Raven's Circle - February/March 2011

CIRI SPOTLIGHT: JAN HARPER HAINES

The author in her own words and a story excerpt

"Hootlani!," a story by author and CIRI shareholder Jan (Petri) Harper Haines, was recently published in the winter 2010 West Marin Review. Haines is also the author of "Cold River Spirits: The legacy of an Athabascan-Irish Family from Alaska's Yukon River." Haines has a bachelor's degree from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and has participated in and taught many writing workshops and conferences.

Jan Harper Haines. Photo courtesy of Jan Harper Haines

Tell me about your early life:
I was born in Sitka in 1943, in Sheldon Jackson's infirmary, Tillie Paul Manor, when Mom couldn't make it to the hospital. The nurse at 4 a.m. was not pleased to be delivering a baby and scolded Mom. When I was about 4, we moved from Sitka to Anchorage. We first lived on Third Avenue with my godparents, near the first ANS hospital.

What are you most proud of?
As an Athabascan, I am leery of talking about pride. Like bragging, it can jinx good luck. I have had moments of success in advertising and marketing in Honolulu and San Francisco. And I am very pleased to have had "Cold River Spirits" published, which honors my mother's people and which was well received by those whose opinion I value, including many of Alaska's elders. When my publisher told me Tony Hillerman had written a blurb for "Cold River Spirits," I felt like I'd won the academy award. It was an amazing moment and I felt lighter than air. I suppose one of my happiest moments was when I presented at the Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference in 2005. The caliber of the other authors and poets was impressive; it was a joy to be there. I loved teaching the workshops. I'd like to do that again.

I was also part of the Anchorage Sisters In Crime "Authors to the Bush" program in 2007. I went to Nenana-not exactly bush. One of my stories in "Cold River Spirits" takes place in Nenana. It tells of a frightening episode in my mother's life. It was in the Anchorage Daily News, Alaska Magazine and I believe the News-Miner, as well as a Seattle newspaper. While in Nenana, I also had a lovely visit with Nina Alexander, an elder who had known some of my Harper relatives.

I was also the guest author and workshop leader for the Chena Hot Springs Alaska Student Writing Retreat. That was a kick. I loved those kids, wanted to take them home.

What are you working on now?
My short true story "Hootlani!" revolves around a personal experience. I have written several such stories. I'd like to assemble them into a book, possibly similar to "Cold River Spirits," but of my generation.

Excerpt:

Spirits were as plentiful as rocks in a riverbed when I was growing up in Anchorage. When my mother's Athabascan relatives got together, the presence of our ancestors was so thick, I could almost smell great aunt Lucy's powder, or the bitter smoke of Sam Harper's hand rolled cigarettes.

When Grandma visited, friends and relatives tried not to mention Lucy or John Minook by name. If they did, Grandma would hiss, "Hootlani!" And if anyone mentioned my grandfather, Sam Harper, she grew still, as if something had entered the room.

Hootlani is Athabascan for protection against having summoned the dead. It is always uttered juicily, with plenty of spit. Hootlani!

Never say the name of a dead person or you will call them to you. Hootlani!

It was, however, permissible to refer to the departed obliquely. As in: Remember that woman from down river with two children by that man who worked at Nerlands? Or: You remember that old woman from upriver who wore pink slippers to the Coop drugstore, summer and winter? No mukluks for her!

One snowy afternoon I was in Anchorage visiting my cousin Mike. Of Grandma's thirty-five grandchillen, Mike had

lived with her the longest. He grew up immersed in Grandma's stories and Native beliefs.

Jane, Mike's wife, was about to fix dinner. She knew I was looking for photographs for a family biography and handed me an old shoebox. "See if there's anything here you can use," she said before disappearing into the kitchen.

Flipping through the aging black and white snapshots, many yellowed around the edges, I went into high alert when I saw a faded photo of Grandma's sister, Lucy Minook. She stood behind an open casket, almost regal in her dark coat, and styled hair.

Just then, the front door banged open and chilly air rushed into the house. "Hey, Mike," I said, waving the photograph as he stomped the snow from his boots. "You've got to see this!"

Smiling, he reached for it. But as he looked at it, his eyes widened. With a sudden yelp, he reared back, knocking into the table and rattling the glassware. Uh oh. I caught the photo as it drifted to the floor. In the casket in front of Lucy was the body of our great grandfather, John Minook. His leathery Indian face fixed in stern repose against a pale satin lining.

Chagrined, I realized I had forgotten the power of photographs in summoning the spirits. Hootlani!

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