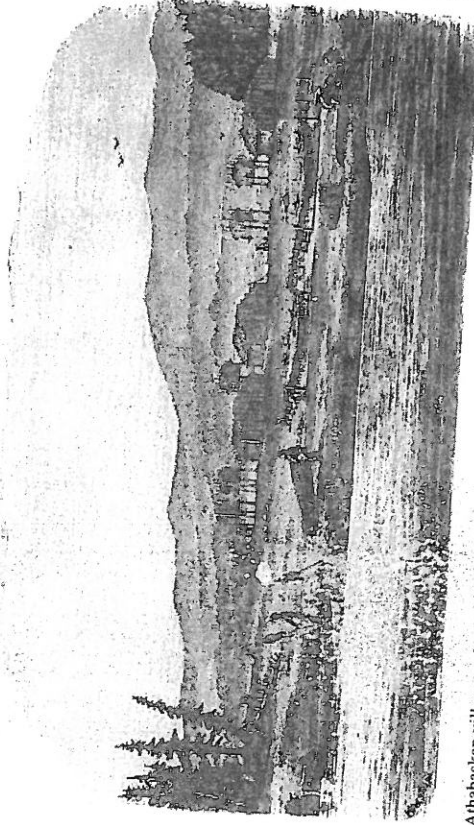
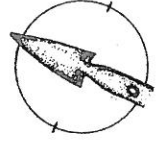


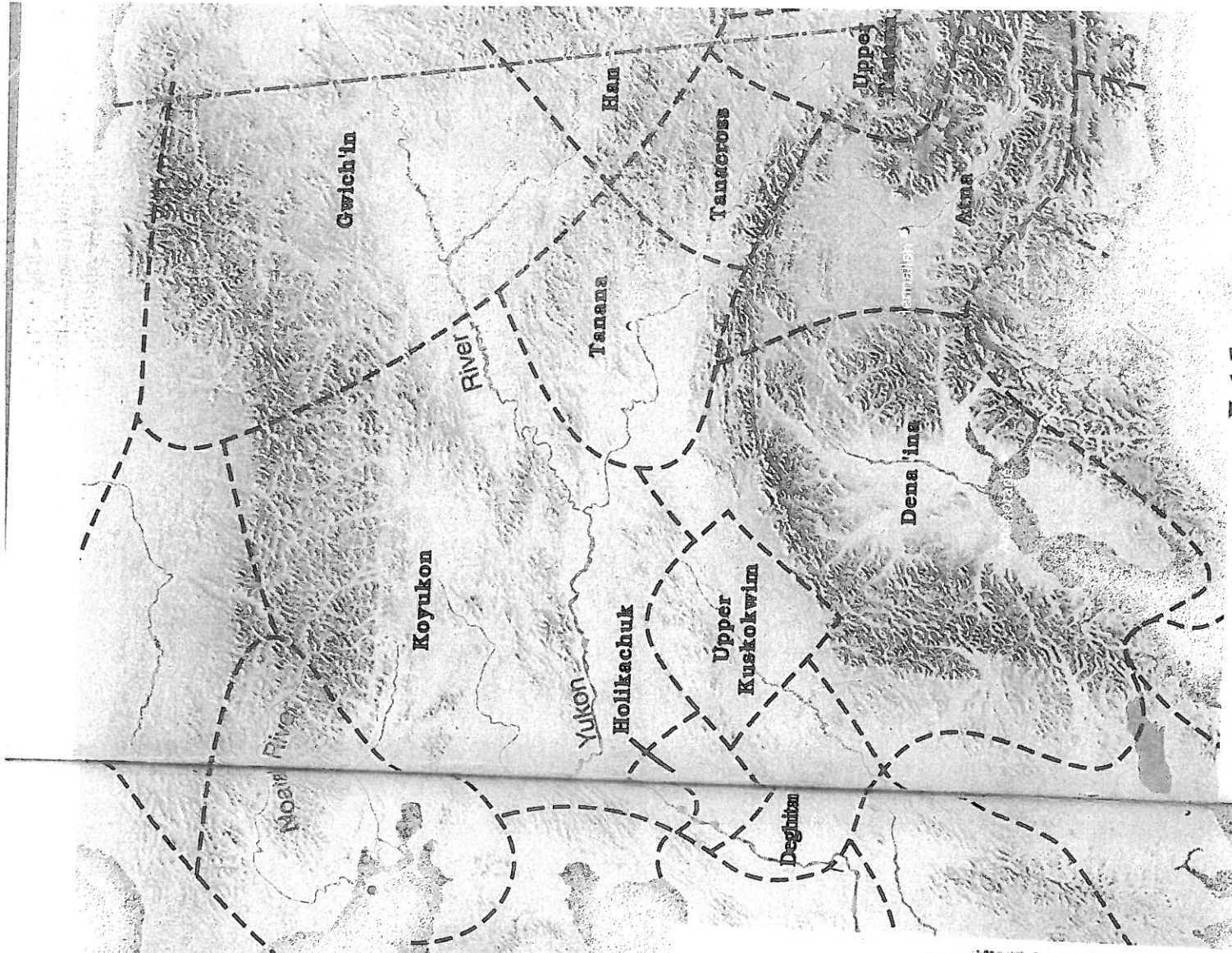
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Athabaskans wore finely-tailored clothes made from caribou and moose skins. Dentalium shell necklaces, floral designs, beadwork, and ornate knife and rifle cases became important ceremonial garb after European contact.

(ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)



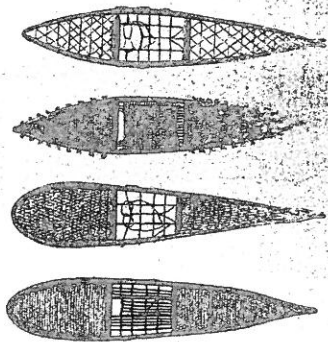
Athabaskan village on lower Yukon River, about 1870.



# Athabaskan

## Athabaskans

### Interior Indians



Athabaskan Indians occupy the broad interior of Alaska between the Brooks Range on the north and the Alaska Range on the south as well as the Copper and Susitna river valleys which drain southward from the Alaska Range. The only Athabaskan group to live by the ocean were the Dena'ina who resided along the shores of Cook Inlet. Alaskan Athabaskan speakers are closely related to Athabaskan speakers of the Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories and British Columbia and also to the Navajo and Apache of the American southwest.

Interior Alaska, considered a portion of the subarctic environmental region, is bounded on the north by the Brooks Range and on the south by the nearly interlocking mountains of the Aleutian, Alaskan and Wrangell-St. Elias ranges. On the west, the transition from forest to tundra is the regional boundary while Alaska's two major rivers, the Yukon and Kuskokwim, cut through the region carrying abundant runs of salmon, with the Yukon continuing on into Canada. These rivers carry rich nutrient loads as well as substantial quantities of wood into the Bering Sea that contribute to the productivity of the marine ecosystem and the survival of coastal Eskimos. A mosaic of forested, rolling hills and wetlands predominate across the landscape referred to as the *boreal forest* that extends eastward into Canada. Soils in interior Alaska, having been spared glacial scraping from the last ice age, are generally more productive than in interior Canada where exposed patches of bedrock are common.

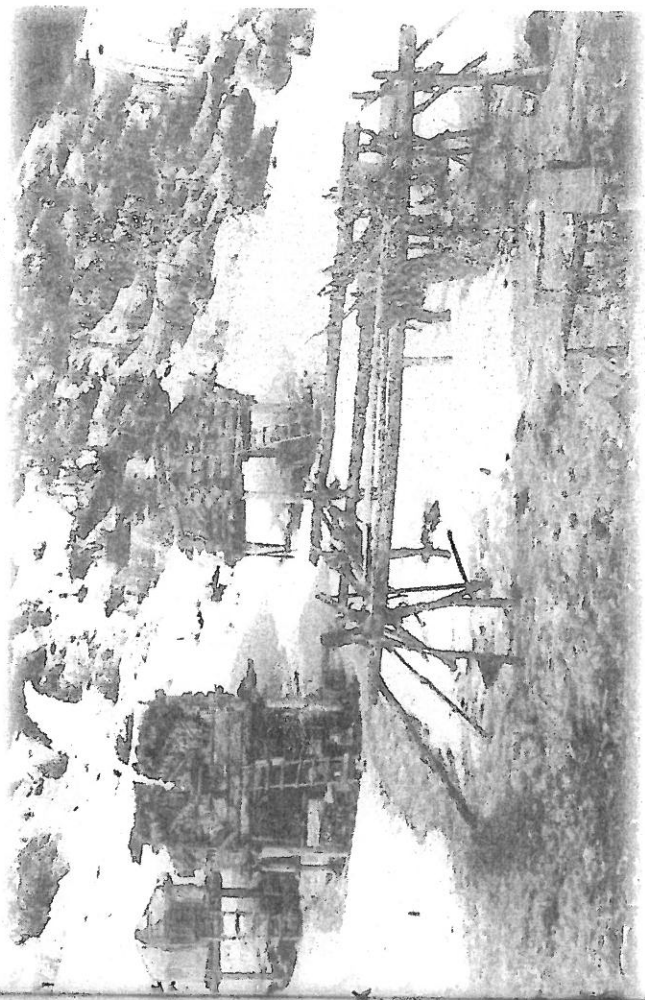
There are 11 Athabaskan ethnic-linguistic groupings in Alaska. Characteristics of these groups include similar language, *endogamy* (marriage within the group), clothing, ceremonies and beliefs. Each of the 11 ethnic groups are subdivided into units termed regional bands, and in most cases they are further subdivided into local bands consisting of between 15-75 people in several related families. Local bands were generally led by men who had demonstrated special competence in hunting, trading or organizing. Below the local band was the household level of organization which consisted of one- to three families sharing the

same dwelling and basic daily activities. Among the more sedentary groups such as the Deghitan, Atna' and Dena'ina, the village was a recognized unit with a territory and a headman. Among Athabaskan groups terms of self-reference are identifiable by an ending such as *ena*, *ene*, or *ina* that means "people" accompanied by a modifier indicating their location.

Athabaskans are considered flexible and adaptive people who incorporate tools, social principles and ceremonial practices from their non-Athabaskan neighbors. Examples include the Dena'ina use of the baidarka and kameika adapted from their Koniag and Chugach neighbors for sea-mammal hunting, the Deghitan use of the qasigh adapted from their Yupiit neighbors, and the 'lower Atna' use of large plant dwellings and clan symbols probably adopted from their Tlingit neighbors.

### Archaeological evidence

The Paleo-Arctic sites along the Tanana and Nenana rivers of interior Alaska are among Alaska's earliest evidence of human occupation a more than 11,500 ya (years ago). One of the interior's most interesting



Athabaskans developed the cache to keep food and supplies safe from their dog and wild animals. The cache is a distinctive Alaska symbol and is still in use today. Photo taken near Copper River, 1910. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

sites is Batza Tena, in the Koyukuk River valley, where for perhaps several thousand years, interior peoples mined obsidian, a volcanic glass important for its tremendously sharp but brittle cutting edge, and traded it widely.

The time period from 8,000 to 6,000 ya is considered a warmer, drier, windier period with lower productivity. Archaeological sites from this time are rare. Beginning around 6,000 ya, a new technology consisting of small, chipped stone arrowheads suitable for taking a wide variety of animals and birds appear and are referred to as the *Northern Archaic* tradition. While predominantly found in the interior of Alaska, Northern Archaic artifacts have been identified on the Bering Sea coast near Cape Newenham and on the Arctic Ocean coast near Prudhoe Bay.

Northern Archaic tradition sites have few artifacts and there is little evidence of wealth, ceremonial items or population concentrations, the lack of which are indications of a nomadic existence. Around 1,000 ya sites in Athabaskan occupied areas of the Yukon River in proximity to the Yupit show influence of that contact in the form of ulus, pottery and ground slate tools. At approximately the same time on the Copper River, more permanent sites with house depressions and multiple storage pits make their appearance. It is also from this period that copper begins to appear in artifact collections used for arrowheads, cutting implements and adornments.

There are three views on Athabaskan origins. One view proposes they are related to the earliest Paleo-Arctic tradition bearers based on the similarity of technologies that change only minimally through time. A second view suggests that they were the bearers of the Northern Archaic tradition that moved northward into Alaska from central Canada. The third view suggests that the dispersion of Athabaskan peoples into Alaska and southward as far as Arizona is more recent and was linked to a gigantic volcanic eruption in southern Yukon Territory. A Gwich'in oral tradition states that the people moved away from a fiery mountain to their present territory indicating that some Athabaskan groups have retained a cultural memory supporting this latter view.

#### *Population distribution and settlement system*

The total population of Alaskan Athabaskans is estimated to have been about 11,000 people at the time of contact. They were relatively sparsely distributed and were most numerous in areas where abundant runs of salmon provided a relatively stable food supply. They can be divided into riverine, upland and Pacific subdivisions based on their location and their basic hunting, fishing and gathering methods. Riverine groups occupied areas with good salmon fishing, upland groups depended on caribou and Pacific groups took advantage of salmon and

Athabaskan Groups and  
Estimated Population at Contact

Group	Location	Population
<i>Riverine</i>		
Deghitan	Lower Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers	1,500
Holikachuk	Lower Middle Yukon and Innoko rivers	500
Koyukon	Middle Yukon and Koyukuk rivers	2,000
Tanana	Lower Tanana River	500
Tanacross	Middle Tanana River	300
<i>Upland</i>		
Gwich'in	Upper Yukon and Porcupine rivers	1,500
Han	Upper Yukon River	300
Upper Tanana	Upper Tanana River	200
Upper Kuskokwim	Upper Kuskokwim River	200
<i>Pacific</i>		
Atna'	Copper River	1,000
Dena'ina	Cook Inlet, and Susitna and Upper Kuskokwim rivers	3,000
Total		11,000

Athabaskan patterns of settlement varied from sedentary to nomadic. Deghitan, Dena'ina and lower Atna' had winter villages with concentrated populations living in substantial dwellings from November to March. Their seasonal camps were often in close proximity to the winter villages, minimizing seasonal movements. Men could hunt in the fall on extended trips from the main village without requiring the entire community to relocate. A second strategy found among Koyukon Tanana and upper Atna' involved smaller winter villages and three or more seasonal camps requiring entire families to move for extended periods. Finally, upland Athabaskans such as the Gwich'in and Upper Tanana lived in small, two or three family camps virtually year-round as they moved regularly to known resource sites or on hunting trips.

#### *Food and diet*

There are two basic emphases in Alaskan Athabaskan subsistence strategies. Among the riverine and Pacific groups, salmon fishing (including processing (drying) and storing fish for winter consumption was supplemented by moose and caribou hunting in the fall and spring

who lacked access to salmon runs were more dependent on caribou which they hunted in composite bands coordinating efforts at key migration locations in the fall. Upland groups hunted moose throughout the winter and pursued a wide variety of smaller animals such as beaver, muskrat, hare, squirrel, and marmot; fished for whitefish, lackfish, pike, trout and other freshwater species; and snared or hunted birds such as grouse, ptarmigan and a variety of migratory waterfowl where and when available. Bear were occasionally hunted, sometimes for food, sometimes for protection and sometimes for the hunter to gain status. Members of all groups collected bark, berries, roots and roots during spring and late summer.

Notable variations on these basic patterns include the sea mammal hunting practices of the Cook Inlet Dena'ina, the sheep hunting practices of the upper Atna' and the mountain goat hunting practices of the Dena'ina and lower Atna'.

Resources fluctuations are extreme in the interior of Alaska following cycles of predator and prey abundance or climatic swings. While a diet comprised of moose, caribou, and fish is excellent in supplying protein and nutrients, it is lacking in the high fat foods necessary to heat the body during the stark winter. A steady diet of hare or ptarmigan during the winter might lead to starvation if not supplemented by the beaver, prized for its high fat content.

### House types

House types varied dramatically among Athabaskans.

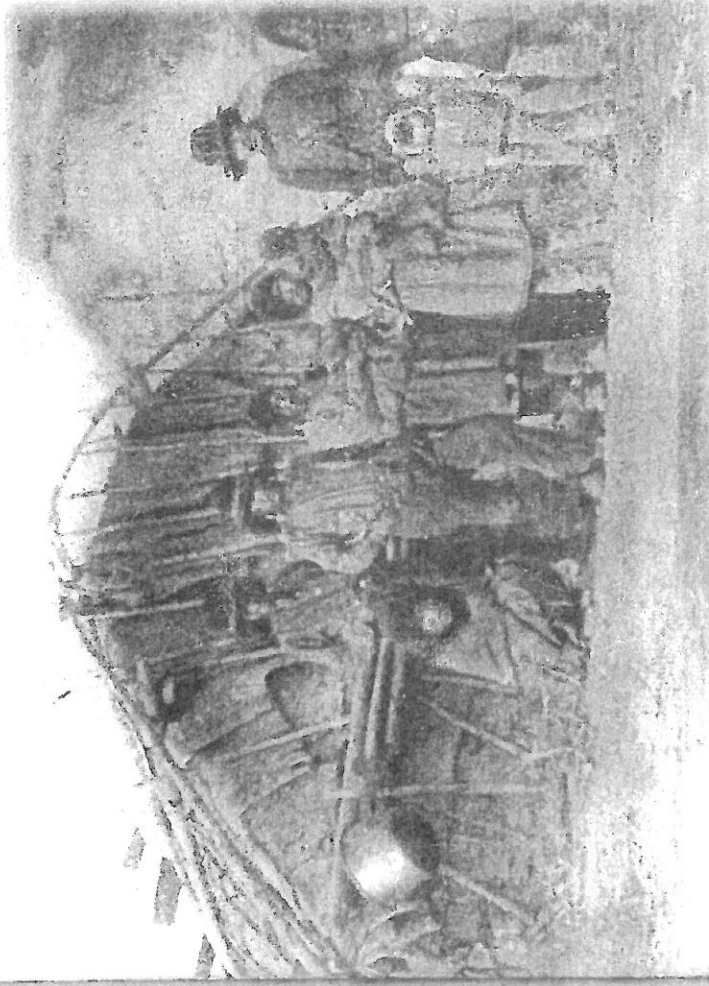
The Deghitan, heavily influenced by their Yupiit neighbors, had semisubterranean log dwellings which had tunnel entry ways. Villages consisted of 10 to 12 of these dwellings, each of which housed two families, plus a larger kashim. The Deghitan settlements also had a larger community house, kashim or *qasigiq*.

The Koyukon and Tanana had semisubterranean log dwellings often built into the high banks of the Yukon and Tanana rivers.

The Dena'ina constructed relatively semisubterranean dwellings with a tunnel entry. Inside there was a large central room with a hearth and several side rooms. The walls were made of logs and banked with earth.

Among the Atna', a variety of houses were used including large plank houses which could accommodate up to ten families. These dwellings had an excavated central pit area with a hearth. Raised platforms next to the walls were divided with bark or bearskins into separate cubicles for families. The Atna' also constructed a smaller house of bark laid over poles, similar to the dwelling constructed by their relatives in the Upper Tanana.

The Gwich'in used a portable, domeshaped, caribou or moose skin



Athabaskans lived in a variety of house styles. Homes could be dugouts, plank houses or dome-shaped caribou-skin tents. This photo shows an Atna bark house, about 1895. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

tent constructed by lashing curved poles together. The structure was about 14 feet in diameter and eight feet high. During the winter, it was heavily insulated with evergreen boughs and snow allowing the people relative comfort in some of the coldest temperatures on earth.

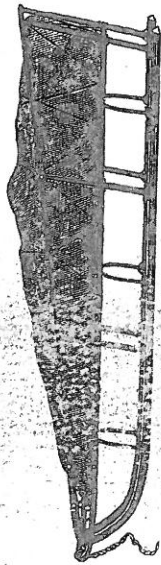
In the summer Athabaskans used a variety of temporary shelters including tents, lean-tos and smaller versions of the winter lodge.

Athabaskan groups used a structure known as the *cache*, a small, wooden house built on a raised platform, to store food and clothing and protect them from theft by birds and animals. Open raised platforms were also used to store materials and equipment. Another common storage technique was the use of bark and grass-lined cache pits placed around the exterior of the winter house. Dena'ina pits along the Kenai River used for salmon storage were over 10 feet long and five feet deep.

### Tools and technologies

The Athabaskan tool kit consisted of a primary core of stone implements for cutting and processing wood, skins, and for making

## Dog Mushing



Inuit sled

Dogs were domesticated in the New World about 10,000 years ago. Evidence has been found of their use in the arctic nearly 4,000 years ago. Dogs probably were first domesticated for warming and defense rather than for transportation or food. Archaeological evidence based on harnesses, sled design and whips indicates that dogs were not used for pulling sleds by Eskimos in Alaska until about 1500 A.D.

Interior Athabaskans placed 35-pound saddlebags on their dogs to transport their belongings. However, the Kutchin and other Athabaskans pulled their own sleds and toboggans.

In the post-contact period, several factors combined to rapidly spread the use of dogs pulling sleds. The most important was the establishment of trading posts (for the fur trade) and the introduction of the basket sled. By the late 19th century, dog teams transported supplies and equipment during the winter in most of northern, western and interior Alaska. This continued until the 1930s when airplanes began to displace dog teams.

The importance of dogs in the Athabaskan trapping way of life led to an emphasis on small dogs built for speed and stamina. These dogs have come to be called Alaskan Huskies. Soon races in the villages emerged as men competed against each other to see who had the fastest team.

Huslia, a small Koyukon Athabaskan village on the Koyukuk River, became a heart of dog racing in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. It produced a number of great mushers including Jimmy Huntington, Bobby Vent, and Cue Bifelt.

But its most famous racing musher is George Atlia, nicknamed the "Huslia Jester" whose life story is told in the movie *Spirit of the Wind*. Atlia reached the pinnacle of his profession by overcoming a substantial leg injury. An uncomplaining competitor, Atlia also used modern methods of diet and selective breeding to maintain his team's position at the top of the sprint race profession in the 1980s.

As long as there are dogs and young men in the villages of rural Alaska, racing with the wind like George Atlia will remain a part of their lives.

other tools out of bone and antler. All groups used chipped stone scrapers, knives, and whetstones. Adzes, wedges, and chisels were used in wood cutting. Projectile points of various sizes for use with bows and arrows show some variation; Atna' made some of these from copper. Especially well developed among upland groups was the three-to five-foot-long, sinew-backed bow which provided greater velocity and accuracy than the shorter bows required for use in watercraft.

Athabaskans are distinctive among Alaska Natives for their use of bark, particularly that of the birch tree, for a variety of uses such as vessels, bowls, receptacles and containers. They also used bark to line storage pits, to cover roofs, and to make canoes.

Athabaskans were masters in making and setting snares and deadfalls for capturing animals from birds to bears. Women were especially adept at snaring small animals and birds in the vicinity of camps. A variety of traps made from wood saplings or slats, stake weirs, spears, dipnets, gillnets, and hooks were used to capture salmon, whitefish and other freshwater species. At certain locations along the Copper River, platform structures were built out into the river from which to dipnet.

In areas where caribou were known to mass for annual migrations, Athabaskans combined into regional bands whose leaders coordinated large hunts in the fall. Converging fences, some miles in length, were used to funnel caribou into corrals where they were killed and divided.

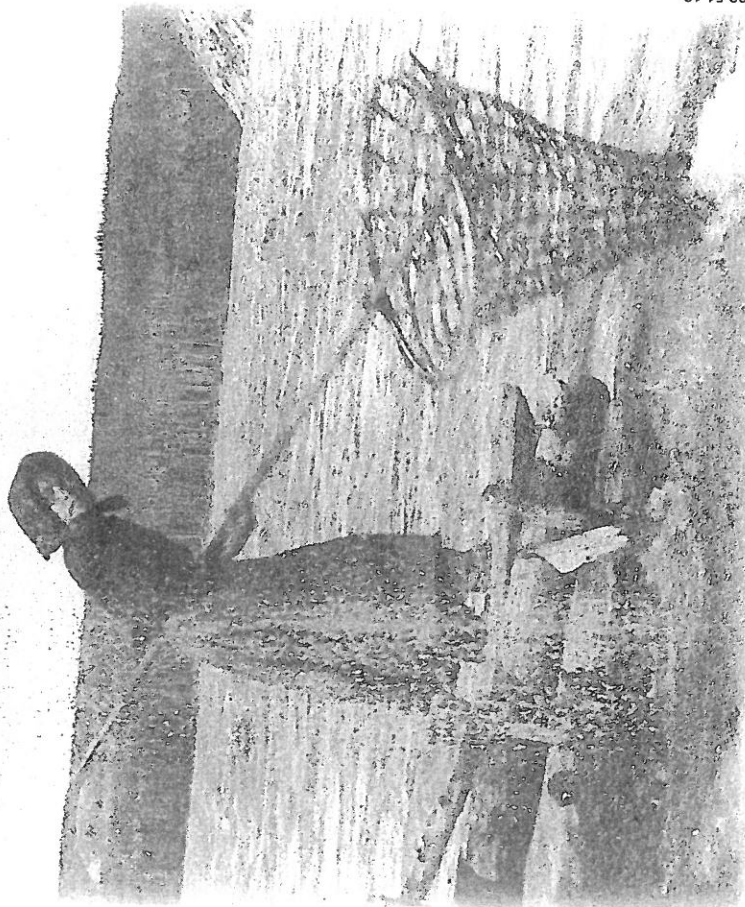
### Transportation

Riverine and upland groups traveled by birchbark canoes and mooseskin coracles, circular emergency vessels used for floating down rivers. Dena'ina used kayaks or baidarkas.

Upland Athabaskans made exquisite snowshoes, varieties of which were designed for different snow conditions. Prior to contact, dogs were used essentially as pack animals. Toboggan-like sleds were used to transport materials from camp to camp. Women assumed most of the burden of transporting goods from one place to another.

### Clothing and decoration

Clothing was distinctive for its tailored, form-fitting, and finely-finished quality. Skins processed by skilled Athabaskan women were highly prized in trade by other Native people. Among upland and riverine groups, standard men's garments consisted of a finely-tanned white or light-colored caribou skin which came to mid-thigh; among the Gwich'in the garment dovetailed to a point in both front and back. Lower garments consisted of a single-piece legging combining pants and boots into a unified caribou skin garment. Women wore leggings and a pullover dress of tanned caribou skin which came to the knee. Winter garments



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**Athabaskans generally lived in sparsely-distributed groups but in places where large salmon runs occurred such as the Copper River (shown here), large groups congregated. Dip nets are still used today.** (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

retained the fur which was worn next to the body while summer garments were hairless.

Both men's and women's outer garments were decorated with a variety of geometric patterns made from porcupine quills, dentalium shells, dried berries, and seeds. Fringes were also a characteristic feature around the bottom of the women's dresses and men's tunics as well on the shoulder in the back. In the winter hats and gloves made of beaver skin and fur were common. Infants were carried in a bark cradleboard.

Additional personal adornment was limited among Athabaskan groups. Dentalium shell necklaces, obtained through long-distance trade networks, were worn as symbols of wealth. Women might have

three straight lines tattooed on their chins and men might have small linear tattoos on their arms symbolizing exploits in war. Nose pins were worn on festive occasions. Faces were painted, with red being the preferred color among riverine groups.

Both men and women wore their hair long. Men are often depicted with their hair down to mid-back with a neat pony-tail.

#### Social organization

Athabaskan social organization is a mixture of their own principles and practices adapted from neighboring groups. A fundamental Athabaskan trait bases kinship on matrilineal descent. With the exception of the Deghitan and one group of Koyukon, all Athabaskans



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**Birch bark canoes required skilled construction and were frequently repaired with patches and pitch. Smaller, easier to handle models were made for women** (CHARLES BUNNELL COLLECTION, ARCHIVES, ALASKA AND POLAR REGIONS DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA-FAIRBANKS)

had clans, named descent groups into which a person was born based on the mother's membership. In the riverine and upland groups, there were three such groupings which were exogamous (requiring spouses to be obtained from another clan). The Atna' and Dena 'ina, who had 11- to 18 clans, also divided themselves into two matrilineal *moieties* (halves), known as Raven and Seagull. This is likely the result of contact with Tlingits who had similar principles of complex social organization.

Social stratification along wealth and class lines varied among Athabaskans. All groups recognized and valued the efforts of individuals to acquire wealth because it would be redistributed through the potlatch. The wealthiest groups appear to have been the Dena 'ina, Atna' and Deghitan. The Dena 'ina *qeshqa* ("wealthy man") and his wife were the leaders of matrilineal extended families consisting of several households in a village. Their status was achieved and depended on both organizational and management skills to acquire wealth through production and trade and open-handed generosity in distributing that wealth to their kinsmen. Among the Atna', a class of wealthy individuals might even be said to have existed. Slavery was practiced among a number of Athabaskan groups, but was almost incidental, typically consisting of women or children captured in raids from other groups.

Most marriages were monogamous with women marrying in their mid-teens and men somewhat later. Wealthier males occasionally had several wives and, among the Gwich'in, might use younger males to sire heirs by their younger wives. Among the Gwich'in, high-status women occasionally had polygamous (woman married to several men) unions to brothers (Slobodin 1984).

Good hunters, traders and organizers achieved leadership and attracted followers, usually through kinship principles. They had little formal authority, leading mostly by example and persuasion. Nevertheless, there were some exceptionally powerful leaders whose influence arose from successful trading practices that generated wealth for their followers.

#### Warfare and Trade

The Koyukon, Gwich'in and Dena 'ina were noted for warfare. The Gwich'in fought steadily with the Koyukon and Inupiat while the Dena 'ina battled the Koniag, Chugach and occasionally the Deghitan. Dena 'ina villages were well hidden to protect them from attacks.

Trade was an important element in many Athabaskan societies. The copper controlled by the Atna' was highly valued by many groups. The Dena 'ina were noted traders between interior groups and the Koniag and Chugach. The Koyukon and Gwich'in traded with their Inupiat neighbors intensively after the 16th century.

#### Ceremonies

The major ceremonial event around which Athabaskan society revolved was the *potlatch*. The term applies to various formal occasions when one group hosts another, distributing gifts to the guests to mark important social events.

The most important potlatch was the *mortuary feast* given in honor of a deceased individual by his clan mates, usually a year or more after the death occurred. During the intervening period, close relatives manufactured and collected an abundance of blankets, other wealth items and food. At the appropriate time, an invitation was sent to other bands and clans to attend the potlatch. Upon arrival, the invitees received gifts in formal presentations followed by feasting and dancing. It was expected that the hosts later would be invited to a potlatch given by their guests. Gift giving was implicitly competitive with leaders vying to give more wealth and foods than their counterparts in other groups. The hosts were expected to give the very best and could be left nearly destitute after hosting a major potlatch.

A particularly distinctive event developed by the Koyukon was the *Stick Dance*, a marathon circle dance conducted around a pole erected either in the center of the village or attached to the center of a building. This was part of the two-day memorial celebration on behalf of a deceased individual but it also was a performance for all those who had died since the previous Stick Dance. Participants were exhilarated, exhausted and uplifted by the emotional outpouring that characterized the marathon dance. It continues to be held from time to time among the Koyukon today.

Smaller potlatches were also given to celebrate events such as a birth, marriage, a boy's first successful hunt, and to rectify wrongs between groups such as accidents or insults.

A different but especially important event was the ritual associated with a young woman's first menstruation. A separate hut was erected where the young girl would be sequestered for periods up to a year. A number of taboos were imposed and she was expected to stay away from contact with men and their hunting gear for fear of polluting it. She was attended by a kinswoman past menopause who taught her the skills and practices necessary for the adult female role. A special feast hosted by her clan announced the completion of her ritual and her availability for marriage to members of other clans invited as guests to the ceremony.

#### Beliefs

Athabaskan beliefs about and relationships with the supernatural involved several important principles. A critical set of beliefs revolved around the similarities between men and animals in the distant past

Both have spirits and in the past they communicated directly with each other. These ancient relationships had been transformed by the acts and antics of Raven, a culture hero and trickster who constantly disrupted the moral order by deception. The legend cycle, told in stories to Athabaskan children, is composed of tales concerning the activities of Raven, along with other mythical beings which exemplify concepts of right and wrong in Athabaskan culture.

Despite the transformations, important relationships between the spirits of men and animals continue. Especially important animals include the caribou, bear and wolf. Humans must remain respectful through ritual practices, such as sexual abstinence and taboos, in order to remain in the good graces of the animal spirits. Some individuals might obtain power through a special relationship with the spirit of an animal species.

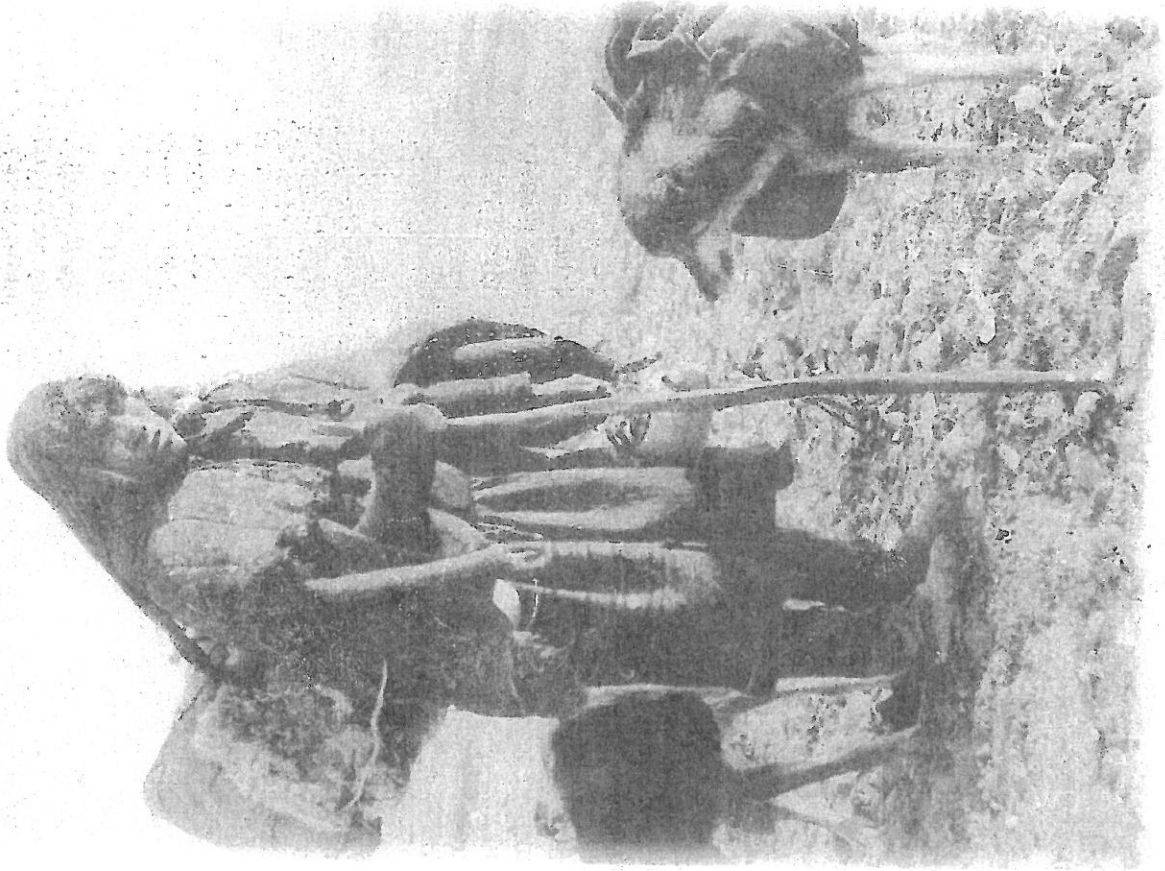
Malevolent spirits must not be offended. One of them, termed the "woodsman" (or *nahim* among contemporary Koyukon), lurks in the forest to capture children and is believed to be what people who are lost in the forest become.

Among the Pacific Athabaskans, the *shaman* was an important intermediary with the spirits. Shamans acted as both magician and medical practitioner and could have either a good or bad reputation. Curing and predicting future events such as weather and hunting success were important activities of the shaman. Among the upland groups, shamans utilized *scapulimancy*, a method of divining the location of game when hunting success was limited. The shaman would place the scapula bone of a caribou in a fire and interpret the resulting cracks in the bone to indicate where the hunters should look for game.

#### *Contact with Europeans*

Direct contact with Russians, English, and Americans came relatively late to Athabaskan groups due to their interior locations. In western Alaska, the effects of trade predated actual contact causing major shifts in village locations and the seasonal activities of the Deghitan and probably the Koyukon (Van Stone 1974). The Russian penetration of the Yukon and Kuskokwim river valleys in the 1840s set in motion major struggles over the control of trade which dramatically altered relationships among the Athabaskan peoples.

Introduced diseases such as smallpox, measles and flu differentially impacted Athabaskan groups. The Deghitan and Koyukon were especially hit hard by the smallpox epidemic of 1834-38; some scholars believe this massive die-off led to the Stick Dance, a ceremony still practiced among the Koyukon today.



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"Horse Creek Mary" typifies the nomadic life of the Athabaskans. Women assumed most of the burden of transporting belongings. Many of the Athabaskan trading trails of southcentral Alaska became today's modern highways. (ANCHORAGE)