

60 year-old-man last Aleut dancer today

By Wayne Atlla
Campus News Service

As a child growing up on the beaches of his Aleutian Island village of Unalaska, Alfred Stepetin learned how to tell stories through Aleut dancing. Today the 60-year-old man is the last Aleut dancer.

The diminutive man, quick to laugh, skillfully and articulately tells the stories of his life and that of his people to students and a tape recorder on the UAF campus, practicing what he says is his responsibility as an elder to his people.

Stepetin arrived on campus in mid-January for six weeks, teaching, translating old Aleut writing, and will be an honored guest at the upcoming Festival of Native Arts being held Feb. 18-20 on the UAF campus.

"I saw my dad dance when I was seven years old. I know how the motions go," Stepetin said. "Aleut dancing is more storytelling than dance," said the Aleut elder who hasn't performed recently due to health reasons. "I don't know of anybody (besides Stepetin) who performs Aleut dancing," said Lydia T. Black, professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. According to Black, the most destructive blow to Aleut traditions is the relocation of Aleut people during World War II.

"They were deprived of an environment in which the younger generation could become acquainted with their traditions," Black said.

According to Black, since the reloca-

tion so much knowledge of Aleut tradition is lost and the new generation does not know the traditions.

The Aleuts were developing a written language before the war. Today there may be four people who can read and write the old Aleut script, said Black. Stepetin, one of the four, is currently translating a 120-year-old written work for the university.

On June 3, 1942, the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor and a few days later the Japanese had taken Attu Island. "There was immediate talk of evacuation," Stepetin said. A few days later 180 Aleut people, including the 12-year-old Stepetin, were evacuated by boat and taken on a 14-day trip from Unalaska to the site of an abandoned cannery on Burnette Island in Southeast Alaska.

Over 800 Aleuts were evacuated from numerous Aleutian villages and relocated for three years until WWII was over. When they were brought home Stepetin found his village ransacked and destroyed.

Stepetin remembers the day his village was evacuated. "When we were leaving Unalaska, the ship was docked in an area where as it left the bay it passed the church. Many of our elders, young too, many of them knelt and prayed. I was wondering would we ever see it again and prayed that we would. Not in any of our lifetime did any of us leave the village before."

Stepetin recalls coming home after the relocation. "People came home and there was no get-up-and-go in



ALEUT ELDER: Alfred Stepetin, 60, believes survival of the traditional Aleut culture lies in the hands of the elders teaching the young.

photo by Wayne Atlla

"I like the old traditional Aleut culture," Stepetin said. "I will always remember the crackling of wood while in the stove. To smell the odor of wood. I could remember getting up in the early morning sun and getting a good breath of fresh air. Fish jumping in the bay."

them," he said. "Very few would go out hunting and fishing the traditional way."

The period of relocation has not only impacted Aleut dance and language but people don't practice the traditional activities as much as they used to. According to Stepetin, there are very few Aleut basketweavers left and most are elders, with few younger Aleuts practicing the ancient art.

Black says the Aleuts have not yet been compensated for their losses during the war. She said there is currently a bill in Congress seeking compensation.

"So far to my knowledge not a single cent has been appropriated. Congress is considering," Black said. "Unfortunately we only have one congressman."

The only thing that holds Aleuts together as a group is the church, Stepetin said. If Congress compensates the Aleuts for the wartime losses he says his village hopes to rebuild the

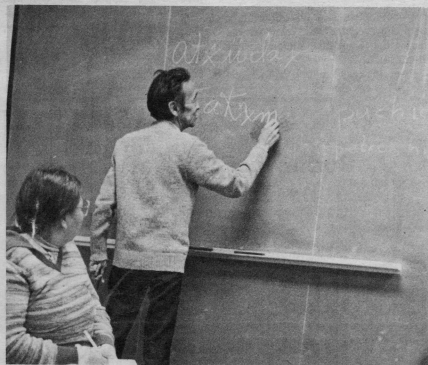
church and also build a cultural and recreational center.

"He is a genuine Aleut artist," said Black, who has authored a book called "Aleut Art". She wrote the book at the request of Aleut artists who were interested in their traditions but needed more information on traditional Aleut art.

Currently Stepetin is painting wild flowers of the Aleutian Islands. He said his next project will be done after studying pre-Russian Aleut traditional clothing. He would like to recreate the traditional headgear that was used in the past.

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"Survival is now up to the elders to teach the young," Stepetin said.



PRESERVING A LANGUAGE: Alfred Stepetin is on the UAF campus teaching and translating old Aleut writing. Stepetin is one of only four people who can read and write the old Aleut script.

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