

# ***CROW IS MY BOSS: THE ORAL LIFE HISTORY OF A TANACROSS ATHAPASKAN ELDER.***

BY KENNY THOMAS, SENIOR. EDITED BY CRAIG MISHLER. VOL. 250 – THE CIVILIZATION OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN SERIES. UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS, NORMAN, 2005. HARDBACK ISBN: 0-8061-3659-6, 266 PP, 32 ILLUSTRATIONS, INDEXED, \$32.95.

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During his 1883 military expedition through the Yukon River basin, Lt. Frederick Schwatka was able to note that the Tanana River was likely “the longest wholly unexplored river in the world, certainly the longest in the western continent.” In 1929, Washington Bureau of Indian Affairs officials couldn’t locate the Tanana Kutchin Indians for the young anthropologist Robert McKennan who was about to embark on a year’s fieldwork in the Tanana valley; McKennan simply went there anyway, “in search of the elusive folk.” His ethnography, *The Upper Tanana Indians*, was finally published by Yale University Press in 1959. Since then a handful of additional works have come forth on the aboriginal culture and history of the upper Tanana River, notably Marie-Francoise Guedon’s *People of Tetlin, Why Are You Singing?* in 1974 and William Simeone’s *Rifles, Blankets, and Beads* in 1995. Now we have this latest contribution to the region’s historical literature, and a fine contribution it is.

Kenny Thomas is an Alaskan Athapaskan who was born in 1922 at the village of *Mesiin Tsiits’iig* – Mansfield, who has outlived many of his generation to become a respected Elder and culture-bearer of the “*Dineh Way*,” the set of beliefs and behaviours by which Athapaskan ethnic identity is juxtaposed to White culture and through which *Dineh* culture is maintained. The text is based on about fifteen hours of extended interviews with Mr. Thomas, which Craig Mishler has re-ordered somewhat in order to create a chronological and topical coherence within the ten chapters which make up the book.

Chapter One, *Mansfield Man*, recounts his family lineage (also laid out in a five-generation family tree in the one appendix) and his childhood years. Along with most others of that village, by the late 1920s he had moved permanently to the trade post and mission settlement established at Tanana Crossing. After the death of his parents in 1934, at the age of twelve Mr. Thomas took on the responsibility of providing for his younger siblings, al-

ternatively working as a deckhand on John Hajdukovich’s and Herman Kessler’s upper Tanana River trading vessels. Hajdukovich became a surrogate father and mentor to the orphaned young man, extending to him the kindness and care for which he is famous and well-remembered all along the Tanana River. Mr. Thomas’ recollection of Hajdukovich is an important addition to the growing literature on the life of this remarkable Montenegro immigrant sourdough.

Chapter Two details these same years during the winters when Mr. Thomas ran a trapline and prospected for gold in the Dawson Range, north of the Tanana River around Ketchumstuck. It proves to be an interesting mix of life history and detailed accounts of the material culture and methods of native trapping in the 1930s, and includes several accounts of life at the gold mining town of Chicken.

Chapter Three collates Mr. Thomas’ commentaries on medicine people, ghosts, and “Stick” Indians, the latter a general term for raiding aboriginal strangers from outside the region. He shares with us his personal experiences with native medicinal healers and animal dreamers from his youth, practices which he abruptly insists, perhaps coyly, have passed from use. He is quite insistent, however, on the continued existence and experience of ghosts, which are seen just prior to the death of their holders, a both chilling and tragic reflection of the continued high rates of death experienced by Athapaskan native communities. The thematic inclusion of Stick Indian tales of raids and kidnappings extend this imagery of loss.

Chapters Four and Five are perhaps the most informative, dramatic, and provocative portions of the book. They tell the tale of Mr. Thomas’ experience during World War II and the difficult years of psychic pain and addictions which followed on his return to Tanacross. Initially engaged to assist in building the Alaska Highway, in February 1942 he was drafted into the U.S. Eleventh Army

Air Corps as a catskinner and general enlisted man. He was involved in the Aleutian campaign and then the battle for Okinawa in the spring of 1945, a bloody battle that claimed over 150,000 lives on both sides and 35,000 American wounded, including Mr. Thomas. Whether a victim of racism or neglect, it was not until 1999 that he received his justly deserved Purple Heart award at a ceremony in Fairbanks. He also lost his two best friends in the Army, two white men who were “like brothers to me,” inciting him to acts of violence against the enemy which he regrets to this day.

“Anyway, why it’s nothing to be proud of. I’m not proud of what I did. But I did something that I didn’t want to do, but I did. But you know I was brought up in my lifetime that I wasn’t trained to kill. You know, I love people. And I always love people whether they’re different from me or what. But I love people because we’re all just like one. And I ask God for forgiveness today for what I did.”

The village of Tanacross had been fundamentally altered by the highway in his absence and after the war; suffering from the bad nerves and guilt of what we now call post-traumatic stress, Mr. Thomas threw himself into working in the post-war boom economy of road-building and firefighting, establishing a highly regarded reputation in both fields. In the late 1960s he entered a two-year period of intensive alcoholism from which he fortunately recovered and dedicated the next twenty years to counseling other addicts. “I want to help these people before they get down as far as I did with the booze. . . . I wanted to do this for the Native people, *my* people.”

In Chapters Six and Seven Mr. Thomas discusses the potlatch, song, and dance traditions of his people, traditions of which he holds an intimate knowledge and for which he holds some responsibility for keeping vibrant and meaningful in the contemporary Upper Tanana world. He has worked for many summers at a culture camp he established at Mansfield with the youth of the region imparting these traditions, and is an important consultant and leader of song and dance at any potlatch from Northway to Tanacross. There is much insight to be found in his explanation of his nuanced understanding of these topics here. Chapter Seven also discusses the introduction and integration of western folk and country music within Athapaskan musical practice, a topic of particular interest to Mishler.

Chapter Eight focuses on the tensions between Athapaskan and White cultures through an extended discussion on human – animal relationships. Few informed

readers will be surprised to hear the bitter tone of Mr. Thomas’ view of the emergence of the control of this essential and spiritual relationship to *Dineh* by State bureaucrats, white sportsmen, urban-based subsistence hunters, and uninformed conservationists. Both here and in other community contexts Mr. Thomas has consistently attempted to relay the importance of hunting to the maintenance of a distinctive *Dineh* identity, not as a way of life but as life itself. His frustration at the loss of hunting rights by native people under ANCSA and the labyrinth of permits, fees, regulations, and reports which now envelope this most basic of land rights of occupation is heart-rending.

“Today I feel like I’m really in a cage or something. If I want to go out and cut wood or something like that, I got to go see somebody and get wood permit before I can cut down trees. If I want to build a fire, I got to go see somebody to get permit to build a fire. And if I’m hungry I want to go fish, I got to go see somebody because before I can set my net I got to get permit. And if I’m hungry and I want to go hunting, I got to wait until the season is open. . . . Today, I feel so funny like I, the way I am now that I feel so bad, that I always feel that people looking down at me all the time. There is no freedom for me. That was taken away from me a long time ago. No freedom for me. I feel like people is looking down at me every day. No freedom for me. . . . just like a monkey in a cage, you would say, where people would look up and down at me all the time.”

Chapter Nine presents Mr. Thomas’ retelling of a number of traditional stories. They include several episodes of the adventures of the Traveler who fixed the world for humans, followed by an interesting discussion in which he presents his interpretation of the meaning of these tales. A short Raven legend is followed by a historical account of death and redemption at 19<sup>th</sup> century Mansfield and the importance of generosity and thanks. The chapter ends with the legend of “The Crippled Boy Who Saved Mansfield” in the Tanacross language, along with direct and transliterated translations into English.

The last chapter (ten) provides “Some Final Words – Living by the Straight Board” in which Mr. Thomas shares the principal ethics of living a good life as he has come to know them through the experiences of and reflection on his long life: kindness, generosity, awareness, respect for self and others, and the continuous pursuit of understanding and meaning. He clearly sees his own contemporary efforts to impart his knowledge of the *Dineh Way* to the young as the link with his own history and the past which brought it into being.

The few criticisms which might be leveled at the book are editorial. Like many Athapaskans for whom English is their second language, Mr. Thomas frequently code-switches from English to his native language in the midst of his utterances; while some of these occurrences have been translated by native speaker and linguist Irene Arnold, frequently the text merely notes “[speaks in Tanacross],” and we are left to wonder what presumably important or nuanced communication Mr. Thomas was attempting to impart at this point in his narrative.

A second point I found wanting is in the explanatory footnotes, which are unfortunately brief and few (about eight pages in all). For those of us familiar with the region’s history and culture this is less of a problem, but for non-Upper Tanana residents and scholars there will be many points at which the reader will miss the fuller significance of points embedded within the narrative of Mr. Thomas’ life. To the extent that this reflects a conscious decision on Mishler’s part in order to avoid “usurping the voice of the teller” this is fair enough, but still I found myself expanding in my own mind additional information on this or that event or person, or wishing to hear more. But then again, Mishler’s intent here is to allow Mr. Thomas to tell his story as he sees it, and so the editor cannot be faulted for keeping to that goal.

Finally, although the book has a six page index, it is not as extensive as it could be to facilitate the use of the text as the important historical reference source it certainly is, a modest failing indeed rectified by a careful reading of the original text. These small matters aside, I certainly recommend the purchase and reading by both scholar and layman alike of this fascinating and informative life history, which encapsulates the twentieth century history of native – white relations in the upper Tanana River region.

These are exciting times for research in the upper Tanana River region. Recent archaeological work on the borderlands by me and Bill Sheppard has pushed the region’s history back into Nenana complex times of the early Holocene. Drs. Mishler and Simeone are working on a new ethnographic overview of the region which should be completed in the next year. John Cook, Simeone, and Mishler are also engaged in an attempt to get McKennan’s informative 1929-30 field notes and journal published. Bob Sattler and I are working towards the publication of Walter Goldschmidt’s field report of his 1946 visit to the area. In addition, I have just completed an ethnohistory of the Chisana River basin and have begun a second volume on the Canadian Upper Tanana people of Scottie, Snag, and Beaver Creeks. A multi-disciplin-

ary, three year study of the upper Tanana River subsistence fishery is in its second year of data collection. Linguists John Ritter, Jim Kari, and Gary Holton continue to collect and collate important linguistic data which will undoubtedly lead to new and important insights into the languages of the area; and a major effort is underway to collate and expand Upper Tanana place names and cultural geographic knowledge within an interactive web-based database. Kenny Thomas and Craig Mishler’s new publication is an important and timely contribution to this effort to bring the culture and history of the Upper Tanana River to light.

Crow is my Boss: The Oral Life History of a Tanacross Athabaskan Elder (review). Chad Thompson. pp. 117-118. View. Download. contents. Happily Ever After: Sharing Folk Literature with Elementary and Middle School Students (review). A Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century (review). Sharon Downey Varner. pp. 120-121. View. Download. contents. Community, and: Celestial Monochord: Journal of the Institute for Astrophysics and the Hillbilly Blues, and: The Art of the Rural: Considering Rural Arts and Culture in the Twenty-First Century (review). Using oral histories, historic aerial photography, and historic maps, I examine the ways residents of Antioch Colony adapted their landscape over time to create an empowering environment suitable for their needs in the post-bellum period. Through my analysis, I find that the landscape created reinforced a sense of belonging by allowing people to freely congregate and move through space. Read more. Last Updated: 10 Feb 2021. Crow Is My Boss book. Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. Born in 1922, Kenny Thomas Sr. has been a trapper, firefighter, road build... Today he is a respected elder and member of a northern Athabaskan tribal group residing in Tanacross, Alaska. As a song and dance leader for the Tanacross community, Thomas has been teaching village traditions at an annual culture camp for more than twenty years. Born in 1922, Kenny Thomas Sr. has been a trapper, firefighter, road builder, river-freight hauler, and soldier. Today he is a respected elder and member of a northern Athabaskan tribal group residing in Tanacross, Alaska.