

Questions, Answers on Land

QUESTION 9: When the Russians first "discovered" Alaska, had Alaska Natives as yet encountered other whites?

Not so far as we know. The Russian explorer, Vitus Bering, setting out from Kamchaktka on the Asiatic coast, "discovering" the Aleutian Islands in 1741, was apparently the first. Two years later, Russian fur hunters commenced to swarm into the Aleutian Islands where they found a competent and peaceful population of from 20,000 to 30,000 Aleuts.

By forcing these people to hunt sea otters and fur seals, in a ruthless, enslaving drive for wealth, they reduced the Aleuts to about 2,500 within a century or so. In the face of gunboats and soldiers, the Aleuts could

hardly keep off the invaders, but they put up a good fight.

White explorers from the eastern United States did not reach the West Coast until about forty years later, by sea, when they found the Tlingit and Haida people occupying the Pacific Coast as far as Controller Bay.

The Russians occupied Sitka in 1800. Captain Cook made his famous venture into Cook Inlet in 1778, and various other white travelers began to penetrate deeper into the interior.

Hudson's Bay Company men went up the Stikine in 1833, and Russians reached Nulato in 1839.

It was nearly a century after Bering's "discovery" before the the Indians around the mouth of

the Tanana saw their first whites, when Lt. Zagoskin traveled the Yukon in 1843.

The last of all Native people to contact the whites directly were the Natives of the Upper Tanana; it is said that some of the old people who saw the first whites as children have died only recently. . . some may be still living.

The Natives, of course, had heard of the whites by means of the river grapevine long before they saw them, and were using iron axes and other implements from the Outside world, traded from the Coast of South-eastern, or of Bering Strait, for more than a century before they first directly contacted the newcomers.