

# Ethnographic Notes on the Pedro Bay Tanaina

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## RÉSUMÉ

A l'occasion d'une expédition archéologique à Pedro Bay, en Alaska, l'auteur nous livre quelques observations ethnographiques des indiens Tanaina.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 1960 the author conducted archaeological excavations at Pedro Bay, Alaska. Pedro Bay is located on the northeastern shore of Iliamna Lake in southwestern Alaska. (Townsend, 1961:1). At that time the author also collected ethnographic notes on the material, social, and folklore aspects of the Pedro Bay Tanaina Indians. The author had planned to return to the area the following season to conduct ethnographic research among this group of Tanaina Indians, but was subsequently prevented from doing so. Since my principal concern was with the archaeological excavations, the ethnographic notes were unsystematic, incomplete, and limited. The Iliamna Lake region is inadequately known ethnographically; the only information available is C. Osgood's monograph, *The Ethnography of the Tanaina*. Osgood was at Old Iliamna for one or two weeks during the summer of 1931. The Pedro Bay Tanaina have never been the subject of ethnographic study, and no information exists concerning them. Since the author cannot, at the

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to express her appreciation to all of the Tanaina at Pedro Bay who were extremely helpful in the collection of these ethnographic notes. Special appreciation is expressed to her informants Mr. and Mrs. Holly Foss, Mrs. Nels Hedlands, and Mrs. Sophie Foss.

present time, foresee when she might return to the area and continue her study in the Pedro Bay area, and due to the general paucity of ethnographic information available on these people, it was felt that the ethnographic notes in this paper, however inadequate they may be, would be of interest and should be made available.

The material is presented in a topical arrangement and the initials of individual informants follow each item listed.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES<sup>2</sup>

### *Houses and Temporary Shelters*

Houses consisted of one large room with one or more smaller adjoining rooms. The smaller rooms were used for steam baths and sleeping compartments. (S.F.)

Several families lived in one house and the cooking duties were rotated among the families daily. (S.F.)

The parents slept on platform beds around the inside walls of the house. Unmarried children, married daughters, and their husbands slept under the parents' platform bed. There was a curtain over the lower opening. (R.H.)

<sup>2</sup> It is regrettable that the dominant trend of Europeans in this area has been to ridicule the Tanaina and Eskimo about their native cultural beliefs and customs. This has had the effect of making it extremely difficult to obtain ethnographic information from the people. Fortunately, the Tanaina are astute and accurate observers of personality and motives and after a few days the author was able to find four good informants. Biographical information of the informants is as follows:

H.F. — Mr. Holly Foss has lived in the area since 1906, is married to one of the informants, and has an intricate knowledge of the Tanaina at Old Iliamna and Pedro Bay.

L.F. — Legaria Foss, a Tanaina Indian female, is married to Mr. Holly Foss, was born in the Iliamna area, and speaks English very well. She is the postmistress at Pedro Bay.

S.F. — Mrs Sophie Foss, a Tanaina Indian female, was married to Mr. Holly Foss's brother, was born in the area, and speaks English very well.

R.H. — Mrs. Rose Hedlands, a Tanaina Indian female, was born in the Iliamna area, is married to an Eskimo from the Bethel, Alaska area, and speaks English very well.

Temporary dwellings, used when on the trail, were tent-like structures constructed of birch bark. Similar to the permanent houses, they had a smoke hole in the center of the roof. (S.F.)

### *Tools and Manufactures*

The Tanaina made fire by rubbing two stones together and igniting dry birch moss. Fire was carried with them on trips so that they did not have to rekindle it. (S.F.)

A brown dye was obtained by boiling birch bark. (S.F.)

The people used a two-handed scraper made from the ulna of a caribou. (R.H.)

Utensils consisted of wooden dishes and spoons and birch bark containers of various sizes. The containers were held together by pine sap. (S.F.)

### *Food Preparation*

All bones of all animals, fish, and birds were collected and thrown back into the water. (R.H.)

The gall of all animals was thrown into the water. (R.H.)

The Tanaina never ate the liver or kidney of a bear. (R.H.)

### *Hunting Implements*

The Tanaina used a sinew-backed bow. (L.F.)

A snare was used to trap the ground squirrel. It was constructed from a stripped eagle feather, and alder trip peg, and sinew string. The snare was set in the opening of the squirrel's hole and tied to a willow pole which was bent over under tension. When the animal moved the peg, which was done when trying to enter the hole, the willow snapped up springing the trap. (L.F.)<sup>3</sup>

### *Dress and Ornamentation*

Women tattooed the area between their mouth and chin. A typical tattoo consisted of vertical lines radiating out from the mouth line. (S.F.)

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Legaria Foss kindly gave the author a collection of these snares that her mother had made and used in the early 1900's.

The nose septum was perforated and items such as needles and thread were kept in it. (S.F.)

Parkas were decorated with shells. Shells were also strung on sinew cord and used as a form of money. (S.F.)

Snow shoes were stained with red ocher. (S.F.)

Waterproof mukluks were constructed from whole salmon skins. The fish was left in the water until it floated. It was then skinned and worked. The mukluks tended to ruin if the wearer stood too close to a fire. (R.H.)

### *Stimulants or Intoxicants*

Fungus moss, found growing on birch trees, was ground in a dish made from a whale vertebra. It was then burned into a white lime substance, mixed with tobacco, and chewed. (L.F.)

### *Signs*

A person would mark the direction he was traveling by leaning a stick in that direction and putting a piece of moss on the top end of it. (S.F.)

### *Ceremonies*

As soon as any young boy made his "first kill" of any animal, bird, or fish, a "First Kill" ceremony was held in the village. A large party was given and the older people ate the boy's "first kill." (R.H.)

Potlatches were held, and strings of beads were given away as gifts. (S.F.)

### *Games and Amusements*

1. A gambling game was played with three sticks. each about three inches long. One stick had a black circle around it. The men sat in two rows, face to face, and sang. The women stood behind the men and sang also. The player placed one hand behind his back and his opponent tried to determine in which hand the stick with the black circle was not. The stakes were usually mukluks or mittens. (H.F.)

2. Another game was played by pitching birch bark discs against a blanket, trying to stack them up. (H.F.)

3. Another game consisted of pitching bark circles at an upright peg. This was similar to the American game of horse-shoes. (H.F.)

At funerals the people danced, feasted, and sang "cry songs." (S.F.)

### *Medical Aids*

Some Tanaina knew of local medicinal herbs. One was used as an eye wash, one was a good anaesthetic and antiseptic which relieved pain associated with cuts, and a third, which grows high in the mountains, was poison when eaten but a very good cure for infections. (R.H.)

Two cures for tuberculosis were known. One was to take the bark of an alder tree, boil it, and drink the red juice. The other cure was to eat the berries found on the tops of the mountain ash tree. (S.F.)

Sick people were usually isolated from others. (S.F.)

### *Social Organization*

Polygyny was approved, but practiced mainly by the more prominent men. (S.F.)

Matrilocal residence was usually followed. (S.F.)

The informant knew of four matrilocal, matrilineal, and generally endogamous clans:

1. Raven (her own clan).
2. Mountain Sheep (two other informants were members: S.F. and L.F.)
3. Fish Tails (one other villager was a member).
4. Tulchina or She-Fell-In-The-Water.

Most villages consisted of only one clan. (R.H.)

Parents usually did not permit a daughter to marry outside of her own clan or village, and they were always harder on the men who married-in from other clans. (R.H.)

The Sheep and Raven clans were more closely affiliated with each other than with the other two clans. They were also associated with inland geographical regions. The Fish Tail and Tulchina clans were more closely linked with the water (Cook Inlet area). The Fish Tail clan was found only at Old Iliamna near the salt water. The Fish Tail and Tulchina clans looked down upon the other two clans. (R.H.)

The Raven clan was descended from the Raven. (R.H.)

### *Puberty Seclusion*

When a young girl reached the age of adolescence she was isolated for about a year. The house she stayed in was lighted and heated by a central fireplace with a hole in the roof providing an escape for smoke. She was not allowed to scratch her body with her hands but was provided with a bone scratcher which had teeth fixed to one end and a hole in the other end. One end of a strip of sinew was tied through the hole and the other end was tied around the girl's waist. The scratcher was tucked into her sleeve when not in use. The girl wore knee-length mukluku while she was confined. She was prohibited from eating any fresh meat, but was allowed to eat meat which was over ten days old. It was at this time that she was taught to sew. When she did go outside of the "girl's house" she wore her parka hood down over her face so that the light did not hurt her eyes.

During her regular menstrual periods she was removed to another house and remained there for about ten days. She left the girl's house permanently when she was ready for marriage. The marriage was usually arranged by her parents without her consent. (S.F.)

### *War*

The Tanaina often fought among themselves, as well as with others. Usually the fighting was conducted in order to steal beads, shells, and other valuable property. (S.F. & R.H.)

Little birds, such as robins or snipes, were usually kept around the camps and warned the people when others were approaching.

Dogs were trained not to bark when strangers approached so that they did not reveal to the enemy the village location. (S.F.)

### *Folklore*

#### Concerning the Russians

When the Russians first came to Iliamna Lake the Tanaina thought that they were blind because they had blue eyes. (S.F.)

The Tanaina living at Pedro Bay I and the Russians living about 500 yards away on top of a hill were on friendly terms.<sup>4</sup> The Indians had sent their children to the Russians to learn their way of life but the children were mistreated at the hands of the Russians. The Tanaina attacked and killed the Russians at their fort on the hill. The Russian chief's son and the Tanaina chief's son were friends and often played together. At the time of the attack on the hill fort the two boys had been playing together at the Pedro Bay I village. The Tanaina returned to the village after burning the Russian fort and wanted to kill the boy. The chief refused to let the people kill the boy and spitting into the boy's mouth "made him an Indian", and therefore, they couldn't kill him. (S.F.)

The Russians came into the village of Old Iliamna during the informant's grandmother's time. They took the natives' fur and the people became angry at the poor trade dealings. A fight ensued and the Russians killed some of the Tanaina. Others fled down the lake to Pedro Bay and warned the Tanaina there. These people burned their own houses at Russian Point and fled to Knutson Bay and Chekok Bay to warn the other Tanaina.

<sup>4</sup> The location of this site, at the top of a point on the west entrance to Pedro Bay, is uncertain but the author found several Indian house depressions at the place known locally as Russian Point. It should be noted that these two stories conflict in that they call Russian Point both an Indian village and Russian fort respectively.

After banding together, the Tanaina returned to Russian Point and attacked the Russians, who by that time arrived at Russian Point. All were killed except one young Russian boy. The people then moved back to Old Iliamna. Old Pedro, after whom the Pedro Bay is named, was the last to move to Old Iliamna. Later the Tanaina moved back to Pedro Bay since the Iliamna River was filling in. (L.F.)<sup>5</sup>

### Taboos

Women should never step over the body of any animal. This would bring bad luck for the hunter. (R.H.)

Women were not supposed to skin any animal. (R.H.)

No person was supposed to step over a man's clothes. (R.H.)

Women were not supposed to watch while a man was stalking any animal as it might attack and kill the man. (R.H.)

Women were not supposed to disconnect the joints of an animal. (R.H.)

A woman nursing had to be very careful not to get any of her milk on a man's clothes. (R.H.)

A woman was not supposed to wear any wolf fur. If she did she would not have any children or she would have a very hard time in labor when having a child. (R.H.)

If a young girl looked at a young boy while she was in her year of seclusion he would be killed while on a hunt. (R.H.)

### Omens

*Fox Omen:* If a fox comes around a village and whines and cries like a puppy, someone will die shortly. (S.F.)

*Owl Omen:* An owl will tell you what is going to happen. Two owls may get to talking back and forth, and they sound like

<sup>5</sup> Both of the stories concerning the Russians are surely based upon fact and probably originate from the Lebedef-Lastochkin-Shelikof trading companies wars on each other and Indians and Eskimos alike between 1791 and 1794 when midnight raids, ambuscades, and open warfare were the order of the day.



the Tanaina language. One time the Pedro Bay people heard two owls in the village and it sounded like they were saying: "Something is going to happen in the village." Later that year a house burned. One man was injured and later died, and another was burned to death. Only one or two children were left alive. (S.F.)

*Flame Omen:* If you see anything unusual it means something is going to happen. The informant and her daughter, while walking one night, saw a flame on top of another man's roof. It looked like the house was on fire at first but the flame remained the same size. The man of that house died soon after that, and his wife died soon after him. (S.F.)

*Grease Omen:* When whipping grease for making Igutuk (Eskimo word for Eskimo ice cream) and it falls instead of fluffing it means bad things will happen to the family. (S.F.)

#### Luck and Offerings

If a porcupine crosses your path it is a sign of bad luck. (S.F. (Informant heard this from a Norton Sound Eskimo). One time there was a giant. Someone stole his sister and he went through the portage hunting for her. You can see his traces now. He also lifted up a rock and this rock can be seen now. The people put coins on the rock for good luck. (S.F.)

If you want nice weather and good luck you should throw money or bread into Iliamna Lake at a place called Tommy Point as an offering to the old shaman who is buried there. (S.F.) Informant used the term "shaman".

Don't mock any animals or it will bring you bad luck. (S.F.)

When you leave a fire you should erect a stick so you won't have bad luck. (S.F.)

#### Giants

There was a giant who once came through the area. Some can see his footprints even today. He carved out a large canyon with a big piece of copper just north of Iliamna Lake. (R.H.)

### Mountain Whistlers

There are whistlers in the mountains which look like little rats that have been cut in half. How they came to look like this follows: There are giants in the mountains who are keepers of the mountains. A large rock closes over the door to their mountain home. One day a whistler was behind one of these doors and it closed on him, cutting him into two pieces because he was not quite inside the door when it closed. (R.H.)

### Woods People

Children were told that there were people living in the woods. Sometimes they would miss a fish from the smokehouse. The Indians would talk to the woods and tell the Woods People to come into the village and take any fish they wanted if they were hungry. (S.F.)

One of the Pedro Bay villagers saw the Woods People once and shortly afterwards he went "kind of goofy." (S.F.)

Sometimes the Woods People capture a person. The Woods People are bigger than a tree. When the villagers search for a missing person they find their clothes high up in the trees above their reach. (S.F.)

Once a young girl, at one of the fishing camps occupied during the salmon runs in the summer, went out into the woods and stayed a long time. She later became pregnant and told her father she had met a man in the woods. The following fall she disappeared before her baby was born. The villagers followed her tracks into the woods and they suddenly came to a stop. This happened a long time ago at Eagle Bay. (S.F.)

### Ghosts

To learn to play a musical instrument you should take it into the steam bath in the dark and begin to strum the instrument. Take a cat with you. You will see little light like fireflies. These are ghosts. Someone will take the instrument from you and begin to play nicely. Then the instrument will be returned to you and you will begin to play. Then you should pinch the

cat's ear and as soon as it yells throw it out of the steambath. You will then be able to play as well as the ghost. (S.F.)<sup>6</sup>

### Concerning the Shaman

The Tanaina word for shaman means "like a dream." (S.F.)

The shaman could cause you to have bad luck. (S.F.)

The Tanaina had some women shamans who could also cure the sick with herbs. (S.F.)

Informant's mother's uncle was a shaman. He had a stuffed doll and kept it inside a parka made of bear gut. He would talk to the doll and she would answer. Informant's mother once dreamed that the doll came to her door. It was her "sister" who had come to take her back. She died afterwards. (S.F.)

The Tanaina had both a chief, who was usually the oldest man, and a shaman. The shaman could be either male or female. (R.H.)

The shaman could travel in his dreams and knew herb medicine cures. (R.H.)

### The Shaman and the Girl Tale

There was once a shaman who wanted to marry a certain girl in the village but the girl married another man. The girl's husband and his brother went to run their trap lines one day. The shaman had promised to get revenge. The men laughed at him and told him that there was nothing that he could do to them. The men didn't return home and the wife began to worry. The wife and her crippled sister-in-law went to the village for help. Then a bear started out after the two girls and when the young wife could no longer carry her crippled sister-in-law she buried her in the snow and covered her with spruce boughs and then ran on to the village. The crippled girl felt the bear run over her as he pursued the other girl. The young wife arrived in the village with the bear right behind her. The villagers killed

<sup>6</sup> The informant stated that this was a "partly Russian belief" also.

the bear which had axe marks on its face. It had attacked and killed the two brothers. When the bear died, the shaman died also. (R.H.)

### The Large Fish Tales

Old timers used to see a large fish in the lake (Iliamna). It would attack the red-bottomed boats.<sup>7</sup> Some say that they could hear the big fish growling. (S.F.)

If you are bad the fish will get you. Two Indians were flying with a bush pilot and saw a large black fish about 20 feet long in the lake (Iliamna). The informant ventured the opinion that the fish might be a big pike. (S.F.)

There was a woman living on Nonvianuk Lake whose husband was away.<sup>8</sup> She was wearing a red shirt and was warned not to go near the shore. She went to the shore anyway. All of a sudden there was no wind at all. Later the people saw the marks in the sand at lake shore where she had scratched it. Her husband returned and put a big hunk of meat on a line which he then put into the lake. He soon caught a big pike and cut it open. Inside he found only his wife's hair. (S.F.)

The teeth of a pike are so sharp that they will kill a dog if it eats the pike's head. (S.F.)

Some people were around a big lake north of Iliamna Lake. They had heard of the big fish. They cut a hole in the ice and put rawhide through it to catch the fish. They hit the fish and it jumped up, breaking the ice where they were standing, and they all fell into the lake. One woman, who had stayed on the beach changing the moss in her baby's diaper, was the only one saved. (S.F.)

The people say that fish will take the shadow of a person. They are just like humans. Once they took a girl's shadow to their home in the bottom of the lake. A shaman talked to a doll and the doll went to the bottom of the lake, where she got

<sup>7</sup> No boats are painted red to this day.

<sup>8</sup> Located south of Iliamna Lake on the Alaska Peninsula.

the shadow of the girl and returned to the shore. The girl did not die. (S.F.)

A person should not pour fresh blood into the lake as it will bring the big fish. (R.H.)

People used to say not to go out too far in the lake and not to look over the side of the boat at the water or the big fish would attack. (H.F.)

One time some women were rowing in Kukalek Lake and they saw a huge pike with very big teeth coming after them.<sup>9</sup> They just barely escaped the big fish. (H.F.)

### Concerning the Wolf

A wolf is just like a human. They can understand what a person says. If you are in the woods and cannot kill anything to eat, you can pray and talk to the wolf, telling him you are hungry, and he will get something for you to eat. (S.F.)

The wolf is a good hunter and is respected by all. He is the Tanaina's "brother." (R.H.)

Because the wolf is a good hunter, a man should wear clothes or trimmings on his clothes made from the skin of the wolf. (R.H.)

### Concerning the Loon

If a loon yells or "calls" he is letting you know that something is going to happen. If you mock a loon it will bring bad luck. (S.F.)

When a loon cries it means that a storm is coming. (R.H.)

The loon is one of the shaman's birds. (R.H.)

### Concerning the Bear

The Tanaina believed they were related to the bear and gave to him much respect. (R.H.)

<sup>9</sup> Located south of Iliamna Lake on the Alaska Peninsula.

If you rub a child or baby on the head of a freshly killed bear, the child will never be afraid of the bear. (R.H.)

### Chulian and his Mother-in-law Tale

There once was a village and a man living there was named Raven or Chulian. He was married and lived with his mother-in-law. In those days they slept under the parents' platform bed. They used bear gut containers for food storage. Chulian's mother-in-law was down at a stream filling her bear gut container. She put it down in the stream so that it would float down and straighten out. She kept putting food into it but it never got full like everyone else's bag. Then her son caught Chulian sitting at the other end of the bag eating the food as it came down inside the bag. The brothers chased him out of the village and threatened to kill him if he returned. (R.H.)

### Chulian and the Bear Fat Tale

Another time Chulian was back with his wife. They slept under the parents' bed. They used to store their fat in bear stomachs. One day they gave the bear stomachs to Chulian to carry back to the village. They began to notice that there wasn't as much fat in the bags as there should have been. At night they noticed a lot of moving around inside the house. Finally the brothers of Chulian's wife caught him eating the fat and chased him out of the village, threatening to kill him if he returned. (R.H.)

### Rock Turns into a Dog Tale

One time the Tanaina were building a new semi-subterranean house. They began digging and found a spotted rock that looked just like a spotted dog. It was customary to use rocks in the corners of the house to hold the logs in place. The old people told them not to use this spotted rock but they did not follow this suggestion. One winter the people in the newly built house did not appear for their daily visit and the villagers went to look for them. The house had a fireplace in the center with a hole directly above it in the roof to let out the smoke. They

looked down the hole and saw a big spotted dog walking around in the house and human hair all over the house. They killed the dog. Only two people, who had run into the steam bath which was connected to the house and blocked the door, were saved. (R.H.)

## DISCUSSION

All of the material presented in this paper is presumed to have been practiced in the pre-Russian and post-Russian periods up until about 1920. By this time the acculturation process had just about eliminated the "old way of life" but some of the material, such as the folklore is still believed today and many of the folktales are told to the children occasionally.

Due to the general limited and incomplete nature of this information it was not felt that a comparative discussion of the cultural traits and folklore was warranted. Interested readers, who might want comparative information, may consult Osgood (1937) and Townsend (1961).

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