Telida Village Founding

By Raymond L. Collins

The story of the founding of Telida is remarkable tale of hardship, courage and resourcefulness. Two families for the upper Kuskokwim were living in the foothills near Deanze (Mt. McKinley). While the men were out hunting they were killed by some other men who were never identified. Somehow the women became aware of what was happening and managed to avoid the raiders. They must have fled their camp with very little as they seem only to have had a knife and no other weapons or tools.

The women were fortunate in that spring was near. At that time of year ground squirrels start coming out of their burrows. But how could they catch them? They found some eagle feathers under a nest. By stripping the feathers they made snares out of the spines. They were able to catch enough squirrels to feed themselves through the summer. One of the strengths of Athabascan life has been to travel light and to have the knowledge of how to make what is needed with just a few simple tools, as illustrated in this story.

The women could not have survived the winter in the foothills, however, as the squirrels go into hibernation, and they had no means of catching large game such as sheep and caribou. So they started down the Kuskokwim valley by way of the Todzolno' (Swift Fork on the maps but locally called the McKinley Fork of the Kuskokwim). The only food they found on the way was berries. Finally they came to a creek flowing out of a large lake where they found whitefish. Somehow they made a fish weir and began catching the fish that were migrating out of the lake. They caught a lot of whitefish, and at last had plenty of food and could even put enough away to see them through the winter. The fish run at this lake occurs just prior to freeze-up and the fish can be dried or stored in underground pits and allowed to freeze. These are the large lake whitefish locally called tilaya and the place became know as tilayadi' or "whitefish place."

Next the women used something to make a winter house. This was the old style semi-subterranean house called, appropriately, nir'yekayih (in-the ground house). The ground was excavated to a depth of three or four feet and a pole frame constructed. The frame was covered with a layer of birch bark, or perhaps grass, and then covered over with dirt and sod. There was a smoke hole in the middle of the roof. This is the same type of house that is described in all the old stories were smoke was seen coming out of the ground and people could walk up on the house and look down through the smoke hole. Carl Seseui described such a house as "all the same, beaver house".

By the time the house was completed it was winter. During all that time the women and not seen any other people, but one day someone came to the door and asked, "Who are you people?" The person who came to the door was their only brother who lived somewhere down the Kuskokwim River. He had been looking all over for them and had finally located them on the McKinley Fork.

From that time on people continued to live at Telida, catch whitefish, and to travel out to the mountains by way of the McKinley Fork. This is the way the story had been told from long ago (Seseui and Deaphon, personal communication).

Other versions of the ending of this story Have made their way into print. Edward Hosley was led to believe that the women were found by stragglers from the war party who then settled down with them at Telida. However, the current elders in Nikolai and Telida believe they were found by relatives who went looking for the when they did not come back from the mountains. This is the most logical version. Warriors often tool women in raids and married them. However, they usually took them home. To settle down near where their husbands were killed would be to invite revenge by the men's relatives once the story was out. In any case, relatives of these two women still live in the upper Kukokwim but the event was so long ago that knowledge of the direct kinship links has been lost.

When the Anthropologist Charlene Craft and party visited Telida in the summer of 1949, Carl Seseui showed them two underground house depressions. He said one of them was the house of the two women.

There have been three Telida winter village sites, the first one being the one visited by the Herron Party in 1899 when they were rescued by Chief Shesoie, Carl Seseui's father. In 1900, the village site was moved 1/2 mile upstream due to erosion of the Swift Fork (locally called the McKinley Fork). In 1935, Carl moved it downriver to higher ground (present site) where an airfield could be constructed (Seseui, personal communication). In addition to winter sites, numerous summer fishing sites have been utilized throughout the area.