

*Speaking about the Unspeakable*  
Elders and the Evacuation



Ray Hudson

Anfesia Shapsnikoff and her grandson Vincent Tutiakof, ASL-P233-UN224.



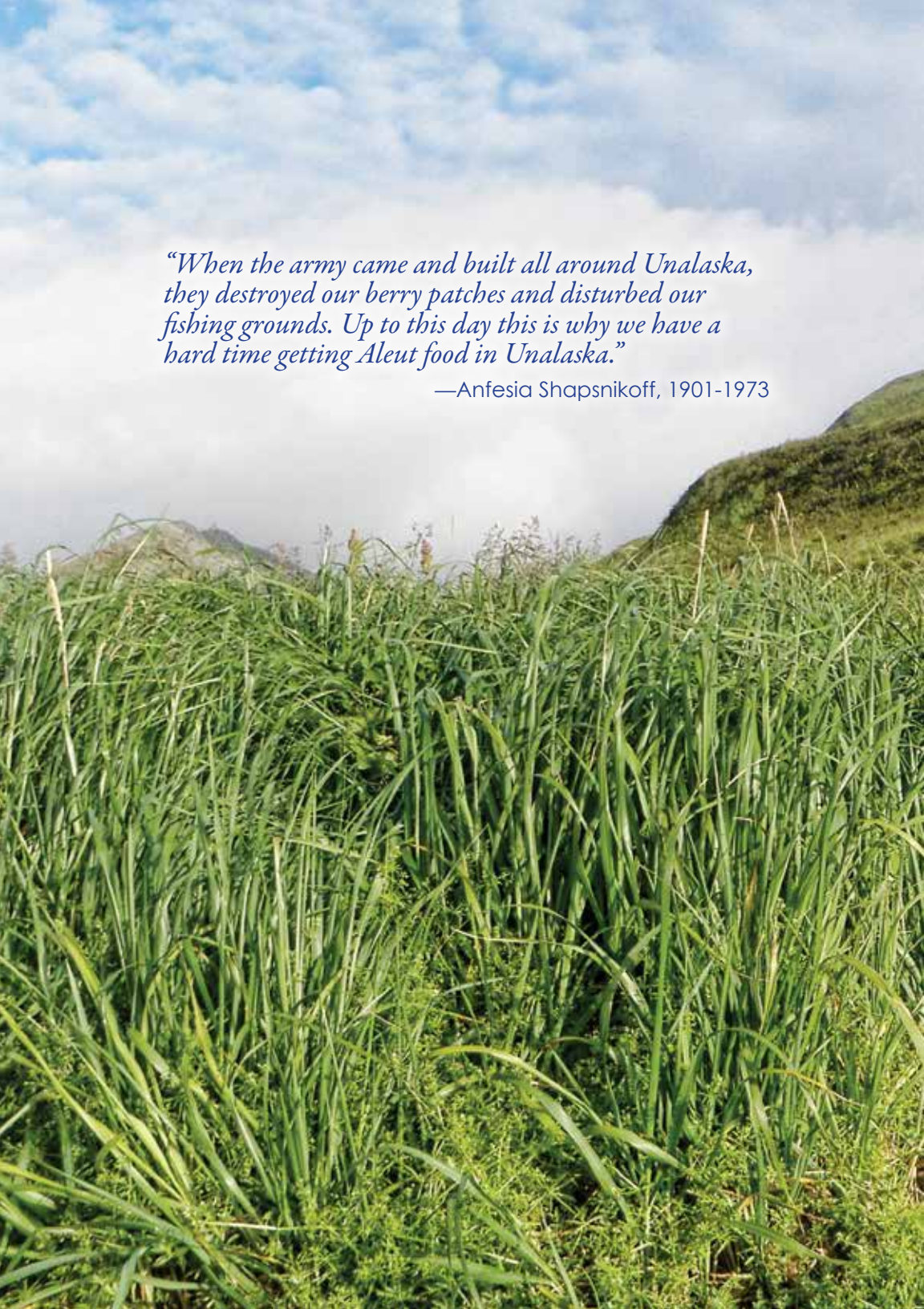
*Speaking about the Unspeakable:  
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A Talk for the Commemoration of the  
75th Anniversary of the Bombing of Dutch  
Harbor/Unalaska and Aleut Evacuation



Ray Hudson

Andrew Makarin. Photograph by Richard S.  
Heyza, *Seattle Times*, December 1966. Courtesy  
Ray Hudson.



*“When the army came and built all around Unalaska, they destroyed our berry patches and disturbed our fishing grounds. Up to this day this is why we have a hard time getting Aleut food in Unalaska.”*

—Anfesia Shapsnikoff, 1901-1973

I am sorry I cannot be present for this event, but Shelly and I send our warmest greetings to you. This talk will discuss the roles elders played in the traumatic events and repercussions known as the evacuation and relocation when Unalaska were ordered off their islands at the beginning of World War II.

Three generations of elders were involved.

- First were those people who actually were elders in 1942. These were men and women who had been born, say, before 1890. It is important to remember that almost all of these elders were dead by the time the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association began the reparations efforts in the late 1970s. The Congressional commission that investigated the evacuation concluded, among other things, that a generation of elders had died during the relocation years. Many *had* died and their children remembered them and spoke about them. This was particularly true for the Pribilof Islands where the mortality rate was among the highest, but it was also true for Atka and Nikolski.
- The second group of elders is composed of people who were elders at the time APIA undertook the reparations effort. They had been born roughly between 1895 and 1925. In other words, they were between 55 and 85 in the early 1980s.
- The last group of elders were “youngsters” born after 1925 and before 1950. They had either been children and teenagers during the evacuation or they were born shortly after the return. They were adults during the reparations process. They took the lead in bringing this story into public view. Today, thirty-plus years later, they are elders. There were significant ties between this youngest generation of elders and the



George Borenin inside the Kashega chapel. Photograph by Ted P. Banks II, uaa-hmc-0068-series 16-17-12 Bank.

oldest. For example, less than a year after becoming executive director of APIA in 1977, Patrick Pletnikoff formally began the reparations process. His interest in the evacuation was sparked when he learned how his grandfather—one of the youngest “elders” in 1943—he was born in 1893—had died in Ketchikan because he could not receive the medical attention he needed.<sup>1</sup>

All these dates, of course, are as random as the definition of “elder.” When Phil Tutiakoff represented APIA at the third Inuit Circumpolar Conference at Frobisher Bay in 1983, one of his complaints was the lack of ribbons or buttons to distinguish elders. He was 56 and he constantly had to correct people who thought he was an elder from Alaska. “My Alaskan friends cracked up,” he wrote.

Those who were elders in the 1980s had lived most of their lives *not* talking about the war years. For a long time after World War II there had been no reason to talk



Icon from the Kashega chapel iconostasis as seen in the photograph on preceding page between the holy doors. National Park Service.

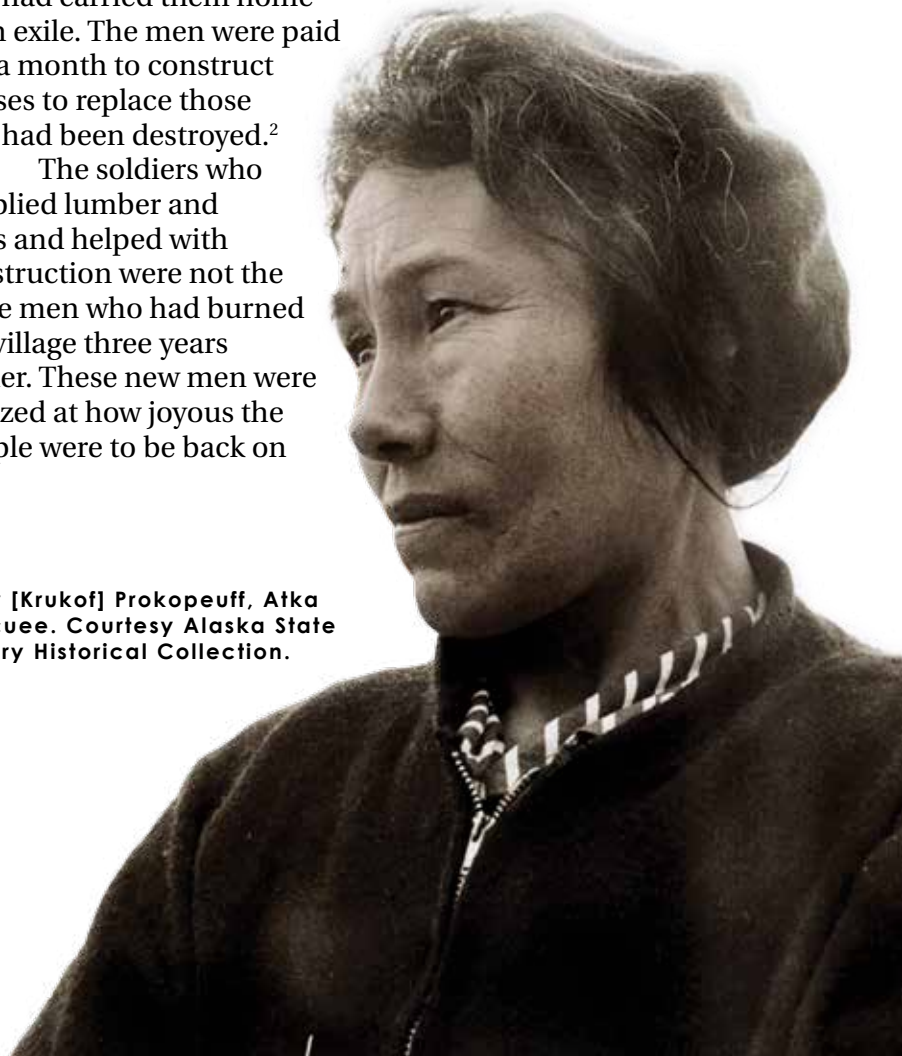
about what everybody had experienced. In 1945 people from Aleutian Island villages were finally back home and rebuilding. Destitute of virtually all family treasures and memorabilia, hunting tools and clothing, Russian samovars and family icons, photographs and written records, people in each village understood the urgency

of preserving the one cultural object remaining in their communities: their Orthodox church. These sacred places had either been destroyed (as at Atka and Attu) or were in serious disrepair. Private and community needs were overwhelming. Resources were scant. The smallest villages were left abandoned despite efforts by a few.

People from Atka and Attu faced the most extreme conditions. At Atka the church and almost every dwelling had been burned down by the U.S. Navy. People were first housed in Quonset huts and provided communal meals. But they were anxious to rebuild, and reconstruction started as soon as they disembarked from the transport that had carried them home from exile. The men were paid \$50 a month to construct houses to replace those that had been destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

The soldiers who supplied lumber and tools and helped with construction were not the same men who had burned the village three years earlier. These new men were amazed at how joyous the people were to be back on

Mary [Krukof] Prokopeuff, Atka evacuee. Courtesy Alaska State Library Historical Collection.



their island. The village of Attu had been literally bombed off the map. After the twenty-five survivors of Japanese imprisonment traveled from Hokaido to Okinawa, to Manila and San Francisco and Seattle, fifteen of them were finally settled at Atka, while the others were either in hospitals or boarding schools.

Over the next three decades, the 1950s, 1960s, and well into the 1970s, the physical, cultural, and emotional repercussions from the evacuation deepened in a multitude of ways in every village. Still, there was no reason to talk about it. Only a few did, and usually only when they were asked.<sup>3</sup>

In 1970, for example, Bill Tcheripanoff of Akutan (born in 1902) and Anfesia Shapsnikoff of Unalaska (born in 1901) were interviewed by a reporter while at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Bill was quoted as saying, “White men are a help to us in some ways, but a lot of our land around Akutan is being taken.” And then he added, in an implied reference to the destruction of Atka and Attu, “We are better off than some because our place was not destroyed by war.” Anfesia was her usual vehement self. “The Army moved in to Unalaska and destroyed our fishing grounds,” she declared. Two years later, in November 1972, two months before her death,



U.S. Marines reconnoiter the village of Unalaska, 1935. Courtesy Archgraphics.

she recorded statements in English and *Unangam tunuu* at the Alaska Native Languages Center in Fairbanks. In these she tied current conditions to the havoc brought about by World War II. "When the army came and built all around Unalaska," she said, "they destroyed our berry patches and disturbed our fishing grounds. Up to this day this is why we have a hard time getting Aleut food in Unalaska." As early as 1954 she had recorded her outrage over the evacuation and the destruction done during those years. But by the time the reparations effort began, she like so many other elders had died.

In 1976, again before the reparations effort began, students in the Unalaska high school Cuttlefish class interviewed six individuals who had been taken to Southeast Alaska.<sup>4</sup> Except for Bill Tcheripanoff, all of them had been teenagers. Neither students nor teacher spoke *Unangam tunuu* and so Bill indulged us the best he could with his limited English. But our real interest was in the falling bombs and ricocheting bullets of 1942. And the people we spoke with were more willing to talk about the attack and the bomb-shelters and the pranks of kids than about the far more serious repercussions that occurred within Unanga's culture over the subsequent years. "I thought we were going to have great fun climbing the trees," remembered Anatoly Lekanof from St. George about the evacuation. Then he cautioned us by saying, "You are only interviewing someone who was a child."<sup>5</sup>

Things got rolling after January 1978 when APIA hired John C. Kirtland and the Washington, DC, law firm of Cook, Purcell, Hansen, and Henderson. They began assembling a prodigious compilation of documents and testimony. But getting testimony meant they had to convince people that there was sufficient reason to dredge up memories. One of the leaders in this effort, among the elders of the time, was Gabe Stepetin of St. Paul. He was 70 in 1981. He was, however, the exception. John Kirtland and the Alaska Congressional

delegation pushed to have the Aleut case added to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians that was established by public law in late July 1980. The commission had its work cut out for it and it did not have much time. Charged with both the Japanese internment and the Unanga's relocation, the commission had less than two-and-a-half years to hold hearings, compile and organize archival evidence, digest everything, and submit a report with recommendations to Congress.<sup>6</sup> By September 1981 John Kirtland and his staff had assembled a vast collection of material and written several major reports.<sup>7</sup> These were provided to the commission when it held hearings at Seattle, Anchorage, Unalaska, and St. Paul beginning in September 1981. But silence had deepened.

The elders of 1981 were asked to speak about the unspeakable. They had replaced the elders who had died during the evacuation and in the hard years afterwards. Who can speak for the dead? A few detailed accounts did come from the older among these elders, people who had been in their mid-twenties or early-thirties during the war and whose first language was *Unangam tunuu*. Some, like Dorofey "Rusty" Chercasin at Nikolski, worked with translators like Father Paul Merculieff to render their statements into English. A few wrote effective English themselves. Many elders had died and their children spoke for them. Alice Hope's children told how as the only medical provider at Burnett Inlet she had struggled to treat mounting illnesses. How many more details might she herself have given us. Bill Ermeloff who was 26 in 1942 spoke about his losses, but what might his brilliant step-father Efenogin Ermeloff have said? Imagine if we could have heard from Nikifor Denisoff of Kashega, the only 19<sup>th</sup> century sea otter hunter who had lived to be part of the evacuation and who died at Ward Lake in 1943 at the age of 80. The oldest surviving evacuees said very little in 1981. Vasha Golodoff of Atka was perhaps

the most eloquent. She had been born in 1909 and her deposition concluded with the simple brutal statement, “We were happy to come home, but [we] came home to nothing.” And Bill Tcheripanoff, that eloquent master of *Unangam tunuu*, in 1981 a very old man and confined to a wheelchair, said nothing.

*“We were happy to come home, but [we] came home to nothing.”*

—Vasha Golodoff

There were several reasons for this reticence. Some feared that the little they had received after the war would be taken from them. Some wanted to protect their children from unpleasant memories. Some were silenced by the experience itself. But if they were relatively quiet in words, their lives spoke loudly and clearly. Fifteen years ago, I was asked to speak at the Ounalashka Corporation banquet. It is hard to compete with fine seafood and endless desserts, and I tried to be brief. The National Park Service sponsored a story-telling session that same weekend. There were three people born before 1920, seven born before 1930—all had been part of the evacuation. I summarized those events and the time in Southeast. And then —“I with no right in this matter,” I said, quoting one of my favorite poets—tried to end by thanking those who were present and who had been part of the relocation. We were all grateful to that generation of elders who had come home from the evacuation and “returned life to normal.” We were grateful “for arguments and differences and reconciliations, for good times and bad; for speaking our language even when we weren’t listening, for weaving and carving, for hunting and fishing, for cooking our favorite foods, for showing us how to do things and for showing us how to do things again, for telling us old stories.” I said people were thankful that they had concealed their pain and for their courage to

reopen old wounds, for testifying and for keeping silent. It was clear that their most eloquent testimony was not in what they said but in the lives they had led.

When the wartime commission submitted its report and recommendations in December 1982 and June 1983, it directly addressed the effect of the evacuation on the elders of the time. It concluded that “the loss of a generation of village elders has had a cultural impact far beyond the grief and pain to their own families.”<sup>8</sup> The implication was that the deaths during the evacuation and relocation caused a breach in cultural continuity. In the *Lost Villages of the Eastern Aleutians* publication, I suggested this was not the case. Enough elders survived to carry on the old culture. There were even circumstances that might have encouraged this (the economic depression that heightened the use of traditional subsistence practices; the reduced number of non-Natives in the major communities; the need to rely on traditional healing practices). The reason for cultural loss had more to do with the impact the evacuation had on the second generation of elders, those who had been younger adults during the war, the very people who were so reluctant to speak for such good reasons.

The most detailed accounts collected during the 1981-1984 reparations process and in the years afterwards came from people who had been teenagers and who did their best to recollect the pain experienced by their parents and grandparents. At hearings outside Alaska, APIA was represented by select individuals who spanned the ages of this group. They included Phil Tutiakoff, born in 1927, and Agafon Krukoff, Jr., born shortly after the war. Hearings in Anchorage, Unalaska, and St. Paul made it possible for many others to provide testimony.<sup>9</sup> As the decades passed, newspaper and magazine reporters picked up on the story and more and more elders told their stories. The success of the reparations effort, the momentum of outrage, had freed them to speak. The people of this generation are the

elders of today. We owe them so much. They would be the first to give credit to their elders, those who were old in 1980 and those who had been elders during the war. The blossoming of Unanga identity and culture that we see today is their doing.

Before I conclude, I'd like to make a pitch for the Aleut Corporation, APIA, the National Park Service, or all three, to compile these interviews and testimonies into a coherent volume. The fine DVD of material available through APIA, material collected by John Kirtland and his law firm, was prepared *before* people gave oral testimony at the 1981 hearings. It contains historical material and the brief depositions. However, it has none of the first-person eloquent and heart-shaking stories that would make history truly live for Unanga students.

I remember when we were planning the 40<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the bombing of Unalaska back in 1982. Luckily, thanks to Phil Tutiakoff, we stopped ourselves from calling it a celebration. There was nothing to celebrate. But two years from now the people of St. Paul and St. George might consider celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their return from exile. The following year, celebrations might be held at Akutan, Unalaska, Nikolski, and Atka. I know this is easy for me to say, being so far removed from having to do any of the work. Have a community potluck. Commission a special basket to be woven, commission a celebratory dance. Dedicate that year's culture camps to the return. There is much to celebrate about life in these islands and the vibrant Unanga culture that continues to re-master the past and to forge new directions thanks in large measure to those elders who raised their voices to speak about the unspeakable.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Pletnikoff interview. May 27, 2006. NOAA Central Library transcription.

<sup>2</sup> "Our Own 'Scorched Earth.'" *Helena Independent Record*, Helena, Montana, July 14, 1945:3.

<sup>3</sup> One of the few voices to be heard was that of Kathryn Dyakanoff Seller. Born around 1884 and raised at Unalaska, she taught school at Atka and Unalaska before moving to California prior to the war. She lectured on Alaska and the Aleutians. Among the topics listed on a flier she prepared was the "hardship and evacuation" experienced during the war and the difficulties people faced afterwards. She was decades ahead of the general population in discussing this miscarriage of justice. Unfortunately, no transcripts or notes from her talks have been found.

<sup>4</sup> Ishmael Gromoff, Anatoly Lekanof, Pauline Lekanoff, Philemon Tutiakoff, and Bill Tcheripanoff. Maryann Krukoff was also interviewed, but not included in the article.

<sup>5</sup> Unalaska City School District, *Cuttlefish One*, 1977:53-64.

<sup>6</sup> Although the final report, *Personal Justice Denied*, was dated December 1982, the commission was extended a few months and its recommendations came out in June 1983. The work of Kirtland and APIA continued until the Aleut Restitution Act passed Congress in 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Among them is Kirtland, John C. and David F. Coffin, Jr. *The Relocation and Internment of the Aleuts During World War II*, Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Inc. 1981.

<sup>8</sup> *Personal Justice Denied, Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, Washington, DC, December 1982:358. *Personal Justice Denied: Part 2: Recommendations*, Washington DC, June 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 50 people testified. For their names, see *Aang Anġaġin*, *Aang Anġaġinas*, Vol. V, No. 5, November/December 1981:6-10.



Come, \_\_\_\_\_ bre-thren, let us give the last kiss— to the dead,

ren - der - ing thanks un - to God, for he has vanished from  
she

a - mong \_\_\_\_\_ his kin, and presses on - ward to the grave  
her

and trou - bles him-self no longer concern-ing van - i - ties  
her-self

and concerning the flesh which suf-fers great dis - tress; where are now

his kins-folk and his friends? Lo, we are par - - - ted.  
her

Let us beseech the Lord that He will grant him \_\_\_\_\_ rest.  
her