

## ATTU BEFORE THE WAR

I could not live without the sight of the ocean...

—Nick Golodoff

*I* N 1942, BEFORE THE WAR BEGAN, Attu was a nice, quiet place with a population of about thirty-four people. We had nothing, no insulation in the houses, and no inside plumbing. There was a woodstove to heat the house. Attu was plain and quiet all the time. There was a trading post, and church and some houses. Some people were still living in barabaras. The BIA school had a white teacher and her husband. People did not have much to do since there were hardly any jobs. The only source of money was trapping during the winter and during the summer; they just dried, salted, or smoked salmon and did some woodcarving. I was only six years old during this time so I did not have nothing much to do besides walking the pathways. There were only a few of them, and they were nothing but gravel. One went from one end of the village to the other end and the other went down to the beach. The main one was from the church to the school. There were no streets, just paths. Back then everyone in the village used to help or work voluntarily but today people work only if you pay them.

*I have a picture of my house in Attu with my dad standing outside with someone. I remember the inside of the house. It had two rooms, one room had beds and the other had a table and a stove and also we had an attic, which we used for storage. I remember while I was in Attu, one morning in winter when I got up, my house was dark so I thought it was still night. My dad went out and made steps out of snow to the top of*



Photo 3. "The 'Main Street' of Attu." Nick's house is the one with two men standing in front of it (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)

*the almost-built house and after I went outside I could only see chimneys and the smoke coming where the house should be. I remember the house used to be cold in the morning because we only had a wood stove and the house was not insulated. I know where my house was because it was the second from the other end where the school side. I used to know the man who lived next door but cannot remember the name.*

*Attu is just like any other Aleutian island. It has more gravel than any other Aleutian island I have been on too and it has rougher country. There is very little sand. I don't remember any volcanoes on the island. Attu does have bushes that Atka doesn't have.*

*Sometimes after church, my parents used to tell me to get my godfather and bring him over to our house for tea. I was told to not let*



Photo 4. "Children playing outside their home." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan May G. Collection)

*him walk in the puddles because he was blind. I guess I was a bad boy because I used to let him walk in the puddles and he never said anything till he got to my house. Then he would tell my parents what I did. I would get kicked out of the house, but I would still do it.*

*I used to like going out in the boat, and still do. I could not live without the sight of the ocean, so when the weather was nice I would be at the beach almost every day. Whenever I needed wood or to go hunting, I was at the beach wanting to go out in the boat, but the adults would not take me and if they did not I was told I would cry and throw rocks at them.*



Photo 5. "View of Attu showing several homes, and a wooden plank pathway in the foreground." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)

*Sometimes after church, my parents used to tell me to get my godfather and bring him over to our house for tea. I was told to not let him walk in the puddles because he was blind. I guess I was a bad boy because I used to let him walk in the puddles and he never said anything till he got to my house. Then he would tell my parents what I did. I would get kicked out of the house, but I would still do it.*

—Nick Golodoff







## Commentary

Nick's memories of Attu as a quiet and pleasant place to live are reaffirmed by numerous other sources, such as officers on Coast Guard vessels, teachers hired by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and visitors such as a Scottish botanist and a stray American archeologist. The village was praised for its harmony and industry. Some of the outsiders theorized that because of its isolation, Attu had escaped many unsavory worldly influences.

Before World War II, there was little exchange of cash on Attu. The villagers obtained most of their food from hunting, fishing, and gathering. Sea lions, seals, and salmon were the main staples of the diet (BIA 1988:27, 65). Salmon was plentiful. The main summer fish camp was several miles from the winter village, at Sarana Bay, near the river mouth. People used driftwood for firewood, and sometimes they had to travel long distances to find it. Occasionally walrus showed up, and the men sold the ivory (Wright 1988).

In winter, the Attuans trapped fox on nearby Agattu Island. Teacher Etta Jones wrote to her family in 1941 that the Attuans' main source of income was from trapping blue fox. She reported that the trappers pooled their furs and divided the cash received among all residents, including widows and orphans as well as others who were unable to trap for themselves (Breu 2009:151). The women wove baskets for sale to outsiders. At the village store, the Attuans traded furs and baskets for goods such as flour, tea, coal and kerosene.

Beginning in the early 1920s, Fred Schroeder, a non-Native trader working for the Alaska Commercial Company, spent part of each year on Attu Island (Jones 1946:39). The Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard cutter *Tallapoosa* noted that, with the exception of a few old women who stayed in the village to take care of the houses, almost all the other residents of Attu left in August to trap blue fox on other islands, particularly Agattu, during the winter. The date of the villagers' departure depended on the arrival of the Alaska Commercial Company schooner *Eunice* in mid-August (U.S. Coast Guard 1931).

◀Preceding page: Photos 6 & 7. Two aerial views of Chichagof Harbor and Attu Village taken prior to the Japanese invasion. Both are dated 5/14/43, about eight months after the Attuans had been taken to Japan in September 1942. (Source: U.S. Air Force [top], U.S. Navy, courtesy Dirk Spennemann [bottom])



Photo 8. "Attu Natives – 10 July 1935."  
(Source: UAA, Archives & Special  
Collections, Alan G. May Collection)



*In 1942, before the war began, Attu was a nice, quiet place with a population of about thirty-four people. We had nothing, no insulation in the houses, and no inside plumbing. There was a woodstove to heat the house. Attu was plain and quiet all the time.*

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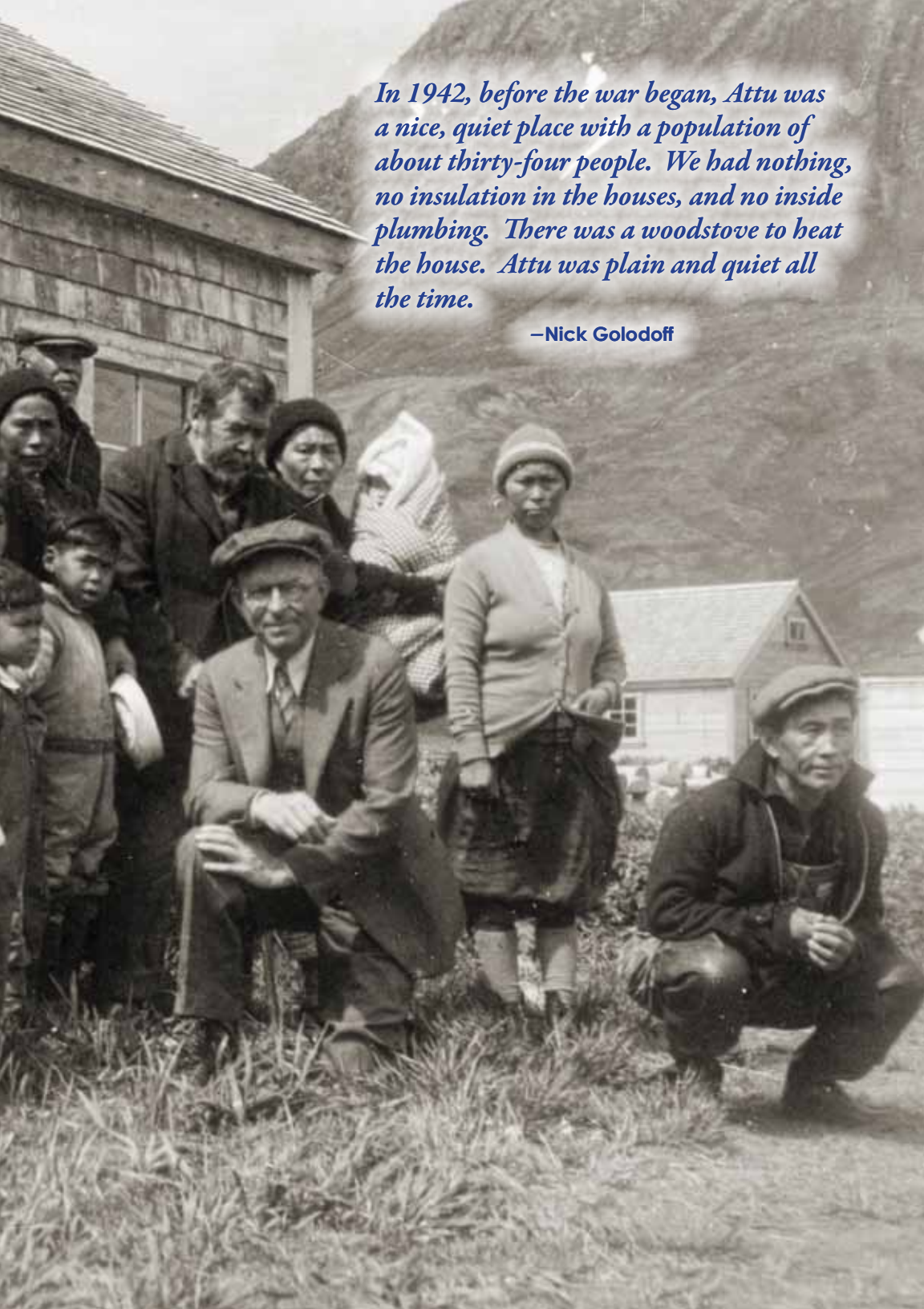




Photo 9. "Maggie's barabara." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)

Attu did not get very many visitors, but the village made a big impression on those who did manage to stop there. In the summer of 1936 Alan G. May, an amateur archeologist who had been part of famed anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička's expedition that year, spent a month in the village. May was put up in the large, modern schoolhouse, which was not being used (Stein n.d.:3). He wrote that the settlement's structures included a church, a schoolhouse, about a dozen wood frame houses, and the same number of barabaras still in use. He had been told that as late as 1928, everyone in the village lived in barabaras (May 1936:96). Another visitor in 1936 noted that on Attu, "Back of the beach were a few old barabaras covered with flowers and turf, but the islanders now occupy comfortable little wooden houses such as might be seen in any other part of Alaska." (Hutchinson 1937:170).

Naturalist Isobel Hutchinson visited Attu the same year as Alan May, after several weeks of botanical collection in the Aleutians. She had already heard good things about the village from the officers of the Coast Guard cutter who took her to the island. She wrote:

‘The natives of Attu,’ the Coast Guard officers told me, ‘are by far the happiest and best of all the natives, because they live in such a remote situation and bad influences don’t so easily come their way. They know this themselves and don’t want to be brought into closer touch with the world. They are always the most friendly and helpful too, coming down to meet us and lending a hand if required.’ (Hutchinson 1937: 168).

Some of the best sources of information about life in Attu in the 1930s are the records of the Coast Guard cutters who stopped at the island to bring mail and supplies, and provide medical and dental services. For example, the *Haida* and the *Chelan* both visited Attu in September 1930. The *Haida* treated people with conjunctivitis, bronchitis, myalgia, tuberculosis, and pleurisy. The commanding officer of the *Chelan* wrote, “The medical officer of the *Chelan* was sent ashore to the village and gave medical aid to seventeen natives and left a supply of medicines for their use during the coming winter season” (U.S. Coast Guard 1930:2).

In 1939, while he was ashore, the Commanding Officer of the *Itasca* married two couples (Willie and Julia Golodoff, and Alex and Elizabeth Prosoff), performed other judicial acts, and recorded the six deaths that had occurred in the village since the Coast Guard’s last visit. The ship found nine people on Attu in need of medical assistance, and five in need of dental work. The dental report for the trip told of pulling teeth from two people; others were lucky enough to receive only an examination. The medical party’s census counted 21 Native males, 14 Native females, eight children, two white males, and one white female in the village population (U.S. Coast Guard 1939).<sup>2</sup>

The Coast Guard officers got to know Vassa “Maggie” Prokopeoff, a basket-maker, whom they called “The Rock of Ages.” She is mentioned frequently in the records of visitors to Attu, who bought baskets from her and commissioned her to weave special ones.

The most well-known Attu resident of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, was Mike Hodikoff, chief of the village when it was occupied by the Japanese in 1942. Mike was born on Attu in 1893 and brought to Unalaska as an orphan in 1910, staying first at the Jesse Lee Home,

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<sup>2</sup>One of the white males was probably the trader, Fred Schroeder. The other white man and woman may have been teachers who stayed for a few weeks at Attu one summer.







Photo 10. "Attu Natives." (Source: Alaska State Library, Evelyn Butler and George Dale)



Photo 11. "Basket weaver on Attu." Maggie Prokopeuff. (Source: UAF, Murie Family Papers)



Photo 12. "The 'Rock of Ages' centre and two other natives." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)

the Methodist orphanage, and later with relatives. He returned to Attu and married his wife Anecia in 1920. Educated in Unalaska, he spoke better English than other Attu residents. English was still rarely spoken at Attu, but Mike spoke it well and very rapidly (May 1936:101). In addition to being chief, Mike was also a lay reader in church (where he also spoke rapidly) and had the job of sending in weather reports.

Mike was already a village leader in the early 1930s, when references to him appear in Coast Guard reports. The Coast Guard was devoting special attention to Attu because Japanese fishing vessels were suspected in the area. Vicious storms at Attu in 1931 wrecked the Coast Guard station there and three barabaras, including one



Photo 13. "Attu chief Mike Hodikoff, wife Anecia & son John." (Source: UAF, Ethel Ross Oliver)

belonging to Mike Hodikoff, whose six-year-old son was killed in the storm. Mike lost another child when his young daughter Mary Hodikoff (also age six) was taken to Unalaska for medical treatment and died during an operation to remove her tonsils (U.S. Coast Guard 1931, pp. 3-6). His wife Anecia died before World War II, leaving him with three children: Angelina, Stephen, and George.

In 1936 Mike Hodikoff communicated with the outside world using Attu's wireless radio station. In the summer of 1934, a fleet of Navy ships was sent to survey the Aleutian Islands. During that time, the Navy erected a temporary radio station in the school building at Attu, and the radio men may have taught the chief to transmit messages. Alan May observed that when the Coast Guard came to town, all the villagers came aboard the ship to watch movies (May 1942:135). These cinematic events are not mentioned in the Guard's official notes.





Photo 14. "Agefangel on left, Mike and Anastasia with a group from the village out collecting roots." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)



Photo 15. "Chief Mike and his son Gorga eating lunch when out searching for drift wood at Holtz Bay." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)



Photo 16. "Anastasia, the Chief's wife." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)



Photo 17. "Baskets and Weavers, Attu, Alaska." The girl on the right is Anecia Hodikoff, who became Chief Mike Hodikoff's wife. (Source: UAF, Murie family photos)

May wrote that Schroeder, the trader at Attu, supported the village inhabitants in several ways. He paid Mike Hodikoff sixty cents an hour to work for him and left him in charge of the store when Schroeder was out of town. Schroeder's wife, too, contributed to the welfare of the people there. May wrote,

Mrs. Schroeder sent a dress as a gift to each woman on the island, which seems very nice of her, and she also sent toys for the kiddies. Mrs. Schroeder has never visited the island, but she does this once a year. (May 1936:122).

Furthermore, Schroeder helped the Attuans pay for construction of the new church by advancing them money for lumber against their season's fox trapping. The old church had been a grass-roofed barabara (May 1936: 118). The women of Attu also raised money for the new church by selling baskets in Unalaska (Shapsnikoff and Hudson 1974:41).

*When I said I saw Jesus just before the morning the Japanese landed, an old timer told me that kids see what adults can't see. I believed him because I saw Jesus come down. He did not touch the ground, but He blessed me and then when I turned around to see if anyone was watching, Jesus was gone.*

—Nick Golodoff







Photo 18. The old church. "Greek church on Attu Island, the furthest [sic] point west" (Source: UAF, Wickersham State Historic Site)



Photo 19. The new church, built in 1932. "From the church looking down the main street. View of a wooden plank pathway to the church, with orthodox crosses marking graves on the right." (Source: UAA, Archives & Special Collections, Alan G. May Collection)

May noted that when Schroeder arrived in late July 1936, all the residents were pleased to see him and he seemed like a nice man (May 1936:129).

The school was built in 1932, but it would be almost a decade before any teachers were persuaded to come to Attu for longer than brief summertime visits (Kohlhoff 1995:6). Etta Jones arrived in 1941 to serve as a permanent teacher. Her husband Foster Jones assumed the duty of radio operator for the village. Both were 62 years old and had worked in other schools in Alaska (Breu 2009:149).

► Following two pages. Photo 20. "Attu Native, M.G.7/41." This is likely Annie Borenin, who became Mike Hodikoff's second wife, with her son Victor. She was also Nick Golodoff's father's sister. (Source: Alaska State Library, Evelyn Butler and George Dale)

Photo 21. "Attu Native, M.G.7/41." (Source: Alaska State Library, Evelyn Butler and George Dale)





