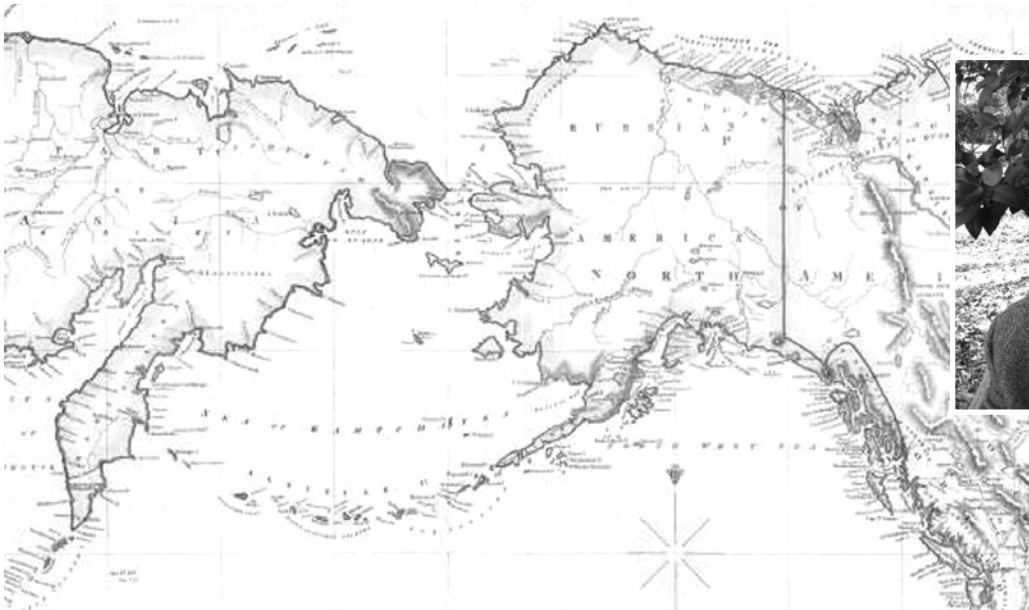




# Alaska History News

Volume 37, No. 1 Quarterly of the Alaska Historical Society Spring 2009



Andrei Znamenski

Chart of the northwest passage, between Asia & America, possibly from George Philip's *General Atlas*, 1859.

Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks, G9235 [1859] P5.

## Message from the President

### *Encounters: Where East Meets West*

#### Alaska Historical Society Annual Meeting 2009 in Unalaska

In an early business-oriented book titled, *North Pacific: Japan, Siberia, Alaska, Canada*, United States Fish Commission agent, Edward Weber Allen, wrote in 1936 that "Alaska is in the limelight because here lies the direct point of contact between East and West." According to Allen, Alaska was not an isolated corner of North America, but stood as a central point of the North Pacific Rim where teeming crossroads connected continents. I have always liked this quote because it portrays Alaska as a bridge linking East and West, rather than as a frontier that either exists outside American history or simply serves as a periphery to it.

Moreover, I find this quote particularly relevant to this year's Alaska Historical Society conference theme: *Encounters: Where East Meets West*. This will appropriately take place in the Aleutian community of Unalaska, a place where history has been shaped by numerous human encounters—encounters that occurred between various cultural groups and with the physical environment. Instead of an isolated and remote outpost, places like Unalaska were cultural meeting points where, long before Americans arrived, Alaskans were encountering the broader world.

Highlighting this theme will be the Alaska Historical Society's keynote speaker, historian Andrei Znamenski, whose research concerns encounters between the East and the West, particularly, the peoples of Siberia and Alaska. Over the years, Znamenski has published a number of works that discuss the status of native Siberians and Alaskans in the nineteenth century Russian Empire and their religious encounters with Christian missionaries. His latest book, *The Beauty of the*

*Primitive: Shamanism and Western Imagination* deals with the cultural history of shamanism. Znamenski is Assistant Professor of History at Tennessee State University and has served on the editorial advisory board of the society's *Alaska History* journal.

Besides papers that will surely underscore the "encounters" theme, we will be paying tribute to Dr. Lydia T. Black, whose life's work was devoted to the region's cultural history. The program committee is currently organizing a special session that will explore the many subjects in which Dr. Black was expert. These include Russian American history, anthropology, Alaska Native studies and language, particularly of the Aleut. The committee welcomes anyone interested in participating to submit a paper, photographs, or personal recollections.

Finally, I would like to remind members of the student and beginning professional travel scholarship. If you are a student or a new professional currently conducting original research in Alaska history, I encourage you to apply for the scholarship so that you might attend and present your work at the conference.

The 2009 Alaska Historical Society-Museums Alaska joint conference in Unalaska is a wonderful opportunity to visit this historically rich part of our state. For those of you who have always wanted to take the ferry, here's your chance! Conference planners are arranging activities so that those interested can ride the ferry from Unalaska to Homer. Be sure to look for more details on [alaskahistoricalsociety.org](http://alaskahistoricalsociety.org). If you're interested in volcanoes, Russian America, World War II, or fish, Unalaska is the place to be in September!

Katie Ringsmuth, *President*

## Editor's Comments

### Bright Lights in Hard Times

For the past year the world, yes, including the United States, has been in deepening economic difficulties. It has gone from these "difficulties" to "uncertain economic conditions" to more plain English "recession" and even hints of the dreaded "D" word (which we can avoid saying by mentioning "the 1930s").

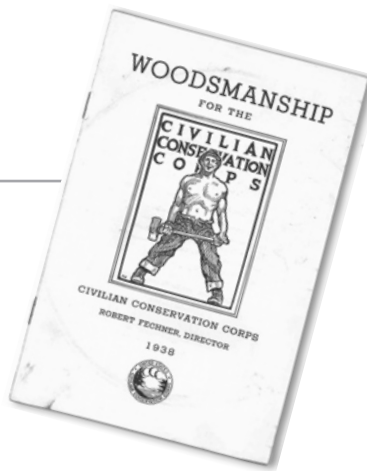
Even Alaska is not immune, although so far if the country has the flu, we have begun sneezing. There is a bit of hyperbole involved, as this country is prone to do. The other day I heard someone make the dire statement that Alaska's unemployment rate has risen since the fall. Does anyone know if Alaska has ever not had seasonal work, which means unemployment is up when the summer ends and the year-round residents settle in for winter? My thought was that Alaska wants to be included in the general uproar.

Now, there is no intention of making too light of the country's fiscal situation. People are out of work, people are desperate about their bills; shivering in their houses because the thermostat is set at 60 degrees, eating beans instead of meat, and generally worrying about tomorrow. But most of us are not in such straits. Historians are in an especially good situation now because we have long memories.

The U.S. has had numerous "economic downturns" in econ-speak. The Panic of 1893-1898 was a major reason so many thousands came to the Klondike Gold Rush, hoping to pick the gold out of the grass and go home rich. Then there was 1974 when oil prices soared, not to mention the early 1980s. The Depression of the 1930s was, of course, the big one that haunts us still.

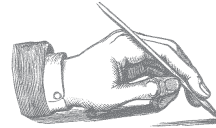
On the bright side, there is much that can be done. Libraries and museums are among the cheapest forms of entertainment, volunteering for various groups can mean free membership, and going through attics and basements can mean tax write-offs for donations. Hey, historical society members — you are already doing those things, so you have it made!

See you in the spring.  
D. L.



On March 31, 1933, Congress passed the Emergency Conservation Work Act (ECW), the law that directed the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

Courtesy USFS Tongass National Forest.



We welcome your letters, news and pictures. Please send them to the editor:

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Carvers participate in the Civilian Conservation Corps Totem Restoration Project in Saxman.

Ketchikan Totem Heritage Center

# Notes from around the state



Statehood parade in Anchorage, 1958.  
McCutcheon Collection, Anchorage Museum at  
Rasmuson Center.

Been thinking about checking out what's new at the **Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center**? Border April and May in black on your calendar and go now or plan on attending this summer as it will be closed those months. Take heart; the reason is to move into the new addition and to renovate parts of the current building. They promise we will all be dazzled. If you plan to dash down now, there is the exhibit *Life in Alaska Leading to Statehood* with all sorts of objects and photographs of the time. If something like cholera slows you down, not to worry. The display is on until September 30.



If there's one thing that brightens the heart of a local historian it's seeing a historic but decrepit building being restored. The **Palmer Historical Society** happily records such a cheerful result in the latest newsletter. A local woman purchased the old Colony Recreation Center, a large building that had been empty for at least twenty years with predictable results. It is located just across from the burnt-out creamery and a warehouse, adding to the charm. Various financial and legal experts weighed in with advice to let the center continue to collapse. However, the buyer persisted and it's now restored, has various thriving businesses in it, and is a source of pride to the community. Any buildings in your community that might not be hopeless after all? The miracle worker was also honored with the Alaska Association Historic Preservation Award, thus putting the icing on the cake.



Speaking of happy endings or at least happy changes, the *Store Door* newsletter of the **Tenakee Historical Collection** is back and with a colossal 16-page issue. Not only has the historic Synder Mercantile store, the heart of the community, been saved, but the former liquor store has been donated for a future museum. That is fitting, as there are six pages on alcohol and Tenakee in the latest issue alone.



There are two intriguing mentions in the **Sitka Maritime Heritage Society** newsletter. One is a fine write-up of a local mystery—did the bell from the first steamer on the West Coast, the famous *Beaver*, really wind up in Sitka around 1850? The other announces the National Geographic Society's Center for Sustainable Destinations lists Sitka as one. The best part is that the NGSCSD (gotta love those initials) is highly critical of “Disneyfication” and “embalming”. The terms are instantly recognizable, and a quick Google search under the name reveals all manner of goals your town or buildings might be interested in.



A most unusual 1964 Earthquake story is in the **Chugiak-Eagle River Historical Society** newsletter. The author gives a vivid account of the effect on the snack bar at the local bowling alley. Pins and balls went everywhere, glass plates shattered, and the bartender had to give up on his attempt to keep bottles intact. The staff all fled outside, barely making it. At the end of the story, we are told that after the quake, “the bowling alley was set up as a refuge for people who needed a place to stay.” That gives you some idea of what the rest of Eagle River looked like. Wow! The newsletter also features small photos and short biographies of some members. Other societies might want to take notice.



The **Tongass Historical Museum** features a display of local photographers and their photographs of the town and residents. See Ketchikan's history from the 1950s in the comfort of the museum.



Street scene, Tenakee, Alaska, ca. 1890-1920.  
Alaska State Library Historical Collections, ASL-PCA-226-421.



## Notes from around the state



Dena'ina fish camp from the *Chaqenq'a* exhibit at the Pratt Museum in Homer.  
Photo by Lisa Williams, Pratt Museum.

Once more we can reflect on Alaska's superiority. Most states wanting to put up Native displays in their museums must involve dioramas and archeological reports. Here, just partner with Native groups. Ninilchik, Kenaitze, and Nondalton have contributed to the *Chaqenq'a*, a Dena'ina Fish Camp, which is the late winter exhibit at the **Pratt Museum** of Homer. Not nice to smirk, but understandable.

When the descendent of a locally important family turns 99, it seems appropriate for the local historical society to mark the event. That was the reasoning of the **Gastineau Channel Historical Society**. They also couldn't resist displaying the book co-authored by the near-centenarian Katherine Shaw, and her friend Montana Earl, age 9. A real charmer.

Several short articles tell of a ten-year book project, Sentinel Island lighthouse, book reviews, and Juneau-Douglas members who received awards at the recent annual state meeting.

There was a notice that brought your editor up short. FinnFest 2009, a national Finnish-American organization that celebrates those in the United States of Finnish heritage is coming to Southeast Alaska this summer via a cruise ship. This all makes perfect sense; 1809 was when Finland was made a Grand Duchy of Russia, thus starting towards independence. However, it does seem a bit odd that the ship will spend a day in Sitka, Alaska, "capital of the Finnish-Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century colony."

How to combine a love of art and a small display space? The **Juneau-Douglas City Museum** found the answer several years ago with its 12x12 art exhibit. All entries must be exactly 12" by 12"; after that, it's up to the artist.

They also conducted a quiz in January, asking Juneau residents what it means to live here.

Interesting question—will be fun to see the answers. Rather reminds your editor of an essay written on the subject by her son, born and raised in Sitka. "Some of us like to live here, but most of us can't afford to leave." Since he was eight-years-old at the time, that made perfect sense.

Do you think of Wasilla and once-Knik only as being part of the exodus of close to 80,000 people from Anchorage to the Mat-Su Valley? The **Wasilla-Knik Historical Society** points out there was a busy gold mining district dating back to 1907 in Knik and 1917 for Wasilla. Visit the **Knik Museum** and **Mushers' Hall of Fame** as well as the Wasilla Page Museum when you're in the area, or become a member of the society for a mere \$15.00 per annum. You can do some visiting at their Web site; <http://home.gci.net/~wasillaknikhistory/>.

Nothing like a bit of historical research from time to time. Most viewers would have said the tiny dog team and driver running across the snow with a huge Alaska Range looming behind on the new U.S. Post Office stamp is pretty generic.

It is forbidden by U.S. law to portray a living person, but the photographer says it's musher Dee Dee Jonrowe. Trust the **Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance** to know.

They also come down on the side of declaring the sled dog the official state dog, rather than the Malemute as an Anchorage school is proposing. Their most exciting time of the year is just about here; the Iditarod race will be started by a member touting the centennial by running an authentic freight sled plastered with centennial signs.



Everyone in Alaska is marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of statehood, but none more enthusiastically than the **Kenai Historical Society**. So far their newsletter has featured a delightful two-part account of a delegate to the first state legislature, a feature on the first elected Alaska governor, Bill Egan, and the nearly-fatal beginning of his first term, and the beginnings of the Kenai Peninsula Borough. The Kenai Community Library also held an evening of readings *Reflections on Statehood*. Various people read pieces appropriate to the subject. They're also soliciting memoirs from those living in the area in 1959 for a possible book. When you go to the Kenai this year, take along your Alaska flag and a copy of the state constitution.

## Notes from around the state

At year's end, the **Resurrection Bay Historical Society** totalled up the 2008 accomplishments. Among them was adding to their obituary index, now at 2,620. Amazing! They are also an ecumenical crowd; members attended the spring and fall meetings of the **Kenai Peninsula Historical Association** and are working on the Seward section of the statehood addition to the association's book on the history of the Kenai Peninsula. Each section will be a picture of a peninsula town in 1959.

Jujiro Wada, an adventurous Japanese, came for the gold rush and stayed on. In 1909 he and another musher were hired by the Seward Commercial Club to blaze a trail from Seward to the new gold fields in the Iditarod country. This December the centennial will be celebrated by the Iditarod Trail committee.

The newsletter also notes that in 1913 a Texas congressman proposed trading Southeast Alaska to Great Britain in exchange for some British West Indian islands. Ah, those pesky Texans messing with Alaska even then.

The **Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum** happily announce a \$20,000 grant for their summer Native Artist Demonstrator's program and winter Native lecturer/artist. The artists present traditional Alaska Native arts, which include wood, ivory, and silver carving, drum making, beading, skin sewing, basket and textile weaving as practiced by all Alaska's indigenous cultures.

The program helps visitors make a modern day connection to Alaska art and culture, and works to preserve and encourage the arts and crafts. It begins in early May of this year. The Friends also recently acquired 20 silver and copper Haida and Tlingit spoons and a brooch made around 1900 by master craftsmen.



Sled dog scene in front of the Fifth Avenue Hotel in Skagway, 1900.

Alaska State Library Historical Collections, ASL-P44-03-025.

The **Tanana-Yukon Historical Society** newsletter reports that Alaska's lone congressional delegate, James Wickersham, met with 14 Athabascan leaders of the Tanana River drainage in 1915 to discuss the impact of the Alaska Railroad. A talk on this subject was given at their February meeting. Seems the surprise was how clear and firm the Tanana Chiefs were in their upfront desire for assistance, specifically education, health care, and job training. What Wickersham and most of the other non-Natives were offering was either a reservation system or individual 160 acre Native allotments, neither of which was acceptable to the Chiefs, who wanted to be left alone in their communities and traditional areas.



According to postcard commemorating him, "Baldy of Nome", musher Scotty Allen's famous lead sled dog, was winner of \$25,000 in sweepstake prizes.

Alaska State Library Historical Collections, ASL-P87-2606.

Sled dog teams in front of Seward Bakery and Hardware Stoves and Ranges store.

Alaska State Library Historical Collections, ASL-P349-101.

## News & Information



Joe Leahy and the  
Fresnel lens from  
Sentinel Island  
Lighthouse.  
Alaska State Museum ASM  
95-15

### REMEMBERING JOE

All of Joe Leahy's friends, which means most longtime Alaskans, were saddened to hear of his death last December in Valdez. Here is his obituary from the *Juneau Empire* and the *Anchorage Daily News*.

Former Juneau resident Michael Joseph "Joe" Leahy died Dec. 6 at Providence Valdez Medical Center. He was 68.

Born Nov. 3, 1940, in Mason City, Wash., to Patrick and Clara Leahy, he graduated from Grand Coulee High School in 1958 and married Marilyn Mroz on Nov. 25, 1981, in Seattle.

He came to Alaska in 1976 while serving in the U.S. Coast Guard as chief journalist. After his discharge, he worked as the director of the Juneau Mining Museum, then as the director of the Juneau Centennial Museum.

In 1985, Joe and Marilyn moved to Valdez, where he served as the executive director of the Valdez Museum and Historical Archive. Upon retiring from that position, he returned to Juneau for four years at the request of Hoonah Heritage Foundation, serving as the development director of the foundation's proposed heritage center and museum.

His love of people led him to serve on numerous boards and associations such as Valdez United Way, Copper Valley Electric Association, the State Parks Commission, the Alaska Historical Society and the Museums Alaska Association. He was the unofficial town greeter for Valdez, prowling the docks, grocery store and post office and regaling visitors and residents alike with tidbits of history and a gentle wit.

"Joe's greatest enthusiasm was for his family," relatives said.

He was astounded and delighted at the birth of his triplets—Patrick, Elise and Christopher—and then again with his bonus child, Marissa.

In retirement, he was an avid and talented photographer, loved to fish and was an enthusiastic rower, his family said.

He is survived by: his wife, Marilyn Leahy; sons, Patrick and Christopher Leahy; daughters, Elise and Marissa Leahy; and brothers, Bill Leahy and wife, Judy, and Gary Leahy.

The Gastineau Channel Historical Society also paid tribute to Joe, as he resurrected the dormant historical society, developed two city museums, and strongly supported acquisition of the Sentinel Island lighthouse during his many years in Juneau. His love of history inspired many.



### CULTURAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AWARDS

As our president pointed out, the joint meeting of our society and **Museums Alaska** will be in Unalaska this fall at the invitation of the **Museum of the Aleutians**. If your funds are small and you're feeling pathetic, the *Rasmuson Foundation's Organizational Advancement Fund* might be able to help. Their Cultural Leadership program awards grants up to \$3,000 for professional development opportunities. This is designed to help museum staff, board members, and/or volunteers. Organizations (your museum?) if an Alaska-based 501 (c) (3) group can apply. Early applications are suggested and must be submitted at least 60 days in advance. The Web page is [www.rasmuson.org/index.php?switch=viewpage&pageid=133](http://www.rasmuson.org/index.php?switch=viewpage&pageid=133) for further information. You might be very glad you did.



### ALASKA YUKON PIONEERS

Reading this from your retirement home? Wondering what ever happened to some old friends in Alaska? Time to send your \$12.00 for a year's worth of **Alaska Yukon Pioneers** newsletters. Send a check to Joyce Penman, 27833 85th Drive NW, Stanwood, Washington, 98292. Call 253/709-0158 if you need more information.



### TWENTY YEARS LATER

Those who were here in Alaska when the *Exxon Valdez* spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound will have their own memories of that terrible event. I recall a reporter speaking of a curious sea otter that came over to the beach, then swam away, trailing a deadly wake of oil. And there was the young woman whose backpack was seized by the thugs at the public hearing. It did not contain a sea otter but her laundry. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that horror is commemorated by the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council with various events in Valdez, Seward, Cordova, Kenai, Homer, and Anchorage. Go to [www.pwsrccac.org](http://www.pwsrccac.org) for what's happening. The RCAC is dedicated to observing all laws are followed and preventing any further disasters in the region. Thanks to former AHS board member Dorothy Moore and Linda Robinson of the RCAC for this reminder.





## Encounters: Where East Meets West

Individuals interested in history and the Aleutian Islands are invited to submit proposals for papers, panels, and poster sessions for the Alaska Historical Society annual meeting and conference. The society's 2009 annual meeting, held in association with Museums Alaska, will be September 16-19 at Unalaska.

The Aleutian Islands inspire a broad spectrum of images: stunning scenery, wildflowers and waterfowl, wind and fog, ancient cultures, promyshlenniki, commercial fishing, and combat zones. Though varied, each image was shaped by numerous encounters. The meeting of the Pacific and North American plates created the stunning mountains and volcanoes of the chain. The meeting of the nutrient rich Bering Sea and the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean support abundant sea life and can cause the violent storms endemic to the region. Plant invasions from different continents create a unique carpet of wildflowers. Encounters between different groups of people have caused everything from a rich cultural heritage to bloody warfare, and encounters between people and the environment have shaped history since people have inhabited the region. Interactions between people—from ancient



WWII guns at Fort Schwatka overlooking Dutch Harbor.

Photographer Howard Bloom, Courtesy Museum of the Aleutians.

intertribal relations to Alaskans in world politics—make Alaska what it is today. Alaska's history with the Pacific world, including Russia, Asia, and the Pacific Northwest, showcases its historic meeting point between East and West.

The 2009 AHS conference also will include a session reflecting on the contributions of Dr. Lydia T. Black to Russian American history, anthropology, Alaska Native studies, and geography.

Proposals for papers and panels should be sent no later than April 15, 2009 to Katie Myers, Program Chair, [kathryn\\_myers@nps.gov](mailto:kathryn_myers@nps.gov); address: P.O. Box 101125, Anchorage, AK 99510; phone: 907-644-3631. Presenters of papers will have 20 minutes, and panel sessions should include three participants and will have 60 minutes. Presenters are to register for the conference.

### ARTICLES OF INTEREST WELCOME

Member Verbeck Smith sent along an interesting article from the *Anchorage Daily News*. Seems black soldiers were sent to the Aleutians during World War II. The 93<sup>rd</sup> Engineers were excellent but in the then segregated army received little attention at the time. There were also black soldiers who worked on the Alcan highway, the road built in record time during the war to provide an overland route through Canada to Alaska. Today it's known as the Alaska Highway.

Please send interesting articles on Alaska history along to the newsletter so we can all read about it. Thanks, Verbeck.



### NEWS ONLINE

Want to keep up with funds for Alaska history preservation from the Feds or the state? What about meetings of Alaska and other groups that deal with history? All you have to do to receive all the news each month on-line is go to: [oha@alaska.net](mailto:oha@alaska.net) with "Heritage, subscribe" in the subject line. Fast and easy and you'll be up-to-date.



### TRAVEL AWARDS

The **Alaska Historical Society** offers two travel awards for a post-secondary student and an emerging

professional to attend its annual meeting. This year the meeting will be in Unalaska, September 16-19, 2009. Each award will consist of reimbursement for documented travel expenses up to \$1,250 and a conference registration package.

**Eligibility:** An applicant must be a 2009 member of the Alaska Historical Society at the time of applying. Student applicants must be graduate students or upper-division undergraduates in spring or fall 2009 with a course of study related to Alaska history. Emerging professional applicants must be employed in Alaska historical or cultural work and have been so employed for less than five years. Applicants are to make a presentation at the meeting. Information about the meeting and the call for papers are at <http://www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org/>

**Application process:** Each applicant must submit 1) a letter with a statement of eligibility and an explanation of how attending the meeting will enhance academic or professional development, 2) title and abstract of presentation, and 3) a résumé. Applications will be judged on the applicant's achievement in Alaska history relative to current status and the likely benefit of the meeting for the applicant.

The application deadline is June 1, 2009. Electronic submission is preferred. Send application to [akhist@gci.net](mailto:akhist@gci.net) or mail three copies to: Bruce Merrell, Chair, AHS Awards Committee, P.O. Box 100299, Anchorage, Alaska 99510-0299.

  
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As interest and writing on Alaska history seem to be sprouting like fireweed in the spring, a useful and popular feature is the society's publication *The Alaska 67* with annotated recommendations of good books on Alaska history.

Send your application for membership to Alaska Historical Society, P.O. Box 100299, Anchorage, Alaska 99510-0299; or join through the website: [www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.alaskahistoricalsociety.org).

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**A group of Siberian Eskimos, Nome, Alaska, 1911-1920.**  
Alaska State Library Historical Collections, ASL-PCA-307.