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ce & Future Village of Iuat/Eklutna

by Ann Chandonnet

History of a Tanaina Athapaskan Settlement



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The Once & Future Village of Ikluat/Eklutna

(A History of a Tanaina Athapaskan Settlement)

By Ann Chandonnet



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Cover photo: Eklutna Industrial School, circa 1925.
Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) file photo.

Drawing of mother and child, circa 1776.

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Dedicated to Louise Potter and to Walt and Elsa Pedersen, who share my taste for crumbs and clues.



An abandoned cache at
Eklutna (February, 1979.)
Photo by Fernand Chandonnet.

Once...

The peace of the place. The serenity of weathered wood and mature trees. Lupine and rock rose. Hand-hewn logs hunker slowly into the gravelly soil.

The place is Eklutna, a small Tanaina Athapaskan village twenty-eight miles northeast of Anchorage, Alaska, on a level plateau bordering the Knik Arm of Upper Cook Inlet.¹

There are no bright lights here, no businesses--with the exception of a house trailer which serves as the headquarters of Ikluat, Inc., the non-profit arm of the village's native corporation. There are no large cultivated areas, no schools. The roads, such as they are, are dirt--like the majority of Alaska's roads. The few houses are rudimentary. Life flows slowly here, peacefully, like a narrow stream just before freeze-up.

The tourist often stops here, momentarily, to view the old Orthodox church, to photograph the "spirit houses" of the graveyard just behind the church--brightly painted boxes, topped by Orthodox crosses, erected in memory of the village's dead.

The spirit houses are not unique. You can find others just like them at Knik across the Inlet, at Sutton to the northeast, in the Aleutians. There are prettier churches.

Why, then, the fascination with this place?

To see Eklutna in the proper light, it is necessary to consider its pre-history and the history of the Athapaskan people.

"Athapaskan" is a word of Cree origin, referring to "the strangers" who lived to the north of Cree Indian territory, especially around Lake Athabasca in central Canada. The Athapascans, nomadic hunters and fishermen, are related to the Navajo and Apache tribes of the American Southwest.

Just before the coming of the white man,² it is estimated there were 6,900 Athapascans in Alaska.² Today there are about 6,000.³

They are a clever people, the Athabaskans (whether you spell them with a "b" or a "p"). They are a migratory people, who do not live year-round at one site, but change their residences as fish, bear, caribou, moose, sheep, and rabbits change theirs. Their cleverness is directly related to the challenges this sort of life presents. They invented the babiche (a rope created by cutting a caribou or moose hide into one continuous strip), used to lash everything from packs to snowshoes. They carved lovely spoons from animal horn and wood. They expertly worked fragile birchbark into many useful (often watertight) objects: canoes, summer shelters, cups, baskets, boxes, and even casts for broken limbs. They were skilled at making deadfalls and adorning clothing with porcupine quills.

One lesser-known aspect of their ingenuity was the creation of songs for all occasions: love songs, traveling songs, imitation songs (imitating wildlife and animal spirits, for they believed humans and animals could communicate), war songs, and funeral or mourning songs. In his essay on the Athapaskans in the Bicentennial Catalog of the Alaska State Museum at Juneau, Wallace Olson comments on Athapaskan music: "Some societies focus this (creative) energy on carvings or painting or physical creations, while others, like the northern Athapascans,

find an outlet in song. There were literally hundreds of songs that circulated among the different groups and a good singer might have known hundreds of melodies and words from memory. They often preferred to have a drum or sticks for keeping the beat, but in many instances broke into song without an accompaniment.... These people have been known even today to sing and dance for eight or ten hours with only temporary interruptions for a cold drink of water and suggestions for new songs."

When Ivan Petroff conducted an American census (the Tenth Census as it is known) of the new territory of Alaska in 1880, he listed seven Athapascan villages in Upper Cook Inlet. (The native inhabitants of the area are variously referred to in old sources as the "Knik," "Matanuski," and "Chickaloon" Indians--but they are essentially the same Athapascan Tanaina.) At or very near the present site of Eklutna, Petroff noted a village called "Nitakh," population 15.⁴ A short way up the Knik River, he placed "Kinik," population 57, in the Goose Bay-Fish Creek area; Zdluiat, 16, near present-day Anchorage; Toyonok Station, 117; and two Shushetno villages (perhaps corresponding to modern-day Susitna and Alexander).⁵

One Bicentennial leaflet hazards the guess that the village of Eklutna is "perhaps 1,000 years old."⁶ This cannot, of course, be proved or disproved--as the bulk of early Russian records of the area have not been released to scholars, and the oldest written English records of this part of Alaska date from May and June, 1778, when Captain James Cook explored the Inlet later named after him and saw "On Eastern shore...two columns of smoke."⁷ Like modern archeologists, Cook readily found tribal resemblances between the originators of the columns of smoke and other aboriginal inhabitants of Alaska he had just encountered to the south: "I could observe," he wrote, "no difference between the persons, dress, ornaments, and boats of these people, and those of Prince William's Sound, except that the small canoes were rather of a less size, and carried only one man. We procured from them some of their fur dresses, made of the skins of sea-otters, martens, hares, and other animals...."⁸

Captain George Vancouver headed a British scientific expedition that spent April and May of 1794 investigating Cook Inlet, especially its upper arm.

As recently as 1974, archeologists believed that the Athapascan Indians had not been long in Alaska, having "been driven out of Canada by warring Crees some 700 or 800 years ago."⁹

Recent archeological digs contradict this theory and shed brighter light on ethnic population shifts in Alaska. Archeologist John Cook of the University of Alaska's Institute of Arctic Biology has spent the past eight years investigating three hundred sites along the route of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

Archeologists are in general agreement that humans visited Alaska as long as 25,000 years ago, establishing continuous residency here slightly over 11,000 years ago. John Cook's findings place Athapascans north of the Brooks Range 1,500 years ago, and Eskimos in the Interior 4,000 to 5,000 years ago.¹⁰

Over the millenia the boundaries of Eskimo and Indian habitation in Alaska were not fixed, and at one time Eskimos resided along Knik Arm. Eventually Athapascans--much respected and feared as warriors--drove them out.

Archeologist Frederica De Laguna concluded after her excavations in 1930 that "the Eskimo were using Knik Arm at least seasonally for some time before A.D. 1000 to perhaps A.D. 1700, with the Tanaina moving in between A.D. 1650 and 1780."¹¹ Her findings indicate that the Eklutna site can be no older than 1650, at least in terms of Tanaina occupancy, or 300-some years old. (Unfortunately, though much digging has gone on at neighboring sites and on the Kenai Peninsula, little has been done at Eklutna proper. Carbon¹⁴ dates for one Kenai site being excavated under the direction of Alan Boraas of Kenai Peninsula Community College came in at 1515 plus or minus 128 BP.) De Laguna refers to the Tanaina living at Eklutna and Anchorage as the "Knat'a-na" and describes the Cook Inlet Athapascans as an inland people, whose culture shows that they had recently moved to the sea and had not completely adapted to a coastal lifestyle.¹²

De Laguna's investigations of Knik Arm's shell heaps (middens) and house pits were hampered by very rainy weather, forty-foot tides, and dense thickets of berry canes and Devil's Club. She did record an ancient name for Eklutna--Ikluat, and an ancient name for the Anchorage-area village--Xa'tikicut.¹³

At Eklutna she noted several abandoned house pits, but "they did not seem to be very old."¹⁴

In 1966 D. E. Dumond and Robert L. A. Mace conducted an archeological survey and test excavations along the northwest side of Knik Arm. Their findings indicate that the Tanaina inhabited most of the shoreline of Cook Inlet, and had at some time supplanted Eskimos. They found, for example, 50 housepits one mile above the mouth of Cottonwood Creek, on the west side of the Creek. Artifacts found generally seemed to be of a late period, corresponding to Kachemak 3 along Kachemak Bay; that is, approximately A.D. 500 to 1500. Pottery sherds from about A.D. 1200 were recovered; it is generally considered that the Tanaina never made pottery, so these bits are presumed to be Eskimo remains.¹⁵ Labrets (lip ornaments) were found which also seem to point to Eskimo inhabitants (c. A.D. 1500).¹⁶ Of course, it is likely that both Indian and Eskimo peoples chose to inhabit the same choice and/or convenient sites--but at different periods of history.

Dumond and Mace concluded, with De Laguna, that the "Tanaina moved to occupy Knik Arm no earlier than A.D. 1650...and no later than A.D. 1780...."¹⁷

That is the archeological picture. The purpose of the present volume is to piece together the fragmentary written history of Eklutna, to append to the scanty written record the knowledge of living informants, and to present a picture of Eklutna as a typical seasonal habitation of a migratory people.

Let us begin with the name of the place, over which there is considerable confusion. Some sources testify that Eklutna was once called "Old Knik" and even "New Knik," or both at different times; even that the name Eklutna is a modern invention dating from the building of the railroad storage yard there.¹⁸ Some sources go so far as to state Eklutna was named after the last village shaman, Eklutna Alex (whose given name was Alex Vasili).

In the Tanaina dialect the word "Eklutna" means "the mouth of the river and two large hills." It is a geographical description of the site. (The two peaks could be West Twin and East Twin, mountains over 5,000 feet; the river, either the Knik or the Eklutna.)

The mouth of the Knik River is about six miles (by water) north of the mouth of the Eklutna River. It would, therefore, be logical that map makers, especially those merely re-drafting older maps, those who had never visited the area in person and were relying on prospectors and hearsay, would incorrectly position the town named Knik near the river of the same name, or would assume that any settlement near the Knik River had to be called "Knik" --not "Eklutna." However, Knik is the name properly assigned to the village located at the west side of Upper Cook Inlet, south of the modern city of Wasilla. Eklutna is the settlement opposite, on the east side of the Inlet.

Because of Russian settlement there and the American gold rush in the area, we know a good deal about Knik. As early as 1835, the Russians established a mission at Knik, and in 1880 there were small Russian trading posts at both Knik and Susitna. "The mission was...moved to Eklutna, across the Inlet, about 1900 (and may still be seen there)."¹⁹

By March, 1915, three months before a lot was ever sold in Anchorage, The Knik News was able to print a list of 132 persons who "have located homesteads adjacent to or near Knik."²⁰ This pre-dates the famous farming experiment at Palmer by 20 years.

Vasili Melakoff, a Russian naval officer, is said to have explored the Susitna River as early as 1834. In 1844, Melakoff returned to explore and map both the Susitna and Matanuska River basins.²¹ It is believed that Russian explorers or promyshlenniki (fur hunters and traders) actually discovered the Mabel gold mine, although they never operated it.²²

After the purchase of Alaska by the United States, Knik became the gateway to the Matanuska-Susitna gold fields, and it is safe to agree with historian Louise Potter that "everyone who came into this western valley before 1915 came to Knik...."²³ (They did so because Knik was a land crossroads, just as today Anchorage is an air crossroads.) Freight and men and women headed for the gold fields came by ocean-going vessels to Ship Creek²⁴, transferred to launches, scows, and lighters (open, flat-bottomed barges) for the short voyage to Goose Bay, where cargo and passengers were unloaded and hauled to Knik. Or gold-seekers walked overland from Seward, down the Eagle

River Valley, past Eklutna, and over the flats (at low tide) to Knik.

The draw of gold fever was such that 300 prospectors were reported camping on Tyonek beach in May, 1898.

Knik is plainly marked as "principle city" on Johnston and Herning's 1899 (copyright date) map of the area; despite this, it is incorrectly marked on maps as late as the one appearing on pages 224-5 of the Cook Inlet Collection (1974), where Eklutna is called "Knik (Eklutna)" and Knik and Wasilla do not appear at all.

In 1914, Knik was the largest town and main port on the Inlet. It had a permanent population of 500, a barber shop, two general stores, a newspaper, a two-room school, a movie house, wharves, lawyers, two doctors, four hotels.²⁵

Knik faded from historical importance and became a typical frontier ghost town almost overnight in 1916 when it was bypassed by the railroad; meanwhile Anchorage sprang up almost overnight for the opposite reason. Bypassed by incoming freight, Knik became "Old Knik"--by reason of untimely death. From a population of 500, it sank to only three families in 1919, to only two families today. Several houses and the school from Knik were moved to the new railroad junction to the north, called Wasilla²⁶ after a local Tanaina chief.

One of the chief firsthand sources of information about Upper Cook Inlet at the turn of the century is the diary of Orville G. Herning.²⁷ Herning came to Knik in the spring of 1898 as a representative of the Klondike and Boston Development Company. He worked at Grubstake Creek for several summers, wintering in Knik. When Klondike and Boston (known as "K.B.") closed its gold mining operations in 1904, Herning recycled himself, changing occupations to become a merchant, opening Knik Trading Company in May, 1905.

Another wellknown inhabitant of the area was George Palmer (for whom the city in the Matanuska Valley was named), who bought the stock of the Alaska Commercial Company when it left the area. His firm at Knik was G. W. Palmer General Merchandise,²⁸ and he was appointed Postmaster at Knik on October 29, 1904.²⁹

The histories of Knik and Eklutna, like those of all Inlet settlements, are stories of population shifts: changing population centers, changing opportunities for employment, gain, trade. As Knik waxes for a time, Eklutna wanes. As Anchorage waxes, Knik wanes. When the gold pans out, Hope fades. As the coal in the Matanuska Valley gives out, Jonesville and Palmer wane.

All the evidence points to Eklutna's being, until the 1940s, a seasonal residence only. Louise Potter theorizes that the earliest permanent (i.e., year-round) village on Upper Cook Inlet was Tyonek (old spelling "Tyoonok"), since the U. S. Census (Petroff's) for 1880 counted 117 inhabitants there; in 1897 it had a post office; in 1908, when it was part of the Moquakie Indian Reservation, an Indian vocational school was established there--the school moving to Eklutna in 1924.30, 31

They Travel In and Out...

All pre-1940 information about Eklutna points to its being a winter habitation only, a stopping point on a regular seasonal migration--or a kind of free motel. The Tanaina were not the only travelers to pass this point, so there were non-native structures and habitations as well: an ACC trading post, known as Knik Station; a roadhouse constructed by Scotty Watson in 1906.³²

Mike Alex, last traditional chief of the Eklutna Tanaina, outlined for me the migratory path followed by his parents' generation. His father, Alex Vasily or Eklutna Alex (who died in 1953 at the age of 87 and was the last shaman of the Eklutna Denna³³), and his mother, Matrona Vasily (a native of Susitna), lived off the land in the ancient ways. His father was born in the Bodenbug Butte area³⁴ near Palmer, where there was a large village called (according to University of Alaska-Fairbanks linguist James Kari) "Hutnaynut'i," or "burnt over." Before Anchorage existed, recalled Mr. Alex, "There was a big native fish camp settlement stretching from Ocean Dock to Eastchester (sections of modern Anchorage). We spent winters at Eklutna, and summers at the fish camp.³⁵ In 1916 measles, or smallpox--nobody was sure what it was--wiped out lots of Denna when we were at the fish camp. In 1918 flu wiped out many people." ³⁶

As a child, then, Mike Alex followed a migratory existence, but after he began to work for the Alaska Railroad in the 30s he used Eklutna as a year-round residence, except when he stayed at her fish camp on Fire Island. By the close of his life, the visits to Fire Island had become of a few days duration only--often in celebration of July Fourth.

Mike Alex was born at Eklutna on June 9, 1907, but baptised in Kenai on February 29, 1908. That the infant Mike was taken all the way to Kenai, a distance of about two hundred miles, in the dead of winter 1908, by his devout parents, for baptism, shows both the hardiness and the migratory nature of the Athapascans: "In summer, they traveled by birchbark canoes and in winter in light birchwood sleds pulled by dogs or on cleverly crafted snowshoes."³⁷ They undoubtedly set off on journeys of this length with the same confidence and nonchalance that the modern housewife sets out for the supermarket, three blocks distant.

Josiah E. Spurr, leader of the 1896 U. S. Geological Survey, noted the nomadic nature of the Athapascans: "Great travelers are the Alaskan Indians too, and at a trading post along this part (i.e., lower) of the Yukon one may see, besides the Yukon Indians, others from the Koyukuk, the Tanana, and even the Kuskokwim."³⁸

Although forced to change his ways because of modern white man's notions of boundaries and private property, the Athapascan was reluctant to surrender this traditional way of life. Speaking to Judge James Wickersham at a 1915 government hearing on the subject of reservations, the Athapascan Chief Alexander of Tolovana said, "I tell you that we are people that are always on the go, and I believe that if we are put in one place we shall die off like rabbits."³⁹

Other sources bear out the picture of Eklutna as a temporary seasonal "camp," and the greater picture of constant motion among all Upper Cook Inlet Indians:

William Beresford visited Cook Inlet in the late 1700s, and in letters home dated July and August, 1786, described the Tanaina: "The inhabitants seem not to have fixed on any particular spot for their residence, but are scattered about here and there, as best suits their convenience or inclination. 'Tis most probable they are

divided into clans or tribes, as in every large canoe we saw there was at least one person of superior authority to the rest, who not only directed their traffic, but kept them in a proper degree of subordination."⁴⁰ Beresford wrote that the Tanaina habitually carried bows, arrows, and spears on their journeys and wore "cloaks made of marmot-skins, very neatly sewed together, one cloak containing perhaps more than one hundred skins.... In their persons, these people are of a middle size, and well proportioned.... Their nose and ears are ornamented with beads, or teeth...they have likewise a long slit cut in the upper lip, parallel with the mouth, which is ornamented much in the same manner with the nose and ears...in proportion to the person's wealth."⁴¹

An Army Captain, Alfred L. Hough, visiting Kenai in 1869, noted on July 31st, "Just before going to the vessel the General had a 'big talk' with two Indian Chiefs, one of the band here, the other one of some 80 miles north who happened here on a trading visit.... One of the Chiefs was quite eloquent...."⁴² (Many historians note that American Indians of numerous tribes had a "high language," separate and distinct from daily patois, used for formal occasions.)

Irwin writes of Knik, "...many Indians came from the Matanuska, the Susitna, and Copper River Basins to catch and dry fish for their yearly supply of food."⁴³ Although these were periods of intense work, they also resembled in many ways family reunions.

Potter writes, "There was a great deal of visiting back and forth among the Inlet Indians to places as far afield as the Copper Center area, visits frequently celebrated by potlatches lasting several days. In January of 1903, for instance, a Knik diary records one such: "Matanuski, Sushetna, Tyoonok, and Knik chiefs holding a potlatch at Nadelhof's house.'"⁴⁴

Another clue to Tanaina habits can be found through inspecting Johnston and Herning's "Map of the Sushitna, Knik & Matanuska Rivers and Knik and Turnagain Arm." This map was copyrighted in 1899 and is reproduced in Louise Potter's Old Times on Upper Cook's Inlet. The map, although not drawn to scale, yields much information when compared with modern topographical maps. It shows eight native trails, one leading to "Vicilea's Cache,"⁴⁵ on the south bank of the Matanuska River, described as six days foot travel to the northeast of Knik.

At least one local man walked the native trails in his boyhood and is still around to talk about them. John Shaginoff was born in Cottonwood Village, a small settlement about five miles northeast of Knik, on December 5, 1909. (Cottonwood Village may be one of the sites Dumond and Mace excavated.) Shaginoff's father was of Russian descent; his mother, who came from Tyonek, of Athapascan. Shaginoff describes Cottonwood Village as "on the shore of Knik Arm, about a mile up Crocker Creek." (Crocker Creek is half a mile west of Cottonwood Creek, where Dumond and Mace found evidence of other camps.) "Fifteen or twenty native families used to camp there in the winter; they lived in good log houses. The camp was one of several on the McKinnon and Bill Hughes' homesteads. (William Hughes and H. McKinnon are among the 132 persons listed in the March 6, 1915, Knik News as having homesteads near Knik.) Freighters used to camp there, too. McKinnon used to run a restaurant there," recalls Shaginoff.⁴⁶

"When I was a boy we would travel from Knik to Wasilla, then through what is called today Fishhook Road, then to Moose Creek, down the Creek to Chickaloon and Nelchina country. Sometimes they called this the '98 Trail. There are still some of these trails between Sutton and Palmer. I was on one of them just a few years ago, and the old telegraph wire that went up before the railroad could still be seen in spots."⁴⁷

Shaginoff remembers two of the non-native habitations at Eklutna: "Gleason run a store at Eklutna before Palmer's time. There used to be a roadhouse run by a Scotty there."⁴⁸

The roadhouses bring us to consideration of another facet of the character of Eklutna--Eklutna as trail-fork.

Eklutna as Trail-Fork

Natives of Cook Inlet traded in furs (for iron, brass, and glass beads) with the Russians and, later, with Alaska Commercial Company (ACC). They also traded in copper and mica--but refused to show the Russians the sources of their goods.⁴⁹ John Cook's research revealed that obsidian (black volcanic glass, from the Koyukuk area) was one of the most widely traded substances among the Athapascans.⁵⁰

Although Eklutna may have been, until the establishing of the railroad storage yard and the Industrial School, simply a winter hunting camp and trading post, and not a permanent settlement, it was well-known as a major trail-fork prior to the twentieth-century. By 1912, it was the fork of several "much-used trails that had developed northward from Seward...and out of Knik to the east and west and various mines."⁵¹ Eklutna was, in a primitive way, what St. Joseph was to the Oregon Trail, what Independence was to the Santa Fe Trail. Eklutna was the northern terminus of the "so-called Seward Trail (1905) from the Indian Village at Eklutna, over Peter's Creek, through the Chugach Mountains, down Crow Creek and Glacier Creek, passed (sic) Kern Creek, 20-Mile Creek, Portage Creek, and up Placer River to the end of the Alaska Central Railway

at Bartlett's...."52

It was also a waystation on the Iditarod. The Iditarod Trail was marked and widened (to allow use by pack and saddle horses) by the Alaska Road Commission in 1910 as a winter mail route from Seward to the gold town of Iditarod (a distance of about 490 miles). But the route was known and used as early as 1898, as the result of Spurr's trip over it, and fully established soon after the Innoko-Iditarod strike in 1909. The Trail passed through the village of Eklutna, and then turned north-west across the frozen Knik Arm toward the boom town of Knik and the gold fields beyond. The Trail was actively used by whites primarily from 1914 to 1917, when it was replaced by mail delivery by railroad.

After the establishing of the Industrial School in 1924, Eklutna had sufficient permanent population to warrant a post office. One was established there in 1926, with Elmet T. Smith appointed Postmaster on May 12 of that year. The last Postmaster there was Mrs. Bernie Hill, appointed in 1944. On April 30, 1945, the post office was discontinued, mail to go to Anchorage. (As of this writing, the post office closest to Eklutna is at Chugiak, 8 miles to the south.) 53

Eklutna Industrial School



Office + Res.

*Girls Dorm
Kitchen*

*Gymnasium
Ware house*

Eklutna Industrial School

The best-documented part of Eklutna's recent history is the Eklutna Industrial (or "Vocational") School, completed in 1924 by the U. S. Department of Education on 1400 acres selected by them (although not officially set aside until 1927).

The Industrial School was a complex organism, with a six-room hospital, an isolation ward (usually used as an over-flow dormitory), director's cottage, girls' and boys' three-story dormitories, shop, gymnasium, implement shed, cannery car, meat house, paint house, barn, brooder (hen) shed, wood shed, laying house, waiting station, and hog house. (Some of the structures, such as the coal and wood shed, rival Thoreau's domicile at Walden for economy; the 16- by 24-foot shed was built from used lumber by the school boys at a total expenditure of \$18.75.) A steamheating plant was installed in the hospital in April, 1929; electricity was connected in May and June of the same year.⁵⁴

Mike Alex did not attend the School; he was one of thirteen children and could not afford to. He remembered it, and the native c

all over the state to board and learn. In his spare time (he worked for the Alaska Railroad for 28 years) he taught traditional fishing methods to some of the students.

Mike's son, Daniel Alex (born in 1941), recalls of the School, "They used to have cows and pigs there, and I liked to watch them. I remember being very amazed that milk came out of a 'faucet.'"⁵⁵

A report to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) dated June 30, 1930, and signed by a Charles R. Smith, notes a school population of ten whites and ninety-two natives, an enrollment of 90 high-school-age pupils, the installation during the year of twenty-two curtain rods, one piano, one phonograph, and (among other acquisitions) two alarm clocks. Smith requests "a steam laundry. All laundry has to be done by hand...." Smith explains that "The school gets the salmon for canning from the School Fish Camp located 15 miles down the Inlet (probably at the mouth of the Eagle River) An old native village is located about a mile north of the school. There are at present about eight good houses where the villagers come at certain times. They travel in and out and are never very long at the village."⁵⁶

During the 1940s, there were two main BIA schools to which native children (from as far away as Point Hope) who had completed eighth grade could go, if they wished to further their education. One was the White Mountain school; the other was the Eklutna School.⁵⁷ As a result, both were well known; one alumnus of White Mountain was Howard Rock. The schools were, to a certain extent, notorious, because they enforced unnatural separations of children from parents and younger siblings for extended periods of time.

Mike Alex recalled the enrollment of the School as peaking at about 180 pupils.

The buildings of the Eklutna Industrial School were condemned during 1945 or 1946. The school faculty and student body were housed in the surplus United States Army barracks at Seward for about a year, before being moved to another surplus military installation at Mt. Edgecumbe, Alaska (an island in Sitka harbor). Secondary students from Wrangell Institute were also brought to this new site, and the Mt. Edgecumbe School (which is still in operation) opened in February, 1947.⁵⁸

After the buildings were condemned, they dissipated without a trace--without one exception: "The Little Susitna Lodge--up toward Hatcher Pass on the Fishhook Road--was a part of the School buildings at Eklutna--torn down and moved to its present location."⁵⁹

The Eklutna Industrial School, c. 1925. (BIA photo)



*Boys Dorm
School Rooms*



Saint Nicholas Church (February, 1979).

Photo by F. L. Chandonnet.

St. Nicholas Church

What immediately catches the eye as one enters the village of Eklutna is the old, handhewn, log church, Saint Nicholas Church, voluntarily maintained for the last quarter century by the late Mike Alex, last traditional chieftain of the Eklutna Indians.

Few examples of Russian-American architecture survive in Alaska today. (Two are on Kodiak: The Baranof House, circa 1793, which served as a storehouse and commissary for Alexander Baranof's settlement on Kodiak, is the oldest Russian structure in Alaska; and the oldest known wooden building on the entire West Coast of the United States; the second is the blue-domed Kodiak Russian Orthodox Church. A third is the Russian Bishop's House at Sitka, a barn-size structure built in 1842-3 and currently being restored by the National Park Service.) Alaska's dry climate has been a natural aid in preserving such structures which, says the National Park Service in its brochure describing the work on the Bishop's House, "exemplify a style of Russian rural architecture adapted to the conditions of the New World and illustrate the Czarist Russian presence in Alaska."

The Russian Orthodox church in Alaska is traditionally

poor, with few salaried priests, so that parishes generally depended entirely on their members for sustenance.

Following the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, the Russian American Company, appointed by the Czar to carry out his colonial policies and conduct the fur trade in Alaska, went out of business, thus terminating its ownership and maintenance of church property in the territory. Charitable agencies of the Orthodox Church in Russia tried to help their Alaskan brethren, but the Revolution of 1917 severed even these fragile pipelines of aid.

Hard times came upon Russian Orthodox parishes in Alaska. "Religious labors gained precedence over maintaining and repairing church buildings," says the National Park Service, and church buildings deteriorated.

Fortunately for the St. Nicholas Church, it was in an out-of-the way spot, isolated from big city development, and guarded zealously by the surrounding village from major acts of vandalism; furthermore, it had the guardianship of Mike Alex and his father.

Traditionally the Athapascans were highly mobile hunters and gatherers, whose habitation varied with the season and the availability of game/fish. Fish and game populations are subject to cycles of plenty and scarcity; thus the Athapascan culture was of necessity a migratory one, which did not lend itself to habitations of a lasting sort. Undoubtedly, too, floods, earthquakes, and forest fires often destroyed rude dwellings and water supplies and caused seasonal campsites to be moved short distances. Natural disasters could explain scattered house pits.

As we have seen, the Eklutna village was a seasonal campsite, used primarily in winter, until about World War II, when it became a year-round settlement. However, the site is at the junction of several traditional Indian trails--some later to become gold rush and mail trails. These traditional native trails lead north to Palmer and Glenallen and over Hatcher Pass. Others lead south to Kenai (a settlement of the Kenaitze people at which the Russians established a trading post in 1788)⁶⁰ and the Kachemak Bay area; others lead northwest, over the tidal flats at the mouths of the Matanuska and Knik Rivers, toward Iditarod and Knik, and from Knik south to villages like Tyonek. As such a crossroads, Eklutna was a perfect site for a religious meeting place, despite the fact that

the parish was not in residence year-round.

As perhaps the oldest surviving example of architecture built by Athapascans under Russian direction, the St. Nicholas Church is naturally a tourist attraction and the object of much local interest and speculation. Rumor has it that the building dates from 1835. This rumor is based on the facts that (1) in 1835 a Russian Orthodox mission was established at Knik (a gold rush boom town directly across Knik Arm to the West), and (2) the church of that mission was moved to Eklutna sometime around the turn of the century.

A prospectors' map, copyrighted in 1899, and compiled from verbal reports by Messrs. Johnston and Hering (the map can be found bound in the backs of copies of Louise Potter's Old Times on Upper Cook Inlet), places the church at Eklutna prior to 1899. (The church is indicated by a cross.) Village tradition says the church bell was moved at the same time as the church building, and the bell (now missing) was made in California in 1895; this date is molded into the bell itself. The bell, which seems to have been salvaged from a ship, would have needed a bit of time to come North, so we can guess that the church was not moved before 1896.

In 1975, a historical architect, Laurin C. Huffman II, inspected the church, and dated it "circa 1870." He noted that the church appears to have been lengthened at some time in the past, at the time glass windows were installed. The present exterior dimensions of the one-room structure are 19 feet 1½ inches by 30 feet 5 inches.

Because St. Nicholas is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Ikluat, Inc. (the non-profit corporation of Eklutna Village) was able to secure two reconstruction grants: \$10,000 from the Alaska Legislature and \$5,000 from the State Parks Service.

Reconstruction began on September 23, 1976, under the direction of Mike Alex and his son Daniel.

The original whipsawn and handplaned floor, laid lengthwise and supported by puncheons resting on logs, which in turn rested on earth, was removed and numbered for reinstallation. The decomposed puncheons were removed, and sufficient excavation done to expose the partly decomposed base logs. The s

braced (with cables and 2 by 8 bracings) to pull it back into shape and to strengthen it while it was raised to allow pouring of concrete footings. A ten by eighteen-inch footing was poured under the walls and through a center trench. Cinder blocks were laid three high on the perimeter footings and two high through the center to provide support for the 2 x 6-inch floor joists. Reinforcing rod was used throughout the footings and every three feet through the blocks. 2 x 8-inch sill plates were bolted onto the wall-bearing blocks. The new base logs--handhewn to match the originals--were positioned, and the church lowered into place. The floor joists were then laid and the old flooring repositioned and secured.

It was discovered during this reconstruction that the altar wall was constructed of handplaned molding, and its main members were joined with mortise and tenon joints with locking dowel pins.

One of the few objects of interest unearthed in the excavations for the footings was a crowbar fashioned from an old rifle barrel.

Winter was fast approaching, and work was suspended until May 3, 1977. At this time the ceiling was restored. First it was braced; then the entire interior was sprayed with a "penta" solution (a wood preservative); and the bared walls and ceiling were covered with Visqueen (a heavy plastic) to keep out the elements. The Visqueen was completely obscured from sight with a covering of heavy cotton duck (a good facsimile of the original, deteriorated, cloth covering; cloth ceilings are typical of early prospectors' cabins). The duck was also draped over the walls down to the level of the wainscoting, as in the original interior. The duck's seams were covered by board battens, and the decaying wainscoting replaced with new boards.

The altar wall was reassembled. ("The wall itself is an amazing piece of craftsmanship and the focal point of the church," writes Craig C. Walker in his report on the reconstruction.") The windows--which had been removed prior to reconstruction to preserve them--were reinstalled. Two cables used for shoring purposes were left in place to correct the center sag of the building. One was concealed within the altar wall's cross beam; the other, across the center of the sanctuary, was covered with a hewn beam with a slot cut to accommodate the cable. Thus the only evidence of this modern steel support is the nuts outside the

top tier of logs under the eaves.

Entrance to the church is through a covered porch topped by a campanile. The porch-campanile structure proved to be in such deteriorated condition that none of it could be salvaged. A concrete footing for the new entry and tower was poured slightly below grade so that it could later be obscured by earth. Then the porch-tower was recreated and sprayed with a "penta" solution.

Temporary repairs were done to the tar paper roof, and at a later date, when additional funds become available, this roof (c. 1928-30) will be replaced with one more approximating the original (c. 1870), perhaps covered with bark like the roofs of early Matanuska Valley settlers.

St. Nicholas houses several old icons--according to village tradition, 200 years of age and of Russian origin. These, too, are in need of restoration. It also retains its original candelabra, which has rifle shells as candleholders.

St. Nicholas was in use until 1962 as a place of worship. Traveling priests (such as Father Mike Oskolkoff, who also served Kenai, Ninilchik, and English Bay; and Father Paul Sedura, who served Knik and Susitna) gave services here at intervals varying from once or twice a month, to once or twice a year, the frequency depending on personnel and funds available. (Mike Alex and his sons constructed a tiny, white, frame house for the use of visiting priests; this is the building close to the road.)

In 1954 Mike Alex was visited by Metropolitan Leonty, Primate of the Orthodox church in America, and was convinced of a call to begin a new chapel. Much of the work was done by the Alex family. The chapel, a white, frame building, was dedicated on May 17, 1962; its importance to the Southcentral Alaska Orthodox can be seen in the fact that worshippers came from as far as Sand Point, Cordova, and Valdez to attend services here. The Bible, cross, and a large candleholder previously used next door in St. Nicholas were transferred to this new chapel.

Except for funerals, religious events are rare at Eklutna today, for the parish meeting place has again moved--this time to Anchorage. From \$20 seed money donated by the Metropolitan, the Orthodox in the area collected sufficient funds to buy land on Turpin Street (in the

Muldoon area of Anchorage) and begin a new church, christened Saint Innocent. St. Innocent was dedicated in August, 1966, and serves a congregation of 500, with a total parish of about 2,000. St. Innocent is within the Diocese of Sitka, and the faithful now have a resident pastor, Archpriest Nicholas Harris.

Local residents are looking forward to the completing of the restoration of St. Nicholas Church, and the erection of a Bicentennial marker at the site. (The marker has been delayed due to widening of the Glenn Highway to the immediate east of the village.) A highway overpass, to allow safer access to and egress from the village, is also planned.

(If you are interested in visiting other surviving examples of Russian architecture in Alaska, here is a partial list: Holy Assumption Russian Orthodox Church in Kenai, built c. 1896, on a vessel or quadrilateral ground plan, with three domes; the blue-domed shrine, west of the Kenai church, which marks the burial of several Orthodox church workers, built c. 1906; the St. Nicholas Church in Juneau, built in 1894, recently restored, in a beautiful location high on a hill beneath massive crags, and the oldest Russian church in Southeastern Alaska; the tiny, white, frame church on the hill overlooking Ninilchik (c. 1900 and in continuous use since its construction⁶¹); the old church at Seldovia (c. 1890⁶²), on a hill overlooking Kachemak Bay. Note that this list does not include the structures mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter.)

NOTE: Information regarding the reconstruction process was derived from these three unpublished sources: Laurin C. Huffman II's "Inspection Report, Old St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Eklutna, Alaska," May, 1975; Craig C. Walker "Progress Report of the 1976-77 Restoration (Phases One and Two (no date); and Walker's "Continued Progress Report of the 1976-77 Restoration (Phases III and IV) (July 7, 1977)."

Churches like St. Nicholas were known as "Russian Orthodox" until 1970, when the name was changed to "Orthodox Church in America."

Icons & Obedience:

Mike Alex

" 'Tis the gift to be simple" goes the old Shaker song, and it is a gift Mike Alex had been given.

If you visited Eklutna during the 1960s and 70s, you were almost certain to meet congenial Mike. He was self-appointed caretaker of the St. Nicholas Church and its picturesque graveyard for twenty-two years. He enjoyed greeting the busloads and cars of tourists who stopped during the summer. "Tourists come, even from Germany," he told me, "and they all think Eklutna is beautiful. They all say they want to come back sometime."

When Alex Vasily died in 1953, he instructed his son Mike Alex to take over. "'You are the only one qualified,' he said. So I took over, took care of the cemetery. There were no meetings in those days about such things. Good Friday afternoon you read from the Bible for twelve hours. They call this Klostanika. Everyone takes turns. I used to do that here, but now I don't have enough help. I used to have a choir here, too," Mike explained.

Mike was troubled by dizziness and a tight feeling in his chest during the winter of 1975-76, and when he consulted a doctor he was told he had an enlarged heart. Medication helped alleviate his discomfort, and he looked forward to fishing and puttering during the coming summer. Some summer days he put in sixteen to seventeen hours around the cemetery, the church, and the chapel. No commuting problem: he lived just across the village square.

Mike was born at Eklutna. For years he was uncertain of his exact birthdate. "When I went to work I didn't even know, and my Dad didn't know. But they found the baptismal record from Kenai, where people had to go for baptism in those days; and I was born on June 9, 1907, and baptised on February 29, 1908."

His father, nicknamed by Railroad men "Eklutna Alex," was Alex Vasily, born around the Butte near Palmer. "My Dad couldn't read, but he was a good carpenter, made sailboats, snowshoes, worked night and day to make a living." Mike's mother, Matrona, was an expert skin-sewer.

Alex Vasily served as chieftain as well as the last medicine man or shaman of the Eklutna Dena. What duties would a medicine man have had? Daniel Alex, Mike's son, theorizes that his grandfather probably interpreted the supernatural; his powers probably amounted to "scare tactics mostly."⁶³

"Before Anchorage existed," Mike recalled, "there was a big native fish camp settlement stretching from what is today Ocean Dock to Eastchester. We spent winters at Eklutna, and summers at the fish camp. In 1916 measles, or smallpox--nobody was sure what it was--wiped out lots of Denna when we were at the fish camp. In 1918 flu wiped out many people. During World War I many were drafted; some never came home."

In the old tribal days of his childhood, "We lived off the country; today you have to have a license for fishing, a license for the boat, a license for trapping. No such thing then. When we cooked roast over the fire on a sharpened stick, we would put a piece of birch bark underneath to catch the drippings. We used to eat beluga oil, fish, sheep. Today everyone runs to the store," he said with some disgust. "In those days, those who hunted were

supplied with good moccasins and clothes. Those who wanted to do nothing were given the leftover food, and the leftover clothing. Not like welfare today. Boys and girls were not allowed to run around together; everyone was pretty strict."

Mike did not attend the Eklutna School, because he was one of thirteen children and it was necessary for him to be a wage earner. He regreted his lack of schooling for one reason: Because he cannot read Russian, he can be only a layman of the Orthodox Church. "I am sorry I did not want to go to school to learn Russian, because I could have been a member of the clergy by now."

In 1976, of thirteen children, only three survived: Mike, his brother Roy Alex, and his sister, Mrs. Gronia Baird.

For years Mike worked as a 50¢-a-day common laborer. Then he and his brother Roy went to work for the Alaska Railroad. "I got on equipment, dozers, and everything," he said proudly. His wife cooked in the mess hall for eight years.

It was about March, 1916, Mike remembered, that the Alaska Railroad reached Eklutna. "They used to call the stopping place Old Knik, but when they built a station, they called it Eklutna, after the mountain. On the other side of Knik Arm, the town was called New Knik, the boom town before Anchorage. They used to unload everything up there by Goose Bay, and haul everything into Knik."

Mike worked for the Railroad for twenty-eight years. During World War II he had to report every six months to the local draft board until the war was over. "But I did a lot of work, working in the yard up at Moose Creek, doing two men's work. When I got on, they found I could do most everything. So I was promoted. The roadmaster said, 'You have got too much experience; we have got to pay you for what you know.' " So in 1944 Mike became Section Foreman, a position he held for eleven years.

"They would have promoted me to locomotive fireman," added Mike, "but I couldn't leave the family; had to cut firewood for them. You didn't buy fuel in those days." Mike and his wife had thirteen children, six boys and seven girls. One son, Andrew, died of diptheria at age six.

at age six. The oldest boy, Herbert, an airplane mechanic and pilot with the National Guard, died in 1970, in a plane crash.

"I really started drawing good pay--\$5,500 a year--when I was Foreman--breaking in Eskimos, Aleuts, college boys," Mike said with a wry grin. "But," he admitted, "There was too much responsibility. Rock crew, powder monkeys, mess hall people would come from Anchorage to eat at our mess hall, to check up on me, to see how I run things."

Eventually the pressure caught up with him. One day in 1953, shortly after the death of his father, Mike felt sick, weak. He was rushed to a clinic, where two doctors awaited his arrival. "Come to find out I had a heart attack. I lay in bed at the hospital for six months. One month I couldn't even raise my arms. The nurses fed me like a baby, gave me baths in bed. At the end of six months I couldn't walk a mile."

For a long time Eklutna was plagued by its lack of an active church, a suitable chapel, and a fulltime priest. Those needs became a cause that both motivated and changed Mike Alex's life. "In olden days we had sisterhood and brotherhood, had bake sales, and make money to support the church. But all my generation was wiped out. No more brotherhoods any more."

While he was recovering from his heart attack, he had a visitor: "John Loven came to see me at home, read to me, blessed me. He tried to get me to join the Church of the Assembly of God, told me that icons were worthless. But I told him this was a holy place; there was something to icons besides pieces of paper. He wrote a letter to Juneau and was going to run me out of here and build a chapel of his own, of his church. Finally I got a letter from Juneau, and they wanted my opinion on Orthodoxy. I put in a pitch, and run Loven out of Peter's Creek. He didn't talk to me for years. Then he came to our church at Tyonek and had to admit, 'Gee, you people have a nice church, nice funeral service.' He used to have an airplane give people bread and gifts to make them come to his church. But he made a mistake when he started to fool with me."

"Without Christianity you can do nothing," Mike believed. "You go further and further into sin. And you

start suffering."

A short time later Mike had a second visitor. "Metropolitan Leonty from New York came. I had never seen him before. I rushed out and bowed down on the ground. He talked and talked--Russian. One of his five assistants asked me if I understood, and I said, 'Just a few words.' Leonty said, 'I hear about you; I come up to help you. You go in the church, ring the bell.' He opened the main altar and read from the Bible, prayed, and started talking again in Russian. Everyone else left then, and he gave me confession and blessed me. He made me well. I went back to work on the Railroad, started building the new chapel (dedicated May 17, 1962) and went fishing like I used to."

Before the Metropolitan left Alaska, he held a vesper service in Anchorage for Mike. "About fifty of us attended, and afterwards Leonty asked my opinion of the Church in Anchorage. I told him, we don't have anyone to baptise our children since Sedura died; we need someone to teach us, and we need help. He asked everyone there his opinion, and everyone said the same thing. Then he put \$20 on the table, and said, 'Here's your start.' So we started collecting money, and we found a location on Turpin for the new church, which we named St. Innocent."

Archpriest Nicholas Harris of St. Innocent talked about Mike Alex: "I have often thought about him; his obedience, his faith is something that has been a manifestation of the native people who have embraced the Orthodox faith for many years. The fact that he was so ill, and then the Metropolitan came here and asked him to do something, and that he took this very seriously, is so impressive. It did not go in one ear and out the other. This is not just a personal case of Mike Alex. He would be just one individual in doing this. But so many of the native people of Alaska have this attitude, this faith."

There are twelve houses in the village now, but only five families, including the Bennetts and Theodores. The rest of the inhabitants, like Mike, are single or widowed. The tribal role in 1976 was 120 individuals, but they are scattered all over the state. Mike has buried about fifty people since he took charge of the cemetery.

Mike remembers being told that there were once 36 families at Eklutna, with a Russian missionary teaching

them.

He likes to re-people his village occasionally, by roasting a turkey and holding a family reunion. Everyone brings some food, and sometimes, as on the Fourth of July in 1975, the reunion travels over to Fire Island (in Cook Inlet opposite Anchorage) to fish. "I started commercial fishing three months a year about 1936. I have a place on Fire Island. Whenever I can, I get on a plane and go down there." He finds it relaxing to fish, and to mend his nets in the light of the long summer evenings, when it is light enough to read outside until 11 pm. Mike's eleven surviving children have supplied him with "about twenty-seven " grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.

Current interest in native peoples and ethnic lore had wrought several changes in Eklutna. First of all, Mike Alex during the last few years of his life, went "downtown" to Anchorage every Thursday evening to teach his native language, using printed materials from the Alaska Native Education Board. He taught the Tanaina tongue, Susitna dialect, and showed me one of his booklets, which contained the sentence

Jan ch'an Paul tii gaaiy.

That means, "These puppies belong to Paul." (Mike scoffed a bit at the simplicity of these language materials, commenting with a laugh, "In olden days some Indians would give speeches just like in the Senate, with high words. I don't know what they were talking about," he added, to show the difference between this and daily speech.) There are twenty different languages among Alaskan natives, and these fall into two families, the Eskimo and the Athabascan-Eyak. The Tanaina language materials, which fall into the second family, are currently used at Lime Village and Eklutna.

A second change had to do with skin sewing. "Mostly our people are not interested in skin work, sewing, today," grieved Mike. "My mother was real good at skin sewing. My wife learned from her and would make things to sell at the Fair in Palmer." In the spring of 1976, Eklutna, Inc., secured a non-profit grant of \$1.275 from the State Council on the Arts for a skin sewing crafts project, to be held at the village.

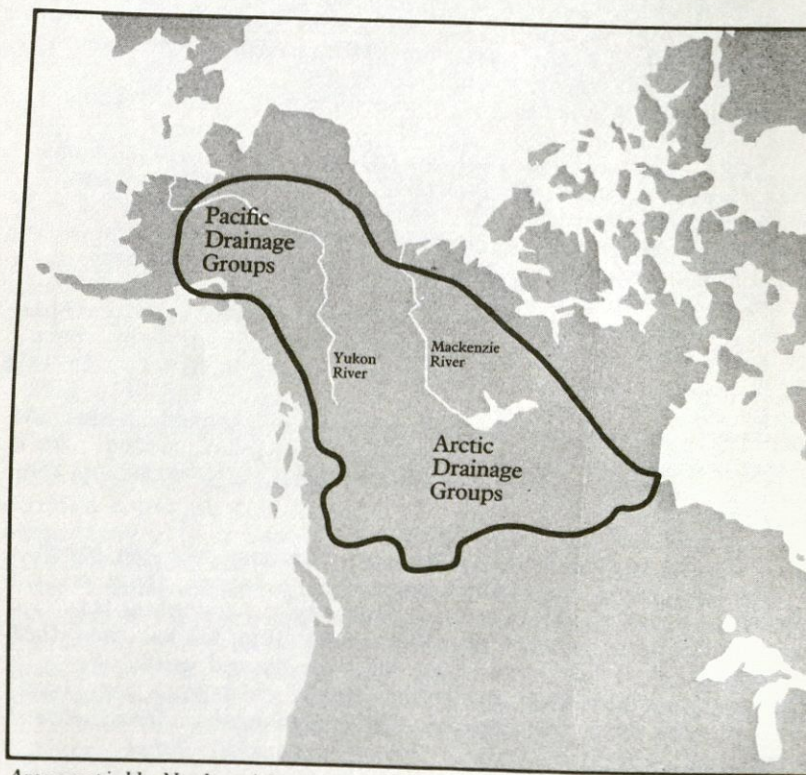
This latter change--as well as the securing of the reconstruction grants for St. Nicholas Church--is the direct result of efforts by Daniel Alex, Mike's son, and Executive Director of Eklutna, Inc. Daniel graduated from Anchorage's West High in 1960, and is an alumnus of Alaska Methodist University (which recently changed its name to "Alaska Pacific University") where he was a math-physics major. After graduation he worked for the Navy in Washington, D.C., as a geophysicist.

In addition to his fulltime post as Executive Director of Eklutna, Inc., Daniel was, in 1976, on the Bicentennial Committee for Environment and Recreation, and Acting Chairman of the Alaska Native Land Managers Association.

Daniel was born in 1941 at Eklutna. "The village was quite removed when I was a child. The Glenn Highway was very narrow, a winding dirt road. There were plenty of mosquitoes. But in the 50s they started to spray--which they don't do now. The family had a vegetable garden: potatoes, carrots, lettuce, peas. We used to fill up the cellar, which was about 10 by 10, with potatoes and carrots for the winter. At the time Eklutna School existed, there was a smokehouse near the mouth of the Eagle River. In late May or early July we would go to Fire Island and help pack the fish. Mother used to put up a lot of smoked salmon and salted salmon, and some just plain dried, not salted. We'd spent all of July and the first two weeks of August on the Island."

"In spring we kids would peel the bark off the birch trees and scrape the thin, sweet, inner layer, about a 16th-inch thick, and eat it. Probably conservationists would have a fit about that today; we didn't know then that it would kill the trees--just that it tasted good. We used to pick berries, and Mother would make jam. We lived on a lot of fish and potatoes and moose meat. There were plenty of rabbits to snare, and we also went sheep hunting."

Mike Alex died in Anchorage on August 27, 1977. The previous year, speculating on the youngsters who would people Eklutna after him, those who taunted him with, "You never went to school; what do you know?" Mike said, "I say to them, 'You should think before you say anything.'" He explained, "You have to be trained before you can be president or doctor. I never went to school, not even to kindergarten, anything. But I am interested in working."



Area occupied by Northern Athapaskan Indians

Vicilea, Vasili, Vasily, Wasilla...

This chapter may be only of local interest, but that seems sufficient reason to include it.

Let us digress at this point on the name "Wasilla" or "Vasili." We have already noted that a Russian naval officer, Vasili Melakoff, was exploring Upper Cook Inlet in 1834 and 1844; his maps were published by the Russians in 1860. Vasili or Vasiliev, meaning "Basil," is a common Russian name, and when Athapascans were converted into the Orthodox religion, and encouraged to take "civilized" names to mark the event, they would have chosen (or their converters would have chosen for them) names they heard frequently.

Around 1900, an old Knik diary lists some of the chieftains of the area: " 'Nicolai, also known as 'White Eye'; Nikita, or Big Nikita, or Nakeeta, or Nekeeta; Chief Pete of Tyoonok; Stephan or Big Stephan of Knik; Chief Tyoon, a Matanuski Indian; Vacilla, or Old Wasilla.' Other Indians often mentioned by name during this time were Affinassa, Esi, Evan, Goosmar, Nakila, Simeon, and Theodore." 64

The chief after whom the town of Wasilla is named Alex Vasily's brother, Theodore Vasili, or "Wasilla Theodore." "In the language of the Knik Indians, the name Wasilla means 'breath of air.' On a hand-drawn map made by Mr. Herning as early as 1904, he has marked an area 'Vasili.' An old Chickaloon Indian chief bearing the name of Wasilla, and remembered by many of the town's 'old timers,' is buried on Cottonwood Creek where there were once a few small Indian cabins. So whether the town's name is of pure Indian or Indian and Russian origin is anyone's guess I believe," Louise Potter writes in her invaluable history.⁶⁵

It should be mentioned here that Tanaina tribes had two chieftains simultaneously: an older one--the "toyon" or "tione" --for strategy, and a younger one--the "sacaschik" for leading men into battle. Cornelius Osgood says, "The leadership of a Tanaina war party on the offensive is apparently in the hands of the toyon, or he is chief, and constitutes one of the few occasions on which he leaves his village. The fighters are always young men which perhaps explains why the toyon as an older person is always described as giving orders from the rear. The true battle leader is the second chief, who leads his men to attack, half dancing as they agilely dodge the arrows and spears of their enemy."⁶⁶

The 1899 Johnston-Herning map shows, in addition to Vicilea's Cache, a "Vicilea" marked near the present site of Wasilla. This is certainly the site Miss Potter placed on Cottonwood Creek, the burial site of Chief Wasilla. Furthermore, this grave and house site is probably the old village site of Tladje't that De Laguna learned of in 1930: "Theodore of Eklutna told me that this was both a summer and a winter village."⁶⁷ Undoubtedly "Tladje't" is one and the same with the "Ladzat" or "mud place" which James Kari mentioned in his chapbook, The Heritage of Eklutna (published in 1978 by Eklutna-Alex Associates, Inc.). "Mud place" fits as the perfect placename for a site often described by local informants as "a portage" between Wasilla Lake and Cottonwood Lake.

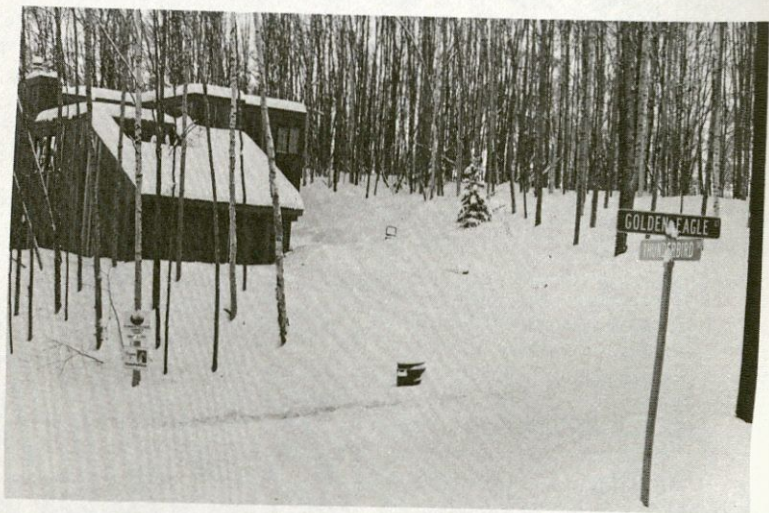
The younger inhabitants of Tladje't, drawn by job opportunities at Knik and Anchorage, probably moved away, and as the village diminished to one home, it came to be known locally by the name of the inhabitants--Wasilla and his wife.

In the summer of 1976 I attempted to find this site, and after several sets of directions and false starts--and encounters with uninhabited cabins obviously too young--reached it. Miss Potter described the site as "on Cottonwood Creek (back of what is now the Valley Christian Home)."68 In 1976 the Valley Christian Home (on the Palmer-Wasilla Highway) was Lord's Land Bakery; the grave was three-fourths of a mile "back of" it, said Miss Potter.

The family of Bill Green guided me through the woods to the grave. It is on a hill overlooking Cottonwood Creek (a shallow stream linking Wasilla Lake and Cottonwood Lake). (This is not to be confused with the Cottonwood Creek that flows south from Wasilla Lake into Knik Arm.) Two slightly sunken graves--said to be those of Chief Wasilla and his wife--can be seen. A few feet away are the remains of a large three-room cabin, now degenerated to a few logs in height. The main room, according to (exterior) measurements, was originally 15 feet 5 inches wide by 16 feet 5 inches long. Two smaller rooms, attached to one side, were both six by eight feet. The Wasilla Boy Scouts once maintained the site; at present it is badly in need of marking and preservation.

Chief Wasilla's cabin follows the pattern noted by Porter in the Eleventh Census: "On the shores of Cook Inlet, among the Athapascan tribes, a log dwelling entirely above ground takes the place of the barabara. These houses are generally divided into two compartments, an outer one, in which the cooking and rougher labor is performed, and an inner sleeping room, floored and ceiled, but very low, not more than four or five feet in height, and generally provided with a small pane of glass or seal gut. This inner room can be almost hermetically closed and affords a warm sleeping place in the coldest weather. In some of the Tnaina (sic) villages this bedroom is also utilized for bathing purposes, being then heated with red-hot stones; but the general custom is to have one or two separate bath huts for each settlement."69

"Vasily," as a surname, has spread as far as Togiak, on the Alaska Peninsula, where it is spelled "Wassillie"70 or "Wassilliey"71. In the 1976-77 Greater Anchorage phone book, there are two more variations: Vasilie and Wassili.



Thunderbird Heights (February, 1979).

Photo by F. L. Chandonnet.

The Future

We have speculated about Eklutna's pre-history, reconstructed the atmosphere of its past two hundred years from contemporary and modern sources and living informants. We have seen the kind of lifestyles the Tanaina of Upper Cook Inlet had, past and present.

But what of the future? What does it hold for this village?

Obviously, the December, 1971, Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act will have its impact on the place--perhaps the biggest impact since a Tanaina toyon out-maneuvered an Eskimo clan somewhere on Knik Arm (c. 1650 A.D.) and assumed control of one of the balmer plateaus in Alaska.

In 1940 there were 50 persons living in Eklutna.⁷² In 1969, there were 38 residents.⁷³ Today there are 23.

In 1961, Eklutna organized a traditional type of government, a native village council, "to stop the constant exploiting of their acreage."⁷⁴

Eklutna, Inc., was formed in 1973 and Ikluat, Inc., in November, 1974. Executive Director of Eklutna, Inc. is Daniel Alex, who is also on the Board of Directors of Ikluat, Inc. Eklutna, Inc., is the profit-making organization of the village; Ikluat, Inc., is the non-profit corporation.

The 1976 holdings of Eklutna, Inc., were 1600 acres on both sides of the New Glenn Highway in the area of the village, including Thunderbird Falls (a popular picnic area bordering Chugach State Park). Under sections 12A and 12B of the Alaska Native Claims Act, Eklutna, Inc., laid claim to 115,000 additional acres, including the 117-acre tract of land on which Chugiak High School and Birchwood School are located, as well as land within Chugach State Park.

The Chugiak High-Birchwood School tract was awarded to Eklutna, Inc., in January, 1977; however, as the Chugiak-Eagle River Star described the action, the Alaska Native Claims Appeal Board "at the same time took on the role of 'Indian giver' by requiring that Eklutna give the lands back to the municipality (of Anchorage) once they are conveyed to the corporation. Reconveying the tract to the municipality, the decision states, would fulfill part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act requirement that corporations must give a minimum of 1280 acres of land to 'municipal corporations' which provide needed services to Native villages."⁷⁵

At the end of the summer of 1977, BIA granted 72 acres close to Eagle River center to Eklutna, Inc. This grant caused considerable local consternation, as it included land proposed for an Eagle River Bicentennial Park. However, Eklutna said it was willing to swap this parcel for similar land elsewhere.⁷⁶

According to the October 25, 1977, Federal Register, another 2800 acres--scattered from Peter's Creek to Eagle River, and not contiguous--were granted.

What do the 118 members of Eklutna, Inc., intend to do with their land? According to Daniel Alex as of 1977, lease it, sell gravel from it, and/or build a ski resort. He told the Chugiak-Eagle River Comprehensive Planning Committee on June 22, 1977, that the corporation had been investigating using some of its land for warehousing or light industry, and defined light industry as a fast-food

processing plant or a poly-vinyl chloride extrusion plant. "In the long run," says E. G. Burton, the corporation's attorney, "delaying the land conveyances is costing the Native corporation more money than would any legal action which might result from giving Native patent to the land before the easement question is resolved." 77

During the winter of 1977-78, Eklutna was granted the Thunderbird Falls parcel and began development of a 108-lot subdivision near the traditional fishing area at the Falls. Thunderbird Heights, as the development is called, has fifteen houses in it now, and the corporation is selling more lots to developers for construction of luxury homes--generally in the \$79,000 to \$155,000 range.

In August of 1978, the Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission recommended that 2,458 of the 2,700 acres of prime railroad land near Anchorage which had been claimed by Eklutna "be relinquished by the railroad, with protection for current leaseholders and the 200-foot right of way for the track itself.... So now, after years of virtually ignoring the Native claims, the railroad is fighting an uphill battle to hang on to its land."78

This railroad land is, says Walt Parker, co-chairman of the Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission, "probably the primest land involved in any Native selection."79 *

The narrow stream shows a warming trend.

*As of February 4, 1979, when this volume went to press, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had yet to hand down its decision on the disposition of this land--worth \$200,000 annually in gravel extraction rights alone.

Notes

¹Lado A. Kozoly, BIA Report (brochure), July, 1963.

²Lael Morgan, And the Land Provides: Alaskan Natives in a Year of Transition (Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1974), xviii.

³U. S. Department of Commerce, Federal and State Indian Reservations (Washington, D.C., 1974), p. 4.

⁴"Nitak" is another name given to a village in this vicinity, but I am not sure if either Old Kinik or Nitak were distinct from the old houses of Ikluat."--Frederica De Laguna, The Archeology of Cook Inlet, Alaska (First published 1934; published by The Alaska Historical Society in 1975), p. 140.

⁵Louise Potter, Old Times on Upper Cook's Inlet (Anchorage, Alaska, The Book Cache, 1967), p. 9.

⁶Chugiak-Eagle River Bicentennial Commission, "Historical Highlights" (folder, 1976), no pages.

⁷Potter, Old Times, p. 5.

⁸Morgan Sherwood, Editor, The Cook Inlet Collection (Anchorage, Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1974), p. 34.

⁹Reservations, p. 4.

¹⁰Lana Johnson, "Artifacts Date From 8524 B.C. to 1936 A.D.," The Anchorage Times (December 5, 1976), p. B-3.

¹¹Frederica De Laguna, v.

¹²De Laguna, pp. 14-15.

¹³Ibid, p. 140.

¹⁴Loc. Cit.

15D. E. Dumond and Robert L. A. Mace, "An Archeological Survey Along Knik Arm," Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska (Volume 14, Number 1; 1968), p. 14.

16Ibid., p. 16.

17Ibid., p. 19.

18"Warehouse space for government surplus was impossible to obtain in Anchorage, so portions were shipped to a storage yard at Eklutna."--E. M. Fitch, The Alaska Railroad (New York, Praeger, 1967), p. 99.

19Louise Potter, A Study of a Frontier Town in Alaska, Wasilla to 1959 (Wasilla Development Co., Inc., 1963), p.5.

20The Knik News, Vol. 1, No. 21 (March 6, 1915), p. 1.

21Don L. Irwin, The Colorful Matanuska Valley (no place, no publisher, 1968), p. 12.

22Potter, A Study, p. 5.

23Loc. Cit.

24Ship Creek was one of many names given to the modern Anchorage area before "Anchorage" stuck. The site was originally called (according to De Laguna) "Xa'tikicut" or (according to Petroff) "Zdluiat." Or there may have been more than one village in the area--as, often, what constituted a settlement was only one extended family. These were summer native fish camps where salmon were caught and dried and/or smoked. Anchorage was previously called "Knik Anchorage" (i.e., the anchoring place for Knik), Weaver, Woodrow, Woodrow City, and Ship Creek. In 1914 the Alaska Northern Railroad arrived. By June, 1915, several blocks were cleared, and lots were selling for \$950. On July 31, 1915, the "Anchorage Grand Opening Ball" was held on the new townsite, and by 1917 Anchorage had a population of about 6000.

25Id Times, p. 31.

26At least one source--the 1977 Milepost--is incorrect on the subject of moving of buildings from Knik to Wasilla. The Milepost states that Teeland's Country Store was founded May 1, 1905, at Knik, and moved to Wasilla in 1914.

This is incorrect.

"The original town of Knik," according to Walter Teeland of Wasilla, "was built around a big gully; now the highway (Goose Bay Road) has been built right through the site, and filled up part of the gully--spoiling your perspective of the old townsite."

"The town was T-shaped: a row of houses along the waterfront was the top of the T, and the stem of the T was a row that went up the natural gully behind. One original building (now a museum and sled dog mushers' hall of fame) remains in the gully, to the west of the road."

"Fred Machetanz painted a picture of Knik, showing George Palmer's store and a barge unloading--using some of Herning's old photos for factual information. The painting hangs in the Alaska Bank of Commerce in Anchorage."

"The Store was founded on May 1, 1905; it was Herning's store. He moved the business to Wasilla in the summer of 1917, and opened it in a new frame building--the Knik store was small and log--in November, 1917. The Knik building was not moved. I know this is true because I know the son of one of the carpenters who built the Knik Trading Company (as Herning's Wasilla store was called) in 1917; the carpenter was John Wirum. My wife and I bought the business from Herning in 1947 and re-named it Teeland's Country Store. When I retired I sold it to Jules and Leslie Mead."

--Walter Teeland, conversations with the author, July 6, 1976, and October 28, 1977.

²⁷Herning kept diaries from 1898 to 1946. These diaries are now the property of the Anchorage Historical Society, and have not been published.

²⁸Palmer's display ad in The Knik News of April 10, 1915, reads: "On account of having our own ship bringing in merchandise fresh from the outside, we are able to quote you prices that competition cannot touch. We Save You Money!"

²⁹A Study, p. 7.

³⁰Id Times, p. 33.

³¹According to Maxim Chickalusion, a bilingual teacher at Bartlett School in Tyonek, there were several winter trails out from Tyonek: to Susitna and on to Knik and Palmer; from Croteau (?) to Willow and Talkeetna. "These were being used until about 1931. Susitna was a

winter village for trapping; in the 1920s the people left in the summer to go to work in Anchorage--on the railroad and so forth. The modern village of Tyonek was built in 1931, about two miles north of the old village site. We moved on account of thirty-foot tides that year. The old village was down on the flats and used to flood in big tides."

"Back in the early 20s there was still a chief running Old Tyonek, telling the people what do. (This may be the Chief Pete mentioned by Hering in 1900.) When he died my uncle, Simeon Chickalusion, became governor of the village, and was responsible for moving the village."

The present population of Tyonek is 270, with about 50 more individuals considered members of the village corporation but residing elsewhere.

Maxim Chickalusion was born October 5, 1921.

"Yes, I think Tyonek was a year-round village--before jobs were available in Anchorage."

--Maxim Chickalusion, conversation with the author, October 28, 1977.

According to an article by Helen Gillette in The Anchorage Times (June 11, 1978, p. B-4), Simeon Chickalusion, last chief of the Tyoneks, was born on April 10, 1880, and died in the spring of 1957. When the village moved from Susitna Station to Tyonek, "He told each family what to do, where each house was to be built... He helped them arrange to buy a tractor and sawmill. He spoke English well, having earlier worked with white men in the Hope and Sunrise goldfields, and on boats sailing as far west as Kodiak and the Aleutians. Villagers recall how he always endorsed the old ways of self-sufficiency, of living off the land instead of buying things from the store. He thought they ought to be out picking berries and wild greens and taking sap from the trees instead of buying corned beef, cookies, and pop."

32R. N. DeArmond, letter to the author, March 29, 1976.

33The tribal name "Denna" is variously spelled "Dena'ina," "Ten'a," "Tinneh," "Dinaa," and "Dene." It is simply the Athapascan word for "person." (See footnote no. 10 in Louise Tenner's Julius Jette, Alaska Journal Autumn, 1975, p. 247.)

34The Butte is a 881-foot outcropping in an otherwise flat river valley--a natural landmark. Bailey Theodore of Knik told me that his grandfather was buried near the Butte when his father was a boy. Bailey's father was Theodore Wasilla (or "Wasilla Theodore"), brother of Alex Vasily (Eklutna Alex), Mike Alex's father. Mike and Bailey were, then, cousins.

--Bailey Theodore, conversations with the author, July 6, 1976.

35For a description of a prehistoric fish camp, based on excavations at Moose River on the Kenai Peninsula, see Catherine Brickley's "Bringing the Past to Life," Ruralite (January, 1978), pp. 16-17.

36Ann Chandonnet, "Icons and Obedience: Mike Alex of Eklutna," The Great Lander, Vol. 8, No. 16 (April 28, 1976), pp. 1-2. (Based on conversations with Mr. Alex in February, 1976.)

37Morgan, And The Land Provides, xvii.

38Josiah E. Spurr, narrative of the 1896 U. S. Geological Survey, as exerpted in "Through the Yukon Gold Diggings," Alaska magazine (October, 1977), p. 32.

39Morgan, xxiii-xxiv.

40Sherwood, The Cook Inlet Collection, p. 44.

41Ibid.

42Cook Inlet Collection, p. 82.

43Irwin, p. 13.

44Old Times, p. 11.

45Just what kind of cache this was is open to conjecture, but attention might be drawn to a funeral custom documented by De Laguna: "Among the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian, the shaman was never burned, but was placed in a box, wrapped in a bark or grass mat, on top of a small island, or conspicuous point, at some distance from the village, usually along a frequented route."--The Archaeology of Cook Inlet, p. 165. The cache could also, of course, have been stored food; but it would seem odd to

note such an ordinary sight of the North on a map.

⁴⁶John Shaginoff of Sutton, conversation with the author, March 13, 1978.

⁴⁷Shaginoff, *ibid.*

⁴⁸Loc. Cit.

⁴⁹Morgan Sherwood, Editor, Alaska and Its History (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1967), pp. 149-50.

⁵⁰"Artifacts," Times, B-3.

⁵¹Potter, Old Times, p. 23.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Irwin, pp. 144-145.

⁵⁴FRC 9725 Historical Record, BIA Schools In Alaska, Vol. 1. Seattle Federal Archives and Records Center, G.S.A., Sand Point Way, Seattle, WA. Report of Charles R. Smith, dated June 30, 1930.

⁵⁵Daniel Alex, conversation with the author, February 14, 1976.

⁵⁶BIA SChools, report of Smith, loc. cit.

⁵⁷James Vanstone, Point Hope: An Eskimo Village in Transition (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1962), pp. 128-9.

⁵⁸A. Teresa Ripley, Supervisor Teacher, BIA, Mt. Edgecumbe School, a letter to the author dated May 14, 1976.

⁵⁹Louise Potter, a letter to the author dated August 8, 1976.

⁶⁰Elsa Pedersen, "The Kenaitze People," in A Small History of the Western Kenai (1976, Pedersen Projects, Sterling, Alaska), p. 3.

⁶¹Marilyn Dimmick, "Ninilchik," A Small History, p. 31.

⁶²Elsa Pedersen, "Seldovia," A Small History, p. 59.

63Daniel Alex, conversation with the author, February 14, 1976.

64Old Times, p. 11. (Note: There are still Theodores living at both Knik and Eklutna.)

65Study, pp. 12-13.

66Cook Inlet Collection, "Tanaina Tales," p. 16.

67De Laguna, Archaeology, p. 140.

68Study, pp. 12-13.

69Archaeology, pp. 143-144.

70"Togiak Girl Visits Bustling Community," Chugiak-Eagle River Star, June 23, 1977, p. 15.

71Paul M. Wilson, "Dress Rehearsal," Alaska magazine, June, 1978, p. A 32.

72Peter A. Ezi, Jr., "Eklutna Then and Now" (two legal-size sheets, single-spaced, typed; undated; Xeroxed--not published); on file at the Eagle River, Alaska, Library, in the non-circulating files), p. 1.

73Kathi Barnett, "Eklutna," Anchorage Daily News, October 5, 1969. Page not known.

74Ezi, p. 1.

75"Eklutna Wins, Loses School Sites," Chugiak-Eagle River Star, January 6, 1977, p. 6.

76Edward G. Burton (Attorney for Eklutna, Inc.), conversation with the author, November 2, 1977.

77"Eklutna Wins, Loses...", p. 6.

78Paul Nussbaum, "Alaska Railroad Battling to Hold Land," Anchorage Daily News, January 18, 1979, p. 2.

79Ibid.