

Oldest Eskimo body to return home

FAIRBANKS — The oldest human body ever discovered in Alaska—that of a St. Lawrence Island woman estimated to be 1,600 years old—will be returned to the island this summer for final burial.

Since it was brought to the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in 1973 for scientific study, the body has been kept in freezer facilities to minimize deterioration.

The body's return to St. Lawrence Island this summer will be in keeping with a commitment made at the time it was turned over to university scientists by island Eskimos.

"We are deeply grateful to the people of Savoonga for notifying us of their discovery of this body and permitting and assisting us to bring it out," said Zorro Bradley, National Park Service anthropologist working at the university.

The frozen, well preserved body was found by Eskimo hunters in a low, sea-washed cliff at Kialegak Point, near St. Lawrence Island's Southeast Cape. As the beach eroded, it began to wash out. The hunters,

thinking the body would be of interest to scientists, removed it from the cliff and reburied it on the tundra above, down in the permafrost.

That was in October, 1972. In the summer of 1973 the hunters—Ray, Gabriel, and Bradley Gologergen, brothers, of the village of Savoonga—told Bradley of their find and took him to the burial site. Recognizing the scientific importance of the body, Bradley made plans to ship it to Fairbanks.

One thing Bradley and other researchers quickly determined: the woman had met a violent end, possibly in the collapse of an earthen house.

The body was naked and found in an area that had long been inhabited, a mound-like area composed of old houses superimposed on one another, said Bradley. It was in a flexed position with the knees drawn up under the chest, one side of the face was crushed, moss-like material was found in the stomach and lungs which could have been swallowed and inhaled if a body had been crushed into the earth by a great weight, and

some vegetation identified as chickweed was clutched in one hand.

The great age of the body was determined by scientists from two institutions working independently, said George S. Smith, a National Park Service anthropologist who reports to Bradley and is doing graduate work in the university's Department of Anthropology.

Dr. Michael R. Zimmerman of the University of Pennsylvania Hospital performed an autopsy shortly after the body had arrived at Fairbanks and took tissue samples back to Pennsylvania for radiocarbon dating, said Smith. The Smithsonian Institution conducted a similar tissue examination.

The St. Lawrence Island body is by far the oldest discovered in Alaska, said Smith. Bodies found in the Aleutians, previously considered the oldest, were no more than "several hundred years old," he added.

In his autopsy, Zimmerman found the internal organs of the body remarkably well preserved, which indicates it was probably frozen almost immediately after death, said Bradley. From the condition of the atrophied ovaries, it was concluded the woman was of postmenopausal age, near 50, he said.

The autopsy revealed other things about the woman. "She definitely had severe 'black lung' said Smith. Such a condition, he said, is typical of persons who

live in relatively small, tight lamps fueled by seal oil or dwellings and frequently burn blubber.