

## **A General History of the Yukon-Innoko Region**

(Information taken from the introduction to *Historic Ingalik Settlements...* and *E.W. Nelson's Notes...* by James VanStone)

### **THE PEOPLE**

This region is occupied by the Anvik-Shagelk Ingalik (preferably called Deg Hitan), an Athapaskan-speaking people who, at the time of their first direct contact with Europeans in the early eighteenth century, were living along the lower-middle Yukon, lower Innoko, and a small portion of the Kuskokwim River drainage. Several settlements of Holikachuk Athapaskans were neighbors of the Deg Hit'an on the Upper Innoko River. The total population of these two groups may have been as high as 2,000 at the beginning of the historic period, but was greatly reduced, perhaps by as much as two-thirds, as the result of a severe small pox epidemic that swept southwestern Alaska in 1838 and 1839. At the beginning of the twentieth century they numbered approximately 500.

The nineteenth century Deg Hit'an wintered at permanent villages along the Yukon and Innoko Rivers. In early spring small groups left the settlements to hunt caribou and moose in the hills. Beaver and muskrat were trapped in April. Late spring was the time of trading expeditions to the coast in the early contact period. Trading parties traveled both ways; Eskimos from Norton Sound came to the Yukon, and the Ingalik traveled to the coast, usually by way of the Anvik River. Summers were spent at fish camps, since salmon fishing was the most important subsistence activity during that time. Shortly before the close of navigation in late October, the people returned to their permanent villages to prepare for late fall and early winter hunting and trapping. By the end of November most hunters had returned to the villages, and trapping continued at least until the end of December. Lavish winter entertainment and festivals took place during the coldest months when outdoor subsistence activities were greatly restricted.

### **RUSSIAN EXPLORATION**

Russian explorers may have reached the Yukon River overland from Cook Inlet as early as the 1790's or from Iliamna Lake in 1818 but it was not until 1833 when the Russian American Company established

Mikhailovskiy Redoubt (later called St. Michael) near the mouth of the Yukon that they were able to penetrate the interior of Alaska via its major river. Andrey Glazunov, an employee of the Russian American Company led a small expedition overland from Mikhailovskiy Redoubt by the of the Anvik River in January, 1834.

Glazunov's journey resulted in the first account given to the Russian American Company of the Yukon valley and its inhabitants. He ascended one of the streams flowing into Norton Sound east of Mikhailovskiy Redoubt, crossed over to the upper Anvik River, a major tributary of the lower-middle Yukon, and descended to the Deg Hit'an Indian village of Anvik at the mouth. After distributing trade goods and exhorting the Indians to bring their furs to Mikhailovskiy to trade, Glazunov proceeded down the Yukon trading and taking a similar message to the inhabitants of Magimiut (Bonasila) and Anilukhtakpak (near Holy Cross). From Anilukhtakpak he proceeded over the portage to the Kuskokwim River and reached the company's small trading post, later known as Kolmakovskiy Redoubt, in late February. In an attempt to reach Cook Inlet, Glazunov ascended the Kuskokwim and the Stony River as far as the Lime Hills, but was forced to turn back after experiencing extreme hardship and starvation. His return route is not definitely known but he and his party arrived back at Mikhailovskiy in mid-April.

Another employee of the Russian-American Company, Petr Vasilevich Malakhov, left Mikhailovskiy Redoubt in February, 1838 and reach the Yukon by way of the Unalakleet River portage. He ascended as far as the mouth of the Koyukuk and was undoubtedly the first European to see that river. After establishing the Nulato trading post, he descended the Yukon to its mouth the next spring, and was thus the first Russian to navigate a significant portion of its great length. During his descent he apparently entered Shageluk Slough and may have continued down the lower Innoko to its confluence with the Yukon. If so, he was probably the first Russian to navigate any portion of that important tributary.

By 1839 the Russians were reasonably familiar with the Unalakleet and Anvik Rivers, the Yukon between Nulato and its mouth and some portions of the Kuskokwim. What they now wanted was more information about the area between the Yukon and Kuskokwim drainage systems and to find round from the Kuskokwim to the Yukon above the usual portages. They also wanted to obtain some first-hand

information about the potentially rich fur-bearing area of the Innoko River and its tributaries.

In the fall of 1839 Petr Fedorovich Kolmakov crossed over from the Takotna, a tributary of the Kuskokwim below the present illage of McGrath, to the upper reaches of the Innoko which he called Tlegon. His journal indicates that he collected a large number of beaver pelt and descended the Innoko in search of a short route to the Yukon. Along the way, possibly at Dementi, he learned that the post at Ikogmiut (Russian Mission) had been attacked and destroyed, and the occupants massacred in the spring of 1839. He was therefore obliged to turn back.

The next exploration of major importance was that of Lte. L. A. Zagoskin for the Russian-American Company from 1842-1844. His mission included the exploration of the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Innoko rivers to find the most practical portages between them. His expedition left Mikhailovskiy Redoubt in December 1842 and proceeded to the Yukon by way of the Unalakleet River. He arrived in Nulato in mid-January 1843 and spent several months in that area. In June he went up the Yukon as far as the mouth of the Nowitna River and in that area met an encampment of Innoko Indians from whom he obtained useful information about their area.

After returning to Nulato he and his party left there on August 2 going down river and arrived at the mouth of the Shageluk Slough on August 13. Being unable to enter because of shallow bars at the entrance, they continued to Anvik, Anilukhtapak, and Ikogmiut (Russian Mission) which became Zagoskin's headquarters for the winter of 1843-1844. During the winter and spring he explored the lower reaches of the Innoko and traveled twice to the Kuskokwim. He apparently reached the mouth of the Iditarod on the Innoko and believed that he had ascended the river to at least the point that Kolmakov had reached from the opposite direction. Thus he realized it was possible to travel from the upper Kuskokwim to the lower Yukon by way of the Innoko, although this route was obviously longer and more difficult than the short, customary portages leading from the Yukon River settlements of Paimiut and Ikogmiut, two Yupik Eskimo villages south of Holy Cross. Zagoskin returned to Mikhailovskiy in June of 1844, and the Russian-American Company made no further attempts at comprehensive interior exploration.

## FUR TRADE

The Russian fur trade on the lower Yukon began with the establishment of Mikhailovskiy Redoubt (later called St. Michael) northwest of the river's mouth in 1833 and the penetration of the Yukon Valley by Andrey Glazunov's expedition the following year. Additional posts were established at Ikogmiut in 1836 (later called Russian Mission) and Nulato on the middle river in 1838.

At first the fur harvest was abundant and meaningful economic ties were established with the Deg Hit'an and their neighbors. Soon, however, the number of furs began to diminish primarily due to lack of knowledge on the part of the Russians. In spite of the presence of a number of trading posts in west-central Alaska, the native inhabitants continued to depend on their Eskimo neighbors to the north who maintained direct contact with the Chukchi who had access to supplies available from Siberian trading posts. For more than 30 years the Russian-American Company struggled to turn the fur trade to its own advantage, but was unsuccessful by the time the country was relinquished to the United State in 1867.

The search for furs by the Russian-American Company gave westerners their first information about the indigenous people and the geography of the area and led to the opening up of the area for further exploration by Europeans and Americans.

## EARLY AMERICAN PERIOD

When Alaska was transferred from Russia to the United States in 1867, American explorer were already in the territory, and there were several expeditions which passed through the lower-middle Yukon and Innoko areas. In the summer of 1869 Captain Charles W. Raymond traveled from St. Michael up the Yukon to Ft. Yukon, but did little real exploration. He did establish a small trading post for the Alaska Commercial Company at Anvik (and possible other places?), and his boat, the "Yukon", was the first steamboat to ascend the river.

St. Michael was one of the early stations of the Signal Service of the United States Army in Alaska. E. W. Nelson was assigned there and was directed to obtain data on the geography, ethnology, and zoology of the

area. He traveled extensively, and his last trip took him into the area of the Deg Hit'an and Holikachuk people. Leaving St. Michael on November 16, 1880 with dogs and sledges, Nelson and Fredericks (the trader from Anvik) crossed the mountains to the upper Anvik River, and then down the river to its confluence with the Yukon. After being delayed at Anvik a few days because of bad weather, he two men traveled up the Yukon a short distance before crossing overland to the Innoko River and exploring its upper reaches. It is not clear how far they traveled or the exact route taken, but it is believed that they arrived at the Innoko close to the village of Holikachuk and traveled upriver for some distance from there. On the return journey the two men passed again through Anvik and from there down the Yukon and back along the coast to St. Michael.

With the transfer of Alaska to the United States, missionaries began to penetrate further into the interior. The Russian Orthodox church had already established a mission at Ikogmiut, and Russian priests had traveled up both the Yukon and Innoko as far as Anvik and Holikachuk. Then in 1887 Rev. J. W. Chapman arrived at Anvik to establish a mission for the Episcopal church, and a year later Rev. Robaut arrived at Holy Cross to establish a mission there for the Roman Catholic church. Both of these missions opened boarding schools and gathered children from the area, thereby having a lasting influence on the communities and surrounding area.

Great changes were also brought to the interior by the discovery of gold. An influx of miners into the Yukon Valley began with the Klondike gold rush in 1897 and continued through the discovery of gold in the Flat/Iditarod area in 1907 until the decline of diggings in that area just prior to 1920. The summer after the discovery of gold in Dawson the Yukon was described as "swarming with boats" and for the first time the Indians had an opportunity to observe Euro-Americans other than trader and missionaries. In the early years of the Klondike stampede, villagers worked on the riverboats as deck hand and pilots, sometimes traveling long distances from their homes. Many also were employed at wood camps supplying fuel to the river boats until wood fuel was replaced by oil beginning in 1903 and river traffic declined drastically after the collapse of the Innoko diggings. After that the interior people were forced one more to rely primarily on income derived from trapping.