

Chugach spirit camp held at Nuchek village site

by Lone Janson

The "spirit" of Nuchek has been with us for a long time. The local Natives talked of it off and on over years, and I always wondered about this historic old village in Prince William Sound. I even had a dog that I named "Nuchek." He was a blue-eyed, sad, lonely little puppy when I adopted him at the Pound, but he grew into a big, strong, handsome Husky, full of love and joy.

The village of Nuchek seems to be in that process now.

I visited the site on only one occasion before. In 1964 we anchored in Constantine Harbor with a load of fish waiting for the tender. We went ashore on the spit and wandered around, finding little. Now I am glad we didn't find much for we might have taken away something that should stay there. But in those days, there was this strong sense that it was all slipping away and would soon be lost.

Members of the Russian Orthodox Church in Cordova are proud that their icons and bible come from Nuchek. In Valdez, Joe Levshakoff told me that in the old days, the brightest Native scholars were brought to Nuchek to learn in the Church school there. So Nuchek was a gathering place and a learning place, and that is exactly what the "Spirit Camp" is. In my short two days there—one wet and rainy, the other beautiful and sunshiny—I heard and saw enough to sense what the Spirit Camp was all about. A number of small memories come

back, like snapshots:

Another said to her son: "When an older person, an elder, comes in, always get right up and let them have the seat!" I have never heard such an instruction to a child while in the big city. Our modern life tends to separate the younger generation from the older and much mutual respect is lost in the process.

The respect needs to pass both ways. I thought of this while we were tromping in single file through the tall, wet grass to the site of the old village cemetery. One little boy really didn't want to go, but he didn't want to stay behind while his mother went. He whined a lot as we went through the deep wet brush to find the graves of old Nuchek. His mother gave him comfort and tried to calm him down, but nothing helped. She had the grace not to make a big scene about it. Her comment sums up an attitude that gives Native children much of their confidence. "He is so big for his age that I forget how young he really is."

There it is, I thought: respect your elders; love and cherish your children. That's the Native ethic.

Modern life throws so much constant stimulus at us—TV, radio, Walkmans, cellular phones—till we never know a quiet moment. The real value of the Spirit Camp is to take away all that extraneous stuff so that the youngsters have time. They need time to get bored, so they can begin to

look around and learn how the elders spent their spare time in the old days. This is the foundation and reality of Native traditions.

During the spare hours after the fish were hung to dry, or the meat put away for winter, the long hours were filled with visiting, beadwork, making beautiful clothing, headbands, kayaks, sleds, and other useful items. Our modern world does not offer those long hours to be filled by ourselves and each other.

Storytelling accompanied all these activities, as I well remember from the old days in Cordova. In those days we had no TV, and very little radio. We visited a lot, going to each other's houses, or exchanging stories over coffee in the local cafe. People no longer visit, it seems. We may go to one another's house, but the TV is always on, and conversation is short and clipped and has no substance.

In the old days we told stories. I don't mean jokes, although jokes were exchanged too. I mean stories, and the storytelling provided us with what TV does now—entertainment—but it also had hidden values and meanings, which TV lacks because it does not talk to real people about real things. Notice how pilots or fishermen gather in groups to exchange "shop talk." The talk is often of hilarious mishaps, narrow escapes, embarrassing moments, accompanied with a lot of laughter. The hidden meaning often is to share knowledge on how to avoid the same



Leo Kunnuks, project archeologist and elder from Seward receives an award from Dr. Lora Johnson. Also pictured are John Christensen, chairman of Chugach Alaska Corp., Larry Evanoff, Liam Riedel. They participated in a recent spirit camp at Nuchek, an old village site in Prince William Sound.

mishaps.

A commercial fisherman may tell how, in a stiff wind, he brought his boat up to a good anchorage spot and (since he was alone) ran up to the bow to throw over the anchor, only to see the end of the rope pass through his hands, right overboard. The story brings on gales of laughter, and so is entertaining, but the hidden lesson is impossible to miss: be sure the end of the line is fastened to the boat!

So storytelling is also a part of our "Spirit" movement. Most of our youngsters have never lived where that valuable element was even possible, but it's part and parcel of being Native, both in the old world and the modern world. I was glad to learn that this was a part of the spirit camp experience.

I was only there two days, but I learned a lot, too. One of the most important reasons for the Spirit Camp right now is to determine the highest and best use of this historic and precious Native site. How much development, if any, and what sort? Should we reserve it just as a place to camp, or should we carefully and thoughtfully share this treasure with others who would value and respect it? We had special forms to fill out to express our personal feelings on the subject.

I am a storyteller, and this is my story: it matters not so much what we do to develop Nuchek, as long as we keep it so that these Native traditions may endure. Don't throw over the anchor unless the rope is securely tied to the boat!