

29 January 1944

Hello Alice -

Here's another volume for
your Aleutian Story - hope you
enjoy reading it as much as
I have.

Love,
Bill

Volume I "Knew your Aleutians" - No 1.

The Aleutian Chain - witches' weather Kitchen - majestic beauty fog befouled. One of the least known regions of the earth! Full of historical lore; land of nature's experiments!

The Aleutian Islands form a tremendous dam that separates the Pacific Ocean from the Bering Sea. The passes between the islands are the dam's spillways, and through them the tides pour at high speeds. Strong winds, common to the chain latitudes, often oppose the spillway currents, forming the terrific tide-rips that tax the seaworthiness of even the stoutest craft.

The islands are volcanic formations. Great cones tower out of the sea to a height of 8,000 ft. or more. Many of them

are active and the steam of their hidden fires wreath their summits. Occasionally they boil over and entrap hapless natives and trappers.

The warm Japanese current, which takes the edge off the Arctic blasts, brings plenty of fog, rain, and snow to the Aleutian Islands. There is a precipitation on an average of four days out of every seven, and when it isn't raining it's snowing. While the temperature never goes very low in winter, it seldom gets above the freezing point. The first snows come in September, and from then until mid-April, the Islands lie under a blanket of snow.

Three different races of natives inhabit Alaska. American Indians live in the southern and

eastern parts; the Aleuts live on the Islands; and the Eskimos are always getting mixed up in people's minds, but they are as different as Japanese and Russians. The Eskimos are an Asiatic-Mongolian people who came across the Bering Strait. The Aleuts are thought to have come up through the Japanese Kuriles Islands. They are shorter than the Eskimos, and the darker of complexion.

Probably, the most outstanding difference between the Aleuts and the Eskimos has been their ability to withstand the ravages of white man's diseases. The Eskimos seem to be the hardiest of the native races. They have become immunized to the ailments of white

man and are increasing in population. On the other hand, the Aleuts have suffered a terrible toll from the plagues of civilization. When the Russians first came to the Aleutians, 200 years ago, it is estimated that the native population was in excess of 19,000. Just before the present war began there were but 750 Aleuts left in the Islands. Tuberculosis and other diseases thinned their numbers each year. At one time more than half of the 150 odd islands were inhabited. Just prior to the war all but six of the Islands were deserted.

The Eskimos talk a language that is full of vowels, as witness such words as igloo and Kyak. The speech of the Aleuts is guttural but more interesting than that of the Eskimos. It has a far larger vocabulary, and, when the Aleut warms up he can turn to with real eloquence.

The Aleuts are a happy, carefree race in spite of their rapidly thinning ranks. Their villages used to ring with music and laughter. When their race finally disappears, the world will have lost something of real value.

Like most native groups, the Aleuts are very conscious of religion and have accepted the Russian-Greek Orthodox

Church, implanted by Russian explorers in the middle 1700's, as their principle faith. They donated freely to the faith from their meagre funds and every village boasts a beautiful church. The church is domed with an oriental minaret and while its exterior may be of plain appearance, the interiors are always filled with colorful pictures of the saints and hundreds of candles emit a lovely golden radiance whose soft glow enhances the rich tints of the red and gold banners hung in dignified profusion.

Custom, plus an obvious shortage of wood, has decreed that native Aleuts live in houses constructed simply by

digging a hole in the ground and piling blocks of sod around a flimsy driftwood framework. The conical roof has a smoke-hole and usually the single window is glazed with the translucent stomach lining of a sealion. The sod huts, or barabaras to use the native nomenclature, often have an adjacent bathhouse. The bathhouse is similar in outer construction to the normal barabara, but has its interior taken up with a rock-lined pit which is surrounded by benches set tightly against the walls. The natives, when in need of a bath, build a fire in the pit and heated the rock lining,

after which the embers were removed and the luxury of a steam bath was easily secured by pouring water on the heat-retaining rocks.

The Aleuts, like the Eskimos, depend greatly on the products of the sea for their food. The Eskimo uses his *Kyak*, a small boat, for his forays after fish but the Aleut had to construct a boat especially adapted to cope with the heavy seas and tide-rips that surrounded his native islands. The Aleut *bidar-kis* is made up of a framework over which skins are stretched. The vessel had two or three hatches and would accommodate as many as six men; three paddling, the others lying

along the bottom. The trips between islands were so dangerous in these frail craft that women folk seldom made the voyage. For years the male Aleuts made it a matter of custom to paddle their tiny craft from all of the remote islands to Unalaska - now known as Dutch Harbor - to visit the great chiefs assembled there. Unalaska, once the center of Aleutian civilization with a population that numbered in the thousands had, just before the beginning of this war, shrunk to a bare two hundred souls.

The Pribiloff Islands - last great stronghold of the true fur seal - lie some 300 miles due north of the Aleutian Chain. Because the fur seal will not

come ashore except on his own carefully selected islands, and will not live in captivity. Few persons have ever actually seen him. The beast so often seen in the circus balancing balls, snorting ludicrous tunes in an amazing assembly of nose-horns, buck-toothed and long-necked, is actually a sea-lion. The sleek little seal seen so often disporting close in to shore lines is a poor relation of the seal family - the lowly hair-seal.

In the nineteenth century the fur seal herd of the Pribiloffs almost became extinct and a drastic protective treaty was agreed upon between the United States, England, Russia, and Japan. Now, due to the agreement, and the excellent

management of the United States Government, the islands have a seal population of well over a million from which an annual take of 80,000 skins is allowed; a figure that permits the herd to increase in numbers steadily.

The annual seal kill always takes place during the mating season which occurs in June. Only three-year old males are killed because at that age their coats are at prime. Because of their polygamous habits, the taking of males does not affect the size of the next generation. The selection of the seal to be killed is easy as the bachelor males always herd by themselves and selecting those at the correct age is merely a matter of judging size.

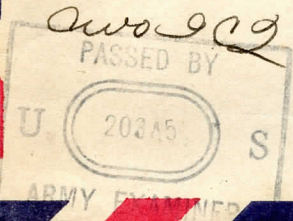
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