

# Resources

Berries of Interior Alaska



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## COMPOSITION: BERRY STORIES

There are many compositions both contemporary and traditional about berries and berry picking. Here are a several traditional stories from Interior Alaska. Others may be found on the Resource List.

### “Berries”

from Beliefs from Nikolai, pg. 2)

*God created the earth. He decided what to put in it. He needed help to plant berries. An evil spirit offered to help. God planted cranberries. The evil spirit planted all the other berries. Because God planted cranberries, they last for a long time. Because the evil spirit planted the rest of the berries, they rot away.*

### “Low-bush Cranberry Story” told by Peter Kalifornsky

from Dena’ina K’et’una pg. 42

*One time a dumb person was left out in the woods by himself to see how well he could survive on his own. The only thing he knew how to do was to eat berries. He tried all different kinds of berries but he only got weaker. Finally, he tried the low-bush cranberries. From them he got his strength back and was able to survive.*

*The old people said that there is more nourishment in the low-bush cranberry than in any other berry,*



## **BERRY PICKING AT HOLIKACHUK**

As told by Alta Jerue of Anvik

This is how it was way before my time. My mother used to tell me about it. She came from Holikachuk.

The women from Holikachuk used to go above Holikachuk on the Innoko River to get berries. They went in a narrow slough, now called Fishnet Slough, back to the mountain. My mother said that slough is quite long and it's good going on one side right up to the mountain. When the water was high they'd use a boat all the way to the base of the mountain. They didn't have motors in those days, they didn't even have rowboats. They just had birch bark canoes. But when the slough was dried out and the water was just shallow, they'd walk from the Innoko River all the way back to the mountain. They had to pack all their baskets and food, enough for a week.

A whole week, that's how long they used to stay up there. They'd live on the mountain all that time and pick a lot of berries. As they picked the berries, they had people carry them down every day because they couldn't carry them all down when they went home. Two or three people would go down every day and put the berries away at the bottom. They when they were done, they would all come down and bring down what they had.

When they got ready to go home, the little canoes couldn't hold very much, so they put up what they called a half-cache. It was just a platform and they'd put the baskets of berries all on top and cover them up real good. Then they'd just leave and take home what they could in the canoes.

After freeze-up and a little snow came on the ground, they would take a sled, pulling it, and go up there. Then they would bring their berries home in the sled. There were winter berries and black berries on that mountain above Holikachuk. I've heard they did the same thing around here, up the Anvik River.

## MINK MAN STORY

As told by Alta Jerue of Anvik

There was a mink-man that lived all alone, in his little house along the river, year in and year out. One day in the spring he thought he'd take a walk around in the woods back of his house. Somehow, as he was walking along, one of those spruce trees with the dry limbs poked in his eye and he lost his sight. I guess it busted his eye, both eyes, and he couldn't see to do anything for himself anymore. Whenever he wanted anything he had to feel for it. It was awful.

He kept living there, in his little house and summer came. There was a mountain beside his house that he used to climb all the time on a trail going up. He thought to himself, I should go up that mountain. I think I could find the trail, if I felt my way. One day he started off. He felt his way all the way up and he got there. He knew he got there but he couldn't see where he was. He couldn't see anything.

And he thought to himself, I wonder what berry would work for my eyes. He tried all kinds of berries. He tried the red berry and the black berry up there on top. Then he went down around the edge of the mountain where there were currants, and he tried them. It wouldn't work. He'd just take the berries out and throw them away.

So he went back to the top and he found some blueberries. He pried his eyes open and slipped blueberries in there. He could see everywhere! His eyesight just came back to him. Gee, the little mink-man was so happy. He went right down the hill and went back to his little house. He could just see everything in there.

And then he went out by the door. The backs of his hands started feeling warm and he looked at them. They were furry. Instead of hands they were little mink paws. He looked down at his body and there was brown fur all over him. He knew then that he was turning into a mink.

There was a lake behind his house so he ran back there, jumped in and swam away. He was so happy!

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE YOUNG MAN

As told by Alta Jerue of Anvik

There was a young man lived alone. He always lived alone, year in and year out. He lived alone, in winter and in summer. He didn't ever see any people.

It became summer again. It became time to get berries. Then he thought, "why not paddle down river since I am lonesome." So he got in his canoe and paddled down river. He was paddling downriver, headed near a little shore. He hadn't paddled very far when suddenly he pulled over. He saw some wood on the shore. A narrow spruce was chopped down there.

"Maybe there's something there. I wonder who chopped it down. There must be people around here," he thought. "I'll stop and see." So he stopped his canoe there and dragged it up onto the beach. He pulled it up right there.

By the tree there was a path. It looked like people walked on it. So up he went, up there, up the trail. The path went on back up from the bank. He kept walking. When he got so far, he looked ahead and saw a big house over there. It looked just like a kashim.

He got to the door and listened. Not a sound. He stood there a while but never heard anything. It was just quiet. There was a nice grass mat hanging over the door. He got nerve enough to pull the grass mat aside and it was light in there. The sun was shining through the smoke-hole covering. So he went in and looked around. Nobody there.

All around there were grass mats, all of them folded back. Among the nice, neatly made grass mats in one place he saw a grass mat that wasn't made very well. It was folded back with a blanket on it that didn't look too good. He went by the door and jumped up on that bench and sat there.

Late that afternoon he heard something. There were many women's voices singing nicely. In the background he could hear someone singing badly. "I wonder who will come in," he thought to himself. He just sat there. Then someone pushed aside the grass mat and many nice-looking women came in. They looked at him but no one said anything. They went over to their own grass mats. And after them came that old lady. That's the one that had the bad grass mat. She went over and sat there on it.

And no one said anything. One girl he found attractive. “She’s really nice-looking,” he thought. They were holding their blueberries. Then the girls reached down and took out nice little wooden bowls, and some of them took out little mashers. They started to mash the berries. Then each one took them over; each one gave him a dish. He started to eat.

All at once the old lady took out a rough looking bowl from behind her and poured blueberries in. She took off her boot and used her heel to mash the berries. Then after she mashed them she put her boot back on. She went over and gave the bowl to him. He took it from her but he was thinking to himself, “I’m not going to eat it.” He put it by him.

Then he spent the night right there with them. The next day they got up. He heard them talking, saying it’s a nice day again today, just like yesterday. It was nice out, the sun was shining and the sky was clear. Then they said, “We’re going again for blueberries,” and then they left. He went with them and he started to walk with the girl he liked. They went back where the berries were and started picking again.

They picked there until late afternoon. Then they all came together in one place. They were standing there and then one by one those girls started turning into blueberries and hanging up on bushes. Then that boy, he turned into a long, narrow blueberry, and that girl he liked turned into a round blueberry and hung right there beside him. Their poor grandmother turned into a big, round blackberry, the kind people don’t eat, and she just rolled in the bushes.

And that was the end. That’s all.

