First Arrivals

2 million years ago, the Anchorage Bowl was covered by glaciers. Modern landforms and vegetation were established about 12,000 years ago. Theories suggest that Alaska Native populations came to the Cook Inlet Area from Asia through Siberia when sea levels were 350 feet lower than today or up from Canada and the American continents. Archaeological evidence has dated back to 3,000 and 8,000 years. Athabascan speaking Dena’ina took over sometime between 1,000 to 1,500 years ago. Upper Inlet Dena’ina villages of today are Eklutna, Knik, and Tyonek, along with Chickaloon who are also Athna Dene.

Eklutna is an old, old village. Nobody knows when they first moved there. [Dena’ina] people came down the Matanuska River when they returned to Cook Inlet after the ice age.” (Billy Pete/James Fall 1978/79)

Bands, Clans, & Moieties

Dena’ina have a rich culture with a well-structured social hierarchy, that maintained order, provided defense for the homeland and shared wealth in times of need. There were several regional bands in Cook Inlet, with the “K’enaht’ana” residing in Knik Arm. The bands had several villages, each containing multi-family dwellings called “Nichił.” Each Nichił was led by a “qeshqa” or “rich man” who Russia and American traders and religious referred to as “Chiefs.”

Men and women in villages belong to their mother’s clan. The clans were grouped into two sides or “moieties.” In Eklutna, the clans are divided between the “Chishyi” and K’kalayi on one side, and the “Nulchina” and Tulchina on the opposite side. Villagers could only marry outside of their own clan and moiety, maintaining diversity in the gene pool and strength in the village lineage.

The clans were matrilineal and women possessed great power in the hierarchy. One of the best known of these women was “Grandma Olga.”

Grandma Olga

Olga Nikolai Ezi was originally from the Tyone Lake, Copper Center regions where her father was a “big medicine man.” In about 1896 Olga married Dena’ina leader Simeon Busdat, later known as Simeon Esia (Ezi) who was also one of the last recognized chiefs of the upper Cook Inlet, including Anchorage and the Matanuska Valley. The Russian government certified Simeon as a Chief due to his friendly success in the traditional worldwide trade system and his Russian Orthodox faith.

Olga and Simeon, along with their five children, led a hard-working subsistence lifestyle fishing in the spring and summer months, trapping rabbits, hunting moose, sheep and ducks in fall and winter. They also operated a small boat business ferrying supplies to area villages from Anchorage. She and her husband had many different homes throughout Cook Inlet. They eventually settled in Eklutna Village where they were well-respected elders and established the lineage of much of the tribe. After her husband’s death in 1935, Olga continued on as an important elder and skin sewer. A doctor reported in a 1945, “Mrs. Olga (Grandma) Ezi, the mother and grandmother of all of the Ezi’s around here (Palmer) and Eklutna, lives at Matanuska. She is very old – probably about 70.”
Heyi Niłtu, Then it is for winter

Tak’at... an important Cultural Property next to the Port of Anchorage was a well-known fish camp among Dena’ina. It included the furthest north tanik’edi in Knik Arm, whereby its name was derived, a kind of wooden dock or dip net platform used for catching migrating salmon as well as whales. Tak’at, like other Cook Inlet locations, is associated with a tidal eddy that concentrates the first schools of migrating king salmon returning to spawn in nearby Ship Creek and Knik Arm streams. In the upper inlet, June was “Łiq’aka’a N’u,” “King Salmon Month.” No one slept until the work was done and there was a lot of visiting between relatives and villages, good times, and potlatches.

The tanik’edi consisted of poles lashed together and placed over the mudflats at low tide. Fishers stood on the poles and harvested salmon with dip nets, snares, and even spears when the tide came in. Among other locations, tanik’edi were used at Tak’at (site north of this sign, overlooking the port of Anchorage) and Nuch’abunt (Point Woronzof) in the present-day Anchorage area, on Fire Island, at Kenai, and on the beaches along western Cook Inlet near Tyonek. Large quantities of salmon were processed, primarily by women, for use over the winter. Preservation methods included drying in smokehouses (baba) and fermenting (chuqilin), and storage in underground caches called əłnen t’uh. Supplies were transported from the camps to the winter villages.

Fish traps

Fish traps were placed in key locations on streams such as Ship Creek. The design allowed entry by fish into the trap’s holding chamber but not their exit. This allowed the Dena’ina to harvest both salmon and trout. They were also able to capture hooligan and even stickleback, which ran before the salmon returned to the creeks for their spawning migration. The stickleback from Ship Creek were an important food during particularly harsh times when winter stores had been exhausted. The Dena’ina would boil the stickleback into a soup which would sustain them until the salmon returned in the spring. Ship Creek was named “Dgheyay Leht,” or “Stickleback Creek.”