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# On the Trail of EKLUTNA



# On the Trail of **EKLUTNA**

BY

**Ann Chandonnet**

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St. Nicholas Church at Eklutna is perhaps the oldest surviving example of architecture built by Athapascans under Russian direction. It was probably built about 1870, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was restored in 1976-77 under the direction of the late Mike Alex. Most services are now held in the white frame chapel next door, which was dedicated on May 17, 1962. The "spirit houses" in the foreground are erected as memorials over graves. There are over 80 of them in this cemetery.  
(Ann Fox Chandler, net, September, 1985)

# Acknowledgements

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## DEDICATION

To the children of Eklutna, Tyonek, Kenai and the other Athapascan villages around Cook Inlet. This is their story.

And to my older sons, Yves Gaétan Chandonnet and Alexandre Jules Chandonnet, who have grown up with this story and were overjoyed to find "bones" (the remains of moose butchering) in a family dump near Cottonwood Creek. We found Niteh together, and we found Wasilla's home.

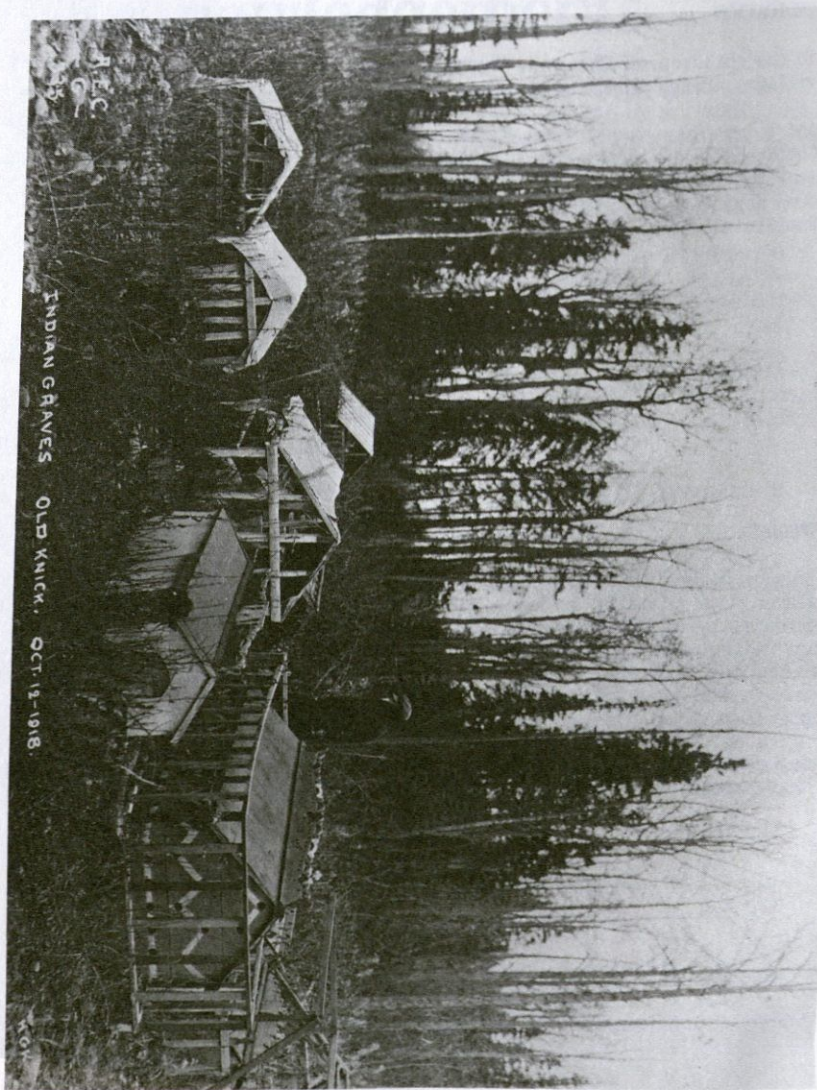
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Thanks to the late Margaret G. Mielke, inspiring poet and brave woman, who urged me to meet Mike Alex. To Karen Workman, who gave generously of her time and advice. To Diane Brenner, photo archivist at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, who seems to keep everybody's obscure project in the back of her head. And to the many people who trusted me to hear their reminiscences accurately and get them down right.

And especially to my husband Fern, who endured a decade of one-sided "conversations" on the subject of Eklutna.

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Eklutna graveyard, H.G. Kaiser, 1918. (Alaska Railroad Collection)

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was also mentioned in Herning's diary, as were Esis and Theodores.

(Orville Herning came to Knik in the spring of 1898 as a representa-  
tive of the Klondike and Boston Development Co. When they  
closed their gold mining operations in 1904, he became a merchant.  
He lived in the area, taking photographs and keeping a diary, for  
several decades.)

(Anchorage Museum of History and Art)



Alex Vasily's cache near his cabin at Eklutna. Vasily was the last shaman of the Eklutna people. He was known as "Chadda" (Russian for grandfather) to his granddaughter Debbie Fullenwider. "I never knew him by 'Eklutna Alex,' " she told The Anchorage Times in May, 1985. As a child, Fullenwider spent many summers with her grandfather, who spoke only Tanaina. "In the summertime, I lived in Eklutna village and fished off Fire Island. I used to go sheep and moose hunting, and fishing in Eklutna Lake."

This cache was once used to store Vasily's shaman's equipment, his "medicine bundle." The bundle contained a red trade bead with a white center, a 1916 Lincoln penny, a 1905 Liberty nickel, a sphere of white granite, an ermine's skin and herbs. (F.L. Chandonnet, 1981. The cache was subsequently toppled by road crews. It is still lying on its side by the stump on which it formerly stood. Eklutna Village Historical Park plans a restoration.)

# Once . . .

The peace of the place. The serenity of weathered wood and mature spruce. Lavender-blue lupine and magenta rock rose. Hand-hewn logs hunker slowly into gravelly soil.

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

No bright lights, no businesses attract the casual passerby -- with the possible exception of a small gift shop and the white trailer serving as office to Ikluat, Inc., the non-profit arm of the village's native corporation. There are no hay fields, no strawberry beds, no schoolyards, no village green. The roads, such as they are, are dirt -- like the majority of Alaska's byways. The few houses are rudimentary. Life flows slowly here, quietly, like a narrow Arctic stream just before freeze-up.

The tourist often pauses here to view the old Orthodox church, to photograph the "spirit houses" in the graveyard -- brightly painted boxes, "dolls' houses," flanked by crosses erected in loving memory of the village's dead.

The spirit houses are hardly unique. Others just like them can be found to the northeast at Sutton, at Knik across the Inlet, in the Yukon Territory, in the Aleutians and at Tyonek. There are prettier, grander churches.

Why, then, the fascination with this place?

Once hunters returned on silent snowshoes, bearing strings of ptarmigan, haunches of bear, tales of great escapes.

Once young women came gaily back from the slopes of Hatcher Pass, where they had spent several weeks trapping ground squirrels just emerging from their dens in spring. They would now spend weeks tanning the skins, for parkas.

Once there were feasts, song fests, great occasions for high language and spirited trading.

And once strange boats appeared on the water of the Inlet, boats with large white sails, bearing queer creatures dressed in shiny parkas, bearing thunder sticks, asking questions that could not be answered.

Eklutna is the anglicized version of the Tanaina word Eydlytnu, "by several objects river," which is the name for the Eklutna River, a shallow stream which connects seven-mile-long Eklutna Lake with Cook Inlet. The root Eydlyghet means "by plural objects," referring most probably to the small hills which surround the flat north of the river mouth. A local legend tells of the origin of these hills, referring to a story of how two Copper River sisters offended a giant fish in Eklutna Lake. (The mile-deep lake, like Loch Ness, is suited to such tales.)

Here live Athapascans, who may have lived here continuously for 350 years, making this the oldest continually inhabited Athapaskan site in the vicinity.

"Athapaskan" is an Algonkian word used by the Cree to refer to the "strangers of the North" who lived around Lake Athabaska in Canada. Athabasca is said to be a Cree word meaning "where there are reeds," and Athapaskan is sometimes translated as "people of the grass."

The Athapascans are a Pacific Coast, Alaskan and Canadian linguistic group of hunter/gatherers and fisherman whose ancestors originally came from Siberia, across the now sunken Bering Land Bridge. Eskimos and Indians may, according to a 1967 hypothesis by W.S. Laughlin of the University of Wisconsin, have arrived simultaneously in Alaska, since at maximum exposure the bridge was a thousand kilometers wide, north to south, providing width sufficient for two populations with different lifestyles to cross without major clashes. But as yet there are no archeological findings to support Laughlin's thesis. Some of the oldest legends of the Chugach peoples tell of the last ice age, when glaciers covered most of Prince William Sound.



Well-made Athapascan clothing was an important item of trade. Here H.M. Wetherbee of San Francisco wears a Tanaina summer shirt decorated with quills and fringe. His caribou skin boots are decorated with Dentalium shells; his snowshoes (lower right) are probably of Athapascan manufacture, too. Wetherbee made four voyages to Cook Inlet between 1889 and 1892. He captioned this pose "Wild and Woolly in High Latitudes." (Courtesy Wetherbee Collection, University of Alaska, Fairbanks)

When Ivan Petroff conducted an American census (known as the Tenth Census) of the new territory of Alaska in 1884, he listed seven Athapascan villages in Upper Cook Inlet. At or very near the present site of Eklutna, Petroff noted a village he called "Nitakh" ("between" or "among islands"), population 15. Just west of the mouth of the Knik River, he placed "Kinik," population 57. At Zdluiat (near present-day Anchorage), he counted 16 Tanaina. At Toyonok Station, 117. He also noted two Shushetno villages (perhaps corresponding to modern-day Susitna and Alexander).

When England's James Cook explored what later came to be called Cook's Inlet a hundred years before Petroff, in May and June, 1778, he saw "On Eastern shore . . . two columns of smoke." Like modern ethnographers, Cook readily found tribal resemblances between the originators of the columns of smoke--the inhabitants of Eklutna and Nitakh--and other aboriginal inhabitants of Alaska whom 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."

When George Vancouver's British scientific expedition spent April and May, 1794, investigating Cook Inlet, they explored Point Possession. They found the framework of some deserted houses on a steep cliff. The four largest dwellings were 24 feet long by 14 feet wide, covered with birch bark. The walls were nine feet high, with the roof four feet higher in the center. These were probably fish smoking shacks, which the people shared with the drying salmon, because the smoke kept the mosquitos at bay. This fishing camp site would have been mostly deserted this early in the season. Vancouver also noted two or three partially underground barabaras at the site.

An old theory of prehistoric migration held that the Athapascan Indians have not been long in Alaska, having been "driven out of Canada by warring Crees some 700 or 800 years ago." Archeological and linguistic evidence disputes this theory. Archeologist John Cook has spent eight years investigating 300 sites along the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. 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. Archeologists are in general agreement that humans visited Alaska from Siberia 30,000 to 25,000 years ago, establishing continuous residency here at an unknown date.

Archeologist Frederica de Laguna concluded after her 1930 excavations of Knik Arm 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." She refers to the Tanaina living at Eklutna and Anchorage

as the "Knat'a-na" and describes them as an inland people, whose culture shows that they had recently moved to the sea and had not completely adapted to a coastal lifestyle.

De Laguna's investigations of Knik Arm's middens (shell heaps) and house pits (holes remaining where barabaras once stood) were hampered by rainy weather, forty-foot tides and dense thickets of berry canes and Devil's Club. The house pits she found at Eklutna, she felt, "did not seem to be very old."

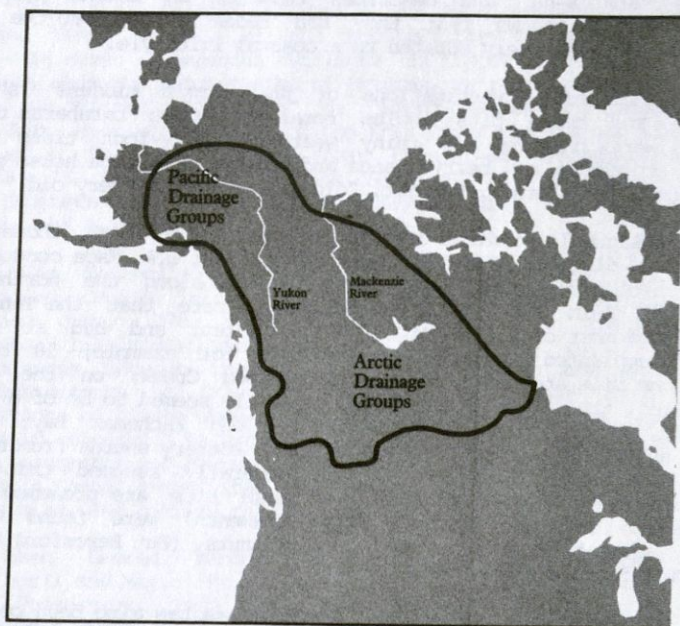
DeLaguna's findings are to be contrasted with those of a later dig. In 1966 D.E. Dumond and Robert L.A. Mace conducted an archeological survey and test excavations along the northwest side of Knik Arm. Their findings indicate that the Tanaina inhabited most of the shoreline of Cook Inlet, and had at some time supplanted Eskimos. They found, for example, 50 house pits one mile above the mouth of Cottonwood Creek, on the west side of the Creek. Artifacts generally seemed to be of a late period, corresponding to Kachemak 3 along Kachemak Bay; that is, approximately 500 to 1500 A.D. Pottery sherds from about 1200 A.D. were recovered. It is generally assumed that the Tanaina never made pottery, so these bits are presumed to be Eskimo remains. Labrets (lip ornaments) were found which also seem to point to Eskimo inhabitants. (But Beresford found the Tanaina wearing labrets in 1786.)

The confusion of evidence aside, there has also been confusion about the name of the place. Some sources testify that Eklutna was once called "Old Knik" or even "New Knik," or that it was named after its last shaman, Eklutna Alex. The mouth of the Knik River is about six miles (by water) north of the mouth of the Eklutna River. It would be logical, therefore, for 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, to incorrectly position the town named Knik near the river of the same name. 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. (The Alaska Railroad surveyors began the whole confusion in 1918 by labeling their photos of Eklutna "Old Knick Village.")

Knik is plainly marked as "principle city" on Johnston and Herning's 1899 (copyright) map of the area. Despite this it is incorrectly marked on the map 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, two general stores, a newspaper, a two-room school. It was bypassed by the railroad in 1916 and faded from importance overnight.





*Area occupied by Northern Athapaskan Indians*

Many tourists who visit Alaska hope to see "Eskimos." They are unaware that there are many other Native American groups in the state, including the Athapaskan Indians. The Athapascans take their name from Lake Athabasca in Canada. The 208-mile-long lake lies astride the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. Its name is derived from a Cree Indian term meaning "where there are reeds." The United States boasts over 400 Native American tribes, but these tribes are dominated by three great language blocks: the Athapaskan; the Algonquian or Algonkian; and the Hokan-Sioux or Siouian. Smaller blocks include the Eskimo-Aleut; the Penutian of the West Coast; and the Uto-Aztecan of the furthest Western desert. The Navaho and Apache are related to the Alaskan Athapascans as can be seen by comparing their languages, all part of the Na-Dené language group. With one exception, none of the Native languages were ever written down. The sole exception was Cherokee, which thanks to the talents of a brilliant fur-trader named Sequoyia, were put into written form in the early 1820s.

# The Land

Cut off from the rest of Alaska by mountain ranges, Southcentral has been an appealing gathering place since glaciers retreated from it 9,000 years ago. As the ice sheets withdrew, two great rivers, the Susitna and the Copper, began to cut wide swaths and braided channels from north to south.

Southcentral has a mild maritime climate, characterized by relatively warm temperatures and copious rain and snow. The climate which challenged early man can be estimated by considering extremes recorded by the National Weather Service at Anchorage. The record low was minus 34 degrees F, in January, 1975. The record high was 85 degrees F, in June, 1969. The maximum monthly snowfall was 48½ inches, in February, 1955. The maximum snowfall within 24 hours was 17.7 inches in 1955.

The topography of the region is as varied as its climate, featuring everything from glaciers to tidal flats. Maps of Russian America in 1852 as drawn by Russian geographer Capt. Tebenkov first reported the river which flows into the head of the Knik Arm as "Knyk." Knik River begins at Knik Glacier in the Chugach Mountains and runs 25 miles to Cook Inlet. A Tanaina village located near the mouth of the river was recorded in the 1880 census as "Kinik" or "Kinnick," population 46. (This was probably Eklutna.)

Companion stream to the Knik is the Matanuska River, 75 miles long, connecting the Upper Inlet with the Copper River area. The Upper Inlet, a brackish finger of the Pacific, branches at its northeast end into Turnagain Arm (43 miles long) and Knik Arm (45 miles long). The major streams emptying into it are the Susitna (293 miles), the Matanuska and the Knik. The broad, flat Susitna Basin encompasses many lakes and streams, many moose and beaver and muskrat, and gradually rises in elevation from sea level to 500 feet. It covers 19,400 square miles of bogs, stunted spruce, birch, cottonwood, alder and Devil's Club.

This is taiga, one of Alaska's two main habitats (the other being tundra). Taiga refers to evergreen forest bordering northern subpolar regions. It is also called "boreal climate." Such regions are characterized by long, cold winters; short, mild summers; and wide annual temperature variations. Ten thousand different insects make the taiga their home. The characteristic vegetation is open coniferous forest on swampy ground covered with lichens. In many areas of the world, taiga is arid. In Southcentral Alaska, however, precipitation is ample, with wet, polar Pacific airs bringing moisture. Much of the taiga is underlain by permafrost.

One of the greatest sweeps of forest in the world, the boreal forest extends in a vast and virtually unbroken arc of green eastward from the Alaska Peninsula through northern Canada to Newfoundland. Great herds of caribou shelter here in the winter, preyed upon by wolves. Both black and brown bear are common. Fur-bearers like marten, mink, squirrel and muskrat abound.

Massive mountain ranges surround the Cook Inlet basin on three sides. On the east, the Kenai Mountains rise to 6,000 feet. North of Knik Arm, the gentle Talkeetnas rise to 7,000 feet. The Alaska Range arcs from northeast to southeast.

The internal geography of the region cuts it into three main river valleys -- the Copper, the Matanuska and the Susitna. Early peoples, traveling along these natural highways in pursuit of game or tradegoods, met, intermarried, and shared their methods for dealing with the harsh climate. Even today Southcentral is a natural meeting ground -- an air crossroads, a media and shipping center, where more than half the state's population makes its home.

Pacific Eskimos first occupied Cook Inlet, with seasonal camps along Knik Arm by 1000 A.D., evidenced by artifacts from archeological digs. Later Athabascans moved here to escape the harsher extremes of the interior. The Tanaina settled along the Susitna and on the shores of the Inlet, gradually moving south to the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound. The Ahtna moved to the Copper River basin. The Eyak moved down the Copper River to its delta (near modern Cordova), where they shared the resources

south to the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound. The Ahtna moved to the Copper River basin. The Eyak moved down the Copper River to its delta, where they shared the resources of the Sound with Chugach Eskimos.

Data is inconclusive as to where Athapascan culture originated, but it is clear that by 500 A.D. Athapascans occupied the interior Alaskan taiga. One expert believes that occupation of the Upper Inlet began about 4000 B.C., perhaps by Athapascans, with Eskimos coming in about 1 B.C. and remaining through 1500 A.D. Around 1650, one theory has it, Tanaina moved in again, and in a decisive battle at Points Woronzof and Campbell, Tanaina established primary occupancy of Knik Arm. Their main settlement at that period seems to have been near or at present-day Eklutna, on the east side of the arm, called "Eydlughet" or "Ikluat," and used only in winter.

Early settlement of Southcentral is evidenced by the Long Lake Wayside site in the Matanuska Valley, a site which appears to contain cultural remains from both Eskimo and Athapascan inhabitants.

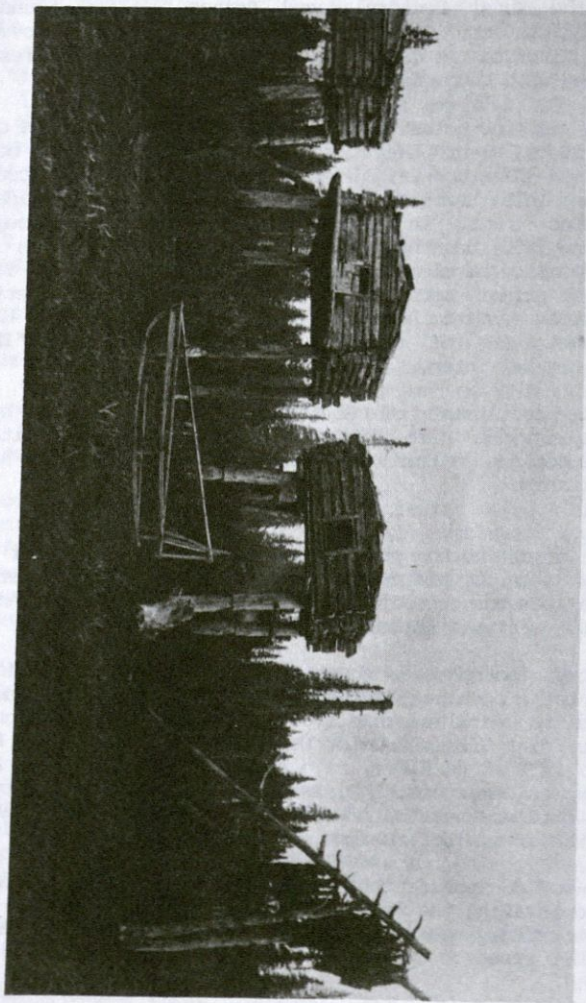
It is estimated that when the territory later called Alaska was seen by Bering's expedition in 1741, there were 10,000 Athapascans roaming its woods and grasslands. According to the 1909 census, there were 3,916 Athapascans in Alaska.

Dumond and Mace suggest that Upper Cook Inlet was Eskimo territory until perhaps 1700 A.D. with the Tanaina coming on the scene no earlier than 1650. However, two components of the Beluga Point Site, B Point North I (9000-6500 Before Present) and BPN II (4000-3000 B.P.), have affinities to interior Athapascans. Douglas Reger of the Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys maintains that there was a period of Athapascan habitation prior to the arrival of Eskimos.

It would appear that the predominance of a number of ethnic groups along the Inlet was always in flux --that control of the territory changed hands many times over the centuries. Only further research and archeological excavation will reveal the truth.

There are two major difficulties to tracing the movements of the Athapascans. One, the acid soil of Alaska tends to quickly dissolve artifacts. Two, their habits are migratory, and their possessions, therefore, small and portable. Thus, they do not leave large totems or plank houses to be found after them.

The nomadic habits of the Athapascans permeate their language. When the Eyak and Gwich'in say they are "out there



"Native Storage Houses," Upper Cook Inlet, c. 1890. This could be Eklutna. Note Orthodox cross marking a grave, in background under legs of second cache from left. Caches kept meat and valuable pelts out of reach of animals. Salmon are drying on the rack at the right and a sled is in the foreground. (Wetherbee Collection, University of Alaska, Fairbanks)

traveling around," "still walking around," or "going around on foot," they literally mean they are hunting. Similarly, Tanaina tales often begin in medias res, on the trail--"We were walking around" instead of "once upon a time." And when they are not on foot, they are after game by water, "poling around" in birchbark canoes, hoping to come upon a beaver lodge or a moose up to his velvety ears in waterlilies.

The subject of this essay is the Athapascan village of Eklutna. The stage is Cook Inlet, a tidal estuary of the Pacific, 200 miles long, averaging 60 miles wide and 200 feet deep, but narrower and shallower in Knik Arm where Eklutna is situated. The drainage area of the Inlet covers 38,000 square miles, including extensive tidal flats. The Arm is filled with icebergs from November through March, with storms, headwinds and bore tides at all seasons.

When the United States purchased "Seward's Icebox" in 1867, the Tanaina were already in a weakened condition, having suffered a loss of half their number during a smallpox epidemic 30 years earlier. The total number of Tanaina in both Cook Inlet and the Susitna River basin in 1880 is estimated at only 972 by Petroff (a count actually made in 1884) and at 739 by another source.

#### ESTIMATES OF TANAINA POPULATION

1805	3000 (Lisiansky 1814)
1819	1471 (Tikhmenev 1978)
1822	1432 (Federova 1973)
1836	1606 (Federova)
1839	1628 (Veniaminov)
1851	1070 (Fedorova)
1862	858 (Fedorova)
	768 (Townsend 1965)
1874	680 (Townsend)
1880	972 (Petroff 1884)
1899	1170 (Elliot 1900; this total includes 1030 Tanaina in the Cook Inlet area and 140 Tanaina of the Nushagak area)
1910	672 (13th Census)
1932	650 (Osgood 1937)
1974	900 (Krauss 1974)

During the first twenty years of the American period, very little occurred to affect the status of Alaska native languages and cultures. The Americans explored the vast territory they had bought so cheaply, but they did not found any schools and discouraged the natives from becoming citizens by restrictive laws. The Russian Orthodox church maintained its educational and spiritual influence unchallenged.

However, about 1887 began an intense period of development in the fish canning and mining industries, bringing severe social and economic disruptions to Alaskan natives. American schools opened in Alaska during this period, under the first Commissioner of Education for the territory, Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson. Unlike Veniaminov, Jackson was adamantly opposed to the use of native languages in either church or school.

Railroad surveyors arriving at the mouth of Ship Creek in the spring of 1914 found mud flats covered with birch and grass as tall as a horse. The wiry grass often hid bears, and the damp soil bred hordes of voracious mosquitoes. Small wonder that in 1915 the Alaskan Engineering Commission suggested that the townsite (soon named Anchorage) should be laid out on the dry gravel moraine 28 miles north, at Eklutna. Later, however, the AEC settled on a site atop the bluff south of the inhospitable creek, where the breeze afforded some relief from the insects. By June, thirty-two blocks were cleared, and a thousand men came that summer and the following two to build a railroad for \$3 a day.

On his expeditions in Alaska between 1901 and 1903 laying out the Alaska telegraph system, William "Billy" Mitchell used two pairs of snowshoes-- a large pair for breaking trail, and a small pair to pack down the trail. The larger pair were made, declared an enthusiastic Mitchell, by "Cook's Inlet Indians, who make the best snowshoes in the North."

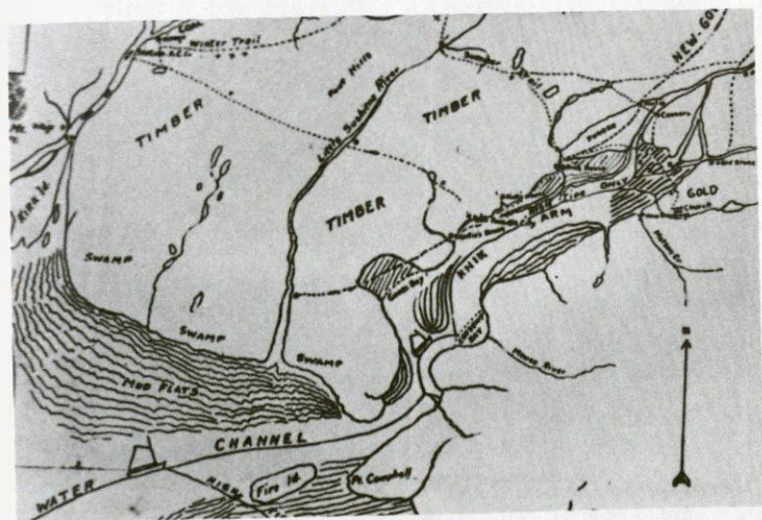
Mitchell described the Athapascans as "fine big fellows with high ridged noses, high cheek bones and copper skins," adding that the people "have suffered greatly at the hands of the whites, by massacres, disease, starvation, and lack of attention."

Like the Eskimos of Barrow and Gambell, who wholeheartedly embrace aspects of modern existence such as snowmobiles and rifles, the Tanaina wish to leave the dismal associations of their past behind. Yet, as the Eskimos wish to retain the whale hunt (one of the most important links in their cultural identity), the Tanaina wish to retain their ancestor feast, one of the few occasions when Athapascans of neighboring bands gather together.

In addition to the ancestor feast or "potlatch," the Tanaina wish to preserve another crucial link with the past--their land, the land their forebears roamed over free and self-sufficient, hunting moose, sheep and goats, corralling caribou; the land which contained specialized sites--such as Ship Creek and Fire Island--which were traditional fish camp sites.

In days gone by, a fearsome array of behavioral taboos and systems of apprenticeship to the wealthy governed the lives of the Tanaina, as did foul weather and fluctuating game populations. Today, they must content with a baffling arsenal of statutes, codes, licenses and acts.

But the Athapascans are a clever people, who have, since they first encountered other cultures, adapted chosen elements to their own advantage. Today, as they master the intricacies of hunting marten in the corporate forest, one can only wish them well.



Johnston and Herning's map, copyright 1899, detail. This map was drawn for prospectors headed for the drainages of the Susitna, Knik and Matanuska Rivers. Eklutna village is shown by several houses and notation "old church." Just north is "Knik Station," noted as "old store" where the Knik River flows into Knik Arm.

(Courtesy of the archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks)



# The People

Captain James Cook was the first to describe the Tanaina in writing. Off North Foreland, in May, 1778, a group of natives approached his ships. Cook recorded in his journal:

"...we were visited by several of the Natives in one large and several small canoes, the latter carried only one person . . . some had a paddle with a blade at each end. . . . they displayed a leather frock on a long pole as a Sign, as we understood it, of their peaceable (sic) intentions."

Cook noted that the Indians possessed iron and blue glass beads. He traded for some of their fur clothing, sewn of sea otter, marten, and rabbit skins. The Tanaina spent two hours between the "Discovery" and "Resolution" and then returned to the Inlet's western shore. On June 2 and 3 Cook traded with Tanaina opposite Point Possession for salmon and halibut. Having realized there was no Northwest Passage here, he departed the Inlet on June 6.

Another early visitor, William Beresford, described the Tanaina as habitually armed with bows, arrows and spears on their journeys, and wearing "cloaks made of marmot-skins, very neatly sewed together, one cloak containing perhaps more than one hundred skins." (These were probably cloaks of ground squirrel pelts). The Tanaina Beresford observed were of medium size and well proportioned. They wore beads in their noses and ears and other ornaments in a slit cut in the upper lip, parallel

to the mouth.

Beresford made these observations during the summer of 1786, noting the Tanaina's nomadic existence: "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." (This leader was perhaps the qeshqa, or "rich man," of the band.)

Freedom of movement was central to the Athapascan lifestyle. Josiah E. Spurr, leader of the 1896 U.S. Geological Survey, noted: "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 (those from the Yukon River), others from the Koyukuk, the Tanana, and even the Kuskokwim."

As the Eskimos have many terms for snow, the Tanaina language numbers many words relating to trails. The Tanaina word for trail is tinitun or ten. A packed snow trail is tigeli or tiqili. A trail with snow drifted over it is k'q'atena. There are terms for sled trails, snowshoe trails, trails used for gathering wood, trails to sites where game has been butchered, and trapline trails. Passages, portages, animal trails and short cuts also have their specific names. To mark trails, the Tanaina used blazes on trees, arrangements of moss and arrangements of sticks.

Louise Potter writes in Old Times on Upper Cook Inlet of turn-of-the-century traveling: "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.' "

In a speech by the Honorable Charles Sumner to the U.S. Senate on April 9, 1867, a speech supporting the purchase of Alaska from Russia, Sumner described the Tanaina as large of head, strong of chest, with "thick short necks, spreading faces, eyes inclined to be small, white teeth, black hair and thin beard. Their persons seemed to be clean and decent, without grease or dirt." Sumner noted that Russian traders described the Tanaina as "a good people" who "behaved in a very friendly manner."

As a rule, the Athapascans are a people of the interior forests and grasslands. The only Alaskan Athapascans to live on salt water, and to have a culture partaking of sea life,



"Residence, Seldovia," 1906-08. This is an Athapascan barabara, the typical dwelling before the Russians introduced entire-above-ground log cabins. According to Joan Tenenbaum's Dena'Ina Sukdu'a: Traditional Stories of the Tanaina Athabaskans (1984), "nichil" is the proper term for an above-ground shelter of poles shingled with birchbark, used as a communal summer dwelling or workplace. "Qenq'a" is the usual word for a house in modern Tanaina, but originally denoted a semi-subterranean winter house like this one, roofed with poles and sod. (Thwaites, AMHA)

as the Eskimos traditionally did, were the Tanaina and the Eyak. Tanaina is a term meaning "the people," or "people, exclusive of Eskimos and whites." The settlements of the Tanaina in the late 1800s were Chinila, Chuitna, Eklutna, Iliamna, Kasilof, Kasnatchin (Anchor Point), Kenai, Kikhkak, Kijik, Knakatnuk, Knik, Kultuk, Kustatan, Nikishka, Nitak, Niteh, Salamatoff, Seldovia, Skilak, Skittok, Stebenka, three villages on the Susitna (Alexander, Kroto and Susitna Station), Talkeetna, Tyonek, and Zdluiat. Ninilchik is often counted as a Tanaina settlement, but it is actually a Creole (mixed Russian-native) retirement settlement founded about 1835. Although Ninilchik and Kenai are still going strong, about a dozen of these settlements are now abandoned, ghost towns.

All pre-1940 information about Eklutna points to its being a winter habitation only, a stopping point on a regular seasonal migration. The Tanaina were not the only travelers to pass this way, since Eklutna is a crossroads on the Iditarod Trail and older trails from Seward. Thus there were permanent, non-native structures and habitations as well: an Alaska Commercial Company trading post, known as Knik Station (1877?-1901); and a roadhouse constructed by Scotty Watson in 1906.

All Athapascans speak a Na-Dene' language, Na-Dene' being a major grouping (phylum or superstock) of North American Indian languages, consisting of three families--Athapaskan, Haida and Tlingit. There are twenty-two Na-Dene' languages. Twenty of these belong to the Athapaskan language family and are spoken in Canada around the Hudson Bay region west to Cook Inlet, in southwestern Oregon and northern California, and in New Mexico and Arizona. Tlingit and Haida are each single languages making up separate families; they are spoken, respectively, in southeastern Alaska and British Columbia. The most important language of the Na-Dene' group is Navajo, with more than 80,000 speakers; it is one of the few native American languages whose speakers are increasing in numbers. Other large languages of the phylum are Western Apache, with about 8,000 speakers in western Arizona; and the Chipewyan dialects of the Northwest Territories of Canada, with about 4,500 speakers.

The Tanaina language may be doomed to extinction. Linguist James Kari of the University of Alaska at Fairbanks estimates that there are now fewer than 200 persons who speak it. He finds four speakers in Kenai, and about ten at Eklutna and the rest of the Upper Inlet. Although the Orthodox clergy in Alaska developed an orthography for and produced written materials in Yupik, Sugcestun Aleut (Chugach Eskimo), Aleut and Tlingit, they never performed these linguistic services for the Tanaina.

As the language is dying, so is the lifestyle. Before the coming of whites, the Tanaina followed a seasonal pattern of existence, a pattern that flowed with weather. They roamed as did the caribou.

Anthropologist Dorothy Jean Ray believes that the Tanaina settled in permanent villages of about a hundred, making relatively brief forays away from home after supplemental foods like Dall sheep and berries. Their dwellings were spacious, semi-subterranean, built of wood and sod; the Russians called them barabaras. Several families shared each dwelling, which might be 30 feet by 20 feet. The dirt floors and walls were covered with painstakingly woven grass mats, and the houses contained benches and shelves. A winter settlement might consist of a dozen such houses.

The barabara was essentially a cellar or dug-out foundation hole, two or three feet deep, above which was erected an arched framework of driftwood, logs or worked wood well insulated with sod and grass. The house might be fitted with a skin door and a smoke hole in the roof. Windows (if there were any) were of dried bear intestine. The entrance was sometimes a tunnel that curved down below the level of the floor--to trap cold air and keep it from entering. The Tanaina word for these semi-subterranean houses is nichil.

According to Alfred H. Brooks, who traveled in Alaska in 1898 and 99, Athapascan dwellings were "for the most part, crude affairs--a framework of poles thatched with bark and brush." Chinks were caulked with moss, and the door was double to give protection against cold. Adjacent to the main dwelling was a willow framework covered with skins, which served as a sauna or bathhouse (nelni). Also part of the characteristic homesite were several underground caches for food.

The Tanaina, notes Brooks, "built more substantial houses" of logs "grooved on one side so as to fit onto the adjacent ones, making the house very tight."

Russian colonial influence (which had influenced the Tanaina for more than a century before Brooks' arrival) caused the Tanaina to abandon their traditional shelters for log cabins entirely above ground. These Russian-style dwellings (such as the replica to be seen at the Anchorage Museum of History and Fine Art) were in two rooms--a large one for general work and living, and one or two small, low-ceilinged rooms for sleeping or puberty seclusion. The steambath, too, was now made of logs, but very low and small, so as to be heated quickly by hot rocks. Rocks were heated in a fire outside, then passed into the interior of the sauna with tongs or a shovel. Water was sprinkled on them to produce steam. Caches, too, were not of logs, and raised on stilts as much as 20 feet above the ground.

Akelen Holstrom (born 1921 at Naknek Lake) describes the aboriginal "mud house" she lived in as a child. Logs made the roof, which was then covered with leafy branches, grass,

and a final layer of mud. The family slept on wooden beds covered with caribou skins, with duck feather pillows for their heads. Lamps or candles provided light, and a wood stove provided heat. The table was low, and they sat on the floor. Water was carried from the lake. (Infant mortality was high under such circumstances; five of Holstrom's siblings died before she was born.)

Each band had its own hunting chief and territory. Each group was isolated, self-sufficient, like the ancient Greek city state or the medieval demesne. Individual achievement was important, and often led to wealth and rank. Intelligence, ingenuity, skill in hunting, memory for terrain and natural landmarks, knowledge of the habits of animals, knowledge of weather patterns, edible barks and roots--these were the important things.

Athapascan clothing was of tanned caribou and moose hide, often gorgeously decorated with porcupine quills, pieces of fur, feathers, seeds, fringe, and, later, trade beads. Their music included love songs, traveling songs, imitation songs, war songs and mourning songs. Athapascans have been known to sing and dance for eight or ten hours with brief interruptions only for "a cold drink of water and suggestions for new songs." A song sometimes served as a memory device, listing all the best known palces on a particular trail.

Women lived a hard life. For adultery, only the woman was punished--beaten or exiled. Often women, not dogs, pulled the sleds. When a new camp was selected, the men arrived first, and then rested while the women arrived dragging skins for temporary shelters, and continued to lounge while the women set up camp. Women had to retrieve game killed by the male hunters and backpack it home. They dried meat and fish in summer, made all the clothing, dressed skins, repaired snowshoes, wove mats, cooked food, dried fish, constructed baskets--and could be beaten for disobedience. So severe was their lot that they often killed infant daughters to spare them a woman's life.

Amusements included battle, singing, dancing, gambling, telling long stories and wrestling. In winter they made a kind of trampoline, about a foot square, attached by moose-skin thongs (babiche) to four trees 30 feet apart. The tiny leather platform was strung about 20 feet off the frozen ground, and the object of the game was to jump up and down without falling off. The person who made the most jumps before falling was declared the victor.

Seasonal food patterns were repeated year after year. In early summer, Athapascans moved to fish camps on the shores of large lakes, rivers or the ocean itself. Here they caught and dried salmon and hooligan. The Tanaina stored part of

of their catch in pits, lined with grass, to ferment. Dried fish (nudelbay) and fermented fish (chuqilin) were staple winter foods.

When annual fish runs dwindled, the band moved to berry camps, gathering as many as 100 pounds per family. Then they moved to winter hunting grounds and settlements. They did most of their hunting during late summer and winter. The largest game, caribou and moose, were snared; caribou were sometimes driven into corrals, then killed. Small game such as ptarmigan, snowshoe hare, mink, marten, otter, lynx, fox and beaver were also prey. Certain furbearers became important as items of barter after trading posts were established.

During spring (May and June), porcupine, ducks and geese were fair game, and wild rhubarb was gathered. During July and August, black bear were hunted; rose hips and wild greens were collected. Indian potatoes (*hedysarum alpinum*) were also gathered on riverine flats during the summer. For Athapascans with flexible schedules, certain seasonal food traditions still remain. For example, many Tanaina still retain fish camps and spend certain weeks of the summer there rather than at their permanent dwellings.

Robert McKenna estimates a familiar band which traveled, lived and strove together at 20 to 75 persons, with an entire winter hunting camp comprising eight to 12 families, or 35 to 65 men, women and children. The territories of any one band could be as big as 50 by 100 miles. Common journeys for the Tanaina were Eklutna to the Coper River (100 miles), or Eklutna to Susitna Station (60 miles by waterways). The natives of Kodiak regularly traded with the Tanaina--a distance by water of at least 240 miles. Kenai to Eklutna, another common journey (made for trade, potlatches, or church services) is about 90 miles.

The Athapascans made their prodigious winter journeys easier by inventing snowshoes. They may also have invented the birchbark canoe. They used birchbark to make buckets, baskets, baby carriers/cradles, cooking pots, splints for broken limbs and even moose calls. IN aboriginal times, Athapascans used bark canoes and rafts for traveling on water. Maritime canoes reached 25 feet in length. They also used small wooden dugouts and moose skin riverboats (bull boats).

Generally men constructed boats and made snowshoes and snares, while women cured skins, snared ground squirrels for parkas and stitched clothing. Skin boots had to be so tightly sewn that air blown into them would not exit along the seams; if breezes could exit, cold could enter. A skilled seamstress was a crucial companion for a native hunter, his backup or pit crew; without good clothing and warm footwear, the hunter

could freeze to death or be ineffective in his quest for meat. An ineffective hunter could mean starvation for an entire family.

Pre-contact clothing included raingear of marine intestine, parkas of ground squirrel skins carefully tanned in one piece (like "socks" of fur), and caribou boots with tough moose soles. Summer clothing was made from skin with the hair removed, but winter clothing was made with the hair turned in against the body. A complete set of clothing included a tailored slip-on shirt/tunic with an attached hood and long sleeves for winter; tailored trousers with drawstring waist and attached leggings and moccasins; and mittens. Cloaks of caribou skin or twined rabbit skins might be worn on top on very cold days. Clothing had to be cut out with sharp obsidian, flint or slate knives. The pieces were sewn together by punching holes along the seam line with a bone awl, then forcing sinew through the holes. Eyed needles were unknown to most Athapascans until they were introduced by white traders.

Clothing for both sexes was nearly identical, although women usually wore longer tunics. Men's shirts were shorter, and summer versions were V-shaped at the hem, front and back.

The religion of the Athapascans of Alaska was a complex system of ceremonies, beliefs, superstitions and rituals. It was not static; new ceremonies, new songs, new masks might be created by the shaman if the need for them arose, just as a modern pastor might create a new prayer on the occasion of a royal wedding, an earthquake, or the assassination of a world leader.

The Athapascans were polytheistic, like the ancient Greeks and Romans. They insisted upon some measure of fasting and/or sexual continence before the hunter set out for prey or the warrior for battle. Their range of cosmological ideas was vast. They believed that animals were the first inhabitants of the land, and these animals were just like men except for two things: they were bigger and they could doff and don their fur like a suit of clothes. One story tells of two bear brothers who assume human form easily and marry a human woman; occasionally they tell her to close her eyes--and then fish are quickly caught or sleds pulled over drifts with surprising speed, because the bears assume their bear shapes for these tasks.

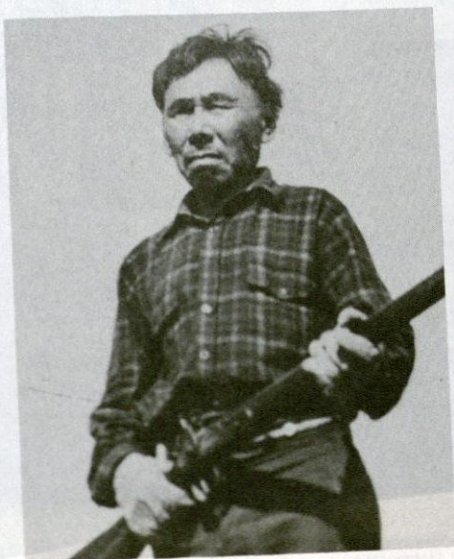
Among both Eskimos and Athapascans, the shaman was the repository of religious lore, and the means of communication with the spirit world. Both men and women could become shamans (after a "call" from the spirit world and a course of apprenticeship), but only male shamans had "the courage to do evil."

In the Athapaskan religion, any part of the natural landscape had a spirit--a piece of driftwood, seaweed, a mountain or

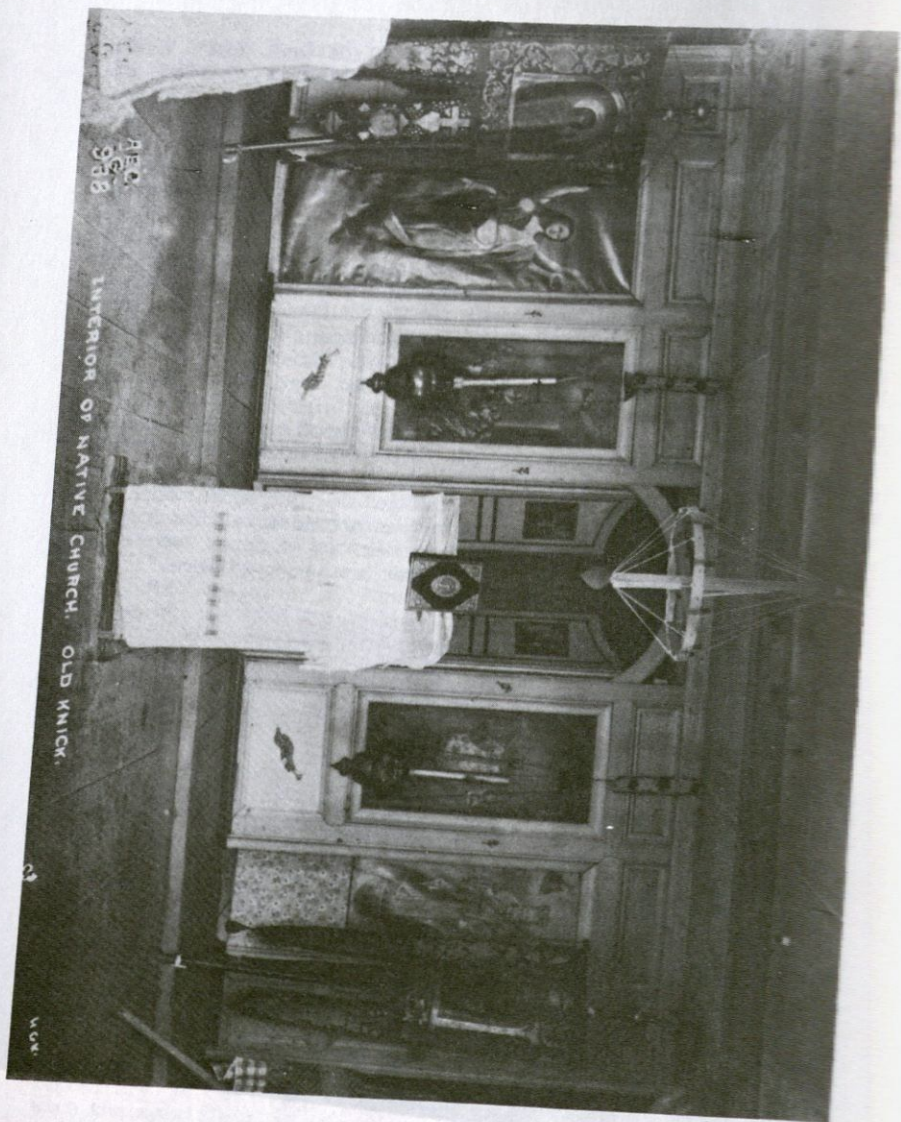


hill--as well as animate beings like birds and fish. There was a whole pantheon of spirit beings, including spirits of cold, death, land, water. Each prey animal or marine creature had its own spirit to be appeased--or others of that species might not allow themselves to be killed in the future. If the prey struggled hard to escape, his spirit was probably unappeased. An appearance of killer whales symbolized that someone would die.

The last shaman of Eklutna was Alex Vasily, nicknamed Eklutna Alex by white settlers. Vasily was born Bel K'ighil'isen, c. 1866. His granddaughter, A. Debbie Fullenwider of Eagle River, is next in line to serve as shaman; she is currently serving as vice president and chairman of the board of Eklutna, Inc. Fullenwider remembers being trained by Vasily at the age of six or seven. "When I was eight or nine, he taught me how to shoot a 22 automatic, and we used to snare spawning salmon in a kind of backwater on Eklutna Flats with a loop of wire at the end of a stick; in those days it wasn't illegal. He sewed himself, and showed me how to do beadwork. When we visited him at Eklutna, we never ran around like kids do now; we sat in a corner and did beadwork, or we chopped wood. If we didn't work, we didn't eat, no matter how young we were."



Eklutna Alex (c. 1866-1953). Date unknown. (From collection of Debbie Fullenwider)



The image screen (ikonostas) of St. Nicholas Church at Eklutna ("Old Knick") as it was in 1918, when photographed for the Alaska Railroad by H.G. Kaiser. Its appearance today is much the same as it was then -- the same as it was when Mike Alex was growing up.

# Mike Alex:

## Icons & Obedience

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

Visitors to Eklutna during the 1960s and 70s 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 months. "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 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 with obvious regret.

In the old days, Mike explained, his parents' generation followed a traditional migratory lifestyle. His father, Alex Vasily and his mother Matrona (a native of Susitna), lived off the land in the ancient ways. Vasily was born in the Bodenbug Butte area near Palmer, where there was a large village called



Mike Alex (Anchorage Times photo, 1970)

"Hutnaynut'i" (burnt over). Before Anchorage existed, Mike Alex recalled, "There as 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. In 1916 measles or smallpox--nobody was sure what it was--wiped out lots of Denna (Tanaina) when we were at the fish camp. In 1918 flu wiped out many people."

A Nulchina or Sky Clansman, 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."

That the infant Mike was taken all the way to Kenai, a distance of about 200 miles by land, in the dead of winter, by his devout parents, shows both the hardiness and the migratory nature of the Athapascans.

As a child, then, Mike Alex followed a migratory existence, but after he went to work for the Alaska Railroad in the 30s he used Eklutna as a year-round residence, except when he stayed at his fish camp on Fire Island. By the close of his life,

the visits to the island had become of a few days' duration only--often in celebration of July Fourth. The visits acted as an annual family reunion--and the proud Mike had the color photos to prove it.

Self-sufficiency was dear to Mike's heart. He often recalled his father's resourcefulness: "My Dad couldn't read, but he was a good carpenter, made sailboats, snowshoes, worked night and day to make a living." His mother, Matrona, was an expert skin-sewer.

In the old tribal days of Mike's 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 stic, 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."

From 1924 to 1945 the government ran an industrial or vocational school at Eklutna, a large complex of buildings including dorms, a warehouse, director's cottage, shop, implement shed, cannery car, meat house, paint house, brooder hen shed, laying hen house, waiting station, and hog house. Mike did not attend the school; he was one of thirteen children and could not afford such luxuries. But he remembered it, and the children who came from all over the state to board and learn. In his spare time, he taught traditional fishing methods to some of the students.

Despite his vast knowledge of traditional ways, he regretted his lack of formal schooling for one reason: Because he cannot read Russian, he is qualified to 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," he said.

For years Mike worked as a 50-cent a day common laborer. Then he and his brother Roy went to work for the 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 recalled, that the railroad reached Eklutna as it attempted to span the gap between Seward and Fairbanks. "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 28 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 11 years.

"They would have promoted me to locomotive fireman," added Mike, "but I couldn't leave the family; (I) had to cut firewood for them. You didn't buy fuel in those days." Mike and his wife had 13 children, six boys and seven girls. One son, Andrew, died of diphtheria 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 1955, 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."

Mike seemed to recover from his heart attack, but during the winter of 1975-76 he was troubled by dizziness and a tight feeling in his chest. A physician told him 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 16 to 17 hours around the cemetery, the church, the white frame chapel.

For a long time Eklutna was plagued by its lack of a modern chapel, a fulltime priest. Those needs became a cause that both motivated and changed Mike Alex's life. "In old 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."

Without Christianity you can do nothing, Mike believed

"You go further and further into sin. And you start suffering."

While he was recovering from his heart attack, Mike had an important 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. "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 (Father) Shadura 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." (As of fall, 1985, St. Innocent is still operating out of a foundation space, trying to raise sufficient funds for its supstructure.)

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 other 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."

Mike remembered being told that there were once 36 families at Eklutna, with a Russian missionary teaching them. The population of Eklutna was 39 in 1967, 23 in 1979, and "about 40" in 1981. In 1979, there were 12 houses in the village, but only five families, including the Bennetts and Theodores. Many of the inhabitants were single or widowed. The tribal role in 1976 was 120 individuals, but they were scattered all over the state. Mike had personally buried about 50 Tanaina since he took charge of the cemetery.

Mike's eleven surviving children have supplied him with "about twenty-seven" grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.



Home of Mike and Katherine Theodore at Eklutna, built in 1927 by Theodore. Steam bath (left) is attached to enclosed porch, so it can be entered from inside during cold months. Main house (right) and steam bath are of logs; porch is frame. Ladder makes repairing the tarpaper roof easier. (AFC, 1981)

Eklutna Inc. has made some provisions for the daily quality of life of the 40 percent of its stockholders who formerly lived in tumbledown ancestral cabins in the village. In 1981 a homesite program was instituted, and five modern ranch-style homes were completed, bordering the first graded road, served with electricity from the public utility, and with water via a pumphouse. This was just the beginning of working out a way to give each stockholder a building site of up to one and a half acres in size and the resources to erect a 20th-century dwelling .

The passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 spurred new interest in native peoples and ethnic lore. As a result, during the last few years of his life Mike Alex went "downtown" to Anchorage every Thursday evening to teach his native language, using printed materials supplied by the Alaska Native Education Board.

Another new program had to do with skin sewing. In the spring of 1976, Eklutna Inc. secured a non-profit grant of \$1,275 from the Alaska State Council on the Arts for a skin sewing crafts project, to be held at the village.



The crafts project grant, as well as the securing of a reconstruction grant for St. Nicholas Church, was the direct result of efforts by Daniel Alex, Mike's son, who has held many of the offices of Eklutna Inc. Daniel graduated from Anchorage's West High in 1960, and is an alumnus of Alaska Pacific University, where he was a math/physics major. After graduation, he worked for the Navy in Washington, D.C., as a geophysicist.

Daniel was born in 1941 at Eklutna. Today Eklutna is just over a bypass from a four-lane highway, marked by large green highway signs. But in the 40s it was set away from public eyes in a forest glen, as Dan recalls: "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 spray. . . .The family had a vegetable garden: potatoes, carrots, lettuce, peas. We used to fill up the (root) cellar, which was about ten by ten (feet), 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 spend all of July and the first two weeks of August on the Island."

"In spring we kids would peel the bark off the trees and scrape the thin, sweet, inner layer, about a 16-th 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 Aug. 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."

# St. Nicholas Church

What immediately catches the eye at Eklutna is the old, handhewn log church, Saint Nicholas. It is the oldest building in the Anchorage area, and, according to hearsay dates back to the 1830s. Rumor has it that it may have been built at the site of a Russian mission near Knik, dismantled and moved to its present location in the late 1800s.

An exact date for the church's origin has yet to be established conclusively. The Orthodox churches built at Kiniklik and Chenenga in the late 1800s or early 1900s are almost identical to St. Nicholas. Nancy Yaw Davis in her unpublished thesis (1965) states the church was constructed "near the end of the Russian period," which would date it pre-1867. 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.

Several sources give 1935 as the date for the establishing of an Orthodox mission at Knik, but according to Russian historian Svetlana Federova, the agricultural settlement established at that time was not at Knik, but at the mouth of the Ninilchik River (Ninilchik). In 1841 the Russian American Company built a chapel in Kenai, but it was not until 1844, according to Federova, that agricultural settlements were founded by the Russians at Kachemak, Kasilof, Kenai, Knik and Matanuska.

Modern informants tend to be of the opinion that Knik was a white town founded about 1898 by prospectors; Federova disagrees.

There was a church or chapel at Knik, but it was never moved to Eklutna. Priest John Bortnovsky described "the chapel at Knik" in his journal for July 11, 1896. The Bailey Theodore family, a family which has been in continuous residence at Knik for over 60 years, has memories of the structure. Alice Stephan Theodore recalls the site as "not too far from our place, and (the church was) about the same size as the one at Eklutna. Mike Alex told the preacher to change the services to Eklutna in 1939; the building was real old and after that it was torn down for (fire) wood."

There is an Orthodox cemetery near the former site of the Knik church, and the Theodores spruced it up in the summer of 1981. It contains about 20 graves. Many of those interred here are Theodores; Alice lost four of her 14 offspring.

The Eklutna village site was at the junction of several traditional Indian trails--some later used as gold rush and mail trails. These traditional trails led north to Palmer, to the Copper River area, and over Hatcher Pass. Others led south to Kenai (a settlement of the Kenaitze at which the Russians established an armed trading post in 1791) and the Kachemak Bay area. Others led northwest, over the tidal flats at the mouths of the Matanuska and Knik Rivers (an area higher and drier before the 1964 earthquake dropped the ground about 5 feet), toward Iditarod, Knik, Nancy Lakes and Tyonek. As a crossroads, Eklutna was a perfect site for a religious meeting place. When the priest arrived from his Kenai headquarters, he sent out word of how long he would remain, set up a canvas altar and began holding services and performing marriages and baptisms.

As perhaps the oldest surviving example of architecture built by Athapascans under Russian direction, the St. Nicholas Church is naturally an attraction. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and has been the subject of many drawings, paintings and prints.

During the historic fervor of the nation's Bicentennial, Ikluat, Inc., was able to secure two reconstruction grants for the church: \$10,000 from the Alaska Legislature and \$5,000 from the State Parks Service. Reconstruction began on Sept. 23, 1976, under the direction of Mike and Daniel Alex.

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 carefully removed, and sufficient excavation done to afford access to the partly decomposed base logs.

The sagging building was braced by cables and wood to pull it back into shape and to strengthen it while it was raised to allow pouring of concrete footings. Cinder blocks were laid three high on the perimeter footings and two high through the center to provide support for 2x6-inch floor joists. The new base logs, handhewn on the spot to match the originals, were positioned, and the church gently lowered into place. Floor joists were then laid and the old flooring repositioned and secured.

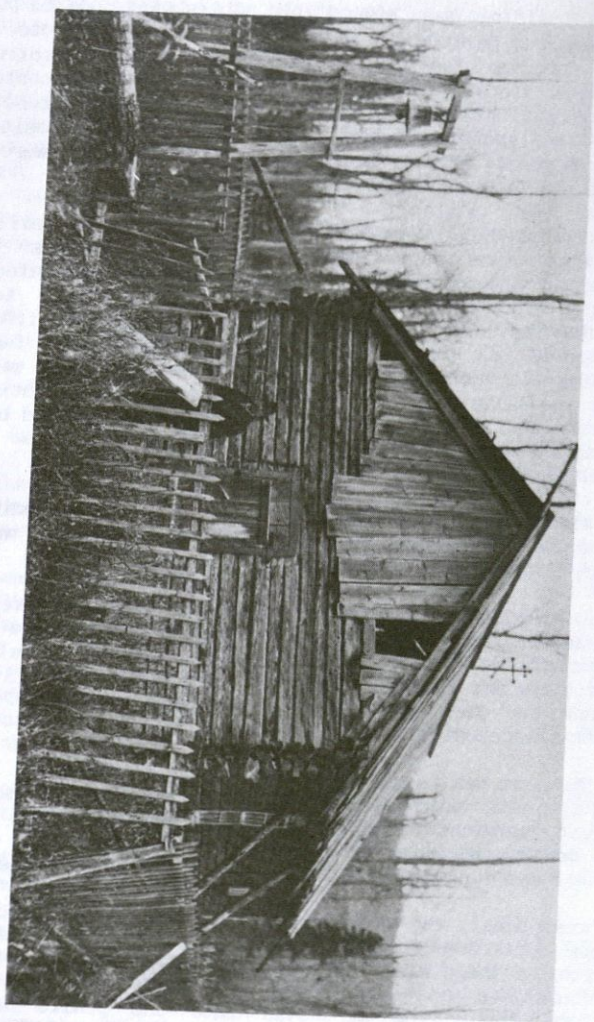
Work continued in May, 1977. At this time the ceiling was restored. First it was braced; then the entire interior was sprayed with a "penta" (wood preservative) solution; and the bared walls and ceiling were covered with Visqueen (heavy plastic) to keep out the elements. The modern plastic was obscured from sight with a covering of heavy cotton duck (a reasonable facsimile of the original, deteriorated, cloth ceiling). 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. These boards were eventually painted bright red and blue.

The altar wall ("an amazing piece of craftsmanship") was reinstalled, and looks much the same as it did in 1918 when the earliest known photo was taken.

Entrance to the church is through a covered porch topped by a campanile. The original porch/campanile structure was in such deteriorated shape 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 be obscured with soil. Then the porch/tower was recreated.

St. Nicholas was in use until 1962 as a place of worship. Traveling priests such as Father Mike Oskolkoff and Father Paul Shadura 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, and the vagaries of transportation.

Although small, the interior of the church is laid out in traditional Orthodox fashion. That is, there is a sanctuary or altar beyond an image screen (ikonostas). As in larger structures, the sanctuary is on a platform, and there is a prolongation of the platform outside the ikonostas into the public area. This prolongation is called an Amvon or Tribune. Beyond the platform, traditionally, there are raised Kliros, or places for two choirs, one on either side of the church. These are absent in this minimalist setting, but can be seen at Kodiak. Traditionally, too, there is a porch or pritvor, a small, separate room outside the body of the church, such as may be seen at Kenai. The two-walled base of the bell tower--more an Arctic entry than anything else--takes the place of the pritvor here.



St. Nicholas Church at Eklutna in October, 1918. The photo was taken by H. G. Kaiser, whose job was to take pictorial records at one mile intervals along the route of the Alaska Railroad-- and other photos of buildings and objects of interest along the route. The church was in a state of severe disrepair at this time. The figure standing in front is probably Father Shadura of Kenai, the parish priest.

# Spirit Houses

No cold granite masoleums or marble angels loom in a Tanaina graveyard. Homey, crooked rows of colorful rectangular "spirit houses," painted in bright reds, blues, yellows and greens, or in Easter egg pastels, line the welltrodden grass.

The memorials painstakingly sawn and nailed together for adults are generally less than six feet long and four feet high, rising to a peaked roof, the ridgepole adorned with a zigzag or cutout dorsal fin. The houses carpentered for children are scarcely bigger than shoe boxes. Patterns of stripes or chevrons are painted on some roofs and fronts. Photos taken by H. G. Kaiser for the Alaska Engineering Commission on Oct. 12, 1918, show some Eklutna ("Old Knick") graves surrounded by picket enclosures. Others lack the spirit house entirely, consisting of a roofed picket fence, with a blanket tacked over the top as a roof.

There is nothing solemn about the spirit house, no lugubrious black crepe. Just the vibrant colors of life--palpable as memory.

If the spirit house covers an Orthodox grave, an eight-pointed, three-barred Orthodox cross stands in the earth before the door or front. Usually the cross is painted white, but

but sometimes there is a vase-like bulge below the crossbars, and this is stained crimson. If the house is baby blue, like one at Sutton, the cross may be a coordinating shade.

The spirit house of Alaska and the Yukon may have Asian origins. In Bangkok, Thailand, to this day, in the gardens of private homes stand miniature duplicates of the A-shaped Thai houses. Offerings of food and incense are placed before these spirit houses, or "chao ti." A spirit must have his own house, the Thai believe, or he will haunt the living.

Alaskan natives as a rule took quickly to the Christian religion because they had an aboriginal belief in reincarnation. There was an afterlife in a sort of paradise above the clouds, reached by climbing up a giant tree trunk on which the souls of men roosted like owls. Northern Athapascans believed in reincarnation in animal form.

Those who had seen a shaman prove his powers by being burned, speaking from the center of the fire, and reappearing days later, could readily accept the idea of a Christ who could die and be reincarnated. But many investigators of Athapaskan ways have found that "beneath the thin layer of Christianity a surprising number of aboriginal beliefs are still strongly



Alex Vasily's brother, Theodore Nmi Vasily, or "Wasilla Theodore," born Kalbis in 1874, is the chief after whom Wasilla is named. He was a fisherman by trade. He died at his home at Cottonwood Creek on Jan. 9, 1952, of heart failure. This is his grave. (FLC, 1980)

This gravesite at Eklutna shows the practice of placing a blanket on the grave for the first 40 days after burial. The blanket shows respect, and the color chosen may have clan associations. (FLC, 1981)



held. Commitment to parts of two different belief systems does not seem to concern or confuse the Indians," James Van Stone writes. "They are perfectly capable of seeing the two systems, Christian and traditional, as complementary rather than conflicting."

Immediately following death, the corpse was dressed in new clothes, sometimes including burial moccasins beaded on the soles. The body was removed through the smoke hole in the roof or a special opening made in the rear of the dwelling. The special opening was intended to confuse any evil spirit responsible for the death, so it could not find its way back to the village again. Widows often mutilated themselves, and relatives singed their hair as a sign of mourning. Wailing by female relatives might continue for several days. The body was temporarily placed on a scaffold at some distance from the dwelling.

A day or two after death, the body was disposed of in one of four ways: cremation, burial, abandonment, or caching



in a tree. Cremation was the most common disposition method, used almost exclusively by the Tanaina, until white contact. Before the advent of organized cemeteries, the deceased were buried close by their homes. (Theodore Vasily's grave, for example, is just 30 yards from the remains of his house.) As Christian churches were established and new customs adopted, organized graveyards came into use. By 1906, burial had become commonplace among Upper Inlet Tanaina.

In aboriginal times, following cremation, the remaining ashes and bits of bone were raked together and buried on the spot or put into a coffin box; in Southeast Alaska, they were inserted in the hollow of a mortuary totem. It is perhaps this coffin box for cremated remains that developed into the spirit house or "top house." In the 20th century, of course, the house no longer holds cremains but is simply placed above an interred body as a memorial. The grave house was common in Alaska and the Yukon after white contact.

Photos of Yukon grave houses are plentiful in Richard Harrington's "Yukon" (1974). A grave house on the bank of Marsh Lake (Milepost 875 of the Alaska Highway) contains a spoon and plate. The cemetery at Upper Laberge has grave houses with ornate picket fence enclosures. Fort Selkirk also has grave houses. Grave houses at the Little Salmon River village feature glass windows with curtains, and are as large as children's playhouses. There are other grave houses at Champagne and at Aishihik.

The nearly 80 spirit houses at Eklutna today are decorated according to individual taste, according to Mildred Alex, president of Iklutat Inc., who has taken on her late father's "job" as caretaker of the cemetery: "The design of the spirit house was decided by the family. Most are decorated the same way for all of the family members. The Alexes' are red and white."

Educators Anderson and Bells, who surveyed Alaskan natives in the 30s, surmised that "the custom of burial in grave boxes came from the south of Norton Sound, where the grave boxes were more elaborate and where the practice of complete exposure of the bodies was not known. In that region," they noted, "wood suitable for boxes was more plentiful than on the Arctic coast."

Abolt Nicholas (Igumen Nicholai), the first Orthodox missionary assigned to the Kenai Parish (which included Eklutna), tried to persuade his parishioners to give up cremation. His diary entry for June 22, 1859, when he was visiting Ugalentzi (Valdez) reads:

"They burn their dead because, as they say, the relatives are ashamed to leave the bodies as food for worms. I have advised them to discard this custom, but did not



"A Native Demise" (Orville Herning, c. 1898, at Old Tyonek. A small, white, spirit house can be seen in the lower right foreground)

insist in order not to disturb them while they are still unestablished in (the Christian ) faith...."

Of spirit houses like those to be seen today at Eklutna, Knik, Nulato, Russian Mission (Ikogmiut) and Sutton, Archpriest Nicholas Harris says: "They are an Indian institution; the Orthodox church does not know of this in the way the Indians do. In the case of the Eklutna indians, the spirit houses bring together both traditions in their burial rites. They still have the aboriginal spirit house, but over the house is the Orthodox cross, which shows that the person buried there is a member of the Orthodox church. My understanding is that the spirit house is simply a monument. But perhaps the deeper meaning is that it is a gesture of love. In the case of a little child, they might take the little garments or toys and put them into the spirit house."

Today at Eklutna, spirit houses are not erected until a 40-day mourning period has passed. Until a few years ago, the graves were "fed" three times a day during the 40-day period. Immediately after burial, says Debbie Fullenwider, a blanket is placed on the grave "to show respect." The blanket is held down by stones at the edges. Red blankets show the highest respect. Other colors show clan associations, says Fullenwider,

and sometimes the blanket is simply the deceased's favorite color. "Usually a favorite dish of the deceased's is put under the spirit house, and for the period of mourning it is kept filled with food. Sometimes a favorite tea cup."

Bits of information about spirit houses can be found by browsing through old books and in archives. For example, a P.S. Hunt photo in the Mary Whalen Collection shows spirit houses in the native cemetery at Eyak Lake (Cordova) almost identical to those at Eklutna today. (Hunt dropped dead at Seward in 1917, so the photo was taken sometime prior to that date.)

The drawing of a Kolosh (Tlingit) burial site at New Archangel (Sitka) illustrating P.N. Golovin's Report of Russian America (1862), shows two structures: one a coffin-like box on stilts, and the other a peaked roof with closed ends, also on stilts. A pole topped with a cross stands between them. (This is in the translation printed by the Oregon Historical Society, 1979).

In February, 1902, Brigadier William Mitchell traveled up the south fork of the Forty Mile River to what he called Mosquito Flats where the Kechumstuk Indians lived. There he met Chief Charlie and accompanied him to his village. Mitchell describes the graveyard on a hill nearby: "Each (grave) was inclosed (sic) in a sort of fence, with the body in a cache supported on long poles. Strung round about it were the pots and pans that had belonged to the dead man, intermingled with streamers of various kinds to keep away the evil spirits." (The Opening of Alaska, By William "Billy" Mitchell, pp. 49-51, Cook Inlet Historical Society, 1988.)

At Nenana, south of Fairbanks, the graveyard occupies a hill across the Tanana River from the village. Laid out on a steep, rocky slope, the graveyard contains spirit houses identical to those at Eklutna.

Whatever their origins, the spirit houses fascinate. Like bright flowers on Memorial Day, they remind visitors of full lives, and bright memories.



**Top:** A picket fence collapses onto a decaying spirit house at Old Tyonek cemetery. This site was abandoned about 1933-35 because of flooding. It was called Tubughneaq, apparently onomatopoeic for the sound of feet walking on beach shingle. (AFC, 1982)

**Bottom:** Four spirit houses standing at Mile 61 of the Glenn Highway mark the graves of ancestors and relatives of Katherine Wade of Sutton. They are set on an angle parallel with the bank of the Matanuska River, not far away. Painted in Easter colors, they are a favorite subject for photographers as they stand proudly on a small knoll.



A native models a complete outfit of caribou clothing decorated with fringe and quillwork. The outfit includes a summer tunic, leggings, moccasins, and a hood. His quiver is also artistically ornamented. (Alaska State Museum, Juneau)

# The Politics

Much has changed for the Tanaina since the days of Bering and Beresford, since Cook sailed up the Arm testing the salinity of the water to gauge the possibilities of a Northwest Passage. Not only have dwellings changed, and clothing, religion and food, but also politics--how the band views and prepares for the future.

There still survives among the people of Cook Inlet an oral tale of the first whites to reach Kustatan, a Tanaina summer village on the northwest coast of the Inlet. Here is that tale, "Unhsah Tahna'ina, The First Russians," as told by Fedosia Sacaloff:

The very first ship sailed into Kustatan. When the Russian ship sailed in, everyone was afraid. There was one man who never was afraid and he went out to the ship. They picked him up together with his boat. They dressed him up like a soldier. They filled his boat with all kinds of things and he brought them back. And the Russians were called the 'Under Water People.'

After the Russians first came, there were needles (with eyes). These they (the Tanaina) learned to use quickly. But they could not get used to the scissors. They strung a rope through them and hung them around their necks.

At that time we also got different kinds of tools. They also got guns. They killed a dog with a gun. One man, in order to see how the bullet comes out, put his head to the gun. He fired. And the man was killed.

(This tale may be a composite of several early visits by whites from different nations. But a part of it can be dated and confirmed; the incident of shooting a dog also occurs in James Cook's journal for June 1, 1778, and apparently took place at Point Possession.)

Obviously the introduction of guns and the desire of whites for certain furs in great numbers on demand changed Tanaina culture forever. When trading posts were established in Cook Inlet and along the Susitna, permanent rifts were made in the subsistence pattern and in the ancient round of seasonal activities, as well as in social organization. Semipermanent villages grew up near trading posts and churches. The natives' economic life clustered increasingly around the individualistic activities of the nuclear family and superseded the earlier collective activities of the band--such as construction of huge corrals for the killing of caribou.

The historic collective effort, which tied them to local geography (the perfect location for a weir or corral, the broad river valleys and lower altitudes where moose are plentiful, the riverine flats where hedysarum is to be dug with sharpened sticks), has metamorphosed to an effort which can take place in suites of offices, in big cities, on telephones, by telegram. The three-piece suit has taken the place of the chief's dentalium necklace.

Education, at first viewed as something that would bring forth only "a life of great discomfort," has now become so ingrained in Tanaina culture that it can be used to preserve certain aspects of aboriginal life. For example, the Athapascans have begun to use the court system in their own defense, as in the Alaska Supreme Court decision, "Carlos Frank," concerning religious freedom, a ruling that moose may be taken for funeral potlatches regardless of hunting season.

Robert D. Arnold notes in "Alaska Native Land Claims" that, like all human societies, American Indians were organized into political systems designed to resolve conflicts. Their rules of conduct tried to control anti-social forces such as spinsterhood and bachelorhood, dealt with theft and murder, and with trade with other tribes. But "because these laws were not in writing, Indian societies were seen as lawless by Europeans whose laws were written." Nevertheless, long before the coming of whites, confederacies were occasionally formed among tribes which had similar languages for "common defense, trade, or hunting....Points at issue were often negotiated and resolved

through the skill of a confederacy's leaders."

Arnold further notes that North American Indians had "clear conceptions of land ownership, for land was a primary value in their societies. Being of value, it was frequently an object of dispute and cause of conflict.... One important aspect of band or tribal ownership was that it was generally exclusive of ownership. The land was not available to other groups for hunting, for settlement, or for other purposes. Land belonging to bands or tribes usually had clearly identified boundaries which were known to all parties in the area. These boundaries (i.e., rivers, mountains, etc.) were often so specific that they were used to describe the lands ceded to Indians by the U.S. government."

Land was allotted to native Americans in proportion to their numbers. If their numbers had been reduced by cavalry battles or diseases introduced by whites, the arrangements would naturally be more in the favor of whites.

In the 16th century smallpox took the lives of several million Aztec and Inca Indians in Mexico and South America. This undoubtedly aided the vastly outnumbered Spanish in conquering them. There is evidence that the Spanish practiced germ warfare, intentionally introducing smallpox to hostile groups of Indians.

The Russians ignored native land claims when they took possession of Alaska, but they did not copy the Spanish example. In fact, the opposite is true: Veniaminov ordered his missionaries to inoculate their parishioners.

Nevertheless, there were epidemics. It is known that as many as 80% of the Aleuts were lost in the first 75 years of Russian domination. The smallpox epidemic of 1838-9 ravaged the natives of the Lower Yukon. Scarlet fever, brought to Fort Yukon from the Mackenzie in 1865, killed many Kutchin Athapascans. Another scarlet fever epidemic was introduced into the Tutchone area by the Chilkat in 1851. An epidemic on Unalaska in the winter of 1806-07 manifested itself in the form of chest congestion and killed about 350 people, out of a total population of 1,898.

The Athapascans were among the last American Indians to be affected by white contact. In Alaska, some Indians did not see whites until the Klondike gold rush of 1898.

The Tanaina were decimated by the smallpox epidemic of 1838, and by subsequent epidemics. In 1918-19 influenza swept over most of Alaska. Because of this epidemic, the Bureau of Education maintained orphanages at Kanakanak and Tyonek to care for homeless children. Mike Alex recalled an epidemic



at the Ship Creek fish camp during the summer of 1916, and the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. Both, he said, "wiped out lots of Denna." In both cases, the diminution of the Denna (Tanaina) population corresponds with the swelling of the caucasian population of Anchorage.

In addition to the cultural change created by disease, what one might term the company store syndrome affected the Tanaina culture. The Russian-American Company was given a virtual monopoly in Alaska in 1799 by Paul II. It was required to organize settlements, promote agriculture and commerce, and to propagate the Russian Orthodox Church as a means of controlling the indigenous peoples. Despite fierce resistance from both Tlingits and Tanaina, and massacres on both sides, the Russians and natives gradually settled into coexistence, and the natives became increasingly dependent on the Russians for trade goods which they grew to covet, which they incorporated into their prestige system.

#### **BILL EZI (1898-1971), TANAINA LEADER**

An important Tanaina leader, one who helped bridge the gulf between aboriginal political systems designed to resolve conflicts, aboriginal concepts of land ownership and modern concepts, was Bill Ezi (1898-1971). William or Bill Ezi (also known as Walking Bill and Billy Goat), survived the 1918 Spanish influenza epidemic and two World Wars, living just long enough to know that the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act would become a reality. Under this Act (which became law on December 18, 1971), Alaskan natives were awarded 40 million acres and nearly \$1 billion in cash. Under this Act, Alaskan natives born before 1971 own 100 shares each in one or another of the regional and village corporations which now control those vast holdings of cash and land.

The story of how Bill Ezi and the sleepy village of Eklutna became involved with native land claims is a fascinating one, as told by Peter A. Ezi, Jr., Bill's nephew: In the early 1900s the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) had 329,000 acres in Alaska, which they wanted to use for reservations similar to those established Outside. They began the MOquawkie reservation at Tyonek in 1915, but the Chamber of Commerce in Anchorage "did not want a reservation here. There are letters in the BIA file expressing this public opinion, so a reservation never was established on this (Anchorage) side of the Inlet," says Ezi. "We wanted a land status, so we took the IRA (Indian Reservations Act) charter and adopted it verbatim, reducing the voting age from 21 to 18. We tried for several years to get land from the federal government."

In 1961 the Ezis and other concerned Tanaina organized

the Native Village of Eklutna and began meeting about once a month to discuss matters of mutual interest. "We were using Tyonek's attorney. In the middle 60s Tyonek came into some money from natural resources, and the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) came into being in 1966, founded by Tyonek's money. We two were the only village organizations at this time. The other villages were represented by perhaps a single person per village."

In Southeast Alaska, however, the Alaska Native Brotherhood had been formed about the turn of the century. Tlingits, too, were interested in land claims. "In the mid 60s Nick Gray started the Fairbanks Native Association and CINA (Cook Inlet Native Association) and Kenai Native Association, so that we could have regional representation. Then Tyonek came into money, and we had a meeting. They thought they would have 30 or 40 people at this first meeting, and we had over 200!" The organizations formed committees, making their top priority land acquisition.

In 1945 Alaskan natives had been given five years (45-51) to file land claims through the Indian Claims Commission, a three-member board in Washington. But most Alaskan natives were unaware of the existence of this opportunity.

Bill Ezi, however, heard of the offer. "My Uncle Bill Ezi filed what was called 'The Palmer Claim,' 60 square miles, a few months before the cutoff date. Nothing really happened with the claim until 1961-2," sighs Peter Ezi. "The claim covered from Montana Creek south to Talkeetna and about half of Anchorage. By efforts of the Native Village of Eklutna, the claim was expanded; it now took all of Anchorage. The government cancelled out the Palmer Claim through the enactment of the Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. There were about 22 Indian claims under the Indian Claims Commission and some of them overlapped."

In August, 1981, when this interview took place, Peter Ezi, Jr., was president of Eklutna Inc. the village corporation. The expanded claim which his uncle filed, The Palmer Claim, took in the area that the Niteh band (the aboriginal village site of the Ezi family, located on an island in the Matanuska River) had been using for subsistence--an area about 80 miles square.

"We have always contended," says Ezi quietly, "that the only things the Russians sold to the United States were administrative rights. In other words, 'the savages' were owned by nobody."

The 1971 Settlement Act reduced the Palmer Claim from the three to five million acres it originally encompassed to



"Wasily (Knik Chief), Wife & Child. Committed suicide, Aug., 1907." This man may be Eklutna John or Kalaltsun. If so, he is brother to Theodore Vasily (Chief Wasilla or Wasilla Theodore, d.1955-56) and to Alex Vasily (1866?-1953). (Photo by Alwin Wheatley, 1906. Anchorage Museum of History and Fine Arts)

"aboriginal habitations." In other words, prior use would have to be proven beyond any doubt. Ezi objects to this, because, as he puts it, "We were an established community, recognizable. Chickaloon and Knik had less of a population, and they were included in the Palmer Claim. When the Land Claims Act came up, we had to establish who is 'an Eklutna person.' There were other groups within the boundaries we had claimed--Montana Creek on the Susitna River--for example. The people who weren't within a recognizable community like Eklutna got into the general region, so in the Palmer-Anchorage area there were 'at large

shareholders,' not connected with any village or group."

Ezi believes the Settlement Act came into being because "it could cover both villagers, and at-large claims. The basic thought of native Alaskans is a real love for the land. The land that is under the Claims is probably more valuable than any dollar amount that could be paid."

Bill Ezi got his name "Walking Bill" because he used to walk up and down the Glenn Highway pulling two sleds, taking his goods from place to place, from seasonal habitation to seasonal habitation. Peter Ezi remembers that his uncle "would go from Eklutna to Palmer into Anchorage then back to Eklutna in one day (a distance of over 80 miles). This was just by walking, not by hitchhiking; he had a Navy coat with stripes and everything, a cowboy hat, and a goatee, white hair," he says, explaining his alternate nickname.

Ezi himself remembers the old nomadic existence from his childhood: "The fishing season used to go from May to mid-August, and you would have to get your boat and nets ready before that." When he was 10 or 11, however, his life changed drastically. "In 1944-45 I got polio in Old Matanuska. There was a kind of epidemic; about 15 of us got it. So my school at Eklutna Industrial was cut off. They sent me to Mt. Edgecumbe School (in Sitka) and Hospital in 51 or 52 and to Seattle in 47; they didn't seem to know what I had. Then they sent me to the University of Chicago Hospital in 1953, and I quit going to hospitals in 53. It was determined that I was as good as I could ever be. In 1951 or 2 the Chugiak Elementary School opened (on the Old Glenn) right across from where the Post Office is today, and I was in the second grade for four or five years until I was promoted to the fifth grade. From 1958 to 1960 I went to Seattle, Edison Technical School, to study accounting. And in 61 I started studying the problems of land claims and local history."

#### **EKLUTNA INCORPORATED**

In his study of history Peter Ezi came across the story that Russian traders "used to sell a rifle for as many beaver skins as flattened out in a pile could reach the height of a barrel." He had reason to remember this story in his dealings with the U.S. government.

In the 1920s, the Bureau of Education had set aside 1400 acres for the Eklutna Industrial School. The school opened in 1924 as a home for 26 native children from various villages who had been orphaned by a flu epidemic. Within two years, enrollment had doubled, and there was a waiting list.

During the 1930-31 school year, enrollment was 110, and it was one of three boarding schools in the state. In 1936 about 328,000 acres of land in the Eklutna area were withdrawn "for the use and benefit of the Eklutna Industrial School until the matter of permanent withdrawal as a reservation can be taken up" (Michael Carberry, "Patterns of the Past"). The school closed in 1945, and land set aside was reduced substantially.

In July, 1961 (apparently as a reaction to Bill Ezi's Palmer Claim), a U.S. public land order was issued reducing the Eklutna Indian reserve from 7,000 to 1,819 acres. The 60 Eklutna residents objected this order, stating they had considered the land theirs since 1927, and needed it to continue their traditional trapping, hunting and fishing way of life.

This land order, as well as comments by the Greater Anchorage Democratic Club that the Eklutna Tanaina were un-productive and should give up all their land, prompted Ezi and other village residents to action. They organized a traditional type of government, a native village council, "to stop the constant exploiting of their acreage."

Between 1961, when the council was formed, and 1973, when a village corporation, Eklutna Inc., came into being, there were further difficulties. In July, 1966, George Ondola and Mike Alex filed a \$510,000 suit in U.S. district court against the State of Alaska, seeking remuneration and damages for 400,000 cubic yards of gravel, which they claimed was taken from reservation lands by the State Highway Department. The suit claimed the taking of the gravel was part of a plan "to harass and injure" the Indians and to "drive them from their ancestral home."

Nothing ever came of the suit, although, early in 1966, a solicitor for the Department of the Interior admitted that the Eklutnas did have rights to the lands they occupied, including the right to the gravel on it.

By 1967, Ondola was president of the council, representing the 180 persons then on Eklutna tribal rolls. The people were reduced to requesting a permit from the military to cut fire wood on what had been their own ancestral land, and "they had a hard time getting the permit" recalls Anchorage attorney Stanley McCutcheon.

This was the sorry state of affairs until the passage of the landmark Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA, pronounced "Ank'sah" by most natives) in 1971. Suddenly, with the passage of this act, hope was everywhere for Alaska's natives. It seemed that the federal government was finally trying to make it up to the state's aboriginal peoples for the neglect they had suffered since 1867.

Eklutna Inc. was not formed until over a year after the passage of ANCSA. Entitled to a total of 92,160 acres, Eklutna filed its first claims in August, 1973--for parts of Chugach State Park, for land around Eklutna Lake (eight miles long and the largest lake in the vicinity), and the lake where Chugiak High stood. They had until Dec. 18, 1974, to select and file for their particular choices through the land office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). If the land claimed had prior private or state patents on it, or if an individual native had filed for it, the bureau's division of adjudication notified the village that the claim was rejected. On the other hand, if there were no existing claims to the land, the village was issued a temporary patent. When the land had been properly conveyed, a confirmatory patent would be issued.

Three years after filing its first claims, Eklutna's holdings were 1600 acres on both sides of the New Glenn Highway in the area of the village, including Thunderbird Falls (a popular hiking and picnic area bordering Chugach State Park). The corporation was still laying claim to 115,000 additional acres, including the 117-acre tract on which Chugiak High and Birchwood Elementary schools were located, as well as land within the state park.

The Chugiak-Birchwood tract was awarded to Eklutna Inc in January, 1977. However, as the Chugiak-Eagle River "Star" (a weekly newspaper) 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 parts of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act requirement that corporations must give a minimum of 1280 acres of land to 'municipal corporations' which provided needed services to Native villages."

Dan Alex magnanimously rose above the claims and counter claims in January, 1978, saying in a prepared statement to accompany a letter to school superintendent John Peper that the village "had to intent to disrupt the educational process," although the land under the schools was part of Tanaina ancestral territory. Eklutna Inc. gave legal consent to continue undisrupted use of it in perpetuity to the Anchorage School District.

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 a Bicentennial park. However, again the corporation showed its good will, offering to swap the choice parcel for similar property elsewhere.

In October, 1977, another 2800 acres--scattered from

Peters Creek to Eagle River, and not contiguous--were granted. By Sept., 1985, Eklutna Inc. had been deeded a total of 11,803 acres under ANSCA. It was expecting the BIA to grant it another 40,000 acres soon. Debbie Fullenwider, vice president and chairman of the board at that time, told the Anchorage Times that acquiring acreage was not the only challenge for Eklutna leaders. Their most difficult task of the corporation, Fullenwider said, was determining how much land should be developed, and how much should be left in a natural state. Eklutna was negotiating with the administration of Tony Knowles to acquire nearly 4,000 acres along the Eagle River set aside as a natural animal habitat, interspersed with recreational areas for people. Fullenwider, who held the office of president of the corporation for a year, was first involved in ANSCA in 1971, when she served as a board member of Cook Inlet Region Inc. As a child, she spent summers with her grandfather, Alex Vasily, who spoke only Tanaina. With Vasily, she fished and hunted for sheep at Eklutna Lake, a traditional subsistence location for her people.

Eklutna is now considered the largest private land owner in Anchorage. It is the fourth largest native corporation created under ANSCA. It has tentative plans to develop 2,460 acres in Chugiak and Birchwood. According to the Jan. 18, 1985, Anchorage Times, the entire land use plan proposes constructing 3,492 single family homes and 7,383 multiple family dwellings in addition to dedicating 180 acres to commercial and 327 acres to light industrial development. If this plan materializes, it could mean that by the year 2,000 nearly 32,500 people could be living in homes built by the native corporation.

When Daniel Alex, the first in his family to attend public school in Anchorage, the first to graduate from college, returned to Alaska after the passage of ANSCA, he assumed his village had been given "a clear mandate to get the land back immediately." But being entitled to land, he found to his chagrin, was hardly the same as a bird in the hand. After repeated trips to Washington in 1973 to speed the conveyance process along, he began to see that it could take 20 or 30 years to collect Eklutna's due. However, his aims today are the same ones he originally had: "to get the land back and then to use it to generate income and spread it among the stockholders."

The late Bailey Wasilla Theodore Sr. (1912-1984) recalls summers spent with his father, Theodore Vasily. Chief Wasilla used to summer at Point Possession, where, Bailey said, "We lived in a tent and fished." The Chief fished for a cannery boat, the "McIner," owned by Joe Bushon of Goose Bay. Bailey recalled that "getting back and forth from Knik to the fishing grounds was hard work." His father used an old cannery scow, powered by oat and sometimes by sail.

(Bailey was a man who didn't like to waste time getting from point A to point B; after all, he was the man who as a youth won first place 13 times in Anchorage's Fourth of July Marathon race.)

Bailey recalled that his father was cheated out of "a big house on Chester Creek" in Anchorage where the family resided from about 1918 to 1927. All the chief got for the house was one thin dime.

It was experiences like this that motivated Bailey to found Knikatnu Corporation and serve as its president until he turned the office over to his son Paul. The corporation has about 30 shareholders on its rolls, and an entitlement of 69,000 acres. It received 140 acres in January, 1985, in a decision that ended a 10-year tug-of-war with the Alaska Railroad.

"We see a lot of our stories and ways we are living starting to be lost because our elders have forgotten to tell us some of their stories and songs," Debbie Fullenwider acknowledges. "Some of the cultural things they had have gone away with them."

But Fullenwider is not about to sit on her hands. She warmly recalls the ways of the past while looking clear-eyed into the future. "We're working very hard to build a future," she says, "to provide jobs for shareholders, from the young to the old."

"I heard that a bus driver taking a busload of people past the village saw some people sitting on a couch by the road and stated they are so rich they have nothing else to do," she told the Anchorage Times in May, 1985. "That's very untrue."

"Most of the people who sit up there are in their 50s and 60s who have worked hard all their lives fishing. They want to sit back and enjoy life."

"They really have not yet reaped benefits from the land claims act." Debbie Fullenwider, Dan Alex and others intend to see that full benefits are gathered in.

No more beaver skins in a pile the height of a barrel, no more thin dimes.



# Dusting Off The Past

Ten thousand years ago, the Ice Age ended in Cook Inlet. As glaciers withdrew to the peaks of the Chugach and Talkeetna Ranges, people began to explore the newly exposed area to see what resources it might yield. These early visitors and residents left behind shell heaps (middens), "cellar hole" dwellings, fire-cracked stones and a scattering of abandoned tools and weapons.

The archeology of the Anchorage area seldom made front page headlines. Finds between Eklutna and Girdwood have been characterized by "lots of isolated evidence -- here a scraper, there an arrowhead," as state archeologist Bob Shaw put it in late 1989.

The lack of material evidence is significant, Shaw said: There were resources in some other areas (of Cook Inlet) rather than in this big, amorphous flat that makes up the Anchorage Bowl."

Nevertheless, there are four main archeological sites in Anchorage: Beluga Point, the Tanaina Athabaskan village of Eklutna, Point Woronzof, and Campbell Point, the site of the last war between Alutiq Eskimos and Athabascans.

Fifteen miles southeast of Anchorage on the Seward

Highway is Beluga Point, a site discovered in the late 1970s by Douglas Reger of the state Office of History and Archeology. Reger subsequently wrote his doctoral thesis on the site, which has since been altered by more recent railroad and road construction.

According to archeologist William Workman of the University of Alaska-Anchorage, Reger just happened to be driving by the scenic, rocky promontory one day when he was struck by a hunch.

"Doug found it," Workman said in awe. "We all went tootling by there for years, and he just got out and looked one time! It's the only site in the area that amounts to anything, because it contains a 6,000- to 7,000-year record of activities."

Before widening of the Seward Highway sliced off the rocky face of the Chugach Range at this spot, Workman said, there was "a spur of rock that came down to a particularly unfriendly sea. We thought about why (early man) camped there. It's a possible location from which you could go into the adjacent uplands and hunt (Dall) sheep. The tides are tricky (in Turnagain Arm)," he added. "The waters are a death trap. But if you wanted to go across, Beluga Point would be a good place to sit and wait for the proper tidal conditions."

The fact that Beluga Point offers shelter from the Inlet's cold winds wasn't lost on Reger or Workman, particularly at lunchtime. They were always able to find the right angle and take shelter while eating their sandwiches.

Piecing together material clues wasn't so easy. After several summers of digging, investigating a cutbank without disturbing resident cliff swallows, Reger, Workman and their crews found little preservation of bone which could be carbon dated. They did find stone tools, however.

"There seem to be three pulses of occupation," Workman said. "The oldest was 5,000 to 6,000 years old, and in that time range it's hard to tell whether the people were Athabascan or Eskimo. Another pulse was 4,000 years ago. The last was more recent -- inside 2,000 years ago." He characterized Beluga as "a wayside with no sign of houses. The suspicion was that it was not a place where people would want to hang around all year."

Bob Shaw views Beluga Point as a site that was occupied fairly early after deglaciation of Cook Inlet. "It was a very small camp, not a major residence," Shaw said. "It was used perhaps seasonally by people and for very short-duration

time periods. The most interesting thing about the site," Shaw concluded, "is that people moved to this locality fairly quickly after it was deglaciated."

Beluga Point yielded a small collection of artifacts. These were ground slate tools 600 to 800 years old, as well as other materials that show strong resemblances to materials found southwest of here that were dated 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. The site contained core blade artifacts similar to materials found in portions of interior Alaska, Shaw said.

While Beluga was only a seasonal campsite, Eklutna may have been used all winter, or perhaps year-round. Athabascans from this site could have been those who rowed out to greet Captain James Cook in the summer of 1778.

Shaw feels that Eklutna is an "ethnographic locality, a historic period locality," meaning its age can be measured in hundreds rather than thousands of years.

New interest in the site arose in 1989 when John Fullenwider, the project director of Knakanen Corp., the development arm of Eklutna, Inc., requested permission from the Municipality of Anchorage to build an Athabaskan theme park. Permission for the \$5.7 million project was granted in August, 1989. The plan was for the park to include the spirit houses, the St. Nicholas church, a theater, a gift shop, a restaurant, the restored home and cache of Eklutna Alex, and the Katherine Theodore home.

Before development could get underway, an archeological survey was required. The survey overseer was Kerry Hoffman, executive director of Anchorage Historic Properties, Inc.

Fullenwider welcomed the requirement: "We were planning to do a survey ourselves anyway," he said. "A significant find would just add to the authenticity of our park. If this was a good enough winter camp for the Athabascans for several hundred years, logic would dictate that it was probably a good site for the Eskimos that were here before."

Anchorage Historic Properties approved a \$75,000 loan to Knakanen Corp. to finance the survey. In fall, 1989, Knakanen hired two Anchorage archeologists to conduct the survey. Floods of rain failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the couple, Linda and Michael Yarborough.

When archeologists delve into Alaska's past, they enter it through a yard or more of accumulated soil, bent nails, rusted peach cans, broken canning jars, butchered moose

bones and garbage. They start with the aluminum pop tops and fastfood containers on the surface and slowly peel away the centuries with deft trowels and cautious whisk brooms.

In the fall survey, the Yarboroughs found some 20th-century pottery, some glass, and an old shoe sole. "But you never know," Michael said. "We may find some very interesting historic finds as well."

Bill Workman sees Eklutna as "the only year-round village in the Anchorage area." The reason was the vulnerability to attack by the Aleuts (Alutiiq Eskimos) from Prince William Sound of other locations in the Bowl. So, the Athabascans preferred to live on the west side of Knik Arm or somewhere up Knik Arm where they could keep watch. Both Shem Pete and Bailey Theodore, natives from the area who were considered good sources of information, said Anchorage was great for summer fish camp because of the salmon, but was not a good year-round location. They would move up Knik Arm in late summer.

Two other important sites lie within Anchorage -- Point Woronzof and Campbell Point. Reached by driving west on Northern Lights Boulevard past Earthquake Park, Point Woronzof seems to have been the site of another traditional summer fish camp. Its inhabitants were the Ezi (or Esi) family, the patriarch of which was Simeon Esia who died in January, 1935. Esia resided at this location dating back to about 1890, as did his sons after him, Bill, Pete and Jack Ezi.

According to Shem Pete's Alaska (1987), Point Woronzof was called Nuchi'ishtunt, or "place protected from wind." The Ezis spent winters at a small, one-family site closer to Eklutna. This Tanaina site was Nitak or Niteh, near the mouth of the Matanuska River. Nitak was inhabited from about 1896 to 1953, according to Alberta Stephan, a former resident. The family of Bill Ezi spent summers at Point Woronzof until 1945 or 1946. The site is close to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, said James Fall, Tanaina linguist and cultural anthropologist.

A fourth, but little explored archeological site in the Anchorage Bowl is Campbell Point, which the Tanaina call Ultsena Huts'ilyuk, or "where Aleuts we dug up." Fall said this name indicates a prehistoric battleground where Athabascans and Alutiiq Eskimos from Prince William Sound fought. According to oral tradition, Alutiiqs occasionally used Portage Glacier as a "road" to gain access to Knik Arm settlements.

The precise locations of some of these sites are vague in order to preserve them. "We wind up not being able to talk about things," Shaw said, "because we want" to protect them from amateur looters.

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A corner of a house pit (the subterranean foundation of a pre-Russian Tanaina dwelling) in the forest near Old Tyonek. This pit is  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 feet deep, and 7 meters by 8 meters. There were two small antechambers off the main living area. Such antechambers were used as bedrooms and for puberty seclusion. Ages of trees growing in the pit help to reveal its minimum age. (AFC, 1982)

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## A NOTE ON EKLUTNA VILLAGE HISTORICAL PARK

A four-acre public attraction, Eklutna Village Historical Park opened on June 17, 1990. It is the first part of a proposed \$7.0 million park which will offer displays and craft demonstrations. The visitor center/gift shop is an old Alaska Railroad depot building which was moved 60 miles from Girdwood at a cost of more than \$100,000. Knakanen Corp., a subsidiary of Eklutna Inc., owns and operates the park.

The rest of the development -- an Athabaskan summer fish camp, a restaurant, an auditorium, passenger train service from Anchorage and regular entertainment by the villagers -- is still in the planning stage.

Eventually, the park will cover 55 acres and provide a three- to four-hour tour of cultural exhibits.

Should you notice sections of the exterior fence knocked down, blame the moose. The long-legged browsers have no respect for boundaries that stand in the way of their nibbling shoots -- especially if those boundaries are less than five feet tall!

## OTHER BOOKS BY ANN CHANDONNET

Chief Stephen's Parky: One Year in the Life of an Athabaskan Girl. 72 pages, paperback, 20 drawings, two maps. For ages 7-12. \$6.95; leatherette library binding, \$16. 1989. Now in second printing. Council for Indian Education, 517 Rimrock Rd., Billings, Montana 59107.

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