

ISEGR Finds Aleuts Persist

"Atka and Nikolski persist decade after decade despite impoverishment, few modern conveniences and the near absence of local job opportunities. . .

"(they) persist and show no signs of consolidating with another Aleut village," writes Dorothy M. Jones, a sociologist with the Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research at the University of Alaska.

"...the persistence of Atka and Nikolski in the virtual absence of local means of earning an income indicates that isolation, is indeed, the stronger determinant of village persistence," she concludes. "If the lure of jobs were a stronger force, Atka and Nikolski would have long since disappeared."

Atka and Nikolski are two of 11 villages in the Aleutian Chain today. In the mid-18th century,

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Aleuts Persist . . .

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when the Russians first occupied the Aleutians, the Aleuts inhabited hundreds of villages in the area.

After a century of Russian occupation, 39 villages remained, the result of Russian-introduced diseases, massacres by the Russians and village consolidation policies of Russian administrators.

By 1890, the U.S. government census listed only 22 Aleutian villages and by 1970, excluding two villages in the Pribilofs, only 11 were recorded.

Most Aleuts today depend on wage employment, rather than subsistence living and the effect of this lifestyle has been apparent in the migration of people from one village to another, notes Dorothy Jones. Population movements in the Aleutians have been fundamentally influenced by one village's proximity to other villages. People join together for improved living standards and improved job opportunities.

The question posed by Jones is why some villagers moved and others stayed; in her study, "Patterns of Village Growth and Decline in the Aleutians," she seeks to answer that question.

In the Shumagin area, the Aleuts have tended to migrate on the basis of good job opportunities, the availability of community services and family. Government and industry reinforced that trend by favoring location of services in expanding villages.

The case of Pauloff Harbor was different. Residents of that village relocated mostly at Sand Point, because Sand Point offered better opportunity than either King Cove or False Pass, both of which were actually closer to Pauloff Harbor.

Belkofsky, settled by the Russians and Aleuts in 1823, offered another interesting situation. During the halcyon days of sea otter hunting, Belkofsky was probably the most affluent village in the Aleutians, Jones notes. Today Belkofsky is without a cannery or any other local means for earning income. The village has not grown and has no store, clinic, bar or communication and transportation services. Aleuts there still use gas and kerosene lamps, and haul water from the creek.

Considering that Aleuts from Belkofsky frequently visit King Cove, some 13 miles away, one might expect them to follow the pattern of Unga residents who moved to Sand Point and in fact, some have, but not to the extent that Unga's population

migrated to Sand Point.

The reason is cultural: Belkofsky remains one of the most traditional Aleut villages; King Cove one of the most Western. King Cove has no Russian Orthodox church nor church organizations, notes Dorothy Jones in her study. King Cove has no chiefs or elders, no community owned steam bath and few Aleut-speaking people. Belkofsky meanwhile has an active chief who serves traditional functions, community steam baths, widespread use of the Aleut language and the dominant influence of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Finally, there are the isolated villagers, which persist with or without local job opportunities. Akutan has had local industries throughout the 20th century. There are no fish processing plants at Nelson Lagoon, but the rich fishing resources at and near the village enables residents to earn a living, Jones writes.

"The question arises whether Akutan and Nelson Lagoon persist primarily because they have local means of earning an income or because they are isolated from and therefore unfamiliar with other Aleut villages.

"The persistence of Atka and Nikolski in the virtual absence of local means of earning an income indicates that isolation is, indeed, the stronger determinant of village persistence," she concludes. "If the lure of jobs were a stronger force, Atka and Nikolski would have long since disappeared."