

STUDY TITLE: A Case Study of Copper Center, Alaska (TR-07).

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APPLICABLE PLANNING AREA(S): Gulf of Alaska; Kodiak; Cook Inlet; Shumagin; Aleutian Arc; North Aleutian Basin; St. George Basin; St. Matthew Hall; Bowers Basin; Aleutian Basin; Navarin Basin; Norton Basin; Hope Basin; Chukchi Sea; Beaufort Sea.

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PROJECT MANAGER(S): H. Reckord.

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KEY WORDS: Gulf of Alaska; Kodiak; Cook Inlet; Shumagin; Aleutian Arc; North Aleutian Basin; St. George Basin; St. Matthew Hall; Bowers Basin; Aleutian Basin; Navarin Basin; Norton Basin; Hope Basin; Chukchi Sea; Beaufort Sea; Alaska; socioeconomics; historical review; pipeline; impacts; socioeconomic characterization; literature review; Copper Center; Alaska Region.

BACKGROUND: The economic history of the Copper River Valley, located in south central Alaska, has been characterized by a series of economic booms since the Yukon Gold Rush in 1898. The focus of this study was placed upon the most recent boom period (1973 through 1978) during which the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) was built. This study effort, one in a series of studies conducted through the Alaska Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Socioeconomic Studies Program, was implemented to provide a comprehensive description of social changes brought about by pipeline construction (i.e., from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez, traversing the Copper River Valley) and the ways Copper Center's society and institutions shaped change and dealt with the distressing pressures placed on the community.

OBJECTIVES: (1) To describe the social history and present community of Copper Center, Alaska; and (2) To discuss the effects of TAPS upon Copper Center, including community stress during the pipeline period and identifying those variables important in predicting the nature of pipeline impact on the society.

DESCRIPTION: An anthropologist's view of change in Copper Center was sought in hopes of discovering some of the processes of culture change during the period. Conclusions reached in the report were based on a combination of observations done in the field during 1971 through 1978, coupled with a study of the literature existing on the Ahtna, other Alaska Natives, and related topics. Information was gathered almost exclusively from interviews with Copper Center residents, as written documentation was found to be virtually non-existent. The researcher lived within the village of Copper Center for extended periods in order to conduct interviews and to record everyday experiences and many of the basics of Ahtna culture. Literature pertaining to Copper Center consists of government reports, a limited number of Russian documents, and an increasing number of publications sponsored by the Native Corporation, Ahtna, Inc.

SIGNIFICANT CONCLUSIONS: During the last two centuries, the Ahtna people have evolved from a self-supporting subsistence economy to a wage-dependent economy. Most of the recent changes within the village society seem traceable to the influx of young and middle-aged people into the village during construction of the pipeline. Return migrants showed a permanent shift in orientation of lifestyle, which will be the source of some bitterness in the future if the opportunity level of the pipeline period is not sustained, and people feel they are unable to support their newly defined needs. In this case, it is highly likely that the Natives will be forced again to follow the strategy of labor migration. Permanent changes that will result in the village of Copper Center from pipeline construction remain unclear.

STUDY RESULTS: The aboriginal territory of the Ahtna extended throughout the Copper River Valley and its drainages, which is surrounded by the Alaska, Talkeetna, Chugach, and Wrangell mountain ranges. Villages, fish camps, and houses were located at virtually every major confluence of the Copper River, which provided food and a means of transportation for the people of the region. The aboriginal village was often quite small. Typical structures were constructed of upright logs, moss, and spruce bark, with small compartments lining the walls around a central fire pit. Various outbuildings (e.g., underground caches, menstrual huts, "honeymoon" houses, racks for drying and preparing meat and skins) stood in the yard. Fish camps usually were located within walking distance of the village, and hunting territories were often several days walk in the higher elevations of the surrounding mountains. The Ahtna harvested locally abundant mammals and fish, predictably following an annual routine that was based on a sophisticated knowledge of local animal behavior. Many of the traditional Ahtna social structures organized people into task groupings for harvesting of resources. Household, clan, and village were the basic units of Ahtna society. Political position in Ahtna society was defined by a combination of factors, including ability, matrilineal ties, and sex. The sexual division of labor was a prevalent organizational principle in the society.

Knowledge of the Russian Period (1790-1865) is sketchy. In general, the Russians and the Alaskan Natives who worked for them had little direct contact with most Ahtna people. It is doubtful that the central Copper River area was greatly changed as a result of the fur trade established during the Russian Period. Technological changes accompanying Western contact (i.e., with the introduction of iron and firearms) were of consequence to Ahtna society. The most obvious change in the value system of the aboriginal Ahtna during the Russian Period was the introduction of Christianity (i.e., Russian Orthodox religion). The American Period began in 1867. The Gold Rush of 1898 brought significant change to the Ahtna with the arrival of non-Natives in the Valley. Copper Center, a good half-way point to the gold fields, was the central focus of the 1898 stampede to the Klondike. The establishment of trading posts within the Valley heralded a major change in the subsistence lifestyle and Ahtna society. Of central importance was the undermining of sharing and interdependence within the Native community. One of the most significant changes in the social system involved the family, as the large house was abandoned in favor of smaller nuclear or extended family units. Villages became larger and were oriented to the trading post. Fur trading attained universal importance during the 1920s, tightly connecting the Natives to the Western economic system. The Great Depression deeply affected the Ahtna because they were fully incorporated into a cash economy. During World War II, and with subsequent completion of the Alaska Highway System linking Copper Center to Anchorage, prosperity returned to the area. Increased emphasis on formal schooling during the late 1940s and 1950s substantially changed Native life. In 1973, many features of the Copper Center Village (i.e., the redistributive network, establishment of services, funneling of money into the village through the elderly, continuing importance of subsistence resource use) were a positive adaptive response to economic variables in the wider society which gave little opportunity to Ahtna Natives. Economic statistics for 1970 show that the Native people of the Region had a lower per capita standard of living than did the non-Native population. A lack of skills is responsible for the poor earning potential in the Native community, with many of the young people who had grown up in the village of Copper Center emigrating to Anchorage in the hopes of finding employment. Thus, a large contingent of elderly form the backbone of the community. One factor allowing Copper Center Natives to remain in their village with so small a reliance on cash income has been their continued reliance on subsistence resources. Kinship continues to be an important determinant of behavior in Copper Center society. Despite the many changes of recent years, the village composition is still largely determined by kinship. Clan affiliation continues to determine many modes of behavior and patterns of interaction. In 1973, Ahtna household composition was highly predictable, with 55% of individuals living in independent nuclear family households, and the remaining 45% living in either single person households, conjugal pair households, or joint family households. During the pipeline period (1974-1977), the Copper Center village and the entire Copper River region witnessed drastic change. The influx of pipeliners, job-seekers, and hangers-on doubled the region's population. Some community services were greatly improved during the pipeline period, while others could not keep pace with the new demands (e.g., telephone service, electrical service, banking facilities). Prices for food, clothing, sundries, lumber, and hardware decreased during 1974-1977 as quality and availability increased. A large percentage of businesses in Copper Center changed hands immediately preceding the pipeline and during the beginning of the construction period. Almost every business was either for sale or lease between 1974-1977. Housing in both the Native and non-Native zones was severely strained (i.e., via precipitous rises in rent and land prices) by pipeline development. Population increases put stress on local schools as the changing racial picture caused by the flood of new students created unrest. Transportation services expanded during building of the pipeline.

Introduction of scheduled airline service was particularly important. Increases in highway traffic during the pipeline construction was a major inconvenience to residents. Health services were also affected by population increases. One major impact on the village was caused by the influx of money. Money management in Copper Center is not only the concern of individuals and families but also applies to the entire village. Potlatching is probably still the most dramatic form of village sharing and redistribution found in Copper Center, while more informal modes of redistribution include sharing subsistence resources and commensalism. The standard of living improved significantly in the village during 1974-1977. The change of individual perceptions of rising living standards varied according to one's ability to take advantage of pipeline employment. Many Natives felt that they did not personally profit from the general rise in the standard of living. Village residents did not agree in their perceptions of recent social changes because the money flowing into the village rearranged status positions and traditional roles within the community. Attitudinal shifts toward a dependence on wage labor and accompanying amenities will be the source of some bitterness in the future if the opportunity level of the pipeline period is not sustained, and people feel they are unable to support their newly defined needs. It is highly likely that the Ahtna will be forced again to follow the strategy of labor migration. It remains uncertain what will be the nature of the village after this migration and what long-term changes pipeline construction will have brought. Variables important in predicting the nature of pipeline impact on Copper Center society fell into several categories, including income and income distribution, health and safety characteristics, educational and cultural characteristics, amenities, community cohesion, and values.

STUDY PRODUCT(S): Reckord, H. 1979. A Case Study of Copper Center, Alaska. A final report for the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management Alaska OCS Office, Anchorage, AK. NTIS No. PB-296961/AS. Social and Economic Studies Program Technical Report No. 7. Contract No. 14-12-0001-29002. viii + 237 pp.

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