

Nuchek village comes alive again at spirit camp

By John F.C. Johnson

The old village site of Nuchek was finally returned to the Chugach people with the recent purchase of a portion of this historic property. The village of Nuchek is considered one of the paramount treasures of the Chugach region. A location to which many village residents in the region can trace their family history, Nuchek was the site of the largest Native historic village in the region and a place of great battles between the Russians and other Alaska Native cultures.

The Russians wrote in their journals that the Chugach people specifically from the Nuchek area have a strong sense of tribal identity and proprietary ownership of the surrounding lands. They were heavily armed and had killed numerous parties who infringed on their traditional lands, according to historical records.

This year, 1996, was the second year the Nuchek Spirit Camp was in operation. My long-awaited dream has come true. Twenty years ago I envisioned that the old village of Nuchek would come alive again with the harmony of children's laughter and the smell of the smoke houses drifting throughout the village. I knew it was not a dream when I could hear the younger generation of Native songs and dances near the old graveyard and village site.

One could sense the spirit and the



Some participants in the 1996 Nuuciq Spirit Camp. Back row: Monica Riedel, Gary Komkoff, Krystal Komkoff, General Consul Yamamoto. Front row: Sylvia Kobayashi, Lone Janson, Dana Allen, and story author John F.C. Johnson.

Photo by John F.C. Johnson

pride of our ancestors as songs traveled through the rainy mist of the old - growth forest. We've now realized that the older generation was going fast and that it was up to the youth carry the torch in protecting the growth of our heritage.

As the cultural program manager for the 1996 spirit camp, my motto was not to force anyone to do anything if they did not want to do it. Force is never the answer. A person has to make up their own

mind as to why they would be here. Interestingly enough, everyone got involved in all of the camp activities. The younger generation realized their ancestors fought hard in order to give them this great and beautiful gift.

The Nuchek camp is for the youth and their children's future, and the elders and teachers were stepping stones helping to guide us into the future. If we take pride in our past where we are, then our future is bright with many more dreams for the next generation.

Native elders, youth and a Russian Orthodox priest from Cordova, Father Benjamin, conducted a blessing and honor ceremony at the spirit camp, dedicating the very first Russian Orthodox church built in Prince Williams Sound, the Church of Transfiguration. A blessing ceremony of the old village site and the spirit camp participants was also conducted at the end of the camp.

At the Church of the Transfiguration, a new white Russian Orthodox cross with a plaque was placed in ruins of the old church. All that can be seen of the church now is a few moss-covered log walls and part of the foundation flooring. The ceremony started with a procession of burn-

ing candles and a breeze carrying songs, prayers and the smell of "Ladon" or incense throughout the woods.

One could feel the spirits' presence. The spirits of the dead were swirling around us. Our hair stood up on the backs of our necks and goose bumps tingled all throughout our bodies. It was a state of euphoria, where our minds were at peace with our surroundings environment.

To the east of the old church is the burial grounds where the last chief, Peter Chimivitski, and his family were laid to rest. The were not resting that day, but were smiling with twinkles in their eyes as they watched and listened to their relatives bring Nuchek back to life.

This summer we conducted many activities such, as hunting, harvesting and processing deer, seal, salmon, halibut, plants and chitons; learning about Native history and culture, and the importance of preserving and documenting our history through archaeology: beading, weaving, and carving various Native crafts; competing in traditional Native games; singing and dancing to traditional Native songs; working together and listening to their elders; having fun and enjoying the beauty of nature in a remote and pristine village location; building smoke houses and other facilities and mending nets and learning the art of tying knots.

Subsistence programs included building a large log-framed smokehouse with metal roof, fish-drying racks and net-mending racks; cutting, salting and smoking salmon and halibut; seal hunting, skinning, smoking the meat and processing the skins; preparing seal oil and braided seal guts; hunting deer, processing the skin and meat; collecting and processing a large quantity of gumboots (chitons), blueberries and salmon berries; and identifying collecting and processing other Native plants.

Many more activities were learned, practiced and taught as a way of life. The time spent at the Nuchek village site is one which will remain with all who attended throughout their lifetimes and carry on through the generations to their children after them.

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