

## Chapter 10

### Kashega



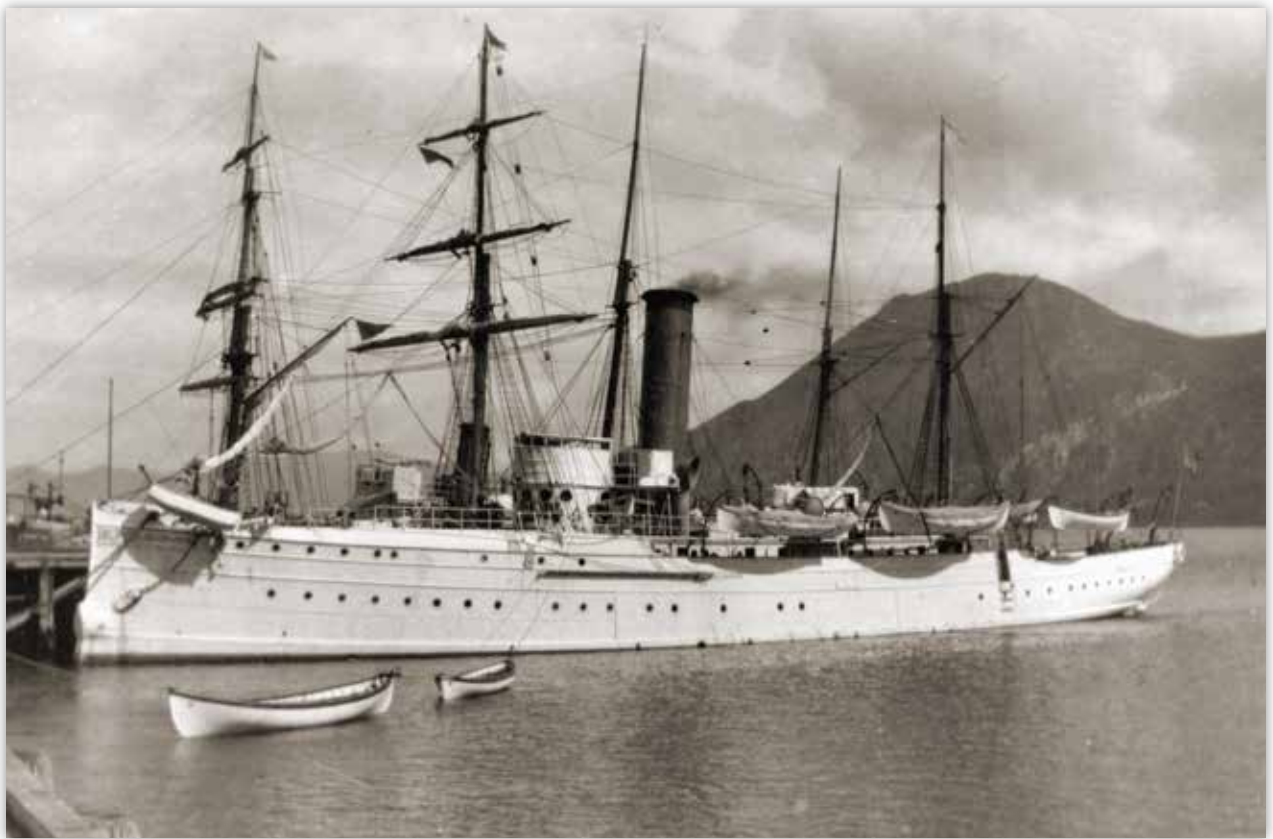
While economic ties among villages dissipated, deep family relationships endured. Sophie Pletnikoff's family was not unusual in the complexity of relationships extending across several villages. Her mother, Olga Shapsnikoff, had been born at Unalaska around 1873 and had moved to Chernofski following her marriage to Joseph Borenin, a sea otter hunter from that village. By 1900 they had two daughters, Feckla and Okalena, and a son, Michael. Joseph was absent from his family for months while hunting sea otters around Sanak.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, Feckla was seventeen or eighteen and married to Timothy Talanoff. Michael had apparently died (he had been only two in 1900) and his place had been taken by three-year old Vasilii, who would live to adulthood. In addition to Okalena, there were now three other girls: Oleta, Lucy, and Sophia, who had been born September 14, 1907. While she was still an infant, the family moved to Kashega. Sophie speculated that they left Chernofski because her mother did not get along with her brothers-in-law but the reasons were probably as much economic as social.

In the spring of 1914, Joseph and his son Vasilii were gathering wood on the other side of the village creek when a man saw the boy standing by himself. It had rained and the stream was swollen with water.

"Where's your daddy?" the man asked.

"My daddy's chopping wood," Vasilii replied. "He's sleeping down there, down the beach."

"Aye-ya-ya!" Sophie said, remembering that day.<sup>2</sup> Olga, George Borenin, John and Nikefor Denisoff ran to where Joseph had collapsed on the beach and died.<sup>3</sup> Not long afterwards, in April, Olga gave birth to her last child, a girl whom she named Dora. She and her children were taken by baidarka to Makushin where her brother Elia Shapsnnikoff was chief. Sophie remembered seeing water through the skin covering.<sup>4</sup>



The U.S. Revenue cutter Manning at Dutch Harbor, 1905, ASL-P79-019, U.S. Revenue Cutter Service Photograph Collection.

On August 15, 1915, the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Manning* visited Makushin and found three frame houses and six barabaras for the 44 people (27 adults and 17 children). It is likely Elia Shapsnikoff lived in one of the frame houses, since he was chief and had moved to the village from Unalaska. The only death the previous year had been an infant. “The houses and barabaras are very dirty, damp and foul smelling,” wrote the ship’s assistant surgeon. “The water supply is obtained from a large rapid running mountain stream near the village. As in the other villages there are no privies and there is much evidence of soil pollution by feces.”<sup>5</sup>

Olga and her children were divided among different homes. They spent time at the old village at Volcano Bay where Sophie recalled the barabaras were windowless and depended on openings in the roof for light. These were closed from the outside at night.<sup>6</sup> Sophie again speculated that her mother and her aunt were not compatible and after a few months, perhaps one winter, they returned to Kashega. They were there by the summer of 1916 because in June the medical officers of the Coast Guard Cutter *McCulloch* treated Sophie for favus, that persistent disease of the scalp.<sup>7</sup> By this time, Sophie’s older sister Feckla had been widowed and she had married the widower Ivan A. Denisoff. Their daughter Xenia was born in 1914. Alice, as Xenia was known, and her two aunts, Sophie and Dora, grew up like sisters.<sup>8</sup>

The chief of Kashega, as noted earlier, was probably Afanasii Denisoff. Sophie indicated that at one time John Kudrin had been both chief and a reader in the church.<sup>9</sup> This may have been Ivan Ivanovich Kudrin (John J. Kudrin) although she identified this chief as Cornelius Kudrin's father—an entirely different man, Elish Ivanovich Kudrin.

Olga Borenin did not remarry but supported her children as best she could. They lived in one of the poorer barabaras. The floor was dirt, covered with grass that was renewed on special occasions, such as church holidays. Clothes were sewed from recycled flour sacks; and shoes, when worn, were made from traditional sea lion throats and flippers. When Sophie was old enough, her mother “loaned” her to elderly residents who had no extended family members and who needed

help with meals and daily chores. Such an arrangement was neither unusual nor unkind even though a school teacher at Unalaska decried the practice as slavery. During periods when people, especially the elderly, had limited resources, this arrangement provided needed assistance while reducing the economic burden on large families. For Sophie, living with elders gave her opportunities to observe and learn a variety of traditional skills, from gut sewing to basket weaving, as she attempted to duplicate what she saw being done. Trial and error was common as when she and a friend first decided to weave baskets and they naively pulled fresh stalks of grass from the ground and set to work.

Kashega women were excellent weavers. Basket collectors often used the term *Attu* when describing any Aleut weaving because *Attu* baskets were considered the rarest and finest. Kashega weaving earned similar praise as when, in 1900, a newspaper advertised the “largest collection in [the] Northwest [of] Aleutian and Kashega Island” baskets.<sup>10</sup> The NAC Company agent recorded receiving baskets from the village in 1904 and 1906. (He noted baskets from Makushin in 1904, but never any from Biorka.) Alexandra Reinken, wife of Adolph Reinken and a member of the Kudrin family, was noted for her work.<sup>11</sup> Agrafina Borenin Sovoroff, also from Kashega, is shown in a photograph taken in 1909 by Dina Brodskaya Iokhel'son wearing an exquisitely woven grass cape.<sup>12</sup> Sophie's mother, Olga Borenin, was a master weaver and there is a superb fish basket by her in the Oakland Museum of California.<sup>13</sup> She preferred the long white grass from a location at Chernofski.<sup>14</sup> She also served as a midwife for the village.



A barabara at Kashega, circa 1930, Alice Moller Collection, courtesy AB Rankin.

Men fished the stream at Kashega on a regular basis even when regulations prohibited it. If the Coast Guard were sighted entering the bay, any illegal gear was hidden in the high grass. Sophie remarked that even if officials suspected illegal fishing, they rarely took steps to stop it.<sup>15</sup> She implied that care of the stream was a matter of both religious and secular concern. It was kept productive both by continuous efforts to keep it physically clean and by the church reader occasionally sprinkling it with holy water and incense.<sup>16</sup> This blending of secular and religious matters was reflected throughout village life. The key positions of village chief and church reader were frequently held by the same person. The institution of godparents was as important to the daily functioning of the village as that parents, aunts and uncles. During menstruation women refrained from entering the church and stayed away from streams and the sea.

Pink, red, and silver salmon were processed into smoked and dried fish. Prior to being smoked, salmon were soaked in brine overnight. The salinity was gauged by adding salt until a potato floated. In the absence of a potato, at times a real delicacy, a fish head was used. If weather permitted, the fish were hung outside for two or three days before being placed in the smoke house where only cottonwood was burned. For salted fish, the salmon were cleaned and covered with dry salt. Once preserved, they could be stored and prior to being used they were soaked in fresh water overnight. Dry fish were prepared in much the same way: cleaned, hung skin-side out overnight, and then turned over exposing the meaty side. Dried fish kept longer than salted fish and could be used throughout the winter.<sup>17</sup> Vigilance was needed to keep flies from laying eggs on the fish. People were not lazy in Kashega, Sophie remarked, and they would sit by their sheds or warehouses where the fish were drying in order to keep them as clean as possible. Women wove grass mats to protect the fish when it rained. Once ready, fish were stored in barrels and in prepared sea lion stomachs.

On one occasion, Sophie and her brother decided to make home brew. Her mother wasn't at home and so they concocted a barrel and, while the alcohol was still hot, they poured it into a glass bottle. It burst sending home brew all over the ceiling.<sup>18</sup>

With no father and only one brother, Sophie and her sisters helped with subsistence chores. They gathered wood and grass. Her sister Lucy was an excellent shot with a rifle.<sup>19</sup> Sophie fished barefooted in the river. Because of inadequate clothing, she was frequently cold and suffered for rest of her life from the results. When she was 16 she began to cough blood, a symptom of tuberculosis. She was first treated with finely chopped sea lion liver mixed with seal or cod liver oil.<sup>20</sup> Fortunately, she was then sent to Anchorage where she underwent surgery. She returned to Kashega, and in late April or early May 1926 she and Tecusa Kudrin, the daughter of John and Ephemia, traveled to Unalaska on the *Umnak Native*. Both girls were seventeen and on May 5 both were married,

Tecusa to Theofan Petukoff of Unalaska and Sophie to Alexei Kudrin of Kashega. He was thirty-two, and because of Sophie's age, permission for the marriage was given by her sister Lucy, now married to Alex Gordieff and living at Unalaska. Alex and Sophie Kudrin returned to Kashega. In March, however, as Sophie neared the birth of her first child, Alex died of tuberculosis.<sup>21</sup> He had gone to get wood and had taken Vasili Borenin, Sophie's brother, to man the oars in the dory. What Vasili had experienced with his own father in 1914 was now repeated with his brother-in-law.

"And my dad was chopping wood," Eva Tcheripanoff said. "It was nice day, sunshine. All of a sudden, blood coming out. And he couldn't stand up no more so he was down on the rocks and my uncle come up to him, sort of walk him down to the dory and took him home. And everybody comes to the bank and brought him home. He died that night."<sup>22</sup>

Before dying, he asked Sophie to name their child after him if it were a boy. The child, however, was a girl and was named Eva.

Death altered living conditions as much as life in communities where women were dependent on men for shelter and food. Sophie and her daughter settled into her brother Vasili's home, where their youngest sister Dora was also living. Sophie's eldest sister, Feckla, had died some years earlier, leaving Ivan Denisoff a widower once again with Alice, his young daughter. Olga, Sophie's mother, had moved into her son-in-law's home to help. By the time of the 1930 census, the home had only Ivan, now 59, and Olga, slightly younger at 55. On January 18, 1930, at seventeen, Alice Denisoff followed her Aunt Sophie into an early marriage. She had met Charles Moller, a Norwegian fisherman who was working for Harry Jacobson at his codfish saltery either at Raven or Kuliliak Bay on the south side of Unalaska Island.<sup>23</sup> John (Ivan) Denisoff gave permission for the marriage.

Jacobson had been drawn to Kashega as the village economy improved. He was born in Tromsø, Norway, in 1870. After working in the mines at Spitsbergen (where he lost his teeth to scurvy), he immigrated to the United States in 1905, gradually making his way to Alaska. (For as long as she lived, his mother sent him a piece of silver each year for Christmas.<sup>24</sup>) By 1919 he was working at the whaling plant at Akutan. Although he was not at Kashega when the 1920 census count was made,



Basket woven by Alexandra Kudrin Reinken, Hood Museum, Dartmouth. 46.17.9384.

he may have arrived soon after. Sophie indicated that Jacobson opened his store when she was about seventeen. Recalling the village before his arrival, she said, “They got hard times...no tea, no flour. No store...no nothing. It’s after that, about I’m seventeen years old, that old man Mr. Jacobson make a store and help Kashega’s people.”<sup>25</sup>

Kashega was in the news in 1928 when the Stoll-McCracken Siberian Arctic Expedition of the American Museum of Natural History arrived to look for prehistoric burials. While visiting villages on the Alaska Peninsula in 1916-1917, Harold McCracken had heard tales of mummies buried in the vicinity of Kashega. His unnamed source, “an old Aleut,” pointed him towards an islet off Kashega. The expedition arrived at the village on the *Effie M. Morrissey* in June 1928, and saw “the earthy dome-shaped tops of their barrabaras.” Two men rowed a dory out and went aboard. McCracken found them “uninteresting people.” He was a writer whose nonfiction works are uncomfortably similar in style and tone to his novels. His depiction of Kashega is straight out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Unanga described as little more than paupers dressed in “wrinkled, faded and frayed” “white man’s clothing” while McCracken strode about the landscape as one of its heroes. He apparently met Harry Jacobson. “His hair was gray,” he wrote. “That is, it would have been gray or possibly even white if it had been clean. He appeared even dirtier and less healthy than the natives around him.”<sup>26</sup> McCracken secured the assistance of the chief and “his son” to take them to Fortress Rock, not far down the coast. These two men, according to McCracken, “were just going along for a ride and being paid probably more money than they had earned in several months.”<sup>27</sup> The chief, although unnamed, was no doubt John Yatchmenoff (the first) and “his son” was probably a nephew or other young man from the village because Yatchmenoff had no children of his own and McCracken was never too worried about facts. A young graduate student from Yale, Edward Moffat Weyer, Jr., was on the expedition and wrote an accurate account of what they found.<sup>28</sup> In addition to detailing the wooden sarcophagus containing four mummy bundles, he referred to “local traditions” among which was that the larger side of Fortress Rock had been inhabited at one time and that the twenty-five foot cleft separating it from the smaller side of the islet had been spanned “by a drawbridge.” The presence of house pits along with extensive grave deposits under an overhanging cliff confirmed the habitation of the island. Subsequent dispatches and articles by McCracken compared their finds to those surrounding King Tut “in antiquity if not in splendor” and members of the expedition were photographed displaying a box with a head from one of the burials.<sup>29</sup>

Henry Swanson visited Fortress Rock not long after McCracken had left and he found “a big mess there where they had dug the mummies out and left a lot of trash laying around.” Henry had learned about the burials from Kashega people and had even tried beating the Siberian Expedition to the island, but, finding the weather such that he couldn’t land he left his men at Kashega and went about other business. “Anyway,” Henry said, continuing his story



The chapel at Kashega (post World War II), Banks photo: uaa-hmc-0068-series16-f7-10 Bank.

McCracken wrote a book and mentioned me, but not by name. He called me this “well-equipped” outfit that was up here ahead of him who were ignorant or dumb and who didn’t get the mummies. In his book McCracken called O.K. Quean a “man who missed too many boats.” That was an expression used about a person who went crazy from being in Alaska too long. “He missed too many boats” going back out. That’s the way he described old man Quean. Oh, Quean was mad about that!<sup>30</sup>

Henry was told that the cliff head on Fortress Rock had sloughed off, covering the mouth of a cave that held even more burials. “So those mummies are still there,” he said, “that is, if there are any mummies in that cave.”

A gradually improving economy meant people had money for purchases at Jacobson’s store. A new church was erected in the summer of 1930.<sup>31</sup> Two years later, it was “remodeled” and Christmas was celebrated with a visit from Father Kochergin.<sup>32</sup> Frame houses gradually replaced the barabaras that had been exclusively used in 1920. By 1930 barabaras were employed only for storage or converted into smoke houses for fish. Alice Moller’s daughter, Mary Diakanoff, recalled that her grandfather, John Denisoff, had a barabara in front of his home where he smoked his fish. It had five steps leading down into it. He also had a wood-frame warehouse that he kept fastidiously clean. Her grandfather was,



James and Carrye Henderson and students in front of the school. Photograph courtesy Ray Kranich.

according to Mary, the fussiest person she ever knew when it came to neatness. Children were not allowed inside his warehouse for fear that they would mess things up. Once she and Polly Kudrin were playing outside and saw him inside. “We walked in,” she said, “and he just stared hard at us until we left.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the clearest indication of a strong economy was the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ decision to establish a school in the village. A building was completed by August 1927. The largest structure in the village, it had ten foot ceilings and held a large classroom (23 x 30 feet), along with a teacherage consisting of a living room, kitchen, and store room. In addition there were two outhouses and a fuel shed. According to one account, the school was founded by Dr. Andrew Smith, a principal investor in the sheep ranching business. Smith maintained an interest in the school and would occasionally send gifts to the children at Christmas.<sup>34</sup> James and Carrye Henderson arrived as teachers in 1929. Their immediate supervisor was George Gardner, superintendent for the Southwestern District, with his office at Unalaska. The new teachers undertook various improvements to the school. They added shelves, book cases, kitchen and library tables. The outhouses were relocated and braced to withstand the winds. A water pump was installed in the kitchen. A flag pole was erected, and all the buildings were painted. The school garden produced radishes, turnips, carrots and lettuce. In 1931 the Hendersons added a kitchen sink and constructed a 10 x 16 shop onto the building. In June 1932 they built a “canoe” for the lake.

James Henderson’s reports for 1931 and 1932 describe an industrious



community. “The natives fish in summer for the canneries and trap for red fox in winter on this and neighboring islands,” he wrote in 1931.

A few go to the Pribilofs in the summer to work as laborers. There are no reindeer. Some of the native men have worked for short times as shearers of sheep for the sheep company here. The women weave and sell a few baskets. There are no other industries but the economic condition has been fairly good to date. There is no wood here and wood has to be boated in from several miles distance. There is one local store and a livestock company doing business here.

In the summer of 1931, the school along with its fence and gate received another fresh coat of green paint. The red roof was repainted and a school bell was installed. “The men who were fishing here for red salmon have finished with that fish,” Henderson wrote on July 31. “They’ll attend to the humpys next and the silvers after that.” On November 16 he wrote, “The health of the community is very good. The native men are preparing to trap, of course, most of them on this island.” In January 1932, the district bulletin reported Kashega had enjoyed a Christmas play. “There is no sickness in the village of an acute nature,” wrote Henderson, “and the weather for the past few days has been extremely beautiful with the thermometer below freezing but the days are calm and sunny and the night skys full of stars and a waning moon. The hills are covered with snow; the lakes with ice.... The men have been very lucky with their trapping for the most part and are now coming home for their church festivities.”

Beginning in 1930, Unalaska superintendent George Gardner and his wife, Victoria, published the *Southwestern District News Bulletin*. Issues included news from villages, including Kashega, and letters written by students.<sup>35</sup> These letters are typical of beginning writers and flit from subject to subject without rhyme or reason as this sample from Martha Denisoff shows.

We have rainy weather at Kashega. We are all right at Kashega. We are always well at Kashega. Yesterday we have nice weather but today we have windy and rainy weather. We are healthy at Kashega. What kind of weather do you have at Unalaska. In the



Kashega Lake with the school. National Archives and Record Administration, Pacific Alaska Region.

morning after reading we have spelling and arithmetic. After recess we have talking English we have forests. It is good thing to learn about forests more and more.... We have no trees at Kashega.... George Washington was born in 1732.<sup>36</sup>

These student letters reveal few details about the community. There were twelve students in the school and eleven houses in the village. Children looked forward to their fathers working in the Pribilof Islands during the summer. Martha Denisoff wrote that her grandmother was going on a picnic and that there were a lot of blackberries (i.e., moss berries, *Empetrum nigrum*). She also commented that her grandfather, Nikifor Denisoff, was “like Mr. Henderson and Mrs. Henderson.” Exactly what that meant is, of course, a mystery. Another student, Sophie’s youngest sister Dora, commented in October 1931 that “Kashega is a cleanest village in Alaska. We keep Kashega clean all the time.... All the Kashega children have gardens. Our gardens are round like a circle.... Perhaps, June 15<sup>th</sup> will be soon enough to plant turnips, lettuce, carrots and radishes....”<sup>37</sup> The absence of trees didn’t prevent Mike Kudrin from winning the state’s forestry essay in 1931.

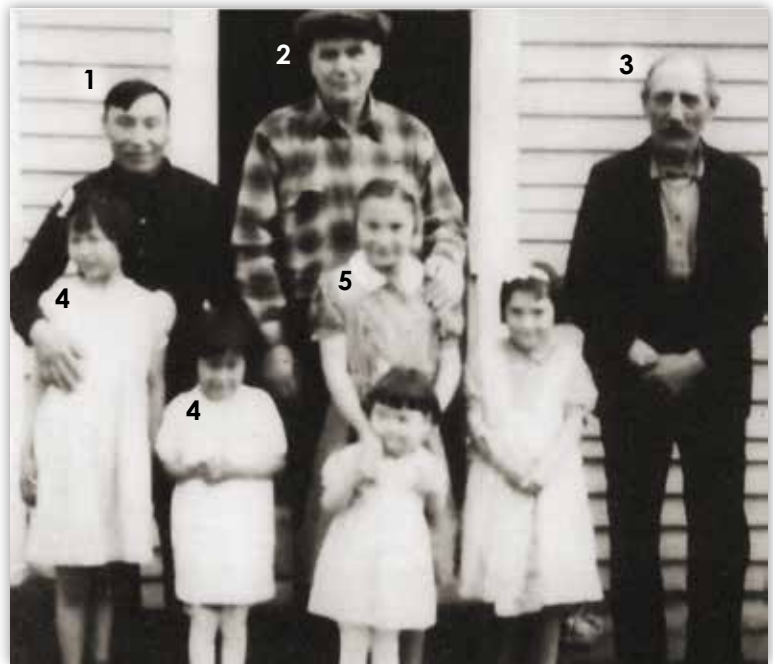
In his final report, for the 1931-1932 school year, Henderson wrote that four men had worked on St. Paul Island in 1931 but that, because the cannery ship in Makushin Bay did not operate in 1932, seven men went to the Pribilof Islands while “the others are staying at home and putting up salmon and drying them.” He commented that red fox trapping had been good that winter, but the price had been low, bringing only between \$8 and \$8.50 per skin at Jacobson’s store and the one in Unalaska. “The women weave and sell a few baskets but not many and are doing less and less of that sort of thing,” he wrote, “apparently as there is no profit now in baskets.” He concluded his report on a positive note: “There is [not] and hasn’t been any destitution in this village; all families are self supporting and their economic condition has been comparatively good.”

John Yatchmenoff, the village chief, died October 3, 1932, of pulmonary tuberculosis. Funeral services were held in the Chapel of the Transfiguration the following day and he was buried in the cemetery at the east end of the village.<sup>38</sup> He was 57. He and his wife, Laressa, had been married 36 years. They had no children of their own, but they had raised Parasovia Kalimof from Chernofski. Parasovia had married in 1915 and, apparently childless, had died before 1920. The chief’s wife was Dora Borenin’s godmother. “Boy! [she was] mean to me!” Dora said, remembering how strict Laressa Yatchmenoff had been when teaching her to read Russian. “Holy! If I didn’t know that one word, she used to let me kneel down until I said that word. Ai-yai-yai! Boy! So I used to read Russian.... I used to read in the Good Friday on the floor. You know, Easter time, ... in the middle of the floor.”<sup>39</sup> That is, she would stand at the front of the church and read from the Bible. When Dora’s sister

Sophie played cards with Laressa, an argument invariably ensued with the loser accusing the other of cheating. It would take some time before they would start a new game.<sup>40</sup> In 1932, with her husband dead and no income of her own, Laressa moved to Unalaska where she became, for all practical purposes, homeless. She lived with whatever family would take her in and carried her worldly possessions in the two large pockets of a navy blue sweater.<sup>41</sup> She returned to Kashega, where in 1942 she would be swept up into World War II. She would die less than a year into the evacuation.

The ruins of  
Kashega village,  
September 2, 2010.  
Photograph by  
Roberta Gordaoff.





A group at Kashega in the 1930s.

1. Cornelius Kudrin
2. Carl Moller
3. Harry Jacobson.
4. Cornelius Kudrin's nieces Polly and Vassa Kudrin (left to right)
5. Carl Moller's daughter Mary

Photo courtesy Mary Diakanoff.

**Kashega Households in 1930  
(U.S. Bureau of the Census 1930)**

Arthur Gillingham, age 59 (head of household, sheep rancher)  
Charles Dillon, age 34 (employee of Arthur Gillingham)

Willie Borenin, age 24 (head of household)  
Doria Borenin, age 15 (sister of Willie Borenin)  
Sophie Kudrin, age 22 (sister of Willie Borenin)  
Eva Kudrin, age 2 (niece of Willie Borenin)  
Willy Yitchmenoff [Yatchmenoff], age 6 (godson of Willie Borenin)

George Borenin, age 33 (head of household)  
Ulita [Oleta] Borenin, age 27 (wife of George Borenin)  
Sergie Borenin, age 12 (nephew of George Borenin)  
Peter Yitchmenoff [Yatchmenoff], age 25 (boarder of George Borenin)

John Denisoff, age 59 (head of household)  
Olga Borenin, age 55 (servant of John Denisoff)

Cornelius Kudrin, age 33 (head of Household)  
Mike I Kudrin, age 25 (brother of Cornelius Kudrin)  
George Yitchmenoff [Yatchmenoff], age 35 (Boarder of Cornelius Kudrin)

John Yitchmenoff [Yatchmenoff], age 58 (head of household)  
Larisa Yitchmenoff [Yatchmenoff], age 49 (wife of John I. Yatchmenoff)  
Eva Yitchmenoff [Yatchmenoff], age 14 (niece of John I. Yatchmenoff)

Nikifor Denisoff, age 68 (head of household)  
Fickla [Feckla] Denisoff, age 45 (wife of Nikifor Densoff)  
Jacob Denisoff, age 34 (son of Nikifor Densoff)  
Martha Denisoff, age 12 (granddaughter of Nikifor Densoff)  
Gabriel Denisoff, age 22 (grandson of Nikifor Densoff)

**Kashega Households in 1930, continued (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1930)**

Ephemia Kudrin, age 44 (head of household)  
Peter Kudrin, age 19 (son of Ephemia Kudrin)  
Mike Kudrin II, age 16 (son of Ephemia Kudrin)  
Olga Kudrin, age 13 (daughter of Ephemia Kudrin)  
Sergie Kudrin, age 10 (son of Ephemia Kudrin)  
George Kudrin, age 5 (son of Ephemia Kudrin)

Dorofey Kastrometan [Kastromitin], age 32 (head of household)  
Malina Kastrometan [Kastromitin], age 30 (wife of Dorofey Kastromitin)  
Demitri Kastrometan [Kastromitin], age 7 months (son of Dorofey and Malina Kastromitin)

Charles Miller [Moller] age 40 (head of household)  
Oxenia Miller, age 17 (wife of Charles Moller)

Harry Jacobsen, age 59 (Head of household, store manager from Norway)

Boyse J. [James] Henderson, age 37 (Head of household, teacher)  
Carrie Henderson, age 30 (wife of James Henderson, teacher)



The sandy beach at Makushin Village. Photograph by Frederick Lekanoff.