

The Undoing of a People: Collapse of the cultural framework

The following is the fifth part of a series the Tundra Times will be featuring on the Alaska Native Commissions Final Report. Excerpts from the report will appear periodically over the next several months.

Social scientists and historians generally view the period of attempted assimilation as a sea-change in the transformation of traditional Alaska Native cultures. At the vanguard of the march of Western civilization across the Alaskan territory were three major groups: miners, trappers and assorted agents of Western commerce; religious missionaries; and school teachers and other government agents.

The potential richness of the Aleutian fur mammal trade was the impetus for European expansion into Alaska. Throughout the next century, miners, traders and

population shifts towards centers of economic activity during this period.¹ The fur trade and general commerce expanded into areas previously unsettled by traders and resource exploiters. Reindeer herding was introduced into the western and northern Eskimo regions by the federal government in the late 1800s. Again, centers of economic activity were created, drawing in the survivors of disease and famine. Major gold discoveries in west and northwest Alaska and in some areas of the interior brought new waves of outsiders to points seldom seen by non-Natives.



Tundra Times file photo

other merchants made scattered inroads throughout most regions of Alaska. But, the most significant effects of the European mercantile system on traditional Native culture were confined largely to the Aleutian Islands, Kodiak, Bristol Bay and other maritime regions.

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of significant cultural dislocation, profoundly affecting the traditional economic system: subsistence hunting, fishing, gathering and bartering. Expansion of the whaling industry in north and northwest Alaska and the commercial fishing industry in southwest Alaska resulted in

The effects of the widespread introduction of Western commerce in Alaska were significant from a cultural and social perspective. First, the trend toward relocation of populations to areas of centralized economic activity was in direct contradiction to the practical requirements of the traditional subsistence economy. Subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering activities, which require small, scattered settlements able to move freely with the seasons and with the game, sea mammal and fish migrations, were difficult to undertake given the population patterns emerging in the late 1800s.



Eskimo woman blowing air into "seal poke," which, when dried, will be used as a container for oil, cut meat or fish, berries or greens.

Photo courtesy of The Anchorage Museum of History and Art

Second, commercialization of species created a downward push on the availability of fish and wildlife stocks for subsistence taking. Commercial pursuits also placed restrictions of time on traditional hunters and fishers.

Accompanying European mercantilism were American missionaries taking the path of the Russian Orthodox Church. Throughout the 1800s, missionaries other than those representing the Russian Orthodox Church had found only limited success in making new converts among Alaska Na-

tives. One of the reasons commonly given to the Russian missionaries' success among the Aleut and Koniag is the emphasis they put on the use of the Native languages in their teachings.²

It appears, however, that the final blow to the spiritual will of Native peoples was dealt by the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1900: "Before 1900 progress was slow except in the Aleutian Islands and on the Pacific rim, where the Russian Orthodox Church was firmly established. but following the epidemic of

1900, whole villages elsewhere converted."³ Frequently referred to as the "Great Death" by Native survivors, the newest and most widespread plague appears to have made survivors ripe for Christian conversion: "The Jesuits established the mission of Akulurak at the mouth of the Yukon River in 1893, but it was not until after the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1900 that they began to make converts."⁴

In keeping with their humanitarian traditions, many American

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missionaries built hospitals for and otherwise tended to the sick and dying. They built orphanages for the children whose families the plagues and famines had ravaged, and they built missions to help feed and shelter many others. But the missionaries were, first and foremost, agents of Western culture bent on "civilizing" the Natives and converting them to Christianity.

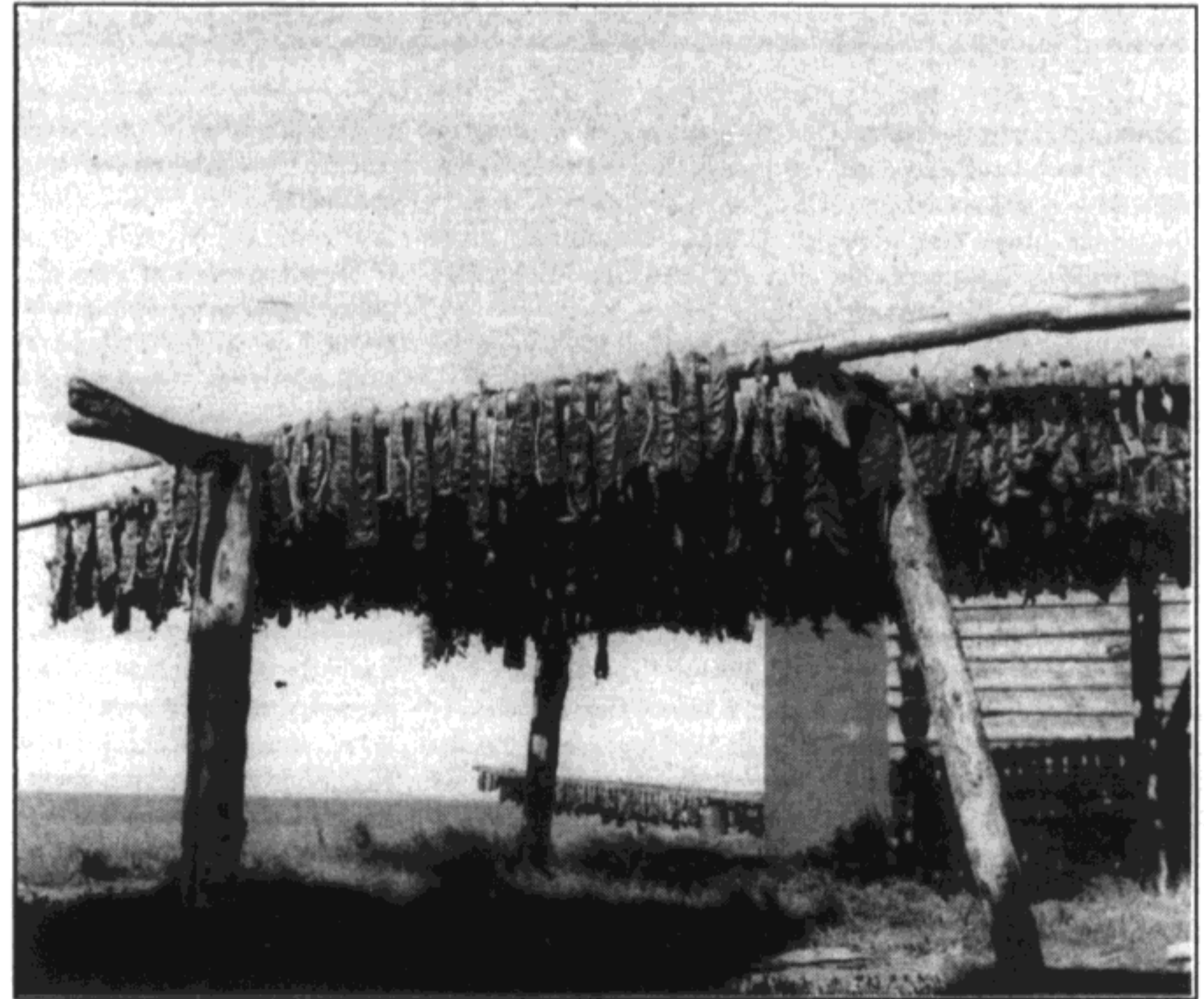
Notwithstanding their humanitarian practices, there is little to suggest that American missionaries gave any regard to the cultures, languages and rich traditions of the Native peoples they encountered. Playing heavily on the guilt of those who had not succumbed to disease and famine, some missionaries convinced many Natives that they were dying because of who they were, the way they lived and what they believed.

To the physically, psychologically and spiritually mangled Alaska Native people at the turn of the century, the message of the missionaries finally became com-

PELLING. Fienup-Riordan postulates that Natives, with all they had been through for one and one-half centuries, now saw the Christian teachings as "a novel spiritual solution to an unprecedented social and economic crisis."⁵

With passage of the Organic Act in 1884, the United States took on the role of "educating" Alaska Native children. Hand-in-hand with the missionaries, the government teachers, who in many instances operated as de facto, all-purpose agents of government, set about the task of making modern Americans of the last of the continent's aboriginal peoples: "We have no higher calling," wrote William T. Harris, head of the Bureau of Education between 1889 and 1906, "than to be missionaries of our idea to those people who have not yet reached the Anglo-Saxon frame of mind."⁶

Several generations of Native people — many of whom are still alive today — would become targets of a tragic, frequently successful campaign of cultural elimination. Demanding that Na-



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tives abandon the cultures and languages of their grandfathers and grandmothers, Natives were given a clear message that one way of looking at the world was superior to the other. That the survivors did as they were told — abandoning their feasts and ceremonies, their dances and even their languages — is testament not to the correctness of the Western message but to the survivors' states of mind. Having lost multitudes of spiritual and political leaders, artisans, historians and elders, those who were left were orphans — spiritually as well as physically — destined to live in a world of emotional and material poverty.

In the schoolhouses and boarding schools, in the churches and in the orphanages, Native children would learn how to become good Christians and good Americans. As the Rev. Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian minister assigned to oversee the education of Alaska Natives, would state: "The children must be kept in school until they acquire what is termed a common-school education, also a practical knowledge of some useful trade. We believe in reclaiming the Natives' improvident habits and transforming them into ambitious and self-helpful citizens."⁷

1 Minerals Management Ser-

vice, pp. 79-84.

2. Fienup-Riordan, pg. 5.

3 Minerals Management Service, p. 379.

4 Fienup-Riordan, pg. 5.

5 Fienup-Riordan, Ann, "The Real People and the Children of Thunder; The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck," University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1991.

6 Fienup-Riordan (1992), pg. 5.

7 Ducker, James H., "Curriculum for a New Culture: Federation Schooling at Bethel and Along the Kuskokwim," Bureau of Land Management, Anchorage, Alaska, 1991.