

Jack Paniyak

Oral History Interview
Conducted by Jim King and Cal Lensink
March 31, 1999
Bentley Road House
Bethel, Alaska

[Please note – some of the names of places and people are undoubtedly misspelled]

Jim: Jack is perhaps the longest term Fish and Wildlife Service employee in Alaska, Cal Lensink is also here. We are going to be talking about the early days of Fish and Wildlife Service and the refuge here.

Jack, it is really good to see you here in Bethel and I can't remember when I first met you. I guess it was somewhere around 1962 when you were then working in the school at Chevak and I was refuge manager. You had started working in 1949 for the Fish and Wildlife Service?

Jack: Yes, 1949 with the lake _____ and maybe after three summers working with next bosses like Paul Adams, Sig Olson, when I started working he was there. I was with Matthew Peterson.

Jim: You were banding geese on the Chenick(??) River?

Jack: Yes, we were banding only during that time when the black brant. I can't remember how many birds we banded.

Jim: I remember there were a good many thousands.

Jack: Oh, yea, there were lots of them out there at that time. They were all over. Today, we don't have that many but we still got them out there.

Jim: Back at that time, did the people give you a bad time for working for the Fish and Wildlife Service or did that business come later?

Jack: Some use to give me a bad time. My kids were growing and sometimes they would come in crying. Somebody made them cry because I was working for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Some guys asked me why I worked for them and I would always tell them that I am going to keep working there unless they are going to feed my kids for life. That's how I told them.

Jim: You worked for Pete Shepherd?

Jack: At that time Pete was working for the State and I was working for the Feds. There were some guys that wanted to work with me but there was no way I could get them to, get them up to the bosses.

Jim: Pete set up that big study area with holes in the ground, 300 acres or so. Were you involved with that?

Cal: That was actually set up by Sig Olson and Pete used the same area. Pete also set up one-acre study plots.

Jim: Pete had Stan Harris working for him.

Jack: I just can't remember what years those were.

Jim: Stan Harris was the one we called "Dr. Man_____."

Jack: Do you remember Drew Chancellor(??) Me and him were working for Pete Shepherd.

Jim: Then a few years later when Cal Lensink came along and hired you again?

Jack: I started working for BIA schools in 1960 and after ten years, I needed a change of place, I guess, so I got to Cal and Jerry Hout and went to work for them and there I was. I was working with Cal.

Cal: This morning when you saw the Steller's eider duck in the tray, you mentioned that there used to be a lot and not many now.

Jack: Yes, there were used to be many eider ducks too, all of the three, the Steller's, eider and the common. There were plenty out there at one time like when I was old enough to go out. They were all over.

Jim: Do you remember Raymond Hawks(??)

Jack: Yea, he was out there when I first started but I think it was only one season that he came out. He never came back.

Jim: Why did you guys name the slough after him?

Jack: He got wet! He was trying to get something and he didn't know it was that deep and he got wet, fell in and that was the name we gave the slough.

Jim: Sig Olson was laughing when I talked to him awhile back about you guys there when you took a look at Hawks and he was such a big, heavy set, man and Sig said "Jack looked at him and said 'no, never go fast no more'." He slowed you right up. Was that a true story?

Jack: Yea, that is a true story. We used the Army tents in the camps. When the sun goes up, the inside would get hot.

Jim: You didn't live at Old Chevak in the old church?

Jack: No. That was way before that I think.

Jim: Fish and Wildlife hadn't acquired that yet?

Cal: The Fish and Wildlife bought it in 1949 but the boats they had were too slow to go from the brant area up to Old Chevak. It would take 2-3 hours to do that, especially with Ray Hawks in the boat. Even when we got there, we camped down river for awhile when we were working there.

Jack: The biggest outboard motor we got at that time was a 9-horse with a wooden boat. The extra backups were 5-horses. Sometimes we would go back to camp after doing some banding out there with the black brant, we came home late and when we were going against the current, sometimes we get home at 1:00 in the morning. Nowadays, in a matter of a few hours.

Cal: You probably remember the days when you didn't even have outboard motors, you had a paddle.

Jack: Yea, the first motor was, I can't remember without having outboard motor. The 9-horse was the biggest one we start with out there.

Jim: Did you know Charlie Gilliam?

Jack: I heard of him but I didn't know him.

Jim: You were there when Roger Torey Peterson came out there?

Jack: Oh, yes, I was there. I think there were three from England and I could never understand what they were saying. They were talking in English and I could never

understand them. Roger Torey Peterson, I could understand him and he could understand the other guys.

Jim: You collected some birds for him so he could do pictures for his books? You shot a crane or something?

Jack: Yea, we did. Roger Torey Peterson was taking lot of pictures, making movies.

Jim: What kind of birds did you get for him?

Jack: I could have but I can't remember.

Jim: Well, maybe that is your crane in the bird book!

Jack: I did for someone else when Strickland, Charles Stickland was the refuge manager, there was one man from the "Lower 48" that I went out to get cranes for him. While the blood was warm, _____. I can't remember his name.

Cal: I don't know who it could have been but he must have been wanting to do DNA. Using blood serum was an early technique.

Jim: Cal, you and Jack worked together on a lot of projects out there.

Cal: Oh, yes. On just about everything we did out there. He helped on bird censuses on fox and he helped censusing with brant on circular plots. He ran the motor almost all the time when I was there, back and forth from Chevak to Old Chevak. He hauled things from Chevak to us when we needed groceries, hauled gas and just about everything there was to do, he helped with.

Jack: Going through the rivers, takes about maybe 5 or 6 hours by two 20-horse power motors. Snow machines take only about 20 minutes. So close but so far away.

Cal: Yes, by direct line I think it is 7 miles from Old Chevak to Chevak where Jack lives and we could see Chevak from Old Chevak just by looking over the tundra. By boat you would have to go clear out to the bay and then back up another river.

Jack: Those rivers, we go out from the village and the river actually turned because Chevak was the other way again and these two long banks, they let people cut them and two of them kind of made the river shorter.

Jim: Did you do that with shovels?

Jack: We didn't do it in one summer. We do more come summer and both of them finally the current of water takes over and makes them into a river. Now the other rivers are getting shallow.

Cal: The place you cut through, they call that place Chevak, don't they?

Jack: That was Old Chevak from Kashunuk River to _____River. I heard that there was a crack on the ground where there were two older people were using a man made axes. They used to make wooden hardwood boats. They would scrape sealskin and they were going to make boots out the sealskin and he put that wooden thing up and scrape sealskins when they were dry. He used that for cutting like they used to use to dry some skin boats or kayaks to go over from one river to another. That is where the crack started. They used that so much that it turned into a crack and it helps to make a river.

Jim: It would start to melt down in the summer.

Jack: In summer, they couldn't possible do it, they did it in the winter. Once they get through the permafrost, that's when we quit and warm weather takes over for awhile and maybe next summer time comes, they start again. I don't know how many years we did that. Two places over there.

Jim: And that's what the word "Chevak" means?

Jack: That means _____. That means cutting it from one river to another.

Cal: Now that "Chevak" at Old Chevak is about 100 yards wide, it is a big channel that connects two rivers now. It is where I took off in an airplane and you did too.

Jim: You had lived there in the old village before the Fish and Wildlife Service was working there and the people moved over to the side of Chevak village now?

Jack: Yea, we were there. First all the people were at the Old _____ where we take the picture the other day. _____ Nanook(?), the man who couldn't hear was talking to other people.

Jim: He was a good communicator even though he couldn't talk.

Jack: He could make noise but he never talked. He would hold dog chains that made noise. He uses the chain in his left hand to make a turn then in his right hand to make a turn. That's when we move up from _____ to Old Chevak hoping there would be a school up there and then _____ - couldn't get into school at all. The ground would get soft. We didn't have sidewalks. The reason was we wanted the government to get school so we decided to get the right one. There was a man with wooden barge who would help us finish up houses, getting the wood out. There was no lumber, just the wood and sod. That is how we used to live.

Cal: The wood was driftwood, mostly.

Jack: There was no lumber. Some of them didn't have no floor.

Cal: When you moved to New Chevak, basically, your houses were the same, basically the old sod houses.

Jack: Same kind. I don't where he got lumber from to make the small houses. No insulation, just a roof with maybe two inches of Celotex, no insulation with the 2x4's. This was after the War.

Jim: Would that have been Charlie Peterson that was barging materials for you?

Jack: Not the Celotex or lumber. He used to send groceries like flour, sugar, milk. I don't know where the Celotex came from.

Cal: Could it have been Eggleston's barge? It came out some of the time. Probably not, because Eggleston didn't come until the 60's. You moved to New Chevak in about 1949.

Jack: We called this "Alaska Housing." I don't know really where that came from. I never learned where it came from.

Cal: When you came from Old Kashunuk – what year was that?

Jack: 1946.

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--start of side 2, tape 1—

Jim: How long were you at St. Mary's?

Jack: Two and one-half years, 1946 to 1948. We went up to the fish camp in the Yukon above Mountain Village and maybe we been there one month. We were waiting until Father Fox led us go by air to _____. We went from Old Chevak to Yukon by

boat by George Shepherd's barge. George Shepherd was at Mountain Village. I don't know what, one time he was there at Old Chevak and he moved up to Mountain Village. Charlie Petersen used to get supplies by boat.

Cal: When you went from Old Chevak to the Yukon, instead of going out to the coast, you followed up the Kashunuk all the way to Yukon.

Jack: Yes, sometimes, the river up there is too shallow with weeds and sometimes going up to the Yukon from Old Chevak, when the tops of the boat hit the weeds and get stuck up around it, someone would have to jump into the water with a knife and cut the grass and start all over again till we finally would get to deep water.

Jim: How long would it take you to go from Old Chevak, that would be several days, wouldn't it?

Jack: More than that I think. Sometimes, maybe one week or so, that's as close as I can get.

Jim: You could sleep on the boat?

Jack: Yes, it was big enough to sleep, not for all of us. Every time we would stop we had the nets out so we could have something to eat.

Jim: Tell me, Jack, after you started working for the Fish and Wildlife some more, did you ever get a chance to bring your kids along on some of the banding trips so they knew a little more about what they were getting?

Jack: We had banding below Old Chevak.

Cal: We needed an army of kids to herd the ducks to the trap.

Jack: Right! That is when all of my kids were small. Maybe some of them were big enough to run around on the ground.

Cal: Is Phillip your oldest boy?

Jack: Next to the oldest. He works for the Fish and Wildlife Service here in Bethel.

Cal: The Refuge says he is a computer whiz now.

Jim: That's nice, that is a second-generation Fish and Wildlife employee. Did he go to school to study wildlife?

Jack: Yea, he used to work in the camps like in some other areas.

Jim: After Cal left, you kept working for six more different refuge managers?

Jack: Oh, yea. Strickland, Frickie, Bellinger, - - -

Jim: You were doing some maintenance things as well as bird drives, etc. You helped Cal put his cache back up on a good foundation. What was that story?

Cal: Do you remember the time that the shed fell off the pilings?

Jack: Oh, yea. The pilings that I was trying to level. One side was kind of low. I had two different axes. One was smaller and one was larger. I turned the smaller one too far. I really messed up! (laughter)

Cal: That was really funny because when the shed fell off the pilings and Jack was all so worried then when I came, I told him that he had solved my problem because I couldn't figure out how to get it off the pilings because I wanted it different. Do you remember that?

I had all the drawings ready for what I was going to do if I could get it off the pilings. Jack didn't believe me at first until I showed him my plans. The wind finally got it. A shed made of 5/8" plywood doesn't really stand up to a 90-mile wind.

Jack: The freezer and refrigerator was kept way, way back. That church stayed put.

Cal: That is a heavy building. All the walls are wood and sheet metal. That church was actually built in Old Kashunuk. There is a picture of the church the way it originally was at Old Kashunuk in a book call the *Kingdom of the Seal*. There is a drawing of the church in the book made by some little girl. That is a pretty famous church.

Jack: It is standing good right now. There was some guy maybe from the "Lower 48" came out and had the right kind of tools and right kind of lumber and things like that. He flew all the things out to Chevak and I hauled that big lumber by snow machine one at a time. That was what we used to make it more solid.

Jim: I remember a big improvement was putting that window in there so you could see out if the airplanes were secure when the wind was blowing. Did you put that window in, Jack?

Jack: No, I never put any windows in. The window on the riverside, Jim Gerts put in. That window came out of the hangar at Bethel. We took it out of the hangar and put it in the church.

Jim: I remember quite often going out the door, before we had the window, just to look and see if the airplane was O.K. Are you still working sometimes for Fish and Wildlife?

Jack: I use to help out taking the camps out by snow machine. I haven't done that in two years. I like to help out banding birds if my hand gets better. I would be glad to do it. I am 65 years old.

Jim: Well, you were a pretty young fellow when you first started working with those guys.

Jack: Really, _____ hired me. He had no choice because I was the only one able to work. While the rest of the men go to the canneries to work, I was the only one able to work. I liked that fast boat with the 9-horse engine on it! There was a lot of good times out there.

Cal: Jack thought it was pretty funny when my dog that I always had out there would come in wet and dirty so I finally cut up an old mattress and made a place for the dog to lay. As soon as I made the mattress and put it in the corner, the dog went right over and laid down on it. Then I told Jack that what the dog really wanted was a pillow so I threw a pillow over there and the dog turned around and put his head on it. Jack just about cracked up. I knew that would happen because when the dog was a puppy, it had distemper and it had a hard time breathing so it always slept with its head up on a shoe or up against the wall or something so it wasn't down. So as soon as he had something to put his head on in that corner, he would use it. That was the first time Jack ever saw a dog use a pillow.

The dog was trained by a book in which you sent the dog away from you with its name. One time a bunch of Eskimos were coming in and I pretended I was calling the dog. Actually I was pretending I was sending the dog out and I told him to charge and instead of him going after something, he would lie down as if it was praying. Then when I called its name, the dog ran away. It was supposed to do that but no one could really figure out why that dog was acting the way it was. I just told them that the dog would do anything opposite that I told it to do.

Jim: When I was there we used to enjoy having Francis Nanook(??) come by and he would do hunting stories for us. He was quite a guy. He would come by for coffee. I remember one morning he came by and we had the boat anchored out in the river. He knocked on the door and he made this little dish thing with his hand and then pointed

down and he did it in such a way that everybody in the room knew that the boat had sunk! He was good at those kinds of signs.

Cal: Have you ever done any of the Eskimo dances?

Jack: I use to, when I was younger but not anymore.

Jim: Some of those dances were hunting stories, weren't they?

Jack: Yes, some.

Jim: We always liked to see him come by. Then I think it was his son or his grandson that would help him out or help us out if we were confused about what was going on.

Jack: I don't know how he does it. He can really talk to others, own brothers and sisters. Sometimes, he just has a nice movement when he talks to them instead of using his hands. A lot of times when he talks to other people, he uses both hands, eyes, mouth.

Jim: He really had a good life without being able to talk like we do.

Jack: He was born deaf. He can make noises but he don't talk. He got married and had a family. He has got a lot of grandkids.

Cal: You had only two years of school but you read pretty good, don't you?

Jack: Yes, I do. I use the dictionary. I was 14 years old. A lot of times when I was in _____ I hardly go to school, they put me to work like getting wood, chop wood. We didn't have any fuel at all like stove oil. We just had to use the driftwood. We just had to go out to the Yukon, up river in boats and cut driftwood, make a long, long raft. The name of the boat was *Satin*(??). Maybe it was 35 feet long. I don't know how strong the motor was but it was strong enough to pull the raft on the Yukon. We used the

wood all winter long. We did a lot of chopping wood. The willows came from the rivers, but the driftwood came from the Yukon. We lived at St. Mary's, on the Yukon.

Jim: Before you had oil heaters at Chevak and Old Chevak, you burned willows?

Jack: We used both wood. Wood was really hard to find. The only wood we really used was in the wood stove was when we were cooking. The sod houses were very good. They didn't take much heat. Now we are using fuels instead of wood. We have a furnace now. Furnaces have taken over. Saves a lot of work.

Jim: Well, it is getting late. Do you think we have had enough stories for this time.

Jack: I was there, but I can't remember.

Cal: I think that is true of everyone. We frequently think of things when somebody else starts telling about it then all of a sudden you remember.

Jim: We always thought it was a lot of fun to be out there in the tundra in the summer time with the birds on the water. Those were good summers and I guess you feel the same way.

Jack: Those were better days. The weather has changed. It is not like it used to be. In the fall, it is wet and strong winds. In the spring, also a lot of rain. The snow goes fast.

Cal: I think Jack was with me the day that I took off in the Cub and I took off in the water and the airplane went into a climb and I couldn't get the stick forward again which was a little hairy. Do you remember that? The airplane was climbing and I couldn't push the stick forward and I finally played with it a little and found that reducing the power I could probably let it down without crashing. Once I figured I could control it in the air with the nose pointed way up without stalling it, then I pulled back on the stick to see what was the matter. I looked down and there was a shotgun shell caught behind the

stick. Someone had dropped it out of their pocket. I had to pull it back still steeper until I could get the shell out then get the plane back to flying normal.

Jim: This has been fun! If we think of more stories, we can try again. Thank you, Jack, for all your stories.

--end of side 2, tape 1—

end of interview

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