

Diva Velez

Dr. Alisha Drabek

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Two Old Women by Velma Wallis

Velma Wallis is a Gwich'in Athabaskan Indian from Fort Yukon, Alaska. Born in 1960. She was one of thirteen children, which was the norm for many households in those days. After researching Velma's life history, I came across a picture of her accepting an award from *Women Who Dared*. She received the *Women Who Dared*, Gratitude Award in October 2023. In the picture I recognize Velma's daughter Laura who is present during the acceptance. I had a fan girl moment; I had no clue that I knew someone who had a famous mother. I worked with Laura at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital. She is an excellent nurse. She now serves the native community with Tanana Chiefs Conference. I had to reach out to her and let her know that I was studying her mother's book in school, and I congratulated her on her new addition to the family.

Back to Velma Wallis and *Two Old Women*; I decided to do a discussion guide on this book, because my Uncle James Grant illustrated the book. He was a famous Athabaskan artist, and an incredibly special person. I knew the book was special as well. There are not that many Athabaskan Authors, and Velma Wallis is one of the first to pave the way.

According to *Women Who Dared*, Velma Wallis was recognized with an honorary degree from University of Alaska Anchorage in April 2022 stating, "Wallis' books have given future

Alaska Native writers permission to explore the traditions, legends and more critical aspects of their cultures.”

Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival was published in 1993 and won the Western States Book Award that year. In 1994, *Two Old Women* won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award.

Two elderly women, Ch'idzigyaak 80 years old and Sa' 75 years old, lived in a nomadic community. They were of no relation and did not know each other very well. They currently resided together and stuck by each other because they were both Elders. They did not talk about their past or share with each other. They had a routine of talking and making complaints. They complained about everything and asserted their elderly status by not having to contribute to the tribe.

The Chief made a hard decision to abandon the elderly women, in hopes to unburden the tribe to save energy in search for food. The elderly women felt so betrayed by their community to be left to die or fend for themselves. The women were not willing to lay down to die and with courageous efforts survived. They were not used to taking care of themselves and faced some hardships with having to move and exercise. But they made living on the land look so easy. They remembered all the training they had as children and brushed up on their skills very quickly. They walked for days, and camped in snowstorms until they found the spring camp they used to go to when they were younger. They decided that it would be the place they would reside as it was rich in resources.

The women first caught squirrels, then rabbits. When they made their camp, they made a cache and smoke house for their fish. They were not just surviving now, they were thriving. The Chief

when back to the place the next year to see if the women have survived. He felt horrible and wanted to make amends. When the Chief left the women, they were able to feed the tribe for a brief time and ended back up facing hardship again with no food. After finding the women gone with no signs of death, he sent his scouts out to look for the women. It took them only a few days to find them.

The women felt vulnerable, but knew even if the tribe meant them harm, they would not be able to defend themselves. “They do not know we have done well for ourselves” (Wallis 118). There was no trust after the betrayal, but they decided to let the tribe stay with them at spring camp by the river, because they knew even if the tribe meant them harm to take their food out camp, they would be able to survive again. They told the scouts their demands and conditions for helping them and in return they provided food and new fur for clothing. It took some time for the women to trust the community again after inviting them back to their spring camp and their demands for no visitor eventually diminished.

Discussion Guide Questions:

1. Was it common to have famine and hardship?
2. How common was it to abandon people in challenging times?
3. How highly were Elders respected?
4. Why was it that Ch'idzigyaak and Sa' had to face abandonment to remember their survival skills?
5. How did the men and hunters look up to the Elderly women after the women saved them from starvation?

6. Did the Elderly women continue to work when the tribe came back together?
7. Was this story fiction or non-fiction?
8. How long has this story been passed down?

Works Cited

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