The ALEUTS’ DEFENSE of the SEALS

A cry of despair about the fur seals’ disappearance was raised by a young Treasury officer named Charles J. Goff in the spring of 1889.¹ His was the first voice raised in official alarm at the rapidly disappearing seals. When Elliott heard of Goff’s report he was horrified.² He had left the Pribilof beaches teeming with fur seals. His estimate of five million seals on the Islands was now internationally famous, and made it inconceivable that the seal herd could be destroyed in such a short time. If the herd was disappearing that would mean that Elliot's estimate was wrong, and that was unthinkable to him. Other people suspected that his estimate had been too high, but Elliott had no such suspicions. He immediately returned to the Pribilof Islands to investigate Goff’s report and to his horror saw the empty beaches that had so disturbed Goff. Northeast Point had only scattered pockets of seals; there were no more than 100,000 young males left.³ Elliott’s horror was increased when the Aleuts told him of how the Alaska Commercial Company had herded the bachelor seals together as they diminished. They even took them from inaccessible rookeries and prevented their return with pieces of broken glass strewn over the rocks.⁴

During the harvest of 1890 Elliott and Goff watched closely over the shoulder of the new manager of the North American Commercial Company. This manager was none other than the infamous Tingle who had been the Treasury officer several years before. He had been awarded the job by the North American Commercial Company, apparently in exchange for a favor. He had withdrawn his charges against the Company of complicity in illegal pelagic sealing. The validity of his charges was never tested.
After 21,000 seals had been harvested in the spring of 1890, it was clear that any further harvesting would dangerously deplete the young bachelors and together Elliott and Goff ordered a stop to the harvest. Tingle was furious. The North American Commercial Company had assumed that it could harvest 100,000 seals a year, which was the same total the Alaska Commercial Company had averaged. Furthermore, the Aleuts' livelihood came from the harvest and therefore if the harvest was short, the Aleuts' wages would be sharply reduced and some of them would face starvation the following year. Elliott compromised. There was a temporary suspension of sealing, but 7,500 more could be killed by the Aleuts for food. On April 5, 1891, Charles Goff was relieved of his duties.

The contract for the North American Commercial Company had specified that the Aleuts would receive a predetermined food allowance, eighty tons of coal, free houses, a church, a doctor, two teachers, and 50c a skin. If the harvest was to be limited, then these provisions would not be enough to allow the Aleuts to live. Rather than insisting that the Company's rate for each harvested fur seal skin be increased, the federal government decided to give the Pribilofs an annual federal appropriation of $19,500 to help supplement the pay of the Aleuts. It was a fateful allotment; the money was allocated by the government agents, not by the Aleuts, and for only articles of necessity that the agents determined were appropriate, such as specific kinds of foods. The money could not be spent on what the people might have chosen. Therefore, although the annual federal appropriation may have kept the people alive, at the same time it took away what little freedom the Aleuts had to spend their small allowances. And the assumption of this control over the most basic choices in life was not relinquished by the federal government until the 1950's.

As part of their contract with the government the North American Commercial Company did build some houses to supplement the ones that had been built by the Alaska Commercial Company, But the houses weren't much, as Aggey Galaktionoff remembers:

The house I lived in- an old N.C. building. One bedroom and kitchen and living room. There were twelve of us in that little house. We used the coal sacks, soaked in the ocean and wash it and get them white and spread them on floor. Today everyone have furniture and
rugs. We had little hand made tables, little stove, heater and to cook on—coal. Beds were of wood covered up and sleep on it. Now people today never like to talk about their times but I said best to let know and not be ashamed of it.

In addition to providing the Pribilof people with material provisions the North American Commercial Company was also instructed by the federal government to "treat the inhabitants of the Islands with the utmost kindness, and endeavor to preserve amicable relations with them. Force is never to be used against them, except in defense of life, or to prevent the wanton destruction of valuable property. The agents and servants of the Company are expected to instruct the native people in household economy, and by precept and example illustrate to them the principles and benefits of a higher civilization." The unmistakable assumption of this statement was that the agents and servants of the company came from a "higher civilization" than the Pribilof people.

It is ironic that during the 1890's when the fur seals were diminishing and the people had become dependent on the federal government hand-out that one of the agents, Watson Colt Allis, described the Aleuts as a "lovable, happy-go-lucky lot," who do not "cling to life." He went on to describe that after the Russian Orthodox priest prepared the Aleut for death, the Aleut very quietly and cheerfully died. Perhaps the stoic quality of their ancestors allowed them to face their future with such forbearance, or perhaps this agent was as insensitive to their lives as so many of his predecessors had been.

**Pelagic Sealing**

The dramatic decrease in the number of fur seals during the 1890s on the Pribilofs was due to both the Alaska Commercial Company's insistence on filling their quota of 100,000 seals a year and to pelagic sealing. The Alaska Commercial Company had vigorously promoted fur seal skin coats, and their advertisements had created a large demand for the fur. At the same time, whales in the North Pacific Ocean decreased and whalers who had often traveled halfway around the world did not want to return to their home ports empty handed. Therefore, these schooners often filled their empty hulls with fur seals instead of whales. In 1879 there were sixteen pelagic sealing schooners sailing under the
flags of several countries; in 1883 there were 34 and by 1889 that number had almost quadrupled. The pelagic sealers shot the seals from their decks and recovered only a fraction of those shot. In 1882, 15,000 pelts that had bullet hole! in them were sold; by 1895 over four times that number with the tell-tale hole were sold. Most of the seals shot in the water were pregnant females and therefore two seals, not one, were lost.

Through Goffs warnings and Elliott's loud distress the United States had become aware of the impending disaster on the Pribilofs. The awareness of the problem resulted in vigorous diplomatic activity over the next twenty years in an attempt to solve the problem of the vanishing fur seals. The Americans claimed that the fur seals were American property and therefore could not be shot by foreign ships. They also claimed that the Bering Sea was an American sea and the foreign ships were trespassing. In 1892 the United States, Russia, Canada, and England, the major protagonists in the problem, sat down to discuss the problem, but they could only agree on the fact that the seals had decreased because of unspecified activities of man. The following years the question of pelagic sealing and the rights of the United States in the Bering Sea were brought before an international tribunal in Paris. This tribunal decided that the U.S. had no exclusive rights to the Bering Sea or to its sea mammals. In 1894 the U.S. House of Representatives, which was disgusted with the international furor over the fur seals, passed a bill to kill all the remaining seals that had caused the U.S. so much trouble. The Senate, however, rescued the fur seals from extinction by refusing to concur.

The situation grew steadily worse. In the ensuing years, no positive action was taken to protect the fur seals from the now legal sea pirates. David Starr Jordan, a leading naturalist and educator, was commissioned to report on the situation on the Pribilofs in 1890 through 1895. He found only 400,000 seals remaining. The following year there was another conference in which the outcome was more diplomatic language, but no action. It was so difficult to get the other nations to agree to some kind of international limit on pelagic sealing because there were a lot of people in each country who were now directly dependent on the fur industry for their living. Therefore, any limit would work a real hardship on these people. In London alone, there were over 10,000
people connected with the fur industry who would have been severely hit by any such international agreement.

Since the diplomats had failed repeatedly to protect the fur seal, the seals' last line of defense in the early 20th century became the Pribilof Aleuts. The Aleuts had to take up arms and guard the Pribilof rookeries to prevent the bold pirates from coming ashore to slaughter the seals. Forty years later, Fredericka Martin, who spent a year on the Island, described this defense in detail:

Early on the morning of the sixteenth (July, 1906), three guards posted at Northeast Point spied a large schooner crawling close to shore. One guard ran off to summon Agent Lembkey and reinforcements. The islanders hiding behind the natural ramparts of rocks saw a small boat, outfitted with mainsail and jib, put out from the vessel and pull directly toward the base of Hutchinson Hill. Six unsuspecting Japanese sailors climbed out of the boat and were immediately surrounded. One sailor pleaded in broken English that they had come ashore only for fresh water. Sealing clubs, knives, and other gear, and a five-gallon cask full of fresh water gave the lie to his excuse. The six oars bound with greased cloth rested in oarlocks so padded that no sound could betray the boat's illegal presence. The trip to shore was no accidental visit. The raiders had come prepared to slay and steal the coveted furs. Under guard, the prisoners were marched off along the 12-mile road to the village.

During the remainder of the day, guards at every rookery waited alertly while guns barked eerily behind the curtain of fog. At intervals the marauding schooners communicated by cannon signals with each other and their small butcher boats. Guards at Reef Point glimpsed a vessel close to shore. At Polovina Point, other watchers saw, for a few minutes, still another sealer at work.

At eight o'clock the next morning a second band of Japanese pirates in three small boats approached the western side of Northeast point under cover of the thick morning fog. The Aleut guards, Michael Kozloff and John Fratis, saw the lead boat at the shore line. Two sailors were busy with the sail. A third sat facing landward with a rifle in his hands. Kozloff and Fratis leaped from hiding and shouted, "Hands up!" Hastily the Japanese abandoned the sail and grabbed their oars. Kozloff fired three warning shots in the water close to the boat. The frantic sailors bent to their oars. The guards fired six more shots, aiming directly at the boat and its occupants. The Japanese slumped in their seats. The strong wind swept the boat back to the
beach. Kozloff and Fratis ran to haul it up on the shingle. Inside lay two dead Japanese. The third man crouched in fright, nursing a wounded shoulder. The other boats had escaped back to the schooner when the alarm was given.

Offshore rifle fire echoed through the fog at Zapadni in the afternoon. Suddenly the clouds of mist rolled away and the two astonished guards gaped at three boats, holding eighteen or twenty sailors, a few yards from them. Excited and frightened at the sudden appearance of such a large force, the guards shot wildly toward all the boats. All swerved at once and headed for the open sea, unharmed by the guards' hasty fusillade.

The captains of the schooners at Northeast Point were determined to steal some furs. All day long the staccato of rifle fire beat against the ears of the shore guards. Again and again, the deadly bellow of the cannon signaled through the murky atmosphere, the threatening sound echoing and reechoing among the rocks. Until eight in the evening the fog protected the marauders. Then the guards could see a schooner anchored in the dangerously shallow water three hundred yards from the western shore of the Point. Again a guard raced to summon Lembkey and a squad of Aleuts. As they arrived the fog bank was moving farther west. On the beach Japanese sailors were hastily preparing to embark. Lembkey called to them to halt, but they leaped into their boats and rowed toward safety. As the bullets pattered over, around, and into the boats, all three turned shoreward to surrender. Then Lembkey realized his own force of fifteen Aleuts armed with six rifles was too small to insure capture of so many armed and desperate pirates. He permitted the first boat to land, then waved the others back to sea.

Gunfire from the schooner answered the Aleut attack on the landing party, but the bullets rained harmlessly into the surf. Casualties among the Japanese were serious. One dead sailor lay in the captured boat. Another toppled from one of the fleeing boats. His body floated from sight. A third body was callously tossed overboard from the schooner.

The Reign of Terror continued for five years. Each season, never less than twenty pirate ships loitered near the Pribilofs. After the July raid more (Coast Guard) cutters were sent to guard the Pribilof shores, but under cover of fog, small boats still slipped inside the three-mile line and bagged their furs. Some were arrested. Agent Lembkey, visiting the offshore table isle of Walrus, was interrupted by the arrival of three boatloads of men and hunting gear which he seized.
and turned over to a cutter. . . . Although the cutters could not effectively guard swimming seals, they did, after 1906, prevent land raids.\textsuperscript{13}

While the Aleuts were guarding the Pribilof beaches, Elliott was lobbying throughout the United States to save his own special animal. In 1907 he enlisted Professor William T. Hornaday, the Director of the New York Zoo, in his cause to help the fur seal. However, time was running out; by 1909 there were only 130,000 fur seals left.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1910, when the contract of the North American Commercial Company ran out, the U.S. government did not renew their lease. Instead, it assumed complete responsibility for the Islands' management after many years of neglect. In the following year, the North Pacific Sealing Convention was signed after more than 25 years of negotiations. The Soviet Union, Japan, Great Britain, and the United States all agreed to prohibit pelagic sealing; at the same time the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to share a portion of their fur seal harvest each year with Japan and Canada to compensate them for their loss of furs caught on the open seas. The ending of pelagic sealing in 1911, however, did not end the land harvest of the diminishing fur seals and the seals continued to be killed each year on the land. In 1911, a Congressional committee began an investigation into the conditions on the Pribilof Islands in general, and the fur seal in particular. In connection with the investigation Congress sent Elliott back to the Pribilofs in 1913. Aggey Galaktionoff, who was a young boy at the time, remembered his visit:

Mr. Elliott was coming up here. He getting suspect, you know, they didn't kill anymore than 10,000 seals cause they were shooting them out on the sea—Canadians and Japs—they were killing seals, and this Elliott comes up here at a time when there was a government agent with Northern Commercial Company—Mr. Lembkey. I know Mr. Lembkey and Mr. Judd.

Mr. Judd, he was drowned up here. In a sailboat out on lagoon, turned the wrong way and the boat capsized. They were with their wives going out for pleasure ride. Old man Neon Tetoff, he wis with them. All the N.C. employees and wives. There were about six Whites with wives and Harry Chester tried to survive his wife who was pregnant. He do his best and he was pretty near drowned himself too.

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but Neon he was getting topside boat and didn't attempt to help them. Just saved himself and that boat tipped over—the mast is so long where we can't get to them. They survived but Mr. Harry Chester—they got him ashore alright but then he didn't pull through and his wife just happened to have birth right away and was this little son. Mr. Harry Chester was in a warm coffin with his son and taken way off this island here. Took them away. N.C. Company take good care of the employees.

Elliott blamed the employees of the North American Commercial Company for much of the demise of the seals. Mr. Lembkey had opposed Elliott's apocalyptic predictions of disaster for years and therefore did not welcome his blistering arrival on the Islands. Nor did their relations improve after Elliott arrived.

An Aleut waiter in the government dining room remembered one dramatic incident in particular between the two men. Soon after Elliott had arrived on the Islands, he stormed into the dining room at noon one day just as Lembkey had sat down to his dinner. Elliott flung onto the table, which was covered with food, a "fat, nasty, bloody seal pelt" as evidence of poor handling. The sight was so disgusting that Lembkey nearly lost his dinner and had to leave the table immediately. For a week he had trouble eating his meals in the dining room.

While Elliott was still on the Island a telegram arrived announcing that Congress had finally established a five-year sealing holiday on land to help the seals repopulate. In addition, Congress had decided to prosecute the officials, both public and private, who had been responsible in the decimation of the fur seal herd. Congress was righteous, but not insistent. In the end, the government never brought anyone to trial for their role in the decline of the fur seals.

The sealing holiday allowed Elliott, who was then over sixty years old, to retire in Cleveland knowing that his beloved animals had been saved. He spent his remaining years battling the monopoly that the Fouke Fur Company had acquired for the tanning of the fur seal skins. In 1930, Elliott died in Seattle, near his children and grandchildren.

The Aleuts, who had been largely forgotten in the international anxiety over the fur seals, were granted, by Congress in 1914, the legal right to be the sole killers of the seals. However, even more importantly they had earned the legal right of residence on the Pribilof Islands after having lived there more than 100 years. These rights were granted by
the U.S. Government with to right hand while its left land was consolidating its control over the Pribilof people.

As the Russian domination of the Pribilofs receded into history, the advantages of their occupation were nostalgically remembered; in the early 20th century the Pribilof Aleuts still felt a kinship with the people whose names they bore and whose church they worshipped in. However, the Russian Revolution in 1917 profoundly changed not only Russia but also the Aleuts' attachments to that country. The revolution had claimed the life of the Tsar and the spiritual life of the Russian Orthodox Church. And with the removal of the Tsar and the Church from Russia, the psychological and religious ties the Pribilof Aleuts still had with the Russian people were severed.

The 20th century occupation of the Pribilof Islands by the U.S. government met no resistance. The U.S. officials considered the Aleuts to be a vital part of their commercial venture on the Pribilofs; however, being vital was not the same as being equal. The sealers were treated as wards of the government who had to be taken care of, rather than as citizens of the country who had to be respected. Therefore, the Aleuts' fight for their independence was no longer with the Russians, or with the private American companies; it was with the U.S. Government itself.
ABOVE: Skin boats, or baidars, on the beach at St. Paul village, ca. 1886.

BELOW: Gun crews on St. Paul Island, ready to ward off fur seal poachers, ca. 1900.
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