

ALASKA NATIVES: BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY **RACHEL D. LINCOLN** ENTITLED, **ALASKA NATIVES: BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE**, BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING, IN PART, REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ART IN NEW MEDIA PHOTOJOURNALISM.

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Abstract

This thesis concerns cultural difficulties and conflicts facing native Eskimos in the Bering Strait region of western Alaska. The question addressed was, what is the state and future of traditional native culture? This photojournalism project was filmed in the villages of Brevig Mission, Teller, Golovin, Nome, and Cape Prince of Wales, Alaska. It includes photographs and interviews with elders and youth, and research from Indian Health Service. I discovered a sense of hopelessness and purposelessness in the rural communities, and that underlying issue is demonstrated in my multimedia documentary and community engagement. This project has changed our common view of the traditional Eskimo ways; they live in modern housing, but lead a subsistence lifestyle. The documentary film explores the factors that led up to present-day lifestyle of the Native Alaskans, such as missionaries, whalers, defective public schools and the Molly Hootch case, inbreeding, and alcoholism in native communities.

Introduction to the Project

Alaskan Eskimos have been trying to find their place as natives in the United States since the Alaska territory was purchased from Russia in 1867. Since becoming a state in 1959, Bering Straits natives have had access to most of the luxuries and privileges of modern America- television, USPS, Internet services and most recently cell phone access to name a few. Dental and healthcare is probably the most comprehensive in the country, if not the world. The Eskimos gladly accept these conveniences while struggling to maintain their identity through cultural and traditional lifestyles. Yet, their native languages are nearly extinct as they and many other traditions become extinct with the passing of elders.

Traditional Eskimo villages in the Bering Straits area are physically isolated and difficult to access, as there are no roads except to one village 70 miles outside of Nome, Alaska. Travel is by small plane (government-subsidized), helicopter to an island village, and snow machine in winter or boat during summer. However, there is daily access to the outside Internet to YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, and Netflix and daily flights. In contrast, half the villages have no flush toilets or running water relying on “honey buckets” and melting water from ice chipped from tundra ponds for drinking and washing.

In the late 1800's when Eskimo children began to attend “white” public schools, teachers punished them if they spoke their native language instead of English. High-school-age students were forced to leave their families and native villages to attend school in larger cities such as Anchorage and Kodiak and even sent as far away as Oklahoma. This ended with the 1972 lawsuit against the state, the “Molly Hootch Case,” and now every village has a school no matter the size. They continue to be educated by "whites" with Eskimo aides. There is little, if any native language or cultural education in the schools. Some children and teens learn traditional

music and dance in villages that are trying to maintain that part of their culture and yearly village cultural festivals strengthens that bond. Ivory and bone carving and beadwork is still prominent, but the art of carving is also dying with the elders. Tundra grass basket weaving is nearly non-existent perhaps due to Tupperware and durable plastic storage bins having been introduced.

Subsistence lifestyle seems to be the stronghold of the culture. Families spend several weeks at "fish camp" where they net fish and still hunt for moose, ptarmigan, ducks and foxes. Spring and fall are best for seal, whale and walrus hunting. Summer is for tundra berry picking and bush greens for salad. Camps are simple with tent homes and driftwood used to hang fish to dry. The fish are cut open using ulus (special knife), washed and sliced into sections to dry. Some camps have smokehouses. Board games are still enjoyed by the campers. Camps are accessed by Honda (name given to all four-wheelers regardless of the brand) or boat.

The future of these villages is quite uncertain. Such close-knit communities are reluctant to fully accept the modern American lifestyle (and especially outsider observation) and strive to maintain traditions mostly through subsistence but little stores with a lot of junk food and pop even threaten subsistence and health. This story is about a unique opportunity to witness first hand what is really happening within the Bering Straits Eskimo communities in Alaska with the assimilation into modern American culture and loss of tradition that this has provoked.

Project Rationale

When I was 18, my mom moved back to the Bering Strait region of Alaska, where I was born and had spent part of my childhood. She now lives in a traditional Eskimo village, and I have visited regularly for the past six years. During my trips up to the village, I became close to one girl in particular, a small Eskimo named Brenda who became my guide in the village, and taught me about the native way of life.

The Eskimos' traditional way of life is fascinating to me. After moving back to Alaska, I became interested in the Alaska native traditional culture, which blends and contrasts with mainstream American culture from the "lower 48".

To begin my documenting process, I interviewed prominent elders within the Bering Strait communities who would be able to speak about the past traditions and changes that have occurred in the past 40-50 years. I then interviewed younger members of the community, from age 6 to 22 so that my documentary would have various perspectives on the current lifestyle.

I had originally intended my project to show how parts of the native culture contrasted, such as the lack of running water in villages, but Internet access available to everyone. However, my project became more focused on Brenda, and she helped the viewer access the story and relate to it.

Summary of Research

The rural traditional villages in the Bering Strait region are very tight-knit, closed off communities. There is no access by road, and there are no hotels for tourists to stay at if they fly into one of the villages. My family currently lives and works in one of these native communities. As a result, I wasn't required to pay a fee even though most villages require you to hire a guide, and I was free to take photos of the village and community events. I flew to different communities such as Wales and Teller, and attended community events and Golovin's annual cultural festival. I used a four-wheeler to go out into the tundra to follow the natives on their berry picking trips, and to get around town and out to the fish camps.

My regular visits to Alaska over the past six years have helped me build strong and trusting relationships, which allowed me greater access to interview subjects, especially elders who had first hand experience with white people arriving in their region.

My research also included multiple visits to the Nome Public Library, where there are a few books on the history of Brevig Mission and Teller, two of the main villages in my documentary. I used the interview and filming techniques we learned last year to capture my subjects in the most accurate way.

Project Timeline and Description

I laid out a story using transcript clips from my interviews. Once the script was set, at the end of the fall 2012 semester, I began putting the corresponding video and audio clips into an Adobe Premiere sequence. In January and February I made changes to the sequence after I am able to view the entire project's rough-cut. I also selected the appropriate scenery and close-up clips to use as b-roll with the interviews. This process taught me to keep asking questions, even when it seemed like my list of discussion topics has been exhausted. Overall, my project accomplished what I had initially hoped – to introduce a culture that has been part of the U.S. for several decades yet still unknown to many Americans.

Professional Precedents

I had originally hoped to make a documentary showing how the traditional Native Alaskan culture used to be, and what contributed to its quick decline. In the past month and a half, my project became focused on one young girl, Brenda, who became the main character in my story about the Eskimo culture. To move forward, I plan on integrating little by little more of my elder interview clips to help give more context to the project. For example, one of the elders briefly describes her interactions with white people and her way of daily life in the early 1900s, before modern American culture was fully introduced into their society. My narrative relies heavily on my own interaction with the Native Alaskans to help the viewer understand how I came to make the documentary, and how I am able to have so much access to such a closed community. It also gives the viewer a way to relate to the story.

My community project is very important to me. I have created an interactive website with multimedia to help communicate the severe need for running water and sanitation facilities, and the failure of the state and national government to provide for these rural communities, even though they are the main caretakers of the villages. My Storyplanet project adds a human voice to the sanitation issue and the data that goes along with it.

My project adds to the dialogue in the realm of photojournalism by bringing to light issues such as sanitation and government interference that are normally not covered in stories on this region or state. Projects that have come before mine have focused on the suicide rates, the effects of global warming, oil drilling, and subsistence lifestyle, but do not include an analysis of what has happened to the native culture.

Conclusion

This project has taught me a lot about working with people from a different culture, even though our languages are the same. I was never hesitant in my process, and always felt that the information I was gathering would make a useful contribution to my project in some way. I learned to open up to my subjects and share my feelings to in turn make them feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and thoughts with me.

I have traveled to many foreign countries and attended school in Europe for over a year, and I know so much more about different cultures around the world than I do about this one small culture in the Bering Strait region of our own country. Through this project I have gained greater appreciation for the difficulties other cultures face when American values are imposed upon them. I have a better understanding of the Eskimo culture trying to maintain its traditional lifestyle while integrating modern technology and values. If government financial support to these communities is taken away or diminished, they will be in a worse position than they are now because they have become so dependent upon it. Even the elders expressed concern for the loss of their traditional lifestyle and what will happen if subsidies decline, and how the population will survive. I understand the conflict in the Eskimo communities over wanting to move ahead and accepting American values, but also resenting us because it takes away from their own culture.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES IN ALASKA

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I volunteered to babysit the sled dogs. They'd just raced 1,000 miles - from Anchorage to Nome - in barely two weeks. While mushers recuperated in Nome hotels, the dogs had to be watched over in shifts to make sure no one harmed or stole them. My mom and I plodded through the snow toward the dog grounds between a bar and the Nugget Inn. It was zero degrees Fahrenheit. We could hear the distant murmur of a few babysitters talking sleepily across the dark rows of snoring dogs. I was 14 and we had returned to Alaska.

My shift started after dark. It was March, and the days were growing longer. Come June, there would be 24-hours of daylight. I sat on a wooden crate at the head of a row of dogs. There were nine teams of mushers' dogs to be guarded - 8 to 12 dogs per team. A few other volunteers circled and paced, waiting for their shifts to end. The dark sky reflected blue off the packed snow. My mom had dressed me in six shirts, four pairs of pants, and three pairs of socks. The tips of a polar-bear fur ruff hung in my face and tickled my nose; the coat was adult size, and still too big for me in spite of all my layers. All around, the snow was packed down and frozen solid, about three feet deep. Mom wandered in and out of the community center. Inside, mushers and Nomites warmed up with hot chocolate or beer. Trucks rumbled down Front Street, Nome's main drag.

When we'd moved away from Alaska to Nebraska nine years earlier, my mom turned our house into a mini-museum of artifacts from her world travels, but the Eskimo art always took pride of place. A three-foot tall walrus skull hung at the base of the staircase; its creamy ivory tusks had a delicate, hand-chiseled image of an Eskimo hunter catching a walrus. My mom placed skull and tusks at the end of the main hallway in each of our houses while I was growing up in the various eastern Nebraska towns where we lived. When one of my friends made the long

walk down the hallway to the kitchen, or rounded the corner to run downstairs to play with me, the enormous tusks were there.

After babysitting the huskies when I was 14, I didn't return to Alaska for another six years. By then, my mom had moved back to Alaska to work in Brevig Mission, a remote native Eskimo village 80 miles out of Nome, and I started college in Washington, DC. I went to visit Brevig the summer after my freshman year.

There are no roads to Brevig. I arrived on a small, eight-person mail plane that had braved the fog and wind to land in the village on a dirt runway. It was just me, the pilot, and some boxes. Out the smudged window, I could see my mom waiting for me on her four-wheeler. She held up my winter coat and waved at me, grinning, and eager to show me her new home.

Mom's house in the village was about the size of my DC studio. The only thing that fit in the bedroom she'd prepared for me was a twin bed. I changed clothes in the entryway that doubled as a closet for my things. All of the houses in this region of Alaska are up on risers to keep the heat from melting the tundra and consequently causing the house to shift and break. Thankfully, Brevig is one of the villages in the region that has running water. Houses in Teller, our neighboring village, have "honey" buckets for toilets. Even the doctors in the clinic have to take turns pouring boiled mountain water over their hands from a bottle to wash up after seeing patients.

My first day in the village was full of excitement and things to see. After landing, I didn't even make it in the front door before being hugged and squeezed by at least ten runny-nosed Eskimo toddlers. That same evening, my heart raced as we jumped on a four-wheeler and zoomed over to the beach hoping to catch a glimpse of a freshly caught whale. Alas, it had escaped. Around midnight, in broad daylight, I was finally able to go home to bed.

Over the next few days, I began exploring. The daytime high temperature was 40 degrees. While I donned a winter jacket, natives sported shorts and tank tops in the “summer” weather. The village was so small that after ten minutes of walking, I had seen everything. So I shot photos and ran around with the native children until my legs were worn out, then went home and lounged for the rest of the afternoon.

Growing up I had never really been allowed to touch mom’s carved-ivory treasures, but now that I was older, the natives approached me with their goods for sale. They loved to show me their new patterns and let me try on colorful necklaces. I wanted to buy everything, but it was pretty expensive. Since I’d always been creative, my mom bought me a few bags of red, blue, pink, and green beads, and a spool of flexible wire to work with and make my own jewelry.

I began trying my hand at a few simple things – necklaces, earrings shaped as forget-me-nots, the state flower, a ring. Given the miniscule size of the two-millimeter period dot beads, and the sheer number of beads to be threaded, I had new appreciation for the intricacy of the bead craft. I learned how hard it was to force a thin needle through the tough sealskin to make a barrette.

One night in July, the midnight sun coming in the window, I sat on the futon in front of the TV, wrapped in an electric blanket. Mom kept the temperature at 60 degrees to save money on heating oil. I threaded beads for hours on end, watching movie after movie, from around 4pm to 4am. Occasionally I paused to scroll through the day’s photos. That was all I had to do in Brevig. There wasn’t even a café or a movie theater.

I had almost finished making pink flower earrings for a little Eskimo girl, Brenda, who had become my sidekick; I gave her life advice and she came to me for candy. Her parents, like most native parents, let their children run wild around the village all day and all night. I would

encourage her to brush her teeth – most of them were already rotted out – and do her homework. Brenda came knocking on our door every day asking if I could come play. I hoped the earrings she liked so much would remind her of me, and perhaps my advice, too.

Around midnight one night, an elderly Eskimo woman knocked on our door, waking up my mom.

“Would you like to see some beading?” She spread out her plastic bag of goods on our doormat. These interruptions were frequent. Someone came to our door every other day.

We bought a \$200 hand-carved ivory and baleen bracelet.

“That will look really nice with your gold, lacy dress if you go to an embassy event in DC,” mom said as she handed over the cash. The number of Eskimos who actually knew how to carve ivory was shrinking rapidly. Their work was cheaper in villages than in Nome tourist stores, so mom readily bought from her neighbors.

After that first trip to Brevig, I returned there every summer and Christmas for the next five years, and I began to shoot photos and video. I wanted to document traditional Eskimo culture in remote Eskimo villages. My Master’s thesis project began to take shape; I was making a documentary about the decline of the Eskimo culture due in part to failed government programs. It also hit home with me since I grew up surrounded by this culture.

As part of my research, I paid a visit to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC this fall. I had hoped to find out more in-depth history than what I already knew. After all, the Smithsonian’s resources were much greater than my own, and I expected to gather historical references for my documentary.

I walked through the entryway metal detector and over to the information desk. The woman jumped up with a handful of brochures. But when I asked to see their Alaska native collections,

her face fell. She pulled out the list of tribes on display in the museum. Yup'ik was the only Alaskan group on the list. While some of the natives from Brevig are part Yup'ik, they are mostly Inupiaq Eskimo. I took the elevator to the top floor, and found the exhibit, "Our Universes". It took bit of wandering, but I finally found the Yup'ik display, buried in a file cabinet-like row of North and South American Indian tribes. Very sparse.

Then I remembered my mom turning away from the display three years earlier. She'd visited me my freshman year of college, flying across the state of Alaska, stopping over in Anchorage, LA, and Houston, and finally arriving in the nation's capitol. She'd been dying to see the new National Museum of the American Indian, specifically, their Alaskan Eskimo collection. We'd meandered through the museum and finally ended up in a small, tucked away area where the Eskimo "collection" was on display – a couple of parkas and masks, an old seal skin, and some nice pictures. We looked around for the main exhibit until we realized we'd just saw it all already. My mom looked annoyed and disappointed.

"The two tiny gift shops in Nome have a far more impressive collection of carvings, jewelry, masks, seal skin slippers, and beadwork; they've got items that put the Smithsonian to shame," she complained.

Visiting now, I was more familiar with the regional villages and traditions. I saw a couple of dance fans from Bethel in the north. There was a drum, but no explanation of the way the natives stretch out walrus intestine and draw delicate, black outlines of the animal on the front. Wooden masks, but no traditional whale vertebra-carved masks inlaid with black baleen eyes and a piece of browned, ancient ivory standing in as a wart. There was only one photo of a fish camp that in no way conveyed the importance of subsistence in the daily lives of the Eskimos. As I

passed by each piece, my mind immediately jumped to portions of my own documentary project that would have fit in nicely.

I stood and mourned all that was missing, and thought of the rich culture that museum visitors would never see. There were no hand-carved ivory and baleen bracelets, none of the multicolored butterfly- and flower-shaped barrettes on sealskin that the Eskimo women like to wear. No miniature winter sled models made out of a caribou jaw. No ivory statues of men in parkas ice fishing. My mom's own collection of jewelry, statues, and paintings was more extensive than what was on display.

I checked the museum website and saw they actually did have all of the same things and more available for viewing, but only online. Given the massive space available in the museum building, the cubbyhole that was allotted to the entire Alaska native community was pitiful and inexplicable. Considering Alaska is our country's 49th state, it's a shame that the Smithsonian was unable to allot even a corner of the space to Alaska native groups, and instead tucked an entire state's cultures away among a series of walk-in cubbyholes.

On one of my recent trips up to Brevig, I asked a native how she manages to sell so much art while living in a remote village with no tourists. She smiled.

"Ohhhhhh, onliiiiiiiiine," she said in a native twang.

It was true, natives all over the region were selling their artifacts from dig sites and modern carvings at a high price through online auctions. There was also a man from New York who flies into the villages once a year and pays cash for art treasures.

Flying "home" to DC, leaving my other "home" in Alaska, I thought again of how the tiny Alaska native display in the National Museum of the American Indian reflects real-life. Eskimo culture is dwindling, too, becoming a small, misshapen piece of the whole. Maybe the erosion

started when public schools were established in the villages over thirty years ago and prohibited the use of native language. Current government health and sanitation programs in native communities throughout the country have a backlog of over 3,400 facilities to be built, according to the U.S. Indian Health Services. Many villages up in Alaska don't have running water or flush toilets, even in the health clinics. Indian Health Services also reports that American Indians and Alaska natives have a lower health status and shorter life expectancy than other Americans. It's a shame that our tax dollars are directly affecting this unique culture, and in such a short amount of time; Alaska has only been a state since 1949. By the time Eskimo children like Brenda grow up, there might not be anyone who remembers how to carve.

Access to the rural Eskimo villages in Alaska is extremely limited to outsiders. I am only able to walk around Brevig freely and without paying a visitor's fee of \$100 because my mom is the village mid-level. Having such a rare opportunity, I feel compelled to use my knowledge of photography and filmmaking to document native traditions such as sewing, dancing, and carving that are quickly disappearing. And I am, in part, documenting memories from my childhood.

Community Engagement Element

The US government is the main provider of water and sewer for rural native communities in Alaska, yet almost half of the homes in these villages don't have running water or flush toilets. I have enhanced my Storyplanet project from fall semester using research, videos, and photographs of life without running water and the related health effects to provide an interactive website for village committees to use to advocate for water and sewer system installation. Additionally, since the project is on the Internet, it has been accessible to groups and organizations in the DC area who are not aware of these issues in Alaska and who may be able to help advocate for water and sewer installation. We are currently in the process of presenting the project and information to various local and regional native community leaders and boards.

Appendices

Appendix I: Personal Interviews

Anderson, Hannibal. Personal Interview. 10 August 2012.

Provided information on school attendance, goals and methods of the village teachers and teaching aids, and outreach to parents to become more involved in homework.

Garnie, Joe. Personal Interview. 9 August 2012.

Spoke on a wide range of issues surrounding the native community, such as the lack of employment, stress, abuse, loss of subsistence lifestyle, alcoholism, and the public school history in the region.

Lycan, John. Personal Interview. 13 August 2012.

Spoke on youth lifestyle, public education, the need for more familial involvement in children's education, and maintenance in the village.

Matthews, Kim. Personal Interview. 13 August 2012.

Provided information on healthcare and community events.

Ningeolook, Marie. Personal Interview. 29 July 2012.

Spoke on the loss of traditional native dialects in rural communities and how it affected her childhood.

Wilson, Octavia. Personal Interview. 3 August 2012.

Spoke on living without running water in some of the villages, the transition from honey buckets to flush toilets, access to clean water, and exercise.

Olanna, Charlie. Personal Interview. 8 August 2012.

Provided insight into traditional Eskimo ivory and bone carvings, craft fairs, and sale of the items.

Olanna, Jennifer. Personal Interview. 8 August 2012.

Provided insight into traditional Eskimo beading, craft fairs, and sale of the items.

Olanna, Renee. Personal Interview. 12 August 2012.

Provided a younger generation's perspective on employment, health aids and healthcare, as well as a list of native dialect words and their English equivalents.

Olanna, Jr., Wilfred. Personal Interview. 7 August 2012.

Spoke on public safety and stress within the villages.

Olson, Dr. Donald. Personal Interview. 30 July 2012.

Provided information on improvements and enhancements to the public school system, especially regarding attendance and graduation incentives.

Tall, Etta. Personal Interview. 29 July 2012.

Provided information on tundra berries and greens, their traditional uses, and traditional native medicine.

Tocktoo, Helena. Personal Interview. 10 August 2012.

Spoke on the salmon fishing and subsistence culture in the Bering Strait villages, and provided some historical information on traditional Eskimo beading and sewing.

Appendix II: Precedents

Photo Essay: To Live and Die in Wales, Alaska

<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/slideshow/photo-essay-live-and-die-wales-alaska>

Helped me understand useful approaches to documenting life in the traditional Alaska Native villages.

NYT Lens Blog Herding Reindeer by Erika Larsen and Kerry MacDonald

<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/19/washing-dishes-herding-reindeer/>

Provided an example of effective use of photographs and text.

Joel Sartore

<http://www.joelsartore.com/stock/search/?search=oil+drilling>

Helped me understand useful approaches to documenting a broader view of the Alaskan landscapes.

Nat Geo Climate Change photo gallery by Chelsea Lane-Miller

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/12/photogalleries/global_warming/index.html

Helped me to understand some of the broader issues concerning Alaska and the native culture.

Nome Eskimo Community, Renovation Program

<http://www.necalaska.org/renovation/renovation.html>

Provided an example of an interactive multimedia project on a specific subject in Nome, Alaska.

Tracking the Whale Hunt with Alaska's Inupiat Eskimos by Shabana

<http://www.vagabondish.com/tracking-the-whale-hunt-with-alaskas-inupiat-eskimos-photo-essay/>

Provided an example of effective use of photographs and text, and helped me understand some of the issues in the state of Alaska.

Appendix III: Bibliography and Research

Cotton, Stephen E. Alaska's "Molly Hootch Case": High Schools and the Village. Accessed 19 November 2012. [<http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/cafe/upload/Alaska-s-Molly-Hootch-Case-Stephen-Cotton.pdf>]

Used for historical information on the way of life of Eskimo youth in the late 1800s through the mid-1900s.

Foy, Hugh. History of Brevig Mission. Brevig Mission: 1969, Dorcas Topkok.

Used for history of the Bering Strait region and the establishment of Brevig Mission by missionaries. This source also provided historical photographs of early settlements in that region.

Indian Health Service Website. Accessed February 2013. www.ihs.gov.

Provided data on the number of houses in the Bering Strait region with water and sanitation facilities, as well as healthcare access.

Brevig, Tollef Larson. Translated by Dr. J. Walter Johnshoy. Apaurak in Alaska. Philadelphia: 1944, Dorrance & Co.

Provided a translated, first-hand records of T. L. Brevig, founder of the village of Brevig Mission in the Bering Strait region.

Library of Congress. Prints & Photographs Reading Room. Accessed January 2013. [<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=wales%20alaska>]

Provided historical photographs of the native Eskimos and villages in the Bering Strait region.

Taliaferro, John. In a Far Country. New York: 2006, BBS PublicAffairs.

Used for the history of whalers in the mid- to late-1800s in the Bering Strait region, and the influence of alcohol and Christian schools on the native culture. This source also provided historical photographs of early settlers in the region.

Stanford School of Medicine. Ethno Med. "Historical Trauma". Accessed February 2013. [<http://geriatrics.stanford.edu/ethnomed/alaskan/introduction/history/index.html>]

Used for research on the effect of forced language loss and assimilation by the Christian missionaries on the native culture.