

The Ahtna Homeland

The chief, Andre, told my Knik interpreter to tell me that I had no right in his country, as it belonged to him.

—Lt. J. C. Castner

The Ahtna homeland covers approximately 40,000 square miles and includes all of the Copper River Basin and the highlands of the upper Susitna River to the west (Figure 1). It is rimmed by the Alaska, Talkeetna and Chugach Mountains, and include the Wrangell and St. Elias Mountain Ranges, (which include nine of the 16 highest mountain peaks in North America).

The Copper River, called 'Atna' or "beyond river" in the Ahtna language (Kari and Fall 2016: 145), rises out of Copper Glacier on the northeast side of Mount Wrangell and flows for 290 miles until it reaches the Gulf of Alaska. The Susitna River, or *Sasutna'*, originates in the Alaska Range and flows southwest into Cook Inlet.

Up until about 10,000 years ago, a lake covered a large part of Ahtna territory. The size of Glacial Lake Atna, as it is now called,

is still being determined, but it extended from the Chugach Mountains north to the Alphabet Hills and up the Chitina River valley, and west to Tahetna Pass along the Glenn Highway. Lake Atna, like most glacial lakes, eventually drained as the glacial dams holding back the waters of the lake melted.

The Ahtna

The Ahtna have lived in the Copper and Susitna River Basins of east central Alaska for more than 5,000 years (Potter 2008). Traditionally Ahtna families made a living by hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering plants and berries. Life on the land had a seasonal rhythm that included fishing for salmon in the Copper River during the summer, hunting for moose and caribou in the fall, spending the winter in snug semi-subter-



Hunting camp of Upper Copper River Indians, head of Delta River, Alaska, 1898.

Photograph by Walter Mendenhall, United States Geological Survey.

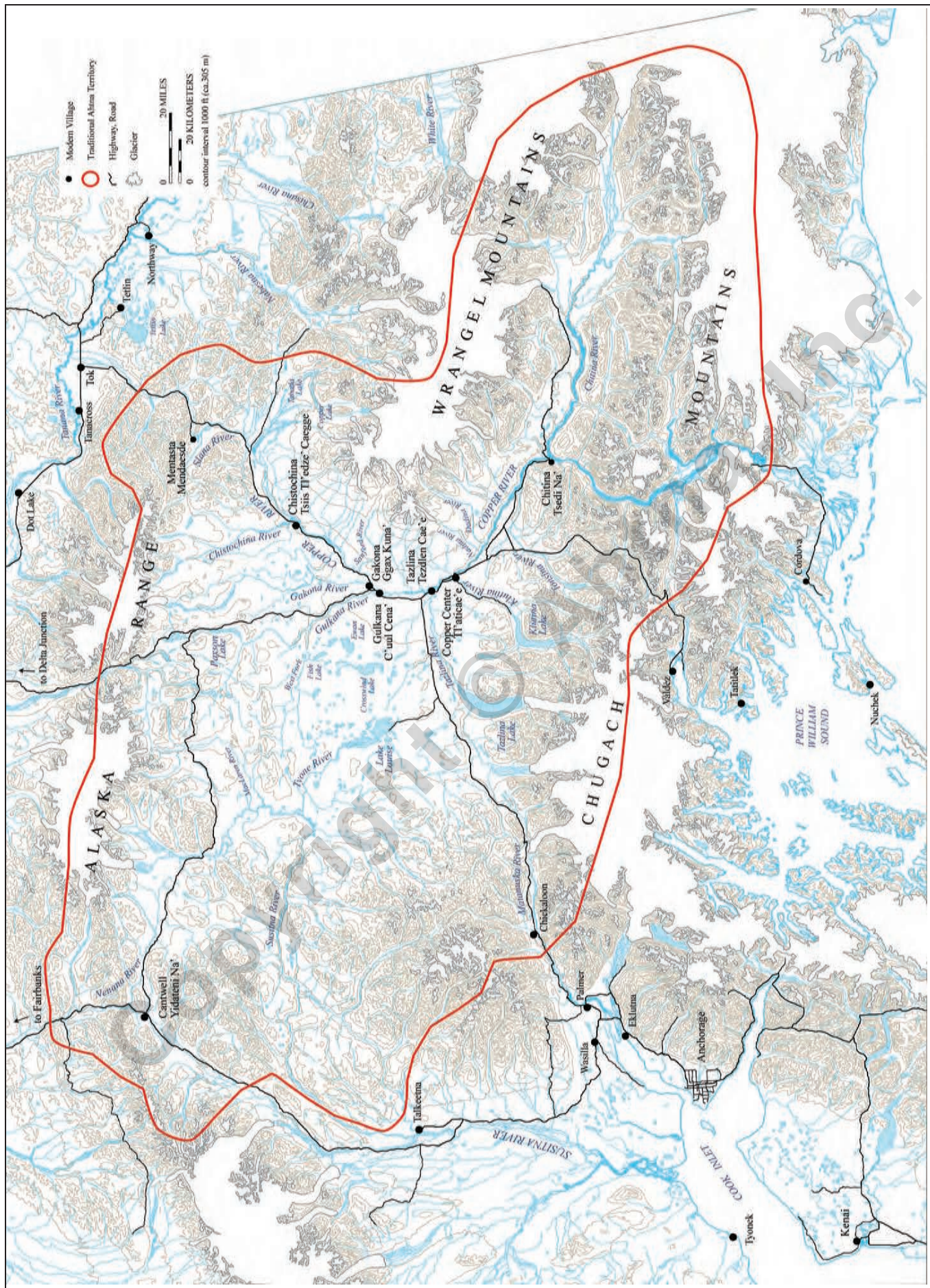


Figure 1. Ahtna Homeland. Traditional boundaries of the Ahtna Homeland and contemporary Ahtna communities. Note, the line depicting the boundary of traditional Ahtna territory is based on research conducted by Frederica de Laguna and Catherine McClellan in the 1950s and 1960s. More recent research has extended the boundary as shown in the map on page 36.



Elizabeth Pete.

Photograph courtesy Alaska Heritage Foundation.



Mentasta Pete.

Photograph courtesy Alice Hand.

ranean houses, and fishing in lakes during the spring. Ahtna elders remember life as demanding but not problematic as their ancestors had perfected a culture that enabled them to thrive and live in an extreme environment.

Following World War II, life changed drastically. Ahtna families settled in one of the eight permanent communities along the road system, sent their children to school, and took up jobs. In 1971, the U.S. Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Instead of establishing reservations, like those in the American west, the act created village and regional corporations. The regional corporation is Ahtna, Incorporated, which today has its headquarters in Glennallen, Alaska, and owns several subsidiaries involved in various businesses. Originally there were eight village corporations, but in 1980 seven (Cantwell, Mentasta, Chistochina, Gakona, Gulkana, Tazlina and Copper Center) merged with Ahtna Incorporated. Chitina village corporation did not merge and remains a separate entity.

Origins

Ahtna mythology describes a world covered with water in which *Saghani*, or Raven, creates an island that began the world. In Elizabeth and Mentasta Pete's version *Saghani* wants to marry swan and tries to follow her as she migrates south and ends up having to create an island in the ocean in order to survive.

*Saghani he make that – a hole in the sky.
He gonna marry swan. Then the swan go
outside [leaves Alaska] when a cold time.
Saghani he gonna fly too. He can't make
it. Many, many hundred, thousand miles that
swan fly. Saghani he tired and he go down.
He see ocean down there. He tired, he gonna
drop down [into the] ocean.*

*He think: "Some kind of stick coming my
place."*

*Close to ocean stick coming [vertically].
He gonna jump on that. He get down there.
He think. He think about ... he see all ocean.
He don't swim. He think he gonna make
hook string, maybe a little stick coming. You*



Mount Drum. *Hwdaandi K'elt'aeni*, or Mount Drum, is a stratovolcano rising 12,010 feet above the Copper River. Photograph courtesy Bill Simeone.

know lake, some kind of grass lake. Like mud – [Saghani ggaay made this world out of some kind of grass.] He gonna make ground. That's how make ground, they say. How many days make ground. He walk on top. That's the way he make this ground, they say.

(Mentasta and Elizabeth Pete, 8.21.1960 dell/mc)

According to the linguist James Kari, there is strong evidence the Ahtna entered the upper Copper River from the Tanana River Valley (Kari 2016:145), although Ahtna clan histories record a more complex account drawing together people from several neighboring regions. (see Chapter 5).

The extent of Ahtna occupation of their traditional territory is evident from the 2,500 Ahtna place names compiled by Kari with the aid of Ahtna elders. Virtually all major drainages, accessible hills, mountains, and ridges are named and none of the names appear to be non-Athabascan in origin (Kari and Tuttle 2005:5). Over time, Ahtna place names have become altered and anglicized to accommodate English speakers. So, for example, *Kentsii Na'*, ("spruce bark canoe river") has become the Tonsina River, *Tl'atina'* ("rear water") became the Klutina River, *Tezdlen Na'* ("swift current river") became the Tazlina River, *C'el C'ena'* ("tearing river") became the Gulkana River,

and *Ggax Kuna'* ("rabbit river") became the Gakona River. Note that in the Ahtna language *Na'*, such as in *Tezdlen Na'*, is the word for river.

The American explorer Lt. Henry Allen sometimes used a person's name instead of the appropriate place name and his names have become normal usage, appearing on many maps. For example, Allen called *Bes Cene* or "base of river bank," "Liebestag's village." Likewise "Conaquánta's village" is probably *Nic'akuni'aaden*, or "place that extends off from shore." Perhaps the most famous of these substitutions was Batzulnetas. In the Ahtna language Batzulnetas is *Nataetde* or "Roasted Salmon Place" located near the confluence of Tanada Creek and the Copper River. Allen called the place Batzulnetas, using the name of the leader/shaman *Bets'ulnii Ta'* ("Father of Someone Respects Him") who was actually the headman for the village at the mouth of the Slana River (Kari 1986). The name Batzulnetas stuck and is frequently used today and appears on many subsequent maps.

The earliest European map of the Ahtna homeland was published in 1839 under the direction of Ferdinand von Wrangell, chief manager of the Russian American Company from 1830 to 1835 (Figure 2). The Wrangell map was made using informa-

tion from sketch maps, a diary made by the Russian explorer Klimovskii, who in 1819 explored the Copper River and named Mt. Wrangell, and information received from Dena'ina and Ahtna informants (Wrangell 1980 [1839]). Figure 2 is a section of the Wrangell map showing Ahtna Territory. According to Kari (1986:105) speakers of the Dena'ina language supplied the information on the map since the place names reflect the Dena'ina pronunciation. Some of the places named on the map are Batzulnetas, named *Nutatlga*, which is the Dena'ina pronunciation for *Nataetde*, the Chistochina River (Tscheschlukina or in Ahtna *Tsiis Tl'edze' Na'*), Tazlina Lake (Mantilbana or *Bendilbene'*), and Butte Lake (Knituben or *Hwniidi Ben*).

Anthropologists have tried to estimate the pre-colonial, or pre-European Ahtna population based largely on the assumption that hunter/gatherer populations were small because resources were scarce and it was hard to make a living. Catherine McClellan (1975:221) thought the pre-colonial population never exceeded 1,000; the Rus-

sian historian Grinev (1993:54) estimated the population at about 1,500 and another anthropologist named Joan Townsend (1980:131) thought there were about 800 Ahtna in the time before Russian contact. Native people say the population was much higher and they cite the fact that there were many villages all up and down the Copper River. They also note that various epidemics, including the smallpox epidemic of the 1830s and the 1918 flu epidemic, killed many people. The anthropologist Robert McKennan, who visited the Upper Ahtna in the winter of 1930, wrote that...

...the older Indians all stoutly maintained that formerly their number was much greater. They said that previous to the coming of the White man, great numbers suddenly died of disease. The earliest explorers on the Yukon all were met with a similar story... Possibly these stories of an epidemic date back to 1851 when the Chilkat introduced scarlet fever to the upper Yukon whence it spread down the river.

(Robert McKennan, 1959:19)



Mount Wrangell. Mount Wrangell, known as *Uk'etedi* or “the one with smoke on it,” is a massive shield volcano that rises 14,163 feet above the Copper River. Off to the left is the smaller Mount Zanetti, known to the Ahtna as *Kaghaxi* or “brown bear cub.” Photograph courtesy Bill Simeone.

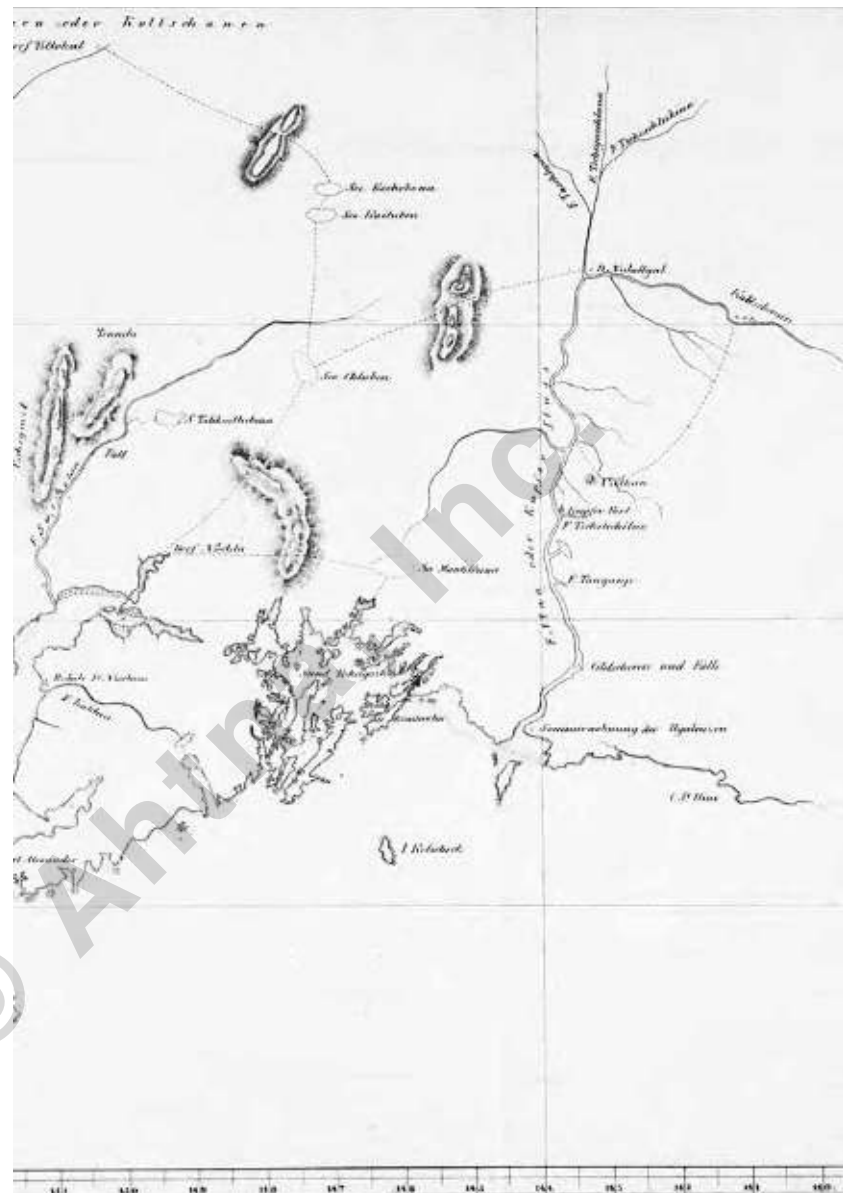
Figure 2. Wrangell Map of 1834.

This map appeared in the first volume of Baer and Helmersen's multi-volume *Beiträge zur Kenntniss des Russischen Reiches und der angränzeden Länder Asiens*, published between 1839 and 1871.

The first volume, written by Ferdinand von Wrangell, chief manager of the Russian American Company, was titled *Statistische und ethnographische Nachrichten Über die Russischen Besitzungen an der Nordwest-küste von Amerika*, and included this map. The map is exceptionally detailed, reflecting some of the earliest first-hand information about the region predating the earliest English, French, and American surveys of the region. The figure shows only the eastern section of a map that also includes Cook Inlet and the Kuskokwim River.

Because the Russians were so dependent on Native knowledge, they were also susceptible to misinformation provided by Native traders protecting their own interests. In his analysis of toponyms on the Wrangell map, James Kari (1986) concluded that Dena'ina Athabaskans from Cook Inlet provided much of the information on the map. For example the Upper Ahtna village of Batzulnetas, written as "Nutatlgat" is based on the Dena'ina pronunciation *Nut Kaq*, and not the Ahtna, which is *Nataet Caegge* ("Roasted Salmon Place").

Kari also concluded that the Dena'ina may have deliberately provided misinformation to the Russians because the trail leading from Copper River to Athabaskan ("Kohlschanen") villages that passes near Mt. Wrangell ("vulkan" on the map) is almost a mirror-image of the actual trail around the base of Mounts Sanford and Drum (Kari 1986:105; also see Kari and Fall 2003:87). Ahtna elder Andy Brown said the trail went around the base of Mt. Sanford and Mt. Drum, crossed over the upper Nadina and Dadina



Rivers, the Chestaslina River, and ran into the upper Kotsina drainage before heading across the Chitina River to Taral (Kari 1986). According to Wilson Justin of Chistochina this trail belonged to the 'Ahts'e'tnaey and Naltsiine clans. The trail was later co-opted by the Americans and renamed the Millard Trail.

Source: Wrangell, F.P. 1880. *Russian America, Statistical, and Ethnographic Information*. The Limestone Press, Kingston, Ontario.

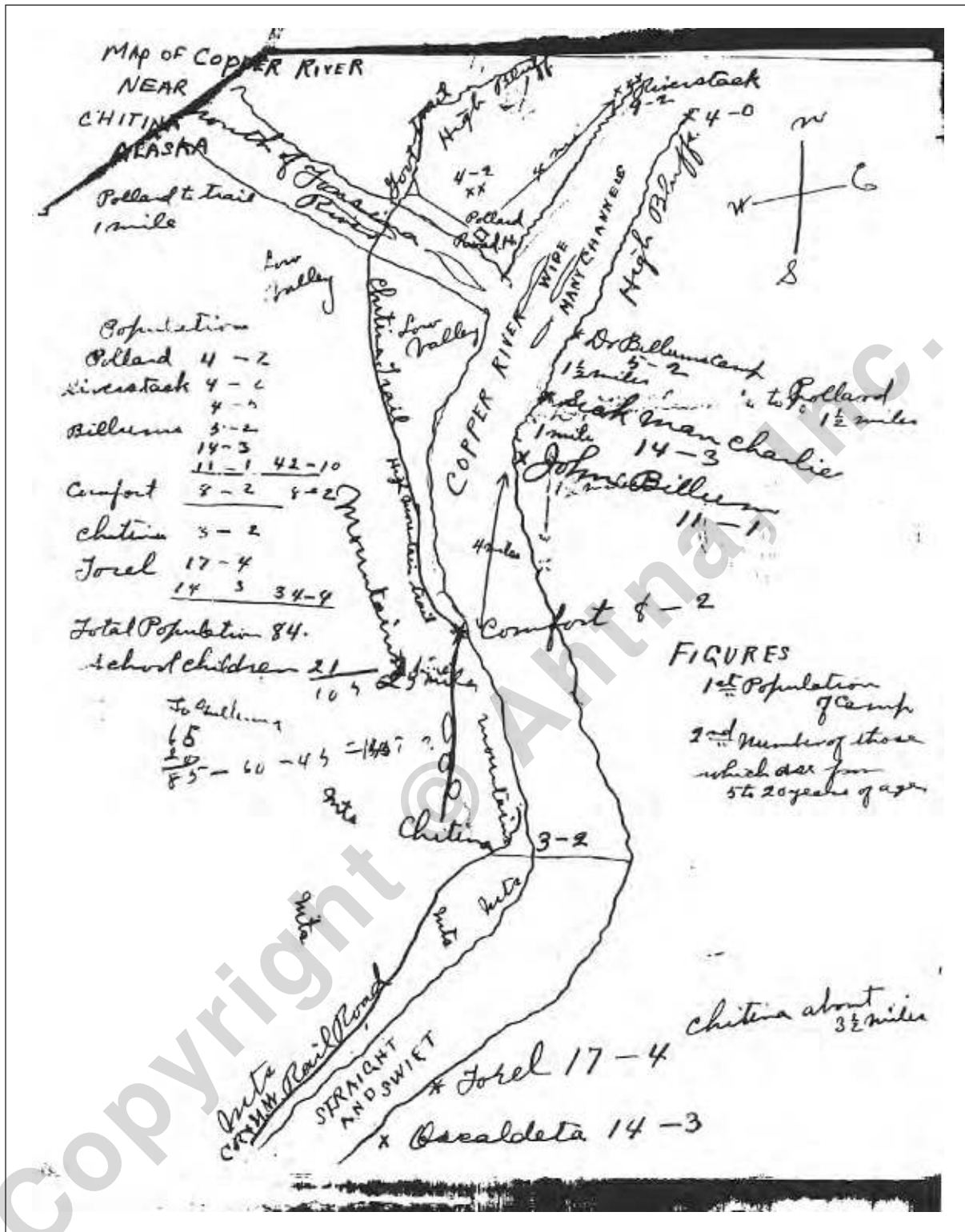


Figure 3.
L. A. Jones' Map of Ahtna Villages on the Copper River Below the Mouth of the Tonsina River, 1911.

Source: RG 75 Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska Division 1909. Box No. 16. National Archives, Washington D.C.



'Atnahwt'aene from the Klutina River. The hand-written caption on the photograph indicates it was taken in 1898 at the height of the gold rush. Courtesy Valdez Museum & Historical Archive Association, Art Hobson photo collection, 1996.030.0087.

At the start of the 20th century, the U.S. government began collecting census data and in 1910 the U.S. census counted 297 Ahtna. A year later, a schoolteacher named L.A. Jones gathered population figures from various settlements along the Copper River in order to estimate the number of school-aged children. On the left side of his map (Figure 3), Jones records populations for Pollard, Liverstack, Billum's, Comfort, Chitina, and Taral. The total population for these six places was 84 with 21 school children.

Today there are about 2,000 Ahtna who hold shares in Ahtna, Incorporated. Approximately 600 live in or near seven communities along the Copper River. An eighth community, Cantwell, is located on the Parks Highway near Denali National Park. Many other Ahtna live in Glennallen, Anchorage, and Fairbanks and some live in the lower 48 states.

Traditional Land Tenure

In the 19th century, the Ahtna were comprised of four regional groups each corresponding to a distinct geographical area and speaking one of four dialects of the Ahtna language: Lower, Central, Upper, and Western Ahtna. Information about the regional groups comes from interviews with Ahtna elders conducted by Frederica de Laguna and Catharine McClellan.

Lower Ahtna territory incorporated the entire Chitina drainage and part of the Copper River as far upstream as the mouth of the Tazlina River. Central Ahtna territory included the Gulkana River drainage as far west as Crosswind Lake, while Upper Ahtna territory encompassed the upper Copper River above the mouth of the Gakona River, including the Slana River drainage. Western Ahtna territory included Tyone Lake and the

upper Susitna River drainage (Figure 4).

In the 19th century, each of these four regional groups was organized into two or more bands related through blood and marriage. The Lower Ahtna bands were the Chitina/Taral band and the Tonsina/Klutina band. The Central Ahtna were made up of a single band referred to as the Gulkana/Gakona band while the Upper Ahtna were composed of three bands: the Sanford/Chistochina band, the Slana/Batzulnetas band, and the Mentasta band. Western Ahtna bands were the Tyone/Mendeltna band, the Cantwell/Denali band, and a third band composed of Ahtna and Dena'ina speakers who inhabited the upper Talkeetna River (Figure 4).

Each band had a territory that encompassed a variety of landscapes with stretches of river where salmon could be caught; forested hillsides with moose; rolling, open tundra with caribou and ground squirrels; and high mountain peaks with Dall sheep and goats. Fur-bearers were in the woods and swamps: foxes, lynx, marten, and mink.

Grayling and trout, ducks and geese, beaver and muskrat were in the lakes and streams. Grouse and ptarmigan lived in the willow patches.

Bands were composed of people from different clans, but the dominant or largest clan usually asserted its inherent right over a territory (Jack John Justin 6.10.1991 14(h) (1) ANCSA interview). The Chitina River, for example, was considered *Udzisyu* country while the upper Copper River belonged to the 'Ahts'e' *tnaey* clan and Tyone Lake was *Tsisyu* but became *Taltsiine* as the *Tsisyu* men married *Taltsiine* women. Bacille George said Paxson Lake was "owned" by the *Udzisyu* clan but they "potlatched" half the lake to the *Naltsiine*, which included the right to hunt caribou as they swam across the lake.

Gulkana side they give it to Naltsiine. Big chief they give it to. Lots of caribou go swimming in the lake. They get lots of money selling the [caribou] skin. That's two of them [clans] belong that lake.

(Bacille George, 7.10.1968 dell/mc)



Charley Sanford his wife and family at Batzulnetas, 1919. In order from left to right: Charley Sanford, his wife Sarah and their children Susie, Frank, Ina, Katie and Katie's aunt Lena. Charley Sanford was born near the mouth of the Sanford River, in the vicinity of the present-day community of Chistochina. Mr. Sanford was known as a very generous man who "helped a lot of people."

Photo by A.M. Baily 1919, National Archives.