

## Chapter 7 Loss of the Sea Otter



**E**conomic considerations were paramount in contracting marriages. Marfa Lukanin was a widow when she married Terentii Makarin at Unalaska in September 1888 and moved to Biorka from Makushin. His wife, Olga Petrov, had died in May. Marfa needed support for herself and her daughter, Seraphenie, while Terentii needed a mother for his two young children, Matfie and Parasovia. Biorka was a more prosperous village than Makushin and Marfa soon settled into her new routine. Her and Terentii's son Andrew was born in August 1889, followed in 1891 by Ilia. In June 1892, as summer began to burst into activity, three-year-old Andrew was probably busy with the job given to all Unanga children: playing. Training would follow eventually, but early childhood was a time for exploration and delight. Andrew, ignoring the spring rain and escaping the watchful eye of his twelve-year-old stepsister, may have slipped outside their home as a strange vessel slowing glided to anchor near the village.

Harrison H. Thornton, his wife Neda, and their traveling companion Ellen Louise Kittredge, were aboard the whaler *Newport* on their way to Cape Prince of Wales where he was to teach school (and be shot to death a year later). Fog had surrounded the small vessel for several days. "The next afternoon the fog suddenly lifted a little," he wrote, "and we found ourselves in an unknown bay with an unknown hamlet, at the foot of unknown cliffs; none of the ship's officers, all of whom were more or less veteran Arctic whalers, seemed to know where we were." They had stumbled into Beaver Inlet and had anchored off Biorka Village.

As we drew near, sounding all the way, not a human being could be seen.... [M]oving still nearer, we could see Greek crosses standing at the head of each lonely grave on the cliff side, and a building surmounted by a Greek cross, probably a church, showing that the natives had belonged, at least nominally, to the Russian church; the almost mountainous cliffs covered with bright green grass, in spite of

the patches of persistent snow lingering here and there, were a grateful sight to our eyes, wearied of the continual sullen gray of that northern sea. At last a single dog was seen, prowling along the beach in search of stray dead fish, cast up by the sea; but no smoke issued from any of the chimneys to show that his master still lived; finally, after creeping along cautiously for ten or fifteen minutes more, we saw a woman come out of one of the houses.

Andrew may have alerted his sister or someone else who came outside to investigate. His own mother probably remained indoors. She was unwell and had only a few months to live. The strangers' brief intrusive exploration of the village was highlighted by a visit to the church.

In spite of the rain which was falling, the ladies were anxious to go ashore, and as we had not set foot on land for three weeks we ran all over the village, peeping in at doors and windows of unoccupied cabins, collecting strange flowers and shells, and trying to establish some sort of understanding with the few women and children we found; for all the men had gone away to hunt sea otter for the Alaska Commercial Company — the usual rough trading house with the sign "A.C. Co." standing there deserted for the time being. We found the old church very interesting, too, with its gorgeous altar cloths, its massive silver candlesticks, its bells manufactured in Russia and ornamented with fine bas relief work.

The name of this little settlement, as well as we could understand the natives, was Berka. After leaving it, a few hours' steaming brought us to Onalaska, the most beautiful little harbor I ever saw....<sup>1</sup>

"The village contains 57 native Aleuts and a Russian Creole trader," wrote Samuel Applegate about Biorka for the 1890 census, "who live in neat and comfortable dwellings, though many of them are but sod huts." Applegate had lived in the Aleutians since 1881 and had hunted sea otters on the schooner *Everett Hays* since 1888. The trader was Ivan Olgin who eventually retired to Unalaska.<sup>2</sup>

Borka was...once a quite prosperous hunting community, which the gradual disappearance of sea otters has reduced to comparative poverty. The hunters still join the parties sent to the reefs of Sannak every season, but they bring but few skins back with them. Fortunately the natural food supply of these natives, derived chiefly from the ocean, is as abundant as ever.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Thornton, "The Trip to Alaska," 392,394.

2 His house, with a few trees, was where the Town Park is now located. Swanson, *The Unknown Islands*, 28. Swanson recalled Olgin commenting on the large population that once distinguished Biorka. Hudson, ed., *Cuttlefish Two*, 64.

3 Applegate, "The Third District," 88.

In Applegate's description, Makushin and Kashega shared many conditions with Chernofski.

On the northeastern shore of Unalaska island a small native settlement exists at the mouth of the bay of Makushin, containing 51 Aleut natives, who maintain themselves by joining the sea-otter parties and by trapping during the winter. Their dwellings are sod huts, and they have a small log chapel, sadly in need of repairs. Mount Makushin, an extinct volcano, looms up to the northward of the little village, and to the eastward extends the vast bay for over 20 miles, its dark, rocky shore colored here and there with the green mounds of long deserted settlements.

A few miles to the southward of Makushin there is another small settlement of natives known as Kashigin, or Kashiga, and containing between 40 and 50 people, who depend entirely upon hunting and fishing for their subsistence. Fish are very abundant, and the hunters reap quite a harvest of fur-seal skins by hunting the animals at the time of their migration to and from the islands through the pass between Unalaska and Umnak islands.<sup>4</sup>

“The same may be said of the village of Chernovsky,” Applegate continued, “but the people of this settlement have the additional advantage of a resort for sea otters in their immediate vicinity among the reefs and kelp beds which fringe this desolate coast. At Chernovsky a trading store was maintained for many years, but it has now been abandoned. The dwellings are chiefly sod huts, but comfortably kept, and a neat little chapel was erected during the more prosperous times of the past.”

All three villages had replaced their barabara-style chapels with log or wood-frame buildings, although exact dates for the new constructions have not been discovered. It was probably when the new Makushin chapel was dedicated that its name was changed from the Chapel of St. Gregory to the Chapel of the Nativity of Christ. Men aboard the U.S. Fish Commission steamer *Albatross* who visited Makushin in 1889 noticed a dozen barabaras for the local residents and a “small frame church painted white.”<sup>5</sup> In 1870 Veniaminov, then the Metropolitan of Moscow, sent an icon of the Transfiguration to Unalaska. Because the chapel at Kashega bore the name Transfiguration, it has been assumed the icon was for that chapel.<sup>6</sup> A new generation of Unangaꝰ men had risen to leadership roles in

---

4 Applegate, “The Third District,” 89.

5 Tanner, Report... Steamer *Albatross*, 244-245.

6 The icon appears in an 1896 inventory of the Church of the Holy Ascension. On the back in Russian is “On the Island of Unalaska to the Church of the Transfiguration of our Lord, 1870 July 27 Moscow” [translation by Barbara Sweetland Smith] along with a stamp with the signature of Metropolitan Innokentii. Smith and Petrivelli, *Making It Right*, 1058-1059.



Chapel of the Epiphany of Our Lord at Chernofski. Photograph courtesy Ray Kranich.

their respective chapels and in the 1890s services were conducted and children baptized by Ivan I. Kudrin at Kashega and Ivan G. Kriukov at Makushin.<sup>7</sup>

The Chapel of the Epiphany of Our Lord at Chernofski, judging only from an exterior photograph taken in its decline, was the most remarkable of all the village chapels and testifies to the wealth sea otter hunting had brought to that community. The double doors leading into the narthex were bordered by plain, almost bas relief, columns, each topped with a graceful three-tiered capital. Above these, a high arch rose to its apex, enclosing an eight-part fan that stretched from side to side like a sunrise. The decorative elements continued near the peak with a small fleur-de-lis. Two brass bells hung from a support just outside the doors.

The Church of the Holy Ascension at Unalaska was in need of repairs and plans were made under Father Nicholas Rysev to completely rebuild the structure. Villages began to contribute furs, usually sea otter pelts, to a special construction fund. In 1891 residents of the three villages joined with people from Nikolski, Chernofski, Akutan, and Unalaska to ask the AC Company to hold this credit until “we agree and authorize the disposition” of the funds.<sup>8</sup> A new cathedral would be consecrated in 1896.



Postcard view of the Church of the Holy Ascension, Unalaska by F.H. Nowell for the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, Seattle. Image courtesy Ray Hudson.

The virtual monopoly this company had enjoyed in the Chain for almost twenty years was ending. Perhaps sensing the upcoming controversies over a decline in seal populations and a rise in pelagic sealing by British and Japanese vessels, the company surrendered its once lucrative contract to the North American

7 Marti Murray, citing a translation of an 1896 Unalaska church book by Lydia T. Black. “Lost Villages: Mini-biographies of the last inhabitants of Attu, Biorka, Chernofski, Kashega, and Makushin.” Draft, 2 August 2005.

8 Letter to the Alaska Commercial Company, August 21, 1891. Library of Congress, Russian Church Collection, D-49.

Commercial Company in 1890 without much of a fight. To implement their new twenty-year contract, the NAC Company established headquarters in the deep-water port of Dutch Harbor, within Unalaska Bay. They constructed a dock and a complex of buildings that included warehouses, residences, a hotel and a store. Even though the AC Company now had neither the income from the Pribilof Islands to buttress sea otter hunting losses nor the supply of sea lion skins and fur seal carcasses necessary for distribution to its hunters, it continued to station traders in the villages, at least for a few more years.

Sea otters had virtually disappeared from the vicinity of most Aleutian villages by the time hunting regulations began to favor Native hunters. Indeed, the catch ascribed to hunters from villages throughout the Chain was primarily taken from islands around Kodiak. Even the once rich otter grounds near Sanak, Belkofski, and Morzhovoi were becoming depleted.<sup>9</sup> The increased employment available to white men in mining and fishing along the Alaska Peninsula prodded the Treasury Department to gradually restrict otter hunting to Natives. After April 14, 1893, white men married to Native women were no longer able to hunt sea otters. The ban on the use of rifles, however, remained in effect. In the spring of 1892, the *Yorktown*, a steel-hulled navy gunboat, joined a trio of revenue cutters and two other navy vessels patrolling off the Alaska Peninsula and into the Bering Sea. Near the end of July, while at False Pass, it seized furs and rifles from ten Morzhovoi and six Belkofski hunters. "The loss of outfits and catch," wrote C.H. Townsend, "left the people of Belkofski and Morzhovoi completely destitute." He was a naturalist aboard the U.S. Fisheries steamer *Albatross* and he urged the government to make restitution for these losses. "The hunters of Makushin, Kashega and Chernofski whom I interviewed," he wrote, "were so frightened over the fate of the Belkofski and Morzhovoi hunters that they returned home without having taken any otters." Unable to repay the company for their outfits and advances, "they had little hope of assistance from that source for the coming winter." Townsend's memorandum urged that Native hunters be allowed to use rifles. "I am greatly interested in the preservation of the sea otter," he wrote, "but still more interested in the welfare of the native Aleuts who are dependent on its capture for a livelihood." He mentioned that for "the young men who have grown up accustomed to guns[,] the spear is merely an accessory." Rifles had become irreplaceable tools for subsistence.

The price of a single sea otter will enable a native to purchase clothing and other necessaries, while food, with the exception of fish, is procured to a considerable extent by means of the gun, with which he shoots seals, sea lions, porpoise, and all kinds of sea birds. Without his gun he cannot obtain skins of the sea lion from which his boat is always made. The boat (*bidarkie*) is absolutely essential to all movement in this Archipelago whether for hunting or fishing. From the sea lion is derived also the material for the waterproof garments always used by the Aleutian people. Six sea lion skins are required to properly construct a two hatch boat, and these must be renewed nearly every year.

---

9 Hooper, *Sea-Otter Banks of Alaska*, 7.

The shot gun is constantly used in taking sea birds, for with these people sea birds are not only used for food, but their skins are largely sewed into clothing. In brief, the Aleut is dependent for food and clothing on his boat, gun and fishing line. He lives by the sea; what he derives from the land is an unimportant feature in his subsistence.<sup>10</sup>

He feared a crisis if Aleuts were forced to return to hunting for essentially “vanished” game with “almost forgotten methods.”

The ban on Natives owning rifles was lifted on December 2, 1896. That year had been exceptionally lucky for the seventeen Makushin hunters. A visitor to Unalaska was shown “a box of sea-otter skins” which the AC Company had purchased from them for “some 12,000 dollars.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, sea otters were so depleted that the AC Company began removing its agents from small villages and closing its stores. “The low prices prevailing in the London market and the constant and rapid decrease of the sea-otters,” lamented Rudolph Neumann on September 20, 1897,

has made that branch of the trade unprofitable, and has forced us to abandon, in this district, the following stations: Woznesensky, Belkofsky, Morzhovoi, Sanak, Akutan, Biorka, Makushin, Kashega, Tschernofsky, and Umnak.

The natives of these ten settlements supported themselves entirely by hunting sea-otters, but, in consequence of the disappearance of these animals in the localities above mentioned, had to be transported in schooners during the last few years to the remaining sea-otter grounds in the vicinity of Kadiak Island, which now have, also, ceased to be profitable, and the people will eventually be forced to rely on Government aid for their subsistence.<sup>12</sup>

The agents at Atka and Akutan purchased the company stores, and Henry Dirks and Hugh McGlashan continued to make goods available to residents. The stores at Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega were simply closed.

In September 1897 C. L. Hooper, commanding officer of the Bering Sea Patrol, detailed a devastating decline in sea otters with predictably profound results for communities. In several particulars, he repeated Townsend’s recommendations. He included a household census for fourteen villages. Compiled with the help of Father Alexander Kedrovsky at Unalaska, the report enumerated 1,165 residents in the Chain. In only a few villages were men identified specifically as hunters, but if all the men from sixteen to sixty were counted there were 331 who were

---

10 Townsend, C.H., memorandum, April 13, 1896. Submitted to the Secretary of the Treasury by the U. S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries. NARA, RG 22.

11 Gray, Maria Freeman. *The Alaskan and Herald Combined*. September 12, 1896.

12 Report of the Governor of Alaska to the Secretary of the Interior. Government Printing Office. Washington, D.C. 1897:38.

probably sea otter hunters. Townsend had counted 347 hunters in sixteen villages from Unga to Attu.

The 1898 hunt was thwarted by an embargo on hunting otters from vessels.

In his official report for that year, Governor John G. Brady recommended that otter hunting be entirely prohibited and ludicrously suggested Aleuts should work in fish canneries or cut wood “along the Yukon River.” In 1899 he wrote that no more than ten or fifteen dollars was received by each hunter for his season’s catch. In 1900 he reiterated that Aleuts should be “constrained to seek work in the canneries and in the mines and to cultivate gardens.” That year he emphasized how otter hunting kept those “who engage in it miserably poor and always in debt to the store which outfits them and conveys them to the hunting grounds.” This allegation was passionately disputed by Samuel Applegate whose sea otter hunting career had begun in 1892 when he had the *Everett Hays* built in California.<sup>13</sup>

The influenza and measles epidemic of 1900 followed the northern coast of Alaska and arrived at Unalaska in August where, according to Dr. Albert Newhall, “it was introduced by a boy from St. Michael.” This was true for the influenza, but the measles arrived later and probably came off a vessel from the south. In any event, the “Great Sickness,” as it came to be called, “struck with lightning force and within days whole villages were sick or dying.”<sup>14</sup> As many as 2,000 people died in the Territory, with some villages losing between 25 and 50 percent of their residents. Newhall wrote that about one third of the Native population in the territory died. In late July 1900 Dutch Harbor, along with Nome, was quarantined under an order from the Marine Hospital Corps.<sup>15</sup> The epidemic was compounded by tuberculosis and pneumonia and later outbreaks of whooping cough and small pox. The commanding officer of the *Rush* reported that measles “had assumed fatal form” at Unalaska and many Natives had died.<sup>16</sup> According to a Sitka newspaper, by October there had been 17 deaths at Unalaska.<sup>17</sup> The illness spread to Belkofski, Unga and other locations and by 10 November the newspaper reported 39 deaths at Unalaska and between 12 and 15 at Belkofski. A report from the Unalaska public school, written by Frances Mann, mentioned a fall and winter epidemic of measles “and its sequel” that “caused the death of about one third of the population.” A 1901 report made by F. J. Thornburg, assistant surgeon attached to a briefly manned hospital at Dutch Harbor, included information received from P.B. Kashevaroff. According to this priest, from a population that had stood at 353 the previous year, 116 had died

---

13 Gross, Nancy. “Samuel Applegate: Practical Dilettante” A paper presented to the Alaska Historical Society symposium, *Commerce in Alaska’s Past*, October 21, 1988:5. Applegate’s extensive correspondence documents the final years of sea otter hunting. In 1893 he initiated a long-term commitment to Nikolski Village that continued until hunting was banned in 1911.

14 Fortuine, *Chills and Fever*, 215-226

15 San Francisco Call, 29 July 1900.

16 W.H. Cushing to Secretary of the Treasury, September 8, 1900. NARA, MF 720 (Alaska File of the Office of the Secretary of the Treasury, 1868-1903), Roll 8.

17 *The Alaskan and Herald Combine*, October 27, 1900.

during the past year. Among these there were 30 deaths ascribed to “cold,” 24 to tuberculosis, 33 to measles, 7 to old age, and 5 to drowning.<sup>18</sup>

The surgeon aboard the U.S. Steamer *Manning* reported that measles had been responsible for the deaths of 47 people at Atka during the winter of 1900-1901.<sup>19</sup> If that is accurate, it meant approximately 37 percent of the village had died. The situation at Attu was unknown; however the following year he visited that village and found the health of the community of 60 had been and was very good. Nevertheless, Attu’s population only five years earlier had been 98. Mortality figures for the three villages are not known. At Biorka, Terentii Makarin’s third wife, Irina Kochutin, whom he had married in April 1896, died September 2, 1900, perhaps a victim of this epidemic. Their son Petr was three years old.

After the AC Company ended its direct involvement in sea otter hunting, men had to make their own way to the otter grounds if they were unable to work for one of the few private vessels still pursuing the otter. Travel was by skin boat. In 1900 storms forced men from Akutan to camp on Ugamak Island, the most eastern of the Krenitzin Islands, for three weeks before crossing the pass to Unimak and on to the otter grounds some 100 miles away. For men from more distant villages travel was always problematical, if not impossible.

In May 1901 Applegate collected four petitions signed by 105 hunters from Unalaska, Kashega, Chernofski, Makushin, Nikolski, and Akutan asking that they be allowed to hunt either from vessels or from shore. There were 36 signers from Unalaska, 16 from Makushin, 9 from Kashega, 11 from Chernofski, 21 from Nikolski, and 12 from Akutan. To his long cover letter to the Secretary of the Treasury, Applegate appended support from two other schooner owners: Hugh McGlashan of the *J.P. Ward* and W.B. Handy of the *Selma*. Another individual engaged in the hunt was Brown [Bjorn] Benson of Morzhovoi. On April 21, 1906, the agent at the North American Commercial Company reported that Benson planned to take Biorka men sea otter hunting. However, two months later the agent noted that because Benson had not fed them properly they had deserted his vessel and returned home. A few of the men came to Dutch Harbor where they reported having taken one sea otter by the time they left.<sup>20</sup>

The Biorka men were able to hunt migrating fur seals during the fall and winter of 1905-1906. Deputy U.S. marshal Harmon said that he would not prosecute the killing of fur seals when taken for food “but he would like to get at the fellows that are buying the skins from the natives.”<sup>21</sup> In 1908 Harmon wrote, “In the three years that I have been here there has been no persecution against the natives, for

---

18 “Rapid Decline of the Aleuts.” San Francisco Call, October 7, 1901.

19 A. Lanson Weeks, report of June 28, 1901. NARA, MF 720 (Alaska File of the Office of the Secretary of the Treasury, 1868-1903), Roll 9.

20 April 21 and June 21, 1906, North American Commercial Company, Log Copy Book, August 11, 1905 – October 23, 1906.

21 January 8, 1906, North American Commercial Company, Log Copy Book, August 11, 1905 – October 23, 1906.

killing seal, and there is no record in this office of any ever having been made. All the seal that come in here are pups, the skins have no value, but the meat is highly prized by the natives.”<sup>22</sup> The Biorka men sold salted skins at Unalaska, frequently to Nadir C. Kafoury, who had a small store in opposition to the AC Company. If



Nadir C. Kafoury.  
Photograph courtesy  
Stephen Kafoury.

illegal, the sales were not exactly a secret. The NAC Company agent asked a group of men from Biorka how much they got for seal skins and they told him \$2.50 for each one.<sup>23</sup> In January 1906, the deputy U.S. commissioner, Nicholas Bolshanin, reported that Kafoury had forty skins on hand for which Biorka men had been paid \$2.50 a skin.<sup>24</sup>

With less income from sea otter hunting, villagers became even more dependent on subsistence fishing and hunting. Anything that threatened these pursuits caused alarm. In February 1890 Bogoslof Island burst into another round of violent activity and ash was carried to Unalaska for several days. “The Aleuts have been terrified at all their villages on Unalaska,” George Davidson wrote, “and

they recall the traditions which relate much suffering to have occurred to them after great convulsions and earthquakes among the Islands.”<sup>25</sup> Bogoslof had been last active in 1883 and 1884, after decades of relative quiet. In 1906 another series of eruptions began. The following summer the Chain was swept by storms that prevented regular hunting. From May 12 to August 25, the men aboard the *Everett Hays* were able to be out on the water a mere 119 hours, taking six otters. Benson’s *Emma* hunted only in July and took two pelts. Both vessels focused on the area around the Sannak Reefs. Foul weather also plagued the 1908 season. Nevertheless, the *Emma* was out 45 days and took six otters. The *Everett Hays* secured 19 otters between May 17 and August 18. During one 38-day period, the *Everett Hays* was able to hunt only 11 hours, but Applegate’s men were lucky and landed among otters every time they went out.

Father Alexander Kedrovsky left Unalaska in July 1908 after 14 years of furious activity that had seen the rebuilding of the Church of the Holy Ascension into a magnificent cathedral, the defense of Orthodoxy against a concerted Protestant

---

22 C.C. Harman to [name blurred], November 1908. Correspondence Copy Book, 1903-1910. Pat Locke Archival Collection, Museum of the Aleutians.

23 January 13, 1906, North American Commercial Company, Log Copy Book, August 11, 1905 – October 23, 1906.

24 January 12, 1906, North American Commercial Company, Log Copy Book, August 11, 1905 – October 23, 1906.

25 Davidson, “Volcanic Eruption in the Bering Sea,” 271.



Father Alexander Kedrovsky, his wife and children. ASL-P243-1-086, Michael Z. Vinokourov Photograph Collection.

attack led by missionaries and government officials, and what would be the last round of publications in *Unangam tunuu* for over half a century. Kedrovsky had kept a close eye on village chapels and his detailed financial accounts exist in the Library of Congress. In 1896 he published a summary of conditions throughout his parish, but it contained little specific information other than that the chapels at Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega were comfortable and adequately maintained. The Makushin, Kashega and Chernofski complex had a total of 177 residents in 1896, fairly evenly distributed. Makushin had 60 residents while Kashega and Chernofski had 53 and 64 respectively. Biorka had 51 residents while nearby Akutan had 74. Kedrovsky continued the distinction between creoles and Aleuts, although his reasons for doing so are unclear. For example, he divided Makushin's residents into 37 creoles and 23 Aleuts, while Biorka and Kashega were said to have all Aleut populations. (Iliuliuk was recorded as having 152 Aleuts and 137 creoles along with 21 individuals connected to clergy with the Orthodox church.)

On April 21, 1910, Congress passed the Fur Seal Act, Public Law 146. This ended the practice of leasing the Pribilof Islands' fur seal harvest to private companies and put management under the Department of Commerce and Labor. It also ended sea otter hunting within territorial waters. "I presume you noticed the new Game Regulations and perhaps are under the impression that it seriously affects my business," Applegate wrote to J.A. Sterling in Fairbanks. "I assure you it does not in the slightest. I had a long talk with Mr. Nagel, Secretary of Commerce and Labor, in whose office the regulations originated. As I do not hunt sea-otters within the Territory, but on the open ocean, outside of the limits of Alaska, the law does not apply in my case. My skins are always entered through the Custom House." Nevertheless, the regulations had an impact on the actual hunt that year as he explained. "The sea-otter hunting the past summer was a failure. My natives heard about the new regulations, and some busy bodys and trouble makers made it their special business to say things to them so that they became frightened and would not hunt longer, and I thereby lost the whole of August."<sup>26</sup> They hunted only twice while out and secured four otters.

In 1910 the *Everett Hays* was joined by a new vessel, the *Elvira*. On July 22, 1908, the Japanese vessels, *Kensai Maru* and *Saki Maru*, were seized by the Revenue Cutter *Bear* within territorial waters off St. Paul Island. They were taken to Unalaska and eventually sold at an auction where Fred Schroeder, agent for the North American Commercial Company at Dutch Harbor, purchased them for a little under \$5,000.<sup>27</sup> He renamed the *Kensai Maru* the *Elvira* and hired Christian Theodore Pedersen, who was on his way to becoming one of the best-known captains in northern waters. In April 1908, Pedersen married Sophia Reinken, daughter of the former AC Company agent at Chernofski. In 1910, her son Henry, aged 15, accompanied his stepfather on the otter hunt after an acrimonious dispute between his parents and the director of

---

26 Copybook. Letter to J. A. Sterling. September 17, 1910. p. 457 Papers of Samuel Applegate, 1875-1925. 0003 MS Alaska State Historical Library.

27 *Seward Gateway*, April 30, 1910.

the Jesse Lee Home where Henry had been living. Henry Swanson later provided a detailed and important account of that season.<sup>28</sup>

According to Swanson, Emilian Berikoff of Unalaska was hired as chief of the 24 hunters who came from Unalaska, Biorka, Kashega, Chernofski, and Makushin (whose chief Elia Shapsnikoff was among them.) They hunted from two-man kayaks. By 1910 the Unalaska men were using dories and skiffs and most of the skin boats for this hunt came from the smaller villages. Berikoff's kayak was covered with cowhide, from animals butchered by the A.C. Company. "It worked fine," Swanson said, "except the first time they launched the baidarkies, there at Sanak. They [Berikoff and his hunting partner] were the first ones to go overboard and they started to sink! The cow skins leaked, or the seams. They had to launch a couple of baidarkies quick and go out and rescue them. But they fixed that. I guess they soaked their baidarky and oiled it."

They hunted from Unalaska to Kodiak, from March into late August. "The hunters would be out all day," Swanson said. "When they wanted to rest and walk around they'd get the baidarkies all in one bunch and it would be like a large raft. They'd take turns walking around on top." When fog closed in around the ship, a horn was used to signal the hunters. If the fog was unusually thick, a small cannon was fired. Swanson described how rifles had replaced spears.

The hunters had rifles and shotguns and spears. The only one knew how to use the spear was old man [Emelian] Berikoff. [He was about 45 years old in 1910.] Aleut spear thing was a rough thing to handle, I mean to be accurate with. They had that stick [throwing board] and held it in their hand and the spears laid flat. I know. I tried it. It takes a lot of practice to throw them straight because you have to let them go out at the right time. If you went a little further and stopped, the spear would go down. And if you held that thing a little sideways it would go up this way. They used to target practice off the schooner. The only one that really could hit anything with them was old man Berikoff and he was really good with them. He would throw one of those spears out far as he could. Of course, they were built so they floated point downward. They'd stick out of the water about a foot. They worked this wood until it did that, you know. And then he'd use that first spear as a target and throw all the others in a circle round it. He must have had 25 spears. I don't know why he had that many 'cause he never used them. They used guns, but then they had them. He'd go out there and pick up his spears. The rest of the hunters would be throwing spears in every direction! Well, but they had never used them, but he had before.<sup>29</sup>

---

28 Swanson, *The Unknown Islands*, 29-33

29 Swanson, *The Unknown Islands*, 30-31.

The *Elvira* caught in the ice, ASL-P390-040, Richard G. and Mary S. Culbertson Photograph Collection.



It is significant that by 1910 even the men from smaller villages had lost expertise with the spear. Swanson recalled that hunters on the *Elvira* took 14 otters that summer while Applegate's crew took nine. (Officers aboard the U.S. revenue cutter *Rush* said the *Elvira* men took 12 otters.) Hunters were paid \$300 for each skin, worth over \$2,000 on the commercial market. When the *Elvira* arrived back at Unalaska on September 2, it was boarded by officers from the Revenue Cutter *Rush* who found the ship had hunted under a permit from the deputy collector of customs. Captain Foley of the Bering Sea Patrol wrote that this approval was not sufficient. "She should not be permitted again to engage in sealing or in trade," he wrote, "without proper documents."<sup>30</sup>

In 1909 a new priest arrived at Unalaska with his wife and daughter. Although Alexander Panteleev's stay was briefer than Kedrovsky's, he established such deep ties with the local people that after 1934, when he became the Bishop of Alaska, he returned for extended visits. During the summer of 1910 he visited Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega along with other villages as far west as Attu. His descriptions are detailed and sympathetic. Panteleev took advantage of the *Elvira* returning sea otter hunters to their villages for his visit to Kashega and Makushin. He boarded the vessel on September 4 just as a storm descended on Unalaska Bay and kept the vessel at anchor for five days. When he arrived at Kashega, the priest found nine small barabaras. The village was permeated by the scent of salmon drying on racks. He noticed a rock weir or dam that had been constructed in the river for ensuring a good catch. Dried fish could be stored longer than smoked fish and was the staple of diet during the winter.<sup>31</sup> It was eaten with seal or sea lion oil without bread or salt. Bread was a luxury. The priest was given a room in the chief's home where the walls and floor were

30 Foley to the Secretary of the Treasury. September 8, 1910. RG 26, file 611, box 1834.

31 Recorded conversation with Platonida Gromoff, Sophia Pletnikoff, and Nick Galaktionoff [with Ray Hudson]. January/February 1974.

wooden while a net hung over the ceiling area to prevent soil and grass from filtering onto the floor. Sobriety was not universal in the village, he noted, and numerous people suffered with eye infections. He learned that the population had increased by only a single individual over the past three years. The Chapel of the Transfiguration of the Lord was bright and clean. Following liturgy and communion, the villagers came to the chief's home for tea. On entering, they greeted their leader much as they would a priest. The chief sat in a corner and, as each individual approached, he extended a hand that was then taken and kissed three times.



Panteleev's trip from Kashega to Makushin was by skin boat and began with near disaster. He was dressed in a kamleika and wore Unangaġ boots. His three-holed kayak, one owned by the church, developed a serious leak a short way from shore. His oarsmen sped back to land, but the two men with him were soaked. The boat was repaired and the next day they arrived at Makushin after a five-hour trip. He went immediately to the Chapel of the Nativity and found it in beautiful shape with its iconostasis rising in two tiers from the carpeted floor. Makushin had three wooden houses and five barabaras. The population had increased by two males during the past three years. Residents were suffering from a scalp malady that produced baldness in a number of people.

Alexander Panteleev on Akutan Island, Davenport Collection. Photograph given by the Unalaska City School to the Museum of the Aleutians.

Alexander Panteleev dressed in a kamleika and standing beside his kayak, Davenport Collection. Photograph given by the Unalaska City School to the Museum of the Aleutians.



Earlier that summer, in late June, he had accompanied Biorka people on the trail that led into the mountains east of Unalaska, down the pass to Ugadaga Bay, and across the inlet to Sedanka Island. They walked through a profusion of white anemones while ravens cavorted in the air and spring birds chirped. The trip across the inlet took three hours because of headwinds, but when they arrived the entire village was on the beach and the chapel bells were ringing. Biorka had no wooden dwellings. There were ten barabaras, larger than those at Akutan and, in many respects, he found them much like regular Western homes buried in the ground. The priest was treated to tea at the chief's home while a tent was erected for him near the chapel. He gathered some sheaves of dried grass for use as a mattress. On entering the Chapel of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, he saw walls covered with decorative wallpaper and the floor carpeted with rugs. The overall impression was one of cleanliness and light. He congratulated the local people on the care they gave to it. Significantly, when listing occupations for the men at Biorka, Panteleev omitted sea otter hunting. Men fished, hunted fox and sea lions, and occasionally found summer employment on the wharves at Unalaska and Dutch Harbor. The population had remained steady over the past two years and he credited the people with living temperate and sober lives. He thought Biorka's relative proximity to Unalaska contributed to making the people more sophisticated than residents of more remote villages.

Although the priest perceived a resiliency in the people as a whole, his summary of conditions was not optimistic and he found their potential far from realized. He thought that with more opportunities they could yet develop into a strong nation. He was told that the population had declined due to disease and epidemics, and as proof he was shown numerous abandoned village sites. He concluded that people needed education, better housing, diversified

employment, and improved means of transportation. Barabaras, which he characterized as damp caves, remained necessary because of the prohibitive cost of lumber. Between nine and ten individuals lived in each home. There was no regular transportation between villages and Unalaska apart from skin boats and these were usable primarily during summer months when people arrived to trade fox skins for a pittance and to purchase goods at exorbitant prices. People occupied themselves with subsistence hunting and fishing. The preparation of dried fish for winter was of paramount importance since it formed the core of the local diet. The priest suggested that, with government assistance, Unanga could take advantage of the plentiful grass on the islands and develop cattle ranching.

At Biorka the priest brought up the idea of consolidating smaller villages, including Biorka, into a single location. The people replied that they would not leave while they could still trap fox and secure enough fish from the waters around the village. This conversation suggests Panteleev had had discussions with D.P. Foley of the U.S. Revenue Cutter service. While stationed with the Bering Sea Patrol at Unalaska for several years, Foley had recommended consolidating villages into a single location. This would, in effect, accelerate what was occurring naturally as people moved into Unalaska where there was at least the chance of employment along with access to limited services. "If the people could be gathered together in two or three villages fairly convenient to Unalaska," he wrote in 1910, "the problem of caring for them would be much simplified." He initially suggested Chernofski as the primary settlement. A year later, he recommended the consolidation take place at Unalaska where he thought there was suitable land that could be taken from excess claimed by both the AC Company and the Methodist mission, the Jesse Lee Home. He urged that Unanga men be hired to build houses and install a water system. Like Panteleev, Foley found people resistant to this suggestion. Significantly, he attributed this reluctance to cultural divisions. "To this, however, they are much opposed," he wrote. "Like other people they have a love for their native places and are moreover remnants of tribes that once waged bitter warfare against one another and some of the old animosities still live though the war spirit is dead."<sup>32</sup>

Two years later, in 1912, H.O. Schaleben, superintendent of the southwest educational district, recommended that all Unanga west of Unalaska be relocated to Unalaska. He wrote that the infrequent travel between villages was only by kayak and was very hazardous. He found Chernofski in the most desperate straits. However, when asked why they didn't move to Unalaska "they answered that...they could not very well move since they had no houses at any other place."<sup>33</sup>

---

32 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, October 20, 1910. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1834.

33 H.O. Schaleben to W. T. Lopp, July 12, 1912. NARA RG-75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, Entry 804.

Foley made an impassioned plea on behalf of Aleuts:

This is but little to ask of the Government in the name of humanity, and these people are most deserving. They have never cost the Government anything except for the establishment and maintenance of two schools, one here and the other at Atka.... They have never cost a dollar for soldiers to keep them in order as have the Indians of the plains; perhaps if they had, they would not have been so long neglected. They have never had any continued medical care or treatment, no treatment at all in fact except what could be given by the surgeons of the Revenue Cutters in their occasional flying visits, and yet it is known that they are suffering, not as individuals but as a people, from some of the most dreadful known diseases....<sup>34</sup>

Pervasive sickness and general ill health, the result of prolonged poverty, were reported by the service's medical officers. "The village of Akutan...is probably the most wretched in all the Aleutian Islands, with Kashega and Makushin close seconds," declared Foley in 1910.<sup>35</sup> The people at Makushin had become enervated and were "illy clad in ragged garments." The village reflected a people suffering from "favus [a disease usually affecting the scalp], trachoma, pediculosis, pulmonary tuberculosis and kindred complaints."<sup>36</sup> People lived in barabaras but were unable to make satisfactory repairs for lack of materials. Whereas once lumber had been purchased for flooring and walls, now the floors were packed dirt. Beds were platforms with dried wild rye grass. People covered themselves with "old rags and blankets."<sup>37</sup> Occasionally a few men could find employment at Unalaska, but to reach there involved a long boat trip down Makushin Bay and a six to eight hour hike across the mountains. When they brought furs to Unalaska, they received "a ruinous rate of trade with the Alaska Commercial Company, the most inimical factor in this country to the natives."

At Biorka, the homes were found to be unclean and unsanitary. Even the best contained very little furniture, and that was almost worthless. Flour, tea, and other basic foods could be purchased only at Unalaska after crossing Beaver Inlet, leaving their boats in Ugadaga Bay, and hiking "a hard trail over the hills about seven miles." He repeated Pantelev's assertion about the pittance received for fox pelts relative to the cost of goods. "The amount of money realized by the community," Foley wrote, "must be very small in comparison to their needs for food and clothing."<sup>38</sup>

---

34 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, October 9, 1911. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1835.

35 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, June 28, 1910. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1834.

36 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, August 10, 1911. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1835.

37 P.A. Carter, surgeon on the *Unalga* to his commanding officer, May 30, 1913. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1838.

38 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, September 16, 1911. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1835.

At Chernofski, once the most profitable of sea otter hunting villages, conditions were even worse. In 1910 the people were said to be destitute.<sup>39</sup> The people were “extremely poor” and “during the winter they are in dire straits for want of food.”<sup>40</sup> Salmon had disappeared from the vicinity and the hunting of fur seals was forbidden.

And yet, according to other reports, people showed the resiliency that Pantelev had noted. At Makushin there was an abundance of fish and ducks and some ptarmigan. People at Kashega kept their village neat and they were better clothed. The sea around Biorka had an ample supply of fish. The barabaras built at Makushin were higher and better ventilated than those at Volcano Bay, now used as a summer camp. The Chernofski barabaras were fairly large and had good ventilation, wooden floors, glass windows, and were fairly well furnished. The people were well clothed and their homes were clean.

Disease accompanied poverty until conditions became so bad that a captain of the *Unalga* recommended to his superior that cutters not transport villagers for fear of infecting the crew. “Even the healthy appearing natives,” he wrote, “no doubt have all these diseases [,] consumption, syphilis and favus of the scalp, in a greater or less degree.”<sup>41</sup> In contrast to this attitude, Reynolds wrote, “The people are very hospitable, and take in strangers as well as friends.”<sup>42</sup>

Signed on March 8, 1911, a further regulation prohibited any hunting or killing of sea otters until November 1, 1920. A month after returning from his hunt on the *Elvira*, Fred Schroeder wrote the Bureau of Fisheries for clarification, asking if both hunting from shore and by schooners outside territorial waters were prohibited.<sup>43</sup> The *Elvira*'s hunters had taken their twelve otters at least 30 miles offshore. Shortly afterwards he wrote that the prohibition against sea otter hunting would be a great hardship on Native people. “The work around Unalaska is getting scarcer every year, the wages paid for this work are the same as they were ten years ago, while the price of provisions has advanced as much as fifty percent.” He also noted that another otter hunter, Samuel Applegate, was under the impression he could take a crew out hunting in the spring of 1911.<sup>44</sup>

He was correct. On May 25, 1911, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Fisheries wrote to the AC Company that hunting sea otters outside the three-mile limit was permitted under current regulations. Both the *Everett Hays* and the *Elvira* took part in what would be the last sea otter hunt. The *Everett Hays* returned to

39 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, October 20, 1910. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1834.

40 B. J. Duffy, assistant surgeon on the *Tahoma*, to the commanding officer, June 15, 1912. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1837.

41 Crisp to M.E. Reynolds, July 12, 1913. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1838.

42 Reynolds to Secretary of the Treasury, November 19, 1913. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1838.

43 Schroeder to the Bureau of Fisheries, October 4, 1910. RG 22, box 46, folder 259: Sea Otter 1910-1923.

44 Schroeder to Secretary of Commerce and Labor, November 12, 1910. RG 22, box 46, folder 259: Sea Otters 1910-1923.

Unalaska on August 26, 1911, with a catch of eight sea otters. The *Elvira*, with hunters from Unalaska, Makushin and Chernofski, came into port the next day with eleven pelts. Applegate feared regulations were about to be tightened even further. On September 10 he asked the deputy Collector of Customs at Unalaska, N.E. Bolshanin, to certify that the 23 otter skins in his possession had been legally taken “in the open ocean and outside the Territorial Limits of Alaska” between 1909 and 1911.<sup>45</sup>

While the otter hunt had been in progress, representatives from the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and Russia had been meeting. On July 7, 1911, a Treaty for the Preservation and Protection of Fur Seals was signed in Washington, D.C. These nations agreed to preserve and protect sea otters and fur seals. One clause specifically made it illegal to “kill, capture, or pursue” sea otters outside of territorial waters. On October 21, the Commissioner of Commerce cabled the Collector of Customs in San Francisco that under the new treaty all sea otter hunting in the North Pacific Ocean and “tributary waters” will be prohibited from December 15 for the next fifteen years. When Applegate heard this treaty was being considered, he told D.P. Foley that if it were enacted he would kill off his fox on Samalga, sell his schooner, and close his store at Nikolski.<sup>46</sup> On April 28, 1912, he wrote to his brother that the treaty stopping all otter hunting had been signed. “So now no more will be killed by those respective citizens for the next fifteen years. Thus ends my otter hunting.”<sup>47</sup> The Nikolski people owed him \$830.17 for supplies he had advanced for recent hunts.<sup>48</sup> He would have to find other ways to collect.

In 1908 Applegate had written, “It would have been much better for me had I never started in hunting otter.” This was an exaggeration. That year he had \$3,036 worth of sea otter pelts on hand. On September 30, 1908, he shipped 20 sea otters to Alfred Fraser in New York City for transport to London. In 1909 he had \$10,885 in unsold otter skins. A photograph taken October 14, 1911, by Noah Davenport, shows a string of around 20 otters. On the reverse, Davenport wrote, “If you owned this line of skins you would be well off. They are sea otter and worth \$12,000. I took the picture for the owner.”<sup>49</sup> Applegate’s net profits from otter hunting, fox trapping, and his store operations for the years 1906 through 1909 amounted to over \$26,812.00.<sup>50</sup>

---

45 Bolshanin, N.E. September 10, 1911. Papers of Samuel Applegate, 1875-1925. 0003 MS Alaska State Historical Library. Box 2, folder 10. (Copy received from Jeff Dickrell.)

46 Foley to Secretary of the Treasury, October 9, 1911. NARA, RG 26, file 611, box 1834.

47 Copybook, letter to Brother John, September 10, 1905. Papers of Samuel Applegate, 1875-1925. 0003 MS Alaska State Historical Library.

48 “Debts owed to me when ceased hunting,” Papers of Samuel Applegate, 1875-1925. 0003 MS Alaska State Historical Library.

49 Swanson, *The Unknown Islands*, 33. Photograph from Davenport Collection, Unalaska City School. Gift of Margaret Boaz.

50 Statement of business for the past 5 years. Papers of Samuel Applegate, 1875-1925. 0003 MS Alaska State Historical Library.

The summer that sea otter hunting ended, the Revenue Cutter Service was asked to distribute about 600 barrels of seal meat and 100 kegs of seal oil from the Pribilof Islands to villages in the Chain.<sup>51</sup> In January 1910 Joseph L. Brown, the Bureau of Indian Affairs teacher at Unalaska, distributed food to Chernofski, Kashega, Makushin, Biorka, and Akutan as he had the previous year.<sup>52</sup> A people who had fashioned a world of plenty from the sea were destitute. Not only were sea otters gone, but that vital subsistence mammal the sea lion was disappearing from locations near villages. The sea itself had become impoverished.

---

51 May 29, 1911. NARA, RG 26, file 611-62, box 1835.

52 Brown to Harlan Updegraff, January 11, 1910. Supply Agent of the Department of the Interior to Updegraff, December 6, 1909. NARA RG-75, Letters Received. Entry 804.



Right: Alexei Meronovich Yatchmeneff; left: his son John. Photograph courtesy University of Alaska, Fairbanks.