

CHAPTER TWO

The Unangax and Alutiiq



The Unangax and Alutiiq people came from southern and southwestern areas of Alaska. Out of necessity, they occupied the coastal regions and Alaskan islands.

Because Alaska is so close to Russia, the Unangax and Alutiiq cultures adopted many customs from that country. Although Alaska is now part of the United States, the territory belonged to Russia until 1867. The mixing of the cultures, though, continues to this day. Members of these Native Alaskan clans cook many Russian dishes, for example. The Unangax and Alutiiq also use many Russian words in their languages. Each village in this region even has an Orthodox Church for Natives who follow the Russian Orthodox religion.

Many Russians and Natives have intermarried. Dr. Lydia Black, a local historian, explains, "Very few Russian women came to Alaska."¹ As a result, many of the Russian men married Native Alaskans.

Tania Chichkenoff was born in Alaska. Although she has both Russian and Native Alaskan ancestors, she grew up in the Orthodox

faith. "We were born not knowing that there was any other," she recalls. "We live in a remote, remote village, and the only thing was Orthodox . . . and we've kept it. I have eight children and thirty-six grandchildren, and they've all been baptized Orthodox."²

The territory of this group extends from the inlet known as Prince William Sound off the southern coast of the state to the tip of the Aleutian Islands. Although many people refer to the Native islanders as the Aleut, tribe members do not use this name. They call themselves the Unangax. A small number of Unangax also live on nearby Bering Island, which is still part of Russia.

Today life is pretty peaceful on Alaska's islands, but in the 1940s, this region was anything but serene. During World War II, the United States evacuated Native Alaskans living on the islands, sending them to camps on the mainland. A total of 881 Unangax from nine different villages were among the uprooted people. Each one was allowed to take just a single suitcase. The United States National Park Service website describes the scene as the Natives were ushered away onto crowded transport ships. "Heartbroken, [the] villagers watched as US servicemen set their homes and church afire so they would not fall into Japanese hands."³

The conditions at the camps were even worse than on the ships. The relocated Natives lacked warm clothing, proper food, and



Yury Lisiansky was a Russian Navy officer and explorer who traveled to Alaska.



Alaskans from the Aleutian city of St. Paul were forced from their homes during World War II. Some of them are seen here on the US Delarof as they head to internment camps in southeast Alaska.

clean water. They had no plumbing or electricity. The islanders remained in the camps for two years with little to no medical care. Over time diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis began to spread, claiming the lives of the youngest and the oldest people. In all, seventy-four people died. Since many of them were elders, much of the history and culture of the Unanagax people died with them.

One of the people who lived to tell about the experience was Bill Tcheripanoff, Sr., of Akutan Island. "In 1942, my wife and our four children were whipped away from our home . . . all our possessions were left. . . . I tried to pretend it was really a dream and this could not happen to me and my dear family."⁴

The Alutiiq people are known by many different names. Anthropologists divide them into three sub-groups: the Chugachmiut, the Unegkurmiut, and the Koniagmiut. The Native

Alaskan clans have different names for themselves. Each one is based on where the clan was from, adding the suffix "-miut" (meaning "the people of"). For instance, the Koniagmiut are also known as the Qikertarmiut, which means "people of the large island."

The various clans among both the Unangax and Alutiiq were especially respectful of one another. For example, they divided the land into territories. This arrangement kept one tribe from intruding upon another's natural resources such as fish and plants.

The Alutiiq stand out for their unique housing, which interestingly didn't stand out at all. Their homes, known as ciqlluaq, were built partially underground. This design helped to shield them from the harsh elements of the area. Natives entered the dwellings by way of ladders from their tops. Because the roof of each ciqlluaq was covered with grass, people who didn't know they were there might not even see them.



Alaska became a focal point for military activity during World War II. During the Aleutian Islands campaign, the US recaptured the islands of Attu and Kiska from the Japanese. The soldiers seen here with their 50mm machine gun are searching the sky for enemy aircraft.

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Although the world knows how the Alutiiq fished and how they built their homes, many other parts of their culture aren't as well known. Sven Haakanson wants to recover the missing pieces. He is the executive director of the Alutiiq Museum. Haakanson shares, "We've been working with elders, museum collections, we've been documenting our language, we've been documenting pretty much everything that has been lost."⁵ He knows that if he and others who care about the culture don't act fast enough, some things may be lost forever.

Like the Athabascan people, the Alutiiq language faces a particular risk of becoming extinct. In 1999, only twenty-four people could speak the language fluently. It only took ten years for that number to be cut in half. Haakanson reports, "It's been a real challenge for us to try to maintain our language, but also trying to preserve it."⁶

Haakanson himself is learning about his own history in the process. "I grew up not knowing much about my culture, not knowing who we were in terms of our 7,500 years of history, and what it really meant. . . ." He adds that through the museum's efforts, "[W]e will hopefully continue for the next century building and putting that knowledge back into a context where it becomes commonplace knowledge, instead of museum knowledge. . . ."⁷



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Native American art has been known to fetch some high prices. Carved wooden masks, similar to this one owned by artist Perry Eaton, have sold for around \$30,000.

Unangax Culture Camp

People interested in learning more about Unangax culture can sign up for an educational experience called the Urban Unangax Culture Camp. Each summer about 200 adults and children visit the tribe's central headquarters in Anchorage, Alaska, for the event.

A wide range of ages are welcome at the camp. Kids ten and under attend shorter, morning sessions where they learn about the tribe's history through stories told by the elders and about the Unangax language and food. Older kids stay all day. They can choose from a wider variety of hands-on activities including dance, drum-making, and gut-sewing. Those interested in a bigger project can even learn how to build a kayak. Adult-only classes are held in the evenings. Grownups can attend then or during the day with the kids. But during the day, the children are the main focus.

Camp ends with a closing ceremony to share what everyone has learned. Community members and some of the campers prepare traditional dishes for the celebration. Art projects are displayed. Songs and dances are performed. Even the kayak is shown off as participants head to a nearby lake for anyone who wants a ride in it.



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