Pioneer Arctic Archeologist J. Louis Giddings

Courtesy of Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology (49-19)

The Nakarak family washing artifacts on the beach at Iyatayet, Norton Bay. Photograph by J.L. Giddings.

Left: J. Louis Giddings and Almond Downey at the Battle Rock site, Cape Krusenstern. Photograph by Douglas Anderson.

Courtesy of Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology (61-DA-149)

By Becky Saleeby

J. Louis Giddings dedicated his professional life to understanding the people and the prehistory of Northwest Alaska. During almost three decades of prolific scientific fieldwork (1936-1964), he made discoveries that greatly changed prevailing views on the antiquity and complexity of Arctic cultures. As a result of his work, notably on the Kobuk River, Norton Bay, the Choris Peninsula, and Cape Krusenstern, he authored several books and a long list of journal papers about these cultures. His legacy is far greater than the sum of these scientific studies, however, and is nowhere more evident than in the vast expanse of Cape Krusenstern National Monument, designated in 1978 primarily to protect and interpret its incredible archeological resources. It was there some 20 years earlier that Giddings, with the assistance of his Iñupiaq boatman, Almond Downey, discovered a long sequence of ancient beach ridges. Preserved on the ridges was evidence of Arctic prehistory from about 6,000 years ago up through recent times.

National recognition of the scientific significance of the area first came in 1973, when the Cape Krusenstern archeological district, composed of hundreds of sites on 114 beach ridges, was designated as a National Historic Landmark. Two other sites Giddings excavated, the Iyatayet site on Norton Bay and the Onion Portage site on the Kobuk River, were also designated National Historic Landmarks. Beyond Giddings' contributions on the national scale are those on a more personal level. The bonds of cooperation and mutual respect he forged with his Iñupiat crew and friends are still remembered today by elders—Almond and Ruth Downey, Nelson Greist and Wilson Tickett. In his book, *Ancient Men of the Arctic*, he credits their knowledge of the land and its people as essential to his success throughout his years of Alaskan fieldwork.

Born in Caldwell, Texas in 1909, Giddings heeded the call to the northland early in life. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) in 1932 and ventured farther north in 1934 to spend a winter in Kotzebue, which would later be the staging point for many of his expeditions. Although his graduate education and later teaching positions took him away from Alaska, his research interests always brought him back to the far north.

One of his early scientific interests was in the field of dendrochronology — the dating of wood samples based on growth rings. The variations in the tree rings occur in a living tree as a response to local environmental conditions as the tree grows. Giddings' work with tree rings initially pertained to the study of past climates; however, archeology also benefitted from the cross-dating of logs or wood samples. When a tree is newly cut, its rings can be dated to a modern calendar. This information can then be correlated to similar patterns of rings in wood, long dead, found within prehistoric sites. Giddings learned these techniques from the father of dendrochronology, A. E. Douglass, at the University of Arizona and successfully applied them in the Arctic.

In order to have adequate comparative material for his studies, Giddings began collecting wood samples from placer gold operations around Fairbanks in 1936 and continued this research when he returned to UAF to teach in 1938. At that time, prior to the application of radiocarbon dating, it was difficult to accurately date artifacts collected from sites. Radiocarbon dating, based on the half-life of carbon from

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organic materials preserved within sites, did not become the standard means of archeological dating until the 1950s. In the 1930s, Giddings' research must have appeared "state of the art" to his colleagues at the university, so it is not surprising that in 1939 UAF anthropology professor Froelich Rainey invited Giddings to participate in an archeological project at Point Hope. Until then, St. Lawrence Island, with artifacts similar to those from Siberia, had been the focus of much of the archeology in northern Alaska. Giddings was introduced to field archeology that summer, and the experience proved to be a turning point in his career.

It was during the 1939 field season that Giddings, Rainey, and Danish archeologist Helge Larsen discovered the enigmatic Ipiutak culture. In Giddings' words, "The discovery of the original Ipiutak site at Point Hope, one hundred miles northwest of the Cape Krusenstern beaches, will always seem more dramatic to me than the opening of Tut-ankh-amen's tomb." *(Giddings 1977:102)*. After working late at the nearby Jabbertown site, the site first appeared to them in the low, red, midnight sun, as a series of shallow, rectangular depressions on low beach ridges south of Ipiutak Lagoon *(Giddings 1977: 113)*. Some 575 depressions, identified as semi-subterranean house pits, were eventually mapped, making it one of the largest known prehistoric settlements in the Alaska Arctic. Flourishing in northwestern Alaska around the beginning of the Christian era, the Ipiutak culture was vastly different in artifact types from previously known Arctic cultures and striking because of its elaborate burial goods. The following summer Larsen and Rainey continued their work at the Ipiutak site (which became a National Historic Landmark in 1961), while Giddings turned his attention toward the Kobuk River.

Today a trip from Anchorage to one of the Kobuk River villages is a few hours flight by jet to Kotzebue and then a brief trip by small plane to Kiana, Shungnak, or Ambler. Giddings' first trip to the Kobuk area in 1940, in contrast, took many days of slogging over the tundra and a great deal more stamina. His journey began with a flight to Allakaket, a village on the Koyukuk River. His map of the region showed a blank space of some 50 miles between the Koyukuk and his destination on the Kobuk. Setting off with a 40-pound pack, a compass, and a rifle to shoot birds and small game for food, he proceeded on foot across the uncharted territory *(Giddings 1977: 294)*. Six days later he arrived on the gravelly bank of the Kobuk, and with great ingenuity, considering he had no axe or hatchet, constructed a makeshift raft to float the river.

His first encounter with civilization came at fish camp of people from Shungnak. Mrs. Daisy Tickett was a young girl when Louis Giddings appeared at the camp of her parents, Susie and Henry Stocking, in 1940. In a taped interview with NPS personnel, Mrs. Tickett remembers that day over 60 years ago.

The arrival of Mr. Giddings..., I always thought it may have been July or August, but he arrived at the time we were in summer camp...His raft was remarkable in that it was very short and small and seems like it was constructed to sit on it by placing several pieces of wood. It was in the afternoon when we see a stranger in view on a raft. The stranger stopped in front of us and got off. So that was Louis Giddings who arrived. (Ramoth and Ridington 2001)

The people of the Kobuk River were of particular interest to Giddings because they, as Iñupiaq-speaking Eskimos, occupied a forested environment usually associated with the Interior Athapaskan people. He believed that studying their prehistoric sites might shed light on possible inland origins for the Ipiutak culture *(Giddings 1977: 292)*.

The first year on the Kobuk, Giddings collected wood samples, recorded ethnographic accounts, and conducted limited site excavation. He returned the following year with a graduate student and hired eight local men from Shungnak and Kiana to excavate the house pits at several sites, including Onion Portage. The great age and significance of Onion Portage, however, would not be known until he returned to the site two decades later.

One man on his crew was a young Nelson Greist, now a patriarch in the Kobuk River village of Ambler, who recalls the early days.

He saw how raw I was. Louie let a young man interpret and told me that I would not be excavating but I was to start from the bottom, doing dishes and watch the tents, equipment etc. and I would be with him, that was in 1940...When we met again the next summer his impression of me changed quite a bit. He already put on the top of the list. Yeah my friend Louie was a very good man. When I start to be with him he take time to teach me how to excavate, very much like on the job training and I got to the point of teaching other workers that did know how, when he was satisfied that I can do it. (Ramoth and Ridington 2001)

Giddings returned in 1942 to traverse almost the entire Kobuk River on snowshoes with a dog team for the U.S. Army Engineers. After a four-year stint in the military during World War II, he returned to the Kobuk in 1947 and eventually published the results of his fieldwork in two books. In *The Arctic Woodland Culture of the Kobuk River* (1952), he describes the results of archeological fieldwork, highlighting similarities of artifacts between the inland Iñupiat of the Kobuk and their Athapaskan neighbors, the Koyukon; while *Kobuk River People* (1961) is an ethnographic account.

Always searching for more evidence to answer his questions about the origins of the Eskimo cultures in Alaska, Giddings conducted fieldwork in Norton Bay during the summers of 1948 through 1952. Along the edge of a small bay near Iyatayet Creek, Giddings and his crew discovered a site that had three separate periods of human occupation. At the bottom they found a new culture, the Denbigh Flint complex. Giddings recognized the small, beautifully chipped stone tools as ancestral to later expressions of Eskimo culture in Alaska. His discovery of the Norton culture, the middle layer, at Iyatayet was also significant as it marked the first appearance of pottery and large permanent winter villages in the Arctic. The upper level, named Nukleet, was dated to the last millennium.

The date of the Denbigh Flint complex was not known until his final trip to Iyayet in 1952, when he collected radiocarbon samples from the site and dated the bottom layers at approximately 5,000 years before present *(Giddings 1964: 248)*. Giddings' discovery did not only represent a local culture, but was later recognized as a variation of the Arctic Small Tool tradition, a prehistoric way of life found along the entire coastline of North America from the Bering Sea to the northernmost tip of Greenland *(Dumond 1987)*.

Meanwhile, Giddings was carving out a niche for himself on the academic front in the 1950s. After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1951, he moved on to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where he was appointed professor of anthropology as well as director of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology in 1956. Those

Courtesy of Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology (64-238)

Excavation crew at Onion Portage in 1964. Photograph by J.L. Giddings.

National Park Service photograph

Nelson Greist, Ambler, Alaska.

National Park Service photograph

Wilson Tickett, Shungnak, Alaska.

National Park Service photograph

Ruth and Almond Downey, Kotzebue, Alaska.

duties did not prevent him from returning to Kotzebue during that summer. There, he hired Almond Downey, a resident of Noatak, to be his boatman, and the crew set off for the Buckland River. En route they were waylaid by gale-force winds, and they were forced to stop on the Choris Peninsula. This event proved fortuitous because it led Giddings to the discovery of large oval-shaped house pits on one of the many narrow beach ridges. After testing, he attributed the house pits to the Choris culture, intermediate in terms of artifact and house types to the Denbigh and Norton cultures *(Giddings 1977: 201)*.

Downey became an essential member of the summer crew for the next several years, and in 1958 he guided Giddings to Sealing Point on Cape Krusenstern. Under the frozen sod covering old beach terraces, they found a horizontal succession of cultures — Birnirk, Western Thule, Ipiutak, Old Whaling, Denbigh — with the most recent at the modern shoreline and the most ancient, some 3 miles (4.8 km) inland. Ancient people abandoned each successive beach ridge as changing ocean conditions caused a new beach ridge to be formed in front of it. Eventually, Almond's wife, Ruth, and their young children joined the crew, along with Giddings' student, Douglas Anderson, and Giddings' own family.

Almond and Ruth Downey, who now live in Kotzebue, were interviewed about their fieldwork with Giddings. Ruth Downey recalls:

When the ice break we come down from Noatak. Then maybe in June 10 or 12. 10, 11, 12 Giddings come. Later on we went to Sealing Point, and there were bunch of us there. There was some young men that follow us like Murphy, brother of Almond, Bobby Lee and Julian Tauqsaiq to stay with us...they would be gone all day looking for old things and me and the kids would be home all day too. We stay over there for all summer, June, July and August. (Ramoth and Ridington 2001)

In 1964, his last year of fieldwork and the last year of his life, Giddings returned to Onion Portage on the Kobuk River for a large-scale excavation. Three years earlier, during a break from work on the coast, he had discovered that the site was well stratified, with layers of human occupation evident beneath the upper house pits. He hoped that Onion Portage would provide a vertical succession of Arctic cultures, in the way that the Cape Krusenstern beaches had provided a horizontal one.

The site, along with the field camp where the excavators lived, was a bustling place in 1964. It included the entire Giddings family (wife Bets and three children), Almond Downey and his family, graduate students, and a local excavation crew. Wilson Tickett of Shungnak remembers that summer:

When he was here for the last time that summer, that's when I work for him...I can't recall how many feet deep we excavated, I found out that each level of dirt do tell the tale of when people live there. Some are a foot or more apart that indicate the time when people lived there. It is very interesting to know that generations can be determined

this way...One time he said it indicated that people lived here before Christ, by carbon dating the burned pieces of wood from fire here at Onion Portage. (Ramoth and Ridington 2001)

Also joining in the excitement that summer of 1964 was Giddings' old friend, Nelson Greist, who was hired to build a cabin on the bluff, with a commanding view of the Kobuk River, above the Onion Portage site, for the Giddings family.

When Louie found out I was here (Ambler) he come up from Onion Portage to see me. He told me and made plans to have a log cabin built there and I am to build it for him...I complete the cabin in one month. After the cabin was done he ask for cache. I hustle for material to build it...he told me he will retire pretty soon. We had become good friends. According to what he says we would live here in the same place when he retires. (Ramoth and Ridington 2001)

In December of 1964, Louis Giddings died unexpectedly while recuperating in the hospital after an automobile accident. His mentorship of so many, however, allowed the fieldwork at Onion Portage to continue. Douglas Anderson, Giddings' assistant, and his crews were eventually able to identify eight different cultures at the site, ranging from the Akmak complex (over 8,500 years old) through the Arctic Woodland Eskimo culture (A.D. 1000-1700), thus fulfilling Giddings' vision of the unique scientific potential of Onion Portage. Like his mentor, Anderson depended on the expertise of the local people for his excavation crews, crediting Tommy Lee, Nelson Greist, Shield Downey, Arthur Douglas, Arthur Gray, Shield Downey, Jr., Willie Goodwin, Oscar Greist, Don Williams and John Blower with providing much of the on-site archeological interpretations (Anderson 1988).

Two of Giddings' books were published posthumously: *Ancient Men of the Arctic*, a wonderful narrative filled with stories about fieldwork and archeological theories of the day, was published in 1967 (reprinted in 1977); and *Beach Ridge Archeology of Cape Krusenstern*, co-authored by Douglas Anderson, in 1986. Perhaps even more important is Giddings' spirit of scientific inquiry and dedication, which lives on today through the work of his team of archeologists, their students, and students' students, still actively involved in Arctic research. The legacy of Giddings' work on Cape Krusenstern and the Kobuk River has been handed down to numerous National Park Service archeologists. His other legacy — the spirit of cooperation he shared with his Iñupiat fieldworkers and friends — is one that all Alaskan archeologists would be wise to emulate. Only through such partnerships can we hope to achieve a lasting sense of stewardship for the sites so important in understanding the history and prehistory of our state.

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