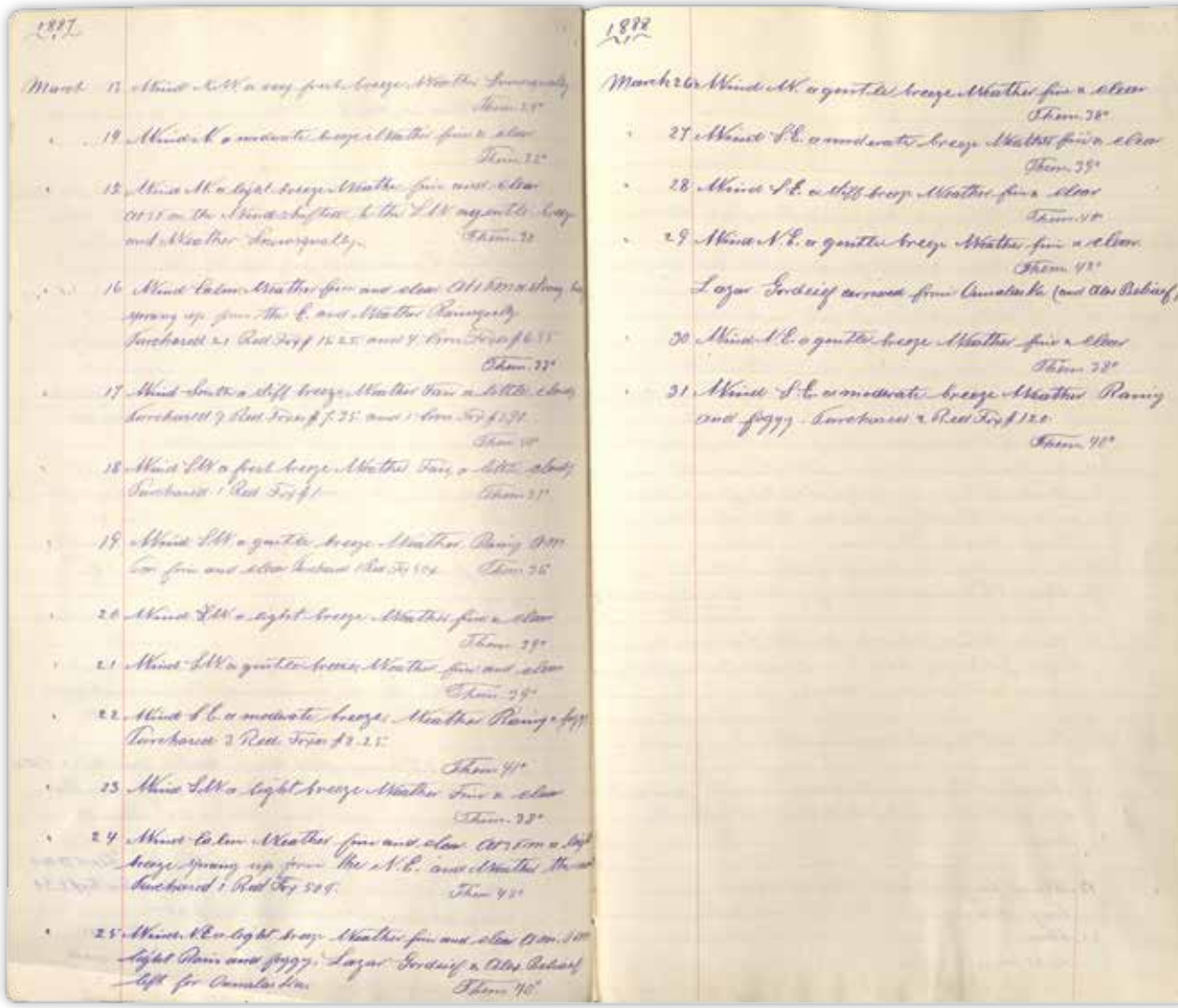
Chapter 6
The Lives of Sea Otter Hunters

The men of the "new" Makushin Village, like practically all able-bodied Unangaŝ men, were active sea otter hunters employed by the AC Company. The reports that document the beginning of the long and irreversible decline of sea otter hunting tell us little about individuals. Among the names that do surface occasionally is that of Lazar Gordieff. He appears six times in the 1885-1889 AC Company copybook and in a few other documents. These fragmented records provide little more than shadows, but they are far more than we have for most Unangaŝ of the late 19th century.

Lazar was twenty-two in 1878 and living with his widowed father, two brothers and a sister at Chernofski.[1] In a June 1885 letter from Rudolph Neumann, since 1880 the AC Company general agent at Unalaska, we learn that Lazar was given dried seal throats.[2] From this it can be deduced that he crafted delicate models of kayaks. The throats of fur seals, removed, cleaned, and dried during the seal harvests in the Pribilof Islands, were the preferred material for covering the intricate wooden frames. This letter went to the agent on Wosnesenski Island, in the heart of the eastern sea otter grounds, where Gordieff was part of the summer hunting party. He may have spent time between hunts carving and assembling models. A few of these trade items, all anonymous, survive in museums and testify to intimate knowledge of the kayak and to a high degree of craftsmanship.

The hunters were still away in August, but after they had returned to Unalaska in October and Neumann had gone over the records, which arrived on a subsequent ship, he discovered that Lazar owed the company $166 while another man owed $805. By then, both men had returned home to Chernofski.

"Why in h--- did you not collect from them," an incensed Neumann demanded of the Wosnesenski agent, "on the furs which you bought and

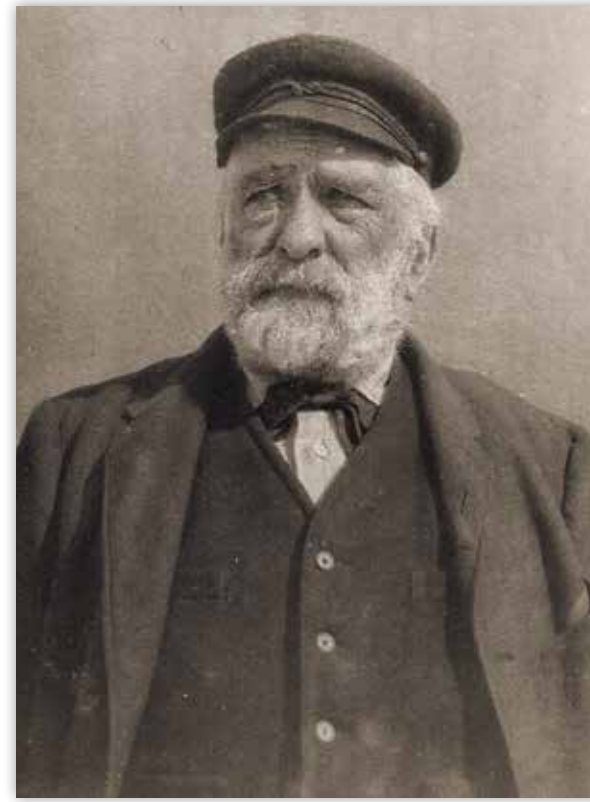


AC Company station's log book. Chernofski, March 1887, with entry for Lazar Gordieff. Courtesy J. Pennelope Goforth, editor. *Bringing Aleutian History Home: the Lost Ledgers of the Alaska Commercial Company 1875-1897*. Unpublished transcripts produced at Anchorage, Alaska. 2011-12. ©2011 J. Pennelope Goforth.

transfer their account to us…. In the future whenever a native leaves your station always send his account along by the same vessel."[3]

Two weeks later Lazar's debt had doubled and the general agent demanded an explanation from Adolph Reinken, his agent at Chernofski, "by return vessel."[4] Reinkin's reply does not exist, but by January 1886 he had installed Lazar as chief, to the disgust of the general agent who refused to accept the appointment even though Lazar's father, Michael Gordieff, had been chief up until October 15. "It would seem as if you did not know how to handle your men," he chided Reinken. "You should have reported here before installing Lazar Gordeoff and until the party comes over here on their way to Sanak you will leave Alec. Belioff [the interim chief] alone. If he does not then [sail] a new chief will be appointed here."[5]

In April 1887 the S.S. *Dora* collected men from Chernofski, Kashega, and Makushin for the summer sea otter hunting party. Not quite a decade old, the 120-foot *Dora* was one of the company's workhorses, although, at its launching a reporter had gushed "her lines are as graceful as those of a pleasure yacht."[6] Gordieff was probably one of the men who boarded the ship and who, with hunters from Biorka and Unalaska, were taken east to the sea otter grounds where they remained until September. That December, after he had returned home, his wife gave birth to a daughter.[7] The next we hear about him he and Alex Beliaef [Belioff] traveled to Unalaska on March 24 and returned five days later.[8] It is interesting that they traveled together, the interim chief and the would-be chief. Perhaps by this time they were first and second chiefs. It is likely that they were delivering winter fox pelts to the company headquarters. The summer hunting cycle was repeated in 1888 and Gordieff again hunted around Wosnesenski Island. That September, after the men had returned to Unalaska and before the *Dora* departed with them to their home villages, Neumann wrote to Reinken. He had the letter delivered by kayak so it would arrive before the steamer.



Adolph Reinken, AC Company agent at Chernofski. Gift from Henry Swanson to Ray Hudson.

"Lazar Gordieff died on Woznesenski," he informed his agent. "I forward a box with his belongings to his wife, his rifle I have retained here."[9] This is all there is, all there ever will be. His wife was from Attu, and in August 1889 Neumann wrote to Reinken, "Let Lazar Gordieff's wife stay where she is, if she wants to go to Attou we will see about it next spring."[10] Consumed by water or fever, whether he drowned or died in an epidemic that swept the area, Gordieff's short life was neither exceptional nor unusual.

The Company and Its Sea Otter Hunters

As the 1870s drew to a close, the boom that had accompanied the sale of Alaska diminished and residents in the three villages entered a period of economic decline. The Alaska Commercial Company achieved its virtual monopoly, buying or driving out smaller firms. "In a few years a change came," wrote George Bailey in his succinct 1879 summary,

> the traders of small capital went to the wall; the prices paid for furs went down to a living figure for those that remained; the hunter's profits became correspondingly less, and, in order to keep up his

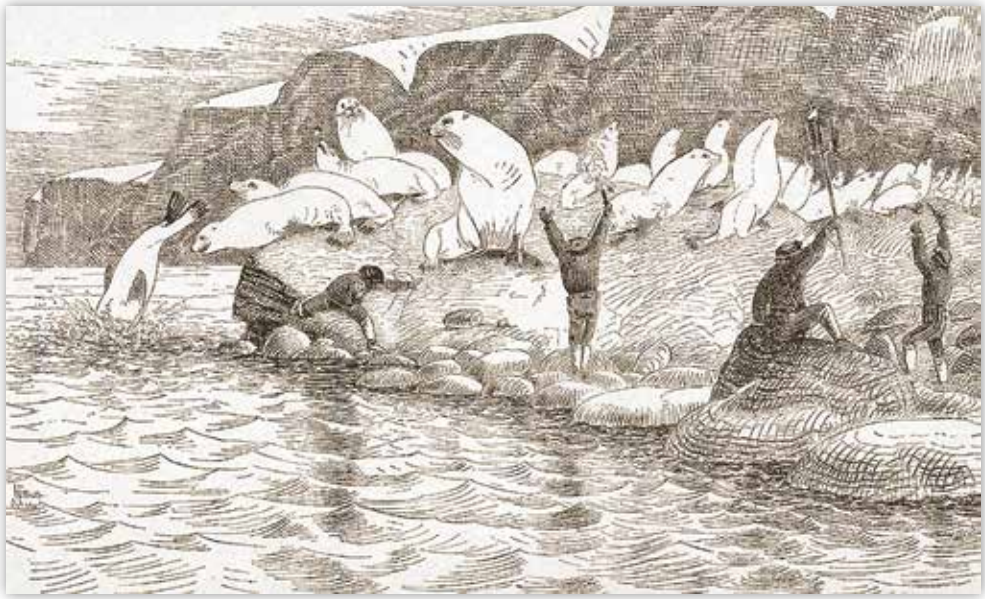
> income, he had to be more constantly employed. This constant hunting has reduced the number of animals in some localities, and today a large proportion of these people are very poor.[11]

The AC Company attempted to control sea otter hunting through a complicated system of recruitment and rewards. Loyal hunters were extended credit. For residents of the three villages, this meant credit at the small stores run by local agents whose account books were scrutinized by the general agent. The company was alert to any hunter who did not sell his furs to it, in which case the man's credit was cut off.[12] "Where did Dionese Kholinof get his sea otter which he gave to Tchernofski church?" Neumann asked Reinken in November 1886. "Did he bring it with him from Ounalaska?"[13] Men were outfitted for hunting expeditions at a cost to be repaid from a successful hunt. At the same time that the company introduced wood frame housing to the Pribilofs, it built cottages at Unalaska and Belkofski for their best hunters. This was not done in any of the three villages. Mark Harrington found that the company could control its hunters with little effort. "Indeed, the Aleuts are too submissive for their own interest," he wrote. "They allow themselves to be over-ridden and abused without complaint…. Yet they are bright and intelligent, and are always trustworthy."[14]

As the AC Company strove to stay abreast of any changes in manpower, it required village agents to record births and deaths.[15] "Enclosed you will find…list of natives belonging to your station," Neumann instructed Reinken, "which you will return to us in the Spring marking those natives who are dead and absent and where they are, also correct spelling of names in your ledger."[16] This list included men living at both Kashega and Chernofski.

Whether hunting on their own, with partners (*angtaasax̂* and *angaayux̂*), or as members of company-sponsored hunts, men were away from their villages for longer and longer periods. Their extended absences

Unangax̂ hunters travelled as far south as Calilfornia to procure sea mammal pelts for the Rusian-American Company. Below: *Settlement Ross* (California) by Ilya Gavrilovich Voznesenskii, 1841, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Russian Academy of Science, Petersburg. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Ross,_

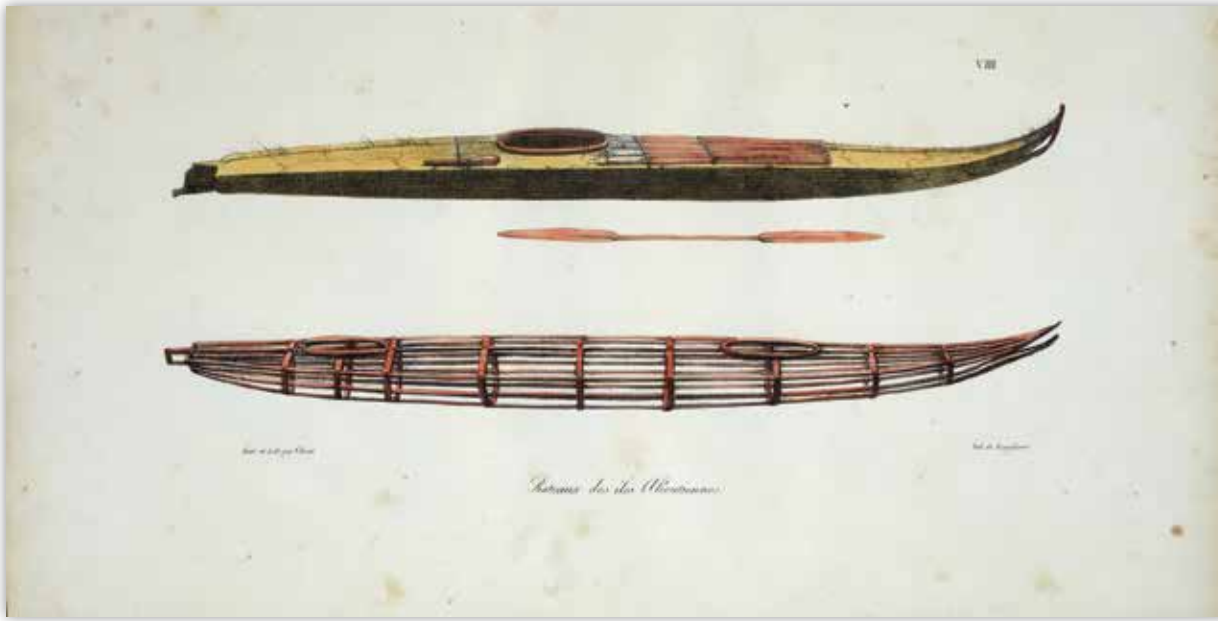


"Springing the Alarm. Natives capturing Sea-Lions, Saint Paul's Island." H. W. Elliott. NOAA.

impacted subsistence practices, most importantly in harvesting sea lions. This was nothing new. Under the Russian-American Company prolonged hunting expeditions had reduced the number of men able to procure food and subsistence materials locally, and the company had positioned itself as the distribution agent for necessities.[17] The AC Company learned from that example.

With exclusive rights to the Pribilof Islands, the company had crews there that harvested large numbers of sea lions, dried the meat, and prepared the throats, intestines, and hides. These hides, known as *lavtaki* (pl.) were shipped to Unalaska and disbursed by the company to villages where they were prepared as coverings for kayaks. The throats were used for the upper part of boots and the intestines were sewed into kamleikas or gut raingear. During the fur seal harvest, meat was salted, barreled, and sent to Unalaska for distribution by the company. The general agents were responsible for securing these raw materials. "I have none on hand," Neumann wrote about sea lion hides in July 1886 to the agent at St. Paul, "and it is unnecessary for me to state, how important they are to the business down here, please ship also the intestines and throats and seal meat."[18] The following summer he wrote to St. George, "We are very short of luftak[,] intestines etc. and you will greatly oblige us by sending the above at first opportunity."[19] Uninterrupted control over the harvesting and distribution of sea lion skins gave the AC Company unchallengeable power. Dall wrote that during his first stay at Unalaska, 1871-1872, the company "had a monopoly on the sealion skins which the natives used on their skin boats."[20]

From the fragmentary extant records, it is possible to get a sense of the quantity of hides secured on St. Paul by the company. In 1870, 527 were sent to Unalaska for use throughout the Aleutians. Along with the hides



"Bateaix des Iles Aleoutiennes," (Boats from the Aleutian Islands). Illustration of single-hatch skin boat and double-hatch frame executed by Ludovik (Louis) Choris between 1815-1818. From *Voyages pittoresque autour du monde*... UAF, B0083-83.

went 34 barrels of blubber and seal oil used to soften them.[21] "A quantity" was sent in 1872. On September 16, 1873, approximately 160 sea lions were killed on St. Paul. Again on November 26, 130 were killed. In 1875, 295 skins were delivered; in 1876, 79 were taken to Unalaska by Alfred Greenbaum; and in 1878 the Unalaska station purchased 150.[22] Occasionally the Unalaska agent supplied skins to Kodiak.[23] To supplement sea lion intestines, the company requisitioned bear gut from other parts of Alaska where it had stations, such as Kodiak and St. Michael.[24]

Of course, whenever possible, Unangax̂ men hunted locally. Unfortunately, sea lion populations rose and fell and there were times when the animals were scarce. In 1872 Dall noted that sea lions were no longer found at Unalaska and 14 years later Neumann remarked to the Kodiak agent that they again were scarce.[25] When new skins were not available, men had to make do with what they had. "All your men that have decent bidarkas or can make them so," Neumann wrote to the Nikolski agent, "should be ready on the arrival of the vessel to go on a hunting party for the summer."[26] Skin boat construction required specialized skills, specialized tools, and weeks of work, and the general agent tried to deliver hides to villages in the fall so the winter could be spent preparing them and getting kayaks ready by late spring for departure on the summer hunt.

Sinew for making thread was another vital commodity. Whale tendon was the preferred raw material and various grades were made for sewing skins to kayak frames and in the production of clothing. Sophie Pletnikoff of Kashega once showed me how two fine strands, torn from a hard piece of tendon, one held in each hand, were twisted together into a single cord. In 1888 the agent at Makushin was told to send to Iliuliuk all the

sinew he could spare, "just keeping enough for your own Bydarkas."[27] After the Makushin people found a whale in the fall of 1889, they were ordered to sell sinew to Nikolski for a dollar a pound. "Should you not be able to get the sinew," the general agent wrote, "let Adolph Reinken know so that he may supply them."[28] In February 1889 the Akutan Station sent twelve pounds of whale sinew to Unalaska.

In addition to sea lion hides—and occasionally kayaks themselves—the company supplied vital waterproof kamleikas to their hunters. In 1886 Neumann sent four kamleikas by kayak to Biorka for hunters preparing to leave on the spring hunt.[29] If men were successful taking local sea lions, women were expected to convert the intestines into kamleikas, either for use by local hunters or to be sold to the company.[30] There was a qualitative difference between boats and raingear contracted and distributed by the company and those that were made within the context of a village or extended family. Kamleikas produced for export were sometimes so poorly made that they had to be resewed.[31] But if a woman sewed a garment for her husband or son, she would have taken great care in its manufacture.

As the 19th century ended, although Unangaŝ retained extensive knowledge about skin boat construction and gut sewing, the cyclical patterns of life were falling into disarray. Sea lions and skin boats had formed a circle of subsistence: sea lions were used to cover skin boats and these kayaks were used to hunt sea lions and other game. When men no longer took sea lions for their own use, the intimate relationship between a man and his kayak diminished. It was inevitable that a hunter would feel less attachment to a purchased or loaned *iqyaŝ* than to one he had crafted himself, one on which his wife or sisters had sewed the sea lion hides after piercing them with bird-bone awls, one in which he had secreted his amulets. The "mass production" of skin boats may also have contributed to the gradual coarsening of the vessel. Certainly durability became a primary concern of the commercial company who relied on a fully equipped hunting force. The kayak had once been an integral part of the family, even taken inside the barabara. Now its production and use was an instrument of commerce controlled by the AC Company. The people of Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega had taken another step away from their ancestral way of life.

Pribilof Island Connections

The dried fur seal throats given to Lazar Gordieff undoubtedly originated in the Pribilof Islands. They were a very minor export when compared with sea lion skins, salted fur seal meat, and, of course, the lucrative fur seal pelts themselves. Despite stringent control by the U.S. government and domination by the AC Company, the residents of the Pribilof Islands comprised, as one visitor remarked, a western aristocracy.[32] The fur seal harvest guaranteed an annual income far greater than any achieved by residents of the Aleutian chain. A

"Seal Drove Crossing," Saint Paul Island October 20, 1872. H. W. Elliott, UA482-2.

comparison of income between the two Pribilof communities and Akutan shows the difference.[33] For 1886 and 1887 the average Pribilof income was about seven times that earned by an Akutan man, $487 compared to $74.[34]

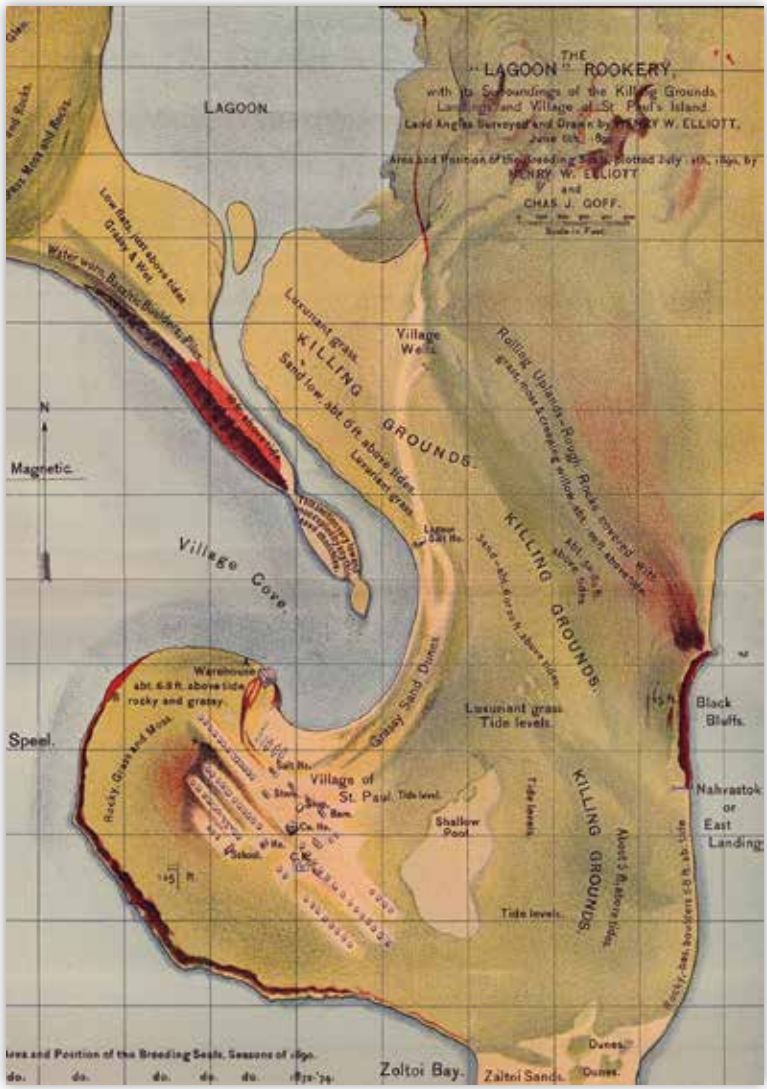
By 1879 a few men from the Aleutians were allowed onto the Pribilofs to do work that fell outside the seal harvest. They earned $1 a day or 10 cents an hour for various jobs including loading and unloading vessels and bundling furs after they had been salted. Pribilof men who could earn between $25 and $35 a day sealing had little incentive to work for $1 a day. In the spring of 1882 a large number of deaths at St. Paul compelled the agent to use laborers from Unalaska.[35] While most of these men came from Iliuliuk, men from the three villages also found seasonal employment. In 1887 about forty men were brought to St. Paul Island to assist with the sealing. According to the special treasury agent, "The average pay of the St. Paul native sealer this year is a little over $500, whilst the Unalaskans receive on an average $80 each."[36] By 1888 between thirty-five and forty-five Unalaska men were seasonally employed. "They are taken from the poorer class at Oonalaska," said Thomas F. Morgan, "men not successful in hunting. They are usually composed of old men, too old to hunt the sea otter."[37] Boys found employment there also, although they were paid as little as $15 a month.

Without a doubt, St. Paul and St. George were incomparably wealthier than villages in the chain and this condition continued for decades. In 1873 St. Paul embarked on construction of a new church, completed in 1877 at a cost to the community of $14,000. The nine bells alone cost about $3,000 plus another thousand for freight from Philadelphia.[38] The AC Company was an active participant in the building's design and construction. In contrast, a decade later when the Kashega people wanted a new chapel they recycled an abandoned building. "In regard to the Kashega people," Neumann wrote to Reinken at Chernofski (in the same letter in which he notified him of Lazar Gordieff's death), "you can let them have the building they wanted to buy at their place for a church." A letter in July 1889 shows that by "have" he meant "purchase." After the village submitted a request for items in February 1889, Neumann wrote that he would attend to it but he pointed out that the church now owed the company $106.40. That summer he asked Reinken to itemize the church account that had grown to $631.80.[39]

As of August 1, 1887, the people of St. Paul and St. George had over $94,000 in U. S. bonds in San Francisco. In 1895 the company's books held $52,757.96 in savings for the people of St. Paul and $3,133.51 for those of St. George.[40] (This included $1,876.56 in a special account called the "Natives' fund for translation of Bible.") As an admittedly biased commentator remarked that same year about the Pribilof Island men, "It is safe to say that no laboring men within the boundaries of the United States are better paid or better cared for."[41]

Everything done on the Pribilofs, however, was accompanied by controversy. In 1874-75 the company conducted a massive replacement of barabaras with wood-frame dwellings and this was seen, depending on your point of view, either as company beneficence or a ploy to gain ownership of land.[42] In either case, the local people found the new dwellings cold and difficult to heat.[43] Subject to the whims of government

Detail from "The Sea-Lion Hunt on Pribylov Islands." Images from left to right: "... bidarrah covered with sea-lion skins; sealers' houses." H. W. Elliott. NOAA.



St. Paul Isand showing village and "Killing Grounds." H. W. Elliott. NOAA.

and company agents, men who were both benign and venal, the residents endured what amounted to decades of congressionally sanctioned forced labor. As the titles of two books on the Pribilof Islands suggest, the people were "slaves of the harvest" who endured "a century of servitude." The islands were an unusual prison, however, for it was one where people fought to remain and that others struggled to enter.

Although harvesting fur seals was the exclusive right of the AC Company in the Pribilof Islands, during the 1880s fur seals appeared in lists of furs sold by hunters from Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega. These were primarily pups taken for food as they migrated south through Aleutian passes from the end of October to the end of November. Petroff wrote that men at Makushin had "an opportunity better than that enjoyed by any other settlement in their country to capture the young fur-seals in their passage through the straits of Oomnak in the fall, securing between 1,000 and 1,300 of these animals every year."[44] He stated that Biorka hunters took as many as 1,400 seals in one season in Unalga Pass. "The northerly winds bring them in the direction of this harbor, and the natives go out in their bidarkas and spear and shoot them for food," testified two Unalaska Aleuts in 1892. "Sometimes we find old male seals with them, but we dare not attack them in the bidarka."[45] Ruff Burdukofski, for many years the chief salaried by the AC Company at Unalaska, noted that the best time to get pups was "immediately after northerly gales, and before the water has grown so quiet that the young pups can again continue their journey."[46] He stated that Unalaska village caught from 150 to 200 pups a year, depending on the weather. Meat from fur seal pups was comparable to chicken.[47] Arthur Newman recalled its use while he was the company agent at Chernofski and Nikolski.

> The native hunters living at the settlements of Chernofsky and Umnak [Nikolski] used to hunt the fur-seals in the fall of each year for food, laying the flesh away for winter use. While at Chernofsky, I collected annually from the natives about 750 skins of fur-seals killed in the water adjacent, and at Umnak, I collected on an average about 150 skins. These were mostly the skins of gray pups taken during the month of October, they being most highly prized by the natives as an article of food.[48]

Native barabara and boy, St. Paul Island, Alaska. (*Alaska Investigations-1914*). Department of the Interior. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Alaska Regional Office, National Archives and Records Administration.

These pelts fell outside the number the AC Company was authorized to take in the Pribilofs, and they could be shipped only with permission from the deputy Collector of Customs. In 1885 the company shipped 1,392 skins and 2,821 in 1886. In 1887 they received permission to ship 4,686.[49] As the numbers of sea otters declined and villagers returned to subsistence practices, fur seals became an increasingly important source of food. In 1887, however, word was received that "there seems to be a law prohibiting such killing" and Neumann asked his agents to collect "as few as possible" fur seal skins.[50] "I know they have to kill some to live," he wrote to Reinken, "but I want you to buy as few skins as possible, and have therefore shipped you also less salt."[51] In 1889, perhaps to make up for a decrease in locally taken seals, the Unalaska agent asked his counterpart on St. Paul to "kindly send…abut 250 or 300 Seal carcasses for the natives of these Islands."[52]

When Richard Emmons, deputy U.S. collector of customs at Unalaska, sought permission in June 1890 for Unangaŝ to kill fur seal pups for food and clothing, the Secretary of the Treasury had no choice, under the regulations, but to deny his request.[53]

The Sea Otter Hunt

Like other men from Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega, Lazar Gordieff's life was inexorably bound to the success of seasonal sea otter hunts among the Shumagin Islands and other enclaves off the Alaska Peninsula. Expeditions were organized by the AC Company so as to never leave the otter banks without hunters. A summer party generally left in April and returned in September. A winter party, frequently transported on the vessel that picked up the summer hunters, remained until the spring. Gordieff appears to have usually joined the summer party.

Hunters from Makushin, Kashega, and Chernofski first traveled to Unalaska aboard a company vessel where they joined a larger contingent that included men from Biorka and Unalaska itself. Kashega men

frequently traveled by kayak to Chernofski where they met the company ship. Their kayaks were, of course, taken on board as these were used during the hunt. Biorka hunters arrived at Unalaska on their own after the local agent had been notified that a vessel was preparing to take the hunting party east. Notification was occasionally given by a signal fire lit on the Unalaska Island side of Beaver Inlet.[54] On June 7, 1878, eleven kayaks arrived at Unalaska from Biorka with eighteen men to join the hunting party destined for Sanak. In 1887 William Petersen, captain of the *Mathew Turner*, was told to take twenty-one kayaks from Unalaska and seven from Biorka "all laying in this port now" and proceed to Sanak.[55] The schooner transporting men to Sanak sometimes stopped at Biorka, saving the men the trip to Unalaska. This was done on May 12, 1879, when the Schooner *Bella* arrived to "take on board . . . 19 Baidarkas 32 men." On that occasion, however, there was room for only ten kayaks. Nine had to travel to Unalaska on their own and wait for the *Bella* to make a second trip.[56]

Hunters from the three villages did not always travel or hunt together. In April 1888 Biorka hunters sailed on the Schooner *Pearl* in April while men from Kashega and Makushin came a little later on the *Dora*.[57] In May 1889 hunters from Makushin, Kashega, and Chernofski went on the *Dora* to hunt at Seal Cape, while men from Unalaska and Nikolski hunted at Sanak.[58] While each village had its own chief, these men were not necessarily in charge on the otter grounds. As he aged, Chief Ruff Bourdokovsky accompanied hunters less often. The operation of the hunt appears to have been a cooperative venture between the AC Company agent on location or the captain of the vessel from which men hunted and a chief recognized by the company who could communicate with the hunters. Thus in 1888 Neumann admonished William Peterson, captain of the *Turner*, whose men had left him "in disgust," to consult with Vasilii Shaiashnikov, chief of Unalaska, in order to "do something to retrieve yourself."[59] Shaiashnikov's position at the time was salaried by the AC Company. In a journal that I ascribe to him, covering the years 1886-1888, there is an entry that suggests his "assistants"—that is, sub-chiefs—from Makushin, Chernofski, Kashega, and Biorka, were also paid for their services.[60] Unfortunately, the journal provides no names.

Wives and daughters occasionally accompanied their husbands and fathers to the sea otter grounds. This was how Hugh McGlashan of Akutan met his future wife, Feckla Prokopeuff of Attu, who was assisting her father at the hunting camp on Sanak.[61] It is possible, of course, that this was how Lazar Gordieff met his wife, also from Attu. In 1888, however, Neumann wrote to Reinken, "If any winter-party comes for Sanak do not send their wives." He went into more detail in a letter to Henry Dirks at Atka, "Keep the women belonging to the men that go on the winter-party at home, from all I hear it is preferable to let a man remain at home rather than carry him with his wife to Sanak, where she only proves a hindrance to hunting."[62]

Once on the otter grounds, hunters used a variety of techniques. Hunting from kayaks most frequently employed a strategy called the

"Aleuts sea-otter hunting south of Saanak Island; the bidarkies waiting for the otter to rise again." H. W. Elliott, NOAA.

surround. Once sighted, an otter was encircled by a ring of hunters who kept up a barrage of spears, driving the otter to stay under water until, forced to the surface for a long gulp of air, it was struck.

On April 21, 1879, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury restricted the killing of fur-bearing animals to Alaska Natives. Firearms were forbidden from May through September. No vessels, except those transporting otter hunters, could anchor in the "well-known otter killing grounds." Then he added a final sentence that had wide repercussions: "White men lawfully married to natives, and residing within the territory, are considered natives within the meaning of this Order."[63] This sentence according to Captain Michael A. Healy, following a cruise in 1884 on the U. S. Revenue Steamer *Corwin,* was "but offering a premium for bigamy and desertion."

> Unprincipled white hunters, tempted by the great value of otter skins, come here and marry the simple girls, force them to accompany them on their hunting trips and do their cooking and work for them, bring two or three children into the world, and then leave their families to get their living as best they can, while they themselves return to enjoy their earnings with other wives in civilization.[64]

In 1881 John Muir noted that fifteen white men at Unga had married Native women in order to hunt sea otter.[65] These men brought breech loading rifles under a permit which allowed their importation for self-defense against hostile Indians. Of course, there were no hostile Indians in the region. Occasionally in southeastern Alaska outbreaks of violence between whites and Natives occurred, and in the western parts of the

Captain Healy on the quarterdeck of the Revenue Cutter *Bear*, circa 1895. Healy is the first man of African-American descent to captain a vessel of the United States Navy. United States Coast Guard, U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

continental United States the Indian campaigns were still being pursued, a fact noted in an article from a newspaper glued for insulation to an interior wall of an Unangax̂ home at Unalaska and discovered about a century later when the house was razed.[66]

"No where in the Aleutian Islands," wrote Healy in 1881, "is a breech loader necessary as an arm of defense. The natives are mild and peaceful in disposition, and if a permit be granted under any such plea, it should be to the native, not the white man."[67] As everyone realized, rifles were not imported for defense but for hunting. They were brought in on permits and then given or sold to residents. Healy wrote, "Those to whom permits for breech loaders have been granted are given a big advantage in hunting over the natives—moreover from four to six of these guns are at times collected together by one person, and given out to natives to hunt with." On March 30, 1882, rifles and ammunition were prohibited except for persons about to leave the territory and then only to certified residents of the mainland United States. Like any prohibition, this law jacked up the prices throughout the territory. Rifles continued to be used by both whites and Natives, as was seen when Lazar Gordieff died and Neumann claimed his rifle.

On April 19, 1886, the Reverend Nicholas Rysev drafted a petition on behalf of the Natives of Unalaska and surrounding areas. It was signed by 140 sea otter hunters. A comparison of the names with census lists

from 1878 and 1897 shows that they came from five villages in addition to Biorka, Kashega, and Makushin: Akun, Akutan, Unalaska, Chernofski, and Nikolski. The date of the petition suggests it was drafted at a time when men gathered at Unalaska, returning from the 1885-1886 winter hunt and preparing to leave for the summer 1886 hunt. Addressed to President Cleveland, it was forwarded by A. C. Barry, Deputy Collector of Customs at Unalaska, who wrote "that the petitioners are not Indians but Christians and are peaceable and good citizens, and that in my opinion their prayer deserves a favorable consideration."

Of the 140 hunters who signed the petition, 99 appear in the 1886-1887 winter hunting party ledger.[68] They included sixteen from Biorka, seven from Makushin, and fifteen from a combined Chernofski and Kashega. Among them were Lazar Gordieff of Chernofski, Arsim Galaktionoff of Makushin, and Terentii Makarin of Biorka.

This petition reviewed contemporary practices that may or may not have been in compliance with the statutes. As the petitioners understood the law, "the importation of fire-arms and ammunition is…granted to white hunters who marry native women also to immigrants, actual settlers, and residents," but denied to Unangax̂. The competition from these white hunters forced them to abandon the spear and to begin using "muzzle-loading fire-arms." The foreign hunters erected dwellings on the islands within "the hauling grounds and resting places" of the otter, gradually driving them away. Unangax̂ emphasized the importance of the otter to their lives: "We gain our daily bread by the chase. Our principal occupation is sea-otter hunting." Otters were being driven to even more "unapproachable places" making the hunt increasingly difficult and dangerous.

> We beg respectfully that the permission granted to other hunters to import breech-loading rifles, but with-held from us, be also extended to us, and thus enable us to gain our subsistence by our own exertion.
>
> Also that nobody should be permitted to build and inhabit any dwellings on the hauling and resting places of the sea otter, and section 1956 Revised Statues prohibiting the killing of fur-bearing animals without the consent of the Secretary of the Treasury be strictly enforced, as well as the penalties against violating this law, by vessels.[69]

In his reply addressed to Governor Swineford of Alaska, the Secretary of the Treasury wrote that "no good reason is perceived for granting the petition until all reasonable means for the suppression of illegal hunting shall have been exhausted."[70] Although Swineford was no friend of the AC Company, he also opposed the petition. He went to lengths to explain his reasons, even suggesting that white men married to Native women could hunt only with spears.

…it is wholly illegal for white men not married to native women to kill the sea-otter in *any manner*, and that white men who are married to native women have the same rights as the natives, no more, no less.... As I understand it, were it in my power to grant the permission asked for, I would only be making a bad matter worse by hastening the complete extinction of the sea-otter, should I comply with the request of the petitioners.… The spear is the only mode of killing the sea-otter recognized by law....[71]

Alfred Peter Swineford, Governor of the District of Alaska, 1885-1889. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alfred_P._Swineford.jpg

But words had little effect. Rudolph Neumann is said to have dismissed and ridiculed Swineford's letter. The Unalaska deputy U.S. commissioner promptly gave or sold a rifle to Ivan Dyakanoff while Neumann traded a Winchester rifle to Ivan Locomekoff for the first two sea otters he would kill with it.

Another petition was sent to the President of the United States the following year from hunters at Sanak, Unga, Belkovski, Unalaska, Akutan, Atka, and Attu. This requested a government vessel be stationed near the sea otter grounds to warn off pelagic hunting crews from American and British schooners. "It is stated that twenty schooners are now within a short distance of the Sanach and Choumagan hunting grounds," reported the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "and the natives in their canoes have no chance to catch any otters. Being deprived of their legitimate pursuit, they are unable to obtain provisions in exchange for their furs."[72] By this time schooners were specifically outfitted with steam launches that were able to scour "every nook and cranny on the coast and otter-hunting grounds"[73] Chase Littlejohn had used a steam launch as early as 1886, and that year the AC Company offered to make them available for between two and three thousand dollars.[74] On the other hand, the use of nets proved ineffectual.[75] In 1887 three vessels (the *Otter*, *Alexander*, and *Rose Sparks*) took 1800 seals and 228 sea otters. The 1890 census decried the use of "well-fitted schooners… provided with steam launches and all the latest inventions for the destruction of marine animal life. The puffing and churning of the miniature steam craft can now be heard on the waters of all the most valuable hunting grounds, sounding the death knell of the highly prized mammals…."[76] In addition to schooners, whalers carried men who were crack shots, and these ships did a supplementary business taking otters and fur seals. The establishment of cod fishing stations around Sanak further disrupted the otter grounds.

As they had for almost two decades, hunters from Biorka, Makushin and Kashega continued to be transported to the islands off the Alaska Peninsula with their companions from other villages. The winter 1886-

1887 hunt included eighteen men from Biorka, ten from Makushin, and seventeen from Chernofski and Kashega. Among them was Nikifor Aleksiev Denisoff of Kashega. He was twenty-three and he alone of all the active sea otter hunters of the 19th century would live long enough to become part of the World War II evacuation.

In 1888 there were 135 two-man baidarkas sent to the otter grounds including five from Makushin, six from Kashega, and fourteen from Chernofski. Biorka, for some unknown reason, does not appear on this list.[77] Approximately 2,496 otter were taken that year across the region.

Back Home

When men returned home from the otter grounds, the first thing the local agent did (or should have done had he followed standing instructions) was to review each man's catch against his indebtedness to the company. When the Makushin, Kashega and Chernofski men returned in August 1889, Reinken was given detailed instructions.

> Enclosed you receive the transfers of the hunters that have returned from Seal Cape, you will have to be careful about increasing their debts as a rule do not let them draw more than their cash amounts to, if possible see that their accounts are reduced, and only in extreme cases, where there is actual poverty or want let them overdraw.[78]

This was the letter that told Lazar Gordieff's wife to stay where she was. Neumann also reduced the cost of wood that now sold at two pieces for 25 cents. The local agent was in periodic communication with Neumann or his substitute at Unalaska regarding individual debts and requests. "I enclose bill for pants delivered to Ivan Burenin 1st, and also watch for Ilia Kudrin sent per Makoushin natives in October," wrote Arthur Best to Reinken. "Afanasia Denisof wished for a pair of cheap pants," he continued, "I have not given them to him not knowing what he has drawn, should his account warrant it you can let him have them. Feodor Kolishulin goes to Kashega to live, he has no account."[79]

The fall and winter months were spent hunting the occasional stray sea otter or migrating fur seals, and trapping red, cross, and other fox. Occasionally the general agent at Unalaska sent someone to collect furs, as on December 4, 1878: "Sent to Makooshine 2 3-hold Bardakas with 5 men—for fur Seals—with some provision and 300 pounds Salt." This party returned on December 9 with the fur seal skins.

All three villages supported both their local chapels and the Church of the Holy Ascension at Unalaska. A May 23, 1878, entry in the AC Company log noted that 3½ sea otters had been received from Biorka for the Unalaska church and half an otter for the Biorka chapel. The three and a half pelts were valued at $69 while the half sea otter brought $15. In October a small sea otter valued at $8 was donated to the Biorka church

account. A $6 sea otter went to the Kashega church account on August 3 while a $10 pelt was credited to the Chernofski church on the same day. Iliuliuk was the recipient of the largest donations, receiving $55 in pelt credit in July and $54 in November.[80] In 1887 Nikolai Kichikov and Terrentii Makarin each donated a sea otter to the fund for construction of a new church at Unalaska.[81] Residents of the three villages came to Unalaska for special church services when the priest was unable to visit them. This was particularly true for marriages. The 1886-1888 Shaiashnikov ledger records a marriage at Unalaska on September 25, 1888 between Artemin Yatchmenev and Feodosia Khramov who traveled from Kashega for the ceremony. A marriage was recorded on September 26, 1888, between the widower Terentii Makarin of Biorka and the widow Marfa Lukanin from Makushin.

Village agents lived in their villages, unlike the general agent who lived in company housing at Unalaska but often owned a home in San Francisco or elsewhere. The village agents often had marital or familial ties to the local population. Any hardships they created stemmed more from neglect than from overt acts against residents. However, the commercial ruthlessness that characterized the AC Company in its dealings with competitors not infrequently devolved onto its general agents. Dall was told that "Hennig the A.C. Co.'s agent went out by night and poured acid in the skin boats belonging to natives suspected of free trading and then refused to sell them any new skins, so they could not go out after otter."[82] Whether this accusation was true or not, it suggests an absence of accountability on the part of general agents. Greenbaum, the general agent before Neumann, was noted for his temper and men who stepped in as acting general agents followed his example. When the chief of Makushin arrived at Iliuliuk on March 15, 1879, with seven red and one cross fox pelts, he found that the Western Fur and Trading Company offered him more than the AC Company. As a result, he "had his arm (ulnar bone) broken, and otherwise inhumanly beaten, on the 17th of March 1879," wrote Lucien M. Turner. Only one of the skins belonged to the chief, he explained, "the other skins he sold belonged to other natives who commissioned him to sell them for them…. The beating was done by the man left in charge as agent while Greenbaum went to San Francisco."[83]

Illness was a constant worry and epidemics were frequent. In the spring of 1881 Biorka was struck by an outbreak of "typhoid pneumonia" that attacked "all classes, but is more fatal with the aged. They are taken with fever, and pains in the chest and lungs, and die in from two to three days in great agony."[84] When Captain Hooper visited in May four had died and 18 remained in serious condition. The appearance of such a devastating illness was particularly severe in a village like Biorka, small, isolated, without a physician. (At Unalaska 13 had died and 35 were still sick. The AC Company physician was ill and unable to assist, but Surgeon Rosse of the Revenue Cutter Service had stepped in.[85])

Six years later, in 1887, another epidemic struck villages in the Alaska Peninsula area. On July 12, Neumann wrote to his agent, William Brown, at Morshovoi, "I hear a great many natives have died at your place, please send the names and what they owed."

On the same day he wrote to O.W. Carlson at Belkofski that he was sorry to have heard about the deaths, including that of Revd. Salamatoff. "Send list of names and transfer their debts except Salamatoff," Neumann instructed Carlson. He asked the Wosnesenski agent (Otto Berlin) to inform him of any deaths.[86] In a letter to Dirks at Atka, however, Neumann suggested that the deaths created the possibility that hunters from the Chain itself might have a more successful season.[87]

Whether it was the same illness or a different one, the Unalaska parish was devastated by the deaths of 73 individuals during the first five months of 1888. On October 13 Nikolas Rysev wrote to his superiors that during a visit to all the villages under his jurisdiction between late April and late September either by kayak or on a ship of the AC Company, he learned that 43 males and 28 females had died. From his description of "coughing with piercing pain and other illnesses" the illness may have been pertussis or whooping cough leading to pneumonia and other serious conditions.[88]

Drowning inevitably stalked men who made their livelihood on the sea. Returning home from Unalaska in September 1877, two Kashega men drowned when a storm capsized their two-hatch kayak. They escaped from the kayak, but were unable to hang on to the one-man kayak that had accompanied them.[89] The 1886-1888 ledger noted that five men "perished" on Sanak in 1888. Two men from Biorka (Kornilii Izmailov and Petr Sapozhnikov) are recorded to have drowned, in either 1887 or 1888. They may have been among four men from this village who perished in a storm while returning from Sanak in their baidarkas. Alexei Yatchemenev's account of this does not provide names, but it states that two baidarkas, four men, from Biorka were lost.[90]

Violent death was rare. At the time of the Alaska purchase, murder had reportedly been absent for over fifty years.[91] Two murders in the last quarter of the 19th century reflect a change in society. In March 1889 the brutal killing of Philip Dvernikov was investigated during an inquest held by the AC Company doctor and the jury found a verdict against unnamed whalers. Dvernikov was a retired sea otter hunter who had signed the 1886 petition and whom Neumann described as "a poor old inoffensive native."[92] A second example directly involved a resident of Makushin and is illustrative of how Unalaska (Iliuliuk) dominated life in the eastern Aleutians.

Ioann Ladigan was a volatile individual, who may have moved to Unalaska from Atka. After his wife died in mysterious circumstances, he was "exiled" to Makushin where he arrived with his teenage son and daughter. In March 1878 he and his son accompanied Alexander Sherebernikov, an older man from Unalaska, on a trek across the portage from Makushin Bay to Captains Bay. Sherebernikov's strangled body

was found along the trail. Suspicion fell on Ladigan, and in the absence of any law enforcement personnel, a public meeting was held, presided over by the AC Company agent, Alfred Greenbaum. At the end of the meeting, Greebaum wrote, "nothing definite could be ascertained."[93] Ten days later, on April 12, the agent received a petition asking for Ladigan's banishment "to some island which you may select, we only ask that he may be taken to the North." The petition had a cautionary tone. "We do not wish him to be punished in any way," it concluded, "but only ask that he shall leave Ounalashka and stay away." Ladigan consented and signed the document.[94] He and his children may have been sent to Sanak. An Anton Ladigan was listed among hunters registered at Sanak for the 1886-1887 winter hunting party.[95] In 1888 Rudolph Neumann wrote to Captain Wm. Peterson, of the Schr. *Turner*, not to allow Anton Ladigan on board (July 20, 1888). In 1897 he was listed as a resident of Belkofski.[96]

Whatever the cause of death, when a man died the AC Company transferred his debt to his children. Implementation of this policy was not uniform. When a Denisoff died in 1885, his debt of $212.25 was divided equally between his two sons, Constantine and Nekifor—with an extra 25 cents going to the company. When Bonifati Yatchmenoff died, Reinken was told to keep his debt in his own name and to not transfer it to his sons. Jacob Chercasin died owing the company for a shotgun, and the company wanted to know to whom it had been given in order to charge it to that individual's account. When Nikolai Kozlof died at Biorka, the local agent was instructed to "take both gun & bydarka as the former has not been yet paid for."[97] And, as noted earlier, when Lazar Gordieff died at Sanak, his rifle was kept by the general agent.

We do not have the name of the Makushin chief who was beaten in 1879. Gregory Petukoff's descendents continued living at Makushin, including his son Gregory, his grandson and numerous granddaughters. Joseph Petelin still lived in the village with his wife, son and daughters. Beginning around 1880, Thomas Petelin became the Makushin agent. The widespread Krukoff family had a presence here as did the Kostromitin family. Peter Kostromitin had the distinction of being the eldest resident of all three villages. He had been born in 1798, a year before the Russian-American Company received its first charter. When Ivan Petroff visited the village he interviewed Kostromitin but found it "next to impossible to arouse his slumbering faculties of recollection."[98] Nevertheless, when Petroff set about writing the various reports related to the 1880 census, he used the elder's accounts to document the growth of Bogoslof Island. The elderly Unangax̂ was jettisoned from the final report even though Petroff had produced a set of recollections of astonishing detail.[99] All fake, of course. The 1886-1889 Shaiashnikov ledger records the death of a Petr Kostromitin in 1888. Another man with the same name is listed as dying in 1881 in the Russian Church Records.

In 1878 Abraham Yatchmenev, who had resided at Kashega and been instrumental in the establishment of the local chapel, was now

Front, seated: Ivan Olgin. Back row, left to right: Serapion Petelin, unidentified man, and Aleksandr Shaiashnikov. ASL-P243-1-114, Michael Z. Vinokouroff Photograph Collection.

seventy-two years old and living at Iliuliuk with his wife and twenty-four year-old daughter (perhaps Christina). His son Miron was also there with his wife, two daughters and three sons, including the future chief Alexei. Abraham's daughter Matrona married into a Kashega family, that of John S. Borenin, and her descendents would play a significant role in the last years of Kashega. In 1878 Bonifati Yatchemenev, about thirty years younger, was also living at Kashega with his large family, including his three-year old son Ioanne who would eventually serve as village chief. Iakov Kudrin, another former RA Company employee, remained in Kashega with his wife Marianne, his nineteen year-old daughter Elena, and his son, Nicholas, twenty-three. There were two other adult Kudrin men with families in the village. Ioanne Kudrin's descendents would include Cornelius Kudrin, one of the last two residents of Kashega, and Michael Kudrin, the father of a large family with ties to an important family at Makushin and Unalaska, that of Nicholai and Pauline Lekanoff. The wife of one of Ioanne's grandsons, Efemia Krukoff, would be the oldest World War II evacuee from Kashega. Kashega was the only village without a permanent AC Company agent because of its proximity to Chernofski where the German immigrant Adolph Reinken was stationed for many years. Following the death in 1878 of his first wife, Reinken married Alexandra Kudrin of Kashega in 1881.

Terentii Makarin continued to reside at Biorka in 1878. The leader of the community, however, was Gregory Krukoff. Although Krukoff's son

Lazar was 20, the Krukoff family would disappear from the community by the end of the century. John Olgin became the agent after Gregory Krukoff died. He appears to have been a good manager, never raising the blood pressure of the general agent. His father, Alexander, had been a creole who since 1828 had worked for the RA Company aboard ships and as a clerk at Sitka and Kodiak.[100] Although he had closest ties to the Kodiak region, John Olgin spent years in the Aleutians.[101] He eventually retired to Unalaska where he had a home.

When village sea otter hunters left for extended periods, the local agent sometimes went to Iliuliuk. In April 1887 Olgin was told that after putting his hunters aboard the Schr. *Pearl* he should close up shop and return to Iliuliuk, leaving someone at Biorka "to look out for the women and children which remain there."[102] That same spring, Petelin at Makushin was told that he would have to remain in the village to "get your goods ready for taking stock" but that his wife and belongings could travel to Iliuliuk with the hunters. He later joined the agent at Sanak to assist him.[103] In 1889 Neumann gave more detailed instructions to A.M. Larsen, his agent at Akutan. "You can issue some provisions, say for 3 months to each family," he wrote, "then take out of your store anything you deem the people might want and leave it with some trustworthy native. You will ship all furs on hand, bringing your inventory with you, you will come to this station."[104]

Encroaching Poverty

By the end of the 1870s the economic tide was clearly receding. Hunters still took enough sea otters and fur seals to maintain a relative if precarious prosperity, and Unangax̂ in the eastern Aleutians were doing better than hunters in the Kodiak region. The store in Kodiak sent goods to Unalaska that could not be sold there even though Kodiak hunters were generally paid more for otter skins that Unangax̂.[105] In 1877 the Kodiak AC Company station paid an average of $35 for a sea otter skin.[106] In 1879 the Unalaska station paid an average of only $22 per skin.[107] Growing poverty was reflected in an 1878 notice the Unalaska store posted in Russian requesting that debts be settled at least once every twelve months. "Persons whose debt has increased larger than the Agent deems them responsible for," read the announcement, "can only receive additional advance for hunting outfit."[108] The church distributed both funds and food, as did the agent of the AC Company on occasion.[109]

Again, specific information is lacking regarding conditions at Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega. Petroff, following his 1878 visit, referred to the Makushin people as "mere auxiliaries of the inhabitants of Oonalashka village… [who] furnish a contingent every year for the regular sea-otter hunting party that leaves Iliuliuk for Sannakh." Whereas once, he wrote, they had produced warriors of renown, they were now notorious for indolence.[110] He was more impressed with appearances at Biorka. With

uncharacteristic honesty, he left Kashega out of his report because he had not personally visited the community.

As the 1880s drew to a close, men from the three villages accumulated increasing debts. Neumann cautioned his village agents about overextending credit. "Say for instance, Artemon Yatchmenef owes $684.65," he wrote in 1887 to Reinken about one of the Kashega men. "His furs amount to $242.00 [and] he took at Ounalaska $30.00 so you can let him have $100.00 to 120 more, you will of course act the same to all the natives that are in debt."[111] Neumann periodically reiterated his instructions, but debt continued to mount. In 1884 Kashega owed the company $4,738.08. By August 1889 this had increased to $6,363.49.[112] Figures for Makushin and Biorka are missing, but Chernovski's debt rose from $2,927.70 to $5,971.50.[113] Given the steady and rapid decline in sea otters, this was a staggering amount, a bondage of extraordinary proportions from which escape proved impossible.

Sea otter skull. Photograph by Francis Broderick.