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A Meeting at Grandma's Camp (Selections)

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Abstract

This excerpt from a longer paper presents a detailed description of a 1998 'supper tour' to Atsua Ku, a First Nations fish camp on the Yukon River. This first-person narrative by the late Dr. Lucie Dufresne explores the negotiated identities and relationships of the inhabitants and owners of the fish camp with herself as the lone tourist to visit that day.

Keywords: Indigenous tourism, Yukon Territory, matriculture

Resumé

Cet extrait d'un article plus long présente une description détaillée d'une « tournée de souper » en 1998 à Atsua Ku, un camp de pêche des Premières Nations sur le fleuve Yukon. Ce récit à la première personne, rédigé par feu Dre

Lucie Dufresne, explore les identités et relations négociées des habitants et des propriétaires du camp de pêche, avec elle-même comme seule touriste à visiter ce jour-là.

Mots-clés : tourisme autochtone, territoire du Yukon, matriculture

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CONTEXT

Atsua Ku (Grandma's Camp) Riverboat Adventures is a three year old family-owned and operated First Nations business. It offers Yukon River boat tours and stays at a 'traditional' First Nations fish camp. These stays can include Native foods, cultural activities, nature walks, Native entertainment (songs, dances, storytelling), and overnight accommodation in turn-of-the-century double wall canvas tents.

The camp is located forty-five minutes away from downtown Whitehorse by riverboat. It is located on the northern bank of the river and occupies a fairly large plateau above the high water mark. The area is lightly wooded with spruce, willow, aspen, and birch predominating. The camp is set up in a cleared area overlooking a creek that runs into the river. This cleared area contains a cook tent, a wash stand, a smoking tent to process fish and game, two picnic tables, a large framework structure that can be covered with tarps to protect against rain or sun, a children's play area, and a central fire pit around which the storytelling and other cultural activities are held. The only permanent structures are the tent poles and frames which are made from tree trunks. Everything else is canvas tenting or blue plastic tarp. These are taken down when the camp is not being lived in. In the neighbouring trees are situated the (4 – 6 ?) sleeping tents and outhouses. Gravel has been put down to cover all walkways and the area around the fire pit. I was told that this was done to control the mud and to limit walking on non-gravel areas. This is a working food gathering and processing camp as well as a tourist attraction.

Atsua Ku is one of a growing number of First Nations private enterprises set up by individuals and families to take advantage of the large yearly tourist influx, especially of that number of tourists who are interested in 'wildlife adventures' or First Nations history. All of these venues are away from urban centres and most are accessible only by boat and only through a guide. Road access is limited and maps to their locations are non-existent. Access is one of the commodities you buy as you 'book' your adventure.

Two sisters own and operate this camp. Lin (*sic*), the eldest, is the cook and grounds manager. Dorothy is the bookkeeper, promoter, and workshop instructor. Their younger brother, Carl Sams, is the riverboat operator and woodsman. Other sisters also cook occasionally when a large tour group is being entertained. The current members of this family consider themselves as continuing in the footsteps of their grandparents who had used this site as a yearly fish gathering and processing site. Prior to this use, the site had been the Croucher Creek Wood Camp (fuelwood cutting and storage site) for the steam boats until the 1930s. I could not ascertain if the site had been a fish camp prior to being a wood camp. However, the Sams family now state that they are reclaiming their heritage and continuing in their grandparents' footsteps.

When the two sisters decided to set up this camp three years ago, they had to reclaim the land from poachers and clean up after more than thirty years of abandonment and misuse. The camp had been used as a 'party' site and occasional dump, and was littered with over ten truckloads of garbage, like discarded camp equipment and broken bottles. It was now a pleasant, clean, unpretentious, comfortable, obviously lived in and cared for site that was someone's home, and not just set up for tourist activities.

15 AUGUST 1998 VISIT

Later in the day I called my B&B and was told that the fish camp had called: I would be picked up at the boat dock. I walked to the boat dock and sat down to wait, since I was early. I didn't see any sign indicating that I was at the right place and no other person arrived to wait with me. There was no way for me to reduce the uncertainty of the situation, so I tried to wait as calmly as possible. Finally, a young Native woman in office clothes approached me and asked for me by name. She identified herself as being the camp's booking clerk and that she was there to greet me. I asked her if I was the only one this evening and she said, Yes. I didn't know what to make of this, so I asked her if this was usual. She replied, No, but the family is at the fish camp anyways and if I didn't mind being a guest at their family meal, I would be welcomed. I decided I had nothing to lose if I went. Finally the boat arrived and the young woman left.

Carl Sams introduced himself and invited me into the boat. He was dressed like most everyone in the area that didn't have an office job: jeans, check shirt, jean jacket, and visored camp. He also had on a life jacket and he had a large folding knife at his belt. He instructed me in how to put on a life jacket; that done, with me seated comfortably in the small flat-bottomed boat, we left the dock and proceeded down the river towards the camp.

Carl informed me that the river tour was a major part of the event and that he would be identifying for me sites of special historical, ecological, or cultural interest. He would also make sure that I would see plenty of wildlife, so he hoped I had brought a camera and binoculars. I thanked him, told him I would not be taking pictures, and assured him that I didn't need to take pictures.

Our trip took well over the forty-five minutes allotted. We discussed many of the sites he pointed out. I was also interested in the wildlife and appreciated the particularities of the habitat and ecological adaptation that he identified. We also lapsed into silence quite often as he would bring the boat more slowly towards a loon family or a coyote hunting on the bank. We seemed to relax into silence and eventually he would simply point towards something rather than verbally call my attention to it. Time seemed to stretch and neither one of us seemed to mind.

Eventually, we arrived at the camp and as we were greeted by Dorothy, Carl was quick to state to her that I had noticed the coyote we had observed and not him. This seemed important and startling information and he repeated it several times during my stay there. It seemed to mark me as unusual and somehow worthy of special attention. I came to understand later that the power of observation is a skill that is highly prized in this culture that teaches its children through example and rarely through formal teaching or question & answer.

After introducing me to the other people on site (five people: two sisters with one son each and their brother), Dorothy walked me over the grounds and brought me to an area behind the camp and more deeply into the forest. She showed me two small log cabins used by her grandparents as summer and winter hunting shelters. She spoke with pride of the resourcefulness and skill of her grandparents as they lived off the land. She also made a point of telling me that she had been born in one of the cabins and that they had been used as recently as her childhood (thirty years ago?). She showed me where she had found her grandmother's fleshing site where she dressed skins and smoked them. She showed me the stone scraper she had found when cleaning up the site. These were treasures and they identified her to herself (and to me) as a First Nation woman still attached to the land.

Interspersed with these comments were other decrying the sorry state of the cabins and the almost total vandalism of the buildings and their contents. This was recent; she said that when the site was abandoned, when it was no longer a wood camp or a working fish camp, squatters had moved in, especially during the seventies, and they had 'lacked respect' for the land and for the site. They had stolen, broken, or moved most of the belongings left in the cabins. They had broken trees and turned the site into a dump. They had 'lacked respect' and now that the family had reclaimed the site and cleaned it, her

grandparents would ‘know respect’ again. The theme of respect was becoming general, both during the boat trip and now, during the walking tour of the site.

My silence and my acute attention surprised my interlocutor; she asked more than once if I was interested in what she said and if I had any questions. I said that I enjoyed her presentation and that no, I had no questions. Finally, I did ask a few technical questions about skin processing techniques and she was surprised. She asked me where I had learned about processing hides and I said that one of my uncles in New Brunswick was an expert Micmac (*sic*) snowshoe maker and that I knew something about skin preparation from him. She was delighted at my interest and mentioned my interest to the others when we came back to the main area of the camp; we were not fitting each others’ expectations of tourists and tour organizers and cultural performers.

Because I was the only guest, the evening became much more informal than usual. I was invited to have supper with the family rather than eating by myself. I could be served supper if I wanted but I could also sit with them. I chose to sit with them and I’m glad I did. I would never have witnessed how this nation discipline their children or how they themselves eat the food they served me, had I not sat with them.

We had cariboo (*sic*) swiss steak with caesar’s salad (*sic*) with capers, bannock, and fruit salad. Chicken was also available if I didn’t want cariboo. I wanted cariboo. The food was excellent and there was plenty of it. I was aware that the menu had been tailored to western taste, but how the meal was served and eaten was very peculiar to me. First of all, I was the first to serve myself from a buffet table, then the others served themselves in what seemed to be no particular order. What became really interesting to me was the use of condiments; I have never seen butter used the way my husband uses ketchup: as a condiment on everything else. Butter was added to the swiss steak in large quantity as well as spread over the bannock, and all of them used it this way.

An interesting example of socialization occurred when one of the boys started playing with his food. His aunt asked him if he had suddenly become left-handed. When he answered with a surprised ‘No, why?’, she replied that he must have since he was using the wrong hands to cut his food and place it in his mouth. She then demonstrated the proper way while saying that, ‘Yes, eating with utensils was a difficult thing to do.’ This contrasted sharply with the reaction of a white tourist woman to her child’s behaviour at a local donut shop. She had slapped the child’s hand and ordered him to stop embarrassing her. I had heard that Native children were generally rebuked with gentle ridicule and now I had seen it happen.

After the meal, I was invited to learn a Native craft: making dreamcatchers. I was never told that this was a local craft, which it is not, but only that it was traditionally Native. Again, Dorothy took over. Once I said that I was happy to stay at the picnic table where we had eaten to now do crafts, she went to get her craft supplies and we got to work. I was offered no folklore to explain the object we were making. Rather, Dorothy and I started to have a quiet, friendly conversation about child rearing, family life, and the vagaries of both being women entrepreneurs. I had prefaced one of my questions to her with the information that I was a part-owner of a store and that it was 'rough' being in business in these economic times.

This was a fortuitous action because it seemed to give her something outside the evening's 'job' to talk with me about. It was as if we had a neutral ground where we could be friends; there was a distinct shift in our relationship. She was still in a didactic position with me learning, but the buyer / seller relationship seemed to disappear. We both knew economic hardship and we could now discuss the ' backstage' strategies needed to attract customers and present a saleable product. We laughed, we joked, we felt conspiratorial, we had common ground where we explored becoming friends. When she realised that I was having no difficulty making a dreamcatcher, she became wary until I told her that I used my hands alot and that I usually knitted and embroidered. A skill in one craft seemed to imply at least the possibility of skill in others and we resumed our conversation.

The extent to which we became friends became obvious to me when she took back the feathers she had offered me to finish my dreamcatcher, and she tentatively handed me another bag of feathers. Would I like some eagle down for my dreamcatcher? I was stunned. Leaving aside the illegality of a non-Native having in her possession an eagle feather, the cultural importance of the eagle for the Dene made it highly unlikely that it would be casually given away. I was speechless. Then I very quickly thanked her, took two small feathers, and added them to my dreamcatcher. I then securely closed the bag and gave it back to her, thanking her again. We looked at each other for a moment. Then she laughed and called for the guest book to be brought for me to sign. We were both grateful that the moment had passed. We were also grateful it had occurred.

When it was time to leave, the women hugged me, we joked about them staying with me in Ottawa when they would come to the Tulip Festival. The kids shyly waved and I entered the boat with Carl. Because it was getting late (the supper had lasted a good hour and a half longer than expected), we motored rapidly back to Whitehorse. The engine noise precluded conversation and there didn't seem much left to say. When we docked, Carl shook my hand, we both smiled, then I walked away.

About the Author

An anthropologist by training and a teacher by preference, Dr. Lucie Marie-Mai Dufresne was a long time sessional lecturer at the University of Ottawa in the departments of Classics and Religious Studies, Sociology and Anthropology, and Women's Studies. She received her BA in Anthropology from the University of British Columbia, and her MA and PhD from the University of Ottawa. She was an esteemed elder of the Canadian Pagan community and taught lace making and fibre arts at the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA – Kingdom of Ealdormere). Prior to embarking on her academic career Lucie performed and taught belly dancing as the acclaimed Jasmina Mehidi. She was one of the founding members of the Middle Eastern Dance Association in Ottawa.