

Chapter 19

The Legacy



Although diverging in significant ways during their final decades, each of the three villages was a culturally unified community, however stressed at times, however different in the 1930s from what they had been in the 19th century. Each had an evolving but continuous ethnography; that is, change occurred within the context of village history and was to a degree controlled by the people themselves. The swift changes precipitated by the World War II evacuation disrupted this pattern of gradual and adaptive introductions and hurled the villages toward oblivion.

By the time war enveloped Biorka and Kashega, these two villages were exhibiting differences that were at least as significant as their similarities. Although both relied on wages earned each summer in the Pribilof Islands seal harvest, their local economies differed significantly. Biorka remained essentially isolated while Kashega (like Makushin) had attracted outsiders whose presence accelerated change. For example, however much *Unangam tunuu* was used in Kashega homes, English was becoming an advantage for employment at the sheep ranches and in commercial fishing. Biorka residents had little reason to acquire English. Although Kashega had older residents, Biorka's ties with the past had a practicality—an economic component—that was stronger than any at Kashega. What would have become of these villages without the interruption of the war? While that question cannot be answered, the question whether or not the evacuation prevented either Kashega or Biorka—or a resettled Makushin, for that matter—from developing into a sustainable community during the crab boom of the 1960s and the emergence of village corporations in the 1970s can be answered in the negative by an examination of the resources available in those locations. They lacked sufficient water and land for development; their harbors were neither deep enough nor large enough for the number and type of ships that would be involved. Would the population have survived the flood of

outsiders? It seems unlikely. Would these villages have found economic solutions to ward off emigration apart from commercial fish processing? Who can say?

By 1960 the lost villages were lost forever. Survivors from the three villages had been incorporated into other communities, principally Akutan and Unalaska. The extent of assimilation varied from person to person. For almost a century, Unalaska had been anything except receptive to promulgating Unangâ identity. In a series of lectures in 1988, Alfred Stepetin described conditions at Unalaska in the 1930s. By 1933, he said, “already the Aleut traditions were forgotten. Very few people knew how to sing, dance, or even basket weave.”¹ This explains why Anfesia Shapsnikoff, when she contemplated forming a club to promote Unangâ culture in 1967, named Andrew Makarin from Biorka and Sophie Pletnikoff from Kashega among those who would be key contributors. She also included people from Nikolski—such as Sergie Svoroff—and from Akutan—such as Bill Tcheripanoff—but no one from Unalaska.² This club never became a reality, but Tcheripanoff, Shapsnikoff, and others—notably Sophie Pletnikoff, Nick Galaktionoff, and Sergie Svoroff—taught traditional skills in nontraditional ways whenever opportunities arose. They participated in school classes paid with federal Indian education and other grant funds; they gave demonstrations at Native craft festivals; and each taught private lessons when requested.

With the formation of corporations under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in the early 1970s, it was clear that Unangâ communities would change once again. For the eastern Aleutians, Unalaska in particular, this federal legislation arrived not a moment too soon. Commercial success had always brought domination by outsiders. The first king crab boom had arrived in the early 1960s; and as that decade progressed, the relatively small Unangâ community—including former residents of the three villages and their descendants—began to be overtaken by outside economic forces massed behind commercial fisheries just as it had been overwhelmed by the military a generation earlier. By 1970 the General Services Administration had already sold a few key parcels of land on Amaknak Island to private developers and further sales were only halted when three elderly Unangâ filed suit. Local Unangâ organizers were assisted by a growing regional body as they made difficult, complex, and at times fractious decisions.

With the formation of the Akutan and Ounalashka Corporations, identity acquired a corporate component that some viewed with disdain as being non-traditional, non-Native. But Unangâ identity had always had an economic component. “For a long time already the Aleuts...accept and are ready to accept every innovation which tends to their advantage,” wrote Veniaminov in the 1830s, “not because they did not dare to go against the innovators, but

1 Alfred Stepetin, January 19, 1988. H90-06-180, Elders in Residence Program Collection, Oral History Collection of the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

2 Anfesia Shapsnikoff to Ray Hudson, Sept. 13, 1967.



Playing a game at the A.C. Company House, Unalaska.

1. Polly Lekanoff
 2. Jenny Galaktionoff
 3. William "Coco" Yatchmenoff
(Kashega and Biorka)
 4. Alex Ermeloff (Biorka)
 5. Dora Kudrin
(Kashega)
 6. Anfesia Shapsnikoff
 7. Molly Lukaninf
(Makushin and Biorka)
 8. Larry Menoff
(Akutan)
 9. Sophie Pletnikoff
(Chernofski and Kashega)
 10. Agrifina Makarin
- Photograph by
Theodore P. Bank II,
circa 1953.

because they were convinced of the real benefit of the innovations.”³ Within the corporations, seemingly “non-corporate” attitudes occasionally influenced decisions. The Ounalashka Corporation’s refusal to act hastily, as outside developers frequently urged, contributed to its gradual emergence as a key player in the future of the region. At Akutan, leaders took pains to insure the relevance of their traditional chief, Luke Shelikoff. “They told me that I am still chief of the village,” he said, “that I am still taking care of the people.”⁴

At the same time that nascent regional and local corporations pursued a secure and profitable base for their operations, a parallel movement developed to address social and cultural issues. This was focused in local non-profit corporations and in the regional Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, also a development of ANCSA. Broad social issues took precedence over cultural matters. Government and private funding was available for critical areas such as housing, health, and education. Less easily funded—and consequently less emphasized—were needs related to language and a range of cultural

3 Veniaminov, *Notes*, 320-321.

4 Luke Shelikoff in Smith and Petrivelli, *Making It Right*, 173.

components that traditionally distinguished Unangâ from other Alaska Native groups. These had been preserved most strongly by residents of the lost villages.

Before the first decade of corporations under ANCSA had passed, the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association focused part of its attention and money on the evacuation and relocation of Unangâ villages during World War II. Initiated by Patrick Pletnikoff, championed by Philemon Tutiakoff, and aggressively pursued by Greg Brelsford and Dimitri Philemonof, the reparations effort took more than a decade and was coupled with Japanese-American efforts to address the internment of civilians. It involved extensive research, interviews, and Congressional testimony, and culminated in passage and signing of the reparations bill (Public Law 100-383) on August 10, 1988.

The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians held a hearing at Unalaska in September 1981. At its conclusion, Judge William M. Marutani, the only Japanese American to sit on the commission, went off the record and spoke directly to students I had brought to the last session. “I don’t get out to Unalaska very often,” he said, with a slight smile. “I’m afraid this will be my first and last time and this will be my only opportunity.” In the course of listening to Unangâ testify, he had found many similarities between the Aleut experience and that of Japanese Americans. “The experience has been strikingly similar,” he said. “The suffering has been similar.”

He recalled a young Unangâ who had expressed feeling shame at being an Aleut at one point of her life. “And the Nisei, too, felt shame,” Marutani said, using the term for second generation Japanese Americans. But when you find out, he said, especially when young people “find out—and you owe it to yourself because it is part of your heritage—about what your parents and your grandparents went through—I think you will be mighty, mighty proud of them. You will be mighty, mighty proud to be an Aleut. And you should be.” The story of the evacuation, he insisted, should be widely available. “It should be made available to all, but particularly to you because it has very special meaning to you and it will strengthen you as you grow.”⁵

Did the evacuation contribute to extinguishing Unangâ identity in the way the report from The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians declared? “The Aleuts had their culture snatched from them,” the report concluded. “The loss of a generation of village elders has had a cultural impact far beyond the grief and pain to their own families....Evacuation meant irreversible cultural erosion....”⁶ Certainly, a significant number of important voices had been silenced: Nikefer Denisoff, Efemia Kudrin, and Larissa Yatchmenoff from the three villages and many more from other Aleutian and Pribilof communities. And yet, the economic depression that struck the

5 Transcribed by Ray Hudson and used with permission of William M. Marutani, September 17, 1981.

6 *Personal Justice Denied*, 358-359.

Chain after the war heightened the possibility of cultural revival. It necessitated increased subsistence activities. Those older Unanga̱ who had survived the evacuation and were healthy enough were once again able to practice traditional skills. More significantly, the absence of a strong economy meant a diminished non-Native presence. Even so, a number of factors worked against a return to traditional ways for passing on traditional knowledge. It can be argued that a sufficient number of elders had survived the evacuation to ensure cultural succession, but that it was the evacuation's impact on younger generations that doomed cultural continuity and led to "irreversible cultural erosion." There were teachers, but no one to teach—or at least there were few individuals willing to invest the time and effort into learning. The Nick Galaktionoffs of the late 1940s and early 1950s were rare.

Several factors contributed to this. Economic conditions that encouraged a return to traditional ways also prompted younger individuals and families to leave the islands. They were lured away by opportunities they hoped to find in larger communities. The educational system required students wishing education beyond the eighth grade to attend boarding schools at Sitka or near Salem, Oregon, for nine months of the year, thus depriving communities of the very demographic that had been traditionally taught by elders. For children descended from the three villages, life at Unalaska meant English became the language of primary experience and this created barriers for communication with elders. Another impediment lay in the very complexity and depth of Unanga̱ culture where specialization was required. To ensure continuation at a high level of expertise, a large body of learners was needed to find a sufficient number of individuals with both interest in specific areas and the time needed for mastery. Another factor was that relocated elders had to acquaint themselves with new surroundings before they were able to be effective teachers. Place was integral to knowledge and the place had changed. For example, Sophie Pletnikoff rarely harvested basket grass at Unalaska because she didn't know where the prime grass grew and she had no wish to infringe on any Unalaska weaver's home turf. And, finally, relocated families were forced to spend disproportionate time just making ends meet. Stress increased; social problems multiplied. From whatever causes—and they were many and complex—in the years *following* the return from southeast Alaska, a host of elders from the three villages took extensive traditional knowledge to the grave.

Today the descendants from the three villages—like descendants of people from Attu, Atka and Unalaska, from St. George, St. Paul, Nikolski and Akutan—remember their relatives who had lived in the villages and who had survived the evacuation or died during it. All share a common legacy. Today Unanga̱ recognize the evacuation as among the most significant episodes in their history. Its remembrance has heightened a sense of urgency to preserve Unanga̱ culture and to master whatever new skills ensure effective action in economic, political, and artistic arenas. People understand that pride in being Unanga̱ must be rooted in enduring specifics if it is to be anything other than hot air or posturing.

As local and regional organizations increasingly emphasized traditional knowledge and cultural practices, they found resources in the former residents of the lost villages.



Gathering at the A.C. Company House, Unalaska.

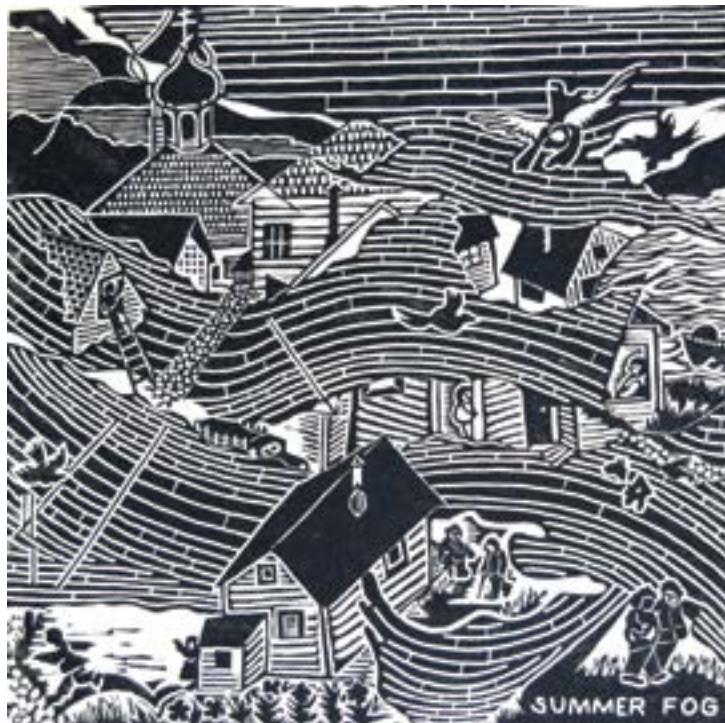
1. Eustina (Esther) Makarin (Biorka)
2. Andrew Makarin (Biorka)
3. John Gordieff (Chernofski)
4. Larry Menoff (Akutan)
5. Polly Philemonoff Menoff (St. George)
6. William Yatchmenoff (Kashega and Biorka)
7. Anfesia Shapsnikoff
8. Sophia Pletnikoff (Chernofski and Kashega)
9. Jenny Galaktionoff
10. Agrafina Makarin
11. Polly Lekanoff (Kashega)
12. Simeon Pletnikoff
13. Alex Ermeloff (Biorka)
14. Molly Lukarin (Makushin and Biorka)

Photograph by Theodore P. Bank II, circa 1953. Bank gave the image to the Unalaska City School and it was published in *Cuttlefish Two: Four Villages*.

Memory is as important to effective cultural innovation as it is integral to cultural continuity. An account of visits made to the three village sites by former residents and descendants is told in the epilogue. At each place, individuals collected mementos: a stone, a piece of wood, a handful of soil, an edible berry. These visits were a reminder of how the stories and skills passed down by elders from the villages has helped shape contemporary Unangañ identity. The history of the lost villages has become more than one of loss and disappearance. It is above all a story of courage, endurance, and transformation.

Wildflowers, Biorka
Village, September 2,
2010. Photograph by
Greg Jones.





Summer Fog.