



Honored Athabascan Elder Belle Herbert died September 10.

PHOTO BY ROB STAPLETON

## Storms, sun mark Belle Herbert's death

It rained and stormed ferociously the night before Belle Herbert was buried but the day of services to mark her passing was sunny and warm, befitting the death of an honored Athabascan woman.

Belle Herbert, the woman who was born and grew up long before the white man came and before life changed to many western ways, was laid to rest on a hilltop near her village of Chalkyitsik on Sept. 14, three days after she died peacefully in her sleep.

She died of a stroke the day after she told a longtime friend about the clothes she wished to be dressed in for her funeral.

She had put the clothes and a sheet upon which she wished to be laid away three years ago when she was 126 years old.

Mrs. Herbert was said to be 129 years old when she died and was believed to be the state's and possibly the country's oldest resident.

Her longtime friend, Munnie

Salmon said "I visited her before her stroke. She was so happy to see me. She said 'I don't think I'll live very long' and she told me about the clothes."

Mrs. Herbert was buried in her handsewn dress and moose hide boots.

More than 250 friends and mourners gathered in the warm sun to mark her passing and a simple potlatch of traditional foods was held in her honor.

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# Belle Herbert saw much in her life

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Mrs. Herbert was born long before Alaska was passed into United States control and spent much of her life on the Black River.

She was raised in traditional ways according to her recent biography "Shandaa: In My Lifetime" which was published by the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

In her book, Belle Herbert tells of her life growing up after her father died which was before she got to know him, she says. As was the custom when a family could no longer care for children, her mother tried to adopt Belle out brother cried so much she took them back and they stayed with relatives and friends and her mother trapped rabbits for food.

She was married to Joe Herbert and they had children while living a life of subsistence hunting and fishing. Skin trapping was unknown until many white traders came to the area to buy the skins and she often asked in her story, "what did we need to catch them for?"

In the biography, she spoke of many things - life spent in hunts, delivering children, life before the white men came, the arrival of white people and marriage rituals.

Here are some excerpts from "In My Lifetime," the life of Belle Herbert:

## The coming of the white man...

Alice: What did they use for tea?

They ate a little meat and then just drank the broth. What else could they drink, when people were so poor in those days?

We didn't even know about white men.

I myself saw when the first white men came around here. Up there where they call Old Rampart, there was only a priest, and a chief stayed there, that's all we heard. And far away we heard there was a settlement at Dawson. And Tanana (Fairbanks) where all the people go, it came into existence in my lifetime. It was not too long ago that it was established.

And when they struck gold down in Tanana, that was the last (gold strike), I think they call it Talkeetna, that too happened in my lifetime.

In Dawson and in Circle they struck gold, and after that, they struck gold down river there.

And the Dawson gold strike, from that time on we began to see white men.

And after they struck gold in Circle, the steamboat started. From that time on, we saw a lot of white men, though we didn't see them all the time. It hasn't been too long that they've had stores around here.

But we sometimes saw white men before that time. When they struck gold downriver,

that was when the white men started coming around.

At that time we were really poor. But we survived out here, our families would take care of us, so we had things. But we were really very poor then.

## On pain and healing...

When I was quite small, anytime someone got hurt, even people who had nothing to do with it used to cry a lot.

If that happened now, I'll bet they'd kill themselves.

Nowadays people just kill each other.

In the old days people hardly ever died except of natural causes. They lived as the animals do out there, how would they die?

That's the way it was.

How was it, they lived as the animals do, how would they get sick?

That's the way it was, but today we live here on the point.

We just stay in one place and work for ourselves; we don't do much any more.

Ah! grandchild, women really suffered a lot then. Even during my lifetime. Now.

## On childbirth...

Ah! grandchild, there were a lot of women that took care of each other, you see, when they were in labor some women would be there sitting in front of them holding their bodies, and they would also hold onto us.

Meanwhile with both arms we would hold her firmly up off the ground. Then the child would be born.

Down there, Ah! they call her, she was born like that.

She almost killed her mother, she did. Even the men got tired.

So I went down there and I came in and sat in front of her. She was in labor and had contractions. She was in labor and just doing this, this way. She had contractions but they stopped. She grabbed hold of me and then shortly while I was holding her the baby came.

My arms felt like they were dead.

That's what we always did. That's all we did.

Nowadays they just lie flat on their backs and nobody helps them. At that time when women were in labor, that's how we treated them.

We would hold them up with all our strength and while we did that the baby would be born.

It used to be like that, but now women just lie down on their backs and that's the way they have kids now.

And it seems like women suffer a lot that way.

Everybody used to help take care of the sick. The women all took turns and really they all took care of her and it was a comfort to her when they took care of her, they held up her buttocks with their palms and eased her, you see. That's the way I had my babies.

When nobody helps us, we just lie on our backs and I think the labor is harder.

## And on respect...

Ah! grandchild, people used to respect each other a lot. When strangers came around, they showed what affection they had for the people who came.



In her final years Belle Herbert lived a simple life in this Chalkyitsik cabin



We wish to thank Rob Stapleton who took these pictures of Belle Herbert shortly before her death.