

## A Partnership for the Past

**T**he U.S. Coast Guard base in Kodiak, Alaska—Integrated Support Command (ISC) Kodiak—has a venerable history.

Originally constructed as part of Alaska's World War II naval campaign, the base covered more than 40,000 acres, held over 1,000 structures, housed roughly 45,000 personnel, and played a critical role in the Aleutian campaign. The Coast Guard arrived in Kodiak in 1947 to act as the Navy's search and rescue arm and expanded its operations to include fisheries patrols in the 1950s. In 1972, the Navy transferred the entire property to the Coast Guard, making ISC Kodiak the world's largest Coast Guard base. To commemorate its significant contributions to American history, portions of the base and associated historic features were designated a National Historic Landmark in 1985.

But the history of ISC Kodiak covers much more than the recent past. That is what the staff of Communication Station Kodiak (COMMSTA) learned recently as they assisted archeologists unearthing prehistoric camps in their antenna field. Along the grassy shores of the Buskin River, a shallow, meandering salmon stream, fox holes and bunkers, airstrips and dirt roads document World War II activity. To most observers these features summarize local history.

The surrounding mountains and lush rolling meadows suggest little else. But buried from view is another story, with objects revealing a deeper past. For more than 5,000 years, Native people built camps along the river, moving inland from coastal settlements to capture and preserve fish. With help from the Coast Guard, the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, a Native Alaskan organization, is preserving and sharing this unique piece of history.

In 1995, ISC Kodiak commissioned an archeological survey of its land to learn more about its past. In addition to its military mission, ISC Kodiak is a trustee of public lands and cares for cultural resources reflecting local history. Native people have lived in the Kodiak Archipelago for more than 7,500 years, creating a rich record of their lifestyles. There are more than 1,200 known archeological sites, and many contain remarkable accumulations of structures, tools, and midden.

Along the Buskin River, subtle clues led to the discovery of ancient encampments perched on the terrace edge. Gentle depressions suggested underlying structures and erosion uncovered stone fishing tools. Alutiiq Museum archeologists mapped and tested the area and then suggested a more intensive study through their Community Archaeology program.

Each summer, the Alutiiq Museum works with land managers to gather information from local sites, particularly those threatened by erosion, modern development, or vandalism. Sites are chosen for their potential to produce scientifically valuable information and then excavated with the help of community volunteers. Through this popular program, Alutiiq people recover another piece of their heritage, archeologists gather data on the evolution of Alaskan societies, volunteers experience the thrill of excavation, and the information from threatened sites is saved. Coast Guard members, travel agents, students, biologists, accountants, state troopers, teachers, tourists, reporters, the borough mayor, and parents and their children are some of the people that have signed up to help.

*Robert Kopperl oversees the excavation at the Outlet Site, Locus A. The four excavators (lower left) are uncovering a 3,300-year-old house. Trina Squartsoff (upper right) is sieving all of the excavated soil looking for small artifacts. Photo by Patrick Saltonstall.*



No archeologist had ever dug a settlement in an interior region of Kodiak. Here was a chance to investigate a little-known piece of Alutiiq history while assisting the Coast Guard with site stewardship.

“Since the Coast Guard deeply values its rich history, we readily appreciate the efforts of the Alutiiq Museum to discover and document the rich heritage of Kodiak’s native inhabitants” remarked Lt. Commander David Dermanelian.

For the last two years, the staff of COMMSTA Kodiak and the Environmental Branch of ISC Kodiak have assisted the museum with permitting, project safety, and logistical support. The museum has recruited participants, offering high school and college credit in collaboration with local educators, and created educational packets with a grant from ISC’s Officer’s Spouses Association.

“It’s not just about getting your hands dirty and finding artifacts. We want people to learn about Alutiiq history and the value of archeological sites” notes Museum Collections Manager Elizabeth Eufemio.

More than 80 volunteers have given nearly 3,000 hours of their time to study five locales along the river terrace. With shovels, the crew cut back the sod capping the site to reveal a layer of midden, filled with artifacts and black from the charcoal of ancient fires. Excavations focused around gentle depressions visible from the site’s surface. Alutiiq people once built their houses partially underground—digging a foundation that was fitted with a wooden frame and then covered with warm, insulating sod. When these houses collapse, they leave depressions that last for thousands of years.

One depression produced a house with a sunken entrance tunnel, a large central hearth, clay-lined pits for cooking, and a sleeping area. Another appeared to be a storage structure, a place where fish were stockpiled and perhaps dried with fires of local alder and willow. Several other depressions produced tent foundations, temporary structures used alternatively as dwellings and fish smoking houses.

Early project results are posted at the museum’s web site <[www.alutiiqmuseum.com](http://www.alutiiqmuseum.com)>, while staff complete their study of the thousands of artifacts, animal bones, and charred wood

samples collected. The objects remain Coast Guard property, but they are stored at the museum where the native community cares for them and where they are incorporated in displays and research projects. Each object has been carefully cleaned, numbered, identified, and entered into a computer database—again with the help of community volunteers.

The data are beginning to reveal a picture of economic change. Over time, fishing and preservation technologies evolved to support larger salmon harvests. The earliest fishermen visited the river with slate spears; hunting lances refashioned with barbs to impale individual fish. Their camps have been obscured by later occupations, but their visits appear brief and their catches modest. Later visitors constructed tents and used pits for smoking, preserving quantities of fish perhaps speared behind weirs. They brought a new type of long-edged knife, the *ulu*, that was perfect for processing larger catches. The most recent inhabitants built a large permanent house and permanent storage structures. With large nets they seem to have harvested fish in much greater quantities than ever before. These results are enriching the picture of life in Kodiak’s distant past and will be supplemented with a final season of research in 2001.

The success of this collaborative program has not gone unnoticed. In December 2000, the Alutiiq Museum was honored with the National Award for Museum Service. Bestowed by the Federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, and presented by then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, this prestigious award honors organizations that enrich life in their communities through sustained and innovative public service. Community Archaeology was one of three museum programs cited.

“We are proud to be recognized for this achievement and hope that our collaborative programming will serve as a model for other organizations seeking to promote cultural awareness,” said Executive Director Sven Haakanson, Jr.

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