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THE CHENEGA PROJECT

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MORGAN YOUNG
A YOUNG FURMAN GRADUATE SPENDS A YEAR IN ALASKA,

RECORDING THE CULTURE AND TRADITIONS OF A SMALL BUT PROUD COMMUNITY.

As we flew over Prince William Sound in south central Alaska, I admired the breathtakingly beautiful vistas from the co-pilot’s seat. Just a few weeks earlier, I had graduated from Furman. Now I was soaring over some of the most spectacular scenery in the world.

Suddenly the pilot banked the tiny plane sharply to the right so I could get a close-up view of the Dall sheep grazing on the side of a mountain. As we flew past the jutting rocks, I could feel the blood draining from my face. I spent the remainder of the trip pale and white-knuckled, a death grip on the edge of my seat.

By the time we landed on the narrow gravel runway in the village of Chenega Bay, I had recovered enough to take a quick tour of the island with a local resident. Quick is the operative word here: Besides its 60 or so residents, the village has a school, a Russian Orthodox Church, a clinic, a museum and a power station. The remainder of the village is natural and untouched.

My colleague John Smelcer and I decided to stroll down to the waterfront so I could take some photographs. As we wandered along the rocky beach, John mentioned that black bears frequently search for salmon in the area and often charge through the woods paralleling the water.

Somewhat unnerved, I asked him what would happen if we encountered a bear. Since he had no gun, he said the best way to scare bears away was to talk loudly and deeply, alerting them to our presence.

This wasn’t the most encouraging news, I thought, but I decided to be brave and forge on. I did convince John to walk on my right — the woods side — so he could serve as a buffer should a bear...
According to the author, this is the only type of igloo you’ll see in Alaska. This structure is actually an abandoned gas station. Opposite: A stunning tableau in Denali National Park. Previous spread: Saint Theotokos Russian Orthodox Church is a landmark of Chenega Bay. The author is pictured on second row, far right — next to the bear.

decide to approach us. For good measure, I occasionally bellowed, “Bear! Hey bear! We’re here, bear!” And I had my camera ready, just in case the opportunity to “shoot” a bear came up.

After a while, John, more familiar with the area than I, suggested a shortcut through the woods. This was clearly the worst idea I’d heard in a while, so I insisted on walking back along the beach and continued to reassure myself with my anti-bear tactics.

We made it back to the village unscathed, but when we returned to the site an hour later, two black bears were roaming and fishing where we had walked.

Such was my introduction to the wilds of Alaska.

I graduated from Furman last spring with a degree in history and experience as a student photographer for the university’s publications and Web pages. Thanks to my background, I was able to land a one-year position in Alaska with the Chenega Corporation.

My job: to assist John Smelcer in preparing a book titled *We Are the Land, We Are the Sea: Stories of Subsistence from Chenega, Alaska*. Our goal: to preserve, at least on paper, the traditions of subsistence living as practiced by a specific Alaskan Native community.

Chenega has a tragic history. The original village was established in the 1770s and was the oldest settlement in Prince William Sound. All was well in the quiet fishing community until March 27, 1964, when the second most powerful earthquake in history struck Alaska. The resulting tsunamis destroyed the village and killed more than a third of its residents. The survivors were temporarily resettled in villages throughout Prince William Sound.

In 1971 former residents of Chenega received title to 70,000 acres of land in Prince William Sound, which enabled them eventually to re-establish the village of Chenega and form Chenega Corporation, a Native Alaskan-owned company involved in a number of service and manufacturing business lines. In 1984 the new village of Chenega Bay was established on Evans Island, in Prince William Sound.

It wasn’t long, however, before disaster struck again. On March 24, 1989, the *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker struck a reef off Bligh Island, spilling millions of gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. Today the village of Chenega Bay, which is accessible only by air and water, still feels the impact of the oil spill, particularly through its effects on area wildlife and on the subsistence lifestyle of the villagers.

Yet the village Natives — the Chugach Alutiiq, one of five Native Alaskan groups — persevere, and today their community is thriving as they work to maintain their traditional lifestyles and adapt to the modern world. Chugach refers to Natives from Prince William Sound. Other Alutiiq communities can be found on Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula.

It is important to the Natives, and to Alaskan historical and cultural history, to sustain
a connection to the past and to record, in words and photographs, their tradition of subsistence living — a tradition that involves living off the land and sea without altering the balance of nature, be it by hunting, fishing, harvesting clams, gathering berries or picking edible plants. Indeed, while different Native groups have their own cultural idiosyncrasies, subsistence represents a common thread among the indigenous Alaskan cultures.

Living in Prince William Sound, the Chugach Alutiiq are a maritime people. When subsistence was their mainstay, they relied heavily on fish — salmon, halibut, herring — and marine mammals, such as seals and sea lions. Hunting was also important, with deer, moose and bear being the main game.

Today few people depend solely on subsistence for their diet, as technology and easier access to stores and supermarkets have made the subsistence way of life almost obsolete. But many Natives in Prince William Sound still subsist as a way to carry on their culture and honor the heritage of their elders.
By preserving the stories of the past and the oral histories of the shareholders and descendants of Chenega, *We Are the Land, We Are the Sea* is designed to help the local residents maintain the vestiges of their culture. In our interviews with tribal elders, they described how things once were — before the earthquake, before the oil spill, before the conveniences of the modern world. Teen-agers retold their early hunting stories of how they felt when they first shot a deer, or about the surge of pride when they received their first hunting knife. And the residents admitted their fears about the potential loss of their culture and, ultimately, their way of life.

I hope my work can aid in preserving the heritage of the people of Chenega. Perhaps *We Are the Land, We Are the Sea* will even spark a renewed interest in subsistence and the traditional Alutiiq lifestyle among the younger generations.

In addition to working on the Chenega Bay project, I took advantage of my time in Alaska to explore various areas of the state.

I was based in Anchorage, which was an adventure in itself. I lived in an apartment downtown, in a neighborhood known as Bootlegger’s Cove, right on the shore of Cook Inlet. Moose roamed the area, and despite my frequent sightings of the prehistoric looking creatures, I was still startled speechless at every encounter.

When I first arrived last summer, I passed many sleepless nights attempting to adjust to the eternal
sunlight. Just when I had adapted to the midnight sun, the endless darkness began. Anchorage actually has a fair amount of daylight in winter, especially compared to the northern areas of the state. Barrow, for example, experiences two months of complete darkness when the sun never rises.

Not surprisingly, the weather was also an adjustment, given that I'm from St. Augustine, Fla. Last summer was abnormally cold, with temperatures seldom rising out of the 60s, and the winter followed suit, with record snowfall and lows in the single digits.

When the first snowfall hit in October, I walked around my neighborhood snapping hundreds of photos, completely mesmerized by the white flakes piling up everywhere. By the next day, I'd already had enough and joined my fellow Anchorage residents in cursing the cold weather.

Then I did the practical thing: I put studded tires on my truck, locked it in four-wheel drive, and prepared for six months of ice. Eventually I came to enjoy the cold and actually found myself complaining when the thermometer rose above 35 degrees.

After a few months in Anchorage I began volunteering at the local Visitors Center, a sod-roofed log cabin in the heart of town. On Saturdays I would don my uniform of guspuk (a traditional Native parka, made of lightweight cotton) and offer my services to the tourists who wandered by. The tourist business slowed in winter, when most of our visitors were locals who would stop in to get out of the cold — and entertain us with their colorful tales.

Thanks to our project, I was able to visit the Nuuciq Spirit Camp on Nuchek Island in Prince William Sound. Run by Chugach Alaska, a regional corporation, the camp is for children who are at least one quarter Alutiiq. Campers live on the island and learn about their Native culture and heritage through language, dance, art classes and subsistence workshops. Elders from communities throughout the sound visit the camp and pass on their knowledge to the younger generation.

It was an honor to be allowed to see these activities, but a bit of a challenge for a vegetarian to find non-meat dishes among the traditional foods. Nonetheless, it was an exciting experience, and I left the camp with several hundred photographs.

On my own, I visited Denali National Park, Talkeetna, Seward, Girdwood, Moose Pass, Kenai, and many other places. Denali Park was especially memorable, because there I got engaged to Michael Orr '05. He proposed on the banks of the Nenana River when he visited me last September.

As my work in Alaska comes to a close, I can honestly state that this project has solidified my interest in history, especially public history, and encouraged me to continue my academic studies. This fall I will begin graduate study at the University of South Carolina, where I plan to focus on modern United States history.

I will never forget my year in Alaska. It is my hope that, through the stories I have recorded and the photographs I have taken, I can help in some way to preserve the culture and lifestyle of the people of Chenega Bay. Despite trials and upheavals caused by natural and man-made disasters, they have emerged strong and proud — and determined to ensure that their heritage is not forgotten.