

THE POOLE FIELD LETTERS

Editor's note

Poole Field was for many decades a trader, trapper and prospector in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. He aided the Geological Survey of Canada and the National Museum on several occasions. Not the least of his contributions are a series of communications on the ethnology of the Athabaskan-speaking peoples between the Yukon and Mackenzie Rivers. These data were in the form of personal letters to a member of the Geological Survey of Canada. The Museum possesses typescript copies of these letters. The earliest, dated 1913, is presented only in this issue. Editing has been held to the minimum necessary for comprehensibility. Editor's insertions are bracketed by slashes.

J. H. MacNeish

Ross River,
Feb. 8th, 1913.

The following is some material on customs and history of the Indians now living and hunting in the country lying between the upper Liard and Mackenzie waters and the Yukon.

/It was/ gathered during some ten years spent travelling with and trading and trapping with said Indians. The original Indians claiming the country of the Upper Pelly and its tributaries have completely disappeared with the exception of one old woman now on the Pelly /who/ is all that is left of a once large tribe.

The main causes for this is quarreling amongst themselves for one cause or another, generally started by two men fighting and one killing the other, when the relations and friends would take the quarrel up and kill the first man or some of his relatives to get even and so they would keep the quarrel going until one party were all dead or so weakened that for a time they were satisfied to stop. Secondly, by strange tribes making raids on them and killing the men and taking their women away with them if the raiders proved the strongest.

So things went until about the year 1886 as near as I can find out. All the Indians then living on the upper Pelly made a trip to the head of Ross River and Head of South Fork of McMillan, where they met in with a tribe of Indians coming from the Mackenzie waters. They only met a few of the men the first day and made friends and arrangements to meet the whole tribe the next day. The old woman now here and her husband decided to move back down the Ross that night as they did not trust the Mackenzie /Indians/ and were afraid of them, but all the rest decided to stop and meet the strangers.

Next day about sunrise, the old women said, they heard shooting at the camp they had left which kept up all day at intervals (the Indians at that time had muzzle loading rifles), which made them believe they were shooting at each other instead of just saluting each other which was the custom when two strange tribes met. So they came on down the river to the mouth where they stayed that winter waiting for some of the Pelly's to return. Three of their

dogs returned but none of the Indians which made them pretty sure that there had been trouble of some kind to have kept them all from returning. So they went up the Pelly and over to the Liard, where they met in with a tribe of Indians called the Center Indians with whom they were friends and had met before and told them what had happened and joined the tribe. Some time after some of the Center Indians made a trip to Ft. Liard, and heard there that some of the Pellys were still alive and were living with the Indians called the Mountain Indians and then trading at Ft. Norman on the Mackenzie. The Mountain Indians claim the most of the Pellys died off and the few that are still alive and living with them were too young at the time to remember what happened, but by what evidence I can gather, I believe the most of the grown people were killed. However, this ended the Pellys as a tribe.

The Center Indians from that time on gradually moved into the Pelly country and claimed it as theirs, also claiming a right to the country they had left at the head waters of the Liard.

Occasionally they were joined by other Indians from the Yukon and Teslin Lake, who married women from the Center Indians, also some of the Indians from Ft. Liard. They then called themselves the Pelly Indians doing their trading at Ft. Liard /sic, or?/ Liard Post, sometimes making a trip to the Yukon. Until later years there has been a trading post established on the Pelly which has induced Indians to come in from all directions and trade on the Pelly. Such is a rough sketch of what has happened in the past as near as you can find out from any Indians alive today on the Pelly.

The present Indians now here may be divided into three parts. The Center Indians who claim the country from the Liard post on the Liard and its tributaries to the Lappy /Lapie/ river, a tributary of the Pelly on the one side, and to Mt. Sheldon on Ross River to the mouth of the Ross on the other may be called the Pelly Indians.

The Indians claiming the country from Sheldon Lake to the head of Ross River, the Macmillan from the mouth of the north fork to its head, the head of Hyland south and north Nahannie Rivers, and all of the Gravel may be called the Mountain Indians.

The country west of Lappy and Ross River is claimed by Indians originally from the Yukon and may be called the Little Salmon Indians.

The country is owned by the women. Any man from a foreign tribe taking a wife is supposed to hunt in the country his wife belongs to. This holds good in all three tribes.

Among the Pellys and Little Salmons, the custom was that if any man wanted a wife he made her a present of some kind. If he was satisfactory as a son-in-law to the girl's parents, the present was kept, if not, it was returned. If the present was kept, he had to keep on giving to the girl and her parents of game and skins, also helping his intended father-in-law in hunting until the old people were satisfied with him as a son-in-law when he got the girl which was generally celebrated by a feast. After this you were not supposed to speak to your father or mother-in-law, or them to you. If you wished to tell them anything you must do so through a third party. The old people did the same. At the present day this law is very seldom kept up except in a few cases, but was very strict at one time.

There is no limit to the number of wives as long as you can support them, but of late years public opinion seems to be against this and now there are very few with more than one wife.

Divorce can be had by either party for most any reason. If a man kills another or any person, there is no excuse. He must either be killed himself, or one of his relatives, or pay the price to be set by the relatives of the dead person. A life for a life, or pay, seems to be the only satisfactory settlement regardless of who was in the wrong.

Amongst the Pellys and Little Salmons the belief in witches and casting of spells was very strong up to a few years ago when the contact with White people and the fear of the police has practically put a stop to any serious crimes. The medicine men were the very leaders of this. They were supposed to have the power to detect a witch. /Then he or she was/ overpowered and tied up hands and feet, then hung up by the heels to a tree. Then the doctor would make medicine over them and sing and dance, asking them if things looked different in any way. If the supposed witch said "No" he was left hanging there till he did.

Then he was taken and killed.

Only in cases when the person who was supposed to be a witch had very powerful relations and they gave the doctor presents to doctor over him did anyone get off from being killed. However, although I don't believe any of the Indians would go to this extreme now, still some of the older people have very strong beliefs on the subject yet.

The medicine man has the power of a kind of second sight either in dreams or when he or she, whoever the doctor is, starts singing they are supposed to go into a trance and when they recover they will be able to foretell the future, also cure the sick, and so forth, which gives them considerable influence with the tribe. They have tales of enormous animals such as the mammoth, and spiders as large as a full-sized grizzly bear and long worms that are supposed to be alive today and nobody can save them from these animals but their doctors. Some of the Indians will tell you they have seen these animals. I believe that the faith they put in their doctors and a warped imagination will account for all of their stories of seeing strange animals and their tracks.

Also there are the little men of the Mountain that are supposed to be about four feet high at the most and have fine living places in the heart of the mountains and are exceptionally strong and wise who come out occasionally and capture their women for wives, in some cases making the father of the girl they have taken a medicine man in return for the girl.

When a girl first comes to the age of puberty she was made to go away about a quarter of a mile from the main camp and camp alone in a skin tent. She was allowed to cook nothing. Food was sent by a female from her father's camp and no male was allowed to see her or pass close where she was stopping /for/ if he did it was supposed to bring him bad luck either by sickness or /in his/ hunting. She wore a mask over her face which she wore whenever she came out of her tent. If the Indians moved camp she came last and camped behind them whenever she camped. If it was in the winter one or two of the other females travelled with her and they had to put a green bough across every track that crossed their trail when the track came on the trail and where it went off. No matter what the track was they had to shut it off before

the girl could pass. Sometimes when the Indians crossed a lake or prairies when small game was plentiful, this was quite a job. This lasted for about two weeks when she would come back to her father's camp.

After this, whenever she had her monthlies, whether she was married or not, she had to camp alone for at least four days, but did not have to wear a mask or put boughs across any tracks she might cross in travelling.

The Pellys and Little Salmons believe that very nearly all sickness comes from the otter and mink and if anybody kills one, they or some of their near relatives will get sick and die. If any should happen to kill an otter or mink and skin it, he generally will use some old knife and throw the knife away when he is finished. He believes by doing this he guards against getting sick as the sickness is in the knife. Also if you touch or kill a frog your limbs will lose their strength, and you will get poor. Your flesh will gradually waste away till you die.

Years ago they lived in open camps sheltered on three sides by throwing up logs and brush and had a fire in front using a skin covering of caribou skins for a roof. After the winter set in, it was the custom in the morning before they made a fire to cut a hole in the ice where the water would come about to the shoulders. All the men and youths that held any claim to being strong and being able to withstand hardships jumped in the water, each being armed with small bundles of willows. When they had stayed in the water as long as able, they climbed on the ice and beat each other with the willows. The man who could stay in the water the longest and also /endure/ the hardest whipping with the willows and ask for more was proclaimed the strongest man in the tribe.

Their principal food is meat and fish. Years ago when some of the oldest men alive today were young men, they claim there were no moose in this part of the country, but caribou were very plentiful. They used bows and arrows to hunt with, spears, snares, dead falls also. They would make long fences when the caribou and sheep came below timberline, sometimes packing poles to make their fences with up on top of the mountains. They would leave spaces big enough for a caribou or sheep to go through in their fences and

set snares in them. Whenever a herd was sighted they would try to surround them and drive them through their fences. They would make snowshoe string out of the skins, blankets, and clothing of all kinds.

When the moose appeared they did practically the same thing with them. As a rule they would set their snares on the mooses' runway where they came to a lake to feed or /to/ a lick for salt. They still set snares for these animals among the Mountain men, and I have seen caught in snares moose, sheep, black-bear, wolves and wolverines. They use the twisted sinew or raw twisted caribou skin for their snares and tie one end to a loose green stick so that the animal caught can drag it around, the size of the stick varying according to the strength of the animal the snare is set for.

As the moose increased the caribou decreased until up to a few years ago, when they seem to be increasing again. But I believe up to date there is no decrease in the moose.

Beaver the Indian kills every way, with nets in winter, spearing and shooting them, dragging them out of their holes with their hands and killing them with a club. This last may demand a fuller explanation. The beaver up here very seldom occupy their house till the ice freezes. They generally have holes in the bank with the mouth of the hole under water which they come up and live in during the summer months, also some times in the winter. The Indian, late in the fall just before freeze-up, finds these holes, starting from the entrance. He makes a hole on top of the bank big enough to get his arm in. He then takes a stick with a slight bow in it and feels up the hole with it, very gently. As a rule the beaver will be right at the end of his hole when you touch him with the stick. If you are careful he will stay perfectly still if his tail is towards you. You can feel it, as it feels just the same as rubbing a stick across a rough file. Then if he is near enough, put your hand in and catch him gently by the root of the tail or just above the first joint of his hind leg so as to get a good grip. Do this very easy till you have a firm grip, then jerk him out as quick as you are able, till he is half out of the hole when you pound him on the back with a club or the head of an axe till he stops struggling, when you bring him all out and finish him. Their holes are so narrow that it is practically impossible for them

to turn and bite you in doing this. If he should be facing you in the hole, poke him gently on the nose. He will either turn round or bolt out. If he comes out, you have to be quick to spear him when he enters the water or before he gets into another hole.

The Indians claim that they can tell what kind of winter it is going to be by the way the beaver build their houses and the amount of food they put up for the winter. According to how cold the winter will be, the amount of food and the place chosen for a house /vary/, being made higher out of the water in case of the water freezing to the bottom and overflowing. I believe there is a good deal of truth in this, but have not been able to collect enough evidence as yet to be sure.

I believe there is more trouble caused now and in the past over beaver than any other one thing. Each Indian has his beaver country where he can go at any time and get his dinner, as the beaver, if not disturbed, will stay for years in one place or close in that neighborhood. He arrives at his beaver country to find some one has been before him and not only taken his dinner but also his money in the shape of the beaver skin, and if he catches the man that did it as a rule there is trouble of some kind. This is how a lot of the trouble between different tribes is started, also amongst the tribe itself.

The Indian generally tries to get into a good game country about the end of August when all game is fat, to put up a cache of dried meat for the winter months. If in the mountains the women catch groundhogs and gophers they dry them for the winter. Often /by/ the end of October the nutting /sic, rutting/ season is over and most of the male animals in the big game line are poor.

They use the caribou and calf moose for snowshoe string and in making their toboggans also for clothing tanned with the hair on, sometimes worn with the hair inside of the garment, sometimes with the hair out. Some of the more stylish use beaver for coats and hats and mitts, also in trimming garments. They use rabbit skins cut in strips and knitted for blankets, also the skins of squirrel and ground hog. At the present-day, they are copying the white man more and using his clothing which is not as warm as their own

in winter. They use the dog entirely as beast of burden, pack him in the summer and /with/ a sleigh or toboggan in the winter. They have stick traps and snares for most all the animals there are in here. Their tools originally were made out of wood, bone, or stone, but they use the white man's traps and tools as a rule almost altogether now.

They are continually on the move, only stopping a few days in one place and cover a large tract of country in a year. Their food supply is taken from such a large country that it leaves plenty to breed from, so although an Indian kills a lot of game in a year he does a country very little harm.

Also this travelling is pretty hard work, so if anybody falls sick, he either has to get well in a hurry or die, as the Indians cannot stay very long in one place for want of food, and their nursing is of the poorest, so it is a case of get well quick or die. Tuberculosis seems to be the strongest of all diseases amongst them. A few years ago they were dying off fast but it seems to have killed all the sickly ones and left the strongest and healthy ones, as they are now on the increase and very little sickness amongst them of any kind. There is a great similarity in the language spoken by the Indians living on the Liard and on the Mackenzie from Fort Providence to Ft. Good Hope, and from Selkirk to Lake Tagish on the Yukon and the Pelly. Many of their words are exactly alike and many being so similar that to anyone speaking our language fluently it is easy to understand what is meant. Their main sources of amusement are gambling, dancing, singing and telling stories.

They have a God who is supposed to be an Indian and lives in one of the stars who made everything on the earth. The animals were the first and the smartest of all the animals and the wisest were the wolves and the ravens, the next was the wolverine. All the animals could talk and understand each other and can yet. The wolves and ravens intermarried and their children were Indians. They called the wolverine their brother-in-law and were very friendly with him.

The wolves and the ravens held a meeting and made a law that they would not marry any other animal, but a wolf was to marry a raven and a raven a wolf. The children would take their name from their mother, and their mother would own the country. Sisters and

brothers after they became of age should not speak or play with each other. When a wolf died the other wolves would make a big feast for the ravens to eat and would give the ravens presents but would eat nothing themselves. When a raven died he was to do the same for the wolves and so the world was started.

These laws are followed to the present day amongst all the Indians on the Yukon, Pelly, Teslin Lake, and Upper Liard, but the Mountain Indians do not. But all the Indians living on water running into the Yukon and the Upper Liard, the first thing they will ask you when you meet is what tribe /moiety/ you belong to, the wolves or the ravens. If you belong to the same tribe as them, they will call you brother or father according to age, and are supposed to treat you as such, and although you may be no relation, if you belong to the same tribe you can't marry, but if it should happen that you belong to the opposite family, even if you should be close blood relatives, marriage is all right.

When an Indian dies his relatives dress him up in as good clothes as possible, also furnish him with a gun, if they have one, and a blanket. The men were supposed to follow him to the grave. On the way their chief or head man was supposed to walk ahead and call to their God that one of his children was coming to him, occasionally firing the gun belonging to the dead man. When they arrived at the grave and had lowered the body into it, they fired two more shots, then loaded the gun again and left it at full cock and placed it on top of the coffin pointing west. Then the head man spoke to the dead person calling him first by name two or three times, then telling him, "You are leaving us now to go to our great Father. According to the life you have led here below, whether good or bad, /that/ is the reception he will give you. You see the trail ahead of you leading from here to his camp in the star that we on earth are not permitted to see. You must follow this trail, neither turning to the right or to the left on small hunting trails, but keep to the well beaten one. We will put food in the fire every time we cook for you to eat on the way. Be brave and fear nothing that our Father may be proud of the people you came from." /The head man calls/ "culah, culah" twice, meaning "finish." They then fill in the grave and return to camp, where the relatives make a feast for the opposite party from the deceased, whether Wolf or Raven, in honor of the dead and throw

food into the fire for him to eat.

When the dead person arrives at the Star, if he is a good Indian he is met by the God, who gives him a hearty welcome and leads him to where the other Indians are stopping that have died before him, who also give him a hearty welcome and make a big feast for him. When they are through eating they dance and sing and gamble and have a general good time. If the dead Indian should not have been a good Indian on earth, the God is liable to turn him into a bear or a moose or any kind of animal and send him back to earth, and leave him there until such time as he thinks he has punished him enough, when he will take him back and he will be received with the same honor as a good Indian.

The dead person's goods, if he has any, are packed up by the head of the family. That of it that is of any value is cached; the rest is either thrown into the river or burned after a year or two. The valuable stuff is then divided amongst the relatives of the dead person, or in case he was rich part of it would be given to the ravens if the dead person happened to be a wolf or vice versa.

The Mountain men used to have trouble a long time ago with the Eskimo Indian, somewhere near Bear lake. Every time they would meet there would be a fight. The story goes that at one time the leader of the Mountain men became very strong in their fights and was a great hunter, also the main leader of the Eskimo Indians was the same. They had often tried to meet each other in fights, each claiming to be the better man, and would hunt close to each other's boundary line to show they were not afraid. (This is supposed to have happened before they had any rifles.) One day they met each other while out hunting and were very polite. The chief of the Eskimo invited the Mountain chief to hunt white bear with him (this was in the winter), believing that if the Mountain chief did he would either get killed by the bear or /the Eskimo/ would get a chance when his back was turned to kill him. However, the Mountain chief was willing, so they went down to a place where the water was open and a good fishing place where they were almost sure to find bear. They found one fishing from the edge of the ice. He seemed to be a young one about three years old. The Eskimo said he would kill this bear alone if the Mountain man would sit down where he was and watch. So he did. The way they hunted bear then was to get

as near as possible without being detected, so that they could either kill him unawares or make the bear stand and fight. If the bear saw them he would probably run away. When the Eskimo got within five or six yards of the bear, he left his bow and spear and just used his knife and him and the bear went at it. They had quite a fight on the ice, and finally grappled each other and fell in the water which separated them and each made shore again. Then the Eskimo killed the bear without getting hurt himself with the exception of a slight scratch on his shoulder. He was then joined by the Mountain man who complimented him on his hunting. On looking down the river they saw another bear much larger than the first coming towards them, also busy fishing. The Eskimo told the Mountain man "Now I have killed a bear alone, now you kill one." The Mountain man started off and made much closer to the bear than the Eskimo did without the bear seeing him, also leaving his bow and spear and just using his knife. When the bear saw him, he came for him and when within striking distance, he stood up on his hind legs. But the Mountain man dodged the blow by side stepping and drove his knife into the bear just back of the short ribs above the kidneys, where there is a soft joint in the back bone. He struck this joint and when the bear landed on its front feet it broke its back. Then he was easily killed.

This rather scared the Eskimo from attacking the Mountain man, so when they came to where they separated to go to their different camps, the Eskimo said "Let us sit down and talk. I wish to tell you, he said, that when we first met it was my intention to kill you if I could catch you unawares, but since you killed that bear so easily I was a little scared about tackling you. Now, we have been at war together, your tribe and mine, for a long time. Sometimes your tribe gets the best of it, sometimes mine. Now since we have met, what do you think of us making friends and partners. I promise that I will never do you any harm from this date, and if I hear of any harm coming to you I will try to prevent it, if you get killed I will try to kill the man who did it, will look after you in sickness or when out of luck, divide half I have with you. We will be more than brothers to each other. If you should die I will be a husband to your wife and a father to your children, the same as my own. Will you agree to do the same by me?" The Mountain chief said he would, so they exchanged bows and spears and knives and clothing right there.

"Now we will call this partnership Sa-Anzie for when our young men hear of it they will want to follow our example so we must make it a law if anyone makes a Sa-Anzie and does not live up to his agreement he will have to pay for it." "Now, the Eskimo said, "to prove your faith come home with me, and stop in my camp tonight and I will return and spend a night with you in yours and our wives will be partners the same as we are." So the Mountain man did, much to the surprise of the other Eskimos. However, this started the Sa-Anzie Brotherhood on the Mackenzie and very nearly every man after that when they met a strange tribe made a Sa-Anzie of one of the strangers and it was strictly lived up to and is to the present day. The Mountain men all have Sa-Anzies with the Pellys as a safeguard against treachery and to help in case of sickness and /in/ several cases where the man has died. Although so far they have not taken the widow to wife still the Sa-Anzie gives her presents and food and looks after the children.

The women are supposed to have ten or eleven children and until they do have this amount they are not considered old. Amongst the three tribes the men and women invariably eat together. The Mountain women do practically all the cooking, but amongst the Pellys and Little Salmons, it is about equally divided.

The Mountain women have very little to say in the management of affairs. The Pelly and Little Salmons are about even with the men, in some cases the women being the boss entirely. In regards to camp work it depends entirely what season of the year it is. If in fur season, it keeps the men busy hunting and trapping and the women do practically all of the camp work. In the summer months they help each other.

Since they have come in contact with the Whites they look further ahead and some are saving a little money each year instead of spending all their fur and getting credit besides.

They have lots of old legends of the country being flooded, also of being covered with ice, another of the country being covered with ashes, and the trouble the people had at that time to live. The first may have originated with the White man; they met years ago. The last might have been from some volcanic ash that years ago undoubtedly existed some place in the country, as there is volcanic ash in the banks of the

river from Ross River on down.

They have other old stories which I can write you later about, if they should be of any interest to you. I will be able to get you a collection of curios illustrating their life and habits. I will ship them to you when the steamer arrives here in July. I am rather handicapped in this as I am not sure just what value you would care to pay for some articles. I am using my own judgment about some but I should like you to advise me what to do, if possible. I am getting a model moose-skin canoe, instead of a full-sized one, say about four or five feet long, also a child's fur blanket instead of a large one. Then in clothing some of them have beaver coats well worked in beads and trimmed with otter. One sold here to a White man for \$70. I could get one like it as the coat is really worth it, but it is a big price to pay without advice. I could get the same coat made out of caribou fur and without beadwork for probably seven or eight dollars.

Yours sincerely,

(Sgd) Poole Field.