

First of a Series—

Authority Relates History of Pribilofs

PRIBILOVIAN, THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE OF ALASKA

By Helen A. Shenitz, Ph.D.

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I believe that before I start to speak about the Pribilovians the following clarifying remarks are in order. First, Who are the Pribilovians? They are aborigines of Pribilof Islands. Second, To what group of Alaskan natives do they belong? They are Aleuts. Third, Of what racial origin are they? They are Eskimoids, meaning that while they are not Eskimos, they are of Eskimo race. Fourth, Aleuts were the first Christians among the natives of Alaska, the first who learned three Rs, and the first who counted among themselves many members of their race, who were educated in Russia, learned various trades, or received professional education and came back to Alaska as fully educated people. After 10 years of working in Alaska they were free to go to Russia, or to any other country and practice their trade or profession. They were free to return to Russian America any time they wanted. Incidentally, the best and the most complete atlas of Russian possessions in Alaska was engraved by an Aleut, a Mr. Terent'ev. Fifth, Aleuts were the first natives of Alaska to receive full Russian citi-

zenship.

In 1786, Gerasim Pribylov a prominent Russian navigator, a boatman in the Russian language of that time, discovered St. George and St. Paul islands.

In prime of his life, Pribylov was a man of vision, a man who just couldn't and wouldn't sit still, submitting himself to the routine of every day life.

While in 1786 a sea otter, the priceless fur bearing marine mammals, were still in abundance in the waters of the Aleutian Chain, Pribylov was already looking for greener pastures. He believed that there must be, somewhere in the vicinity of the Aleutian Chain, other islands, as yet not discovered by Russians, where sea otter would be even more plentiful than along the Chain.

So, one day, taking a short supply of food, and a few men as his crew, he sailed in his small boat on what he believed would be a short exploratory trip.

Bering Sea is most of the time either stormy or foggy. It was summer, and suddenly Pribylov and his boat were shrouded in fog, and for what seemed to them a long, long time they drifted aimlessly, not knowing where. Then as suddenly as fog enveloped them, for a brief period the heavy curtains of fog were lifted, and Pribylov and his men found themselves near a sandy beach of an unknown island. Land, what a beautiful sight!

When Pribylov and his men landed they almost immediately discovered that very shortly before their arrival some people either visited the island or they were living on another part of the island. Fresh traces of camping near Pribylov's landing were found, and remnants of a bonfire were still warm. Later Pribylov has learned that the unknown campers were Aleuts from the Aleutian Chain; what is known today as the Pribilofs were Aleuts' camping and hunting grounds long before Russians discovered Alaska.

After starting another bonfire to get warm, and a hasty meal, Pribylov and his men went to sleep only to be awakened by a distant but a loud roar, the roar of fur seal bulls. Gerasim Pribylov has arrived as the root of his last name indicated he would. The root of his name, in Russian means one who has arrived. He did! He arrived to the kingdom of milady's fur coat.

In a few days of an uneventful return trip Pribylov was back, reporting his discovery to the manager of his company. Shortly after his report groups of promyshlenniki and of Aleuts were dispatched to St. George and St. Paul islands to be permanently settled there. And so began saga of fur seal and sealers.

There is no question that the first Aleuts brought to the Pribilofs were slave laborers. But not for long. As early as in 1790, four years after the discovery of the Pribilofs, wrote Empress Catherine the Great, in her own handwriting, on a document addressed to the governor of Irkutsk, the following order, concerning treatment of Aleuts: "Impress upon hunters the necessity of treating their new bretheren and countrymen, the inhabitants of our newly acquired islands, with great kindness." And the Imperial Charter of 1821 gave Aleuts full Russian citizenship, and the Russian-American Company was "obligated to leave at the disposal of the Islanders" (meaning Aleuts) "as much land as is necessary for all their needs, at the places where they are settled or will be settled, and shall endeavor to get them acquainted with the benefits of civilized life and give them means to enjoy it."

Same Charter, section 50 states: "Any fortune acquired by a native through work, purchase, exchange, or inheritance is his full property. Any attempt to alienate it from him, or to inflict personal injuries, shall be punished strictly according to laws."

And section 53 of the same Charter reads: "The colonial authorities are obliged to provide the natives, ordered for the service of the Company, with proper clothes, food, and boats, and to pay for the animals caught not less than one-fifth of the pay received by Russians. Those called for service with the Company shall not be employed more than three years, after which period they shall be replaced by others."

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