

# **Alaska Historians**

**By Wally Olson**

When someone mentions "historian", the picture that comes to mind is that of an old, bald-headed scholar plowing through the dusty archives of an ancient library. Seldom do people think of the historian as a writer, an artist. If a person is called an "amateur historian", the term is then used to refer to some young bungler who just messes things up. That isn't what the French meant when they coined the word amateur. The term comes from the Latin and means "someone who loves his subject." And so an amateur historian is one who loves to look at the past and learn from it. Historians come in two sexes, several shapes and sizes, and often look much different than the picture of the old scholar.

And historians are artists. An artist is one who puts things together in a pleasant and acceptable way; he or she is creative with the materials available. Certainly, historians have to research their subject. Slipshod history is probably worse than no history at all. Names, dates, places, events and all source material have to be as accurate as possible. But the art comes in the job of putting everything together in a meaningful way. There are many rules for checking validity and reliability and even for interpretation. But explaining the past and making it understandable, is a fine art. It can be done by amateurs.

There is no such thing as the history of any place or any event; there is only a history, or one person's view of the past. Each historian, and every person, may see the past in a slightly different light. The way a person was brought up, their personal experiences, their training, values, beliefs and purposes will all affect the way they see and write history. Recently we say a flurry of interest in America's past with the bicentennial celebration. Have you ever thought of the way a British historian might see the American Revolution? How would you like to read the history of World War II as written by a Japanese general; he might have a different view of things. The professional historian is trained in research methods and exposed to a great deal of information. He or she has learned how to search out information and get the details.

Like any good professional, they know how to do their job well. A professional historian can be of immense help to someone who is just starting to research and write history. But there aren't that many professional historians in Alaska. There is a real need right now for people to write down and keep track of what has happened before it is lost. There are old timers around who have lived Alaskan history and if they are not contacted their information will die with them. Here is a great place for amateur historians to get started. All that is necessary is a sincere interest, some time and the ability to ask questions and listen. Training wouldn't hurt, of course, but after a while the average person will find out where their strengths and weaknesses are.

Another important part of Alaskan history that is being lost is Native History. There are elderly Indians around Fairbanks who can still remember what it was like before the prospectors came to the Tanana. Think of the wealth of information that lies in the memories of many old Eskimos. How many stories, how many legends, how much oral history have they gathered about life in their areas? Yet there aren't many people around to help them put this down in writing.

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## **Historians**

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Now that the Native regional corporations are working on their site selections for cemeteries and historic sites, a lot of information is coming out on Native history. And Native historians can do more than just gather new information, they can throw a whole new light on Alaskan history. So often the story of Alaska's past has been told by outsiders, or newcomers to the State. Few have ever tried to tell the story as seen through the eyes of the Natives who live here. Jack London and others wrote stories about Nome and the gold rush days, but who has explained from the Native point of view the discrimination, the corruption, the destruction of the old way of life that went with it? Who has told it as the Eskimos saw it?

In the past few years, the Alaska Historical Society has become increasingly aware of the fact that there are few Natives who belong to the Society. The door is wide open for any Natives that would like to join. The only requirements are that a person have an interest in history and pay a small membership fee. The Society has an annual meeting where anyone who wants can present a paper, give a talk, tell their history as they see it. It gives people a chance to find out what others are doing and what can be done. Many towns have their own local historical societies. Native communities can organize their own local organizations to preserve their history and even get into the job of setting up local museums. There are hundreds of things that can be done. For instance, the Alaska Native Brotherhood has a long history of fighting for Native rights and recognition. There is a great history there and part of the ANB tradition has been to preserve the Native history and heritage. Maybe someday the ANB will be able to form a Southeastern Native Historical Society and participate in the Alaska Historical Society's program as any other local group does.

Alaska needs professional historians, but right now we need a lot more amateurs too! Hopefully the tricentennial history of Alaska can be put together by Natives, non-Natives, professionals and amateurs, and reflect a lot of different viewpoints. That's the real fun of history and that's why so many people love it. Let's hear it for all the amateurs, folks - they love what they're doing!