

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

CHARLENE CRAFT LEFEBRE (1923–1999)

Dianne Gudgel-Holmes

Anchorage, Alaska

Charlene Craft was born in Washington in 1923. After graduating from high school in Cordova, Alaska, she attended the University of Alaska (Fairbanks) in the early 1940s. Her interest in archaeology is revealed in a 1941 letter to UA President Bunnell in which she expressed concern that sites were being destroyed at Dutch Harbor.

Men now considered to be legends in archaeology either taught in Fairbanks in the 1940s or passed through on their way to the field. Craft learned from, and became friends with, Froelich Rainey, Louis Giddings, Helge Larsen and Ivar Skarland. After receiving an M.A. from Radcliffe in 1948, Craft taught anthropology courses in Fairbanks for about two years. She called upon her contacts with these prominent archaeologists for references in her quest for grant funding. It was not easy being a female archeologist in 1948. Craft's arrangement with the university may have been temporary while Ivar Skarland finished his Ph.D. at Harvard. WW II interrupted many people's education; it was expected and accepted—by many women—that they would step aside when the men returned. Letters hint that this was the case with Craft, although Skarland tried to find her a project with the Human Ecology Branch of the Office of Naval Research (ONR) in 1949. The ONR was interested in the welfare of Alaska Natives in the post-war era.

While many colleagues were supportive of Craft, including Lawrence Irving of the Arctic Research Laboratory, she left Fairbanks about 1950. Hard feelings must have accompanied her departure because—when asked in the 1990s—she emphatically denied ever wanting to return, even for a visit. Her goal was a Ph.D. from Harvard, but finances prevented that. In 1954, Craft married Charles LeFebre, also a Fairbanks alumnus, and in 1965 she was accepted into the graduate program at the University of Washington, but she did not complete



Figure 1: University of Alaska yearbook Denali photo of Charlene Craft, 1948.

her degree. Craft taught community college courses in Washington state until just before her death in 1999.

TELIDA RESEARCH

Craft's quest to find a place to do research was guided by Louis Giddings' suggestion that she concentrate on the rivers of interior Alaska. She narrowed her focus to the Upper Kuskokwim River after reading letters sent to the University of Alaska Anthropology Department by Bob Stone, a miner from that region. Stone was extremely helpful as Craft prepared for her summer's work, providing advice on suitable aircraft and hand-drawn maps. Craft received a \$1500 grant from the American Association of University Women to conduct archaeological and ethnographic fieldwork in the upper Kuskokwim region. Her records show she paid \$487 for a round-trip charter with Northern Consolidated Airlines. Her fieldwork was put in jeopardy by the airline; minutes before leaving, she was told to lighten her load by 400 pounds even though her supplies weighed far less than what she'd been promised she could take. She complained to the airlines when she returned in the fall and her letter indicates that her crew suffered towards the end of the summer for lack of food. Problems with the return flight only added to her dilemma when Craft discovered the pilot had brought his girlfriend along; the added weight meant she had to leave some items behind, including fire-cracked rock.

Considering all the hardships and paucity of information about the region, Craft and her two students, George Schumann and Leona Neubarth, accomplished an amazing amount of work in 1949. Their success was due to Carl Sesui, an Upper Kuskokwim Athabaskan of Telida. Sesui provided ethnographic information, orally and physically. He constructed a complex fish weir, fish trap, and snowshoes, all of which Craft documented and photographed.

Although Sesui thought it odd that Craft was interested in the "old places," he showed her old villages, including the semisubterranean houses that he called "beaver houses" (Craft 1949). Sesui's whole life had been spent in the Upper Kuskokwim region; as a child, he recalled how his father rescued Lt. Joseph S. Herron and his starving men when they became lost in the region in 1899. Craft acknowledged Sesui's help in her *American Antiquity* article in the closing sentence, "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" (1956: 274).

Craft did not consider her research of consequence, but obviously was pleased when Charles Holmes and I tracked her down in 1983. She willingly shared her documents and perhaps most importantly, her black and white photographs and 16-mm silent color film of Telida, Deering, and Kotzebue (1949–1950). Some of her photos reside in the collections of the Tochak Historical Society in McGrath, Alaska. All of the original 16-mm film was lost after Craft's death; however, a VHS copy is archived at the Alaska Moving Image Preservation Association, University of Alaska Anchorage. Craft's papers, estate, and a massive library are archived in the Charlene Craft LeFebre and Charles Timothy LeFebre Collection, Knight Library, the University of Oregon, Eugene.

REFERENCES

- LeFebre, Charlene Craft
1949 Field notes. Charlene Craft LeFebre and Charles Timothy LeFebre Collection, box 1 of 6, Knight Library, Special Collections and Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.
1956 A Contribution to the Archaeology of the Upper Kuskokwim. *American Antiquity* 21(3):268–274.