

On the trail of Ahtna history

by John Alfonsi

Fieldwork under the 14 (h)(1) program began this summer, when Ken Bayless, my assistant, and I, accompanied by my faithful dog, Coach, set out on the trail of the Ahtna Indian history.

The 14 (h)(1) program is the part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) which entitles Alaska Natives to own their old village sites and grave sites.

We started this field season by reading everything we could find on each old village. This helped some, but the trail became much clearer when we started listening to the Ahtna elders. They knew so much more about the old villages and country than we did, and they really helped us to find our way around Ahtna Indian country.

Next, we contracted with Lee's Flying Service and scheduled to fly in to the Sanford River, Fish Lake, Dickey Lake, East Fork Chistochina River, the MacLearen River, the Susitna and Tyone Rivers, Tyone Hill and Tyone Lookout. All of these places, and everywhere in between, were used by Ahtna Indians then, as today. The trail

was becoming clearer.

On the Sanford River, we found traplines used by Gakona people. Further up the trail, we found a place where, long ago, people would make arrowheads of stone while watching for caribou and other game.

Ken and I tried to make arrowheads from rocks, but we couldn't even find the right rock. It took an expert to make a stone arrowhead, we found out.

Then, we flew to Fish Lake. With our inflatable raft and motor, we went up the West Fork of the Gulkana River and found the trail to Frank Ewan's old trapping cabin. The cabin has fallen in and only a cache is standing, but Ahtna elders say that this was a very busy house, with many Indian trappers from around Charley and Ewan Lakes stopping here to visit and have a good time before going out trapping again.

From Fish Lake, we flew to the East Fork of the Chistochina River to explore another Ahtna Indian trail of history. Adam Sanford had said that there was a big fishing village here, and, as usual, the elders knew best.



Camps like this one on the Sanford River made our lives more enjoyable.

Ken and I found over fifty "Net-sa", or "cache in the ground" here. This is where people kept their fish during the summer months for use in the winter time.

It was here, on the East Fork, that we saw our first grizzly bear. He knew we were there, and slowly moved away into the brush. We never saw him again.

Further up the East Fork, we found two "Nat-yi-nagh", or "in-the-ground house". It was here that people stayed while fishing for king salmon.

As we flew over the Ahtna Indian country to Dickey Lake, Ken and I were both amazed by how much distance the trails of history covered. In the old days, Ahtna people walked hundreds of miles to make a living. Everywhere we looked, Ahtna Indian people had been there already, long before anyone else.

At Dickey Lake, we found many stone arrowheads and skin scrapers used by Ahtna people. There are hardly any big trees at Dickey Lake, and we could see for miles around. Hunters would sit up high and make their tools

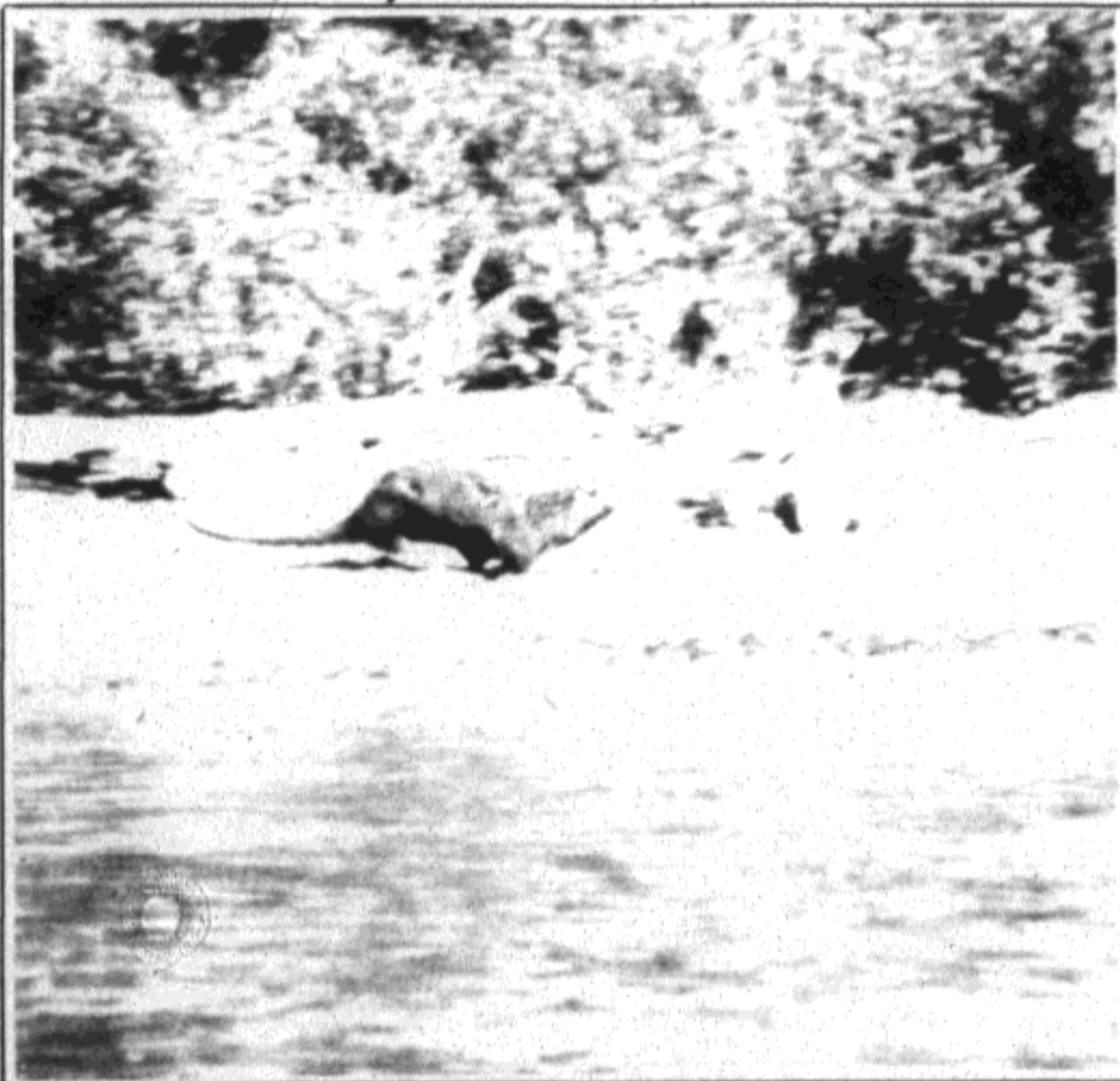
while watching for caribou. Then, they would pack the meat down to Gulkana Village. There were trails all around Dickey Lake — trails of Ahtna Indian history.

Over to the MacLaren River we flew, and here we found a small trapping cabin built by Cantwell people. This cabin, built by Oly Nicklie's father and Joe Secondchief's father, was still in fairly good shape.

Later in the year, further down the Susitna River, we saw five wolves chase a caribou and calf across the Sustina. It was a sight to remember.

Now, the trail of history of the Ahtna Indian people is still being worked on by Ken and I. We are writing down what we saw and where we found old villages on site survey forms. These forms will go to the federal government this winter.

One day, the corporation will own the land that the trails of history lead us to and Ahtna Indian people will again follow the trail of their ancestors. Hopefully, the work we have been doing will make the history trail in Ahtna country easier to follow for the younger generations.



This playful river otter was making a run for Tazlina Lake!