

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *SHEM PETE'S ALASKA: THE TERRITORY OF THE UPPER COOK INLET DENA'INA*, 2ND ED.

BY JAMES KARI AND JAMES A. FALL. (UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA PRESS, FAIRBANKS, 2003). CLOTH, ISBN 1-889963-56-9, \$65.00; PAPER, ISBN 1-889963-57-7, \$29.95. 392 PP. MAPS, TABLES, FIGURES, INDEXES, BIBLIO.

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Referred to by the authors as an “annotated and mapped ethnogeography of traditional Dena’ina place names” within the upper Cook Inlet dialect area of the language, this is a new edition of the early favorite published by the Alaska Native Language Center in 1987. According to its preface, this much revised and expanded version includes an additional 253 named places (for a total of nearly 1,000) and revises more than 75 of those listed previously; it adds 14 new stories or expository articles; and it is equipped with handsome shaded relief maps, the work of Matt Ganley.

Going beyond these simple statements of the authors, it is abundantly clear that the book has been expanded in every way. There are now 66 numbered maps, compared with 28 previously; there are new photographs, the total now numbering more than 225, and pictures used previously are much improved in quality of reproduction. There is a section of color plates that provide much improved notions of the nature of landscapes. Most useful, where the original edition was not indexed there are now three separate indexes: by geographic name, by personal name, and by subject. As before, the present edition includes a word profile of Shem Pete (who died in 1989) with additions to bring it to present date. And it also includes profiles of additional source-individuals drawn on especially for this edition, although not entirely invisible in the previous one. The most important of these are Shem Pete’s son, Billy Shem Pete, and Billy’s second cousin and clansman Sava Stephan Sr. (their maternal grandmothers were sisters). These two provide numerous additions and emendations to the corpus of places and the stories about them.

Basic presentation is again carried by 16 substantive chapters, each listing named locations in a separate geographic subdivision of the area — a sub-area such as a fairly contained drainage basin or the shores of a large water body. Places are listed in the former fashion, numbered by chapter and by individual place. But within this

overall plan, the format in the second edition is changed: whereas stories and articles relevant to each chapter were earlier placed together at the chapter’s end, following the enumeration of places, they are now larded through the place listings themselves. And whereas named places in the earlier edition were given in order strictly numerical (e.g., from 1.1 through 1.117), the numbers now appear in more scattered fashion, as the listing follows a geographic rather than purely numerical progression.

The implication should be clear: this is a handsome and promisingly useful book. To be sure, a few production boggles can be found if one looks carefully — numbering of maps and figures not always in agreement with text citations, cited reference omitted from the bibliography — but there are so many citations of so many maps, figures, and references that the reader must be impressed that mis-citations are so few. The leavening of articles and personal stories lifts chapters above their enumeration of places. Thus, the descriptive entries of places combine with those stories and articles, recycled and new, to produce much more than an annotated geography. The book is an encapsulated ethnography of the Dena’ina people emphasizing both subjective and objectified views of their territorial world.

Among the new expository sections in the text are a segment on Dena’ina log construction (republished from a work by D. C. Beard), a section on Dena’ina watercraft, by author Kari, and a somewhat expanded explication of the Dena’ina sound system and practical alphabet, together with a parallel discussion of similar aspects of the Ahtna language as well as a few notes on at least the alphabet of the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans. The significance of a substantial part of the expansion is clear in that a large number of the new articles relate to Dena’ina history and hypotheses bearing on it. More overtly historical additions include an article on the pre-history of the upper Cook Inlet region by Douglas Reger, a brief report of archaeological investigations at Hewitt

Lake in the upper Yentna River drainage by R. Greg Dixon, and an analysis of Dena'ina and Upper Kuskokwim relations by James Kari.

These come together around the authors' proposals that prehistoric Dena'ina-speaking people maintained close relations with their Atna-speaking Athabascan neighbors, now to the east of them; that nevertheless the same Dena'ina, or at least those of the ancestral Upper Inlet dialect group, had at one time occupied an area nestled among Upper Kuskokwim bands west of the Alaska Range; that the ancestral Upper Inlet group moved to the east of the Range (which would have involved the Hewitt Lake area) and onto the Inlet from the west, being the first of the Dena'ina to arrive on salt water. Kari proposes that this arrival was as much as a couple of thousand years ago, by which time they had established close contact with the Atna. Reger, in his article, suggests on archaeological grounds that the Upper Inlet group of Athabascans arrived in the area possibly as early as 1,500 years ago, apparently following abandonment of the area by coastal people with closer relations toward the Kodiak Island group — people of so-called Kachemak cultural tradition. Tantalizingly, from what must be Kari's point of view, Dixon in his description of work at Hewett Lake reports a radiocarbon determination dating some occupation at about 4,400 years ago. But Dixon provides no immediate support for ancient Athabascan residents in that region not far southeast of the Alaska Range, for he is inclined to relate the Hewett Lake finds, which include some objects of polished slate, again to people of Kodiak of that date.

These discussions together provide a nod to an especially uncertain area in Alaska prehistory — the geographic position of ancestral Athabascans. Whereas there seems to be a certain amount of agreement among prehistorians on the presence of ancestral Northern Athabascan and linguistically related Eyak people somewhere in south mainland Alaska by 2,000 or 2,500 years ago, the location of their predecessors in the millennia before that is both unclear and disputed. At one extreme, it has been argued that ancestral Athabascans, or Na-Dene, have been present in interior Alaska for more than 10,000 years. On the other, lie suggestions that much of that interior was unoccupied between around 5,000 and 2,000 years ago, and that ancestral Athabascans appeared from somewhere to the south. Difficulties in relating the relatively few well-dated interior archaeological finds of this period to historically known Athabascans, include both the extreme variation in subsistence adaptations manifest by the different Northern Athabascan groups of history (coastal beluga hunters, riverine fishers, interior moose

and caribou hunters) and the very attenuated inventories of artifacts revealed in so many apparent Athabascan sites.

But these questions reach far afield from the subject that is tapped in the book under review. The subject here is the geographic outlook of the most extensively settled coastal dialect group (Upper Inlet) of the single Athabascan language group (Dena'ina) that was thoroughly adapted to life on the salt-water coast at the time Europeans first arrived in southern Alaska. To this subject *Shem Pete's Alaska* makes again a signal contribution.