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THE MAGAZINE OF NATIVE PEOPLES, COMMUNITIES, AND WAYS OF LIFE

# First Alaskans



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CHEFORNAK SUMMER

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NATIVE FOODS PHOTO CONTEST



# Sit' Tlein

*aakulagtevkkenata* | *focus*

The story of  
Hubbard Glacier's spirit  
and indigenous knowledge  
of Tlingit seal-hunting  
practices

BY LESLIE HSU OH

**A** DELICATE DANCE IS AT PLAY in Yakutat Bay. Called Yaakwdáat by the Tlingit people who harvested here for millennia, floes discharged by Hubbard Glacier, or Sit' Tlein, clink against each other like cubes in a glass. Pop, crackle, sizzle. A swift current keeps things in constant negotiation while the sea gently combs the shores. The sun transforms everything white into a translucent drip.



Kai Monture (Tlingit) awaits the arrival of his community to Shaanáx Kuwóox', the place of the ancestral seal-hunting camp near Hubbard Glacier, or Sit' Tlein. PHOTO BY BRANDON McELROY, PROGRESSIVE MEDIA ALASKA

ABOARD A 33-FOOT ALUMINUM offshore fishing vessel, archaeologists, Forest Service employees, and indigenous researchers gather around George Ramos Sr., as he prepares an offering to Sit' Tlein, or Láayaduxk'áns'. Ramos, known as Woochjáxueesh in his Tlingit heritage, is of the Raven Moiety, people of the Coho Clan, Frog House—and is the inspiration for the group's activities.

The largest tidewater glacier in North America measuring 76 miles long, 7

miles wide, and 600 feet tall at its terminal face, Sit' Tlein silences everyone with a shotgun crack, then a teasing trickle of ice, followed by a section of the glacier about the size of a building calving. By the time the thunderous sound fades and the massive wave from the entry of the ice into the water dissipates against the hull, things are so quiet that you can hear the “goo goo ga ga” of seal pups on distant ice floe.

In his left hand, Ramos holds a bag of American Spirit tobacco. Shielding

his eyes with a pair of dark sunglasses and a navy blue cap embroidered with the words “Native Veteran,” Ramos leans back and projects his voice up into a baby blue sky caught in whispers of white clouds.

He addresses Sit' Tlein in both Tlingit and English while rubbing the tobacco with his right hand, “Our grandfathers, our uncles on our mother's side, I thank you. We have come to your country where we used to hunt. And you brought me here when I was

a little boy as you used to put the food into the fire and call your grandfather. We ask you to be with us. Don't let trouble come among us and don't let anyone get hurt in this country.”

After he sprinkles tobacco over the side of the boat, Ramos hands his daughter, Judith, a loaf of bread. Known in Tlingit as Daxootsu, of the Raven Moiety, people of the Copper River Clan, Owl House, Judith breaks off the bread chunk-by-chunk, each time saying “Gunalchéesh,” before feeding it to the sea.

BESIDES SERVING as a senior researcher of a study directed by Smithsonian anthropologist Aron Crowell and funded by the National Science Foundation, Judith is fulfilling her parent's dreams. Her father inspired the research model by suggesting to Steve Langdon, former Department Chair of the University of Alaska Anchorage's Anthropology Department, the value of studying ancestral sealing camps and place names he learned as a young seal hunter. Ramos hypothesized that the seal camps must be greater in age the farther the distance from the modern front of Sit' Tlein.

Judith's mother, Elaine Abraham, is the other senior researcher. Called Chewshaa in Tlingit, she is clan mother of the Raven Moiety, people of the Copper River Clan, Owl House, as well as Chair of the Alaska Native Science Commission and renowned as a pioneer.

Principal investigator Crowell, Alaska Director of the Smithsonian Intuition's Arctic Studies Center, says, “It is fairly unusual for a major research study to start with a theory and an oral tradition provided by an Elder [Ramos] in the community.” It is also notable that community scholars including Elaine Abraham and Judy Ramos share fully in the responsibilities of analyzing the research. Judith is writing her dissertation on this research for a Ph.D. in Indigenous Studies at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where she is teaching as Assistant Professor.

Crowell says, “We want strong ownership from the community, not just helping us or looking on. Ideas for the project and guidance on the way it should be done are coming from the community itself.”

At a kickoff meeting, Abraham said, “I am really excited about this project. I have dreamed of doing some of these things in Yakutat for the second generation. They need to know where their ancestors camped and where they lived and where they gathered their food. Under oral tradition we can talk about it, but we need to have it validated by scientists for the second generation.”

The significance of this validation is that human and environmental history encoded in living oral traditions and place names can now be chronologically correlated with archaeological and geological data. For example, the story of how the Gineix Kwáan migrated from Copper River region down to Yakutat Bay and made their first settlement near Knight Island is not only centuries old, according to Crowell, but “a very specific story in terms of place and the people who were involved. It includes interesting observations about where the glacier was and how it retreated. We can ask ‘when did that happen?’ We can pursue that story by looking at archaeological and geological evidence.”

That evidence so far suggests that the migration might have taken place around A.D. 1500, when the glacier silt partially filled the bay but when Yakutat's harbor seal population, which thrives in its field of ice floes, was already well established.

Co-principal investigator Daniel Mann, Assistant Professor in the Department of Geology and Geophysics at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, is mapping and radiocarbon-dating moraines, trim lines, the overrun of forest beds, and other evidence of the retreat and advance of Sit' Tlein and surrounding glaciers as well as sea level history.

If the oral narrative indicates the glacier fills up a large part of the bay

**‘There’s only a few fluent Elders left that have the ancient stories, oral history, place names, migration stories, traditional knowledge of seal hunting.’**

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**Judith Daxootsu Ramos**

senior reseacher and assitant professor, University of Alaska Fairbanks

but not Knight Island, Mann can figure out when the story took place based upon the geological date. At the same time, Crowell can do archaeological radiocarbon-dating at Knight Island and look at when people first occupied the villages there. Together, they can precisely date when people built that village and the other sealing camps mentioned in stories passed down generation after generation. Crowell can also study evidence of the distinctive Copper River culture that the migrants bought with them. For example, earlier excavations by the Smithsonian's Frederica De Laguna in

1949-1952 revealed an abundance of copper artifacts such as knife blades and jewelry at the Tlakw.ann (Old Town) site, probably brought from the Gineix Kwáan's original homeland.

Environmental history is also encoded in place names. For example, K'oootsinadi (or Knight Island) means "shaken land" signifying that so many people lived there that their feet shook the ground. 'U-nahd'idayahc (or Point Latouche) is an Eyak word meaning "month when animals bear their young." In addition, researchers are also looking at linguistic source of place names.

THE MOST IMPORTANT and fascinating discovery made so far occurred in 2011 when the largest seal camp in Disenchantment Bay, believed to have been used from about 1845-1899 annually from May through July for hunting harbor seals in the ice floes, was finally rediscovered after years of failed attempts to locate cultural remains. The illusive camp, known as Shaanáx Kuwóox' ("wide valley") in Tlingit and Qek'otliya in Eyak, had been obscured by an earthquake in 1899 that uplifted the land and shifted it inland where it became overgrown with a thick cover of alders, devil's club, and ferns.

Judith's son, Kai Monture, or Kaakh'utxhéich, follows his mother's clan as is culturally appropriate, and says, "There's always reservations that you have of strangers coming into your land like this and handling things that belonged to your Ancestors and family, but I know they have the best of intentions."

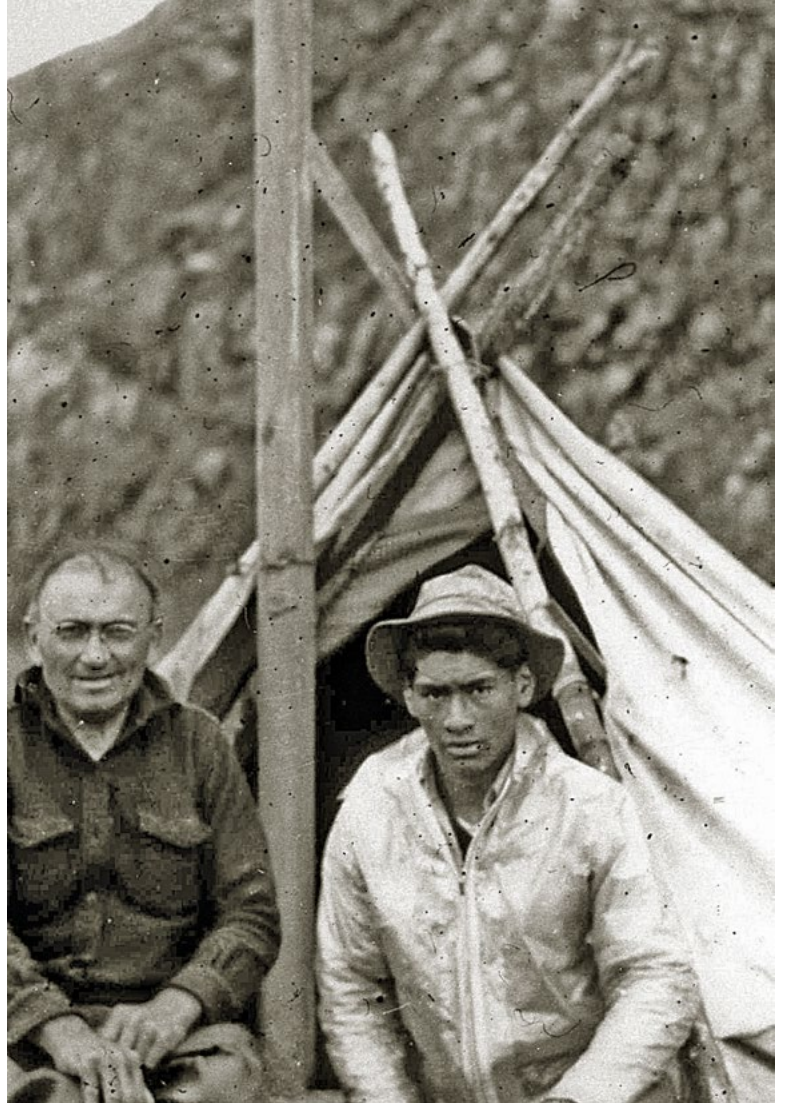
Elders and members of the Yakutat Tlingit community visited the site last summer after Crowell and his archaeological team had uncovered the remains of seven tents and bark-covered smokehouses that the 19th century hunters and their families used during the sealing season. Inside they found rich evidence of camp life, including rifle cartridges, beads left behind by women who were sewing moccasins and regalia, and children's

toys. Community members participated in a ceremony, which some Elders said they have never experienced in their lifetime, to "reclaim that land and to also feed the spirits of our family or ancestors that might have died there... We did that ceremony to put them at ease and let them know that what was happening was a good thing and that we had given those archaeologists permission to be there and dig up the campsite and remove artifacts."

A historical place claim for the sealing camp under section 14(h)(1) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and a later appeal were both denied by the Bureau of Land Management

in the past on the basis of insufficient evidence. Now, not only can Yakutat Tlingit youth walk in the footsteps of their Ancestors but the old seal camps mentioned in the stories told by their grandparents are now eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places and some may be returned to tribal ownership.

For the Yakutat Tlingit community, Judith says her "main goal is to document knowledge because our Elders are so old and there's only a few fluent Elders left that can speak the language and have the knowledge of the ancient stories, oral history, place names, migration stories, traditional knowledge of seal hunting. My parents are two



Sometime in the 1940s, George Ramos (*right*) and his uncle Jack Ellis at one of the seal camps currently being excavated.



Tlingits Kai Monture, his grandmother Elaine Abraham, his mother Judy Ramos, his cousin Nirvana Ramos, and his grandfather George Ramos (left to right) partnered with archeologists, geologists, and linguists to tell Sit' Tlein's story.

of the last fluent Elders. Tremendous knowledge will be lost in the next 5-10 years. We are running out of time.”

An archive will be established with the Yakutat Tlingit Tribe with more than 500 hours of footage and video-recorded interviews with key informants, scenes such as the clan ceremony conducted at Shaanáx Kuwóox' and hundreds of documents, photographs, and reports resulting from the seal camps project. Curriculum will be produced with a focus on Tlingit language, Yakutat history, sealing, archaeology, and environmental science. Tlingit student volunteers from high school through graduate level will be conducting field research, analysis, and media production.

Monture is co-directing a broadcast-quality educational documentary with Brandon McElroy of Progressive Media Alaska. McElroy says, “My hope for the work is that it makes its way into a final form that everyone involved would feel proud of and represents years of hard work and aspects of the sacredness of this work without trespassing across really important

lines to be respected when it comes to sacred content.”

CULTURE AND INDIGENOUS intellectual property rights as well as clan ownership of stories, songs, and dances are the most challenging aspect of this project. Like the delicate dance of ice floe, sun, wind, and water, all the parties, interests, and priorities will have to weigh these rights against building coherence between indigenous and western knowledge systems.

McElroy says his “job is to keep track of everyone’s priorities and information that’s coming in and try to synergize that into a whole that works for everyone involved and results in something that connects young people. I feel like, all over the world, there’s a lot of apathy and disenfranchisement in the younger generation. I want other young people and communities across America to watch this show and feel like they could make a difference in their community.

“They can get a handy camera or iPhone and document their Elder stories and galvanize activities in

their community that would connect Elders to the youth and accelerate this process of intergenerational sharing. I’m trying to tell a story that sets an example that will inspire indigenous young people in other communities and encourage them to pursue cultural revitalization projects and go over to their grandmother’s house and ask her to tell stories or organize culture camps.”

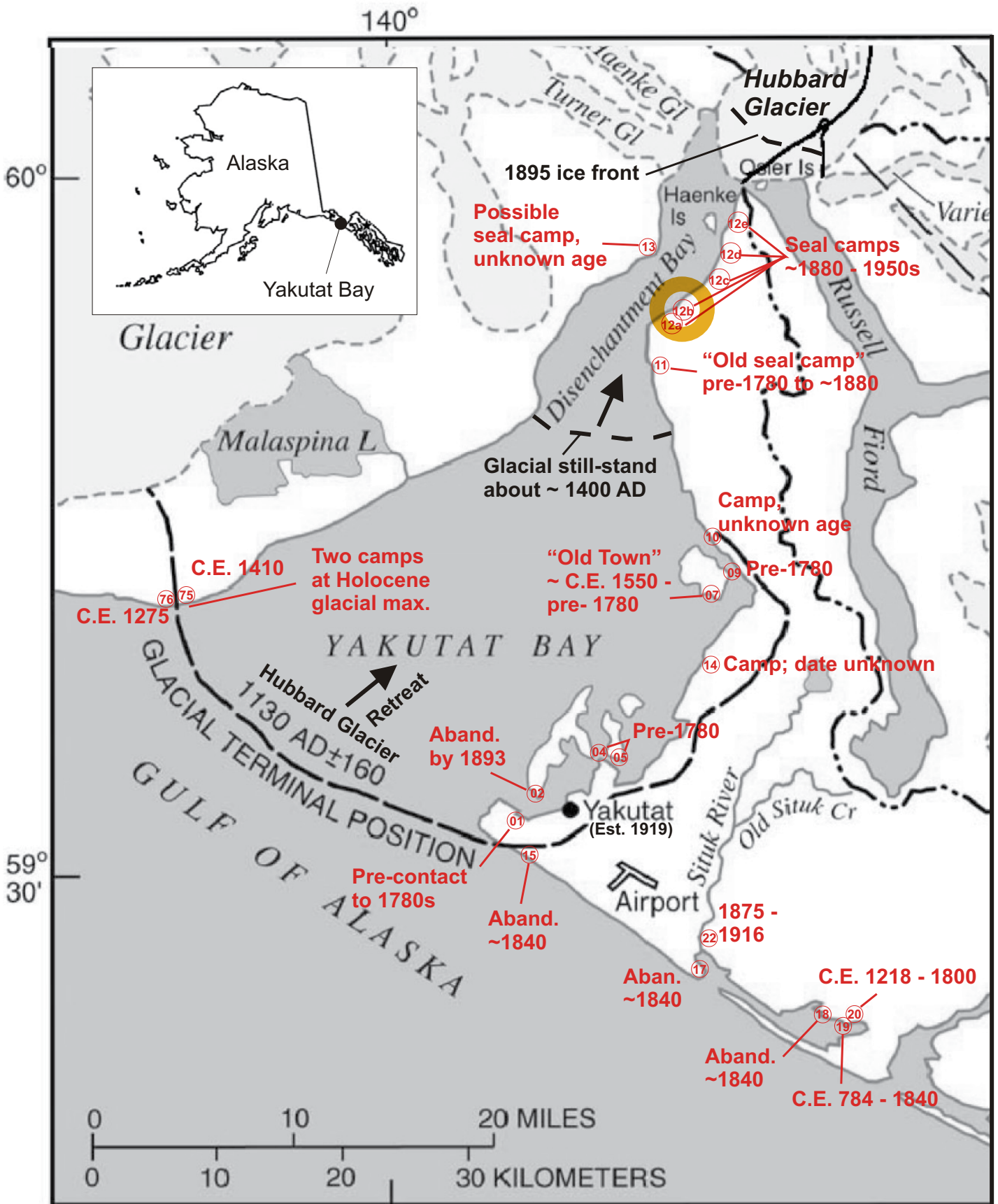
Monture’s voice launches the trailer of what they have in mind: “More than a thousand years ago my people migrated from Interior Alaska down to Yakutat. This is one of the songs that came down with them.”

Ramos says, “I am proud that my children have stepped up to help the project, that they understand the importance of learning the language, working with the Elders, and documenting the knowledge.”

Now, thanks to the efforts of the Ramos and Abraham family, everyone has the chance to learn from their Elders. Before Monture’s song fades, his grandma, Elaine, chimes in “The spirits of the ocean is really important in this area. Hubbard Glacier and Mount St. Elias became the caretakers of these foreign people that were coming down to settle upon their land.... It was a foreign country. They didn’t know what to eat, they didn’t know how to live. The spirits of that place adopted them. They adopted the young ones. They showed them in spirit how to hunt seal and they became part of that glacier. They became friends of the spirit of the glacier.”

Without this context, without Láayaduxk’áns’, without the stories, we could never understand the intricate relationships between landscape and people, indigenous knowledge, and history of a place. ◀

Leslie Hsu Oh ([www.lesliehsuoh.com](http://www.lesliehsuoh.com)) is a frequent contributor. Her essay “Between the Lines” was listed as a Notable Essay in The Best American Essays. She can be reached at [lhsu@post.harvard.edu](mailto:lhsu@post.harvard.edu).



A map of Yakutat Bay, from the project's National Science Foundation funding proposal, shows how seal camps (in red) moved up the bay, following the retreat of Sit' Tlein (Hubbard Glacier). Site 12b, highlighted here in yellow, is the location of the recently rediscovered large camp known as Shaanáx Kuwóox' in Tlingit, and Qek'otliya in Eyak.

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