

# SLAVES OF THE HARVEST



By Barbara Boyle Torrey





*SLAVES of  
the HARVEST*

*The book, Slaves of the Harvest, funded with assistance from the Tanadgusix Corporation in cooperation with the Pribilof Islands School District, is proudly dedicated in the memory of Iliodor Merculieff, a truly great Unungan leader.*

*Iliodor Merculieff, born on St. Paul Island, provides inspiration to all Aleut people because he was a political and religious leader who accomplished a great deal at a difficult time, Iliodor served as director of the American Orthodox Church Choir on St. Paul for over 15 years, and through his dedication to the Church, the choir distinguished itself among choir groups in the entire United States by the beauty and grace of their singing. As President of the Aleut Community Council of St. Paul, and with the help of Gabriel Stepetin, Terenty Philemonoff, Sr. and Alexander Melovidov, Iliodor launched a major claim against the United States of America demanding legal recognition and money damages for maltreatment of Pribilof Aleuts and the return of lands wrongfully taken. The claim, placed in the U.S. Indian Claims Commission in 1951 was settled out of court in 1980, 29 years later.*

*Through publication of this history, it is hoped that each present and every future generation of Aleut people will always recall how our ancestors struggled against overwhelming odds under conditions of extreme hardship, allowing us to be where we are today; and, that remembering their efforts may be a guiding force in helping Aleut people cope successfully with demands of the future and the many goals yet to be achieved.*



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# ***FOREWORD***

*by Larry Mercurieff*

*Slaves of the Harvest* is unlike any other book written about Unungan (Aleut) people of the Pribilof Islands and Aleutian Chain because it is a factual story of our people and not a scientific analysis, an anthropological report, or a history as seen through the eyes of Russian explorers and administrators.

This story traces our historical roots in the Aleutian Chain, which began ten thousand years ago, to the present. It was a difficult story to document because our Unungan ancestors had an oral tradition of passing history down to new generations—a tradition that was virtually destroyed within a hundred years after the first invaders set foot on our land. *As* a result, what remained were bits and pieces of written information and oral reports documented in hundreds of papers and books scattered in many different libraries and historical files. It was only through the sincere dedication of Barbara Boyle Torrey and Agafon Krukoff Jr., that the historical puzzle was pieced together.

It is more than timely that this story is published today, because it comes at a time when there are three thousand Unungan people remaining on this earth. Given this small number of Unungans, we have a commitment to do as much as we can to prevent our extinction as a unique race and culture with a heritage we can be so proud of. No words can describe our appreciation of Barbara Boyle Torrey and Agafon Krukoff Jr., for helping us meet a part of our commitment.





## *The LEGEND of the FUR SEAL ISLANDS*

Long ago, when history was still recorded in song instead of in books, there was an Aleut chief on Unimak Island whose name was AhKahNecKak.<sup>1</sup> He had a son named Igadik<sup>2</sup> who spent much of his time in his kayak (*iqaq*) hunting the whales, otters and fur seals that roamed the Aleutian waters. Igadik became highly skilled in hunting and navigating at sea, and often spent days on the open ocean, hunting for the sea mammals that provided his people with food, fuel and clothing.

Each spring Igadik watched the fur seals swim north through Unimak Pass heavy with unborn babies, and every fall they swam south again with their new pups. But although his ancestors had continually explored the waters north of Unimak Island, no one had ever learned where the seals' birthplace was. One day Igadik was caught in his kayak by a fierce storm that blew out of the south, and he was forced to run before the wind for several days. When the storm was finally exhausted, he found himself in a deep fog, further north than anyone in his village had ever been before.

Through the fog Igadik could hear familiar sounds of birds and seals. Their voices seemed to be calling from a land hidden in the mist. He pressed forward blindly until the sound surrounded him. Suddenly in front of him loomed a great dark coastline. As he cautiously drew nearer to the stony beaches, his unbelieving eyes saw millions of fur seals, nursing their newborn pups. There were so many seals on the beaches that he had to search for a long time to find a place to land.

For a year Igadik lived in this misty island he had discovered, gathering fur seal skins to take home to his village. On very clear days he could see another island to the south which was often clothed in fog and surrounded by high cliffs and seal beaches. In the summer the islands were covered with all the brilliant colors of wild flowers. In the winter the wind blew the mist away, leaving the snowy volcanic islands sparkling in the icy sea.

Finally, when the north wind was beginning to blow strongly again, Igadik knew it was time for him to return to his father's home. He loaded his kayak with the furs he had caught and set his course due south. After several days of running before the wind, he sighted the familiar volcanoes of Unimak Island and soon he could see his father's village built out on a narrow spit of land.

The people in the village held a great feast to welcome him home and the feast lasted long into the night. That evening, many songs and dances told and retold the story of Igadik's discovery of the misty fur seal islands which he called Amiq. In the years to come, these songs were sung many times and each new Aleut generation passed them on to their own children. In this way, the discovery of Amiq by Igadik, the son of the Unimak chief, was always remembered by the people of the Aleutian Islands.

Eventually strangers came from the West and spent many years searching for the same fur seal islands. The descendants of Igadik kept the location of the islands secret in hopes that the strangers would be unsuccessful in their search and would return to their own homes. But after many years of searching, the strangers too found the fur seal islands and their rich animal life. They, of course, didn't realize that the islands were already named and therefore, in their ignorance the strangers gave a second name to the islands. They named them after their navigator, Gerassium Pribylov.