

INTERVIEW WITH DELLA KEATS  
ALASKA WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION  
Date of Interview: October 11, 1980  
Bethel, Alaska  
Interviewer: Joanne Mulcahy  
Transcriber: Gloria Bodnar  
Begin Tape 1, Side 1

Introduction by Joanne Mulcahy:

I am at the Bethel Regional Women's Conference talking with DELLA KEATS, an Eskimo doctor and healer who is here to conduct some sessions. She has agreed to talk with me about her life. Della, do you consider yourself a doctor or healing person or how would you describe your role in the villages?

Well, I never thought that I would be a doctor in all the villages in my young, in my teenage. Always brought up my books what I have when I'm in school about a physical. And some parts that was interested to me, I put it in my mind. I never write it down.

Really?

Really.

Just remembered everything?

I didn't remember everything in the book, but the ones that so interested that I really need, I put it in my mind. When it happened to the people the way from what I read from da book, I tried to help them and helped them. Make them good. Dat's why I was so proud of da books what I have when I was in school. When I start to help--starting to help, all the people just liked me. Ever since, even when I was a child, I tried to follow da books how to help dem when dey, like dey really be cut and losing blood or some thinks. Dese are the ones that I always work on da people right now. Just by my own experience. What I do it myself, what I help myself. When people complain about it and think he's now hurting, complain about what his problem. And when he do the same way what I did, like I do this and get good myself and try to help 'em.

You did a lot of your own healing?

Yes.

When you say that you learned some things from books and remembered them even though you didn't write them down, was there another doctor in your community in the village where you grew up? Or a healing woman?

I never see any.

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No?

I never see any. If I knew, I would go over and ask about everything. (They both laughed.) Because I don't know, to de people in early days long ago, these people helping themselves or what they do or what kind of a herbs they use, how did they get good? I always ask my folks, my parents, not to--somebody-- but numbers in Eskimo, I learned them from another old man. That's the only one I asked. Old man, I learned the Eskimo numbers.

What did your mother say about how she was healed? Did she heal herself if there was no doctor when something went wrong?

There was no doctors, nothing. You know, she never get really bad, to bed, so ill, in their family. But, the way when she start having baby, how do, I ask her how do dey tie-- with what do dey cut the cord, with what they put their clothes on with a band to the belly and what kind of string they tie on cord of baby, how do you keep it warm and things like that I always ask? She tell me da way when I was born.

She told you what happened when you were born?

How to do. How to help me. Like, how did you tie my belly?

I opened my belly to her and say, "How did you tie my belly?" And she say, "With sinew, black sinew, of caribou."

Oh, really. Did she have someone to help her too?

Nobody help her. She all alone she having her baby. Me, I was born in a small hut, small hut in the falltime. When she was pregnant, my daddy gather all the moss around der 'cause my mother was going to have a baby, so he could make a little hut enough for her 'cause they always stay away from the house and have der baby. Dey stay away four days, a woman.

Oh really?

Really, not in der home.

I didn't know that.

No stove. Daddy made a little moss hut when she start havin' labor. He put down floor with willows, covered da mud with willows and put lot of, two



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three skins of caribou skins in it. Enough, enough to make having a baby to sleep.

To lay on.

To lay on.

Was there a reason that you didn't have your baby in your house?

If you have a baby right der long ago, the people in the house will die. That's just because you bleeding.

Oh, I see.

That's why, try to save dese people. My mother, my father, heating the rocks, let them hot, you know, flame. Really get hot, then hold the rocks, put sticks by the door and put the rocks in der for her heat.

I see.

The first one didn't make it warm, dat little hut all right. De second one make it more hot. He had to watch dese rocks, my old dad, when she was laboring.

To make sure they stayed hot?

Un huh, she don't wanna have me in a cold little hut. I was born in January 15, 1907. I was born and she tie me with sinew and cut it with ulu and put powder of dead willows (burn dem, the top one soft just like a powder) and she parted the belly button after she cut it and tie it. She just put powder; she never put me a pant. She say she never put anything on 'cept ash of willow.

Did your father help or did she do it all by herself?

Just she do it herself. Just Daddy, my old Dad, watching de heat for her, not even one help her. And I never get infection of my cord, really. If you want to see it, it's way inside. You even hardly put your little finger in dere. It heal good; no infection.

(Joanne Mulcahy laughed.)

She did it all alone.

What else you put me? You cover you, dressing me or something me with something? "No, just barely on her body."

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She was warm.

And so I warm. Breast feed. That's all.

That was January?

January.

She must have been warm.

When dey hunting, traveling? She pack me without any clothing inside without clothing. De have fur parkie. But the weather--

Did your mother, did she do hunting and shooting of the animals too?

Yes.

They both did?

She was the best hunter, raised with her uncles, two uncles. They go together to hunt the animals, sea otter, (unclear), and kill everything, fishing and animals.

Did she fish too?

Un huh.

Did you learn to do those things when you were growing up?

I learn how to hunt, how to snare (unclear), how to snaring martin, hunting, fishing, trapping. I'm a hard worker. I raise my kids. I have dogs my own and haul wood and haul ice. Hauling, go get de dog food what I store a little ways from the village and go with hunters and hunt caribou and mountain sheep. Everything, put away everything, potatoes, berries, everything for winter.

Un huh.

Dry food for winter, everything.

You do all those things and you were also the doctor.

Yes, try to helping people that complain about dere problem, try to help them. Or, deliver the babies, midwife.

Did you go from one village to the next or did people come from different places to ask you about their health?

Yes. Un huh. I daresn't go any place like right now, staying home. When I raise my three kids, when they able to do themselves, I start traveling



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when my folks gone and I never watch them. When my old folks went from my sisters and brothers, I'm the only left.

Were they?

Right.

Were they sick?

They die from---dey didn't have any accident. Dey sick and die. And I the only left. That's why I never try to get a job for Ann<sup>7</sup>hela, myself and Anna. They heard of me about healing da people and they asked me to work for 'em. So then, I say yes. I always willing to help people just like my own body. I love dem; I love to help dem.

I think you must; you work so hard.

Even though I never--I don't know dem, den when they complain--the first time seeing 'em, I begin to help dem.

Do you work with the doctors too?

I never been trained all right, but from the hospital (in Kotzebue Hospital) when dey have patients, when dey don't know treat dem. They know it all right but dey can't understand. When they sprain der back for different relatives in Kotzebue area, one time they call me for three patients. I work with 'em at the hospital. The doctors call me to go down and try to help these people. So, I did, and after I work on 'em, not too long, this young fella, the youngest one, "Tomorrow." he said. (He talk to these other sprain back patients.) "First time I ever see ever knew a doctor dat could heal right away. I'm getting good now. I'm getting good. Off and on I used to go to hospital and right now and it hurt. Right now, it doesn't hurt no more. I'm discharged from the hospital."

Really, that's amazing.

That's what he say, and he never even ever go back to hospital to see the doctors do. That young fella what I worked never come back, who come off an on to the hospital for back, and ever since he never go to hospital no more. He healed up.

When you were young in the village that you lived in were there mission-aries there?

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Was anything?

Were there missionaries? Church people?

Yes.

What kind of people were there?

Quaker.

Quaker, oh, I see.

They called it "friends."

That's right, the friends.

Un huh. Dey were dere. Teachers were missionaries, talkin' to people at same time. Later on, after 8 years, a missionaries came to Noatak. I was born 1907; after I was born, after I was 6 years old. When I'm 6 maybe I go to school.

Un huh. Was it a Quaker school then?

Yeah. BIA school.

Did they help you? Were there doctors that came with them?

No. No, the teachers taking care of the medicine whenever the people get sick. I don't know when he, dis teacher, a man, he bring out medicine for the people that sick, I don't know. I won't tell.

You're not sure.

I don't know.

Do you think that there are a lot of the old ways, use of "stink weed", and other things, do you think it was better than the modern medicines? Do you think--how do you feel about that?

When da really need it, you know, just like, a lump, or a lump that make itself inside intestine, grow itself there. It doesn't help to quick all right, but help, sometimes. And when they have stomach problems from intestine or stomach or large intestine, you know, it helps to boil even. And for pneumonia, it's really good. I got pneumonia myself and I drink 1/2 a glass three times a day just like you having a pill. (By the time) I watch the time and drink 1/2 glass of "stink weed"; that's the only thing. I have medicine, cough medicine from doctors; it doesn't help but when I start drinkin' with my "stink weed", by the time, every four hours, I start getting good. It really good for TB. I know before dat, long time ago, I had one lady that was having a TB spitting all the time. I boiled



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"stink weed" getting strong and by the time, every three hours four times a day, I give her one tablespoon every three hours a day, every three hours four times a day. She heal up and get fat. I stayed in Kotzebue and tried to help her. People were telling me dat I would catch from her TB but I never scared. I never scared nothing. I stayed with dem and help her. And she get good and sick and from the bed could do something. When I see the last time, she begin to drink, back again. She die from it, starting back. She start liquor.

Un huh.

She not take care of herself any more. She die from it.

Un huh.

Not real old, maybe only in fifties.

What kind of things did they do for a funeral after the friend dies?  
What kind of a ceremony? Do you bury them? Or do their friends?

No, their friends have to bury them. A long time ago dey used to, the family handling the one they lost. And right now, everybody try to help people that lost loved ones and it's better right now. A lot of people, a lot of mens have to dig in making a box for 'em, 'til they're buried right now.

Your children, was there a midwife there to help you when you delivered?

No. Just two. I have da oldest one, the next one, I have no midwives. Just my sister-in-law, but these two the midwife's helping me.

Are there still midwives in the villages?

They're still having--there's still midwives. I could help every time too, when people, when woman goin' to have a baby.

Are there other women in the village that learn from you about herbs like "stink weed"?

Yeah, they learn when I used to tell dem. I used to tell dem to use this nut but not too much. They could over-dose. One lady almost get over-dosed because she really wanta get good right away and she have one gallon a day. That's too much! She gets dizzy! She don't know about it. Don't ever drink that much in less than 1/2 a day, that's only thing. By the hours, you should use it.

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She tried to get cured too fast?

Un huh, she don't know about it.

Did you also use any kind of rock to let out blood or things like that to help people that had problems?

Well, I had my poker, I leave it this time. I use to take it along. I'm afraid dat people might poke themselves. I use to take it along, but I leave it right now. Just a little blade, axe blade, axe now, but a point, a little narrow to open the puss in peoples. I save a lot of people from puss you know. In fact, infections and boils with that. One time 'cause people always scared doctor just to open people just for nothing, hate that poker. I hate it too. Without nothing, if it's not infect, to open it no need, but when it's infection, when it have a puss, that puss can't open the skin, that's the only time I use it. I only open it even a boil.

Now, you still go to the different villages?

Different villages. Right now, I train three ladies. I scared, if I lost everything what I do, I've lost, and I'm teaching two young girls and one man.

Really?

Two women, yeah, young adults and one man. They're helping me real lot. They learn from me. I teach them how. Dis man he always give me a question when he don't know.

Un huh.

I have a work shop for them last year alone, and teach them how they should do.

When you have gone to different villages in this area, they didn't have anyone else there that was a medical person like you, no men, no women?

I never look 'cause I don't know people. As you know, some people never try to show themselves to me, you know. That's why I always don't know. Even I don't know you before. You tell me--you show it to me--you show it to me and I know you right now. Like dat! (Della laughed.)

(CLOSING by Joanne Mulcahy: This interview with DELLA KEATS was recorded on October 11, 1980 at a Regional Women's Conference at Bethel, Alaska,



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and sponsored by the Tundra Womens' Coalition and the Native Women of Calista, and the Association of Village Council Presidents. Monies were received from the Alaska Humanities Forum and the Alaska Commission on the Status of Women.

This conversation was with DELLA KEATS, who was an Eskimo doctor, born in April, 1907, at Noatak, Alaska. She's now employed by NANALOOK, the Kotzebue Native Health Corporation as a tribal health doctor. She works with the doctors and travels through the villages. An accompanying paper by Sandra Jewel, called "PORTRAIT OF ESKIMO TRIBAL HEALTH DOCTOR", explains in further detail how she heals, what methods she uses and how she's passing this on to the village health aides. Sandra's paper was made possible by a grant from the University of Washington and in conjunction with the University of Alaska.)