

Mary Kraus

Mary Kraus [née Deneya (NWT Archives) or is it Deneyoua?] was interviewed at the Kraus residence at Little Doctor Lake for three hours on August 11 and two hours on August 28, 1974 producing roughly 1.5 hours of taped conversation. She spent three hours on August 27-28 providing Dene names of features that I entered on topographic maps, but I did not record our conversations because it was so convoluted.

Mary is a fascinating person. She is fairly shy but through this she radiates strength of personality and human dignity. She is intensely interested in her Dené culture, almost to the point of obsession. She reads whatever she can get on the subject and talks to elders whenever she gets an opportunity when away from the isolation of Little Doctor Lake. Mary has lived in the domineering shadow of Gus for years, barely getting a word in edgewise when he is in full story telling flight. At Kraus Hotsprings in 1966 Wendy and I found them to be aggressively competing with each other for an audience and each can be quite disruptive of the other. This was exacerbated by their isolation with each craving an opportunity to talk when somebody shows up. If two visitors show up the problem is partially solved. In this case of this interview at Little Doctor Lake, a friend was along and he was able to talk to one while I interviewed the other.

Mary's fund of knowledge about nature and the Dene is huge, her abilities in the bush legendary. She is anxious to communicate this to some people but her shyness also holds her back, especially if Gus is present. Her shyness may be in part because she feels she is not fluent in English. In fact, her English is as good as most whites despite her grammar on the tapes seeming somewhat odd. As with a number of languages the verb is left until the end of most sentences in the Dene language instead of being placed immediately after the subject. In Mary's case her native tongue's sentence structure sometimes spills over into English.

Mary has an unusual background. She lost her parents while still an infant and was raised through her childhood years by relatives. During her school age years she lived at the Roman Catholic residential school in Fort Simpson. She may also have spent time at The Fort Resolution residential school. The stern, 'proper', no nonsense upbringing at the school coupled with her inner strength and determination ought to have produced flashes of rebellion there. Whether or not it did is unknown. While at school Mary began a personal photograph album that continues to this day. After leaving residential school she returned to live with her people at Fort Liard, Trout Lake and Netla. By her own admission, she had to then learn how to be a Dené, to learn how to survive in the bush. Her photography continued during this period and she still has an extensive negative collection showing the Dene way of life in the 1930s and 40s. These are among her most treasured possessions and they constitute a valuable historical record.

Mary married Pascal Konisenta? (Bill Clark photo). She was known as Marie until the death of her first husband. When she began living with Gus Kraus she became Mary.

In Mary there is real conflict between her obsession to communicate her knowledge and her reluctance to tell because of her shyness. This interview includes only a small portion of Mary's knowledge.

There is also an interview with her in the NWT Archives done by Lynn Hancock.

Mary Kraus
Little Doctor Lake
August 09, 1974

Could tell us a little about yourself, such as where were you born?

I was born at Fort Liard in 1924.

What were your parents' names?

My father's name was Deneya [spelling?] It means waterlily. My mother's name is Annie but they call her Annesha [spelling?]. When I was small and my father died, when they had him buried... Fort Liard when they run the stores were Hudson's Bay and different... All the men they go down there to track a big skiff up with the freight on. They get all the men to track up to Resolution, and some places [Fort] Smith. They load all the stuff and they come down to Simpson and up to Liard. That's where [unintelligible word] and trade there. I was small [when my father died] and I don't know my father. He went and helped them. He got a cold walking in the water and got pneumonia and died from that. He never got over it. He died some place close to Liard, Muskeg [River].

From there my mother was trapping. In January she was camping out under the trees in wind-blown snow, with an open fire and got pneumonia too. Everybody camp out under the tree with an open fire, no stove. They don't know what a stove is. She got cold and on top of that she got pneumonia and died. My grandmother, she didn't know and she looked after me. Then she went blind and she went down to the hospital at Simpson. That's where my grandmother is buried and my mother is buried at Liard.

From there I was ninth year and I stayed with my brother's, my aunt. Then I went to Yukon Toobally Lake. I remember where we stay but where was called I don't remember. I was very small, I guess.

Would you be five or six years old?

I don't know.

Would it have been normal for your aunt and her family to travel back and forth between Simpson and the Yukon? Did they do that each year?

Yes, all the time they moving back and forth. The men come to Liard to get tea and tobacco [unintelligible word], sometimes a little bit of clothes but no flour, nothing. They go back and go trapping and they come with the fur in the wintertime. In the summertime they come down with a moose skin boat to Liard, Beaver River. In August they already heading back into the mountains way back at the head of Beaver River even to Crow River in the Yukon, Ross River,

all that. I was small, someplace they cross the river and they pack me over the mountain. They used to do that. I remember [that] good.

From there I went to school. My grandmother she is dead already. My aunt didn't want me to go to school. Two [RC] sisters came up to me and said the kids would like to go to school [unintelligible word]. My grandmother asked me to go but I didn't went, so I told sister that I would like to go but my aunt wouldn't let me go. I told father too. Old Mr. Harris, he's going around. He's in charge [unintelligible phrase].

This is Flynn Harris?

Yes. She better go to school he said. This child would like to go to school. She'll go. I went and lots of kids went with me but some, they turned back. Joe Donta he was going to school at Simpson. His father come from the Yukon. He is married to my aunt. One of my aunts is dead. He left there. Joe, he slept alone. He's going to school there. There is my cousin and some other cousin go to school at Resolution. I didn't know it. I was going to school there, good enough to learn to talk [English].

Let's go back a bit. When you were going to the Yukon with your aunt, how did they go back overland from Fort Liard?

There's a road [trail?] there. Indians change, all over they change. [the route?] They have a chain going there parallel to the side of the Liard River. Then they walk on the shore and walk up Fisherman Creek at the [unintelligible word] cross to the other side and cut across to the Kotaneelee trail. It comes out to the Liard River. They hit that and it goes away up. They wind up it and hit the river and cross it. They make a raft and pack it and cross. They stay on the other side and into La Biche River and into Beaver River and Toobally Lake. [Mary pronounces Toobally as Cheebally Lake.] I don't remember if they walk around that.

Did they ever go over into the Nahanni country from Fort Liard?

Yes, all over. That's why I say [unintelligible person's Dené name] his mother and his father and my aunt, they all been up hot springs, Clausen Creek. It's not Clausen Creek they say. We call that [unintelligible (to me) Dené name]. That's Big Bird Creek. Big Bird is sitting and drink all the water. We call that Toncha [spelling?]. [Two unintelligible sentences mainly in Dené.] They cut across. There's a trail there too.