

Aleut ethnographer 'just drifted into this'

After talking to Dr. Lydia Black, professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, it's hard to believe what she says of her work with Alaska's Aleuts — "I just drifted into this." Her contributions to the field of Aleut ethnography — the descriptive study of culture — span more than a decade and belie a woman who merely drifts.

Black, who presented two lectures last year as part of UAF's Otto Geist Lecture Series 'The Aleuts,' came to UAF from Providence College in Rhode Island, where she had taught since 1973. Black is an internationally known scholar whose path to her present position in Fairbanks has been far from traditional.

Born in Kiev, Russia, Black was raised in a family of Russian intellectuals who stressed serious academic pursuits at home, rather than formal, institutional education. She learned very quickly to enjoy and appreciate books and knowledge. In 1950, she and her husband moved to the United States, where he worked as an applied research engineer specializing in thermodynamics in Massachusetts. They raised four daughters, and Black states that, "one of the most rewarding aspects of life is being a wife and mother."

When Black's husband died in 1969, her life changed dramatically. With four daughters ranging in age from three to 17, she had to find a means of support. Black was anxious to find a job immediately, but her daughters encouraged her to go to college to formalize the learning that up until then had been an avocation. She decided to do just that, and Black credits Northeastern University in Boston and a very understanding dean for helping her get established in the 'real' academic world. "They gave me credit for the knowledge I had acquired on my own," she said. She was awarded a bachelor of science in 1969 and decided to go on to graduate school.

The college scene was not as easy for mature adults as it is now. For example, Black enquired at Harvard University about graduate studies and was told she was too old. She was, however, accepted at Brandeis, and received her master of arts degree in anthropology in 1971. By that time, she was beginning to develop an interest in Siberia and in anthropological theory.

Because Brandeis did not have a pro-

gram suited to her interests, she pursued her doctorate at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. She focused on social anthropology and did research on the Nivkhi people, who live along the Amur River in southeast Siberia and on Sakhalin Island, north of Japan. After she was awarded her Ph.D., she accepted a job at Providence College. "I wanted to stay on the east coast until my daughters were grown," Black says, "because all of our family roots were there."

Her interests were to be pulled toward Alaska, however. Black's major publication — in art — grew out of personal contact with Aleut artists. She met Fred Anderson, an Aleut sculptor, in Anchorage in 1975. "Fred was

Education. The Aleut Cultural Heritage Project was born, and Black was asked to write a comprehensive book about Aleut art.

The result is "Aleut Art: Unangam Aguqaadangin." Published in 1982 by the APIA, the book spans several thousand years of Aleut art, ending with contemporary Aleut artists. Black points out that without the dedication of everyone involved, especially project director Patricia Petrivelli of Atka, who "beat the bushes" for additional funding to provide color reproductions in the book, the project never would have been completed.

The book is now out of print, but UAF's Rasmuson Library has two copies in its Alaska section.



Dr. Lydia T. Black, professor of Anthropology at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.
UAF Photo by Sam Winch

frustrated because he couldn't find any models of Aleut art that would help him shape his own art." As a favor, Black began collecting photographs of Aleut masks for Anderson.

In 1978, another Aleut, Pat Pletnikoff, realizing that the existing Aleut art was in museums and at universities and not in the villages, talked to Black about collecting information about the Aleut artistic heritage.

The late Philemon Tutiakoff of Unalaska, then chairman of the board of directors of the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association (APIA), raised this same question in 1980. Wheels began to turn, and the association secured a grant from the U.S. Department of

Black is unequivocal in her feelings about the entire project, and says that as a result of the work involved in writing the book, "I have established a degree of communication with the Aleuts so that I feel comfortable when I meet members of the Aleut community."

She says that in anthropological circles there is a saying, "the field selects the anthropologist," and that in her work with the Aleuts she was fortunate because everything clicked. Although Black has achieved distinction with works before and after the publication of "Aleut Art," she states emphatically that "this is the book I want to stand on."

Her other works provide interesting reading about Russian America — Alaska — before it was purchased by the United States in 1867. These include "Atka: An Ethnohistory of the Western Aleutians," Volume 24 of The Limestone Press series published and edited by Dr. Richard A. Pierce, a distinguished visiting professor of history this semester at UAF and Black's colleague and close friend. Also in this series are the journals of Iakov Netsvetov's years as the Russian Orthodox priest in the Atka district from 1828 to 1844, and Volume 26 covers his tenure on the Yukon from 1845 to 1863.

In the 1984 issue of "Etudes/Inuit/Studies," Black published "The Yup'ik of Western Alaska and Russian Impact." In the article, Black examines how borrowings from Russian culture have been woven into Yup'ik culture, to the extent that they are believed to be Native when, in fact, they are of Russian origin.

Besides her full-time teaching load at UAF, Black is busy with several projects. With Pierce, she is working on the journals of Vladimir Stafeyev, who was a Russian who married a Tanaina woman from the Kenai Peninsula. After the U.S. purchased Russian America, he stayed in Alaska, and his journals are full of detail about life in Native villages during the period of military rule in Alaska and just prior to the Gold Rush. Among other things, Stafeyev provides rich data on the Alaska Commercial Co., which dominated the fur trade in Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet.

Perhaps Black's most exciting project, however, is one that will span the next two summers. Black is interested in the impact of Russian trade and culture in the Yukon Basin, from the Seward Peninsula to Fort Yukon. With two grants, one from the National Geographic Society and one from the Ella L. Cabot Fund of Boston, Black plans to travel the Yukon by boat and "visit villages that were within the orbit of Russian traders and missionaries." She hopes to travel from Tanana to St. Michael next summer, and to come back up the Yukon "so I can experience the conditions of going up the river in a small craft."

These are hardly the words of a woman who "drifts."