

Matfay worked his way up fishing ranks

by Mike Rostad
for the Tundra Times

KODIAK — Larry Matfay, respected elder from the village of Old Harbor on Kodiak Island, has walked the hills and navigated the waters of the island for well over a century.

The 82-year-old Russian Aleut continues to operate a bear guiding business and a fish camp, and occasionally he dances with Shoonaq Tribal Dancers of Kodiak Island.

No moss grows beneath Matfay's busy feet. Matfay was honored this year by the Alaska Legislature for his contribution to professional big game guiding and for the preservation of the Aleut culture and history on Kodiak Island.

Matfay was born in Akhiok, situated about 100 miles southwest of Kodiak. His father, Sava Matfay, was a sea otter hunter whose shiny pelt was traded for the cedar house Larry Matfay was born in. Matfay's mother, Pelegya, died in the 1918 worldwide flu epidemic.

In summers Sava took the family to the Alaska Packers Association cannery at Olga Bay where he helped move supplies, worked in the cannery lines and fished on beach seine gangs.

Matfay worked his way up into the fishing ranks. His career began in the cannery cafeteria, then Larry moved to the processing lines, joined a beach seining gang, eventually became a foreman, and finally he got his own boat and fishing site.

Matfay was also a reindeer herder, watching over the animals that were shipped to Kodiak Island in 1922.

Mail carrier, is another responsibility Matfay took on as a young man. He carried the mail, either on foot or in his jitney, to the Alitak cannery where the mail boat, *Star*, made monthly stops.

On one of his mail runs, Matfay met Martha Naumoff of Karluk. He was so impressed with this young lady who had come to Akhiok with her father to visit relatives, that he asked her to marry him. Several days after the proposal, Matfay and Naumoff were married at the Orthodox Church in Akhiok.



Larry Matfay, right, and John Peterson, a kayaker from Greenland who visited him, got together in Kodiak.

The Matfays moved to Old Harbor in 1952. Larry opened a show hall and operated a transmitter radio — the only means of instant communication with the Outside. In 1964, the Matfays shared their neighbors' loss and grief when their home was destroyed by the devastating tsunami. Villagers were evacuated to Anchorage, but returned to Old Harbor before the year was over.

Matfay was one of the first Aleuts to receive his license as a registered big game guide. Before he started conducting hunts in 1971, he was an assistant guide and packer for other guides. In 1949, he was involved in the tak-

ing of a near record bear at Olga Bay. The bear's skull measured 18 and three quarters of an inch.

Frequently called upon to share stories and songs of the Aleut culture, Matfay willingly and happily gives of his time.

"I want to share my culture," he says. "I don't want to take it with me when I die."

Matfay was twice nominated by the Kodiak Area Native Association as Citizen of the Year, for the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention. He is a member of the Cultural Heritage Committee for KANA and a member of Three Saints Orthodox Church Council in old Harbor.

The citation presented to Matfay

says he is a "highly respected and honored elder of the Aleuts of Old Harbor and Kodiak in general. . . . It is to this unselfish and caring person . . . whose actions and contributions exemplify and enhance one of the cornerstones of the traditional Aleut people, that of sharing and passing on knowledge through example and demonstration, that this 16th Alaska State Legislature hereby bestows its Honor."

Matfay's life story, *Time to Dance! Life of An Alaska Native*, was published recently. Inquiries about the book may be sent to Mike Rostad, 2610 Mill Bay Road, A-18, Kodiak 99615, telephone 486-8342.



The 17th Annual Village Participation Conference will take place Feb. 20-23 at Centennial Hall in Juneau. Sponsored by the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, with funding from the Alaska Department of Community and Regional Affairs, the "VPC" addresses rural issues. This year the planners selected "Healing the Circle, Restoring a Legacy" as the 1990 theme. Those who are interested in attending the 1990 VPC as self-supporting participants may contact David Hardenbergh at 279-2511 or 1-800-478-7227 for information on registration and travel and hotel discounts.