DICHINANEK' HWT'ANA:

A History of the people of the Upper Kuskokwim who live in Nikolai and Telida, Alaska.

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Introduction

Nikolai-Telida Village History Report

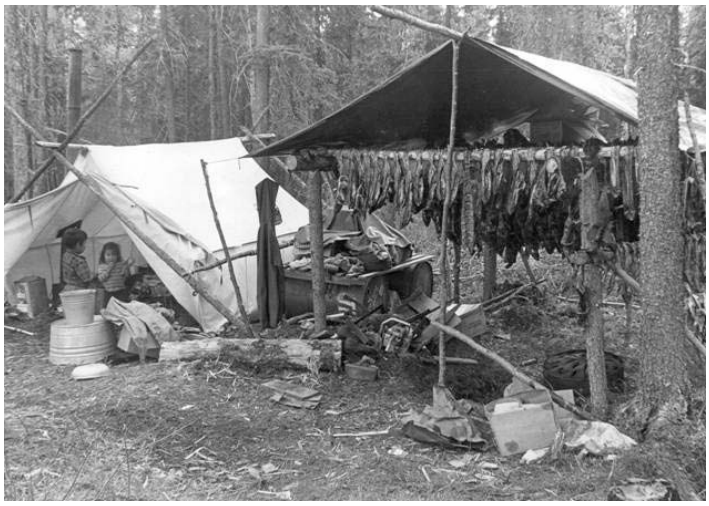
When I was contacted by the Native Village Councils of Nikolai and Telida and asked to write their histories I was very pleased. I have been living in this area for over 35 years and have accumulated a wealth of information so this is an opportunity to share it with the people of these communities. It is not possible to separate the history of the two communities as they have so much in common in terms of kinship, language, and culture. Therefore, I began the report with a description of their common heritage. This is followed by accounts of how their world was changed, first by contact with the Russians and then with the Americans. The two communities are then dealt with individually as to their origin and development. The families are placed in the community to which they are most closely associated. This was a difficult task since people continually moved around prior to the establishment of schools. Since Nikolai had the first school, most younger residents have spent more time there.

The school is specifically mentioned because it played a critical role in the movement of people. Miska Nikolai, who grew up in the Nikolai area, moved to Telida to marry Barbara Jocko. When the school opened in Nikolai they moved there so their children could attend. When their children completed school and married some of them moved back to Telida and this later led to the opening of a school at Telida for their children. Now that the Telida school has closed, the families are back in Nikolai. The Gregory brothers from Vinasale married women from Nikolai but lived in Vinasale. When the school opened in Nikolai they relocated there. The Esais moved up from Big River to Nikolai after the school opened.

Churches were built in Nikolai and Telida in the early 1900's. While these brought people together for the holiday seasons they dispersed to their separate winter villages for the remainder of the year.

In presenting information, I have kept in mind the oral tradition that passed history down in the form of individual stories. It was up to the listener to put the pieces together and analyze them. I have tried to honor that tradition by presenting much of the information as stories and using stories to illustrate the other material. An attempt was made to present things in chronological order but some topics overlap and do not lend themselves to strict chronology. I will leave it to the readers to judge whether I was successful or not.

Since I first began to gather information in 1963, and not all readers are familiar with my involvement with the people of the upper Kuskokwim, I will provide a brief overview. I arrived at Medfra in May of 1963 with my wife Sally Jo and two of our children. Most of the people of Nikolai and Telida were in residence in fish camps located on both sides of the Kuskokwim from Medfra upstream to the mouth of the South Fork of the Kuskokwim. They spent the summer in these camps, putting up enough fish to feed themselves and the dogs through the winter. At that time everyone was dependent on a dog team for transportation during the winter, using them for hauling wood, visiting the trading post at Medfra, hunting, and running traplines.



Medfra fish camp in 1964, Ray Collins Photo

We had gone to Nikolai with the support of the Wycliffe Bible Translators to study the previously unwritten Athabaskan language which is spoken there. In March I had visited Nikolai where I met Chief Devian, and Second Chief Pete Gregory, and as many other families as possible in order to obtain their permission to move to the community. That's when I found out they would be at Medfra for the summer so I made plans to join them there. Unfortunately, Chief Devian passed away in early May, right after my first visit, so I did not get to know him as I would have liked.

In May of 1963, when we moved to Medfra, we lived in a cabin rented from the trader, Bertha Winans. In August we moved to Nikolai, along with everyone else, in order to be there when school opened. There were no extra houses in Nikolai but John Dennis had built a cabin there in preparation for having to move from Telida in another year or so when his children reached school age. He needed an outboard motor to move his family back to Telida from fish camp so I bought him a motor and traded it for the cabin, which was just a shell at the time. He borrowed a boat from his father-in-law Carl Seseui and moved my family and me up to Nikolai with the motor I had purchased. That was my introduction to how things were done at that time. Everyone had to help one another out as cash was hard to come by. And John built another cabin when he needed it.

We spent the next eight years in Nikolai participating fully in the life of the community while studying the language. This involved acquiring a dog team and learning to handle it. John had given me my first two dogs along with the cabin. Gleman Esai had a dog and, after I helped him out on a fall moose hunt, he gave me that dog as he didn't have a team. His son would sometimes borrow the dogs to haul wood for his father and himself so it all worked out. Fortunately the dogs were already broke to harness so I didn't have to start off with green dogs - I was the only "green horn" in the team! The dogs at that time were built for working and not for speed, and I went all the way to the Alaska Range (80 miles) that winter with just the three dogs. Some men "owned" traplines out to the Range in two or three directions from the village (traplines were generally passed down in families or to relatives by common consent). Others accompanied the

trappers just to hunt in the mountains. The Range was an important source of big game such as sheep and the meat was desired for winter potlatches when the whole community could enjoy it.

I began taking notes on the community and its history at that time out of personal interest, not knowing how the information might be used. The information and experience I gained from many elders over the years is included in this history. I went back to the University of Alaska in 1973 and completed a degree in Anthropology. In 1983 I became the director of the University Center in McGrath and was able to begin sharing what I had learned from elders and peers in Nikolai by teaching courses to students throughout rural Alaska about the Native cultures of Alaska. I continued to learn more from Native students throughout Alaska.

During our years in Nikolai we lived in a log cabin without electricity or running water, living like everyone else in the village - except the teachers. The school had the only generator and was the only building with electricity. I did not know when we arrived in 1963 that the village and its way of life was on the verge of dramatic change. Within five years the snowmachine had all but replaced the dog teams except for sentimental or sporting reasons such as racing them in the annual spring carnival, *Hutenodinech*, which was started in the late 1960's. Some Nikolai dog teams were also raced in events at McGrath and Takotna into the late 1980's but today virtually all winter travel is by snowmachine.

Everyone was fluent in Athabaskan at that time, including all the children, but English was beginning to replace it. Young adults who had struggled with English in school were now starting families and some chose to use English with their children to help prepare them for school. The “sixties” was a time of educational reform and money was appropriated for “head start” programs which also moved the preschoolers into English more rapidly. Another influence on the move toward English was the State Operated Schools System’s directive to teachers to not allow the use of Native languages at school.

People filed for Native allotments for the first time and joined in land claim debates. With the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, village and regional corporations were formed. People from Nikolai village had just completed an airstrip the year before, using only hand tools. It was paid for with a state grant, the first of many that flowed into the community over the next few years. I will leave the rest of the details to the history. Let the story begin!

- Ray Collins

Common Heritage

Names

It is appropriate to begin with a discussion of the names that have been applied to the people of the Upper Kuskokwim area. A search of existing literature reveals a number of different names. Among them are McGrath Ingalik, Kolchan, Goltsan, and Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan. There is also some confusion in the literature as to whether the residents constitute one group, more than one group, or an amalgamation of groups. What then is the historical origin of the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskans whose descendants now live in Nikolai and Telida?

In 1960 the anthropologist Edward Hosley came to study the people of the area. He concluded, after gathering family histories, that the people were:

"--an amalgamation of at least two earlier societies and show strongest connections with the Ingalik of the lower Yukon" (Hosley 1960:63).

He referred to them at the time as the McGrath Ingalik.

In the Introduction of Native People in the National Park Service publication Land Use in Northern Addition to Denali National Park and Preserve: An Historical Perspective a note of caution is made:

"Various linguistic and cultural groups make up the Native populations living on the north flank of Denali. The historical roots of these groups point to in-migration, out-migration, intermarriage, dispersions, and consolidation. They are not one people; they are many" (NPS AR-9, 1984:8).

It is important not to conclude from these statements that there is a lack of cohesion and historical continuity among the residents of Nikolai and Telida. Note that by 1981, with additional information, Hosley published the article Kolchan: Delineation of a New Northern Athapaskan Group (Arctic 21(1):6-11). In it he states:

"The Kolchan are the Athapaskan Indians of the upper Kuskokwim River. They speak a distinct Athapaskan language more closely related to Tanana than to Ingalik, spoken on the middle Kuskokwim. They are not so much a "tribe" as a collection of autonomous contiguous bands having cultural and linguistic similarities" (Hosley 1981:618).

We can also add that they have numerous kinship ties.

It is the language that is the deciding factor. Language is one of the key features that has been used to identify Athabaskan peoples. A map produced in 1984 by Dr. Michael Krauss, of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, lists Upper Kuskokwim as one of the 11 Athabaskan languages that have been identified in Alaska. While these language areas do not denote tribal or political boundaries in all cases, they do reflect a degree of

geographical isolation over time that allows distinct dialects to develop. These dialects developed differently enough from neighboring dialects to eventually become unique languages.

In looking at current residents of Nikolai and Telida, one has to go back only one, or at most two, generations to find someone who came from outside the area and was raised speaking a different language. The people of the area could have told us all along that their language is different from that of all their neighbors. However, in the past, they usually grew up being able to understand the Athabaskan language spoken by their closest neighbors. When someone moved into another language area, he eventually adopted the local language and his children grew up speaking it. It was not unusual to be bi-lingual or even tri-lingual. Some residents of the Upper Kuskokwim could speak or understand Koyukon, Holikachuk, Tanaina, or Tanana (all Athabaskan languages) and Yup'ik (Eskimo). When the Russians arrived they began learning the Russian language and when the Americans arrived, they added the English language as well. But all those who made this area their home adopted the Upper Kuskokwim language as their primary language.

The presence of the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan language is proof that a distinct group of Athabaskans has been living in the Upper Kuskokwim River basin for a long period of time. It takes time and social or geographical isolation for new languages to develop. In some ways the Upper Kuskokwim language is very conservative and has retained some of the characteristics of the ancestral Proto-Athabaskan language. One such characteristic is the retention of an almost full array of consonants at the ends of words. In many of the Athabaskan languages the endings of words have been simplified so that only a few consonants, out of many possibilities, are utilized in the end position. This feature, and others, shows that the language developed in place over time and is not an amalgamation of other Athabaskan languages but a distinct language.

Even though there has been a continual movement of people in and out of the area, and the bands consolidated into the communities of Nikolai and Telida in more recent times, their unique language marks them as a distinct group of people and ties them to the area in which they live.

As to what name should be assigned to this group, they refer to themselves simply as *Dina'ena* (the people). But they also recognize geographic distinctions. The broadest of these is *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana* (Timber River people). Their neighbors also knew them by this name. In Tanaina they were *Kenaniq' ht'an* while the Koyukon people to the north referred to them as *Dikinanek Hut'ana.* The English translation would be "Upper Kuskokwim people".

The Russians first learned about the people of the Upper Kuskokwim from other Athabaskans who called them *Goltsan*, and adopted this name, but as Zagoskin noted in his journal:

"This is a name applied to all the tribes of the interior by those living along the coast. Those we saw called themselves by the rivers which in a sense constitute their patrimony" (Zagoskin 1967:243).

The term *Goltsan* is probably best translated as "strangers". The Tanaina sometimes used this term to refer to their neighbors, pronouncing it *Gheltsana.* This is the term that Edward Hosley chose in 1981, spelling it *Kolchan*. It is now used in some publications by other anthropologists. In 1965, when Ray and Sally Jo Collins published their first material on this language, they

chose to use the geographical term "Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan". In retrospect, they might also have chosen *Dichinanek' Hwt'ana,* the Athabaskan name, instead of its translation.

Historically there was a clan system present in the Upper Kuskokwim which placed people in groups. Everyone in the same clan was considered to be related and could not marry another member of that clan. An individual belonged to his mother's clan while his father would belong to a different clan.

In the late 1960's Wassily Petruska and Carl Seseui identified the following clans:

Midzishtihwt'ana Caribou people

Noltsena Middle people

Ne » chots'ina (meaning not known)

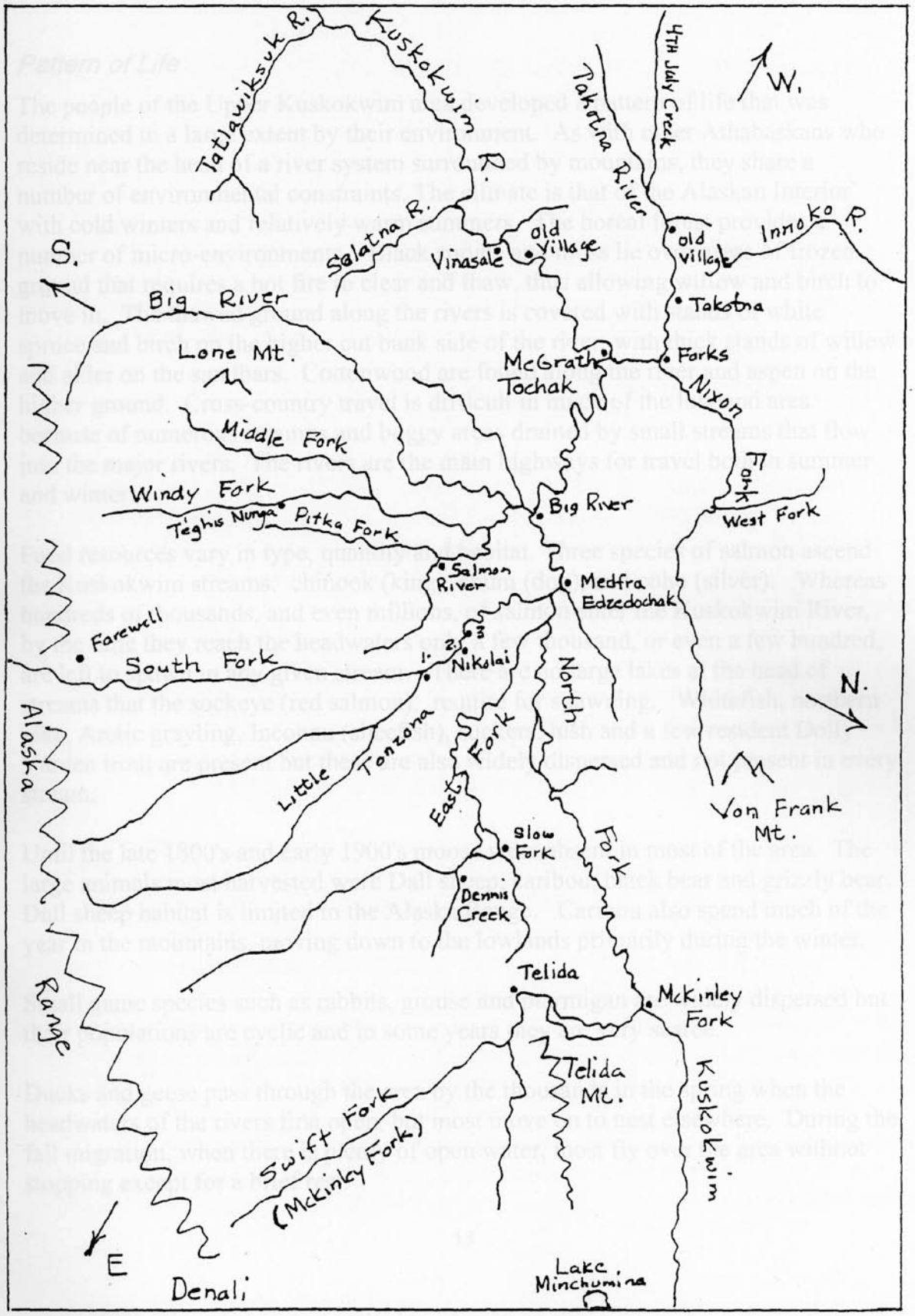
Tonedrghelts'elinh Mid-river people (?)

Dichalayu Fish-tail people (thought to be a Yukon clan)

When people traveled in the Interior where other Athabaskans also used the clan system, they could expect that anyone of the same clan delineation would treat them as sister or brother. This was of great importance in the past when people traveled far from home to trade or to seek a wife.

In attempting to explain clans, Carl Seseui said they were "all the same Democrats and Republicans." He may have been inferring that members of the same clan were like-minded people who stuck together and treated fellow clansmen kindly. In times of warfare one could rely on clan members to give support just as family would.

While elders in the 1960's had some knowledge of the clan system, most young people today are not aware of their clan affiliation. They would have to consult with elders to try to determine the clan affiliation of their mothers or grandmothers to identify their own clan status.


Tatlawiksuk R.
Kuskokwim R.
Takotna River
4TH July Creek
W.
Salatna R.
Vinasale
old Village
old village
Innoko R.
S.
Big River
Takotna
Lone Mt.
McGrath
Forks
Tochak
Nixon
Middle Fork
Windy Fork
Big River
Tetlin
West Fork
Teghis Nunga
Pitka Fork
Salmon River
Medfra
Edzedochak
Farewell
South Fork
Nikolai
North
N.
Alaska
Tonzona
Little
East Fork
Von Frank Mt.
Slow Fork
Fork
Dennis Creek
Telida
McKinley Fork
Range
Telida Mt.
Kuskokwim
Swift Fork
(McKinley Fork)
E
Denali
Lake Minchumina

Pattern of Life

The people of the Upper Kuskokwim area developed a pattern of life that was determined to a large extent by their environment. As with other Athabaskans who reside near the head of a river system surrounded by mountains, they share a number of environmental constraints. The climate is that of the Alaskan Interior with cold winters and relatively warm summers. The boreal forest provides a number of micro-environments. Black spruce and moss lie over areas of frozen ground that requires a hot fire to clear and thaw, thus allowing willow and birch to move in. The thawed ground along the rivers is covered with stands of white spruce and birch on the higher cut bank side of the river, with thick stands of willow and alder on the sandbars. Cottonwood are found along the river and aspen on the higher ground. Cross-country travel is difficult in much of the lowland area because of numerous swamps and boggy areas drained by small streams that flow into the major rivers. The rivers are the main highways for travel both in summer and winter.

Food resources vary in type, quantity and habitat. Three species of salmon ascend the Kuskokwim streams: Chinook (king), chum (dog), and Coho (silver). Whereas hundreds of thousands, and even millions, of salmon enter the Kuskokwim River, by the time they reach the headwaters only a few thousand or even a few hundred are left to spawn in any given stream. There are no large lakes at the head of streams that the sockeye (red salmon), require for spawning. Whitefish, northern pike, Arctic grayling, Inconnu (sheefish), suckers, lush and a few resident Dolly Varden trout are present but these are also widely dispersed and not present in every stream.

Until the late 1800's and early 1900's moose were absent in most of the area. The large animals most harvested were Dall sheep, caribou, black bear and grizzly bear. Dall sheep habitat is limited to the Alaska Range. Caribou also spend much of the year in the mountains, moving down to the lowlands primarily during the winter.

Small game species such as rabbits, grouse and ptarmigan are widely dispersed but their populations are cyclic and in some years they are very scarce.

Ducks and geese pass through the area by the thousands in the spring when the headwaters of the rivers first open, but most move on to nest elsewhere. During the fall migration, when there is plenty of open water, most fly over the area without stopping except for a brief rest.

This illustrates that no one resource could be counted on as a source of food in any one location, and never all year long. The people had to utilize a wide variety of resources dispersed over a wide geographic area. There were no permanent, year-round villages in the past. People had to move seasonally to harvest food and would winter in different locations to keep from depleting the resources such as food, fur, and firewood in any given place. Many times it was easier to move the camp than to transport the resources back to the village. A person who moved around a lot and became familiar with hundreds of square miles of territory was better able to survive and support a family. If one resource failed he always knew of another place where he could successfully support his family.

For this reason, once a young man reached his teens he was expected to move around and learn to live off of the country. Even young women were prone to wander, as can be seen in the following story of "Ts'ek'its'a" (see Telida Village Stories section). Sometimes it was a matter of life or death as illustrated in the case of the two women who first settled at Telida in the following story "Capture" (see Pattern of Life section). Women moved with the men whenever possible. However, if they had young children that would have hindered the band then they might remain at a fishing site or other camp while the others went on nomadic hunts, such as to the mountains. The elderly traveled as long as they were able, then they remained in camp while others went on a migratory hunt. An example of this situation is recorded by Gordon (1917:65) who found an elderly man in camp alone on the North Fork of the Kuskokwim when he descended that river in 1906. Prior to this incident, he had found only a few people at Lake Minchumina while the rest of the band members were away hunting in the mountains.

Moving frequently, for the early Athabaskans, was a survival strategy. This is not unlike what takes place today when young people move to Anchorage for awhile to work, or even up to the "north slope" to work in the oil fields, or to go commercial fishing. One might also move between villages for work or to get married. Occasionally someone remains away permanently, just as in the past we found that some people moved into the Upper Kuskokwim area from a distance away for a variety of reasons. While the old strategy of moving around still applies today, it does not mean that one has abandoned his home - most people are still identified as being from where they or their parents or grandparents had lived.

Over time people identified dependable key resources and their locations in the Upper Kuskokwim and they returned to those places repeatedly. Telida was one of those locations with a dependable run of whitefish that moved in and out of Telida Lake each year. The Alaska Range also played a key role in the yearly cycle as sheep could always be found at the same locations, caribou spent the summer and early fall there, and later moose became numerous enough to harvest along the foothills. There were other advantages to hunting in the mountains. The ground is firm, making travel easier than in the lowlands. Once in the foothills hunters moved up and down into the mountains, or along the range from drainage to drainage. It is open country and game could be spotted from a great distance utilizing key lookout locations. When game was killed in the summer it was dried before transporting. In the late fall it was allowed to partially dry and could be hung for later retrieval. The hides of moose, or at an earlier time caribou, would be sewn together over an improvised frame to make a boat. After loading in all the meat, the camp, and the family the party floated downstream to a suitable winter camp in the timbered lowlands.

In the past, some Upper Kuskokwim people lived year ‘round in the mountains at the head of streams on the north and south forks of the Kuskokwim River. Originally the only reason to move downstream was to secure a better supply of fish or to trap beaver and muskrat. Marten and other furbearers, even a few beaver, could be found in the mountains. When people became more dependent on trade goods from "the Outside" it made sense to move closer to the source of those goods. One such move of Nikolai Village was linked to the availability of trade goods. There was an early site up the South Fork near Farewell from which people had moved to the mouth of the Tonzona River, a major source of king salmon. Later, in 1910, when a steamboat

with trade goods ascended to just above the present site of Nikolai and a trading post was erected, the people established their winter village at that site.

Each of the original band territories described by Hosley was along one of the major tributaries of the Upper Kuskokwim and most extended out to the mountains. A yearly cycle in one of these territories might begin with relocating to a fishing site in the late spring to take advantage of the fish runs that began moving upriver at breakup. Chinook (king salmon) was one of the prime fish sought because of its size and nutritional value. The original method for catching these fish was by constructing a fence and weir in a shallow side stream that was utilized for spawning. They were more difficult to catch in the main Kuskokwim River until the fishwheel was introduced in the early 1900's, and large twine and nylon fish nets became available. The original nets were made of babiche or willow bark. Both were difficult to make and required a lot of maintenance. If left in the water for very long they would rot and fall apart so they had to be taken out and dried frequently. Because of the labor involved these were smaller than the nets used now. There are only a few key fishing sites for king salmon in the Upper Kuskokwim area; at *Jits'u » kashdi'* on the Tonzona River, on the Salmon River of the Pitka Fork, near Fourth of July Creek on the Takotna River, and a site up the Nixon Fork of the Takotna River. Of these, the first two sites were the most productive. Whitefish and other fish were caught in nets and later in fishwheels.

Miska and Katherine Deaphon installing the Salmon River fish fence, mid-1960's. Ray Collins photo

Completed Salmon River fish weir, mid-1960's. Ray Collins photo

After a good supply of fish was cut, dried and stored for the winter the men, women without small children, and children old enough for the walk headed for the Alaska Range to hunt. They traveled by boat to a point on the South Fork of the Kuskokwim or a location on the Middle Fork of Big River where they would cache their canoes. Both places are called *Nenots'eshts'ilyashdi'* (place where we left our boats). From there people would proceed with just what each person could carry in a pack, walking the river bars of the then-braided stream out to the mountains. There they would hunt and dry meat until they had enough hides to make a skin boat and enough meat to fill it up, then rejoin kin who had remained in other camps downriver. After freezeup the young men would be sent back out to the foothills to hunt for the entire village.

Nikolai and Telida were suitable sites for winter villages. Other sites that were used at times included East Fork, Big River and Vinasale. During the winter some families dispersed to trapline cabins. As trade goods became more available, and with the establishment of trading posts at McGrath and Medfra, trapping began to play a bigger role in the yearly cycle. Men and boys trapped for marten, lynx, wolf and wolverine and then in February their efforts shifted to trapping beaver. This sometimes involved moving to spring camp sites where muskrat could also be trapped or shot in the early spring.

By the time spring came the supply of dry fish from the previous summer and the meat from the fall and winter hunts was depleted. Beaver and muskrat provided some food as well as fur, but by mid-spring people looked forward to the thaw when the rivers would begin to open up. Ducks and geese returned, fat from a winter of feeding in the south. Open water also meant the commencing of the fish runs. All of these fresh food resources were greatly appreciated, especially after a long winter when food supplies might have been depleted. At times there were periods of starvation in the late winter when resources were depleted and conditions and location prevented immediate replenishment.

Ideally, fresh food was provided frequently, even in winter, by snaring rabbits around the winter camp and hunting grouse and ptarmigan. During some years migrating caribou moved down into the valleys around the winter villages. Whenever possible fresh meat was brought from the mountains. As stated earlier, some families remained through the winter in the foothills where they had access to sheep and caribou, and in more recent times, moose.

This general pattern of life continued until the late 1960's with some modifications. A major disrupting factor was the advent of schools. The presence of a school in Nikolai, beginning in 1948, required families to stay in residence there during the school year. The family, as a unit, could no longer move to the trapline or hunting grounds. Instead, men formed partnerships and worked their traplines. They remained away from the village for periods of time that varied from a few days to a week or more. Then they would have to return to the village to bring meat to their family, replenish the firewood supply, trade furs, and replenish their own supplies. After a few days in the village they would return to their lines to check their traps. Some of the old patterns were incorporated into these activities. Whereas young men used to go out to the mountains to hunt for the meat supply for the village, they might now open a trapline after freezeup that extended to the Alaska Range. They would remain in the foothills for a few days, hunting while their traps "worked". Then they would check their traps on the return trip to the village. After a few days this process would be repeated.

Stories Which Illustrate the Pattern of Life

Capture

One winter a young woman and a boy were captured in the upper Kuskokwim area and taken over to the Yukon River. The next summer the young woman was allowed to go out berry picking with the other women but was watched closely. She did manage to take some dry fish with her each time she went out, and cached it. While picking berries she spotted an eagle's nest on a high bluff near the berry picking area. When she had hidden enough food to last her for a few days she watched for an opportunity to escape. Finally one night she slipped away, picked up the dry fish she had cached and made her way to the bluff. She managed to climb the bluff and hide under the nest. This was done in the early morning when the mother who watched her was away. From her hiding place she could watch the people searching for her. When they finally gave up the search she headed home for Nikolai. She was a relative of Miska Deaphon.

The next spring, after her return, Jinoljits, Miska Deaphon's grandfather and a man from Tanana set out after the Shaman who had captured her. They left in the spring and after making their way to the Yukon they found the man. They slipped up on him at night and speared him. There was some fat from his stomach membrane on the spear and two of the men ate some of it for protection. (It was believed that by eating even a small part of an enemy he became a part of you. If his spirit came after you to do harm it would be like harming his own body.) The other man, who was from Tanana, did not eat any and on his way home that fall he was killed by a bull moose. Other moose had come after him several times but always stopped short. Finally, up near lake Minchumina, a bull moose got him. He had climbed a small tree for protection but the moose tore it down and killed him.

Jinoljits lived to be an old man. He was blind but a nephew led him by a stick. He lived up the Takotna River and was finally killed on the trail between Takotna and Vinasale Lake. He and his nephew, who was leading him, were at the front of a traveling party when someone behind them stumbled and shot him in the back with a muzzle loader. It was thought to be an accident (J. Gregory, personal communication).

Summer Trips to the Mountains

As Told By Miska Deaphon
Transcribed and Translated by: Betty Petruska
Edited by: Ray Collins

This is what they used to do here a long time ago, around Nikolai village. They stayed home in the summer-time while they were catching fish. They dried the fish they caught. All the people that stayed here were doing that. After the fish were dried, some of the men would travel upriver towards the mountains. But the young women and people who had small children would stay home while the men and only some of the women went upriver to the mountains.

They started off in skin boats going up there to the mouth of *Nenotr'esh'ilyashdi* (place where the boats are left). They all came to that one place where they left their boats. Upriver, at the point of the island, inside the island, is a place where they had a summer trail. From there they started walking upriver.

Whatever they will use (while on the trip), they put in one place. They carried a rope for those things and with it they bundled their clothes. They would pack it on their backs. They had a pack handle (a flattened stick that fits across the chest) with which they carried it. They picked them up, and upriver inside the island, where the trail used to be, they would start walking upriver.

Then upriver at a place they call *K'esh T'ough* (beneath the birch) there was a small outlet creek from a lake. The beaver had a dam across the outlet. They walked to there and then, "We caught one beaver," they said. They would take the dam apart and let the water drain away from the beaver pond. When the water had gone down they would catch one or sometimes two beaver. Having what they wanted they skinned and cooked that one. They used to camp there with the one they wanted. They spent the night there. Afterwards, in the morning, they continued walking up inside the island again.

Finally they came to the tip of the island. They didn't walk very fast so the children could keep up with them. Upriver when they came to the tip of the island there was another beaver dam. The beaver had a dam across a narrow pond. It stayed in that pond. They took the beaver dam apart. Then they killed one beaver and having what they needed they stayed overnight again.

Upriver further they came to a long sandbar and then they would spot a porcupine over there on the bar. While the dogs were walking around by themselves they would find a porcupine. The dogs would start barking at the porcupine and that is how they would find it. So they walked up to it. They killed the porcupine. Then they would build a fire and burn the hair off of it. That is the way they take care of that one. Sometimes they got two porcupines. Up there at a place this side of *Tohwnaghe'o* (peninsula sticking out in the water) they would camp again. That is the

way they used to do it. By the time they ate the porcupine it started getting dark. In the morning they would start walking upriver again.

Up there beyond *Tohwnaghe'o,* there on the southwest side, is a long ridge that the summer trail follows. They walked up there. Beyond there they walked up to where another hill comes down. They walked to the top of that hill and from there you can see in all directions. Around there are open foothills. They walked to where you can see all over. There are blueberries there also. They continued walking along up there where the river stretches out. From *Ts'enan Naz'one* there are lots of little hills sticking up all around.

When you come up to *Nin'tsodi'oye* (underground cache place), halfway to the mountains on the west side, there are open foothills where you can see a long ways. When they reached there they would spot caribou. They would put their packs on the ground while one person would stalk the caribou. Sometimes two people would go. When they got close to the caribou they would shoot at it and kill one. Then they would walk back and get their packs, take the caribou apart, and hang it up. They did that with some of it. There are also some pools of water in the open foothills. There is water all around on the ground. Having what they wanted (caribou) they would camp around there. They stayed overnight in a patch of spruce in the open foothills. In the morning they started walking again.

Up there is the mountain they call *Ts'enan Naz'one.* On the west side of that one out there a small mountain sticks out. They walked up to that one. They used to say there were *Dzi » yehwt'ana* (Hill-People) inside that mountain. They came to a place they called the "doorway" of the Hill People's home. Then whatever they are carrying in their packs - dry fish eggs or dry fish - everyone takes some from their packs. They would put a little piece of that dry fish or fish eggs in the place they call the Hill People's doorway. Then they would talk to them and say, "In return for whatever you people use of this you will help people, because this is what we have down below and here we are giving it to you to eat." Then they would put those things in the doorway. They named the things that are around there also _ caribou, sheep, black bear, moose and porcupine. "You will help people with these things," they said, and then they put the things there.

From there they walked to the river. Upriver below *Ts'enan Naz'one* there are some lakes up there (on the bench Farewell Lake s), and they came there again. There were some moose tracks around there so they spread out to look for it. Some went on the upriver side of the lake and some went on the downriver side. "Up there at that place where the ridge starts up we will meet," they said, and then separated and all spread out. "See if someone can spot that moose," they said. When they were all spread out they started walking and then they heard shooting from down below. Whoever sees the moose kills it. Sometimes they would kill two moose when there were moose around the lakes. Then they would all gather around the moose. They would cut that one up also and make a meat rack for it. Sometimes they would stay there two or three nights. They cut up the moose they killed and hung it up. Over it they put the moose hide so water wouldn't drip on it. They cut down small spruce trees and put them around it so nothing would eat it.

After they cut down the spruce they started walking again. Up there on the west side of *Ts'enanNaz'one*, back in, up above, is *Toy'draya* (Heart Mountain/Little Egypt). They camped again above there where a creek comes out. Around there are what they call mountain trout.

These are little Dolly Varden trout. They caught these with fish hooks. They made the fish hooks out of sewing needles and caught them with that. They would put the fish together in one pot and cook them. They wanted those fish so they camped there.

Afterwards they started walking upriver again. Above *Toy'draya* they say there is another small creek coming out. They continued on and above there is a place where they go over. They walked over what looks like a little hill. Then on the other side where a valley comes out they reached the Post River. Below there where they came out is a shale slide. They went down that and reached the Post River. As they continued up (the Post River) they went past a mountain and there a hill comes down to the river again. As they came to the point of the hill there were sheep right above looking down at them. The sheep were moving around and from that bunch they killed one. Having what they wanted they camped again. Sometimes they spent two days in camp. Then they spotted a black bear across on the hillside. Two people would stalk it. They killed that one also. They cut that one up in small pieces, so they can carry it, and packed it back to camp. Having what they needed (black bear /sheep) they might camp there three nights.

Afterwards they would go on from there again. They used to do it that way. They continued to go up the Post River as long as they had enough food.

They went up the Post River to a place where there is a little strip of spruce trees. They stayed overnight there. They spent the day there also. Once when I was a child they did that and I was with them. Then Grandma, Grandma too, went with us. The old man who stayed with her was with her. While I was staying there with Grandma, "You stay here," they told me. They left without us and went upriver.

That afternoon, up there where the spruce are growing up on the mountain, from those spruce it sounds like a lot of shooting. Over there under the cliff. Over there where the mountain comes down to the water is a rock bluff. We were a little way below there. I was sitting under a canvas (lean-to) with Grandma. The dogs were tied out in front on the sandbar. It was sometime after the shooting when I looked upriver and it looks like something came out of the trees. "What is that coming from upriver?" I said to Grandma. "It's the_one_to_be_scared_of," (grizzly) she told me. She pushed me down to the ground and threw a blanket over me. She sat under the canvas as it came lumbering over there. When it got to the entrance of the canvas it stood up on its hind legs. It was looking all around. The dogs that were tied out in front started really barking at it. The dogs were lunging at it but it just stood there looking around. It was looking around to see if it could spot somebody. Grandma didn't move and from under the blanket I saw it in the doorway. Finally it dropped down on all fours. Downriver there was a line of spruce trees. It lumbered into those trees and then two dogs broke loose and followed it.

The people were all gone but pretty soon the one who used to be my father came running back to camp. "What are those dogs saying?" he said. "It happened like this." Grandma told him. He went downriver and climbed clear to the top of the mountain but couldn't find where it went. It had gone into the timber and the dogs were gone too. Then just as the sun was setting the dogs came back alone. And then he saw a black bear up above him. Up there on top of the mountain on the west side. He killed that one and packed it back over there (to camp) instead (of the grizzly).

Then the people who were shooting up there came back alone (without any game). They had caught some moose, too. They killed three moose up there. The people who had went across there camped up above instead (of carrying the game back to the camp). In the morning we moved up to that place also. It is the place that looks like a line of spruce along the riverbank. They were going to make a skin boat, so they moved to where the skin boat would be made and began staying there. They packed all the meat to that one place. They made a big meat rack for it. They cut it up and hung it there. Meanwhile they continued hunting both ways. They killed sheep there and caribou also behind there. Up the Post River they caught two more moose and then they had five moose.

After they packed those in and they decided to make a skin boat. In preparation they had cut rope and also a bunch of rawhide. Besides that they also got the skin boat poles and the ones that would become ribs all at one time. After they brought the poles back there and they sewed the moose skins together. Then they laid down the poles that would be the backbone (keel). They could tell how long they should be by laying them next to the skins. Then they placed the ribs by it and tied them in place with rawhide. As they had no nails they tied the skin boat frame together with rawhide. They made two skin boats.

They stayed there for some time while the meat was drying. Finally they put the skin boats in the water and put in them whatever they had. They all took off at the same time next to each other. They left from there heading downriver. The dogs were smart too: they knew what the people were doing. When people left they knew from the way the water is flowing to go downriver above the ridge on top. From there they went around and they came down to the mouth of the river (the cut bank and ridge along the river forced the dogs to climb up on top and go behind the ridge and then come back to the river). They came down in the skin boats and arrived at a place just above the mouth ahead of them. After some time all of the dogs finally came up to us there. There are sand bars around there and the dogs would go along on the shore near the people who were going downriver in the skin boats. As they did that they camped here and there.

They reached the mouth of the Post River and then they were floating along in the skin boats down the South Fork of the Kuskokwim. And then the water was flowing past a sandbar and down at the point where the water is flowing there was a fish. It was a king salmon, a really big one, that had just died there recently. They stopped there and walked over there to it. They brought it back and cut it up. Right there on the sandbar they cut it up and cooked it in a pot. I still remember when they found that really big king salmon. The fish that go upriver to spawn, they die and float down to a sandbar like that one did that time. They wanted that one so they stayed overnight there.

When it was morning they went on downriver again and stopped down there at *Toy'draya* (Little Egypt). There was already a road-house there at that time. They called that place Farewell Roadhouse. A fellow by the name of French Joe (Joe Blanchell) was running the roadhouse then. He stayed there in summer and fall (as well as winter). We stopped a little below where he stayed, at the mouth of a creek.

He found out we were there and walked down to us. "Anyone who is out of salt, sugar, tea or anything I will help him," he said. He always came over and said that. He went after it himself.

When they would tell him what they were out of he goes and gets it and brings it back to them. He stayed with us at the place where we stopped. He used to do that. He was by himself and he got lonely. He really used to like meat that was fried over the open fire. When they would kill a porcupine, skin it and fry it he really liked that one also. "Take your things up there (to his place) and stay there awhile," he said. So they made a meat rack there and hung up everything that was in the boats.

Downriver from there up on the higher ground back from the river is where there are moose. After awhile they walked back to the place down below *Ts'enanNaz'one* where there are lakes, to get the moose they had killed and hung up there when they were walking upriver. French Joe went with them. When they got there they killed another moose. Then he said, "I have salt so why don't you cut up the fat ribs in strips and fry it?" So they fried that one for him. That one who stayed at the road-house (French Joe) used to eat a big piece that was fried over the campfire. We are the only ones who used to be good to him and when people went there he used to help them.

As they were going back down there to the one (meat) that was hanging up with the brush stacked around it, it had been drying. By the time they got back to that one it had really dried up a lot. They packed all that back to one place and then they hung it up again.

"You stay," that white man said. So then they stayed there with him for maybe a week. "The ones who are lacking something, maybe ammunition, when the ammunition is gone you tell me. I have those also," he said. That is what that white man used to do to help us. He was the one who used to stay there at Farewell Road-house.

Then he told the people, "Float across downriver a little this side of the *Tetno'* (Dillinger) and hunt for red salmon (local name for silver salmon). There is a red salmon spawning place across there." They paddled across there. They went with him to a place where the water runs through the timber a little ways above *Tetno'*. There were really a lot of red salmon in the water where they spawn. They got a lot of red salmon from there. They split them in half and hung them up. They were hanging in smoke. After that they used to pull the skin boat back upriver on the other side and then return to camp.

After that they left there. But downriver below *Tohinaghe'ohw*, there below *Techamisa'* they camped again on the way to Nikolai. They arrived at a place above Nikolai. Where there is also a place where fish are spawning. There it was that the mountain animal (grizzly) was getting fish so they walked the shore for that one too. They shot them also. They camped there too, sometimes twice (two nights).

After that they left there and then across the river, downriver at *Nonoch'idolkwshdi* is another place where fish spawn. They stopped at the mouth of that creek. They say there is a place up there where it (grizzly) goes for fish. They used to do that too. They shot at a mountain animal and killed that one.

There are *dinuhmo*' (white berries) around there so they hunted for porcupines. The porcupine eats *dinuhmo'* and they really get fat. They put all of them (porcupine they caught) in one place

and burned the hair off them. They took the insides out, split them and hung them in the smoke. When they are half dry they would leave there. When they leave there they go downriver past the mouth of *Tonilts'udochak'* (Tonzona River).

When they come to Nikolai they would all gather together in one place. The ones that stayed there are really thankful that they (the travelers) got lots (of game). When they see their relatives they would really get happy. They brought back by boat all kinds of meat for winter to that one place (Nikolai). Meanwhile the people that stayed there had been getting fish. These they dried and by the time the others got back to them they had lots of dry fish. They put sheep meat, caribou meat, moose meat and black bear meat in the caches. They split it up and gave the same amount to each family. They all had the same amount of food.

Then it froze up with them. After it was frozen up again they had sleds and dogs. They built sleds. Then after freezeup they went back up to the mountains again. They took off by dog team to go back there to *Dots'odimona'*. They were young guys with only three or four dogs. And when they reached the mountains they would kill fresh caribou. They would kill moose again also and haul the frozen meat back. They hauled sheep back too. At that time people had lots of food.

It doesn't happen like that now. Now children do not listen to older people. The way it happens now even those who have children are not helped by them. This is what the older people used to do, when it was the morning of a big holiday, they would cook everything. And then at that time many people would eat because of them. It does not happen like that now. Instead many people are hungry. Even when there is everything (we need) around us the government is watching over (guarding) the things on earth. They make all kinds of laws against the village people. And then it is impossible for village people to go hunting. They have closed everything.

People from a given area are hungry because of them, the way they have it now. Because of that many people are hungry now. In the summer and the winter too. Whatever they used to eat is closed to them instead (of being available). They have made it bad. Now what we used to kill is closed and instead the game commission will arrest you, because of what we used to eat. The laws they have are bad for us.

Are we not the people from around here? We are Alaskan people. They should leave it up to us. We should stay near the place where we are born. They guard them (the game) from us. That is what I do not like now. I remember what the old timers used to do and I do not want to go to jail because of what I eat. When someone is hungry he eats. And then he eats something fresh and because of that he has to stay in jail. That one (game) is put on earth for us. God put us on earth, and then we are born at a place that will be our village. Then whatever is around that place we should be able to eat. Instead of that the government keeps watch over (protects) it from us. Because of that we do not get to eat many things such as caribou and sheep. We used to eat as much of those as we ate moose. The way it is now sheep are protected. It has been over 30 years since I ate sheep because it is closed (during the winter when it is accessible to the villagers). The government, the game department keeps them from us.

I do not like it but what can be done? We are the people from around here. The door should be open for us. Instead it should be closed only to the people from the states. That would be good but now it is no good because they put people from around here in jail because of what they eat.

Sometimes I do not think it is good what they are doing to us. Alaskan people should have a meeting over the food (game animals) that is closed to them. There should be an open door again to the things that we eat. We are Alaskan people so I want everything we eat to be made like that again but I don't know who else thinks this way. I think sometimes that people from all over who think like this should make a petition against those laws.

I think that way because that is how my late dad used to feed me. And myself too, whatever I needed I would kill from back in 1920 all the way through. We went up there to the mountains and got whatever we needed. We hauled it back to one place. We used to share that with older people. We were young guys then, when we went up to the mountains. We brought the fresh ones to one place, sheep and caribou. We shared those with older people and then we would go back up there again by dog team.

It is not like that anymore. So then, many people are hungry instead. Many people are not doing the right thing for themselves now. The children that are old enough to work for themselves do not listen to older people. Because of that many people are hungry.

Long ago it was not like that. The young boys who looked like they were old enough to go out hunting would be advised by the older people. That is the way is was long ago. Then the young people listened to those older people. Following their advise, they would go out hunting and kill something. They would put all that in one place for the older people and they used to eat good. Now it is not like that.

Now many people are hungry because the season is closed to us. Younger people do not learn what they should about hunting and on top of that the season is closed to us. When us older people would eat something it is out of season and because of that we do not kill what we should. They have made laws for us we do not want but what can we do about it. We used to be able to hunt all winter long and have whatever we needed.

Because they had everything needed they also made *nemaje* (Indian ice cream). They had all kinds of grease to make ice cream, and berries too. They had all kinds of berries so they made all kinds of ice cream and put them in the cache. They also gathered those wild carrots. They piled them together and broke it up by pounding. So, long ago they had wild carrot ice cream also. It is not like that now. I do now know what happened to those.

When they killed a mountain black bear and it was fat they would cook it and get the grease. So they had all kinds of grease for berries. They made ice cream out of that one too. I have not seen that kind for a long time. They would only give those special kinds to the oldest people. There is nothing done like that now.

On the morning of a big holiday they brought out whatever they had and put it together in one place. They had a potlatch for as long as a week. They cooked all kinds of food even porcupine.

During a holiday they used to eat everything, sheep, caribou, porcupine, beaver and all kinds of ice cream. I remember how they used to do that. They do not do that at home anymore. Because people do not do things the way they used to it is hard to get around now. It is not only in Nikolai they don't do it. The people who stayed in Slow Fork and Telida used to do it that way also. But now the people are gone from those places. Because the older people are gone we are not learning the things we should.

They used to fish a lot at Telida too. But now the old people are gone. So nothing is happening there either. At Slow Fork too, one big family used to stay at Slow Fork. Those people went to the mountains too. Whatever was there they would get. They used to dry what they got and put it in a cache. None of that is happening at those places now. There is nobody there. All around the old people left are hungry instead, because they do not do anything (like they used to). It is like that now. It is bad now.

Now about down there at Big River, the old timers would go up the North Fork and they would make a skin boat up there. That is what the people who stayed at Big River used to do. There where there is a creek outlet they would stay. The places where lake whitefish used to migrate they would find and then they would camp there to catch them. They made a fish trap for them. They used to catch a lot of fish. They do not do it that way anymore. They stopped doing that. The place where the fish used to be are still there but nobody tries to catch the fish.

Then there are the places where the spawned out fish used to gather together. The fish on the sandbars they would also get and cache them in one place. It does not happen that way now. Many fish still come there but people leave them alone. That is what happens. It is wrong but what can you do. That is what the people from each place did.

Those women also picked a lot of berries. They made birch bark baskets for the berries. They put them in those for wintertime, for freeze up time. They picked berries for all winter. There used to be a lot of berries at that time. That is how they used to put berries away.

The eggs of those fish they caught were also put away in birch bark baskets. They put them in baskets and then the eggs would ripen in the baskets.

That is what they used to do but they do not do it that way anymore.

Jim Nikolai's Story

Jim Nikolai was raised at Telida. When he was growing up, even at a young age, he used to ride around with his dad in a canoe, hunting.

The Nikolai family went to Nikolai for Christmas in 1949. While there Jim started going to school for the first time. The school had opened the year before. He went through the second grade and then quit to go trapping. He wanted to catch marten. He had already learned to trap before starting school.

In the 1950's, when he was about 14 or 15, Chief Devian wanted to walk out to Jack Dunn's cabin in the Alaska Range. It was in late August and Jim's dad said, "You should go with him". The Chief would have been in his 70's at that time. They left from the Tonzona River and followed the winter trapline trail to the Alaska Range. It took three days to walk to the mountains.

At the foothills they found a cache of flour, sugar and tea which had been left there during the previous winter when Chief Devian had traveled there by dog team to trap. They stayed there about a month, hunting. They didn't get any sheep but they did catch a moose so they had plenty to eat. In mid-September they walked over to Dry Creek, which was in the next drainage, and caught a cow and calf moose. They built a *dwhk'a* (meat cache) and hung up all the meat. They covered the cache with brush so the birds could not get to it. Later in the winter they went back by dog team to bring in the meat. The meat was still good and nothing had bothered it.

The Chief would have stayed at the foothills longer but Jim wanted to go back to Nikolai. It had taken them three days to walk out to the foothills, but it only took two days to walk back to the Tonzona (J. Nikolai, personal communication).

The Chief, like many of his generation, liked to live out in the country. Even late in his life he would travel up the South Fork in a canoe by himself and hunt all alone. Young people were still being introduced to this nomadic lifestyle in the 1950's.

Bobby Esai's Story

As told by Bobby Esai, 1991
Transcribed and translated by Betty Petruska
Edited by Ray Collins

I am Bobby Esai. I will tell you a little about what it was like a long time ago when I was a child. They say it was 1928 when I first saw Nikolai. It was New Nikolai. Nikolai was already there a long time. It was maybe twenty years since they moved from Old Nikolai to New Nikolai. It was the village they had moved to. That was the Nikolai I saw in 1928.

Some people were still using tents to live in. There were not many houses. There were only a few houses when I saw Nikolai. Theodore Pitka was the one who built the church back there and he had a roadhouse, a two-room house. He had a big place when I saw Nikolai. Deaphon Nikolai, who was the chief, also had a house. I remember when Nikolai only had a few houses.

People used to be nice in those days. They used to meet in one place. They told each other how the last winter was with them. They also told each other about their hunting trips. Those people, who have now passed on, used to laugh and tease each other. They used to really be happy at that time.

Now? Now they complain while they are young that they are sick. Long ago, when I was a child, the elders didn’t say, “I am sick here.” They would get together in one place and talk. Sometimes they would tease each other. It is not like that anymore. In those days they would serve tea and

eat together. Now it is not like that. Long ago those who were elders would get together in one place by themselves. They would tell the children to come in in the evening. “It is getting dark now,” they would say and when they said that we would (come in)! Now children play outside even in the dark. Those that raised us used to be really strong when they spoke to us.

They would tell each other their plans. They told each other where they would go and when they were going to return to a second place. They told each other when they would come there. They all lived out in the woods. When a “big day” came (that’s what we call it in our language; white men call them holidays), they would be aware it was coming. When the time came they gathered in one place. For white man’s Christmas they would go to McGrath. I don’t know how many days they stayed in McGrath for white man’s Christmas. When the calendar ended they would go to Takotna to celebrate New Years. When the celebration ended they would travel back to wherever they came from. Russian Christmas is January 7th. Some would come to Nikolai for that. It is a holiday for us and we would do nothing for three days (except participate in the celebration). They always used to go to church. When we were children, at four o’clock in the evening they would ring the church bell and we went to church. “Go to church,“ they would say. So we went to church. “Wash your hands and face,” they told us and we went to church. Also, early in the morning at nine o’clock, we went to church again. We went to church for three days when it was Russian Christmas, on January seventh.

Now it is different. Only a certain few are in church and the rest are absent. It is different now days. They stayed in one place for church, three days in Nikolai. They would stay until January 14 and then it was the Orthodox New Year. On New Year’s eve they would stay up until midnight. That’s when they say evil spirits are especially strong. Then on the 14th they wished each other a happy New Year. They say, “It’s a bright new day,” and they are thankful.

In the evening there would be music and white man’s dancing and sometimes Indian dancing. Athabaskan speeches and native dancing and songs. They used to drum too but for some reason the religious people told them to leave the drumming alone and they stopped. From then on we only see white man’s dancing. Soon it was January 19 which is another big church day. It is a holiday in honor of Saint John the Baptist. They went to Telida for that one. They would pray there.

They also held potlatches. I don’t know how many but on lots of days. Each one would last for two or three days. There was lots of food in those days. They would go hunting. The young men would go up the mountains. They would save all the good food and store it in one place. They saved it for when the people would gather in one home. Their parents would all save something. The best food such as the stomach, the guts, the brisket, the backbone and the kidneys were saved for the potlatch. They didn’t run out of food in those days.

Sometimes at night the dogs would start barking. When they barked it meant a visitor was coming. They came to the village late and all the dogs were barking. They only used dogs in those days. When visitors came the whole town would come out to greet them even if it was dark. They are all thankful to see each other again. They would quickly take all the dogs out of their harnesses and tie them up out there. They also had grass ready and they would put that down for the dogs. All this was done for the newcomer and in no time the traveler was settled

down. That's the way it used to be done. They helped each other. They would also tease each other.

Sometimes there would be dancing at night. When a dog traveler arrived there during the dance, and he was all snowy, he would come dancing in with frost on his face. I remember seeing those dancers coming to the dance like that. They used to be happy at that time. Now people arrive quietly and people don't pay much attention to each other.

When I was young, around the first time I saw Nikolai, the people played instruments. They owned instruments and they played and sang for the dancers. They had guitars, mandolins, violin, accordion and harmonica. They had a good time. Old man Pete Snow played the harmonica. Miska Deaphon, Nick and Pete Pitka all played. Tony Pitka had a guitar. The children would also make music. But only a few tried the guitar and they didn't change chords much.

They would mush up from Vinasale even though it is a long ways. They would also haul food for the potlatch. The late Gregory family, who are from Vinasale, used to do that.

Whatever is good, the best parts, they saved for the potlatch. Some people would be cooking outside and some would be cooking inside. The men would have something big on a fire outside and they would cook on the fire they kept going. At that time people always helped each other. When someone started to work on something everyone would gather there.

After the potlatch, the travelers would soon disperse. They would all go home with cooked food. Fifty pound flour sacks would be clear full. Many sacks would be put in each sled. They would not have to cook a meal for maybe a week. They would just heat up what they needed. That is the only food they ate for some time.

It used to be fun when they gathered for holidays. They traveled long distances to get there. They came from down at Vinasale, and from what we now call Deacon's Landing and even from Stony River. They used to mush dogs from way down there at that time. That is what they did! Even when it got real cold it wasn't too cold to travel. They would still travel in cold weather at that time. The people never used to stay in one place. They used to travel all over. The elders never used to complain of aches. Even if they were old they still worked.

Sometimes after breakup they would meet at what they called Tochak (McGrath). They got together there and stayed for some time. The town of Old McGrath was across the river at that time and up the Takotna at the Nixon Fork was a place called Forks. They had a town there too and the steamboat used to travel up there.

My parents used to go to McGrath at breakup and I thought that was a real nice place. The houses of the town used to only be strung out along the bank. Over at Old Town there was a small store and a store that was first called the A.C. (Alaska Commercial) and then it was called N.C. (Northern Commercial) and now it is the A.C. again. The Alaska Commercial Store. At the time my parents lived up the Nixon it was called the N.C. store. It was a big store. The one across in Old Town had two buildings. The first one built in the old town site burned and after

that they built another one over there. It was really a big place over there at what they now they call the old town site. That place burned down too. Sometime about then they moved across the river to the current McGrath town. A.C. built the third store there and now it has been replaced by a new store.

Wasilly Devian , Carl Seseui and Old Esai in front of the Northern Commercial Co. store at McGrath; 1930s -W. F. Erskine Collection photo, UAF Archives 1

Over in the Old Town site the houses were only down there along the bank. It went clear around the bend. I remember those log houses.

I also remember when they built the airstrip at McGrath. There were big spruce trees near the town site and they cut them down. There were no machines then. They only had their hands and horses. When there was a stump they would hook the horses to it. The horses pulled out the stumps from the big trees. They also used block and tackle to pull them. I remember when the airstrip was being built. Sometime after they were already working on it a Caterpillar tractor, or what they call a “bull dozer”, was brought up on the steamboat and then the work wasn’t hard at all. I remember seeing it pushing dirt. They used to work hard in those days. Those poor people had to work hard! One person told me he worked for only $7.00 a day then. Only $7.00 and hard work too. That is what they did a long time ago.

When I was small my parents went to McGrath in the spring. When they went there was a steamboat there. It was a small one. They were unloading it. There was a young slender person, a Native person who was working on it. That boat was the “Gasoline Nick.” That was the boat’s name, “Gasoline Nick.” Adolf Linn was the first person to run a gasoline engine at McGrath. The young man that was working on that boat was Vonga Bobby. I was really small then yet he is still living. Vonga Bobby was already working when I first saw him. He is from Lime Village. He may still be stronger than me now even if I am way younger than he is. I say I am sick and move around slow but he still gets around fast. They say he still gets around when they see him in McGrath. Some people live a very long time.

Things have changed now. There is alcohol and drug abuse now. Some might be living still if it wasn't for that. Accidents! There will be no elders living in the future. Our language will be gone too. Now, since we only have a few elders, our language is like a flame burning out and maybe it will be gone.

It used to be that our late parents worked every day. In the summertime they used the water. They fished using only fishnet and dip nets and that is how they got them (fish). They used to make the nets themselves too. They wove the nets. It was not like now. They did not wrap food in paper then. Flour came in a cloth sack and this had a gunny sack on the outside. They would unravel the gunnysack to make a fishnet. They also took sinew from back strap and that sinew was woven along the edge. They braided the fishnets that way. If they were short of gunnysacks, sometimes they used willow bark. They tore the willow bark into long strips and used it along with the gunny sack. There was fishnet twine available then but only some people used it. There was always a shortage of things at that time.

There were no fishwheels then. It was maybe 1910 when a white man came over from the Yukon. It was a family man named Lee Atwater who came over from the Innoko River to the Kuskokwim side. He was a young man who had married a native woman from Holikachuk. Lee Atwater who moved from the Innoko River to the Kuskokwim in 1910 made the first fishwheel then. He made a raft with only an auger. He drilled it with only an auger. He used wooden pins to make it. He put the wooden pins into the holes he drilled. The fishwheel shaft was also drilled with an auger and the holes to put in the poles for the basket. He made that fishwheel at McGrath. That was the first time a fishwheel was made on the Kuskokwim and from then there were fishwheels here.

At that time the people from the Outside raised their own food. They raised chickens and they also raised animals for their fur. Lee Atwater used some wire they called "chicken wire" to make the baskets. Other people started copying him but some didn't have any chicken wire so they used strips of spruce to cover the baskets. If they had no chicken wire that is what they did. They were really hard working people. Now people don't work real hard. Things have changed.

That first fishwheel Lee Atwater made at McGrath he moved upriver. Above McGrath where the shipyard was is where he got a piece of ground the first time. It was a homestead. He had a homestead there for a short time and then a man named Vanderpool and his family bought the homestead from him. Lee Atwater moved up by Big River. His place was five miles below Big River on the winter trail. By river it was fifteen miles at that time. Right now the place is still called Lee Atwater's.

I am talking into a tape recorder even if I forgot some things. These are the parts here and there that I remember. This is the first time I have used a tape recorder.

Political and Social Organization

Edward Hosley described how the people were organized in pre-contact times:

> "The social and political unit of the inhabitants of the upper Kuskokwim -upper Kantishna River area was the semi-nomadic band. These groups were customarily little more than a large extended family, numbering perhaps fifteen to thirty individuals. According to tradition, the band was often structured around two brothers, or a brother and his sister's husband, with their wives, children and perhaps daughters' spouses and grandchildren forming the nucleus to which other, more distant relatives might attach themselves" (Hosley 1966:76).

These bands tended to locate along major streams which allowed them to follow the seasonal round of movement previously described; e.g., movement from the Kuskokwim River to the Alaska Range. These bands, excluding the Kantishna River -Minchumina band, can be described as: the Telida band along the McKinley Fork (Swift Fork) which frequently wintered at Telida; the East Fork band with winter villages at Slow Fork and Dennis Creek; and the South Fork band with villages in the Farewell area or at the mouth of the Tonzona (Little Tonzona). (The latter village moved twice and became Nikolai village during the contact period). Other bands included the Salmon River band along the Salmon River and the Pitka and Middle Fork of the Kuskokwim; the Big River band which used Big River and the Middle Fork with winter villages at Farewell Landing and the mouth of Big River; and another band which ranged around Vinasale Mountain and had close ties with the former Tatlawiksuk and Takotna River bands. All of these bands were connected with numerous kinship ties, and families and individuals moved frequently between them. As various epidemics swept through the area, the population declined and people began the process of consolidation into the remaining communities of Nikolai and Telida.

With Russian contact and the conversion of the people to the Russian Orthodox Church, some former band leaders were appointed as "chiefs" (doyon). Previously they were recognized informally based on their ability to lead and serve their bands. Nikolai, the first "Chief", was appointed by a priest who visited Vinasale sometime in the late 1800's. Later, Old Man Seseui was appointed as the chief of Telida. These are the only communities where churches were built in the upper Kuskokwim area. The chiefs had a special role in each church to see that the spiritual and physical needs of their members were met. In the absence of a priest the chief would speak in church. This merely formalized the roles of the former band leaders within the church structure. Formerly they spoke to the band, and spoke for the band to outsiders. They were also expected to see that all members of the band were provided for.

When Chief Nikolai died, he was succeeded by his son Deaphon (Nikolai). Wassily Devian was appointed second chief or "Marshal" (Hosley 1966:175). The first church was built in Old Nikolai about 1910. In 1924, the village and the church moved to the current location on higher ground that did not flood. After this move Devian was appointed chief, serving until his death in 1963. He was succeeded by his second chief, Pete Gregory. A few years later Miska Deaphon was appointed chief. Chief Seseui of Telida was succeeded, upon his death in 1930, by Second Chief Sergie Petruska. Carl Seseui followed Petruska in this position. These men, plus the adult

males in the community, formed a traditional council that made all important decisions for the group.

Following the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and the incorporation of Nikolai as a second class city, leadership in the communities has become much more complex. More recently the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) has assisted in the formation in each community of Native Village Councils which are recognized by the federal government.

Nikolai and Telida first formed their own separate village corporations. Then, in 1976, they merged with McGrath and Takotna and formed MTNT, Ltd. A board of directors was elected to run this corporation with each of the four villages represented. MTNT, Ltd., holds title to land around each village and manages their joint income from ANCSA. They all belong to the Doyon regional corporation, and the non-profit Tanana Chiefs Conference which has a sub-regional office in McGrath.

Russian Period

Initial Contact

The first contact the Upper Kuskokwim people had with the outside world was indirect through trade. With the establishment of trading posts on the Kenai Peninsula in the late 1700's, the Tanaina Athabaskans were brought into direct contact with Europeans and their trade goods. This contact resulted in the Tanaina becoming middlemen in trading with the people of the Interior.

No stories or written records document this early trade but there is a story about a Tanaina “strongman” who established a village in Upper Kuskokwim territory at *T’ighis Nunga’* on the Middle Fork of the Big River. His presence and treatment of the people led to growing resentment and eventually an attack in which he and his people were killed. One man escaped to take word back to his people about what had happened. This did not seem to lead to retaliation, possibly because, according to one story, he had been warned by his father not to cause trouble. Instead he had boasted that he "was not afraid of those Giltsane" (the Tanaina name for the Upper Kuskokwim people). Thus he was viewed as being in the wrong. The story follows:

“Strongman”

One time a “strongman” moved in from the Iliamna area. He camped at *T’ighis Nunga’* on the Middle Fork of Big River. He had been warned by his father not to cause trouble but he didn't listen and boasted, "I'm not afraid of the Giltsane. They won't kill me!" He began to cause trouble and resentment against him grew until finally a war party was formed. Grandpa Esai's father was said to be one of the members, so this would place it back about six generations, sometime in the latter half of the 1800's. Two men went after him while he was sleeping behind a low brush shelter. One man speared him, cutting his stomach open from the naval up, but he grabbed the spear, cutting his hands badly on the blade. In spite of this he drove the attackers off and shot some of them with arrows before he died. One account says he wrenched the spear out of the attacker’s hand and threw it backward with such force that he pierced one of the attackers with the shaft. Another account refers to him holding the bow with his feet because of his cut hands and drawing the arrows held between his teeth.

Later people from his home raided Vinasale and took captives, a brother and sister, back to Iliamna. They lived there for awhile. The girl managed to stash away some dry fish and other food that would keep. Finally they held a big dance, making the captives dance also. It lasted for a day and a half but finally everyone was tired and they all went to sleep. The brother and sister ran away and hid in the grass near the village until people stopped looking for them and then they took off for home. This was in the early spring and when they got to the mountains they were able to walk on top of the snow crust. They made it to Lime Village where the boy decided to stay and marry so the girl returned to Vinasale alone. This is how the Gregorys have relatives at Lime Village - through their mother who was related to the girl.

The Iliamna people said that they would not have made the raid if the people in the Upper Kuskokwim had only killed the “strongman” because he had previously made trouble at home, but they felt it was necessary to avenge the others who were killed with him (A.Gregory 1971; B.Esai 1991).

Lt. Lavernity Zagoskin Expedition

The first written account of the early trade and contact was by Lt. L.A. Zagoskin, a Russian naval officer, who was given the mission of exploring Interior Alaska for the Russian American Company. He was to provide an accurate map of the country and make recommendations on the best locations for future trading posts. Fur taken by Alaskan Natives in the Interior was being traded with coastal Eskimos via the Kaltag portage and the portage between the Koyukuk and Buckland Rivers. On the coast the Alaska Natives were trading with Siberian Natives who then traded with Russians in Siberia. The furs that left Alaska by these routes did not pass through the hands of the Russian American Company so it brought them no profit. To deal with this situation, the Russians established a post at St. Michael on Norton Sound and then on the Yukon at Nulato, intercepting the trade through the Kaltag portage. However, they were not able to intercept the fur being traded up the Koyukuk River and out to Kotzebue Sound.

Lt. Zagoskin was familiar with navigation, and able to take accurate astronomical readings and map his location. He and a small party entered the Interior in 1842 via Fort St. Michael and the Unalakleet-Kaltag portage. They had arrived at St. Michael on July 11 but were not able to depart for the Interior until December 4, 1842. They had a cold, difficult journey over the portage, finally arriving at Nulato on January 15, 1843. At the end of February Zagoskin and his party set off up the Koyukuk River to locate the trail to Kotzebue Sound. They were greeted cordially by the Athabaskans along the Koyukuk River who were reluctant to take them over the portage to the coast. They were shown the beginning of the trail but were stopped by the onset of spring, being told it was too late to travel through to Kotzebue Sound. The spring thaw was well under way by the time Zagoskin got back to Nulato. The ice went out on the Yukon River on May 8, ending travel until after the breakup.

The party set off up the Yukon River on June 4th. They paddled and pulled the boats, first along one shore and then the other. On June 17th they were traveling along the south bank when they suddenly came upon a camp of Indians. This encounter is of interest because the people came from the "Tlegon" River. This is shown on Zagoskin's map as the east branch of the Innoko River which heads in a portage to the Takotna River. These people would have been acquainted with, and very likely were related to, people living in the Upper Kuskokwim.

From them Zagoskin learned that beaver and fox were abundant in their country and that these Indians either went out to the Yukon River with their furs to trade for white and black beads, shells, metal and tobacco, or took them down the Innoko River to trade with other people there (Holikachuk and Shageluk people). They were also acquainted with a large river to the south (the Kuskokwim) and from traders there they obtained clothing such as the Russians were wearing (indicating they were trading with the people of the Upper Kuskokwim). They also stayed on the Yukon River to put up fish during the summer and then returned home in the fall after the first snow. On the Yukon River they would have been trading with other Athabaskans who met annually in the spring at the mouth of the Tanana River to trade. Zagoskin's party met a party of 14 canoes further up the river that was returning from this trade fair. Each of the boats was loaded with marten and wolverine and a large bundle of beaver. They were unhappy about finding the Russians so far up the river (probably because the Russians would interfere with their trade).

They also encountered some Athabaskans who had "a black bead, rings and other iron items that could have only been released from Fort Kolmakof ". This demonstrated that there were trade connections between the Koyukon people of the Yukon and the people of the Kuskokwim. This could have been through the people of the Upper Innoko that they met earlier or between the people of Telida and the Tanana people. It also indicated that all of the trails and trade connections were being used in the 1840's. Zagoskin traveled up the Yukon River, mapping as far as the Nowitna River, and then returned to Nulato for the winter. From there he continued exploring down the Yukon River.

During the winter of 1843, Lt. Zagoskin journeyed to Fort Kolmakof and visited Yup'ik communities downriver before returning to the Yukon. He then traveled up the Innoko where he visited the first village of the *Tlegon Khutana* on the right bank just below the historic site of Holikachuk. He noted how these people had helped Peter Kolmakov by letting him know about the destruction of the Russian Mission Post in 1839 (Zagoskin 1967:228). He had a copy of Kolmakov's map which he was able to use to fill in the Upper Innoko and Upper Kuskokwim areas on his map. Of the map he said, "It was drawn, to be sure, without regard to scale or any kind of system, but certain particulars are noted in detail such as the bends of the river, the direction of the mountain ridges, the position of forests, cliffs, settlements, and so forth with which he familiarized himself while visiting these parts" (Zagoskin 1967:237).

In the spring of 1844, Zagoskin traveled over to Fort Kolmakof on the Kuskokwim River to accompany the manager Lukin on his annual trip up the river to trade with the Native people. Zagoskin made some interesting comments on how Lukin conducted his trade at the post:

> “Lukin always kept an open house; we have often seen a dozen natives in his little room who will wait silently for days at a time until he returns from his work in the woods or at the fish-trap. If guests arrive at meal time the piece of yukola (dry fish) and the teapot are divided among those present.
>
> “Owing to the difficulty of transportation the quantity of European goods traded is negligible, and the biggest turnover is in native products, such as deer-skins, thongs, tanned sealskins and fats” (Zagoskin 1967:255).

The upriver trade was very important to the Kolmakof post. In 1841 the post had taken in 2,000 beaver pelts, but Zagoskin reported, "In 1842 through ignorance as to which tribes carried on trade with this settlement, the Kenai (Tanaina) were given the means of crossing over the mountains to the Upper Kuskokwim, and the number of furs collected sank to 1,200" (Zagoskin 1967:254). This indicates that the Tanaina Athabaskans from Cook Inlet began crossing the Alaska Range to trade with the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskans in 1842. It also tells us that over 40% of the fur traded at Kolmakof came from upriver, and possibly 50% since the Tanaina did not get all of the fur as the following account reveals.

Zagoskin and Lukin departed on May 18th in two boats. Besides the supplies needed for the travelers they only carried about 22 pounds of beads and other trade goods. They had an interpreter who spoke the Tanaina Language. On May 22nd they passed the mouth of the George River. Athabaskans lived there who were related to the people of the Innoko River country.

Zagoskin noted that there was a portage at the head of this stream which provided passage to the Innoko River. Near this stream they met a man who had acted as their guide on the lower Innoko the previous year. At one time this stream had an abundance of beaver but they had now disappeared (had they been trapped out?). On May 23rd they passed the Holitna River. From this point on Zagoskin states that the Upper Kuskokwim is called the *Ttychannanika* (*Dichinanek')* by the "Ttynay-Goltsan" tribes living along it. Finally, on May 26, they encountered the first Upper Kuskokwim people.

> "We were held up until noon by the necessity of drying out the boat, and toward evening by meeting six native men of the Goltsan tribe who live in the vicinity of the Challono and Tochotno Rivers (Salatna and Takotna Rivers). A mile off we heard the melodious tune of their marching song, and when we met we immediately started trading. They were coming down to the mouth of the Khukitnak (Holitna River) for the purpose of informing the manager that the people living farthest up the river would not be coming to the meeting place this year, as all their furs already had been traded during the winter to the Kenai chief Kosloma who had been sent to them from the Fort St. Nicholas side. One of the natives had an old rifle of Tula workmanship which he had bought from the Ttynay of the Tkhalknuk (Stony River).
>
> "The natives were used to our trade goods and would have made a rush for the Kolosh capes, but as they did not have a sufficient number of beaver pelts they had to select other goods. There was one who did not have to wait--he paid 15 beaver pelts for a cape of black broadcloth with a pattern of red crosses and a border. They collected with enthusiasm the quilted shirts that had been given up as impractical by the expedition. Each one covered his head with a blue cloth cap with red piping, and laid in a year's supply of tobacco, beads, flint, and sealskin thongs for taking deer (caribou). Within an hour the manager had taken in 164 beaver, 4 otter, 2 deer, and 2 black bear skins. The carefree children of the north dressed themselves up and started to dance" (Zagoskin 1976:269).

It is interesting to see that most of the pelts were traded for what could be considered luxury items: exotic clothing, beads and tobacco. Only the flint for starting fires, and the thongs for snares would have assisted them in making a living. But, as Zagoskin noted, the beaver were taken primarily for meat before the Russians arrived and their skin was of limited value. This report also indicates that at least one man had already acquired a rifle by 1844. There is no mention of trading for powder or shot so it is not clear if the rifle was in active use.

On May 29th they reached the site that was designated as a meeting place with the upriver people. It was described as being on the right bank one mile below Vinasale Mountain. Two families with a total of nine people were living there.

At this site Zagoskin met an old man who had been designated *toyon* (chief) of the area on Kolmakov's recommendation and had been given a metal inscribed "Allies of Russia". He greeted them in Russian and fired a two-gun salute. This is the second mention of rifles and indicates that they were fired. Zagoskin went on to state that they traded the Stony River

Athabaskans five beaver pelts for a pound of powder. The powder originated with the Cook Inlet Tanaina, who were related to the Stony River people. The old chief presented Zagoskin with a gift of 15 beaver pelts and then traded an additional 20 to Lukin. Zagoskin gave the chief a half pound of powder in recognition of the salute (Zagoskin 1967:271).

From Vinasale Zagoskin continued up to the mouth of the Takotna River, ascending that stream about five miles. He sent his interpreter Stepanov on upriver to locate the people who lived further up. The party returned to Zagoskin's camp on June 1 with three men and two women and their children. Two of the men had previously met and traded with him on May 26. He mentions that after the usual exchange of gifts they obtained the following information about a key trading location further up the Kuskokwim :

> "From the Togtygchagno the Kenai people travel on the winter trail to meet the Ttychannanika natives, who for their part assemble to trade with them at the place called Itstsynno, near the mouth of the Togtychagno" (Zagoskin 1967:272).

This location is locally known as *Edzedochak* (mouth of the South Fork Kuskokwim) and Upper Kuskokwim elders confirm that it is a historic trading location. It appears that this location was designated a trading site after the Kenai people began coming into the area in 1842, and that trading was becoming an annual event as they met there again in 1844. In the 1920's the site once again became an important trading site when a post (Berry 's Landing, later called Medfra) was opened to serve nearby gold mines and the village of Nikolai.

The Native people also told of a large lake near the headwaters of the Kuskokwim, which is probably the earliest reference to Lake Minchumina.

Zagoskin would have liked to continue on to the headwaters of the Kuskokwim but the men he had borrowed from Fort Kolmakof were needed there, so from this location on the Takotna River he headed back downstream.

In his travels, Lt. Zagoskin was able to communicate with the people of the Upper Kuskokwim through his interpreter, Stepanov, a creole who was born on the Kenai Peninsula and was a speaker of the Tanaina Language.

He was also assisted by a Kuskokwim Yup'ik man who had accompanied Peter Kolmakov in his exploration of the Upper Kuskokwim country in 1839. Kolmakov had traveled up the Takotna River and portaged over to the Innoko River. He descended that river to the vicinity of Holikachuk where he learned that the Russian post at Ikogmiut, his destination, had been destroyed by Yup'iks. They blamed the Russians for the smallpox epidemic which was devastating their village. In view of the danger, he returned to the Kuskokwim.

These two individuals undoubtedly contributed greatly to the accuracy and completeness of the information that Lt. Zagoskin reported.

Father Illarion

The Russians continued to make annual trips up the Kuskokwim until selling their interest in Alaska to the United States in 1867. At times the manager of Fort Kolmakof was accompanied by a priest as he was in the following 1861 account. Father Illarion was a Russian Orthodox priest who served at Russian Mission. In his diary he wrote that they departed Kolmakof on June 1st to trade with the Kolchan (Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskans) at the mouth of the Chulitna (Holitna) River. Apparently this was a regular trading site as, in 1844, the upriver people who met Lt. Zagoskin were headed there to meet the Russians. Illarion referred to this meeting as a "fair".

The Russians arrived at the Holitna River on June 9th where they met with the people assembled. On June 12, Illarion noted:

> "The long expected Kolchanes suddenly arrived. They came in bark and skin boats. After landing, they walked towards us in one crowd, singing loudly to signal, according to tradition their peaceful relations with the Russians. The manager and his men responded with a loud shout: Hurray!" (Oswalt 1960:107).
>
> "I heard confessions of 15 Kolchanes (10 men and 5 women) and 6 Inkalits (5 men and 1 woman)."
>
> "Note" I must in all justice give credit to the Kolchanes who are more devout and zealous Christians than our (other) Kuskokwim people. They even come from their settlements on the Tlegon (upper Innoko River) and the Tokichitna (Takotna) Rivers, so far away from Chulitna, and they brought their families though at that time all of the natives are usually fishing. They forsook their important occupation for the sake of completing their Christian duties" (Oswalt 1960:109).
>
> "Wed. 13th. Not wishing to interfere with their trading operations by taking too much time for the religious service, I began the service at 4 AM and gave a brief talk about the necessity and value of morning and evening prayers for the Christians and about the holiness and power of the cross. The people listened attentively and then went about their business, i.e., to sell and to buy, which was all completed by 4 PM " (Oswalt 1960:108).

At this point the manager left to return home, leaving Father Illarion with two three-place bidarkas. Illarion had five helpers - a churchman, messenger boy, interpreter and his son, and one laborer.

Illarion further noted:

> "After the manager had gone I had more freedom to occupy myself with the Kolchanes and Inkalits. First it was necessary to register them. Unfortunately, some of them forgot their names" (Oswalt 1960:108).

He referred to their Christian names, given at baptism. This would seem to indicate that in the early years people did not use their new names, on a regular basis, after baptism.

Illarion went on to say that he had to:

> "...sort them out by settlement: then to supply information as to the names, number, and age of the baptised; by whom baptised-priest or layman; and the age & names of the unbaptised. This census taking continued until 8 p.m. "
>
> (Oswalt 1960:108).

He did not record the total number of Kolchanes who had traveled downriver but at least 15 had gone to confession to prepare for communion on the first day. On Friday, there was a total of 80 communicants, both male and female of all ages. Illarion went on to say that Maxim was his interpreter for both the Kolchan and the Inkalit languages, thus recognizing that the mid-river Athabaskans and the Upper Kuskokwim people spoke different languages.

In the 1850's, the Russians established a trading post at Vinasale, subsidiary to Kolmakofsky Redoubt. Trade goods were shipped from Kolmakofsky to the Vinasale Post which was operated only during the summer months.

The Russians and the creoles they employed brought about several changes in the lives of the Upper Kuskokwim people. By then most were members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian baptismal names had replaced all of their original Athabaskan names. Starting out with a single Russian name, succeeding generations at some point adopted their father's name as their last name. Iron replaced the bone, stone and copper used in weapons and knives. Rifles were in the process of replacing the bow and arrow and spear. This process was completed after the Americans arrived with better and more available firearms. Beads replaced porcupine quills in decorations on clothing. Western clothing replaced moose and caribou skin garments with the exception of hats, gloves and footwear. The axe and saw made it easier to work wood and Russian style cabins began replacing the semi-subterranean "beaver house," as Carl Seseui called them (see Carl Seseui's comments in the section titled Telida Village Founding). Many of those houses still occupied were heated with sheet metal stoves instead of the central fire pit located under a hole in the roof. To support all of these changes the basic economy also changed. Trapping became a major activity through the winter - earlier trapping had been a minor activity that took place in connection with hunting for food since only a few furs were needed for blankets and clothing.

These changes were viewed as positive by the people and for the most part they were chosen, not forced upon them - they were in control of the changes. As Pete Gregory stated (personal communication), "Things got better after the Russians came." He went on to explain about the fighting that had taken place before and the spiritual warfare that was carried on by the shamans. The Russians discouraged the warfare and raiding as they were not compatible with trade and were contrary to Russian Orthodox teaching. The raiding and kidnaping of women and children ceased around the end of the Russian era, or early in the American period.

The following illustrations indicate that the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church had a direct impact on ending the warfare and the revenge killings:

> One man explained that his great grandfather on his mother's side lived below Vinasale. The great grandfather had formerly raided on the Yukon River. He went into a steam bath with two men from the Yukon. They came out of the steam bath first and then waited and attacked him as he came out. They ran away but one of them got ahead of the other who tried to catch up to him. Finally, when he saw that he couldn't catch up, he shot his own partner. The story teller's grandfather, who was a child at the time, was told by his father before he died, not to do anything about the killing to avenge it (J. Gregory, personal communication).

Andrew Gregory (personal communication) said that the last battle fought in the Upper Kuskokwim area was between some men from Vinasale and the area upriver, who went over to Dishkaket and killed some people. After they returned, all died but one. Before this raid, they had all been told about God and that it was wrong to kill, but they hadn't listened. People believe this is why they died.

American Period

American Contact

Following the sale of Russian interests in Alaska in 1867, there was little immediate change in the Upper Kuskokwim area. On the Kuskokwim River the Russian posts consisted of Kolmakof Redoubt and a small post at Vinasale. In the 1870's the posts were taken over by American merchants from San Francisco who later formed the Alaska Commercial Company. The first trader under their reign was Reinhold Separe, a part Russian/part Alaska Native. Nicholai Dementov and Evan I. Andreanoff worked for him at the posts, and their primary customers at Vinasale were the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskans. This was the only outside presence in the area for several years.

The Alaska Commercial Company later reorganized as the Northern Commercial Company, and in more recent years has again become the Alaska Commercial Company after undergoing several changes in ownership.

Toward the end of the 1800's, gold was discovered in the Interior and prospectors began to spread out along the river systems. The United States government realized that it had only vague information about the Alaskan Interior and that the maps made by the Russians, such as Zagoskin, were incomplete. Accordingly, in 1898 the United States Geological Survey sent out five expeditions to begin filling in the blank spaces on their maps.

Josiah E. Spurr Expedition

In 1898 Josiah Edward Spurr was selected to lead an expedition for the U. S. Geological Survey, and, given his choice, he opted to explore the Kuskokwim River. Included in his party were W.S. Post, a topographer; T.S. Hincley, a naturalist; Oscar Rohn; Hartman; and Harrell. Three of these left their names on tributary streams of the South Fork - the Hartman, the Rohn and the Post Rivers. These names replaced the original Athabaskan names that were in everyday use at that time.

Spurr hired a man named Madison who had trapped in the Tyonek area of Cook Inlet for eight years and was married to a Tyonek woman. They started from Tyonek in canoes on May 4 but then had to wait at the mouth of the Susitna River until the ice went out on May 20. When they arrived at the Alaska Commercial Company post at Susitna Station they tried unsuccessfully to hire guides. Everyone said the upper Yentna River was not good for boating and that they did not go up there in the summer time. As the party proceeded up the Yentna River they met Stefano, the second chief of the Susitna Athabaskan Indians. Though he had never been to the head of the stream, he drew for them a map of what he knew.

They proceeded on upriver and on July 10, after a difficult journey, they crossed the Alaska Range into the upper Kuskokwim River country via Ptarmigan Pass. Their canoes had been patched many times and were wearing thin. On July 21, after portaging over the pass, they found

a well marked Indian trail that led them to a stream they named the Styx. Descending this stream, they came to a well established Indian camp complete with a steam bath, just above the junction of the Styx River and the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River. From the signs of usage in the camp, Spurr concluded that it must have been occupied during the winter and that the people had gone downstream after breakup.

The party passed several other Indian camps as they proceeded down the South Fork, affirming that the Upper Kuskokwim people were making extensive use of the mountain locations and resources at that time (1894). Two sleds were found at one of the camps, indicating winter visits. The people had probably left the area after break-up when they had no use for the sleds.

Finally, on July 28, Spurr sighted another camp and then just half a mile below it they came upon four Indians. They were in the process of burying two people in graves which they had marked with Greek (Russian Orthodox) crosses. When the men spotted the Spurr party, they hollered to alert the other people in camp across the river. Though Madison spoke some of the Tyonek Athabaskan Language, he could not understand them or make himself understood except through sign language. The language of these people was unique to the Upper Kuskokwim area.

Spurr greeted them with the Russian term "Drastye". The chief crossed the river to greet them and introduced himself as Nicolai. They described him as being "a tall straight old fellow who was lightly bearded." He was wearing moose skin breeches. The others were dressed mostly in long parkas made of cotton cloth which Spurr thought of as Eskimo dress. Their breeches and moccasins were made of cloth or skin. Spurr also noted that "they have beautiful birch bark canoes narrow and long as fits a river canoe" (Spurr 1975:(3)54).

Most likely this location was that of the first Nikolai village at the mouth of the Tonzona River. Spurr recorded the name that they gave him for the South Fork as *Nando*, but it should have been *Edzeno*. They may have simply been referring to the direction in which the river flows, which would have been *nodo'* (downstream). They had Chief Nicolai draw them a map but had difficulty in communicating as none of these Upper Kuskokwim people knew any English at that time.

After trading for some fresh whitefish and dog salmon, the party proceeded downriver. The next day, at a fish camp, they met a family consisting of a man, his wife and two or three children. They were living in a tent, which indicates this item was already being procured through trade. They also had fresh moose meat hanging, confirming that these animals were occasionally present in 1898, although so scarce that the Spurr party saw only one and did not harvest it. He mentioned the scarcity of game, even on the Susitna side of the Alaska Range. In contrast, when his son visited some of the same country on that side of the mountains thirty years later, he encountered "great numbers of game". This agrees with what many contemporary elders have said about there being few moose in the Kuskokwim until the early 1900's.

The Spurr party continued on for another three days before encountering more people, between McGrath and Vinasale. Just above Vinasale Lake they came upon a permanent camp consisting of a log cabin, a cache, and a bark hut. There were two men, two women and some children in the camp. The old man was called Elia but no names were recorded for the others. They were

living in the bark covered summer house, which was most likely the normal summer dwelling before canvas tents became available.

From that camp it was only a short trip to the long awaited Vinasale post which consisted of two cabins, two caches, and a graveyard with five or six Russian Orthodox crosses. The party had earnestly hoped to purchase food but the place was deserted! They searched the buildings, finding only some trade goods, Russian books and icons - but no food. They determined that the trader's name was Dementieff from an inscription in a book.

As they left Vinasale, the Spurr party encountered the last Upper Kuskokwim resident they were to see - a slender, lightly bearded man, traveling upriver in a canoe. He was very surprised to see them and, through gestures, they held a "conversation". He found out that they had come from the Susitna Station, not the Yukon River as he first supposed, and Spurr learned that it was about five travel days to Kolmakof Redoubt, the next trading post. When they conveyed that the party was out of tea and other supplies, the man picked up a small sack and poured out a cup of tea leaves. This was an amazing example of hospitality when one considers that there was no more tea in the area, Spurr and party were complete strangers, and the man had just gone to considerable trouble to journey down to Kolmakof Redoubt to trade. They graciously declined his offer.

While Spurr's contact with the people of the upper Kuskokwim was somewhat limited, his account does provide us a glimpse of some of the residents living there in 1898.

Captain Edwin F. Glenn: Cook Inlet Exploring Expedition

In 1899 Captain Edwin F. Glenn, U.S. Army, was given command of a military expedition charged with exploring transportation routes in Alaska. The following orders were given to conduct these explorations:

> ..."From the permanent camp at Tyoonok (Tyonek), Alaska detachments will be sent to explore the country to the northward via the Matanuska, Shuchitna, Yentna and Kuskokwim Rivers, for the most direct and practicable route from tide water to the crossings of the Tannana River; and from these crossings Northward to the military posts established on the Yukon River, at Rampart and Circle City..." (Herron 1909:4).

The second part of the order required that:

> "This expedition will cover as much territory as possible and will collect and incorporate in the reports all information that may be valuable to the development of the country explored regarding topographical feature, available routes of travel, feasible routes for railroad construction, appropriate and available sites for military reservations, adaptability for agriculture and stock raising, mineral resources, timber, fuel, food products, and the stock best suited for food and transportation purposes; the number, location and condition of the natives of the

> territory explored. Maps and photographs will accompany all reports" (Herron 1909:4).

The third point required that:

> “The routes traversed by this expedition should be definitely located and properly marked in order that they may be known and used as routes of travel by the public" (Herron 1909: 4).

In order to accomplish this, the party was also authorized to:

> "--employ the necessary Indians, natives of Alaska, for duty with the expedition as guides, for such periods of time as may be necessary" (Herron 1909:5).

Most of these routes were later used to establish the routes of transportation still in use today. The route via the Susitna, Yentna and South Fork of the Kuskokwim Rivers, originally the Seward-Nome route, later became part of the Iditarod Trail. The Susitna River route was followed when the Alaska Railroad was built from Seward to Fairbanks in the 1920's and today is the route of the Parks Highway. The route up the Matanuska River became part of the Glenn Highway which was built during World War II.

These routes and the maps produced were also used by the prospectors who were spreading throughout Alaska at the turn of the century.

Lt. Joseph S. Herron Expedition

In addition to exploring the Seward to Cook Inlet areas, a party was to find a route from salt water to the Yukon River. Lt. Glenn assigned Lieutenant Joseph S. Herron, U.S. Army, to explore the route up the Susitna and Yentna Rivers and on to the Yukon via the upper Kuskokwim River.

Herron's party consisted of the following:

Acting Assistant Surgeon, Henry R. Carter
Pvt. Sam L. Jones
Pvt. Gilbert Dillinger
Packer, E.M. Weber
Packer, George Brown

Two of these names are the sources of names for tributaries of the South Fork just as it leaves the mountains - the Jones and the Dillinger Rivers. They were so named on Herron's expedition map.

On June 9, 1899, the party arrived at Susitna Station on the Susitna River where Mr. Cleghorn was agent for the Alaska Commercial Company. He assisted Lt. Herron in calling a council of the local Indians. At this council they learned that "The Indians knew very little about the country beyond the divide, by reason of their territory and hunting, trapping and fishing grounds being restricted, by the oldest traditions and customs among the tribes, to the country east of the divide, and with certain limits, for the same reasons, in the other directions" (Herron 1909:19).

This statement indicates that the Athabaskans living at Susitna Station had a clear awareness of their band territory boundaries, and that these were defined by "the oldest traditions". The people of the upper Kuskokwim most likely had the same awareness of their boundaries in relationship to those of the other people living around them.

The Susitna people felt comfortable in speaking only about their own country. They stated that the Yentna River was headed by glaciers and did not offer a route to the Interior. Two of them were familiar with a branch of the Yentna River which could offer passage, so Herron hired them - Stepan and Slinkta. (Stepan is probably the same individual Spurr met the year before and identified as the second chief.) They then proceeded to the head of navigation which was about three miles up the Keechatna River.

Captain Glenn, who had accompanied Lt. Herron to this point, related, "The country over which you are ordered to proceed is so little known that it is impracticable to give you anything like definite instructions as to the route to proceed. So you will be forced to depend upon the information you may be able to obtain from your Indians (guides) and such other natives as you may chance to meet en route" (Herron 1909:22).

The Herron party had 15 pack horses and a total of 3300 pounds of supplies. This meant a load of 220 pounds for each horse. The supplies included six hundred pounds of breakfast bacon in

fifty-pound canvas sacks. The bacon would prove to play a key role in the success of the expedition, if not its salvation.

The party started up the river on July 1. Herron described their daily routine:

> "A reconnaissance for the best route for the day's march; a search for fords, crossings, detours around or passages through ravines, swamps and obstacles; construction of a pack trail by chopping out timber and brush in dense forests, blazing in open forests and corduroying in soft mud and tundras; fording or swimming the pack train over the rivers encountered and the building of spar bridges for the horses where necessary" (Herron 1909:27,28).

They averaged about three miles a day of travel and this might have actually been only two miles by direct distance. By July 5, after traveling about twelve and a half miles, they reached the location on the Nakochnu River where "the Indians cache their canoes" or "the head of canoe navigation." Such locations are also designated in the upper Kuskokwim, on the South Fork and on the Middle Fork of Big River. Thus all the river routes to the mountains are known. Head of canoe navigation was noted. From that point all travel was on foot when going into the mountains. On return trips skin boats might be used to float downstream from areas closer to the headwaters.

It is interesting to see the attempts made to learn the native names for geographic features though it seems there may have been some miscommunication at times. One of the hills encountered was called "Nin" which could be the general word for ground (*nin'* in Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan) and another hill opposite was named "Tesch" which may be the general name for hill (*tish* in Upper Kuskokwim).

On July 10 the party encountered steep country and was informed by their guides that the horses could not make it over the divide. They indicated that men had to use hand holds to get across. For the next six day the guides kept repeating that they "savvied" (knew) the country no further. They were obviously getting nervous as they came to the edge of their country. On July 17 they reached the head of the Keechatno River. Stepan shot a bull moose, the first one mentioned on the trip. They also encountered three bears, hundreds of mountain sheep (they shot two), and another moose which they did not shoot.

They finally reached the summit (Simpson Pass) on July 23. On July 28, after having failed to convince Lt. Herron that they should turn back, the two guides slipped away in the night and returned home. Herron had seen this coming but didn't see how he could prevent it short of keeping them under guard 24 hours a day.

It is interesting to note Herron's comment on the value of his guides, two men in a six-man party. "This deprivation of the Indians' energy and skill as axemen, hunters and trailers, and their craft and instinct as woodsmen and recognizance men, put more than a twenty-five percent handicap on the progress of the expedition" (Herron 1909:35).

As they proceeded down the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River, which they called the Echeatnu (*Edzena'* in Upper Kuskokwim), they came to the first of two deserted villages, this one at the mouth of the Tonzona River (*Tonilts'uno'* in Upper Kuskokwim). This would have been the village that Spurr found occupied by Chief Nikolai the year before. This may indicate that people did not summer in the same location every year. Spurr had arrived at this location on July 25 and Herron did not get there until August 8. It could have been that they had finished fishing and gone on a nomadic hunt.

At that point Herron left the South Fork and proceeded overland to the East Fork which they call Chedotlothno (*Ch'idotlu » no'* in Upper Kuskokwim). Here they found a second deserted village, this one consisting of two cabins, a cache and a graveyard. Herron found in one of the cabins "a sled, a pair of snowshoes, a stove, a knife, spearhead and some picture of Russian divinities and prophets" (Herron 1909:35). The presence of a stove is interesting in that it had to have been brought from one of the existing trading posts which were all a long ways distant. Later the Telida people indicated that they owned the cabins on the East Fork, again demonstrating that the seemingly abandoned villages were not really abandoned but just seasonally occupied. The sled and snowshoes may indicate that people from Telida had been there in the spring before breakup, possibly to catch fish in the early summer or to trap beaver, returning to Telida over the summer trail before Herron arrived.

The presence of Russian icons confirms the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, telling us they were hanging icons on the wall then as they still do today, 100 years later. These would have been obtained from the priests and traders who began coming up the Kuskokwim to the mouth of the Holitna River and to Vinasale Lake in the 1840's.

It is interesting to note the construction of the houses at this village in a picture taken in 1899 (Herron 1909:39). The logs used for the walls were tapered but flattened on two sides and the corners dovetailed. This style must have been copied from the Russians after metal axes were obtained. Later cabins were built of round logs with notched corners, which is actually a simpler method of construction. To flatten the logs on the outside would serve no purpose other than to make them look like the dwellings made by the Russians. The cache, of plank and pole construction, was set on high poles.

Herron continued on to the northeast on August 25, losing two horses that impaled themselves on snags. He had to abandon the canvas canoe at this point as they no longer had a way to carry it. On September 1 they encountered the first frost. The horses weren't getting enough food so they started feeding them flour. Then the last of their dried potatoes were lost when a sack was pierced and they dribbled out on the trail. On September 4 they cached some bacon, rice and other food, then crossed a swampy area to reach the Tatlathno (*Todzo » no'* in Upper Kuskokwim). This is the Swift Fork on current maps (locally called the McKinley Fork).

At this point Chief Shesoie (Seseui) of Telida enters the story. He was out hunting and killed a bear. When butchering the animal he found that its stomach was full of bacon. He recognized the bacon as white man's food and wondered where the bear had found it. So he backtracked the bear and found the source was the cache left by Herron's party. Next he followed the trail left by the explorers until he caught up with them. He found them in a life-threatening situation. They had

abandoned the horses and were attempting to carry their last two week's supply of food in cumbersome packs. They were constantly wet from fresh snowfall, not being dressed for winter weather, and freeze-up was approaching. Chief Shesoie convinced Herron and his men to follow him back to Telida and wait until it was safe to travel.

After they cached the bacon, they had reached the *Todzo » no'* and thought it was flowing toward their destination, so they constructed some rafts and attempted to float downstream. They tipped over several times when they collided with sweepers, losing some food and much of their camp gear. Herron reported that the expedition was--"now reduced to the last resort, that of being its own pack train. We filed along like coolies with fifteen days food and other impediments harnessed on our backs."--"the damp snowfall loaded the trees until they bent under its weight. When we passed through the bush each tree dropped a small avalanche on our heads and kept our clothes wet, while the snow on the ground added to the labor and discomfort of walking and kept our feet wet" (Herron 1909:41)

If Chief Shesoie had not found them they might well have perished. They had no proper winter clothes. They were almost out of food and had lost much of their gear. Freeze-up was approaching and the unsafe ice on the rivers and swamps, plus the increasing snowfall, would have trapped them with no means of travel. They had begun traveling back upriver and were about to pass Telida - and there were no other villages for many miles. Chief Shesoie found them on September 18. They learned later that he was the one who had killed the bear which was also served to them.

The party welcomed him but found their mutual vocabulary consisted of only three words - "yes", "no", and "good". Herron stated that, "The deficiency was made up by using pantomime." They negotiated for eight days and then went into winter camp at Telida for two months, waiting for favorable trail conditions. During this time the villagers outfitted Herron and his men with snowshoes, mittens, hats, and winter boots. He said, "Our food during this time consisted of moose, bear, beaver, fish and tea." The only thing the Herron party could have contributed was the tea, although they may have helped with the hunting as they had rifles and ammunition. This would have been no small burden for the village to feed six men for two months.

Lt. Herron recorded the census of Telida in 1899 as:

> Shesoie, man, age about 30 years. (Seseui)
> Barian, wife of Shesoie, age about 25 years. (Mary)
> Annisa, daughter of Shesoie, age about 12 years. (Anna)
> Gara (Carl), son of Shesoie, age about 5 years.
> Infant child of Shesoie, age about 6 months.
> Bacilli, age about 35 years. (Wasilly)
> Barian, wife, age about 20 years. (Mary)
> Uruska, son, age about 5 years.
> One son buried at Telida.
> Tenesche, man, age about 35 years. (Dennis)
> Annisa, wife, age about 30 years. (Anna)
> Eulian, son, age about 16 years. (William)

Andre, son, age about 10 years. (Andrew)
Kurgurvey, son, age about 8 years. (Gogomy)
Eleana, daughter, age about 5 years. (Lena)
Rubber Indian, man, age about 25 years. (Joko?)
Yocutter, wife, age about 20 years.
Wastinia, infant son, age about 5 months
(Herron 1909:67).

Of the 17 residents listed none was estimated to be over 35 years of age. This gives some indication of how hard the communities had been hit by deadly epidemics in the late 1800's.

Herron also obtained information from the people at Telida about the residents of the village at the mouth of the Tonzona. He stated that there were about 20 people living there and listed the men as:

Nikoli (chief)	[Nikolai]
Dia-sohn	[Deaphon, Nikolai's son]
Mit-ar-uska.	[Petruska (?)]
Bacilli.	[Wassily]
Kur-gur-vey	[?]
Soy-on	[?]

(Herron 1909:67).

Finally, on November 25, the Herron party, led by Chief Shesoie and three other adult men, left Telida and headed for the Tanana River via Lake Minchumina and the Cosna River. There was a village at Minchumina with about 15 residents, including Minchumina Ivan. Ivan was estimated to be about 50 years old and one of his wives about 40. These were the oldest Upper Kuskokwim people that Herron encountered. From Coschaget, the village at the mouth of the Cosna River, they journeyed down the Tanana to the Yukon River. There they found a new army post, Fort Gibbon, which had been built within the previous six months near the Tanana trading post that Shesoie had visited several times in previous years.

Carl Seseui (Gara Shesoie in the above census) was a young boy at the time of the visit by the Herron party. One of his memories was of the horses that were turned loose. They remained in the area for awhile, and Carl recalled seeing the tracks and asking his dad what kind of animal that was. Another memory he shared was the story of how his dad helped the men so much and how little he received in return.

George Byron Gordon’s Trip Down the Kuskokwim

In 1907, George Byron Gordon and his brother MacLaren Gordon, built a canoe in Fairbanks and set out to explore the Kuskokwim River for the University of Philadelphia Museum. They first had to travel down the Tanana River and up the Kantishna River to Lake Minchumina. They spent about a week with the people living there - two men, three women and two children. Others of the group were off hunting. These people called themselves *Minkhotana* (Lake People).

From Lake Minchumina the Gordons portaged over to the North Fork of the Kuskokwim River. The 10 1/ 2 mile portage was a long-established trail used by the people of Lake Minchumina and the Upper Kuskokwim. They met two prospectors on the portage who were transporting a 2-year's supply of food. They met two more trappers on the North Fork who were looking for a place to trap and they found a trapper's cabin on the upper North Fork that had been occupied the winter before. More and more non-Native people were moving into the country and establishing traplines in direct competition with the local residents.

As they descended the North Fork the Gordons kept watch for an Indian camp they had been told about when they were at Lake Minchumina. They found it near the mouth of the McKinley Fork, relating:

> "In the afternoon we came to the Indian encampment for which we had been on the lookout. It was on the left bank and consisted of three fairly large brush shelters, a summer encampment.
>
> "The Indians at Minchumina had prepared us not to expect many people at the camp until the hunting season was over. We found just one very ancient Indian" (Gordon 1917:100).

From this we learn that tents had not completely replaced the traditional summer dwellings by 1907 and that old people still stayed behind when others went on nomadic hunts.

They passed the Chedotlotna River (*Chidotlu » no'*, East Fork) and the Istna (*Edzeno*, South Fork), encountering two Indian men in birch-bark canoes on the way. Near the South Fork they had another encounter:

> "Here we met another Indian, in a canoe. He was dressed in caribou skins and carried a bow and arrow" (Gordon 1917:105).

In this area some people were still wearing traditional clothing in 1907 and using the bow and arrow.

The Gordons continued on down the Kuskokwim River. The evening after the encounter with the man in the canoe they arrived at the mouth of a large stream coming in from the left (Big River) and found a small encampment of Indians at that site. Unfortunately, no other information about

the people there is presented. The Gordons did not encounter any other Upper Kuskokwim people and, for some reason, failed to mention Vinasale.

When they arrived at the mouth of the Tacotna River (Takotna) they met Peter McGrath whom George Byron Gordon had known in Nome in 1905. McGrath had just arrived that spring (1907) to record mining claims for the new gold diggings on the Innoko River (see the Gold Rush section). He had already established a small trading post at the mouth of the Takotna River.

Gordon did provide one other description of traditional clothing worn in the Upper Kuskokwim and a drawing of a man so dressed:

> "Before they adopted white man's attire they wore a long fringed coat over leggings with moccasins attached. The cut of the man's coat was the same as that of the woman, except that the man's was pointed before and behind and the woman's was rounded. These garments were made of deerskin dressed without the hair and decorated with porcupine quill embroidery. Men and women wore ornaments of Dentalium shell obtained in trade from the tribes adjoining the southern coast" (Gordon 1917:188).

Trade

Trade has always been an important part of life in the Upper Kuskokwim area as there are things of value not locally available. Even before the Europeans arrived, extensive trade networks existed. There were trails through the mountains to Cook Inlet where the Tanaina Athabaskan people lived. They in turn had connections with the people of the Copper River country; one of the items traded for was copper which was used to make arrowheads and knives. This route may also have been used to import Dentalium shells that were used to decorate clothes and to make necklaces and other items. These shells came all the way from southeast Alaska. There was a trail from the North Fork of the Kuskokwim to the Cosna River which drains into the Tanana River. To the northwest, a trail connected the Takotna River to the Innoko River system which led to the Yukon River. A trail through Lime Village country led southwest to Nondalton and the Kuskokwim River itself acted as a highway to Yup'ik country in the west.

With the arrival of the Russians on the Kenai Peninsula in the late 1700's, trade with the Tanaina intensified. One of the Upper Kuskokwim trading locations was at *Edzedochak* at the mouth of the South Fork. This is where the Medfra trading post was later established in the 1920's. When the Russians established posts on the Yukon and the Kuskokwim in the 1830's, direct trade became possible. The Russian trader from Kolmakofsky (above Aniak) made annual trips upriver. One trading point was at the mouth of the Holitna River to which Upper Kuskokwim people traveled to trade. As was mentioned in an earlier section, Lt. Zagoskin accompanied a trader all the way upriver to where McGrath is now located. Later, the Russians established a post at Vinasale.

Carl Seseui's Grandfather is reported to have made the trip from Telida all the way to the trading post at Russian Mission on the Yukon. He had to travel over six hundred miles on two major rivers to make this journey. He brought back the first tea to be used in the upper Kuskokwim, which he introduced at a potlatch (Hosley 1966:148).

Miska Deaphon told of people meeting some Tanaina Athabaskans who were hunting sheep near Farewell. They related that the American people had opened a trading post at Susitna Station on the Cook Inlet of the Alaska Range. Later that winter people from Nikolai walked over to the store. They went through Rainy Pass pulling sleds on which they carried mink, beaver and marten skins. These were traded for about fifty cents each and they purchased their first 30-30 rifles, some ammunition and pilot bread (M. Deaphon, personal communication).

When Carl Seseui's wife Alexandria was a young girl she walked through Rainy Pass and over to Susitna Station. She was in a party that was using dogs to pull the sleds. The Pass was sometimes dangerous due to whiteout conditions which could cause travelers to lose their way. They were always careful not to make any noise when approaching the Pass, believing that noise was what brought on the whiteouts. On this trip the dogs must have made too much noise for in whiteout conditions Alexandria became separated from her family. Finally she became tired and laid down. It was snowing at the time and she was soon covered over. Grandpa Esai was traveling along behind Alexandria 's family. His dogs were following the trail of those ahead as it was not possible to see the trail. Suddenly his dogs stopped. When he went up to check on them he found that they had stopped by the still form of Alexandria. He put her on his sled and finally caught up

with the others - they were waiting for him in the timber on the other side. They were really happy to see that he had found the girl as they had just realized she was missing but had no idea where she might be in the whiteout conditions (G. Esai, personal communication).

Around the turn of the century the first American traders made their way up the Kuskokwim River. They had the first steamboat that was seen in the country. Miska Deaphon's father went downriver to Medfra in a canoe where he met them. He guided them up the South Fork as they didn't know the channel. It was fall time and the water was low. They were stuck for awhile on a bar but finally made it up to what became Old Nikolai, where they stayed for the winter (M.Deaphon, personal communication).

At the same time a Russian Orthodox priest went upriver to minister to the people of Chief Nikolai's village at the mouth to the Tonzona River. He passed the traders on the way up. He advised the people to move their village down to where the steamboat was as the traders had lots of groceries. They did move the village and it remained there until 1918. In the Nikolai Reader (1975:16) this is reported as having taken place in 1892. However, in the newspapers of the time (Iditarod Pioneer 1/22/11) it was reported that John Holten went up the Kuskokwim River, established a roadhouse and trading post, and wintered over in 1910-11. This later date is more likely because the village had not yet been moved when Spur floated down the South Fork in 1898 and met Chief Nikolai. The Gordons make no mention of any traders in the Upper Kuskokwim in 1907 except the two Indian traders at the mouth of Big River and the new post just established in McGrath.

The Alaska Commercial Company, which took over the Russian American Co.’s trading property, had a seasonal post at Vinasale. In 1909, the AC Co., which had reorganized as the Northern Commercial Co., built a store at McGrath. They have remained the major store in the area up to the present time. There have however, been other stores in McGrath. Many of the early posts bought fur and some of them extended credit and grubstaked trappers.

The trading post that was established at Medfra in 1920 played a major role in the lives of the people of Nikolai and Telida until it closed in the 1980s. In addition to all the basic foods, this store carried a wide variety of goods needed by trappers - from dog harnesses to sled runners and hardware, a wide assortment of traps and snares as well as ammunition and rifles. You could purchase chainsaws, outboard motors and gasoline for your motors and blazo for your lanterns. The post bought fur and in the summer, cordwood, for local use or shipment to McGrath when the annual barge came in with supplies. Many families from Nikolai and Telida spent the summers in their fish camps. For many years, this was the closest post office to Nikolai. The airstrip and radio allowed for a plane to be sent to Medfra in the summer when firefighters were needed. World would go tout on the radio that a plane was coming, and the men would come in from the fish camps to be hired for fire fighting. Fourth of July celebration was held at Medfra with games, foot races and prizes in addition to food!

When snowmachines began replacing dog teams in the 60s, they were also available at Medfra. The Snow Jet was one of the most popular early machines.

C.F.H. Spencer opened the first post in about 1917. Arthur Berry bought him out, and the location became known as Berry 's Landing. In 1922, the post office opened and the location was renamed Medfra. In 1937, Clint and Bertha Winems bought the store. After Clint died in 1958, Bertha continued to operate the store until she sold it to Jack and Nadine Smith in 1963.

Trader's house at Medfra , built by men from Nikolai for Clint and Bertha Winans; Late 1930's or early 1940's. Ray Collins photo, 1965

Gold Rush

The discovery of gold brought about major changes in the Upper Kuskokwim. Prior to the 1906 strike on Ganes Creek, a tributary of the upper Innoko River, only a few non-Natives lived in the region. Fur traders had made their annual trips to the area. A few prospectors wandered through and a few trappers were showing up and establishing traplines but they were "few and far between". Except for the small trading post at Vinasale, established at the end of the Russian era and occupied by Dementieff in the early American era, there were no permanent non-Native settlements.

Frank Densmore was one of the first, if not the first, prospectors to pass through the area. He entered the Kuskokwim via the Native-made portage from Lake Minchumina in 1889 with a party of about five men and descended the North Fork of the Kuskokwim (Brooks 1953: 292). He did not find what he was looking for and continued on down the river in a boat that was loaded with people and dogs. Gleman Esai reported that this was the first party of Americans his father, Old Esai, saw as a child (personal communication). Old Esai was living at Big River village at the time. He had stated that this occurred prior to Lt. Herron's trip in 1899. He also remembered three other men who walked over the mountains (Alaska Range) and went by Big River in the spring, about the same time. They made it as far as the vicinity of the Tatlawiksuk River before the snow got too soft to travel.

In 1906 Thomas Ganes, Mike Roki, John Maki and FCH Spencer crossed the Native-made portage trail between the Kuskokwim and the Innoko Rivers. This trail went up the Big Creek of the Takotna River, across the divide and down what became Ganes Creek. During a lunch break they did some experimental panning and found gold. Hearing of other strikes on the Kuskokwim, the judge at Nome appointed Peter McGrath the U. S. Commissioner of the Kuskokwim that year. He settled at what became McGrath in the spring of 1907, opening a trading post and recording mining claims for the Innoko District. Although Abraham Appel had opened a trading post at the same site in 1904, when Peter McGrath arrived and started a trading post it was called McGrath's (Seward Weekly Gateway, 4/27/1907). In 1913 the post office was established and named McGrath (Ricks 1965:40).

The strikes on Ganes Creek and several other upper Innoko creeks brought hundreds of men to the area. This in turn created the need for regular river boat freighting on the Kuskokwim and Innoko Rivers to bring in supplies and mail. The riverboats created a need for wood for fuel and the Gregory brothers and others spent time in wood camps along the Kuskokwim River cutting wood for the steamboats. Other local people worked as deck hands and firemen on the boats and even acted as captains at times. Pete Gregory, of Vinasale and later Nikolai, worked on the riverboats for years.

The boats wintered near McGrath and each spring had to be repaired and made ready for the next season on the river. Boats that had been pulled out had to be re-launched. Besides this work and wood cutting, Pete Gregory worked his way up and became an oiler during the 1960's. (Oil had replaced wood and the engines needed regular maintenance.) Pete also took over the wheel at

times and always piloted the boat from McGrath to Nikolai up the shallow, winding South Fork to deliver supplies to Medfra and Nikolai.

But riverboats could only operate from May to September while the river was open, so from the beginning of the influx of newcomers a winter trail was needed for personal travel and to bring in mail and supplies during the winter.

Lieutenant Herron had anticipated the need for trails, as stated in his 1899 report. He made the following report based on information he gained from Chief Shesoie and other people at Telida:

> "In exploring my route I found that there already existed throughout its length winter sled trails cut, blazed and in regular use by the Indians and coinciding with or paralleling my trail throughout. I have indicated these on the maps of this report. These trails represent the result of a knowledge of the country accumulated during many generations, as well as the labor of many Indians. They follow direct lines and traverse advantageous ground. These can be economically followed, connected, plainly marked, and made ready for general use.
>
> "A branch trail much used by the Indians leaves the Indian village (Nikolai's village) on the Echeatnu (South Fork) for Vinasale on the Kuskokwim, and a winter sled trail leaves Vinasale for the Yukon. A winter sled trail comes into the Yukon at Nulato from the Kuskokwim. If these are joined they will connect at Nulato with the winter route to Nome and St. Michael.
>
> "Indian guides, familiar with these trails, can be obtained at Tyoonok, the Indian village (Nikolai) on the Echeatnu, Vinasale, and Nulato (Herron 1909:54)."

He was referring to the old trail that led from Vinasale up Beaver Creek, over the divide to the Takotna River, then up Big Creek and over the divide to the Innoko River. The trail then went down the Innoko River to Dishkaket and from Dishkaket cross-country to Nulato.

In 1908 W.L. Goodwin, Engineer in Charge for the Alaska Road Commission, was directed to conduct the initial survey of the new Seward to Nome trail. He left Seward on January 31, 1908, on the Alaska Railroad, which was under construction, disembarking at Mile 54 out of Seward. From there the route he surveyed went to Turnagain Arm, up Glacier Creek, down Eagle River and cross-country to Old Knik. Goodwin then had to cross the Knik Arm to New Knik and then went cross-country to Susitna Station. The trail then went up the Yentna River, the Skwentna and Happy Rivers, Pass Creek to Rainy Pass, down Dalzell Creek, Rohn River and the Kuskokwim River to a point near the mouth of the Tonzona River. From there they went cross-country to the mouth of the Takotna River at McGrath, up the Takotna and cross-country to Takotna Slough, over rolling hills to Ganes Creek, down Ganes and cross-country to Ophir Creek, cross-country to Dishkaket, thence across to the Kaiyuh Slough and on to the Yukon River, up the Yukon to Kaltag. From Kaltag the party followed the existing overland mail trail to Unalakleet and on to Nome.

The survey party traveled with 2 sleds and 15 dogs. They "paced" the whole distance from the end of track to Kaltag and checked their pacing periodically with and without snowshoes. They had with them the 1904 USGS map of Mt. McKinley, the 1898 map of Spurr and Post, and the 1899 map by Lt. Herron. They were able to confirm the maps through to Farewell Mountain but from there to Kaltag found they were in error.

Goodwin's party met Chief Nicholi (Nikolai) at the mouth of the Tonzona River and had him pilot them cross-country to Nicholomas opposite the mouth of the Big River (later known as the Big River village). Except for Chief Nicholi, Goodwin didn't make any other comments concerning Native people of the Upper Kuskokwim area. At Nicholomas they obtained information from a man named Wilson on the route to McGrath's, a trading post and the office of the U.S. Commissioner. About a dozen men rendezvoused there but spent their time hunting and trapping (Goodwin reported that he found game plentiful everywhere). At Tacotna (Takotna) they found few people but many caches as this was the head of pole boat navigation. In 1908 about 200 people lived in the Ophir area, down from some 450 in 1907. Ophir, on the Innoko River, had become the center of the gold mining area.

In the winter of 1910 and 1911 Goodwin completed another trail survey which included straightening and improving the trail. He departed from Nome on November 9, 1910, and arrived in Seward on February 25, 1911. On this trip nine men and six dog teams with seven dogs in each accompanied him. The trail was measured by cyclometers attached to bicycle wheels which were fastened to sleds.

They survey party set up markers each place the trail left the river and tripods across all the open areas. The tripods consisted of two 8-foot poles and a third that was ten or twelve feet long and hung over the trail.

From Dishkaket they marked a side trail to Dikeman where it joined a well marked trail to Iditarod. From Tacotna (Takotna) they cut out a trail that went by the north side of Appel Mountain to Berry 's (at Big River). From Berry 's they cleared a trail eight to ten feet wide by the straightest route from Big River to Farewell. This is part of the trail still in use today that goes by Salmon River and through the "Farewell Burn". The Farewell to which Goodwin referred is the roadhouse site on the South Fork. Trail work ended at Happy River.

Dan Callahan standing under the sign at his roadhouse on the Kuskokwim at the mouth of the Big River, late 1920's or early 1930's. A store and Callahan's quarters are in the wing to the right. Alaska Road Commission photo, Juneau Historic Library, 61-283

It is amazing to see how quickly entrepreneurs took advantage of the trail. By the time Pat O'Cotter published an article on the trail in the Alaska-Yukon Magazine in July of 1911, he reported that there were roadhouses at all points on the trail approximately a day's travel apart. In some places they were only a half day apart. This was a walking distance of about 20 miles so many travelers were able to walk in over the trail and sleep at a roadhouse every night and get a meal. Sometimes they could even stop for lunch. The roadhouses served meals for $.50 to $1.50 apiece and beds cost $.50 to $1.00. There were also dog houses for the teams at most stops and dog food for a nominal cost. This meant a constant stream of travelers along the trail from late October to the end of April.

Local people sold dried fish and meat to the roadhouses and in some cases operated the roadhouses. Bobby Esai told of earning his first wages by helping the mail team drivers who stopped at Big River to unharness their dogs in a dog barn and to feed them. The dog barns had a door at both ends so teams could be driven in one end, tied up in stalls along the side walls, and then hitched up in the morning and driven out the other end. The sled sat in the aisle where it stopped during the night and did not have to be moved (B. Esai, personal communication).

Shortly after the Alaska Railroad was completed through the Alaska Range in 1922, a mail trail was opened on the north side of the mountains. It was routed through Lake Minchumina, Telida and Nikolai to Big River where it joined the Seward-Nome trail. These communities became more directly involved in the trail activities. People at Telida opened a roadhouse. Miska Deaphon and Carl Seseui were hired to carry the mail over sections of the trail. There also were a roadhouse and dog barn in Nikolai.

Most of the people in the Nikolai and Telida areas continued their traditional life of hunting, fishing, and trapping during this era. A few men worked for short periods at placer mines during the summer or assisted miners with assessment work on their claims but most of their time was spent in more traditional activities. When the airplane replaced the dog team in hauling mail and supplies (in the mid-1920's), during the winter the flow of traffic on the trails ceased and the roadhouses closed. There were few non-Native people in the villages and most families spent their summers in fish camps. Their contact with English speakers was limited to trading in Medfra and McGrath and some summer employment at these places. Daily activities in the villages and camps were conducted in the Athabaskan language which remained strong up into the 1960's.

Airplanes

In 1924, an event took place that was to bring about dramatic change to life in the Upper Kuskokwim as well as the rest of rural Alaska. Previously all transportation was by river or trail, both of which took days or even weeks to move mail and goods from one center to another. On February 21, 1924, at 9:00 a.m., Carl Ben Eielson lifted off from Fairbanks heading southwest in a DeHavilland IV airplane. He landed at McGrath at 11:49 a.m., just 2 hours 49 minutes later, with mail. It was the first commercial airmail flight in Alaska, Eielson having been given a contract for this experimental service. In less than ten hours he had made the round trip, allowing some residents in McGrath to answer their mail the same day they received it! The same trip by dog team over the mail trail would have taken 10 days to 2 weeks. On the return trip, Eielson left McGrath at 2:35 p.m. and landed in Fairbanks at 6:30 p.m., in the dark. The plane tipped up on landing and bent the propeller but this did not deter him from going on to complete seven additional airmail deliveries to McGrath, as well as many other trips throughout Alaska (Kusko Times 2/23/24).

This was an indication of things to come and in a few years the airplane completely replaced the dog team mail system and the trail traffic came to a stop except for local travel. The planes not only hauled mail but also passengers and freight.

Miska Deaphon told of hearing that first airplane:

> "The first airplane came in 1924. It flew from Fairbanks to McGrath. The pilot was Ben Eielson. Miska went to Telida that day. He was out hunting moose. There was a rattling noise in the sky. Miska looked up and saw the plane. He stood on his snowshoes and watched the plane. Miska was frightened but he didn't run away. He didn't get a moose. He went home that day with no meat" (Nikolai Reader 1975:4).

Because planes on skis could use many different kinds of landing sites during the winter - such as lakes, rivers, and swamps - people began hiring them to get to and from traplines or to fly in supplies. The following account shows that planes had their down-side as well as up-side. One winter, about 1947, Miska Deaphon and Bobby Esai were staying with their wives in a camp on a large swamp below Jack Stewart's cabin on Big River. It was cold during the month of January and they almost ran out of food. Earlier they had taken furs to Medfra and sold them. They purchased supplies which the mail plane from Fairbanks was to drop off at their camp but the weather turned cold and the planes were not flying. Miska finally got a moose when they were down to one last sheefish they had stored in Stewart's cache (M.Deaphon, personal communication).

Airstrips soon began to appear near Upper Kuskokwim settlements. Old Slow Fork village is located on the Nikolai-Telida trail about four miles above Nikita Petruska's trapline cabin on the East Fork of the Kuskokwim. (This village was originally about a mile above the village but it flooded regularly so it was moved to higher ground.) An airstrip was built right behind the village by Wassily and Sergei Petruska and Alufa Evan soon after airplanes began to make regular trips from Fairbanks to McGrath.

The Telida airstrip was built later by Carl Seseui who did most of the work by hand. In the 1980's, after the school opened in Telida, the village organized a Council. They began to receive funding for the community and with it they purchased a tractor which was driven overland from Lake Minchumina in the winter. The tractor was used to improve the airstrip and keep it clear of snow. Until the presence of a school made possible regular mail flights to Telida, Carl Seseui chartered a plane about once a month to get mail and supplies delivered. He maintained a short-wave radio to arrange these flights with an air taxi operator in McGrath.

Nikolai was one of the last communities in the area to build an airstrip. In the summer and fall of 1962 the original strip was cleared behind the village but it was not in regular use for the first few years. During the winter three alternate areas were used at various times. The river ice in front of the village was the first choice. If this was not available, due to overflow or when the spring thaw weakened the ice, a runway was packed on a large swamp above the village. A third option was *Nikotl'mina'* (Salmonberry Lake) about a mile behind Nikolai. This lake was particularly useful for large planes.

During the summer, sandbars along the South Fork served as landing strips. One was right across the river from Nikolai but it was sometimes too short. A better sandbar was about a mile upstream, on the left. As soon as the river dropped after spring breakup these bars were cleared of any driftwood left by the high water, and utilized as landing strips. The new airstrip behind the village took time to dry up. There was no equipment for removing the snow so it remained until it melted naturally. Additionally, there was no equipment except pick and shovel to lengthen the strip by leveling high spots and filling the low areas.

After the school opened in Nikolai in 1948, scheduled mail flights were made to Nikolai for a few years. Teacher Agnes Rodli arranged to get a post office opened in 1949 but it was discontinued in 1951 after Rodli left, since the Territorial teacher who replaced her did not remain in the village year 'round. Prior to this the closest post office was in Medfra. It opened in 1922 to serve the developing mining camps twelve miles north of Medfra. All Nikolai mail was sent to Medfra before and after the short opening of the Nikolai office, until 1963 when the villagers, assisted by the Collins', successfully petitioned to get weekly mail service during the winter. Nearly everyone in town gathered at the plane on mail days and the mail was sorted and claimed right at the airstrip, as no individual was "in charge of it." Finally, in the late 1960's, a contract post office was opened that is still in service today.

A regular practice in the early years for most villagers was to meet every plane and see who was coming and going. This continued up into the 1970''s. Battery-operated radios were tuned to the air traffic frequencies in McGrath to keep track of the planes. When an airplane approached the village the tethered sled dogs would set up a howl before the plane was discernible to the human ear. This howling was unique to airplanes and was the signal to head for the airstrip. This alarm system did not fall into disuse until the early 1970's when the dog teams were mostly replaced by snowmachines.

In the late 1960's, Don Harris, a contractor in McGrath, was awarded a contract to do some work at the Nikolai school. The river barge had brought in a prefabricated kitchen which was to be attached to the school building for a lunch program. And larger generators were received and had

to be installed. Harris had a Caterpillar tractor shipped to Nikolai on the barge to help complete this work and while there he did some improvement work on the airstrip.

Nikolai village began getting project money after incorporating and some of the State's oil revenue began to flow into rural Alaska for construction projects. Equipment was purchased that could be used on the projects and on the airstrip. Finally in the 1980's the State appropriated the money to lengthen and widen the airstrip, gravel the surface, and construct a building to house a grader for keeping the runway cleared of snow. With these improvements the alternate fields ceased being used with the exception of Salmonberry Lake, which could be cleared to handle large freight planes in late winter or early spring when the ice was thick enough.

Starvation, Sickness and Health Care

There are some stories that tell of periodic starvation which had significant impact on the population of Upper Kuskokwim people. However, epidemics of diseases brought by the Europeans had far reaching and devastating effects on Native populations.

It is not clear when the first epidemics reached the Upper Kuskokwim. There is an early record, in the 1830's, of smallpox decimating many Alaskan communities. When it hit some Yup'ik communities in western Alaska, they blamed the Russians who had recently arrived in the area and had established trading posts on the lower Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers. In 1838, in retaliation, the Yup'iks attacked and destroyed Russian Mission (Zagoskin 1967:236,237). Whether this particular epidemic affected the Upper Kuskokwim is not known; there are no specific accounts in oral tradition.

At some time in the 1800's various diseases began reaching the Upper Kuskokwim. When Lt. Herron visited Telida in 1899, there were no residents that he estimated to be over 35, nor were there many children. The ages of people at Minchumina were similar, though one resident was about 50 years of age and another about 40. Life seemed to be particularly hard on the elderly and the young.

The situation continued to deteriorate. In the early 1900's, when contact with the outside world began to intensify, the only medical treatment available was that practiced by the shamans, and traditional herbal remedies. Neither of these remedies was effective in dealing with the new diseases introduced by newcomers. When Hudson Stuck traveled in 1910 through Telida, East Fork village and Nikolai (second location), he noted a large number of new graves, of which many were children.

The world-wide influenza epidemic of the early 1900's apparently reached the Upper Kuskokwim. Miska Deaphon (personal communication) related that his grandfather, Chief Nikolai, had five sons. Three of them died at this time, leaving only Deaphon and Miska Nikolai. The sickness was described as a form of flu similar to whooping cough. People would cough very hard, then choke and die in a very short time. Gleman Esai reported that his family and a few others spent the winter out in the Alaska Range and therefore avoided this sickness. Many of Bobby Esai's family (the Wassilys) died at this time. Bobby and a brother who survived were taken in and raised by Grandpa Esai.

In the late 1920's, when Gleman Esai was about 30 years old, he went to a gathering of shamans over on the Kantishna River between Birch Creek and Nenana. Five shamans had gathered there to attempt to deal with sickness that was sweeping through the area. This may have been the last organized attempt by the shamans to deal with serious illness. Gleman was told that if he wanted to avoid the sickness, when he left for home he was not to look back for the first few miles. Each night he was to pass by his intended campsite, tie the dogs, and then return to his camp alone. When Gleman went through Nikolai on his way to Big River everyone was sick except Antone Pitka and his sister Anna. They were taking care of the fires for everyone in the village. Carl Seseui and Andrew Dennis were also on the trail at this time, returning from the gathering (G.Esai, personal communication).

The Upper Kuskokwim people began to embrace western medicine, but not every experience was a positive one. One example of the unorganized and chancy nature of health care from sources outside the villages is the following story about Helen Nikolai Esai. In 1948, when Helen was three years old, she was living in Telida with her parents. She was a sickly child and unable to walk. One day a bush pilot stopped at the village and the parents asked him to take their daughter to a hospital. He accommodated, taking her to the Public Health Service Hospital at Tanana where he left her. The problem was that he left without giving them any information about Helen, so the hospital registered her as "Jane Doe". They had no idea who she was nor where she was from. She spoke her own language as a 3-year-old would, but not English, so she could tell them nothing about herself. Helen was treated for rheumatic fever and her health was restored. Her family moved to Nikolai when the school opened and the parents asked Agnes Rodli and Mildred James, the teachers, to write to Tanana to see if their child was there. The doctor replied immediately and within a short time Helen was reunited with her family in Nikolai after having been gone for a year! (Rodli 1963:139).

Tuberculosis (TB) reached epidemic status in rural Alaska in the 1940's and 1950's. Some families, such as that of Mrs. Gogomy Dennis, lost several children and spouses to the disease. Treatment was just becoming available and many patients were sent to the Alaska Native Service Hospital in Anchorage, a treatment facility in Sitka, Alaska, and even a hospital in Tacoma, Washington. With medication and sometimes surgery, some were healed and allowed to return to their homes.

Junior Gregory, who spent many months in the hospital in Anchorage, received some medical training while he was being treated for TB. When he returned to Nikolai, he served for many years as the health care provider for the village. He was given a limited supply of medicines and, when he could make radio contact, would receive advice from the Public Health Nurse at McGrath or doctors at the Alaska Native Service Hospital in Anchorage. He served for many years as a volunteer, daily making rounds of all the homes to check on people's health needs (J. Gregory, personal communication).

Around 1970 an organized Health Aide program was established by the Tanana Chiefs Conference with more extensive training provided, and village clinics were established.

In 1949 two nurses from the Alaska Native Service, Esther Schaubel and Ruth Grover, made the first medical visit to Nikolai. They tested everyone for TB and only eight of the tests were negative; all the others had been exposed to the disease (Rodli 1963:138). It was not until 1963 that a physician from the Alaska Native Health Service, Dr. Gloria Parks, held a general medicine clinic in Nikolai, just in time to diagnose the first case of mumps in village history. In the following three months 80 of the 100 residents contracted the disease - only the very young and the very old were spared.

Until the mid-1960's nearly all babies were delivered by traditional mid-wives. Then the Alaska Native Health Service began to provide more hospital care, paying airplane fare for expectant mothers and others needing medical care to travel to the hospital in Anchorage.

When Upper Kuskokwim people became reliant on western medicine to treat these new illnesses, and even such routine events as childbirth, the practice of traditional medicine was pretty much abandoned.

Gogomy Dennis taking his daughter Martha to the airplane to be hospitalized at Seward for Tuberculosis treatment. Theodore Pitka on the right, 1948-50. Agnes Rodli photo 1

Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church began to influence the people of the Upper Kuskokwim soon after their arrival on the Kuskokwim River in the 1830's. The traders were authorized to conduct services and baptize. They were also accompanied by priests in later years.

When people were baptized they were given a Russian name. When the priest Illarion went up to the mouth of the Holitna River and conducted services for the Upper Kuskokwim people who traveled there in 1861, he commented on their devotion. They had given up important summer fishing time and had brought their whole families to benefit from the priest's services. The men could have gone alone had they just wanted to trade but the people were already committed to the Church and brought their families with them.

When Illarion started to bring his records up to date he indicated whether the people were baptized by priest or layman, but found that many had forgotten their names (new baptismal names). By the end of the 19th century the people had adopted Russian surnames. If they were given Athabaskan names none have survived. It is very seldom in oral histories that an Athabaskan name shows up but everyone has a Russian name. This switch may have been facilitated in part by the traditional practice of avoiding personal names and using kinship terms when referring to someone, or addressing them. People may have found it easier to use the new "church" names. Athabaskan names have only survived as nicknames in the Upper Kuskokwim.

In the early years the priests ascended the Kuskokwim River no farther than the Holitna River. In later years they went as far upriver as Vinasale and all the people would gather there from throughout the Upper Kuskokwim area. Edward Hosley was told that a priest made his first visit to the Tonzona village of Chief Nikolai in 1900, one year after Lt. Herron's visit (Hosley 1966:168). If so, this would not have been the priest that came the same year as the first steamboat because the first steamboat arrived in 1910.

The first church in the upper Kuskokwim country, St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, was built at Old Nikolai in 1910. It was moved to the current site of Nikolai in 1918. A few years later it was replaced by a new church building constructed by Theodore Pitka. Old Man Gregory bought most of the lumber for it. Miska Deaphon related that his father, Nikolai Deaphon, traveled all the way down the river to Kolmakofsky to obtain icons for the new church. At some time a church bell was also purchased and installed. When the original church was replaced at Nikolai a small structure was placed over the location of its altar and marked with a cross. It can still be seen in the cemetery adjacent to the church.

The first visit by a priest to Telida was in approximately 1914 (Hosley 1966:174) and the first church, St. Michael ’s, was built in Old Telida in 1918. After Telida was moved to the current site, Carl Seseui took the church building apart and moved it. It is the oldest surviving church in the Upper Kuskokwim basin. The churches at Nikolai and Telida were built and paid for entirely by local people.

After the church at Nikolai was built it became the custom for all the people from Vinasale and Telida to gather there on January 7 for the celebration of Russian Orthodox Christmas.

Whenever possible, a priest was brought in. After the Telida church was built, the priest sometimes journeyed there for Russian New Year's on January 14.

The practice of Slavic, or "starring", was introduced by the Church and is carried on in Nikolai today as it is throughout Alaska in communities with Russian Orthodox congregations. Carolers visit each home for three days in a group, carrying elaborately decorated, candle-lit pinwheels called the "star" and "moon". Food is then offered to the carolers - sometimes an entire meal. At times an airplane is chartered to convey some of the carolers to Telida, and in more recent years some have made the trip by snowmachine so that both communities are involved in the celebration.

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Nikolai, Alaska, 1965. Ray Collins photo

Russian Orthodox Church at Telida, 1949. C. Craft LeFebre photo

Pete Gregory, Carl Seseui, Russian Orthodox Priest, and Chief Devian in St. Nicholas Church at Nikolai, 1958. Katherine Deaphon photo

World War II

Though no residents of Nikolai or Telida were drafted, World War II (War) had some impact on the people of the Upper Kuskokwim. With the military buildup in McGrath, and the improvement of the airfield, there was more work available. There was also an increase in riverboat traffic and jobs related to it. In the Fairbanks area the construction of military bases and the Alcan Highway attracted workers from the Interior. Bobby Esai was one who worked around Fairbanks for civilian contractors hired by the military.

By Executive Order the gold mines all ceased operating during the War and the heavy equipment and supplies were removed for use in military construction projects. This resulted in some loss of jobs for local residents, Native and non-Native.

The government provided Carl Seseui of Telida with the first short-wave radio transceiver in the area, and a generator to operate it. With it he reported weather from the head of the Kuskokwim, and kept watch for and reported air traffic in that area (Seseui, personal communication).

The trading posts at Medfra and McGrath received a year's supply of food and other merchandise by river barge once during each open season. This service continued so rural Alaska did not suffer the shortages and rationing that affected other parts of Alaska and the contiguous states.

The increased pressure of new people in the McGrath area had some negative impacts. Pete Gregory related that their old family cache at Vinasale Lake was robbed during this time. Someone made off with old rifles and other family possessions that had been stored there (P. Gregory, personal communication).

Following the War, trapping again became the main winter economic activity for many area residents. Some area gold mines re-opened in the 1950's on a limited scale but did not return to full production until the price of gold was deregulated in the 1970's. Upper Kuskokwim people have had only limited experience working in the mines. They provided some labor, and in 1963 were still doing assessment work for Bertha Winans, the trader at Medfra, on her claims.

Indian homes and newly constructed Russian Orthodox Church at Telida, 104 miles to nearest trading post by winter trail, March 12, 1919. Stephen Foster Collection, UAF Archives, 69-92-315

Air view of Telida village with airfield. Mt. McKinley in background, 1955. Ray Collins photo

Telida

Foundation of Telida Village

The story of the founding of Telida is a remarkable tale of hardship, courage and resourcefulness. Two families from the upper Kuskokwim were living in the foothills near *Denaze* (Mt. McKinley). While the men were out hunting they were killed by some other men who were never identified. Somehow the women became aware of what was happening and managed to avoid the raiders. They must have fled their camp with very little as they seem only to have had a knife and no other weapons or tools.

The women were fortunate in that spring was near. At that time of year ground squirrels start coming out of their burrows. But how could they catch them? They found some eagle feathers under a nest. By stripping the feathers they made snares out of the spines. They were able to catch enough squirrels to feed themselves through the summer. One of the strengths of Athabaskan life has been to travel light and to have the knowledge of how to make what is needed with just a few simple tools, as illustrated in this story.

The women could not have survived the winter in the foothills, however, as the squirrels go into hibernation, and they had no means of catching large game such as sheep and caribou. So they started down the Kuskokwim valley by way of the Todzolno' (Swift Fork on the maps but locally called the McKinley Fork of the Kuskokwim). The only food they found on the way was berries. Finally they came to a creek flowing out of a large lake where they found whitefish. Somehow they made a fish weir and began catching the fish that were migrating out of the lake. They caught a lot of whitefish, and at last had plenty of food and could even put enough away to see them through the winter. The fish run at this lake occurs just prior to freeze-up and the fish can be dried or stored in underground pits and allowed to freeze. These are the large lake whitefish locally called tilaya and the place became known as tilayadi' or "whitefish place."

Next the women used something to make a winter house. This was the old style semi-subterranean house called, appropriately, nin'yekayih (in-the-ground house). The ground was

excavated to a depth of three or four feet and a pole frame constructed. The frame was covered with a layer of birch bark, or perhaps grass, and then covered over with dirt and sod. There was a smoke hole in the middle of the roof. This is the same type of house that is described in all the old stories where smoke was seen coming out of the ground and people could walk up on the house and look down through the smoke hole. Carl Seseui described such a house as "all the same, beaver house".

By the time the house was completed it was winter. During all that time the women had not seen any other people, but one day during the winter, someone came to the door and asked, "Who are you people?" The person who came to the door was their only brother who lived somewhere down the Kuskokwim River. He had been looking all over for them and had finally located them on the McKinley Fork.

From that time on people continued to live at Telida, catch whitefish, and to travel out to the mountains by way of the McKinley Fork. This is the way the story had been told from long ago (Seseui and Deaphon, personal communication).

Other versions of the ending of this story have made their way into print. Edward Hosley was led to believe that the women were found by stragglers from the war party who then settled down with them at Telida. However, the current elders in Nikolai and Telida believe they were found by relatives who went looking for them when they did not come back from the mountains. This is the most logical version. Warriors often took women in raids and married them. However, they usually took them home. To settle down near where their husbands were killed would be to invite revenge by the men's relatives once the story was out. In any case, relatives of these two women still live in the upper Kuskokwim but the event was so long ago that knowledge of the direct kinship links has been lost.

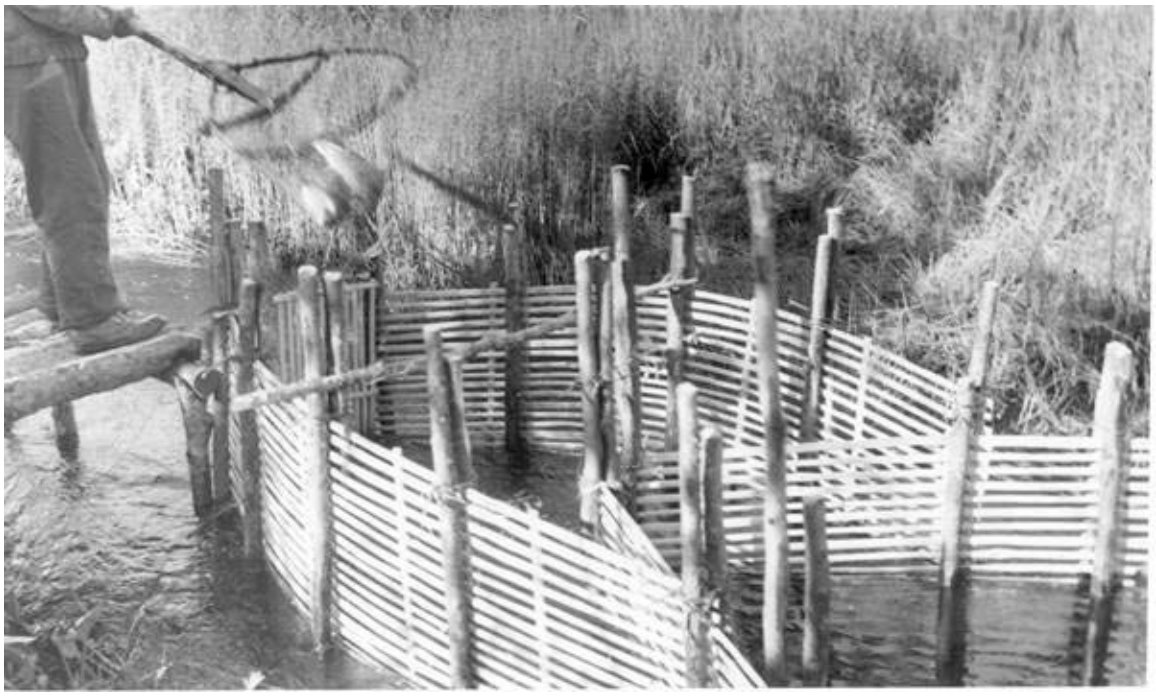
When the Anthropologist Charlene Craft and party visited Telida in the summer of 1949, Carl Seseui showed them two underground house depressions. He said one of them was the house of the two women.

There have been three Telida winter village sites, the first being the one visited by the Herron party in 1899 when he was rescued by Chief Shesoie, Carl Seseui's father. In 1900, the village site was moved ½ mile upstream due to erosion of the Swift Fork (locally called McKinley Fork). In 1935, Carl moved it downriver to higher ground (present site) where an airfield could be constructed (Seseui, personal communication). In addition to winter sites, numerous summer fishing sites have been utilized throughout the area.

Carl Seseui carving snowshoe pieces, Telida, 1949. C. Craft LeFebre photo

Carl Seseui assembling fish trap, Telida, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo

Fish trap parts mad of spruce wood, Telida, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo



Carl Seseui dipping whitefish *(tilaya)* from trap at mouth of Telida Lake, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo

Mrs. Carl Seseui prepares fish for drying, Telida, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo

Re-covering a canoe, Telida, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo 1

Carl Seseui paddles on Telida Lake in recently rebuilt canoe, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo

Carl Seseui's inboard gas boat, Telida, 1949. C. Craft LeFebre photo 2

Telida Village Stories

Ts'ek'its'a Kwnja'

Wassily Petruska told the story of a woman who lived at Telida with her younger brother who liked to snare ground squirrels. She is an example of how tough and resourceful people used to be.

> *Ts'ek'its'a* was a woman who lived at Telida with her brother. She went up *Todzo » no'* (McKinley Fork or Swift Fork on the current maps) to the foothills. She went without any matches, rifle, bow, or dogs. All she carried was a knife and some smoldering birch punk for making a fire.
>
> Her younger brother left, going downriver in a canoe. When he got back to Telida they told him she had left for the mountains by herself.
>
> She was catching a lot of squirrels. She also roasted them over the fire to eat. After eating she lay down to sleep by the fire. The sun went down and it got dark. While she was sleeping she suddenly became aware that something had come up and was standing near her by the fire. There was only a little fire still burning. She took some of the dry grass she was sleeping on and carefully reached out to where there was still a little fire. When it flared up she thrust it into the long belly hair of the animal standing by the fire. They still tell the story about what happened. The "one to be afraid of" (grizzly bear) took off running. Way over there she saw it run into the timber, still burning in the dark (Dinak'i Ch'its'utozre-3 1973:8-10).

A Time of Hunger

As told by Miska Deaphon

Many years ago, somewhere up by Telida, there lived a man and his wife. They had a little baby. They were really starving. They would not have made it through the rest of the winter without food. The man hunted but he never got anything. He even looked along the lakes for blackfish. As he was going along he found an otter hole in a lake. Even though the otter kept coming up, he only had a knife with which to kill it.

While he was trying to get the otter his clothes got wet and began to freeze. He kept on trying, however, to kill the otter. Finally he tired it out and was able to kill it with his knife. He was too weak to carry it all, so he cut off the otter's tail. This was all he was able to carry. He started to return to his home but finally got so tired he gave up.

His wife at home became worried about him. She kept going out looking and listening for him. Finally it got dark. She went back out again and heard him calling. But because she had a little one to take care of she did not attempt to follow her husband's voice in the dark.

The night passed slowly and finally it was morning. She set off in the direction from which she had heard her husband calling. But before she left she bundled up her baby in lots of things so he would not get cold while she was gone. As she went along she came across a lake. This was where she found her husband. He was all frozen. When she moved him she found he was still warm under the armpits. She searched him carefully and found the otter tail. She went back to her baby and found him just the way she had left him.

The next morning she followed the tracks left by her husband to see if she could find the otter. She finally came to the place where the otter was. It was under the snow where her husband had buried it.

She could not do anything with her husband because the snow had drifted over him. She and her baby, however, were able to live on the otter until spring arrived.

Barbara’s Story

Based on an interview with **Barbara Nikolai** in 1984,
published in Old Channel.
Translated by Steven Nikolai.
Recorded by Helen Frost

Times were sometimes hard in the past. Barbara Nikolai's grandmother grew up around Telida. One time some people came to Telida and took her back to Minchumina to be someone's wife. There she had a daughter who later became Barbara's mother. The grandmother didn't like the man she was staying with so she decided to leave him and return to Telida.

She was going over Telida Mountain carrying her daughter on her back when her brother-in-law, who had followed her, caught up with her. She fell unconscious when he struck her on the head with a knife. When she woke up she found that her bother-in- law had gone, leaving her and her infant daughter. When she had recovered enough she continued on her way to Old Telida. But when she arrived the village was empty.

When people went on nomadic hunts they had a way of leaving messages for anyone looking for them. She found a stick pointing in the direction the villagers had gone. She went down Old Channel towards the North Fork of the Kuskokwim River looking for them. Her brother was with the Telida people and, while out hunting, he thought he heard his sister crying. He didn't find her but went back and told people in the camp what he had heard. That night she came out on the bank across the river from the camp. This would have been in the spring or summer when it is light enough to travel all night.

They went across and picked her up. She had not eaten for a long time but they nursed her back to health and took care of her daughter. The daughter (Barbara's mother) was then raised around Telida.

When she grew up she also married a man from Minchumina named Jocko. He took her back to Minchumina and Barbara was born there but they also spent time at Telida. When Barbara was growing up people still moved around a lot. She learned to catch rabbits in snares. Her parents took her on trips out to the foothills of the Alaska Range. They even spent a whole year out there one time. At the foothills they would snare ground squirrels and hunt big game. She described it as being a good place because it was open country and you could see a long ways and spot all kinds of animals.

When staying at the foothills they would make a house out of black spruce with the limbs on (*i » yekayih*). They would cover this with a canvas tarp that they carried. They would cook and heat with an open fire near the door. Barbara's mother carried five small steel traps in her pack that she used to catch ground squirrels. When the weather turned cold her father would catch some small caribou. Her mother tanned and sewed the hides together to make blankets.

When they came down from the foothills they would travel down to Telida Lake where they would catch whitefish. They were still using the same country and routes as the two sisters who had originally founded Telida. They could catch up to ten whitefish at a time using a moose sinew gill net in the lake. In the late fall when the fish moved out of the lakes they would use a fence trap and dipnet.

They were already using guns when Barbara was born in 1905 but her dad remembered when they had to use bows and arrows. At that time they used dogs for hunting. The dogs could run down a moose. It would stop when surrounded and people could approach it and make a kill with a bow and arrow. The dogs could also carry packs when they went out to the foothills.
Barbara was about 15 when she first saw an airplane. She described it as an open cockpit type, probably a DeHavilland like that flown by Ben Eielson, the pilot who flew the first airmail from Fairbanks to McGrath on February 21, 1924.

Telida School

Telida did not get its own school until 1975. Prior to that the children had to leave the village if they wanted to attend school. One of the options for elementary children was the Wrangell Institute, a boarding school in southeast Alaska. When they completed the eighth grade they could go on to Mount Edgecumbe High School. In the late 1950's Steve Eluska and his sister Agnes went to Wrangell Institute. Their parents lived at McKinley Fork and Telida. Like many other elementary children they found themselves a long way from home in a school where only English was spoken. They had grown up speaking only Athabaskan at home. After a few years they went to Nikolai to stay with their grandmother to finish school. At that time students were required to remain in school until they were 16 or had finished the eighth grade.

Other students from Telida also boarded with relatives in Nikolai in order to attend school. Because families came to believe that school was important, they were willing to allow their elementary children to be boarded out, sometimes at their own expense. There may also have been some pressure from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to place their children in school.

Carl Seseui, the chief of Telida village, began requesting assistance in getting a school at Telida. During the 1960's more than one letter was written, but all requests for a school were denied. The usual reason given was that there were not enough children at Telida, while in fact many families were living elsewhere so their children could attend school. Because of Telida's small population there was no political force to gain assistance from legislators to initiate a school.

Finally the "Molly Hootch" lawsuit, filed in 1972, focused attention on small communities which had no schools such as Telida. In the summer of 1974 the State Department of Education contracted with an Anchorage consulting firm to survey the situation in Telida and present evidence which could be used to determine whether or not the community had a sufficient number of students to justify a school. The consultant, Terry Chase, met with Ernie Holmberg, the sub-regional director of the Tanana Chiefs Conference in McGrath which served Telida village. They contacted parents of prospective Telida students who were in McGrath for summer work, and wrote to other parents to determine how many students would be at Telida if there were a school located there. Then they made a visit to Telida to meet with parents to determine if they in fact wanted a school. They found 8-10 school age children there at the time. Mr. Chase took a picture to submit with the report. The report surprised personnel at the Department of Education and led them to initiate a school program at Telida the next fall. The Department was apparently quite certain that the report would show insufficient children and allow them to end the pressure for a school.

The community was given the option of having a new school built or of leasing their recently completed community building to the State. After discussing the matter they decided in favor of a new building. The community building was leased until the new one-room school was completed in 1976. The school design was the same as the one built at Lime Village at the same time. Lime Village was another small community that had never had a school. Both schools were taken over from the State by the newly formed Iditarod Area School District when it began operation in the fall of 1976.

The school was closed again in 1996 as the enrollment dropped below the 10 students now required by the State to operate as an independent school site

The following chart provides some information about the Telida School:

Year	Enrollment	Teacher	Comments
1975-76	**8**	Paul Chevalier	
1976-77	**6**	Jane Anderson	
1977-78	**6**	Gordon Castanza	
1978-79	**14**	Gordon Castanza	Operated only half of the year and was closed due to declining enrollment. Remaining students on Correspondence study
1979-80	**6**	Alan Dick	
1980-81	**6**	Alan Dick	
1981-82		Helen Frost	
1982-83		Helen Frost	
1983-84		Helen Frost Thompson	
1984-85		Merla Barberie	

S. Collins 1985

Families of Telida and East Fork

Historic Families at Telida

In assigning families to Nikolai or Telida it should be noted that people frequently moved around, living for varying periods of time in different places, and this was always true of Upper Kuskokwim residents. The first written record we have of the people of Telida is Lt. Herron's report of his 1899 visit. He listed a Shesoie (Seseui) family; Bacilli (Wassily) family; a Tenesche (Dennis) family; and the Rubber Indian (probably Jocko) family (Herron 1909:67).

The **Shesoie family**, consisting of Shesoie, Barian, Annisa, Gara and a 6-month old infant, is discussed in more detail in this section under the heading "Chief Seseui's Family".

The identity of the **Bacilli family** is not clear. It may be the family of Wassily, the brother of Barian (Mary), Chief Seseui's wife.

The **Tenesche family** appears to be the Dennis family who were said to have settled on the East Fork. The wife is listed as Annisa and they had three sons and a daughter at the time of Herron's visit. Eulian (William) was 16 years old; Andre (Andrew) was 10; Kurgurvey (Gogomy) was 8; and Eleana (Helen Lena) was 5. (The Dennis family is expounded on in the Nikolai Family section as that is where Andrew, Gogomy and Lena later settled).

The other family listed at Telida was referred to as **Rubber Indian**, with a wife Yocutter and an infant son Wastinia (5 months old). It is highly probable that this would have been Barbara Jocko's parents as they should have been living at Telida at that time. Hosley listed Barbara, who was born about 1905 after Herron's visit, as having a sister named Wastinia with no birth date given (Hosley 1966:178). Herron may have been mistaken about the gender of the 5-month old infant. It is also possible that Yocutter was identified as Jocko's wife rather than by her own name, and he listed her as Yocutter (his interpretation of Jocko). There undoubtedly was a language barrier and it was not unusual for women to be identified by as "the wife of....." (a practice which still exists today). Based on the information available today, it seems highly likely that this is the Jocko family but there is no explanation for the name "Rubber Indian" given to the man. (For further information on the Jocko family, see "Barbara's Story" in the Telida Village Stories section).

Using the above information and rationale, it appears that the four families at Telida during the Lt. Herron expedition were: Chief Seseui, his brother-in-law Wassily, the Dennis family and the Jocko family.

Lt. Herron obtained from the people at Telida the names of the men who lived at the mouth of the Tonzona River (when he passed through there in August of 1899 the village was empty). He listed these men as Nikoli (chief), Dia-sohn, Mit-ar-uska, Bacilli, Kur-gur-vey and Soy-on (Herron 1909:66). He estimated the population to be about 20.

East Fork Village

The only other village he marked on his map was the one on the East Fork which had only empty houses. He later determined that they belonged to people at Telida (Herron 1909:67). It is not clear what time of the year these houses were occupied, but the fact that they were of wood and contained a stove may indicate that they were for winter occupancy, perhaps in relation to trapping in the vicinity.

When Hudson Stuck passed through the area in the winter of1910 he found people in residence on the East Fork but he did not name them (Stuck 1914:312). The Petruska and Evan families have stated that they wintered there when growing up, and after moving to Nikolai for school in the late 1940's they have continued to maintain trapping cabins there.

Contemporary Families at Telida

Chief Seseui's Family

Chief Seseui was only about 35 years old when he rescued the Lt. Herron party in 1899 and took them to Telida. Seseui, the clearly recognized leader of the Telida people, arranged for the feeding of the party during their two-month stay, and then led them to Ft. Gibbon on the Yukon River. Lt. Herron reported that Seseui had already made trading trips to the post there, demonstrating his extensive knowledge of the country.

In 1903 when Judge Wickersham was traveling up the Kantishna River, he met a group of Indians from Lake Minchumina who were building a birch-bark canoe and tanning moose hides. Their leader was Chief Shesoie (Seseui). This meeting took place near the mouth of Moose Creek on the Kantishna River. Wickersham stated:

> "In the afternoon, the storm having subsided, we climbed the bluffs again to study the country in company with the chief (Seseui) and Old Ivan, who had for many years hunted around the heads of the streams approaching Denali. Those hunters (Seseui and Ivan) traced the location of the various streams in that direction and pointed out the gaps in the hills through which we must go to reach the great glacier which they tell us comes from its summit. They also traced the course of the Kuskokwim to its source in the Nuchusala, or Bull Moose Mountains" (Wickersham 1938:256).

This account makes it clear that Seseui was very familiar with all the streams and drainages flowing out of Denali Park. This also indicates that Chief Seseui and Minchumina Ivan showed Judge Wickersham the way he had to go in order to climb Mt. McKinley. They also helped correct the map that Wickersham was following as he found it was "incorrect".

Wickersham stated:

> "After consulting with the Indian Chief (Seseui) and his aged hunters, we determined to cache our boats at this place - up the slough a mile or two, and go across the Chitsia Hills towards the base of Denali. They advised that course and we accept their judgement" (Wickersham 1938:256).

Wickersham also wrote about Chief Seseui's role in saving the Herron party.
Lt. Herron recorded that Seseui was married to Barian (Mary) and they had three children - a daughter Annisa, who was about 12; Carl, who was about 5; and an infant about 6 months old. Hosley, who talked to Carl in the 1960's, listed three boys and a girl (Hosley 1966:178). The last boy would have been born after Herron's visit. Seseui's wife Barian (Mary) was a sister of Devian Wassily and Petruska.

Only Carl survived to adulthood. He married Alexandria Petruska, the sister of Maxine, Sergie and Wassily. They had no children but they adopted his uncle Maxine's son Pete, and Gleman Esai's daughter Betty, who was just a baby when her mother died.

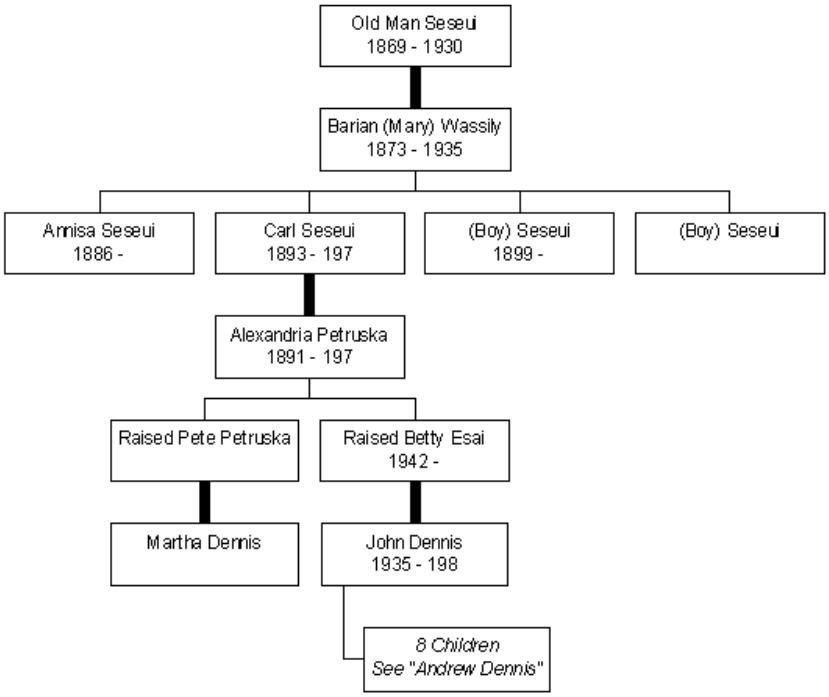
Carl was an excellent hunter, trapper and fisherman. He was Chief of Telida for many years and the government provided him with a radio transceiver to report weather and the presence of enemy aircraft during World War II. After the war he maintained a radio and small generator in Telida to charter a plane to bring mail and supplies or get help in medical emergencies. In his youth he had spotted the tracks of Lt. Herron's horses and asked his dad what kind of animal made that kind of track. This observation led to the rescue and deliverance of the Herron party.

He was one of the first to build a river boat powered by an inboard engine. He built his own canoes, snowshoes, and sleds as did most men of his generation. Early in the 1960's he purchased one of the first snowmachines and used it to haul wood. It was a Polaris Snow Traveler.

Carl organized the move of Telida to its present location and he dismantled and moved the Russian Orthodox Church building. He initiated and did much of the work on the original airstrip which was built entirely with hand tools.

For many years in the 1950's and 1960's he moved his family each summer to a fish camp site at Medfra.

Descendants of Old Man Seseui



Mary Seseui, mother of Carl Seseui, Telida, 1949. C. Craft LeFebre photo

Carl Seseui and wife Alexandria, Telida March 20, 1919. UAF Stephen Foster Collection 69-9293

Indians at Lake Minchumina, April 12, 1919. UAF, Stephen Foster Collection 69-92-334

Front row: 2 nd from left, John Evan; 4 th from left, his wife; 5 th from left, Abbie Dooga (who moved to Telida and then Nikolai where she lived out her life). Back row: 2 nd from left, Roosevelt John, 4 th from left, Carl Seseui.

Mrs. Carl Seseui (Alexandria Petruska) scraping a moose hide, Telida, 1949. C. Craft Lefebre photo

Miska Nikolai, Mary Petruska (Carl Seseui's mother), Deacon Petruska. Katherine Deaphon photo

Eluska Family

Old Man Eluska grew up around Vinasale and the Takotna River village. He married a woman named Alexandria and they had at least two children who lived, Deacon and Ilya Eluska. Ilya married Mary Deaphon, the sister of Miska Deaphon. They had four living children when he died in 1944. They were: Deaphon who married Heldina Nikolai; Katherine who married a man named Chandler and moved to Fairbanks ; Mary who married Sammy John of Crooked Creek; and Demoski. After their mother died, their uncle Miska Deaphon took in the younger children - Katherine, Mary and Demoski. Mary's first child, David, was adopted and raised by Miska and his wife Katherine.

Deaphon moved to Telida where he married Heldina Nikolai, daughter of Miska and Barbara Nikolai, a long-time area family. They lived at Telida and also at McKinley Fork where they raised their three children, Steve, Agnes and Andrew.

During the summer the Eluskas would move to fish camp near Medfra or sometimes at McGrath. There they put up dry fish, or Deaphon would find work. In the fall they returned to McKinley Fork with their fish and winter supplies. In the winter he trapped his lines out of McKinley Fork.

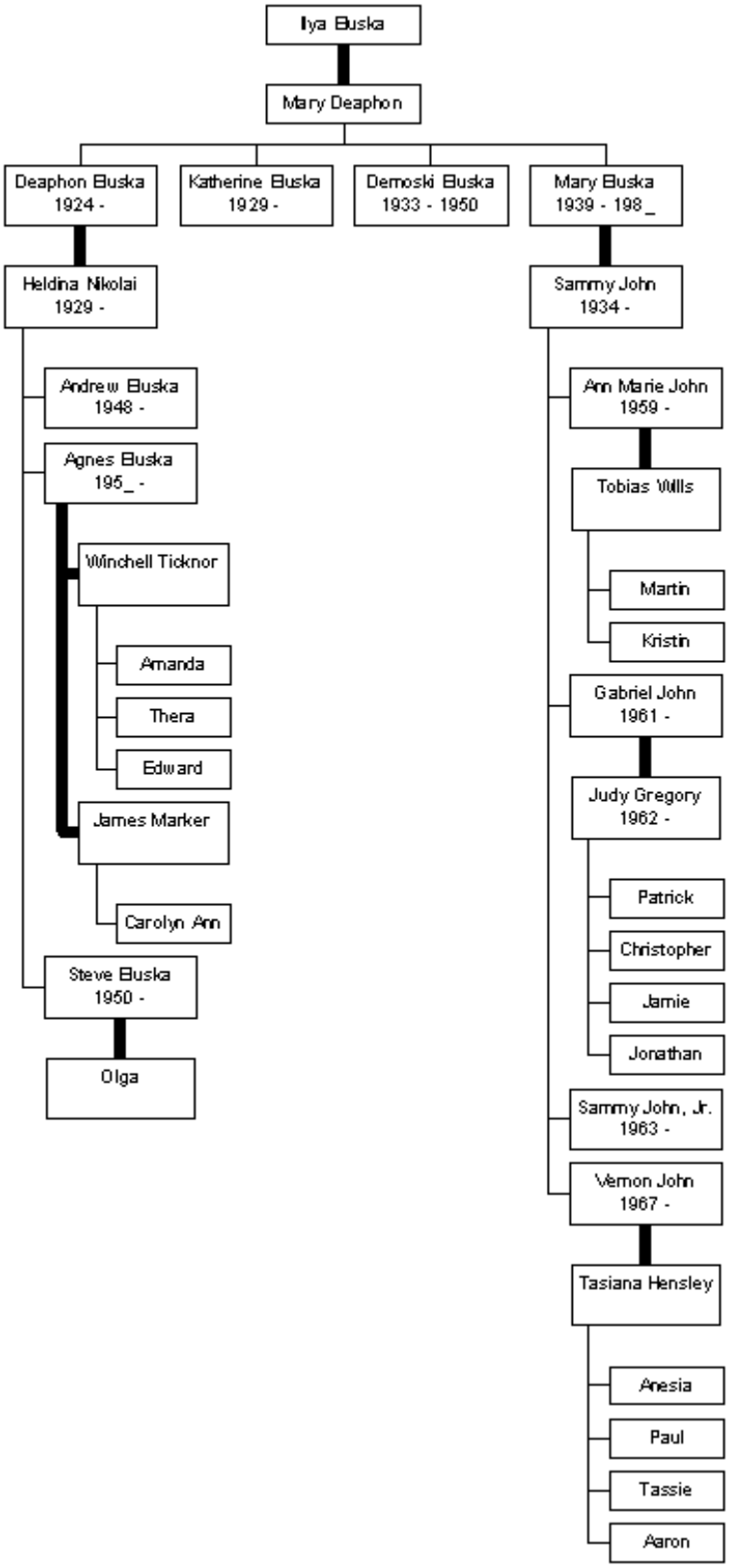
In more recent years Deaphon and Heldina have been wintering at Telida where there are an airstrip and a phone system, making it easier to get supplies and medical service when needed.

After two of the Eluska children, Steve and Agnes, reached school age they attended the Wrangell Institute near Wrangell in Southeast Alaska where the Bureau of Indian Affairs operated a boarding school for elementary students. Until that time they had spoken only the Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan language. Later they attended school in Nikolai where Agnes completed the 8 th grade. Steve attended until he reached the age of 16. They boarded with their

grandmother Barbara Nikolai who had moved to Nikolai so that her younger children could attend school. When they were out of school they moved back to Telida. Agnes' children began their education at the Telida School before they moved to Anchorage in the late 1980's.

Steve became the maintenance man at the school when it opened and has kept the generators running and the airstrip cleared of snow for many years. After the school closed in 1996, and Steven Nikolai and his family moved to Nikolai for schooling, Steve Eluska and his parents became the last residents of Telida.

Descendants of Ilya Eluska



Petruska and Evan Families

Old Man **Petruska** is listed by Hosley as being one of the permanent residents of Telida village (Hosley 1966:177) but he was raised at Slow Fork where his father Wassilia had settled. He was a brother of Devian Wassilia, and Mary Wassilia who married Chief Seseui. Petruska married a woman named Lena from Slow Fork. He was not in Telida or Slow Fork in 1899, however, when Lt. Herron went through. The Telida people told Herron that there was a Mit-ar-uska living at the Tonzona village. This may have been where he was spending that winter. He would already have been married at that time since he already had three children - Sergie, born about 1889; Maxine about 1890; and Alexandria, born about 1891. His youngest son, Wassily, was born about 1900. The family lived at Telida and at the old Slow Fork village. Alexandria married Carl Seseui of Telida, and Sergie became chief of Telida village when the old chief Seseui died in 1930.

Maxine Petruska married and had three children - Melissia, Deacon and Pete. Maxine slipped on an icy trail and injured his hip some time in the 1930's. He went to the hospital in Fairbanks for surgery but after returning from Fairbanks he broke it open and it would not heal. He died about three years later. Melissia was married for a time to Old Man Pitka and had a daughter Betty. Betty went to High School in Sitka and was later sent to Tacoma for TB treatment. At some time she was married to a man named Frane. Melissia later married Tom Roemer, a white man. After his parents died, Pete was adopted by Carl and Alexandria Seseui (Alexandria was his paternal aunt). Pete married Martha Dennis but they had no children.

Wassily Petruska lived with the other Petruskas at Slow Fork and Telida. He never married, and later in life lost his eyesight like his brother Sergie. In the early 1930's Wassily helped Sergie and Alufa Evan build the first airstrip behind the Slow Fork village. He lived out his later life in Nikolai and was a gifted story teller.

Sergie married Lena Evan whose family history follows.

One branch of the **Evan family** moved from the Selatna River to the East Fork between 1900 and 1910. The Selatna village had been hit with an epidemic and Old Man Evan had moved to get away from the sickness. He had a son named Alufa who married Mrs. Petruska after Old Man Petruska died. Later Alufa married Alice Esai, Gleman’s first daughter, and they had five children - Madronna, Mary, Willy, Olga and Nikita.

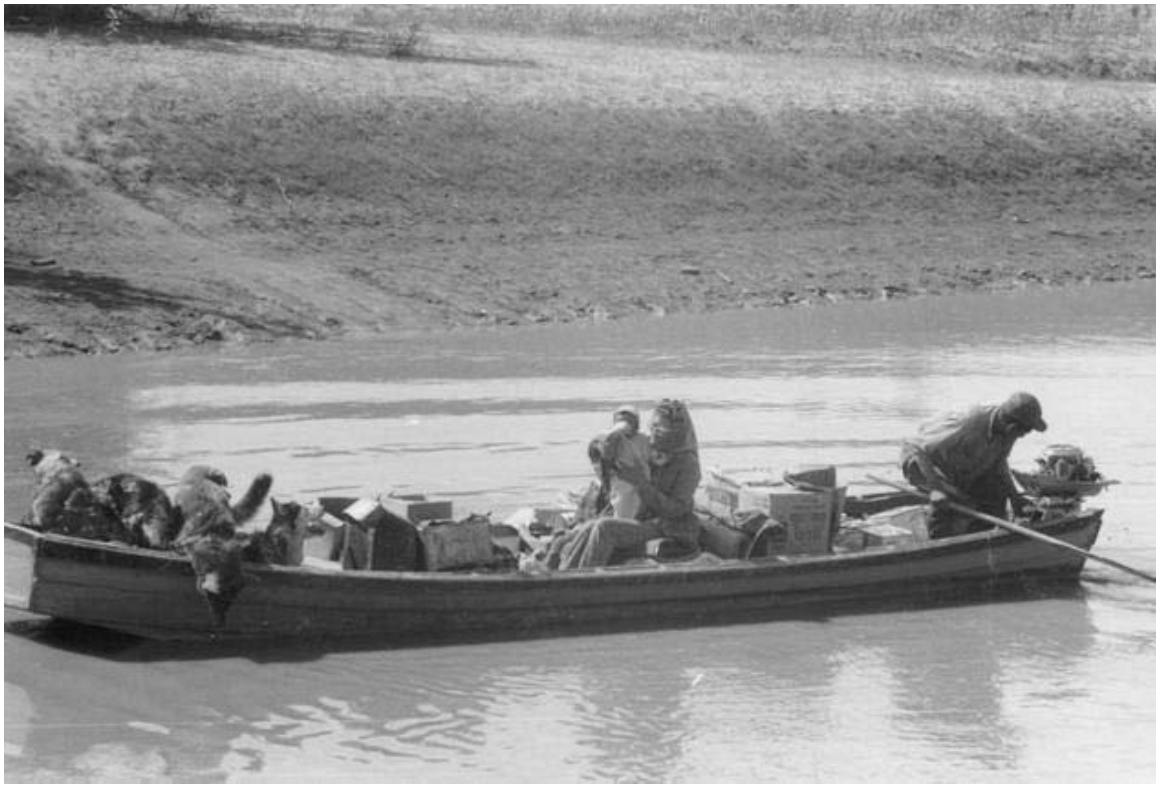
Lena 's grandmother Katherine was a refugee from the Innoko. She fled with her daughter to get away from the fighting. She married again and raised her daughter (Lena 's mother) on the Kuskokwim River around the Tatlawiksuk River. Lena 's mother married an Evan who was related to the Evans who had moved to Slow Fork but the exact relationship is not clear. Lena 's mother died when Lena was only about a year old so she lived with her grandparents at the mouth of the Tatlawiksuk River. Her older sister Aniska was married to an Upper Kuskokwim man named Devian, a brother of Bobby Esai's mother and Old Man Esai. They lived out by Lone Mountain on the Big River. When she was a few years old, Lena and her grandmother went to live with them. They traveled cross-country from Vinasale to Lone Mountain where they lived for 5 or 6 years, until Lena was about 11. She and her grandmother lived in a tent, and the family

moved around a lot. When Lena ’s brother-in-law killed a moose or other large game, they would move their camp to the site and remain there until the meat was gone.

When the brother-in-law died Lena ’s sister married Jack Stewart and they continued to live around Lone Mountain. After her sister died, Lena lived in McGrath with the Vanderpool family for a couple of years. She married Sergie Petruska and they moved to Slow Fork.

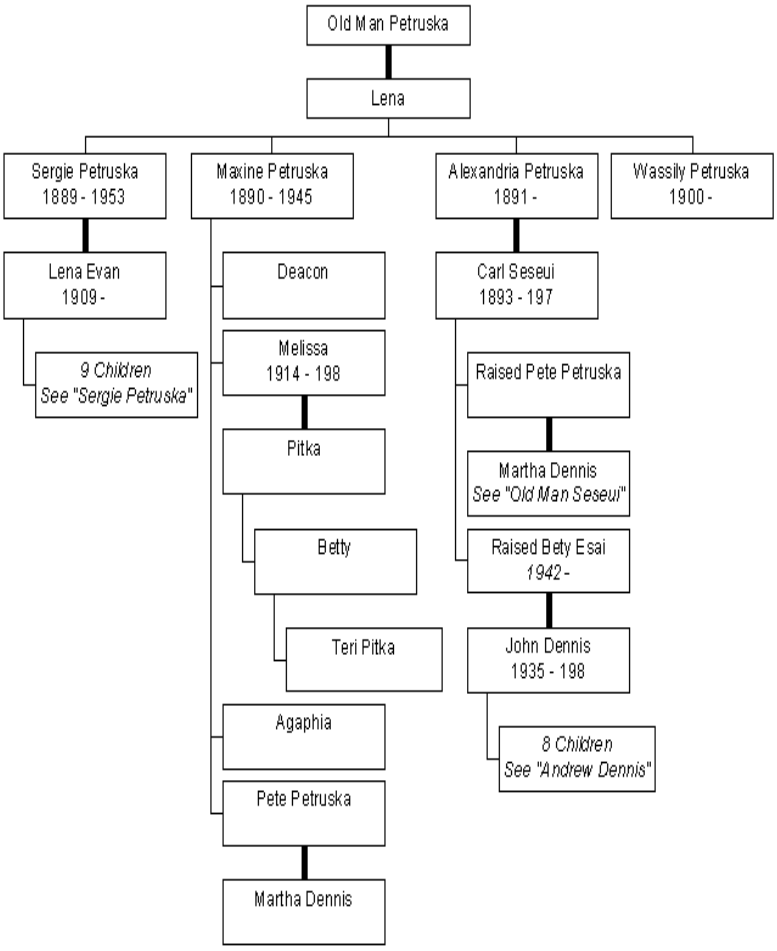
Later Sergie lost the sight in one eye so Alufa Evan helped take care of his family for as long as he was able. After Sergie became blind in both eyes, the family moved to Nikolai where more help was available. Sergie and Lena raised a large family and all of the younger children attended school in Nikolai when it opened. The family’s tie with Slow Fork is continued by Lena ’s son, Nikita, who traps in that area.

Lena remembers that it was in the mid-1930's while her family lived at Slow Fork that the men made their last summer trip up the East Fork to the Alaska Range. Only the able-bodied men went. Lena, Mrs. Petruska, Maxine Petruska, Abbie Dooga and the children all remained at Slow Fork village. The men shot four bull moose and made a skin boat with the hides. They sealed the seams with moose tallow. They also shot some caribou and sheep and half-dried the meat so it would keep. Then they floated downriver with all the meat in the boat. Sometimes they went so fast the dogs (running along the shore) could not keep up with them. There were big waves at some points in the river, making the trip very dangerous. The trip took a whole month (L. Petruska, personal communication).

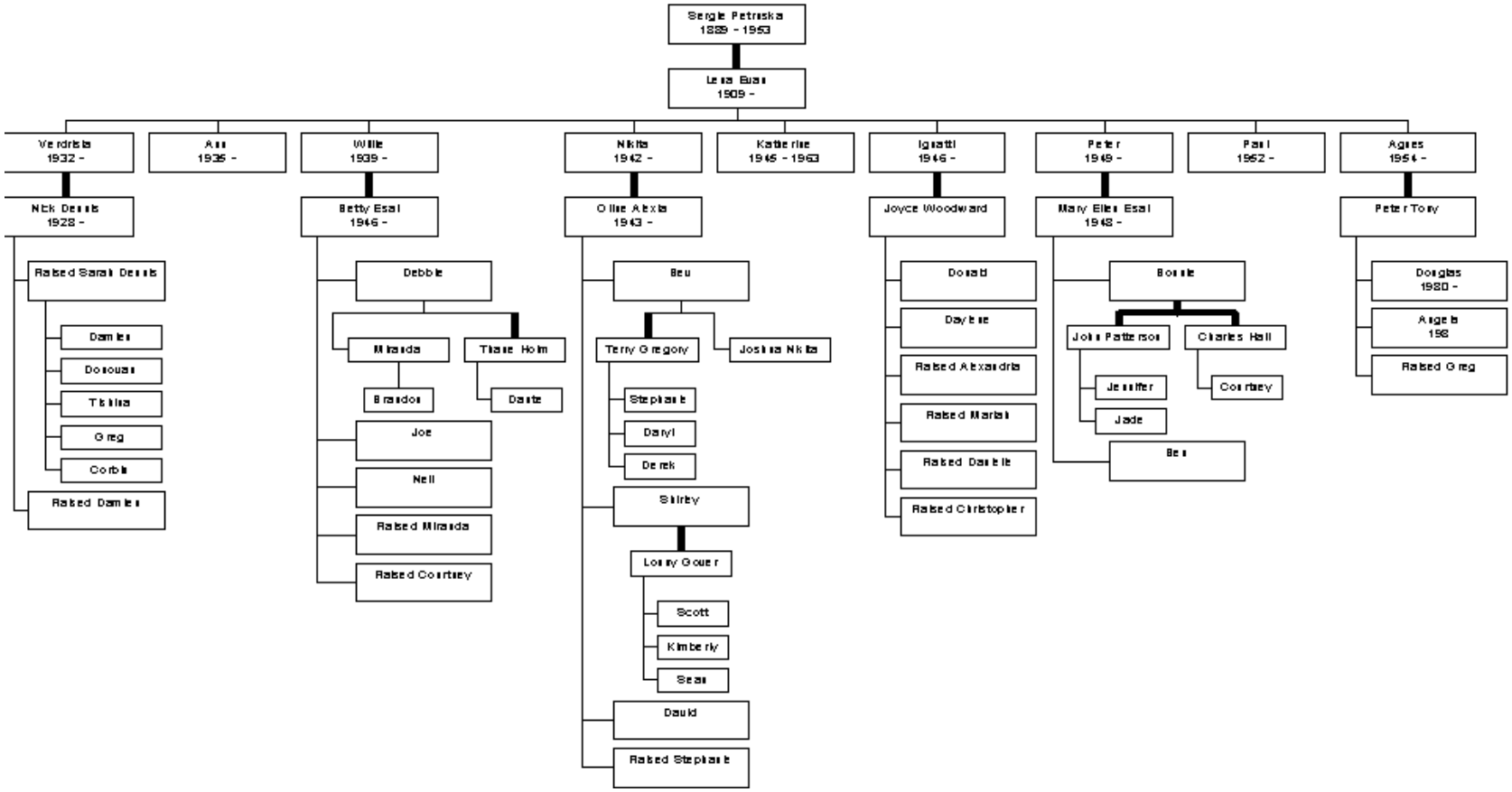


Nikita Petruska moving his family, dogs, and camp to fish camp site, 1964. Ray Collins photo

Descendants of Old Man Petruska



Descendants of Sergie Petruska

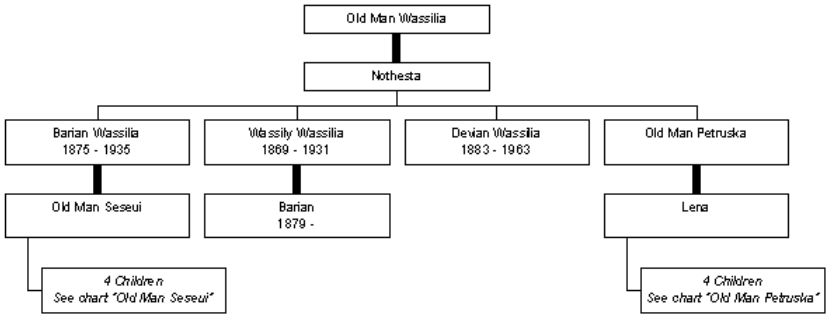


Wassilia Family

Hosley reported that one of the early residents of the East Fork was a man by the name of *Chiatliena* who came from *Kluklatsodomina* (perhaps Spirit Lake) southeast of Lake Minchumina. He had a son that survived, named Wassilia. Wassilia married a woman named Nothesta who had at least three children. The eldest was a daughter named Barian (Mary), born about 1875. She married Chief Shesoie at Telida and their son was Carl Seseui. Hosley recorded that Barian died about 1935 but Charlene Croft LeFebre took a photo of her as an old woman at Telida in 1949. Barian had three brothers, Wassily who was born in 1880 and Devian, born in 1883 and Petruska. Wassily died about 1934. Devian, who never married, became chief of Nikolai village in 1923 and was still chief forty years later when he died in May of 1963. He was one of the last men to hunt bears with a spear, at least black bear s in their winter den. It is also said that he hunted grizzly bear up the South Fork by himself as an elderly man. His weapon of choice was a 30-30 rifle. He trapped out at the Alaska Range during the winter at Jack Dunn's old cabin, and he also liked to walk out there in the late summer to hunt. Jim Nikolai accompanied him on one such hunting trip in 1950 when Devian was in his 70's (see Jim Nikolai's Story in the Pattern of Life section).

Devian was a strong chief and had the support of the community. Following is an illustration of that strength. There used to be a liquor store at Medfra. One time when there was too much "partying" by the young men, Chief Devian met them on the trail to Nikolai when they returned from Medfra, searched their sleds for bottles, and poured the liquor out. He could safely do that because he had the support of the elders, and was expected to protect the community.

Descendants of Old Man Wassilia



Aerial view of Nikolai, 1965. Ray Collins photo

Nikolai

Nikolai Village Relocates

Tonzona Village

The major settlement on the South Fork for many generations was a village at the mouth of the Tonzona River. It was a strategic location for subsistence purposes, being the site of one of the major king salmon runs in the upper Kuskokwim. The Salmon River was the other important site. There was a summer trail between the two that continued on to the east Fork and Telida. From the Tonzona village it was an easy walk to the mountains. The site was noted by both Spurr and Herron on their maps as Nicoli's Village (see Chief Nikolai's Family in the Nikolai section).

In the late 1800's major changes began to take place. Prospectors entered the Kuskokwim area and trading became increasingly important. As we have noted, people had begun to live in tents made of canvas. With the aid of newly available metal axes and saws, cabins were being built for winter dwellings, replacing the semi-subterranean houses of former years. Stoves were needed for the cabins. People were hunting with rifles and using steel traps, instead of just the bow and arrow and dead-fall traps. These new goods became available closer to home, eliminating the need to travel hundreds of miles to trade at a post or wait for once-a-year visits from the Susitna traders or the Russians from the lower Yukon.

Old Nikolai - Holten's Trading Post and Roadhouse

In 1910 Captain Holten ascended the Kuskokwim River in his steamer *Maddie.* At the mouth of the South Fork he was met by Chief Nikolai who had gone down the river in a canoe. Captain Holten depended on Nikolai to guide him as he did not know the channel in the shallow South Fork. Due to low water, he only made it upriver to the location that was to become old Nikolai. There he pulled his boat out on a sandbar and built a roadhouse/store where he could trade with the people of the upper Kuskokwim.

That same year a Russian Orthodox priest traveled up the river to Nikolai village, passing Holten along the way. He met with the people and helped them organize their first Council. Nikolai was appointed first chief and Devian was second chief (they may have been appointed earlier when a priest had visited Vinasale). In Orthodox villages the Council consists of all the adult males. When a man is married and has children his voice carries more weight. The second chief is sometimes called the "talking chief" or "marshal". A deacon and reader are also appointed with special roles in the church. This early Council represented not just the Church, but governed the village as a whole. At the first council meeting, with the encouragement of the priest, they decided to move the village downriver to the location where the steamer had stopped at the head of navigation.

At this new village site the first church was built. Hosley (1966:174) reported that it was built in 1914 but Hudson Stuck, the Episcopal priest who visited the village in late February of 1911, wrote:

> ..."We were four and a half hours making eight miles or so to Nicoli's village and the road-house..."
>
> ..."So here was our first white man in sixteen days (the trader)..."
>
> ..."Nicoli's Village is a very small place with a mere handful of people, situated on the South Fork of the Kuskokwim forty miles by river above the junction of the Forks. Before the epidemics devastated it, it had been a considerable native community. A Greek church, which the natives built entirely themselves, and which boasted a large painted icon of sorts, was the most important building in the place, and was served by a lay minister referred to before. Thus far the Kuskokwim is navigable for vessels of light draught, and a small stern-wheel steamboat lay wintering on the bank" (Stuck 1914:321,322).

Stuck's account verifies that the steamboat did winter over in 1910 -11, that Chief Nikolai had moved to the village, and that it was being referred to by his name. Stuck also indicated that the Church was already built and that it was the most impressive building in the community. That must have been a busy fall! He also reported that the village was located at the head of navigation.

This is an important account because some upper Kuskokwim stories report that the event took place in 1892. It could not have been 1892 - Spurr's expedition took place in 1898. He met Chief Nikolai in the village at the mouth of the Tonzona River and did not report any other villages between there and the mouth of the South Fork down which he paddled.. In 1899 Herron reported there was a village at the mouth of the Tonzona. He did not go down the South Fork but was apparently not told about any other village when he visited Telida people who referred to the Tonzona village as Nikolai's village. Edward Hosley reported that the move was in 1910 based on information he got from elders in 1961 and 1962.

Captain Holten, the trader, signed into Happy River Roadhouse on January 11, 1911, on his way from Nicoli (his spelling in the ledger) to Seattle. He made a quick trip as he registered again on March 21 of 1911, on his way back to Nicoli from Seattle (Happy River Roadhouse Log 1910-1929). Each time he spent a couple of days at the roadhouse. He was not at Nikolai when Hudson Stuck arrived so he must have left someone else to run his store. On February 9, 1912, he again signed in at the Happy River Roadhouse, this time registering as from Nickolai and heading for Seattle. It is not clear when he returned from the 1912 trip, or if he returned, and no further information on his store and roadhouse has come to light. Note that in 1911 he used the same spelling as Hudson Stuck but by 1912 it had changed.

Nikolai School

There is only an oral history account of the first formal school to operate in the Upper Kuskokwim. About 1913 a teacher was sent to Nikolai to establish a school. This teacher, who has not been identified, remained only part of a year, departing at the request of the elders of the village. Their decision was said to be influenced by "the bean agent", a term used to refer to traders. It could refer to the trader in Nikolai at the time or another one in the area. It is known that Old Nikolai was established in 1910 at the head of navigation and that John Holten operated a roadhouse and store there. It is not clear when he departed - so it is not known whether he was the one to stifle education. It has been reported that some traders preferred not to have the people become literate as then it would not be as easy to take advantage of them in trade. When Agnes Rodli and Mildred James arrived to open a school in 1948, some 35 years later, they were told that the U.S. flag from the first school was in Chief Devian's cache. This flag was the only physical evidence that remained of the earliest school. Rodli and James also faced opposition from some parents until their children began to learn math and to demonstrate to them that sometimes their purchases were incorrectly charged at a local trading post (Rodli 1963:111).

There were reasons other than the opposition to literacy for the first school to be opposed. A school would make it more difficult for the Upper Kuskokwim people to carry on their traditional life-style of making a living. They, like other interior Athabaskans, lived a semi-nomadic life style. They might spend part of every year in a fixed village such as Nikolai or Telida, but then disperse seasonally to hunting, trapping and fishing sites. If a school opened in the fall when families might have gathered in Nikolai after summer fishing, the men would still have to disperse for fall hunting. By November, when trapping season began, the families would face some hard choices. Normally they would disperse to different trapping sites where they had cabins or would establish a tent camp. They would not gather again in Nikolai until the Russian Christmas and New Year's celebrations in January. If the children stayed in school, the men would have to go to their traplines alone or trap out of Nikolai. Families left in Nikolai would need firewood and fresh meat. This would mean extra work for the women and children, and for the men on the traplines. They would have to make frequent visits to the village, thus requiring extra travel. If everyone trapped out of Nikolai it would place an extra burden on the local resources, or would require frequent long trips to more distant lines. The people may not have been ready for these changes at the time.

Whatever the reasons, no permanent school was established to serve people of Nikolai and Telida until 1948. The individuals who learned to read prior to this time, such as Bobby Esai, were basically self taught. It was reported to Agnes Rodli, when she began to teach at Nikolai, that the trader at Medfra in the 1940's had convinced the people that it was not necessary to even learn to sign one's name, since an "X" with two signatures as witness was better than a single signature! During this time the educational responsibility for the children of this area lay with the federal Bureau of Education (later taken over by the Bureau of Indian Affairs). Federal legislation - the Johnson/O'Malley Act passed in 1934 - made funding available for educating Alaska Native pupils but still nothing was done to provide a school for the people of the upper Kuskokwim.

The villages of Nikolai and Telida were also long overlooked in official census counts by the federal government. Nikolai showed up for the first time in the 1950 census with a population of 88, and Telida in 1960 with 14people. There were clearly more than enough children in Nikolai to warrant a school. Although during this time schools were established all over Alaska to serve Native students, there was none in the Upper Kuskokwim. It took a private effort to get a school started.

During the mid 1940's Richard Teeter was pastor of the Assemblies of God Chapel in McGrath. He became aware of the lack of a school in Nikolai and after talking to some of the parents, and getting their agreement to settle in Nikolai for the school year, he started efforts to establish a school. He contacted Mildred James, whom he had known in bible school and who was at the time a missionary-teacher in northern California. Agnes Rodli was working with her. The two ladies, with the support of some 12 to 15 congregations in northern California, agreed to open a school in Nikolai. They arrived in Nikolai in the late summer of 1948, bringing all the school supplies for the year with them. They conducted school for two years with no assistance from the Territory of Alaska or the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Territory agreed to provide support for the school in the third year (1950-51) if the people of Nikolai would demonstrate their commitment to the school by providing a building. Nikolai may be one of the few Native communities in Alaska that was required to build its own school! The people of the village went out and cut logs, hauled them to the site and constructed the new building. Because there was not enough money available locally for the purchase of windows, doors and roofing, Rodli and James raised the funds in their supporting churches. From that point the Territory, and then later the State, have supported the school (Rodli 1963:133).

Students at first school in Nikolai, 1948. Agnes Rodli photo

Students at Nikolai with teacher Mildred James, 1949. Agnes Rodli photo

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Men of Nikolai beginning foundation, then making gables on new school, 1950. Agnes Rodli photo

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New Nikolai school nearing completion in the fall (above), and completed after the first snowfall, 1950. Agnes Rodli photo

In 1954 the log school building was replaced with a two room frame building with an attached teacherage. A generator was installed to supply electricity for this new building. The school was the only building in Nikolai with electricity for 23 years. In 1977 the village worked out an agreement with the newly formed Iditarod Area School District (IASD) to take over the school generators and provide electricity for the whole community. Prior to that time homes in the community were lighted with candles, kerosene lamps or gasoline lanterns.

In later construction a water well was developed at the school, while the rest of the community continued to get water from the river. In the early 1970's the Public Health Service replaced the school well and constructed a laundry and shower facility for the entire community. This facility was taken over by the IASD when the new school was built in 1983 as the City of Nikolai found it difficult to provide the technical support needed to keep it going, and the school needed the well. The showers had only limited use by the residents of Nikolai since most adults preferred to continue using the traditional community steam bath.

The following chart contains information extracted from the annual education reports of the territory and state:

YEAR	PUPILS	TEACHERS	COMMENTS
1948-49	20	Mildred James, Agnes Rodli	Supported by churches in Calif.
1949-50	17+	Mildred James, Agnes Rodli	
1950-51	19	Mildred James, Agnes Rodli	Mildred James paid by the Territory of Alaska; Agnes a volunteer
1951-52			No school information; perhaps it only operated part of the year
1952-53	21	Dorothy Stone	Had a High School diploma, and a Provisional Certificate
1953-54	21	Red Williams	Taught part of the year; Dorothy Stone was gone to California
1954-55	26	Dorothy Stone	
1955-56	19	Dorothy Stone	
4956-57	19	Dorothy Stone	
1957-58	20	Dorothy Stone	
1959-60	30	Dorothy Stone	
1960-61	34	Dorothy Stone	
1961-62	31	Deborah J. Armstrong Dorothy Stone	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4
1962-63	32	Howard Cameron Edna Cameron *Advisory School Board*	Head Teacher, Grades 5-6 Grades 1-4 Pete Gregory
1963-64	27	Charles Montgomery Roma Jean Montgomery *Advisory School Board*	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Pete Gregory, Chairman Bobby Esai, Clerk Miska Deaphon, Treasurer
1964-65	27	Elmer Gortemiller Virginia Gortemiller	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4

		Advisory School Board	Pete Gregory, Chairman Bobby Esai, Philip Esai-Members
1965-66	27	Elmer Gortemiller Virginia Gortemiller	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4
1966-67	30	Elmer Gortemiller Virginia Gortemiller *Advisory School Board*	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Ray Collins, Chairman Phillip Esai, Junior Gregory, Members
1967-68	27	James Ede Julia Ede *Advisory School Board*	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Ray Collins, Chairman Phillip Esai, Junior Gregory, Members
1968-69		James Ede Julia Ede *Advisory School Board*	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Not listed
1969-70	27	John Wallace Shirley Wallace *Advisory School Board*	Principal Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Bobby Esai, Chairman, Oline Petruska, Mary John-Members
1970-71	31	Stephen Nicol Patricia Nicol *Advisory School Board*	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Ray Collins, Chairman Oline Petruska, Mary John, members
1971-72	27	Azel King Bethel King	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4
1972-73	30	Azel King Bethel King	Head Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4
1973-74	30	Burnell Crone Donna Crone *Bilingual Instructors:* *Advisory School Board*	Principal Teacher, Elementary Elementary Betty Petruska, Helen Dennis Mary John, Chairman Nick Petruska, Secretary Ann Alexia, Nick Alexia, Peter Petruska, members
1974-75		Burnell Crone Donna Crone *Advisory School Board*	Principal Teacher, Elementary Elementary Nick Alexia, Chairman Nick Petruska, Sec./Treasurer, Ann Alexia, James Gregory -Members
1975-76		Marjorie Coyle Tom Coyle	Principal Teacher, Grades 1-4 Grades 5-8
1976-77	22	Marjorie Coyle Tom Coyle	Principal Teacher, Grades 1-4 Grades 5-8
1977-78	26	Jerald Reichlin Rebecca Reichlin	Principal Teacher Gen/Elementary/Secondary
1978-79	26	Jerald Reichlin Rebecca Reichlin Marjorie Coyle	Principal Teacher/Secondary Secondary Multi-grade/Elementary

1979-80	20	Jerald Reichlin Rebecca Reichlin Dawn Christy	Principal Secondary Elementary
1980-81	23	Robert Payne Wilma Payne Dawn Christy	Head Teacher, Grades 5-11 Multi-grade Elementary
1981-82	30	Robert Payne Wilma Payne Dawn Christy	Head Teacher, Grades 5-11 Multi-grade K-2
1982-83		Virginia Smith Don Stand Pam Randles	Principal Teacher, Elementary Grades 5-8 Secondary
1983-84		Kristina Minelga Don Stand Pam Randles	Principal Teacher, Elementary Grades 5-8 Secondary
1984-85		Bob Maguire Cora Maguire Naomi Gates	Principal Teacher, Grades 5-8 Grades 1-4 Secondary

When the school was established it effected a number of dramatic changes in the pattern of life in the upper Kuskokwim. At that time many families did not live in Nikolai year 'round and some only went there for the holidays. The Esais usually wintered at Big River, the Petruskas trapped on the Slow Fork, the Alexias were on the Tonzona, the Nikolais wintered at Telida, and the Gregorys lived at Vinasale. With the inception of a school, those with school-age children began wintering at Nikolai.

Most of the men still had to trap during the winter to support their families. This change meant that they had to go to the trapline without their families, so two or three men would trap as partners, going out for a week or more at a time and then back to Nikolai. The only reason to stay in Nikolai all winter was the school. It would have been easier for family units to make a living on the trapline. Dog teams took a lot of care and required a large supply of dried salmon. When traveling, the amount of food carried limited how long one could stay on the trail. In the spring families moved out to fish camps to begin putting up fish for the year. Previously they would also have moved to beaver camps in the spring. Now everyone anxiously awaited the end of school so they could move to summer fish camp. This did not change until the snowmachine came into use in the late 1960's. When the snowmachine replaced the dog team it was no longer necessary to go to fish camp to put up dog food. Longer distances could be covered in a day and less time needed to be spent away from families. Staying in Nikolai was no longer a great hardship.

The Upper Kuskokwim language was unwritten when Ray and Sally Jo Collins arrived in Nikolai in 1963. Most preschool children spoke only Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan. That led the Wycliffe Bible Translators to choose the language for study and possible Bible translation. Ray and Sally began writing the language for the first time and, after analyzing the sounds, developed a practical alphabet in the mid 1960's. They also developed literacy material and a dictionary of nouns. In 1973 the State of Alaska provided an Athabaskan bilingual program in response to state and federal legislation that required instruction or assistance be provided in schools for children who spoke a language other than English. At that time many of the children in school were bilingual and their first language was Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan.

Also in 1973, using a grant provided by State Operated Schools, three people - Betty Petruska, Willie Petruska and Helen Dennis - were chosen for literacy training as potential bilingual instructors. In a six-week training session in Nikolai in the spring of 1973 they became the first Upper Kuskokwim speakers to learn to read and write their language. A program was started at the school that fall with Betty Petruska and Helen Dennis as teachers. All the children in the first bilingual classes were taught to read and write since they already spoke the language. After a few years the program changed as children began entering school speaking more English than Athabaskan. By the 1990's it was mostly an oral language program since the children entering the school no longer spoke Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan. Betty Petruska remained with the program through May 1999. The program was reduced to about three hours a week and Steven Nikolai, who had taught in Telida, assumed the position in the fall of 1999.

There has been a dramatic change in the use of the Native language from the parents and grandparents who had begun school speaking little or no English in 1948 to the children who are entering school today with little or no knowledge of the Upper Kuskokwim language. In 1963, when the Collins arrived in Nikolai, all of the children were speaking the language fluently. The early teachers were instructed to discourage the use of the Upper Kuskokwim language. The first students had such a difficult time that when they became parents they used English with their children in order to prepare them for school. The real change in language use began in the late 1960's with the emphasis on preschool programs that promoted English at an early age. It was accelerated in the late 1970's when television was introduced and became common in most homes. There was also an increase in travel and contact outside the community with the English speaking world. The children were immersed in English for most of the day, including in their own homes. The bilingual programs did not stop this language shift but did provide the option for some speakers to become literate in thisr own language or in later years of maintaining some of the local language.

Until 1976 the school in Nikolai included only grades 1-8. In the early 1960's a few students began to go on to high schools outside the village for at least one or two years. Some went to Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka, Alaska ; some to Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma ; some to Chemawa School in Oregon ; some to Beltz School in Nome ; others to McGrath when a boarding program was started there. In 1968 Mary Ellen Petruska became the first student from Nikolai to graduate from high school. She has been followed by many others.

In 1975 legislation was passed that broke up the State Operated School System into Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAAs). In 1976 Nikolai and Telida became part of the Iditarod Area School District which has its own elected school board. Advisory School Boards, which had been started by the State, were maintained in each village of the District. Nikolai's first representative to the IASD board was Jeff Stokes. He served until 1993 and was followed by Peter Tony. Villages with an elementary school were allowed the option of also having a high school program as the result of the 1972 "Molly Hootch " case. The State reached an out-of-court settlement with the plaintiffs, formally known as the Tobeluk Consent Decree. Molly Hootch and over 2000 others of her generation were being sent to boarding schools even though other smaller non-native communities had local high school programs. This settlement resulted in small high schools being built throughout rural Alaska or existing schools being expanded.

Some problems existed with the school building and program during the 1960's and 1970's. There was no water in the school until a shallow well was drilled in 1969, and it went dry before Christmas. In a letter to the Commissioner of Education, Mr. Hartman, on January 1, 1970, village residents expressed their concern about the physical condition of the school. The building had shifted in the 1964 earthquake and had not been re-leveled. The foundation under the oldest part of the school was settling and needed to be replaced. The State had been operating the school for twenty years at this point and the children were still using outhouses behind the school. There was no running water for student use nor for the lunch program. The teacherage had only one small bedroom and the last two teaching couples had children who slept in a classroom and in the bedroom closet. In the late 1960's oil stoves replaced the wood burning stoves used previously to heat the school and teacherage. Oil was delivered to the school in barrels which had to be rolled by hand from the river bank to the school since no storage tank had been installed, even though $22,000 had been appropriated to install the tank and drill a water well.

Following the Molly Hootch settlement (Tobeluk Consent Decree), the people of Nikolai chose to have a K-10 program. This allowed the younger high school students to remain at home until they were older, and then to finish the last two years in a larger high school. Many Nikolai students chose to board in McGrath and finish high school there. Later, the 9th and 10th grade program at Nikolai was dropped as there were so few students and most parents wanted their children to have the advantage of a larger high school program. This is financially feasible as the State pays boarding costs for any student who does not have access to a local program.
The number of children in Nikolai has been declining in recent years even though the population has remained nearly the same (about 100 residents). Partly this is a result of changes in family size with most young families having only two or three children rather than the four or more found in older families. Also, many young men remain single while the young women tend to move out of the community.

As a result of the Molly Hootch settlement a new school was built in Nikolai in 1983. It includes a small gymnasium with toilets and showers, a photo darkroom, kitchen, library, office and classrooms for multiple grades. The fully modern building is a far cry from the tiny log cabin with a path in which Mildred James and Agnes Rodli began to fulfill their vision of bringing education to the people of the upper Kuskokwim area.

Incorporation

Nikolai incorporated as a second class city in 1969. Elected to the first City Council were: Nikita Petruska, president; Nick Dennis, vice president; Oline Petruska, secretary; and members Junior Gregory, Nick Alexia and Phillip Esai. Since that time the Council has initiated numerous improvement projects for the community including construction of the city building with a washeteria, clinic, library, post office, office space and community room. Wells were driven to supply water to the individual homes, and a community sewer project provides service to homes and other buildings. The trails in the community were upgraded to roads and graveled. When Iditarod Area School District was created in 1976 the school had the only generator and electric power in the community. The Council negotiated with IASD to take over the generators and

provide power for the whole community. It also placed the City of Nikolai in the fuel business, making it locally available. Prior to this everyone had to order his own fuel on the barge or travel to Medfra or McGrath to buy it. Dramatic changes took place in Nikolai in the 1970's and 1980's when the State Legislature was investing oil money in capital projects around Alaska. Village people went from packing water from the river, using gasoline lanterns to light their homes, and everyone using an outhouse to running water, electrification and a modern sewer system.

A modern telephone system was installed and the State installed a satellite dish for television (TV) reception. The City later installed its own dish and made cable TV available to all homes for a nominal fee. Housing projects over the last few years have made modern housing available to most families. The first project utilized locally-cut three-sided logs. The owner worked on his own house and assisted in the construction of the others. At the end of the project each owned his own house. The most recent houses are rentals built by the Interior Housing Authority with money from Housing Urban Development.

Prior to these projects, which began in the mid 1970's, everyone constructed his own house from locally-cut logs with the assistance of family and friends. Most builders used round logs. Some older houses were chinked with moss and had birch bark and sod on the roofs for insulation. They were covered with sheet iron or shingles made of flattened Blazo (white gas) cans and later with aluminum roofing. There was a cache standing near each of the older houses for storing dried fish and other items such as camp gear, tools, etc., that were not needed in the house. Most caches have disappeared as have the dog teams.

Telida was not a large enough village to incorporate but did receive some money from the State for small projects, including a phone system and a satellite dish for TV reception.

Firefighting

In the late 1950's firefighting became an important summer activity for persons seeking a cash income. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), with a regional office in McGrath, was responsible for fighting fires in the Interior. During the summer most families moved to fish camps along the Kuskokwim River near Medfra. Bertha Winans, the trader at Medfra, had a short-wave radio which she monitored and most people in the camps had battery operated radios. When a fire broke out and men were needed, the BLM in McGrath would call Medfra and inform Bertha. Word would go out to the camps and all the men would gather at the Medfra air field. BLM would send a plane, hire the crew on the airfield and take them to the fire.

The crew could be gone for up to 21 days but usually it was for a shorter period. While the men were gone the women and children had to take over the job of checking the fishwheels and continue with their own work of cutting and drying the fish. This placed an extra burden on the families but the money the men earned made it possible to purchase outboard motors, gas, groceries and chain saws (to replace the traditional "Swede saw", long used to cut firewood). While putting up fish and waiting for fires, the men also cut firewood that Bertha "purchased" by giving them credit in the store. When the river barge made its annual trip up to Medfra to bring in the year's supply of groceries, fuel, and other goods for the trading post, the crew would load the firewood on board and haul it back to McGrath where it was sold.

This pattern continued through the 1960's until snowmachines began to replace the dog teams. If a family purchased a snowmachine and no longer owned a dog team, they only needed to process fish for the family to eat and no longer had to stay in fish camp all summer. With the improvement of the airstrip in Nikolai, and access to the school radio, people could stay in Nikolai where fire crews could be picked up. Most families shifted away from fish camps to summering in Nikolai in the 1970's and 1980's. There was also work created in the village by school construction and the many projects conducted by the City with state grants.

Following is a list of the 24 man fire crew hired out of Nikolai in 1970. It represents most of the adult men in the community at the time.

Crew Boss: Ray Collins

- **Squad 1. Nick Dennis, boss**
  - Antone Pitka
  - Don L. Dennis
  - Deaphon Eluska
  - Steve Eluska
  - Peter Petruska
- **Squad 2. Andrew Gregory, boss**
  - Nick Nikolai
  - Willie Petruska
  - Steve Nikolai
  - Esai Esai
  - Nick Petruska
- **Squad 3. Phillip Esai, boss**

Jim Gregory
Ignatti Petruska
Deacon Nikolai
Tony Alexia
Paul Petruska

Squad 4. Nick Alexia, boss

Pete Gregory
Bobby Esai
Bernie Alexia
Sammy John

This is just an example - the crew boss and squad bosses changed from year to year. At that time (1970) there were no physical tests given and every able-bodied man was hired. They ranged in age from 18 to 60. Finally, in the late 1970's the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) took over fire suppression in the McGrath area and some policies changed. Firefighters had to undergo a physical test and take part in training to get a fire card. They also began hiring women to fight fires alongside the men.

Firefighting is still considered an important summer job and crews have even been hired as late as September to fight fires in the "Lower '48" states. Land managers including the state, federal agencies and private land holders, developed a fire management plan to determine which land should be protected from fire, so not every fire is manned as was the case in the 1950's and 1960's. Fire crews from many villages have been trained and are placed on a rotation list. During some years low fire incidence may result in no crews being hired out of Nikolai, or there may be only one or two opportunities for employment. Firefighting is no longer as dependable a source of seasonal income as it was in earlier years.

Some Family Histories

Chief Nikolai's Family

Chief Nikolai, for whom the village of Nikolai is named, was originally from the Innoko River. He had three brothers, two of whom were pretty mean and had made enemies on the lower Yukon. In contrast, Nikolai was a good and gentle man. Nikolai's family lived at the mouth of a tributary of the Innoko River, possibly the Dishna.

Nikolai had gone upriver hunting. While he was gone some men traveled upriver from the lower Yukon. They killed his three brothers who were in camp but did not harm the women or children. When Nikolai returned he saw what had happened but didn't say anything. It was a tense situation and the raiders were debating what to do with him. His wife knew what was going on and she handed him a baby, which he held, still without saying anything about his brothers. They finally decided they wouldn't kill him as they didn't think he would cause any trouble. The raiders loaded their weapons in their canoes and departed.

Chief Nikolai realized that the raiders might easily change their minds and come back after him so he left with the three women and their children, heading up the Innoko. They most likely went up the North Fork of the Innoko to mislead anyone who followed them since the normal route to the Kuskokwim was by way of the southern branch of the Innoko, then crossing over to the Takotna via the Ganes Creek -Big Creek portage. After freezeup they made a sled and headed across the mountains. When they came to Limestone Mountain they crossed over the top on bare ground so they would leave no trail, depending on snow to cover any tracks they accidentally left. They descended the Kuskokwim to the mouth of the South Fork which they ascended to the mouth of the Tonzona (now called Little Tonzona) where a village was located.

Wassily Devian's people were camped at *Jidzu » kashdi',* up the Tonzona River, and didn't know immediately that the party had arrived. The women and children didn't live long after they arrived as the trip was very hard on them and they had been weakened by starvation (M. Deaphon, personal communication).

Nikolai must have been recognized as a good man since he later became leader of the band of people living on the South Fork. He was recognized as the chief when the explorer Spurr came through in 1899 and visited the band at the mouth of the Tonzona. This location became known as the first Nikolai village and was so marked on the early maps.

Chief Deaphon and his band, 1919. UAF Stephen Foster Collection, 69-92-330

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Miska Deaphon, Stephen Foster, Deaphon Nikolai, (not identified), 1919. UAF Stephen Foster Collection, 69-92-332

Nikolai lived to raise a family in his new home. He had five sons and at least one daughter. Three of his sons died in the early 1900's in one of the influenza epidemics that swept through his village. His surviving children were Nikolai Deaphon Huecla Deaphon and Miska Nikolai.

Nikolai Deaphon was chosen as chief of Nikolai when his father died. He married and raised three children - Miska Deaphon, Alexandria Deaphon and Mary Deaphon. Alexandria married Gogomy Dennis (see Dennis Family), Mary married Old Man Eluska (see Eluska Family) and Miska married Katherine Esai, daughter of Old Man Esai of Big River. Miska and Katherine did not have any children but they raised the children of his sister after she died - Katherine, Mary and Demoski Eluska. They also adopted Mary's first child, David.

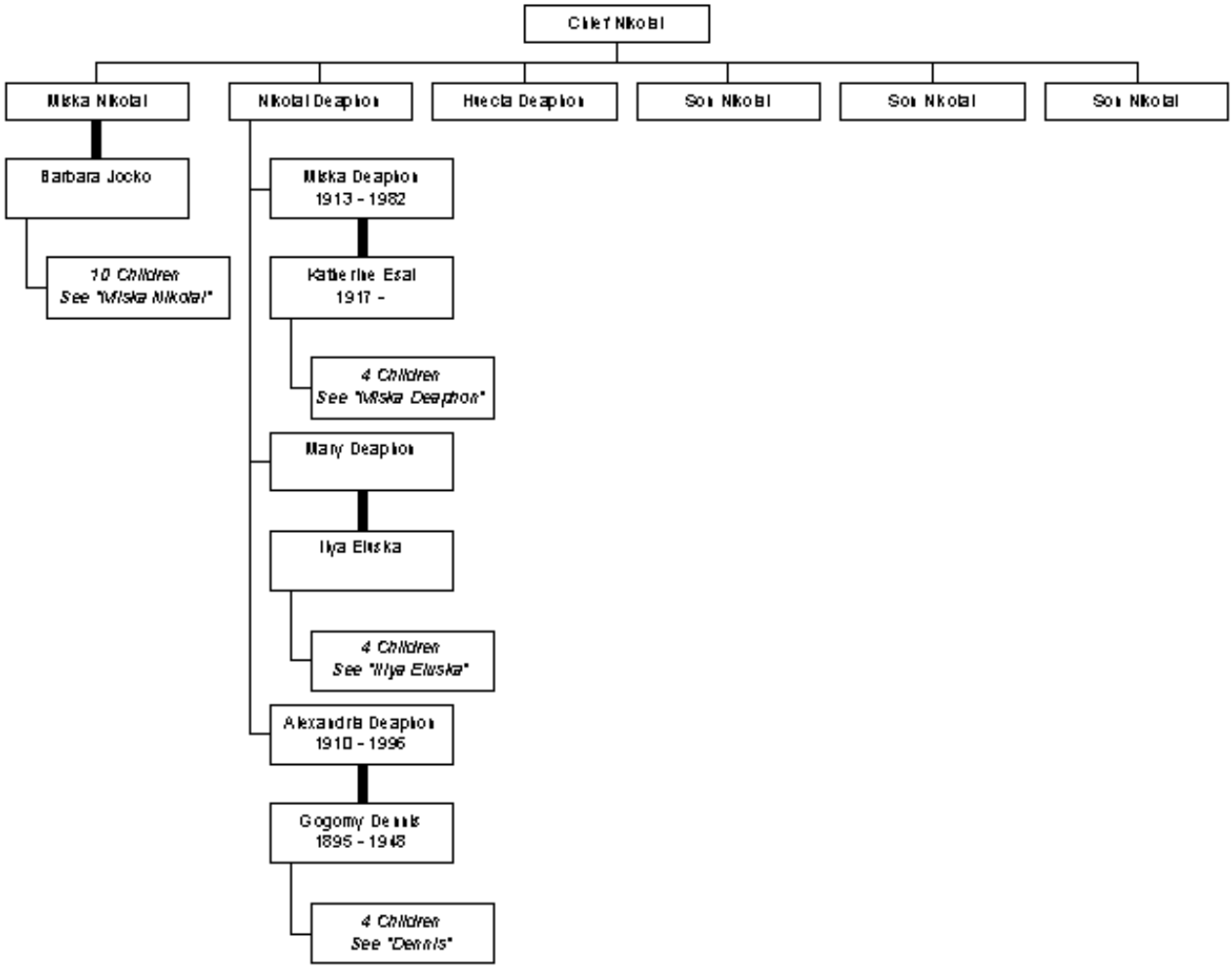
As a child, Miska walked out to the Alaska Range with his grandparents (see Summer Trips to the Mountains). After marrying Katherine, Miska often hunted in the Alaska Range with the Esais of Big River. He fished at Salmon River for many years and put in the last fish fence and trap there about 1968. He was very knowledgeable about traditional life. He was a gifted craftsman and made his own snowshoes, sleds, canoes and fish trap s. In his later life, Miska spent time recording some of the stories that he wanted to pass on. These tapes have been transcribed and translated into English. Some of these stories are included or referenced in this report. The others have not yet been published.

Miska Nikolai, another son of Old Chief Nikolai, married Barbara Jocko of Telida. They lived at Telida but moved to Nikolai after the school opened. In 1953 Miska, and a couple of other men at Nikolai, died from influenza. Miska and Barbara had a large family - Heldina, Jim, Taffy,

Sam, Nick, Helen, Deacon, Mary, Sophie and Steven. Barbara and seven of the children have died since the mid-1960's.

Miska and Katherine Deaphon with children they raised: Katherine (Chandler), Mary (John) and Demoski Eluska, 1951. Agnes Rodli photo

Descendants of Chief Nikolai



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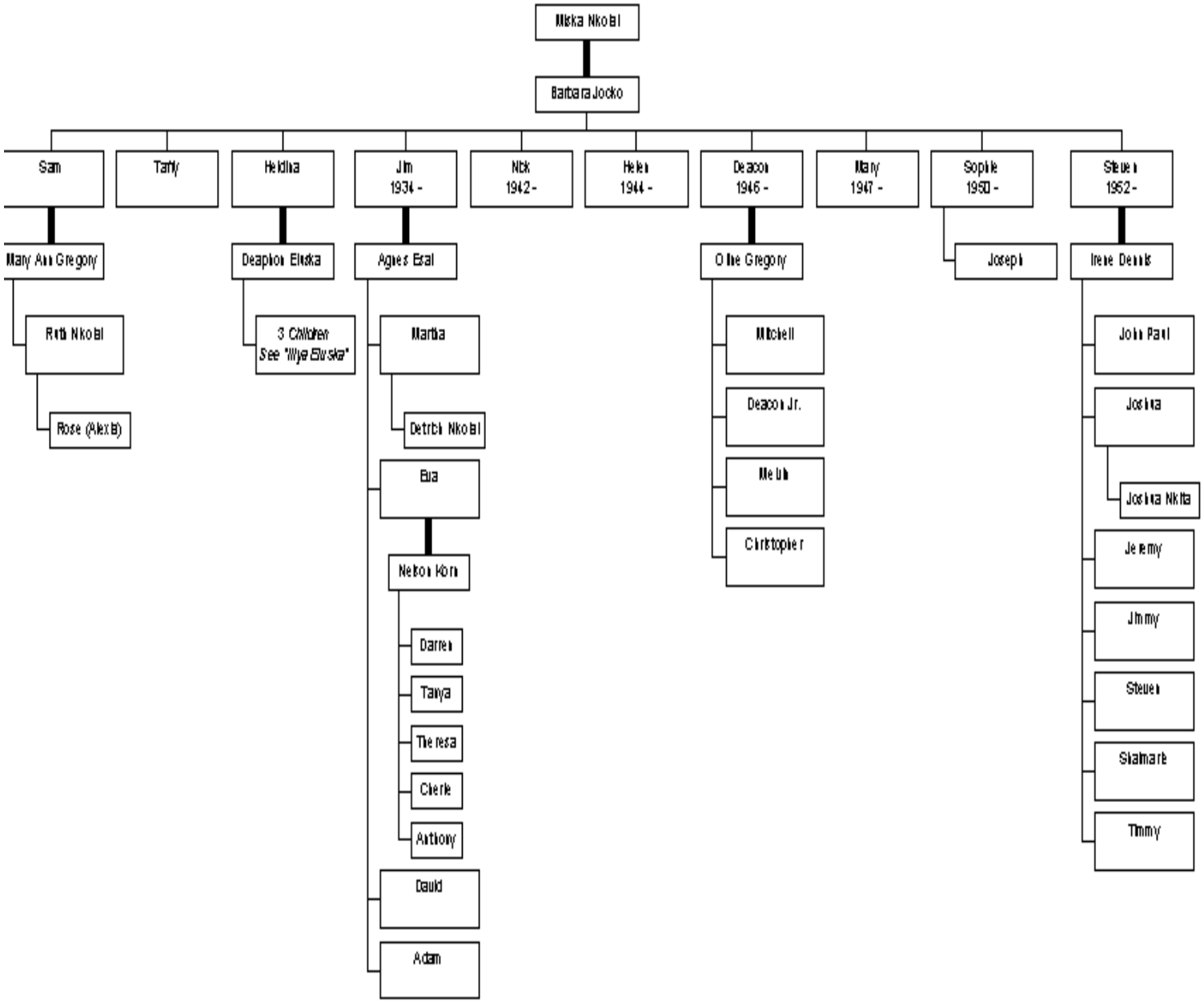
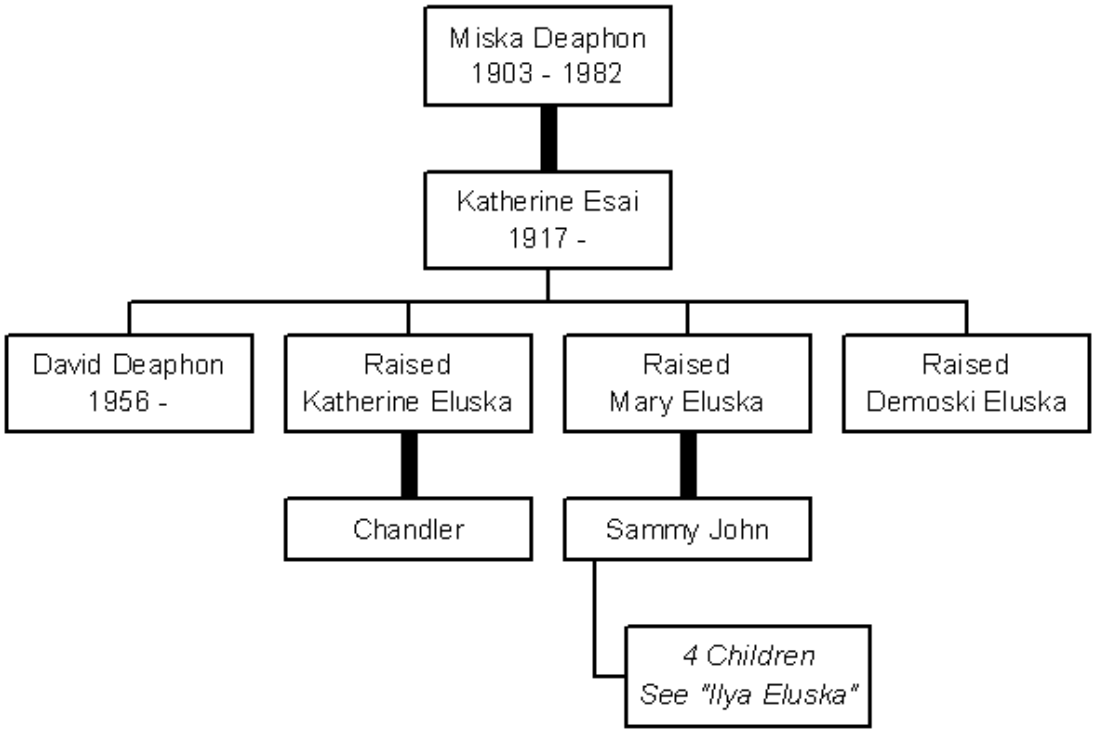
Descendants of Miska Nikolai



Descendants of Miska Deaphon



Alexia Family

Grandfather Alexia was an orphan from downriver and may have been part Eskimo. He was from *Tsaghoye*, Sinka Gregory's village. Arthur Berry and his dad, Jim Berry, stopped in this village on their way up the Kuskokwim River. They were some of the first white men to winter over in the Upper Kuskokwim and Alex, a young man at the time, decided to join them. They went up the North Fork to trap.

That winter some people came over from the Slow Fork to visit them on the North Fork. After that visit Alex was not getting along with Berrys so he followed the tracks the visitors had left back to their village at Slow Fork and stayed there with them.

He married Helen Lena Dennis, the sister of Andrew and Gogomy Dennis, and spent the rest of his life in the Upper Kuskokwim. Two children, Miska and Martha, survived to adulthood. Miska married Anna Pitka and Martha married Slim Gregory.

Miska was partially raised by Chief Devian and inherited his trapline out to the Alaska Range. Part of this trapline was originally made by a white trapper. The cabin at the Range bears his name, Jack Dunn. Miska also had a trapping cabin on the Tonzona near the site where a fence and trap were built to catch king salmon.

Miska was noted for his cheerfulness and humor; he usually had a smile on his face. He was a gifted craftsman, turning out ladles carved from birch wood with a “crooked knife“, and skillfully cutting fine babiche from moose and caribou hides. During the summer of 1963, Miska built one of the last river boats to be made of whipsawed lumber. All of the lumber for this 30'-long boat was hand sawed and planed from local spruce. (During the 1970's aluminum boats began to replace the traditional wooden boats.)

Alexia and family, Devian and Dennis at East Fork Village April 14, 1919. UAF Stephen Foster Collection, 69-92-317

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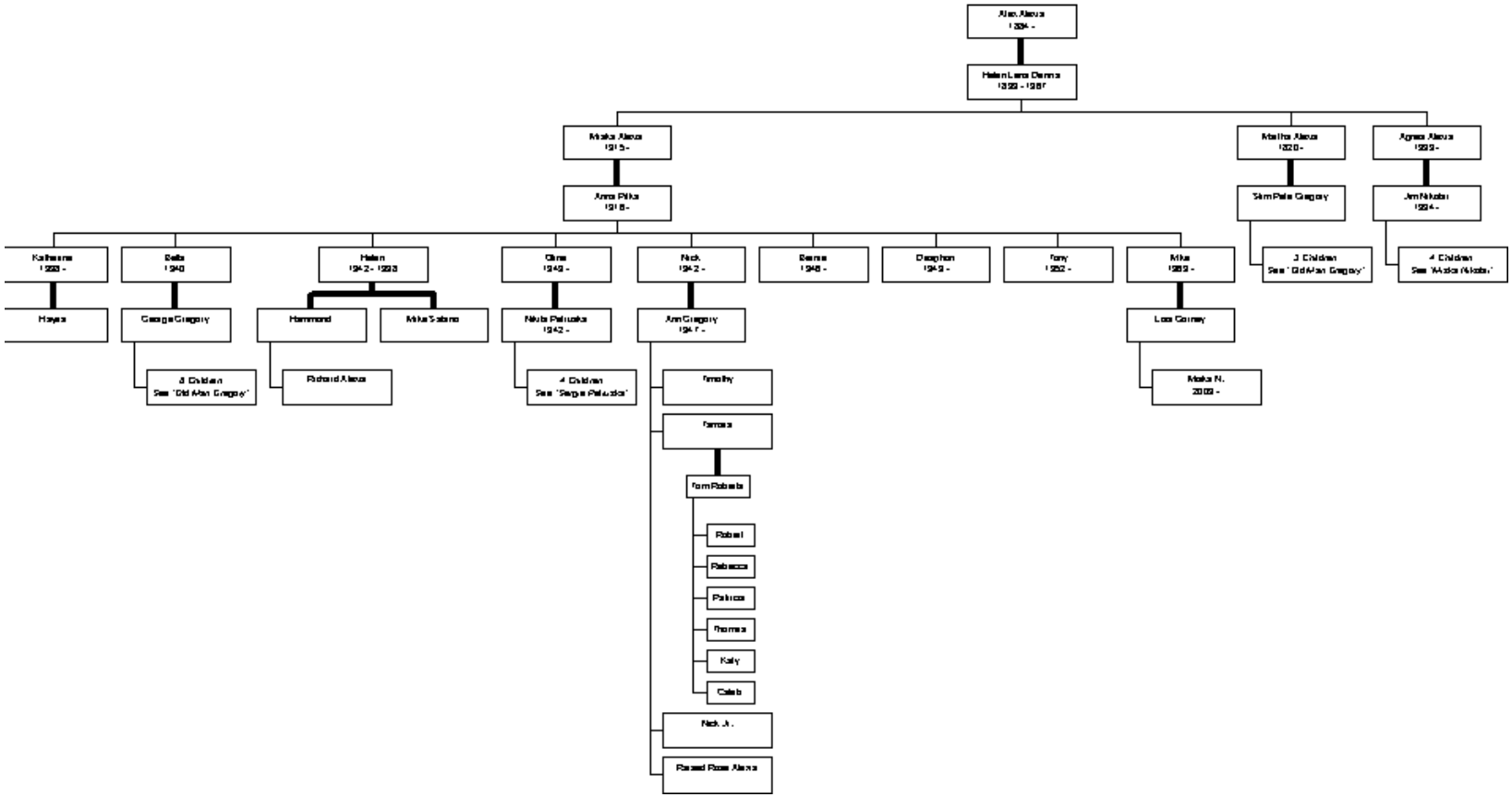
Miska Alexia building a canoe at Nikolai, 1950's. UAF Morley Collection, 1973-0100-00067

Descendants of Alex Alexia



Dennis Family

Old Man Dennis was born on the Innoko River, perhaps at Dishkaket, about 1864. (This is based on Lt. Herron's report wherein he reported that he met a man at Telida in 1899 who was about 35 years old, named Tenesche (Herron 1909:67). When Dennis was about two months old his parents were killed in a raid. He was found by an old couple who took him in. They referred to him as *Chela Nots'ideltane* (the child we picked up). In order to feed him, they took an air bladder from a sucker fish and filled it with soup broth. They managed to keep him alive with this improvised bottle.

There was a lot of fighting going on between the people on the Innoko and those on the Yukon. Finally the Old Man decided it was best to run away to escape the fighting. He took family and his brother and took off across the hills to the Kuskokwim. The party got away with very little but they managed to live by catching ground squirrels with sinew snares. They hid their trail as they went by brushing out their tracks behind them. They finally reached the Kuskokwim and managed to make it up to Big River Landing where they settled.

When the Old Man died he was buried there. He was thought to be a powerful medicine man, and before he died he told people he would continue to help them. That is why some people still stop by his grave site to leave a little gift, such as food, and ask him to help them in hunting.

Dennis was old enough to start getting around on his own when his adoptive parents died. He spent time in Chief Nikolai's village, *Tonilts'uno' Dochak'* (Mouth of the Tonzona River) and up at the Alaska Range at the mouth of *Tetno' Dochak'* (the Dillinger River) and over on the East Fork at *Draht'anedi*. He eventually settled on Dennis Creek, a tributary of the East Fork. His village was called *Ch'udiljisno'*.

Dennis was at Telida in 1899 when Lt. Herron was brought there by Chief Seseui. Herron listed him with his wife and four children:

> Tenesche; man, about 35, born about 1864 (Dennis)
> Annisa, wife, age about 30, born about 1869 (Ann)
> Eulian, son, age about 16, born about 1883 (William)
> Andre, son, age about 10, born about 1889 (Andrew)
> Kurgurvey, son, age about 8, born about 1891 (Gogomy)
> Eleana, daughter, age about 5, born about 1894 (Helen Lena)
> (Herron 1909:67).

Another daughter, Mary, was born later. When she was still a little girl someone from the Tanana river passed through Slow Fork and kidnapped her. They hid her in the sled and passed through Telida without stopping. Her brothers wanted to go after her when they found out what had happened, but their Dad said, "No. You might make a mistake." He did not want to risk losing his sons also. Mary is still living (1999) in Nenana where she raised a large family. Members of the Dennis family only found out about her in recent years when she identified herself to Bobby Esai at the Denakkanaaga Elders Conference in McGrath in May of 1998.

The elder brother, William, was crippled and could not walk. As a young adult he traveled all over in the summer time in a canoe. He never married.

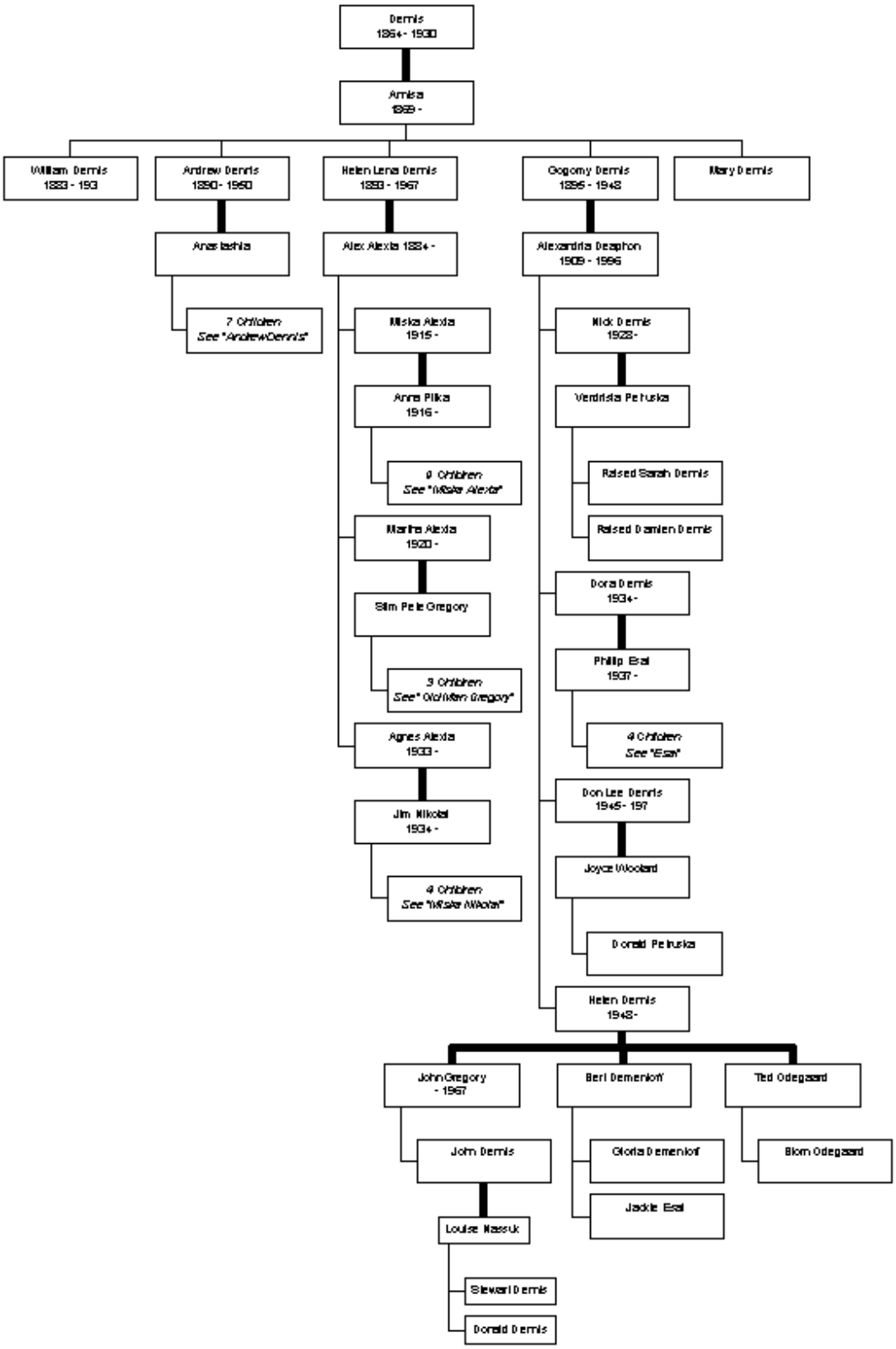
Andrew married a woman named Anastashia and they had a large family (5 daughters and 2 sons were still alive in 1963). Gogomy married Alexandria Deaphon and they also had a large family but several succumbed to tuberculosis. Helen Lena married Alex Alexia who had come up the Kuskokwim River with Jim Berry and his son.

While growing up on the East Fork the brothers also made nomadic hunts out to the Alaska Range. After they married they moved back and forth between the East Fork and Nikolai, eventually settling in Nikolai.

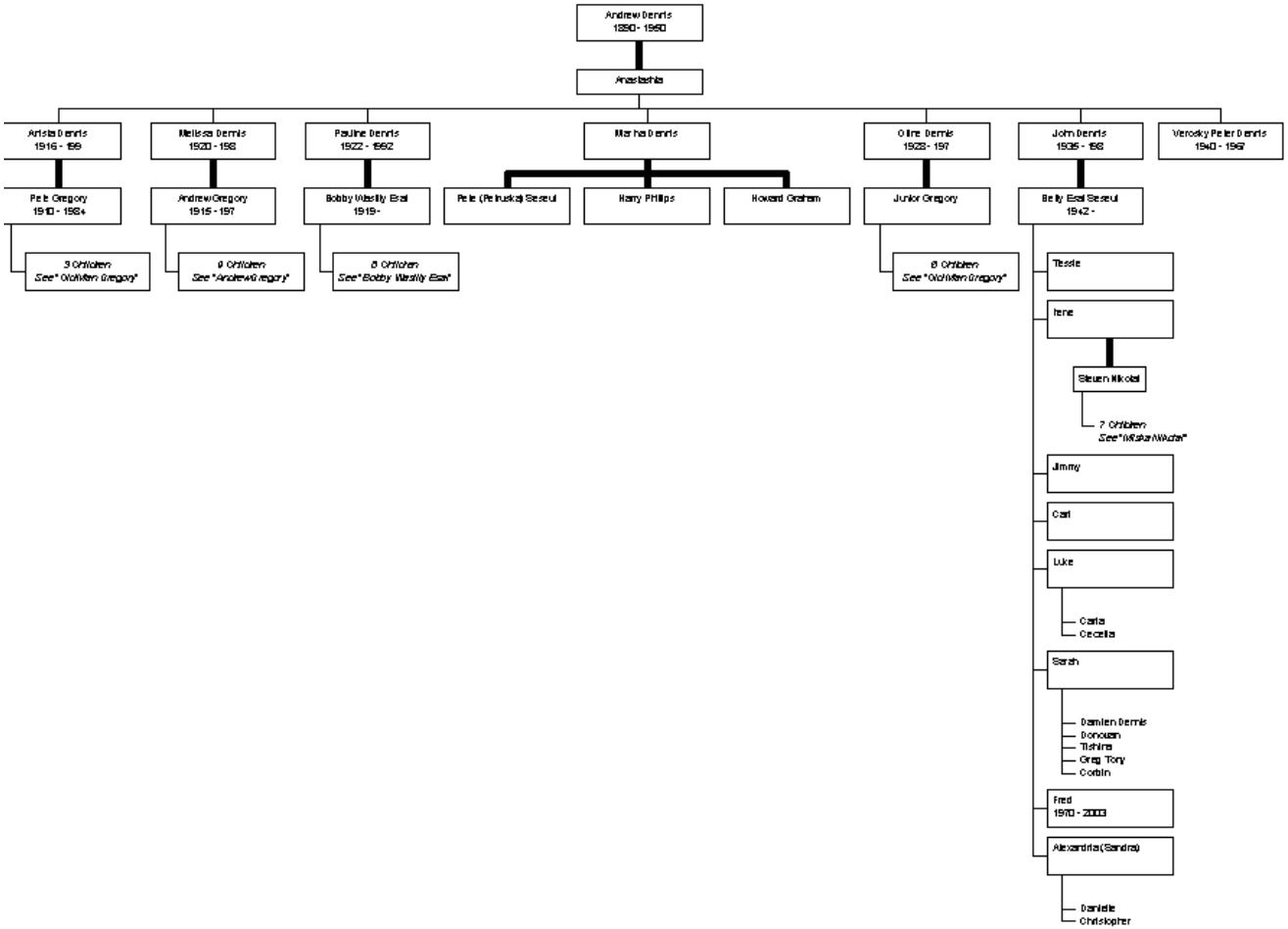
Old Man Dennis stayed with them. He continued to pack in wood for the families while the men were out hunting even though his daughters-in-law encouraged him to rest. He insisted he had to stay busy. He died about 1930, his wife having passed away years before (N. Dennis, personal communication).

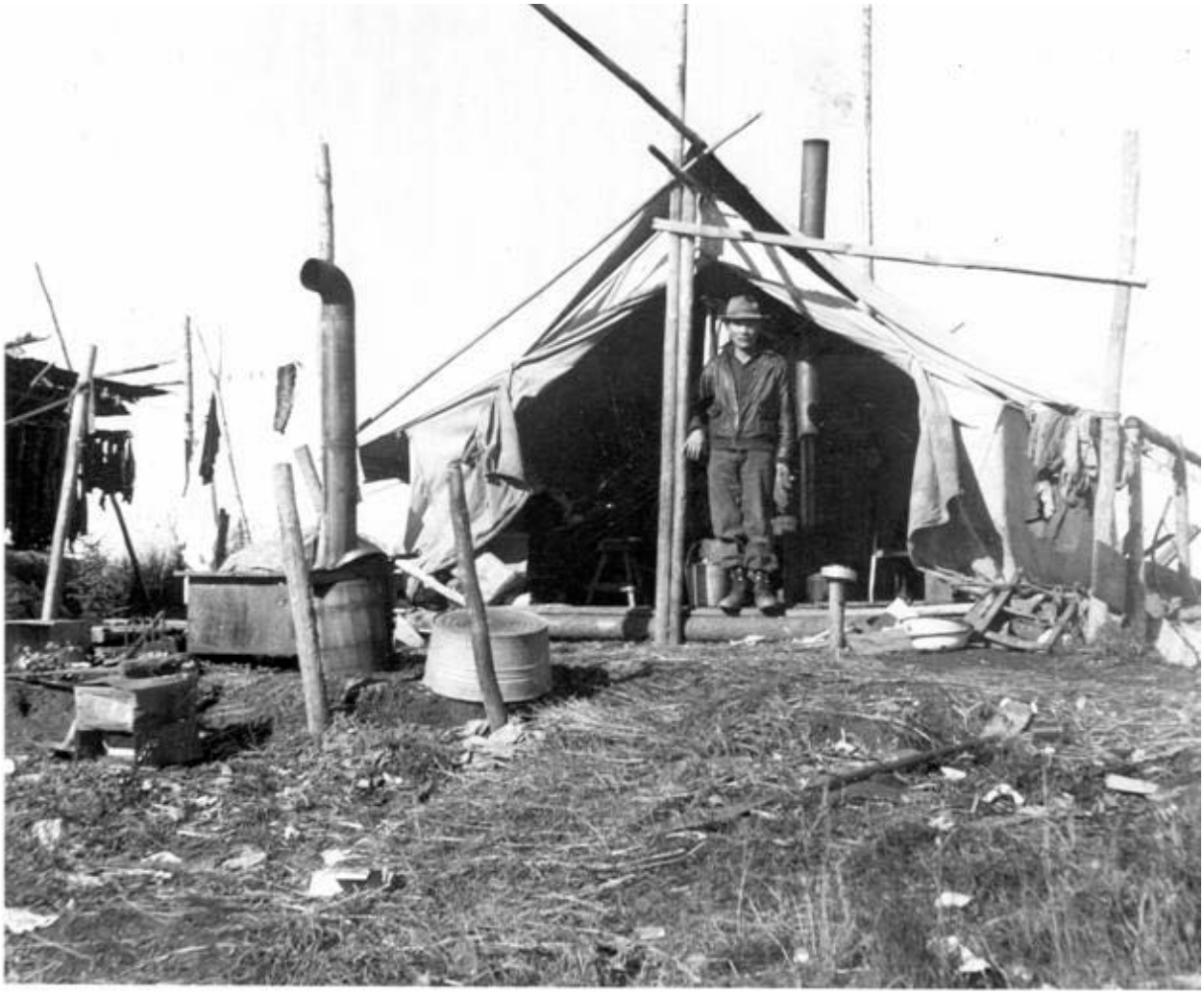
All three of his surviving children raised big families and their children in turn make up much of the population of Nikolai today.

Descendants of Dennis



Descendants of Andrew Dennis





Gogomy Dennis at fish camp, 1950. Agnes Rodli photo

Esai Family

The Esai family settled at Big River, a winter village located on the north bank of the Kuskokwim opposite the mouth of Big River. A roadhouse was established at this location after the Seward-Nome (now Iditarod) Trail opened during the gold rush era.

Old man Esai had several children, including Gleman Esai, Katherine (Esai) Deaphon and Sinka Esai. He and his wife also adopted or helped raise other children such as Bobby Wassily Esai after his father (Wassily) and mother died. Esai's father's mother was from elsewhere. She had been captured in a raid and soon after she arrived on the Kuskokwim a son was born (the grandfather). When he grew up he married a woman from Dishkaket. She spoke the Dishkaket language (Holikachuk) for the first three or four years until she took up the Upper Kuskokwim language.

Katherine married Miska Deaphon, the son of Nikolai Deaphon (see Deaphon family section).

Sinka's death was reported in *The Kusko Times* on Saturday, March 23, 1929 :

> "Sinka Esai, about 25, son of Esai at Big River, came to a sudden death near his home about March 19. He is reported to have been chasing a fox on the river, during which he collapsed. He is thought to have broken a blood vessel, the hemorrhage following undoubtably causing his death. His death occurred while his father, Esai, was visiting in Takotna. Deceased leaves a wife and child, now at Big River." Hunters used to pride themselves on being able to run down game on snowshoes and this may have been what he was doing.

Gleman Esai told the following story about his birth:

> His grandmother, his father, and his mother were headed for the East Fork road-house to spring out (stay there until after breakup). His father snowshoed ahead while the women drove the dogs, pulling a sled carrying a large bark boat and a canoe which they were moving from Big River. Finally his mother said she couldn't go any further so grandmother caught up with father and had him come back to clear the snow off the riverbank and build a fire. They had no sooner cleared the ground than he was born. They stayed there three nights and then went on with the new mother and baby in the sled. Father went back for the boats later (G. Esai, personal communication).

Gleman said of his family:

> One spring they moved out to the Windy Fork as the snow left. They spent all summer moving back and forth along the mountains (Alaska Range) hunting. That was the year they got the first moose. His grandfather killed a cow moose. They didn't know if they should eat it or not. His grandfather finally decided to try some even if it made him sick. Gleman was a young boy at the time and he said,

> "I will eat some too and die with you if it is bad." The meat was good so they ate it instead of feeding it to the dogs. Later that summer they also got a bull moose.

Prior to that summer they were only used to eating caribou, sheep and bear meat. After that the moose became more plentiful and the caribou declined.

They were at the mouth of Rainy Pass that summer when they saw the footprints of two adults and two children. They followed them and when they caught up with them it was Wassily Friday, Bobby Esai's father. These accounts verify that people were still doing a lot of nomadic hunting during the early 1900's.

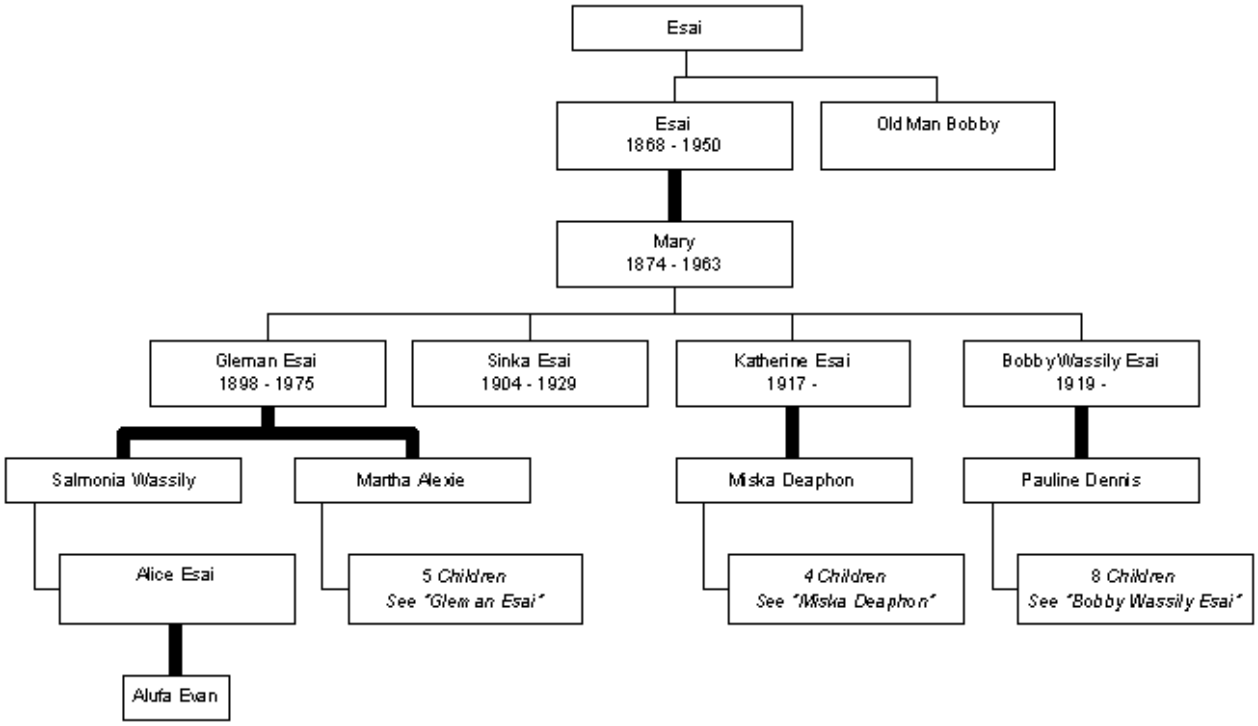
Gleman also said that one fall his grandfather built a cabin near Farewell Roadhouse. He built a mud stove out of black mud from the bank of the South Fork. Using a piece of stovepipe as a model, he made a chimney out of mud that was molded around bark. They used it all winter and it didn't crack.

Gleman's first wife Salamonia was an older sister of Bobby Esai. They had a daughter Alice who married Alufa Evan. After his first wife died Gleman married a woman named Martha Alexie from down the Kuskokwim. They had a large family consisting of Helen, Salmonia (Sally), Madronna, Phillip, Betty and Esai. After that wife died, grandma and grandpa Esai helped raise Salmonia, Phillip and Esai. Betty was adopted by Carl and Alexandria Seseui. Gleman disappeared in Anchorage in the mid-1970's after being treated at the Alaska Native Service Hospital, and no trace of him has ever been found.

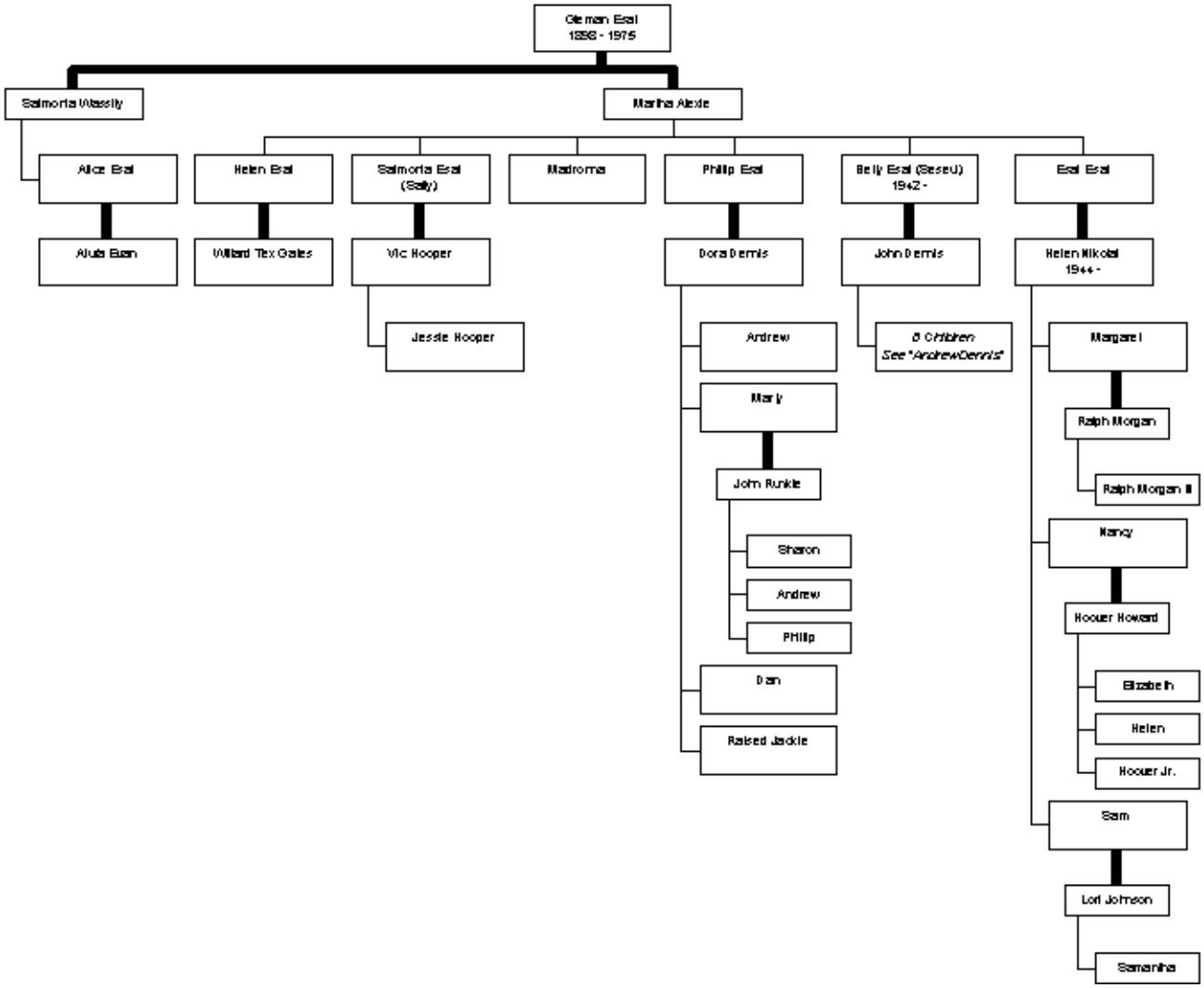
Grandma Mary Esai in McGrath, 1959. Jack Morris photo

Gleman Esai with his wife Martha, and children – Son with daughters, Betty and Salmonia, 1940's. Jack Morris photo

Descendants of Esai



Descendants of Gleman Esai



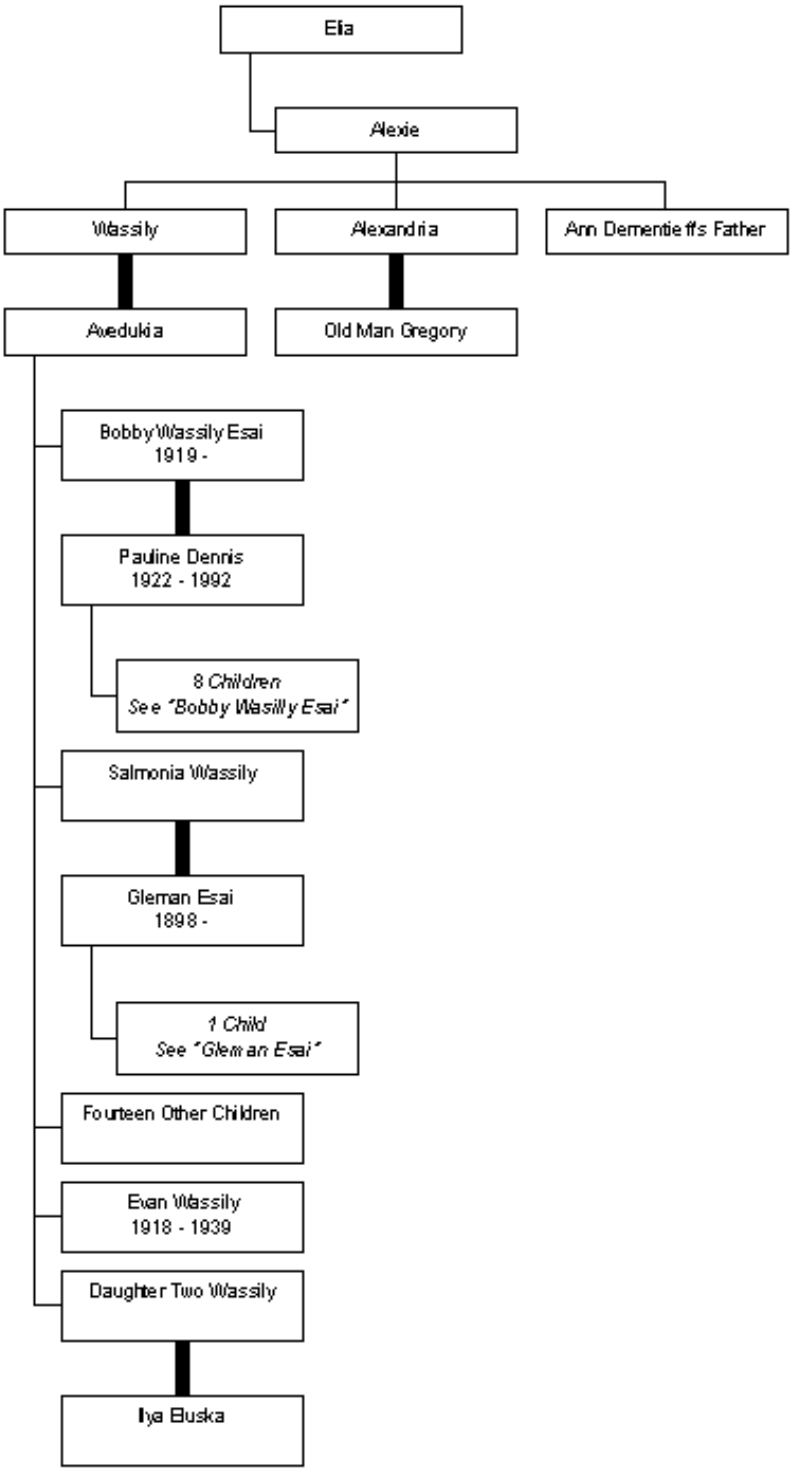
Elia / Wassily Families

There was an old timer named Elia who lived on the Takotna River. He is most likely the man that Spurr met in the old village above Vinasale when he went thorugh in 1898 (see Josiah Spurr account in American Period). He had a son named Alexia, who is buried at Big Creek on the Takotna. Alexia had three children – a son that grew up and settled on the Selatna (Ann Dementoff of McGrath's father); a daughter that married Old Man Gregory, who had come over from Dishkaket looking for a wife (they lived at Vinasale); and a second son was named Wassily. He was the father of Bobby Esai.

Wassily married a sister of Old Man Esai. They had a total of eighteen children and lived with ttheir family on the Takotna River. Later they moved to the West Fork of the Nixon Fork of the Takotna River. One spring Wassily went out hunting and failed to return, apparently the victim of drowning. After breakup his body was recovered and he was buried below McGrath on the bank of the Kuskokwim near the site that has become Anderson Park.

Most of his children did not survive adulthood. One daughter is buried near Egypt Mountain in the Alaska Range. Another daughter is buried across Pitka Fork at the mouth of the Salmon River. This indicates how he moved around with his family from hunting camps in the mountains to lowland fishing and trapping camps like everyone else just a couple of generations ago. One of his daughters married Gleman Esai and they were the parents of Alice Evan, now of Anchorage. A son, Evan Wassily, died in 1939 at the age of approximately 21 years. Another daughter was the mother of Deaphon Eluska. His only surviving child in 1999 is Bobby Wassily Esai (see Esai family section).

Descendants of Elia



Bobby Esai

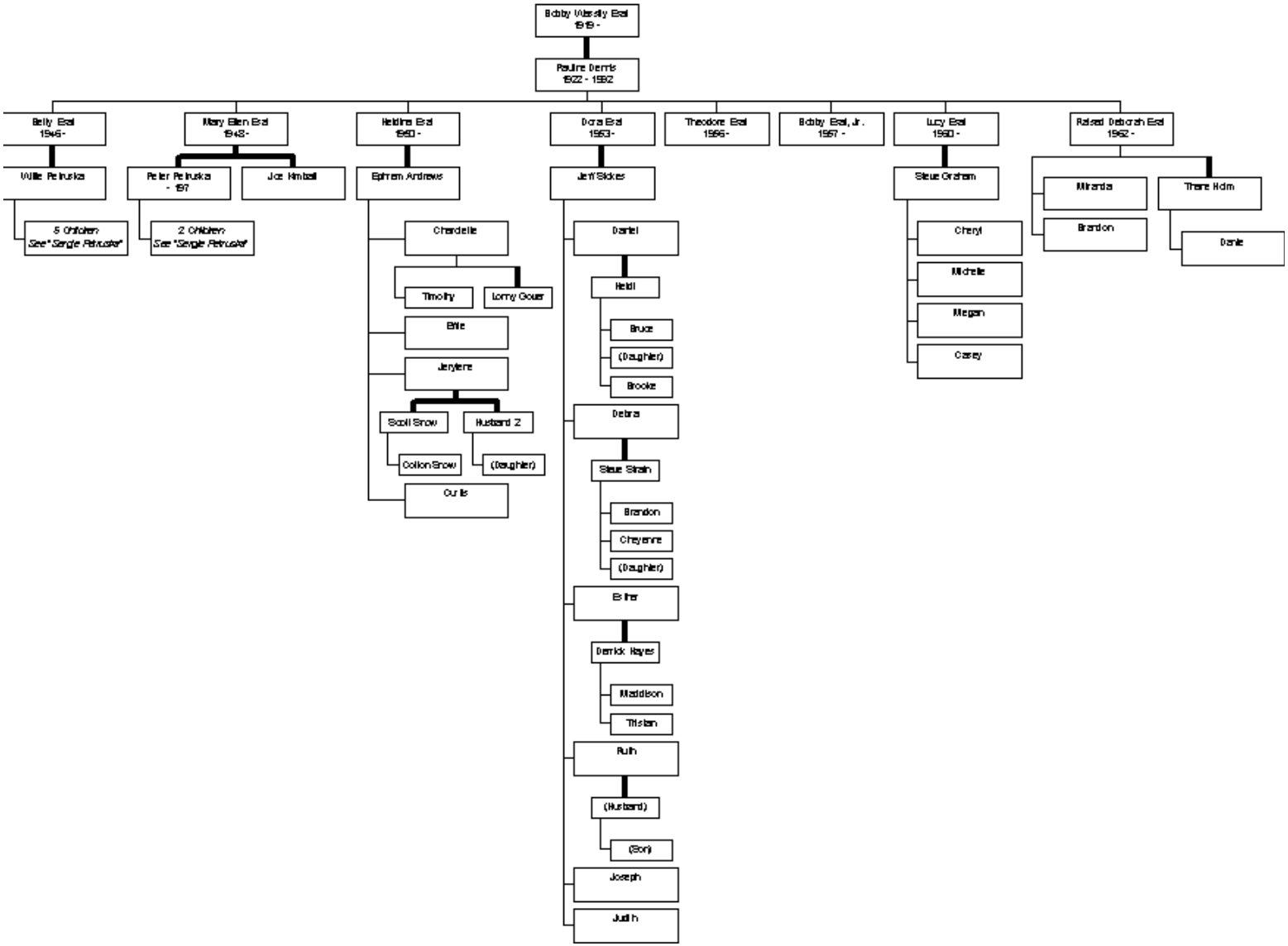
After his mother died, Bobby was taken in by Old Man Esai. He spent a lot of time at Big River village while growing up, and also traveled with Old Man Esai to the Alaska Range, using the route up the Middle and Windy Forks of the Big River.

Bobby has had a variety of experiences that illustrate the changing lifestyle in the Upper Kuskokwim. His first job was helping cut down trees with a two-man saw, rafting them to McGrath and working there in a sawmill run by Gene Tibbs. He worked as a deck-hand for the Alaska Rivers Navigation Company on runs between Bethel and McGrath. At times he would fill in for the pilot when he took a break, or run the engine when the engineer needed relieved. When World War II (WWII) broke out Gene Tibbs and Oscar Winchell built a small freight boat called the *Cowboy*, using the nickname of Winchell who grew up on a ranch in the “lower '48 states”. Bobby worked on this boat which was used to haul fuel oil and building materials up to Salmon River and Farewell Landing for the Civil Aeronautics Authority during the construction of an airfield and station at Farewell.

Also during WWII he went to Fairbanks and worked on different jobs. One was cutting utility poles for use along the Alaska Highway, then under construction from Whitehorse, Canada to Fairbanks, Alaska, and another was the construction of the Fairbanks International Airport.
In the 1950's and 1960's Bobby was the janitor at the Nikolai school, and during several seasons worked as a fire fighter for the Bureau of Land Management.

Bobby married Pauline Dennis, a daughter of Andrew Dennis, in 1945. They spent their first winter living in a camp in the Alaska Range below *Tremok'ish* mountain near where Silvertip camp is located today (B. Esai, personal communication). He and Pauline raised their family at Big River until the opening of the school at Nikolai led them to relocate there. He was appointed Reader for St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church and is currently First Chief at Nikolai.

Descendants of Bobby Wasilly Esai



Gregory Family

Old Man Gregory was from the Innoko River ; he grew up around Dishkaket. At some time in the 1800's the family was baptized and became members of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the late 1800's, the Episcopal Church established a mission in Anvik and began ministering to the people of the Innoko River at Shageluk and Holikachuk. One of his brothers married a woman from Shageluk and settled there.

When it became time for Old Man Gregory to look for a wife, his father suggested that he go over to the Kuskokwim as people there were Russian Orthodox. He traveled to Vinasale and married a woman who lived there. (One of his brothers moved with him to Vinasale, but never married). After their first child was born they started back to Dishkaket by canoe. When they reached Ophir, they were told by some miners, who had come up the Innoko River, that a bad sickness had struck at Dishkaket and people were dying. To protect his family, they returned to the Kuskokwim and remained there. (This would have been around 1909 or 1910. Sometime later those who survived at Dishkaket abandoned the village and moved to Anvik, Shageluk and Holikachuk).

His second wife was Alexandria, also from Vinasale. Her family were long-time residents of the Kuskokwim River. One of her relatives lived on the Tatlawiksuk River. Following is his story:

> One spring when there was a crust on the snow his brother went visiting and took his pet dog along. The dog returned without him and that night commenced to howl. The dog kept him awake but he did not get up and get dressed. Early in the morning he heard raiders coming. He jumped up and managed to get one leg in his pants before they arrived and he had to flee.
>
> He fled barefoot on the crust only partially dressed. There was open water at the mouth of the creek but he plunged in and managed to make it across to the other side before they caught up with him. He scrambled up the bank and just as he reached the top he saw and arrow fly between his legs. He threw himself forward on top of the bank and lay without moving.
>
> The attackers assumed that he was dead and since they couldn't cross the creek without swimming they finally left him. Once they were gone he ran to the settlement at the mouth of the Tatlawiksuk and found it had been destroyed.
>
> At that time people lived in semi-subterranean houses in the more permanent winter villages. When such a villages was attacked the enemy raiders would attempt to block the door and then drop flammable material down the smoke hole on top of the house setting the inside afire. When people were driven out by the smoke and fire they would be killed as they forced their way out.

> The only thing he was able to salvage was a piece of beaver skin blanket which he tied around his feet. He then ran upriver on the ice all the way to Vinasale village where he had relatives. He just managed to make it there before the crust got too soft to travel. After that he settled there and didn't return to the Tatlawiksuk" (P. Gregory, personal communication).

Alexandria 's father was born at Vinasale but after he married he lived for a time in the Farewell area in the foothills of the Alaska Range. That is where she lived during part of her early childhood. Shortly after they moved back to Vinasale another bad sickness hit and they were among the few survivors. The family also lived for a time in the Takotna River village at the mouth of Big Creek.

The village of Vinasale was located upriver from Vinasale Mountain, on the opposite bank. Spurr mentioned stopping at the village site and then going on down to the trading post located below Vinasale Mountain. The original village has eroded into the Kuskokwim River. The last site at which the Gregorys lived was on Vinasale Lake where remains of a few buildings can be found today.

Old Man Gregory's oldest son, Sinka, married a woman from downriver and moved to a location that became known as Sinka's Landing. His other sons, Pete, Andrew, Slim and Junior, all married women from Nikolai and moved there after the school opened.

A trapline trail extends from the site on Vinasale Lake to Lone Mountain. The family trapped in that area, and also cut cord wood for the steamboats in the years before they converted to oil burning engines. Pete worked for many years as an oiler on the river boats, and also acted as Pilot between McGrath and Nikolai. All of the brothers established traplines out of Nikolai after moving there. The one used by Junior and Andrew went from the East Fork to the Alaska Range, following Dry Creek. This was one of the routes from Nikolai that was used by hunters going after sheep during the winter.

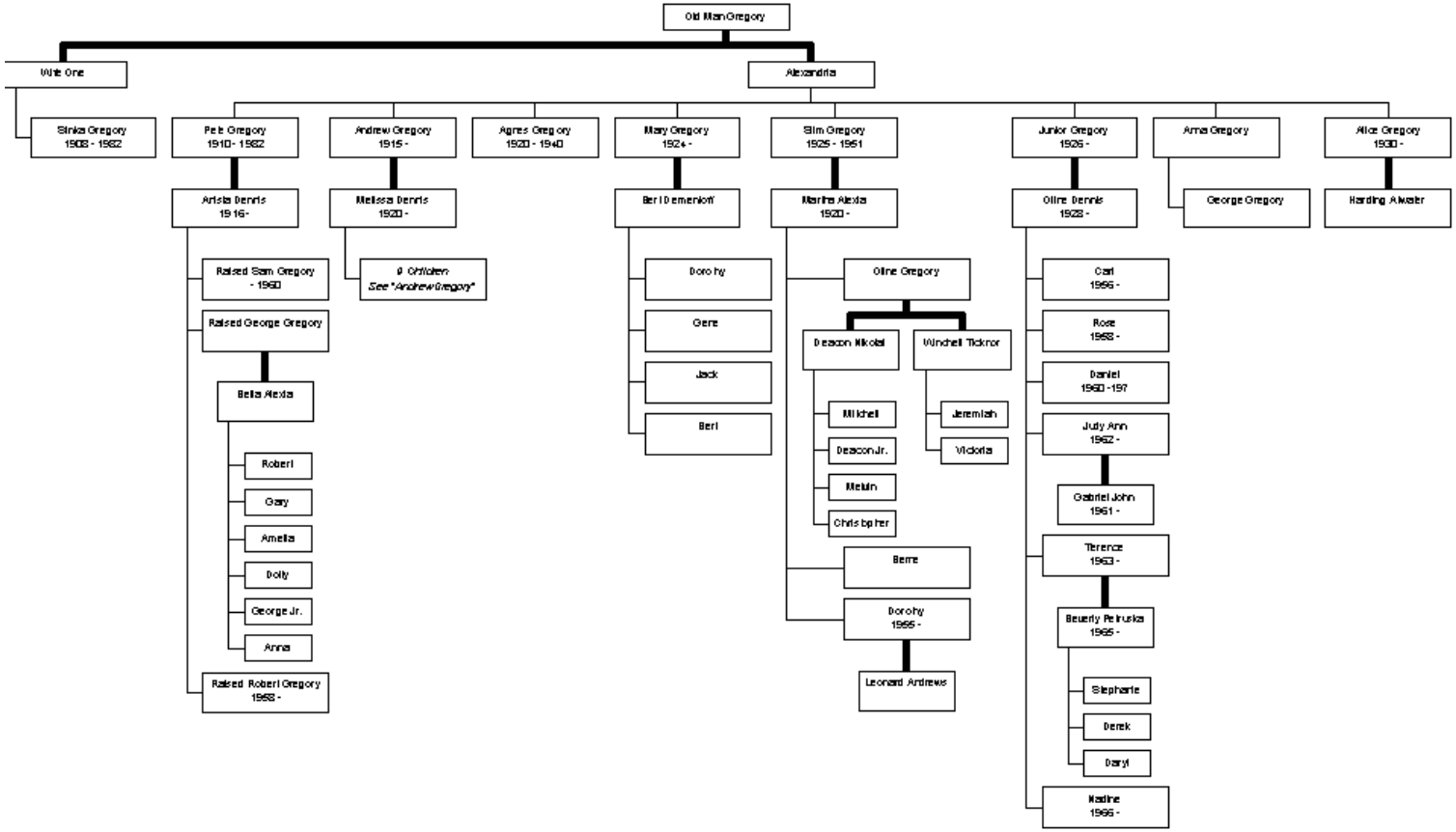
After she was widowed, the maternal grandmother of the Gregorys raised her nephew Eluska (the father of Deaphon, Katherine, Mary and Demoski). She met a tragic end at the old village site above Vinasale. The story of her demise follows:

> One winter when he (Eluska) was gone trapping up the Nixon River the other people from Vinasale started out for the Takotna River. But they turned back, returning to Vinasale. When they got back they found that her house had burned down. She had escaped from the burning cabin but was found dead in another cabin, covered with a tent (A.Gregory, personal communication).

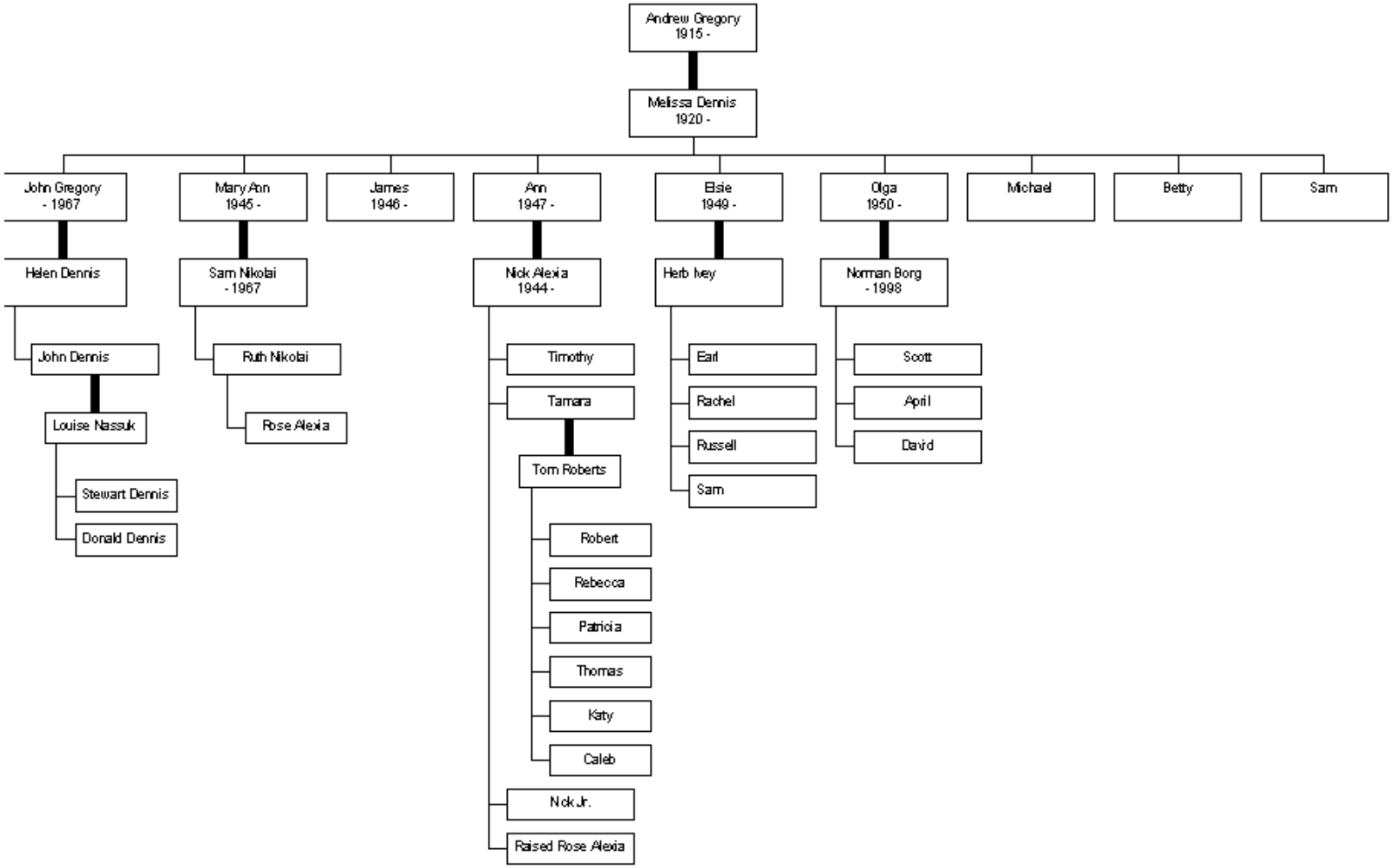
After that the family moved to Vinasale Lake where everyone except Andrew got sick with the flu. This was about 1927-1928. While they were sick the family fed themselves by dipping blackfish from a nearby lake. Andrew shot rabbits each day to feed the dogs until his older brother got strong enough to kill a moose (A.Gregory, personal communication).

Anna (Dennis) and Pete Gregory in Nikolai, around 1985. Terry Haynes photo

Descendants of Old Man Gregory



Descendants of Andrew Gregory



Pitka Family

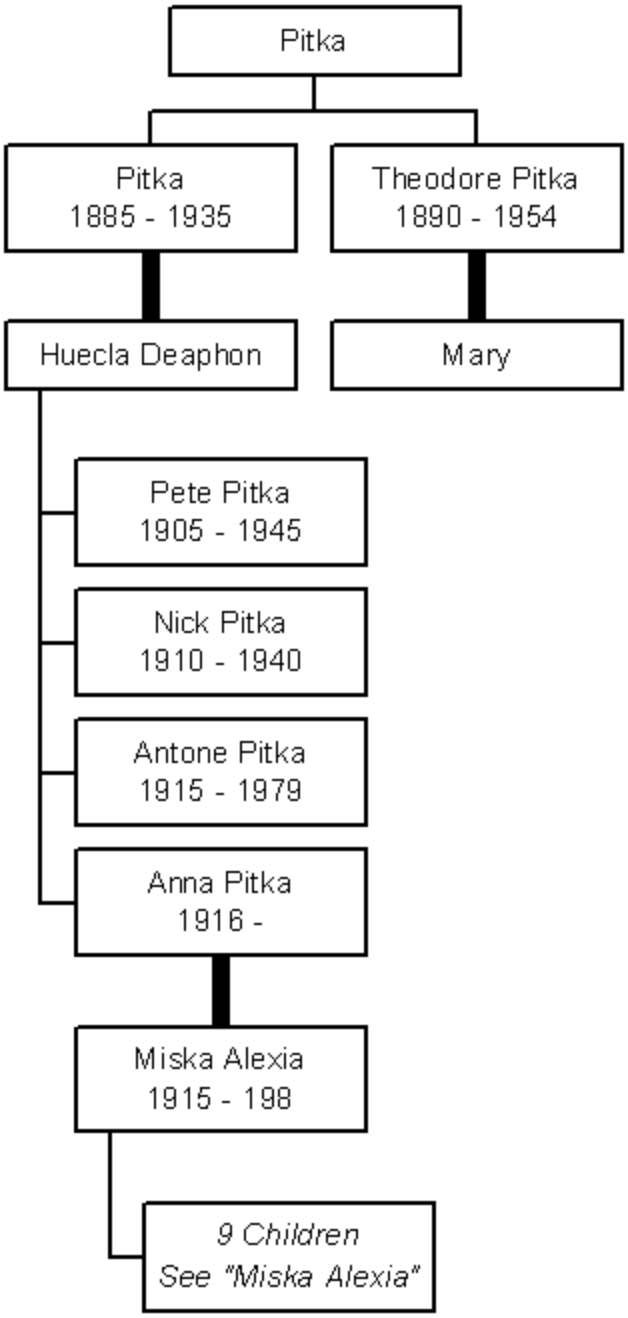
The Pitkas are one of the oldest families in the Upper Kuskokwim area. They are associated with the Salmon River area and the Pitka Fork of the Middle Fork of the Big River. They are thought to have always lived in or near this region (Hosley 1966:185). Old Man Pitka was said to have had to wives. He had two surviving sons. One, also named Pitka, married Huecla Deaphon, a daughter of Chief Nikolai. The second, named Theodore, had a wife named Mary.

Huecla and Pitka had four surviving children - Pete, Nick, Antone and Anna. Pete and Nick passed away in the 1940's. Antone acted as guide and general assistant to Edward Hosley in 1962 during his second summer of enthographic fieldwork and would have been the source of much of the information about the Pitka family found in his writing (Hosley 1966). Anna married Miska Alexia and they raised a large family on the Tonzona River and at Nikolai.

Salmon River, where the Pitkas lived, was an important source of king salmon. The Pitkas had one of the fish camps near the forks of Salmon River where people have fished for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Numerous old fish pits can be found on the high ground nearby. From this location there were summer and winter trails to the Tonzona village site, and to Vinasale and also to the old village of *T'ighis Nunga* where the battle with the Strong Man took place. After Nikolai was moved to its current location a trail was established between Salmon River and that site. When the Seward to Nome mail route, later called the Iditarod Trail, was established a roadhouse was established at the mouth of the Salmon River.

No male children with the Pitka name are alive today, and the only evidence of the Pitka family in that location are the remains of the old fish camp and the family name on one of the streams, the Pitka Fork.

Descendants of Pitka



Relationship to Denali Park

The people of Nikolai and Telida hunted seasonally in the Alaska Range extensively for many generations, well into the 1900's. Prior to the arrival of moose in the Kuskokwim valley around the turn of the century, the mountains were the primary habitat of big game animals such as sheep and caribou. Caribou did not move away from the mountains until late October and by late March they headed back to the foothills. Thus, from March to October big game, except black bear, was scarce in the Kuskokwim valley lowlands. When moose moved into the Interior, they appeared first along the Range and later developed a viable population in the valley of the Kuskokwim.

Late summer and early winter hunting trips were the norm. These trips were usually timed to end before freeze-up so that a skin boat could be built to float back downriver to winter villages in the valley. The other choice was to wait until freeze-up made it safe to travel overland, returning home before the short days of midwinter. At times one or more families would spend an entire winter in the foothills of the Range. They used the north side of the Alaska Range from the headwaters of Big River northeast to the headwaters of the Foraker River, and perhaps to the head of the McKinley River. In old McKinley Park this would have included the headwaters of the Swift Fork, Highpower Creek, Herron River, Foraker River and perhaps the head of the McKinley River. It should be kept in mind when reading accounts from Nikolai and Telida, or interviewing people from there, that when speaking English they always refer to the Swift Fork of the Kuskokwim, which flows by Telida, as the McKinley Fork. It is much clearer in Athabaskan where this stream is always called *Todzo » no'*.

Judge Wickersham made it clear that Chief Seseui was very familiar with all of the headwater streams which flow out of Denali to the north, even to telling him which glacier leads to the summit of Denali (Wickersham 1938:256).

The Jocko family of Telida, which includes Barbara Jocko Nikolai, may have been one of the last families to winter somewhere in the foothills near the head of the Swift Fork. Barbara was born in 1905, and she remembered staying there, so it was probably after 1910 (B. Nikolai, personal communication). Other residents of Telida also made trips out to the Range to hunt and others from Nikolai and Telida have trapped and hunted in the western portion of Denali Park Preserve. Beaver were trapped in the extensive lake system around the Lonestar Roadhouse. As late as the 1960's, trappers from Nikolai and Telida established a spring beaver camp in that area (personal knowledge). When caribou from the Denali herd appeared around Telida in the 1960's, hunters from Nikolai traveled to join their kin in Telida and hunt out towards the Preserve. Caribou were not available further down the valley around Nikolai at that time.

Trapping in the Preserve continued up until the last few years. The decline in the population of Telida and falling fur prices in the 1990's have led to a decline in trapping.

It remains to be seen what will happen in the future. There has also been a change over the years in who used the Park. Men were always the primary users of the Park area for big game hunting but they had earlier been accompanied by their families. The two women who founded Telida

were survivors of a massacre in the Park area and they supported themselves during the summer by catching ground squirrels before they left to descend the Swift Fork. Barbara Nikolai stated that her mother carried some traps she set for ground squirrels. With the establishment of schools, first in Nikolai in 1948, and later in Telida, the children stopped accompanying their families to the hunting and trapping camps and women with school-age children had to remain in the village while their husbands continued to hunt and trap. Men formed partnerships and two or more men would share a trapline. Sometimes other men would join them for hunting if the lines extended out to the Alaska Range. The use of these long lines extending from Nikolai and Telida outward has only declined in the last few years. Dog teams were used on all of these lines until the late 1960's when they were replaced by snow machines. When trapping by dog team it would take two or three days to reach the mountains from the villages. At the mountains men would remain to hunt for a few days while their traps worked; thus a typical trip would take about a week. The use of snow machines shortened these trips as they could reach the mountains in as little as a day.

Telida and Nikolai were recognized as Subsistence Resident Zoned Communities (SRZC) under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conversation Act (ANILCA). This was based on their historic use of the lands added to Denali Park by ANILCA. In the future this could prove very significant to these communities being able to continue their subsistence activities. Subsistence hunting is characterized by economy of effort. With the establishment of schools, as discussed earlier, families were required to stay in Nikolai and Telida if they wanted to keep the family together while the children attended school. As long as subsistence needs can be met near their communities there is no need to travel into the park lands (Denali National Park). It is not practical because of the effort and time this would require. However, this could easily change in the future.

Should a road be built into the Kuskokwim drainage it would open this area to greatly increased hunting pressure. If this happens, having subsistence preference in the park lands may prove significant to future subsistence opportunities. This is not unlike the situation that now prevails in Cantwell, an SRZC community, where much of their former hunting area is on state land, and open to increased hunting pressure. Cantwell people are already exercising their subsistence rights within the Park; Nikolai and Telida may find it necessary to do so in the future.

If subsistence preference for rural residents is not established on state land this will have a continued negative impact on residents of Nikolai and Telida as they are surrounded by state land. In this case having protected subsistence rights in federal park lands becomes more important even if access is limited.

Currently (1999) the moose population in the upper Kuskokwim is reaching a critical low. Hunting seasons will likely have to be reduced in order to allow the population to grow. This could affect the use of park land, especially if the situation does not improve in the near future. Snowmachine trails exist between Nikolai, Telida and Lake Minchumina. They are already being used for trapping, socializing, and recreation. It would not take too much effort to open existing trapline trails into the park preserve, making winter hunting possible in the area. The main reason for not doing so now is that subsistence needs can currently be met closer to home.

One of the aspects of Denali National Park that should be remembered and honored by those who currently use and appreciate the Park is that it is part of the heritage of the Athabaskan people of Nikolai and Telida, and other Interior Athabaskans. Their recent relatives and ancestors used these lands for hundreds, if not thousands, of years but left a very light footprint. When one travels from Denali Park down the Kuskokwim valley toward Telida and Nikolai, it is very difficult to determine any changes in the nature of the land until approaching the communities themselves. There are trapline trails and a few scattered cabins but even these trails are used more by animals than people. The Park can be considered wilderness, not because it has been protected from human use, but because the people who used it for thousands of years did not attempt to change its basic nature. Hopefully this will be part of the story told by the people of the Park Service and remembered by the descendants of the *Dichinanek Hwt'ana* (Upper Kuskokwim people)

Future Research

There are a number of areas for possible research that could involve or be of interest to the people of Nikolai and Telida:

1. Locate historic and prehistoric archeological sites within the northern and western areas of Denali National Park. This could start with the location of camps and trails used in more recent years. Unfortunately, the individuals who actually used these camps are now deceased but there are still residents of Nikolai and Telida who have second-hand information.
2. Locate and map historic trails.
3. Document actual subsistence practices that were used in the Park. Some of these are mentioned briefly in the history, such as snaring ground squirrels with an eagle feather spline and using skin boats to descend rivers. Investigate whether there is any evidence of using caribou fences in the Park. They were used by the ancestors of Nikolai and Telida people elsewhere. Describe how these items were made and what they looked like. Study which plants and animals were used and how they were harvested and utilized.

People in the villages may want to use the genealogies in this study as a base and fill in any missing information to bring them up to date. Family histories are very brief - families may want to expand them for their own use or to provide more details for their village history.

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