

THE DAY
THAT CRIES
FOREVER

Stories of the Destruction of Chenega
During the 1964 Alaska Earthquake



Collected and Edited by
John E. Smelcer

Foreword by
Charles W. Totemoff

Chenega Future, Inc.
Anchorage, Alaska

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Foreword

For the past several years there has been a growing concern among shareholders about the loss of our language, customs, and subsistence traditions. In the spring and summer of 2004, interested shareholders began a grassroots effort to do something about the slow erosion of our culture. Twice they assembled in Anchorage to discuss the problems and to define long-term goals and objectives. From those meetings, the Sugcestun Language and Cultural Preservation Project was established. One of the first priorities was to document first-person accounts by survivors of the tsunamis that devastated the old village of Chenega during the 1964 Good Friday Alaska Earthquake. That singular event was a turning point in Chenega's history. Twenty-five years later to the day, Chenega was again devastated by disaster when the *Exxon Valdez* wrecked on Bligh Reef, spilling eleven million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound, negatively impacting our subsistence way of life for many years afterward.

This book is the product of our determination and commitment to preserve our heritage. The Board of Directors of Chenega Corporation has been honored to support this project, providing financial assistance to conduct the first two Anchorage workshops. It should be noted that royalties from this book will go toward scholarships for Chenega shareholders and their descendants.

Charles W. Totemoff,
President and CEO, Chenega Corporation



Introduction

On Good Friday, March 27, 1964, the largest earthquake ever to strike North America shook the state of Alaska for a full four minutes. The destructive power was tremendous. Coastal communities in south-central Alaska were hardest hit; and while much has been written about Anchorage, Valdez, and Seward, very little has been written about the tiny Native Village of Chenega, which was completely obliterated by a series of massive tsunamis generated by the earthquake.

More than a quarter of the population perished in the waves.

Before the earthquake, Chenega was a small, island community of about 120 people speaking the now-endangered Sugcestun Sugpiaq regional dialect of the broader Alutiiq language that is more akin to Yupik than to its geographically neighboring language, Aleut. Like all Alaska native languages, it had no written form until recently. For Sugcestun, most language documentation began in the early 1970s. The name of the village, *Chenega*, means *along the side* (from the word *caniqaq*), referring to its geographic location on the side of the island. People from neighboring villages often called Chenega *Ing'im Atca* (from the word *ing'iq*), a nickname meaning *under the mountain*, referring to the village's location below a mountain.

The original village was the oldest continuously inhabited native community in the area of Prince William Sound. The name of the village was first reported by Ivan Petroff and appears in the 1880 Russian-Alaska census. It is known that Vitus Bering, the famous Russian discoverer of Alaska, spent time moored off the shores of Chenega. Later, Lord Baranov, then governor of Russian-America, married Anna of Chenega, making her the first "First Lady of Alaska."

Introduction

For the most part, the people of Chenega lived a subsistence lifestyle, fishing the sea, hunting seals, and gathering shellfish, bird eggs, and berries. As well, they became known as a people of deep spiritual conviction after Russian fur traders brought the Russian Orthodox Church to Alaska. Even today, a beautiful, new church stands as the pride of the community's rebuilt village in Chenega Bay.

While Anchorage, Seward, and Valdez rebuilt after the earthquake, the survivors of Chenega never returned to live at their ancestral home because of government-imposed relocation. Some survivors do not openly or willingly discuss that tragic day. To them, it is an unspeakable matter, better kept inside. To others, the pain of having lost loved ones, even forty years ago, is still too great. Because of these feelings, this project has met with resistance. Some survivors have refused to participate, and their feelings are understandable and must be respected.

Another reason why the old village of Chenega was relocated was simply due to geography. Clearly, the old village was situated in a bad location, in the event of another tsunami. The new village of Chenega Bay is built on Evan's Island and situated on a much higher elevation above sea level. After decades of struggling to determine a new village site, the citizens of Chenega have a new hope of rebuilding a strong community rooted in tradition and family.

One of the unforeseen effects of dislocation is that the people are losing their indigenous language. In a close-knit and somewhat isolated community, language—even an endangered language—can survive, precariously. But when indigenous people of Chenega moved away to different villages and towns and cities, the community of language was also, in great measure, affected. Today, very few people speak the old tongue. Fortunately, there is a movement afoot to revitalize the language.

The stories in this volume reflect the memories of many people. Some were adults at the time, while others were yet children. Some were not in Chenega during the event itself, though their homes were lost. Two younger people, for instance, were away at a boarding school in Wrangell, and one was not even born at the time; yet all of their lives were similarly affected.

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The stories were collected over a year's time in a variety of ways using a variety of media. Some were audio-taped in personal interviews with the editor; family members recorded others in the comfortable familiarity of their own homes, sending them to the editor for transcription; several were written out by hand; and two were e-mailed. The editor has been careful to maintain the original contents of the stories, as well as the oral emphases and inflections of the storytellers (to the extent possible in written language), even when that meant transgressing precise rules of written English grammar and punctuation. Nevertheless, clarifications were frequently needed, and indeed, requested. In fact, every story went through a multistage approval process. Each storyteller reviewed the first transcription of his or her narrative. Then subsequent drafts, including the final draft, were again approved at meetings held in Anchorage throughout the year.

There is no linear progression to the telling of this sorrowful episode in the history of a people. No single story is more important than any other. Events happened to everyone at the same time. Thus, each personal account is but a snapshot of the whole picture. Because of this, the narratives have been arranged alphabetically by last name, except for Donia Abbott's story, which has been placed at the end because she was not yet born at the time of the quake. No attempt has been made to arrange recorded events for rhetorical purposes. These personal stories speak eloquently for themselves.

While many books and articles have been written about the 1964 Good Friday Alaska Earthquake, even recently, the tragic story of Chenega has been mostly forgotten. Without it, as former Alaskan Governor Jay Hammond insists, the story of Alaska's history is incomplete.



Margaret Borodkin

Voices in the Darkness

IT WAS AROUND SUPPERTIME when the earthquake hit. The tidal waves didn't come right away after that. It took a little while for them to travel to Chenega.

I was thirty-five in 1964. I remember I was at my mother's house. I think we had just finished eating. They were going to play a movie up at the schoolhouse. I don't remember what it was called, but some people still remember. I do know that if the earthquake had happened even an hour later, almost everyone in the village would have been up the hill watching that movie.

Maybe a lot fewer people would have died then.

When the first earthquake began, the whole house was shaking. The walls were splitting, and part of the roof and ceiling was falling in. Things on shelves or tables were crashing to the floor. I tried to get out of the house, but when I went under a doorway, something heavy fell on me and trapped me on the floor. My leg and hip hurt really badly. I thought my leg was broken. I couldn't get up. When the shaking stopped, I could see my mother outside. She was yelling to people to come help me. After a few minutes I began to hear a loud sound. It was really loud. I couldn't see because I was trapped on the floor, but it must have been the giant tidal wave. When it struck the house, it was as if a bomb blew up. Everything was crashing and rolling and smashing. I must have passed out during that because I don't remember anything else about that. I just remember being scared.

When I woke up I was out in the bay floating on a large piece of debris. I don't even remember what it was exactly—the wall of a house,

THE DAY THAT CRIES FOREVER

I think. There was lots of other debris floating on the surface around me. The whole bay was full of debris. Little did I know at the time, but the whole village had been washed to sea. I was soaking wet and freezing cold. I don't know how long I was in the water. It might have been a long time. I don't know. It was getting dark outside. I could barely see the beach where our village used to be, but there was nothing left of it. I tried to move, but my leg hurt so badly and I was so cold that I couldn't move. I started screaming for help. Soon I could hear someone yelling back to me.

"Who are you?" the voice asked.

I told him who it was and then he ran away up the hill to find someone to help.

The time after the voice in the darkness left was the scariest time for me. I was alone in the water, freezing cold, hurt, and frightened. I didn't know how long it would be until he would return, or if he'd return at all. Perhaps he would get busy helping other people and forget about me. I hadn't actually seen the tsunami, so I didn't even know what had happened. One minute I was in my house and the next thing I know I was floating on the sea. From where I was, I could hear people crying, screaming, and calling out for help or to one another. Entire families were searching for one another. Parents were looking for their children and children were crying for their parents. It was all very sad and terrible.

As the waves rocked my floating island of debris, I held on tight and tried to paddle towards shore with one hand, but it was useless. I was so cold I didn't think I was going to make it.

Finally, a boat that had been out fishing or hunting—I think they had been out seal hunting—came in and saw me floating in the bay. I think it was called the Marpet. They pushed through all the floating debris and fished me out of the water. They put three sleeping bags on me, but that didn't help. They told me later that I stopped breathing for five minutes, but that I eventually came to. I don't remember anything about that, but it must be true.

Later, I learned that my mother, Anna Vlasoff, had been washed out to sea when the first wave hit. My last memory is of her running around outside her house trying to find someone to help me.

Voices in the Darkness

I'll never forget that.

It's been forty years since that tragic night, and in all that time, I've never gone back to Chenega. I just don't think I could stand to see where my home used to be, where my mother last stood, where my entire village was swept off the face of the earth.



Paul Timothy Selanoff

The Day I Was Alone, but Not Alone

I REMEMBER ON THE DAY of the earthquake we were all going to watch a movie. It was *The House on Haunted Hill*. Before movie time, my dad and them just took a bath, and they were relaxing in the house. There was Mom and Willy. But I remember my oldest brother, Kenny, just wanted to go kill birds. So we went out on the beach, and we were chasing them. I was trying to get them first just so I could beat him, since he was older than me. I started getting way ahead on the beach. I was way out there all by myself, maybe a mile away from everybody. The village was real small from way out there. Even the other kids—there was Kenny, and Jerry and Georgie, I think—they were far away. I was all alone. I was way out there where the big boulders are. It was low tide.

All of a sudden the ground started shaking real hard. It was shaking so hard that those boulders were jumping off the ground like rubber balls. I started running back as fast as I could. I was wearing a black jacket with rocks in the pockets. As I ran, I jumped from boulder to boulder while they were bouncing in the air. I could hear Kenny and them yelling, “Come on! Come on!” But they were so far away I could barely hear them. Pretty soon I could hear this big rumble, a roaring like ten fighter jets flying by low. It was really loud. I got scared and started running faster. I was running and jumping from rock to rock, trying to get back to the village.

The ground was like Jell-O.

I was really scared, and then I felt a tap on my right shoulder, and I heard someone tell me not to be afraid. He tapped me and said,

The Day I Was Alone, but Not Alone

“Look, don’t be afraid.” Suddenly, all of my fears just went like still waters. Everything was calm and peaceful. There was no fear. Everything was calm. Everything was okay. And then He tapped me again and said the same thing. Then He tapped me a third time and said, “Look, don’t be afraid.”

I remember I turned around to look and there was a giant tidal wave, maybe a hundred feet tall, and it was almost upon me. So I turned around, but yet I wasn’t scared. But I was still too far away and there was no place to go. There was a side of the mountain that was almost straight up. I couldn’t run along the beach, so I had to go up the mountainside. I had to go straight up. I ran up as fast and as high as I could. There were no trees there. I think from an earlier snow slide. I had my right hand dug in. I recall the ground was really like Jell-O. When I ran up, I was holding on to a twig. It was just a thin little root or something sticking out of the ground. It broke, but I didn’t fall. I don’t know what it was. It was a powerful feeling, though, like someone holding me from falling.

I don’t remember what happened after that. It’s as if I fell asleep, as if somebody erased that time from my memory. I don’t know how I escaped the wall of water. Since 1964, I’ve been thinking about it, trying to remember. I’ve come to think that He didn’t want me to remember it, that there was no need to worry about it. Anyhow, that’s how I’ve come to feel about that day. I just put it in His hands.

Later, I awoke on top of that mountain, saying “The Lord’s Prayer.” It was like He was setting a stage for me, like I was going to watch a movie all by myself. He had a little place for me to sit down. It was a depression on the ground like a natural armchair.

From it, I could just sit and see the waves coming towards the village. Down below, I could see someone running. I think it was Mike Eleshansky. He was running around on the dock checking on his skiff, and people were screaming at him. I saw Steve Eleshansky going around the point to John Selanoff’s place. I watched Mrs. Evanoff and Joann Kompkoff run into a house and close the door. And then the first wave came and went, and I saw three people riding in and out on the waves on this log. I think it was the light pole from the church. I come to find

out later it was my dad and Kenny and somebody else. They rode out all three waves.

In between the second and the third wave, the water went out so far that the whole bay just emptied out and became mudflats. I looked below at the village again and said, "What the heck?" There was this one guy running down, and there was someone stuck in the mud way down there. I didn't know who it was. You can't imagine how far down it was. But he ran down there and pulled the person out.

It turned out it was my dad and the person he saved was my sister, Nancy.

Then, the next wave came in, and it washed right up the hill where the village was. It swept all around it. It was way up there. The whole village was under water. It was two feet deep in the light plant (generator) up on the hill. A funny thing about it: there was my dad's boat—maybe eighteen feet long. It was named Jeanie. It was running around like it was full speed going fifty or sixty miles an hour as if someone was inside steering it. It was racing around all over. When it was all over—after the three waves had come and gone—it was parked right where it was supposed to be, without an anchor, not even broke, like nothing had happened at all. It must have got a hole, though, because it slowly sank there. Its bones are still down there.

From atop the hill, I saw the St. Theresa get hit by two waves coming together. It was Eddie Vlasoff's boat. At first it was sitting on the mudflat because all the water went out of the bay before the big waves hit. When the wave came in, it lifted that boat right up and pushed it up in the air above the trees, annihilating it right before my eyes.

After the third and last wave, I remember the whole bay was full of debris, logs and lumber and parts of houses and boats and everything just going out to sea. Next thing I remember was hearing someone yelling for help. I stood up so I could see better and there was Margaret Borodkin floating out there among all that debris. I was too far away to hear what she was yelling, but I knew it was her. I recognized her voice. It looked like she was stuck in the debris, like it was crushing her. In a little while, I saw a boat trying to get to her, pushing its way through

The Day I Was Alone, but Not Alone

all the debris. Eventually, George Borodkin, I think, came in his skiff and got her.

The old church was destroyed. But later they found the Bible from the church near the wreckage, and it was lying there open to a passage from Revelation. We still have that Bible in the new Russian Orthodox Church in Chenega Bay.

I still remember how powerful those waves were. You can't imagine what it's like to see three giant waves, each almost a hundred feet tall, maybe higher, coming in at hundreds of miles per hour, maybe faster—a giant wall just coming in like that, that fast. It's just awesome. No words can describe it. I hope you never experience a thing like that.

I sat up on the hill for maybe two more hours. It was getting dark, and I could see only two lights left on in the village—Ms. Madsen's and Norma Selanoff's, who were maybe alive up at the schoolhouse. There were no other lights at all. I thought they were the only other two people left on earth. I really thought it was the end of the world. But I wasn't afraid. I remember that I was still calm, sitting up there on the hill in the snow.

I finally made my way along the hill around our village to look for people up near the school, walking in snow up to my waist. I was cold, I had lost a shoe, and I was tired. I got scared and started calling through the darkness. Someone answered. I ran downhill towards the voice, jumping over debris. I must have jumped eight feet at a time. I followed that voice, and guess who it was? It was my dad. When I saw him I jumped, almost flying, into his arms like a magnet.

He hugged me and whispered in my ear, "You seen Buttons and Gula?" He almost cried. But he was happy to see me. I was so happy to see my dad.

Later, everyone who was left was up in the woods up above the schoolhouse huddled around a campfire. That night I slept in one of those old Blazo fuel boxes—one of those wooden crates—listening to my mom crying. There weren't many blankets or extra coats. All we had was whatever we were already wearing or what was in the school at the time. We used whatever we could find to keep warm.

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The next day, we started walking down the hill to where the village had been. We were at the schoolhouse when another big earthquake shook, almost knocking everyone down, and we all went running back up the hill again. We thought another wave was coming. We were like scared little rabbits. I could tell even the men were scared, which was really different. They were never scared of anything.

It was perhaps ten minutes after the first earthquake hit that the waves began to come in. It might have been longer. I don't remember for certain. Everything happened so fast. So many things happened to so many people in just a few minutes. There was no time.

We lost lots of people that day.

I remember when the planes came to take us away after the second day. When we were up in the air, I looked down at my village and there was nothing left except the old schoolhouse on the top of the hill. There was nothing left. I remember as we flew over Knight Island, I looked out the window and saw all these orange things floating on the surface. I thought they were crab buoys. I remember thinking, "Man, they're crabbing all over." But it was red snappers that had died in the tidal waves and were floating around everywhere.

No one lived in Chenega after that. Everyone moved away to other places.

A few years after the earthquake, my family went back to visit the village for the first time. We were fishing aboard Nellie Juan 36, and we stopped to see our old home. I remember it was dark outside when we dropped anchor just off the beach. Then the strangest thing happened. It was strange, but it was also comforting at the same time. It was more mystery than anything else. There was this dishpan hanging on the wall near the door about four feet from me—maybe six feet. All of a sudden, the pan started making sound like someone was banging on it. The thing was bouncing and swinging against the wall, but the sea was calm and flat. The boat wasn't rocking at all. I thought it was a trick, but no one else was there. Mom and dad were on the beach walking around with Tommy. I told George to look, and he also saw it just bouncing around, making sound like someone was banging it, like someone was using it like a drum. But I wasn't afraid. I had the sense that every one

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of the twenty-three souls of those lost relatives was happy to see us come home. They were drumming to welcome us home. They were happy to see us.

I guess I was a little scared.

Other strange things happened, too. We could hear what sounded like people walking around up on the deck. Things were being moved around like a washbasin that we found out on the deck by the winch. And then someone or something untied our anchor line, and you could hear it running out. My dad said, "That's enough," as he caught the line just before it went over the side. We slept there the next night too, but nothing happened. It was quiet. They had come to visit us that one time, all at once, really hard. You could hear them all over that first night, but it was quiet from then on.

I guess they got to say goodbye.



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