

# Despite Tragic Background Grandma Lucy Lives Good Life

By AGNES PETE

Left to die on the tundra between Bethel and Nelson Island over 90 years ago as an infant during a famine, Lucy Link, an Eskimo from Bethel, Alaska, has outlived her sons and brothers and sisters.

A sister who could not bear to see her die had no idea what a great humanitarian act it was when she went back to get her infant sister and stuck a piece of seal blubber in her mouth to keep her alive.

Since that day, Lucy had lived through many good and bad times, fed many visitors from outlying areas, housed pregnant mothers awaiting the birth of a child under care of the doctors in Bethel, counseled distraught persons, and has been "maureluq," or grandmother, to many people.

Lucy, who has lived to see her two great-great grandchildren and maybe more, has been mother to many people who aren't even related to her — and a wonderful great-grandmother to me.

When she used to take care of me as a baby, Lucy lived at our present fish camp site, five miles north of Bethel, on the Kuskowim River. There she and her husband fished during the summer and smoked fish for the long winter, picked berries, and went hunting and trapping.

Today there are five graves at the camp, two of which are my mother's parents and the other two Lucy's sons. The members of my family use the camp during the summer to carry on the tradition of smoking fish for winter. They also pick rhubarb, high bush cranberries and blueberries, gather wild vegetables, and maybe keep a small garden.

The camp is a place of many memories, of the older days when mail was brought by dog team, when my mother's parents had a small store, when at Christmas the freight did not arrive on time, and when my mother's parents gave credit to customers who wanted to buy presents for their kids.

I remember all the good times eating many kinds of Eskimo food at my grandmother's, especially whenever some coastal food was given to her by friends and relatives from Nelson Island — things like dried herring, fish eggs, walrus, seal meat and oil, birds and bird eggs.

The foods we ate from the Bethel area included Eskimo ice cream (made of blueberries, blackberries or salmonberries with sugar, tallow and fish or salmonberries mixed with seal oil), moose meat, dried and smoked salmon, whitefish, blackfish, bear, rabbit, ptarmigan, geese and ducks.

The tastiest food then was rotten salmon heads ("tepa") which had been left in a hole in the ground for about ten days



**LIVED A USEFUL LIFE** — Left to die as a baby because of a terrible famine, Lucy Link was rescued by an older sister and is now living a fine life being a "grandmother" even to youngsters and young people who are not related to her. To the author of this story, she is "a wonderful Great-grandmother to me."

and covered with grass and dirt and left to rot. We used to eat it in Grandma's smokehouse in Bethel, but now health officials say it is bad. Even so, many Eskimos have eaten it, and lived for years on end.

My grandmother used to sew many furs, making beautiful parkas out of squirrels, rabbit, moose, reindeer, mink, muskrat, and decorated with strips of fur

or tassels of yarn and beads. In the olden days she used to make rain coats and boots out of seal intestines before rubber was introduced. She also made pants of fur and mukluks to keep the feet warm and to prevent the dangerous frost bite.

Lucy learned the importance of warm clothing. Once, when Bethel was in its developing stage, she had to assist a doctor

cut a woman's frostbitten feet and calves off. Today, people have an easier time surviving, what with more modern methods of keeping body and soul together available.

Since I spent considerable time with Lucy as a child, her industrious nature may have indeed rubbed off on me. She always seemed to be busy sewing something, cleaning house, cooking, making guests comfortable, or caring for people when sick.

She loved people for what they were and helped them in any way possible — traditional of the hospitable Eskimo spirit. In the olden days people had to help each other on matters of survival.

Though Lucy spoke Eskimo, or Yupik, fluently, she understood very little English. For many years, we had a difficult time communicating as I understood only English, mostly because the missionaries had forbidden my parents to speak Eskimo in school.

They had to relearn the language after returning to Bethel and thought it best for the children to speak English.

So, oddly enough, it wasn't

until college that I picked up some of the Eskimo language after taking nine months of Yupik. Upon going back to Bethel, therefore, Lucy and I were able to communicate much better. I understood more of what she said, though I could only speak simple words or sentences in Eskimo.

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# Grandma Lucy . . .

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Last fall, Lucy almost died, but her great will to live overcame her bodily weaknesses. Her heart almost stopped, but after given her last rites by a priest, she snapped back. Many people prayed for her, and it was not uncommon for relatives to say, "It must have been because I prayed for her" that she recovered.

To me she has always been there, ready to visit whenever anyone dropped by. She will always be in the hearts of many people. She stands for the old way of life — when seal oil lamps had to be used for lighting, when life was survival of the fittest, and when people had to count on each other's friendship.

Last year in May, my mother was going to Anchorage from Bethel for my sister's participation in the Teen-age Beauty Pageant. The morning of the day my mother was scheduled to leave, she went to tell Lucy she'd be gone awhile.

But Lucy was determined to go along, too. So, my mother packed her bags, and off they went to Anchorage that afternoon by jet. I was astonished to see Lucy get off the jet in Anchorage, cane in hand, and still spry in mind, though aging in body.

Later, my mother told me about the police check before getting on the aircraft in Bethel. She said the policeman told her, "I don't need to check her. She's a bit old to hijack the plane!"

Lucy found Anchorage too lonesome, though she'd been there several times when she was much younger. There was no one to speak Eskimo to, no good Eskimo food, and she missed all her visitors. She had originally planned to stay awhile, but within a week she was ready to go back to Bethel.

In Bethel on the radio station, the program director sometimes had people tell stories in Eskimo. Lucy would listen attentively and wish she could tell stories, too.

So, one time when she was visiting our home, I let her tell a few stories on the tape recorder. Her eyes lit up with animation as she listened to the playbacks. She also sang a few songs, and did so with vivacity. I treasure the tape.

One summer my sister stayed with Lucy to take care of her while my uncle, who normally stays with her, was away. My sister Marilyn really spoiled her by cleaning the house, serving meals at her bedside, having tea ready at appropriate times, helping her wash, combing her hair, running errands and so on.

When Marilyn had to go back to school, on one else seemed as warm or loving in my grandmother's eyes.

Lucy lives on a piece of land next to the river, held back by logs, making it an ideal port. She strives to hold onto the

land. The titles for the land and buildings took a long time to find, as in the olden days there was only a territorial court. The state court was not established in Bethel until 1960.

Though almost squashed in on the tiny piece of land, with a neighbor's buildings and machinery very close to hers, Lucy values the land, for it has been the site of her home for many years.

I shall always be grateful to her sister, whom I never met, for taking baby Lucy back home. I guess her mother had a heart after that, though in times of famine food was hard to get, making the chances for an infant to survive more difficult.

I once visited Nelson Island, where my great-grandmother and her sons used to live many years ago. It was as if I had been there before, though I had never been. I dreamed of the life that used to be in my great-grandmother's days. Yet some things had changed and others had not.

The people were just as hospitable as always, I'm sure. When they heard I was there (being my mother's father's granddaughter), close relatives who knew my grandfather before he died, came to see me. They talked about him, and it made me feel very welcome because I had never known my mother's father.

The people of the villages on Nelson Island still fish, still hunt seal, and still gather berries, wild vegetables, and bird eggs. The only difference is that they use snowmobiles instead of dog teams, wooden boats instead of skin kayaks, man-made clothing of cotton and wool instead of fur skins, and so on.

The types of tools, utensils, and machines used now are different, but the people's culture for the most part remains.

Certain aspects of the old culture are more evident — the people still hold Eskimo dances, the men go to the "qasgiq" where they along steambathe and visit. They merely have adapted partially to the new culture, using its tools to do the things necessary to maintain a subsistence existence.

One of their problems is the diminishing numbers of fish, caused by foreign fishing fleets. The fish, so necessary to their existence, have been much less in numbers. I guess this would lead to greater dependence on imported foods.

Lucy has grown in her wisdom because she has seen the different worlds of the Eskimo and white man. Today her influence is still developing as her many grandchildren and great-grandchildren learn both lifestyles. They still like to eat the good Eskimo food introduced to them by their grandma, who once squatted on the smoke-house floor with them, eating the delicious "tepa" (decayed fish heads).