

# Alaskan Voyage

## 1881-1883

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An Expedition to  
the Northwest Coast  
of America

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On the Kenai  
Peninsula, Digging at  
Kachemak Bay

At Fort Alexander, on the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula, I found a schooner from Kodiak under the command of Captain Sand and Mr. Frank. These gentlemen were engaged in salmon fishing and expected to return to Kodiak with their load after a fortnight. The entire population of the place was occupied with sea otter hunting, so that it was difficult if not impossible to hire any of the men. But even if I had found any I would not have trusted myself to ride with them in the skin boats of questionable seaworthiness across the wide strait between Kodiak and the Kenai Peninsula. Only under the most favorable circumstances do these people venture out on this passage; in many instances they would rather wait for weeks for better weather.

Mr. Frank told me on the day of my arrival that in the interior of the region of Kachemak Bay, which I had just crossed, there were ruins of an old, deserted Indian settlement called Soonroodna, and that it might be worth my while to do some excavation at this place, which the Eskimo called Hardak or Hardanak. Since I had to wait for the schooner longer than a week I decided to use this time for such excavation, even though I would have to retrace my journey by about thirty English miles. After I had hired some people at a high price, we left Fort Alexander on 26 June and arrived that same afternoon at Akedaknak in Seldovia Bay, where I engaged as a guide an old Indian whose father had lived in this abandoned village. We continued that same day to a little island, Yukon, where we first collected bird's eggs and shot some birds and then spent the night in a house that belonged to our Indian guide. He sold me several old stone lamps and a pair of dance rattles.

The next morning we circumnavigated Yukon Island, and on the shores we shot ten sea parrots and some auks, as well as a large flecked seal, which booty extended our provisions considerably. After several hours of fast sailing we arrived at

last at the ruins of the village of Soonroodna. It is situated at the foot of the third glacier on the south shore of Kachemak Bay.

Soonroodna was a village of considerable size even before 1794 when the Russians came there. Shortly after they had built Fort Kenai the Russians one day went over to Soonroodna in many boats to carry out a second "Rape of the Sabine Women"—they took as many of the young girls and women as they could back to the fort and kept them as wives. In deep sorrow the Indians left their village because they realized that against the Russians they were powerless. They scattered among the Eskimo villages on Kodiak Island.

The ancient inhabitants of Soonroodna before the arrival of the Russians cremated their dead and buried the remains. These were all that were left when the people deserted the village. Objects that remained with the dead, like old dance masks, were collected in a cave and remained there in respect for the ancestors. Everyone that visited the abandoned village made an offering to these masks, which represent the dead. This offering was usually food, but was also small baskets of excellent workmanship that the people made then and still make today. They used baskets for cooking with hot stones. Our old Indian guide said he remembered one place where the dead and these offerings had been put. This was the place we wanted to find. But with the passage of time the rock cover had sunk and all the offerings were crushed, as could be clearly seen. All efforts to move these great blocks of stone were in vain. It was only possible to dig a few fragments out from under the stones.

We then visited a small cave that was used as a burial site after cremation was no longer practiced. There I found a staff similar to those used in ceremonial dancing and also a figure of a woman and a square piece of wood with a hole in the center. Its use could not be determined.

We commenced our excavation on the spot where our old Indian guide told us the house of the most important chief of Soonroodna once stood. Beside the house I assumed that the next structure might have been the chief's cache. This consists in this region of a small house raised on four posts for storing dried fish, meat, and skins out of reach to dogs.

Five persons dug until late in the evening, to a depth of about five feet. The site yielded the following: a layer of firm sand, then a layer of ashes, broken shell, and charcoal, obviously the remains of the first occupation of the site. Here we found as evidence of occupation small pieces of pottery such as they use along the Yukon River. Also we found fragments of bones of bear, fox, porcupine, several kinds of birds, beaver,

white whale, seal, and sea otter. These bones were clearly very old and brittle. Above this lowest culture-bearing layer was a layer of clear sand and gravel as though this site had been flooded for a long time. On top of this was another layer that also consisted principally of shells of marine forms and seemed to be better preserved than the same material at the lower level. In this layer we also found several arrow points and harpoon points of bone. Above this there was the customary layer of dark earth mixed with bone and ashes, in which I found lance points, a piece of wooden lance shaft, a small piece of copper that had probably been a knife, a small iron knife, a blue glass bead, two bone harpoon points, and many bones of a variety of animals. My guide explained that formerly the value of a small iron knife was equivalent to two slaves and the same evaluation was also made in terms of one hundred marten skins.

In order to make the excavation less costly, I sent the old guide back the next day and continued with the other men. At one place under the first shell layer I found two short pieces of whale ribs that had been cut with a stone or some other unsuitable instrument.

According to my helpers these bones were prepared to be made into arrow points; at least they were the proper length. In addition we found more potsherds and spear points, a stone lance point, and, a foot beneath the surface, an iron ax, and more animal bones.

On the second day we examined a cave that was known as a shelter for hunters. I had the ground dug up and found many signs of ashes and charcoal as well as a Russian iron ax. We also made another attempt to penetrate the cave I described earlier, but we were not successful.

In the surrounding hills we found many signs of human habitation, especially great shell heaps. This led one to believe that the old settlement of Soonroodna was of considerable size.

On the third day we intensified our efforts at digging. It was the general opinion that the principal part of the village was down near the shore, not ten to twelve feet above the tide line like the chief's house. Here we began our investigations. In the lowest culture stratum I found old potsherds, a harpoon for sea otter and seal, a piece of a well-made stone spear point, a piece of iron ore, a straight iron knife about five inches long, a horseshoe-shaped iron knife with its cutting edge on the outside, which according to my Indian informants was a type used as a fish knife, worked bone which was used for needles and awls, and many animal bones. This ended our excavations at Soonroodna.<sup>33</sup>

The next morning we began our journey back. The wind had