

Chief Fred Ewan on Growing Older and Frying Fish

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He may be a little slower these days, but his mind is still sharp and his fish-cooking skills unmatched.



Traditional First Chief Fred Ewan turns 100 this year. He says he doesn't feel any older and that the trick to being young is to just tell yourself what age you are and be it.

Born at Crosswind Lake in 1916 to John and Katie Ewan (Tsisyu-Raven Clan), he lived a traditional life with little formal education. He was a good trapper and hunter – but was known best for how fast he could cut fish.

Chief Ewan married Stella (Gene) in 1938, and the couple adopted Stella's sister's sons Norman and Harry. He worked as a grader operator for the Alaska Road Commission and helped build the Gulkana Airport. He and Roy Ewan owned and operated the E&E General Store in Gulkana, which also sold traditional beadwork under consignment.

Chief Ewan was named Second Chief in 2006 when his long-term friend Ben Neeley became First Chief. Then after the passing of beloved Chief Ben Neeley in 2014, Fred became Traditional First Chief.

"Lord willing, we all live a long life. The future of Ahtna is in how we treat each other today. Take care of the land, families and each other, and work hard."

Chief Fred Ewan

A few weeks ago, Brianne Island, corporate communications coordinator for Ahtna, visited the chief. Below is her story from her visit.

Fred lives in Gulkana Village, north of Glennallen on the Richardson Highway. His home is easily recognized by a few of his old vehicles parked outside and faithfully watched over by his tiny dog.



Dressed in his beaded traditional chief vest, I watched his granddaughter Marcia Ewan help pick out a beaded choker from a beautiful selection and help him straighten out this chief's strap, worn over one shoulder and across the front. Only once everything was in order would we set out for a drive.

Along for the ride were Marcia Ewan, Fred's granddaughter and primary caregiver, along with Corie and Reina, the late Harding Ewan's daughters.

Armed with a few fishing poles, we drove north on the Richardson Highway to Popular Grove. The grayling were active, hungry, and it looked to be quite promising for all.

Fred watched the fishing action perched on a big rock, giving stern instructions on where to cast, how to bring in and unhook a fish. He showed us his secret – use the fisheyes of a fresh catch if you are out of bait.

We drove back to Fred's house, prepared to relax and settle in for a good chat about Fred's life. But Fred went straight to work cleaning and preparing the afternoon's catch. We girls watched as Fred scaled and cleaned. We watched him dig out seasonings, heat and oil a giant skillet and then load up the

skillet with about a dozen grayling. Unsure of this cooking method, we watched in amazement as the fish sizzled and popped, packed in the pan with a lid barely teetering atop the piled fish.

As he cooked, Fred talked about his love of all Native foods: moose, salmon, a tree fungus used to make a strong chew (not for the faint of heart, I'm told). He talked about how important it is to protect the land that feeds us.

When the first pan of grayling was ready, Fred served it straight up. The best way to eat grayling was whole, he said, head, guts and all. And that is just what he did.

"I wished more young people would talk with Elders and be interested in what we have to say. We are survivors, and hard times are coming, and I don't know if they know how to survive."

CHIEF FRED EWAN

Fred went on to talk about why it is so important to work hard for the things that matter – land, people, and culture.

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While Fred is the oldest living Ahtna shareholder-owner, as Traditional First Chief, Fred still attends as many Ahtna events as he can. He provides an invocation and speaks about how we should lift each other up and take care of one another, a message reminiscent of what his best friend and former Chief Ben Neeley would say.

Fred had a seriousness about his tone when talking about being chief, but as soon as that little dog of his jumped up on his lap, Fred smiled and beamed, he seemed to take stock of the moment surrounded by a younger lot listening to his every word. It is clear that Fred has a big heart and a lively spirit. Fred is an avid supporter of traditional singing and drumming, teaching the youth and providing guidance to the dance groups. Fred is known to sing and dance at potlatches, but if you really want to see him kick up his heels, take him out to listen to some old time fiddlers.

We had so many questions, but by his look, we would have to make more than the one visit to really appreciate his wisdom, the stories and to learn about strength and perseverance as a people.

As for his upcoming 100th birthday celebrations, all I could get Fred to say he wanted for his birthday were “cars, fiddle dancing and traditional foods”. For all else “go to the chief for advice”.