

Author preserves oral history with her books

by David Totten
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Fort Yukon writer Velma Wallis sees herself as more of an historian than a fiction writer. She wrote her first book, "Two Old Women," because she was afraid that people would forget the story.

"I don't see myself doing a whole lot of legends unless they pertain to our history," said Wallis during an interview in Anchorage recently. "I like to say that I like to do stories that history forgot."

The stories Wallis tells in "Two Old Women" and "Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun" were told to her as history – stories that actually happened – not religion or myth. This gives her stories an extra sense of realism, especially when they intersect with other, more popular stories.

"My only intention then was to preserve our local history. When I heard 'Two Old Women,' it was such a revelation to me about our history because previously I heard oral history type stories, but I mostly heard myths and legends, and 'Two Old Women' was oral history."

"The Man who Followed the Sun" is about an explorer—the Columbus of the Gwich'in.

"There were indigenous people exploring the land around them. They were curious about what was beyond," said Wallis. "A young man was told about the legend of the sun, and it became his quest to find the land of the sun because he's born in this place where it's dark and cold almost nine to 10 months out of a year and life is hard, and it's not easy, etched out of the snow. In time he is able to travel down to what we know as the Lower 48. Years later, he comes back and tells the people about the horse he'd seen and the land he'd seen."

"Bird Girl" is about a conflict between the Gwich'in and their northern neighbors, the Inupiat. The main character runs away from home rather than get married at age 14, but she is kidnapped by an invading group of Inupiat. She is tormented by her captors for 10 years.

Both stories are about people who go against tradition. In a society as concerned with tradition as the Gwich'in, someone breaking the rules was a historic event.

"The two young people were branching out and they were going against tradition in a very stringent and traditional lifestyle," said Wallis. "Usually people are not allowed to go outside tradition in such a society but these people wanted to and they did."

Wallis has even more stories in mind for later. She recalled that her grandmother was among the first to meet the Canadian fur traders – the first white people her village had ever met. Her grandmother traded her moose-skin garment for a calico dress.

"The scouts had come up to where my grandmother was, up by the Circle area and they said there are some people down there and they're not from here," said Wallis. "So the People were curious, so they gathered their things and they went down to Fort Yukon. And sure enough there were people there. (The People) approached them cautiously and in time they got to know them. (The scouts) weren't made aware of it until those People popped up there on the banks of Fort Yukon."

The story continues with Wallis' Aunt Nina, who was a witness to the epidemics.

"She said that at first people died one at a time and people just would go down there and cry because they did not know why they were dying." Said Wallis. "And then, toward the end, people were dying ten times a day, and the people no longer cried."

The sense of discovery, of meeting a new group of people, intrigues Wallis.

"The Russians were coming from one end and the Canadians were coming from the other end. I think the Gwich'in were the last people to be discovered by the traders," said Wallis.

Success has not changed Wallis. She still lives in Fort Yukon, although she now owns a generator to power her computer. She owned a four-wheeler for a while, but sold it when she realized that she missed taking walks.

"The book (Two Old Women)" does not sell on the New York bestseller. The way it goes around is it gets passed around, just like my mother passed it on to me. Like this lady, she said she bought a copy, then said I've got to get 10 more for my family."

The stories Wallis heard as a child not only taught her moral lessons, but also taught her to think for herself.

"If you weren't thinking about a legend that my mother told you, you weren't learning. A lot of times she would leave her stories unfinished or they were so abstract that you could not figure them out. She would never tell you what it meant and she would never finish the story if she didn't want to. She would say, 'you have to think about it. I'm not going to give you the meaning to anything.' It would frustrate me a lot of times. A lot of the elders said that that's how they taught people because in order to survive off the Arctic they had to be innovative. They had to use their minds."

When "Two Old Women" was published, some people accused Wallis of selling out, but she said if she does not write down these stories, they could disappear. Unfortunately, she says there



Velma Wallis, author of "Two Old Women"

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might not be enough people willing to listen to these stories anymore because of television.

"There are many elders wanting to tell their stories, their oral history, their legends, but there are not enough listeners."