

FIELDIANA

Anthropology

Published by Field Museum of Natural History

VOLUME 62

NUSHAGAK

AN HISTORIC TRADING CENTER IN SOUTHWESTERN ALASKA

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MARCH 17, 1972

PUBLICATION 1145

TRAVEL AND TRANSPORTATION

The only objects in the McKay-Johnson collections that are specifically associated with travel are two *snowshoes* which are not mates and a model birch bark canoe. The snowshoes are described and illustrated by Mason (1896, p. 394, pl. 13). He states that they were collected by McKay from the Tanaina Indians. This is possible, but these shoes closely resemble specimens which I have seen in communities along the Nushagak River.

The *model birch bark canoe* is covered with a single piece of bark which is fastened to the gunwales with spruce root. There are three single piece thwarts and two long ribs, one on each side parallel to the center board. Such a boat would have been used for river transportation throughout the region.

CLOTHING

Only the most general comments can be made concerning clothing in the collections. In general, those specimens which were located do not differ greatly from the clothing from southwestern Alaska described and illustrated by Nelson (1899, pp. 30-43).

Some information concerning *winter clothing* could be learned from a small male doll wearing knee-high caribou skin mukluks and a squirrel skin parka decorated with strips of the same material. There is caribou skin trim around the hood and cuffs. A female doll is wearing caribou skin mukluks that stretch above the knee and a squirrel skin parka decorated with strips of beaver fur painted red on the inner surface. The parka ruff is also of beaver fur and there are designs in white caribou skin on front and back.

In addition to the doll, two *women's parkas* and a coat provide more information concerning female winter clothing. The two parkas are made of squirrel skins and reach well below the knee. One is almost identical to the doll's parka and the other is decorated with strips of squirrel skin and has two strips of white caribou skin running down the center of the garment. The coat is of caribou skin decorated with strips of worsted and muskrat fur. Along the bottom the caribou skin has been slit to form a fringe. Strands of black, white, and red beads hang from the shoulders and there is no hood; just a fringe of worsted around the collar.

There are *six caps* in the collections. One specimen, 20 cm. long and 12 cm. wide, is a boy's cap of caribou skin with rows of beads

running around it. Six strands of beads hang down on either side in the vicinity of the ears. A single milk glass button and a metal button are also used as decoration. Another cap 25 cm. long and 17 cm. wide is made of seal intestine ornamented with bands of needle work. There are two squirrel skin caps with red cloth borders and tufts of red yarn and strips of squirrel skin at the back. A cap that is described as being for winter wear is made of beaver skin where it covers the head and has a cape of squirrel skin extending down the back. This cape would have reached approximately to the wearer's shoulders. A band of cloth and white beads separates the two kinds of skins. The area of beaver skin has been sewn in strips with tufts of red yarn between each strip. The whole cap is lined with cloth on the inside. The last specimen to be described is a small peaked cap made of sections of sewn salmon skins. There is caribou skin trim around the bottom and tufts of caribou hair have been used as decoration.

Two *belts* are strips of commercially prepared cowhide ornamented with caribou or reindeer teeth. A third is a strip of caribou skin decorated with rows of blue, white, black, and red beads. Brass buttons and the heads of shotgun shells have also been used as decoration. This type of belt is said to have been worn by women and girls.

A single pair of caribou skin *gloves* is decorated with rows of red, white, black, and green beads around the waist, and has parallel rows of white beads running up the back of the hand. Around the wrist is a trim of red worsted. The two gloves are attached by means of a beaded string. In addition to these gloves, the collections also contain two pairs of fish skin mittens and a single pair made of woven grass. There is also a pair of *socks* woven from the same material.

The final item of clothing to be mentioned is 15 carved ivory *belt toggles*. Several are in the shape of sea's and at least one is a beaver. All are extremely well carved and many are decorated with drilled dots.

PERSONAL ADORNMENT

Earrings in the McKay-Johnson collections closely resemble those illustrated by Nelson (1899, pls. XXIII, XXIV). Two sets have ivory ornaments in the shape of a human face together with white, amber, white-lined red, and blue faceted beads. Three additional sets are also of ivory with the characteristic circle dot ornamenta-

tion. These, too, are heavily decorated with beads. There are also two sets of sickle-shaped ivory *labrets* with two small bead suspension holes drilled on the side.

A *necklace* 45 cm. in length is made of commercially prepared cowhide ornamented with caribou incisors. Ten pendants of seal teeth are suspended on strings of white and blue beads. At one end of the necklace is a short strap to which is attached a large, translucent blue bead. This bead fits into a loop at the other end for the purpose of securing the necklace around the neck.

Several *dress ornaments* are included in the collections, but only one will be described. It is a strip of caribou skin decorated with beads of various colors and with two small brass bells secured as pendants at either end.

TOBACCO COMPLEX

Evidence for the use of tobacco is confined to five *snuff boxes* and a wooden *mortar* used for mixing tobacco with birch fungus or some other material. The snuff boxes are oval to round in shape and approximately 5 by 8 cm. in size. They have tight fitting lids flush with the rim and closely resemble specimens illustrated by Nelson (1899, pl. LXXXVI, 1-4).

TOYS AND GAMES

There are nine *tops* in the McKay-Johnson collections, seven of wood, one of bone, and one of ivory. Seven are similar in that they consist of round disks 3 to 12 cm. in diameter which fit over pegs 6 to 11 cm. in length. A single top is somewhat different, being one piece of wood which broadens and comes to a point at one end. This specimen and four others are described and illustrated by Culin (1907, pp. 737-738, figs. 973-977).

Three *buzzes* are rectangular pieces of wood from 8 to 10 cm. in length which have perforated edges and constrict at the center where pieces of sinew are attached. They are painted red and blue and presumably would have had small sticks attached to the sinew.

There are four wooden *whirlers* which have "handles" 30 to 40 cm. in length to which thin "wands" are attached by lengths of sinew. One specimen is painted with black and red stripes.

Four *dolls*, three wooden and one ivory, are crudely made and dressed in skin clothing. A single animal doll, possibly a squirrel, is made of sealskin stuffed with grass and decorated with beads.

A total of nine small *ivory carvings of animals* was located. They represent seals, walrus, and beavers, and all are extremely well made. An interesting carving of a seal illustrated by Hoffman (1897, pl. 56, fig. 2) is decorated with circle dot designs, the centers of which have been drilled to receive wooden pegs which hold tufts of caribou hair in place. Also illustrated (pl. 56, 5) is a walrus with circle dot designs on the sides and upper part of its body.

Three *storyknives* are made of curved, flat sections of antler which widen at the distal end to form a knife-like blade. Inverted chevron designs as well as circle dots occur on all specimens. Ethnographically, the telling of stories illustrated by means of a storyknife is confined to Eskimo girls living in southwestern Alaska (Oswalt, 1964, p. 310).

CEREMONIAL EQUIPMENT

The Nushagak Eskimos, as might be expected, used masks extensively in their ceremonies held in the *kashgee*. Unfortunately, no complete *masks* are preserved in the McKay-Johnson collections. There are, however, a number of mask hoops, plumes, and appendages for the type of elaborately carved mask characteristic of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta region south to Bristol Bay. Such masks are extensively illustrated by Nelson (1899, pls. XCV-CV). The collections also contain two *finger masks* which, although badly damaged, appear to be the type with projecting feathers illustrated by Nelson.

Also apparently used in *kashgee* ceremonies were three so-called *dance wands* consisting of wooden platforms approximately 70 cm. in length and 3.4 cm. wide to which are fastened figurines of the same materials illustrating subsistence activities. Feather plumes also project from the platforms. All are in a poor state of preservation, but it is obvious that they were held at one end, perhaps while dancing. The first shows a man dragging two seals, the second depicts a man hunting walrus from a kayak, and the third shows a man hunting a caribou from a kayak. All are painted brown and gray. Nelson does not mention ceremonial paraphernalia of this type.

Somewhat similar are two wooden *carvings of animal-like figures* that are said to have been used in *kashgee* ceremonies. The first is

ican since sherds with American maker's marks have been recovered from other historic sites in southwestern Alaska (Oswalt and Van Stone, 1967, p. 54; VanStone, 1970, p. 79). In the small Nushagak collection there are at least four basal sherds large enough so that some parts of maker's marks would be visible if they were present. At least some Nushagak pottery, therefore, was unmarked and could have been made in America or imported before 1891 (Ormsbee, 1959, pp. 16-17; Godden, 1964, p. 11; VanStone and Townsend, 1970, p. 81). In a previous publication (VanStone and Townsend, 1970, p. 85) it was noted that although some European pottery was included in trading inventories throughout southwestern Alaska during the Russian period, the bulk of it probably dates no earlier than 1880. Although design elements appear to be widely distributed throughout the area (see VanStone and Townsend, 1970, p. 84), it is not, at the present time, possible to attach any particular significance to these resemblances except to suggest a common source for much of the trade pottery coming into Alaska. Unfortunately, the small pottery collection from Nushagak does not provide new information relating to any of the chronological or distributional questions associated with this particular trade item.

Glass.—Objects of glass are not plentiful in the Nushagak archaeological collection and, in fact, provide very little information concerning the use of this material at the site, particularly in the form of containers.

There is a single, four-hole, milk glass shirt *button*, bi-convex in shape with a slight depression in one face; it is 1.1 cm. in diameter. Buttons of this type were first manufactured in France and introduced to the United States about 1860 (Fontana and Greenleaf, 1962, p. 98).

Most of the 51 *window glass* fragments in the collection are no more than 2 mm. in thickness. A few, however, are slightly more than 3 mm. thick. The thin fragments are clear, while the thicker ones have a slightly greenish color. A certain amount of window glass has been recovered from all the historic sites previously excavated along the Nushagak and Kuskokwim rivers. It appears to have been available to the Eskimos of the area as early as 1842 (Zagoskin, 1967, p. 255).

A sizeable number of *bottle glass* fragments were recovered but they do not provide a great deal of information about the types and sizes of bottles used by the inhabitants of Nushagak. Of the 141 fragments, three were retouched as scrapers and have been described

previously. Of the remaining 138, virtually all are of a dark brown or dark green color and associated with containers having long, thin necks. These were probably liquor bottles. There are five large, round basal fragments, the largest of which is 8.2 cm. in diameter. All are unmarked. A single basal fragment is from a nine-sided container, perhaps a condiment bottle, and is 6.2 cm. in diameter.

There are five complete neck fragments, three of which have rounded shoulders and are long and thin with thickened lips. A single neck fragment is much smaller with an everted lip. The fifth neck fragment is short with a thickened lip and appears to have been part of a small rectangular bottle no more than 3.5 cm. in diameter. A characteristic feature of these neck fragments is that they are all hand-finished. Scars from the mold from which they were made do not pass through the lip. Thus they can be said to date prior to 1903 when the first fully automatic bottling machine was invented. They were constructed so as to receive cork stoppers, a characteristic of nearly all bottles made before about 1900 when metal caps were introduced (Hunt, 1959, pp. 9-10; Jones, 1962, vol. 2; Ferraro and Ferraro, 1964, p. 79). The collection also contains a single *mirror* fragment.

A very few glass *trade beads* of various colors were recovered from the Nushagak excavations, most of them seed beads attached to a garment found in house 4. The small number of recovered beads and their extremely uneven distribution throughout the excavated structures make typological and comparative analysis of limited value. Therefore, comments concerning the beads will be restricted to a brief description.

A total of 465 beads was recovered from three of the four excavated structures. Virtually all of these (458) were of the seed form measuring less than 2 mm. in diameter and were attached to a garment fragment recovered from house 4. These seed beads belong to a shape that has been identified as type a in previous reports (Van Stone, 1968b, p. 294, fig. 19; 1970, fig. 14, p. 83; VanStone and Townsend, 1970, p. 94, fig. 26). Of the total number, 124 are white, 215 blue, 39 red, 53 green, and 27 black. The blue beads range from dark to light in color and from opaque to translucent. The color of the white beads is more uniform than the blue, but nevertheless varies from an extremely bright, hard whiteness to an almost clear translucence. The green beads are all translucent but the color variation is considerable. Most uniform in color are the red beads, all of which are translucent. Black beads are uniform in

color and are somewhat larger than the others in the seed category; none of them is translucent. These seed beads are identical to those sold in tubes throughout rural Alaska today for sewing into beadwork designs on cloth or skin garments.

In addition to the seed beads just described, there are four white beads approximately 5 mm. in diameter of which three belong to type a and one to type b (VanStone and Townsend, 1970, p. 94, fig. 26). There is also a single translucent blue bead belonging to type E as defined in the VanStone and Townsend report. The final beads to be described are a large yellow specimen of the type a shape which measures approximately 1.6 cm. in diameter, and a polychrome bead also belonging to type a. The latter is basically white and exhibits a variation between exterior and interior color. On the outside there are alternate red and green lines, two of each, running parallel to the stringing hole. The specimen is approximately 3 mm. in diameter.

Most of the beads described above are not unique for the Nushagak site, and since it has been virtually impossible to interpret the chronological significance of much larger assemblages, such as the one from the Kijik site (VanStone and Townsend, 1970, p. 97), no interpretive comments will be made here. A major difficulty in determining the chronological significance of trade beads in Alaskan historic sites seems to arise, at least in part, from the fact that most of the diagnostic forms were used extensively in other areas of North America and then, at a later date, were introduced gradually into the Alaska trade. Thus, even though it can be determined with some degree of certainty when specific forms were introduced into the North American trade, it as yet has not been possible to be equally certain with reference to their first use in Alaska.

Metal—Objects of metal are by far the largest and most important category of imported goods in the Nushagak collection. The actual number of types represented, however, is not great.

A total of 142 *nails* was recovered, most of them heavily rusted and corroded. Of this number, 117 were excavated from the fireplace in the entryroom of house 3. Thus the total number of nails is not distributionally significant. The large number found in the fireplace suggests that, at least to some extent, prepared lumber rather than driftwood was used as fuel. A great deal of such lumber was doubtless available as a by-product of activities going on at the two canneries.