

McClellan Interview 1

Rachel: So yeah, this is very relaxed and if you want to talk about anything more or not talk about something, just let me know. And Sally, you too- if you want to talk about something, feel free

Sally: Oh, okay

R: I'm just going to ask some questions about your background and your work, and then some questions about Kotzebue and Northwest Alaska and then some questions about your work and building. So hopefully we can cover some of it- once you don't want to answer more questions, you can just tell me. We'll just stop after a little while.

So first, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about yourself- something about your childhood, your family, your adult life.

James: Oh, I'll tell you about the boat I built for them and the sled and the kayak my dad and I built.

R: Okay, let's start with that.

J: You have to pick up the right roots from the tree from the river up there, driftwood, cut them- chop them, limb them and take the barks off and make the strips real thin for the kayaks. I made that one up there; dad helped me with that one. And then the sled, they wanted a sled so we started on a sled after we finished that kayak frame. It didn't take us long to finish that sled. After that, they quit hollering for a while [laughter], but about a year later, something like two years later, they wanted a skin boat frame. So I had to go up the river.

R: And which river is that?

S & J: the Noatak River.

J: It's about, 85/86 miles to my camp up there. I get all of the gas and what not and I go right about my camp up there and in the sand bars, look for some driftwood and get the right ones and cut them, shape them up. After I shape them up real good up in the camp there and bring them down here- then after that, I go back up to get some good driftwood again. Real long ones.

S: Honey, tell her about your family, your mother and dad.

J: And so, I cut about maybe 20 or 30 of them around the river there and limb them and take the barks off and drag them down here.

R: And what kind of boat do you take back here?

J: Oh, my boat. My big boat.

S: Regular fishing boat.

[4:15] J: I let them come up and I let them dry up for about a week or something like that, I start shaping them with a chainsaw. Cut them in strips like that for the frame. And then I have to order glue and screws and nails and what not.

R: And when you make the different things you make, is it a very different process to make a sled or an umiak? How is that process different?

J: It's the same work, you have to go up the river to pick out the same roots, bended roots like that and get them again. So I made a few of them, two three of them for Point Hope. And they got them, they're using them.

R: Did you make them for somebody in Point Hope?

J: Yeah, for the whalers.

R: And what did you make for Point Hope?

J: They wanted... I was wondering how they were going to get them up there. And I said that bullhead barge always goes up north, maybe you could talk to the guys and see if you can throw them in the barge. So they took them up and dropped them out in Point Hope. And they were happy; they got up there in one piece.

R: So what would you call your work? I would say, I'm a student, what would you say?

J: I would say art work, carpenter work. So my dad, he showed me how to do this and that and he showed me and gave me the idea. I've been building ever since.

R: So when did you learn how to build with wood, be a carpenter?

J: Oh, after I got done with the pipeline, that's the time I went home here. I stayed in the pipeline 27 years. And then I retired.

R: So then you started to learn after you got back from the pipeline?

J: Mhmm.

S: but you had learned as a little boy too. So it wasn't that you had to start over.

J: after I got done with the pipeline, I went home and started working over here, mostly sleds.

R: And you grew up next door, right?

J: Yeah.

S: and in Noatak.

J: There was a house right here, I got all of the materials and built that house for my dad. And we [7:50] made a shop and these people started hollering for basket sleds, you know.

S: But his dad built different houses around here, he was a carpenter.

J: So we started building some hard wood houses around here from Hansen's and Rotman's they had them around here, they used to order them from Seattle. They could barge loads of them. Them days they were cheap- now it's over 300 a plank. Right now I have to order them from anchorage and Fairbanks. It always costs lots of money to get them up there on the plane.

R: So your father worked as a carpenter and built houses. Did you build houses?

S: We built a house up there at our camp. But his dad, when they came down, there weren't many houses in Kotzebue. And they were a large family. He built a house for his oldest daughter and then a house for his other daughter. And the house that he lived in.

J: It was a log house.

S: And the logs- people built log houses on the ground and they didn't last. Because the logs rotted from the moisture in the soil. But they lasted for a couple of generations. And we had a log house at camp and we built that a little bit above ground, in the 1970s- I think 1977. And when we wanted to build our regular house, we moved the log house back

J: we did that from Spenard Builders Supply (*Alaskan building company*). And it cost us lots of money to get it up here from...

S: It came from the barge

J: It came with the plane, with northern air cargo.

S: I don't remember that. But we built it up the house anyway, it had everything cut. All of the wood was cut.

J: It was pre-cut so I just hauled it

S: And it's a nice house, it's got windows all around it.

R: And your camp is in Noorvik?

S: No, it's in Eli. It's on the Eli River (*in the preserve*) down the Noatak. And the river has gotten so shallow in the past years that we really can't go up there and fish anymore. And that's gradually happened. We can't take a boat up to camp, we have to take a boat up the mouth of the Noatak River and then we have to walk. And we can't fish there either. Not enough oxygen. So the fish are up in the rivers- but there are a lot of fish here, we can get whitefish here, more fish here than there. It was a fishing camp! But we still have the camp.

[11:29] R: Do you get to go there now?

S: Oh we can go there. But we used to stay from March to June, until the ice went up. But we probably won't do that again because we can't get any fish. And if we stay here, we'll be able to get all the fish we want. And if we didn't do that, then we'd come back and it would be ugruk (*bearded seal*) hunting time and almost past the time to get whitefish. And we want the fish, so we'll get it up here. And then we'll go up in the fall and visit the family graves, which is what we have to do.

But James, you were born at Noatak, weren't you? And your family lived there. His dad was a territorial guardsman in world war too.

J: ATG- a long time ago.

S: And he was a guardsman, a territorial guardsman, and there's a picture of him two rows down [points]. His mother had 10 kids all together

J: no, we had 12 of them.'

S: 12 of them, some of them died. And never had any kids after age 35. She had rheumatoid arthritis and ended up totally crippled. They didn't have the medicines they have now. And she lived into her 80s but totally crippled. It runs through the family, but we have one niece who has rheumatoid arthritis. It skips generations, but it will affect other people too. But just one out of all the kids and all the daughters and all the men.

R: So, in the order of the ten children, which one are you?

J: I am the youngest one. Now I'm 76 [laughter]

R: How was it growing up with so many siblings?

S: So many brothers and sisters

J: Let's see, there was Levi, David- that's all. Three of us.

R: Three sons

J: Yep, the rest of them are all girls

S: And his brother lived to be 55. And several of those girls died too.

J: that's us, us youngsters, right up there [points to picture]

S: But he's not there, he wasn't alive yet

J: That was taken before I was born I guess.

S: When people came up and had cameras, they took pictures. So it would be years before [14:30] somebody would come up and then take your picture. And his dad and mother when they were older [shows picture] she could get around for a long time

R: She's beautiful

S: She was very pretty and artistic, she could make things. And his dad, after the war, worked at canneries. He had a large family to support and went down to work at the fish hatcheries- canneries, not the hatcheries. Then they came back and his dad used to take people from Noatak to Kotzebue, he had an inboard, an old inboard motor and he would take people down, a whole boatload of people who were moving or coming down- there were no planes then.

J: We had a big wooden boat. Whaling boat.

R: Did your father make that?

J: Dad must have bought it, it was a whaling boat and he put an engine on it. 12 horses.

S: We had that thing for a long time. the boat wore out but we kept the motor. Yeah, and then when they moved out here in 1946.

R: How old were you out here? Were you young?

J: Yeah, I was pretty young.

R: How was Kotzebue when you moved out here? What was different?

J: [laughter]

R: A lot I'm sure.

S: Oh, there were not as many people. I took care of his dad for a long time so I know the details- his dad said about 400 people here.

R: Did the landscape look pretty different?

J: It was real different around here. Everything was real big and there was no erosion and what not. Back here was nothing but willows, and there used to be lots of blueberries and blackberries. And that's where they started to build the airport, move everything, you know.

R: I noticed that when I came in, there are no trees.

S: Kotzebue has been- ever since I started teaching school here, 1970s I guess- it's a strange place to build a school. They built it out there, why did they do that? Now the town is built up around that. We were a Bureau of Indian Affairs school. And before that the friends church had a school. They had a high school.

[17:57] R: So when you moved to Kotzebue, what were the roads like? Were there roads?

J: Nope, just a narrow road, where the people walked.

S: Front Street.

R: And did you know most people when you moved here?

J: Yeah, when we got down here we knew pretty well each other.

S: Yeah, a lot of the Noatak people moved in to the size of town.

J: This section down here had nothing but tents.

S: Those were the Noatak people.

J: Nothing but tents.

S: The town people stayed southward, odds and ends of people stayed on that end of town. Not that people didn't want to associate with each other, it was more like oh there's land here, we'll live here. And the graves were in back. Somebody died and you'd bury them out back. Some of the older people tell about having to drag their husband's bodies back because other people were busy.

R: So in the 1940s in Kotzebue, what did most people do for a living?

J: They did a lot of fishing and they did a lot of seal hunting.

S: and a lot of trapping.

J: and there used to be lots of belugas and we used to go out there and sit and wait for them.

R: That's what I was going to ask- have the animals in the water changed since the 1940s?

S: There are fewer belugas. We used to herd them into Sisaulik.

J: There are still a lot of seals, but the belugas are getting less and less every year. We used to herd them in, millions of them.

S: Not millions. [James and Rachel laughter] but there's a picture of his dad with lots of beluga muktuk.

J: You see those big kayaks there? We used to go out with those when it was calm. And we used those tin can, 5 gallon cans and pound them and heard them and finally they go to the shallow and we get em and herd them.

R: But no polar bears, right?

[21:02] J: They're up in Point Hope and Kivilina.

S: They had polar bear hunters and people in the South 48, people came up to hunt them. And that was a big deal, in the forties and fifties. Not sure when that stopped.

J: They came around here, started to hunt them. There were a lot of planes.

S: To take the polar bear hunters out

J: They come from Fairbanks and Anchorage.

S: Movie stars came up to get a polar bear. They actually killed too many polar bears.

J: There was Leon Shellburger, Nelson Walker, Art Fields, and Warren Thompson and Bob Baker... they were all pilots who would take them down early in the morning and they'd always come back with a big load.

R: Of polar bears, wow.

S: And a lot of the meat was wasted and finally, it ended because of that. People had jobs, you could work at the store, you could longshore, you could build houses because housing was being built. A school was built and a post office was being built. People could get jobs building things, if they weren't real carpenters.

R: And so, Sally, how did you come to Kotzebue? Are you from here?

S: I'm from Mendeltna (*town of 39 in Southeast Alaska*) over on the Copper River. My dad is a [CLARIFY], my mother is a missionary, she was from Germany and came as a missionary. Many missionaries came here. And when my mom got pregnant with me, she left me because she couldn't go home with this baby. She went home, with my father, went back to Wisconsin and decided against missionary work, that didn't work out to well. I didn't see her until I was 7, my grandfather raised me- she died.

J: I got to meet most of the movie stars when they came around, like Roy Rogers and

R: How did you meet them?

J: They came around here

S: Everybody went to go see them. They were going to hunt polar bears.

J: After they get that polar bear, they go- they go back.

R: So, Sally how did you get to Kotzebue and how did they two of you meet?

S: Oh, I made a deal that if I ever had children, I'd stay here because when I came up, there was no phone, houses didn't have toilets, you didn't know when the plane was going to run. I was in

[24:53] Seward and had windows and I was also 32 and I said I'm not going to have children. And didn't realize that I was pregnant at the time, her name is Catherine.

J: Now, she's a doctor now.

R: Oh you must be so proud of her!

[point at picture]

R: Oh, she's beautiful!!

S: That's from when she was five

J: Maybe like five or six.

S: Yeah because she had a dirty old snowsuit on but it was a pretty picture of her.

R: So, I guess a couple questions- how would you describe Kotzebue changing in your lifetime so far?

J: Well them days they didn't have no stores and a theater, that started coming up. So they had a theater and stores.

S: There was a theater but the seats were old so you had to sit on this spring pole

J: This man, he's a Mexican, he put a restaurant. Old man Louis Rotman he came around and that white store that's his.

S: They had a store in Selawik- they still have the store in Selawik. And then built a store here. That was the first of the big stores.

J: Them big planes started to come in. that was Ween's Alaska Airlines.

S: Usually they came one at a time; you never had more than one plane.

J: They didn't have no jets, just a small propeller plane.

S: It was a small airport and they were used to that- you could get to Anchorage, in five or six hours but you could get there.

R: Probably really expensive.

S: Yeah, it was pretty expensive. You didn't make many trips, because you couldn't afford it. But people started coming up, the government came up. Fish and Game, Fish and Wildlife for the federal government. And then we should have a city government, have a mayor. You could work for the city. Then how about a borough?

[28:48] J: They had no radio station.

S: Well, they had a radio when they started the boroughs though.

R: When would you say that was?

S: Well, 1975 maybe. We heard it on the radio.

J: The only station we could get was from Nome.

S: Yeah, when I lived in Mendeltna there was one station you could get from Nome and one from another place that was fire and brimstone religion. And when I was a little girl, I was scared to death.

J: You could get Russian people and China, Koreans. Them people out there, when they were out there fishing, you could listen to them.

S: When they were out there fishing.

J: No TVs.

R: When did indoor plumbing come into Kotzebue?

S: Started in the early to mid-70s. And if you lived in this area, chances are that you could get a toilet. Chances are, you'd have a pipe that would go right out into the water, but they were toilets. And people outside your house would line up.

J: No running water.

R: When did running water come in?

J: We had those lakes back there, we always cut ice.

S: I remember getting ice, they would deliver ice sometime or you could bring your sled and go, it was faster that way. And then city water came in the 70s but sometimes there were long outages of water. That went on for a long time. I know we had a dairy queen here and if you were out of water, you could put your name on a list and they would go by the top of the list and it was months. Six months one time and five months the other. I have a real washer.

J: A long time ago when we first came we had a well right where the parks service building is; now they covered it up. I had to dig way down, maybe 10 15 feet so I can put a barrel underneath so that the good water can come up.

S: Nobody tested the water.

J: that's where we were getting our drinking water from, well water.

[31:52] S: And then the city decided to have plumbing.

J: Nice and cold.

S: Plumbing started and then you could drink the water. And when you had a well- you never knew because it depended on the quality of the water. Oh and when people had toilets back there, you never really knew. That could have drifted into your water. So yeah, people wanted city water and it wasn't always clean- a lot of times it was yellow or brown, but it was water. They tried purifying it.

R: How was it raising your daughter in Kotzebue?

S: oh, he worked for a long time down in Red Dog. And when he came back, he hadn't been back for about five years. And came back

J: She's the girl that would follow my footsteps.

S: And I know she said, what are we gonna do with him?

J: She said, oh once you go up to red dog, I'm gonna go up there with you.

S: She worked at red dog for a while. Yeah, James had worked at Red Dog and she was going to try that too.

J: And before she went to college she said, dad what do you want me to be? And I said, be a doctor and she was in school all the time.

R: And look where she is! So successful.

S: She had gone to Cornell to be a hotel manager, she had seen somebody working at a hotel and she was dressed very nicely and Cathy wanted to be this nicely dressed woman in charge of the hotel, she thought that would be something to do. Fortunately, at Cornell, you had to clean toilets and they timed you. It wasn't anything like what she was planning on doing. And one of the girls who had graduated didn't have a job at the time. And Cathy decided to do something else. So we went her down to Wisconsin because my mother was living down there. And she had aunts and uncles. So she had family right there. She went all the way through school.

J: We had a house down in Wisconsin; it costs too much to go down there.

S: Yeah, we went when she graduated. We had never seen a place that large, there were so many kids graduating that you never knew who to look at.

J: And then we gave the house to Cathy and she lived on it for how many years? About a year

S: Oh, yeah.

[36:08] J: When she was on her own and she was married. Passed it to the family.

S: But oh I thought, she was going to Wisconsin for a year and she wouldn't be able to stand it because it would be too hot [Rachel laughter].

J: Too hot down there for me. I always live in the basement there where it's nice and cold.

R: I'm from Kentucky, it gets way hotter in Kentucky, this is cold.

S: Wisconsin is too hot. Humid. And when she graduated, she got a job at the University of Oregon. And that's cool and damp. They keep their house cold.

R: So you can come visit! So James, do you think modern technology is affecting the carpentry, the work that you do? So using chainsaws and those sorts of things, is that different from how you learned as a child?

J: I work on nothing but equipments. I learned from my dad.

S: And other tools you don't use as much because they've gone for newer tools.

R: So can you tell me some of the most important tools that you use?

J: An axe, chainsaws, I don't have any saw mills- I just do them by hand, chopping. It's a lot of work.

R: And you mostly use driftwood?

J: Nothing but driftwood. It takes me about 3 weeks to finish one.

R: A sled?

J: Yeah. It's hard.

R: Yeah. How are your sleds different from somebody else's sleds in Kotzebue?

S: They're easy to repair.

R: How are they easy to repair?

J: Oh, they last for a long time. Most of the sleds you see around there, that's my building.

R: So do you make them a certain way so that they last for a long time, is there something you do? What do you do?

J: Yeah. I always cut them with a skill saw and you've got to steam them to shape it, let them dry for a week and then push them together.

R: Are you using the techniques that your father taught you?

[39:20] J: Yep

R: And those work the best?

J: Yep

R: So when you were a child, how did he teach you about working with wood?

J: He teached me about making kayaks and showed me how to hunt and whatnot. I learned real good. I feed a lot of peoples around here.

R: You keep busy, and you are still busy working now, right?

J: Mhmm yep.

R: So your family moved to Kotzebue and then you started working at Red Dog? What happened after you grew up here?

J: Yeah, I started working at Red Dog and I heard there was going to be a mine opening and so I did that. I must have worked up there for 10, 11 years. And then I went to Fairbanks and joined the union, 302 and started working on the Pipeline. Stayed on the Pipeline 27 years. They wanted me to go down to Panama and I said, no, that's too damn far.

R: And so did you come back up here after Fairbanks?

J: No. I stayed in Fairbanks; they put me down in Idaho, building another pipeline. So I built another pipeline all the way up to Canada and then let those Canada peoples take over the rest. [Rachel laughter] Stayed down there again 10, 11 months [both laughter]. That was my last project.

R: And then did you come up here?

J: Yep. I had a lot of fun in that work with them Texan peoples and all of kinds of people.

R: And what language or languages did you grow up speaking?

J: oh we always go fishing, mostly salmon in the summertime around here. We didn't know about commercial fishing. Them days they didn't have no commercial fishing.

R: When you were growing up with your family, what language did you speak? Did you speak Inupiaq?

J: Yep.

R: And how did you learn English? Your English is very good.

J: Well, I stayed in Fairbanks for a long time. Got married and started working with them guys. [43:15] And that's how I learned my English.

R: So, I have a lot more questions but I'm just going to ask you one more, and then maybe I can come back next week?

J: Yeah, if you want to come back, if I'm around.

R: I'll call again.

J: Yeah.

R: Can you tell me how you feel about your pieces being in the park building? Have you seen them?

J: No.

R: Are you proud of them?

J: Yep.

R: Remind me again how they ended up being there, how did the umiak, the sled and the kayak end up being in the building?

J: Well um that one guy, I forgot his name, I think he lived down in Anchorage works for the Parks Service, he gets to know me somehow and I can't understand but that guy he said, I find out you're a good builder for umiaks, I want one. So I keep on thinking a little bit, gee I'm fishing and he asked me when would be the best time to make it and I said, after fishing I guess. So I got the material and started building it and it took about two weeks, two and a half weeks.

R: Wow, that's pretty fast.

J: I had all the good tools, that's why.

R: And what about the sled?

J: Me and dad build those. I think they took us about one week to finish that sled and a week to finish that kayak frames.

R: And for the other two pieces, did somebody call you, or how did that work?

J: They called me. They always call me to make sleds. I've been getting calls from all over- from Point Hope to Barrow, Kivilina, Kiana, Selawik. Them guys they always call me, they want a sled. I make it and I always ask them, how the hell they gonna get it there? They say bring it down to the airport and put it in the plane. [laughter] so I always bring it down to the plane and they always get it. A little too far for them to travel with snow machine. They're happy—but

[47:22] every once in a while they always want something. They want kayak frame so I have to make it and I'll just send it. I always ask them, what kind of skin you gonna put on it? They always tell me, canvas, canvas skin. Those work, you put enough paint on it.

R: It's waterproof.

J: Yep, waterproof. Now they have that material for stuff, like umiak or kayak. They found that good material. They say it works really well and it doesn't tear.

R: So when somebody from Barrow or Kiana wants something, do they call you?

J: No, they don't call from up that way, they call from Point Hope. And Point Lay.

R: They call you and they say this is what I want and you say ok?

J: Yep. And then they take it up with the barge.

R: Well thank you for talking to me. I'm wondering if you can sign this form [gets him to sign the form]

J: Yeah, I always have a lot of fun with people. They always want this, want that!

R: You're a popular guy. Would it be okay if I come back to talk to you next week? I'll just call.

J: Sure

Interview 2: James and Sally

Rachel Swanson

R: So it's been a week, have you guys had a good week?

S: Oh yeah, he was just out gathering wood with our fish partner.

J: Oh, you have a little recorder!

R: If that's okay. So everything has been going well?

J: Well yeah, a little bit. Not too much though. Kind of a hard day for me today. What do you want to hear about?

R: SO I'll just show you what I did, I wrote it all up! It was 14 pages.

S: 14 pages?!

R: You guys told me a lot of good stories and a lot of interesting things. It's very funny because when I was listening to it, you guys kept making me laugh so I kept hearing myself laugh and laugh. I came up with some more questions off of that, some questions to clarify things, and just some more questions. So just like last time, if I'm asking you something you don't want to answer, you can tell me not to ask that and if you get tired and want to stop, you can ask me whenever.

Yeah, so today I just want to talk about... I'm going to show you some photos of your work I took and ask you some questions about those photos. And then I'd like to go into some more detail about the tools that you use and how you build the amazing things you build.

J: I see.

R: I have some questions for Sally, I have some questions about family and your community. Maybe we can start with the photos actually. [Rachel shows Sally and James her desktop background, with her family pictured. We talk about it.]

So we'll start here, the sled.

J: Oh the sled I built?!

R: Yep, there it is! It has lots of fur over it and there's a caribou over there. Here are some more pictures of it. It's beautiful. So I'm wondering if you can walk me through the steps of building the sled, starting with the materials to planning out the design to actually building it. Can you take me step by step in as much detail as possible to build that sled?

J: Well, first I had to get the hickory and then I had to order it from Fairbanks or Anchorage

S: Oh the hickory came from Spenard Builders down in Anchorage.

J: And then when we got done, we took it over.

[4:55] R: Did you and your father make this sled together?

J: Oh yeah.

S: Yeah, his dad made sleds up until his upper eighties.

R: Wow. So you get the wood from the builders and then what happens? You bring it here.

J: Yeah, we bring it here and then we have to shape it, cut it up in all these pieces. And when we do the bending we'll have to steam that wood, just right and you have to bend it, you see [points at picture]

S: But you have to steam it in the bathtub first so if you're taking a shower you're standing over the wood. But it's always been that way.

R: So is there one plan that you use every time or do you change it?

J: Yeah. Sometimes we do make them narrower or wider. That there sled [park service] is a bit narrower.

S: It depends on what people want. They can tell you. But it's basically the same. If it's a wider one, it's wider slats.

J: do you see back there where it has that curve on the bottom? That's where they stand. You could run 10, 11 dogs with that one.

S: And usually in the spring there are slats from all the sleds, so you don't want anything different, you're gonna be in and out of those ruts, so usually they're the same. Less people want something different. And then it's up to them, if they want them longer/shorter, well, that's up to them.

And a lot of people in recent years have wanted children's sleds. They're about 4 feet long.

J: Those go like hotcakes.

R: Do you build children's sleds too?

J: Yes, mostly in Christmastime.

S: they got holes there for their children, or they can just take groceries home.

J: keep me busy a year on those sleds.

R: How many sleds would you say you build a year?

J: Oh maybe 300, something like that. And they go all over; most of them go to Selawick and Noatak and Point Hope, Kivilina

[7:38] S: Oh no no no, in a year maybe 3 or 4 in a year now, used to be 6 or 7. Slowing down.

R: Yeah, I imagine they take a lot of work.

S: And now we're making Teflon sleds- and the price of Teflon goes up and down with the price of oil. Very expensive.

But it was the same plan and we had to learn how to put the stations in. Fit them without splitting them. And then we test them to make sure that they work, because if something isn't going to work, better we find out. Yeah, people like our sleds. We don't change the prices much, people don't have much more money. We could say, oh we're going to charge it up this much per year, but people's income doesn't go up each year. We have to keep it at what people can afford- you could easily charge it up more but then people couldn't afford them.

R: And just out of curiosity, how much do you sell a sled like this for?

J: Oh that one will go for about 1,200- the longest ones; I'm selling them for 2,500 though.

S: Sometimes not though.

J: Other sled builders they go way up- he told me that he was selling it for 4000 bucks now.

S: Yeah but you don't sell many. Because if you get to 2000 dollars, you're almost over what people can afford to buy. They just don't have that much to spend on that.

J: So maybe this coming year I'll charge that much-

S: Well you won't sell much-

J: Well maybe they won't holler so damn much [J and R laugh]

S: You know, he draws pictures on them too. The year and a picture and we started doing that because one of the sleds was stolen and we thought, okay- how can we tell your sled from someone else's? and we thought if we put the word and the picture only one sled that year would have that date and that picture on it, so we told them to take a picture of it and yours isn't going to look like someone else's.

R: What kinds of pictures do you draw on there?

J: Other workers they always build them really cinchy, they can't build them like I do. They don't take the edges off like I do, when you leave the edges on it's real sharp like this [points at the coffee side table]

S: Yeah, tell her what pictures you draw on there.

J: And then after I get done with that, I oil it- linseed oil. That will last forever. Linseed oil will [11:45] soak right through that wood there and make them real brittle. It has to last

S: Trees, scenery, people doing other things, simple pictures, caribou, moose, yeah the picture you have and that year is your sled, no one else has one like it. Even though they might have the same size, they're not going to have the same picture. And that way you can identify yours. And for the people in the villages- they just need to look around at people they know and they'll find it.

J: The Peacocks, how many years have they had it? Bout 13, 14 years?

S: Longer than that because that's one that your dad made. And he died in 1988 so that sled is- assuming that he didn't make it the last year that he was alive. And it's repairable.

J: They break every once and a while, they bring it over here and say, wanna fix that? Naaaaah, kind of lazy [laughter]

S: He always does though, they'll take it back and they'll use it.

R: Alright, I have some more pictures. [Umiak] I always get questions from the little boys if I made it

S: [laughter] oh sure, in my spare time.

R: And then I get questions about how I put it up on the ceiling, and I tell them- I didn't do that either.

S: Oh, you just take a big jump and-

J: tell them you got a winch and you just winched it right up.

S: Oh I just jumped up!

Oh, it would help if they would oil it if they ever brought it down. Even though it's been oiled once, it should be oiled once every few years. Because otherwise you'll start finding little pieces of wood on the floor. That's the sign that it needs to be sanded down.

J: There should be somebody who works on wood who works up there, eh?

S: Well, or you.

R: I'll let them know though, that's a good tip.

J: You should tell them to oil it though- it won't take a gallon! A gallon won't be enough; you'll have to use about 5 gallons to oil that whole thing.

S: It doesn't take that much.

[14:53] J: Spruce wood, it soaks right in, that linseed oil.

S: Yeah, it would help if they took it down and figured out how many years they've had it- if it's been about 5 years, then they should take it down and oil it. Because those were always kept outside on a rack

R: And it's warm

S: Yes, and it's warm and damp.

J: Time to get it down and oil it.

R: Okay, I will! Can you do the same thing for this process; walk me through step by step, from starting to get the spruce wood to it getting finished?

J: I don't do any steaming or anything for that kind of wood, it's driftwood there. They bend easy. Some of them do break when they're too dry. I always look for some new ones, some green ones. They bend real good.

S: You don't have to steam them.

J: They make good framing. Years go by and they dry up- it gets real light.

S: But to make them you take the runners and make holes for the stantions and the other runner and holes from the stantions.

J: After I make those stantions, you have to tie it. That one used nothing but nails and screws, and bolts, that one.

S: For the bigger ones though, or the ones we make out of hardwood.

J: If I make them out of hardwood, they don't have to be all hardwood like that, that has to be about 24, 25 feet hardwoods. They grow real long, hickory. But you have to get them from iowa. A long ways. They'll take all my money.

S: The freight is now more than the wood. It had been getting close but now, when the wood might be 100 dollars and the freight would be 110, so alone that's 210! And that's what gets expensive. But once you have the stantions in, the crosspieces. They get put in and tide. And then you have the base of the sled, the ups and downs and the basket itself, going to be curved.

[Phone rings- telemarketer]

S: The bending of the wood- oh that's always interesting because sometimes if the wood is a little dry you steam it and bend it and if it breaks- you have to start all over again. And then you start again: wet it, sits in the bathtub and gets wet, goes into a steamer and it steams and you bend it and you hope it doesn't break. The wood is better that we're getting now. His dad had a [20:07] lot more problems with breaking. He worked in that shop and you could hear him- he wasn't a man who usually cursed. But that would make him curse. And then it was time to get supper on the table and take a break.

R: To ease the tension a bit.

Um, okay I have three more- one more picture. It has a really nice mural behind it.

J: That's made out of the same kind of wood, driftwood, spruce. And those you see those bended ones, like that, that's the roots of the wood, they're shaped like that. They've got all kinds of shape like that in the roots, we split them. Keep on working down for that framing on top. See that railing? That's the one you put on your skin, it will be there. We use those for seal hunting out in the ocean. We use regular seal skin for the cover.

R: But some people use canvas?

S: They do now. Oiled canvas.

J: They get their fabric now, that doesn't tear. Long time ago, we used regular canvas, painted canvas.

S: You have to seal it- you can use oil, even paint. I've seen sleds painted. We oil them, but paint seals too.

R: Some similarities between the umiak and the kayak, you use the same kind of wood? What else is similar between the two?

J: After we cut them, that spruce wood, we put them down there in the water so they don't dry up.

S: They make them right there on the beach. In the summertime

J: That shape will stay there.

S: What are umiak covered with? Umiak are bigger, what are they covered with?

J: Oh those- you know!

S: Yes I do know, but tell her.

J: You're telling all the stories! [Laughter] Those peoples in Point Hope and Kivilina, they use ugruk hide.

S: It's bigger.

J: Some of them get about 10, 11 feet like that, and they're real wide. You've got to skin that ugruk to get the hide.

[23:28] R: Do people use canvas to cover the umiaks too, or no?

J: Yeah, they use regular canvas to cover them- those Barrow people do.

S: Barrow people. They have the same frame but they'll use a canvas. And they'll use wooden boats in the fall and umiaks in the spring; I don't know why they do that. Always wondered.

Well they put outboards on them in the fall and you row the umiak for the spring. That just might be the difference. In Point Hope, just in the spring and they use regular umiaks.

R: So James, which of these three pieces – remind me again, which of these three pieces you worked on with your father? The kayak and the umiak and the sled?

J: That sled and that kayak.

S: The umiak he did alone.

J: That umiak, I did it.

R: Can you remember any stories about building these things or other things with your dad that you might want to tell me?

J: Well, the old man, I used to just watch him. We used to live down the coast- this side- park side. We'd get them old ugruks down there and he always just trusted me. I'd always just watch him. Because there's lots of driftwood across there on the beach. We'd look around for the right ones, we'd always hitch up our dogs. The whole piece of wood, we'd take it to our camps and no scale saws, no hand saws, regular hand saws, that's it. It takes weeks and weeks to get the strips.

S: And you'd learn where to get the wood.

J: He sure does work hard.

S: But there's a lot of time down the coast.

J: I just watched him and I did the easy parts when I was kind of young. He always told me to do this and do that and soak this wood in the water, the salt water in the ocean so it would be this shape and it wouldn't break so easy.

R: So when you and your dad worked together, how did you figure out who did what?

J: After we get done with that, the frame, we hang it in our- like my cache down there, air dry. It dries up, and after it dries we get the seals and put the skin on. That's easy. Mom would always sew. We'd use that caribou sinew, that's what we used for sewing up the seals. And then we'd use that sap, tree sap for cocking it right in the seals. Use our finger there, to water proof it.

[27:44] S: And you'd learn from dad where to get the sap and when to get the sap.

J: We'd always go look for them sap up in the Noatak there where there are lots of trees. By the time we'd fill up a coffee can full, that would be enough to build something.

S: And you'd do that in the spring.

R: So I didn't know that your mother also helped work on these too. She helped sew?

J: Oh yeah, she's the one who always helped put the skin on them; she got to take the hair out and let them sift the hair out, real easy. She will just keep wetting the oil after she takes the air out, maybe 10/11 good size seals. She'd sew it together, all together; make it long enough and wide enough to cover. And she'd put that seal on top not on bottom. We'd just stretch it real tight.

S: Who helped your mom?

J: Dad. She didn't have no arthritis them days, she was husky. Real tough woman. [Talk about arthritis]

S: She became more and more crippled so somebody must have helped her.

R: Last time you were telling me that you had brothers; did they learn from your father too?

J: My sisters?

S and R: Brothers

S: David.

J: Oh yeah, he learned. Him and I did all the woodwork and let dad do all the tying and shaping. He'd always make that rawhide out of seal. There ain't no spring them days.

S: Yeah, David worked odd jobs.

J: These bottom ones, where it's curved like that, those are willows. The framing alone is all driftwood there, wet wood, green wood. Them willows make good ribs like that. They're easy to bend.

R: And where did you get the willows from?

J: There are lots of willows down the coast there. We always go look for good ones, straight ones.

S: Or watch for moose, they eat willows and will lead you right to them. We have some up at our camp, we have them all over.

[32:00] J: We didn't have no moose up there in them days- there were no moose up there!

S: Yeah, they've come within our lifetimes.

J: Nothing nothing but caribou and reindeer. The moose came from south, the Fairbanks area, I guess. They stopped to migrate around here. A lot of moose.

R: Um, let's see. Of these three pieces, which one do you build the most of?

J: Sleds. Every year I make a sled.

S: Umiaks last forever.

R: And kayaks probably last a long time.

S: And you can make kayaks out of other plastics and they work fine. There are people on their kayaks out there today.

R: Yeah, we saw them out there.

J: You can see some of that green wood out there.

R: I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about how your pieces got to the Park Service building. I know that the umiak was commissioned by somebody who came over to your house, right? And somebody in the parks service told me that the kayak might have been made for somebody named Jake Jacobson, the dentist?

S: Probably!

J: Yeah, they used to have that museum up there.

S: And when he didn't work anymore and wasn't here, he may have turned it to the parks service, because they were right there.

R: Okay, and what about the sled?

J: Oh yeah, I saw it when I went in there one time.

S: And that's from a long time ago. I think that was the same thing. When he was getting rid of his household stuff.

J: Park Service guys, they always want something here and I have to make it. And when I get done with it I say here!

R: I don't think they'd ask for it if it isn't good.

J: And they asked me if I had a saw mill and I said nope, I use my ax and my hand mill.

[35:00] R: Yeah, actually that's a good transition. Can you tell me about the most important tools that you use?

J: When I'm shaping it I use planers, electric planers and a skill saw. Nails and screws for building a frame like that. You can see that umiak has no ties on it.

S: But you have a drill press now for those sleds, your dad told me to get one for you. They're for making holes in the sleds. It just takes forever. And that could make them faster.

J: Now a days they got regular drills, electric drills. A long time ago we used to use the other kind, no electricity. We used to use the gas light. It was hard- those short days. We had to get that blaze though for the light, gas.

[Phone rings again]

R: Sally, I have a question for you. When I was listening to the recording, I couldn't quite hear what your father said he did as a job?

S: He was a carpenter too, and he was a fisherman too. But he also was a bootlegger too. A lot of the Athabaskan men.

J: That first museum here, that first one- I helped build it. Real long, it was getting too old.

R: So Sally, you're pretty familiar with this world of building because-

S: Because they did the same things.

J: It's fun to work hard, once you get it up here [points at his head], you know all the measurements now, the thickness of wood. I don't have no blueprints or anything, I use my head.

S: When our son was just a baby, I took him into the shop and started watching dad build- starts very early and get him interested in daddy building.

[Talk about the television in the background]

R: James, what piece of work that you've ever made are you most proud of?

J: Most of my work I make whatever they want- flat sled, basket sled, kayak frame. I have more fun building basket sleds.

S: Or that umiak. Whoever it was from the Park Service kept calling- he had no idea how long it was taking to make that thing, and to get that particular wood and put it together. It was going to get done; it was right on the beach. But he wanted it to get done. We tried our darndest to get it done but we just kept thinking, who is this man?

R: I don't think he worked in the office here.

[40:16] S: It was always long distance- Anchorage or Seattle.

R: Oh, okay.

S: Well we didn't think to send him pictures. If we had a videotape or something, he could have seen what was coming. No, he just wanted it done by a certain date. I thought, just getting that done for that man so he would stop calling! And now it's done, you can go past and you can see it. And I don't know if that man has ever been here and has ever seen it.

J: When I start building a sled throughout the years, people would come down and watch me, and see how I was doing it. Take videos of it.

S: You almost have to see it.

J: But 9, 10 in the morning.

R: Yeah? Are you working on them now?

J: No.

R: Only in the winter?

J: Only in the winter. I've got too much to do in the summertime.

R: Sounds like you stay very busy.

J: Get wood. And next month we've got to start fishing. There are going to be two months of fishing.

S: And ugruk hunting too.

J: And we've got to go out there in the ocean and get fresh ugruk. I like that black meat there. You ever tried that?

R: I haven't, no.

J: They eat nothing but shrimp out there in the ocean, out in the deep. They've got real rich meat out there.

S: It turns black and you think UGH but it's good tasting meat. And whale meat tastes very good. [...]

R: So I know I've been asking a lot of questions. I'm going to ask a few more questions and then I'll stop.

Did you ever teach Cathy, your daughter, how to build?

[44:41] S: We didn't teach her how to build; we taught her how to work on seals, when I did it, and work on ugruk. And she appreciated that.

J: She liked to work on it when she was a kid. She worked until she finished it. Other girls they just work a little bit and then they go.

S: I had her do it and showed her what bones are, what intestines are, here is the bones and here are the intestines. What's in the intestines, what's in the stomach. Yeah we just identified everything, the bones in the flippers and the bones in your fingers. Can you bend them? And the sinew. When I was talking to her, when I was just showing everything to her.

J: When she was small, about four years ago, I used to have a little barrel with nothing but blubber in there to make oil. She used to sneak over to the barrel and start eating that oil.

R: Like the cookie jar.

J: She liked that blubber [laughter]

S: I thought oh Cathy, don't do that! She did like oil, until she got to school. When kids get to school they start to make fun of it.

J: Like I'd rather eat a hamburger or something. [...]

R: Do you think it's important for people to learn how to build?

J: I try to teach up there in the tech center- teach them kids how to build a sled. They're not interested.

R: Really?

J: They don't want to work on that stuff. There's a lot of boys working in the shop when I was trying to teach them and they don't want to work on it.

R: Why don't they want to learn?

J: I don't know, it's too hard.

S: It's not in instant, it takes time.

J: I told them if you want to learn to be a carpenter, that's it and you build up from here.

R: So do you keep teaching there or was that like, that's it?

S: We've tried to get somebody to come into the shop and watch James build because he's 76 and nobody will know.

J: Now a days, these older ones they watch me and they learn. But them kids up in Noatak, I [49:11] showed them and they've been building sleds. I was gonna bring mine up there so they could make the pattern without taking it apart, just use the measurements. I never did bring it up there this spring.

S: Oh there's a carpenter in Noatak who made a sled inside his house because he didn't have a shop. But then he had to figure out how to get it out of the house because the door doesn't curve. He had to take a window out to take the sled out of the house. He was a carpenter so he could do it, but I'm not sure his wife was too happy.

R: No, I'm sure. First the bathtub and then the window! Taking apart the whole house.

S: Yeah, I wish I could have seen it because he was absolutely serious about you had to do it.

J: I told him it would get all dried up in the house.

S: Yeah, he doesn't have a shop.

J: I told him it doesn't take very much to build a shop.

R: I'm wondering if you can tell me about an example, a time somebody came wanting to learn.

J: Oh, I'll be happy to show them.

R: You just tell them that?

S: WE haven't had anyone come who has lasted. We've had people come saying I'm going to come back and watch you, but then they don't.

R: Who are these people who come?

S: Without naming names, the one who works at the Place [changed] who wanted to come for lunch but whose lunch is always at 12 and we eat at 2. Okay. Oh I want to learn I'm going to watch you!! He came once or twice and never came back. You need a family in back of you that is going to make the meals and order your supply.

J: It takes a lot of talent.

R: It sounds like it, and it sounds like it takes a lot of family. Because your dad was working on it and your mom with sewing and you were using the house and the whole family.

J: And mama would cook.

S: Someone has to cook. I cooked for his dad when James was off working. And I cleaned the shop. When he built the house in 1984 I always said, you go on home, I'll sweep the shop. And I always did.

[52:26] J: We always worked late, til 10 or 11:00 at night. Because Christmas is here and they want it. I think when we built that sled it was for a kid.

S: And you know somebody would call.

J: And they'd always be happy.

S: You make an extra one in the spring because somebody's gonna want it.

R: Well thank you so much for talking to me again. So what I'll do is that I'll type it up and it will be just like this. I probably will have more questions. So would you mind if I come one more time?

J: Come every day!

S: If you give me a copy of this, we'll send it to our daughter.

J: Maybe you could help and get some wood.

R: Thank you. I'm really enjoying this. You know so much and I completely understand wanting to pass this along.

[story about fishing]

Interview 3 James and Sally

R: So did you get a lot of driftwood out there?

J: Yeah when the ice was up.

R: What kind of wood did you get?

J: Whitefish.

R: But what about wood? Did you get driftwood?

J: Lot of driftwood.

S: This driftwood will last us through fall and then when there's snow and ice they'll go and get more.

J: It's still not enough, so we'll probably get about 5 or 6 loads, big boats.

R: How many loads do you need for the year?

J: About 6, 7. But there are a lot of bugs in the river right now. Real hard to work with.

R: Is this spring pretty typical? It's late, isn't it?

J: Yep. There are a lot of these little whitefishes across.

R: Have you been going out most days to fish?

J: Yep.

R: And when does commercial fishing start?

J: On the 13th, 14th, something like that.

R: What are your days like when you are commercial fishing, where do you go?

J: Oh, right in front of the house here.

S: Oh for about the first month they can fish right out front.

R: And what do you catch normally?

J: Oh chums, mostly chums here out front. Flounders, all kinds of fish.

S: Our chums average about 8 lbs, but one guy last summer got a 32 lb chum. It had to be a record.

J: Right now there are a lot of sheefish out there. Lot of sheefish. I think I gave John a boatload.

[Talking more about fishing]

R: James do you think sometime before commercial fishing start you could come to the museum and talk to me about your pieces?

[6:15] J: Especially when tourists come, there are millions of them. A nuisance!

R: So many questions, right?

J: All I do is say yeah yeah! People come from all over. Can't understand them sometimes.

R: But you worked with a lot of different people when you worked on the pipeline?

J: Yeah, it's hard to understand people sometime.

[Talking about the fish we were cutting]

R: So, James, when you do building, do you mostly build in here or outside?

J: Outside. When I build dogsleds I build them mostly in here. I start outside and then go inside.

R: Sally, you said that you've never had anyone learn the style.

[Talk about James and Sally's upcoming trip to Kenai]

J: Ain't no rest for the wicked.

[Talk about ugruk hunting strategies/boat/materials- Sally chimes in]

J: Never sleep out there.

Part 2

[Talking with Sally about the fish, Ross Schaeffer]

R: Sally, do you think you and James might want to come to the museum and I can video you talking about the pieces?

S: Oh yeah, we could do that!

R: Does James ever make sleds for like John Baker?

S: He has, but now they make modern airplane stuff.

[Sally talking about dog food meat, teaching, cats, mice, the wedding, hunting, fishing, ugruk, drying fish]

[16:00] R: And Nikapak means?

S: Just regular Eskimo food. We got some whale meat from Point Hope.

R: Did you used to get a lot of belugas here?

S: We used to heard them in. When the belugas are coming we get together in a line and drift towards the shore. The hunters are on the shore. You've got to take care of that thing, you've got to take off all the oil, all the muktuk... that's a lot of work.

R: A lot of people in the family help too, right?

S: Our daughter did because I said- you and I are going down to the beach.

R: You taught her didn't you?

S: Yeah, how to cut up ugruk, how to make oil. Other girls would say- I don't want to get dirty.

R: I bet she misses it in Oregon.

S: We send her what we can.

Part 3

R: So, can you give me an example of a change you've made in your building?

J: Oh nothing's changed, same old same old.

R: Why do you make it the same?

J: They like it. People like my style. So I just keep on making it.

R: Did you change anything from what your father used to do?

J: No I didn't. Same thing.

R: So I'm wondering, I just- can I go over the whole process and you tell me what's wrong with what I know?

J: Mhm.

R: So the first thing you do is you get the wood. And for kayaks and umiaks it's driftwood spruce and for sleds it's hickory, from the building store.

J: Yeah, I get it from Spenard Builder supply or even that Superior Hardware in Fairbanks. Sometimes I get some from Iowa but that's a long ways, and it costs too damn much to get up here, freight. Sometimes it costs me over 10,000 bucks.

R: So when you have the wood, the next thing you do is chop it

J: With skill saws.

R: Do you do that outside?

J: Mhm. If I do it in here it's too damn dusty. It's hard.

[2:30] R: And then after you chop it up, you limb it.

J: Yeah, I shape it and smooth it up. Clean it and after that I steam it to bend. And then start putting it together.

R: How do you limb it?

J: What?

R: When you are shaping it up, how do you do that?

J: I use these steam boxes, water and real hot water in the bottom, it's like cooking. And that steam is real hot. I would just steam about 25 minutes and that's about it. The hardwood gets real flimsy and it bends real good. Then I put them over the benders after I steam it and keep it sitting about 3, 4 days and when I dries up I put it together. It stays like that. The hickory, that's the kind of wood I use all the time—ash is too easy to break and the hickory is real good.

S: Rachel, I want to show you what whale meat looks like. There's no fat in it, it's a very lean meat. If I give you a couple of slices, would you be willing to try it?

R: Yeah, just a little bit though I don't want to take too much.

[explains how to cook it- bowhead whale]

R: After you limb it, do you take the bark off? When you're shaping it, do you take the bark off before or after?

J: Oh when I build umiaks? Yeah. That's what I do- take the bark off and the branches and then I shape it. It's a lot of work.

R: And then, after you steam it, and you put it in the shower?

J: No, I don't... I just put it together and when it dries it stays like that, after I steam it. That's how it always is shaped and done.

R: How long does it take to dry?

J: Not too long, a couple of days. I always keep the woodstove going and it doesn't take long for the wood to dry.

R: And then after it's dry, what do you do?

J: I tie it, tie it together and after I get done, I oil it. Linseed oil.

[gives me fish]