

# Interview with an Aleut woman from Ouzinkie, Alaska

I was born in 1921 on Ouzinkie Island, Alaska. Ouzinkie is about 13 miles away from Kodiak. Ouzinkie dates way back to the time that the Russians were there. Ouzinkie means "Narrows" in Russian and the population then was about 300, but now there is only about 200 total living there. My mother and father both went to the Russian school in Kodiak and they read, wrote and spoke Russian.

I didn't start school until I was eight years old and I didn't speak a word of English. There was eight of us children, five boys and three girls, and my dad died of double pneumonia two weeks before I was born, so I never new my dad. My father was the chief of the village before he died. No the chiefs were elected by the members of the village. My older brother was 20 years my senior, so he was more or less like my dad. He

was the one that took care of mother. She widowed young. He was a carpenter, boat builder, barber and coffin maker. He built several homes in the village, and a nice lumber home for us (a home where her and her husband lived in). He also built mother a nice log home after dad died, because the old home was getting too old.

They had a hand built saw mill that they cut their lumber. There was no big

boats like they have now, like the big fishing boats, you had to build your own boat so you could get back and forth to get supplies. I came from a hard working Christian family. My brothers did a lot of hard work and also went hunting and trapping besides. In the meantime, I lost four brothers. One brother, who was eight, died of the big diphtheria epidemic they had throughout Alaska, another died from drown-

ing on the job, one fell off a cliff and hemorrhaged, and one died of a heart attack. Leaves only four of us surviving today.

The village people were all hard working, honest, and God fearing people. There was no alcohol ever allowed in our home, no smoking, and drugs were unheard of at that time.

I am the youngest in my family and I did not know what a whipping was, I was  
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# • Katherine Helmig interview

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never spanked in my life. Mother never ever yelled at us or hollered at us, we were never abused. She was a very mellow, very sweet, compassionate person.

Everybody had their chores to do, and she worked just as hard as the rest of us. My grandparents died before I was born. My family was just my brothers, sisters and my mother.

This was the time of the Depression, when I was growing up and we never felt it, because we had cattle — everybody had cattle in the village — it was good grazing land over there and good soil for vegetables. Everyone in the village all got along with one another, they all helped each other. We had acres of potatoes, rhubarbs, turnips, and rutabagas. In the fall, all the villagers would go across to the lagoon where they cut hay and stacked it and put it up in the lofts for the cows for the winter. The women would be berry picking, making their jam, and drying their fish. We also picked protuskie, which we put in brine to preserve. It grew naturally and was like mustard greens. The only thing we ever needed from the store was flour, sugar, tea and coffee. When they butchered the cow in the fall, all the meat would go into brine, for the winter. The rest was kept in a cache outside, things that had to be frozen. They put up fish every way possible they dried it, they smoked it, and salted it. They sun dried the fish. So that was all we needed for the winter. My mother would also get snails from the sea, they were so tasty, we also had gumboats (large

sea snail), and blue mussels.

We traded the furs my brothers got from trapping in Kodiak, at Commercial Trading Co., which was thirteen miles away by boat, for these supplies and also the clothing items we needed. We had to buy groceries in 100 lb. quantities or by case lots. Commercial Trading Company was started and built in Kodiak by the Russians.

The Russian Orthodox Church was the church we all went to. There was a monk there who taught school. We were never told not to speak our own language. I know that other Natives in various other villages were kept from speaking their own language, but never in my own village. When the Russians were there, my parents learned a lot of their culture, we were taught how to raise our own vegetables, how to raise cattle. There was no welfare in those days, we lived off the land, it was all hard work, you know, the men would have to go up in the woods

with their sleds and chop the trees and haul it out, put it in the sheds for fire wood. It was a good clean life, and you never heard of physical abuse, or sexual abuse. My mother used to help other families if she saw someone who needed help, which is the way all the villagers were.

Now my village has an air strip, wide roads, cars. Everything has changed. No, I never wish I could go back and grow up again now that things are so different. It was a lot of hard work, but there was so much family love and enjoyment and there was no problems. We never listened to television or the radio so we never knew what was going on in the world, we just lived in our own little world there.

Mother was a very conservative person, and today, all my sisters and myself are the same way today. I save everything especially food, we don't waste food. When my daughter used to cook, I'd come home from work and I'd say well we have this left over, she'd say, "I threw it in the garbage." I would say, "Oh, don't do that — you can make some beautiful leftovers like mom used to make." They have so much now that they don't know what to do with it. When you have to

really work for all the things you have, including growing all the food that you need — you wouldn't consider throwing it away. Although my daughter is changing now that she is getting older. She is a hard working girl and is a single mother. They learn. She always tells me that 'from what you have taught me and told me, I have learned a lot and became a much better person.' I really have some nice children and grandchildren. It was my family, my mother, the way she brought us up, she left a big impression on me. Made my life what it is today.

When it came time to go to high school, I went to Wrangell, Alaska and attended high school at the Wrangell Institute. I was there four years till I graduated and when I came back to my village, they appointed me the village health aide. I delivered a couple of babies, used to give morphine shots to this woman who was dying of cancer, helped the nurse with the DPT shots. That is when the WWII broke out. In our village, we had no running water, electricity, no sewer, I didn't even know what a toilet was or what to do with it. It was a big change for me, so what I did was just watch what the

other girls did. I didn't ask a lot of questions, I just followed and I just fit right in. Of course, they were dressed a lot nicer than I was, the Southeastern girls were up to day in their fashions, you know sweaters, skirts, and campus shoes. When summer came, I went to Hydaburg and worked in a cannery and came back right in style. Very much so, some of those teachers and matrons were half Natives — some of the school teachers were state-side Indians. After I got used to the place, I elected to work in the clinic — that was my job — we all had jobs, some worked in the kitchen, some in the laundry, or dormitories and so forth. They had sports — basketball was the number one — we went to town on weekends, and also we would go to the show. We had dances on weekends at the institute. We would be lectured to be on our best behavior while we were in town. I was a security guard while I attended Wrangell Institute. I definitely didn't want to live there anymore, but I did marry a local boy and I stayed there till he died and then I left. I was the village health aide at the health center — I learned a lot from the doctors. I could have gone to Riverside, California to a nursing school, but when I came home I got married instead.

*(Editor's Note: This never published oral history interview is by Sandra Camp and submitted by Bonnie Vlasoff.)*



Paul and Marie Katelnikoff and children in Ouzinkie. Circa 1920's.  
(Katherine Helmig Collection)



The three remaining sisters (left to right) Dora Pestrikoff and Kathy Helmig, both of Anchorage; and Gladys Chichenioff, Kodiak.  
(Katherine Helmig Collection)



Russian Orthodox Church in Ouzinkie.  
(Bonnie Vlasoff Collection)