TRANSCRIPTION OF AUDIO DISC

DISC LABELED:
ORAL HISTORY TAPES WITH SELDOVIA VILLAGE TRIBE
NORMAN OPHEIM
12/11/2000
RUN TIME: 23:15
MP3 FORMAT / 27MB
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INTERVIEWER: Today is December 11th, the year 2000, we've got Mr. Norman Opheim here and we're going to be interviewing him on his subsistence lifestyle and hopefully he can—he'll start from the time he was young and to the present time.

So I guess the first question here—or the first part is to describe your household, who—those who harvested resources with you and those you shared resources with?

MR. OPHEIM: Well, I only usually shared with my immediate family, my daughter and my son and my brothers, because we all shared back and forth, my brothers do when they get fish or whatever. But anybody else was usually left out. That's the way it's always been.

INTERVIEWER: And what about---

MR. OPHEIM: It's too hard to get this stuff anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, what about when you were younger, do you remember the first time you went—did your fishing or your subsistence hunting, when you were younger?

We didn't call it subsistence then but---

MR. OPHEIM: We called it going out and getting something to eat. And we used to duck hunt and when we were young we got one box of .22 shells every Fall and that was it, we'd have to make it last all year long, because there was no time for a second box, because they costed twenty-five cents for a box of shells back then. And we had these little single shot .22's, me and my brother, and that's all we hunted with. We each got a box of shells, and we'd used to go hunt these little Rock Ducks or Goldeneyes, or Mallards, whatever, wherever we could find them and that was our meat.

And that was all Winter long was our meat. Unless we actually caught a seal, but seals were kind of a scarce thing for us because we were just little guys and when we got one we got him and boy we were pretty proud to haul that guy home. And that was a pretty good treat for us to get one of them. First went the liver and---

But the meat, the fat and all that stuff, you know, the fat part of it, the skins and all that sort of stuff that just went to waste. The dogs just ate that, we had a little dog, or I had one, named midnight, you know, and go out and feed—you know, and they'd get that stuff, and we got the rest of it. There wasn't no dog food, so they'd have to eat whatever we drug in.

And then deer came along in later years, but I was about fourteen then, and we could go out and hunt those and by that time we were able to buy guns of different kinds for ourselves because we'd bring fish over to the cannery, worked with other people, doing whatever we could, sell sawdust from the sawmill, but hunting and fishing was the thing that we used to--just always went out and got it when it came.

But we'd get these big schools of trout—that was something that completely—you know, there weren't enough—you know, you talk about the sea lions dying off today and where have all the trout gone, you could go down to the beach and make a haul of trout this time of year and they could, you know, get enough for the whole village, there was plenty for all, all the time.

Take these big candle fish things that were buried in the sand, hooligan, or whatever you want to call 'em, they're not there

anymore and we had those things all the time. We used to go out and eat them, guts, bones and all, just the way they came out of the sand, washed them off and—but the trout, they're just completely gone, they're depleted, once in awhile you'd see these little pools and cricks, but other than that you just don't see very many of them anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, there's a lot of resources that are gone.

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Did you—did you and your brother hunt when you were younger?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, hunted all the time.

INTERVIEWER: Did your dad come with you guys?

MR. OPHEIM: Nope.

INTERVIEWER: No?

MR. OPHEIM: It was just the shells and the guns and both of us go out the door. I have a model 6 Remington, it's got a falling block and you have to pull the hammer back, you pull the hammer back then the falling block, put the shell in it, and shoot it one single shot at a time.

INTERVIEWER: By the time you get it ready your target's probably gone too?

MR. OPHEIM: Oh, yeah, you definitely have to be real cunning, you know, you have to sneak up and be real quiet on him, because by the time you got this gun loaded—now, but this old gun, I still have it, it's about maybe thirty inches long, stock and all, the whole gun, but you had to pull this big hammer back first put the falling block on and put the shell in it, pull the falling back up because that's where the firing pin was in that, and then get ready to fire the gun otherwise you didn't shoot it because it had this big hammer on it, until you pull it back.

INTERVIEWER: Did you share a lot of your game with your—your fishing and then your game with people in the village?

MR. OPHEIM: When we were there in the summertime, now in the Fall—in the Fall and Wintertime we hardly saw anybody because we lived two miles out of town and you had to row back in those days, you know, everybody rowed, and we had these big dories like I still build today, and when we were kids you could hear those things coming, because one would tow and the other two would row and they'd be coming from Port Lions or above, some of those people would go to Kodiak and that was how they'd go by, one—they'd

all be rowing, three people would be rowing in these skiffs at a time and they had these old nine horse kickers, you could hear them for about forty miles away and they'd be pulling on the other one and that's how they got back and forth.

And the whole tribe would go to Kodiak, those from Ouzinkie, that's how they went by, and they'd come down to see us once in awhile, stop by and see us in the wintertime there, from Ouzinkie and usually for Christmastime and you know, we had to go to school and catch up on our schooling.

We went to Calvert School courses, we were the very first Calvert School kids in Kodiak Island, me and my brothers and my sister and—but we would generally have to go to Ouzinkie and get these brush-up things and go and sit in a class for a few days and go back.

INTERVIEWER: It was home schooling?

MR. OPHEIM: It was home schooling, yeah, everything would have to go in the mail---

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it's just that name doesn't sound familiar to me, yeah.

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, it was all home schooling, but it was called Calvert School courses and it came out of Juneau, and we'd go and that's how we went to school.

And many times we were out to duck hunt because mom was teaching us—we always had to have something on the table, so, it had to be that way.

INTERVIEWER: Now, it mentions here what animals, fish and plants were the most important to your subsistence in the past?

MR. OPHEIM: It was--you lived on crab, salmon, trout and ducks. Until the deer came along, like I said, we were about fourteen or so before they showed up in any quantity, because you could go out and hunt for days and never see a deer, it's not like now where there's so many of 'em that—you know, it took time for them to get up, you know, stocked up to where to keep going on and you know, for people to go out and hunt them, otherwise there was nothing there to hunt before.

INTERVIEWER: How about bear?

MR. OPHEIM: We never hunted bears.

INTERVIEWER: Oh?

MR. OPHEIM: We never saw one ‘til we were older, because we went salmon fishing on boats, that we went salmon fishing on, but we’d never—we’d see tracks, you know, if we were out beachcombing or whatever.

That was another thing, during the war years, we were kids, we could walk those beaches, you know, we could go out and be finding these big five gallon cans full of all kind of Army rations, you know, and you go up break those--and cut those things open and then take and fill our pockets with the stuff and go on home, you know, it was pretty neat, you know, it was all cookies and candy.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I imagine you’d find something like that in Kodiak, everything drifts ashore.

MR. OPHEIM: Coco and all kinds of stuff. And it’d be a big five gallon can like you’d see coffee comes in today, it’d be like that and you’d just open it and get the stuff out and that was a picnic for us, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, yeah.

What kind of—what kind of fish was your main—what was your main fish?

MR. OPHEIM: Salmon, pink salmon.

Because we had a little crick right there in Piney Cove there and you could go out and fish right in front of it.

But there was a school of fish that would come in what we called Dog's Bay, on the other side of Pleasant Harbor, and those fish spawn in the sea, so that had to be a pond at one time, a some sort of a—before that island sunk or something like that—where Nelson Island or Niger Island, must have been a deep lake in there at one time for those fish to be spawning in there that deep, because why would they spawn on a beach, and the sea, there'd have to be like a breed of fish that would come back to their own little spot. And they do that today yet. Yeah. But the biologists have never went over there and looked at it, so, we used to see them there all the time.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

You know, that's one of the things about people in the villages, that's—they're the scientists, they know—they know everything that goes on, they see it.

MR. OPHEIM: Oh, yeah, yeah, but that's—the village people would take a look at little things like that, they could probably, you know, and then go back and tell us how long ago the island sunk that far and make the channel goes across to Nelson Island, you know, there's six or seven fathoms of water out there now, it had to have

been a lake at one time, you know, in order for the fish to go in there and spawn on that beach, because there is no fresh water coming out of there except that little stream that comes down, it must have flooded it into a lake, brackish water at one time, but they go in and spawn there today.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, we forgot to say where it—where this is at?

MR. OPHEIM: This is Spruce Island, Kodiak Island.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Because the people---

MR. OPHEIM: The village of Ouzinkie.

INTERVIEWER: Uh huh.

MR. OPHEIM: Just three miles from where I lived at.

INTERVIEWER: Because the interviews that we've been doing, the people have been local---

MR. OPHEIM: Right, okay.

INTERVIEWER: ---except for you, and it's interesting—okay, and what plants do you use?

MR. OPHEIM: The only plants we ever used were salmon berries, elderberries, cranberries, and we have all them blueberries, just like here.

INTERVIEWER: You used seaweed and---

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, seaweed, and we had wild onions that grow there.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, in the village they usually find wild onions—how about that---

MR. OPHEIM: And that Patrushki.

INTERVIEWER: Patushkies. Did you guys use goose tongue?

MR. OPHEIM: No, we always used salmon berry shoots in the Spring.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, what about—oh—what was I going to ask you—oh, what about Pushki?

MR. OPHEIM: Nobody in our family ever ate those, I don't know why. I seen people ate them, but we never did. We tried them when we were kids but they burnt us, so we never---

INTERVIEWER: That's probably why, yeah.

MR. OPHEIM: ---yeah, so we never did use them.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, because you can't get the juice---

MR. OPHEIM: ---off your skin---

INTERVIEWER: ---off your skin, yeah, because it burns just like an acid.

MR. OPHEIM: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, please describe your season-round subsistence activities, where did you go to harvest, and who usually went with you? I guess you already explained that.

MR. OPHEIM: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, okay, please describe a hunt or fishing trip or berry picking—let's see, did we do that part already---

How was your meat processing preserved?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, oh, I don't know where my dad ever came up with this idea, but we had a big box, and we filled it with ice in the wintertime and it was lined with sawdust and was about a foot and a half thick walls, the thing was about eight feet square, but the inside was only about four and a half feet square, and we filled it with ice and we put stuff in there, and it kept—it'd be summertime and

go into town, we'd go to Kodiak to get—to buy ice cream or something like that, you could put it in there and it would last for days, you know, nothing spoiled in it then.

And it had a big lid, you had to get the tool and pry it open and get the stuff out of there, but it kept stuff, it was real neat. In fact it was up in that shed until the tidal wave, I don't know why it wasn't ever taken out of there, because, oh, early Sixties—Fifties, late Fifties I should say, we got a first freezer, for the first time and a little generator, started using that, but it was only at nighttime that we would run that generator, so the freezer, you know, would be run at night and, you know, keep stuff frozen.

INTERVIEWER: You must—he must have—that must have been brought from Europe, maybe?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, somewheres like that. I don't know where he could have come up with an idea like that, but it would have to have been something like, you know, the Vikings concocted, to keep stuff freezing without spoiling, you know, but---you know, it sure worked good.

But I think it actually worked better than that freezer, because the freezer had to be kept cold all the time, every night you had to turn on that—keep that little light flashing.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm, that's interesting.

How did you preserve your meat or your process—I guess that would be process—preserve or process—like your---

MR. OPHEIM: Preserved it, salted it.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yeah.

MR. OPHEIM: Like we salted a lot of meats, and that's something you can't buy today is Saltpeter, unless you go and buy some meat, because it'll turn snow white, the meat will, if you put it in brine, and that's pretty ugly looking. But the Saltpeter was put in there to preserve the color, to keep the color in. And I see the shops using that same stuff to put pink salmon in to salt it, and they salt the pink salmon and it looks just like the day you put it in brine, you know the way pink salmon loses its color, and you looks just like the day you caught it.

I'd like to try it on red salmon, but you can't buy it anymore, unless you have a—go in to a drug store and you have to have a background check on it, because it's used in explosives.

INTERVIEWER: Wow!

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah.

Sulfur, Saltpeter, any of that kind of stuff, you can make gunpowder with it.

INTERVIEWER: I'll be darned.

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, so you have to go and get-a and have a background check done on you before you can buy it.

Maybe here in Seldovia, in a little store like this, they might just sell it off the counter, but I really doubt it, I think you probably still have to go through all this crap.

INTERVIEWER: Wow, you—I imagine you—when you preserved your game or your fish and stuff like that, you probably smoked, salted, dried—what's another way—canned---

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, we canned a lot of fish, but you know that was the thing, we had such a big canner, I don't know where dad ever bought that thing from or got it, but it would hold one whole case of those cannery cans---

INTERVIEWER: And they put that over the stove?

MR. OPHEIM: Uh, huh, forty-eight cans it held and they put it on a big wood stove and cook it on it, held forty-eight of them cans I think.

And we had them—we had some cows—that's how they used to make that, but we had these little cows that they would take a butcher them, in the Fall sometime and once in awhile we'd sell one if we had time—others would come by and you know, but it wasn't very often—and in later years we would try selling that meat, but people just don't want to buy meat that's whole, they got to go and buy everything in a package at the store, all ready to put in the freezer.

Well, I was sitting on the beach watching some deer hunters and I asked them what they were doing, they were cleaning this meat and setting it on this little sandy log, you know, I don't know whose wife would go and cook this shit for them, I mean that's the way they were doing it, but they might have just thrown it away, because you can not get sand out of meat, a good cut of meat, it goes into meat and just continues going up into it.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe they're used to country meats?

MR. OPHEIM: That's right, yeah, it kinda files your teeth down is all, you know, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, okay.

How was—okay, I guess you mentioned how the fish was processed and preserved?

Canned it, salted it?

MR. OPHEIM: Just salt it, canned it, and the dried fish we usually ate it right away, you know, within—dried halibut, and salmon, was something we ate right away, it didn't last long, we'd just go out and munch that, it didn't last too long, but that smokehouse, we had this huge smokehouse and we got smoke salmon in there half the Winter, it held about a thousand fish and so---

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. OPHEIM: ---it was humongous and it held a lot of fish in there.

INTERVIEWER: I guess before—how was it for mold?

MR. OPHEIM: We never had no problem with that. It just hung in that smokehouse all the time. It was never taken out of there and put in anything else.

INTERVIEWER: It must have had enough smoke in it for it not to—get mold?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah. Dry enough—hard enough, dried enough.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, how was subsistence fishing worked around commercial harvesting? Did you commercial fish?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, I've always commercial fished, I started fishing when I was about fourteen, fifteen, on the same boat, the first time I saw a power block I was about fifteen, and it run off rope that run off the winch, the rigger head had a big winch, pulled it up there and drove it off a big belt, came back down, had to turn the power block, that's how that operated. The first one I'd ever seen.

INTERVIEWER: And you brought in—did you bring in—in your fish—during your commercial fishing or did you—that was separate?

MR. OPHEIM: No, that was separate, always separate, yeah we always did that, even in the Spring we caught fish, or in the Fall we caught fish.

Fish for drying were really good in the Fall, there's no oil in it, but I used tell the old ladies to bring home fish and throw it over the clothes line, dry it for two or three days, you know, make soup out it, you know, when they come home from the cannery, I always told them old ladies, you know, to throw it over the clothesline.

INTERVIEWER: We call it umada.

MR. OPHEIM: Uh, huh.

INTERVIEWER: How have your subsistence activities changed over the years?

MR. OPHEIM: Oh, not too much, it's pretty much the same way yet. I go to Kodiak, like in the Spring when I go over there to work, and I dry—catch fish and smoke it and do whatever I can with it and can it. I like to can halibut, for the last couple years I've been doing that. And Jay Galligher, my friend, he's the one that got me into that and I seen people doing it but he was—he got me into that, and canning it. And it's really good, you got to try it. And he told me tons of people, you know, put butter into it, and stuff like that, or olive oil and stuff like that, and I used to can my fish like he did it, just can it like you would any other fish and it comes out really good, real good.

INTERVIEWER: Do you use more or less wild foods than you used to?

MR. OPHEIM: No, I think it's pretty much the same, because both Nancy and I are fish eaters and so we eat a lot of fish.

INTERVIEWER: That's good.

What has been the major factors affecting variation in your subsistence harvests?

MR. OPHEIM: Just there's nothing there half the time, it's not there to be affected, yeah, our crab is the thing that is completely, you know, you used to could go walk on the beach and catch King crabs, over there on the island, Dungeness crabs, right up on the beach, and so at night we could go down with these long poles and we had these poles with a hook on them, just a big codfish hook or whatever you want to call them, and go down and catch—snag these fish and crabs and bring them ashore and take them home and eat 'em, and that's how we all caught our crabs. We didn't have any pots or anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: Crabs must be—they must be all the same, because the Dungeness, you know, they used to come in—they used to--just in the slough, I mean just kinda go up with the tide?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, walk up around with the tide.

Over there the same thing, on the beaches over there the tide—the rocks, it's all rocks and you kinda come down off the beach and then all of a sudden when the tide goes out it's just like a paved road, it's just sand and—and black sand, these rocks have washed into black sand and these crabs would come in along there and the kelp and stuff like that and go out there and catch them and have some nice crabs.

But we never did try caning any of them, we always just ate them fresh, you know, when we caught them and that was—you know, like I do with clams today, I come home a twelve o'clock at night and I cook clams, and we did that with our Dungeness crabs, we brought them home and ate them.

The tide was low, it was time to get crabs or some clams.

Dogone, there was a buoy out there, the cockle clams, you know, there was literally tons of them, you could go down---

INTERVIEWER: On Kodiak?

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah.

You could go—oh, heck, if you took a skiff you could have a load of clams in a half an hour—two people could—yeah, you now, you didn't—there were huge ones, they were four or five inches across, they were really big ones, and but that's something that went with the tidal wave, I don't know if it affected the tides or whatever, did something there, and took out most of them, and then, oh, and then just a few years ago the sea otters showed up, and the clams were already gone by that time.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it must have something to do with the tidal wave and then the, you know, the kelp beds, you know, when they're gone the surf will come in to the bays, it's just like whenever the fishermen are saying about here---

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: ---I think that's how why one of the reasons too we lost the clams across the bays is because the kelp beds are gone out here.

MR. OPHEIM: Yeah, all that—I noticed that with all these bays and the places that the kelp beds are gone, you know, but it's just a cycle.

People are worrying about these sea lions, hell, I don't see where—we used to eat those things, but now if somebody shot one to eat, Christ, they'd be in prison for the next two thousand years, you know, they wouldn't even let, you know, God see their body when they buried it, you know.

INTERVIEWER: I think if there was one in the bay you can go shoot it?

MR. OPHEIM: I bet not. I wouldn't go out there and even point my gun at it—the last time I eat any---

INTERVIEWER: The last meeting that I went to they told us—they told me that you could—natives could shoot---

MR. OPHEIM: Oh, yeah—I see the seals are coming back, we've been without seals for a—since the mid Seventies the seals disappeared and there'd be just two-- or two that'd come by this little island and now there are seventy-four at one time I saw them, I went and counted them there down on the beach. I thought that it was pretty neat that there was that many.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's nice.

Now, comments, how has Seldovia changed in your lifetime? Or since you've been—I know you've been here for many years?

MR. OPHEIM: Well, when I first got here Seldovia was bigger than Homer was, there was over a thousand people living here, and I could drive up here where my house is now on (the side of the) hill and look at Homer and Homer was just a little, tiny lighted spot, it was just this big over there, I mean it looked like it was about two inches of land covered with light, now there's a hundred miles of it covered in stinkin' lights over there, you know, of course then we had the cannery going at full blast and then the sawmill was going with logging. That brought a lot of people to this town.

So, it's changed a lot since I got here. I don't know if it's for the better or for the worse, but it's—it's getting to be kinda of a resort town, there's nothing but old people here to help these kids.

INTERVIEWER: Any comments on the youth in the community, are they learning subsistence skills?

MR. OPHEIM: I don't see any children, any young people hunting, except the few white people that come here and I don't know where they, you know—I think they do it because where they came from they weren't able to do this kind of thing and so they have fun doing it and go out, and I've seen a couple of young guys go out hunting here, mess around and do a little fishing this time of the year and stuff. But I don't see none of the native kids doing it.

INTERVIEWER: No, there's not too many.

Okay, well, thank you, Norman, that's all the questions we have and appreciate your information that you're sharing with us.

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