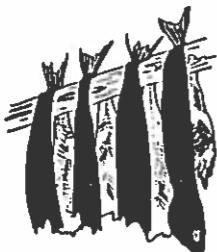


Interior Indians: Athabascans



Athabaskan Indians occupy the broad interior of Alaska between the Brooks Range on the north and the Alaska Range on the south as well as the Copper and Susitna river valleys which drain southward from the Alaska Range. The only Athabaskan group to live by the ocean were the Tanaina who resided along the shores of Cook Inlet. Alaskan Athabaskan speakers are closely related to Athabaskan speakers of

the Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories and British Columbia and also to the Navajo and Apache of the American southwest.

There are nine Athabaskan ethnic-linguistic groupings in Alaska. Characteristics of these groups include similar language, *endogamy* (marriage within the group), ceremonies and beliefs. Each of the nine ethnic groups are subdivided into units termed regional bands, and in most cases they are further subdivided into local bands consisting of between 15-75 people in several related families. Local bands were generally led by men who had demonstrated special competence in hunting, trading or organizing. Below the local band was the household level of organization which consisted of one to three families sharing the same dwelling and basic daily activities. Among the more sedentary groups such as the Ingalik, Ahtna and Tanaina, the village was a recognized unit with a territory and chief.

Athabascans are considered flexible and adaptive people who incorporate implements, social principles and ceremonial practices from their non-Athabaskan neighbors. Examples include the Tanaina use of the kayak adapted from their Koniag and Chugach neighbors, the Ingalik use of the kashim adapted from their Yuit neighbors, and the Ahtna use of large plank dwellings and clan symbols probably adopted from their Tlingit neighbors.

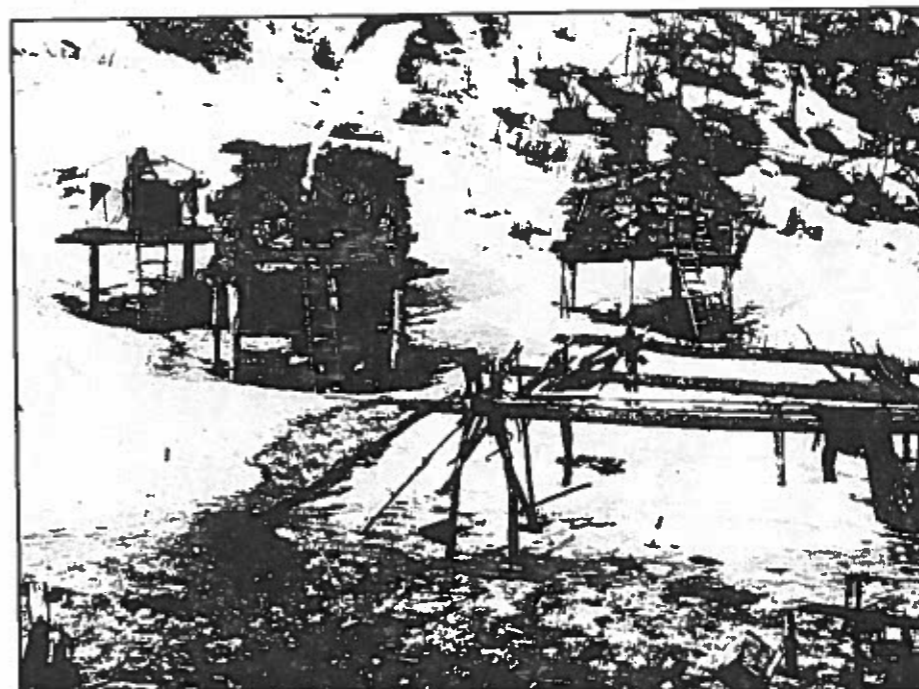
Archaeological record

The archaeological record from the interior of Alaska is one of great continuity and little change from 6,000 years ago to about 1,000 years ago. Sites have few artifacts and there is little evidence of wealth, ceremonial items or substantial population concentrations other than in major river valleys where salmon were available. The tools include large projectile points used with spears and small blades used with bows and arrows. In areas bordering Yuit populations in southern and southwest Alaska, interior sites show influence of that contact in the form of ulus, pottery and ground slate tools.

Population distribution

The total population of Alaskan Athabascans is estimated to have been 10,000-11,000 people at the time of contact. They were relatively sparsely distributed and were most numerous in areas where abundant runs of salmon provided a relatively stable food supply. They can be divided into riverine, upland and Pacific subdivisions based on their location and their basic hunting, fishing and gathering methods. Riverine groups occu-

Athabascans developed the cache to keep food and supplies safe from their dogs and wild animals. The cache is a distinctive Alaska symbol and is still in use today. Photo taken near Copper River, 1910. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)



pied areas with good salmon fishing, upland groups depended on caribou and Pacific groups took advantage of salmon and other coastal resources.

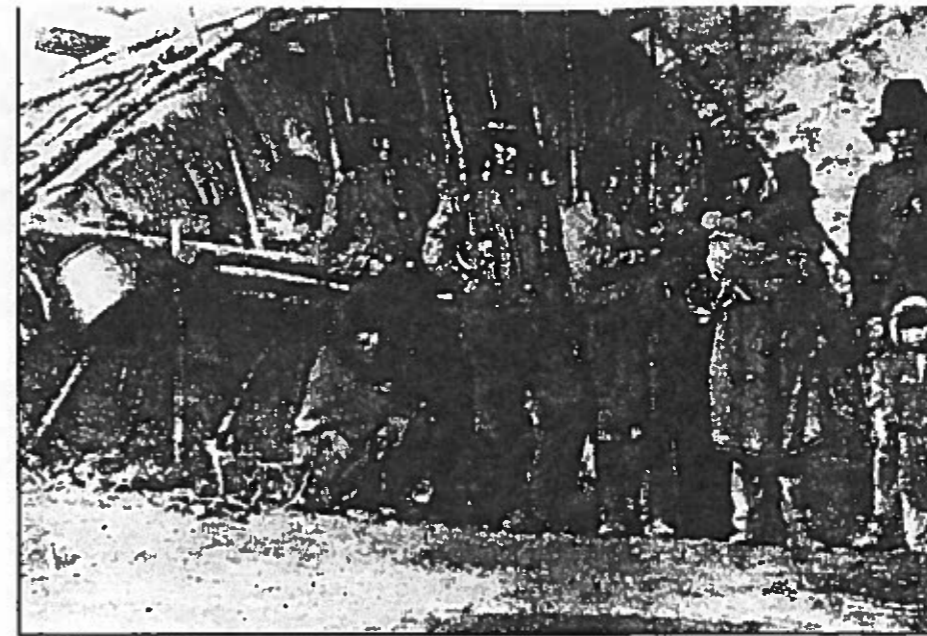
Athabaskan Groups and Estimated Population at the Time of Contact

Group	Population	Location
Riverine		
Ingalik	1,500	Lower Yukon and Kuskokwim
Koyukon	2,000	Middle Yukon and Koyukuk
Tanana	500	Lower Tanana
Holikachuk	500	Lower Middle Yukon and Innoko
Upland		
Kutchin	1,500	Upper Yukon and Porcupine
Han	300	Upper Yukon
Upper Tanana	200	Upper Tanana
Pacific		
Ahtna	1,000	Copper River
Tanaina	3,000	Cook Inlet, Susitna and Upper Kuskokwim
Total	10,500	

Food and diet

The subsistence strategies of Athabaskan groups took two forms. Among the riverine and Pacific groups, salmon fishing was supplemented by fall moose and caribou hunting. The upland groups who lacked access to substantial salmon runs hunted caribou intensively in the fall. They also hunted moose and small furbearers such as beaver, hare and ground squirrel and fished for whitefish, blackfish, pike and other freshwater species in the spring and winter. Berries, greens and roots were collected by all groups during the summer months.

Opportunities for hunting, fishing and gathering largely determined where Athabascans lived. Pacific and riverine groups were more sedentary, occupying substantial dwellings on the major rivers from November to March. During the summer and fall, the groups moved to as many as three different seasonal camps. All groups moved to summer fish camps to catch and dry salmon and most moved to fall upland camps for caribou drives. Riverine groups also moved to spring camps for muskrat, waterfowl and/or caribou hunting. A more nomadic existence was



Athabascans were found living in a variety of house styles. Homes could be dugouts, plant houses or dome-shaped moose-skin tents. This photo shows an Ahtna bark house, about 1895. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

characteristic of the upland groups who had to pursue game and were not able to put up enough fish to last them through the winter.

House types

House types varied dramatically among Athabascans.

The Ingalik, heavily influenced by their Yuit neighbors, had semisubterranean log dwellings which had above-ground entry ways. Villages consisted of 10 to 12 of these dwellings, each of which housed two families, plus a larger kashim.

The Koyukon and Tanana had semisubterranean log dwellings often built into the high banks of the Yukon and Tanana rivers.

The Tanaina constructed relatively semisubterranean dwellings with a tunnel entry. Inside there was a large central room with a hearth and several side rooms. The walls were made of logs and banked with earth.

Among the Ahtna, a variety of houses were used including

large plank houses which could accommodate up to ten families. These dwellings had an excavated central pit area with a hearth. Raised platforms next to the walls were divided with bark or bearskins into separate cubicles for families. The Ahtna also constructed a smaller house of bark laid over poles, similar to the dwelling constructed by their relatives in the Upper Tanana.

The Kutchin used a portable domeshaped caribou or moose skin tent constructed out of curved poles lashed together. The structure was about 14 feet in diameter and eight feet high. During the winter, it was heavily insulated with evergreen boughs and snow allowing the people relative comfort in some of the coldest temperatures on earth.

In the summer Athabascans used a variety of temporary constructions including tents, lean-tos and smaller versions of the winter lodge.

Tools

Athabascan tools made from stone, bone and antler were used to modify skins and wood. Athabascans are distinctive among Alaska Natives for their use of bark, particularly that of the birch tree, for a variety of vessels, bowls, receptacles and containers. They were masters in setting snares and deadfalls for capturing animals from as small as hares to as large as beaver.

Transportation

Riverine and upland groups traveled by birchbark canoes and mooseskin *coracles*, circular emergency vessels used for floating down rivers. Kayaks, or baidarkas were used by the Tanaina.

Upland Athabascans made exquisite snowshoes, a variety of which were designed for different snow conditions. Prior to contact, dogs were used essentially as pack animals and sleds were pulled by human power. Women assumed most of the burden of transporting goods from one place to another.

Athabascan food gathering techniques were limited but effective. A simple bow was the preferred hunting implement but a wide variety of snares and deadfalls trapped large and small game. Funnel-shaped fences were used to force caribou into corrals where they were killed. Basket traps, weirs, spears, nets and fishhooks were used to catch freshwater fish.



Birch bark canoes required skilled construction and were frequently repaired with patches and pitch. Smaller, easier to handle models were made for women. (Charles Bunnell Collection, Archives, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska-Fairbanks)

Clothing and decoration

Clothing was unique in its tailored, form-fitting quality and was highly prized by other Native people. Among upland and riverine groups, standard men's garments consisted of a finely-tanned white or light-colored caribou skin which came to mid-thigh; among the Kutchin the garment dovetailed to a point in both front and back. Lower garments consisted of a single-piece legging combining pants and boots into a unified caribou skin garment. Women wore leggings and a pullover dress of tanned caribou skin which came to the knees. Winter garments retained the fur which was worn next to the body while summer garments were hairless.

Dog Mushing



Dogs were domesticated in the New World about 10,000 years ago. Evidence has been found of their use in the arctic nearly 4,000 years ago. Dogs probably were first domesticated for warning and defense rather than for transportation or food. Archaeological evidence based on harnesses, sled design and whips indicates that dogs were not used for pulling sleds by Eskimos in Alaska until about 1500 A.D.

Interior Athabascans placed 35-pound saddlebags on their dogs to transport their belongings. However, the Kutchin and other Athabascans pulled their own sleds and toboggans.

In the post contact period, several factors combined to rapidly spread the use of dogs pulling sleds. The most important were the establishment of trading posts seeking furs and the introduction of the basket sled. By the late 19th century, dog teams transported supplies and equipment during the winter in most of northern, western and interior Alaska. This continued until the 1930s when airplanes began to displace dog teams.

The importance of dogs in the Athabaskan trapping way of life led to an emphasis on small dogs built for speed and stamina. These dogs have come to be called Alaskan Huskies. Soon races in the villages emerged as men competed against each other to see who had the fastest team.

Huslia, a small Koyukon Athabaskan village on the Koyukuk River, became the heart of dog racing in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. It produced a number of great mushers including Jimmy Huntington, Bobby Vent, and Cue Bifelt.

But its most famous racing musher is George Attla, nicknamed the "Huslia Hustler" whose life story is told in the movie "Spirit of the Wind." Attla reached the pinnacle of his profession by overcoming a substantial leg injury. An uncompromising competitor, Attla also used modern methods of diet and selective breeding to maintain his team's position at the top of the sprint race profession in the 1980s.

As long as there are dogs and young men in the villages of rural Alaska, racing with the wind like George Attla will remain a part of their lives.

Both men's and women's outer garments were decorated with a variety of geometric patterns made from porcupine quills, dentalium shells and seeds. Fringes were also a characteristic feature around the bottom of the women's dresses and men's tunics as well on the shoulder in the back. In the winter hats and gloves made of beaver skin were common. Infants were carried in a bark cradleboard.

Additional personal adornment was limited among Athabaskan groups. Dentalium shell necklaces, obtained through long-distance trade networks, were worn as symbols of wealth. Women might have three straight lines tattooed on their chins and men might have small linear tattoos on their arms symbolizing exploits in war. Nose pins were worn on festive occasions. Faces were painted, with red being the preferred color among riverine groups.

Social organization

Athabaskan social organization is a mixture of their own principles and practices adapted from neighboring groups. A fundamental Athabaskan trait bases kinship on matrilineal descent. With the exception of the Ingalik and one group of Koyukon, all Athabascans had clans, named descent groups into which a person was born based on the mother's membership. In the riverine and upland groups, there were three such groupings which were exogamous (requiring spouses to be obtained from another clan). The Ahtna and Tanaina, who had 11 to 18 clans, also divided themselves into two matrilineal *moieties* (halves), known as Raven and Seagull. This is likely the result of contact with Tlingits who had similar principles of complex social organization.

Social stratification along wealth and class lines varied among Athabascans. All groups recognized and valued the efforts of individuals to acquire wealth because it would be redistributed through the potlatch. The wealthiest groups appear to have been the Tanaina, Ahtna and Ingalik. Among the Ahtnas, a class of wealthy individuals might even be said to have existed. Slavery was practiced among a number of Athabaskan groups, but was almost incidental, typically consisting of women or children captured in raids from other groups.

Most marriages were monogamous with women marrying in their mid-teens and men somewhat later. Wealthier males occasionally had several wives and, among the Kutchin, might use younger males to sire heirs by their younger wives. Among

the Kutchin, high-status women occasionally had *polyandrous* (woman married to several men) unions to brothers (Slobodin 1984).

Good hunters, traders and organizers achieved leadership and attracted followers, usually through kinship principles. They had little formal authority, leading mostly by example and persuasion. Nevertheless, there were some exceptionally wealthy leaders.

The Koyukon, Kutchin and Tanaina were noted for warfare. The Kutchin fought steadily with the Koyukon and Inupiat while the Tanaina battled the Koniag, Chugach and occasionally the Ingalik. Tanaina villages were well hidden to protect them from attacks.

Trade was an important element in many Athabascan soci-



Athabascans generally lived in sparsely-distributed groups but in places where large salmon runs occurred such as the Copper River (shown here), large groups congregated. Dip nets are still used today. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

eties. The copper controlled by the Ahtna was highly valued by many groups and the Tanaina were noted traders between interior groups and the Koniag and Chugach. The Koyukon and Kutchin traded with their Inupiat neighbors intensively after the 16th century.

Ceremonies

The major ceremonial event around which Athabascan society revolved was the *potlatch*. The term applies to various formal occasions when on group hosts another, gifts are distributed to the guests to mark important social events.

The most important potlatch was the *mortuary feast* given in honor of a deceased individual by his clan mates, usually a year or more after the death occurred. During the intervening period, close relatives manufactured and collected an abundance of blankets, other wealth items and food. At the appropriate time, an invitation was sent to other bands and clans to attend the potlatch. Upon arrival, the invitees received gifts in formal presentations followed by feasting and dancing. It was expected that the hosts later would be invited to a potlatch given by their guests. Gift giving was competitive with leaders vying to give more wealth and foods than their counterparts in other groups. The hosts were expected to give to destitution.

A particularly distinctive event developed by the Koyukon was the *Stick Dance*, a marathon circle dance conducted around a pole erected either in the center of the village or attached to the center of a building. This was part of the two-day memorial celebration on behalf of a deceased individual. Participants were exhilarated, exhausted and uplifted by the emotional outpouring that characterized the marathon dance. It continues to be held from time to time among the Koyukon today.

Smaller potlatches were also given to celebrate events such as a birth, marriage, a boy's first successful hunt, and to rectify wrongs between groups such as accidents or insults.

A different but especially important event was the ritual associated with a young woman's first menstruation. A separate hut was erected where the young girl would be sequestered for periods up to a year. A number of taboos were imposed and she was expected to stay away from contact with men and their hunting gear for fear of polluting it. She was attended by a kinswoman past menopause who taught her the skills and practices necessary for the adult female role. A special feast announced the completion of her ritual and her availability for marriage.

Beliefs

Athabaskan beliefs about and relationships with the supernatural involved several important principles. A critical set of beliefs revolved around the indistinguishability between men and animals in the distant past. Both have spirits and in the past they communicated directly with each other. These ancient relationships had been transformed by the acts and antics of Raven, a culture hero and trickster who constantly disrupted the moral order by deception. The legend cycle, told in stories to Athabaskan children, is composed of tales concerning the activities of Raven, along with other mythical beings which exemplify concepts of right and wrong in Athabaskan culture.

Despite the transformations, important relationships between the spirits of men and animals continue. Especially important animals include the caribou, bear and wolf. Humans must remain respectful through ritual practices, such as sexual abstinence, and taboos, in order to remain in the good graces of the animal spirits. Some individuals might obtain power through a special relationship with the spirit of an animal species.

Other malevolent spirits must not be offended. One of them, termed the "woodsman" or *nahani*, among contemporary Koyukon, lurks in the forest to capture children and is believed to be what people who are lost in the forest become.

An important intermediary with the spirits among the Pacific Athabascans was the shaman. Shamans acted as both magician and medical practitioner and could have either a good or bad reputation. Curing and predicting future events such as weather and hunting success were important activities of the shaman. Among the upland groups, shamans utilized *scapulimancy*, a method of divining the location of game when hunting success was limited. The scapula bone of a caribou was placed in a fire and the resulting cracks in the bone were interpreted by the shaman as indications of where the hunters should look for game.

Contact with Europeans

Direct contact with Russians, English, and Americans came relatively late to Athabaskan groups due to their interior locations. In western Alaska, the effects of trade predated actual contact causing major shifts in village locations and the seasonal activities of the Ingalik and probably the Koyukon (Van Stone 1974). The Russian penetration of the Yukon and Kuskokwim

river valleys in the 1840s set in motion major struggles over the control of trade which dramatically altered relationships among the Athabaskan peoples.

"Horse Creek Mary" typifies the nomadic life of the Athabascans. Women assumed most of the burden of transporting belongings. Many of the Athabaskan trading trails of southcentral Alaska became today's modern highways. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art)

