

## Copper Center the way it was

*Editor's Note: Copper Center, one of the biggest and liveliest of the Copper River Basin's communities, is home to many Ahtna Indian families. Well-known Copper Center family names now include Johns, Craig, George, McConkey, McKinley, Ewan, Jackson, Lincoln, Brown, Steinfeld, Stickwan, Buchea, Martin, Sabon, Jack, Nickolai, Yazzie, Pete, Bell, Larson, Fleury and Sinyon.*

### The gold rush and later

Jim McKinley is a vigorous, vibrant man who was born in 1899 at the height of the Gold Rush. He lived at Wood Camp, around 3 or 4 miles from Copper Center.

He remembers, "They had a school building here in 1902-03. I was 4 years old. I remember pretty good." By 1904-05, he says, there were very few white people left, in comparison to the thousands who stampeded through a few years earlier in their search for riches and who built 'Rabbit City' at Klutina. Copper Center, recalls Jim McKinley, was just the 'City' — because it had everything. Right down to a jail and an experimental gardening station.

As a young boy, Jim McKinley hunted. He hunted bear, moose, caribou and sheep. He was six years old when he shot his first beaver with a .22 single-shot. He was about nine years old when he downed a moose with a 30/30 and then helped his dad cut up and dry the meat.

But even more important to the young boy were the tales told by the old people. He loved listening to the old people tell stories, and he spent a lot of time with them, learning things. "I think *learning* is most important," he says now. "I don't want things lost."

He is especially proud of the language of the Ahtna people, of Ahtna history, and of the wise and generous Indian custom of Potlatch.

Several young people have visited Jim McKinley and asked him questions about the old way of life — just as he used to visit older people. He is pleased in their interest in the old

ways that he loves.

### The early Twenties

Before he lived in Chitina and Glennallen, Walter Charley lived at Wood Camp, down from Copper Center. He remembers that Copper Center was called 'Mission Village' during the years he went to school.

"In Wood Camp, I lived in a big log home. I remember there was a kitchen in the back. There was three families there in old Wood Camp: Jim McKinley, my family, and Big Charley, my uncle." Big Charley's was Walter Charley's foster family. "Pretty bright man. Conservative. Always had a pile of wood ahead of time. He used to have all the fish put up and all the meat. Never was a hungry day in my home. There was hungry days after I left," he laughed. "Many of them."

In the early 20's, recalls Walter Charley, Tony Jackson, Louie Lincoln and Mentasta Pete lived in Wood Camp along with Bobby Jackson, Tonsina Teddy, Earl Jackson, Skookum Johns, and Billy Nickolai. Billy Nickolai built a lot of houses.

Across the river from Copper Center was another village. Tenas Jack lived there, and 'Big Jack' (Chief Andrew Jackson), Copper Center John, Pete Jackson, Arthur Jackson, and an old man they called Tanana Jack, Henry Allen, and the Craigs.

"The father was the boss of the family, supplied the family. He was training his kids to go out there, how to do the hunting. Training them to get out of bed in the morning, jump up, go

outdoors. Just like the white man, exercises in the morning. Sometimes they went so far as throw you in the river — and if you crawl out they throw you back in, keep you in that water. You got to pack wood, pack water..."

You had to learn the law of the land back in those days if you were a boy. Usually you went out with your uncle or father — and your uncle was as much of a boss, and had as much authority to tell you what to do as your own father did. Uncles and fathers taught boys how to track. "They teach you about wind — which direction the wind blows. They teach you about movement of animals — which way the animals move. They teach you what kind of places the animals move to," says Walter Charley.

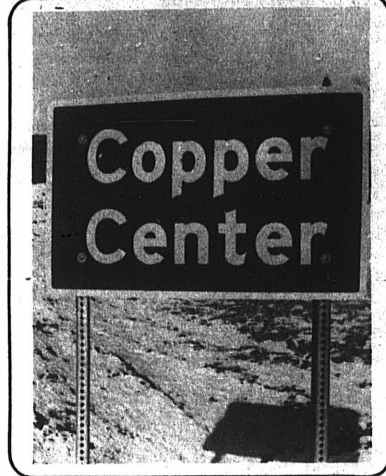
In those days, recalls Walter Charley, "when you camp any place, you laid something down, you know it belongs to someone else. Who it belongs to. You never pick it up. You could use it, or whatever, but never take it along. Back in the old days, we drove up and down along the trail, we see a gun hanging along the trail — it stayed there for weeks. If you pick up his gun, you're jeopardizing his life. It's his livelihood, that's the only gun he had... That's all the stuff I remember, the good stuff."

### Life at Klutina Lake

Basille Jackson was born in the Klutina Lake area in the middle of winter 56 years ago. "There was hardly any people around," he remembers about his boy-



Jim McKinley in a relaxed mood at home.



### The first marten

"The river changed," remembers Hector Ewan. "It used to be close, right across from the Lodge. We could talk together every day. In the last 30 years I imagine it went back half a mile. They used to use boats — boats were just like a car. Two dollars. That was big money."

Hector Ewan left home at the age of 14 and went back into the woods to live at 16-Mile Cabin with his brother-in-law. "My brother-in-law, first time I met him, he didn't say two words to me. He said, 'You trap this way tomorrow. He never told me how to set a trap. I was stupid.'"

But not that stupid. The very first day out he caught a marten and a mink. The young boy was excited and proud of himself. "I wanted to run home that 16 miles. I wanted to show my mom. My brother-in-law said, 'Hey; you gotta skin it first!'"

Parents knew that a young child had to learn grown-up ways, and become tough and resourceful. Hector Ewan also recalls the way a young boy became a man. Sometime, usually between the ages of 9 and 14, "Your dad would say, 'Are you in good shape?' Then he'd toss you in the river. You'd have to break trees, make a big pile — build a fire. That's what they'd call you — 'man' — then."

### Rediscovering the old ways

Young Ahtna people are actively finding out about the history of the people of (See COPPER CENTER, Page 5)

hood days. "There was Ruth Johns' folks — they used to move out there with us and we stayed out there all winter. Our regular home was down in Wood Camp until it burned down, and then we moved to the village, up at the top of the hill."

As a young boy, Basille Jackson used to do lots of hunting and trapping with his uncle, Jim McKinley. "When school started, I stayed with my uncle Tony (Jackson) in wintertimes. In summertimes I stayed with Grandma and Grandpa (Elaine and George McKinley) at the fish camp across the river."

"It was lots of fun — interesting. We don't stay in one place. In summertime, everybody fished down the river. Fall time, after fishing, everybody takes off in the country. I remember we used to live up at the mouth of Klutina Lake at a house where we stayed all winter long. I remember as a kid one time I was back in the mountains. We saw a brown bear and Grandpa showed me how to shoot a bear. Get up close — as here to that door — and shoot it."

Life has changed a lot and memories are not always accurate. "A couple of years ago, I guess, I went up to Klutina, took a boat, and went around the Klutina, and stopped at a cliff where I used to play when I was a kid — it was really high. It's kind of funny. I stand on top, and look down. It's just a little cliff. . . maybe ten feet high."

But some memories are golden: "I used to like hunting. I'd always tag along. Me and Uncle Jim. I'd be right behind him, wherever he'd go."

# ● *Copper Center*

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Copper Center.

Several years ago, two teenaged girls, Kathy Ewan and Wanda Bell, interviewed Mary Bell, Andy Brown, Hector Ewan, Ruth Johns, and Elizabeth Pete — all of Copper Center. They spent a semester finding out about old customs and writing an English paper which eventually grew into a small book.

The girls questioned their informants about everything: about tools, preservation techniques, food and transportation.

Among the things they discovered were that houses in this area used to be made of logs tied together with

moose strips, that the roofs were made of branches and bark, and the doors of bear skin.

Bedding was made of animal hide — moose, bear, wolf and fox skins. Ahtna people used moss for padding and mattresses. They knew how to use practically everything in Nature. Candles were made of moose, caribou, or salmon grease, and wicks were made of moose or caribou strips. Moose bladders were used for windows, bones for tools, and sinews for thread. Boats were also made of moose hide. The hair was taken off, and the skin was sewn to a bark frame while it was still wet.