

Alaskana: Gwich'in journey

CLARENCE ALEXANDER When I was 4, my blind grandfather called, 'Come, I want to see the leader,' and he felt my face.

Interviewed by JUDY FERGUSON

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I was born March 12, 1939, in Hudson Stuck Memorial Hospital in Fort Yukon, the oldest of 10 children. My father was born about 1910; my mother was the sole survivor of her family during the Spanish flu epidemic.

Gwich'in means "one who dwells here," and passers-by have been perceived as "drifters." My grandfather said there were once so many of us that our campfires resembled "a mountain with porcupine quills on it."

We did not "subsist," a borrowed term for Lower 48 farmers requiring government subsidies. We as a people recycled and sustained our natural resources. We had no jails. If people broke our strict laws, they were exiled permanently from the community, becoming "brush people" -- naa'in.

When I was young, territorial wars were still real. We were taught to rebound like a cat and to sleep lightly. Everyone practiced genealogy, never marrying within his same group. (I came from the cha'sa/"worker" group.)

My family's home is Alexander's Village (Shoo/"happy place"), by a lake on the Christian River north of Fort Yukon. Until I was 10, in 1949, most people lived in their traditional locations. Fort Yukon was a place for seasonal trading, becoming a community of many Gwich'in dialects and Yup'ik as well as Irish, German, Finnish and Danish descendants. We taught the newcomers survival, and they in turn brought their skills: a bakery, theater/dance hall and restaurants. A motor launch pushed a big barge supplying the villages. The Gwich'in came in for spring and summer and camped on the banks, enjoying the lucrative life. We cut firewood for the steamboats at \$3 a cord.

A community of six sections grew up, each with its own values and mentors. Beyond a line of trees, there were mixed Gwich'in-Europeans in downtown Fort Yukon. I lived downstream on the banks of the Yukon where our first language was Gwich'in.

The first 10 years of my life, from 1939 to '49, were peaceful, sliding down hills, dressed in a fur parka and pants, mittens and thick moose hide booties. I was surrounded by elders born in 1850 who prophesied that hardship was coming. I assumed they meant famine, not social and economic upheaval. The message from our elders was "Go to that school, learn their information better and do it nicely."

TRADITION WASHED AWAY

In 1947, a teacher, Alice Wilson, arrived to teach us in a one-room log classroom. About 1950, a new law required all children under 16 to attend school. We could no longer be out with the clans helping trap, which increased their burden of support. School met only three months a year so it took me three years to get past the fourth grade.

In the summer when the steamboat came, we smelled the pungent fresh odor of oranges and apples filling the air. We were not allowed to eat much sugar, salt and tea; that could lead to addiction.

Children worked alongside their elders, and a transferal of mind and skills naturally took place. When I was 4, my blind grandfather called, "Come, I want to see the leader," and he felt my face.

One spring day in 1949, I was sent to James A. Carroll's store with a muskrat skin under my arm and a shopping list. Suddenly, water began pouring over the bank and everyone started running. I got a ride home. The Yukon, carrying piles of jammed ice, ripped out the bank, taking cabins, many of the elderly, dogs, caches, family storage and regalia.

Suddenly we were cut off from our heritage, homes and belongings. The Assembly of God mission had 160 acres on top of the hill which they turned over to the community. Contrary to tradition, the Red Cross deeded surveyed house lots to us. Outsiders decided we were impoverished and put our mothers on welfare. With no concept of tribal law, government agencies issued regulations dictating when, where and how much we could hunt and fish.

SEARCHING FOR NEW GROUND

Fort Yukon was serviced by the territorial school for the kids beyond "the row of trees," while the rest of us attended Alaska Native Service school. There were "too many" Indian kids in the log cabin school.

When I was 15 in 1954, 30 of us were shipped off to Mt. Edgecumbe, where I was put in seventh grade.

I read the Gettysburg Address, but when I was on the playground if I spoke Gwich'in, I got beaten on the head. My forefathers gave me our traditional life, but somehow I didn't feel included in the other forefathers' "certain inalienable rights." Our elders told us to "not to make rebuttal and listen" no matter how we were treated. I listened, but it seemed nobody else was listening.

My Gwich'in phrase "Nikah gwahdah" could not be translated literally "tomorrow, next day" but only as "day after tomorrow." Patterns and protocol were being remapped in my head, all scrambled up.

When I was 17, the Air Force's Distant Early Warning system imported 130 people suddenly into Fort Yukon. That impact on our women and the subsequent new generation of children caused an additional burden to the state and federal subsidies. Those generations continued to propagate, eroding our traditional work ethic.

About that time, my father drowned. A few years later it was decided that our family home was in the way of needed construction. Using the right of eminent domain, the state of Alaska gave my mother the assessed value and took our house. She was now not only alone but had no place to go.

I wanted to find a way to work with the state, but at that time, we were not considered equal partners in any way, shape or form.

If I wanted to become a carpenter, there were no funds for me to attend carpentry school in Fairbanks. Having only a 10th-grade education, I could not enter the university. As a Native, I was the last possible choice for hiring. I pursued one position at 8 a.m. daily for three months, and when I got the job I had to be on my toes continually.

In 1960 in Fort Yukon, my views of local development were not yet acceptable. I heard there were good-looking gals in California, and I decided to see what the Lower 48 had to offer.



Alexander, shown here in 2003, is a co-founder of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments and former grand chief of the Gwich'in peoples.



Clarence Alexander in 1960 at age 21, about to leave Fort Yukon for California.

Photo courtesy of Clarence Alexander



Alexander and other delegates at the 1993 Alaska Federation of Natives convention in Anchorage.



Chief Esais, left, and Chief Christian, right, with village men in front of St. Stephen's Hospital in Fort Yukon, circa 1915.

Work of a chief

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Interviewed by JUDY FERGUSON
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Our elders warned of "hardship coming," but we thought it meant famine. Born in 1939, a descendant of the original Athabascan Gwich'in nomads from the Fort Yukon region, I am a bridge between traditional and current world. In 1960 I departed for California. I returned 10 years later just before passage of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

In 1965, Sen. Ernest Gruening was pushing for the world's largest hydroelectric project, Rampart Dam, which would inundate seven Athabascan villages. Gwichyaa Gwich'in Ginkhii -- "A person of Fort Yukon speaks" -- was organized to protect our land. GGG combined with the reorganized Tanana Chiefs Conference that ultimately helped lead to ANCSA.

There were many shortcomings in ANCSA, including lack of local control as well as no subsurface rights at the tribal (village) level. Additionally, neither ANCSA nor the subsequent Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act recognized the right of aboriginal peoples to manage wildlife on their lands, a right exercised by many tribes in the Lower 48. Regional nonprofit organizations like Tanana Chiefs Conference were set up to support the villages, operatives both of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and of the state.

TCC employed people in the city, but at the village level we needed direct control of our own education, realty, tribal government and justice while also creating business on the side. I began sharing the vision of local development in 1960, but it wasn't really acceptable until 20 years later.

There was a lot to learn. I saw there were parallels between my trapping business and developing any business. I paid a merchant in Fairbanks to teach me modern transactions, and I read a book on corporate structures.

By the late 1970s, local frustration and anger had replaced our former self-sufficiency. Our once-healthy people battled diabetes, cancer and alcoholism. Children were no longer apprenticed by their seniors.

REORGANIZING THE VILLAGE

While I was on a trip, I was asked if I might consider becoming chief. When I returned, I asked the council, "What has been done here since 1953?"

Hearing we'd been reduced to a subsidized population, I said, "Well, things are different now. We are going to do whatever is necessary to become responsible, accountable Gwich'in, in control of our own lives." We were facing the "hardship" our elders had prophesied.

I got on the executive board of TCC with a very determined agenda: to take over the business of the health program for the Yukon Flats and to co-sign on all the BIA programs. If TCC has a \$100,000 program to administer for us, why give them \$30,000 when I can train someone in Fort Yukon who knows the land to do those community allotments?

I reopened the Native village of Fort Yukon (Gwich'yaa Zhee Gwich'in), hired a consultant and began creating. We had to build a functioning tribal government that existed on its own. There were six levels of society in Fort Yukon, each with its own values and mentor. I went to the leaders' homes, asking, "Come sit on this new council; you have ideas."

We started pulling in programs, hiring from our own community and teaching them new skills. With that training, some have since gotten jobs at the regional corporation, state or federal level.

THE GWICH'IN GATHER

With the council off the ground, I stopped in one day at Beaver to see my friend Paul Williams, who said, "I have a muskrat baking; come on in."

Over our traditional delicacy, he began, "The time is now. Let's visit the villages and consider an organization that will base in the Flats, creating economic opportunity for the Yukon Flats people."

He decided to go to Stevens Village, Rampart and Birch Creek while I would go to Fort Yukon, Circle, Venetie, Arctic Village, Chalkyitsik and Canyon Village. We planned a gathering to honor our revered former chief, Esias Loola, who had been taken from us to Seattle for medical treatment in 1953 and never returned.

In 1983, we invited all the Alcan Gwich'in; 15 villages gathered, speaking Gwich'in only. To better connect us, we decided to get a radio station. Over the next seven to eight years, I campaigned and contracted one of the best grant writers at the Federal Communications Commission in Washington, D.C. Finally we obtained KZPA 900 AM Gwandak Radio. We made a Yukon Flats board and came under the tribal umbrella, the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments.

Frustrated with government systems staffed with outsiders controlling Yukon Flats' fish and game, education and health care, we began localizing management of intertribal regional programs including natural resources and health funding and gaining greater control of housing, education and environmental arenas. Today the CATG Health Department oversees village clinics and staffs a large clinic in Fort Yukon. We run our own natural resources department staffed by two wildlife biologists who work closely with elders.

As former grand chief of the Gwich'in, I recently gathered 17 tribes to discuss drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, resulting in a unified stand for the Yukon River watershed. Since 2001, I have served on the YR Inter-Tribal Watershed Council to protect our salmon and water.

My personal stand on drilling in ANWR is that of a warrior and a former Alaska Guard member. For the sake of the caribou, I oppose drilling, but if the national security were at risk, in an emergency I would support drilling.

In the new millennium, I have served on the board of the Alaska Humanities Forum and in 2005 I received the Ecotrust Buffet Award for Indigenous Leadership.

Between 1 and 5 a.m., I like to take a walk. Nature is alive then. There is one who whistles, "This is it! We live in the most pristine nature," sings a "silver-throated" bird. Here, we're not so distant from still being connected to the animals. We humans did not come packaged, as some might think, in cardboard boxes, but we are just another part of nature.

Judy Ferguson is a publisher as well as a freelance columnist for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. She is the author of Alaska histories "Parallel Destinies" and "Blue Hills" and the children's books "Alaska's Secret Door" and "Alaska's Little Chief." Her Web site is www.alaska-highway.org/delta/outpost.



Chiefs of the Yukon Flats, 1998, Fort Yukon. Clarence is in the back row on the left.



Clarence Alexander, former grand chief of the Gwich'in, 2005.