

Charlie Sheldon — Life of an Itkilaikroich Eskimo

Story and Photographs

Courtesy of Bernice Sheldon

Charlie Akpelik Sheldon, a life long Eskimo resident of Shungnak, Alaska, died peacefully in the night on September 29, 1979. Charlie lived 71 full years that included life as a reindeer herder, a Baptist lay minister, gold and jade claim holder and miner, trapper, hunter, railroad worker, and longshoreman. He was a husband and father, city council president, village leader, traveler, Eskimo story teller, and humorist.

Charlie was born in January of 1908 to an Eskimo couple who were traveling by dog team in the Brooks Range between the Naotak and Kobuk Rivers. Annie, the mother was breaking dog team trail by snowshoe when she stopped to have her baby. Giving birth to a small son, she was going to desert the baby. John, having been influenced by the Christian missionaries, determined that it would be like murder to abandon the child, and that they should keep the baby. They named him Akpelik and traveled home to Kobuk where the school teacher gave him the name of Charlie.

His parents were reindeer herders so the next twenty some years were spent growing up at reindeer camps. While herding, they traveled from the Pah River on the Kobuk to Buckland on the coast, some 200 miles. As a baby, Charlie rode on the back of a reindeer covered by mosquito net. Later he learned herding for his father. Then the BIA took the reindeer away, with no remuneration and made a reindeer company. Soon after, the caribou migrated through the area and the reindeer were lost as they migrated off with the caribou. Charlie felt the loss all gain, since ever after the caribou have continued to migrate to the Kobuk area. While reindeer herding, Charlie felt that there could be no happiness in any other kind of a lifestyle, but proved himself wrong many times as he continued to change with the times.

As a child Charlie would go to Kobuk for the Christmas holiday and stay with his grandmother and attend school for about a month each year. When tired of school or homesick he would return to live with his family at the reindeer camp. His brother, Henry, a few years older, went to highschool at Chemawa, Oregon, and returned to have a strong influence on Charlie's life.

When 9 years old Charlie and who had married the Indian girl Killik. Killik had brought peace to the warring Eskimo and Indian tribes, and that peace has been enjoyed to the present.

Charlie trapped with the Indian men and made dogteam trips to visit his Indian friends and do trading.

One summer while in his twenties, he traveled alone by foot to the Upper Ambler River and hunted Dahl sheep. He got enough for the whole village (as his brother Henry would go out trapping in the Brooks Range with a few dogs for a month or more at a time. They had been taught survival skills and were selfsufficient in caring for themselves at a young age.

Charlie's father, John, died when he was two and his mother remarried to Mickey Marks, a reindeer herder. Mickey Marks was one of the last medicine men of the area. He received power from above and did deeds of healing and helping. His father took Charlie as a young boy to trap marmots in the mountain passes of the Brooks Range. Deadfalls of stone were used instead of metal traps. They would return home with meat for winter and furs for clothing. Charlie often recalled following his daddy and carrying his own made bow and arrow with visions of what he would shoot, if need arose.

In the 1930's, Charlie worked for a gold mining company on the Shungnak River near Kobuk. Henry had worked with many of the white gold miners who worked the creeds in the area. After the goldmining company left Henry and Charlie staked gold claims on the Shungnak River. They earned their winter grub stake in gold by suicing gold at \$30 an ounce. In the 1940's some jade from the claims was carried out and found a market so Charlie switched from gold mining to jade mining. All the summers until the present have found Charlie at work at the Shungnak River claims.

In the 1950's he could take jade to pay his airfare to Fairbanks, his hotel bill, and have money left over to take a younger village man along and help him find a job. After a couple of weeks of steak dinners each night and seeing the movies he would return to Kobuk. Charlie used gold to provide part of the family needs of food, tools, and ammunition. Later jade provided cash for boat motors, snowmobiles, and machinery. Besides providing a living, Charlie found his mining to provide a way of life, close to nature and full of freedom and independence.

In his younger days, Charlie trapped and dogteamed in the Pah River area and associated with the Huslia Indians. Charlie's ancestors were the Itkilaikroich, Indian-Eskimo, tribe and lived at the mouth of the Pah River. His grandmother's ancestors had been the Eskimo Onalegnoruk

was traditional), built a raft, and safely rafted his catch down the Ambler River to a cache where the skins and meat were put away until snowfall when it would be hauled by dogsled to Kobuk.

Most of Charlie's life was spent on the land and with the land. Charlie felt he owned the mountains, tundra, rivers, birds, animals, plants, trees, sun, and moon. He was a self taught naturalist who knew animal behavior, bird calls and plant names. For many springs he did not hunt game birds because of his concern over the plight of the birds that lost their mates.

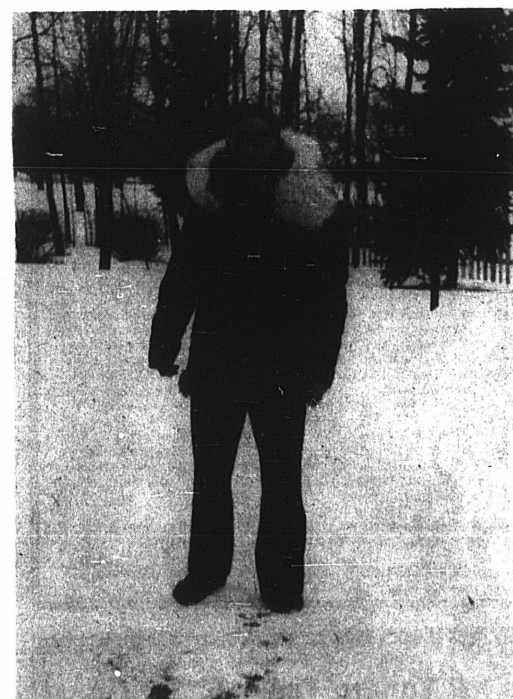
Charlie's motto was "Be Happy". As a school child he played the part of a "bad boy" who sneaked pencils and pulled girl's braids. As an adult he was a humorist who had any group of Eskimos he was visiting in laughter.

Charlie accepted the Lord at age 9 and his family followed. By age 16, he was a self appointed preacher at fish camps, using only a New Testament. In the 1950's he arranged for a young Baptist minister, Dick Miller, to come to the Kobuk. Together, they cut logs and built the Kobuk Baptist Church. For the next years, Charlie pastored the church and saw most of his village accept the Lord and be baptized. He could often be seen teaching the Bible in postoffices and stores. Charlie's last two Sundays were spent at Kotzebue Baptist Church standing in for the pastor on leave.

In the 50's, Charlie was mistakenly hospitalized for TB in the Seward sanitarium. A month later after becoming weak from bed rest and medication it was discovered that a man with the same name in Kiana really had the TB. At the hospital, Charlie found a wife, Doris one of the nurses from California. They married and lived at Kobuk until Doris' death. Charlie and his mother raised an adopted daughter Lydia.

Charlie was often council president at Kobuk and Shungnak. He was a leader for independence from BIA and against Indian reserves. After playing Yankee Doodle on the harmonica, he would announce, "I'm an American". He enjoyed the history of his Itkilaikroich Tribe and liked telling Eskimo stories. Charlie traveled widely to other villages from Nome to Barrow

and Fairbanks. He worked on the Alaska Railroad between Nenana and Fairbanks for a few seasons. He worked as a caretaker and bouncer for a Fairbanks bar until Henry convinced him that the work was too dangerous. Everywhere Charlie went and worked, he had best friends and partners. He learned Eskimo words from other villages and was fascinated by language. Often he served as interpreter at meetings.



Charlie was a gentle hearted, soft spoken person. In 1967 he noticed a much younger school teacher while at a meeting in Nome, and determined to have her as his wife. A year later, he took his first trip out of Alaska to marry Bernice Schmidt in Detroit, Michigan. During the past eleven years, Bernice has taught in Northwest Alaska and they lived in Kobuk, Shungnak, Point Hope, and Kotzebue. They traveled to Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, Washington, California, and Hawaii. Hawaii was Charlie's fa-

vorite vacation state and many people there thought he was Japanese.

Charlie like isolation and for many years had his home across the river from the village of Shungnak. With Bernice he built a log cabin a couple miles from Shungnak on his 80 acre Native allotment.

Having an enlarged heart, Charlie was on medication and doctor's care for several years. A year ago he had a pace maker installed. He gradually recovered and enjoyed camping, bear hunting, boating and salmon gill netting during the past summer. His last day was enjoyed hiking several miles and hunting for caribou. After dying peacefully in the night, he was buried alongside of his mother's grave in Shungnak.

He is survived by his wife, Bernice Sheldon, and sister-Vera Douglas of Shungnak, a daughter-Lydia Douglas of Ambler and 9 grandchildren, and a half brother William Marks of Chicago.