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Honoring Alutiiq Elders: John Peter “JP” Pestrikoff—a prolific Alutiiq storyteller

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Reflecting back upon the many Alutiiq Elders who have contributed to Alutiiq language revitalization and education, there are several who stand out as our most amazing storytellers. John Peter “JP” Pestrikoff was both a patient, committed teacher and a great storyteller. After visiting Port Lions this past Saturday, I’ve been thinking about the significant impacts JP made—impacts that will continue to resonate into the future long after his passing.

JP was our oldest contributing fluent Elder, and was one of the very few fluent Northern Kodiak Alutiiq speakers. He passed away on November 7, 2013, at 104 years of age in Port Lions village. If he were still with us today, he would be 108 years old. I first started working with JP and his wife Julia when he was 89 years old. While I could not speak Alutiiq at the time, I found him very humorous and enjoyed listening to his stories in English. Over the years, I was able to



JP Pestrikoff with Jared Bezona, photo courtesy Chris Arend and Afognak Native Corporation

visit with him in Alutiiq and appreciated the depth of his knowledge.

On August 29, 2010, JP was born to Peter Vasilief Pestrikoff and Chistina Woche in Ouzinkie. His mother Christina was originally from Kaguyak, part of the Melevidoff family, and later adopted by Alexis Benjamin Woche along with two other sibilings. Her sister Mary married Emilian Petellin, who owned a store in Afognak.

In 1912, during the year of the Katmai eruption, Christina moved her family to Afognak when JP was two years old, to be near her sister Mary (Woche) Petellin. Christina worked for Mary and Emilian Petellin at their store for the next five years.

As a young boy in Afognak, JP grew up learning to speak the Alutiiq language. He often spoke fondly of the

importance of music growing up. Because of this importance, he learned how to play the guitar, banjo and the mandolin. He also met and later married the love of his life, Julia Knagin. Together they had one child, Fred Pestrikoff, who later married Sandra Ponchene and raised their three children: John, Richard and Karen Pestrikoff.

When Afognak village was destroyed by the Good Friday Earthquake and Tsunami in 1964, JP and Julia moved with other Afognak residents to build the village of Port Lions—where he lived up to his death in 2013.

JP Pestrikoff’s life was defined by the stories he accumulated throughout his life and work. As a young man, he helped Elders hunt by rowing for them. Along the way, he heard many old stories and tales. In fact, he fur trapped

with Aananaa Chernikoff around Tonki Cape.

He went on to work on the labor crew for Ouzinkie Cannery; he pitched fish, along with doing other jobs, for the Uganik Cannery; he was a watchman at a fish trap in Raspberry Straits; he was able to fish out of Dutch Harbor as a crewman for herring; and he ran the F/V KFC8 for Kodiak Fisheries, and later owned his own boat, the F/V Gale.

Throughout his life, JP worked as a commercial fisherman and as a bear guide. JP fished when the price for red salmon was five cents each and pink salmon were a penny. Some of his most famous hunting clients included the rifle manufacturer Roy Weatherby and the singing cowboy Roy Rogers.

In his Elder years, JP contributed to oral histories, genealogy and language documentation of the Kodiak Alutiiq people. JP always took the time to work with young people and visit classrooms to share valuable Alutiiq traditions so that they may live on.

He was interviewed many times by Dr. Jeff Leer at the Dig Afognak Elders Camps in the late 1990s. During this time, JP and Dennis Knagin contributed to developing the Place

Names Map of Afognak Island, remembering over 120 traditional names for places in the Afognak area. JP provided essential knowledge that otherwise would have been lost. It was during these camp recording sessions that Archeobotanist Karen Adams and I heard JP tell the story of a red cedar log he remembered his Elders showing him as a boy.

This story led Karen Adams and I to write [The Red Cedar of Afognak: A Driftwood Journey](#), with illustrations by Afognak artist Gloria Selby. JP received the 2004 Honoring Alaska's Indigenous Literature (HAIL) award for his contribution to the book at the Native Educators of Alaska Conference. The book also won an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, which Dr. Karen Adams was able to accept on our behalf. He was always humble and willing to share.

He participated in the Alutiiq Museum Language Program as a master speaker, helping to preserve our Native language for posterity. He taught language apprentices in Port Lions through the Alutiiq Museum's revitalization programs from 2004 until he passed away, including

teaching Kathy Nelson and Peter Squartsoff of Port Lions to speak Alutiiq. His instruction provided the foundation for Port Lions School's language classes for several years.

Although JP is no longer alive, because he shared his tremendous knowledge over many years, he lives on not only in the hearts and minds of his family, friends and students, but in numerous audiovisual recordings and publications that he contributed.

We were blessed to have such a treasure in JP, and so many keepsakes to remember him by. His recordings can be found at:

- Alutiiq Museum Language Portal <https://alutiiqmuseum.mukurtu.net>
- Alaska Native Language Archive www.uaf.edu/anla/collections/search/
- Native Village of Afognak Archive
- Keep Talking Documentary Outtakes Shown on PBS and sold on DVD by the Native Village of Afognak www.keeptalkingthefilm.com

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