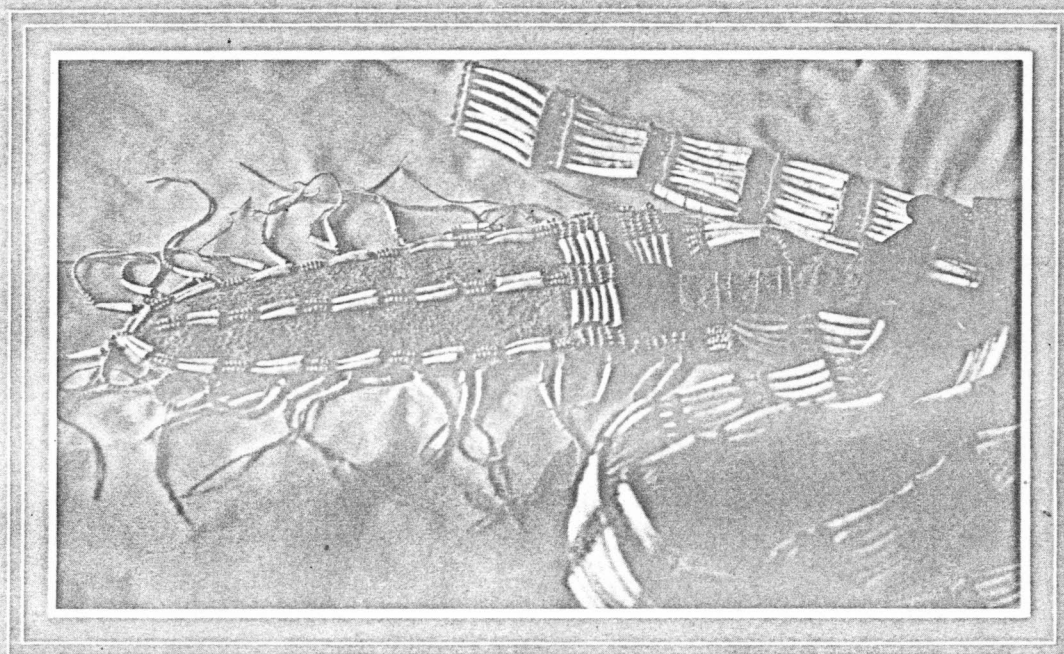


AUTUMN, 1973
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Alaska
History and Arts of the North—Quarterly
Journal®



Lael Morgan

*A chief's necklace and scabbard, owned by Ralph Perdue, Fairbanks jeweler.
See—"Trade Beads, Alaska Native Heirlooms," page 217.*

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TRADE BEADS

ALASKA'S NATIVE HEIRLOOMS

Heirlooms are few among the Native peoples of most of Alaska, the exception being the Tlingits, Haidas and Tsimpshians of the southern Panhandle. The forebears of the more northerly residents were in great part nomadic and they traveled light, moving with the game and the seasons. They placed little premium on personal possessions, especially of the bulkier sort. But even the travelers among the northern Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos did place a high value on glass and ceramic trade beads and acquired and kept possession of them, often handing them on from one generation to the next. Beads are light and durable, easily transported and easily stored.

The first European trade beads probably arrived in Alaska before the white man did. As early as 1649 Russian Cossacks had opened a trading post at Anadry in North-western Siberia, and goods from there flowed across Bering Strait.

Kotzebue Sound was a great trading center for early Alaskans. The first white man to bring trade beads directly to Alaska was probably Vitus Bering, in 1741. He had no direct contact with the Natives, but Steller and others who went ashore from the *St. Peter* at Kayak Island found Native habitations and caches and helped themselves to some of the things in them. In return, they left some items of Russian manufacture. Some fifty years later members of the Billings expedition found an old Native who described the things that had been left on Kayak Island when he was a boy, including tobacco, iron kettles, and beads.

Nearly all of the early traders and explorers who came to Alaska's shores brought beads with them, and the value of these beads, as expressed in furs or other local products, fluctuated wildly over the years. James King, who was with Captain Cook and completed his journal, noted that in Prince William Sound, "Though six of the finest skins

Below—Maggie Isaac of Tanacross whose mother was a chief's daughter. Right—Betty Wescott, who comes from Bethel, wears dentalia, the sea shells that have been prized by the Natives since before the white man came.



Above—Nanny Ooyahvonah of Point Hope and an artifact she found on the old village site. Right—Ralph Perdue wearing a beaded jacket that was owned by his grandfather, a resident of Nulato.



Andrew Isaac, chief of the United Crow Bands in the Tanacross area, and his wife, Maggie.

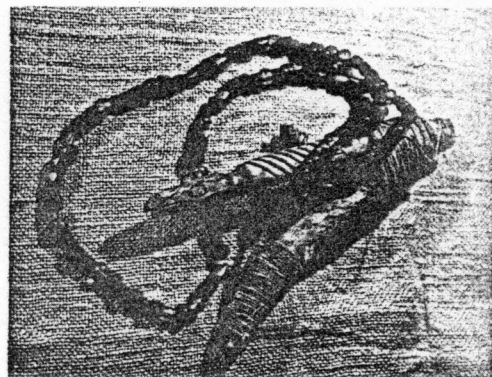
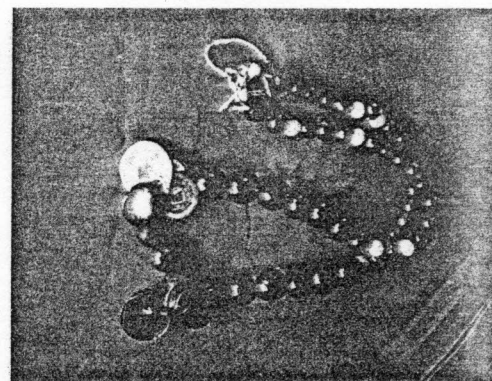
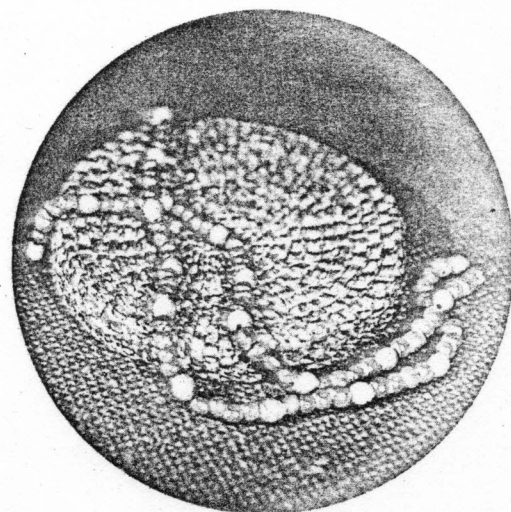


purchased by us were got for a dozen large green beads, yet it is well known the fancy of these people for articles of ornament is exceedingly capricious; and that iron is the only commodity for their market."

After 1800, the two largest fur traders in Alaska were the Russian-American Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. The Russians favored a brilliant faceted

blue bead, while the English company bartered the "Cornaline d'Aleppo," a bead with brick red or orange exterior and opaque green or white center.

Lieut. Laverentiy Zagoskin, who traveled in Russian America in the 1840's, wrote that before he left home and at the suggestion of his father he bought for a few tens of rubles various colored glass beads



From top to bottom—Beads and basketry, in the Alaska State Museum, Juneau. Blue and red beads with Russian and American military uniform buttons and Chinese coins, Norma Hoyt collection. Trading beads with a Tlingit halibut hook, in the Alaska State Museum, Juneau.

and bangles. "I must confess," he wrote, "that acquainted though I was with the conditions at Novoarkhangelsk (Sitka) from the tales and descriptions of my comrades, I never guessed how valuable this cheap art work would prove to be."

The going rate at the time was three or four deer skins for two flawless matched clear greenish-blue beads, or a sable for tubular or round blue beads. Along the river network of Interior Alaska, one bead per beaver was a common rate of exchange, but the price of the beads sometimes climbed higher. A Hudson's Bay Company trader reportedly got 75 fox skins for one bead, and in the Bethel area today old people recall that a skin boat, a umiak, might be traded for a single bead.

In time the Natives grew to understand the white man's monetary system and concluded that they were being "had." Beads began to go out of favor as a medium of exchange, but many were kept as ornaments because they are truly beautiful. Those that have survived the years have grown even more beautiful as their colors mellowed into lustrous shades that man cannot manufacture.

Lucky are the Alaska Natives who kept these heirlooms, for trading beads have become more than merely an intriguing bit of the past. The baubles have caught the fancy of collectors in such a big way in recent years that their monetary value has skyrocketed almost high enough to justify the exorbitant prices the original Native owners paid for some of them. A top quality strand of beads on original stringing can bring as much as \$450 today, while a string of better than average beads will fetch \$175 or more. Lesser necklaces commonly command prices of \$45 to \$75, while individual beads sell for as much as \$1, especially if they are slightly unusual.

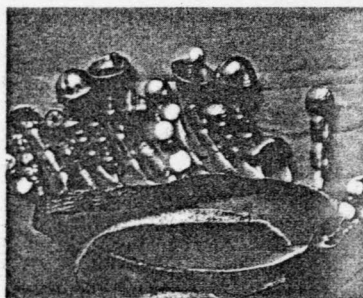
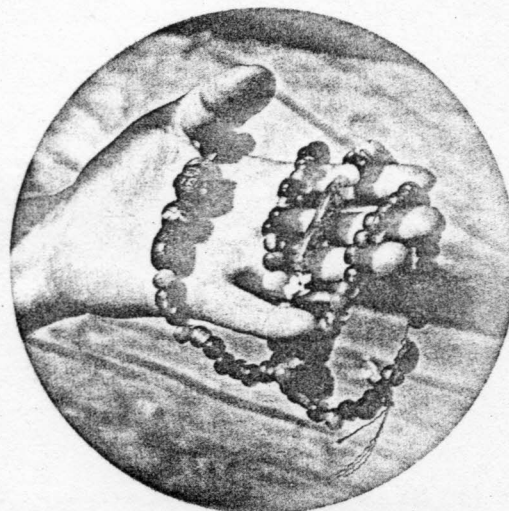
This does not mean that cheaper beads are not valuable. They are. The manufacture of beads still goes on and many gift shops carry strings of new beads that the inexperienced collector may buy for the genuine old acquired-by-trade article.

The main problem in collecting real Alaskan trade beads today is not



Heidi Senungetuk holds a varied strand of beads that came from Wales.

Top—Agnes Jimmie of Galena displays some of the fine beadwork of that area. Bottom—William Nelson Sr., of Angoon, wearing button blanket and Tlingit war hat.



From top to bottom—A string of beads owned by Hazel Strassburg of Galena. As a girl, Hazel pitched beads into the Yukon. A cradle jumper from Savoonga in the Norma Hoyt collection.

so much the price as it is the finding of someone who will set a price. Alaskan Natives are not as ready to sell their holdings as are Indians in other states.

Eugene Wescott of Alaska's Geophysical Institute, had long been a collector of trading beads before he came north in 1950. His adopted father was a Mohawk Indian and Wescott traveled widely with him, picking up some good beads in dusty old shops and bartering with Indians for others.

"But it's harder to collect up here," he says and speculates that museum collectors "did a great scouring job in earlier years."

Wescott's wife, Betty, a Bethel Eskimo, had no trading beads in her family and contents herself by wearing the treasures her husband collected outside Alaska. Showpieces of the Wescott collection are a necklace and hair ornaments of beads and dentalia.

Dentalia are slender, conelike white shells which were a staple of Indian trade long before beads appeared. The mollusk, sometimes known as tooth shell or tusk shell, grows only in fairly deep water and was harvested by the Indians only along parts of the seaward side of Vancouver Island. A few families of the Nootkan tribes of that region apparently had a monopoly on the best dentalia beds and they gathered the live shells from the sea bed by a slow and laborious process. The hapless animals were removed from their shells by boiling, after which the shells were polished, then dispersed by trade up and down the coast and for some distance inland. Of the use of the shells in Alaska, Ivan Petroff the Census agent, had this to say in his 1880 report:

"The dentalium was an ornament much prized by men and women. This shell did not exist in the Russian possessions, but was imported from the British colonies north of the Columbia River, and thence passed from hand to hand along the whole coast as far as the Aleutian Islands. At the time of Davidof's visit to Kodiak, in the year 1802, the price of one pair of these little shells was a whole parka of squirrel skins.

"Davidof also relates a tradition of the Kaniagmute [Kodiak people] to



From top to bottom—Norma Hoyt of Anchorage, an ardent collector of beads, with a chief's necklace. Olive Hauk Tunuk, curator of the museum at Bethel, wears beads from Kasigluk. Joan Grimaldi, daughter of Hazel Strassburg, and her son, Galena.

the effect that in the country of the Thlinket, far to the southward, there was a lake from which the dentalium or hyqua shell was obtained, the mollusks being fed with the bodies of slaves thrown into the water—a story evidently invented by the Thlinket to enhance the price of this commodity, of which they had a monopoly."

Another story has it that the shells were sometimes gathered by sinking the body of a dog to the dentalia beds, then hauling it up after several days and removing the mollusks that clung to it. The bodies of slaves were said to have also been used for this purpose, but this is probably a part of the same "Thlinket" invention related by Petroff. By whatever means they were fished up from the bottom, a six-foot single string of dentalia was at one time valued at one male slave, while a three-foot string had the value of one female slave.

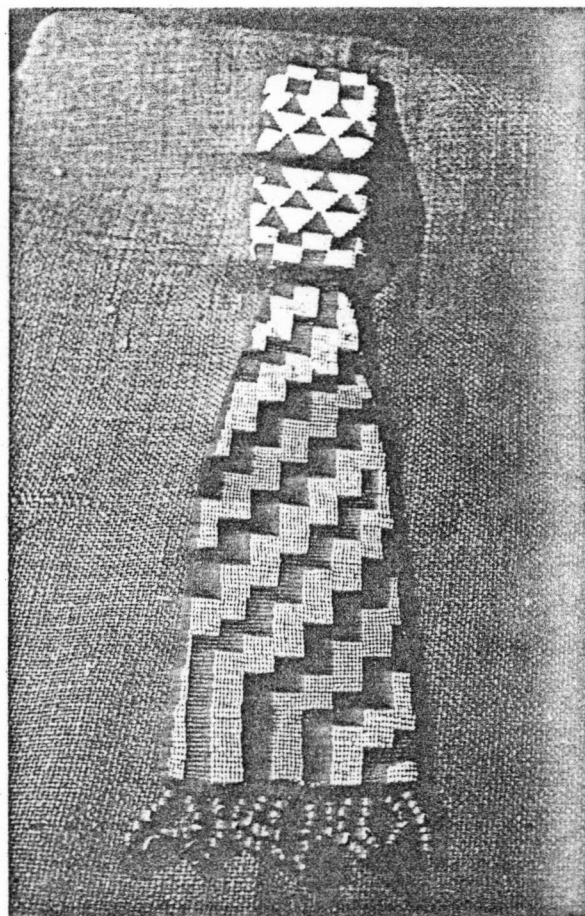
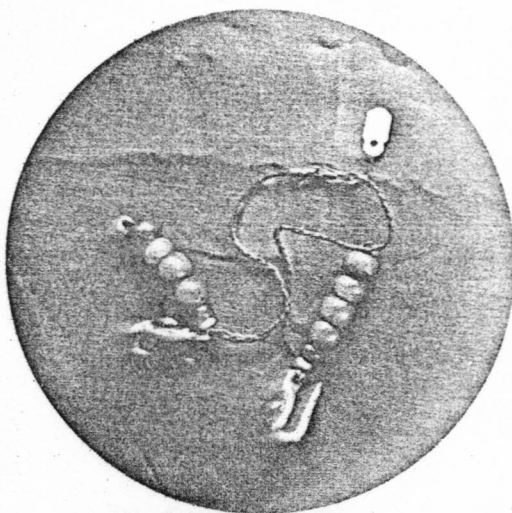
Wescott recalls seeing an old photograph of Indians harvesting the shells to sell to the Hudson's Bay Company, which once planned to wholesale them. What success this effort had is not known, but there has been a continuing demand for the shells, so much so that at least one company tried, unsuccessfully, to duplicate them in porcelain. Today a somewhat similar shell is being imported from Africa and marketed with the current output of beads. The African shells can be distinguished from the Vancouver Island dentalia by the fact that they have a ribbed instead of a smooth surface.

The traditional "Chief's necklace" of dentalia or dentalia and trading beads is one of the rarest collector's finds today. Only a chief could afford to own one—then and now!

Ralph Perdue, an Athabascan Indian and Fairbanks jeweler, once had such a necklace in his family because his great, great grandfather was chief at Koyukuk. Today the necklace is among the missing and although he has acquired two similar ones through trading, he'd like to get back the family original.

Perdue also has an Indian scabbard decorated with dentalia and blue beads, and several separate strings of large blue beads which he believes were most valued by his people. An account by the late

From top to bottom—
Bead earrings, in the
Norma Hoyt collection.
Shanon Gallant with
beads that came from
her grandmother in
Klukwan. Sally
Hudson of Fairbanks
wears a necklace of red
and white beads and
porcupine quills.



Above—A ponytail holder,
in the Alaska State
Museum, Juneau. Left—
Cap of beads and dentalia,
in the Alaska State
Museum, Juneau.



Charles Brower of Barrow tends to confirm Perdue's belief. Brower wrote of meeting a seemingly poverty-stricken Eskimo enroute to trade one blue bead at Nuwuk. "In exchange for his one turquoise bead," Brower wrote, "the fellow showed up with a new sled, five dogs, 10 large slabs of whalebone, five cross foxes and one silver fox skin, the value of which was well over \$1,000."

The most intriguing item in Perdue's collection, though, is an exquisitely beaded suede jacket which has been in his family for three generations. The beads are tiny and worked in intricate patterns down the jacket front and on the pockets, shoulders and cuffs. The jacket fits Perdue as well as it did his grandfather and is still in mint condition.

Artist Ron Senungetuk of the University of Alaska, a native of Wales, treasures a wall hanging of blue, red and yellow moonstone beads that once belonged to his grandparents, but he owns only half of the piece. Long ago it was split down the middle to settle a family argument and he is still in search of the other half. According to stories passed down through his family, his Eskimo grandmother used to fasten trading beads from ear to ear or braid them in her hair when dressing for a dance. Senungetuk owns some of these strands and one now belongs to his young daughter, Heidi.

Nanny Ooyatuonah, one of the oldest residents of Point Hope, can recall when Eskimo women wore a single trading bead strung through the septum of the nose. She received no family beads, however, and has had to dig for her own. Residents of the village report often seeing the tiny old lady out in her waders digging at the ancient Point Hope village site, just out of reach of the surf which is carrying it away. One of her finds is an artifact shaped like the head of a fox with two tiny trading beads for eyes. She sometimes wears it on a thong around her neck.

Artist Shanon Gallant inherited her trading beads from her Tlingit grandmother who was from Klukwan and who stored the beads in seal oil to keep the color bright. Shanon's collection includes a

Below—Norma Marshall wears a necklace from the Ora D. Clark collection. Right—Russian blues and a Tlingit knife, in the Alaska State Museum, Juneau.



Right—Beads from Klukwan, owned by Shanon Gallant. Right middle—A chief's necklace from the Koyukuk, owned by Ralph Perdue.



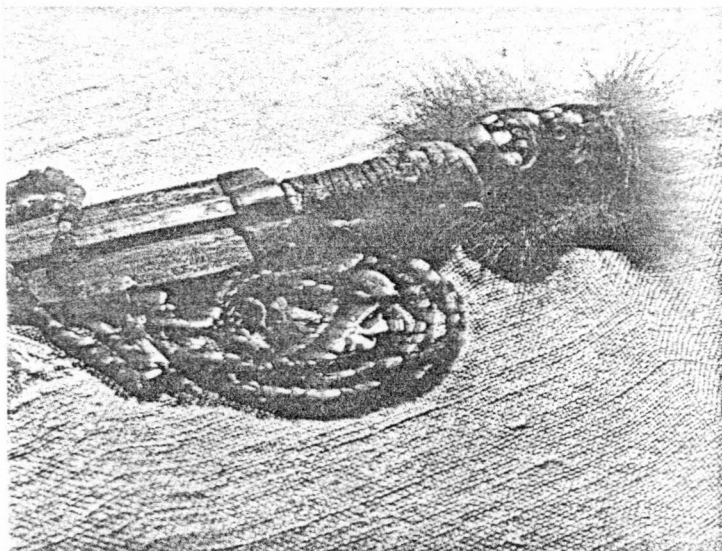
necklace of small, varied dark beads, a larger strand of mellow reds, and a few large "candy strippers" which are rare in Alaska but were popular in the American Southwest.

Agnes Jimmie, Galena oldtimer, has doggedly managed to save her family bead collection from the flooding Yukon by storing it in a traditional Athabaskan cache, a little building on stilts, some 10 feet off the ground. The women of her family did fine decorative work, using tiny beads, and she particularly prizes a wall hanging of felt with beaded tassels and an ammunition case that once belonged to an uncle and is made of beads and dentalia.

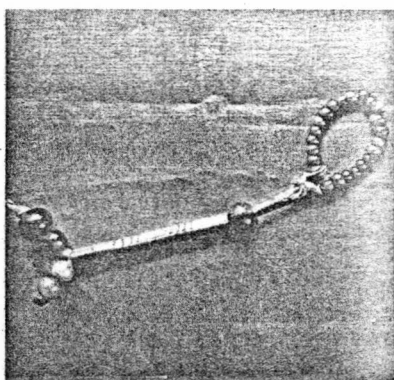
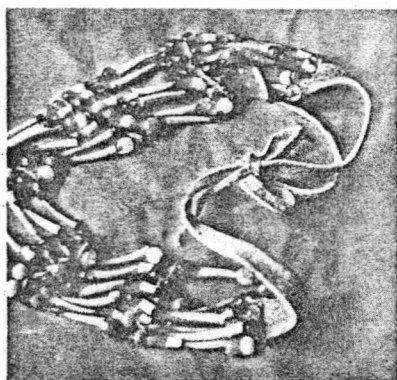
Hazel Strassburg, also of Galena, can remember entertaining herself as a girl by pitching trading beads into the river. Her father, Charlie Evans, had a trading post upon the Koyukuk River where his father had traded before him. There were many beads, left over from the days when

they were used for barter and, since they were then valueless, Evans gave them to his daughter to play with. Mrs. Strassburg is today a knowledgeable collector of antiques and knows full well the worth of the "toys" she tossed away. She has several fine strings of beads she has gathered from old family sewing boxes and trunks, but she is still haunted by the marvelous collection she sunk in the river.

Mrs. Sally Hudson, who was raised in Rampart, recalls that there were trading beads in her family. None survived, perhaps because when her mother died of tuberculosis she ordered all her possessions destroyed so the disease would not be passed on. Proud of her Athabaskan heritage, Mrs. Hudson has sought her own bead collection and has several valuable strings. The handsomest of these is a necklace of red and white beads set apart with porcupine quills.



Below—Needle case acquired by Norma Hoyt from Bessie Nunraeli of Savoonga, is believed to have originated in Siberia.



While the Tlingit people of South-eastern Alaska sometimes traded with the Russians for blue and amber faceted beads, they seemed to prefer to acquire wool blankets and mother-of-pearl buttons. The buttons were valued at two for a marten skin and the Tlingits bought them by the gross. There are some particularly fine examples of their ceremonial blanket capes, ornamented with buttons, at Angoon and in fact they are still being made there. William Nelson, Sr., has one which he tops with an ancient Tlingit war hat carved in the shape of a raven, with Russian coins for eyes.

Andrew Isaac, traditional chief of the United Crow Bands in the Tanacross area, wears a handsome chief's necklace of dentalia and dark beads which came to him through the family of his wife, Maggie.

"My mother she was a chief's daughter," Mrs. Isaac explains.

"Only chief people could wear such a necklace. And for a woman, it was like a queen!"

Mrs. Isaac herself does traditional beading that few women of her generation can match. The high moccasins she works sell for about \$75 a pair, which is a modest price for the work involved. She has all the orders she can handle.

Olive Hauk Tunnuk, the young curator of the Yugtarvik—"Place of the People's Things"—in Bethel, carefully sorts and classifies a fine collection of beads from the Kuskokwim area, but she would not trade any of them for the string she received from her grandmother, Marie Nichols of Kasigluk. The pretty, multicolor strand has been in her family as far back as anyone can remember.

Eugene Wescott is correct, however, in his surmise that museums collected the best of Alaska's beads early in the century.

"About 99 per cent of our beads were collected many years ago," reports Mrs. Dinah Larsen, curator of the University of Alaska Museum. "The museum has acquired none of its fine collection in recent years."

The late Ora D. Clark, who taught school in many places of Alaska, amassed one of the state's finest collection of trading beads, but she acquired the bulk of it between 1906 and 1917. The collection has been on display at the Gold Pan Gift Shop in Anchorage but it is definitely not for sale.

One of Alaska's most active collectors today is Mrs. Norma Hoyt, a retired Anchorage school teacher. Although not an Alaskan native, Mrs. Hoyt has been a resident for 40 years and guards her prizes jealously. She so strongly believes that Alaskan heirlooms should stay in the state that she has traveled as far as Colorado to barter for and bring back pieces that have been carried away. For this reason, Natives who are forced by low finances to sell old beads often prefer to deal with her.

One of the highlights of the Hoyt collection is a needle case purchased from Bessie Nunraeli of Savoonga who suspects that the treasure originally came from Siberia. Mrs. Hoyt also has an Eskimo cradle jumper with Russian bells and beads, and a string of blue and red beads interspersed with old American and Russian military uniform buttons and Chinese coins.

Buyers without Mrs. Hoyt's long experience and expertise should be wary in their purchases. Peter Corey, former curator at the Alaska State Museum, reports manufacturers today are turning out exactly the same types of beads that were produced 200 years ago, and it is often difficult to tell the difference between the old and the new. Original stringing is an asset in dating beads, but buyers should check as carefully as possible into the history of any beads they buy.

One way to be certain of the authenticity of a purchase is to find a trustworthy Native who wants to sell a family heirloom. But most likely if it is a family heirloom, he just won't want to sell it.

