

Timothy Twitchell: Reindeer herder, businessman, teacher, guide

by Mike Rostad
for the Tundra Times

KODIAK — Timothy Twitchell certainly doesn't know all there is to know about Alaska, but through his own experiences as a reindeer herder, a teacher, a businessman and guide, and through the stories told by his pioneer father, he's arrived at a pretty good understanding of the Last Frontier as it was before the oil fields and skyscrapers made their appearance.

Twitchell was born in Bethel in 1906. His father, Adams Hollis Twitchell, was lured to Alaska by the gold strikes of the 1800s. Tim's mother, Kacheek, was a Y'upik Eskimo from Nelson Island.

A man who expresses deep admiration and respect for a "stern, but understanding" father, Twitchell compliments him by clearly recalling the stories the elder shared with his children.

A.H. Twitchell was a Vermont-born adventurer who came from a family claiming kinship with the Adams family which produced a U.S. president.

His sights set on Dawson, A.H. Twitchell wanted to get in on the gold stampede that was heralded sensationally in newspapers Outside. But when he got to Skagway, sickness forced him to return to the states.

A.H. Twitchell was a man of resiliency. Soon he was back in Alaska. This time he migrated to Nome. He finally discovered that he didn't care much for mining. So his ears perked up when he heard that fur was fairly cheap on the Yukon Delta.

He and a partner named Fowler made an agreement with the Alaska Commercial Co. in Bethel to take ammunition, tea, coffee and other staples to the wilderness and trade them with the Natives for furs. The furs, in turn, were to be sold to buyers in San Francisco.

Twitchell loaded his basket sled with supplies and took a Y'upik interpreter with him on a long, cold journey that led to Holy Cross and beyond. Twitchell had no idea they were entering country inhabited by the Athabascan Indians. The Athabascans were not very happy with the Y'upiks, who had driven them northward, says Timothy Twitchell.

By the time the men reached Shageluk Slough, many of the best supplies had already been picked out.

"It took a little more persuasion," says Timothy Twitchell. "My dad called for his interpreter, and when these Athabascans heard this Y'upik, all trading ceased. They went into their houses and locked their doors."

Twitchell, Fowler and another partner eventually bought the Alaska Commercial Co. store in Bethel and incorporated as the Kuskokwim Commercial Co. They established other outlets.

Fur trading became secondary to supplying miners with necessities. Supplies were carried on pack horse, sleds and scows.

Concluding he was getting nowhere financially, Twitchell sold out his share of the company. By that time he was a family man, concerned about the future of his children. He considered another investment.

"The reindeer business and placer mining were booming," says Timothy Twitchell. Mining was out of the question, but selling reindeer, now that attracted the man.

Twitchell bought reindeer from the Laplanders, hired by the U.S. government to come to Alaska to teach Natives how to properly care for the animals. After serving a four-year ap-



Timothy Twitchell was born in Bethel in 1906 and has lived in Alaska all his life.

Photo by Mike Rostad

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prenticeship, the Natives were given their stock.

The reindeer were to provide food and clothing, but the animals couldn't be sold, says Timothy Twitchell. However, the Laplanders, who were paid in reindeer, were permitted to sell their animals.

A.H. Twitchell bought most of his stock from the Pete Spein family, who reared a girl who would become Timothy's wife.

Hiring Eskimos to help him, A.H. Twitchell wintered the reindeer at Holy Cross and moved them to Otter Creek in the spring.

Timothy, 9 years old then, was asked by his father if he would rather "learn more in school or herd reindeer." Timothy didn't hesitate to tell his father he preferred to be out on the range. A.H. honored his son's answer.

There are not too many boys who can claim the Kuskokwim Mountain Range of Alaska as their classroom. But it was there where young Timothy Twitchell learned the crucial lessons of survival and responsibility. He embraced the life of a nomad. Reindeer herders moved from one spot to another, living in tents. Later, they enjoyed the luxury of cabins.

Controlling predators was a serious game the herders couldn't afford to lose.

"We had problems with the grizzly bear to begin with. We got them under control pretty fast. But then you have another problem. If you eliminated the grizzly bear, the next thing you're going to have is the black bear."

"And the black bear is worse than the grizzly. He not only goes after your stock, but he gets into your cache and raises Cain. We had some problems with golden eagles. We took care of that, too. And later, we had

wolves."

When they started out in the business, the Twitchells butchered the reindeer on the grounds and delivered the meat to market on dog sleds in winter and on pack horses when the trails allowed.

Later, they decided it was more expedient to drive the animals to market and do the butchering there.

For a season, selling reindeer meat proved to be a viable business for small operators like Twitchell.

"We had enough meat to supply the market. At that time we were in the midst of the gold boom and placer mining was at its peak," he said.

The herders looked beyond Alaska for markets. In a promotion campaign, the Twitchells traveled all over the country, telling people how good reindeer meat was.

Reindeer business in Alaska met tough competition from farmers Outside, whose beef, poultry and sheep products were flown to Anchorage, which was fast becoming the metropolitan center in Alaska.

Tim, the oldest of the children, remained with his parents after the other siblings left to get out on their own. When his mother took sick, he stayed with her until she died.

Besides supporting reindeer, the land in Western Alaska provided Tim Twitchell with another means of livelihood. A multitude of fox, mink, lynx, beaver and other inhabited the area, and he discovered that by employing patience and animal insight qualities he developed as a reindeer herder he could trap those animals and sell their fur.

Twenty-five years old, Tim Twitchell scouted other territory for his reindeer. He considered the Cantwell range near the railroad, but an abundance of coyotes, wolves, eagles and bears discouraged him.

Thankful for the precious knowledge and experience he had gained by living in the wilderness, Twitchell decided it was time to catch up on his formal education. He attended secondary school and college in Fairbanks, graduating from the University of Alaska in 1937. Majoring in business and minoring in education, Twitchell earned the distinction of being the first Eskimo to graduate from the university.

He was appointed to teach school in Eklutna, where he also became postmaster and railroad agent.

One year of teaching was enough. "I got along with the students alright, but I was disappointed in the bureaucracy."

The village of Aniak was Twitch-

ell's next place of residency. He was assigned Northern Commercial Co. agent and took on the position of postmaster there.

Once again he became associated with the Laplanders. He went into business with them and married Anna, the daughter of the man from whom his father purchased his first herd of reindeer.

Some folks at Aniak still talk about the big celebration that was thrown for the newlyweds. Gunshots were fired; tin cans were banged together. There was all sorts of commotion.

When Anna heard the men were planning to take her to one island and Twitchell to another, she quickly found refuge in a smokehouse and didn't come out until she figured it was safe.

Twitchell was a businessman as well as a social worker. He and his wife formed a winning team. They worked as medical aides, performing first aid and midwifery in the Bush. Twitchell delivered six of the 10 Twitchell children.

When the measles epidemic struck Aniak, the Twitchells were up, day and night, tending the sick. They exhibited their concern for fellow human beings in yet other ways. The Twitchell home was known as a place where not only friends, but strangers, could get fed and clothed.

After living in Aniak and Akiak, the Twitchells made their home in Takotna. Twitchell returned to teaching, but was wooed into the construction business, which seemed to be more lucrative profession.

The Twitchells found it necessary to move again. Anna required a great deal of medical attention in Anchorage. Rather than spending money on frequent trips back and forth, Twitchell decided it would be more feasible to live in the Anchorage area.

Twitchell got a job at the Alaska Native Service Hospital. Yet he wasn't earning enough to support the family, he says. "It was so rough. I was concerned about the children being hungry and cold."

The Twitchells saw to it that their children were properly fed and clothed. However, Twitchell was neglecting his own diet to the point of becoming anemic.

Twitchell's education in the wilderness came in awfully handy during those difficult days. He approached a local guide and asked if he could assist the man in moose and caribou hunts.

"I can take care of the skinning and salting of the skins and doing chores around camp," Twitchell offered. "All I want is the meat. You don't have to pay me a cent."

An agreement was made. Twitchell came home with meat and \$500, too, a bonus he received after repairing an all-terrain vehicle that got stuck on the trail.

The hospitality the Twitchells practiced so freely was returned to them. People sent food baskets and at Christmas, Union Oil Co. presented Twitchell with a barrel of fuel oil. When that supply got low, Twitchell asked if Union could send another barrel. In payment, Twitchell would put in a day of work.

"That 'day' lasted 12 and a half years," Twitchell said, smiling.

After he retired from Union, Twitchell became a teacher's aide, assisting the Native students.

Prudhoe Bay, made famous by successful oil drilling, held much the same attraction for Twitchell as Dawson and Nome held for his father. Forfeiting teacher's retirement benefits, Twitchell became part of the new boom in Alaska.

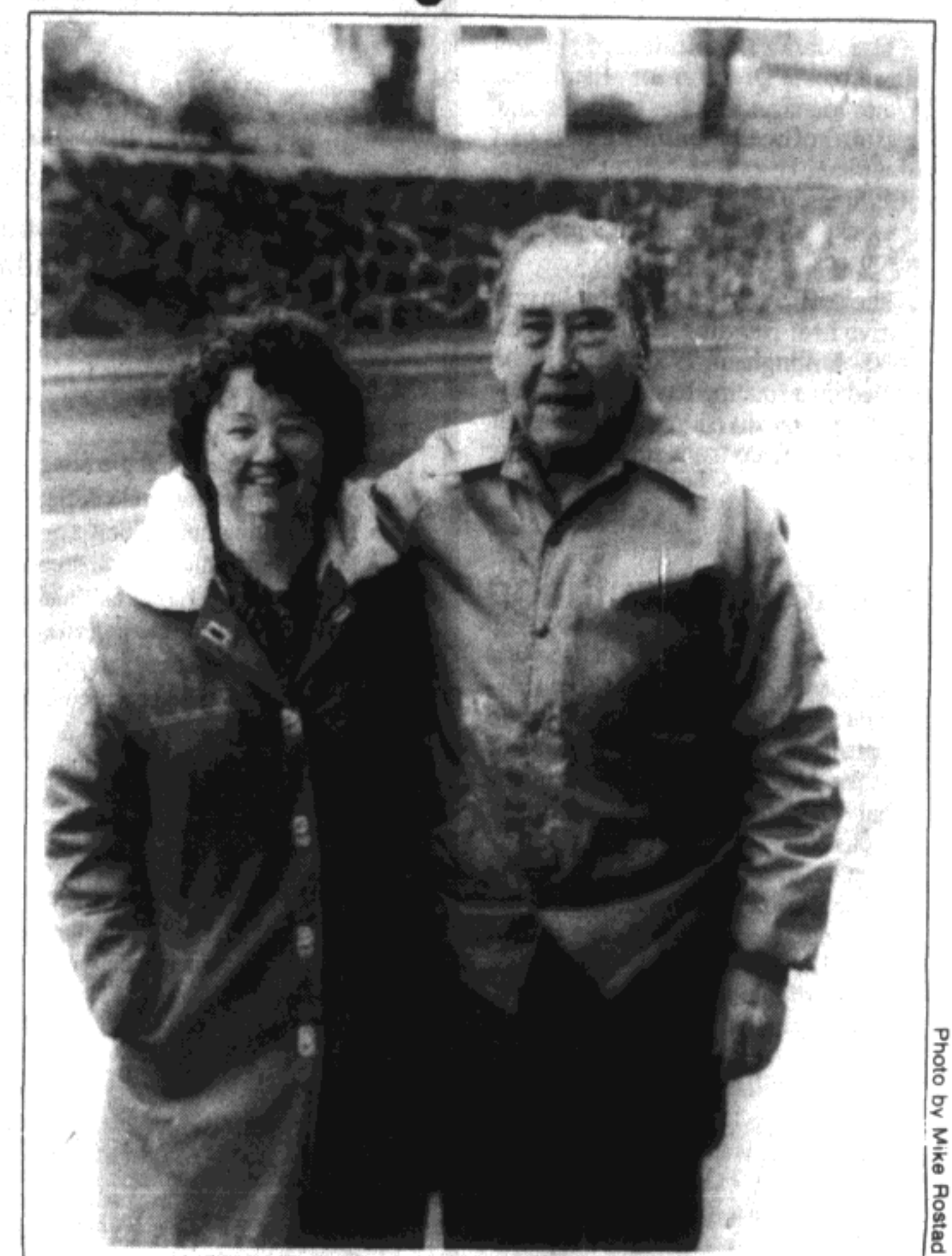
Clerking for an oil company at a Fairbanks warehouse, Twitchell banked a lot of money in just a short time. But his wife's deteriorating health forced him to return to Anchorage.

There was no alternative but for both Twitchell and his wife to move into a nursing home. Yet, Twitchell remained active. Last September, he went on a strenuous moose hunt. The day before the hunt was over, his wife died in Anchorage.

Much that was precious to Twitchell is gone. Along with the passing of loved ones, a way of life that was simple, tough and rewarding has disappeared.

Twitchell is disturbed by some of the changes he's seen in Alaska.

"In the older days, if a man didn't conduct himself mannerly, he had no choice but to be completely isolated or move away," Twitchell said.



One of Twitchell's daughters is Lois Stover of Kodiak.

Photo by Mike Rostad

Twitchell is not opposed to all changes. Some are necessary, he says. A man who takes pride in his Y'upik heritage, Twitchell feels it's important to preserve the Native land and culture in Alaska. He's demonstrated his devotion to the culture in many ways, including writing English translations of Y'upik stories.

In some cases, those who uphold old customs and traditions must be will-

ing to adjust, says Twitchell.

"You've got to take into account that if your culture is going to come into conflict with society's established rules, there has to be a compromise made in there."

"You cannot live unto yourself alone," Twitchell said. It's a philosophy he's held on to wherever he's gone in Alaska.



Timothy Twitchell is shown in this early photograph, described as "waiting for the tide."



Shown dipnetting for hooligans, Twitchell was often dependent on subsistence.