

# CULTURAL DIVERSITY

## Resume Of My Grandmother

The Cultural Diversity series is for the preservation of traditional and indigenous cultures and the ageless wisdom held dear by their people.

By Rose High Bear  
of Wisdom of the Elders (WOTE)

The thunderous crack of spring ice resonates from the riverbank—a sound that signals the alert to evacuate. Most villagers have already traveled by dogsled to spring hunting camps, leaving only a handful to witness this year's breakup. They've prepared for the raging flood of sub-arctic water, ice, silt and debris to twist its deadly way through the lower reaches of this small deserted Dene village, imperiling foundations of humble dwellings and all else that lies in its path.

Spring flooding. It is part of the rhythm of life on the eroding, constantly changing banks of this great sub-arctic river, the Kuskoquim. Our elders come to know the river, their grandmother, as she endlessly weaves her way past our village. They spend their days listening to her, watching her, traveling on her, and feeling her many moods and seasons. She flows

mercifully and mercilessly hundreds of miles downstream through the valley beneath the Alaska Mountain Range where she enters the Bering Sea.

On this clear warm day in May, the remaining villagers know what to do. They've predicted this time of ice breakup for thousands of years. They take the last of their belongings to higher ground and patiently wait to behold what the river has in store for them this season.

The flood of ice and gushing water races past below them and the people gradually feel relieved that, this time, Grandmother has been compassionate with her children. Only the lowest portions of the village have been affected and very little riverbank is lost. Families living in lower parts of Old McGrath will return from spring hunting camp without heavy loss from this year's breakup. The ice jams will gradually clear and soon the returning families will set up river camp once again. By early June, the people will be putting out fish traps, smoking fish, gathering roots, berries and medicines, and fortifying winter dwellings and food caches—in preparation for a hard winter that comes too soon.

The grandmothers vigilantly tend

fire beneath the fish racks at river's edge as their men and children depart and return—day after day—fishing, hunting, gathering. They bring their grandchildren to the shore and raise them to learn of this way so they can know this power that gives the people life and then swiftly takes it away.

Dene ancestors—ancient migrating inhabitants of the sub-arctic kept our heritage pure for centuries as we shared this vast tundra wilderness with few outsiders. The grizzlies and dall sheep of the mountains, the migrating caribou and the wolves of the foothills, and the moose and of course the mosquito nation, that lived along the forested waters. These were our closest neighbors. By the turn of the century we live in, only the most courageous of missionaries, the most ambitious of traders, and the most enthusiastic of the miners had ventured this far into our homeland.

My full-blooded Alaskan Dene grandmother—Sophie—migrated to Old McGrath in the early part of this century. She traveled by dogsled from her birthplace, Anvik, up on

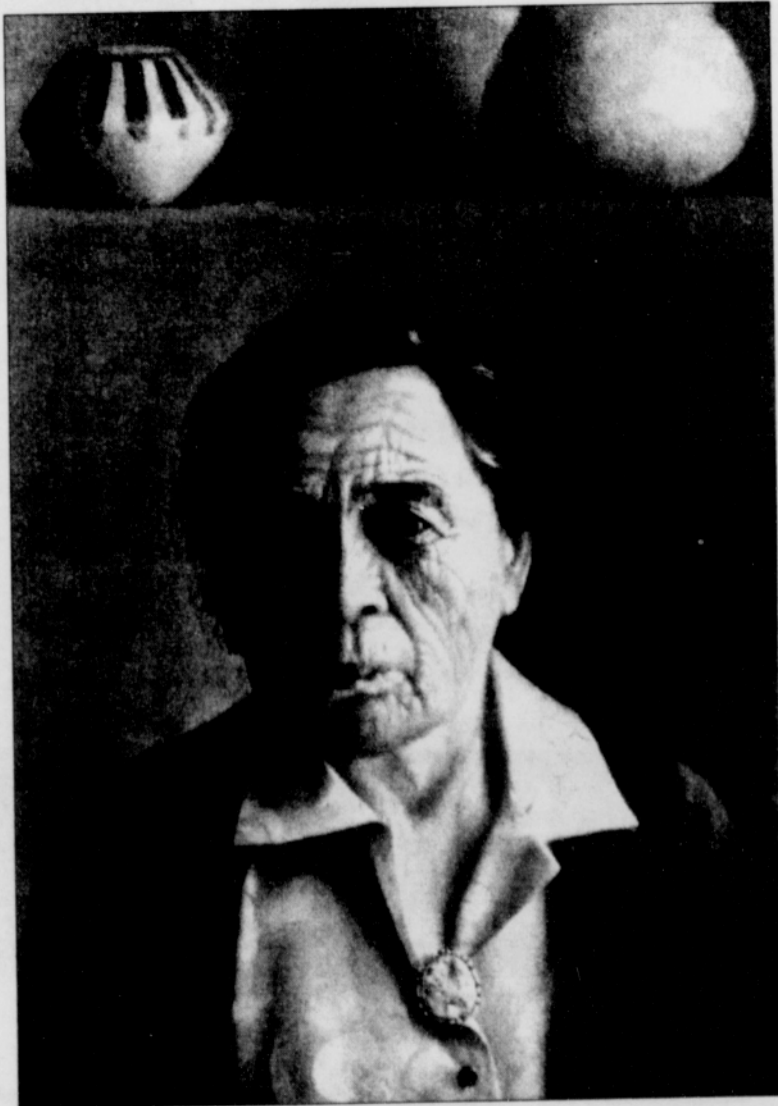
the Yukon River, with her Dutch husband, William VanderPoole, the territory's new constable. He didn't know Dene tradition, that the woman doesn't leave her ancestral village.

Grandmother was among 170 natives who fluently spoke Ingalik dialect of Athabascan. When her husband forbid her from teaching her language and culture to the family, she was obedient, but rarely used his language, the English language. Suppression of indigenous heritage, though a common occurrence this last century throughout the North American continent, did not succeed in taking the Indian out of this grandmother. Tran-

scending syllable and sound, her redeeming qualities shone through and had a quiet, but commanding effect on following her muckluk steps.

Raven, another ancient inhabitant of the Kuskoquim watched over the river and His people from generation to generation imparting love, wisdom and hard lesson to all of His children. This black-winged creature, shrewd trickster, yet chosen to speak for Creator, perched in the tree above the cemetery and eloquently eulogized my Grandmother in 1983, as she began her final journey home to the Spirit World.

This is the resume of my Grandmother.



Sophie Fredericks Vanderpool was a well-known elder who had 53 grandchildren. She is part of a memory of how things used to be that is remembered less by the young, but treasured by those of us who lived during those days and grow, from time to time, nostalgic when we see how much the world has changed since then.

**KENNEDY SCHOOL**  
McMenamins

## SUMMER EVENTS

### Flatlands

Thursday, July 15

### Theresa Demerest & Good Company

Thursday, July 22

### Songwriters in the Round with Craig Carothers

Sunday, July 25 at 7:30pm · \$7.00 admission

### The Jack McMahon Band

Thursday, July 29

### The Jessie Samsel Band

Thursday, August 5 at 7pm

### Retta & the Smart Fellas

Thursday, August 12

### UNCF Fundraiser with Tom Grant

Tuesday, August 17

### I & I

Thursday, August 19



**McMenamins Kennedy School**

5736 NE 33rd · Portland, Oregon · (503) 249-3983