

## THE KUKAKLEK REINDEER STATION

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Flying over Kukaklek Lake, *Qukaqliq*, provides a bird's-eye view of rivers choked with sockeye salmon, grizzly bears wading in the water, and pods of sport fishermen casting fancy fly rods. The remoteness of the lake, the lack of visible "improvements," and the sheer beauty of the land earned its inclusion within the renowned Katmai National Park and Preserve. The people of Igiugig Village, however, see an ancient homeland, layered in rich cultural history, the most recent of which revolved around reindeer herding.

The elders of Igiugig are descendants of herders and the last generation of people who were raised on the land and then settled into modern villages. The connections to the places where they were born, subsisted, herded reindeer, or lived set the stage for the era of land claims when families chose allotments and villages chose corporation lands that reflected personal and family connections. Beginning in 2007, my grandmother, Mary Gregory Olympic (born 1931), a former reindeer herder and esteemed Igiugig elder, began telling me stories about the early years of the Kukaklek Reindeer Station, helping me to understand its importance today.

A case study of the Gregory family and the Kukaklek Reindeer Station demonstrates that reindeer herding in the Bristol Bay region served as a transitional economy. While transitioning from a subsistence-based livelihood to commercial fishing, reindeer herding families maintained traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering ties to landscapes while generating income at a time when people in the region were increasingly relying upon commercial products and mechanical transportation. Reindeer herding and fur trading supplemented household incomes until the fishing industry began to dominate.

Reindeer were introduced to the Iliamna Lake area in 1904 by accident when Norwegian Saami-American Hedley Redmyer attempted to transport 300 deer and

four herders from Bethel to Copper Center, a 600-mile trek that proved to be too long and difficult to complete. Sheldon Jackson, general agent of education in Alaska, commissioned Redmyer to establish a reindeer station at Copper Center, but after Redmyer could not find a passable route through the mountains, Jackson gave him permission to settle at Kokhanok Bay and establish Kokhanok Reindeer Station (Morseth 2003:98). Redmyer writes: "I made up my mind to return to Iliamna Lake, which is one of the finest reindeer countries I have seen in Alaska" (Unrau 1994:470). It is from this Kokhanok herd that most Bristol Bay and Alaska Peninsula herds originated (Macnab 1996:96n80) (Map 1, color plates).

My grandmother's father, Alexi Gregory, managed one of the herds originating from the Kokhanok Reindeer Station. He was born on March 17, 1894, most likely on the Alagnak River. When he was sixteen years old, in 1910, he started a herding apprenticeship at the Koggiung Reindeer Station. Four years later, he advanced to become a full herder, owning forty-three reindeer. A 1917 annual reindeer report from Koggiung indicates that he left Koggiung for Lake Iliamna in 1917 with forty-five deer (U.S. Reindeer Service 1917). He then met Marsha Wassillie (born 1897) and they had several children together (Fig. 1). They eventually married in 1926. In the 1920s, they moved to Kukaklek Lake where they continued to pursue herding. *Qukaqliq* means "middle one" in Central Yup'ik, and it is named for its location between Lake Iliamna to the north and Nonvianuk Lake to the south.

Around Kukaklek Lake, the Gregory family incorporated reindeer herding into their nomadic subsistence lifestyle. May through September were spent at a fish camp at the east end of Kukaklek. Over 2,000 sockeye salmon were split, dried, and smoked each year to feed the dogs and family over the long winter. The women split fish during the day while the men took the reindeer out to



*Figure 1. Alexi and Marsha Mary (Wassillie) Gregory at home in Kukaklek Lake, circa 1940s. Courtesy of Igiugig Village Council.*

roam the mountainsides and eat willow leaves and lichen. During the hot days the reindeer migrated towards the snow patches to cool off and get away from biting insects. By mid-September the family moved farther east to their fall fish camp at the outlet of Battle River to put up “red fish” (sockeye salmon that are about to spawn) until late October. Alexi hunted brown bears, often traveling days to find one, while his wife trapped ground squirrels. After the red fish dried, the family would move back to “Winter Camp” where they lived seven to eight months of the year. Alexi spent the winter trapping for fox, otter, mink, wolf, wolverine, lynx, and beaver using a nine-dog sled team (Salmon 2008:106). At the end of the season, the furs were brought to the Igiugig trading post and exchanged for food and cash (Olympic 1995). Supplies were hauled from the Koggiung cannery and included window panes and a wind-operated battery unit for the radio (Salmon 2008:106).

While trapping, Alexi depended on hired help to maintain his reindeer herd. Relatives came from the surrounding villages, and a settlement called Reindeer Village was established at Kukaklek (Fig. 2). One of the men hired was Evan Apokedak (born 1911 in Clarks Point), the father of Igiugig elder Annie Apokedak-Wilson (Wilson 1989:16). He described his youth to his grandson, George Wilson:

We moved this way to Diamond J [cannery on the Kvichak River]. From Diamond J, we go up to Reindeer Valley. We lived in a lot of different places. We moved in 1924 to Kaskanak and after that we used reindeer, no dog team. I never school, no place. One time we stayed at Kukaklek in 1930. We got no church when we stayed up at Reindeer Valley. So we couldn't have holidays. . . . Everybody all together got over a thousand [reindeer]. . . . Sometimes the reindeer move around and we stay with them in a tent. Mostly we live in the tent, even in the wintertime. Usually three young men would herd the reindeer. The rest of the



*Figure 2. Marking reindeer at Kukaklek Lake in 1933 with Kasyulie, Feenie Andrew, Mike Gregory, and Old Pete Mike. Courtesy of Igiugig Village Council.*

people and the families would stay in the village. We train them first, then let them pull. I watch them [his uncles] and that's how I learned. First time I see reindeer I scared. The guys lassoed the reindeer and it charged this way and I go in the house. I figured it come right [in] the house after me. After a couple of days, I get use to it (Wilson 1989:17–18).

At least three extended families lived at Reindeer Village who took care of the reindeer herd and the forty-plus sled dogs. On November 21, 1931, Alexi and Marsha Gregory had their seventh child, Mary Ann Gregory, my grandmother. Mary became responsible for the reindeer herd at age thirteen, along with Elia Eknaty, an orphan taken in by the Gregory family. Alexi no longer relied on hired help because Mary and Elia became full-time herders. My grandmother has described how the reindeer were taken to the hills for grazing in the second half of each day, between four and eleven o'clock at night. The reindeer had to be watched carefully so they would not be killed by wolves or absorbed by migrating caribou herds. Mary Gregory Olympic recalls her work as a young herder:

Boy lots of work to do [with] reindeer. They let us go four o'clock evening time, let them eat, [the] reindeer out in the bushes. After they start, when they full they start [to] sit down. [We] let them stand up, let them keep on eating the white moss. . . . When a wolf start howling around, [we] burn a Christmas tree [spruce tree]! [The] whole thing [to scare the wolves away]. [Our] reindeer dog watch the wolf, and chase them away. We [didn't] see caribou, [only] once in awhile. [My dad] [killed] them right away, because they might make [the reindeer] wild, take them away. Sometimes three, four [he would kill them all] (Olympic 2005a).

These “reindeer dogs” were specially trained dogs brought from the Nushagak area. The Gregory family had two, Puscatnaq and Mulchatna, named after the river from which Mary's dad brought them.

Mary remembers reindeer being used for food, transportation, and hides. Her mother made mattresses, sleeping bags, and *kameksiik*, or skin boots, with the hides. However, Mary regarded the reindeer as her “pets.” Following a common pastoral practice introduced by Saami herders in the region, Mary's reindeer were marked on their ears with special cuts that identified her as the owner. Her mark looked like the spade found on playing cards. Mary's most cherished memories of Kukaklek Lake are of playing with the reindeer. She tells a story about the time they tried

lassoing reindeer for fun. Mary's hardy laughter augments her animated narrative in Yup'ik and English:

Me and Elia Eknaty used to lasso little tiny kind, *nuriaq* [yearling reindeer calf]. They call them *nuriaq*. *Lassu-artukuk* [we would lasso] when we got them, we take it off. One time Elia Eknaty mistake with a big one. Mistake with a big one, we can't handle them. When he hold them both of us [were dragged] around. Can't handle the big, big mama one. She got spotted [fur] white, gray. Some of them fancy. That one, we got them. Try to hold it but we can't. Both of us hold them, he dragging around.

Finally, Elia tell me, “*Malia Apatiiq aqvau!*” He tell me to “Mary go get Apatiiq!” [an elder her parents were taking care of]. I [ran] down, [went] in there. [He was] usually in a little bed by the door. Apatiiq [was] lay[ing] down, relax[ing].

I didn't tell my mom.

I [went] in there: “*Apatiiq! Tai-tai!*” [Apatiiq, come!]

“*Ciin?*” [Why?]

“*Tai-tai, ciin apnuq, tai-tai. Qanemcikukamken.*” I [told him], “You come, I wanna tell you something outside.” He walk[ed] out. “*Apatiiq, alartuk tuntu-mun.*” We [mistook] a reindeer when we play lasso. “*Ikayuryugtukuk*” [We want you to help].

He [went] back in, put *paallaguaq* and coat and gloves. He walk[ed] with me. We walk up there. He take the lasso, he take them. Apatiiq can't drag [it] around. [He] tie[d] it around a tree, Christmas tree. [He took them by the antlers] and let them lie down, and took the lasso [off]. *Iiiiiiii!* [expression of amazement]. After that he tell us:

“*Ukuk lassuaralungituaq angtuaneq. Akngirci qaicetuaq.*” [He] tell us “Don't lasso big one, we [you] might [get] hurt” (Olympic 2005a).

Through “playing out with reindeer” and growing up outdoors, Mary gained an encyclopedic knowledge of her homeland. In describing her diverse education, Mary explains that she was “raised both ways”: “I am glad my parents [taught] me both ways. My daddy—outdoors, hunting, trapping. My mama—indoors, cleaning, sewing. . . . I'm happy, that's why I am not lazy” (Olympic 2005b).

The late 1930s saw the downfall of the reindeer herding industry in the Iliamna Lake region. Part of this was due to predators, but mainly it was due to the rise

of commercial fishing. John G. Gordon, a teacher at the Newhalen Native school, wrote:

The real problem is this: how are we going to make it worthwhile for the herder to stay with the herds? The herders are able to make eight to fourteen hundred dollars during the fishing season in Bristol Bay and that is more than enough for buying all their needs from the local trader. If they want fresh meat they go on a short hunt and get moose. In the fall and spring geese and ducks are plentiful in these parts and the natives manage to get all they need (cited in Unrau 1994:474–475).

Reindeer Village at Kukaklek Lake was one of the last remaining reindeer stations in the Lake Iliamna area, but by the 1940s Alexi Gregory and his sons, like many men in the region, also turned to commercial fishing in the summer months. They would travel by boat down the Alagnak River to Bristol Bay and Naknek to work for the Red Salmon Cannery. Mary and Annie Ekmaty-Zackar were left to care for the remaining reindeer. In 1947, at sixteen years old, Mary's younger brother Alix died. His death was so tragic for her parents that they decided to release the reindeer and move the whole family to Igiugig on the Kvichak River.

The connections to land made during the reindeer-herding era created a strong basis for individual land claims (Salmon 2008:89–116). In accordance with the Alaska Native Allotment Act of 1906—an act designed to enable Alaska Natives to protect their lands from encroachment by non-Natives—Alexi Gregory filed an allotment application in 1960 for land adjacent to Kukaklek Lake. He and his family had used this land as early as 1922 (Olympic v. United States, Alaska District Court 615 F. supp. 990:992, August 8, 1985). After a ten-year legal battle, Mary Olympic inherited her father's 160-acre allotment at Winter Camp, although she refers to the entirety of Kukaklek Lake as *nunaka*, “my homeland.”

In 1971 the Igiugig Native Corporation (INC) was formed under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. The corporation actively manages the surface estate of 66,000 acres surrounding Igiugig, including land around the shores of Kukaklek Lake and the Kvichak River. Mary Olympic was very influential in the land selection around the lake. In part, it is through her life history and the stories she tells that the place has become meaningful for the residents of Igiugig. Anthropologist Keith Basso (1996:106) writes, “dwelling is said to consist in the multiple ‘lived relationships’ that people maintain with places, for it is

solely by virtue of these relationships that space acquires meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Mary's stories of learning from elders, playing with her reindeer and friends, caring for reindeer, and of being “raised both ways”—learning sewing and cooking as well as hunting and trapping—around Kukaklek Lake have given those sites significance. As oral historian William Schneider (2004:25) writes, “stories ma[k]e the sites come alive with meaning.” In this way, Mary's stories have linked the community and history of Igiugig to Kukaklek Lake.

## NOTE

1. As an example of the ongoing “lived relationships” (Basso 1996) with Kukaklek Lake, residents of Igiugig have recently recognized a need to connect youth with the land base to gain a more comprehensive understanding of local history. For this reason, the first “culture camp” was hosted at Kukaklek Lake in October of 2012. Students and elders along with chaperones and teachers filled their days with learning to prepare traditional foods, tools, and crafts, hearing place names, and practicing storytelling. This enabled youth to develop a deeper relationship with their homeland.

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