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The world first learned of the existence of northwestern America as the result of the voyage of Vitus Bering in 1741. Over the next 50 years its coastline was more fully defined, and names were applied by explorers and navigators to its harbors, bays, and other features. Much of the interior was to remain unknown to the world for another hundred years.

Geographic features of the land were already known and named, of course, by people who would in time become known as Alaska's Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts. It was — and had been for thousands of years — their homeland.

But the world's knowledge of these Americans — as they were appropriately called by their first foreign visitors — was but slowly acquired. Their existence and their lifeways became known to the world only through the eyes of foreign voyagers, fur trappers, miners, missionaries, and others. It is necessary to draw upon their observations gathered over a century and a half — together with later research, to portray the people of Alaska before the arrival of the first Russians in the mid-1700's.

Alaska was then the home (according to James Mooney) of an estimated 74,000 Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts. They belonged to one or another of several dozen linguistic and cultural groups. Each group lived in identifiable geographic regions. To varying degrees, the groups' territories were recognized and respected by others. To the extent they could support life, the accessible lands and waters were used and occupied by these native inhabitants.

Most Aleuts lived in coastal villages on islands named after them stretching 1,000 miles across the North Pacific. Some few lived at the lower end of the Alaska Peninsula.

The population of about 15,000 Aleuts lived in numerous small villages, most of which were located on the Bering Sea side of the islands. One island, Umnak, once had 16 villages. A typical village was made up of six or seven houses; each household consisted of 20 to 30 people who were related to one another. Their houses were half underground and covered with a warm dome of sod.

Every village with its cluster of houses had its own sea hunting areas, which had to be respected by other villages. Use of these areas without permission meant war.

Adult men hunted seals, sea lions, and whales in the open sea from kayaks, perhaps the most seaworthy of watercraft. Roots, berries, birds, and eggs were available on the land. The food resources of the Aleuts were so abundant that anyone who could walk, young or old, could survive by gathering food from the beaches and the reefs.

The material culture of the Aleuts included 30 kinds of different harpoon heads and a great variety of nets and darts. Rainproof clothes made of sea mammal gut and wooden hats (often highly decorated) were useful in this rainy and foggy territory. Baskets of finely woven grasses were used for many purposes.



Man and woman of Unalaska, 1780's



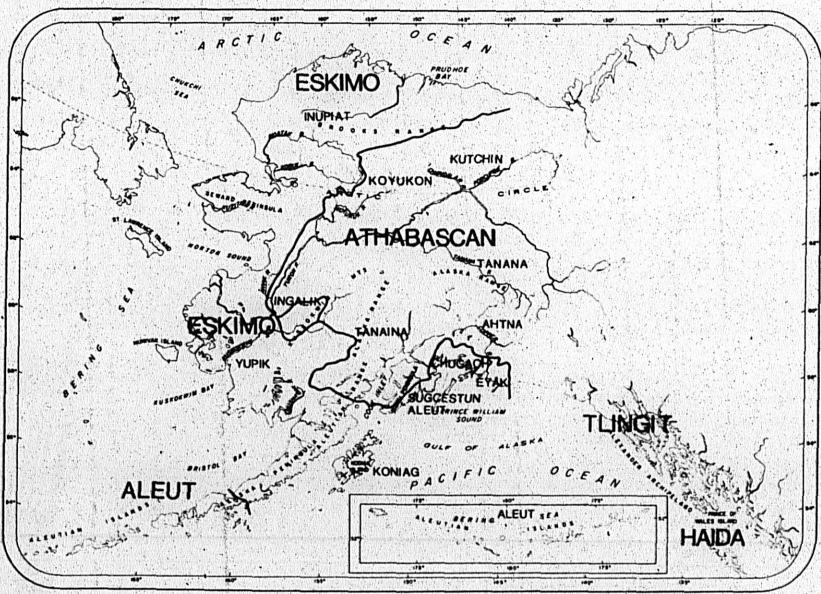
Alaska State Museum, Juneau (Lutke's Voyages)

Aleut hunters in kayaks, 1820's

PHOTO CREDITS FOR PAGE ONE: Russian portraits of Koniag Man and Women of the 1880's. From the Alaska State Museum, Sarychev's voyages. The two on the far right are Kotzebue Sound Eskimo's of the 1820's. From the Alaska State Museum, Von Kotzebue's voyages.

Dentalium and amber were so highly prized for ornamental purposes the Aleuts used them in trade. Their trade took them great distances — and there was always risk, for they might run into enemies on the way.

The Aleuts also had considerable knowledge of the human body. They had surgeons who could perform operations, and they skillfully embalmed the dead before respectfully burying them in caves.



Wendell Oswalt, Alaskan Eskimos, 1967

MAP 2 GENERALIZED GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF ESKIMOS, INDIANS AND ALEUTS IN ALASKA