

INTERVIEW WITH BILL AND JEAN THOMAS
BY ROGER KAYE NOVEMBER 12, 2002

MR. KAYE: This is an Oral History interview with Bill and Jean Thomas, conducted in Wasilla, Alaska on November 12, 2002. The subject is their life on the upper Porcupine and upper Black Rivers. Roger Kaye is conducted the interview. Jean and Bill, thank you for participating in this. I'll begin with you first, Jean. What years did you live on the Porcupine River? I believe it was at the Salmon, Trout and Porcupine River areas.

MRS. THOMAS: I don't remember years, we were pretty young anyway. Bobbie was about seven or eight years old when we left Old Rampart to go to Burnt Paw because of my dad's health. My brother was born there, and that was in 1961 I guess. So that was quiet a number of years ago I guess.

MR. KAYE: So you lived there, and your father had a trading post. There was your mother, and your sisters; Bella, Doris, Barbara and Bessie.

MRS. THOMAS: Bessie's real name is Blanche, Blanche Williams now. My dad had a trading post and he was also a trapper.

MR. KAYE: Your father was Charlie Strong, is that right?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes.

MR. KAYE: Tell me about him.

MRS. THOMAS: I was just a little kid when we were up there. One of the highlights I always remember when my dad came home from the trap line was us kids looking forward to taking his boots off, and putting his slippers on for him. That was such a joy to do that.

MR. KAYE: You were about 170 miles up the Porcupine from Fort Yukon. Was there a sense of isolation, or being far away from everybody else?

MRS. THOMAS: I can remember times when it seems that way, but there was our family and there was another family across the river. There were at least two or three other families. In the wintertime we could go across the ice and visit back and forth. Of course, my Grandmother lived near us there too.

MR. KAYE: What was her name?

MRS. THOMAS: May, May Martin.

MR. KAYE: Was she married to John Herbert then?

MRS. THOMAS: I guess she was married to him, but I don't remember him at all. So he must have died before I could remember.

MR. KAYE: What is most memorable about childhood way up the river there?

MRS. THOMAS: I guess we always thinking of the fun things. We don't think of all of the hard work! Of course, I was so young, that in the summer time and in fall, or about August I guess, when the Salmon start coming in. My dad had a what we called a [sounds like] petta bar. He would go out and check the nets and the petta bar would be half full three times a day. Mom and the older kids had a lot of fish to cut. We'd cut it and dry it and bale it and smoke it and just every way we could fix it. That is one of the things I remember. It was always a lot of hard work. They worked hard, but I was too young to cut fish. I helped carry it up the bank. We'd put it in a burlap bag and put it over our shoulder, with all of this stuff running down our backs. I helped that way but I wasn't allowed to cut the fish because mom thought that I'd cut myself.

MR. KAYE: So, when you were seven or eight you went to Burnt Paw, just down the river. Then you moved to Fort Yukon, is that right?

MRS. THOMAS: Yeah, my dad's health was not very good, so we had to move.

MR. KAYE: Was that in the late 1940's?

MRS. THOMAS: It was later than that, but I don't remember the years.

MR. KAYE: Did you meet Bill here, in Fort Yukon?

MRS. THOMAS: I have known his family for years. I guess all my life I have known his family.

MR. KAYE: Well Bill, let me ask you a couple of questions now. You grew up in a trapping camp on the Black River, is that right? Just south of where Jean grew up?

MR. THOMAS: I am not sure about the distances, but it is approximately 300 miles from Fort Yukon up the river. It used to take us seven days traveling, long days on the boat, to get there.

MR. KAYE: Who were your parents?

MR. THOMAS: Jacob Thomas. "Tommy the Mate", they called him. He was a Mate on a steamer there for many years. My mother was Margaret. I think my dad came to

Alaska in 1905 or 1906. He was working on the river boats as First Mate and from there he took on the trapping.

MR. KAYE: When did your father move up to the upper Black River?

MR. THOMAS: It was a long time ago. Let's see, it was probably in the early 1930's.

MR. KAYE: So, you really grew up there?

MR. THOMAS: Yes.

MR. KAYE: And how old were you when you left that area?

MR. THOMAS: I left in 1942.

MR. KAYE: So you left during the War?

MR. THOMAS: Yes.

MR. KAYE: What was childhood like up there?

MR. THOMAS: It was beautiful. There was a nice, clean environment. You don't catch no "bugs" because there was no people! We'd be there approximately nine months out of the year. Then it got to be just our family. Our nearest neighbor up river was about twenty-five miles. And the nearest one down river was about forty miles.

MR. KAYE: Was there a sense of isolation, being away from everybody?

MR. THOMAS: Yes, but you get used to it. We actually enjoy it. But it does get kind of lonesome once in a while. You think about what all the other young people are doing, you know, but other than that we enjoyed it. It was a good, clean life.

MR. KAYE: Was that lifestyle then, based on trapping? Was that the main thing?

MR. THOMAS: Yeah, trapping.

MR. KAYE: When you were young, what was an average day like for you?

MR. THOMAS: Well, let's see, it depends on what time of the year it is.

MR. KAYE: Say, trapping season?

MR. THOMAS: We'd have lines going out to different areas. Then we'd have either a small trapping cabin or in some cases we used a 7' x 7' wall tent if there was no timber in the area to build with. You'd go out for three or four days at a time and come back. Then you'd go out in another direction for a few more days and come back. You could cover a lot of area that way. It was interesting. It was a good life, but it's gone now.

MR. KAYE: It's gone now! So you left during World War II. Did you serve in the War?

MR. THOMAS: Yeah.

MR. KAYE: Where at?

MR. THOMAS: I was in the Coast Guard. I shipped out to Ketchikan, to the base there for a while. Then I was on a patrol boat up west of there in the [unintelligible] Straits area for three or four months. I came back and joined the parachute rescue squad. I didn't jump, but the crew, the jumpers that had gone off for training and another fellow and I joined afterwards. They picked us because we were equipped, you know, used to it, in case they had to haul somebody out of the bush or someplace. They did that with a helicopter.

MR. KAYE: Wow! So after the War then, did you ever go back to Black River to trap?

MR. THOMAS: No. When I got out of the service I took a year's training at [sounds like] Care River Technical Institute to be a mechanic. There was really nothing left to go back to.

MR. KAYE: So you had had enough of that lifestyle, and wanted to...?

MR. THOMAS: Oh, no! Not us. It's just that things had changed. The prices of fur and the costs. You had to have a steady job in order to go out and trap!

MR. KAYE: I see.

MR. THOMAS: It's a good life. I enjoy getting out, and staying there.

MR. KAYE: So, your seasonal cycle during the year then was you trapped the main fur animals, and then in the spring would you trap beaver and rats?

MR. THOMAS: Yes and in the early days you were allowed to shoot beaver too. But later on it was trapping only, mostly muskrat and beavers.

MR. KAYE: Then what would you do after the muskrat and beaver season?

MR. THOMAS: Then we'd head for town and celebrate! A little recreation!

MR. KAYE: Tell me about the trip from upper Black River to Fort Yukon. You had homemade boats?

MR. THOMAS: Oh yeah. We had a large river boat and a smaller poling boat that we towed. It takes about two days to get there going down river.

MR. KAYE: So who all would be in the boat? Would it be pretty crowded?

MR. THOMAS: No, just my family, my mother and dad and all my brothers.

MR. KAYE: Did you have dog teams too that went?

MR. THOMAS: The dog team went in the poling boat.

MR. KAYE: So you'd float down to Fort Yukon, and that was the first time you'd seen other people for quite a while?

MR. THOMAS: Oh yeah. Like I say, we had a few neighbors up river, but they just passed going one way or the other.

MR. KAYE: So what's it like for a young boy to be entering Fort Yukon after being out in the woods for nine months?

MR. THOMAS: Well, you enjoyed it. You notice I'm not much of a talker. You stay out in the woods for nine months and you get used to not talking very much. Of course, you'd talk to your family, but when you're out by yourself for a week at a time, you're not used to talking.

MR. KAYE: Did you have your own dog team as a boy?

MR. THOMAS: Oh yeah. I used dog teams all of the time. It was the only way to get around in the wintertime, unless you wanted to use snowshoes.

MR. KAYE: As a boy or young man would you go out by yourself?

MR. THOMAS: Oh yeah.

MR. KAYE: How long would you be out by yourself?

MR. THOMAS: Well, mostly ten days or so when you were out building a cabin or something like that. But normally, if you were just trapping, five days was about the

most you were out there. Out there it would get down to sixty-five below, you've got to keep going because you've got only so much food and fuel. It was interesting in a way.

MR. KAYE: Were you ever scared, going out that far, alone?

MR. THOMAS: No. Didn't even think about it. You get past that after a while.

MR. KAYE: Jean, did you make the same trips from the Porcupine down to Fort Yukon in a plank boat?

MRS. THOMAS: My dad had a big barge made out of wood. And he had a big inboard motor that had the power. That's what we used to go down the river with in the springtime and coming back in the fall. They put a tent over the big barge and that kept the wind and rain out. That's the kind of boat we had for going back and forth.

MR. KAYE: Jean, tell me what it was like; the trip from Salmon Trout, or Old Rampart house, it was called, down to Fort Yukon.

MRS. THOMAS: In the springtime, sometime in May, or when the ice goes, that's when we headed down. Of course there was high water from bank to bank and it was very swift. I believe we had our dogs on the raft next to our boat. We had to watch them as we were going down river. I remember that was kind of scary because the water was so high bank to bank, and so swift. Our dogs were on the raft next to our boat.

MR. KAYE: Before you got to Fort Yukon, did you stop and dress up, or get ready?

MRS. THOMAS: We probably did. I don't remember exactly. Of course, we were very anxious to see our relatives that were there, our Aunt especially. Aunt Fanny and Jimmy Carroll had a general store. Our Aunt always had us up for lunch. I remember after being up home all winter long, you run out of different things. My dad always bought things by case lot, but towards spring you'd begin to run out of various foods and things. She used to open up a can of peaches and we thought that was just the most delicious thing! We used to look forward to that so much!

MR. KAYE: I've got a picture that I took of the place years ago. That's your father's place right, the house that you grew up in?

MRS. THOMAS: Probably, I don't remember that far back. But that might be.

MR. KAYE: If that old building could talk, what do you think it would tell for stories?

MRS. THOMAS: "I miss you all!" I remember that it was a very nice place. We had a kitchen. And my mom had everything so nice and clean. We had a wooden floor that was

white. It wasn't painted or anything. Mom kept it so clean. We just utilized whatever was available. We didn't have a store to go to buy Comet or anything, so what my mom used on the floor was wood ash. She scrubbed the floor with that and it made it nice and white, just like Comet would do. That's one of the things I remember. Of course, the back rooms were hard wood floors. I remember that my mom baked all of the bread and rolls and cinnamon rolls and things like that. She always had a big bowl of rolls on the table. Even when we were outdoors playing and we came in, we would never just go to the table and help ourselves. We had to ask, I remember. It was always nice to have that on the table. There were always cinnamon rolls, or fresh rolls, or fried bread. She would take part of the dough and fry it in Crisco. That's what they used all of the time. It was so delicious. I still like homemade bread today. My mom would bake as much as fourteen or fifteen loaves at a time because there was no place to go to buy anything like that.

MR. KAYE: So, your father was a trader. And he had a trading post there. Who came to buy goods from your father?

MRS. THOMAS: People came from across the river, like I said. And the native people that trapped, they came bought their supplies from Dad.

MR. KAYE: Did people come from Old Crow and from up on the coast?

MRS. THOMAS: I don't remember from how far they would come up. But I know there were quite a number of people. I just don't know where they all came from.

MR. KAYE: What were your happiest times there as a child? What are the most memorable things that you did?

MRS. THOMAS: I think the most fun thing we did was sledding. My dad made a toboggan for us and we would slide down the bank and out on to the river. It was all frozen and packed with snow from the wind that blows so much there. My dad would help us pull it back up and we'd do it again. Then, we'd make snow houses too, like the Eskimos do I guess. Sometimes my mom, and dad would haul the blocks of snow, square blocks, and she's make a house for us; just stacking them up. Sometimes we would just make a pile of snow and make a hole inside. That was our little snow house. My mom used to make little furniture for me, for inside of the house. There was a stove and a sink and different pieces of furniture. When the spring came, I wanted to keep my furniture. I didn't want it to melt on me. So I would put it behind the house and try and preserve it as long as I could before it melted on me.

MR. KAYE: What did you do during the summer?

MRS. THOMAS: Well, as soon as the ice was gone we went to Fort Yukon.

MR. KAYE: What did you do there in Fort Yukon?

MRS. THOMAS: We had a lot of friends and relatives that we visited we. And we had a lot of cousins that we played with. We made little clothes for our dolls, and little fur coats out of squirrel and rabbit skins. I used to enjoy doing that.

MR. KAYE: Was it hard for you to go back up the Porcupine River in the fall and leave Fort Yukon?

MRS. THOMAS: No, we enjoyed it. We actually looked forward to going back up there. It was so much fun. We never got sick when we were up there. It's just amazing how none of us ever got hurt or anything as much we did. My older sisters would cut and chop the wood. That's just the way of life. Nobody ever got hurt. Nobody ever got sick until we came to town, and we all would catch a cold. But it was a fun way of life. We liked it.

MR. KAYE: You mentioned the natives that lived across the river. Your mother was native, what that right, and your father was a Scotsman?

MRS. THOMAS: A Swede.

MR. KAYE: Ok, what did you consider yourself? Was there a question about your identity at all?

MRS. THOMAS: The kids used to just make fun of me. I guess I was lighter that they were. And they told me that my hair was like grass in the fall. I would cry. I would come in and say that to my mom. I would go back out and say that my hair was that color because my mom put Mentholatum in my hair! That was kind of hard because the kids made fun of me. I different that they were I guess.

MR. KAYE: Your father was probably a leader in that area, being a white person and being educated and having a store. Were you kind of different from other Indian kids whose families trapped and traveled through the area?

MRS. THOMAS: We didn't think we were really different. We were all so close there. I guess the only thing I can remember is that they made fun of the color of my hair and things like that. But other than that, I think we got along pretty well.

MR. KAYE: Bill, what did you do when you were a very young boy; too young to be out trapping? What did you do up the Black River as a child?

MR. THOMAS: I can't remember too much before trapping. We started awful early. We probably started at about ten years old. Of course we went to school too. Yeah we started quite early with the trapping. I spent several years at Fort Yukon going to school when I quite small. When we got older, why, we were part of the team. It would take everybody to make things go.

MR. KAYE: So when did you quit school?

MR. THOMAS: I don't remember the date, of course. I was mostly self-taught. I read a lot so I could pass my GED. We did get too much book learning.

MR. KAYE: You were also part white, and part [sounds like] Cochiti. What did you consider yourself, or did you even think about it?

MR. THOMAS: I didn't think about. Mother was half, and dad of course was white. We were three quarters native, but it just never crossed your mind, really. You were just like anybody else.

MR. KAYE: When you were a kid, living way up the Black River, you must have read about the lower forty-eight and the outside world. What did you think of that far away place?

MR. THOMAS: Well, I doubt we gave it much thought. As I remember, we had another schoolboy from stateside writing back and forth as a pen pal. He mentioned some of the things, but I don't think we were really interested. We were more interested in what we were doing.

MR. KAYE: Jean, when you were a very small girl living up on the Porcupine, you probably read your father's magazines about the lower forty-eight. What did you think about that far away place?

MRS. THOMAS: Well, I guess it was something like a dream I guess. You just never thought much about it I guess because you just know you'll never go there. It was just so impossible. We were way up there. We were so busy when we were up there, making a living, and with chores and everything we had to do that a person didn't think too much about anything else. Just about what you needed to do. You were so exhausted in the evening you'd just go to sleep. We just really didn't think too much about it.

MR. KAYE: When you were a young girl, was there any sense of change, or any sense that old native ways and that traditional lifestyle were disappearing?

MRS. THOMAS: Not that I can remember.

MR. KAYE: Looking back at it today, it's gone pretty much, as a lifestyle. What do you think about that? Is it unfortunate? Was anything lost with that change?

MRS. THOMAS: I think so. It's such a good and peaceful life. It's a wonderful life. And it was clean. Instead of what the kids are getting into nowadays, you know, with all crimes. All of the drinking and drugs and things we were spared. So we never got into anything like that out there. In a lot of ways the younger people who live around Fort Yukon may have a better education, but from our standpoint and with the way we were raised, we just had better morals and things like that. We were spared from all of that. I don't know which one way is the other. I prefer the other way myself, the way I was raised. I have seen relatives, and other people that I know just going down the tubes the way they are living nowadays and it's really a shame. Becoming an alcoholic and using drugs and things like that that we never even heard of when we were growing up. We were just away from all of that.

MR. KAYE: So you think you're a better person for having grown up that way, out there?

MRS. THOMAS: I think so.

MR. KAYE: How about you Bill? Do you feel that having grown up and worked hard out there in that kind life was important to the person that you became?

MR. THOMAS: I wouldn't be important if you could make everything easy. But with the price of fur down and the cost of everything is up, why, nowadays it would be kind of hard to make a go of it. We'd have to work all summer in order to be able to trap all winter. It was a good life. I really enjoyed it. I would have liked to have kept right on with the way it was. But it's gone.

MR. KAYE: Looking at the future now: Back when you two were young there was no sense that the area where you grew up and trapped in would become a National Wildlife Refuge. In 1980, a law was passed, the Lands Act. Bill your area became the Yukon Flats Refuge, and Jean, your area became the Arctic Refuge. Do you recalled hearing about the Alaska lands issue? It was very controversial in Fort Yukon and other places in the 1970s. The idea of putting your area within a refuge to protect it; what did you think of that when you heard about that idea?

MRS. THOMAS: I think it's wonderful to preserve the land that we grew up on there. With all of the animals, and the Caribou migrating there. They stayed up a hill out behind our place all winter long. I'd just like to see that continue. It's such a beautiful place. If I was thirty years younger, I'd go back there. It's such a beautiful country, and it's really neat.

MR. KAYE: How about you Bill? Do you remember the controversy to protect that area? What do you think about the idea of being protected as a Wildlife Refuge?

MR. THOMAS: I would like to see it protected. They are all for development and all of that, but I like the country the way it was. As long as the people are allowed to hunt and fish and trap, why, it's wonderful. I'd sure like to see it kept that way.

MR. KAYE: Jean, I've got a picture that I found. Actually, your sister Bella gave it to me. It shows you girls when you were quite young in what looks like homemade parkas standing in front of Old Rampart on the river. Tell me about that picture, and what you see there.

MRS. THOMAS: Do you want me to describe the parkas and how they were made?

MR. KAYE: Yes!

MRS. THOMAS: I'll describe Bella's parka. The parka is made from Caribou hide. My mom tans it. This is the fur side out. She tans on the inside. I think it was white fox. There is fancy trim and Wolverine trim on the bottom. That's how she made all of our parkas. When we were younger, about seven, eight or ten years old, she made what looks like bib overalls with feet attached, and the fur is on the inside. That's how our clothing was when we were outdoors playing all day. We never got cold because the Caribou hide is so warm. In this picture the next one is my other sister Barb, I believe, then me and my other sister Doris. She isn't living any more, but there were four of us there.

MR. KAYE: Do you remember going up on the rock that's behind Old Rampart?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes we did. In fact, just right up in here, is where we used to go up. [showing on photograph] We went up on the edge and looked up and down the river at the boats coming in. Sometimes there would just be a big barge hauling freight back and forth to Old Crow. We used to look forward to seeing that.

MR. KAYE: Would people stop by your place to visit, who were going to Old Crow or beyond?

MRS. THOMAS: Sometimes they did. But a lot of times they just went on. It often depended on the weather and the water level. Sometimes the water would get low and they have to go when it's just right. They would just keep going because it's quite a long ways.

MR. KAYE: Did any of the Ministers stop by? The Episcopal Priests, or Anglican?

MRS. THOMAS: Not that I can remember, not way up there.

MR. KAYE: And how did you get your mail?

MRS. THOMAS: I remember Sam White used to bring it up in the wintertime.

MR. KAYE: The Game Warden?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes.

MR. KAYE: Do you remember Sam White, the Game Warden?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes, he used to land right in front of our place. He had a big gravel bar there to land on.

MR. KAYE: Oh he did!? What did people think about a Game Warden at that time?

MRS. THOMAS: I don't know. He was a nice guy and very friendly. It was nice to see him when he brought up our mail.

MR. KAYE: He didn't give local people trouble about breaking the law?

MRS. THOMAS: It was a way of life. I think he just sort of accepted it, you know. We'd just get the Caribou when we needed it, and so forth in the wintertime.

MR. KAYE: And he overlooked that?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes. That was just a way of life for us. There was no other way to get meat. That's what we did. The Caribou were just right up the hill so whenever we needed meat, we'd just go up and get a Caribou.

MR. KAYE: Would Sam stay overnight at your place, or would he just stop by?

MRS. THOMAS: I think he just stopped by.

MR. KAYE: Did he have his old airplane, the biplane?

MRS. THOMAS: Yeah, he had a little airplane. I don't know what kind it was. He would just come in and land on the big gravel bar right in front of our place.

MR. KAYE: I see. Did you come in the winter or summer?

MRS. THOMAS: It was in the wintertime. I remember the snow.

MR. KAYE: He landed with skis?

MRS. THOMAS: Right.

MR. KAYE: Did he talk to you kids?

MRS. THOMAS: I suppose he did. I don't really remember. Of course, we were all so shy. Whenever somebody comes we were so shy we didn't talk very much like people do nowadays.

MR. KAYE: Bill, let me ask you, do you remember Sam White?

MR. THOMAS: Yeah.

MR. KAYE: Did he stop by your camp?

MR. THOMAS: Yes, there was one time that he stopped there that I can remember. I remember him bringing oranges and candy for the kids. That was quite a treat during the wintertime. What he did was to stop by and check the furs to make sure you didn't have any illegal furs. At that time you were allowed ten [unintelligible] per person. So you don't over do it. But he didn't give anybody a bad time as I recall. As far as he was concerned if you didn't waste it, even feeding it to the dogs, it was ok.

MR. KAYE: In those days, he was concerned about people using strychnine. I know that some people in Fort Yukon did. What that an issue that you remember hearing about?

MR. THOMAS: Yeah. I heard about. I figured any way to get rid of those cotton picking [sounds like] wolves. They can be quite bad. When the snow and weather conditions are just right they can really murder those moose.

MR. KAYE: So did you try strychnine?

MR. THOMAS: No. He was down in the Hughes area there, when I was working for Wings. I was a bush pilot for Wings. He said that the moose were up to their bellies in the snow and wolves could just walk on the crust. They could wipe the moose population out. They were just helpless.

MR. KAYE: Do you remember Evelyn Shore, when she lived up the Black River? She was one of the women who lived up there on the Black River. She wrote the book *Born on Snow Shoes*.

MR. THOMAS: Was that the [sounds like] Bergams you mean?

MR. KAYE: Yes, that's right.

MR. THOMAS: They were up on the Salmon River fork. The Salmon River goes to the right, and the Black River goes to the left. They were up there somewhere. I'm not sure where, but there were three sisters there.

MR. KAYE: They were pretty tough trappers?

MR. THOMAS: I understand they were! [Mrs. Thomas laughs]

MR. KAYE: Tell me about them.

MR. THOMAS: Well, I don't know that much about them! They had two brothers who drowned in a boat accident down at Fort Yukon. There were just the three girls that I remember, besides their mother. Later on there was this old guy named John who was helping them out too. But I don't that much about them.

MR. KAYE: Jean, do you remember the Bergam sisters?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes, I do.

MR. KAYE: Tell me about them.

MRS. THOMAS: Well, they were pretty rough. Their mother was a real lady. She had bakeshop where she would bake all kinds of breads, and she'd sell it. I remember she would crochet beautiful tablecloths and bedspreads and things like that. She was a beautiful lady, and very nice. The girls were very rough and rugged, just like men you know. I guess they did everything men could do as far as hunting and trapping. They talked a lot. They really like to talk with ladies. There were, I believe there were, three sisters. I believe they were all married and had children. I used to iron for Evelyn, I think that was her name. She would put clothes in a big washtub and fill it up. She and her husband didn't like to do the ironing. I would iron for hours for her!

MR. KAYE: Did you ever hear stories of the 'bush man' when you were a girl growing up there?

MRS. THOMAS: Yeah, I've heard of stories about that, but I don't remember much. They used to talk about it. It was kind of scary, you know, wondering if you might run into one of them or something when you were way out. But other than that, I don't remember too much about it.

MR. KAYE: Your mother, and your grandmother May Martin, did they tell stories about what it was like before the white man came, before there was a white presence?

MRS. THOMAS: I know my sister Bella talks about that. But I don't remember my grandmother much at all. I was very young when she died. I remember very little about her. I think it was grandfather Roderick, we used to be kind of afraid of him because they called him a medicine man. They'd say that he could just hang on a nail in the wall and call the rabbits. He'd take a willow and make a snare and call rabbits in. He could call rabbits that way. I remember us kids used to be kind of afraid of him. But that's about all I remember about him.

MR. KAYE: How about you Bill, did you hear stories about the 'bush man' at all?

MR. THOMAS: Oh yeah.

MR. KAYE: What were they?

MR. THOMAS: I believe what they actually were, were people used to have these warring parties. The stories that I heard at the Naval base was that the Eskimos and the Indians had a lot of warfare between them. Sometimes some of the people would get pretty well wiped out. There were just a few of them left and they lived all by themselves. That is one way they said that the 'bush man' could have evolved. Then, people would be afraid of them. They lived by themselves. But this is just hearsay.

MR. KAYE: You never met one?

MR. THOMAS: No!

MR. KAYE: Did you hear about Veit Quatro, a bushman that lived in that area?

THE THOMASES: No, we haven't.

MR. KAYE: Bill did you hear stories about the first white people that came into the country, or hear stories from relatives about before they came?

MR. THOMAS: I heard an old fellow tell about how this was passed down. There was this old guy and the first time he saw these Russian traders, and they showed him guns and matches and things like that. At that time, all they had for making fires was flint. They'd make a powder out of these growths on Birch trees. Then they'd strike the flint and get a spark going over this powdered material. They'd get it started that way. Anyway, supposedly these three Russians, they caught him and he was afraid. The story that he was telling people was that he was afraid. They showed him how to shoot a gun, and they gave him a gun. They told him to go get some fur. They gave him matches

of course. They took his flint outfit and flung it out in the bushes and he was so unhappy about that! He took this back to his camp and told the other natives about it. Apparently, that how they got started to interacting with the Russian fur traders. They wanted, they gave the natives equipment so that they could get some furs. Other than that, it was just a passed down story. I don't really know nothing much about it.

MR. KAYE: What year were you born Bill?

MR. THOMAS: December, 1920.

MR. KAYE: So you probably wouldn't have known Hudson Stuck then?

MR. THOMAS: No, but I heard a lot about him.

MR. KAYE: What did you hear about Hudson Stuck?

MR. THOMAS: Well, not too much really. I heard my dad talk about him. I understand that he was one of the first to climb Mount McKinley, although he had a lot of help. I understand that they helped him up to the top there. His native helpers helped him get up to the top there. He traveled around a lot, I understand, from village to village, by dog team. It was before my time. I remember seeing a great big concrete cross where his grave is there at Fort Yukon.

MR. KAYE: Did you hear stories about Hudson Stuck, Jean?

MRS. THOMAS: I remember the name, but I don't remember any stories. That was before my time. I don't know much about it.

MR. KAYE: Jean, this is a picture of Old Rampart, taken from that rock that we looked at earlier. This is a little cove there, tell me about that.

MRS. THOMAS: That's what we called a Salmon [trap?]. . . you mean up this river here?

MR. KAYE: Yes.

MRS. THOMAS: That's where the Salmon, they spawn up this way. They go up this, it's a good sized river there.

MR. KAYE: Did you net them there?

MRS. THOMAS: Yeah, right it there, [pointing to photo] there was an eddy that my dad used to go out with the [sounds like] peterbar and get it half full three times a day in the fall.

MR. KAYE: Really? So quite a few salmon go up there?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes. Oh, there were these big schools. You could see them. The water was clear, just like rainwater so you could see them real well. I remember my dad used to get all of that salmon in and my mom and my older sister would cut fish until late in the evening by lantern.

MR. KAYE: And that was to feed the dog team?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes.

MR. KAYE: How many dogs did you folks have?

MRS. THOMAS: I think my dad must have had about fifteen or sixteen dogs.

MR. KAYE: Oh really, a couple of teams then?

MRS. THOMAS: Um, hum. That was a lot of dogs. Of course we had to have a lot of dogs for hauling the wood as well as my dad traveling.

MR. KAYE: Did you fish for Grayling in the creek there?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes, we fished for Grayling there. I remember further up this little creek there was a big flat rock, just like somebody had sliced the top of it off. You could go out on it and fish. The water was real deep but you could see the Grayling just coming around. I remember I was fishing there one time and like I said, you could see the fish real clear, and I could see one coming for my bait and my heart would just be pounding. I just knew that big Grayling was going to get in the net.

MR. KAYE: Do you remember when the first airplane came to Old Rampart?

MRS. THOMAS: Well, Sam White, I think, is the first one that I remember coming with an airplane up there. That was in the wintertime. I don't remember ever having any boat coming, unless he landed on a little lake. There was a little lake on that gravel bar I was telling you about earlier, too. He may have landed there with a float plane too, but I don't remember.

MR. KAYE: How about you Bill? What's the first airplane you remember seeing?

MR. THOMAS: We had a person up above our place named Kennedy that was sick, he was brought down by our neighbor there. He was all swollen up. I don't know what it was. But anyway, he was sick and they decided to try to run to town by dog team and

send an airplane up for him. It takes five days by dog team to get to Fort Yukon if the trail is good. This fellow went down and brought back an airplane. They couldn't land on the river so they landed on this large lake on the bank. We hauled him out. My dad hauled him out by dog team to the airplane and they flew him out. I think that was the first one. About that same time they started hauling freight by airplane up in to our country up there. Jim Dodson was the first one that stopped by at our place. He flew by and dropped a note saying that he'd like to stop by. He wanted us to make a twenty foot circle on the ice there if was no over flow. If there was overflow, we were to make a square. My dad was downriver. My mom was there. And I had already been out all day. I hitched up the team and when down to get him. I know that he wanted to go to town by the aircraft. That's probably the first or second time. It was probably 1937, or 1938.

MR. KAYE: When you were young and trapping there what kind of catches did you make? How many martin or lynx did you catch? Do you remember in a year?

MR. THOMAS: We didn't get too many lynx when I was [trapping]. Earlier there was more. We'd get four or five mink a winter, and probably thirty or forty martin. Primarily we got a lot of beaver and muskrat. I have some pictures that you have probably seen, that show how we'd get probably fifty or so beaver in the springtime, and a few hundred muskrats.

MR. KAYE: When did the rest of your family leave the Black River for Fort Yukon?

MR. THOMAS: The ice was usually out by the 10th of June, and we'd head on down.

MR. KAYE: When did your family quit living out there year round, or for all but the summer.

MR. THOMAS: They were still living there when I left in 1942. They were there for some time after that.

MR. KAYE: Did you ever go back?

MR. THOMAS: I've been back a few times. I've gone out hunting with my brother John up there for moose. It's nice. I like to get out and see the old country.

MR. KAYE: Your brother John describes himself as a "gentleman trapper". He says that he like to go out, but he doesn't want to work hard like in those days.

MR. THOMAS: We went trapping there. We don't travel together. We'd do in different directions. We all traveled by ourselves when we trapped. It was a good life. I enjoyed it.

MR. KAYE: That's all the questions that I had. Do you have anything that you want to add?

MRS. THOMAS: I've got a bear story that I wanted to tell about my dad and I.

MR. KAYE: Please do.

MRS. THOMAS: This was in Burnt Paw. I was a bit older then, so I could go out and trap with my dad.

MR. KAYE: Burnt Paw is down river about thirty or forty miles or so?

MRS. THOMAS: Yes, from Old Rampart. It was in the fall, and my dad...

MR. KAYE: What year would this have been?

MRS. THOMAS: I don't remember. I was helping my dad break a new trail over the mountain, and down. We had to cut all of the brush out of the way to make the new trail. We would set up a tent. We had two tents and went home and got another tent so we would camp in the next one, and so forth. We would be setting traps as we were going along. We'd check them on the way back. I guess we'd go back and check our traps about once a week because sometimes it would snow so much you couldn't let them go for too long. We were back checking our trap line, my dad and I, and when we came to the second tent we noticed that a bear had been there. It was a Grizzly bear. You could put your feet inside of their footprint. My dad only had a thirty aught six [30.06 cal.] Everything was strewn around. The tent was ripped down. The big pot that we used to heat snow for water was just like somebody had put a bullet in it. We had powdered eggs, and powdered milk and things like that, and Frisky for the dogs. All of that was just torn up and strewn everywhere. I remember that was so scared. We had to pitch a tent. We had a new tent with us, and we had to stay there that night! Of all things! The dogs were all scared. You can tell. We didn't see the bear, but we could tell. There was tracks all over. The food was just strung everywhere and the tent was torn down. It was just a mess. Luckily we had our tent and the stove was ok. I remember that I didn't get much sleep that night. As a matter of fact, I don't think I got any sleep at all. I was so scared! My dad had the 30.06. He didn't have a bigger gun than that with him. And you know it was a big grizzly bear.

MR. THOMAS: They [bears] are extremely dangerous when they're out in the wintertime like that.

MR. KAYE: The winter bears?

MR. THOMAS: Anything that moves is food.

MR. KAYE: Did you have trouble with winter bears at all? [to Mr. Thomas]

MR. THOMAS: No. I can remember I was setting out my line at the top of the mountain in early November. I saw a track there across the road. Have you seen these bear claw snowshoes? That's about what it looked like. Fortunately I didn't have a trail in there yet. Otherwise, if I had had a trail, he'd probably follow it to camp. They are hungry when they're out like that, and they'll eat anything.

MR. KAYE: Anything else either of you would like to add about the old days up at camp?

MRS. THOMAS: At Burnt Paw, when were living there my dad had been quite ill then; he had a trap line out but he wasn't able to go out and check it. My sister Barbara was only seven or eight years old at that time. They chose me to go out and check the traps which I did. Mom wanted my sister to come along. I don't know what kind of help she would have been. It was just for company I guess. She rode the sled the whole way. I remember putting my snowshoes on real early in the morning, as soon as day break and starting to break the trail; following the trap line that my dad had. We camped out twice with a tent in each place. When you get in to camp it would start getting dark and you have to feed the dogs and fix your own food and all of that. I often wondered why they let my sister go because she was so young. I guess mom thought that she'd be good company for me. I was scared a little bit at night because it was just my sister and I way out in the woods.

MR. THOMAS: I heard a story when they were out, about bears.

MR. KAYE: This was the Bergam girls?

MR. THOMAS: Yes. This bear was following their trail to a cabin. The trapping cabin was usually small so it would be easy to heat. The bear trail went into the cabin and didn't come back out. The three girls had these old [sounds like] Grey Jorgenson rifles. They were 30.40's. I understand that they started shooting into that cabin and they killed the bear without even seeing him. They must have riddled up that cabin pretty well.

MR. KAYE: Did you know Pete Nelson? He was down river from your camp.

MR. THOMAS: Oh yeah, we used to stop at his place all of the time.

MR. KAYE: What other old-timers were in that area where you trapped?

MR. THOMAS: There was old Gabriel. I don't know his last name. Gabriel is what they called him. We have different places there, different camps. Gabriel's was one place. Then there was John Stevens' place on the way towards [sounds like] Tealgeetzik. I just remembered the names of people that had a camp, they wintered there and trapped out of there. In the summer time you went back downtown. Fort Yukon was the main hub. Everybody from that whole area there migrate to Fort Yukon.

MR. KAYE: And you call that "downtown"?

THE THOMASES: Oh yeah.

MR. THOMAS: That the big city!

MR. KAYE: It was a big city to you. Bill, when was the first time you saw a real city like Fairbanks?

MR. THOMAS: In 1942.

MR. KAYE: Oh, not until you left for the war?

MR. THOMAS: Yep, it had a population of three thousand, five hundred.

MR. KAYE: What did it seem like to you back then?

MR. THOMAS: Of course, it's grown a little bit.

MR. KAYE: And Jean, when is the first time you saw a big city like Fairbanks? Do you remember your first impression?

MRS. THOMAS: I remember seeing the cows along the road. I had never seen a cow before.

MR. KAYE: How old were you when you first saw Fairbanks?

MRS. THOMAS: I was probably about sixteen or seventeen. I remember seeing them along the road. I was with Phillips Baker and his family. Evelyn Melville, I used to work for her in Fort Yukon.

MR. KAYE: Oh, you did? The historian?

MRS. THOMAS: Yeah. Her parents sent over. I stayed with them. That's when I remember seeing all of these cows. I had never seen a cow before.

MR. KAYE: Did you go to see a movie? Of course, you could see movies at Fort Yukon in those days.

MRS. THOMAS: Yeah we did years ago. It was different! It was a big city to us!

MR. KAYE: Well, I want to thank you both for giving us so much interesting information about life up there. I look forward to talking to you again about it.