



They Left a Part of Themselves With It

BY TANYA KASHEVAROF AND AMY BRISTOL

It is very important that people all over the U.S. know the truth behind blind acts of intolerance and injustice and misunderstanding that have affected so many in this country throughout history. Some events are better known than others; some are unknown to most. Today, the past is almost forgotten for many whose stories are not in the history books. This is a dangerous thing. Many young people learn about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II but know nothing of a similar injustice done to our people during the same time.

So we are going to tell you a little of what happened during the Aleut Evacuation that changed the lives of a small, peaceful community forever. Injustice, discrimination aren't easily forgotten by those who have experienced it even if they would like to. Our grandparents and others were reluctant to tell this story because they have been scared about bringing up this painful past.

We have always been interested in the lives our elders led on the island of St. George when they were young like us. What we found out was that they lived through an experience 60 years ago in which they were taken from their homes without their consent and relocated to another part of Alaska.

In December 1941, the U.S. declared war on Japan after the bombing at Pearl Harbor. The Aleut people weren't at war with anybody — they were at peace. But that peace would soon be shattered. In March 1942, the U.S. government believed that the Japanese might attack the Aleutian Islands. On June 3, after Dutch Harbor was bombed, the military evacuated the Aleut population from the islands, putting them on a military transport boat called the *Delaroff*. Officials gave them only one hour to pack and told them they were allowed only one suitcase. The people brought only the clothes that they needed. Most of their possessions and valuables were left behind.

Many people cried because they didn't want to leave their homes. Too afraid to protest this action, some got down on their knees and prayed for guidance, faith, courage and the safety of their families. They also had to leave their church, which is very important to the Aleuts on St. George. Church is where they go for inspiration, courage, faith and comfort; it is a place to find peace when the whole world is in total chaos. And when they had to leave it behind in 1942, they left a part of themselves with it.

When everybody was on board, the *Delaroff* set off toward Funter Bay, an old salmon cannery near Juneau. The 700–800 Aleuts — the population of both St. George and St. Paul — didn't even know why they were leaving their home and had no idea where they were going.

“During the trip, people got very sick and many lives were lost,” remembered Terenty Mercurief, who was then a young boy. “The people who died at sea were given proper rites, and then we were ordered to throw their bodies overboard.” When the boat arrived, officials moved the Aleuts into a broken-down, abandoned building, which was to be their home for the next two years. They were stuck in little 8-by-8 foot cubicles. In some parts of the building, the floor was so rotted that people actually fell through. There was no heat, electricity or running water.

“There was no privacy, so blankets were used as walls,” said Mercurief. “Only outhouses were available at the end

of the dock, so the waste went into the water. The people bathed in contaminated water where the waste was put.” Back home, the Aleuts had fresh food like seal meat, reindeer, halibut and other native food. At Funter Bay, the Aleuts had no food and didn’t know what to do, so everybody went out to look for edible plants and mushrooms for food. The men got fish from the bay. Because the Aleuts have great hunting and fishing skills, they were able to provide enough food.

Before too long, the building became too small to hold both the St. Paul and St. George populations, so many of them moved down the road to an old abandoned mine where, years before, Chinese laborers had worked. A measles epidemic soon swept through the dormitories on both sides of the bay. Because the living conditions were so crowded, it was difficult preventing the spread of infections. After the disease carried its course, the people from both islands created a little cemetery for those who had died.

At this, I wish I could say they went back home and forgot the whole ordeal and lived happily ever after in peace with the rest of the world. But it would not be until June 1945 when all Aleuts from St. George and St. Paul were permitted to return home. When they arrived, the Aleuts practically had to start over. Homes and churches had been damaged and even destroyed.

Many of the Aleut people were wounded emotionally by this experience. In the 1980s, some went to court asking for money for damages and to set up a trust fund. Most of all, they wanted a formal apology from the U.S. government. Everything was given to them except an apology, even though President George Bush in the late 1980s gave the Japanese Americans an apology for interning them during World War II.

As a result of their experiences at Funter Bay, many Aleuts have no trust for outsiders or the government, and still wait for an apology. I think that is all the people really want. Is that too much to ask? The government relocated them to an unknown place without proper medical attention, proper housing, or other necessities to live a comfortable life. Many of the elders never really talk about it because it hurts them so much to recall what their family and friends went through. They are a proud people who have looked for peace and only recently discovered it. This important event of Aleut history must not be forgotten.

Tanya Kashevarof and Amy Bristol were 8th grade students at St. George Island School in Alaska when they wrote “They Left a Part of Themselves With It.”