The Chugach Baidarka, The story of Chenega
1933-2012
• Chugach Vocabulary

• Baidarka - Russian word for skin and frame kayaks

• Qayaq – Chugach word for skin and frame kayaks
Qayanguaq – Chugach word for one man kayak
Qayarpak – Chugach word for two man kayak
Paitaalek – Chugach word for three man kayak
Anchorage at upper left, Chenega Island left center –

Prince William Sound, Alaska
1778
John Webber, artist, Cook’s third voyage
Snug Cove, near Tatitilek, Prince William Sound
Chugach bidarka model collected by Vancouver
Prince William Sound 1794
Frederica de Laguna and Kaj Birket-Smith, do an ethnological study at Chenega, 1933
Chenega was the only village still building baidarkas
Frederica de Laguna paddling a baidarka in Chenega
Blessing of the Baidarka 1933
Steve Vlasoff, Russian Orthodox lay reader
Blessing of the Baidarka 1933
Steve Brizkaloff, master builder 1933
Boat Shop Chenega 1933
Alexi Steve paddle making 1933
Boat house and new baidarka 1933
Alexi Steve with new baidarkas using canvas covering
1933
Finishing the canvas covering 1933
Steve Vlasoff’s baidarka in front of Steve’s smokehouse 1933
Baidarkas were paddled in the kneeling position
Chenega 1944-48

• John M. Poling was assigned the teaching position in Chenega. He and his wife, Lucy Poling, and two sons, Mitch and Don Poling, were welcomed to the village by Steve Vlasoff, spiritual leader of Chenega.
Steve Vlasoff, Russian Orthodox lay reader and John M. Poling, schoolteacher
Chenega, 1944
Painting the church
The school 1946
Sam Riboloff with salmon
Bill Hjort launching his fishing career
Lucy Poling with our baidarka 1947
High tide at the boathouse 1947
Alexi Steve and Mitch at the boathouse
Baidarka on the dock
Baidarka frames in the boatshop
Baidarka frames
Charlie Selanoff with baidarka bow
Pete Selanoff with super sized paddle
Nellie Evanoff and Mitch, in front of Nellies house
Bill and Leland Poling by the church 1946
Jack Evanoff with baidarkas and Bingo
Willie Evanoff in foreground with his baidarka
Willie is off with his groceries
When Steve was 70, in 1953, he paddled to Valdez and back, which took several weeks.

In 1954 he loaned his baidarka to the son of the owner of the mailboat Siren. The baidarka was taken to Cordova. It was acquired by the Cordova Historical Museum in 1969.
Interior bow lashing
Interior bow construction
Gunwale, rib, beam, and side stringer construction
Top skin lashing
Traditional single paddle and model baidarka
The Good Friday earthquake in 1964 generated a tsunami that destroyed Chenega. The only building left standing was the schoolhouse on the hill.

The survivors established a new village, Chenega Bay, thirty miles away, on Evans Island in 1984.
Don and Mitch Poling in 2002 on the beach near the former location of Steve Vlasoff’s smoke house. Nothing remains but the derelict schoolhouse.
Nuchek Spirit Camp, Nuchek, Alaska

Nuchek Spirit Camp was established in the 1990’s by John Johnson under the auspices of the Chugach Native Corporation. The Chugach culture, language, and arts are being passed to the younger generations.
The Russian Orthodox Church at Nuchek
Baidarka Renewal

- Baidarka building started at Nuchek Spirit Camp in 2003. The campers, lead by Mitch Poling, Walter Elisovisky, and Don Kompkoff, completed and paddled the first three man baidarka in Prince Wiliam Sound since the early fifties. The baidarka was dedicated to the spirit of Steve Vlasoff and to the memory of Charlie Selanoff in a blessing ceremony.
Blessing of the Baidarkas 2008 Nuchek
Don Kompkoff and Father Sergei Active officiating
The younger generation gets acquainted with its heritage.

Nuchek 2008
The fleet grows. Nuchek 2008
Don Kompkoff holds the upright paddle
The young men take to the water
And the girls too!
Even the elders get in the action!
Paddling the anyyak (canoe)
John Johnson enjoying the angiaks
Looking for sea otters
Found them!
Nuchek Spirit Camp
Humpback whale at Nuchek
The lagoon at Nuchek
The beach at Nuchek
Baidarka Building

- gunwales
- bow
- stern
- keel
- ribs, stringers
- cockpits
- bow boards
- covering
Model baidarkas
The construction sheet for the models
• Full size construction
Start with the gunwales (Apamak)
The gunwales are cut, the rib pockets made, and initial bending
The cross pieces (ajage) are installed
The cross pieces can have a complex shape
There are six to eight cross pieces
Installing the bow (nucugvia) and stern (aqua) is next
Pegs are cut to hold the stern piece
The stern piece is drilled to fit on the pegs
The keel (nanguna) is installed to complete the fastening of the bow and stern
Note the keel on the left frame
The bow is notched and lashed on
The bows were originally carved from a spruce stump
But now we take a shortcut and cut them and carve them from 2x12 lumber
Full carved bow from a 3” thick wood piece
Note the very special notching, scarfing, and lashings used to hold the bow.
The Y lashing
The bow peg is characteristic of the Chugach kayak.
The stern also uses a peg for the lashing. This is typical for the Chugach kayak.
The ribs (atuna)

• The ribs are bent using boiling water. We use yellow cedar, traditionally hemlock was used. Often the ribs were chewed at the bends so that they would not break. We skip the chewing part in these modern times.
Well, most of us do - Martha Vlasoff shows how
Bending the ribs is an art. We do it by eye, no forms or templates, just like in the old days.
The ribs go into pockets (slots) cut in the gunwales. The stringers are lashed to the ribs with a continuous one piece side to side lashing.
Henry shows how to bend the ribs into place after the hot water bath
Henry cuts the rib to length
The rib is in the pocket
Special tie down lashing at the rib ends
Stringers (unanarat)

- There are about fifty lashings for the stringers, a big job
A view down the hull
Stringer cross ties at the stern, also at the bow
The little kids get to do this too!
Top deck

• Top deck stringers, cockpit hoops, and cockpit supports are next
The top stringers are lashed on
The cockpit supports (ajapaqvik) are lashed in. Walter Elisovisky at work.
The cockpit hoops (painga) are lashed to the supports
Cockpit hoop scarf lashings
Bow boards (sinkaq)

• The bow plates are added
bow boards
The front deck stringer goes above the bow plates
The bow plates are carved to shape
The completed frame is painted with linseed oil to waterproof it.
At last the frame is done! Henry Makarka leads the drumming
The cover (ayahwak)

- We use ballistic nylon with a urethane water proofing. Formerly sea lion skins were used. These are now very expensive and require constant maintenance.
Sandra Smith-Poling is setting up the cover at the boathouse at Nuchek. Stretching the cover tightly with no wrinkles around the cockpit is a challenge.
Stretching the covering around the bow is also quite the challenge.
There is very little margin left to sew with down the bow curve/slot.
Bow sewing is complete. The wrinkles will come out with water shrinking, then heat shrinking.
Once the covering is on, we color the nylon with dye used for silk. Aztec Gold gives just the right color.
The boat house at Nuchek. The sewing is done! Sandra Smith-Poling is the chief sewer. This is very hard work – thank you!
It comes full circle
January, 2012
Chenega Bay, Alaska
High school students building three baidarkas at Chenega Bay
Village adults were an important part of the team. Larry (village mayor) and Gail Evanoff work on the covering.
The grade school kids did a lot of sanding and planing on the frames, and built their own model baidarkas!
The high school kids also made the paddles
It snowed a lot, over 20 feet deep!
Finished at last! Middle of March!
Off to the school to be stored there
Chenega school study area
The Blessing Ceremony
June, 2012 at the original Chenega Village site on Chenega Island

The baidarkas were given spirit names and paddling names

• The Spirit of James Angaiak    Chenega Bay
• The Spirit of Willie Evanoff    Old Chenega
• The Spirit of Don Kompkoff      Chenega
The blessing ceremony at old Chenega  June 2012
The blessing ceremony
They are paddling what they built
Sweeney Selanoff, Joyce Kompkoff
Old Chenega bay
The old Chenega beach
My thanks to

Steve Vlasoff
John M. Poling
Frederica de Laguna
Their work made everything possible

John Johnson
Mike Livingston
in gratitude for their work in preserving the Aleut heritage

David Zimmerly
• Cordova Historical Museum  Cordova, Alaska
• Russian Orthodox Museum  Anchorage, Alaska
  Anchorage Museum  Anchorage, Alaska
  Alaska State Museum  Juneau, Alaska
• Kunstkamera Museum  St Petersburg, Russia
  Museo de Americas  Madrid, Spain
  Ubersee Museum  Bremen, Germany
  Canadian Canoe Museum  Peterborough, Ontario
Chugach seal hunting hat, 1794, Museum of the Americas, Madrid, Spain
200 year old Chugach paddling hat made of spruce root, at the Kunstkamera museum in St. Petersburg, Russia
Ceremonial paddles made by
Making paddles at Nuchek