

ANS.401 - Knowledge of Native Elders
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Alfred Stepetin
Summarized by: Debbie VanDyke

TOPIC: War Years and Their Effect on the Aleut People

Dutch Harbor was bombed June 3, 1942 by the Japanese. A few days later the Japanese invaded Attu. They took 26 residents as prisoners to Japan where they were put into concentration camps. They were released soon after the war, but the Americans did not permit them to return to Attu.

On July 12, 1942 Alfred was evacuated with a group of people from Unalaska with only two days' notice. They were told to take only one suitcase with them (Alfred mentioned in 1/26 class that the white people in Unalaska were permitted to remain there). They were put on boats and as they left the harbor and passed the church all the elders knelt down and prayed, saying, "Will I ever see you again?" This evacuation was hard on everyone, as they were told nothing and did not know if they were going to return. August 12, 1942 they arrived in Wrangell. This evacuation affected eight Aleutian villages, Nikolski, Akutan, Unalaska, Kushega, Mukushun, Atka, St. Paul, and St. George. Everything was done so quickly that relatives in the other areas did not know each other's whereabouts (i.e. Alfred had a sister in Nikolski and he didn't know where she was going). On August 25, 1942 the Unalaska group was placed at Bernet Inlet (fishing camp). The people of Nikolski, Akutan and Mukushun were placed near Ketchikan, the people of Atka were placed at a fishing camp called "Kilisnu" and the people of St. Paul and St. George were placed at two different canneries at Fonter Bay. The people were not free to come and go; they became wards of the federal government.

LIFE IN THE EVACUATION CAMP

The evacuation camp consisted of nine two-bedroom houses and one bunkhouse with eleven rooms. A year after the arrival of the group from Unalaska four more houses were built to house 180 people. The houses were heated by woodstoves. There was no running water or electricity, no school, church, hospital or clinic in the camp. The nearest hospital was 80 miles away, a two-hour boat ride. The only medical supplies in the camp were a first aid kit held by the schoolteacher's wife. The Aleut elders helped themselves with their own remedies. Food was rationed to the Aleuts by the federal government (i.e. one day they were given apples, another day apples, another day flour and sugar). They had no means of communication with the outside world, so at the point of the bay they built a fire. If someone from a distance saw the fire burning it meant there was an emergency at the camp.

Since Alfred was a teenager, he was able to leave the camp to attend vocational school at Wrangell. Students in grades 8-12 were taken away to school in September and did not return till May.

Outbreaks of impetigo, lice, and boils occurred in the camps. Doctors and dentists visited the camps infrequently. The people received nets so they could go gill netting, which is not their traditional way of fishing. There were no animals for the men to hunt. Only blueberries and cranberries were nearby, which the women picked. Psychologically, relocation had an effect on everyone, especially the young. The elders did not want to die in these relocation camps. An elderly lady who did die there was taken home to be buried.

RETURN HOME

When the people went back to their villages, they had to start over. They were given wood-frame houses called cabanas and they rebuilt their homes. When the people of Mukushun and Kushega were allowed to leave the relocation camp they were given a choice. They could either go back to their villages and start from scratch, because GI's had ransacked their villages, or they could go to one of the other Aleutian villages. Some chose Akutan and others chose Unalaska, although two brothers did return to Kushega. The people from Borka were also given the same choice, and they chose to live in Unalaska. Three Aleut villages were completely destroyed. They were Kushega, Borka, and Churnowski. What was left inside the churches at Kushega, Mukushun and Borka was moved to the church at Unalaska.

COMPENSATION

Under President Carter a commission was set up to investigate the relocation of Japanese-Americans and the Aleut people. Aleuts were included because documents were found in various archives substantiating the relocation, though other documents had been destroyed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In 1978 the Aleut Corporation hired a Washington firm to put their case together, and so the Aleuts were included in the proceedings of the commission. In 1983 the commission completed its investigation and recommended compensation to individual survivors, and compensation to the communities, establishing a fund for a cultural center. Before the last election, Majority Leader Jim Wright stopped the Aleuts' compensation because Aleut communities were mentioning rebuilding their churches in their petition. He cited the doctrine of separation of church and state. This bill is soon to come up again in Congress (February, 1988). Alfred spoke of taking a group of people into different Aleutian villages to document what survivors of the relocation had to say about it. This was on television.

LOCATION OF CHURCH

Alfred told of the Russian Orthodox church being situated down-

town in Unalaska where businesses were also located. When they went to one of these businesses they would say, "I'm going downtown", but if they were going to church they would say, "I'm going up to church."

QUESTION

Were the happenings of World War II foretold by the elders?

Alfred: Back in the 30's elders would say there is going to be a war, but they didn't say with whom.

A GI used to pass Alfred's uncle's place every morning to read the weather report off the teletype to the fishermen. He could ask Alfred's uncle (Meedfa?) "What's the weather going to be like today?", and he would tell him. After he read the teletype report to the fishermen he would add, "But (Meedfa?) said..."

Alfred still is wondering why Aleuts never ate crab. Ms. Black replied that maybe it is because the crabs are believed to eat the flesh off corpses that drowned!

Aleuts use the Russian alphabet and have some Russian loanwords. The Aleut language is related to the Eskimo language.

Ms. Black: The Smithsonian Institute is preparing an exhibit of Alaskan art, mostly Tlingit and Aleut. This includes items that are on loan from the Soviet Union for the first time. This exhibit will arrive in Anchorage two years after its opening date. During the Russian occupation of Alaska a lot of artifacts were taken back to Russia and Finland. They are in storage in these countries. In 1840 a museum was opened in Sitka. In 1876, when the United States purchased Alaska, General Davis got hold of this collection and some of it ended up at the Harvard Museum.