three girls and one unknown; only eight grew to adulthood (Nelson, Jason, Jules, Godfrey, Virginia, William, Helen, and Paul). One child, born between Nelson and Jason, died either in infancy or early childhood; the gender and cause of death is unknown. Two other children, Charlotte (born around 1925), and

¹²⁰ Jason Joseph. Delayed Birth Certificate, State file number 14 100118, issued by the State of Alaska July 29, 1986. There is no Red River in the Interior of Alaska noted in the “DeLorme Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer.” There is a Red Slough (page 101) near the Telida Mountains which is the likely location of his birth. His brother Edgar married Abbie Joseph whose father is from Telida. Both families wintered near Denali.

Wilmer (born around 1926), lived a few years and were recorded on the 1930 census, but they died at a young age. Helen has no recollection of them. Their age at the time of death and cause of death are unknown.

Not much else is known about her mother, and Helen has few memories of her. She vividly recalls her mother's long shiny black hair, so shiny that it looked nearly blue. The last memory Helen has is that of her mother stepping into a boat with Mr. and Mrs. Adams who took her just two miles downriver to the Tanana Hospital to have her baby. Helen never saw her mother again. She remembers her dad coming home very sad. Helen Luke Joseph died August 12, 1933, twelve days after giving birth to her youngest child. The baby, Paul, lived and was adopted out to the Peter Henry family. The Henrys had also adopted Flora Kokrine Demoski. Flora and Helen call each other *sōdāh*, sister.

The last few days of Helen Luke's life must have been very difficult. The primary cause of death listed on her death certificate is pelvic abscess involving the tubes and ovaries. The secondary cause was chronic salpingitis which is inflammation or infection of the tubes/ovaries, a condition the administering doctor stated that she had had for about 19 years.¹²¹ She is buried on Mission Hill, along with her ancestors.

3.3 Thoughts of Mother

Nevertheless, her mother looms as a large figure in Helen's life. *When I really started thinking about her I was about, maybe eight or nine. I start thinking because I see mothers with my girlfriends. And I just wondered "Why me, why did you take mother away, my mother?" And there was some nights I went to bed and I felt very lonely. I was missing something although my grandmother and my father and my brothers always held me. I needed that, I needed someone to*

¹²¹ Helen Luke, Certificate of Death.

hold me, and I needed somebody to tell me it's ok. But they never said anything to me, they never said things like that to me but they held me in the mornings and in the evening. I laid my head on my grandma's lap, but that was not enough for me. That was like my heart would hurt. I did not like to see my friends being upset with their mothers, you know, it just really bothered me when they got mad at their mom, say things to their mom.

Because of that feeling that I have that something is missing in my life I hurt inside. I did not know what it was until later. As I was gettin' older, I realize that was my mom that I miss. I had my grandmother and deaconess, they did everything they can for me and yet I hurt. There were times that I would imagine what she would be like and I would imagine that she was in the room with me. I imagined how she would be and what she would do with me and for me. I imagined these things so I get away from being hurt. I never even told my best friends how I felt when I went to bed and cried for my mom. I never shared my feelings with anyone, how I hurt inside for my mom and how I missed her. I just want that feeling that I had to be gone. There were many times, many times I was alone.

Most of the time, in the camp, I was always alone [wipes tears]. One time I was alone on the beach at Rapids and I was walkin' in the water alone and I picked a bunch of rocks out of the water, washed them off. These are going to be my children, they're all gonna be boys. I counted those rocks. I took care of those rocks. That's what I played with every day. I picked them up and pretend they were babies, because there was nobody else with me and those rocks become my playmates, my children. You think kids don't know or don't understand but kids do have feelings. They have feelings and they hurt like a human being, they hurt inside. I sure did, I hurt inside but I did not tell anyone. And we're real good at that, real good at puttin' a front up, covering up the

hurt inside. So, as I was gettin' older I start coping with it better. I still never talk about it, how I miss my mother.

And I was jealous of girls that had mothers. I just wanted a mother so bad and I used to get mad at them because they're not good to their mothers, talkin' back to their mothers, but I took care of my grandmother like I would my mother. I wanted to take care of my mom so I took care of my grandmother very well. As a young person I would get frustrated sometimes, but never said a bad word to her, but I would have liked to. And I never did.

When his wife died, 'Lige mourned her loss deeply. He grieved for a long time and honored her memory with a lavish potlatch in the fall of 1937 at the Mission.¹²² *The year he was going to make potlatch for her he used to sing this song he made for my mother. [Sings song.] I know there're other words to it but I can't remember. He thought she was going to live on with us. He thought she was never going to leave us.*

For the give-away on the last evening of the potlatch, the family made skis, sleds and snowshoes. They also gave away many Russian blankets. Other than blankets, all gifts and other potlatch items were hand-made or procured through subsistence activities. Big caches were built to hold all of the goods. There was one cache of dry fish and one cache of meat, along with fresh moose and all sorts of frozen fish. Boats full of people from throughout the Interior – Kokrines, Ruby, Rampart, Stevens, Koyukuk, Nulato, Minto, Fort Yukon and Nenana – came to pay their respects. It was not unusual for hundreds of people to attend such an event. Helen remembers the teenager Sarah Silas of Minto attending. The people were welcomed to shore with an exchange of gun shots and a dance. Tents were everywhere. A large gathering place with a dance floor was built outside and for three days and three nights they held potlatch. Drums beat all night long.

¹²² The memorial potlatch is discussed in detail in the next section.

Great dancers performed the traditional and Russian dances. Bonds of friendship were strengthened as the community at-large gathered to support the grieving family. The tradition of the potlatch and the Native community gathering to support one another through times of grieving and hardship is still practiced.

3.4 The Memorial Potlatch

In Alaska, potlatches are a traditional activity practiced by nearly every tribe in some fashion. Interior Athabascans conduct potlatches for funerals, special events and to memorialize a loved one. Each Athabascan tribe has its own unique customs and practices, so the ways in which potlatches are conducted vary. The practice described here is the way in which Helen's family conducts a memorial potlatch. As culture bearers, Helen's family members have been instrumental in keeping the tradition alive. Not every family prepares for or participates in memorial potlatches. It is possible that the practice was not passed on to them by their parents as something important to maintain. Or, it could be that they do not have the knowledge, means or ability to host a memorial potlatch.

The present potlatch retains elements of the old ways. Some believe that when some people die, they do not go where they are supposed to go, but wander for a time amidst the living. Helen said that one of the purposes of the potlatch is to share the last meal with those who have died. Another important purpose of a funeral potlatch is to give the spirit of the deceased every opportunity to leave. If the person is wandering around, he or she is doing so for a reason and the family wants to provide every opportunity to move along. The family takes the belongings of the deceased out of the house, gives their possessions away, burns food in a bonfire, and brings a meal for the deceased to the graveyard. If the spirit of the person continues to remain, he or she will give some indication to let people know.

Helen did not entertain avenues for the dead to communicate with her and only had one such experience with a bed side bell that her husband used to ring to call her for help when he was ill with cancer. A couple of nights after Hardy died she closed the bedroom door leaving all of his personal items in the room. One night the bell rang in the middle of the night – she jumped up and ran in the room. She exclaimed, “You got me!” Soon thereafter, her friend, Anna Frank came and took her husband’s belongings back to Fairbanks.

The funeral potlatch is conducted immediately following the funeral ceremony and is not an elaborate affair. Family and friends of the deceased gather for three days and nights for “tea” and on the third night the meal is served potlatch style. Dances are conducted on the last night. There may or may not be a give-away the last night of grieving. The deceased’s personal items are packed up and stored for distribution during the memorial potlatch.

The purpose of the memorial potlatch is to help the grieving friends and family release their grief and to assist the soul of the dead person to be at peace. It is meant to help the living move forward, and the dead to be at rest. When people are old or terminally ill, there is time to prepare for his or her loss. When the deceased is young and has died unexpectedly or tragically, the memorial potlatch provides the outlet of preparation in order to let the deceased go.

A memorial potlatch is conducted when the host is ready. Readiness means when all the gifts are in place for the honored guests and the special song for the deceased has been written. Several years of preparation may be required. Family members and friends contribute items or cash to help out.

Gifts are the most important elements of the ceremony and the family works hard to bead enough necklaces, slippers, gloves, and other regalia items to give to their guests. Many blankets are purchased as these represent a treasured gift. Colorful bandanas are strung on poles or lines

throughout the hall and cooking area and are later given away. Bolts of cloth are tacked to the wall to be used later in the ceremony as part of a dance and then finally cut into strips of cloth given to women to make *bets'eghe hoolaane*.¹²³ Other gift items include rifles, chainsaws, and household items. Gifts are created and distributed in order of importance to the deceased. The most honored guests (those that were especially meaningful or helpful to the deceased and/or host) receive the hand-beaded items, blankets, rifles, ruffs and special clothing items. Most attendees leave the potlatch with some memento of the occasion. Gifting brings healing to the hosts and imparts a bit of themselves to their guests.¹²⁴

There are different types of songs, including two types of mourning songs that are sung according to their purpose. One type is the eulogy song composed for the deceased which is the next element of importance. The eulogy song is usually written by someone who knew the deceased or who has a special understanding of him or her. The song-maker is usually chosen by the host, but a song-maker might volunteer if he or she is feeling particularly inspired. The song encompasses the deceased's lineage, character, and his or her essence. In the literature on memorial potlatches, much has been recorded about the practice of giving away many goods, essentially giving away all of the person's wealth, but little has been written about the memorial songs. William E. Simeone provides a good explanation of the songs and song sequence among the Tanacross Athabascans in the book *Rifles, Blankets, and Beads* but there are slight distinctions between the Tanacross practice and the Tanana practice.¹²⁵ In Tanacross the song for the deceased is called a "sorry song."¹²⁶ In Tanana, the song would be known by the name of the

¹²³ The Koyukon word for the style of dress more commonly known *kuspuk*.

¹²⁴ William E. Simeone. *Rifles, Blankets and Beads: Identity, History, and the Northern Athapaskan Potlatch*. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995). 50. See page 54-63 for details of potlatch gifts.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 139-145.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 145.

deceased, for example, “Marlene’s Song.” A second distinction is that when Tanana people sing the person’s song, it is sung to the rhythm of hitting two sticks together to keep time instead of a drum. All other mourning songs are sung to the beat of the drum and are only sung at funerals or memorial potlatches. The eulogy song is sung only during the three-day memorial period.

In general, songs tell stories, and when singing a song publicly, the song-maker is always acknowledged. Songs may be sung by other tribes only with the permission of the song-maker or the song-maker’s family member who has the authority to grant such a request. For example, many of the songs written by Helen’s father, ‘Lige Joseph are sung, with permission, by the Minto Tribe and the Fairbanks Native Association’s Johnson O’Malley dance troupe. Songs bind the tribe in unity and provide a mark of identity. Each tribe has its unique expression.

Food is the third important element to the potlatch. The community works together to support the grieving family in hosting the event, which may be attended by hundreds of people in some instances. It is a matter of the community’s honor and expression of love and respect to “put someone away good” (burying a person). Interpersonal or familial disputes are temporarily set aside. Chores are divided by long standing traditions – the men hunt and are responsible for making the moose soup, cooking the meat and brewing the tea, all of which are prepared outdoors over an open fire, while women chop vegetables for the soup and make the salads, desserts, berries and other items.

Memorial potlatch activities take place over the course of three days. During this time, guests are fed every meal in a community setting. Breakfasts and lunches are usually served in the home of one of the host family members. The evening meal or potlatch is held in the community hall or school. Workers prepare the hall each day by laying down long strips of paper on the floor to serve as the “table.” Guests sit on the floor on either side of the paper.

Experienced potlatch attendees bring their own “potlatch bags” containing utensils, plates and bowls. The host family is responsible for serving the guests. The men serve the soup, meat and tea, while the women circulate with salads, desserts and berries. Children pass out pilot bread, a variety of homemade breads and fry bread. Special attention is given to the elders and honored guests who are given the choicest bits of meat, fish and fowl.

For three days the family sings the eulogy song composed for the deceased at three different times throughout each day while hitting two sticks together to keep time. There is some special significance of hitting the sticks, but that knowledge has been lost. On the third day, after the evening meal is finished, the food items are removed and the hall is cleaned up for traditional dancing and the give-away. Dancing occurs only on the third night and is an event that everyone looks forward to. It is a critical component to the healing process and is treated with great respect and pride. For this part of the evening, attendees dress in traditional regalia or nice clothing. After the dancing, when it is time for the give-away, the hall is once again prepared as the family lays down blue tarps where the assortment of gifts is arranged. Personal items of the deceased are also placed at this time for distribution. The mound of gifts to distribute can be quite impressive. Extended relatives may potlatch at the same time for other deceased family members.

Signaling the start of the give-away, the men of the host family make a grand entrance to a traditional song in a remarkable display by carrying guns tied with a bandana held high in the air. Then, the memorial song is sung and the stick is hit for the last time. This is usually a very emotional moment as the long-held grief is released through song and tears. Finally, the gifts are distributed.

Helen drew very close to her father in the months following her mother's death. *I was really close to him during the time of his mourning, I was always with him and I can see why he was like that. After she died I was wondering what happened to her, but nobody told me that she died so I didn't know what happened to her. Maybe I would not understand anyway even if they did tell me. I knew something was wrong because she was not there; and the way my father reacted I knew something there was wrong. But that passed. He sang every day, used to lay down and just sing. He had a great way healing himself.*

After the death of his wife, 'Lige continued to do the best that he could to provide for the busy household. Grandma *Gaalno* became an important person in raising Helen, as did Deaconess Sterne. Helen remembers the Deaconess had a two-story house, and since then she has always wanted one.

3.5 Anna Gertrude Sterne, Episcopal Deaconess

Deaconess Sterne of the Tanana Mission became a surrogate mother to Helen. Deaconess, as she was called, was born on January 25, 1875 in Illinois to William C.W. and Sarah Benson Sterne.¹²⁷ In 1917 she traveled to Anvik, Alaska to serve at the Christ Church Mission. In 1922, Bishop Rowe asked her to replace Mabel Pick at the Tanana Mission, which she did.

Mission sites and missionaries were funded solely by donations that various church workers were able to raise. When Deaconess went on furlough she would use her Quincy, Illinois family home as a base from which she launched speaking engagements. Many times deaconesses were the sole persons operating the mission sites, serving as nurse, teacher, and

¹²⁷ Anna Gertrude Sterne preferred to use her second name as a familiar name and signed official documents A.G. Sterne. Sometimes, in the literature, she is referred to as Gertrude M. Sterne which is not correct and is not another person named Sterne in Tanana per the Archives of the Episcopal Church.

surrogate mother in addition to providing religious instruction; Deaconess Sterne was one of those amazing women.

Deaconess Sterne found her niche at Tanana. She was an accomplished missionary who, along with her household management skills and Biblical education, played the piano and sang. The Reverend Wilfred Files said of her, “She was greatly loved by the Indian people of the village and town and never missed an opportunity to teach a Christian truth.”¹²⁸ While she officially retired January 1, 1936 at the age of 62,¹²⁹ Deaconess Sterne remained in Tanana and continued to serve in any way she could in an unofficial capacity until well after the Mission closed, at least until 1949.¹³⁰ Upon leaving Alaska, she lived independently at the Hotel Clark in Los Angeles, California from around 1950 to at least 1961.¹³¹ Due to declining health, she returned to her hometown where she died on August 14, 1964 at the age of 90.¹³² She is fondly remembered by Helen and several other elders at Tanana.

3.6 Life with Dad and Brothers

In addition to his activities devoted to his children, and to subsistence work, ‘Lige was a traditional leader very involved with community affairs. When people were in trouble, the community worked together to resolve problems. Elders gathered regularly in her father’s large home on Sundays to discuss community business. At times they would conduct “court” in his home. This was an early representation of the tribal court, as a form of restorative justice. The disciplinary decision of the group carried weight and was followed without question. Helen

¹²⁸ Campbell, 22.

¹²⁹ Email from Sara Dana, Research Archivist, The Archives of the Episcopal Church. December 11, 2012.

¹³⁰ Sterne’s obituary in the Quincy Herald Whig dated August 17, 1964 states that she retired in 1949 but she continued to reside in Tanana. Helen remembers visiting her in Tanana when she returned in 1949 when she gave birth to Don in June.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

listened to the proceedings from her bedroom at the back of the house where she could sit in the comfort of her bed surrounded by mosquito netting. She joked that she was a back room judge!

At the mission, at that time when they had all those counselors I call them, even though they weren't trained as counselors they were there to protect people, the chief and everybody else was concerned about the community. If there was ever any problem like that they straightened it out. Our house was like a court house. That's where everybody went, to my dad. He gathered up the people that need to be there to help him straighten these things out. The elders were very important because if there was a person there with a problem, like a marriage problem, they'd get the couple in the house and they'd talk to them, like counseling them. If a man or woman were havin' a problem in the home they had them come and sit in the middle of all of them. They would talk with them to see where the problem is. Usually work out. If somebody came and was drinking they'd take him in and talk to him or her. And there were really concerned men. If it was a young man that got in trouble, their parents would have to be the keeper of that person. They had their own Indian cop there.

There were concerned people at that time, really concerned people, what they did for each other was amazing. It was amazing to see men speakin' up you know. Speakin' up the truth and what is right.

Although their mother was gone, the Joseph home was a happy one, filled with joy and music. Singing and dancing were important means of communicating and socializing. 'Lige left a legacy of traditional songs and dances as he was an excellent musician and composed many songs that are still sung by the Tanana Tribe. He was a generous man who always had a full grub box and shared what he had with others.

In later years, 'Lige had a wood cutting camp where he and his sons would put up one thousand cords of wood for the steamboats traveling to Nenana. Using two-man saws they cut timber into four-foot lengths. Working dogs pulled the logs out onto the river bank to be stacked. Helen knew of three families that put up wood. 'Lige was good with his hands and made snowshoes, skis and heavy sleds for sale or trade.

Helen grew up in a household of men, and remains more comfortable relating with men than with women. Curiously, none of her brothers ever married and only one, Godfrey, had a child – Loretta, who was adopted by Grandma Abbie when she was an elderly woman. Helen thinks the reason her brothers never married had something to do with the medicine men.

Nelson, the first child, was born around 1911. A tall man, he remained a gentle soul even though he served many years during WWII in the Aleutians and later in the South Pacific; he participated in the Battle of Iwo Jima. Helen received letters from him while he was on active duty. His military experience seems to have shaped his identity. Upon returning to the village, he continued to wear either a pilot's jacket or an army-style jacket.

Jason was born May 10, 1914 at Tanana, according to his delayed birth certificate, but his Tanana Tribal Council identification card lists June 13, 1914 as his date of birth. He went blind at the age of fourteen; thus he attended a special training at the Eklutna Training School where he learned how to navigate life as a sightless person. At school he had a girlfriend named Minnie Blackstone who was also blind. They did not marry but he often spoke of her throughout his life. Although he frequently lived with family members, Jason was able to live alone. He impressed his nieces and nephews with his ability to walk unassisted from his cabin to downtown Tanana, traversing a narrow foot bridge.

Jules Joseph, or Julius as he was called, was born May 18, 1916 at Fish Creek, attended by the midwife Minnie (Reese) Joseph.¹³³ His birth certificate is the first reliable piece of documentation that helps fix dates for the Joseph family, as it was officially recorded in Tanana on June 13, 1916 and filed in Juneau on August 21, 1916.

Julius was a “character” who also studied at Eklutna Training School. He learned to play the guitar and had a nice singing voice. Unable to attend his mother’s funeral, he wrote a song in her memory. *He came back from Eklutna and he had a guitar. He sang me a song when he came back: “I Saw My Mother’s Picture in the Mirror” was the name of that song. How I remember that song I don’t know.* It is a moment Helen fondly remembers. Due to a heart condition Julius was not able to enlist in the armed service, even though he wanted to serve. *He was really disappointed when everyone went out and he did not get to join [the army during World War II]. God had something else for him to do. He took care of his blind brother until he died. Julius was quiet; he would never say anything to anyone. When I would go to his house and try to convert them he’d say there are different ways to do things. He would not say anything against anybody. He used to tell funny jokes.*

Adopting army discipline, Uncle Julius kept an army issue bed, the linens tucked with straight lines. When he was sober he was quiet and busy but when he drank, he would tell the wildest tales with great detail and enthusiasm, acting out the parts. His nephew, Guy Peters, said he was the happiest drunk ever; people would invite him over, or go to his house, to hear the stories. He told people that one time he had Hitler in his gun sight and took a shot at him. He said that he dated Hitler’s girlfriend as well as Liz Taylor! Another time he wound up in the boxing

¹³³ Jules Joseph Birth Certificate, document number 000486 issued by the Territory of Alaska and recorded on August 21, 1916 at Juneau, Alaska.

ring with Joe Louis and went a couple of rounds with him. Taking his role of uncle seriously, he was a great help to Helen by assisting her with her young children.

Godfrey, usually called by the nickname “Moe” or his Indian name “B’guh’si” was a short man who was known as a “tough man,” as he had both great physical strength and strength of character. Born February 22, 1918, he made a name for himself as a young man in the boxing ring. In his youth, he worked on steamboats along the Yukon and Tanana Rivers. He served the nation, along with his brothers, during World War II in the army. Moe was a top-rate musher well-known in the Interior. He was also a rescuer of people. One time he did something heroic for the village of Minto, as testified by elderly men at his funeral service; however memories of the deed have faded so we no longer know what the deed was. He often cooked for people in need or gave them a place to stay. In his older years, Moe spent his time playing Pan in one of the card houses in downtown Fairbanks, or traveling throughout the Interior playing his drum for potlatches. At the age of 87, Moe died in Fairbanks on July 3, 2005. He is buried at Mission Hill. Moe is fondly remembered throughout the Interior as a culture bearer, dancer and song keeper.

William, better known as “Swiftwater Bill,” was born around 1916. In his later years, he was in a terrible car wreck that left him a paraplegic. He lived in a nursing home for about five years until his death. In the face of adversity, Swiftwater kept a good sense of humor, and people liked to visit with him to engage in lively conversation. As part of his therapy he was hung from an apparatus that was turned periodically. Sometimes guests would lie on the floor underneath him to talk to him while he hung from the apparatus. Always a flirt, he would tell the nurses to “bring two glasses of wine!” Because salvation of her family is extremely important to Helen, every time she went to visit him she would talk to him about the Lord. But Swiftwater would not pay attention. Finally, a year before he died he accepted the Lord as his personal savior. The year

that he passed, Helen and Swiftwater spent Thanksgiving together and he had the two glasses of wine. He died in December in the late 1970s and his body was sent back to Tanana to be buried with his ancestors.

Virginia, or “Virgie” as she was known, was born June 4, 1920. At the age of twelve or fourteen Virgie was married off to Milton (*Nagasudne*) Moses, a much older man from Steven’s Village. “Old Moses,” as he was called, was considered to be a good medicine man and a good leader. He is credited with saving the lives of miners at Moses Village/Arctic City. Milton’s sister-in-law made Virginia a beautiful blue silk dress to wear as a wedding gown. Together they had nine children: Charlotte, Nelson, Gilbert, Kathryn, Harry Roy, Jack, Elijah Burk (Don Moses’ actual name), Milton, Jr., and Sharon. When Milton Sr. died, the young children were placed at the Nenana Mission. Sadly, several of the children died at young ages. Later, Virgie married Winthrop Mayo and had five more children – Marilyn, Shirley, Jeannie, Robert and Sally, who was raised by Barbara Bluekins. It is estimated that Virginia had a total of twenty-four children as she also took in or adopted other children. Virgie is buried at the Birch Hill Cemetery in Fairbanks.¹³⁴

Paul Henry, known as “Slippery Paul” was born July 31, 1933 and was adopted out to the Peter Henry family after his mother died in childbirth. It was an open adoption and when the Henry family traveled to Tanana they would stay in ‘Lige Joseph’s big house. Helen says that her father was not warm to Paul and that he would not acknowledge the boy in the way he did his other sons. Perhaps this was because ‘Lige associated the child with his wife’s death, or perhaps he simply never knew Paul as he knew his older boys.

¹³⁴ Mary Moses Edwin provided additional information about Old Moses and Virginia’s children.

3.7 Old Ways and Fond Memories of Growing Up

‘Lige spoiled Helen when she was very young, not allowing her to do any chores. She nevertheless developed many household and subsistence skills that she learned from her grandmothers and Deaconess. She enjoys cleaning and doing laundry. She eagerly took part in family life, and other adults expected her to take on responsibility.

Imagine, I grew up with hunters but I never shot a gun. My father would not let them give me a gun. I was not allowed to shoot guns. I was not allowed to touch wood. I was not allowed to bring in water. I don’t know what he thought I was going to be, but all those things I did with my grandmother. I don’t know what my father thought, but he would never let me bring in wood, do dishes, nothing; it would make Virginia mad. As soon as he left, I would work. My grandma would have me do things and I enjoyed it. She said houses had to be clean. She used to tell me “Get up and make your bed first thing when you get up.” She [Virgie] was always picking on me because of the way my father took care of me. I knew that. And there was a point to it because I was just a baby when my mother died, you know? I remember the things that we used to do. I remember the days when my grandmother told me to go out and get some snow and she told me how to do it. She’d say, “There’s a pail there and there’s a homemade shovel that was made out of birch bark. It really looked like a shovel but it’s really tiny, tiny enough for me to use. And so I went out. And I thought it was kind of fun for me to go out and play in the snow and fill up the tub with snow with that shovel and just pack it down into the tub.

They have tubs [that] were number two, and number three and number four. It was a number three about [makes motion with arms] this big. Number one tub is kind of small. Number three tub is kind of big. So I brought it in, put it on the stove so we had wash water. That’s the days we had to have wash water, and had to bring in the water. Winter time we used snow and

ice for drinking. And they used to have a big tank behind the stove, a big fifty gallon tank where you put your ice. Yeah, and it thaws out, nice cold water. That was for drinking. The warm water on the stove was for washing, washing up and washing dishes, doing the floors or whatever. That's the days we had to wash by hand. We had to fill [a number three or number four tub] with water and use a washboard and wash clothes. Washboard and rinsing water and had to ring it by hand and then after you get done washing clothes you had to take it outside and hang it. Winter time it just freezes. And it just wind dried, you know the wind is always blowing so it softens up, probably freezes but then it just blows off the clothes, then bring them in they're partly dry so bring them in and hang them up and have dry clothes.

We only have about two dress clothes, two nice clothes. We never had a lot of different things. We had a lot of meat, a lot of moose meat, a lot of fish. We'd get some fresh grouse, rabbits. They'd set snares for rabbits, we had baked rabbit, stewed rabbit, boiled rabbit. Sometimes I get hungry for rabbit.

Springtime we got logs out of the river, drift logs. We spent all our nights gettin' drift logs. One time there was Richard Grant, Bessie Grant, me and some of the Starrs were with us. We were on the beach. They gave me a hook and like a fool I tied the rope around my wrist and I threw that hook and it caught a log and just drug me right into the river. So Richard Grant had to jump into the river with a knife and cut that rope off for me and take me back to shore. Is not that something?

[Excitedly] We had a phonograph with the wind up [makes motion] kind. We had that as teenagers at home. Wind up phonograph, we dance any old place. I think we had a lot of western music. I was just telling somebody at whatch you call it [lunching], when "Deep in the Heart of Texas" came out I was washing dishes and my grandmother was sittin' over there by the stove

and my cousin Helen Grant walked in the door and I was singing this song: “Deep in the Heart of Texas.” And she tell grandma, “What she’s doing?” My grandmother say in Indian, “She’s singing love songs.” [Heartily laughs.]

We had a radio. Before we got a radio my cousin Helen got a radio. She lived about a mile and a half away from us and every morning at 6:00 my brother and I would go down there and listen to “Inner Sanctum.”¹³⁵ It’s kind of scary program. And Lone Ranger. There’s another we used to listen to, Lone Ranger, Inner Sanctum and ghostly stories.

We had all kinds of people play, all the men used to play instruments, some used to play the guitar, some used to play the violin, some used to play the drum, some even played the mandolin. People all played, that was just exciting, men in their homes playing the violin or guitar or something.

3.8 School and English/Native Language

Athabascan is Helen’s first language; she learned English at school, which she attended sporadically, as seasonal activities allowed. Some of the missionaries and teachers made an effort to learn Athabascan. She did not learn how to read well, so with her first job as a nurse’s aide she was trained orally and memorized the instructions. Later in life, she taught herself how to read, so she could read the Bible on her own. Helen recalls that alternating between English and Athabascan was perplexing when she was young. *During the school, teacher said we can’t talk [Athabascan], but we did. It was not like a school they send children to, cut their hair. It was not one of those. When we want to talk to each other we talk Athabascan. She did not discipline us. We all talked to each other in our language and she’d tell us that we have to speak with each other in English. That was about in 3rd [grade]. They did not punish us; they just told us we need*

¹³⁵ Inner Sanctum Mystery aired from January 7, 1941 to October 5, 1952.

to speak while we're in school we need to speak English. It's kind of confusing because when I'm home I have to speak Athabascan, you know with Grandma, although she spoke pretty good English she always talked Athabascan to me. Then when I left there and went other places to school, I had to talk English. Yeah, I wondered why we had to switch, Indian to English. Even in a day I'm home then I go over to school and have to talk English.

3.9 The Importance of Christmas as a Community

Holidays at the Mission were exciting times as people from the nearby camps and trails would go to the Mission for church services and to visit. One summer, when a storekeeper went Outside to do supply shopping, 'Lige arranged for him to purchase a dress for Helen. That Christmas Evening 'Lige gifted Helen with the pretty new dress made of royal blue silk, and they went to a dance at the A-B Hall.¹³⁶ There are many excellent self-taught musicians in Tanana, and on this night the band was comprised of former soldiers who had remained in Tanana. They played old-time music for special events. Helen's friends Bessie Grant and Isabelle Folger also attended the dance. The other girls had new moccasins but Helen was the only one with new shoes. Throughout the evening the three girls shared the one pair of shoes – one girl would dance then take off the shoes so one of the other girls could wear them for the next dance. And so it went throughout the evening. The dress signified a special moment for Helen with her father and blue remains her favorite color.

Christmas time was really important, you know, because it was a whole week of celebration between Christmas and New Year's. People would come from other parts of the river for Christmas Eve service. They used to bring food to the altar at the Church during Thanksgiving and Christmas. They would pass it out to the elders and the people who could not

¹³⁶ A-B stands for Arctic Brotherhood which is an Alaskan fraternal organization for gold miners.

gather their own food. So the altar would have a lot of food around it to share, and pray over.

What a blessing to help others in a season of giving and love!

It probably did the men good. When trapping is done they just meet together in a place where they play cards, or play instruments or just talk. The one thing I remember about that time is women met together, they sewed together or just visited each other. Everyone had new boots, gloves or mittens, coats and fur pants for the winter trail. Even the dogs got presents, new harnesses with color tassels.

We used to invite people to our house for dinner and visit. Holidays, we just made turkeys after turkeys, everybody come to eat, whoever wants to. It was something that I picked up from my parents, I mean, you know. Share.

In those days we did not know we were without. We were happy with what we made – gloves, mittens, mukluks. The Red Cross would send packages with soap, toothpaste and little things. We were just happy with that. The church would give a package and we were just happy. We did not know that we were poor.

They had real good dances, all during Christmas, the whole week they dance and potlatch all week. I used to see my dad and Edgar, they dance Russian dance, they were both really good at it. They'd hold a gun up in the air like this [holds arms up], gun up, you know how Russian dance [makes motion]. They even had Russian music by the violin and guitar, that's what they danced to. Donnie Moses and I always used to dance for dad. As little kids we just dance. Well they were great dancers and I guess we just dance.

Even at the school when we used to have evening parties there we had dances. I would dance square dance, dance two-step, dance the polka. We used to dance the polka, and all kinds of different dances. It's not like it used to be.

For New Year's Eve dinner, members of the community would walk through the village with a large blanket and knock on doors. People would toss contributions for the New Year's potlatch onto the blanket.

3.10 Caring for One Another

People in the Native village helped one another, not only with daily activities, but also in times of need. Members of the community acted as a large extended family to provide support especially to those who were elderly or infirm. Women helped with cooking, cleaning and even bathing of the person. Men helped by providing a wood supply or hunted and fished for them.

There were times that they had to take care of an old person, they did. The women cleaned and fed him; the men got the wood and water for that person. And that way the old person did not need anything because they did it for him or her.

There was a lady that was sick, her name was Lucy.¹³⁷ She could not do anything for herself anymore, so the women went and took care of her. Us little girls used to go there, sweep her floor, wash her dishes. But the women used to really take care of her, bathe her and change her bed and scrub her floors and make her dinners. People used to take turns to bring her breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's not just one person, different homes that would do that. The men would take turns cuttin' wood, bringin' in water for her and things like that. To me as a little child that was really important. That was really caring and sometimes I wonder where all that went to. That was one thing that they did.

¹³⁷ Lucy was Dorothy Pitka's mother. She was also called Sitzu Looza.

3.11 Outdoor Activities

Winter days were filled with myriad activities: the subsistence tasks of chopping wood, cutting ice or packing snow for water, and ice fishing, as well as sports, exercising the dogs and general child's play. Cold temperatures rarely if ever kept the children inside, but during the dark hours, storytelling entertained the children.

Winter time we had no time to be bored. We had so many things to do, it was just fun. Especially when my father was not there, that's when I could do those things like bring in ice, bring in wood. I could not do that when my dad is there. But when he was gone I did it. But that was fun to me, I don't know, it was just something that we could do.

All the girls and boys used to ski, we skied a lot. That was our thing to do, ski or slide. We did not skate because we did not have the money to buy skates but we skied because it was easy. They used to send butter and different things in those [fifty gallon] barrels to the store and the store keeper would give us those barrels and then we'd make skies out of them. I had one pair of skies that my father made me, out of birch, real good skis but they wore out.

In the moonlight we drove dogs, you know when it's really bright moonlight out there and you could just practically see all over. The whole Mission was full of dogs; every home had dogs so we had our own dogs we can drive. They leave dogs behind. The old dogs or too young of a dog but they leave them behind for us [to] drive, so we drive dogs. We used to even drive dogs on skis, two dogs, three dogs, one dog. Three dogs is the limit though.

And we used to slide, in springtime we had caribou skin mattress. Grandma, they used to call her Sitsu Looza, that was Dorothy Pitka's mother, and she lived right next door to us, and she had her caribou skin mattress outdoors hanging up. So those kids say, "Let's take that mattress, use it to slide." Ooh, slide fast so we took it, took it over to the hill where we were

sliding down, we were sliding down spring time, late in April and there was an open place down there by the river, you know flow water. Our mattress and all of us went into that water and we had a boy with us, Happy Hunter's son. We used to call him "Pretty Boy" – just really handsome boy. And he was in front of us and he slid into that water so I grabbed him and somebody else grabbed me and all of us just grabbin' each other pulling each other to shore, tryin' to get that mattress out of the water. And then we took that mattress, hung it back up on the line.

That was our activities, even if it's cold at minus fifty degrees, but we don't think it's cold, we'd go out there and slide down until we get so tired then we just go home. But we were dressed for it. We had mukluks, parkees, mitts, hats, all fur. Everything was fur, so we were dressed for that weather. But tell you the truth seems like I never caught cold. I did not dare to cough in front of my grandmother because she always gave me something that was horrible tasting stuff. She did not want me to catch a cold. I really did not know what it was but it sure didn't taste very good, it's probably some kind of birch or spruce or something boiled you know.

Our grandmothers used to tell us stories after we come inside. She'd sit by the fire and have a caribou skin mattress on the floor and I would lay on there and she'd put a pillow under my head and she'd tell me stories. Stories about what they did when they were traveling around. She'd tell me many stories.



Figure 4: Tanana Grandmas. Helen's relatives are second row from top, left to right: Grandma Annie, Grandma Gaalno, Mother Helen. Richard Frank Photograph Collection, 1913. UAF 1997-122-14. Alaska and Polar Regions Collection and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Chapter 4: Traditional Practices and Spiritual Matters

According to Helen, Native spirituality always had a connection to the Creator, and honor was properly given to all animals and elements on Earth that the Creator provided. Athabascans also had people in their midst who could tell the future.

They sure did [know the Creator], my grandfathers and my grandmothers, even before the missionaries came, they know who created the world. They had stories of the creation and stories of many things in the Bible, what they did not even read about yet, but they knew it, they knew. They honored what was given to them, they honored the river and the trees that God has grown for them, they respected animals and they took care of the animals. They did not throw any piece of that animal away if they needed it. Caribou, they used the skin, the bones and everything they used. Sometimes they hid caribou bones; you know they got marrow in those bones and they know that was very precious and they buried them in case of famine. They marked where they buried them in case somebody needed it. They did not want to dirty God's land, God's creation, they just kept it clean. That is what my grandmother said. That's how they lived. And she said whenever they moved and everything they used they burned. Like the spruce bows that they used to put underneath for sleeping on and things and wood that they had cut down for making a lean-to or whatever. They took them all apart and burned them and cleaned it up before they left so it would not be a mess.

There were many men that will tell them what was going to be. And women, used to tell what was going to be and it came true. Like the weather, where they need to go and where they need to be to survive. And they tell them where to go and what to do and they survived. And if there was a problem in that area where they were at, like if someone was very ill, they'd send a

runner toward Tanana or any other village and they'll put this big caribou skin or moose skin or something hanging and they'd put this sign on there, what's happening in that village, that place where they're at. Runners were very important; they had a lot of runners. George Edwin was a runner. That's the only one that was alive that I knew was a runner.

4.1 Medicine Men

Spirituality has a strong tradition among the Koyukon – all natural elements have a spiritual component to them. Most Athabascan people have a strong spiritual component to their being that is not reserved for medicine people. Anthropologist Richard Nelson explains, “For traditional Koyukon people, the environment is both a natural and supernatural realm.”¹³⁸ The supernatural power is a gift given to a person by the spirit realm and it is considered that, “The interchange between humans and environment is based on an elaborate code of respect and morality, without which survival could be jeopardized,” writes Nelson.¹³⁹ This was demonstrated by how people treated possessions and animals, how animals were killed, how meat was handled and respected, and how people took care of their belongings, their home and family.

In the Athabascan community shamans are more commonly referred to as medicine men or women; the terms are used interchangeably and at one time, there used to be many medicine men living on the Yukon River and its tributaries. There is a difference in the power of an Eskimo shaman and an Indian medicine man or women; in the Indian community the position is not hereditary. Medicine people were thought to maintain the balance in the community. To that end, there were different kinds of medicine people. Some were viewed as healers, some functioned in the realm of dispute mediation, and others were song makers who healed through

¹³⁸ Nelson, 31.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

their song-making ability.¹⁴⁰ Band leaders were often, but not always, medicine men who were responsible for the safety of the band, for guiding them to the appropriate hunting and fishing places, depending on the season. According to Nelson, “Older people of the Koyukuk villages, who are ever watchful of their surroundings, say the loss of medicine people has disrupted the balance of natural things.”¹⁴¹

Some medicine men became prideful and battles were fought over trade routes and women. Epidemics disrupted healing processes, and many medicine men turned to doctors or Christian workers for assistance. One year before the first confirmation took place at the Mission of Our Saviour, eight medicine men publicly renounced their practice before the congregation and turned to Christianity.¹⁴² Possibly this was due to a true conversion in Christ, or possibly it was an admission of defeat over sickness and death. In Fort Yukon, Dr. Burke was initially met with resistance by medicine men, but eventually many acquiesced, as his power over spirits was deemed greater. Some even began to attend the church.¹⁴³ Claire Heintz Burke related that medicine men stopped stealing patients from the hospital after Dr. Hap surgically restored the sight of a blind man.¹⁴⁴ Anthropologist Phyllis Fast cautions that “Gwich’in resistance to Christianity is generally unperceived by those who might wish to see Christianity as a totalizing influence.”¹⁴⁵ Medicine men are considered a relic of the past, the practice fading out in the 1900s with heavy missionization efforts. However, there remains much interest in the medicine rituals and some medicine acts are still practiced in the shadows.

¹⁴⁰ The story of the woman with the healing song was told to Guy Peters by the late Neil Charlie of Minto.

¹⁴¹ Nelson, 30.

¹⁴² Campbell, 10-11.

¹⁴³ Clara Heintz Burke. *Doctor Hap*. (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1961), 219.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Fast, 17-18.

Helen said that the powers associated with medicine people were a spiritual gift given to them in order to do good, for the purpose of healing, but that some medicine people used their powers for destructive purposes. Helen's thoughts:

My grandmother was the one that told me about those things. She was the one who told me about medicine man, spiritual healings, things like that. They had the power to know what it is.¹⁴⁶ They called them daynet (medicine person). They have their own songs that they sing. They did things like cover up with a scarf¹⁴⁷ so you would not see what they're doing. The medicine man that I knew wore caribou skin gloves with pennies stuck at the end of them and when he danced they would rattle and that was his sound. His sound belongs to him.

The power was probably given to them from God. God meant it to be good and gave them powers to heal. That's what God gave it to them for, to heal. Because at that time they did not have doctors, they had healers. [The medicine man] would only go to person that was supposed to be healed. The first time that Helen saw a healing ceremony was when her grandfather Justin made medicine over his son who was sick with tuberculosis. He had taken as much of the illness out of him as he could. The illness presented in the natural realm as bugs on the end of his fingers. He showed the people the bugs and squeezed and squeezed the bugs in a hanky.¹⁴⁸ When he was done there was nothing there. He did say that he was not able to help him. That was my first one that I saw. Then after that I used to doubt them. After that he'd tell my father "get her out of here, I can't do anything with her here."

One time they were out in a camp and a man hurt his back; he could not move. A lady had them dig a hole and fill it with hot rocks. They laid him on it overnight. The next day they

¹⁴⁶ By this Helen means that they had the ability to discern what was wrong with a person, especially if they were ill.

¹⁴⁷ Henry T. Allen records a similar practice in his 1885 report. Allen, 481.

¹⁴⁸ The sickness appeared on the end of the medicine man's fingers in the form of bugs.

wrapped him in towel, then she did an operation, then put him back on the rocks. He was healed. The “operations” were by using their hands...they can work on the body, move things around, take things out, all without opening the body. And they use their hand. You heard of these people in different countries that did operations, like that.

You know God gave men power to heal and some men use it for destruction. That’s why it disappeared. There was lot of medicine people but they start killing people, using it to hurt other people so it started, it disappeared. I think the church had something to do with it [the stopping of the practice] but a lot of people continued. I don’t think everybody agreed to do that because I saw in later years they were practicing. Not too long ago they said Belena Starr was a [medicine woman]. I said, “Oh Belena Starr, she was no medicine woman.” I tell them “I know one medicine woman that was my father’s mother.” She was a medicine woman. But she never practiced it. Only if somebody was sick like her grandchildren, her brother or somebody, she’d do it. But otherwise she did not. Helen’s paternal grandmother lived in the new town of Tanana with her daughter or niece. As a young girl the grandmother’s chin was tattooed with three lines as prevention against kidnapping. Helen can no longer recall her grandmother’s Indian name and she made little impression on the young Helen as she was already quite old and ill. The grandmother died at a very old age when Helen was about twelve years old.

Mystery and an aura of power surrounded medicine men, and people were generally careful not to intrude in their domain. The following is a story of the repercussions some young people experienced when they presumed to sing one of Grandpa Justin’s songs. Gaalno’s sister, Annie, was married to Justin Edwin, a medicine man. They also resided at the Mission in their later years. Grandpa Justin would go to Minto Lakes in spring time to get muskrats. Also, people

would go ratting¹⁴⁹ on Yukon at Steven's Village. In springtime they would come down from Steven's Village. In summer time Grandpa Justin's camp was at the Rapids – right across from Zuray's present-day camp.

One time in the spring, James Starr, who was much older than us (sixteen to seventeen years old), said he and his friends were going to stay up all night. He say, 'Let's make medicine, let's sing Grandpa Justin's medicine song.' And we tell him, "Oh we don't know his songs." We built a big fire and we all danced around. James knew one medicine song. We did not know it but we copied him. So he sang it and we just run around the camp fire singing his song. Grandpa Justin was at Fish Lake¹⁵⁰ and he say he just got done hunting muskrats and he came to shore [to] build a fire and he was just goin' to pour himself a tea when he heard us singing his song. So he sat there and drank his tea so he thought, "I better go down." So next morning he went down, we were all sick. All of us that was walkin' around that fire were all sick. Can't eat anything, throwing up and diarrhea and everything, we were just sick. He come in our house and he tell me, "Whatch you do last night?" "Nothin'" He say, "That's why you're sick, nothin'?" I tell him, "We sang your song." He say, "Yeah, I know. That's why, it's a good thing you picked that song. Some of my songs are pretty bad songs." He say, "They'll kill you, don't do that again, don't mess around like that. You don't know what you're doing. Bump into something pretty dangerous. Each one of you is sick because you sang that song. Nobody sing my songs. Nobody. Don't do that anymore, it's bad, bad thing."

¹⁴⁹ Ratting is a term for trapping muskrats.

¹⁵⁰ Fish Lake is about 16 miles up from Mission Hill on the Tanana River.

4.2 Going Behind the Curtain

Many superstitions surround Athabascan women, particularly during menstruation. Some traditional practices were particularly hard on the women. According to Gwich'in historian Moses Gabriel, "The female babies that were permitted to live were taught at an early age to please and care for men."¹⁵¹ One of the rights of passage for young girls entering menses (around the age of twelve) was the practice called going "behind the curtain." The girl was isolated from the community and was expected to live in the woods by herself in a tent some distance from other people for thirty days. Often she wore a hood over her head and ate certain foods and only drank using a straw made of bone for a certain period of time.¹⁵² Her movement was restricted to the tent. She was attended by an older sister or female relative. The girls were under strict surveillance and not allowed to gaze upon men during their seclusion.¹⁵³

After this imposed exile, at age thirteen or fourteen she was given in an arranged marriage to an older man. Girls were not allowed to question the choice and there was virtually no escape from the arrangement. Men could take more than one wife but by the time Helen was growing up this practice was done away with. Once, when my husband and I were visiting Chief Peter John in Minto around 2002, Grandma Evelyn and Auntie Josephine told the story of when the bishop came and made everyone choose one wife and send the other one away. They just giggled about it.

By the 1920s and 1930s, when Helen was young, the concept of romantic love and choosing one's own spouse was gaining ground. Helen recalls a visit with Jessie Folger who shared with her daughter Isabelle and the young Helen her heartache about lost love. Jessie had

¹⁵¹ Gabriel, 11. Moses Gabriel worked with the UAF Alaska Native Language Center in the late 1970s on Gwich'in language and culture projects.

¹⁵² Ibid., 12.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

married as a young girl and after her first husband died she fell in love with another man and wanted to marry him but her family had already made another choice for her. *Jessie was a beautiful woman and one time she had tuberculosis. Isabelle and I were sittin' to her and we got her ready for bed and she was talkin' to us and she tell us, "Come here, sit right here, I'm going to tell you about love, how a person can love. I was in love after my husband died, I fell in love." She fell in love with Henry Moses. Nice lookin' man. But she could not marry him. Her husband was already picked. After she married Sam Joseph she saw Henry Moses. He was driving his dogs by her camp so she went out there and ran behind him, even she did not see him anymore she ran up by where he went and she made a song. She say, "I made a love song." She say she stood there and looked at the tracks where he went and she was crying and she say (sings Indian song) "This is where he went, he went by, this is his track." And she just cried. Tears were running down her face when she was talkin' about him. She tell us, "You two watch it. Don't let anybody pick for you, pick your own, fall in love with your own man." She say, "I'll take him to the grave with me, he's always in my thoughts, every day, I'll take him to the grave with me." She tell us, "don't let nobody pick for you."*

Helen's sister Virginia was the last of the Joseph family to go behind the curtain and marry young. By the time Helen was thirteen, the practice had ended. When Helen's godmother Belena [pronounced Bleene] Starr wanted to put Helen behind the curtain, her grandma said, *"It's no use, it's not for them. That was for us, not them."* There are two possible explanations for the change in the practice. Helen thinks that it ended partly because the missionaries disapproved of it as it did not make sense to them. She also thinks that the change may have come about because of how medicine men interacted with women and young girls. According to Helen, they kept people in fear and sometimes committed terrible acts.

When I became a lady Belena¹⁵⁴ came up she say, "You better put her behind the curtain." My grandmother say, "No." She tell Belena, "Get with it, that's gone. That was our time, no more that. This is another generation. That will never happen again." My grandmother put her foot down.

They used to put girls back in the tent, back in the woods. Thirty days. You could not leave your house. They don't want no men to look at you. And the last people that I saw do that was at Rapids, it was my friend, Marian Edwin's sister.

Well, we're at Rapids. I lived across the river on the other side. Going up river I lived on the left hand side of the Rapids and Louise, the sister of Marian Edwin, was across the river from us by Grandpa Justin's camp. Anyway, we went over there one day and she was gone so I asked where Louise was. And her sister said, "Oh, about a mile back this way, there's a path. Just go back there." So I walked back and she was in this tent out there. So I knock on the tent. "Who is it?" she said. "Me." "Oh, come in." So I walked in. She was sittin' there. Nice little place, stove there in the tent, nice bedding. She had scarf on her head and she was sewing beads. "What are you doing?" I tell her. She say, "Well I have to stay in here." "What for, you're being punished?" "No, would you like some dry fish and some tea and some bread?" So she gave me dry fish and tea and bread and butter. "How long you're going to stay here?" "They tell me about thirty days." "Well tell me, what's the matter?" "Well, I became a lady," she said. "What's that? Aren't you already a girl?" "Yes!" "Oh," she said. "you don't know about it." "About what?" And she tell me, "Oh, all women do this." "No!" I tell her. She say, "Yes! All women go through this." "Oh, not me!" She say, "Oh you will." And I sat with her all afternoon. She just sit there and sew. And the reason why they keep them there is many things,

¹⁵⁴ Belena Starr, the wife of John Starr, Senior, was Helen's godmother.

many little things. Their complexion on their face, what kind of skin they have. And how well they see, how well they sew. How well they're going to sew when they learn how to sew. Knitting needles there for her to knit and sew. That's the thing, they practice sewing, knitting and different things. They have them go through life, teaching them different things and how to feed people when they come, how to treat people when they come into their house. That's why she asked me, "Would you like to have tea with me?" So that's practicing for her, what she's going to do for the rest of her life.

And during that time they're not supposed to see young men because of luck. Luck in hunting was essential for community survival. To this end, there were many taboos women had to follow in order not to break the man's luck, rules such as not walking over a man's article of clothing, not handling certain items during menstruation and not asking questions about hunting practices. They don't wanna take anything away from men that belong to men. Stepping over their glove or hat, or jacket, anything. Women never used to have men's things on the floor. Always picked up because of luck, it is so important for them. Important for that time, you know. Cuz they need their luck when they hunt, they need their luck with everything and that was preparing that girl what life is all about and how she's going to carry on through her life. How she's going to treat people, how she's going to talk to people. You don't know but a lot of people have a rough voice, kind of sharp, rough voice. That too they teach them, they teach them that somebody knockin' on the door, you know some people holler out. You know the girl they're teaching she just say "Who are you" you know, who are you and what's your name, whatever, but not to holler. Lots of little things like that.

She's the only one I saw really with my eyes and visit her. I'm the only friend that visit her I guess. Well, she never complained, you know. She never tell me "Oh, I don't like it here"

or “I hate it” or never say anything like that to me. She just said, “This is something that I have to do so I’m going to do it and get it over with.”

Clara Heintz Burke, who served as a medical missionary in Fort Yukon for many years alongside her husband Dr. Grafton Burke, observed that this practice had a more sinister side to it: “The ‘instructive’ violation of young girls by medicine men when they reached puberty was considered a matter of tradition. It was believed that any man, or men, who discovered where the girl was hiding was entitled to exercise his male prerogative. This, he believed, would ensure his good fortune on the hunting or fishing grounds. Many of the girl children were pledged in marriage in infancy to preserve them from this practice.”¹⁵⁵

4.3 *Nek’enle’eene*

Nek’enle’eene’s, woodsmen or wild men, are considered by Koyukon Athabascans to be people who have lost their way. Occasionally they make an appearance and *Nek’enle’eene* sightings create quite a stir within river communities. Sometimes *Nek’enle’eene’s* steal items from people and sometimes they steal children. Richard Nelson views them “as a bridge across the narrow gap between humans and animals, or between the worlds of humanity and nature.”¹⁵⁶ *Nek’enle’eene* encounter stories abound; Helen recounts her experience.

Nek’enle’eene. They used to have a lot of them, they’re just people. I kind a think that [they’re] people that went hungry and just lost it, went out in the woods, but they remember that they were people like those people [humans living in communities] and they [Nek’enle’eene’s] just lived in the mountains. Up at the Rapids there was this Morris Edwin, Grandpa Justin’s grandson. He [Morris] said his grandma, grandpa were cuttin’ fish on the beach and his

¹⁵⁵ Burke, 50.

¹⁵⁶ Nelson, 21.

grandma said, "Go up and get us some water." So Morris went up and he say he saw this man standing there by the tent. And that's all he remember, just this man standing there. And it was Nek'enle'eene and he took him, took him up [the mountainside]. In the meantime this Grandpa Justin is a medicine man and he saw it so he dropped his knife and started running. And he run around up by the hill, running up on top there and he found Morris in a willow house (this Nek'enle'eene had built a little lean-to with willows) and he put Morris in there to sleep. So his grandpa just picked him up and took him back down to the tent and stayed there with him. If he did not find Morris, Morris would have been taken away and just be part of them.

I saw one too. I must have been about five or six years old. My dad and I were going to the [fish] wheel and he was paddling and this woman stand on the bank, her hair was just long, it was kind of peppered, like gray, gettin' old and she was just like this [makes a 'come here' motion with her hands]. My father threw a jacket on me and tells me, "Don't look at her." She was just crying, just staying like this [makes motion of outstretched arm and 'come' motion with fingers]. Instead of going to the wheel he turned the boat around, paddled back up. And Grandpa Justin told my father, "Watch her, watch her. Somebody's got to be with her all the time," he said. So I guess they watch me for the rest of the summer because they were afraid she would take me away. But I did see her; she was a normal lookin' woman.

I think our lives were kind of scary at times because they told us, "You can't." Like you can't go out into the woods by yourself, you can't do this and you can't do that because of that one, because of Nek'enle'eene we have to keep an eye on you. You can't be walkin' off and doing things by yourself. We were kind of closed in, locked up, it was kind of scary. And they used to tell us lot of things [as] we're gettin' older, like don't step over your brother's glove or hat, in

fact anybody's, if you do you take away something from them, you know luck or something. You give them bad luck if you step over their clothes or step on their clothes or whatever.

4.4 Reflections on Change

Koyukon Athabascans have experienced extraordinary change beginning with the time of Helen's grandmother *Bedzidehoodeno*, and during the span of Helen's life time. Mere survival is no longer the struggle it once was, yet Helen muses that her people have lost some of their energy and strength as western life ways have come to dominate. Then, everyday life was difficult and there was much work to do.

You know, today we can't even stay in a house without running water or bathroom, but grandma Gaalno stayed. They just traveled and build and stayed in whatever they built, even wintertime. And I did not hear her complain about it. How she slept on spruce bows and caribou skin mattress and feathered mattress and feathered blanket. And that's what they made. In springtime when they get all those ducks they pluck those ducks and make all those quilts with feathers, and that's what they used. I had grandma Gaalno's last quilt she made. I gave it to Mike Andon for his wedding; it was a hand-made duck feather blanket. I don't know whatever happened [to it]. But that's the changes from sleeping on spruce bows, then comin' to a cabin, sleepin' on a bed. That's a change. Instead of building the fire outdoors for cookin' they start building the fire in the house on a stove to cook on. That's a change. What else can they do? They could not change things that were happening.

Some changes were good and some weren't. My grandfather, [Rampart Joe] was a blind man, and he told me, "Sit down, I'm going to tell you the future." And he tell me, "In your day you're gonna hear people walkin' on the moon, in your day, you're gonna see lights in the air (airplane), flying birds, he say, flying birds, you're gonna see a lot of 'em." Airplanes, and then

he said, "It's gonna get more and more, more things in your day, more, everything." "Don't forget," he said. "Don't forget who made everything first, don't forget God has got the power over everything. 'cuz in your day, everything is gonna [change], you're gonna see everything." He was like telling of the future like a prophet.

At times, Helen longs for the days when life was as it used to be. Everybody worked, the men especially, doing wood cutting, trapping, sewing, cooking or cleaning. Children did chores – helping with cleaning, cooking and the care of others. Helen fondly remembers the strong men who were directly engaged in the affairs of the community when she was growing up. *They were the keepers of the family and provided food and clothing. They were different than men are now. They used to have to plan - cut wood, haul water, have everything prepared because they were gone all winter. Things are different, people don't help each other like they used to.*

Chapter 5: Life is Not So Rosy: Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Suicide

Growing up, life at the Mission was not always easy, nor was it safe. In the 1930s during a famine when the Mission families were short on food, *Gaalno* and her sister, Annie, went to the Fort Gibbon Army Base and hired on to do laundry. The army paid them in food, sugar, coffee, beans, etc. With this compensation, the grandmas helped feed the whole Mission.

Tensions between the Mission families and those living in town mounted over the years, however, and Native people began to experience a different kind of pressure. Alcohol abuse was not yet a serious problem at the Mission site itself, but it was a growing problem in the area in general. Although alcohol was not allowed at the Mission, some families used it in tea as a medicine and some, like Helen's father, drank wine for Christmas. She recalls no problems with public drunkenness while growing up.

The western border of the Mission property was a demarcation line, still discernible, called "Mission Line" that delineated the territory between the Mission site and the town. Soldiers were not allowed at the Mission; Natives could go into town but were not allowed in all establishments. Racial segregation was a practiced reality in Tanana. Some say "Mission Line" was established for the safety of the Mission residents. With six to ten bars in town, many bootleggers, and upwards of two hundred soldiers stationed at Tanana, life could be dangerous for Alaska Natives, especially young women who were plied with alcohol and exploited by the soldiers.¹⁵⁷ Apparently the debauchery in Tanana was extreme, so much so that Episcopal Archdeacon Hudson Stuck notes that the behavior of the soldiers stationed at Eagle was quite restrained as compared to the behavior of Fort Gibbon soldiers at Tanana.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles*, 154.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

Native men encountered problems as well. Chief Matthew (*Gaalno*'s brother) was known as a scrapper because he would leave the Mission site and go into town and get into fights with soldiers. Years later, after the fort closed, Helen's brother Mo was a fugitive from justice, running from federal marshals in Tanana. He was wanted by the law after he assaulted a veteran soldier in town who had continually harassed him. Mo ran to the Mission, took his dogs, and went to the Rapids. From there he headed to Stevens Village where he spent the winter. In the spring, he returned to Tanana without issue, the incident forgotten.

Episcopalian missionaries believed that, in addition to preaching the gospel, their role was to protect Native people, especially young girls, from low-down whites and the corrupting influence of alcohol. Hudson Stuck strongly favored the concept that Native people should be kept in their original environment, particularly on the tributaries of rivers, and he encouraged the separation of Natives from the non-Native society.¹⁵⁹ Missionaries upheld this philosophy.

5.1 Sexual Assault

There were also internal troubles that did not involve white people, from which Helen's care givers could not protect her from. Alaska leads the nation in sexual assault, domestic violence and suicide rates. According to the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, "Almost 75 percent of Alaskans have experienced or know someone who has experienced domestic violence or sexual assault."¹⁶⁰ In Alaska, child sexual assault is nearly six times the national average¹⁶¹ and the suicide rate is two times higher than the national

¹⁵⁹ Dorsey, 131-132; Stuck, *Ibid.*, 369.

¹⁶⁰ "Domestic Violence Facts: Alaska from Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. (2006). 2006 Annual Report: Working in Alaska Communities For: Safety, Justice, Advocacy and Education, Violence Prevention. Juneau, Alaska." Internet, available from <http://www.dps.state.ak.us/CDVSA/default.aspx>, accessed 15 December 2013.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

average.¹⁶² So alarming are these rates of violence that Governor Sean Parnell declared war on sexual assault and domestic violence in December 2009 by partnering with eighteen communities. By 2013, one hundred twenty Alaskan communities participated in *Choose Respect* marches.¹⁶³

Helen and her family have not escaped these statistics. In late February, 2011 Helen returned to Tanana for a visit (she had been living in Fairbanks throughout the winter). While there she remembered two incidents when she was violated as a young woman. One incident occurred when she was around nine years of age and the other incident when she was around age thirteen. She never told anyone. She believes that if she had told Deaconess Sterne that she would have tried to do something about it. But, Helen was unable to speak about what had happened to her. It was not only in her youth that Helen was sexually assaulted. In researching her story, I found a document in her papers stating that a mentally ill client at her place of employment attacked her and tried to rape her when she was sixty seven years old.¹⁶⁴

Governor Parnell's *Choose Respect* campaign has allowed for dialog about domestic violence and sexual assault to begin, and it seems that people are slowly beginning to open up about the violence they have experienced. Helen has participated in these marches along with the Tanana community. She has chosen to remain silent no longer.

I must have been about nine. I'm going to go back to when we used to travel around. This was springtime and we were at Fish Creek, and there was bunch of tents there. Bunch of people there and one morning I woke up and I just felt I wanted my grandma, I wanted my mom and I

¹⁶² Alaska.gov. Alaska Suicide Facts and Statistics flier. Internet, available from http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs_sspc/AKSuicideStatistics.pdf, 15 December 2013.

¹⁶³ Governor Sean Parnell Letter. Choose Respect Website. Internet, available from <http://gov.alaska.gov/parnell/priorities/public-safety/choose-respect.html>, 15 December 2013.

¹⁶⁴ Alaska Department of Labor, Report of Occupational Injury or Illness, March 22, 1996.

was on the bank of the creek there, crying. My father walked up to me and he tell me, "Come with me." So we went in the tent and were sittin' there and he tell me, "What's the matter?" "I don't know, I want my mom, I want my grandma." And, being my father, doing what he thinks is for me, hired this man to take me to Tanana in this canoe. I grew up with men, so I had no fear of my brothers and anybody, yet, I mean at that time. So, he hired my aunt's son, it was not my uncle's son but she was married before. And he took me all the way down, and then across Mission there's this island. He said, "I need to go to the bathroom." So he landed and he molested me there. I must have been about nine and I just cried. When I saw my grandmother I really cried and she asked me what was the matter and I did not tell her what was the matter. I just cried every day, I cried all the time. And Deaconess asked me, "Why are you crying, what's the matter?" And I did not tell her. And I realized that I could not trust everybody, not my brothers but anybody besides them I could not trust. I don't know what I felt. I was pretty young, but I always remembered and I always had nightmares. He raped me. I never told anybody.

There was a second time. I must have been thirteen because I did not get my period until I was fourteen. It was at the Mission and I was with my grandpa and my grandmother. It was spring time and nobody was around. I don't know where everybody was; everybody probably went to spring camp. I know my Grandpa Justin and Grandma Annie was right next door and my grandma [Gaalno] was inside.¹⁶⁵ Grandpa [Rampart Joe] was inside the house and I went out to get something. I went out to get rainwater or something and this man¹⁶⁶ came around the house and just picked me up [makes picking up motion]. And he [covers her mouth and nose with her hand] put his hand over my face, carried me away.

¹⁶⁵ At some point her grandparents had moved into 'Lige's big house.

¹⁶⁶ Helen named the offender but the name was removed to protect the family.

I took my panties off, full of blood and I took a pan and put it in cold water and [Helen had a very faraway look on her face as she slowly recounted this story], I could not tell my grandmother. I don't know what she would have done but I know she would cry. And, that's probably why I did not want to tell her. Then I thought [crying], "Am I an orphan, is that why this is happening to me?" I did not tell anybody. Have to come out, I have to let go now. Maybe it'll help somebody, sometime, somewhere. But it's always better to tell even if it's hard to tell. Well, being home and seeing that island brought it back.

Unable to tell anyone and having to live with the offender in her daily life, Helen spent much of her time crying. *Maybe that's why I cried so much. Maybe that was the way out? One time it came close, [close to telling someone about it] I was in Arizona. It was a woman's meeting, they were talking about really hard stuff and it came to my turn and I could not speak, I just started crying. I just cried and cried. That lady said, "We'll let her go, it's OK." Almost, almost. Then I probably started preparing myself to take care of myself. The one thing that kids need to know it is not their fault, it's not their fault. They don't have to think that they caused it to happen. It's not their fault. Another thing they need to do, however hard, is to talk about it they need to tell someone. They need to tell someone about it, otherwise it will just stay with them for the rest of their lives. I bet I'm not the only one. Why? Where did it come from? How do people do that? Nobody knows. I think the silence kept it going.*

5.2 Abuse Cycle Continues

Through the course of this interview we discussed other episodes of abuse that occurred in her family with her children and her grandchildren. Some of her children were sexually abused by members of the community. Her son, Guy, said that children would discuss the abuse with each other in such a way that it seemed normal, but Helen was unaware that such abuse was

taking place. She did not know until going through this interview process that her son also had been violated by men and boys in the community. She was also unaware of the abuse of her daughters. When she learned about these abuses she responded: *I wonder what I would have done. I just finally heard about it, just lately. It is a lot of hurt. It never dawned on me; I never saw anything to warn me. The girls never said nothin' to me. They can just tell me everything, I thought they could tell me everything, but I guess not. Now that it's known, it's going to have to stop.*

We discussed the silence surrounding domestic violence and sexual abuse and I asked her what role she thought that *hutłanee*,¹⁶⁷ a behavioral norm that encompasses stoicism, played. She did not think it was a matter of *hutłanee*, but a matter of medicine men who abused their role when it came to sexual relations with women. Through fear the medicine man could silence the people. Medicine men could be so manipulative that they curried sexual favors from women. Helen says that women preferred to die than have sexual relations with a medicine man. Somehow, the unspoken rule of silence continued.

Not hutłanee, but medicine man. The medicine man had a power and it affects his family, they would not bring it up. They would not, anybody that's related to that medicine man. It's the fear, not hutłanee. I saw some good things happen out of the medicine people, you know, but yet I saw some bad things happen. Like some of them want a woman, you know, if she did not she'd

¹⁶⁷ *Hutłanee*, can mean a topic is taboo or a person should be quiet. It can also be used to let a person know that he or she is going astray. The “right” way of doing things was expected. This encompassed a broad spectrum of behaviors and attitudes like “never giving up”, taking care of things, giving back, sharing, respecting the land and animals, all things came from the Creator. The wrong way would encompass disrespect, laziness, sleeping all day, not giving back. Sometimes the term is used to frighten people to stop doing what they are doing because something bad may come upon them.

*die, you know. Most of the women prefer dying; at least two I know [chose dying rather than have sex with a medicine man].*¹⁶⁸

5.3 Visited by Suicide

The State of Alaska leads the nation in suicide rates. Suicide among Alaska Native men is particularly high.¹⁶⁹ Since the 1960s, suicide rates have skyrocketed among Alaska Natives. In Helen's youth, suicide was much less common. However, grief and desperate loneliness led her to the brink of suicide. *I was about ten I think and it was becomin' spring time and something went on and that hurt from my mom was really strong. I really miss her. I think a lot of people, when they hurt, they think of suicide. I thought of it, I really thought of it. So, I decide I'm going to get rid of myself but how I'm goin' do it? I took a sharp knife and I stuck it in my coat and I walk across the river. On the river there's a path, goes right into the bank on the other side. I was walkin' over that way and I was thinkin' how I was gonna do it. I kept on and I reached that place and just like somethin' came to me, just like somebody just touched me on my shoulder and started talkin' to me, telling me, "What are you doing? Where're you going? You'd better turn back. From right here go back. Forget. Forget." In my head this person was telling me, "Forget, forget, turn aroun', turn aroun'." So I turned around, started back and that voice keeps tellin' me. "Think, think back, think what you were told, how you're supposed to take care of yourself, how you're supposed to be, remember, remember those words, remember that you were told to take care of yourself, that you are loved, that you must take care of yourself." Then I started cryin', and then I went home. Never again that thought ever come back to me, no matter what.*

¹⁶⁸ The women were cursed in such a way that resulted in death.

¹⁶⁹ Alaska.gov. Alaska Suicide Facts and Statistics flier. Internet, available from http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs_sspc/AKSuicideStatistics.pdf, Accessed 15 December 2013.

No matter what kind of situation I was in, it never did come back. Never. And those voices that was talkin' was my mother and my grandmother and my father and everybody else. You see, I was loved. I was loved and yet I could not let go of that one person that was part of me that I lost, I could not let go of that. But then I realized that there is life out there.

Another time the presence visited her when she was at Hunter's Eddy camp. She went to a cliff where there was swift water all around. On her way back she thought, *If I let go, nobody would find me.* She explained, *I felt something, really strong hanging on to my hands while I was going across the other side, really pressing.* She thought it was her mother – or maybe angels. *Why could not I just let go? Then I would be with my mother. Many times I would think she was watching me, sitting by me, when someone was watching me.* Throughout her life there have been many times when she felt alone, but then a presence would come and help her. *I really believe when I saw this scripture [Psalm 139:7-12] I thought "was that you the Lord, instead of my mother always with me" As I got older it must have been the Lord, but as a younger person I thought it was my mom.*

After a long time it got better, I could cope with it. Whoever was speakin',¹⁷⁰ to me [helped her.] And I realize that life must go on, life must go on. Do the best we can. I must do the best I can.

¹⁷⁰ Helen is speaking about the presence that visited her and talked her out of suicide. At the time she thought she heard the voices of her ancestors by way of the presence. Later in life she attributed this presence to the protective power of the Holy Spirit. Once she recognized the presence as the Lord, she never contemplated suicide again.

Chapter 6: Traditional Life Begins to Change

The transition to puberty is often a difficult time for girls. For Helen, the fact that she did not have a mother made this transition more poignant. This, coupled with life circumstances, pushed her into a deep loneliness. Helen still does not like to be alone. Her early adolescence was marked by a series of more traumatic changes, including her father's remarriage. *He did marry again, a lady from Minto. Gee, I can't remember her name. Oh, she didn't like me. I was my dad's pet. She used to talk Indian to me in her language and one time she told me to go out and get fish out of the cache and I did not know what she was talkin' about, she got mad at me. I was just a kid and I did not really understand, but she did not really care for me. She went back to Minto and Dad did not [follow] her. We were in the camp, wood cuttin' camp at the Tanana River and I saw her in the morning gettin' dressed after dad and the boys went cuttin' wood. I saw her puttin' stuff in a little bag, a little back pack and she just bundled up and walked off, she walked to Minto. When my dad came back he had to ask me what happened. I tell him "I did not know but she went off, and walked that way." And he knew. That spring people down from Minto brought her back [giggles] that was the same summer my dad drowned. She came back in the spring, high water, that same spring my dad drowned.*

Minto, Tanana, and Steven's Village people would all come together during the spring time on the Minto Flats for muskrat hunting. They would go by dog team to the lakes just when the ice was rotten. There were lots of camps set up near one another. They would get their furs and gamble. Some people would lose all of their money in the bets. In order to get back home to Tanana they would make a raft and float down the river.

Elijah regularly took his children on these spring trips. An April 1924 letter from Deaconess Sterne to Dr. John W. Wood, Executive Secretary of the Mission Board, confirms this activity in reporting few congregants at Easter services. "There were seventy four people at Church, though usually most of the Indians are away at the lake hunting muskrats at this time."¹⁷¹

One spring, when the Joseph family was visiting in Steven's Village it started flooding so they made a large raft and put two tents on it to drift down to Tanana. It was on one of these trips that Virgie met her future husband, Milton Moses, who stayed with the Joseph family in their spring camp. Helen remembers telling her sister that he was the man she would marry. *Virgie did not like that news and she cried and cried. She did marry him that fall and cried and cried. She did not like him. Virgie was in love with the man that married Agnes Matthew – Arthur Mayo! While married, instead of sleeping on the bed with him, she would sleep on the floor rolled up in her blankets.*

On her last journey to Steven's Village with her father in 1941 he put a canoe in the water and went to shore. He came back with three baby wolves to show Helen. He said, "I brought them for you to look at, I've got to take them back to their mom." Perhaps he was trying to create a special memory for her, as after this he dropped Helen off to be raised by relatives in Rampart, which was not uncommon at that time. With *Gaalno's* advancing age, he probably felt that they were not able to raise a pubescent young lady. *That's when he dropped me off at Rampart; he was going to give me away. He walked the ground for two days; I would not quit crying so he came back to Rampart to pick me up.*

¹⁷¹ Anna Gertrude Sterne. Letter dated April 4, 1924 in Protestant Episcopal Church in USA. National Council (Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society). Alaska Records, 1884-1952. (Episcopal Church Archives, Alaska Records).

6.1 Death of Her Father

In June 1942, because of unusually high water on the Yukon, 'Lige and his family remained in Tanana. Normally, by this time they would have gone to the Rapids fish camp. One day, he went to check the fish nets that he had set near Tanana. Due to the high water there was a lot of driftwood, and he was knocked out of the boat and drowned. For ten days or more Henry Wiehl and some other boys from Rampart dove, trying to recover the body but it had become lodged underneath a barge. Elijah Joseph's official date of death was June 14, 1942; just three days after his daughter had turned thirteen.

The death of her father was even harder on Helen than her mother's death. When her father died, darkness entered her life. *My dad is even harder when he drowned; just like I died. It was a nightmare to me. I have lost someone that cared for me, took care of me when I was a baby and always spoke to me, he never ever hollered, always spoke to me like he loved me, like he cared and after he died this was all gone. That was a big loss to me. Everything disappeared in my life. Even God disappeared in my life, got far away from me. I did not feel anything for a few days. I even walked downtown [three-miles, a long distance for a young girl to be walking] by myself, 4:00 in the morning by myself. I walked down there when they found his body. I was probably in a shock because I did not feel anything until I got there and saw him. And then, just like that the whole world disappeared; everything was just gone. My grandma was still alive. I know she was. That's when, seems like everything begin to change. War was on. Boys would go. Nelson did not come back, Godfrey did not come back, Julius came back but just like my whole life made a turn and there was nothing left.*

Everything that God had made was so beautiful but now it was gray and dark. Everything changed to me. I did not hear laughter, I did not hear singing, I did not hear my dad singing, I did not see him dancing. That's the way it became to me, just nothing left.

I was there and the boys were out for war and they let him [Nelson] know. The army would not let him go home in the middle cuz he was fighting the war, he was fighting the Japs. And he used to write to me and tell me what's going on. And I used to take my letters over to the deaconess and she used to read it to me and tell me what all is happening. And he tell me about how he was crawling in the ground, it was rainy, foggy and cold and he was just crawling up and he found a fox hole and just slid into it and he said while he was there he heard someone out there say, "Ganaa, ganaa,[friend]." And he thought it might be Harper so he say, "Harper!" and Harper say, "Ganaa, I'm down here (in Indian), in the fox hole." And he came and Harper told him, "I'm right next to you in a fox hole." And he told me about this sixteen year old boy from Tennessee. The minute they got off the boat that boy hung on to him. Nelson hauled that kid around for six months. Finally that kid got killed. And he sent me little coins that fell out of Japanese pocket, he sent them to me and tell me how he pick it up off the ground. Not telling me good news.

There I was hurtin' over my dad and my brother kept telling me all the things happening to him at war and I just sit and sit on my bed and try to put things together in my mind. My grandmother was still alive. There was my grandma, grandfather, Jason, Julius and me. I don't know why we were living in this big house, my dad's house. We were living in this great big house. Way in the spot in the corner over there was my bed with a thing around, and everything looked so huge and empty and not hearing people laughing and eating and not having to smell my father's cookin', big pot of moose soup or somethin' on a Sunday morning. Everything came

to a stop. There's nothing, just lookin' for empty tomorrow. That's how I felt, empty tomorrow. There was no noise, no singing, no nothing, no tomorrow, all gone. No tomorrow [thinks for a long while with a pained look on her face]; for a long time there was no tomorrow.

Well, way after, I used to go up to the graveyard pretty often. I used to go up there and Reverend Files used to tell me, "I'll go with you." [Helen responded,] "No, I don't want anybody to go with me." And then things began to change after I went to work. I began to realize that there are people that are around, there is laughter around, there is singing. And I began to realize that I have to fall into that pattern of work and be friends to some of those girls workin'. That's what I did, fall into their pattern of work.

Although Helen had many others who watched over her, they were not entirely able to fill the gap left by the death of her mother. Now, with both parents dead, Helen was left in the care of elderly grandparents. Grandma *Gaalno* was already 97 years old and could no longer do things for her like sew. She was no longer able to see well and her hands could not manipulate the small needles and beads in order to make traditional items for Helen. *I could tell she was really upset about that. She'd talk about it and say, "I wish I could do this and do that for her." Then I would tell her, "That's OK Gram, you don't have to worry about that, I'll manage." But she used to really talk to me about things in life and what life is going to be. She was my mother's mother and so I just made believe she was my mom. And, a lot of other times I was hurt and thinkin' "Now if I had a mother I would not have to go through this." But I guess even girls with mothers go through many things like that. And I just wanna cover those things that were hard for me. But, as I was gettin' older I start doing more things in my life like skiing, driving dogs and things like that. So took away some of the hurt in myself.*

In this, Helen felt something was lacking in her life, as she saw other young girls with their hand made slippers, dresses and other special items that were crafted by their mothers. One Christmas, Virginia Roberts gifted her with a new pair of beaded moccasins, an act of kindness that meant a lot to Helen. Virginia Roberts was the age of Helen's sister, Virginia Joseph, and she was Helen's best friend. *She [Virginia Roberts] was always really nice to me and she sewed. She was a seamstress, you know, she sewed, she made moccasins, boots, and all of the clothes. She used to make dresses for me. She always used to clean me up, probably needed a bath or something. She used to wash my hair, put a new dress on me that she had made; she was always really nice to me. She's the one that made the moccasins for me [for Christmas].*

Deaconess Sterne assisted when she could. But, Helen became more aware of the loss of her mother and felt that she was missing out on certain aspects of sharing and caring that she saw other mothers provide their daughters. One time Helen's godmother, Belena Starr, apologized to her for not having done more to help her. When Helen began menstruating around age fourteen, she did not understand what was happening to her, even though Grandma *Gaalno* kept asking her about it. Helen did not know what to say. She thought she had been hurt. Grandma enlisted Deaconess Sterne to speak with Helen about menstruation, and Deaconess apologized for not telling her earlier.

Her father's death led to more changes in Helen's life. That summer, although she was in a deep state of grief, Helen left her grandmother and Deaconess and moved the three miles into the town of Tanana to work at the hospital as a nurse's aide; she no longer attended school. The hospital had a room where she could stay, and she earned fifty dollars per month. On weekends she went up to the Mission to assist her grandmother with house cleaning and other chores.

Helen took the laundry back to the hospital to wash. That same summer Helen accompanied *Gaalno* and Rampart Joe to Hunter's Eddy where *Gaalno* put up a lot of fish for the winter.

At the hospital, Helen was asked to baptize stillborn babies and she often sent to the tuberculosis (TB) ward to comfort dying elders. As they passed from this life to the next, many of them would impart their blessing to her, passing on bits of wisdom and spiritual inheritance.

I was a regular nurses' aide. I did everything, I bathed patients, I changed their beds, I passed medication and, and just, I just took care of the whole ward. You have to wear gowns and everything in the TB ward. You have to scrub everything down every day. There [were] girls there my age. But you know what the pay was? Fifty dollars per month, room and board.

6.2 Mission Struggles and Closes

For nearly fifty years the Episcopal Church operated the Mission of Our Saviour but WWII brought many changes. As part of the war effort, people associated with the Tanana Mission made hats, socks and mittens and all kinds of baby clothing. The items were packed up and sent where they could be put to good use. Despite this activity, life at the Mission was becoming more difficult. Mission funds were drying up and the U.S. Government moved the school teacher from the Mission to town. Alcohol abuse became problematic and people stopped participating in daily obligations to themselves and their families. Many stopped fishing and doing other traditional practices and the sense of community surrounding the Mission withered. The church was no longer full.

Families started to vacate the Mission site, signaling a change in the times that Reverend Wilfred Files, the Episcopal priest stationed in Tanana from 1935-1945, understood. For many of those years, he conducted services at both the Mission church and St. James Church located downtown Tanana when both churches were active. Helen grew up under his tutelage. In

preparation for consolidating time, energy and expenses, Files designed and rebuilt the St. James church in town in 1940 as the old logs had rotted out. Helen and Jake Starr were the last to be confirmed at Mission of Our Saviour by Bishop Bentley in 1942. She wore a blue dress made for her by Deaconess Sterne. Bishop Bentley came down river in a boat to conduct the service. Years later, in 1980, Helen went to Sitka for a church meeting where Bishop Bentley was present. *We all line up, we all come into the building and he was lookin' at everybody and he say, "That's a Joseph girl." That was me, he recognized me*, she said, her face lighting up at the memory. Helen says that he was a gentle person, *Seems like he could just talk to anybody*.

Around 1943-1944, Reverend Files closed the Mission site and moved the worship activities to St. James in town.¹⁷² Deaconess Sterne moved to town and Reverend Files moved to Fort Yukon. The Mission church's stained glass windows and altar pieces were moved to the St. James church, and they remain there today. Helen is currently the resident priest at St. James Church.

The original church building at the Mission site still stands but is in a state of disrepair. The distinctive shake and gable design is quite remarkable, and the building is on the National Register of Historic Buildings.¹⁷³ The property and grave yards, which had been so meticulously cared for are now totally overgrown. Only Helen's blind brother Jason and Grandmother *Gaalno* remained in residence at the Mission after it closed.¹⁷⁴ This would soon change as *Gaalno's* health began to deteriorate.

¹⁷² The Alaskan Churchman, (November 1940), 13.

¹⁷³ Andrews.

¹⁷⁴ The Alaskan Churchman, (February, 1945), 20; Campbell, 22.

6.3 *Gaalno* Passes

In 1944, at the age of 100, *Gaalno* asked Helen to take her one last time to her camp at Hunter's Eddy. Helen thought, *No way! How are we going to do this?* Despite her tender age of fifteen years and her misgivings, Helen agreed to her grandmother's request and took responsibility for the journey. Helen assisted her aged grandma, her blind brother Jason, and her blind grandfather Rampart Joe by taking them to Hunter's Eddy for a final visit. Helen had to rely on dogs pulling the boat at times along the bank in order to reach the camp and to return to the Mission. She was amazed at Jason and Joe who could pitch a tent and chop wood just as if they could see. When they were chopping wood she would close her eyes and wait until the chop was executed and then peek out to make sure all was well.

By late summer, *Gaalno* was dying, and Helen returned to the Mission to care for her bedridden grandmother until she passed. With her grandmother gone and the Mission closed, Helen had nowhere to call home.

Chapter 7: Starting a Different Life - Moving to Fairbanks

Gaalno's death in the fall of 1944 at the age of 100 signaled the end of an era and the end of life as Helen had known it. The Mission that had once been so vibrant and full of life now echoed with memories of days gone by. In later years, Helen's brothers would be laid to rest in front of the decaying church with its distinctive gables, and their graves would thereby continue to hold village memories.

At fifteen years old, already with a lifetime of experience, Helen set out to create a new life for herself. First, she traveled to Manley, where she worked at the Manley Roadhouse. She spent the latter part of the winter of 1944-45 with her sister Virginia in Minto. In September 1945, Virginia had a baby girl and Helen stood as a baptismal sponsor. Afterwards, she caught a ride in the priest's boat and made her way to Nenana. By early winter 1945, she was living alone in the Burns Hotel¹⁷⁵ in downtown Fairbanks, working as a waitress for Frances Doyle at the café located in her home at 819 First Avenue. Frances Doyle, who became another of Helen's life helpers, was a prominent Fairbanks business woman.¹⁷⁶

In Fairbanks, Helen's daily life consisted of walking down Second Avenue past the Model Café, then crossing Cushman Street to walk past the bank building and finally cutting through the parking lot to First Avenue, where she walked a few more blocks to work. She was afraid to venture off this familiar pathway and for a long time her world consisted of this small area of Fairbanks.

¹⁷⁵ The Burns Hotel was owned and operated by Joe Burns and located on the empty lot on Second Avenue next to where the Eldorado Bar is now. The Big Ray's parking lot would have been the Nordale Hotel location. Special thanks to Patrick Cole who assisted me in tracking down this property and the Doyle café.

¹⁷⁶ "Death Claims Frances Doyle." *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, Saturday, February 15, 1958, 1. The building enumeration system has changed over time. I think this is now the empty lot next to the Radio Station Building on First Avenue.

I just thought I better travel on since everybody has left. Everybody went to heaven, grandma left, everybody left, so I decided to find out what's on the other side of the world so I'm going to find my sister. So I flew to Manley, oh it cost me about \$19 to fly over to Manley Hot Springs with my suitcase and sleeping bag and I got there and I had friends there, Frank...there was two of them, two brothers, I know them there. But anyway, they were there and we went to the Roadhouse and the manager say, "Boy I need somebody to work." So I went to work there. And they had two soldiers there and one was John, he was from Hughes, his mother and father had a store over there and he was there [at Manley Hot Springs]. We got to be friends. He was raised up with a bunch of Indian people and he had Indian friends over there. When he got in the army they send him to Manley and we got to be friends. He was just a young kid and so was I. There weren't very many young people there. When I'm off on the weekend we go sliding. Manley is a good place to go sliding. Finally around December I got in touch with my sister in Minto and I told her I wanted to go to her. And she says, "OK, I'll send for you." Just before Christmas, Milton, her husband, came down and we drove to Minto.¹⁷⁷ That way I got to Minto. Spent the rest of the winter there with her and then spring came and everybody go out in camps, springtime in Minto.

And we were at a big lake back there; there was Virginia and her husband. [There was a] whole bunch of people camping on that lake or on the little island or whatever it was there. Anyway, Josephine Riley was there, she was just a young girl, teenager. We used to go out in the canoe together get some wood; pick wood, dry wood for camp. We do things together all the time, her and I. This is before she married Harry [Riley¹⁷⁸]. And then late fall we move back to Minto and this boat came with a priest. He was going around doing services I guess. And he had

¹⁷⁷ They traveled by dog team to what is now called Old Minto.

¹⁷⁸ Harry Riley is a well-known musher from Minto.

hired a boat from Nenana. And this, Charlie Smith was on there, he was Harry Riley's brother-in-law and I said something like, "I would like to go to Fairbanks." Charlie said, "Well, come with me." So, I did.

We got to Nenana and he took me up to the village and introduced me to an old lady there, her last name was John and she had a granddaughter named Clara. She got to be my friend, Clara John, my age. This old lady knew my father and my mother and my grandmother and everybody, so she just took me in. One day Charlie said, "I'm going to Fairbanks tomorrow, do you want to come with me." I tell him, "OK!" So, we got on the train, went to Fairbanks. On First Avenue they had a, I can't remember what the hotel's name was. Anyway, it was past the movie house on Lacey Street. Right past there was this hotel and he got two rooms.

And the next morning he woke me up for breakfast. He said, "I'm going to take you to a friend of mine, we're going to eat at her place, I know who she is, Frances is her name." So we went down there and had breakfast, we were sittin' at a little table. Frances came in while we were eatin' there and she came, pulled a chair up and start talkin' to Charlie. She say, "Who's this?" He say, "My daughter."¹⁷⁹ She say, "I'm lookin' for somebody to wash dishes and wait tables for me." Charlie tell her, "Well she's here, you can hire." So Frances hired me and told me I can come to work at 5:00 that evening. Helen did not know what to wear so Charlie told her to wear a pair of jeans and shirt. He found a place for her to stay with his friend, Joe Burns at his hotel. He took us over to this little one bedroom, closet, dresser, little room. Charlie tell him, "I'll pay for her for two months." And it was \$19 a week, it's on Second Avenue, it was around where the Co-op is. So that was the beginning of my searching and lookin' and afraid, just afraid, you know. I've never been in a city where people just kept walkin' back and forth along

¹⁷⁹ It is not certain why Charlie referred to Helen as his daughter.

the street. Just so many people. It was kind of scary for me. And I met Joey Burns. Poor Joey, I used to just boss him around. He was a little boy about seven or eight years old and he became my buddy. And we just went out on weekends. I just walked down the street to the movie, you know. Just so close but I had to have Joey come with me. I had to take him to the movie, buy him coke and stuff.

We spent our weekends at the Lacey Street Theater. I didn't want to get off Second Street because I didn't want to get lost. Walk down to work on First Avenue and when I got off of work at midnight it was late at night and I would just walk straight down First Avenue and right around where the bank is, you know the First National Bank used to be right there. I would walk that way and run across the street there, to get home to my place. And pretty soon Joey would not stay with me. When I work too late at night he already goes to bed so I had to get used to being by myself. And yet, it was scary. Every paycheck I bought somethin' for myself. Never ever went to stores and bought clothes like that [before] you know. So I bought nice jeans, nice jacket, nice shirt, shoes and this continued on and on.

Josephine Riley would come up from Minto for clinic or somethin' and she'd come and stay with me. Start doing that, people I know, I would let them come and stay with me in my room. It was exciting in a way but scary. I was always afraid until I start gettin' used to it, you know; going shopping by myself, going down the street, going to the movies by myself. I had to figure it out for myself that was why it was so scary.

7.1 Ladd Field

As time went by, Helen became more comfortable in Fairbanks, and she began meeting teenage girls from other villages who had come to town. Like Helen, many had no adult supervision. They began spending time and working on the army base at Ladd Field. Helen

considers this to have been a bad decision. With so many single GIs and single young women there, a high risk lifestyle of parties, drinking and promiscuous behavior developed. A young woman such as Helen had to be very careful not to be exploited or worse. After a while, Helen realized that Ladd Field was not a healthy or safe environment for her. Finally, she went back to working for Frances Doyle.



Figure 5: Helen as a stylish young woman. Family photo.

Well there was so many of us girls there, you know. Bad influence. That was not a good place to be. The work was good, the pay was good. There was just too much, too much partying. It was a big change for a lot of [us], even for me. It was not an easy time. It was war time, not only for me but for everybody else it was really a tough time. You have to be careful; you just can't go walkin' around by yourself. There're many things that we have to watch out for.

Not all those soldiers were bad, but there were some among them that were bad. There was some killing you know, girls disappearing, kids disappearing and you know, just war time. I think it affect the whole world. Just like Germany, same thing up here, it just did not hit certain towns, it just hit all over.

Well it became work and party, work and party. Finally, we all decide "Let's all join the army." So we all line up there, we're all going to join the army. This short little lady was the first [in line] to join; she come out and she was just sweaty. She told us what they did and we all ran away [laughs] that was our joining the army. I wonder what would have happened if we did?

But [the partying] was just gettin' out of hand you know, workin' an' going to work, not feeling good. So I decide I better quit out there, go back and work with Frances Doyle. So I did.

But I did not stay at the hotel, I stayed with a friend; her name was Bertha Dall from Beaver. She was my age and she had a little cabin so I rent with her. We went out but not as bad as at the base. I went back to work at the Doyle's and that was a good situation, I could keep better track of myself. Besides she [Frances] kept talkin' to me about things, about everything in the city, where not to go, where to keep away from. She knew, she was an elderly lady, she knew.

7.2 Don Andon- the Voice of KFAR

One day, in 1948, Helen met Don Andon who had come to Fairbanks for adventure. Don, who was one day and one year older than Helen, was born on June 10, 1928 in St. Paul, Minnesota to Ida and Louis Andon. He had a challenging childhood, raised in the foster care system. Don revealed little to Helen about his past and she did not know much about him. Nevertheless, they married on August 2, 1948 in a small church in Fairbanks. Helen wore a pink dress. As a young couple, they were not able to communicate well and their marriage was an unhappy one. When Helen was pregnant with their third child, Don packed up his belongings and left without saying a word. Helen returned to Tanana in 1953, with two young children in tow, to have her third baby and begin a new life. Don went on to work for the Fairbanks radio station KFAR, where he began a long career in broadcasting. Many Fairbanksans grew up listening to the sound of his voice. He retired in 1979 as general manager. Helen never saw him again, and he never sought a relationship with his children. He died May 1, 2008 in San Diego. The obituary published in the *Fairbanks Daily News Miner* did not recognize Helen or their three children.¹⁸⁰ Don had remarried twice and perhaps these families were unaware of his Alaskan children.

¹⁸⁰ Donald G. Andon obituary, *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, May 4, 2008.

There was a bar on First Avenue called Wunderbar. I went in there to wait on a friend. This man was sittin' across from me and he bought me a coke. I was sittin' there and I thought "Well she's not comin'" So I left, he followed me out, it was Don Andon. I told him I was waitin' for a friend. He says, "How about a movie?" I tell him, "OK." So we went to a movie. And after I got home I told Bertha¹⁸¹ that I was at the movie. She said, "By yourself?" I tell her, "No, I met some guy." "Who is it?" I tell her who he was. She did not say anything, she just laughed.

Well, that continued so finally we just got married.¹⁸² No questions asked. I mean, we did not even know each other. We did not even, God, just...I was probably searching for something, searching for someone and that was my opportunity for someone so I did not ask any questions. He told me about his father and mother and how he grew up and that was it. He had one brother. I saw a picture of his brother and a picture of his father, not even the mother. He said he grew up in a boarding home, both him and his brother. He never did see his brother; they never have been in contact with each other. But I never questioned it. I mean, I never thought anything wrong with it. I wanted to fulfill me. Instead of askin', lookin' for anything wrong and that's my mistake. Yeah.

When I was going to have my first child, he tell me, "You wanna go home, have your baby down there?" I tell him, "Yeah, I wanna have my baby down there." So I flew home [to Tanana]. That's another thing, I got home, no place to go, everybody died off, no place to go. My brothers were up at the Mission and I would not be able to walk back and forth from the Mission. Nobody there, all my family was gone. Empty, they probably tore it [the big house she grew up in] down for wood. I think Reverend Files went to Fort Yukon but Deaconess Sterne was still there. You see that parish hall that's next to me, the one that I bought? Deaconess moved to town

¹⁸¹ This was Bertha Newman Dall.

¹⁸² At the time of their marriage on August 2, 1948, Helen was 19 and Don was 20 years old.

and moved in there. It was up further though. I went to see her. The Alberts moved back to Crossjacket. The Starrs moved to town, Josephs moved to town, Nicholias moved back down river or moved to town. So, everybody was gone and the rest died.

But Virginia Joseph [her friend, not her sister] and Effie Kokrine were there so I stayed with Effie Kokrine until she moved. That was the year she moved up to Fairbanks, 1949. Her uncle put her on the boat and brought her up here [to Fairbanks], whole family, dogs and everything. Effie Kokrine moved out of Tanana, moved up here because her husband worked up here. So I went to stay with Virginia Roberts Joseph. Every night she'd take me for a walk, you know just walk. And the boat came in and I tell her, "I don't feel good." And she tell me, "How do you feel?" I was telling her what I feel you know. And she tell me, "Well, let's take a walk." We were walkin' toward the hospital so she took me in there, "I think she's starting labor." Hours and hours of labor – all night, all day, nobody there. The Catholic priest came in; he sat with me and held my hand, [laughs] Catholic priest. We did not even have a [Episcopal] priest there, they were all gone.¹⁸³ Nobody, just alone.

Then I had this boy, six pounds and some ounces and they brought him in.¹⁸⁴ No doctor, just the nurse. The doctor did not stay there he went to Nome. Anyway, I had this boy, oh gosh. George Edwin and his wife Lillian came down to the hospital. Lillian say, "Stay with me when you get out, come to the house." And so I did. They lived on First Street. So I stayed there, brought the baby in. George had nice place for me, for the baby. Nice bed, clean. He had a clean house; just really nice. Don used to write to me when I was in Tanana, when I was there with Don [the baby], little short notes.

¹⁸³ There was no Episcopal priest in Tanana at this time. Reverend Files was the last resident priest who left Tanana in 1944.

¹⁸⁴ Donald George Andon, Jr. was born June 4, 1949; Helen turned 20 a few days later.

I brought a skirt, what I used to wear and I could not put it on, just too tight, and I cried. I did not realize that after you have a baby you're not skinny. I just cried in the bed there and that nurse come in and she say, "What's the matter?" I tell her, "I can't put on my clothes." She said, "Just put those clothes on you came in." I tell her, "Well I thought..." "I know what you thought," she said. Try to squeeze into my skinny skirt, funny. There's funny things I did.

And then I flew back to Fairbanks and I went home. He picked up the baby and held the baby. I knew right away that he liked the baby, but he was just, Don was just... [uninvolved and absent], I think he did not want any more children. I spent so much time with Don [the baby], he never. He was nine months old when I trained him, I got up during the night, put him on the pot; nine months old he quit diapers. And I used to iron his sheets, iron his nightgowns. I just played with him like he was a doll. Poor.

In Fairbanks when Mike¹⁸⁵ came, I almost had him on the bridge. Don had to carry me the rest of the way across the bridge [to St. Joseph's Hospital]. We got over there and it was breach, that's how come I did not have him on the bridge. So they had to put me out and turn him around for him to born. He was breach, Mike just try to run out foot first.

Mike was so mischief. He don't even walk yet and he tried to jump off the table. And he never crawled forward, he just crawled backwards, [laughs] he crawled backwards. And one time I had a big barrel of water by the table, I had to get wash water. He climbed on the table and jumped in that barrel of water, not jumped, he dove into it. I just came around a corner and saw his legs going down into that, so I went out there and pull him out [motions by the legs]. He tell me, "I dove, I dove." Funny.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Lee Andon was born August 13, 1951.

Then when I got pregnant with Helen he said, “That’s it!” He packed up and left.¹⁸⁶ We never talked to each other, just left. So I packed up and I went home to Tanana. I stayed with Lee Edwin; I had no place to go. Finally, Horace and Harriet Roberts were out at Manley so she tell me to stay at their house. That’s where Don and Mike and I stayed, and then after I had the baby we were still staying in that little cabin. Again, there was no doctor, just the nurse. That time they used to have dances in the basement in the hospital. They were having a dance that evening, every once in a while they’d run up and say, “Did she have her baby?” “No,” They go back down and dance and every once in a while holler if I had the baby yet. The head nurse tell ‘em, “No, not yet!” Finally, it was a girl; she was born in September.¹⁸⁷ She had a veil on her face. Yeah, Helen had a veil on her face. She had a special gift, that veil.¹⁸⁸ So when the nurse came she took that veil off and told me about it, she tell me, “You got a daughter that’s got a special gift, she’ll be a special person.” I never did tell her about that.

7.3 Rebuilding a Life

Upon separating from Don Andon, Helen struggled to provide for herself and the children, and she suffered emotionally. Many people in Tanana helped Helen and the children in those early years. *I was sorting things out. I was trying to get over this person that had left and it was hard. I was angry, I was sad, I was hurt. I guess I could not move past him, that was hard. I felt sad all the time. I felt like somethin’ was taken from me, like mistreated, like dirt. I felt all kinds of things because of that. And keep hittin’ myself for makin’ such a big mistake, for being*

¹⁸⁶ Don Andon left long before baby Helen was born and he never met his youngest child.

¹⁸⁷ Helen Beth Andon was born September 25, 1953.

¹⁸⁸ Helen Beth was born with a caul, the intact amniotic membrane forming a mask over the baby’s face. It is a rare occurrence. Some believe babies born with a caul are special. Internet, available from <http://www.birthingway.com/caul.htm>, accessed 31 January 2014.

so willing. And I just pound on myself for that. It was hard; it's just like a man dying. You know, like part of you died. It was like that. I never did see him again.

I had good supporters though. I had Ruth Grant and Martha Albert and her sisters. Susie and all those girls that work at the hospital used to come over to me. You know, just come over and help me around the house, help me with my children or babysit for me when I go out and go shopping up the store. They babysit for me because they want to get away from the hospital too.

Those boys [Don and Mike] were lookin' for someone and Harry Nicolai being one of them people that they looked up to. Especially Mike, that's why he was so close to Harry. Like Don and his cousin Pete Joseph. They latched on to somebody they cared for. So when she [Helen Beth] was about two months I went to work. I went back to work at the hospital. And I was breast feeding her so I had her next door with Violet Nusinginya to take care of her. She just lived right next to the hospital so I used to run over there, every time I had a coffee break and feed her.

And then they moved me from that house. They fixed a house, one of those buildings back behind the hospital, those tall buildings. They fixed the upper part for me and the bottom part for Clara Clark 'cuz they're workin' there at the hospital her and her husband. So they were livin' on the bottom of me and I lived upstairs. But we did not have running water there and toilet there but they had put inside toilet¹⁸⁹ for me that men used to come during the night take it out, and they had big tanks of water for me when I could use water. And they put double bed in there, bunk beds for my boys and a crib for my baby inside there. And big kitchen, one time army living quarters for the army there. They had one of those big stoves with the thing on top of it. It was

¹⁸⁹ This was a honey bucket set up comprised of a five gallon bucket with a toilet seat on it which needed to be regularly dumped and cleaned.

wood stove one time but they turned it into oil stove, or gas stove whatever, like propane you know. That's where I began to put things together, you know, my kids.

My brother used to come, Julius watched babies. Summer time I would hire Anna Grant. I used to hire her because she used to go to Mount Edgecombe and she come back for the summer and she wanna work so she worked for me for the summer, take care of my children when I worked. But I bought my own things, my own groceries and everything, took care of my kids. They were OK.

Marion Edwin's sister, Louise. One fall, they were transferring people outside for work training and she was going to Seattle to work in the hospital out there and she tell me, "Come with me, come with me. Helen, come with me, we'll do good together, we'll make it." I tell her, "Well, I'm goin' to make it up here." She say, "Yeah, but I would not be around, I'll be in Seattle." Well I tell her, "You'll have to be in Seattle and I have to be here because I got three children, I'm going to raise them here, you only got two." She says, "Well, even that, come with me." And one day I almost did, I almost made up my mind to go with her. And then, I don't know who it was, I was telling Pete Joseph I think – was sittin' there at the table with me at my place and I was telling him about it and he say, "Yeah, but you're not going to have people there backin' you up if you need help." That's all he said. Pete Nicholia and Richard Grant used to bring fish and meat to me, when they got moose, they bring me some. When they go out to fish, they bring me some. And that's what he meant [when] he said, "If you need somethin' there would not be nobody there to help you." That changed my mind. And I thought, well, even at times life get tough, you know, life get tough, you're alone, life is not easy, it's not, you have to do everything for yourself. Although I did not have to cut wood or bring water in but I had kids, I had three children to take care of.

One letter he wrote to me, Don Andon did, he wrote to me while I was in Tanana and at the beginning he said, “The one thing I’ll say about you,” he says “you’re the best mother I’ve ever known.” He say, “We’ll be lucky in this world if every mother is like you.” And he’s never ever said anything like that to me before. Because even when he was with me I took care of my kids, took care of my house, you know took care of everything, took care of groceries, took care of my clothes, did the laundry, ironed clothes, the floor was always clean. He used to come home from work and read the paper but I guess he always looked around and saw. I got one letter from him [after they separated].

In 1954, Helen purchased her own cabin in Tanana, contents and all for three hundred dollars. In the ensuing years, although the building has changed Helen maintained her residence on this property. Over time, she purchased additional properties near her cabin. *It had a kitchen, a side room and a living room. That’s the one I bought for \$300, that’s the one I bought, that cabin. What happened was the priest was a pilot, he had his own plane. Somethin’ happened to his plane, he needed money right away so I just happened to just be walkin’ by and he knew I was lookin’ for a place so he called me in and asked me if I wanted to buy that place next door to him. I said, “Yes! I’ll pay you payday.” So I did. And he came over and fixed the door, put in a new window.*

7.4 Hospital History

Historically, Athabascans along the Yukon River and tributaries used plants, roots, bark, and pitch for medicinal purposes. Healers (medicine people) were called in for serious illnesses or injuries, and midwives assisted with the birthing of children. With waves of immigrants entering Alaska, the scourge of epidemics overwhelmed traditional healers as populations were decimated and traditional knowledge lost. In response, missionary societies established missions,

not only to bring Christianity, but also to offer medical assistance in the face of epidemic diseases and to help Alaska Natives prepare for the socio-economic change that was occurring. Missionaries at St. James Mission near the mouth of the Tozitna and later Mission of Our Saviour provided medical assistance using their rudimentary medical training and medical supplies provided by the mission society.

Along the eight hundred and fifty mile stretch of the Yukon River between Dawson City in Canada and Nulato in Alaska, only four hospitals existed at the start of the twentieth century. Of those four, two – the territory hospital at Dawson City and the U.S. Government hospital at Fort Gibbon – would not receive Native patients.¹⁹⁰ The Fort Gibbon hospital was the first hospital built in Tanana in 1899. An itinerant doctor was supposed to provide services at the Mission but he was lacking in ambition and did not appropriate his services to the Native community with much care.¹⁹¹ Medical needs in the region defined goals for missionaries and eventually, Episcopal and Catholic leaders built some of the first hospitals in Alaska's Interior to serve Natives.¹⁹² Hudson Stuck's base of operation was at Fort Yukon, 350 miles upriver from Tanana. In 1908, he welcomed Dr. Grafton Burke as a medical missionary and together they established St. Stephen's hospital at Fort Yukon in the early 1900s.

Burke's wife, Clara Heintz Burke wrote an excellent account of their time at Fort Yukon in her book *Doctor Hap*.¹⁹³ Dr. Burke traveled up and down the Yukon and other rivers to attend to sick people. He dispensed medication and performed surgeries in crude circumstances, even

¹⁹⁰ Hudson Stuck. The Arctic Hospital, *Spirit of Missions*, Hudson Stuck Papers, reel 27, Arctic and Polar Regions Archives, Rasmuson Library, UAF, 1-2.

¹⁹¹ Campbell, 15.

¹⁹² Tay, 57-58.

¹⁹³ Clara Heintz Burke. *Doctor Hap*. (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1961).

on his kitchen table! For the next thirty one years, Burke built a prestigious reputation as a medical provider and spiritual advisor.¹⁹⁴

Many gold miners and other immigrants who entered the region brought harmful behaviors with them. Bootlegged alcohol was a major bane the missionaries fought tirelessly. Burke recounts that in 1908 when she and Hap returned to Fort Yukon from their honeymoon, bootleggers had taken advantage of his absence and sold a large quantity of hooch for a few muskrat skins. “We found them, men and women alike, sleeping or unconscious outside their cabins, some lying in the middle of the frost-hardened trails, with children wandering around, crying, hungry and cold. One by one we dragged them into the cabins...two of the youngsters tagged after us, refusing to be abandoned to the care of neighbors and we took them to the mission house.”¹⁹⁵

Missionaries worked hard to provide the basic necessities of shelter, food, clothing and medicine, at times becoming overwhelmed and exhausted by the work. At some mission sites just one worker (usually a woman) cared for over 40 children, in addition to adults who came to the mission sites for assistance. Missionary activities helped desperate communities that, without intervention for basic necessities, may not have survived. The influenza epidemics of 1900, 1918-19, 1927, 1942 and smallpox epidemics decimated the Native population.¹⁹⁶ The tuberculosis epidemic (TB), which spanned from 1920-1960 at its peak would overlay all of these epidemics and persists to the present time. Dr. Robert Fortuine calls tuberculosis the “scourge of Alaska.”¹⁹⁷ Stuck said that whiskey and tuberculosis were the greatest threats to the

¹⁹⁴ Phillips, 16.

¹⁹⁵ Burke, 139.

¹⁹⁶ Dorsey, 60.

¹⁹⁷ Robert Fortuine. *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 255.

health of Natives and their continued existence.¹⁹⁸ In her book *Northern Athabaskan Survival*, anthropologist Phyllis Fast estimates that the Northern Athabascans were reduced in number by sixty to eighty percent from over fifty years of epidemics.¹⁹⁹ As a result, the whole social and economic infrastructures of tribes or clans were broken down. Due to illness, many hunters were unable to hunt or fish in order to provide and store necessary food, or trap to obtain furs for trade. Many young children were orphaned. Traditional knowledge was lost.

The toll of the relentless series of epidemics on the Native population was devastating and the effects are noticeable today. The misery and devastation is difficult to comprehend as some villages experienced one epidemic followed closely on the heels of another; people even suffered two epidemic illnesses at one time.²⁰⁰ At the height of the epidemics when vessels arrived at villages either on the coast or on the Yukon River they stumbled into scenes of horror as they found piles of bodies with no one strong enough to bury them, scores of ill and dying people, or even whole villages strewn with corpses and rubble.²⁰¹ Fast wrote that “In less time than it takes a child to become an adult, families lost tradition bearers, hunters, and other skilled crafts people, which is one of the fundamental reasons that present day knowledge of the traditional customs is limited.”²⁰² In the Interior, orphans were either sent to live with relatives in other villages or to mission homes established by the Episcopal Church.²⁰³ As the fur trade waned and trading companies vacated the river more changes affected Natives who had fully participated in the trade economy; many lost their means of earning wages. Some were able to

¹⁹⁸ Stuck, *Ten Thousand Miles*, 359.

¹⁹⁹ Fast, 62.

²⁰⁰ Fortune, 223.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 209-226.

²⁰² Fast, 62

²⁰³ Ibid.

find work cutting wood and other such occupations, but many became dependent on others for survival.

The Mission of Our Saviour had a small dispensary operated solely by missionaries but they could not keep pace with the health crisis. More than thirty funerals were conducted during the winter of 1910 alone.²⁰⁴ When the dispensary burned down, it was replaced by a proper hospital called St. Agnes in 1916.²⁰⁵ But at the height of the flu epidemic in 1920 there was still no doctor at the Mission; missionary Mabel Pick did the best she could, yet many people died.²⁰⁶ Helen recalls the church at Mission Hill stored coffins with bodies in the library awaiting burial. When her father died in 1942 there was not much time for mourning due to the high number of burials, neither was there time for a potlatch and 'Lige never had a potlatch conducted in his honor.

When Fort Gibbon closed in 1923, so did the hospital. Subsequently, medical services in Tanana were administered by the Bureau of Education school teacher/nurse.²⁰⁷ Three years later, in October 1926, the Bureau of Education reopened the old fort hospital which had become a regional hospital, providing service primarily to Native people anywhere between Fairbanks and Barrow, and Nome and Tanana.²⁰⁸ The operation of the hospital was transferred from the Bureau of Education to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1931.²⁰⁹ After decades of service, the old army fort building had declined to the point that a new facility was needed, and a new 32-bed facility opened in February 1941 on the site of the old fort hospital, adjacent to the parade grounds.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ Campbell, 13.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 16.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Determination of Eligibility Tanana IHS Hospital and Support Buildings [for the National Register of Historic Places] document p. I-8.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., I-8-I-9.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. I-9.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

For the next forty years this regional hospital became an important social and healing hub for the Interior as hundreds of people received care there. Many people in the Northern region of Alaska were born at the Tanana Hospital. Because there was no hotel in town, family members would stay with Tanana families. By 1982 medical practice had changed and the facility had once again become outdated. Citing age, cost, and inability to attract nurses and doctors to Tanana, the hospital was closed October 1, 1982.²¹¹ The closing of this regional hub signaled the end of an era that seemed gentler and kinder. People were forced to make larger transitions as they were transported to Fairbanks or Anchorage for medical treatment, often alone and away from family and community. When the old Tanana Hospital buildings were scheduled to be demolished in 2009, the community held a closing ceremony to remember those who had worked there, those who had passed away there and those who had received treatment there. The heading on the flier read, “Honoring our Sacred Healing Place.”²¹²

As a regional facility the Tanana hospital attracted doctors and nurses from all over the state and also the Lower 48. Well-known figures in Alaska’s medical field, Drs. Gaede, James, Carroll, Brown, Elterman, and Schaible, to name a few, began their medical careers in Alaska at the Tanana Hospital. Native elder Poldine Carlo moved to Tanana from Nulato as a young woman to work at the hospital. She spent much of her adult life in Tanana, raising her children there. Many other young women came as nurses and married into the Tanana families. Those who worked there talk about their time at the hospital with great fondness. Strong friendship bonds developed and endured long after the hospital had closed and everyone moved away. Shortly after her daughter was born, Helen found stability in the comfortable familiarity and

²¹¹ Ibid., I-10.

²¹² Tanana Hospital Closing Ceremony flier, September 2009.

routine of the hospital when she began to work there again, this time in the kitchen and housekeeping.

When I was workin' there there was Dr. James, Dr. Elterman, ah, there's three doctors there. One end was tuberculosis, bathrooms, the men and the women down on that side, the upper was general. The hospital was just really lively, the nurses and the doctors were just a bunch of lively people. In wintertime we'd all go out, put the kids in blankets on sleds, and go out with dog teams. Pete Joseph and all them would hook up their dogs. Nurses and doctors would just pile in them sleds and go way back and build a big bonfire and some, like Bobby Swenson, somebody would play the guitar and they're all singin', drink beer and coffee and tea and eat dry fish and crackers. At least once a month we did that. Doctors and nurses – all the workers went back there and just got together, sang songs. Just did somethin' different than staying home. They were fun.

And we used to have dances all the time, every Saturday. Many times we went to work, a bunch of us, Monday morning without sleep. And one time, after Alfred [and Ruth] got married and was in that house next to the hall, we needed somebody to sing in the hall and play guitar. So we took him to the hall and of course we never thought of him singing and Ruth hearing him from the [house]. She'd come over and just drag him back out. [There was much laughter at this memory]. It was good clean fun though. That's what saved me. Being back down there and being with people like that really did something to me, really brought me back to [life].

It was the second [time] when I moved back to Tanana, that's when Elvis came out. I was just dancing away, on Elvis. Harry Nicholia's father, he was a TB patient, and I was workin' on him, dancing around and he keep telling me about Harry. I guess he wanted to get Harry and me

together; he kept talking to me about Harry. He was tryin' to marry us off. I tell him, "No time, no time for Harry." And he say, "Yeah, yeah." He shake his head and say, "Not today."

7.5 The One that Got Away: Coleman Inge

Coleman Inge, a native of Alabama, arrived in Tanana the summer of 1955 to serve as a missionary on the Yukon River as part of his seminary obligation. There were 300 Athabascans living in the village at this time.²¹³ After completing seminary, Inge returned to Alaska in August 1956 to begin a three-year appointment on the Yukon River. He was ordained a priest at St. James' Episcopal Church in Tanana on February 24, 1957.²¹⁴ He and Helen developed a close friendship. The first time he traveled to Tanana he was flown in the Episcopal airplane by Bishop William Gordon.²¹⁵ Helen attended his retirement celebration in 2007.

I had a real good friend that helped me and his name was Coleman Inge. He was a priest and he helped me along. That's the reason why I went back to the church. He came up from Alabama to Fairbanks. Bishop Gordon told him, "You're going to this village, it's an Indian village, nobody speaks English and they'll be running around with bow and arrows." One day he flew up to Tanana and this Coleman and Bishop Gordon come in and I just happened to be walking down the hall in the hospital and the Bishop called me so I went out there and he introduced me to Coleman Inge. And I said, "Inch, what's the matter?" "Well I expected Chinese or Japanese or something."²¹⁶ Coleman just laughed. I tell him, "Come back to the kitchen and have some coffee." Coleman and Bishop went back and we had coffee. We sat there

²¹³ Buddy Smith. "Reverend Coleman Inge: He took a roundabout trail to ministry." *The Baldwin Press Register*. March 22, 1990.

²¹⁴ Coleman Inge Service of Ordination Program at St. James' Episcopal Church, Tanana, Alaska February 24, 1957.

²¹⁵ The much beloved Bishop William Jones Gordon, Jr. served in Alaska from 1948 to 1974. He was known as the "Flying Bishop" because of his penchant for flying into villages to conduct church business. On this occasion, he had flown the new missionary to his destination and left him in Helen's care.

²¹⁶ Helen thought that, based on his last name, Inge (which she pronounces "Inch") was Asian.

talkin'. Some girls stop by and we talked and I introduced them to Coleman Inge our new priest. The Bishop left him and walked back down to his plane to take off. Coleman just stayed there in the waiting room and I walked back by him and I saw him sittin' there and I tell him, "Coleman, what are you waiting for?" He said, "I'm waitin' for you." "You are, OK, I live up that way," I tell him. By that time I moved up town, I bought that little house. And then at 4:00 I got off and started walkin' off, and he walked all the way home with me. So I fixed supper for all the kids and I told him, "Stay for supper." And he stayed for supper. He just became a good friend of mine and helped me, just be around.

Inge had arrived in the "Land of the Midnight Sun" around the time of summer solstice, the longest day of the year. On this day, Alaskans have the privilege of watching the sun dip under the horizon and reappear moments later. The two became instant friends as they stayed up all night talking. This was the first and last time that Helen stayed up to watch the solstice. *His first night he told me he wanted to see the sunrise. He said, "Let's climb that Joe Burns house." It was high, you know way up. I tell him, "Well there's nobody here with the kids." "Oh, we'll watch them from up there." So we went up there on top, climbed up there, way up on top, looked around, and watched the sunrise. That was the first time I ever seen sunrise, and the last time. Never did that again.*

He went out with us. Like when we go on picnics, he go with us. And we'd be drinking beer and he'd have a beer. And then one time we were over on Hay Slough fishing. He say, "What we're going to do?" I tell him, "Fish, you know, we're gonna fish. We're gonna dip net, we're not gonna use hooks, we're gonna dip net." So that's what we did. There was Pete Joseph, Pete was always around, and Bobby Swenson played the guitar – Coleman played the guitar too. There was Hannah Nelson and Alan Nelson and me. Five of us were over there and we were

gonna catch some fish. We did, we got some fish. Bobby cleaned it up and put it in a frying pan and we all had fresh white fish. Coleman thought it was just wonderful. From Alabama. So we used to take him wherever we went. Anyplace we went he went with us. He was sure my friend.

And then when Hardy and I were going to get married he tell me, "Are you sure, are you sure you're doing...are you sure?" I tell him, "Coleman!" Well he was standing right here [points to ear], here I am standing there, Hardy on this side gettin' married and hear him talkin' in my ear, "Are you sure, are you sure?" I tell him, "Coleman." "OK," he says. My Coleman. We used to have so much fun because he used to talk with a "sugar."²¹⁷ Tease about how he talk. He say, "My mom called me and my mom wrote to me and told me 'you better not get hooked up with a little Indian girl.'" And I tell him, "Did she say you better not?" And he say, "Yeah." Then he went Outside and brought Anne back and married her. They did not stay married very long; they had two kids, one girl and one boy. I met the girl when I went to Alabama.

A few years ago I got a card from his wife. He remarried and she said they were having a fifty year anniversary for him. Fifty years in church service so I flew out there and they went out to meet me at the airport. He thought I still had long black hair. Anyway, I was comin' down with my white hair and he tell her, "I wonder if that's her?" She said, "I would not know." And I looked up and I saw 'em and I smiled and he say, "Oh, that's her." He whispered in my ear and he tell me, "You should a dyed your hair, I just really wanted to see your brown hair." I tell him, "Next time Coleman." "When I come I'm gonna get a wig." Years later he told Helen [Helen's oldest daughter], "I was in love with your mom." I never knew, I thought, I mean, you know, he was just my friend. He told her, "I really loved your mom."

²¹⁷ By this Helen means that he spoke with a drawl.

We used to laugh at what the bishop told him you know because of all the Indians running around with bows and arrows. Bishop Gordon was mischief. He and Coleman used to go up for services in the boat to Rampart.

7.6 Getting Married

Hardy Allen Peters became the love of Helen's life after she lured him away from other women whom he had dated in Tanana. They were united in marriage on September 2, 1956 at Tanana by U.S. Commissioner Elizabeth R. Kimble with Joseph Wholecheese and Flora Kokrine as witnesses. He moved into her little cabin with her and the children. For some reason, Coleman was standing near Helen during the ceremony.

Hardy was born to David Corning and Josephine Adamon on January 23, 1931 at Kokrines, located downriver from Tanana on the Yukon River. At one time, prior to the trading post and school being established at the site, Kokrines was the major Native village on that part of the Yukon. It was a large thriving community characterized by friendly, hardworking and giving people. Ruby sprang up downriver from Kokrines in 1911 as a small mining camp, and after WWII it began to grow when Native families from Kokrines began to move there. Kokrines was abandoned as a village after the trading post burned down and the school closed not long after that; one by one families moved from Kokrines to Ruby and other places.²¹⁸ David Corning lived in Kokrines when it was a large Indian village. When diphtheria struck Nome in January 1925, David became a hero of the trail as he participated in mushing the serum through Alaska's wilderness to its destination in what became a historic event, broadcast throughout the nation. As

²¹⁸ Kokrines information provided by Clara Honea, a cousin to David Corning, as told to Guy Peters, 2012.

the ninth musher in the relay to be passed the precious cargo, he mushed 30 miles from Nine Mile Cabin to Kokrines on January 29.²¹⁹

Relatives remember David as a kind soul and happy person. He was a singer and dancer who also wrote songs. Not much else is known about David Corning, but he was considered by Neil Charlie (the late Minto elder, also originally from Kokrines and a relative of Hardy) as a good man. Once, Neil told David's grandson, Guy Peters that David should be remembered, and he gifted Guy with David's Indian name – *Dischoch* ("something big"). The grief of losing his family drove David Corning into a life of solitude. A house fire killed two or three of his children, another child died later, and his wife had a mental collapse. In those days, it was believed that in order for remaining children to survive, they should be given to someone else to be raised. Hence, his son, Hardy was adopted out and raised by Sophie Peters in Ruby. His daughter, Helen, was sent to Eklutna and continues to reside in the area. David was never the same after this.

How I met Hardy. Well to tell you the truth I met Hardy many years before that, as a little girl, [when] we were walkin' down the beach, Judy Woods and I. This boat came up from down the river and there was this young man on the boat and he was turning away from us. Judy said, "Let's throw rocks at him." I tell her, "OK, let's throw rocks at him." So we throw rocks at him, never move, never even look at us. Just sat there, and just never paid attention like it was not happening. We never hit him; we just throw rocks around him, over him and finally I say, "Oh, those downriver people, they don't even...." "He would not even know if we hit him," I say. "Let's just go!" So we left, went up the bank and that was the last time I saw him until back in the fifties.

²¹⁹ Gay Salisbury and Laney Salisbury. *The Cruellest Miles: The Heroic Story of Dogs and Men in a Race against an Epidemic*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 263.

He was in Tanana Hospital working. And he was there and the girls were pairing off with guys. Nurses were marrying men around there, like Judy See. In fact, I happened to be standing there when she walked in the door, she had red hair and he [Ben] looked up and said, 'Ooh, who is that red head comin' in?'”²²⁰ Steve Matthew married a nurse down there – Valerie. And Gordon Olin was workin' down there and he met a nurse and they went off Outside, they got married.

In fact my boys are the ones, you know, he was there for dinner one time. He left and we're all sittin' around the table and Don say, "Mom, you should marry him so we'll have a dad." I looked at Mike and he say, "Yeah, yeah." "Well OK, I'll get 'im." There were all these girls and they were always gettin' boyfriends. Hardy went with most of them I think. Your dad [speaking to Guy] was going with Ruth Grant, not only Ruth Grant but he had a lot of girlfriends. But that had to come to a stop. I decided I wanted him, he's gonna be mine. I had to join the party and I won. And then the funny thing is most of them babysat for me and my husband-to-be. Babysat, generous huh?

In a twist of fate, Hardy's adopted mother died in a winter fire when she was an elderly woman. In the 1950s, Hardy's birth father, David was sent to Tanana for treatment of tuberculosis before his death. There, he met Helen, pregnant with their first child Kathleen, for the first time. He told Hardy, "You did the right thing, comin' up the river to get a pretty woman."

Hardy served in various community and tribal roles and worked as a maintenance man at the Tanana Regional Hospital for many years until illness prevented him from continuing. He

²²⁰ Ben See, from Southeast Alaska, was a maintenance worker at the Tanana Hospital. He married Judy who worked there as a nurse. Later, Ben and Judy adopted Marlene's son Jared in an open adoption. The See family continues to have a close relationship with the Peters family. At the 1989 memorial potlatch for Hardy and Marlene, Helen adopted Ben in the Indian way.

was one of a group of three men who worked closely together in maintenance at the hospital who died at young ages of cancer within a relatively short period of time. When the hospital was about to be torn down in 2009, Carla Klooster, former Executive Officer of the Tanana Tribe wrote, “One thing you have probably already thought of is that a special mention should be made honoring all the guys in the maintenance department over the years that (I am convinced) literally gave their lives for that hospital through their continued exposure to chemicals. Nobody out in the field knew how hazardous the chemicals actually were, but the rates of cancer among these men cannot be explained away. Women working in the housekeeping also had exposure to cancer causing-cleaning solvents that have since been banned.”²²¹

7.7 Raising Kids

In addition to Helen’s three children Donald, Michael and Helen, whom he raised as his own but never adopted, Hardy and Helen would have four natural born and two adopted children together – Kathleen, Faith, Marlene, Guy, Elizabeth, and Mary Ann. With the arrival of the younger children, the cabin Helen purchased in 1954 for \$300 became too small for the family. Hardy added on to it at various times until they had a large enough home to accommodate everyone. *He built another part. He tore down the kitchen part and the bedroom part, left the living room part. He built another house to it, a big house; our wood stove was in the basement. Our house was moved back further – and that living room part was where Jason and Julius [Helen’s brothers] used to stay. We brought them downtown, took care of them.*

²²¹ Carla Klooster e-mail to Kathleen Peters-Zuray, September 9, 2009.

Both Hardy and Helen were civically minded and active in community affairs and at one point Helen even served as the mayor of Tanana. The Peters home became a focal point of hospitality for visitors who were often directed to “Go see Helen Peters.” Other than the old

Mission House (a building near St. James’

Church used by the diocese for various

functions), there were no hotels or public places to stay in the village, so when people visited, villagers made room for them in their own homes, or on the school or clinic floor. Helen fed and housed visitors, dignitaries and visiting clergy in her home where the family welcomed them with food, lively conversation and a bed. Additionally, students from other villages who came to Tanana to attend the regional high school filled the Peters home. Many of those who came to Tanana for the Native Land Claims meetings in the 1960s also stayed at the Peters’ home. *A lot of visitors [stayed at their home]. Marlene [Helen’s daughter] painted the back room blue and she drew mushrooms and things on the walls, flowers. One side of the wall was just pictures; she painted all kinds of stuff on there. She tell me, “That’s the Blue Room.” She say, “That’s where all the Bishops stayed.” All the priests and all the bishops and all the stray people that come stayed in that room. I wish I would a kept a book and [recorded] their names in that book, I wish I would a done that.*



Figure 6: Hardy and Helen with all but their youngest child around 1965. Family photo.

Helen has many fond memories of all the activities the community participated in. One of the unique attributes of living in a small town is everyone shared a party line system so everyone knew each other’s business. The village did not yet have running water so the Peters family

hauled water for drinking and washing. There were few modern conveniences like automatic washing machines, so clothes were washed in a ringer washer and hung to dry.²²²

During the 1950s and 1960s Helen and Hardy were so busy with work outside the home, and she with household chores that the children often had to entertain themselves. There was much for children to do, and the village created its own entertainment. Helen cherishes fond memories of children playing cowboys and Indians, watching movies as a community, and participating in community dances and games. Despite her extensive work and family obligations, Helen seemed to have a bottomless reserve of energy. With full-time employment and a house full of children, she began to raise sled dogs.

Oh, we had all kinds of things going. There's Maudry and me, and a lot of other women. We had a lot of things going for kids. We had Valentine's party and king and queen for Valentine's Day. We had Halloween party and we had dancing. We hired somebody to have movies for them on Saturday, twenty five cents. They had popcorn for them and they all go to the movie, cowboy movies! After the movie was over, when Don and them were small they used to play cowboy and Indians. Every weekend, bunch of kids running around. They carved wood shaped like guns. Boy just used to play hard. And there was Uncle George's niece Freeda, always a bunch of kids behind her. She was kind of like a storyteller and she'd have a bunch of kids and she'd say, "Oh, we're having burial." She found a dead bird so all these kids were behind her singing church songs, walkin' up the street. She'd have black scarf on, she'd hold a cross, and all the little kids just singing away, trying to bury this bird. She was always doing things like that. But she had kids singing, really singing church songs. Sometimes they'd sing on the bank you know, just tryin' to be elders.

²²² Helen finally had running water installed in her home in 2010.

One time I came back from work and there was this bunch of girls in the back lined up and Kathleen was being hair dresser. She was just cuttin' all those kids' hair. Joanne had real curly hair and she just cut her hair short. I called Maudry and told about her kid coming home with short hair. She just laugh and say, "ah, it'll grow back."

I was amazed to see my son take care of your children [Helen is referring to Hild] because their dad did not do that. I had to get up, feed the baby, clothe the baby, and change the diaper. He would never do it. I was just surprised when I saw Guy doing that. I thought, "Why didn't Hardy do that?" He didn't change diapers but he was good to the kids.

You know, bringing up my children with work, seems like that's all I did was work. Work at home, work at the hospital, work at home, work at the hospital, work at home. And I knew as a mother that there was something lacking with my children. I did not have time. I mean, I clothed them, I fed them, I was there but I never gave time. Not like I should have. I knew that. The thing that stuck with me was I did not have a mother. They do things for kids that I did not have. They do things for their kids, that they desire. I would always feel the need to get my kids stuff, not to make them greedy of course, but because I did not have a mother. I would want them to have their desire.

One time I worked night shift for thirty days and I would be comin' in the door and Hardy'd be going out, workin'. After thirty days [I] shook his hand. He tell me, "Oh, you're just silly." But, I guess that is what made it go. I was just goofy. But I enjoyed that hard work. As my kids were gettin' older, seems like as soon as they get out of school they want to eat. So I used to make bread, just get some pot o' beans or something, I leave it, you know. They come home they just eat.

Fred Nicholia always used to come in the front door, walk all the way back to the refrigerator, open it up pour juice, drink it and go out the back door, all the time. [Recently] I came back from Arizona, I was there alone and he come in the front door, walk to the kitchen, open the refrigerator and poured juice and drank it and he was going out. I tell him, "Fred! You know what you did?" "What, what did I do?" I tell him, "You just did the pattern you used to do when you were a little boy." He laughed. Him and Reisland used to do that. Guy had a bunch of toys and they used to stop and play with those toys but first thing they all used to look in the refrigerator for juice.

And then one time I thought maybe I did not have enough to do so I wanted dogs, start pickin' up dogs. I bought a leader from my Uncle Lee, Gypsy we called her and she had a bunch of pups. I raised those pups. Then somebody else gave me dogs, started driving dogs after work. Isn't that crazy? Then finally I got tired of that and so I tell Don "You can have those dogs." So he started drivin' dogs, takin' care of those dogs. Kids used to drive them. Man, like we did not have enough to do.

One summer we had high water in Tanana, I was washing [clothes] outdoors and Guy and Loretta (I had Loretta that summer) and they keep running to the bank and I tied them up to that cache with a long rope and she start crying and he point at her, laugh at her. She was crying she did not want to be tied up with Guy. Guy thought it was so funny; he just got the giggles about her. But I was not keeping an eye on them so I had to do something.

There were tough times in our lives but it was not somethin' that we could not take care of. And he [Hardy] had somethin' to do for himself and one day I tell him, "What do you want to do for yourself?" He said, "Build a boat." [I said,] Build a boat! He said, "I don't have a place." I tell him, "You know what, there's an old building over there by the post office, put a

wood stove in there and build your boat.” So he got the materials and all winter he work on his boat. It was a nice boat. It was one of the C type boats with a big front, nice place in there for the kids. We could pull the canvas over us if it start raining, like a tent.

That summer when he finished the boat we went to Hunter’s Eddy and put up a tent there and put in a net and we [caught] our first king. They’re huge! We were just pulling it up and that’s when Marlene grabbed Guy around the neck, you know, pulling him back down underneath told him that was a ‘shock’ that we caught. I tell her, “It’s not a shark it’s a king salmon.” She looked at me, she say, “It looked like a shock to me.” So we had a fine time that summer with that boat, we went all over. Every spring we start going down there, to Kokrines and Ruby. Coming back, we never camped but we camped down there.

I used to tell him, “Let’s take vacation and go somewhere.” He’d get the boat ready and off we go, up to Green Slough or Big Lake or somewhere else. One fall we were out, I don’t hunt, I just ride along. Anyway, it was fall time and the moon was out, I tell him, “Oh don’t put tent up just look at the moon.” “Oh,” he said, “we’re hunting.” That’s after we were married. I had romantic ideas, not him, he was there to hunt.

Hardy worked hard and taught his children how to navigate on the Yukon and Tanana rivers, how to hunt and fish. We take vacations down to Kokrines and Ruby in the springtime. That’s where my kids learned how to read water – Faith and Guy – just those two. Kathleen did not want to do that but Faith and Guy did. Their dad was no longer captain. They learned [in a] hurry how to do motor, read river. And today, Mike and Don have to follow Faith to stay out of shallow water. They say, “Let’s follow our sister, we won’t get stuck.”

Every time I tell him let’s go someplace we get in the boat and go to Green Slough. It was pretty there with clear water and you see all these animals comin’ out, comin’ around your boat.

We would stop the motor and just float in. All those beaver around you, just friendly, just get up and talk to us. Just chatter away with us then take off again. It was just different, something different, something I remember from way back you know. It was beautiful, beautiful time, wonderful time.

The Peters family ordered an annual shipment of food and supplies from Outside which was not commonly done in the village. Helen ordered clothing for her children out of the catalog from Sears and Montgomery Wards.

We had our ups and downs, like anybody else, there was nothin' bad. We worked hard, that's for sure. We used to order all our groceries for the winter from Seattle and it would come to Tanana in the fall, by cases. All the kids thought we were rich people, 'cuz we ordered groceries, and came on the boat. We ordered cases of vegetables, ordered coffee and tea in cases, and all our, dried food, beans, flour, sugar, macaroni and just everything. Lots of cans of fruit and canned milk.

My kids were the best dressed kids in Tanana. For Christmas, tear up all the catalogs, marked them all up. Todd Kozevnikoff stopped by my house one Sunday. He told me, "Oh, I just stopped by to tell you, how your kids look so nice, never ever look dirty." I tell him, "Well, this is summer time; they just wear shorts and shirts." He tell me, "Yeah, every day I go by here, kids are so clean."

Helen passed on traditional dances and songs to her children. Many of them are song leaders; especially Mary Ann. Guy is a drummer. Through their efforts, the Tanana Traditional Dancers are a strong dance troupe performing at many festivals and events in Tanana, Fairbanks and Anchorage. Back in the 1960s and 1970s many events that included traditional dancing took place in front of their house.

And as far as the songs were concerned, it seems like it was just holidays we did that but it seemed to grow through the community that all the kids start singing. We had a big lot in front of our house and that's where they dance and sing and potlatch there, everything, right in front of our house. When folks from Stevens Village and Minto come, they used to dance in front of our house.

In 1995, Helen made the painful decision to have the house that she raised her family in torn down to make way for a new cabin. The old cabin was no longer habitable and required too many repairs. The day they were going to tear it down, she sat quietly in the empty building reminiscing. So many people had eaten there. So many people had stayed in the “Blue Room” or tucked into nooks and crannies in bedrolls on the floor. A new cabin was eventually built on her property and it is where she continues to reside.

7.8 Land Claims Meetings

The first land claims conversations for Alaska Natives began long before statehood. In July 1915, a group of Native leaders from the Tanana area had been organized to meet with Judge James Wickersham and other government representatives at the Thomas Memorial Library in Fairbanks to discuss the building of the railroad in Nenana on Native land and the future of other white encroachment in the region. Wickersham proposed that, due to the inevitability of whites moving into the Interior, Natives should either select their 160 acre allotments or move onto reservations. The “Tanana Chiefs” as they became known, soundly rejected these two proposals. Chief Joe of Salchaket said, “We are suggesting to you just one thing, that we want to be left alone. As the whole continent was made for you, God made Alaska for the Indian people,

and all we hope is to be able to live here all the time.”²²³ This historic meeting is credited as the first Native land claims meeting in Alaska.²²⁴ Often, Athabascans will refer to Tanana as the place where the chiefs first met. The last known gathering at *Nuchalawoyya*, including a meeting of the chiefs, in the historic sense was in 1913.²²⁵ It is possible that they also met there prior to the 1915 Fairbanks meeting, but this has not been recorded. Helen’s relative, Paul Williams served as the interpreter for this historic meeting.

Along with statehood status in 1959, Alaska was granted the right to select a certain portion of federal acreage; however the question of aboriginal title to Alaska’s lands had not yet been settled.²²⁶ When the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, aboriginal land title had not been extinguished by the *Treaty of Cession*.²²⁷ According to Robert D. Arnold in *Alaska Native Land Claims*, while the *Treaty of Cession* appeared to accept aboriginal title it did not prevent others from taking land or resources.²²⁸ Additionally, he wrote, “Until Natives became citizens and until they could organize for their cause there was little they could do about it. With the cession of Alaska to the United States all of its lands and waters had become public domain – land held and controlled by the federal government. Transfers to private ownership or designation for specific uses required Congressional action.”²²⁹ Two acts of Congress allowed Alaska Natives to obtain land title: The 1906 Native Allotment Act provided conveyance of 160 acres of public domain to adult Natives, but many did not understand that such allotments could

²²³ Robert D. Arnold. *Alaska Native Land Claims*. (Anchorage: The Alaska Native Foundation, 1978) ; Stanton H. Patty. “A Conference with the Tanana Chiefs,” (*Alaska Journal*. Spring, 1971), 9.

²²⁴ Arnold, 81

²²⁵ Chiefs Conference Proceedings from June 1962 Meeting at Tanana in Alfred R. Ketzler, Sr., Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Collection. 1961-1977. (Ketzler, Alfred R. Collection). Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1.

²²⁶ David S. Case and David A. Voluck. *Alaska Natives and American Laws*. (Third Edition ed. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012), 34-35.

²²⁷ Arnold, 79.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

be obtained.²³⁰ The Native Townsite Act of 1926 provided for survey of villages into lots, blocks and streets.²³¹

With statehood status obtained in 1959, the state now had a twenty-five year period in which to select lands and a promise had been made that no Native land would be selected.²³² But threats to Native land began to emerge. Inupiat in Barrow, with the support of the Association on American Indian Affairs, organized the Inupiat Paitot in late 1961 to fight Project Chariot and other projects that affected hunting and fishing rights.²³³ Also in 1961, a small advertisement in the *Fairbanks Daily News Miner* notified readers of a land filing for road construction to Minto in order to build a recreation site which happened to have abundant hunting and fishing.²³⁴ Quick thinking by various people led to a protest signed by Minto chief, Richard Frank that blocked the sale.²³⁵ In 1963, Frank testified at a meeting of sportsmen, biologists, State officials and conservationists that development in the region would ruin the subsistence way of life.²³⁶

Meanwhile, Al Ketzler of Nenana organized a meeting of representatives from ten villages – Minto, Tanana, Tanacross, Beaver, Gulkana, Delta, Dot Lake, Northway, Tetlin, and Copper Center – to advance the discussion about Alaska Native land claims and Native rights.²³⁷ Native people understood how vital it was to “speak with a unified voice to protect the land.”²³⁸ The group met initially in Nenana in March 1962 and resolved to meet again that June at *Nuchalawoyya*, or Tanana, the traditional meeting place of the Athabascans. At this first meeting

²³⁰ Arnold, 80-81.

²³¹ Arnold, 81.

²³² Judy Ferguson. *Windows to the Land: Alaska Native Land Claims Trailblazers, An Alaska Native Story*. (Big Delta, Alaska: Voice of Alaska Press, 2012), 174.

²³³ Arnold, 96.

²³⁴ Ferguson, 174; Arnold, 100.

²³⁵ Ferguson, *Ibid*.

²³⁶ Arnold, 100-101.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

²³⁸ Tanana Tribal Council, 22.

in Nenana, Peter John, later known as the first traditional chief of the Athabascan nation, and Alfred Starr of Nenana, took leading roles that helped shape the conversation and plan of action.²³⁹ Those gathered took the name *Dena' Nena' Henash*, which means “our land speaks.”²⁴⁰ Representatives from throughout the Interior and beyond attended this historic meeting which many refer to as the second chiefs’ meeting. Finally, a decade after the *News Miner* notice had awakened alarm among Interior Athabascans, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was signed in 1971.²⁴¹ The two 1962 meetings headed by Al Ketzler formed the basis of the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) which incorporated shortly thereafter with Ketzler as president. TCC was instrumental throughout the state in modeling and assisting other communities in their organizational efforts in response to the land claims work. When the Act was signed, Doyon, Limited was established as the for-profit regional corporation representing the Interior and TCC’s role changed, becoming the non-profit corporation for the region.²⁴²

Hardy was selected as one of the Tanana delegates and he became quite involved with the land claims effort from inception through its conclusion. The meetings were held in the hall just behind the Peters home and many activities spilled over into their yard. Although politics was his passion, his son Guy thinks that Hardy took lesser positions rather than pursuing his political aspirations, because they provided stability and he could be close to his children.

Hardy was supposed to become a priest, but his interests were elsewhere as he would rather participate in land claims meetings; he represented Tanana. That’s why he did not become a priest, because he said that’s what he wanted do. He was the main guy in that land

²³⁹ Nenana Meeting of Chiefs, Official Minutes, March 11, 1926 located in Alfred R. Ketzler, Sr., Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Collection. 1961-1977. (Ketzler, Alfred R. Collection), Alaska and Polar Regions Collections and Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.; Ferguson, 176.

²⁴² Tanana Chiefs Conference web site. Internet, available from <http://www.tananachiefs.org/about/>, accessed 23 February 2014.

claims; smart guy too. I guess he was the president, he was secretary too. He got his men who worked with him, got Pete Nicholia, Arlie Charlie, Todd Kozevnikoff and somebody else, bunch of good workers, bunch of men that worked together. Maudry Somers and I were there too.

I think people were just more or less thinkin' about the land, you know, because that's all they talked about was the land, that they did not want the state to get the land. Emil Notti was the president that time; they used to come to Tanana for the meeting because that's where the first, long ago that's where they met, Chiefs met there.

I remember it being a big meeting. I remember there was so many meetings down there 'cuz I took care of that church meeting and I was driving. I went down to the airport; pick up people to take to their place to live. I [saw] that big plane came in, and all kinds of booze come off of it. And there was one cop there so I called him; I told him a bunch of booze came on that plane. He said, "OK, I'll keep an eye open." So the cop got somebody, marked some money and gave it to that person and went in there and bought booze. That way they got in there. They say they took all that booze and took it over the bank and dumped it into the river. Yeah, that's the first time. That was too much. Because they're gonna have a big meeting there and I did not want it to become drunken party. He [the one who ordered the alcohol] never did find out who turned him in.

Helen had grown in these years from a frightened but determined adolescent to a hardworking, mature mother of nine children while building a meaningful family life with her husband Hardy. There were many happy moments but these years encompassed many struggles as well. During the 1970s, an undercurrent of frustration and anger began to run through their home.

7.9 Substance Abuse and Domestic Violence

After WWII, alcohol started to become problematic in Tanana. People who had taken alcohol for medicinal purposes were now drinking more regularly and openly. During the 1960s social drinking among friends had turned to alcohol abuse. When the Vietnam veterans returned to the village in the 1970s, drugs were introduced and became more readily available, enticing many. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s substance abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault among villagers escalated to chaotic proportions. Children were no longer safe in their homes. The Peters family did not escape the rise in abuses of every kind. Hardy and Helen worked hard, they played hard, and they fought hard. Helen was tough and was a victim to no man, engaging in mutual combat with her husband. Guy remembers one episode where his mother had his father pinned to the floor and was hollering for the children to bring her a knife. Helen was particularly hard on her daughters as anger often turned violent. Her penchant for fastidious cleaning demanded that all dishes and other items in the house be clean and in their proper places at all times. Out of place items could trigger her anger. Scenes of corporal punishment spilled out of the house into the yard on a regular basis for others to witness.

During the interview process leading to this thesis Helen discussed the violence that permeated the atmosphere in Tanana and shared examples that occurred among her friends. In so doing, she demonstrated the Native way of communicating which is to talk indirectly about something, indicating a more subtle approach to telling about one's personal difficult circumstances. One of the criticisms that arose after some of her children read a draft of this thesis was that Helen was not honest about her own violence. When we discussed these concerns with Helen, it was difficult for her to speak of specific memories, but she agreed to allow these

paragraphs about the violence in their home to be included in order to make the story more complete. Of her children's confrontation Helen said, *I'm glad they brought it up.*

Ironically, despite the violence in her own home, Helen was drawn into violent situations as a friend and peacemaker. Women, with their faces and bodies battered with bruises, would often find solace in the Peters home.

*Poor Friend,*²⁴³ *she's the one that really had bad time, really, really bad. He [her husband] just beat her up. And every time he's gonna beat her up she'd call me, like if I could do anything. But when he see me coming he just take off. I guess, I don't know. And one time she called me and she tell me, "Please come!" So I went and he had a tub of boiling water on the stove, boiling. And he had [the baby] by the foot holding her like this [motions holding her over the boiling water]. And he say, "I'm going to drop her (into that water)." And I walked in, I went over there and I just grabbed her and just put her away. And he did not do anything to us, just sit there and watch. I tell him, "Whatch you're doing?" He say, "They have to listen." I tell him, "If anybody took you by the foot, put you up like that would you listen?" He looked at me and said, "I don't know." I tell him, "You're just scaring her to death, she's not thinking about anything else, she's just scared OF YOU!"*

Another time he grabbed me and he had a pocket knife, I still got that mark on my leg where he poked me. And [the son] saw it so he went over and he had frying pan on the stove and he just [makes motion of grabbing and swinging] hit him over the head, knocked him out. And he tell me, "Is that a cut." "Yeah but it'll be alright, I'll put band aid on it, don't worry about it," One time she called me and her whole face on this side [motions on the left side] was just all torn up. That's when he went to jail because she went to the hospital and they had to pick him

²⁴³ The names of people in this section have been omitted to protect family members.

up. I don't know, it must have been six months or so and he came back. One time Helen's friend was going to the hospital Outside to have her face worked on and the husband was left to take care of the children. He called me one night about 2:00 in the morning. He called me, "Would you come?" I tell him, "What's the matter?" He said, "[Son] is very sick." I tell him, "Well take him to the hospital." He tell me, "I want you to come up." So I went up there and he was just burning up so I took some cold packs and I just put cold towels on him and got temperature down. And I tell him, "Take him to the clinic. Tell them I took his temperature down, it was too high." So he did and they put him in the hospital. He had some kind of infection. And another time he went to jail [when] he shot his son. Shot him up around in his stomach, but it just went through. That time they put him in jail. When he was going to come back she [Friend] said, "I'm going to get me a gun." I tell her, "Whatcha gonna do with that gun?" She say, "If he lay a hand on me again, I'll shoot him." I tell her, "Go ahead, get that gun!" I know she would not but she lived in fear. He must have threatened her in some way not to leave him. And when he died she was just relieved, free of fear. Imagine, living in fear of your husband.

By 1974, at the age of 45, Helen was regularly drinking to excess and home life was chaotic. She wore cat eye glasses and a buckskin jacket with fringe on it. She was larger than she is now and wore her hair a bit puffy. She prided herself on being tough. At the end of one particular party, she was involved in a motorcycle crash that broke her ankle. This episode sparked the moment where her life began to transform and Helen started on the journey to become the woman she is today. In that moment she committed to stop drinking and she relied on the Lord to help to keep that vow.

They're always having some kind of program for alcohol and drugs but it will never leave until everybody get together and know that there's only one person that can destroy it, it's

the Lord. How did I get out of it? Even after dancing and havin' a good time, it became like I was doing something wrong. Many times I would go to the church and sit in there by myself and spend the night in the church. Wintertime it [the urge to attend church] started becoming stronger and stronger with me. In 1974 we went on a party. In the morning I got up and I walked into the church, I knelt at the altar and I was crying. The Lord came to me there and held me; I was just really crying. He helped me and said, "It's OK." Just then, the person that I wanted to be like, walked through the door, Roseanne Keller. I did not get along with her because I was jealous of her; I wanted to be who she was. I did not tell her that but that's what I thought. When she walked in, the Lord was just holding on to me and telling me it's OK. She knelt by me and prayed. From there on we walked out together and we became good friends.

One time, after that, Hardy and I were going to a New Year's party. The [Holy] Spirit tell me, "Go and have one drink, they'll be watching you." I went in there; all my friends were in there. And when they were passin' drinks and they ask me I tell them, "Yeah." They set glass down there for me and I drank that glass. And the Spirit tell me, "Go home now." So I asked John Huntington to drive me home. I told Hardy I was going home, and he said, "OK." So I went home. Every time I see somebody they tell me, "How did you do that? I can't do it. How could you just drink one and go home?" "I can't do it." Gladys tell me, "I can't." I tell her, "If I tell you, you would not believe me." She said, "Probably not, I wanna know." I tell her, "I'll tell you sometime." Even Lester asked me one time, "How could you do that?" I tell him, "The Spirit of God. That was not me; my strength is a human strength. But when the Lord gives you strength from His Spirit, you have all the strength that you need."

Chapter 8: Spiritual Journey and Renewal

Helen's spiritual journey began as a young girl under the tutelage of her grandmother *Gaalno* and Deaconess Sterne. Although there were seasons in her life when she was not actively engaged in religious or spiritual activities the "calling" of God never departed from her. When Helen remarried in 1956, she began working around the church and met many wonderful people who helped her along the way. She was a hard worker and was dedicated to the work of the ministry. The wheat grows with the tares, and for a while Helen was training for the ministry at the same time she was mired in the dysfunction of village life and the chaos in her home. She still felt the nudge and calling of the Holy Spirit which is what prompted her to seek solace in the church in the dark moments of soul searching. It was there that the Lord met her and, after a life-changing experience in the presence of the Holy Spirit, Helen committed her life and her ways to the Lord and she began to assemble order out of the chaos.

8.1 Early Training in the Episcopal Church

I started to get training [in the Episcopal Church] since I was about nine years old. The deaconess showed me what to do with the Holy Communion – the table, how to take care of it and how to respect it, that I knew. And, the Common Book of Prayer, I knew where to look and what do to if I was into a spot where I need to be.²⁴⁴ And when I was workin' as a young girl in the hospital, I don't know where they get it from, but they always got me to baptize babies that were stillborn. I mean, this is even before I was even called to do anything. So long before anything happened about the church in my life, they already had guided me to do things that no other person would do at the hospital but me.

²⁴⁴ Helen is talking about tracking with the correct places of the liturgy or standing at the altar.

I was young. They used to tell me, “Go to that elder and take care of her because she’s going to pass pretty soon.” And, that is the Lord’s work through other people, you know, through doctors and nurses telling me to do that. Sure enough, before they died they blessed me. Every elder that passed, before they died, they blessed me. That’s why I know the Lord was with me at the beginning when I came into the world. That’s how I know because He led me through all the deep waters and guided me through the shadow of darkness [He] led me through all those [times] and [I] survived. He said, “No prophet of mine will be destroyed. No one that loves me will be destroyed.” And, at Cook School,²⁴⁵ [a woman] from South Dakota said, “One person out of this whole class is gonna make it. Helen is gonna make it. Helen has got something that we all don’t have. We say we’re more educated than her but she’s the one that’s going to make it through, she’s the one that’s going to be ahead of all of us.” Word of knowledge that was.

Helen recalls how she returned to the church after many years of not participating in the faith or worship activities. *Then, after I took Hardy away and we got married, I decide I better go back to church. I went back to church [in 1956, the year she married Hardy] and I was the women’s auxiliary person and I had things done for the church, and we raised a lot of money for it. We got propane stoves and everything for the mission house, got it all fixed up. Men came and rebuilt the place, just fixed it all up. Then we start getting’ priests. For many years I worked at the church.*

When Helen committed to a life of sobriety, she busied herself even more with church and community activities. She had a renewed sense of vigor and purpose and remained active in

²⁴⁵ Cook College and Theological School, more commonly referred to as Cook School, started in 1870 as a vision of Presbyterian minister Charles H. Cook to train Native Americans as ministers and leaders. The first school opened in 1890 and the ministry grew into a multid denominational theological school for Native Americans. The property that once housed a busy campus in Tempe, Arizona is in the process of being sold. The buildings will be razed to make way for new apartment complexes. Today, it is called Cook Native American Ministries. Internet, available from <http://www.examiner.com/article/cook-christian-training-school> accessed 21 February 2014.

the women's church auxiliary. She spent her time conducting Sunday School, organizing pot luck dinners and cleaning up the church. Church leadership recognized her dedication and potential and provided much support for her spiritual growth.

Life was beginning to change, through prayers and through asking for prayers. I really believe that you could pray, but you need other people to pray also. The power that I know the Lord had given me, the strength that He has given me and everything else. I can hear Him when He speaks to me and I just knew the Lord is always near, always nearby. Otherwise, I would not have made it, I would not have. We were all standing by the window one day, a lady was staggering by, and one of my girls said, "Look at that." I said, "Yeah, that could have been me." "That could have been me, so don't ever point your finger at anyone because that could have been me." It's just so simple, just as simple as night and day that a person can become that way if they don't have the power of our Father in their hearts and mind.

It was not easy for me to be where I'm at, where God had put me. But He already knew me. He already knew me and already knew my direction while I was still in my mothers' tummy. I know because even at a young age, I knew that there was always somebody with me. Although Satan is pretty powerful also, but he can't beat the Lord! The Lord will just beat him in everything. Because I know my Lord. When it was the darkest point for me, He'd come and let me know that He's nearby. When there's no one around, just me, and I would think that it would be better if I just went out and joined everybody else, and He'd come and touch me. I can feel His hands upon my shoulders holding me, then I know He's nearby.

8.2 Entering the Ministry

For Helen, belief in Denaahuto (Creator God) is intertwined in the legends of her ancestors. Growing up in the Episcopal Church was a positive experience for her but taking the

steps to enter the ministry formally was daunting. It would be a difficult but rewarding journey that has born much fruit over the last forty years. Bishop Gordon chose Helen and Hardy Peters to participate in training in Arizona, along with several other people from the Interior. About thirty participants, including their families, moved to Tempe, Arizona where they all lived in the same apartment building. In 1974 Helen was ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Church. Thirty years later, in 2004 she was ordained as a priest by Bishop Mark McDonald at a ceremony at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Fairbanks.

When I first recognized that's the direction [entering the ministry] I'm going I went to see my uncle, George Edwin. He was a priest and he was at home and I told him about my thoughts and I told him what I was going to do and he told me, "You know it would be very hard, you know that you would not be welcome. You know that people will talk. People will bring up your past. People will laugh at you. People will throw darts at you." And then he said, "I would say no to anybody but to you. You've got something that nobody else has. You have something in you that no other woman has, so I'll say yes, you go ahead and let them throw whatever at you but remember..." he says, "They can't hurt, they will never hurt you...just by words...but God is there, you watch and see." I did, I did.

8.3 Heading to Arizona: Cook's School Training

Bishop William Gordon was a big man and everyone knew he was the boss. He could be impatient and gruff and everyone called him "Bishop" and never by his first name.²⁴⁶ And yet, everyone knew that he cared deeply about them. He had a remarkable memory and one time introduced over one hundred people (some of whom he had just met) without stumbling.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Phillips, 40.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 49.

Bishop Gordon was a man of action and when he set his mind to doing something, he did it. For example, he traded the river boats for an airplane and learned to fly so he could better serve the diocese that was the entire state. He was a risk taker. Gordon was committed to ordaining non-seminary trained deacons and priests because it was practical and the right thing to do; it was also revolutionary. Natives had long been vital partners in the work of the ministry and training new “outsiders” was becoming increasingly challenging. Gordon charged the “Outside” priests and deacons that he placed in the villages with “work[ing] themselves out of a job,” instructing them to “[not] do anything the people can do for themselves” which meant lay people had to learn how to do the work of the ministry.²⁴⁸ He put in place a project called TEAM (Teach Each a Ministry) as well as other programs and encouraged Native people to rise to the occasion. Alaska became the leader in the United States in the sacramentalist program²⁴⁹ as Gordon championed changes to Church Canon and was influential in the passage of Title III Canon 8 that allowed the “ordination of especially qualified persons in remote and ethnically distinct situations for unique but appropriate ministries.”²⁵⁰ National training programs were developed, and Alaskans began to prepare for leadership roles in the church. Many were hand-chosen by Bishop Gordon and sent to Cook College and Theological School in Tempe, Arizona for specialized training.²⁵¹ The Reverend Anna Frank wrote, “Alaska was fortunate in this time of change to have a Bishop like William Gordon who embraced the new international vision of indigenous leadership. He supported Native people in their determination to gain access to all levels of leadership in the church, including ordination.”²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 40-42

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 56

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 47.

²⁵¹ See note on page 148.

²⁵² Phillips, 90.

When Bishop Gordon called us [to the ministry] Hardy was workin' in Nome that summer, big job over Nome hospital, they sent him over there. I was home and I was workin'. Bishop called me and said, "You were picked to go to Arizona." I tell him, "What!" "You were picked to go to Arizona." I tell him, "For what?" He tell me, "You and your husband is going to become a priest." I tell him, "Is he? He never told me." But, that's the way he [Bishop Gordon] worked, that's how he got things done, he just went and did it. Alfred Grant and family, us, Stanley Jonas from Fort Yukon, David Salmon from Chalkyitsik, Titus Peter, Raymond Titus, Luke Titus and Sarah Silas' daughter all went down there one fall.²⁵³ The whole Cooks school was full of Episcopal Athabascan people. This was in 1967, Guy was six years old.

Functioning as a deacon in the village was no easy task, as Helen often stood outside of the social norms. Although she was sober, other people continued the drinking lifestyle and often reminded her of her past. Even her friends would ridicule her, but when they needed help they would call upon her, and she would attend to their needs.

It was hard to deal with it. But I knew where I stood. I knew that whatever they threw at me would not hit me. I know that through life everybody sin, everybody. The only person that never sinned was Jesus Christ himself. So whoever throws a stone must not have any sin at all. So, there were times in my selfishness I would cry to the Lord, tell him, "I can't do it, I can't do it!" No way that I could do it by myself, He had to do it for me. He had to speak through me. He had to help me speak. He had to help me see things that nobody else saw. He had to help me with everything. "Hey! You got me into this, you gotta help me now!" You know?

²⁵³ Other participants included Mary Nathaniel of Chalkyitsik, John Starr of Tanana, Steve Matthew of Steven's Village, Berkman Silas, Luke Titus, and Anna Frank of Minto. The training was open to Alaskans of other denominations and James Nageak participated. This does not represent a complete listing of participants.

He said, "No matter what it is, don't throw rocks back, help them. Help your enemies, help them." So I went to them when they needed someone, I went to them. And I cried with them and I prayed with them. They'd call me to be with them, they'd call me for help. It's a long haul but I had to really listen to the Lord, what he tells me. I really had to listen and obey Him. The last time in Phoenix, after I lost my husband I was coming back home and I drank wine on the plane. Helen came, picked me up. She was really upset, I know, but she did not know what all I went through. That's why I say it's easier just to do that [drink] than face everything. It's easier to take a drink and forget it all but they forget when they wake up it's still there. But that taught me a lesson that the worldly things is not worth it. All the hardship with all the suffering and everything that goes [with it]; we can't make it any better by destroying our own lives. That was the last time I ever did something like that. It's a long time ago.

Even my best friends, people that I worked with, people that called me, people that said one time, "You think you're better than me." I tell her, "No, I'm not better than anybody else." And then I told her "Everything that happened to me is with the help of my Lord Jesus Christ, it is not me alone." When she was dying she said, "I remember what you said." I tell her, "I don't remember what I said." She said, "I should have taken that cup that you drank and I would not be at this point right now." I tell her, "That's your destiny and this is mine, my destiny. Whichever way we pick to go is the way it's going to be." And she tell me, "I know that now, I know that now." And she tell me, "I hope you can get to my children." And I just thought of Abraham, you know, but I did not say anything to her. And I tell her, "You think they'll listen?" I tell her, "You'll just have to give it to the Lord." I tell her because I could not make them listen, I could not make them change their destiny. And she tell me, "I wish I would have known. I know now but I wish I would have taken what you said to me long ago." I tell her, "Like I said, you

picked your destiny and I picked mine.” So, it was the hardest thing I could have ever went through but I knew it was coming. I knew all that bad talk and all those things is gonna come, I knew that. Look what they did to Jesus. And He hasn’t done a thing. He did not do a thing and they killed Him. I may have drank but I did not hurt nobody, I did not kill anybody, I did not do anything to my neighbor, but yet I was not the right person for them. I was the right person for Jesus, but not for the people. But who is right? Just the ones He picks. He picked me because I was nothin’, nobody.

Over the years, I guess they just realize that I was not so bad after all. One woman come up to me one time and said, “I hope I can wear your shoes.” And I tell her, “Size seven and a half!” But, it’s changing; people are more open to the word of God. There’re still a lot of hard people. They’re gonna learn. Because all that talk about a dark cloud around the sky – that dark cloud over Tanana is broken. It’s broken so people begin to wake up, especially little children; they’re beginning to know who Jesus is. Even though they don’t have Sunday school except during the summer, they’re beginning to know who He is. And even though my children, some of them don’t go to church, my oldest boys, they tell me, “Mom, I respect you.” And that tells me something. That tells me one day they’ll wake up. No matter what they do right now but later they’ll wake up to the word of God.

Chapter 9: Life Changes Forever

In the year 1981, time stopped for the Peters/Andon family as they experienced the loss of a beloved daughter and sister, murdered by a serial killer. Just fifteen months later, husband and father Hardy passed away, succumbing to brain cancer likely caused by the chemicals used on a daily basis during his work at the Tanana Hospital. The loss of these two, especially Marlene's murder, tested the family in a way that they had never before experienced. They would survive, but the specter of Marlene's death remains with them and more than thirty years later the family continues to process her loss.

9.1 Marlene

Marlene Jean was born to Hardy and Helen March 4, 1960, the second to the last of Helen's natural born children. Everyone knew she was special. In tune with her heritage, she kept her shiny black hair long, always down past her knees. She had a paper-thin physique and smooth, clear skin. She was, "Like a China doll," said her sister. She loved to sew and used only natural fibers. Everything she wore was hand-made of cotton or wool and she had a penchant for using organic products before it became the fashion. Her cooking was similar, only using whole grains and unprocessed products. Marlene was a good cook and is remembered for her spicy spaghetti. She was an artist and a writer, given to expressing herself through these media. Tucked away in a file folder of Helen's papers is a pen and ink drawing in graphic style that Marlene did of a Native woman. It is possible it was a self-portrait. The following poem was twined around the edges of the woman's face. The drawing is signed simply, By Marlene Jean Peters.

*The Indian child is
BORN INTO...
Prejudice
unemployment
deprivation
malnutrition
disease
isolation of all solutions.
And we still
live
and
still
laugh.
Gazing into the future
vision of a better way.*



Figure 7: Marlene Jean Peters. Family Photo.

Marlene was particularly close to her sister Faith and brother Guy. "I think about me and my sister Marlene, because we were so close...we were connected to ancestral knowledge," said Faith. She was a gifted painter. "When she got into it, nothing could keep her out of it. She would be like in a trance; she would not even look at the paint colors," Faith remembers. "Me and her would lay in the grass and look at the sky. We had protections around us. [A certain man] would come and bother us but we learned how to fight back. We always slept with sharp pencils."²⁵⁴

A friend of many, Marlene was a gentle soul and a good listener. She had deep insight and had an ingrained sense of knowing. Ethereal and very creative, she was in tune with herself, others, the Earth and the sky. She understood life's mysteries beyond her years; she was a seer, soul-traveler and spirit-traveler. "Marlene would have out-of-body experiences. She could fly. She would not eat for days. She would not eat anything with preservatives. She didn't want any poison in her," said Faith.

²⁵⁴ During parties at her parent's home, there were times when men entered the rooms of sleeping children with inappropriate intentions.

During her junior year of high school in 1977-1978, Marlene attended an art school in Albuquerque, New Mexico.²⁵⁵ She thrived in the artistic environment where she connected readily with people who shared similar interests and thoughts. In the evenings, students attended large bonfires where alcohol was present. Not long after she was invited to explore other mediums by attending drumming circles. Medicine people invited her first to observe, and then to participate in Peyote ceremonies where she was introduced to operating in the spirit realm. Spirit walkers showed her what they could do while traveling in the spirit realm and she was invited to go along with them. On one such journey the spirit walkers ran into a bad spirit that traumatized the group in some way. "Something spooked her spirit," said her sister Faith. "Marlene would tell people that, 'when you're with God, you are looking down on the earth.'"

Although spooked, when Marlene returned to Tanana in the summer of 1978, she was more mature and had gained a confidence and sense of strength that she previously had not possessed, according to her brother Guy. "She was feeling good about herself until she ran into a punk who wanted to take that from her," said Guy.²⁵⁶ That summer, she was raped by a young man from the community. Guy said that she was never quite the same after this. She went into a terrible depression and would not talk to anyone. She slept all day and painted her room black. It took some time but Marlene slowly began to recover and resumed previous activities, reengaging with her family and friends. Feeling more hopeful, Marlene painted her room blue with many happy symbols – flowers, fountains and birds. In early 1980, Marlene discovered that she was pregnant. In many ways, the pregnancy was very healing for Marlene and she was once again feeling good about herself.

²⁵⁵ Marlene Jean Peters, Obituary in Tanana Chiefs Conference: *Council*, June, 1981, 19.

²⁵⁶ Name intentionally withheld.

When I first met the family in 1998, the wound of her passing was still fresh, as though it had happened yesterday. "We did not know how to process her death, how do you process a murder?" said Guy. "That's the bigger deal. She was just a missing person for a long time, weeks. The murder was a shock, a total shock. Dead is one thing but a murder is another..." said Guy as he remembered his sister. "To think about how she died was awful. We got the details from the troopers. Those last moments were horrible." Everything about Marlene still resides right under the surface in the hearts and minds of Helen and other family members.

Marlene remains in the hearts of others too. One day in July, 2013 Guy and I met retired trooper Jim McCann while perusing cars at Gene's Chrysler in Fairbanks. Guy happened to be wearing a Tanana T-shirt that McCann noticed, and he said that he had been there and that one time he was supposed to go to Tanana for a potlatch, for the girl – Marlene – who had been killed by a serial killer. He told us that he had worked the case. Guy said, "That was my sister." Silence followed as the three of us processed this chance meeting thirty-two years later. McCann mentioned that he still had the slippers he had been gifted by the Peters family, but they were chewed up by the dog and could no longer be worn. He kept them because of what they represented. He had been one of the lead investigators of the case, cracking it through an unusual sting operation in Texas.²⁵⁷ Later that month, Guy and I talked about the chance encounter with Jim McCann. Guy said, "Nobody could talk about it. To meet Jim again, when we were standing there...[trails off]. I was there when Jim called and said, 'I got him.' He had found the killer."

Accounts vary as to what happened the night Marlene disappeared. It was the middle of January, 1981 when some of the Peters children were in Fairbanks getting ready for spring semester at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Marlene was thinking about enrolling and was in

²⁵⁷ Tom Brennan. *Murder at 40 Below: True Crime Stories from Alaska*. (Washington: Epicenter Press, 2001), 160.

town visiting and babysitting for a family friend. The family believes that Marlene had gone from the South Cushman area to downtown to find the friend. While yet downtown, she passed through the Co-Op Plaza where she ran into her brother, Guy, who was having a late-night cup of coffee. They chatted for a few minutes and he told her, “be careful.” He never saw her alive again.

The *Fairbanks Daily News Miner* reported that Marlene had been trying to hitchhike to Anchorage from downtown Fairbanks to see her ill father when she disappeared, which was a possibility.²⁵⁸ On January 31, 1981, Marlene was reported missing by her sister Kathleen. The next three and one-half months were like a living hell as her family and friends relentlessly searched for her every weekend. They posted pictures of Marlene up and down the Parks and Richardson Highways, in restaurants, truck stops, etc. They would tromp through snow with a stick looking for her. “I told my sister [Kathleen], by May 15th we will find her,” said Faith. Faith thinks her mother nearly went crazy from January through May. Helen could not understand why someone would take her daughter; she would not have hurt anyone.

Helen reflects: *I always dream. Hardy used to dream about her all the time too. Hardy was sittin’ there way after we buried her, he say, ‘I dreamt of Marlene.’ I tell him, “Tell me the dream.” He said she was comin’ out, just like in a wedding gown, white gown. Marlene always used to put wild flowers around her head. He said she had flowers all around her head, she was carrying flowers and she go like this to me [shows hand with ring finger] and she say, “I married Him.” She had a ring on her finger and she say, “I married Him, I married Jesus. You better tell Mom.” So he would tell me she was just dancing around, she always used to dance around. She said to tell him, “I married Jesus.” Nice dream.*

²⁵⁸ “Troopers Identify Body, Suspect Link in Slayings.” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, May 18, 1981, 3; “Troopers, Parents to Meet: Murders Prompt Safety Session.” *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, May 20, 1981, 3.

And I still call them [her other daughters] Marlene, I still call her name every once in a while when they're all together. Like if I'm gonna call Faith I say, "Marlene!" So I still call them. Marlene, Marlene. And I often wonder why it was Marlene. Marlene was the closest to me. She always slept with me, she always was with me. And the girls used to say, "Marlene bakes bread and makes clothes and sews on the machine and she knits and purl and she..." I tell 'em, "Well, she's always with me and she picked up all that stuff because she watched me." One time I told Marlene that I was going to quit the church. She looked at me she said, "You can't do that." I said, "Oh yes I can." She tell me, "Gimme that prayer book, look at it!" She say, "Mom, He may not have put a ring on your finger but you married Him." She was about fourteen, I guess and the girls start calling her "Mom's baby," so she kind of backed off. And that's too bad, my Marlene. I guess the Lord had a reason to take her first.

My daughter Marlene was going to have a baby. We really never talked about what to do with the baby. She thought since her father was sick and we don't know what the future is going to be. Anyway, she had this baby down at the hospital and I went down there thinkin' I'll just be with her, be her nurse. It did not work out that way, I could not do it. I was in labor myself. So they told me that I need to wait out in the waiting room or something. So I did. And she had this beautiful boy and then she told me, "I have parents for him." She needed the telephone. She tell me, "I want Ben and Judy [See] to have my boy." I felt let down by it, but I knew the situation we were in and I knew what was best for the baby, but I wanted it too. I gave her a telephone in the hospital, and she called Judy. I don't think Judy wasted any time, she just flew up with a suitcase full of baby stuff and something to carry baby home in. She acted like she had a baby. And I knew that was what she prayed about and wanted to have Judy and Ben to have her boy. I knew she had a lot of time thinkin' about it, nine months and talkin' to God about it. I knew she set it

up the way she wanted it. And, it had to be. God had to be involved in that one; because we don't know what the future would be and she probably did not know either. But, she was doing the right thing. She already had him settled in a home where he'll be taken care of and loved. She made a very good choice in who she wanted to have her son.

After they took the baby, we cried. Three months we cried every day for that baby. Yet, we knew that was the right thing to do. It really told me something after her death, that God was involved in that whole situation.

When they found her they [the See family] came up. He was two years old and he climbed up on top of my bed and just laid there and put out his arms like he was holding someone. Now I remember. And Judy looked at him and she called me, and she tell me, "Look!" And she [Marlene] used to lay on that bed all the time, on my bed. She used to lay on my bed and he laid on that bed and pulled his arm out like he was holding somebody, and he was two years old. That was somethin'; I knew that God was going to take care of him.

Marlene, Guy and Kathleen were at university and Hardy was in Anchorage hospital and I was home [in Tanana]. I don't even know if I had Mary Ann with me, can't remember. Anyway, they were all going to school in Fairbanks. On January 6, I flew from Tanana to Fairbanks; I was lookin' for Marlene so she could go with me to Anchorage. I did find her, but she said she had too much school work to do so she could not go with me and I told her, for some reason I could not get her off my mind, I'm worried about her. She told me, "Mom, don't worry about me." She said, "When you start thinkin' about me just quote Psalm 23 – 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil' For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.'"²⁵⁹ So, I tell her, "OK, you'll be ok?" She said, "Yeah, I'll be Ok."

²⁵⁹ Ps. 23:4 (New King James Version).

And I left. I went to Anchorage to visit Hardy at the hospital and when I was there I visited with him and I could take him out of the hospital. Helen [eldest daughter] was living there so she picked us up, took us to her apartment. He could go out for the weekend so we were there at Helen's house and it was during the night I heard something or I saw something in my sleep. I told Hardy there is something wrong, something wrong with one of our daughters. And he said, "Oh, you probably had a dream." I tell him, "No! There's something wrong, something happened." And I did not sleep the rest of the night, I just stayed awake and the next morning I was telling him about it and he said, "Oh, they're OK." I knew there was something wrong, I knew.

On Monday, we took him back to the hospital and I flew back to Fairbanks, then they start telling me they were lookin' for her. They were lookin' for Marlene. The cops tell me, "Maybe she went to Canada." I tell 'em, "No, I don't think so." "When she was home she called me all the time. I don't think she would take off like that." And they kept saying, "Well, a lot of girls run away." I tell 'em, "I know a lot of girls run away but Marlene would not run away." So it went on and I went home, went back to work. I was a cook at the school at that time. I went home but I never could stop thinking about her. I thought of her night and day and I could not sleep. I worked and just waited.

Just wait. Wait. Every day I wait for somebody to tell me, "There she is and she's OK." Every day I wait. I work. I don't know how I worked. I just had to stay busy and go home and just think about her, wondering what happened to her. And I went into Fairbanks. One of the inspectors, I knew him because we used to go to state meetings together, and I called him and he said, "I have people out, I have good men lookin' for her." And I tell him, "I really think somebody hurt her, I really think that somebody got her." And then I said, "Oh, I could even be

a decoy.” And he said, “Helen, there’s all kinds of decoys out there.” He talked to me every once in a while, call me at home; tell me what’s happening, where they’re lookin’ and what they’re doing. I was still home working and Hardy never come home yet. They [eventually] did send him home for a while because his cancer came to a stop.

In May, our friends Dave and Roseanne Keller were leaving Alaska. Hardy said, “Let’s go to town and visit them before they leave.” So we did that and we were at their house in Fairbanks and they saw something in the paper but I did not see it. Dave was not sure, so he did not want to say anything about it. Anyway, the next morning, Don and his family were living in North Pole and the police called him out there. The FBI called him and told him they found Marlene and asked where I was. He said “I’ll call her.” What happened was two guys were out hunting, thirty five miles out of here, they were hunting, springtime, in May around a lake. They were walking around a lake and they found her. So they covered her and they went out and called about her and they brought her into town and had the doctors check her out because they wanted to know if it was really her or not.

So they told Don to tell me. He said, “Come over to my house.” I told Hardy they found Marlene and so we went over to Don’s house and everybody in town heard that they found Marlene and were going out to Don’s house. We were there for a couple of days. When we went over to that morgue I wanted to see her and they tell me, “No, you can’t, you can’t see her.” I tell ‘em, “I want to see her, I won’t even look at her, I want to touch her.” And they tell me, “No, no.” They cremated her and then we went home and everybody came back [to Tanana]. We had a funeral service for her. People came down, all the Minto people came down and Bill Hickenbochum, and Dr. James came down, boy and everybody else. They made a potlatch and I

did not even... [drifts off in thought]. Hardy was there, he was not feeling very good but he was still OK.

It is not known exactly when Marlene died, but Alaska State Troopers believe that her body was in the woods for at least three months.²⁶⁰ Her body was found May 14, 1981 in a wooded area at mile 32 on the Richardson Highway, south of North Pole, by two men who had been hunting. She had been strangled and then shot in the face so that her features were obliterated.²⁶¹ It could not be confirmed whether she had also been sexually assaulted.

Thomas Richard Bunday, who went by the name Richard, was on active duty in the United States Air Force stationed at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks when he murdered five young women – Glinda Sodermann (19), Doris Oehring (11), Marlene Peters (20), Wendy Wilson (16) and Lori King – killing all of them in a signature style of strangulation, followed by a shot to the face so their features were unrecognizable.²⁶² The bodies of all the young women were found in close proximity to one another. Psychologists believed that rape was not the primary motive as not all of the women had been raped. Married with two children, Bunday had a history of inappropriate behavior with women.²⁶³ Although his name appeared several times as a possible suspect, he eluded capture until 1983, due to a faulty FBI profile.²⁶⁴ When they finally were certain that he was the killer, Alaska State Troopers James McCann and Chris Stockard worked tirelessly to capture him, staging an elaborate sting operation in a hotel room in Texas. Bunday eventually confessed to all the murders.²⁶⁵ Because Alaska State Troopers had no

²⁶⁰ *Fairbanks Daily, News Miner*, May 18, 1981, 3.

²⁶¹ Brennan, 159.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 156-159.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

jurisdiction to arrest anyone in Texas without a warrant, precious time was lost from the time of confession to the point when they could make an arrest.

In the meantime, the family was reeling from the tension and range of emotions they had experienced during the two years while the investigation took place. "When she died, there was more hatred in my being than I could control, I could not stand anyone in military uniform," said Faith "We plotted how we were going to kill [the murderer] when he got off the airplane." Justice for the family was not to be. On March 15, 1983, an hour and half after the confession and after stopping to file his taxes, Richard Bunday was dead; he had purposely driven his motor cycle into a semi-truck.²⁶⁶ "They found the guy, but he took himself out," said Guy. "We were denied justice and closure. That's the problem, we have no closure."

It was not an easy time for me and for everybody else. I was angry at that man that shot her. I was angry at him. After the death of my daughter, I don't think that I would have survived if I did not have Jesus in my life. I would not have. My good friend, Bill Hickenbochum, came to Tanana when they found Marlene, he was sittin' there. He tell me, "Helen, I want you to put it on tape for me. How you feel. How you're surviving." I told them on the tape how I felt. I tell them, "First few days I did not feel anything, just like on air, just like on a dream, just like nothing happened, just like it was not anything." And then pretty soon I started feeling this hurt around in my heart. My heart just hurt. And I tell Dr. James, "Gee, my heart hurt." He tell me, "I wish I could do somethin' for you but there's nothing I can do for that." He was sittin' there [at the] kitchen table with me. Dr. James came to Tanana and he was sittin' there and I tell him how it's hurting in my heart. And he tell me, "I wish I could help you but that's somethin' I could not help you with." That's the kind of hurt it is, losing a child, that way. When you lose a

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 168.

child with sickness it's a different thing but when you lose a child in violence and, she was not even ready for death and dies, that's something different. I did not sleep much. Hardy was in the hospital, I was alone. I was working. I was hurting, gosh.

9.2 Hardy Passes

Marlene's ashes were interred on May 18, 1981, at the family cemetery in Tanana, alongside her ancestors. Most of the children were no longer living at home, except for Mary Ann who was only eleven years old. Hardy was feeling better physically, as his cancer was in remission, and he wanted to go back to Cook School in Arizona to finish their training. Hardy, Helen and Mary Ann were in Arizona only three months when the cancer once again became active and they had to return to Alaska for medical treatment. *That fall, we even went back to Arizona, him and I. He wanted to go back, Hardy did. But he could not stay. It [the cancer] came back in November so we moved back to Alaska.* Hardy flew back to Anchorage while Helen and Guy drove the car up from Phoenix. *We got there end of November I think. Anyway, we were there for Christmas. Hardy had to go back to the hospital so we took him to Anchorage hospital and they said he had to stay there near the hospital. Faith had a friend that let us have her apartment in town [Anchorage]. We stayed there until they found a place for us in Palmer, so we moved to Palmer. Guy and the girls were all in school, except Mary Ann was in school there in Palmer. We just stayed there and then that winter he lived and in August²⁶⁷ he died. He did not want to stay in the hospital so we just drove him back and forth.²⁶⁸ And this one day he say, "Give me a shower." And I gave him a shower. He say, "Let's have Holy Communion." All the kids were there and we had Holy Communion. We drove him to town and he said, "The kids can*

²⁶⁷ Hardy died on September 13, 1982.

²⁶⁸ The family would drive from Palmer to Anchorage where Hardy underwent cancer treatments. Family members would also travel from Fairbanks or Tanana to be with their parents.

go home but stay with me.” So I did, he died that morning. And that doctor just cried because she could not do anything. He did not want anybody to bother him because he was going to die.

Then I just stayed there, got him ready. I bought a coffin and they flew him to Fairbanks. The Palmer church gave me some money and we drove up to Fairbanks and then from there they had service at St. Matthew’s [Episcopal Church in Fairbanks] for him, and then the next day we all flew back to Tanana and to our house and then they had funeral there. Minto people came, Ruby people came and we had a big potlatch and I had a big give-away. And then I was there, there was nobody, just Guy and Mary Ann. Mary Ann was going to Mount Edgumbe, so she went to Mount Edgumbe and I was alone.²⁶⁹

9.3 Processing Grief

To process the profound grief of losing her daughter and her husband, Helen retreated to nature and went to Sixteen Mile Island, sixteen miles upriver from Tanana on the Yukon by herself. Helen’s traditional fish camp where she had caught fish with nets for over twenty years was here. Many years later, in the 1990s, Helen’s camp was used as a site where “Spirit Camp” was conducted for the youth of Tanana.

I used to go to there, Sixteen Mile Island, and just stay there. That really helped me. It was in May, after they had potlatch, after everybody left, I had a boat and motor, I went up to Sixteen Mile Island. My two dogs Doyon and Tozit just follow me around the island. I walk around the island, hollering and hollering. First thing, mad, I was really mad. Lay on the rocks, cry, wind up praying, crying and praying, screaming. My dogs howl when I scream. They just howl. One day somebody stopped by and said there’s a grizzly right at the end of the island on the shore. I tell ‘em, “It’s Ok.” They tell me, “Are you sure?” “Yeah, it’s ok, I’m alright.” And

²⁶⁹ Mount Edgumbe is a state sponsored boarding school located in Southeast Alaska.

late that evening it got across [the river by] me, laid on the beach on that side of me. It just walked across. And I thought, my grandma said, they don't like the smell of burning cloth. So there was a mattress that needed to be burned so I brought it over and I put on the camp fire and it just burned all night. It [the bear] was still over there lying down and I went to bed. The dogs got into the bed, they just sleep by me. The next morning I woke up, there was a squirrel that come up the side of the tent come in. There were two squirrels that stand there, talk to each other. They look at me and they talk. I thought what a nice way to wake up to somebody gossiping about you. "I would like to know what you two are talkin' about," I said. And they shook off and walked away. It was just funny. Then I went out and that bear was gone, never did come back. It was gone.

9.4 Memorial Potlatch for Marlene and Hardy in 1989

The family held potlatches for both Marlene and Hardy immediately following their respective funeral services. Although there are similarities, funeral potlatches and memorial potlatches are different types of potlatches. Memorial potlatches are conducted several years after a person's death, whenever the family feels ready. Helen hosted a large potlatch in memory of Hardy and Marlene in 1989, seven years after Hardy's death, and eight years after Marlene's death. Helen prepared for at least three years before hosting a memorial potlatch for Hardy and Marlene. *That was a big potlatch. Man, the biggest potlatch Tanana ever had. Minto people came, people from Fort Yukon came, from Huslia, Hughes, Ruby, there's a lot of people here. I invited Bill James and Mark Boesser; he was the priest in Palmer. And at the first night, the beginning of the potlatch they came in with the Alaska Flag and Flag of America and they just came in the hall with it, circled around and came back and put it up on top the stage. That was the beginning. And a lot of little kids got up and they sang a song about Alaska. "This is my*

home.” It was just cute, they wanted to do that – Alaska is my home. That was the beginning. Three days of that. When I was in Cook School there were some people there who make those little white canvass bags and I don’t know how many of them I had made, bunch of them two, three hundred dollars’ worth of bags. I just send them back to Tanana before I even moved back. Sent stuff up you know, ship them up ahead of me. Three years it took for me to [gather enough gifts and other items together to host a potlatch], well I was alone you know. Three years it took for me. And I took three hundred fifty blankets from Sears and they ship it to Tanana.

How I did my groceries, bought it here [Fairbanks] and mailed it. I got my coffee in those five gallon cans. Mayonnaise and everything in those five gallon cans for the potlatch - shipped them up through the mail. When I was going back [to Tanana] I came up and sent fresh foods, you know fresh stuff, potatoes and onions, fifty pounds of potatoes and fifty pounds of onions and things like that – rice, macaroni, sandwich meat, bread, just everything – I don’t know how many cases of bread I sent down. Man there was a lot of food. We had a couple of moose. Don and Mike were out there cookin’ and other men were outside cooking. There’s just some things I even forgot like porcupine and other things that I had gotten ready, and I got so busy with things I forgot about cookin’ those things for the elders that were there. But it was just amazing. Man, I had lots of stuff! And Mo, my brother, potlatched for his brothers [Julius, Nelson and Bill] the same time as me.

And I just wish I could remember that song they made for him [Hardy]. One day I looked for it, put it on tape so everybody will know his song and know Marlene’s song.²⁷⁰ She had a real nice song, Mabel Charlie made that song for her and she got up and sang it. And I did not know it very well but when I got up to sing it, just like something came over me, just, and I just start

²⁷⁰ Helen is referring to the songs that are written for the deceased in preparation of the memorial potlatch. Hardy and Marlene had their own unique song which is only sung during the memorial potlatch.

singing that song. And that's the one you drum...and they say you don't play it again but I'll find it and we'll listen to it. That was a really nice song she made for my baby, my Marlene. I still find things at home she [Marlene did]. She wrote a lot you know, she had a lot of books she wrote in and stories and pictures she drew. I think Faith has got it all. I gave it all to Faith so she could do something with it, put it on tape or something you know, CD, put it on CD or something.

Over the years, Helen would reflect on how she survived two stunning losses of her loved ones in such close proximity, as well as how she overcame the early childhood losses, trauma and great obstacles such as alcohol abuse throughout her life. Others would ask her about it from time to time. *And everybody used to say, "How could you go through all that?" I tell them, "I could not; no way a person could go through [those] things by themselves." I tell them, "My Jesus is by my side and He take care of things for me, take care of me." One woman asked me how I could live without drinking. I tell her, "Well that is not me, I asked God to be with me and He'll take care of me, and He'll keep those things away from me, I would not have to depend on something like that, I depend on Jesus to help me through things, through hard times." I tell her, "I know I'm not the only one, there's many people in this world that's suffering."*

In addition to working and staying busy, Helen leaned heavily on prayer and fellowship with other Christian people to process the loss of her husband and daughter and busied herself with church activities in order to not think too much about it. She even traveled to other countries on evangelistic trips. She poured herself into the care of others and through this, healing came to her heart and mind.

My friend Bill Hickenbockum taped me and told them this story of Marlene. He sent them out to people whose kids got killed or got in car accident or murdered or something, he sent those tapes out to them. And when I was traveling to Russia, I stopped in New York and went to

this hotel. I went in and the lady there said, "Your name." And I said, "Helen Peters." And way back in the hallway "Helen Peters!" And this lady came running out, grabbed me and hugged me and tell me, "I got your tape, Marlene's tape!" "Hickenbockum sent it to me. My son was killed, my only son. I play that tape every day," she said. So my tapes went around the world I guess.

The ensuing years immediately following the deaths of Marlene and Hardy were particularly difficult for the Peters/Andon family. Helen's memory about the timing of events after their deaths is blurred and she has difficulty placing her memories in chronological order. The two deaths mark a time when family life as they knew it stopped and many of her children spiraled into a dark place. Several of her children fell into destructive patterns of alcohol and drug abuse. More difficulties arose as two teenage daughters had children who were given up for adoption. A beloved son went to jail and other family members dropped out of relationships with one another. "Dad was the anchor," said Guy. "When he passed, everybody sank, everybody started drifting." Some memories take more time to heal than others, and the family continues to process the loss of Marlene and Hardy.

In her state of grief and confusion about where to go from here, Helen returned to Arizona by herself to finish her training. She finished out the year and then returned to Tanana. *I went back to Arizona. That was a mistake. I hardly could do any study. I ran five miles a day, and that's my cry time. It was really hard. I met the secretary there and she became a very good friend of mine, Joanne. She helped me through the time I was there. It was very lonely time for me to be there and try to do work.*

I came back [to Tanana] and I just started doing Sunday school at home. I did Sunday schools in the summertime and just morning prayers and little things. I just kept the doors open

in the church, that's about it. Just continue workin'. While I was there I was thinkin' "What am I going to do?" The school changed, but I guess I could have asked for a job there but I did not. I just stayed home, went up camp, you know, things like that. All my children were all drinking, just out of it you know.

Anyway, I was just wondering, "What am I gonna do?" The telephone rang; it was Mike Graff from TCC. He say, "We're lookin' for somebody to work with the mental illness people, to take care of them. Your name came up when we were in a meeting so we decided to call you first before we call anybody else, would you take the job?" I tell him, "Yes!" So I took that job and they moved me up [to Fairbanks], had me stay in a hot little apartment because they're workin' on that building. Helen became the manager of the Paul Williams House located on Twenty Third Avenue in Fairbanks. This was a patient hostel owned and operated by the Tanana Chiefs Conference for mental health patients who needed a place to stay while in Fairbanks seeking treatment. She worked there until she retired in 1996.

Helen worked her entire life, never receiving welfare, and imparted a strong work ethic to her children. Many of her children and grandchildren received college education degrees. The tribe's songs and other cultural practices remain at the core of the community due to her efforts. Over time, her children emerged from the chaos of their early life strong, and some semblance of family life resumed. Several children have lived clean and sober for many years and several children have become leaders in the Tanana and Fairbanks communities and beyond. One son, Guy, followed her into the ministry. Her children and grandchildren are a treasure to her, and Helen takes great pride in their accomplishments.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

Helen's life has been a public testimony of how faith in God can help a person overcome great obstacles and trauma. Through the words on these pages she publicly challenges the silence that is killing Native people by disallowing discussion of the effects substance abuse, violence and sexual assault has had on them. During the 2013 Alaska Federation of Natives' convention, Helen took a stand when she publicly supported the testimony of her granddaughter, along with other youth of the Tanana 4-H group, who spoke directly to convention participants about the effects that alcohol, drugs and violence in the community have had on them.

Helen was so moved by their words that she felt the need to acknowledge her granddaughter's courage. She walked to the stage and put her blue scarf on the ground and said *I'm going to pledge \$100, so pledge with me for this group.*²⁷¹ Over \$9,000 was raised.²⁷² Helen's act of stepping forward and laying down her scarf did more than validate the youth; it was a signal to the Native community that it is time to talk about these difficult topics and to not leave the weight of them with the youth. The audience signaled their agreement by contributing.

The moment resonated so powerfully with the audience that one could physically sense the atmosphere changing. Recognizing the significance of this moment, journalist Dermot Cole wrote, "...the procession to the stage sent a message nearly as powerful as the statements by the kids. It made clear that other people understand the frustration, worry and fear that brought the children to the stage."²⁷³ This incident dramatically exemplifies Helen's walking in a renewed authority. Her son Guy says, "When my mother rose from her chair among thousands of

²⁷¹ Dermot Cole, "Anti-Suicide 'Tanana Pledge' Captivates Native Convention, Elicits \$9,000 in Donations" *Alaska Dispatch*, October 25, 2013.

²⁷² The money will be used by the Tanana 4-H group for general purposes.

²⁷³ Ibid.

delegates to place her blue scarf on the stage in support of the children, she was demonstrating the God-given authority she had gained from a life time of trials.”

Helen is a remarkable woman and leaves a strong legacy as a minister, community leader and traditional elder. The faith she has in God, and her resolve to follow Him no matter what allowed her to keep going in the face of much adversity. Hers is a poignant and powerful story. With few exceptions, there is a dearth of literature about the lives of women in Helen’s generation and the struggles they endured. As a traditional Native Elder, Helen courageously takes the lead in breaking the code of silence by speaking about the harsher side of growing up in a village, opening the door for others to walk through. She feels it important to no longer remain silent about sexual abuse, domestic violence and suicide. For that we are indebted to her.

A deep faith in God has allowed Helen to overcome great obstacles and have a thankful and joyful heart, despite the trauma and incomprehensible tragedy she has experienced. Most people never experience one of the tragedies that Helen did in her life, let alone all of them. “There is nothing intrinsically ennobling about suffering,” wrote New York Time Op-Ed Columnist, David Brooks, “But some people are clearly ennobled by it.”²⁷⁴ Agony can drive a person to a depth which draws out an unknown reserve and “the healing process, too, feels as though it’s part of some natural or divine process beyond individual control,” Brooks observed.²⁷⁵ Helen’s life exemplifies the divine in the healing process.

Helen remains an active and vibrant person, full of love and life. She fills her time with many rewarding activities. In particular, she loves to spend time with her grandchildren and enjoys hearing them laugh and have fun together. She loves to engage with them by going to movies or going sledding with them – even into her eighties! Other favorite activities include

²⁷⁴ Brooks, D. "What Suffering Does," 1.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 2.

spending summers at the Zuray fish camp located at the Rapids on the Yukon River, where she and her daughters jar and dry king salmon; and visiting with family and friends. Her days are filled with myriad projects and pursuits, and she remains engaged with an extensive network of friends and family.

Helen maintains a home in Tanana although she spends much time in Fairbanks, especially during the winter. As a resident elder of Tanana, Helen is often called upon to represent the Tanana Tribe at various functions in Tanana and Fairbanks, many times opening events in prayer. She continues to pass along her Native knowledge through programs and activities hosted by entities such as the Fairbanks Native Association (FNA), *Denakenaga* (a youth and elders meeting), and the Tanana Tribal Council. It was through her efforts and those of her dear friend, Pinky Folger, that the Tanana Traditional Dance group continues to thrive. In 2006, Doyon Limited, the Alaska Native Corporation for Alaska's Interior, named Helen Elder of the Year. She remains engaged in numerous organizations and often has the FNA van pick her up so she can go "lunching" with other elders in Fairbanks. Nearly every day, FNA cooks a lunch for the elders at their building, although sometimes they go to a restaurant. On occasion, they do special projects, and sometimes they visit schools or rehabilitation centers. Helen thoroughly enjoys these outings.

Helen is steadfast in her faith and has served as a minister in various roles for over forty years. Since becoming ordained in 2004, she takes her priestly duties seriously and is driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. In addition to serving the St. James Church at Tanana, Helen serves the Athabascan community at-large in times of crisis, being on hand to minister to the dying, pray with people, comfort grieving families and bury the dead. She also serves in times of joy at baptisms, weddings, special events and dedications of buildings or other activities. She knows

personally at least one member of the Alaska Congressional Delegation and many other dignitaries. The late Morris Thompson²⁷⁶ regularly called upon her to open Doyon, Limited board meetings in prayer. She has journeyed internationally to Israel, Korea, and Russia to share her faith. She continues to travel to Interior villages for ministry and to Anchorage and Fairbanks for meetings or doctor's appointments. When possible, she returns to Arizona to visit friends and her daughter, Helen.

At eighty-four years old, Helen has a renewed vigor and understanding of spiritual matters. She continues to evolve spiritually as maturity and experience have given her peace and serenity she lacked in her younger years. Through daily devotions and prayer she has made a conscious decision to delve deeper into the word of God to know Him better. The result is that she has begun to walk in her God-given authority as a representative of the Gospel and as an elder of Tanana in a different way. She is speaking and praying with an authority that she has not had before.

Helen urges people to begin to talk about the difficulties they have experienced and she continues to pray for each one of her children, grandchildren, and members of the community. Her primary hope and prayer is, *One day, before I go, they [would] all know the Lord. Everybody, that's my prayer.*

²⁷⁶ Morris Thompson was a respected leader from Tanana who gained prominence in the 1970s as the leader of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1985 he became the president of Doyon, Limited, one of the 13 Native Corporations established during ANSCA. He died January 31, 2000 in the Alaska Airlines flight 261 crash. He is buried in Tanana.



Figure 8: Helen conducting Easter Sunday Service 2012. Photo by Faith Peters

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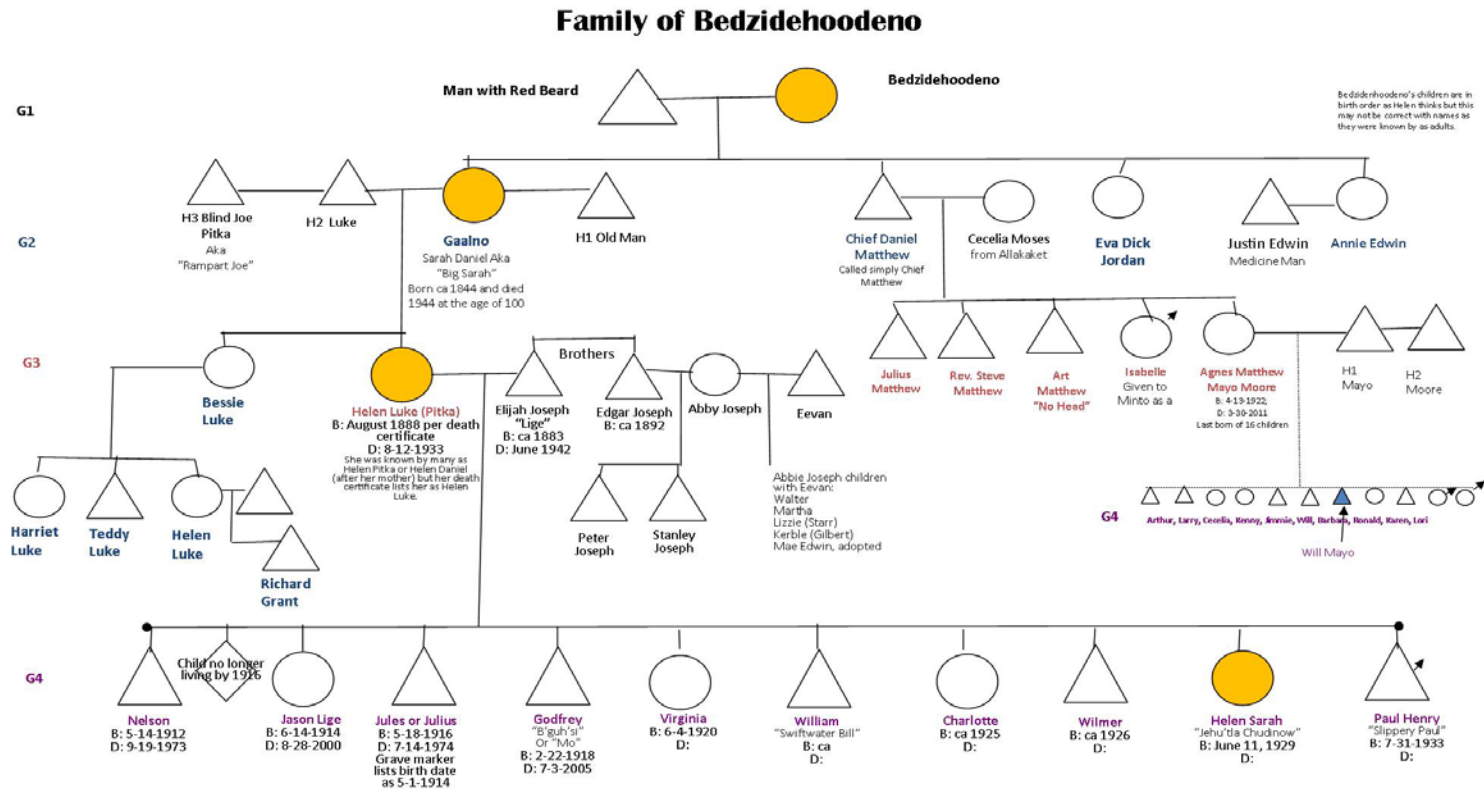
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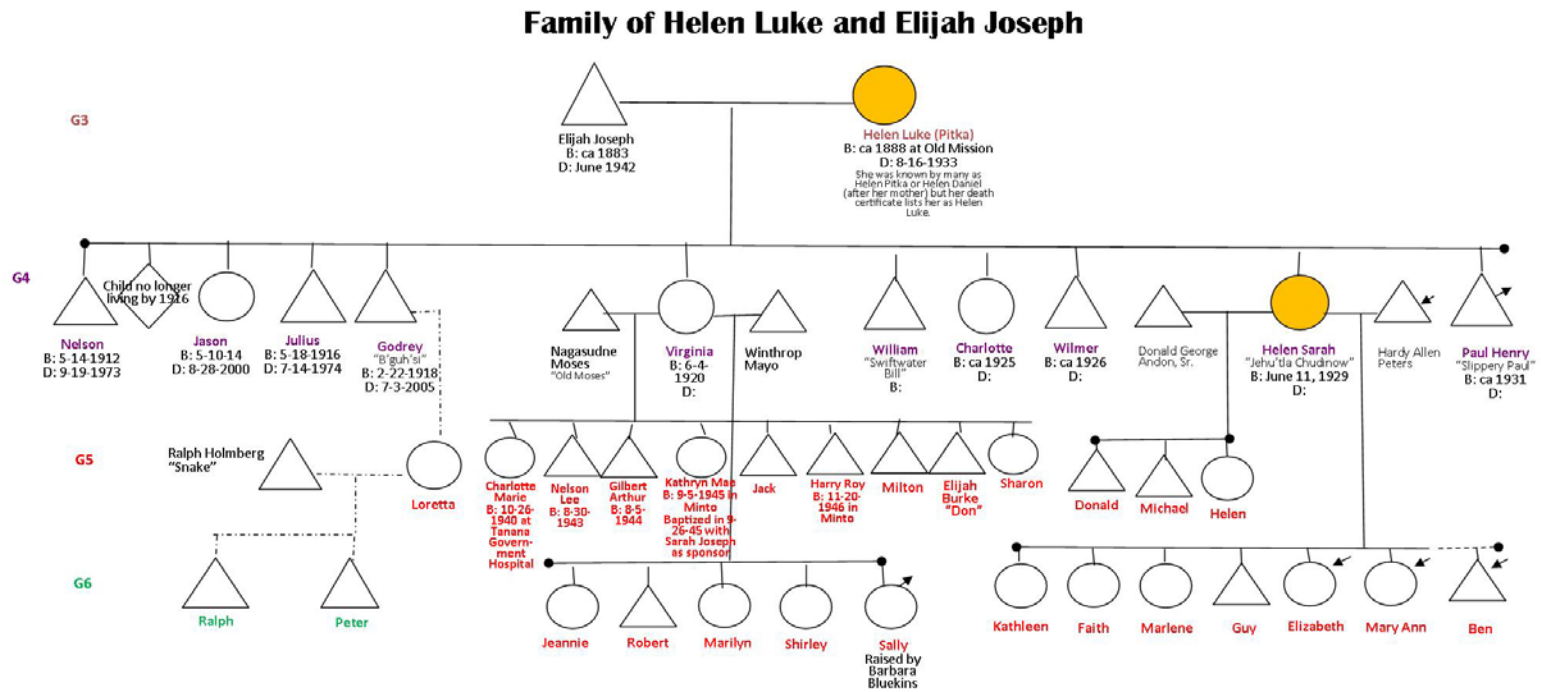
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Appendices

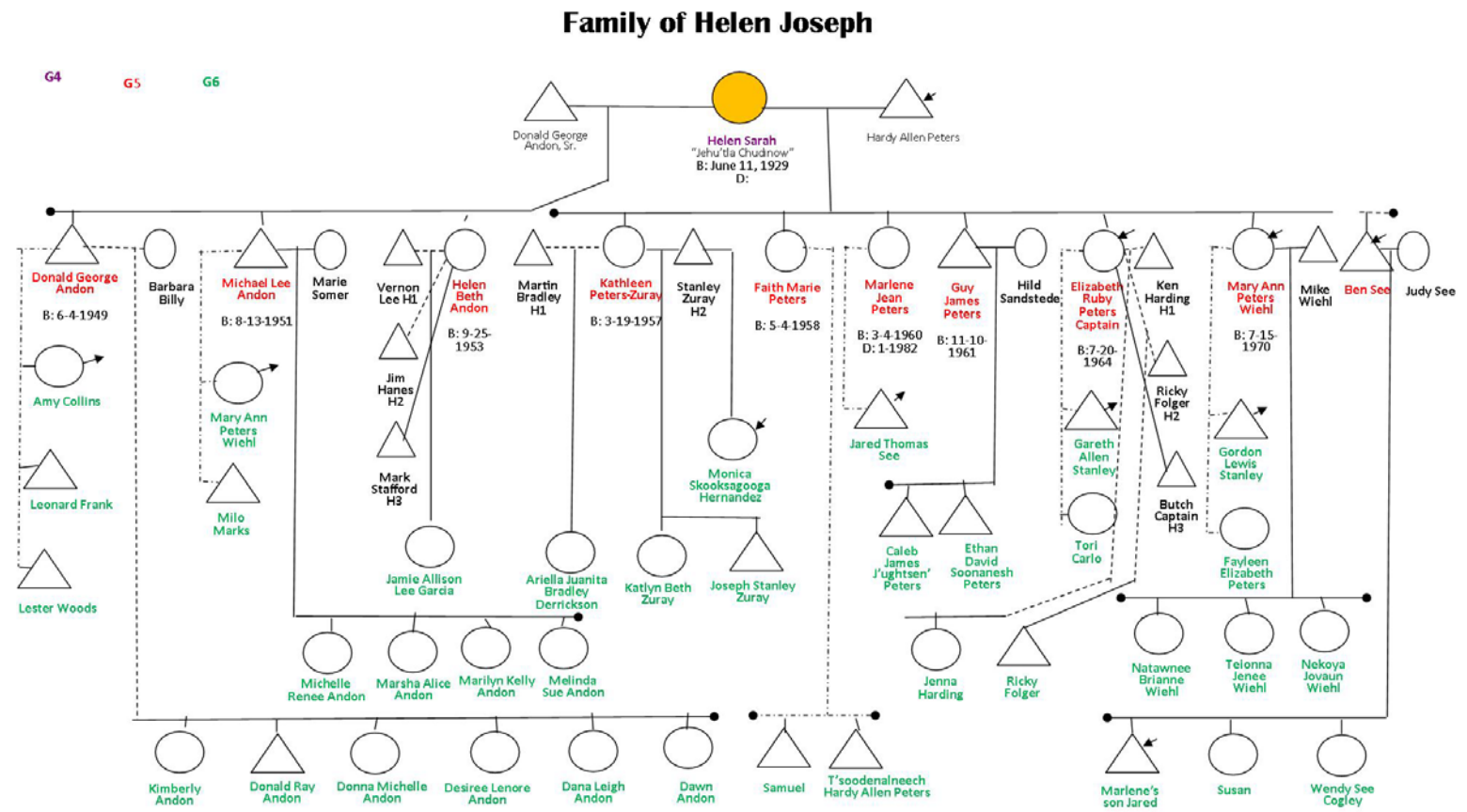
Appendix 1 - Family of *Bedzidehoodeno*



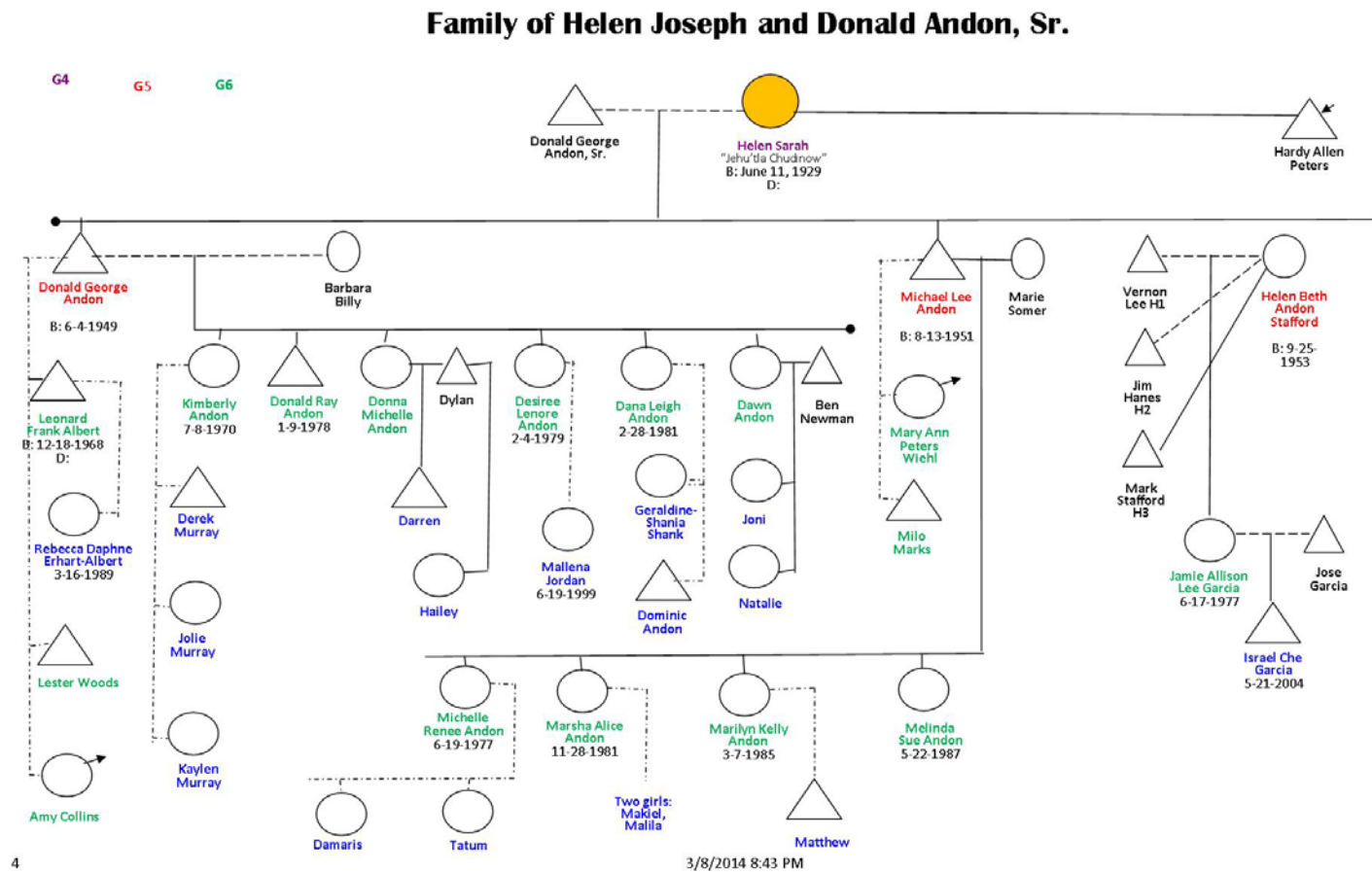
Appendix 2 - Family of Helen Luke and Elijah Joseph



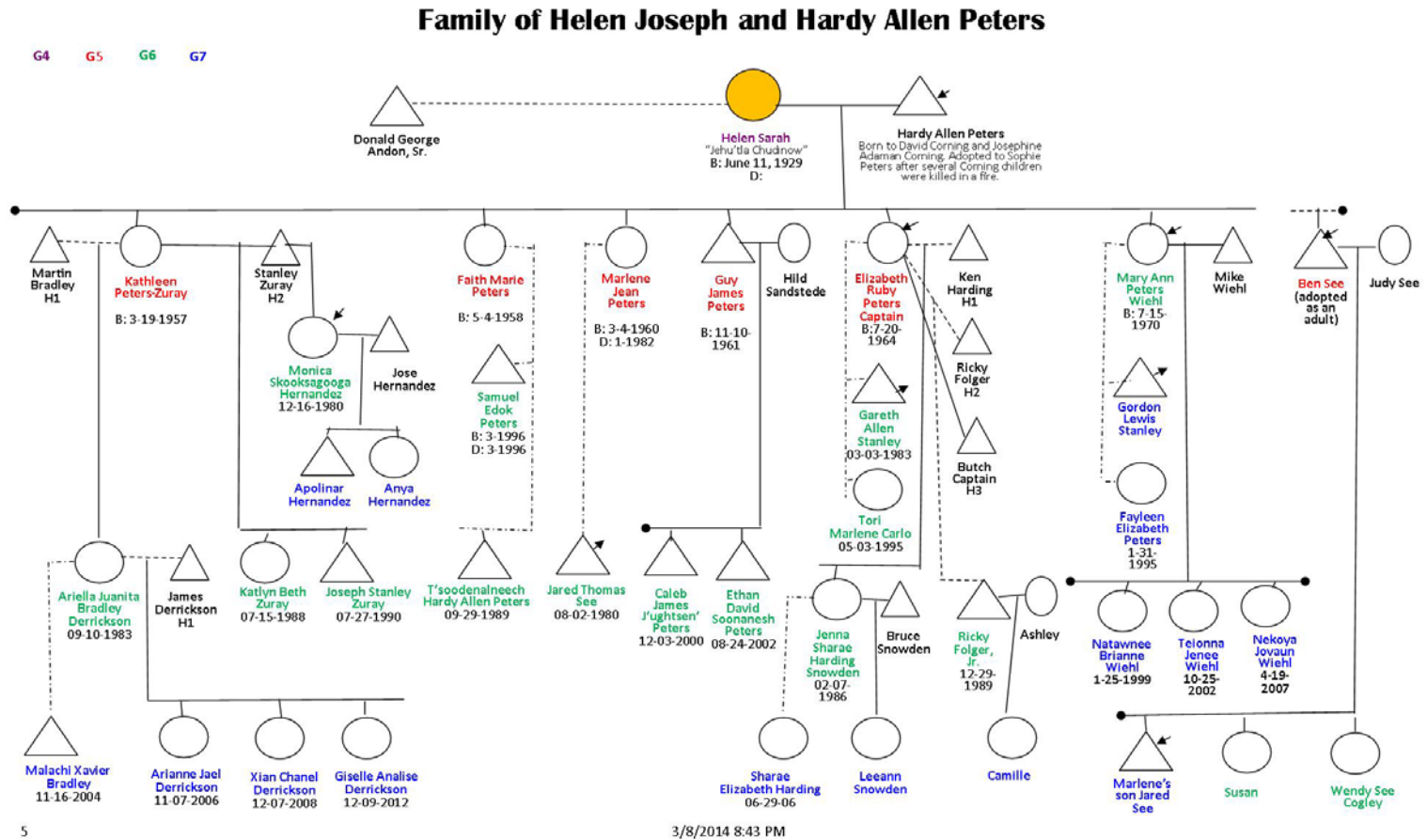
Appendix 3 - Family of Helen Joseph - All



Appendix 4 - Family of Helen Joseph and Don Andon



Appendix 5 - Family of Helen Joseph and Hardy Allen Peters



Appendix 6 - Key

KEY

