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Contact the People:

A Video by Garry Oker, Stacy Shaak, and Robin Ridington

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INTRODUCTION (BY GARRY OKER AND ROBIN RIDINGTON)

“Contact the People” is a video documentary about Dane-zaa cultural tradition and continuity. It was realized from audio actualities and archival photographs collected by Robin and Jillian Ridington between 1965 and 2000, together with video footage shot during the summer of 2000. The first sounds heard are song and oratory by the dreamer Charlie Yahey, recorded in the mid 1960s. Later voices are those of elders May Apsassin, Tommy Attachie, Billy Attachie and Sam Acko. Their narratives, digitally recorded in 1999 and 2000, comment on the teachings of Charlie Yahey, describe traditional vision quest training, and talk about the loss of game resources due to logging and oil exploration.

The film’s narration is accomplished entirely through these audio actualities. Video editing and special effects were done by Stacy Shaak on Galiano Island, BC. Garry Oker of the Dane-zaa First Nation was the overall creative director. Robin Ridington provided archival images, audio actualities and ethnographic advice. The final version was created by the three authors working in collaboration on Galiano Island, BC. The video was previewed at the North Peace Cultural Centre in Fort St. John, BC, and had its international premier on October 12, 2000 at the ICNSA 3 conference in Sapporo. Garry Oker of the Dane-zaa First Nation introduced the film. The following is a transcription of his talk.

Garry Oker:

Today I’d like to share with you the sound and images of Dane-zaa; past, present, equals future. The future is for us about tourism, about business. This way we can practice the culture. And that way we can again pass that on to the next generation. We are looking for ways to transmit this knowledge. And one way that we are attempting to do now, is to make video and give it back to the people as stories. Each story is told, is like a cycle in life, for as soon as the story is told to you, you become part of that circle. We hope that by doing this, that the wisdom is never lost.

The video will begin by our last Prophet that speaks about, he says, “Everybody think that the Dreamers are gone.” He says that many Dreamers have come onto this land, and there is proof about what they say on these skins. He says that these written realities tell the journeys to the Heaven. So that it is possible that the words that they speak about is true. And he sings. As he’s singing, you will see in the video, it is like reading musical notes. These songs and these notes then becomes the trail to the spirit world. That’s the first part of the video.

The second part we have our present elder that talks about our Dreamer, Charlie Yahey. She says that when he was alive it was very good. He told people how to live, how to behave, and everyone followed what he say. "Today it's very difficult," she says. "Even the older people do not act their age. All they think about is having fun, drinking, smoking. They don't take the responsibility." And she says, "It's important to understand who we are through the language." That's the second part.

The next part shows the history of Tea Dance. Tea Dance is when people gather to dance, they make big pots of tea. And everybody is dancing around the fire. And you are thirsty, you drink tea. This is why it's called Tea Dance. And it shows the history about the practice. And the first part is 1960s, early '60s, and the video will show the evolution, the continuation to the present.

The next scene is about hunting, about killing animals, and eating, and living well, and being blessed. Because whenever someone kills a moose, its a great honour. After this, is the modern day, 2000, you will see the rodeo, horses, the dances, the parties, many different areas of what our society at this point, in this time, still do. And then at the end you will see the future generation coming out of things; the water, the earth, all those things that they're coming out of, but still maintaining the traditional music and culture.

The animation you will see represents our technique or our ways to represent the spirit. And finally at the end, our chief will speak in his language, in Dane-zaa. He says it is good to gather. It is good to come together, for we do this for the next generation because they don't know really who we are. So if we show them what we are doing they will be proud of who they are. Let's watch the movie.

MAKING "CONTACT THE PEOPLE"

In February, 2001, Garry Oker and Robin Ridington met to discuss the cultural heritage project of which the film is a part. The following is a transcription of their conversation. Garry Oker and Robin Ridington talk about making "Contact the People"—Recorded February 5, 2001

Garry:

Well, it happened that forty years ago with you, when you came upon the Dane-zaa people, which is our ancestors, the old-timers. Back in those days I guess there was hardly any contact with the white people. There was just native people, Dane-zaa people living up there. When you came there, one of the prophets there saw the opportunity, or saw the future in that he wanted you to record. The prophets saw that it was important for you to record and begin documenting this information and the stories. So that was like forty years ago or something like that, when you first met with them.

It was '99 I believe, we started to digitalize all the information into a modern format so that we can preserve it. Mostly that was the big thing. All the photographs. We started out with the photographs and then we began the music and then the third stage

came the video and putting it all together in a multimedia format. I guess to me the whole process is to retell the stories in a modern way so that the next generation can understand it.

Mostly for me, the idea of "Contact the People" was because of the destruction of the land and the cultural changes that's going on right now, where a lot of our people are losing, basically, the cultural activity. And actually we are going through a major transition, I think. But then, how are we going to transmit the information of long ago to the youth. So that's to me one of my concerns. So if we can be able to use the videos and films, I think some of our young people can learn some of the wise stories that our people told about knowledge and about wisdom.

Robin:

Yeah, we used the stories from elders like Billy Attachie and May Apsassin that were recorded recently, in the last couple of years. In a way, we let them be the narrators of the film.

Garry:

The way I thought the process was, we were just visualizing the story. And because I know Dane-zaa language, because I grew up with it. My family, my grandma, everyone speaks Beaver language, and being around it myself, my grandpa who was a keeper. We call it "Shin haw daen." So I am kind of very familiar with the ideas and the concept behind it. And when the stories are being told in our language I could visualize it and help visualize those stories. And I think just when we got the elders involved, and when they saw it they really were happy with it, because finally their stories are retold in a way that people can understand them. Because there is a language breakdown amongst the youth also. The opportunity to tell the stories is not there either, because of the changes now with the modern TVs and satellites and all that. So if we can bring those stories, I think the elders would be happy that we are still listening to them.

Robin:

One thing we decided to do was rather than have a narrator telling what you're going to see in the video, we went to recordings of people telling stories, the elders telling stories, and we found places where what they had said, what Billy called "wise stories," was the narration that we wanted to go with the visuals. Some of them were old photographs from elders of thirty and forty years ago.

Garry:

Yeah, I really like the idea of hunting. It's like a hunting of the stories or the wisdoms. Whereabouts, where are they? Because each one has something to offer in terms of the moral of the story, so the moral of the story is trying to find that wise knowledge, that wisdom. And it could be hidden in any one of those songs, or the stories itself. And what is the clue that we have to find? And I find that when we are doing that we

discover that a lot of the wisdoms lie within that stories. That's why I like the idea of saying, "stories within stories," because as you begin to tell a story, what's inside that story begins a whole new concept and ideas, and I think that's an interesting way to learn different things.

Robin:

Yeah, the way in which a lot of these stories got recorded, I've always thought of it as being kind of like hunting. When I'm up at Doig what I'm doing is hunting for stories. I'm not hunting for moose, I'm hunting for stories, and when people in Dane-zaa culture go hunting for an animal, you can't just go and kill an animal that doesn't want to be killed. You have to make contact with it and you have to get in touch with its spirit. You have to get it in the mood to give itself to you. And in a certain sense, that's what I'm doing when I'm hunting for stories. People are not going to tell me stories unless they want to tell me stories; unless they think there's some purpose to that.

That I'm going to be a good listener and that I'm going to use them for a good purpose. And if that's the case, then people are really really generous with their stories, so we benefited from that. I was able to drive around through the territory. People offered to drive me through their territory and then tell stories that related to the different places. And some of those stories were stories that we used in the film.

Garry:

Yeah, I find that many many times it's the timing. Got to find the right time to be told something. And it reminds me a lot about the vision quest stories, when you have enlightenment about things. You got to be in the right time. You have to be there and when it seems to be right they come out with these stories.

Robin:

The one that Billy tells which we use in the film, about the vision quest, about how kids used to go out into the bush and get animal friends, that he told as part of the language project. There were a group of people, some of them elders and some of them younger people all working together on Beaver language. Billy's a linguist; has linguistic training. So they were bugging him to tell some stories about things like this. And he said, "Oh, I don't feel like doing that. I'm not in the mood." So one of them, Annie, says, "OK, if you're not going to tell stories, I'm going to call up Tommy or Sammy." So she gets the phone and she's going to start phoning, you know, and pretty soon Billy says, "OK, OK. What do you want to hear about?" That's how that particular story came about. So I was just there recording it, you know. This process was going on. It was going on between people who were working on a language project together.

Garry:

Well yeah, three years ago we really started putting all this together, and one of the things I've been pushing also is to document the language and put it into CD format. And we can use that too for teachings, as the kids start learning the language through

the CD. And then of course, all the video footages and the archival stuff that you recorded, start documenting them, and eventually going to film. I'd like to see a film story about Sammy and I were talking about that, like making the film about the Tsaa Tsedu, the story of the transformation of the beaver into a woman and how she helps a man in his life. But there's a major moral to that, you know, like there's no shortcuts. That's what I find about that. There's no shortcuts in learning and about being disciplined. It's about discipline and following true on your responsibility. And I think with those type of stories we can put it into a format for the teachings again. So each one has something that we can learn from.

Robin:

Yeah, one of our projects for next summer is doing video entirely in the Beaver language. Some of it would be like taking a traditional story and actually getting Dane-zaa speakers to act in the roles of the characters in the story. And some of it would be just recording people telling the stories. Doing films entirely in the Beaver language, I'm thinking how exciting it would be to make like a foreign film, but it's not foreign to Beaver-speakers. And then have English subtitles, so that it's a way of teaching younger people who are kind of on the edge of the language, of giving them something other than just vocabulary, which is dry. Giving them stories, and they'll be able to follow along.

Garry:

Well, I think that's where the future lies in all the stuff that we have, the information, is that we have a multi-media production house where we can produce all this stuff. And not only for career explorations, but an opportunity for them to learn about technology, but at the same time learning about their historical knowledge; history about the people. And I think it's very exciting that, you know, we've done that direction. How do we take old stories or knowledge, old traditional knowledge, and put it in the modern context so that it becomes interesting, just like we did with the digitalization of the photographs, old photographs, and then using animation to create the spiritual effect. 'Cause they talking about that, you know, so we're using the modern technology to do that, and I think maintaining knowledge is just not about written texts anymore. You know, before, all the stories that you guys recorded and wrote about in your papers, I think we got to go beyond that. I think we got to go beyond that in terms of what we presented at the conference.

We show the spirit of it into all these multi-media formats, because that's what really happens, you know, and when you're out there, there's all these different ways that we now can use the tools available to us to tell stories.

Robin:

Closer to the oral tradition.

Garry:

I think so.

Robin:

Video and audio are oral media, and we're in this remarkable situation right now where there are still people who speak the language and know the stories and are happy to pass on their knowledge, and at the same time we've got the technology. We've got digital video and digital audio equipment that's really portable and relatively cheap, and we're training younger people how to use this stuff so they can be documenting their own culture at the same time as they're learning about it. We can do production on computer, and it's all easy to do. What would have been prohibitively expensive and cumbersome ten years ago is now in the realm of possibility.

Garry:

I think to me that is the most exciting time right now, where we have the ability to re-create the stories and visualizing those stories, and that's the exciting part. I think the stories are good, but if you can't visualize it, 'cause I know in Dane-zaa language, when the stories are being told, it's very, very visual. You can actually see the colours, and the smell, everything is there, you know, because the language is so descriptive. So I think video image and film, that's what does it. So the audio creates the environment, and then we bring out all the visuals to really just basically seduce the audience, the listener, to come into the story. And for me, I think that's the next step, but further, closer to the oral tradition, would be the virtual reality. And then once we get there, I think then we can really, really tell stories in virtual content, where we can get people into the environment, with the sound, the smell, and even the visualizing.

For example, not long ago they talked about the Onli Nachi, the giant animals. I could just see the giant animal coming out of the screen and you can see him three dimensionally or even if it's some kind of spiritual place, you can go right into that place and then see what's really going on. And alongside of that you have really good sound, audio, to be able to create the effect.

CONCLUSION

The video we presented at ICNSA 3 is a preliminary experiment in a medium we feel will do justice to Dane-zaa oral tradition. The feedback we received from audiences in Japan and also in Dane-zaa territory has been useful in helping us edit the final version of this video and plan for future productions. For instance, audiences suggested that subtitles for the oral narratives would help them focus on the meaning of these texts. They also asked for more extensive narrative passages and suggested that the presentation of visual images be slowed down. We are taking all these suggestions into account in preparing our final version of the video.

In further productions we plan to use extensive audio actualities in the Dane-zaa language and include written subtitles to explain and translate the narratives. The material

will be accessible to an international audience with the addition of subtitles in the appropriate language. The multimedia texts we are creating will be of interest both to outside audiences and to younger Dane-zaa who are no longer fluent in their language. We are collaborating closely with Dane-zaa elders and take their direction regarding the best way to communicate “wise stories” to younger generations.

