

# Pribilof Aleut abuses continued into 1960's

**Editor's Note:** Last week, the *Tundra Times* reported the Pribilof Aleuts were awarded more than \$11 million by the Indian Claims Commission in damages for the failure of the Government to provide adequate goods and services, food and compensation as promised. Although the period covered in the claim was from 1870 to 1946, this account, written in 1964 by Alaskan historian Helen A. Shenitz, indicates maltreatment and abuses of the Aleuts by the Government continued into the 1960's. When the *Tundra Times* published this account in 1964, officials of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries charged the author and *Tundra Times* editors with being Communists or controlled by Communists.

By HELEN A. SHENITZ, Ph. D.  
Auks Bay, Alaska

When a few years ago I went to the Pribilof Islands to do some historical research, as an Alaskan historian, I was well informed in regard to the history of Russian America, the history of Alaska, and the history of the Aleuts.

But I was absolutely unprepared to what I found on those islands, practiced openly for all to see: Aleuts in the servitude of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It really shocked me!

At a dinner given for me and the village council on St. Paul Island by the Very Rev. Markary Baranoff, the Aleut people spoke freely about racial discrimination and their deprivation of free citizen's rights.

Rev. Baranoff had spent 24 years on St. Paul and was the ecclesiastic superior of the Russian Church on the islands and the entire Aleutian chain.

#### Humiliating Treatment

The people talked freely about: non-equal pay for equal work, better jobs given to less qualified non-Natives while Aleuts were available, dictatorial power of the manager who at the same time was the U.S. Commissioner, adoption of Aleut children by non-Native

people who eventually took them "outside" without any investigation by territorial or federal authorities of qualifications of the adoptive parents; derogatory remarks about their Church, and humiliating treatment of Aleuts by non-Native people on the islands.

#### Worse Than Shocking

All that was shocking indeed but at that time I didn't realize that the worse had yet to come.

#### Removal Decided

In 1962 or in the beginning of 1963 in one of his newsletters Senator Bartlett informed Alaskans that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had decided to retrain the Aleuts on St. George and St. Paul and then remove them from those islands, all this to be done in 10 years.

Aleuts do not mind to be retrained. They are willing and able to learn and acquire new skills, but they definitely do not want to leave the islands, their homeland for 178 years.

In 1964 from an Aleut, whose home is on one of the Pribilof islands, I received information that Aleuts on St. George sent a petition to Robert L. Bennett, director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska, asking him to protect the Aleuts on St. George and St. Paul from the forcible removal of them off the islands. According to the informant, they received no reply.

#### Plank 14

After the 1964 Republican State Convention included in the Republican platform Plank No. 14: "Protect all Alaskan Natives' lands and property rights especially on the islands of St. Paul and St. George" an Aleut informed me that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service started to spread rumors that Aleuts will be permitted to remain on the islands, provided they lease from the federal government their own land and their own houses.

#### Lease Your Homes

What would non-Native people in Alaska say if they would be told that in order to continue to reside on their property



**PRIBILOF SEAL HUNT** — Aleuts from St. George in the Pribilofs caught their first fur seal with a harpoon in a great many years in 1975. Fur seals are harvested in the Pribilofs under provision of an international treaty to which the United States, Soviet Union, Canada and Japan are signatories.

they would have to lease it from the federal or state government?

It is very significant that while the U.S. Fish and Wildlife administration calls Aleuts "Natives" and even calls the Russian Church a "Native" Church, at the same time they insist that Aleuts are not the aboriginal people of the Pribilofs.

I suggest that these federal bureaucrats consult Webster's dictionary which says: "Native, syn. aboriginal."

#### Historical Background

The group of Pribilof Islands were discovered in 1786 by Gerasim Pribilof who became lost in a heavy fog, while at sea, and whose boat finally drifted to one of the sand beaches of St. Paul Island.

After Pribilof started to examine the surrounding area, he soon found fresh traces of a hunters' camp. The camp was an Aleuts' camp. At that time Aleuts didn't live on the Pribilofs, but they regularly hunted sea otter and fur seal there.

#### First Settlement

Upon his return to Unalaska, Pribilof reported his findings to the manager of the Shelikhov company and suggested estab-

lishment of a small settlement on St. Paul.

Pribilof was a responsible man and a navigator of fame. His recommendation was followed through and in the same year a small group of Aleuts and Russian Promyshlenniki (hunters) were sent to St. Paul to live and hunt there. Aleuts have been living on St. Paul and St. George ever since.

#### Alaska Purchase

At the time of the Alaska purchase in 1867, the adult Aleut population on St. Paul consisted of 276 inhabitants of both sexes, and on St. George of 140 of both sexes. Most of those Aleuts were offsprings of the original settlers.

#### Unexcelled Sealers

At the time of the first Aleut settlement on the Pribilofs Aleuts were already unsurpassed fur seal and sea otter hunters. It was the Aleuts who made the Shelikhov, and later on the Russian-American companies rich by their skill in hunting and skinning those marine mammals. To this day Aleuts remain unexcelled in their herding, killing, skinning and scraping pelts of the fur seal.

#### Penguin of Aleutians

I visited St. Paul and St. George in May, the month during which the Fish and Wildlife vessel the Penguin goes along the Aleutian Chain hiring additional Aleut force for the sealing season.

Federal administrators on both islands have told me that each year they hope and pray that enough Aleuts would come for the season as it is only the Aleuts who know the process of sealing.

#### Special Clubs

Incidentally, seals are killed with special clubs and have to be killed with only one blow on the head, otherwise, pelts will be ruined.

The administrators have told me that the permanent Aleut force on the islands is absolutely indispensable as far as the sealing is concerned. They also told me that in all this process from herding to scraping of pelts, one wrong action on the part of the sealers would ruin one or more pelts.

So, on one hand Aleuts are irreplaceable in our sealing industry, and on the other hand the Fish and Wildlife Service wants forcibly to remove them from their homeland. Why?

#### Grab The Land

Nowhere in the U.S. do the federal employees, and especially those in the administrative positions, live as uncontrolled and as luxuriously as they do on those islands.

#### Live in Mansions

The homes of the administrative personnel are not just comfortable houses, they are mansions, and year after year new and costly improvements are made.

#### Exclusive Pools

Then these federal employees want hothouses, play grounds for children, and swimming pools.

Both islands are natural playgrounds as there is no traffic, no forest, no animals and no strangers on those islands to bother children. But they have pressed for exclusive playgrounds right in front of their houses where Aleut children wouldn't be permitted to come.

#### Church Land Pressed

Unfortunately for the administrators, the land surrounding the federal housing belongs to the Russian Church, and therefore cannot be bought or condemned. Many, many efforts have been made by the administration to usurp the land, even to the point of destroying the old Aleut cemetery.

So far, every attempt has been unsuccessful and it appears that in the not too distant future, the Church will finally get patent to that land.

Now I expect a question: What has the Church land to do with the forcible removal of Aleuts from the islands? The answer is: Everything!

#### So Long As They Worship

According to Article 4 of the Treaty of Cession "...the churches which have been built in the ceded territory by the Russian government shall remain in the property of such members of the...church residents in the territory as may choose to worship there."

As long as Aleuts remain on the islands and worship in those churches, the land belong to the Church, and therefore the Aleuts. Remove the Aleuts off the islands and then there will be no one to worship in those churches and the Church land would cease to be the property of the Church and the Aleuts. Simple, is it not?

#### Treaty Unstudied

No, it is not. Unfortunately for the Fish and Wildlife Service, it has not studied the Treaty of Cession. Article 3 of that Treaty reads as follows: "...if they (inhabitants) should prefer to remain in the ceded territory, they with the exception of the uncivilized tribes, shall be admitted to the enjoyment of all the rights, advantages, and immunities of citizens of the United States, and shall be maintained and protected in the

(See PRIBILOF, Page 11)

# ● Pribilof

(Continued from Page 8)

free enjoyment of their liberty, property, and religion. '

Aleuts were the first Natives who became Christian, first who learned to read and write, and first who were given full Russian citizenship. Hence, Aleuts in 1867 were a fully "civilized tribe." Instead of depriving the Aleuts of their rights the federal government according to the Treaty of Cession, shall protect their rights, because any international treaty signed by the United States is the law of the United States.