

Cliff Gray still doesn't know why he was forcibly taken from his parents

by Helen Chase

Cliff Gray was only 4 years old when he and his brothers and sisters were taken from their parents by people Gray believes worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The day remains so vivid in his mind he remembers what they had for breakfast that morning — oatmeal — and what he was wearing that day — a cowboy outfit complete with hat and toy gun. This incident occurred 33 years ago.

What followed for Gray was a life filled with the terror of child abuse, reform schools, alcoholism and institutions. Thirty years later he found his way home.

Cliff Gray's story began when his mother, Helen Escalita, a young Athabascan Indian living in the village of Chitina, married Ronald Miller, an immigrant from Germany.

Already raising three children, Helen had three more with Ronald — Cliff, Alberta and Richard. The nightmare started when the Millers moved to Anchorage in 1955. Less than six months later two social workers, accompanied by police, came to the Miller home and took all six children.

Millie Buck, Gray's aunt, also remembers the day clearly.

"It was no less than kidnapping," she said.

Although she remembers her sister Helen being ill often, even admitted to hospitals for her problems with asthma, she feels there was no legitimate reason for the children to be taken.

"My sister and I took care of the kids if Helen was hospitalized and Ron was at work. We wanted these children, and the door was literally slammed in our faces when we tried to find out what was happening," she said.

About four months after the children were taken, Buck was allowed to see them for about 10 minutes where they were being held on Fort Richardson.

"Nobody was interested in helping us," she remembers.

Buck and her mother, Maggie Escalita, spent the next 30 years looking for the children.

"My mom used to walk down the streets of Anchorage looking at the faces of the children she passed, searching for her grandchildren. Do you have any idea what that is like?" she asked. "We thought this kind of thing might go on in other countries, but not in the U.S.A."

Gray remembers being taken somewhere in Anchorage, but the first few days after being separated from his parents remain a blank in his mind. The next thing he remembers is being taken to Elmendorf Air Force Base with his sister Alberta. He remembers a big two-story house and a woman telling him this was his new home and that she was going to introduce him to his new parents.

"It didn't make a lot of sense to me then," said Gray, "and it still doesn't."

It was a non-Native couple from Massachusetts that Gray was introduced to. Their names were Theresa June O'Brien and Emery Carroll Gray. Even as an adult, Gray remembers their names with a vengeance he still harbors, recalling the abuse he suffered at their hands.

"The only thing I can think of was that this woman was mentally ill, and because she was white," Gray said, "there was no investigation."

Gray believes that in the early 1950s, the military protected its own, covering up abuse and alcoholism.

"On Elmendorf, I went to school many days with blood seeping through my shirts from the beatings she gave me. The school nurse saw this, but wasn't able to do anything."

Gray remembers receiving more love and care in the first four years of his life than the next 35 combined.

"I remember the first time I was ever hit, I was totally shocked. I had no idea where it was coming from. Then it got to be real routine," he recalled.

Gray does not know the reason why the couple adopted him and his sister.

"The only motive I can come up with," he said, "was the fact that they were childless and could not have children of their own."

Gray also believes that adoption occurred in Alaska with Native children similar to the trend in the early 1970s when people adopted Vietnamese children.

"You know, be the first on your block to adopt a Vietnamese child and show everyone how good and caring you are by bringing these children into your home," he said.

Gray said no followup was done by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the adoption agency. No one ever checked on his or his sister's situation.

The two children stayed in Alaska with their adoptive parents until 1959. Then he moved with his sister and adoptive mother to Massachusetts to live with her parents.

Theresa and Emery were having marital problems and had separated.

"There was no communication between us," Gray said of his adoptive parents. "There was never any holding or love."

Gray remembers the grandparents as being good people, but he said still suffered a sense of alienation. When he started school in Massachusetts, he remembers how odd it was for him to be the only non-white child in school.

"We are talking about a staunch, white, Catholic community," he said.

During his childhood, Gray's adoptive parents told him they were taking care of him because his natural parents didn't want him.

"I never believed it, even in later years I just never believed it," he said.

"This was just incomprehensible to me. I knew that my adoptive parents didn't want me, but I never believed my natural born parents didn't. I know that I was forcefully taken from my mother."

During these earlier years, Gray did learn that he was originally from Alaska, that his real name was Miller and that he was from Chitina.

"I thought I was Eskimo," he said. "My adoptive parents told me I was Eskimo, and I didn't know there were Indians in Alaska. To Outside people, anyone from Alaska was Eskimo."

It was in fact his racial pride that kept him going, Gray said.

"I knew I was different, so I was going to be the best Eskimo out there."

Gray studied Eskimos and their culture. He greatly admired the self-reliance that book after book expounded on. He wanted to take care of himself and didn't want people to give him a handout.

"By golly," said Gray, "I became a pretty good Eskimo. I even enlisted in the Army years later as Eskimo. You can imagine my shock when I got out of the Army and found out I was Indian. Me — who had fought Indians in my youth because I read Eskimos and Indians were natural enemies."

Although Gray's adoptive parents, foster homes and institutions raised Gray as white, he feels he raised himself as Eskimo.



Cliff Gray was taken from his mother Helen Miller when he was 4 years old.

"I never wanted to be white because I wasn't white. I could just look at my skin and know that I was different. How do you tell a child he's the same as everyone else when all he has to do is look at his arm and know that he's not the same?"

The family stayed in Massachusetts for about a year. Then they moved to Riverside, Calif., where Theresa reconciled with Emery. Emery was stationed at March Air Force Base at the time.

"It was in California that the abuse started getting worse," Gray recalled. "I remember asking Emery why he wouldn't do anything to help, but he would just walk away."

Gray recalled being beaten with a broom stick by his mother when he was 8 years old. When it broke she told him, "Stay there until I find something else to finish beating you with."

It was during this incident that Gray realized crying didn't help. He remembers turning to his mother and saying, "You will never make me cry again, and no one will ever be close enough to make me cry."

Gray was 30 years old before he ever shed another tear.

After the move to California, Gray began running away. It was then he discovered a place called Juvenile Hall.

"It was kind of a nifty place," Gray remembers. "They took care of you, they fed you on a regular basis and the rules were real clear. They didn't change. One of the problems I had was the changing rules at home, the inconsistencies."

Soon Gray had the address of Juvenile Hall memorized. When things got rough at home he would head directly there. Juvenile Hall could legally keep him for two weeks before they had to return him to his parents.

Gray underwent sessions with the staff psychiatrist during his stays at Juvenile Hall. When the doctor asked him what he wanted if he could have

any wish, Gray said, "I want to live in the desert because there are no people there."

He wasn't yet 9 years old, and he wanted nothing more to do with mankind.

The running continued for Gray until he was 11 years old. By this time he had created enough attention publicly by his actions that the family had become an embarrassment to the Air Force. The family was transferred to Glasgow Air Force Base in Montana.

That moved turned out to be "probably the best thing that ever happened to me," Gray said. It was in Montana that a social worker recognized the abuse and had Gray removed from the family. This was considered a radical step in the 1960s, particularly considering he was an adoptive child.

After Gray was taken from Theresa and Emery, Gray began living in a succession of foster homes and also a boys ranch. During this time his sense of alienation and anger continued to grow, and no situation worked.

Gray could not stay at home, and he didn't fit in with the foster homes or the boys ranch. At the age of 12, Gray was institutionalized in a reform school until he was 17. It was during this time he lost track of his sister Alberta. He believes she stayed with Theresa and Emery until she was 16.

For five years in the reform school Gray was kept drugged on Thorazine, a strong depressant usually used on large animals such as horses.

"One problem with being constantly drugged, you never learn how to deal with your emotions," Gray said. "You are always just blah. Two things can happen though, an emotional breakdown of some kind or a complete withdrawal. I chose withdrawal."

Gray said the effects of withdrawing showed up later when he was released on a work permit.

When he was 17, Gray was allowed to work on a custom combine crew. The crew went from Montana to Texas and back again, following the wheat

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—Millie Buck, Cliff Gray's aunt

harvest. He never had friends and never became involved romantically with anyone.

After working on the crew, Gray had a number of jobs where everyone thought he was very good at working when he wanted to work. Gray knew even then he was unstable.

"I would work at something only until I was good at it. I wanted everything everyone else had, but didn't know how to go about getting it. I was always unhappy to a point where I didn't fit it."

Gray was 18 or 19 when he discovered alcohol. At the time, he found it to be the best thing that ever happened to him.

"Finally," said Gray, "I could become the person I wanted to be with alcohol — someone who was accepted and fit in."

Quite bluntly, Gray became a drunk.

"I didn't know then what a drunk was or what alcoholism was, but I would drink to the point of blacking out," he said.

Gray admitted to having a tremendous capacity for alcohol at this time.

At age 21 he tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide. When he failed, he decided he had better make a location change and went back to Montana. He believes God had a hand in letting him live.

"I was never a particularly religious person in my youth," he said, "but when I woke up, I felt that God had something different in store for me, and it always stayed in the back of my mind."

Gray wrote to the State of Alaska in the mid-1970s, requesting assistance for education and in finding his natural parents. He told the state in his letter that he was from Chitina, that his name was Gray and that he believed it had been Miller.

He got a letter back from the Governor's Office which stated there was no education aid available and that his parents were dead.

The pattern of drug and alcohol abuse continued until Gray was about 30 years old. Instead of becoming the person he wanted to be when he drank, Gray found himself becoming a violent drunk and fighting a lot.

In the Army by this time, Gray was told by a captain, "Cliff, we have a problem here. You have a problem, and the Army has a problem. Either you take care of your problem, or the Army will take care of theirs. Your problem is alcohol, and the Army's problem is you on alcohol."

"I understood that, and I checked into a treatment center. I quit drinking," he said.

Gray described an excellent facility in Heidelberg, West Germany, where he was stationed that changed his life. Up until he was 30 years old, he had no direction. He was rudderless and emotionless, with nothing to live for. Gray had no family and no roots. At 30 years old, he was completely burned out.

"I had no money, no honor, no pride. I even stunk because I refused to take a shower."

The alcohol treatment helped a great deal. But finding his family was what made life today at age 37 a life beyond his wildest dreams or expectations. Today, he is married, owns a home and has two foster children under his care.

"A psychologist told me that statistics show 98 percent of the boys raised as I was are either dead or institutionalized. Only 2 percent overcome it," he said. "I was told I had two roads to follow — either I would be a successful criminal or successful in business."

Gray also was told during his alcohol treatment that because of the drive he exhibited, he would either be the best or the worst. For him, there wasn't much in between.

Gray's life changed five years ago when he received a letter from his Aunt Millie. Back in the early '80s, he had seen an advertisement in a newspaper about shareholders in a Native corporation. Gray called the number in the ad and found he had been carried on the rolls as dead, so he was registered over the phone.

His aunt later saw his name in the register and wrote to him. The letter noted that his aunt had been looking for him for years and that he had brothers and sisters.

"We would like to hear from you," she said.

Gray said he kept the letter for about a year. He would read it, fold it back up, put it away almost every day. His attitude at the time was, "What do they want?" He was 32, finally getting his life under control, and for the first time felt that things were starting to come together, that he was making progress.

The letter brought out feelings of anger. Why were these people coming into his life? Where were they when he needed them when he was 11 or 12?

Eventually, though, he worked through the anger.

"I called her, and we talked for a little bit. I was very cautious. My attitude was a 'Who are you?' type of attitude. Aunt Millie was overjoyed."

After the first phone call, Gray didn't call her again for about eight months. Gray said he needed time to think about it, that it was a tremendous shock to him.

"This family out of nowhere comes into my life and says, 'I'm your aunt.' I'm your grandmother. These are your brothers and sisters." Out of nowhere! Poof! Instant family, instant feelings. But I felt nothing. There was just a blank, a void. I didn't know if I wanted to get involved in all that," Gray said.

Gray ended his term in the Army and decided to come to Alaska to be discharged. He got out of the Army Dec. 14.

"We arranged the whole thing where I'm coming in. I arrived at the Anchorage International Airport, expecting to be met by my long, lost relatives, like in a book or in the movies. I get off the airplane, and there is nobody. Boy, I felt about 2 inches high."

So Gray told himself, "That's just fine. I'll get on the plane and get out of here. I've gone 33 years without you all. I can go 33 more without you."

Instead, however, Gray went to the military liaison and arranged for a place to stay. What had happened was that his Aunt Millie had become very ill and couldn't make it to the airport.

"No one else in the family would come in because they were afraid of being let down, too. They thought that maybe this isn't the Cliff they had been looking for," Gray said.

In the past during their search, the family had been contacted by other people, claiming to be Gray.

Eventually Gray called his aunt and did make it to her house before Christmas.

"Without my Aunt Millie's dedication," said Gray, "I wouldn't be here today. May aunt is a very remarkable woman; I've learned a lot from her. She's a very powerful woman."

Gray has a huge extended family in Alaska.

"In the Indian culture a whole village may be related to you, then you go 50 miles in another direction to another village, and they might all be related to you, and so on," Gray said.

He said that learning about the family took a lot of getting used to.

The family has tried to offer an open welcome to Gray, but he feels he still is not as close to his family as he'd like to be. Gray developed distancing behaviors early in life to protect himself from being hurt.

"I know intellectually my family would never hurt me, but emotionally I still have that fear," he said. "I feel very close to my aunt and some of my brothers and sisters."

Gray feels particularly strongly about Native children. He and his wife Diane are now foster parents themselves.

"It's something that I basically wanted to do and with Diane's consent we followed up on it. You see, if nothing else, I can keep a child in Alaska."

Gray said he does not want another child to go through life as he did through lack of a foster home.

"What about children? Do children have to reach out for help? Do children have to be victims?" he asked.

Gray and his wife are currently taking care of two foster children from a village, a boy who is almost 7 years old and a girl only 2. Gray said that overall, things are going well. The little girl is adjusting much better and faster than the boy is.

"The boy desperately wants attention, but doesn't know how to accept it. It helps a lot that we have the same color skin."

The need for Native foster homes in Alaska is very desperate. Currently, there are fewer than 10 available.

Editor's note: This is the first in a three-part series.

Cliff Gray never saw either of his real parents after he was taken from his home at age 4. Ron Miller died in an auto accident in the early 1960s. Helen Miller died in 1976 from an illness.

Today, Gray is the maintenance supervisor for Cook Inlet Housing Authority. He and his wife are parents of two foster children and are expecting a baby of their own.

The search for Gray's sister Alberta, who would be about 36 years old now, continues.

Gray was last in contact with her about 10 years ago. Gray heard she was living in Cincinnati and may have a child. He used to call her "Bertie" and feels she still thinks she is Eskimo.

Those who are interested in becoming a foster parent may contact Cook Inlet Tribal Council at 272-7529.

Helen Chase is employed part-time by CITC. She produces the agency's newsletter and press releases.



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