

THE ARRIVAL: NATIVE AND MISSIONARY RELATIONS ON THE UPPER TANANA RIVER, 1914

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a context for a series of historical photographs that document the arrival of missionaries at the Episcopal mission at Tanana Crossing in 1914. The photographs were taken 15 years after the Klondike stampede of 1898, which set in motion a series of developments that, by 1914, were already having a profound effect on the Native people of interior Alaska. The author argues that while the Episcopal Church saw Native people as nonactors in the drama of development and feared unregulated change, Native people embraced change, and this is evident from the photographs. The people facing the camera saw themselves as sophisticated, “civilized” people still in control of their world. This confidence produced a certain anxiety because Whites were then faced with an image that neither White nor recognizably Native. Such unregulated transformations placed the church in a double bind, because they not only led to unrecognizable forms but might also lead to desires for self-governance.

KEY WORDS: Episcopal Church, Upper Tanana, Athabascan, photographs, missionaries

In 1914, the upper Tanana region of east central Alaska was on the periphery of the American frontier. Gold seekers had briefly wandered through the area on their way to the Klondike in 1899, but by 1914 the region was remote from the major transportation corridor connecting the population centers of Fairbanks and Valdez, and it was not until the construction of the Alaska Highway during World War II that the region became accessible to settlers. This period could be characterized as a “middle ground” because EuroAmerican hegemony had not yet become dominant (White 1991).

Deaconess Mabel Pick (Fig. 1) of the Protestant Episcopal Church arrived at the mission station at Tanana Crossing late in the summer of 1914. A thin layer of

wet snow covered the ground. Accompanying Pick were the Reverend Charles Betticher, priest in charge of the Episcopal missions along the Tanana River, and Celia Wright, a lay missionary who was returning to the mission after a furlough in Fairbanks. The 200-mile trip had taken eight weeks by river steamer (Betticher 1914). As soon as he arrived Betticher began taking photographs. From the steamer he took two photos of the mission, which was a converted telegraph station purchased by the church from the U.S. military. The telegraph station had been built at a ford or crossing on the Tanana River and was part of the telegraph line connecting Valdez with Eagle City on the Yukon. By 1914, the line and all the stations had been abandoned. Those Native people who lived nearest the mission

in 1914 were from the Mansfield/Ketchumstuk band, who had semipermanent villages at Mansfield Lake, located 11 km north of Tanana Crossing, and Ketchumstuk, 97 km further north (McKenna 1981:565).

Pick, Wright, and Betticher were greeted by retiring missionary Margaret Graves and a contingent of Native people. At some point Betticher photographed the entire group standing against one wall of the mission house. There are approximately 50 people in the photograph, but this is certainly not the entire Mansfield/Ketchumstuk band since the 1910 census lists 57 people at Lake Mansfield and 44 Native people residing at Ketchumstuk. The missionaries stand to the right, with Pick dressed in

a somber black and white outfit. Some of the people are holding cabbages harvested from the garden started by the missionaries.

To greet the new missionary, some people, especially the younger ones, wore their best clothes: the men in suits, white shirts, ties, and Stetson hats, and the women in dresses they had either purchased in Dawson, Eagle, or Fortymile or had made themselves using a sewing machine brought by the missionaries. Many of the young women also wore hairstyles influenced by the missionaries. Because the mission was so remote, Pick brought enough supplies to see her through an entire year, and these were unloaded with the help of Native men. The missionaries decided to celebrate and use some of the new supplies to make bread, and they enlisted the help of several Native women.

When I found Betticher's photographs in the late 1970s they appeared to have little ethnographic value, since everyone was dressed in western-style clothing. But the images were fascinating. They have a captivating vitality and immediacy. The people seem almost bemused, exuding a relaxed self-assurance that is reminiscent of the stately high society portraits painted by the American artist John Singer Sargent. I showed the photos to Tanacross elders Martha Isaac and Gaither Paul. They were able to identify most of the people and related stories about where people came from, whom they were related to, and some of the personal idiosyncrasies they were noted for. But the question was: what did the photographs represent as historical documents? Using various sources of information, I constructed a context around the pictures and thought about the relationship between the missionaries who took the photographs and the people in the pictures.

The photographs were taken 15 years after the Klondike stampede of 1898 and only a few years after Felix Pedro found gold on a tributary of the lower Tanana River (Simeone 1998). The discovery of gold set in motion a series of developments that, by 1914, were already having a profound effect on the Native people of interior Alaska. Their territories were inundated by swarms of prospectors who must have seemed like a group of warring aliens, rushing from one creek to another, building and then evacuating towns, and shooting and fishing where convenience demanded. In the context of this drama the Protestant Episcopal Church saw Native people as passive actors who had to be protected from the ravages of unscrupulous Whites and unchecked progress. As the Episcopal priest Frederick Drane put it, the church not only had the



Figure 1. Deaconess Mabel Pick surrounded by supplies that were supposed to see her through winter. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

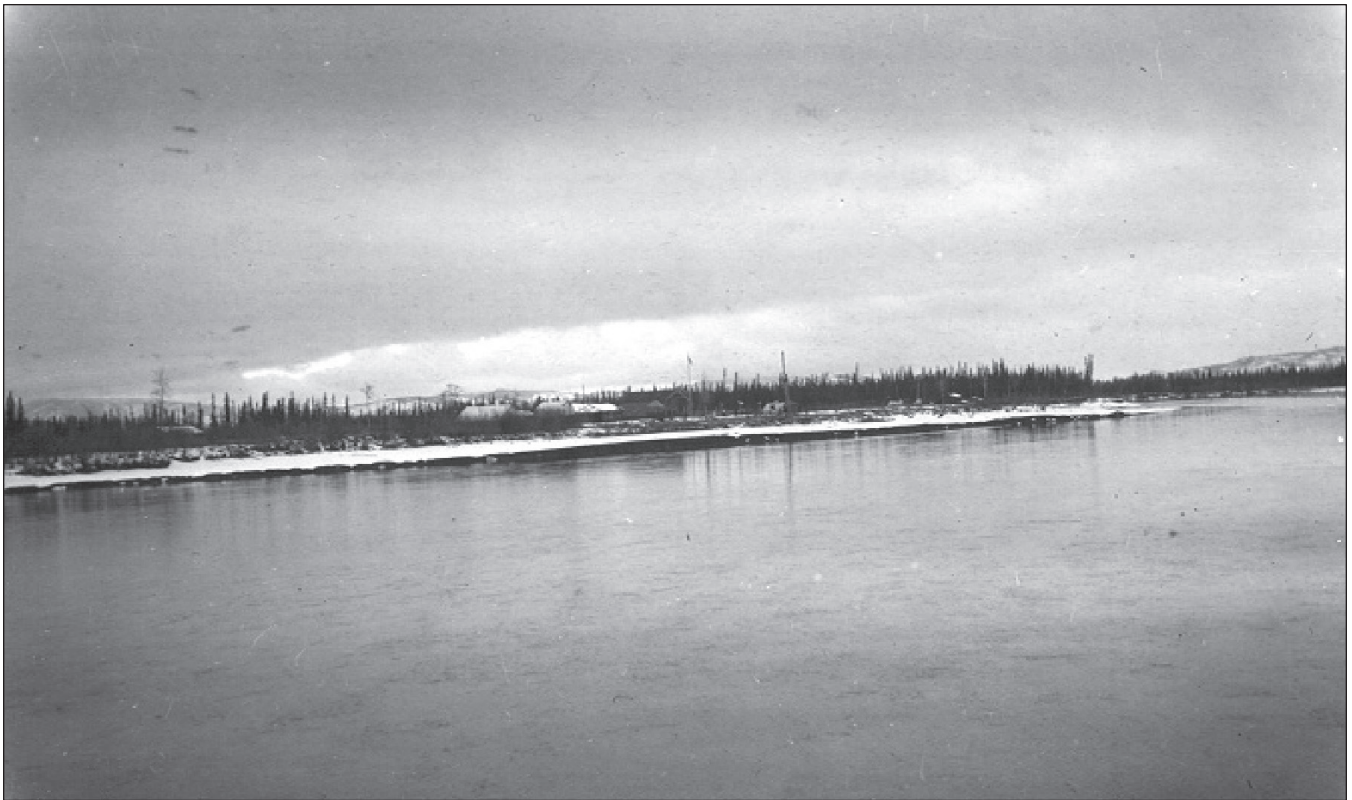


Figure 2. The mission station at Tanana Crossing, 1914. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)



Figure 3. The two story mission house and covered well. The mission house was originally built as a telegraph station on the line linking Valdez with Eagle (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)



Figure 4. Mansfield and Ketchumstuk people with the missionaries Graves, Pick, and Wright, 1914. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

responsibility to pass on the gospel but a duty to “humanity as well as to God to show the Native that there were those who would work for his uplift as well as those who would prey on his weakness” (Drane n.d.:14). But the situation created a dilemma for the church. How do you protect Native people not only from unscrupulous Whites but from their own desire to embrace change and mimic or emulate what they saw around them? One solution, advocated by Episcopal Bishop Peter Trimble Rowe, was to consolidate the scattered bands of Indians into centralized locations controlled by the church. In his annual report for 1910, Rowe (1910–11:68) wrote that

In places they [Native people] are made victims of lust and debauchery. While subjects of laws they have no voice in, yet no laws seem to protect them. This is why they are so scattered that it is next to impossible to help them. The Government expends much in trying to educate the children, but average attendance is frightfully small. ... It is like caring for the top of the tree while the roots are rotting. Something entirely different is demanded, and these original possessors of the country thrust to one side, their food-giving preserves encroached upon by the not-to-be-prevented advance of the superior race, are justly entitled to some protection and aid from our Government. What is needed is some law by which all those who live in scattering families shall be brought together in places not already appropriated by the white people, where under wise leadership they can easily support themselves, learn the art of self government, where they

can receive such medical help as will save their lives and where education will be to some purpose and cost less than the present unsatisfactory methods.

On the other hand, the Archdeacon of the Episcopal Church, Hudson Stuck (1988 [1914]:288–289) thought that to remove Native people from the land would destroy them and that to educate simply for the sake of education was wrong. Stuck wrote:

For no one who has the welfare of the natives at heart can tolerate the notion of making them paupers; these who have always fended abundantly for themselves, can entirely do so yet. With free rations there would be no more hunting, no more trapping, no more fishing; and a hardy self-supporting race would sink at once to sloth and beggary and forget all that made men of them. If it were designed to destroy the Indian at a blow, here is an easy way to do it. Yet there are some, obsessed with the craze about what is called education, regarding it as an end in itself and not a means to any end, who recommended this pauperizing because it would permit the execution of a compulsory school-attendance law. Or is it a personal delusion of mine that esteems an honest, industrious, self-supporting Indian who cannot read and write English above one who can read and write English—and can do nothing else—and so separates me from many who are working amongst the natives?

Administrative pragmatism won out, and the church started a series of missions along the Yukon and Tanana rivers. On the Tanana River missions were built at strate-



Figure 5. Little Mark Solomon was from Ketchumstuk and the brother of Silas Solomon, a noted Tanacross elder. In addition to his suit, he is wearing a pair of heavily beaded moccasins and what looks like a red, white and blue campaign ribbon on his lapel. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

gic points beginning at Nenana in 1907, Chena in 1908, and Salchaket, on the middle portion of the river, in 1909. Finally, in 1912 the church built a mission at Tanana Crossing on the upper river. By building these stations the church hoped to somehow induce outlying Native groups to a place where they could be easily educated, given proper medical treatment, and kept from drifting toward towns where they would become the prey of corrupt Whites.

None of these missions were self-supporting but relied heavily on subsidies through donations from parishes out-



Figure 6. Unknown woman and Jennie Frank (on the right). Both women are wearing moose hide moccasins with cloth inserts over the instep. This particular type of moccasin had a flap that was wrapped around the ankle and tied. (Photo C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

side of Alaska. To solicit support, the missionaries often wrote articles illustrated with photographs demonstrating their activities and progress. Many of these articles were published in the *Alaska Churchman Magazine*, a periodical published by the Episcopal Church in Alaska to provide news and update parishioners "outside" about the mission's progress. One simple method of illustrating success was to take "before and after" pictures in which the Natives are shown first as dirty savages in tattered clothes and then as well-groomed and properly adorned mission Indians.



Figure 7. Salina Paul (right) and her sister-in-law Laura Paul. Salina was the daughter of Old Paul (see Fig. 8), and would soon marry Joe Joseph. She is wearing moccasins and a beaded belt and has flour on her hands from making bread. Laura was married to David Paul, who became one of the first Native deacons in the Episcopal Church and was the son of Old Paul. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

When Betticher took his trip to Tanana Crossing in 1914, he was the editor of the *Alaska Churchman* and interested in developing articles for the magazine. However, the photographs taken at Tanana Crossing were never published, although a rather extensive article, with photos, including a photo of a dead bull moose, was published about Pick and Betticher's trip upriver (Betticher 1914). There are probably many reasons why these photos were never published, but I think one reason was that they did not conform to the missionaries' view of Native people in general and to their view of upper Tanana Athabascans in particular.

In 1914, the church viewed the upper Tanana region of east-central Alaska as "Indian country." Physical access

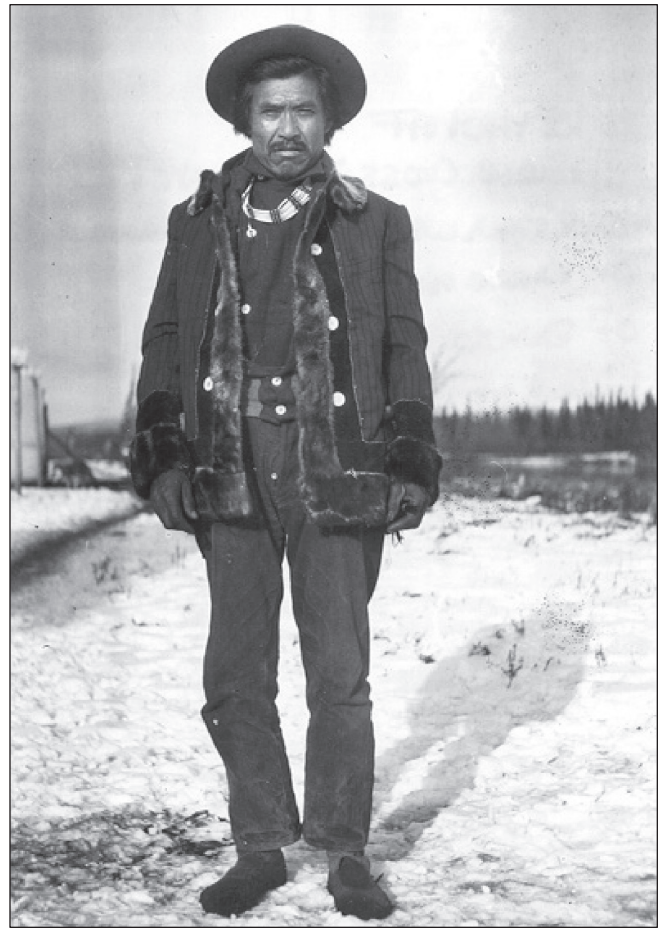


Figure 8. Old Paul dressed in his chief's coat and wearing his dentalium shell necklace. Old Paul was from Salchaket. He was married to Julia, who was Peter Onion's sister. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

was difficult since at the best of times it was almost impossible for steamers to travel up the Tanana River beyond Fairbanks. To reach the area from the Yukon River, one had to travel 242 km (150 miles) overland. Only a handful of non-Native traders had penetrated the area and no major gold strike had yet occurred, so it seemed an especially fertile ground for the establishment of a controlled community as envisioned by Bishop Rowe. Bishop Rowe wrote that the "natives in this region are better off physically, than any I have ever seen. They have not been hurt by the evil White element and game and fur are plentiful. All are anxious to have a mission and a school." He went on to say "I chose Tanana Crossing as the most advantageous place to begin ... having one [a mission] here puts

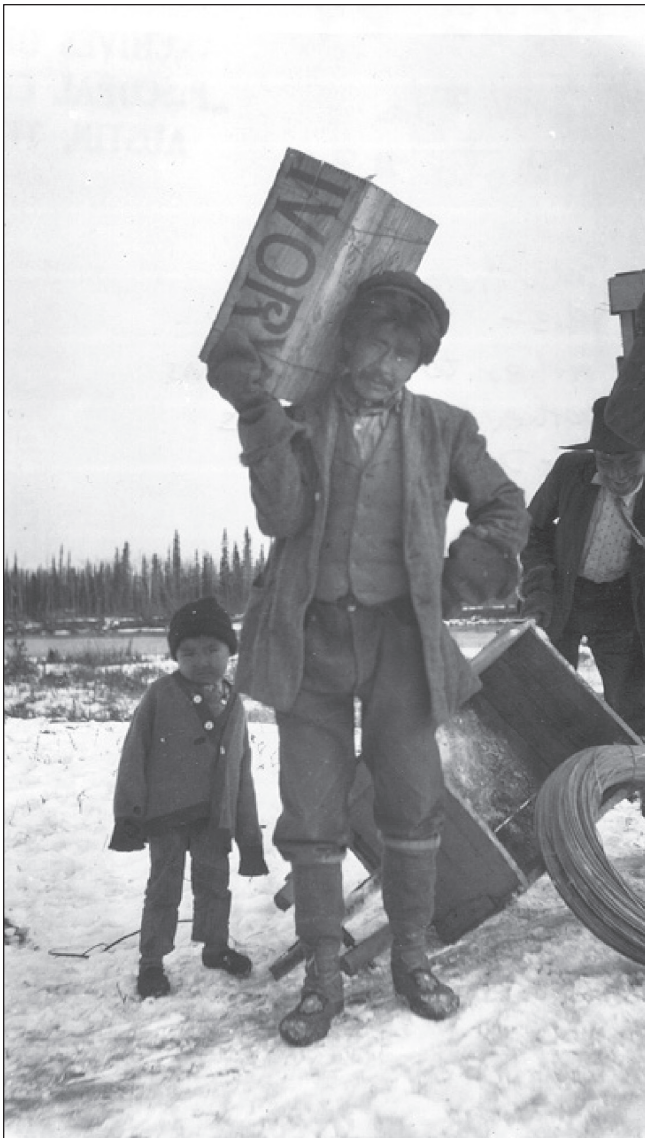


Figure 9. Peter ('Onion') Thomas hauling a box of Ivory Soap for the mission, 1914. He was nicknamed Peter Onion because he liked to eat onions. He was known as an expert moose tracker and orator. Thomas wears a pair of gauntlet-style mittens trimmed with beaver or otter fur and a pair of moccasins that are beaded on the cloth vamp. (Photograph by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

us in possession and control of the whole Tanana River" (1910–11:69).

As the site for a mission, Tanana Crossing was advantageous for three reasons. First, there were already buildings on the site. In 1902 the U.S. government had built a telegraph line connecting the tidewater port of Valdez with Eagle on the Yukon, which was the site of a federal court. To maintain the line the army established relay stations

along the route, and there were three such stations within the territory of the Mansfield/Ketchumstuk Band. One was at Tanana Crossing. After the line was abandoned in 1910, Bishop Rowe purchased the buildings at Tanana Crossing with seed money from St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Cantonsville, Ohio. For this reason the new mission was named St. Timothy's (Simeone 1995).

Second, Tanana Crossing was centrally located to a number of upper Tanana bands. The closest was the Mansfield band, who had a village on Mansfield Lake, 11 km north of the mission. One hundred kilometers (60 miles) further north the Ketchumstuk people had a village in the hills separating the Yukon and Tanana rivers. Further up the Tanana River were the people of Tetlin and Nabesna, and about 72 km (45 miles) to the south were the upper Ahtna of Mentasta, Suslota, and Batzulnetas. The church hoped to induce most, if not all, of these people to resettle around the mission.

A third reason for starting a mission at Tanana Crossing was because the church thought they had been invited to do so by Chief Isaac, one of the local rich men or *hak'ke*. Both written and oral accounts emphasize the prominent role Chief Isaac played in the initial decision to establish the mission. According to E. A. McIntosh (n.d.), who was an Episcopal missionary at Tanacross for approximately 30 years, Chief Isaac had traveled to Eagle where he had seen the church and mission, and he had also heard about missions being started at Fort Yukon and Salchaket. So in the fall of 1909 Chief Isaac went downriver to Fairbanks to meet Reverend Betticher and petition the church to send a mission to his people. The following year, in 1910, the bishop sent Archdeacon Hudson Stuck to look over the situation. Stuck writes about his encounter with Chief Isaac in his book *Ten Thousand Miles with a Dog Sled*. According to Stuck (1988 [1914]:262), Chief Isaac told him he had visited the Anglican missionary William Bompas at Fortymile when he was a boy, but the archdeacon was the first minister most of his people had ever seen. Chief Isaac also told Archdeacon Stuck that if the church was to build a mission he, Chief Isaac, preferred that it be near Mansfield Lake or at Tanana Crossing since "farther down river was not so good for their hunting and fishing."

The missionaries' account is consistent with the oral traditions. Silas Solomon, a Tanacross elder, said:

1912 was when [Arch]Deacon Hudson Stuck and Bishop Rowe come through. They talk to Chief

Isaac; they ask him “can we lead a mission here?” Chief Isaac innocent man, no fighting, no cussing, just friendly, he feed a lot of people. He feed a lot of the people that’s why he became a chief. In the early days. He said yeah they’d like to have a mission. (Simeone field notes 1987)

Tanacross elder Gaither Paul also knew about Chief Isaac’s involvement in establishing the mission and emphasized the equality between Archdeacon Stuck and Chief Isaac. According to Paul, the archdeacon, on his trip up the Tanana River in 1910, caught up with Chief Isaac at Paul’s Cabin, a camp on the Tanana River. Paul’s Cabin was the camp of Old Paul, a very prominent man who was photographed by Betticher in his chief’s coat and dentalium shell necklace and who happened to be Gaither Paul’s grandfather. Chief Isaac went to Old Paul and told him “some important man wants to meet with me but I don’t think I am important enough.” Old Paul told Chief Isaac not to think that he wasn’t important enough: “You are a leader here and you can talk to Hudson Stuck man to man.” A third Tanacross elder, Martha Isaac, said that on his deathbed Chief Isaac asked that a mission be established at Tanana Crossing (Simeone field notes 1987).

For the missionaries Chief Isaac seemed to fit the image of a strong paternalistic figure they could work with. Archdeacon Stuck (1988 [1914]:263) obviously thought so when he wrote that Chief Isaac “was evidently a chief that was a chief.” McIntosh took pains to reinforce that image when he wrote that Chief Isaac had vision and wanted the mission to counter the evil influences of the towns and mining camps. McIntosh further strengthened that image with a story about how Chief Isaac had traded all of his furs for the stock of playing cards owned by a local trader so that he, Chief Isaac, could burn them and stop his people from gambling (McIntosh n.d.).

Among Tanacross elders today, the Episcopal Church figures prominently in any discussion of the past. In part this is because the missionaries were viewed as friendly to Native people and because Chief Isaac was seen as instrumental in establishing the mission. But whereas the church was interested in changing people’s morality, Chief Isaac, I think, had more practical aims for establishing the mission that are reflected in the Silas Solomon’s comment that Chief Isaac “fed a lot of people, that’s why he became chief.”

In the summer of 1912 Margaret Graves and Celia Wright set out to establish a mission at Tanana Crossing. Graves had previous missionary experience in Alaska but it was thought she would need assistance in such a

remote location as the upper Tanana, so Celia Wright, who was part Athabascan and had been raised at the mission at Nenana, was assigned to accompany her. The trip was difficult. Initially the two women traveled by river steamer, but within 120 km (80 miles) of their destination were forced to return to Fairbanks because of low water. Eventually they made their way to McCarty, near present-day Delta Junction, where Betticher and four Native men joined them. The four men—John Paul, Sam Charlie, John Sam, and Joe Joseph (who eventually became Salina Paul’s husband)—pushed and pulled the missionaries and their boats the remaining 160 km (100 miles) to the crossing. Graves remained on duty for two years before being replaced by Pick in 1914, who stayed for a year before returning to her native England. Today most Tanacross elders remember the names of all the missionaries, although some are more prominently remembered than others are. Margaret Graves is remembered as the “woman preacher, [a] single woman who wasn’t married” (Solomon 1984).

A principal aim of the mission was to undermine the power of the shamans, who were considered to be not only evil, but also competitors for the hearts and minds of the people. Soon after the mission was established, Graves decided to stage elections for the position of chief. Chief Isaac had died in 1912 and the missionaries wanted to elect someone who was sympathetic to the mission. Walter Isaac, Chief Isaac’s second son, was elected chief. Though he gained considerable stature over his lifetime, Chief Walter, as he became known, was never considered a rich man or *hak’ke*. Instead he filled a new role in the community that might be compared to a toyon, since he often acted as a cultural broker. Throughout most of his life Chief Walter was considered the chief of Tanacross, but even as late as 1987 some people maintained he was not the real chief. Eventually both Walter’s son Oscar and his grandson Jerry became elected chiefs and his nephew Andrew Isaac became the traditional chief of the Doyon region. In Betticher’s photograph of him, Chief Walter looks dapper in his suit and tie that is strikingly similar in its sober quality to the clothes worn by Deaconess Pick.

The apparent isolation of the upper Tanana region and the “true and childlike” nature of the indigenous people had induced the church to build a mission station at Tanana Crossing, but was the upper Tanana region this imagined Eden? From one perspective it was. Up until the beginning of the 20th century the entire Tanana River was largely unknown to Whites. Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka (1893:302) described the Tanana River as “the

longest wholly unexplored river in the world, certainly the longest in the western continent." In 1885 Lieutenant Henry Allen undertook the first recorded exploration, but he largely confined himself to the river. By 1914 the only development along the entire river was taking place around Fairbanks. By comparison, the upper Tanana region appeared empty. When Archdeacon Stuck visited Chief Isaac in 1910 there were only two places to acquire trade goods on the upper Tanana River. William Rupe had a trading post near the head of the Tanana River, in the Scottie Creek Valley at a place called Nahtsiaa Ch'ihchuut, in the Upper Tanana language (Easton n.d.), and farther downriver was W. H. Newton's store at Healy Lake (McKenna 1959:25). Additional sources of trade goods were the gold camps on Chicken and Franklin creeks and stores at Eagle and Dawson on the Yukon River.

While the upper Tanana appeared isolated to Whites, Native people had been living in the area for centuries and had developed an extensive system of trails that connected them with many parts of interior Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Titus David, an elder from Tetlin, described at least five routes that led out of the upper Tanana region. One led down the Tanana River to the rendezvous at Nuklukayet at the confluence of the Tanana and Yukon rivers. Four more led to Dawson City on the Yukon. He also described active trading with Canadian Indians and with the Chilkat Tlingit that his father participated in and where he learned about leaf tobacco (Simeone field notes 1987). The Eagle Trail itself, billed by the U. S. government as the all-American route to the Klondike, followed a system of Native trails that connected the Yukon, Tanana, and Copper rivers.

After the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, trade in interior Alaska developed quickly as a number of competing firms established posts along the Yukon River almost as far as the mouth of the Klondike River in western Yukon Territory. The impetus for building posts on the upper Yukon was to enhance trade relations with remote bands of Athabascans, including those on the upper Tanana River (Mercier 1986:1–2). The establishment of Fort Reliance in 1874 and Belle Isle in 1880 brought trade goods to the region's doorstep, and by the early 1880s people from all the upper Tanana villages were making regular excursions to the Yukon (Allen 1887:76, 80). The situation shifted in favor of the Mansfield/Ketchumstuk people in 1886 when gold was found on the upper Fortymile River. Placer mines opened at Franklin and Chicken creeks, about 20 miles from Ketchumstuk, and two entrepreneurs, Leroy



Figure 10. Walter Isaac, later known as Chief Walter. He was the son of Chief Isaac, a well known hak'ke or rich man. Walter Isaac was the father of Oscar Isaac, who was chief at Tanacross from about 1965 to 1990. Walter's grandson is Jerry Isaac, who was also chief at Tanacross and president of the Tanana Chiefs Conference. (Photo by C. Betticher, courtesy of the Episcopal Church Archives, Austin, Texas.)

Napoleon McQuesten and Arthur Harper, established a store at the mouth of the Fortymile River (Mercier 1986:3). In 1898–99 the trade expanded again with the Dawson Stampede and the opening of the Eagle trail.

Native people embraced the trade and enthusiastically adopted all the consumer goods they could lay their hands on. Clothing was especially sought after, and Native people were often dressed to the nines, even when out hunting. Various observers have commented on the Indian's "extravagance" both in terms of their propensity not to save, but also in their preference for luxury items like flashy clothes. In the summer of 1898 a prospector named Basil Austin (Austin 1968) passed through the upper Tanana region on his way to the Klondike. At one point he met a man named Solomon, who was a member of the Mansfield/Ketchumstuk band and probably the father of Mark Solomon, one of the men Betticher photographed in 1914. Austin called Solomon the "Generalissimo" of the hunting party and described him as dressed in clothes of "loud design and color" that made Austin "feel rather shabby in comparison." According to Austin, Solomon's watch chain was "strong enough though a little short to have tethered [a dog]" and it "anchored a real watch of the turnip variety" that Solomon consulted at frequent intervals. Not only was he well dressed, but Solomon spoke fairly good English and had been down the Yukon as far as Circle City and out to Skagway.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS: DIFFERING VIEWS OF CHANGE

The missionaries were idealists, looking for an Eden that did not exist. Native people, on the other hand, were pragmatists and materialists, willing and able to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities that would make life more comfortable. The church saw Native people as nonactors in the drama of development. Hudson Stuck thought it was part of Native people's nature to be passive and thought it best they remain in the woods. The church feared unregulated change, feared what might happen if Native people were not buffered or insulated against what the church considered to be the "evil White element" found in frontier towns. In the view of the church, Native people were too easily impressed with and too ready to mimic lower-class forms of dress and behavior. To counter this tendency, the church worked to create a moral dependency on the part of Natives and to guide them towards more acceptable middle-class forms that would transform

them into civilized subjects. But while demanding change, the missionaries often became uneasy when they thought Native people carried things too far. This "colonial mimicry" produced, as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) notes, a certain anxiety because Whites were then faced with an image that was not quite right; it was neither White nor recognizably Native. Such unregulated transformations placed the church in a double bind, because they not only led to unrecognizable forms but might also lead to desires for self-governance. It was better to hold Native people in a limbo where they were neither here nor there.

Although the church feared change, Native people embraced it, and this is evident from the photographs. The Native people facing Betticher's camera appear sophisticated, "civilized" people still in control of their world. They equated suits, ties, white shirts, jackets, Stetson hats, and watch fobs with being civilized (Simeone field notes 1987). Manufactured clothing was particularly sought out in this regard because of the ease with which it could be displayed on the body. Such clothing also demonstrated or signaled competence and social prestige, which was and still is a major concern in the indigenous culture.

Certainly people mimicked or emulated what they saw in the towns and mining camps and they did a good job. But the photographs suggest that these changes were neither imposed nor detrimental. People wore their clothes with style and grace. The critic John Berger (1980:39) would suggest that such an easy acceptance of consumer goods that lay outside people's own culture and experience is succumbing to a cultural hegemony. From this perspective Native people would forever be condemned, within the system of class standards that produced the clothes they wear, to always being second-rate, uncouth, and defensive. But in 1914 the Native people on the upper Tanana River still existed at the periphery of that system. Mansfield/Ketchumstuk people, like the Dawson Boys described by Richard Slobodin (1963), moved freely between two worlds. Instead of succumbing to a cultural hegemony, Native people were busy creating their own space that was not White, nor was it Indian as defined by Whites. The Episcopal priest Frederick Drane (nd.:62) suggests this when he writes, in 1918: "The Indian of this section [the upper Tanana] today is almost universally friendly with the White man. He has found it to his advantage to be so for the white man brings him ammunition, the tea, the tobacco, other things he has learned to depend on." Drane then adds, "while most of the Indians of this section are

friendly to the Whites, most of them feel a great superiority to them, for this is strictly Indian country.”

POSTSCRIPT

In fact the upper Tanana region essentially remained Indian country until World War II. In 1940–41, the region’s isolation was breached by the construction of the Alaska Highway. At the same time the Army Air Corps constructed airfields at Tanacross and Northway, a village close to the U.S.–Canada border. The end of isolation brought a number of problems, including loss of political and economic autonomy; competition for wild resources, especially moose and caribou; racism; and alcoholism. By the 1950s the church and the BIA were the only two institutions directly involved in the villages. One of the last Episcopal priests to serve as a full-time missionary at Tanacross was the Reverend Robert Green. Green is fondly remembered as one of the few non-Natives who stood with Native people in the difficult post war years. He helped develop an indigenous ministry and brought some modern conveniences to the community, such as a local telephone system that connected most of the houses in the village. The church maintained a mission at Tanacross staffed by lay workers and itinerant priests until the mid 1970s.

The Episcopal Church has been very influential in Tanacross history and culture for a number of reasons. I have already talked about how people see their elders as instrumental in creating the mission and how as soon as the mission was created they enlisted the help of Walter Isaac. But he was not the only person who became a prominent adherent to the church. David Paul, who was Old Paul’s son, learned English at an early age and became something of a lay worker and eventually the first Athabaskan to be ordained deacon. David served the church faithfully until the early 1970s. The church was also well represented by some of its priests, such as the Reverend Robert Green, especially immediately following the war when the village was struggling to survive. Today Christianity and the Episcopal Church have become integrated into the indigenous culture, and the church is a central feature of the Tanacross people’s identity, similar to the Russian Orthodox Church in Alutiiq communities. At the same time, Tanacross people, and all Native people living in the upper Tanana region of east central Alaska, are still very much involved in building a distinctly Athabaskan tradition. In this sense the upper Tanana is still very much Indian country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the contributions of Norm Easton and Robert King for thoughtful reviews of a draft of this article, as well as the help of my dear wife Colleen Tyrrell and my father, William E. Simeone, Sr.

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