

A Contribution to the Archaeology of the Upper Kuskokwim

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A CONTRIBUTION TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE UPPER KUSKOKWIM

CHARLENE CRAFT LEFEBRE

THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY of the University of Alaska has for many years solicited information concerning archaeological sites in Athabaskan as well as Eskimo territory from trappers, prospectors, casual travelers, and residents. One of the more likely reports, received from B. A. Stone of Medfra, Alaska, concerned the Lake Telida region. Lake Telida is located about ½ mile from the McKinley Fork, called the Tatlatno River in early accounts (Herron 1901), of the Upper Kuskokwim drainage. It is about 100 miles southwest of Lake Minchumina and is northwest of Mt. McKinley National Park (see Fig. 82).

During the summer of 1949 2 students of the University of Alaska, Leona Neubarth Lowery and George Schumann, and the author conducted a field trip into this area. This trip was made possible by the author's appointment to the Margaret Snell Graduate Fellowship of the American Association of University Women, to which I should like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude.

The present winter village of Telida is about 3 miles by winter trail (probably 10 miles by riverboat) downriver from Lake Telida, with only one Indian family, that of Carl Sesui, permanently resident. The Sesui family also

have a fish camp on the McKinley Fork at its nearest point to Lake Telida, which they occupy most of the summer while gill-netting and trapping whitefish in the lake and the stream draining it.

Two other historically inhabited villages (see Fig. 82) had been reported, and we hoped that prehistoric material would here come to light. Approximately ½ mile upstream from the fish camp is one of these sites, called by Mr. Stone "Old Telida." We subsequently found that this village had been established about 1910 and that it had been abandoned about 1918. The village is comprised of 2 log cabins, a Russian Orthodox Church, a 4-pole cache, a cemetery, and the remains of dog hutches, fishracks, and steam bath, all in an advanced state of collapse. Trenching in this site yielded nothing older than metal tools, fragments of phonograph records, tar paper, warped gun barrels, and tin cans.

The other historical site, to which we subsequently referred as "1899 Telida," had been occupied at the turn of the century when the Herron Expedition explored this area. According to Carl Sesui, who was a small child when Lieutenant Herron and his men wintered at Telida in 1899, these were the first white men to visit this area although he indicated that

trade goods, apparently from Hudson Bay rather than Russian sources, had been filtering in for some decades. This 1899 Telida is located about a mile by trail (3 miles by river) downstream from the Sesui's present fish camp. It probably dates only from the last half of the 19th century, older than Old Telida, at least. It was occupied as long as the latter, until 1918, that is; but no buildings, even in as poor repair as those at the other village, remain, although the cache at the edge of the lake was said to have been floated up from this village some 25 years ago. According to our informant, the cabin where the Herron expedition stayed the fall and early winter of 1899 was located on the bank of the river, and this older portion of the village has sloughed off during spring floodwaters since its abandonment. This site, like Old Telida, yielded no prehistoric material.

Several isolated old house sites were pointed out to us and were investigated, but were found to be quite recent, although older than the villages above. One of these (termed "that beaver house" by Carl Sesui, ostensibly because of the semisubterranean nature of this house type) had been in ruins when pointed out to him by

his grandmother when he was a boy. This site, located on a cutoff meander on the other side of the birch ridge west of the lake, looked promising. It was about 16 by 20 feet and had a central fire area; the floor was depressed about a foot below the ground surface. Base logs, roof beams and poles, and part of the flooring and platform were distinguishable. A birchbark basket, trade beads, a wooden sled stanchion of an old type, and cut bones were among the objects found within this structure buttressing our hope of its having some respectability of age; and then the inevitable tin can (identified as a black-powder can with "Pat 1859" impressed on its bottom), china and glassware fragments, a wooden tobacco pipe, a piece of blanket fabric, and pieces of metal destroyed this hope. This house probably had been built around 1850, possibly a decade or so earlier, which in general corroborates Carl Sesui's statement: "That beaver house hundred years old—I dunno, maybe two hundred."

The vegetation type of this region is taiga, and the terrain is very swampy, much of it muskeg and niggerheads. The lake is sur-

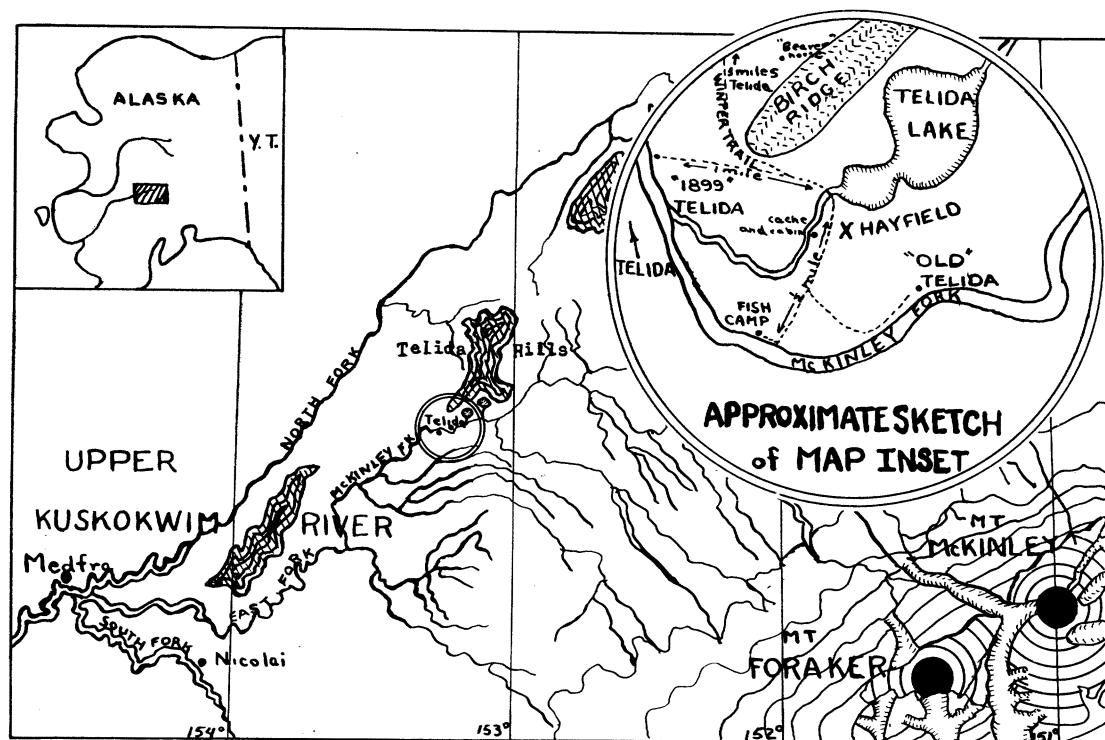


FIG. 82.

rounded by a quaking bog of floating vegetation, and there is little high ground directly on the lake. However, Carl Sesui had said that he remembered old "beaver houses" along the stream that drained the lake near the cache and the cabin, but that these had since settled and were at present certainly in the swamp.

We had noted that the village sites were invariably on high well-drained ground, which would be expected, and that after abandonment they became grown up in fireweed and tall grass, now cut and dried as "hay" to supply winter bedding for the sled dogs. We did not have facilities for searching out other winter villages along the river. But from what we know of recent Athabaskan economic pursuits (Osgood 1936), villages apparently were never very permanent; and when the game moved or was hunted out in one area, the local group moved on to another. There is, however, in this vicinity a permanent source of food for a limited population in the fish of the lake, especially the whitefish. It is, in fact, from a large variety of whitefish that the name "Telida" is derived. (The local Athabaskan term is more like "te-lai-ya," the accent on the second syllable.) This persistence of historic villages near the lake and the presence of a modern fish camp suggested to us that it surely could have been a focus for people living on the McKinley Fork in prehistoric times also.

About 70 yards back from the stream which drains the lake, between the cache and the lake, was a "hayfield" on fairly high ground which we successfully investigated for material that predated the tin-can era. In this hayfield we found wherever we prospected a layer of ash and blackened earth and stones representing old hearth levels under a layer of sod from 6 to 11 inches thick. The hearth layer was from 6 to 12 inches deep and lay on sterile clay or sandy clay which was frozen at from 17 to 20 inches below the surface ("permafrost"). No timbers of houses were discovered, and there were no surface indications of occupation except for the above-mentioned presence of "hay." This was not a village site in the usual sense of the word, but rather it apparently had been a fish camp site occupied while the band was fishing in the lake and the stream and hunting in the surrounding area. Concentration on trenching this area resulted in the recovery of prehistoric material including obsidian flakes;

potsherds; hearth and boiling stones; ashes; fish, animal, and bird bones; stone and bone tools; and birchbark. The complex is characteristic of other sites in Athabaskan territory of recent prehistoric date (Rainey 1939; de Laguna 1947). There follows a description of the material recovered from this excavation.

Adzes. Two types of adzes are represented in this collection. The first is a small splitting adz (de Laguna 1947: 154) which is D-shaped in cross section and is grooved for hafting (Fig. 83, 1). This adz had been pecked from a fine-grained basic igneous pebble; the blade had been polished, the butt retaining the original pebble surface.

The second type is also single bladed and is similar to the type de Laguna (1947: 162) describes as a pick-like adz, "possibly used as a generalized weapon as well as a tool." This broken specimen had been pecked from siltstone and a ridge was left between shallow grooves for hafting (Fig. 83, 2). It is roughly elliptical to oval in cross section.

The specimen illustrated in Figure 83, 3 is a broken quartzite pebble which had been used as a hammerstone.

Obsidian Tools. A group of interesting flake and blade tools manufactured from obsidian are illustrated in Figure 83. These are, with the exception of 4c, which

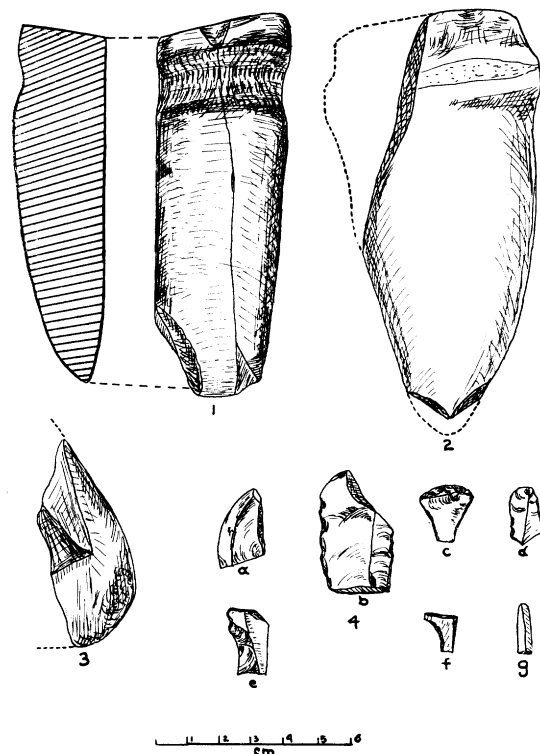


FIG. 83.

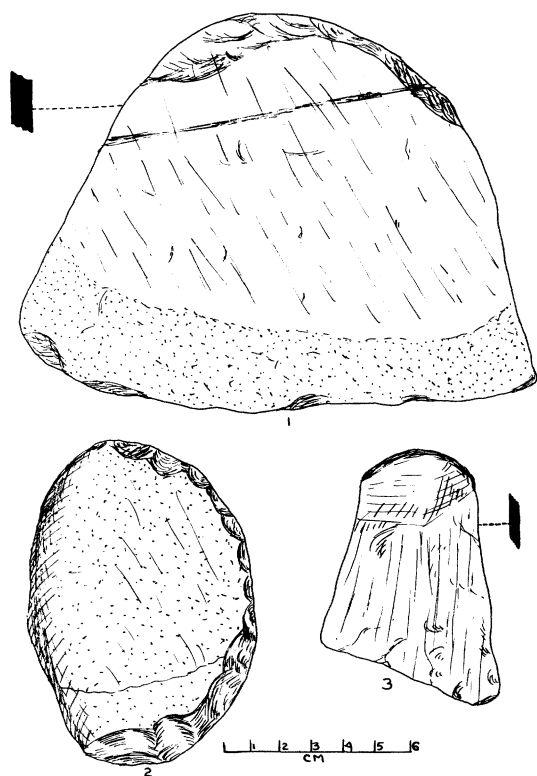


Fig. 84.

is a broken blade or flake knife, all microlithic in nature. The microliths were all found in a limited area of the hayfield, but in identical hearth and ash levels under sod as the rest of the material. 4a is a small sidescraper on a flake; 4f is also a sidescraper but the retouch is along a concave edge, possibly an arrowshaft smoother. 4c is a finely made thumbnail endscraper on a flake. The retouch on 4e is peculiarly located on one corner of the blade, possibly for use as a grooving or incising tool. 4d is a blade apparently retouched by use. The last of the series, 4g, is a broken lamellar flake, probably struck from a prepared core, similar to those found in the Campus site collection (Rainey 1937: 387). Several other small generalized retouched and unretouched blade and scraper fragments were identified in the collection of obsidian chips. No cores were found, either of the prepared polyhedral or unprepared types.

Unlike the Indians living near the Dixthada site queried by Rainey concerning the chipping of obsidian and who had no traditions of the practice (Rainey 1937: 366), our informant recalled stories of the "old people" making knives and projectile points of "that glass" which apparently was only found as river pebbles.

There are several small broken flakes of chert, jasper, chalcedony, and other fine-grained flintlike materials which may be retouched blade and flake tools of types similar to the above, but are too fragmentary to be identified surely.

Scrapers. Several tools, readily identified as skin scrapers by Carl Sesui and his wife, are represented in this collection. Rainey (1937) describes a type of pebble scraper, which he calls *tci-tho*, in the following words: A flat oval pebble selected from the beach was struck so that a thin, disc-like flake was detached; the edge of the flake was then battered against another stone to produce a blunt, retouched edge.

The specimen illustrated in Figure 84, 2, which is made of slate, fits this description of the *tci-tho* exactly, the flake being oval rather than disc-shaped.

Another type is the ulu-shaped scraper (de Laguna 1947: 128), whose form takes advantage of the natural cleavage planes of the slate, schist, and similar materials from which they have been manufactured. Slabs of such stone, $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick and big enough to be held comfortably in the hand, have been provided with a curved scraping edge by chipping. An example of this type of scraper is represented in Figure 84, 1, and a smaller variety of scraper made in the same way in Figure 84, 3. There are 11 other unfinished and broken scrapers in the collection, made of similar materials and similarly produced.

Ulus. Four knife blades of the type commonly designated in northern archaeology as ulu or ulo were identified in this collection, Figure 85, 1 being the only complete specimen. This blade has an odd peaking of the semilunar cutting edge, and only the beveled cutting edge has been polished. The 2 illustrated in Figure 85, 2 and 3 represent broken ulu blades, both showing evidences of sawing on their polished surfaces. These 3 specimens, all with curved cutting edges, and the one unillustrated, which has a straight cutting edge, are made of slate.



Fig. 85.

Netsinkers. Four netsinkers were found in the hayfield trenches (Fig. 85, 4-7), all of tabular schist with grooves for tying to fishnets. This type has been used as recently as Carl Sesui's boyhood.

Projectile Points. Three of 5 chipped arrow or projectile points are illustrated in Figure 85, 12-14, all manufactured from slate. Two of these are tanged forms. 13 is flat in cross section, having been split along a cleavage plane on one side and chipped flat on the other, with retouch on the edges; the tang is broken from this specimen. 14 is a flat diamond in cross section, having been chipped of sandy-grained slate as if it were flint. 12 and a more complete specimen not shown both have straight bases and are shaped to a point. They are thin and flat, broken along the plane of cleavage of the slate. The fifth specimen, unillustrated, has been tentatively identified as a broken tip of a straight-based point.

Miscellaneous Stone Objects. Figure 85, 8 is a perforated oval piece of schist, utterly undistinguishable in material from large quantities of similar stone in the trenches, which was possibly used as a pendant. 9 is a small piece of slate with striations indicating its use as a whetstone. 10 is a broken fragment of slate showing 2 parallel grooves made by sawing. The last item, 11, is clay, colored to a pinkish buff, probably by hematite, which has been ground, presumably for paint, on 4 surfaces. Carl Sesui still uses a special "dirt" to impart

a reddish brown color to snowshoe frames and the ladles he carves with his crooked knife from birch.

Unillustrated are quantities of river pebbles, fire-blackened, which were probably used as boiling stones. Carl Sesui remembered this technic of dropping hot stones into a birchbark basket filled with water until it boiled, as an alternative method of cooking.

Bone Awls. Several awls were found in the hayfield trenches. Bird bones seem to be the material used for Figure 86, 1, 2, 3, and 6, and 4, 5, and 7 are of animal bones, 4 being of caribou leg bone. 7 has a peculiar hook worked into one end, while the other end is a conventional awl point. It possibly could have been utilized as a net gauge. 2 has an awl point on one end and a beveled "screwdriver" point on the other. 6 is the only decorated specimen in this category, being in cross section rectangular with rounded edges. Two incised lines run from the butt $\frac{3}{4}$ of the length of the awl on the broader surfaces. Near the butt of the awl 2 parallel incised lines join these lengthwise incisions; on the opposite surface 3 parallel lines occupy the same position. Compass-made circles divide the length of the awl into approximate thirds on the broad surface.

There are 5 other awls, not illustrated, in the collection, all in a very poor state of preservation.

Bone Arrowheads. Only 2 bone arrowheads are represented, both in poor repair. Figure 86, 8 is an arrowhead with a broken butt; the tip had been reworked and most of the small barbs which had run along one edge have been sheared off. This specimen is roughly triangular in cross section. The second example is a conical butt probably broken from an arrowhead.

Figure 86, 10 is a harpoon-arrow type which our informant said had been used in his boyhood for hunting muskrat. This had an iron blade in place when found. There are barbs on both edges and a notch at the tongue-shaped butt for attaching a retrieving line. Since this specimen was found on the surface of the sod, under a thin layer of moss, it is more recent than the hearth layers and is probably not over 100 years old.

Figure 86, 11 is a fine blunt arrowhead with a quatrefoil shape. Single and triple incised lines run down opposite sides of the arrowhead with 3 short lines at right angles to them near the tip of the "petals." The butt had been broken away, leaving no indication as to the method of hafting.

Numerous beaver incisors, complete and fragmentary, were found in the hearth layers, as well as beaver jaws cut to expose the incisors for their removal. Doubtlessly, some of these incisors had been hafted for chisels, scrapers, or knives (Osgood 1940:83) although no evidence of their utilization could be found (Fig. 86, 13).

Miscellaneous cut bones in the collection are represented by the caribou bone in Figure 86, 16, which actually came from the "beaver house."

Unique Decorated Bone Objects. Figure 86, 12 is a small tab of bone with an indented groove at one end and on the opposite surface a group of incised lines, possibly an ownership mark. The other 2 items are

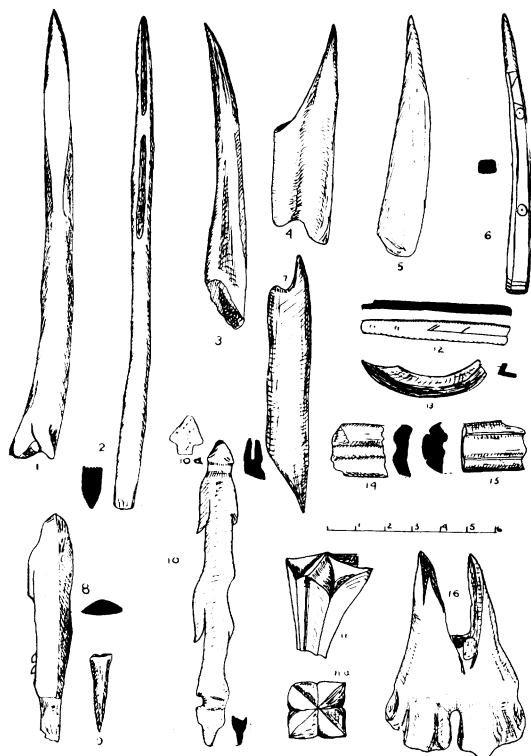


Fig. 86.

grooved and incised pieces of bone shown in Figure 86, 14 and 15. Unfortunately these are broken. Their use is problematical.

Pottery. Pottery was recovered from the hearth layers and from the sod above them. It was extremely fragmentary, at most only 2 or 3 sherds from any single pot, so little can be postulated concerning shapes. However, some remarks may be made concerning paste, temper, and rim shapes.

There does not seem to be any clay suitable for pottery making in the immediate vicinity of Telida. Our informant, Carl Sesui, reported that his grandmother had told him about cooking pots she had made of "dirt" in her youth, although he himself had never seen such a pot. She had told him also that the Telida people got the clay for such cooking pots from the Innoka River, which is at least 100 miles overland.

All the ware seems to have been molded by hand, probably by the paddle method described for the Yukon (Osgood 1940: 146-9).

... The bottoms of the pots are always made thick. Then the walls are added by sticking on pieces about two inches high and three inches long of the desired thickness. These are squeezed together at the joints. When the wall of the pot is half finished, one hand is put against the wall and the outside slapped with a wooden paddle. A sliding blow is given with the paddle which stretches the clay upwards. ...

Potsherds range in surface color from buff and brown to light and dark gray. The firing varies, some thick sherds showing distinct zoning in cross section, outer zone buff, inner zone gray.

Tempering methods, also, seem to be consistent with practices on the Yukon (Osgood 1940; de Laguna 1947). Some exfoliated sherds show clear impressions of grass and leaves and small feathers, at times $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in length. Other sherds are tempered with pulverized vein quartz and coarse sand, and one small sherd is tempered with something that glitters like mica, possibly crushed schist. Some inclusions are quite large, one rim sherd (Fig. 87, 3) having a piece of quartz some 5 by 10 by 3 mm. between the decorative incised line and the rim. The invaluable Carl Sesui, again quoting his grandmother as authority, said that they mixed the "dirt" with moose hair, which partly corresponds with Rainey's information from Chief Mathew (Rainey 1939: 376) concerning chopped bear's hair being used as an ingredient in pottery. Such temper was not identified in this collection, and microscopic analysis was not practicable with such a fragmentary collection.

Several rim shapes are illustrated in Figure 87, 1a-d, varying from rounded to flattened at the rim edge; 1b shows a marked bulging below the rim, and 1d has a considerable outward flare. Two bottom sherds were identified, both badly exfoliated, but showing a flattish inner surface with heavy charred organic incrustations.

Very little decoration is in evidence, probably due to the smallness of the sample, but that which is present is in the usual pattern of incised lines or grooves and dots or punctations (de Laguna 1947: 144-9). Figure

87, 2 is a sherd from the rim with a row of dots below 2 parallel grooves. Figure 87, 3 is a rim sherd with 2 incised lines running parallel to the rim, the sherd having broken away at the lower line.

Birchbark. Several pieces of birchbark, either folded or with possible awl-made holes were found, although none were complete enough to be identified as baskets.

Fauna. A final comment should be made concerning the occurrence of identifiable animal and bird bones which were encountered in this excavation. Among the larger animals were moose, black bear, and caribou; among the smaller, adult and kit beaver, muskrat, weasel or squirrel, and possibly fox. Evidence of freshwater mollusks and numerous bones and scales of fish indicate the dependence of the former occupants of this area, like their living descendents, on the lake, stream, and river. Particularly interesting were literally handfuls of scales which were found among the fire-blackened hearth stones and which, even to our untrained eyes, looked like the scales of the whitefish and northern pike we ourselves were eating daily. Among the bird bones were duck, goose, and swan; smaller bird bones were possibly willow grouse or snipe.

In summary, the material herein reported represents a complex similar to the recent prehistoric described by de Laguna and Rainey, and probably is not of great antiquity, with the possible exception of the microlithic obsidian tools. The position of such artifacts in the sequence of types in the prehistory of the Athabaskans is not clear, and the evidence in this site does not clarify the situation.

It is hardly necessary to insist on the importance of field work in Athabaskan country. Recent work pushing back the time horizon in the coastal Arctic regions would indicate that some-

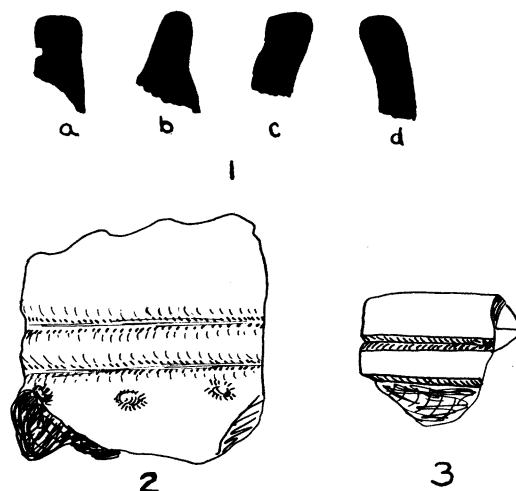


Fig. 87.

where in the interior also will be found traces of Alaska's, and possibly America's, earliest inhabitants, as well as the picture of the ancient Athabaskans themselves.

Planned fieldwork is a particular problem in this region because it is so difficult to locate sites, which were seldom occupied more than a season or two, a consequence of the migratory habits of the people involved. Further, there is the almost jungle-like capacity of the country to cover up traces of habitation with layers of spongy moss and forests of birch and spruce in relatively short periods of time. Also, it is quite possible that the older sites are buried in the even more uninhabited, untraversed areas along old stream and riverbeds, because the Kuskokwim, like all meandering rivers, constantly is cutting off oxbow lakes and forming new channels. Away from the areas where modern methods have built roads and highways, in the valleys of the interior the rivers and streams are, as they were in ancient times when climatic conditions were similar, still the only means of moving from one place to another during the summer season. During the winter, dog sled and snowshoes will take people overland when the ground is frozen. You cannot go far through muskeg and swamp; you go where the river takes you during the summer.

Careful reconnaissance, such as was carried on by Rainey and de Laguna on the Yukon River, is needed on the Kuskokwim with systematic excavation of the more likely sites. Especially, attention should be paid to the cut-off meanders where logically the older sites should be. Here, somewhere in the interior, will be found some of the answers to the questions archaeologists are asking about early man in America. It will hardly be found by accident as the interiors of Alaska and Canada are sparsely inhabited, there are few "interested amateurs," and Carl Sesui's generation is disappearing fast.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my debt to several individuals. Otto Geist, expert paleontological field worker at the University of Alaska for Charles Frick, was the authority for the identification of the animal and bird bones in this collection; Bert Griffin, formerly on the faculty of the University of Alaska, served in like capacity in the identification of the stone material. Without Leona Neubarth Lowery and George Schumann, there could not have been a field trip, and any success we had, I owe to them. Our guiding genius, as the frequent appearance of his name in this paper might indicate, was Carl Sesui. It is impossible to gauge how much we owe him, so I will only state my obligation and my hope that all anthropological workers in the field are fortunate enough to find someone like him.

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