Interview with Katie Roehl

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Katie was born in Nunapitchuk Alaska, she is 82 years old and a resident of Bethel. Katie shares her story of growing up in Nunapitchuk and the survival skills her family used to live. The epidemic outbreak of tuberculosis impacting Alaskan natives including Katie as a teenager. Moving back to her hometown and meeting the love of her life. Today Katie is still active driving the roads of Bethel, eating her traditional foods and taking care of her great grandchildren. There is a God who answers my prayers Katie says “The doctors said I was going to die countless times for years I continued to pray to live”.

As a child I remember the summers were peaceful the views were beautiful. We did not have any electricity or cars in the village. I had homemade dolls made from cloth, and homemade dresses for the dolls. I played outside with my friends we built clubs and played house. We didn’t have television but I remember when my dad bought a radio, it was exciting to hear the radio. Her face was lit up smiling I thought the radio was so cool we really enjoyed listening to the radio. She giggled, my grandma used to tell my brother to hush when her favorite station that spoke in Yupik was on. My brother used to want to listen to the English station we had to keep quiet not to distract them.

Wood stoves was our only source of heat to keep us warm. We scourged for wood pieces too especially during the winter. Men had to travel with their dog teams in extreme distances to gather logs being gone for a day. During that time hand saws and axes were our only way to cut wood we didn’t have chain saws. My grandma used to take me out ptarmigan hunting during the winter. I remember seeing her making snares using a fish net in the willow trees and bushes that got the ptarmigans feet tangled. On our way back home we gathered willows for firewood.

The qasgiq was a gathering place for men. They taught the young boys and teenagers how to make blackfish traps and many other snares and traps. The men used to hunt for reindeer, rabbits, muskrats, otters, birds and many other land animals. When she was about 6 years old fur trading began in her village. People started trading their animal furs for sugar, flour, salt, and cloth to make clothes. There was a white man who came to Nunapitchuk and bought fur. We didn’t grow up with candy it was rare we had it a few times during Russian Christmas. Katie giggled as she said “when I was 6 years old I thought having candies, apples and oranges meant we were rich!”. I remember an old couple gave me a handful of candy I thought they were so rich I began daydreaming of being rich with a houseful of candies.

When I was 13 years’ old there was an old man who was very ill without family to care for him. My mother took him in to take care of him. I saw him as he laid in bed coughing and spitting in a can. Soon I became very sick and started coughing up blood. I was taken to the hospital here in Bethel we never spoke English. That’s when we learned there was an epidemic of tuberculosis around the 1950’s all over Alaska. I learned my first English word which was hemorrhage. I was told I had a hemorrhage that’s why I was coughing up blood and that I was infected by TB. Many people were killed both old and young from this disease. Katie spent 2 years in Bethel hospital. Her family prayed for her recovery she was released to go home and ordered to be rested, but did not listen and became very ill again throwing up blood. My 2nd trip back to Bethel hospital they told me “I was going to die”, but I refused to accept it and prayed and believed to live. My mother and 3 brothers also became affected by tb. I was sent to Dillingham Kanakanak Hospital then to Anchorage Providence Hospital. I stayed in Anchorage hospital for years. I began to speak the English language, learning from the doctors and nurses. They gave me comic books I started reading too. Later I was sent to Seattle Washington General Hospital. I found out my mother and one of my brothers were at Riverton Hospital in Seattle and 2 of my brothers were being treated in Sitka Community Hospital. Later the doctor told me there was treatment for TB, I started taking the medicine. Soon my mother, brothers and many others got well and were discharged to go home. It took longer for my recovery so I stayed, I wished to get well to go home. A male patient and I were told we needed to have lung surgery. The male was afraid and told me to go first. He said to me” I’ll be after you if you’re ok, I will have surgery”. I prayed to live and for the surgery to go well. After my recovery I found out he didn’t make it. Part of my lung was cut off. I remember thanking a doctor he said “Katie don’t thank me! thank yourself, you fought hard to live”.

After almost a decade of being in hospitals, I was finally able to go home! I was 20 years old by then. I quickly picked up my native language I had forgotten a lot. My friends were all married with children and some had relocated. They married very young at the ages of 15 and 16, I felt like an “old maid”. Quite a few men had asked my mom to marry me she said “No! she’s not ready!” I started slowly learning how to sew, cut fish and cook. By the age of 24 I was asked to work at the post office. We had homemade wooden boxes I used to call people who had no mail boxes one by one to hand out mail. Later after turning 27, I met a handsome Indian man named Willis Roehl who came to work as a carpenter in Nunapitchuk. We became friends and he came to visit with me at the Post Office a lot. When I went to visit him at the school he had asked me to marry him. I got up and started running away. He caught up and said, “Katie I won’t take no for an answer Marry me” I said yes. But then I thought of my mother and thought that she wouldn’t allow me to get married. I planned to run away with Willis to marry him. My youngest sister was watching me pack my clothes and she went to tell my mother. My mom came in and said, “Katie you don’t have to run away you can marry him”.

I moved with Willis to Homer and there I met his family and we got married. Katie started having children her first two babies died. I had two more boys and they lived. We moved back to Nunapitchuk and stayed there until my boys became school aged children. Then we moved to Bethel and made this place our home. My husband worked while I stayed home and took care of the house. In the morning after my boys went to school I went back to sleep. One day my husband caught me sleeping after my kids went to school. He said “Katie this is no way to live you need to find work”. I started walking and looked for jobs I applied for a clerical position with no experience. A social worker asked me if I have typing experience I said” no”. He didn’t hire me but he sent me to KUC a local college here in Bethel to get typing lessons. I took typing lessons and started learning how to type. At that same time, I wanted to learn how to drive a car after trying to drive my husband’s car for the first time and bumping into stairs and a pole. So I signed up to take driving lessons. It was winter I practiced driving all winter with instructor Nel’s Alexie. Spring arrived I decided to take a driving test for my driver’s license. The day I took my test an Alaska State Trooper observed my driving to pass or fail my test. I was so nervous I felt like I drove clumsy and sloppy. At the end he said I passed my driving test! Katie giggled, I think he felt sorry for me and let me pass. After I got typing lessons completed and learned to drive, I worked on the job training as a receptionist for the school.

Bethel has been Katie’s home ever since she and her family moved here. Today Katie is still active driving her car on the roads of Bethel, taking care of her grandkids and storing away her traditional foods. There is a God who answers my prayers I was told countless times I was going to die and that I would not make it. I battled TB for 7 years when I was 13 years old, I am 82 years old now. With God all things are possible I learned to speak English, learned to type and drive a car. In the conclusion Katie said forgive, let your past go so you will live a happy life. Live for today, and hope for tomorrow, God answers your prayers he knows your thoughts. Forgive your selves also because God is willing to forgive. It was an honor to listen to her incredible story.