Chapter 12
Biorka

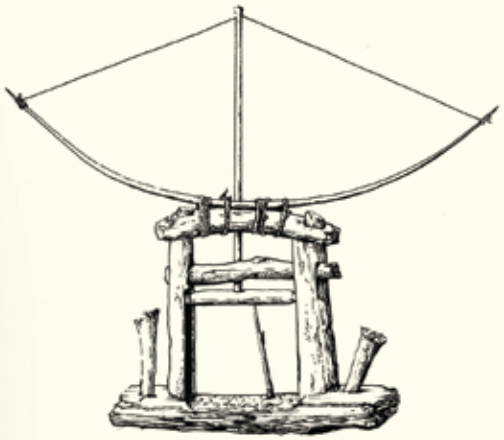
Henry Swanson recalled that, "Biorka had been a strong village clean up to the war. Makushin and Kashega people kept leaving for Unalaska, but Biorka was living good. They were closer to Unalaska, too, and could come in when they wanted to."[1] Several factors contributed to Biorka's vitality. They had a number of strong leaders, including Jacob Kozloff, Alec Ermeloff, and Andrew Makarin. They had an abundance of deep-sea fish. They were, indeed, relatively close to Unalaska. The preferred route was to travel past Unalga Island and around the northeast end of Unalaska Island, but such journeys were usually deferred until after the last of May, when the weather moderated. The trip could be made in eight to ten hours. When men were ready to return home, Unalaska kayakers would accompany them as far as Priest Rock.[2] Traveling around the northeast end of Unalaska Island presented challenges. "The passage past Fisherman's Point, even in good weather and taking advantage of tide flows, is very rough for a short distance," declared a 1937 mining report,

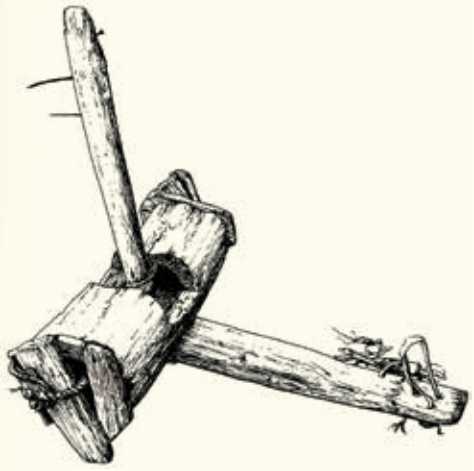
> due to the near presence of a reef that extends from the North Pacific Ocean to within a short distance of the Fisherman's rocks and a rip tide caused by the meeting of waters from the North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea, and should be attempted only in calm weather and with a sea-worthy boat.[3]

When the weather was more problematical, people traveled by kayak or skiff further inside Beaver Inlet, along the Sedanka side, until reaching the northeast tip of Tanaskan Bay where Andrew Makarin had a fish camp, at a place called *Aasxiyuux*. From here the traveler would cut across the inlet to Ugadaga, on the Unalaska side. If need be, a stop could be made at Dushkot Island where Ruff Ermeloff (Alec Ermeloff's son) had

a camp.[4] The boats were pulled above high water and the travelers then hiked the long-established trail to Unalaska Village.

There was an unusual pond near Andrew's camp. Fresh water was collected from it; but when the tide went out, the water level fell. When hard east or north winds blew, the water became salty and undrinkable. When that happened, they would go to the creek to get fresh water.[5]





Two fox traps introduced to the Aleutians in the 1740s by the promyshlenniks: the "bow trap" or *chalkanaX̂* (above/and see page 33) and the "skull crusher" (below). Illustrations by Mark Luttrell in *Chasing the Dark*. Courtesy Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Biorka shared the poverty systemic to the region during the closing years of sea otter hunting. The residents turned to a variety of occupations: fishing, trapping red and cross fox, and working both at Unalaska and in the Pribilof Islands. Biorka received fewer visits from Revenue Service and Coast Guard cutters than either Makushin or Kashega, situated along the route to the more populated villages of Nikolski, Atka, and Attu. Consequently, there are fewer reports about Biorka and this paucity leads to unanswerable questions. For example, when the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Manning* visited in August 1915, the year the Revenue Service became the U.S. Coast Guard, the assistant surgeon learned that during the previous year there had been nine deaths in the village (two men, two women and five boys).[6] No reason was given for this unusually high mortality.

In 1912 the Navy's Alaskan Radio Expedition erected a station on Unalga Island as part of a four-year effort to provide better communications linking coastal Alaska with Seattle.[7] Construction was plagued by violent weather. The 180-foot wharf washed away shortly after completion and had to be rebuilt. The buildings included a dwelling with the radio equipment installation. This was surrounded by a glass porch that could buffer the cold and muffle the noise from high winds that interfered with operations. There were also a powerhouse (attached to the dwelling by a covered passage), a cottage for the electrician, and buildings for oil, coal, and a gasoline engine. The station was well supplied, including a library of 400 books and a 44-foot motorboat. The station was commissioned on September 1 and less than two weeks later another storm wiped out the wharf and carried away the station's motorboat. The entire operation was short-lived—poor reception and the difficulty of supplying it were reasons for its closure in 1915. Nevertheless, the construction project provided employment for Biorka men including Andrew Makarin, Alec Ermeloff, and others. Alec was paid $9 and five pounds of pilot bread for each of the two months he worked.

The wharf on Unalga, with the USS *Nero*, 1912. This wharf replaced the first that was destroyed in a storm. U.S. Naval Historical Center. Photo #: NH 105434.

Nick Galaktionoff understood that Biorka residents began building wood-frame houses following construction of the radio station. However, a 1915 report described Biorka as having ten barabaras and no wood-frame structures for the 30 residents, 17 adults and 13 children. The construction of wood-frame houses probably began shortly after the closure of the station. In addition to receiving unused lumber, it is probable that Biorka people salvaged materials from the abandoned station. This included hefty timbers—10-by-12s and 12-by-12s left over from the wharf. These were towed to the village using kayaks and then sawed into usable lumber. Driftwood was scarce in Beaver Inlet and men had to travel long distances to find it.[8] Additional wooden houses were built later using wood from the whaling plant at Akutan and from Unalaska.

Around the time wooden houses were introduced, Andrew Makarin and Eustina "Esther" Sovoroff of Akutan were married. He was in his late twenties. In contrast, Alex Ermeloff, only eight years Andrew's senior, had been married to Anesia Siftsof for over a decade and was probably widowed by this time. The Ermeloffs had nine children between 1901 and 1912.[9] Although the 1920 census shows Andrew and Esther with a daughter, Anestasia, born in 1916, she seems to have died young since her name is missing from records after the 1920 census. Their granddaughter, Anna Jean Bereskin, recalled Esther saying that she had a son whom they named Terentii, after Andrew's father. This child also died young and afterwards they were unable to have further children. In the early 1930s they adopted Irene Borenin, Anna Jean's mother. In 1917 Esther was brought to Unalaska with a broken leg. Nicholas Bolshanin was the commissioner and, as he had done for another woman a few months

earlier, he placed her in jail so that she could be cared for by Dr. A. W. Newhall of the Jesse Lee Home. The next day, May 31, he conveniently found Andrew guilty of vagrancy and sentenced him to two months in the same jail.[10] In 1919, presumably after the pandemic had passed the region, Andrew returned to Unalaska when Father Hotovitsky had repairs made to the Church of the Holy Ascension. Because a large number of Unalaska men had gone to the Pribilof Islands for the summer seal harvest, men from the outer villages were able to find employment. Andrew stayed for three years, working at whatever was available including aboard coaling ships for the AC Company.

Although Biorka was comparatively rich in terms of subsistence, especially fish and birds, the residents visited Unalaska to purchase goods at the stores and to receive used clothing from the Jesse Lee Home. The clothes came in annual shipments of "mission boxes" from parishes in the States. Occasionally staff members at the Home could only shake their heads in bewilderment when they unpacked what had been sent.

> Once a barrel of straw hats arrived—to a place where, as [Mary] Winchell put it, the wind blows the hair off a dog. They received a shipment of fans and a dozen black swallow-tailed coats. Men from Biorka village eventually took the coats, leaving Winchell to reflect how coats that had once attended concerts in Boston now hunted ducks along the Biorka shore.[11]

When the Home closed in 1926, the staff cleaned out the accumulation of 35 years of operation and sent clothes to Nikolski and Biorka.

People came from Biorka to attend services at the Church of the Holy Ascension. In 1911 Epiphany fell on January 19. This commemorated the baptism of Christ and was observed by the blessing of the water. People from Biorka were present and had the priest bless a keg of water that they then placed on a sled and pulled over the long pass to Beaver Inlet. The school teachers, Noah and Clara Davenport, happened to be out hiking and used the hard packed trail as a path back to the village.[12]

Jacob Kozloff was a generation older than Makarin and Ermeloff, having been born around 1863. During the late 1880s, he had been an active sea otter hunter. We do not know when he became chief of Biorka, but he served after 1910, during a period when legal claims for land proliferated as individuals filed for homesteads, trade and manufacturing sites related to mining and to salting and canning fish. Sedanka Island became part of the Aleutian Islands Reservation for the preservation of native birds, animals, and fish, established by President Taft in 1913. On March 30, 1918, Kozloff filed for a trade and manufacturing site at the location of the old Biorka village. The claim was made "for the whole village" and the reasons were a combination of subsistence and commercial salting of salmon and cod.

> That the specific and particular use for which said land is claimed is for our own fishing business and for using same for salting salmon and codfish, that same is our own old village and for that reason we claim the whole of said village for living and carrying on the fishing business.[13]

Biorka was the only one of the three villages to take such action. Wooden dories were used alongside kayaks in the 1920s. Andrew and Eustina Makarin would row from Biorka to Unalga, locate a driftwood log, and then take all day towing it back to the village. In the late 1920s when outboard engines became more common, Andrew purchased a boat from the whaling station at Akutan and installed an engine.

> It was a double-ender, about a thirty-footer. It had a pretty good-sized old Clift engine in it. He used it to come to Unalaska to get groceries and supplies and take them to Biorka. He used it only in the summer time when the weather was good. The winter was too rough for the boat because it had a small sail in it and there was too much weather in the winter. It was a heavy boat and when he wasn't using it he would have to pull it up out of the water. In the summer, however, he kept it anchored all the time. If the weather changed he would move the boat to a different location.[14]

Eventually he had two skiffs: the larger one for hauling wood and hunting sea lions, and a smaller double-ender with an inboard engine that he used when traveling shorter distances such as to his camp or to Ugadaga Bay. He also continued using a kayak into the 1930s.

Whatever potential for violence existed in small Unangaŝ communities was heightened during times of excessive alcohol use. This was true for Unalaska and all the smaller villages. Irene Makarin told how Eustina was seriously injured when an intoxicated man threw her against a woodpile. A splinter pierced her eye and, despite efforts by medical personnel at Unalaska, she eventually lost all sight in it.[15] An even more traumatic incident occurred in the village when seventeen-year-old Matthew Popoff shot his stepfather to death in 1926. According to Anfesia Shapsnikoff, Ignaty Popoff was a particularly cruel individual who harassed and misused his wife and constantly forced his stepson to work.[16] On November 25, 1926, during a village-wide celebration when both Ignaty and Matthew had been drinking, Matthew sought out his stepfather. "He was sleeping," Anfesia said. "His mouth open." The boy took a rifle and shot him. Word of the murder reached Unalaska almost immediately and the deputy marshal arrived the following day aboard the Department of Fisheries boat *Eider* and Matthew was arrested.[17] Barbara Popoff was left with a five-year-old daughter. A year later, Barbara succumbed to tuberculosis of the throat and her daughter, Agafia, was left an orphan.[18]

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

Alec Ermeloff, age 47 (head of household)
Marie Ermeloff, age 28 (wife of Alec Ermeloff)
Sophia Ermeloff, age 26 (daughter of Alec Ermeloff)
Rufus Ermeloff, age 22 (son of Alec Ermeloff)
Daria Ermeloff, age 17 (daughter of Alec Ermeloff)
August Ermeloff, age 9 (daughter of Alec Ermeloff)

Andrew Makarin, age 40 (head of household)
Eustina "Esther" Sovoroff (Makarin), age 39 (wife of Andrew Makarin)
Eakinf [Akinfa] Gerasimoff, age 17 (lodger of Andrew Makarin)

Elia Makarin, age 39 (head of household)
Agrafina Makarin, age 38 (wife of Elia Makarin)
Marie Makarin, age 17 (daughter of Elia Makarin)
Martha Makarin, age 8 (daughter of Elia Makarin)

Kessick [Kerik] Popoff, age 60 (head of household)
Anastasia Popoff, age 60 (wife of Kerik)
Ephrosenia "Elsie" Ermeloff, age 20 (adoptive daughter of Kerik)
Agafia Popoff, age 9 (granddaughter of Kerik)

Jacob Lukanin, age 28 (head of household)
Mary Lukanin, age 20 (wife of Jacob Lukanin)
Irene Lukanin, age 6 months (daughter of Jacob Lukanin)
Gladfiena Lukanin, age 16 (lodger of Jacob Lukanin)
Peter Lukanin, age 13 (lodger of Jacob Lukanin)

Irene Makarin was born in 1930, the daughter of Anna and Mike Borenin. After Anna died in 1933, Mike was left with two older sons and three-year-old Irene. Andrew and Eustina approached him and he gave permission for them to adopt Irene. Their home became her home; she became their daughter. Irene's descriptions of Biorka prior to World War II portrayed a village that was well-suited to subsistence activities.[19] The island was rich with blueberries, salmonberries, and mossberries. A local leaf was used for tea. It was picked in September and October, brought indoors and dried. It was then mixed with regular tea to extend that more expensive product. Water was drawn from the lake and when the water level fell it was collected from a stream or spring on the side of the hill and carried to the homes. This was a job given to children who used small buckets.

Except for serious emergencies, traditional medicines were used. For example, Andrew skimmed oil off the surface of still ponds and stored it in a jar. Eustina would apply a drop to her eyes after rinsing them. He also combined applications of the strong putschke with prolonged steambaths to treat his wife's back problems. Although gradually going blind, Esther was one of the village midwives. She was a skilled healer who was frequently called upon. Moses Gordieff recalled that he once had an intestinal malady and Esther massaged him, "rubbing all over me for a long time" until he had recovered.[20]

Both Andrew Makarin and Ruff Ermeloff read services in the well-maintained Chapel of St. Nicholas. Families kept dogs and cats and a few

Esther and Andrew Makarin (left); Agrafina and Elia Makarin (right). Photograph courtesy Ray Hudson.

raised chickens. Kerosene lanterns lit the homes, and there was a record player shared by the community. "My daddy used to tell me that if there's somebody hungry," explained Irene, "if there's somebody got no place to stay, you just help them." Several of the men, including Andrew Makarin, George Yatchmenoff, and Alec Ermeloff, kept journals in Aleut, recording what they trapped or hunted. They had been taught to read and write by their fathers. Theirs was the last generation to be literate in *Unangam tunuu*.

As a Native community, Unalaska men worked through the St. Ponteleiman Brotherhood to secure a productive blue fox island. They eventually leased Carlisle, among the Islands of Four Mountains. Sedanka was proposed as another possibility, but the majority of the brotherhood felt it would prove unsatisfactory because it was rocky and mountainous and the pass separating it from Unalaska was too narrow. Its size and terrain would make it difficult to eliminate the indigenous red fox that, being larger, would drive off any blue fox. Nevertheless, the Unalaska community leased Sedanka on July 24, 1930, for $50.[21] In August 1933 the Coast Guard cutter *Tahoe* anchored along the north side of Unimak Island where ten Unalaska trappers came aboard along with a dozen crated live fox. The ship returned to Unalaska for the night. The next day five of the

Biorka prior to World War II. Courtesy University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1985-0012 -00050.

men proceeded aboard the *Tahoe* to Sedanka where the fox were released east of the village. George Yatchmenoff, who had once lived at Kashega, was among the trappers and he hiked to the village where he remained while the other four men returned to Unalaska.[22] In 1932 he had married Alec Ermeloff's daughter, Ephrosenia or "Elsie." His first wife had died in 1927 and now his son William joined his father and stepmother and before long they had become integral members of the Biorka community.

As early as 1935 Biorka residents partnered with Unangax̂ at Unalaska to get reindeer transplanted to Sedanka Island through a petition prepared by John Yatchmeneff on behalf of the Aleutian Islands Precinct Democratic Club. In 1936 G.R. Gardner—who had helped the Unalaska brotherhood with their fox island permit—followed up with another request and, in reply, the superintendent of the reindeer service wrote that 60 breeding female reindeer and five bulls were to be delivered in the spring of 1937 (with the same number for Akutan). The herd, he explained, would grow slowly, with only 94 adult animals ready for butchering at the end of eleven years.[23] The animals, however, never arrived.

In 1936 Biorka was said to have 44 residents: 12 adult men, nine women, and 23 children.[24] A somewhat detailed description of Biorka came in late September 1937 when the Coast Guard Cutter *Northland* visited. The ship's doctor examined each individual. "Here as at other Aleutian villages there appeared a great deal of eye trouble," he wrote.

"The children were just recovering from an attack of measles." His report described an indolent population, a conclusion dramatically at odds with the active village described by others. He wrote, "The natives had a run down, hollow chested, weak eyed appearance of the average Aleut of the present time." Captain F.A. Zeusler described four houses and a church. The homes "were frame structures and were clean and comfortable. All were fitted with wood burning stoves. Driftwood is secured on the beach. At the time of the visit there were only two men in the village, two women and six children. None of the natives could speak English." Zeusler found that "the principal food consists of fish, flour, tea, sugar and other store bought food obtained in Unalaska. There were several small boats in the village and one motor boat." He concluded that the general condition of the village was good although "there is no store in the village and no radio. A tin and zinc mine is located in the vicinity."[25]

This mine, like the reindeer project, never materialized. In the summer of 1937, F.H. Lerchen had exploratory work done, employing six Biorka men including "the Chief of Sedanka Island." From June 12 to July 19, they were "constantly working with picks, shovels and occasional use of dynamite, stripping moss, dirt and broken slide rock to extend the surface exposures made by Nature to determine, as near as possible, the extent and nature of the ore."[26] Lerchen wrote that only "about 5 natives" lived in the village—the majority of the men were probably working in the Pribilof Islands that summer. He described the village as having "a few dwellings and a beautiful little church." In 1942 Fred Schroeder (previously the trader at Attu) sent this report and other material to the commissioner of mines in Juneau who replied that the grade of zinc would require a large mining operation and was, at that time, of doubtful profitability.

On February 1, 1938, the Biorka Native Community filed for a townsite of 1500 meandering feet along the beach at Samgathik Bay. It extended 800 feet back from the water. This was located on the northeast side of Beaver Inlet, about two miles south of the village. Alex Ermeloff, as chief of the community, filed the claim that was witnessed by Andrew Makarin and John A. Yatchmeneff.[27] As the 1930s ended, Biorka seems to have achieved an equilibrium in which subsistence was balanced with occasional wage employment. In 1939, Akinfa Ermeloff, Ruff Ermeloff, George Yatchmenoff, and Andrew Makarin worked at St. Paul. Andrew arrived in late May while the others came the first of July. In 1940, they were joined by the younger men Peter Lukanin and Willie Yatchmenoff. Henry Swanson's description of Biorka as "a strong village" is borne out by subsequent events and by the degree to which residents survived the evacuation that was soon to sever them from the island.

Kashega Village. Photograph courtesy Mary Diakanoff.