

Alfred Semple

Aklavik, NT

Born: December 20, 1920
Birthplace: Mayo, Yukon
Parents: Johnny and Alice Semple
Gwich'in: Ehdiitat Gwich'in
Married: Catherine Vittrekwa in 1944
Children: Alice, Caroline, Philomene, Annie, Richard, Elizabeth, George, Robert, Emily



Alfred was born on December 20, 1920 in Mayo, Yukon at a time when his parents were moving around to different places. His parents were originally from Fort McPherson. They stayed in Mayo for a while before moving back to Dawson where Alfred grew up. His family, along with Alfred Bonnetplume's family and Joe Henry moved to Calico City, north of Black City, in the Blackstone River area. In those days, people moved a lot between Fort McPherson and Dawson to get their supplies.

Alfred remembers meeting people from Fort McPherson when they were travelling around the Hart River area in the mountains - families like William Vittrekwa, Ronnie Pascal, Ben Kunnizzie, John Vaneltsi, Jarvis Mitchell, James Mitchell and Old Jarvis Mitchell. Alfred remembers Johnny Kay's stories of people travelling up Sruh niilii tshik following the old time dog team trail to the high country to hunt for caribou, moose or sheep. They would see where hunters used caribou corrals, built by Tsii deii people, to snare and kill caribou with bow and arrows in the fall. When he was nine years old, Alfred's mother taught him

how to read and write English.

Alfred spent nine years, from 1930 to 1939, at the boarding school in Carcross, Yukon, almost losing his language there. When he returned to his family, he worked with a mining company for the summer, then made the nine-day trip to Hungry Lake to trap for the winter.

In those days, boys were taught hunting skills and the skills of the land by their fathers. They were taught everything they needed to survive on the land. "My father taught me everything. He taught me how to hunt, he taught me how to butcher the meat, moose or caribou, he taught me how to dry the meat, to prepare the meat for food, and he taught me how to fish. Everything I know of the land my father taught me. In those days, I was a young man." Alfred's father Johnny Semple, who later became a minister with the Anglican Church, used to read Bible passages to him while they were out on their trap line.

Alfred married Catherine Vittrekwa, daughter of William and Ellen, in 1944 in Fort McPherson. They did not stay long in Fort McPherson. They made their first

home in the Black Mountain area on the Husky Channel. Alfred said of Catherine, "She is a woman who likes to keep busy. She keeps my clothing well and she keeps everything in good order. She looks after me and looks after our home very well." In the fall of 1960, they lived at Hungry Lake where they netted 500 jackfish for their six dogs and had plenty of moose and caribou meat plus almost 200 martin pelts before Christmas. Alfred and William Snowshoe made a trip to Dawson to trade their furs. Later Alfred and Catherine settled near Aklavik when their children were ready for school.

Today, Alfred and Catherine still spend time on the land at their camp, three miles outside of Aklavik on the Peel. Alfred talks about our Gwich'in language, culture and tradition, "I would like to see our generations using the land, meats and fish instead of relying on 'whiteman food' to feed our children. My father taught me well. If we teach our children in this way, they will soon learn too. It is an important part of our life."