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Traditional Ecological knowledge

Told by Angela Asicksik

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Angela Asicksik was born in October 4, 1934 and raised in Fish Village along a Slough connecting to the Yukon River. She lived in a one-room log cabin with two windows, a wood stove, a homemade wooden bed, and a small wooden table built by her Father. She has no memory of her Mother; however, remembers her Papa always carried her on his back everywhere he went. Her sister Laura Kylook always walking beside them. One of their chores was to pack water from the stream located in the middle of the village. Her and her sister Laura used pails made out of small Lard cans. All her memories were from a time her Grandmother Elizabeth Afcan was alive.

Angela's village consisted of five families. Her house, her Grandparents house, Elizabeth Afcan's stepdaughter Agnes Paukan's family. Elizabeth also had two of her bothers living in Fish Village. A Catholic priest wintered with them and moved to Aqulurak after spring break up. The mailman came with dog team during the winter, and a very small motorized skiff during the summer. As a young girl Angela thought that, they were the only ones living on Earth.

Winter hunting season of reindeer, moose, and the jackrabbit was hunted on the lower Yukon River. No part of edible animal was ever wasted. The family dried the skin of the reindeer, jackrabbit, muskrat, beaver, otter, mink, and possibly beaver to be made and used as boots, parka's, mittens, winter leg coverings, bedding, wrapping goods in the sled, string, and everything.

Inedible animals were stored neatly in a pile in the smoke house on a small shelf to await spring thaw. The meat of mink, wolf, wolverine, and other animals like that were put into a grass, (weaved by her Grandmother) and buried in a freshly dug up hole or thrown into the lake always away from Fish Village. The meat of these animals were never thrown around anywhere on the ground, or into the river, or slough, where our drinking water was collected.

Before the Yukon River breakup, the whole village moved up on the hillside on higher ground including the Catholic priest. The priest would give Angela a small bell to ring beside everyone's canvas tents when the priest was ready for daily Mass. Everyone always brought wood. The little children brought twigs. I was a little perplexed and asked, "Why did everyone bring wood?" To which she answered, "To heat the tent up." Angela thought the priests and nun's or sisters never changed their clothes or take off their clothes when they go to bed.

When the priest was away, the whole village conducted church services themselves. The men sat on one side of the tent, the women on the other side, the children in the front, and babies were kept quiet under their mother's parka. Nobody ever looked around or whispered to each other. Everybody looked forward, and when the parishioners sang, they sing loud. Everyone memorized all the gospel songs. Her Aunt Theresa Westdahl was very strict. Her cousin Virginia Afcan was a young nun. Angela called her a "little nun."



The men always busy, during the summer built and used a fish wheel to gather fish. During the wintertime, the men used nets under the ice to get fish. When the fishermen had enough fish for the family, they dug a deep hole and buried large amounts of fish which would ferment and used this for the dogs winter feed. The men cooked for the dogs outside in a very large container. The dog food very rich in fat were fed every third day when not running.

The women gathered everything edible off the ground during the spring through fall season. Rhubarb collected in large quantities, cleaned, and cooked outdoors. After the rhubarb cooled off were stored in large barrels. The leaves mixed with different types of berries and stored in large barrels as well. She liked it best in this fashion.

During berry picking season, the family used a rowboat to their berry picking grounds. The berries were then stored in the smoke house in very large wooden barrels. Angela do not remember where the barrels came from but remembers they were always there in the smoke house. When empty her Grandmother brought the slab pieces of the barrels downstream to soak overnight before scrubbing them clean with grass.

Using a sharp pointed stick the women looked for mouse holes along the Yukon River bank to dig for mouse food. The mouse food are large along the Yukon River. Here in the Bethel area the roots are small and thin. They also found some kind of black berries the mice stashed along the riverbank. Angela could not recall the name of these black berries. However remembers that they are very sweet during the fall time. After digging the food out of the ground, the women always covered up the holes as a sign of respect rather than leaving a gaping hole, and maybe the mice will reuse that spot in the future.

During the fall season Elizabeth gathered small purple/green fragrant flowers that bloomed on the ground in among the trees to use as mosquito repellent. The flowers were stored in cloth bags for the winter and used sparingly as mosquito repellent only during berry picking season when the mosquitos were the most bothersome the plant was rubbed on their face and hands. Angela's search for this plant in the Bethel area has come to no avail.

Among the medicinal plants picked was Labrador tea. After steeping the leaves in hot water the tea used for headaches, or fevers. Angela remembers occasionally her grandmother burning the stem of Labrador tea for aroma. Remembering her Grandmother, Angela burns the stems to this day.

Angela said she never saw, or heard of Caiggluk (a green leafy plant) until she moved to Bethel with her husband and a coworker from the hospital suggested she gather a large amount of Caiggluk, enough for winter use as well. The instructions Angela was given was boil them until it makes a strong tea, and drink it when you get sick or get a cold. If you get sores in your mouth, chew on the leaf until the sore goes away; however, if the sore is on your skin, wash the sores with Caiggluk in the morning, afternoon, and before you go to bed. Caiggluk can cure anything and everything including some cancers.

When her husband face was swollen, itchy, sensitive to the sun, and he could only stay in the shaded cool place, she brewed this concoction and put some into a basin with a little bit of Holy water and instructed her husband to wash himself in this three times a day. He healed within three days. Her husband later learned that the allergic reaction came from working with insulation.

When the people in the village start getting sick, her Grandmother would give Angela and her cousin cod-liver oil followed with a plain cup of hot water. Including drinking the hot broth of duck soup. The daily dose would cease when the flu passed. She also rubbed them with Vicks, including steaming the Vicks in hot water. Amazingly, they were the only ones that never got sick.



Everyone used Fels-Naptha soap to wash everything from the floor, clothes, dishes, and yes even to wash themselves up. She remembers using a white bar of soap for their faces. However, do not remember the name of the soap. After boiling water, they would create a lather to wash the dishes, and when they did the laundry by hand in a large tub and washboard, they rubbed Fels-Naptha soap directly onto the garment before rubbing the garment on the washboard. This all happened before the washing machine was invented, or liquid soap, pine sol, Clorox, or sprays.

Trash was never thrown around anywhere on top of the ground. Nothing was ever wasted, people always made a hole in the ground and put their trash there, and the hole thoroughly and neatly covered up. Everyone always conscious of litter so they kept their surrounding clean. In addition, she has kept to this teaching by her Grandmother to this day.

She cannot and will not throw anything outside. Not even a bone, or left over spoiled food. Moreover, if she sees a bone on the ground she cannot walk by it without picking it up to discard into a trash can. Her Grandmother's saying was, "If you waste food, or throw the food on the ground a day will come when you are hungry and you will remember that which you wasted. At that time, you will have great regrets. So be mindful of not wasting anything." Keeping clean help keep mice and maggots at bay.

Today she notices a huge change. Enormous change has taken place. Angela was told by her Elders that even relative's will not recognize each other. Which has come true. There is disrespect shown by the youngsters with no shame. The young girls half dress with short shorts, and shirts with no sleeves. Including relatives mating. People living together without getting married. Young couples killing each other without fear. Telling lies, stealing, comes as second nature, and everyone is unable to trust your own relatives.

Angela said this all comes from the grandparents passed down to parents and then to their children. First, someone deliberately hurts someone else; in that hurt and pain, good knowledge and teachings get lost. Sometimes that hurt is all they know and live by, and the pain is passed on to the next generation that keeps going until it comes to this day, this generation. It is now a very scary time. Young people are without fear doing wrong to each other. Everyone always fighting. Nothing to fight about and they still fight. People see someone doing wrong and think they can too. They think nobody can see me. I can get away with it. The people turn to drinking, and drugs. When Angela asked a young boy to attend church. His response was, "The Church is a bore."

Angela recalls a time when for two years Rose Dominick from OTNC invited her for Native Wellness and Healing gatherings at TWC. Angela quit attending the gatherings because she got hard of hearing, and they spoke too much in the English language, which made it difficult for her to understand.