

Yakutat: An Eagle Folds His Wings

By WILLIAM DIEBELS

A chapter in the Native history of Yakutat closed in quiet dignity when Olaf Abraham passed away at Mt. Edgecumbe hospital on April 25, 1972.

The venerable Tlingit leader of the Eagle tribe had lent honor to his tribal nobility for more than 100 years.

As his Raven brothers prepared the Chief's final resting place on the Ankau River, the skies cleared to reveal the majesty of Mt. St. Elias.

No one was surprised. Tradition has it that the great mountain smiles as it welcomes a regal son to final peace.

"Ya nan' eash" was born on Khantaak Island, 3 miles from the present village of Yakutat in 1871. The Russians had been driven out more than half a century earlier and the young nobleman would be 19 before white men again visited the Yakutat Indians.

A land plentiful in resources permitted a rich cultural development. To honor his noble birth, a slave of similar age was appointed for "Ya nan' eash".

Growing up, they became like



AN EAGLE FOLDS HIS WINGS — "... I have felt honored to have known Mr. Olaf Abraham who recently passed away," said a friend who had known Abraham for eight years. Olaf was over 100 years old when he died.

brothers. During their teens, the master freed his slave in the dramatic ritual required for such unusual an event.

The Spartan training by his maternal uncle changed the boy to a man of pride, strength and wisdom.

Naked, daily plunges into the icy waters of Yakutat Bay followed by beating with willow branches to restore circulation developed the stamina required to paddle open war canoes to Sitka to the south and Cordova to the north.

As years unfolded and the white man's influence became more prevalent, Olaf selected elements which he valued of the new culture while never abandoning the traditions of his heritage.

As an active and charter member of the Alaska Native Brotherhood, his influence in the goals of that organization were felt.

He did not betray his beliefs and thus maintained the charisma of his high-caste position. Even in his final years, a hush fell upon the hall as Olaf rose to speak.

Olaf Abraham is now a memory. But his life sustains a reality that lives in the hearts and values of the people of Yakutat and of the others who were able to know him.

The two eagles that soared above as the funeral procession made its way from Yakutat to the cemetery may have been coincidence ... I like to think not.