

# Yakutat's own matriarch

Maggie Johns is the silver-haired matriarch of Yakutat, a woman who has outlived 11 of her 13 children and still teaches beadwork to the young girls of her village.

Yakutat, is now the headquarters for extensive offshore oil exploration in the Gulf of Alaska. Maggie, a 81 year old Tlingit Indian, grew up there in a community house with 50 families sharing the labor, where the women cooked while the men hunted.

Her face dissolves in wrinkles as she talks about the old days.

"This used to be the richest town for food. We ate what came off the beach, halibut, herring and red snapper in February, hooligan in March, and salmon in the summer.

"We put up our winter supplies from around our house, blueberries, and strawberries, and sometimes five cases of salmonberries. It's hard to get the food

now."

The Tlingits lived an isolated life during Maggie's childhood, houses were built of split logs, "planned up into planks as shiny as little buttons." Today, Yakutat has modern housing and jet service.

Life was simpler when she was young. Though not bitter about progress, she clings to the memory of the old Native ways.

"We had a law for everything. We knew the Ten Commandments before the white man came. There was no divorce among us, and girls were watched carefully before they were married.

"We weren't greedy or selfish, and the Native people had no enemies. When we hunted, we hunted for what we wanted to eat. We didn't get more than we could use, and we all shared. The Natives lived just like one body."

