

Knowledge of Native Elders
Larry & Martha Matfay
Summary by Anthony Rickard
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NO TAPE

Larry began the class by passing around pictures of Native garments and discussing how they were crafted, of particular interest was the rain gear made from either bear or seal gut. As Larry explained, the rain gear was quite waterproof and very durable; he related how kayaks were "airlocked," or made watertight, by the paddler tying his rain gear tightly around the hole. Larry also said that the rain gear needed to be moistened from time to time, otherwise it would become too dry and would eventually wear out. Indeed, the rain gear was very important in keeping kayakers dry during their trips, and could even help keep the kayak afloat in case of trouble.

Along with discussing the rain gear, Larry told us how the bear and seal guts were prepared. Basically, they had to be thoroughly cleaned inside and out, and then carefully treated so they would'nt leak. Surprisingly, if a bear gut is taken in the fall it will usually have some small holes in it. Larry explained that this is because the bear has eaten fish all summer, and the fish bones cause the holes. However, if the bear is taken in the spring the guts will have healed and the rain gear made from them will be much more waterproof.

Larry also told us his story about spending a lot of time and effort preparing a large (30 foot long) bear gut. He was going to give it to a women in Kodiak who was going to make a garment with it. However, when Larry took the gut to Kodiak, carefully wrapped in plastic bags, he left it outside on a grabage can. As luck would have it, the trash collector took it away with the garbage. Larry said he did try to find the gut, but had no success.

While circulating pictures and answering questions, Larry discussed other Native garments, such as parkas made from bird skin (puffins, for example) and animal hides. He mentioned how seal stomachs were used to store food and water, and that sinew was used as thread to put together the clothes and food sacks. We got to see pictures of barabaras, as well as, other illustrations of the Kodiak area. Several pictures showed villages, like Old Harbor, during the late 1800's some of those pictures also showed food being prepared. Larry told us that when fish was put in a windy place to keep the blueflies off of it.

Next, Larry and Martha answered questions concerning the Russian Orthodox religion. Larry said that soon after the Russians first arrived in Kodiak (at three Saints Bay) they built the first Russian Orthadox Church on the island. Other, churches were built later in other locations, including Old Harbor. Although the Russian Orthadox priests were in Kodiak, they would periodically visit the villages,

usually coming twice a year. The villages the priests visited included Eagle Harbor, Old Harbor, Kagniak, Aktalak and Akhiok. The priests would stay about one week in each village, teaching the people and baptising children. Weather and the rough seas often made travelling difficult for the priests, but they still visited the villages regularly. Larry and Martha described how the community had weekly services even though the priests were usually not there. People in the village took care of the maintenance of the church year round. Painting or fixing up the church was usually a community event, sometimes lasting 3 or 4 days, with the women sometimes preparing food for a village potluck. When it was approaching the time for the priests to come, the church was prepared and the candles lit, as soon as the priests arrived, a service was held. As Larry and Martha mentioned, Lent is observed by the Russian Orthodox faith in March, and during Lent people aren't suppose to drink or eat very much meat (fish is alright though). If someone of the Russian Orthodox religion was going to marry a person who was not of the same faith they would be baptised by a priest before the church wedding. Martha stated that nuns also served in the Russian Orthodox church, and that many of the village readers were women. Larry and Martha both pointed-out that many people in the Kodiak area are of the Russian Orthodox faith, and there is even a Russian Orthodox seminary in Kodiak.

Overall, it was a very informative session and much was discussed about the religious practices of the Kodiak area villages. We also learned a lot about Native garments, what they were made of and how they were used. Larry and Martha answered many questions about the Russian Orthodox church and Larry's comments and illustrations of Native clothes were very interesting. Indeed, the stories and explanations the Matfays shared helped to better understand and appreciate Alaska Native culture.