



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

Frank with Captain of *Manning*, Chirikof Island, 1913. This is one of the few photos of Franklin G. Lowell, probably taken during a visit with his daughter Eva and grandson Frank Revell, Jr. on Chirikof Island, shortly after Katmai volcano erupted in 1912.

The Lowell Family and Alaska's Fur Trade Industry: Seward, Alaska

By Sandy Brue

Life on the Outer Coast

To appreciate the natural wonders of the remote landscape of Kenai Fjords National Park, one must understand the people who visited and lived along its rockbound coast. Explorers of Alaska waters in the early historic period, chiefly Russians (although British, American, French and Spanish ships were recorded as early as 1725), were not the first humans to eke a living from this wilderness.

Thousands of years before the first European explorers arrived, Alaska Native people traveled regularly from the Aleutian Islands to southeast Alaska in skin boats. The glaciated fjords, from Resurrection Bay on the east coast of the park, around the Kenai Peninsula south to Kachemak Bay, were home to the Unergurmiut (see article by A. Crowell, this issue).

Before their first contact with Europeans between 1750 and 1780, Alutiiq people derived most of their livelihood from the sea. In the spring, people collected shellfish and watched for sea mammals, birds, and

fish to return. Summer was a time for hard work: hunting sea mammals, collecting sea bird eggs, fishing for salmon, and picking berries. Fall was a time of preparation: hunting ducks and caribou, and storing food for winter use. Winter provided an opportunity for trapping and social gathering.

Women prepared bird, fox, otter, and ground squirrel skins and stitched them into loose fitting garments. They dried fish and gathered foodstuffs. Women worked with delicate gut skin to provide waterproof jackets and bags. They created waterproof stitches for boat covers made from seal and sea lion skins. In addition, they wove and made baskets used for cooking, drinking, and eating vessels, from spruce roots, beach grass, and baleen. Baskets were used for food storage, collecting, backpacks, and cradling babies. By the time the Russians began the fur trade in Resurrection Bay, the Russian-American Company had already been a colonial presence in the Aleutian Islands for decades. Sea otter fur pelts were "soft gold," valuable for trade to the market in Asia. The Russians were unskilled in sea otter hunting, so they forced Native men,

who were accustomed to life on the water in lightweight *baidarkas* (kayaks), to hunt the elusive mammals.

While the Russians depended greatly upon the Native men's hunting skills, it was the constant supply of food, clothing, baskets, and footgear produced by Native women that enabled the fur traders and Native hunters to survive. Historians have given but a passing glance to Native women's role in the fur trade industry. Without the support they provided, however, the fur trade industry could not have prospered.

American Fur Traders Arrive in Alaska

After the United States purchased Alaska in 1867, the Alaska Commercial Company (ACC) and the North American Commercial Company (NAC) continued the fur trade from the same stores and warehouses the Russian-American Company had used. Like other New England men of his time, Franklin G. Lowell of Maine arrived in Alaska about 1870 to begin working in the fur trade.

Frank Lowell was a distant relative of the



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

After Frank left, Mary and the children raised vegetables in this garden, trapped, and fished. A monthly steamer brought them supplies, carried away their furs, and brought mail.



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

Mrs Mary Lowell and family

famous Massachusetts Lowell family. His father died before he was five, and young Frank grew up on the rugged coast of Maine, in a family who made their living on the sea. The fjord-like bays of Lincoln County, Maine, where Frank learned to fish and sail, resembled the coast line of Kenai Peninsula.

Young Frank inherited his seamanship from both sides of his family, preparing him for a lifetime of work in Alaska waters. His maternal grandfather, Captain Robert P. Manson, Sr., earned a reputation as a free spirit in 1809 when he piloted merchant brigs through United States fortifications, defying the federal government's embargo with France and Great Britain. Frank's aunt, Eliza Lowell, married Captain Samuel Snow, a merchant sailor who established a shipping line between San Francisco, Seattle, and Alaska. In fact, Captain Snow's company often carried supplies for the Alaska Commercial Company.

Frank was apprenticed to his maternal uncle, R.P. Manson, a ship builder, at age 11. When he was 15, Frank left Maine and made his way to Alaska. He sailed around Cape Horn with an older relative—an uncle or cousin—and arrived in Sitka, a common entry point to Alaska at the time.

By 1875, after becoming an accomplished entrepreneur, Frank had moved west, to the Kenai and Alaska Peninsulas.

In the Kenai Peninsula area, Frank sold salted salmon to the Alaska Commercial Company from the shores of Resurrection Bay, maintained trading stations in Nuka and Aialik Bays, employed Native hunting parties, and sold furs to both the ACC and the North American Commercial Company. Eventually, Frank became an agent for the ACC at Wrangell Station on the Alaska Peninsula in 1889. In Kodiak, he worked on the 1890 census.

During these years, Frank had children with three Alaska Native women from the communities where he worked. From interviews historian Mary J. Barry conducted with Frank's daughter, Eva Lowell Revell Simons, we learn that after Frank's arrival in Sitka he fathered a son with a Native woman. Whether this was his son William who accompanied him to Resurrection Bay (Russian Orthodox



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

The Lowell family cabin, as it sat at the head of Resurrection Bay, circa 1902.

Church records in Seward list the boy as Vasilii F. Lovel, born in 1870) or another child is unknown.

Sometime before 1871, when their oldest daughter Anna was born, Frank met Mary Forgal from English Bay, an Alutiiq village now known as Nanwalek. Mary would have been about 16 when she married Frank. Little is known of her earlier years. Since there was a Russian Orthodox funeral when Mary died in Seward in 1906, she probably belonged to that church;

however, research has yet to find her listed in any Orthodox parish records. There are no records of Frank and Mary's marriage, which produced eight or nine children. In 1883 or 1884, the couple, their children, and several Natives from English Bay (perhaps Mary's relatives) settled on the shores of Resurrection Bay at the present site of Seward, Alaska.

It is understandable that Frank Lowell needed a Native wife and partner. Union with a Native woman gained Frank a firm alliance with local Native families and cemented his trading ties. Native women's skills made them valuable wives: they knew how to trap small game, gather edibles, and prepare skins and footwear. The women also provided a link between the white traders and Native men. Frank Lowell's story illustrates the continued dependence of European fur traders on the Native community—a story that began with Russian occupation in the eighteenth century.

During the years of the Russian Colony, Resurrection Bay represented only one of many locations along the route between two points of commerce, Sitka and Kodiak. Census records for 1890 show that ACC trading stations dotted the southwestern coast of Alaska and continued into the interior along the Yukon River. Fur exports from Alaska were sent exclusively to Portland, Oregon and San Francisco. Resurrection Bay, at the time the Lowells moved there, was an isolated outpost on the outer fringe of the fur trade industry.

Frank and Mary Lowell's decision in 1884 to move from English Bay, the center of the fur trade, to settle on Resurrection Bay was probably influenced by several



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

An early photograph of Seward, Alaska

local events. In 1883, an influenza epidemic swept through the Kenai Peninsula, taking hundreds of lives in the villages of Ninilchik, Seldovia, and English Bay. This tragedy occurred the same year that Mt. Augustine, a volcano across Cook Inlet from English Bay, erupted and covered the villages with ash. A tidal wave flooded English Bay. Thus, in addition to the incentive to start a new fur trading post, the Lowells may have wished to leave English Bay behind.

The ACC influenced their white and Native employees and families to move and resettle among fur trading posts. The company built chapels and stores in population centers such as Kodiak to attract hunters and fur traders to these communities. By 1889, the sea otter catch was declining; the few animals found in the outer fjords were disappearing from years of overhunting. As the fur trade industry began to collapse, the

ACC focused its business interests in the area around Kodiak Island, outposts along



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

Frank Junior, Ida, and Harry Revell, 1913.
This photo of Frank and Eva Revell's children was probably taken about the time of their mother's marriage to Andy Simons.

the Yukon River, and the eastern coast of the Alaska Peninsula. Frank Lowell was forced to take a post as general agent of the Wrangell Station on the Alaska Peninsula in order to remain employed by the ACC. According to Frank's daughter Eva, her mother Mary refused to leave Resurrection Bay with Frank. Mary and her children stayed in Seward, and Frank moved to the Alaska Peninsula.

Frank was the ACC agent at Wrangell Station for several years, even after the declining company stopped paying him a salary or expenses. In August 1895 Frank married Akilina Koshon, a Native woman from the Alaska Peninsula. By the turn of the century, although Frank was still employed by the ACC, the Wrangell Station was deeply in debt. His letters from those years reveal that he closed the station, sold

the warehouse to “the church” (probably the Russian Orthodox Church), and moved to Kodiak Island. A contract with the ACC found with Frank’s letters shows he worked on a fox farm for the company on South Semidi Island from June 1903 until about 1907. When Akilina died about 1910, Frank placed his two daughters, Anna and Emma, in the Russian Orthodox orphanage founded by Father Herman near Kodiak. Census records for that year, however, also show that his two boys, age three and five, were



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

Eva Lowell Revell Simons on wedding day, September 1903. In September 1903 Eva Lowell married Harry E. Revell. They later divorced and she remarried Andy Simons, about 1913.

with him on Chirikof Island. In his declining years, Frank, still working for the ACC, was caretaker on Chirikof Island in the Kodiak Archipelago.

Meanwhile, 1906 and 1907 were years of tragedy for Mary Lowell and for Frank’s children who had stayed in Resurrection Bay when he left. Mary Lowell died in May 1906 from pleurisy; and Frank’s oldest son, William, lost his Aleut wife and eleven-year-old daughter to disease. In the spring of 1908, Frank’s daughter Eva wrote to him that the past summer, when the schooner *Dora* carried William’s surviving children to the Kodiak Baptist Orphanage, was the worst she had seen. Thus, when Frank sent his daughters by Akilina to the Herman Orphanage in Kodiak, some of his grandchildren were living nearby in the Baptist Orphanage.

What became of the Lowells? The trail grows cold after Eva Lowell Revell Simon’s death. Her children, Harry E. Revell and Frank Revell, moved to Oregon and Washington. The Resurrection Bay Historical Society has letters from Eva’s son Frank, written in 1976 when he was in his seventies, recounting a trip to visit his grandfather

In the archives of the Kodiak Baptist Orphanage, a single file card records the date William Lowell left his children there. Dated July 1907, it shows several payments he made for their care.



Photo courtesy of USGS archive in Denver, Colorado

Frank and Mary Lowell’s story is not unusual. There were thousands of European fur traders who depended upon Native women, as companions, wives, mothers of their children, and unofficial members of the work force. The wives of Alaska Commercial Company boat captains in this photo probably shared in the daily work of transporting hunters and furs.

Frank Lowell in 1913. His letter of June 29, 1976 recalls that his mother passed down to him a watch that belonged to Frank Lowell, his grandfather. Today, this watch resides in the Lowell exhibit of the Seward Museum. There are letters written in the 1970s from Rita Lowell Johnson, Eva’s only daughter, living in Oregon, crippled with arthritis and wheelchair-bound, keeping in touch with old friends still living in Seward. In one letter Rita describes her mother and Andy Simon’s home, which Rita had inherited, sliding into Kenai Lake during the 1964 earthquake.

In the archives of the Kodiak Baptist Orphanage, a single file card records the date William Lowell left his children there. Dated July 1907, it shows several payments he made for their care. Most records from the orphanage were lost in a 1925 fire, but in the few remaining copies of newsletters sent back east to sponsoring churches, there are hints about the lives of the Lowell children. William’s daughter Eva died before the census of 1910, and Alexandra died from tuberculosis in 1912. Young Frank disappears from the records, but in 1921 John’s name appears in the newsletters as

a young man coming of age and ready to leave the Kodiak Baptist Orphanage after residing there for 14 years.

In April 1911, William Lowell married Elena Berestov. They had one child, Mamie, before Elena died in 1913. In September 1916 Mamie joined her half-brothers living in the Baptist Orphanage. The only record of little Mamie found in the orphanage archives is a photo of her, standing with her sewing class, proudly holding up a newly stitched white apron.

To date no Herman Orphanage records have been found of Frank's children while they lived there. Church archives and other records may yet tell us about Mary's heritage. Her voice, like the voices of Native women who married white fur traders, is silent on the subject.

There is no doubt that in Alaska the very survival of fur traders depended upon the skills and companionship of Native women like Mary Lowell. A glance at the clothing worn by U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) surveyors in the late 1890s, with their fur

coats, leggings, and moccasins, tells of survival in a harsh wilderness made possible by the work of Native women. Photos taken by USGS surveyor Mendenhall in 1898 show the Native wives of the crew of the ACC schooner *Olga* assisting with the crew work. White traders married local Native women who worked alongside them and provided companionship. They were unofficial members of the workforce.

The Lowells may be gone, but their story lives on at Kenai Fjords National Park on Resurrection Bay, where Frank maintained his hunting and trading business. Several geographical places in Seward such as Lowell Point, Lowell Canyon, Mount Eva, and Mount Alice (named for Eva's sister) are all within sight of the original Lowell homestead on the shore of Resurrection Bay. Interwoven with the history of the Alutiiq people, the Russian colony, and the Alaska Commercial Company, the Lowells' story documents the human side and the personal experiences of the people who hunted and traded furs in Alaska.



Photograph courtesy of the Seward Museum

Eva on front porch of the family cabin, Resurrection Bay, 1902. Eva Lowell, youngest daughter of Frank and Mary Lowell lived with her mother and two younger brothers in the family cabin until her marriage in 1903 to Harry Revell. She was always proud of her father's connection to the Massachusetts/Maine Lowells, as evidenced in the caption written on the bottom of this photo.

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