

Chapter 13

Kashega: A Green and Pleasant Place



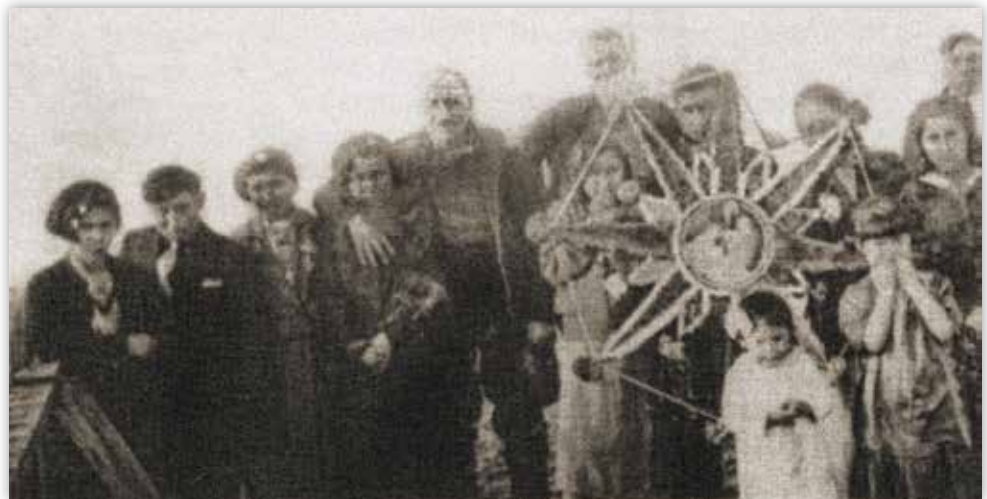
Four days after John Yatchmenoff died on October 3, 1932, Kashega men traveled to Unalaska aboard the *Umnak Native*, a vessel owned by the Nikolski community. The purchases they made “stimulated our cash sales,” wrote A.H. Proctor. “These men will return to their homes on the ‘UMNAK NATIVE.’”¹ Fall trapping necessitated travel aboard one of several vessels operating in the area and the *Umnak Native* frequently made trips the entire length of the Chain. It had been built in Seattle and was a 49-ton vessel, 59.2 feet long and 16.5 feet across. That fall, the *Umnak Native* carried trappers to various islands and in late January 1933 it left Unalaska to collect the men and return them to their villages. For this trip, Bishop Antonin and Michael Tutiakoff, a deacon with the Unalaska church, were given passage to visit communities to the west of Unalaska. On January 24, while sheltering from a storm in Inanudak Bay on the west side of Umnak Island, the vessel wrecked and eleven perished. Among the men from Nikolski who died was Stephan Krukoff whose sister was Efemia Kudrin of Kashega. Her husband, John J. Kudrin, had died a few years earlier.

Bishop Antonin survived the wreck and in July 1933 he visited Kashega aboard the *Tahoe*. Apparently, the village had not yet formally elected a new chief following Yatchmenoff’s death. “There is no permanent chief,” according to the vessel’s seasonal report. “John Descisoff [Denisoff] is acting as chief at present.” He was soon accepted as the community’s leader. The bishop, a somewhat heavy-handed individual, was never reluctant to step into a fray. A year later he arrogantly informed the office of education that he planned to move the entire population of Kashega to Umnak.²

If Arletta Carter, the school teacher then at Kashega, heard about this, she probably rejoiced. Following her brief visit to Makushin, she had reluctantly returned to Kashega where she declared its future to be “one

of drinking, debauchery, disease and death.”³ Carter had arrived in 1932, replacing Halfton Burgh who taught briefly after James B. and Carrye Henderson. She was from Berkley, California, and her initial reports glowed with praise. “There is a splendid community spirit,” she wrote in the spring of 1933. She told how the men had built a new village steam bath the previous fall. Families contributed money for a well and a pump, replacing the waterline that had run from the lake. All of this was possible because the village had income.

Sophie Kudrin managed to slip Eva in among Carter’s primary students, but after thirty-eight days of giving her “busy work only” Carter insisted the four-year-old stay at home. As a teacher, she was neither as enthusiastic nor as effective as the Hendersons had been. The first year, she failed two students and promoted five (including George Gordaoff whom she sent to Unalaska to live with his father, Alex Gordieff; George’s mother Lucy had died in 1930). Two students withdrew, including Martha Denisoff who had written enthusiastic letters under the former teachers, and Mike Kudrin who had won the forestry essay.



Starring in Kashega with Harry Jacobsen (center). Alice Moller photograph from *Cuttlefish Two: Four Villages*.

Mike had been somewhat old for grade school. On March 5, 1932, he and Dora Borenin traveled to Unalaska where they were married at the Church of the Holy Ascension. She was seventeen and he was twenty-five. “My brother and Mike Kudrin were friends,” Dora said. “I told my brother that I wasn’t going to get married. I used to write letters to the store when he wanted to order things from Unalaska, but when he told me I had to get married I wouldn’t write letters for him.” Vasilii had informed Dora of her impending marriage shortly after Russian Christmas, January 7, which was followed by days of **starring**, when a decorative twirling star was carried from home to home and blessings were sung for the residents. After starring and before Epiphany, there were days of masquerading during which individuals dressed in costumes and went from house to house commemorating the search that Herod’s men had made for the infant Jesus.



Waiting at the Unalaska dock for the mailboat to return to Kashega.

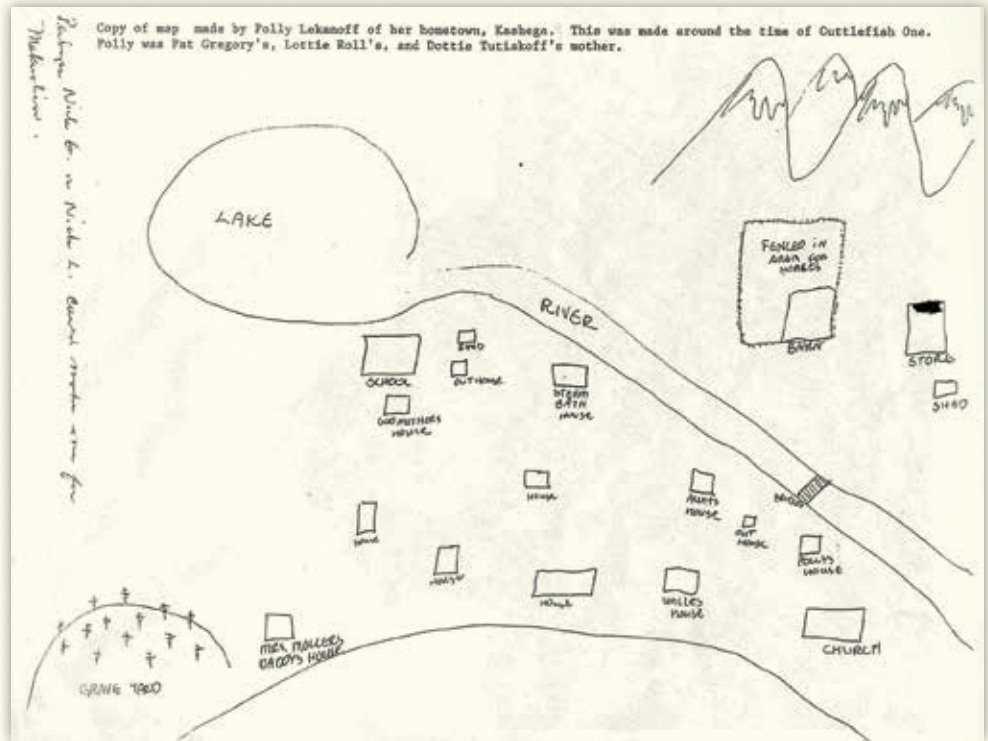
1. Feckla Denisoff (wife of Nikefer Denisoff)
2. Sisters Oleta Borenin and Sophia Kudrin (left to right)
3. Alice Moller.
4. Anna and Carl (Carol) Moller (left to right)
5. Sophia Kudrin's daughter Eva.
6. Mary Moller

Photograph courtesy Mary Diakanoff.

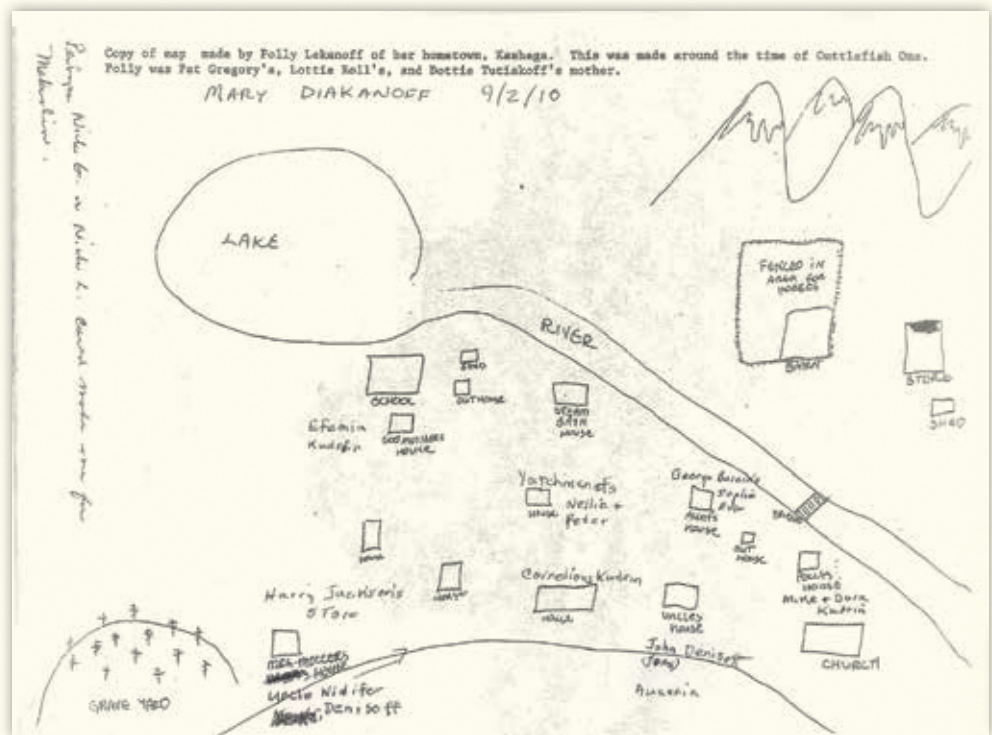
I was in the living room behind the door, on top of a half a sack of flour, sitting there crying. I told him I wasn't going to marry. That night we had a masquerading. Mike came to my house. I knew Mike because he wasn't dressed up. We were all dancing, you know, and a pitcher of cold water I spilled on him! I did that so I wouldn't have to have him for my husband! But I was married with him for thirty-five years. I was married in 1932 and we had five girls.⁴

At the conclusion of masquerading, there was a ritual cleansing that symbolized washing away the demons. At Kashega this was done by going to the river and pouring fresh water over oneself. "I used to like to get more than Mrs. Moller [Alice Denisoff]," Dora recalled, "so I put two buckets of water on me! Boy! Tried to be tough, I guess!"⁵

In the early 1970s, one of Dora's daughters, Polly Lekanoff, drew a map of Kashega Village as she remembered it. It showed a church near the bay, nine houses, a school with an outhouse and shed near the lake, one additional out-house, and a cemetery at the opposite end of the bay from the church. A footbridge over the creek led to the store with its shed and a barn with a fenced in area for horses. She identified the buildings and this identification was expanded in 2010 by Mary Diakanoff.



Map drawn by Polly Lekanoff. Image courtesy O. Patricia Gregory



Polly Lekanoff map with revisions by Mary Diakanoff, 2010.

In the early 1930s, the Western Pacific Livestock Company moved its ranch headquarters from Chernofski to Kashega. This provided seasonal employment for a few local men. It was also good news for Harry Jacobsen who owned the store and had started a soft-drink bottling company. At first he put out just a few bottles, but by 1933 he had hired an assistant. “Numerous trading vessels come into the harbor bringing raw products in the form of salt, barrels, sugar, malt, and so forth,” wrote the *Seward Gateway*, “and take on exports such as fur, wool, salt, codfish, mutton, bottled soft-beverages, and fine baskets woven by the native women.”⁶ Although her memories were those of a child, Eva recalled that Jacobsen’s store always seemed to be well-stocked with shoes and raingear.

For Carter, Jacobsen was the embodiment of all that was evil. She called him a “lazy drunkard” and “unprincipled.” She castigated him for operating a store out of his house that was more like “an old time saloon, gambling den and red-light house—a rendezvous for ‘Hoodlums.’” She suspected him of trading alcohol for fox pelts and turning everyone, men and women, into “habitual drunkards.” Not particularly healthy herself, Carter left Kashega several times, taking a boat to Unalaska, Seward and eventually Seattle. While staying at Unalaska she was dined and interrogated by A.H. Proctor of the A.C. Company about Jacobsen’s doings. She led Proctor to believe Jacobson sent regular deposits to a bank in Bremerton, Washington, where “he has quite a nest-egg laid aside....”⁷ The company suspected he made purchases from competitors and was deliberately planning to evade payment on his debt. They considered seeking out the bank account and placing an attachment on it. Proctor later shared all this with Jack Martin, to whom Jacobson also owed money. An equal-opportunity accuser, Carter claimed the AC Company sent “bums” to Kashega specifically “to raise ‘H---’ with the objective of exploiting the Natives.”⁸



Mary Moller with her aunt Oleta (Aleta) Borenin. Photograph courtesy Mary Diakanoff.

Jacobsen was hired as caretaker for the sheep ranch during its off seasons. (The commanding officer of the *Tahoe* wrote August 1, 1933, that there was a small herd of thirty-six sheep near the village belonging to the Aleutian Livestock Company of Chernofski.) Jacobsen allowed the village men to use the company's barn as a shop where they built a new motorboat from the wreck of another. He continued operating a codfish saltery at Raven Bay on the "Pacific side," where he employed local people. He also had a fox farm in that bay (perhaps on Ogangen Island which fills a good part of Raven Bay). When absent from the village, people still had access to supplies as he turned his store over to a local man, often Jacob Denisoff, son of Nikifor Denisoff. Jacobsen also had his hand in prospecting. In 1933 the *Seward Gateway* reported that he and a partner, John Reinken, had filed a gold claim where they planned to strike it rich.⁹ Henry Swanson said it wasn't gold; it was copper. "Maybe they thought they had gold, too," he remarked. Buttressed by this anticipated fortune, Jacobsen announced that he was leaving Kashega and moving to Seattle or back to Norway. Three months later, however, the *Seward Gateway* quietly reported that he had "returned from Raven Bay to make his home in Kashega."¹⁰ John Reinken arrived to spend the winter with him.

Reinken was an articulate scallywag. Son of Adolph and Alexandra Reinken, he was raised at Kashega and Unalaska. In 1894 he was sent to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania through the intervention of Sheldon Jackson, the commissioner of education for the territory. Returning to Unalaska, he did little except annoy his ill father who finally sent him away again.¹¹ Probably one of those individuals who was never completely accepted by either the Unangañ or the white communities, Reinken drifted between jobs and schemes. He periodically found himself in trouble with the law, spent time in jail, escaped, and was known for a time as the only person to have hiked across the Shaler Mountains to Kashega. He was undoubtedly one of the "hoodlums" who plagued Arletta Carter.



Kashega Village as seen from across the creek. Photograph courtesy Mary Diakanoff.

In July 1933 a visiting officer aboard the *Tahoe* went into the store and found it “meagerly stocked.” He was unable to discover whether or not “additional supplies were expected before winter.”¹² This hardly mattered, as a matter of fact, because the winter’s supplies were generally ordered in bulk from Unalaska or Seattle.

Kashega’s population declined from 49 in 1920 to 33 in 1930 when there were five non-Natives, including Jacobson, the teachers (Hendersons) and two men connected to the sheep ranch. Population figures for the mid-1930s are somewhat difficult to trace, but in 1936 the population stood at 43.¹³ However, the decline in the number of school-aged children led to the closure of the school in 1935, and this, in turn, became another reason for two families to move to Unalaska.

Charles and Alice Moller took their daughter Mary to Unalaska about 1935 when Mary was five. They settled in the town and bought a home. He fished salmon in Bristol Bay each summer. “He has been one of the few fishermen who has always come in and paid up his account on his arrival from Bristol Bay each fall,” A.H. Proctor wrote to company headquarters. The company was experiencing competition from George and Victoria Gardner who ran a herring saltery for Alaska Salmon Company. If Moller chose to work in the herring industry, he would be unable to fish in Bristol Bay. “So far as we know now Charlie Miller [Moller] is the only one we are carrying [with a credit account] and who plans to fish for Gardner,” wrote Proctor.



Alice Moller and her daughter Mary.
Photograph courtesy
Mary Diakanoff.

There doubtless will be others and we will keep a sharp look-out and try to learn who they are but we feel that from this on until fishing actually opens such information will be hard to get.... If some means could be devised to drive a wedge into the production end here some good might come. Should we stop the credit of Miller [sic] we might create a feeling favorable to the Gardners and to that extent aid their plans. On the other hand should their plans fall through after the first shipment of fish the earnings of the people here would be adversely affected and we would have to take some losses in our credit outstandings among those who happened to be working for the Gardners.”¹⁴

The herring business at Unalaska was short-lived. It began in 1928, declined by 1932, and was virtually over by 1936.

When they moved to Unalaska, people from the three villages gravitated toward each other. Mary Diakanoff recalled that she never felt part of the larger Unalaska community. The Unalaska people spoke English more than *Unangam tunuu*, whereas the villagers were almost entirely Native speakers. Mary's favorite babysitter was Yakim (Jack) Petikoff. He and his brother Matfey had moved to Unalaska from Makushin in 1940. Jack and Matfey were known respectively as Big Uncle and Little Uncle. Big Uncle would read Russian stories about Ivan Durak ("Ivan the Fool") to Mary while babysitting her.¹⁵ When Jack and Matfey had visited Unalaska, before moving there permanently, they stayed with their sister Annie who was married to German Stepetin. Alfred, her son, welcomed their arrival as an opportunity to hear Jack's stories. He recalled that the stories were not long, but the story-telling itself lasted late into the night.¹⁶

In June 1935, Alex Gordieff drowned when his skiff overturned in a large patch of kelp. His only relative was his ten-year old son, George.¹⁷ Alex's wife Lucy had died a few years earlier. George eventually moved back to Kashega where he lived with the elderly John Denisoff. John, who visited his daughter Alice at Unalaska fairly regularly, may have encouraged George to return to the village. In any case, George divided his time between the village and the sheep ranch. Charles and Alice Moller returned to Kashega every so often to put up red salmon for the winter. John Denisoff would accompany them if he happened to be visiting Unalaska. On one trip that Mary Diakanoff remembered, they took the mailboat and the voyage lasted eighteen hours. At Kashega, Mary played with Polly Kudrin, daughter of Mike and Dora. When they were tired of being outside, they sometimes visited Mary's great-uncle, Nikifor Denisoff because he had cocoa in his kitchen. "He was very old," Mary recalled, and very relaxed. He'd sit in his chair and visit with the girls; and then Polly, who knew where the cocoa was kept, would go into the kitchen and make them each a cup.¹⁸

One morning Nikifor's wife walked into the kitchen and found him stirring a pot on the stove. He said he was cooking mush for breakfast and nodded at the counter. She saw a bright orange box with the black silhouette of the Fairbank's Gold Dust Twins. Her husband was boiling a pot of the latest innovation: powdered soap.¹⁹

Alan G. May wrote a detailed description of his trip to Kashega in August 1938.²⁰ He was a member of Aleš Hrdlička's Aleutian expedition. The men intended to hike overland to Kuliuliak Bay where they hoped to discover the location of an old and very large village site. However, they met Art Harris at Kashega. He worked for the sheep ranch and had been to Kuliliak Bay. He told them there "was very little there and it was not worth walking over to find out...."

He did, however, take them to see "an old Aleut." This may have been Nikifor Denisoff, certainly the oldest resident of the village.

Thru an interpreter we found out that there was a large cave on Grass Island nearby.... We went to Grass Island after leaving the village to look for the cave reported by the old Aleut. This was easily found for it was a large one and formed by the action of the sea—consequently of no use to us.

Hrdlička described the cave as “a large storm cavern with nothing in it.” However, “high up in rocky cliffs to the left, about 30 feet from top,... [there was] a large black hole going deep in, promising, but unreachable without a long rope...”²¹

May counted 26 residents at Kashega. “The two houses I was in were quite clean,” he wrote, “but not scrubbed to the point of shining like so many of the Russian Aleut houses. There is a nice little church of course. All the women had donned their best clothes for the occasion and some of them had put rouge on their cheeks.”

Harris was an efficient manager. The next summer, the sheep ranch was reported to be employing many local people, although several men had gone to the Pribilof Islands to help with the seal harvest.²² The Kashega men arrived at St. Paul July 1, 1939. They included Keril Borenin, John Denisoff, Cornelius Kudrin, Mike E. Kudrin, Peter Kudrin, and Sergie Kudrin. These five, except for John Denisoff, returned the following year along with Mike J. Kudrin and Peter Yatchmenoff.

Eva Tcheripanoff’s memories of Kashega are filled with the good times that children often remember.²³ She played and got into mischief. She carried around a doll made from a light-weight rock. Her uncle, Sophie’s brother Vasili, eventually tired of watching his niece dress and undress a rock and so he carved a wooden doll for her. He attached arms with rubber bands so they moved and Eva’s mother glued yarn on for hair. Sophie also sewed clothes for the doll.

Sophie was skilled in traditional gut sewing and she made a small kamleika, the Unanga raincoat, for Eva, along with a pair of skin shoes. Eva, however, got the shoes wet and, although she had been warned not to put them by the stove, she placed them under it where they hardened like stone. The next day she hid them from her mother who eventually discovered what had happened. “Maybe she was mad at me,” Eva said, “but she didn’t say nothing to me.”

Eva wanted to be a hunter like her uncle and she would put on his Unanga boots. They came up to her knees; and when she went to the beach, she could feel the rocks through the soles even though the shoes were lined with grass. She recalled that her grandmother (Olga Borenin) lived with “Old Man John,” Mrs. Moller’s father. When Eva stayed with her grandmother, they would take trips away from the village to collect firewood. It had to be brought



Eva and her Uncle Vasili.
Photograph courtesy
Mary Diakanoff.



Olga Borenin and John Denisoff. Photograph courtesy Mary Diakanoff.

back either in a skiff or by hand. Eva recalled carrying it on her back. Wood was a precious commodity, and there were times, even when it was rainy and cold, that people went without heat. "It was hard to get wood, you know," Eva said. "It was awful."

Once Eva went down to the lake where kayaks (baidarkas) were stored upside down on the grass. She turned one over, pushed it into the water, and crawled inside. Before she knew it she was away from the shore. "And I was just hollering, hollering, you know," she said. "Finally somebody must have heard me. Must have been the Kudrin family heard me." Someone launched another kayak and brought her back to land.



Left to right: George Gordaoff, Tatiana Nevzoroff, and Eva Kudrin on horse. Photograph courtesy Roberta Gordaoff.

Verso of photograph reads: "George I. A. Gordaiff [Gordaoff] 12 yrs Bad Boy, Miss Tatitona E. D. Nezoroff [Tatiana Nevzoroff], Miss Eva S. A. Kudrin. Kashega, Alaska."

She remembered that when she misbehaved her grandmother would spank her using a hard thong of whale muscle. “As soon as I spotted it,” she laughed, “boy, I used to hide away!”²⁴ She added, “Even big people, grown up people, they used to spank. They’d paddle them!” During this interview, her mother added, “Those old-time people were mean.”

Eva had a pet cat that she carried around and treated like a puppy. “And he died!” she said. “And I buried him by the creek. Every morning I’d go down there and pray by it!” She laughed as she recalled those visits. “I’d pray by it. I think that helps me for my health,” she said and laughed again.

Eva’s uncle, Vasilii, had one of the better homes at Kashega. Eva remembered it as a large house with an upstairs. He had crafted a tin sink for the kitchen and hooked up running water that was also used to operate a flush toilet. Vasilii, however, fell ill and died before the evacuation. Like her mother, Eva worked for older residents of the village. She washed clothes for John Denisoff’s wife and helped around the house. Once she tried making bread, but she forgot to add the sourdough starter and it never rose. John’s wife used fresh seal oil and made fried-bread from the dough.

There were few children in the village. Eva’s closest friend was Tatiana Nevzoroff who was from Atka. She eventually married Peter Kudrin. George Borenin made a pair of walkie-talkies for the girls, stringing two cans together. One evening Eva was playing with them by herself.

“What are you doing?” George asked.

“I’m playing radio,” she answered.

“Poor thing,” George said to Sophie in *Unangam tunuu*, adding that he wished he could buy Eva a real radio, “but he’s got no place to buy a radio from.” Years later, after the war and the evacuation, when he was the last resident of Kashega, George would have his own large radio to communicate with the outside world. But in the late 1930s, that world was far away.



Four Kashega women (left to right): Sophie Kudrin, Olefa Borenin, Eva Kudrin (in front), Tatiana Kudrin. Alice Moller Collection, photograph courtesy AB Rankin.



Old and new cross at the site of the former chapel at Makushin, August 31, 2009. Photograph by Josy Shangin.