

ANS 401  
KNOWLEDGE OF NATIVE ELDERS  
ALFRED STEPETIN  
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SUMMARY: GERALD PILOT

TOPIC: Aleut singing, dancing, and storytelling.

Two video tapes were shown, taken in early 70's in Fairbanks, one during a Festival of Native Arts, and another during a cultural workshop held at UAF.

The first was on singing, dancing and storytelling. Alfred was a member of this group of about six or seven participants of Aleuts. Following the singing and dancing, Willie Tcheripanoff, an elder Aleut from Akatun told a traditional Aleut story in their language. The group sat around him on stage, and showed their interest and courtesy by making "uh" sounds after each remark during the numerous pauses. Earlier in the semester, Alfred said that they did this to show that they were paying attention, and also their courtesy and respect that they had for the storyteller. From the response of his group and Alfred's later statements, it was easy to generalize this from viewing his storytelling style even though we did not understand the language. Alfred then translated the story into English.

The other video presented a group of Aleut dancers, mostly younger, dancing with two elders, Willie Tcheripanoff and Anfesa Shapishnikoff. Alfred said that he had known Anfesa since she was a little girl, and had never known that she knew how to dance. She was also from Unalaska and Alfred said that he would never have thought her to be an aleut dancer. He also said that she was the only aleut women he had ever seen dance. Willie Tcheripanoff, Alfred remarked, was the true Aleut, he knew dancing, singing, and was the best storyteller that Alfred ever knew.

Other questions following the video programs, pertaining to this topic were:

Was singing done in homes, so younger people learn these skills?

Yes, every family had songs that they passed on to their children, mothers sang to children, special lullabys, and other folk songs that were often changing. Also, some songs were community songs, meant to be sung at social gathering and other community events.

How did the church affect dancing?

The Orthodox church felt that it was paganism, so they did what they could to stop it. However, today Aleut dancing is not wholly Aleut, since it is a mixture of traditional and Russian mixed. Today the Aleuts see their dancing as uniquely theirs.

General questions:

Was caribou native to the Aleutians?

No. They were moved from Nunivak Island, before World War II. During the war they stayed on the islands by themselves, so they became wild. Blue fox was also introduced by outsiders and they multiplied so much that they began killing off the wild geese population. A program was introduced to exterminate the foxes so that the geese could come back.

After the WWII evacuation, what happened to the two men left at Unalaska?

The younger man died in an accident while the people were gone, and the older man who was mostly concerned about the church survived.

Is the grass used in basket-weaving different in the

Aleutians?

Alfred joked, and said, that for sure Aleut grass is a lot sturdier from all the wind. Maybe the grass was't any different, but that it sure had an effect on the quality of the Aleut weaving. Then he said that there were different ways to treat and prepare grass for weaving. Grass left out in the sun to be bleached, became whiter. Left in the dark, they became darker. Also, berries were used as dyes. Alfred said that he knew how to basket weave, that all you really needed was grass and the weaver, plus a lot of patience and skill. The finer the weaver is, the finer and tighter the basket will be. He said that he was able to weave good enough so that he could drink coffee out of what he had woven.

Another specific topic was about the occurrence that took place on Attu Island between the Japanese and the Attuans when the WWII invasion took place. The Aleut chief, Alex Hudiokoff, told the invaders to leave his people alone, and that they could take him as their prisoner. Using him as an example of what would happen if they did not follow orders, the chief was shot in front of his family. This showed the importance that the Aleut chiefs placed on their leadership role. Being a chief was not just a title, but a responsibility. A white man who was a teacher was also shot, while his wife was also taken as prisoner. The rest of the villagers were then taken to a concentration camp in Japan for the remainder of the war. Eventually, they returned to Alaska by way of California, to Anchorage, and eventually resettled at Adka, not on Attu Island, since the Military had taken it over.