

ANS 401
Knowledge of Native Elders
Class Summary, February 9, 1989
by: Dan Molina

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NO TAPE

Introduction

Larry and Martha Matfay, Aleut elders, presently reside in the village of Old Harbor which is located on Kodiak Island. Larry, born in the year 1907, was raised in the village of Akhiok, located on the Southwestern coast of Kodiak Island. Martha, born in the year 1919, was raised in the village of Karluk and is situated on the western coast of the island. Both, Larry and Martha, adhere to the Russian Orthodox Religion, which is predominant in this area of Alaska.

Cannery Employment

Sea otter hunting was not regularly practiced in the spring due to the poor conditions of the pelts. These poor conditions were the direct results of the sea otters fighting, and was in the form of puncture marks at this time. Larry's father, a sea otter hunter, would take his family north to Olga Bay and begin work in the cannery. His family travelled by kayak because it was his fathers favorite form of water craft travel. Young Larry and his sister would ride inside the covered portion of the kayak, while his father and mother paddled. Other family members travelled to the cannery with neighbors in their dory. Employed at the cannery were Larry's father, mother and older brother.

Housing at the cannery was initially in the form of barabaras. Russian in name, this building style is indigenous to the Aleut people. These dome-like structures, constructed with a driftwood frame and covered with grass, provided a clean, dry, and comfortable place to live. Seal and bear skin provided bedding, while copper and iron kettles were used for cooking. Later in time, however, the cannery provided wood frame houses for its employees and their families.

Boys and girls not old enough or ready for the laborious cannery work spent their time playing, mainly on the beach. Larry recalled that the girls usually played "village" using mussel shells for both people and buildings. The boys mostly played "boats" and any nearby item that floated was employed - usually wood. Larry remembers he and his friends waging "war" on the girls, makebelieve villages in the sand. These games, however, came to a close at the end of the commerical fishing season when younger children helped to procure fish. These fish were to be used by the individual families. The younger children did "the dirty work" that consisted of chasing fish into nets that were placed in shallow creeks. Stressing the point that people helped one another, Larry said these fish were often times shared with others so that everyone would have some fish.

Education

Larry's formal education occurred in Akhiok's one room school house. The school accomidated approximately 20 students with boys sitting on one side of the building and girls sitting on the other . Larry, however, preferred to

be out helping his dad do chores, such as hunting and gathering driftwood to be used as firewood. He remembers the school teacher coaxing him to attend school with an apple, only to be disappointed by not receiving apples from that point on. School kids, were not allowed to speak their language - Aleutiq, were encouraged to speak English both in and out of the classroom.

A Time to Dance

Larry proudly passed out several copies of this biography Time to Dance, a well written, informative and enjoyable book. He led the class, leafing through the book's pages, and told short stories of the people and places contained in the photographs. These stories, ranged from unsuccessfully trying to decipher petroglyphs found near the village of Akhiok to where he and Martha first met.

Karluk, Martha's home village, is approximately 45 air miles, from Akhiok. Larry explained how he would walk to the village, a journey of about 14 hours, to conduct affairs. He stated that when he was taking Martha's family across the bay, in his skiff, to get to the mailboat, something transpired. Being stormy, he put the passengers under a tarpoline to protect them from the elements. Larry went to place an oar over the tarpoline to hold it down and inadvertently hit Martha on the head with the oar! Larry and Martha both fell in love and were married four days later.