LIVING THE FRONTIER MYTH IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

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On the cusp of the millennium, a small number of people live near the community of Central, Alaska in the heart of the state that calls itself "The Last Frontier". On the edge of largely uninhabited lands this group of people have chosen a way of living consistent with traditional American ideals of self-reliance, independence, solitude, and wilderness. Seeking a place to build a quality life integrating meaning and value, far from crowded situations, they have planted themselves in a wild and natural setting. Their narratives display the influence of the physical environment on their view of themselves, others, and the broadening of their inner capabilities. Their stories communicate the fear that this distinct way of living is being brought to an end through conservation efforts and governmental regulation. Preserving this lifeway is important as it contributes to the richness of human diversity and expresses universal themes in its stories.
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Finally I’d like to acknowledge my immediate family, particularly my husband, Rick Tyrrell, for the moral support, and the dishes, laundry, and chores performed, enabling me to find enough enough hours in a day to complete my studies.
Introduction:

Living at the End of the Road

On Route Six the pavement ends forty four miles out of Fairbanks, Alaska. Better known as the Steese Highway, this road stretches one hundred and twenty miles after it turns to dirt, ending in the community of Circle at the edge of the mighty Yukon River. Although the term, highway, denotes heavy traffic, rapidly cruising on paved, lighted bypasses, the Steese is a lonely stretch of road. Dusty in the summer and at times perilous during the winter, it becomes narrower and windier the farther one drives from the city of Fairbanks. By the time the pavement ends no phone nor electrical poles line the lane and a half strip of highway. Side roads begin to peter out, few houses are visible, most signs of human habitation are missing.

One hundred and seven miles from Fairbanks the road passes over Eagle Summit. At 3,685 feet, it is well above the limit of the trees in this far north land. With few guardrails to act as a boundary, the feeling of immense space is unmistakable. The tundra falls away dramatically first on one side of the highway then on the other. The magnificent alpine wildflowers nod in the summer breeze giving little hint of the terrifying winter winds that cause the dangerous atmospheric condition known as a “white out”, where a driver cannot tell road from sky.

On the far side of the summit is a wide spot in the road providing a vista of the contour of the land. Rolling tundra slowly gives way to the spruce and hardwood forests of the lower elevations. Birch Creek valley and the Yukon River course are discernible as steep sided cliffs rising from indentions in the shape of the distant hills. There are traces of human occupation visible, an old trail, a tailing pile, a straight line of differing vegetation across the hillside, but the meandering rivers, the varied natural plants and animals are the dominant role in the landscape.

One hundred and twenty-eight miles northeast of Fairbanks one encounters a cluster of homes and businesses. This tiny rural community
known as Central, was at one time referred to as the Grand Central Station of the North. It served as a freight transfer point from the Yukon River to the numerous mines on the gold bearing creeks in the area. In the beginning of this millennium a small number of people have chosen to make this place their home.

Rural situations in the state of Alaska, the United States, and perhaps most places in the world, are declining in numbers as the bulk of the population choose to reside in urban environments. The 1998 figures published by the Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section manifest this urban concentration in Alaska. Although 621,400 people make this state their home over half live in the Anchorage metropolitan area, (313,308). Fairbanks North Star Borough boasts 83,928 of the Interior Region’s 98,647. The rest of vast Interior boasts two percent of the state’s population scattered among its villages, communities, and spaces between. Clearly the total number of people who live and attempt to earn a living in rural situations is a tiny fraction of the whole. Central’s population seems infinitesimal.

What attracted these people to make a home in the Alaskan Interior known for its harsh conditions? Why is Alaska the place they can carry out their dreams and ideals? Why would they choose to live a lifestyle reminiscent of the American frontier? Cat skinner, guide, pilot, gold miner, bead worker, subsistence hunter, fisherman, or trapper is not an ordinary job. How did they learn the knowledge and skills they need to survive in a totally different environment? What pressures would make them give up this lifestyle and move on? Through written sources, interviews, and the analysis of their stories I have undertaken to find the answers to these questions.

Literature Review

A wide variety of literature and academic material were chosen to augment and focus attention upon the questions. Perspectives on the concept of the frontier as a force in American history and personality, were a specific part of the research. Frederick Jackson Turner formed a much debated hypothesis
that life on the frontiers of America forged distinctive social, economic, and political institutions. In his document, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, he postulated that existence carried out on the advancing edges of civilization required adaption to conditions individuals had not experienced in their lives before. The land itself demanded new ways of thinking and doing. Turner claims America with its form of government, and the American people were molded by the existence of life on the frontier. He examined, described, and formulated the origins of the frontier myth.

Historical background on the interior of Alaska with particular emphasis on the land and its usage around Circle and Central was investigated. Melody Webb describes the history of the area in her book, *The Last Frontier, A History of the Yukon Basin of Canada and Alaska*. She concurs with Turner's conjectures, stating that Alaska is a place people can still break the boundaries of conformity and improvise new ways of meeting the challenge of the environment. She describes the Yukon as a place "virtually untouched by permanent intrusions. It still provides a setting that nourishes the last frontier" (Webb 309).

Richard A. Caulfield's work with the people who lived along the Yukon River documents the existence of white settlers in the area under discussion. In *Subsistence Use in and Around the Proposed Yukon-Charley National Rivers*, Caulfield establishes the way of living in the land and off the land that is a part of the style of life people have chosen to practice.

A particular focus of my study was the combination of the frontier concept, environmental awareness, and the formation of a wilderness ideal. On a national scale the work of Roderick Nash in his classic study of American attitudes toward the natural environment examines concepts of frontier and wilderness. Using the Turnerian view of the frontier in his book, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, he demonstrates the importance of wilderness to our national history and heritage. He associates the pioneer frontier with unique and desirable national characteristics (145). He further imbues wilderness with multifaceted value linking cultural, scientific, aesthetic, spiritual, and
psychological values, indeed the fundamental well being of human survival, to the existence of wild land.

Theodore R. Catton's work, "Inhabited Wilderness: The Making of Alaska's National Parks", links the national ideal and its concrete expression in the establishment of parks in Alaska. He also links Alaska to the embodiment of the frontier myth in the American mind.

The translation of environmental values into political realities through the conservation of large tracts of land, the debate this engendered, and the political process itself are separate areas of my academic inquiry.

Peter A. Coates, in The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy: Technology, Conservation and the Frontier, traces the history of the conservation movement and its influence on the political development of the lands within Alaska. He indicates two extreme visions of land use based upon fundamentally different value systems, sharing the common thread connecting Alaska and the Frontier. Both visions employ the powerful symbolism of the importance of wilderness to the American psyche. One vision supports development of the economic potential represented by the natural resources and the other visualizes an unspoiled and untouchable natural habitat.

Charles O. Jones, in An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy, and Charles E. Lindblom and Edward J. Woodhouse, in The Policy-Making Process, clarify exactly what the policy process is in the United States. They describe the interaction of interest groups within the political system, the method the expression of environmental concern could become the law of the land through the legislative arena, and how the bureaucratic system renders the law into action.

Oran R. Young, in Arctic Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the Circumpolar North, discussed the political situation of northern communities with respect to the larger urban concentrations of people who often control the political climate of a nation. He describes the difficulties encountered in administering natural resources that not only cross political boundaries, but ideological frameworks.
Popular fiction and nonfiction reflect the tides of social interest and experiences people wish to relate to. Northern literature dealing with adventures in the frozen northland and wilderness experiences were chosen to identify the themes represented. The historical perspective was studied from three specific books on the gold rush, *Women of the Klondike* by Frances Backhouse, *Gold Rush Women* by Claire Rudolf Murphy & Jane G. Haigh, and *Good Time Girls* by Layle Morgan. These written accounts document the diversity of women who came north during the Gold Rush era, portray the lives they conducted, and its meaning to them as a defining moment of their lives.

Through the use of first person accounts written by those who undertook a journey to and life within the Alaskan frontier, I researched past and present experiences. These books provide a personal perspective on living in the wilds of Alaska. *Fishcamp* by Nancy Lord, is the author’s story of life in a current salmon fishing camp. *Trail to North Star Gold* by Ella Lung Martinsen, is the tale of a woman who followed her husband during the Gold Rush days. *Girl in the Gold Camp* by Peggy Rouch Dodson, is a book written largely from a journal kept during the Gold Rush spent in a camp close to Central, Alaska. Jo Anne Wold wrote, *The Way It Was: of People, Places and Things in Pioneer Interior Alaska*, incorporating narratives of many lives, including ones spent in the Central area, expressing the significance of living in this place and the adventures people experienced. *Arctic Daughter* by Jean Aspen, is the adventure of a woman and her husband who chose to move as far as possible from urban influences by building a cabin on the side of a river in the Alaskan wilderness.

*Into the Wild* by John Krakauer, is a story of one man’s quest to deal with wilderness adversity. *Coming into the Country* by John McPhee, contains many accounts of inhabitants of rural communities and isolated homes along the Yukon River. Both books are cited as literature written about this lifestyle from the viewpoint of an outsider and provided valuable insights.

Classic American authors of the transcendental movement and early environmental writings were pursued to focus upon elements concerning the
integration of values and meaning. Henry David Thoreau's, *Walden*, was studied as a Turnerian expression of Yankee ingenuity. Expounding upon the excessive materialism of his own time, he decided to live a different way. In 1846 in an act of independence and self-reliance he built a cabin at Walden Pond with his own two hands. Without many luxuries he attempted to strip life to the bare essentials in a wild environment.

The environmental movement points to the wilderness values expressed by adventurers in Alaska, such as John Muir in *Travels in Alaska*, or Margaret Muire in *Two in the Far North*. These writings convey in glowing terms the wonder of the beauty of nature and the absolute grandeur of wild places in Alaska.

Visions of the “Good Life” were researched, particularly the modern dream called the back-to-the-land movement. Jeffrey Jacob conducted surveys and interviews throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. In *New Pioneers, The Back-to-the-land Movement and the search for a Sustainable Future*, he analyzes the lifestyles of people all across the nation who moved away from an urban environment and a materialistic society to small acreages located in or near rural communities. Philosophical underpinnings include ideals of independent living while enjoying the beauty of nature, the closeness of friends and family, and the richness of life connected with the land.

Jennifer Brice draws upon two separate families that live pioneer lifestyles within the state of Alaska. In *The Last Settlers*, she describes the philosophies that drew them to live in the “Last Frontier” as well as their daily lives and experiences.

The use of story, narrative, and oral histories to display issues of importance to differing groups of people, were examined. Oral history recordings housed at the University of Alaska Fairbanks were reviewed for information specific to living in Circle, Central, Eagle, or in between these communities. The work done by William Schneider and Dan O’Neil during the creation of the Yukon-Charley interactive jukebox is heavily cited during the chapter dealing with the lives of “The River People”.
Readings of particular significance reflected the way in which people use their narratives to establish who they are, what this means to them, and how they shape the past and future through their interpretation of events. The stories display the symbols and perceptions of the tellers and the meaning their experiences hold for them.

Timothy C. Lloyd and Patrick B. Mullen conducted in depth research with Lake Erie Fishermen. The link between stories and occupation is explored in their book, Lake Erie Fishermen: Work, Tradition and Identity. For the fishermen "an important part of their self-image is that they are outdoorsmen who are close to nature as part of their everyday experiences" (113). Through their narratives and a shared body of knowledge they established a group identity and an insider and outsider relationship. The fishermen tell they have struggled to maintain individual and group identities in the face of social changes they feel will destroy the occupation.

Edward D. Ives, in George Magoon and the Down East Game War explores the creation of folk heroes in stories from Maine. Magoon was an outlaw whose tales of outwitting game enforcement officials served the community as a method of wish fulfillment. Ives believes that these outlaw heroes, like Magoon, come at a time of economic and social crises and serve to champion a segment of society (27).

The final area of academic inquiry linked with the interpretation of the stories from Central included the use of a story, tale, or myth itself as a quest for quality and meaning, a search for something mysteriously valuable. The symbols in myth are abstract expressions of universal human experiences that represent goals and common truths. The structure of the hero's tale follows a pattern that involves images and characters which have meaning for many cultures and times.

Joseph Campbell explores in his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, the stages of a myth. The mythological hero sets forth to the threshold of adventure. Beyond this threshold the hero journeys through an unfamiliar world. Some of the events and people he meets threaten him, which constitutes
a test of character. The hero undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The final stage is that of return (245 - 246). Adventures are perils, obstacles, difficulties that require the mythical hero to break past the horizons that limit others to make unfathomable realizations. According to Campbell people choose not to follow the "safely marked general highways of the day", but they choose the adventure of the special way, through "difficulties not commonly encountered" (21).

Shirley Park Lowry, in *Familiar Mysteries: The Truth in Myth* expresses the idea that this pattern is known to all of us as it is, "in enlarged, dramatic form, the pattern of our own experience" (90). They represent stages in every life. Lowry analyzes the adventure as a testing experience that wrenches the individual "from comfortable, familiar patterns, the conventional life and conventional wisdoms" (77). The individual is "thrown upon his own resources" (77) allowing the opportunity to grow or "the chance to discover possibilities that he has not dreamed existed" (78). Through interactions with this perilous place the hero must face extreme danger but, has a supreme revelation of true import, that constitutes his reward.

Methods

In an effort to document this lifeway and understand some of the answers to the stated and other questions, I surveyed, interviewed, and recorded the life stories of both past and present area residents. Through the stories they tell people reveal the meaning of their experiences, their views of themselves, and what they are capable of. They speak to issues of importance such as their concern for the future of this way of living.

The thesis begins with physical descriptions of the land people inhabit and how they interpret their individual identities and capabilities through interactions with this place. Group and community norms which have a profound affect on changing personal definitions are described and examined in Chapter Two. Chapter Three explores the importance and value of this lifeway to those who practice it. Investigated in Chapter Four are the changes
mandated by conservation efforts and the resultant regulations that these people translate as the death knell to this way of life. The Conclusion draws together the significance of this lifeway against the backdrop of our country's heritage and as an expression of human endeavors.

Throughout the thesis people's own stories and narratives are used to demonstrate aspects of their lives. The stories incorporate techniques and customs of this lifeway, residents' symbols of import, and their passionate emotions about living this life. The stories and interpretations are from their own perspective as they search to make meaning out of how they envision their interactions with the environment, themselves, and others. It reveals the narrator's emotions, how they view their participation in this lifestyle, and the effect it has upon their lives.

There is always more than one side to the story both within the community and between it and others outside the community. This thesis constructs events from their viewpoint which may not be internally consistent nor match with the stories that others tell. The presentation has been criticized as highly romantic and perhaps too rosy colored to be consistent with reality. While this may be a valid academic or subjective viewpoint people tend to reconstruct their actions and experiences in a positive and symbolic manner. The more unpleasant aspects of their own behavior are forgotten or purposely left in the mists of the past. These stories are connected to how the people of Central perceive events and make sense of their experiences and may not represent historical accuracy nor the literal "truth".

In depth house to house surveys were conducted in Central, Circle, and Eagle beginning in August, 1993, under the auspices of the National Park Service. The Cooperative Park Studies Unit of the University of Washington and the Department of Natural Resources of Washington State University created a multi page questionnaire which was strictly adhered to during the household interviews. The questions were designed to document contemporary and historic natural resource use patterns within the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve Area. Trapping, fishing, and hunting patterns
were examined and mapped in one-year, five-year, and ten-year increments. As a part of this study I was trained to conduct oral history interviews with the intent to provide case study and background material. As far as I am aware the study was never published, but the stories from some of the interviews became part of this thesis.

Throughout the nineties I continued to collect oral history recordings from past and present community members. In 1996 and 1997 under a grant provided by the Alaska Humanities Forum in partnership with the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Circle District Historical Society, I served as project director in the creation of an interactive computer program in a jukebox format. The program entitled, Central: Reflections Then and Now, utilized recordings, maps, and photographs selected by members of the community to display their homes and lives.

During the 1998-2001 research for this thesis, I had originally set out to document a woman’s perspective on this lifeway. Once these specific interviews were in progress and the stories analyzed it became apparent that their lives could not be isolated from that of their mates. Complimenting and supporting each other the lives of the women and their husbands, lovers, friends, and partners were totally intertwined, making it impossible to separate. Any preponderance on the female viewpoint stems from this intention to describe a separate existence.

Appendix A is the list of questions used for some of the twenty-five recorded interviews I conducted during the research. They were chosen to represent people from different backgrounds who have spent a good deal of time in the country. A semi-structured questionnaire was formulated to allow the respondent freedom to answer in a manner she/he chose. The questions were open ended to encourage honest answers that reflected the person’s own view of self and life while minimizing interviewer affect.

Appendix B is a representative questionnaire used to document the subsistence lifestyle of people who lived and worked within the Yukon-Charley National Preserve.
Appendix C is visual representation of the households in Central. It displays the kind of general economic activity the households participate in, an estimate of the number of years the unit has been in residence in this place, and the type of schooling they have chosen for their children.

Further items of relevance such as the "Shootout at the Okay Corral" and "The Rock" were obtained through personal interviews with specific questions pertaining to experiences and stories well known and often referred to within the community. The individuals cited for providing their version of the events were given the opportunity to review this document as written in order to ensure adherence to their verbal account.

My own experiences are included to augment and detail themes of relevance. As a member of the community of Central I have personally known many of the people I interviewed and shared experiences with them. As a participant in the same lifestyle I have survived similar events, could relate to their tragedies, humorous events, and descriptions of actions of which they were particularly proud. Although this makes it more difficult to remain unbiased in my interpretations, as a participant-observer I am a member of the group and privy to information and inner secrets that are not usually open to scrutiny by others. I believe people trusted I would be sensitive to their openness and understand their fears. In choosing to share these events with me they expressed the hope that I might be able to portray them to the world at large in a positive light.

It should be remembered that studying this lifestyle tends to create a conundrum. Documenting the life requires it to be shared with others. According to some of the people interviewed this takes away the feeling of wilderness, of aloneness within the natural world, which is the reason the lifestyle is being lived. The respondent wrestles with the problem that Miki and Julie Collins express so successfully in the Preface of their book on living the lifestyle of a trapper close to the community of Minchumina. "For three years we struggled with the idea of writing this book. We didn't really want to display our precious lifestyle in a permanent form... But write it we did, with trepidation and
the fervent hope that Our Readers will respect our lives and our valued privacy” (V-VI).

Some respondents chose to stay anonymous to remain unknown, but knowable through the recording of their lives. Joyce Stockbridge had to think about the choice for a month and read some articles written in journals of the north before she felt comfortable airing her ideas and opinions. Fronzie Straub and Rocky Harrison waffled back and forth trying to decide if such public treatment of their lives would breach their privacy and love of isolation. I also have some reservations about revealing thoughts and values of such a private and personal nature. Hopefully no harm will come of the written accounts and recorded interviews as this thesis is written with the best of intentions.
Chapter One:
The Physical Environment and the Construction of Individual Identity

1.1 The Bear
My husband was behind the bushes away from the cabin doing his business. He had his pants down and he heard a stick break behind him. He turned around to look, thought it might be a squirrel or something. His movement of turning around spooked this bear that was probably watching him and the bear started running after him, straight toward him. The only thing he could do was run towards the cabin. I was inside the cabin. I heard him yelling 'Get the gun'. I'd never heard him yell in that tone of voice before, he was really scared. So I got the gun. Normally I probably would say, 'well, why?' Ran out on the porch. He was running toward me with his pants down and there was this black bear right behind him. My husband tripped on a root. The black bear was right there. I started yelling, and the bear stopped, and looked at me which gave me time to shoulder my rifle and put a shell in there. He looked back toward Bill and I had a good shot, there right in the neck, and the bear went right down. (H98-18-01)

Personal risk, a reliance upon one's own resources, specialized knowledge, and courage to face danger is revealed in this and other stories of living close to the natural world in places far from many sources of aid. These themes are viewed by residents of the Central area as fundamental attributes critical to living their chosen lifestyle. Understanding the meaning of their stories opens a window into the participants' vision of themselves, others, and the behavioral codes they value.

The person relating the above occurrence in her life, Fronzie Straub, and her husband, Bill, had been flown to a remote site along the Little Black River. Landing off an airport, at least forty-five miles from the closest community, they
discovered a bear had demolished their tiny line cabin. The ground, littered with empty, crushed tins of food and the disheveled interior state of the cabin were indications of this particular bear’s destructive mentality and physical capability. In the course of cleaning up the mess, they found that the bear was still in the vicinity, intent upon committing mayhem.

Fronzie is not inclined to dramatize or boast about events in her life. When the pilot arrived to pick them up neither she nor her husband mentioned the adventure with the bear. Nor did they tell the story in the community for a number of months. The first time I heard this tale I was sitting in her sunlit, one-room “home” log cabin, drinking tea on the banks of the Yukon River, thirty miles upriver from the closest outpost of civilization, Circle City. I elicited the story from her by asking about a used 30-06 bullet casing hanging on a braided yarn over the handmade diamond willow bedpost. She chuckled and murmured something about it being a gentle reminder to her husband of her importance in his life.

The story illustrates a way of living in the Interior Alaskan environment in which people make and establish their personal identity. It reflects themes of significance to Fronzie and other participants in this lifeway. The story takes place in a remote landscape where specific and specialized skills are essential to this life. Daily existence, intertwined with “jobs” held, the place people live, and the elements they value, is in sharp contrast to an urban environment. Fronzie exemplifies the risks inherent in interactions with the natural world, people accept as a part of life. Far from any town, community or medical assistance the seriousness of this situation cannot be overemphasized.

Her skill, courage, and levelheaded response are elements of not only the story, but of her self-identity. Exhibiting familiarity with animal behavior and practical knowledge of anatomy and physiology, she waited until her husband was no longer between her and the bear. She yelled to distract its attention from the prone man allowing her the precious seconds she needed to prepare a killing shot. She knew where and how to shoot the bear to halt its collision course with her vulnerable husband.
Other stories highlight further themes of import to this lifeway which are linked to the expression of ingenuity, overcoming difficulties in new and unusual ways. Participants express satisfaction in the ability to stretch individual boundaries and the discovery of unknown reserves of inner strength brought forth in response to the challenge of living in this place.

The location of Central in the arctic landscape, knowledge of the natural environment, daily exposure to this unforgiving climate, and how to cope with this setting is an integral component of their narratives. Daily interactions and experiences with the natural world are vital to the self-image of these people. In order to understand the dynamics between the world around them and the vision these people hold of themselves, we need to take a close look at the place in which they have chosen to carry out their lives.

1.2 Remote, Northern Location

Located N65°34' W144°47', Central and the surrounding vicinity, lie close to the Arctic Circle in the higher latitudes of the world. The area is known as the Interior Region of Alaska lying between the Brooks Range to the north and the Alaska and Coast ranges to the south. The Canadian border is one hundred and three miles upriver to the east. The Bering Sea is to the west, approximately thirteen hundred miles down the Yukon River.

As is common with many northern communities, Central is small, fairly isolated and certainly physically detached from the other portions of the United States. The closest center of population is Fairbanks, one hundred and twenty-eight miles southeast on the Steese Highway, a predominantly gravel road. Residents rely upon Fairbanks, “the big city”, as its regional supply, medical and communication hub. To the residents this remoteness and distance from city amenities combines with its northern location as defining elements of their existence.

Babs Catt drives a loader in the gold mine she and her husband operate on Crooked Creek. Residing over six miles from the center of Central, she depends on Fairbanks for all her medical requirements and the majority of her
needed supplies including equipment parts, fuel, and essential food items. During the summer months Babs makes almost weekly trips to Fairbanks to support her family’s business enterprise. At the beginning of winter she tries to get enough bulk items from the stores to last her until spring. Finding Fairbanks crowded, smelly, and traffic heavy, she dislikes the stress caused by a town trip. Unless something arises that makes it necessary, such as a visit to the doctor, Babs prefers not to go to town for the seven or eight months of winter. If her planning results in a shortage of an item, well, one can make do without the item in cooking, change the menu, or swap with the neighbors (H98-18-03).

1.3 Climatic Influences

Due to its extreme northern location the sun rides at an indirect angle. The summer sun circles the sky barely dipping below the horizon, resulting in long hours of daylight without true darkness. Indeed daylight is nearly continuous from mid-May until the beginning of August. The winter sun hugs the horizon peeping over only briefly in the flats, but is hidden completely by the hills surrounding Central during most of November, December, and January. Darkness consumes much of the “day” in winter. The abbreviated days are rosy colored gradients of light. The long star filled nights can house spectacular displays of the aurora borealis commonly known as the northern lights.

The wide ranges in the duration of the summer daylight and the winter darkness are vastly different from the day and night cycle of more temperate zones. This phenomenon gives rise to two great extremes of season with long harsh winters and brief warm summers. Spring and fall are fleeting times of transition between the two.

Spring, known as “breakup”, occurs as the sun melts the snow but, the permafrost prevents the ground from absorbing the runoff. The “top few inches of soil become water-logged, a soggy, muddy morass” (Webb 6). Travel through the landscape or over the road becomes arduous, as objects sink through the soggy layer. Fall, known as “freezeup”, occurs as the colder temperatures cause ice pans to float in the waterways eventually freezing into a
single stationary mass. Travel becomes easier as footing becomes solid when the ground and water freezes.

"The region has a wide temperature range, varying from -75°F to +100°F" (Oakes 2). Thus, it is very warm in the summer and exceedingly cold in the winter. The region receives no more precipitation in a year than a desert, but much of the ten to twelve inches comes in the form of snow, which might last as long as seven months of the year. Beginning to fall usually in late September, the snow never thaws until spring, sometime the end of April or early May.

Certainly the picture is clear; winter, the longest season of the year, has extreme cold temperatures. Winter, with its danger of frostbite, exposure, or hypothermia, is a dominant force in the life of the people who reside here. As the temperature goes down to -30°F then -40°F inventions of modern man groan and behave in distinctly odd manners. Vehicles must be preheated to keep the oil viscous enough to lubricate the engine. Snow machines are stiff and difficult to start. Steel and plastic parts are extremely brittle in the intense cold and tend to break under use. Propane for cooking and light acts differently, and may even quit flowing in extreme cold temperatures. Diesel and stove oil coagulates into an unusable solid as the temperature stays low.

During the winter of 1989 the temperature stayed below -50°F for more than a month. The generator, furnishing the Tyrrell home electric needs, quit running as its fuel turned to slush instead of remaining in a liquid state. We contacted Sourdough Fuel, the Fairbanks vendor who had filled the 1000 gallon tank, to discover the nature of the problem. We were informed that national regulation requires petrofuel companies to ensure that gasoline and diesel products remain liquid until -50°F. One degree below this magic number and it becomes an unusable solid. At -51°F the generator quit. Out went the electric bulb on the propane tank to keep it warm enough for the gas to flow. Out went the propane lights and the gas cook stove would not ignite. Life reverted to candlelight and meals cooked on the woodstove or a Coleman camping unit.

Without an electrical plug in to preheat the engine, my husband, Rick,
could not start the truck. Each day he put his parka and snow pants on over his pants, longjohns, tee-shirt and wool shirt. He wore his windproof moosehide and beaver hat and mittens. Ten pound white “bunny boots” were donned over two pairs of socks. Bundled up, he and many of the community residents, resemble the Pillsbury Doughboy. Waddling out the front door, he traveled the fourteen miles to and from work on a snowmachine. Rick enjoyed the ride, the smaller fuel bill, and the freedom from the bulk of our cold related mechanical troubles. Even when the weather warmed up he continued to ride to work on a snowmachine or three wheeler, heck with the truck.

Centraliters’ stories can attest to the fact that cycles of daylight do affect life. Married couples have been known to argue heatedly particularly during the numerous dark winter nights of enforced inactivity, causing severe disruptions in their relationships perhaps ending in a split or divorce. Others sleep long hours showing a marked inclination toward lethargy and depression. With little or no desire to be active during the cold times some residents find a huge amount of time on their hands, with little to do. Settling themselves on a stool at Crabbs Corner or the Central Motor Inn they fill their empty hours consuming copious amounts of alcohol. Others spend many hours reading, relaxing, creating handicrafts, or playing ninetendo. While others look forward to the winter months with the huge variety of outdoor activities it offers.

Whatever their personal response, winter clearly has a profound impact upon the way in which daily lives of area residents are carried out. It is a vital physical force that must be dealt with. This season is reflected in every aspect of life from the types of heat chosen, to preparation and methods of movement from one place to another, the activities one participates in, to the clothing necessary for warmth.

Frank Warren, a long time resident of both Central and Circle tells this tale of a trapper, Carl Dasch, carrying out winter subsistence activities far from his neighbors. Although this is an extreme example, certainly Carl’s life was shaped by his seasonal winter existence in this vast unpeopled land.

Carl come up in the spring, stay down there all winter. Take his
boat down before the river froze up and come up in spring. He couldn't talk. Totally lost his voice. He'd be around a couple, three days before it'd come back to him. (H95-39)

Taking place in an undisclosed place far from Circle City, the setting to this story of Carl, the trapper, is certainly remote. His total isolation for the entire length of the winter is apparent in his voice loss. He is alone, no one is there for him to talk to. Most likely he did not say a single word from the time he left the community in the fall until the time he came back in the spring.

Carl works within the climatic and seasonal limitations making sure he has transportation to get back to Circle City for the summer. He must take the boat down the river to his trapline cabin before the river freezes in order to have it available in the spring after trapping season has ended and the river thaws.

This story incorporates the months he traps or catches and cares for the skins of wild animals for his economic livelihood. Trapping activities and the whole value system attached to this consuming enterprise represent a theme people tell about in their stories. Their success is dependent upon their awareness of events that transpire in the environment around them and their understanding of animal behavior. Constituting the frame for the story, much of the significance of the knowledge and values are not spoken, but integrated in detail.

Carl's movement from one home to another also illustrates the way in which many lives are carried out. Dependent upon the season of the year and the activity they are engaged in, residents will reside in one of their multiple dwellings. Miners move from their homes in Central to their gold mines for the summer mining season, trappers live in their remote line cabins during the winter trapping season, and fishermen relocate to be near their set net sites or permit areas during the salmon runs.

Dean Willis, my closest neighbor on Circle Hot Springs Road, moves seasonally to accommodate gold mining. Each spring when the ground thaws and the mining season begins he, his wife Lara, (pronounced Ya-ta), and two preschool children, Bianca and Erica, relocate to a two roomed house
overlooking their operation. During the summer months he works long hours well into the “night”. The move brings him closer to his work place where the family can be together and keep an eye on the mine and the work being done there. In the fall when the ground freezes, ceasing the mining activities, and causing the non-winterized house to become cold, the family moves back to their larger two bedroom home on the Hot Springs Road (Willis).

Fronzie and Bill move from line cabin to line cabin all winter on their trapline, then to Cordova around the month of May or June to fish commercially for salmon. Returning by August, they occupy their home on the Yukon River twenty-eight miles from Circle City until the start of trapping season in November. To facilitate these moves and have a place to hang their hat while fixing equipment or shopping for supplies, they have a simple one roomed cabin both in Circle City and Fairbanks (H98-18-01).

Rocky and Phil with their two children move over a thousand miles each spring then again each fall. From their home in Central they relocate to a remote piece of property close to Lake Becherof on the Alaska Peninsula for the seasons they guide hunters, fishermen and photographers. They also have a modest two-roomed A-frame in Wasilla to act as a place of transition for a week or two each fall and spring (H98-18-06).

1.4 Distinctive Land and Homes

The land around Central has not seen major volcanic activity nor endured heavy glacial movement. The surrounding landscape bears few signs of man’s intrusion, except along the creeks and streams where for the past hundred years gold mining operations have taken place. “The existence and extraction of gold has been the major land surface alteration mechanism in the region” (Anderson 6). The land and the history of making a living from the minerals found there have had a lasting influence upon the residents of this area. Today placer mines are still active supporting numerous families, employees, and businesses in the area.

There are three major geologic forms in the area. One is known as Birch
Creek schist. It is pre-ordovian in age (5000 Million years) and generally comprises the bedrock where the placer gold mining operations take place (Anderson 6). Another geologic form is associated with lowlands that resulted from past activity of the Yukon River. It is composed of silt, sand, and gravel areas. The third form is intrusive granite which creates rocky outcroppings scattered among the gentle slopes and rounded ridges of the area.

The vast expanse of the Yukon Flats spreads out at the feet of the Crazy and White Mountains. The “flats” are so named because the land is flat. Dropping only nine hundred feet in the over a thousand miles to the ocean, the river and its tributaries meander back and forth across the land. Myriads of lakes, numberless sloughs, and acres of swamp fill the flats.

Many residents speak of the land’s beauty, but it does not have the scenic craggy mountains nor steep sided valleys that many people look for in wilderness settings. Struggling to express what she finds beautiful about the land, Babs Catt, the Crooked Creek gold miner, speaks of times when she gets depressed and misses the sun, gone for a couple months. To lift her spirits all she has to do is drive the six miles from her home to Central and look at the “mountains” in both directions, “What are you thinking? Look at this!... Something different in being able to live this way” (H98-18-03). The colors of the daylight hours, the northern lights, the silence, and the vast unpeopled spaces displaying little of man’s altering touch are some of the features that are attractive to her. She feels drawn to the place, it has hold of her deep within her being.

The existence of permafrost is another geographically defining feature that significantly affects the ability of the surface above it to drain water and support vegetative life. Permafrost is a layer of permanently frozen ground underlying the soil of the area, that may be moderately thin to thick. It holds profound consequences for the construction of dwellings on its surface and the relative stability of those structures.

Sheila Symons, her husband Rick, who was raised in this area, and her four children built a home on their lot underlain by permafrost. Enclosing a two
room trailer with planking, they built a large room of upright logs attached to its side. Saw dust from a local mill filled and insulated their floor. The chicken pen is heated by piping from the wood stove. In back of the main dwelling is a generator shed, and an outhouse among numerous parts and pieces of machinery that Sheila considers “yard art” (Symons).

Within three years of its construction the house developed a slant toward the middle of the room where the wood stove is located. The heat was penetrating the layer of permafrost causing it to melt and the ground to sink. Sheila’s kitchen counter cants at an odd angle as one end becomes lower and lower. She cannot keep articles still, they roll toward the cook stove at the end of the counter. Her children love the shape the pancakes make as the batter slides across the pan toward the lowest point of the stove. Some action will have to be taken during the summer, hopefully before the sinking cracks the floor and shatters the windows (Symons).

The mighty Yukon River, Birch Creek, and Crooked Creek comprise the major area waterways. The Yukon cuts across the face of Alaska and is considered one of the continent’s greatest rivers. Birch Creek may have been named “creek” only in comparison to the Yukon; “it is by most standards a major Alaska river” (Oakes 1). It winds and loops roughly parallel to the Yukon for many miles before entering the river’s flow. Crooked Creek runs through the center of the community into Birch Creek.

Along the banks of Crooked Creek by the junction of the Steese Highway and the Circle Hot Springs Road are a cluster of homes and public businesses. Within a thirty mile radius of this juncture, unmarked spur “roads” created by private land owners radiate from the highway in a variety of directions. Leading to the homes of the approximately one hundred and thirty residents, some of these “roads” are passable only by off-road vehicle or when frozen in winter. Many of these dwellings are set back from the road and are not plainly visible either from the highway or from other abodes. Reflecting the individuality of their owner and builder there is little commonality in house design except perhaps the preponderance of log construction and the existence of multiple
outbuildings. Small buildings may be moved from yard to yard, some recycled from the gold rush ghost town of Deadwood. One or two homes may have the touch of a professional carpenter, but predominately they are built by the person or persons within, are never completely finished, and mirror the absence of building codes.

Joyce, a city girl from the Boston area, illustrates the distinctive nature of individual homes, how buildings may move through the community, and the process of continual modification by the home owner. She described with a sinking heart her arrival in the community to an old, dilapidated, one room cabin which had been moved from Deadwood to Pat Oakes' home then traded to the man of her dreams for labor. Located down a footpath, it had no running water, no electricity, no phone, but lots of mosquitoes. A two-story addition to the original house was built over a period of a couple of years with lumber both purchased from a local sawmill and cut in their own. Cross stitch designs by Joyce have been set inside the front of their handmade kitchen cabinets, which replaced curtains hung on wires covering the open plywood shelves. A digital satellite dish run by town power stands in their yard on scaffolding they welded. Outbuildings include a garage, a woodshed, a boat shelter, a storage building, and an outhouse. Out of the one-roomed building they have created a home surrounded by a "yard" perhaps not with a landscaped lawn, but a special place that holds purposeful meaning for them (H98-18-04).

Building here requires advance planning, ingenuity, and occasionally help from friends. While possible, one does not rely on others. Nor is a trip to Fairbanks undertaken to buy a single forgotten bolt. The project might be put aside until a later date or rigged another way. One has to count on the ability to do it yourself since there are few professionals to call to fix a problem.

In 1979 my husband and I acquired over three acres of virgin "forest" off Circle Hot Springs Road. We cut local trees ourselves and hauled them onto the property creating a driveway as we went. As fast as I could I peeled the bark off the sixty logs, but could not do so quickly enough. The bark began to stick. One day between ten and fifteen community members showed up to pitch in
and peel the remaining logs.

Over the next three years the logs seasoned as a 12' x 16' dwelling on skids and a garage with concrete flooring were erected. Rick made his own chainsaw mill and during the course of two summers, each log was cut making two flat sides. Raising the floor above the ground in an effort not to disturb the underlying permafrost, we constructed a two-story, three bedroom log home literally with our own two hands. As is usual for Alaskan homes, it remains unfinished as plans for running water in the bathroom are as yet unfulfilled.

Our garage building is referred to as the “shop” since we ran a snowmobile sales and repair business from it years ago. Drawers of differing size bolts, screws, nails and washers are along the bench. A welder sits alongside an acetylene and an oxygen tank, lumber lines the walls of shelves that hold snowmobile replacement pieces, truck and car parts, woodworking tools and sundry devices to repair or fix every imaginable eventuality.

Occasionally a resident may borrow a few nails or screws replacing them on their next town trip. In 2001 Gene Hume, a retiree from Fort Yukon, forgot to buy a bolt to screw his fan to the ceiling of his home under construction. Without this bolt he couldn’t fix the fan which also meant he could not finish the ceiling. All construction work halted. In passing he mentioned his lapse to me, I mentioned it to Rick (the mukluk telegraph). Rick rummaged around in the garage and came up with a three foot piece of all thread that looks like a giant screw. One just cuts off the size needed and voila, a bolt. On his next trip to Fairbanks Gene will have on his list a piece of all thread to replace ours.

The existence of the community far from centers of population, close to the Yukon River and the gold bearing Birch Creek schist are defining features of the residents’ view of themselves. As they build and add to their own homes, people rely upon their own experiences, resources, and abilities. The essence of their stories and narratives is the ability to live on and in the land and the link between this place and the people who populate it.
1.5 Area Vegetation and Wildlife

Gold miners, heavy equipment operators, trappers, fishermen, and hunters must work and travel outdoors in the weather as part of their livelihood. Reminiscent of other stories from Lloyd and Mullen’s Lake Erie fishermen, and Ives’ hunters from Maine, they see themselves as outdoorsmen. Much of their daily conversations deal with the weather and its cycles. At the post office during the summer or fall, one will hear comments on the state of ripening mushrooms and berries, or the seeding of such plants and wildflowers as fireweed. Their relation to past experiences with the season are considered signs or portends for the timing of the arrival of winter or its length and breadth.

Lori Wilde, a long term Central resident, and her husband Jim, operate Wilde Enterprises. They built a two story frame home with a full basement on their land behind Crabbs Corner. Summer and fall finds them living on Deadwood Creek in an old cabin located on their gold mining claims. Lori picks different types of edible mushrooms close to the cabin and combs the hills for many varieties of berries including raspberries, blueberries, and cranberries. She makes generally correct predictions on the coming seasons grounded in the ripeness of the berries in a yearly timeframe. From the duration and dimension of her past experiences of natural processes she feels confident of her ability to anticipate seasonal changes (H98-18-08).

In the lobby among the post office boxes Sheri, the mail order bride, finds Lori, the mushroom hunter, sorting her mail. “Have you been picking raspberries yet?” asks Sheri.

“Good, and ripe early this year,” replies Lori. She might join the loosely formed group of women who pick together on “Raspberry Lane”. Moving among the bushes growing on old tailing piles on Deadwood Road, the women laugh and talk, swapping gossip and stories. The dogs are allowed to run and the children to make as much noise as they please to encourage distance from berry eating bears. Trucks arrive and cars leave as the hours flow by and women come and go. The scene will be repeated on Portage Summit during the blueberry season and along area roads when the cranberries are ripe.
Knowledge of local vegetation is clearly an important part of residents' lives. I have studied the plants around the area and observed yearly cycles, taking pictures and writing descriptions for a display in the area museum. The four distinct vegetation types noted botanist Leslie Viereck has identified as existing in the entire Interior of the state of Alaska, all occur within this relatively small area (Anderson 13).

(1) Lowland areas around Medicine Lake, Crooked Creek, and Birch Creek are treeless bog types of vegetation. Huge amounts and varieties of standing water cause conditions that are too wet for tree growth. Consisting mostly of grasses, mosses, especially sphagnum, and sedges, these flats are in local terms, "generally a low, swampy region, conducive to the wellbeing of mosquitoes and gnats" (Oakes 2).

(2) Low areas and north-facing slopes that may be underlain by permafrost are named open, low growing spruce forest. Sometimes called a drunken forest, the stunted black spruce grow here at an exceedingly slow pace. Reaching eight inches in diameter a full grown black spruce may be over a hundred years old. These areas typically have local patches of treeless bog among them.

(3) In the foothills up to tree line with better drained soil the closed spruce and hardwood forest exist. White and black spruce, paper birch, aspen and balsam poplar can be found on south-facing hillsides and along rivers where permafrost is lacking.

(4) The fourth vegetative type, tundra, is found above tree line on all the surrounding hills. Eagle Summit and Twelve Mile Summit on the Steese Highway are both above this height. Alpine tundra features windblown shrubs, dwarf willow, and is dotted with low growing plants and flowers in summer.

Waterfowl and many varieties of song birds arrive in spring, stay throughout the summer and migrate again in fall. A few varieties of hardy birds including owls, grouse, ptarmigan, ravens, chickadees, grosbeaks, and gray jays winter over in the area.

Each summer coho, chum, and king salmon make their way up the
Yukon River to spawn in the freshwater streams of their birth. Burbot, grayling, pike, sheefish and whitefish all live in the freshwater systems of the area. Many local residents own riverboats to access the river system. Four or five families, including Jim and Lori Wilde, the mushroom picker, hold subsistence permits for salmon fishing on the Yukon River. Each day during the summer season they drive to Circle City, put their boat into the river, and check their net for fish. Others check their fish wheels. Each evening when they arrive home they process the catch for winter consumption.

The Fortymile Caribou Herd includes Central and the area in its traditional migration patterns. Lynx, fox, wolverine, wolf, mink, beaver, marten, black bear, occasionally grizzly bears, hare, muskrats, and moose make their home in the interior lands.

One can only chuckle looking at a huge horse sized moose on the ground after a successful hunt, knowing before the meat is ready for the table it will be shoved through a one-inch grinder hole. Cut, ground, spiced, wrapped, and labeled the wild sausage and meat that people process fills them with satisfaction. It sure tastes good, and has the advantage of no added chemicals. The hides must be salted and prepared for sale or for the tannery to chemically treat for later use in constructing mittens, warm hats, or foot gear. In their personal narratives people displayed immense pride that their own food was on the table. A great deal of knowledge and work is incorporated in the activities of ordering or buying, gathering, hunting, cleaning the gleaned produce, processing it for the table, then cooking a fine meal.

Berry and mushroom picking, hunting, fishing, and trapping activities provide food, perhaps clothing articles, and a little extra income to help people make ends meet. These activities require many skills and tidbits of knowledge about plants and animals, their habits and patterns of existence. The cycle of the plants and animals and their existence in and around the community as well as the intimate knowledge required to deal with them effectively is reflected in a whole group of stories.

A trapper, who wishes to remain unnamed told one spring about a
German fellow trapping another's line close to his own. On a friendly visit the trapper noticed the German's parka was ripped and torn, completely in tatters. When he asked him about his coat the German replied, "Those lynx sure have sharp claws." Having heard trappers yarning together of strangling a lynx he proceeded to use his bare hands instead of the requisite snare wire. This story told in the context of a group of participants illustrates the body of knowledge common to the livelihood and separates the experienced from the neophyte.

1.6 Water

Central has no community water system. Some residents have their own wells and septic systems or leach fields. Some melt snow for drinking water. Others haul water by five gallon bucket, fifty gallon drum or tank installed in the back of their pickup trucks. Crabbs Corner and Central Motor Inn have spigots for filling conveyances. Arctic Circle Hot Springs has a hose from which hot water is available.

Most of the residents have been at some point, without running water to ease the burden of cleaning. Even in the cold temperatures of mid winter people routinely trudge to the outhouse when necessary. Laundry and showers take on new meaning when gallon after gallon after gallon of clean water has to be dipped, melted, pumped from the well, or somehow collected, hauled in, heated, used, and hauled out again. A host of stories exist on how people have dealt with this fact of life.

Jane Williams, an old time resident of the area, remembers a fellow who was not very tidy.

Johnny Lake told my kids, dishes were never a problem with him. He would eat on the clean dishes then turn them over and he had another set of dishes. After that he'd put some water in a big tub and let them soak for several weeks then wash them up and be ready again. (H95-21)

Frank Warren speaks about another old-timer, Phil Brael, whom he enjoyed visiting on the Yukon River.
Dishtowel, hanging across the log. When we'd stop there he'd rinse a cup out but then, he'd wipe it out with this dishtowel that hadn't been washed for months. It probably made the cup dirtier than what it would have been if he just left it rinsed. Didn't bother Phil any. I'm not overly clean myself but, cleaner than that. Pretty hard drinking a cup of coffee or eating anything around there when the dishes were that way. (H95-39)

The above story has another important theme that will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Two. The system of hospitality and appropriateness of behavior are evident. Frank is expected to partake in a cup of coffee and maybe eat on these dishes as a participant in this code of behavior.

Many of the operating water systems are nonstandard and considered locally to be funky or bush standard. They work sometimes, are sluggish others, and at times totally quit working. The cold weather penetrates the system freezing parts, or perhaps the whole network. Babs, the female loader operator, lost her water system all winter when it froze solid. Usually her well works most of the year, from August or September through April, then it goes dry (H98-18-03). She also has to explain to visiting relatives that the gurgling sounds are normal, and the drain will empty, eventually, but please, use the bucket not the toilet.

Wesley Tyrrell, the author's son, always checks out the "protocol" in a whispered conversation before using anyone's facilities, indoor or outdoor. Homes may have toilets that have to have a pitcher of water added before "flushing". Other homes do not put paper in the toilet or only flush after doing a real messy job. A honey bucket may be the prevailing method or a port-a-potty as found in a camper. One might be expected to deposit the paper in the wood stove for recycling purposes or leave it in a paper bag conveniently located for this purpose. The outdoor facilities range from a horizontal stick over a hole, to a place behind the tree, to a large storage shed with a corner sectioned off. Wesley, having come from a home with outdoor facilities checks to be sure he knows how to follow the correct procedure.
Each home and outhouse has its own unique system of water usage. Conversations are centered around water, how one gets it, drains it, how the system functions through the yearly cycle, how this might be improved upon, what has been proven to work, and what has not. People also change the system and try new innovative ideas. Truly life is not static.

Washing dishes or clothes and taking showers uses a tremendous amount of water. Combined with the nature of the water systems from well or storage tanks makes Central people intensely aware of water and its usage. Elsewhere this is a mundane part of daily living, not connected to hours of labor and thought. For these people it is an important part of their link with natural systems.

It is through the drawing of water from the creek and the smell of freshly cut spruce for the woodstove that the these people feel the connection to the earth that this routine evokes. These actions while seemingly part of the daily grind or even sheer drudgery, provide them with joy and a deep sustenance from life (Shoemaker). It is a source of pride and self-confidence that many carry with them when they leave or begin using modern conveniences.

Not everyone loves their chores. Sheila says she hates dumping the water. After giving her four active children baths she still has to carry the dang stuff outside, sloshing all over. Toilet training all those kids is not much fun without running water but, these unpleasant aspects she would not trade for an urban environment. She embraces the lifestyle even though it is not great all of the time (Symons).

The substance of water has filled the preceding pages. Other seemingly commonplace amenities are also hard won facets of life. Many heat their homes with wood stoves or wood backups and provide their own electricity. The community currently has its own private electrical company that operates diesel fueled generators. The arrival of town power on the Hot Springs Road within the last five years was an occasion for celebration in my household. It frequently quits working, my electric clocks sometimes run fast and other times slow, my bread maker has burned up at least three times. But, life is certainly
made easier with the ability to plug in.

As I write this in 2002 residents are still off the power grid. The lines only run so far. Others have yet to be able to make a phone call from their own home. Most have become part of the microwave, or tower, or other kind of telephone system but, their methods of operation with audible delays and echoes are sure different than using a phone in downtown Fairbanks.

The necessary chores and activities to carry out this lifestyle take the individual outside observing and working in the natural world. It is not only the love of the outdoors and the environment, but having that wild environment be a part of everyday living that sets these people apart from their urban counterparts. It is the focus of their lives, the stories that portray this life, and the integral part this place plays in their self-image.

Fronzie likes to have lots of chores. "I like going to get water. I like splitting wood. It's stuff that's physical and I like doing physical stuff. I like to feel tired at night when I get home. I like being outdoors" (H98-18-01). Before breakfast she thinks of all the things she has to accomplish for the day. She tries to convince herself that she should stay inside and finish the sweater, or the baking that needs to be done, or fix the patches on Bill's snowsuit. After breakfast she can't wait to get outside, and she goes right out into her dog yard leaving all the indoor chores for another day (H98-18-01).

1.7 Travel Dispositions

Items necessary to carry out the daily chores must be made from scratch or bought from the store. Thus lists of essential articles, plans for activities that must be completed, and necessary materials to complete them decorate every home. As we have seen it requires a drive or flight into Fairbanks passing above the tree line on two of the three mountain ridges. In the winter the blowing snow can make the road impassible. Summer rocks from the gravel portions tend to poke holes in tires. Spring and fall temperatures can make the surface hazardously muddy or slippery.

Although the Steese Highway is "open" year-round, travel is not always
advisable, nor possible, as deep snow drifts can block the road. The relentless wind can blow so hard that the only way to safely motor across the summit is to follow in the wake of a snowplow. During these occasions life resembles less of the outside world. Emergency supplies and equipment must be in the vehicle for possible overnight or long term delays. Contingencies need to be planned for, such as emergency patients that require expert medical attention when road transportation is not possible.

Expectant mothers plan carefully for the arrival of their newborn baby. Most find a place to stay in Fairbanks closer to medical attention than Central. Moving there at least two weeks prior to their due date women ensure their health and that of their babies. Sheila, the permafrost dweller, knew from her previous three pregnancies that her children tended to arrive a least two weeks "late". In 1999 although the Doctor pestered her to come to earlier, she did not move to Fairbanks until the exact due date of her daughter, Sabrina. Sheila says of that last ride to town at nine months pregnant, "Not a comfortable ride in" (Symons 2002). Waiting about two weeks for the child to make her appearance, she stayed with a friend. Afterward, before heading back to Central far from medical aid, Sheila hung around another couple days making sure both she and Sabrina were healthy.

Blowing snow on stretches of treeless road causes a weather condition known as a whiteout. Experienced by most of the community residents at one time or another, it is a terrifying and dangerous atmospheric state. A driver cannot tell where the earth and sky separate, nor where the edge of the road is. "It gets where everything is white. The road. The sky. It's like being inside a pingpong ball," says Rick Tyrrell (O'Donoghue A1). He has served as a snowplow driver on the Steese Highway for twenty years. Al Olson, another Alaska Department of Transportation employee, was on the job in 1990 during a whiteout. The visibility was so poor he failed to find the edge of the road before his snowplow plunged off the top of Eagle Summit causing his death.

"Tyrrell's wildest rescue involved a Japanese group stuck on Eagle Summit. He freed their car with a quick tug from the snowblower. But the
Japanese driver never hit the brakes and his car began rolling straight toward the edge of a cliff" (O'Donoghue A9). Rick rammed his equipment in reverse and tried to tighten the chain. Before the slack could be removed the machine ran into a huge drift of snow. Raising the snowblower, Rick jerked "the rear end of the little sedan off the ground as its front wheels dangled over the edge. ‘I got out and walked over to them. Their eyes were just huge.’ Tyrrell said" (O'Donoghue A9).

Travel on along the Yukon River particularly during the seasonal changes comprises a large theme in local stories. Many use the river corridor for transportation, hunting, trapping, gathering, and recreational activities. Brad Snow moved from an urban situation outside Alaska up the Nation River, a tributary of the Yukon. Residing far from his closest neighbor he hunted and lived in this remote setting. He related a story about traveling down-river to his cabin right after freeze-up in the fall or early winter. Being inexperienced with the way in which the river freezes he did not realize the ice was unsafe. Passing around the bluff in front of Eagle in -40°F weather he trusted his weight on thin shelf ice that had only frozen over the night before. Breaking through, he fell into open water. He managed to get out so quickly, his layers of clothing did not soak through. Only the outer layer was wet enough to freeze, the inner layer close to his vulnerable skin remained dry. Brad relived the experience in his dreams many nights but, he learned much on how to read the river ice (H95-11, H95-12).

1.8 Hazards and Risk

Hazards of daily encounters with elements of the natural environment comprise an important component of the stories of residents. Dramatic stories that relate close calls these people have had while out participating in their lifeway, illuminate the value they find in having faced danger and in surviving the ordeal. When asked about their scariest experiences these people related encounters with bad weather, wild animals, and situations which called for instant decisions. These represent significant events, not mundane details like
feeding the dogs. Most often they were based on a real danger, an event that held life or death potential. Like the stories from the Lake Erie fishermen successful navigation of such a situation is an important element of their self-image (Lloyd and Mullen 114).

During many fall hunting seasons, Babs, the loader driver, floated in a canoe down the Coleen River in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. One of these trips set the stage for the worst experience she has ever had, an encounter with a charging grizzly bear. Her husband fired more than one round into the bear located between them and camp. Keeping a wary eye out for the bear, they successfully harvested a moose the following day. Babs was extremely nervous and worried about the wounded bear’s whereabouts, but had to spend days in the same place waiting for her bush pilot to pick them up. As is common in this lifestyle, the pilot had been unavoidably delayed due to inclement weather. Far away from any sort of community with no other choice, Babs spent an excruciating week in constant fear of that wounded bear, waiting to hear the sound that meant going home.

When the pilot finally arrived she and her husband were located on a gravel bar too short for a safe take off with a heavy load of meat and gear. These gravel bars may be level enough for a “runway” but, they are not hard packed surfaces like paved airports. The pilot took a portion of the meat, Babs, and some of her equipment to a longer gravel bar relatively close by. As the pilot flew off to retrieve her husband and the rest of their gear, she was left totally alone with this lump of fear burning inside. Surviving this incident has played an important role in her self-image (H98-18-03).

In such remote isolation a simple miscalculation, slip, or accident has the power to alter everything in an instant. Pam Haskins homesteaded a piece of property outside the community of Central. Alone in her cabin on a cold, dark winter evening Pam was wiping down the counter. Her towel caught the tip of a knife. It flew off the counter bouncing against her hand before it hit the floor. Looking down Pam realized the flesh between her pinky finger and wrist was laid wide open. Fat and muscle layers were clearly visible. She was forced to
rely on her own ability to stop the bleeding and bandage the wound. Triumphing over adversity alone and unaided filled Pam with self-confidence. Trying to share the realization from this and other encounters, Pam speaks at high schools in Texas when she visits her mother. The message she carries is “Don’t limit yourself” (Haskins).

These brushes with danger are accepted as part of this lifestyle and illustrate the pride these people feel in having confronted a life-threatening situation, and having survived it. They were terribly frightened, but somehow maintained control and dealt with the circumstances. Through the hazards they face in interactions with the natural world around them, they gain self-confidence and a vision of themselves as capable, courageous outdoorsmen. Their close calls traveling on the ice or over the summit, dealing with bears or other animals, surviving the harsh unforgiving weather of winter, or jerry rigging broken equipment reinforce this image.

Rocky relates that it does not have to be a personally hazardous event that intensifies this self-concept. She reveals it is daily living in particularly remote sites while raising her two young children that has been the source of her strength. Each day possesses occasions of potential peril, requiring thoughtful and deliberate action. Managing to successfully counter each circumstance builds a reservoir of pride. No one else is there rely upon, no other source to keep control of the repeated situations (Harrison).

Inarguably in other settings, places, or occupations dangerous occasions exist. Living in Harlem, New York, or minding a store in Johannesburg, South Africa, or welding high on a steel frame for a new building in Los Angeles, California carry their own inherent risks. In Central people have traded the Peeping Tom for the curious bear, the drunken driver for drifting snow on Eagle Summit, the heart attack close to the hospital for a home far from the doctor. In their stories it is the remoteness of their situation requiring the reliance upon oneself that leads to a positive self-image.

Roderick Nash analyzes the history of the wilderness idea in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. He postulates that wilderness is a
perceived place rather than an actual condition of the natural environment. In thinking about pioneers in earlier periods of history and their experience of the wilderness he concludes that "Implied was a relationship between the dangers of the wilderness and the quality of those who faced them... Survival seemed an indication of success in this respect" (38). The stories of people who live in Central certainly incorporate this idea. Survival of a dangerous situation denotes success and comprises an important component of self-esteem and overall self-image.

Illness and perhaps death are ever present risks taken as a natural part of life in this place. No clinic nor any organized health care program exists within the community. Periodically a state-funded public health nurse provides shots, routine eye, or hearing screening, and related services for infants, children, and the elderly. People rely upon the Emergency Team composed of volunteers trained through the state Emergency Medical System, to respond to medical emergencies. The distance between residences and the medical facilities in Fairbanks defines the care one can expect to receive.

People discuss ways of trying to prevent the ultimate consequences, but it is seen as a risk worth taking in order to live in this place. People outside the community are sometimes unable to face these conditions including "Wilderness" seekers who embrace this concept for short stints in the wilds.

Arlene Bell lived on the Yukon River about forty miles above the community of Circle City. She raised her sons there without electricity, plumbing, or communication of any kind. She felt defensive about this aspect of life.

Floaters say this is the most beautiful, gorgeous life you ever could live but, people ask us what would happen if you got sick? Had a heart attack? Appendicitis? Well, we had discussed this before we came here. Everybody who floated down would like to live close to the land but, want the doctor close by. If we could get to a doctor or some help we would do it. But, if we couldn't, if we died— we died. We all agreed on that. (H95-27)
Mary Warren relates a time her husband, Frank, was seriously ill. In the spring he was in the process of cutting their winter’s worth of wood, Frank had made a few trips down the wood-road when he got sick. His stomach was bothering him. Hurt so bad he couldn't get out of bed. It got worse and worse. We had a radio with Fort Yukon but it worked on atmospheric conditions... I couldn't get anyone on the radio that day. Around 1:00 he seemed to get better. I kept trying and trying on the radio... (H95-09-01, 02)

Finally she reached a pilot in Fort Yukon who came to bring Frank to the hospital in Fairbanks. Conducting an exploratory surgery it was discovered his appendix had ruptured filling his system with poison. Mary’s story continues, At the time one of the doctors said, ‘Well where's his wife?’ Well, she couldn't come in. Has the store to take care of. He thought that was awful that his wife wouldn't come in when he was so sick. (H95-09-01, 02)

Mary was home alone, caring for the wood stoves, the children, hauling water, and minding the family business.

1.9 Stretching One’s Limits / Meeting the Challenge

The challenges and adventures of living this Alaskan lifestyle helps one to grow and perhaps find themselves to have more strength, endurance, character, and motivation within themselves than they knew they possessed. Facing danger, surviving it through their own resources, relying upon their personal talents to provide basic necessities of living, and successfully carrying out daily interactions with the natural world provide the experiences through which they learn who they are and what they are capable of. Most discover themselves to be more capable than they ever dreamed.

Joyce says of herself, “I melded,” with the lifestyle (H98-18-04). Displaying a great amount of courage and determination, Joyce was forced to shoot one of her two male dogs in her own front yard. This story reflects an
event that had to be dealt with swiftly and forcefully. She raised two puppies that went with her everywhere. They tended to act like male dogs and fight over the position of dominance. One day when her husband, Owen, had left for the trapline, the two dogs got into a real brawl. There were no phones, only CB communication, and no way for this sheltered woman to call for help. Joyce felt she must take immediate action or both of her precious babies would surely die.

Circumstances did not leave her the option of waiting for help to arrive, nor playing a helpless female and dissolving into tears. In Fairbanks she might have dialed 911, or with running water she might have thrown a pail of cold water on them. Using the short amount of time available to her, Joyce made an irrevocable decision. This slight, city bred woman took out her husband’s pistol, aimed and fired. In order to save the life of one of her beloved pets she performed an action she never thought possible (H98-18-04). It was no a life or death situation for her but, she successfully met the challenge. The encounter was one of the stones that built an image of herself as capable of finding the strength and courage to meet a trial.

Fronzie Straub, the women from the bear story is not afraid to branch out and try something new, particularly after listening to experienced people. When the future of their Yukon River commercial salmon fishing enterprise appeared dismal, Fronzie and Bill decided to fish elsewhere. After listening to older Copper River Delta fishermen, they motored their newly purchased boat into the ocean and prepared to drop their nets. Finding it a dangerous way to make a living, Fronzie’s own words about their encounters demonstrate jewels of self-confidence and self-esteem. “It is something that can be pretty scary at times. But, if you can get yourself through a scary episode you get this wonderful feeling of WOW I actually did that... and survived... and that's a good feeling” (H98-18-01). She faced the rough, stormy seas, and fast moving tides then found herself to be more than equal to the task.

Successfully dealing with elements beyond one’s control means changing and adapting to the circumstances. Each situation is different and may require unique responses. One cannot react rigidly, apply a learned skill
from a book, or shared community knowledge, and have the appropriate tool to fit every lock. Uncommon ways of seeing things or dealing with events are rewarded and required in this life. It is the ability to adapt, substitute, or modify, successfully fashioning a befitting response that is a positive source of self-image for residents.

Ella Hosmer wanted to wire her log house for electricity. Her graduate work in philosophy at the University of Miami was not applicable to this situation (H98-18-07). Going to a store in Fairbanks she bought a book on electricity and electrical engineering. Not everything she felt she needed to know was covered in the pages; it was written for standard situations not unconventional log cabins. She derives immense satisfaction from her ability to apply logical reasoning to the published material and devise appropriate circuitry for lights and outlets.

Rick Tyrrell, the snowplow driver, is also a “bush” pilot. Landing on the side of the Porcupine River far from any community or town, with his wife, one month old son, and two older boys, he punctured his tail wheel tire. Inside the airplane were plenty of tools and spare parts, but there was no extra tail wheel. Racking his brain for a solution to this problem he stuffed the tire full of gunny sacks until it was hard enough to use.

Within themselves men and women discover an unknown quality, capability, or trait that helps them to deal with unexpected difficulties. Stretching the boundaries of their imaginations, these people pride themselves on their ability to formulate solutions to challenging situations. Used as a foundation it can be built upon and applied to similar situations in the future. This ability to confront new experiences with creative solutions is a hallmark of this lifestyle.

1.10 Those Who Fail the Challenge

The old timers and community residents that people tell stories about, are people who have struggled to measure up to this place. Few choose to live this lifestyle and among those who are willing, not all succeed in facing the challenges and risks. Some do not care to try. Some cause residents to shake
Centralites chuckle at Christopher McCandless, a character in the bestseller *Into the Wild* written by Jon Krakauer. Although this portrayal was not Krakauer’s intention, to Centralites he does not measure up. The true life account of McCandless is used by residents of Central as an illustration of one who failed the test.

McCandless goes on a great Alaskan odyssey, burned his money, and buried his Winchester. Leaving modern civilization behind he walked or grabbed rides into the “wilderness” to follow a dream. Krakauer writes “Ironically, the wilderness surrounding the bus - the patch of overgrown country where McCandless was determined ‘to become lost in the wild’ - scarcely qualifies as wilderness by Alaskan standards” (165). During the summer months, within walking distance of a major highway, McCandless lived in an abandoned school bus with four other cabins in a six-mile radius. Within four months of his arrival he was dead. He never faced the severe cold of winter, nor the treachery of the river, nor according to his written account, any dangerous form of encounter with the elements or wild animals. Yet he did not live to tell his tale.

Not all pay the ultimate price that McCandless did. Usually, in Central, they become a story from the past. Each year new people show up in Central, Eagle, or Circle. Perhaps they are drifters, those who want to leave civilization far behind, or marginal personalities who might be considered candidates either for the padded cell or the prison cell. Thinking this tiny town the perfect place, many claim Central is where they want to spend the rest of their lives, but within a relatively short amount of time they may be gone and become referred to as “end-of-the-rovers”.

One fellow, the subject of several stories, is talked about as an manifestation of this phenomena. “Marty” arrived in the fall and left as soon as
the snow melted in spring. He chose a place to live a few miles up a trail behind the Hot Springs Resort. In an attempt to keep his home warm during the arctic winter he built his own wood stove. Not having many materials available he used tin foil for the door of the stove and an old fuel drum for the body. Adding a stick or two of wood at a time, he kept the fire burning low enough it did not burn the door. When the temperatures plummeted to -20°F then -30°F, he was unable to keep the floor of the cabin from freezing. At -40°F he and his wife wore their snow pants and parkas inside the abode.

During a vicious cold snap his dog had several puppies. Because the temperatures on the inside floor and the ground outside were almost the same, it was extremely urgent he find a method to keep them warm. He hung them in socks from the stove pipe... When the story about the puppies’ death became known to most residents through the “mukluk” telegraph, they registered their disapproval.

His desire to leave the community heightened. In a hurry to start his truck, he attempted to jump the battery from the headlight of his snowmachine. Finding the bulb unequal to the task he abandoned both vehicles in the Hot Springs parking lot. When spring arrived and the sun returned, they brought enough warmth and light to get his truck moving without preheating. He drove over the pass and physically out of the community, but his stories remained.

One year as Fronzie and I were driving about thirty-five miles an hour down the Hot Springs road, we were hit from behind by another example of an end-of-the-roader. A jeep did a three hundred and sixty degree turn in the middle of the highway then took off up Deadwood Road. We were so startled that the hit-and-run driver could think he would get away by escaping on a dead end road, we sat in the truck watching him raise a cloud of dust. Within moments a local driver happened by, stopped, and asked “What’s up?”, then chased after the jeep in an effort to apprehend the offender.

We waited at the local gas, restaurant, and bar known as Crabbs Corner. Thinking he knew the road so well after driving it a few times, he had “borrowed” a friend’s rig. He was driving over eighty miles an hour on the gravel road and
ran into my truck, which was hidden by the resultant dust cloud. He showed me his social security card since he had no driver’s license, and offered me five dollars for the huge dent in my tailgate in lieu of insurance information.

Desperately seeking medical attention he left Crabbs Corner and hitched a ride to the health aide in Circle. We heard later he had left his bunny boots on too long during the warm summer weather. Inside the rubber boots his feet had actually become rotten. Under medical care, he hobbled around Circle on crutches until he stole someone’s boat and proceeded down the Yukon on a lengthy crime spree.

I suppose every place has these types of characters, but in a place like Central they stand out. The cultural, social, and behavioral codes combined with the small population cause these types to come under greater scrutiny. In this place their creative solutions contain the possibility of harmful or dangerous ramifications that urban situations do not incorporate. Their incompetent and somewhat comical behavior is used in stories to strengthen the social order and reinforce the self-image of a capable outdoors person.

1.11 The Strands of Personal Self-image

The location of the community, the area climate, vegetation, and wildlife comprise the setting for the stories about the way in which these people carry out their daily existences. Requiring a different set of skills and adaptions than life in urban America, a resident needs to be prepared to deal with climatic realities and mechanical failures far from medical help or the car mechanic. Stories reveal that by living in Central one relies upon his or her own capabilities to remedy inescapable and unforeseeable circumstances. The seasonal activities and experiences with the river, the summit, extreme cold, and the wild inhabitants of the area comprise the background for themes of essential knowledge and skills, ingenuity, self-reliance, successfully navigating a dangerous situation, and a system of hospitality and helpfulness. Knowing what to do and how to do it under certain circumstances and successfully applying creative solutions to overcoming a problem at other times nourishes a
sense of accomplishment, a source of pride. What constitutes safe ice and what
does not, how to cope with getting wet in sub-zero temperatures, indeed how to
travel safely from one place to another whether on snowmachine, by foot or in a
vehicle constitute skills and experiences shared through the use of stories by
this group of people. Their community and personal identity have been shaped
by living and working in this distinctive environment.
Chapter Two:  
The Social Environment and the Construction of Community  

2.1 The Community and Its Inhabitants  

The one hundred and thirty residents of Central know each other by sight, name, or reputation. Indeed after years of living, working, and recreating together these people know most others by nickname, past designations, and intimate details of that person’s mother, father, aunt, sister, and brother. The vehicle one drives, the exact date a new or used one is procured and its cost are widely known and discussed details. Not many private or secret events occur. Any unusual behavior or occurrence spreads seemingly by osmosis.  

Mary Warren remembers Woodchopper Joe, so named for the wage earning job he held in the community,  

Every morning he would check everybody. He would get up real early and check everybody’s house from one end of town to the other. If there was fresh snow he would know who went where the night before. And he was a storyteller and tell everybody what had gone on the night before. (H95-09-01, 02)  

A few old timers sit on their front porch on a summer’s eve with a set of binoculars enjoying the flow of traffic around the community. Winter or summer they watch to see who goes to the local bar, or into town, meaning Fairbanks, with whom, and for how long. An extra head in the vehicle when a person returns means a trip to the airport probably has taken place to perhaps pick up a visiting friend or relative.  

I had the porch watcher tell me one day, “I hate to tell you this, but.... Rick’s truck was at Mimi’s all night long.” What a scandal she created, a married man spent the night at a single woman’s home! I did not mention, I had driven that particular evening to stay with a sick friend. Gossip and tattletales can reveal the vicious side of group dynamics passing “information” that is often hurtful and troublesome.  

Seasonal residents swell the local population. Summer after summer
people return to visit vacation homes or work on their gold claims. Throughout the year tourists pass through, particularly during the warm sunny months and on long holiday weekends such as Christmas and New Year’s to visit the lands around the community or Arctic Circle Hot Springs Resort. The advent of the thousand mile sled dog race, the Yukon Quest, causes an influx of mushers, handlers, tourists, and film crews.

The rest of the year the population fluctuates a little as residents leave for the winter this year or that, seeking a setting change or employment elsewhere. New residents make their way into the area each year, some to stay awhile, others to leave immediately. Over the twenty-three years of my residence I have noticed a pattern of relocation within five years of arrival. However, at least twenty different households of couples or families have stayed longer than ten years, as shown in Residents of Central 2001-2002, Appendix C. Most never plan on leaving, however long they stay.

Residents are of all ages and come from many different socioeconomic backgrounds and educational levels. Ella, who came from an extremely wealthy home, almost had her PHD. Jack from the coal mines of West Virginia, claims he made it through the third grade. Bill hails from the south side of Chicago. Chris grew up in the upper echelon of New York City Jewish society. Although due to a real or imagined slight, each year some family or other will not be on speaking terms with another, usually most will maintain cordial relations.

Joyce comments that this is one of her favorite aspects about living in the small community. She likes having relationships with people of all ages and backgrounds. “Friends from Wesley to Harry, aged 6 to 90” (H98-18-04). In her urban life in Massachusetts before coming to Central she relates that people of certain groups could not associate with just anyone. They mingled only with others of their own age and background. The people of Central mix together irrespective of age or economic status. Life in this place bolsters a sense of community.
2.2 Helping Hands

One winter before the Steese Highway was opened year-round a miner leaving for the season plowed Eagle Summit open. Five or six local families decided to make a fresh food and material run to Fairbanks. For the tandem return trip they met in Chatanika, close to the end of the pavement, at an appointed time in the evening. Waiting at home, many wives, friends, and relatives left their CB radios on. This form of communication was commonly used within Central in place of telephones throughout the nineteen seventies, eighties, and into the late nineties when most homes had the opportunity to receive their own telephones.

Long after midnight on this specific evening, a couple radios with either special extension capabilities or in a particularly good location began to pick up transmissions from the top of Eagle Summit as the returning vehicles spoke to each other. Listeners began to relay the information throughout the community. Visibility was nonexistent, the wind was howling. Blowing snow quickly blotted out the signs of human passage. Chains and ropes held the lineup together as they crept across the pass. One person walked in front scouting out the road. Several others were afoot on each side of the lead truck. As a vehicle became stuck in a snowdrift the side walkers shoveled and pushed. Eventually one fourwheel drive truck was unhooked and broke through the worst stretches to the Central side of the whiteout. The walkers and driver went back along this track to guide the next vehicle. Hour after hour they paced vehicles, shoveled snow, and yanked with tow ropes until everyone was off the summit. Hot drinks, warm food, and community members waited for them (Tyrrell).

Alone, none of the vehicles would have been able to reach Central, but working together they could travel over the summit, prevailing under these extreme conditions. Sharing the environment's adversities, people depended upon each other in order to survive in this place. This story illustrates the sense of community shared by a group of people who operate together in an atmosphere of mutual helpfulness.

They had to rely upon themselves, their friends and neighbors, not any
form of local government, because none exists. Central is not an incorporated town, has no mayor, is not part of a borough. It has no governing council, no local law enforcement, nor any local government at all. In place of these agencies people turn to each other and local volunteer or service related organizations.

The Lion's Club, like its state and national affiliates, has sponsored many local activities and worthy projects such as cleaning the dump and the yearly spring turkey shoot. Individuals in unfortunate circumstances have been financially supported. Cindy was in a great deal of pain, but could not afford the dental work to relieve her until the Lion's Club donated over $500. Volunteer organizations also in need of assistance have benefited from their largess. One year the Emergency Team could not replace used blankets, backboards, and oxygen tanks without their help. School field trips to provide local children with experiences outside the community have been partially funded through this organization as well.

Another volunteer group, the Central Emergency Team, is on call twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. Each member is trained through the state Emergency Medical System to respond to medical emergencies of many varieties. Making no charge for their services they rely on state grants and donations to buy their bandages and equipment. Driving their own vehicles they respond when called throughout the community, along the area highways, and off the road system.

A local advisory group for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game provides a forum for community discussions and responses to hunting, fishing, trapping, and subsistence issues regulated by the state of Alaska. Nine unpaid positions exist on this board. The meetings include any member of the community who is present and has an opinion, in its consensus style approach to issues.

Perhaps the most formal organization that exists within the community is the Circle District Historical Society. Utilizing volunteers this group erected a number of buildings that house historical equipment and displays. Gold
nuggets from area creeks, a Sourdough's log cabin, a trapper's set, photographs of local wildflowers, prehistoric fossil remains, and an interactive computer program of life stories from long time residents are some of the displays created by people from the community.

Along the Steese in “downtown” Central, a few public buildings exist. There is a Post Office to mail and receive letters and packages, the aforementioned CDHS museum, the State of Alaska Steese Highway maintenance station, a satellite communication building, and a school operated by Yukon Flats School District, itself considered a regional attendance area rather than an organized borough.

On the outskirts of the community is an unofficial, but permitted dump. Donations are collected periodically to defray bulldozing costs incurred during voluntary, but routine maintenance of this communal place where people leave their trash. An incinerator made by a resident welder is used to burn paper products. Close by is a ditch, for all other items. Miscellaneous parts, pieces of furniture, automobiles, and odd scraps are “recycled” through the community by the existence of the dump. One family leaves an old storage cabinet standing on the edge of the pit and another comes by and takes it home, where perhaps it becomes known as “yard art”.

2.3 Economic Independence

Central has few full-time regular wage-earning opportunities. Far North School, the Alaska Department of Transportation, and the Post Office offer a small number of full-time and part-time positions. Arctic Circle Hot Springs, Crabb’s Corner, and Central Motor Inn are three establishments that offer tourist or visiting accommodations. Each are owner-operated, usually offer seasonal employment opportunities, and a limited number of full time positions.

Small household industries and family run businesses abound. Hiller Enterprises, owned by George Hiller, delivers fuel and water. Wilde Enterprises, run by Lori and Jim Wilde, rents heavy equipment accompanied by an operator, such as a dump truck or a front end loader. Dave’s Tire Repair,
among other things, fixes flat tires. Central Electric, controlled by Cliff and Cathy Hendrickson, is a privately owned company providing electrical power to the community. Maclin, managed by Mac and Linda Carter, is available to hire for snow removal and the procurement of garden plants. Circle Air, a local air taxi overseen by Renald Drouin or “Frenchy” and his girlfriend Dawn, will contract to fly a passenger most anywhere. Families such as Dean Willis’, operate their own placer gold mines which occasionally hire seasonal employees. Some people have developed their own art form such as Kay Harrison’s birch bark creations or Sheri’s quilted items and beaded purses or jewelry. There are carpenters, welders, and mechanics to hire for specialty jobs.

A few hold regular employment elsewhere, leaving the community on a biweekly or seasonal basis to return on their days off. Pam’s husband works on the North Slope on a two week on and two off rotation. After a period on the slope he comes home until the next scheduled work week.

Colette Glanz calls herself “Jackie-of-all-Trades”. She endures low wages and manual labor to remain in Central. Taking on any wage earning position available, she has cleaned houses, swabbed the pool, waited tables, trained dogs, and driven semi trucks.

Combining subsistence activities, wage labor, gold mining, and the sale of handmade items, many residents endeavor to make enough to provide for necessities. Most of the residents do not rely on any one wage earning situation, but work at one job, then another, and switch to a third, taking advantage of perhaps temporary or seasonal wage earning opportunities. Central may have few jobs opportunities available, but its residents have a multitude of methods to earn a living.

Joyce currently works for the State of Alaska on road construction projects which are seasonally based away from the community in another part of the state. She and her husband, Owen, do not rely on any one job but, perform some wage earning and participate in many subsistence activities that allow them to fulfill their financial needs. Owen hunts for large and small game and traps fur bearing animals to sell the hides or has them tanned for his own
personal use. Joyce harvests berries, making jams, jellies, pies and other foods for the table. Owen has cut wood, run equipment for gold miners, worked on the State of Alaska Steese Highway maintenance crew, and odd jobbed over the twenty-four or twenty-five years of his residence. Joyce has worked in the kitchen, waited tables, and in the housekeeping department at the Hot Springs, Crabbs Corner, and the Central Motor Inn. She has sold handiwork and frequently bartered and traded needed materials and labor in an informal manner. As mentioned before the one-room cabin that formed the basis of their current home was exchanged for menial labor.

Gold miners choose to work for themselves in small independent placer operations earning their living from the earth itself. Their stories show the belief that this precious metal affords them freedom from the established financial structure. Unconnected to the federal reserve system they can work for themselves earning money that can be kept separate from a network that invades the lives of private citizens.

Individuals in Central share in a network of general reciprocity that operates much like currency in other communities. Physical labor, clothing, meat, or cranberries might be exchanged for a haircut, fixing an outboard engine, or supplying power to someone’s freezer. No economic price is placed upon the traded goods, instead an obligation is incurred to return an item of equal or greater value. One quickly learns through experience which households are likely to make generous or conversely unequal trades even though no time limits are placed upon the barters. In the story of “Smeagol” and the tale of “The Shootout at the Okay Corral” both found later in this chapter, the principle characters exemplify poor trading partners. Told with a hint of “serve them right” they demonstrate dishonorable actions.

Brad Snow had the know how and labor ability to help a man mend his fish-net. In order to show his appreciation the man waited for an opportunity to help Brad in return. When Brad’s wife was about to deliver a baby, the man flew his own plane to a fishcamp, to pick up a close friend of hers. The story is retold to indicate the pilot’s thoughtful exchange by providing feminine assistance
when it was particularly beneficial (H95-11, 12).

Babs and her husband swapped or bartered the furs on their walls for repairs on snow machines, or generators. For years before town power came to Central they kept our freezer next to theirs in a building they supplied with electricity. In return each fall during hunting season we furnished camping equipment, a canoe and transportation to a remote river where they might harvest a moose (H98-18-03).

2.4 Code of the North

The stories these people tell form a pattern woven from threads of how life ought to be lived in this place, the proper way to carry out activities. The differing strands include the use of existing cabins, trapping and hunting ethics, and a system of hospitality involving helpfulness, treatment of others, and obligations of giving and sharing. Rules of etiquette that govern appropriate and befitting conduct are mainly unwritten, but binding none the less.

Leaving a remote cabin, open for visitors, even when you're not home, is a part of being hospitable. Many cabins are left unlocked and stocked with provisions including food and wood in case a wayfarer needs to use it. The expectation is that whatever is used will be replaced with another item or more wood will be cut and stacked.

Arlene Bell talked about her cabin on the Yukon River forty miles above Circle City;

When we moved to Woodchopper, at forty mile we left the door unlocked and food in the cabin, dishes and a note saying, 'Please leave the cabin as you found it'. People would come by and use the cabin and if we had a seasoning or something they had we didn’t, they’d leave theirs. By that fall we had a whole shelf of all different kinds of seasonings and foods. Nobody abused it. A couple of German men scrubbed the floors and everything. Left a note the best they could in English saying what they’d done. That was really nice. (H95-27)
Most all the community residents were at one time a newcomer to the area. The climate and the lifestyle highly contrasts with the places these people arrived from, and requires a whole different way of thinking and acting. Although sometimes a new individual in a small community can cause wary suspicion or stir old prejudices, usually they will be given assistance and instruction from others already in the country. Randy Brown tells of Mike Potts taking him out and teaching him to trap and letting him use cabins, traps, and other things needed for this lifestyle (H91-22-42, 57).

Arlene tells with an immense amount of admiration in her voice as well as amusement with her own ignorance, how Gordon Bertoson taught her and her husband,

How to build a fish-wheel and how to set nets. We were clumsy to start with. When Gordon cut fish, he was so fast you couldn't really see what he was doing. Gordon showed us how to build a wheelbarrow without sides on it. Flat with angled front. Set the tub on it and it wouldn't slide off. (H95-27)

Arlene and her family eventually had their own commercial salmon fishing enterprise on the Yukon River. They caught and canned many cases of fish, selling it to earn a living. In return for Gordon's generosity, they not only brought him many of their salmon when he could no longer work on his own fish wheel but, they treated others who arrived in the area, like they had been treated by Gordon.

We had a big bay window in the cabin and could hear when boat motor in trouble. Ray would go out to see what's up. One group had two weeks. Something wrong with engine. Had no paddle even, and Ray took boat and hauled them into shore. They ended up putting a tarp down on the ground and took the engine all apart and found the problem. Ray made a part for it and they only lost two days out of their vacation. They wanted to pay, but Ray said, 'If a neighbor can't help a neighbor, what good are you?' If in trouble we helped them. (H95-27)
Participants in the “Code of North” most often extend hospitality to old friends, strangers, and visitors alike. Stories demonstrate breaking this pattern of behavior causes uneasiness, friction, and anger. A note of frustration can be heard as participants tell of times others outside the group have not followed the rules of courtesy. A note of satisfaction can be heard when “punishment” is exacted for “wrongful” action.

Brad tells of a newcomer, taken in to be taught the skills required for living in this land, as is fitting. The newcomer broke the code through his refusal to participate in the expected exchange of labor, food, and hospitality. Eventually he paid the same terrible price as Christopher McCandless.

This fellow showed up in Eagle and hung around for a few days. He seemed like a nice enough man at first. He did have some unrealistic plans including hiking up the Kandik River, over the hills to the Black River, and down the Black to the village of Chalkyitsik. To this end he found himself a ride down the River to the mouth of the Kandik River. There he befriended Fred, an easy going guy, who was busy fishing for his winter's supply of salmon. He stayed sharing in Fred's meager supply of food without helping in the salmon harvest or other work related activities. Fred finally told Smeagol he was welcome to use a line cabin about twelve miles up the Kandik on his way to the Black. This cabin was half dug into the ground and was approximately four foot by six foot with a four and a half foot ceiling. There was room enough for a bunk area with a chair next to it and a stove on the other side. Smeagol packed up his things and left.

Shortly thereafter Fred had to leave his cabin on a fall supply run. When he returned he found Smeagol in residence, eating virtually all the winter's cache of rendered moose fat. Fred had maybe four or five quart jars of fat he had rendered off an August moose kill. This represented his entire year's requirement
of fat in which to fry lean meat providing nutrition as well as calories. The loss of this important resource threatened Fred's very existence.

Fred asked Smeagol to leave and never return. Being a quick fall that year it started to snow and the river started to freeze. After awhile Fred began to feel guilty about Smeagol. Meanwhile it continued to snow and snow. By the time Fred got around to feeling he ought to check on Smeagol, the snow was really, really deep. He tried one time to walk up to the other cabin but after five or ten miles gave up the effort.

The following spring after breakup when travel on the river was again possible Fred and another fellow tracked up to the cabin. There they found Smeagol sitting in the chair holding the last jar of Fred's moose fat. The jar was polished clean. He had sat there and wasn't able to, or couldn't, or refused to go any farther.

His body was feather light. They took him out of the cabin and laid him on the tundra to let the birds and the wolves and the voles take care of him. No one ever came looking for him. (H95-11, 12)

In the course of lives and activities in the land many residents must interact with "government" officials. Mary Warren, the trading post operator, sums up many people's feelings about these dealings with outsiders. Her comments display the tension residents feel when faced with those in a position of power over their actions, who do not follow the rules of hospitality. The insider/outside context of this story is a heartfelt theme which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.
Her family had flown to a remote lake where they had spotted some wildlife. Making an off airport landing they watched and photographed the animals. Federal officers located them, landed their airplanes, and began to ask for identification and licenses before engaging in the requisite small talk and cup of coffee. Mary interpreted this act as indicating the officials' assumption of unlawful conduct in progress.

The world isn't made up of bad people. We're not out there to rape the land. If you live out in the woods you take care of it. Now, if you're out in the woods looking at scenery, taking pictures, Fish and Wildlife comes along and demands to see your hunting license. We're not hunting, just enjoying being there. ‘Why are you here?’ Why can't they just come in and share a cup of coffee? They come in and look at you like you've done something wrong. Look at us like we're bad people. (H95-09-01, 02)

2.5 Friendships and Feuds

Not all interactions among insiders are calm, reasonable, or without friction. People sometimes just don't get along with other members of the community. Individuals often hold strong, inflexible opinions about any subject imaginable, with little tolerance for opposing views. Neighbors argue, fight, and hold long term grudges. This fall a fellow walked into the morning coffee hour at the Central Motor Inn and clubbed another man about the head gashing his skull and giving him a couple black eyes. He claims to be getting even for the other man repeatedly backing into his brand new pickup truck when leaving the coffee clutch during the previous month or two.

In 1992 the Central Motor Inn was the site of a disturbingly violent culmination of a feud, locally known as the “Shootout at the Okay Corral”. Dean Willis, an area gold miner, was on his way to Fairbanks that eventful day in July. Stopping for gas and a coke he noticed an unusual amount of commotion on the porch centered on Doug, Sue, and her fifteen year old son Shawn. Dean became aware that some incident had taken place that morning, the third of
July, and Doug and Sue were waiting with friends in a public place for Wade and Rhonna to appear. Rumors of ill will between the two families had begun to surface over a year before. They had acquired some adjoining state land a couple of miles outside Central. Together they had created a road into their properties called “Crazy Mountain Way” or “Squabble Ridge”. In building their respective homes someone had borrowed a tool, but failed to return it. The other brought back a broken shovel, so sorry. A check turned up missing from the Post Office. Shawn, a new driver, was forced off the road.

The Alaska State Troopers arrived in Central and arrested Wade for growing marijuana plants on his property. Dean heard about six months after the fatal incident was over, that Doug was a member of the Witness Protection Program for providing information on a drug conviction outside Alaska. After the Central bust, dialogue between the two families grew even more heated. Snowmachine seats were suspiciously slashed. Water was found in four wheeler gas tanks.

Accounts vary about the start of the showdown at the Motor Inn, but Dean remembers Rhonna and Wade absolutely steaming as they walked up the steps. Sue and Rhonna were nose to nose, yelling and screaming when the shots began. Innocent bystanders crawled under pool tables or into the basement. Sue went to her truck and got a semiautomatic rifle and sprayed the front of the building with bullets. Wade ducked and fired, ducked and fired. After a long ten minutes of people running in and out of the building firing as they ran, Wade put his gun down. Doug lay dead, shot through the chest. Rhonna had at least two shots through both arms into her abdomen area. Shawn sustained a gunshot to the shoulder (Willis). In the court case that followed everyone was acquitted, but in Central they were all condemned as undesirable.

Despite bickering and disputes that occasionally erupt into violence and bloodshed, people assist each other in troubling times. During a crises most people put aside their conflicts to aide one another. No matter how heated the exchange at the school meeting the night before, the anger dissipates if a
community member breaks down on the highway or has no insurance to cover a serious or debilitating illness.

When long-time Central resident, Georgia Corey, was diagnosed with terminal cancer she wanted to remain for as long as she was able, at home in "Wrinkleville" or Pioneer Acres off the Hot Springs Road. Community volunteers took turns visiting her, spending many hours a day keeping her company and cooking her meals. Lori, the mushroom hunter, drove her to town each week for her chemotherapy treatment. Without health insurance the disease soon depleted her retirement nest egg. Lori and Joyce spearheaded a spaghetti dinner and Chinese auction to raise funds. Members of the community donated items that were "auctioned" as a windup timer counted the seconds. A volunteer raced around the room collecting dollar bills waved in the air by those interested in the item. The sound of the buzzer indicated the winner. Friendly dollar rivalries took the place of hostile relations as almost the entire community pitched in to raise over four thousand dollars in one evening (Wilde).

2.6 Social Controls and the Wider Community

These stories relate how people can operate together assisting and supporting one another like an extended family. This "family" spans a wider area than just around Central, covering some residents of Eagle, down the Yukon to Circle City, and out in the country between. Through stories related at Crabbs Corner, or over a cup of coffee at a neighbor’s home, through attrition, listening to trapline chatter, a radio message show, and rubbing elbows in the country, many residents are aware of others who are active in the area. The stories they hear impart to the listener a feeling of having met the characters involved. Thus, without coming face to face, one feels everyone in the country is a neighbor and deserves the treatment and hospitality due to a neighbor.

Al Stout from Eagle epitomizes this theme as he tells,

I met them and talked with them. But, didn't really know them. But knew where people are and you hear stories about them. But you never lay eyes on them. It's a small country, people know others
by name before you ever met them. (H87-74)

Within this country activities carried out each year in certain "designated" areas are recognized by other residents. For instance, it is common knowledge who traps where, how long their lines are, and who is next to a specified boundary landmark. These creek and trail landmarks have evolved through the years, but are enforceable only through the controls developed within the community. The unmistakable signs of another snowmachine, airplane, dog sled or other conveyance in the snow on an established trapline usually means a newcomer to the area who is ignorant of local custom.

In the absence of the law to enforce compliance residents try to use their stories as a tool of local control. A newcomer will be told they are encroaching on so-and-so’s territory with perhaps a tale of what happened last time someone trespassed or upset local views of appropriate behavior.

People recall the large rock outside Crabbs Corner. A thief was apprehended by the fuel delivery man, George Hiller, in the act of breaking and entering a vacant home. He was cuffed around and told to sit on the rock until the State Troopers could arrive. For the next forty-eight hours every time he got off the rock, he was physically but perhaps, not very gently, placed back on it.

People recall the return of “Marty”, the guy that cooked his puppies on the stove pipe. He was playing music at one of the bars for a new owner. Residents gathered, stony silence fell as he completed a musical number. The jukebox played during a band break, a large number of couples got up to dance and laugh. As the jukebox finished they clapped enthusiastically, hooting and hollering. Stony silence ensued when the guitar player returned to the tiny stage. Marty was given the distinct impression he was not welcome (Tyrrell).

People recall Bill’s treatment of the fellow most did not want to stay around. He was termed undesirable. It was suspected he had been responsible for a number of break-ins perhaps even the one at the museum that had destroyed a gold display put together by a large number of miners. The fellow drove up to an impromptu public celebration in Crabb’s Corner park on the longest day of the year. Bill jumped onto the roof of his car, pounded with
his fists, and berated the man at the top of his lungs, “Get out of town! We do not want your kind around here!!” He leaped to the ground, slammed the car door open and shut several times, and yelled more of the same. The fellow zoomed down the road, called the police in Fairbanks claiming he feared his life was in danger, then left the community (Tyrrell).

Recalling these incidents within hearing of an “offender” is a surprisingly effective tool. Sometimes the direct approach and introduction of past tales fails to dampen the newcomer’s enthusiasm for perhaps trapping in an occupied area. The progression continues from a mild interchange to more virulent forms of the expression of displeasure. The next step may be accompanied by a few bristling hairs.

One old time trapper had a person fly in and put sets on his line. After collecting the traps and hanging them snapped to a pole he left a note that simply said, “This place is already occupied.” He received an answer saying, “It’s a free country and if you touch my private property, I’ll take you to court.” The old timer set traps all around the newcomer’s reset ones, a lot of traps. He then used the wolf’s and dog’s sign of territorial marking. He peed all around and over the offending equipment. The message, “It may be a free country, but this is my territory” was perfectly clear to the pilot. He removed his traps (W. Straub H95-30).

These methods rarely fail. Occasionally, there have been people who embrace grossly “inappropriate” behavior such as continued trapline “trespassing” or acts of public violence. Viewed as an affront to locally recognized boundaries and a potential threat to each and every resident, ostracism has resulted. All survivors of “The Shootout at the Okay Corral” were administered the cold shoulder treatment. No helping hand was offered and all ongoing sharing style exchanges were ceased. Crabbs would not sell them gas. The Hot Springs would not serve them a meal. Central Motor Inn would not let them on the premises. If they entered a public gathering silence would fall upon the crowd. Residents spoke to them in extremely short phrases, if at all. Life in a small community can be distinctly uncomfortable under these
conditions. None of these people have been seen in the community for years.

Along the Yukon River or out in the hinterlands, and through the course of years people living on Portage Creek Road, Deadwood Creek Road, Ketchum Creek Road, along Birch Creek, the Coleen River, the Nation River, the Yukon, and the Black River form a loosely knit society, a group who share common values, knowledge, behavior and experiences. On nameless creeks and sloughs these people live, die, and share their stories.

2.7 Self-transformation

People find their strengths to be in demand and of immense value to this fraction of humanity. Residents tell that if an individual harbors an ambition, any ambition, but figured they might never have the opportunity to undertake the endeavor, this is the place to give it a go. Whatever their area of expertise there is likely to be few others, if any, who can contribute that special ability to the community. Thus women and men can play an indispensable role in this small group. Their individual abilities and contributions of those talents to the welfare of the community causes them to be held in high regard. The positive feedback engendered bolsters self-confidence which leads to more self-assurance and the ability to branch out expanding horizons.

The life stories of community members illustrate the way in which the lifestyle and the social environment of the community encourage individuals to mature into important people. Changing from an urban, modern setting to a rural setting reminiscent of the American frontier ideal, some people have altered the focus of their life. Through their daily experiences with the natural world they have gained confidence in themselves to learn, adapt, do what is necessary. Within the community the small pool of social resources encourages members to draw upon their inner strengths and branch into uncharted areas of expertise, and leadership. They become necessary to the lives of others. Thus the combination of the physical and the social environment cultivates an alteration in personal perspectives.

Babs, the drug addict, became a crucial emergency care provider, Sheri,
the biker, became a talented artist, and Dan, the silver miner, became a successful business leader. These three examples are chosen from a multitude of life stories of people who have used the self-confidence they have earned from living in the community, to change the scope of their possibilities.

Babs described herself as a "Bad Girl Gone Good" (H98-18-03). She had a wild and reckless youth following an abusive childhood. As an unwed mother she dropped out of her final year at the university and became addicted to drugs. Knowing her life was leading nowhere, she dried out and moved to Central, Alaska searching for something better, a second chance. Leaving the urban environment behind her, she chose a lifestyle as far from her past as she could. "I'm clean now. No drugs. My life was going in the wrong direction before I moved to Central. Now its in the direction it should have been, a long time ago" (H98-18-03).

Coming from this background of drugs and abuse she has risen to a place of prominence in the community. She is the leader of the Emergency Medical Team and people rely upon her medical expertise and level-headed judgment during crisis situations. Through the training provided by the state she has learned invaluable techniques of bandaging and packaging, that has saved quite a few residents from harm. Over the years many of the other members of the team have come and gone, but Babs has responded again... and again... and again to serious health hazards within area homes and on the roads and trails.

Arriving at the scene of an automobile accident she found Lara, who lives less then a mile from her own log cabin, lying in the road. Lara had heard an odd sound from her neck when the accident occurred. Due to the possibility of a spinal injury, Babs and the team members strapped her to a backboard, carefully secured her head, then transported her to the Central airport. Calling Warbelow's, a newly operational air-taxi ambulance located in Fairbanks, Lara was transported within five hours to the hospital. X-rays confirmed the spinal injury. A slight movement of the spinal cord could have resulted in her permanent paralysis (Catt, Willis).
Head injuries, gun shot wounds, heart attacks, and difficulty breathing are life threatening situations that Babs has voluntarily responded to in the community. In each of these and a multitude of other situations she was indispensable to the welfare of the patient. With her help families have lived through dire circumstances. Community members depend upon her and want to have her around, the reformed drug addict.

Her face reflects the absolute delight and self-confidence Babs derives from this situation. Her facial features have softened, losing much of the hard more calloused look of her earlier barfly life. Smile lines have become more prominent than frown lines. Her frequent laughter and recovered sense of humor lights up her face, allowing her feelings of inner beauty to shine through.

Babs believes she has had to branch out plumbing new depths of her being. Most of the training books are based upon the hospital being within a two or three mile radius. In Central, this might take at least three hours travel time over the road, provided the accident is on a road, and Eagle Summit is open. Many of the snowmachine, three-wheeler, and equipment mishaps take place off the road system. The "normal" EMT routines do not apply, special care and unusual methods must be improvised. Through these new, different ways of thinking, Babs has discovered new horizons and built her confidence in her own abilities.

During a community poker run, an accident occurred between Birch Creek and Medicine Lake. A woman caught her leg between her heavy snowmachine and a sizable tree. Her femur, the substantial bone in the upper thigh, was bent in an unnatural position. Shortly after, Babs participating in the snowmachine outing, arrived on the scene. With no formal equipment available Babs had to improvise a method of immobilization for this extremely painful and serious injury, and arrange transportation to the Hot Springs, at least eight miles away through the roadless muskeg. This is not a situation covered in the EMT manual. Sawing down a few small black spruce trees she secured the leg and strapped the woman to the back of a snowmachine (Catt).

Babs' experience of living in this place, changing to meet daily
contingencies, her position of trust within the community, and the ability to adapt to differing circumstances gave her the confidence in herself and her own ability to surpass her own limits. She used the change she made in her assumptions and definitions about living in this land to shift the focus of her life and become what she wanted to be. Possibly this transformation could take place in another place. It might be more difficult, however, as it seems reliance upon oneself, and the encouragement of both the physical and social environment to meet new situations are integral parts of the process of transformation.

Upon her discharge from the army Sheri was at loose ends and unsure what direction her life was going. She needed something to change her life. While visiting her mother in Seattle she picked up a magazine idly reading advertisements from men seeking partners in Alaska. Although she had been fascinated with Alaska her entire life she could not envision moving there with no contacts and little financial backing. Writing to the man in this specific ad was a way of changing her possibilities. Out of many responses he received, Larry chose to send her a reply. They continued the courtship through correspondence. The romance blossomed into love and eventually marriage. Together they planned and built a home in Central (H98-18-02).

Eight years ago Larry wanted a pair of mukluks. Without any prior experience, Sheri found a pattern and picked up a needle and thread and began to stitch traditional Athapaskan bead work designs onto leather. Eventually this action lead to an unusual art form that has become her passion and a method of earning a living. Sheri creates uniquely Alaskan designs, transfers them to a computer to form a pattern, then out of various colored beads weaves them into pictures and three dimensional objects.

In the course of establishing this business Sheri taught herself to use a computer and published a book of her original designs. Over the internet, and at commercial outlets all over the state Sheri sells many beautiful and unusual handmade combinations of artwork and utility, including lamps, necklaces, amulet bags, wall hangings, and purses. She has transformed a pastime into a
financial success.

The financial gains are the outward symbol of her success but, she says, the expansion of her other limits are her greatest accomplishment which fill her with a deep sense of satisfaction. “Didn’t have enough confidence in my ability to do something like that” (H98-18-02). She has learned to perform many activities that were outside her realm of possibilities before she came to Alaska. In her own words Sheri speaks of her growing self-assurance,

Since I’ve been up here I found peace within myself that I enjoy and have more confidence in myself because of the things I have accomplished. Not just doing the book, beading, building house. But, some of the things I’ve been through on a trapline. Going through water and darn near froze to death. Things of that sort. Adventures. Things that, I think have more meaning. (H98-18-02)

Men change as well but, speak of it in terms of self-realization or the opportunity to succeed, to make something of themselves. Dan an eight grade graduate, grew up in a small town in Idaho. He worked in a silver mine deep under the ground changing the honey buckets used by other miners. Dan verbally attributes most of his success to his wife’s nature and hard work. Together they ran a general store at Arctic Circle Hot Springs then bought the Yukon Trading Post in Circle City. For over ten years they ran this restaurant, bar, hotel, gas station, liquor store. In addition Dan provided weather information many times a day to the National Weather Service, plowed the airport, and picked up the mail. He fixed equipment, heaters, refrigerators, freezers, cars, and outboard motors. He changed tires, minded the store, cooked, stocked shelves, and swabbed the bathroom. A real handyman. Somehow during all that work he found time to learn about and become a private pilot. Buying his own tail dragger he taught himself to land off airports on gravel bars. Certain features of the airplane he wanted to improve upon. Mulling it over he decided to build a plane from a kit. Within two years he had turned a pile of nuts and bolts into a flyable aircraft. From the bottom of the
silver mine he has risen to a position of financial and personal success. Certainly, he relates, he could not have accomplished this if he had remained where he was. His move, lots of luck, his close relationship with his spouse, and hard work have undeniably crystallized into a successful combination (Pearson).

2.8 Community Foundations

The people who reside close to Central come from widely different socioeconomic backgrounds. Living in close quarters in the unforgiving climate of the interior of Alaska they come to know and usually appreciate the strengths of other residents. Such a small reserve of population allows and encourages individuals to branch out and contribute needed resources to the group.

Although folks try not to require assistance in their daily life, occasions arise that require a helping hand. The reality of coping with the harshness of the winter, difficulty of travel, or rigors of daily life leaves people vulnerable to needing support from others under circumstances beyond their control. Without any formal system to count upon during stressful situations, these people participate in a system of helpfulness, hospitality, and sharing.

Common experiences and knowledge joins them together as a community. The things they know about life in this place and the experiences they have shared, whether in a group or on separate occasions, make them different from others, setting them apart. Mutual skills, encounters with the natural environment, ideals, and perceptions of behavior connect them together as a group, a community.
Chapter Three:  
Escape from the Ordinary

The River People, those who lived or continue to live along the Yukon River, took the values and meaning inherent in the lifestyle under discussion to a drastic degree. The life they chose to create was a passionate expression of their search for meaning and led them far from ordinary places. Many of these people no longer live along the river, but have moved to Fairbanks, Anchorage, or New York, but the underlying values and perceptions of their lives are held by the current residents of Central. The concepts that dominated their choices contain elements and ideas, dreams, visions, and plans that many people express who have chosen Central, Alaska as their home. The River People tried an extreme expression of living these ideals, but the stories from Central embody, albeit to a lesser degree, the same philosophical foundations.

3.1 The River People: A Quest for meaning

Mainly during the seventies a number of people searching for substance and meaning in their lives rejected the consumerism and materialism of contemporary American culture. Seeking an environment antipodal to the urban technological places in which, for the most part, they were raised, by ones and twos those who came to be known as “The River People” moved beyond the edge of civilization into wild lands. Frustrated by overcrowding in paved urbanized landscapes, they turned their backs on modern technology and followed their dreams past the end of the road into uncluttered, natural country.

The River People arrived in the interior of this state, planting themselves on the banks of the Yukon River with a vision of how life ought to be lived. Searching for freedom they chose a place free from any recognizable form of governmental regulations. Yearning for space, they chose a place far from large concentrations of human population. Dreaming of living amidst nature, they chose a lifestyle dependent upon and closely tied to seasonal cycles of the
earth. Driven by the desire to live a conscientious life based on the principles of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, independence, freedom and the enjoyment of the beauty of nature, the River People focused upon living a simple life in this particular place.

In an effort to synthesize their values and their daily lives these people explored the limits and uses of a non-mechanized lifestyle. Making deliberate choices grounded in their philosophical, ethical, and moral precepts each individual or couple created a value driven existence. In order to live consistently with their ideals each and every aspect of life, the details of daily living were deeply pondered and debated with others. Dropping all frills or seemingly frivolous material possessions and provisions they explored the pitfalls and virtues of technology and its relevance to existence. Probing the edges of basic necessity they frugally prioritized essentials of life itself.

Each faced these limits in their own individualistic manner, but as a group they cut living to the fundamentals of food, shelter, water, air, and human companionship. Characteristically they built small, simple, one room cabins without the use of power tools, from materials at hand, such as poles, moss and logs. They gathered, grew, fished or hunted from the land the food they ate. Water was hauled from the river itself. The place they chose to live provided clean air to breathe. Living far apart the groups of ones, twos, and threes were isolated from each other often for weeks or even months at a time (Caulfield 43).

Randy Brown intentionally chose his dream of living in the land, with the land, and off the land as completely as possible. He based life around a couple cabins, one located thirty miles up the Kandik River from its confluence with the Yukon. Once a year he journeyed to Fairbanks or Eagle to get supplies,

I got a few clothes and some ammunition... wasn’t that much, we didn’t really need that much. I was full of the excitement of living out there and I didn’t really have any desire to do anything else or get anything. (H91-22-42, 57)

Randy pondered the relative merit of such common household items as kitchen matches versus older methods of starting a fire. He might buy
ammunition for his rifle, but was thoroughly aware that this use implied an industrial culture with a tremendous infrastructure.

Steve Ulvi and Lynette Roberts lived at least ten years on the banks of the Yukon. They rejected the use of plywood even as it floated by them on the river and built their home with log walls, a pole floor and roof, with moss on top. But, they did use visqueen, a plastic oil product, on the roof structure. There simply was no other material they could envision to use.

We were not into power tools. We were very much into being quiet... No chainsaws, outboard motor. Wasn't in the plans. A generator to generate electricity would have been outrageous. (H91-22-05)

In an interview with Dan O'Neil Lynette tries to articulate how she and her husband Steve chose the commodities containing the essence of their philosophy. "Do with minimal... We didn't bend spruce roots to make snares" (H95-13). For them store bought snare wire was an acceptable accommodation to modern inventions. Feeling for the boundaries and borders of basic necessity they experimented with natural alternatives to items some as simple as toilet paper and candlelight. Using a pioneering history or a frontier practicality yardstick, they measured what was necessary for life to be lived as close to the origin as possible.

Slowly through experience, and trial and error, they decided which pieces of modern technology to incorporate into their simple existence. Steve indicates that it is the country itself and living there that helps one choose the items that are necessary to maintain life. "There are lessons we learned as we went. Basically you go with a head full of preconceptions and soon you open up a little bit and the country starts to teach you more" (H91-22-05). The year they experimented with the use of candle light they found the long dark winters not conducive to life without all fossil fuels. They bought a kerosene lantern.

The lives of the River People demonstrated an idealistic vision of an alternative to the materialistic consumer society. Their goal was to be more connected with the world than living in modern America (Evans, H91-22-39).
The households reached differing conclusions of simplified life stripped to the bare essentials, but according to Caulfield, even the most luxurious were primitive compared to modern urban living.

Carolyn Kelly lived on the river for over six years with her husband and eventually a young child. They attempted to live simply and quietly in harmony with their surroundings. They purchased no paper products of any kind to satisfy their daily needs and ground their grain for their daily bread. Hunting drift piles they foraged plywood for the floor of the log cabin they dwelt in. Rejecting the noise and smell of fossil fuels they became adamantly anti-snowmachine and chose to use dogs as a viable means of non-mechanized transportation. Carolyn tries to explain how they felt for the edges of essential living, “To live simply you take things you really needed and turn your back on other things” (H91-22-47).

Moose, caribou, bear, small game, and salmon were the mainstay of many of the household’s diet. This was supplemented by growing a garden in summer and gathering all the berries around their homes. As a subsistence dweller many times an animal would be harvested out of season, but this too was a well thought out procedure consistent, in their minds, with the values of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and the desire to have a life tied to the environment. Each moose or caribou was harvested and fully utilized only when and if needed, regardless of regulation (Caulfield 43-47). “I would use everything,” Randy Brown commented on his conscious effort to reject consumerism that wastes by wise use of the resource (H91-22-42, 57). The hide was prepared for clothing or a toboggan bag, trapping bait, blanket, or babiche (Ulvi H91-22-05, Brown H91-22-42, 57). All of the meat and fat was eaten including the nose, tongue, intestines and even the bone marrow was relished. What humans could not consume, the dogs could.

In order to travel from one place to the next for supplies, human contact, or in the course of earning a living from the land these people utilized non-mechanized methods of movement. A few traveled by age old human muscle power alone, on foot. Others used a combination of human endurance and
simple technology. During the summer months many used canoes, some in combination with dogs to pull the craft upstream. Teams of dogs harnessed to handmade toboggans or sleds were used in winter on trails that people hand cut and snowshoed through the land, or over the river.

The manner in which dogs were fed, housed, harnessed, and utilized as working animals was deliberately focused upon. As individuals, and as a group, the standards and norms were explored in conscious debates, discussions, and resulting actions. Harvesting a moose or caribou to feed the dogs was not an acceptable use of the resource (Caulfield 47, 48, Ulvi H91-22-05). Feeding them salmon was considered acceptable.

The size of the team and the size of the dogs were closely considered areas of concern. When Carolyn and her husband George brought fourteen dogs to the river’s edge others told them the team might prove to be too large. In feeling for the edge between values, practicality, and utility they felt the team was necessary for their needs. After a few years of feeding salmon to their dogs, Carolyn struggled with the necessity of killing so many fish. Adapting to the situation they cut their team down to five (H91-22-47).

Catching, cleaning, drying, and all the myriad steps in fish preparation represents a large workload and dominates the summer tasks. Steve Ulvi and Lynette Roberts worked hard to harvest between 1500 and 2000 fish each year. Steve expresses the wise resource use of the whole salmon, “Philosophically I was really opposed to dumping heads and guts in the river. Never saw it as a viable alternative” (H91-22-05). They utilized these parts in the garden as fertilizer.

Some form of income was necessary in order to stay on the land. The use of leg-hold traps and the killing of animals for money was a fiercely debated, highly emotional decision. Most were philosophically opposed to this activity, but many households had no other way to earn enough cash to get by. Trapping “was the only feasible means of making a necessary income from the land” wrote Richard Caulfield (51). Following their goals of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, they attempted to wrestle a living from the land itself,
accommodating themselves to setting out traplines.

There are whole art forms of knowledge in the related activities of hunting, fishing, and trapping, requiring intelligence and an affinity with the land and animals (Brown and Howe H91-22-01, 02). Each has a season of maximal activity and the lifestyle as a whole tied the participants to a yearly cycle which filled their everyday lives with purposeful activities. Spring or during May and June the garden needs planting and tending. The fish come up the river to spawn mainly during July and August and into September. Hunting moose is legally relegated to the fall and trapping occurs during the winter months when the animal pelts are prime and travel cross country is relatively easy.

As each explored the limits of life tied to the seasons without high levels of technology, these people began to recognize the virtues of mechanization and the industrial culture. Doing every task by hand, using traditional methods, provides a great deal of satisfaction and pride, but involves a huge amount of time investment. Bits of modern technological culture began to creep into usage as people adjusted their need for comfort, time, or desire for a better life. Concessions were made to expediency and family life as the years passed. Each addition to their lives was deliberately pondered and chosen with care such as the the piece of plastic Steve added to his dog sled.

Steve had made his own toboggans for his dog sled team using birch and other wood and old fashioned steaming techniques. Plastic was incorporated into sled design as the old toboggans became warped or damaged by use. Plastic considerably shortened the construction time and was an improvement over wood during the wet snow conditions of over flow and early spring. Its surface would slide over the sticky snow instead of collecting it on the under side of the wooden sled.

Outboard motors were attached to canoes of more than one household. This made travel in the summer less time consuming and labor intensive than walking and pulling the supply laden boat against the current. For people like Steve, it enabled him to power his canoe up the river after working a wage job each weekday in Eagle. Chainsaws began to be utilized for cutting the
seemingly endless amount of wood to heat the home particularly during the long arctic winters.

Households such as Randy’s and Steve and Lynette’s grew as the single males found mates and children began to arrive. Concepts of the "Good Life" were continually examined and reexamined as the families went about living their dreams and visions. Images of this life had to be flexible and subject to change.

Randy Brown, after a few years of living alone or with other males in the hinterlands, met and married Karen Kallen-Brown. Together they created a life on the Kandik River many miles from the closest community of Eagle. They had two children, used dogs for transportation and in an effort to live simply, did not put in a wood floor in their cabin. The price was “great billows of dust that would go up” (H91-22-48). As their children began to stomp on the dirt flooring all the items in the cabin became coated with the airborne dust, even leaving mud streaks on the clean dishes. Choosing to change this particular reality, a floor was added.

Children have needs and desires that conscientious parents try to fulfill. Pondering and reflecting upon their goals as individuals and family units, the River People adjusted their living circumstances, one step at a time. Karen Kallen-Brown, an educated woman and a certified teacher, had strong ideals about raising her children specifically to provide them with a foundation “for operating in the two worlds” (H91-22-48). She explored the limits of teaching them both ways of life, one provided by an urban setting and the other by the wild and remote environment of the Yukon River. Soon a computer made its way into their home. This was the solution to being “competitive in any traditional job or college situation” (H91-22-48). The computer, of course, requires electricity in some form. It could still be serviced from an alternative system than the dreaded fossil fuels by perhaps the use of solar panels. However, the existence of this piece of modern technology is predicated upon the acquisition of more material goods.

Purchasing more possessions and adding to the ease of travel or need to
have items such as safety vests for the children necessitated an increase in income. Many of the River People applied for full-time or part-time seasonal work to financially support the life they wanted to lead. Reminiscent of the people in Jeffrey Jacob’s book, New Pioneers, The Back-to-the-Land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future, they faced the work-time conundrum, how to earn a living (xi). In the course of his examination of agrarian lifestyles on small holdings in particularly the Pacific Northwest and southeastern British Columbia he found many acquired a job to maintain their life on the land.

A rural life and particularly a completely subsistence lifestyle is a full time job, not a style of living that one can easily participate in some of the time. The wage earning frustration; wanting more and needing more to provide the home front, but working a job takes time. Time, that is ultimately an indispensable part of the tasks and method of living the country or subsistence lifestyle. People from the river began to live closer to their work for longer and longer periods.

With the creation of the Yukon-Charley National Preserve the status of the public land they were living on changed. A new layer of federal government and regulations was placed upon their lives. Park Service use of motor boats, helicopters, and other motorized vehicles combined with their method of enforcing a new permit system created an insider/outsider conflict discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. The clash between the two value systems contributed to the movement of the River People away from the river. The country has been all but vacated by residents.

Carolyn Kelly indignantly conveys,

We're heavily anti-snowmachine and motors...adamantly so. We didn't want anyone coming to see us on snow machine. We wanted to get away from others to have things quiet. Chainsaws, snow machines, boats and motors really noisy and stink and smell. Living out on the river, very little traffic until Park Service set up at Coal Creek. Traffic up and down the river really increased. Had helicopter too. Lots of noise. Riverboat and helicopter. One hundred miles from Eagle and government there
and here's all this noise and traffic. What a joke to be down there going through all this work doing things the way we were doing them and all stuff happening. I thought of myself as a conservationist and concerned about the environment, but the reality of Park Service presence wasn't what was in my mind as conservation or environmentalism. Here people being paid to play with expensive toys and create pollution....I got disgusted. (H91-22-47)

As the participants in this way of life drifted away from the Yukon for various reasons they leave behind an example of an experiment in living. The River People have perhaps moved on following the current of life, but this way of living has filled them with a sense of pride in their own self worth, a wonderful feeling of self confidence. Carolyn Kelly talks about how it increased her self-confidence and changed her whole life. It taught her "the true value of things. I know all I need to be happy is a warm, dry place to live, fresh water and food" (H91-22-47).

The deliberate choices they made as they followed their ideals and visions in their search for freedom, sense of esthetics and practicality, proved to themselves and others that a simpler life is possible. Happiness can be found in unusual environments. A synthesis of value, utility and every day living can be achieved.

This group caught the imagination of more than one interviewer and writer such as Richard Caulfield, becoming the subjects of books, articles, and studies. John McPhee wrote extensively of their lives in his popular novel, *Coming Into the Country*. Melody Webb traveled with and included some of these people in her historical work on the Yukon River entitled, *The Last Frontier, A History of the Yukon Basin of Canada and Alaska*. Dan O'Neil and William Schneider conducted extensive oral recordings of these people's own accounts of their unusual lives. These recordings document their lifestyle and some of their reasons for leaving. Presented in a jukebox format they are available through the University of Alaska Fairbanks.
Since the books have been written and the studies completed lives have continued to evolve and change. The land around the particular area this group lived out their dreams may not be open for current settlement, but the cycle continues as others seek out the Last Frontier. The River People are mostly gone, but people still show up in the community of Central with similar perceptions and ideals. The stories from past and present residents of Central and the river encapsulate yearnings for self-reliance and participation in activities that directly contribute to your comfort and survival with your family. With their use of technology they make deliberate concessions based upon the personal knowledge of how much they are using, what it costs, and takes to maintain this usage. Living in this place of beauty connected to nature, they make individual choices about activities participated in, acquiring direct feedback on how well one accomplishes these tasks.

3.2 Transcending Boundaries of Conformity

In their stories through contrast with the time-bound, materialistic dweller from the lower forty-eight states, Central residents display their vision of themselves as freedom loving outdoors people. Their individual life-stories demonstrate a conscious rejection of comfortable patterns of existence in an urban setting. Coming north they searched for a place that contrasted the hectic pace of life amidst tall buildings, many people, and parking lots. To establish the life they dreamed of, they chose an uncommon way of life. Consciously they break the boundaries of conformity.

Chosen through a different set of criterion, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the homes they build, and the jobs they hold, are not standard urban fare. They do not fit an urban mold. The guidelines they follow and the values they express are fashioned to fit the setting in which they choose to carry out their lives. Buying the newest car or look alike home on the block is not appealing to this group of people. Measured by its ability to safely traverse the overflow they might purchase the latest snowmachine. Due to its small size, making it easy to carry, and its versatile uses, they might buy the newest
Leatherman.

The stories contained in Chapter One and Two have demonstrated the importance of wild berries, moose, caribou, and salmon to people’s diet. Through their sharing and hunting activities community members attempt to harvest as much of their food as possible. Some have gardens and chickens providing eggs and vegetables to supplement their wild foods. The way they go about shopping to fill their other needs by the month or season contrasts with urban habits. Babs almost always attracts attention and amazed comments when she checks out of a grocery store with three or four full carts in tow.

The style of clothing fits the setting. Clearly Fronzie could not wear a dress and high heeled shoes to work in her dog yard, even if she wanted to. Babs’ plaid shirt worn over a turtleneck and faded jeans are more appropriate than nylons and a short skirt to wear on a huge piece of oily machinery. A person who refuses to wear long handles and layers of clothing is easily identified as one who does not spend any amount of time outdoors during the arctic winter.

The longjohns, bunny boots, parka, hats, mittens, and snow pants vital to riding on a snowmachine or on the back of a dog sled are heavy and exceedingly warm for inside wear. It is necessary for these items to be readily accessible in a vehicle on a Fairbanks “run” during the winter months, but they are uncomfortable and nearly impossible to wear while shopping or conducting “town” business. In their conversations together residents sum up in a simple statement the implicit changes in mental and physical gears necessary for a trip to Fairbanks. “Tomorrow I’m going to town. Need something?” They must change their clothing and be ready to deal with noise, crowds, prior planning, and the stress of simply getting there and home again.

A trip “Outside” causes groans at the necessary cost of new apparel and the effort everyone intuitively understands will take place to “fit” in. Babs comments that she feels like an actor in a movie when she visits Arizona to see her in-laws. The smells are different, the loud noises of traffic bothersome, the hectic pace of crowds milling to and fro, frazzle her nerves. Her clothing, lack of
makeup, and way of dealing directly with a stranger do not fit in with the urban situation (H98-18-03).

Trying to present how dissimilar the settings are Babs began by telling about the Central airport, containing no terminal.

You park your truck on the wide spot in the gravel runway, officially called a taxi-way and hop on the twin engine tiny plane. Most of the other six or seven faces inside are familiar. No parking ticket. No ticket counter. No baggage check. No hassle. Land in Fairbanks and there is a paved runway but, inside the terminal you can walk around the single building within five minutes. There are only two baggage conveyors, and the parking lot right outside the door is easily reached. Go shopping in this town and you will likely run into someone you know at Fred Meyers or Sam’s Club.

Leaving Alaska one flies over trees, mountains, glaciers. “Outside” Alaska there is a patchwork quilt of farms, land is all squares of cultivation, roads, and houses everywhere. No one will look you in the eye. Skyscrapers. Hit the terminal in Seattle and there are strangers everywhere. Pavement everywhere. Take a bus to get to another terminal and the right flight. Gate 25 G. What a difference! And that is only the beginning! (Catt).

Homes built, for the most part, by the individual owners in the Central area are unique. In Chapter One their distinctiveness was discussed in detail. Unquestionably they physically bear little resemblance to “ticky-tacky” houses that all look the same. Many have an address invented by the dweller to satisfy regulations that leave little room for non-conformity. “One Tail Dragger Lane” Ella, the home-electrician, calls her log cabin. She and her husband have a dirt strip cleared on the edge of their property to accommodate the use of their airplanes that have a tire in the tail of the plane (tail dragger) rather than a tricycle gear configuration with a wheel in the nose used by planes on paved runways. Without this “address” many mail order catalogs and UPS deliveries are not “allowed” as some warehouses refuse to dispatch merchandise to a PO
Although some are not so trusting, many of the Central residents do not lock their homes, vehicles, or outbuildings. Sheri and her husband Larry don’t have a lock on the back door. The front door key is located above the door, she thinks... It has never been used.

I lived in the lower forty-eight and Seattle area, I had bleeding ulcers and I was a nervous wreck. You were always afraid and you didn’t go out at night and you locked your doors and didn’t talk to your neighbor. If somebody approached you, you clutched your purse like they were going to mug you. (H98-18-02)

Clearly this is a different type of danger than one would expect from Central where she knows all her neighbors, never locks any door, and will offer a stranger the hospitality of the North.

In teaching my teenage sons, Jacob and Luke, to drive a car I have had to tape a spare key on the outer body of the vehicle. Driving around Central the key is left in the ignition or occasionally put in the ashtray. Although they have learned to lock the door when navigating city traffic in Fairbanks, the key habit is ingrained. A spare was added after an experience or two with the locksmith picking the truck door in a store parking lot while the keys dangled within sight. Rocky commented after reading this passage, she was glad she wasn’t the only one to have this experience (Harrison).

Mundane activities that are simply executed in the urban environment such as a visit to the Dentist take on extraordinary preparations. Considering the distance, time, and financial investment involved, a family trip to the Doctor’s office is not undertaken lightly. The Symons family has four children ranging in age from almost two to twelve. With wood heat, forty chickens, and a dog at home it is difficult to schedule a convenient time to have a yearly checkup for the dentist, never mind the “yearly” doctors physical, and eye exam which is common “Outside”. Leaving home during the winter means the house will freeze, and so will the chickens. Summer then is the time to trudge to town trying to arrange appointments with one child after the other in a five hour time
Imagine trying to keep the baby occupied while her older brothers sit in the chair, and please, let's not have to make a return trip to take care of someone or other's problem! Cram the whole family, groceries, and survival gear into one vehicle, quick before the road crew gets off work and traveling the road becomes more tricky! Another appointment or running out of time for other list items means another hundred dollar bill to find a place to stay the night and don't forget to call a neighbor to feed the chickens (Symons).

Jobs people hold contrast with the ordinary confines of a 9-5 wage earning situation. Gold miners, fishermen, and construction workers toil long hours, outdoors during the brief seasons of spring, summer, and fall. The long winter months are spent preparing for the coming season and in leisure pursuits. Those who are self-employed work in fits and starts when work is available. Handicrafts can be worked around other schedules. Trappers work during the winter setting lines and trying to complete the bulk of their work during the short daylight hours. Chosen for the freedom they represent none of these occupations are bound by the time clock.

The life they envision does not include working for twelve months of the year to earn a two week vacation in which they can enjoy nature. Fronzie, the bear slayer, dreamt of living her vacation. She wanted to integrate the natural environment into her daily life not to "go" backpacking for a limited duration in order to experience wild places. Instead of working a job to enable her to visit these places she wanted to live there and earn enough to stay (H98-18-01).

Trapping, hunting, fishing, gold mining, and odd jobbing on a seasonal basis don't seem to provide a huge amount of cash nor does an employer provide health insurance. The cash comes in lumps and slumps instead of a steady paycheck and may not include withholding for income taxes or retirement benefits. The income is a means to enable them to live where and how they want to live but, also means, there are certain conditions that must be endured.

The Symons family is supported by Richard Symons. Fixing an engine here and a snowmachine there, he earns enough to afford the six member
family a living. The enchantment and allure of their cabin might not be apparent to others. The counter tilts from the action of the permafrost. The walls are covered with cardboard, the ceiling with clear visqueen. The floor is speckled with sawdust. Their clothes are discolored from hard use in outdoor play and repeated washings which cause missing buttons and snaps. The backyard is a jungle of nonworking vehicles and “yard art”. In any other setting they might be considered poverty stricken but, in this place they do not consider themselves poor (Symons).

Many aspects of Central residents lives are not ordinary and unconfined by the rules and regulations others follow in crowded urban situations. They choose to carry out their lives incorporating activities and a way of living that they feel others just do not do. Their stories tell that living in this environment carries challenge, peace, and the breaking of boundaries and horizons that limit human possibilities.

3.3 Urban Contrast, Life Tied to the Natural Seasons

Moving to this place requires one to leave behind many of the urban comforts. The technology residents have available to them requires a conscious choice and is difficult to achieve. The infrastructure that supports urban environments must be created and maintained by individual home owners before the benefits of the modern world can be realized. Described in Chapter One is the effort needed for the common amenity of running water. Other urban technologies such as multi channel TV or internet hook ups are unusual services that take a concerted effort to acquire. Their narratives tell they are conscious of exactly what is necessary for them to receive and support technological equipment.

Chris Kriendler’s two roomed cabin off the Hot Springs Road has an unusual combination of frontier living and twenty-first century technology. Water comes from a five gallon bucket while he has a satellite dish for a Starband computer/internet connection. It was not a simple plug in the wall, but a major investment of time and money that procured this utility for Chris. His desire to
have this modern convenience in this place illustrates the thought process and investment that must take place for many community residents to have up to date devices.

The phone system of microwave, satellites, and ground lines connecting Chris to the rest of the world are too slow to support good internet connections. He therefore put up a satellite dish and connected it to his computer bank in his 10 x 12 living room. Not being on the town power grid, Chris must maintain his own generator to supply electrical power to his home requiring a small building separate from the house. The fuel to feed the generator requires storage tanks and a system of filtering out fuel impurities. This thousand gallon tank must be filled, periodically a delivery must be scheduled. Chris must plow the steep road providing access to his home as no one else lives on that road year round. Driving a four-wheeler with a plow he keeps the miles clear of snow during the winter months, and smooths out the ruts caused by spring and summer rains washing away the dirt. He has had to think of all the ramifications of his desire for computer access, create a system to make it possible, and continue to work to maintain it.

Through their choice of homes, diet, jobs, social interactions, choice of technologies, and general way of living, residents feel they have established a relationship rooted to their environment. Their lives are tied to the land and their seasonal activities, bound by natural clocks more than 9 to 5 routines. When spring thaws the creeks, it is time for the miners to begin their summer wage earning. With the advent of freezeup the business of harvesting available food sources begins, and active mining ceases. As winter freezes the voice of the water, it is time to start the trapping season.

Time is viewed from a different perspective as people immerse themselves in the world of nature instead of man. It takes on a different rhythm. The pace of life has a different focus and they enjoy feelings of peace and tranquility. Sheri chooses to live this way because she really cherishes the slower pace of life. "I just enjoy the peace that you find up here and the pace which is a little slow. If you have something to do it can always be done
tomorrow" (H98-18-02).

Karen Kallen Brown explores the inner feelings of life along the river contrasted to an urban environment,

I also liked the aesthetic surroundings, peace and quiet and ability to focus and do what you want to do without the types of interruptions that get in your way in busy or urban areas. In town so many other demands on your time... I feel split. Certain things I could do that feed my soul out in the bush. I can't think of any place I'd rather be, all other things being equal, than being in Canyon Cabin and seeing the view right around that area of the woods and having the incredible peace and stillness you have in a place like that. (H91-22-48)

In Central and camps beyond the community boundaries, the great Alaskan silence fills residents' ears. In this century it is an unusual experience to live in a world dominated by nature where the sounds are predominately natural ones. Margaret Murie and other writers comment on this unusual aspect. No sounds of jets flying overhead, no electric hum, no noise from traffic. No lawn mowers, few sounds of human activity at all except the ones made by the person or family unit.

My experience in the various camps that my family and I spend time on our seasonal rounds, is that the days pass in a rhythm enclosed in silence. The sounds of moving water in summer, birds, small mammals, and very occasionally the sound of a heavier animal with its toenails click, click, clicking on the stones. The sound of the leaves after the first frost, falling, drifting, hitting tiny branches all the way down. The wind in the wings of occasional flights of ducks and geese on their fall migrations. The sound of trees cracking in the cold of winter and the slow movements of ice and snow upon the lake or river. An odd, unusual, or different sound is cause for attention.

The weather and the country become the focus of life, one settles into the land. The most important actions of the day are keeping the kitchen shelter viable in blowing wind. Keeping sand, snow, or insects out of the food and
utensils as much as possible. Keeping sunburn and sun damage to a minimum on my redheads during the summer and frostbite from their cheeks in the winter. Making sure the woodpile is large enough. The world outside the camp fades in importance, ceasing to be of vital significance to daily life. The owl making curious passes over our heads and the source of the soft grunting noise is of more consequence than what is happening in Seattle or on the popular TV soaps. There is little reason to rush an activity or watch the hands of the clock. We might spend hours training the local Gray Jays to eat out of our hands or creating a new game using the wind and a kitchen garbage sack.

The relationship with my family and the events transpiring in the environment are the central focus of attention. Each day we move through the land watching for signs of animal activity etched on the gravel bar in summer and in the snow in winter. The unfolding story of their passage and activities are the paramount news. There is literally no contact with anyone outside the small circle of family. What a contrast this exemplifies from the crowds of urban situations where attention is fractured by the hectic pace, distractions, and noise of modern life.

It is a way of living centered upon the family unit and involving activities that nourish your body, mind, and soul, carried out in a seasonal and natural setting. Think of Fronzie, the bear slayer, who moves from cabin to cabin, place to place dependent upon the season of the year. She did not think to mention the story of the bear and her husband with his pants around his ankles until I asked about the 30-06 casing. She and her mate, form a close intimate bond through their life together. The spent shell is a subtle reminder of her vital significance to his existence. No flowers are necessary when he is late from the job site to remind her of his continued love. His ability to come home at all displays the depth to which their lives are intertwined, their dependence upon each other within the context of the place they carry out their lives.

The contrast to the urban environment is clearly stated by Brad Snow from the Nation River. He and his wife Lilly Allen moved to this place searching for a place to live unlike that of New Hampshire from whence they came. They
chose to live tied to the rhythm of nature, not man. Brad looked for a place where he did not have to work for twenty years to buy a plot of land only to be surrounded by box houses.

For necessary money, they could work from time to time in Fairbanks - and, possibly, in Eagle. But, they hoped to live much of the year apart from any community. ‘I reject suburbia.’ Snow was not shy to explain. ‘I reject crowds. I do not want a new car, a fancy house. They are not worth working for.’ What he and Lilly sought was terrain where the individual spirit might be confined only by the metes and bounds and rules of nature. (McPhee 239)

3.4 Integrating Values and Living

The people written about in this thesis have chosen to leave their past homes and lives in search of a different way of living. Some speak of the limits placed on an individual by life in a manmade urban environment. Dissatisfied with one way of living they came north searching for a contrast to that life. As a thread throughout all their life stories is the diffuse feeling that the urban lifestyle does not suit their sense of what constitutes a quality life. In changing their life, these people made an effort to integrate their values into their daily living.

Even though Karen Hamilton is overweight and suffers from congestive heart failure, in 1994 she, her husband, Don, and her breathing machine moved to a two roomed home in “downtown” Central. She comments, “Quality of life is more important than quantity” (Hamilton). Considering themselves rural folks, not city people they moved away from the city violence to a place where the friendliness of people impressed them, and government was at a minimum. The remoteness and beauty of the surroundings attracted them to this place where they looked to enjoy a peaceful and quiet life. They have made a considerable effort to integrate their values with the life they lead.

Reminiscent of the American frontier ideal this group of people share core values that revolve around self-reliance, incorporating nature into their lives, a sense of community, a system of give and take, an emphasis on close
family ties, and utilizing items of value. In order to incorporate these beliefs into their lives each household rejects certain common amenities, perhaps considered luxuries, and embraces treasures of civilization they find valuable. Consciously each makes unusual and individual choices grounded upon elements of personal value. Chris Kriendler is not on a town power grid, but has a very up to date computer bank. The Tyrrell family has no running water, but own their own airplane and bread maker. Bill and Fronzie Straub have five or six cabins, each with only one small room.

Underlying their lives is an effort to come to terms with what they consider the failings of the dominant values of contemporary technological society. They may not articulate the idea touted by environmental groups that change must occur in order to save the biosphere that sustains all life on earth, but their lives are based upon this notion. They have taken a nebulous concern with rampant materialistic consumption, the resultant demands upon limited earth resources, and tried to translate it into a way of living within the environment. Items are judged by utility to the lifestyle with a view toward long term service not outward appearance nor stylishness. It is not a repudiation of civilization, but a choosing of elements of value integrated with a way of living close to nature.

According to Linton Caldwell, the founder of the Environmental Protection Act, social concern regarding mankind's environmental future has been expressed through the environmental movement (Caldwell 4). He views this movement to be critical for the creation of a rational order for the continuance of human life on earth. According to Caldwell a new planetary perception is vital based upon a different relationship between man and nature. Humans must face the realization of discernible threatening events in the global environment caused by the value of growth and consumptive lifestyles of modern society. Caldwell envisions political realities, these people have taken this same concern and translated it into a lifestyle reality.

The Symons family does not verbalize the need to change society's values, they live according to a set of principles at variance from them. Their yard contains “recycled” bits of “trash” from the dump, retained for future use.
Parts and pieces available in very few other places are found on the odd hulks of dead machinery. It is no big deal to them if a pot or fitting has a few dents, it is still usable. Instead of paper products such as Kleenex they use handkerchiefs. Using whole grains they make their own flour products like bread and macaroni. Their small home, heated by wood, powered with a combination of solar panels and generator takes a fraction of the infrastructure and monetary value to maintain than its urban apartmental counterpart. Using the state correspondence program the family studies and educates together. Many times the sons work along side their father in his odd jobs.

The family values they express and the simple life they lead are in contrast to the accumulation of material property and excessive consumption Caldwell speaks about with such eloquence. With their garden, chickens, and method of financing, they attempt to integrate a life of value with modern technology. Theirs is an experiment in living, an example of beginning to formulate a sustainable relationship between man and earth.

Lara certainly did not come to this place to live in harmony with nature or for the love of solitude in wild and natural lands. Growing up in an urban environment in Brazil she misses the constant comings and goings in a house full of people. In winter she will hardly step outside her door as she waits for the summer sun to remind her of a preferred warm climate. Her love for a man who wants to draw his living from the land has brought her here. Family values and a chance to stay home raising her daughters ties her to this place.

Out of the twelve families in the community this winter who have school age or younger children as shown in Appendix C, only the female school teacher holds a full-time job outside the home. Three-fourths of the women expound openly on the value of mothers remaining in the home to bring up their children. This is not to say that they do not “work” at “jobs”, but in many cases the way they support the family finances is fashioned around the kitchen table. Creating works of art from beads, sewing hats and mittens, and cooking meals for crew or clients provides income, but allows the children to be the focus of their lives.
Because their choices evince a stereotypical female role, the women were defensive about their lifestyle. Their own friends and family, who live many miles away, display a curiosity about this life, but a distinct lack of understanding the positive benefits. Society has placed a stigma upon those who do not spend their time at the workplace, but stay at home becoming nothing more than a mother. Their values expressed in phrases such as “for the love of a man” or “to raise my children” are also a way of escaping the boundaries of conformity and convention.

A gold miner in the area, who wishes to remain anonymous, makes a concerted effort to integrate his family values and ideals of independence. He is adamant that the country’s monetary system has no solid foundation and the financial principles it is based upon will cause it to fall apart. He strives to keep himself and his family as self-sufficient as possible by earning a living from a real and natural substance, a precious metal from the earth. His wife supports the small independent business through the making of breakfast, lunch, and dinner for all the men that work at the mine.

Trying to provide as much of their needs as they possibly can themselves, they endeavor to teach their children not to be totally dependent upon the nation’s industrial complex. Using solar panels and a bicycle, they generate most of their electrical needs. Raising goats for milk, meat, and cheese, and chickens for eggs, they attempt to provide many of their nutritional requirements. With a vegetable garden and few material needs, this family feels their way of living connects them to the earth and its natural rhythms in a very real sense.

People in Central tell that they are intensely aware of not only the amount of their consumption, but of the impact it has upon the land in which they live. Most people give little thought to the quantity of water, power, or oil products they utilize in the course of a day. Chris Kriendler, the computer whiz, is certainly aware of the electrical power, fuel and equipment necessary to support his desire for certain implements of modern technology. Making his choice based upon his values and knowledge of its direct impact Chris has chosen to
communicate through the Internet. The actions he takes are conscious
decisions to integrate his values and his way of living.

With their small homes, family run businesses, wild harvest meals, and
low levels of materialistic consumption, the lifestyle of these people can be
viewed as an effort to live in an ecologically sustainable manner. It is not
articulated as the focus of their ideals, but generally they live within the
environment's capacity. With a slower more reflective approach to existence,
they exemplify a striving for quality in life. Trying to earn a livelihood in the land
while maintaining a relationship with the natural world they are actively involved
in changing man's relationship to nature. They love the natural environment
and strive to make it part of their everyday living, not a weekend excursion.
Ideals of relying upon oneself instead of social regimes, using items of utility
rather than fashion, freedom from convention and binding doctrines, and close
family relationships are integrated with every aspect of their lives. Their life is
an experiment in blending together nature, everyday experiences, work, and a
simpler life of substance.
Chapter Four:
An Endangered Way of Life

Perceiving a host of antagonistic forces to be aligned against them, residents of Central do not see much chance for this way of living to survive. Through their stories they reveal their understanding of how this is coming to pass. During the 1980’s before the enforcement of stringent environmental regulations, Dean tells that twelve gold mining operations existed on a single creek in the Circle Mining District. In 2001 only a dozen operations were active in the entire district encompassing a multitude of creeks. Fronzie tells that in the 1980’s dozens of family units lived along the Yukon River and its tributaries between Circle and Eagle. Today these families can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Their stories reveal their belief this is due to changes in land status and the resultant management by federal agencies. Rick relates the number of households that trap as a supplemental part of their income has dwindled from most of the community to a very few. Many Centralites attribute this to the drop in the price of fur caused by emotional concern for animals. Through their stories and conversations residents express the certainty that the people living this lifestyle, reminiscent of an earlier American era, are an endangered species.

4.1 Environmental Concern Triggers Regulation

Ed Gelvin, a soft spoken elderly man, speaks passionately about the changes he sees undermining his way of life. With the following words he illustrates several perceptions that pervade the stories of community residents.

When white men first came out there in the country trapping, prospecting and doing whatever doing, they didn’t change things none. Why do the government have to know what’s doing and stop them doing it? The thing that kills me is the bureaucrats in the Park Service can lobby Congress to get things their way with our money. (H91-22-55)
The environmental movement has spawned legislation carried out by government officials impinging on the ability of his family to continue to live his accustomed style of life. His livelihood has been dependent upon trapping and gold mining activities that have been curtailed due to concern by environmental groups about changes in the land wrought by the hands of man. Hunting activities which have an immediate affect upon his diet, have been subjected to intense regulation. He tells that his aerial wolf hunting activities which had comprised a large portion of his self-identity as well as household finances, have been ceased altogether as a direct result of the totemic rise of the wolf as a symbol of the wilderness. Although he has raised four children and some grandchildren in this way of life he feels defenseless against the tide of legislation washing over the land and its permitted activities.

Pressure to save sections of our country from being overrun by the urban environment culminated in a movement to preserve large tracts of “pristine” land. People from cities and states where the resource exploitation denuded whole mountains, polluted streams, and soiled the earth persuaded their legislators to protect the lands in Alaska, the nation’s last source of uncommitted public lands, from following the same route. People, feeling strongly about the vision of our country’s last chance to “do it right”, organized as special interest groups termed environmentalists. Utilizing the media to focus the attention of the populous and the Congress on “the Last Frontier”, this group of people were highly successful in translating this perception into legislative action. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, (ANILCA) was the culmination of this political process where 104 million acres were reserved in conservation systems with an additional 57 million acres designated as Wilderness. This massive reservation system fully tripled the nation’s wilderness preservation system.

Yukon-Charley National Preserve, Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River, Steese National Conservation Area, and the White Mountains National Recreation Area are some of the varying designations that have been given to the land surrounding Central since the
passage of ANILCA. Central residents, while located in the midst of millions of acres of undeveloped and unpopulated land, tell they feel a tightening noose of regulation governing the use of that land.

For instance, the classification of upper Birch Creek as a Wild and Scenic River had a profound affect upon the lives of Central residents. It set in motion new regulations governing their use of the land with major ramifications for the gold mining industry. Setting the stage for conflict between "insiders" and "outsiders" the story is used in Central as an example of conserving places for recreational purposes excluding other usages.

No longer were the cabins along its length considered a place of residence nor could work be conducted along its tributaries that would detract from the river's wilderness character. Thus the water flowing into Birch Creek including Crooked Creek upon which Ed had been mining for gold had to meet new standards of quality. Change was mandated within the mining community.

As the site of the original gold discovery in the Circle Mining District, Pitka’s Bar on Birch Creek had led to a gold rush before the famed Klondike stampede. From its origins in 1893 residents tell, this area has supported continuous mining activity and subsequent freighting, lumbering, and farming industries. Numerous signs of man’s endeavors exist along the creek and its tributaries. They tell it could not possibly be described as wild or devoid of man’s intrusions.

Patricia Oakes, a retired public school administrator, opposed the wild and scenic designation in a scholarly paper on the history of economic activity in the Circle Mining District. She put into written language the feelings of many Central residents. The corridor had been developed “as a commercial area for over 90 years. It has historically been an economic, not a recreational, area and has developed far beyond being a pristine wilderness experience” (Oakes 17).

During the 1980’s there were between two and three hundred permit applications in the Circle Mining District for gold mining claims, Dean Willis relates. After the wild and scenic designation this number dwindled, due to the
abrupt change in regulations limiting sediment discharged by mining operations into the “pristine” water. The allowable particles of dirt flowing back into the stream giving it a muddy appearance after a miners’ operation became strictly interpreted. Dean, a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines, explained the concept of stream turbidity. When water is tested for the amount of dirt suspended in it, the analysis is reported in a range. The amount of acceptable turbidity is established by regulation at an exact number. Since the precision level of the test is stated as a range, the exact amount can never be demonstrated with the pinpoint accuracy required by the regulation. Dean relates that miners could no longer discharge their water back into the creeks without being in violation of the regulation (Willis).

He and other miner’s use turbidity to demonstrate the willingness of the federal government to regulate the small independent businessmen out of existence. The story is an example to them of the use of regulation to make it difficult to realize a profit in their accustomed ways. They tell of other new restrictions concerning the visual aspects of the land after a miner has worked his claim, known as reclamation, and increasing procedural steps in permit applications that continue to tighten the regulatory noose.

Growing concern for the environment has caused further changes in perceptions and assumptions. Trapping, which has been established as a valuable source of cash income to Central residents, has engendered its own controversy. The environmental movement has raised ethical objections to the killing of wild animals, particularly endangered species, to serve human populations. Ed and other Central trappers tell that the animal populations they are catching are not endangered in the place they catch them, and fur is the warmest, most natural material for making clothing.

As a direct result of the political pressure exerted by this movement, European markets banned wild fur that has been caught in a leg hold trap. Alaskan state law does not prohibit the use of the leg hold so fur caught in Alaska cannot be sold in Europe, considerably shrinking the selling market. This has had a profound affect on the price paid for fur within Alaska directly
impacting the number of people able and willing to participate in this activity.

Public opinion toward occupations such as miners, trappers, commercial fisherman, and oil workers has shifted. Mountain Men and trappers were seen as romantic figures that were important to the opening of our great country. Now they carry the connotation of murderers of innocent animals and dirty disheveled ne’er-do-wells. Gold miners, who had a tremendous impact on the growth of Alaska have become despoilers of natural beauty.

One eighty year old man would not make a recording, sharing the story of his fascinating life, because he has become sensitive to the negative feelings surrounding a few of the activities he has taken part in. Continuing his trapping activities until his late seventies, this man lived a rigorous outdoor existence. Employed by the federal government as a professional hunter, he eliminated troublesome bears all over the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. On creeks in the Central area he took part in a predator control program which claimed the lives of many wolves. Discovering many of his wage working years were spent in politically incorrect pursuits, he refuses to share his stories with a wider audience. As further proof of his currently unpopular actions, he tells that as a biologist he kept meticulous records of his activities in places that became part of the wild and scenic river system. These records are "no longer available", or "not in the files" when he has requested them.

Ed Gelvin indicated it was the "Greenies" emotional arguments that had banned the use of his aerial wolf hunting activities, ultimately resulting in a natural resource management predicament focused on the Fortymile Caribou Herd (Gelvin 1998). Environmentalists were instrumental in instigating legislation that eliminated the use of airplanes in hunting wolves. Using arguments based on the right of an animal to fair chase combined with the aura of the wolf they stirred public sentiment against this activity. With the cessation of the aerial hunting, Ed claims the wolf population markedly increased, which in turn caused more deaths of prey animals such as caribou.

The Fortymile Herd which had experienced a dramatic decline in numbers, was not recovering even under regulation that severely restricted
caribou hunting pressure. In order to formulate a public policy to confront this problem a Management Plan (1995-2001) and a Harvest Plan (2001-2006) were created. Interest groups including animal rights, environmental groups, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, subsistence hunters, sportsmen groups, commercial enterprises, and representatives from interested parties in Canada met together to hammer out a policy agreement.

Ed and Sheri were some of the Central residents who participated in the formulation of this plan and have been directly impacted through harvest opportunities. Local volunteers traveled to Fairbanks and Eagle to attend numerous meetings with antagonistic interest groups. Sheri tells how difficult it is to speak suitably and have her voice heard when many of the interest groups such as the Animal Alliance had well educated, paid professionals who were knowledgeable about the correct procedures (Nelson 2000).

Scientific research conclusively demonstrated that the primary limiting factor to herd growth was wolf and grizzly bear predation on calves during the calving season and the summer months (Gardner 1997). This research indicated that predator control was advisable. Accordingly it was recommended. The environmental interest groups opposed the use of lethal intervention in wildlife systems and organized a media event utilizing the connotation of the wolf as a symbol of the wilderness. The emotional appeal persuaded the Governor of Alaska to veto the wolf control program proposed to assist the recovery of the Fortymile Caribou Herd.

Stormy meetings and further compromise hammered out a plan that included predator control through a combination of an untried program of biological sterilization and removal, and increased trapping incentives. Even though they had agreed to, the Animal Alliance group refused to endorse the proposed plan.

To Sheri, Ed, and Central residents the refusal of the “Bunny Huggers” to support the document illustrates the conflict that will ultimately end their style of life. Local knowledge of animal behavior even when combined with scientific evidence was an ineffective tool pitted against the use of a symbol to kindle
sentiment. In their eyes the ethical and preservational stance strongly opposes consumptive uses of wildlife, and will not compromise nor bend for any reason.

As Mary Warren has told in her previous story (page 60-61) of off airport landings, residents receive the impression through their interactions with “outsiders” that photography, camping, hiking, and other recreational uses have become the more applicable utility of the land around them (H95-09-01, 02). Hunting, trapping or other consumptive activities, they feel, have become viewed as less and less of a “legitimate” use of the wild areas. From the evil hunter in the Disney cartoon to the publications claiming only the alpha pair in the wolf pack can mate, these expressed values fly in the face of Central’s community values. Their stories represent how they feel life ought to be, not necessarily what reality is.

To them preservationists and environmentalists are known as “Greenies”, “Bunny Huggers”, “Posie Sniffers”, and “Ecofreaks”. These groups actively sought out the lands in Alaska for preservation as scenic national resources. Through Congress and the creation of ANILCA legislation a “Wilderness Area” is defined as a place where man visits, but does not remain. Seen through the Central filter this means one is not allowed to live in the woods. These places were set aside for people to recreate in, not to live in. The impelling vision of the environmentalist to save areas from harm becomes translated into a dream of an urban dweller to deprive those living in the land of their homes and simple pleasures.

The term and interpretation of the meaning of “Wilderness” has become hugely controversial and has a direct bearing upon the way in which this thesis has been written. In conversations with other students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, such as Roger Kaye in the Northern Studies Department, I found that he views “Wilderness Area” in a different manner than those from Central. To him it signifies a federally designated area, with that specific title, where only a few activities are permitted. The country directly around Central is not a “Wilderness” because it does not have this designation from Congress.

The way the people who live in Central envision the place they live
encompasses the meaning of wilderness. They use the term to mean the wild and natural land in which they carry out their lives and activities. Their stories show their attachment to this way of life, it has substantial meaning for who and what they are. Theodore Catton discusses other populations that found bush Alaskans or rural whites to embody the myth of frontier living. The wilderness to them is “something more than a place to recreate; it possessed tangible cultural significance” (109).

Until this page, as I have interpreted the stories from Central, I have consciously endeavored to describe their environment as natural. I stayed away from the term “Wilderness” in order not to become entangled in the debate on exactly what constitutes a wilderness.

As we have seen Central residents view themselves as outdoorsmen who enjoy the wilderness and spend innumerable hours there. The love of the beauty and unspoiled condition of the natural environment is one of the original reasons they were drawn to this place and remains a fundamental element of what keeps them here. A major reason they moved away from urban situations was to be close to natural rhythms and wild places.

These same values are expounded by philosophical and environmental groups who the people of Central find themselves pitted against socially and politically. It is an astonishing mystery to them that urban dwellers could envision themselves as those who love and enjoy the wilderness more than someone who has chosen to live there. Centralites express that they certainly do not want Alaska to become like New York, but are frustrated when those surrounded by a parking lot create the laws that forbid activities of import to them.

4.2 Bureaucratic Enforcement
Residents tell stories about the National Park Service, Brown Suits, or Alaska Fish and Game officials who they see as adversaries. Whether it concerns permit holders, the response of residents to gold mining regulations, hunting restrictions, or other uses of federal lands, the stories told by specific
people can be a sensitive issue. Although indicative of strong feelings and illustrative of the theme of an endangered lifeway they hold potential for disastrous ramifications if they are told to an audience outside the community.

Since only a small number of people are active in the country, a simple description contained in a story can lead to only one possible individual who meets those particular details. A tricky maneuver around an "unreasonable" bureaucratic regulation makes a good story and is often passed through the community, but if the agency discovers the deception, people face possible court action. Permits issued by regulatory agencies can be approved or denied giving that agency, or person within the agency, tremendous power over an individual. Many of the current stories must therefore be told with care to ensure I have not broached a confidence or opened the gate on an unresolved dispute.

For instance, the following story can be narrowed to only one specific source known to both insiders and outsiders. A conclusion has already been reached, hopefully, no further conflict can result by its telling. Central people tell this and many stories of the capriciousness of agency decisions and the method in which they are enforced, to demonstrate the extremes the government will go to in order to get what they want.

The Park Service had an argument with an in-holder in Yukon-Charley National Preserve. A landslide occurred, on a fellow's property, sliding mud and debris down a cliff right past a cabin. (This statement narrows the in-holders down to one place and everyone in the area knows who and what this story refers to, including the National Park Service.) Fortunately the cabin was unharmed, but some other outbuildings were demolished and carried out into the Yukon River and its floodplain. The Park Service claimed the land that slid belonged to them as the land had slid down from what was originally part of the preserve. The land it slid onto was park land so in their eyes, even if it had originally been private land, it was park land as well. According to them, none of the land involved in the slide was part of the private in-holding, all of it was part of the federal claim (W. Straub).

In the American democratic system, policy is created through the
interaction of differing interest groups. Once the policy has been legitimized or given the authority to address a problem it must be implemented. Implementation is left to the machinery of government or the bureaucracy. The intent of the lawmakers must be interpreted and applied through rules and regulations. These administrative actions are open to further interpretation allowing for them to be tightened or relaxed according to the whims and political climate of each succeeding administration and departmental head within the bureaucratic system. Centralites tell that bureaucrats are literally left with the power to apply regulations and interpret definitions of land use. The mandate and internal value system of the agency that oversees the management of the land becomes extremely important to the interpretation of the congressional legislation. To a Central resident this means they have the power to deny or grant your required permit and subsequently the activities they can participate in. Their stories tell they feel they are being fazed out of existence and the right to participate in activities they greatly value through the interpretation of legislation.

The congress' creation of ANILCA's policy was an effort to solve current and future land use conflicts. The permit system, unique to Alaska, established as a part of the legislative language allows people to continue their customary and traditional activities on the land under federal protection. Central residents tell that many within the bureaucratic system interpret this to apply to native people, not those like themselves that are white.

In the course of their enforcement duties federal officials can exercise their power in a manner to obtain results consistent with their value system. Community members use stories like the following, to demonstrate how authorities within the Yukon-Charley can gave residents like Karen Kallen-Brown the distinct impression they are trespassers on public property.

How to deal with having to speak to them. We have no motorized boat. Say have to have permit. Get to the office, no permits ready. Show up at fishcamp, here it is. You have to sign it, this is permit we have. Don't sign and you're in violation. They have ways of
dealing with people, disinviting. We tried to be friendly. Cabin permits, runarounds. File, get this permit before this date but, permits aren’t ready. You can’t just come to town all the time from the bush. Comment period ended thirty days before you got your mail. Park Service presence and style not compatible with lifestyle out there. One step at a time squeeze out. False claims of dope growing, harassment. (H91-22-48)

As already mentioned the lifestyle in this place does not easily mesh with the standard practices of governmental agencies. When a trapper or gold miner comes into contact with the political process or a bureaucratic institution their life does not fit the mold. Trying to apply for a permit or harvest ticket it is assumed one has access to e-mail, fax, and copier, or computer technology. Meanwhile the applicant living far from the office may have only very limited access to electricity or even a telephone.

A life tied to the natural seasons and rhythms may have a different schedule than the time clock. An important deadline may fall in the middle of a run of salmon necessary for winter meat or during the warmer spring weather, perfect for beaver trapping. Bureaucratic institutional clocks run on specific times and are not oriented to adjust to natural cycles. Karen and other residents use their narratives to accommodate themselves to the agencies and display their feelings of powerlessness to affect change.

My son, husband, and I have a permit for a trapping cabin on public land. We have held this permit and renewed it two separate times, five years apart. My sons have the right to use it after I am gone, but not my grandchildren. Many who participate in this way of living feel it is an example of planned obsolescence as it contains a “sunset” clause when it will end reinforcing the conviction of extinction for this lifeway.

The first time the trapline cabin permit came up for its five year renewal, I was informed I was probably ineligible because I currently lived in “town”. Even though Central has a larger concentration of people than the isolated cabin site, the community hardly constitutes a “town”.
“Oh,” says the man, “I have you mixed up with someone else.” He shuffles some papers. “I read that article about you. I think you are having fun out there,” he said referring to an article in the Heartland section of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner about our family.

People retell this story illustrating to them the absurd nature of their dilemma. This man holds the key to the required permit, allowing or forbidding one to continue participating in this lifeway. But, work and fun are closely allied. Of course they enjoy the style of life they have chosen, otherwise they would begin to live somewhere else. The value system he seems to be alluding to defines recreational use as fun, the seasonal work of trapping is not supposed to be fun.

The fear of being regulated out of permitted activities, combined with their anti-government sentiments drives their struggle with whether to comply with the permit system or not. Perhaps if they continue to live quietly and remotely out of sight no one will even know they are in existence. If they apply for a permit they not only become visible, but risk being turned down by the permitting agency. Just because they live there does not mean they will automatically receive the permit. I count myself among the lucky ones who have complied with the system and so far, been able to keep my permit.

The following story is retold as an example of a petty, mid level bureaucrat “abusing” his power, and of the government’s desire to rid itself of in holdings in any conservation unit. To the resident it seems their existence is not a valued part of the land. They feel the government agency in charge wants them off the land and out of the country. Those that have the in holdings tell they are at the mercy of a system gone mad that will stop at nothing to get their way, meaning life in the land will vanish.

Phil owns forty acres within a national wildlife refuge. In the course of business operations he and his family must apply for permits and pay fees to the refuge. Phil spends many hours in the Refuge Manager’s office in the course of complying with stipulated regulations. Behind the manager’s desk, hanging on the wall, was a list entitled, “Priority of Acquisition” (Shoemaker). At
the top was one other piece of property, next was Phil’s land. Shoemaker relates that the refuge has purchased the other piece.

Everything he did was subject to the “fine toothed comb” (Shoemaker). All his actions were checked and double checked. The refuge began to call every client who had ever stayed at his place. Phil is charged by the number of days he is guiding someone on refuge property. After three years of contacting past clients, the refuge found someone who said they arrived and departed on dates that did not tally with Phil’s. He was accused of lying to the refuge. Because there was a discrepancy of only two days, Phil owed a total of $14. “Okay,” Phil says, “I’ll pay.”

“No,” comes the response. “We want your permit” (Shoemaker).

Phil had been keeping all paperwork, letters, and anything sent to him, so he had proof of the transpiring events. In this particular incident he had proof of the dates in question. The fisherman had stayed on Phil’s private forty acres, instead of going into the refuge. Phil was “vindicated” (Shoemaker). But, the Refuge continued to keep up the pressure.

By state law if a guide sees a game violation in the field they must report the violation. Over the years I turned in one or two violations a year. Hunters that did not take all the meat out. I got a letter from the Refuge Manager that I should not ‘Watch so aggressively’ or I might lose my permit. The enforcement agent of the refuge asked me to go to a camp and see. He didn’t have time that day. I walked over. I told him they didn’t take all the meat. The state enforcement turned the case over to the Feds to prosecute. The feds called the three hunters and said, ‘If you testify against Shoemaker we will drop the charges. (Shoemaker)

The three testimonies turned in held conflicting accounts. A couple of them mentioned how pleasant Phil had been when he arrived in their camp. The refuge told Phil he could pay a $100 permit violation. If he had agreed to take this course of action he would lose his permit, the area, and could not make a living there any longer. Phil turned them down.
Eventually the case came to trial. Phil was informed that it cost over a quarter of a million dollars to prosecute for this $100 fine. The three witnesses all told their conflicting stories, one changed his testimony, but all of them testified to the refuge offering to drop the charges if they would turn in Phil. The jury acquitted him.

A case of pure government abuse of power. Why would they prosecute me for a $100 fine? Couldn't unless there was support within the agency and the only reason that makes sense is the land, the in holding... No one in the office could remember seeing the chart behind the manager's desk. They were all transferred out, the whole office staff are gone. They are still working in refuges, somewhere. (Shoemaker)

No matter which agency, encompassing its internal value system, controls the implementation of the new regulations people living in the land and on the land tell they have been left to cope with the aftermath of a tremendous national political debate and its translation into policy. The people of Central feel they have no easy access to power nor the legislative process that continues to restrict their activities. Their stories tell they just want to be left alone to continue living their isolated lives. Their stories tell they are the ones who must submit to this new order, the rules, regulations, and definitions that directly affect their lifestyle. They are expected to comply with the interests of distant outsiders who hold little understanding of their perspective. The tightening of regulations is directly proportional to their lack of freedom to pursue economic and consumptive activities in a way they value and have practiced in the past.

4.3 A Game Board of Regulations

A mosaic of differing categories of state and federal management mandates and techniques surround the community of Central. The agencies governing each area pass regulations that differ from the adjacent one. To the consumptive user of Central the different regulations, definitions, and
boundaries of varying agencies result in utter chaos. It seems that one agency contradicts another leaving a resident who is ultimately responsible for staying within the law totally confused at times about what the law states.

Definitions of key terms used in the regulations carry political overtones because they are a part of the policy process. This allows them to change with management boundaries, and philosophies. Sometimes these all pervasive definitions conflict from one area to another, one land usage to another, and intentional applications confuse most everyone involved.

For instance, the federal and state contentions on exactly what constitutes a subsistence hunter controlling when and where people can hunt. A Fortymile Caribou hunt is in progress as this thesis is being written, November 2001 to February 2002. There are pink colored permits and green colored permits for different areas marked by river confluences close to Central. There is a state season, state subsistence season, and a federal subsistence season operating at different times and under different definitions.

The green permit is the “2001-2002 State/Federal Fortymile Caribou Winter Registration Permit Hunt”. It says on the back that it is good from “November 1 (Federal Subsistence) or December 1 (State Subsistence) through February 28, 2002, unless season is closed by Emergency Order”. Calling the number for hunt status information printed on the back of the permit served to muddle the issue and baffle the hunter.

On the first day of the season Rick spent at least half an hour on the phone requesting information. The number on the permit he was issued at the local vender did not correspond with the number the agent on the phone kept using. By the end of the call only a few facts were apparent to him; the governing state agency could not clarify the information necessary for hunting, the local vendor had provided the permits according to her instructions, and no federal subsistence hunting regulations were available for hunters in the community to read (Tyrrell).

At Crabbs Corner, Central residents decided if you wanted to be sure you were not breaking the law you better have both permits on your person or
maybe you had better not harvest a caribou at all. Three days passed before someone would verify which permit was to be used and where it was permissible to hunt with that permit.

The state season ended within forty-eight hours, but as far as anyone can figure out the federal season remained open until the end of February. Some residents received confirmation of this season through the federal subsistence office. Meanwhile the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has requested the return of all permits necessary for the hunt, before February 1, and posted a notice that the season is closed.

This confusion caused by conflicting definitions and contradictions of governing agencies demonstrates to Central residents the hopelessness of their situation. It they try to continue living their lives they will be fined and punished for being in violation by one agency or another.

One of the main reasons people have given for moving to a place such as Central is the relative lack of governmental “interference”. They left behind the rules and regulations enacted by the government and enforced by the law that binds the interactions of the masses of people found in a manmade urban environment. They chose the freedom of living in a place where restrictions made by man are few, government at a minimum.

As we have seen gold miners give this independence from the established financial structure as one of the biggest reasons to continue to mine for gold. Their ideals of independence and self-reliance are antipodal to being allowed to take part or not in certain defined activities, being forced to comply with decrees and endless red tape, trying to conform to differing and seemingly inconsistent standards. Psychologically the experience is entirely different.

There is a simmering discontent with the “government”, the authority creates the regulations and laws that are becoming part of life in this community. It deprives them of control over their future and the freedom that originally drew them to this place.
4.4 Insiders and Outsiders

The landscape around Central shows signs of being scarred by machinery and the presence of man. Outsiders sometimes find this ugly and annoying while community members see it as a tiny spot on the whole picture and a testimony to their continued interaction with the natural environment. Ed Gelvin expresses this difference in attitudes and perspectives with his story of a flight with a Congressman over the area, “One tiny little strip of gravel in this huge area with nothing for miles and he says, ‘Boy they sure made a hell of a mess’ (H91-22-55).

In an attempt to maintain individual and occupational identity, it is common to tell stories establishing otherness through the difference with another group. Ray Bell defends his life in this place through the use of this oppositional insider/outsider issue. His story demonstrates the group’s desire for justification against the forces who would see places become recreational havens, but not lived in environments. “We lived there and cleaned up after ourselves, a lot of years and never hurt anything. Built a cabin from wood on one island and the ice came that spring and leveled the island, took out the rest of the trees” (H91-22).

With this story he demonstrates the power of nature to change the land’s surface. He continues to fix his own identity through comparison with others and his sense of outrage that due to environmental concern about human caused damage people are no longer allowed to live in this place.

Not anyone can go out there, isolation too much for many people. Different lifestyle and takes different kind of people to do it. I’ve seen a lot of people come and go... didn't stay very long. Anyone I ever saw never done any great damage to ground living on. Park Service won't let people in there. I helped so many tourists or people up there, shear a pin, ran out of gas, countless number of them. You'd try to help them out, caught lots of boats with no one in them. Someone come along in a day or two looking for a boat. I wasn't the only one doing it. Anyone living on the river did it.
Beautiful river. Damn shame more people can’t have the opportunity to use it. Not a soul hurt it, cut a few trees but, that’s all. (H91-22)

Insiders tell their existence in this place is a positive asset to the environment not a negative force. Their cabins and existence there provide a safety net for insiders and outsiders alike far from other sources of aid. They feel the marks they leave upon the land can hardly be compared to the power of nature to change the earth’s surface.

Strong attitudes are persistent in their stories surrounding codes of behavior such as the proper use of cabins. Mary Warren becomes irate as she reveals a perception that this use has not only been changed by an outside group, but actively discouraged.

Move in to trap or live and built a cabin. Cabin always called after the person who built it. When that person was through using it, next person take over or buy it. Some cabins in the Park that have burnt down. The Park calls them their cabins and their land. Can’t use them anymore ‘cuz they didn’t like them being used. Or trails in there being used even though trails in there being used a long time. Trails don’t hurt anything. People depend on cabin being there. With snow machine, dog team, or airplane if you think you can make it there and it isn’t there can hurt a man. Leave a cabin open for anyone to use on the Yukon. People use them and leave them a little better than when got there. A little food or gas for the next person who comes along. Way cabins are. People stop for shelter. (H95-09-01, 02)

Like many occupational groups that work in a specialized discipline, the people of Central tell stories that can be interpreted as interference in their way of living. The rules and regulations for hunting and trapping animals are sometimes based on knowledge they feel is based only on theory, not practical experience. This disturbance in daily living is not appreciated, but hotly resented. A feeling of helplessness and frustration emerges that the lives of the
people in this place are bound to regulations passed by outsiders that do not understand the place or life in this place.

The stories collected by Lloyd and Mullen of Lake Erie fishermen reflect the same feelings of resentment against interference in their established way of living. Fishermen's group identity is expressed through their narratives and the interaction between insiders and outsiders. The stories display the fear that their occupation may not survive the change in public opinion towards them and the laws that are made by "those whose knowledge, they feel, is based only upon 'theory' removed from the test of day-to-day experience" (5).

Frank Warren, a forty year resident of the Central area, like Ed Gelvin, was an aerial wolf hunter and gold miner. Through the enforcement of laws and regulations based on a polarization of differing beliefs, ethics, and experiences his life was forced to change. Sitting in his home surrounded by photographs of wolves, drawings of wolves, and paintings of wolves in wild settings he tells this story to demonstrate erroneous knowledge based on book learning, not actual interactions with animals.

You hear stories about. All the experts of course, who have got their education out of books and know everything about wolves, tell you that wolves will only kill the sick and the weak. Also, that only the alpha male and alpha female breeds, and keeps control of the rest of the pack so they don't breed. You hear that. You've always hear that. One winter a friend of mine and myself, I used to hunt wolves. Kept track of a pack of fourteen wolves northwest of Circle in the flats. During the winter we didn't kill any of these wolves. We'd check on them usually about once a week to see where they were and what they killed. They were making a circle, about a twenty mile circle, in their rotation. They had nine moose killed at one time and these moose were in all stages of being eaten from just barely being touched to almost devoured. Other animals were eating on them too, of course, the wolverines, the fox, and the birds. Toward springtime eagles, of course. In the
spring after we watched this pack all winter, if I remember right, we killed six out of the pack. It just happened five of the six we killed were females. Wouldn't you know all five of them were pregnant. We cut every one open and every one we checked had no less than five pups, and no more than eight, I think it was. However, five females were pregnant, which isn't supposed to happen.

(H95-39)

From his experience with animals, particularly the wolves, Frank has formed a different perception of animal behavior than others. He envisions the wolf as an opportunistic hunter and breeder that does not conform to the rules set by the government of the pack. Decisions based on other theories of pack behavior display to him ignorance and a conflict in values.

Ed Gelvin related the frustration people feel as politics and interest group manipulation begin to directly affect the ability of residents to continue their activities. The role of the animal rights groups in the management and harvest plans for the Fortymile Caribou Herd discussed earlier reflects the seriousness of the situation for this group of people.

These hunters, trappers, and self-employed businessmen picture themselves as ethical, self-sufficient, self-reliant entrepreneurs trying to maintain their way of living. The regulations restricting their activities, based upon ignorance and emotionalism, are sometimes viewed as unfair and unjust. The bureaucracy has a vision of retaining land for recreational use not lived environments building a mountain of red tape which makes it difficult for them to realize a profit from such activities as trapping, guiding, or mining. Their stories contain the sense of being the underdog, so they must sometimes circumvent the legions against them simply in order to survive.

Ives relates the George Magoon factor that helps portions of society during times of social transition and crises. At such a juncture, Ives relates, their feelings of powerlessness with no easy access to the legislative process can be expressed through the elevation of a regular citizen to the position of folk hero. This provides an outlet for feelings of frustration and helplessness
which facilitate residents’ accommodation to change.

In Central Joe Vogler, a gold miner, may be thought of as a “hero”. In the tradition of Jesse James or Robin Hood, Vogler is an outlaw that broke the law because he felt it was unjust. Vogler in an action that has precipitated the movie called “The Battle at Webber Creek” took his mining equipment to his legitimate claims within the Yukon-Charley National Preserve. He felt the constitution of the United States protected his freedom to cross federal property gaining access to his private in holdings. The Park Service interpreted their tenure of the land to mean they could issue a permit restricting when and where access might be obtained. Leaving the Hot Springs with multiple pieces of heavy machinery, Vogler traveled on a historical trail across the country during the summer months. The government asserting he was destroying public property, establishing a trail, went after him with a helicopter and flak jackets.

His tracks upon the muskeg can be seen as a symbolic action, they did not really change anything. He lost the judicial battle, had to remove the machinery, but residents use his story to demonstrate a blow struck for freedom and private enterprise against the collective “Goliath”. Gold miners and residents can identify with his stand as an individual against the overpowering might of the federal government, the evil “they” or “other” in their stories. He represents the clash with the environmentalist who would change life by ceasing all the activities these people take part in. This and other stories, such as Phil’s, of outwitting or overcoming the enforcement of regulations illustrate the battle against forces they feel are aligned in opposition to them. Story is one way they can approach, work through, and make sense of these issues.

There is a sign outside Crabb’s Corner written by Jim and Sandy Crabb that reads, “Notice: We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone including special interest groups and governmental agencies with goals threatening to the lifestyle of the Circle Mining District and our means of making an honest living.”

With relish Central residents relate stories that stress the bureaucrats ignorance of real life experiences, abuse of power, unfair enforcement while
providing a theater for the display of local honesty, knowledge, and skills. In their minds it is an appropriate setting for the conflict of society against the individual, rural against urban. With increasing outside authority and regulation over the land and the activities performed there, these people are trying to preserve some form of independence. As we have seen, independence is part of the value system of this lifeway.

The feeling of doom and the extinction of this lifeway indicate the powerless feeling of community residents. The global view of the environmental movement, the preservation of large tracts of land for the common good makes the practice of a lifestyle based on the land and its animals with ideals of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency seem less practical. This social conflict has tremendous implications for the continuation of this lifestyle as the occupations on the land are seen as less tenable through this shift in social perceptions and definitions. Heating up of the conservation or wilderness ideal and the creation of many levels of federal land made it impossible for them to live and earn a living in their old accustomed ways. Perhaps their narratives and antigovernment stories are a method of enduring the unavoidable changes and an effort to accommodate themselves to the inevitable.
Conclusion

After proofreading this thesis for accuracy, Sheila Symons gave me the following poem entitled Happy Loser. Feeling it expressed many of the themes contained in the stories I had interpreted, she thought it might help to draw the conclusions together. She began writing the piece right after she had arrived in Alaska, adding to it over the years as she added children to her life.

Happy Loser
By Sheila Symons

Packed up my camper
Gonna travel around
Have to get out of this crowded town

Just not a career girl
(to my parents' dismay)
Prefer the pioneer life-
I'll find a way

I've read Annie Dillard
And Tom Brown too,
Now it's my turn
To take to the woods

Took the road north...
Drove the Alcan
Got lucky I know
I found a good friend

Still have some room
On this old cabin floor
   Hey honey--
Think there's room for one more?

Our children are free
Unencumbered by wealth
Instead they enjoy life
And bask in good health

Wouldn't trade that old scrub spruce
   Not even the bugs
For life with the traffic,
Cement buildings and thugs

Home for me now
Is this remote northern place
   Thank you God
I finally lost the rat race!

In the words of the poem she expresses the yearning for a different way, a search for a simpler life containing more quality and value. The pioneers lived during a period of history that represented a life she felt exemplifies this ideal. Leaving a career in a populated area, Sheila chose to head north to a place that represents this vision in our country, the Last Frontier, Alaska.

The Alaskan state motto embodies and encapsulates the myth that lures people north seeking a land relatively wild and free from the hand of man, a place of opportunity, of a chance to build a new life. The narratives and stories from Central demonstrate people were drawn to this place, searching for peace, freedom, wilderness, and a chance to recreate themselves.

Choosing the Last Frontier is culturally and historically consistent with American traditions. Concepts of individual liberty, self-reliance, and ideals of
freedom have been a part of the American tapestry since the founding of our nation.

The stories from Central support Frederick Jackson Turner’s premise that the formation of the American personality is rooted in the existence of the frontier. The Central stories display interactions with the land and climate of the north engendering new ways of reacting to experiences. Due to location far from traditional standards and ingrained patterns of responses the setting requires different solutions and fresh insights.

Clearly Babs had to improvise proscribed EMT routines in order to prepare a patient for transportation to the closest hospital. The setting far from a doctor’s care required her to invent new methods and break established ways. This and other experiences mold the personality and self-image of these people and define who they are and what they are capable of. This knowledge they carry within themselves for the duration of their lives whether residing in Central or elsewhere. It is a defining moment in their lives.

The perception of needing space comparatively free from the stifling interference required by conformity to societal rules and numerous procedures, smacks of one reason to choose a place of few governmental regulations. Consistent with American cultural and historical trends is the idea that breaking the bounds of conformity may have positive results while simultaneously the rules that bind one to stricter behavior are tightening. It may be no wonder then, that the stories from Central take on such a note of anger and desperation in reference to the encroaching controls imposed upon them.

Sheila describes “her way” in her poem as taking to the woods, to wild land. Through contrast to the urban environment she states her passion for this place and the joy she derives from the lifestyle. Even with the constraints that are not considered positive, like the hordes of summer mosquitoes and the spindly black spruce, she doesn’t want to leave.

That people should choose the “wilderness” or lands around Central, in this case, is consistent with wilderness philosophy as well as American national heritage. Roderick Nash expounds on the sanctuary and peace in the solitude
and silence of wild places that relieve the strain of urban lifestyles. Although he envisions undeveloped places as becoming more valuable for recreation he particularly describes them as necessary for psychological renewal.

Many of the stories from Central use the contrast of the urban setting to the peace and solitude of the lifestyle. The healing power of the life in a natural setting is opposed by the mechanized way of life in the noisy crowded city environment. Consistent with the ideas of psychological renewal their stories present a case for a life of psychological health.

In Babs’ case we have a complete transformation. Changing the assumptions and definitions basic to her daily life allowed a different focus to emerge. Through her ability to face challenging situations relying on her own inner capabilities she was able to exceed her own expectations. Examining other stories from Central we see similar threads of historical significance connected to the image of a place containing the freedom to become, of a second chance.

Western and Northern literature are full of references to the requisite inner strengths of character that allow people to become important figures within their community, despite their past actions. Central as a place, unbound by class distinction, where an individual of caliber and merit through drive and hard work can make something of themselves is seen through success stories such as Dan’s. An individual’s basic character is the determining factor of achievement, not where he is born, nor when, nor the economic status of his birth. The myth of America is founded upon it being a place the individual is granted the freedom to choose what they will accomplish.

Once in Alaska, Sheila describes in her poem, meeting a good friend. In the original poem she had written that she found a good man, which was the literal truth and it had the added bonus of rhyming with Alcan, but Sheila felt this was a politically incorrect statement. Even though she remains for the love of this man, she felt there was something unacceptable about saying it plainly, especially if any of her friends from the lower forty-eight read it. Hers in not an ordinary choice.
Intertwined with the love for this “friend” are her “family” values and her choice to give up a career to raise a family. She isn’t seeking material or professional success. Her children are taught a philosophy and system of beliefs that are centered on values other than mass consumerism. They are free from needing possessions to occupy their time and healthy young minds. These are her visions of what constitutes the “Good Life”.

The philosopher and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau evinces many of these same themes. Deploiring the materialism of his own time, he built a cabin at Walden Pond with his own two hands. Without many luxuries he attempted to create a simple life in a wild environment, just as many of the River People tell they did during the seventies and eighties. He expresses the same themes of independence and self-reliance that are such a large part of the Central existence.

Throughout our country’s history people have sought America, the frontier, and the wilderness as a place where they have the freedom and space to attempt to live their vision of the “Good Life”. Jeffrey Jacob conducted his research with people in a more temperate climate and a pastoral rather than a wild setting, but the Alaska back-to-the-landers hold similar philosophical perceptions. The two groups choose rural lives with ideals of appreciating the beauty of nature, the closeness of friends and family, independent living, and self-reliance woven into the fabric of their daily lives. Deriving personal satisfaction and joy from their lives outside the mainstream culture of America Jacob’s back-to-the-landers and Centralites verbalize the richness of life connected to the land. It represents a conscious chose, a deliberate way to live a simpler life, their vision of the "Good Life".

Ways of living and establishing personal identities, skills, and capabilities are not unique to the stories of Central. The lives of the Lake Erie fishermen display through their occupational stories the connection between their personal identity and the place they carry out their lives. The fishermen, like the Central residents, use the construction of the pattern of insider/outsider interaction to express a group identity and differences with others. Public
opinion towards them have changed and their narrations contain a perception that this way of living is coming to an end, neither group see “much chance for the occupation surviving” (Lloyd and Mullen 140). The fishermen’s stories parallel the same deep connection between people’s occupation, everyday activities, and personal identity found in the stories of the lifeway in Central.

The fishermen of Lake Erie, the hunters from the Maine woods, described by Ives, and the people of Central have in common the feeling of being a minority, a small handful of people who exist in a way that depends upon living in an environment, not vacationing there. They each used their stories to illustrate the frustration that the natural resources on which they depend would be saved for recreation, not as a foundation for living. These are stories of people involved in social and symbolic battles against forces that are viewed as harmful, that might end their way of life. The narratives and stories are explorations of who the individual is and how each might adjust to changing times while maintaining a positive sense of self.

In a more general sense the personal narratives and life stories of the people of Central are universal stories that can be compared to hero tales from classic myths. Myths from all cultures and periods of history follow a pattern known to all of us because they express in simplified form the stages of every life. Perhaps this is the deeper value these stories and experiences of lives from Central contain for all of us. They are dramatic representations of stages we all experience.

The stories from Central of integrating a way of life with their values can be inspirational to others as stories of humans making an effort to reach their goals. The focus of the story is not whether they reach their ideals but, in the effort made to try. The attempt to live a quality life close to nature and the core of meaning, can be seen as a quest in search of an individual’s uniqueness and capabilities. The prize is the treasure of self-confidence and self-esteem. In measuring up they discover they are talented and can rely upon themselves to be capable of overcoming future hurdles. Within the context of the small community they may discover their existence is important and can make a
difference in other people's lives.

The life stories of those from Central demonstrate the choice to leave the familiar patterns of life in an urban situation and journey to a new place, a different environment. In the case of Central it is a choice of the physical as well as metaphorical "wilderness". Their life there involves dangers not encountered in their old life. Due to their isolation they must rely upon themselves to reach within and discover their inner strengths.

The stories describe the adventures of living in this place Central, allowing the individual to find treasures of inner being, capabilities they never knew they possessed. This bounty of self-worth and personal fulfillment becomes an integral part of the person's existence even if they choose to move away or return to urban environments.

"Quest, boon, and return: This is the essence of the heroic life-pattern. The hero leaves the safety of home, ventures into the wilderness, finds something there that is mysteriously dangerous or valuable - often both - and returns home in triumph" (Lowry 78).

Perhaps when people leave the area they are returning to the community. They find the treasure of themselves, then return to the urban environment to share with others this discovery. Many residents including most of those who lived along the river have returned to urban life. Some of the River People such as Steve Ulvi, Randy Brown, and Dave Evans hold jobs within the federal and state agencies they struggled against. Their insight into this style of life may well affect a change within that community.

Even if this is not the focus of their stories, from their own words we can see that the time they spent in the place called Central had a tremendous impact on their life as a whole. It was for them a defining moment, that will continue to nourish their inner selves. Their narratives reflect a strong sense of self-respect, self-confidence, a sense of contributing to the welfare of the community, and a feeling of psychological health they can draw upon for the rest of their days. This lifestyle is important to them and their sense of selves. It is important to others as a dimension of human diversity.
In the twenty-first century hustle to preserve habitat in suitable settings for endangered species of all varieties, it is all too easy to allow human niches to fall between the cracks. All living things including this tiny fraction of humanity are worthy of consideration and the effort required to keep them from vanishing from the earth. Surely we need to preserve this way of life that enriches humanity as a whole, mirrors the cultural image of our nation, and provides the foundations of personal worthiness for its individual participants.


----. Personal interview. August 2000.


----. Personal interview. February 2000.


Pearson, Dan. Personal interview. 16 August 2000.

Shoemaker, Phil. Personal interview. 10 March 2002.


Appendix A:
Questionnaire 1998

General Background: Where grow up, Family & ties now, How come to Alaska --- Central, Met Mate

Food, hunting (How learn), Growing, Shopping Seasonal Activities? (Learn), Trapping, Mining

Economics: Job / Earn a living (Define self job?), Swap

Pleasure activities: Sewing, Knitting, Other (feminine)

Why choose live this way?

What make you give up this lifestyle?

Stories of: Scared, Tragic, Funny, Proud of

Concluding Question: What do you think a story of your life should say?
Appendix B:
Sample Questionnaire 1994-1995

Washington State University and University of Washington past and present resource utilization patterns in and around Yukon-Charley National Preserve. Funded Park Service.

Focus -years in and around Yukon-Charley National Preserve

What factors in life led up to heading to River? (Early): Length of stay
What resource use? Percentage household income derived use of resources from subsistence?

HUNT (# and species 1 year): Other resource utilization as hunted, Territorial use? Species specific? Other comments, Thoughts

FISH (dog-chums human Kings) (#and species 1 year): Method take, Territorial? How establish ownership? How long own when not in use? Trespassers? How deal? Pass on right, Other comments, Thoughts

When, how, why use change? Federal management? Animal rights?

Sharing of resources? Sense of community?

Your comments, Thoughts

Why left River?

FUTURE: Will trapping continue? Fishing? Hunting? How different?

Characters saw

Mapping activities
## Appendix C:
### Residents of Central 2001-2002

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<th>Employment</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>Children's Schooling</th>
<th>Residence in Years</th>
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