

People of Ahtna Region: Jim McKinley

by Bill Hess

Tundra Times

A Bible-study book is held firmly in the hands of Jim McKinley as he sits in a chair near a wood stove inside the log cabin he built himself in 1918. Draped from his neck are the bone-styled sash and necklace which are to be worn only by traditional Athabascan chiefs.

Above him on the wall is the name "Jesus," formed in the shape of a fish. A blue ribbon hangs from it. Further over on the wall is a large certificate commemorating his ordination as a preacher. On the next wall hangs a colored print of a man praying over his bread, and alongside that a large portrait of Christ.

Everywhere there are books and magazines, including many, many issues of National Geographic. McKinley has been a member of the National Geographic Society for decades.

Once he quit, but was then visited by a man and woman representing the society. They felt very bad he was no longer a part of them, and so he joined up once again.

"I'm not a chief, you know that," the son of McKinley George and the grandson of Chief Stickwan says. "I'm just a pretended chief, see. They just put me here to pretend, to look after people, what they do. If there's any death or what not, I speak. That's all."

Still, McKinley takes obvious pride in having the right to wear the ornamentation. One of his more recent duties as the 85 year-old traditional chief of Copper Center, which also has a fully functioning, elected tribal council, was to address Judge Thomas Berger of the Alaska Native Review Commission.

Doing so had not been his plan, but when someone had stopped by to give him a ride to the hearings, he willingly went along to voice his concerns.



Jim McKinley

"Well, its good, all right," McKinley speaks of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act of 1971. "I say its good, but I don't know about 1991, what's going to be happening."

Many of the concerns expres-

sed by fellow villagers and others in the Ahtna region concerning 1991 had to do with taxes which could be imposed on Native lands 20 years after they had their lands officially conveyed to them.

"I'll tell you what I feel," McKinley says. "Before 1901, there was this white man around here. They take him up," he speaks of some of his people, "and they find lots of things. They find gold.

"At Valdez Creek, there was all these claims. They took out more than \$200 million of gold, like they're taking the oil now. At Sleet Creek, they took \$500,000 of gold."

McKinley likens the gold to a great tax already taken from Native lands before there even was a land claims settlement. In addition, a non-Native had some Athabascan show him where some copper-laden rocks originated, and started up a large Copper Mine from which great amounts of ore were extracted, again before any kind of settlement had been reached.

"There's millions and millions of dollars been taken from Alaska, from my people," McKinley says. "You see what they have done; they have given us a little bit of housing, and some stuff, but it is nothing according to what they have taken from us.

"Now there is land claims, and oil running through that pipeline."

In earlier days, he used to hunt and trap where the oil now flows, but now he and his descendents are not allowed to do so.

"We get a little bit out of it," he refers to the jobs and money which have come to some of his people as a result of the pipeline and the settlement. "Not too much, see. This is our land, too. But we're being pushed out all the time. I can't stand it!"

"When they say we own taxes to the United States, there are millions and millions of dollars he never give us back. That's how I feel. Now, we don't know about 1991.

McKinley also expressed concern for the young people, especially those born after 1971 who do not have any holdings in the corporations. "I'm so worried about these young kids! I don't know what they are going to do when all the old people have died."

McKinley says he counsels the young not to drink or use drugs, but kids don't listen like they once did. Despite talk of having respect for the Elders and listening to their advice, any time they use drugs or abuse alcohol, they are not listening to the Elders, McKinley says.

Even if many young people choose not to listen to his words today, McKinley is seeing to it they will have another chance. He is writing a book, telling the history of the Copper River area as best he knows it, and of his own observations and concerns.

"There are some Natives, when I tell them about a new kind of fish they've just found that I've read about, they think I'm crazy. Another thing, some Indians, when you do like this, writing a book, they see it as crazy."

Some day, when Jim McKinley is gone but his words remain behind, such sentiments are likely to change to appreciation.