

PART TWO: THE FINAL DECADES

Chapter 8 The Last Families



Much is rightly made of population losses suffered in the eastern Aleutians during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, for which Russian promyshlenniks and administrators of the Russian-American Company are excoriated for their respective roles. What is less recognized, however, is that at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, under U.S. administration, Unanga communities experienced a population decline of almost comparable severity. The numbers were necessarily smaller—given the base population—but the result was nearly as devastating. After having reached its lowest point in the early 1820s, the population in the region had started a slow recovery. In 1830 Veniaminov recorded 514 residents on Unalaska and Sedanka islands, including the four villages of Chernofski, Kashega, Makushin, and Biorka with 164 residents. There were, at that time, a number of additional small villages on Unalaska Island. By 1880 these other villages had disappeared, and the overall population of Unalaska and Sedanka islands had increased to 763 while the four villages stood at 371. Thirty years later, in 1910, the collective population of the two islands had dropped to 434, significantly lower than in either 1830 or 1880. The overall population from Attu to Akutan had decreased nearly fifty percent, from 1,364 to 729. Biorka, Makushin, Kashega, and Chernofski had plummeted to a combined population of 171, a decline of over fifty percent.¹ This loss paralleled the disappearance of the sea otter and was propelled by poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, scarcity of affordable fuel, and the lack of sea mammals for food and raw materials, as well as deaths from epidemic diseases. It was exacerbated by the ineffective enforcement of regulations enacted to prevent the sea otter's extermination. It was accompanied by a steady immigration of desperate and opportunistic newcomers,

propelled by greed, ignorance, self-righteousness, and governmental paternalism. The number of Unangaŝ who left the region to settle in Washington, California, and elsewhere was small. A few students were sent to Indian boarding schools; a few women married white men and left; and a few members of wealthier families (such as the Simeon Melovidov family from St. Paul) chose and had the means to leave the islands. These instances, however, were peripheral contributors to the overall population loss. The decline would grind on into the next decade, threatening the viability of these villages and bringing the very survival of Unangaŝ as a people to a critical point.

For generations, sea otter hunting had structured life. Its termination, although gradual and predictable, produced fissures or, to give them a more accurate description, chasms within villages. These had to be filled or bridged if communities were to survive. The foundations of village economies altered, requiring a host of new talents if leaders were to be effective. Although much of the subsistence calendar remained fixed, who participated in subsistence activities was influenced by absences occasioned by periodic employment away from the village (usually at Unalaska or the Pribilof Islands), by the presence of more men in the villages during what had been traditional otter hunting periods, and by the introduction of new technologies, principally the replacement of skin boats with wooden skiffs. Patterns of child rearing altered as parental and community expectations changed.

The census agent in 1900 had declared that with the loss of the sea otter, Unangaŝ hunting skills had become useless. Coupled with isolation and generations of dependency on the AC and NAC companies—“government-fostered monopolies” in the words of the agent—village residents had lost their “individuality” along with economic resources. “Numerically he is decreasing,” the agent declared, distancing himself with late 19th century jargon. “Physically and morally degenerating, and his extinction as an Ethnographical unity is at hand.”² The question of what it meant to be Unangaŝ, of course, was nothing new; identity had been in flux for 150 years.

As the story of the three villages approaches its final decades, it is possible to trace the outlines of a few families although, as with the 19th century, it is difficult to understand in detail how specific persons met—or did not meet—the challenges facing individuals, families, and communities. In one sense, there are far too many individuals to trace all family histories here. In another sense, the numbers are very small. In 1910 Kashega had only four men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine, while Makushin and Biorka each had ten. There were seven women at Kashega, eight at Makushin, and ten at Biorka in the same age range. There were a handful of older residents. Biorka and Kashega each had seven adults between forty and fifty-nine while Makushin had only three.

Makushin

In 1910 Makushin's forty-seven residents were divided among ten families. The eldest resident in all three villages lived here. This was Matrona Krukoff, a sixty-year-old widow, living with her twenty-one-year-old son Elia [Il'ia] and his younger brother, Matfey, fifteen. The boys were listed as Krukoffs, but ten years earlier when she had lived at Kashega and been married to John Borenin (the first)³, Matrona's two sons along with their older brother, Stepan, had been Borenins. They could trace their ancestry (through their father's mother) to Abraham Yatchmenev, the starosta of the chapel at Kashega in the 1850s, and in this way they were distant relatives of Alexei Yatchmeneff who had become chief of Unalaska in 1902. The 1910 census was taken by Vasilii Shaiashnikov, Yatchmeneff's predecessor as chief, and it is probable that he recorded the names the boys were actually using. Before long, however, both Elia and Matfey returned to using their father's surname. Paradoxically, in 1942, it was the family of Elia Borenin, a man from Kashega, that became the last Unanga family living at Makushin.

As the 20th century began, the families with the deepest ties to Makushin were the Kastromitins, Telanoffs, Krukoffs, Petelins, and Petukoffs. The Kastromitins, represented by a single family in the 1900 census, disappeared from Makushin during the next decade; however, this family name resurfaces at Kashega. There were four Telanoff families in 1900, but only one in 1910. In 1900 there were two Krukoff families, including that of Ivan Grigorovich Kriukov, the man who was the primary official at the church. By 1910, however, this family was represented only by the widow Matrona, the mother of Elia and Matfey Borenin. Family names that disappeared from census records continued to have a presence through the female line. Thus, Nick Galaktionoff's grandmother, Marva Petukoff, had a Kastromitin grandmother. The disappearance of these names, however, was symbolic of losses suffered by villages.

Two families had been primarily responsible for establishing the chapel at Makushin, that of Joseph Petelin and that of Gregory Petukhov [Petukoff]. By 1900, the Petelins were no longer present. Thomas Petelin, the last agent for the AC Company, had moved into Iliuliuk when the company closed its Makushin station in the 1890s. There were three Petukoff families in 1900, if the widow Marva Petukoff and her son Peter are counted as they should be since by 1910 he had married and started his own family. There were two other Petukoff families; that of Innokentii and Elena Petukoff and their daughter, and that of Vasilii and Elizaveta with their children Anna, Yakim and Matfey.

The Lekanoff, Galaktionoff, and Shapsnikoff families of Makushin trace their families to men who moved into Makushin in the second half of the 19th century. According to Nikolai Lekanoff, his father, Simeon Nikolaiovich Lekanoff, was born at Unalaska where he attended the school operated by the Orthodox church. The 1878 census for Iliuliuk includes Nikolai Lekanoff (written as Lezanove) with his wife, three sons,

and a daughter. According to Nick, Simeon Lekanoff moved to Makushin while his brother settled on St. George Island. Stepan “Lehanof” was fourteen when he arrived on St. George in 1884 as a “servant” in the family of Rev. Innokentii Lestnikoff. Several early St. George census reports place his birth at St. Michaels. According to family tradition, he entered the Lestnikoff family following the death of his mother when her clothes caught fire at the stove.⁴ Father Lestnikoff, born on Attu and educated in Sitka, served the church at Unalaska from 1873 until he moved to St. George as a priest in 1882. It is certainly possible that both Stepan and Simeon Lekanoff had been students at the school founded by Veniaminov and consolidated by Bishop Nestor in the early 1880s. Permanent residence on the Pribilof Islands was restricted to those present around the time of the Alaska purchase, but in 1889 Stepan was “adopted” by Father Lestnikoff and the following year he had married and established his family as an integral part of the St. George community.⁵ The date of Simeon’s arrival at Makushin has not been established but it may have been around the same time that Stepan went to St. George. Simeon may have followed his older brother, Andrei, who had married Evdokia, a woman from Makushin. Andrei signed the 1886 sea otter petition. In any event, by 1897 there were three Lekanoff men with families at Makushin, all reportedly born at Unalaska. Andrei was 38, Nikolai was 26, and Simeon was 24. Simeon was married to Julita (Oleta) Pankoff. By 1900 Andrei had died, leaving his widow and three children. Nicholai, with his wife and daughter, was still at Makushin but he eventually moved to Unalaska where he perished in the 1919 pandemic. Simeon survived longest and became the head of a large extended family. He was known as a fine singer, served as starosta for the chapel, and by 1900 he and his wife Julita had two daughters, aged one and two. These children appear to have died young because they are not listed in the 1910 census where two sons and a one-year-old daughter are found. The eldest son was Constantine who himself became the patriarch of an extended family at Unalaska. The daughter was Parascovia, destined to become Nick Galaktionoff’s mother.

Arseni and Tikhon Galaktionoff were from Atka. They were descendents of Ivan Konstantinovich Galaktionov who was born in 1803, educated at Kodiak and New Archangel, and served as a physician and school teacher at Atka, beginning in the 1830s. He retired in 1847 after 26 years service with the Russian-American Company. At Atka, he and his wife Natalia had a large family. By 1878 Arseni and his mother were living at Unalaska with his younger sister Marina, and three younger brothers: Antipater, Lazar, and Aleksander. There was also an Anna Galaktionoff, 18, and her younger brother Basil living there. Arseni Galaktionoff was an active sea otter hunter in 1886. He signed the 1886 petition and is included among hunters from Makushin for the 1886-1887 winter season. In 1897 he and his wife, Lubova (from Morshovoi), had three children.

Tikhon Avramovich Galaktionoff was also living at Makushin. He was married to Marva Grigorievna Petukoff whose paternal grandfather was Gregory Petukoff, the Russian-American Company employee stationed at Makushin, while her grandmother was Marva Kostromitin. Tikhon and Marva had several children including Evdokia, Gabriel, Akenfa, and Agafia, before Tikhon died in June 1902. Akenfa would become the father of Nick Galaktionoff, among others, and it is significant that Nick credited his grandmother, a woman with deep generational ties to Makushin, for the oral traditions he shepherded into the 21st century. After her husband died, Marva married Ioann S. Borenin and in 1905 they had a son whom, with little originality, they named John.⁶

The short tragic life of Gabriel Galaktionoff, Tikhon and Marva's eldest son, suggests the unraveling that was happening within Unanga communities as one era transitioned to another. There were insoluble problems. In 1898, when he was about ten years old and a year after he had been recorded living at Makushin, he was discovered living in an abandoned dory on the beach at Unalaska.⁷ The U.S. deputy marshal took him to the Jesse Lee Home where he was admitted on August 6. Details are lacking, but in late November 1906 Dr. A.W. Newhall, then the director of the Home and a man of expansive good will, filed a complaint against Gabriel for unknown reasons. He was taken to Seward where he appeared before U.S. commissioner L.S. Howlett on January 7, Orthodox Christmas. He was declared insane and transported to the Mt. Ivy [Mt. Tabor] Insane Asylum in Oregon where he died.

In 1910 the chief of Makushin was Elia Michael Shapsnikoff, yet another person with deep ties to Iliuliuk where in 1878 there were at least nine Shapsnikoff households. The 1886 petition contains numerous men with variants of the Shapsnikoff surname. By 1897 Elia and his wife, Subove, were at Makushin, her home village, where they had a son and two daughters. Three years later, he was married to eighteen year-old Fedosia and the only child in the home was eight-year old Daniel. By 1910 their family had grown to include two daughters and a son.

Kashega

By the time Matrona Borenin had been widowed, married a Krukoff and moved to Makushin with her sons Elia and Matfey, her oldest child, Katrina, was herself married and starting a family in Kashega. She and Ivan A. Denisoff had married in 1899. Ten years later, however, on January 21, 1909, her body was found in the creek. Residents suspected she had fallen victim to outsiders, perhaps murdered by Japanese fishermen who were known to occasionally land on the Pacific side of the island. The death was reported to Unalaska in early March, but it was



A stone weir in the river at Kashega. Alice Moller Collection, courtesy of AB Rankin.

late May before the marshal reached the village. Through an interpreter (George King) he conducted interviews, and then he and two men hiked to the Pacific side. Four months of winter had erased any trace of a Japanese camp and the case was left unsolved.⁸ Katrina died leaving Ivan with two young children.

The Denisoffs, male and female, were inextricably bound to Kashega. Ivan had an older brother, Nikifor, who had been born in 1863. He would eventually outlive his siblings, three wives, and most of his nine children, and be evacuated after the Japanese attack on Unalaska in 1942. Ivan and Nikifor's sister, Vasilisa, married Moses Borenin and was the mother of George Borenin, the last chief of the village. Moses himself died in 1900 leaving Vasilisa with three daughters and two sons whom she raised, no doubt with traditional assistance from their maternal uncles, Ivan and Nikifor Denisoff. A member of the Denisoff family was chief of Kashega during the second decade of the century, but who exactly remains unknown.⁹ A likely candidate was Afanasii Denisoff—likely because he was listed first in Hooper's 1897 census and in the 1910 and 1920 federal census reports. His name also heads a 1916 petition from the villages of Kashega and Chernofski.¹⁰ He had been born in 1860.

The Borenin, Kudrin, and Yatchmenoff families had been established at Kashega for generations, and, like the Denisoffs, they continued living in the village through the final decades. Ivan Ivanovich Kudrin [John J. Kudrin], who had been the reader in the church in the 1890s, married Efimia Krukoff a few years after the death of his first wife in 1901. Ivan and Efimia had four sons and three daughters. Five of these children along with their widowed mother lived at Kashega until the outbreak of World War II. Another Kudrin family was that of Ivan's brother Eliah. As with so many families, Eliah's first wife, Paraskovia Petukoff, died early, leaving a son Alexei. Eliah then married Pelagia Sivtsov and their son Cornelius Kudrin would be one of the last two residents of Kashega. Alexei Kudrin, like his mother, would die as a young adult but not before he had married Sophia Borenin [later Sophie Pletnikoff]—one of the key figures in the preservation of Unangaꝥ culture and the oral history of Kashega.

There were two John Yatchmenoffs at Kashega. John B. Yatchmenoff (the first) served as chief of the village for many years until his death in 1932. He was married to Laressa Talanov and, although they had no children of their own, they raised Paraskovia Kalimoff, a girl from Chernofski who died young. He was about ten years older than John Yatchmenoff (number two) who married Helen Golley of Atka. They rarely lived at Kashega, but spent most of their time at Unalaska, where six of their seven children were born.

Biorka

Of the three villages, Biorka suffered the gravest population loss, declining 70 percent between 1878 and 1910, down from 141 to 42. This involved not only the disappearance of complete families but also

the reduction in the number of family units among those names that survived. Five families managed to maintain a continuous presence between 1900 and 1920: Makarin, Yatchmenoff, Siftsoff, Kozloff, and the doomed Popoff.

In 1910 Terentii Makarin's household consisted of himself and his two adult sons, Andrew and Elia, now 22 and 20. Terentii himself was 57. For him to have been married three times was not unusual. His first wife, Olga Petroff, had died in May 1888, leaving him with Matfey, age six, and Pariscovia, age three. His second wife, Marva Lukanin, died in 1892, leaving Andrew and Elia, born in 1889 and 1891. He next married Irena Kochutun, with whom he had Peter, born in 1897. After Irena died in September 1900, perhaps from the "great sickness" that swept coastal Alaska, he did not remarry.

In 1910, Vasili Yatchmenoff, in his late forties, and Jacob Kozloff, in his mid thirties, both had families while Gabriel Siftsoff, in his early twenties, was not yet married. Kerik Popoff, in his late thirties, was married and his eldest son, Ignatii, was almost 20 and about to start his own family. Ten years earlier there had been another Yatchmenoff family, that of Gregorii and Maria. On November 21, 1900, she was found "stabbed through the skull" on the beach. Charges against her husband were filed by Leontii Siftsoff, the Unangaâ deacon at Unalaska. Five witnesses came from Biorka to testify. Each witness was paid \$6.50 for their travel and day in court. Siftsoff received \$3.10 for travel costs and \$2.00 for his translation services.¹¹ Sufficient evidence was presented for a trial, and Yatchmenoff was to have been sent to Sitka. Judge James Wickersham, however, was in Nome on his traveling circuit and, learning that there were two murder cases at Unalaska, decided to take the court there. In the second case, Fred Hardy was accused of killing three people on Unimak Island. Told it would be impossible to find enough jurors at Unalaska, Wickersham had 16 grand jurors and 18 trial jurors travel aboard the *St. Paul*. The grand jury indicted both Hardy and Yatchmenoff. Witnesses were again brought from Biorka, but on August 26 Wickersham noted in his diary that they were "about to fail as witnesses for fear that if he is found guilty he will be hung. They would be willing to tell the truth if he was only to go to the penitentiary but if he is to hang they will be dumb."¹²

Just as with the 1878 incident involving Makushin and Unalaska people, the residents of Biorka appear to have preferred banishment, rather than death, for the crime of murder. The trial began on September 9, a few hours after Hardy's jury had found him guilty. The next day, the jury brought in a guilty verdict against Gregorii Yatchmenoff. That afternoon both men were sentenced. Hardy was to be taken to Nome and hanged. Yatchmenoff was given twenty years at McNeils Island



James Wickersham, district judge for Alaska 1900-1908. <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~aknomebo/Photos/IgJamesWickersham.jpg>

Penitentiary in Washington. The fate of his widowed mother and the three children in the family is unrecorded. By the time newspapers picked up the story, the murder at Biorka had ballooned so that readers learned how a “Unimak Indian” had pushed his three wives off a cliff.¹³

This event became part of oral history. Nick Galaktionoff recalled Alex Ermeloff telling how a woman had been attacked and killed by one of the spectral outlaws or “bogeymen” known as Outside Men at Sedanka. Her husband had been innocent, but had been convicted and sentenced to twenty years hard labor. He returned to the Aleutians after serving time. “He stayed around here for about five years,” Nick said, “then passed away.”¹⁴

Like Makushin, two families that played pivotal roles at Biorka began when two men immigrated. There had long been Lukanins in the village, but in 1900 no Lukanin family was present. The most prominent Lukanin had been from Atka. Ivan Lukanin had a distinguished career with the Russian-American Company during the second quarter of the 19th century. He married Elizabeth Bogdanova from Unalaska.¹⁵ Kerik Lukanin had been born at Biorka around 1869, but he lived at Iliuliuk until he married Terentii Makarin’s daughter Pariscovia. They settled at Biorka. Alex Ermeloff, the man who would become chief of Biorka, was probably from Nikolski where the Ermeloffs were a long-established family. He married Anesia Siftsoff of Biorka and moved to the village. By 1910 they had a two-year-old son, Ruff, and three daughters: Anesia, Sophia, and Ephrosenia.

Challenges

Residents in the three villages faced a variety of challenges, none deeper than subsistence during a period of declining natural resources. People needed to eat and clothe themselves. Cash was also required to purchase household goods, hunting equipment, clothing, and a few of the “luxuries” the sea otter years had made commonplace. Unanga communities on and near the Alaska Peninsula had both codfish and salmon industries to fall back on when sea otter hunting declined. These were only peripherally available to residents of the three villages. The young needed education—both in English and western skills and in those traditional practices that could be put to practical use. Elders were equipped to teach traditional skills and consequently boys like Andrew Makarin and George Borenin learned the craft of hunting from baidarkas although they would never be sea otter hunters. Literacy was also taught, but it was in *Unangam tunuu* or Russian, the languages the people themselves spoke and read. In a 1916 petition signed by men from Kashega and Chernofski all the signatures are in Russian script, except for that of Cornelius Kudrin.¹⁶ Cornelius had attended both the public school and the Orthodox boarding school at Unalaska. A critical challenge to village survival had its roots in what had helped preserve much Unanga culture throughout the past century: the willingness and ability to assimilate whatever might benefit their lives.

Although Biorka had been on its own for a decade or more by 1910, the interdependency that had united Chernofski, Kashega and Makushin was unraveling and each of these three villages began to stand or fall on its own. If they had ties to any other village, it was to Iliuliuk or Unalaska whose economy, in the words of Dorothy Jones, was “uncertain, unstable, and volatile” for the first forty years of the century.¹⁷ In addition, Unangâ residents were cut off from effective participation in affairs by language, religion and race. Despite the efforts of Vasili Shaiashnikov, chief from 1887 to 1902, and his successor, the renowned Alexei Yatchmeneff, Unalaska continued to be a community controlled by outsiders. Every position of power, from deputy U.S. commissioners and marshals to school teachers and postmasters, was filled by non-Natives. The only exceptions were the brief tenures of Kathryn Dyakanoff Sellers as a teacher and Olga Reinken Bolshanin as postmaster. (Both had been educated at the Protestant Jesse Lee Home and the Carlisle Indian School.) Those Unalaska Unangâ who were able to participate in community or territorial elections did so by virtue of being recognized as something other than Unangâ. Critical differences developed between “urbanized” Unangâ at Unalaska and those living in outlying villages. These differences increased the difficulties experienced when the more rural residents chose or were forced to move into the larger community.

Despite a deeply rooted resiliency, the generation born around the turn of the century faced challenges as critical as any encountered since the rise of the Russian-American Company a century earlier. The transformations required for survival were complicated by the fact that they had to be tackled not from within relatively self-contained villages, but within in a larger society where Unangâ were increasingly marginalized. How the generation born at the end of the sea otter hunting era met these diverse challenges determined the strength each community possessed as World War II descended across the Aleutians.



Looking across the lakes toward Volcano Bay. Photograph by Ray Hudson.