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INTERVIEW WITH MR. JOSEPH APSASSIN, FORT ST. JOHN, B.C.
July, 1956. Interview by Isabel Loggie, Fairview, Alberta.

Mr. Apsassin was born at Grouard. His mother was an Asalick* before her marriage, his father was Peter Apsassin. A measles epidemic at Grouard resulted in the death of his parents, sisters and brothers. Joseph Apsassin himself was sick for a month and does not remember anything which happened during this illness. One day, he said, he was able to get up, and found he was the only one of his family alive. The same epidemic killed some eighty people at the Lesser Slave Lake settlement.

The Apsassin house was, he remembered, near the Catholic mission and the priests were visiting the sick and praying for them during this epidemic.

He worked as a boy doing light chores at Grouard, at one time chopping wood and getting water for Frank Beaton, Hudson's Bay trader. When he was fifteen years old he was clearing brush, making fence poles, and cutting wood at Grouard, but does not remember particularly whom he worked for at that time. When he was twenty years old he became a Hudson's Bay employee for a time, and came to Fort St. John, where he has been ever since.

He came up river in a "tracked" boat with an eight-man crew. It was a Bay boat in charge of Dan Ferguson, who worked at Lesser Slave Lake. He had also come across the Grouard portage to the river with Dan Ferguson, on horseback. They brought supplies from Grouard to last ten days. He remembered making one camp before Dunvegan, where they stopped for a mid-day meal.

Dr. MacKay (who had, he said, "one eye") was the Hudson's Bay trader at Grouard; Frank Anderson was at Hudson's Hope; George Harvey at Dunvegan; and Max Hamilton at Fort St. John.**

Mr. Apsassin drove dogs with the Bay mail packet and hauled freight between St. John and Dunvegan in the next few years. Sometimes on mail trips the snow would be above his knees, and he used snowshoes made by himself out of moose-hide strings. He would peel birch wood with the same kind of knife used in hollowing dug-out canoes, then bend the wood and tie it with babiche strings. He can remember going two days without food on such a trip.

* Spelled phonetically.

** This arrangement of Hudson's Bay traders probably means he came to St. John in 1898.

He married a Fort St. John girl, taking her down river to Peace River Crossing to be married by the priest there. He does not remember her name, and says he does not think he ever knew it, since she was a widow when he married her, and her parents were at the time also dead. He had two girls and four boys by this first wife; older children died, as there were no doctors at St. John then. He lived in a house at St. John for the first few years after his marriage, then moved north to trap and hunt. In the fall and spring (sometimes four times a year) he would come to St. John for supplies.

He trapped north and south of the river: at one time he lived about two miles up the Cutbank and trapped all the way east to the Montaigneuse River; later he came north of the river and lived more or less permanently in the Beaton River airport area, where he still lives. He had a cabin for a while on Neck Creek, about forty-eight miles from the present-day Alaska Highway. He had at one time a herd of some sixty horses which he had bought from the Hudson's Bay, from other Indians and half-breeds. His first four horses were three mares and a stallion which he bought from the Bay, and from these he raised others. His furs were used as credit when he needed grub and clothing: a black fox he sold to the Bay at St. John, for instance, brought a credit of \$1000; and he killed some 200 lynx one year when lynx were worth \$3 each.

In the old days, he said, a man trapped "in" a place or area, not on a trapline.

When Mr. Apsassin came to St. John first he saw a buffalo cow and calf. Chief Montaignais gave his people instructions not to shoot, but some fool-hardy young Indian ignored the chief. the animals. That cow and calf were the last buffalo in the St. John area as far as Mr. Apsassin knew. He saw the meat of the dead animals in the muskeg north-east of St. John, a long distance from the post.

The Beaver Indian Pouce Coupe was an old blind man when Mr. Apsassin came to St. John first. He remembered seeing him riding horseback, using a saddle worth about \$100 and a bridle worth \$20 at the Bay post at St. John. Pouce Coupe stayed on the Pouce Coupe prairie summer and winter.

Sam Baptiste Testawich and Duncan Testawich were at St. John when he came, but the Calahasens were at Grouard. Pierre Akinas ("Stoney") came to St. John after he did: Akinas drove cattle to the Grande Prairie for George Tanton on the same trip on which Urban Gladio came to the country.

Beaver Indians he remembered included Montaignais*, "Big Charlie", Yelase, Appas, Ateselis and Achina**, and the Wolf.

He was coming in to St. John from the north for supplies and saw the Klondikers' wagons where they had been rolled into the creek bottom. As far as he knew, the Indians who pushed the wagons over the hill were from Fort Nelson. They had wintered their horses in the Blueberry area, on the flat where Mr. Apsassin now lives, and continued north to Fort Nelson. In the spring, when they returned, they found some of the horses dead. Mr. Apsassin said the ice might have been responsible for the death of these horses, but the Fort Nelson man apparently blamed the white prospectors.***

He said that his clothing consisted of woollen pants bought from the Bay at St. John, and a shirt and underwear from the same post. He would tear strips off Hudson's Bay blankets and wind them around his feet and legs inside his mocassins. His gloves would be of moosehide lined with wool and skin - i.e. fox hide turned fur-side towards the hand. He had a beaver skin hat made by an Indian's wife on his (Apsassin's) request.

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He ~~never~~ ate fish at St. John, but remembered lots of fish and potatoes at Grouard. Mainly he ate mixed smoked meat and dried berries at St. John.

He used a single-barrelled musket with powder and cap in the early days.

Seven moose hides sewed with sinew made up the covering for one tepee. The usual camping and travelling group ~~is~~ the Indians at St. John was small: a family group. The grand-parents might have one tepee, the younger people and children another.

When he or others in his family were sick with a headache, a certain kind of stone was heated and put against the head.

- * When asked what this name meant, he said he did not know; he seemed sure, however, that the name was not Cree, which is his own language.
- ** Spelled phonetically.
- ** This incident took place in 1897, according to N.W.M.P. annual report for that year. He was not clear on the date he came to St. John first. See contradiction p. 1.