

Continuing Education

| BY MARCIA BLASZAK |

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE “LOWER 48,” those little contiguous states far to the south, Alaska’s cultural legacy may seem limited—perhaps some evidence of the great Klondike gold rush, and weren’t the Russians there a long time ago? That was close to my perception years ago as my Park Service career carried me along with stops at Shenandoah, Yellowstone, and parks in California. **SINCE MY ARRIVAL HERE 11 YEARS AGO,** my education has been ongoing, giving me a much fuller appreciation of the richness of resources, both those that find their home in the 17 park units and affiliated areas and those in the communities in which we live and work. **YES, THERE IS EVIDENCE** of the Klondike gold rush—some 15 restored turn-of-the-century buildings in Skagway from the heady days of 1898. Every day in the summer, the little town comes alive with a rush of cruise ship passengers and highway visitors—about 800,000 people a year pass through what is in the winter a town of less than 1,000. More quietly, a few thousand people hike the Chilkoot Trail, passing by the silent artifacts of the struggle made by thousands of seekers of gold and adventure as they lugged a ton of goods towards Canada and possible fortune. Rusting cans, moldering buildings, and bits of shoes tell volumes of a fascinating period of America’s history.

FURTHER TO THE SOUTH, in Sitka, there is indeed evidence of Russian America. Our park in the former colonial capital features the 163-year-old Russian Bishop’s House, the state’s finest remaining example of Russian architecture, painstakingly restored by the National Park Service nearly 20 years ago. And again, a quieter example of cultural preservation, a trail among historic totem poles winds its way to the area where the last major battle between Tlingit Indians and Russian colonists was fought in 1804. **ALASKA’S CULTURAL LEGACY,** though, stretches more widely and across a greater breadth of time than those well-visited examples. I’ve been privileged to see archeological sites in our northwest parks that go back more than 10,000 years, evidence of a hunting culture that—while technologically different than today’s—continues in our parks and preserves with the direct descendants of the earliest Alaskans. More recent examples of thriving communities, including others who came later, exist in every park. **THE ALASKA NATIONAL INTEREST LANDS CONSERVATION ACT,** a quarter-century old in

2005, makes abundantly clear that our parks are not only great reserves of natural resources, but treasures of living culture as well. The opportunity for subsistence uses was, in the words of the law, essential for physical, economic, traditional, cultural, and social existence. It is wholly a part of the fabric of life in rural Alaska, and a fundamental purpose of most of the parks. **THAT CULTURE IS NOT ONLY REFLECTED IN** our subsistence management, but in other programs as well. The Beringian Heritage International Park Program has worked for the past 15 years to reinforce the links between Alaska and Russia, links that are as diverse as plant communities, language, and family relationships. **THE PURPOSES OF THE 10 PARKS THAT WERE ESTABLISHED** in 1980 variously include protecting archeological and paleontological sites, scientific research, the study of the peopling of Alaska from Asia, and providing for traditional activities. From those mandates, along with existing park and national legislation, Alaska has grown its preservation programs significantly over the past 25 years. But in many ways, we have just begun.

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VAST AREAS OF PARKLAND REMAIN UNSURVEYED by archeologists. Professional care of growing collections remains a challenge for parks with limited budgets and curatorial space. Many nationally significant buildings have been restored, their decay arrested, but maintenance is a challenge. New places want to tell more of their part in America’s story: the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area provides timely lessons of another generation’s defense of the nation—and mistreatment of its own citizens; Barrow’s Inupiat Heritage Center tells the story of the 19th century whaling voyages, and their influence on the communities of Alaska. **DESPITE OR PERHAPS BECAUSE OF** these challenges, cultural stewardship in Alaska will be a continuing education not only for me and the National Park Service, but for the nation.

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