



MRS. EDNA EAKON, an Inupiak Eskimo, picks edible wild greens near Unalakleet. She is one of the oldest residents of that village.

—Photo By EMILY I. BROWN

Historical Unalakleet—

'Effects of the South Wind'

By EMILY I. BROWN

The village of Unalakleet—located on the coast about 127 miles east of Nome—is built on a sand spit on the west side of the mouth of the Unalakleet River, on the coast of Norton Bay in the Bering Sea.

Its location is reflected in its Eskimo name, which literally means "the effects of the south winds." The coast line on which it is located parallels the south

winds.

Colonel Muktuk Marston, who came to the village during World War II, is credited with giving it its Eskimo name.

The ancient Unalik Eskimos were Unalakleet's first inhabitants. We do not know when they claimed this coastal land, but archaeologists have determined that Cape Denbeigh, 28 miles west of Unalakleet, is from 3500 to 4500 years old.

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Historic Unalakleet...

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We do know, however, of the significant contributions the Unalik Eskimos have made to the other tribes of Alaska, because their legends, myths, folklore and songs have been carried down by word of mouth from generation to generation, even though no written record of these contributions has been made.

(The older people still tell stories in the Unalik language, and some of these stories have been translated into malemute.)

Late, the Unaliks were captured by the Malemute Nomads, and, a few centuries later, sometime between 1700 and 1867, both tribes were seized by Russian explorers.

Eventually their descendants became wards of the United States government, but they were allowed to govern themselves under the leadership of chiefs—a system of government they had used since the reign of the Malemutes.

Four brothers and a sister organized Unalakleet as a village.

Their great, great, great grandfather was a famous hero. He saved his people from a massacre planned by the Interior Indians.

It happened this way:

One evening a messenger came to the chief to tell him that his village was surrounded by warriors. He went out and climbed the Karghi (council house) and faced the foe.

In his own Indian language, he said: "If you have not changed your minds about annihilating my people, I request that you kill me first, as I do not wish to witness the extinction of these people who have saved my life and accepted me as their leader."

As he stood waiting for the attack, the warriors crept quietly toward the river. Extinguishing their torches, they left the village in their canoes and retreated.

Later the chief told how the former chief's sister had once saved him from starvation, after his own people had fled and left him on the battlefield.

His descendants have kept his name alive among their children and their children's children.

Shortly after Alaska's transference to the United States government, one of this chief's descendants, Moktok, gave the Reverend Axel Carlson of the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of America permission to establish his missions at Unalakleet.

He not only taught the villagers about Christianity, but he also taught them such things as how to cultivate their own vegetables. For many years—about 15—Unalakleet was called the "Garden City of the Bering Sea."

But Reverend Carlson had a difficult time in many respects.

He arrived at Unalakleet during a time of conflict between the Unaliks and the Malemutes. The Unaliks felt that the Malemutes, as foreigners, had no right to try to change the cultural life of the Unalik people.

According to Ojoquk (Rock), an orphan once saved the reverend's life by taking him away from assailants who had planned

to kill him one night at Mose's Point Roadhouse.

And, on another occasion, Nashoalook, the youngest brother of the four consecutive chiefs, saved Rev. Carlson's life by hiding him in his house from conspirators who wanted to kill him.

We do not know who these conspirators were and can only assume that they were Unalik Eskimos who resented the changes the Malemutes and Rev. Carlson were trying to make in their cultural life.

During the Russian occupation chickenpox broke out in the village. Since the Russians neglected to inoculate anyone against the disease, the only residents to survive were those few who happened to be away camping at the time.

Infected Eskimos were left in their igloos to die and were not buried.

Before Russian officials left the area, they gave property to some of the natives. Nashoalook received a Russian block-house equipped with cannon type gun.

But the only visible traces of Russian occupancy today are the names of some of the residents—names like Ivanoff and Kamaroff.

Humorous incidents have occurred through the years—just as they have in any town—and, in their own way, add to the history of the area.

Like the time in the 1920s when the first airplane landed at Unalakleet.

As the purring sound of the airplane became audible, it sounded different to different people.

One woman, hearing the plane, fell into the tub of water which she had just filled to cook dog food in. Another woman burned herself as she tried to lift the lid of the stove, because she thought the sound was coming from the fire.

When the plane landed, people were running, children crying, and some people were too stunned to move.

The Reverend E. B. Larson, who was kneading dough when he heard the plane, ran out with bread dough on his hands, wearing his big white apron. When he saw a stream of people running toward the airfield, he joined the crowd. And when, as the only white man, he extended his hand to shake hands with the pilot he discovered that it was still covered with bread dough.

While the villagers were at the airport, loose dogs raided their kitchens, eating the food left on the tables at the time of the plane's landing.

It was a great day for these isolated people to watch the plane as it lifted off the ground like a bird. Little did they dream that they themselves might someday travel on a jet plane to anywhere in the world.

NEXT WEEK: Important Visitors.