



Native Trading Beads...

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"About 99 per cent of our beads were collected many years ago," she said. The museum has acquired none of its fine collection in recent years.

The late Ora D. Clark, who taught all over the territory in the early part of the century, amassed one of the state's finest collections but she got the bulk of it between 1906 and 1917.

Mrs. Norma Hoyt, a retired Anchorage schoolteacher, has a fine contemporary collection but that's mainly because word has gotten around that she guards her prizes as jealously as any savvy Native and fights to keep them in the state.

The first trade beads to arrive in Alaska probably came via the Bering Expedition of 1741 but since almost everyone who went ashore failed to get back to the ship, there's little record of trading transactions.

The log does note a brief stop at Kayak Island where glass beads and tobacco were left ashore with an iron kettle, but all the natives were away at the time so that wasn't exactly a trade.

Capt. James Cook found Natives wearing beads on the islands east of Kamtchatka in 1778 but noted in trading, "Glass beads they were not fond of."

His men had better luck in Prince William Sound where they exchanged glass beads and pieces of iron for cloaks of sea otter.

However, Capt. James King, who completed Cook's Journal, noted, "For though six of the finest skins purchased by us were got from a dozen large green glass beads, yet it is well known that the fancy of these people for articles of ornament is exceedingly capricious; and that iron is the only commodity for their market."

By the late 1700s, the fancy of the people was definitely for beads. Both the Northwest Fur Company, formed by the English, and the Russian American Fur Company began trading large quantities of ornaments.

The Russians had their best results with a brilliant faceted blue bead and the Hudson Bay people bartered "Cornaline d' Aleppo", a bead with a transparent bright red or orange exterior over an opaque white or green center.

Lieut. Zagorskis, a Russian, recorded (Travels In Russian America 1842-44 published by University of Toronto Press) stopping in his Russian hometown enroute to the new world and buying, for a few tens of rubles, various colored glass beads and bangles at the sug-

gestion of his father.

"I must confess that acquainted though I was with the conditions at Novoarkhangelsk from the tales and description of my comrades, I never guessed how valuable this cheap art work would prove to be," he wrote.

The going rate at that time was three or four deerskins for two matched, flawless clear greenish blue beads or sables in exchange for tubular or round blue beads.

In the interior one bead per beaver was a common rate of exchange. But prices would go up on occasion. At one point Hudson Bay reportedly traded one bead for 75 fox skins and in the Bethel area old people recall a single bead might be traded for an umiak.

Also valued was dentalia, slender conelike white shells which Indians traded long before the whites appeared.

Wescott recalls seeing an old photograph of Indians raking the ocean floor for the shell to sell to Hudson Bay Company which was trying to wholesale them. According to the earliest legends, however, dentalia necklaces cost one human life.

The shells were sometimes taken from the body of a dog which had been weighted for several days on the ocean floor but the fierce Tlingit Indians are supposed to have preferred to kill slaves rather than dogs for the purpose.

A six foot single string of dentalia could be traded for one male slave and a three foot string for a female slave. Even after the advent of the trading bead, the shells continued to be so popular one trading company tried (rather unsuccessfully) to duplicate them in porcelain.

The traditional "chief's necklace" of dentalia or dentalia and trading beads is one of the biggest collector's finds today. Only a chief could afford to own one...then and now!

Ralph Perdue, a Fairbanks jeweler, once had such a necklace in his family because his great, great, great grandfather was chief at Koyukuk. Today it's missing and, although he's acquired two of his own through trading, he'd like to get back the family original.

Ron Senungetuk, a Native of Wales, has a similar quest. He owns half of a marvelous blue bead wall hanging that belonged to his grandparents. He's looking for the other half.

Perdue has always heard the large blue beads were the most valuable and an account by the late Charles Brower backs him up. Brower tells of meeting a

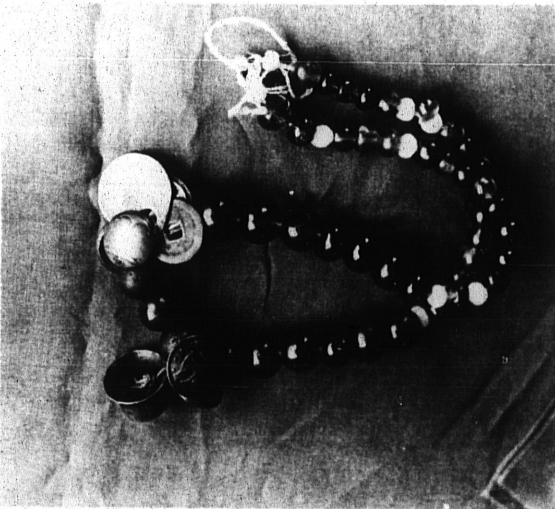
seemingly poverty stricken Eskimo enroute to trade one blue bead at Nuvook.

"In exchange for his own turquoise bead the fellow showed up with a new sled, five dogs, 10 large slabs of whale-bone, five cross foxes and one silver fox skin, the value of which was well over \$1,000."

The barter still goes on. In fact, it got Mrs. Hoyt into the trading bead field. A friend of friend—a Native woman in Savoonga—was looking for some fox furs to sew and Mrs. Hoyt got the job of shopping for them in Anchorage.

"I told her she could pay me in beads and tokens and she did. My friends thought that was quite a switch. A white, trading furs and getting beads in return from a Native!"

So maybe the Natives knew what they were doing all along!



COLLECTORS ITEM—Mrs. Norma Hoyt of Anchorage found these beads in the west coast area. They are the coveted blues and milky glass mixed with old buttons from a variety of sailors uniforms and coins.

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