

Yakutat youth learn from elders at Situk River subsistence camp

Special to the Tundra Times

Eight Yakutat youngsters learned how to plan, construct and operate a family subsistence fish camp near the mouth of the Situk River at a recent workshop. They are Matthew and Willie Anderstrom, Herbert Bremner, Olivia and Ronnie Converse, Briana Dundas, Sherman Gregory and Ralph Johnson. Average daily attendance at the camp was 29 persons.

Camp instructors included adults who grew up at family fish camps along the Situk River and Yakutat elders for whom the Situk has always been a basis of economic and cultural life.

The river, located 15 miles from Yakutat by road, has runs of all five species of Pacific salmon and steelhead. Ramona Anderson served as camp director, Marie Shodda and Nellie Lord as instructors, Robert Henry as counselor and Sugar Valle as cook.

The youngsters helped to build a cookhouse, smokehouse, outhouse and tent frames under the direction of Yakutat commercial fisherman skip Johnson, who served as an unpaid volunteer. They were trained to set a gillnet and pick salmon from it; to fillet, dry and smoke salmon and to use

a pressure cooker to preserve it in jars.

Most of the preserved salmon was given to elders who demonstrated fish processing techniques and taught the history of Yakutat Tlingit Indians in storytelling sessions. Lessons in seal hunting also were provided.

The camp concluded with a community potlatch during which persons who provided support for the workshop were honored. Among some 100 guests were Yakutat Mayor Larry Powell, State Rep. Peter Goll

of Haines and local church officials.

Most of the camp participants are members of two families of the Eagle clan whose tribal heritage is founded on the river. They performed Tlingit dances and songs, one of which was written to commemorate the camp by Sue Abraham, Tlingit elder and a member of the Raven clan.

"It's alright if the river floods us," they sang, "as long as we have the Ravens to smile at us." The words refer to their expectation that the Situk River will be flooded and drastically altered when Russell Lake, located near Yakutat, overflows.

The lake, formerly Russell Fiord, was formed late last May when Hubbard Glacier surged across the mouth of the fiord and dammed it.

Russell Lake is filling with rainwater and meltwater, and it is estimated that the lake will overflow as early as next summer. If it overflows at its south end, floodwaters are expected to flow down the old Situk River channel into the Situk and connect it with Lost River and the lower Ahrklin River into a large delta, inundating fishing sites along the Situk.

The Situk River workshop was sponsored by the Alaska Native Human Resources Development Project, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Alaska. Helen Andon, camp program leader for the Human Resources Development Project, participated in workshop activities.

The camp program, initiated last year by Donald Peter, director of the HRDP, has also been conducted at Fort Yukon, Tanana and Fairbanks. It is designed to strengthen individuals, families and communities by providing training in subsistence skills, cultural

heritage and leadership in a traditional setting, with emphasis on the use of elders as teachers.

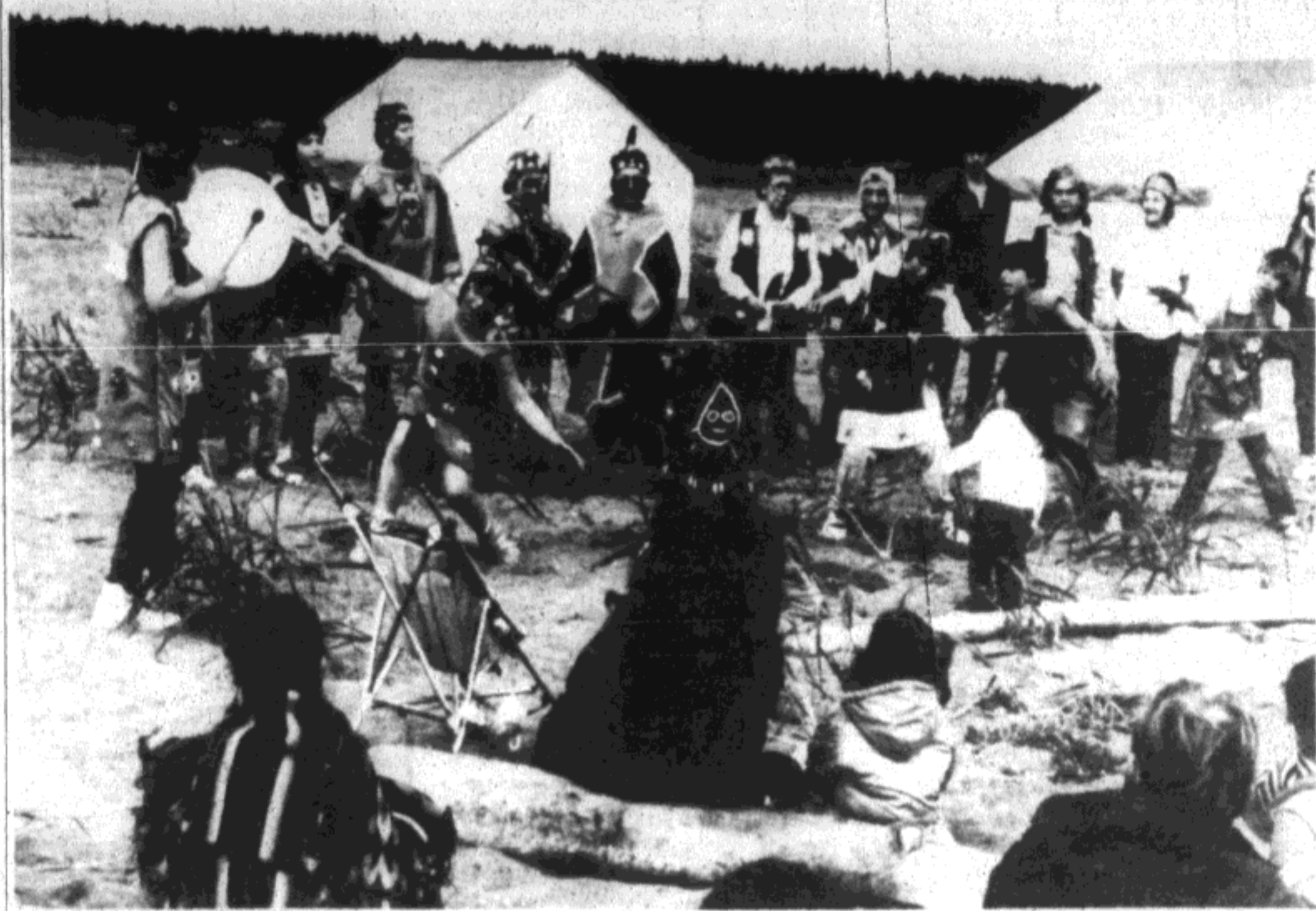
Supplemental contributions to the Situk River camp in the form of lumber and other supplies, cash, food cost discounts and labor were provided by several Yakutat businesses, the U.S. Forest Service, the American Legion, the Yakutat Alcoholism Program, the Yakutat Community Corporation and a number of individuals.

The Human Resources Development Project provided assistance for the Situk River camp in response to a request by Mary Ann Paquette and Lena Farkus, director and counselor, respectively, of the Yakutat Alcoholism Program. They viewed the camp program as an important means to achieve community development goals that were identified at a Village Reawakening Workshop held last May in Yakutat.

Workshop participants identified the root causes of alcoholism in their community as the loss of traditional culture, the loss of control over their lives at the local level and the development of dependencies as a result of rapid and forced acculturation.

They resolved to address community problems through alternative activities that would strengthen traditional values; heal individuals, families and the community; strengthen the clan system, and develop a self-reliant community.

They also established objectives that include learning to respect oneself, elders, and others; the use of elders in their traditional role as teachers; learning to appreciate and share resources; to gather and preserve foods, and to potlatch; and developing the clan support system.



Camp participants performed Tlingit dances for potlatch guests. Shown above: (foreground, from left) Sherman Gregory, Ronnie Converse, Ralph Johnson, Herbert Bremner and Matthew Anderstrom; (second row) Willie Anderstrom, Olivia Converse, Briana Dundas, Skip Johnson, Ruth Jackson, Eva Melton, Martha Totland, Sue Abraham, John Grass, Marie Shodda and Sugar Valle. Herbert Bremner, bottom right, carries salmon picked from a subsistence gillnet. Eva Milton, bottom left, hangs salmon fillets on a rack.

