

## THE McGRATH INGALIK

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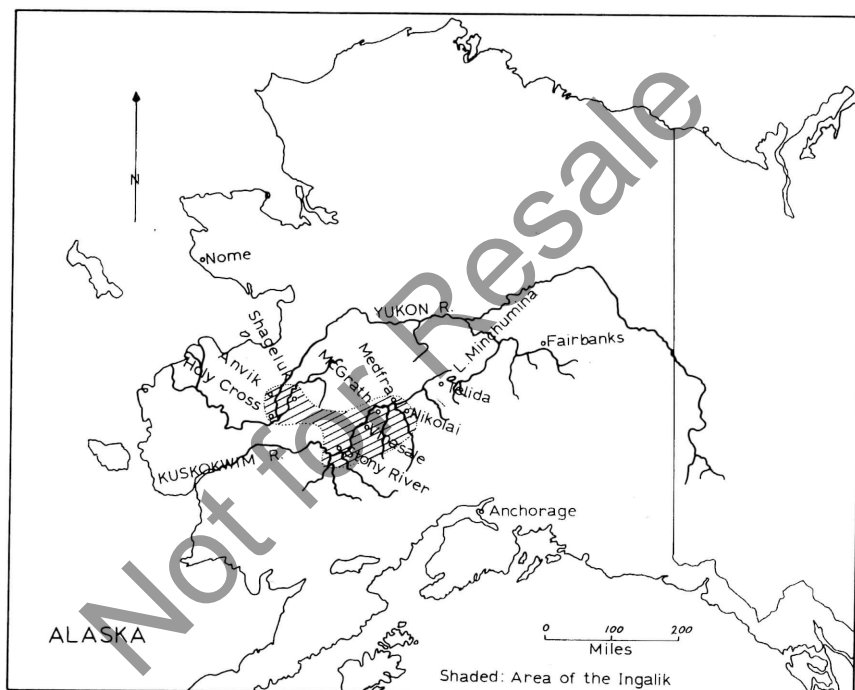
During the summer of 1960, the writer spent three months studying the McGrath Ingalik, a northern Athabaskan group situated on the upper Kuskokwim River, in central Alaska. The bulk of this time was spent in the settlements of Medfra and Nikolai, on the North and South Forks, respectively, of the Kuskokwim River.<sup>1</sup> The field data was obtained by personal observation and through informants.<sup>2</sup> This group has not, to the best of my knowledge, been previously studied, although they are mentioned briefly in several accounts by early travelers. As a result, very little is known of the past or present culture of these people. There is evidence which indicates that the present group is an amalgamation of at least two earlier societies, and they show strongest connections with the Ingalik of the lower Yukon River. In view of this affinity, I will retain Osgood's designation of these people as the McGrath Ingalik (Osgood, 1940, p. 31).

The region of the upper Kuskokwim River was first penetrated by the Russian explorer Zagoskin, who traveled up the Kuskokwim River to Vina-sale village and the mouth of the Takotna River in 1844. In 1889, the Alaskan pioneer Frank Densmore, with a party of prospectors, passed from the Tanana River to the Kuskokwim, and descended the latter to the Yukon portage (Spurr, 1900, p. 95). In 1898, the geologist J. E. Spurr crossed the Alaska Range from the east, and going down the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River reached the main body of the Kuskokwim, which he then descended (Gordon, 1917, p. 105). In 1899, a small party of soldiers under the command of Lieutenant J. S. Herron crossed the Alaska Range near Rainy Pass, and descended the South Fork of the Kuskokwim to the vicinity of the present site of Nikolai Village. The expedition then struck off northward, in the direction of the Tanana River, visiting Indian villages at Telida Lake and Lake Minchumina en route (Herron, 1901, pp. 18-44). This expedition is still remembered by many of the older Ingalik of the region, particularly for the horses which they mistook for moose.

The major white habitation center in this area at the present time is the town of McGrath, located on the Kuskokwim River at its juncture with the Takotna River. A trading post was first established here in 1907, while

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<sup>2</sup> My primary informants for this study were Junior Gregory, Bobby Esai, Antone Pitka, and Chief Wathili Devian, all residents of Nikolai Village. They were most helpful and patient in answering my many questions. I am also indebted to Mr. Bob Stone, and Mrs. Bertha Winans, long-time residents of the area, whose assistance and hospitality greatly aided me in contacting and working with the McGrath Ingalik.



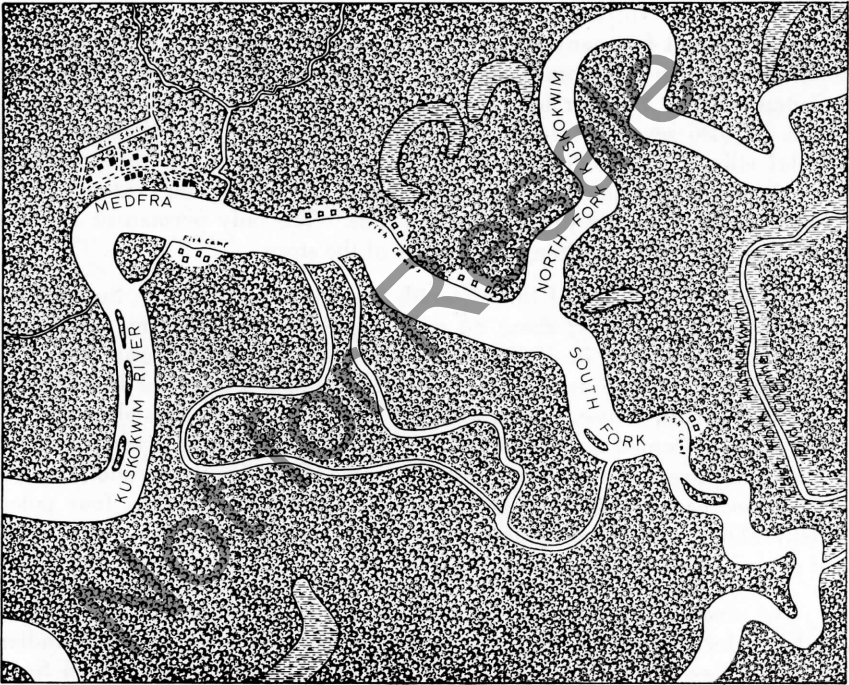
Peter McGrath was U.S. Deputy Marshall for the gold diggings on the Takotna and Innoko river drainages. During the Second World War, the town grew substantially in size, with the construction of a large airfield by the U.S. Army. At the present time, it is a minor stop for scheduled airlines, and is the site of an F.A.A. facility. McGrath has two stores, several boarding houses, numerous residences, and a charter air service. There is a permanent population of about 80 residents, including two or three Indian families, and several Indian women who have intermarried with white residents.

The community of Medfra is approximately 50 miles upstream from McGrath, on the North Fork of the Kuskokwim River. It has been the site of a trading post for many years. At the present time, Medfra consists of a small dirt airstrip and several log buildings, one of which serves as the store and post office. A larger log structure is the residence of the store owner. There are also several storage buildings. A cabin, built by the Indians of Nikolai village, is also located there, and used by them on their periodic trips during the winter. A dirt road about 10 miles long extends from Medfra to some mining property in the hills. The only permanent resident of Medfra at the present time is the owner of the store.

Nikolai is a village of the McGrath Ingalik located on the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River, about 30 miles upstream from Medfra. It moved to its present location in 1925, previously being situated several miles further upstream. There are 12 one-room log cabins, two school buildings, a small men's bath house, and a Greek Catholic Russian Orthodox church. The village is located on a low bluff, 20 to 40 feet above the river, and most of the cabins are within 50 yards of the stream. Each family, in addition, has at least one cache which is a small, closed, log structure set on four poles, usually about 5 feet above the ground. In this are kept furs, tools, food, and other items not kept in the cabins.

The small settlement of Telida, some 100 miles up the North Fork of the Kuskokwim from Medfra, is the permanent residence of three Indian families. Two of these are Ingalik from Nikolai, and the third, Carl Sesui and his wife, is apparently the last of a once much larger group inhabiting the area near Lake Minchumina. Telida has been at its present location since 1916. Herron gave the population of (Old) Telida in 1899 as 17 persons, and estimated Carl Sesui as having been about 5 years old at that time (Herron, 1900, p. 67).

The present population of the communities of Nikolai and Telida totals approximately 100, 86 of whom reside in Nikolai. Of this 100, 66 are under the age of 20, and 32 of these attend school. With the availability of modern medical care, families tend to be large, sometimes as many as eight surviving children, but with an average of between four and five.



MEDFRA AND VICINITY

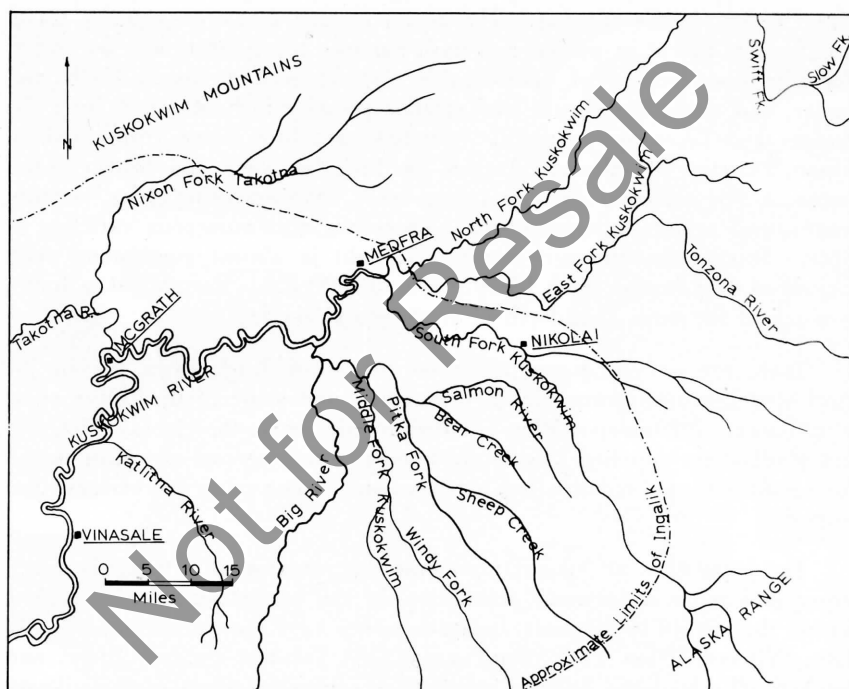


The region of the upper Kuskokwim River and its many tributaries is a wide, flat, forested alluvial plain, marked occasionally by low, rolling hills. There are numerous streams of varying size, often quite wide, generally draining to the northeast from the foothills of the Alaska Range until the base of the Kuskokwim Mountains is reached. Here, the main body of the Kuskokwim River trends southeastward, emptying ultimately into Kuskokwim Bay, some 600 miles away. North of Vinasale, the rivers are generally slow-moving and sinuous, often doubling back on themselves, with innumerable sloughs and abandoned channels. Heavy summer rains and moderate winter snows are typical, and the temperatures generally range from  $-50^{\circ}$  in the winter to  $80^{\circ}$  in the summer. The aspect is such that cross-country travel is unfeasible except in winter, and most summer transportation is by water. There is good spruce of considerable size, as well as much birch and poplar, and numerous shrubs and smaller plants. Fish obtained from the streams and lakes are primarily whitefish, grayling, some trout, and in season, varieties of salmon. Animal life includes black and brown bears, moose, a few scattered caribou herds, wolf, fox, wolverine, lynx, martin, beaver, and rabbits, among others. There are also numerous varieties of birds. During the summer months, daylight is almost continuous, with periods of dusk lasting from 10:00 pm until 2:00 a.m. Permafrost is found in much of the area, at a depth of from two to six feet.

There are no year-round roads on the upper Kuskokwim, except for short stretches near towns, military facilities, and some of the larger operating mines. All transportation is either by air, or on the rivers. McGrath and Medfra are supplied largely by barges, which ascend the Kuskokwim during the summer months, but air transport is becoming increasingly important.

The population at Nikolai represents the remnant of a formerly much larger and more widespread population in the upper Kuskokwim region. Within the last 40 to 50 years, habitation sites have been abandoned at Big River, Vinasale, Slow Fork, the Tonzona, the Takotna, Salmon River, and the Nixon Fork of the Takotna, as well as earlier locations of the villages of Telida and Nikolai themselves. Some of the residents of former villages at Vinasale and on the Takotna River moved down the Kuskokwim River, but the majority moved to Nikolai village because of kinship affiliations. This has been the end result of the decimation in numbers caused by diseases such as diphtheria and smallpox, shortly after the first contacts with Americans around the turn of the century. Most of the abandoned communities were reduced to but one or two families, who continued to live there until the older people died.

It is apparent, from ethnographic evidence and linguistic affiliations related by informants, that at one time, there were two distinct groups of



AREA OF MCGRATH INGALIK

Indians in the upper Kuskokwim region. One of these, in an area extending from the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River, south to the region of Stony River and Sleetmute on the lower Kuskokwim, was most closely affiliated with the Ingalik of the lower Yukon River regions of Holy Cross, Anvik and Shageluk. The second group, from about the Tonzona River north to Lake Minchumina and the upper Kantishna River, although linguistically close to the Ingalik, was seemingly more nearly related to Indians of the Tanana region and the middle Yukon River. In addition, there is evidence that a small group of Koyukon Indians from the Yukon River settled near Lake Minchumina about the middle of the last century.

The above indicated dichotomy agrees with a statement of G. B. Gordon (Gordon, 1917, p. 201) regarding a division between Indians below the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River, and those further north.<sup>3</sup>

## PAST AND PRESENT CULTURE

### *Seasonal Round*

Today, in the spring, shortly before or after the river ice breaks up, families without school-age children leave Nikolai and travel downstream in their boats to the vicinity of Medfra. The remainder follow in early June, at the end of the school year. Near Medfra, usually scattered at wide intervals for two or three miles on both sides of the river, the Indians set up their summer fish camps in groups of two or three families related through brothers or sisters. Dwellings consist of canvas tents, one to a family, and in addition there is usually a small canvas bath house, an open smoke house with a canvas or metal roof, and sometimes a small cache. The dog teams, usually five or six dogs per family, are staked out at intervals about the camp, and skiffs with outboard motors are usually moored a few yards from the tents. The tents, as with the cabins at Nikolai Village, invariably face the river. The groups customarily remain sedentary until early September.

The Indian families usually return to the same fish camp site for several summers, and the location is considered to be the property of the families occupying it. Changes of location, however, occasionally are made in mid-summer because of a relocation of fish wheels, or due to minor strife between neighbors.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon states that "the traditions of the Sikmuit [i.e., Sleetmute] . . . pointed to the Upper Kuskokwim, and away from the Yukon. . . . They occupied the Kuskokwim Valley from the point where the Eskimo held them in check up to the Istna [South Fork of Kuskokwim] and including that stream. They were in touch with and closely related to the Minkhotana who occupied the Lake Minchumina country, the Upper Kantishna River, and the upper Kuskokwim. . . ."

Upon reoccupation of a site in the spring, the men return the fish-wheels to the river. These are drawn up on the banks during the winter, to prevent damage from the ice jams. Each family has at least one fish wheel, and usually more than one. Until the salmon run in the early fall, however, these collect only a dozen or so fish a day, mostly whitefish. Fish wheels were introduced into the Kuskokwim River region about 1910-1920, by Americans. They are large, paddle-wheel affairs, constructed of peeled saplings, scrap lumber, and chicken wire. They are turned by action of the current, and dip fish swimming upstream into baskets. Fish wheels are most often placed on the outside of a curve in the river, where the water is usually deepest and swiftest, and are generally located within walking distance of the fish camp.

In former times, weirs in conjunction with fish traps were employed, and stationary gill-nets are still used by some, although the latter are no longer made by the Indians themselves.

Despite the fact that the river near Nikolai is narrower than at Medfra, and thereby a better location for fishing, the people travel downstream to Medfra. In part, this is in order to be close to the store and post office located there. More important, however, is the fact that once the fish-camps have been set up, and fish wheels repaired and placed in the river, the men have little to do until early August, when the salmon run begins. They therefore are free to take summer jobs in McGrath and elsewhere, particularly with the Forest Service fire crews. The presence of a radio-telephone and an airfield at Medfra facilitates their appraisal of, and transportation to, areas where work is available.

In early August, the men of Nikolai who have been working, return to their fish camps and prepare for the salmon run. At this time, they may cut winter wood for the few whites in the area, and for shipment by barge to McGrath. In addition, they may build new fish wheels, tend a few small garden plots, and hunt. Berries ripen at this time, and the women and children usually spend several days gathering them.

During the salmon run, the fish are cleaned and split, and then either dried in the smoke houses, or salted in barrels for winter use. Fish are now used primarily for winter dog feed, the people subsisting largely on purchased staples.

In September, with the onset of cold weather, the McGrath Ingalik return to Nikolai village, and the children return to the school there which has been in operation for five or six years. At this time also, they harvest their small garden plots at Nikolai, which they have tended from time to time during the summer. The crops grown are primarily potatoes, with some rhubarb, lettuce, carrots, onions, and turnips. The amount of land culti-

vated, however, is generally small, and the average plot for a family is only about 20 feet square.

In preparation for the winter season, dog harness is mended, dog sleds and snowshoes constructed or repaired, and prior to the river's freezing, boats are removed from the water, painted and repaired. Some wood for winter fuel may be cut, but this is customarily obtained only as needed, since anyone with a large supply of wood soon loses it to his neighbors and relatives.

In the fall, some hunting is done, mainly for moose and ducks in season, and preparations are made for fur trapping. The furs thus obtained are primarily beaver, although numbers of other skins are also obtained. With a full limit of 20 beaver skins, a family can expect to add several hundred dollars to their income. Although the prices for fur fluctuate, large prime beaver pelts bring as much as twenty dollars in McGrath or Medfra. The men follow set trap lines, usually the same one every winter. The region is, however, beginning to be trapped out, and the Indians are finding it necessary to go far afield to obtain results. The trap lines are run by dog team, although there has been a tendency for the more affluent men to have their supplies flown out to the trap line. Most families have at least one dog sled, to which the teams are hitched in tandem.

During the early spring, little is done at Nikolai aside from some occasional hunting and trapping, and periodic trips by dog team to Medfra for mail and supplies. The people are usually impatient for warmer weather, and at the first sign of thaw or spring breakup, several families will immediately prepare to leave for their summer fish camps, although it may be several weeks before the snow leaves the ground.

The above seasonal round is quite different from that which was observed in earlier times. Up until some 40 or 50 years ago, it was the practice of the Nikolai group to travel in the early spring from their village, then located several miles further upstream, to the mouth of Big River to the south. There, they would be joined by relatives from Vinasale, and the people would then travel by dog team southeastward toward the Alaska Range, reaching the foothills prior to the spring breakup of the river ice. This group would then spend the summer in the foothills, traveling north-eastward across the upper reaches of the Middle Fork of the Kuskokwim River, Windy Fork, and Sheep Creek. During this time, the Indians would hunt and fish, drying the meat for winter use. By fall, prior to the onset of freezing weather, the group would have reached the headwaters of the South Fork of the Kuskokwim. Here, they would build bull boats of caribou hides stretched over a sapling framework, load their summer's catch, and return downstream to their villages.

That this was a general aboriginal practice for the region is indicated by the statements of Mr. Bob Stone, a white resident of the area for some 40 years. He stated that in his earlier days, he saw numerous abandoned summer campsites on McKinley and Foraker Creeks in the Kantishna drainage, often with moose blinds still in place on the sand bars.

McGrath Ingalik informants stated that it was also a general practice, in former times, for Eskimos from far down the Kuskokwim River to ascend to the Alaska Range to hunt caribou. This was done in the spring by means of the Stony River Drainage. Upon reaching the foothills, these Eskimo would also spend the summer months hunting and drying the meat for winter use. They would move north to the headwaters of Big River, and occasionally as far as the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River. There, in the fall, the Eskimos would construct sewn-skin boats, and descend to the Kuskokwim River and their own villages to the south. Contacts between Eskimos and the McGrath Ingalik were few and peaceful, however, and the Eskimo boats usually drifted past the Ingalik villages without stopping.

### *Technology and Housing*

Summer tents are made by the Ingalik women from canvas yardage purchased at Medfra or McGrath. A widower or bachelor will usually have one made for him by a sister or other relative. These are well-made tents, and average 8 x 12 feet in size, with a 6 foot peak. They have a pitched roof, straight side walls, and stand firmly against the often strong summer winds with the aid of a framework of saplings. The floor of the tent is covered with spruce boughs, which are renewed regularly. A small metal cooking stove is placed near the entrance of the tent, and blankets, sleeping bags, and extra clothing are placed on the floor at the rear of the tent.

The winter cabins at Nikolai are generally constructed of unfinished and, more recently, three-sided logs. The cracks are chinked with clay and moss, and the pitched roof may be of sod, or covered with flattened gasoline cans, tar paper, or corrugated iron. The single room is an average 12 x 20 feet, and there is a plank floor. Dirt is usually banked about the exterior of the house to a height of 1 or 2 feet to conserve heat, and the windows are usually double-paned. Furnishings usually include a table, two or three chairs, a cast-iron cooking stove, and a large steel-drum stove for heating. In addition, there are two or three low wooden shelves which serve as beds, and often an old army cot as well. Bedding consists of blankets and sleeping bags, with the parents' bed often screened off by a curtain. On shelves and in boxes are stored foodstuffs, clothing, cooking utensils, rifles, traps, and other items. On the rafters are often placed harness, snowshoes and sleds in various stages of construction, and lines for hanging clothes.

Most families own gasoline-powered washing machines, gasoline lan-

terns, gasoline-powered chain saws, and battery-operated phonographs and radios. All of these items are generally carried with them during the seasonal changes in residence.

The men and older boys take steam baths at all times of the year, daily whenever possible. At the summer fish camps, a low sapling framework from 4 to 5 feet square is covered with canvas for this purpose. Inside, stones are heated in a fire or on a stove, and water is poured over the hot stones to produce steam. At Nikolai, the bath house is a low log structure, about 5 feet high and some 10 feet square, with one low door and a small window. Within, a steel drum stove is nearly covered with boulders and cobbles brought from several miles upstream. Along the walls of the bath house are low wooden benches upon which the men sit while bathing. Raven-wing fans are used for cooling. Due to the drying effects of the intense heat, the bath house periodically burns down, and a new one is then erected by the cooperative effort of the men of the village. In former times, after taking a steam bath, the men would run and dive into the river. This is no longer done, however, apparently due to fear of acquiring colds.

The McGrath Ingalik, although increasingly dependent upon manufactured items for their subsistence, are still skilled at a variety of crafts. In the processing of hides, for example, the women are quite adept. After a moose is skinned, a paste is made of moose brains and water, and this is spread over the skin. Then the flesh and hair are scraped off. The process is repeated until the skin is free of hair and reduced to the desired thickness. When the skins of fur-bearing animals are processed, the fur is of course retained. The skins are then closely hung over a smoke fire of rotten wood placed in a pit, so as to allow as little of the smoke to escape as possible. The smoking process is essentially for color, and imparts a deep brown hue and a pleasant smoky odor to the leather. From prepared skins, the Indian women make moccasins, gloves, caps, small bags, and other items, mostly for sale in the stores at Medfra and McGrath.

Babiche, or rawhide line, is cut by the women from untanned moosehide, and is used in lashing together dog sleds, and in the stringing and lacing of snowshoes. The women also manufacture birchbark baskets sewn with spruce roots. These are very well made, and are used for a variety of things, such as sewing baskets, trinkets, small articles of loose clothing, and in former times were used for stone boiling.

Material for the construction of sleds and snowshoes by the men is obtained by splitting spruce wood. After the wood strips are roughly carved, they are steamed until pliable, bent to the desired shape, and hung in the cabin until dry. Although the sleds are primarily held together by lashings of babiche, points of stress are strengthened by the use of bolts and other metal fastenings. Sled runners are made of imported ironwood, metal runners

proving unsatisfactory at the extreme temperatures encountered in this region.

Bows and unfletched, side-notched arrows are still made by the men for children, but are no longer used for hunting. Game and furs are now obtained with rifles and steel traps. A few of the older men of Nikolai, however, can recall when the only weapons available to them were cap-and-ball rifles, and most hunting was done with bows or long lances. Deadfalls and snares are still sometimes employed, although rapidly falling into disuse in favor of the more easily handled steel traps. Most men have a variety of rifles and shotguns and are excellent marksmen.

Although pottery is no longer manufactured by any of the McGrath Ingalik, it was used within the memory of the older people. I was shown a place on the bank of the Kuskokwim River where the proper type of clay was obtained, and informants stated that beaver hair was always added to the clay as a temper.

The Indians build their own flat-bottomed boats, generally from commercial lumber. These are usually from 15 to 20 feet long, with a beam of from 3 to 4 feet, but are occasionally larger. In addition, they build canvas-covered hunting canoes. The McGrath Ingalik formerly made canoes of birchbark over a framework of spruce, caulking the seams with spruce gum. They deny, however, ever having made sewn skin canoes, although they were known from the lower Kuskokwim River.

Canoe paddles are today crudely carved from a single piece of spruce, and have a flat, squarish blade. One older paddle, however, was beautifully fashioned with a thin, concavely curved, and ribbed blade. This construction was in order to insure silence while hunting from a canoe.

### *Economic Life*

The McGrath Ingalik are well integrated into our money economy, and depend upon furs and summer work for the bulk of their income. State aid also plays an important part in their economy, with old age assistance and aid to dependent children amounting to over \$1000 a month. The average yearly income of an Indian family at Nikolai is from \$1700 to \$2000 a year.

The Indians obtain a substantial amount of their subsistence from the environment, including game, fowl, fish, and berries in season, but they purchase the bulk of their food from the store at Medfra. Staples include flour, sugar, canned goods, coffee, tea, butter, eggs, bacon, and powdered milk. Except for some articles of winter wear, all clothing is also purchased either at Medfra or McGrath, and occasionally also through mail-order houses.

As a result of this dependence upon the stores for most of their needs,



and the sporadic nature of their income, most things are purchased on credit, and the Indians usually have a standing debt of from \$50 to \$200. In addition, they rarely buy large quantities of food, preferring to make frequent trips to Medfra, even during the winter months.

### *Religion*

Religion plays an important part in the lives of the McGrath Ingalik, and the Greek Catholic Russian Orthodox church in Nikolai village, a rather imposing frame structure, is a source of community pride. The regional priest, an Eskimo, visits Nikolai only once or twice a year, and the people look forward to his coming. Whatever the time of year, the Indians drop whatever they are doing at the time, and if away from the village, return for a week or more of services. While the writer was in the area, the priest arrived for a visit, and everyone, including those who were working at McGrath, went to Nikolai Village. Only one or two young people were left at Medfra to tend fish wheels and dog teams.

The people are generally very devout and have icons and religious pictures on the walls of their cabins. During the winter, in the absence of the priest, weekly services are conducted by a lay reader, who also performs baptisms and burials when necessary. Weddings, however, are conducted only by the priest.

All marriages are now sanctified by the church, although this was not the practice in the past. In recent years, pressure has been brought to bear by church officials and the territorial marshall, requiring both civil and church marriages. This was at first resisted by some of the men at Nikolai, however, as prior to this time they could divorce their wife by simply leaving her and taking another woman. When the priest informed them that those couples that had not been properly married could not attend church services, however, the men eventually complied.

At the present time, only one polygamous marriage exists, and all evidence indicates that it was always a rare circumstance. In the present case, the first wife is a legal one, the second, common-law. This situation was brought about by the failure of the first wife to produce any children. Although the first wife at first protested vigorously, she is now apparently reconciled to the situation. However, as a consequence of this second marriage, the man concerned has not been considered to be eligible for church or village offices, although his age (55) and the fact that he is the son of a former chief, would otherwise qualify him.

Under the influence of the priest and local white residents, arranged marriages are no longer common, although attempts are still half-heartedly made in this direction. On the whole, young people, especially the girls,

exercise free choice in marriage. Unwed mothers are fairly common, but there is apparently no stigma attached, nor is this a bar to later marriage. In former times, most marriages were arranged, often while the parties concerned were very young. Marriage to a maternal first cross or parallel-cousin, formerly the preferred one, is no longer practiced. This relative remains a "joking relative", however.

In earlier times, when a person became ill, his relatives simply surrounded him with candles and religious pictures, and waited for him to either get well or die. In recent years, however, with the increased use of the airplane and the availability of medicines, many of the Indians now go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Hospital in Anchorage, often even for childbirth.

The church has been a strong influence, since the first missionaries in the early twentieth century, in doing away with native beliefs and folklore. The answers to most inquiries concerning the religious beliefs and practices before the advent of the Russians were vague. Statements were usually to the effect that at that time, the Indians were ignorant of laws and of God, and did not know that what they did then was wrong. As an illustration of this, one informant stated that the Indians did not know that it was wrong to cremate the dead, until the missionaries told them that the dead should only be buried.

Informants consistently stated that prior to the coming of the church, the general belief was that a person just died and that there was no spirit or afterlife. Such statements, however, do not agree with other of their beliefs. For instance, it was related to me in another context that when a person came from another village with news of a death, ashes were scattered across his trail to prevent the dead man's spirit from following it. Also, when a child died soon after birth, it was believed that his spirit would reappear in the next child to be born in the village.

### *Education*

A school, under the auspices of the Assembly of God Church, has been in operation at Nikolai for the past several years, and the majority of the children under the age of 18 have a reading and writing knowledge of English. Many of the older adults as well, having either taught themselves or attended some school during the winters, read and write, some quite well. As a result, English is rapidly replacing the aboriginal language as the vernacular of the younger generation, and the speech of all the Indians is generously interlaced with English words. It is possible that English will almost completely replace the aboriginal language within the next 30 years. A contributing factor in this is the fact that all school work is conducted in English.

At the present time 32 pupils are attending school, all grades being taught together by a single teacher until the eighth grade. After this the boys usually no longer attend school. Where it can be afforded, however, some of the girls attend high school in Anchorage. This has tended to result, in recent years, in some girls remaining in the larger cities, not returning to Nikolai except perhaps to visit their parents.

Because of religious conflicts, the adults of Nikolai have, in the past, driven out some of the school teachers, and at other times kept their children from attending school. However, due to a growing realization by the parents of the importance of reading and writing, particularly for getting better jobs during the summers, combined with the practical desire to have the children kept busy during the long winter months, they now make their children attend. The Orthodox priest has also been instrumental in urging the Indians to send their children to the school, and in smoothing over the religious question.

#### *Socio-Political Organization*

Little information was obtained on the past kinship and descent systems, apparently due to their no longer being present as functional elements. Residence tends to be initially matrilocal after marriage, with some semblance of bride service, until the husband can build his own cabin. Indications are also that this was generally the rule in the past. Descent is patrilineal, and this also seems to have been the case in former times, with the chieftainship sometimes passing from father to son. However, the choice of a chief at the present time depends more upon personality and leadership qualities than anything else.

Status and rank depend upon age, wealth, generosity, and often upon whether one has an ancestor who was a chief or other leader. Persons who have no children, or who were born outside of Nikolai Village, sometimes have a rather low position in the village status structure.

The governing body of Nikolai Village is a tribal council made up of a chief, a sub-chief or "marshall", and all the adult men of the community. Through this, the village is self-governing, only major crimes and problems being referred to external authorities. The chief and sub-chief are elected by the council, and hold their positions until removed. The present chief is 77 years old, and has held this position for 40 years. Prior to that time, he was sub-chief. There is also a sub-chief at Telida Village, subordinate to the chief at Nikolai.

This village organization is one which has been adopted by the McGrath Ingalik since Russian contact, and informants state that they formerly had no chiefs. Instead, the villages were directed by the older and wealthier

men. The present tribal council is generally an effective organ of self-government. In a recent case of theft by one of the young men of the village, pressure by the tribal council caused the man to return the stolen articles and turn himself in to the state authorities. A year or two ago, when the sale of alcoholic beverages at Medfra was causing a good deal of drunkenness in the village, the people under the leadership of the chief requested the state not to renew the beverage license of the store owner.

The inhabitants of Nikolai are in general a cohesive group, with nearly all adults belonging to one of three families, and there are in addition several instances of brothers married to women who are sisters. However, some animosity is often shown to persons who were not born in Nikolai or Telida. One Eskimo from the lower Kuskokwim River, recently married to a girl from Nikolai, was constantly subjected to vocal and physical abuse. As a result, the couple has left the village, and now are living at Medfra. Another inhabitant, an Ingalik born in another village, was discriminated against over disputed rights to the inheritance of a cabin. This man now plans to move his family to Telida Village, and further stated that he felt he was generally ostracized because he was poor and not faithful in attendance at church.

A basic feature of the village social structure is the great degree of sharing and cooperation that is expected of its members. Should one of the villagers have extra food, wood, money, or gasoline, and not offer to share it with the rest when needed, he is looked upon as stingy and mean. Similarly, when an Indian contracts with someone for cutting wood, it is expected that he will ask all of his neighbors to share the work and profits. An individual who consistently works alone and shares little is not considered to be a good member of the village, and his voice on the village council is generally ignored. The unity of the sibling groups in Nikolai, however, which cut across almost every family line, tends to keep such divisive frictions at a minimum.

### *Ritual Observances*

The Orthodox Church has strongly opposed many of the aboriginal ritual observances, and most of them are no longer practiced or even remembered clearly. A few practices, however, remain from earlier times. One of these, still practiced by most families, is the sequestration of girls when they reach puberty. As it is now practiced, this consists of what the McGrath Ingalik call "going into the corner". At her menarche, a girl is hidden from the view of men behind a screen or blanket, in a corner of the cabin or tent. She is kept here for a period varying from a few days to several weeks. During this time, she may eat no fresh fish, meat, or berries, and may not leave the cabin during the day. The girl feeds herself from special

dishes, and the food is prepared for her by her mother or other female relative. There is apparently no restriction on her touching herself, however. In addition, no restrictions are placed on subsequent menstruations. Nursing mothers, however, are also forbidden fresh foods.

Another practice, still very strong, is that of a taboo against bears for all women of child-bearing age. Women may not eat bear meat, sleep or step on a bearskin, or walk on the ground where a bear has been slain. When a bear is killed, care is taken by the men to allow none of the blood to fall on the ground where a woman might inadvertently step on it, such as near a camp or on a trail. It was stated that should a woman do any of these things, she would not be able to bear children. In addition, a pregnant woman would become ill, and the unborn child would be aborted.

Some minor rites are still practiced by the men in handling the bodies of certain animals. When an otter is killed or trapped, it is skinned, and the carcass is suspended in a tree. It may not be thrown on the ground, nor may it be eaten. The same treatment is accorded caribou and moose bones, except where these are used in manufactures. Similarly for a wolf, after the animal is skinned the carcass is cut into several pieces, these are then suspended in a tree. When asked the reason for these customs, the reply was only "that is the way we always do". The practice in connection with wolverines, however, is more complex. While skinning it, a weapon of some kind, such as a knife, must be placed on the ground beside the animal. The carcass is also disposed of in a tree, and may not be eaten. When asked the reason for this placement of a weapon beside the animal, the answer was that it was in order to "protect" the hunter.

The McGrath Ingalik have several ways in which they attempt to make it stop raining. One of these is to kill a "camp-robber" (Canada Jay), pluck the head clean, and then throw the bird into the river. Another method is to place ashes in the bottom of a birchbark basket, build a small fire in it, and set it adrift in the river. Still a third way is to burn a raven in a large fire, or to simply burn a tree which contains a raven's nest. As with the wolf and wolverine, ravens are never eaten.

Although no longer practiced, the potlatch was formerly an important part of Ingalik ceremonial life. These were usually held during the winter months, and were apparently of two basic types. In one case, potlatches were held which were essentially feasts, and to which members of neighboring villages would be invited. At these feasts, which lasted several days, quantities of foodstuffs would be consumed and given away, and presents or gifts of various kinds presented to visitors. It was considered an honor to give such a potlatch, and invited guests were then under an obligation of reciprocity. When asked how often such potlatches were given, my informant answered "whenever there was too much stuff to give away".

A second type of potlatch was held as soon as feasible after the death of a member of the village. These were not generally given for a child, but upon the death of an old and wealthy man, the ceremony, described as a "happy time", would last several days. At this potlatch much food was eaten, and all of the possessions of the deceased would be distributed by relatives to the other members of the village. Distribution was according to rank, which was based primarily on age, and if the deceased had owned a rifle, it was always presented to the oldest man in the community.

An informant born on Slow Fork, a tributary of the North Fork of the Kuskokwim, stated that potlatches were held with villages at Telida Lake, Lake Minchumina, Birch Creek on the Kantishna, and further north, but not with groups to the south.

### *Legend and Folklore*

Numerous stories relate the power and abilities of shamans in former times. Shamans apparently served both as medical practitioners and sorcerers. Curing ceremonies involved chanting, trances, and beating on a tambourine drum. "Seances" were also held in which the shamans would go into a trance, voices would be heard, and objects such as the drum and paddle would be seen to fly through the air. Rival shamans would occasionally "fight" each other, performing tricks such as swallowing live coals, and testing each other's "spirit power". One informant stated that the loser of such a battle lost his life. A second, however, stated that when a shaman lost one of these "games", he forfeited the life of a near relative, who soon sickened and died.

As recently as a few years ago, there was a man who claimed to be a shaman living at Nikolai Village. It was reported that he was generally respected and feared by the women of the village, but apparently most of the men failed to take him seriously. The older Indians of the village said that in former times, shamans were powerful men, greatly feared, and able to cause death among their enemies. It was further stated, however, that they did not appear to be too successful in curing illnesses, and that present-day shamans aren't really medicine men, because they lack the "power".

One story told concerning a shaman at Vinasale, a grandfather of one of my informants, was that when he died, his body remained warm for several days. The shaman's brother, upon observing this, then went to the old man's canoe and "killed" it by slashing it with his knife. It was related that the body of the shaman then turned cold and rigid.

Another story from Vinasale tells of an Indian who had an argument with a shaman. The shaman became very angry and threatened the man's life. The man laughed at this and walked away from the shaman. Later

this individual went out hunting, and while he was descending the slope of a hill (the location was very carefully described), he observed a large whirlwind, full of dust and leaves, coming directly towards him. Believing it to be the shaman coming to kill him, he fired both barrels of his rifle into it, after which it dissipated. Upon returning to Vinasale, the Indian discovered that the shaman had died during his absence. The obvious connection was made, and the area where the shaman had been "killed" was thereafter carefully avoided.

In former times there was apparently a considerable amount of feuding and raiding carried on by the occupants of the upper Kuskokwim River region, both among themselves and with groups on the Yukon River. Villages especially reknowned for this were Vinasale, villages on the Takotna and Salmon Rivers, and villages near Lake Minchumina.

One traditional tale concerns the village at Salmon River, now abandoned. It is said that this community was once headed by an Indian who was attempting to establish a reputation for himself as a powerful war leader. He had many followers who wore wooden slat-armor above the waist and raided other villages for women, killing all of the men. This leader was finally stabbed to death in his sleep by two brothers seeking revenge, and his warriors were allowed to go free.

Another story is about members of the village of Vinasale, and a village on the lower Takotna. In retaliation for raids across the Kuskokwim hills by Indians living on the Yukon (said to be Koyukon) all of the men who had had relatives killed took part in a war party to the Yukon and Innoko rivers. This group crossed the Kuskokwim Mountains and descended the Yukon, raiding and burning villages as they went. At one of these, the Ingalik war party killed a powerful shaman. In order to prevent his spirit from harming them, they cut open his body and ate parts of his internal organs, thus acquiring some of his power. The raiding party descended the Yukon to the Kuskokwim portage, and eventually returned up the Kuskokwim River to their villages. My informant's maternal great-grandfather participated in this raid, and the approximate date may thus be fixed around the middle of the nineteenth century.

Carl Sesui, who states that he is the last of the original inhabitants of Telida, tells the following story concerning the origins of the occupants of the upper Kuskokwim River in the area of Lakes Telida and Minchumina. Sometime during the last century, while the original inhabitants of this region still lived in semi-subterranean pit houses, a large band of Indians from the Yukon River (possibly Koyukon) surprised a hunting party from a village near Lake Minchumina. The group from the Yukon attacked and killed all members of the hunting party, then split up into small groups to avoid pursuit and headed back to their villages on the Yukon River. One

band of men came across the village of the group they had ambushed and discovered two sisters hiding there. These men remained, married the sisters, and founded the village of Old Telida. It is claimed that all of the people in the Minchumina area came from this village.

Another story concerning origins is one told by an old Indian born on Slow Fork. He stated that when he first came to live at Old Nikolai Village (some 25 miles from the present location), there was a very old man living there whom everyone called "grandfather", and who was considered to be a more or less closely related ancestor to nearly everyone in the village. This old Indian, who had originally come from Vinasale, told my informant that all of the people then in the upper Kuskokwim region were descended from some originally from the Holy Cross region on the lower Yukon River. He also said that these people came across the mountains and first settled on the Takotna River and at Vinasale on the Kuskokwim.

### *Conclusions*

Because of the conflicting evidence and disruption caused in the Kuskokwim River region by disease within the last century, I do not feel that it is possible at this time to delineate precise ethnic boundaries for the area. This region has been one of settlement, migration, and conflict, and what were once at least two, and possibly three different Athabaskan groups, make up the present population of the region.

McGrath Ingalik born in Vinasale before its final abandonment some 20 or 25 years ago, showed a much greater agreement in vocabulary with the Anvik-Shageluk group of Ingalik than did informants born further north on the Kuskokwim.<sup>4</sup> In addition, an informant of 32 years of age from Vinasale identified nearly all illustrations of material culture elements by name and correct usage and volunteered the information that he had seen his parents and grandparents employ most of them (Illustrations from Osgood, 1940). A much older informant, born further north, was not nearly so successful, however, and stated that the objects pictured "looked a little" like things he remembered being used, but that the ones he recalls were different in some respects. Some items, such as sled and snowshoe types, this latter informant immediately identified as being common to the lower Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers.

Indians from the northern part of the upper Kuskokwim tend to show a stronger affiliation with groups to the north in the Tanana and upper Yukon rivers as evidenced by claimed linguistic similarities and exchanges

<sup>4</sup> This list was taken from Osgood's "Ingalik Material Culture", pages 459-477. Only words agreeing closely with Osgood's orthography were considered valid, as many Athabaskan words in Alaska have a wide distribution with only slight sound shifts.



of potlatches, and by a tradition that they originally came from "upriver", i.e., the northeast.

It is probable that at some time in the early nineteenth century, an Ingalik group from the lower Yukon River crossed the Kuskokwim Mountains and settled at the mouth of the Takotna and at Vinasale. That the region was already occupied, possibly by Tanana Indians, is probable, and possibly indicated by the stories of warfare between villages in the upper Kuskokwim area. The Ingalik then expanded south to the area of Sleetmute, but apparently did not move much beyond the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River in the opposite direction. But that they did go at least this far northward is supported by stories of the original inhabitants of Old Nikolai Village coming from Vinasale.

The original inhabitants of the area north of the South Fork of the Kuskokwim were probably also Tanana Indians, but here again we have the story of unidentified invaders from across the mountains to the east settling at Telida Lake, apparently about the middle of the nineteenth century. This latter story, moreover, was unknown to the informant born at Slow Fork.

It is possible that further archaeological work on known sites in the Minchumina and Telida region, as well as elsewhere in the upper Kuskokwim drainage, may shed some light on the above problems. However, the writer feels that at this time it is possible to conclude that the McGrath Ingalik are closely related to, and ultimately derived from, Ingalik Indians on the lower Yukon River. Also, that the true McGrath Ingalik probably never extended much beyond the South Fork of the Kuskokwim River, and that the region to the northeast of this was probably originally inhabited by groups closely related to the Tanana Indians to the north.

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