

Fish Wheel

by

Timothy Stathis

I used to see Grandpa David fixing his fish wheel every spring. Other people too. Always seemed like it'd be the same thing every year. He'd be there every day over the last couple weeks before summer vacation. I'd be coming home from school and I'd see him working on it. Those big wheels about twice as tall as a man looked almost like a Ferris wheel. When it came time to work on them I'd see him laying up a big pile of spruce poles. He'd be shaving the bark off them. He'd hack those into shape with his axe how he needed them. Then he'd start tying everything together. Most people nowadays make them out of nice cut wood they buy in Fairbanks and drive here with it. He was the last one who made it the old way.

When he was done, his looked just as good as any other one. Two big paddles on opposite sides of the axle each one part of a big-cage-like thing. Spokes of poles formed the wheel. Two side pieces came up from the log-raft bottom and the axle was place on these so half the wheel was above and half below where that axle turned. They'd stick those wheels off the river's edge with long ropes tied on the raft and tied at the other end to the shore. When everything was quiet late at night or early in the morning, if you were out on the river and shut off your boat engine, you could hear those wheels squeaking as they turned. Sometimes if you were lucky you could see a fish that got scooped-up from the bottom be lifted up as the wheel turned and the fish would slide off into the catch box. Scooping, and turning and squeaking. The wheel would keep going, on and on, turned by the flowing river which never stopped.

I don't know where he learned how to make that wheel. And I never stopped long enough to watch how he did it.

He's not there this spring. He died last fall. He was an old man.

Something different was happening with our people this summer. I don't know why exactly. We had come to the old village site to hear stories of our people. I guess that was the point. The elders probably had other reasons too, but they told us kids they wanted us to hear them tell how it used to be a long time ago.

Yesterday morning everybody's grandma and grandpa had gotten in boats, old Jon Boats, Sea Arks, and every kind of flat-bottom boat, some so old, no one even knew what kind they were. Only flat-bottom boats like those were any good around here. Whole families got packed in-between a week's supplies. Most had those big white canvas tents all rolled up. Black plastic trash bags filled with clothes, big cardboard boxes of food. Rifles, axes, and saws.

There must have been ten boats all following one another; maybe six or seven people in each boat. We couldn't travel side-by-side too much because the channel of the deep water was usually pretty narrow even though the river's often a hundred yards wide.

Sometimes it was tricky to ride in the channel. If you misjudged the channel your propeller would hit bottom.

We took Grandma Minnie. She was Grandpa David's wife. It was a hot day but Grandma Minnie was wrapped in a blanket and everyone wore coats. Moving along the river gets cold after awhile even on the hottest summer days. It's been a long time since I've seen Grandma Minnie go in a boat.

It was good to be out on a long ride on the Tanana, the breeze in our faces. The winding of the river, endless trees. No man-made structures. No talking. The hum of the motor, the pointing out of a swimming beaver, keeping a watch on the gurgling parts of the river.

There was lots of driftwood in the water: logs and branches. The river must've been pretty high lately picking up all that stuff from the banks. I would just look at those boats in front and behind us; so many people all going to the same place.

It took us about four hours on the river before we got to this old village site. It used to be the village where everyone lived before they decided to move it to the new place. That was before I was born. This place was in the low lands and just flooded too much at break-up. When the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act went through, part of it allowed for getting the new village site. There'd be no more flooding there. But a lot of the old people weren't too sure of how all that was worked out. I don't know the particulars, but 25 years later some of them are still arguing about it. I wasn't sure what they were arguing about.

Some of the people, like my dad, had arrived a few days ago to clear the overgrown brush, cut poles for the tents, and set up a cooking area. We pulled the boats into the bank. When I climbed up the bank to tie up the boat's rope I could see people had been working. Half of the field still had thick grass grown as high as my waist but the other half had been cut down with big piles of it raked up. At the far end of the field a few guys were building a pretty big structure. Something permanent. It'll be the place where we'll gather to eat together. Everyone.

We spent our first day getting our own tent up and helping set up tents for the elders. Between some trees away from the field a path was made and eight tents for the elders were set up in lines on both sides of it. Others put their tents around wherever they wanted. Some put them back farther, beyond the path further into the trees. That's where my dad had his. Other people scattered their tents around the edges of the field. There were blue plastic rain tarps over the tents, everywhere. My two cousins, Nathan and Vince, and I got to have our own tent together. We'll make it a good time here no matter what. I sure was glad we didn't have to stay with any of the younger kids. Too bad cousin Charlie isn't here, though. Just two years older than me, graduated from high school a year ago and now he's dead. I just can't believe he killed himself. Just two months ago. Everyone sure was sad or mad about that. I guess we still kind of are.

I had seen the old village only last fall when Charlie and I were cruising the river moose hunting in his father's 25 footer with the 40 horse Yamaha. We pulled up on the bank next to it and got out but didn't walk around. It was hard to see much with all the overgrowth, but you could tell it was a village: old rotting cabins falling in on themselves, a log-built church without a door or windows. I could see lots of birch trees

where nice even sections of the bark had been cut out long ago. There didn't seem to be much about the old village. It all looked dead.

The sun had burned off all the mosquitoes in the morning from around where everyone was tenting. It was even too hot to be sitting on the cleared area by the river even though there was a slight breeze coming up the bank. Grandpa Neil and Grandma Geraldine were sitting under the canopy extending from their tent. Grandpa Neil was just staring out beyond everything and Grandma Geraldine was working on making a birch bark basket the old way. The idea was that everyone would do things here the old traditional way.

Grandpa Neil wasn't the oldest in the village but he was second oldest. The Chief of Chiefs, Peter John, was 96 years old. He was the oldest. Everyone said he knew more about the old ways than any Athabaskan alive. He was very good at talking with white people too. When he stood up to speak both white people and Indians paid full attention. Everyone says Grandpa Neil will be the next chief. But I never heard anyone say anything special about Grandpa Neil standing up to speak.

My younger sister, Lena, was sitting with her best friend, Beth, in front of Grandma and Grandpa. Those two girls were just kind of whispering to each other. I guess my sister's kind of pretty and I really thought Beth was the prettiest girl in the high school, best out of all eleven of the girls, even if she was two years younger than me. Seeing her in that tank top and shorts and sandals made me kind of wish we were back in the village, I mean the "new" village, so I could be figuring out how to get her alone. Nathan, Victor, and I were standing a little ways off just joking around, trying to get the girls' attention.

My dad came down the path packing a saw. "Why don't you boys go sit with those old folks."

That made me kind of frustrated that he'd interrupt.

"Don't feel like it."

"That's the idea, you know," he went on. "To sit with the elders when you're not doing survival work."

I was wishing he hadn't come by. "What work is there?"

"Hauling water, chopping wood, and all that," he said and stood there too close, staring at us waiting for us to answer.

We didn't feel like doing any work in that hot sun, that's for sure, so we went over without actually answering him back. He ruined my joking-around mood.

We sat down kind of across from the girls. That made a half circle of us teenagers in front of the Grandma and Grandpa. All of us were shaded by the canopy. Grandma Geraldine smiled at us when we sat but went right back to sewing her basket.

So here we were sitting with the old people. I was trying to calm down my mood and was thinking about how the old people are always around back at home. So what's the big deal about sitting with them here? But I guess we just got too used to them. Took them for granted or something. That's why they made us come here. So it'd be different. Or maybe so we couldn't get away. Well, this wasn't too exciting sitting here so I made eyes at Beth and so did Nathan.

Still working on sewing her basket and without looking up, Grandma said, "Gonna need some more spruce roots for this basket, boys. Maybe later you kids go out and get me more, Yeh?"

"Sure, Grandma," I said

"You don't know what's good roots to use and what's bad for sewing. How you gonna know?"

"I don't know. We'll just dig up a bunch and bring it all to you and you pick out what you want."

"You might pick out all bad," she said, and gave a big laugh that only she could give. Nothing seemed especially funny but when she thought something was funny and laughed it just made everyone laugh. She was teasing us hard, but we laughed with her this time too.

"I'll go with you tomorrow and show you. Then next time you will know and can go alone."

"O.K., Grandma. Whatever."

"You come too, girls," she said in kind of a commanding tone. The girls nodded up and down several times without hesitating.

Somehow this little conversation made us all silent and no longer really aware of each other. The girls stopped whispering and I stopped checking out Beth. I looked at Grandpa a minute who kept looking off in the distance. He wore dark sunglasses but I could dimly see his large eyes were gazing far away. Not a single one of his thousand wrinkles on his face was moving. He hardly seemed to show he knew we were there. Somehow, in this long silence, no one was bored. I suddenly realized I was happy that I was going to go get spruce roots with Grandma tomorrow.

The silence was broken at first faintly by the distant sound of a single engine plane. Louder and louder it came. Finally it overpowered our thoughts when it was overhead and we couldn't help watching it. Then it slowly diminished into the distance.

I followed the plane when it came into view until it disappeared. Grandpa never changed where he was staring off to.

That made me think of a question. That's why we were here anyway; so I asked what came to my mind.

"Grandpa," I said. My heart started beating faster. That was weird. He was my Grandpa. "Grandpa, were you living when the first airplane was seen by anyone in this village?"

All the other kids looked at me, kind of shocked-like, surprised I'd ask an important question. But they looked at Grandpa quick enough, all their attention that way, waiting to see what he might say, if anything. Seemed like before in the village he never said much to anybody about anything. I can't remember even talking much to him except getting things for him around the house like his coffee cup or slippers. Grandpa kept looking where he was looking, and I was suddenly feeling more strange. What was I doing here anyway?

"Oh, yes. Yes," he said slowly beginning to nod but not changing where he was looking off into nowhere. He sure didn't look at me. His mouth kind of twitched a bit between his expression as it was before and a smile. I can't remember Grandpa smiling much before.

"I was about 8 years old, then."

In my mind I saw this old man as a little boy. I imagined this little boy with dark sunglasses running around tossing sticks in the air.

"I was standing over there," he said, pointing to a section of the cleared area about a hundred feet away. "Old Grandpa Charlie had a place there. He was chief. He was my grandpa and was a good hunter. He had just brought in a moose and lots of people were working on it. I was watching them. We heard that sound and all the people stopped what they were doing and looked for where that sound was coming from. It was getting louder. We didn't know what to do. When we could see the plane coming over the trees there, yes, over there," (we all looked to where Grandpa Neil was pointing), "we started getting really afraid."

"Oh, yes," Grandma Geraldine interrupted. "We didn't know what it could be. I was only about 5 years old. But I remember that day. I was so scared I ran and was hugging my mommy's leg."

"Everyone was looking to Chief Charlie," Grandpa Neil went on, "to see what he would do. We watched him but he kept watching that thing in the sky making that big noise. He never took his eyes off it even for a second and even when people were asking him lots of questions. He was concentrating on it every second like it was a caribou he was hunting. It wasn't until after it was gone that he looked down from the sky.

"He told some other people to finish the moose and told some other people to go with him right away. They were going to go up to that Trader Bill's place and ask him about it."

All of us were listening intently but Vince interrupted and asked, "Who was Trader Bill?"

Grandpa Neil smiled. Grandma Geraldine said, "Oh, you never hear of Trader Bill? Oh, he was a good man."

"He was a white man," Grandpa Neil said. "The only white man I had seen when I was that young. He was already around ever since I could remember...came before I was born. To me he just seemed part of everything I knew. Not like he was strange or something because he was white. I just thought some people were white but white people didn't live with us, 'cause he lived about a mile up river."

"He had a store there," Grandma Geraldine interjected. "Sometimes when my family went there to trade him furs for things he would give us kids some candy. Oh, how I loved those colorful sweet candy sticks," she said beginning to laugh with that high pitched childlike laugh of hers that made us all laugh. "One's with red stripes, yellow, green. Oh, it was a special day when we got to go to that store."

"Seemed like he knew about things that weren't part of the natural world around us that we were used to," Grandpa Neil went on. "Chief Charlie calmed everybody down and said this thing we saw in the sky was probably something of white people's and Trader Bill would know about it. So he told some people to get in canoes to make the trip up to Bill's store. I was so happy when he said it was O.K. for me to go."

Lena asked, "How did Chief Charlie guess the airplane was a white man's thing?"

"That Trader Bill was always showing us new things at that store of his," Geraldine answered, "Iron pots and pans, white men's clothes that were sewed up all nice and perfect, glasses for the old people to see better. All kinds of things."

"One time," Grandpa Neil went on, "a few years before that airplane came, I remember I saw my first steam barge. I was by the river playing and I heard and saw it coming and I was scared and ran to my father. I remember he laughed and told me about what it was. He said that not long before I was born Trader Bill had come over from his place to the village in early spring. He told the people that after break-up about this big boat, a hundred times bigger than our canoes, was going to be coming. He told about how it would be smoking at the top and he even explained to the older people how it worked. So when that first barge came they were still pretty amazed at it but they were expecting it. They could understand it. They could understand because it was kind of like a big canoe. They could understand how something could float on the water. And because people knew all about fish wheels they could understand how the paddles of that big steamboat worked. They could understand the power that fire could have. They weren't afraid of that steamboat.

"Trader Bill told everybody it was bringing in all kinds of supplies for his store and he was giving them the furs we traded him. We could understand that somewhere out there white men had a lot of different things. Guns had been around a pretty long time even before I was born."

Grandpa Neil started thinking silently again.

I was so into the story that I interrupted his thoughts, "So what happened about that airplane, Grandpa?"

Grandpa Neil smiled. "So about ten canoes of people went up to see that Bill. I remember it very well. Trader Bill knew why we were there. He was a good man.

"I remember how he explained that just like people had used the power of fire to make that big barge go, so people had figured out how to use the power of fire to make something that could fly them in the air. I remember Chief Charlie was shaking his head back and forth. Seemed at first like he was doubting what Bill said. My father asked him if he thought Bill was telling the truth. Chief Charlie said, 'Yes. I believe him. It's the only answer that could be right. These white people are changing everything. Everything's changing,' he said and was shaking his head back and forth again and again."

Grandpa Neil stopped talking again and all us kids were just staring at him. Grandma Geraldine just kept working quietly on her basket. In the silence us kids looked at each other. I wondered if they were feeling how I was feeling. It's hard to explain. I felt like we were all different. I mean, well, that I was seeing them and me, in a different way. Like there was something new about us all. Or, maybe, there was more about us than I knew before.

"That Trader Bill helped us one year," Geraldine started to say while yet sewing her basket. Grandpa Neil, as though he knew exactly what story she was thinking about, started to nod several times.

"There was no moose that year. No caribou. Very little rabbits. All the smoked fish from summer was running out. Those men hunting just weren't getting food. My mom was so scared for us. That Bill, he sent down boatload after boatload of all kinds of canned food. He just gave it to us. We ate that canned food until springtime. I remember."

"Yep," Grandpa Neil chimed in.

"I was already a young man for awhile, maybe twenty-five or thirty when Bill left. He was getting old. A lot of us went up there when the barge came for him. He had just packed up a couple boxes and got on that barge. Said he was going to Seattle to live with his daughter. We sure did miss him and that store. But by that time lots of people were going to Nenana on those barges. Had jobs there in Nenana. Money. Different kinds of supplies were coming in all the time. Even a missionary came and started that church there some years before. Even had a school started before I was grown up. I even knew some English by that time when Bill left."

I started to calculate in my head. Grandpa Neil is seventy-seven. When he was 8 at the time of that first airplane, let's see; that's sixty-nine years ago; 1927. If he was about twenty-five when Trader Bill left, seventeen years later. That's 1944. Trader Bill left in 1944. And they still think about him, clear as if it was yesterday. Seems like he was just a backwoods guy running a store. Maybe he was pretty special though. Now all this learning about the outside world is in encyclopedias. But there isn't any more Trader Bill around.

"Oh, yes. Lots had changed already," Geraldine said. She paused in her sewing. "Your Grandpa Neil's brother, Elijah, and some of the other men had joined the army for the big war then. They were gone already when Bill left. Oh, yes. They were gone about three years altogether. We knew lots about Japanese, Germans, Alaska, the United States. That's a lot of learning from the time of the axe chips!" she exclaimed and started laughing and laughing and even Grandpa Neil started to laugh a little. We started to laugh with them but we didn't get the joke.

"Axe chips to atom bombs," someone behind me declared. It was Elijah. Another old man; some years younger than Grandpa Neil. "That's a lot of learning." And the old people all started laughing together but us younger ones stopped because we all realized we just didn't get it.

Finally I couldn't take it any more and shouted into the laughing, "What is this about axe chips?"

All got quiet a moment. Uncle Elijah, my great uncle, said, "That story goes back even before our time, Nick. It's a story that Peter John heard when he was a boy." He pointed behind us. We turned and saw Peter John sitting alone under the canopy by his tent. He had one hand on his hand-carved willow cane and was slightly leaning on it. He was staring off in the distance. If it seemed like Grandpa Neil stared off at times, far off, then here it seemed that Peter John was staring off ten times as far. With our storytelling paused, I noticed just how quiet this whole place was. Peter John, so silent. As we looked at him for that moment we felt something very ancient about him. How weird. He was just a helpless old man to me before.

Uncle Elijah sat down next to Grandpa Neil and went on, "Peter John heard the story of the axe chips when he was a boy. It was in the memory of the people of his time; his grandfather told the story. His grandfather was there. Peter John knows a lot of stories of old old times that even I or Neil don't know. But this one we've heard.

"It was before any one of the Athabascans here had ever had contact with any white person. One man was standing by the river and saw these wood chips go floating by. He pulled some out. He looked and looked at those. He knew they were just too big and different from what a beaver could make. He just couldn't figure it out. He showed

them to other men and no one could make out what it could be. They watched the river closely over the next days and, yes, more of these started coming down. So they went on an expedition up the river to figure out where these were coming from. After a while they came to where a white man was. They knew because of his skin he was different. They tried talking to him but they figured out they couldn't understand one another. Just by using signs with their hands they communicated with one another. That man invited those men for some food. No one was afraid of each other. Just curious. They showed him the chips and he showed them his axe. He chopped a little from a tree with it. They were surprised at that axe."

I looked back a moment at the ancient face of Peter John and thought, "From axes to atom bombs..."

"Come on you kids," Elijah said. "I came to get you. We're going out to chop some spruce poles to make a fish wheel."

We got up without saying anything to Grandpa Neil and Grandma Geraldine as we started to follow Uncle Elijah. It was still baking hot as we left the shade of the canopy. "Go get your father's rifle and axe," Elijah told me. The others went on toward Elijah's boat and I turned back to go to my father's tent on the other end of the path. I passed in front of Peter John going by him. He didn't stir or change his posture or his gaze at all. I grew up all my life around Peter John. I never thought twice about him. He was just an old man. Now I wondered what he was thinking about in that gaze.

My Father's tent was way up at the end of the path. When I got close and was about to go in it I noticed something beyond. There was a lot of brush that hadn't been cut down but I could see a big stone standing back there. I went closer pushing my way through. It was a tomb stone. It was so quiet in all that brush. It was so thick I couldn't see back where I came from. There were more tombstones. Just me and all those graves. "Now you know," a voice said. It scared me. I didn't know where it was coming from. I turned around. It was old Dorothy. An old lady. Neil and Elijah's older sister. She had a million wrinkles and big thick glasses. Her hair was pure white and a little curly. She was really small and walked bent over a little.

"I saw you go in."

"Now I know what, Grandma?" We called all the old ladies Grandma for respect.

"It's because of this. This," she said with almost anger in her fragile voice. "It's because of this that a lot of us didn't want to leave this old village. You see it's all grown up here. The graves are almost disappearing. We were afraid. Really afraid. We said if we go away from this village, we'll forget the graves of those people. That's some really good people down there!" She was raising her voice loudly and it was squeaking. "They did a lot of important things for our people. It's because of them we're alive." She was looking out over the graves and the brush. "My father's buried here. My Mother. Peter John's father and mother. Everybody. Way back. We're afraid people forget them. Afraid people forget all their stories!" Dorothy looked up at me through those thick glasses.

"Our people always remembered the ancestors. We honored where they were buried. These tombstones was a good idea. Put 'em on the old graves. After time, people went all the way to Nenana to get a tomb stone for an ancestor where they knew there was a grave from long before. Sometimes men save lots of money and bring these tombstones on the barges."

Old Dorothy looked around at the graves. She pulled out some weeds in front of one, then another. I looked at some of the names. I couldn't think who they were.

That white-haired lady grabbed me by the arm. I looked down into her face. When she was looking at me, like she was thinking about who I was, I felt like a little boy. She was so old.

She squeezed my arm harder and spoke harshly, sadly, "Maybe if Charlie know about these people. Maybe if he hear about their stories. He'd know where he come from; who he is. Maybe then he not kill himself! Maybe he'd still be with us then." The old woman shook her head and turned away. I followed her out.

Back in front of the row of tents again. I took a breath. Dorothy disappeared.

I grabbed the rifle and axe and came back down the path. Peter John hadn't moved. Something made me stop in front of his tent.

"Peter John." Slowly, as though each inch of movement took a year, he looked at me, directly at me, but didn't say anything. "Peter John. We're going to chop spruce poles to make a fish wheel."

He stared at me. He stared at me a long time it seemed. Then he smiled. He looked at the axe. "Spruce poles. Fish wheel. Good. We need to get fish here. I'm tired of this white man's food you've been feeding me," and he began to laugh. I was half laughing and half crying. He looked back at me silently and I knew he knew everything I was feeling, what I was thinking. "Later, when you come back, you sit here and I tell you story about when I make fish wheel with my father one time. It's a good story. You want to hear?"

"Yes, Peter John. I want to hear."

I slung the rifle over my shoulder and walked down toward the river, rubbing my thumb against the axe blade checking its sharpness. I was thinking, "I want to hear more than anything else in the world."



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