HUTCHINSON’S PROFIT AND ELLIOTT’S DELIGHT

When the United States, the world's greatest democracy, bought Alaska from Russia, one of Europe's great monarchies, there was little significant change in the lives of the Pribilof people. The principles of democracy that had grown and flourished on American soil did not find their way to the Pribilof Islands for almost 100 years after Alaska was purchased. There was, however, a number of practical differences between the Russian and American managers of the Islands.

Perhaps the biggest practical change after the arrival of the Americans was the new language barrier that suddenly had to be climbed by the Aleuts. The Aleuts could not understand English, although they could read and write both their own language and Russian fluently. Aleut was the language of their ancestors; Russian was the language of their church, their school, and the sealing harvest. However, with the arrival of the Americans, English became the new language of sealing, and the Aleuts were forced to learn it.

In addition to the new language there was another practical change the Americans made in the lives of the Pribilof Aleuts. After the Alaska Commercial Company had won the seal trade monopoly, they began to build houses for all the Aleuts who were living in barabaras built into the ground. The motives for this new construction were a mixture of self-interest and a paternalistic concern for the Aleuts. Ostensibly, the Company wanted to improve the housing on the Island; but they also thought that it would make it easier for their twenty year contract to be renewed if they had built permanent structures on the Island which they would thereby own.
Until 1870 all of the Aleuts had lived in sod walled huts that were partly dug into the ground. These houses were dark and often dirty because of the soot left from the burning of seal blubber, but they had the advantages of being relatively large and easy to heat in the subarctic winters. The Aleuts petitioned the new company to build their own homes on land that would be reserved for them. The Company, however, considered the petition devious. They thought it was a scheme to establish the Aleut right to permanent Pribilof residency and consequently overruled this request. The Aleuts had to wait another 45 years before their rights on the Islands would be recognized.

In the next few years the Alaska Commercial Company constructed eighty wood frame houses on the site of the present village. These houses erected by the Company superficially improved the standard of living on the Islands but they were, in fact, impractical for the harsh reality of Pribilof life. Although the houses had some insulation and were provided with a stove, they could not be heated easily. The houses were like a sieve more than as a defense against the wind and were therefore not as warm as the older, but more practical, sod houses. The new wooden houses were also much smaller than the sod ones and therefore the people were more crowded than they had been before. Finally, since there was no plumbing whatsoever, the people still had to draw water from the lakes near Telegraph Hill, a mile and a half from the village, just as they had done since 1925.

All of the new houses faced north and thereby their front doors opened into the northerly winds that blew down off the Bering Sea. Fire was always a problem in these wood homes, made worse with the combination of the high winds and kerosene lamps that were used in the latter part of the century. The Alaska Commercial Company had no plans for adequate fire protection for their new houses and therefore it is only a matter of luck, and perhaps prayer, that during the next 45 years only one house burned to the ground, an incident in which the entire family was killed.

The Alaska Commercial Company was required by their contract with the Federal Government to provide the Aleuts with the basic necessities, including food. It was the only way to guarantee that their involuntary source of labor would be able to do the all-important work of sealing each year for the Company. The principal food provided for the Pribilof Aleuts was the seal meat which they obtained themselves.
and consumed at a rate of approximately 1 1/2 pounds a day.\footnote{7} Salmon was shipped up to the Islands to supplement the seal meat, along with salt beef and pork. The Aleuts were not fond of beef or pork and would eat them only when it was given freely or when there was no other kind of meat available. Bread, butter, canned fruit and sugar were other staples that the Company provided. Tea was consumed in great quantities, a habit which was acquired from the Russians; and approximately fifty pounds of tobacco a week were used on St. Paul.\footnote{8} There was always a relative abundance of natural food on the Pribilof Islands, compared with other islands on the Aleutian Chain. But despite this advantage, there was also a lot of disease among the people, contributing to their unusually high death rate.

Death had always been a close neighbor for the Aleuts who lived on the Pribilofs. The number of people who died each year always outnumbered the births, since the time of the Russians the Pribilof population was maintained only by the continual resettlement of people from the Aleutian Islands. The principal cause of death among the Pribilof Aleuts was tuberculosis (then referred to as consumption) and bronchitis, both diseases primarily of the lungs.\footnote{9} At that time the only cure known for these diseases was warmth, rest and a nutritious diet, the very things that were so hard to obtain. It was impossible, of course, to maintain the warmth needed to cure these diseases in the sod homes, and even more so in the wooden houses built above the ground. So the diseases slowly ate away the strength of the people and quickly spread from person to person in the overcrowded quarters. By 1914, an observer estimated that fully one-half of the St. Paul population had tuberculosis, which meant that the disease had slowly reached epidemic proportions.\footnote{10}

The population of the Pribilofs, which was approximately 350 people, was relatively stable from 1820 to 1873. However, this stability does not reflect the large number of deaths or the importation of new Aleuts from the Chain.\footnote{11} The people imported from other islands were not only laborers, but also marriageable women and their children, who in 1887 were one-third of the population.\footnote{12} After the American purchase of Alaska the population of the Pribilofs, which had been stable for sixty years, began to drop off precipitously and by 1887 there were only 223 people left on the Islands.\footnote{13} In that year eighteen out of the 223 Aleuts died; this was almost 8% of the population.\footnote{14} Given the present
Pribilof population of 625 today, that would be equivalent to fifty people dying a year. Since profits were down at that time, it is plausible that the Company simply allowed the population to dwindle with little concern for either the lives or deaths of the people. It is also of interest that in 1880 there were considerably more females than males on both St. George and St. Paul, implying perhaps that the men were more susceptible to lung diseases and died earlier than the women.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the high death rate could have caused some social instability within the community, in fact the Pribilof Aleuts had a tightly knit society that governed itself until 1885. The Aleuts selected their own leaders who represented them before the Company's managers; they decided how the communal wages would be divided, and how to deal with any misbehavior within the Aleut community.\textsuperscript{16} Until 1886 there was no record of any Aleut breaking any law on the Island.\textsuperscript{17} Consequently, there was no need for policemen, because the community took the responsibility of enforcing its own standards of behavior.

\textbf{The Working Conditions}

Work on the Pribilofs has always been intense, but seasonal, since it has been timed to the annual harvest of the fur seals. When the Alaska Commercial Company took over the management of the harvest, the sealing operation became more intense as the harvest days were reduced. In 1872, seventy sealers killed 75,000 seals over a fifty day period, but in 1874 the same number of sealers killed over 90,000 seals in 39 days.\textsuperscript{18} This meant that most of the hard work on the Island was completed in less than two months. When the harvest had ended the men would work at odd jobs such as grading the roads and unloading the ships for 50¢ to $1.00 a day. They would then do their own hunting until the seals returned in the late spring to signal another period of heavy work.

During the reign of the Alaska Commercial Company, it paid 40¢ a skin to the community. The division of this money among the Aleuts was done by their own leaders who insured that everyone received their fair share. In 1872 the Aleuts were paid $30,637.37 for the 75,000 seals that were harvested. People were put in one of the four different classes, depending on the amount of work they had done that year. The 37 hardest workers received first class shares of $451.22; 23 workers
were given second class shares of $406.08; four people were given $360.97 and people who were sick or aged were given fourth class shares of $315.85. Soon the Alaska Commercial Company was harvesting 100,000 annually and the Aleut community then received a total of $40,000 to be divided among them.

In the same year in which the Aleuts received $40,000 for their back breaking work, the Alaska Commercial Company made approximately one million dollars and the federal government collected $300,000 in revenues from the sealing operation. The Aleuts, who had done the work, received 3% of the profit they had created, and no one in the Company or the government raised a question about the equity of such a distribution of the profits from the sealing operation.

Surprisingly enough, people were able to save small nest eggs on their meager wages. In 1875 there were 80 Aleuts on St. Paul who had savings totaling $34,715.24. The Company kept the Aleut accounts and paid interest on all of the savings. As a consequence of these savings accounts, the steady employment and an adequate supply of food, the Aleuts on the Aleutian Chain considered the Pribilof people the "rich Aleuts." This reputation of wealth was also embroidered with the assumption that the Pribilof people were also more energetic, better educated and more religious than the other Aleuts. It is all the more remarkable that their excellent reputation was made while they were in total bondage to both the Alaska Commercial Company and to the fur seal.

Recreation and Education

When the sealers were not working they spent much of their time in church. There were over 22 Russian Church holidays during the non-sealing season that were observed by every Aleut in the community. Birthday parties, dances, and card games learned from the Russians were important social events. Visiting neighbors, hunting, and drinking also filled the idle house between the seal harvests. The games of the children were similar to the games children played all over the world. The boys played with tops, marbles, and kites and the girls played with dolls. The one new game the Americans introduced was baseball, which was taken up avidly in the 19th century and is still played on the ballfields of the Pribilofs today.
Each year in August there was a berry festival that was always held just as the berries in the rocky nooks on the Islands ripened, the young people on St. Paul would go out to northeast Point to pick the berries and often would spend the night in the old salt house that was near the road. Berry picking was obviously another opportunity to have a large party before the school year began again in September.

The contract of the Alaska Commercial Company specifically required it to provide school houses and teachers to instruct the Pribilof children. School was held for eight months of the year for any child between the ages of six and sixteen. There was a single-room school house on both islands into which all of the children were crowded. Each island had one teacher who had to take on the task of simultaneously teaching six different grades, usually without books or supplies. At first, many of the children resisted this new school because the instruction was, of course, in English. The parents, however, encouraged the children to go to school as long as they also attended church school and maintained their Russian language, which was so important to their religion. In 1881 there were 45 pupils enrolled on St. Paul and only two or three would be absent on any given day. One of the students, Simon Melevedof, was so promising that he was sent to San Francisco for schooling, and after successfully completing a five year course, he returned to the Islands and was put in charge of the schools on St. Paul and St. George.

The Treasury Officers and Company Managers

The non-Aleuts who lived on the Pribilofs during the last half of the 19th century fell into one of two categories. They either worked for the Company and were in charge of the sealing operation and the maintenance of the company equipment, or they worked for the U.S. Treasury Department to protect the fur seal herd and insure that the federal government got its fair share of the seal harvest. There were usually four Treasury agents assigned to the Pribilof Islands, most of whom were political appointees who were transferred from job to job frequently. Therefore, they were often not well-qualified to look out for the welfare of either the sealers or the seals, to say nothing of the federal government's interest. Their pay was poor and their isolation made them dependent on the Company for innumerable favors. Their de-
pendency on the Company corrupted their independent judgment, and many of them were incapable of writing a critical appraisal of the Company's activities. As a consequence, the federal government did not learn until almost too late that the Alaska Commercial Company's destructive sealing practices were decimating the herd.

Because the agents and the managers had so much control on the Pribilof Islands, the personalities of these men became a critical factor in the lives of the Aleuts. The first American on the Island was, of course, the peripatetic Hutchinson. He was not well-liked by the Aleuts, but he arrived with the Aleut Captain Iliion Archemandritov, whom the Aleuts accepted as their representative. Since Archemandritov was a good friend of Hutchinson, he persuaded the Aleuts to follow him instead of the other American merchants, a decision that sealed their fate for the next twenty years. In 1872 Hutchinson's chief agent was a whaling ship captain by the name of Charles Bryant, who had retired in 1858 to a farm in Massachusetts. After Alaska was bought by the United States, he was asked to step out of retirement and visit the Pribilof Islands as a special Treasury agent. After his visit to the Islands he recommended that the sealing operation be turned over to the Alaska Commercial Company. The Company rewarded him by making him the manager of their operation on the Pribilofs and in so doing set an unethical precedent of financially rewarding men who wrote favorable government reports.

Captain Bryant was a man with broad experience at sea, but little formal education. In fact, many of the Aleuts who could read and write both Aleut and Russian were better educated than he was. He was also a heavy drinking man, although the U.S. Government had forbidden liquor on the Islands. At least Bryant did not enforce the law for the Aleuts that he continually broke for himself.

**Henry Elliott**

While Bryant was the manager of the Island a new young Treasury agent named Henry Elliot arrived on the Pribilofs to oversee Bryant's stewardship of the harvest. Elliot was at the beginning of his career; Bryant was at the end. Their perspective on life was completely different, and over time the differences between them increased.
On April 28th, 1872, Henry Elliott, who had a joint commission from the Smithsonian Institution and from the U.S. Treasury, landed on Lukannon Beach. As he was rowed ashore he saw, for the first time, the animals that were to become an obsession with him the rest of his life. Before he could fully recover from his first encounter with the masses of seals, he was whisked away to Northeast Point where a sealing operation was already in progress. He found the multitudes of fur seals at Northeast Point even more staggering than at Lukannon and began to spend long hours with pencil and pad observing and recording every habit of the fur seals. His pencil and pad became his trademark and eventually the Aleuts simply referred to him as "the man with the pencil." His fascination with the seals and their home eventually led Elliott to become the first man in anyone's memory to draw a detailed map of the Island. He spent long days studying the fur seals and taking copious notes on every aspect of their behavior. He attributed human characteristics to them and thought them the most extraordinary animals in the world.

Elliott was a passionate young man of 22. He had immediately fallen in love with the fur seal as one of God's most beautiful creations. He also was in love with the Island and within weeks he had also found Alexandra Meloveidov. He must have courted her in haste, for two months after he landed on the Island he married her. Alexandra's father had been a Russian colonial officer at Sitka where her mother had become an impeccable hostess. They had returned to the Pribilofs when the Russian administration had been replaced by the Americans. In Sitka, Alexandra had received an excellent education, which made her a likely wife to a naturalist who had quickly adopted the Pribilofs as his own islands.

Elliott was obsessed with the fur seal, and with the energy of a possessed man he took on his self-appointed role as their benefactor. Agent Bryant was not enthusiastic about having such an eager fellow on his hands who criticized everyone that had anything to do with his beloved animals. The following year the tension between the two men was so strong that Elliott demanded Bryant's resignation. That was the same year that Elliott had made his first estimate of the number of seals on the Pribilofs. By using his own calculations of average body size and average size of the rookeries he concluded that there were three million seals on St. Paul and 160,000 on St. George, not including the 1.5
million non-breeding males. Elliott returned to San Francisco in 1873 with Alexandra and their baby daughter and was immediately recognized by natural scientists as the leading authority on the fur seals. In hearings by Congressional committees, Elliott was always called as the expert witness. And in all of his testimony he strongly supported the Alaska Commercial Company whom he found faultless in its administration of the fur seal harvest. Few people knew that he had, in fact, accepted money from them in the form of a retainer for unspecified consultations. This money unquestionably helped him to look favorably upon the company that ultimately would devastate the fur seal. In 1874 the U.S. Treasury sent Elliott back to the Pribilofs to check his seal census. He was accompanied by a young naval officer, Lt. Washburn Maynard, who concluded that Elliott's estimate of five million seals on the Islands was low by at least one million. Maynard's collaboration on the original estimate increased Elliott's reputation as an expert on fur seals. Captain Bryant, who thought the number of fur seals was considerably smaller, finally retired to his farm in Massachusetts.

Unfortunately, Elliott was much more interested in the fur seals than in the Aleut sealers, despite his marriage to a Pribilof woman. At one point in one of his books about Alaska and the Pribilofs he even refers to them as "the lower races" and dismisses their problems with a flick of his pen. Consequently, his role on the Pribilofs was limited to the natural history of his seals rather than the human history of the sealers.

Over the next few years there were a number of Treasury agents who succeeded each other on the Pribilof Islands. Since they stayed only a year or so on the Islands, they never became involved with the plight of the Aleuts or of the fur seals, both of which were beginning to diminish at alarming rates. In 1879 when a new agent named Harrison Otis arrived the Aleuts tried to tell him of the serious decline in the number of fur seals on the Islands, but he shrugged at their alarm. In 1881, he could no longer ignore the Aleuts because they organized the first strike in Alaskan history against him.

Otis had become upset at the Aleuts use of their sugar quota for making the alcoholic drink kvass. Under Russian domination, the Aleuts had become accustomed to making Russian kvass using sugar. When the Americans had first prohibited liquor on the Islands, the
Above: Natives driving the "Holluschickie." The drove passing over the lagoon flats to the killing-grounds, under the village hill, St. Paul Island, ca. 1872. Below: Seal meat frame, lighter, hut, and houses at St. Paul Island, 1787-1880.
Aleuts and the managers, such as Bryant, had simply ignored the law. Therefore, when Otis suddenly enforced the law there was an uproar. The leader of the Pribilof Aleuts, Artomonoff, threatened that if there was no sugar there would be no completion of the seal harvest that year. By luck or by design, the Company had strike breakers conveniently at hand. Aleuts from Unalaska had been brought to the Pribilofs that summer to help build some roads; when the Pribilof Aleuts refused to continue the harvest the Company put the Unalaska Aleuts to work instead. The St. Paul Aleuts realized immediately the threat these outside Aleuts posed to their wages that year and to their very livelihood in the future. Finally, they were forced back to work to preserve their lives on the Pribilof Islands. The yoke of the fur seal bound the Aleuts to their work and the Alaska Commercial Company tightened the yoke by breaking their strike. To protest meant they risked losing their work and their homes. Not to protest meant they lost their freedom.

There was a brief protest the next year when the Aleuts were ordered to stand guard on all the rookeries without being paid. In answer to the protest the Treasury officers ordered the store closed and no wages paid. The Aleuts, once again, felt the noose around their neck and surrendered.

A year or two later the new agent, Glidden, told the Aleuts that the Alaska Commercial Company was having trouble filling its sealing quota and therefore ordered the Aleuts to sell to the company the skins of the seal pups that the Aleuts killed in the fall for fresh meat. The Aleuts, however, had always used these skins themselves to make trinkets to sell to sailors on ships passing by the Islands. This was the only form of private enterprise that they had been allowed and they refused to give it up. Their refusal was final and the Company had to fill their quota of skins elsewhere.

In 1886 a new Treasury agent named Tingle rechecked Elliott's census of the seals and decided by some magical calculations that Elliott's numbers had been low. While Elliott's estimate of vast numbers of fur seals was perhaps based on his enthusiasm for the animals, Tingle's estimate was almost surely based on prevarication; both the Aleuts and the Alaska Commercial Company had observed the serious decline in the seals due to the pelagic sealing. Pelagic sealing, the shooting of fur seals from the decks of ships in the open sea, had
increased over the last decade and the results of this hunting were obvious to everyone except Tingle.

Tingle was a cruel, arrogant and arbitrary man whom the Aleuts resented bitterly. He was angrily remembered for his abusive language and for his severe punishments. For minor offenses, he would levy heavy fines or put people in leg irons and handcuffs. During his reign, self-government by the Aleuts was abolished, and for the first time in the history of the Pribilofs a law enforcement officer was posted in the villages.

It appears that the Alaska Commercial Company trusted Tingle no more than the Aleuts did. Despite his reports that estimated more than five million seals on the Islands, the Company knew that their numbers were decreasing. The Alaska Commercial Company had been having so much trouble filling their quotas of seal skins in the few years proceeding 1890 that they had to resort to killing undersized bachelors to fill their quotas. Secretly, they commissioned a study to determine what effect the pelagic sealing by fishing vessels was having on the numbers of seals and ultimately their profits. The study confirmed that this piratical sealing was having a devastating effect and that, consequently, the $1 million a year profit they had managed to average between 1870 and 1890 could not continue. When their contract expired in 1890 the Alaska Commercial Company bid very conservatively on a new contract, knowing the situation better than their competitors. They were hoping, of course, that their construction of the houses for the Aleuts would give them an edge over their competition. However, the U.S. government gave the new twenty year contract to the highest bidder, the North American Commercial Company, who had bid $2 million for the right to harvest the fur seals over the next twenty years.

Just as the North American Commercial Company was preparing to take over the Pribilof Islands operation a short telegram was sent to Washington that broke down the U.S. Government's twenty years of complacency concerning the fur seals. Only a few seals were returning to the Islands that year; they were in danger of extinction and no one had ever bothered to mention the fact to Washington D.C. The Aleuts had warned the government agents, but these warnings had not been heeded; by 1890 it was almost too late.
SKETCHES OF A CRUISE TO ALASKA, ca. 1884. Courtesy Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.
SKETCHES OF THE BERING SEA SEAL-FISHERY, ST. PAUL Pribilof Islands, ca. 1891. Courtesy Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.