

University Press of Colorado
Utah State University Press

Chapter Title: 1

Book Title: Alaska's Daughter

Book Subtitle: An Eskimo Memoir of the Early Twentieth Century

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Published by: University Press of Colorado; Utah State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nwzm.4>

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On my mother's side of the family I am Eskimo. My father was a German sailor shipwrecked in the Arctic Ocean off Alaska's northernmost coast. Ouyaghasiak (pronounced ow-ee-yag-has-ee-ak), my mama, was born about 1889, daughter of Ootenna (pronounced oo-ten-nah) and Kinaviak (pronounced kin-ah-vee-ak), at the village of Shishmaref, Alaska, just below the Arctic Circle, facing on the Chukchi Sea about sixty miles from the easternmost point of Siberia across the Bering Strait. By the time of Mama's birth, whalers, sealers, explorers, and traders from the outside world had already brought alcohol and diseases into the North, which began to decimate our people. With repeating rifles, iron-pointed lances, and harpoon guns—the modern methods of those days—the foreign seafarers had thinned out the once great population of ocean mammals that had provided my ancestors with clothing, food, fuel, and shelter.

While sailing ships and steamers were returning from Arctic voyages with their holds loaded to capacity with casks of whale oil, baleen, walrus hides and ivory tusks, sheaves of seal skins, and otter and fox skins, the Natives on the shore were starving. With their age-old weapons and tactics,

they could no longer obtain sustenance from the dwindling animals and fish of the land, sea, and ice pack. Until the late 1800s it was unlawful for an Alaska Eskimo, Indian, or Aleut to own a breech-loading firearm because the reasoning went in Washington, D.C., that the Natives would wipe out their food supply by improvident hunting practices. There were no such restrictions against white outsiders, who could simply sail away from a region when they had depleted the waters or the land of animals and their operations were no longer profitable.

At the same time, the Indians of the interior of Alaska and Canada were being forced by hunger and destitution to leave their traditional hunting grounds because of white trappers, miners, voyagers, and other adventurers who were depleting the inland herds of caribou, moose, and other animals of the tundra and the mountains. Migrating toward the sea in search of food, the Indians, forced to leave their interior habitats, met and warred with the coastal Eskimos. My grandparents, Ootenna and Kinaviak, had vivid memories of battles their people fought with these strangers in defense of hunting lands and fishing waters.

Like a plague that swept the North, wherever the white man came in contact with the Native people, great numbers eventually died. Tuberculosis and communicable diseases, such as measles and chicken pox, wiped out whole tribes and villages. One of the most tragic aspects for the Natives was a quickly acquired taste for liquor, to which they had no more resistance than they had to the diseases of civilization. Intoxicated, the ordinarily peaceful, happy, family-loving Eskimo might murder his wife and children or best friend or lie in a drunken stupor while migrating game was all around.

In the summer of 1880, the United States revenue steamer *Corwin*, on a voyage to the Arctic Ocean in search of a fleet of overdue whalers, found mass suffering and death from starvation among the Eskimos as a direct result of dealings with whiskey traders. Visiting St. Lawrence Island in the northern Bering Sea, the *Corwin's* crew examined several villages where everyone lay dead as a result of murder and starvation. Captain C. L. Hooper, the master of the vessel, wrote: "These people lived directly in the track of vessels bound to the Arctic Ocean for trading or whaling; they subsisted upon whales, walrus and seals, taking only as much as they actually needed for their immediate use, never providing for the future. They make houses, boats, clothing, etc., from the skins of walrus and seals, and sell the bone and ivory to traders for rum and breech-loading arms. So long as the rum lasts

they do nothing but drink and fight. They had a few furs, some of which we tried to buy to make arctic clothing, but notwithstanding their terrible experience in the past refused to sell for anything but whiskey, breech-loading rifles, or cartridges."

Captain Hooper went on, "We saw thousands of walrus while passing the island, lying asleep on the ice, but not an Indian in sight. Having a few furs and a small amount of whalebone, they were waiting for the curse of Alaska, a whiskey-trader. As near as I can learn, over four hundred Natives had died of actual starvation on this island within the last two years. Unless some prompt action is taken by the Government to prevent them from obtaining whiskey, they will in a few years become extinct" (quoted in Bixby, 1965).

Hooper wrote further that the Natives of St. Lawrence Island were the best-looking men that he had seen in Alaska; tall, straight, and muscular, but perfect slaves to rum who would barter anything they had to procure it and remain drunk until it was gone. The problem had still not been solved when I was growing up in Alaska in the 1920s and the '30s.

My maternal grandparents were from Tigara, which is the Native name for Point Hope, a cape jutting into the Arctic Ocean north of the Arctic Circle and south of Point Barrow, which is the northernmost point on the North American continent. After an era of hunger and hardship directly related to the whalers and whiskey traders, nearly the whole village left Tigara in *oomiaks* (which are big, broad-beamed, walrus-skin boats, framed with whalebone and driftwood) and traveled southward in search of a place where food was more plentiful. Some traveled south about 150 miles and settled at Shishmaref, where my mother was born, along with three brothers and one sister.

The hunting was much better, not because there were more animals in the sea but because pods of whales and herds of seal and walrus, migrating from southern waters to feeding ranges around and under the polar ice, came close to the shore on their path north. In addition, offshore shoals kept sailing ships well away from the coast where they were not competitive with the Natives who hunted from shallow-draft, open boats and on the ice pack. Hunting was as hazardous for the Eskimos at Shishmaref as it had been at Point Hope, and there was seldom a year when men, afoot on the ice or following open leads in *oomiaks* and kayaks, were not carried off by ocean currents and never seen again. But it was possible to supplement what the sea had to offer by hunting creatures of the land—caribou, arctic hare,

squirrels, ptarmigan, geese, and such waterfowl as eider ducks, pintails, and mallards.

But in a few years hunger again drove the Ootennas (my grandparents) and others of their nomadic tribe and family to the south. They resettled at Ikpek Lagoon, fifty miles below Shishmaref and just sixty miles from East Cape, Siberia, which is on the west side of the Bering Strait. But, as steamships became more prevalent, hard times came to Ikpek as they had to Shishmaref and to Tigara. Not being dependent upon wind and current, the captains of the steam ships could thread through leads in the ice pack and hunt whales right up to the beaches and even into landlocked lagoons. When whaling was poor, the crews went out onto the ice and slaughtered walrus by the hundreds for blubber, hides, and ivory. It was soon obvious that the Ootennas would have to migrate again or starve.

While at Ikpek, they learned of the recent introduction of reindeer to Alaska. One herd was said to be at Teller Mission on Port Clarence Bay, eighty or so miles down the coast. Another was at Cape Prince of Wales, only about thirty miles down the coast. So with others of their family group, the Ootennas moved on to Wales, a village situated on the cape that is the westernmost tip of the North American continent. Asiatic Siberia was just over the horizon a few miles to the west. They could see the bluffs of Cape Dezhneva in Siberia on a clear day.

At the Eskimo village of Wales there was a mission school of the American Missionary Association operated by William T. Lopp and his wife. He was the first American missionary teacher in that part of Alaska. Devout but practical Christians, the Lopps were very fond of the Eskimos and were deeply loved by them. The missionary was acknowledged to be an expert in handling both animals and the Native herdsmen he trained.

The reindeer at Cape Prince of Wales and at Teller Reindeer Station were owned principally by the Missionary Association, with the remainder being the personal property of the Lopps and various Eskimos. The animals were used not only to provide food and clothing but also as beasts of burden. They carried packs and riders and pulled sleds in harness. My grandfather quickly learned from Mr. Lopp and fellow Eskimos how to care for reindeer and soon owned several of his own. To this day members of our family still hold an interest in some of the reindeer that descended from Ootenna's original animals.



Reindeer herd near Teller, Alaska, 1900.

Not all the white people who came to the North were blind to the problems of our people. Farsighted missionaries and teachers, like the Lopps, who lived with the Natives, ate their diet, wore their clothing, hunted with them, and shared their bounties and their hardships, could see the obvious. If something were not done, and soon, the Eskimos would become as scarce as the animals upon which they thrived. Though not so cold bloodedly deliberate, but just as effective, it was the same story as that of the Plains Indians and the buffalo—destroy the food supply and you eliminate those who depend upon it, which was official U.S. government policy in the 1870s and '80s.

Allowing the Alaska Natives to have modern guns so they could compete with the white men was not the answer. This would only hasten the extinction of the wildlife. The methods of the earliest hunters with their spears, bows and arrows, snares, and slings required great skill and patience. Even when game was plentiful, it was hard to take more than the immediate needs of a village or family. But the inborn instinct of the hunter was to kill all he could when it was available because tomorrow there might be nothing. Those who knew this Eskimo trait feared that if given a rapid-firing rifle, the Native was apt to go out and bang away as long as there was something to shoot at and his bullets lasted. That was why firearms had been outlawed to begin with.

By the nature of their environment, my ancestors were meat eaters. Except for berries, leaves, and roots that were eaten during the brief Arctic

summer and put up for winter use, their diet was almost entirely meat, fish, and animal oil. The Natives put into seal pokes all the edible leaves they could find in the summer and early fall. The women and the children would walk for miles around where they camped to hunt and gather these edibles to supplement their diet. They picked several kinds of berries, which they also put up for winter use in wooden kegs or seal pokes. By the middle of winter the greens, which had been mixed with a small amount of seal oil, would be quite tart to the taste buds and, perhaps to the novice, a little strong to the nostrils. To those in authority who sought an answer to the problem of the Eskimo's dwindling food supply, agriculture was hardly considered. Even if fruits and vegetables could have been grown, they would not supply the rich nourishments required to fuel the body in the frigid climate. The Eskimos had to have the fats, proteins, and vitamins inherent in fresh meat and fish.

The only solution seemed to be the introduction of domestic animals that could flourish in northern regions. Sheep and cattle would quickly starve on the sparse tundra vegetation or be killed by the harshness of the climate. Inland vast herds of caribou ranged a land similar to that adjacent to the northwest coast of Alaska and Canada. Occasionally seen along the coast, they were wild and migratory. One day there might be 10,000 of the animals in sight, and a week later not one could be found within a hundred miles.

As an experiment in 1892 sixteen gentle reindeer, the tame European cousin of the caribou, were brought from Siberia to Teller Mission. The deer certainly would furnish meat and skins, but could Eskimos be changed from hunters to herdsmen? Over the next ten years another thousand or so reindeer were imported, and herders were brought from Lapland to teach the Natives how to care for these animals. The plan was highly successful. The Eskimo and the reindeer seemed to have been made for each other. Our people ceased to be nomads, moving from region to region in search of food, and adapted easily to the life of the deer herder.

For the 300 American whalers and the 500 Eskimo residents of Point Barrow at the top of the continent, the introduction of reindeer to Alaska was a timely godsend. Were it not for the reindeer, one of the great sagas of the Arctic would never have occurred, and the lives of 800 humans might have ended tragically.

In the fall of 1897 a ship returning to the United States reported that eight whaling vessels had been caught in the ice off Point Barrow. Some

ships were crushed, and their crews and the Eskimos whose food they had to share faced starvation. When the Coast Guard revenue cutter *Bear* returned to Seattle from her six-month-long patrol of the Bering Sea, she was directed by President Grover Cleveland to return immediately to the Arctic. Her orders were to sail north until stopped by ice, then put a rescue party ashore with dog teams, hire Eskimo guides, and proceed overland to Cape Prince of Wales. Here they were to arrange with Mr. Lopp to drive a herd of reindeer to Point Barrow to be used to feed the destitute whalers and the local villagers. Quickly refitted and supplied, the three-masted, barkentine-rigged steamer departed Seattle for the Arctic on the twenty-seventh of November, 1897. She met the southward creeping ice pack in a storm off Cape Vancouver, 150 miles below the delta of the Yukon River. In a straight line the *Bear* was only 800 miles from Point Barrow, but to get there the rescuers would have to travel a circuitous route of nearly 2,000 miles.

The party consisted of three revenue cutter service officers, lieutenants D. H. Jarvis and E. P. Bertholf, and surgeon S. J. Call. They landed at Cape Vancouver with dogs and sleds, camping equipment and supplies. The *Bear* then returned to Unalaska at Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians to wait out the winter. When the ice went out the following summer, she was to proceed to Barrow and pick up her officers and the surviving whalers—if there were any. Being long before the days of wireless, it would be at least June or August of 1898 before it could be learned whether the mission had succeeded or failed.

At the village of Tanunak, the expedition officers hired Eskimo guides with sleds, dogs, and feed, and on the seventeenth of December departed for St. Michael, 250 miles north on Norton Sound. The route took them over ice-locked inlets of the Bering Sea, across frozen ponds and lakes and streams, and finally to the Yukon. Reaching the coast again, they raced on to St. Michael. From there they mushed their dogsleds over the Norton Sound ice pack to Golovin Bay, where they saw their first reindeer. Sending the Tanunak men and dogs back to Cape Vancouver, they hired local Eskimos with harness deer and sleds for the next leg of the journey, a jaunt of 120 miles westward along the coast to Cape Rodney. Being near mid-January they were well into the northern winter, with deep-freeze temperatures and violent blizzards. The sun along the sixty-fifth parallel, when not obscured by clouds or driving snow, was above the southern horizon for less than four hours each day. At Cape Rodney a small herd of reindeer was purchased

from a herder, Artisarlook, who was hired to care for the deer during the long drive to Barrow. After a nearly disastrous experience, the party learned to avoid Native villages where vicious, half-wild dogs would attack the reindeer. There were few such villages on the Seward Peninsula, but one place even Artisarlook, though himself an Eskimo, refused to remain.

They reached Wales on the twenty-fourth of January. Mr. Lopp was astounded that government officers would be in the region at that time of year. When the circumstances were explained, he readily agreed to furnish the needed reindeer and accompany them to Barrow, insisting that six of his best "boys" go along to care for the deer. They were Sokweena; Keuk; Ituk; Netaxite; Kivyearzruk, a cousin of my mother; and my grandfather, Ootenna. The revenue cutter service officers were somewhat concerned about Mr. Lopp leaving his wife and small children alone with the Eskimos during his absence, which would be several months. "There is not a thing to worry about," he said. "They are all fine people." And Mrs. Lopp herself encouraged him to go.

On the third of February, the party left for Point Barrow, 700 miles north, with 438 reindeer and 18 deer-drawn sleds loaded with equipment and supplies. My mother, who was eight years old at the time, watched with my grandmother Kinaviak and the rest of the village while the rescue expedition left for Point Barrow with my grandfather in the lead.

The party was fortunate that the days were getting longer, and they did not have to travel during the total Arctic darkness. The further north they trekked, the less of the sun they saw each day. There could be no hurrying or forced march; the reindeer had to be allowed to plod along at the speed of the slowest animal in the herd, walking a few steps then stopping to paw down through the snow to forage the tundra moss and lichen. Each morning the deer-sled drivers would break camp and go on ahead and set up a new encampment and have tents and hot food ready when the herd arrived at dusk. Even though bad weather prevented them from traveling for days at a time, they averaged thirteen miles daily, reaching Point Barrow on the twenty-ninth of March. There were 382 reindeer remaining of the 438 they'd started with, the rest having been killed for food en route and by hungry wolves prowling at night.

They found the people at Barrow were not faced with starvation. The supplies from several of the frozen-in whalers had been sledged to shore and living quarters were built of timbers salvaged from vessels crushed by the

ice pack. In addition, there was a local reindeer herd, and Charles Brower, the head man of Point Barrow and a trader known as the "King of the Arctic," had a warehouse full of frozen deer carcasses. The big problem was the maintaining of law and order among the 300 hard-boiled whalers. This the revenue service officers did until the *Bear* arrived in Barrow in late summer and returned the shipwrecked mariners to the United States. Mr. Lopp, my grandfather, and the rest of the "boys" returned to Wales soon after reaching Point Barrow the same way they had come, on foot. No human was lost or seriously injured during the entire trip.

My father, Albert Bernhardt, was one of the survivors of the ill-fated whaling ships crushed by the encroaching ice. His life in Alaska began in the year of 1897.