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Retired teacher works to save Salcha's scattered history

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Amy Viltrakis is the coordinator for the Salcha Historical Society. Amanda Bohman/News-Miner

SALCHA, Alaska — The Salcha community of about 1,000 people in the middle of the Fairbanks North Star Borough has a richer history than you might think, and retired teacher Amy Viltrakis is on a mission to document it.

Viltrakis helped establish the Salcha Historical Society in 2016, helped open a three-room historical museum and is gathering stories, photographs and artifacts related to old homesteads, roadhouses, gold mining, the Salchaket band of Athabascans, the Salcha telegraph station, the old Valdez Trail

and more.

“The history of Salcha isn’t written in one place,” Viltrakis said. “It’s a little here and a little there, and a lot of it is stored in people’s memories.”

The project started with third- and fourth-graders at the Salcha Elementary School in the 1990s. Viltrakis said the students split up into groups, interviewed old timers, collected memorabilia, wrote reports and shared their work. For a few years, the community, 40 miles south of Fairbanks, celebrated Salcha Pioneer Day, inviting early homesteaders to visit the school.

Viltrakis worked at the school and was involved with the project. She kept all of the reports and materials, including cassette tape recordings of schoolchildren interviewing elders. One of them was Joe Balch, who settled in Salcha in 1946, homesteaded a parcel of land and, in 1954, opened the Salcha Store.

The schoolchildren interviewed John Rubel, who told them about how before the trans-Alaska oil pipeline, the military ran an oil pipeline in the Salcha area. When the pipeline leaked, residents would descend on it carrying buckets, shovel up the tainted gravel and filter out the oil, Viltrakis said.

One student wrote a report on Bessie Barnabas, the last full-blooded Salchaket, who died in 1986 at an estimated age of 105. Her daughter, Cecelia, continues to reside in Salcha.

The students discovered that Salcha once had a potato chip factory, Viltrakis said.

The telegraph station in 1902, followed by the old Valdez Trail connection to Fairbanks, is what put Salcha on the map, she said. Families then homesteaded and opened roadhouses.

Viltrakis made her way to Alaska from California 76 years later to study anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

“I just always wanted to come to Alaska,” she said. “My grandfather had been here several times.”

She met her husband working a summer job at Bingle Camp at Harding Lake.

“It’s a friendly community,” Viltrakis said. “It’s a great place to raise kids. People are always willing to help each other out.”

Viltrakis grew up listening to her grandparents talk about family history and developed an appreciation for the olden days.

“One of the things that I just love is listening to the early homesteaders, how rugged they were and just resourceful,” she said.

When she thought about what to do after retirement, she decided to build on the work of the schoolchildren and preserve the local history.

“Over the years, even before I retired, we would just talk about, ‘You know, we really need to start recording oral histories and bringing it all together,’” she said.

The museum is a mixture of private collections, donations from old homesteading families and the work of students from the Salcha school. It encompasses rooms upstairs from the senior center, a community gathering place in Salcha. The collection includes photos, maps, old telegraph wires, an antique tobacco can, an old mining bucket and short typed reports on the area’s history.

A trip to Fairbanks was an all-day trip on the early roads, Viltrakis said.

“Living in Salcha required a lot of work. Many of the people we interviewed talked about gardening, growing their own food, raising animals, hunting and fishing,” Viltrakis said. “Several mentioned that as kids they all worked to help their family with subsistence activities.”

Several families lost homes to fires and had to rebuild.

Viltrakis recounted a story told to her by Myles Comeau. In the 1950s, children of Salcha attended school at Eielson Air Force Base.

“They rode in an airport yellow limousine with suicide doors,” Viltrakis said in an email.

One day, a door flew open. “The three kids in the back seat were holding on to each other so they wouldn’t fall out.”

For Viltrakis, collecting stories like Comeau’s is like finding little treasures.

“My husband calls it my new job,” she said.

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