

Response to Chugach book warrents second printing

by Jill McGuire
For the Tundra Times

When *Chugach Legends: Stories and Photographs of the Chugach Region* was published in 1984, the book was hailed as a valuable resource toward the preservation of Alaska Native culture.

According to its author, John F.C. Johnson, response has been good enough to warrant a second printing. In addition, Johnson said, "I am hoping for a third, revised edition if the additional copies sell."

Chugach Legends, published by the Chugach Alaska Corp., is a compilation of 64 legends, the oral history of Aleut, Eskimo and Indian people who lived in the Prince William Sound and Lower Cook Inlet region. Some of the stories date back 6,000 years.

Johnson believes the stories are "the basic building blocks that form and unite our culture."

Johnson, who is a descendent of Chugach Natives, came upon these stories while researching his heritage. Many of the stories in this book were credited to Johnson's great, great uncle Chief Makari Feodorovich Chimovitski.

Most were collected by anthropologists Kaj Birket-Smith and Frederica de Laguna during the First Danish-American Alaska Expedition of 1933.

The legends include tales of the formation of life and the relationship of man to wildlife, and many recount the battles the Chugach endured protecting their land.

The stories also show that the Chugach Natives migrated to this region thousands of years before the Russians. Johnson unearthed a particularly poignant legend from the archives of the University of Alaska. The tale was told by Doroshin, a Russian explorer.

"Their own legends say they came from the North, I heard the following story: To the north from Kodiak Island there is a little settlement, Chilkak. There a powerful old man created man and woman. At first the old man decided to create them from stone but he lifted the man and accidentally broke his left leg. Then he decided to make people out of earth. This is the reason that men die, for earth decays. Were we created out of stone we would live forever.

"Many children were born to them. So the husband and wife began to worry, Shall we stay here? . . . There are going to be so many men in Chilkak we are not going to have enough birds for our parkas. So the first Chugach began assembling a pile of sand. He gave it a long, narrow shape and said to the old man, You are powerful. You have created us. Cause this to turn into something in which we could swim on the sea.

"The old man fulfilled their wish and that was the first two-seated baidarka. On this they sailed away into the sea. First they saw Kayak, then Kochak. They landed on these islands, lived there long enough to have children, left them and sailed further. They saw Nuchek, Tsuklak and other islands; they named them all and left descendants on all of them.

"They landed on the mainland but did not stay for they could not find a suitable place. They sailed further but leaving behind islands and the shores of Chugach Sound all filled with her children, the first Chugach woman wept bitterly and began to sing a song of farwell to her descendants.

"In the sea the travelers saw the islands Ushugnuk and finally Kodiak, where there was a multitude of birds.



A man of Prince William Sound, from a book by John Johnson. Shown on Page 1 is Chief Makari Chimovitski in a photo by Frederica de Laguna.

Alaska Historical Library photo

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Here they decided to stay forever, sure that they and their children were going to have plenty of material from which to make parkas.

"First they ate raw food, then they learned to weave baskets. They tried to warm the water in those. Into the hot water they put sea cabbage and other seafoods left on the shore at low tide. As soon as their attempt was successful they tried to boil seal meat and it turned out good. They cooked their food in this way before the coming of the Russians."

In addition to the legends, Johnson's book also contains a striking collection of photographs, the best of which document the now abandoned village of Nuchek. Johnson hopes these photographs will renew interest in renovating historical sites to "preserve them for next generations."

Proceeds from book sales will benefit a special scholarship set up by the Chugach Alaska Corp. specifically for this project. In doing so *Chugach Legends* succeeds in not only preserving the history of the Chugach culture but guaranteeing its continual survival.

Johnson would like to hear from anyone with additional stories or photographs of the Chugach area for a revised edition of the book.

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