

Book offers a year in Athapascans' life

by Steven C. Levi
for the Tundra Times

Chief Stephen's Parky, by Ann Chandonnet. Council for Indian Education, 517 Rimrock Road, Billings, Mont. 59107. 72 pages, 20 drawings, two maps. Illustrated by Janette Kasl. \$5.95.

Perhaps the worst thing that could be said about *Chief Stephen's Parky* was that the book was too short.

The work is readable and realistic, and Chandonnet leaves the reader with the impression that the characters are real people, not just stick figure, generic Natives who go through white man's motions.

The book focuses on a "year in the life" of the family of the chief of Knik, a village of the Tanaina Athapaskan Indians located about 40 miles from what is now Anchorage.

The primary character is Olga, the young wife of Chief Stephen. Being the wife of an Alaskan chief brought few special privileges. Olga did what all the other women of the village did in 1898: forage the countryside for small animals and edible plants while the men went off after larger game.

The book culminates with Olga sewing her husband a "parky," a knee-length parka made of ground squirrel skins rather than the modern version of nylon and goose down.

Chandonnet is hardly a newcomer to the history of the Tanaina. She is also the author of a history of Eklutna, the oldest continually inhabited Tanaina Athapaskan village in Southcentral Alaska.

Chandonnet checks her facts carefully and weaves history into her chronicle to make a believable story that has roots in the history of the area.

Chandonnet has been in Alaska for 17 years, incidentally, and is also a well respected poet and cooking author.

At the end of the book there are several pages dedicated to the people and places in the work which anchor it firmly into the history of the area.

The story of how the book came about is as fascinating as the saga of Olga. Chandonnet discovered a sepia photograph of Chief Stephen standing in his parky at the Knik Trading Co., Outfitters. The photograph was taken by Orville Herning, the owner of the establishment, in the first decade of this century. Herning had come to the area to search for gold and had been forced to open up a trading post to make a living.

Though he prospected for years, he never struck it even modestly rich. But, when the rest of his expedition returned to Boston both poorer and wiser, they left their camera with Herning. Herning's pictures made him very little money — and then mostly from postcard sales near the end of his life — but they do show a slice of Alaska's heritage that otherwise would have been lost forever.

Overall, the book is well researched and easy to read. Chandonnet has done an admirable job of weaving fiction and nonfiction together. Several of the characters in her book are real people. The rest of Chandonnet's characters fit in so well with the history that these people acquire a life of their own.

To her credit, Chandonnet does not gloss over details in an attempt to show

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"the big picture," rather, she uses detail to enhance her story.

For instance, anyone who has done any sewing at all knows how difficult the job can be, even with a tape measure and a sewing machine. But consider this, how would an Athapaskan woman measure her husband for a parky? And how would she record those measures, particularly with no pencil or paper? Chandonnet doesn't just ignore this tidbit of cultural history. She uses it as a showcase:

"Olga could neither read nor write. She owned neither pencil nor paper. She marked her measurements in an ancient way — by knotting a length of rawhide. She would remember which knot marked which measurement. She kept a length of rawhide knotted with measurements for every member of

the family, taking new measurements as they grew."

Chief Stephen's Parky is not just a book for the library. It is a book to be read, not just with the eyes but aloud. It's short enough to be finished in two or three sittings yet long enough to offer more than just a quick look at a

vanishing way of life in America's last frontier.

It's complex enough to offer something for every reader, regardless of age, yet simple enough that a child will find it entertaining and educational — a rare combination. Moreover, at \$5.95, it's an absolute steal.