

# Aleut Bill Update

by shelley gill

It was in June, 1942, that the U.S. Army undertook the evacuation of the Aleuts from their villages throughout the chain and transported them to various camps located in Southeastern Alaska.

The evacuation was chaotic. Residents had less than 24 hours to prepare and were forced to leave their personal possessions behind. Authorities burned the village of Atka, shot the village cattle on St. George and rigged the homes and Russian Orthodox church with explosives. 560 Aleuts were herded aboard the U.S. DEERAOI. It was aboard this ship that the abuse of the Aleuts would begin. It would continue for the next two years. For two weeks the DEERAOI sailed eastward, its human cargo crowded in the hold of the ship. There was one bathroom, no privacy and no medical attention. Sickness had broken out by the time the ship reached its destination. At the camps the Aleuts were separated: the Atkians went to Kallisnoo, the Pribilofians to Funter Bay. Contaminated water, poor food, inadequate clothing and medical supplies led the epidemics that would rage for the next two years.

Long after the threat of Japanese attack had passed, the Aleuts remained virtual prisoners of the federal government.

When the people were finally returned to their islands they found their homes vandalized, their personal belongings gone. The precious icons and crosses, symbols of the Aleuts' Russian Orthodox faith, were removed from the place they had been hidden at the departure. The people went to church to pray for their return and for the 60 people who had died and were buried on the distant shores of Southeastern



Gabe Stepetin, of St. Paul, has fought long and hard to gain and preserve the rights of the Aleut people. Above: St. Paul Island villagers returning from Funter Bay found their homes wrecked; their belongings carried off as souvenirs. Left: An American flag serves as a backdrop for these residents of the village of Akutan during a recent town meeting.

photos by  
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