$ Back to "Stella Miller" Search Results

Tiny community devastated by cancer

By DIANA CAMPBELL December 8, 2004 Publication: Fairbanks Daily News-Miner (AK) Word Count: 660

ALONG THE ALASKA HIGHWAY--Peter Charles was a healthy man, accustomed to hard work. Often he would have to accept jobs away from his Dot Lake home to support his family.

It was when he was away from home in 1965, working construction at Ladd Field, now known as Fort Wainwright, that he suddenly become ill.

The doctors determined he had leukemia, then rare among Alaska Natives. At that time, only 80 Natives annually were being diagnosed with some type of cancer.

"It just devastated the whole family," said his daughter, Stella Miller, who gets emotional when talking about her father nearly 40 years later. "They didn't know too much about cancer then."

After he was treated briefly at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, doctors flew him to Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Maryland. Family members didn't think it strange then but now wonder why he was sent to a military hospital; he wasn't a veteran.

They wonder if there is a connection between military chemical testing or contamination that may have occurred in or near Dot Lake.

To this day they don't know.

Peter Charles had settled in what is now Dot Lake in 1946 when his wife, Doris, decided

she had had enough of the easy availability of alcohol at a military camp at Tanacross, where she lived with Peter and their six children. Tanacross is 10 miles north of Tok on the Alaska Highway.

So she packed some meager household goods in a tablecloth, gathered the children and hitched a ride 35 miles down the Alaska Highway, where she found a house that had been abandoned by highway construction workers. The setting was pleasant, on a lush plain with lakes, hills, and plenty of game trails and berries.

"We were never hungry again," Miller recalled, sitting on the screened porch of her Dot Lake home. Today, the community has 50 residents.

Nearly 20 years after Dot Lake popped up along the Alaska Highway, Peter Charles found work in construction at Ladd Field. One day in 1965, he fainted and was taken to Fairbanks Memorial Hospital for medical attention.

"They thought he was drunk," his son, Carl Charles, said during a phone interview.

After another fainting spell a few weeks later, he was diagnosed with leukemia and given four years to live. In the end, the family brought him home to Dot Lake to die in

1967, just two years after his diagnosis and subsequent failed treatment in Bethesda.

"He died a horrible, horrible death," Miller said of her father. "We felt dad was too young yet. We felt we were cheated and of all things of a disease we never heard of before."

The family wondered: How did this healthy, vigorous man become a cancer fatality?

Wild game, fish and berries were the bulk of their diet in Dot Lake. The family began to be suspicious of their wild food.

Since Charles' death, others in the small community of Dot Lake have died from

leukemia and breast, lymphoma and stomach cancers, enough people for residents to wonder if it is normal, said Tracy Charles-Smith, Peter Charles' granddaughter.

She remembers as a child the visits by medical professionals to Dot Lake School and of blood samples being taken from her, but neither she nor her grandmother, Doris, who was her adopted mother, were informed by anyone as to why, she said.

Charles-Smith has tried to obtain Peter Charles' medical records from both the Alaska Native Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Medical Center because she wants to find out more about Dot Lake cancers and about why her grandfather was treated in Maryland for leukemia.

"Nobody seems to know where his records are,"

Charles-Smith said. "That was so long ago."

Doris Charles, who also died of cancer, had commented to her family that the moose meat had changed through the years.

"Every time someone gets sick and we don't know what's wrong, we wonder," said Miller, who is battling breast cancer.

Diana Campbell can be reached at 459-7523 or dcampbell@newsminer.com .

Fairbanks Daily News-Miner (AK)

Date: December 8, 2004

(c) 2004 Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.