

Our guest elder is Alfred Stepetin an Aleut from Unalaska, born in 1928.

Elders- Kadakiinginaxtan: Aleut word = the ones that came before us. They were placed high in the village group.

d = "th" sound  
ii = e  
x = ah sound

They were the teachers of the past and present and the predictors of the future. They taught using the spoken word only, nothing was in writing. The fathers and uncles taught the sons and nephews the ways of tool making, navigation, house building, and the migration of wildlife and fowl. The mothers and aunts taught the daughters and nieces basket weaving, food preparation and storage.

The future and continuing way of life was dependent on the elders teaching. Each family was dependent on the elders knowledge. Culture was a necessity, not an art.

By 1933 - 35 Alfred says that the tradition was already gone, very few knew the basic skills. Alfred reports that his father was the last true Aleut dancer in the village of Unalaska and he died in 1935. He dances as he remembers his father's dance, but a friend sings for him. Aleut dancers sing for their own dances, and ~~after~~<sup>often</sup> use a drum for demonstration. His father danced in 1904 at the St. Louis Worlds Fair.

When the Russians came they enslaved the Aleuts, forcing the hunters to hunt until the seas, were nearly barren. Enslavement was discontinued in 1850 and by then the Orthodox Church was well established. It forbid Aleut dancing and singing as pagan, but allowed hunting and family life traditions.

The Russian Orthodox Church did have the liturgy, carols and gospel translated into the Aleut language. This was one way and reason the language survived. As a child, Alfred remembers that they weren't allowed to speak Aleut in school. His mother spoke to him in both languages, he could understand Aleut but not speak it until he was 25. Church is where you will hear Aleut today, more than other place.

<sup>aa</sup>  
Agiigx - Aleut word for God, "maker." They had this concept before the Russians came with church but they had no carvings or material symbols to illustrate God. Church was

also a social event and the Aleuts accepted the church when it came.

Barabara - Russian word for house (Aleut language doesn't have "r's"). The houses were built halfway underground, made of strips of wood and sod, you probably can't find a barabara now. The steam bath houses are somewhat like those houses, with a wooden floor and benches built at several levels. Rocks were heated and water poured over them to create steam. The houses were built for warmth, not looks.

Wood was washed up on the shore all the time and used for building and fire. There was never a lack of wood.

Bidarki - the 1-3 man skin kayaks of older times, were not built after 1935. They were used for hunting.

Food was almost exclusively seal, ducks, some root and bulbs and occasionally whales. They did not bury their fish underground, instead they prepared it for winter by smoke. The drying method started in the 17 and 18th century. After the Russians/Europeans came they used salt. In Unalaska they ate fish, halibut and clams, but never ate crab, although there were plenty of crab.

Childhood games included a shuffle board type game, stick game and bone game where winning meant getting all 26 pieces. The games were played to music. Aleuts love to sing and storytelling was part of survival during the long winter nights. Most were told for entertainment but some had a message or meaning. Some stories were not told in the village but were told at home, in private, they were not "family stories".

The family group was a small part of the village and the village was a small part of the regional group which was part of the Aleuts as a whole. Unalaska became the central village with islands on the east and west of it. There were twenty-six villages on Unalaska.

Each village had a Chief and the chief on Unalaska was the chief of chiefs who controlled the meetings. He was looked to with respect and what he said was law. All the chiefs would meet in Unalaska once a year and surrounding the meetings were potlatches (to borrow the term), games, visiting and dancing. The stories were not real long, but the storytelling could last into the night.

Japan bombed Dutch Harbor in June, 1942 when he was 12 years old. In July they were given 24 hour notice of a evacuation to Southeast, in Alaska some 2000 miles away. They were allowed to take one suitcase. 800 were evacuated, including 180 from Unalaska, two men were left behind as caretakers.

They were housed in old cannery buildings, 15 -20 buildings for 180 people. There were 1 - 2 bedroom houses, for up to eight people per house. The Southeast area did not have the plentiful food they were use to, it was a great hardship.

They were returned in 1945 to Unalaska only to find that most of the homes were totally destroyed or ramshacked. They were not given any compensation or materials to rebuild. In his home his mother had kept his father's ivory carving and boat building tools, skin boats, and other valuable articles, they were all stolen. The culture was dead, very few went out hunting, fishing, or did weaving the old way. The people were very discouraged. The church became a very important part of their life, something to look to. Even today, anywhere in the world when an Aleut meets an Orthodox, they feel a common bond.

Alfred did not describe much about the Aleut way of life between 1945 to the present at this session.