

# *Cestun Alutiit Liitaartut* – ALUTIIQ EDUCATION

In Alutiiq/Sugpiaq communities, education is woven through daily life. People of all ages learn by doing. They listen to Elders, assist experienced people, and practice new skills. Instruction often focuses on a person's future family or community role. Young people learn everything from cooking and childcare to healing, hunting, fishing, navigation, weather prediction, cultural arts, and the care of the land and its resources. This way of teaching is ancient and very different from classroom instruction.

Before the arrival of Russian people, every adult was an instructor. Children learned simple tasks like braiding line or collecting shellfish by helping family members. Elders told legends to explain the origins of the world. Spiritual leaders taught dance and etiquette, and everyone told stories that shared history and reinforced values like generosity and respect. As a child grew, apprenticing to a cultural expert (often an aunt or an uncle) helped them acquire special skills—kayak building, whale hunting, or midwifery. All instruction followed the rhythm of the seasons, and prepared the next generation to become teachers.

The conquest of Kodiak disrupted traditional education. Enslavement, hunger, and disease killed thousands of Alutiiq people and upended many practices. Russians did not prohibit speaking in Alutiiq, but they believed that reading, writing, and Christian morals would control and enlighten the Alutiiq. In 1786, Russian merchant Grigorii Shelikhov established Alaska's first school on Kodiak Island. In the following decades, some Alutiiq youth attended local schools and others were sent to Russia to study trades like shipbuilding and ministry.

The cultural assimilation of Alutiiq students grew in the late 19th and 20th centuries in American classrooms. American educators believed that Native students needed to adopt Western traditions to become productive citizens. Children were punished for speaking Alutiiq and sent to distant boarding schools for training. In places like Oregon and Pennsylvania, Alutiiq youth suffered cruel treatment and isolation, living for years without family contact. Many lost their ability to speak Alutiiq and never had the opportunity to learn traditional skills and values. Others caught fatal diseases like tuberculosis and never came home.

Today, Alutiiq children attend schools in their communities, following a 1975 court case (*Tobeluk v. Lind*) that found the practice of sending Alaska Native children to boarding schools discriminatory. While classroom education is not the Alutiiq style, educators are increasingly incorporating Alutiiq language, culture, and the arts in curriculum to help all youth understand and celebrate Native heritage.



*Ozinkie School ca. 1940. Hender Toms collection, courtesy of Melinda Lamp (AM588:200).*